

# Empire and New Testament texts: Theorising the imperial, in subversion and attraction

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Considering the overt or sublime connections biblical scholars increasingly indicate between biblical texts and empires, this contribution engages the need for the theorisation of empire beyond material depiction. It is suggested that empire is primarily of conceptual nature and a negotiated notion, a constantly constructed entity by both the powerful and the subjugated, to which the concomitant responses of subversion and attraction to empire attest. The discussion is primarily related to the first-century CE context, arguing also that postcolonial analysis provides a useful approach to deal with (at least, some of) the complexities of such research.

## Theorising Empire: Initial considerations

First-century CE Mediterranean life was largely determined by the omnipresent and ostensibly omnipotent Roman Empire in its various forms and guises. The material reality of imperial imposition was unavoidable for first-century people, constantly reinforced by visual images and verbal or written decrees, through military presence and social systems. The Empire made its presence felt in tangible and visible ways,<sup>1</sup> in step with imperial ideology. This dictated the continuous reinforcement in various ways of both the imperial presence and the required responses (including senses) of submissiveness to it. With an all pervasive Empire the consciousness and worldview of first-century people around the Mediterranean would not have remained oblivious of or unaffected by Roman imperial presence and practice, even if such influence is difficult to always plot historically accurately.

Plotting its influence is from the outset complicated by the presence of material and discursive imperialism, as well as their interrelatedness. Material or historical imperialism already sculpted and determined the daily lives of first-century people in a myriad of ways, but so also did discursive imperialism at the level of consciousness or in terms of ideology. In other words, a territorial understanding of Empire maintained through military force (as one important material element) will always be important to make sense of the Roman Empire. But, at the same time, for the largest part the Empire was sustained through hegemony that was reliant upon a multivalent and complex paradigm of socio-political power to achieve and maintain its authority and control. More than only direct military action, the Romans sustained and wielded the *imperium* through a combination of recourse to force, social structures and systems as well as through ideological, imperial propaganda. Like other (earlier and later) empires, it propounded a sense of moral virtue and beneficence, claiming to exist *and* function with a vision of reordering the world's power relations for the sake and betterment of all.<sup>2</sup> The totality of this socio-political framework (discursive imperialism) was more powerful and certainly more pervasive than its material enactment alone, even if accounting for its possible relation to the New Testament is not necessarily easier.

The study of the possible influence and impact of Empire on the communities and texts of the New Testament has of late generated not only discussion but also criticism. The notion of tracing and accounting for the impact of Empire on the early followers of Jesus in this broader sense and, in as far as can be gleaned from the texts, is burdened by many assumptions and dangers.<sup>3</sup> Adequate

1. In the British Museum (Room 70), a display case on 'Circulating the Imperial Image' provides tangible evidence of the wide dissemination of artefacts with a demonstrable link to the Empire. Since Julius Caesar started it in 44 BCE, most Roman coins had an image of the Emperor as well, but statues, busts and jewellery also carried images of the emperor or relatives. 'From Spain to Syria, everybody knew about Rome, what it stood for, what it did, and who was in charge of it' (Wright 2005:64).

2. Explicit and implicit positive claims to peace, prosperity and justice, accompanied by negative claims about their victims, were used to provide justification (cf. Elliott 2007:183; Horsley 1987:87–90; 2000:74–82; and 2.2 below).

3. One example of the problems brought about in theorising empire is when a valid warning to avoid anachronistic scenarios such as portraying Jesus and his followers as freedom fighters with the reshaping of social reality as goal, is undone by further claims. The insistence that 'Jesus and the prophetic tradition, however, show no interest in structures, democratic or any other ... [and are] only interested in how power is exercised, and to what end' (Bryan 2005:127), in a way foreign to antiquity divorce agency and purpose from institution. Moreover, the subtext of such claims in fact tends towards the anachronism it wants to avoid, presupposing structural change as possibility over against the daunting autocratic (oligarchic) rule of Empire, held in place through central and local systems of control (administrative, military, local elites), nestled in a hierarchically ordered world. Cf. the two typically modern dangers to avoid when thinking about first-century politics: a fixed map of post-Enlightenment political option on a left-to-right sliding scale; and, the separation of domains of life, such as the theology and society, or religion and politics (Wright 2005:59–60). Some other dangers, not limited to readings related to empire, include using the text as a window on the world, with all the dangers of representation, etc. imminently present; the dangers inherent to circle argumentation, where the texts are enlisted to conjure up a socio-historical context, against which the very same texts are interpreted, and so forth.

theorising of empire<sup>4</sup> amidst contemporary and popular talk of *empire* needs more than a one-sided focus on the Empire's military or political-economic underpinnings, as much as it needs to move beyond the all too often celebratory, sensational or anti-sociological approaches of popular culture. Formulating an accountable, anthropological approach to Empire is key, alert to the cultural making of value and viewing Empire as more than an elitist project, and focused on the socio-historical and contextualised understanding of empire.<sup>5</sup> That is, 'to question the singular thingness that the term *empire* suggests by identifying the many fissures, contradictions, historical particularities, and shifts in imperial processes' (Lutz 2006:593). Acknowledging the complexities involved in theorising empire at both material and discursive levels requires an appropriate grammar and vocabulary to plot first-century power relations and its structural organisations.

The focus here is on theorising empire, trying to formulate some broad perimeters for discussing empire. With primary a theoretical interest, I aim towards a framework for understanding the construal and nature of possible connections (implicit or otherwise) between New Testament texts<sup>6</sup> and Empire. In short, current perceptions about texts which possibly relate to Empire are impacted upon when empire is understood as a multifaceted, conceptual and negotiated entity.

## Empire in the first century CE: Overt and surreptitious

The overt categories of imperial structures, systems and mechanisms are the proverbial tip of the iceberg when it comes to empire in New Testament times. Empire was co-constituted by various key interlinking, overlapping and (even) inchoate spheres, including a centralised seat of ultimate power and military conquest; the system of patronage; a rhetoric of peace, prosperity and concord; and the imperial cult

4.Theorising empire soon encounters a problem with terminology: should all forms of political rule and/or government in the Bible simply be posed as 'empire' (as Bryan did in 2005)? What are the dangers of a narrow theological reading? Does one not need greater sensitivity for the most plausible socio-historical settings as well as for (as gleaned from social and political sciences) the intricacies and involved nature of empire: attraction/allure; mimicry; hybridity; etc.? Simplistic equations of all forms of Roman internal rule as 'empire' should be avoided: 'It is probably more appropriate to call the different forms of Roman internal rule "republic" and "principate", since even before the emergence of the "emperors" of Rome, the Romans controlled foreign territories, and this could be called "empire"' (Hollingshead (1998:26, n. 14). Although my use of empire will soon become clear, empire is not used as denotation in a generalised way characterised in today's common usage of the term as either indicating any and all political regimes or signifying architectural style, artistic endeavours or superlative claims (movies; TV-series; computer games; fiction; car rental; etc.). Although these distinctions sometimes intersect, *Empire* is used of a particular Empire such as the Roman Empire, while *empire* is used for the theoretical and rhetorical concept.

5.Although it cannot be dealt with here, empire and the messiness of scholarly constructions thereof has in the past been the object of criticism; cf. e.g. Stowers' (1995:297–302) critique against what he perceives to be Horsley's totalising schemes. However, Friesen's (2001) comment is important: 'If the central figure of the Christian faith was executed on a sedition charge by the occupying forces of the Roman Empire, and if the early churches took root and grew in an imperialist setting, then why is there so little theorizing in biblical studies about empire and religion?'

