

“Come Out,
My People!”



God's Call out of Empire
in the Bible and Beyond

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Introduction

“Is God on Our Side?”

THE TWO RELIGIONS

“Is God on our side?”

This question has taken center stage in many of the dramas played out on the world stage in recent years. A U.S. president claims God’s inspiration for the invasion of Iraq or Afghanistan. Suicide bombers do the will of Allah. Zionist Jews defend the “Holy Land.” There is no authority more desired nor controverted than the favor of the divine.

Many people respond to the cacophony of cries claiming God’s favor by throwing stones at “religion.” One editorial writer in a Seattle newspaper expressed it like this: “Is it any wonder so many of us who were religious and have come to doubt religion or who never were involved in religion dismiss it or harbor suspicion toward it?”¹ Others dig in their heels and substitute rhetoric and “justified violence” for conversation that seeks mutual understanding. Still others, believing in a God of inclusion and love but overwhelmed by the vehement pride of those claiming God’s support for their violent cause, withdraw to a “smaller” religion of home and hearth.

Can anything be done besides fighting fire with fire or retreating into private “spirituality”? This book attempts to join clarity of thought and deep faith in the Word claimed by Jesus in response. First, though, we must take a few steps back from the fray and look with a wider lens.

Have you ever walked into a room where people are watching a movie already in progress and tried to get a sense of what’s going on in the story? One can leap to all kinds of wild (and false) conclusions about plot and motivation of characters by taking one or two scenes out of their narrative context. Another example: have you found yourself in a foreign land or with people from a different culture and discovered (perhaps after an embarrassing moment) that you had completely misunderstood one another’s words or actions? These two kinds of experiences — confusion or misunderstanding as a result of experiences taken out of narrative and/or cultural contexts — are behind much of the failed dialogue around the question of God’s partisanship in politics, economics, and war. We already know how to fix the first problem: start the film at the beginning. The solution to the second kind

1. John McBride, “Religion Is Not a Primary Need,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 18, 2006.

of situation is similar: find out how “the others” think and act and why they believe and behave the way they do.

But how do we “start the film at the beginning” when it comes to complex global struggles? One answer is to gain as much understanding as we can about how the situation we’re in came to be. In other words, what happened from “the beginning” until we “entered the room”?

We cannot restart the disc of human history. But we can, in a meaningful way, go back “to the beginning” and discover patterns that play themselves out again and again. And this is where, perhaps surprisingly to some, one of our most helpful tools is also the world’s most frequently misunderstood book, the Bible. This ancient collection of writings, just like a modern-day film or an experience of a foreign land, can be abused by having its stories told outside of the narrative and cultural contexts in which they were composed and first heard. If you are irreversibly committed to the idea that the Bible proposes simple and straightforward “answers” that can be extracted when needed to “prove” God’s support for your views, you are likely to find this book challenging. But if you are willing to approach with an open mind, you may be joyously surprised by the wisdom the Bible contains and the light that wisdom can shed on our struggle to discern God’s partisanship in current events.

The Bible does not present a single, unified perspective on what it means to be a “Jew” or a “Christian.” Rather, it gathers together witnesses to a passionate, historical *argument* over what it means to be “God’s people.” It constantly keeps before its audience questions that must be wrestled with before our central question can even be addressed. “Which ‘god’ are you talking about?” Which ‘side’ are *you* on?”

The Bible insists that there are no “sidelines” from which to watch others do battle. All people are inevitably and unavoidably drawn into the fray, or at least its consequences, by the fact of sharing this beautiful, abundant, yet fragile and finite planet as our home. We can choose to run away, to be silent, or to hide, but we cannot choose not to *participate*. We may not agree with our neighbor’s “religion,” but we cannot remain unaffected by it.

This calls us to take our first step back to consider one of the basic terms in this argument: “religion.” Ask most people (ask *yourself* right now), “what is religion?” and you’re likely to get something like one or more of these responses. Religion is:

- ♦ a system of beliefs and practices associated with labels such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism;
- ♦ teachings that provide a moral framework for one’s life;
- ♦ things you do in a church, synagogue, or mosque;
- ♦ a set of rewards and punishments that motivate people to behave in a certain way;

- ♦ answers to questions like, “What happens when we die?” or “What is the purpose of life?”
- ♦ a remnant of more primitive times before reason and science when people developed myths to explain natural phenomena such as earthquakes or disease.

