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Apocalypse and Difference:

Rereading Cultural Boundaries in Early Christian Texts

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in History

by

Patrick George McCullough

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in History
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The dissertation that follows pursues two complementary tracks: (1) a cultural critique of scholarship on earliest Christianity and (2) an original contribution regarding the social function of apocalyptic discourse in our earliest Christ-confessing texts. I situate early Christian scholarship as it relates to apocalyptic discourse and anti-imperialism. My thesis is that such scholarship is bound by return-to-origins strategies that make early Christ-groups exceptional from their social and cultural environments. These strategies provide avenues for progressive Christian scholars to legitimate their modern ideological perspectives. This dissertation provides insight into such operations in the field of apocalyptic discourse that has scarcely been explored and previously only in a sporadic manner. I use this occasion to argue that such operations belie
the social complexities of early Christ-groups. I argue, then, that essentialist strategies to
promote early Christian exceptionalism work to mask how embedded early Christ-confessing
authors were within their ancient Mediterranean settings. I have targeted apocalyptic discourse
because such discourse appears to suggest a starker, apparently more “sectarian” contrast
between insiders and outsiders than potentially any other. It is even in the midst of such dualistic
discourse that we see early Christ-confessing authors fully participating within their social world.

I dedicate two chapters to unpacking our scholarly operations and another two chapters
“zooming in” on two very different “case studies” in which such operations introduce challenges
to our academic knowledge of Christian origins. In Chapter 1, I lay the groundwork for my
critique of scholarly maneuvers vis-à-vis essentialist return-to-origins narratives and early
Christian exceptionalism. I then turn my attention to “empire” and apocalyptic discourse in
particular in Chapter 2. My third chapter targets issues of identity and empire that capture
scholarly attention on First Thessalonians, while my fourth chapter underscores how Revelation
scholars have reframed the apocalypse to fit anti-imperial paradigms and absolve the document’s
disturbing elements. What these case studies and theoretical interventions demonstrate is that we
must honestly accept the complexity of the earliest Christ-confessing texts. As historians, we
must not simply bolster their subversiveness in hopes of authorizing our modern progressive
ideologies, no matter how fundamental are our contemporary fights.
The dissertation of Patrick George McCullough is approved.

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To Christina, Declan, and Evelyn
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Introduction

The dissertation that follows pursues two complementary tracks: (1) a cultural critique of scholarship on earliest Christianity and (2) an original contribution regarding the social function of apocalyptic discourse in our earliest Christ-confessing texts. I situate early Christian scholarship as it relates to apocalyptic discourse and anti-imperialism. My thesis is that such scholarship is bound by return-to-origins strategies that make early Christ-groups exceptional from their social and cultural environments. These strategies provide avenues for progressive Christian scholars to legitimate their modern ideological perspectives. Such operations are themselves worth investigating and situating within their own cultural matrices. This dissertation provides insight into such operations in the field of apocalyptic discourse that has scarcely been explored and previously only in a sporadic manner. I use this occasion to argue that such operations belie the social complexities of early Christ-groups. I argue, then, that essentialist strategies to promote early Christian exceptionalism work to mask how embedded early Christ-confessing authors were within their ancient Mediterranean settings. I have targeted apocalyptic discourse because such discourse appears to suggest a starker, apparently more “sectarian” contrast between insiders and outsiders than potentially any other. It is even in the midst of such dualistic discourse that we see early Christ-confessing authors fully participating within their social world.

I dedicate two chapters to unpacking our scholarly operations and another two chapters “zooming in” on two very different “case studies” in which such operations introduce challenges to our academic knowledge of Christian origins. In Chapter 1, “Authorizing Exceptionalism and Essentialism,” I lay the groundwork for my critique of scholarly maneuvers vis-à-vis essentialist
return-to-origins narratives and early Christian exceptionalism. I identify where the problems lie here—what is at stake with such readings. Namely, I demonstrate how progressive, often anti-imperial readings of the New Testament domesticate or sanitize subversion in a way that is palatable for Western Christians, on the one hand, and that universalizes progressive Christian claims for all interpreters, on the other. I introduce in this chapter the problem of “origins” that plagues this field of research and propose a way forward for researching texts that have been canonized without reifying the authority of that canon. In other words, I examine scholarly attempts to return to the “origins” of an essentialized Christianity in order to say that Christianity is what we want it to be. To shed light on such operations by way of comparison, I explore the operations that are embedded within cultural discussions of American origins. I apply these insights to two progressive readers in particular: John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg.

Having laid the foundations for my critique of exceptionalism and essentialism in progressive interpretations of the earliest Christ-confessing texts, I then turn my attention to “empire” and apocalyptic discourse in particular in Chapter 2 (“Empire and Apocalypse: Towards a Discourse Analysis”). In order to explore how apocalyptic discourse functions in early Christ-confessing literature, especially in view of the empire, I examine theories of how Roman imperial power functions and how early Christ-groups were situated within Roman society. We need an approach that does not excuse the brutality of imperial authority, but which also highlights how local groups and provinces participated in Roman society and culture to serve their own localized ends. Christ-groups fit squarely into this paradigm, participating in Roman cultural practices even while they, at times, critique particular Roman authority. Understanding such imperial dynamics helps to uncover the operations at play with the most-used theoretical approaches regarding empire in New Testament studies: James C. Scott and
Homi Bhabha. I examine and contextualize the use of these scholars more comprehensively than has currently been seen in any other works in New Testament studies.

One of the key themes that we see in the use of Scott’s “hidden transcript” notion is that “empire studies” NT scholars use to show how many (if not all) the New Testament documents are “anti-imperial”—even if they do not seem so at first glance. I explore this theme in greater depth than other scholars of NT texts to highlight the problems embedded within an overreliance on Scott’s paradigm, particularly when applied uncritically. Homi Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and ambivalence tend to find more complex interactions in scholarship on NT documents, but nevertheless also face critical problems. In fact, both theorist’s concepts suggest a “resistance” that does not actually pose any real threat to the authorities. When such non-threatening forms of resistance are read into the NT documents and then transferred into a modern context, this bolsters critiques of subversive interpretation as sanitized, domesticated resistance today. In the end, then, lauding the anti-imperialism in the biblical texts apparently does more to rescue the biblical canon’s authority for ideological shifts in many of these readings than it does for today’s resistance movements.

Having situated the study of empire and the fundamental problems in how theory has been applied, I articulate my understanding of “apocalyptic discourse” and how this particular focus helps us explore the questions of this dissertation. In this chapter, I identify the social function of apocalyptic discourse, as it legitimates the cultural practices and ideological positioning of its author. Apocalyptic discourse need not be deployed in any single literary form or towards any one particular end. As with any legitimating discourse, apocalyptic discourse is flexible in its symbolism and function. I highlight here how scholarship has moved over the years in its discussions on the genre of apocalypse and how such insights have shifted the
conversation of early Christ-confessing apocalyptic discourse—from fraught theological conversations over the role of apocalyptic discourse in early Christian communities and what this means to more recent arguments promoting apocalyptic discourse as fundamentally subversive. This dissertation unmasks the interests embedded within these more recent academic maneuvers.

I have chosen two case studies that figure prominently in Christian apocalyptic imagination historically. Meanings within these works remain contested and display our modern-day ideological proclivities. In my third chapter (“Parousia, Identity, and Empire in First Thessalonians”), I target issues of identity and empire that have captured scholarly attention in First Thessalonians. Conversations regarding identity and empire have gravitated towards the apocalyptic discourse found within this earliest text of Christ-groups—namely, what has been called the “second coming” of Christ or Christ’s παρουσία. Within this letter, we have several challenging theoretical issues that present themselves. First, we confront the idea of a heroic Paul, so dominant in Pauline studies, raising his fist to the powers that be. The letter, in fact, lists three co-authors (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy). This raises the recurring theme of returning to authority figures within Christian origins.

Furthermore, several terms related to both empire and apocalyptic discourse come to the fore in such discussions of First Thessalonians: παρουσία, εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, ἀπάντησις, and κύριος. Those arguing that the letter is fundamentally anti-imperial (e.g., Neil Elliot) see these terms as keys to unlocking this revolutionary message. Those arguing the letter has nothing to do with empire (e.g., Abraham Malherbe) deny these terms have any sort of connection to imperial ideology. I critique both readings and demonstrate that this letter participates in the imperial discourse of Rome, the letter’s authors deploying the terms above to promote their ideals for Christ followers in ancient Mediterranean society. I accomplish this by highlighting the use of
several of these terms in ancient Mediterranean literature. For example, several scholars suggest “peace and security” (εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια) is a Roman slogan that Paul—they rarely mention his co-authors—uses as a “hidden transcript” (referring to Scott’s concept). Using ancient evidence, I show that (1) it is not a Roman “slogan,” (2) the terms are nevertheless separately evocative of Roman authority, and finally, (3) such usage constitutes participation in not resistance to ancient Mediterranean discursive practices. This discussion highlights the pitfalls of simplistic understandings of identity theory and empire studies.

In my fourth and final chapter, I tackle perhaps the most contested and complex document included within the New Testament canon. My analysis underscores how scholars have evolved in their stances on the apocalypse and its situation within the Roman world. Revelation scholars once insisted on an actual persecution, which later moved towards the perception of persecution as the text’s social historical background. Anti-imperial readers of Revelation deemphasize perception and focus more on strategies that promote the author’s antagonism to Rome, regardless of John’s social and cultural status. In particular, I highlight how such scholars have picked up on a theme of “parody” in Revelation. At one time, interpreters viewed this as a simple literary device (e.g., certain Christ followers are poor, but rich; conquering through death) but progressive Christian scholars have increasingly pursued interpretations that suggest Revelation is a thorough-going satire. They do this to brush aside passages that present difficulties (i.e., Revelation’s misogyny and violence). These scholars suggest Revelation is merely mimicking Rome in order to mock it and thus the document is not only anti-imperial, but even nonviolent.

Highlighting the theoretical pitfalls of such readings, I also situate Revelation within its own ancient Mediterranean context. To underscore the problems of exceptionalism raised here, I
use Roman satire as an avenue for seeing that Revelation is not an anomaly in the Roman world.
Even those who are close to power in Rome use otherworldly journeys, divine judgment, and satire (if we accept this as operative in Revelation) as a way to critique particular Roman authorities. Yet, such authors remain embedded within their Roman paradigms. Their satirical critiques do not remove them from time and space. The same is true for Revelation, which participates in cultural critique of particular Roman authority through a violent revenge fantasy of an exiled author—perhaps comparable to the previously exiled Seneca and his *Apocolocyntosis*. Satire does not save John from our modern reservations. What these case studies and theoretical interventions demonstrate is that we must honestly accept the complexity of the earliest Christ-confessing texts. As historians, we must not simply bolster their subversiveness in hopes of authorizing our modern progressive ideologies, no matter how fundamental are our contemporary fights.

Finally, I believe that it is incumbent upon us, as scholars, to self-reflexively evaluate our own cultural orientations and how these orientations affect the direction of our work. This, indeed, lies at the heart of my argument: that our ideological commitments often lead us down a wishful reading of authoritative texts. This dissertation has itself constituted my own personal journey with this academic field. I do identify as a “progressive” myself and have, in the past, participated in communities that read early Christian texts as authoritative. I began my doctoral work as Barack Obama was elected and Democrats held majorities in both houses of Congress. At this time, I listened to sermons and associated with Christian scholars who looked to the most liberationist readings of biblical texts as a way to authorize present-day behavior. In this atmosphere, exploring the many layers of progressivism, how such layers operate, and their cultural consequences seemed entirely appropriate.
I finish this dissertation in a very different era. Ideologically, in 2018, I would place myself within the “resistance” to the political authorities controlling our national government. I am tempted to say that my nuanced critique of progressive authorizing strategies feels less urgent. However, as we look towards building a political future, my strongest conviction remains: we need to attend to the ways in which we define what voices are included within a socially progressive society. For example, do we privilege a sanitized understanding of liberalism that offers the most benefits to those who already hold privilege? Do we accept the push of some white progressives who exclude black voices from their political paradigms? And do we accept revisions of Christian history in ways that reinforce biblical authority, that universalize such reinterpretations as the true reading for all interpreters? In such reinterpretations of New Testament texts as “anti-imperial,” do we participate in reinforcing biblical authority rather than bring our honest questions to historical texts? Even when resistance is the priority, resisters need to keep a keen eye on the shape of that resistance. This is why I bring such questions to bear on these texts. We cannot blindly let biblical authority dominate a field that is putatively non-confessional. We need to be honest about what operations our tools for resistance actually do and who most benefits from such operations.
Chapter 1: Authorizing Exceptionalism and Essentialism

The Domestication of Subversion in Academic Discourse and the Universalizing of Progressive Christian Claims

Many scholars of biblical and other early Jewish and Christian texts position these works as radical examples of resistance literature. Such concerns, of course, emerge out of the impacts of Western imperialism and its global victims of multifaceted domination. These scholars have heard the calls of postcolonial authors and revolutionary leaders seeking to promote justice and eliminate oppression. I share the cause of promoting justice for the global poor and marginalized. I also sympathize with the need to authorize such a cause and shift the discursive agendas, particularly, of American evangelical social actors. However, as a scholar uninterested in promoting a confessional perspective and who operates in a nonconfessional setting, I see many of the interpretative considerations of this scholarship unnecessary and perhaps harmful.

This dissertation seeks to situate such liberationist interpretative moves as rooted in an interest to rescue the authoritative status of the Christian Bible. In the tradition of the late Jonathan Z. Smith and many others before me, I argue that early Christian texts must be read not as wholly unique and distinct but as examples of identity negotiation by full members of Roman society. In particular, I target apocalyptic discourse as a nuanced arena in which such negotiation takes place. While early Christian apocalyptic discourse displays apparent fractures between these groups and other members of their society, I will demonstrate that such stark language belies the varied ways in which Christians participated in their Mediterranean social and cultural systems. In this chapter, the dissertation first targets the theoretical foundations of my analytical paradigm, namely, how essentialism and exceptionalism function within liberative readings of the New Testament more generally. I here triangulate my approach within among the various
critiques of liberative biblical scholarship. In the second chapter, I explore how such discussions have played out in the field of apocalyptic discourse in particular. Finally, in two remaining chapters, I evaluate the apocalyptic discourse of three separate and distinct texts (1 Thessalonians and Revelation), highlighting academic debates on these sources and demonstrating the varied ways that apocalyptic discourse gets operationalized in such texts as early Christ-confessing groups navigated their place in ancient Mediterranean society.

To start, we need to understand three primary concerns regarding liberative biblical scholarship. First, liberative interpretations often settle on a liberationist theological reading of biblical texts that is then universalized for all interpreters. Confessional statements on radicality then marginalize those who do not participate in confessional networks, enshrining largely Christian traditions. Within the interpretative moves of scholars seeking to promote biblical texts as bastions of subversion, ideological interests are entangled with historical and literary techniques. Such scenarios lead to slippage between scholarship presented as if non-confessional and a scholar’s confessional interests in maintaining the authority of the Bible. Here, claims are made about individual biblical texts and the Bible as a whole as innately revolutionary. Christianity itself then becomes redefined as anti-imperial or subversive at its core. One can understand the impulse for activists to make such appeals to the Bible, targeting their evangelical interlocutors with a shared authoritative source. In response to the disturbing level of white nationalist discourse in Donald Trump’s path to election, progressive Christian activist and founder of Sojourners Magazine, Jim Wallis, calls on Christians to replace “white identity politics with faith identity politics.”

1 Jim Wallis, “Time for Healing. And Resistance,” Sojourners, November 9, 2016, https://sojo.net/articles/time-healing-and-resistance. Wallis used this line in a prayer on a phone call with other liberal Christian leaders the same day, saying, “We ask you, Lord, to replace the white-identity politics that dominated this election with a faith-
“operational acts of identification,” then this is precisely the project in which liberal Christians are participating.\(^2\) They have not rediscovered the timeless truth of Christianity as innately revolutionary, but rather have sought ways to effectively reconfigure Christian discourse towards progressive ideological ends, to redefine what it means to be a true Christian.

Such claims of authenticity are to be expected within the realm of popular discourse, but again it is the slippage between confessional activism and scholarship framed as if non-confessional that presents challenges. Namely, progressive Christianity is held as the standard for all interpreters and perhaps even all (non-Christian) progressive activists. As an example, the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) hosted a discussion on race and society under the banner of its theme for that year, “Revolutionary Love.” The theme itself was set by the 2016 President of the AAR, Serene Jones, also President of the progressive Union Theological Seminary in New York. Leading up to the conference, a number of scholars wrote of their concerns regarding an academic conference theme that seemed to establish a liberal Christian mission for a conference dedicated to the academic study of religion.\(^3\)


The panel concerning race and religion under this theme performed an illustrative dance between contemporary social policy discussions and progressive Christian activism, one that reinforced the concerns voiced by some scholars in advance of the conference. In reflecting on her experience in the audience of this discussion, Laura Levitt critiqued the session as the universalization of progressive Christianity for all AAR participants. The session was a discussion between Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, and Kelly Brown Douglas, author of *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. Levitt expresses her profound resonance for the first portion of the session, which featured Alexander’s social critique; namely, her pointed detailing of “the radical degradation of people of color, of especially Black men in the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex that institutionalized these enactments and perpetuates them.” However, she notes, “the conversation took, what was for me, an unexpected turn.” She continues,

The revolution became spiritual, and, more specifically, a proclamation of the power of “the Church,” of Jesus’s suffering on the cross, on the brother/sisterhood of humanity, all of us “children of God.” This was a decidedly Christian universal message. Just as Alexander proclaimed the bankruptcy of American democracy she proclaimed the revolutionary power of the Church. I could not help but hear a call to crusade, a sacred revolution in the name of Jesus Christ and I was no longer a part of this story. The discourse had shifted, profoundly. I was in a different universe.

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
Levitt laments that her “scholarly organization has become an arm of Union Seminary.”8 Most troublingly, she writes, is the complete silence on the fact that “the Church” has long represented a much different vision for the nation than the one now presented by progressive Christians. “But either way, Christian hegemony reigns supreme.”9 That is, for an outsider attending this officially sanctioned AAR session, this session felt like a way to validate the vision of Christianity one finds at Union.

I do not seek to delegitimate those Christian leaders who use the language of “faith” as a way to “rally their troops” towards revolutionary ends, but to critique how such faith-based academic conversation normalizes this language for those not included in this conversation. In other words, I have no interest in doubting the sincerity of such faith-based discursive appeals, but rather I seek to situate their social function. A question remains about whether such moves, depending on their contexts, serve in effect to mobilize social change or rather primarily to shift and redeem one’s own particular “faith identity politics.” In these discursive contexts, as noted, social critique often slips into faith-based social critique and putatively non-confessional scholarship can become faith-based activism through scholarship. For instance, Stephen Young uses Pierre Bourdieu’s “protective strategies” to situate evangelical scholars who bolster inerrancy while “represent[ing] themselves as practicing true, honest, and legitimate historical scholarship.”10 In other words, Young finds that such inerrantists utilize the “prestige of the academic” to legitimate the ideological discourse surrounding “inerrancy.”

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Even more to the point for our discussion, Rebekka King similarly uses Bourdieu to argue “that the study of religion and biblical criticism by progressive Christians serves as an ideal venue in which they are able to construct, articulate, and proudly assume an alternative, non-normative Christian identity.”\(^{11}\) Indeed, as with many identification strategies, King argues that such progressive Christian academic interventions function to distinguish these scholars from “an evangelical or fundamentalist representation of Christianity, which I term, following Jonathan Z. Smith, a ‘Protestant proximate other.’”\(^{12}\) Claims to authenticity move in different directions for inerrantist and progressive Christian scholars. Young describes the former as claiming *academic authenticity*, while King positions progressive Christian scholars as claiming to represent *authentic Christianity*. These claims are necessarily entangled: authorizing strategies for academic claims and confessional Christian claims support one another on both sides. For inerrantists, the inerrancy of the Bible is a legitimately academic conclusion, not merely one of faith. For progressives, conservative Protestants are stuck in backwards cultural ideas and must contend with the historical contexts of the Bible. A proper understanding of the Bible within these contexts, they claim, necessarily promote nonviolence, anti-imperialism, and liberationist readings of biblical texts.

Second, many scholarly claims of various forms of revolutionary or liberative hermeneutics take place in a relatively “safe” social and cultural context in the West. Indeed, not only are such claims often “safe,” but participate in neoliberal discourses that counterintuitively


\(^{12}\) King, 15.
bolster Western forms of capitalism and modern imperial ideologies. In the field of historical
Jesus studies, both Robert Myles and James Crossley have made such arguments. Myles focuses
particularly on the work of N. T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan in emphasizing the
“subversion” of Jesus. Noting the pervasiveness of this motif, Myles catalogues Wright’s
heightened appeals to subversion: “‘profoundly subversive’, ‘doubly subversive’, ‘thoroughly
subversive,’ ‘deeply subversive,’ ‘powerfully subver[sive],’ and even ‘multiply subversive.’”
Wright and Crossan have managed to bring the concept of a revolutionary and subversive Jesus
to the center of historical Jesus studies, Myles notes, but in ways that are not themselves
revolutionary:

While construed as counter-cultural political and religious figures, however, their
subversive Jesuses are simultaneously part of mainstream Anglo-American culture, and
largely function as superficial points of resistance already contained within the totalizing
framework of neoliberal rationality. . . . [D]espite the well-intentioned appropriation of
some features of the radical Jesus tradition, the concept of subversion is ultimately
fetishized in the work of Crossan and Wright—and those influenced by them—to make
Jesus palatable to broader and more politically conservative audiences.

Myles outlines how the neoliberal political forces coming out of the 1980s allowed niche space
for “nonconformist identities, . . . facilitating the containment of political dissent.” The
dominant forces of capitalism and colonialism could operate more efficiently with sanitized
social critiques that are purportedly revolutionary. Consider, for instance, the popularity of anti-
capitalist films and television that are nonetheless promulgated by major multinational

13 “Neoliberalism” itself has become a catch-all buzzword for self-positioned leftist critiques of culture. I follow
here James Crossley’s framing of neoliberalism as that manifestation of capitalism “which emphasizes, for instance,
the power of the individual, image, free trade, the private sector, and freedom, the very economic model which has
been facing such a crisis these past few years” (Crossley, Jesus and the Chaos of History, 5). This mode of
discursive practices has also been identified as “late capitalism.”

14 Myles, 64, quoting Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, 235, 466, 594, 441, 278, 369, 565, 471, 596.

15 Myles, 56.

16 Myles, 58.
corporations that control interests within Hollywood. On this point, James Crossley highlights Slavoj Žižek’s review of the film, *Avatar*, where he notes popular fascination with the revolutionary film plot while ignoring similar political struggles around the world, describing audiences as “sympathising with the idealised aborigines while rejecting their actual struggle.”

Revolutionary discourse, in other words, is baked into the very system it seeks to resist.

Myles argues that Crossan and Wright came to prominence in the 1990s riding a wave of “subversion” discourse embedded within wider and complex academic discussions from postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory. Even if such discussions themselves have not come to dominate biblical studies, Myles notes, “the sub-discipline was nonetheless influenced by them in tacit and perhaps unconscious ways.”

Nonconformist and transgressive appeals abounded within the cultural structures against which they framed themselves. “In this sense, parody is utilized to both subvert and legitimate that which it parodies.”

The radical Jesuses of Crossan and Wright, Myles maintains, “align more closely to a diluted form of gestural subversion and identity-formation firmly rooted in the cultural milieu of late capitalism.” For Crossan’s part, Myles argues that his Jesus is exalted as one who heroically and nobly chooses to identify with the poor. Crossan frames Jesus’ association with the poor as a “lifestyle choice” made from a presumed place of socioeconomic privilege. “Part of the appeal

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18 Myles, 56.

19 Myles, 58.

20 Myles, 59.

21 See Myles, 62–3. Myles discusses how Crossan’s commitment to Jesus as his understanding of what it means to be a “cynic” relates to this “lifestyle choice.”
of Crossan’s Jesus is that he might very well promote subversive cultural ideas,” Myles notes, “but his Jesus also conveniently obscures the centrality of class antagonism by choosing to identify with the poor.” In effect, he argues, this is a Jesus designed for the bourgeois to congratulate themselves for making rhetorical appeals on behalf of the poor.

Wright, who maximizes the language of “subversion” in association with Jesus, arguably receives the harsher treatment. Following James Crossley, Myles highlights Wright’s portrayal of Jesus as “very Jewish,” but nevertheless subverting Judaism—that is, Wright’s subversion serves a kind of supercessionism that simultaneously allows for Jesus’ Jewishness. Furthermore, Wright’s Jesus is not subversive in a more “conventional” sense: he does not directly and violently rebel against political structures. For Wright, this makes Jesus even more subversive: he subverts against the powers while also subverting those who subvert those powers. “What primarily matters for Wright’s Jesus, it would seem, is the symbolic and internal revolution of the individual believer.” Myles highlights the marketability of Wright’s Jesus, like Crossan’s, providing a popular means to identify with a Jesus that is “edgy” in a way that is palatable for the intended audience:

Wright’s Jesus is, it would appear, subversive in a reactionary way that disrupts the dominant culture by challenging the ‘spurious conventional wisdom’ of a perceived secular and/or liberal hegemony (expressed, for instance, through Evangelical resistance to same-sex relationships, and so on).

For Wright, “revolution is merely contained to the individual lifestyle and morality of the believer and his or her community.” Such configurations of biblical interpretation pose no

22 Myles, 67.
23 Myles, 66.
24 Myles, 67.
25 Myles,
tangible threat to the established capitalist social order. Indeed, a Marxist might argue that such readings actually serve to maintain and participate in late capitalism. As Crossley writes, “radical historical Jesuses perform our anti-capitalism and radicalism for us, allowing us to consume books about him with impunity.”

Speaking similarly of the high opinion philosophers have of their influence, Pierre Bourdieu writes, “It is the typical illusion of the lector, who can regard an academic commentary as a political act or the critique of texts as a feat of resistance, and experience revolutions in the order of words as radical revolutions in the order of things.” This dissertation cannot examine the social location and “actual radicality” (if such a thing exists) of any particular scholar. However, when some scholars frame their studies in a discursive context of “subversion” or “resistance,” other scholars may fairly interrogate the role such self-characterizations play as performances of ideological proclivities and identifications. In other words, academic discourse on Christian origins that purports to model or discover subversion rides a wave of neoliberal ideological rhetoric—seemingly revolutionary, but safely protected in the privileged walls of Western values and traditions. This is particularly the case for those approaches seeking to reinforce the authority of Christianity by relabeling its origins as revolutionary.

Finally, when scholars pursue an essentialist and exceptionalist narrative about Christianity as anti-imperial and liberationist at its core, such approaches flatten internal diversity of discourses and strategies, ignoring important contextual power dynamics. Such essentialist and exceptionalist strategies find ways to maintain the authority of a group’s origins and the purity of its identity claims by either re-interpreting or dismissing, for example, any

26 Crossley, Jesus and the Chaos of History, 8.

distasteful violence. Thus, essentialism in pursuit of noble, inclusive goals can have harmful effects. Essentialism in progressive readings of the New Testament purportedly serve to mobilize social responsibility in Christians living in Europe and the United States. To the extent that this is achieved, that goal is commendable. However, such strategic essentialism serves both to whitewash the problems in the “good” literature, on the one hand, and condemn all aspects of the “bad” literature, on the other. To the contrary, honest readings of ancient literature (including the documents we label “biblical”) as cultural data should thoroughly examine those aspects that offend our modern ideological sensibilities, whatever they may be.

An example on such discourses from outside biblical studies is instructive. London School of Economics sociologist Chetan Bhatt has spoken tirelessly against racism, xenophobia, and imperialism, yet Bhatt also vigorously critiques the essentialist strategies of liberal multiculturalist discourses in the West. For example, Bhatt follows this line of questioning when it comes to liberal anti-racist and multicultural appeals in Britain, finding that such discourses flatten minority groups in a communitarian lens. For Bhatt, such multiculturalist theory constitutes “an affable liberalism” that masks its “elitist religious identity politics and cultural narcissism” in a misleading discourse of tolerance and inclusiveness, anti-racism and anti-imperialism.28 One of the consequences of such discursive moves is to normalize the violence performed by fringe elements within the imagined “groups” now championed by a multiculturalist framework. The intolerance, sexism, and violence of foreign actors embraced wholesale as flattened “communities” by multiculturalism, then, becomes glossed over in the name of diversity. In the interest of including marginalized “communities,” Bhatt claims, these

“communities” are often represented by those patriarchal, authoritarian voices making identitarian claims for the larger group.

Bhatt suggests that a transnational shift occurred in the 1980s towards “a new set of geo-social ideas about identity and political affiliation.” This shift was “exploited by new religious right forces whose importance and novelty was not fully recognised.” That is, conservative religious groups, whose ideological interests and practices do not align with the expressed interests of “left anti-racism” (as Bhatt terms it), nevertheless takes advantage of liberal discourses on inclusivity. We might look to such maneuvers in the United States, for example, with the discourses of “reverse racism” and the “men’s rights movement” known as “meninism.” Far right groups find ways to exploit liberal multicultural frameworks—some are condemned, while others are ignored. Bhatt’s critique should not be equated with alarmist nativism. This is not a denial that racism exists, nor is it a claim that all anti-racist efforts in society must stop. Rather, we must acknowledge when well-meaning liberal discourses against racism or imperialism in the end whitewash violence and erase complex internal debate in the name of multiculturalism and identity politics. Following Žižek, James Crossley calls this the “multicultural acceptance of the Other deprived of Otherness.” Western multiculturalists can accept into their fold the adherents of Islam so long as “true Islam” is defined as peaceful and nonviolent, while simultaneously framing the true core of Christianity also as nonviolent. Suggestions to the contrary are delegitimized through multiculturalist identity claims. Again, this critique must not detract from the important advocacy work seeking to advance the cause of

29 Bhatt, 109.

30 Bhatt, 109.

31 Crossley, Jesus and the Chaos of History, 6.
marginalized people. Rather, we must interrogate the ways in which such advocacy becomes subsumed under the purview of Western and Christian discourses—thus using putatively progressive advocacy in order to reinforce and reify the authority of the West and Christianity.

Within biblical studies, anti-imperialism works somewhat differently from the British multiculturalism critiqued by Bhatt, but nonetheless mirrors the effects. The underlying goal of multiculturalism is to pursue inclusivity for those who have been dispossessed within dominant society. The apparent underlying goal of progressive, liberationist, anti-imperialist readings of New Testament documents is to mobilize Christians to serve and support those who have been marginalized in the imperialist agendas of the rich and powerful today. However, both do so by reconfiguring either national or religious identity claims—what it means to be British is to be multicultural; what it means to be Christian is to be anti-imperial. Such efforts associate such positive, progressive agendas with these identities. However, both circumstances also both hide seedier problems embedded within such narratives. As Bhatt notes, multiculturalism embraces those on the margins in British society but who are powerful in their own social contexts, even sometimes wielding such control to marginalize and violently oppress minorities within those contexts. In biblical studies, one can look to progressive Christian scholarship on Revelation—as this dissertation will below—to see that book’s misogynistic discourse and violent fantasies rebranded as non-violent anti-imperialism.

**Authorizing Strategies: Essentialism and Exceptionalism via Return-to-origins Narratives**

Foundational to all three concerns here regarding liberative scholarship is its regular appeal to essentialism and exceptionalism—that there is one true Christianity and that Christianity is itself unique within its original contexts. In order to establish Christianity’s exceptional essence, scholars point to their reading of early Christian texts as Christianity’s true
origins. In the fields of New Testament scholarship and Christian origins, progressive Christian
efforts at countering the “Protestant proximate other” manifest through return-to-origins
narratives. Such interpretative strategies look back to the earliest documents ascribed to
Christianity as a way of redefining the “heart” of Christian theology and practice. If authors can
convincingly redefine these early works as defining the core of Christianity as subversive,
revolutionary, and anti-imperial, then they have authorized their contemporary ideological
perspectives. I do not argue here that authorizing strategies are, in themselves, “incorrect”
readings (presuming one can have an “incorrect” interpretation). We must recognize, however,
that in these putatively revolutionary readings, interpreters often promote an essentialist view of
Christianity that is innately exceptional in its origins, even if corrupted by later imperial interests.
Such essentialist strategies flatten internal diversity and promote Christianity in a field that
should not be assumed as confessional in nature.32

Ancient texts that have been canonized in the Bible continue to enjoy an influential
position in cultural discourses. Scholars of those texts, however, hold a complicated relationship
with this influence. In discussing these texts—indeed, defining their careers with these texts—
these scholars pursue a limited array of interpretative options. To oversimplify, such academics
may choose to discuss the texts in a manner in which she or he (1) appears unmoved by the
Bible’s cultural impact, (2) promotes a confessional stance by capitalizing on the Bible’s
authorizing stature, or (3) criticizes biblical texts as part of an attempt to undermine groups that
use the Bible as an authority. The first of these options presumes an air of neutrality, whilst
nevertheless reinforcing the importance of a collection of documents that we call the Bible—

32 Not incidentally, confessional interpreters are not alone in their essentialist return-to-origins narratives, as so-called “secularists” have also sought ways to define a “core” of Christianity against which they make their arguments. See discussion of Russell McCutcheon on this below.
simply by talking about it in detail. In recent decades, biblical scholars have availed themselves of “theory” as a way of interrogating the biblical texts as well as those who deploy them. This dissertation is at once my attempt to participate in this trend and critique it.

This project thus focuses its attention on the discourses of early Christ groups without examining the texts as a vehicle to understand what the biblical canon “says.” However, I have intentionally selected texts included within the canon to deal with the theoretical problems associated with our modern study of these texts, tangled as they are with theological narratives and claims. Thus, I begin the project by identifying the tangled web with which we must contend and offering a way forward. We ultimately cannot “untangle” these texts from their historical place of authority. However, we can self-reflexively explore the implications of this web of interests and be explicit about our own interests in commenting on them.

In his influential work, *Drudgery Divine*, Jonathan Z. Smith highlights the ideological entanglements embedded within most comparative projects evaluating early Christianity. For Smith,

> the statement of comparison is never dyadic, but always triadic; there is always an implicit ‘more than’, and there is always a ‘with respect to’. In the case of an academic comparison, the ‘with respect to’ is most frequently the scholar’s interest, be this expressed in a question, a theory, or a model—recalling, in the case of the latter, that a model is useful precisely when it is different from that to which it is being applied.34

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33 See Sara Mills on this point: “The Bible (itself considered by some to be a set of commentaries) could be considered a text of this nature, upon which commentaries have been written and will continue to be written; in a sense, these commentaries keep the Bible in existence, ensure that it keeps in circulation as legitimate knowledge. Commentary attributes richness, density and permanence to the text at the very moment when it is creating those values by the act of commentary” (Mills, *Discourse* [New York: Routledge, 2004], 68).