6.While the focus here is largely on the 1st century CE and therefore the Roman Empire, the interaction with Empires in biblical texts includes a wide variety: Assyrians; Babylonian; Persian; Macedonian; Greco-Egyptians; Greco-Syrians; Romans (cf. Crossan 2007:82). Cf. Carter (2006:14–16) for a brief (and maybe too nostalgic) presentation of Israel's past history with empires of various origins and kinds.

(e.g. Horsley 1987:87–90; 2000:74–82). Their importance is beyond dispute, even if their complex nature and involvement with a range of other related (and unrelated) properties already make accurate description and proper analysis difficult. Yet, regardless of how the material or historical realities of Empire are arrayed, its pluriform materiality remains a first important – even if not the most vital – focus.

## Aspects of imperial materiality

The *overt manifestation* of Empire had its basis in Roman power primarily situated in its vast military force in the form of generally well-trained and well-resourced legions which operated both ruthlessly and efficiently. Punishment for dissent and sedition was harsh, and the cross was the ultimate symbol of Roman power and cruel brutality. Its justice was not limited to foreigners and lower classes but at times even held Roman provincial governors accused of wrongdoing accountable before the courts. Roman taxes were at least as brutal and cut a broad width. Whilst legitimised as recompense for receiving privileges wrought by Empire such as peace and security or freedom and justice, taxes more often served to increase the magnificence and opulence of the elite who ultimately benefitted from imperial machinations.<sup>7</sup>

Local elites were the cutting edge of Empire and its public face for the majority of people, and an indispensable aspect of the imperial machinery.<sup>8</sup> Through their 'government without bureaucracy' (Garnsey & Saller 1987:20–40), the Empire yielded administrative authority<sup>9</sup> to indigenous elites with a twofold purpose.<sup>10</sup> Local elites kept the imperial wheels turning in the provinces in particular, ensuring collection of tribute, organising business and politics, and garnering support for Empire by conferring benevolence and granting public works programmes. At the same time, elites were crucial to imperial divide and rule-politics (Moore 2006b:199), taking the blame for popular resentment and even uprisings while the imperial powers secured their authority in remoteness and unavailability.<sup>11</sup> For theorising Empire, it means that rather than trying to understand its nature from an inward looking perspective, a measure appropriate for

7.The ambiguity is well represented in the following comment: 'Rome's system of justice – which, to be fair, was often a considerable improvement on the local systems over which it superimposed itself – supplied tribunals and courts of law answerable, ultimately, to the emperor himself' (Wright 2005:64).

8.The incorporation of local elites and their collusion with Empire, fitted into a broader Roman practice: 'In practical terms, the Roman way was dominant because the Romans exercised political control of the region, but the Romans never set out to eliminate the cultures they absorbed' (Hollingshead 1998:14).

9.Roman 'administration' may be a misleading term, as Millar (1966:166) argues, since it was 'not an arrangement of compartments, of administrative hierarchies, but an array of institutions, communities and persons, the relations between which depended on political and diplomatic choices which could be made by any of the parties.'

10.'We hear much of such elite γένη in the Roman period, since Rome extended its rule over the Greek world by forging alliances between its aristocracy and the Greek elites' (Stowers 1995:317). The γένος or clan was 'a locative sacrificing kinship group larger than the οἶκος but smaller and less diverse than a phratry' (Stowers 1995:315–316).

11.In exceptional circumstances, such as the outbreak of the Jewish war in 66 CE, 'the ultimate authority finds it necessary temporarily to relinquish its godlike remoteness and relative invisibility in order to intervene decisively and irresistibly in the corrupt affairs of its creatures in an attempt to contain the chaos that its own administrative policies has created' (Moore 2006b:199).

the Republic, the Empire first has to be understood from the outside, from the provinces before looking inward (Millar 1966:166).

Patronage was another cultural-convictional or ideological aspect that manifested in material ways as part of Empire's overt manifestation, but also regulated much of it. 'Far from trying to eradicate traditional patronage relationships, emperors encouraged their continuation, in part because they were the main mechanism for recruitment of new members of the imperial elite' (Garnsey & Saller 1987:201). With the Emperor as ultimate patron, his power devolved to other patrons, each with a circle of influence as well as a group of underling-patrons, continuing in a never-ending extension of the patronage system (cf. Chow 1997). Criss-crossing through socio-political, economic and cultural systems and structures, the patronage system's significance stood firm in its vastness, making its importance difficult to overrate.

### Aspects of imperial ideology

An *ideological framework* underwrote the Roman Empire in its materiality. By the beginning of the first century, having conclusively dealt with its main rival, Carthage, the Roman Empire had established itself as an overriding political force, replete in an indulgent network of power, influence and wealth. Imperial ideology was reciprocally connected to symbols of its power; the symbols informing ideology and ideology justifying the symbols. With imperial ideology built upon revisiting the ideals of the old republic, Empire prided itself as a democratic institution, the pretence of which was underwritten by notions of liberty and justice.<sup>12</sup> After the civil war, Augustus was often upheld as herald of peace to the Empire and the world at large.<sup>13</sup> Soon enough, claims to such values and achievements were ascribed to the benevolence of other emperors also, and individually and collectively presented as *εὐαγγέλιον* (good news).<sup>14</sup>

Poets and historians like Virgil, Horace, Livy and others, created in their different ways 'a grand narrative of *empire*, a long eschatology which has now reached its climax' (Elliott 2007:183).<sup>15</sup> In the court of Augustus, the story of Rome

12. 'The republic has long prided itself on its justice, and in the middle years of Augustus' reign "Iustitia", too, became an official goddess: Rome possessed Justice, and had the obligation to share it with the rest of the world' (Wright 2005:63).

13. Concepts such as peace was of course filled out differently by those from within and outside the Empire; Tacitus puts the following words in the mouth of the British rebel commander Calgacus about the Romans around 85 CE: 'To robbery, butchery and rapine, they give the name of "government"; they create a desolation and call it "peace" (*ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*)' (Tacitus *Agricola*, 29–31; cf. Hollingshead 1998:26, n. 16). Nevertheless, '[f]reedom, justice, peace and salvation were the imperial themes that you could expect to meet in the mass media of the ancient world, that is, on statues, on coins, in poetry and song and speeches' (Wright 2005:63).

14. For the widespread use of the 'good news' notion in the ancient world, cf. the Gaius inscription (c. 5 BCE) where it is claimed that Gaius Julius Caesar's coming of age was celebrated as 'good news'; the Priene calendar of c. 9 BCE, where it is claimed that 'birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings (*euvaggeliwn*) for the world that came by reason of him'; and, Josephus' *Jewish Wars* 2.418–420 where the 'terrible message' of his troops being needed to put down the sedition at the bequest of the Jewish elite, was received by governor Florus as 'good news' (*euvaggeliwn*). For a summary of this and other imperial terms probably taken up and redeployed by Paul, cf. Elliott (2008:98–99).

