

**Jesus Was Not Against Imperialism:  
New Testament Ethics as an Imperialist Project**

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In a well-known postcolonialist tome, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (1989), Bill Ashcroft and his coauthors observe that the British empire is now largely defunct, but “cultural hegemony has been maintained through canonical assumptions about literary activity, and through attitudes toward postcolonial literature which identify them as off-shoots of English literature.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, although Christian empires may no longer be as politically powerful as they once were, they still exert their cultural hegemony by extolling the ethical and aesthetic superiority of their biblical texts over those of other cultures.

One example of how New Testament ethics is complicit in perpetuating Christian religious and textual imperialism is the popular portrayal of Jesus as an anti-imperialist. In his book, *The Politics of Jesus* (2004), Obery Hendricks claims that: “[t]he rhetoric of empire certainly is not consistent with the politics of Jesus.”<sup>2</sup> Hendricks is not the only one to make such a claim. Richard Horsley and Warren Carter, among many other prominent names, also are devoted to this anti-imperialist image of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> In this view, Jesus was fully aware of the problems of imperialism presented by the Roman empire in which he lived, and Jesus sought to correct the injustice and social ills that such imperialism wrought. Horsley, for example, remarks that “[t]rying to understand Jesus’ speech and action without

knowing how Roman imperialism determined the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem is like trying to understand Martin Luther King without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined the lives of African Americans in the United States...”<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to these scholars, I argue that the portrayal of Jesus as an anti-imperialist actually betrays a pro-imperialist Christian agenda on the part of many New Testament ethicists. To understand my argument, one might begin with what Frederick Douglass, the famous African American abolitionist, understood better than most historians today when it comes to the Christian historiography of slavery.

Now that slavery is no more, and the multitude are claiming the credit of its abolition, though but a score of years have passed since the same multitude were claiming an exactly opposite credit, it is difficult to realize that an abolitionist was ever an object of popular scorn and reproach in this country.<sup>5</sup>

Douglass was commenting on the fact that many Christians who formerly supported slavery began to revise their own history when they joined the abolitionism bandwagon. Instead of admitting that they once supported slavery, many Christians now claimed that they had always been against it. Likewise, many anti-imperialist readings of Jesus and the New Testament may be nothing more than attempts to whitewash the fact that imperialism is so inscribed in the

New Testament that later Christian imperialism was simply putting into effect what was there from the beginning.

In terms of literary history, the anti-imperialist view of Jesus is part of a broader trend in biblical studies that focuses on post-colonialist and anti-imperialist readings of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Historically, this is part of the western response to the continued dismantling of European empires that began in the eighteenth century, and continued with independence movements in Latin American, India, and Africa, among other places after World War II. The trend accelerated with the rise of what is called “liberation theology” in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup> In ancient Near Eastern studies, postcolonialist approaches gained some more fervor with the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978).<sup>8</sup>

Despite its relatively recent advent, postcolonialist approaches already form a diverse phenomenon.<sup>9</sup> If postcolonialism refers to the socio-political situation that exists after the achievement of formal independence by nations, then the postcolonial experience of countries around the globe has not been uniform, and the achievement of freedom itself spans a variety of historical contexts.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the economic dependency of otherwise politically independent nations is a form of colonialism, and so the term “postcolonial” is a misnomer altogether.<sup>11</sup> Rather the modern world is more akin to the relations between an economically hegemonic core and an economically exploited and dependent periphery outlined by Immanuel Wallerstein.<sup>12</sup>

I define postcolonial literature and scholarship *as writings that scrutinize critically the colonial experience, whether past or present.*<sup>13</sup> Thus postcolonialism

here refers to a state of consciousness that does not accept colonialism as the proper political arrangement. Under this definition the writer may or may not be living in a colonial situation. Colonialism may be seen as any form of social, political, or economic subjugation undertaken by a state and its allied institutions.

The rise of anti-imperialist portrayals of Jesus also is part of a reaction against the depoliticized portrayals of other scholars. For example, in his construction of the anti-imperialist Jesus, Horsley remarks that “[w]e can identify at least four major interrelated factors in this construction of a depoliticized Jesus—most recently in the guise of a wisdom teacher.”<sup>14</sup> Horsley is specifically referring to the scholars of the Jesus Seminar who advocate a Jesus resembling “the vagabond Cynic philosophers, which has so intrigued liberal interpreters recently...”<sup>15</sup> For Horsley, Jesus has been domesticated and his political dimensions erased by scholars who view him as a modern hippie.