For the purpose of this book — and, I’d suggest, for the purpose of any reading of the Bible — I’d like to offer a different meaning, one grounded in the root of the word itself. The Latin *religio* means literally, “to bind again.” Even in ancient times, *religio* became associated with some of the specific practices and beliefs associated with “religions.” But I invite you to consider throughout this book its broader sense of *the attitudes, beliefs, and/or practices that bind individuals together as a “people.”*² Seen this way, there are countless “religions” beyond the organized and institutional traditions at the top of the list. Ask yourself: What binds me to other people? Consider some possibilities:

- ♦ immediate family;
- ♦ ethnicity or race;
- ♦ language (formal, such as English; technical, such as “computerese”; or popular, such as slang);
- ♦ nationality;
- ♦ neighborhood or geographic region;
- ♦ common interests, such as sports, music, arts, or hobbies;
- ♦ membership in an organization such as a labor union, professional association, or political party;
- ♦ concern for social or political issues.

It is obvious that some of these “religions” are stronger than others in that they exert a comparatively more powerful and permanent bonding force. One might scream and cheer with one’s fellow football fans, for instance, but one isn’t as likely to lay down one’s life for them as one might for one’s fellow family members or citizens. Similarly, we might feel bound to people whom we see regularly but quickly lose touch if we move away. In contrast, we are likely to stay bound to family or our ethnic group wherever we are.

2. Mason argues at length that the term “religion” does not fit any category of collective identity before at least the sixteenth century of our era. I acknowledge that my use herein is heuristic and anachronistic, not “historical.” I am not aware of another category that can be used to take into account all of the elements shown in Table 1. Further, he shows definitively that the English words “Jew(s)” and “Judaism” are anachronistic and unwarranted translations of the corresponding Greek words, *Ioudaioi* and *Ioudaismos*. Therefore, throughout this book, I will use various substitutes, depending on context, such as “Israelite,” “Judean,” or “Jews” with quotation marks. I have left intact the use of forms of the word “Jew” in quotations from other authors.

Table 1: The Two Religions

Feature	Religion of Creation	Religion of Empire
Source of “divine power”	One God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth	Many gods and goddesses
God’s “home”	Beyond and within creation and among people	In a temple near the palace in the royal city
Places of sacred encounter	Earth: mountains, rivers, wilderness; direct encounter; table fellowship; human intimacy	Urban temple, mediated by priestly elite; urban royal rituals
Purpose of human life	Praise God with joy in gratitude for the abundant gift of life	Serve the gods through loyalty to “empire”
Basic social structure	Egalitarian kinship	Hierarchical patronage
Basic economic structure	Gift, barter, collaboration amid abundance	Money, debt, competition amid scarcity
Basic social architecture	Village, small town	Urban, megalopolis
Basic political ideology	God alone reigns	Human king reigns as presence of supreme god
Relationship with unknown “others”	Hospitality; love	Suspicion; violence
Religious “obligations”	Love and praise of God and neighbor expressed in “right relationship” (justice)	Rituals expressing loyalty to “patrons,” both “divine” and human
Relationship with earth / land	Belongs to God; people are “tenants”	Belongs to king and those who can afford to buy it
Relationship with “enemies”	Love them	Destroy them

Some religions simply express our personal preferences, while others are vigorously passed down across the generations as “truth.”

Let’s move from this general definition of “religion” to the specific worlds of the Bible. We may presuppose that the Bible is seeking to encourage and support commitment to one of two religions called “Judaism” and “Christianity.” There are indeed two religions in the Bible vying for the loyalty of listeners and readers. But to label one as “Judaism” and the other as “Christianity” is to miss the central point.

For example, consider the topic of war. Are “Christians” *for* war or *against* war? We know that people using the label “Christian” to identify their religion fall along the spectrum from absolute pacifism to enthusiastic support for “just war.” We’d find a similar spectrum for numerous issues, such as homosexuality, poverty, abortion, the global economy, and so forth. We’d also find “Jews” who are adamant supporters of Israel and justify its defense by any means necessary, while others renounce both nationalism and

violence. Yet anywhere on these spectrums, we find people claiming “God is on our side.”

This was also true in biblical times, whether within monarchical Israel or among the first communities of Jesus’ disciples. But rather than the image of a *spectrum* to portray the range of views on topics that bind or divide people (i.e., *religious* topics such as politics and economics), we can think of the biblical authors speaking in relation to *two opposing magnetic poles* — that is, *two religions* — each pulling on people in opposite directions. The biblical narratives repeatedly show its characters pulled toward one pole and away from the other. Once we can see the Bible Story’s big picture — that is, once we start at the beginning and read it in its narrative and cultural contexts — we can see the basic pattern that repeats itself across the generations. What can be especially confusing is when people in the biblical Story gather around the pole that is *away from God* yet claim that God is on their side *in that place*.

