

Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not:
Evaluating Empire in New
Testament Studies

April 2013

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Critiquing Empire Criticism

So what is empire criticism? In short—and this book is devoted to both description and evaluation of this method—it refers to developing an eye and ear for the presence of Rome and the worship of the emperor in the lines and between the lines of New Testament writings. One example here will suffice. A simple reading of Luke 2 reveals Luke using the following terms for Jesus—*Savior* and *Lord*, and alongside those terms are the terms *good news* (gospel) and *peace*. Now it so happens that empire critics call to our notice that these are the precise terms used of Caesar in Rome, the very terms broadcast throughout the empire on declarations and in letters and on countless inscriptions visible in all major cities in the empire. The implication of Luke 2, empire critics claim, is that Luke was not just imparting spiritual goods about the Christian faith. Instead, his words were laced with criticism of Rome—to say Jesus was Lord and Savior or to say Jesus was the one who brings peace and is good news is at the same time, in a covert way, to say Caesar was not Lord and not Savior, and that Caesar was neither good news and that his peace was shallow. The language of Luke 2 then was coded for anyone with a good first-century ear. It is only our distance and comfort with modern empires that deafens us to the sounds. . . .

What empire critics want us to see is what the Geneva Bible's editors wanted their readers to see and then put into practice: the empire, including King James, must bow before King Jesus. Well, that's a rough and ready analogy that can serve our purpose. In brief, then, empire criticism asks us to listen closer to the sounds of the empire and the sounds of challenging empire at work in the pages of the New Testament.

This method has now extended to all books in the New Testament, and not just to Revelation, where it has played a role among scholars for longer than scholars care to count. It asks us to stand up and notice that the message of the gospel was at once spiritual as well as subversive of empire, that it was both a powerful redemptive message and a cry for liberation. Moreover, the New Testament, if we care to listen, is at times an assault on Caesar and calls the Christian to form an entirely different society—one that listens to Jesus as its King and takes its orders not from Caesar or his laws but from Jesus and his moral vision shaped by a cross that breeds sacrifice and self-denial. It calls us to worship King Jesus and not Caesar.

This approach, if right, is breathtaking in its implications.

Which is just the problem: Is it, many are asking, right? Are we reading Rome and Caesar *into* the New Testament or are we reading *what is actually there*? If you insert the theme, the theme will suddenly appear everywhere. Is it just insertion? These are the questions *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not* seeks to answer.

—Adapted from the introduction

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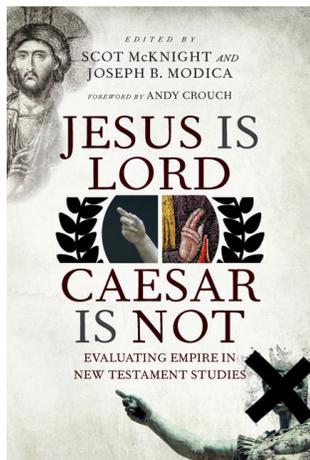
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Scot McKnight (PhD, University of Nottingham, 1986) is a professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary. He is a recognized authority on the historical Jesus, early Christianity and the New Testament. Widely published, McKnight's books include *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed.), *The Blue Parakeet, A Community Called Atonement*, *The Jesus Creed*, and *The King Jesus Gospel*. His blog, *Jesus Creed*, consistently ranks as a leading Christian blog.

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Experts on Empire

Foreword

Andy Crouch (MDiv, Boston University School of Theology) is an editor-at-large at *Christianity Today* and the author of *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*. He is executive producer of *This Is Our City*, a multiyear project featuring documentary video, reporting and essays about Christians seeking the flourishing of their cities.

We Have No King but Caesar: Roman Imperial Ideology and the Imperial Cult

David P. Nystrom (PhD, University of California) is provost and senior vice president at Biola University. A specialist in New Testament and Roman history, he is the author of many works including the James notes in the NIV Application Commentary and, with Bradley P. Nystrom, *The History of Christianity*.

Anti-Imperial Rhetoric in the New Testament

Judith A. Diehl (PhD, University of Edinburgh) is an instructor of New Testament and hermeneutics at Denver Seminary. She has written numerous journal articles, including a series of articles on anti-imperial rhetoric in *Currents in Biblical Research*.

Matthew

Joel Willitts (PhD, Cambridge University) is associate professor in biblical and theological Studies at North Park University. Among Joel's several publications on Matthew's Gospel are *Matthew's Messianic Shepherd-King: In Search of the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel* and "Matthew and Psalms of Solomon's Messianism: A Comparative Study in First-Century Messianology."

The Gospel of Luke and the Roman Empire

Dean Pinter (PhD, Durham University) is rector at St. Aidan Anglican Church, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. His doctoral research is related to the areas of divine and imperial power in the writings of Paul and Josephus.

John's Gospel and the Roman Imperial Context: An Evaluation of Recent Proposals

Christopher W. Skinner (PhD, The Catholic University of America) is assistant professor of religion at Mount Olive College in North Carolina. He has published many articles and books including *John and Thomas: Gospels in Conflict?*, *What Are They Saying About the Gospel of Thomas?*, *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* and, with Kelly R. Iverson, *Unity and Diversity in the Gospels and Paul*.

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Joseph B. Modica (PhD, Drew University) is university chaplain and associate professor of biblical studies at Eastern University (Pennsylvania). His current research interests include spiritual formation, faith development and historical Jesus studies.

Proclaiming Another King Named Jesus? The Acts of the Apostles and the Roman Imperial Cult(s)

Drew J. Strait is a PhD candidate in New Testament at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He is an adjunct lecturer in biblical and theological studies at North Park University and North Park Theological Seminary. His research interests include Luke-Acts, the speeches of Paul in Acts, Greco-Roman religion and rhetorical strategies for critiquing deified rulers in early Judaism.

“One Who will Arise to Rule Over the Nations”: Paul’s Letter to the Romans and the Roman Empire

Michael F. Bird (PhD, University of Queensland) is lecturer in theology at Ridley College in Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of many publications including *The Saving Righteousness of God*, *Introducing Paul* and *Colossians and Philemon*.

Philippians and Empire: Paul’s Engagement with Imperialism and the Imperial Cult

Lynn H. Cohick (PhD, University of Pennsylvania) is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. Her interests include the Greco-Roman cultural and social world and how Jews and Christians negotiated that environment. Her publications include *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians* and, with Gary M. Burge and Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity*.

Colossians and the Rhetoric of Empire: A New Battle Zone

Allan R. Bevere (PhD, Durham University) is a professional fellow in theology at Ashland Theological Seminary and the pastor of Akron First United Methodist Church. He is the author of *Sharing in the Inheritance: Identity and the Moral Life in Colossians*. His interests include the ecclesial nature of politics and the church's witness.

Something Old, Something New: Revelation and Empire

Dwight Sheets (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is associate professor of New Testament at Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri. His expertise is in the area of Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic literature. The research of his dissertation *The Sitz im Leben of The Apocalypse: Realized Eschatology and Apocalyptic Expression* provided the basis for the views expressed in his essay.