

Appendix C

Jesus and Empire: Then and Now

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What Do We Understand by the Term “Empire”?

Many have tried to establish the characteristics of what constitutes Empire. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) proposes a definition where Empire is the convergence of economic, political, cultural, military, and religious power, in a system of domination that imposes the flow of benefits from the vulnerable to the powerful. Empire crosses all boundaries, distorts identities, subverts cultures, subordinates nation-states, and either marginalizes or co-opts religious communities.

This understanding of Empire highlights the idea that it is a particular configuration of power characterized by the confluence of economic forces, government structures, and some political organizations and segments of civil society. While these forces normally hold each other in check, in an empire, they align together and are subordinated to a single objective, creating a dynamic that negates other forms of power and alternatives. Although these forces may retain some secondary conflicts and contradictions among them, within Empire, they are united in their will to control and dominate. The public space is subjugated to the coercion of cohesive power determined to control everything, to impose order, and to limit access to decision-making power. In short, it converts what is public into the restricted purview of the interests that dominate it.

Of course, no human power is capable of totally achieving this...that is our hope. But there can be historical circumstances under which, in some regions and for some period of time, this configuration of power manifests itself with such strength that it conditions all human action within its sphere of influence. Some authors distinguish “Empire” from “imperialism,” reserving this second term to the territorial or economic expansion that happens in the context of conflict among nations. It is possible for a country to maintain “participative” governmental institutions of a republic, but act in an imperialist way in its foreign policy. As a matter of fact, the Roman Empire, where the term empire was coined, and which provided the historical backdrop for Jesus’ ministry, was formally a republic during its existence.

While institutional forms of government are not always modified in the transition from Republic to Empire, they are forced to operate according to a new correlation of forces. In Rome, for example, the institutions of the Republic formally functioned, but they all responded to the same economic interests; they were aligned to achieve the same governmental objectives, and were subordinated to the mandate of the imperial elite. The wealth of the landed patricians presiding over the *Senatus*, the tribunes that represented the plebs, the military power, the official artists protected by *Mecenas*, the different schools of philosophy that dominated the intellectual world of the time, the spectacles that were offered to the masses, and even the architecture and statues of the cities, as well as the circulation of the Roman currency itself all served to reinforce a configuration of power that sought to deny all other alternatives. Even religion was not left untouched by Empire: the Roman pantheon included all gods, and while all of them were tolerated, they were subordinate to the only God that truly mattered: the *Divus Caesar*.¹

1 Míguez, Néstor O., *El tiempo del principado Romano [The era of the Roman Principality]*. (Mimeo: ISEDET, 1998). I ask for

Aspirations of a Global Empire

We are now witnessing a time of imperial consolidation, with the variant that this empire aspires to be global (in fact every empire aspired to this, but historical and technical conditions did not allow it). The whole world is under pressure to mould itself to a single economic system and way of conceiving politics of managing power, as well as to a supreme military force. As in the Roman pantheon, the diversity of cultures and religions are accommodated as long as they live within the parameters imposed by the Empire. Perhaps the best metaphor to illustrate this is the food court in a shopping mall where it is possible to find all of the diversity cultures have to offer: from Thai food to Italian pizza, Chinese rice, German chucrut, Mexican tacos, Argentinean churrasco, and Japanese sushi. All of these are allowed on the condition that they are served as fast food, which is what the globalized model of consumption demands. And the dominant aroma will be the one imposed by air conditioning.

In the end, everything must fit inside the shopping mall; in other words, everything must be adapted to the framework of capitalist commerce and consumerist society. Because this global Empire is the empire of mature financial capitalism, the economic axis is the one that turns the other forces: political, military, and cultural. The rich diversity of the world is thus reduced to a question of economic management. The real scaffolding behind the empire is the international financial network, and it is to this logic that all peoples, expectations, cultures, and nations must submit.

