

Render to Caesar

*Jesus, the Early Church, and
the Roman Superpower*

CHRISTOPHER BRYAN

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Prologue

By virtue of the law, that a people which becomes a state absorbs its neighbours who are in political infancy, and a civilized people absorbs its neighbours who are in intellectual infancy—by virtue of this law, which is universally valid and as much a law of nature as the law of gravity—the Italian nation (the only one in antiquity to combine a superior political development and a superior civilization, though it presented the latter only in an imperfect and external manner) was entitled to reduce to subjection the Greek states of the east which were ripe for destruction, and to dispossess the peoples of lowest grades of culture in the west—Libyans, Iberians, Celts, Germans—by means of its settlers. . . . It is the imperishable glory of the Roman democracy or monarchy—for the two coincide—to have correctly apprehended and vigorously realized this its highest destination.

—Theodor Mommsen, *The History of Rome*¹

Excudent alii spirantia mollius aera
(credo equidem), vivos ducent de marmore vultus,
orabunt causas melius, caelique meatus
describent radio et surgentia sidera dicent:
tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento
(hae tibi erunt artes), pacique imponere morem,
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.

[Others, I doubt not, shall with softer mould beat out the breathing bronze, coax from the marble features to the life, plead cases with greater eloquence and with a pointer trace heaven's motions and predict the rising of the stars; you, Roman, be sure to rule the world (be these your arts), to

crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and
crush the proud.]

—Virgil, *Aeneid* 6. 847–53, H. Rushton Fairclough, trans.

As I shall be using the term, “imperialism” means the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; “colonialism,” which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory. . . . In our time, direct colonialism has been largely ended; imperialism, as we shall see, lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices. Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth century imperial culture is plentiful with words and concepts like “inferior” or “subject races,” “subordinate peoples,” “dependency,” “expansion,” and “authority.” . . . In the expansion of the great Western Empires, profit and hope of further profit were obviously tremendously important, as the attractions of spices, sugar, slaves, rubber, cotton, opium, tin, gold, and silver over centuries amply testify. So also was inertia, the investment in already going enterprises, tradition, and the market or institutional forces that kept the enterprises going. But there is more than that to imperialism and colonialism. There was a commitment to them over and above profit, a commitment in constant circulation and recirculation, which, on the one hand, allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated, and, on the other, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost physical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples. We must not forget that there was very little domestic resistance to these empires,

although they were very frequently established and maintained under adverse and even disadvantageous conditions.

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*²

When I was at school, we read Virgil's *Aeneid* and Theodor Mommsen's *History of Rome*. Of course, we knew that Rome's *imperium* ("supreme administrative power") had its limitations and that from time to time, before Constantine the Great, some emperors had persecuted the Christians. But still, taken all in all, we understood that the Roman Empire had been, as Sellar and Yeatman would have put it, "a good thing."³ Even in relation to Christianity, therefore, we tended to speak of Roman rule as "providential." We noted that *pax Romana* ("the Roman Peace") meant reasonably safe travel on good roads, with seas free of pirates, and good harbors, and *that* meant that the gospel could spread. We noted that the prevalence of Greek language and culture made communication easy. We noted that Roman officials as they appeared in the New Testament seemed on the whole to have been rather supportive of those who followed Jesus. All these elements we saw as "providential." "It can," said M. A. C. Warren in a book that was published shortly before I began to study for the priesthood, "be fairly argued that successive imperialisms have made a significant contribution to the realization of the vision of the time when 'the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the water covers the sea.'"⁴ Not surprisingly, then, even as a theological student I was largely strengthened in my view of the Roman Empire as having functioned "as a *preparatio* for God's good will for the world."⁵

Needless to say, I did not at that time even conceive of the questions raised by Edward Said. Such questions were first raised (for me, at any rate) during the last decade of the twentieth century as a part of the kind of thinking and critique that we have come to call "postcolonial." In the context of ending, or at least evolving, French, British, and American imperial power in the world, "postcolonialism" tries to reflect on the nature and meaning of that experience (colonial and imperial, postcolonial and postimperial) for those involved in it. Now that such thinking has arisen, however, and such questions have been raised, we are bound to reflect again on the rise of Christianity. Was Roman rule as "providential" for Jesus and his first followers as we thought? How did Rome look from the viewpoint of an ordinary Galilean in the first century of the Christian era? And what conclusions are we to draw from these considerations, not least about ourselves and our own understanding of and relationship to Jesus of Nazareth?

