

Cutting ties with religion of empire

John Dear | Feb. 8, 2011 | On the Road to Peace

A year ago, I spent ten days staying at Tahrir Square in Cairo, marching with protesters after 1400 of us were denied entrance into Gaza by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. We were threatened, harassed and followed by undercover police. It was a scary experience of dictatorship, repression, and empire.

So I rejoice with the crowds who peacefully assembled and marched these last few weeks in Cairo demanding an end to the brutal thirty year, U.S.-backed regime of Mubarak. I hope and pray that the good people of Egypt will find justice, nonviolent democracy, and new freedom.

The long history of Egypt is a struggle for its people to come out of empire. But one could argue, their story is the history of humanity -- to come out of empire into the new life and freedom of loving nonviolence.

A ground-breaking new book reads the Bible itself as God's call to humanity to come out of empire and live in peace in God's creation.

Scripture scholar Wes Howard-Brook has published an astonishing commentary -- on the entire Bible! *Come Out My People!: God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* is a masterpiece of scholarship and political commentary which could help everyone everywhere out of their culture of violence and empire into the new life of God's love and peace.

I think it's a defining moment in scripture study. I urge everyone to get this book, study it and discuss it. It charts a new course for all of us.

In a nutshell, Howard-Brook walks us through the entire Hebrew Bible and its "war of myths" leading up to the nonviolent Jesus, St. Paul's writings and the concluding book of Revelation to see the movement of God through history as a call to humanity out of empire into God's realm of peace, love and justice.

The cumulative effect is nothing less than a revelation. It's as if we've missed the point of the Bible for centuries, using it to support our wars, injustices, violence and empires.

Instead, the Bible is a summons to cut all ties with empire -- with all the political structures and systems which claim God's power -- and to enter the freedom, nonviolence, peace, and justice of God and God's creation.

The best scripture commentaries of my lifetime are *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* by Ched Myers and *Becoming Children of God: The Gospel of John* by Wes Howard Brook.

If you have not read them, get them, and take ten years to study them! Another excellent resource is a superb collection of essays co-edited by Wes Howard-Brook and Sharon Ringe called *The New Testament: Introducing the Way of Discipleship*, which I also highly recommend.

These two great scholars -- Myers and Howard-Brook -- build on the work of William Stringfellow, Walter

Wink, Walter Brueggemann and Richard Horsley to develop the best scholarly studies of the Gospels from the perspective of war and peace, violence and nonviolence, injustice and justice, empire and creation.

Come Out My People! takes this powerful new political reading even farther -- daring to walk us through the entire bible. It is the first such book of its kind. Orbis is to be commended for publishing it.

The mass of data, brilliant interpretation, and sheer intelligence are overwhelming. They're also readable and manageable if you take it in small doses. I read about 25 pages a day over the last month, underlined as I went, and pondered his insights.

Howard-Brook contends that there are two fundamental religions throughout history -- the religion of empire and the religion of creation. (I might have called them the religion of violence and war vs. the religion of nonviolence and peace.) In this sweeping and transformative approach to biblical interpretation, he presents the Bible as a struggle between these two competing religions.

Throughout the stories, struggles, and ages, people have been caught in empire and renounced God and the gifts of creation. Biblical history leads up to the appearance of the nonviolent Jesus who once and for all denounces the religion of empire and proclaims and embodies the religion of creation as the way of love, truth, justice and peace.

Because Jesus is killed by the empire, his resurrection is the definitive vindication of the religion of creation. Consequently, those who follow him renounce violence, domination and empire to live in the peace of his creation with humanity. Instead of "Onward Christian soldiers," the mission is "Onward Christian peacemakers."

I trust Wes Howard-Brook's insights because they flow not just from his academic studies, but his activism for justice and peace.

"I have discovered an exciting, worldwide circle of discipleship that transcends previous denominational divides, ages and nationalities in which people are seeking to discover and to live the authentic Way of Jesus, leaving behind the legacy of "Christian" empire," Howard-Brook writes in his introduction.

"Recognizing how Jesus definitely embraced the "creation" story in the Bible while rejecting the "empire" story provides a new foundation for engaging our scriptural inheritance in service of personal, communal and global transformation."

