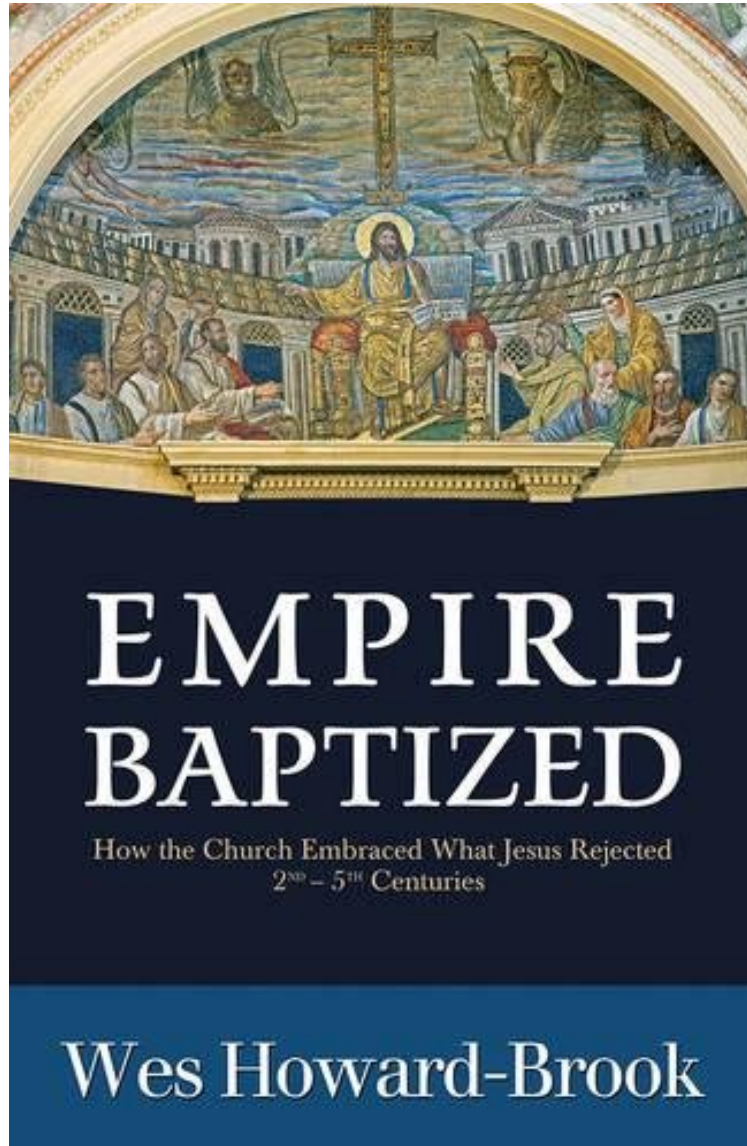


[Library ebook] Empire Baptized: How the Church Embraced What Jesus Rejected (Second-Fifth Centuries)

Empire Baptized: How the Church Embraced What Jesus Rejected (Second-Fifth Centuries)

Wes Howard-Brook

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Wes Howard-Brook : Empire Baptized: How the Church Embraced What Jesus Rejected (Second-Fifth Centuries) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Empire Baptized: How the Church Embraced What Jesus Rejected (Second-Fifth Centuries):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A Christianity Immersed in EmpireBy James MatichukIt is