So various books and studies have surfaced recently that direct our thoughts in directions quite different from those with which I grew up. In *Jesus and Empire*,⁶ Richard Horsley suggests that much modern Western Christianity has domesticated and “depoliticized” Jesus,⁷ creating a figure who correlates with various assumptions and procedures of our own—assumptions and procedures that are, in fact, highly questionable. These include our assumption that religion must be separate from politics and economics, our individualism, and our allegedly “scientific” culture, which has influenced biblical scholarship to a point where only data about Jesus that will “pass the test of modern reasonability/rationality can be used.” The net effect of all this has been to make Jesus into “a religious teacher who uttered isolated sayings and parables relevant only to individual persons.”⁸ As we have domesticated Jesus, so we have domesticated his background, so that we talk of “the Jews” as if they were a single entity, when in fact the society in which Jesus lived was immensely complex, involving many realities other than the religious. “The peoples of Palestine in the time of Jesus appear as a complex society full of political conflict rather than a unitary religion (Judaism).”⁹ Opposition to Roman oppression regularly marked the immediate Palestinian context of Jesus’ mission. “For generations before and after the ministry of Jesus, the Galilean and Judean people mounted repeated protests and revolts against the Romans and their client rulers, the Herodian kings and Jerusalem high priests.”¹⁰ Therefore, “trying to understand Jesus’ speech and action without knowing how Roman imperialism determined the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem” is rather like “trying to understand Martin Luther King without knowing how slavery, reconstruction, and segregation determined the lives of African-Americans in the United States.”¹¹ We should see Jesus as a leader who “belonged in the same context with and stands shoulder to shoulder with these other leaders of movements among the Galilean and Judean people, and pursues the same general agenda in parallel paths: independence from Roman imperial rule so that the people can again be empowered to renew their traditional way of life under the rule of God.”¹² Since in what follows I am somewhat critical of Horsley, let me say at once how much I admire his short, passionate book. Indeed, for better or worse I was moved to write the present volume largely as a result of reading *Jesus and Empire*. So I am in Horsley’s debt, even when I disagree with him most.

Evidently, then, matters are not so clear-cut as I once believed. Yet are they quite so clear-cut as Horsley (and others) seem to suggest? Granted that the Roman Empire was not from Jesus of Nazareth’s point of view simply “a good thing,” are we then to understand that it was simply “a bad thing”? While we must be grateful to those who have raised postcolonial issues in relation to the

biblical texts, how far should we follow them in their interpretations of those texts? Have they sufficiently considered how Israel itself reflected on and understood its experiences of empire? Was the Jewish experience of Roman rule always the same, or did it differ at different periods and under different Roman officials? Are the insights and questions of postcolonialism (a movement that already has its own history)¹³ being properly understood and applied in the present connection? How far can techniques of analysis that were developed in connection with the post-Enlightenment colonial—to be precise, *postcolonial*—experience of cultures formerly subject to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western domination properly be applied to the ancient, largely Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire? And how far should these considerations affect our understanding of Jesus of Nazareth?

I do not imagine that the answers to these questions are easy, or self-evident, and answers to some of them may not be possible at all. The discussion that follows is, nonetheless, my attempt to address them.

In my opening chapters, by way of setting the New Testament within its environment, I examine Israel's traditions about empire and its attitudes toward international superpowers as it experienced them throughout its history. My first chapter looks at its witness in the scriptural and immediately post-scriptural period, from the Egyptians to the Greeks. My second considers the period from the Maccabees to the war that began in 66, with a brief look at what followed—the more immediate setting for the life of Jesus and the beginnings of the Christian movement. In my third chapter, I turn to what we may know or surmise of the teaching and ministry of Jesus and try to consider its likely significance vis-à-vis Rome. In my fourth, I attempt to do the same thing with the passion narratives, which have special problems of their own. In my fifth and sixth chapters, I turn to a selection of other early Christian witnesses, namely Paul, Luke-Acts, 1 Peter, and the Book of Revelation. In my seventh chapter, I reflect on appropriate, and possibly inappropriate, relationships between the study of first-century Israel and Rome and contemporary postcolonial insights. In a concluding “unscientific postscript,” I reflect on the possible significance of all of this for our own understanding of empire and “superpower status,” then and now.

Many of the questions to be addressed in the following chapters are historical and exegetical, and I try to approach them, at least in the first place, from within those disciplines. Chapters 3 and 4 in particular are largely concerned with what we usually call “the historical Jesus”—an expression that is hardly without problems of its own. To cut a long story short, by “the historical Jesus” I mean (like John P. Meier) the “Jesus” whom we can, at least in principle, recover and examine by using the ordinary tools of modern historical

research.¹⁴ In considering such questions, I prefer therefore when I can to proceed on the basis of criteria normally preferred by historical critics: multiple attestation and consistency. If, overall, I am less skeptical as to the value of the New Testament texts' historical witness than are some of my colleagues in New Testament studies (and I am), that is not because I consider the texts to be sacred (although I do) but because I believe, on the grounds of the best scholarship I can manage, that my more skeptical colleagues are mistaken.¹⁵ As Cardinal König pointed out to the Second Vatican Council, it is not difficult to show that "the sacred books are sometimes deficient in accuracy as regards both historical and scientific matters."¹⁶ There are, however, some in the New Testament guild who need rather to remount the horse from the other side, modestly recalling, as George Kennedy has said, that "ancient writers sometimes meant what they said and occasionally even knew what they were talking about."¹⁷

