Jesus and Empire

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The Foundation of Empire is Art and Science...Empire follows Art and not vice versa as Englishmen suppose. William Blake

If Blake could have surveyed the scene a century later, he might well have included biblical studies in "Art and Science."1 For a student of "Christian Origins" who had become aware of the United States' role as an imperial power—overthrowing elected governments and installing dictators in Iran and Guatemala, escalating war in Vietnam, supporting military regimes in Central America—it was not difficult to discern that the ancient Roman imperial order constituted the historical conditions of Jesus, the Gospels, Paul and other New Testament history and literature. Accordingly, in my first four books I attempted to set popular Judean and Galilean resistance movements and the historical Jesus in the context of the Roman empire, indeed as resistance to it.2

Yet it was not until I became acquainted with several "third world" students in my courses at Harvard Divinity School that it really hit me how much biblical studies as well as the Bible itself play a role in Western imperial domination. I was slow to catch on that two Zulu students, one a Methodist minister, the other a Catholic priest, both with European-oriented theological school degrees in South Africa, had been educated in the assumption that the Bible was an anthology of European texts, stories, and

1. The quotation of Blake comes from Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism (New York: Random House, 1993), who documents and explores at length the interrelation between cultural expressions and political-economic relations involved in modern Western imperialism. Books such as Anders Stephanson, Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995) make informative historical perspective for "Americans" who have been reluctant to think of the United States as an imperial power with an imperial ideology.

theology. But of course. It had been brought by the British missionaries. And the assumptions, concepts, approaches, and textbooks they read in theological school were European. When we read the Gospel of Mark as a whole story, however, it finally hit them that Mark was not the Europeans’ story but their story. It is not a story that comes from or is written to imperial colonizers, but a story about people who are subject to empire and take action to resist empire. That is when it really dawned on me that not only had the Bible become an imperial book, but that standard European-American interpretation of the Bible was embedded in and a carrier of imperial Western European bourgeois culture.³

To critically explore aspects of the New Testament and the Roman empire, therefore, we must also deal with the field(s) of study in which we have been trained. Of course serious questioning of its assumptions, concepts, and approaches has been going on already for several decades. Feminist, African American, Latin American and other liberation perspectives brought many key assumptions and concepts of standard biblical studies into question. Despite the serious challenges posed by such perspectives, we are only beginning to recognize the extent to which we professional biblical interpreters have been socialized into an established professional discourse (paradigm) in which the assumptions, concepts, and approaches have been shaped in and by Western imperial culture. Let’s take a look at three in particular.

New Testament Studies and Empire

In “secular” societies with separation of church and state, religion and politics, biblical studies has operated on the assumption that the Bible is about religion and not about politics and economics. Closely related is the modern Western individualism that led to the idea that Jesus and the Pauline letters were addressing individual faith and morality, and not communities, peoples, and institutional structures. These related assumptions, that the Bible is all about religion and addressed to the individual, and not about politics and economics, then more or less excluded the possibility that biblical literature is also about imperial power relations and the con-

licts they generate. Indeed partly because biblical studies were involved in imperial relations themselves, they did not especially want to acknowledge poverty and other symptoms of Western imperial domination of other peoples. The New Testament could be read comfortably in (essentialist) terms of the emergence of the truly universal and truly spiritual religion (Christianity) from a parochial and overly political religion (Judaism). And on a more personal basis, the Gospels and Jesus, after all, belonged to devout Western Christians and to the church as their scripture. These interrelated assumptions are difficult to overcome because they are reinforced by the institutionalized separation of religion and political economy and an institutionalized academic division of labor.

In that division of labor and professional socialization of biblical interpreters, moreover, biblical literature is appropriated mainly as text fragments. In churches the Gospels are carved up into and read and heard in the form of weekly scripture lessons. Correspondingly in New Testament studies in theological schools, Gospel materials are carved into “pericopes” for exegesis, supposedly justified as a basis for preaching. Gospel materials are appropriated in even more fragmentary fashion when interpreters focus on individual sayings or verses. This standard practice is rooted in traditional appropriation of Scripture as propositional truths codified in chapter and verse for handy reference for use as proof texts for sermons and theological doctrines. Thus neither in theological school courses nor in church services do we ever read or hear the Gospels as complete stories with the dramatic political-economic-religious conflicts (between Jesus and the Roman and Jerusalem rulers) that constitute their dominant plots. Rather than become a source of serious questioning about the use of imperial power against subject peoples, therefore, the Gospels remain in their assigned place at the cultural margins of the real world of power relations. But from the margins they continue to reinforce the grand narrative of Christianity as the true religion and of personal Christian faith as the counterpart of Western civilization and America, as God’s New Israel (as well as the new Rome), that now dominate the world.4

Much of the basic conceptual apparatus of New Testament studies consists of a set of essentialist constructs, many of them dichotomized. “Judaism” vs. “Hellenism” and “apocalyptic” vs. “sapiential” play a particularly determinative role in study of the Gospels and Jesus. But these are modern scholarly constructs with questionable applicability to ancient life and literature. Seeing New Testament texts through these abstract anachronistic concepts, moreover, obscures the concrete realities of political

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4. See further Stephanson, Manifest Destiny.
domination, the struggle for economic subsistence, peasant movements, and scribal protests.

In our attempts to extricate ourselves from the constraining discourse of standard Western biblical studies we have looked for help from other academic fields. Yet other academic disciplines are also the products of Western imperial culture. The literary studies that New Testament interpreters borrowed was also pretending that literature had nothing to do with politics. The structural-functional models that biblical scholars borrowed from sociology—about a decade after sociologists had largely rejected them—obscured conflict and pasted over power relations.

Our attempts to understand the New Testament and empire will thus entail discernment and deconstruction of how modern and contemporary imperial relations determine our ability to discern imperial relations in the Roman empire.

There has been much discussion in critical academic circles and in public media recently that the United States’ invasion of Iraq was the result not only of a lack of intelligence but of “bad intelligence.” Much of that “bad intelligence” was rooted in or related to what Edward Said and others have researched as Western European and American “Orientalism,” the West’s construction of its Other in travel narratives, official diplomatic circles, and academic disciplines. In what is admittedly a rough analogy, the field of New Testament studies works with “bad intelligence” rooted in or related to its essentialist construct of (“formative/early/sectarian”) “Judaism.” The essentialist concept of “Judaism” blocks New Testament interpreters’ discernment of the concrete political-economic-religious realities of the lives of ancient peoples who identified themselves from their Israelite heritage; it also prevents them from recognizing the determining reality of Roman domination on those peoples’ lives.

