



# Proclaiming (in/against) Empire Then and Now

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**A**mong recent books on the New Testament are volumes that examine the interaction between the early Christian movement and the Roman imperial world.<sup>1</sup>

Why is this scholarship emerging? What is it investigating? And what implications does it have for contemporary Christians in the pulpit and in the pews, engaging the New Testament writings from within arguably the most powerful empire the world has ever seen and in a time when the economic, cultural, and political Pax Americana is being actively promoted around the world by various means?

## WHY IS THIS SCHOLARSHIP EMERGING?

Shaped in part by developments in our contemporary world, this scholarship develops and challenges aspects of current biblical work.

<sup>1</sup>Among others, Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004); Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001); Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003); Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001). Edward Said (*Culture and Imperialism* [New York: Vintage Books, 1994] 9) defines imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.”

*Every chapter and every pericope of the New Testament are products of empire. Every text must be investigated in this light. The New Testament calls followers of Jesus to active discipleship that resists imperial abuses.*

1. Students of the New Testament literature are familiar with historical-critical work (which asks who wrote what, to whom, when, where, why, and how). But frequently this inquiry has been selective, exploring some areas and neglecting others, such as the Roman imperial world.

- Scholars have conventionally examined the ideas and doctrines of the New Testament texts but paid less attention to the social contexts, relationships, and societal interactions in which these texts participate. Since the 1970s, scholarship employing sociological and anthropological models has redressed this one-sided focus on minds to the neglect of (social) bodies. Increasingly the interaction of New Testament communities with larger societal structures has come into focus. Such inquiry leads inevitably to questions about participation in the structures of the Roman empire.
- Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the mid-twentieth century, the Jewish context of the early Christian movement has received much attention. This work has produced considerable insight into the diversity of first-century Judaism, the relationship of Jesus and Paul to it, and Christian anti-Judaism.<sup>2</sup> Some work has explored Judaism's interactions with Hellenistic culture, but New Testament scholars have generally paid little attention to Jewish (and Christian) negotiation of pervasive Roman power.

2. Factors in the contemporary world have also influenced this developing emphasis.

- Contemporary understandings often regard religion as a private matter of personal relationship with God. Religion constitutes its own individualistic, internal, spiritual sphere, separated from the state and much of daily socioeconomic life. These presuppositions frequently impact our engagement with the New Testament texts as we engage in so-called depoliticized readings and look for the "spiritual" message that applies to "my" well-being and "my" relationship with God.<sup>3</sup> But in the Roman world that the New Testament texts assume, religion was much more a civic and communal matter, embedded in political, social, economic, and household structures and practices. To understand the New Testament texts as "religious" texts leads us into, not away from, the Roman imperial world.
- The twentieth century saw the growth of nationalistic movements and the collapse of empires. International trade, travel, immigration, worldwide communication systems (television, World Wide Web), and terrorism have created the awareness of a global village and of a multicultural and

<sup>2</sup>See the excellent discussion in George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

<sup>3</sup>See Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963) 199–215. For extensive engagement, Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Politics* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).

multireligious world. Such a context has stimulated new scholarly investigation, notably postcolonialism, people's history, and related postmodern approaches in which issues of power, gender, and class (to name but some) have been to the fore. As with other disciplines, biblical studies, long dominated by Western males, has become much more diverse and international in its personnel and in its areas and methods of inquiry. Matters of power and societal structures, and the roles of the church and Christian traditions in this changing and pluralistic world, have become prominent. Since there is no exegesis without presupposition or cultural location, scholars bring such questions to the interpretation of the New Testament texts. Inevitably, this inquiry raises questions about the neglected issue of the early Christian movement's negotiation of Rome's world.

#### WHAT IS BEING INVESTIGATED?

Previous scholarship has studied "church and state" in the New Testament, often concentrating on those texts that make overt references to the state (e.g., obedience in the difficult Rom 13; Jesus' words about paying taxes; Pilate).<sup>4</sup> Previous work has also focused on "Roman backgrounds" to the New Testament.

