CHAPTER FOUR

APOSYNAGÓGOS AND EMPIRE

4.1 An Initial Orientation

This chapter aims to consider the *aposynagōgos* passages within the broader Roman imperial context in which John’s Gospel was written and its narrative is set. The chapter will ask whether the emerging sub-field of Biblical criticism known as “empire criticism” might assist in efforts to situate within Jesus’ lifetime the events depicted in the *aposynagōgos* passages. It will be argued that although empire-critical study of John’s Gospel has focused upon the experience of the Johannine community living under the Roman empire, proper historiographical focus should rest upon the ways in which the imperial context structured the events of and surrounding Jesus’ life.

The broader context for this chapter is that emerging sub-field of biblical criticism known as empire criticism. Empire criticism is closely related to what is also sometimes called “postcolonial criticism,” and, indeed, this latter term is sometimes used as a synonym for the former. Following Anna Runesson’s recent study of postcolonial exegesis, the present author would distinguish between “postcolonial analysis within the historical critical paradigm,” on the one hand, and “postcolonial methodological approaches beyond Western historical critical discourse,” on the other.¹ What is in this study termed empire criticism should be considered more or less synonymous with the former of these two categories. Thus the category of empire criticism would include efforts to contextualize biblical texts within the ancient imperial contexts in which they were produced and first received, and exclude efforts to construe biblical texts within the contemporary imperial and post-imperial contexts in which they are received and read today.² This is not to deny the potential value of these

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² Examples of empire criticism, as here conceived, would thus include, in a hardly exhaustive list, Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia’s Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 2008); Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*
latter efforts, nor to assume that there exists a non-porous line between these two approaches to what we might define more broadly as “political exegesis,” but rather to recognize that one cannot do everything in any one study.


3 A term that the present author finds immensely superior to “ideological criticism.” “Ideological criticism” tends to encourage the fallacious supposition that one can find a non-ideological criticism. Historical criticism itself is embedded in the ideologies of the bourgeois revolution, a point made quite well by, *inter alia*, Ward Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), and the various contributions to Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, eds., *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). Of course, the term “political exegesis” introduces the potential risk of assuming that there is such a thing as a-political exegesis, when in fact one must remember, with Jorge Pixley, “The Political Dimension of Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *God’s Economy: Biblical Studies from Latin America* (ed. Ross Kinsler and Gloria Kinsler; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 18–33, here p. 32, that “every biblical reading has a political dimension.” Nonetheless, the present author would define “political exegesis” as any exegesis that is explicitly and intentionally concerned with either the political dimensions of the text under discussion, or the political situation of the exegete. One could conceivably offer a similar definition of “ideological criticism,” such that the term “ideological” indicates not that the exegete is motivated by ideology, but rather that she or he is concerned with investigating matters of ideology. Yet, “ideology” and “ideological” are typically freighted terms, which Biblical critics frequently utter in an intellectually unacceptable pejorative fashion. Thus it seems best to prefer the somewhat less inflammatory term, “political.” Another possible pitfall of the term political exegesis is that it has become, at times, more or less synonymous with “Marxist Biblical criticism,” which should be seen as a distinct sub-field of political exegesis, rather than political exegesis en toto. This pitfall must be conscientiously avoided, for of course one can quite conceivably have