In other words, there are no disinterested comparisons. Smith articulates the genealogy of Christian origins studies as “Protestant anti-Catholic apologetics.” That is, such scholars see an original kernel of pure belief or faith—set apart from ritualistic “Greco-Roman” mystery religions—that later becomes corrupted by the legalistic rituals that later constitute the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant critique of Catholics is thus projected onto a narrative of uniqueness and corruption. Krister Stendahl raises a similar critique of supercessionist discussions of Paul and the law. Namely, Lutheran readings of Paul project their anti-Catholicism back onto Paul’s understanding of the Jews and the law. Stendahl’s famous essay paved the way for what became called the New Perspective on Paul and overt supercessionism lost favor after World War II and the Holocaust. As many scholars have noted, such anti-Catholicism is bound together with (explicit and implicit) anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

Though NT scholars often decry such tactics and offer a host of reasons why such views are problematic, they also often have not lost their instinct to find exceptionalism in Christian origins. And, while supercessionism lives on in quieter representations, the overt enemy for early Christians becomes the “empire.” Indeed, Christianity itself radically subverts the empire until

35 Smith, Drudgery Divine, 34.


37 On this point, see, e.g., Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique of Richard Horsley: “Horsley does not problematize that the new paradigm in Pauline Studies, like the old one, is formulated in terms of dualistic othering and constructs an ‘over and against,’—although now the ‘other’ is no longer Judaism but rather Paganism—in the form of the emperor cult. According to this formulation, Christian identity still needs for its self-understanding the negatively constructed ‘other.’ Since he does not critically consider the imperial inscriptions in the Pauline literature, nor question the scholarly eagerness to read Paul as opposing the imperial order, Horsley (despite all rhetorical adaptations) cannot take up the crucial question raised especially by feminist scholars” (The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007], 90). Albert Harrill also makes this point in his discussion on the use of “empire” in Pauline scholarship: “Shifting the contrast from the standard ‘Paul and Judaism’ and ‘Paul and Hellenism’ of previous scholarship, scholars now frequently refer to how Paul negotiated his experience of Rome’s authority and power” (“Paul and Empire: Studying Roman Identity after the Cultural Turn,” Early Christianity 2, no. 3 [2011]: 281).
it becomes appropriated by the empire at the time of Constantine. In many ways, Protestant
instincts live on in this critique of a corrupted Christianity, tied now to the absolute power of the
state.\textsuperscript{38} In Smith’s view, discussions of comparison should lead us “above all, to those tacit
assumptions, to those matters which are taken as self-evident, which govern the scholar’s
work.”\textsuperscript{39} Christian exceptionalism remains a tacit assumption undergirding nearly the entire field
of New Testament studies. This concept of exceptionalism—that Christians must be considered
as exceptional within their social and cultural contexts—requires us to interrogate the notion of
“origins” itself as it relates to this field.

In his essay, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” Foucault critiqued the understanding
of history as a fixed, chronological line. The search for origins in such an understanding of
history is the search for the true essence for a categorical trajectory. Borrowing and adapting
Nietzsche’s concept of “genealogy” as an alternative, Foucault describes the task of such
historical research in this way:

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that
operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things; its duty is not to demonstrate that the
past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having
imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes. Genealogy does not resemble the
evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people. On the contrary, to follow
the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is
to identify the accidents, the minute deviations—or conversely, the complete reversals—
the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things
that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being does not lie
at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{38} More on this below.

\textsuperscript{39} Smith, 34.

\textsuperscript{40} Foucault Reader, 81.
Genealogy “will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning.”

In other words, the history of any “tradition” we may identify in the present should not be accepted as inevitable nor should it be defined by a pure, unmediated essential origins. Rather, the social and cultural phenomena we observe in the present are the results of complex, fragmentary jolts through the social and cultural scenarios of history. For our purposes, for better or worse, viewing “Christianity” through this lens identifies no timeless, unbreakable core from its origins.

Edward Said plays a central role in this discussion, as the inspiration for much of (liberative) postcolonial biblical scholarship but also as someone influenced by Foucauldian genealogy. Said targeted western narratives about the strange and mystical “orient.”

In Said’s view, 19th century intellectuals (e.g., Weber) who had theorized the “orient” had participated in western colonialism by projecting upon eastern cultures and nation states narratives and values that reinforced colonialist superiority. In this way, Said critiqued the prevailing wisdom on “oriental” cultures by situating scholarly portraits in their ideological settings. Such narratives conveniently depict the “east” as ripe for European and/or American intervention. Said’s critique gave rise to a host of others, including that of Homi Bhabha and James Scott, that have been grouped together as postcolonialism or postcolonial studies.

Recent decades have seen a growing reliance on such authors and postcolonialism in general within academic work on the New Testament and Christian origins. As we shall see below, the results have been mixed. Many

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41 Foucault Reader, 80. In his Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault brings a relevant critique to the concept of “tradition”: “Take the notion of tradition: it is intended to give a special temporal status to a group of phenomena that are both successive and identical (or at least similar); it makes it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same; it allows a reduction of the difference proper to every beginning, in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for the origin; tradition enables us to isolate the new against a background of permanence, and to transfer its merit to originality, to genius, to the decisions proper to individuals” (421).


43 See next chapter for more on Scott and Bhabha.
have utilized such theoretical tools to call prevailing narratives into question and present a fragmentary and complex picture of early Christian documents and groups. On the other hand, a great number have used such postcolonial works as a means to reinforce biblical authority and Christian exceptionalism towards anti-imperial ends. We should not miss the irony of using postcolonial critiques as a way of bolstering Christianity, redefined though it may be.

We must unpack here precisely how early Christian texts act as proxies of modern cultural interests and how appeals to ancient authoritative texts and the “origins” of Christianity blur the lines between confessional and non-confessional approaches. In a programmatic essay on the use of such texts as sites of authorization, Craig Martin argues that scholars must not stop at simply cataloging variant interpretations of authoritative texts—let alone participate in the normative dispute over authentic readings by claiming their own “true” reading of an authoritative text. Rather, he suggests, our job is “to show that interpretations are strategic and to enquire what social agendas specific interpretive strategies may advance.”

Therefore, this project identifies the social strategies embedded within the attempt to use—as an example—apocalyptic discourse within the New Testament as part of a trend in labeling early Christian texts “anti-imperial.” The putative “anti-imperialism” of these writings participates in the interests outlined in the previous section. That is, positioning these texts against the “empire” allows the scholar to continue in a reification of an essential “heart” found in the origins of Christianity, one that is later corrupted only to be resurrected by modern (largely Protestant) interpreters.

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Martin is not interested in the “nature of hermeneutics,” but rather the specific historical conditions for particular interpretations. He thus emphasizes the need to examine the rhetorical strategies of any interpretation, whether these strategies are problematic, and “the implicit effects of those strategies on the authority of the text in question.” He offers a ninefold taxonomy outlining a variety of such strategies, which he admits may not apply in every interpretative discourse. Furthermore, he notes, these strategies may not be made intentionally but rather through Bourdieusian “practical sense,” which allows interpreters “to intuit the stakes of discursive exchanges and negotiate them by responding in ways that reflect their prior experiences and serve their future interests.” In other words, an interpreter does not necessarily intend to project their ideologies back on the Bible, for example, but has internalized such moves as the most effective strategy in articulating that ideology for a particular context or audience.

Four overlapping interpretative categories from Martin—“projection/ventriloquism,” “extrapolation from an invented essence,” “projective extrapolation,” and “displacement of associations”—deserve particular attention here. The first, “projection” or what Martin calls “ventriloquism,” involves interpreters who attribute meaning that the author could not possibly have intended. Here he offers the example of G.W.F. Hegel’s Life of Jesus, which “turns the ‘golden rule’ into Immanuel Kant’s ‘categorical imperative,’ making Jesus suggest that it is a universally applicable moral principle.” The second relevant strategy of interpretation,

45 Martin, “How to Read an Interpretation,” 06.2.

46 Martin’s full taxonomy includes the following strategies: Historical-critical exegesis; Speculation; Projection/Ventriloquism; Extrapolating from an invented essence; Refusal to extrapolate/Disabling contextualization; Selective privileging; Recreating the canon; Projective extrapolation; Displacement of associations. Martin notes that “interpreters rarely use one strategy at a time” (06.4)

47 Martin, “How to Read an Interpretation,” 06.3.

48 Martin, “How to Read an Interpretation,” 06.7.
“extrapolation from an invented essence,” also involves a kind of projection. One finds an authoritative text offering, for example, a problematic or unclear statement from the interpreter’s current social setting. The interpreter decides what the “essence” of the text is and therefore reinterprets the text with today’s social setting in view. Martin highlights examples relating to alcohol prohibitions and slavery laws. Depending on what “essence” the interpreter attaches to the text—i.e., the most convenient reading for the interpreter’s ideological position—she or he finds a way of clarifying the text to match that essence. A biblical law may approve of slavery, but since the law focuses on alleviating the harshest forms of slavery, the law ultimately becomes anti-slavery for our context in an abolitionist’s eyes.

The third interpretative category I highlight here, “projective extrapolation,” combines some aspects of the prior two. According to Martin, this strategy “goes beyond inventing and projecting an essential message by also projecting a set of assumptions.” He uses the example of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s approach to Jesus, which is read in light of Marxist assumptions, where the Kingdom of God becomes a utopic socialist society. Alternatively, Martin notes here Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (1995), which reads Jesus’ commandment to love in light of liberal Buddhist values that Hanh himself holds. While Marxist socialism and Buddhism cannot possibly constitute the ideological setting of the New Testament Gospels, these modern works are successful insofar as they are able to mask the anachronistic disconnect. These extrapolations must seem as if they flow naturally from the authoritative text, which then offers authority to the views that have been projected backwards. Such strategies not only borrow on the authority of the text, but reinforce its authority still further.

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49 Martin, “How to Read an Interpretation,” 06.17.
Finally, the fourth relevant interpretative type, “displacement of associations,” also involves a form of projection. Martin notes that “[t]his strategy is usually deployed through the use of analogies that suggest that because two things are similar in one respect, they must be similar in all respects.” As an example, Martin discusses Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* in which the contrast between Egypt and Israel serves as an analogy of the Cold War contrast between Soviet communism and American democracy. Similarly, Martin also highlights the analogy that undergirds so many of the works targeted for critique in this dissertation: the equation of the Roman Empire and the American Empire. On this theme, though he could have included countless other examples, Martin highlights the book *Jesus for President* by Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw. According to Martin, Claiborne and Haw hope for their readers to transfer their negative feelings for the Roman Empire onto the American Empire, without explaining precisely how these two imperial societies compare. This is not a critique against comparisons in general, but a call to adjudicate the ways in which comparisons serve ideological ends. One might quibble with the precise articulation of these categories, and as we have seen, these strategies include a great deal of overlapping techniques. However, Martin’s exercise forces academic interpreters to reconsider the ideological grounds upon which they launch their interpretative efforts.

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50 Martin, “How to Read an Interpretation,” 06.19.


52 Incidentally, Martin suggests that “historical-critical exegesis” may or may not reproduce the authority of a text. However, Foucault’s understanding of what he called “commentary” actually suggests that exegetical work does enshrine the text as something worthy to be studied and therefore reproduces the authority of the text, even if it challenges the particular features that characterize a conservative evangelical notion of biblical authority (i.e., the Bible as “inerrant”). Therefore, though Martin seems to present “historical-critical exegesis” as a neutral strategy, this strategy does implicitly bolster the text’s authority. For this reason, any historical study of texts that have been attributed authority—such as those collected in what we call the Bible—necessarily reproduces that authority. Thus, if we are absolutists about not reproducing the authority of texts, that to do so would be “unethical” as Martin
In the current study, I will highlight works that use these strategies with varying degrees of nuance and self-awareness. Capitalizing on the popularity of “empire” language today, some authors characterize New Testament documents as anti-imperial by tethering this popular contemporary discourse to the ancient Roman Empire. And thus, the concept of an “American Rome” (see, e.g., Harry O. Maier) registers strong associations, even when it does not precisely define how the Roman Empire might correlate with the American Empire. The question remains for us how much of our modern understanding of imperialism we ought to read into provincial social settings in the Roman Empire. Relatedly, we must also question the extent to which we can read modern-day nonviolent anti-imperial resistance into the texts of Christian origins. We will see, for instance, extrapolation from an invented essence with interpretations of Revelation that characterize the text as “nonviolent” even in its graphic depictions of spectacular violence.

In the interest of self-reflexive scholarship, Martin includes a statement on his own situation within academic and social conversations:

In addition, a second reason why we might want to draw attention to these modes of interpretation is, quite simply, that scholars should not be in the business of reproducing or advancing the authority of the texts and traditions they study. I do not take any of the texts, figures, or traditions discussed in this essay to be authoritative for me in any straightforward manner, and I choose not to blindly reproduce their authority in my research and my teaching. Although I support leftist projects, just as many of the interpreters I have described, I do so largely because they are intended to improve the material conditions of those in the world with whom I sympathize, not because some authoritative text can be made to require me to do so.54

suggests, then we must never engage in “historical-critical exegesis” as it reproduces the authority of the text in a Foucauldian manner.


54 Martin, “How to Read an Interpretation,” 06.22.
I reproduce Martin’s point here at length as this statement so parallels the assumptions undergirding my own project. My critiques here are largely aimed at advocates of social causes with which I identify, but who have used the Bible as an authorizing text for their position. Again, my interest is not to attack internal rallying cries for confessional communities, but to shine light on the confessional and otherwise essentialist return-to-origins strategies that dominate the fields of New Testament studies and Christian origins.\footnote{Many scholars with whom I sympathize and identify (e.g., Craig Martin, Russell McCutcheon, Aaron Hughes, Merinda Simmons) claim that we should not involve ourselves in “identity politics.” That is, we should not advance the claims of biblical texts or their interpreters as innately authentic or true. However, this group of scholars, generally speaking, participates in operational acts of identification (and identity politics?) by staking a claim on what it means to be a “scholar.” Even those of us who rest our laurels on “critical theory” cannot claim neutrality, but rather try to promote a vision for what it means to be a “scholar” that advances our own interests, attempting to claim the prestige of this title for ourselves and not others. Thus, in this dissertation, I associate myself with this “critical theory” approach, influenced largely by a tradition of philosophy labeled “poststructuralism.” However, I acknowledge that this position is not itself immune to critiques of ideology and identification.}

**Return-to-origins Strategies: America Edition**

The search for an essential core to Christianity by digging into the writings of the earliest Christians serves as a means to undergird its uniqueness and exceptional quality, much as American exceptionalism is bolstered with appeals to the “founding fathers” and the central documents of America’s origins story.\footnote{For discussions on the Bible and the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, see, e.g., Jaroslav Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible and the Constitution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008); Jacqueline M. Hidalgo, *Revelation in Aztlán: Scriptures, Utopias, and the Chicano Movement* (New York: Springer, 2016), 229–30; Russell T. McCutcheon, *A Modest Proposal on Method: Essaying the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 65–6, 68. See also the brief but insightful reflection by Ingrid Lilly, “Foundational Texts, Interpretation, and Playing the Game: The Religious Underpinnings of the Sotomayor Hearings,” *Sightings: Religion in Public Life*, July 30, 2009, https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/foundational-texts-interpretation-and-playing-game-religious-underpinnings-sotomayor. I agree with Russell McCutcheon’s conclusion that “despite what many who have an interest in this document may assert concerning its origin, coherence, and meaning, there is nothing unique about the Bible once we see it as yet another cultural site (an e.g., to borrow [Jonathan Z.] Smith’s well-known terminology) where the process of signification is taking place, a process that involves the paired (we might as well say dialectical) human activities of delimitation and innovation within those self-imposed limits” (*Modest Proposal*, 103). Thus, a discussion of similar cultural sites of signification are worth a moment’s consideration here.}

The reverential Rotunda of the National Archives Museum hosts the “Charters of Freedom,” piously displaying for the pilgrimaging general public the three authoritative texts of American origins: the Declaration of Independence, the US...
Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Aspiring citizens of the United States must answer questions on all of these founding documents in order to pass a naturalization test; newly-minted citizens of ten receive copies of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence at their naturalization ceremonies. These foundational writings—and the founders who participated in their creation—form the basis for national authority and exceptionalist discourse in its various forms through the past two and a half centuries. Examining American authorizing discourses helps to focus the present discussion of Christian exceptional essentialism through comparison.

While interpreters and activists have variously negotiated the importance of each of the “Charters of Freedom” in relation to the others, the US Constitution holds special status as an authorizing document through American history. The Constitution is upheld through rituals, institutions, and popular discourse. An entire profession of certified practitioners (i.e., lawyers) hold up a host of contemporary scenarios against the text of the Constitution. Constitution reverence is displayed from a host of cultural actors from all walks of life and levels of power in the country. Some on the “liberal” end come to mind in this context. One can hardly forget the moment during the 2016 Democratic National Convention when Khizr Khan, father of a Muslim American Soldier who died in combat, held his pocket-sized Constitution in the air and proclaimed, “Donald Trump, you’re asking Americans to trust you with their future. Let me ask you, ‘Have you even read the United States Constitution?’”57 As news broke about this story, we learned that Khan’s waving pocket Constitution was no mere prop provided by political operatives, but his own personal object of faith. Indeed, Khan keeps a pile of pocket

Constitutions at his house, handed out as parting gifts when they entertain guests. This moment brilliantly embeds the authority of the Constitution in the liberal discourses of the Democratic Party, displaying affection that feels comparable to emotional investment placed on the texts people call “sacred.”

Another example in which one finds a similar affection is the controversial Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, who also carried a well-worn copy of the Constitution in his pocket. Black confesses the personal significance of this document,

> That Constitution is my legal bible; its plan of our government is my plan and its destiny my destiny. I cherish every word of it, from the first to the last, and I personally deplore even the slightest deviation from its least important commands. I have thoroughly enjoyed my small part in trying to preserve our Constitution with the earnest desire that it may meet the fondest hope of its creators, which was to keep this nation strong and great through countless ages.

Black also mobilized this careful constitutional discourse towards “liberal” causes during his tenure on the court (e.g., Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal economic regulations). Black’s devotion to the Constitution and the way he read that document allegedly led him to depart from other liberal justices on the Court. One sympathetic writer says of Black, “Invoking constitutional language and intent and, especially, rendering periodic decisions at odds with his liberal colleagues, he was able to disavow credibly any desire to remake the Constitution.” In other words, for this writer at least, Black presented himself more convincingly as a credible interpreter of America’s most authoritative textual work. His devotion to this text shone through


59 Pelikan, 55.


not only in his affectionate care over the words of the text, but also in his willingness to occasionally depart from his ideological peers in reinforcing the authority of the Constitution.62

One need not appeal to a personal well-worn copy of the constitution, of course, to capitalize on its discursive authority. Martin Luther King, Jr. marshalled American return-to-origins essentialist strategies with great rhetorical power, appealing to both “Judeo-Christian” values and those embedded within the Constitution. Talal Asad identifies this nationalist essentialism—combined with King’s particular Christian discourse—as one of the reasons for Martin Luther King’s relative success in the wider culture in contrast to the discourse of Malcolm X.63 King states,

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thus carrying our whole nation back to the great wells of democracy, which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.64

King’s challenge masterfully projects the ideals of the civil rights back into the core of American democratic values, thus also authorizing King’s movement through America’s founding documents. As Asad notes, “Thus King’s political discourse identifies the guilt of the white majority and urges their repentance, seeking thereby not merely an extension of civil rights to all

62 It should be noted that Black was a member of the Ku Klux Klan before he became a United States Senator, a move which he later publicly repudiated. However, his record as a Senator included a fight against anti-lynching legislation. As a Supreme Court Justice, he wrote the majority opinion upholding the detention of Japanese-Americans by the federal government during World War II, a decision he remained behind: “I would do precisely the same thing today, in any part of the country. I would probably issue the same order were I President” (included in a posthumously published interview as part of his New York Times obituary, “Justice Black, Champion of Civil Liberties for 34 Years on Court, Dies at 85,” New York Times, 1971). He also saw the Constitution as supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal economic regulations.

63 Talal Asad, Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 146. Of course, Malcolm X’s message also embraced violent resistance, which was unlikely to be met by approval by a cross-section of white people in America.

American citizens irrespective of race but the regeneration of America itself.”65 King uses the foundational ideals and documents to redefine America.

In both the popular and the specialist arenas, we see the founding documents and their role in American origins narratives variously deployed towards ideological ends. Notwithstanding the hand-wringing over originalism, textualism, intentionalism, etc., the discursive strategies surrounding constitutional interpretation give authority to the mythology of America—cloaking the nation’s past, present, and future in both vague grand ideals and the detailed structures of regulated tradition. What one takes to be the story of America, then, colors the way one interprets and wields its origins story. Like Christian origins, then, the arena of American origins remains a contested space, but the contest itself reinforces its power over how we continue to define the American dream—what it means to be an American.

However, in his book *Between the World and Me*, written as a kind of letter to his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates offers a poignant critique of American dream that is instructive for our current investigation into Christian origins. For Coates, “the Dream” cannot simply be redefined by inclusivity and justice (contra King) as it remains too historically tied to the scaffolding of white supremacy. “The Dream,” is the myth of American exceptionalism, framed with homey beauty: “It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake.”66 The Dream is built upon a myth of the moral goodness of

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65 Asad, 146.
America, but the Dream, Coates says, is not for all people. “And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies.” America is “a country lost in the Dream” and his challenge is how to live in the undergirding racism that buttresses the American myth. The officers who perform violence upon black bodies and are not held accountable, for their actions are “the destroyers” who are “merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy.” The Dream is for those who “need to believe themselves white” to remain on the top while black bodies remain “below.”

As a young man in college, Coates explains, his early response to this Dream was to construct a different myth, one that celebrates the nobility of Africa and its heritage. He searched for his own countervailing “grand theory” or “unified narrative.” To counter the pervasive view that black bodies and their heritage cannot possibly match the superiority of Western (“white”) history, Coates sought a counterbalancing narrative that would enshrine authentic and powerful “black” voices. He tells the story of how he latched onto the story of the great Queen Nzinga, the 18th century ruler of Central Africa. During her negotiations of the Dutch, Coates recounts, the Dutch tried to humiliate her by refusing her a seat. Nzinga displayed “her power by ordering one

\[\text{that Coates will develop his own take based on his reading, making him as much an active participant in the historicizing process as the people he reads.}\]

67 Coates, 11.

68 Coates, 13.

69 Coates, 11.

of her advisers to all fours to make a human chair of her body.”71 This was the sort of history of power that Coates sought to “weaponize”: “My working theory then held all black people as kings in exile, a nation of original men severed from our original names and our majestic Nubian culture.”72 Not only did his Howard University professors disabuse him of romantic African origins myths, but he also came to see himself and his ancestors more like the humiliated advisor on all fours than exiled kings.

Even in the midst of his forceful review of white supremacy as the foundational myth of the United States, Coates manages to forward a cogent critique of essentialism and exceptionalism as themselves bankrupt analytical strategies. It is worth quoting Coates’ striking prose here at some length:

The Dream thrives on generalization, on limiting the number of possible questions, on privileging immediate answers. The Dream is the enemy of all art, courageous thinking, and honest writing. And it became clear that this was not just for the dreams concocted by Americans to justify themselves but also for the dreams that I had conjured to replace them. I had thought that I must mirror the outside world, create a carbon copy of white claims to civilization. It was beginning to occur to me to question the logic of the claim itself. . . . It began to strike me that the point of my education was a kind of discomfort, was the process that would not award me my own especial Dream but would break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere, and would leave me only with humanity in all its terribleness.73

Coates would not have his son—and his readers—seek out a better (essentialist, exceptionalist) “Dream,” but rather to “break all the dreams.” In their stead, Coates promotes the “struggle” against ignorance and toward consciousness, “when you can no longer be lied to.”74 “I would not

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71 Coates, 45.
72 Coates, 46.
73 Coates, 50, 52.
74 Coates, 107, 116.
have you descend into your own dream,” Coates writes to his son. “I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.”

He hopes for the consciousness also for the Dreamers, but he does not want his son to struggle for them. “I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. . . . Hope for them. Pray for them, if you are so moved. But do not pin your struggle on their conversion. The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all.” Coates does not propose to eschew historical narrative, but to dismantle idealized narratives harking back to picturesque origins. For Coates, the appropriate narrative is one of human plunder and violence, but also celebration of the cultural products of black bodies that have borne the brunt of the plundering Dream. In short, Coates deploys what is a Foucauldian or, more broadly, poststructuralist critique of historical myths and the discourses that uphold them. He does so without the jargon, for a popular audience, and holds fast to a powerful protest against social conditions within the United States.

Indeed, poststructuralist critique must not obscure social facts. Coates reminisces of his time at Howard, “And still and all I knew that we were something, that we were a tribe—on one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real.” This line resembles another by Craig Martin, “social facts, although social, are nevertheless real facts—if only for the community that recognizes them as such.” In other words, we can question the timeless, static, innate essence

75 Coates, 108.
76 Coates, 151.
77 Coates, 56.
of what it means to be, e.g., an American, but the social structures that reify America nevertheless have social and even physical effects upon those who live within and outside its imagined borders. Such work should not negate the celebration of a “community” or “identity” that has been brutalized by those whose myth of domination is written into the nation’s laws. To see race as a myth does not absolve those who wielded such categories to mutilate black bodies into submission for white profit. Therefore, on the one hand, this dissertation takes as an undergirding assumption that notion that all categories are invented and “there is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification.”\textsuperscript{79} However, it will not suffice to say “it’s all invented” or “everything is discourse.” For my part, I intend to highlight cultural discourses in order to understand how these relate to social facts—whether they are used to manipulate, subvert, or reinforce such social facts. Our participation in the interpretation of documents judged to be the origins of Christianity carries with it a host of such concerns, as this chapter highlights.

\textsuperscript{79} Bayart, 92.
Authorizing Strategies in Action: Crossan and Borg

John Dominic Crossan: “I propose that a deeper and more thoughtful study of the Christian Bible demands a different metaphor. There is, on that deeper level, a fascinating and interactive pattern between those parallel train tracks. There is a recurrent rhythm between the biblical vision of God’s nonviolent distributive justice and God’s violent retributive justice. The more accurate metaphor is not the Biblical Express Train but the Biblical Heartbeat.” ⁸⁰

Marcus Borg: “The Bible is one massive protest against the ancient domination system, which makes it a very political document.” ⁸¹

These discussions over the essentialist and exceptionalist quest for origins provide an analytical analog for situating our conversations on New Testament documents. Projecting essences back onto authoritative texts from the distant past and reinterpreting origins in light of contemporary ideological developments do not belong to biblical conversations alone. Clearly, we have a cyclical discursive relationship with multiple sites of origins for our multiple sites of identification. Our authorizing strategies in these arenas often remain invisible. My goal here is to bring such strategies, intentional or not, into the light of examination—while also offering a way forward without reinforcing narratives about the putative timeless nature of Christianity or Judaism. It is instructive, then, to observe two well-known, bestselling New Testament scholars viewing the New Testament and Bible as a whole from an explicitly liberal ideological lens. The quotes above from John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg display two slightly different approaches, though they both try to capitalize on the Bible’s cultural authority to reinforce their contemporary claims about society and the state of Christianity. ⁸² At the same time, their

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⁸² Crossan describes historical Jesus research as “open-heart surgery on Christianity and maybe also on civilization itself” (A Long Way from Tipperary [San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000], 175). Crossan suggests here
approaches reframe the terms with which we situate the Bible’s authority. Their statements here both suggest that the Bible is essentially about social justice and resistance to dominating powers.

Crossan’s statement occurs in the context of a book, *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*, in which he tries to make sense of the Bible’s disturbing passages while keeping the Bible’s authoritative status intact:

Throughout the biblical story, from Genesis to Revelation, every radical challenge from the biblical God is both asserted and then subverted by its receiving communities—be they earliest Israelites or latest Christians. That pattern of assertion-and-subversion, that rhythm of expansion-and-contraction, is like the systole- and diastole cycle of the human heart.

In other words, the heartbeat of the Christian Bible is a recurrent cardiac cycle in which the asserted radicality of God’s nonviolent distributive justice is subverted by the normalcy of civilization’s violent retributive justice. And, of course, the most profound annulment is that both assertion and subversion are attributed to the same God or the same Christ.83

Crossan identifies a “heart” (i.e., an essence) in the “Christian Bible,” in which he attributes “radical” “nonviolent distributive justice” to God and “normal” “violent retributive justice” to “civilization.” Crossan here tries to solve the tension in biblical texts that attribute the normal, violent way of civilization to God and Christ. Clearly, though, the heart within the beating heart—that is, the true essence of God—for Crossan is “God’s nonviolent distributive justice.” In other words, Crossan projects his own political ideology back onto the Bible in a way that fits nicely into the interpretative categories that Martin calls “projection/ventriloquism” and “extrapolation from an invented essence.” This is not to say that there is zero evidence for Crossan’s position; rather, this is to highlight Crossan’s interest in emphasizing—indeed,

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83 Crossan, 28.
essentializing—the evidence that fits his perspective while finding ways to ignore the rest. More on this below.

The late Marcus Borg’s statement above reifies “the Bible” as a unified, static category with a core purpose: protest against domination. Similarly, “the ancient domination system” is conceived in singular terms, eliding any difference in the ancient contexts of those documents gathered together in various forms of what we call “the Bible.” A single document set up against a single system. Many scholars pursue similar such subversive arguments to varying degrees of nuance and complexity, while in the end these readings use many of the same sorts of authorizing strategies as the conservative voices they critique. As Rebekka King notes, “progressive Christians adopt the textual habitus and cognitive frameworks of the Christian Right, while simultaneously challenging the beliefs and textual practices of their Protestant proximate other.” Borg’s statement comes from an interview in which Borg notes, “sometimes the Bible is wrong.” Borg has spoken elsewhere about how viewing the Bible as a “human product” erases “many of the problems people have with the Bible.” As examples, he offers the

84 Rebekka King, 18.

85 Borg outlines some of these problems: “The conflict between the Genesis creation stories and science vanishes. The laws of the Bible need not be understood as God’s laws for all time, but as the laws and ethical teachings of these communities. The stories of God destroying Israel’s enemies are Israel’s way of telling its story, just as a violent destruction of the enemies of Christ is what some early Christians hoped for. Of course, this realization doesn’t make these ‘good stories’, but at least the problem of thinking of them as expressing the will of God disappears. In general, the literal and absolute reading of the Bible as infallible words of God disappears and is replaced by a historical and metaphorical reading” (The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith [San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003], 46). Thus, Borg is able to dismiss what he or others see as problematic within the Bible by framing the Bible as a “human product.” Nevertheless, Borg notes, this doesn’t preclude the Bible from being “inspired by God.” He refers to “plenary inspiration,” a view that “that every word is inspired by God, and thus has the truth and authority of God standing behind it.” The emphasis is not upon words inspired by God, but on people moved by their experience of the Spirit, namely these ancient communities and the individuals who wrote them” (ibid.). Applying this to “religious pluralism,” Borg suggests that this view, “enables us to affirm the Bible as the response to God in our particular cultural stream, even as it enables us to recognize the sacred texts of the other enduring religious traditions as the response to the sacred in their particular cultural streams” (ibid.). Yet, if the humanness of the Bible is the reason that we are able to dismiss problems—such as “violent destruction of the enemies of Christ”—why would we hold on to any other sentiments of this humanness as
rapture, slavery, and the roles of women. The issue of women being told to subjugate themselves to men “disappears” if people are willing to say “sometimes the Bible is wrong.” This strategy, and Crossan’s strategies concerning biblical violence, are classic examples of what Martin labels “refusal to extrapolate/disabling contextualization” or, in other words, saying that “this part of the text is past its expiration date.” By making this move, Borg manages to excise from the Bible those portions strategically unhelpful and thus maintain the Bible’s authority, which Borg then defines as entirely radical. Borg’s and Crossan’s approaches rest their authority upon the canonicity of biblical texts, redirecting the essential message of these texts in order to normalize a putatively subversive ideology. The canon keeps its authority, even if some fragments are discarded as no longer relevant.

The scholarship of Borg and Crossan blends confessionally-based activism with supposedly non-confessional arguments about the good of society. Their statements about what they see as this “good” help us to contextualize their own more detailed research, for example, into the historical Jesus. Other scholars are not always so explicit about their authorizing strategies and, as we will see, appeal to the “subversive” and “radical” nature of texts without specifically stating the connection these have to theological (or other ideological) interests. For such interpreters to state their explicit commitments is helpful and avoids some problems seen in what appear to be neutral academic accounts. However, the slippage between confessional and non-confessional remains. Borg and Crossan may be explicit about their ideological persuasions,

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“inspired”? If the category of “inspiration” is operative for an interpreter, that interpreter needs a standard by which she or he judges which human concepts and stories in the Bible are inspired and which are not.

Martin, “How to Read an Interpretation,” 06.10.

This is, of course, interesting in view of both Crossan’s and Borg’s interest in noncanonical texts that support their view of the essential core of Christianity. This itself deserves its own article-length treatment.
but nevertheless present their interpretations as neutral, factual findings. The presentation is such that it is difficult to see where the ideology ends and the objective historical interpretation begins. As many will note, there are no objective historical interpretations, but the illusion of such is nevertheless perennially presented from all possible angles. While Crossan, Borg, and other interpreters use their writing to advance the cause of the socially disadvantaged—a cause I share—such appeals in scholarship can be done without reinforcing the authority of the Bible and muddling its messy contexts.
Toward Non-Confessional Interpretation without the Specter of “Origins”

The critique of such return-to-origins liberative interpretations that universalize their appeals could be taken still further, which brings us to an even more foundational critique of this field from Russell McCutcheon. For McCutcheon, even simply studying the texts of the New Testament (or the Bible more generally) itself constitutes essentialism, by participating in the putative origins of an invented tradition. For him, we should not study these texts as artifacts but only the social actors who authorized them. The only reason that we study NT texts as data is because they come to us through interested preservation of these texts. The texts serve those who found them to be authoritative.