It is difficult to discern what the referent of the term “Judaism” might have been in the early Roman empire. There was nothing that we could call a religion separated out from the historical political-economic-religious social formations. There was a long-standing temple-state in Jerusalem headed by high priestly families kept in power by the Romans, many thousands of ordinary priests, and a half a million people living in villages

5. This is one of the principal points in Said, Culture and Imperialism.
8. My own attempts to explore the concrete historical structures and circumstances of
that sources such as Josephus refer to as “Galileans” in the north, “Judeans” in the south around Jerusalem, and “Samaritans” in between.8 “Sectarian Judaism” also has no referent, unless it be to the Qumranites and others who may be identified with the “Essenes.” Of the other “philosophies” listed by Josephus, the Pharisees appear to have been something like a political party among the scribal retainers of the temple-state, and the Sadducees a less influential party closely identified with priestly families. “The Zealots” is a modern scholarly construct that obscured the differences between several different movements, from the scribal-Pharisaic organizers of resistance to the Roman tribute to many movements among the villagers that took distinctively Israeliite form. There was no standardized text of writings that could be understood as “the Old Testament/Bible” yet. Manuscripts found in the caves at Qumran indicate that there were alternative scrolls of “Torah” (11QTemple; 4QMMT) as well as three coexisting textual traditions of the Pentateuch each of which was still unstable and developing.9 Since literacy was confined to scribal-priestly circles and scrolls were cumbersome and expensive,10 moreover, the vast majority of people would have had no direct knowledge of authoritative writings. It is thus quite unwarranted to posit “apocalyptic(ism)” as a widespread “Jewish” religious ideology or worldview oriented to “the End,” since there is no reason to believe that Judean or Galillean villagers had much contact with the scribal circles who may have cultivated mantic wisdom and produced what we label as “apocalyptic” literature.11 Similarly, until at least after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the systematic devastation of the Galilean and Judean countryside by the Romans in retaliation against the widespread revolt of 66-70 C.E., there was no such thing yet as “Christianity” that had split off as a new religion. Rather several parallel peasant-based movements focused on Jesus spread rapidly from Galilee (and/or Jerusalem) into Judea, Samaria, Syria, and out into towns and cities of the eastern empire. Jesus and Jesus movements were never separate from Israel. Trading the “bad intelligence” with which the field has been

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10. The extensive survey by Catherine Hezser, Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine (Tübingen: Mohr, 2001) now replaces our earlier articles and chapters based on more general surveys such as William V. Harris, Ancient Literacy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).
working should help clear the way toward understanding Jesus and his movements in the context of the Roman imperial rule.

Beyond the Depoliticizing Quest

- Compounding the diversionary effects of our "bad intelligence" are inappropriate approaches to investigation of the historical Jesus and to the Gospels that constitute the sources for such historical investigation. Besides being problematic in themselves, those approaches and assumptions are also depoliticizing in their effects. I have been struggling for years to find more appropriate assumptions (we do not work without some) and to develop a contextual and relational approach to the Gospels and Jesus that takes into account the implications of recent researches that have undermined the standard old assumptions. I have sketched a provisional approach to the earliest Gospel sources in recent books on Mark and Q, and a few key aspects of a tentative relational and contextual approach to Jesus in Jesus and Empire. Since this provisional approach departs so significantly from the assumptions and procedures of previous interpretation of Jesus, I should offer at least some brief explanation of how I proceed to the reading (or rather "hearing") of Gospel sources and Jesus in relation to the Roman imperial order. In attempting to be brief I will risk caricature on a few key aspects of my shift in assumptions and approach.

Toward a relational and contextual approach

The standard approach to Jesus, especially among critical liberal interpreters, works on individualistic assumptions. This has multiple roots, such as the individualism of modern Western culture and the resilient Christian belief that Jesus was a unique person. Jesus was an individual figure teaching or otherwise interacting with other individuals. Transmission of Jesus' teachings was by individual recollection and transmittal to other individuals. Indeed it is simply assumed that communities or movements focused on Jesus started only after he was executed, (for example) when his disciples became convinced that he had been raised from the dead and became motivated to formulate a message about Jesus (the determinative influence of the scheme presented in the early chapters of Acts).

It seems far more appropriate, however, to understand reality as unavoidably and irreducibly relational, particularly if we are trying to understand historically significant figures in the dynamics of historical circumstances and events. Those who have theorized about leaders of movements that had a significant historical effect have focused on the relationship between leader and followers in their historical circumstances, developed relational models to help understand how historical changes are catalyzed. Both Max Weber’s scheme of “charismatic leadership” and Karl Mannheim’s concept of the “utopian mentality” explicitly involve a tri-polar relationship or interaction between a leader and followers and/ in a situation that has become problematic. Historical investigation of historical leaders and movements, however, requires an even more complexified model. The circumstances that leader and followers find problematic, perhaps intolerable, are the results of historical changes. Moreover, in both their evaluation of those circumstances and their interactive creative response to the circumstances, they are working from the basis of their own cultural tradition. Indeed, that cultural tradition even provides the “roles” or “scripts” according to which leader and followers interact in making that response and forming a movement. And it is out of that complex set of relationships in historical context that a leader-figure becomes historically significant, significant enough that later generations are interested in historical investigation.

To take a rough analogy: we would not investigate the historical Martin Luther King, Jr. by focusing mainly on his sayings. We would have only a very limited sense of King if we focused only on his speeches. To adequately understand the historical figure of King we cannot separate him from the civil rights movement of which he was a principal leader. And we cannot understand King and the civil rights movement unless we know American history, particularly the history of slavery, emancipation of slaves, and reconstruction and segregation in the South; unless we understand the sharp cultural conflict between American and Christian ideals and the harsh realities of slavery and segregation. And we cannot understand how King and the civil rights movement formed and operated unless we know about African American churches as the principal political as well as religious base of African American communities, in which people began to get organized and in which the role of the preacher provided the model that was adapted by King and his followers as the civil rights movements developed.

We need to proceed in a similarly complicated way in the case of Jesus vs. the Roman empire: to understand the structural power relations and historical dynamics of the imperial situation, the cultural tradition out of
which Jesus and his followers were operating, the roles or "scripts" that Jesus may have adapted. Only then we can begin to understand how Jesus and his followers interacted and acted in the imperial situation they found unacceptable on the basis of their cultural tradition.  

Sources: Taking our Gospels Whole

Our understanding of Jesus in the context of the Roman empire of course depends on the historical sources available, principal among which are the Gospels, canonical and non-canonical. It also depends on how we view and use those sources, on our assumptions about them and how we use them. Here also the standard assumptions and procedures in New Testament studies are problematic, and again are de-politicizing in their effect.

First, partly because biblical scholars were on the defensive once Enlightenment criteria of knowledge became pervasive in Western culture and partly because of deeply ingrained habits of appropriating Gospel materials in fragments, scholars retreated to the individual sayings of Jesus as the only defensible basis for reconstructing "the historical Jesus." That was surely one of the principal driving forces of form criticism. That approach has been refined to the height of sophistication by leading liberal scholars, for example in the Jesus Seminar. The sayings of Jesus are purposely isolated from their narrative or other literary context, which was supposedly secondary and thus historically unreliable, in order to determine their authenticity and to establish their meaning. This procedure, however, simply leads to a dead end. Separate sayings have no meaning because meaning depends on meaning context. And the best, perhaps the only guide we have to the historical meaning context of sayings of Jesus is the literary context in which they stand. The assumption that "in the beginning was the separate saying" and that the gospel tradition developed by people combining sayings into sets of sayings is unfounded, perhaps simply false. Jesus became historically significant because he communicated with people, indeed very effectively. But nobody communicates in individual sayings.

Second, by isolating individual sayings and parables of Jesus scholars are using the Gospels (non-canonical as well as canonical) merely as con-

13. Further developed in Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2003).

tainers of "data." They are thus ignoring the historical literary integrity and social function of the Gospels which comprise the sources for knowledge of Jesus. In a case such as the Gospel of Thomas the structure does indeed appear to be a list or collection of sayings and parables, but as nuggets of wisdom for individual mediation, not as social memory that edifies a community. The Gospel of Mark, however, is/was a story, and must be read as a complete narrative, or we violate its integrity. Mark's story, like any good story, moreover, is full of multiple conflicts. The dominant conflict is not that between Jesus and his disciples. It is rather between Jesus and the rulers: Jesus spearheading a renewal of Israel and condemning the rulers of Israel, while the Jerusalem retainers and rulers seek to destroy him and the Roman governor finally executes him as a rebel leader against the Roman imperial order. This dominant conflict, moreover, is inextricably political and economic as well as religious. Only by attending to the overall story of the Gospels can we gain a sense of the political-economic-religious conflict(s) they narrate—and avoid the depoliticization that results from isolating "pericopes" or sayings or the limitations of lessons in the lectionary. The complete story, e.g., in the Gospel of Mark, or the equivalent in the other earliest gospel source, the overall picture gained from the whole sequence of speeches in Q, are our only guide to how the component episodes and particular speeches might function in a historical meaning-context.