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*"Roman power pervades every aspect of the world from which the New Testament texts emerged; every chapter and every pericope are products of empire"*

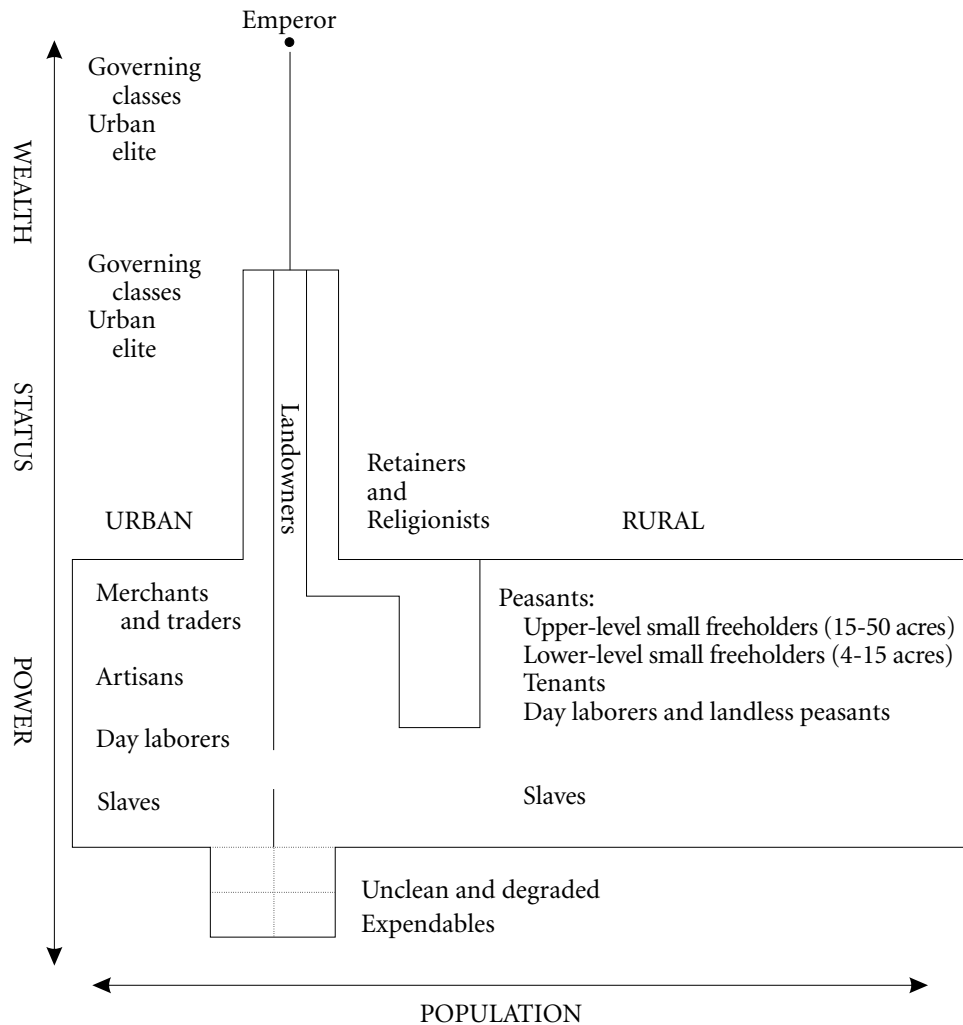
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Recent scholarship, though, differs from and extends previous work in both method and content. In its method, it draws on sociology, anthropology, archaeology, and classics. In its content, it recognizes that Roman power pervades every aspect of the world from which the New Testament texts emerged, whether Judea and Galilee, or cities such as Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus. Hence, the New Testament texts do not negotiate Roman power only at a few "obvious" points, whereas in other passages the empire disappears. Rather, every chapter and every pericope are products of empire. The texts continually assume and engage aspects of imperial structures and claims in relation to understandings of God's purposes for the world. That is, the New Testament texts, shaped by the revelation of God's purposes in Jesus, constantly negotiate dimensions of the imperial way of organizing the world and structuring social interaction. They interact continuously with societal visions, with ways of conceiving what it means to be human, with power exercised for the benefit of a few and to the harm of the majority. At times, they imitate and perpetrate these structures; at times, they contest and subvert them with God's different purposes.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, the helpful Walter E. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

