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COLOSSIANS
REMIXED

SUBVERTING THE EMPIRE

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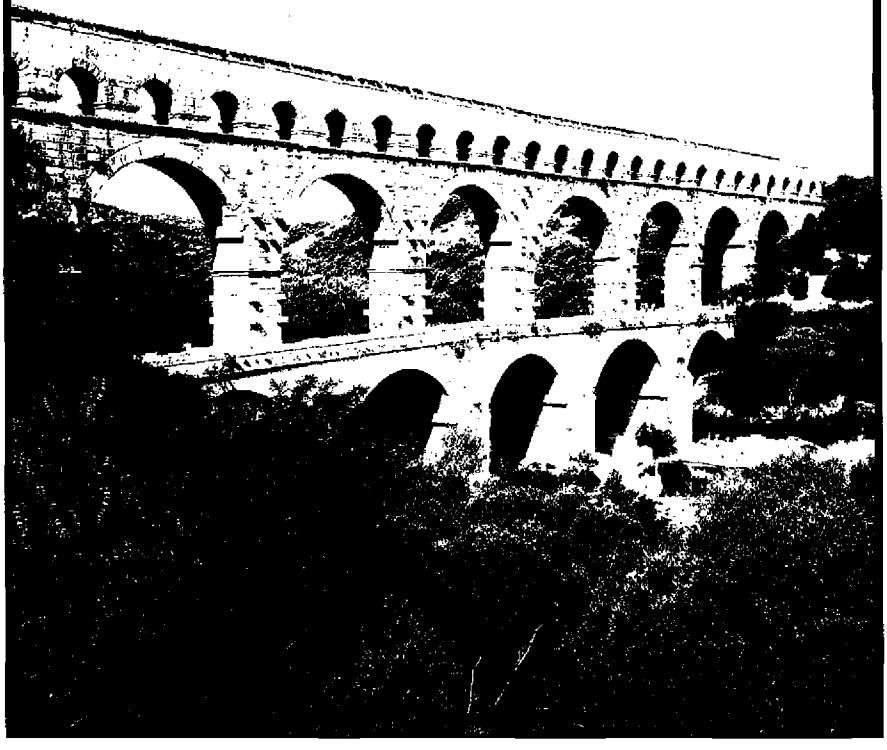
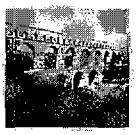


CONTENTS

—2—

COLOSSIANS AND DISQUIETED GLOBALIZATION



Ancient texts were not always ancient. That may seem to be rather obvious, but it is worth remembering. Paul's letter to the Christian community in Colossae was once a piece of contemporary correspondence to a particular community in a particular place and time. And like our time, theirs was a time of empire.

In the next chapter we will attempt to situate this letter more concretely in the context of the first century, and we will have occasion to return to the theme of empire at that time. But before we do that, let's stop and try an interpretive exercise. What would happen if a letter like this was written to us in a post-September 11 context of global disquiet, combined with the cyberoptimism of the so-called economic boom? What language would the author use if he listened to contemporary music, watched the World Trade Center towers collapse, and was culturally attuned to the challenges of being a Christian community in the twenty-first century? What would the letter to the Colossians look like if it was written not two thousand years ago but last week? And what would it say if its audience weren't the beleaguered Christian community in the town of Colossae in the Roman empire, but the Christian community trying to make sense out of being the body of Christ in the third millennium?

This isn't really such a novel way of approaching an ancient text. In fact, when rabbis read the Torah to the Jews of the Diaspora, they did precisely this kind of thing. Recognizing that their congregations did not understand Hebrew, the rabbis would have to translate the text as they read. And their translations were certainly not literal. Rather, they would update the text, apply it to the changing context and put it into contemporary idiom. The results of such interpretive exercises were called *targums*—extended paraphrases of the text. So before we dive into the world of the Roman empire, consider this targum on Colossians 1:1–14.

Colossians 1:1-14 Targum

Brian and Sylvia, disciples of Messiah Jesus by the grace of God, to the covenanted community of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in the totally wired world of the new global economy.