The upshot of this critical reconsideration of our approach is that we must start not with text-fragments but with complete gospel stories or sets of speeches and how they represent or portray Jesus in interaction with his followers and the broader configuration of actors and institutions in historical context. Only after ascertaining the Gospel representations of "Jesus-in-relation-to" can we then compare those representations and project or extrapolate to the historical situation behind the portrayals.

Recent researches, however, have further complicated our historical task by calling into question the standard assumptions of print culture. In the communities and movements that produced and used them the Gospels were not read by individuals (lesson by lesson) but were orally performed or recited before groups (and more likely as complete stories than as separate episodes). That is, our sources were not documents in archives like those used by modern historians, but messages recited in interactive performance. In New Testament studies we have not been trained on how to hear such recitations. Other fields, however, such as ethnography of performance or socio-linguistics can offer clues, even

15. Developed at length in Hearing the Whole Story.
models of how to proceed. Key is that we are no longer looking for the meaning of textual artifacts abstracted from concrete situations, but for what work a performed message does in and among a group of hearers. I find it particularly helpful to keep in mind several interrelated aspects of how the recited message "works." A "text" or message is performed orally in a community, in a register appropriate to the performance-context, so that it resonates with the community of hearers by metonymically referring their cultural tradition.\textsuperscript{16}

For us at such a historical distance from Jesus-in-movement, operating with the inappropriate assumptions of print culture, it will be difficult to remain attentive to all of the interrelated factors involved in the complex approach just outlined. Most important for our historical understanding of how the performed text did its work will be knowledge about the historical context of performance and the cultural tradition that Gospel messages referenced. The context, far more inclusive than the old Sitz im Leben der Kirche of form criticism in its isolation of text fragments, includes all significant aspects of the concrete conditions of Galilean, Syrian, or other villagers' lives under the Roman imperial order. The Israelite (and other?) cultural tradition(s) that the Gospel stories and speeches referenced was cultivated, not in individual sayings or motifs, but in broader patterns, such as stories of liberation, paradigmatic prophetic or messianic leaders such as Moses, Elijah, or the young David and the movements they led, and the Mosaic covenantal structure of the people's relation with God and each other.

In this article I aim to summarize previous arguments, on the basis of ancient sources, that Jesus and the movements he catalyzed can be understood only in the context of the Roman imperial order and resistance to it. More particularly, Roman conquest and domination determined the conditions of and for the Jesus movements; and Jesus and his movements fit historically among many other Galilean and Judean movements of resistance to Roman rule and renewal of the people Israel. I then want to explore how major aspects of Jesus' mission and the movement he catalyzed constituted direct or indirect resistance to the Roman imperial order in Galilee and Judea. In particular, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God as a renewal of the people of Israel meant as the displacement of Roman rule by the direct rule of God; Jesus' exorcisms were a struggle against Roman domination and its effects on the people; and Jesus' re-

\textsuperscript{16} I find very helpful the work of John Miles Foley, particularly The Singer of Tales in Performance (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1995); and have used his combination of socio-linguistics and ethnography of performance in both Hearing the Whole Story on Mark and Whatever Hears You Hears Me on Q.
newal of covenant aimed to revitalize village communities so as to resist the disintegrating effects of the imperial order.

**Roman Domination**

Roman conquest of the Middle East and the Roman imperial order created the conditions for the emergence of Jesus and other prophets of resistance and renewal among the subject peoples of Galilee and Judea. The few treatments of Jesus that take Roman domination into account tend to focus on the effects of the tribute and occupying troops. Roman imperial domination, however, was far more complex and pervasive in its operations and effects. We can sketch some key interrelated factors.17

First, The relentless Roman extension of its power over other cities and peoples of the Mediterranean world was not accidental, but driven by the idea of empire. Romans saw themselves as a superior people, a “people of empire.” They viewed other peoples as inferior in various ways, needing the domination of a superior people. Some, such as Syrians and Judeans, were basically servile and good for little other than enslavement. Rome itself was somehow destined to achieve world supremacy. The torch of civilization had passed from ancient Troy to Rome (see Virgil’s Aeneid). Rome was favored by the gods; history was moving through its good fortune. The aftermath of Octavian’s great victory at Actium in 31 B.C.E. ending the chaotic empire-wide civil war only escalated and consolidated the ideology among subject cities and peoples. The elites of Greek cities built monuments and temples, established games and festivals to honor Augustus/Caesar as the Savior who, under the guidance of divine Providence, had brought Peace and Prosperity to the whole world.

Second, Roman warlords carried out their military conquests, and particularly their re-conquests of recalcitrant uncooperative peoples such as Galileans and Judeans, with extreme brutality. In the course of its conquests, Roman warlords destroyed whole cities, such as the classical city of Corinth in 146 B.C.E.—only to rebuild it as a Roman colony a century later. Generals such as Pompey or Vespasian commanded their troops to devastate villages, to slaughter and enslave the people, and to crucify those who resisted in view of survivors. All of this was clearly to intimidate

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17. The following section summarizes some of the discussion in Jesus and Empire, Chapter 2, which in turn draws on earlier explorations in Jesus and the Spiral of Violence and Galilee. On Roman attitudes toward and treatment of peoples in conquest and subjugation, see for example Susan P. Mattern, Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999).
peoples into submission, literally toterrorize subject peoples. Josephus’ histories supply case after case of such Roman brutality in its sequence of re-conquests of Galilee. Some of these could be classified as massacres, such as the slaughter of thousands in and around Magdala in 52-53 B.C.E. and in the area of Nazareth in 4 B.C.E. As we may be aware by reports of the recent massacres in Bosnia and Kosovo, such massive violence by the vengeful Roman military would have left collective trauma among surviving Galileans in those areas.

Third, following their conquest of Middle Eastern peoples, the Roman patricians and imperial regimes set up indirect rule through client kings such as the Herodians. After his appointment by the Senate, Herod the Great conquered his people with the help of Roman legions and then held them in check with an extensive security apparatus of fortresses, garrisons, and informants. He quickly became the Romans’ favorite military dictator, partly because of his extensive program of “development,” mainly massive building projects, such as whole cities named in honor of Caesar and several imperial temples as well as impregnable fortresses for the regime’s security. Such “development,” of course, required draining maximum resources possible from the Galilean, Samaritan, and Judean villagers.

At Herod’s death the Romans placed his son Antipas, who had been raised and educated at the imperial court, in charge of Galilee and Perea. Continuing his father’s “development” programs, he (re-)built two capital cities in Galilee, Sepphoris and Tiberias, within 20 years. Such massive building of course required extraordinary revenues. But the collection of taxes was now presumably far more efficient once the ruler of Galilee was located directly in the district, with nearly every village within easy oversight of one or another of the ruling cities.18

Fourth, as symbolized by the vast rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, Herod and the Romans kept the temple-state intact as a key institution of the imperial order. The temple-state had been set up in Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C.E. by the Persian imperial regime as an instrument of imperial control. The temple provided a religious-political-economic formation in which the Judean people could serve their own “God who is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:3) while providing economic support for a priestly aristocracy who both controlled the area and rendered tribute to the Persian court. The Romans and their client king Herod, like the Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires before them, simply perpetuated the temple-state as an

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18. See further Galilee, Chapter 6. Interpreters of “the historical Jesus” have hardly recognized, much less come to grips with, the fact that the Jerusalem high priesthood did not have jurisdiction over Galilee during the lifetime and mission of Jesus.
instrument of imperial rule. Herod launched the ambitious and massive project of vastly expanding and rebuilding the whole temple-complex in grand Hellenistic-Roman style. Herod’s temple became one of the great wonders of the Roman imperial world. Along with the sacrificial cult to the God of Israel, which comprised their principal function, the priests also offered sacrifices on behalf of Roma and Caesar. Above the gate of the temple Herod erected a great Roman imperial eagle. After Herod’s death, when the Romans ostensibly imposed direct rule by a Roman governor, the four high priestly families appointed by Herod were placed in charge of Judean society. The incumbent high priest was appointed by the Roman governor from among those four families and, in effect, served at his pleasure. The high priestly aristocracy generally was responsible for maintaining order and for collecting the tribute to Rome. They also used their positions of power to feather their own nests of privilege. Archaeologists have discovered that they apparently built increasingly lavish mansions in the New City in the course of the first century C.E. The temple-state, as much or more than Herodian kingship and Roman governors and garrisons, constituted the face of Roman imperial rule in Judea.

