

Believers or loyalists? The Jesus communities' identity and social responsibility in Roman imperial times¹

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The narrowed down translation of πίστις to “belief” skews the interpretation of the Pauline letters, where this word-group primarily denotes loyalty and fidelity, including notions of trust, confidence and conviction. These notions, if in different ways, framed the Jesus communities' relationship to God as well as to the imperial context in significant ways. In the end, rather than faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship, the Pauline letters promoted faithful citizenship.

1. Introduction

Paul introduced the notion of citizenship in the New Testament. Some would argue that this is no particular achievement since Paul's letters are the oldest writings in the NT and therefore any theme he put on the table, would have been a first. However, from the range of themes, ideas and metaphors he could have chosen for describing the lives of Jesus followers, his choice for a concept with political implication is significant and worthy of investigation. Paul used citizenship notions that were part of a politically charged discourse at the time, within which πίστις (and its related lemmas), was a crucial concept. A word which Paul also often used, it resonated across a broader spectrum of meaning in the first century than its univocal translation in Bibles as “faith” or “belief”.

These claims are not difficult to substantiate, as will be argued below, but they are somewhat ambivalent, given the context. Politics and religion were simply not such categorically divided notions as modern people generally hold them to be – another topic receiving attention below. Furthermore, citizenship often was a sought after commodity, not taken for granted as much as legitimate childhood, and sonship in particular, was not simply the outcome of birth. Citizenship was not simply about birth or residence in a certain place. Intimations in the Pauline letters regarding responsible citizenship, on the one hand, are not focussed on keeping the polity honest but indicates rather a sceptical and resistant attitude towards the authorities of the day. On the other hand, the NT authors can be shown to have availed themselves of imperialist discourse, taking it up and taking it over for their own purposes. This presentation investigates faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship in the Pauline

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letters, which evidently did not exist independently of one another, and which were tied up in socio-ideological discourse of the time, but which through translations and rather one-sided theological readings were made to disappear from view. My argument concludes that, rather than faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship, the Pauline letters show a rhetoric of faithful citizenship!

2. First-century citizenship

Assuming a linguistic frame of reference entirely informed by an ecclesial context is anachronistic, since Paul's letters pre-date Christianity, formal church structures and orthodoxy. In fact, "Paul's words are not church words, religious-theological words, but vocabulary in common civic discourse, frequently with critical political edges" (Zerbe 2012:15). The proper setting for Paul's emphasis on πίστις was the commonwealth or citizenship; in other words, citizenship was what gave content and meaning also to Pauline appeals to πίστις. When Paul therefore encouraged recipients of his letters in Galatia or Philippi or Rome to exercise a certain kind of citizenship, those people heard him use a concept with they were very familiar with, a notion which has literally determined their lives, from long before they ever heard of Paul.

2.1 Citizenship, Paul and Roman times

The value of Roman citizenship largely derived from the benefits attached to it, compared to non-citizens.² Developments in the Hellenistic period already saw citizenship gain a more technical political significance which it did not have earlier. With the Greeks the city became a political entity and citizenship started to involve carefully protected privileges.³ This trend continued in Roman times.⁴ Initially Roman citizenship was restricted to Rome, but in imperial times it was extended shrewdly to non-Romans for services in the interest of Rome. Roman citizenship was a special distinction, and retained in the family, transmitted by birth (Bruce 1992:1048).⁵ Although Paul in his letters never claimed Roman citizenship, it is expressly

² Ancient Near Eastern citizenship generally only meant birth or residence in a particular location, with freeborn men only entitled to a modicum of privileges if any. Special prestige accrued to citizens of prominent cities (for Jerusalem, see Ps 87) (Bruce 1992:1048).

³ In 5th century Athens, both parents had to be freeborn Athenians for a child to be considered as citizen (see Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 26).

⁴ The value and exclusivity of Roman citizen's privileges waned throughout the 2nd century, and came to an end when Caracalla granted it to all freeborn provincials throughout the Empire (Bruce 1992:2040).

⁵ Roman citizen claims could be validated by birth registers, as the Lex Aelia Sentia (4 CE) and the Lex Papia Poppaea (9 CE) provided for the registration of Roman citizens at birth. The child's father received a copy of the entry, which the mature child apparently sometime worn around the neck or was kept in the family archives (Bruce 1992:1048-1049).

indicated in Acts.⁶ Acts' Paul claims as Jewish man his Roman citizenship in Tarsus (ἐγὼ ἄνθρωπος μὲν εἰμι Ἰουδαῖος, Ταρσεύς τῆς Κιλικίας, οὐκ ἀσήμου πόλεως πολίτης, Acts 21:39), inherited by birth (ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ γεγέννημαι, Ac 22:28).⁷ Some scholars challenge Paul's portrayal and the indication of his citizenship in Acts, especially since Paul did not mention it in any of the autobiographical sections in his letters. Regardless of his own position, he did on more than one occasion refer to citizenship explicitly, particularly in his letter to Philippi (e.g. Phil 3:20), and even more regularly assumed it as crucial concept. Paul's deployment of citizenship in close concert with terms like πίστις, require further analysis.

