

D. Clint Burnett, *Paul and Imperial Divine Honors: Christ, Caesar, and the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2024). Pp. 316 + xxvi. 49,99 USD (hardcover/ebook). ISBN 978-0-8028-7985-1

Marcin Kowalski

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin
marcin.kowalski@kul.pl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8732-6868>

The monograph by D. Clint Burnett, *Paul and Imperial Divine Honors: Christ, Caesar, and the Gospel*, is a contextual-critical examination of the empire criticism approach applied to Pauline letters. Empire criticism is still a relatively young branch of New Testament studies, but it seems to have established itself firmly in Pauline scholarship. Nicholas T. Wright devoted to it a chapter in his *Paul. Fresh Perspectives*, presenting it among various research perspectives on the letters of Paul.¹ A critical analysis of the approach, with a list of its representative authors, can be found in numerous monographs and articles up to date.² One of the most interesting recent publications drawing on the empire criticism is Christopher Heilig's *The Apostle and the Empire: Paul's Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2022).³ It testifies to how the approach is maturing, becoming

1 N.T. Wright, *Paul. Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK 2005) 59–79.

2 S. Kim, *Christ and Caesar. The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2008) 3–64; D. Burk, “Is Paul’s Gospel Counterimperial? Evaluating the Prospects of the ‘Fresh Perspective’ for Evangelical Theology,” *JETS* 51/2 (2008) 309–337; J. White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul. An Attempt at Building a Firmer Foundation,” *Bib* 90/3 (2009) 305–333; W. Carter, “Paul and the Roman Empire. Recent Perspectives,” *Paul Unbound. Other Perspectives on the Apostle* (ed. M.D. Given) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 2010) 7–26; J.R. Harrison, *Paul and the Imperial Authorities at Thessalonica and Rome. A Study in the Conflict of Ideology* (WUNT 273; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011) 2–14; J.D. Fantin, *The Lord of the Entire World. Lord Jesus, a Challenge to Lord Caesar?* (New Testament Monographs 31; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press 2011) chapter 1; J.A. Harrill, “Paul and Empire. Studying Roman Identity after the Cultural Turn,” *Early Christianity* 2/3 (2011) 281–311; J.A. Diehl, “Empire and Epistles. Anti-Roman Rhetoric in the New Testament Epistles,” *CurBR* 10/2 (2012) 217–263; S. McKnight – J.B. Modica (eds.), *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not. Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2013) 39–82, 147–196; N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 4; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 2013) 1271–1319; A. Klostergaard Petersen, “Imperial Politics in Paul. Scholarly Phantom or Actual Textual Phenomenon?,” *People under Power. Early Jewish and Christian Responses to the Roman Empire* (eds. O. Lehtipuu – M. Labahn) (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2015) 101–127; J. Punt, “Paul the Jew, Power of Evil and Rome,” *Scriptura* 117/1 (2018) 1–17; M. Kowalski, “The Lion Against the Eagle. A Critical Appraisal of the Anti-Imperial Reading of Paul,” *ColT* 93/2 (2023) 57–103.

3 See the review by M. Kowalski, “Rev. Christoph Heilig, *The Apostle and the Empire. Paul’s Implicit and Explicit Criticism of Rome* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2022),” *BA* 13/2 (2023) 379–383.

more and more methodologically sophisticated (see the issue of the ‘hidden transcript’), and how the rich source material (texts, coins, inscriptions, archaeological artefacts) is used by the authors.

Paul and Imperial Divine Honors by D. Clint Burnett is an example of such a mature scholarship. The author is an independent scholar of early Christianity and Greco-Roman material culture. He holds a PhD in Biblical Studies from Boston College. His previous books include *Studying the New Testament through Inscriptions: An Introduction* (Hendrickson Academic 2020) and *The Enthronement of Christ at the Right Hand of God and its Greco-Roman Cultural Context* (De Gruyter 2021). The author is no novice to the ‘empire criticism’, which can be inferred from his numerous publications on the subject.⁴