The impact of Roman conquest and tribute, along with Herodian and high priestly rule, would have been severe on the peasantry, the 90-plus percent of the society that formed the economic base. As noted above, the brutality of Roman conquest and re-conquest left collective trauma in its wake. The demand for tribute to Rome and taxes to Herod in addition to tithes and offerings to the temple and priesthood dramatically escalated the economic pressures on the peasant producers, whose livelihood was perennially marginal at best. After decades of such escalated pressures many village families fell increasingly into debt and were faced with loss of their family inheritance. The impoverishment of families meant also the disintegration of village communities, the fundamental social form of such an agrarian society. It should not be surprising that the Gospels and other sources represent Jesus and other prophets as addressing conditions of hunger and debt.

Galilean and Judean Resistance

The Galilean, Judean, and Samaritan people inherited a deeply-rooted

19. The following section draws upon more extensive exploration in Horsley with Hanson, Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper & Row, 1985); Jesus and the Spiral of Violence, Chapters 3-4; and Jesus and Empire, Chapter 2.
tradition of independence of foreign/imperial rule from their Israelite ancestors. Memories of early Israel centered around the exodus from bondage in Egypt under the Pharaoh and the many stories of Israelites gaining their independence of Canaanite kings. The ideal articulated in age-old victory songs such as the Song of Deborah (Judg 5) was of Israelite village communities free of exploitative practices of rulers. The God of Israel was the only proper ruler of the people, and the principles of social-economic interaction were laid out in the Mosaic covenant, which insisted upon the people's exclusive loyalty to their divine king and non-exploitative egalitarian relations among the people. A whole series of prophets from Elijah on appealed to those principles in condemning the oppressive practices of domestic kings and foreign emperors alike. Especially in Judean memories would have been fresh of the Maccabean revolt in which Judeans had again attained their independence of imperial rule.

This deeply-rooted tradition of independence is surely what underlies the repeated resistance mounted by Judeans and Galileans against the imperial order imposed by Rome. The lifetime and mission of Jesus, in fact, is framed by widespread revolts, against Herod's conquest of his subjects with the help of Roman troops, against the Herodians, high priesthood, and Romans at Herod's death in 4 B.C.E., the great revolt against the Romans, Herodians, and high priestly aristocracy again in 66-70 C.E., and against the Romans again in 132-35 C.E. Between those revolts, moreover, scribal groups as well as peasants and Jerusalemites protested repeatedly against the rulers, and peasants formed several movements of resistance and renewal.

Most of the protests, non-violent in themselves but met with brutal repression by the rulers, were mounted by peasants and/or Jerusalemites. Some protested provocations by the Romans in violation of Israelite covenantal principles such as Pontius Pilate's provocative dispatch of Roman troops into Jerusalem carrying their army standards decorated with sacred images or the emperor Caligula's order to place a bust of himself in the Jerusalem temple. Others protested oppressive treatment by Herodian or high priestly rulers. Perhaps the most vivid example of the continuing confrontation between Roman imperial order and Judeans or Galileans acting out of their deep tradition of independence was the annual celebration of the exodus from bondage under Pharaoh at the Passover Festival in the Jerusalem temple. Anticipating that Judean and Galilean passion for deliverance would be running high, the Roman governors posted Roman soldiers atop the walls surrounding the temple-courtyard, a provocative reminder of their continuing subjugation. One year toward mid-century the Passover crowd erupted in protest of an obscene gesture by one of the
soldiers, and the governor Cumanus sent in the troops to attack them, with considerable slaughter.

More significant in their level of organization and persistence were the many popular movements that took two distinctively Israelite social forms. In the revolt that erupted at the death of Herod, in the major districts of Galilee, Judea, and Perea, says Josephus, peasants proclaimed one of their number "king"—just as long ago Israelites had "messiahed" the young David as their king—who led them in raiding Herodian fortresses and storehouses or Roman baggage trains. These movements were able to maintain their independence for months, in one case three years, before the Romans could again "pacify" the areas. The movement headed by Simon bar Giora in the great revolt and the Bar Kokhba Revolt as a whole took the same form, of a popular messianic movement. In mid-first century C.E., moreover, several movements of peasants coalesced around prophets such as Theudas or the "Egyptian," who led followers in anticipation of new acts of deliverance patterned after the one led by Moses and the taking of the land led by Joshua. Again of course, all of these movements were brutally suppressed by the Roman military.

In addition to these protests and movements of resistance and renewal among the ordinary people, however, protests were carried out by some of the sages and teachers who, as scribal retainers of the temple-state, were economically dependent on the priestly aristocracy. As Herod lay dying two distinguished teachers of Jerusalem inspired their students to cut down the golden Roman eagle from above the gate of the Temple. A decade later, when the Romans imposed the direct rule of a Roman governor, a teacher and a Pharisee, Judas of Gamla and Zadok, organized a movement to refuse payment of the tribute. Then, 40 or so years later, as the high priests became blatantly predatory against their own people as the social order deteriorated, the successors of those dissident intellectuals went so far as to organize a terrorist group, the Sicarii, who assassinated high priestly figures who were collaborating closely in Roman rule.

We can draw three major conclusions from this survey of resistance and rebellion: First, resistance to the Roman imperial order was widespread among the people, in Galilee, Judea, Samaria, and Perea, and persisted for well over a century. Second, the movements opposed the high priests and Herodian rulers as part of the Roman imperial order. Far from having represented the concerns of the Judean people, the high priests do not appear in our sources as having protested against Roman provocations. Third, even groups of scribal retainers economically dependent on the temple-state mounted protests against the rulers; indeed resorted to terrorist acts against their own high priestly figures.
Jesus and the movement he catalyzed belong in and can be understood only in the context of the struggle of the Galileans and Judeans for independence and renewal of the Israelite people in resistance to the Roman imperial order. As outlined above, we proceed by trying to hear and consider the earliest Gospel sources as complete narratives sets of speeches and by attending especially to the context in which they resonated and to the key patterns in Israelite cultural tradition that they referenced. Perhaps the three most important aspects of Jesus-in-movement's opposition to the Roman imperial order were the proclamation of the kingdom of God, exorcism of demons, and Mosaic covenantal renewal of village communities.

Kingdom of God—Renewal of Israel Independent of Roman Domination

Recent studies of the historical Jesus continue to proceed by close examination of the word "kingdom" and the phrase "the kingdom of God" in various text-fragments such as isolated Jesus sayings or short passages in Judean or Diaspora Jewish texts. The only possibilities for what the phrase meant, however, are already predetermined in the discourse of the field by certain synthetic scholarly constructs: it can be either past or present or future, and/or it can be either "apocalyptic" (future "cosmic catastrophe") or "sapiential" (present internal-spiritual).

