EPHESIANS:
PAUL’S POLITICAL THEOLOGY IN
GRECO-ROMAN POLITICAL CONTEXT

Fredrick J. Long

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Study of Politics in Paul

It is a well-known fact, but its implications too often forgotten, that the designation Χριστιανός first applied to the disciples in Antioch in Acts 11:26 originally carried political connotations (formed with the Latin suffix -ianus). It meant they “were now viewed as a separate society rather than as a section of the Jewish synagogue” and this would have carried with it the problems of protection under religio lecita and “how they related their knowledge of the Messiah to the Messianic promise given to Israel.” Also,

---


2 Walter Grundmann, s.v., TDNT 9:537 n299.
Adolf Deissmann’s conclusions a century ago are still germane: “It must not be supposed that St. Paul and his fellow-believers went through the world blindfolded, unaffected by what was then moving the minds of men in great cities. These pages [of this book], I think, have already shown by many examples how much the New Testament is a book of the Imperial age.”3

However, despite these concrete historical realities, and even Aristotle’s inductive pan-anthropic axiom that “it is clear that the polis is one of the natural things, and that man is a political animal by nature” (Aristotle, Politics 1253a2–3),4 in an entry in The Anchor Bible Dictionary on “Early Christian Attitudes towards Rome” it was concluded that “The predominant impression in the Pauline epistles is of a profound lack of interest in either local or imperial politics.”5 Furthermore, Ephesians is not once mentioned or cited in this entry. Such a view, articulated 20 years ago, must now be completely rejected. It is time again to seek to understand to what extent Jesus and his followers and the documents they produced were political, even articulating a “political theology.”

My use of the expression political theology corresponds to that found in Dieter Georgi, who perhaps more than any other recent New Testament interpreter, has written on the political dimensions of biblical thought for the contemporary urban world.6 In addition to Georgi, numerous other scholars have pursued similar lines of thinking with, e.g. Richard Horsley,7

---

3 Deissmann, Light from the Ancient East, 344.
6 Dieter Georgi, Theocracy: In Paul’s Praxis and Theology (trans. David E. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991), 1–2, affirms that “From the very outset, the description of the biblical God as unique and omnipotent had a political dimension, which it never lost. As it enshrined the religious experiences of individuals and groups, so also it reflected political models and implied political demands ....[It is found in] the intimate bond between covenant, people, and cult, not to mention the analogy between divine and human monarchy and the relationship of both to the royal cult.” See a collection of twenty essays of life-long studies by Georgi, The City in the Valley: Biblical Interpretation and Urban Theology (Atlanta: SBL, 2005). Georgi’s political understanding of the New Testament is seen in his focused studies on specific political matters in Paul’s letters, e.g. The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians: A Study of Religious Propaganda in Late Antiquity (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996; orig. 1986); Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992).