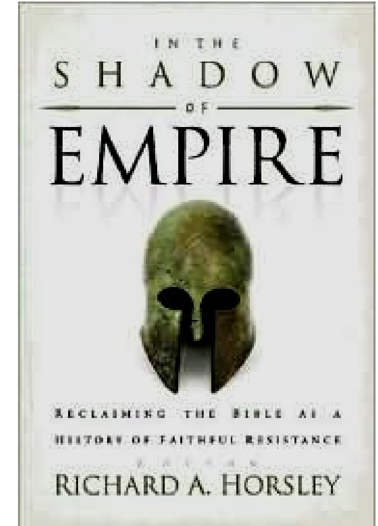
In the Shadow of Empire:
Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance

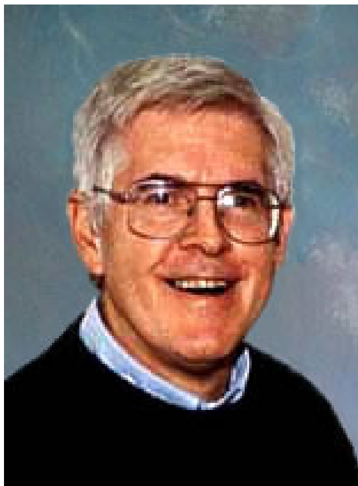
Book Review by Ched Myers

Published in Theology Today (Princeton Seminary), Fall, 2009.



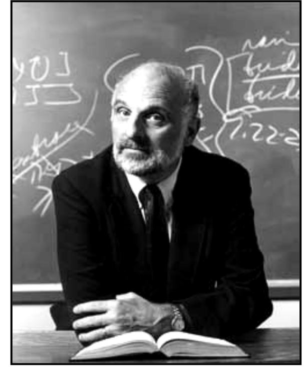
Richard Horsley, In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance. Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, 199 pp ($24.95).

It has become almost *de rigueur* among biblical scholars to use the lens of "empire studies" in their work. I see this as a welcome change from 20 years ago, when my commentary on Mark (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus,* Orbis, 1988/2008) was deemed by some academic reviewers to be "overly politicized" for taking precisely this approach. As Richard Horsley points out succinctly in the opening lines of this volume: "Americans have a special relationship with the Bible. They also have a special relationship with Empire…. Until recently, however, most of us may not have been aware of the second, and we had certainly not given it much critical thought" (p. 1).



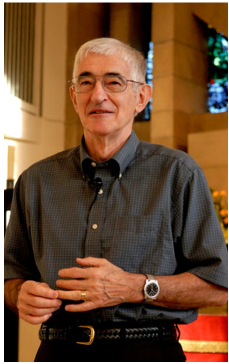
Empire-critical studies are predicated upon ever more sophisticated work in the social history, political and economic culture and anthropological modeling of Mediterranean antiquity. Increasing archaeological data is available for reconstructing material history, as are comparative studies of a wider array of ancient textual traditions. This work is not only an asset, but essential to any serious reading of either Testament today. Editor Horsley *(left)*, recently retired from the University of Massachusetts in Boston, can legitimately be seen as the "dean" of the new political contexting of biblical studies, and many of the contributors to this collection were fellow pioneers. I am delighted to see such an excellent overview of and introduction to this rapidly growing field.

It is fitting that the first essay should be from Norman Gottwald, whose work changed the terrain for studying Israelite origins. The chapter is an accessible snapshot of his prolific (but sometimes dense) work. I agree with his concluding suggestion that "the present-day equivalent of ancient Israel might properly be relatively powerless countries like Cuba, Nicaragua… [and even] Palestinians of the West Bank" (p. 24). First world theologians who have unconsciously read biblical Israel through the analogical lens of British, German or American colonial "success stories" have thus read the story exactly backwards. Fortunately, a new generation of engaged scholars are following in Gottwald's footsteps to correct this, such as Laurel Dykstra's *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (Orbis, 2002).



Walter Brueggemann (*right*) is the other North American giant of social readings of the Hebrew Bible, though he is more theologically oriented than Gottwald. His contribution is strongest in its exposition of three oracles from Isaiah concerning "YHWH who changes the calculus" of empire (p. 37). He portrays the prophets as poets proclaiming both truth and hope in the face of imperial oppression. Brueggemann's ambiguous title "Faith in Empire" addresses a peculiarly American struggle: distinguishing between empire as the *social location* of a critically conscious church, and empire as an *object* of belief about security and salvation.

