

Response to “New Testament and Roman Empire”

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As I read through and then listened to the papers from this afternoon, the words *image*, *power*, and *control* kept bobbing up like those bobbin-head dolls of sports figures that sell so well when a team is winning. I suspect my association is not coincidental given that ultimately, empire and empire-building is about winning and the losers become a sad or pitied footnote for those generations later to consider as we mine the artifacts of their agony and defeat or their complete assimilation or ingestion...or perhaps, rebellion. Winners also capture our attention, if not imagination. Empires hold a special fascination for us, be they Roman or Egyptian, Mongol or Songhai, British or American.

Images of winning and the winners are captivating and sobering. The dress, the music, the language, the wealth, the status, the power, the style of these things shock and awe as they demand obedience—if not submission. These images are meant to make sure that losers get that way and stay that way. Military might keeps people in check and with little awareness or knowledge of the fine features of hegemony that say that there are times when the losers become winners—if they believe they can be. Cultural productions as mechanisms of control, blind many from the fact that hegemony, the ability to control reality and shape it into their or our own image, can be a tool in the hands of those colonized. This happens because most of us feign modesty in these things and hate admitting that we like to win and that we like to control.

Economic strangleholds block us from seeing that hegemony is crafted with the tools of power and control and a studied will to inflict manufactured realities that benefit a design spun from human insufficiencies. These false realities help compensate for our shortcomings like the character, Lord Farquaad, the four-foot-tall ruler of the “perfect” kingdom, Duloc, in the movie *Shrek*. It is Dulocs we are creating with empires—manu-

factured perfections that ignore the realities of the messiness of living and the grubbiness of humans being humans in creation.

However, lest I wander too far into analogies here, let me return to my beginning point—the issue of power and control. It seems to me that the papers end where this ethicist of Christian things picks up her work. One question arises for me after we do this kind of careful reconsideration of the Roman empire as the New Testament's socio-political context and are able to engage in major paradigm shifts in textual interpretation. The question is: What are we learning from this re-reading scripture in light of the worlds that helped shape it in contemporary Christian communities that are living within the U.S. empire?

I think of this question particularly in the case of Black folks of the African Diaspora because the truism that I was raised with from the grandmother generation of several generations of Black folk. It was a simple one, but piercing in its critique: White folks and us have the same Bible but we ain't reading the same book. This truism/critique has been fading as I watch and hear an increasingly theologically conservative Black Christianity start reading the White folks' Bible and believing that it is true. Or, in the case of some, being paid to say it is true (through the shock and awe of the strings that come from faith-based monies and other forms of political graft and corruption).

Empire is on the eyeball when a simple-minded faith-based presidency can play to homophobia and heterosexism, sexism and gender control and role routinization, jingoism and ethnocentrism, and specious loyalty to a patriotism that is built on the model: see no evil, hear no evil, do no evil—at least not from American intentions. Empire is part of Black Christian life when Black Christian folk who either are or know lots of people who are victims of domestic spending cuts that eat the heart out of education, childcare, access to health care and affordable health care, social security, Medicaid and Medicare; and racialized drug laws rationalize their support for the president who has led the latest onslaught against Black lives and countless others in the U.S. because they believe him to be a Christian (read: "godly man") and because they are Christians they support him. Empire is also present when Hardy Billington, a 52-year old White man from Poplar Bluff, Missouri told a rally of 20,000 he helped gather in support of President Bush when Massachusetts made same-sex marriage legal:

The United States is the greatest country in the world. President Bush is the greatest president I have ever known. I love my president. I love my country. And more important, I love Jesus Christ.¹

The crowd went wild.

As we turn from Rome's empire to explore what might be found through a much more nuanced understanding of how much Christianity's very roots are situated in that empire, I raise the specter of Christian triumphalism. This is close to the heart of our unipolar and faith-based domestic and international policies in the American empire we are sitting in as we breathe in and out. This is a mean-spirited form of Christian triumphalism dressed up as compassionate conservatism. It is one in which a church seeks a position of power and dominance in the world through attitude and practice. Behind this, is the belief that the church is the locus of God's full and complete revelation. Forgotten or disremembered is that the church is not in possession of the truth, but on pilgrimage toward it.