There are, of course, other witnesses to events of the period, and we must ask questions about them, too. We cannot proceed as if every statement in the New Testament were open to doubt but all other sources could be relied upon as "historical." When Philo criticized Pilate in his *Embassy to Gaius*, to what extent was his description of Pilate influenced by his own rhetorical objectives? Much more important—for in many matters that interest us he is our only or our main witness—how far can we trust Josephus? Are there significant differences between what he wrote in the *Jewish War* and what he wrote in the *Antiquities of the Jews* a quarter of a century later? In a still influential article published in the 1950s, Morton Smith argued for a significant change in Josephus' opinions and attitudes.¹⁸ Smith's view of Josephus was followed by a number of scholars and historians in the ensuing decades. Recently, however, it has been challenged. Steve Mason, after a detailed analysis of relevant passages, concludes that "the theory of Rasp, Smith, Neusner and others that *Ant.* 18 dramatically improves the Pharisees' image over against *War*, or that Josephus deliberately corrects *War* (Rasp) seems to lack any basis whatsoever."¹⁹ Personally, I have come, like Louis Feldman, to consider Josephus "more and more" to be a historian deserving our respect.²⁰ We need to understand, however, that he was a Hellenistic, *rhetorical* historian, who conceived it as his task not merely to narrate facts but also (like an epideictic orator) to be "laudatory or encomiastic"²¹—in other words, to be one who bestowed honor. Of course, he knew that such a historian must tell the truth. "Who does not know that the first law of history is that it should not dare to write anything false?" (Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.62). So Josephus' information is usually as reliable as his sources will allow, and his sources are often quite good. But *mere* information was not for him an end in itself, any more than it was for an epideictic orator. The facts

were recited to give honor. It is worth noting that at the beginning of the *War*, Josephus criticizes others who have written on the subject *both* because they have failed to tell the truth *and* because they have thereby failed in their purpose, which was to honor Rome (*War* 1.1–3, 6–8). Quite evidently and openly, he considers both failings to be significant. To whom then does Josephus intend to give honor? To some extent, naturally, to his patrons, the Flavians, and to himself, where his own honor is involved. But much more—and it is surely to the credit of the Flavians that they must have perceived this and yet were Josephus’ patrons anyway—to God and God’s people Israel. That is why, quite often, Josephus writes with irony, and even (especially in his accounts of his own doings) playfulness—an irony and playfulness that subsequent readers have missed, supposing him merely tendentious, self-serving, or sycophantic but that his first hearers, including the Flavians, surely did not.²²

Where, then, does all this lead me, and any who choose to go with me?

My conclusion, briefly, is that Jesus and the early Christians did indeed have a critique of the Roman superpower, a critique that was broadly in line with the entire biblical and prophetic tradition. Its basis is the prophetic claim “the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler, the LORD is our king; he will save us” (Isa. 33.22), “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1.15). On that basis, the biblical tradition challenges all human power structures. To that extent (and I think it to be a very important “extent”), I find myself in agreement with Horsley: the privatized, depoliticized, and generally domesticated Jesuses who are at present, *mutatis mutandis*, equally characteristic of the conservative Christian right and the liberal Christian left will not do.²³ Such Jesuses are neither the Jesus of the gospels nor the “Jesus of history.” One cannot worship and serve the biblical God, the God of Israel, and not be concerned about justice (including international justice) here and now. To that extent (and it is, again, a very important extent), the words and works of Jesus and his followers are both political and revolutionary.

Where I believe that Horsley and I differ is, however, in this: I think that the biblical tradition challenges human power structures not by attempting to dismantle them or replace them with other human power structures but by consistently confronting them with *the truth about their origin and purpose*. Their origin is that God permits them. Their purpose is to serve God’s glory by promoting God’s peace and God’s justice. For so long as they attempt those things, they may do quite well. As soon as they forget them, they stand condemned, and their days are numbered, not because human wisdom or courage will put an end to them but because God will do so. To put it another way, the prophetic tradition subverts the “powers that be” by insisting at every point *that they should do their job*. This, I believe, is its burden, and this consistently

emerges at every point where we examine it. Hence, to treat Jesus' political critique as a call to replace *one* human power structure with *another* ("home rule for Israel") is to miss its point. It is also to be in danger of missing the way in which, as a critique, it continues to challenge those who live under structures of government quite different from those that could or would have been envisaged by the authors of the New Testament. For if the Lord is truly king, then even twenty-first-century presidents and prime ministers elected (at least in theory) by Western processes of post-Enlightenment democracy *still* need to remember that they govern only by God's will and that the purpose of their governing is to promote God's peace and justice. Forgetting those things, they will stand condemned as surely as did any arrogant Caesar of antiquity. God is not mocked.

But I anticipate. Let us begin at the beginning.