He makes a critique to this effect in his *Modest Proposal on Method*. In responding to the volume of essays, *Secularism and Biblical Studies*, McCutcheon finds that most of the authors are, “in advocating for the role of the atheist exegete, . . . doing precisely the same thing as their theological interlocutors.”88 That is, the authors target their analysis on something called “the Bible” and assume one can accurately extract the original meaning or authorial intent with the proper exegetical methods. The proper task of scholars studying the Bible, in McCutcheon’s view, instead targets “the socio-political conditions of its various components’ creation,” “the history of its invention as a closed, authorized collection,” or “describing its current use.”89 Both so-called “secular” and confessional biblical scholars, then, deploy “rhetorics of origin, meaning, and intention to legitimize a reading of what is collectively recognized by both sides as a foundational document to further one’s own contingent interests.”90 As scholars of religion, we

88 McCutcheon, 104. Emphasis in original.

89 McCutcheon, 104.

90 McCutcheon, 108.
should not presume the Bible is a “self-evidently authorized artifact,” but rather interrogate “the criteria that are being used to distinguish artifact from trash.”\textsuperscript{91} For McCutcheon, finding meaning in the pages of the Bible is a task best left to “that socio-political institution we call the Church.”\textsuperscript{92}

So far, much of this aligns with my own critique as stated above. However, McCutcheon does not stop his critique at those interested merely in the meanings and intentions of texts, but turns also to his colleagues (even co-authors) who have framed their own study as “Christian origins.” The move to embrace this label over “New Testament studies” signals a sense in which the texts of the canon must not be paramount in the study of this milieu. However, McCutcheon notes, the specter of “origins” still haunts this articulation of the field as well. The term assumes a transhistorical entity called “Christianity.” As he summarizes,

\begin{quote}
\textit{despite how progressive some may portray it, Christian origins’ explanatory efforts suffer from trying to reconstruct the social world from out of which some bubbling and flowing movement that today strikes us as coherent somehow arose by reading yet more texts so as to reconstruct the context from out of which the very texts they read arose; what’s more, it also implies taking the presumption of Christianity’s existence (defined however) for granted as a virtually Hegelian Geist that was somehow there at its own birth.}\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

While scholars of Christian origins have indeed challenged the problem of canon (the problem McCutcheon identifies with the “secular” biblical scholars), they have not moved past the problem of origins. Thus, from McCutcheon’s perspective, one cannot offer an alternative biblical perspective nor an alternative view on Christian beginnings without participating in the same contest as confessional interlocutors. One either reinforces the authoritative text of Christianity (“the Bible”) or Christianity itself as a coherent, transhistorical entity. His critique

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[91]{McCutecheon, 108.}
\footnotetext[92]{McCutecheon, 114.}
\footnotetext[93]{McCutecheon, 133.}
\end{footnotes}
suggests that there is no logical future for studying the Bible or Christian origins among non-confessional scholars of religion.

Surely McCutcheon is correct to highlight the contests at play and the intellectual dangers of falling into essentialist paradigms. Again, these are the concerns that I have sought to outline above. However, distinguishing between cultural product and cultural producer, artifact and interpretation, forms an endless cycle—a critique that may be rendered useless due to its universal applicability. More importantly, scholarship must forge a path forward in the analysis of social and cultural data with full cognizance of the contests in which these data participate. The figure of “Paul” serves an important role for scholars in their attempt to define Christianity’s essence, positively or negatively. But the texts in the New Testament that appear to be written by a figure named Paul also themselves participate in discursive strategies, negotiating group boundaries and behaviors as well as his own position of authority through the use of inherited discourse. The strategies and contests occurring within texts included within the New Testament canon deserve critical analysis themselves. We can choose to direct our analytical critiques at more obscure texts, to be sure, as well as the processes of authorization and interpretation for canonical texts. What I show in this dissertation, however, is the importance of evaluating the contests on either end of these texts, their ancient contexts, and their continued deployment in cultural negotiations.

Rather than reinforce enshrined narratives about biblical authority, then, I join scholars who redescribe early Christian discourse without the presumption of exceptionalism.94 In his

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94 I join here, for example, many of the scholars working with the Redescribing Early Christianity program unit in the Society of Biblical Literature. Some of their work may be found, for example, in the following volumes: Ronald Cameron and Merrill P. Miller, *Redescribing Christian Origins* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Cameron and Miller, *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians* (Atlanta, Ga.: SBL Press, 2011); Barry S. Crawford and Miller, *Redescribing the Gospel of Mark* (Atlanta, Ga.: SBL Press, 2017).
essay, “The Origins of Christianity Within, and Without, ‘Religion.’” William Arnal objects to reading back into early Christian texts an understanding of “religion” as a reified, timeless object, which pushes the scholar to “synthesize all the details and aspects of the surviving ancient Christian literature as equally ‘religious’ dimensions of a single insight, notion, or orientation.” We should not seek any “single moment, single cause, single concept, or single unique feature that accounts for the explosion of speculative taletelling about Jesus.” Instead, we ought to “demystify” traditional narratives rooted in essentialized notions of “Christianity” and “religion” in order to explore how various Christ discourses compete with one another and how they are perhaps more akin to strategies found in texts that would not have been labeled “Christian.” For instance, Philip Harland redescribes early Christ groups as modeled on ancient voluntary associations, thus defamiliarizing the notion of Paul as a great hero (and sometimes founder) of the Christian faith. In this paradigm, the Christ groups to which Paul writes function like other groups in the ancient Mediterranean, in which members find a sense of belonging. In another successful attempt at redescription, Heidi Wendt alternatively redescribes Paul as a self-authorized itinerant religious expert, akin to others popular in the first two centuries of the

95 William Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, _The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of “Religion”_ (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 162. Emphasis in original. The book is co-authored by Arnal and McCutcheon, though the book makes clear that this chapter was written by Arnal. As we have just seen, this distinction becomes important as McCutcheon himself pushes against the entire project of “Christian origins.” This essay intervenes in the field but not does not suggest dismantling it altogether.

96 Arnal and McCutcheon, 170.

97 Harland’s bibliography on this is extensive, but his first book-length treatment is Philip A. Harland, _Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society_ (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). See discussion of Harland in Arnal and McCutcheon, 150. More on associations below.
Roman Empire. In other words, we seek alternative paradigms in order to address the entanglements of authorizing appeals to origins.

The important essay by Stanley Stowers on imagined “communities” in Christian origins complements such critiques, targeting the widespread and imprecise application of the concept that itself can participate in essentialized origins narratives. For Stowers, we can neither identify coherent local communities nor can we legitimately posit a trans-Mediterranean “community” of Christians in the ancient world. To do so places a primacy upon textual representations of circumstances, rather than to interrogate how texts utilize historical and social contexts in order to legitimize the social interests of the present. For Stowers, “There never was a social body, a congregation, a community, on the one hand, nor were there defilements of a social purity, rifts and defections from such a nonexistent social miracle of harmony and unity of mind, on the other hand, except in Paul’s imagination and rhetoric.”

If we emphasize the notion of communities for these sources, we risk mystifying the power relations embedded within these texts. “If the writings that constitute virtually all of our evidence, and could have been the most powerful force in the ‘movement,’ simply swell up from vague communities, then the writings do not clearly have interests and are not the results of explainable social processes.”

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98 Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). Wendt surveys the overwhelming disdain displayed in elite Roman authors for such self-styled specialists: “most writers are more interested in denouncing them as charlatans or inculpating them in some mishap than they are in accurately describing their teachings and practices or explaining their appeal” (4).

99 Stanley Stowers, “The Concept of ‘Community’ and the History of Early Christianity,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 23.3–4 (2011): 244. One could find the statement an exaggeration. There were gatherings and many of these gatherings likely had regular members, but the force of “community” may risk suggesting more coherence than we can really account for. Our evidence comes from a small handful of authors who are trying to make local groups fit into a larger paradigm. We can acknowledge the paradigms of these authors, but we should be careful not to essentialize them as the “actual” nature of something called “Christianity” amidst these disparate gatherings around the Mediterranean. We have one-sided anecdotes and theological discourses.

100 Stowers, 249–50.
imagined communities risk attributing coherence to chaos, resting our conclusions on the ideological interests of the textual evidence we investigate.¹⁰¹

Even among those who see themselves as radically separated from the traditional norms of biblical studies, so many of the innovations we have seen in New Testament studies have served to undergird the authority of the New Testament canon. This dissertation joins the work of scholars who highlight ideological contexts of continued interpretative strategies, while seeking to realign our comparanda from antiquity, thus redescribing and demystifying the texts of Christian origins. I use the concept of “Christian origins” with an acknowledgment that there is no singular “source” out of which the streams of “Christianity” flow. We have data for a multiplicity of competing Christ claims in antiquity. The fragmented confusion of the evidence likely stems from the reality that any such “origins” for these contests over Christ discourse themselves lack coherence. There is no grand narrative or unifying theory of Christian origins. There is no great Christian community, be it high Christology or anti-empire. There is no authentic core to be found.

Thus, in this chapter, I have argued that liberative biblical scholarship often seeks to universalize theological claims about the Bible for those who do not participate in theological confessional communities. Such moves also flatten diverse and often distasteful data in order to construct a coherent beginning to a transhistorical “Christianity,” that has been redefined as ultimately radical. The lines between theological and putatively neutral scholarship is constantly blurred within the field. We face the inescapable problem of origins, but we can do so self-

¹⁰¹ One could push back on Stowers here, with the concept of “real” “social facts,” as discussed above. I do not wish to suggest that there were not social realities on the ground, that actual people did not meet in one another’s homes, and neither—I believe—does Stowers. However, we have no access to any such “actual” gatherings of Christ groups in this early moment apart from Paul’s texts. Paul stabilizes “communities” that may have lacked any broad coherence. Turning our analytical gaze upon his authorizing strategies provides a firmer target.
reflexively, without giving up on interpreting texts that happen to find themselves within a
canon. In the following chapter, I unpack the more particular target of this dissertation: the
relationship between how we conceive of the “empire” of Rome—and empire more broadly—in
relation to the texts and textual practices we generally label “apocalyptic.” For the last several
decades, an increasing collection of scholarship has explored Christian (and, at times, Jewish)
apocalyptic discourse as fundamentally anti-imperial. Such scholarship, in my view, often
participates in the essentialist and exceptionalist pitfalls that I have outlined above.
Chapter 2: Empire and Apocalypse: Towards a Discourse Analysis

Situating Christ Groups in the Empire

Thus far, we have examined the ideological considerations regarding well-meaning progressive readings of the New Testament—namely, the essentialism and exceptionalism involved in liberationist return-to-origins narratives. I have triangulated myself as one opposed to essentializing Christian origins in any sort of static manner, but concerned that we also do not avoid analyzing biblical texts themselves out of a fear of participating in such essentialism. Under the umbrella of these problems, this dissertation interrogates the increasingly popular anti-imperialist readings of early Christian documents found in the New Testament. The fetishized “subversion” discussed in the first chapter is indeed part of this larger trend. In order to properly assess such readings, we need to address the particular assumptions entangled with “empire” and “imperialism” as a modern conception and an ancient one. Such terms in contemporary academic writing on these texts are both under- and over-theorized. That is to say, one finds an abundance of references to cultural theory and postcolonial studies, but they are often applied in a facile manner without a complex discussion of the concept of “empire” and how we situate ancient Roman practices as “imperial.” Many scholars work from an implicitly conceived monolith as “empire,” a background against which we can set the early Christian writings, which opposed “empire” nearly universally. Furthermore, “Rome” and “empire” in such renderings often become synonymous. If the Christian authors oppose some aspect of Roman rule, then these authors are then conceived as “anti-imperial” in an expansive sense. That is, for such interpreters, these Christian writers oppose all empire down through the present.
In contrast, I argue that the Roman Empire is far more complex and variegated than we tend to imagine and that early Christian writings *participate* in dynamic social and cultural negotiations as much as any other group within the ancient Mediterranean world. I begin by discussing several scholars’ views on how to understand Rome as an empire. In order to understand what NT scholars suggest the NT authors are resisting, we must take a moment to explore briefly what we imagine the Roman empire to be. Key to the imaginary of the Roman Empire is the relationship between central Roman authority and its diverse and disparate provinces. Targeting especially the influence of Clifford Ando in Roman studies, I examine the ways in which the provinces willingly participate in Roman discourses and practices in order for local elites to borrow the authority of the Roman empire. I then explore the two primary theorists that NT scholars use to frame their reading as “anti-imperial” (i.e., Scott, Bhabha). As I am situating the ways in which Christ groups participate in Roman social and cultural discourses, I then review discussions on the economics of early Christ assemblies—including what assumptions we make about the socioeconomic status of these group members. Anti-imperial readings are keen to depict Christ groups as marginalized as possible, but those who understand Christ groups as equivalent to ancient associations paint a much more dynamic picture of the social situation. Finally, this chapter targets “apocalyptic discourse” head on, reviewing how the category of “apocalyptic” has come to serve anti-imperial readings in a way that reifies progressive Christian return-to-origins narratives and downplays internal competitions among the early Christ assemblies themselves. To highlight a popular definition discussed below, we may think of apocalyptic discourse in terms of “revelation” that is “mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural
world.”¹⁰² I offer a way forward that emphasizes the social function of apocalyptic discourse and acknowledges the flexible, dynamic manner in which such discourse is deployed in a variety of genres.

For the people walking the roads of the ancient Mediterranean, Rome was a cacophony of practices, materials, buildings, stories, and images. Rome was a state, a military, an economy, a political system, a collection of gathering spaces, a promise to control the chaos of life on land and sea, coins, food, and funerals. It was also crucifixion and war and gladiators. It was slavery and *patria potestas* and discourses on modesty. Rome was the purple-dyers, the performers, the athletes, the physicians, the Demetriasts, the Judeans, the Christians. Rome was the city, the province, the boundaries separating Roman life from the barbarians and their frontiers abroad. Rome was farms and temples and ships at sea. Arguing that the figure of the emperor tied the varied discourses and institutions of the Roman world together more than any factor, Carlos Noreña outlines all the variegated conditions of the vast territory we label “Roman”: geological, ecological, economic, sociological, technological, artistic, cultic, literary, linguistic, dietary, and historical.¹⁰³ As Noreña notes,

> Stretching across four modern time zones, the empire embraced three continents and included multiple geological and climatic zones ranging from coastal plains, rugged mountain ranges, and high plateaus to fertile river valleys, deserts, and thick forests, all differentiated by temperature, rainfall, flora, and fauna. Nested within these broad zones were the countless microregions of the Roman imperial world, sometimes no larger than a single hillside or coastal inlet, within which the majority of the empire’s inhabitants, more or less insulated from one another, spent most of their lives.¹⁰⁴


¹⁰⁴ Noreña, 2.
The success of the Roman imperial system was to find a way in which these disparate collections of inhabitants—with their varied traditions, practices, and environs—could all be described as “Roman.” While the Mediterranean Sea itself provided some sense of collectivity, the sea itself boasted a wide variety of currents and climates and stretched thousands of miles. Though there was some civic conformity, regular administration of mundane local affairs fell to the “semi-autonomous communities” scattered across these microregions.105

Allowing for such autonomy, the Roman imperial system nevertheless found ways to bind together its expansive, divergent territory. Noreña identifies here a “general convergence of ‘social power’ in the Roman world” happening in the early empire, where “the key actors were the institutions and associated personnel of the central state; the most influential collectivities within the empire, especially the senate and the army; and the layered aristocracies of the Roman world, both imperial and local.”106 Noreña’s description of this social power convergence highlights the connection between the central state and the local aristocracies of the Mediterranean:

This bond was based on a simple trade. Local aristocrats throughout the empire helped to maintain order and to collect taxes in the interests of the central state, which in return provided these local “big men” with markers of status, especially Roman citizenship and, where necessary, with armed force. Closely related to local administration was civic benefaction, the customary practice by which these same local aristocrats voluntarily expended their own wealth on the physical development and adornment of their cities.107

Local elites benefited from their own close associations with the powerful central Roman state, which was itself bolstered by a host of various cultural and institutional practices across the

105 Noreña, 5.
106 Noreña, 10.
107 Noreña, 11.
empire. The relationship was mutually authorizing. Noreña details what he sees as an “ideological convergence” between the local elites and the central state in the links of key virtues found on official Roman coinage and local inscriptive representations of the emperor—aequitas (equity), pietas (piety), virtus (virtue), liberalitas (generosity), and providentia (foresight). He finds a link, from reign to reign, of the virtues minted on coins by particular imperial regimes and their echoes in epigraphical data in local cities.

Thus, both the central state and the local elites participated in the idealization of the emperor, serving their interests in different ways:

So while the central state communicated a set of ideals and values mainly in order to strengthen belief in the legitimacy of Roman imperial rule, the local aristocrats in the provinces replicated these same ideals and values mainly in order to secure their own privileged place within the empire’s social and political hierarchy.

Here Noreña contrasts himself with Clifford Ando. Ando makes a similar argument, seeking to explore how “Rome ceased to rule her subjects through coercion and began to rely on their good will.” Both Noreña and Ando explore the reasons the subjects of the empire accepted their status as subjects willingly. Both scholars highlight the role of the emperor as a unifying feature of the Roman state, combined with the bureaucratic apparatus reinforcing and actualizing imperial rule throughout the provinces. However, Ando emphasizes strategic loyalty to the emperor among the local elites in order to compete for imperial favor. Noreña views such honorific displays toward the emperor not for an external audience (i.e., the emperor), but rather

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108 Noreña, 235.

109 While the main evidence he reviews is found in the western area of the empire, the implications for this interplay are broadly found across the Roman world. The Greek east had more established cities in place prior to Roman rule as well as local currencies, which complicates the data in the east.

110 Noreña, 19.

111 Ando, 19.
an internal one (i.e., local competition among elites). Noreña does not “deny that imperial statues could also function as public demonstrations of loyalty to the imperial regime, and that provincial governors and other imperial officials formed a part of their intended audience.”

Instead, however, Noreña emphasizes the integration of Roman imperial discourse through rituals and epigraphical display as reifications of local aristocratic power statuses.

Noreña focuses more on the political interests at stake in the idealization of the emperor than does Ando. Two themes here receive emphasis in Ando’s work: consensus (based on Habermas) and charisma (based on Weber). This point brings us to one of the most emphatic critiques that Ando has received in Peter Rose’s article, “Divorcing Ideology from Marxism and Marxism from Ideology: Some Problems.” Ando writes, “Rather, the rulers of the empire perpetually sought to found their actions on the consensus of their subjects, making them active participants in their own subjugation by urging them to iterate the principles of the ruling order.”

In response, Rose pointedly asks, “If the provincials are ‘active participants in their own subjugation,’ how is the resultant ‘consensus’ not a fraud?” Furthermore, Rose argues that an emphasis on Weberian “charisma” is designed to de-politicize Ando’s understanding of Rome. Ando ignores some of Weber’s own comments on the dangers of authoritarianism

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112 Noreña, 271–2. Noreña describes Ando’s position regarding provincial loyalism as “not tenable” (271), but then also as “not incompatible” with his approach (19 n. 61).

113 As Noreña states, e.g., “Though the central state and these local aristocrats had different goals, then, their motives in idealizing the emperor were ultimately compatible, since this collective idealization manifestly served the distinct interests of both sets of actors” (19).


115 Ando, 338.

116 Rose, 130.
associated with charismatic leadership.\textsuperscript{117} Indeed, Rose forcefully critiques Ando for a host of theoretical imprecisions in Ando's massive book.\textsuperscript{118} For Rose, Ando's Rome is one that highlights its “utopian projections” without underscoring “the various ways in which these constructs serve the interests of the dominant class.”\textsuperscript{119}

Furthermore, Ando distances his reading of Rome from Marx, favoring Bourdieu “because his inquiry reaches so far beyond the level of politics and economics.”\textsuperscript{120} From Rose’s perspective, this reveals Ando’s interest in sidestepping questions of politics and economics, not least because it ignores how deeply rooted in a class-based critique Bourdieu’s concept of habitus is.\textsuperscript{121} Ando notes the “real benefits to local populations” of the monumental building

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\textsuperscript{117} Rose, 123. Here he notes, “with the ancient form [of charismatic leadership], its authoritarian character is simply a given of no interest to Ando: the countless arbitrary deaths caused by the emperors do not appear.”

\textsuperscript{118} Namely, Rose outlines the various ways in which Ando seems to misunderstand the theorists he uses and the legacies in which they participate. Ando repudiates Marxist approaches to ideology, arguing, “by concentrating on the subjugation of the proletariat, [these approaches] can suggest that members of the bourgeoisie were not similarly situated within a social totality, indeed, within the same social totality” (Ando, 20). “I find this particular argument utterly mystifying,” Rose states (114). As a potent example of Rose’s critique, it is worth reproducing here:

In the first place, it is hard to think of a contemporary theorist more obsessively focused on class and the social totality than Bourdieu. Secondly, as far as I know, the greatest theoretician to focus repeatedly on “the social totality” is the Marxist Georg Lukács in his \textit{History and Class Consciousness} (1971), a fundamental and purely Marxist assumption of which is that proletarians and bourgeois are inextricably part of the same social totality but have radically different interests within that totality. Indeed, the very insistence in Marx that classes are by definition relational implies precisely that they are part of the same social totality. Ando’s point, however, as I deduce it from his subsequent text, is that ideology is not primarily a class construct aimed at specific classes but a homogenizing discourse functioning on a purely individual basis. (114)

Furthermore, Ando frames two of his primary named influences—Bourdieu and Habermas—as successors to Weber. However, Rose notes that Bourdieu and Habermas would be better situated as succeeding Marx’s theoretical legacy (114). According to Rose, Ando’s understanding of Marx—as with so many other scholars—is overly simplistic, embracing clichés of Marxism rooted in American cold war narratives, and missing important subtleties from Marx and his interpreters.

\textsuperscript{119} Rose, 115.

\textsuperscript{120} Ando, 21.

\textsuperscript{121} Rose, 118. This is a repeated point made by Rose: e.g., “what is amazing is Ando’s apparent belief that his own view of the imperial cult is somehow not ‘political’” (123; cf. his note on Ando’s “lack of interest in the economics of empire,” 128). On this point, Rose penetratingly asks, “if the ruler cult is so fully in Ando’s own terms a central piece of imperial ‘ideology,’ how is it not ‘political’? Ando speaks as if the successful internalization by the
works in their urbanization push, while ignoring them—according to Rose—Bourdieu’s own point on “the cost of establishing domination in pre-capitalist societies.”¹²² Another Bourdieusian point that Rose uses to push Ando is his comment on “the researcher’s social phantasms” that one seeks out in social observation, “i.e., his [sic] unanalysed relationship with his own society.”¹²³ Here, Rose points to the combination of and those “rigorous, repeated refusals of the relevance of his own era with his relentless, all-but-unequivocal celebration of the Roman empire”¹²⁴ To this point, Rose notes, “What [Ando] leaves untheorized is his own stake in the whole process of Roman legitimation.”¹²⁵ Rose identifies Ando’s tome as “an essentially utopian project directed toward creating freedom from the oppressions of present-day capitalism and projects it back into the Roman empire.”¹²⁶ This Ando does even while he repeatedly denies the relevance of his own historical and political situation to his historical inquiry, a point of relevance for the NT scholarship this dissertation critiques.

Rose helps us realize that if we leave our understanding of “empire” with the largely discursive dynamics examined by scholars such as Noreña and, in particular, Ando, then we risk missing the brutality and exploitation masked below the titles and virtues that help construct the beautiful Roman façade. While a de-emphasis on Roman brutality might assist an argument against anti-imperialist NT interpretations, I have no interest in sanitizing Roman imperial power provincials of ‘belief’ in this cult somehow divests it of its political meaning. One may posit ‘sincere’ belief in the superhuman powers of the individual in whom so much power is, in fact, concentrated, but this in no way explains how this power is exercised and in whose interests” (124).

¹²² Ando, 13; Rose, 120.


¹²⁴ Rose, 121.

¹²⁵ Rose, 129.

¹²⁶ Rose, 126.
in an effort to critique the sanitation of early Christian writings. One of the strongest recent voices offering a less rosy picture of imperial power is David Mattingly, who critiques the “benign view of colonialism” among Roman historians and archaeologists “that strongly correlates the Roman Empire with Western Civilization.”

“[O]rthodox approaches to Roman archaeology,” he notes, “follow an agenda that is predisposed to emphasize the cultural achievements of the empire and the positive and benign effects of Roman rule.” Like Noreña, Mattingly emphasizes the heterogeneity of the lands and cultures included within the empire. For Mattingly, the dominant “Romanization” paradigms centralize conformity and the hierarchical “passing down of Roman culture and ideas about identity to grateful provincials.”

He ties this benign view of Roman colonialism with modern British colonialism, where comparisons were explicitly made between the civilizing strategies of British colonizers and those of the Roman empire. Mattingly highlights the large number of imperial settlers who held Oxford classics degrees. Such is the legacy that muddies Roman studies in the West.

Alternatively, Mattingly offers a perspective he has borrowed from the concept of “discrepent experience” in postcolonial studies in order to outline what he calls “discrepant identity.” This approach, like much identity scholarship in recent years, emphasizes

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128 Mattingly, 204.

129 Mattingly, 204.

130 Mattingly writes, “We must also note the interconnectedness of the ideology of modern empire and the development of the study of ancient Rome in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. For example, the impact of Oxford classicists in the Indian Civil Service has been highlighted by Oswyn Murray and others: Oxford provided half the ICS entrants between 1892 and 1914, and in 1938 no less than six out of eight provincial governors in India were Greats men (that is, had Oxford classics degrees). Knowledge and admiration of the Roman Empire shaped British policy in its own colonies, while at the same time the modern British imperial experience reinforced a particular view of the Roman world” (9).
“multifaceted,” “multiple,” and “dynamic” identities. In this way, Mattingly helpfully counters the overly simplistic traditional paradigms of Romanization, which largely move in one direction (top-down or bottom-up). Mattingly does not incorporate the sharpest critiques of such approaches to multifaceted identities in recent years, namely those of Jean-François Bayart and Rogers Brubaker on the imprecision of the term “identity” and what it signifies.131 Both of the latter scholars eschew “identity” for “identification” as an active term indicating process over a static condition. Brubaker notes the apparent contradiction in terms that resides in phrases like “dynamic identity” or “fluid identity.” If identity is porous, it no longer constitutes identity at all. Regardless, Mattingly’s critique is well-founded: identification in the Roman world is not an either-or affair between passive assimilation and hardline resistance. The complex heterogeneity of the Mediterranean and all its groups, professions, ethnicities, classes, etc., included near infinite possible combinations of identification with and against the cultural representations and social practices associated with the Roman empire. More pointedly, however, these identifications operate within the context not of loyalism, but fear of retaliation by Rome’s massive military power. For Mattingly, Roman rule is brutal and violent—and it is this brutality that leads to discrepant identities, not Rome’s benevolence for its subjects.

Rome, then, is a diverse mix of identifications and social practices. Local elites generally compete in their participation in Roman cultural discourse, which itself is authorized by the dominance maintained by Rome’s brutal violence. Early Christ groups are but one small piece in

131 Jean-François Bayart, The Illusion of Cultural Identity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Rogers Brubaker, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” Theory and Society 29 (2000): 1–47. Bayart’s line that “there is no such thing as identity, only operational acts of identification” (92) has received much attention in the academic study of religion in recent years.
this larger puzzle, at times participating in Roman discourses in their own internal competitions and at times resenting the very Roman power that undergirds such discourse.

**Anti-Imperialism, Scott, and Bhabha in NT Studies**

Discussions of the nature of the empire play a different role in scholarship on the New Testament and Christian origins. Academics in this field often play on the violence of Rome as merely a counterpoint against which to set up the exceptionality of early Christians. These Christians are victims of oppression who nevertheless eventually “blossomed” into the global Christian faith.\(^{132}\) We need to survey the contours of anti-imperial NT scholarship, to show the assumptions that undergird such work. Many scholars merely lean on prominent NT scholars on matters of empire without dipping into either Roman studies or the theoretical foundations of what we consider “empire” to be. Other scholars do engage such theory, but often use this theory in order to bolster their own theological frameworks. A minority of scholars working on the documents of early Christ groups use critical theory in order to contend with the complexity of these materials and not to bolster a canonical authority that reinforces theologies today. In this section, I examine the ways in which such scholars contend specifically with anti-imperialism in general and the main theorists the field utilizes—namely, James C. Scott and Homi Bhabha. As we will see, generally speaking, Scott is often used to flatten the meanings of such early documents while Bhabha is more often used to foreground complexity. The use of both scholars, however, play into dominant themes we have already seen in the desire to treat Christians as

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radically exceptional. These examinations lay the groundwork for conversations we will see in subsequent chapters featuring both authors.

Judy Diehl’s three-part series of articles for *Currents in Biblical Research* presents a useful case-in-point as a piece promoting an anti-imperial reading of NT documents. Though CBR is not a Christian journal, Diehl’s pieces explicitly assume a shared Christian perspective (“our Christian faith”), citing almost entirely Christian authors and not engaging directly with theoretical literature outside of biblical and early Christian studies. She uses themes of anti-imperialism to situate the early Christians as a persecuted voice “from below” living under the thumb of the dominant Roman Empire, sometimes borrowing themes from “Greco-Roman culture” in order to spread “the gospel of Christ.” For example, Diehl writes, “The Gospel writers did not fall into ‘syncretism’, but redefined the pagan world-view in terms of Jesus Christ and the Christian perspective.” Borrowing from N.T. Wright, she notes, “the Christians were cautiously law-abiding citizens in the Empire, with the exception of their bold devotion to Christ.” In order to transmit their subversive message of devotion to Christ under the oppression of the empire, Diehl states that the early Christians communicated with coded language and wrote pseudonymously in order to avoid detection by the state that persecuted them. We must understand why scholars appeal to “anti-imperial” arguments by interrogating what precisely these scholars feel the NT authors are protesting. For Diehl, the way in which the Christians here are “anti-imperial” is not in defiance of dominance itself, but rather, they counter

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133 For instance, on the theme of “hidden transcripts,” she cites Warren Carter and makes no mention of James Scott, from whom the concept is borrowed (see below).

134 Diehl, 21. She is here summarizing, but also apparently affirming the work of Brian Godawa.

135 Diehl 18.
empire simply by worshiping Christ. This is an anti-imperialism that is palatable to the more conservative evangelicalism represented by Denver Seminary, Diehl’s employer at the time she wrote these pieces.

Diehl’s series of articles is just one example of the larger trend, most of which do not stop short of direct political considerations. In New Testament studies, we find a host of literature promoting a strong distinction between NT writings and the Roman Empire. In addition to the works of N.T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan, whom we have covered in Chapter 1, authors such as Richard Horsley, Warren Carter, and Neil Elliott have together edited or authored dozens of books covering such themes. The predominance of anti-imperial discussion seems to have had its most impactful start with the Paul and Politics group of the Society of Biblical Literature.136 This group pushed back on many of the dominant strategies of SBL sessions, which failed to recognize the “political” considerations of reading.137 The work of Horsley and others helpfully

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137 This group has, however, been critiqued for ignoring the advancements in “political” readings by feminist scholars. Marchal writes,

However, in spite of a range of critiques, cautions, and concerns raised by feminist scholars in such [Paul and Politics SBL] sessions and in these volumes, it is equally remarkable that the majority of the work rarely touches upon the topics of gender or sexuality or implements feminist practices. Far from recognizing the key role of gendered rhetorics in Paul’s letters and in the empire, these volumes include feminist and/or female voices only to ignore or implicitly dismiss them. (The Politics of Heaven, 18)

participates in a significant drive in recent decades to understand the political situation of Jesus and Paul, challenging individualistic Western understandings of Jesus as a rather personal savior or a politically-innocuous sage. “Whatever reservations some biblical scholars might have about some of Horsley’s scholarship,” as Stephen D. Moore writes, “there is no question that he is capable at times of reframing the field in electrifyingly original ways.”

One of the key features of such anti-imperial readings (often billed as “empire studies”) is James C. Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcript.” Scott’s “hidden transcript” is part of a

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138 Moore, “Paul after Empire,” 12. Moore’s chapter is an excellent survey and analysis of Horsley’s particular influence in the “Paul and empire” movement within academic biblical studies.

larger theoretical paradigm emphasizing “ordinary class struggle” or “resistance in everyday life.” Scott imagines a main “stage” in which the players perform according to the rules set by the dominant. The peasants are powerless to change the rules of the stage and thus they find ways to resist the powers subtly “offstage” or “backstage.” He feels the field of peasant studies focuses too much on overt violent revolution to the dismissal of the ways in which peasants quietly resist the powers through subtle, covert, and even playful means. In his classic work, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Scott outlines some of the offstage possibilities:

By reference to the culture that peasants fashion from their experience—their “offstage” comments and conversation, their proverbs, folksongs, and history, legends, jokes, language, ritual, and religion—it should be possible to determine to what degree, and in what ways, peasants actually accept the social order propagated by elites. Some elements of lower-class culture are of course more relevant to this issue than others. For any agrarian system, one can identify a set of key values that justify the right of an elite to the deference, land, taxes, and rent it claims. It is, in large part, an empirical matter whether such key values find support or opposition within the subculture of subordinate classes. If bandits and poachers are made into folkheroes, we can infer that transgressions of elite codes evoke a vicarious admiration. If the forms of outward deference are privately mocked, it may suggest that peasants are hardly in the thrall of a naturally ordained social order. If those who try to curry the personal favor of elites are shunned and ostracized by others of their class, we have evidence that there is a lower-class subculture with sanctioning power. Rejection of elite values, however, is seldom an across-the-board proposition, and only a close study of peasant values can define the major points of friction and correspondence. In this sense, points of friction become diagnostic only when they center on key values in the social order, grow, and harden.¹⁴⁰

These “peasant values” displayed through “offstage” performances thus highlight the ways in which the powerless lower-class find ways of resisting compliance. The “hidden transcript” is the space where the peasant class playfully pushes back against the “public transcript” of the

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powerful. It is worth noting here, however, Scott’s reticence to apply such schemas “across-the-board.”

Scholars of the New Testament and Christian origins have latched onto this idea as a way to “decode” the face-value meaning of such texts—to demonstrate the ways in which NT and other ancient Jewish or Christian texts are anti-imperial even when they do not appear so at first glance. The “hidden transcript” motif has exploded into one of many theory-tropes deployed in such anti-imperial readings. In the employ of scholars of ancient Jewish and Christian texts, we find “hidden transcripts” manifested as single code words, pericopes, speeches, entire documents, and even literary genres as a whole. What many so-called “empire studies” scholars have done is to apply Scott’s understanding of “hidden transcripts” that peasants use in covertly resisting the elite and to therefore conclude that the NT, or various sections therein, are “anti-imperial.” The term “anti-imperial” itself suggests a kind of rejection of “imperial” values themselves and not the very specific powers that dominate. As we will see, many NT scholars do make such statements, sometimes explicitly using such connections in order to redefine the essential heart of Christianity itself as “anti-imperial.” It is worth considering the conditions by which any particular theoretical concept gains popularity within biblical studies. NT scholarship, in particular, has been the breeding ground for experimental discussions about theory. After all, there is only so much that one can say about such a small literary corpus without testing these works with newer theoretical interventions. It would appear that the theoretical interventions that find wide application are those that rehabilitate NT documents from a particular ideological perspective. For example, as we have seen in the first chapter, liberative NT scholars often find themselves drawn to theoretical schema that challenge the status quo only to limited extents.
Scott has received critiques from his fellow anthropologists on this theme of “hidden transcripts,” and such critiques are instructive for NT studies. Matthew C. Gutmann, currently Professor of Anthropology at Brown University, critiques Scott’s theory of everyday resistance as overly focused upon innocuous forms of resistance—that is, forms of resistance that do not actually lead to movements seeking change of the status quo. For Gutmann, Scott works too hard to rationalize the status quo and romanticize these small matters that actually pose no threat to the larger social order. Gutmann critiques Scott’s hard dichotomy between overt and covert resistance. In fact, Gutmann sees Scott as valorizing covert (and thus, nonthreatening) resistance over overt, direct revolutionary action.