fashionable, in some theological circles, to speak of the Constantinian compromise. Constantine's victory (and conversion?) in 312 CE issued in an era of religious freedom for Christians which they previously had not enjoyed. But it also started the ball rolling in terms of the centralizing of the power of the bishops, and eventually Rome in the West, and led to doctrinal compromises as the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic church sought to accommodate itself to the demands of Empire. Wes Howard-Brook does not doubt that this trajectory toward Empire replaced the spirituality and prophetic critique of Jesus in the life of the Church. His previous book, *Come Out My People!* (Orbis, 2010), was a reading of the biblical narrative which contrasted Jesus liberationist movement—the religion of Creation called the Kingdom of God—with the religion of Empire—imperial readings of the Bible which wink at (state supported) violence and shave off Jesus radical, prophetic edge. However, Howard-Brook doesn't envision this shift happening within Constantine's lifetime or afterward but sees the genesis much earlier. In *Empire Baptized* (Orbis, 2016), he traces the shift toward Empire (and creation abstracting/denying spirituality) developed in the writings of Christian thinkers in the 2nd to 5th centuries and the ways their thought still hold sway today. In his first chapter, Howard-Brook provides an overview of the Roman imperial context, its social and economic structures and religious life. In the next six chapters, he examines how the Christian movement developed along imperial lines, focusing his study on the cities of Alexandria and Carthage, Greek and Latin centers of Christian thought. Chapter two looks at these cities' histories and their key Christians in the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Centuries. In chapter three, Howard-Brook describes how the developing biblical hermeneutic of the Fathers, while rejecting Marcion and Gnostic readings, embraced a Neo-Platonism which abstracted physical life. This had the effect of weakening Jesus' political and social critiques. Speaking of Origen, who held sway over the developing Biblical hermeneutic both East and West, Howard-Brook writes, Origen (and the church around him) proclaims a gospel about a soul whose fate was separate from the body. Could a Jewish man like Jesus even understand what it meant? With this claim, any Christian concern for the human body, for the physical creation, and for the whole social-economic structure of society is put aside in favor of the question of the soul's fate in the afterlife (88). The rest of the book traces how Christian writers like Tertullian, Clement, Origen, Cyprian, Athanasius, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine continued to abstract the Christian life from creation and physical life, while at the same time imbibing the cultural values of Empire (evidenced by a misogyny which paralleled Roman cultural values and unwillingness to challenge the status-quo). Constantine does have a significant impact on the church, as bishops began to adopt ceremonies and raiments of the imperial court and revise their image of Christ along royal lines (i.e. icons of Christ as Lawgiver and Judge sitting on a jeweled throne) (198). Howard-Brook does his homework and his book is thoroughly researched. Yet he does not offer here, a sympathetic reading of the Church Fathers (their voices most often mediated through secondary sources). He frequently faults the Fathers for the way they catered toward elites and the how they adapted their theology to fit their own circumstance (such as Jerome's preaching against riches while assigning a higher place in the afterlife to the Christian scholar, 247). Surprisingly, he does end up saying nice things about Augustine, the frequent whipping boy of all that is wrong in Western Theology. He describes him as a theologian who took a path of moderation between the extremes promoted by others in his context (265), though of course, he goes on to fault him for his handling of the Donatists, his promotion of state-sponsored violence, and Pelagius. I enjoyed this book and I think Howard-Brook offers an important perspective on the development of Christian doctrine. Jesus did challenge the kingdoms of this Age in the way that later generations of Christians did not. There is a trajectory toward Empire, Neo-Platonism, and the status-quo in Church history. However, by profiling particular thinkers, through particular lenses, he is able to construct his narrative and parse the evidence in a certain way. He doesn't highlight prophetic and counter voices to Empire throughout this period or pastoral aspects of his chief interlocutors. I wished at times he applied a more of a generous reading of the patristic period, though I appreciate the critique he levels and think it is substantive. I give this five stars. Notice of Material Connection: I received this book from SpeakEasy in exchange for my honest review. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. He does not go at all easily on his subjects so the book rigorously roots out ...By Bill

Before you pick up *Empire Baptized* it is important to know that it is really a sequel to Wes Howard-Brook's *Come out My People!: God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond*. This does not mean that you will have to read *Come out My People!* in order to understand or appreciate *Empire Baptized*. Howard-Brook provides a helpful summary of his necessary arguments in the introduction but it does mean that you will most likely want to read *Come out My People!* by the time you finish *Empire Baptized*. Most important for the purpose of reviewing the book, however, is Howard-Brook's big thesis: that the history of Jesus, Jesus' precursors, and Jesus' followers up through the present day can be modeled as a tension between what the author calls religion of empire and the religion of creation. This book is, effectively, a strong attempt to trace the development of that tension out of the first century and the writing of the Bible, up through the "Constantinian moment" wherein the Church largely found a way to make peace with the religion of empire and learned to serve more often than call out the Empires of the day. And taking that as the core project of the book, I want to say that Howard-Brook succeeds powerfully. In the text, after meticulously setting up the theological, cultural, and political landscape of the church in the 2nd century the author (his analysis of Philo of Alexandria is particularly good) works through the "whose who" of the early church fathers (Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, Eusebius, Athanasius, Jerome, Ambrose, and finally Augustine) centering on North Africa and

