

Up against Caesar: Jesus and Paul versus the empire

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The “kingdom” of God and “gospel” are usually thought of as terms unique to Christianity. And who else but Jesus was called not only “the son of God” but also “Lord” and “Savior”?

In fact, say biblical experts, these terms and concepts were already familiar to residents of the Roman Empire who knew them as references to the authority and divinity of the emperors, beginning notably with Caesar Augustus before the dawn of the first century.

Julius Caesar was assassinated on the Ides of March in 44 BC. When a comet was later visible on July nights, Octavius, the adopted son and heir of Julius Caesar, promoted the idea that it was a sign that the divine Caesar was on his way to heaven. When Roman law in 42 BC deified Julius Caesar, the status of Octavius, who took the name Augustus, was strengthened by adding the phrase “son of God.” Poets celebrated the divinity associated with Augustus, and across the empire coins, monuments, temples and artwork promoted the cult of Augustus and other emperors who adopted Caesar as an honorific title.

To many in the empire, Roman civilization brought stability and wealth. And the people were urged to have “faith” in their “Lord,” the emperor, who would preserve peace and increase wealth. “In the Roman imperial world, the ‘gospel’ was the good news of Caesar’s having established peace and security for the world,” wrote Richard A. Horsley in *Jesus and Empire*.

Christians gave secular words associated with the empire a new meaning. The Greek word *parousia* referred to the triumphant arrivals of emperors into cities. In churches it meant the expected return, or second coming, of the heavenly exalted Christ. Churches, literally “assemblies,” were the Christian counterparts to the Roman *ekklesiai* where Caesar was celebrated, according to Horsley, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. “Caesar was the ‘Savior’ who had brought

‘salvation’ to the whole world.”

In that context, the Christmas passage in the Gospel of Luke has a subversive tone, says Horsley. Angels bring “good news” of joy “to all the people,” because of the birth of a “Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” A heavenly multitude joins the angels in proclaiming “on earth peace among those whom he favors.” For the Romans, peace was the militarily imposed *Pax Romana*, and it was already guaranteed by Rome.

Horsley has been a pioneer among biblical scholars who have emphasized the anti-imperial, political strategies of the Jesus movement. He has been joined in recent years by a growing number of colleagues, including prolific authors N. T. Wright and John Dominic Crossan. The latter’s latest book, coauthored with Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul*, is subtitled: *How Jesus’ Apostle Opposed Rome’s Empire with God’s Kingdom*.

About seven years ago, Horsley edited an influential book, *Paul and Empire*, and started a “Paul and Politics Group” that met at annual sessions of the Society of Biblical Literature. “We launched a serious consideration of Paul as [being] opposed to the Roman Empire,” he said. “But I think it was 9/11 and the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq that really provoked interest.” At last November’s SBL meeting, a new program on Jesus and the Roman imperial world attracted ten speakers and required overflow rooms, Horsley reported.

The escalating attention to the biblical-era empire has been amplified by the open lament of some ethicists, church leaders and politicians that the U.S. has assumed aspects of an empire—complete with religious imagery to assure skeptics of its benevolent motives. Despite the many differences between ancient Rome and present-day Washington, a growing number of critics are eager to draw comparisons and note the historical irony—whereas the early church reconceptualized the meaning of empire, current leaders have invoked Christian language to support the American empire.

In October about 200 Christian ethicists issued a statement “about the erroneous use of Christian rhetoric to support the policies of empire,” as it was put by one signer, Glen Stassen, who holds an endowed chair at Fuller Theological Seminary. The statement declared that “a time comes when silence is betrayal.” The Christian call to peacemaking has been co-opted, the group said, when “a ‘theology of war’ is

emanating from the highest circles of American government; the language of 'righteous empire' is employed . . . [and] the roles of God, church and nation are confused by talk of an American 'mission' and 'divine appointment' to 'rid the world of evil.'"

Also in October, Brazos Press published a collection of essays, *Anxious About Empire*, edited by Wesley Avram of Yale Divinity School. Interviewed by the school's *Reflections* magazine, Avram likened the Republican convention to a megachurch where President Bush spoke from a pulpit. "You realize that he is using a kind of language that's so infused with religious symbols that one wonders how the church can speak, when its language is so taken over by the culture," he said.

Only days before the November 2 elections, Union Theological Seminary in New York held a two-day conference on analogies between the Roman Empire and the American one. "This conference will explore how the imperial presumptions of American power today can find resonance with early Christian resistance to the Roman Empire," said organizer Brigitte Kahl, professor of New Testament. Fewer than 100 attendees were expected; 300 showed up.

