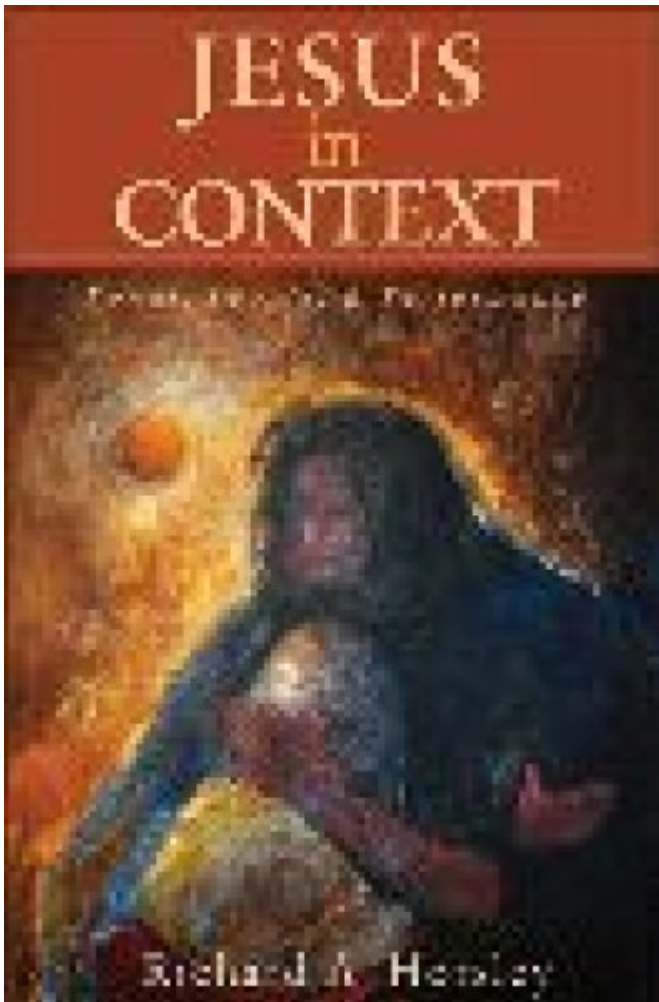


# Six books on empire

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

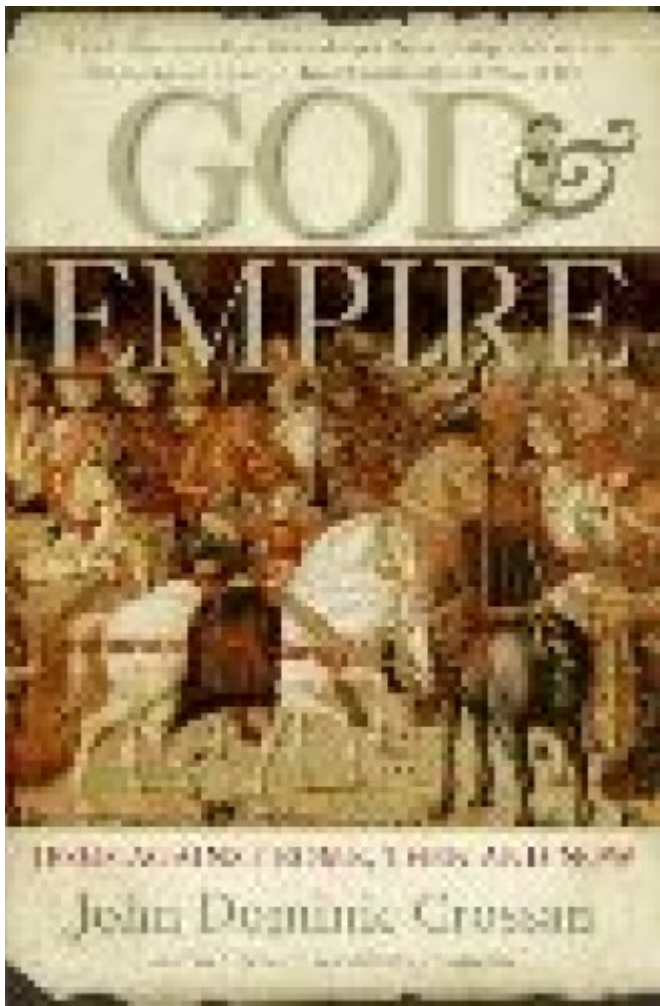
## In Review



## **Jesus in Context: Power, People, and Performance**

Richard A. Horsley

