At the beginning of “Introduction to the New Testament,” I always tell my students that context is everything. Context not only influences interpretation but also determines its meaning. This is crucial in biblical interpretation. One of the topics of interest among New Testament scholars in the U.S. in the last decade, particularly after 9/11, is the Roman imperial theology and how this often neglected context impacted and influenced Jesus’ preaching and the New Testament writers. Latest research and publications suggest that New Testament writers negotiate, challenge, and resist the Roman imperial theology in their writings.

Every year biblical scholars from all over the world get together to foster biblical scholarship and to present their latest research and ideas. The 2007 annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) took place in San Diego, California, from November 17–20. An area of New Testament studies that attracted many participants at this year’s meetings focuses on Roman imperial theology and context. A few sessions are worth mentioning: “Jesus Traditions, Gospels, and Negotiating the Roman Imperial World Section”; “Empire and Post Colonial Hermeneutics”; and “Paul and Empire.” While there were certainly other papers and presentations that dealt with the Roman Empire and the New Testament in other sessions, these examples suffice to show that the Roman imperial context has attracted much attention and is currently a very interesting topic in New Testament scholarship.

Over the past few years, a steady stream of books and monographs on the Roman Empire and the New Testament has appeared and seems to be groundbreaking for scholars as well as for students in biblical studies. These authors reexamine the political, economic, social, cultural, and religious aspects of Roman imperial theology and propaganda and demonstrate that the New Testament writers as a whole resist the Roman imperial rule. Some scholars, Richard A. Horsley and John Dominic Crossan for example, critique the current U.S. political system by portraying Jesus as a resistant leader to Roman imperial domination and draw crucial parallels that exist between the policies of the ancient Roman Empire and...
American Empire. Ultimately, Christians today too must choose Jesus over empire.

What these SBL papers and recent publications demonstrate is that in order to fully capture the meaning and significance of New Testament texts, one has to be familiar with the Roman imperial context and theology (Carter ix–xi). But the question is how, and is it even possible? With the aid of archeological finds, biblical scholars can now piece together a Roman imperial worldview that was permeating in the first century C.E. The Roman propaganda and media consisted of temples, monuments, festivals, coins, bath houses, statues, inscriptions, and sites. These ancient billboards were no less sophisticated means of advertising Rome’s imperial theology that the gods and goddesses have given Rome the power, authority, and legitimation to rule as empire, and that the Roman emperors were divine saviors and the guarantors of peace and order. Two sources of archeological evidence will illustrate this point.

Ancient coins tell us a lot about the social, political, and religious worldview of the time. Fortunately for us, archeologists have uncovered numerous Roman coins, particularly of Augustus Caesar (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.). On many of his coins, which were minted all over the Empire from Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to Spain, Augustus was declared as “Caesar Divi F,” which is the abbreviation of the Latin “Caesar Divi Filius” or “Son of the Divine [Julius] Caesar.” If Julius Caesar was divine and Augustus was his adopted son, Augustus then was the “Son of God.” This divine title attributed to Augustus was well known throughout the Roman Empire in the New Testament time.

Interestingly, Augustus was not only declared as “Son of God” but also “savior” of the world. It was during the long reign of “Augustus” (Latin) or “Sebastos” (Greek), which means the “revered one” or “one who is worthy to be worshiped,” that the Pax Romana was established. It was Augustus (who was previously called Octavian) who put an end to civil strife and brought order and peace to the Roman Empire. Because of his great contribution, people in Asia Minor immediately declared him to be divine and even changed their calendar in order to coincide with his birthday. A famous inscription, which is dated around 9 B.C.E., gives us a historical illustration of Augustus being honored and worshiped as divine, a savior who fulfilled humanity’s hope and aspiration:

Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence has applied her energy and zeal and has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus, whom she filled with virtues for the benefit of mankind, bestowing him upon us and our descendants as savior—he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar, who by his epiphany exceeded the hopes of those who prophesied good tidings [euaggelia]. . . . and since the birthday of the god first brought to the world the good tidings [euaggelia] residing in him. . . . For that reason, with good fortune and safety, the Greeks of Asia have decided that the New Year in all the cities should begin on 23rd September, the birthday of Augustus. (Crossan, 148)

How do New Testament writers negotiate with the imperial claim and theology that Augustus Caesar is the Son of God and Savior of the world? A cursory reading of the Gospels, particularly the ample references to and proclamation of Jesus as the true “Son of God,” shows that the Christian message clearly contested the imperial claim of the day. The opening words of the Gospel of Mark state, “The beginning of the gospel [euaggelia] of Jesus Christ the Son of God” (1:1). God also declared that Jesus is the
“beloved Son” (1:11; 9:7) as well as a Roman centurion confessed at the foot of the cross, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (15:39). Furthermore, according to Luke, the birth of Jesus is truly good news [euaggelia] (Luke 2:10) for he is the real savior of the world (Luke 2:1; cf. John 4:22). When asked about paying taxes to Caesar, Jesus’ response, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Luke 20:25), clearly indicates that he too was subversive toward the gospel of Caesar as divine.

Similarly, the apostle Paul testifies that Jesus is the only and true “Son of God” (Rom 1:3, 4, 9; 2 Cor 1:9; Gal 1:16; 2:20) and has the power “to save” humankind (Rom 1:16; 8:24; 13:11; 1 Cor 1:21; Phil 2:12; 3:20). According to this Gentile apostle, Christians belong to God’s empire (Rom 14:17; Phil 3:20), not to Caesar and his gods (Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 8:6; 10:26). Moreover, the one and only true gospel is the “Lord, Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:1). Paul’s clever usage of imperial terminology throughout his epistles is a clear indication of a direct challenge to the gospel of Caesar.

Perhaps the most important book of the whole New Testament that needs to be read within the context of imperial Rome is none other than the book of Revelation. To fully comprehend Revelation’s symbolic images and theological message, one must understand the imperial politics, economics, culture, and myths of Rome. Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther poignantly point out in their book that the central purpose and message of Revelation is to unveil (“apocalypse”) the wicked and destructive forces of the Empire; furthermore, rather than being seduced by its propaganda, Christians then and now are to resist its imperial allurement. John of Patmos admonishes his readers then and now “to come out of her” (Rev 18:4) and to worship only Christ who is “the Lamb who was slaughtered” (5:12; cf. 21:22).

There are ample examples to further illustrate that the New Testament writers resisted the Roman imperial theology. But these few examples are enough to show that the New Testament writers as a whole contested the imperial claim. By professing that Jesus is the only Son of God and the true Savior of the world, Christians directly opposed the imperial theology and gospel of Caesar.

While context is everything for biblical interpretation, it is not however just any kind of context. Latest research and publications unveil that one often neglected but crucial element for understanding the New Testament is the Roman imperial theology. Furthermore, New Testament writers clearly contested and directly opposed Caesar’s gospel and theology on every page of the New Testament canon. To not recognize this context is to miss out a lot.

References


Illustrations of Augustus coins, see http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/ric/augustus/t.html.