At the dawn of a new millennium, and in the face of a world of terror, may you experience the all-encompassing shalom and wholeness that is received as a wonderful gift from God our Father.

We want you to know that thankfulness permeates our prayers for you. We continue to give thanks to God, the Father of our sovereign Messiah Jesus, as we hear the stories of struggling and daring discipleship that continues to characterize his followers. We have heard that your faith and trust in Jesus is proved true because it takes on the real flesh of love in your midst—a love that is manifest in your care for the poor, providing shelter to the homeless, food for the hungry and hospitality to the stranger. Such faith and love are inseparable: one cannot exist without the other. But neither is possible without hope. And here at the end of a century of such bloodshed, betrayal and broken promises, it is an amazing thing to be a community animated by hope. May that hope sustain you in a world addicted to violence.

But your hope is not the cheap buoyant optimism of global capitalism with its cybernetic computer gods and self-confident scientific discovery, all serving the predatory idolatry of economism. You know that these are gods with an insatiable desire for child sacrifice. That is why your hope is not the shallow optimism of the "Long Boom" of increased prosperity. Such optimism is but a cheap imitation of hope. Real hope—the kind of hope that gives you the audacity to resist the commodification of your lives and engenders the possibility of an alternative imagination—is no human achievement; it is a divine gift. This hope isn't extinguished by living in "the future of a shattered past," precisely because it is a hope rooted in a story of kept promises, even at the cost of death.

You didn't get this hope from cable television, and you didn't find it on the Net. This hope walked into your life, hollering itself hoarse out on the streets, in the classroom, down at the pub and in the public square, when you first heard the good news of whole life restoration in Christ. This gospel is the Word of truth—it is the life-giving, creation-calling, covenant-making, always faithful servant Word that takes flesh in Jesus, who is the truth. So it is not surprising that the Word of truth is no detached set of objective verities committed to memory and reproduced on the test. No, this Word of truth is active, bearing fruit throughout the cultural wilderness of this terribly scorched earth. From the beginning blessing, "Be fruitful and multiply," God has always intended that creation be a place of fruitfulness. Now the Word of truth is producing the fruit of a radical discipleship, demonstrated in passion for justice, evocative art and drama, restorative stewardship of our ecological home, education for faithful living, integral evangelism, and liturgy that shapes an imagination alternative to the empire's.

And when that kind of fruit is evident in your lives, you don't need to choke on the word *truth*—you don't need to whisper it through your tears. You see, once you have comprehended the grace of God in truth and your life bears witness to the power of this truth, then you can speak—indeed you can sing—of truth with integrity. You have

learned all of this well from prophets and singers, teachers and preachers, artists and storytellers who have come before us, and again, they all testify to your love in the Spirit.

So ever since we have heard of your faith, love and hope, we have not ceased to pray for you. And our prayer is that in a world that has commodified knowledge, you will be saturated with the holistic, intimate knowledge of God's way with this world that he has created. May your lives be characterized not by the accumulation of disembodied, unconnected facts and information but by a playful, history-embracing, this-worldly, interconnected wisdom that traces the wise and loving way God engages this world in all of its rich diversity.

What we are praying for is that you will demonstrate a spiritual wisdom and understanding in all things, so that you can discern where the Spirit is leading the church in this new century. You see, such knowledge, wisdom and understanding are essential if you are to shape cultural life in a way that is worthy of the Lord. And don't miss the scope of what we are talking about here. What is at stake is nothing less than the pleasure of our Lord, a pleasure that he takes when every dimension of our lives bears the fruit of his kingdom.

But it is not simply a matter of growing in knowledge and then displaying the practical consequences or uses of that knowledge in our daily lives. No, that would be too much like the intellectualism that was the hallmark of modernity. The knowledge and cultural fruitfulness we are talking about feed off each other. Knowing the world in wisdom and discernment engenders a certain way of life that then leads to an increase in knowledge. Knowing grows in the doing.