The more recent impetus for the anti-imperialist portrayal of Jesus centers on a protest against American imperialism, especially during the presidency of George W. Bush after September 11, 2001. Obery Hendricks, for example, devotes an entire chapter in *The Politics of Jesus* to showing how George W. Bush does not comply with the teachings of Jesus about social justice.<sup>16</sup> Richard Horsley specifically refers to September 11, 2001 when assailing the idea that one can separate religion and politics.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Horsley speaks about how “[t]he United States, an ostensibly Christian country, violates the holy ground of Islam in basing military forces in Saudi Arabia, forces that also prop up the unpopular Saudi regime that oppresses its own people.”<sup>18</sup> Other references suggest that the

United States is the modern version of the oppressive Roman empire against which Jesus would struggle if he were alive today. But even if the United States is the modern equivalent of the oppressive Roman empire, this does not mean that Jesus was against empire.

### *Rethinking “Anti-Imperialism”*

The most salient problem in seeing Jesus as anti-imperialist is simply the biased definition of “anti-imperialism” being used by most of these New Testament scholars.<sup>19</sup> Such scholars describe as “anti-imperialist” statements that seem to attack the Roman empire.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the mere attack on any particular empire does not define one as anti-imperialist. ***Anti-imperialism should be defined as an ideology that is against any empire***, and that is certainly not what Jesus was championing. Attacking the Roman empire in the New Testament is usually for the purposes of replacing it with another empire called The Kingdom of God or the like.

Hans Morgenthau, the famed advocate of political realism, postulated that any entity that seeks a favorable change in power status is, in fact, pursuing an imperialist policy, defensive or not.<sup>21</sup> By extension, those who oppose any empire, must seek to replace an opposing empire with their own empire. That is to say, everyone is pursuing a hegemony for their view and that often requires force. Even those who say they want a pluralistic society seek to overthrow a non-pluralistic society. Extending a pluralistic society may require imperialistic actions when opponents do not want to yield peacefully. Similarly, Americans

pursuing an abolitionist society eventually required force, as the U.S. Civil War demonstrated.

One can readily see that many of those scholars who claim that Jesus is an anti-imperialist also believe that Jesus intended to replace the Roman empire with the Kingdom of God. In his study of the eschatological politics of Mark, Tatt-siong Benny Liew concludes:

Mark's politics of parousia, by promising the utter destruction of both Jewish and Roman authorities upon Jesus' resurrected return, is one that mimics or duplicates the authoritarian, exclusionary, and coercive politics of his colonizers.<sup>22</sup>

Other scholars are more self-contradictory on the imperialistic nature of the Gospels. Consider these two sentences by D. Michael Cox:

In sum, Matthew's Gospel embodies resistance to the claims of empire. The theological challenge argues for the sovereignty of the Lord over against the gods of the Romans and the conviction that Jesus, not the emperor, acts as God's anointed agent and the manifestation of divine presence.<sup>23</sup>

In his first sentence, Cox describes Matthew as embodying “resistance to the claims of empire.” But in the very next sentence, Cox speaks of the “sovereignty

of the Lord” and of Jesus being the agent of that sovereign. So, how is Matthew “resisting” empire if he champions the “sovereignty” of his lord? Indeed, Matthew is not against empire at all. *Matthew is simply saying that he prefers a different empire*, but it is an empire no less because it aims to exert its sovereignty over the world. Matthew prefers Jesus, not the Roman emperor, as the agent of that divinely appointed empire.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Kingdom of God as an Empire*

Whether Jesus saw himself as an emperor or not, most scholarship agrees that Jesus sees himself as an agent of the entity known as the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>25</sup> That Kingdom of God/Heaven is portrayed as being just as imperialistic as the Roman empire. Ironically, Warren Carter, who otherwise sees Jesus as an opponent of empire, acknowledges as much:

The Gospel envisions salvation as the end of this sinful world, the defeat of Rome, and the establishment of a new heaven and earth under God’s sovereignty. But the irony must be noted. This bold vision of the completion of God’s salvation and overthrow of Roman imperial power co-opts and imitates the very imperial worldview that it resists!

For Rome and God, the goal is supreme sovereignty of the most powerful. For both, the scope or extent of their sovereignty is the

cosmos. Both appeal to the divine will for legitimation. Both understand the establishment of their sovereignty to be through a chosen agent and by means of the violent overthrow of all resistance. Both offer totalizing perspectives. Both demand compliance. Both destroy enemies without room for the different or the noncompliant. Both recognize that those who welcome its sovereignty benefit from it. The Gospel depicts God's salvation, the triumph of God's empire over all things, including Rome, with the language and symbols of imperial rule.<sup>26</sup>

Despite Carter's admission of the similarity between the Kingdom of God and the Roman empire, he still regards Jesus' views as different and ethically superior.

The best reason that Warren offers for the Gospel's imperialistic rhetoric is that it is simply using the only language that is available. For Carter, the Gospel is framed in imperialistic terms because "the imperial worldview is so prevalent that even in this story of protest against imperial rule cannot escape its own cultural world. It has no other language to use."<sup>27</sup> The problem with this argument is that one must deny the plain meaning of the rhetoric in order to extract an opposing meaning. Even if Jesus is using imperialistic language, Carter tells us that Jesus really meant an anti-imperialistic message in those same words.