15. E.g. in *Aeneid* 1:255–296, Virgil portrays how in the aftermath of the Trojan War, Jove promised the goddess Venus that her beloved hero Aeneid would both find a great city and subdue the proud nations. His descendants would prosper but also control all sea and land; Romulus, one of his descendants and the legendary founder of Rome, was destined to rule forever as masters of the world.

was told as the culmination of a long process of training and preparation for Empire to assume its destined role as world ruler.<sup>16</sup> The emperors' own ideology mongering is shown in achievements claimed by Augustus on behalf of the Roman people and the world and inscribed as memorial (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*). Imperial conquest, domination and subjection of other peoples are described as bestowing on them the friendship and fidelity of the Roman people.<sup>17</sup> The defeat of other peoples through conquest and warfare was portrayed as the miraculous achievement of the *Pax Romana*, as worldwide peace. The breadth of imperial ideology and propaganda meant that the Roman world was saturated:

with a carefully managed repertoire of images depicting the piety and benevolent potency of the emperor, and of the routinized representations and celebrations of those virtues through a ubiquitous imperial cult. (Elliott 2007:183)

Roman imperial ideology, pervasive as it was in the first-century Mediterranean world, underwrote Empire's continued existence.<sup>18</sup> Rather than military strength, the longevity and vibrancy of the Roman Empire increasingly relied upon the growing consensus that Roman rule was justified, a consensus itself that was a product of the complex interaction between the centralised power of Empire in Rome and its remote peripheries, the outlying provinces or colonies (Ando 2000). Central to this was a religious fibre which significantly affected Empire's discursive imperialism as well as its materiality, and finally, also requires some attention.

### Empire and emperor in religious garb

Roman ideological propaganda in a first-century context with its interwoven political, social, cultural and religious sentiments in particular, has led some to talk rather of Roman imperial theology (Crossan 2008:59–73). The ideological glue that kept Roman civilisation together, imperial theology would have had a *fourfold basis of power*,<sup>19</sup> like the rest of Roman civilisation, mythology and religion. Whilst Roman civilisation was founded on imperial theology and it in turn centred on the divinity of the Emperor, it involved *more than 'the emperor cult'*.<sup>20</sup> Other characteristics of imperial

16. 'This ideology, like most imperial rhetoric, got rewritten as the empire wore on, but managed to survive the ridiculous chaos of AD 69 and carry on well into subsequent centuries' (Wright 2005:64). After Julius Caesar's murder and civil war, which saw the collapse of the Republic, Octavian as Caesar's adopted heir was victorious over Anthony (who joined forces with Cleopatra) at Actium in 31 BCE, and took the title Augustus. After ruling for more than 4 decades (27 BCE–14 CE), his son Tiberius, took over and consolidated his work. In 37–41 CE, Gaius Caligula made a disaster of his rule, followed by the feeble but cunning Claudius, after whose death in 54 CE saw Nero come to power as the new hope for the Empire. Upon his death in 68 CE (accompanied by contrasting assessments of his rule), the year of four emperors followed. After Galba, Otho, and Vitellius almost run the Empire into the ground, it was Vespasian who established a new dynasty which saw the Empire encapsulating most of the Mediterranean and some part of the hinterland too (White 1999:110–135; Wright 2005:62–63).

17. 'The ideology of Roman supremacy involved the inferiority of other peoples who were destined to be subservient to the Romans; within this ideology, the Jews were on occasion singled out as a people born to servitude' (Elliott 2007:187).

18. Contemporary underlying imperial theology is probably more readily formatted by conventionalised 'root metaphors', as concepts and patterns of speech taken for granted and generally not consciously considered or deliberated (Elliott 2005:175, referring to Lakoff); such metaphors do not only frame but actually constitute and format certain social patterns.

19. 'Military power as the monopoly or control of force and violence; economic power, the monopoly or control of labor and production; political power, the monopoly or control of organization and institution; and ideological power, the monopoly or control of meaning and interpretation' (Crossan 2008:60; cf. Mann 1986:518–522).

20. Socio-historical and literary investigations of the cultic machinations and operations of the emperor cult is important, but should not suggest either un(der) development as religious formation complete with theological underpinnings or idiosyncratic and thus fleeting, opportunistic endeavour.

theology included the promotion of *imperial divinity*, with its ideological underpinnings and associated practices, not restricted to outlying provinces but with presence closer to Rome, too. The success of Imperial theology rested largely on its effective dissemination through appropriation by means of *imperial-aligned elites* throughout the Empire (cf. Ando 2000), and relied upon oblique and indirect references to the divinity of the living *Augustus*.<sup>21</sup> Divine status was attributed to emperors as *dynastic and imperial prerogative*, including the Julio-Claudian (esp. Julius Caesar, Augustus) but later also the Flavian dynasties (esp. Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian). Imperial theology, finally, was promoted vigorously through *images and structures*, including poems, inscriptions, coins and images, statues, altars and other structures.<sup>22</sup>

Probably for obvious reasons, New Testament research on the *religious* dimension of Empire have in the past mostly focussed on the *emperor cult*,<sup>23</sup> claiming *inter alia* that by mid-first century it was the fastest growing religion (Wright 2005:64). Indeed, in the East of Empire, where traditionally rulers were regarded as divine,<sup>24</sup> the emperor-cult grew strongly and cities benefitted by receiving rewards of various kinds. Building programmes saw temples erected in honour of the emperor, accompanied by the restructuring of cities such as Ephesus and by other activities such as games, festivals and other celebrations in honour of the emperor.

In addition to encouraging the worship of imperial gods, emperors were often included among those worshipped.<sup>25</sup> Initially, emperors were declared divine by the senate only posthumously, but outside of Rome and already during the time of the New Testament, living emperors were increasingly worshipped as gods – as Empire’s divine ‘saviours’ (Ehrman 2008:28).<sup>26</sup> Few emperors attempted to claim divine honours for themselves, their insistence on the divinity of their predecessors often served to reinforce their own positions of power. This practice ensured that the claim by any given serving emperor to be a ‘son of god’ was not

21. Cf. Ovid (*Tristia* 3.1.36–39), where Augustus is portrayed as a Jupiter-incarnated.
22. This is not to suggest that ancients had religious ‘beliefs’ analogous to Christianity. Rather, their commitment was to rituals of communication with the gods, which were central to civic and family life. But their religion did not consist of ritual actions alone, without ideas, thoughts or commitment, since ritual was ‘an embodiment of thinking’ (Price 1994). Cf. Zanker (1990).
23. The emperor cult ‘served three main functions: the diffusion of imperial ideology, the focusing of the loyalty of subjects on the emperor and the social and political advancement of these provincials who presided over its operation’ (Garnsey & Saller 1987:202). Cf. Botha (1988:87–102). After this contribution was already finalised, a publication edited by Brodd and Reed (2011) appeared, that further deepens discussions on the imperial cult.
24. The emperor cult goes back to the time of the Hellenistic kings (Momigliano 1986:183–186).
25. One scholar has concluded that the reason Roman Emperors became gods, was twofold: ‘The imperial cult was primarily a sign of indifference or doubt or anxiety about the gods; it was, furthermore, an expression of admiration for efficient, but alien, rule’ (Momigliano 1986:181–193). Given the imperial military might through which the emperor laid claim to all territory and people, ‘As far as most of the Roman world was concerned, the “divinity” of the emperor was obvious and uncontroversial’ (Wright 2005:65; cf. Ehrman 2008:28).
26. Augustus, for example, was hailed by the contemporary poets for what was described as his remarkable and thorough piety, which was often given as the reason for his successful establishment of Empire. On the Ara Pacis, the Augustan Peace altar in the Forum in Rome, the image of the pious Trojan hero Aeneas who was making sacrifices on the shore of Latium was paired with a similarly pious Augustus offering sacrifices for the Roman people (Elliott 2007:183). For the emphasis on piety, amidst public grandeur and civic works programme, in Augustus’ political agenda, cf. White (1999:110–135).

uncommon at the time, even if the relationship between the emperor and predecessor was mostly one of adoptive kinship, as in the case of Octavian/Augustus.<sup>27</sup>

Recent studies on the imperial cult, its position and operation in communities has focused on the essential role that leading citizens themselves played through local initiatives. Also, the great variation in practice from city to city meant that there was no single unified imperial cult. Forms of worship were occasioned by negotiations locally and with the authorities in Rome, and constituted a means of conveying, in religious terms, the new power structures with which communities now had to cope (Price 2004).<sup>28</sup> In short, the emperor cult was but one, albeit important, element of a much more pervasive religious dimension<sup>29</sup> which was part of the imperial system.

