

## Isaiah 40.3 and the Synoptic Gospels' Parody of the Roman Road System

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This article proposes that the Synoptic Gospels' pronouncements of Isa 40.3 (Matt 4.3; Mark 1.2–3; Luke 3.4–6) invite a comparison with the Roman road system and its extensive broadcast of Roman imperial ideology. Heralding the sovereignty of a coming king on newly constructed roads through difficult terrain, Matthew, Mark and Luke portray the coming of the kingdom of God in terms analogous to the laying of Roman roads followed by the enforcement of Roman rule throughout the Roman Empire. If Isa 40.3 heralded the arrival of the true God through the ministry of Jesus, as the Synoptic Gospels proclaim, then Rome's pretensions were by implication counterfeited. The engineering feats of raising ravines, levelling heights, smoothing terrain and making straight highways denoted Roman expansion, conquest and the standardisation of Roman imperial ideology. In contradistinction, the Synoptic Gospels' citations of Isa 40.3 presage the triumph of God, while simultaneously parodying Roman imperial ideology.

**Keywords:** Isa 40.3, מְסַלְמֵת, Matt 4.3/Mark 1.2–3/Luke 3.4–6, Roman roads, John the Baptist, parody in the NT

### Introduction

This article builds on scholarship that identifies Matthew, Mark and Luke as each replacing Roman imperial propaganda with gospel correctives.<sup>1</sup> Each

- 1 I use the term 'parody' in reference to 'any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice' (S. Dentith, *Parody* (London: Routledge, 2000) 9). The terms *παρωδία*, *παρωδός* and *παρωδή* share a complex, dynamic semantic history with origins as early as Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and as contemporary as post-modernism. The early Christian usage we envision constructs its message upon corrective polemical comparison but without the comic nuances that characterise most literature that has been classified as parody throughout literary history. On the literary and etymological history of parody, see: M. A. Rose, *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 4–47; Dentith, *Parody*, 39–54; F. W. Householder Jr., 'ΠΑΡΩΔΙΑ', *Journal of Classical Philology* 39.1 (1944) 1–9. On distinguishing the ancient form from its modern iterations, see L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 30–49.

promoted Jesus as σωτήρ, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, ὁ κύριος, inaugurator of τὸ εὐαγγέλιον and herald of ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, each honours setting right the false pretensions of the Roman emperor cult.<sup>2</sup> The practice was not so much of redefining previously unconsidered Roman categories but of asserting that these shared categories had their epistemologically valid conceptual backgrounds in Israel's sacred scriptures,<sup>3</sup> which had now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Appeal to Isa 40.3, we argue, accomplished this objective with respect to John's preparation of the way that would eventually lead to the manifestation of the salvation of Israel's God. Our thesis is that Matthew, Mark and Luke, however one explains the Synoptic problem, were 'synoptic' in their agreement that the ideology propagandised by the Roman road system was false by comparison to the true gospel prophesied in Isa 40.3.

### 1. Imperial Roads in the Ancient World

Proclamation of a supernatural highway at the beginning of the Synoptic Gospels befits the governing theme of each – the *kingdom* of God. In the ancient Near East, highways were renowned achievements of empires. 'Royal roads' centralised the empires of Assyria, Babylon and Persia long before the emergence of Rome:

An organized road system formed the backbone of the Assyrian administration. It seems reasonable that the creation of exactly fixed and strictly controlled roads was somehow influenced, at least for certain stretches, by military

- 2 Representative works include R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1993) 338–52; D. E. Aune, *Revelation* (WBC 52A; Dallas: Word, 1997) lxiii–lxiv; A. Brent, 'Luke-Acts and the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor', *JTS* 48 (1997) 411–38; W. Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001); C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) lxxx–xciii; R. A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); M. Bennett, *Der Kaiserkult in Judäa unter den Herodiern und Römern* (WUNT 203; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); A. Winn, *The Purpose of Mark's Gospel: An Early Christian Response to Roman Imperial Propaganda* (WUNT 11/245; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); K. Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke's Narrative* (LNTS 404; London: T&T Clark, 2010); S. Porter and C. Westfall, eds., *Empire in the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011); M. Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); D. E. Aune, *Jesus, Gospel Tradition and Paul in the Context of Jewish and Greco-Roman Antiquity* (WUNT 303; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 25–56; B. W. Winter, *Divine Honors for the Caesars: The First Christians' Responses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).
- 3 For example: σωτήρ (LXX Isa 12.2; 17.10; 45.15–18, 21–2; 62.11–12); ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ (LXX 2 Sam 7.6, 10, 14; Ps 2.7; 1 Chr 17.13; see also the Jewish concept of Son of God in 4Q246 and 4Q174); ὁ κύριος (LXX Isa 40.9–10; 52.7–10; 60.6–7; 61.1); τὸ εὐαγγέλιον (LXX Isa 40.9; 52.7; 60.6; 61.1).

considerations. Concerning for example the royal road to the West, the numerous campaigns of the Assyrian army, especially in the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, may have shown the necessity of keeping abreast of the rising stream of military, political or economical information emerging in the course of every military action, which had to be registered as quickly as possible in the royal residence.<sup>4</sup>

Imperial road strategy continued under the Babylonians, whose engineering history included the earlier road-building campaigns of Hammurabi (ca. 1810–1750 BCE). Karlheinz Kessler, citing the findings of Michael Jursa,<sup>5</sup> locates the transformation of rural roads to ‘royal roads’ especially under the Chaldean dynasty.<sup>6</sup> The imperial symbolism of roads continued under the Persians. In his narration of Xerxes’ march towards Greece, Herodotus (ca. 484–425 BCE) comments in detail on the measurements of the royal road that ran from Sardis to Susa: ‘If I have rightly numbered the parasangs of the royal road (ἡ ὁδὸς ἡ βασιλῆϊ) ... then between Sardis and the king’s abode called Memnonian there are thirteen thousand and five hundred furlongs’ (5.53).<sup>7</sup> Herodotus then identifies the engineering of canals and bridges, along with roads, as strategic preparation for imperial conquest (7.19–25, 33–6).

Even kings of smaller nations conveyed imperial pretensions through the building of royal roads. The Hebrew scriptures describe Israel being turned back from the ‘king’s highway’ of Edom (Num 20.17) and later the ‘king’s highway’ of the Amorites (Num 21.22).<sup>8</sup>

The Greeks and Macedonians were less road conscious.<sup>9</sup> ‘Epigraphical sources are almost completely silent’<sup>10</sup> on ancient Greek roads probably because of the Greeks’ maritime preoccupation. Their ‘highways’ were sea routes. Furthermore, the Greeks never established adequate political unity for the building of an imperial road network. Yet, Greek lore does attest royal association with roads and the use of roads for ideological advancement. Herodotus notes that in

4 K. Kessler, ‘“Royal Roads” and other Questions of the Neo-Assyrian Communications System’, *Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project Helsinki 1997* (ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus, 1997) 129–36, at 129–30.

