

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Empire, then and now

The Roman Empire is the setting for what we read about in the New Testament. The Empire strongly influenced the lives of Jesus, Paul, and the other earliest Christians. As Christians today, however, we often fail to recognize this all-pervasive influence. We miss what was originally being said by the titles that we assume referred only to Jesus. We tend not to notice how boldly Jesus resisted the Roman Empire and contrasted it to the Kingdom of God.



Also, we may not notice how empire shows up in our world today, leading many observers to call the U.S. today's equivalent of first-century Rome. Our lack of awareness sometimes keeps us from seeing how we as Christians need to be opposing empire's current manifestations.



Following Jesus in today's empire

In recent years, the discovery and analysis of Roman artifacts, buildings, and documents have brought more to light about the Roman Empire and the early Christians' responses to it. Leading Christian scholars are making known what life was like in the Empire, how it influenced early Christianity, and how similar features appear in today's world.

Prominent among these scholars is John Dominic Crossan. Born a Roman Catholic in Ireland, Crossan was a monk for nineteen years before he left the priesthood. Lately he has focused especially on what ancient documents, coins, and ruins of buildings reveal about the Roman Empire's operation and Jesus's response. His findings make him concerned about how today's Christian Americans need to be responding to the American empire.



An inappropriate label

I've been dismayed by a page that has appeared several times recently in my congregation's weekly newsletter. It announces a new category of recognition for top financial contributors. Members who pledge as much as \$6000 toward defraying the church's debt for some major building and grounds improvements, the announcement says, will be given the title "Centurions."



"We chose the Centurion metaphor," the newsletter explains, "for the exemplary model of honorable and courageous leadership. This leadership enabled the Roman Army to achieve what many believed to be impossible. We invite you again to seek the centurion's path ..."



The system that killed Jesus

I could hardly believe my eyes when I read that. The Roman army, led by its centurions, was the enforcement arm of the Roman Empire, the system that killed Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul continually opposed this system, portraying it as the very opposite of the Kingdom of God. Thus people who call themselves "centurions" are labeling themselves opponents of Jesus Christ.

The gospels mention some centurions who saw the value of Jesus, but the point to these stories clearly seems to be that those centurions recognized his worth *in spite of* their being centurions, not *because of* being centurions. We could compare them to police in today's world whose job was to stop a civil-rights protest but who suddenly realized the protesters' cause was right.



We mislead ourselves and others

Well-meaning but inappropriate acts like using "centurion" as a label of honor in the church show how urgently church members, both lay and ordained, need to become better informed about the Bible and Christian history. When we fail to inform ourselves and to provide full information in our churches, we risk misleading both the church and the world about the true meaning of Christianity.

The glue that held the world together

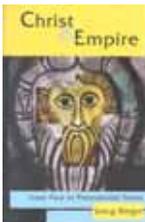


In his book *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), Dominic Crossan describes how the ideology of the Roman Empire affected all of life. He calls it the glue that held the civilized world together. Document

fragments discovered in recent years reveal important parts of this picture. However, because few people living in the Roman Empire could read and write, sculptures, paintings, coins, monuments, and public buildings furnished a lot of the “glue.”



Another Christian theologian and scholar writing about empire’s influence on both the early church and our world today is Joerg Rieger, a professor at Perkins School of Theology. In his book *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Fortress, 2007), he reminds us that the Roman Empire’s imperial temples and sanctuaries occupied the most prestigious locations of a city, giving strong visual messages about the emperor. Also, the priests of the emperor cult played roles that go beyond our view of religion. They came from the wealthiest and most influential families and were among the most influential political figures. Besides, the emperor cult was considered mutually beneficial for rulers and ruled, so no direct coercion to enforce participation in it seemed necessary.



Using Caesar’s titles for Jesus

Roman buildings, coins, and documents reveal the many ways in which Roman emperors were portrayed as divine, these and other scholars find. Crossan challenges us with this: “There was a human being in the first century who was called ‘Divine,’ ‘Son of God,’ ‘God,’ and ‘God from God,’ whose titles were ‘Lord,’ ‘Redeemer,’ ‘Liberator,’ and ‘Savior of the World.’ Who was that person?”

Most Christians and most other people who know the Western tradition, Crossan guesses, would answer that it was Jesus. Most apparently think that those titles were originally created to describe him and were uniquely applied to him. “But before Jesus



ever existed,” Crossan assures us, “all those terms belonged to Caesar Augustus. To proclaim them of Jesus the Christ was thereby to deny them of Caesar Augustus.

Christians ... were taking the identity of the Roman emperor and giving it to a Jewish peasant.” This, observes Crossan, was high treason.

