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Richard A Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003.

A young doctor who has begun to participate in the work and witness of Brentwood said to a friend, over lunch after church a few weeks ago, "I need a little more Jesus in my life." It's a wonderful way of thinking about discipleship, about being a friend and follower of Jesus, the Christ through whom God has reconnected the beloved creation to its original purpose. That reconciliation has a particularly powerful significance for human beings, the creatures to whom God entrusted the care and cultivation of the world.

But who is this Jesus for whom our friend yearns? How does this congregation, in its worship, learning, fellowship, and service, witness to the way in which the God chose to take flesh and dwell among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). That is a pressing question in this day of clashing images and understandings of this prophetic peasant rabbi.

Richard Horsley is a leading scholar among those who have taken a fresh look at Jesus' earthly life in the context of the social, political, and economic ecosystem in which his message of the Commonwealth of God was preached and taught. I use the language of 'commonwealth' rather than 'kingdom' because I think it captures in English more of the meaning and significance Jesus' teaching had in his day. William Tyndale, the first translator of the Bible into English, used this language, as do some of the translators of the seminal twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth. What Horsley finds is that Jesus was convinced that the Roman rulers and their clients among the rulers and priests of Israel had been condemned by God. His mission was to declare this reality, to heal the effects of empire, and to summon the village people among whom he worked to rebuild their social/economic relationships in ways that were equalitarian and mutually supportive.

Jesus, in the flesh, was not about individual salvation. He sought to reverse the communal disorder imposed by the dominant imperialism of his day. He did this in four interrelated ways.

1. He expelled the occupying forces that cause the disorder. He restored people to a rightful state of mind and relationships. Satan and the demons in the Gospel stories represented Roman power and possession.
2. He encouraged the people to trust in God's restorative power, seen in his work and witness, to recover from the death-dealing domination of imperial Rome.
3. He instilled hope in a hopeless situation by evoking memories of God's great acts of deliverance in Israel's past.
4. He counteracted social disintegration by reinforcing familial and social solidarity in mutual love and support in doing the will of God,

All of this was woven together in stories and acts of a renewed covenant with God that again brought a deliverance that called forth gratitude and devotion to the cause of that liberating God. His presence and teaching broke through patterns of behavior in which his compatriots blamed themselves for their suffering and fell into despair. Jesus called them into a new covenantal community that focused on the prophetic possibilities of justice, kindness, and humility. He summarizes this near the end of the book.

Jesus launched a mission not only to heal the debilitating effects of Roman military violence and economic exploitation, but also to revitalize and rebuild the people's cultural spirit and community vitality. In healing the various forms of social paralysis, he also released life forces previously turned inward in self-blame. In these manifestations of God's actions for the people, and in his offering the kingdom of God to the poor, hungry, and despairing people, Jesus instilled hope in a seemingly hopeless situation. The key to the emergence of a movement from Jesus' mission, however, was in his renewal of covenantal community, calling the people to common cooperative action to arrest the disintegration of their communities and to revitalize their cooperation and mutual support. (126-127)

Horsley concludes his book drawing the obvious parallel between the Roman Empire and the American Empire. American has co-opted many of the religious institutions of Christianity in the same way Rome has co-opted the religious institutions of Israel. If we are to seriously pray for a little more Jesus in our lives, he contends, then we have to follow Jesus into the Commonwealth of God that he preaches and models.

Lots of New Testament scholars think that Horsley and his colleagues are overstating their case that early Christian literature arises primarily from efforts to organize an international anti-imperial society based in local communities. But it is intriguing and worth a serious look.