But what about "none of the above"? The continuing debate about whether Jesus' preaching of the kingdom was "apocalyptic" or "sapiential" is a "red herring." Neither side recognizes that their debate is determined by, because focused on a synthetic modern scholarly construct. A century ago theologically-trained New Testament scholars such as Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer constructed what was supposedly a dominant ancient Jewish world view of Apokalyptik out of text-fragments from recently discovered "apocalyptic" documents that they read literally. A half-century ago, Amos Wilder tried to persuade interpreters to be more sensitive to metaphor and hyperbole in the use of language and to be more open to the relation between "eschatological imagery and earthly circumstance." The theological influence of Rudolf Bultmann, however,

20. The "Wisdom and Apocalypticism Group" of the Society of Biblical Literature was formed to conduct a critical examination of the dichotomized abstract scholarly constructions of "wisdom" and "apocalypticism" and to establish the study of Judean and Christian literatures on a more appropriate footing; but it has yet to examine the role of the construct "apocalypticism" in exploration of the historical Jesus.

prevailed over the literary sensitivity of Wilder, and Jesus interpreters continued to read their apocalyptic text-fragments in terms of “cosmic catastrophe.” In the ongoing debate theological conservatives continue to take apocalyptic imagery literally as referring to “the end of the world.” Critical liberal interpreters, on the other hand, to avoid a Jesus who might seem like a deluded fanatic if the imminent coming of the kingdom had been meant in concrete social-political terms, insist on an inner, individualistic meaning. Both sides of the debate thus manage to obscure the political context and implications of Jesus’ discourse of the kingdom as well as of the Judean texts they were using for comparison. The focus on short text fragments, however, tends not to consider the broader literary context of complete documents that may be the only guide to the historical (meaning-) context in which they originated and functioned.

We can establish an alternative to standard, depoliticizing debates about what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God by taking three interrelated steps. We can simply avoid the modern scholarly construct of apocalyptic(ism). Instead of focusing on text-fragments, we can attempt to hear the gospel sources as more complete stories or sets of speeches.22 And insofar as the Gospel sources did their work by referencing Israelite cultural tradition, we can review what the kingdom of God meant more broadly in Israelite-Judean tradition and Judean texts in their concrete historical contexts.23

The concept (if not the phrase) “kingdom/kingship of God” was deeply rooted in Israelite tradition at both the scribal and popular levels. In the tradition of early Israel, prior to the monarchy (hence originally popular tradition before being taken up into the text of the great tradition), Yahweh was understood literally as the king of Israel. This is implicit in the formulation of the Mosaic covenant. God is the sole king as well as the only God of Israel. This is closely related to the experience of having been subjected to foreign kings such as the Pharaoh in Egypt. Since Yahweh was the sole king of Israel, it was impossible for Gideon to agree to the request that he become king (Judg 8:22-23). Similarly, when the Israelites asked Samuel to make them a king like other peoples have, Yahweh told Samuel “they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Sam 8:7). In the resulting compromise, human kingship is limited and conditional, under the continuing divine kingship of Yahweh (1 Sam 8; 10:17-27). Even

22. As explained in Hearing the Whole Story and Whoever Hears You Hears Me.  
in the imperial ideology of kingship evident in the Psalms (e.g., Pss 2, 110) and the charter of unconditional Davidic-Solomonic kingship (2 Sam 7; Ps 132), God is the transcendent king who has set the human king into power and, by implication, king also over other peoples and human kings.

Under the Persian empire’s sponsorship of the temple-state in Jerusalem God appears to take a demotion, being merely “the God who is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1). Under the Hellenistic imperial regimes, however, the dissident scribal circles that produced apocalyptic literature represent God as the overarching king of history: God, who was still ultimately in control of history, would finally bring judgment upon oppressive imperial kings and their own high priestly aristocracy who collaborated in oppressive imperial rule in apocalyptic literature. We see this in the legends of Judean sages at the Persian imperial court, where the main message seems to be that Judean scribes/sages can boldly persevere in their cultural traditions, since God is ultimately in control of and will punish or destroy oppressive imperial rulers (Dan 1-6). The vision in Daniel 7 condemns the whole succession of imperial rulers as beastly, particularly the Hellenistic emperors climaxing in Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The main message is that God is about to execute judgment on the oppressive imperial ruler, and restore the people, symbolized by “the one like a son of man,” to the sovereignty, presumably under the direct rule of their God.24 Enoch literature implicitly and explicitly condemns imperial rulers for making destructive war on peoples and confidently asserts that God is not only ultimately in control but will remove the kings and mighty ones from their thrones so that they no longer rule the earth and the peoples oppressively. The scenario of God’s finally acting to end imperial rule is stated most precisely in terms of God’s kingdom in the Testament/Assumption of Moses:

Then his kingdom will appear throughout the whole creation...
For the Heavenly One will arise from his kingly throne...
In full view will he come to work vengeance on the nations...
Then will you be happy, O Israel! (T. Mos. 10:1, 3, 7, 8)

The combination of the termination of foreign rule and the restoration of Israel to life directly under the kingship of God was not new or unique to apocalyptic literature. This double agenda was also articulated repeatedly by the prophets. And non-apocalyptic literature, such as the scribal Psalms of Solomon appeal to God as King. Psalm 17 insisted that “the

kingdom of God is forever over the nations in judgment" and appealed to God finally to end the imperial domination of Rome (esp. Pompey), which had "laid waste the land and massacred young and old," so that the people would again be distributed on the land according to their tribes. Thus "the Lord Himself is [would be] our king for evermore." Neither apocalyptic literature nor Psalm of Solomon 17 was about some "cosmic cataclysm," contrary to the modern scholarly scheme of "apocalypticism" that has figured so prominently in New Testament studies. These Judean scribal texts from late Hellenistic and early Roman times looked to God to assert his kingship over history specifically in order to terminate Hellenistic or Roman imperial domination. The kingdom of God in Israelite tradition was explicitly and directly opposed to contemporary imperial rule over the Judeans.

Indeed, the conviction that, since God was its exclusive king, the people of Israel should live independent of foreign rule and directly under God's rule was so deeply-rooted and strongly-felt that it resulted in active resistance to Roman imperial domination. The most dramatic case among scribal circles was the resistance to the Roman tribute organized by a group Josephus calls the "Fourth Philosophy" (Jewish Antiquities 18:3-9, 23-25). When the Romans deposed Herod's son Archelaus and imposed direct Roman rule through a Roman governor and payment of tribute, the teacher Judas of Gamala and the Pharisee Zadok organized a resistance movement. This "fourth philosophy," says Josephus, shared the basic views of the Pharisees, except for their passion for "liberty" (eleutheria, note the political language). They said the Roman tribute amounted to douleia ("slavery") and urged "the people" to assert their eleutheria, since "God alone is their leader and master" (monon hegemonon kai despoten ton theon). We can only understand this as an appeal to the fundamental Israelite (Mosaic) covenantal understanding that God is not only their king ultimately, but the direct ruler of their society as a people independent of human rulers. Since God is their direct ruler, this people cannot have a human ruler. In Judean and Galilean society at the time of Jesus, the connection in which the kingdom of God comes to the fore is precisely that of Roman imperial rule and resistance to it.

When we read/hear Mark as a whole story and Q as a whole sequence of speeches, it becomes clear that the kingdom of God is the dominant theme in both. This theme, moreover, is closely intertwined in Mark's story with the dominant plot of the renewal of Israel over against the rulers of Israel:

25. See further Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs, 190-99; and Jesus and the Spiral of Violence, 77-99.
and in the Q sequence of speeches this theme stands at the center of a program of renewal of Israel. Whereas God's rule has scribal features in Judean apocalyptic and Psalnic texts, however, in Mark's story and Q's speeches it has features that fit peasant culture and interests, including more covenantal connections (as we might expect from the Israelite popular tradition).