In *conclusion*, Empire was material, ideological and religious (religion?), but also more *and* less than that! Its materiality was evident for all to see, in its plural, bewildering ways as well as in subtle frames. Whilst imperial ideological efforts criss-crossed through all overt imperial form and function, it was assisted by provincial elites, likewise eager to develop their versions of imperial splendour in imagery and ritual, to demonstrate the new configuration of power in their cities.<sup>30</sup> Imperial imposition by sword or other forms of compulsion generally proved unnecessary, that is, as long as the perceived benefits of imperial rule appeared to exceed its distractions.<sup>31</sup> The overt penetration of imperial presence and power into all spheres of life, as well as its intimate but elusive relations to structures and systems on social, economic and political levels is a challenge for theorising Empire but also for credibly accounting for its reach and impact.

## Framing and understanding Empire as concept

The argument to this point can be consolidated in three claims about Empire. Firstly, Empire was quite evidently

27. Cf. the evidence in various other ancient authors pertaining to the divinity of Augustus (Priene Calender inscription of c. 9 BCE; Virgil *Aeneid* 6; Virgil *Eclogue* 4; Suetonius *Divine Augustus* 94.4; Horace *Odes* 3.5; *Epistle* 2.1); cf. [www.textexcavation.com/augustus.htm](http://www.textexcavation.com/augustus.htm).
28. Price’s work was based on the epigraphic record of the Greek-speaking cities of Asia Minor, which provide in some cases useful details of the organisation of rituals and festivals.
29. [G]overnment and religion both functioned, theoretically, to secure the same ends of making life prosperous, meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace and prosperity and made the state great. In turn, the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of gods’ (Ehrman 2008:27). Richard Horsley has argued that there are three patterns which are useful for describing the relationship between empire and religion. Firstly, imperial elites can simply construct the subject peoples’ religion; secondly, subjected people can in reaction and even resistance to imperial rule, revive their traditional ways of life; or, thirdly, religious practices can be developed that in fact constitute imperial power relations (Horsley 2003d:13–44). Cf. Roth (2003:121–128); Horsley (2003b:129–133).
30. Competition with their counterparts elsewhere for the more excellent reproduction of Caesar’s example of ritualised piety and benevolence, soon reached the extent that the boundaries between the emperor and the elites blurred, and these values identified with each other (Elliott 2007:183). Cf. Cassidy (2001:5–18) who argues that as its basic characteristics, notwithstanding some fear, apprehension and at times subversion, even the military power and political structures and taxation attracted local populations in different ways through the offer of tangible benefits for populations of subjugated territories: e.g. public works; peace and order; effective administration (incl. Roman citizenship benefits as major prize). The flux and variation of Empire which allowed local populations to fill out contextually the particulars of broad Roman rule is ascribed to Augustus (Galinsky 1996).
31. As long as the benefits were apparent: ‘[W]hatever the costs of Roman conquest and the broader social and political consequences of Roman rule, throughout the empire daily life was certainly safer and more stable’ (Hollingshead 1998:5).

a 'structural reality', comprised of and operating in terms of a principal binary of centre and margins, where centre is often symbolised by a city and margins are that which are subordinated to the centre – at a political, economic or cultural level.<sup>32</sup> Secondly, structurally Empire was not a uniform phenomenon in temporal or spatial sense but 'differentiated in constitution and deployment' regardless of many remaining similarities.<sup>33</sup> It is with a third, and more contested claim about Empire that further theorisation becomes vital. The claim is that the reach and power of Empire was of such an extent that it influenced and impacted in direct and indirect, in overt and subtle ways, 'the entire artistic production of center and margins, of dominant and subaltern, including their respective literary productions' (Segovia 1998:56–57).<sup>34</sup> The unrelenting material presence and ideological influence, traversing other dimensions of first-century life, across a geographically spread of communities, makes good sense in a conceptual framework or theoretical reflection that incorporates two further, important claims about Empire.

Therefore, in addition to the structural, differentiated and influential nature of Empire, a fourth claim is that, all considered, empire is primarily a *conceptual entity* to which its material form(s) attest – even admitting mutuality between structure and idea does not reverse the conceptual *primacy!* Studies of the modern phenomenon of empire<sup>35</sup> also focus on empire as construct, a *concept*, not a nation, and thus without boundaries. Other traits of empire have also emerged above as true of the Roman Empire, too. The concept of empire is unencumbered by borders as it postulates a regime that effectively encompasses *all reality* (the civilised world), in the total sense of the word. Also, empire's rule extends beyond the material and therefore exercises its influence not only on human bodies but on *human psychology* as well. Empire 'creates the very world it inhabits', which includes the material or external as well as the internal world as ultimate bio-power. Finally, the concept of empire is always committed to peace, which is a peace that transgresses all

32. From this key binary (Segovia uses 'binomial'), other binaries soon follow: civilised/uncivilised; advanced/primitive; cultured/barbarian; progressive/backward; developed/undeveloped or underdeveloped. In the discussion of Rome and its role and impact on the communities of the early followers of Jesus, the city of Rome constitutes such as metropolitan or rather imperial centre; and areas such as western and in particular eastern parts of the ancient world, including subcontinents such as Asia, was one of the peripheral areas (Friesen 2001:17).

33. 'Every empire is imperial in its own distinctive way' since '[t]here are empires such as the Ottoman, based on a common religious faith, and there are religiously tolerant, pagan, and even largely secular empires, such as Rome became in its grandest centuries. There are short-lived empires, based, like that of Alexander the Great, upon raw military power. And there are empires that thrive for centuries, usually because, like Rome and Carthage, they achieve commercial prosperity that can enlist the allegiance of far-flung economic elites, or because they establish a professional civil service, an imperial governing class' (Walker 2002:40).

34. The prevailing and pervasive presence of Empire in New Testament texts would thus give rise to questions of culture, ideology and power, such as suggested by Segovia (1998:57–58): 'How do the margins look at the "world" – a world dominated by the reality of empire – and fashion life in such a world? How does the center regard and treat the margins in light of its own view of the "world" and life in that world? What images and representations of the other-world arise from either side? How is history conceived and constructed by both sides? How is the "other" regarded and represented? What conceptions of oppression and justice are to be found?'

35. Applying requisite caution, the recent studies (e.g. 2000, 2004) by literary scholar Michael Hardt and political theorist Antonio Negri on Empire nevertheless add some valuable theoretical resources for theorising (about) ancient empires.

conventional boundaries to become 'a perpetual and *universal peace* outside of history'<sup>36</sup> (Hardt & Negri 2000:xv).

The power of its underlying imperial world view was also the key reason why the Roman Empire did not require constant bloody war and conquest, or continuous subjugation in a vulgar way, to sustain its power – not that there were not also many instances of such practices (even by the hand of Roman emperors). This explains why the image of Romans as expert military strategists in the modern sense is illusory. The status and security of the Roman emperors and powerful elite largely depended on their *perceived ability* to inflict violence. Contrary to expectations, protecting the boundaries of their realm appeared a smaller concern for emperors and elite. Overshadowed by compulsive reaction to what was considered an insult, their reactions do not provide evidence of considering possible risks in relation to potential advantages, and of often having been oblivious to expertise<sup>37</sup> (Mattern 1999).

