

Jesus and the Imperial Rome: Why Rome? Pastor Alan Lai

The general perception of Jesus is that Jesus' teaching is mainly religious. Jesus came to save us from our sins, not sinful social structure. The gospel writers seldom failed to show us Jesus' "enemies" within the Jewish leadership. This depoliticized Jesus was a perfect human being and a saviour of the world who cares only for our spiritual practices and status before God. The traditional understanding of Jesus' sayings such as "render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" is that the empire should be given its due. It is usually understood as two separate realms of obligation: to pay taxes to the state on the one hand; and to be faithful to God on the other. This interpretation helps foster a perception that Jesus' mission is about loving God and it has nothing to do with politics and social change.

This depoliticized assumption is further carried out by modern Western individualism. During the heydays of Christian fundamentalism, evangelistic preachers preached fervently an individualistic-morally concentrated Christianity that sought to revitalize personal commitment to Christ. Jesus was understood as mainly talking to individuals and their morality, not social groups or resisting a political empire.

Who would benefit from this depoliticized Jesus? No doubt it would be political empires. On another level, we might assume a Christianized Roman Empire was "good" because it reduced persecution of the church and it supported the spread of Christianity through its infrastructure. It is part of this assumption that Christianity is naturally poised to become the official religion of any empire. In the United States, some tend to see that empire is beneficial for Christianity and its moral values. Such values are perceived as being embodied in the only remaining Superpower; despite the U.S. also produces million dollar bombs and its military budget is more than able to wipe out poverty and homelessness in the country.

We have also come to realize in Jesus' times there was no such thing as a single, unified religion called "Judaism." Instead of a singular "Judaism," it is more accurate to talk about "Judaisms" in the plural. In addition, "Judaism" is a term we now use to label a rabbinic tradition with its origin developed in the second century. But in Jesus' times, none would have understood what we were talking about if we mentioned the term. In the first century, what we find are schools of interpretation, or religious sects. They were developed as responses to the reality of Roman occupation. Consequently, the idea of the messiah was a Jewish concept of an anointed king who in the first century's sentiment, meant to drive away the Romans and restore the land of Israel. To ignore the role Rome played in the ministry of Jesus created disastrous results in terms of understanding his teachings.

If it was so, why don't we read such influences of Rome in the New Testament? If we are willing, they are there implicitly, not explicitly. They are implicit because it was not safe to do so. The violent character of Rome discouraged outright critique of Imperial Rome without risking persecution. Many of Jesus' parables could be characterized as subversive speeches where Jesus protested against Rome. Jesus' political message could not be missed by the first century Galileans. Like hearing a joke from another culture; insiders immediately pick up the implicit message where outsiders wonder why people laugh. That is why we need to recover that ancient political context and attempt to appreciate Jesus' politics the way first century Galileans would.

Biblical scholars have long been diligent in studying the contexts of biblical messages. The fairly recent trend in biblical scholarship is to understand the political conditions from which Jesus' ministry began. We have come to recognize that the ancient Jewish people responded to Roman occupation in a lengthy and often deadly series of protests and social movement. The Jesus' movement was no exception. It is this background that allows us to see how Jesus' mission was highly political. In the words of a highly esteemed biblical scholar, Richard Horsley says separating Jesus' sayings from the knowledge of how Roman imperialism created the conditions of life in Galilee and Jerusalem would be like trying to understand Martin Luther King, Jr. without knowing how slavery and social segregation created the conditions for African Americans in the United States.

Jesus pronounced the kingdom of God. We should not fail to hear how such talk of a divine kingdom challenges the political kingdom of Caesar since Augustus also claimed to be divine. Kingdom is a political term. But politics always have social and economic ramifications. To live in God's kingdom to Jesus' followers meant social acceptance, equality and servanthood; on the other hand, to live in Caesar's kingdom meant burden, coercion and violence. Imperial Rome felt the threat of Jesus' popularity not because Jesus was religious, but because he inaugurated a new kind of kingdom living.

Jesus' sayings can hardly be understood apart from the empire. One of the key reasons of the study of Christian theology in the context of the empire has to do with a realization that the church cannot be co-opted by the empire, but instead it must begin to seek alternatives to the empire. When the church mimicked patterns of empire-like life in the church, the world suffered. Imagine its negative impacts in the world in the past few centuries when the church equated colonial theology as gospel.

Through the practice of religion, worshipping the appropriate gods, to secure a blessing for a war that resulted in victory and secured peace on land and sea, imperial Rome instilled its control throughout the empire. We must remember that Jesus' followers were primarily outcasts, poor people and illiterate, whose life had been ripped off by the oppressive characters of Roman rule. Jesus as a wise and spirited-filled teacher used images, ideologies, and life situations commonly understood in the empire but twisted it enough for ordinary power-less peasants to understand there are alternatives. Our task is to understand how Imperial Rome inserted its control in the empire and what kind of political situations they created.

Studying Jesus and the empire has an important lesson for us who are part of the North America who control and enjoy the majority of resources of the world, have extensive military interest in the world, and would like to call ourselves a Christian country (although not as pervasive as in the United States.) Jesus' version of the kingdom of God was an alternative to the kingdoms of this world. But so often Christianity mimics the kingdoms of this world and lost its prophetic character. As the church claims to be faithful followers of Jesus, the church needs to re-learn how to resist "Caesar" of our times.