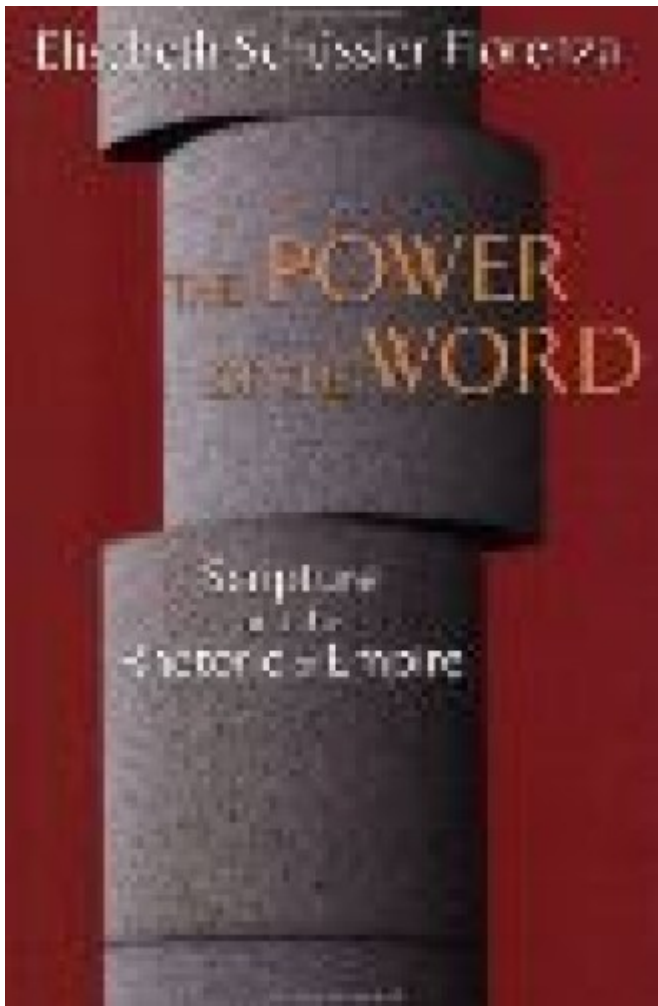
Fortress



## **God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now**

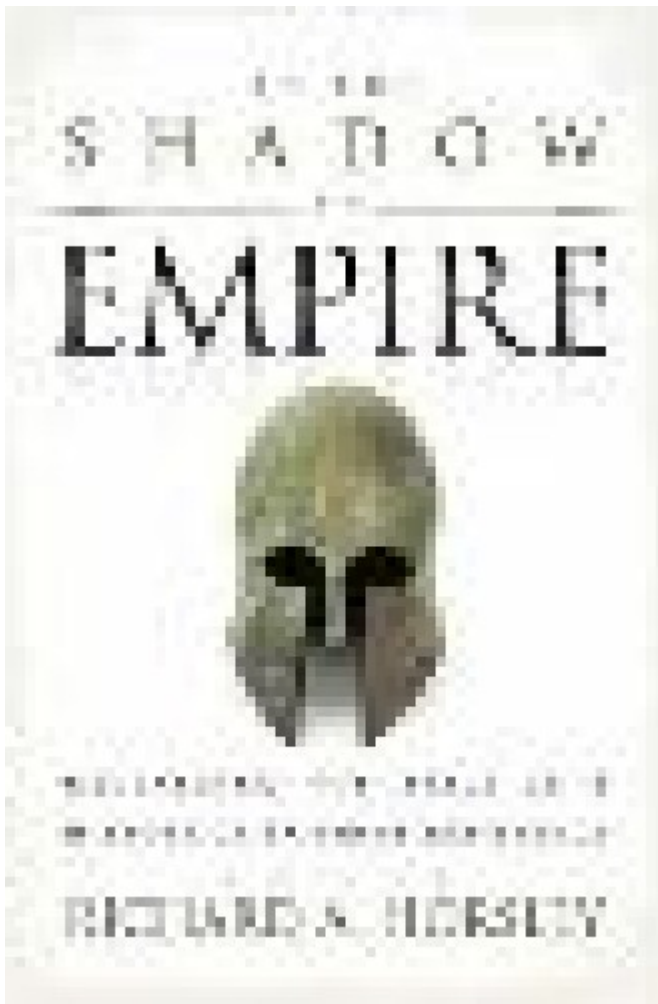
John Dominic Crossan

HarperOne



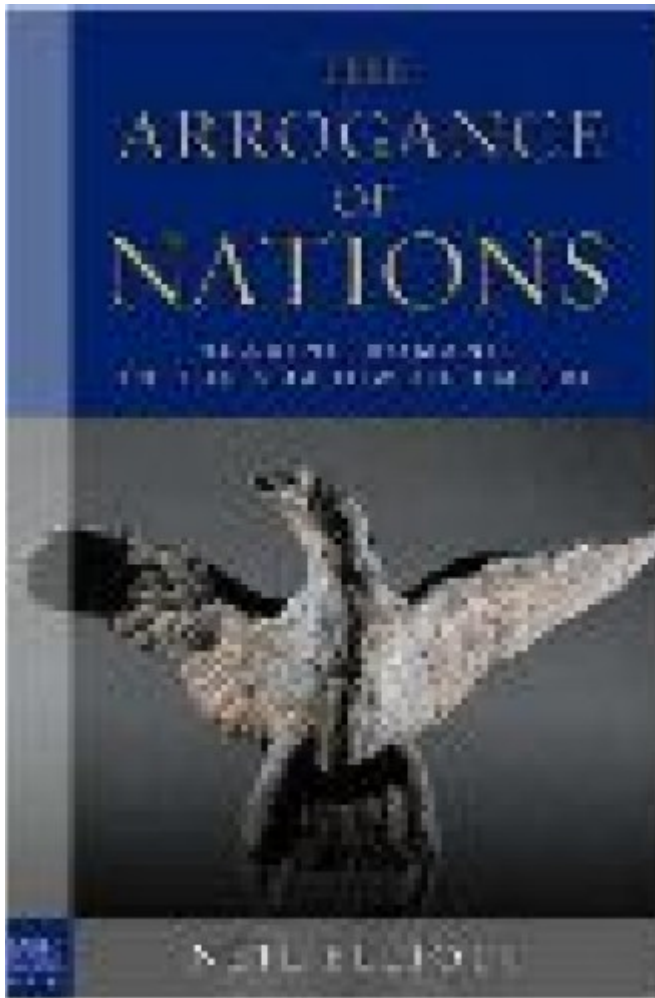