Especially important for understanding the larger picture and the systemic workings of the Roman imperial world have been models of agrarian-aristocratic empires.<sup>5</sup> These models, along with disciplines such as archaeology and classical studies, provide a heuristic view of Rome’s empire. They map the overarching context to which particular aspects of the imperial system relate.

FIGURE 1<sup>6</sup>



Gerhard Lenski’s model of agrarian-aristocratic empires (see Fig. 1) is especially concerned with the exercise of power, posing the question, “Who gets what

<sup>5</sup>John H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 18. Used by permission.

and why?” In an agrarian empire like Rome’s, a small group of about 1–3% of the population controls much of the power, wealth (land, slave labor, rents, taxes), and status, consigning the remaining 97% to powerlessness and relative degrees of poverty. The empire was very hierarchical, with a huge gap between the wealthy and powerful elite and the rest. There was no middle class, and little opportunity (apart from trade or patronage) for social advancement. For the elite, life was quite comfortable; for most, it was a desperate struggle for daily existence.

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Rome exercised political, economic, social, military, and religious power. It maintained its hierarchical world by at least eight means.

1. Economic control was exercised through ownership of resources, notably land and labor (slaves, day laborers, tenant farmers, etc.).

2. Taxes and tributes, usually collected in kind, transferred wealth from peasant farmers, fishermen, local artisans, etc., to various elites, spanning local landowners and officials to the emperor.

3. Roman military power, both actual and legendary, ensured compliance and the maintenance of Roman honor. Refusal to pay taxes, for example, was considered an act of rebellion.

4. War, though, is expensive, as is a large bureaucracy. Rome avoided expensive war and minimized bureaucracy through alliances with provincial elites, with whom they shared power and spoils (taxation, status) and from whom they expected loyalty and the maintenance of the status quo. Often elites were centered in cities and towns, often in local councils, or, as in Jerusalem, in the temple, with (in)vested interests in maintaining the status quo.

5. Pervasive patronage from the emperor down ensured a network of favors and loyalty, privilege and dependency, throughout the empire. Elites valued calculated displays of wealth, power, and civic euergetism (the sponsorship of a festival, building, group meetings, statue, handout, etc.). Such acts gained recognition for their status through influence and wealth and provided enough beneficence to maintain the status quo.

6. Imperial theology, asserted through civic celebrations of victories and rulers, as well as by image-bearing coins, statues, buildings, personnel, festivals, poets, writers, etc., promoted the claims that the gods, especially Jupiter, had chosen Rome and its emperor to rule the world and manifest the gods’ will and blessings among the nations. The imperial cult, frequently promoted by local elites, provided a mostly voluntary means of expressing loyalty through sacrifices to images in temples, and at games, street parties, artisan guild meals, etc.

7. Rhetoric, notably the art of persuasive speech, was prominent at civic occasions. Whereas military force played on fear to effect coerced compliance, rhetoric,

spoken and written, sought consent by persuasion, thereby securing social control, cooperation, and cohesion. Speeches (appropriate to various civic occasions) and written texts articulated the power relations of domination that maintained the civic order and the privileged role of the elite.

8. Roman “justice” protected elite members (bringing charges against a corrupt governor, for example, was extremely difficult) but took harsh action against threats to the structures. Punishments often fitted not the crime but the offender’s social status. Crucifixion, for instance, was reserved for noncitizens and low-status provincials who threatened the state (citizens were crucified, appropriately, only when guilty of treason).

