

## RESISTING and IMITATING THE EMPIRE: IMPERIAL PARADIGMS IN TWO MATTHEAN PARABLES

### **Theme: Reading Matthew's parable.**

I am always fascinated to find resource that helps read scripture texts especially parables in political, social, economical, and cultural context it was written or said. This article describes the socio-political background of Jesus' conflict with chief priest and scribes as follows:

**Rome frequently ruled in alliance with local elites such as landowners, priest, and scribes. These allied groups shaped a society to promote and protect their mutual interests at the expense of the remaining taxable 95% of society.**

**Then it seems reasonable to understand Matthew's presentation of Jesus' conflicts with the Jerusalem-centered, temple-based chief priest and scribes as concerning not narrowly "religious issues" but social visions, societal structures and practices, arrangement of power, and the theological sanctions invoked to maintain or challenge society under Rome's imperial control.**

*In this context, Jesus collides with a socio-political system that benefits the small ruling elite.* He would challenge us not to be comfortable in our empire.

### **For example; the parable in Matthew 18 : 23-35**

Like most people, I understood the parable to urge forgiveness and to mean that knowing God's forgiveness in the parable urges us to forgive others.

**Who is the king then here?** We have been interpreting him to be God.

The noun "king" commonly denotes Rome's emperors, the most central, important, and powerful figure in the imperial world. The use of this image suggests that the key to the parable lies in contrasts and opposites, not similarities to God.

So the article interprets the king in the text is not God but a worldly King.

After contrast has been drawn between God's ways and self-enriching king, suddenly a similarity is established. It means that here are accountability and punitive consequences for ignoring God's will. The parable calls us to do the same.

**The article compares the human empire and God's empire. I could relate some aspects of "American Empire" to human empire described in the article. This comparison helps me to hear God's calling to his mission of transforming our current empire:**

**Whereas empires like Rome's removed food from the vast (predominantly peasant) majority by taxation and tribute for the benefit of the elite,**

**Jesus provides abundant food in anticipation of the establishment of God's just reign marked by plentiful food and access to land resources (Matt. 5:5; 12:1-8, 14:13-21; 15:32-39; cf. Isa. 25:6).**

**Whereas empires like Rome's render people sick through deprivation of resources and intimidation,**

**Jesus provides healing in anticipation of the establishment of God's just reign (cf. Isa. 35:5-6).**

**Whereas an empire like Rome's guards its hierarchy closely and expresses it in meal practices that reinforces social status by order of seating, quality and quantity of food, and quality of eating utensils,**

**Jesus uses meals to break down hierarchy and include those marginalized by imperial society (Matt. 9:9-13).**

**The gospel presents a sharp critique of this imperial paradigm. the gospel contrasts imperial status quo and contrasts its way with God's**

The opening chapters provide an immediate, harsh, uncompromising disclosure of, and verdict on, Roman imperial society and any society organized for similar ends.

**Jesus inhabits** a world peopled by the sick, the maimed, the hungry, the powerless. He demonstrates God's empire, an alternative order marked by healing, exorcisms, feedings, blessing, inclusion, mercy, justice, and service.

**In conclusion**, readers are led to be suspicious of empire and their rules.

They typically bring destruction on people. Jesus' bold, alternative social vision means inevitable – ultimately fatal – conflict with, and resistance from, the imperial order because the empire always strikes back. **I hear the voice of God demanding me to wake up in the prison of the empire.**