



By Walter Brueggemann

IN BABYLON:

Holy Living Amidst Empire

Our capacity to let the Bible be contemporary among us depends on spotting imaginative analogies between our time and ancient time. One such analogue is the notion that Christians in the United States live amid the American empire in the same way that ancient Jews lived amid the Babylonian empire. In that ancient world of Babylon, the challenge was to maintain a distinct Jewish identity and a distinct Jewish way of life in an empire that wanted to erase such distinctive identity in the interest of a more generic culture.

The Christian in the United States must now intentionally practice a particular identity in the midst of American militarism and consumerism that has no patience with the particular oddity and radicality of Christian identity. This analogue invites us to think anew about Christian life and faith, when we have commonly assumed that Christian faith and American social reality were synonymous. Now it becomes clear that they are in deep tension, and the work is to explore how to live faithfully in the midst of that tension.

Babylon occupies a role of enormous importance in Jewish imagination as a threatening world power which reduced ancient Israel to an acquiescent colony in the sixth century BCE. For the Babylonians, however, life in the empire meant something much different. The empire's success would have been the source of an uncommon deposit of wealth, privilege, and entitlement guaranteed by its military dominance. Jews living in Babylon might question the justice of Babylon's acquisition of all this wealth and power, but the Babylonians themselves would have found the privileges of empire wondrous to receive and, in the end, perhaps "our just due." Thus we may imagine that the passionate protests and alternative hopes of the faith of Jews sustained a counter-view of history within the empire.

It is no new thing to suggest that the contemporary United States mirrors ancient Babylon's imperial pretensions. Nonetheless, the study of such a linkage is an enterprise worth pursuing, because our own situation of empire in the United States matters enormously to all those with alternative loyalties—especially people of faith.

Competing Loyalties

Christians in the United States are accustomed to reading the

Bible in a democratic context where we have political-religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution or, even more, to read the Bible with the United States cast in the role of God's chosen people and carrier of God's will for freedom in the world, an exceptionalism that pervades our public discourse. Such a reading becomes a very difficult matter, however, when the facts on the ground exhibit the United States as empire, as the place for faithful reading and faithful living according to an alternative loyalty that is in deep tension with the empire's claim to ultimate loyalty.

The United States' unrivalled military advantage obviously contributed to its emergence as empire. But U.S. military advantage was and is closely tied to U.S. financial leverage, so that the U.S. flag, without any precise formulation, has come to symbolize both a powerful military commitment and an aggressive capitalism that is endlessly in pursuit of new markets and natural resources.

All of this, moreover, has been intimately tied to "the Bible," so that there is missional fervor and rationale for the imposition of U.S. cultural domination in the world. Indeed, much of the missional energy of the U.S. church carries with it the U.S. flag and U.S. dollars, so that it has become very difficult to sort out what, in such missional efforts, belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. The outcome has been an unprecedented accumulation of power, influence, and leverage in the world, with enormous benefit to the United States in terms of a seemingly limitless standard of living.

In the limitless prosperity of the U.S. economy (an expectation when not a fact), it is profoundly problematic to hold to a tradition that features sacrifice for the sake of holiness and justice for the sake of the neighbor. That tradition attests to another belonging, another loyalty, and another citizenship. Empire, however, allows no rivals and no competitors. One can sense the dismissive impatience for any "hyphenated American" who remembers another belonging, and a rude intolerance for those who cherish a mother-tongue other than the language of the empire. Indeed, the empire is impatient with those who embody any trace of "other," for the presence of "other" exposes the empire's claims of ultimacy as false or at least compromised. Consequently the Jews in ancient Babylon struggled over their otherness. And the struggle in the U.S. Empire—among Christian-Americans—is not finished. There may be more than one

strategy for that struggle; by whatever name, it is an urgent and demanding issue among us.

We must do a careful reread of U.S. culture and history that refuses the common ideology and sloganeering of “democratic capitalism.” This critique, since the collapse of the national economy, is made much easier and more obvious, because it is clear that the “democratic” qualifier to “capitalism” has completely disappeared. The widespread passion for “deregulation” has led to the unleashing of rapacious economic practices with a greedy appetite that has been eager to “devour the poor.” What

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had passed for capitalist virtue is now readily exposed as a destructive selfishness that contradicts in wholesale ways any chance for the common good.

The Fruits of Empire

It may be that the United States as empire is a disputed point and not all will be persuaded. But here I suggest a test case: “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt 7:16). The proposition invites us to assess the fruits of United States empire, to see whether it is indeed an authentic empire. The fruits we might list that are positive include the maintenance of global stability and the investment of new wealth in developing cultures. These matters seem to depend directly upon the United States. But the ledger is not in balance if we consider the fruits of United States policy and conduct. The United States, in many important ways, is a predator economy that seizes resources, imposes a certain culture, and does immense damage to the environment, leaving many societies in poor shape by a pattern of intrusion and departure.

Certainly an empire cannot be expected to replicate the marks of a faith community. There is no suggestion that the empire is satanic or demonic simply because it cannot make such a replication. But empires do thrive on practices that are inimical to covenantal righteousness. It is not difficult to see that the “fruits of empire” are indeed “greed which is idolatry.”¹ The combination of military power, economic exploitation, indifference to environment, and a theology of entitlement generates anti human values, policies, and practices.

The community of faith, in the midst of empire, is called to “a more excellent way,” a way that consists in hospitality, generosity, and forgiveness. The empire is an odd and hostile environment for such practice. But then, these fruits of faith are designed and summoned for precisely such a time and place and circumstance. The totalizing pageantry of empire always wants to think there are no alternatives to predatory power. But the community of faith always entertains an either/or that in time brings the community to the “cost and joy of discipleship.”

If this way of characterizing Christian life and faith in our culture is roughly correct, then the issue is not simply a liturgical

Still Questing

Bearded like an ancient prophet
with a voice like rolling thunder,
he is full of words—
seeking to make the ancient commandments of Sinai
and the life-filled stories of Galilee
a roadmap for bewildered urbanites
in a rich nation cursed with greed and violence.

Near the close of a faithful ministry,
he still anguishes for the enigma-splitting word
that will drive wealth-blinded Americans
to their knees, then to open-hearted sharing
with the hungry, the homeless, the despairing outcasts
in our nation and our capitalistic-crazed world.

In hope rooted in death-defying faith,
he heads to a Trappist monastery—
this overflowing fountain of words—
to seek in silence the Word that imparts life.

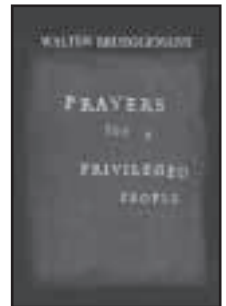
— Fred Cloud

**Retired Minister, Tennessee Annual Conference and
Chairman of Tennessee Fair Housing Council**

or theological identity. It is rather the maintenance of a counter-cultural practice that resists the pressures of our culture and that lives and advocates another kind of humanness. The prospect of Christian life in our society may consist in intentional counter-cultural action of a specific and concrete kind that refuses the seductions of military consumerism. It was not easy or obvious for ancient Jews to know how to do that. Nor is it easy or obvious among us. But surely it is now the summons of the gospel. □



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1 The phrase is from Colossians 3:5; see Brian S. Rosner, *Greedy as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007)