

Study 6 – Empire

John's Gospel records that in reply to a question from Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world." (John 18:36 NRSV) Many a sermon has been preached using this text to support a view of the Kingdom of God being located in a spiritual realm that is quite distinct from the material world in which we all live our earthly lives. But Jesus' next words make it clear that he had a quite different distinction in mind: "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

Kingdoms and Empires

Ever since the agricultural revolution, when humankind exchanged the nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life for cities and villages supported by agriculture, people have organized themselves into larger and larger social groups. The Agricultural revolution took place around 12,000 BC, and "by ca. 8500 BC the largest settlements in the world were villages such as Jericho, home to several hundred people. During the fifth and fourth millennium BC, cities with tens of thousands of inhabitants sprouted in the Fertile Crescent, and each of these held sway over many nearby villages. In 3100 BC the entire lower Nile Valley was united into the first Egyptian kingdom. Its pharaohs ruled thousands of square kilometres and hundreds of thousands of people. Around 2250 BC Sargon the Great forged the first empire, the Akkadian. It boasted over a million subjects and a standing army of 5,400 soldiers." (Harari 2011)

In city-states and kingdoms, wealth was created through producing more food on farms than the people producing it needed to live, with the surplus being used to support the official hierarchies and the life-styles of the small proportion of people in whose hands power was concentrated. And it remained broadly this way from the dawn of written history until the emergence of capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. There were limits to how much food and how many resources a given area of land could produce, and so the surest way to become richer and more powerful was to control or own more land, and to extract tribute or taxes from the people who lived on it and worked it. Empires were thus built on the labour of peasants, who had to work long hard hours, and were constantly threatened with catastrophe for themselves and their families from poor harvests, natural disasters, sickness and infirmity or the ravages of war.

In the ancient Near East, Empires were built up as the more powerful states conquered other lands and imposed tribute in the form of agricultural produce, together with available precious metals and luxury goods. So, for example, when the Assyrian emperors conquered the monarchies of Israel and Judah, they demanded tribute, so the kings of Israel and Judah increased the tax burden on their own subjects in order to cover both ongoing national expenses and the tribute to the empire. Already hard-pressed peasants were required to yield tribute to two regimes, both their native rulers and the Assyrian overlord. (Gottwald 2008) Whilst armies conquered the land, and kept the vassal King paying the imperial tribute, it was the religious ideology that provided the justification to the population at large for imperial domination. After all, the emperor and his appointed officials were the gods' representative on earth, so if you wanted to stay in the gods' good graces, then you had to conform.

The Bible and Empire

During Biblical times, there wasn't the separation of religion and state that we have today. Instead, the rulers of the Empire were both heads of state and the representatives of the Gods on earth – unless, of course, they were divine themselves. The hierarchical systems that maintained empire controlled both the official religion (through officially sanctioned priests) and the systems of state (through a network of officials authorized to collect taxes, and armies to maintain order).

At the time of Jesus' discussion with Pontius Pilate with which this study opened, the Roman Empire held sway over most of Europe and large parts of the Middle East and North Africa. Roman Legions maintained the peace, Pax Romana, by force of arms, and Roman Officials were ruthless in executing any who threatened their dominance and control. That was how it was in kingdoms that were 'from here'. Indeed, that is how it had always been for the tiny state of Israel in the land of Palestine, trapped between the mighty Empires of Assyria, Babylon or Persia in the East and the Mediterranean Sea in the West and the equally fearsome Empire of Egypt in the South.

The Old Testament provides evidence of two sets of responses in Israel in the face of this imperial reality: those of kings, and those of prophets. Indeed, the prophetic warnings about kingship are spelled out very clearly in the Book of Samuel, where the prophet Samuel tells the assembled Israelites, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day." (1 Samuel 8: 11-18)

The Bible tells us that the Israelites, of course chose first Saul, and then David as Kings to help them in establishing the Kingdom of Israel, which later split into two. Kings of the Northern State of Israel proved incapable of withstanding the might of Tiglath-Pileser of Assyria, and within 24 years of his rise in 745 BCE, Samaria had been sacked, and its people deported, to be replaced with a peasantry who were much more susceptible to providing the necessary tribute. In the southern kingdom of Judah, the records imply that Ahaz pretty much threw in the towel with Tiglath-Pileser (2 Kings 16) and agreed to conform his policies to those of the empire, thereby compromising the practice of Yahwism in Judah. (Brueggemann 2008) His son Hezekiah and grandson Josiah, however, seem to have supported Yahwism whilst seeking to hold the empire at bay using various political manoeuvres, but Hezekiah was quickly brought to heel by Sennacherib (2 Kings 18:13–16).