Alexandria, situates them effectively within their own differing historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, and then applies his model to much of their work, identifying the ways in which they (most often) capitulate to the religion of empire or insist on the religion of creation. He does not go at all easily on his subjects so the book rigorously roots out evidences of capitulation to convenience, security, and apparent desire for acclaim in the authors. This is not a book to strengthen your love of the patristics. If I have a critique of the book it has to do with structure and language. Howard-Brook takes a solidly scholarly approach to his language and argument and does so effectively. At the same time, there are ways in which his treatment of the subject is a little more on the popular than the scholarly level. He has clearly done the relevant research and acknowledges contemporary debates and contentious issues, however he does not usually explain why he finds a particular position compelling which leaves the book open to the charge (I think it would be a false charge) that he has chosen those conclusions which are most conducive to his thesis rather than those which recommend themselves on their merits. Of course the only alternative would have been to produce a scholarly tome which would have had trouble getting any popular readership. I find his project compelling enough that I would very much like to see him follow the model of Greg Boyd or NT Wright, or James K.A. Smith on this, producing a large, scholarly work and a companion popular work. The book is at its strongest when the author is providing overview (Howard-Brook provides a number of synthetic insights which emerge naturally enough from his religions dialectic but which are far too easily missed without it) and in his analyses of Origen and Augustine. Possibly because those two theologians have been enjoying something of a renaissance in and reexamination respectively in Evangelical and Progressive Christians circles recently, Howard-Brook is able to bring significant nuance to nearly any readers reflex opinion of those writers. Here is a representative sample from his analysis of Augustine: The consequences of Augustine's erudite eloquence in expressing what was already a widely held view cemented this perspective into longstanding Christian orthodoxy. To this day, even undergraduate students who identify as "atheist" or "agnostic" still largely respond to the question "what is the Christian purpose of life?" with some form of "to go to heaven when you die." It plainly isn't what the Jesus of the Gospels proclaimed, not what Christians in Augustine's time proclaimed when reciting the Lord's Prayer. But "Christianity" had long since stopped looking to the Jesus of the Gospels to determine "the Way." My suspicion is that the way in which you react to that quote is likely representative of the way in which you will react to the book as a whole. For those who are really committed to an American Evangelical history of the Church and reading of the Bible, *Empire Baptized* will likely seem saturated with heretical premises and challenging, troubling evidence (like I said Howard-Brook has done his homework). Those who are intrigued or excited by the quote will find the book equally intriguing/exciting. If the quote bores you, you will not likely get much out of the book either. For myself, while I don't agree with every premise or element of the book, I find Howard-Brook's religion dialectic really helpful and eagerly await future treatments of the great schism and the protestant reformation. I would love to read his thoughts on how much of the religion of empire made it into the Radical (Anabaptist) Reformation, into the Protestant Reformation, and through the Council of Trent. Before that though, I want to read a little more about where he finds the undying persistence of the religion of creation in the early church. This is a book which both satisfies and demands a further exploration of its own thesis.⁵ of 6 people found the following review helpful. Jesus did not attempt to bring a "scheme for salvation" but to show how the love of God is lived out in relationships with other. By Customer The author uses a wide range of scholarly works in constructing this very readable work. He catalogs the remarkable "remaking" of the message and life of Jesus into a religion which during the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries CE was readied to be a legal religion under Constantine fully compatible with the notion of Christendom and all that has followed. Supremely documented and designed for the informed reader. I cannot praise this book enough in the context of the 21st century where Jesus has been reduced (over the centuries) to the "forgotten man" and as one writer has said so well, Jesus did not attempt to bring a "scheme for salvation" but to show how the love of God is lived out in relationships with others. Lou Tulga, PhD

Through a study of the writers of the post-New Testament period, this book shows how "Christianity" was forged as "the religion of empire," undermining the New Testament's proclamation of Jesus as upholder of the "religion of creation," two categories laid out in Howard-Brook's earlier volume, "Come Out, My People": God's Call Out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond (Orbis 2010). Using writers from Alexandria (Clement, Origen, and Athanasius) and North Africa (Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine) as test cases, Howard-Brook traces how Platonic and Stoic philosophy on the one hand, and Roman imperial culture, on the other, were taken for granted by these writers in creating "Christianity."

Wes Howard-Brook has performed a great service with *Empire Baptized*. He explains how the transition in Christianity from Jesus's way of peace to the coercive ways of Christendom happened. An enormously enlightening account that helps us better understand our present dilemmas. - Ted Grimsrud, author of *The Good War That Wasn't-- And Why It Matters: The Moral Legacy of World War II*; Senior Professor of Peace Theology, Eastern Mennonite University. About the Author Wes Howard-Brook teaches at Seattle University. He is the author of several Orbis books, including "Come Out, My People," *Unveiling Empire*, *The Church Before Christianity*, *Becoming Children of God*,

and co-editor of *The New Testament: Introducing the Way of Discipleship*. He and his wife, Sue Ferguson Johnson, collaborate in the ministry, *Abide in Me*, which seeks to lead people and communities into deeper integration of the inner and outer paths that empowers people to "come out" of empire.