5 M. Jursa, ‘Von Vermessungen und Straßen’, *Archiv Orientalní* 63 (1995) 153–8, at 155.

6 Kessler, ‘“Royal Roads”’, 133.

7 Translation from Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, vol. III: Books 5–7 (trans. A. D. Godley; LCL 119; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922) 58–61.

8 For a photo of the King’s Highway (Num 20.17; 21.22) used by the invading kings in Genesis 14, see G. E. Wright and F. V. Filson, eds., *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) 40.

9 Hence Strabo: ‘The Romans had the best foresight in these matters while the Greeks make but little account of, such as the construction of roads and aqueducts’ (*Geogr.* 5.3.8.235).

10 W. K. Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography*, Part III: *Roads* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 162.

the case of Sparta ‘the kings act as sole judges ... in cases concerning public roads’ (6.57.4), while Xenophon (ca. 431–354 BCE) cites roads in the context of military preparation: ‘with these tools they are to march in squads ahead of the wagons, so that, in case there is any need of road building, you may get to work without delay’ (*Cyn.* 6.2.32–6). The Greeks also erected herms between villages and major cities. ‘These road markers served the dual purpose of ethical admonition and political propaganda ... were objects of cult, and were forerunners of the later milestones.’<sup>11</sup>

Of the ancient kings of Macedonia, Archelaus (413–399 BCE) stands out as perhaps the only visionary builder of roads for national defence.<sup>12</sup> Alexander the Great’s takeover of the ancient Near East (336–323 BCE) was simply too fast and too expansive to accommodate the labour and time necessary for road construction. He simply followed the best routes available. He did keep in his entourage, however, two surveyors, Diognetus and Philonides, and a team of highly skilled engineers led by Diades and Charias, whose engineering feats, in addition to battering rams, catapults and siege towers, included the famous causeway to Tyre and bridges across the Euphrates and Indus rivers.<sup>13</sup>

Palestine was a still different story. ‘This “land of hills and valleys” was technologically too demanding ... there is no evidence of an ancient Israelite equivalent of the Assyrian *ummani*, the Persian and Greek *ὄδοποιοί*, or the Roman *viarum stratores*, all of whom were corps of the military.’<sup>14</sup> Josephus’ statement that Solomon built a causeway to Jerusalem out of black stones is probably fictitious (*Ant.* 8.7.4). But as we shall see below, Isa 40.3 does indeed envision Israel’s future salvation as commencing with the construction of a processional road that would ascend into the royal city of Jerusalem.

## 2. The Roman Context

The engineering feats described in Isa 40.3–5 had been undertaken by Roman road crews on the Italian peninsula since 312 BCE<sup>15</sup> and in the provinces since 130 BCE.<sup>16</sup> Highways were visible features of Roman imperialism. Roman

11 Pritchett, *Studies in Ancient Greek Topography*, 162.

12 J. Roisman, ‘Classical Macedonia to Perdiccas III’, *A Companion to Ancient Macedonia* (ed. J. Roisman and I. Worthington; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 145–65, at 155.

13 A. Fildes and J. Fletcher, *Alexander the Great: Son of the Gods* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002) 111.

14 N. L. Tidwell, ‘No Highway! The Outline of a Semantic Description of *M<sup>E</sup>SILLĀ*’, *VT* 45.2 (1995) 251–69, at 261.

15 The first major Roman road was the Via Appia from Rome to Capua (R. Laurence, *The Roads of Roman Italy: Mobility and Cultural Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999) 11–26).

16 J. A. Olsen and C. S. Gray, eds., *The Practice of Strategy from Alexander the Great to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 48.

soldiers literally made paths straight, filled ravines, levelled high places, straightened crooked places and smoothed out road surfaces for the solidification of Roman hegemony.<sup>17</sup> Rome subjugated its empire through monumental propaganda contemporaneous with the historical Jesus, the NT apostles and the earliest recipients of the Synoptic Gospels, and this propaganda took its most prominent form in cult temples.

In strategically visible locations, three temples of Augustus and Dea Roma stood in Israel–Palestine: Caesarea Maritima, Sebaste and Caesarea Philippi.<sup>18</sup> Each massively memorialised in stone and epigraphy the emperor’s presence, divine status (*divi filius*) and military muscle.

Temples of Dea Roma and Augustus reminded passers-by that this land now belonged to the people of Rome. Ronald Mellor comments: ‘Roma was created to deal with the political reality of Roman power ... Roma was not a living man, a king honored as a god; she was the personification and deification of the Roman state, the *res publica Romana* (Livy 7, 6, 3).’<sup>19</sup> First-generation Christian encounter with Dea Roma and Augustan temples, shrines and epigraphic tributes is indisputable, as archaeology has documented in Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Syrian Antioch, Pisidian Antioch, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, Laodicea, Pergamon, Miletus and Cyprus as well as the three temples in Israel mentioned above.<sup>20</sup> We may thus consider Bruce Winter’s conclusion an

17 For the Roman military and economic investment in roads, see J. P. Roth, *The Logistics of the Roman Army at War (264 BC – AD 235)*; (Leiden: Brill, 1999) 215, 305 and S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 126–7.

18 Winter, *Divine Honors*, 76: ‘The first disciples in Judea would be well aware of imperial claims and imperial venerations undertaken in Caesarea Maritima, capital of the Roman province of Judea, with its own temple dedicated to “Roma and Augustus”.’ See also J. F. Wilson, *Caesarea Philippi: Baniyas, the Lost City of Pan* (London: IB Taurus, 2004) 11–33.

19 R. Mellor, *ΘΕΑ ΡΩΜΗ: The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 19, 22. See also *idem*, ‘The Goddess Roma’, *ANRW* II.17.2.950–1030. Josephus remains a primary source for the study of Dea Roma (*J.W.* 1.21.7; *A.J.* 15.9.6; 15.8.5; 16.5.1); D. Fishwick, *Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Provincial Cult* III.1 (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 5–39.