## **The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire**

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza  
Fortress



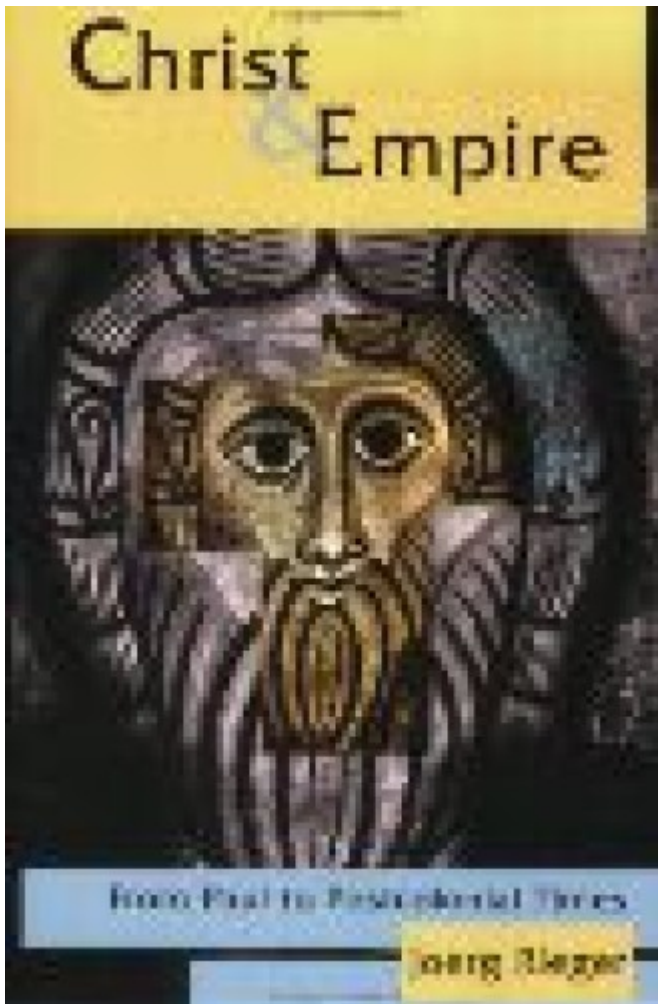
**In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance**