I

Israel and Empire

From the Egyptians to the Greeks

If postcolonial studies have taught us anything, it is surely that in examining historical situations, we must listen for the voices of those who were ruled as well as for the voices of those who ruled them. Often the voices of those who were ruled are not easy to hear. They have been ignored or silenced, and so forgotten. What we call “history” tends to be written by the powerful. In his analysis of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Edward Said drew attention to the way in which Austen—surely as intelligent and compassionate a writer as ever lived—was clearly aware that what had happened in the British colony of Antigua was vastly significant for the lives and prosperity of the main characters in her story. Yet she says virtually nothing about the effect of those events on those who actually *lived* in Antigua.¹

All the evidence says that even the most routine aspects of holding slaves on a West Indian sugar plantation were cruel stuff. And everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery. Fanny Price reminds her cousin that after asking Sir Thomas about the slave trade, “There was such a dead silence” as to suggest that one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both.²

A new factor was needed to change that situation, and it would come in the aftermath of empire: a *post-colonial* awareness. “In time

there would no longer be dead silence when slavery was spoken of, and the subject became central to a new understanding of what Europe was.”³

But when we have broken the silence, our difficulties are not over. In a sense, they are beginning. For then we become aware that people who were not literate could create little or no record of their thoughts and deeds, so that what the slaves on Antigua thought at the beginning of the nineteenth century is by now available to us only by way of archaeological discoveries or oral traditions that, even when we can gain access to them, may be very difficult for us to understand and evaluate. Moreover, recent research into contemporary peasant societies shows the extent to which, even where protest or resistance movements do (as we say) “rise to the surface,” they often form only a small fraction of a much deeper popular resistance that remains *deliberately* hidden. In considering the communications that take place between the powerful and the subject, the anthropologist and political scientist James C. Scott distinguishes between the “public transcript of power” and the “hidden transcripts” of both rulers and ruled. The “public transcript of power” is determined largely by those who rule, and it is they who have the resources and the ability to create written resources, behind which their “hidden transcript” represents “the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed.”⁴ But the “hidden transcript” of the oppressed, of those who “dare not contest the terms of their subordination openly,” represents “a social space in which offstage dissent to the official transcript of power relations may be voiced.”⁵ Here is to be found “an entire discourse, linked to . . . culture, religion, and the experience of colonial rule.”⁶ That discourse is hidden, in part because those who create it do not generally have the resources to record it and in part because they *choose* to hide it from those who have power over them—and for a good reason, namely “the simple fact that most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity. Or, better stated, such activity was dangerous, if not suicidal.”⁷

What, then, of Israel? Israel constitutes something of an exception, for Israel created the scriptures. Through them Israel’s voice, even when it spoke as subject or oppressed, has never been totally silenced. Of course, even Israel constitutes only “something” of an exception. We hear from its past only what must always have been a limited group of the literate and the articulate, and even then, in general, only from those whose voices prevailed. Throughout its history, no doubt many in Israel said and believed many things not represented in scripture, or represented only at its margins. Still—and here we are on firm historical ground—it remains that, by the first century of the Christian era, most ordinary Jews, certainly most who were in any sense believing, had come to identify the scriptures (which at this period comprised at least the Penta-

teach, the prophets, and the psalms) as expressing God's word and promise to them. The first Christians continued to make that identification. In that sense, therefore, a voice that ordinary people held to be holy, true, and theirs, is still available to us. In asking, then, what they may have believed or hoped about the empire whose subjects they were, or about empire generally, it is appropriate, and indeed necessary, to begin with the scriptures.

From the viewpoint of faithful Israel, that Israel should be subject to *anyone* raises a theological problem. Israel is God's chosen, beloved and uniquely God's partner, called by God so that by it "all the communities of the earth shall find blessing." How, then, is one to understand God's purposes in relation to a foreign power that has dominion over Israel and its people? Is such dominion merely a manifestation of evil, and is acceptance of it therefore a compromise with evil? Apparently not—or, at least, the matter is more complicated than that. According to a consistent stream of biblical voices, God *chooses* that there shall be empires. Thus, Egypt (Gen. 47:7–10), Assyria (Isa. 10:5–6, 37:26–27), Babylon (Jer. 25:9, 27:5–6; Dan. 4:17–34), and Persia (Isa. 44:24–45:7) are all, in their time and place, said (in the case of Egypt) to be blessed and to prosper, and (in the case of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia) to rule over other nations by God's mandate. Early postbiblical voices speak in a similar way of the Greeks under Ptolemy II Philadelphus (*Letter of Aristeas* 15b, 19–21). But always such power is granted within the limits of God's sovereignty. Those who exercise such power are called to obey God's command, for the Lord alone is truly king (Ps. 96:10, 117). If they flout that command, they face certain judgment (Ps. 2:10–11; Wisd. of Solomon 6:1–9). Understandably, those who speak from the midst of Israel most often present God's command as a requirement referring to the well-being of Israel itself (e.g., Isa. 47:6; compare *Aristeas* 20–27), but sometimes (and very interestingly), they imply a more general command for justice and courtesy among *all* the nations (Amos 1:13, 2:1; compare, again, *Aristeas* 24, 187–90). They suggest that there is at work in the world, as Walter Brueggemann says, "a defense of human rights that is beyond the challenge or resistance of even the most powerful state. That is what it means 'to judge the world in righteousness, equity, and truth' (cf. Pss. 96:10, 13; 67:4; Isa. 2:4)."⁸