The apologetic intent of Carter's argument becomes apparent when one realizes that the same can be said of Roman imperialistic language. Why can't one say that the Romans were actually subverting empire by using imperialistic



language? Why can't one argue that despite how imperialistic the rhetoric of the Romans may seem, it was really meant to be anti-imperialistic? One can just as well say, as does Carter in the case of the Gospel, that the Roman empire used imperialistic language to express an anti-imperialistic message because "[i]t has no other language to use." It is of no help to argue that the Roman empire was actually acting as an empire, and not just using imperialistic language. All empires usually express their imperialistic intentions, even if couched in benign rhetoric, prior to becoming actual empires. Even if Jesus is not heading an actual empire, we can certainly claim that he is portrayed as endorsing an imperialist project. Therefore, he is at least an imperialist in ideology.

When Jesus' imperialism is acknowledged it is frequently done so by euphemisms or circumlocutions. Christopher Bryan, who has opposed the more radically political portrayals of Jesus drawn by Horsley, states: "I believe that Jesus stood foursquare with the biblical and prophetic attitudes toward political and imperial power represented by Nathan, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Deutero-Isaiah; he would acknowledge such power, but he would also (and therefore) hold it accountable."<sup>28</sup> The Hebrew prophets mentioned by Bryan certainly see a worldwide empire under Yahweh's control. Yet, Bryan never describes Jesus as an "imperialist" as he does others who support imperial power.

The entire idea of a Kingdom of God can be traced back to the Hebrew Bible.<sup>29</sup> As Dale Patrick observes, "Jesus did not coin the expression Kingdom of God, it was already in circulation during his time."<sup>30</sup> For example, in 1 Chron. 28:5 one finds this statement: "And of all my sons (for the LORD has given me

many sons) he has chosen Solomon my son to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel.” Here, the Septuagint renders the Hebrew **מלכות יהוה** (“kingdom of the Lord”) as *Βασιλείας κυρίου*. In Chronicles, the kingdom of Yahweh basically refers to the worldly territory or to the nation of Israel (cf. Exod. 15:18, 19:6).

The arrival of monotheism at least by the time of Deutero-Isaiah was accompanied by the belief that one god created and owned the entire world. In Isaiah 45, for example, one finds an intimate link between creation, ownership, and dominion of the world:

For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (he is God!),  
who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not  
create it a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!): “I am the LORD,  
and there is no other...By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has  
gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘To me  
every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear’” (Isa. 45:18, 23).

Moreover, Yahweh’s favored people or followers will share in the earthly power that God’s ownership bestows. Thus, Dan. 7:27 states: “And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.”

Isaiah envisions the following for Immanuel (who is identified with Jesus

in Mt. 1:21-23): “Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore” (Isa. 9:7).<sup>31</sup> Isaiah also envisions a future trajectory in which the entire world will be enslaved to Yahweh and his chosen people:

The LORD will have compassion on Jacob and will again choose Israel, and will set them in their own land; and aliens will join them and will cleave themselves to the house of Jacob. And the peoples will take them and bring them to their place, *and the house of Israel will possess them in the LORD's land as male and female slaves*; they will take captive those who were their captors, and rule over those who oppressed them (Isa. 14:1-2; my emphasis).

What is described here should best be characterized as pacification through violent means rather than through some benign process. The expectation of worldwide Kingdom of God continued during the Second Temple Jewish period.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, an equally important feature is that the arrival of the Kingdom of God entailed horrible violence. The Testament of Moses, which John J. Collins dates in its present form to “about the turn of the eras,” announces the following phenomena associated with the arrival of the Kingdom of God:<sup>33</sup>

Then his kingdom will appear throughout his whole of creation.

Then the devil will have an end. Yea, sorrow will be led away with him. Then will be filled the hands of the messenger, who is in the highest places appointed. Yea, he will at once avenge them of their enemies. For the Heavenly One will arise from his kingly throne.

Yea, he will go forth from his holy habitation with indignation and wrath on behalf of his sons. And the earth will tremble, even to its ends shall be it shaken. And the high mountains will be made low. Yea, they will be shaken, as enclosed valleys will they fall. The sun will not give light. And in darkness the horns of the moon will flee. Yea, they will be broken in pieces...

For God Most High will surge forth, the Eternal One alone. In full view will he come to work vengeance on the nations. Yea, all their idols will he destroy. Then you will be happy, O Israel! And you will mount up above the necks and wings of an eagle. Yea, all things will be fulfilled. And God will raise you to the heights. Yea, he will fix you firmly in heaven of the stars, in the place of their habitations. And you will behold from on high. Yea, you will see your enemies on the earth (T. Mos. 10:1-10).<sup>34</sup>

Of course, this cosmic upheaval accompanying the Kingdom of God also reaches back to Near Eastern theophanies, such as those of Baal.

