

**Review of Christopher B. Zeichmann, *The Roman Army and the New Testament*.****Lanham: Fortress Academic/Lexington Books, 2018***Robert J. Myles, Murdoch University*

According to Mary Beard's popular-level book *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (Profile Books, 2015), there was just one thing the Romans imposed on all those who came under their control: to provide troops for the military. Most nations conquered by—or who were forced into an alliance with—Rome had as their only long-term obligation the provision and upkeep of soldiers. Troops that conquered nations contributed to ensuring the “peace and stability” of the Empire and were raised, equipped, and in part commanded by locals. This was an effective and efficient way of exerting Roman dominance which required few Roman administrative structures or manpower. It was, moreover, a means of building an expansive army that was basically self-sustaining.

Why has this common understanding of Roman conquest exerted such little influence upon readings of the New Testament, especially those texts where the military is explicitly identified? Further, how might such an understanding contribute to our broader knowledge of the world of Jesus and Paul? In *The Roman Army and the New Testament*, Christopher Zeichmann observes that while Jews were not mandated to supply Rome with soldiers from their ranks, the military presence in Palestine during the time of Jesus was no less complicated. Zeichmann offers a comprehensive reassessment of the topic, drawing on socio-historical and literary methodologies. He argues that the military was a complex issue in the ancient world and that many New Testament texts are somewhat ambivalent about it. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is largely historical and considers the identity of soldiers in Palestine, followed by a discussion of their daily tasks. The second part is more interpretive and attempts to bring the diachronic analysis in section one into conversation with the New Testament corpus, including chapters on the Gospels-Acts, Paul, and Revelation.

In chapter one, Zeichmann suggests four categories to clarify differences among soldiers in the New Testament: (1) Legionaries employed directly by Rome; (2) auxiliaries who served the Roman government but were non-citizens recruited from the lower-classes of the provinces; (3) royal forces under the authority of a client king; and (4) the Praetorian guard serving as the Emperor's personal military force on the Italian peninsula. While Jews were not conscripted by Rome against their will, Jews and Samaritans nonetheless formed the majority of soldiers serving in Palestine during the time of Jesus. The Roman-Jewish War (66–73CE), however, had a significant impact on military demographics in the region. Prior to the war, most soldiers were local recruits. But after the war, Judean auxiliaries were transferred to other provinces, and a not insignificant number of foreign auxiliaries and legionaries were introduced to the region.

Chapter two is divided into two parts. First, Zeichmann describes the “official” functions of the military in Palestine. This included combat missions, preventative violence to deter unrest, patrol garrisons, and work on public construction projects like

roads and aqueducts. Second, Zeichmann addresses “unofficial” functions of soldiers. Contrary to the popular image, warfare was only a small part of the soldiering life. Zeichmann unmasks how the military was a major facet of daily life—both positive and negative—for inhabitants of first-century Palestine. This includes a fascinating account of how a military presence often went hand in hand with the introduction of coinage into exchange processes, transforming the local economy. He writes that “the extent of monetization correlates directly with the prominence of the area’s military presence . . . Local taxes and imperial tributes were the primary means of funding troop pay, rendering the process cyclical in that more coinage resulted in easier extraction of taxes” (37).

In chapter three, Zeichmann provides an overview of the military in the Gospels and Acts. This chapter considers a large number of pericopae written by several authors, and I found myself occasionally wanting more thorough and sustained exegesis of specific texts. Indeed, some texts only receive a paragraph in passing. Others, however, are engaged with at length. This includes an interesting comparison of the centurion’s confession at Jesus’ cross. For Mark, the centurion “is perceived as a man of potential openness and goodness—the one without cruelty on his mind” (65). Conversely, Matthew has the centurion “explicitly motivated by *terror* of the surrounding events: earthquakes, supernatural darkness, resurrection of holy people, and the tearing of the temple curtain” (74). Overall, the different Gospels appear to hold diverse attitudes towards the military: whereas Mark’s Gospel is deeply ambivalent with most soldiers (with the exception of the centurion), Luke “imagines a cozy relationship between Roman power and early Christianity” (75).

Chapter four considers the military in the Pauline corpus and has a more focused argument than the previous chapter. Zeichmann contrasts the depiction of the military between the “authentic” epistles and the “disputed” epistles (most notably Ephesians and the Pastorals). Ephesians’ “highly spiritual understanding of early Christianity as a project in deep harmony with the Roman military imagination” (107), for example, conflicts with Paul’s apparent unfamiliarity with and social distance from the Roman military. In 1 Cor. 9:7, for instance, Paul mounts an argument on the erroneous belief that soldiers did not pay for their own rations. In drawing the contrast between the authentic and disputed epistles, it remains unclear whether the apparent distinction offers an argument against Pauline authorship of the latter, or merely functions as a framing assumption guiding interpretation. For example, when discussing the Pastorals, Zeichmann supposes, “It is clear that the pastor has a better understanding of the military’s workings and values than Paul” (122). In 1 Tim. 1:17, the author commands Timothy to battle false teachers, which, according to Zeichmann, “places the pseudonymous ‘Paul’ in a position of military authority and identifies ‘Timothy’ as a soldier” (121). In my estimation, while the Pastorals may assume the validity of Rome’s conventional values, its military references are still arguably vague. Zeichmann demonstrates these texts have a particular affinity for Roman social institutions (including the military), but it is an exaggeration to conclude the author has a superior understanding of military matters.

Military imagery abounds in Revelation. In chapter five, Zeichmann argues that while a number of interpreters may read Revelation as offering a subversive message of hope, “it is difficult to avoid the impression that John of Patmos simply wishes to replace the Roman Empire with another empire. This ‘hope’ is mitigated by the troubling misogyny and bloodthirsty fantasies, suggesting a more ambivalent stance of Roman violence” (135).

This leads to the concluding chapter, where Zeichmann draws together his observations to suggest that, overall, the New Testament “not only offers both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ responses to the Roman military, but ‘who cares?’ as well” (139). He then turns to a critical reflection, bouncing off contemporary theorists like Slavoj Žižek, about the role of the military in the perpetuation of the mundane state violence that was also part of the “ordinariness” of the Roman imperial regime. He concludes by suggesting that because the military was experienced in various ways by the inhabitants of first-century Palestine, both good and bad, it is important to push back against simplistic readings of the New Testament that depict the military one-dimensionally as evil collaborators with the Roman imperial project.

There is much to commend in this study. The first two chapters, in particular, are detailed and insightful, and provide extremely useful background information on the military that I plan to incorporate into my own readings of New Testament texts. The book also frequently brings simplistic “anti-empire” treatments of the New Testament corpus into contention, revealing how the reality of Empire and military interaction was typically far more complex and complicated than is sometimes assumed by modern exegetes. For these reasons, Zeichmann’s study should be required reading for anyone serious about the military presence in first-century Palestine, and its political, social, and economic ramifications.



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