The most visible consequence of this arrangement is that those who do not have financial capital are left out of the system; but the system proposes and needs to command all of the economic, energy, and technological resources of the world. In brief, those without money do not have the right to exist. On the other hand, where resources exist, they ought to be at the disposition, not of the imperial state (this differentiates it from the classic imperialism), but of those private interests that constitute the economic essence of the Empire. This is true even if in this case, one nation-state, the United States of America, constitutes the Empire's political-military centre. Thus, Bolivian gas is important, but not Bolivian people. Therefore, Bolivia's energy resources must be privatized. Iraqi oil is important, even if it has to be extracted from underneath the cadavers of Iraqis who do not want to give it up. In summary, the small global class (the elite composed of financial groups that also directly or indirectly controls productive enterprises) reserves the right to own the world. Everything becomes precarious before the power of Empire, yet in the end, Empire itself becomes precarious in relation to human law and the design of Creation. A sane theology of Creation should recognize that the ecological problem does not reside in a static conservationism, but in recovering the meaning of the first line of Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it."

One of the multiple consequences of Empire's financial rationale is the transfer of rights of human being to things and financial fictions. In this manner, capital can travel throughout the world without any borders, and products must be bought and sold without obstacles (especially those that favour the most powerful sectors); but people's mobility is ever more restricted, particularly if they are poor. The Berlin Wall has fallen, but a wall is built to exclude poor Mexicans from accessing jobs. The war of ideologies is transformed into a war against the poor. People's right to health is subordinated to the patent rights of legal entities and to "registered trademarks" that do not even recognize the scientist who contributed to their creation. In other words, the world of the virtual takes proprietorship of the rights of living human beings. By placing the love of money at the centre of its value system, the

my readers' indulgence; most of the references in this text are from my own writings because its purpose is to outline my personal understanding of this topic. References to other authors will be limited.

financial empire distorts and reverses the meaning and sense of human life as we used to conceive it outside the Empire. Everything must be subordinated to the law of profit: Mammon is God.

Finally, although we are still far from exhausting the analysis of the reality of Empire, we must mention the role of communication. Communications media with global reach are manipulated by imperial interests to create the perception that they are the only valid ones, the only possible ones, the only way. Whether in the news or in soap operas, reality becomes virtual and is reduced to nonsense. Private lives are exhibited in public like spectacles, while public resources are privatized. Desire is shaped and oriented in function of commercial interests. The message is “just do it.” Immediacy is the norm, primitive impulse becomes the only engine, and appearance is everything. “What’s new?” “Where can I get some?” “How much does it cost?” These are the questions most frequently asked by our colonized youth. Individual satisfaction dissolves any sense of solidarity. This is how different forces come together to generate an imperialized subjectivity where the room for freedom is erased, and where human beings are either subordinate to the dominant interests or marginalized.

Empires and the Biblical Tradition

The Hebrew and Christian sections of the Bible were written in the context of imperial enterprises that are recorded in their pages. When the people gathered together after the great flood (Genesis 10 and 11), Babel was established by Nimrod, the first potentate of the Earth (Genesis 10:10).² With his city and his tower, Nimrod aspires to dominate everything, to impose only one language (in contradiction with Genesis 10:5, 20, 31), and to make a name for himself. However, his imperial project is stopped by the liberating action of God who allows for a diversity of languages, cultures, and forms of life to flourish again. Nevertheless, imperial powers consolidate themselves over and over until the end of Apocalypse (18-19) when Babel/Babylon is destroyed forever and is replaced by the Kingdom of God and God’s people which includes all languages, races, and nations.

It is not possible in this brief document to develop a detailed account of all the forms and visions of Empire directly or indirectly described in the biblical pages. Nor is it possible to outline all of the consequences of Empire (in opposition to God’s will) for humans and the rest of Creation. It is possible to find prophetic denunciations, even of Israel itself, when it tries to be an imperialist nation, or when it makes alliances with the empires of the day (this is mentioned even in Psalms, for example Psalm 146).

Whether it is Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon in the case of ancient Israel, or the Hellenic monarchs of the deuteronomic period, or the Rome of the Christian pages, Empire is always seen as destruction, blasphemy, and pain. When it is tolerated or accepted it is to serve as a lesson or as punishment or consequence for ambition or a lack of justice. In opposition to the power of Empire and attempts to make it absolute, there finally appears in the last pages of Isaiah the idea of a renewed creation (65:17).³

It is necessary to recreate life after the destruction of Empire. In his visions, the prophet Daniel sees how empires are born and follow one another, but also how they fall in the face of divine power,

2 For my interpretation of this text see “Comparative Bible Study, Genesis 10–11: An Approach from Argentine,” in P. Wickeri, ed., *Scripture, Community and Mission: A Festschrift in Honor of D. Preman Niles* (Hong Kong: the Christian Conference of Asia and the Council of World Mission, 2002).

