

The Non-Negotiable Price of Sanity

Walter Brueggemann

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Jesus of course was not born in a vacuum, nor did he live in a vacuum. Clearly his life is bounded by the ambitious, absolutist claims of “Caesar,” a metaphor of the extreme pretensions of human power. Thus at his birth,

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus...(Luke 2:1)¹

At his death, the testimony against him went like this:

If you release this man, you are no friend of Caesar. Everyone who claims to be a king sets himself against Caesar...We have no king but Caesar.
(John 19:12, 15)

Eventually Jesus, in his rule, must come to terms with Caesar and his power. Or rather, Caesar and his power must come to terms with Jesus and his rule.

My difficult assignment in what follows is a reflection not on *Jesus and Caesar*, but on what a pastor in the U.S. Church may say about the political-economic-military hegemony of the U.S. as the last, now unbridled superpower. The question is an odd one in Advent, because we do not usually pose such great public issues at this season in the Church. The topic has one other oddity for me, namely, that as an Old Testament teacher, I must transpose the theme into Old Testament categories. I do so by suggesting that in the Old Testament, it is Nebuchadnezzar the Babylonian who is a cipher for absolute human pretensions to power and authority. The reader will only need to be agile enough to move back and forth among *Nebuchadnezzar*, *Caesar*, and *U.S. hegemony* in order to see that evangelical proclamation of the coming Christ child is indeed vis-à-vis big power questions. The big power questions are available because the birth of Christ is always just as “a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.” I cite three Nebuchadnezzar texts that readily transpose into our own preaching possibility.

I.

The Bible can entertain the thought that *God will align God's self with a superpower (Nebuchadnezzar, Caesar) on a provisional basis, in order to accomplish a particular task*. The Bible inevitably struggles with the claim that *divine purpose* and *human agency* may be directly connected. It struggles, moreover, with how to speak about that connection. In prophetic discourse, the performance of the connection is in simple, direct, “supernatural” talk, though sometimes the rhetoric is more cagey, as when it is said that God “stirs up” human agents. Such a verb makes a claim, but without any exact “cause-effect” explanatory substance.

In the particular case I cited of divine purpose through human agency, Jeremiah can speak twice of Nebuchadnezzar as *chosen servant, instrument, and vehicle* of divine purpose:

I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, *my servant*, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. (Jer 25:9)

* * *

Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, *my servant*, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. (Jer 27:6)

In this particular case, the divine purpose that is to be enacted is the destruction of Jerusalem, a recalcitrant city that is the target of divine wrath. In this discourse, the “Caesar” of Babylon is dispatched to do the deed (see 2 Kgs 24:10-17; 25:8-21). Now of course, such an incursion by the Babylonians can be completely understood in terms of *realpolitik* without reverence to divine purpose. But that would miss the point of it all, for in prophetic discourse it is divine purpose rather than human agency that is the key issue.

The two verses I have cited from Jeremiah voice a remarkable, even treasonable utterance in ancient Israel, namely, that YHWH could recruit a foreign power to move destructively against God’s own people. Thus the problematic of this provisional alliance between YHWH and Babylon is in at least two dimensions, first that YHWH was able to recruit a foreign power and second, that the purpose is judgment of God’s own people.

Mutatis mutandis, one could imagine prophetic discourse to make a contemporary claim that the God who governs public life has aligned God’s own self with the last superpower (the United States), in order to accomplish a particular task, namely, the “regime change” in Iraq. Indeed, the feverish patriotic rhetoric of war comes close to that affirmation. That parallel to ancient prophetic discourse, however, misses an acute point; in Jeremiah, it is a dispatch of an enemy force *against us*, whereas in our preferred rhetoric it is a dispatch *of us* against others.

In order to appropriate the radical prophetic rhetoric of “against us,” one might, in parallel to Jeremiah, rather say that the God of history “stirred up” Osama Bin Laden as a provisional tool against the recalcitrant United States. Of course I know of no prophetic figure who wants to say that, and I know of no church where it might be said. The analogue is worth notice in order to recognize the extreme character of prophetic discourse that permits YHWH to enter into odd alliances, the sort of connection we ourselves would find improbable and scandalous. The recruitment of odd agents “against us” is simply what Isaiah means by God’s “alien work”:

For the Lord will rise up as on Mount Perazim,
he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon;
to do his deed—*strange is his deed!*
and to work his work—*alien is his work!* (Isa 28:21)

II.

