

## Introduction

### *“You Shall Not Bow Down and Serve Them”*

The Gospels are stories, exciting stories. We miss the excitement when we focus on particular verses in Bible studies or hear only separate “lessons” week by week in Sunday services. If we read the Gospels whole—or, better, hear them performed by a storyteller—they turn out to be dramatic stories about Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is particularly fast-moving.<sup>1</sup> The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John have pauses in the action for Jesus to deliver long speeches. But they also are stories of high drama.

#### CONFLICT, RENEWAL, AND POWERS

Among the many striking features of the Gospel stories, three in particular stand out:

1. The Gospel stories are full of *conflict*.<sup>2</sup> The dominant conflict is not between Jesus and his disciples but between Jesus and the high priestly and Roman rulers, and the conflict is not just religious but political. In Mark, the story has barely begun when the Pharisees and the Herodians, the representatives of those rulers, begin plotting to destroy Jesus. The primary conflict comes to a climax when Jesus marches up into Jerusalem at the head of a crowd that acclaims him as a liberator and then carries out a forcible protest demonstration in the temple. In Matthew, no sooner is Jesus born than King Herod sends out the death squads to massacre all the infants as a desperate device to kill the child who has just been born as the new, liberating messiah-designate. In Luke, after Jesus’ dramatic speeches and actions against the Jerusalem rulers and their representatives, he is

accused before the Roman governor of perverting the people, forbidding them to pay tribute to Caesar, and generally of stirring up the people with his teaching. In the Gospel of John, Jesus marches into Jerusalem several times for confrontations with the high priestly rulers of Judea, who in turn seize Jesus and turn him over to the Roman governor for crucifixion, lest the Romans take military action against the whole people because of Jesus' disruptive activity. The Gospels are full of *political conflict*.

2. The Gospel stories portray Jesus as carrying out a *renewal of Israel*.<sup>3</sup> He carries out new actions of deliverance of the people reminiscent of the sea crossings and feedings in the wilderness led by Moses and the healings of Elijah. Jesus then appears with Moses and Elijah on a mountain and appoints twelve figures representative of (the twelve tribes of) Israel. He heals a twelve-year-old woman who is almost dead and a woman who has been hemorrhaging for twelve years, who evidently symbolize the Israelite people, nearly dead from having been bled dry by their rulers. Like the prophets of old, Jesus pronounces God's condemnation of the rulers for having exploited the people. Matthew, Luke, and John all, at several points in their stories, state explicitly that Jesus is fulfilling the longings and expectations of the people and particular prophecies spoken by prophets such as Isaiah. In the Gospel stories, Jesus stands squarely in the tradition of Israel and is carrying out a renewal of people. Jesus' renewal of Israel, moreover, is opposed to and by the rulers of Israel. In the climactic confrontation(s) in Jerusalem, Jesus declares God's condemnation of the rulers, and throughout the Gospels the rulers oppose Jesus and finally arrest, try, and execute him.

3. The Gospels are stories about a struggle between *opposing powers*, both at the political-economic level and at the spiritual level.<sup>4</sup> Herod sends out his military to suppress the threat represented by the newborn messiah. Caesar, having conquered subject peoples, has the political-military power to demand that they render tribute from their crops, which supply the energy needed to sustain people's lives. Jesus pronounces (God's) condemnation of the high priests for draining away to the Temple the people's resources, and he condemns their scribal and Pharisaic representatives for leading the people to violate the commandment of God to feed father and mother and for "devouring widow's livings." And the chief priests in Jerusalem and the Roman governor use their political power to arrest, try, and execute Jesus.

The power struggle rages also at the spiritual level. "Unclean spirits" or demons have seized control of certain people, in one case causing the demoniac to do extreme violence to himself as well as to members of his community. Jesus' exorcism of these spirits involves a struggle. The Gospels present Jesus' exorcisms and healings, as well as sea crossings and wilderness feedings, explicitly as *dynameis*, a Greek term that means "powers" but may be best translated as "acts of power." Indeed, Jesus' powers are threatening the dominant order.