Richard A. Horsley, ed.  
Westminster John Knox



## **The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire**

Neil Elliott  
Fortress



## **Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times**

Joerg Rieger  
Fortress

It is a truism that the questions we ask of a biblical text to a great extent determine the outcome of our reading of it. We have long known that this is true in the case of primarily historical questions about texts, but the recent intrusion of ideological awareness into imagined historical objectivity has lately caused very different questions to be asked.

Questions of empire are now front and center for at least three reasons. First, we are now aware that advocacy, dispute and contestation are present in the text itself. Given that awareness, we are able to see that the people who formulated and treasured a text did so in contexts of empire—whether they were accommodating empire or resisting it.

Second, many scholars and interpreters now pay heed to the context of their own reading. They are aware that much interpretation in the past was unwittingly colonial— that is, it proceeded from the center of power and in the interest of power. Such interpretation, regarded at the time as objective, simply assumed the legitimacy of centrist power that could impose meaning on supposedly lesser communities. To read outside of such centrist imposition is to be postcolonial; it entails recognition of the power of empire in much conventional reading.

Third, many readers in the United States are now aware that the sociopolitical context of the church (and of scholarship) in the U.S. is empire, a setting that evokes very different renderings, some accommodating of empire, some resisting it. The work of the Bush administration made the U.S. empire crudely visible among us, but the empire has existed for a very long time even though it was not previously much recognized as a hermeneutical force.

A wondrous and compelling group of recent books addresses the theme of reading the Bible in the context of empire. My list of works is rather accidental and ad hoc, comprising books that have come across my desk and are a representative sampling of a growing literature that will challenge interpreters who have been committed to old-style historical criticism that screens out ideological force and context.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza continues her tough and discerning interpretive program in *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire*, which is an urgent, even alarming introduction to the topic. Fiorenza's thesis is that assumptions of empire are deeply inscribed in our reading, so that we inescapably read the text with a wholesale disregard of its emancipatory intent, for empire screens out the sharp edge of emancipation. Because her long-term focus is on patriarchy, she sees a radical feminist hermeneutic as an urgent alternative to an unexamined patriarchy that proceeds, by positivist assumptions, to enhance the status quo.

Fiorenza aims to transform scripture study so that it operates not from "the modern scientific paradigm" but from a "(post)modern hermeneutical or cultural paradigm" that will eventuate in a "rhetorical-political paradigm" with an "ethical-political turn." While her target is doctoral programs in which scholars tend to replicate themselves in their students, it is clear that the same issues are alive and urgent in ecclesial settings. At the end of her vigorous argument, Fiorenza suggests four factors that make deep change necessary: diversification of populations, globalization of knowledge, the artificial dichotomy between religious and theological studies, and

the growth of fundamentalism. No one can doubt that we are now in a new interpretative situation, for which the recent presidential election may be a symbol and sign. Clearly attention must be paid to this programmatic challenge that goes deep into the crisis of faith and knowledge in our society.

Answering Fiorenza's challenge is a fresh wave of New Testament scholarship that invites a more intentional contextual read. Surely the most important work on empire in New Testament study is that of Richard Horsley, who has consistently considered empire to be the context for the Jesus movement and the formation of the early church. In what is perhaps his most important and programmatic study, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Fortress, 2003), he offers an ironic construal of the Roman Empire as an agent for a disorder that stood under prophetic condemnation. Horsley identifies Galilee as a context of resistance and sees the articulation of serious Jewish faith as an act of resistance to Rome. Jesus offered an alternative to the Roman imperial order by enacting new order, the Jesus movement, which provides not only a new script that challenges the imperial rendering of reality, but also principles for common life that affirm cooperation and nonhierarchical forms of power. Thus, against the massive order of Rome, the new movement is local, operating at the level of the village.