Marjorie Becker offers a similar critique rooted in the cultural practices of resistance and elite response in the time after the Mexican Revolution, during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. Becker finds that the elite Cardenistas were adept at appropriating and offering

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142 Gutmann, 76–80. Gutmann highlights examples in which Scott argues “that covert forms of resistance are not merely the most common but also the most efficacious” (80). Gutmann contends, “The question ultimately is not that these forms of protest must be acknowledged as such but whether the accomplishments of peasants—and the poor and oppressed in general—in their day-to-day lives are essentially all that they realistically can achieve” (80). For further critiques of Scott’s approach to “resistance in everyday life,” see Wilma A. Dunaway, Slavery in the American Mountain South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 171–97; Kevin Malseed, “Where There Is No Movement: Local Resistance and the Potential for Solidarity,” Journal of Agrarian Change 8.2–3 (2008): 489–514.


Cárdenas responded to the challenge in Michoacán by adopting a program calling for governmental control of agrarian policy, domination of institutional politics, and the dissemination of anticlericalism. He mobilized a squad of teachers, political leaders, and agricultural agents in Michoacán to implement his program and to win popular allegiance to his government. They, in turn, adopted an ambitious strategy. Determined to promote Cardenista values among the campesinos, Michoacán Cardenistas spent months constructing what they viewed as a popular idiom—agricultural symbolism, the ceremonial imagery of the Catholic mass, and fragments of the
concessions to select complaints that arose from the “everyday weapons of the weak” available to the campesinos. By paying attention to campesino resistance, the Cardenistas mollified the anger by addressing the most infuriating cultural offenses while still maintaining a social order benefiting their elite status. They thus deployed “a strategy which simultaneously perpetuated an illusion of cultural freedom while undermining the possibility that cultural dissidence could effect political change.” Becker notes, “the Cardenistas read the campesino resistance and moved to nullify its potency. In this case, at least, the weapons of the weak proved to be weak weapons indeed.” Considering the discussion of neoliberalism above, it is suggestive that this particular theoretical concept resonates so strongly among NT scholars—a theory that emphasizes a kind of revolution that provides no social threat to Roman dominance. We need not negate the fact that “everyday resistance” occurs and is sometimes displayed in covert ways. However, we need to interrogate the popularity of such theoretical tools.

Homi Bhabha’s concepts of ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry have also found some reception in NT studies, albeit with a far different network of scholars than Scott’s “hidden transcripts.” These scholars tend to identify as those practicing “postcolonial studies” as

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Tarscan Indian language spoken by the ancestors of Michoacán’s sizable Tarascan population.

144 Becker, 246.

145 Becker, 246.

opposed to “empire studies.” Where Scott maximizes resistance among the peasant class, Bhabha emphasizes the complexity of how the colonized respond to their colonizers. These interconnected concepts introduce far greater nuance into the imperialism discussion and are not nearly as convenient for straightforward anti-imperialism readings. For Bhabha, colonial mimicry is a strategy of colonial power in which colonizers seek to recreate their colonized subjects in their image—“the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”

Thus, “mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.” The strategy of mimicry, however, can also act as a threat to colonizers. As the colonized indeed internalize the norms of


colonial power and replicate those norms, they begin to “pass up”—that is, put their subjugated status at risk of blending into the colonizer’s discursive norms. Colonizing power, however, must have a colonized subject to constitute itself. This leaves the situation in a confounding ambivalent, “in-between” cultural space. Colonizers seek to reform native practices—for example, into those that may appear more “Christian”—while also making sure the colonized respond to their “interpellated” status as defined by the colonizing power. The colonizers from the British Empire explicitly sought to produce “mimic men” who would serve as “interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

According to Bhabha, hybridity itself is also the ambivalent space that threatens the authoritative status of the colonizer. That is, as the colonizer enacts an “in-between,” ambivalent space that is neither constitutive of the colonizing identity nor the imagined identity of the colonized—a bastardized mirror image that displaces fixed images of both the colonizer and the colonized. This hybrid, ambivalent, liminal space confounds the assumed simplistic dialectic between colonizing power and its subjects. Colonizing power is authorized by recognition, the ability to differentiate the Other. In hybridity, “[t]he presence of colonialist authority is no longer immediately visible; its discriminatory identifications no longer have their authoritative reference


151 E.g., “The paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” (Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 165).
to this culture’s cannibalism or that people’s perfidy.”\textsuperscript{152} Thus the two stated goals of the colonizer collapse into each other. That is, the ideal of noble reform for savage natives in a Christian European image legitimates the practices of colonization, while the process of interpellation undercuts any noble façade. On the other hand, the deployment of “reform” that recreates the cultural representations of the colonized in the image of the colonizer eventually destabilizes the difference upon which interpellations are founded.\textsuperscript{153} The colonized find their agency by revaluing and reframing the colonizer’s cultural practices—by removing its ability to signify the colonizer’s authority.

Bhabha uses the example of Bible translation in colonial India, in which natives demanded the Bible be translated into their own language and thus resulted in a partial representation of English culture that in turn displaces English authority based upon their Bible.

\textsuperscript{152} Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, 163.

\textsuperscript{153} One of his clearer articulations of these dynamics comes from Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}:

It is the power of this strange metonymy of presence to so disturb the systematic (and systemic) construction of discriminatory knowledges that the cultural, once recognized as the medium of authority, becomes virtually unrecognizable. Culture, as a colonial space of intervention and agonism, as the trace of the displacement of symbol to sign, can be transformed by the unpredictable and partial desire of hybridity. Deprived of their full presence, the knowledges of cultural authority may be articulated with forms of ‘native’ knowledges or faced with those discriminated subjects that they must rule but can no longer represent. This may lead, as in the case of the natives outside Delhi, to questions of authority that the authorities—the Bible included—cannot answer. Such a process is not the deconstruction of a cultural system from the margins of its own aporia nor, as in Derrida’s ‘Double session’, the mime that haunts mimesis. The display of hybridity—its peculiar ‘replication’—terrorizes authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery.

Such a reading of the hybridity of colonial authority profoundly unsettles the demand that figures at the centre of the originary myth of colonialist power. It is the demand that the space it occupies be unbounded, its reality coincident with the emergence of an imperialist narrative and history, its discourse non-dialogic, its enunciation unitary, unmarked by the trace of difference. It is a demand that is recognizable in a range of justificatory Western ‘civil’ discourses where the presence of the ‘colony’ often alienates its own language of liberty and reveals its universalist concepts of labour and property as particular, post-Enlightenment ideological and technological practices. (164–5, emphases in original)
The now nativized Bible becomes an “inappropriate signifier.” Thus, the colonized strategically deploy these inappropriate signifiers, “at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance, from the disciplined to the desiring.”  

Here, Bhabha says, “discrimination turns into the assertion of the hybrid, the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery.”

This is where Bhabha departs from his interlocutor, Frantz Fanon, who suggests that the colonized’s only choice is to “turn white or disappear.” For Bhabha, the colonized can enter into this “more ambivalent, third choice: camouflage, mimicry, black skins/white masks.” In this paradigm, he intends to question essentialist notions of self, noting that there is no essential, universal, marginalized voice under the hybrid mask.

At first glance, such complexity may appear to offer a more fruitful theoretical course regarding discussions of empire and early Christ groups. However, such concepts themselves also do not provide a potent threat to empire. Postcolonial NT scholar Joseph A. Marchal summarizes a number of the ways in which Bhabha’s approach has been critiqued, including ways that will echo the critiques we have seen of James Scott. As Marchal writes, “[t]he fractures Bhabha finds are more often signs of colonialism’s subtle vitality than its undoing.”

While he is largely positive about Bhabha’s paradigm and its usefulness for Pauline studies, in

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154 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 172.

155 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 172.


157 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 172.

158 E.g., he writes, “Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: it is not what Césaire describes as ‘colonization-thingification’ behind which there stands the essence of the présence Africaine” (“Of Mimicry,” 29). Also, “It is precisely as a separation from origins and essences that this colonial space is constructed” (*The Location of Culture*, 171). In other words, the in-between, hybridized space disrupts essentialist notions of some pure, e.g., English culture in competition with a pure Indian culture.

159 Marchal, 75.
particular, Marchal also raises concerns about its potential to elide the voices of the colonized—as they are merely versions of the colonizer’s rhetoric. “For example, on the African scene of colonialism, a native with apparently ‘in-between’ characteristics does not disrupt the categories of savage and civilized, but reinforces an argument for imperial supremacy: linear progress.”

Again similar to concerns we have seen earlier regarding neoliberalism, Marchal notes “how colonialism works by finding ways to include and contain ambivalence.” In other words, we should hesitate to label the mimicry of the oppressed as a subversive strategy when it leaves the colonizer’s authority undisturbed and may simply play right into the hands of colonial strategies. Furthermore, by underscoring the subversion of such techniques, we often de-emphasize the ways in which internal power dynamics among the colonized replicate the harmful discursive strategies of colonialism in order to bolster localized authority structures.

When placed in conversation with other interpretative “camps,” Marchal’s work brings a number of relevant discussion points into focus. For instance, in a revealing review of his book, Brigitte Kahl—whose book *Galatians Re-imagined* falls in the “hidden transcript” camp indicated above—raises numerous concerns about Marchal’s largely negative reading of Paul. At first Kahl frames these concerns as exegesis-related, but quickly and forcefully confronts the issue of “who benefits” from such a reading of Paul. That is, for Kahl, Marchal’s feminist and postcolonial critique of Paul and power dynamics inadvertently reinforces traditionalist readings of Paul: “it is paradoxically and distressingly the conservative interpretations that ultimately win

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160 Marchal, 82.

161 Ibid.

the day—in their abstract negation they are simultaneously confirmed and reinscribed as ‘genuinely Pauline.’”163 With such an approach to Paul, she asks, “Why still bother with Paul?”164 This is precisely the issue at stake in this dissertation: scholars largely “bother with Paul” as an authoritative text not simply as an example of ancient discursive strategies. Paul, for progressive Christian scholars, is put to use to advance the cause of liberation, for “mobilizing forces and resources for resistance and transformation.”165 We should note that Kahl is a Professor of NT at Union Theological Seminary, the same institution as Serene Jones. The same question we raised for Jones’s theme for the 2016 Annual Meeting of the AAR remains relevant: should we accept an approach that is appropriate at the progressive Protestant Union Seminary as universally normative for the rest of the academy?

We also find tension between Marchal and fellow postcolonialist interpreter, Ronald Charles. Charles—who falls in the Bhabhan hybridity camp in the above dichotomy of scholars—takes a radically different position than Marchal on the matter of Paul as traveler. On the one hand, Marchal is concerned that Paul’s motif of travel invokes themes of colonization, tied as it is to progress:

That Paul twice justifies his travels in the name of progress echoes the historical rationale for colonization: empire is for the good of the subjects, a paternalistic, civilizing force of advancement. The imperial resonance of Paul’s *parousia*, the term used for the arrival of a victorious emperor or the visit of an imperial administrator, then, may not be entirely coincidental.166

164 Ibid.
165 Ibid.
166 Marchal, 46.
Charles, on the other hand, offers a fair point regarding the nature of Paul’s travels—that is, Charles sees Paul, in a sense, as a migrant worker. Interestingly, Charles critiques the author of Acts for his “hero-worship” image of Paul tailored to a Rome-friendly ideology found in the book. However, Charles offers his own kind of image of Paul as hero, albeit a humble hero of lower, migrant social status. The complexity as well as the paucity of our evidence affords us the opportunity to read Paul however it may suit our ideological positions. Even robust theoretical considerations do not offer us an outlet from our traditional bifurcations on the nature of Paul, whether we consider him a “good guy” or “bad guy” in our narratives of Christianity.

Though Bhabhan themes do introduce far more nuanced discussions regarding colonial power dynamics than Scott’s work, several weaknesses exist. Indeed, a similar criticism can be made of mimicry as was made of Scott’s “weapons of the weak.” As we have seen, scholars have questioned the seditiousness of colonial mimicry and its ability to erase other important questions of power dynamics. Such concepts are far more appropriate for NT studies than a blanket classification for the entire NT corpus (or nearly all of it) as revolutionary. However, we may also raise concerns here. To place members of the early Christ assemblies in the same category as those who have been colonized by European powers in, for example, Africa and Latin America, continues to romanticize the status of early Christians. To emphasize the response of these documents to external powers and characterize that response as “resistance” underemphasizes internal power dynamics. I contend that this choice of emphasis is an ideological one. The problem that I see with the categories borrowed from Scott and Bhabha is in the assumptions embedded with classifying all the earliest Christians as the marginalized, the

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colonized, the oppressed, and the persecuted. Even the language of “accommodation” or “assimilation” that is often used in these discussions assumes the Christians are not already participating in the cultural discourses and social practices of their regional settings within the ancient Mediterranean world. We should expect all inhabitants of this world to have internalized and to participate in the wildly successful discursive paradigms of Roman society. The use of such discourses (or “transcripts”) should not be first assumed to be subversive or coded. The authors have their own interests and deploy these discourses to serve those interests. Naming discursive practices in the NT as “hidden transcripts” or examples of “colonial mimicry” offers a label that imputes revolutionary power to this corpus and whitewashes the complexity of cultural scripts within these diverse documents. We need to question whether the replication of imperial discourses within, for example, NT texts should be considered subversive or whether they are simply deployments of imperial strategies at a localized stratum.

Economics and the Early Christ Assemblies
This dissertation thus has an interest in exploring the localized power dynamics within these documents and highlighting how the groups we name as the early Christians were full participants in ancient Mediterranean society along with all other inhabitants of these diverse regions. With this backdrop, we should consider the contentious discussions over the socioeconomic status of the early Christ groups. One of the conversation departure points is Steven Friesen’s ambitious article, which questions the so-called “new consensus” of social historical readings of NT documents—that these meetings included a cross section of the population of Roman social and economic strata. Friesen helpfully outlines degrees of income,

arguing that Christ-followers would not have been in the top 2.8% of the urban elite that owned most of the wealth in the empire. Friesen largely follows the broad argument of Justin Meggitt

Instead of leaving economic conversations at the generalized level of the “rich” and the “poor,” Friesen sought to construct a seven-level poverty scale. The following is Friesen’s poverty scale and the details he proposes for each level, a combination of Figures 1, 2, and 3 in his article (341, 344, 347):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social groups included</th>
<th>Annual income needed by family of four (Figure 2)</th>
<th>Poverty scale with estimated percentages of urban population in larger cities (Figure 3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS1 Imperial elites</td>
<td>imperial dynasty, Roman senatorial families, a few retainers, local royalty, a few freedpersons</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS2 Regional or provincial elites</td>
<td>equestrian families, provincial officials, some retainers, some decurial families, some freedpersons, some retired military officers</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS3 Municipal elites</td>
<td>most decurial families, wealthy men and women who do not hold office, some freedpersons, some retainers, some veterans, some merchants</td>
<td>25,000-150,000 denarii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS4 Moderate surplus resources</td>
<td>some merchants, some traders, some freedpersons, some artisans (especially those who employ others), and military veterans</td>
<td>5,000 denarii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS5 Stable near subsistence level (with reasonable hope of remaining above the minimum level to sustain life)</td>
<td>many merchants and traders, regular wage earners, artisans, large shop owners, freedpersons, some farm families</td>
<td>In Rome: 5,000 denarii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS6 At subsistence level (and often below minimum)</td>
<td>small farm families, laborers (skilled and unskilled), artisans (esp. those employed by others), In Rome: 5,000 denarii</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
regarding the general economic status of Pauline Christ groups, while offering nuanced
differentiation for the vast majority of poor inhabitants of the Roman world. For both Friesen
and Meggitt, the Christ assemblies were overwhelmingly made up of the poorest members of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>level to sustain life</th>
<th>wage earners, most merchants and traders, small shop/tavern owners</th>
<th>Other cities: 600-700 denarii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PS7 Below subsistence level</td>
<td>some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners.</td>
<td>In the country: 250-300 denarii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

He acknowledges that this scale is purely based in relative measurement towards subsistence and not a holistic scale addressing socio-economic status. This is an intentional move, as he says, “our preoccupation with ‘social status’ is the very mechanism by which we have ignored poverty and economic issues” (334). The JSNT issue that included Friesen’s proposal also hosted two responses from John Barclay and Peter Oakes. See John M. G. Barclay, “Poverty in Pauline Studies: A Response to Steven Friesen,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament 26.3 (2004): 363–66; Peter Oakes, “Constructing Poverty Scales for Graeco-Roman Society: A Response to Steven Friesen’s ‘Poverty in Pauline Studies,’” Journal for the Study of the New Testament 26.3 (2004): 367–71. For Barclay, Friesen’s characterization of the history of scholarship’s “new consensus” is “simply too skimpy and too impressionistic” (364). Barclay also takes issue with Friesen’s proposal at the level of data. He notes, “It is helpful to get a sense of the possible gradations among the population outside the top 3% (the ‘superwealthy elite’ in categories PS 1-3), though it is hardly revolutionary to discover that Paul and his converts belong to the remaining 97%. So far as I know, no one in the ‘new consensus’ has proposed that Paul’s churches contained members of the ‘super-wealthy elite’—with the possible exception of Erastus” (364–5). Friesen’s numbers are also too speculative for Barclay, based as they are in generalized information about pre-industrial societies, for instance. In his reply to Friesen, Oakes worries that a purely resource-based scale is too limited for the complex and piecemeal data available to us, “if, as I would hope, we are to take Friesen’s project further, into more specific analysis of poverty, the form of the New Testament data will drive us towards constructing a behaviourally based poverty scale, rather than a resource-based one” (368). Namely, “subsistence” cannot be so easily quantified as “calorific intake,” as Friesen does, but also “rental, taxes, payments to usurers, protection money, bribes, religious and status-related duties that the person prioritizes above food and shelter” (ibid.).

171 Justin Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival (London: T. & T. Clark, 1998). Barclay notes the similarity of Friesen’s argument to Meggitt’s in negative terms, “Friesen’s critique of the ‘new consensus’ often mirrors Meggitt’s, and his determination to examine economic realities follows closely the programme of Meggitt’s book (but without the detail of primary source or scholarly engagement). Thus I do not take Friesen’s interests to be as revolutionary as he claims” (“Response,” 363). Meggitt’s project has been called into question on this point of differentiation. See, e.g., Dale B. Martin, “Review Essay: Justin J. Meggitt, Paul, Poverty and Survival,” Journal for the Study of the New Testament 24.2 (2001): 51–64. As Martin writes, “The very question at issue is whether using one simplistic category for 99 per cent or more of the population of the Roman empire clarifies more than it distorts” (55). Thus, Friesen’s article may be seen as an attempt to take up Meggitt’s critique of the consensus, while offering a much more plausible and nuanced discussion of economic levels. In the end, though, Friesen’s conclusions regarding the socioeconomic status of early Christ groups do not significantly differ from Meggitt’s.
society. In his careful and fascinating study of the economic data available with recent finds in Pompeii, Peter Oakes explores the distribution of space occupied by this population.\textsuperscript{172} Though his methodology is radically different, Oakes is surprised to find that his model largely supports Friesen’s proposal regarding economic stratification in Roman cities.\textsuperscript{173} Bruce Longenecker argues that early Judaism and Christianity were both exceptional in their treatment of the poor, a

\textsuperscript{172} Peter Oakes, \textit{Reading Romans in Pompeii} (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2009).

\textsuperscript{173} Oakes presents his own table on these points (61):

\begin{table}[h!]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textit{Equivalent space occupied (m}\textsuperscript{2}) & \textit{Percentage of population} \\
\hline
above 1,000 & 2.5 \\
900-999 & 0.2 \\
800-899 & 0.3 \\
700-799 & 0.5 \\
600-699 & 1 \\
500-599 & 2.5 \\
400-499 & 4 \\
300-399 & 4 \\
200-299 & 7 \\
100-199 & 11.0 \\
0-99 & 67 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{A very tentative model of income distribution in Pompeii and Herculaneum, based on equivalent urban space occupied}
\end{table}

Though his early response to Friesen was skeptical, Oakes’ own assessment of this data agreement receives a positive assessment: “the 67% in the lowest equivalent housing size is very close to his 68% for PS6 and PS7. The other figures then inevitably fit his total for PS4 and PS5, although it would be mischievously arbitrary to divide our upper non-elite range into 100-400 m\textsuperscript{2} (22%) and 400-1,000 m\textsuperscript{2} (7.5%) simply to fit with Friesen’s PS5 and PS4!” (66). Oakes nevertheless remains hopeful for yet more material evidence to supplement these analyses: “Further progress looks likely in the future from analysis of further types of socio-economic evidence such as skeletal remains (marking aspects of health and lifestyle, although the patterns of evidence are complex) or food remains (one could imagine a social scale based on diet, as evidenced by latrine waste from various houses!)” (67).
concern he claims was not of interest to the wider Mediterranean culture of reciprocity and benefaction. Though he reconfigures Friesen’s poverty scale as an “economic” one with broader social concerns, these authors (Meggitt, Friesen, Oakes, Longenecker) all generally agree with a far lower socioeconomic status for members of Pauline Christ groups than is traditionally assumed.

However, scholars redescribing Christ-assemblies as comparable to ancient associations (e.g., Kloppenborg, Harland, Ascough, Last), present a somewhat different picture based on their own analytical data and comparative work. In general, these scholars allow for a more

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complex and diverse understanding of socioeconomic relations within Christ groups, noting evidence for some ancient associations and clubs that include a range of members as well as a number of groups of middling and modest statuses. Richard Last, for instance, has recently come out in strong opposition to the conclusions of Meggitt, Friesen, and Longenecker.\(^{176}\) Last explores the economics of “modest clubs,” which include those who are lower down on the socio-economic ladder (e.g., slaves). Even in these modest clubs, members were required to contribute resources for the functioning of the group, even if significantly less than other assemblies. Last questions the assumptions by Friesen and Longenecker that the Christ-assemblies would resemble wider urban demographics, arguing “many people in ancient cities could not afford club membership.”\(^{177}\) Last believes Christ-assemblies would function according to the rules of groups and clubs more broadly—that is, that there would be fees associated with

\(^{176}\) Richard Last, The Pauline Church and the Corinthian Ekklēsia: Greco-Roman Associations in Comparative Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

\(^{177}\) Last, 94.
club membership and that those living at or below subsistence level may not have been able to afford these fees.178

Friesen and Longenecker also use Paul’s instruction in 1 Cor 16:1–2 that Christ-assembly members save resources over time in order to gather enough to support Paul’s collection for the “poor” in Jerusalem, arguing that such a practice indicates these members were at the subsistence level.179 Last argues that this is a speculative assumption, which is likely false, particularly if he is correct that Christ groups would need to collect fees at each gathering as other assemblies would have done.180 Scholars are still evaluating material evidence to come to more localized pictures of ancient economic data, rather than extrapolate from known data in other, quite different regions of the ancient Mediterranean world.181 There is a drive to overemphasize inclusivity of early Christ groups, which aligns also with the impulse to emphasize the radical, revolutionary character of the Christian “movement.” What Last and others emphasizing association data offer us is a sense in which we cannot come to oversimplified conclusions about how all Christ groups operated, particularly ones that fit into a neatly defined progressive and inclusive confessional narrative about Christianity.

With every possible angle of research, including explorations meant to situate early Christ groups with both postcolonial studies and archaeological data, some scholars continue to

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178 He uses two examples from Egypt to explore whether these clubs modest statuses would hinder them from performing the basic functions of other ancient groups, namely, “organisational apparatuses such as offices, formal presentations of honorific rewards, and collections of subscription dues” (97).

179 The NRSV translation of 1 Cor 16:1–2 reads, “Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come.”

180 Last further argues that the “have-nots” or “those who have nothing” should not be taken in an economically absolute sense, but in a more immediate sense, as those who have nothing to eat at the banquet.

181 The two economically modest groups he cites from Egypt come from documents dating to the third and second centuries BCE, which casts some doubt on his presentation.
highlight an ideological interest in setting Christians aside as exceptional and revolutionary. As noted earlier, Arnal highlights the work of Harland and Ascough as a way past entrenched concerns regarding early Christian exceptionalism:

As dislocated individuals within a multiethnic and cosmopolitan empire, the first Christians, just like their neighbors, sought out new ways of belonging—in essence, they formed clubs as substitute social bodies. The composition, organization, rhetoric, and practices of the Jesus clubs were essentially the same as those of other, not-especially-religious associations, because their function was identical. Nothing mysterious or even distinctive is happening at all.\footnote{Arnal and McCutcheon, 150.}

Yet, others look to association data and instead of highlighting distinction, they yet again find Christ groups to be “anti-imperial” associations.\footnote{E.g., R. Alan Streett, \textit{Subversive Meals: An Analysis of the Lord’s Supper under Roman Domination during the First Century} (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2013).} Whether we present nuanced or overly simplified data on economics, we continue to find strategies emphasizing the marginalized status of Christ group members. We still have much work to do in identifying precise, localized implications regarding association data and the earliest Christ assemblies. We must not fill the gaps in data with our ideological interest in a revolutionary, anti-imperial Christian movement. Having said this, all of these interventions offer helpful aspects in contributing to a complex picture of Christ assemblies in their social context. Similarly, we find indications in their writings that feel to us like resistance literature, while we also find other indications that such groups found no pressing reason to question the social dynamics in which they participated. Members of Christ groups would have occupied the same streets, markets, and professions as others in society. What I suggest we avoid is considering the earliest Christ assemblies as a kind of revolutionary “movement” of the proletariat, offering a timeless heart for a religion we call Christianity that should be claimed today in the midst of new forms of imperialism.
By comparing the academic discourses of Roman history seen in these discussions with those in anti-imperialist NT scholarship, we see quite different depictions of Rome in the status quo of each field. Often progressive Christian NT scholarship emphasizes the brutality of Rome in order to promote the idea that the early Christians were, supposedly at their core, anti-imperial and thus Christianity itself must stand against empire. In their complex and ambiguous reflections on their place within Mediterranean society under Roman rule, early Christ-confessing authors do not oppose “empire” as such. These authors, at best, have an ambivalent relationship with Roman authority and other members of society, as with any group in the Mediterranean. To suggest otherwise is to succumb to return-to-origins impulses towards essentialism and exceptionalism. Early Christian authors are not “anti-empire” for at least three reasons: (1) we cannot say that all early Christians share any particular sentiment because there is no inherent, innate essence for what it means to be a Christian; (2) those who might be identified as Christians participate in society the way any other person in that society might; (3) the way that many scholars use the term “empire” (as an abstract category) lacks meaningful definition. We have no way to definitively determine the precise socio-economic strata occupied by members of early Christ groups, but any suggestion that all Christ groups fit into the most marginalized strata of society should be questioned, as such assumptions serve the goals of progressive Christian interpreters today.

**Apocalyptic Discourse**
As I seek to demonstrate the mundane commonness of the early Christ groups, this dissertation focuses its attention on arguably the most difference-oriented discourse available in the texts of early Christ groups—apocalyptic discourse. In this section, then, I establish the arena in which I will discuss such discourse. First, I explore the theoretical foundations for what I mean by “discourse” and how I envision a category called “apocalyptic discourse.” I then review
some of the relevant functions the “apocalyptic” category more broadly in the history of scholarship of early Jewish and Christian texts. Finally, I bring this discussion into conversation with the concerns this dissertation targets: namely, return-to-origins narratives that highlight the exceptionalism of early Christians—particularly, here, in view of the empire. This discussion lays the groundwork for more particular conversations on 1 Thessalonians and Revelation.

According to Foucault, discourses constitute objects into being and place these actions into power relations.\(^{184}\) To simplify, this is discourse as classification. We have scientific discourses that identify and distinguish a planet from a dwarf planet, for instance. When these classifications are recalibrated, Pluto’s classification shifts from one to the other, with implications for how scientists treat Pluto and what teachers tell children about the number of planets in our solar system.\(^{185}\) However, for Pluto, the classificatory negotiations of humans on Earth has changed nothing. It does not know it is no longer considered a planet, nor does it understand it has a name in the first place. Humans, on the other hand, respond to the classifications that are made of them—as with Althusser’s “interpellation.” Ian Hacking distinguishes these two different kinds of classifications as “indifferent” (planets) and “interactive” (humans), the latter of which enter a “looping effect.”\(^{186}\) That is, a human is offered a label. That label corresponds to institutions, regulations, social practices, and cultural

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\(^{184}\) For example, he writes that “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 49. In his classic work, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argued that force is inadequate to successfully maintain authority in a given social context, that violent force raises problems. He thus traces how force bled into the power dynamics of discursive influence, the surreptitious manner in which subjects reinforce their own subjection by internalizing the discursive framework of the authorities. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

\(^{185}\) For this example of classification, I am indebted to Martin’s discussion of Pluto in his *Introduction*, pp. 25–8.

assumptions. Society treats a person differently based on whether they are classified as a citizen, for instance, or a police officer or mentally ill. To the extent that humans are conscious of these classifications and the practices resulting from them, they internalize their place within society and their behavior changes based upon this complex web of interaction. In the words of Althusser, framed in terms of ideology and interpellation,

Ideaologies never stop interpella ting subjects as subjects, never stop ‘recruiting’ individuals who are always-already subjects. The play of ideologies is superposed, criss-crossed, [and] contradicts itself on the same subject: the same individual always-already (several times) subject. Let him figure things out, if he can…

Thus, Hacking notes, “social reality is conditioned, stabilized, or even created by the labels we apply to people, actions, and communities.” Such labels create the appearance of order, seeking to rank and negotiate any given subject’s multiple, “criss-crossed” interpellated hails.

When evaluating textual discourses, Bruce Lincoln offers observations and proposes analytic processes for non-confessional scholars. Lincoln targets what he calls “religious texts,” in particular, those that “connect themselves—either explicitly or in some indirect fashion—to a sphere and a knowledge of transcendent or metaphysical nature, which they purportedly mediate to mortal beings through processes like revelation, inspiration, and unbroken primordial tradition.” Such a characterization certainly includes ancient documents from Christ groups that deploy apocalyptic discourse. Lincoln targets a Vedic text displaying esoteric discourse of

188 Ian Hacking, Historical Ontology (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 103. Hacking is here summarizing the basic operating assumption of a concept called “labeling theory,” which he then links to Foucault as “a currently more fashionable source of the idea of making up people” to whom he personally is indebted (103). See also above on social facts as “real facts” in the discussion of Coates and Martin above.
the cosmos, which he argues naturalizes social categories and ranking thereof through the use of cosmological arguments. Alternatively, such discourses can be wielded to “recalibrate” the social order, “shifting advantage from some to others.” Our role as discourse analysts is to pay attention to the complex ways the texts either maintain or redefine such social hierarchies. Overlapping with Hacking’s insights above, Lincoln underscores that cosmological speculation does not “significantly effect” the “nature of the cosmos.” Society, however, exists only insofar as it is continually produced and reproduced by human subjects, whose consciousness informs their constitutive actions, perceptions, and sentiments. When any given discourse—metaphysical or cosmological, as well as explicitly sociological—succeeds in modifying general consciousness, this can have profound consequences for social reality, even if cosmic reality remains serenely unaffected.

We therefore assess even the most abstract, esoteric texts not for the sake of esotericism itself, but to assess how society is maintained or renegotiated therein.

Lincoln’s proposal on discourse fits nicely with this dissertation’s interest in apocalyptic discourse. The authors gathered within the New Testament used discursive strategies to negotiate their criss-crossing Mediterranean identifications, prioritizing a confession in Christ. In the midst of this complexity, apocalyptic discourse stands out as forceful in its stark sense of dualism between good and evil. Such discourse would apparently deflect any questions about complex and multiple identifications, but such is the power of these discursive maneuvers. Apocalyptic discourse positions the primacy of Christ-commitment while simultaneously allowing for the same sorts of negotiations we see in virtually all discourse. This discourse draws upon a network of symbols and strategies and serves to legitimate the authority of the author by calling upon a

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190 Lincoln, 129.
191 Lincoln, 139.
timeless and transcendent divine authority. A great deal of work has been done on the rhetorical function of apocalyptic symbolism, which will be outlined below. I critique and build on this work, but I also do not seek to identify a singular function of such language.

To generalize, apocalyptic discourse makes authoritative claims rooted in specialized knowledge of the divine (in broadly emperor-like form) and the ability to mark cultural difference—even as early Christ groups continued to participate in the ancient Mediterranean world. Apocalyptic discourse offers a manner in which early Christian authors might define themselves in relation to their own social context, allowing them to participate in cultural discourse that display themselves as members of ancient Mediterranean society—while articulating a mythic sense of difference between those inside and outside their contested boundaries. Apocalyptic discourse offers a means by which they could use the strategies at play within wider cultural discursive practices while also deploying particular images and symbols of the Judean traditions—or, at least, images and symbols they perceive to be particular.

A number of scholars have, of course, sought to describe and define the boundaries of our apocalyptic terminology. In the past few decades scholarship examining apocalyptic literature has made significant advances. The impulse for this comes from a desire to clarify the vague use of “apocalyptic” as a signifier in previous research. Most research has concentrated on early Jewish and Christian apocalypses, as is the case with arguably the most important scholarly milestone, Semeia 14. In that volume, scholars involved in the Apocalypse Group of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Genres Project—most notably John J. Collins—provided a typology for the various subjects and rhetorical devices used in the apocalypse genre. This group

classified a variety of distinctions within the larger genre, such as the differences between
“historical” apocalypses and otherworldly journey apocalypses. This group offers a typology of
various features of revelation (visions, epiphanies, journeys, otherworldly mediators, reaction of
the recipient, etc.), how temporal events are represented (cosmogony, primordial events, ex
eventu prophecy, judgments, resurrection, etc.), how otherworldly regions and beings are
represented, and other items. Examples of “historical” apocalypses (more concerned with
temporal events than otherworldly journeys) include the Book of Daniel, the “Animal
Apocalypse” in 1 Enoch 85-90, 4 Ezra, and others, while otherworldly journey apocalypses
include much of the extant enochic literature (e.g., the Book of the Watchers in 1 Enoch 1-36)
and other examples. Revelation, the document from which the term “apocalypse” comes (Rev
1:1), straddles both of these types, including both historical concerns via the Roman Empire and
the otherworldly journey of John of Patmos.