2.2 Gods, rulers and humans

Citizenship often proved to be the link between people and gods in antiquity. For ancient people, religion was thought of in terms different from modern categories. For them the importance of religion was connected directly to ethnic ties and the antiquity of religion; meeting the obligations of your people's gods; participating or at least showing respect to public cult activities; and, last but not least, "the importance for public security of maintaining the *pax deorum*, the concordat between heaven and earth that guaranteed the well-being of city and empire" (Fredriksen 2006:601). Such connections rested strongly on the family type relationships that people, as part of larger groups of people, saw themselves having with the gods. Family relationships with gods depended on descent, and so kings of Israel, Alexander the Great and various emperors were the "son" of some god.⁸ Hellenistic and Roman representatives constructed intricate relational webs between cities through appeals to kinship established through deities.⁹ As Fredriksen laconically remarks, "Divine connections were politically useful".

Paul was familiar with the references to the Israelites as the sons of their God. Interestingly, when he took up the notion of Israel's divine Sonship, he further differentiated his *genos* in

⁶ On three occasions Acts has Paul exercising his right as Roman citizen: protesting his beating without a fair trial in the Roman colony of Philippi (Ac 16:37); averting a flogging by Roman authorities in Jerusalem (since Valerian and Porcian laws prohibited interrogation under torture for Roman citizens) (Ac 22:25); and, appealing to Caesar in Caesarea, for having his case transferred to the supreme tribunal in Rome (Ac 25:11).

⁷ In the first-century, a property qualification of 500 drachmae was required for citizenship in Tarsus (see Dio Chrys. Or. 34.23).

⁸ "Alexander was descended from Heracles; the Julian house, through Aeneas, from Venus. Jewish scriptures used similar language, designating Israelite kings the sons of Israel's god (e.g., 2 Sm 7:14; Ps 2:7, and frequently elsewhere. Later Christian exegesis referred such passages to Jesus)" (Fredriksen 2006:590-591).

⁹ "We hear much of such elite γένη in the Roman period, since Rome extended its rule over the Greek world by forging alliances between its aristocracy and the Greek elites" (Stowers 1995:317). The γένος or clan was "a locative sacrificing kinship group larger than the οἶκος but smaller and less diverse than a phratry" (Stowers 1995:315-316).

terms that reminded of Herodotus: οἱτινές εἰσιν Ἰσραηλιῖται, ὧν ἡ υἰοθεσία καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ αἱ διαθήκαι καὶ ἡ νομοθεσία καὶ ἡ λατρεία καὶ αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι (They are Israelites, and theirs are the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises, Rom 9:4). Paul ascribed to Israelites as gracious gift of their God, *inter alia* three aspects: the deity's presence expressed by ἡ δόξα or glory invoking divine presence at the Jerusalem temple's altar; αἱ διαθήκαι καὶ ἡ νομοθεσία or customs in the sense of covenant, and Torah; and, ἡ λατρεία or cult which again reference the Temple's cultic actions.¹⁰

The close relationship between people and their gods had a number of implications. One, gods and their human followers regularly came in contact with each other. By simple equation, the greater the political unit, the greater the diversity and plurality of people and their gods. Diversity of gods and peoples meant a corresponding diversity of cultic practices.¹¹ Two, people assumed the existence of many, different gods given the existence of many, different people, and therefore the existence or otherwise of outsiders' gods was not problematic. So too Paul accepted the existence and influence of other gods, but insisted that in order to be included in the coming redemption they should worship only Israel's God and not others (2 Cor 4:4; Gal 4:8–9; 1 Cor 15:24). Three, the register for cult respectability within the first-century Mediterranean world was precisely ethnicity and antiquity (Fredriksen 2006:592).

Within the wide range of deities and cultic activities, two important institutions held the diversity of gods, cults and peoples together. In the increasingly Roman world of the first century, the role of emperor worship amidst the plurality of religions or cults should not be underestimated, since, as Fredriksen (2006:592) argues, “the dense religious multiplicity of the Roman world was offset by the binding power of civic organization and the imperial cult”.¹² These two institutions derived from Alexander the Great, whose Greek city notion left

¹⁰ Second and third century Gentile-Christian communities used such Mediterranean language of divinity and blood-kinship (ethnicity) to formulate their identity (Buell 2002:429-468).

¹¹ Fredriksen (2006:591) is at pains to point out that as much as a wide range of religious practices characterised ancient empires, it did not constitute what today would be seen as religious tolerance: “Ancient society simply presupposed religious difference, since many subject peoples *eo ipso* meant many customs and many gods”.