It's impossible to review this book; that would be like writing a review of the Bible itself. My copy is marked up with passages noted for their fresh insights -- from Genesis to Revelation. Here are some of the aspects, themes, or passages which helped me:

- His opening discussion of the culture of empire and how it co-opts every religion to serve its will. How in the book of Genesis the Creator gives us paradise to live in peace on the land and how we reject that gift for "the Great City" -- for empire as a way of life.
- The brilliant review of biblical history under various kings and empires. How some people were faithful to the call out of empire; how most not only served empire, but thought they were serving the Creator by doing so; how the Bible became a counter-narrative to the Babylonian worldview which Isaiah and Jesus used to explain our way out of the culture of violence into fidelity to a loving God.
- In particular, his treatment of Genesis was eye-opening, as a counter-narrative to the Babylonian imperial worldview, to Cain, vengeance, agriculture and the "Great City."
- How biblical Israel rejects reliance on "YHWH alone," uses the realism and militarism of empire, and never succeeds because it trusts in violence not in the nonviolence of God.

- How attention to how the counter-narrative to empire first begins in the Bible with four women -- two midwives, Pharaoh's daughter and Moses' mother, who fear God and disobey the king.
- Side comments on the nature of God, such as God's appearance to Elijah in the silent wind (1 Kings, 19:12): "YHWH is not to be encountered only in external events of visible and audible power, but also in utter stillness. Such an experience is unknown to the religion of empire, where elaborate spectacles visibly linked gods and kings."
- The differences between the prophets, especially the distinction of Micah who offers a truer creation-oriented alternative, even to Isaiah: "Isaiah's vision is one that imagines a renewed kingship and a restored Jerusalem in which YHWH's peace will be found. Micah, on the other hand, foresees revolution: an utter rejection of monarchy as the basis for the end of war and the establishment of justice on Zion."
- His discussion of the non-canonical, radical text of 1 Enoch as pivotal to the anti-imperial identity of the Gospels; and his analysis of the apocalyptic writings in Daniel (my favorite book).
- His summation of New Testament studies over the last century, and announcement of a new moment as we understand the anti-imperial thrust of the Gospels in its call for total trust in the peacemaking Creator.
- His reflections on the writings of St. Paul within the context of the Roman empire, showing Paul's radical anti-imperial stand in light of his assertion that in the resurrection of Jesus, God calls out of us out of empire into the Christ's communal life of love.

In Jesus, God fulfills the call to humanity to "Come out of empire," Wes Howard-Brook writes. One passage sums up Howard-Brook's take on Jesus:

Jesus' mission was clearly not to "bring down" the Roman Empire in the traditional militaristic sense. At the same time, his goal was not to "spiritualize" political notions such as "kingdom" and "messiah" so as to render his followers either indifferent to "the world" or ineffective in participating in God's project of renewal and restoration. Finally, Jesus did not "inspire" his disciples to engage the empire's own social and political machinery in order to "reform" it.

Rather, his purpose -- as seen through a resurrection-oriented reading of the thousand year long storyline we have followed [in the Bible] -- was to bring YHWH's ancient purpose for humanity to fruition: the bringing forth of a people whose lives would be a light for others to show them how to live in true harmony/shalom with God, one another and all creation.

This understanding of YHWH's purpose would have been obvious were it not for the persistent, powerful presence of the religion of empire claiming YHWH's authority, practiced by the Jerusalem temple, its priesthood, and its collaborators, among both the elite and ordinary people. Jesus, experiencing God's overwhelming love for him and for all creation, took up the sacred vocation of embodying YHWH's will by engaging in the two-part mission of denouncing the religion of empire and proclaiming as Good News the religion of God's immanent and abundant kingdom of peace, justice, love and joy for all. (P. 395)

"The Gospels portray a Jesus who sides consistently and definitively with the Creator/Liberator God and against the gods of empire," Howard-Brook writes.

As I read his clear, stunning analysis, I could not but help wonder at and grieve the great distance we have traveled from this anti-imperial, pro-peace Jesus.

I only wish Howard-Brook wrote twice as much on the Gospels because his insights are so rich.

I would have liked 50 pages alone on the Sermon on the Mount, which I consider the ultimate teaching on resistance to empire and the nonviolent life outside empire. But Howard-Brook hints at the end that more volumes may follow, so perhaps he could unpack more of the Sermon on the Mount in the next volume on the

early church.

Come Out, My People! is certainly one of the best scripture books I've ever read, and one that I will return to for the rest of my life.

I urge everyone to get it, study it, discuss it, and use it not only to understand the Bible, but to live the biblical mandate to reject empire and choose instead Christ's way of peace, love and nonviolence.

To hear a new podcast interview with John Dear, go to www.jesusradicals.com. This week, John will speak the Univ. of Rhode Island in Kingston, RI (postponed from last week). In two weeks he will give a keynote speech at the annual Sabeel Conference in Bethlehem, Palestine/Israel (see: www.sabeel.org). His latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), and other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund, go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. For further information, or to schedule a lecture or retreat, visit: www.johndear.org.

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