Given such a history, it would not be surprising if any historical Jesus had assimilated and used such violent and imperialistic concepts of the Kingdom of God. Indeed, there are numerous passages, especially in Matthew, in which Jesus seems to have no trouble assuming an imperialistic view of the Kingdom of God. For example, in the Matthean version of the Lord's prayer, one reads: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). The desire of any emperor is that his or her will be done in whatever area is deemed to be the emperor's property or domain. Accordingly, Jesus' view of the ruler of the Kingdom of God does not differ from what Augustus Caesar might desire. Doing the will of the divine emperor is important to Jesus: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21).

The fact that Jesus is portrayed as an agent of this empire is apparent when he speaks to Simon Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt. 16:19). If Jesus does designate himself as "the Son of Man," then he also speaks of himself as the regent of that Kingdom of God: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Mt. 16:28). Note that, when referring to the Son of God, Jesus speaks of "his kingdom" (τῆ βασιλεία αὐτοῦ). Jesus further compares the Kingdom of Heaven directly to "a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants" (Mt. 18:23).

The Kingdom of Heaven is compared to a king again in Mt. 22:2: "the

kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a marriage feast for his son...” However, in this example, Jesus has no ethical problems with a king who decides to burn an entire city to punish a few murderers who come from that city. According to Mt. 22:7: “The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” These sorts of retributive actions are not that different from what the Roman emperor did with Jerusalem or from what Esarhaddon (681-669 BCE), the Assyrian king, did with cities where violators of his treaties lived.

As previously noted, all divine kings have human agents, just like every other empire sponsored by a deity in the ancient world. A full-fledged violent imperialist is certainly depicted in Revelation:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of

kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:11-16).

When Christian apologists are confronted with such imperialist passages, one recourse is “representativism,” or the claim that only some texts in the canon represent Jesus’ true teachings. For example, Hendricks argues that the book of Revelation is not representative of Jesus’ teachings when he remarks: “I don’t mean the scary, vengeful Book of Revelation Jesus who is fire-and-brimstone preachers claim will burn up everyone except the Elect...”<sup>35</sup>

I don’t argue that Revelation is representative of all early Christians. I do affirm that selecting Revelation as representative of Jesus’ teachings is no less arbitrary than selecting Matthew or Mark. That is to say, how was it determined that the author of Revelation was not transmitting any ideas that the historical Jesus had? As demonstrated by *The War Scroll* at Qumran and other Second Temple texts, violent apocalyptic rhetoric was certainly available in the time of Jesus, and so why could Jesus not have used it?<sup>36</sup>

In any case, there are sufficient similarities in the crucial features (divine origin or character, demand of all encompassing allegiance, threats of violence for violators of his empire) of an emperor and those ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament to conclude that he was viewed as a sort of emperor or viewed himself as an agent of an empire called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. Even if Jesus did not see himself as an emperor, he certainly can be seen as an agent or advocate of imperialism. What Jesus was presumably advocating was no less imperialistic than the Roman empire when he spoke of the Kingdom of God.

### *A Double Standard for Jesus' Anti-Imperialism*

According to Richard Horsley, Jesus' anti-imperialist project "pressed a program of social revolution to reestablish just egalitarian and mutually supportive social-economic relations in the village communities that constituted the basic form of people's life."<sup>37</sup> I devote a whole chapter in *The Bad Jesus* to exploring how New Testament ethicists use Galilean economics to support the notion that Jesus is a friend of the poor, and I will not rehearse those arguments here.

In any case, Horsley provides a catalogue of all the ills that the Roman empire inflicted on the inhabitants it controlled to showcase Jesus' revolutionary agenda. However, missing from the contrasts between the ideology of Jesus and the ideology of the Roman Empire is any substantive acknowledgement that the Roman empire was not much worse than the biblical visions of God's empire that Jesus' own scriptures highlighted.<sup>38</sup> In so doing, Horsley follows a long Christian apologetic tradition of denigrating non-Christian cultures and extolling the superiority of his own despite very similar practices and concepts.

One example is how Horsley describes Israel as being "under Empire," by which he refers to domination by the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and other empires. Readers are told that after the Exodus, "the Israelites established an independent life in the hill country of Palestine, led by 'liberators' (*shophetim*) and 'prophets' (*nebi'im*) such as Deborah and Samuel...the freedom-loving



Israelites persistently resisted efforts by David and his successors to consolidate power in an imperial monarchy.”<sup>39</sup> Missing from this summary is any mention of how these “freedom-loving Israelites” were actually the ones who dispossessed and oppressed the indigenous peoples of Canaan.