Studies of imperial power and peasant societies also show that whenever power and control are asserted, opposition and resistance are inevitable. Somewhat infrequently, there are open, violent, direct challenges—spurred, for example, by not paying taxes, establishing alternative ruling structures, attacking ruling personnel, and seizing property and resources. The Jewish revolt of 66–70 is one such event. But much more often in peasant societies, resistance is expressed in more covert, self-protective, and calculated ways. These acts might include cheating on taxes, sabotage, go-slows, apparently inadvertent non-expressions of honor (a sneer, no greeting), subversive songs and stories, seizing initiative from the powerful (like carrying a soldier’s pack further than the stipulated mile), or handing over one’s undergarment as well as the outer garment, thereby exposing the harshness of the powerful one’s demand (Matt 5:38–42).

A proverb from peasant societies sums up active, nonviolent, self-protective resistance: “The landowner/general/governor passes by, the peasant bows—and passes gas.” These discreet acts of nonviolent, active resistance challenge the public and official versions of reality, secure some honor and dignity for the powerless, and keep alive hopes and visions of different forms of societal interaction. Similar forms of resistance constitute one aspect of the early Christian negotiation of Rome’s world.

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#### SO WHAT? TWO EXAMPLES OF NEGOTIATING ROME’S WORLD

Such power structures pervade first-century daily life. When peasant farmers or artisans who are followers of Jesus walk down a street in first-century Antioch or Corinth, they participate in and negotiate Roman power displayed by these means. Following Jesus is not, as some New Testament interpretation suggests, a spiritualized matter that has no implication for daily lives and sociopolitical structures. Nor does it involve only synagogue communities (which are also embedded in the realities described above). Rather, following Jesus, one crucified by the empire, means a daily negotiation of Roman power. Recent scholarly attention to the interaction

between the New Testament texts and the Roman imperial world seeks to make explicit the dynamics of Roman rule that the texts assume in every chapter and pericope.

Two brief examples will offer a glimpse into the exciting insights and questions that arise from paying attention to the New Testament's negotiation of Rome's world. A short example illustrates something of Paul's engagement with the Roman world, and a longer example shows both Matthew's critique of and imitation of this world.

### *Romans*

In discussing Romans, Dieter Georgi argues that “every page of the letter contains indications that Paul has very concrete and critical objections to the dominant political theology of the Roman empire.”<sup>7</sup> Georgi notes that key Pauline terminology—πίστις (*fides*), δικαιοσύνη (*iustitia*), εἰρήνη (*pax*)—are prominent imperial claims—denoting Roman loyalty and faithfulness, justice, and peace—expressed in Rome's violent domination that benefited Rome's elites and allies at the expense of the rest. Paul's contestive claims express God's purposes for all people for a different sort of world. Paul concentrates on “God's loyalty (πίστις) as affirmed and expressed in God's solidarity (δικαιοσύνη) with the human race.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus, descendent of David (Rom 1:4), participates in solidarity with sinful, rebellious humanity (5:5–8), to be “what the *princeps* claimed to be: representative of humanity, reconciler and ruler of the world.”<sup>9</sup> Romans 14 promotes this solidarity in reconciling different groups so that the congregation might be a “pluralistic model-society.”

### *Matthew*

Matthew's Gospel offers a second example of both imitating and contesting Rome's claims. Roman imperial theology proclaimed that the gods had chosen Rome and the emperor to exercise the gods' rule through an “empire without end” (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.279). The emperor appears as the agent of the gods' sovereignty, presence, and will on earth. Submission to Rome means enjoyment of the divine blessings and well-being.

