

The Colossian Context: Discerning Empire

Imagine that in the year 2200 a letter is discovered which had been written to a North American church in 2000. The discovery is incredibly exciting, because in 2050 the city in which the church was located was buried in an avalanche and almost no records remain to show what the city and the church were like. All our living witnesses to that city are gone. And now a letter suddenly comes to light. Would we be able to understand the letter? Would we be able to set the historical context of the church and the issues it might have been facing?

Even though little evidence might remain about the particular congregation to which the letter was written, there would be some important evidence to help us understand the letter. One would be the larger historical context. What were the issues facing the culture as a whole? What was the dominant worldview of the culture of which this city was a part? What were the nearby cities like? Does the letter seem to address any of the issues of this dominant culture? Does it refer to cultural events and symbols that were part of the larger culture? What can we infer from such references?

When reading the letter to the Colossians, we find ourselves in a similar situation. Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake somewhere around A.D. 60-64 and has never been excavated. We have much less knowledge of the context in Colossae than we do of other cities in the first century. But we do have some knowledge of the dominant worldview of Asia Minor in the first century. We know what some nearby cities were like (Laodicea, Hierapolis, Aphrodisias), and we know what some of the hot issues were for Christians throughout Asia Minor. All Christians at this time would have found themselves confronted with the worldview of empire.

To understand this letter, then, we need to understand something of the world in which Nympha lived and its parallels to our own world. To discern both the historical and the contemporary meaning of Colossians, we need to discern empire.

In chapter one we stated that empires are (1) built on systemic centralizations of power, (2) secured by structures of socioeconomic and military control, (3) religiously legitimated by powerful myths and (4) sustained by a proliferation of imperial images that captivate the imaginations of the population. This definition of empire will provide the contours for our discussion of Colossians in the context of both the Roman empire and our own imperial realities.

Systemic Centralizations of Power

Empires always guarantee the status quo of privilege and oppression through a centralization of power. In the Roman empire the *paterfamilias*—the patriarchal structure of marital, familial and economic relationships—was considered the empire's building block. In this "father-directed" hierarchy, power was centralized and the empire was socially encoded. The economic importance of women, children and slaves was carefully guarded in Roman law: the bulk of rulings regarding the guardianship of

women and the various laws upholding the power fathers had over their sons was rooted in the practical necessity of safeguarding the family wealth.¹⁸ Similarly, the legal code ensured that slaves, even if made free, continued to be legally under the power of their former masters.¹⁹

In fact, even freed slaves still fell under the strictures of the patron-client relationship which ensured the continuation of power amongst certain sectors of Roman society. The patron-client relationship, with its dynamic of the promise of benefit from the patron in exchange for the honor and praise of the clients, functioned as a powerful means of social cohesion and control. This same dynamic operated on the level of the society as a whole: the emperor was the ultimate patron, bestowing his benefits on those who lauded him.²⁰ Indeed, in the structure of the *paterfamilias* the emperor is the father supreme. The whole structure of society serves to secure his rule and authority.

It is astonishing how similar power relations in the context of global capitalism are to this first-century system. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill describes patronage in a way that demonstrates some striking parallels with contemporary economics. In the patronage system, withholding promised resources from the client served to strengthen social power in an effective manner because the patron's "power over a client derives not from generous and regular distribution, but from keeping him on tenterhooks with the prospect of access to resources which is in fact never fully granted."²¹ Such a strategy, of course, is not alien to those of us familiar with the policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for keeping countries in the South dependent by means of structural adjustments and perpetual debt.²²

Global economic structures reveal centralizations of power. Most major corporations use the equivalent of slave labor to produce clothing, toys, tools and some foods. Most of this labor is done by people in Asia, Latin America or Africa. While cash-crop farmers include both men and women, the majority of those who work in sweatshops, on coffee plantations and in the sex trade are women and children.²³ Al-

¹⁸On women see Bremen, "Women and Wealth," p. 234; Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (London: Colin Helm, 1986), pp. 14-22. On the power of fathers over sons, see J. A. Crook, *Law and Life of Rome, 90 B.C.-A.D. 212* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 107-11.