In fact, every single one of the bad features of the Roman empire listed by Horsley finds a correspondence in Israelite actions toward their own conquered peoples. For example, Horsley speaks of how the Romans “had a penchant for public display of lists of peoples they had subjected, particularly in remote regions such as Ethiopia, Arabia, and India.”<sup>40</sup> Fair enough, but is that much different from the lists one finds in Joshua 12 of all the indigenous conquered people? Note this passage:

And these are the kings of the land whom Joshua and the people of Israel defeated on the west side of the Jordan, from Baal-gad in the valley of Lebanon to Mount Halak, that rises toward Seir (and Joshua gave their land to the tribes of Israel as a possession according to their allotments, in the hill country, in the lowland, in the Arabah, in the slopes, in the wilderness, and in the Negeb, the land of the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites): the king of Jericho, one; the king of Ai, which is beside Bethel, one; the king of Jerusalem, one; the king of Hebron, one; the king of Jarmuth, one; the king of Lachish, one; the king of Eglon, one; the king of Gezer, one; the king of

Debir, one; the king of Geder, one; the king of Hormah, one; the king of Arad, one; the king of Libnah, one; the king of Adullam, one; the king of Makkedah, one; the king of Bethel, one; the king of Tappuah, one; the king of Hephher, one; the king of Aphek, one; the king of Lasharon, one; the king of Madon, one; the king of Hazor, one; the king of Shimron-meron, one; the king of Achshaph, one; the king of Taanach, one; the king of Megiddo, one; the king of Kedesh, one; the king of Jokne-am in Carmel, one; the king of Dor in Naphath-dor, one; the king of Goiim in Galilee, one; the king of Tirzah, one: in all, thirty-one kings (Josh. 12:7-24).

Some of these conquests seemingly delight in informing readers that everyone, including women and children, were exterminated, as in the following account: “And they put to the sword all who were in it, utterly destroying them; there was none left that breathed, and he burned Hazor with fire” (Josh. 11:11). Yet, Horsley and other anti-imperialist scholars never seem to criticize Jesus for not being morally outraged by these genocidal actions in his scriptures.

Similarly, when alluding to the horrible terror and vengeance practiced by the Roman empire, Horsley remarks that “[t]here is no way we can understand such practices as crucifixion, mass slaughter and enslavement, massacres of whole towns and annihilation of whole peoples other than as purposeful attempts to terrorize subjected people.”<sup>41</sup> Yet, Jesus generally upholds the sanctity of

biblical texts that also endorse terrorism to dispossess and oppress. For example, in Exodus 23:

I will send my terror before you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out Hivite, Canaanite, and Hittite from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you are increased and possess the land (Exod. 23:27-30).

Unlike the case of the Romans, whose terroristic purpose Horsley reasonably inferred, the biblical author has no problem explaining that terrorism is the purpose of these actions against indigenous peoples.

In fact, Rahab, the prostitute at Jericho who aids Joshua, may be seen as the victim of effective terrorism when she describes why she is willing to help the conquerors:

Before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, and said to the men, "I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the LORD

dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any man, because of you; for the LORD your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Josh. 2:8-11).

And, of course, biblical narratives indicate that more specific acts of brutality such as mutilation (Judg. 1:6-7) and massacres of whole towns (Jericho in Joshua 6) or peoples (1 Sam. 15:1-3) were part of God’s agenda. Otherwise, these actions were accepted without objection. Yet, one never sees Horsley or other critics of Roman ethics denounce Jesus for not censuring these acts of terrorism in the scriptures Jesus holds sacred.

### ***The Benign Rhetoric of Imperialism***

Many biblical ethicists reference the benign, liberative, and peaceful proclamations of Jesus as proof that Jesus is anti-imperialistic. One finds such claims in the work of Richard Horsley, Seyoon Kim, Ronald Sider, Walter Wink, and John Yoder.<sup>42</sup> Yet, all imperialists speak of how their hegemony will bring peace, prosperity, and social improvement. Empires usually frame their agendas in benign terms and peaceful terms, and claim that any violence is defensive or necessary.<sup>43</sup> Even Warren Carter, who champions the anti-imperialistic view of

Jesus, observes that “[i]mperial rule typically presents itself as benign, especially for its immediate beneficiaries.”<sup>44</sup>

If one reads the accomplishments recorded in the *Res Gestae* of Caesar Augustus (reigned 27 BCE-14 CE), we would find at least some of these benign actions of the emperor being extolled:

At the age of nineteen on my own responsibility and at my own expense I raised an army, with which I successfully championed the liberty of the republic when it was oppressed by the tyranny of a faction...I undertook many civil and foreign wars by land and sea throughout the world, and as victor I spared the lives of all citizens who asked for mercy. When foreign people could safely be pardoned I preferred to preserve rather than to exterminate them....in my eleventh consulship I bought grain with my own money and distributed 12 rations apiece...these largesses of mine never reached fewer than 250,000 persons.<sup>45</sup>

Here, we find that some of the benign actions expected of the emperor include mercy, selflessness (taking monetary expenses upon himself), and equality, insofar as his distributions of rations were “12 apiece.” His largesse was massive, reaching no fewer than a quarter million people. A merciful Jesus supposedly feeds masses of people just as Caesar claims to do (Mark 6:34-42; 8:1-10).

