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Faith Under Empire: Old Testament Perspectives for Today

MARK W. HAMILTON

On Christmas Eve, 1917, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany wrote his troops: “The year 1917, with its great battles, has proved that the German people has in the Lord of Creation above an unconditional and avowed Ally, on whom it can absolutely rely.... From this we can gain firm confidence, that, in the future also, the Lord will be with us.”¹

A year later his armies’ final offensive had failed, and he had exchanged his throne for exile in the Netherlands. The God of Heaven had failed to act on behalf of the Kaiser’s quest for European domination.

The startling thing about this episode is not a ruler’s effort to enlist God in his own fight, nor even the fact that German Christians could take seriously his equating their nation’s culture with Christian values, but that all the combatants on each side of such a brutal and needless struggle as WWI could do so in their own way. Indeed, with tiresome predictability, empires bent on extending their own power, wealth, and prestige have cloaked even the most extreme violations of human dignity in the mantle of faith. From SS belt buckles sporting the logo “Gott mit uns” (God with us) to pieties about the “white man’s burden,” religion and empire have often linked arms. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, “We ... as all ‘God-fearing’ men of all ages, are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire.”² Because the symbols of religion can be hijacked by the powerful and thus can serve to sanctify and render uncontested their actions, disentangling faith and empire presents an important challenge to us who are both Christians and citizens of the world’s last remaining superpower.

The challenge of living under an empire has pressed Christians and Jews for many centuries. The Bible contains important resources for those who wish to remain faithful in such a setting. But its presentation is complex, demanding deep theological reflection on our part. Thus in the New Testament the book of Revelation equates the Roman empire with the whore Babylon, soon to fall under the weight of its sins, while Paul in Romans 13 (though hardly endorsing Nero’s government), still sees it as somehow God’s instrument. And even more positively, the book of Acts portrays Roman governors as protectors of the infant Christian movement. So the New Testament includes a range of attitudes toward the Roman Empire.

The Old Testament, on which I wish to focus just now, presents an even more nuanced set of attitudes and reflections on the problem. Israel never operated as a self-contained theocracy indifferent to international geopolitics. From Israel’s first encounter with the expanding Assyrian Empire in the 850’s B.C.E. to the reactions to the Hellenistic states in the book of Daniel, prophets, priests, and sages spoke the message of God to changing international political arrangements. Over time, Israel’s relationship to the great empires changed. That relationship began as one of competition, but subsequently a resistant of conquest; still later Israel became a reluctant subject, and still later, an acquiescent subject.

In the ninth century, Ahab led the coalition of states that pushed back Assyria for a century. In the eighth century, Assyria dismembered and then swallowed up northern Israel and reduced Judah to vassal-

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1. Kaiser Wilhelm II, in Lyn McDonald, *To the Last Man: Spring 1918* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1999) 7.
 2. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner’s, 1952) 173.

age. In the late seventh and early sixth centuries, Judah bid repeatedly for independence, only to fall to Babylon, which had succeeded Assyria on the world stage. Later, a restored Jewish people were subjects, usually loyal, of Persia and then of Alexander the Great and his successors. Then the extreme provocations of Antiochus Epiphanes led to a century of Jewish independence under the Hasmoneans.

The Old Testament contains texts from all these times, and thus diverse approaches to the problem of faithfulness under empire. These approaches include passive resistance and engaged criticism, guarded acceptance, active resistance within the rules of the empire, and radical repudiation. While many Old Testament texts address political issues, fewer address problems of faithfulness under empire. While I can merely sketch some of the biblical treatments of the problem, each of them deserves serious consideration by Christian theologians, political scientists, and politicians.

OPTION 1: PASSIVE RESISTANCE

The most famous example of this approach appears in the confrontation between Isaiah and Ahaz, recorded in Isaiah 7 and commented upon in chapters 8-9. Ahaz sought to navigate between his immediate neighbors, Israel and Aram/Damascus, and their mortal enemy Assyria. Like other small states in the region, he opted to pay tribute to Assyria – better the devil far away than the one next door! Isaiah, offering Ahaz an unwanted sign of divine protection and blessing, called upon the reluctant king simply to remain still, to avoid entangling alliances. Ahaz understandably declined.

I say “understandably,” because Isaiah’s advice looks suspiciously like the strategy that the new Bolshevik rulers of Russia briefly tried in 1917-18: doing nothing in order to produce a condition of neither peace nor war. Just as that strategy failed miserably owing to German inability to appreciate the genius of such novel politics, Ahaz must have expected that neither side would understand the niceties of Isaiah’s theology. Hence Ahaz’s vassalage to the larger empire.