Jon Berquist attempts to unravel the contradictions of the Persian period. Though longer on broad analytical points than textual work, the essay offers a helpful general portrait of how empires project military power and exercise ideological control in a region, and how they can promote either economic extraction *or* intensification. It then specifically portrays how Persian hegemony shaped the restorationist project of post-exilic Israel, particularly how the construction of the Second Temple served Persian interests and split Israelites along class and geographic lines. Without naming it, Berquist uses the post-colonial approach of discerning complex strategies of accommodation and resistance by communities under imperial domination.

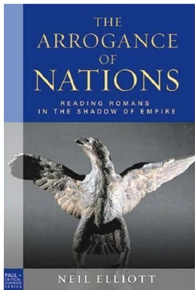


John Dominic Crossan *(left)* has been churning out "empire readings" of the N.T. for a decade. His essay provides an excellent summary of the literary, architectural, monumental and numismatic evidence of Roman imperial politics as a religion. In my favorite line of the book, he concludes: "Before Jesus the Christ ever existed and even if he had never existed, these were the titles of Caesar the Augustus: Divine, Son of God, God, and god from God; Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, and Savior of the World. When those titles were taken from him, the Roman emperor, and given to a Jewish peasant, it was a case of either low lampoon or high treason" (p. 73).

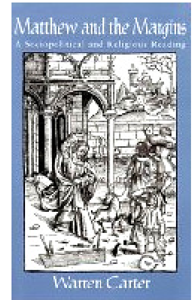
Crossan's background essay is followed by another in which Horsley summarizes his argument that "Jesus, his mission, and his movement(s) must be understood in this context of persistent conflict between Roman domination and the Galilean and Judean people" (p. 83). Drawing characteristically upon the writings of Josephus, Mark and Q, he shows how Jesus used various modes of peasant resistance to the dominant order that included healing and exorcism work among the poor, proclamation of an alternative authority, prophetic demonstrations and parables, and calls to Covenant renewal. We are in debt to Horsley for all he has done over 30 years to move the "Jesus and Politics" debate well beyond the simplistic options of withdrawal, collaboration or armed struggle. Horsley also supplies an introduction and concluding summary to the anthology.

Neil Elliott has done similar service to Paul's writing. His essay reviews the apostle's political language, which reflected "the tensions between his fundamentally Israelite vision and the fantasy of imperial theology" (p 109). Aware of the long

legacy of interpretive domestication of Paul, he includes a rereading of Romans 13. Elliott's work in the "historical Paul" has been so refreshing (most recently in his compelling *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire,* Fortress, 2008) that it makes two methodological moves all the more disappointing. On one hand, Elliott opines that Paul's eschatology was "wrong," and he "paid for these miscalculations with his life" (p. 114). On the other, he disdains how Paul was soon "repackaged" by Luke's Acts and the deutero-Pauline epistles, which he contends "effectively accommodated 'Paul's' teachings to the dominant Roman imperial order" (p. 100). I'm not sure Elliott can lament both developments; after all, if Paul *was* so obviously wrong, why *wouldn't* his successors retool his vision? But I think Elliott's literalization of Paul's eschatology and dismissal of a fifth of the N.T. is not only problematic, but unnecessary for his political reading of the apostle. Indeed, Elliott leaves us with a rather tepid choice between the "realism" of empire and Paul's "utopian fantasy" of liberation (p. 116). That's pretty thin (not to mention "domesticated") broth for contemporary Christians trying to negotiate a very real American empire!



Warren Carter's chapter recapitulates his recent ground-breaking work on Matthew *(right),* which he contends exhibits negative attitudes toward Rome's imperial violence and oppression, but also employs "a prominent theme from the prophets whereby various imperial powers act as agents of God's punishment of the Jerusalem rulers" (p 126). I think Carter's interpretation of Mt 17:24-27 is overly subtle; he understands it to authorize disciples to pay taxes to Rome while still qualifying as a "hidden transcript of resistance" (pp.128-32), while I see it as a hilarious political parody that begs the question of allegiance a la "render to Caesar" (see *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, *Vol I*, p. 57). But Carter's overall social portrait of the Matthean community's struggle to embody an alternative to empire in Antioch in the wake of the disaster of 70 C.E. is reliable and compelling.