¹⁹See Chow, "Patronage in Roman Corinth," pp. 120-21. Whereas a patron-client relationship was usually of a voluntary nature, the relationship between a master and freed slave was governed by law. See Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society," in *Patronage in Ancient Society*, ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 76; Crook, *Law and Life of Rome*, pp. 51-55.

²⁰Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society," p. 84.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

²²Thus it is no surprise that for every dollar that is sent in foreign aid to Africa, four are returned in the form of debt servicing.

²³See *New Internationalist* no. 347, *Inside Business: How Corporations Make the Rules* (July 2002); Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000), pp. 195-229. On the effects of globalization on women in Africa, see Omega Bula, "A Jubilee Call for African Women," in *Jubilee, Wealth and the Market* (Toronto: Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative, 1999), pp. 64-76.

though we live in a society that would deny it, such centralizations of power are still evident in the overwhelmingly white male face of corporate culture in North America and in the increasingly high levels of poverty and incarceration among aboriginal and black communities. Even in this brief sketch it is evident that although our culture does not openly subscribe to an ethos of patriarchy, racism and classism, the effects of the global economic market create the same kind of societal dynamic that was present in first-century Rome.

A question we will need to address when looking at Paul's advice to women, children and slaves in Colossians 3:18—4:1 will be whether Paul is reinforcing or undermining the *paterfamilias* of the empire in this passage. And how might his view of households inform our engagement of oppressive socioeconomic structures in our own time?

Socioeconomic and Military Control: An Economics of Oppression

Rome was renowned for its efficient military structure. Once a land had been conquered by Roman might, once the soldiers had taken their plunder and the garrison set up (which continued such plunder), the conquered area had to be made profitable for Rome. Roads needed to be built, irrigation improved, and rivers bridged. All this made it possible for goods to flow easily from the provinces to Rome.

Klaus Wengst describes this dynamic in a way that makes the parallels with our times clear:

So what Rome needed in order to exploit a province economically was above all the provision of an infrastructure, though this was tailored to its own needs. If the term "development aid" had already been in existence it would have been just as much a euphemism for exploitation as it is today.²⁴

A steady stream of taxes, tolls, offerings, tributes and levies, along with grain, produce, cloth and natural resources, found its way to Rome. As people in the provinces became more impoverished and were unable to pay their taxes, they were forced to sell their land. This enabled those with power to expand their land base.²⁵

Even more than military control, the economic policies of Rome were designed to ensure that the lands they controlled would have no resources for resistance to the empire. Such control was on the one hand more lucrative, and on the other cheaper, than maintaining power through military control.

Wengst's comments about development aid hint at the parallels between Rome's economic policies and those of a globalized economy. Through mechanisms such as

²⁴Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1987), p. 28.

²⁵Ramsey MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 285* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 20, 37-39, 48-52.

the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, powerful nations in the North are able to dictate the economic terms by which the South is kept firmly ensconced in the cycle of international debt and development aid. By means of such economic control, these structures dictate the social policy of dependent countries, ensuring that it favors the corporations of the North to the detriment of local peoples, economies and land.²⁶

While these policies have by and large ensured that the flow of wealth and resources continues to move from the South to the North, on occasion military control must be used to enforce the system. It is no secret that the North, particularly the United States, has been heavily involved in overthrows of legitimate governments and in creation of puppet governments in Africa and Latin America.²⁷ And while the 2003 war against Iraq was fought in the name of national security and the liberation of the Iraqi people, widespread suspicion that this was a military intervention prompted by larger concerns of the Pax Americana have been validated as more evidence emerges concerning untruths surrounding the call to go to war.

In the face of an empire that rules through military and economic control, what is the shape of a community that serves a ruler who brings reconciliation and peace by sacrificial death rather than military might? If the empire elevates economic greed and avarice into civic virtues, while Paul dismisses such a way of life as idolatrous, then how does a Christian community shaped by Paul's gospel live its life in the empire?

Powerful Myths: The Pax Romana

Everyone loves a good story. And the story that legitimated the economic and military power of Rome was very good. It can be summed up in two words, *Pax Romana*. Ironically, the Roman legitimation for continued military oppression was rooted in a story of peace, proclaiming that Rome was the bearer of cosmic peace, fertility and prosperity.²⁸ With the coming of the Roman empire a new age had dawned upon which rested the blessings of the gods. And in conquering the barbarian peoples who populated the whole of the known world, Rome was ensuring that its story would become the story of the whole world.