The Pharisees accuse Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. In response, Jesus insists that his exorcisms are, in effect, evidence that in the broader struggle between Satan and God for control of human life, the "strong man" has been bound. He declares that "the finger of God" has effected a new exodus-like deliverance. The two levels are thus closely interrelated. The people who witness Jesus' exorcism, moreover, declare that Jesus is acting with "authority/power," in contrast to the scribal representatives of the Jerusalem rulers. In the climactic confrontation in Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem as well recognize that Jesus is acting with authority/power that they, the "authority figures," cannot match. In reassurance to his followers, whom he warns about the possibility that they may (also) be faced with "taking up the cross," he promises that the kingdom of God will (soon) be coming "with power."

## ANACHRONISTIC ASSUMPTIONS

Insofar as political-religious conflict, renewal of Israel, and power(s) are so prominent, indeed central, in the Gospels, one would expect to find these same features in investigations of the historical Jesus, particularly insofar as the Gospels are the primary sources for such investigations. But rarely do any of these features crop up in interpretation of Jesus. There are a number of closely interrelated reasons for this, rooted in the worldview and assumptions of modern Western culture in general and in the field of New Testament studies in particular.

1. One of the principal reasons for this lack of attention to the conflict and the power struggle is that standard study of the historical Jesus does not consider the Gospels as stories, much less as historical sources, but as

containers for individual sayings of Jesus and little vignettes about Jesus, which are analyzed for the “data” from which conclusions can be drawn by the scholar.<sup>5</sup> Focused thus on text fragments that contain isolated bits of “data,” scholars simply do not discern the broader patterns and relationships indicated in the Gospels and other sources for the historical context.

2. Another fundamental reason is that the field of New Testament studies, of which historical Jesus studies is a subfield, like Western culture generally, assumes that religion is separate from politics (and economics). Jesus is considered a religious figure. Hence, virtually by definition, he cannot have been political (or economic). This basic separation extends into the established academic division of labor in which reality is divided up for investigation, with political science charged with investigation of politics and religious studies or theology dedicated to investigation of figures such as Jesus or Muhammad or Gautama Buddha. In this modern Western division of reality into separate spheres, power is ordinarily understood as belonging to the political sphere, in both popular and academic discourse, and occasionally to economics. If religion has any power, it is confined to spirituality. Hence, again by definition, Jesus cannot have been involved in a power struggle.

3. With the combination of powerful individualism and the increasing marginalization of religion in the modern West, moreover, religion itself has been reduced to individual faith or belief. In contrast to traditional agrarian societies, in which religion was integral to fertility and economic production and the political-economic order, religion in contemporary Western societies is external or marginal to the relations and processes of economic production and political order.<sup>6</sup> As viewed by modern individualism and the reduction of religion to individual faith, particularly by modern liberals, Jesus was primarily an individual teacher of individuals about individual religious ethics or lifestyle.

4. Another reason for the inattention to the conflict and power struggle in historical Jesus studies is that, in the modern Western understanding, God, like Jesus, is associated primarily with religion, which is separate from politics and economics. This may be most clearly illustrated in the standard understanding that there is no conflict between “giving to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:13-17), that is, that Jesus instructs us to pay taxes to the political

authorities while giving our religious loyalty to God. In keeping with the same modern understanding of God, liberal interpreters have recently argued that "the kingdom of God," the very center of Jesus' teaching, was an individual, personal spiritual reality, an unmediated relationship with God.<sup>7</sup> The God of marginalized modern theology thus has a drastically reduced jurisdiction compared with the God of Israel, consistently portrayed in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) as comprehensively and directly concerned with political and economic affairs inseparable from religious loyalty. Similarly in biblical understanding, "the kingdom of God" refers to the comprehensive sovereignty of God.