In Mark, immediately after Jesus announces that the kingdom of God is at hand, he then manifests it in a series of exorcisms and healings that free the people from possession by alien spirits and enable the paralyzed to walk again. In the second episode of exorcism the possessing alien spirit that drives its host to socially- and self-destructive violence is identified as Legion, i.e. Roman troops. In the next two episodes two women who, in symbolism of twelve, represent Israel being bled dry and almost dead, are healed, partly by the trust that the people have in the power working through Jesus. In reassuring those who may face martyrdom if they persist in commitment to Jesus and his mission, "Jesus" declares that the kingdom of God is coming with power. Using the negative example of a wealthy man who is deluded into thinking that he has kept the Mosaic covenant, which demands egalitarian economic practices, Mark's Jesus declares that it is impossible for the wealthy to enter the kingdom. Finally, facing imminent arrest and execution, Jesus shares his last supper/Passover meal with the twelve, the representatives of Israel undergoing renewal, in anticipating eating again in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God now at hand, which is opposed to and opposed by both the Jerusalem rulers and the Romans, is fairly clearly the overarching theme for the renewal of Israel that Jesus is announcing and manifesting.

The episode in Mark's story that most vividly dramatizes that the rule of God is directly opposed to the rule of Rome is the question about the tribute to Caesar—once we can hear it in the contexts both of Mark's overall story and of the sustained Galilean and Judean resistance to Roman domination. The standard Western and American separation of church and state, religion and politics, keeps us from "getting" what was happening both in the attempted entrapment by the Pharisees and Herodians and especially in Jesus' clever response. The Pharisees, like their more activist members such as Zadok who helped lead the resistance to the tribute twenty-some years earlier knew very well that according to covenantal commandments it was unlawful to render tribute to Caesar. God was their exclusive ruler, and the economic dimension was inseparable from the political as well as the religious dimensions. The Pharisees, however, also knew that the Romans regarded failure to pay the tribute as tantamount to rebellion and sent in the troops accordingly. And of course they functioned as the representatives of the high priestly aristocracy who
in turn, as the client rulers of the Romans, were responsible for the collection of the tribute to Caesar. That their question will entrap Jesus assumes that, as a popular prophetic leader preaching the kingdom of God, he will say that it is indeed not lawful to pay the tribute, or risk popular disillusionment and rejection. Jesus, however, avoids saying explicitly that the people should not pay the tribute. But everyone knew what he meant in his reply “Give to God the things of/that are to God and to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” What belonged to God? Everything. To Caesar? Nothing. He declared that Israel did not owe tribute—or loyalty or submission—to Caesar. His reply was a bold, as well as clever, declaration of independence from Roman imperial rule.

In Q as well the kingdom of God theme appears at a crucial point in nearly every major speech. In the first and longest speech (on covenant renewal, see below); the promise of the kingdom to the poor sets the tone of God’s action on behalf of the people not only in this speech (Q 6:20-49) but in the whole sequence of speeches. In the next speech Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed the coming one (prophet) fulfilling the long-standing longings that the blind might see, the lame walk...and the poor have good news preached to them. All of these are manifestations of the kingdom, which will far surpass John’s prophetic ministry (Q 7:18-35). In the mission discourse, Jesus commissions envoys to expand his program of preaching that the kingdom has come near, which is again manifest in healing (Q 10:2-16). The Lord’s prayer is a prayer for the kingdom, which focuses on the people’s economic needs, especially on sufficient food and a (mutual) cancellation debts (Q 11:2-4), the two principal dangers that constantly threaten peasant life because of demands for taxes, tribute, and tithes. Jesus charges that the Pharisees, in their role as retainers of the Jerusalem rulers, keep the people from entering (hide the keys of) the kingdom (Q 11:39-52). The future banquet of the kingdom will exclude the presumptuous aristocracy, the Jerusalem rulers who kill the prophets God sends (such as John and Jesus; Q 13:28-29, 34-35). Lastly, in the final fulfillment of the kingdom, the Twelve representatives of Israel will be seated on twelve stools doing justice for the twelve tribes of Israel (Q 22:28-30).

Mark and Q, in the very different registers of communication, narrative and speeches respectively, both represent Jesus’ preaching and manifestation of the kingdom of God as the theme of the renewal of Israel in opposition to the Jerusalem and Roman rulers. These are the earliest Gospel sources, whose historical contexts are very close temporally and sociologically to that of Jesus’ mission. Thus, insofar as they both portray Jesus’ preaching and manifestation of the kingdom of God in such grammatical political-economic terms, it would be difficult to argue that all
Jesus meant by the kingdom of God was the inner spiritual transcendence or monk-like (or Cynic-like) lifestyle of individual itinerants.

Demon Possession and Exorcism

Interpretations of Jesus' healings and exorcisms have been consistently reductionist by applying modern concepts to isolated Gospel episodes. Even recent attempts to take seriously the reality of some sort of personal change behind the Gospel episodes turn out to be reductionist. The concept of "miracle" in post-Enlightenment Western culture is loaded with connotations of the supernatural or divine or irrational, as opposed to the natural, human, and rational. The Gospel sources have no equivalent of the modern English term "miracle/miraculous." Similarly, however rehabilitated, the modern Western concept "magic," while useful in its shock value in current battles to reappropriate the historical Jesus, retains negative and polemical overtones and obscures rather than opens toward analysis more sensitive to ancient cultures. Even borrowing psychologists' and anthropologists' recent attempts to understand spirit-possession in terms of "multiple personality disorders" projects the modern Western concept of a normally integrated self onto ancient societies. Far from being comprehensible as a projection of repressed emotions and inner conflicts onto an outside "unclean spirit," demon-possession as represented in Gospel sources involved an invasion of host persons by outside forces.

We might rather follow the lead of recent medical anthropologists in recognizing that illness and healing, spirit-possession and exorcism, have irreducible social aspects and are culturally constructed. (How ironic that even the NRSV uses the reductionist terms of Western bio-medicine in representing Jesus as performing "cures" of "diseases.") "Critical" medical anthropologists also point to outside political and economic forces that often affect indigenous peoples' (social) experience of illness and the appropriate healing processes. If we adopt such an approach that deals with ancient Galilean and Judean culture on its own terms, then it is quickly evident that demon possession and exorcism has everything to do with imperial domination, certainly in ancient Judea and Galilee.27 If we simply bother to

26. This section draws on recent research and a forthcoming article on "Jesus' Healing and Exorcism: Key Aspects of the Renewal of Israel in Response to the Impact of Roman Domination," which will be further developed into book-length study in the next few years.

27. As I explored earlier in Jesus and the Spiral of Violence, 181-90; and Hearing the Whole Story, Chapter 6.
correlate Judean literature with what was happening to Judeans under the succession of empires to which they were subject, we can "see it coming."

In the Hebrew biblical books, whose original composition was presumably earlier than texts such as the sections of 1 Enoch and the Community Rule and War Rule from Qumran, we find little if any superhuman evil spirits and little speculation about rebel angels. Roughly coinciding with the shift from "eastern" to "western" empires, beginning with Alexander the Great's conquest of the Middle East, we find what are clearly attempts to understand how worldly affairs could be so utterly out of control. God is imagined as a distant emperor rather remote from the year to year administration of his empire, while disobedient disloyal spirits/angels/divine beings generate a race of giants (superpowerful beings) who use military weapons to oppress people while they themselves dwell in luxury (1 Enoch 1-36). Enoch and Daniel literatures also affirm that the divine forces loyal to God, such as Gabriel and Michael, will eventually take action to rescue the people/Israel/Judeans, when God finally holds the rebel forces accountable at judgment.