This story shaped the rhythm of life in the empire. Feasts and festivals celebrated Rome's victory over the barbarian hordes (which included, of course, the recalcitrant people of Judea and Galilee). Festivals in honor of the birthday of the emperor and in

²⁶A vivid picture of such dynamics is found in Bula, "Jubilee Call for African Women," pp. 68-71. See also Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

²⁷For a fictional wrestling with a real overthrow in the Congo in 1960, see Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998). Other examples include, of course, U.S. subversion of legitimate governments in Chile (September 11, 1973) and the White House-supported Contra rebellion in Nicaragua during the mid-1980s.

²⁸Zanker, *Power of Images*, pp. 167-83.

thanksgiving for Rome, its ruler and its power included sacrifices that reinforced the centralization of power by emphasizing the places of nobility, plebeians and slaves in the hierarchy of the empire.²⁹

Such myths, of course, drive contemporary globalization as well. Most powerful is the progress myth, which has been the driving force behind Western capitalism since the Enlightenment.³⁰ The myth that we are moving as a culture toward increasing wealth and technological control, and that this is invariably good, provides the justification for all the economic and military policies of the North. Countries in the South are called “developing countries”; that is, they are not different from us, they are simply behind us, trying to catch up to where we are now. According to the progress myth, this “development” can only be good, and it is defined in terms of increasing industrialization and increasing technology, which will result in increased wealth. In spite of the evidence that increased industrialization and technology lower the standard of life rather than raise it, the progress myth provides powerful legitimation for the lifestyle of Europe and North America.³¹

This myth has come to expression most powerfully, however, in the rhetoric of the United States. If the Pax Romana summarized the Roman imperial mythology, then the Pax Americana, with its clear distinction between good and evil and its self-righteous and aggressive foreign policy, encapsulates the dominant mythology of our day. Like Rome, the United States describes itself as a nation chosen by God to bring democracy and freedom to those parts of the world “backward” enough to endorse a different system of government and different economic priorities from those of global capitalism.³²

In Colossians Paul is telling a story that is an alternative to the mythology of empire. Mythology is always about salvation, peace and prosperity. Rome found salvation in the universal peace of the age after Augustus. The “American Empire” finds salvation in economic progress and global control. Paul tells a story about a salvation

²⁹Stanley K. Stowers, “Greeks Who Sacrifice and Those Who Do Not: Toward an Anthropology of Greek Religion,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 319-29; Gordon, “Veil of Power,” pp. 134-37.

³⁰Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society*, trans. Josina Van Nuis Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979).

³¹An ever-increasing gap between the rich and poor, rampant health problems (like cancer, obesity, heart disease), environmental degradation, racial tensions, divorce rates, urban uglification and psychological stress all are indicators of a low standard of living amidst “economic growth.” For more nuanced understandings of economic well-being, see Bob Goudzwaard and Harry deLange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Towards an Economy of Care*, trans. and ed. Mark R. Vander Vennen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), and Herman Daly and John Cobb Jr., *For the Common Good* (Boston: Beacon, 1990).

³²For instance, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft told an audience in Nashville in February 2002 that “American ‘freedoms’ are made in Heaven: ‘not the grant of any government or document, but our endowment from God.’” Quoted in “Worldbeaters,” *New Internationalist* 347 (July 2002): 29.

rooted in Christ, historical sovereignty located in a victim of the empire, and prosperity that bears fruit in the whole world.

Imperial Images That Capture the People’s Imagination

In a fascinating book, Paul Zanker describes the way imperial images dominated both public and private space in the Roman empire. Images of Caesar were found in the market, the city square, the public baths, and the theater, at the gymnasium and in the temples. Images of the empire were also found on every imaginable object for private use.³³ The symbolism of the empire became part of daily furnishings, permeating the visual landscape and therefore the imaginations of the subjects of the empire.³⁴

It isn’t difficult to see how the powerful myths of our own culture are evident in the images that surround us in daily life. Corporate logos and corporate advertising not only shape the public space in our culture but also permeate our private lives. The grocery store, the mall, billboards, buses, television, computers, even our clothing, towels and toothbrushes: all may be marked by corporate logos.³⁵ The entertainment giant Disney Corporation, whose movies and cartoons reinforce the corporate myth of our culture, markets toothbrushes, towels, pajamas, lunchboxes, backpacks, pens, pencil cases, cuddly toys, coloring books, picture books, encyclopedias, swimming pools, balls and other toys, all emblazoned with Disney images.