The definition of the apocalypse genre put forward in Semeia 14 has been widely
influential:

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in
which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient,
disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages
eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural
world.193

In a follow up volume, Semeia 36, Adele Yarbro Collins and others expanded upon the definition
to include something of the apocalypse’s social function: “. . . intended to interpret present,
earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both

the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.\textsuperscript{194} Picking up on these themes and expanding them into a comparative discussion with wisdom literature (i.e., scribal literature carrying on Judean “wisdom” traditions), the past few decades have seen scholars using such comparanda as an avenue for outlining the social situation of apocalypse literature. Such work highlights the role of scribes as gatekeepers of symbolic traditions as applied to their current circumstances. As they have access to secret esoteric knowledge, these scribes are able to wield such knowledge to their social and cultural advantage—more on this below.\textsuperscript{195}

With a few exceptions, notably work on Qumran literature, much research on apocalyptic literature remains a conversation about apocalypses and less about how the symbolic universe of apocalyptic literature makes its way into other genres—such as ancient letters. In the field of New Testament rhetoric, however, many scholars have sought out a broader understanding of the social function of apocalyptic discourse by applying the lessons and tools of this recent research to literature not traditionally labeled as “apocalyptic.” Introducing a collection of essays on this topic, Greg Carey offers a somewhat vague, but nevertheless helpful definition of his own sense of “apocalyptic discourse”—accompanied with some caution regarding the category:

\textit{Apocalyptic discourse} refers to the constellation of apocalyptic topics as they function in larger early Jewish and Christian literary and social contexts. Thus, apocalyptic discourse should be treated as a flexible set of resources that early Jews and Christians could employ for a variety of persuasive tasks. Whenever early Jews and Christians appealed to such topics as visions and revelations, heavenly


journeys, final catastrophes, and the like, they were using apocalyptic discourse. We should not concern ourselves with ruling specific instances in or out by asking, Is this apocalyptic discourse or not? Instead, a more sophisticated approach will inquire in what ways a given example is or is not a case of apocalyptic discourse and how apocalyptic discourse contributes to its larger meaning.\textsuperscript{196}

In other words, for Carey, apocalyptic discourse is less a specific, monolithic, and identifiable category as it is a dynamic collection of rhetorical resources used by early Jews and Christians. Looking back to the typology provided in \textit{Semeia} 14, for example, then becomes helpful in identifying such discursive maneuvers within genres other than the apocalypse. If a letter includes enough of these features, it becomes apparent that apocalyptic discourse is being employed towards some rhetorical purpose (e.g., catharsis, behavioral modification for insiders).

For the current dissertation, the content of what we call “apocalyptic discourse” resembles the concept as outlined by Greg Carey. This dissertation seeks to highlight the ways in which apocalyptic discourse functions in its navigation of various competing discursive appeals.

To connect the discussion of apocalyptic discourse to the insights we have seen from Lincoln and others, an example of the discussion on “wisdom” and “apocalypticism” helps us push beyond content description to analysis of discursive function. Benjamin Wright III, for instance, explores the “social location” of the authors of Ben Sira, \textit{I Enoch}, and \textit{Aramaic Levi} by examining the interests tied to their textual representations of what we categorize as “wisdom” or “apocalypticism.” All three authors share “a common interest in calendar, dreams and visions, esoteric knowledge, and all apparently originate in scribal/priestly groups.”\textsuperscript{197} These overlapping


concerns suggest to Wright “competing groups/communities . . . who know about each other, who do not really like each other, and who actively polemicize against each other although not necessarily directly.” The apocalyptic texts of 1 Enoch and Aramaic Levi advocate a solar-based calendar where Ben Sira decentralizes the importance of the sun in favor of the moon. They condemn Jerusalem priests for what they considered illegitimate marriages, while Ben Sira offers a generally positive picture of the priests. Indeed, Ben Sira advocates restricting the priesthood to the descendants of Aaron.

Wright speculates that the authors and editors of Aramaic Levi and 1 Enoch “represent priests and scribes who are marginalized and even disenfranchised vis-à-vis the ruling priests in Jerusalem.” In terms of discursive strategies, then, these authors authorize their position with a claim to direct revelation from God occurring in an ascent vision. In an ingenious move of counter-authority, 1 Enoch reaches further back in their shared literary traditions than the revelation to Moses and Aaron by appealing to Enoch (Gen 5:21–24). The strategies outlined by Wright here match squarely with Lincoln’s proposal, in which one group naturalizes social reality through appeals to shared cosmological discourse, while the other finds ways to recalibrate such discourse in order to alter social power dynamics. Thus, we can use the broad features of apocalyptic discourse to highlight the ways in which it offers symbolic power to strategies of difference.

Apocalyptic discourse has presented scholars with a dilemma, however, and we must return to the theme of origins to understand this dilemma. One of the problems that scholars have in describing the primitive origins of Christianity is the baggage carried by categories like

198 Wright, “Putting the Puzzle Together,” 108.
199 Wright, “Putting the Puzzle Together,” 108.
“apocalyptic” and “eschatology.” If the members of early Christ groups held to an understanding that the “end” was approaching immanently, how then should we understand the true core of Christian thought and practice? Said differently, how does one anchor the authorizing power of Christianity’s “origins” if the earliest Christians believed in the immanent eschaton? We are presented with a conceptual framework that seems to short circuit our desire to define an “origins” that remains relevant. Scholars have thus sought to contend with these categories in relation to the origins of Christianity.

Such questions were tackled head on by two of the most consequential scholars of Christian origins in the 20th century—Ernst Käsemann and Rudolf Bultmann. Käsemann famously argues that “apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology.”200 In fact, Käsemann wonders “whether Christian theology can ever survive in any legitimate form without this [apocalyptic] theme.”201 Käsemann’s mentor, Bultmann, on the other hand, claims that he could accept such a notion only if one swaps the term “apocalyptic” to “eschatology.”202 For Bultmann, “apocalyptic” concretely fixes the “end” chronologically, whereas for him “eschatology” speaks not only of the “end” but how the “end” manifests in the present. In his view, emphasizing “apocalyptic” minimizes the theological relevance of the New Testament

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authors, while “eschatology” expands their theological possibilities. These scholars show how debates over what we call apocalyptic have long been embedded within our understanding of what is true or legitimate Christianity. The disagreement between Käsemann and Bultmann also points to the paradoxical place apocalyptic discourse holds within modern NT scholarship. On the one hand, it seems to spark the birth of the Christian movement. On the other hand, apocalypticism is an embarrassment to contemporary Christianity. Emblematic of this theme, many who emphasize eschatological readings of NT documents today tend to deemphasize social justice in the present, which progressive Christian scholars obviously find problematic.

Thus, many scholars—not just the progressive Christian ones—have followed a strategy to demonstrate that apocalyptic thought does not represent the core of the early Christian movement. Some have sought to defend a Jesus with no apocalyptic views, which were only attributed to him later. Others have sought to emphasize how apocalypticism only represented the earliest form of Christianity, which quickly grew out of this infancy stage and moved towards institutional orthodoxy. The latter notion has been called Frühkatholizismus or “early catholicism,” which is rooted in a desire to define the “origins” of Christianity as a way of defining the essential core of what they might call “Christianity” today. Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer, and (as we have seen) Ernst Käsemann, all argued for the importance of

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203 Borrowing from Dieter Georgi, Jonathan Z. Smith suggests that “eschatological” serves as a marker of uniqueness for Bultmann and others. See Smith, Drudgery Divine, 41.

204 Crossan is a good example of this.

apocalyptic thought as constituting the origins of Christianity. These particular scholars also all see such thought as a *delusion*, which necessarily broke down over time. Such fanaticism must give rise to stabilizing institutionalism, these arguments emphasize. Käsemann, though, saw apocalypticism as providing a sense of stability to the “enthusiasm” of the earliest church, which focused on possession of the Spirit. In line with Bultmann’s camp, some authors choose to pursue the category of “realized eschatology” in order to sidestep the fanaticism associated with “apocalypticism.” One perhaps cannot reasonably deny the importance of eschatology to the early Christians, but one can show how “hope” in the future translates into present action. The narrative of “already but not yet” continues to pervade discussions not only of Paul, but also for other early Jewish writings.206

In the decades following *Semeia* 14, however, scholars have sought ways to reclaim apocalyptic discourse in positive theological terms and not as an embarrassment. J. Christiaan Beker could be identified first in this new wave of interpreters, authoring numerous volumes on Paul and apocalyptic thought. Beker argues that apocalyptic themes are so fundamental to Paul that “only a consistent apocalyptic interpretation of Paul’s thought is able to demonstrate its fundamental coherence.”207 The emphasis here on Paul’s *thought* should not be overlooked—the interest in getting at secrets of the author behind the text as a way of accessing theological insights that remain relevant and even normative. A number of scholars have followed in pursuit of apocalyptic thought as a fundamental theme with which to anchor Christian theology,

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Cosmology here is not an avenue for exploring social relations, as with Lincoln and Benjamin Wright, but rather a way to rehabilitate Christian theology as it is rooted in the Pauline literature. Such attempts seek to find some essential theological core to early Christianity and early Judaism—indeed, one that translates into theological reflections on the meaning of eschatology for Christians today.

While some scholars have highlighted the relevance of apocalyptic thought for the purposes of emphasizing Christian theology, others have settled on apocalyptic discourse’s revolutionary potential. The coming chapters will detail a host of scholars pursuing this line of argumentation to varying degrees in the context of interpreting 1 Thessalonians and Revelation. The writings of Richard Horsley and Anathea Portier-Young provide two noteworthy examples. To return to one of the key figures in “empire studies,” Richard Horsley’s Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins pursues a hard anti-imperial line for apocalyptic scribes, just as he has for Jesus and Paul. Though he does not explicitly react to the group of scholars above pursuing “apocalyptic thought” in Paul, Horsley’s consistently sharp critique of theologically-oriented readings such as these—framed as they are in terms of interior “thought”—hangs in the background. Horsley highlights the competing interests touched on earlier by Benjamin Wright, but frames this literature as imperial resentment and not primarily as

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internal competition: “these intellectuals were caught in a conflict between loyalty to their patrons, who were in turn dependent on their imperial overlords and their loyalty to the traditions of which they were guardians. At least some circles of dissident Judean intellectuals were led into resisting imperial rule.”210 The divergent internal/external foci here reproduces the debate between Noreña and Ando on provincial elites in relation to Rome, though manifested through radically different discursive content.

Anathea Portier-Young’s Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism covers far more complex ground than Horsley.211 For example, where Horsley mentions Scott’s “hidden transcripts” only in passing (and favorably) in his Revolt of the Scribes, Portier-Young spends considerable time exploring the benefits and pitfalls of reading through Scott’s lens.212 Portier-Young distances herself from Scott’s sense that the anonymity of hidden transcripts “discourages open acts of rebellion”—a theme about which we have already seen Scott critiqued. In the early Jewish apocalypses she selects for analysis, she contends “these writers believe that the time for open, public resistance is not in the distant future; it is at the moment of their writing, and the moment of their reading.”213 She also suggests that the apocalyptic authors in her study do not seek to hide themselves for fear of repression, thus here also departing from Scott’s hidden transcripts.214 For her, the resistance is not “hidden” because

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210 Horsley, Revolt, 3.

211 Anathea Portier-Young, Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011).

212 Horsley, Revolt, 213–14 n. 24.

213 Portier-Young, Apocalypse against Empire, 38.

214 Portier-Young makes what feels to this author a questionable distinction between anonymous and pseudonymous authorship. She suggests that because the authors provide (pseudonymous) names, they are therefore not afraid of reprisals (39–40).
apocalypses are fundamentally about revealing how “hidden realities ineluctably shape the visible.” On the theme of pseudonymity, Portier-Young brings in Foucault’s notion of the “author”—notably, she does not mention Roland Barthes’ complementary reflections on the death of the author. For all this complexity and nuance, however, Portier-Young’s rendering ultimately classifies apocalyptic literature quite broadly as “resistance literature.”

Parsing Portier-Young’s nuances, a progressive Christian theological paradigm begins to emerge. Surprisingly, Portier-Young’s use of Foucault bolsters rather than dismantles the reinforcement of an essentialized “origins”—the choice of pseudonym attaches the author to a stable “tradition.” And while she does nuance Scott, she nevertheless deploys Scott to argue that the apocalypse genre “unthinks the logic of empire and asserts in its place an alternate vision of reality.” As I will argue in my chapter on Revelation below, apocalyptic discourse does imagine an alternate vision of reality but it does not “unthink the logic of empire.” Instead, this discourse reproduces such logic in heavenly form, an empire of God that protects and extends the authority of the author’s own identity. Portier-Young allows that “[n]ot all apocalypses articulate a discourse or program of resistance to empire.” However, she chooses to assess our earliest extant historical apocalypses—apocalypses that survey history in the form of ex eventu prophecy—in order to establish “the origins of the genre itself as a literature of resistance.” Portier-Young is thus explicitly using a return-to-origins strategy not simply for Judaism or Christianity, but for a particular genre’s true essence. Furthermore, she does not engage

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216 Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 44.

217 Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 45.

218 Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 45.
scholarship on wisdom and apocalyptic literature as seen in Benjamin Wright and others—such a move would require more attention to *internal* competitions and likely less on anti-imperial ideologies.

As a Professor of Old Testament at the Methodist-affiliated Duke Divinity School, Portier-Young’s professional context sheds further light on her approach. Portier-Young promotes the use of apocalyptic theology as a way in which Christian preachers today might resist today’s empire. As she writes on the online preaching site, WorkingPreacher.org, Portier-Young believes “[w]e live in the belly of a wounded beast. We conduct our business in the tattered market stalls of Babylon.”219 And, for her, “apocalyptic preaching is at the heart of Christian witness.”220 As noted, pseudonymity reifies a “tradition” to which the scribal authors tether themselves.221 She sees Christian preachers today in that same “tradition.”222 As we saw, Portier-Young chooses the earliest apocalypses in order to establish the true essence of what apocalypses are meant to do. For Christian preachers, she uses this essence to speak to the heart of what apocalyptic literature means in canonical texts for Christian interpreters today. Thus, we

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220 Portier-Young, “Apocalyptic Preaching.”

221 In her monograph, she writes, “Each apocalypse studied here is attributed to an ancient figure known from earlier traditions. Each figure has a narrated history and an associated body of tradition already known to the audience. The composer situates her work within this discourse. She makes a deliberate choice not to identify herself as author. By choosing to claim only the authority of the pseudonymous hero (and the heavenly sources from which that hero’s revelation proceeds), she claims no authority for the self embedded within existing structures of domination. Instead, she locates authority within a tradition of revelatory discourse that testifies to an alternative source of power and alternative vision of reality. Within this narrative of revelation all other claims to authority, including the authorizing claims of imperial discourse, are rendered derivative, contingent, or invalid” (Apocalypse against Empire, 42).

222 In her online preaching advice, she writes, “The authors of apocalypses were not hiding but claiming their place in a tradition. They remind us the discourse that has the power to dismantle every empire and reveal God in our midst doesn’t originate with you or me. We don’t speak on our own authority or for our own glory. We claim the authority of the gospel, and we preach the gospel from within a tradition. John, the seer, was the one apocalyptic writer who put his own name on his book. But the truth of his message and the shape of his witness came directly from the slaughtered lamb” (“Apocalyptic Preaching”).
have in this work the sort of slippage that I am critiquing in this dissertation—between theoretical approach and confessional attachments, between apparently objective, theoretically-informed historical analysis and return-to-origins authorizing of a form of present-day Christian theology. Like so many scholars who find “anti-imperialism” embedded within early Jewish and Christian texts, Portier-Young elides the chasm between particular authority (here the Seleucids) and an ideological category that spans time and space (“empire”). By turning anti-Seleucid discourse into an attack on “imperial power” itself, Portier-Young builds a bridge between the empire she feels Christians today must oppose and the empire that Judeans in the Second Temple period opposed. She establishes the true origins of apocalyptic literature as resistance literature, then transfers that onto apocalyptic literature in the Christian canon.

Ultimately, I find that there is no stabilized and systematized apocalyptic discourse, nor is there any singular effect of such discourse beyond its authorizing potential. This dissertation sets out to demonstrate how apocalyptic discourse is deployed in very diverse literary settings toward complicated ends even within this corpus that continues to wield canonical authority. Broadly speaking, apocalyptic discourse invokes specialized, esoteric knowledge in order to authorize the writer and promote identifications that work to the author’s benefit. At face value, the starkness commonly found within apocalyptic discourse’s web of symbols may suggest what has been labeled as “sectarianism” or any other form of harsh disconnect from the world outside. Apocalyptic discourse would seem to be the very counterpoint to the idea that Christ groups fully participated in ancient Mediterranean society.

We should take care to remember that—though apocalyptic symbolism feels unique in its characteristics and sectarian in its outlook—visions, epiphanies and otherworldly journeys were entirely commonplace in ancient Mediterranean discourses. To return to Heidi Wendt, she notes
that Paul was “hardly unique among first-century Judeans in adducing literary mysteries, prophecies, and eschatological narratives from Judean writings, nor, for that matter, in receiving messages from God through revelations, dreams, or other methods of divination.” Similarly, Sarah Rollens devotes an entire article to the ordinariness of Paul’s vision of the risen Christ, demonstrating that “Paul’s claim to have encountered a deity in a vision, which in turn provided the impetus and the justification for him to ‘found’ Christ groups throughout the eastern empire, is an entirely ordinary way to narrate the origins of an ancient association and was likely regarded as such, and not necessarily as a self-evidently exceptional or unique encounter with Christ.” Her survey and analysis of ancient association data demonstrates the “routine nature of experiencing visions of deceased people and the blurring of dream states with ordinary time.” Furthermore, revelatory discourses in such data “show that ordinary people, not just elite emperors and rulers, could claim to receive authority to do things based on encountering a deity in a dream or vision.” Apocalyptic discourse is designed to feel extraordinary, but the discourse of revelation in the ancient Mediterranean is entirely ordinary.

By exploring the apocalyptic discourse of two separate and distinct texts (1 Thessalonians and Revelation), and highlighting particular academic debates on these sources, I demonstrate that apocalyptic discourse gets operationalized in a variety of ways by early Christ groups. Our analysis of apocalyptic discourse, then, requires attention to the particulars of each case. I have not chosen these two texts—as Portier-Young does—as exemplar texts that establish some

223 Wendt, 154.
225 Rollens, 45.
226 Rollens, 50.
original “rule” for a genre. I have chosen these texts, rather, because they are each so different. Both of these texts do feature epistolary frameworks, raising questions about how these authors each sought to deal explicitly with real world problems faced by early Christ groups. In each of these chapters, I highlight scholarly discussions that bring out the dominant themes raised here. I demonstrate in each case the ways in which our traditional methods have largely failed to underscore the normality and conformity of these texts’ discursive strategies within their ancient Mediterranean contexts.

I would also like to return here to Ta-Nehisi Coates’ appeal not to seek out alternative “dreams,” but to “break all the dreams, all the comforting myths of Africa, of America, and everywhere” and to struggle towards a consciousness “of this terrible and beautiful world.”

This is more or less the foundation upon which I rest my own approach. I sympathize with postcolonial concerns, but work here in an effort to explore the functions of cultural discourse as a means by which we can explore myths of difference and exceptionalism.

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227 Coates, 52. See Chapter 1 above.
Chapter 3: Parousia, Identity, and Empire in First Thessalonians

As discussed, the field of “Paul and empire” is a particularly loaded site of the authorizing maneuvers discussed in this dissertation. This theme is most prominently associated with apocalyptic discourse in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, which offers a precious window into the social and cultural realm of the early Christ-group movement. As the earliest of the surviving documents that we now label “Christian,” 1 Thessalonians provides evidence of a creative literary experiment addressing burgeoning social challenges. As Helmut Koester aptly names it, the letter serves as an “experiment in Christian writing”: “the Christian letter in the making.”

In this experiment, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy address concerns about the Christ-group in Thessalonikē in hopes to encourage the Thessalonians in the midst of perceived external pressure and conflict. Letters of encouragement do not merely serve to boost morale, however, but also to strengthen social cohesion and solidify group boundaries. In other words, this ancient letter offers not only an opportunity to explore the construction of a particularly important literary category for the movement, but also to witness the negotiation of social identities in action for the early Christ-group. As such, the letter has served as an academic battleground for the group’s identification contests within Roman society.

In this chapter, I take the first steps towards seeing the issues raised in the first two chapters within the conversations surrounding specific texts. This first case study uncovers the basic problem, while the chapter on Revelation goes into ideological claims more forcefully.

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228 Helmut Koester, “1 Thessalonians—Experiment in Christian Writing,” in Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Huntston Williams on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday, edited by F. Forrester Church and Timothy George (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 33.
because the text itself forces anti-imperial interpreters to confront its less savory aspects. First Thessalonians does include judgment of outsiders but seems far less problematic for modern progressive Christian readers. Thus, in this chapter, I explore how discussions of identity and empire often fail us because of foundational assumptions by which such scholarship operates. Studies of group identity in 1 Thessalonians tend to depict Paul (usually dismissing the significance of his co-authors) as either radically anti-imperialistic or culturally accommodating. Representing the former view, Neil Elliott boldly argues that First Thessalonians represents Paul’s “frontal attack on the false peace of the empire.”\(^{229}\) In contrast to this interpretation, Abraham Malherbe describes an acculturated and assimilated Christian community in Thessalonikē, encouraged by the letter, with “a positive view of its place in the larger society.”\(^{230}\) Malherbe’s claim stands in contrast with increasing scholarship taking a view similar to Elliott’s. More recently, Jeffrey A. D. Weima offers a sweeping review of several types of ancient sources (numismatic, monumental, inscriptional and literary), which he believes demonstrates “the pervasiveness of the \textit{Pax Romana} theme in the first century CE and so demonstrates that this political propaganda is the intended reference of Paul’s phrase ‘peace and security’.”\(^{231}\) For Weima, though, Paul’s is not simply a “reference” but, in line with Elliott and others, “a stern warning for all those who trust in the political power of Rome.”\(^{232}\) This anti-imperial reading of Paul in 1 Thessalonians has now come to dominate the discussion.


\(^{231}\) Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “‘Peace and Security’ (1 Thess 5.3): Prophetic Warning or Political Propaganda?” \textit{New Testament Studies} 58, no. 3 (July 2012): 333.

\(^{232}\) Weima, 359.
Several key terms rest at the heart of this discussion, which scholars claim to represent the Romanness against which Paul warns. These include those associated with the apocalyptic imagery of the Christ’s παρουσία (“coming”) and his ἀπάντησις (“meeting”) with his faithful followers, as well as the eschatological judgment of those who say “peace and security” (εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια). Scholars have used these terms, and their own contextualization of the terms, to argue for their understanding of Paul’s position vis-à-vis the “empire.” In this chapter, I will demonstrate how these terms do indeed highlight Roman cultural discourse in the letter, but need not represent antithesis between the Thessalonian Christ-group and “Rome.” Rather, these terms, in combination with Judean apocalyptic traditions and developing Christ-group symbols in the letter, represent an example of an integrated negotiation of multiple identities in Thessalonikē.

The images used in the letter, and the boundaries drawn, are vivid and stark—making anti-empire readings understandable. This boundary, however, belies a more complex and fluid negotiation between the integrated Roman and Christ-group identities of the author(s) and audience. The foundational point here is that Paul, his co-authors, and their audience are all members of Roman society and thus utilize the cultural symbols of their Romanness, an identity as plural and porous as Judean-ness. As Albert Harrill suggests, “matters are much more complex than asking whether Paul was ‘for’ or ‘against’ the Roman Empire, as if that culture were somehow stable and harmonious.” In First Thessalonians, the writers participate in Roman identification, even as they sought to reify cohesive boundaries around the Christ-group of Thessalonikē. We need not deny the political substance of terms mentioned above (παρουσία, εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια, ἀπάντησις, κύριος) as does Malherbe, for example, in his critique of

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Elliott’s (and others’) anti-imperialistic view. At the same time, the political import of these terms need not constitute a “hidden transcript” as Elliott and others have suggested. Rather, Paul and his co-authors deploy the shared discursive symbolism of their own Romanness to bolster the shared identity of the Thessalonian Christ-group. The letter thus manages multiple collective identities in view of conflict with other local groups—not as a veiled critique of a monolithic entity called “the empire.”

A Letter Localized

As mentioned earlier, the case studies selected for this volume present strikingly different examples of how early Christian letter writers navigated complex identities—all of which have been oversimplified by modern scholarship. First Thessalonians is more localized and its authors more identifiable than Revelation. This letter utilizes terms that can clearly be connected with a wider discourse of Roman power. By contrast, we have the name of Revelation’s author without any other verifiable information about him. The epistolary introduction to Revelation highlights seven cities in Asia Minor, addressing particular concerns that this author has regarding those cities. Revelation further distinguishes itself, however, by using the deeply symbolic, or putatively “coded,” language of the apocalypse genre in its discussion of “Rome” as “Babylon.”

If we are to investigate the imperial propaganda that may be considered the “background” for identity formation in 1 Thessalonians—imperial ideas forming the outgroup against which the ingroup is defined—we first need to review the situation at Thessalonikē. With that in mind, I first consider the historical roots of this important city. Thessalonikē\(^{234}\) was founded in 316

B.C.E. by Cassander, a general of Alexander the Great who was appointed to rule Macedonia. Early on, the city served as a port for the Macedonian capital of Pella. After Macedonia fell to Rome in around 167 B.C.E., between the second and third Punic Wars, the region was incorporated into the Roman Republic and split into four provinces. At that time, Thessalonikē became the capital of the second region. Two decades later (146 B.C.E.), the city was made into the capital of the reorganized province of Macedonia. As the city rose to greater importance in the region, Thessalonikē “enjoyed . . . commercial and civic privileges (including the right to mint its own coinage) accorded the seats of provincial governors.”235 In addition to its strategic role as port city, it also stood along major trade and travel routes, including the Via Egnatia. Such geographic situation provided the city both security and a prosperous commercial environment.

As a significant claim to historical fame for the city, Cicero spent six months of his exile in Thessalonikē (from May to November, 58 B.C.E.), writing 18 of his letters there. In a later speech regarding alleged abuses of the Macedonian governor, one can deduct a picture of Thessalonikē in which the city “enjoy[ed] the Roman benefactions and attention to security it had realized in other times.”236 During the civil wars of the first century B.C.E., Thessalonikē apparently pursued a policy of neutrality even as it played a significant role in the crossfire of intense rivalries. As such neutrality remained difficult, the city apparently originally offered support to Brutus and Cassius. Before the second battle at Philippi (42 B.C.E), however, Thessalonikē withdrew its support of Caesar’s assassins and rather showered honors upon the victors of that battle, Octavian and Antony. For its support of Augustus, Thessalonikē was made

235 Hendrix, 6:524.

236 Ibid.
a free city that year. Later, upon Octavian’s rise to power as the ruler of the Roman Empire, they honored the new “Augustus” profusely. We have material evidence documenting the city’s honoring the emperor in several ways, including its thriving imperial cult (among several other religious movements: mystery cults, Egyptian gods, etc.). Most intriguingly for our purposes is a statue of Augustus that has been dated to the time of Gaius Caligula or Claudius and thus the time of Paul’s visit to Thessalonike.\(^\text{237}\)

Several scholars have situated the Thessalonian Christ-group within this city through an investigation into the available voluntary association data. Richard Ascough has put forward the most thorough argument regarding such data, suggesting that the Thessalonian Christ-group emerged from existing professional associations.\(^\text{238}\) Diving into more recently released inscription data, Pantelis M. Nigdelis paints a rich picture of association activity within the city, in which a host of gods and goddesses were honored and worshipped by a wide variety of groups. Such groups were diverse in membership, included a variety of different rules, and participated in funerary dedications, ritual sacrifices, feasts, processions, funding public monuments, etc. The picture here does not diverge from much of the work done on voluntary associations that we have already seen. Such associations offered the non-aristocrats, those of middling and lower strata, a place within the civic identity of the city. Nigdelis contends that such group participation offered Thessalonians of all stripes greater ways to remain engaged in

\(^\text{237}\) Ibid.

public and social life. It appears highly likely that the Thessalonian Christ-group fit somewhere within this cornucopia of association-based life in the city.239

Widely thought to be the earliest of Paul’s letters, and thus potentially the earliest known document of the Jesus movement. First Thessalonians was written in the middle of the first century C.E., probably around 50-51 C.E.240 The letter indicates that the authors (Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy) had earlier visited with the Christ-followers in Thessalonikē. Though many scholars attribute the bulk of the letter to Paul due to its resemblance to Paul’s ideas and language articulated in the other undisputed letters, Kathy Ehrensperger argues that the three were founding members of the community there and share responsibility for the community as partners.241 In her assessment of the letter, the authors offer mention of their own previous trials in Philippi (2:2), “not to emphasize their authority over against the community but rather to emphasize the commonality between the group in Thessalonikē and the group of apostles.”242 Such commonality, as opposed to authority (we will unpack power and authority in greater depth in the following chapter), is supported by the language of gentleness in this passage, as the authors describe themselves “like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children” (2:7). We return to such language below as we examine identification practices in the letter.

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242 Ehrensperger, 100–1.
As mentioned, in their letter to the ἐκκλησία of Thessalonikē, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy engage in what Helmut Koester has called an “experiment in Christian writing”: “the Christian letter in the making.” In this experimental letter, the authors write to the community that he helped construct—apparently under some perceived social pressure. According to Acts, Paul was only in Thessalonikē for two weeks. In his letter to the Philippians, however, he notes that the community there sent him funding twice while in the city, which suggests a longer stay. Apparently, according to the letter, Paul is concerned that this ekklēsia faced potential demise. The letter thus celebrates the Thessalonian ekklēsia as not simply surviving social pressures, but thriving, and even becoming leaders in the region for other ekklēsiai. Nevertheless, Paul addresses concerns about the nature of what will happen when Christ comes back and emphasizes that they do not know when Christ will come. The letter is traditionally viewed as one highlighting encouragement, but we need not stop there. “Encouragement,” when viewed through the lens of group identity, is itself a tool for bolstering the ingroup and solidifying boundaries.

Limitations of Identity

A number of scholars have used 1 Thessalonians and other Pauline letters as an avenue for discussing early Christian identity—namely, social identity. The Social Identity Approach (SIA)—a combination of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)—has been borrowed from social psychology and was pioneered in biblical interpretation by Philip Esler. Esler and others have applied SIA to nearly every text in the biblical canon and many outside it. The original research was motivated by the work of Henri Tajfel who sought to
“differentiate between intergroup and interpersonal relations” in the field of psychology.\textsuperscript{243} Naturally, studies related to collectivist cultures have enormous relevance for our study of ancient texts from the Mediterranean world. The points Esler takes to be most relevant are connected to the process of ingrouping and outgrouping. One aspect of ingrouping is the definition of group behavioral norms, or what Esler calls “identity descriptors.”\textsuperscript{244} One aspect of outgrouping is the act of stereotyping. Both of these rhetorical tools are used in First Thessalonians, as well as others.

Though the literature applying SIA in various contexts towards diverse purposes is vast, Tajfel’s work on SIT began in the 1970s. He describes the “beginning of [his] interest in social psychology”\textsuperscript{245} as the aftermath of the Second World War. Tajfel notes, “Amongst those who died then, there were millions who formed, in the most concrete sense of the term, my ‘social background.’”\textsuperscript{246} It was with the background of this profound social problem that Tajfel found frustration with his own field of social psychology: \textit{social} was not being placed first as the “fulcrum of our work on the subject.”\textsuperscript{247} By creating “minimal group experiments” in order to attempt to control all variables, Tajfel—along with his student and colleague, John Turner—developed the working theories of SIT, particularly as they related to intergroup conflict. John

\textsuperscript{243} Philip Francis Esler, \textit{Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter} (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003), 19.

\textsuperscript{244} Esler, \textit{Conflict and Identity in Romans}, 20–1.


\textsuperscript{246} Tajfel, 1.

\textsuperscript{247} Tajfel, 4.
Turner carried on the legacy of Tajfel, while also developing it in new directions with the outlining of SCT, focusing on the intragroup perspective.

Richard Jenkins reflects upon the legacy of SIA, which seemed to ignore research upon similar topics in closely related fields, such as the work of imminent social anthropologist Fredrik Barth. Jenkins postulates that such silence about preceding work came not from disdain, but rather from Tajfel’s own context and intentions. Tajfel’s discipline, social psychology, is heavily rooted in the laboratory model of research common among the natural sciences. He is thus unaffected by the ethnographic approaches of anthropology. Nevertheless, as Jenkins notes, “He seems to have been trying to establish a distinctive school of thought.”248 He was successful; and his followers have made this school of thought into an intriguing approach for studying collective groups.

In the parlance of social theory, there are two ways of looking at a collective: a “group” and a “category.” Simply put, the persons included within a category are defined by the person who creates the category—members of the category may not even realize they have been placed in a particular category (e.g., a salary range which defines one’s tax bracket, or a sociological categorization of an indigenous people group). The persons included within a group are defined by those who self-identify as members of a group, based upon some form of commonality.249 The former is an external identifier, while the latter is an insiders’ perspective—even if that insiders’ perspective is being defined by outside observers (e.g., twenty-first century scholars studying the first-century Christ-confessing movement). Group members, however, could make their own categorizations of those considered outsiders to their ingroup, just as these outsiders

249 Jenkins, 103–4.
may have their own categories for the ingroup: “to categorize and be categorized in turn.”

We can see both internal and external categorization in the form of labeling in the book of Acts, which claims that the label “Christian” (Χριστιανός) was originally an external categorization applied to the group (11:26), while the ingroup self-categorization designation in Acts appears to be “the Way” (ἡ ὁδός; e.g., 9:2; 18:25; 24:14, 22).

To return to Esler’s use of SIA for 1 Thessalonians, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy are writing to a Gentile audience, who have turned from “idols” (ἀπὸ τῶν εἰδώλων) “to serve a living and true God” (δουλεύειν θεῷ ζῶντι καὶ ἀληθινῷ; 1:9). These Christ-confessing Gentiles are now recreating their identity as “the community [ἐκκλησία] of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1). The Christ-confessing Gentile ingroup is constantly distinguished as holy as compared to those other Gentiles (stereotyped as the sexually immoral ones). Paul also highlights the importance of mutual service, urging the Thessalonian ἐκκλησία to continue to be a model of mutual ἀγάπη in Macedonia. He gives social purpose to this ἀγάπη by suggesting it makes the community both independent from and unassuming to the “outsiders” [τοὺς ἔξω] (4:12). Such instructions for the Christ-confessing community at Thessalonikē serve

250 Jenkins, 110.

251 As Esler states of 1:9: “such language would be quite inappropriate, indeed grossly insulting, if the ingroup comprised Israelites as well as gentiles” (“‘Keeping It in the Family’: Culture, Kinship and Identity in 1 Thessalonians and Galatians,” in Families and Family Relations as Represented in Early Judaisms and Early Christianities: Texts and Fictions; Papers Read at a NOSTER Colloquium in Amsterdam, June 9-11, 1998, edited by Jan Willem van Henten and Athalya Brenner [Leiden: DEO, 2000], 163). This goes against the account given in Acts 17:4, which includes Jews in the Thessalonian congregation.