20 For temples and inscriptions dedicated to Dea Roma in each of the cities listed, see T. B. Mitford, ‘A Cypriot Oath of Allegiance to Tiberias’, *JRS* 50 (1960) 75–9; J. H. Kent, *Corinth*, vol. III.8: *The Inscriptions, 1926–1950* (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1966) 50; Mellor, *ΘΕΑ ΡΩΜΗ*, 21, 24, 49, 53, 56, 60–1, 71–2, 76, 80, 92–3, 104, 108, 139, 234, 138–40, 142–4, 156, 197; T. B. Mitford, ‘The Cults of Roman Cyprus,’ *ANRW* II.7.2.2176–2211; S. J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, vol. I: *The Celts and the Impact of Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 104; J. K. Hardin, *Galatians and the Imperial Cult: A Critical Analysis of the First-Century Social Context of Paul’s Letter* (WUNT 237; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); M. Wilson, *Biblical Turkey: A Guide to the Jewish and Christian Sites of Asia Minor* (Istanbul: Yayınları, 2010) 201, 284, 309, 319; C. Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, ‘Philippi’, *Brill’s Companion to Ancient*

historic fact: 'Christians in the Graeco-Roman East simply could not have ignored imperial cultic celebrations.'<sup>21</sup>

Roman highways connected all hubs of propaganda for the creation of an empire-wide programme of imperial indoctrination:

One need hardly point out that every one of these roads reflected the very history of Rome's conquests; that the entire road system was the fruit of an organic, rational design, applied with method and perseverance, and the result of tremendous effort; and that the existence of this very system, and its efficiency, were indispensable to the control, administration, and defense of an empire spanning three continents.<sup>22</sup>

For some in the provinces Roman roads offered hope of a superior political allegiance that provided foreign protection, clemency and economic advantage. For others, however, whom Rome was absorbing against their political preferences, the approaching roads presaged subjugation and, if surrender was not volunteered, a devastating military invasion. The latter proved to be the case for Judea.

Augustus himself set the imperial standard for these historical dynamics by personally assuming primary management of the Roman road system as *cura viarum* in 20 BCE.<sup>23</sup> In the imperial age, roads could be built only by emperors, who often bore the additional title of consul and were, in any case, endowed by definition with *imperium*.<sup>24</sup> The Roman road network globalised the religious profession of its emperor as divine – propaganda that Rome reinforced through the apotheosis myth symbolised in the images and inscriptions of coins, larger than life statues of the emperors, monumental temples and inscriptions on mile markers throughout the Roman world. Legitimation of the apotheosis of political/military heroes played directly into the political ambitions of Augustus,<sup>25</sup>

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*Macedonia: Studies in Archaeology and the History of Macedonia, 650 BC – 300 AD* (ed. R. J. Lane Fox; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 439–52; Winter, *Divine Honors*, 128–39, 185–92, 226–55. Dea Roma is the likely referent for the whore of Babylon in Revelation 17. See D. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (WBC 52C; Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998) 919–33.

21 Winter, *Divine Honors*, 5.

22 R. A. Staccioli, *The Roads of the Romans* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2003) 83.

23 See Cassius Dio 54.8.4. Staccioli, *Roads*, 58.

24 Staccioli, *Roads*, 55.

25 M. Pfanner ('Über das Herstellen von Porträts: Ein Beitrag zu Rationalisierungsmaßnahmen und Produktionsmechanismen von Massenware im späten Hellenismus und in der römischen Kaiserzeit', *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 104 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989) 157–257, at 178) has approximated the number of portraits of Augustus in antiquity to between 25,000 and 50,000, basing his calculation on the number of portraits typical of each city multiplied by the number of cities in the Roman Empire. The most comprehensive compilation of extant portraits of Augustus is found in D. Boschung, *Die Bildnisse des Augustus: Das römische Herrscherbild*, Part 1, vol. II (Berlin: Gebrüder Mann, 1993), which

who as *pontifex maximus* ('greatest pontiff/bridge builder'), was the most powerful figure in the Roman religious system and, as such, the archetype for each of his successors.<sup>26</sup> The Roman geographer Strabo (63 BCE–24 CE) sheds light on this history:

For in addition to his putting down the brigands Augustus Caesar built up the roads as much as he possibly could; for it was not everywhere possible to overcome nature by forcing a way through masses of rock and enormous beetling cliffs, which sometimes lay above the road and sometimes fell away beneath it. (*Geography* 4.6.6)<sup>27</sup>

The Romans had the best foresight in those matters which the Greeks made but little account of, such as the construction of roads ... they have so constructed also the roads which run throughout the country, by adding both cuts through the hills and embankments across valleys, that their wagons can carry boat-loads. (*Geography* 5.3.8)<sup>28</sup>

Later, Tacitus (ca. 56–120 CE) taps into the same ideological trajectory in his recounting of an imperial conquest in Germany that depicts road building as essential to the securing of conquered territories: 'Instantly conveying both armies down the Rhine, he threw them on the Frisii, raising at once the siege of the fortress and dispersing the rebels in defense of their own possessions. Next, he began constructing solid roads and bridges over the neighbouring estuaries for the passage of his heavy troops' (*Ann.* 4.73).<sup>29</sup>

Closer to our NT context are Josephus' (ca. 37–100 CE) descriptions of road construction as preparations for war in Vespasian's build-up to the Roman invasion of Galilee in 66 CE:

Vespasian, eager to invade Galilee himself, set out from Ptolemais with his army arranged in the usual Roman marching order ... *After them came road-makers to straighten out bends in the highway, level rough surfaces, and cut*

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corroborates the ubiquitous presence of Augustan statues and busts throughout and beyond the empire.

26 See A. E. Cooley, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 148.

27 Translation from Strabo, *Geography*, vol. II: *Books 3–5* (trans. H. L. Jones; LCL 50; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960) 275.

28 Translation from Strabo, *Geography*, II.405.

29 Translation from A. J. Church and W. J. Brodrigg, trans. Reliefs of Roman soldiers constructing roads on the way to Dacia may be seen on Trajan's column in scenes 13, 22–3, 41–2 (see F. A. Lepper and S. S. Frere, *Trajan's Column: A New Edition of the Cichorius Plates* (Gloucester: Allan Sutton, 1988) Plates XVII, LXVI, LXVII).