Into this mix, another factor thrusts itself. In Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon, the prophet does something that appears to be new. He not only affirms that the Babylonian sovereignty over Israel is God's will but also tells the exiles that, even though they are in a land characterized by Amos and Hosea as polluted (Hos. 9:3–4; Amos 7:17b), still God has not forsaken them (Jer. 29:11–14). They may flourish there, and indeed have a duty to do so. Let them build, plant, and marry (29:5–6). Let them continue to pray in the expectation

that God will hear them (29:7b, 12–14a). Jeremiah’s letter is set in the context of his opposition to false prophesy and, indeed, expresses such opposition (Jer. 28.1–17, 29.20–32)—a striking illustration of what we observed earlier, that the voices that have been preserved for us as God’s word to Israel were not the only voices in Israel, or their thoughts the only thoughts. In this case, we are given a glimpse of what may have been the “false” prophetic message that led those who heard it to “trust in a lie” (29.31). We are told about the words of Hananiah son of Azzur, words that are decidedly violent in tone: “Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years” (28.11). In opposition to this violent forecast, however, Jeremiah receives a quite different word: “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put upon the neck of all these nations an iron yoke of servitude to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they shall serve him, for I have given to him even the beasts of the field” (28:14). Babylonian imperial rule is, for the present, the will of God. In that context, the terms in which Jeremiah tells the exiles to flourish in Babylon—they are to build, to plant, and to marry—gain particular significance, for they are the precise terms in which God’s people are granted exemption from participating in holy war (Deut. 20.5–7; compare 1 Macc. 3.56). Daniel L. Smith states the essence of the matter: “Hananiah’s opposition to Jeremiah was the opposition of a Zealot, the violent revolutionary who called on Israel to draw their swords to end the yoke of Babylon. The argument between Jeremiah and Hananiah was both political and theological: how to be the people of God in a strange land.”⁹

Yet Jeremiah goes even beyond that, even beyond “nonviolent resistance.” For, most striking of all, the exiles are to pray *for* that land, heathen though it is, seeking the good of the city where they find themselves (Jer. 29:7). As Jeremiah makes clear, such prayer is by no means devoid of self-interest (29:7b). Even so, Walther Eichrodt’s point remains: “the way in which both the personal longing for revenge and the national desire for retribution are overcome is remarkable, culminating as it does in the formation of a new fellowship with the heathen through intercession.”¹⁰ In that connection, we might reflect on Edward Said’s observation that “one of imperialism’s achievements was to bring the world closer together.”¹¹ To state the matter more biblically, the very humiliation and exile of Israel serves, in the consciousness of at least one prophet, to strengthen his understanding of the greatness and universality of God and his sense of God’s relationship to all peoples.

The temptation that faces those who rule empires is, however, to absolutize their power, claiming for themselves autonomy. “They divinise themselves, and then the mind of the emperor is ‘changed from that of a man [and becomes] the mind of a beast’ (4:16)” (O’Donovan).¹² This, according to the scriptures,

is what happens at different times with Egypt (Exod. 5.2; Ezek. 29–32), Assyria (Isa. 10.7–14, 37.29a) and Babylon (Isa. 14.13–14, 47.6–8; Dan. 3.4–6, 4.29–30), and with the Greeks under Antiochus (1 Macc. 1.10, 44–53; Dan. 11:36–37).¹³ Such self-absolutizing is a rebellion against God and therefore carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. So destruction comes upon Egypt (Exod. 15.4–10; Isa. 19.1–20), Assyria (Isa. 10.15–19, 37.29), Babylon (Isa. 14.15, 47.9–11; Jer. 50.1–3), and the Greeks under Antiochus (1 Macc. 3:49–53, 6:5–13), for no power, not even an imperial power, can long defy God. The scriptural tradition, moreover, never attributes this falling of the great powers, this decisive break in their authority, to any cause *except* God’s governance, which is partly a matter of God’s own simple authority, partly a matter of God’s peculiar devotion to Israel, and partly a matter of God’s hatred of all injustice. Even with the Greeks, whose defeat might have been ascribed to armed rebellion on the part of Israel, still the tradition makes clear—particularly in 2 Maccabees—that Israel’s deliverance is essentially God’s work: “we prayed to the Lord, and our prayer was heard” (2 Macc. 1:8; compare 2:22, 3:23–40, 8:5, 18–21, 23–24, 9:4b–29, 10:29–30, 38, 15:21–29, 35).¹⁴

Part of God’s gift to Israel is, indeed, that she should know all this:

Daniel said: “Blessed be the name of God from age to age, for wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding. He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and light dwells with him. To you, O God of my ancestors, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and power, and have now revealed to me what we asked of you.” (Dan. 2.20–23)

The knowledge that Daniel has received is a knowledge that encompasses all Nebuchadnezzar’s apparent sovereignty and greatness, showing that it is, in fact, entirely subject to God’s sovereignty. And such awareness inevitably has its social implications as part of a strategy for exile. As Daniel L. Smith-Christopher says, “the survival of Jews as a diaspora people partially involves the conviction of superior *knowledge* in the face of superior *strength* (cf. Prov. 16:32, 20:18, 21:22). It is precisely by *teaching*—that is, instructing the hearer of the Daniel tales about their calling and their relation to God—that these tales ‘renegotiate’ identity in the context of diaspora existence. That wisdom is greater than strength or money is the subversive strategy of minority cultural survival.”¹⁵

Even that, however, is not the whole story. For, in the midst of it, a new possibility is raised. What if the imperial power were to *acknowledge* the su-

perior knowledge and wisdom of God's people? What if the imperial power were to declare, "Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!"—which is exactly what Nebuchadnezzar does say in response to Daniel's wisdom (Dan. 2.47)? What if the Emperor were then to offer Daniel and his fellow Israelites top-ranking positions in the imperial civil service—which is, again, exactly what Nebuchadnezzar does do? Then, interestingly enough, Daniel and his fellow Israelites would accept those positions, and there would be cooperation between God's people and empire—exactly, of course, as it is claimed there had been in the time of the Pharaoh who "knew" Joseph (Gen. 41.37–57).¹⁶ Here, Jeremiah's hint at the possibility of fellowship between pagan empire and God's people moves to an entirely new level, in which pagan empire is a conscious and willing participant.

With imperial Persia, the Bible presents us with a development of this last possibility, suggesting that the experience of foreign empire may actually be positive. The Jewish scriptures in general do *not* perceive Persia as in arrogant rebellion against God. There is, as it happens, evidence other than scriptural that Persian imperial policy (no doubt on the basis of intelligent self-interest) was much more respectful of local tradition—and therefore of the religion of Israel—than was the Assyrian or Babylonian.¹⁷ The Assyrians and, to a lesser extent, the Babylonians endeavored to establish their power by deporting local populations, particularly the upper classes, and by introducing their own religion alongside local religions. The Persians allowed and even encouraged their subjects to develop their own lives and traditions, provided they accepted Persian sovereignty. So it is that much of the Jewish Bible pictures Persia not as the enemy but as the *patron* of a renewed and restored worship at Jerusalem, which is paid for with Persian money (see Ezra 1.2–4, 6.3–5, 14; 2 Chron. 36.23).¹⁸

So the elders of the Jews built and prospered, through the prophesying of the prophet Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo. They finished building by the command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus, Darius, and King Artaxerxes of Persia. (Ezra 6.14)¹⁹

Evidently, then, *pace* O'Donovan, it is simply not true that "beyond making use of the moment [of ending the dominance of Babylon], Israel has nothing further to do with Cyrus." Quite the contrary! (See also Ezra 1.1–11, 5.14–6.5) Likewise, O'Donovan's more general statement—"Yhwh's world order was plurally constituted. World Empire was a beastly deformation"²⁰—cannot stand unqualified as a description of the biblical attitude to empire. Of course, it represents what *may* happen, and what, alas, often *does* happen, but not, ap-

parently, what *has* to happen. As O'Donovan himself pointed out at an earlier point in his study, "as we survey the texts which speak of Yhwh's kingship, we notice a reluctance to make direct connections with any concrete form of political order."²¹ That is correct, and "World Empire" is not an exception to it.

In postbiblical tradition, *The Letter of Aristeas* offers a similar pattern. The pagan monarch Ptolemy Philadelphus is also presented as a king who is not in rebellion against God. On the contrary, he appears as philanthropic, committed to care for his people, and corresponding exactly to the Jewish sages' own model for a king that shall "keep his kingdom without offense to the end. . . . If he practice just dealing toward all, he will carry out each task well for himself, believing that every thought is manifest to God. Take the fear of God as your guiding principle, and you will not fail in anything" (187, 189). Just how far all this represents the historical reality is doubtless open to debate. As Martin Hengel points out, these stories "come from the milieu of the Jewish diaspora in Egypt, where in the second century above all a close collaboration was developed between the Ptolemeans and the Jews." So we must take them with a grain of salt.²² What matters, nonetheless, is the continuing possibility they present of a pagan monarch who acts as God's partner and not as God's adversary. *The Letter of Aristeas* is notoriously hard to date. We should note, nonetheless, that those who date it after the anti-Jewish policies of Antiochus, when such a partnership between God and the pagan monarch would have been much harder to envisage, make its witness only the more significant.²³

What of Israel itself, as an imperial power—for such, by its own testimony, it had once been? "Jerusalem has had mighty kings who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid" (Ezra 4:20; cf. 1 Kings 9:21; 2 Chron. 8:8). And what is the Messianic hope, if not a hope that, under God, Israel's imperial rule will in some way be restored?