Closely related to the reduction in the scope of reality over which "God" has jurisdiction is the continuing operation of an earlier theological emphasis that what was most important in both "Christianity" and its predecessor religion "Judaism" was "monotheism," the belief that there is only one God, not many. This, of course, was the ideal for Jewish and Christian faith, as stated in the Jewish Shema and in Christian creeds. In the Bible, from the Song of the Sea, the earliest Hebrew poetry ("Who is comparable to you, O YHWH, among the gods?" [Exod 15:11]) to the apostle Paul ("in fact there are many gods and many lords" [1 Cor 8:5]), it is understood that many gods/lords/powers are operative in the world. The theological emphasis on monotheism versus polytheism, however, tends to divert our attention from the reality of the multiple forces/gods that were impacting the lives of Jesus' contemporaries.

5. Moreover, interpretation of Jesus as part of New Testament studies, which is a subdivision of Christian theology, works with a standard theological scheme of the origins of Christianity as a new, supposedly more universal religion from the older, and supposedly more particularistic religion of Judaism. In this scheme, Jesus was the revealer, teacher, and healer of individual followers. Only after and as a result of the resurrection faith did a community or movement of his followers form. Jesus himself did not catalyze a movement. So theologically oriented interpreters focus mainly on the features of Jesus' "ministry" compatible with and developed by "early Christianity" as it spread primarily among "Gentiles" in the Hellenistic world. They see little or no reason to attend to the particular concerns and political conflicts in Galilee and Judea.

6. Finally, a principal reason for the lack of attention to "unclean spirits" and Jesus' "acts of power" in the Gospel stories is surely the modern

“scientific” frame of mind that developed in the wake of the Enlightenment reduction of reality to what was natural and comprehensible by reason. Figures such as angels and demons were defined as unreal or “supernatural.” New Testament studies shared the Western scientific definition of reality; the field found the Gospel stories of healings and exorcisms to be “miracles” or “magic,” due to “supernatural” causation. If Jesus’ exorcisms and healings were to be interpreted at all, they belonged to the (individual) religious sphere, separate from the rest of life, and required explanation in more “scientific” psychological or psychosomatic terms. Standard critical study of Jesus took spirits and acts of power as elements of an ancient worldview that had to be “demythologized” in order for the teachings and acts of Jesus to become palatable for scientific-minded modern individuals.

## RETHINKING

In seeking to understand the historical Jesus in historical context, however, it makes sense to attempt to understand the worldview, assumptions, and culture of the ancient historical context, rather than to impose modern Western assumptions and worldview onto the Gospel sources. Of course, it is impossible not to be determined in all sorts of ways by our own culture, viewpoint, and assumptions. But we can at least attempt to appreciate other cultures and to be self-critical of our own culture and viewpoint—particularly of the assumptions and approach in which professional scholarly interpreters have been trained.<sup>8</sup>

1. It should not be all that difficult to learn to read the Gospels, our principal sources, as whole stories. Gospel interpreters have been doing this for the last thirty years, with many treating the Gospels as modern novellas or short stories, but at least some have attempted to appreciate them as ancient stories in an ancient context.<sup>9</sup> Far more than mere containers of “data,” the Gospels present broader portrayals of Jesus in which the particular episodes are components. The Gospel stories (and the parallel speeches in Matthew and Luke, presumably derived from their common “source,” Q) are our principal guide to the significance of those particular components in the historical context of Jesus’ mission and movement. What have been taken as individual sayings are not separate

in the Gospels, and probably were never isolated from some communication context. They are, rather, components of speeches or of dialogue episodes on particular issues.

2. More difficult is how we can change our conceptualization to deal with the political-religious conflict, the (renewal of) Israelite tradition, and the powers and power struggle that are principal features of the Gospel stories of Jesus and of Jesus in historical context for which they are the principal sources. Since we are all virtually "socialized" into what are problematic modern Western assumptions and concepts that keep us from seeing significant features in the sources, it will take deliberate and concerted effort to think differently.

