

Chapter 1

The Powers of Empire

Jesus worked among people subject to the Roman Empire. His renewal of Israel, moreover, was a response to the longings of those people, who had lived under the domination of one empire after another for centuries, to be free of imperial rule. Israelite tradition from which Jesus worked in his mission bore the marks of a prolonged struggle of the people both to adjust to and to resist the effects of the powers of empire.

Ancient empires were all about power, or rather, a whole network of interrelated powers. While some of those powers were relatively more natural, others more political, others more economic, and others more religious in their operation, there was no separation between these aspects, as is often assumed in modern Western society. The principal powers were superhuman, far beyond the control of humans, but they were usually not “supernatural” or “otherworldly,” as is often assumed by modern “scientifically” minded people. Indeed, the powers of ancient empire, mysterious in their operation, were thought of as divine, as gods. Modern science, including the academic field of biblical studies, has tended to misunderstand or to demythologize these superhuman Powers, imagining that they were “just” vestiges of a prerational worldview or even “just” a certain pre-modern mode of language. But biblical and other ancient Near Eastern sources do not share Enlightenment theology of sophisticated intellectuals (ancient and modern).

IN THE “CRADLE OF CIVILIZATION”

The most accessible example of how the powers of empire operated as a cosmic-political-economic-religious system is that of ancient Babylon.

It also happens to be the empire from which the ancient Hebrew Bible and the subsequent Abrahamic traditions of Christianity and Islam made their decisive departure. A fuller examination of the civilization of ancient Mesopotamia, and especially its main myth of origins, can illuminate the powers in response to which Israel established an alternative society and Jesus strove to renew Israel.¹

The great civilization that developed in the land “Between the Rivers” was a truly remarkable achievement. In the area that is now modern-day Iraq, the ancient Mesopotamians built many large cities along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The burgeoning population built an extensive irrigation system to sustain the agriculture that supported the “great ones” and their armies as well as the people themselves. The construction of the cities, with their massive monuments (ziggurats, like “the tower of Babel”), as well as the vast system of irrigation canals, required sophisticated organization of the people’s labor. And that required a complex hierarchical administration, from the (district) commanders at the top to the foremen in command of gangs of laborers at the bottom, all under the autocratic command of the principal “great one.” The construction of the massive monuments to the glory of the gods and the rulers, the ziggurats in Mesopotamia, like the pyramids of Egypt, also required the commandeering (by “trade”) and transport of stone and timber from upriver. The whole imperial system of powers, great ones, administration, and construction was supported by the agricultural produce of the people who worked the irrigated fields.²

But what motivated those people to toil in the fields in the stifling heat and humidity day after day? What led them to submit to the forced labor necessary to construct the extensive irrigation system and palaces for the great ones and for the Powers who communicated with them? Apparently it was an intense fear of the terrifying superhuman Powers that determined their lives. They lived in constant fear, for example, that River, the Power that supplied water to the fields, would overflow his banks in a fit of rage, destroying both the irrigation ditches and the crops to which they brought water. They were terrified lest that even greater Power, Storm-Kingship, would suddenly swoop down upon the cities so laboriously built along the banks of River and topple buildings and fill the irrigation canals with sand from the desert. So, to appease the terrible wrath of these forces, at whose whim their collective life might be devastated (a tsunami, or a Katrina), the

people rendered up tithes and offerings to the Powers. They surrendered a certain percentage of their crops to the chief servants of the Powers in their “houses” (the priests-managers in the palaces-temples-storehouses), who tended to the care and feeding of the Powers.

As in any ancient society, religion was inseparable from political and economic life. In Mesopotamian civilizations, a single term, “the great ones,” could refer to people we would distinguish as “king,” or “high priest,” or “manager.” More obviously than in Rome centuries later, the annual cycle of festivals celebrated the annual cycle of productivity. Planting and harvesting were surrounded with special prayers, sacrifices, and fertility rituals. In ancient Babylon, the climax of the annual natural-economic-political-religious cycle was the New Year festival (*Akitu*). This week-long festival celebrated both the end and the beginning, both the completion and the regeneration of the cyclical political-economic-natural divine order, the delicate balance among the great Powers that determined the people’s lives.

The renewal of order against (the threat of) chaos was focused in the great ritual drama enacted in the grand temple-palace of Marduk, principal Power of Babylon, who as Storm King stood at the head of the divine forces of order. This ritual drama offers fascinating glimpses of the relationships among the divine Powers and of the people’s relationship to them. The “text” of this ritual drama, the Babylonian epic of origins, *Enuma Elish* (“When on high . . .,” its opening phrase in Akkadian), even provides a sense of the two major stages in which this imperial civilization developed.

In the first act of the drama, River and Sea, intermingling their waters, “begat” Silt and Sediment, who in turn “begat” Horizon of Sky and Horizon of Earth. The latter generated Sky-Authority, who generated Irrigation-Wisdom and other offspring. It is clear from their names and roles in the drama that they were the principal Powers of nascent civilization in the land Between the Rivers. Annoyed by the noise that the forces of civilization were making, Father River threatened to destroy them all. But the enterprising Irrigation-Intelligence, drawing a map of the (Mesopotamian) universe and casting a spell, put River to sleep (“killed” him).

In this first act of the drama we discern that the Mesopotamians’ sense of the origins of their civilization centered on the “houses” of the divine forces, presided over by high-ranking specialists (priests-managers) in

communicating with those forces. At this still relatively simple stage of irrigation civilization, the temple-communities were held together by authority (Sky) and intelligence (Irrigation), no coercion by military force yet being necessary to maintain order.