Impractical as Isaiah’s approach seems, it was less devastating than the option Ahaz actually chose. The prophet recognized, apparently, that a commitment to so-called realistic politics demanded a willingness to lurch from one crisis to another. If his conviction that God would protect Judah in some unspecified way seems utopian, it at least has the support of Israelite liturgy (e.g., Pss. 2, 83) and story (Exod; Pss. 78, 105, 106). Isaiah’s call to trust Yahweh rather than attempt to engage in power politics on the same terms as everyone else offers an important touchstone for our own reflection.

Corollary 1: Ongoing Critique of the Empire

Passive resistance works only when the faithful community can critique the radical claims of an empire in the light of divine revelation. Thus Isaiah of Jerusalem could appeal to Yahweh’s transcendence over the nations as the basis of a rejection of the fundamental claims of an empire. As Isaiah 10 makes clear, the prophet knew in some detail the propaganda of Assyria and he responded to it by arguing that Yahweh, not Assur and the pantheon of gods, ruled history.³ Thus the political and military successes of the empire took place at Yahweh’s sufferance. Success did not guarantee virtue. Might did not make right. The prophet, deeply committed to the Sovereign God, regarded with skepticism the empire’s claims to be acting with political virtue. Such critique provides a model in which the faithful people of God do not ignore politics or take refuge in a fantasy world of spiritual narcissism but engaged the powers with intellectual vigor.

The most sustained critiques of the pretensions of empires occur in the oracles against the nations in the various prophetic books (e.g., Isa 14-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 24-32; Amos 1:3-2:3). Far from being merely xenophobic attacks on Israel’s enemies, the oracles against the nations denounce violence and oppression in all its forms. The fact that the prophets can shift from these oracles to shockingly similar ones opposing

3. See the detailed study of Peter Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image in the First Isaiah,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103 (1983) 719-37.

Israelite behavior shows that what is at stake is a profoundly ethical sense of the world. The cry for justice takes precedence over group loyalty in all its forms.

OPTION 2: GUARDED ACCEPTANCE

Such an engagement allowed the possibility that under certain limited circumstances, Israel could embrace even a Gentile empire. Thus the Chronicler can end his work with a favorable reference to the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus (2 Chron 36:22-23). The empire fulfilled prophecy because the emperor proclaimed liberty to enslaved Israelites in the name of God. The so-called Second Isaiah shares this fairly rosy view of the Persians, even calling Cyrus Yahweh's anointed (Isa 44:28-45:5). Though this optimism may not have lasted long (since a text from the Persian period, Esther, agrees with contemporary Greek sources in their suspicion of the Persian monarchs), it is remarkable that it existed at all. Just as some early Christians saw Rome as a possible protector, so some Jews understood Persia in the same way. The God of history could move in strange ways.

A similar view appears in the first six chapters of Daniel. These stories of Jews at court operate under the assumption that persons who adhere to key elements of the faith (in Daniel, prayer, monotheism, and the laws of *kashrut*) can not only survive, but flourish. The court tales place their major theological claims in the mouths of Gentile kings whose experience compel them, often reluctantly, to admit the superiority of Judaism (Dan 2:47; 3:28-29; 4:34-37; 6:25-27). The author of Daniel 1-6 does not naively equate Jewish survival with the goals of the empires, but he does believe that ultimately it is possible to flourish as a faithful person even in a state led by pagans.

OPTION 3: ACTIVE RESISTANCE WITHIN THE RULES OF THE EMPIRE (ESTHER AND PURIM)

A third option is that of the book of Esther. Probably written during the waning decades of Persian dominance, this comedy of manners lampoons the Persian court, with its drunken parties and irrational rules. For the author of Esther, Persia's leaders can rule the world but not themselves. Like Alice's Queen of Hearts, they intimidate subjects through caprice. Their entire legal system is a travesty: what sort of law can never be changed?

Within such a mad system, Esther and Mordecai use the greed, pride, and selfishness of Haman and Ahasuerus against themselves in order to bring about a good result, the saving of Jews in distress. The book of Esther accepts empire as a fact of life but argues that faithfulness to the chosen people must continue in spite of all difficulties.

The Greek revision of the book, which appeared in most Christian Bibles until the Reformation, accentuates this theme by adding prayers and other pious accoutrements.

OPTION 4: RADICAL REPUDIATION

Sometimes, the critique of an empire becomes so far-reaching that only complete rejection remains possible. Such is the case in Daniel 7-12, the apocalyptic visions concerning the Hellenistic empires of the second century B.C.E. So hostile has the empire become that faithful people must expect divine intervention to reverse the course of history. These chapters do not counsel active resistance, despite the fact that the Maccabees in the second century took precisely such a route and books like 1-4 Maccabees celebrated their revolt. Daniel does not, on the other hand, rule out such a possibility.