252 Aside from 2 Thessalonians, this exact phrasing is not used in any of Paul’s other known letters, disputed or undisputed. First and Second Corinthians come closest: τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ τῇ οὔσῃ ἐν Κορίνθῳ (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1). The term ἐκκλησία is also used in the introductory comments of Galatians (ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις τῆς Γαλατίας; 1:2) and Philemon (τῇ κατ’ οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ; 2), but without the same kind of identity-forming conceptual qualifiers.
the function of maintaining social cohesiveness and therefore undergirding the ingroup’s social identity.

Ehrensperger’s suggestion of commonality in crisis and conflict raises an important issue regarding identity formation in the letter. In addition to the general historical background for the letter, a close look reveals the theme of shared crisis and suffering. Paul and his co-authors indicate that the Christ-confessing community at Thessalonikē heard and accepted the message that they were preaching even in the midst of some sort of perceived affliction (θλίψις; 1:6). The authors themselves came to Thessalonikē, they say, having already suffered (προπάσχω) and faced mistreatment (ὑβρίζω) at Philippi (2:2). The authors tell the Christ-confessing Thessalonians that they share common experience with the ἐκκλησίαι in Judea, who suffered (πάσχω) at the hands of their fellow Ἰουδαῖοι (2:14). The authors then connect this experience of suffering with the killing (ἀποκτείνω) of Jesus (and the prophets) by those Ἰουδαῖοι (2:15). Those Ἰουδαῖοι who committed such violent acts now must face the wrath of God (2:16). While in Athens, the authors sent Timothy to be with the Christ-followers at Thessalonikē during their afflictions (θλίψις; 3:1-3). They also remind their readers that they had predicted the fact that the authors themselves would face affliction (θλίβω; 3:4). When receiving an encouraging report from Timothy, the authors state that they have been encouraged by the faith of their readers even in the midst of the pressure (ἀνάγκη) and affliction (θλίψις) they faced (3:7).

On the point of crisis, Esler highlights the insights of Tajfel into how “oppression of a group strengthens its members’ sense of belonging, and in this letter we find Paul expressly utilising [sic] such ill-treatment of Christ-followers in Judaea as a prototypical experience for the
The authors of the letter highlight suffering in order to strengthen ingroup ties within the Thessalonian ἐκκλησία. Paul and his co-authors thus begin this letter by constructing an identity (or affirming an already constructed identity) for the Christ-confessing community in Thessalonike. As Esler applies the insights of Tajfel to the opening words of the letter: “To employ Tajfel’s terminology, Paul is articulating for his readers/listeners a pronounced cognitive dimension, a sense of belonging to the group, and also a very favourable evaluative one, since the emotional rewards of membership must have been high.” The ingroup we are dealing with then is the ἐκκλησία of God the Father and the Lord Jesus in Thessalonikē. An essential example of ingrouping for the Thessalonian ἐκκλησία in this letter is that of fictive kinship.

The plural of the term ἀδελφός occurs 18 times in this brief letter alone. Furthermore, the term πατήρ is used as a descriptor of God four times, at key points within the letter. Esler demonstrates that the usage of family language in First Thessalonians is a dominant theme which demonstrates the ingroup strategy employed by Paul in the letter. The work of Scott Bartchy regarding patriarchy and Paul’s concept of the “society of siblings” is highly relevant at this point. Bartchy argues that Paul’s use of sibling language in his undisputed letters demonstrates

253 Esler, “Keeping It in the Family,” 164.

254 Esler, “Keeping It in the Family,” 163.

255 The term πατήρ is used once as a metaphor describing the relationship of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy with the Christ-confessing community at Thessalonica (2:11). This metaphor is not used to borrow the authoritarian image of the father in the patriarchal culture of the ancient Mediterranean world. Rather, it is to indicate that these three leaders acted as models of behavioral norms who were also quite concerned with the growth and development of their “children,” the new Christ-followers at Thessalonica. Such usage of the term πατήρ does not undermine its effectiveness as a role belonging primarily to God, the true Father of the new family of Christ-followers.

his “strategy for convincing his readers and hearers to treat each other as biological siblings had
been socialized to do.” Esler complements Bartchy on this point when he describes what that entails, “In the group-oriented culture of Thessalonika this meant sharing and protecting one another’s goods, including their joint honour, and not competing with one another in the manner typical of unrelated males.” Both Esler and Bartchy lament the unfortunate renderings of ἀδελφός in modern English translations, trading the sibling language for terms such as “believers,” “beloved,” “friends,” “fellow Christians,” etc. Such modern renderings hide the tremendous social impact that sibling language would have had in the Ancient Mediterranean in its challenge to patriarchy (emphasized by Bartchy), but also in its important implications for social identity formation (emphasized by Esler). Meanwhile, feminist interpreter Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre takes a more pessimistic of the authors’ use of sibling language, arguing that the community only included male members and modern translations that assume the term includes both “brothers and sisters” are brushing aside women’s invisibility in the letter. Such discussions highlight one of the problems of identity scholarship: it avoids taking a stand on the more specific ideological positioning of the authors.

As scholars, we are external observers of an internal perspective. Using social theory in an effort to understand group behavior is not meant to come to a conclusion about whether a group is ontologically “real.” Rather, the tools of SIA (and other approaches to group identity

257 Bartchy, “Undermining Ancient Patriarchy,” 70.
258 Esler, “Keeping It in the Family,” 170
formation) provide us a means by which we investigate a “reality” that is intersubjectively defined. As Jenkins describes, “Group members, in recognising themselves as such, effectively constitute that to which they believe they belong.”261 That is, we are interested in collective perceptions and how certain authors attempt to define and/or construct those collective perceptions, more than we are interested in outlining a definitive and monolithic social reality that could be universally accepted as objective or normative fact.

Within the social sciences, many specialists allow for ambiguity and confusion. As the sociologist Richard Jenkins critiques another sociologist, Rogers Brubaker, “He is attempting to impose theoretical order in a human world in which indeterminacy, ambiguity and paradox are part of the normal pattern of everyday life.”262 Underscoring a point relevant to use of the social sciences in biblical studies, Jenkins notes,

> Although as social scientists we must aim for the greatest possible clarity, our concepts must also be grounded in the observable realities of the human world. If we try to impose concepts that are too straight-edged on this messy reality we risk divorcing ourselves from it, substituting the ‘reality of the model’ for a ‘model of reality’.263

Brubaker, in fact, brings his own critiques to the study of identity, as we have seen. He, too, targets the stability and precision with which identity scholars operate. Jenkins’ critique of the model, however, is applicable for scholars who study the social aspects of ancient documents, including biblical texts. Esler, for example, condemns the eclecticism of social historians in NT studies: “[Social history] has, indeed, proved something of a dead end. . . . Social history has become, in effect, a form of empiricism, whose practitioners regularly employ concepts such as ‘kinship,’ ‘identity,’ ‘ethnicity,’ and so on without subjecting these ideas to the social-scientific

261 Jenkins, 106.

262 Jenkins, 9.

263 Jenkins, 9–10.
modeling they require for clarity of application.”

What both Jenkins and Brubaker advocate from within the social sciences themselves, however, is a recognition that we cannot control social data nearly as neatly as we would like.

To push outside the NT canon on these issues, L. Stephanie Cobb offers another intriguing use of SIA, by tracing the social identity forming power of gendered language in martyr texts. Cobb departs from prior research done into martyr texts, often focusing upon the “psychology of individual Christians mentioned in the texts.” By using SIA, however, “we examine how and why individuals define themselves (or in this case, how authors define their characters) as part of a group and how group membership influences and explains intergroup encounters.” SIA offers an opportunity to interpret martyr texts by revealing how they depict the norms and ideal attributes of the ingroup, “namely, courage, strength, reason, and justice.” Identifying these as the normative attributes of the outlined in martyr texts, Cobb uses this as a door into discussing gender: “Since these traits were those most closely associated with masculinity in antiquity, in the texts under consideration here, it appears that to be a Christian

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264 Philip Francis Esler, “Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation,” in Ancient Israel, edited by Philip F. Esler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 13. Esler does indeed expand his notions of identity as he looks into all sorts of texts with SIA, combining this concept with others he finds from the social sciences. Esler vigorously defends the use of models against “social historians” perhaps more than any other NT scholar. I do wonder whether a commitment to the terminology of “model” really adds a precision that these “social historians” lack. On the one hand, this entire dissertation serves as a reminder that we cannot simply toss about concepts that seem vaguely rooted in theoretical discussions. In this way, I do agree with Esler’s interest in finding clear research that helps makes sense of the past. On the other hand, I wonder whether such commitment to models—even if models are adaptable to new evidence—leads us to be overly optimistic about our conclusions in organizing ancient historical data. Such approaches help us to understand how the past differs from our present-day assumptions, but I do not believe such approaches make us immune to making the model say what we want the texts to say. No matter the approach (Bhabha, Scott, Social Identity Theory, Foucault, etc.), we need to interrogate the approaches themselves to be honest about the work these approaches do for us.


266 Cobb, 19.

267 Cobb, 19.
was to be a man."\textsuperscript{268} Because of this more generalized approach in applying SIA, however, Cobb refrains from defining specific ingroups and the particular concerns of actual communities. Rather, she uses SIA to draw out insights regarding the values of the author and the author’s general community. Such flexible and interdisciplinary use of these identity theories seems far more fruitful. When not bound by strict models, we allow our analysis to examine, for example, how gender intersects with other data related to social identity in our texts.

Though others could be found, let us now pause to consider three potential pitfalls of applying the SIA model to the ancient texts of Second Temple Judaism, including the early Jesus movement; similar risks could be discussed for the use of social-scientific models more generally. First, there is a fundamental danger in extracting a model based upon the ethnographic study of tangible, knowable individuals and groups in the modern world, and matching the modern pattern with ancient groups using not much more than texts (most likely anonymous or pseudonymous texts at that). This concern is perhaps why most of the authors applying SIA have concentrated on a more identifiable author than any other in early Judaism, Paul of Tarsus. When one examines an author that can be known, one is on slightly firmer ground. As we have seen, this apparent firm ground, however, may distract us from the kinds of questions that we find in cultural studies, for example.

Second, among all sets of data and methodological insights there exists a grand temptation to steal only those insights that are most convenient for our argument. As we step into the foreign world of a much different discipline (social sciences) in which we have no formal training, blunders may result not only from the temptations of proof texting, but also from our

\textsuperscript{268} Cobb, 19.
simple ignorance. The point here is one of the proper selection of evidence. If we find a singular occurrence of a social-scientific argument that seems plausible to us, we may not realize that it has been definitively dismantled by subsequent scholarship—nor are we suitably equipped to definitively dismantle such work ourselves. We must become pupils of majority, consensus positions. We must also be aware of where our secondary sources fall within the history of their own fields’ scholarship.

Finally, when it comes to applying strict social scientific “models” on biblical texts, we risk the temptation of exceptionalism. Social psychology is a discipline designed to look intently on small groups in something of a sterile, controlled environment, disconnected from the complexities of multiple identifications. Harrill’s work is instructive here. He critiques the oft-used language of “assimilation, acculturation, and accommodation” (his critique is specifically targeted at the work of John Barclay) used in these discussions, as this framework “relies too much on social anthropological studies of immigrants’ processes of negotiation. Paul was not an immigrant to the Roman world.” Harrill suggests framework in which we may discuss how early Christian communities were not set-apart foreigners in the Roman world, but full participants in a widely diverse Mediterranean society. Contrary to many of the old binary models, which often presuppose Christian particularity, Harrill suggests framework in which we may discuss how early Christian letters (and other texts) participated in varied Roman discursive practices. Using social psychological models often feed into our interest to think of the Christ-groups as special and unique.

**Parousia and Empire**

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269 Harrill, 293 n. 39.
What such identity discussions often fail to do is place these ancient documents in their wider cultural and societal context. Social identity has been deployed in scholarship to highlight the boundaries and norms found within the text, but not always to highlight how such strategies relate to those of other authors and groups. This brings us to how identity formulations relate to conversations about “empire.” There are several key terms in the letter—and two passages in particular—to which scholars turn to situate 1 Thessalonians in the context of “empire.” Namely, we must examine the letter’s depictions of the apocalyptic παρουσία of Christ, which has inspired unending artistic renditions and theological speculations. Traditionally seen as embedded within an apocalyptic tradition removed from any social context, the παρουσία of Christ in 1 Thessalonians raises questions about how it might either echo or challenge imperial practices.

The term παρουσία occurs four times within 1 Thessalonians, more often than in any other NT document. In the first instance (2:19), The writers indirectly suggest that the παρουσία “of our Lord Jesus” will bring “our” hope (ἐλπὶς) and joy (χαρὰ) and a crown of boasting (στέφανος καυχήσεως). But the direct purpose of describing such features of the coming Lord is not to describe the παρουσία for its own sake. Rather, these descriptors are used as a means for encouraging the readers/hearers in the present using these words to describe the Thessalonian ekklēsia: “Is it not you [pl.]? Yes, you [pl.] are our glory and joy!” (2:19-20). In other words, the passage fits with others in the letter that promote internal cohesion in the Thessalonian Christ-group. The second use of παρουσία in the letter occurs in a blessing to the Thessalonian Christ-followers: “And may he so strengthen your [pl.] hearts in holiness that you [pl.] may be blameless [ἁγιωσύνῃ] before our God and Father at the coming [παρουσίᾳ] of our Lord Jesus with all his saints [ἁγίων]” (3:13). Another reference to the παρουσία comes at the end of the
letter and exhibits similar themes: “May the God of peace himself sanctify [ἁγιάσαι] you [pl.] entirely; and may your [pl.] spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you [pl.] is faithful, and he will do this” (5:23-24).

The language in these passages is that of preparation for the coming judgment. The community is encouraged to remain holy and blameless (with God’s help) in anticipation of the judgment that will occur at the Lord’s παρουσία. Both of these παρουσία references not only speak of a general sense of anticipatory faithfulness, but are also both closely connected with neighboring passages describing behavioral norms for the community.

The most significant expression of behavioral norms for the letter is found immediately after the second reference to the παρουσία (3:13). Following the blessing of encouragement to remain blameless for the coming of the Lord Jesus and the accompanying judgment, the writers give some picture of what such preparation requires. On the whole, these norms generally entail a commitment to love one another, encourage one another, to treat one another with respect, and abstain from sexual immorality. These norms are revisited at the end of the letter, just prior to the final mention of the παρουσία (5:23). One of the connective tissues between these two mentions of παρουσία and the passages outlining norms is the concept of holiness or sanctification. Some variant on ἅγιος is used 10 times in the brief letter, including twice in 3:13 and once in 5:23.

The behavioral norms discussed immediately after the παρουσία blessing in chapter three discuss holiness in terms of abstaining from πορνεία (4:3) and controlling one’s σκεῦος (a phallic euphemism?) in holiness and honor—rather than with “lustful passion” like those Gentiles who do not know God. Here we have yet another distinction between the ingroup (holy) and the outgroup (those other Gentiles, the sexually immoral ones). Sexuality, however, is not the only aspect of behavioral norms in the letter. The authors urge the Thessalonian ekklēsia to
continue being models of mutual ἀγάπη love in Macedonia. The authors connect this ἀγάπη to remaining independent and unassuming to “outsiders” [τοὺς ἐξω] (4:12). Such a connection perhaps means ἀγάπη manifests itself in mutual service and aid within the Thessalonian ekklēsia, a kind of internal interdependence that reifies ingroup boundaries. Such a reading is supported by the behavioral norms outlined in the end of the letter. Readers/hearers are instructed to respect those who work among them “in love [ἐν ἀγάπη] because of their work [διὰ τὸ ἔργον αὐτῶν],” and to admonish the idlers (5:12-14). This closing passage—immediately before the final παρουσίᾳ mention—speaks of encouraging the fainthearted, helping the weak, and being patient with everyone in the group (5:14). They must not “repay evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all” (5:15). Such instructions for the Christ-group at Thessalonikē again serve the function of maintaining social cohesiveness.

On the heels of naming such behavioral norms, we find the most discussed use of the term παρουσίᾳ in Christian history. As we have seen, the vivid depiction most likely finds its roots in potential doubts and questions within the Thessalonian ekklēsia regarding the death of some of their members: Is this community and cause still worth the efforts of faithfulness in the midst of crisis? Is vindication truly attainable? The full description of the παρουσίᾳ here bears repeating:

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord [παρουσίαν τοῦ κυρίου], will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord [εἰς ἀπάντησιν τοῦ κυρίου] in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. (4:15-17)

Ending this passage, the authors frame this depiction with their desire again for social cohesion and mutual encouragement within the community (4:18). In other words, the παρουσίᾳ is an
example of what Bayart calls “operational acts of identification”—it is a useful device for reifying the group’s boundaries and norms.

It is here, though, that we turn to the letter’s imperial context, as the particular passage at hand (4:15-17) has been in the center of scholarly conversations regarding the letter’s view of “empire.” In addition to the use of κύριος, which has potential for both Roman and Judean discourses, two words in particular appear to hint at a link between the παρουσία of Jesus and language regarding ancient rulers: (1) παρουσία itself and (2) ἀπάντησις. We do find examples in which παρουσία refers to the coming of a king or Caesar and ἀπάντησις refers to “a festive and formal meeting of a king or other dignitary who arrives for a visit of a city.” Writing in the second century B.C.E., Polybius recounts a story from the military exploits of Hannibal, the Carthaginian general of the second Punic war. In the story, Hannibal descends suddenly on the city of Rhegium (at the “toe” of Italy’s “boot”), cutting off all those Rhegians who had left the city temporarily and were out in the country. Notably, the text says: “during his sudden coming/appearance [παρουσίᾳ], he became lord/master [κύριος] of a large number of Rhegians” (Hist. 9.7.10). Here a powerful military leader descends upon a city to become its κύριος, clearly resonant with our terms’ usage in 1 Thessalonians.

A story from Josephus connects both παρουσία and ἀπάντησις. In the story, Jaddua the high priest receives word that Alexander the Great is planning to visit Jerusalem. Concerned about what to do, Jaddua fears the consequences of a visit from the great military leader. After offering sacrifices, Jaddua receives a vision in a dream in which God communicates that “he and the priests should meet [ὑπάντησιν] the king in the habits proper to their order, without the dread

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270 Koester, 160.
of any ill consequences” (Ant. 11.327). Having been relieved by the dream, Josephus tells us that he “waited for the coming [παρουσίαν] of the king” (11.328). Later in the story, Alexander is shown the Book of Daniel “wherein Daniel declared that one of the Greeks should destroy the empire of the Persians” (Ant 11.337), and Alexander believes that he is the man fulfilling the prophecy. In this story from Josephus, then, we have a clear association between παρουσία, a related form of the word ἀπάντησις, the arrival of a great military leader, and even the apocalyptic symbolism found in Daniel.

We should also note that the term ἀπάντησις is so widely accepted as this sort of meeting that the Latin author Cicero—which we recall incidentally was once exiled in Thessalonikē—uses the untranslated Greek word in his writing (To Atticus 8.16.2; 16.11.6).271 In one such instance, the term describes the “complimentary processions” of a political party which rushes to meet Julius Caesar and parade their loyalty to him. In another instance, he describes the coming of Octavian to a particular city, in which “[t]here was a wonderful procession to meet him [ἀπάντησις], and loud expressions of encouragement.”272 As we have seen in all of these examples, the terms are used for major military and iconic leaders in their coming to cities, often with a desire to appease the coming leader. To return to 1 Thessalonians, the Christ-followers appease the coming lord (Jesus) by following the authors’ behavioral norms and maintaining the group in the midst of perceived social pressures.

The connection of the term παρουσία to the coming of a great leader is not widely contested, but the precise meaning of ἀπάντησις in our context has been the cause of some

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271 Malherbe, 277.

272 Translation of Evelyn Shuckburgh.
debate. Malherbe\textsuperscript{273} and Peter Oakes\textsuperscript{274} both see the “complimentary procession” understanding of ἀπάντησις as improbable in our text because it refers to a practice of escorting the “lord” to the city, while the use in First Thessalonians is a “snatching up” with no expectation of return to earth. They both critique authors (such as I. Howard Marshall\textsuperscript{275}) who argue for an implied return to earth. Such exegetical discussions distract from the fact that discourses are flexible. The authors may allude to such cultural practices (i.e., processions) without conforming to all details in how such practices are performed.

In his commentary on the letters to the Thessalonians, Charles Wanamaker notes the importance of the sky as a midpoint between the heavens and earth in Jewish cosmology. The event of meeting the Lord in the air is most likely conceptually connected to the salvation of the ekklēsia from the coming wrath of God. Wanamaker connects this passage with 1 Cor 15:23f., another παρουσία text of Paul’s, in which Christ “hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” (15:24). Wanamaker states: “While it is always dangerous to press apocalyptic imagery and accounts too literally, this does imply that the return to heaven is necessary for Christ to render up his rule to God.”\textsuperscript{276} This passage, then offers a Judean apocalyptic myth, connected to the “son of man” tradition found in Daniel 7, for example. As we have noted in the previous chapter (see, e.g., Rollens) and will see prominently in the next chapter, certain features of apocalyptic discourse may be particular to

\textsuperscript{273} Malherbe, 277.


\textsuperscript{275} Marshall, 131.

\textsuperscript{276} Wanamaker, 175.
Judean literary traditions—but Judeans did not have a monopoly on epiphany, divine judgment, or otherworldly journeys.

What appears to be the strongest argument for an anti-imperial reading of 1 Thessalonians is the suggestion that the authors sarcastically target a Roman imperial slogan. We find the putative slogan in the authors’ depiction of the “day of the Lord” coming “like a thief in the night” (5:2). We already know what will happen to the ingroup meeting the Lord in the air, but this passage highlights the coming punishment for the outgroup: “When they say, ‘peace and security [εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια],’ then sudden destruction will come upon them” (5:3). Making the clearest distinction between the ingroup and outgroup in the letter, the authors define the readers/hearers as the children of the day, of light, who “stay sober” (behavioral norms). The outgroup (those who say “peace and security”) are of the night, of darkness. This “night” group is either drunk or asleep (5:7). Either way, they will not be prepared for the day of the Lord and the wrath of God.

But it is this phrase “peace and security” (εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια) that has been associated with Roman imperial propaganda, specifically a Greek form of what some interpreters suggest is a Latin slogan, pax et securitas. In order to unpack such claims, we should here explore some uses of these terms. Writing in the second century, the Roman historian Tacitus recounts a letter from the Roman General Marcus Antonius Primus to the emperor Vespasian. In the letter, probably dated to 69 CE, Antonius boasts of his military accomplishments as complementary to the successes of certain renowned leaders in Asia Minor: “They had at heart the peace [pacem] of Moesia, I the safety and security [securitatem] of Italy” (Tac. Hist. 3.53).278 Tacitus relates an

277 Slight adaptation by me from the NRSV.

278 Translation by Alfred John Church.
imperialistic speech from Cerialis, Governor of lower Germany under Vespasian, upon his suppression of a rebellion in Trier (70 C.E.):

Give therefore your love and respect to the cause of peace [pacem], and to that capital in which we, conquerors and conquered, claim an equal right. Let the lessons of fortune in both its forms teach you not to prefer rebellion and ruin to submission and safety [securitate]. (Hist. 4.74)

In one instance, Tacitus speaks of the “security of peace” (securitate pacis; Hist. 2.12), here again tying the terms together in imperial discourse.

Josephus again adds to this picture, writing in Greek and as a Jew with close connection to Roman imperial ideology. The Judean historian uses these two terms from 1 Thessalonians 5:3 in many circumstances, highlighting an ideal of peace and security brought about by military might, particularly the Roman military.²⁷⁹ He states in one instance: The “Romans, following the conduct of their ancestors, undertake dangers for the common safety [ἀσφαλείας] of all mankind [ἅπαντων ἀνθρώπων], and are ambitious to settle their confederates and friends in happiness, and in firm peace [εἰρήνῃ]” (Ant. 14.247).²⁸⁰ Here the Romans are those who take on the difficult work of military action in order to keep up the security and peace of “all mankind,” or at least those who are under the protection of Rome. These passages from Tacitus and Josephus do perhaps illustrate the Roman ideals in which all, “conquerors and conquered,” may live together “under the same roof” of the Empire in peace and security. Given the role of Thessalonikē as the provincial capital and its support of the first emperor, as mentioned earlier, such a theme must have been as socially relevant as anywhere in the Empire. Though we can see such terms

²⁷⁹ E.g., Ant. 13.22-23; 14.160, 247; 15.348; JW. 4.120.

²⁸⁰ Josephus translations from William Whiston.
connected in some instances with imperial discourse, the question remains as to how we use such context to interpret 1 Thessalonians.

This is where we see Elliott’s “frontal attack” comment, in which he slots the “peace and security” comment in 1 Thessalonians into a larger “ideological intifada” against the empire in Paul’s writings.281 For his part, Peter Oakes rejects an association with Roman propaganda in 4:15-17, but he includes 5:3 in a category of social relations that he classifies as “Christianity against Rome” (without the “frontal attack” of Elliott). David Luckensmeyer agrees with Oakes by suggesting that “such an association [between the phrase εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια and the pax Romana] does not necessarily imply a specific attack on the Roman establishment.”282 The letter itself suggests something gentler than an attack in its encouragement to the audience “to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs . . . so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be dependent on no one” (4:12). While the letter may define an outgroup, which belongs to the darkness and will face the wrath of God in the future, the Christ-followers in Thessalonikē are instructed to take a more gentle stance towards these outsiders. Luckensmeyer writes, “It does, however, confirm Paul’s dualistic view when it comes to the Thessalonian ekklēsia—those who say ‘peace and security’ are clearly outside the community, and are among those who are thought to experience the day of the Lord in a negative way.”283 Therefore, while the authors’ use of imperial discourse does not aggressively target the “Empire,” Luckensmeyer argues that the phrase nevertheless creates a “polemical” identification of the outsiders (or outgroup) with “imperial Rome.”

281 Elliott, 190.
282 Luckensmeyer, 291.
283 Ibid.
Those who contest Roman imperialism as the background for 5:3 have suggested instead that the words εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια are rooted in the Hebrew prophets. Specifically, the prophets include a mantra which appears to be relevant to the phrase in 5:3: “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” (Jer 6:14; cf. Ez. 13:10). Malherbe is among those denying an imperial or political association with the words εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια. Agreeing with those who find its origins in the Hebrew prophets, Malherbe argues that the second εἰρήνη was replaced with a common Epicurean term, ἀσφάλεια. He believes the letter includes challenges to Epicurean philosophy elsewhere in the letter as well (4.11 and 13). Thus, this is one additional reference to this school of thought, which he estimates would have been prevalent in Thessalonikē.

With Elliott, J. R. Harrison and Jeffrey A. D. Weima contend that the most immediate context for this phrase is, in fact, Roman imperial propaganda. Harrison writes:

> the prominence of both εἰρήνη and ἀσφάλεια—whether individually or combined—in the imperial propaganda would have ensured that the ‘hidden transcript’ at Thessaloniki . . . was imperial in its reference rather than Epicurean. \(^{285}\)

To support the idea that these terms together represent a slogan that NT scholars routinely Latinize as pax et securitas, Harrison appeals to a singular inscription, for which he points to Klaus Wengst (OGIS 613). Indeed, in their classic NT lexicon, Moulton and Milligan call OGIS 613 “a vivid picture of the Pax Romana.”\(^{286}\) In the English translation that Harrison uses (apparently done by Wengst), the possibility of a “peace and security” slogan is heightened. A better translation of the final phrase (καὶ τοὺς διοδεύοντας καὶ τὸ ἔθνος διὰ παντὸς εἰρηνεύεσθαι

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\(^{284}\) Malherbe, 304.


ἠσφαλίσατο), however, would be: “brought peace and ensured the security.” In other words, though the words are found in the same inscription and are thematically linked, they are not a “slogan” as seen in 1 Thessalonians.

For his part, Weima sets out in a more systematic way to dismantle the old view that “peace and security” in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 might be an allusion to the Hebrew prophets. Weima contends that the phrase refers to “a popular theme or slogan of the imperial Roman propaganda machine.”287 Again, he characterizes “peace and security” as “a popular concept or perhaps even a fixed slogan of Roman political propaganda.”288 In his conclusion, however, Weima has disregarded the possibility that the phrase is a mere “popular concept” or “theme,” claiming rather it constitutes “a clear allusion not to the warning of the Hebrew prophets who spoke only about false claims of ‘peace’ but the sloganeering of the Roman state and its claim of providing for its citizens the same two benefactions highlighted by the apostle.”289

There are a few important points to note here regarding a rather problematic depiction of Roman culture. First, no such “imperial Roman propaganda machine” existed. Second, Weima appears to equate “theme” and “slogan.” Weima has demonstrated interconnected cultural discourse, but he has not established that a propaganda slogan like that found in 1 Thessalonians exists. In regards to the numismatic evidence, Weima notes several instances in which pax occurs and other (separate) instances in which securitas appears. However, Romans included a host of such terms or representative gods on their coinage, including but not limited to: aeternitas, concordia, felicitas, fides, liberalitas, pietas, and spes. Indeed, Thessalonikē received

287 Weima, 332.
288 Weima, 355.
289 Weima, 358.
status of *civitas libera* and continued to mint its own coins. A great variety of such terms would have been found in Thessalonikē in the mid-first century.290 When we examine the meaning of the term “slogan” itself, alongside the evidence, the use of the term is clearly inappropriate. The term “slogan,” as it is typically utilized, refers to a phrase or dictum employed by a government, business, or movement for political, marketing, or advocacy purposes, respectively. When applied to modern scenarios, the slogan is typically seen as an intentional persuasive strategy. No modern scenarios can serve as useful comparanda to the varied uses of the terms “peace” and “security” in Roman cultural discourse. Ancient Rome established no Bureau of Propaganda nor did it hire marketing consultants. In comparison to many empires, as discussed in the previous chapter, Rome took a rather loose approach to governing the daily activities of its various regional inhabitants. The many different peoples of the Roman world, conceived in broad terms, certainly embraced common cultural paradigms and shared rhetorical practices. Thus, one will find examples of various local leaders throughout the empire described in terms of benevolence, humility, and reluctance most boldly modeled by Augustus’ *Res gestae*.

While interpreters have failed to demonstrate that “peace and security” served as a standard Roman slogan or formula, opposing viewpoints have even weaker evidence. I contend that the terms “peace” and “security” are separate but related concepts which function in the symbolic universe of a varied Roman cultural identity. This view contrasts, however, with the idea that the writers have utilized a definitive and recognizable Roman slogan. The assumption that Paul has ironically used such a putative slogan has led scholars to the conclusion that Paul is here displaying a “hidden transcript” (as defined by James Scott). In his penetrating critique of

“Paul and empire” studies, Harrill dedicates several paragraphs on such discussions in 1 Thessalonians. Even Harrill states, “To be sure, εἰρήνη καὶ ἀσφάλεια do appear together in religious-political slogans of inscriptions and of coins having the legend paci Augusti or securitas Augusti. My purpose is not to dispute this evidence. What I do dispute is the claim that Paul quotes this slogan as a ‘hidden transcript’ of resistance against ‘Roman imperialism’.” However, no scholar has yet demonstrated that these two terms were routinely used together as a slogan or formula. Harrill himself has provided no examples in which these terms appear together. Similar to Harrill, I do not dispute that the terms “peace” and “security” serve separately as important Roman concepts. However, the force of the “slogan” argument needs to be challenged in view of the evidence. We simply have no good evidence to clearly identify who are “those who say ‘peace and security,’” except that they are fellow members of the Roman world who apparently believe things are just fine as they are.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have introduced many of the stumbling blocks in the interpretation of specific NT texts as they relate to identity and empire. For many interpreters, “identity” feels like a clear option to unpack the social implications of a letter. However, the ways in which the “identity” discussion has taken place with 1 Thessalonians has removed it from substantive discussions of its social and cultural context. The “model” that SIA provides treats the letter as if it lives in a laboratory environment, naming the tropes in the letter that highlight ingroup cohesion and norms as well as outgroup stereotyping. It is not that identifications do not operate within the letter, but rather that simply naming norms for insiders and stereotypes for outsiders is a limited view of the cultural impact of the letter. On the other hand, pushing identity

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291 Harrill, 308–9.
conversations into the realm of “empire” brings us into another freighted territory. In view of “empire,” interpreters are able to unpack more of the cultural impact of the letter, but too often with a simplified view of how cultural discourses function. The authors are not simply “for” or “against” empire; they participate in imperial discourse in a manner that is difficult to pin down. As I have demonstrated, the most suggestive possibility for anti-imperialism in the letter—that the authors target some preexisting Roman imperial “slogan”—is a red herring. There is no such slogan. On the other hand, we need not bend over backwards to deny there is any imperial import in the letter’s discourse. There is imperial language embedded within the letter because the authors participate in the Roman imperial world. We only turn to “hidden transcripts” when we want to ascribe subversion to the letter when it is not readily apparent. The Christ-group at Thessalonikē likely inhabited their city like many of the other voluntary associations, while the authors wanted to make sure that the group prioritized their membership in this particular group. We turn to Revelation to see the ideological maneuvers of scholars even more prominently displayed.
Chapter 4: Apocalyptic Satire? The Pitfalls of Parodic Reading

Revelation is an ideological playground. In popular usage, the work finds a home in the sermons and books of premillennial dispensationalists as well as the cinematic imagination of Hollywood. A cadre of scholars address this by offering insights on what Revelation “really means” historically, explaining its symbolism through references to the author’s own world. Through such careful historical work, these scholars wrest the text from the grip of unpleasant theological proclamations. Other scholars, however, have pushed the interpretation of what Revelation “really means” beyond the limits of historical contexts. Indeed, theologically liberal scholars seek to claim the book for their own liberationist message. Thus, Revelation is not a map for end-times pontificators to explain the chaos of contemporary history, nor is it merely a symbolic commentary on the historical situation of the author. Rather, for these scholars, Revelation represents a vision of Empire defeated. It is on this concept of “empire” that much current Revelation scholarship pivots.

As with our other texts, this work draws upon apocalyptic discourse in order to negotiate boundaries and solidify the author’s authority. The apocalyptic scene and its rhetorical pronouncements suggest a sharp distinction with the “outside world.” Quite a bit of historical research on Revelation has sought to identify the “crisis” that led to this radical stance towards the “other.” Such historical examinations have indeed laid the groundwork for today’s liberationist readings, as they posit a juxtaposition between an exiled, sectarian John shaking his apocalyptic fist at the Roman establishment. For ages, the text was read as a product of empire-wide persecution, though more recent discussions favor localized harassment or social pressure. Ultimately, we have no definitive access to the original circumstances laying “behind” the text of
Revelation. Rather, we have a powerful collection of discursive strategies deployed by its author. Recent scholarship has often embraced rhetorical readings of the Apocalypse, as these approaches offer interpretative opportunities for Western Christians living in and under the empires of today.

My treatment of Revelation deploys the strategy that I have outlined in my first two chapters, operating at two levels. First, I argue that scholarship that uses the categories of irony or parody to absolve John of his violent rhetoric obscures John’s participation in ancient Mediterranean cultural discourse. Such attempts serve the needs of theologically liberal interpretative priorities. Second, when we release Revelation from canonical authorizing strategies, we find that John navigates cultural boundaries not unlike those whose writings drip with irony: the Roman satirists. Thus, our comparative choices radically alter the story we are able to tell about this document.