As the nascent civilization became more complex, however, with the emergence of larger cities up and down the rivers, the system experienced chronic conflict. In the next “act” of the ritual drama, Sea (Chaos) went on a violent rampage to avenge her consort’s defeat. Sky-Authority and Irrigation-Wisdom, the older forces of social cohesion, were unable to withstand the assault. To cope with the desperate situation of civilization in chaos, Irrigation generated a new force, Storm, who was acclaimed King by the forces struggling to reassert order over chaos. In a scene of horrifying violence that disturbingly juxtaposes domestic relations with the order of the universe, Marduk (god of Babylon) as Storm-King slaughtered (his ever-so-great grand-) Mother Sea. He then butchered her body to produce both the heavenly order, symbolized by the zodiac, and the earthly order in the land of the two rivers (Mesopotamia), which flowed through her eye sockets. After the victory of the forces of order over the forces of chaos, palaces had to be built for Storm-King/Marduk and the other victorious Powers. But it would have been unseemly for the vanquished forces, who were also divine, to be subjected to physical labor. So Marduk created people to be slaves of the gods, to build palaces for the divine Powers. In the final scene, Marduk (= Storm-Kingship) is celebrated as eternal King of the universe.

The climax of the ritual drama both reflects and models the establishment of empire by military violence in Mesopotamian civilization. After a period of chronic warfare between the city-states that developed along the Tigris and the Euphrates, one city-state finally imposed its rule by conquering the others. The imperial order, achieved by Babylon’s military conquest in the land of the two rivers, was understood as the earthly counterpart of the imperial order achieved in the violent victory of Marduk and his forces of order over the disrupting forces of chaos.

Regularly reminded by the annual New Year ritual drama of the precarious order established by the violence of the great Powers, and reminded also of their own origin as the slaves of the Powers, the people acquiesced not just in worship of but in concrete economic service to the Powers. The great ones of Babylon, such as Hammurabi, in the role of the

chief servant of Marduk and the other Powers, maintained the cosmic-political-economic order with the threat of military violence against any who might act as agents of Sea and her forces of chaos. And, of course, also being in control of the produce and labor of the masses of “slaves of the gods,” the great ones lived in wealth and privilege. Agricultural surplus was transformed into the wealth of conspicuous display for the glory of the gods, products of high civilization such as gold inlay in the gods’ palaces, artistically designed plates and goblets of precious metals for the gods’ dining pleasure. And they hired intellectuals, who developed writing, initially to keep records of payment of tithes and offerings, and studied the heavenly powers of sun, moon, and the stars (astronomy) in order to determine the right time for planting and harvest, along with the timing of the rituals that synchronized the agrarian political economy with the annual cycle of the heavenly powers.

What powered the Babylonian Empire or the similar imperial system in ancient Egypt was the labor and produce of the people as the servants of the Powers. But the way the system worked was that when the people rendered up their labor to build the ziggurats and their agricultural produce to feed the Powers, their labor and produce became power in the control of the great ones who managed the religious ceremonies, the administrative organization of labor, and the military forces. The imperial civilizations of the ancient Near East were thus systems in which the labor-power of the people, yielded up as offering to the Powers, was transformed into power wielded *over* the people by their rulers, the great ones.

One of the many stories of Joseph’s exploits at the court of Pharaoh (Genesis 41, continued in Genesis 47) offers a vivid illustration of how, in the parallel imperial system of Egypt, the (labor-) power of the people was expropriated by the central rulers and transformed into power over the people. Pharaoh dreamed of “seven sleek and fat cows,” followed by seven ugly and thin cows, who “ate up the seven sleek cows.” Joseph interpreted the dream to mean that there would be seven years of abundant harvests followed by seven years of drought and famine. Joseph advised Pharaoh to appoint additional managers, presumably with strong-arm backup, to expropriate one-fifth of the produce during the years of plentiful harvests to be stored under the authority of the pharaoh. As Pharaoh’s newly appointed CEO, Joseph thus built up a huge surplus.

What ensued would be called extortion on a grand scale were it not so familiar from the practices of contemporary megacorporations that manipulate supply and demand while ostensibly operating under the sacred impersonal “law” of supply and demand. When the famine became severe and the people clamored for grain, Joseph demanded in exchange all their “goods” or “possessions,” presumably meaning (since money had not been invented yet) precious metals, jewelry, and other such movable goods of value. When the starving people again clamored for grain, Joseph further demanded all the livestock (draft animals, flocks, herds). Finally, when the desperate people again came begging for relief, they had nothing left as collateral for loans but their land and labor. “We with our land will become servants of Pharaoh; just give us grain, so that we may live and not die.” All the land became Pharaoh’s and the people themselves became slaves—or more like sharecroppers or serfs—who no longer controlled their land and labor. By manipulating the people, who were utterly vulnerable to drought and famine, the rulers, who had extracted and now controlled huge reserves of grain and other produce, used their power over the peasants to escalate their now permanent share to one-fifth of the harvest (GDP). The story in Genesis leaves out the religious dimension of the people’s slavery in the Egyptian system. As in Babylon, however, what motivated people to render up their labor and produce was the fear of the powers that determined their lives.

THE “SHOCK AND AWE” OF THE “SOLE SUPERPOWER”

The Roman Empire was more complicated than its Near Eastern counterparts but displayed many of the same features and the corresponding powers. The Romans, like the Greeks, feared and honored, many of the same powers that determined their societal life with temples, sacrifices, and festivals. Here we are interested in reviewing various aspects of power in the historical working of the Roman Empire, particularly as it affected the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, the context of Jesus’ mission and the earliest Jesus movements.

Rome built its empire by military conquests, which it pretended were necessary to defend its own territory, interests, and “allies.” Rome’s

destruction of both Carthage and the classical Greek city of Corinth (146 B.C.E.) signaled to the rest of the world that it would brook no rival for power in the Mediterranean. After the Hellenistic empires that succeeded the conquest by Alexander the Great had collapsed from making war on one another, the Romans sent large military expeditions to conquer the lands and peoples on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. As the sole superpower, Rome was the dominant military power of its time. Overwhelming military force, however, supplied the necessary but not the sufficient power to invade and control subject peoples who resisted in serious and persistent ways, such as the Judeans and Galileans. Only after repeatedly sending in huge military forces to conquer and reconquer them over a period of two centuries were the Romans finally successful in effectively “pacifying” the populace.