*down obstructive woods, so that the army would not be exhausted by laborious marching (Jewish War 3.115, 118).*<sup>30</sup>

Vespasian was eager to destroy Jotapata; for he was informed that the biggest number of the enemy had taken refuge there, and that in addition it was a strong base for their activities. He therefore sent infantry and cavalry ahead to level the road, which was a stony mountain track, difficult for infantry and for cavalry quite impossible. They took only four days to complete their task, *opening a broad highway for the army.* (Jewish War 3.141–2).<sup>31</sup>

The historicity of these accounts is corroborated by a 69 CE Roman milestone discovered in the valley of Jezreel on the road from Caesarea Maritima to Scythopolis. Its first line reads: *Imp(erator) | Caesar [Ve]spasianus* – an explicit declaration of Vespasian’s status as emperor and Rome’s claim on the land of Israel. The full text testifies to the road’s construction by the soldiers of the Tenth Legion under the command of Marcus Ulpius Traianus. The milestone affirms that the Romans built at least one imperial road during the Jewish War and that road building was in fact a historical prelude to the invasion of 66 CE, as affirmed elsewhere by Josephus.<sup>32</sup> Hence the obvious: ‘It must be accepted then that the extent of Romanization was closely connected, both as cause and effect, with the system of roads.’<sup>33</sup> ‘Road building was a political act.’<sup>34</sup>

### 3. Milestones and the Imperial Presence

Later, Plutarch (*ca.* 46–120 CE) provides further historical reflection on the Roman road-building enterprise – here recalling the campaign of politician Caius Gracchus:

But he busied himself most earnestly with the construction of roads, laying stress upon utility, as well as upon that which conduced to grace and beauty. For his roads were carried straight through the country without deviation, and had pavements of quarried stone, and substructures of tight-rammed masses of sand. Depressions were filled up, all intersecting torrents or

30 Translation from Josephus, *The Jewish War* (trans. G. A. Williamson, rev. E. Mary Smallwood; Middlesex: Penguin, 1985) 198 (emphasis added). For epigraphical evidence for Vespasian building roads in Syria, Cappadocia and Asia Minor during the mid-70s CE, see B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 34–6.

31 Translation from Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 200 (emphasis added).

32 B. Isaac and I. Roll, ‘A Milestone of AD 69 from Judea: The Elder Trajan and Vespasian’, *JRS* 66 (1976) 15–19; ‘The Roman Road System in Judea’, *The Jerusalem Cathedra* 3 (1983) 136–61, at 140.

33 R. Chevallier, *Roman Roads* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976) 204. On the intensity of Roman road building leading up to the Jewish revolts of 66–70 and 132–5, see M. Aviyonah, ‘The Development of the Roman Road System in Palestine’, *IEJ* 1 (1951) 54–60.

34 Laurence, *Roads of Roman Italy*, 39.



ravines were bridged over, and both sides of the roads were of equal and corresponding height, so that the work had everywhere an even and beautiful appearance. In addition to all this, he measured off every road by miles (the Roman mile falls a little short of eight furlongs) and planted stone pillars in the ground to mark the distances. (*Life of Caius Gracchus* 7.1-2)<sup>35</sup>

Of particular interest to our study is Plutarch's reference to 'fixed stone blocks to mark the distances'. In the western part of the empire, the Romans positioned these milestones along important roads at intervals of one Roman mile = one thousand double paces (1,482 m); in the east they erected them every Philetherian/Egyptian mile (1,575 m).<sup>36</sup> The earliest known Roman milestone dates from 252 BCE.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to providing distances to and from city centres, forums and gates, milestones communicated Roman sovereignty, broadcasting, and should there be any doubt, Rome's military presence and the reminder that that territory belonged to Caesar. Fatih Cimok comments, 'Like the milestones, in addition to their practical function, the road inscriptions were the visible signs of the Roman presence and served for imperial propaganda.'<sup>38</sup> David H. French similarly affirmed, 'The function of the milestones was at once practical and political: they served as much as an instrument of policy as they provided a guide to road-users.'<sup>39</sup> Israel Roll elaborates still further:

While milestones were ostensibly erected to record road construction for posterity as well as to indicate distance, they actually filled a far more important function. For the Romans, their primary role was to propagandize the idea of Rome and its Empire. A traveler from Jerusalem to Eleutheropolis, for example, a distance of thirty miles, would encounter with mathematical precision twenty-nine groups of milestones proclaiming the names and titles of the great rulers of the Roman Empire, past and present. This 'brainwashing' was meant to make the traveler aware of the might of the Roman government, past and present, and convince him that no power on earth would be able to

35 Translation from Plutarch, *Lives*, vol. x: *Agis and Cleomenes. Tiberius and Caius Gracchus. Philopoemen and Flaminius* (trans. B. Perrin; LCL 102; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921) 212-13.

36 Roll, 'The Roman Road System in Judea', 152.

37 Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, 39-47. Polybius (ca. 200-118 BCE), describing a distance in north-eastern Spain from Emporiae to the Rhône, comments: 'this last part of the road has now been carefully measured by the Romans and is marked with milestones every eighth stade' (*The Rise of the Roman Empire* 3.39 (trans. I. Scott-Kilvert; London: Penguin, 1979) 212). With approximate measures for the stade being 600 ft and the Roman mile 5,000 ft, every 'eighth stade' would be close to a literal mile. Research has identified over 600 milestones in Anatolia (F. Cimok, *Roads of Ancient Anatolia: A Turizm Yayinlari: Istanbul*, 2008) 13.

38 Cimok, *Roads of Ancient Anatolia*, 14.

39 D. H. French, 'Pre- and Early-Roman Roads of Asia Minor: The earliest Roman, paved roads in Asia Minor', *Arkeoloji Dergisi* 5 (1997) 179-87, at 181.

challenge it in the future ... Erecting milestones also was a way to express the loyalty of the governor, his troops and province, to the emperor.<sup>40</sup>

While much of the history Roll cites postdates the authorship of the Synoptics, the phenomenon itself was contemporary, as we have clearly seen.

Christianity began as a migrant faith on the move from Jerusalem. And it was on provincial Roman roads that the first followers of Jesus encountered Augustan-era emperor cult temples, imperial epigraphy and honorary monuments such as the *Res Gestae* in Pisidian Antioch, Apollonia, Ankyra<sup>41</sup> and Sardis,<sup>42</sup> the Priene Calendar Inscription with its famous *euangelion* citation found in Priene, Apameia, Eumeneia, Dorylaion, Maioneia and Metropolis,<sup>43</sup> and the Metropolis inscriptions containing the Pauline technical term ἰλαστήριον (Rom 3.25), as found on two altars in the Metropolis theatre (located between Ephesus and Smyrna).<sup>44</sup>

The *Res Gestae* of Pisidian Antioch, the head of the Via Sebaste, exemplifies the monumental scale of emperor cult propaganda encountered along Roman roads in the East. Augustus refounded the Seleucid city as *Colonia Caesarea Antiochia* in 25 BCE. Situated like Rome on seven hills, Pisidian Antioch gave travellers the

40 I. Roll, 'The Roman Road System in Judea', 153. See also Plutarch, *Life of Caius Gracchus* (7.1–2). The Roman milestones Roll describes in Israel were post-70 CE but nonetheless document the same Roman strategy of subordinating and ideologically centralising the provinces through epigraphic propaganda as witnessed by Paul and the earliest apostles in Galatia, Pisidia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia. At the time of Roll's writing, close to 500 milestones had been discovered in Israel (152).