This chapter will outline the ideological maneuvers of scholarship in claiming Revelation as an “anti-imperial” text. First, we explore how earlier descriptions of the book’s historical setting provided a fertile ground for such anti-imperial readings. Scholars have attempted to describe the perception of crisis in the text and the circumstances that may have led to such perception. Just as nuanced proposals started to find their footing in Revelation scholarship, discussions of Revelation and “empire” have seized control of the conversation. Second, we see how scholars interested in claiming an anti-imperial character for the work find themselves in a particular dilemma: if we champion the revolutionary nature of Revelation, what do we do with its nasty, violent parts? While some scholars do not attempt to excuse the unsavory elements found within the work, others seek a way to “solve” the dilemma. A prominent solution, exemplified in Harry O. Maier’s *Apocalypse Recalled*, suggests that face-value readings of
Revelation misunderstand John’s subtle and clever rhetorical moves. John’s violent rhetoric mimics the empire in order to mock it; John is an ironist. Interpreters who blame John for his own violent and misogynistic language are like those who might assume an article from *The Onion* to be real news. It is as if they have taking at face value the persona of Stephen Colbert from his now-ended parody-infused *Colbert Report*. According to these scholars, John was simply being ironic. The fact that this is a problem for interpreters underscores how the text functions. If Revelation does not function as an authorizing text, then we need not have an interpretative “problem” with any of its rhetoric that we may find distasteful.

Exploring Roman satirical works, similar considerations come to the fore. After discussing the trends I have mentioned, I then explore the most relevant material for Revelation within the Roman satirists: the divine council motif. Even if we do explore satire as an analytical path for Revelation, we see that comparing the book to other satirical writings simply underscores how embedded Revelation is in the negotiation strategies of authors in the Roman empire. Revelation is less exceptional, not more. Furthermore, we see that these satirical texts also present “problems” for interpreters. If we valorize Roman literature as the foundations for Western Civilization, the Roman authors also force Romanists to contend with unsavory cultural critiques.

**From Persecution to Perception**

The history of Revelation’s interpretation long assumed the context of actual persecution, usually under either the emperor Nero or Domitian, which served as the motivation for John’s diatribe against the Roman empire. More recently, however, the question for John’s motivation has become more nuanced. Christopher Frilingos characterizes such investigations as a scholarly program towards a “theory of origins” that establishes “the ideological, psychological, and
sociological factors that compelled the seer John to pen Revelation.” 292 Indeed, the search for Revelation’s “context” of persecution presents an instructive example of what theorists like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault addressed in their comments on the “death of the author.” 293 That is, these academic endeavors to understand John as an author and how his circumstances affect his writing suggest a positivism that sees authorial intent as the effective meaning of the text. In this section, I provide an overview of the more recent and influential voices who have sought such answers. 294 Such voices provide the footing for later liberationists who use Revelation as a text that can “speak” to us today.

As three of the most important proposals in Revelation scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s, John Gager’s Kingdom and Community, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s The Book of Revelation, and Adela Yarbro Collins’ Crisis and Catharsis display differing conclusions on the background and purpose of the work, each with an eye towards “persecution.” Both Gager and Schüssler Fiorenza presuppose a social context of actual persecution. Gager’s use of sociological and psychological theory marks a significant break with preceding research, pursuing a creative thesis that John’s text psychologically removes “Christians” from their suffering and transports

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293 See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” [orig. 1968], in Image, Music, Text, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–8; Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” [orig. 1969], in The Essential Foucault, eds. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose (New York: New Press, 2003), 377–91. For example, Barthes notes, “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’—victory to the critic” (147).

them to a symbolic universe over which they have control. Gager offers an approach that sees Revelation as a voice for the voiceless, a text of hope for the hopeless. Revelation’s audience, for Gager, included those who had experienced “relative deprivation” and persecution. The work offers a way of dealing with the complicated emotional impact of their social situation. Taking a rhetorical approach quite different from Gager’s, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza nevertheless argues a similar point that the author of Revelation “has adopted the ‘perspective from below’ and expressed the experiences of those who were powerless, poor, and in constant fear of denunciation.” Indeed, for Schüssler Fiorenza, those who deny the actual persecution of those behind this text are compared to “well-to-do white Americans” who might deny that any oppression of blacks existed in the time of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Adela Yarbro Collins, on the other hand, argues that there was no great persecution under Domitian—she dates the work under Domitian—other than “the usual sporadic repression suffered by the Christians in the first two centuries.” She notes, “Rather than simply consoing his fellow Christians in a situation of grave crisis, he wrote his book to point out the crisis that

295 John G. Gager, Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975). About Gager’s proposal, Friesen notes, “Gager’s specific proposal about Revelation as a kind of liturgical group therapy for cognitive dissonance has not been widely accepted in the secondary literature, but his innovative approach set some of the terms for subsequent discussion. His analysis marked a turning point in Revelation studies by supplementing traditional textual methodologies with concepts and methods from the social sciences that addressed questions of social function. It was simultaneously a move away from theological explanation and towards religious studies analysis” (“Apocalypse and Empire,” 164–5). Friesen is certainly correct on the methodological significance of Gager’s work; however, on the final point, I demonstrate in this chapter that “theological” readings of Revelation still dominate academic discussions of the work. Indeed, in the decades following Gager, “empire” gains greater theologized significance.


297 Ibid.

many of them did not perceive.” Yarbro Collins highlights the *perceived* crisis, the fact that John *feels* persecuted, in order to explain his cathartic apocalyptic vision. Thus, John constructed a problem that he then set out to solve in his work. Though she differs from Gager and Schüssler-Fiorenza on the social setting behind the text of Revelation, her argument does not challenge reading it from the *perspective* of the oppressed. For Yarbro Collins highlights the concept of “relative deprivation” felt by millenarian movements, highlighting the importance of “not so much whether one is actually oppressed as whether one *feels* oppressed.” Thus, Revelation continues to represent a marginalized voice, even if it is merely the *perception* of marginalization.

In a position not entirely unlike that of Yarbro Collins, Leonard Thompson offers a sophisticated reading of Revelation that would tie it to no social situation in particular, but rather to the deviant knowledge of a cognitive minority (even if this deviant knowledge must have some sort of plausible “social base”). In Steven Friesen’s words, Thompson “successfully dismantled” the view that an actual imperial persecution inspired Revelation’s genesis. But Thompson departs from the view of Yarbro Collins in his suggestion that Revelation also represents an “all-encompassing scope of knowledge,” which “calls for a bold cosmopolitan existence in the empire.” Thompson describes the context of Revelation as that of

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299 Ibid., 77.

300 Ibid., 84. Emphasis in original. The content of such perception was based on actual tensions and hostilities faced by John and others, but John consolidated many disparate circumstances. Frilingos describes Yarbro Collins’ use of “relative deprivation” as a “remarkably supple notion” (*Spectacles of Empire*, 4).

301 Friesen, “Apocalypse and Empire,” 166. Among other arguments, Thompson tackles the rhetorical strategies deployed in texts typically used to support a Domitianic persecution.

“cosmopolitan sectarianism,” which consists of an “essentially ambivalent, symbiotic
relationship with the larger society.”303 Thompson, then, suggests the social situation is near the
opposite of what scholars such as Gager and Schüssler Fiorenza have argued, as if life in Asia
Minor consisted of a quaint suburban bliss for rich and poor alike.304

Taking a somewhat different path, Robert Royalty argues that the social context for
Revelation is more about “the struggle for power and authority within the young churches” of
Roman Asia than about offering comfort for oppression, real or perceived (though, Royalty does
believe “Christians were a minority group subject to perceived oppression in Greco-Roman
culture”).305 For Royalty, the “ideology of wealth” in the Apocalypse serves to legitimate “the
authority of the author within the Christian communities” and to legitimate “the power of God
and Christ against the power of Rome.”306 James Kelhoffer gives the discussion of perceived
oppression a slightly different twist by using Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Specifically,
Kelhoffer argues that the concept of withstanding persecution serves the early Christian authors
as an indicator of cultural capital, which is then wielded for each author’s rhetorical tasks. In
Revelation, John’s claimed status as one who has withstood suffering (1:9) legitimates his
“prophetic authority,” and helps establish his message that “all true believers, like John, must
faithfully resist oppression and not assimilate to any idolatrous influences.”307 Thus, both

303 Ibid., 196.

304 See Ibid., 166–67. As Friesen notes, Thompson offers “a narrative about urban life in the Roman Empire that
most specialists would now describe as overly optimistic” (Friesen, “Apocalypse and Empire,” 167).

305 Robert M. Royalty, The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John (Mercer University
Press, 1998), 244.

306 Ibid., 245, 244.

307 James A. Kelhoffer, Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration
Royalty and Kelhoffer focus their attention on John’s attempt at legitimation through discursive strategies—those related to an “ideology of wealth,” on the one hand, and withstanding persecution, on the other.

For his part, Frilingos is concerned that scholarly approaches to Revelation that underscore John’s sectarian motivations—be they towards Rome or other Christ groups—dislocate the work from its larger context. Such approaches have been helpful, he notes, but have nevertheless “driven a wedge between Revelation and the society of the early empire, a setting that has often been described according to fairly narrow categories or been made subordinate to other concerns.” Frilingos would rather “attempt to read the book of Revelation as a cultural product of the Roman Empire, a book that shared with contemporaneous texts and institutions specific techniques for defining world and self.”

The “social setting” of Revelation is ultimately unknowable, but the critiques of persecution as context are helpful. Even without persecution as the text’s origin, many scholars have pushed into an arena in which Revelation can keep its revolutionary, liberationist message. My position in this chapter is not to say whether John is “truly” revolutionary or subversive in this text, but rather to observe the stakes undergirding scholarly arguments for or against its subversion. Revelation holds a complicated legacy as a canonical text, but it nevertheless remains a canonical text. Even those who feel compelled to condemn the patriarchalism, misogyny, and violence in the text do so at the risk of reinforcing Revelation’s authoritative status. One key area that liberationist scholars have identified as potentially fruitful for rescuing

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308 Frilingos, 5.
309 Ibid.
Revelation’s authoritative status is that of parody and satire. We now turn to a review of such maneuvers.

**From Simple Parody to Subversive Irony**

As with 1 Thessalonians, scholars of Revelation debate over categorical assumptions that are rarely explicitly defined. The use of “parody” in Revelation scholarship plays multiple roles. Scholars have long emphasized the antithetical descriptions of demonic and divine characters in the book. The beast, for example, constitutes a “satanic parody” of Christ. Such discussions hinge also on Revelation’s use of irony, particularly the irony of victory through death. Over time, however, these categories (parody, irony) have evolved from straightforward literary devices into a comprehensive authorial perspective, manifested in “subtle” and putatively misunderstood literary strategies. The latter approach often, though not always, gets paired with an anti-imperial reading of the work, offering a way to depict John as “nonviolent” and offer him a “pass” on rhetoric that troubles modern sensibilities.

Thus, a discussion of “parody” in Revelation begins with its antithetical use to refer to the beast et al. as the “demonic” or “satanic” parodies of the true powers of heaven. A good example of this is Sophie Laws’ slim volume, *In the Light of the Lamb: Imagery, Parody, and Theology in the Apocalypse of John*. For Laws, the beast is a parody of the lamb, blasphemy is a parody of the “word of God,” etc.³¹⁰ Laws claims Revelation represents “the climax of the whole history of the antagonism of nations . . . a product and a reflection of the great cosmic divide between the creator God and the power of chaos.” This conflict, Laws writes, is “about Christ whose status and rôle [sic] the Roman power blasphemously claims and parodies.”³¹¹ Similarly, Richard

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³¹¹ Laws, 42.
Bauckham sees the “radical political critique” of Revelation, in part, manifested through John’s “christological parody” in chapters 13 and 17. In chapter 13, John uses language of the beast first wounded and then healed and come back to life (13:3, 12, 14). In chapter 17, John uses a triplet in various forms (e.g., “it was and was not and is to come,” 17:8b) to describe the beast. Each of these examples echo claims made elsewhere for God or Christ, thus, each “embodies the idea that the beast is an imitation or satanic parody of Christ.” On this dynamic, Eugene Boring succinctly writes, “all earthy claims to sovereignty are only pale imitations and parodies of the One who sits upon the one throne.”

This stream of scholarship highlights the nature of “satanic” or “demonic” imitation in Revelation. John depicts his Roman targets in antithetical terms, pale copies of John’s true rulers (God and Christ). The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet constitute the “unholy trinity.” Unlike “parody” as a satirical literary composition (see below), these examples appear to fall under a definition of “parody” as “a poor or feeble imitation of something; a travesty” (Oxford English Dictionary Online, 3rd ed.). In this framework, the “(satanic) parody” and that which it imitates (Christ) are both rhetorical constructions of the author. By contrast, those who use “parody” as a satirical construction argue that, in addition to depicting the empire as a “pale imitation” of God’s kingdom, John “parodies” the very rhetoric of “the empire” by imitating such rhetoric in his own work. Both uses of “parody” have implications for how we conceive


313 Bauckham, 432. Emphasis added.

314 Boring, Revelation, 103. Emphasis added.

John’s constructed boundaries, but the latter transfers the burden of violent rhetoric to imperial actors.

Similarly, a host of commentators explore “irony” in a simple sense as something “that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected; an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations” (“irony, n.”, Oxford English Dictionary Online, 3rd ed.). That is, commentators commonly highlight John’s preference for images and concepts that go against the standard order of things. For instance, John uses ironic reversal in the concept of martyrs becoming conquerors through death. In a typical characterization, Gregory K. Beale speaks of John’s “notion of Christ and the church reigning ironically in the midst of their suffering.”316 Just as “parody” above refers to antithesis, “irony” here suggests paradox, inversion, or reversal. Thus, John uses antitheses and paradoxes to fit his own rhetorical strategies. At face value, such observations appear obvious and inconsequential. However, others have pushed these categories into more complex and freighted territory. Perhaps more than any other scholar, Stephen D. Moore has interrogated the ideological underpinnings of academic discourse on Revelation. Moore identifies the problem that a confessionally-oriented scholar, such as Bauckham, faces with the concept of parody. If scholars argue that “Roman imperial power is but a parody or pale imitation of divine power,” Moore writes, then “the difference between Roman sovereignty and divine sovereignty would be quantitative rather than qualitative in Revelation.”317 God is more powerful, but does not wield power any better.

In his *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Bauckham attempts to quash the possibility that God is merely a projection of human authorities by appealing to apophaticism or “negative theology.” For Bauckham, God is radically distinguished from creatures in Revelation. Moore questions this argument, highlighting the obvious literary differences between the Apocalypse and “the consummately restrained and exquisitely delicate theological probings of a Pseudo-Dionysius, a Meister Eckhart, or other Christian thinkers more commonly termed apophatic.”318

For Moore, Revelation instead depicts God as a “Foucauldian nightmare”:

> We have not yet exited the dystopian netherworld of *Discipline and Punish*: on one side, the absolute monarch publicly exacting frightful physical punishment on all who oppose his will; on the other side, a more “benign” realm in which the rack, the stake, and the scaffold have been rendered obsolete—but only because the ruler’s subjects are no longer capable of distinguishing his will from their own.319

Thus, a reading of parody as “pale imitation” in Revelation presents the confessional scholar with ideological (i.e., theological) challenges that are not easily resolved. Moore complicates parody in Revelation still further in later works, but not until after others have shifted the conversation in their own way.

For her part, Tina Pippin calls upon the category of “parody” only briefly in her provocative feminist reading of the Apocalypse, but nevertheless suggests possibilities for the category that have not yet been realized. For Pippin, liberationist readings see Revelation as offering dramatic reversal and an opportunity at utopia. She unmask this promised utopian fantasy, however, as an *atopia* for women. She states, “The female figures in the Apocalypse are given symbolic names and symbolic tasks; they are not allowed to speak their own identity. This

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technique distances the reader from the female images, leaving only women stereotypes of good and evil and no real flesh and blood women."³²⁰ In this sense, Pippin seeks to "gaze" upon the "symbolic universe" of the Apocalypse, which she calls "a parody of flesh and blood reality."³²¹ Pippin fleshes out her understanding of parody as a concept borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin. Reading John’s depiction of the Whore’s destruction in chapter 17, Pippin addresses the scene as "carnivalesque." Using Bakhtin’s understanding of Menippean satire, Pippin categorizes Revelation 17 as a "parody’ of the social, political, economic, and religious systems."³²² Pippin emphasizes Bakhtin’s take on the subversive nature of language and its "interrogation” of the “dominant ideology,” which is overthrown in the carnivalesque demise of the Whore. However, the “erotic tension” in which the Whore is stripped naked and helpless, “here points to the ultimate misogynist fantasy! All the world’s hatred of oppression is heaped on the Whore.”³²³ Thus, Pippin hints at the liberationist possibilities of carnivalesque parody, but ultimately the carnival reinscribes oppressive misogynistic imagery. Thus, as with Moore’s reading, the potential of “parody” here comes up short.

The discussions by Moore and Pippin on the complicated relationship between Revelation and empire remain outliers. A substantial amount of recent scholarship in Revelation seeks to bolster it as an anti-imperial text, at times accounting for ideological problems and at times minimizing them. One method of minimization depicts John as a kind of satirist or ironist, detached from his own rhetoric, which only serves as a darkly comedic carnival of parodic

³²¹ Ibid. Emphasis added.
³²² Ibid., 65.
³²³ Ibid., 67.
monsters. This reading of Revelation as a thorough-going ironic parody or satire suggests that John’s rhetorical strategies were so subtle that we misunderstand his violent discourse. In this view, John mimics not only the rituals and practices of empire in his work in order to mock the empire, but also imitates the violence of empire itself as a satirical jab at the empire. That is, John himself does not present a violent vision per se, but a subtle critique of imperial violence—so subtle that one may mistake the critique for John’s own violent discourse.324

Two essays lay the groundwork for such discussions in the early 1980s. First, Adela Yarbro Collins writes a piece on Revelation 18, which highlights the paradoxical or ironic aspects of the chapter as a dirge—a mock lament for Rome. The “kings of the earth” stand from a distance as they watch Rome burn, saying, “Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come” (18:10 NRSV). Following the kings, the “merchants of the earth weep and mourn” for Rome, “since no one buys their cargo anymore” (18:11 NRSV). Exploring whether such ironic language should be taken as harsh critique of Rome, she offers, “The literary form used allows a subtle and indirect description of the fall of Rome and, at the same time, an opportunity for the author to indicate its significance.”325 Yarbro Collins’ article responds to those who refused to see any sort of antipathy in this passage, even as interpreters

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324 The Oxford English Dictionary defines this form of “parody” as such: “A literary composition modelled on and imitating another work, esp. a composition in which the characteristic style and themes of a particular author or genre are satirized by being applied to inappropriate or unlikely subjects, or are otherwise exaggerated for comic effect. In later use extended to similar imitations in other artistic fields, as music, painting, film, etc.”

325 Yarbro Collins, “Revelation 18: Taunt-song or Dirge?,” 199. “Irony” plays a role in her analysis: “The analysis of the dirges in Revelation 18 has shown that there is no simple, one-to-one correspondence in their case between form and function. On the surface, they express mourning. But when they function on another level to announce judgment, and when that judgment is on an enemy, the dirge takes on a paradoxical or ironic character, because of the unlikelihood of genuine mourning. Whether that irony is malicious is another question, to which we shall return” (197, emphasis added). And again: “The dirges themselves function to announce judgment and this function gives them an ironic character. The extent and significance of this ironic character must be clarified before conclusions about the function of Revelation 18 can be reached. The images used to portray Rome and the reasons given for its impending judgment have a significant bearing on the nature of the irony involved” (200, emphases added).
simultaneously acknowledged its biting mockery. She concludes—in understated fashion—that “the desire for revenge played a role in the composition of the passage.” Thus, in the midst of a carefully detailed treatment of Revelation 18, Yarbro Collins modestly suggests that John’s subtle rhetoric serves as a kind of revenge fantasy towards Rome. She does not argue that John opposed imperialism itself.

In a highly influential essay, David Aune writes on Revelation’s imitation of imperial court rituals in chapters 4–5. The chapters open the visionary report in the book, introducing the reader to a fantastical throne room scene, rich in ceremonial detail—apparently borrowed in part from imperial imagery. While noting that others have observed Revelation’s “antithesis of Satan and Caesar to God and the Lamb,” Aune argues that “the subtlety and deftness of John’s literary design has not always been sufficiently appreciated.” More specifically, Aune argues, “John’s description of the heavenly ceremonial practiced in the throne room of God bears such a striking resemblance to the ceremonial of the imperial court and cult that the latter can only be a parody of the former.” Thus, like Yarbro Collins, Aune sees John’s rhetorical subtlety in parodies of Roman practices, clearly moving beyond the concept of the antithetical “satanic parody” within the book. Both Yarbro Collins and Aune influenced a number of commentators to explore the possibilities of “parody” and “irony” in this vein, not merely as an internal literary

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326 Her interlocutors who do something along these lines include Paul Minear, Robert Mounce, Hanns Lilje, and M. Kiddle and M. K. Ross.

327 Yarbro Collins, “Revelation 18: Taunt-song or Dirge?,” 185, 204.


329 Aune, “Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial,” 99.

330 Aune, “Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial,” 99–100. Emphasis mine. This particular statement is widely quoted.
technique, but a rhetorical strategy that positioned John vis-à-vis the Roman Empire. Both essays are well-documented, cautious in their conclusions, and stop short of assuming a broad condemnation of imperialism in Revelation.

Harry O. Maier’s work marks a transition in Revelation scholarship on this theme, significantly expanding the potency of parody and irony as analytical categories, which are now directly aimed at something called “empire.”331 For Maier, who is explicitly interested in the liberal theological implications of interpretation, Revelation’s “parody and irony may help Christian communities feel less at home in the American Rome.”332 Situating the use of parody and irony in Revelation scholarship, Maier delineates between those who “discover John cracking a smile” (Aune, Laws, and Boring), while others “return it with a scowl” (Pippin, Shüssler Fiorenza, Royalty, and Moore).333 Discussing the challenges of parody, which Maier characterizes as “the poor cousin of its wealthy relation, irony,”334 he points to the difficulty in parsing between parody and counter-parody in the book: “Where does John stop joking around

331 As Friesen describes in “Apocalypse and Empire,” a major shift had occurred in the use of “empire” as a category between the Yarbro Collins and Aune pieces and the publication of Maier’s volume. Friesen attributes the initial move in this direction to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who compares the kingdom of God to the Roman Empire by calling it an “anti-kingdom to the Roman Empire” (The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment, 76). For Friesen, “These comparisons imply a comparative category ‘empire’ that undergirds the analysis, a category that would later become overt in the secondary literature” (166). About Leonard Thompson’s book, Friesen notes that it is “the first study in which empire was important enough to appear in the title” (ibid.). He notes a transition from scholarship in the 1980s to the 1990s, as the idea of an actual Domitianic persecution had fallen out of favor for Revelation’s social setting: “This required a different explanation for the hostility of John’s Apocalypse toward its imperial setting, which coincided with the emergence of empire as a contested category in the study of John’s apocalypse” (167). Indeed, interest in relating Revelation to “empire” exploded in the 1990s, as it began to also take hold in a variety of other fields as well.


333 Ibid., 166.

334 Ibid., 169.
and get serious?"  

Maier’s solution to this foggy scenario is to double down on irony, setting John up as a thoroughgoing “ironist.”

Calling upon a cornucopia of ironic forms, Maier seeks to underscore the “incongruities” of John’s text. For Maier, John uses irony first to offer subversive critique to his opponents (i.e., by naming them Balaam and Jezebel), then to dramatically expose his ironic predicament through his theatrical narrative, and finally “to offer a sharp critique of Roman imperial might and authority.” The ironic types Maier uses for these developments in Revelation move from “assailing irony” to “dramatized irony” to “irony demystifying”/“irony oppositional” (Rev. 12–13; 17–18). Maier thus utilizes a variety of understandings of “verbal irony” (simple literary device) in order to bolster his argument that Revelation constitutes a “situational irony” (thoroughgoing ironic strategy). According to Maier, John uses his decrees to the seven churches to frame the dramatic situation of the work as fundamentally ironic. Furthermore, as an “ironist,” Maier sees John himself as “detached” from his “ironized subject so as to explore its incongruities.” As a detached ironist, John plays the “buffoon” when he falls prostrate before God’s angel, in “an ironizing burlesque performance of idolatry.” Maier thus seeks to maximize the possibilities of “irony” in his interpretative attempts with the Apocalypse.

335 Ibid., 168.
336 Maier appears to use “incongruity” to mean: things that are not the way you might think they would be.
337 Ibid., 179.
338 Ibid., 173, 176, 178, 179.
339 Ibid., 169.
340 Ibid., 176.
Indeed, Revelation does present several incongruities, particularly as featured in John’s messages to the churches. John uses paradox to affirm the church at Smyrna, offering that Christ knows their “affliction and poverty, even though you are rich” (2:9 NRSV). Most other such uses criticize the recipients, for example, as with the church at Sardis, whose members have a reputation for “being alive,” but they are “dead” (3:1). In a reversal of the statement made of Smyrna, the Laodiceans claim they are rich, but are, in fact, “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:17 NRSV). John condemns some competing groups with similar incongruous language: namely, “those who say that they are Jews and are not” (2:9; 3:9). Most fundamentally, though, is the nature of “conquering” in these messages. John’s Christ (the “firstborn of the dead,” 1:5) announces, “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). Those who endure the present afflictions will reign with Christ in the coming kingdom.

However, interpreters have long pointed out such incongruities as simple paradoxes or literary parodies. Maier pushes the category of “irony” in a new direction in order to serve explicitly stated ideological needs. For Maier, irony is a tool of subversion or inversion. He admits that John both “rehearses and subverts . . . contemporary politics and theology.” But his rehearsal merely serves subversive ends as “[h]is parodies accept the structural logic of the religio-political world he inherits, only to turn that world inside out.”341 When John accepts this inherited world, such acceptance is “straightforward.” His subversive intentions, however, are enacted “more subtly and parodically.”342 The target of John’s subversion is twofold:

341 Ibid., 186.
342 Ibid. Though there are many differences between Maier’s ambitious account and the careful work of Yarbro Collins and Aune, we can recall here the common appeal to “subtlety” in John’s ironic or parodic rhetorical endeavors.
“theological notions of power and force inherited from Judaism” and “imperial notions of military power and triumph.”  

As I have noted in the first chapter, the trend towards anti-imperial readings of New Testament texts has often sought to fill the void of anti-Jewish readings of the New Testament. In his work on the irony of Revelation, however, Maier pursues both strategies by setting the book apart from both Judaism and empire. He sets John over against “theological notions” of “Judaism” that John “inherits” but “inverts.” He thus creates what some might call a supercessionist reading of the Apocalypse—distinguishing between John (the heroic radical) and the notions of Judaism, which John improves. Maier summarizes John’s use of Judaism in this way:

Revelation uniquely replays a violent Older Testament or more apocalyptic messianic motif of conquering divine warrior by inverting it with its references to the blood of the suffering Lamb and the sword of Jesus’ faithful testimony to death. Through ironic inversion and parody (conquering through defeat; slaying through testifying/dying), John turns the theological world he inherited inside out and initiates the most destabilizing of apocalyptic applications.

For Maier, John’s “unique” apocalypse borrows the violent rhetoric of earlier Jewish motifs, but destabilizes such constructions to the extent that they become nonviolent.

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343 Ibid., 189.

344 Ibid.

345 Maier’s use of “Judaism” in this way is striking when one considers the subsequent work of scholars such as John Marshall, who summarizes his argument in “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” pages 17–32 in A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (Bloomsbury, 2010). He argues “that the Book of Revelation is properly understood as a Jewish text. By this I mean a text that is a part of a Judaism that does not conceive itself as Christian and that cannot be understood as Christian within a polythetic and historical-critical understanding of the phenomenon of religion. John’s ethnic map is a Jewish map—a world of Jews and Gentiles—and his own name locates him in the Jewish territory of that map (Rev. 7.1-10; 10.11; 11.9; 17.15). His ideals of calendar and worship and his idealization of the heavenly Temple of the God of Israel situate him within Second Temple Judaism. So do his commitments to the ‘commandments of God’ (Rev. 12.17; 14.12). His care for purity is evident . . . John’s mythological heritage is that of the Hebrew Bible inflected by the wide experiences of Jews living in the Greco-Roman world. All of this takes place in a time when ‘Christian’ is not an identity articulated as such. John and his audience see themselves as Jews through and through (cf. Rev. 2.9; 3.9) who keep the commandments, who are drawn from Israel, and whose destiny is God’s Holy City. Reading Revelation as Jewish and as in Roman colonial context is a basic responsibility of
Though John’s Christ returns with a sword in his mouth “with which to strike down the nations” (19:15), Maier suggests the sword represents a self-sacrificial testimony and thus inverts a violent image with nonviolence. It remains unclear, however, how one might read nonviolence out of Christ’s striking down the nations with this sword, ruling them with an iron rod, and “tread[ing] the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” (19:15). Indeed, the latter elements constitute the “inherited” imagery with which John works in a “straightforward” manner. For Maier, the nonviolent testimony provides the ironic key to unlocking John’s subtle subversion here—a small clue that overrides the obvious violent imagery of the passage. To be sure, when it comes to the concept of victory in the book of Revelation, John deploys imagery that one might consider surprising, incongruous, or paradoxical. Jesus did not conquer any territories or crush any earthly enemies during his short life and neither, apparently, has John. Indeed, not wielding obvious authority and power, John claims such power with rhetorical tools fit for the task. To suggest that John’s vision of power and might is historical and critical reading” (21). For Marshall’s full argument, see his Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001). Indeed, as David Frankfurter notes, “It is important to recognize that nowhere in this text does John juxtapose himself to Judaism or Jewish traditions” (“The Revelation to John,” in The Jewish Annotated New Testament, ed. by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Z. Brettler [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 469) and “John is not only Jewish but Jewish in a sectarian, rigorous sense. His visions of the heavenly Christ and his Jesus devotion seem indeed to be extensions, or consequences, of his Jewish hyperpurity” (“Jews or Not? Reconstructing the ‘Other’ in Rev 2:9 and 3:9,” Harvard Theological Review 94 [2001]: 412). In the end, Frankfurter’s articulation of this argumentation is more compelling, as Marshall seems to lean too heavily on essentializing “Judaism” and integrates this into an “anti-imperial” reading of Revelation—the kind that I am trying to counter here. Nevertheless, the preponderance of evidence for how we might fit Revelation into the category of “Jewish” far outweighs the evidence for identifying him as “Christian.” To set Revelation up against “Judaism” in such stark terms as Maier does here displays his own interest in promoting a present-day form of Christianity, one that speaks against present-day imperialism.

fundamentally “parodic” because he utilizes a lamb as victor and a sword in the mouth, however, leans too hard on John’s putative “subtlety.”

Maier’s irony-based approach to Revelation finds echoes in other areas of biblical interpretation, such as in Carolyn Sharp’s *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*.347 Taking a similar approach to the rhetorical subtlety of biblical authors as Maier, Sharp suggests that “Scripture” challenges “everything—through over-earnest assertions, hyperbolic characterizations, subtle understatements, sardonic observations, and unreliable narrators.”348 Taking an explicitly theological move, Sharp argues that when one pursues the ironies of “sacred biblical texts,” one enters “inquiry into God’s way of framing the dilemma of mortal existence.”349 Indeed, she claims, “God has made us for irony,” which serves as “a fundamental texture of human existence.”350 From this theological position, Sharp targets huge swaths of the Hebrew Bible for ironic reading.

Sharp’s Bible uses irony to promote subversive messages from the margins, critiquing narratives of power and xenophobia. Sharp’s reading of Esther is instructive for the current discussion. Sharp argues that the book of Esther “fatally ironizes Esther’s Jewishness.”351 Picking up on other interpreters who find the book as excessive and burlesque farce, Sharp views the disturbingly violent ending to Esther as ironic in its excess. The story does not merely end at

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348 Sharp, 42.

349 Ibid.

350 Ibid.

351 Ibid., 67.
Queen Esther’s vindicated efforts to save the Jews from Haman’s genocidal plot to eliminate them in Persia. Not only does Haman hang on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai, but the Jews take violent revenge on all of their enemies, five hundred in Susa and seventy-five thousand in the provinces. That the Jews slaughter their enemies, much in the way that they were about to be slaughtered, has indeed raised many complicated issues for this text’s interpreters—particularly with the history surrounding the modern state of Israel. Sharp offers a solution to this interpretative problem: irony.

Sharp attempts to “tease out the deeper dimension of ironic signification” in the story of Esther, finding significance in its affinity for strategic excess.\footnote{Ibid., 71.} She notes: “Excess abounds in this story not just as a droll texture to an amusing tale but as a serious matter of profligacy, overzealousness, and misuse of power.”\footnote{Ibid., 74.} Such excess is “not intended to be valorized.”\footnote{Ibid.} Thus, as we see ambiguity even in the Jewish characters of the story, we find characters compromised by their closeness to power. For Sharp, the tale of Esther thoroughly ironizes multiple subjects, pushing the audience to reflect on the complicated consequences of assimilation. Reflecting on the comic nature of the annihilation of the Persian enemies, Sharp constructs a complex web of ironic intentions for the book:

The celebratory laughter of Esther is a laughter of ironic mockery that aims in a number of different directions: at the Persians, who have been shown to be less than powerful; at the Jews, whose cowering in fear at the prospect of their own annihilation has been transformed by a simple edict into a merciless killing spree twice as long as the original edict specified; at the implied audience, whose expectations have been reversed again and again by the plot turns of this book.\footnote{Ibid., 79.}
Sharp’s treatment of Esther, then, allows for a degree of nuance within her sacred scripture—the book functions as a subversive critique of imperial excess, but also as an internal warning to Jews facing difficult cultural decisions in exile. The book of Esther itself does not face Sharp’s interrogation, but rather acts as a means by which Sharp can communicate a liberal theology that valorizes not excess but ambiguity and social justice.

Sharp’s project—as it claims some fundamental ironic perspective pervading the Hebrew Bible—extends far beyond the scope of Maier’s book, but both signal a similar attempt to control the data of scripture for liberal theological ends. The challenges of apparently violent and misogynistic rhetoric within sacred scripture are neutralized through subversive and subtle ironic strategies. Thus, Sharp and Maier utilizes similar approaches in molding biblical texts to fit liberationist sensibilities. However, if Sharp’s argument were correct—if any interpretation of a text can be “correct”—it would undercut Maier’s argument about John’s inversion of a violent Judaism from the “Older Testament.” For, indeed, John would thus be ironizing texts that are already rooted within irony themselves. Revelation would then participate in an ironic legacy rather than invert a violent one. This observation underscores the problematic webs we enter when we suggest that any text embodies subversion, because the target of subversion is too often simplistically essentialized.