Beyond restrictive, essentialist understandings of empire,<sup>38</sup> it can be theorised as both dynamic and primarily a process, in its conceptualising as well as its constant fabrication. Accounting for interaction and mutuality, complex but potent, between an underlying imperial worldview and its material manifestations, profits from theorising Empire as concept. Equally, theorising it as concept can invest new potential in analyses of Empire and suggest alternative understandings of its overt and covert presence and influence, without foreclosing on other complexities. But, both for theorising first century Empire and also for framing the understanding of possible links between it and the New Testament in mappings of space and power, a fifth and final important theoretical consideration is crucial – as is referencing some texts.

## Empire as *negotiated* concept

If complicated interrelations are in the end that which constitute empire, attraction to and subversion of Empire, as two opposite positions, characterise the New Testament, they serve not only as markers of a wider range (ambit) of relating to empire, but also sustain the *negotiated* nature of empire.<sup>39</sup> Of course, no (social) programme for political

36. At the heart of imperial peace is violence, ably supported by the military and various other structures, systems and manifestations of violence. Cf. Punt (2011b).

37. This may explain why the 1st century tactician Onasander (1.1) listed intelligence, self-control, sobriety, frugality, used to hardship, thoughtful, indifference to money, neither too youthful or too old, and preferable the father of children, eloquence and a good reputation as required characteristics of a good Roman general. Interestingly, no mention is made of military training or experience, knowledge of geography or military tactics and strategy, knowledge of the enemy or even bravery (Mattern 1999:19–20; cf. Smith 1998:151–166).

38. The disinclination towards an essentialist understanding does not primarily imply a disavowal of any real life, flesh and blood entities (as propagated by some, cf. Roth 2003), but point to the illusory nature of sure categories (essentialism) and certain grounds (objectivity) (cf. Brown 2001:44), i.e. to view social phenomena in terms of trans-historical essences, independent of conscious beings, disallowing the notion that society or people determine the categorical structure of reality.

39. Thinking of empire as concept and understanding it as on-going negotiation are two notions that feed off one another, but are not simply two sides of the same coin. The conceptual nature of empire is required to make sense of its dynamic, evolving nature, while the negotiated nature of empire underlines an important part of the format of its conceptual nature, i.e. empire as co-constructed by all affected, the powerful and the powerless. The focus on two contrasting positions of attraction and subversion is not intended to deny the instability and fluid nature of both, or of the constantly changing and multiplying of other relation to and with Empire – also in the NT.

action against Empire is found in the New Testament, not even in undisguised, anti-imperial rhetoric such as found in Revelation 13. In addition, it does not show evidence of upfront imperialist propaganda, not even in ostensibly pro-imperial texts such as Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. However, with Empire as concept, a structured notion with its existence dependant on ongoing engagements and negotiations, the question is whether such inklings can be traced to New Testament texts. Thinking of Empire as negotiated entity and as impacting and affecting people's lives, and in the end possibly also their literary legacy, the New Testament makes for interesting reading and feeds into our theorisation.<sup>40</sup> For our purposes, New Testament texts' hints about Empire can be grouped around resistance against and attraction to Empire.

### Resistance against Empire, amidst ambiguities

Literary and other evidence of resentment towards or at least ambivalence about Roman imperialism exists, even in Empire's inner circles, of which the famous words of Cicero is a good example.<sup>41</sup> However, the level of antipathy and the extent to which such resentment translated into active revolts among people subordinated to Roman rule, and the nature of such protest and resistance, is difficult to determine.<sup>42</sup> Some scholars understood these actions as part of active and popular protest against the Roman authorities (Horsley 2003d:35). Others argue for a more complex socio-political landscape, and caution that revolts such as that of Judas the Galilean was probably more the result of animosity for being replaced by the Herodian aristocracy, describing their banditry as 'the last efforts of a dying social class to regain its former position of wealth and status within Palestinian life' (e.g. Freyne 1988:50–68, esp. 58).

The New Testament texts probably imbibe similar tensions and possibly even subversive notions toward the Roman Empire. For some, incidents from the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels are telling of both his subversive approach to the political authorities of the day, 'speaking truth to power', as well as the popular, local support he garnered among Galileans and Judeans: the triumphant entry into Jerusalem during the time of the Passover festival, and the 'cleansing' of the Temple are often mentioned (Horsley 2008).<sup>43</sup> With

40. Further, explicit caution is advised in theorising empire, in particular when addressing the relationship between textual legacies and Empire. Texts are neither indicative of a simple or once-off engagement, in a straightforward manner, with Empire; nor did they engage Empire uniformly, in a monolithic, one-size-fits-all approach. Whether construed as subversively kicking against the shins of Empire or walking hand in hand with it, texts (textual communities) are in their engagement with Empire co-constituting it in their own ways. On the one hand, the Empire of the texts was not its mirror image, presenting 'the real thing', a one-on-one representation. On the other hand, Empire was as much material reality as continuously reconstructed and refurbished, by its originators and supporters as much as by its distractors (not either material or notional, but both material-real and pliable-morphing).

41. 'It is difficult to put into words, citizens, how much we are hated among foreign nations because of those whom we have sent to govern them throughout these years, men wanton and outrageous' (Cicero *On the Manilian Law*: 65).

42. As the different understandings of Josephus' account of the resistance by Judas the Galilean and Saddok the Pharisee to the Roman fiscal census in Judea in 6 CE, indicate.

43. Horsley's more general notion that Jesus deliberately directed a programme of the renewal of covenantal Israel in and across villages (Horsley 2008), is probably more difficult to show than to claim as the broad canvas for understanding Jesus' work.

the Roman imperial context as underlying canvas, new questions emerge about the first-century portrait of Paul.<sup>44</sup> For example, what impression would the Pauline emphasis on judgement, according to works (Rm 2:12–16) have made in an ideological context where the superiority of Roman people was celebrated? Or, how would the Pauline insistence on faithfulness (πίστις) 'apart from works (εργα)' have resonated where Roman patronage and the 'works' of benefactors determined people's lives and livelihood – as ultimately underwritten by the emperor as benefactor *par excellence* who readily claimed his 'works' (cf. Augustus and the *Res Gestae*)? How would Paul's proclamation of a single ancestor for all people of the world, Abraham as father of faith but also the 'impious' (ἄσεβής; Rm 4:5), have been perceived in a world where the imperial ideology relied on the legacy of piety exemplified in Aeneas' portrayal? (Elliott 2007:186).

To stay with Paul for a moment, even though the subversive potential of his portrayal of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 1:23–24; 1 Cor 15:24) and relativisation of earthly rule is nowadays more readily acknowledged, such admission does not imply agreement on Paul's stance and actions (explicit or implied) towards the Empire. For some, Paul's position towards Empire merely meant that he subsumed earthly authority and power under God's heavenly power and justice, and the social and political consequences of Christ's universal authority boil down to 'a challenge to rulers to understand the basis of their authority and a call to them to seek God's justice for those whom they rule' (Bryan 2005:92).<sup>45</sup> In contrast, others argue that even the ostensible pro-regime Romans 13 should be read along with Romans 12, which renders a different understanding of Romans 13 and a series of oppositional Pauline claims: undermining and subverting Empire through an apocalyptic challenge; arguing for a transformed body politic; undermining the basis of imperial power, namely honour; undermining the violent ethic of Empire, calling rather blessings onto the enemy; rejecting the imperial path through conquest; denying Rome any divine authority; contrasting the body politic of Jesus with the Roman Empire defined by wrath and sword; and, calling upon the community to love (Keesmaat 2007:141–158; cf. Elliott 2007:187; Wright 2005:78–79). Yet others argue that 'Jesus' alternative vision did not challenge or seek to radically alter the colonial apparatus' (Sugirtharajah 2002:87–91), notwithstanding

44. It was Paul's urban-focussed mission which would have brought him in close contact with the omnipresent imperial tentacles. 'Roman cultural hegemony was exercised principally in the cities and their immediate hinterlands. The possession of Roman culture was another symbol of the status of a community and its leading members, many of whom continued to use the vernacular as the language of common discourse. Roman rule accentuated rather than broke down the divisions between city and country, rich and poor, local elites and the urban and local masses' (Garnsey & Saller 1987:203).