Remarkably, Matthew's Gospel makes parallel claims for Jesus! The gospel begins by presenting Jesus as the one anointed by God (“the Christ,” Matt 1:1, 16, 17, 18). Jesus is chosen from conception as God's agent to manifest God's saving presence (1:21, 23), sovereignty (the rule/kingdom/empire of the heavens, 4:17), will (chs. 5–7), and blessings for human well-being (5:3–12; chs. 8–9).<sup>10</sup> The gospel narrates what happens when God's kingdom or empire is manifested in the midst

<sup>7</sup>Dieter Georgi, “God Turned Upside Down,” in Horsley, *Paul and Empire*, 148–157, esp. 148.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 152.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>10</sup>For commentary, Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*. For congregational Bible studies on Matthew, see my contribution in *The Pastor's Bible Study*, vol. 1, ed. David Albert Farmer (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004) 1–66.

of Rome's empire. The noun usually translated as "kingdom" or "reign" (βασιλεία) commonly designates political empires in the Septuagint (Dan 2:37–45; 1 Macc 1:6, 16) and in Josephus (*Jewish Wars* 5.409, referring to Rome).

After declaring that God's empire is at hand (4:17), Jesus demonstrates its impact:

1. In 4:18–22, he calls four fishermen. The scene assumes imperial economic structures. Since the emperor was "ruler of lands and seas and nations," and every "thing in the wide ocean...belongs to the Imperial Treasury" (Juvenal, *Satirae* 4.51–55, 83–84), the fishermen are deeply embedded in an imperial political-economic system involving licenses, quotas, and taxes that express Rome's sovereignty over the sea of Galilee.<sup>11</sup> Jesus' call manifests God's sovereignty over their lives. It disrupts and redefines their participation in Rome's world by separating them from such structures, offering them a new allegiance, and providing them with a new mission.

2. Jesus proclaims "the gospel of the kingdom/empire" (4:23). The clash with Rome's claims of sovereignty is signified with the reference to God's empire and intensified with the term "gospel." This word echoes not only the good news of God's salvation from the Babylonian empire in Isa 52:7, but also imperial proclamations of the "good news" of the emperor's birth, coming of age, and rule. The gospel will show that Rome's claims of good news are fraudulent and that the days of this "empire without end" are numbered by Jesus' present salvific actions and future return to establish God's just and life-giving purposes.

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3. Jesus demonstrates a third dimension of his mission, namely, healing (4:23–24). The Roman world was peopled with sick and physically damaged folks. Lifespan for the nonelite was short. We know from our own world that oppression, powerlessness, poverty, and disease frequently go together. Rome's imperial system literally made people sick. Imperial power should come with a health warning: "Bad for your health." Taxation—paid in kind—deprived people of their food supply. It created overwork, stress, deprivation, poor nutrition, despair. These are the people that Matthew identifies several verses later as "the poor in spirit" (5:3), those who so lack resources and options that their material poverty eats away at their very being, their dignity, their personhood. Jesus promises them comfort, land, and abundance when God's justice is established (5:4–6).

Jesus' healings manifest God's empire. Isaiah had identified the physically transformative impact of the establishment of God's empire in restoring sight and hearing, making the lame to walk, and cleansing lepers (Isa 35:5–6; quoted in Matt

<sup>11</sup>K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 106–112.



11:4–6; demonstrated in Matt 8–9). Jesus’ manifestation of God’s empire, continued by disciples (10:7–8), begins the process of repairing the damage, sin, and death that the Roman system spreads. Jesus’ healing anticipates the transformation to be effected by God’s future victory.

4. Along with physical wholeness, God’s reign ensures that all people have access to adequate resources, such as land (the promise of 5:5, based on Ps 37) and food. Hence Jesus’ feeding miracles (14:13–21; 15:29–39) and inclusive meals (9:10–13) are a foretaste of the abundance and inclusion of God’s empire when it is fully established. In an age of hunger, it is no surprise that eschatological writings by Matthew’s contemporaries (e.g., *2 Baruch* 29:4–8; 73) and prophets like Isaiah present God’s empire in terms of abundant feasting (Isa 25:6–10).