Not just in the Gospel sources but in ancient life in general, religion was inseparable from politics and economics. To allow the dimensions of reality to come back together, it may be necessary to use awkward hyphenated terms such as "political-economic-religious." Such a term is necessary to comprehend the institution of the temple-state in Jerusalem. The Temple was the center of the Judean economy, where people sent a portion of their crops as tithes and offerings, as well as the sanctuary where sacrifices were offered to God/the Most High. The high priest was, in effect, the local "head of state," appointed by the Roman governor in the first century C.E., and the priestly aristocracy was charged by the Romans with collection of the tribute paid to Rome. Caesar was not only the emperor but the "son of god," who was honored in temples and shrines throughout the Greek cities as the Lord and Savior who had brought salvation and peace and security to the world. The synagogues in which Jesus proclaimed the "kingdom of God" and exorcised demons were not (yet) religious buildings but the local village assemblies that were the form of local governance as well as gatherings for prayers.<sup>10</sup> The prayer that Jesus taught his followers focused on the people's need for bread and on their debts, that is, on economic issues.

3. The dominant conflict portrayed in the Gospels was political-economic-religious, as illustrated by the juxtaposition of the people's economic need addressed in the Lord's Prayer, on the one hand, and the combination of Caesar's demand for tribute and the high priestly demand for tithes and offering, on the other. The dominant division and conflict in ancient Roman Palestine were not between Judaism and Hellenism or between Jews and Gentiles, but between the people living in village



communities and the Roman rulers and the high priests and Herodian kings they appointed over the people.<sup>11</sup> Not only the Gospels but other sources as well, such as the histories of the wealthy Judean priest Josephus, portray the conflict between people and rulers. He includes accounts of widespread revolts and many resistance movements among the Judean and Galilean people against the Herodian and high priestly rulers as well as against Roman rule around the time of Jesus (see further chapter 3 below).

4. Contrary to modern Western individualistic assumptions, the ancient Galileans and other people among whom Jesus worked were embedded in the fundamental social forms of family and village community.<sup>12</sup> As exemplified in some of the movements included in Josephus's histories, leaders adapted "roles" or "scripts" from Israelite tradition in their relations with their followers in particular social circumstances. Inasmuch as the episodes and speeches in the Gospel traditions of Jesus were shaped by popular social memory for some decades before inclusion in the Gospels, we cannot know precisely "what Jesus really said" or "what Jesus was really like"—other modern concepts. What mattered historically was how what Jesus said and did affected people in the historical context and resulted in movements and in the Gospel traditions that those movements developed. What is significant historically, what we are after in our historical investigation, and what is important to understand is Jesus-in-movement-in-context.<sup>13</sup>

5. If Jesus was leading a renewal of Israel, as indicated in the dominant agenda and many of the component episodes of the Gospels, then he must have been not only embedded in Israelite tradition but interacting with his followers and opponents on the basis of Israelite tradition. We thus need to understand how Israelite tradition was alive and operative in the historical context and how Jesus may have built on aspects of Israelite tradition in the conflictual context of Roman Galilee and Judea.<sup>14</sup> We cannot understand the political-religious conflict that the Gospels represent Jesus as having with the rulers without appreciating how prominent conflict with rulers was in the Israelite tradition. Gaining such appreciation will require intensive critical acquaintance with Israelite tradition, not just as it appears in books later included in the Hebrew Bible, but in other Judean texts such as the *Psalms of Solomon* and key Dead Sea Scrolls. Moreover, with the recently dawning awareness that literacy was



limited mainly to scribal circles,<sup>15</sup> the present approach will also require greater sensitivity to how cultural tradition (social memory) operated differently among ordinary people from the way it was cultivated by the literate elite.<sup>16</sup>

6. Most difficult for us children of the Enlightenment may be to recognize the reality and operations of powers, particularly those that do not operate according to the canons of reason that still function as the criteria of the real. Yet, while demons or Satan or "the finger of God" may still seem quite alien to our rational-technological modern Western culture, the operations of powers in today's world have become more familiar in public discourse than they were when the assumptions and concepts of New Testament studies became standardized.