The Roman warlords practiced an ancient equivalent of “shock and awe,” that is, the use of overwhelming destructive force to terrorize the targeted populations into submission. The ancient Romans’ version of “shock and awe” was extremely low-tech, but intentionally and systematically executed. They devastated the countryside, burned villages, and either slaughtered or enslaved the people. For good measure they then rounded up those who had put up the greatest resistance and hung them on crosses along the roadways as a public warning to any who had survived the conquest.

For centuries, Roman warlords relied on this means of expanding their *imperium*, conquering one people after another. The Greek historian Polybius, who identified with the Roman advance, was nevertheless candid about their “scorched-earth” practices. He personally witnessed the Roman devastation of a city that left in its wake a horrific scene littered with animal as well as human corpses. “It seems to me that they do this for the sake of terror,” he commented (10.15–17).³ The Roman historian Tacitus minced no words about Germanicus’s slaughter of the tribes across the Rhine: “for fifty miles around he wasted the country with sword and flame. Neither age nor sex inspired pity. Places sacred and profane were razed indifferently to the ground. . . . Only the destruction of the race would end the war” (*Ann.* 1.51.56; 2.21). A new generation of classical historians, no longer paying homage to “the glories of Rome,” now recognizes that such brutality “was traditional, it was the Roman way.” “The aim was to punish, to avenge, and to terrify.”⁴ The Romans, in

building their empire, like the modern European colonial powers in the Middle East and Africa and the United States' administration in recent years, believed that uncivilized people were, virtually by nature, irrational, stubborn, and violent—that the only language they understood was that of force.

The Romans invaded the Middle East to secure its supply of needed resources in the “unstable” eastern Mediterranean, which was being disrupted by pirates or “bandits.” The Roman Senate entrusted the great warlord Pompey with bringing the East under effective control. When Pompey finally invaded Palestine, he faced little resistance until he arrived at Jerusalem. There he stormed the Temple, in which the priests were fortified, and plundered the Temple treasury. He also laid the conquered people under tribute, a standard Roman punitive as well as revenue-generating measure (Josephus, *War* 1.7.6–7 §§153–56; *Ant.* 14.4.4 §§73–76).

The more serious Roman devastation of Galilee and Judea came in the aftermath of Pompey's initial invasion. The Roman invasion of the Middle East triggered decades of turmoil, including Arab raids against Roman interests and a civil war between rival claimants to the Jerusalem high priesthood (Josephus, *War* 1.8.2–7 §§160–78; *Ant.* 14.5.2–14.6.3 §§82–102). Crassus, another of the infamous Roman warlords of the period, in his quest for greater glory, invaded the Parthians across the Euphrates River and lost an entire Roman army. En route, he plundered the Jerusalem Temple of whatever Pompey had not taken (*War* 1.8.8 §179; *Ant.* 14.7.1, 3 §§105, 119). His arrogant behavior further aggravated anti-Roman sentiment among Judeans and Galileans. Shortly thereafter, Cassius, as Roman governor in Syria, ruthlessly exacted an extraordinary levy of tribute (*Ant.* 14.11.2 §272).

Our sources offer only occasional glimpses of what the Romans did to complete their conquest at certain times and places. Some of those times and places in Galilee and Judea, however, undoubtedly had a direct impact on Jesus and his movement. To regain control of the area in the aftermath of Crassus's debacle, Cassius presided over one of those typical Roman acts of terrorization. At Magdala, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee southwest of Capernaum, during what would have been the lifetime of Mary Magdalene's grandparents, he enslaved thousands of people (Josephus, *War* 1.8.9 §180; *Ant.* 14.7.3 §120). This same Cassius, when the Judeans were slow to render up the special levy of tribute, enslaved the

people of the district towns of Gophna, Lydda, Thamma, and Emmaus, one of the sites of Jesus' later resurrection appearances (*War* 1.11.1–2 §§218–21; *Ant.* 14.11.2 §§271–76). And in western Galilee, only a few miles from the village of Nazareth at about the same time Jesus was born, Roman armies burned the town of Sepphoris and enslaved the inhabitants (*War* 2.5.1 §68).

MANIFEST DESTINY: THE POWER OF IDEALS

Military power in empires, however, does not operate by itself. In the case of Rome, as in the new American Rome, the aggressive use of military power was sometimes paired with and sometimes driven by the power of ideas or a sense of mission. What drove the ancient Romans to extend their control over more and more territories and to expand their power generally was a sense of what nineteenth-century Americans called “Manifest Destiny.”⁵ In its civilizing mission, the Romans set the example for their later American imitators. They believed that their empire had been willed by the gods, whose favor they had earned by practicing piety and justice. Cicero articulated the conviction, which can be traced to well over a century before, that “it was by our scrupulous attention to religion and by our grasp . . . that all things are ruled and directed by the gods that we have overcome all peoples and nations” (*Har. resp.* 18–21). In what became the foundational epic of Augustus's consolidation of the Roman *imperium*, Virgil has Jupiter, king of the gods, bestow on Rome a dominion without limits in space or time, over the whole *orbis terrarum* (Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.277–83; cf. Cicero, *De or.* 1.14). The limits of the latter, of course, were continually expanding, certainly at the time of its invasion of the Middle East.

In its sense of mission, Rome also claimed an exceptionalism and universalism similar to that of the later American Manifest Destiny. Romans thought of themselves as a special people that had learned from the woes of others and taken the best from history, which was now embodied in Rome's piety, justice, and institutions. And Rome, like America, claimed to be a universal example insofar as it represented the ideals and interests of humankind generally. This status conferred special international responsibilities and exceptional privileges in meeting those responsibilities.