41 See Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 1–55.

42 See P. Thonemann, 'A copy of Augustus' *Res Gestae* at Sardis', *Historia-Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 61.3 (2012) 282–8.

43 For text and translation of the Priene Calendar Inscription, see F. W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton, 1982) 217. The broad distribution of the inscription is documented by the instruction 'And the same announcement shall be made in all the cities where the contests are held in honor of the Caesars, and the rescript of the proconsul is to be inscribed together with the Asian decree on a stele of white marble, which is to be placed in the temple precincts of Roma and Augustus' (Danker, *Benefactor*, 218). See C. A. Evans, 'Mark's Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel', *JGRChJ* 1 (2000) 67–81. On the extra-biblical backgrounds of the term εὐαγγέλιον, see J. P. Dickson, 'Gospel as News: εὐαγγέλι- from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul', *NTS* 51 (2005) 212–30.

44 See M. W. Wilson, 'Hilasterion And Imperial Ideology: A New Reading of Romans 3:25', *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 73 (3), no pages; online: a4067, at <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4067>: 'The altars of Metropolis functioned similarly as social and psychological expressions of the belief among the elite in Metropolis that Octavian was the divine gift of God sent to re-establish order and peace in the world through his reconciling power. Thus, it was inevitable that the imperial ideology that Octavian/Augustus was the reconciler of the world would conflict with Paul's theology that Jesus Christ was in fact that reconciler.' Pace P. Stuhlmacher, *Das paulinische Evangelium 1: Vorgeschichte* (FRLANT 95; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968) 207–44.

impression of a miniature Rome replete with a cult temple containing a larger than life statue of Augustus. Juxtaposed was the ten-column inscription *Res Gestae*, whose heading broadcast in enlarged red letters: *rerum gestarum divi Augusti, quibus orbem terra[rum] imperio populi Rom[a]ni subiecit* ('Below is a copy of the achievements of the deified Augustus, by which he made the world subject to the rule of the Roman people').<sup>45</sup> It is noteworthy that Paul travelled through Pisidian Antioch on his first, second, and third missionary journeys, staying over a week during the first (Acts 13.14–51).<sup>46</sup>

Also instructive are the following 6 BCE Augustan mile marker inscriptions from the Via Sebaste, on which Paul travelled at least in part (Acts 13–14).<sup>47</sup> Each honours Augustus as both *Divi filius* and *pontifex maximus*:<sup>48</sup>

90 (C):

Imp(erator) Caesar Divi f(ilius)  
Augustus pont(ifex) maxim(us)  
cons(ul) XI desig(natus) XII imp(erator) XV  
trib(unicia) potest(estate) XIII viam  
Sebasten curante  
Cornuto Aquila leg(ato)  
suo pro pr(aetore) fecit  
XXIII

94 (B):

Imp(erator) Caesar Divi f(ilius)  
Augustus pont(ifex) maxim(us)  
co(n)s(ul) XI desig(natus) XII imp(erator) XV  
trib(unicia) potest(ate) XIII viam  
Sebasten curante  
Cornuto Aquila  
XII

95 (D):

Imp(erator) Caesar Divi f(ilius) Augustus  
pont(ifex) max(imus) cons(ul) XI desig(natus)  
XII imp(erator) XV trib(unicia) pot(estate) XIII

45 Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 58. This paragraph is dependent on Cooley, *Res Gestae*, 13–16.

46 On Paul and Empire, see R. A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1997); N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 1271–1319.

47 See M. Wilson, 'The Route of Paul's First Journey to Pisidian Antioch', *NTS* 55 (2009) 471–83: 'by far the easiest and probably the safest route for Paul and Barnabas to travel to Pisidian Antioch was the western route along the Via Sebaste – a conclusion supported by such experts on Anatolia as French and Mitchell' (482).

48 D. H. French, *Roman Roads and Milestones of Asia Minor*; Electronic Monograph 2 (2012), at: <http://biaa.ac.uk/ckeditor/filemanager/userfiles/3.2%20gal%20final%20optimised.pdf> (No. 90 (C) 150–1; No. 94 (B) 160; No. 95 (D) 161–).

Viam Sebasten curan-  
te Cornuto Aquila leg(ato)  
suo pro praetore fecit  
XXXII

Each inscription commences with Augustus' name and official titlature: Emperor Caesar Augustus, Son of the Deified One, *pontifex maximus*, consul eleven times, designated for his twelfth consulship, hailed as imperator (by his troops) fifteen times, holding tribunician power (annually granted) for the eighteenth time.<sup>49</sup> Each then claims Augustus built the road, supervised by the governor Cornutus Aquila with *propraetorian* power of the province of Galatia. Respectively, the inscriptions mark the 23rd, 12th and 32nd mile from the *caput viae*, from which miles were measured. Apollonia was the *caput viae* for the first inscription and Pisidian Antioch for the second two. 'This important road was constructed in 6 BC to link the Roman colonies that were established around Pisidia to serve as a military buffer. The road started at Perge and ran to Pisidian Antioch, the *caput viae* ("head of the road"). The road was later extended to Iconium, with a spur extending south to Lystra.'<sup>50</sup>

#### 4. Roman Roads and the Imperial Religion

It is difficult to imagine the first Christians being indifferent to these ubiquitous signposts, so replete with iconic polytheism. For these propaganda-laden highways brought travellers to cities where main streets, often called 'sacred ways', led them on a procession to the local sacred shrines where sacrifices were offered to that city's patron deity and other local deities newly incorporated to support Rome. It was upon these main streets, first-century CE counterparts to Babylon's ancient processional way, that Greek and Roman sacred festivals climaxed in priestly processions and where triumphant military parades occurred. Famous sacred ways existed in Ephesus, where processions climaxed at the Temple of Artemis; Miletus, where religious processions extended 10 miles all the way to the Temple of Apollo in Didyma;<sup>51</sup> Troas, where the sacred way ascended to the temple of Apollo at the Smintheum,<sup>52</sup> and, of course,

49 For translations and abbreviations, see C. Bruun and J. Edmondson, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 787–98. The author wishes to thank Jonathan Edmondson for his translation and explanation of these inscriptions.