In the period following direct attacks on Jerusalem and Judea by the Seleucid regime and in the early Roman period, this explanation of history completely out of control has blossomed into a full-blown and systematically articulated dualism of the Prince of Light vs. the Angel/Prince of Darkness/Belial (1QS 3-4). That it has to do with imperial domination is stated explicitly in the Qumran War Scroll. The Qumran community apparently anticipated an imminent battle between the forces of God/Light and the forces of Darkness/Belial, but one that involved members of the Qumran community themselves fighting against the Kittim, a code word for the Romans. What was happening in the transcendent spirit world was understood as controlling what was happening to the Judean people and Qumran community, i.e. subjugation by the Romans. The ritual action of the community, in which they apparently held ritual rehearsals of the future great battle, was their way of affirming and anticipating their eventual liberation when God would finally engage the Romans along with the forces of Darkness.

The Gospels give us a window onto the corresponding struggles on the popular level to deal with the same imperial conquest and control, only now the demonology and demon-possession are ad hoc rather than systematically thought-out. Having been possessed by unclean spirits, certain people have become dysfunctional, no longer themselves, not only unable to carry on a normal life in their village communities, but violent to others and themselves, such that they must be chained and/or removed from the village. Qumranites themselves were not demon-possessed be-
cause as members of the elect covenantal community, "the Sons of Light," they were already living under the power of the Prince of Light; but everybody outside the community was subject to the Prince of Darkness.

By contrast, in the Gospels Jesus performs exorcisms, expelling the unclean spirit that had come to possess certain people. This also has to do with imperial domination and resistance to it, as can be seen in the way his exorcisms are understood. A power-struggle is engaged at three levels, the individual possessed, the spirit world where God is battling Satan, and by implication the political level in which it is stated that if God/Jesus is winning the battle at the spirit level, as manifest in his exorcisms, then Roman rule is about to be terminated. This can be seen most clearly in the exorcism of the Gerasene villager, where the demon’s identity is ascertained as “Legion,” i.e., Roman troops (Mark 5:1-20). When Legion then enters the (military) “company” of swine it “charges” down the hill into the “sea,” it thus self-destructs. This is by no means a literal destruction of Roman troops, but it is a symbolic indication of what is happening or about to happen through Jesus’ exorcisms. This is also indicated by implication when, in the Q Beelzebul debate, Jesus says that since it is by the “finger of God” he casts out demons, “the kingdom of God” has come upon them, i.e., God now rules and that means Rome’s rule is virtually over. This is far more than some individual religious action that can be compared with “banditry.” The latter is a merely individual ad hoc response to oppression. Jesus’ exorcisms are part of a broad political-religious program of the renewal of Israel in opposition to Roman domination.

To say that Jesus is defeating “demonic imperialism,” moreover, while true in a suggestive way, does not allow us to distinguish further what is happening at least in Jesus’ exorcisms as represented in the Gospels, compared with what happens in other cases of demon-possession and exorcism. People who believe in demons and are demon-possessed know the difference between the spirits who possess them and the actual colonial figures or the imperial armies who conquer them. The demons are spirits, the colonialists are foreign human beings. Among many African peoples in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, possession by and, among some peoples, exorcism of demons was a way of adjusting to the impact of foreigners, including the Arab authorities who came with Islam in North Africa and the European explorers, traders, commanders of troops, doctors and missionaries. People were possessed by demons named “Kijesu” (Jesus) or “Lord Kromer” and in the Zar cults, for example, engaged in elaborate rituals in which those demons were first identified/diagnosed and then driven out.28 We can see that resistance is involved in this action, which is mainly a means of accommodation.
Frantz Fanon was the one who really illuminated how belief in and possession by spirits (djinn) was the Algerians' way of adjusting to the violent French invasion and domination, with the self-protective effect that they did not lash out against the French in what would have been suicidal action. Possession subsided, however, when the Algerians focused on the French themselves and organized active resistance, i.e. when they focused on the actual political colonial occupation instead of on the demonic symptoms of French imperialism. Something somewhat similar may be happening in the Gospel representations of Jesus' exorcisms. Demons and demon-possession were real (psychological reductionism will not help). Ethnographers of African peoples, Sinhalese, and medical anthropologists now take the phenomenon seriously, suspending their own Western scientific disbelief. We should follow suit. So when Jesus exorcizes demons he deals directly with the effects of Roman domination. As seen in the Gerasene case, when he evokes the identity of a demon, the result is more than simply the name Legion. For one thing, the demon is not simply driven out but proceeds to self-destruct. But also the people from the countryside and city who find out what just happened are afraid and ask Jesus to leave their area. They, like Jesus, recognize that what has driven the demoniac into such violent destructive behavior is not just a demon whose name is Legion, but the Roman troops who have come to control their lives. And they are not prepared to face that reality. Presumably the hearers of Mark are, or are somewhat, prepared to recognize the reality of Roman domination. How they were able to acknowledge and deal with this continuing reality surely has a good deal to do with an aspect of Jesus' program of renewal of Israel and has gone relatively unrecognized.

Covenant Renewal

The most important larger Israelite cultural pattern overlooked in standard study of the Gospels and Jesus is the Mosaic covenant. The habitual focus on text-fragments such as individual sayings (e.g., "love your enemies," "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle

29. Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1964); applied to demon possession and exorcism episodes in Mark in Hearing the Whole Story, Chapter 6.
than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God”) precludes recognition of broader cultural patterns. The theological importance of Jesus’ bringing the Gospel to break through the burdensome obsession with requirements of the Law in “Judaism” worked actively against recognition of components of the Mosaic Covenant, which is closely associated with the Law. And the importance of Jesus being unique and original in his teaching (as in the old criterion of dissimilarity) tended to prevent recognition of allusions to traditional covenantal teaching. Not surprisingly, even when Gospel interpreters recognized law-like formulations (“statements of holy law”), for example, at several points in Mark 10, they did not “connect the dots,” even in contexts where the covenant commandments were recited explicitly (Mark 10:16-31).

The Mosaic Covenant, of course, forms the basis of Israelite society, central both in the popular tradition cultivated in Galilean and Judean village communities and in the great tradition developed in Jerusalem. Older law-codes and covenantal teachings were included in the literature of the Jerusalem temple-state. According to the windows on earlier history that they provide, covenantal texts such as Exodus 20, 21-23; Leviticus 19, 25; the book of Deuteronomy, certain passages in the prophetic books, and so on, the Mosaic covenant provided the fundamental principles of “social policy” according to which social-economic-religious life operated in the village communities that constituted Israelite society, that formed the fundamental political-economic forms of the society (whether they were subject to the power of a monarchy or empire or not). Prophetic covenantal oracles and priestly covenantal teaching derives from and/or builds on Mosaic covenantal principles. Closely linked with, and probably in implementation of, these covenantal principles were a set of mechanisms that seem to function like those of other peasant societies, to keep the constituent families economically viable on their inheritance of land—prohibition of interest, sabbatical cancellation of debts, sabbatical release of debt-slaves, sabbatical rest of the land so that the poor can harvest, etc. In ancient Israelite society, these were the forms of what James C. Scott calls “the moral economy of the peasant” in his cross-cultural study of agrarian societies.31 The covenant commandments were the principles and the regular cancellation of debts, release of debt-slaves, etc. were the mechanisms by which village communities as a whole maintained the viability of each component family or household.