Rome's stated purpose in extending its rule to other peoples was its civilizing mission. With its dominion, it brought law and order—although usually Rome simply imposed its own law and order. Rome practiced “civilized right” as its “great world duty,” to eradicate instability by intervening in states that were already civilized as well as in unstable semi-states on the periphery of civilization. As Cicero, the great Roman teacher of law, said, just as masters had a duty to treat slaves with justice, so an imperial power was bound to protect the ruled. The expansion of civilization among the uncivilized, however, involved a considerable amount of brutality. Nevertheless, what the Roman “master organizers of the world” claimed to be doing was to bring about salvation, peace, and security—as they inscribed on monuments all over the empire.

THE “MILITARY-AGRIBUSINESS COMPLEX”: THE CONSOLIDATION OF ECONOMIC POWER

What happened as a result of the Roman warlords' creation of Roman *imperium* was a concentration of economic and political power somewhat similar to the “military-industrial complex” that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned the American people about in the late 1950s.⁶ Roman warlords such as Pompey and Julius Caesar controlled the recruitment and deployment of the legions for the enhancement of their own and other patricians' wealth and power in Rome. Until recently, however, because of the modern Western glorification of ancient Rome and the tendency to focus on the elite and the military campaigns they led, historians glossed over what happened to the spoil the Romans took from conquered rulers, the people they enslaved, and the legionaries they exploited. The warlords and other patricians systematically siphoned away the remaining power of the peasantry in both Italy and the provinces. The result, in an ancient agrarian economy, was what might be called the Roman imperial “military-agribusiness complex.”

Whatever their sense of mission in controlling other peoples, the Roman patricians also had economic motives. As in other ancient agrarian empires, the elite in Rome were looking to control additional land and the people who labored on it. Until modern industrialization, imperial civilizations were powered by the produce generated by human labor

on arable land. Given the limited productivity of land and labor in antiquity, the powerful could extract only so much without killing the peasant sheep they were shearing. If they wanted to expand the resources they controlled, they had to expand the amount of land and labor that they ruled. The general effect was an increased flow of power, in the form of control of resources, from the peasantry to the rulers. In the Roman Empire, this happened both in conquered areas such as Judea and Galilee and in Rome and Italy itself, in parallel and interrelated processes.

In the Roman Republic, as in ancient Athens, the military was a people's militia. Citizens were expected to serve in the military, under the command of fellow citizens usually from the aristocracy. In the last two centuries of the Republic, however, this proved to be a boon for the patrician warlords and their officers and a disaster for the Roman and Italian peasants who served in the legions. The "system" of continuing conquests steadily transformed the peasants' power of subsistence into power exercised over them by the wealthy.

The perpetual military campaigns mounted by ambitious Roman warlords such as Julius Caesar and Pompey forced prolonged military service on tens of thousands of peasants.⁷ During the last two centuries B.C.E., more than 10 percent of the estimated adult male population served in the army for years at a time. If their wives and children could not provide the labor to eke out a subsistence living, the families fell into rising debt. The creditors from whom they borrowed were wealthy patricians, often the warlords and the officers whose ambitions the recruits to the legions were serving.

The Roman warlords and their ranking officers from wealthy senatorial and equestrian families, meanwhile, were returning to Rome with huge amounts of treasure as the spoils of their conquests. The profits that a high-ranking governor or "publican" ("tax-farmer") could rake in during even a short stint in a given province were enormous, supplying a hereditary fortune for a family, if it was not already wealthy. According to the ideals of a traditional agrarian aristocracy, however, the only respectable investment was land and the only respectable pursuit was farming. These wealthy families built up large landed estates (*latifundia*) by foreclosing on indebted peasant families' land. With their surplus wealth from booty and interest on loans they then bought large numbers of slaves captured by the legionaries in the warlords' triumphant

conquests and replaced the labor of the peasants they had displaced. Slave labor was probably not any less expensive than free labor (peasants had fed themselves). But the wealthy land- and slave-owners could control the labor of slaves far more than they could that of free laborers. What the wealthy families did not consume in their lavish households in Rome, also staffed by slaves, they could sell to the government for the food supply of Rome and other cities. The ancient biographer Plutarch sums up the process.

The rich men in each neighborhood . . . contrived to transfer many of these holdings to themselves, and finally they openly took possession of the greater part of the land under their own names. The poor . . . found themselves forced off the land. . . . The result was a rapid decline of the class of free small-holders all over Italy, their place being taken by gangs of foreign slaves, whom the rich employed to cultivate the estates from which they had driven off the free citizens. (Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* 8; cf. Appian, *Civil War* 1.7)

Another key development in this process was an ominous shift from the traditional principle of the “commonwealth” of the Roman Republic. This process required changes in the laws governing the holding and use of land to allow the powerful to claim land as their *private* property. The patricians in the Roman Senate enacted a deregulation, to make possible the unlimited privatization of public resources (land) and the expropriation of citizen soldiers’ inheritances of land.

It has been estimated that from 80 to 8 B.C.E. about 1.5 million people, roughly half the peasant families of Roman Italy, were forced off their ancestral lands. Many went to new lands in Italy, many were sent to Roman colonies in other lands, such as Corinth, and many simply migrated to the city of Rome and other towns in Italy.⁸ It is estimated that between 45 and 8 B.C.E. more than 250,000 adult males from Italy, roughly one-fifth of the 1.2 million who had lived there, were displaced from the Italian countryside.⁹ In a complementary flow, over the course of the first century B.C.E., more than two million peasants from conquered provinces such as Judea were taken as slaves to Italy. By the end of the first century B.C.E., slaves amounted to about 35 to 40 percent of the total

estimated population, the same percentage as the slaves in the southern United States in the nineteenth century.¹⁰

The effects of the Roman conquests were similar on the peoples they subjugated, such as the Judeans and Galileans. The Roman warlords enslaved large numbers of peasants, as noted above. The Romans also laid subjugated peoples under tribute, which the peasants had to pay on top of the taxes due to their local rulers. With additional percentages of their crops expropriated by tax collectors, peasants found it necessary to borrow to feed their families, at unmercifully high rates of interest. Heavily indebted peasants were forced to become sharecroppers on their own land, or they were forced off the land to become wage laborers. Thus, in subjected areas as well as in Italy, the Roman conquests had set in motion a process in which increasing amounts of the peasants' produce were siphoned upward into the control of the wealthy, thus augmenting their political-economic power.