50 Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 170. On the dating of the Roman governors of Galatia, see R. K. Sherk, 'Roman Galatia: The Governors from 26 BC to AD 114', *ANRW* II.7.2, 954–1052.

51 Wilson, *Biblical Turkey*, 206, 270. See also L. Burn, *The British Museum Book of Greek and Roman Art* (London: British Museum, 1991) 42, Fig. 29.

52 For Paul's walk from Troas along the sacred way to the Smintheum, see G. L. Thompson and M. Wilson, 'Paul's Walk to Assos: A Hodological Inquiry into its Geography, Archaeology, and

Rome, where the ‘sacred way’ (Via Sacra) processed past the temples of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Mars Ultor, Saturn and Minerva, to mention a few, who at various times in Rome’s history were believed to have been advantageous allies in Rome’s military victories.<sup>53</sup>

The association of such deities with military success is ancient in Roman history, as is the association of roadways with the gods.<sup>54</sup> Ovid’s (*ca.* 43 BCE–18 CE) ‘High Heaven’s Palatine’ is exemplary:

There is a high way, easily seen when the sky is clear. ’Tis called the Milky Way, famed for its shining whiteness. By this way the gods fare to the halls and royal dwelling of the mighty Thunderer. On either side the palaces of the gods of higher rank are thronged with guests through folding-doors flung wide. The lesser gods dwell apart from these. Fronting on this way, the illustrious and strong heavenly gods have placed their homes. This is the place which, if I may make bold to say it, I would not fear to call the Palatia of high heaven. (*Metamorphoses* 1.168–76)<sup>55</sup>

Centuries before Rome’s development of the triumphal procession, the Babylonians had ritualised ‘triumph’ in equally lavish splendour through the lapis lazuli-adorned streets of Nebuchadnezzar’s Bablylon, as Babylonians celebrated the triumph of Marduk, the Babylonian king of the gods. Leading their procession was the god Nabu, Marduk’s son.<sup>56</sup>

In the Hebrew Bible, Psalm 68 shares thematic correspondences: ‘Lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts ... They have seen your procession, O God, the procession of my God, my king, into the sanctuary ... To him who rides upon the highest heavens’ (Ps 68.4a, 24, 33).<sup>57</sup>

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Purpose’, *Stones, Bones, and the Sacred: Essays on Material Culture and Ancient Religion in Honor of Dennis E. Smith* (ed. Alan H. Cadwallader; Atlanta: SBL, 2016) 269–314.

53 See M. Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 92–6.

54 Beard locates the religious association of Rome’s gods with her military triumphs at the font of Rome’s collective memory (*SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (New York: Liveright, 2015) 53).

55 Translation from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vol. 1: *Books 1–8* (trans. F. J. Miller; LCL 42; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966) 15. The NT counterpart to the Roman myth is the heavenly Jerusalem disclosed in Revelation 21, whose one street (πλατεία) is pure gold, like transparent glass (Rev 21.21), and whose temple is ‘the Lord God, the Almighty (παντοκράτωρ) and the Lamb’ (Rev 21.22).

56 For a detailed reconstruction of the Babylonian procession, see I. L. Finkel and M. J. Seymour, eds., *Babylon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 54–9.

57 Probably aware of both the Babylonian festival and its OT correspondences, the NT author of Revelation contextualised the pseudonym ‘Babylon’ to symbolise Rome, the city of contemporary pagan triumphs that marginalised Christians as Babylon had once marginalised Jews – parody being a major literary feature of Revelation. That the ‘Babylon’ of Revelation 17 is Rome is virtually beyond doubt as the reference to the seven mountains in 17.9 is

## 5. Theological Corrective from Isaiah

We propose that Matthew, Mark and Luke, cautioning against the deception of Roman propaganda, intentionally alerted their audiences to what they believed to be the authoritative counter-prophecy of God's coming in Isa 40.3, which cohered with Isaiah's anti-imperial prophetic taunts against Babylon (ch. 13; 21.9), Assyria (14.24–8), Philistia (14.29–32), Moab (chs. 15–16), Damascus (ch. 17), Ethiopia (ch. 18), Egypt (chs. 19–20), Edom/Arabia (21.11–17), Tyre (ch. 23) and all the nations of the earth (ch. 24; 34.1–2; 40.15, 17; 41.2–4). Such theologically based political warnings recur in Isaiah, with 'the nations' implying a veiled reference to 'the empire of the day'.<sup>58</sup> It is into this theo-political context that Isa 40.3 speaks: 'All the nations are as nothing before him ... he it is who reduces rulers to nothing, who makes the judges of the earth meaningless' (Isa 40.17, 23). We propose that Matthew, Mark and Luke quoted Isa 40.3 to transmit again this same set of truths.

Speculation of authorial intent may strike sceptics as dubious. However, what seems harmless in one context can be offensive in another. For example, to promote Jesus as 'the prophet' after the fashion of John 6.14 would hardly raise an eyebrow in most Western contexts. But in Muslim lands the same proclamation would be an offensive violation of the *Shahada* – 'There is no God but Allah and Muhamad is his prophet.' Similarly, we suggest that Isa 40.3 was a radical proclamation in the politically charged context of Roman rule.

In Isa 40.3 'highway', הַדֶּרֶךְ (LXX/NT: ὁδός), occurs 27x<sup>59</sup> in the MT to refer to 'a prepared road leading across country' and in some contexts to a road that ascended to a city's main gate, where it became the 'sacred way' upon which religious processions made their way to that city's temple.<sup>60</sup> N. L. Tidwell has argued that twenty-two 'instances of *M<sup>e</sup>sillâ* in the Old Testament occur in sacred processional road contexts',<sup>61</sup> though investigation leaves the impression that his count is more precise than the contexts actually reveal.

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clearly a reference to the celebration of Septimontium ('seven mountains/hills') held each December in ancient Rome. Beard comments, "Septimontium" was the name of Rome before it became "Rome" (SPQR: *A History of Ancient Rome*, 80).

58 J. Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014) 127: 'From this use of "the nations" to refer to the empire, we might infer such a reference in other passages where there is no direct indication in the context.'

59 Num 20.19; 1 Kings 5.20; 20.31, 2, 45; 21.19; 2 Kings 18.17; 1 Sam 6.12; 2 Sam 20.12 (2x), 13; 1 Chron 26.16, 18; 2 Chron 9.11; Ps 84.6; Prov 16.17; Isa 7.3; 11.16; 19.23; 33.8; 36.2; 40.3; 49.11; 59.7; 62.10; Jer 31.21; Joel 2.8. The related term מְסִלָּה is used in Isa 35.8.