In opening remarks, Hal Taussig, a visiting professor at Union and a pastor of a United Methodist congregation in Philadelphia, said he found it "stunning" to consider how early Christianity adopted Roman imperial terms as its own. "We were not quite listening in the 1990s" when scholars like Horsley and Crossan, two speakers at the Union conference, were proposing that Jesus was crucified primarily for his political opposition to Roman rule. "It has taken us too long to get here."

Taussig credited another speaker, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, with breaking new ground in 1985 with her commentary on the Book of Revelation. "She made it clear that it was a message of oppressed people" against Rome, he said.

Those Revelation themes were also treated in *Unveiling Empire*, a 1999 book by Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther. They suggested that the author of Revelation, John of Patmos, wrote his visionary text to shake the complacency of the churches in Asia about the cult of Caesar as well as about Rome's economic exploitation, violence and arrogance. "For him, Rome was not an order with which one could cooperate," they wrote. "It was, instead, an incarnation of 'Satan.' It was both a ferocious Beast and a seductive Whore."

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, in a blurb for *Unveiling Empire*, praised the writers for their critique of the “contemporary preoccupation with apocalyptic” themes. “Howard-Brook and Gwyther understand that the Book of Revelation is an exercise in ecclesiology. That is, how to be the Church in the face of a powerful and seductive empire?”

Some years before Revelation was written, Paul was sending letters to churches in Asia Minor and Greece to build up the Christ-rooted societies with an egalitarian credo, recognizing believers whether they were Greek or Jew, male or female, slave or free. These assemblies stood “in contrast to the hierarchical social relations” in the empire, Horsley wrote in *Paul and Empire*, a book deemed significant by Wright, a New Testament scholar and the Anglican bishop of Durham. “Tom Wright was one of the first to pick up on that theme, and he has run with it,” Horsley said in an interview.

In a lecture at Princeton’s Center of Theological Inquiry, Wright, like Horsley, tried to anticipate the objections of those who doubt there is political protest in Paul’s message.

“It is important to stress, as Paul would do himself were he not so muzzled by his interpreters, that when he referred to the ‘gospel’ he was not talking about a scheme of soteriology. Nor was he offering people a new way of being what we would call ‘religious,’” said Wright. “For Paul ‘the gospel’ is the announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth is Israel’s Messiah and the world’s Lord. It is, in other words, the thoroughly Jewish . . . message which challenges the royal and imperial messages in Paul’s world.”

Rome regarded itself as the fount of justice that flowed to all its conquered nations. A temple to the Roman goddess Justice was established in Rome in 13 BC, and “justice” had already been celebrated as one of the virtues of Caesar Augustus, Wright noted. To be successful, he said, the gospel of the Christians had to be positive, not merely subversive: “It claims to be the reality of which Caesar’s empire is the parody; it claims to be modeling the genuine humanness, not least the justice and peace, and the unity across traditional racial and cultural barriers, of which Caesar’s empire boasted.”

In his Letter to the Romans (13:1-7), however, Paul counseled believers to be subject to and pay taxes to the governing authorities, which he said were instituted by God.

Wright and Crossan both think that such passages reflect Paul's strategic decision not to invite punishment with open defiance of the empire.

Pauline scholar Neil Elliott, chaplain at the University Episcopal Center in Minneapolis, wrote in *Paul and Empire* that within the rhetorical structure of Romans "these remarks have an important function: to encourage submission, for now, to the authorities, rather than desperate resistance" that would endanger Christian Jews in Rome who were recovering from earlier imperial violence.

But didn't Jesus himself, on the question of paying taxes, advise inquirers to give to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's? For some scholars, Jesus' answer indicates that the kingdom of God can coexist with the Roman power structure. But Horsley and some others view Jesus' response as a clever, indirect way to foil his foes' attempt to entrap him. In Israelite tradition, everything belongs to God and nothing to Caesar, said Horsley in *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel*.

One evident slap at Roman rule in Mark is the story of Jesus healing the demoniac that no one had the strength to subdue. Jesus asks the man's unclean spirit for its name. "My name is Legion; for we are many," replies the man, using the Latin word for a large unit of Roman troops. The demons beg Jesus not to send them out of the country, but instead into a herd of swine; when he obliges, they promptly rush down a steep bank into the sea. Horsley believes the symbolism is unmistakable: Jesus takes control of the Roman forces who have brutalized people and foretells the army's demise.