45. A political message running through the Bible as consistent line of calling authorities to assume their God-given responsibilities, subsuming all texts are into this scheme, is promoted unwaveringly by Bryan (2005). He criticises Horsley and Crossan for their respective portrayals of a radical element among early Jesus-followers and Paul, and for questioning the historical veracity of descriptions of Jesus' passion and his trial and execution in particular. But Bryan fails to take Paul's apocalyptic stance seriously, devaluing it to an otherworldly focus; worryingly, Romans 13:1–7 is according to him the only certain passage with 'a Pauline view of the Roman state', and given what Bryan calls Paul's 'broadly favorable view' to it, leads him to conclude that 'the idea that Paul was interested in seeing an end to Roman rule in the sense which, say, Judas the Galilean was interested in that agenda is without basis whatever' (Bryan 2005:92–93).

some Empire-critical Gospel-sayings.<sup>46</sup> Lacking evidence that Jesus challenged the expropriation of land by imperial forces, it seems as if even amidst Jesus' alternative vision, the maintenance of the status quo is presupposed. In the end, 'Jesus is seen as a protector of the weak rather than as a protester against the system which produces and perpetuates predatory conditions' (Sugirtharajah 2002:87–91).

For many scholars at least antipathy towards Empire is present in the New Testament texts, even if the course of action (e.g. opposition; subversion; conflict) and scope of engagement (e.g. intra-community; society-based; structural or personal; conventional or cultural) is not as easily determined. But the situation is more complicated, as antipathy towards Empire is not the only response reflected in New Testament texts.

### Attraction of Empire amidst ambiguities

A negative disposition towards the Roman Empire would be in line with the (a?) biblical and prophetic tradition (e.g. Is 33:22; cf. Mk 1:15) which acknowledges God as ruler of all, and avoids 'privatized, depoliticized, and generally domesticated Jesuses' (Bryan 2005:9). Whether this entails that biblical tradition is not intent on destroying or bluntly replacing one set of human power structures with others, but rather 'consistently confronting them with *the truth about their origin and purpose*' (Bryan 2005:9) is another question.<sup>47</sup> The apocalyptic scenario permeating many texts assumed the replacement of existing human structures with another, divine dispensation; nor is divine purpose attributed to imperial powers or are their ideological claims shared.<sup>48</sup> The silence-based argument about texts' general tenor not showing unequivocal criticism of rulers and their rule, or explicit calls for (violent) action against them (e.g. Bryan 2005), may be early indications of accommodation to Empire. Texts such as Matthew 22:17–21; Romans 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:13–17; or Acts,<sup>49</sup> however, more than hint at accommodation to

46. Four implicit critiques against imperial, hegemonic formations are often pointed out: dealing with the ambitions of the sons of Zebedee, Jesus' pronouncement on preferring a leadership style different from that of worldly leaders (Mk 10:42–45; Mt 20:20–28; Lk 22:24–27); disparaging remarks about the opulent lifestyle and lavish clothing of the rich, and the implicit exploitation of the poor (Mt 11:8; Lk 7:25; cf. Mt 3:4; 6:19–21; Lk 12:33–34, 16:13); the indirect disparagement of the Herodian kingdom, played off against the kingdom of God, in reaction to the accusation that Jesus was aligned with Beelzebub (Mk 3:23–25; Mt 12:25; Lk 11:17); and, the statement about a king counting the cost of going to war (Lk 14:31), probably referring to the war between Herod Antipas and King Aretas of the Nabateans in 32 CE as the culmination of their strained relationship.

47. Bryan's protest against what he portrays as a one-sided, negative reading of Roman Empire in scholarship, and hermeneutics warped by presuppositions (Bryan 2005: esp. 119–123) are unconvincing. A one-sided notion of postcolonial work (which privileges and almost justifies the 'white man's burden' à la Kipling) overlooks notions like mimicry and hybridity that help to articulate resistance to imperial powers, otherwise blurred in a context where aspects and benefits of the powers are in fact appropriated. Second, the absence of ideological criticism has the unfortunate result that ancient sources are generally taken at face value and that the interests of other scholars are questioned without the author accounting for his own. Third, the vast and encompassing role and effect of discursive imperialism, of the Roman imperial ideological propaganda machine that operated even beyond the documents of the imperial 'spin-doctors', is generally not accounted for. A crucial aspect: how can claims that NT authors merely wanted the Empire to acknowledge its dependence on God and insisted 'that they should do their job' (Bryan 2005:9) be maintained amidst the NT's dominant apocalyptic framework presupposing 'regime change'?

48. There is little in the texts (and the accompanying theological interpretative framework is another matter) to support a situation that amounted to a scenario of either simplistically ascribing to imperial figures or actions a theological purpose in (furthering or obstructing) the Kingdom of God, or otherwise removing them from history altogether.

49. For Acts as a political apologetic document, intent of having the Empire and emerging church find common ground, cf. Punt (2010a:45–59); Walton (2002:204).

Empire, going in a different direction from the notion of calling authorities to (God's) order. The point is that suggestions about accommodation to Empire in New Testament texts are inadequate, not for claiming too much, but for claiming too little!

Tolerance (accommodation) is too soft a term to describe the *attraction* to empire, and tends to slight over simultaneous distanciation, revulsion, and subversion (if not active resistance) towards it. Beyond the question whether the attraction of empire is exhausted by a goal of enlistment in trying to make sense of texts such as Romans 13 or Acts, those on the downside of imperial power often avail themselves of empire's structures and rhetoric. Beyond pragmatism, in what can be described as mimicry, those outside the imperial centre often borrow, take up from empire, in order to achieve similar accoutrements as brought about by imperial affiliation (such as power, status, wealth), even if along different lines and for different purposes. Amidst the powerful, political manoeuvres and overtures of the imperial mighty ones, the subalterns were engaged in actions of negotiating their positions anew (Price 2004:176).<sup>50</sup>

The attraction of empire is a powerful mechanism through which apparent opposition to empire is co-opted, and translated into alter-empire. A rhetoric of alter-empire is built around the proposition of 'a parallel, more powerful imperial structure and presence to that which is being made manifest in the world' (Aymer 2005:141). If dealing with Empire means its replacement with another, even if metaphysical, the same imperial rhetoric is bound to surface, complete with potentially (world-)devastating consequences.<sup>51</sup> An alter-empire lens exposes the influence of imperial logic in the New Testament: Revelation portrays an alternative, divine empire equally soaked in blood (cf. Rv 14); Matthew ascribes all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus (Mt 28:18); Jesus is born as the commander-in-chief of the entire heavenly army (Lk 2:13); the representative of Rome identifies Jesus rather than the emperor as Son of God (Mk 15:39); Jesus disrupts imperial time with a new sense of eternity (Jn 1:1–2); Paul called for an otherworldly citizenship (Phlp 3:20) and anticipated the annihilation of his opponents (1 Th 2:16, 5:3); and so forth<sup>52</sup> (cf. Aymer 2005:144–145). An alter-empire

50. Hegemony in postcolonial thought is often portrayed as *domination by consent* (Gramsci), 'the active participation of a dominated group in its own subjugation', and regardless of the numerical advantage of the subjugated over the powerful, even if the oppressor or army of occupation have the advantage in terms of instruments of subjugation such as sophisticated weaponry and the like. 'In such cases ... the indigene's desire for self-determination will have been replaced by a discursively inculcated notion of the greater good, couched in such terms as social stability ... and economic and cultural advancement' (cf. Moore 2006a:101). E.g. Paul and his communities found themselves in a hegemonic situation, largely characterised by consensual domination. In the Gramscian sense – evidence of uprisings and revolts in the areas where Paul claimed to have been working as apostle, is scarce and probably an instance where the exception (insurrection) proved the rule (negotiated domination).