The monograph *Paul and Imperial Divine Honors* by D. Clint Burnett consists of a foreword, preface, acknowledgements, introduction, four chapters and conclusion. It also comprises four lists (figures, tables, abbreviations, and epigraphic conventions), two appendices, a bibliography, and five indexes (authors, subjects, ancient persons, Scripture, and other ancient sources). These testify to the fact that we are dealing with a solid and well-researched publication, abundant in references to ancient sources, numismatic, epigraphic, and archaeological material. In the preface, the author articulates two goals of the book: (1) to provide contextual reconstructions of imperial divine honours in the three cities where Paul established Christian churches and to which he wrote letters: Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth; (2) to provide contextual reconstructions of the relationship of early Christians in these cities to imperial divine honours. The author’s intention is to show

that imperial divine honors were embedded in the public fabric of Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth, what today we would call the social, political, economic and religious spheres of these cities, and that any suffering experienced by the early Christians was not solely due to these honors, but resulted from a more complex reason, the overthrow of Greco-Roman pagan culture (p. xvii).

Burnett also intends to demonstrate how imperial worship differed in those three cities and what implications this has for understanding Paul’s correspondence and interactions with the Philippian, Thessalonian, and Corinthian churches. The book is in an accessible language (reasonable number of footnotes, Latinized spelling of all Greek names and terms) and refers to the sources available to the average reader. The author also provides access to specialized data by including Appendix 1, with relevant inscriptions discussed in the book

⁴ D.C. Burnett, “Divine Titles for Julio-Claudian Imperials in Corinth,” *CBQ* 82 (2020) 437–455; D.C. Burnett, *Studying the New Testament through Inscriptions. An Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson 2020) 97–120; D.C. Burnett, “Imperial Divine Honors in Julio-Claudian Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *JBL* 139 (2020) 567–589; D.C. Burnett, “Imperial Divine Honors in Julio-Claudian Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence,” *Thessalonica. The First Urban Churches* (eds. J.R. Harrison – L.L. Welborn) (WGRWSup 21; Atlanta, GA: SBL 2022) VII, 63–92; D.C. Burnett, *Christ’s Enthronement at God’s Right Hand and Its Greco-Roman Cultural Context* (BZNW 242; Berlin: De Gruyter 2021) 111–156; D.C. Burnett, “The Interplay between Indigenous Cults and Imperial Cults in the New Testament World,” *Inscriptions, Graffiti, Documentary Papyri* (eds. J.R. Harrison – E.R. Richards) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan) (forthcoming).

along with their fresh English translations, and Appendix 2, containing a hypothetical reconstruction of the Julio-Claudian imperial calendar in Philippi and Corinth, accompanied by rich indexes and a well-chosen bibliography.

In the introduction (pp. 1–19), the author offers a reconstruction of the divine honours and festivals at Gythium, one of the best-known and most important places of the imperial cult. He then moves on to the use of imperial divine honours in the study of Paul's letters, pointing out the lack of precision in the New Testament authors who refer to them and the resulting errors in reconstructing the socio-cultural and religious background of the communities in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. The author intends to bring down the simplified, monolithic structure of imperial worship, showing its complexity and local differences. While imperial honours were well known to Paul and his converts in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth, 'their relationship to early Christianity varied from city to city because each community and each group of Christians in these cities were unique' (pp. 14–15). In the final part of the introduction, the author describes the content and research objectives for each of the chapters of the book, pointing out the sources he will use: monuments, coins, inscriptions, epigraphs, Paul's letters, and the Acts of the Apostles, treated as a reliable historical material for reconstructing the history of the communities in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth.

In Chapter 1, 'Imperial Divine Honors' (pp. 21–57), the author defines the honours in question and discusses the sources from which we can learn about them (inscriptions, coins, statues, and archaeological data). He then surveys how the New Testament scholars have tended to interpret imperial divine honours (mostly Alfred Deissman, Bruce Winter, and Nicholas T. Wright) and presents a more appropriate approach. He divides imperial divine honours into different categories – Roman, provincial, civic/municipal, and private – and links them to aristocratic brokerage. The contextual approach, according to the author, should consider the immediate context of these honours in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth, the proper use of comparative material, the ways imperial divine honours were most often wedded to honours given to the gods, and how local aristocrats were responsible for mediating and promoting such honours to their cities.