A century ago power was understood primarily in political-military terms. Europeans and European Americans had come to dominate other peoples because of their military might. In the early twentieth century, international relations were dominated by the "great powers," such as Great Britain, Germany, France, Russia, and the United States. Power was now clearly political-economic-military, generated and displayed partly in the respective empires. After World War II, the two great "superpowers," both possessing enough nuclear power to annihilate the earth, faced off in the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States came to dominate the "new world order" as the sole superpower. During the last decade, political theorists have discussed the relative effectiveness of wielding the "hard power" of military attacks or the "soft power" of diplomacy (often backed by the threat of military action).<sup>17</sup>

But power has been experienced and, often in retrospect, discussed in its other aspects as well. Psychological theorists such as Sigmund Freud drew attention to the reality of irrational drives that resisted rational personal and social control. In national and international affairs, the Nazi Party mobilized the powers of racism and fascism into the extremely destructive nationalistic political-military power in Germany, leading to the invasion of the rest of Europe and the mass slaughter of Jews in the Holocaust. Economists now discuss the power of the unregulated "free-market" economy, supposedly rational in its operations, in terms of the "irrational exuberance" that created the "housing bubble." It was the collective "greed" of the CEOs of megacorporations and the managers of "zombie banks" that led to the collapse of the globalized market economy

in 2008. We are thus now coming to recognize that in today's world there are various kinds of power, or a number of powers, usually interrelated.

With such public awareness, albeit often in retrospect, of the operations of superhuman powers in the contemporary world, it may not be such an intellectual stretch to recognize the reality and operations of some corresponding powers in ancient Galilee and Judea under Roman rule. Awareness of the recent aggressive use of "hard power" by the United States in the invasion of Iraq enables us more readily to recognize the "shock and awe" of the standard Roman military destruction, slaughter, enslavement, and public crucifixion in conquests of peoples such as the Galileans and Judeans (in the accounts of Josephus and Tacitus). Recent discussion of the irrational exuberance and corporate greed that have operated so disastrously in the capitalist market should enable us to recognize the irrational exuberance and greed of the Roman elite who built up huge fortunes during the early Roman Empire by exploiting provinces such as Judea.

In recent decades, presidents, senators, and leading social scientists at major universities have been driven by fear of "the Evil Empire." So it should not be difficult to appreciate how ancient Judean intellectuals such as the Pharisees feared that a popular prophet who was gaining a following through his exorcisms was working in the power of the demonized ancient Canaanite god Beelzebul. The military-industrial complex, nuclear tests, and the regular military exercises of "war games" during the Cold War were the political-economic and military counterpart to the ideological dualism between "the forces of freedom" and the "forces of Communism." That our own society was caught up in such an ideological dualism may help us to understand those other ancient Judean intellectuals who left the Dead Sea Scrolls, who were rehearsing for a holy war against the Romans in the confidence that the prince of light and God would be fighting on their side against Belial, the prince of darkness, who would be fighting on the Romans' side.

## **POWER, THE POWERS, AND POWER RELATIONS**

If it is possible for us to appreciate the reality of the powers that figure prominently in the Gospels and their component episodes and speeches, then it may be possible to gain a fuller appreciation of Jesus' mission in its

historical context. Considering how Jesus is dealing with the powers may enable us, among other things, to appreciate how his proclamation of the kingdom of God and his actions in manifestation of God's direct rule were inseparably political-economic-religious. Proceeding in this way will entail consideration of key aspects of power/the powers.

People's lives in the ancient world involved a plethora of powers. The heavens and sometimes the earth as well were alive with spiritual beings. Some of these, referred to variously as "spirits," "messengers (angels)," "demons" (originally a neutral or ambivalent term), or *numina*, were of lesser, sometimes local importance. The importance of the powers in ancient civilizations, however, is more readily discerned in the major powers that are usually named in sources such as ancient myths and historiography.