BREAD AND CIRCUSES: THE CENTRALIZATION OF POWER IN ROME

The impoverishment of the Roman peasantry had further implications for the empire's exploitation of the peasantry in the provinces. With increasing numbers of peasants forced off their ancestral farms flooding into Rome, the population of the city expanded exponentially. By the time Augustus "restored" the Republic, it had reached a million, an unwieldy population for an agrarian economy. This created a number of interrelated problems. Since many, perhaps the majority of these people, had been displaced from their traditional source of livelihood and were un- or underemployed, they had to be fed. Since they had time on their hands, they needed entertainment or diversion. And since they were concentrated in the imperial capital, they were potentially volatile politically and a threat to imperial rule.

But Roman institutions evolved as they adjusted to the forces unleashed by imperial expansion so that the potential threat never effectively materialized. The key Roman institutions were "bread and circuses," made famous by the satirist Juvenal (*Sat.* 10.77–81).¹¹ As the second-century C.E. orator Fronto observed, "The Roman people are held

fast by two things above all, the grain-dole [*annona*] and the shows. . . . The success of the *imperium* depends on entertainments as much as more serious things.” As the people who had come to dominate the rest of the world, the Romans felt they had a right to enjoy the good life of bread and circuses. Juvenal’s satire of the consumption and spectacle might seem to exaggerate their importance in Rome, but Augustus’s official propaganda, which he ordered inscribed on monuments in Rome and elsewhere, confirms that the “bread and circuses” that he (“personally”) provided for Roman citizens constituted fully half of the imperial program.

To preserve public order—and to preserve their own positions of honor, privilege, and power—the Roman elite had to provide the burgeoning populace of the imperial metropolis with adequate food. While half of the Roman plebs succumbed to the expanding patron-client system, the other half resisted the indignity of becoming personally as well as economically dependent on powerful figures. The need to feed the populace became so overwhelming that only state action could deal with the problem. Already by 123 B.C.E., the numbers of indebted or displaced peasants was so large that officials enacted sweeping economic “reform” measures. All of Rome’s citizens would receive, at a low price, monthly quantities of grain. Another “reformer” with his eye on the Roman populace, Julius Caesar, made the distribution of grain free. Under Augustus, grain was doled out to an estimated 250,000 male citizens, affecting (if not completely feeding) around 670,000 people (not counting the 30 percent of the population who were slaves and resident aliens). Since the emperor had become the state, the populace of Rome became, in effect, the clients of their imperial patron.

Provision of food for the imperial metropolis became one of the major factors in the Roman Empire’s expropriation of resources from subject peoples. It only compounded the seizure of spoil by the warlords in the initial conquests, the extortion of huge fortunes by governors and publicans (highest-level tax collectors), the produce taken to supply the other major imperial cities, and the continuing drain of resources needed to feed the army. The bulk of the grain (and other food) imported to Rome and taken for the army was extracted from subject peoples in the form of tribute and taxes in kind (Josephus, *War* 2.16.4 §383). The effect of the tribute levied on top of the local taxes, tithes, and rents gradually forced the provincial peasants into debt. Unable to feed their families after the

multiple extractions from the piles of grain on their threshing floors, they had to borrow from creditors who controlled supplies of grain, probably officers and stewards of the provincial elites. For the peasant producers, the imperial drain on their resources meant increasing hunger and, with spiraling debt, potential loss of their family inheritance of land.

Hand in hand with the bread went the circuses.¹² The satisfaction of the people's material needs by the distribution of grain produced an abundance of leisure that required entertainment, stimulation, and excitement. Rome observed an annual cycle of celebrations and festivals in honor of its principal gods (the powers that provided fertility, security, and so on), called the public games. These religious festivals consisted mainly of chariot races in the circus and theatrical performances, organized and presided over by some of the magistrates of the year.¹³ The games were entertainments that the city dedicated to the gods/powers, and public banquets in which they offered sacrifices to the divine powers of the imperial order. Religious devotion was thus inseparable from—indeed, took the form of—indulgence in merrymaking, revelry, and spectacular entertainments.¹⁴

The games were also a form of gift giving, not only to and from the powers/gods but from the warlords and other magnates to the people. The wealthy and powerful magnates were giving back to the people a portion of what they had gained from their positions of power in the state and army. The Roman people resented private luxury but heartily approved luxury shared with the public. Those in possession of wealth and power had to demonstrate that they were being devoted to the good of the populace. The imperial dimension of this can be seen most clearly in the display of military glory that was the popular face of imperial conquest. When the victorious warlords returned to Rome with their mountains of booty and enslaved prisoners of war, they celebrated *triumphs*. In these festivals and by building great monuments, they demonstrated that their victories had been manifestations of the divinely ordained destiny of the Roman people and signs of the gods' favor.

Beginning with Augustus, the emperor increasingly monopolized the role of gift giver (sponsor) as well as the roles of presider and commissioner. All games and gladiatorial shows in the Colosseum began with acclamations of homage to the emperor. Religion and politics were clearly inseparable in the power relations expressed in these elaborate spectacles.

The games and shows were official state ceremonies, developments of deeply rooted Roman custom, but also popular entertainment. In the annual calendar of state festivals, each of which lasted a few days, the games and shows filled the equivalent of four months—more than the total of weekends and holidays in American society. And for those spectacles *given* by the emperor, the people spent part of nearly a third of the days of the year with their patron being entertained in the stands of the arena. The people developed important forms of communication with their imperial sovereign, via approval or disapproval of the performances he sponsored. But most important was the continuing bond that these ceremonial spectacles forged between emperor, people, and even the now powerless Senate. The power centralized in the emperor thus took ceremonial form in the civil-religious festivals as well as economic form in the distribution of grain—bread and circuses.