¹² “[T]he cult of the ruler, introduced to the West through Alexander, was adapted and adopted by Rome. The emperors, from Augustus on, ruled and protected the commonwealth as heaven's special agent on earth. After death, translated to a higher realm, they continued to serve as the empire's special agent in heaven... Such worship served to bind the empire's far-flung municipalities together both politically and religiously (again, the terms are virtually synonymous in this context). Politically, establishing an imperial cult brought honor to one's city and the potential for more direct imperial patronage. Religiously, to offer to the emperor was to offer as well for the empire” (Fredriksen 2006:593).

its mark on Roman religion and politics as well. Cities were little short of being religious institutions, since inhabitants displayed their loyalty through numerous public and communal rituals (processions, blood sacrifices, dancing, hymns, athletic and musical competitions and the like) to the cities' heavenly patrons to safeguard their favour. In short, the connection between gods and cities meant that the well-being and indeed, prosperity, of a city depended on its inhabitants showing due deference and respect to the gods, if not worshipping them.¹³ Conversely, citizenship and emperor worship played a crucial role in the stability of first-century life: gods were as important to cities' well-being, as citizenship was for maintaining social cohesion.¹⁴

2.3 Politics and religion: two sides of the same coin

Citizenship, among others, served as the link between people and gods in antiquity, and therefore ended up being (to use modern categories) both a political and a religious concept. The close relationship between gods, rulers and people in ancient times, underscores that in the first century politics was not conceived of as a separate sphere, in contra-distinction to economics, religion, or culture. "Particularly in the Roman Empire, politics and religion were not only intimately connected, but arguably the same thing"¹⁵ (Hollingshead 1998:x). The context described above should not mislead one to suppose a level playing field on which the many disparate, fledgling, often disjointed communities of Jesus-followers (which should not all too easily be assimilated under the rubric "early Christianity") came into contact with the generally well-oiled, but in any case overwhelming and vast machinery of the *Imperium*, deployed with its military, social and religious dimensions across the ancient Mediterranean. In fact, with the intimate connection between politics and religion, the competition between Empire and church for the submission, obedience or loyalty – the πίστις – of first-century people, set the scene for a power struggle; even if during the time of the New Testament it

¹³ Tertullian's famous remark towards the end of the second century CE, shows this tension in early Christian practice: "If Tiber overflows, and Nile does not; if heaven stands still and withholds its rain, and the earth quakes; if famine or pestilence take their marches through the country, the word is, Away with these Christians to the lion!" (*Apol.* 40.2; http://www.tertullian.org/articles/reeve_apology.htm).

¹⁴ In later years, probably as the early Christian church and Empire grew closer together, the distinction became less clear, also with regard to emperor worship. "And as canons 2, 3, and 4 of the Council of Elvira (303 CE) make clear, not all gentile Christians saw the problem: this church council had to legislate against Christians who nonetheless continued to serve as *flamines*, that is, as priests of the imperial cult" (Fredriksen 2006:302)

¹⁵ The notions we label as "theological" or "political" and especially the attempts to maintain a distinction between them would not have been understood in the first century CE. "The attempt to suggest a division here between the 'religious' and the 'political' is entirely unhistorical" (Bryan 2005:27). Cf also the arguments in Punt (2015b:89-106).

was a muted affair given the size and shape of early Jesus-follower communities in contrast with that of the Empire.¹⁶

The challenges raised by the Roman Empire and emperor cult for other religious formations and practices such as the early Jesus follower communities, was that religion or cult in the first-century Mediterranean world was predominantly accomplished through public participation in rituals. “The ritual was what mattered, rather than any doctrinal or theological rationale” (Bryan 2005:117). This awareness requires caution for a construct such as “Roman imperial theology” (see Crossan and Reed 2004:10), even if its constructed nature is admitted. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that officially sanctioned ritual activities constituted religion in the eyes of the Romans. Notwithstanding some “theological reflection” (e.g. Cicero’s *On the nature of the gods*; see also Versnel 2011), religious rites were that which constituted religious reality for the general populace.¹⁷

For what today is seen as religion, the word cult is the better term in the first-century Mediterranean world: “those rituals and offerings whereby ancients enacted their respect for and devotion to the deity, and thereby solicited heaven’s good will”. Individual households and at times individuals themselves practiced their own versions of piety, but ancient worship was generally public, communal and political (at civic and imperial levels). While modern religion focuses on “psychological states”, “sincerity or authenticity of belief” or the inner disposition of the believer, ancient religion focused on acts: “how one lived, what one did, according to both inherited and local custom. Ancient religion was this intrinsically communal and public performance-indexed piety” (Fredriksen 2006:590).