To make this clearer, let’s jump ahead and look at the features of these “two religions” that will be revealed in our engagement of specific texts. Although this risks oversimplification, let’s call them “the religion of creation” and “the religion of empire.” That is, we can understand one of the Bible’s religions to be grounded in the *experience of and ongoing relationship with the Creator God*, leading to a covenantal bond between that God and God’s people for the blessing and abundance of *all people and all creation*. The other, while sometimes *claiming* to be grounded in that same God, is actually a human invention used to justify and legitimate attitudes and behaviors that provide blessing and abundance for *some* at the *expense of others*. We’ll explore the details as we go. Table 1 provides a schematic overview of these two religions.

One can view all human history — indeed, the very formation of what we call “history” — as the *interplay between these two religions*. The Bible takes up the story about four thousand years ago, which is, in the big picture, much closer to the “end” than the “beginning” of the roughly two-million-year human existence. But that four thousand year period does give us a sufficiently wide angle with which to view current events rather than simply starting from when we “entered the room.”

It might help to pause before we engage the biblical narratives to clarify the use of the term (“empire”) as a label for the religion at the opposite pole from the religion of creation. Political scientist Herfried Münkler observes that

the concept of empire has had an arbitrary, often simply denunciatory meaning. Political science has not provided solid definitions and backed them up with examples, but has rather left the field to the whimsical operations of everyday journalism.³

3. Münkler, 4.

He goes on to remedy this problem by arguing for concrete and specific criteria by which one can distinguish “empire” from other forms of political power, such as “hegemony.” For our purposes, we can simply note the major elements he names:

1. *“Imperial boundaries . . . involve gradations of power and influence”*: that is, there is a structural difference between imperial and nonimperial space.
2. *“Imperiality . . . dissolves . . . equality and reduces subordinates to the status of client states or satellites”*: that is, international relations are not between equals, but between a “center” and a “periphery.”
3. *“Most empires have owed their existence to a mixture of chance and contingency”*: that is, there need not be a “will to empire” (i.e., “imperialism”) or a “grand strategy,” but rather, a series of circumstances that lead to increased power and control of people and/or territory.
4. *“The capacity for reform and regeneration . . . makes an empire independent of the charismatic qualities of its founder (or founding generation)”*: that is, there is temporal continuity that transcends the original situation that generated the empire.
5. *“An empire cannot remain neutral in relation to the powers in its sphere of influence”*: that is, it cannot allow either independence or nonparticipation without retaliation.⁴

These elements help us to avoid the risk Münkler names of reducing “empire” to a mere pejorative label.⁵ At the same time, it allows us to be inclusive of various historical social orders that were not far-flung geographically yet manifest these elements. Thus, an ancient city-state that exerts long-term authority over its neighboring cities and villages could be understood as the embodiment of the “religion of empire.”

We’ll attempt in Part I to peer “behind” history to understand where the two religions came from and why. Although we cannot literally see “the beginning,” we can make some reasonable hypotheses based on the evidence we do have. Just as astrophysicists posit “the Big Bang” and biologists a theory of evolution to explain the movement from “the beginning” until now, so too the Bible proposes its own story of origins. This Story, while perfectly consistent with the scientists’ stories, addresses different questions:

4. Ibid., 4–14.

5. Cf. the definition of “empire” offered by Goldstone and Haldon, 18–19: “a territory (continuous or not) ruled from a distinct organizational center (which may be mobile) with clear ideological and political sway over varied elites who in turn exercise political power over a population in which a majority have neither access to nor influence over positions of imperial power.” They propose this definition in relation to “state,” about which they note that “no agreement has ever been reached on a universally acceptable definition that has any real analytic value. . . . Too rigid a definition merely acts as a conceptual straitjacket that ignores the fundamentally dynamic and dialectical nature of human social organization” (4–5).

those arising from a people confronted by, but standing in resistance to, the religion of empire. From that original confrontation, the biblical Story unfolds.

This will require not taking the biblical chronology at face value but rather asking questions about when various texts were written, by whom, and why. For example, in the immediately following chapters, we’ll consider the book of Genesis. Clearly, the story of creation coming to be in the first chapter of Genesis was not written at the time it narrates. Scholars have been exploring the question of the origins of Genesis for a long time and have proposed various theories. We’ll look at how the Genesis stories resonate against a very specific background, during and after the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century BCE.