60 K. Koch ('הַדֶּרֶךְ', *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 270–93, at 278) and, similarly, D. A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1991) 229). Tidwell, 'M<sup>e</sup>SILLĀ', 256–8, 63, 69.

61 Tidwell, 'M<sup>e</sup>SILLĀ', 258.

Both John the Baptist and the Qumran community interpreted Isa 40.3 as referring to a roadway in the literal wilderness (Matt 3.1; Mark 1.4; Luke 3.2–3; 1QS VIII, 7) – John preparing the way in the wilderness by means of his call to repentance, the Qumran community by their call to the study of Torah. However, as the biblical image expands in Isa 63.9–10 and Mal 1.2, the envisioned eschatological way leads to the city of Zion (Isa 63.11), where Yahweh was to come into his temple suddenly (Mal 3.1). Mark’s conflation of Isa 40.3 with Mal 3.1 in Mark 1.2 suggests that Mark had this broader vision in mind, as Matthew and Luke probably did also, as each concludes with Jesus in Jerusalem.

הַלְצֵנִי occurs with military denotations elsewhere (Judg 5.20; Joel 2.7–8; Isa 59.7), as it does in Isa 40.3, where construction precedes the coming of the Lord God ‘with might’, ‘his arm ruling for him’ and ‘his recompense before him’ (Isa 40.10; cf. Isa 52.10; 63.1–5). The theological contexts of הַלְצֵנִי, complemented by synonymous uses of לְצַדִּיק (13x in the MT), develop a salvation historical background for understanding the prophetic ramifications of Isa 40.3 – the ‘highway’ in view is one upon which God will arrive to save his covenant partner from foreign oppression:<sup>62</sup>

Isaiah broadcast Isa 40.3–5 in subversion to the imperial propaganda of Babylon: For the exiled Israelites in Babylon, these imposing highways were symbols of Babylon’s might, the might that had brought about Israel’s own downfall. These are the circumstances in which they heard the cry to make straight in the desert a highway, a highway ‘for Yahweh’ ... our God’. Although this is not said until the motif is further developed, the highway of which the prophet thinks is the one that is to enable Israel to make her way homeward through the desert. It is, however, designated a highway ‘for Yahweh’ our God’, just as the magnificent highways of Babylon were strictly highways for her gods.<sup>63</sup>

The prospect of a road campaign from Babylon to Palestine is not apparent in Isaiah 40, however, as it is in Isa 11.16, 35.8–10 and 49.11–12. The image, *pace* Westermann, is not of exiles travelling home, but of God’s *arrival* to meet and

62 See also N. L. Tidwell, ‘A Road and a Way’, *Semitics* 7 (1980) 50–80.

63 K. Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 38. Diodorus Siculus (writing ca. 60–30 BCE) transmits the divine associations of road building through the myth of the goddess Semiramis, the Assyrian/Babylonian queen who became the prototype for every goddess and female cult figure in the ancient world: ‘she became ambitious both to leave an immortal monument of herself and at the same time to shorten her way; consequently she cut through the cliffs, filled up the low places, and thus at great expense built a short road, which to this day is called the road of Semiramis’ (*The Library of History of Diodorus Siculus* (ed. C. H. Oldfather; LCL 279; 1.1–2.34; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933) 397).

save his people.<sup>64</sup> The majority of more recent commentators have thus rightly rejected the return from exile theme in this section of Isaiah.<sup>65</sup> The image is of God's arriving, his *parousia* in all his glory to the rapturous welcome of his humbled covenant partner: 'her warfare has ended, her iniquity has been removed, she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins' (Isa 40.2). The motif 'recalls the processional routes used for religious festivals and triumphal processions in Babylon (and cf. Ps 24.7-10)'.<sup>66</sup> Isaiah's vision foresees preparation for the arrival of Yahweh and the full display of his glory. With the directions reversed and Babylon's counterfeit deity exposed, the Babylonian myth cited above from Westermann has, according to Isaiah's vision, its genuine fulfilment in Yahweh. Compare:

From hostile Elam he entered upon a road of jubilation, a path of rejoicing ... of success to Su-an-na. The people of the land saw his towering figure, the ruler in (his) splendor. Hasten to go out, (Nabu), son of Bel, you who know the ways and the customs. Make his way good, renew his road, make his path straight, hew him out a trail.<sup>67</sup>

Bel has bowed down, Nebo stoops over; their images are consigned to the beasts and the cattle ... They stooped over, they have bowed down together; they could not rescue the burden, but have themselves gone into captivity. ... Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other. (Isa 46.1-2, 9)

What the Babylonian myth envisioned with respect to Nabu, Isaiah heralded as true with respect to Israel's God.

We propose that Matthew, Mark and Luke imitated Isaiah's parody of Babylon in an effort to expose the ideological fallacies of Roman imperialism. Correspondence between the famous religious processions in Babylon and the equally famous triumphal processions in Rome provide imperial contrasts to the application of Isa 40.3 in the Synoptic Gospels. Overtones of theo-political subversion are manifest: 'That all humanity, indeed all living creatures (literally, "all flesh"), will witness and acknowledge the triumphant return of Yahweh to his defeated and dispersed people is the first of many indications in these chapters of the prophetic defiance of political realities.'<sup>68</sup> And the act of preparing the way for the coming of this event involved an intentional choice to live in faithfulness to

64 However, the association of the building of a highway with the return from exile does appear in Isa 35.10, which has clear parallels with Isa 40.3-5.

65 J. N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 51; J. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55* (New York: Doubleday, 2002) 181; J. Goldingay and D. Payne, *Isaiah 40-55* (2 vols.; ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2006) II.75.

66 Goldingay and Payne, *Isaiah 40-55*, II.74.

67 Westermann (*Isaiah 40-66*, 38), following P. Volz, *Jesaja II* (Leipzig: Scholl, 1932) 4.

68 Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55*, 183.



Yahweh, while resisting the temptation to compromise with the politico-religious policies of the ruling empires.

The composite vision of  $\eta\lambda\epsilon\gamma\mu\alpha$  in Isaiah 11.11–16; 19.18–25; 35.4–10; 40.1–11; 49.8–13; 62.10–12 entails the inauguration of Yahweh's saving campaign to regather, comfort, protect, heal and vindicate his covenant people in a resurrected earth of global idyllic shalom: 'The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isa 11.9), and 'all flesh will see it together' (40.5). Miraculous healing of the blind, lame, deaf and dumb ensue (Isa 35.5–6; cf. 19.22), and the symbolism of the city of God culminates the disclosure of God as his peoples' glorious refuge (62.12).