Brigette Kahl is not as harsh as Elliott in her assessment of Acts. It "does not have a consistently 'pro-Roman' stance," but in her attempt to "try to do justice to the real-life circumstances and the restraints of his story" she notes a "puzzling ambiguity in Luke's attitude toward the imperial order" (p. 138). She seems to struggle to hold together her dialectical thesis that while Luke is critical of Roman claims, his intent was to write "a 'safe version' of the Christ (hi)story within the framework of Roman power" (p. 147). She goes so far as portraying Paul as a "client" of Roman provincial governor Sergius Paulus (p. 142), and in the end agrees that Acts must be included in the "canonical betrayal of the apostle Paul" (p. 156). The problem is that Kahl's effort to "read Luke against Luke" provides too much inconvenient anti-imperial material that contradicts her main thesis. I would have been more interested if she had pursued her own suggestion that Luke may have been presenting Paul as a "trickster hero who knows how to prevail in the most dangerous situations" (p. 151). Indeed, Acts' putative 'happy ending' ("Luke simply… [lets] their story end before serious trouble sets in," p. 148) could just as plausibly be read as political parody as imperial apology (Kahl admits that most of Luke's readers would have known very well what happened to Paul at the hands of

Nero). Still, her suggestion that Acts omitted notable elements of Paul's ministry (such as the collection and the prominent role of women) as *too* subversive is interesting, if an argument from silence. Kahl (*left)* does point out that Acts has historically been used to legitimate *both* radical movements and conservative ones, so her focus on ambiguity in the text is justified. But her thesis would be more persuasive if she could point comparatively to another ideological narrative that manages to both sanitize *and* preserve the subversive legacy of a radical social movement.

Greg Carey's essay brooks no such equivocation, situating the Book of Revelation firmly in the context of post 70 C.E. Jewish resistance literature. He focuses on John's three-fold symbolic caricature of Rome—the empire as "Sea Beast," the imperial cult as "Land Beast," and the imperial socio-economic system as "Babylon"—which figures are contrasted throughout the apocalypse with the Lamb and his "witnesses." Revelation encodes both passive non-cooperation and active resistance to the empire, but finds accommodation singularly anathema.

This last point raises interesting questions for the allegations of Kahl, Elliott and (to a lesser extent) Carter concerning post-Pauline N.T. literary strategies of accommodation to Roman domination. It is clear that the violent imperial backlash against Jews (and thus Christians) in the wake of Rome's crushing defeat of the Judean revolt in 70 C.E. made life dangerous for both throughout the empire. But if the steady drift of the post-apostolic movement was toward accommodation in order to facilitate "safety," why does Revelation—which if written during the Domitian persecution would have had more reason than Luke or Matthew to play down the subversive aspects of Christianity—*intensify* the critique of Rome, calling openly for resistance at the cost of martyrdom? Perhaps post-colonial analysis of, say, Mennonites under the Soviet Union or Dalits in India might suggest examples of how hard-pressed minorities can continue to resist yet survive, which could illumine later N.T. writings.

Aside from the issues raised above, I have three quibbles with this anthology. First, I wish it were more evenly weighted between testaments (two thirds of the contributions address the N.T.) Second, it would have been nice if the authors exhibited a little more concern for Christology (a continuing weakness in political hermeneutics). Third is the matter of "application." For some academics the analysis of imperialism stops at antiquity (Bruce Malina's work comes to mind), but the contributors to this collection rightly see it as crucial for reading both past and present. Yet while most of these essays draw connections to our current American empire and its discontents, little effort is made to suggest specific engagements. And I wish those who derogate "accomodationism" in the N.T. would turn their hermeneutic of suspicion on their *own* class and race privileges as professional scholars in the Pax Americana. But these are minor criticisms. Empire-critical studies stand, in my view, as the most important development in biblical studies in our generation, for which this volume is a welcome and representative primer. It deserves wide use in our seminaries, sanctuaries and streets.