PATRONAGE PYRAMIDS AND CLIENT KINGS: POLITICAL(-ECONOMIC) POWER

After the Romans created their empire by military power, they secured and maintained it by political power, although political power was hardly separable from economic and religious power, as we shall see. The forms taken by political(-economic-religious) power, however, depended on whether the subject peoples were already “civilized” or not. The basic division was between the “Greeks,” who had long since established city-states, and the barbarians, who had not yet developed such a “civil” form.

To maintain order in the already “civilized” parts of the empire, the Romans adapted the pyramids of patronage developed in Rome itself into a mode of imperial political-economic power. Following their military conquests of city-states or smaller kingdoms, ancient Babylon and Assyria had established a giant pyramid of agriculture-based economic power, which in turn supported their political and military power. Somewhat similar pyramids of power developed in the Roman Empire, but focused on personal relations in a patron-client system.¹⁵

In Rome itself, as the peasantry was forced off the land and into the city, pyramids of patronage relations evolved in which wealthy and politically ambitious patricians promised to alleviate the hunger and poverty of

the poor in return for personal political loyalty. The pyramids of patronage that emerged were thus instruments both of social cohesion across the gulf dividing the poor and the wealthy and of social control by the wealthy patrons. As Seneca observed, the exchange of favors and services (*beneficia*) “most especially binds together human society” (*Ben.* 1.4.2). Patron-client relations also developed within the aristocracy between prominent politicians and their protégés—although considerate patrons thoughtfully avoided the demeaning term *cliens*. The most powerful figures surrounded themselves with “friends”; and both those of lesser rank and aspiring younger politicians needed “friends” in high(er) places.

The institution and the model of patronage was readily developed into an empirewide system under Augustus.¹⁶ He began running the empire as a vast network of power pyramids. In Rome itself, he set himself up as the patron of patrons, controlling the aristocracy by distributing *beneficia*, including senatorial offices, magistracies, and honors, as personal favors to senators and knights. In addition, in Rome itself he became the grand patron of the populace that was not already dependent on one of the great houses, as noted above.

Beyond Rome, Augustus established patron-client relations with the elite of the major cities and provinces. In the major cities of the empire, prominent provincials proudly publicized their gratitude to the emperor in public inscriptions and the shrines, temples, and games that they sponsored in his honor. Paralleling the benefits that the emperor bestowed on urban and provincial elite in return for honors rendered, Roman governors cultivated a loyal clientele among local aristocrats by dispensing certain favors and benefits for them or their cities. As far as the provincial elite were concerned, they were no longer governed by foreign conquerors but by “friends” of “friends.” In the cities and provinces, wealth was already consolidated in the hands of a few local families. The patron-client relations established between them and the imperial family thus consolidated political-economic power in a network of many pyramids of power, all unified at the top in the person of the emperor.

The pyramids of personal-economic power relations also had a unifying effect politically, at least at the top, among the wealthy and powerful, who dominated affairs in their respective cities, provinces, and petty kingdoms. Many of those inscriptions that prominent provincials dedicated to their imperial patron articulated the imperial ideology: the Romans

demonstrated their *fides* (= Gk *pistis*), loyalty in the sense of protection, while the friends of Rome showed their *fides*, that is, their loyalty to Rome. Many will find this language familiar from Paul's letters, where *pistis* is usually translated as "faith," which only points to the dominance of the imperial context in which Paul was working. Pliny (*Panegyricus* 2.21) declared that the good emperor was not so much an efficient administrator as a paternal protector and benefactor. Since subjects could not repay imperial benefactions in kind, the reciprocity ethic dictated that they make a return in the form of deference, respect, and loyalty. The emperor who played the role of a great patron well had no need of guards because he was "protected by his benefits" (Seneca, *De clementia* 1.13.5).

To maintain control of the less "civilized" peoples, on the other hand, the Romans relied on the more concretely coercive forms of client kings and military strongmen. As Tacitus commented, this was an "old and long-standing principle of Roman policy, [to] employ kings among the instruments of servitude" (*Agr.* 14.1).

After their initial conquest of Palestine, the Romans attempted to rule through the temple-state that had been established originally under the Persian Empire. By this arrangement, Judeans continued to serve "the god who is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 1:3) in the Temple with their tithes and offerings, thus supporting the priestly aristocracy that maintained order and collected tribute for the imperial regime. To put an end to the battles between rival Hasmonean pretenders to the high priesthood, however, in 40 B.C.E. the Romans appointed the energetic and ruthless young military strongman Herod as "king of the Judeans." "Antony and Caesar left the senate-house with Herod between them, preceded by the consuls and the other magistrates, as they went to offer sacrifices and to lay up the decree in the Capitol" (Josephus, *War* 1.14.4 §285). After subduing the reluctant Judeans, Samaritans, and Galileans with the help of Roman troops, Herod established a highly repressive regime that maintained relative stability in his realm from 37 to 4 B.C.E. To bolster his own security, he established an elaborate system of impregnable mountaintop fortresses around the countryside. Masada, overlooking the Dead Sea, is only the most famous of these. Herod ruled with an iron fist, required oaths of loyalty to his own and Roman rule, and used informants to spy out dissidents.

Well before the end of his reign, Herod had become paranoid in his tyranny. He executed his own elder sons for suspicion of disloyalty and

ordered two distinguished scholars and their students burned alive for attacking the Roman eagle he had erected above the gate of the Temple as a symbol of his loyalty to Rome. We don't know that a "massacre of the innocents" such as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew ever took place. But it would have been very much in character for Rome's client king obsessed about security.¹⁷

With his westernizing policies of economic development, Herod became Augustus's favorite client king. To ensure that his sons were properly socialized into Roman imperial culture, they were sent to be raised at the imperial court in Rome. Herod mounted numerous building projects, some of them massive in scale. He built several Roman-style cultural institutions around his realm, such as amphitheaters and hippodromes, and several temples in honor of the emperor. Most impressive were whole new cities also in honor of Augustus. Partly to facilitate "trade" and the shipping of tribute and other goods to Rome, he built the seaport city of Caesarea on the coast, with huge statues of the goddess Roma and the god Caesar facing west across the Mediterranean and the appropriate Roman-Hellenistic installations of theater and stadium. On the site of the previously destroyed capital of Samaria, he built the city of Sebaste (Augustus) and settled a military colony there. To maintain favorable relations with the imperial regime and the elites of the great cities of the empire, Herod made lavish gifts to imperial family members and endowed the construction of temples and colonnades in several Greek cities. Meanwhile, he established a lavish court, and he and extended family members built up huge personal fortunes. The funding of all this "development" and "diplomacy," of course, came from taxation of his people and the produce of his royal estates worked by tenants.

