

Christoph Heilig

Hidden Criticism?

The Methodology and Plausibility of the Search for a Counter-Imperial Subtext in Paul

[Versteckte Kritik? Die Methodologie und Plausibilität der Suche nach einem anti-imperialen Subtext in den Paulusbriefen.]

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Paul has been regarded as being uncritical of the Roman Empire for a long time, not least because of his apparent call to obey the state in Rom 13:1–7. However, recent scholarship has questioned this assumption by pointing to »hidden criticism« in the letters of the apostle. But how can we decide, in a methodologically sound way, whether such a counter-imperial message lies beneath the surface of the text? On the basis of insights from the philosophy of science, Christoph Heilig suggests several analytical steps for examining this paradigm. He concludes that the hypothesis that we can identify critical »echoes« of the Roman Empire in Paul's letters needs to be modified for it to be maintained. In particular, concern over the danger of overt criticism and subsequent persecution do not sufficiently justify this interpretative hypothesis. Nevertheless, Heilig concludes that the search for a counter-imperial subtext in Paul could turn out to be heuristically fruitful so long as the limitations of the approach are heeded. Hence, a re-evaluation of Pauline passages in light of Paul's engagement with ideas from his Roman environment is encouraged.

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