REFLECTIONS FOR EMPIRE-DWELLERS TODAY

For Christians living in the American empire and to a large degree influencing its economic and social life (which are, increasingly, the same thing), the biblical reflections on life under empire pose sobering questions. Obviously, when political leaders use Christian language to justify naked military aggression or the neglect of the poor and vulnerable, Christians must call for truth-telling. And when such truth-tell-

ing meets defensive claims – “well, would you rather have [insert dictator’s name here] in power” or “these countries can’t rule themselves” – we do well to call attention to the long, sorry catalogue of imperial propaganda justifying brutality in the name of some transcendental value.

Christians also must work hard to build alternative communities in which telling the truth, even when it is unpleasant, combines with a passionate love for others. Critique of the empire should not become a stridently self-righteous activity but one rooted in a community’s life of hope and faith.

But beyond these generalities, what are we to do? Basically two options have existed in Christian history, neither of which is entirely satisfactory alone. The first is the separatist option – we recognize the amorality of empire and refuse to participate in it in any way. Such a longing for purity has obvious attractions – it allows, as Stanley Hauerwas puts it, the church to “be the church” in telling the story of sin and forgiveness⁴ – but equally obvious problems. Separatism can lead to moral fecklessness, to the sort of sloppy ethical thinking that reduces all evil to the same level and fails to recognize that regimes do in fact differ in the degree of their brutality and the seriousness of their erosion of human dignity. Separatism can also lead to a suffocating self-righteousness that, in the name of love, ends up denigrating real human experience.

The second option is a critical engagement with the powers that be. This approach does not simply surrender to the powers or mask their will to power behind religious rhetoric. Rather, it recognizes that Christians are in fact entangled in the life of the powers and cannot easily escape them. Innocence is no longer possible for us. American Christians do have their fingers on the nuclear button, can destroy the environment, and do sit atop the economic food chain, benefiting from the toil of impoverished millions. Willing all this away with pious platitudes changes nothing.

Such realism raises this difficulty: how can we sustain such critique over the long haul? As the prophet Jeremiah discovered, hammering away at all the world over a lifetime takes a great psychic toll. For us, the lures of materialism and political power are ever-present. More seriously still, critical engagement, because it involves seeking the best available option for justice in the moment, can find itself compromising with the empire as it lurches from crisis to crisis. History can trump the vision of God’s Kingdom.

As we already noted, both of these approaches have long histories in Christianity, and in some ways they both draw on parts of the canonical witness of Scripture. That is, Scripture offers several possible responses to the claims of empire, and Christian theology has played out these responses in several ways. We must engage biblical theology in a critical way in order to decide which responses will be most fitting in a particular situation. If past experience is an indication – and it usually is – then different Christians will make different choices. Separationists and critical engagement types must learn to work together for the good of the Kingdom.

Certain basic assumptions lie behind all the approaches to empire that we see in the Bible, and thus behind all faithful actions today:

1. Yahweh is God of history, and no human experience can long express his will. The ends and goals of empires never coincide with God’s dreams for humanity. The will of the institution never coincides with God’s aim for humanity.
2. Human institutions partake of sin, and all do justice imperfectly.
3. The goal of the state is to maximize justice, dignity, and peace. These goals exist in some tension with each other.
4. Christians within the empire must be continuously vigilant and indeed critical. Acquiescence is not really an option, for it risks idolatry. Equating the Christian story with the story of any particular country is heresy, which Christian teachers have an obligation to resist.
5. The believing community must remember its own story and live it out in concrete practices of love,

4. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2000) 32.

peace, justice, and hope. This may mean supporting each other in counter-cultural modes of living that reject the basic capitalist, political assumptions of the American empire.

Living faithfully to God under empire will challenge all of us profoundly. Too often the empires of the world have sought in God an “unconditional and avowed Ally,” and too often the good gifts of the church have served up such a god. But if we do not wish to be on the wrong side of history, much less the wrong side of God, we do well to remember not only the fate of the Kaiser Wilhelms of every age, but more still the hope-bringing message of Israel, for whose God all the nations are like dust on the scales, but for whom, someday, every valley will be exalted and every mountain and hill will be leveled. Even the American empire needs this radical faith of ours, and not our blind obedience to its norms. May we have the courage to resist the siren song of patriotism so that we may join the heavenly choruses praising the God of all creation.

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