Russell Morton
Ashland University
Ashland, Ohio

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, scholars such as Richard Horsley, Warren Carter, N. T. Wright, Joseph A. Marchal, Matthew Forrest Lowe, Brian Walsh, and Sylvia Keensmaat, to name only a few, have sought to understand how the long shadow of the Roman Empire impacted the writers of the New Testament. The result has been the emergence of a critical methodology, empire criticism, informed by the concerns of postcolonialism. In the process, a sociopragmatic method pioneered by Marxist and feminist exegesis is often utilized. Sociopragmatic practitioners admit that their readings of the Bible subordinate the biblical tradition to their own uses. This observation also applies to empire criticism, which legitimately “finds in Western democracy an imperialism that deserves critique. The issue … is how much of this is sociopragmatics and how much of it is history” (19)?

The editors and writers of _Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not_ do not deny that sections of the New Testament are anti-empire and anti-imperial cult. For example, the scathing rebuke of “Babylon” (Rev 18) and Paul and Silas’s speech in Acts 14:14–18 cannot be understood as anything less than critique of empire. What is debatable, however, is whether the critique of empire is so pervasive as to be the primary theme of the New Testament. To answer this question, the book is divided into ten chapters that discuss both the nature
and extent of the imperial cult in the first century as well as the presence, or lack of presence, of anti-imperial themes in the gospels, Acts, epistolary literature, and the Apocalypse.

Chapter 1, “We Have No King but Caesar,” by David Nystrom, discusses the Roman imperial ideology and imperial cult. Nystrom notes how the imperial ideology received impetus under Augustus. After Actium, he was the “last man standing” after Rome’s bloody civil wars, which dated to Caesar’s conflict with Pompey. At the same time, Augustus refused the trappings of worship. It is only after his death that he, like his uncle Julius Caesar, was endowed with divine status. This pattern would be followed by Augustus’s successors, with the exception of Gaius and Commodus. However, although Augustus refused the trappings of worship, the cities of the eastern Roman Empire in particular were anxious to erect temples to Augustus and Rome during Augustus’s life. “People worshiped Augustus as they worshiped their family ancestors, and thought of him as lord and king, but he was careful to link his role with traditional symbols and patterns of power” (35–36).

It is in the Eastern Roman Empire that Christianity took root, and it is in this milieu that the New Testament documents were written. This fact requires scholars to consider the extent to which the New Testament reflects an anti-imperial polemic. This question is discussed by Judith A. Dahl in “Anti-imperial Rhetoric in the New Testament,” the longest chapter in the book. Dahl notes that, while there are numerous overt references to the trappings of empire, taxation, palaces, prisons, and the like, the “indirect information teases us and pushes us to closer examination” (39). By employing social-scientific and cultural research as a supplement to traditional historical criticism, “biblical scholars are becoming increasingly aware of numerous passages in the New Testament that can be interpreted and understood as anti-imperial rhetoric” (41). Yet, do these observations yield productive results, or are discoveries of hidden anti-imperial ideology being read into selected New Testament passages? This question is especially important, since, despite its pervasive nature in the first century, “[p]articipation in the imperial cult … was not obligatory for most people” (45). Rather, scholars often apply evidence from the second century and later, such as martyrologies, and apply it to the first century, failing to recognize the real differences between these periods of Roman history (see 45–46). There can be no doubt that the Christian gospel undermined the hierarchical values of both Rome and ancient Judaism (58–60). Postcolonial approaches likewise note how Paul, for example, sought to set up communities that were “alternatives to and resistant to the accepted imperial society” (68). Likewise, Revelation provides a prime example of rhetoric that can be considered subversive to the imperial ideal (68–76).
Despite these observations, however, the question remains as to whether anti-imperialism is, in fact, the primary concern of the New Testament authors. If it is, the advocates of empire criticism acknowledge that the New Testament does not employ an overt polemic against the empire. Rather, it utilizes coded language recognized by a close reading of the text. Does this conclusion conform to the evidence? Chapters 3–10 provide case studies to analyze whether the claims of the empire critics are valid. In chapter 3, Joel Willitts examines the claims of Warren Carter. Carter finds in Matthew’s Gospel a polemic not against Jesus’s Jewish opposition but the Roman power behind that opposition (see 89–90). Similarly, Matthew’s ecclesiology, with its emphasis on love for neighbor as oneself, undermines the predominant Roman ideal of self aggrandizement (92–93). Willitts’s evaluation of Carter’s conclusions, while appreciative, conclude that Carter’s case is not proven. Rather, Matthew’s vision is broader, with Jesus undermining not only Rome but the Satanic power underlying Rome, as well as all other kingdoms of the world (Matt 4:8). Carter’s conclusion that Matthew opposes Rome via his condemnation of Jewish authorities is likewise not convincing to Willitts.

