EMPIRES DO WHAT EMPIRES DO

Posted on May 23, 2022 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

I would argue that there is a theme running through Scripture which pits human empires against God and his people. Empire, in which one group of people seeks to dominate and impose themselves on others is one way in which humanity's rebellion against God is expressed. We see this in an embryonic form in the Babylon narrative, where people seek to concentrate in one city speaking one language, rather than spreading across the globe as God had commanded.

Through the Old Testament, we see various empires rising up and seeking to subdue and dominate the people of Israel. This continued in the inter-testamental period with the rise of Alexander's empire and the subsequent domination of Israel and the desecration of the Temple. Two broad themes run through the Old Testament encounter with empires. The first is that God's people are repeatedly rebuked for seeking their security under the wings of powerful empires, rather than finding it in their God. The second is that - powerful as they are - empires are still tools in God's hands, though this does not excuse their faults.

The entire New Testament is set against the background of the Roman Empire. There are allusions to it through the Gospels and Letters and into Revelation. The claim that Jesus is Lord, is a clear counterpoint to the way that Augustus Caesar was addressed and regarded.

One of the features of Empire is the way in which they impose their language and culture on others. This is in direct opposition to the way in which authentic Christianity is worked out in diverse languages and cultures. Empire seeks to dominate and to impose uniformity, whereas the gospel reconciles us in our diversity. It is very significant that on the day of Pentecost, people were given the ability to understand Peter's message in their own languages rather than all being given the ability to understand Aramaic, or whatever language he was speaking in.

I was prompted to write down these thoughts after reading that Russian authorities had started to burn Ukrainian language books and to impose Russian language teaching in the territories that they have occupied over the last few months. Empires do, what empires do; it's a story as old as time.