### *Overlooking Roman Anti-Imperialism*

In a seeming effort to render Jesus a unique champion of anti-imperialism, most of Christian ethicists never acknowledge the “anti-imperialist” rhetoric present in authors one usually thinks to be pro-Roman.<sup>46</sup> In a study of the speeches placed in the mouth of the enemy, Eric Adler explores how Polybius, Livy, Tacitus, and other renowned Roman authors expressed a subversive critique of the Roman empire.<sup>47</sup> By placing such criticisms in the mouths of the enemy, the authors can voice criticism, while not ostensibly validating it. One example is from Tacitus’ description of the rebellion by a widowed queen of the Celtic Iceni tribe in Britain around 60 or 61 CE. According to Tacitus:

The Britons began to discuss the evils of slavery, to compare their wrongs, their grievances. Nothing is gained by submission, they argued, except that heavier commands are laid on those who appear to be willing sufferers...On the battlefield it is the braver man who plunders his foe; but under the present circumstances it is largely unwarlike cowards who are stealing their homes, abducting their children, demanding levies from them; as though they can die in any cause except their country’s.<sup>48</sup>

If these opinions belong to Tacitus, rather than to the indigenous Celts, then he was calling the Romans cowards, and excoriating them for abusing the indigenous people. In contrast, *none of the Gospel writers ever have Jesus or anyone else criticize the genocide and dispossession of the Canaanites.*

In another case, Sallust (ca. 86-35/34 BCE), the Roman politician and historian, records the words of Mithridates VI (134-63 BCE) the king of Pontus, who complains: **“Indeed, for the Romans there is a single age-old cause for instigating war on all nations, people, and kings: a deep seated lust for empire and riches.”**<sup>49</sup> One looks in vain for any clear statement from Jesus about the nature of war or the motives for Roman imperialism other than what is couched in terms of his preference for the Kingdom of God. If Jesus deserves high praise for his supposedly anti-imperialism, then New Testament ethicists ought to praise Sallust or Mithridates even more.

### *Summary*

An anti-imperialist should designate someone who is against all empires, whether human or divine. New Testament ethicists routinely overlook the extent to which New Testament authors portray Jesus’ Kingdom of God as an imperialistic project. The Kingdom of God is envisioned as empire more powerful than any known on earth. Jesus is portrayed as an agent of that empire and as an enthusiastic champion of it. Therefore, Jesus cannot be characterized as anti-imperialist.

In addition, many New Testament ethicists who espouse the image of an anti-imperialist Jesus are Euro-American scholars with no indigenous ancestry. As far as many Native Americans are concerned, Euro-American academics and their institutions (e.g., seminaries, colleges, universities) are occupiers of Native American lands.<sup>50</sup> Horsley rightly claims that placing American bases in Saudi Arabia “violates the holy ground of Islam.” At the same time, the very presence of many Euro-American institutions, including universities where many of these New Testament ethicists teach, in the United States itself is violating the sacred ground of many Native Americans.

Accordingly, Euro-American New Testament ethicists are *de facto* part of an empire and complicit in an occupation according to the viewpoint of many champions of indigenous rights. Yet, for all the repudiation of the Roman empire and rejection of American interference in the Middle East and elsewhere, these same scholars seldom, if ever, acknowledge their own complicity in perpetuating Christian or Euro-American empires. Therefore, Christian New Testament ethicists who defend the Kingdom of God as benign, liberatory and laudable may be simply subscribing to another case of “Empire is good when it is MY empire.”



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\*This is condensed and revised version of Chapter 4 (“The Imperialist Jesus: We Are All God’s Slaves” in Hector Avalos, *The Bad Jesus: The Ethics of New Testament Ethics* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), pp. 151-177.

Unless noted otherwise, all biblical translations are those of the Revised Standard Version.

<sup>1</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Obery Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus’ Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), p. 222.

<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Warren Carter, *Matthew at the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000); idem, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 2001). See also Ian E. Rock, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans and Roman Imperialism: An Ideological Analysis of the Exordium (Romans 1:1-17)* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2012); Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Lance B. Richey, *Roman Imperial Ideology and the Gospel of John* (Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 283; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2007).