These expectations are the comfort God calls Isaiah to proclaim to his people in Isa 40.1 and the joy that God was to conceive amid the injustices of imperial rule (Isa 35.10; 49.13). Isaiah's eschatological  $\eta\lambda\epsilon\gamma\mu\alpha$  thus refers to the triumphal entranceway upon which God would arrive to hold court in uncontested glorious triumph. This arrival would consummate the true gospel (Isa 40.9; 52.7; 61.1–4), by comparison to which all imperial ideologies were vain.

Evocative redaction of this kind cohered with each Gospel's emphasis of the kingdom of *God* (singular), which, of course, contested the polytheistic political ideologies of the later Greek and Roman Empires. Mark's quotation of Isa 40.3 in Mark 1.2–3 reinforces his introduction, 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God' (1.1), which contests Roman concepts of  $\epsilon\upsilon\acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\iota\omicron\nu$  and *divi filius*.<sup>69</sup> Matthew's Gospel, sustaining Mark's inference in a different context, builds Isa 40.3 (Matt 3.3) into its promise-and-fulfilment defence of Jesus' messiahship before eventually culminating in Peter's profession of Jesus as 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' in Caesarea Philippi (16.16) – one of the three cities in Palestine that had a temple dedicated to Augustus and Dea Roma. In that geographical context, proclamation of Jesus as Son of God invited comparison between Jesus, Son of God, and Augustus, *divi filius*. Luke's expanded quotation of Isa 40.3 in Luke 3.4–6 coheres with his establishment of an Augustan context (2.1), the development of Jesus as  $\sigma\omega\tau\eta\rho$  (2.11), Jesus' status as agent of true  $\sigma\omega\tau\eta\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$  (1.69, 71, 77; 19.9), Jesus as inaugurator of true peace (by contrast to the *pax Romana*)<sup>70</sup> and Jesus as agent of the true gospel ( $\epsilon\upsilon\acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\acute{\iota}\zeta\omicron\mu\alpha$ ).<sup>71</sup> In the context of the Roman Empire, these associations gave Jesus the status that Rome reserved for Caesar.<sup>72</sup>

Alerting the earliest Christians to Isaiah's prophecy (Isa 40.3–5), the Synoptic authors aimed to expose Rome's imperial cult program as contrived, theologically

69 See Evans, 'Mark's Incipit', 67–81.

70 Luke 1.79; 2.14, 29; 7.50; 8.48; 10.5, 6; 11.21; 12.51; 14.32; 19.38, 42; 24.36.

71 Luke 1.19; 2.10; 3.18; 4.18, 43; 7.22; 8.1; 9.6; 16.16; 20.1.

72 For further development of imperial correspondences in Luke, see Brent, 'Luke-Acts and the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor', 411–24.

false and soteriologically deceptive. Taxes, obedience to laws and prayers for the emperor were well and good, but integration with Roman religion would violate the gospel's core convictions of monotheism and aniconism. On this their sacred scriptures were unequivocal.

## 6. Conclusion

Imperial ideology was ubiquitous in the first-century Roman world within which Christianity emerged. Within this historically documented context, the Synoptic Gospels' adaptations of Isa 40.3 were culturally radical. By broadcasting a stock imperial theme – highway building in preparation for imperial conquest, occupation and administration – the Synoptic authors invited a comparison between Roman imperialism and the arrival of the kingdom of God. As agents of preparation, construction and triumph, John the Baptist and Jesus were radically countercultural. The Synoptic Gospels insinuate that what Roman ideology broadcast as propaganda was in fact true when applied to the gospel of Jesus Christ. A solitary Jewish prophet, John, had prepared the processional way before Jesus, the Jewish Messiah/Son of God, who had arrived as Saviour to perform authentic miracles and announce the universal sovereignty of the kingdom of God. Heralding this gospel as having begun, the Synoptic usage of Isa 40.3 was *theologically* and *soteriologically* subversive to the imperial *religious* pretensions of Rome, whose highways were roads to imperially sanctioned idolatry and polytheism.

Christian application of Isa 40.3 was equally subversive to the Hellenic allegiances of the cities Christianity first encountered, where Roman and Greek religious landmarks existed side by side. City after city had 'sacred ways' upon which religious processions made their way to temples of Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Athena etc. – Greek counterparts to the Roman deities Jupiter, Venus, Apollo, Diana, Minerva and so on. For the earliest Christians whose liturgical convictions were founded on the aniconic monotheism of the Hebrew scriptures, Greco-Roman religious expressions were all one and the same – idolatrous violations of their sacred covenant.

Read in the first-century context of the Roman Empire, Isa 40.3, when applied to John the Baptist, asserted that John's message of repentance was the *exclusive* entry ramp to the glory of God's salvation, which had arrived in the person of Jesus, the true Son of God. For their gospel to be true, Greco-Roman ideology had to be false, as the author of Luke-Acts made explicit through the preaching of Stephen and Paul – the true God (singular) 'does not dwell in houses made by human hands' (Acts 7.48; 17.24).

Some may view these comparisons as overstated or contrived. But the presence of Roman imperial ideology throughout the world of Christianity in the

first century CE is incontrovertible, as is overlapping religious nomenclature.<sup>73</sup> Recognising the rhetorical and pedagogical effectiveness of using vocabulary familiar to their audiences – σωτήρ, υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, εὐαγγέλιον, ἰλαστήριον, κύριος – the earliest Christians were able to advance their gospel by using Greco-Roman religious terminology as *preparatio evangelica*. In doing so, they attempted to replace what they believed to be false religions with the gospel as forecast in the LXX translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The question we leave for the sceptics is this: could the earliest Christians have claimed continuity with their sacred aniconic scriptures and fidelity to their exclusive God, while turning a blind eye to the iconic cultural fixtures of the Roman emperor cult and the surrounding temples and statuary of other Greco-Roman deities? An increasing body of evidence suggests that they did not.<sup>74</sup>

73 Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, lxxxix: ‘Christians well understood that their confession that Jesus was “Lord,” “Savior,” and “Son of God” directly competed with and challenged the Roman Emperor and the cult that had grown up around the office.’

74 Pace S. Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 8; J. M. G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011) 387; S. McKnight and J. Modica (‘Conclusion’, *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in the New Testament* (ed. S. McKnight and J. Modica; Downers Grove: IVP, 2013) 211–14, at 212).