Perhaps because of his own illegitimacy and unpopularity with his subjects, Herod kept the Temple and high priesthood intact as instruments of his own—and imperial—rule. As quickly as was expedient, he eliminated the last members of the incumbent high priestly family, the Hasmoneans, and installed high priestly families of his own choosing, some from Diaspora communities in Egypt and Babylon. Four of these families became the high priestly aristocracy after Herod's death. Besides offering the traditional sacrifices to God, the priests also performed sacrifices in honor of Rome and Caesar. Their dependence on Herod ensured that the Temple served as an instrument of his rule. The Temple itself

Herod rebuilt in grand Hellenistic fashion. “Herod’s” Temple in Jerusalem, which took nearly eighty years to complete, became one of the great “wonders” of the Roman imperial world, a pilgrimage destination for prominent Romans and for wealthy Jews from the Diaspora communities in cities of the eastern Mediterranean. Since peasants almost never leave written records, we do not know exactly what the people thought about the huge new Temple with Hellenistic-style colonnades and travelers from abroad. The economic implications of the new structure of power, however, were clear. The Roman installation of Herod and his rebuilding of the Temple and expansion of the priestly aristocracy meant that the Galilean and Judean peasants now had not just one but three layers of rulers to support.

When Herod’s son Archelaus proved unsatisfactory as a client ruler, the Romans resorted again to the priestly aristocracy to control Judea and Samaria and to collect the tribute. Now, however, they placed the high priesthood under the supervision, and military backup, of a Roman governor based in Caesarea. Since the governors usually exercised the power of appointment, it was incumbent on the four high priestly families from which the high priest might be appointed to maintain close collaboration with the governors. These high priestly families became increasingly wealthy during the first century. They maintained private gangs of strongmen, apparently for their own security as well as to implement their predatory appropriation of the people’s crops. As Josephus reports,

[The high priest] Ananias had servants who were utter rascals and who, rallying the most reckless men, would go to the threshing floors and take by force the tithes [meant for the regular] priests; nor did they refrain from beating those who refused to give. The [other] high priests were guilty of the same practices. (*Ant.* 20.9.2 §§206–7; cf. 20.8.8 §181)

The popular memory of these high priestly families left its mark in the Talmud.

Woe unto me because of the house of Baithos;
 woe unto me because of their lances!
 Woe unto me because of the house of Hanin (Ananus); . . .

Woe unto me because of the house of Ishmael ben Phiabi,
 woe unto me because of their fists.
 For they are high priests and their sons are treasurers
 and their sons-in-law are Temple overseers,
 and their servants smite the people with sticks! (*b. Pesah. 57a*)

Roman rule through the priestly aristocracy in Judea proved increasingly less capable of controlling the growing turbulence toward mid-first century.

In Galilee, after Herod's death, the Romans imposed his son Antipas. As a second-generation client ruler who had been raised at the imperial court, Antipas came to power already integrated into Roman imperial political culture. He continued the "development" of his father. Within twenty years, he had built two new cities in the tiny territory of Galilee. Besides the alien urban culture suddenly set down upon the landscape, this meant that for the first time in history the ruler of Galilee lived in Galilee, with clear implications for the efficiency of tax collection. Presumably the Jerusalem Temple and high priesthood no longer had jurisdiction over Galilee. Yet we must wonder whether they still attempted to keep at least some flow of tithes and offerings coming to the Temple and priesthood from Galilee, and what the implications were for the economic pressures on the Galilean peasantry.

In this system of indirect rule, the Herodian "kings" and the Jerusalem high priests based in Herod's massively reconstructed Temple became the face of Roman imperial rule in Galilee and Judea. Indirect rule may have been less objectionable to the subject people than direct rule, with an occupying army. It was effective, however, only so long as either the client rulers or the Romans themselves applied repressive coercive force. Herod maintained tight control with his police state. Roman governors periodically sent out the military to suppress protests and movements.

THE APOTHEOSIS OF IMPERIAL RULE: RELIGIOUS POWER

Just as Roman religion itself was transformed into one of the principal manifestations of imperial power, so too religion in cities and countries

subject to Rome was transformed into a form of imperial power. The religious forms taken by Roman imperialism may be difficult for modern Westerners to understand, handicapped as we are by our assumption of the separation of religion from politics and power and our reduction of religion to mere individual belief. In attempting to understand how religion could become one of the principal forms of power by which the empire held together, it may help to review the principal religious institutions of the Greek cities (and the Judean temple-state) that were subjugated by Rome.

The ancient Greek city-state (*polis* in Greek, *civis* in Latin), like ancient Rome, had its “civil” or “political” religion: temples, statues, sacrifices, and other celebrations in honor of and devoted to its gods. The gods that the city-states served in these forms were the principal natural-civilizational powers that determined their lives, such as the forces of fertility (Demeter/Aphrodite, and so on), earth (Gaia), heaven (Uranus), the sea (Poseidon), and the personification of the power of the city-state itself that nurtured and protected it (e.g., Athena). As in Rome, sacrifices and games, such as the “Olympic” games, were celebrations of and communion with these life-giving and/or life-threatening powers. The survival, welfare, and general life of the city-state depended on the goodwill of these powers—hence their appeasement. In the Greek cities, religion had to do with power every bit as much as politics. Better stated, religion was inseparable from politics in representing and structuring the power relations of society.