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<sup>4</sup> Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Great Britain’s Example is High, Noble, and Grand...6 August, 1885,” in John W. Blassingame, and John R. McKivigan (eds.), *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One—Speeches, Debates and Interviews* (5 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979–92), 5:203. See also J. Byron, “Paul and the Background of Slavery: The Status Questionis in New Testament Scholarship,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 3 (2004), pp. 116-139.

<sup>6</sup>For some examples of postcolonial approaches to biblical interpretation, see Fernando F. Segovia, and R. S. Sugirtharajah (eds.), *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (The Bible and Postcolonialism 13; London: T. & T. Clark, 2007); Fernando Segovia and Stephen D. Moore, *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections* (Bible and Postcolonialism; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005). R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); idem, *The Bible in Asia: From the Pre-Christian Era to the Postcolonial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). See also W. L. Wimbush (ed.), *Theorizing Scripture: New Critical Orientations to a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Simon Samuel, *A Postcolonial Reading of Mark’s Story* (Library of New Testament Studies 340; London: T. & T. Clark, 2007); Ronald Charles, “Q as a Question from a Postcolonial Point of View,” *Black Theology* 7 (2009), pp. 182-99.

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<sup>7</sup> For surveys of liberation theology, see David Tombs, *Latin American Liberation Theology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2003); Hector Avalos, “Liberation Theology,” in Ilan Stavans (ed.), *Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture and Society in the United States* (4 vols.; Danbury, CT: Grolier, 2005), II, pp. 435-437.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). For a critique of Said, see Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007). For how imperialism affected Judaism, see Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). A critique of Schwartz may be found in Yaron Z. Eliav, “The Matrix of Ancient Judaism: A Review Essay of Seth Schwartz’s *Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.*,” *Prooftexts* 24 (2004), pp. 116-128.

<sup>9</sup> See the essays in Anna Runesson (ed.), *Exegesis in the Making: Postcolonialism and New Testament Studies* (Biblical Interpretation 103; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2011). See also, Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, “After ‘After Theory,’ and Other Apocalyptic Conceits,” *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010), pp. 1-27; idem, “The Secret Vices of the Biblical God,” *Biblical Interpretation* 8 (2010), pp. 87-113; idem, “Biblical Studies ‘after’ Theory: Onwards Towards the Past: Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves,” *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010), pp. 191-225.

<sup>10</sup> Octavio Paz (*Sor Juana* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988], pp. 14-15), for example, argues that New Spain “was never a colony” in

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the same sense as the American colonies. American colonists, argues Paz, came here to escape religious orthodoxy, while in New Spain colonists came to expand orthodoxy.

<sup>11</sup> See Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (eds.), *The Empire Writes Back*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>12</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and its Origin in the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); idem, *The Capitalist World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). For a critique of Wallerstein's theories as they apply to the ancient Near East, see Norman Yoffee, "Mesopotamian Interaction Spheres," in Norman Yoffee and Jeffrey J. Clark (eds.), *Early Stages in the Evolution of Mesopotamian Civilization: Soviet Excavations in Northern Iraq* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), pp. 257-270.

<sup>13</sup>I first proposed this definition in Hector Avalos "The Gospel of Lucas Gavilán as Postcolonial Biblical Exegesis," *Semeia* 75 (1996), pp. 87-105 (88). My definition is a variant of the definition offered by Elleke Boehmer, (*Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995] p. 3), who defines postcolonial literature as literature which "critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship."

<sup>14</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 154 n. 7.

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<sup>16</sup> Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, pp. 207-247 (Chapter Six). For the observation that anti-imperialist scholarship was particularly vigorous during the administration of George W. Bush, see also Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (eds.), *Jesus is Lord, Caesar is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> See Michael G. Smith, “The Empire of Theory and the Empire of History—A Review Essay,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 39 (2010), pp. 305-322. For the idea that “Kingdom of God” has no single referent, see Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

<sup>20</sup> Some important studies of the Roman empire include Ramsey MacMullen, “The Power of the Roman Empire,” *Historia* 55 (4, 2006), pp. 471-481; Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (Hellenistic Culture and Society 48; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Jon E. Lendon, *Empire of Honor: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> See Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations, The Struggle for Power and Peace* (ed. Kenneth Thompson; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), pp. 50-51.

<sup>22</sup> Tat-siong Benny Liew, *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con)textually* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), pp. 148-49.

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<sup>23</sup> D. Michael Cox, “The Gospel of Matthew and Resisting Imperial Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 36 (2009), pp. 25-48 (38). See also, Joan E. Taylor, “Pontius Pilate and the Imperial Cult in Roman Judaea,” *New Testament Studies* 52 (4, 2006), pp. 555-582.