51. Claims about Paul's 'counter-imperial' theology (cf. Wright 2005:69–79) are offset with the notion that Paul was opposed to Caesar's empire not because it was *empire*, but because it was *Caesar's* and because Caesar claimed divine status and honours which only belong to God (Wright 2000:164).

52. Cf. Paul's long tirade against the wisdom and power of the powers-that-be in 1 Corinthians 1–4; his retort is not to let go of such claims and configurations, but rather to re-configure, to re-assemble prerogatives and priorities and privilege – not only what favours and appeals to him in his situation but also claiming divine sanction for his newly formulated position. Cf. Punt (2011a).



postulated and even propagated in the New Testament is not a notion that will surprise postcolonial analysts; in fact, Empire is often resisted not with that which is contrary to empire (anti-empire), but rather with a difference in agency (alter-empire).<sup>53</sup>

Attraction of empire entails more than tolerating propaganda, the ideological image of political stability and peace, and economic security and progress (= control) as the benefits of empire – whether through empire's self-portrayal or the perceptions generated by its direct, implicated and indirect beneficiaries. Attraction of empire is about its appeal, its perceived 'rationality', including normality, properness and order.<sup>54</sup> All of life is integrated in what can be called an imperial framework project, and no effort, forceful, persuasive or otherwise, is spared to prove the framework as rational and beneficial to all. Problems show up when it is challenged, or when the power source or material means that maintains it collapses, or when the majority of people are no longer convinced that it is indeed a proper and rational framework.

Since interactions with the Roman Empire constructed from (through) New Testament texts were hardly univocal or monolithic, the notions of (a position of) subversion and (an attitude of) attraction can be useful, but only when not posited as necessarily mutually exclusive. Positions towards Empire were dynamic, not simply static positions 'for' or 'against', as people's responses to and interactions with Empire were infinitely more complex and hybrid than merely those of singular support or opposition.<sup>55</sup>

## Negotiating empire: (Postcolonial) Tools of the Trade?

Naming and describing postcolonial criticism is difficult given the hybridity of its subject matter in various aspects (practitioners, ideological concerns, its subject matter; is it about texts or practices, about psychological conditions of historical processes, cf. Mongia, in Gallagher 1996:229), because it is a relatively new approach, but also because of the imperialist tendencies incorporated in the impulse and act of definition.

A final question is what, methodologically, is needed and warranted for approaching Empire and biblical studies along such lines: Empire as primarily a conceptual entity, existing through on-going choices and negotiations between rulers

53. The New Testament is far more imperial, alter-imperial yes, but imperial nevertheless, than some of us with less imperial agendas care to admit' (Aymer 2005:146).

54. In other words, 'soft power', the ability of the powerful to make others want the same as that which empire and its forces want (cf. Walker 2002:48, taking the phrase from Joseph S. Nye of Harvard University).

55. On the one hand, it was a matter of diversity: '[f]ollowers of Jesus employ various strategies – survival, accommodation, protest, dissent, imitation – in negotiating Rome's world' (Carter 2006:26). On the other hand, negotiation entailed much ambivalence: 'People endure indignities because the coercive power of their rulers gives them no alternative and in some cases because they become habituated to the ideology and rituals that enforce their subordination' (Horsley 2008).

and subjects, notwithstanding its military power and ensuing oppression and subjection of people? Different reading paradigms render different understandings of empire and biblical texts' interaction with Empire,<sup>56</sup> but postcolonial work is particularly well placed to deal with the New Testament and Empire relation.<sup>57</sup> Alert to the literary nature of New Testament texts, postcolonial readings show upon indeterminacy and instability that can be identified in many texts (cf. Burrus 2007:153), investigating power, language, and the imagery of New Testament texts, as well as the socio-political structures and power relations it draws upon (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 2007:4–5). Postcolonial work goes beyond anti-imperial readings,<sup>58</sup> since the understanding of what constitutes the colonial and the imperial provides new challenges, not least the ever-present danger of overlooking alter-imperial rhetoric, of re-inscribing privilege and power.<sup>59</sup> In picking up on surface-level and underlying tensions in texts, postcolonial biblical criticism is useful *and* effective in studying Empire not only as material setting but also as heuristic grid for biblical interpretation (cf. Punt 2010b).<sup>60</sup>

A postcolonial perspective does not neglect material analysis, neither investigations of Empire as cultural production nor as social matrix. The analysis of the texts from early Christianity in the light of the broader sociocultural context prevailing around the Mediterranean constitutes a first dimension of a postcolonial optic. It conceives of Empire as 'omnipresent, inescapable and overwhelmingly socio-political reality –

56. A doctrinal-theological paradigm that underwrites the Bible as word of God tends to either accept the rhetoric of empire as part of divine revelation or employs an apologetic rhetoric intent upon absolving biblical authors of accusations of complicity in imperial rhetoric. Another deep-rooted tradition is the positivist historical or social-scientific antiquarian paradigm, vested in so-called objective, scientific description of empire, albeit generally limited to material appearances. A third, hermeneutical paradigm insists upon a division of hermeneutical labour between interpretation and application, maintaining careful boundaries between what a text meant (the exegete's prerogative) and what it means (the pastor, minister or theologian's terrain). A fourth series of approaches (incl. critical feminist, postcolonial, ideology-critical, cultural, race and class studies, cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 2005:137) are apprehensive about the former paradigms, and can be described as collectively constituting a critical public discourse paradigm. Seeing rhetoric as incorporating ethical and political dimensions, they insist on understanding biblical texts as 'rhetorical discourses that must be investigated as to their persuasive and argumentative functions in particular historical and cultural situations of empire' (Schüssler Fiorenza 2005:137; cf. Aymer 2005:142).

57. Empire studies are valuable for investigating the nature, reach and impact of first-century Roman Empire but the rise of postcolonial studies have sounded warnings to avoid the pitfalls of recent empire (or better, anti-imperial) studies which tended to lean towards the rehabilitation of the writings rather than self-critical engagement with them. The value of postcolonial theory in the investigation of Empire can be described in different ways, particularly in raising awareness about neglected aspects of imperial and colonialist forces, structures and practices, as well as about uneven power relationships.

58. This is partly a problem with terminology: should all forms of political rule and/or government in the Bible simply be posed as 'empire', as some scholars appear to do (cf. Bryan 2005); greater sensitivity is needed for the most plausible socio-historical settings as well as for (as gleaned from social/political sciences) the intricacies and involvedness of empire as explained above.

59. On the one hand, imperial-colonial contact has always been multifarious in nature (Segovia 2005:68); on the other hand, (post)colonial and imperial studies can be distinguished from one another (Segovia 2000b:133–135). Imperialism as general description of what concerns the centre or metropolis, can be distinguished from colonialism as that which is related to the margins or periphery (Segovia 2000c:13). Criticising Loomba's work, Marchal (2008:128, n. 8) holds that because centre and periphery are mutually constitutive relations, the generalised distinction 'is neither particularly helpful nor descriptive.'