The pattern established by chapter 3 is carried out throughout the remainder of the book. In chapter 4 Dean Pinter notes that Luke’s Gospel is more interested in demonstrating that Jesus is Lord of all, while at the same time indicating that Christians are not a threat to the established order. Pinter compares Luke’s portrayal of Jesus with Josephus’s “sweet but snarly” history of the Jews to provide an example of how in the first century it was possible to be both critical of imperial abuses and at the same time affirm Roman authority. Thus, “for all his references to Jesus as Lord and King, Luke never creates a direct antithesis between Jesus and Caesar” (110). Similarly, in chapter 5 Christopher Skinner concludes that empire-critical evaluations of the Gospel of John fail to recognize that, while the gospel author was in contact with the Roman world, he was primarily concerned to portray Jesus as the Incarnate Logos. Drew J. Strait in chapter 6 notes that in Acts it is Jews, not Roman officials, who are offended by the gospel message. While an implicit critique of imperial cult can be assumed, this assessment is not explicit. The Christians in Acts do not take overt action against Rome but operate in the midst of the empire, in the new community now known as the church.

The chapters on Paul and the Apocalypse also fail to affirm the findings of empire criticism. In chapter 7 Michael Bird opines that Rom 1:3–4 certainly may be read as subversive to Caesar but not necessarily in the manner empire critics understand. “Behind all of this stands a contrast between two kinds of sonship and two types of kingdoms” (153). Augustus attained his status as imperial savior by killing his opponents at Actium. Jesus’s status as Son of God is affirmed in resurrection from the dead (158). In short, Romans is a pastoral letter announcing God’s righteousness for believing Jews and gentiles, in conjunction with God’s condemnation of idolatry (161–62). In the same
manner in chapter 8 Lynn Cohick notes that in Philippians Paul is not addressing concerns of empire, despite the use of the term *politeuma* in 3:1. It is hard to determine what this word means precisely, since it is only used here in the New Testament. The term was, however, current among Jewish writers, and Paul likely used it in a manner similar to his Jewish contemporaries as a means of referring to Christians as citizens of God’s kingdom. Furthermore, Paul’s opponents in Phil 3 are not Romans but other Christians. In chapter 9 Allan R. Bevere discusses empire-critical analysis of Colossians. He scrutinizes the hypothesis of Walsh and Keesmat that the Colossian philosophy opposed in chapters 2–3 was primarily an expression of imperial pretentions. While appreciative of their questions, Bevere concludes that the Colossian philosophy was not related to the imperial cult or ideology but was either Jewish or significantly influenced by Judaism. Finally, Dwight Sheets concludes that, although Rev 13 presents a message of opposition to the empires of this world, this proclamation was consistent with Jewish apocalypticism. John’s concern is less with opposition to empires per se as it is with the expectation of Jesus’ imminent parousia.

In conclusion, proponents of empire criticism will find *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not* to be a disappointing read. While the authors appreciate the concerns of the empire critics and are sympathetic with their goals, they ultimately cannot affirm the findings of empire criticism. Each of these authors would admit that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not, but they conclude that the lordship claimed by Jesus is not of an imperial sort. Rather, the writers of the New Testament view the empires of this world to be the domain of Satan, which is overcome by Christ’s kingdom. “The New Testament conviction that Jesus is Lord, Caesar is not, is not a direct assault on the Roman Empire, or even a veiled attempt to usurp it. Rather, to claim that Jesus is Lord is to place oneself in servitude of an Emperor of a radically different kingdom—one which has no equal, now and forever (Phil. 2:9–11)” (214). Whether this conclusion will be convincing to empire critics is doubtful. On the contrary, empire critics may dismiss the findings of *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not* as an expression of what N. T. Wright would assert is an Enlightenment worldview, one that differentiates between the spiritual and material domains in a manner in which the ancients did not. Whether or not one accepts its conclusions, however, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not* provides a useful service in reminding its readers that the task of the exegete requires a full toolbox, integrating multiple approaches. The question of the relationship between empire and the New Testament writings remains a complex one. This book serves an important role in reminding its readers of just how multifaceted that interaction truly was.