The significance of the major powers of Mesopotamian civilization, for example, is indicated in surviving texts such as the myth of origins *Enuma Elish* ("When on high . . ."), although this is often obscured when scholarly translators transliterate rather than translate their names. *Anu* was Sky (not "the god of the sky" or "the sky god," which are modern concepts); *Ea/Nudimmud* was Irrigation (not "the god of . . ."); *Enlil* was Storm. In Mesopotamian myths, these powers are personified superhuman forces for which we might use the abstract general concept "gods" (although the Mesopotamians evidently did not yet have such a concept). In the first stage of *Enuma Elish*, Sky has connotations of authority, and Irrigation also means something like the wisdom of rational planning and technology, as they guide the course of what appears to have been an early stage of Mesopotamian civilization. When they can no longer hold civilization together, they generate a new power, Storm, both born as king and then acclaimed by the other major powers as king; he imposes order by massive military violence. Storm is thus obviously also military King(ship). It is thus not surprising that the role and functions of Storm-Kingship are taken over by *Marduk*, the principal power of the city of Babylon in versions that reflect events in the early second millennium, when Babylon became the controlling imperial city. In Mesopotamian myths and culture, Sky(-Authority) and Storm(-Kingship) are clearly fearsome superhuman *natural* powers (but not "supernatural," a modern concept). As illustrated by Irrigation, Sky-Authority, and Storm-Kingship, however, the powers of Mesopotamian civilization were also *civilizational* powers,

with their political-economic and cultural dimensions being or having become inseparable from their function in the “natural” environment of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the developing “high” civilization of Mesopotamia.

The importance of the powers was paralleled in other ancient civilizations, such as that of the Greeks, again as discerned from their names. *Ouranos* was Sky; *Gaia* was Earth, but also Mother/Fertility; and *Kronos* was Time; these were the mysterious origins from which the major powers were generated and, by implication, from which civilization developed. From their roles and functions in Greek and Roman myths, we can see that many of the principal “gods” were natural-civilizational powers (another example would be Poseidon, closely identified with Sea but also associated with seafaring).

The people of Israelite heritage were no exception in antiquity; they also dealt with multiple powers, a fact often obscured by the theological emphasis on “monotheism.” For many if not most books in the Hebrew Bible, YHWH or “the Most High (God)” is not the only god, but the God of Israel, believed to have ultimate sovereignty over history. Indeed, in some texts YHWH/the Most High is not even the only heavenly power attending to the people of Judea/Israel. In the visions of Daniel (7:1-18; 10:2-21), for example, “the holy ones of the Most High” and the heavenly “princes” Gabriel and Michael, in particular, represent, protect, and fight for the Judeans against the “princes” of Persia and Greece as well as against the beastly Persian and Greek emperors.

By analyzing the roles and functions of the major powers of ancient civilizations, we can begin to discern some key aspects of power of various kinds, or the various interrelated powers.

1. Most fundamental, these examples may be sufficient to suggest that the principal powers of the ancient civilizations that we think of as their gods were the forces that most affected or determined their lives. However, in contrast to the term *gods/God* in modern Western society, associated mainly with a separate religious sphere of life, the powers of ancient civilizations were usually inseparably political-economic and religious-cultural and environmental-natural.

2. Insofar as the ancient world involved changing “international” affairs, the powers were not static but changing and dynamic for particular societies. Ancient societies cannot be understood as if they were

closed and constant cultures, such as "Judaism" or "Hellenism." The rapid development of elaborate honors to the Roman emperor in the cities of Greece and Asia Minor shortly after Augustus consolidated his power in the Roman Empire is a vivid example of how a civilization could encounter and enshrine a major new power. That temples dedicated to Caesar and statues of Caesar were erected side by side with those of the other "gods" in the Greek cities indicates that the Roman emperor had become one of the great powers (gods!), perhaps the principal power for those cities.

3. The reality of the powers was not a matter of whether the people chose them or believed in them. The powers were aspects or elements in the overall environment of people's lives, including any and all dimensions, often interrelated, whether natural-environmental, political-economic, or cultural-religious. Irrigation-Wisdom and Storm-Kingship were the most determinative powers in the lives of ancient Mesopotamians. The Sun, identified with pharaoh, and the annual fertilizing floodwaters of the Nile were principal powers determining the lives of ancient Egyptians. Similarly, in the Second-Temple period, the Judeans had no choice about the power of Persian imperial rule or the even more invasive power of "Greek" imperial rule. The impact of the powers, the way they were experienced, however, was mediated and shaped by culture-religion in various ways. Mesopotamians' and Egyptians' anxiety about whether the powers would send productivity or destruction each year was shaped by developing culture into fear of the powers. The intellectuals ("the wise") who produced the book of Daniel, for example, evidently experienced or knew, at least through dream-visions, that "the holy ones of the Most High" and Michael and Gabriel were defending them against the heavenly "princes" of Persia and the Greeks, heavenly powers behind or connected with the invasive Persian and Greek rule of Judea.