Chapter 2, 'Imperial Divine Honors, Paul, and the Philippian Church' (pp. 58–105), focuses on imperial divine honours in Philippi and their relationship to the earliest Christianity in the Roman colony. The author starts with the New Testament scholarship on imperial divine honours in Philippi and criticises how exegetes interpreted the relationship between the honours in question and early Christianity (Adolf Deissman, Nicholas T. Wright, John Reumann, Peter Oakes, Walter Hansen, and Erik M. Heen). Then he presents the evidence to date for divine honours for Julio-Claudians in the city. Burnett lists Julio-Claudians who were given such honours (Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Augusta, Claudius), stressing the Roman character of their titles, and presenting evidence for the imperial cultic officials in Philippi (*flamines*, *sacerdotes*, and *augustales*). The people (mostly aristocrats) who held these offices were closely connected with Philippi's public life, serving as benefactors, sponsoring temples and inscriptions, and supervising the imperial cult,

festivals, and civic events. The author, having reconstructed the cultural, political, and religious context that Paul found in Philippi, argues that the honours in question were not the sole cause of the suffering experienced by some Christians from their pagan neighbours (Phil 1:27–30). The terms *κύριος*, *σωτήρ*, and *εὐαγγέλιον* were not used or attested in Philippi to provoke the persecutions. Instead, the pagan Philippians mistreated Christians in the colony because they interpreted Christianity as a non-Roman custom that advocated atheism and threatened the safety and security of their city, ensured by the Roman gods and Julio-Claudian patrons.

In Chapter 3, 'Imperial Divine Honors, Paul, and the Thessalonian Church' (pp. 106–154), the author again starts with the New Testament scholarship on imperial divine honours in Thessalonica (Holland Hendrix). Subsequently, he reconstructs divine honours for Julio-Claudians in Thessalonica and their relationship to the first Christians there. The point of departure is the history of Thessalonica, which is illustrated with maps and drawings. According to the author, the imperial honours in Thessalonica were Greek and civic in character but influenced by the Roman custom of postmortem divinisation. While the Thessalonians established divine honours for living Julio-Claudians (Julius Caesar, Augustus, Livia, Claudius, and possibly Nero), they tended to wait until these individuals passed before they hailed them as gods. The leaders of Thessalonica, who acted as *ἱερεῖς καὶ ἀγωνοθέται*, served as benefactors, sponsored temples, organised games, cultic celebrations, offerings, and festivals, and were responsible for embedding the honours in question into the public life of their city. Christians in the city were suffering mistreatment, but according to Burnett, imperial divine honours were not the sole cause of their misfortune. The terms *κύριος*, *παρουσία*, and *ἀπάντησις*, used in 1–2 Thessalonians and applied to Christ, had little to do with the imperial cult in Thessalonica. Instead, because the pagan Thessalonians interpreted Christianity as calling for the abandonment of the city's gods and their divinely sponsored rulers, Christians threatened Thessalonica's coveted status of a 'free city', connected with economic, political, and social benefits that the Julio-Claudians had bestowed on the city and that could be taken away.

Chapter 4, 'Imperial Divine Honors, Paul, and the Corinthian Church' (pp. 155–226), focuses on divine honours for Julio-Claudians in Corinth and their relationship with nascent Christianity. The author, as usual, starts with the New Testament scholarship on imperial divine honours in Corinth (Colin Miller, Fredrick J. Long, Richard Horsley, Nicholas T. Wright, Neil Elliott, Bruce Winter). Then he presents the rich history of Corinth and demonstrates the Roman character of the divine honours interwoven into the city's public life. These were granted to Julius Caesar, Octavia, Gaius and Lucius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Augusta, and applied to the whole family line of Julio-Claudians. The imperial cultic officials (*flamines*, *agonothetae*, *isagogeus*, and *agustales*), responsible for administering imperial divine honours, were also the benefactors of Corinth. The importance and ubiquity of the imperial cult were signalled by the location of numerous temples (Octavia's *naos*, the Julian Family Temple, Julian Basilica, and the so-called Temple E), by imperial statues at the theatres and shops, and by various sacrifices and celebrations in their honour.