How did the world get to be so out of sorts? Matthew offers a multistranded analysis:

1. Appealing to the gospel audience’s daily experience, Matthew’s Jesus reminds them, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. It shall not be so among you” (20:25–26). Rome is clearly in view, as are its allies, the Jerusalem leadership, with whom Jesus constantly conflicts. These conflicts over Sabbath, purity, tithing, etc., do not involve minor matters of religious scruple, but social visions and structures. Enforcing a day of rest when most folks struggle for subsistence living is not merciful (12:7) and does harm, not good (12:12).

2. Satan claims authority to assign the “empires of the world and their splendor” (4:8). The gospel reveals Satan as the power behind the imperial throne. Rome exercises power at Satan’s behest (also Luke 4:5–6; John 12:31; Rev 13). The gospel reveals the empire to be diabolical, utterly opposed to God’s purposes. Jesus’ mission is to assert God’s rule and claim as “Lord of heaven and earth” (11:25) to order the world according to God’s purposes. Jesus’ exorcisms manifest the victory of God’s empire over Satan’s empire, evidenced in Roman rule (12:28). His resurrection and imminent return show the empire’s limits and the ultimate futility of imperial power.

Matthew thus critiques and challenges Rome’s empire, asserting God’s empire to be at work in saving the world from what is contrary to God’s purposes. The gospel sets up the community of disciples as an alternative social experience and structure (20:25–26). But, reflecting its cultural setting, the gospel also imitates the imperial world. We have noted the language of “kingdom/empire” and of “king” or “emperor” for Jesus (2:2). In its eschatological scenarios, it asserts the final violent imposition of God’s purposes over all opposition at Jesus’ return (24:27–31).<sup>12</sup> These aspects of imitation are very troubling and require thoughtful discernment and re-imagining.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Warren Carter, “Are There Imperial Texts in the Class? Intertextual Eagles and Matthean Eschatology as ‘Lights Out’ Time for Imperial Rome (Matt 24:27–31),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003) 467–487.

<sup>13</sup>Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 169–179.

## CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

These brief examples reflect but a small piece of the significant rereading of New Testament material in relation to the Roman imperial world. This work has significant implications for contemporary interpreters and communities of faith.

1. This approach extends readers' knowledge of Roman imperial realities and challenges us to rethink our interpretive strategies and understandings. It demonstrates, for example, that our well-practiced separation of the religious and spiritual from the sociopolitical and somatic is not sustainable. Our New Testament texts lead us into the midst of sociopolitical and somatic life, not away from it. Matthew's presentation of Jesus' ministry as a revelation of God's empire does not privilege saving souls over redeeming somatic conditions and societal structures.

2. The work has uncovered complex interactions between New Testament texts and the Roman empire that involve challenge and imitation, cooperation and critique. This complicated dynamic not only requires alert and critical engagement with the New Testament texts, but also requires a careful, honest, and courageous engagement with the prophetic and pastoral implications of the texts in congregational contexts, especially in Bible study and preaching. Our New Testament texts do not uniformly commend a subordinationist or cooperative stance toward the state. They offer insight into the ways of empires and train readers to be discerning about ruling authorities and to assess them in relation to God's life-giving and inclusive purposes. The texts shape lifestyles and practices that also challenge and critique imperial ways.

3. The New Testament texts find the world as we know it—full of suffering, deprivation, disease, hunger, greed, and misuse of power—to be contrary to God's life-giving purposes for a just world. The texts do not legitimate escape or retreat or avoidance or spiritualization of such sinful realities. They do not sustain a "wait-and-see" passivity that looks only to God's intervention, nor do they delegate responsibility for such matters to civic authorities. Rather, the New Testament texts call followers of Jesus to active discipleship that continues the mission of Jesus to resist imperial abuses, to roll back nonviolently their damaging impact (hunger, disease, ignorance, tyranny, etc.), and to establish just and life-giving ways of being that anticipate the full completion of God's good and just purposes for God's creation. ⊕

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