When Rome picked a fight with the league of Greek cities and then utterly destroyed classical Corinth, it was evident that there was an overwhelming new power to reckon with. In Greek cities and elsewhere, temples and ceremonies were dedicated to Roma (the power of Rome). Far more decisive historically was the victory of Octavian, which ended ten years of utterly chaotic empirewide civil war. The victorious *princeps* of Rome had at last established peace and prosperity and brought salvation to the world. He was the Savior. Within decades, the elite of nearly every Greek city, all long since subject to the empire, began to transform the religion of their city.¹⁸ They installed statues of Augustus in the city temples beside the statues of the deities to whom they were dedicated. In the space between the temples in the city center, they built shrines to the emperor. In many cases, the dominant oligarchies built temples to the

emperor, even redesigning the city center to focus on the imperial temple. City or provincial elites also renamed or set up new games in honor of Caesar. The presence of the emperor thus came to pervade public space in the Greek cities.

The reorientation of religious-political life of Greek cities was still more pervasive. The magnates who sat on city or provincial councils even transformed their annual calendars. Public festivals now focused on imperial events such as birthdays of imperial family members, thus injecting the imperial presence further into the consciousness of the public. For example, in 9 B.C.E., the provincial council of the province of Asia decreed that, insofar as the emperor was central to world order and the welfare of humankind, Augustus's birthday would henceforth be observed as the beginning of the new year. "The birthday of the most divine emperor is the fount of every public and private good. Justly would one take this day to be the beginning of the Whole Universe. . . . Justly would one take this day to be the beginning of Life and Living for everyone."¹⁹ The appearance of the emperor and his family on coins and shrines even became the model for clothing and hairstyles. The emperor was portrayed naked, like the gods, dressed in military garb, like the gods, represented in colossal size, like the gods, and overlaid with gold, like the gods. Greeks regularly identified Augustus with Zeus.

It seems clear that the highly civilized Greek city elites, when subjected to external imperial power, simply created a prominent place for that power within their traditional religion and in the forms of traditional religion. The power of imperial domination was so overwhelming that they could not represent the emperor merely as similar to a traditional local hero. They rather had to represent the new power that had established the peace and security of the world, including the order of their city life, in forms traditionally used for the gods. For the previously civilized areas, the Romans had no need of occupying armies or an elaborate bureaucracy. The Greek city elites represented and institutionalized imperial power in traditional indigenous religious forms.

Finally, with regard to the "civilized" areas of the empire, the religious form of imperial power relations was articulated closely with the pyramids of social-economic and political power.²⁰ We have no reason to believe that ordinary people in cities such as Corinth or Thessalonica or Ephesus were enthusiastic participants in the games and ceremonies that

honored the emperor. But the presence of the emperor permeated public space, and the rhythm of public life revolved around imperial events. For the very poor, who made up the vast majority of the populace in any city, the imperial festivals were their only opportunities all year to eat meat, from the sacrifices sponsored by the wealthy patrons of the city. One suspects that most people simply went with the flow of urban life. Decisive for the cohesion of the empire was that those who sponsored the imperial shrines, temples, games, and festivals were the very families who, controlling the wealth in the Greek cities, were also the local magistrates and members of the city councils. For the obvious benefits that might accrue to them and their cities, these magnates cultivated the patronage of the imperial family and served as the priests of the imperial cult.

In the less “civilized” areas of the empire as well, honors to the emperor also played a significant role in holding the far-flung empire together, at least at the top. Herod’s rule in Palestine provides an instructive case. Many of the major economic “development” projects he sponsored were religious forms and expressions of imperial power. With the exception of the Temple, however, he was not “building” on the forms of traditional religion. In constructing the temples to the emperor Augustus, Herod was copying forms from elsewhere in the empire, such as the Greek cities. It is difficult to discern how these temples might have been related to indigenous elite religion in Samaria or other towns in Palestine. The statues of Roma and Caesar looking out over the Mediterranean from Caesarea must have seemed garishly “over-the-top” to tradition-minded elites in the Hellenistic towns along the coast as well as to the priestly elite in Jerusalem.

The temple-state in Jerusalem was different from the Greek city-states in two major respects. On the one hand, the Jerusalem Temple had from the outset been established under the Persian Empire as an institution subject to and the local representative of imperial rule. On the other hand, the god served there was understood as transcending all of the gods (the divinized forces served by other peoples) and being ultimately responsible for all their functions.

Herod was somewhat more subtle and sensitive in his massive reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem than in his other major building projects—but not that subtle. Because the site was super-sacred, he agreed to have some of the priests qualified by lineage to serve in the Temple

trained in masonry and other skills to carry out the most sensitive parts of the construction. The style of the buildings around the perimeter of the Temple Mount, however, was more Hellenistic-Roman than traditional Judean. The erection of the Roman eagle over the principal gate of the Temple, however, proclaimed the power of Rome. It was highly objectionable to those grounded in Israelite tradition, such as the teachers and their students who tore down the eagle as Herod lay dying and the populace who acclaimed them as martyrs.

In contrast to the development of the imperial cult in Greek cities, no statue of the emperor was erected inside the Temple, and no sacrifices were offered directly to the emperor as one of the gods. But sacrifices were offered daily for Caesar and Roma, the personified imperial city. Those were essential as well as required acts of loyalty to (“faith in”) the emperor and empire. But they were objectionable to those deeply rooted in and committed to Israelite tradition. Seventy years after Herod’s death, when the priests in charge of the daily sacrifices suddenly refused any longer to perform the sacrifices for the emperor, it was understood, evidently by both Jerusalemites and the Romans, as tantamount to a declaration of independence. The embodiment of imperial power in religious form, including injection into traditional religion, may have helped maintain the imperial order in Judea temporarily. But its roots were shallow and, if anything, helped alienate the priests, scribes, and people from Roman imperial rule.