60. While the importance of a historical perspective, and a critical one at that, is important in postcolonial studies, it is doubtful whether the claim that 'postcolonial criticism does not reject the insights of historical criticism' (Kwok 2005:80) is altogether appropriate – cf. e.g. Segovia (1995:278–285; 2000b:39); on the danger of 'promiscuous marriages' of theoretical frameworks of perspective, cf. Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:38–39). On the other hand, this is not to deny historical criticism's suspicious and against-the-grain readings of ecclesial authorised readings of the Bible (cf. Barton 1998:16–19).



the reality of Empire, of imperialism and colonialism,<sup>61</sup> as variously constituted and exercised during the long period in question' (Segovia 1998:56).<sup>62</sup> Crucial to such literary and historical work, ideological reflection on historical and discursive imperialism and colonialism<sup>63</sup> marks another dimension of postcolonial work.

In addition to material analysis and ideological investigation, postcolonial work in the third place acknowledges that imperialism and colonialism is set in strong ambivalence, particularly also with regard to the relationship between the powerful and the powerless for which, for example, the notion of mimicry is often employed. Biblical texts are read without foreclosing on their ambiguities, without positing a strong resistance to Empire on one level as excluding collusion at another. A postcolonial perspective assists in accounting for both the attraction of empire in all its ambivalence and amidst resistance to it through mimicry, analysing the conceptual nature of empire through the hybridity of imperial power-mongers and subservient peripherals, dealing with identity and agency without resorting to the kind of simplicity and generalisation brought about by essentialism.<sup>64</sup>

Fourthly, its ability to provide a broader interpretative framework, the capacity to frame and scrutinise imperialism as reflected in biblical texts, to pick up on surface-level and underlying tensions in texts, positions postcolonial biblical criticism as useful heuristic grid for studying empire and Bible. This is no simple task in the presence of virulent problems such as determining textual pitch. On the one hand, biblical documents were hardly of imperial origin or 'public transcripts of power', determined largely by those who ruled, who had the resources, ability and reason to write. On the other hand, are biblical texts 'hidden transcripts' when they came from the literate and therefore higher classes,<sup>65</sup>

61. Imperialism and colonialism, both intimately related to structures of political power and ideology, economic structures and practices, and social-cultural configurations and experiences, are respectively 'the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan city ruling a distant territory' and (as a consequence of imperialism) 'the implanting of settlements on distant territory' (Said 1993:9–10). Colonialism can generally refer to 'any relation of structural domination which relies upon a self-serving suppression of "the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question"' (Gandhi 1998:85, referring to Talpade Mohanty). Given the tension between centre and margin, postcolonial is a 'classic and confusing study of synecdoche', making 'Imperial/Colonial Studies' more appropriate (Segovia 2000c:14, n. 1).

62. Postcolonial theory is, notwithstanding its opposition to modernist approaches to history (linearity; evolutionary progression; etc.), an important asset in making sense of the material setting and related aspects of history, by indeed providing hermeneutical perspective and analytical tools with which to interpret the materialities of all-encompassing imperial settings.

63. Dealing with colonialism and imperialism, the reach of postcolonial studies extends to the realm of the geopolitical since they are engaged in the dialectical relationship between centre and margins, metropolis and periphery as found on a global political scale, in both social and cultural modes. It is appropriate, therefore, to envisage postcolonial studies as multidimensional, multiperspectival and multidisciplinary (Segovia 2000c:11–12).

64. A postcolonial reading not only deals with matters ideological when it comes to the interpretation of New Testament texts in the context of imperialism and (related) subsidiary hegemonic contexts, manifested in uneven social systems of power such as slavery, patronage, patriarchy, and the like. Through its focus on identity politics, its use of concepts like ambivalence, mimicry and hybridity, postcolonial theory also assists in making sense of texts emanating from contexts of imperialism.

65. The practices and claims directed against empire but that no-one dared to express out loud for fear of their lives, the 'social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced' (Scott 1990:xii), were the 'hidden manuscripts' of the oppressed: a hidden discourse linked to culture, religion and hegemony, originating from those who either did not have the resources to record this discourse, or chose to hide the discourse, not to record it for fear of reprisals.

accustomed to wealth and influence, from the privileged few of the time?<sup>66</sup> To what extent and how do the texts convey something of the life and concerns of people more generally?

Finally, postcolonial raising of awareness about the neglected aspects of imperial and colonialist forces, structures and practices ranks as particularly important. With postcolonialism's reach extending to the global *academic* world, it provides, also, 'an ethical paradigm for a systematic critique of institutional suffering' (Gandhi 1998:174). In fact, postcolonial thinking in its insistence on a self-critical, reflexive attitude<sup>67</sup> of investigators does not obliterate the attraction of empire even in academic work.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

Bearing in mind that it was structural and conceptual, differentiated and influential, and importantly, also negotiated, *Empire* remains the best description of what the Romans did in the first-century Mediterranean world in their domination over extended territories and diverse groups.<sup>69</sup> The first-century Roman Empire was neither monolithic nor was it merely imposed in singular, simplistic fashion on passive, disinterested subjects, the profile of whom was equally composite and complex. But it was principally the distillation of sustained interaction between rulers and subjects, imperial forces and indigenous foreigners, with (without) intermediaries.

Framing Empire as negotiated concept does not deny but does intensify the inevitable imperial setting of New Testament documents, moving the discussion forward from a restricted focus on historical descriptions of material or ideological resources. If negotiations with imperial ideology and imposition were neither one-dimensional, nor devoid of intersecting and mutually informing, criss-crossing lines between empire and subjects, nor oblivious to imperial rub-off amidst resistance against it, Empire and the Bible studies can benefit from further theoretical and investigative work in these directions.<sup>70</sup>

66. Even if privilege in the first century CE was always relative! Israel was something of an exception since Israel created scriptures (Bryan 2005:12); however, also in the case of Israel only small, literate and articulate groups were responsible for the eventual writing of the documents.

67. In the words of Horsley (2003b:129): 'The question is how to include some critical awareness of the results and implications of our position [=the academe, as imperial metropolis], including the concept of religion.' Not in the least, also, since 'imperialism and colonialism have come – by and large but by no means altogether so – to a formal end but remain very much at work in practice, as neoimperialism and neocolonialism' (Segovia 1998:51, n. 3), also in biblical scholarship.

68. Roth (2003:125) suggests that scholars today are also tempted by the desire to control the academic discourse in a particular field, also in discussions of empire: 'We often want power, meagre though it may be, which takes the form of dominating a field, determining where inquiry should go, showing that we are right and others are wrong, and insisting that one "must" do this or think that.' (Roth 2003:125).

69. Dangerous for different reasons, a preliminary description may nevertheless be attempted: Empire is a complex, intricate constellation or web of interrelations between the powerful and marginalised, characterised by uneven power relations but constantly negotiated and aimed at the submission of those on the periphery and who are often in distant settings, by taking over and controlling land and resources.

70. Investigations of Empire and Bible beyond socio-historical, descriptive and similar investigations could include: how groups and communities struggled to deal with the imperial pull and push of assimilation, and resultant dangers; efforts to maintain a certain identity and/or tradition in the face of imperial imposition; and, to understand the efforts to move towards the rewriting of a group's identity completely, in contradistinction from imperial influence and impact (cf. Martin & Barnes 2003:11).

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