A virgin birth and a guiding star

I’ve been surprised to learn how many terms that we see as Christian were originally used for Roman emperors, and how widely they were used throughout the Empire. However, I’ve been even more surprised by how many of the claims made about Jesus in the gospels and other familiar Christian statements were originally made about emperors.



Crossan points out that no one else in the New Testament or the earliest Christian literature gives evidence of knowing the stories of Jesus’s birth and destiny that Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 present. They apparently are deliberately designed to contradict Roman imperial theology’s story of Augustus’s birth and destiny. Crossan thus considers them symbolic rather than intended to be historically factual. Matthew traces Jesus’s genealogy back to Abraham, and Luke, after starting his account by specifically mentioning Caesar Augustus, traces Jesus’s ancestry back to Adam. These claims, plus saying that Jesus was born of a human virgin impregnated by God, seem like direct efforts to outdo the widespread claim that Augustus was descended from the virgin goddess Aphrodite-Venus and the Trojan hero Anchises.

The Christian story’s direct challenge to the Empire story shows up in other ways too. Herod was officially appointed King of the Jews by Roman authority. And Augustus’s Trojan ancestors were claimed to have been led from Troy to Italy by Venus’s western star. Similarly, in Matthew the story of Jesus’s birth describes wise men from the East following a star to Jerusalem and asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” In Crossan’s view, this deliberately says “a new and therefore a replacement King of the Jews has been appointed by God and not by Rome.”



Good news from heaven and the Senate



A few years after Caesar Augustus became the emperor, Crossan reports, it was decided that from then on, in the province of Asia, each year would begin on the birthday of Augustus. In the official announcement, he was described as a savior whose epiphany brought peace to mankind. The birthday of the god (Augustus), said the decree, was the ultimate good tidings for the world, announced from heaven above. And the word for these tidings came from the same root as the word used by Christians for “gospel” or “good news.”

Although Augustus apparently didn’t present himself directly as God, writes Rieger, and his successor Tiberius was even more reluctant, people honored them like gods. “When Augustus died in 14 CE,” Rieger finds, “the Roman Senate even decreed his ascension into heaven.”

Caligula, the emperor after Tiberius, and Nero, emperor when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, were emphatic about their divinity.



Peace through justice or through victory?

Titles of divinity would have seemed fully appropriate, Crossan points out, for someone who had saved the world from war and established peace on earth, as Augustus was said to have done. His method was to create peace through religion, war, and victory. Religion here meant keeping the gods on Rome’s side in order to have their aid in winning battles and wars, and the resulting peace on land and sea was obtained through military victory. Of course, Crossan reminds us, this kind of victory “does not bring peace but only a lull—whether short

or long—and after each lull the violence required for the next victory escalates.”

People saw the emperor, however, as a savior who brought not only peace and security but also healing. The first Christians therefore had to make clear that the benefits of their way were equally desirable and not just temporary. The program they presented in direct contrast to the Empire’s program of religion, war, victory, and peace, Crossan observes, was religion, nonviolence, justice, and peace. Stated more succinctly, says Crossan, it was “first justice, then peace,” or “peace through justice.”

Resistance that’s easy to overlook

Dominic Crossan sees Pilate as the most important interpreter of Jesus in the New Testament. Crossan sees this especially in the scene in which Pilate and Jesus confront each other. Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36) and that unlike the world’s way, his followers are not fighting Pilate’s.



For Crossan and Marcus Borg, another example of Jesus’s deliberately resisting the Roman Empire is his procession into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday. Borg and Crossan describe it powerfully in their book *The Last Week* (HarperSan Francisco, 2006). “Two processions entered Jerusalem on a spring day in the year 30,” their account begins. “One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered



by his followers. ... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius Pilate ... entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of impe-

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 14 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

rial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire." Jesus's group apparently was making what we'd call today a planned political demonstration, but I'd never realized that until I read Borg and Crossan's explanation. The direct contrast of the two processions isn't made explicit in the Bible.



It's hard, therefore, for non-scholar Bible readers like me to recognize the full implications of such scriptures. As Crossan points out, in the gospels Jesus never mentions Rome or addresses Pilate by name, despite being condemned to death by Roman Pilate,

in Roman Judea, in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Thus it's easy to overlook the many ways in which Jesus and his early followers actively opposed and resisted the Roman Empire. That oversight becomes especially apparent when churches unwittingly do things like using "centurions" as a label of honor.



In the next *Connections* I'll say more about what contemporary scholars see as the main features of empire and the early Christians' resistance, along with how empire shows up today and needs to be resisted by today's Christians.

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Empire, then and now

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Pilate ... summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But, as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

— John 18:33-36