3 On the topic of Empire and new creation see my work in “The New Creation in the Old, the Old Creation in the New,” in D. Meeks, ed., *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* (Kingswood Books, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2004).

which initially only presents itself as something small. This is also the hallmark of the final vision in the Apocalypse. It is precisely in the definitive chapters of the apocalyptic drama, with all its strong and ambiguous metaphors, that the author sees the powerful of the earth come together in an alliance that seeks total domination of the world, but that in the end is confronted with its Creator. However, the power of the redeemer of the world appears in the figure of a sacrificed lamb still standing.

It is worthwhile mentioning the spectacle of the fall of Babylon (Revelation 18),⁴ because there, along with the moans of the corrupt kings, appear the cries of the merchants who see the source of their wealth disappear once Empire falls. Their wares included “slaves and human lives: (Revelation 18:13). For this reason, happiness does not exist in Babylon: “and the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will be found in you no more; and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no more; and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more; for your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery” (Revelation 18:22–23).⁵

Although he uses a different language, Paul also criticizes imperial practices. Already in his first letter he announces the sudden end of those who proclaim “peace and security” (1 Thessalonians 5:3), the motto of the Roman Legion which was inscribed in standards and in money—curiously, this is the same motto used by NATO. Paul’s strongest words on the subject appear in his epistle to Romans. The second half of the first chapter begins by announcing that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). These, claiming to be wise became foolish, and honoured creatures before honouring the Creator, and so became filled with the will to injustice, homicides, greedy and deceitful, among other wickedness. These know the will of God and nonetheless rejoice in these things. In this way, “creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” (Romans 8:20–21).⁶

Jesus and the Empire

According to Matthew, Jesus’ first encounter with the forces of Empire occurred right at birth, when he escaped the massacre of the children of Bethlehem.⁷ He lived his life under imperial governments, which is reflected in the dates set in the gospel of Luke. Jesus also dies at the hands of Empire’s soldiers, even if they were assisted by local clients. The control that Empire exercised is not necessarily made explicit throughout the gospels, but the careful reader can identify its practices as their background (this also applies to John).

4 A detailed study of the interpretation of these texts appears in my article: “Revelation and the victims of economic exclusion: Reading Rev. 18 from a Latin American context,” in Segovia, A. and Tolbert, M.A. (eds.): *Reading from this Place: The Global Scene, Social Location and Biblical Interpretation* (Fortress Press, 1995).

5 In his speech to give courage to the population of New Orleans following hurricane Katrina, President G.W. Bush said that he could envision the city rebuilt, “with all its shops open, and people doing business as usual.” New Orleans is known worldwide for its music, its carnival, and the happiness of its population, however, [for Bush], these were not the things to recover; rather it was the possibility to conduct commerce. This neatly illustrates the mentality of the managers of the global empire.

6 A study of Paul’s theology as theology in confrontation with empire can also be seen in my commentary on Galatians “Paul to the Galatians: When Liberty is not (neo)Liberalism,” *Global Bible Commentary*, D. Patte, ed., (Abingdon Press, 2004).

7 Néstor O. Míguez, “*Los Santos Inocentes*” [*The Innocent Saints*], in *Página 12* newspaper, Buenos Aires, December 28, 2005. Available at www.pagina12.com.ar

Nonetheless, there are points at which Empire is clearly singled out. For example in the gospel of John, Jesus offers his disciples peace but “not in the way of the world,” in this way making clear reference to a contradiction of the Pax Romana. Further on, he points out to Pontius Pilate, Empire’s representative that he may govern the world but that he still does not know what truth is. Pilate becomes panic-stricken when his Jewish interlocutors tell him that the one who pretends to be the Son of God must die (Son of Jupiter was one of the titles of the Emperor), and then threaten to denounce him before Caesar.⁸

The synoptic gospels contrast the imperial government with what is expected of Jesus’ followers. For example in his answer to the question of power: “So Jesus called them and said to them, ‘You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them’ (Mark 10:42). Luke adds to this by denouncing the clientelist practices of the Roman Empire “and those in authority over them are called benefactors” (Luke 22:25). None of their contemporaries would have been able to ignore their references (nor can we...). Our interpretations, which have taken these commentaries as decontextualized “universals,” often miss the dimension of prophetic condemnation of Empire they contain.