From several references in Josephus it is clear that a regularized cycle

of sabbatical rest of the land was still practiced in late Second Temple times (Jewish Antiquities 3.280-81; 12.378; 12.202, 206, 475; 15.7). The sabbatical cancellation of debts was apparently also still observed, or there would be no rabbinic tradition about Hillel's famous prosbul to circumvent it, supposedly to free up credit.32 The Community Rule and the Damascus Rule now provide clear evidence that a priestly-scribal group, when it condemned and withdrew from the high priestly regime and formed the community at Qumran, organized itself as a strictly observant community according to a renewal of the Mosaic covenant, and practiced ceremonies based on an adaptation of the same structure that scholars have discerned in central covenantal texts such as Exodus 20 and the covenant renewal in Joshua 24.

Hebrew Bible scholars have been teaching us for the last generation that the Mosaic Covenant had a distinctive form (patterned after the Hittite suzereignty treaties).33 It is not difficult to discern that what may originally have been a scheme of six components was easily condensed into three fundamental components:

- statement of God's deliverance—basis of gratitude and obligation
- principles of exclusive loyalty to God and of social-economic relations
- sanctions as motivation for observance

In the original Covenant, judging from texts such as Exodus 20 and Joshua 24, these consisted, more specifically, of statements of:

- God's past deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt (etc.)
- the Decalogue: four on exclusive loyalty; six on social-economic relations
- periodic renewal, witnesses; blessings and curses in the future, all as motivation

This same basic structure of the Covenant apparently persisted historically and came explicitly to the fore in the renewed covenantal community at Qumran. The group's Community Rule (1QS; and similarly the Damascus Rule, CD) has the same three structural components. It is also noteworthy that this document consists of instructions for how the community leaders are to enact actual covenant renewal ceremonies:

• covenant renewal ceremony begins with a statement of deliverance, consisting of a pronouncement of blessings and curses and an elaboration, on how two Spirits control history until the time of God’s final future salvation
• extensive law-codes for community relations=updated covenant law
• sanctions=visitations/ways of those who walk in the respective Spirits

Once we are looking for them, references and allusions to covenantal teachings, principles, and even structural components jump out at us from the Markan narrative and the Q speeches. The petition in the Lord’s Prayer to “cancel our debts as we herewith cancel the debts of our debtors,” for example, is a restatement of a fundamental Covenantal mechanism. Jesus’ “last supper” is a covenantal meal, as indicated in his statement over the cup that “this is my blood of the covenant that is poured out for many,” in allusion to the “original” covenant-making ceremony at Sinai (see Exod 24:3-8).

Interpreters of Matthew’s Gospel have noticed before that the “Sermon on the Mount” has a similar structure. We may add that it also exhibits the same significant change in the covenantal structure as in the Community Rule from Qumran, whereby the “blessings and curses” that originally formed a motivational sanction on keeping the principles of social policy have been transformed into the declaration of deliverance in the structure of the covenant renewal. What has not been noticed, because Q was assumed to be a collection of sayings and not a sequence of speeches, is that the longest speech in Q, clearly used in the Sermon on the Mount, has the same structure:

• blessings and woes transformed into statement of imminent
  (future) deliverance
  “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,” etc.
  (Luke/Q 6:20-26; cf. Matt 5:3-12)
• renewed covenantal principles focused on key “focal instances”
  (with references to traditional covenantal teachings)
  “Love your enemies, do good..., and lend,” etc.
  “Do not judge, and you will not be judged,” etc.

34. The following discussion is based on the fuller analysis in Whoever Hears You Hears Me, Chapter 9, and Hearing the Whole Story, Chapter 8.

- sanctions/motivation
double parable of building houses respectively on the rock and sand

Thus, when we find that the major speech in Q has a structure that closely resembles the adaptation of that same Mosaic covenantal pattern, with its central section of covenantal commands/teachings whose content indicate a village community context of social-economic interaction, we would reasonably conclude that the speech is a covenant renewal speech. In fact, it can easily be read or heard as performative speech, a speech that when delivered before a group enacts a covenant renewal. In this enactment of renewal of Mosaic covenant in village communities, Q’s Jesus is doing at least three major things (among others). First, he is addressing the way in which the invasive Roman imperial order was affecting the people’s traditional way of life, their basic social cohesion and social economic viability. As noted above, village communities constituted the fundamental social-economic form of the society. Under the impact of periodic slaughter and enslavement and multiple demands on their produce for tribute to Rome, taxes to Herodian kings and tithes and offerings to the Jerusalem temple and priesthood, families were falling into debt, hunger, and loss of control over their traditional family inheritance of land. Having exhausted each others’ resources as traditionally channeled through loans and collective cushioning of the impact of outside demands, families were understandably at each others’ throats, demanding repayment of debts and falling into local quarreling and disputes. Village communities were disintegrating. If we have ears to hear, this is what Jesus is addressing in the “love your enemies” set of sayings in Q/Luke 6:27-36.

Second, Jesus is addressing the despair and self-blame of the people. The very traditional structure of the Covenant led people to blame themselves for their suffering. The curses were (mis-)understood as explanation for misfortune, sickness, and suffering as due to one’s own or one’s ancestors’ violation of covenantal commandments. In the transformation of the “blessings and curses” Jesus is addressing precisely this debilitating self-blame. He does this both by turning the tables on the assumption of who was blessed and who cursed (“blessed are the poor...woe to the rich”), and by declaring that God was thereby taking action to bring the kingdom of God for precisely the poor/hungry/despairing who had been blaming themselves.

Third, having extended to the despairing people a new basis for hope about their life-situation, Jesus is delivering renewed covenantal com-
mandments, renewed principles that would foster mutuality and cooperation among members of the covenantal village community. "Love your enemies, do good and lend.” “Stop the rancor and quarrelling.”

We find similar teaching-dialogues, moreover, in an extended section of Mark that makes explicit reference to the covenantal commandments. The issues addressed in the four successive dialogues are all of central concern to the Covenant: marriage (and family) and the basic component of society; membership in the community; economic cooperation and avoidance of exploitation; and community leadership. The dialogues about marriage and economic elations explicitly quote covenantal commandments. And in each of these dialogues, Jesus enunciates a law-like principle easily remembered: “What God has joined together let no one separate”; “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it”; “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God”; and “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant.” This series of dialogues begins to sound suspiciously like a renewal of Mosaic covenant parallel to the speech in Q that takes more explicitly covenantal form. And it fits hand in glove with, indeed is confirmed and reinforced in, Mark’s overall story when Jesus celebrates the Passover meal, which in turn celebrates the exodus, in a ceremony that reenacts the Mosaic/Sinai covenant-making.

Evidently both the community/movement that used Q and the community(ies) that used Mark were cultivating teachings and ceremonies parallel to those at Qumran. Covenantal tradition, form, practices, and teachings were actively cultivated and, at points, explicitly renewed in Israelite society at both the scribal and village level and covenant renewal is a prominent a feature of both Q and Mark. It seems almost certain, therefore, that the parallel practice and emphasis on covenant renewal in Mark and Q derive from the interaction of Jesus and his followers.

The renewal of mutuality, cooperation, and solidarity in village communities would surely have been what enabled people in Jesus movements to resist the pressures of the Roman imperial order. Jesus’ exorcisms of the debilitating alien forces that had invaded personal and community life entailed a demystification: the people were now able to recognize that Roman domination was the concrete cause of the disintegration of the traditional way of life. Holding their own, however, required cooperation and collaboration. The Mosaic covenant had traditionally provided the principles of social policy and the “social contract” that guided the common life in the village communities which made up the people of Israel. Jesus’ renewal of the covenant led villagers who responded to the proc-
lamation that God was taking direct rule in their society to renew local cooperation and solidarity in their village communities. In this way they regenerated the power they could muster by mutual cooperation to hold its own against the disintegrating effects of Roman domination.
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