The Gospel episodes of exorcisms depict a power struggle "at three levels—the individual possessed, the spirit world where God is battling Satan, and by implication the political level," said Horsley at Union Seminary. "If God/Jesus is winning the battle at the spirit level, as manifest in his exorcisms, then Roman rule is about to be terminated."

Roman rulers are the doomed "rulers of this age" in 1 Corinthians 2:2-8, but Paul may also have alluded to malevolent cosmic powers, scholars say. Paul lauds God's power and secret wisdom "decreed before the ages for our glory" over against the "wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. . . . None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

If more scholars come to accept the thesis that many of the New Testament writers were arguing with Roman rulers and their collaborators, that does not necessarily mean they will conclude that Jesus was primarily a political reformer or social revolutionary. Such theories, when broached in the past, have tended to be discounted for lack of evidence.

However, Horsley and Crossan, as well as Wright, argue that the longstanding desire in Western countries to separate politics from religion has inhibited the view that Middle Eastern and Mediterranean religion and politics were as tightly enmeshed 2,000 years ago as they are today.

“Depoliticized views of Jesus have trouble explaining why” Jesus was crucified by the Roman governor in Judea and why another attention-getting figure in the mid-first century named Jesus (ben Hananiah) got off easy, Horsley said. This other Jesus also predicted doom for Jerusalem, but was deemed simply crazy and was beaten and then released. Horsley suggests that the accusation that Jesus of Nazareth pretended to be “king of the Jews” in Mark’s passion story indicates that the Romans believed he deserved “the tortuous death reserved for provincial rebels as well as slaves.”

Though the Lord’s Prayer seeks forgiveness of sins, the petition also asks for God’s kingdom to come and “focuses on the people’s economic needs, concretely sufficient food and mutual cancellation of debts,” said Horsley, explaining how the sociopolitical side of Jesus’ message is downplayed.

Crossan, an emeritus professor at DePaul University, published extensively on the “historical Jesus” from 1991 to 1994 and summarized his conclusions in *Who Killed Jesus?* (1995). “The kingdom of God movement was Jesus’ program of empowerment for a peasantry becoming more steadily hard-pressed . . . through insistent taxation, attendant indebtedness and eventual land expropriation, all within increasing commercialization in the booming colonial economy of a Roman empire under Augustan peace,” he wrote. Jesus lived an alternative life of shared meals, itinerancy and human contact without discrimination. “That was how God’s will was to be done on earth—as in heaven,” Crossan said.

Crossan and recent coauthor Reed, interviewed together at the University of La Verne in California, where Reed teaches, agreed that “kingdom of God” was a phrase chosen by Jesus to confront the divine Roman Empire.

“Jesus could have talked about the Community of God or the People of God,” said Crossan.

“Or the family of God, the synagogue of God,” interjected Reed.

“But as soon as you say the kingdom of God, you’re taking over Roman terminology,” added Crossan. “Jesus picked the one term that was really going to raise eyebrows.”

Their book may in turn raise the eyebrows of some scholars. “I know we will get the accusation that it lacks spiritual content because it is too political,” said Reed.

“However, this is one of the few books on Paul that takes his ecstatic experiences seriously; there is a spiritual component to Paul.”

Crossan added: “People have no problem with the statement, ‘Not Caesar, but Christ, is Lord.’ That’s fine. But then we say, ‘Here’s Caesar’s program and here’s Christ’s program.’ Now we are getting into politics.”

Asked what will happen if they relate their historical work to 21st-century politics, Crossan replied, “Then it will be called partisan politics.”

Nonetheless, in both their book and the interview, the coauthors emphasized that they think neither the Roman Empire nor the U.S. empire can be called “evil.” The early Christian conflict with Rome came because Rome “represented what we call ‘the normalcy of civilization,’” said Crossan, noting that civilizations can be beneficial as well as unjust and oppressive.

“So Paul’s language about a ‘new creation’—starting all over again—has to be taken seriously, because we’re trying to get to a nonviolent civilization, and we don’t have a clue what that looks like.”

The Roman Empire, they wrote, was based on faith in achieving peace through military victory. Opposing the Roman philosophy, Paul the Jew followed in Jesus’ footsteps by proclaiming a covenant of nonviolent justice and true peace.

Crossan and Reed were asked to what extent America can embody those Christian ideals. They agreed that inasmuch as Rome was the greatest preindustrial empire and the U.S. is the greatest postindustrial one, “Paul’s challenge is as forceful now as it was then.”