Lo, your king comes to you . . .
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

(Zech. 9:9, 10; compare Ps. 72, especially 8–10, 15–17, 89.21–28)

Yet, kingly rule by a human being *within* Israel was from its inception as fraught with ambiguities and problems as was kingly rule by foreign nations *over* Israel. The point was made and the problem stated in a nutshell when Israel invited Gideon to be king:

Then the Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of

Midian.” Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.” (Judg. 8:22–23)

Precisely. The argument *for* monarchy was, however, that it was necessary. Israel must become “like other nations” so that the king could “govern us and go out before us and fight our battles for us” (1 Sam. 8:19–20). The scriptures make it clear that in this issue, too, there was more than one voice within Israel. Kingship did not come without a struggle, and even though the pro-monarchists won that struggle, in this case the voice of their opponents was not to be silenced. The prophet Samuel and the LORD are pictured as conceding monarchy reluctantly, and with warning:

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 young men 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 Sam. 8:11–18)

In short, the danger is that your king will govern for his own sake, as an autonomous potentate, and not for the sake of God’s people.

Still, however, monarchy is allowed. Human kingship, with all its flaws, is accepted as a recipient of God’s grace and an instrument of God’s own kingship:

Now the day before Saul came, the LORD had revealed to Samuel: “Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines; for I have seen the affliction of my people, because their cry has come to me.” (1 Sam. 9.15–16)

I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
 I have sworn to my servant David:
 I will establish your descendants forever,
 and build your throne for all generations.
 (Ps. 89:3-4)

Here, then, is a tension, and the Old Testament insists that we live with it. As Paul D. Hanson says, "We may want to rush in where the final editor of the Bible did not dare to tread and resolve the tension by adjudicating which side was right. Are you for kings or for prophets? Declare yourselves! But that course was not the one followed by the editor [of the biblical narrative] nor by the nation [Israel]." ²⁴

It follows from all this that an Israelite king may no more absolutize himself or his power than may a pagan emperor. He must remember his dependence upon God, and he must keep God's commands. Oliver O'Donovan points to the political significance of the prophet's claim, "the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler, the LORD is our king; he will save us" (Isa. 33.22). If that is true, then the Israelite king who reigns faithfully must seek to honor God as king and also to be God's instrument for his people in the service of God's judgment, God's law, and God's salvation. ²⁵ This means, however, that

If his children forsake my law
 and do not walk according to my ordinances,
 if they violate my statutes
 and do not keep my commandments,
 then I will punish their transgression with the rod
 and their iniquity with scourges.
 (Ps. 89.31-33)

So it is even with David and Solomon: when they forsake God's law and arrogate to themselves autonomous power and authority, as David did in the matters of Bathsheba and the census (2 Sam. 11:1-12:23, 24:1-25) and as Solomon did in the matter of his foreign wives (1 Kings 11:1-13), then they are held accountable. In the case of Bathsheba, in order to gain her for himself, David has lied, cheated, and arranged for the murder of one who is bound to him by ties of honor as his dependent, as faithful to him, and as a guest in his dominion. What Nathan the prophet does in response to this is virtually a paradigm of biblical prophetic address to those who abuse their power:

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD. And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him,

“There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” Nathan said to David, “You are the man. Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul; and I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the Ammonites.’” (2 Sam. 11.27b–12.9)

Nathan’s words clearly acknowledge the divine source of David’s power and yet hold him utterly accountable for the misuse of it. Two other points should, moreover, be noted. First, Nathan convicts the soldier-king not on the basis of a command that might be too subtle or lofty for him to comprehend but on the basis of his own understanding of what is just. Second, Uriah *is* a foreigner: this is another of those occasions when the demand for justice in Israel is internationalized. It is not enough to be just to a fellow Jew; one must be just to all.

Solomon, for his part, was promised the glories and wealth of kingship when he sought from God not those things but wisdom to govern God’s people (1 Kings 3:11–14). In the end, however, he receives a stunning rebuke:

Then the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods; but he did not observe what the LORD commanded. Therefore the LORD said to Solomon, “Since this has been your mind and you have not kept my covenant and

my statutes that I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you and give it to your servant.” (1 Kings 11:9–11)

So the Davidic king who flouts God is punished just as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and the Greeks are punished, and for the same reason. But that is not the end of the story.

I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.
I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
His line shall continue forever,
and his throne endure before me like the sun.
(Ps. 89:32–36)

Though the house of David is unfaithful, though Israel is unfaithful, yet God remains faithful. God does not punish in order to destroy. God’s faithfulness remains the basis of Israel’s hope for the restoration of her empire, whether, as sometimes, it takes the form of messianic hope or whether it is stated in more general terms.