According to Burnett, unlike Philippi and Thessalonica, there is no evidence that divine honours for Julio-Claudians caused any adversity for early Christians. There is no attested use of the title *kyrios* in the Corinthian imperial cult, and the meaning of *divus* applied to Caesars departs significantly from how Christians understood the divinity of Christ. This does not mean that divine honours for Julio-Claudians did not cause problems for the Corinthian church. The participation of some Corinthian Christians in pagan rituals, which were stumbling blocks for the weak brothers and sisters, probably included the honours in question. According to the author, many of Paul's converts in Corinth did not grasp the key countercultural aspect of the Gospel, frequenting pagan temples and possibly honouring the rulers of the Julio-Claudian line (1 Cor 8:7–13; 10:14–22, 23–30). Following John Barclay, Burnett argues that outside Christian gatherings, the Corinthians may have acted as they always had before believing in Christ (pp. 225–226).

Conclusion (pp. 228–239) summarises the findings of the four chapters. The author stresses the points of contact and differences between divine imperial honours in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth, to which New Testament authors have not paid sufficient attention. They used to identify Paul's resistance to the empire and explain the Christians' persecutions by the terms which did not play a great role in the imperial cult in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. The author also argues against N.T. Wright's claims that Paul criticises the rhetoric of the empire and the emperors who granted themselves divine honours in Rom 13:1–17. He points out that in Rome, the emperors did not usurp divine titles, with the exception of Claudius, and even voted against them. Romans 13 cannot, according to Burnett, be read through the lens of anti-imperial criticism. Paul is more like Daniel, who, in the pagan empire, found a way to serve the king and, at the same time, be faithful to the God of Israel (Dan 3:1–30).⁵ According to Burnett, in Rom 13:1–7, Paul, fully aware of the complexity of imperial (as well as traditional) divine honours, encourages the Roman Christians to submit themselves to these authorities in general and in the payment of taxes, tribute, and honour, though not divine, in particular (Rom 13:6–7; pp. 237–238). There are, however, some conditions and limits to this submission. The Roman authorities should faithfully discharge their responsibility to be God's agents for the common good. If they do not, and show disregard for God, Paul envisions a situation in which they should be opposed.

Paul and Imperial Divine Honors by D. Clint Burnett is an excellent monograph that provides insight into the important context of early Christian communities, namely the cult of emperors. The author explains not only imperial divine titles, but also provides data on the cult officials, temples, rites, and associated ceremonies. Not only do we learn about Paul smelling and watching the sacrifices in honour of the emperors in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth, but we can also imagine them. In this we are helped by historical reports, archaeology, coins, maps, drawings, inscriptions, visualisations of temples and statues

⁵ See also Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1274–1275; White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul,” 316–333.

of emperors. In the book, we find, as promised by the author, accessible language, a clear structure of thought, excellent introductions, and summaries. The monograph excels in giving a well-nuanced, rich, contextualised approach to the imperial cult in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. I wish the author had engaged more with the monographs by James R. Harisson and Christoph Heilig on Thessalonica and Corinth, rather than placing them in footnotes. Instead, he refers to the undoubtedly popular views of N.T. Wright. Burnett also deliberately and regrettably shuns broader references to imperial ideology, which could provide an important context for the cult of emperors (the universality of the Gospel and the rule of Caesars, the new era inaugurated by Christ and Augustus, how they exercised power, the claims to be benefactors of *oikoumene*, and different moralities they promoted). As the author rightly argues, the New Testament's clash with the imperial ideology must be seen beyond the simple realm of titles used by Roman rulers and applied to Christ. There is still room for researching the issues of imperial ideology using the rich contextual approach advocated by Burnett. In conclusion, *Paul and Imperial Divine Honors* by D. Clint Burnett is an excellent monograph, a well-researched, advanced yet approachable academic tool, and a must-read for anyone interested in and studying Paul's letters from the perspective of empire criticism.