The Bible can entertain the thought that *God’s alliance with a superpower is at best provisional and can be sustained only as long as the superpower*

conforms to the will and purpose of God. In the rhetoric of Jeremiah, there is no doubt that God is allied with Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed, the entire book of Jeremiah is permeated with pro-Babylonian sentiments, with the conviction that YHWH wills a Babylonian onslaught against Jerusalem in the same that easy religious rhetoric can now claim that God wills the U.S. devastation of Baghdad. And no doubt the ideologues around Nebuchadnezzar imagined that divine destiny assured Babylonian preeminence for all imaginable time to come, indeed to perpetuity.

But of course it did not happen that way and it does not happen that way; inescapably singular superpower hegemony turns out to be an unsustainable fifteen minutes of fame as every superpower learns late.² In the case of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 B.C.E. and within a dozen years it was all over for Babylon. It was all over, because Persia (Iran) from the East became the new superpower to last until the rise of Alexander the Great. But if the superpower that is “my servant” promptly goes into demise, then prophetic rhetoric must speak in a new mode.

That new mode that takes into account the demise of “my servant, Babylon” makes clear that the alignment of YHWH with the superpower is provisional. The prophetic rhetoric of demise takes two forms. One is the claim that YHWH has entered into a new alliance, this time with Cyrus the Persian who now, by divine instigation, will displace Babylon. In this usage, the verb “stir up” is paramount:

For I am going to stir up and bring against Babylon a company of great nations from the land of the north; and they shall array themselves against her; from there she shall be taken. Their arrows are like the arrows of a skilled warrior who does not return empty-handed. (Jer 50:9)

* * *

Thus says the Lord:

I am going to stir up a destructive wind
against Babylon
and against the inhabitants of Lebqamai. (Jer 51:1)

* * *

Who has roused a victor from the east,
summoned him to his service?
He delivers up nations to him,
and tramples kings under foot;
he makes them like dust with his sword,
like driven stubble with his bow. (Isa 41:2)

* * *

I stirred up one from the north, and he has come,
from the rising of the sun he was summoned by name.
He shall trample on rulers as on mortar,
as the potter treads clay. (Isa 41:25)

As YHWH had “stirred up” Nebuchadnezzar in the first instant, so now a second “stirring up” of Cyrus causes new political arrangements throughout the known world.

It is, however, the second mode of rhetoric that here concerns us. In Isaiah 47, in the next generation after Jeremiah, the prophetic poet anticipates the demise of Babylon at the hands of Cyrus...at the behest of YHWH. In this poetry, it is *unbridled arrogance* that imagines *imperial autonomy* that is the cause of the failure of Babylon. The glorious empire—the last superpower—is deconstructed in poetic imagination:

Come down and sit in the dust,
 virgin daughter Babylon!
Sit on the ground without a throne,
 daughter Chaldea!
For you shall no more be called tender and delicate.
Take the millstones and grind meal,
 remove your veil,
strip off your robe, uncover your legs,
 pass through the rivers.
Your nakedness shall be uncovered,
 and your shame shall be seen. (Isa 47:1-3a)

The poet places in the mouth of Babylon repeated statements of imagined autonomy that needs give account to no holy ultimacy:

You said, "I shall be mistress forever,"
 so that you did not lay these things to heart
 or remember their end. (Isa 47:7)
 * * *
Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures,
 who sit securely,
who say in your heart,
 "I am, and there is no one besides me;
I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children"—
both these things shall come upon you
 in a moment, in one day:
the loss of children and widowhood
 shall come upon you in full measure,
in spite of your many sorceries
 and the great power of your enchantments. (Isa 47:8)
 * * *
No one sees me.
I am, and there is no one besides me. (Isa 47:10)

Perhaps such imagined autonomy is inescapable in a superpower that goes from strength to strength until there is no more challenge or competition. It is clear in that ancient world that Babylonian power was unchecked; Nebuchadnezzar could do with impunity whatever he wanted.

But of course, it is the vocation of prophetic imagination to assert that because of holy governance such autonomy is a self-destructive illusion. The alliance YHWH

has made with Nebuchadnezzar is a real one that brings honor and victory to Babylon. But the alliance is in order to accomplish divine purpose; when Babylon moves away from that divine purpose, hegemony will fail abruptly. So affirms prophetic faith!