The intertwined and co-constitutive nature of first-century religion and politics meant that political power and position were appropriated as divinely sourced and maintained, as well as that divine contribution in return required honour and respect through religious worship of some sort. Those unwilling to participate (sacrifice) in Roman religions were branded as atheists and seen as a threat to security, so that periods of Christian persecution which

¹⁶ “In general, a sensible display of courtesy, showing and (perhaps as important) being seen to show respect, went a long way towards establishing concord both with other gods (who, if angered, could be dangerous) and with their humans (ditto)” (Fredriksen 2006:591)

¹⁷ A notion underwritten by the frequent references to the unacceptable practices (primarily, of not showing deference to Roman gods) rather than improper belief, reasoning or philosophy: “So, for pious Romans, Christians who refused to sacrifice were evidently atheoi – atheists” (Bryan 2005:118).

coincided neatly with Empire’s troubled times were hardly coincidental.¹⁸ Imperial decline was put before the door of those unwilling to participate in the religions sanctified by Empire; and therefore at times the need arose to remove the religious wayward in order to ensure the prosperity of the Empire. Following the relative peace the early church enjoyed, it was the later times of Decius, Valerian and Diocletian and thus the times of political, military and economic troubles for the Empire, that delivered the most vicious persecutions for the church – until the church eventually persuaded the Roman emperors that this new religion, rather than the gods, were *religio* and not *superstitio*¹⁹ (Bryan 2005:118-119; Fredriksen 2006:602-605). Crucial already in the first century was πίστις or loyalty and faithfulness to the gods and to the civic institution, exactly in their intersectionalities.

3. Paul’s πίστις

Paul used words from his immediate cultural setting, heavily influenced by Hellenism and indebted to Roman imperialism, with the result that much of his vocabulary had political and social connotations.²⁰ The LXX also informed Paul’s vocabulary, and sometimes it is not clear whether his words carried Israelite or Greek and Roman connotations.²¹

3.1 Development of a notion

Today’s English terms “belief” and “believe” in the first place indicates conviction, considering something authentic, and secondarily trust or confidence in someone or something, but these terms do not include the notion of loyalty and fidelity. For Paul the opposite was true: πίστις and πιστεύω was primarily about loyalty and fidelity, even if it also included notions of trust, confidence, and conviction (Zerbe 2012:45-46).

¹⁸ The unwillingness of Christians to participate in Roman sacrifices, constituted largely by the various forms and formats of the imperial cult, meant that they were a threat to the complex and fragile balance of power that existed between the gods and the state (Heyman 2007). The non-participation of Jesus-followers in these sacrifices, when e.g. processions passed by their homes, publicly exposed them (cf. Fiensy 2004:53).

¹⁹ Until the end of the Roman Empire the tensions remained with Roman religion as force that kept on challenging Christianity. This was evident in the position of the erstwhile convert and later apostate emperor Julian (361-363 CE); and in Augustine’s protest in *City of God* that the fall of Rome to Alaric the Visigoth in 410 CE was not because Rome had forsaken its gods (Bryan 2005:118-119).

²⁰ Some scholars see such resonances between Pauline vocabulary and the social context as deliberate (cf. Zerbe 2012:8).

²¹ “From the LXX of this psalm [87] (especially v 5, Gk *mētēr Sīōn*, “mother Zion”) is derived in part from the NT concept of citizenship in the heavenly city, “Jerusalem above” (Gal 4:26; cf. Phil 3:20; Heb 12:22; Rev 3:12; 21:2, 9–27; 22:1–5)” (Bruce 1992:1048). Cf also the debate on whether Paul’s use of ἐκκλησία links up with the LXX use of the word to translate the Hebrew *qhl*, or with the Greek-inspired assembly of the πόλις. References??

In classical Greek usage, words with the πιστ-lemma were not religious terms, at least not in the sense religion is understood today. Religious connotations with and to πίστις abounded though, so that, for example, loyalty to a socio-political authority was a religious duty, faithfulness was linked to piety, and trust could be placed in a deity. Nevertheless, πίστις was not used to denote a basic relationship with God. At best, people would rely on deities or trust in deities and their communications. In the Hellenistic period, in philosophical circles the distinctive nature of belief in God was addressed in dialogue with skepticism.²² Certainty came to be seen as that which is given by the deity, but as related to piety as well as a broader belief in or awareness of the ethereal. Belief, which now slowly also came to include notions such as the soul's immortality, participation in the divine world and a final judgement, was seen to imply certain conduct. A good example is Stoicism, where πίστις was primarily faithfulness to the self, in the sense of integrity of character, and this in turn enabled faithfulness to others. God was seen as πιστός (faithful) which therefore also compelled people towards loyalty. The religious nature of πίστις was situated in its making the relationship between the deity real, rather than as description of such relationship (Bultmann 1985:849).