These images all tell a story of consumer affluence, Western superiority and the ineluctable march of economic progress. But it isn’t just the imagination of the North that is shaped. These images of North American culture are exported via television and the international advertising of corporations such as Coca-Cola and McDonald’s, portraying our society as one of prosperity, safety, equality and happiness.

Just as in the ancient world the images of peace and prosperity masked the reality of inequality and violence, so the contemporary images projected by advertising mask the reality of sweatshops, inequality, and domestic and international violence created by our lifestyles. And in the face of the ubiquitous imagery of the empire, Paul proclaims Jesus as the true image of God (Col 1:15) and calls the Colossian Christians to bear the image of Jesus in shaping an alternative to the empire.

³³Seal rings were engraved with Capricorn (the astrological sign under which Augustus was born) or a kneeling Parthian (a symbol of Rome’s victory over the barbarians who now kneel before it). Silver cups would portray a battle and triumphal procession; clay lamps depicted the goddess Victoria seated on a globe, signifying Rome’s victory over the whole earth. Silver was decorated with sacrificial scenes, and the sphinx, a symbol of hope which Augustus used on his seal ring, appeared on candelabra, bronze utensils, wall paintings, coins and table feet. When the sphinx appeared with the vine, they together symbolized the new age of growth and prosperity. All examples are from Zanker, *Power of Images*, pp. 228-29, 266-67, 270-71.

³⁴“Whatever the case with a particular object—whether the owner sought to proclaim his political loyalty or wanted only to enjoy the latest in artistic fashion—the cumulative effect of the new political imagery, echoed in Roman houses on every level of society, must have been inescapable” (ibid., p. 273).

³⁵See Klein, *No Logo*, chaps. 1-5.

An Alternative Imagination

The story of Rome was not the only story that would have been competing for the imagination of the Colossian Christian community. This community had heard the story of Israel. In fact, the early Christian communities told the story of Jesus as the story of Israel. From Abraham to Moses, exodus to exile, the writings of the early church refer again and again to the fundamental story of Israel and the God who called her.

This was the story of Abraham, who left the gods of the empire to follow the living God. This was the story of Moses, whom God used to rescue his people from the empire and to lead them into a land where they would live in an alternative covenant community. This was the story of Jesus, who was crucified by the empire and rose to proclaim God's new rule, manifest in communities that sold all they had so that none would have need. This was the alternative imagination that energized and gave life to the early Christian community. As we saw, these stories gripped the imaginations of followers of Jesus such as Lydia and Nympha, who began to see that the stories of Israel and Jesus offered a compelling critique of life in the empire.

Such a critique will form the core of our reading of Colossians, but first we need to explore the alternative story that gave life to the church in Colossae and the way it breathed through the language and imagery of Paul.

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When we ask our students to tell us the biblical story, we are always struck by the different overarching themes that they bring. It may be that the theme of forgiveness dominates, or the theme of redemption, or God's concern for the oppressed. Sometimes the theme of the story forward is emphasized, or the theme of the beginning. All of these are legitimate ways to structure a telling of the story. Each of them gives a special insight into God and how God created and sustains the world.

In this chapter we want to explore one particular way that the story of Israel may be central for an understanding of Colossians: that the story of the empire. Such a telling gives us insight into both how the empire worked and what this story says to us in the disquieted

Telling the Story

The very shape of the Scriptures roots Israel's story deep in the creation account of Genesis 1. The creation account of Genesis 1 was written in the face of the empire, to relegate its captive people to the role of slaves, forced to live that were beneath the status of the gods.² And Israel fin

¹On Paul's use of imperial language throughout his writing, see Sylvia Keesmaat, "The Psalms in Romans and Galatians," in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. David M. Carr (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), and "In the Face of Empire: Shorter Epistles," in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Michael J. Gorman (Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004).

²See J. Richard Middleton, "The Liberating Image? Interpreting the Image of the Son," *Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 8-25; and J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 8-25.