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen,
and repair their breaches,
and raise up his ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old;
in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom
and all the nations who are called by my name,
says the LORD who does this.
(Amos 9:11–12)

Strikingly, this divine faithfulness is also presented as the hope of Israel’s enemies—of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. They, too, are not finally beyond hope of repentance and God’s mercy. The affirmation of this hope is not central to the scriptures, but it is there. It is implicit, of course, in Jeremiah’s assurance that exiles are to pray for the “good” of the heathen city (29.7), for what other “good” can there finally be, if not God’s mercy? It becomes explicit in God’s promise of grace to Egypt in Isaiah 19.23–25, in the picture of Nineveh’s (Assyria’s) repentance in Jonah, and in Nebuchadnezzar’s (Babylon’s) turning to

God in Daniel 4:34–37.²⁶ And it depends, of course, utterly and only on the faithfulness of God, who “has delivered all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:32).

We see, then, the same basic pattern recurring again and again throughout this material. Biblical and prophetic tradition taken as a whole is not at all interested in the forms or structures of earthly power, in the choice of one system of government over another, or even in the question as to whether those who rule are believers or pagans. It is interested only in whether those who receive such power understand that it is a gift to them from God and that it is given to them for the sake of God’s people, or even for the sake of the world. The fact that empires and superpowers are seen as acting by God’s command and subject to God’s judgment carries with it the corollary that they exist by God’s will—but also the further corollary that they exist *only* by God’s will. As Brueggemann says, “Yahweh intends that there should be world powers, and that these world powers should indeed govern, but govern within the bounds of Yahweh’s mandate. The mandate variously consists in special consideration for Israel and occasionally the more generic practice of human civility.”²⁷ Any who rule in this way, whether they are pagans or members of God’s household, are to be honored.

Definitive in this context are the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah. No one is clearer than Deutero-Isaiah that the Lord God of Israel is the one Lord of all history (Isa. 45:6b–7, 46: 9–10). Yet, in the context of precisely this affirmation, the prophet speaks of God’s dramatic and powerful action, which will lead to the overthrow of the Babylonian empire and the coming of Cyrus, a king who, although he is not a member of God’s covenant people, is nonetheless raised up and empowered by God as God’s instrument.²⁸

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer,
 who formed you in the womb:
 I am the LORD, who made all things,
 who alone stretched out the heavens,
 who by myself spread out the earth;
 who frustrates the omens of liars,
 and makes fools of diviners;
 who turns back the wise,
 and makes their knowledge foolish;
 who confirms the word of his servant,
 and fulfills the prediction of his messengers;
 who says of Jerusalem, “It shall be inhabited,”

and of the cities of Judah,
 “They shall be rebuilt, and I will raise up their ruins,”
 who says to the deep, “Be dry—I will dry up your rivers,”
 who says of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd,
 and he shall carry out all my purpose.”
 Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
 whose right hand I have grasped
 to subdue nations before him
 and strip kings of their robes,
 to open doors before him,
 and the gates shall not be closed:
 “I will go before you
 and level the mountains,
 I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
 and cut through the bars of iron,
 I will give you the treasures of darkness
 and riches hidden in secret places,
 so that you may know that it is I, the LORD,
 the God of Israel, who call you by your name.
 For the sake of my servant Jacob,
 and Israel my chosen,
 I call you by your name,
 I surname you, though you do not know me,
 so that they may know,
 from the rising of the sun and from the west,
 that there is none beside me;
 I am the LORD, and there is no other.
 I form light and create darkness,
 I make weal and create woe;
 I the LORD do all these things.”
 (Isaiah 44:24–45:7)

“Thus says the LORD, to his anointed, to Cyrus (כֹּהֵן אֱמֹר יְהוָה לְמִשְׁיחוֹ לְכוּרֶשׁ)”:
 Klaus Baltzer’s comment on this passage is surely to the point:

For Israel this designation must initially have been a tremendous provocation, for it was on this concept that the whole monarchical tradition depended. “David” was the prototype of the anointed one. Of course prophets and priests can also be said to be anointed in the OT. But in a scene that is so unequivocally linked with arguments about sovereignty, and in which the argument is pursued in quite

precise political or constitutional terms (“Jerusalem,” “the cities of Judah”), we can assume that for listeners the declaration of the anointing established the link with the Davidic dynasty and its claim. To put it somewhat drastically: Cyrus is the new David! The dignity of the “anointed one” is transferred to a foreign ruler.²⁹

Cyrus, of course, does not “know” the God of Israel (Isa. 45.5), though he may come to know him (45.3). But, in any case, as Christopher Seitz says: “God is fully able to work with Cyrus as is. The problem will be in getting Israel to accept and understand what God is doing on its behalf through Cyrus.”³⁰ Seitz’s statement is precise. Of particular importance for our present concerns is, however, this: that in the prophet’s view, what God chooses to do “for the sake of my servant Israel, and Jacob my chosen” God chooses to do *through pagan emperor and pagan empire*, called and named by the same word that “made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth.” Moreover, this pagan emperor is called and named *as witness to the divine glory*, “so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none beside me.”