A similar decontextualization has occurred to one of the texts that speak most clearly of the confrontation with the Empire: the well-known passage of the taxes and the coin, which in our interpretations is often called “the question of paying taxes,” is really the place where the issue of the authority of the Empire is resolved. We have already established that the imposition of a national currency as the international standard is an imperial practice, and one of its tools for domination. All of this passage breathes the imperial atmosphere. At the opening we are told that they sought “to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor,” a clear reference to the power of the empire (Luke 20:20). When Jesus requests a coin and then asks about its image and inscription, his question is not an innocent one. He does not have coins; it is those who have them that have already included themselves in the orbit of Empire. The response given by the spies is “the emperor’s,” which hides a fact that Jesus will reveal in his own answer: most Roman coins bear in their inscription the phrase *divus Caesar*, of Caesar elevated to the level of deity. To give unto God what is God’s means to deny the divinity of Caesar, and thereby deny the ideological sources of imperial power. We are thus not witnessing discussion on “theology of kingdoms” here, but rather witnessing a repudiation of the deification of earthly power. God become human confronting the human that aspires to become God.

Beyond Empire

Human history is full of surprises. Both good and bad take place many times unexpectedly. The current Empire began to encounter unforeseen sources of resistance some months back. Its existence is producing ever stronger responses. This does not mean that we can now predict with certitude the date when the Empire will fall; but it is now much less thinkable that its presence is permanent and definitive, and that we find ourselves at the “end of [a] history” which concludes not with the Kingdom of God, but with neo-liberal exclusion. The actions of the people and the Spirit of God will condition the development of life. Otherwise, human life on our planet may be extinguished as our current model of consumption and development is unsustainable.

8 See: Hinkelammert, F., *El Grito del Sujeto [The Scream of the Subject]*, pp. 11–91 (DEI, San José de Costa Rica, 1998).

However, the consequences of this global empire must not only be measured in economic and military terms. Taken together, its political forces and cultural ethos, its technological structures and means seek to impose what may be its most lasting legacy: the shaping of a deep-seated, individualist, and selfish subjectivity. The Empire and the globalized consumerist market model with its totalizing tendencies destroys local networks of solidarity, the collective sense, and social contracts of co-operation. It replaces them with power as the only principle, personal satisfaction as its motto, immediacy as its only time, and precariousness in human relations as the only norm. Everything is disposable, from pop drink containers to “unproductive” human beings, or even worse, those who have been deprived of the capacity to produce and live by the only laws that must be obeyed: the laws of the market.

It is here that the power of the Christian symbols and narratives can once again demonstrate their relevance: in the struggle against the imperial world-view; in the decolonization of the minds (Romans 12:2); in the reconstruction of the *afecto societatis*; and in the need to locate real and concrete human beings (with their needs, hopes, loves, poverty, and current condition, and with their creative participation in the world we have been asked to steward) as the final receivers of the love and will of God.

Although some speak of the excessive anthropocentrism inherent in modernity, all that the post-modern empire proposes as an alternative is a “crematocentrism” (money as the ultimate end of all activities, and as the centre and source of life and power). In light of this, we are called to affirm the creative power of God: no human being is “disposable.” We are called to find again the sense of unity/connection of what is created in an economy—not of accumulation (in the final analysis, what is primarily accumulated in our economy of consumerism is garbage⁹), but of justice and life for all.

To locate ourselves in spaces of hope is to begin working beyond Empire. It is to create life-giving alternatives for everyone, because the Empire is a source of death. But for this faith to become reality we cannot wait for time to pass and for the governing powers to fall by themselves. It is necessary to begin to demonstrate in our perceptions, relationships, and communities that another world is possible; that other ways of living bring dignity and plenitude; at least to a greater degree than the devastation of empire. This was the hallmark and means of struggle used by the first Christian communities against Empire. It was not through the opposition of power against power which would have meant their annihilation, but rather through the extension of alternate symbols and lifeways, of which we are heirs. This struggle has been imperfect, it is true; we cannot deny the weaknesses and failures that are part of our human ambiguity. However, the Christian message will be relevant if it is able to pronounce and take part in realizing a vision of “life beyond empire.”

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9 Refer to the works of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman on globalization, especially *Wasted Lives* (Cambridge, GB: Polity Press, 2004), where he shows how the consumerist economy produces the continuous waste of human lives, as well as of natural resources and energy.