Gordon Zerbe (2012:36-45) identifies seven important aspects related to how Paul presented πίστις as faithfulness or loyalty in his letters. In the first place, God's fidelity is foundational: the provenance of fidelity is the gracious God (cf Rom 3:2-6), despite the disloyalty or unbelief of people (Rom 3:3). Second, Christ was not only the agent of salvation but also the prototype of fidelity (Gal 1:16; 2:19-20; 3:22; Phil 3:8-9; Rom 3:21-22; 25-26).²³ A third aspect of fidelity in Paul's letters concerns its nature as submission in loyalty (εἰς ὑπακοὴν πίστεως, Rom 1:5; also Rom 15:13; Phil 2:6-11). Four, for Paul πίστις is confession, pledging allegiance of vowing loyalty (ὁμολογέω, Rom 10:9). The oracles of Rom 15:7-13 are not religious liturgies but songs and praises of homage and loyalty.²⁴ A fifth consideration is that Paul, prominently so in 1 Thessalonians, referred to those whose allegiance is with Christ, as loyalists (πιστεύοντες).²⁵ But, six, πίστις is also (ethical) conviction (Rom 14:1, 22, 23) or (personal) belief (e.g. Rom 12:3,

²² Religious propaganda in the Hellenistic period required belief in the proclaimed deities (cf the Hermetic writings, Odes of Solomon, the papyri, the magical texts, and Celsus) (Bultmann 1985:849).

²³ "Paul has Christ, through the mouth of David) make his own oath of allegiance to God alone among (and for the benefit of) all the nations (Rom 15:9)" (Zerbe 2012:39).

²⁴ "Paul uses the language of 'swearing allegiance' theo-politically also in Phil 2:10-11 (quoting Isa 45:3), where the outcome similarly entails an act of universal submission in recognition of Messiah supremacy" (Zerbe 2012:41).

²⁵ Interestingly, Paul never used the word πολίτης (citizen, cf Lk 15:15; 19:14; Ac 21:39; Heb 8:11).

6; 1 Cor 12:9, 13:2; 1 Cor 8:7), and in this respect πίστις can even assume the status of εὐαγγέλιον itself (e.g. Gal 1:23; 1 Th 2:13). In the final and seventh instance, πίστις is for Paul a cardinal social value, where fidelity to God also means and implies fidelity to members of the community (cf Phlm 5).

The point of departure for Paul's rhetoric was God's actions involving salvation or justice or righteousness, which originated in God's faithfulness. God expressed faithfulness in the faithfulness of Jesus (Rom. 3:21-26), which called forth the Jesus followers' faithfulness and which included elements such as living in trust and with commitment, showing loyalty and obedience (Rom. 1:5). Paul's language reverberated within imperial discourse, who assumed an active role for the goddess Fides among the imperial rulers.²⁶ Loyalty promises in imperial discourse required reciprocal pledges and actions, which entailed submission to the Empire's resolve and collaboration with its self-serving rule. In a similar way Paul declared God's faithfulness, but to purposes different from the Empire's namely focused on justice for all. Paul called on the recipients of his letters to align themselves with these purposes, to faithfully and loyalty join God in striving for such justice (Carter 2006:91). The primary and probably clearest expression of loyalty, and with which Paul's use of πίστις resonated, was found in the imperial, military context of the first century.

3.2 Faithfulness' primary context: empire and the military

Loyalty or faithfulness was an important first-century value and moral choice. Individual loyalty was important but it operated mostly within the broader community given the collectivist nature of first-century life. In the Hellenistic Roman society social formations of people were neither isolated networks existing independently, nor egalitarian.²⁷ "The empire was a single continuous hierarchy, from *princeps*, to Senate, to Provincial Governors, to cities, to families" (Hollingshead 1998:10). The interrelationship went beyond the connections believed to exist from the smallest household to the Empire in its broadest sense. Such interrelationships and the broader Roman societal context as a whole, form the context within which the πίστις- rhetoric of the Pauline letters functioned.

²⁶ The emperor embodied Rome's trustworthiness and loyalty regarding treaties and alliances, as is clear in Augustus' *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (31-34).

²⁷ "[T]he practices of the local household mirrored the relationship of the people to the *princeps*, and Rome to her gods. The empire was a household, as was the entire cosmos" (Hollingshead 1998:213).

Loyalty to the emperor was a general expectation, best seen performed in the army. Life in and loyalty to the army was not an innocuous add-on to lives but often meant the difference between a relatively unworried and a compromised life, to say the least. Participation in the army provided a career possibility, building a life, and settling down with a generous gratuity upon retirement. In fact, “everyday service conditions and prospects were far superior to those generally available outside the army” (Kennedy 1992:790-791). Joining the Roman army was restricted to Roman citizens but auxiliaries were comprised of many different peoples as well as mercenary forces. ... “On being mustered out, usually after twenty years of service, soldiers received Roman citizenship. Thus the army was a major mode of social advancement” (Krentz 2013:348).