Similarly, in Part II, we’ll take up the texts that narrate the story “from Exodus to Exile,” that is, from the call of Moses, through the settlement in the Promised Land, continuing in the time of Israel’s and Judah’s kings, and ending with the fall of Jerusalem. We may be surprised to discover the likely sequence in which this long narrative came to be, and how different parts of it speak from the perspective of each of the “two religions.” This will require unraveling the existing narrative by looking for patterns of “who knew what when.” For example, Moses is rarely mentioned in the monarchy narrative. What might this suggest about which story came first? Similarly, Abraham is almost never “remembered” in the narrative of settlement in the Land. Might this suggest that Genesis was written later than the settlement story? By asking these kinds of questions, we’ll be able to look “behind” the final version of the narratives and try to discern the order in which they were written. This will also help us to understand what “religion” each text encourages listeners to practice.

In Part III, we’ll continue this exploration in the texts written from “Exile to Easter,” that is, during the time of the Second Temple in Jerusalem up to the time of Jesus. We’ll see how the temple establishment elite encouraged the practice of “royal wisdom” in collaboration with foreign empires (Persian and Greek), while voices from the margins insisted that YHWH stood against such collaboration. Some of these texts speak in the vivid imagery of “apocalyptic” visions and dreams. This will invite us to delve into their symbolic worlds to see what they’re “really” trying to say behind their “heavenly” descriptions.

Finally, in Part IV, “from Easter to the Eschaton,” we’ll engage the New Testament texts. We’ll see how Jesus spoke and acted boldly on behalf of the God of Israel proclaimed in the texts of the “religion of creation” and against those who would claim YHWH’s authority for the “religion of empire.” This bold announcement of “Good News” led the supporters of the religion of empire to persecute and kill Jesus, only to have the Creator God’s triumphant power revealed once and for all by raising Jesus from the dead. It was up to Paul, the evangelists, and other disciples to continue to proclaim and

to embody this Good News of the victory of the God of creation over the “gods” of empire. Although the biblical story will take up most of this book, we’ll also explore some texts that were not included in the biblical canon. Perhaps these texts were excluded because they stood in vehement opposition to the prevailing religion of empire. History’s “winners” generally do not preserve opposition voices, yet remarkably, some of these can still be heard. They remind us that, as the author of Luke’s Gospel shows (Luke 3:1-7), we must listen not only to those upon whom the mainstream media focus, but also to those in “the wilderness” who speak truth that leads to life, for humanity and for all creation.

RELIGION OF EMPIRE: urban/temple-centered; hierarchical patronage social structure; suspicion of outsiders; money/debt economy

David/Solomon story in Samuel-1 Kings 11		Monarchical history to Hezekiah	Deuteronomy and Joshua (Josiah’s “compromise”)	Rest of monarchical history	Haggai/First Zechariah Malachi	Ezra/Nehemiah Second Zechariah
		First Isaiah		Jeremiah	Ezekiel Numbers	1-2 Chronicles Esther
1000 BCE	900	800	700	600	Leviticus	500
			Amos, Hosea, Micah		Second Isaiah	Third Isaiah
Exodus story					Genesis	
Nonliterate YHWH-based “high place” and “green tree” village worship and social economy						

RELIGION OF CREATION: wilderness/village-centered; egalitarian social structure; inclusion of outsiders; gift/barter economy



RELIGION OF EMPIRE: urban/temple-centered; hierarchical patronage social structure; suspicion of outsiders; money/debt economy

	Proverbs, Job, Jonah, Qoheleth	Sirach Tobit	1-2 Maccabees		[Philo of Alexandria]	[Writings of Josephus]
400	300	200	100	0	0	100 CE
	Ruth	Daniel “Dream Visions” and Epistle of Enoch (1 Enoch 85-105)	Other apocalyptic texts		“Book of the Parables” (1 Enoch 37-71)	Deutero-Pauline letters
	“Astronomical Book” (1 Enoch 72-82)	“Book of the Watchers” (1 Enoch 1-36)			Paul’s letters	Gospels/Acts Hebrews/James 1-2 John/Revelation
		Ongoing village-based YHWH-grounded social economy				

RELIGION OF CREATION: wilderness/village-centered; egalitarian social structure; inclusion of outsiders; gift/barter economy