In Isaiah 47:6, the poet offers a succinct summary of prophetic imagination concerning ambitious world power:

a) YHWH is angry with YHWH's own chosen people. That of course is the primary burden of much prophetic rhetoric; Israel has violated covenant with YHWH and must be punished.

b) While divine wrath is supernatural in its magnitude, the punishment that is to happen is "natural." It takes place through historical modes. YHWH gives Israel "into the hand" (power) of the superpower. The Babylonian onslaught of Jerusalem is at divine behest! What can be seen is simply Babylonian expansionism. What is uttered by the prophets is the divine instigation of that expansionist policy.

c) But then: You showed no mercy! Now the poet arrives at the culminating message. Nebuchadnezzar was given a free hand against Babylon and enacted that free hand with severity and cruelty. In doing so, Nebuchadnezzar misunderstood his mandate and imagined that he was completely free with his "free hand," to do what he wanted with Jerusalem.

But "no," says the poet. No, a superpower is not given such freedom. No, a superpower is not autonomous in the practice of power. No, the world is not open for any barbarism we may choose. It turns out that Nebuchadnezzar was expected, by the very God who had dispatched him, to *show mercy* upon Jerusalem, the very city he was mandated to punish.

Of course nothing was said earlier to Babylon about divine mercy. Of course military adventurism cannot be "tainted" by mercy. Of course no imperial power thinks or calculates in terms of mercy. Of course! Except...so says the prophet...mercy is the intransigent divine curb on all imperial autonomy, a curb that is intrinsic to the processes of practical politics, intrinsic because it is the ultimate will of the creator God.

I would imagine Nebuchadnezzar replied to this indictment defiantly and defensively, "You never said anything about mercy." I would imagine, moreover, the Holy One saying back to the king, "You should have known!" You should have known because of Sinai; you should have known because of the large covenant with Noah; you should have known because you have seen that the flesh of babies is not amenable to bayonets, because the vulnerability of women is not available for military barbarism, and because you yourself, for all of your macho force, shrink from pain that comes to your body. You should have known because God is God, the God whose wont it is always to who mercy.³ And because you did not know what you should have known,

evil shall come upon you,
 which you cannot charm away;
disaster shall fall upon you,
 which you will not be able to ward off;
and ruin shall come on you suddenly,
 of which you know nothing. (Isa 47:11)

Mutatis mutandis, we may entertain the conviction that God has “dispatched” the United States to do a divine deed. Perhaps. But even so, the overriding reality of such a mandate is mercy; and when mercy is not shown, a superpower (Caesar) that takes itself with ultimate seriousness and freedom will—soon or late—collide with the divine purpose that is mercy. Any superpower inured in *arrogance* that bespeaks *brutality* is not sustainable!

III.

The Bible can entertain the thought that *superpowers that imagine arrogant autonomy eventually self-destruct in insanity and recover sanity only by submissive doxology*. I cite the late reflective narrative of Daniel 4 that continues to ponder Nebuchadnezzar who has become a metaphor for would-be absolute worldly power.

This narrative features a confrontation between Nebuchadnezzar, quintessential absolute world power, and Daniel, the wise, endangered Jew. It takes little imagination to transpose that encounter into one between Caesar and Jesus. It takes a bit more imagination to transpose that meeting into an exchange between U.S. hegemonic power and the Christian preacher. No doubt the narrative, in all of its particularity, is a model of *truth speaking to power*. And if one were to be caught in such a conversation, we may ask what should truth say to power!

Here Daniel interprets the dream of Nebuchadnezzar. The dream may be only a narrative device for what follows. But it may also be a recognition that absolute power is inescapably haunted by misgivings and precariousness, for every absolute power is inherently edgy in its awareness of fragility. Daniel’s interpretation gives force and specificity to the misgivings hosted by arrogant power. The reason for the misgiving, says he, is that,

the Most High God has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and gives it to whom he will. (Dan 4:25)

The deployment of sovereignty is at the behest of the Most High. It is the Most High God who gives it and who can take it back. Which means, of course, that imagined ultimacy is an illusion; worldly power is held only at the will of YHWH. Nebuchadnezzar’s power is at best penultimate, subject to revision and to termination.

The punishment for imagined autonomy is the deconstruction of power and glory into shame, failure, and humiliation:

You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the wild animals. You shall be made to eat grass like oxen, you shall be bathed with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you. (Dan 4:25)

And sure enough, it happened as the dream anticipated. No one would have thought that this absolute power would be promptly reduced to grotesqueness, as a voice beyond his control declared:

While the words were still in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven: "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: The kingdom has departed from you! You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the animals of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like oxen, and seven times shall pass over you, until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and gives it to whom he will." (Dan 4:31-32)

The voice is promptly matched by narrative reality:

Immediately the sentence was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven away from human society, ate grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, until his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers and his nails became like birds' claws. (Dan 4:33)

Now of course, this is a fantasy narrative not to be read literally. It is not an analysis of *Real Politick*. It is rather a brooding after the inescapable reality that worldly power lives in the hidden world of Holy Governance. Nebuchadnezzar did not know that when he had sent his armies against Jerusalem. And Caesar did not know, when he issued a decree that "all the world should be registered." And surely in the contemporary onslaught in Iraq, the U.S. government had given little thought that its power lives in the hidden world of divine mercy. The outcome, so says the narrative, is reduction to bestiality and grossness, barbarism, cruelty, and the loss of humanness. The narrative does not say insanity, but the depiction is of one who has gone crazy in self-regard.