In contrast to the kings' attempts to retain their national identity whilst bending to the will of the all-powerful empires, the prophets' responses were very different. For prophets, although like for kings there is a recognition of the need to maintain national identity and local traditions, unlike them the identity of Judah is decisively marked by reference to

YHWH (Yahweh) the uncompromising God of Israel. Although he is seated locally in Jerusalem, Yahweh's sovereignty extends to the whole scope of international reality. The prophetic imagination (Brueggemann 2001) resists all compromise with earthly powers, seeing in the action of emperors Yahweh's means of correcting and punishing his rebellious chosen people, but calling to account any emperor who considers themselves mightier than Yahweh (e.g. Isa 10:15). Time and again, prophets recall the exodus, whereby the very identity of Israel was as a people freed from the yoke of empire.

Thus the prophetic imagination in the Old Testament provides a rich theology that contrasts the violence and oppression of empire, inevitably justified by what Brueggemann calls the 'Royal Imagination' expressed through the state religion, with the creative and distributive justice of God. This is the theological context within which first Jesus and then Paul worked out their own response to the Roman Empire of their day, and the Jewish authorities that either co-operated with Rome, or opposed the Roman imperial theology in ways that betrayed what Jesus recognised as God's true character.

[Empire today and the Christian response.](#)

Since the emergence of capitalism, the wealth of nations and individuals is no longer directly related to the amount of land that they control. Valuable resources take many forms, some of which (such as oil) are related to land, and some of which (such as money, technology or intellectual property aren't).

At the heart of the term 'Empire' lies the concept of the exploitation of the many for the benefit of the few, which in the eyes of the Old Testament prophets and Jesus and his followers who wrote the New Testament is at variance with the nature and will of God the creator, who Jesus called 'Father'. And this exploitation is as much a feature of modern life as it ever was.

The Council for World Mission has, since 2010, defined Mission as being conducted in the context of Empire. As they explain, "We speak of Empire, because we discern a coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power in our world today, that constitutes a reality and a spirit of lordless domination, created by humankind yet enslaving simultaneously; an all-encompassing global reality serving, protecting and defending the interests of powerful corporations, nations, elites and privileged people, while imperiously excluding even sacrificing humanity and exploiting creation; a pervasive spirit of destructive self-interest, even greed - the worship of money, goods and possessions; the gospel of consumerism, proclaimed through powerful propaganda and religiously justified, believed and followed; the colonization of consciousness, values and notions of human life by the imperial logic; a spirit lacking in compassionate justice and showing contemptuous disregard for the gifts of creation and the household of life." (CWM 2010)

In a similar vein, in his first book as Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby writes, "The more interconnected the world becomes, the more power is held over individuals and nations by economics, by money and by flows of finance. Mammon – a name given by Jesus to this force – gains strength through our obedience. The more we let ourselves be governed by Mammon, the more power he has, and the more the vulnerable suffer." (Welby 2016)

After preaching his influential sermon at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Bishop Michael Curry flew back to join 2,000 other US church leaders to march in Washington DC in support of the "Reclaiming Jesus" movement, and to protest against the

political policies of US President Donald Trump. The grounds for their protest is articulated in a theological declaration signed by a multiracial group of 23 church leaders with representation from evangelical, mainline Protestant, African-American, and Catholic churches and who included. in addition to Bishop Michael, such prominent figures as Walter Brueggeman, Tony Campolo, Richard Rohr and Will Wilemon. The declaration states, “Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. It was central for the early church and needs to again become central to us. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. If Jesus is Lord, no other authority is absolute. Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God he announced, is the Christian’s first loyalty, above all others. We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth.” (Wallis 2018)

But of course, when the Gospel message is understood as relating directly to the values, behaviour and actions of those in positions of power and influence – the ‘elites’ of today’s empires – then the faith becomes highly controversial. Perhaps it is no wonder that Christianity is growing most strongly in those parts of the world where large proportions of the populations are exploited and impoverished, and is shrinking in the affluent ‘West’.

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