Close on the heels of this, in many respects, is the theme that the U.S. is a Christian nation. This theme carries within it the potential and actual for the kinds of religious intolerance we see that shapes the political, ethical, cultural, theological, moral, religious, social landscapes we all inhabit. Moreover, we are deeply historically illiterate as a nation and we are largely unaware that this is the case. We tend to want to have our history unambiguous, true, and without competing narratives. Too many students today grow up with grade-school history teachers who skip over sections in history books on slavery, suffrage, the Holocaust, the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War, and more. Therefore, added to the problem of historical illiteracy is the vexing reality that we cannot remember what we never knew.²

History is messy and it is often not kind and far from antiseptic. Although we sometimes remember that God acts in history, we often lapse into thinking that we are alone in this unfolding of creation and then we proceed to make God a partner to our wishes. That God then chooses to be our side. In short, we hold God hostage if not prisoner as we, the faithful followers, assume God's will.

President Bush is not the first president who ends his speeches with the prayer, "God bless America." Until of late, it had become a sort of platitude of political oratory. However, now there is a different edge to this invocation. Now the U.S. is being invoked as the heart of God's heart and will of God's will—unilaterally and unequivocally and with our own weapons of mass destruction. For me, the problem with Christian triumphalism is that it gets away from being Christian so quickly when

1. Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *The New York Times*, Magazine Desk, nytimes.com web archive article, 17 October 2004.

2. Katie Geneva Cannon, "Remembering What We Never Knew," *The Journal of Women and Religion* 16 (1998): 167-77.

it becomes the familiar of empire. The goal is to win, to dominate, to conquer, to convert at all costs. Even if that cost means lying, stealing, killing, and subverting justice because winning is more important than helping bring in the kingdom, the realm of God. Winning—doing it my way or no way—becomes the doctrinal creed that fuels the piety of annihilation that is often the refuse of triumphalism.

In addition, because we are often historically illiterate, we may miss the fact that this attitude was planted in the context of British empire building by the early seventeenth century Puritans who believed that their Calvinist-based colonization experiment in the new world was a divine charge and mission.

We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.³

This kind of Promised Land theology with its model of military conquest was used to justify the wars against indigenous peoples, the “Canaanites” of the New World. The Puritans saw themselves as God’s elect, called to establish the New Israel. The Puritans did not respect the farms of Native Americans and they sought “legal” ways to get their land. For example, if a Native American broke one of the rigid Puritan religious laws, giving up land paid the fine. Strange to say that some Puritans were able to amass large landholdings through the Massachusetts courts. John Winthrop, who preached the 1630 city on a hill sermon quoted above, obtained some 1,260 acres along the Concord River.⁴

We cannot dismiss the drive to dominate that rings through to us from Winthrop’s sermon for it has remained with us through the centuries—sometimes with deeply held notes, sometimes in staccato. However, what endures is the self-image of being God’s chosen people who are called to

3. John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charity” (1630). This sermon was preached aboard the *Arbella* during the voyage to Massachusetts. The text of the sermon is in the public domain and available at <http://www.libertynet.org/edcivic/winthrop.html>, among other webpages.

4. Hans Koning, *The Conquest of America: How The Indian Nations Lost Their Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 69.

establish the new Israel. In 1776, Benjamin Franklin wanted Moses parting the Reed Sea with Pharaoh's army being overwhelmed by the waters, and Thomas Jefferson wanted the Israelites being led in the wilderness by the pillar of fire by night and cloud by day for the new nation's Great Seal. In Thomas Jefferson's second inaugural address in 1805, he recalled the Promised Land:

I shall need...the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life.⁵

Near the turn into the twentieth century, the nation as a whole increasingly saw itself as "the Protestant Empire." This was something born straight out of the Christian triumphalism that suffused the air of the U.S. culture at that time. The chosen people/Christian triumphalist spirit soon embodied itself after the Spanish-American War of 1898. Much like what we see today, the U.S. pursued a strategy of global influence, engagement, and expansion in terms of both economic interests and territory. In the 1800s, this country grew more involved overseas as a result of business, missionary, and military ventures fueled by a sense of U.S. exceptionalism (another offspring of Christian triumphalism entwined with empire building) and Social Darwinism which then begat racism and ethnocentrism and fear that immigration and annexation would undermine our culture (sound familiar?).