In the Roman army soldiers annually had to renew their oath called a *sacramentum* or πίστις, to the emperor as their Lord (*domus*, κύριος).²⁸ In his oath the soldier undertook to serve and be loyal to the emperor and his associates, follow their orders unto death, and submit to punishment in the event of desertion and disobedience. The military context – so characteristic of the legionary Roman Empire – gave explicit form and substance to πίστις as loyalty, as a sworn oath.²⁹ The oath of loyalty which soldiers swore to the Emperor and Empire signalled more than loyalty in battle.³⁰ The oath was also exemplary of one of the most severe forms of client-patronage. And though the oath, and the commitment it implied, a transition was established from being a civilian to joining military life. A strong correspondence existed between the kind of commitment demanded of the soldier and the warrior of Jesus (Hobbs 1995:257).³¹ Paul’s deliberate use of military terminology and metaphors (see Punt 2015a) suggest the military context as part of the linguistic scenario for understanding the rhetorical force of πίστις.

²⁸ As Hobbs explains about high-context societies and the role of metaphor: “the role of metaphor in highcontext societies is important. Further, this specific metaphor, with its emphasis upon outward symbols of honour (armour), aggressive weapons, obedience to one’s commander and suffering for a noble cause, has special significance in a society like the traditional Mediterranean which was populated by persons bound by concepts of honour and shame, and which was structured according to patterns of patronage” (Hobbs 1995:253).

²⁹ Hobbs asserts that “the military metaphor presents a decisive shift in the self-understanding of at least a substantial part of the primitive Christian community” (Hobbs 1995:255), a development or a corrective depending on one’s chronology of the NT documents. Is this argument sustainable, if Paul’s early letters already rely on military imagery?

³⁰ “The soldier’s oath of office was a common feature of the Roman army from the republic through to the empire. It ostensibly bound the soldier to his general patron for life. Without taking the oath the soldier could not fight” (Hobbs 1995:262 n18).

³¹ In fact, early Christians in the second century and beyond adopted and outdid the Roman military and gladiatorial *sacramentum* by their willingness to be burned, bound, beaten and slain in demonstrating *fides* (Barton 1994; cf Hobbs 1996).

4. Pauline faith or faithfulness? In action...

So what is at stake, when πίστις is read as faithfulness rather than faith? Faithfulness did not exclude the more conventional notion of faith as conviction. “Paul’s *pistis* and *pisteuein* ... have *primarily* to do with loyalty and fidelity, but are inclusive of trust, confidence and conviction” (Zerbe 2012:26-46, emphasis in original). However, although first-century πίστις did not exclude convictional faith, even convictional faith should not all too easily be modernised. Still more importantly, though, Paul’s πίστις had a much broader and wider reach than what often accorded to our modern religio-theological concept of faith. Paul’s πίστις fitted into his notion of the alternative citizenship of Jesus-followers, neither of which stood aloof from what today will be called responsible citizenship. He, of course, had to work out the parameters and the nature of faithful citizenship, an important element of which was his opposition to the version fostered by imperial discourse.

4.1 Pauline imperial subversiveness: Promoting another citizenship

Paul promoted faithful citizenship among the communities he addressed, in a world where politics and religion were mutually constitutive of each other and largely served the same purpose. “[G]overnment and religion both functioned, theoretically, to secure the same ends of making life prosperous, meaningful, and happy. The gods brought peace and prosperity and made the state great. In turn, the state sponsored and encouraged the worship of gods” (Ehrman 2008:27). This much is evident also in Jewish-Roman relationships. The Romans concluded significant agreements with the Jews early in the first-century CE, after the deposition of Archelaus in 6 CE and at the request of the Jews. These arrangements, among others, led until 39 CE to Judea being under direct Roman rule. Jews were allowed to practice their religion in accordance with the same guarantees that Julius Caesar and Augustus granted to diaspora Jews earlier; in exchange, the Jews did a daily sacrifice of two lambs and a bull for the emperor in the Temple (Philo, *Leg.* 157, 232, 317; Josephus, *War* 2.197, 407; cf Bryan 2005:27).³²

Cordial relations and apparent synergy did not rule out tensions or hostility, especially among certain section of the population and in certain sectors (issues which cannot be addressed

³² “Jewish Christians were not so persecuted, because as Jews their exemption from public cult was ancient, traditional, and protected by long legal precedent” (Fredriksen 2006:602).

here). Richard Horsley argued that three patterns are useful for describing the relationship between empire and religion. Firstly, imperial elites can simply construct the subject peoples' religion; secondly, subjected people can in reaction and even resistance to imperial rule, revive their traditional ways of life; or, thirdly, religious practices can be developed that in fact constitute imperial power relations (Horsley 2003:13-44). NT texts suggest that the early followers of Jesus positioned themselves more or less between the latter two.³³

New Testament texts show various tensions and possibly even subversive notions toward the Roman Empire.³⁴ For example, in Mk 1:5 the call for conversion to and loyalty to the kingdom of God (μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ) stands in stark contrast to the loyalty expected and sometimes exacted from people by the Roman emperors. From now on, also in the Pauline letters, loyalty (πίστις) should be shown to the kingdom of God and not the kingdoms of Rome or of the Temple elite. In analogous way to Roman soldiers swearing and renewing their oath to the Emperor as Lord, the early Jesus followers uttered a similar oath as baptismal confession, "Jesus is Lord" (e.g. 1 Cor 12:3; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11; see Krentz 2013:348).