In his recent *Jesus in Context: Power, People, and Performance*, Horsley advances his general thesis with particular reference to the "oral performance" of Mark. Making effective use of the work of Yale political scientist James C. Scott, he considers the way in which the public script serves the interests of domination. The early gospel traditions emerged in a village culture—that is, in villages that were the matrix for resistance to the Roman Empire. Horsley reads Jesus' teachings and the gospel tradition as articulations of a hidden script, the recital of which was itself a powerful act of resistance.

As a follow-up to his own work, Horsley has edited a collection titled *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*. The collection includes essays by leading interpreters of empire as context, among them Norman Gottwald, Jon Berquist, John Dominic Crossan, Neil Elliott and this reviewer. It is clear that this focus both permits and requires a drastic rereading of the text; our older readings stand exposed as excessively innocent. We are left to ponder to what extent that innocence has been intentional, though perhaps not conscious. Even as ancient Jews and early Christians were tempted to cooperate and sometimes collude with the empire, so are we as belated interpreters; this is a central point in Fio



renza's work.

Crossan has contributed significantly to the discussion. In *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* he explores, in broad sweep, the lethal quality of life amid empire. He presents Rome as a carrier of a "civilization" that he exposit as cage, trap and protection. Taking in a great deal of territory, he traces the radicality of a biblical ethic and considers the tension between distributive justice and retributive justice in the Old Testament. With those two backdrops—Rome and ambiguous power in ancient Israel—Crossan turns to Jesus, to the witness of Paul as an alternative, and finally to the significance of apocalyptic thought. Crossan's agile mind teems with all sorts of connections to contemporaneity.

Alongside the work of Horsley and Crossan is Neil Elliott's remarkable reread of the book of Romans, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*. This exposition occurs amid a general fresh reading of the epistle out beyond the reductionist categories of conventional "Lutheran" exegesis. But even given that general orientation in Romans scholarship, Elliott moves in a distinct direction, proposing that the letter to the Romans is a Christian polemic against emperor worship and that it offers an alternative construal of reality centered in Jesus.

There is always a specific community of faith seeking to sustain a local identity, and there is always the context of empire. Because both empire and faith community persist in the narration of Judaism and Christianity, the interface with empire that is so clear in the Old Testament and so palpable in the New is readily traced into the history of the church. Joerg Rieger reflects in discerning ways on this problematic interface. His *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* is a series of episodic reflections on the theological tradition of the church. In it Rieger takes up representative figures from Paul and the formulators of Chalcedon to Gustav Aulén and Matthew Fox in our own time. He perceptively considers the context of each original Christian thinker and the way in which categories of empire permeate that thinker's work.

Thus, for example, he offers what I find to be a powerfully illuminating argument regarding Anselm and his notorious "satisfaction theory." Anselm lived in a feudal society in which lords required satisfaction from serfs for any affront so they could save face and maintain their social standing. In this read Anselm's satisfaction is not the appeasement of holy anger but the just due owed to God as the feudal lord. Sin

is a violation of the Lord's honor, and the offending serf must make amends. Obviously such a reading is plausible only if one takes into account a hierarchical ordering of social power in which every player must render an apt performance in order to maintain the wholeness and symmetry of the structure. Clearly popular forms of Anselm's "theory of atonement" have completely neglected the social fabric from which Anselm drew his interpretive categories.

Rieger has an acute sense of the relation between context and interpretation, but he also finds that there is a theological surplus to the interpretive offer that goes well beyond contextual explanation. That is, even as practitioners and beneficiaries of empire, these representative figures are serious and passionate believers who find ways to witness to the truth of Christ. Some times it seems that Rieger strains a bit to make the case for surplus, but his categories nonetheless help us observe the ongoing contest between the force of empire and the claims of the gospel.

Though these writers clearly have a contemporary agenda in purview, their studies are grounded in good research. The easy alliance of church and state (or church and corporation) is not sustainable in the United States. It matters now, in the face of military consumerism, whether the church can maintain a credible identity—not in order to protect itself but in order to speak an authoritative word about the world that will not otherwise be spoken. It is mind-boggling that for a very long time we have been so inured to empire that we did not notice. The wake-up call that these writers issue reminds us, in the words of theologian Michael Budde, that returning the church to its proper vocation "requires us to refuse the rituals of obedience and allegiance that states and similar institutions demand."