4. The people who held the political-religious power to mediate and manage the people's relationship with the great powers in ancient civilizations insisted that they required not just worship but service. This service took two forms in the ancient agrarian civilizations. The people were expected (required) to yield up a percentage of their crops, the produce of their labor on the land, as tithes and offerings (taxes in kind) to the powers. And the people were expected (required) to devote some of their

labor, often in construction of the “houses” of the great powers and/or great monuments to the gods and kings (e.g., the pyramids in Egypt).

But this leads to the recognition of another fundamental aspect of the operation of the powers. The powers “worked,” that is, they influenced and even determined important aspects of people’s lives, because the people collectively yielded up the produce of their labor to the control of the political-economic-religious authorities. This was thus relational power, dependent on the people’s handing over a significant portion of their labor-energy and food-energy to centralized control. The people were usually induced to this by a well-cultivated fear and/or physical coercion (or at least the threat of it).

5. Theoretically, however, people could fail or refuse to yield their crops and/or labor; they could cooperate in using resources to generate their own collective power, in direct or indirect opposition to centralized power. This is precisely what happened in the formation of the people of Israel, according to the exodus stories and the stories of early Israel led by Joshua and Deborah and other “liberators” (the *shofetim*). Led by Moses, the Hebrews, a sizable section of Pharaoh’s labor force, had withdrawn or escaped from their hard bondage (service) in Egypt. Led by Joshua and Deborah and others, the Israelites asserted their independence of the kings of the Canaanite city-states. And, if the Mosaic covenant in some form goes back to the formative period, the people of Israel established an alternative society in the hill country, guided by more cooperative and egalitarian principles. Most to the point of political-economic-religious power relations are the first and second commandments. According to the first (“you shall have no other gods”), of all the powers operative in the world, Israel is to maintain exclusive loyalty to the power that delivered them from service in Egypt. What that means more concretely is the burden of the second commandment, the scope of which has been narrowed in translations of the Bible (NRSV) to “worship,” that is, to “religion” as separate from political-economic life:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water underneath the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God. (Exod 20:4-5)

The meaning in Israel and the ancient Near Eastern context was "you shall not bow down and *serve* them!" "Idols" were not merely carved stone or wooden statues but representations of heavenly or earthly powers that the people served with their labor and produce. The people of Israel were thus commanded by their God not to yield produce and labor to (other) powers.

At the outset, we noted three prominent features of the Gospel stories: a dominant conflict that is inseparably political as well as religious, Jesus' renewal of Israel as the main agenda of the stories, and a struggle between opposing powers in the life of the people. Insofar as the Gospels are our principal sources for the historical Jesus and the traditions of Jesus cannot be understood apart from the Gospel stories of which they are components, it seems necessary to consider the conflict, the renewal of Israel, and the powers in investigating the mission of Jesus in its historical context. From the discussion above, it appears that the tradition of Israel, political-religious conflict in ancient Judea, and the broader historical context under Roman rule can all be approached and understood through analysis of the many powers that were operative.

Focusing on the powers and power relations enables us to move beyond the separation of religion and politics in standard biblical studies, which limits our understanding. It also moves beyond the simplistic alternatives of imagining that if Jesus did not foment a revolt, he was therefore politically acquiescent or innocuous. And it enables us to conceive of ways in which Jesus and those who responded to him generated power to form creative alternatives to the dominant order determined by Roman power in its various faces. When power becomes largely monopolized by a sole superpower such as imperial Rome, it seems overwhelming, and most people understandably simply acquiesce. Jesus' mission shows that for those rooted in a tradition of independence and power sharing, it may still be possible to (re)generate sufficient empowerment to formulate movements of resistance and alternatives to that superpower.