And then in verse 34, the narrative turns:

When that period was over, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me. (Dan 4:34)

His reason returned! Which means that his reason had been lost! It had been lost in arrogance that produced brutality. The good news for Nebuchadnezzar—and for everyone made insane by power—is that the story turns. It is possible to get over such craziness! It is possible to return to the proper limits of penultimacy in which human power is held in acknowledgement of the curbing power of divine mercy. It is possible to repent of arrogance, though perhaps only through a season of humiliation.

Now Nebuchadnezzar sings to the Most High, the one who has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals and who gives it to whom he will. Nebuchadnezzar sings a doxology, which means that he engages in an act of ceding ultimacy from himself to the God of all mercy. Doxology is indeed a political act of submission and surrender to the one who properly receives our attestation of ultimacy. Nebuchadnezzar sings:

I blessed the Most High,
and praised and honored the one who lives forever.
For his sovereignty is an everlasting sovereignty,

and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.
All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does what he wills with the host of heaven
and the inhabitants of the earth.
There is no one who can stay his hand
or say to him, "What are you doing?" (Dan 4:34-35)

The outcome is that, I was re-established over my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. (Dan 4:36) The great usurper has come to his senses, and in the end extols the king of heaven,

For all his works are truth,
and his ways are justice;
and he is able to bring low
those who walk in pride. (Dan 4:37)

Now rule is marked by trust and justice, exact alternatives to Nebuchadnezzar's erstwhile arrogant practice of deception and exploitation. This is not only theological submission; it is also a reversal of policy. For the one who has power is brought low, low enough to see clearly his proper destiny and vocation in a world governed beyond him.

Mutatis mutandis, it is not difficult to see that U.S. imperialism has now gone insane, drunk with self-congratulatory power, intoxicated with self-regard, out of touch with Holy Reality. The news is that this need not be the fate of this superpower, for reason might return, reason that is the capacity to "come down where you ought to be." That of course can only happen if there are witnesses to God who has sovereignty and gives it to whom he will. The narrative makes it possible to see the distance, slippage, and freedom between divine purpose and human agency, a connection that is always provisional, that depends upon conformity to the merciful purpose of God, and that requires submissive doxology matched by policy.

IV.

Now of course I have strayed from the assignment given by my editor, because I had to transpose the theme into the Old Testament and of course I have departed somewhat from a sustained attentiveness to "Caesar" in the career of Jesus. Nonetheless I believe the issue of Nebuchadnezzar, Caesar, and U.S. hegemony are all of a piece, all seduced to imagined autonomy.

I am aware that in most of our churches even to raise these issues is extremely hazardous. But there is almost no one else except pastors to raise these urgent matters. They do not need to be raised directly or in inflammatory ways. They can be surfaced around good Calvinist themes of the *hiddenness of divine sovereignty*, of the *graciousness of God over the public process*, and the *deathly lure of idolatry*. It is not necessary that the pastor should startle or offend the congregation. It is enough, in my judgment, that the congregation should be haunted in dis-ease about aggressive American imperialism and its seductive power. The ground is ripe among us for such

haunting, given the awareness among us that is pervasive because of the Iraqi prison crisis. But how shall the Church be haunted without texts? And how shall the Church have texts that haunt unless the preacher offers them?

It is more than a little ironic that when Nebuchadnezzar asks Daniel for advice on redress, Daniel answers in a way that is characteristically Jewish:

Therefore, O king, may my counsel be acceptable to you: atone for your sins with righteousness, and your iniquities with *mercy to the oppressed*, so that your prosperity may be prolonged. (Dan 4:27)

It sounds like Daniel had been reading 2 Isaiah. But then, that is what poetic, imaginative pastoral voices continue to do. They continue to read texts that haunt and astonish and transform. And when there are enough such texts available, we may from time to time recover our sanity!

Notes

1. The NRSV prefers to translate "Emperor" rather than "Caesar," but the point is the same.
2. See the notorious claims for empire by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
3. I intend this to be an allusion to the familiar cadence of the *Book of Common Prayer*, though the precise collect is lost to me at the moment.