Maier participates in an ironizing interpretative strategy, therefore, that has found many other targets. His sustained and forceful analysis in the context of Revelation scholarship, however, has required other scholars to respond to this strategy in their own adjudications of the Apocalypse. As a scholar who shares an anti-imperial reading of Revelation, Steven Friesen naturally picks up on Maier’s work in his own. For Friesen, Maier offers a helpful corrective to Royalty, who “has underestimated the way that Revelation transforms the symbols in its
narrative through irony and parody.”356 When engaging the substance of Revelation, however, Friesen would like to offer an “even more precise” reading of chapters 2–3.357 He suggests that, while the messages found in these chapters are “certainly ironic,” he finds “sarcasm” a more fitting category. One of Friesen’s reasons for making this distinction is important: “the recognition of sarcasm in the text tends to undermine efforts to exonerate Revelation and its author. The author blended sarcasm and satire into a volatile form of vilification that I will not defend.”358 While Maier primarily targets subtly deployed situational irony, Friesen notes that John’s comments in the opening messages are anything but subtle. Therefore, Friesen does not simply clarify, but corrects Maier on this point.359 Maier’s approach does indeed appear designed to exonerate Revelation with subtle irony for the common cause of subverting empire.

Greg Carey similarly seeks to find a middle ground in which John is not exonerated from his violent rhetoric, while also trumpeting its role as a subversive text.360 In Carey’s sophisticated essay, “Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation,” he situates the work within a complicated rhetorical framework, calling upon both modern theorists (James Scott) and ancient rhetorical norms. Carey categorizes Revelation as resistance literature, which violates rhetorical propriety by parodying imperial subjects as base images (e.g., beast, whore)—comparable to the


359 Friesen notes that he sides with those who find sarcasm to be a form of irony, “for without some ironic dimension a denunciation is simply abusive” (“Sarcasm,” 131).

low-brow comedies of Demetrius. Recognizing the disruptive nature of “parody and satire” in Revelation, he emphasizes that John necessarily reinscribes the problematic “trappings of Roman glory” as an imperial vision for Christ and his followers.\(^{361}\) Seeking a balanced position between celebration and condemnation, Carey claims that categorizing Revelation as “resistance literature . . . does not necessarily guarantee an assessment that the book is ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘liberating’ or ‘oppressive,’ to particular degrees.”\(^{362}\) Carey argues that “Revelation’s moral ambiguities in large part emerge from its identity as a subversive vision.”\(^{363}\) For Carey, the work is primarily an example of “resistance literature” and the undesirable “moral ambiguities” of Revelation are “symptoms of resistance.” Such efforts at balance are laudable; though, the perceived problem remains unsolved.

The problem of Revelation for liberal Christian scholars such as Carey—who teaches at the mainline Lancaster Theological Seminary—is the desire to read the text in a liberationist manner, while also dealing with the disturbing violence of the text itself. Maier sees irony as the key to resolving the dilemma, basically exonerating Revelation in his attempts to subvert empire and invert narratives of power inherited from “Judaism.” Friesen agrees that irony functions within the work, but seeks further precision and does not attempt to resolve the tension. Carey’s approach seeks balance by acknowledging the distasteful elements of the book as a natural outgrowth of “its identity as a subversive vision.” Carey’s attempt seeks to hold on to an essentially anti-empire reading of the text, grouping it together with a generalized literary

\(^{361}\) Carey, 179.

\(^{362}\) Carey, 173.

\(^{363}\) Ibid.
category of “resistance literature.” This move, however, does not escape the binary that drives these many interpretations of Revelation: should the book be celebrated or condemned?

For liberal Christian readers, “resistance literature” is largely a celebratory category. The “symptom” metaphor, then, raises more questions than it solves. A symptom signifies or gives evidence for a disease. The metaphorical “disease” in this instance, however, is not “resistance” but “empire.” Rather, resistance here more resembles a pharmaceutical intervention than the disease itself. The “resistance” drug may cause unfortunate “side effects” (e.g., authoritarianism, violence, misogyny), which ironically imitate the symptoms of the very disease it seeks to treat (empire). The metaphor of “symptoms” (or even “side effects”) cannot escape a value judgment about the primary task of Revelation vis-à-vis empire. Carey briefly acknowledges that the metaphor is not neutral in his conclusion, but does not fully discuss the implications of this language.364 In the end, the metaphor allows the liberal Christian reader to dismiss the “symptoms” and move to the salient task of celebrating its “resistance,” as seen in its destabilizing parody and satire.365

By calling upon James Scott, Carey models a broad approach pursued by a number of postcolonial biblical scholars, who have also grappled with such themes in Revelation. In his creative and ambitious book, From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths, David A. Sánchez highlights the uses of mimicry and hybridity (Homi Bhabha) as dominated peoples

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364 Carey notes, “Thus far, I have invoked the language of ‘symptoms’ in a neutral sense: these discursive signs are indeed common among resistance literatures. Yet this choice of words is not accidental, for the motivation to resist reflects actual human suffering resulting from alienation, poverty, domination, humiliation, persecution, or some other cause. Even if a given resistance discourse amplifies such injustices, the resulting disorders are no less real” (Carey, “Symptoms,” 180).

365 We should note, however, that Carey does not cite Maier on this point and his discussion of such categories is relatively brief.
attempt to subvert their colonizers. For his expansive analysis, Sánchez targets the appropriation of imperial myths by dominated peoples in Revelation 12, representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe in seventeenth-century Mexico, and contemporary Chicana/o use of the Virgin to counter American narratives of Manifest Destiny. Though Sánchez accepts the careful work of Harland and others that Jewish communities in the first-century felt largely at home in the empire, he amplifies what Harland views as exceptions of sporadic hostilities between the Jews and Roman imperial authorities. Sánchez’s reading does not require “continual, explicit sectarian mentality” among early Jews and Christians, because his analysis needs only one author’s subversion of “Roman domination and Gentile practices” by mimicking the empire’s powerful “Dragon Slayer Myth.” Sánchez’s emphasis on mimicry in this process functions largely as we have seen “irony” and “parody” functioning for other scholars. While Sánchez’s book overall presents a fascinating study of how dominated peoples negotiate their social situations through complex discursive strategies, his reading of Revelation 12 remains a problematic application of postcolonial concepts.

To return to one of the most sophisticated voices in scholarship targeting Revelation and “empire,” Stephen Moore slightly adjusts his work from the 1990s (before Maier) in an essay

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366 David A. Sánchez, From Patmos to the Barrio (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2008), 31.

367 Indeed, Sánchez calls upon a definition of mimicry that includes a statement regarding parody: “This is because mimicry is never far from mockery, since it can appear to parody [distort, ridicule, satirize] whatever it mimics” (8). The bracketed clarifying words here are in the original as addendums from his quoted source, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts (New York: Routledge, 2000), 193. Rohun Park is another scholar using a postcolonial approach to highlight ironic challenges to Roman imperial power (“Revelation for Sale: An Intercultural Reading of Revelation 18 from an East Asian Perspective,” The Bible and Critical Theory 4 [2011]). Following Yarbro Collins, Park sees Revelation 18 as a “parody” relevant to the subversive cause of the colonized, particularly in contemporary East Asia. For Park, it represents “a call not only to separate oneself from, but also to stand over and against, the economics that have long supported the empire” (25.8). Park’s theologically-rooted liberationist reading of Revelation 18 is clear throughout, including the final statement of the article, “Revelation 18 is an excellent example of why imperialism is not immutable and also why it fails to endure the judgment of God” (25.10).
published in his 2006 book, *Empire and Apocalypse* (after Maier). In this later essay, Moore also explores the possible dimensions of Bhabha-defined mimicry in Revelation. Moore acknowledges the existence of a variety of parallels between the literary devices in Revelation and Roman imperial practices of some kind, which have been increasingly emphasized by Revelation scholars. For Moore, the matter at hand is not whether such parallels truly exist, but rather how we categorize such parallels. He invokes “parody” as the appropriate category, imagined as “catechresis” and “defined . . . as an act or practice of strategic misrepresentation.” For catechresis, Moore calls upon Gayatri Spivak:

Originally a classical Greek term denoting ‘misuse’ or ‘misapplication’, catachresis has been revived and adapted by Gayatri Spivak, as noted earlier, to designate a process whereby the victims of colonialism or imperialism strategically recycle and redeploy facets of colonial or imperial culture or propaganda. Catachresis, in this sense, is a practice of resistance through an act of creative appropriation, a retooling of the rhetorical or institutional instruments of imperial oppression that turns those instruments back against their official owners. Catachresis is thus also an act of counter-appropriation: it counters the appropriative incursions of imperialist discourse—its institutional accouterments, its representational modes, its ideological forms, its propagandistic ploys—by redirecting and thereby deflecting them.

As we have seen in the introductory chapter, such language of counter-appropriation is a common narrative in postcolonial work. Moore’s assessment, however, is less celebratory of such subversion.

For Moore, parody “topples over into mimicry.” John’s parodic strategy “mimics in order to mock,” but nevertheless replicates the imperial order within his vision. Moore notes that “the ‘heavenly’ order in Revelation is busily engaged in imitating or mimicking the ‘earthly’

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369 Ibid., 106.

370 Ibid., 105–6.

371 Ibid., 108 n. 21.
order, notwithstanding the book’s own implicit charge that the earthly is merely a counterfeit copy of the heavenly.” In the end, for Moore, “if the Roman imperial order is the ultimate object of imitation in Revelation, then, in accordance with the book’s own implicit logic, it remains the ultimate authority, despite the book’s explicit attempts to unseat it.” In this simple observation, Moore pulls the rug out from under many discussions on “parody” as antithesis, imitation, and even subversion. Moore implicitly suggests that John’s strategy does indeed attempt parodic subversion, but is unsuccessful. Thus, Moore does not attempt to invalidate the category of parody, but rather unveils the problems that face those interpreters who would choose to champion the text. Moore, then, succeeds in his critique of scholars leaning on the categories of “parody” and “irony” to interpret Revelation. This critique, however, is unlikely to move his interlocutors, who can simply disagree with the success of John’s subversive irony.

More recently, David Barr—one of the most important voices in Revelation scholarship—pushed forward the “irony” reading of Revelation in its most forceful and condensed form. Barr’s essay, “John’s Ironic Empire,” appears in a journal published by a seminary of the mainline Presbyterian Church (USA) and aimed at providing “pastors, scholars, and theologians a valuable resource for study, preaching, and teaching.” Fit to this task, his piece synthesizes several insights on the anti-imperial reading of Revelation, seeking to solve the dilemma of the book’s contradictions identified by Royalty, Frilingos, and Moore. Targeting especially Moore’s suggestion that John simply established another problematic empire, Barr

372 Ibid., 112.
373 Ibid., 113.
makes the liberal Christian’s solution to these dilemmas clear: irony. Similar to other approaches, Barr contrasts a “face value” or “literal reading” of Revelation with “an ironic reading” of the book.376 The ironic reading, Barr suggests, emphasizes Jesus’ identity as “a lion known as a slaughtered lamb” and the theme that conquest comes from sacrifice. Barr borrows from Adela Yarbro Collins’ reading of Revelation 18, framing the critique much more strongly than Yarbro Collins herself does. Of chapter seventeen’s whore of Babylon, Barr characterizes John’s critique here in Marxist terms, suggesting that John was attacking both the “substructure” (economy) and “superstructure” (ideology) of the Roman Empire.377 Indeed, ironic challenges to empire so pervade Revelation, Barr argues, that “John’s Apocalypse is not simply a work that contains irony; it is written in an ironic mode wherein most things are not as they seem.”378 Thus, if the book appears to imitate the “Roman imperial system,” an ironic reading helps us see that John actually “makes a burlesque of it, a parody, a radical inversion of roles and power.”379 Barr concludes by noting that readers of Revelation who do not notice “its pervasive irony” are bound to find contradictions. However, such contradictions should inspire interpreters “to seek other perspectives.”380 Thus, interpreters such as Royalty, Frilingos, and Moore, are simply ignorant of this ironic reading, which would resolve all the dilemmas they propose.381

376 Barr, “John’s Ironic Empire,” 26, 30.
377 Ibid., 25.
378 Ibid., 28. Emphasis mine
379 Ibid., 30.
380 Ibid., 30.
381 Barr does not acknowledge the fact that Moore spends a great deal of time discussing “parody.”
The common thread through most of these “ironic readings” of Revelation is a tendency to essentialize “empire” as a static entity—a problem highlighted in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Slight complications are offered by Moore, Carey, and Sánchez, and a discussion by Barr that highlights the non-coercive attractiveness of empire that sounds like the arguments of Clifford Ando.382 The problem with a liberationist’s reading of Revelation is not that there are “contradictions” within the text, but rather that the book is framed within a false binary: empire vs. anti-empire, colonizer vs. colonized. Interpreting Revelation as a model of “resistance”—even if complicated or “ironic”—fails to contextualize the work within the cultural dynamism of ancient Mediterranean society. Frilingos and Royalty demonstrate some of the ways in which Revelation participates in cultural discourse, but their critiques have fallen on deaf ears by those who would hold the book up as a blueprint for nonviolent, anti-imperial resistance.

Revelation and the Satirists

It helps here to look to those in the ancient world who self-reflectively model parody, irony, and satire in their writings: the Roman satirists. A comparative look at Roman satirists provides opportunity to explore the discursive strategies of irony at other levels of society. Though profound differences exist between Roman satire and the literary features of Revelation, scholars of the Roman satiric tradition have faced many of the same problems we face interpreting John’s Apocalypse. The major Roman satirists (e.g., Lucilius, Horace, Persius, Juvenal) also sought to negotiate their positions in Roman society and navigate cultural ideals. Such negotiations take place on the grounds of origin and influence, as well as what constitutes ideal Romanness. Seeking to distance Roman literature from Greek influences, and highlighting

such issues of identification, Quintilian describes verse satire as “wholly our own” (10.1.93). Horace, on the other hand, claims that Lucilius “depends entirely” on old Greek comedy (Sat. 1.4.6). The character and tone of their satiric barbs vary considerably, from piercing and reckless (Lucilius, Juvenal) to cautious and vague (Horace), attributable to the varied circumstances of these authors. Thus, both early Christ-confessing texts like Revelation and those of Roman satire manage to host complex cultural negotiations. However, this comparative exercise is only useful insofar as we see these negotiations in their complexity and not as a way of absolving a canonical biblical text of its violent and misogynistic language. Romanists have also contended in their own way with return-to-origins narratives, as “Greco-Roman” culture is seen as the foundation for Western civilization.

With its thematic parallels, I highlight here the concilium deorum (council of the gods) tradition within Roman satirical works in order to explore common negotiations that find relevance in the study of Revelation’s discursive strategies. In these works, we find heavenly ascents used as literary weapons of attack and mockery towards varying ends. The concilium of the gods does not always explicitly mimic any one particular council (e.g., the emperor’s council or concilium principis), but functions as a way to imagine divine debates over proper judgment of particular individuals. While the tone and style of such writings differ greatly from Revelation, these texts do include otherworldly journeys and the unveiling of divine judgments. Chronologically, the closest extant example of the concilium deorum motif to the Book of Revelation is perhaps Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis. In order to explore just how we might consider Seneca’s comparative value here, however, requires us to excavate the divine council as a literary tradition in ancient satire.
Turning to the *earliest* extant example in the early third century BCE, Ennius’ *Annals* includes a council of the gods debating the status of Romulus among them. The extant sources are fragmentary, but a debate over the inclusion of Romulus among the gods appears to reach back into the origins of Rome in order to project an essence of what it means to be Roman. For Ennius, often considered the founder of satire, Romulus’ apotheosis marks a fascinating operationalizing of the Hercules’ deification.\(^{383}\) Unfortunately, due to its fragmentary nature, Ennius offers us limited use for discourse analysis, except to situate those who came after him.\(^{384}\) Lucilius’ *Council of the Gods* affords us better opportunities to historicize the deployment of this motif. Likely inspired by Ennius, Lucilius (late 2nd century BCE) is also fragmentary but nevertheless includes an intact divine council scene. In this scene, L. Cornelius Lentulus Lupus finds himself judged for his decadence and corruption as a judge. In life, Lupus was convicted for corruption but shortly thereafter was elected to the esteemed position of censor. He took this position just a year after the death of his harshest critic, Cato the Elder. Traditional classicist readings see Lucilius here as an apologist for his friend and Lupus critic, Scipio Aemilianus.

Going beyond this specific political reading, Catherine Connors unpacks the cultural discourse at play still further, suggesting broader societal interests in the work—namely, proposals to redistribute public lands from the elite aristocracy to veterans and the urban poor. Lucilius pins such reforms, in Connors’ view, on “the foibles of a single wealthy individual [that

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\(^{383}\) On Hercules as a model for the deification of Romulus, see, e.g., Marko Marinčič, “Roman Archaeology in Vergil’s Arcadia (Vergil *Eclogue* 4; *Aeneid* 8; Livy 1.7),” in *Clio and the Poets: Augustan Poetry and the Traditions of Ancient Historiography*, ed. by David S. Levene and Damien P. Nelis (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 155.

\(^{384}\) On the use of Romulus in Ennius, Nora Goldschmidt notes, “It is possible that Ennius was responsible for inventing the legend of Romulus’ apotheosis” (*Shaggy Crowns: Ennius’ Annales and Virgil’s Aeneid* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013], 23).
is, Lupus] of luxurious tastes and corrupt judicial practices.” Lucilius’ effort, then, even if representing the *libertas* of forceful satiric rhetoric, nevertheless reinforces a conservative status quo benefiting the wealthy elite. All the while, Lucilius “participates in contemporary discourse about how much Greek culture is too much for Roman identity to withstand.” Such an influx of Greek culture, Kirk Freudenburg notes, is a direct result of Roman conquest and the wealth that such conquest brought. Using his cast of characters as historical avatars, Lucilius’ Romulus becomes the cultural representative of the Roman past, reinforcing these cultural priorities. Freudenburg also argues that Romulus actually becomes a proxy for “not just any old crank but a very particular one: he is the Elder Cato.” This Cato-like Romulus turns his critique toward “a transparent stand-in for Appius Claudius Pulcher (suffect consul in 130 BCE), an effete and luxury-indulging philhellene who, under the guise of Apollo, speaks in Lupus’ defense.” The council itself takes the form of a senate debate between these two representatives for their cultural priorities. Heaven mirrors social realities in order to judge those social realities. We see such themes magnified still further as we turn our eyes to Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*.

With its chronological proximity to Revelation, and its participation in these divine council motifs—perhaps the closest we have to a literary parallel between satire and the book of

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386 Connors, 128.


388 Freudenburg, “Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*,” 100.

389 Ibid.
Revelation—the *Apocolocyntosis* offers a particularly instructive point of comparison. While both offer a glimpse into the heavenly realm, depict divine judgment, and comment on social practices and ideals, the tone and style of each differ wildly. From the very beginning, the *Apocolocyntosis* audience understands that this scenario is clear comic mockery. We have no such indication in Revelation. *Apocolocyntosis* is a Menippean satire; our only complete extant example of this genre that itself plays with the conventions of genre.\(^{390}\) Menippean satire gets its name from the fragments of Menippus preserved in Varro, in which verse and prose work together. As Joel Relihan writes,

> The essence of Menippean satire is an otherworldly fantasy in which a naive experimenter travels to an impossible realm in order to learn that the truth is not to be found at the edges of the world but at home and under one’s own feet. . . . The mixture of prose and verse which is so obviously a part of Varro, Seneca, and Petronius must be read as a provocative crossing of generic boundaries and as a stylistic impropriety, for the author who writes in such an incoherent way invites us to challenge the claim to authority which is inherent in the act of writing itself.\(^{391}\)

Menippean satire is then an otherworldly wakeup call for contemporary social and cultural concerns. Lucilius is pointed to as the earliest representation of Roman verse satire, though Ennius is clearly a forebear, marking the transition from various Greek genres into a new Latin form. Thus, while Seneca obviously draws from Ennius and Lucilius—even quoting Lucilius directly—he nevertheless frames *Apocolocyntosis* in the chaotic style of Menippean satire.

Written in the immediate aftermath of the death of Claudius, *Apocolocyntosis* was probably intended as a performance just months later for the Saturnalia of 54 CE.\(^{392}\) The piece

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390 Another piece that bridges these traditions: Icaromenippus.
displays Seneca’s “accumulated resentment” at Claudius, having been exiled during his reign. In it, Seneca positions himself against Agrippina (Claudius’ wife and Nero’s mother) and as Nero’s sage. Our understanding of Revelation’s particular setting is far more speculative. The linguistic echo of the title—ἀποκολοκύντωσις—with the John’s ἀποκάλυψις is intriguing, if likely only coincidental. Perhaps a case could be made that the two titles perform a similar parodic function with regard to apotheosis.393 John finds himself relegated to an island, as was Seneca during the reign of Claudius. John went to Patmos, while Seneca went to Corsica. Evidence suggests that such island relegation was a punishment reserved for those of higher social standing—though some have argued this does not apply to John.394 Both works include an ascent to heavens and a judgment scene. Both works play with their literary forebears. In Revelation, we see imagery and

393 See Eden, 1.

394 Scholars have speculated over what we can know about John’s placement on Patmos. In his classic commentary, David Aune outlines four possibilities for John’s exiled status: “(1) He may have been condemned to death and gone into voluntary exile to a place of his own choosing. (2) He may have been condemned to deportatio, involving permanent banishment to a particular place and loss of all rights (including Roman citizenship) and property. . . . (3) He may have been temporarily or permanently banished to a particular place, i.e., relegatio in insulam or relegatio ad insulam, ‘banishment to an island,’ a punishment that did not normally involve forfeiture of Roman citizenship or property. . . . (4) Finally, he may have been temporarily or permanently banished from his home territory, i.e., relegatio ab. In such cases the governor would customarily make this pronouncement” (79). Though not making an firm argument for John as wealthy, Aune reasons that scholars have dismissed the possibility of John’s higher status “too quickly” (80). More recently, Brian Mark Rapske reviews the exilic possibilities in more detail but does not come to a definitive conclusion. Rapske surmises that not all island exiles denoted high status, though the vast majority of “capital exile” examples are of Roman elites. Rapske underscores the fact that a non-capital relegatio sentence could apply to “enemies of order” who may be lower in social rank, but “normally” either of these exile punishments were reserved for criminals of higher status (319). Rapske speculates that Patmos would not have been quite as bad a banishment as Gyarus or Donusa, but would nevertheless suggest that one did not have, e.g., a “powerful intervener.” He suggests that it is “perhaps more likely” that John is one of the minority who are relegated to an island while also having “lower status” (332). Leonard Thompson believes that the evidence suggests that John was not actually banished to the island, but simply in residence there. He notes, “Being banished to an island was punishment given to the upper classes in lieu of being sent to work in quarries or mines, or being killed. John did not belong to that group” (33). He does not cite evidence here to demonstrate that John did not belong to that group. Craig Koester, alternatively, notes the possibility that John could have belonged to a higher status (Aune), but prefers as “more likely” that this was simply a lenient sentence based upon a particular official’s perception of John’s crime. It is not entirely clear why these scholars prefer readings that keep John—who clearly has received some level of scribal training—in a lower status even with his apparent exile sentence, though it does reinforce views that see John as a marginalized and oppressed minority.
themes borrowed from Daniel (e.g., Daniel 7 as background to Rev. 4-5; Daniel 2 in Rev. 1:1, 19; 4:1; 22:6). Seneca is perhaps more obviously playful in his references to Homer, etc.

*Apocolocyntosis* describes how the narrator came by the information, revealed to him by a kind of comic messenger. The narrator claims his account to be “the authentic truth” (1.1) and notes that he does not have to answer any questions about the reliability of his account if he does not feel like it.395 “Who is going to compel me?” (1.1). Finally, he reveals that he retrieved this information from a man who functions as the “superintendent of the Appian Way” (1.2), which is the way that deified humans go to join the gods. After Claudius’ death, he appeared on this way, walking “with unequal steps” (1.2)—limping to heaven, as it were. To boot, we learn that his speech is confused and incomprehensible, his face unrecognizable. When Hercules goes to encounter Claudius:

Then at first sight Hercules was really shocked, like a man who had had occasion to fear monsters, but not yet all of them. When he encountered the shape of unprecedented kind, the unusual gait, the voice like that of no land-animal but typical of sea-beasts, hoarse and inarticulate, he thought that his thirteenth labour had arrived. (5.3)

Here we have the lampooned politician, depicted in monstrous if comical fashion, which may remind us of the monstrosities of Revelation. In the subsequent raucous and jab-filled senate-style debate over his deified status, however, Claudius appears to be winning the decision. It appears he will indeed become deified. But at this very moment in the debate, the deified Augustus begins to speak and the audience understands immediately that the tide will now shift away from Claudius’ favor.

Augustus casts Claudius as a murderer, taking him to task for executing without any proper evidence or judiciary procedures. Augustus jabs, “It is not so in heaven” (10.4). He warns

395 All translations of *Apocolocyntosis* from Eden.
the divine council that with Claudius deified, “nobody will believe that you are gods” (11.4). Augustus proposes for Claudius to be banished from Olympus and heaven—Seneca here finding some fictional exilic revenge against Claudius. After Augustus is finished, the council falls in line behind him immediately. Mercury throws Claudius down to the underworld. After witnessing his own funeral on his way down, Claudius finds himself in the court of the underworld, accused and ironically without an advocate. He is condemned to a newly devised punishment of futilely “playing dice using a dice-box with a hole in it. And Claudius was already beginning to chase the ever-receding dice, and was getting nowhere” (14.4). Thus, Seneca does not reach quite as far into the distant past as Ennius and Lucilius, but nevertheless appeals to Augustus as the prototype—the carrier of Roman ideals. We see that the judged individual does not meet the standard for these ideals.

With the satirical nature of the writing, readers have wondered how far the parody pushes. For instance, some have suggested that Seneca here does not simply target Claudius, but takes on the entire tradition of emperor worship. As Christopher Whitton notes, however, “It is important to locate Seneca’s joke precisely.”396 Seneca makes a mockery of Claudius’ deification, not deification in toto. He blasts the idea of literally walking to heaven, not the idea of heaven itself.397 We see this, for example, in the deified Augustus’ authority to dismiss Claudius’ possible divinity. In this speech, Seneca clearly calls upon the legitimation of heaven

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397 Whitton points to Icaromenippus for another example of this sort of embedded critique: “Lucian begins his Icaromenippus with Menippus tallying up the distance he travelled to heaven: ‘so, it was three hundred miles from the earth to the moon . . . from there up to the sun around fifteen hundred miles more . . . and then about a day’s flying for an eagle travelling light.’ Lucian’s joke, of course, lies in taking ‘heaven above’ literally: when mythology and mundanity coincide, friction is inevitable” (158).
to condemn Claudius’ version of Roman power, saying, “it is not so in heaven.” To suggest that such stories question the fundamental assumptions of their society would suggest an anachronistic projection, in which we seek to transform ancient satirists into modern-day commentators. The same applies in our discussions of Revelation; we must not assume that an ancient author’s societal critique—even a critique of society’s most powerful social actors—removes that author from her or his temporal situation.398

In this progression of satirical divine councils, there is a critique of the senate as much as the main explicit targets. Procedures and practices are targeted, they have failed to protect the interests of Romanness. In Revelation, as we have seen, John similarly targets the trappings of Roman authority, though within the literary conventions of Judean tradition. Depending on what questions we’re willing to ask about John’s social status as an exiled Judean, we might place him in a higher social status than is often suggested. If we accept that John is indeed exiled or “relegated” to Patmos as a punishment for his activities, he appears to have some sort of status. In other words, while John is certainly a long way off from the ranks of Seneca, he is nevertheless likely a person of some influence. That John would reach for the literary barbs available to him in order to lash out upon the authorities that removed him from his influence and even their cultural appetites, this is understandable.399

398 After Seneca, Juvenal took on this tradition (see Freudenberg). Other satires with an ascent to heaven and/or a council of the gods include Lucian’s Icaromenippus. Writing in Greek from the Roman province of Syria, the second-century-CE author Lucian directs his typical absurdity-exposing techniques towards the philosophers of his day. Lucian often places his critiques in fantastical, genre-bending scenarios set in the distant past. In this particular work, Lucian uses the literary conceit of a heavenly ascent to mock the absurdity of philosophical speculations of the unknowable. In the story, Menippus takes on a kind of enochic role as an ancient authority gaining special access to the divine. From this vantage point, Menippus is able to see the hypocrisy of the philosophers.

399 One might also explore the parallels of Seneca’s critique of Roman luxury elsewhere with Revelation’s cultural critique. This is beyond the scope of the current chapter.
Finally, one of the questions facing Roman satire is whether the authors are “just” putting on a persona or whether their more distasteful comments—including xenophobia and misogyny—truly represent the satirists own views. Kirk Freudenburg comments on this approach:

[W]e should recognize that persona theory has its further, hidden uses in the acts we put on as we reconsume Roman satire and “produce” it even today, one of which, perhaps the most important of all, is that of excusing satirists from their indiscretions and thereby making them into our good companions.400

Borrowing from Bakhtin, Freudenberg highlights an alternate approach, which seeks to move the study of satire:

decisively away from its fixation on the satirist as a moral agent, discrete and self-determined, to the role he played within a larger set of encoded social practices that both defined and regulated the culture to which he belonged.401

In this way, we can participate in a study of Revelation that is not unlike the sort of shift seen in the study of Roman satire. Do we wield John as a moral agent, presenting an ironic “persona” in his violence and misogyny, and thus excuse his indiscretions? Or do we, rather, seek to situate John’s discursive strategies, as Freudenberg says, “within a larger set of encoded social practices that both defined and regulated the culture to which he belonged”? For my part, I would like to see us put more effort into these sorts of strategies and less effort into making John a good companion. Comparing Revelation to satire within its setting does not make it seem more exceptional, but rather more part of the varied negotiations that happen at different levels of society already.


401 Freudenburg, “Introduction,” 27.
Conclusion

In many ways, the intervention found within this dissertation has deep roots in the scholarship of religion and biblical studies. Historical Jesus scholars from the 19th century sought distinctions between the “Christ of faith” and the “Jesus of history.” Many of these “life of Jesus” scholars felt that theological convictions too strongly colored the ways in which other scholars interpreted the historical evidence regarding Jesus. The push and pull between theology and history has long been center stage in the intellectual battles of the field. In 1966, Van A. Harvey’s classic book, *The Historian and the Believer*, targeted theologians for the fundamental contradiction he saw in their work and modern historical investigation. In the book, Harvey articulates the “ideal of critical judgment” that so threatened the basic assumptions of Christian theologians. Historians must, in Harvey’s estimation, adopt a method that is “informed by the new way of looking at the world created by the sciences.” Following this method, the laws of nature rule out a host of unverifiable events and statements that Christian theologians often take on faith. Harvey is not an absolutist in his positive view of the scientifically-informed historical task, but nevertheless fits squarely within larger discourses emphasizing the modernist project of history.

Indeed, the field of religious studies as an academic discipline was just finding its footing in the 1960s. Though Harvey taught at SMU’s Perkins School of Theology at the time he published his book, he had previously taught at Princeton, would go on to teach at University of Pennsylvania two years later and ultimately finish his career at Stanford. In the 1960s and 1970s,


403 Harvey, 66.
scholars of religion were finding ways to institutionalize a secular version of their academic field that was not beholden to the divinity schools of the past. The transition was incomplete and many universities continue to grapple with such departments. Nevertheless, several scholars were trying to carve a place out for a modern version of “religious studies”—a term that only gained traction in the 1960s. Books published in this trend include Clyde Holbrook’s *Religion, A Humanistic Field* (1963), Robert Michaelson’s *The Study of Religion in American Universities* (1965), and the edited volume, *The Study of Religion in Colleges and Universities* (1965).404 As Donald Wiebe has noted, the surge in such modernist maneuvers in this field were clearly related to the 1963 Supreme Court decision, *Abington School District v. Schempp*, which put new emphasis on the separation between church and state in public institutions.405 This took special relevance for public universities, but scholars of religion at private nonconfessional schools also participated in defenses for the position of religious studies.

The field has moved in multiple directions since these modernist discourses of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, a theologian can now critique Harvey by appealing to postmodernism, allowing theology to resurrect itself from such putatively unimaginative modern critiques.406 To be sure, the modern project of history (and “religious studies”), removed—as it claimed to be—from commitments of faith feels very much incomplete in retrospect. Scholars needed to make


these arguments to situate a new nonconfessional field of religious studies in these decades. My own critique in this dissertation, however, has demonstrated how the current field studying the earliest Christian texts remains a hazy muddle of ideological claims masquerading as modern historical-critical work. Scholars now straddle such putatively scientifically historical work and newer methods found in various pockets of critical theory. This dissertation has shown how NT scholars will, for example, combine the theoretical tools of James Scott or Homi Bhabha with a carefully selected historical practice (e.g., imperial discourse or irony) in order to unveil the hidden subversion of biblical texts.

My own approach may be categorized as poststructuralist, in part, motivated by the theory of authors like Bourdieu and Foucault. Modernist positivism does indeed need to be taken to task, particularly when the work of white men is presumed to be the true face of history without ideological commitments attached. I do not follow the theologian who finds new freedom in what he calls postmodernism to theologize boldly, but I nevertheless appreciate a scholar who justifies his theology plainly and explicitly. The academic study of the Bible, earliest Christianity, early Judaism, etc., have embraced theory without always interrogating how new models and theories reify and promote theological stances that exclude voices who do not share such stances. As my opening chapter argues, such academic maneuvers serve as return-to-origins narratives that authorize today’s ideologies. These approaches continue to position early Christ followers as exceptional from their surroundings and privilege readings that make these followers seem admirably revolutionary.

Apocalyptic discourse serves as an ideal arena to examine such scholarly practices, as the discourse itself feels starkly exceptional. If apocalyptic discourse is not sectarian, than what is? However, I have shown that apocalyptic discourse masks a far more complicated social and
cultural reality for early Christ followers. Authors like John, Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, participated in the discursive practices available to them. In 1 Thessalonians, we cannot see imperial discourse embedded within apocalyptic symbolism and assume this is subversive, an “attack” on the empire, rather than an appropriation of it. In Revelation, we should not politely excuse violence and misogyny as somehow just a distraction or even a subtle irony, absolving the text in order to bolster its revolutionary status. Apocalyptic discourse does not challenge the concept of empire, even if it does challenge particular authorities. Rather, it imagines a new “empire,” repositioning Christ-followers with authority in this new Christ-based empire. To make all biblical texts out to be subversive, we revisit the old stomping grounds of history and theology. We re-authorize canonical authority for a new generation of progressive Christian scholars and, by appealing to modern historical claims mixed with newer theories, we universalize a sanitized view of these ancient texts. I contend here that we need to examine our perspectives and treat both historical method and critical theory with an honest eye to our ideological biases.
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