Such subversion functioned at ideological level.³⁵ In the distinction between "a war of movement" and "a war of positions", the former is about direct, military or political confrontation, and the latter concerns the struggle for civil society: "the war of positions is preferably expressed in the confrontation among the different symbolic structures generated in the social space" (Míguez 2012:177, using Gramsci). Incidents from the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels are telling of both his subversive approach to the political authorities of the day, such as the triumphant entry into Jerusalem during the time of the Passover festival, and the "cleansing" of the Temple (e.g. Horsley 2008).³⁶

³³ Do the Pauline letters amidst its anti-imperial tone at times also advocate an ascetic attitude towards society and everyday life? One thinks of instances such as 1 Th 4:11 ἡσυχάζειν (live a quiet life) and Rom 13:1 and 6 ἐξουσίαις ὑπερεχούσαις ὑποτασσέσθω (be submissive to the authorities) and φόρους τελεῖτε (pay your taxes). What would the impact of such an attitude have been on discipleship and on citizenship?

³⁴ Some scholars resist the notion that Paul could or would have resisted Empire, but sometimes the difference in opinion concerns definitions of terms; e.g. Harrill (2011:292, emphasis in original) contends that "*Transgressive* means violating the cultural norms or rules, whereas *subversive* means actually changing the cultural norms and rules". However, subversive can also point to the erection of alternative ideological or discursive practices serving to challenge the dominant, which is the sense in which the term is used here.

³⁵ *Fides* (loyalty) was one of the many virtues ascribed to Augustus, cited by numerous sources; the others were *victoria* (power to conquer barbaric peoples and rule over enemies); *securitas* (security); *pax* (peace); *concordia* (social harmony); *felicitas* (providence or good luck); *clementia* (grace shown by the victorious over the conquered); *iustitia* (justice); *salus* (health); *pietas* (religious values and piety); *virtus* (general goodness); and *spes* (hope) (Elliott and Reasoner 2011:125; Horsely 1997:15-16; Elliott 2008:28-29).

³⁶ Horsley's more general notion that Jesus deliberately directed a programme of the renewal of covenantal Israel in and across villages

Paul’s urban-focussed mission brought him in close contact with the omnipresent imperial tentacles,³⁷ and his letters’ rhetoric contains sentiments of resisting and subverting Roman ideology. The Pauline de-emphasis on judgement according to works (Rom 2:12-16) was heard in an ideological context which celebrated the superiority of Roman people. Paul’s insistence on faithfulness (πίστις) “apart from works (ἔργα)” had serious implications in a context of Roman patronage in which the “works” of benefactors determined people’s lives and livelihood – as ultimately underwritten by the emperor as benefactor *par excellence* who readily claimed his “works” (e.g. Augustus’ *Res Gestae*). Paul’s proclamation of a single ancestor for all people of the world, Abraham as father of the faithful but also of the “impious” (ἄσεβής; Rom 4:5), stood askance to a world where imperial ideology relied on the legacy of piety exemplified in Aeneas’ portrayal (Elliott 2007:186; cf Punt 2010).

As final example. Philippians is politically provocative, similar to Romans, 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians. At once personal and relational but also political and subversive, it contains the rhetorical trends identified above.³⁸ The letter’s central exhortation is to sustain unwavering loyalty to the Christ and the citizenship or commonwealth established through him. Μόνον ἀξίως τοῦ εὐαγγελίου τοῦ Χριστοῦ πολιτεύεσθε (Specifically, be a citizen body worthy of the good message of Christ, Phil 1:27a), Paul wrote, adding also ἡμῶν γὰρ τὸ πολίτευμα ἐν οὐρανοῖς ὑπάρχει (because our citizenship / commonwealth is in heaven, Phil 3:20). Following from this concern and closely connected to it, Paul secondly then addressed community’s internal life and its citizenship formatted through Christ with lowliness, hospitality and care, and unity as building blocks in contrast to the Roman consumerist, status-focussed, self-promoting glory, and general immorality (Zerbe 2012:19).

4.2 Hermeneutical implications

If the argument thus far showed anything, the crucial point is that Paul’s first-century context differed radically from ours which rule out simple transferences. This is not to say that Paul’s

(Horsley 2008), is probably more difficult to show than to claim as the broad canvas for understanding Jesus’ work.

³⁷ “Roman cultural hegemony was exercised principally in the cities and their immediate hinterlands. The possession of Roman culture was another symbol of the status of a community and its leading members, many of whom continued to use the vernacular as the language of common discourse. Roman rule accentuated rather than broke down the divisions between city and country, rich and poor, local elites and the urban and local masses” (Garnsey and Saller 1987:203).