At this very juncture in 1899, noted Yale sociologist and social Darwinist William Graham Sumner warned against an unprecedented burst of nationalistic enthusiasm to take over half the world if need be:

The great foe of democracy now and in the near future is plutocracy. Every year that passes brings out this antagonism more distinctly. It is to be the social war of the twentieth century. In that war militarism, expansion and imperialism will all favor plutocracy. In the first place, war and expansion will favor jobbery, both in the dependencies and at home. In the second place, they will take away the attention of the people from what the plutocrats are doing. In the third place, they will cause large expenditures of the people's money, the return for which will not go into the treasury, but into the hands of a few schemers. In the fourth place, they will call for a large public debt and taxes,

5. Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), 65.

and these things especially tend to make men unequal, because any social burdens bear more heavily on the weak than on the strong, and so make the weak weaker and the strong stronger. Therefore expansion and imperialism are a grand onslaught on democracy.⁶

Sumner's warning is a shuddery harbinger for today as we see these and some of the other worst-case scenarios of Christian triumphalism playing themselves out in the context of our growing U.S. empire:

- "Shock and awe"—into Iraq.
- A premature announcement of the end of hostilities that has served unexpectedly as a mere prelude to extended deadly street-to-street fighting.
- A continuing popular insurgency.
- Our uncertain occupation of Iraq.
- The rollback of individual rights and freedoms in the name of national security.
- A war declared on knowingly flawed data skewed to fit the designs of few.
- Massive voter disenfranchisement in the 2000 presidential election.
- Compassionate conservatism that looks more and more like the jagged edges of broken glass running across the throat.
- Tax cuts that benefit the wealthy and wealthier.
- God bless America with cuts in welfare programs to give tax relief to those who need it least.
- Body bags being covered with the shame of not being able to mourn our war dead publicly because it does not fit the script that says: we are winning, we are winning, we are winning.

In a February 2003 speech to religious broadcasters, George W. Bush expounded upon America's virtues and implied purity, stating "We are a compassionate country, and we are generous toward our fellow citizens. And we are a courageous country, ready when necessary to defend the peace." In these and other speeches, Bush uses U.S. virtues to segue into the reason that we must confront the "evil" before us. Bush suggests that the road to that victory is paved with American good intentions and that

6. William Graham Sumner, "The Conquest of the United States by Spain," in *War and Other Essays* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1911). <http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/ailtexts/wgsummer.html>. In Jim Zwick, ed., *Anti-Imperialism in the United States, 1898-1935*. <http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/> (March 16, 105).

these American virtues will almost supernaturally imbue our military ventures with righteousness and with victory.

This is heightened by the fact that Bush's religious supporters do not act as spiritual guides, but more like faithful disciples. He is the leader of the America they think God has ordained. This, to my mind, is triumphalism twined with empire—not Christianity. This zealous form of nationalism, baptized with Christian language to justify the carnage we are making of other peoples' lives, cultures, religions, countries—their is-ness. This pump-you-up Christianity is the abridged version of the gospel—sound bites filled with biblical allusions. This Christian triumphalism is an ideology meant to defeat permanent vulnerability and puts celebration in the place of fear. Sadly, the real reason we are who we are and how we do it is not so much informed by deep piety and pithy discernment.

No, what we really are after is the power of the church triumphant through a government headed steadily toward empire. For me, remembering that the New Testament world was within the Roman empire is sobering. Moreover, as Christian communities pick up their Bibles in the United States and open what the old Black folks who helped raised me called "the book of life," we would do well to listen to Jim Wallis from the *Sojourners* community:

Faith can cut in so many ways. If you're penitent and not triumphal, it can move us to repentance and accountability and help us reach for something higher than ourselves. That can be a powerful thing, a thing that moves us beyond politics as usual, like Martin Luther King did. But when it's designed to certify our righteousness—that can be a dangerous thing. Then it pushes self-criticism aside. There's no reflection. Where people often get lost is on this very point. Real faith, you see, leads us to deeper reflection and not—not ever—to the thing we humans so very much want. Easy certainty.⁷

If our textual interpretations cannot help us here, then we are about the business of turning Caesar right side up with our best erector sets and Tonka trucks; putting Paul back on his horse and securing him there with tensile wires, ADT alarms, and smoke detectors; and chanting with the rest of the *Imperium*

We are winning. We are winning. We are winning.

7. Suskind, "Without a Doubt."



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