<sup>24</sup> See further, Barry D. Smith, *Jesus’ Twofold Teaching about the Kingdom of God* (New Testament Monographs 54; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009). Smith differentiates two “historical contexts” (non-rejection and rejection) for Jesus’ teachings about the Kingdom of God that he thinks will harmonize those teachings. However, the proposal suffers from the same problem afflicting all claims about the historical Jesus, and that is we have no means to know what the historical Jesus thought about anything, and so all claims about the historical Jesus are ultimately circular.

<sup>25</sup> For general treatments of the Kingdom of God/Heaven, see Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*; Dennis Duling, “Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven,” *ABD* IV, pp. 49-69; Wendell Willis, *The Kingdom of God in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987); Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1986); Bruce D. Chilton, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); M. Pamment, “The Kingdom of Heaven according to the First Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981), pp. 211-32. See also the excellent study by Joseph D. Fantin, *The Lord of the Entire World: Lord Jesus, a Challenge to Lord*

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*Caesar?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2011), which challenges those who deny that Paul saw Christ as the counterpart of the Roman emperor.

<sup>26</sup> Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, The Early Church and The Roman Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> See Dale Patrick, “The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament,” in Wendell Willis (ed.), *The Kingdom of God*, pp. 67-79. For an earlier treatment, see John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953).

<sup>30</sup> Patrick, “The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament,” p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, *Die Geburt des Immanuel: Die Weihnachtsgeschichten aus dem Lukas- und Matthäusevangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> See John J. Collins, “The Kingdom of God in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” in Willis (ed.), *The Kingdom of God*, pp. 81-95.

<sup>33</sup> Collins, “The Kingdom of God in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,” p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> Following Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I, pp. 931-32.

<sup>35</sup> Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus*, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> See Jean Duhaime, *The War Texts: 1QM and the Related Manuscripts* (Companion to the Qumran Scrolls, 6; New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 105.

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<sup>38</sup> The same may be said of the evaluation of the Roman empire by Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

<sup>39</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 16. It will be interesting to see how the forthcoming work by Walter Brueggeman (*God, Neighbor, Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of the Common Good* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016]) approaches the idea of Yahweh's empire in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>40</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, p. 27.

<sup>42</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*; Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Ronald Sider, *Christ and Violence* (1979; reprint, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001); Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Michigan: Eerdmans, 1972). In *The Bad Jesus* (pp. 171-74), I critique the "spiritualizing" approach to the Kingdom of God proposed in Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> See Wengst, *Pax Romana*, especially pp. 19-24.

<sup>44</sup> Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, p. 90.

<sup>45</sup> A. Brunt and J. M. Moore, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: The Achievements of the Divine Augustus* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 19, 25. See also,



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Ronald T. Ridley, *The Emperor's Retrospect: Augustus' Res Gestae in Epigraphy, Historiography, and Commentary* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2003); Brian Bosworth, "Augustus, the *Res Gestae*, and Hellenistic Theories of Apotheosis," *JRS* 89 (1999), pp. 1-18. For a general biography of Augustus, see David Shotter, *Augustus Caesar* (London: Routledge, 2nd edn, 2005). On how Tiberius used starvation as a tactic, see Anthony J. Woodman, "Tiberius and the Taste of Power: The Year 33 in Tacitus," *Classical Quarterly* 56 (2006), pp. 175-189. Tiberius' use of starvation is not that different from Yahweh's tactics: "You shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and in want of all things; and he will put a yoke of iron upon your neck, until he has destroyed you" (Deut. 28.48).

<sup>46</sup> For a study of Mesopotamian anti-imperialism, see Tracy Davenport, "An Anti-Imperialist Twist to the Gilgameš Epic," in Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks (eds.), *Gilgameš and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference at Mandelbaum House, The University of Sydney, 21-23 July 2004* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 1-23.

<sup>47</sup> Eric Adler, *Valorizing the Barbarians: Enemy Speeches in Roman Historiography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola*. 15.3 (Hutton and Ogilvie, LCL). For a more thorough discussion, see Adler, *Valorizing the Barbarians*, pp. 119-139.

<sup>49</sup> Sallust, *Epistula Mithridatis* (*Historiae* 4.69.5). Following the edition in Adler, *Valorizing the Barbarians*, p. 179. The Latin text follows Adler, *Valorizing*

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*the Barbarians*, p. 177: “Namque Romanis cum nationibus populis regibus cunctis una et ea vetus causa bellandi est: cupido profunda imperi et divitiarum”.

<sup>50</sup> One classic statement is that of Rudy Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano Struggle Toward Liberation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); idem, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (8<sup>th</sup> edition; Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2014). The recent protests against the Bakken pipeline by the Standing Rock Sioux tribe appeals, in part, to the threats against sacred Native American lands. See further: <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2016/08/20/dakota-access-pipeline-standing-rock-sioux-issue-urgent-appeal-united-nations-human> (accessed September 28, 2016). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples may be found here: [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf) (Accessed September 28, 2016).