³⁸ “Philippians is an exhortation (discourse) on the ‘practice of Messianic citizenship’” (Zerbe 2012:20).

ideas are not worth considering today, nor that there is nothing to learn from his letters. Two issues in particular have become apparent. One, the link between discipleship and citizenship would not have been surprising nor uncomfortable for Paul – in fact, at the best of times Paul and his fellow Jesus followers would have found the distinction (not to mention, separation) surprising and uncomfortable. The modern aversion (and rightly so) for any link between politics and religion, to the extent that countries legislate against any involvement between the two, is quite the opposite of the general acceptance in the first century that the two belong together. Two, and in close concert with the first, a different notion of religion prevailed: the first century's emphasis on ritual, activity, and practice over against the twenty-first century's more affective or even cognitive focus. If the early Jesus followers' emphasised faith as action and content, it may have seemed pointless to many, and even as endangering traditional understandings of human relationships with gods.

More specific to Pauline interpretation, a different reading of his emphasis on the theme of citizenship and faithfulness such as proposed here, entails a reappraisal of his focus and what he stood for, and also where he came from. In 1977 already EP Sanders registered "justification by faith" as a key to Lutheran scholarship rather than a cypher in the Pauline letters. Fredriksen (2014:801-808) argues that within an apocalyptic stream of first-century Hellenistic and Gentile-oriented Judaism the phrase confirms Paul's Jewishness. She maintains that the Second Table of the Law was summarised in δικαιοσύνη, and that πίστις meant "conviction, steadfastness, or loyalty" (not "faith" or "belief"). She concludes that δικαιοθέντες ἐκ πίστεως in the Pauline letters indicates people's Spirit-enabled ability to act towards each other in community in line with the Torah. Even if one does not accept that Paul promoted the Torah as framework for life in the community, Paul's insistence on active faithfulness indicates a different ground for justification than affective or cognitive conviction.

The Pauline letters' emphasis on citizenship and faithfulness underlines their situatedness in imperial times, and the importance of proper analysis of the prevailing and promoted power relationships present in the letters. The hegemonic power and relationships that defined first-century life rear their heads also in the Pauline letters. The ambivalence of imperial contexts and identity configurations therein is a constant reminder that simple oppositions and contrasts are more of the interpreters' making than reflecting the practice on the ground.

Rather than categorical distinctions and oppositions, life in imperial times exhibited hybridity and mimicry as distinguishing traits of hegemonic power. Paul's letters force us to go beyond identifying his position towards Empire as simply fight or flight; and to admit that his letters do not appear to recognise their complicity in furthering a rhetoric or even an ideological discourse perched on power relations.³⁹ Pauline promotion of citizenship and loyalty built upon contemporary military metaphor. With the ethos of this metaphor as the soldier's commitment through the *sacramentum* (πίστις or oath of loyalty), Hobbs (1995:257) detects "a decisive shift in the self-consciousness of the primitive Christian community".⁴⁰ Rather than balancing faithful discipleship and loyal citizenship, Pauline rhetoric advances faithful citizenship, that is, members of Jesus communities immersed in the political, religious, and cultural dimensions of the contemporary world as loyal followers of Jesus.

5. Conclusion

The danger of not studying and therefore not accounting for the socio-historical context of the NT texts in their interpretation is plural. Texts are not read for their meaning but have to toe the interpreters' theological line – in other words, secondary interpretive frameworks, however valuable and constructive in themselves, dominate and drown out textually related meaning. In addition, the values of our (post)modernity society, notions such as equality, democracy, human dignity, are presupposed to have been the ideals also of ancient people. Neglecting socio-historical contexts in the interpretation of texts, especially theological texts, leads to anachronism in the absolute sense of the word, by postulating a "general human being", considering all people of all times and of all geographical contexts to subscribe to the same norms, values and morals. This paper attempted the opposite.

It is a tragedy that "in the comfortable, symbiotic dualism of later Christendom, heaven became the soul's spiritual homeland and destination, whereas the empire could claim the full allegiance of the embodied person on earth" (Zerbe 2012:5-6). When it came to life in Empire, what did faithful discipleship and responsible citizenship look like for the Pauline

³⁹ The relationship between language and social and cultural context, and also between social context and its social systems, means that lexical choice is never without context or general, but reveals the social values and self-identification of groups (Hobbs 1995:255, referring to Bernstein).

⁴⁰ Jacobs-Malina argues, referencing Mk 1:1-20, "the ideal wife was expected to demonstrate commitment to her husband is the degree to which both male and female believers are expected to commit themselves to God, as witnessed in their words and actions' (Jacobs-Malina 1993:12). The male, public and honour-bound counterpart for such commitment was embodied in the oath of loyalty soldiers swore in the military (Hobbs 1995:257).

communities? On the one hand, first-century people would not have found the juxtaposition troubling, maybe just tautological and the use of two phrases redundant. On the other hand, the Pauline letters are evidence of efforts to sustain both the categories of what we would call discipleship and citizenship today, and also of some tensions involved, in the end promoting faithful citizenship: loyal commitment to Jesus as lifestyle rather than conviction.

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