But here's the rub. Everything in this monolithic culture of McWorld globalization is allied against you and will try to keep your imagination captive, stripping you of the courage to dream of alternative ways to live. When a culture is threatened, it becomes especially repressive of those who dare to live differently, subject to another vision of life, another Lord. So may you be strengthened with all strength and empowered with the weighty power of God in this disempowered culture of unbearable lightness. May your vision, your stubborn refusal to allow your imaginations to be taken captive, have the tenacity to hang in there for the long haul and a patience that doesn't need to aggressively realize the kingdom of God *now*, because your faith will work and wait for a miracle, for the coming of God's shalom to our terribly broken world.

You will have the resources of such patient endurance and be sustained for the long haul of radical obedience in the face of overwhelming odds if your life is embedded in gratitude. Joyful thanksgiving is deeply empowering.

And *what* we are thankful for provides us with a subversive imagination. While the cybernetic revolution will tell us that the world is in the hands of those with the most powerful computers and widest Net access, and while the forces of globalization arrogantly proclaim that those who control capital have a proprietary right to the resources of creation, we confess that this world is the inheritance of those who live in the light—not the dim light of the Enlightenment, nor the glittering lights of computer screens, televisions and gambling terminals, but the light that liberates us from darkness.

You see, friends, because we are not subservient to the empire but subjects of the

kingdom of God's beloved Son, we have the audacity to say to the darkness, "We beg to differ!"[1] We will not be a pawn to the Prince of Darkness any longer, because we owe him no allegiance, and by God's grace, through our redemption and forgiveness, our imaginations have been set free.

What Was That?

Uh, excuse me, but your translation seemed to add an awful lot to the text.

Well, as we tried to explain, this isn't exactly a translation but rather something akin to the ancient rabbinic interpretive practice called *targum*.[2]

But you can't tell me that the ancient rabbis translated Scripture in ways that were so culturally explicit.

Of course they were culturally explicit—they could only write out of their own cultural context.

Yes, but this feels more like an imaginative construct that the two of you dreamed up. You've rewritten this text with such a strong message to a consumer global culture of anxiety and optimism that I wonder if you haven't changed it immeasurably. And while all your allusions to popular culture—like the Indigo Girls, Smashing Pumpkins and Tori Amos—make your targum exciting and relevant, I feel uneasy with it. I guess maybe the original text doesn't seem to have that exciting relevance, and I'm not sure it ever did.

I guess I'm just a little hung up on the liberties that you take with Scripture. It is all well and good to apply this biblical text to our very different cultural context, but is there any basis in the text itself for what you are doing? Don't get me wrong, I am no fundamentalist, but neither am I a postmodernist. I mean, you can't just do whatever you like with a text. So my question is: does this targum have any exegetical credibility?

Well, what are the parts of the targum that worry you?

Let's start at the beginning. How do you get from a simple and straightforward greeting from Paul, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father," to "May you experience the all-encompassing shalom and wholeness that is received as a wonderful gift from God our Father"? Not only is your version a lot longer, it seems to be saying more than would be present in a typical early Christian greeting. Why all the extra description?

That's a good question. "Grace and peace to you" is a greeting that is rich in meaning, if you can hear all of its overtones. And it seems to us that hearing overtones in

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[1]Mary Jo Leddy, *Say to the Darkness, "We Beg to Differ"* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990).

[2]The noun *targum* is derived from the Hebrew verb *tirgem*, which carries the meanings both "to translate" and "to explain." It is important to note that a targumic translation of a Hebrew text was seldom literalistic. The rabbis invariably expanded on the text as they translated, and the collection of such translations is called the Targum. Philip S. Alexander explains the role of Targum as providing more than "a simple rendering of Scripture into everyday speech: it could be commentary as well as a translation, and impose a comprehensive interpretation on the original Hebrew." As such, targumim (the plural form) "achieve a degree of polyvancy in their readings of Scripture" ("Targum, Targumim," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 6:329-30).

biblical literature is something that most of us are quite poor at. Let us suggest to you this fundamental hermeneutical principle: Always read the New Testament with Old Testament eyes—or to shift the metaphor, always hear the New Testament with Old Testament ears. Now this might just seem a little obvious to you, but take our word on it, it has been a contentious issue in the history of biblical scholarship for at least one hundred years.[3]

If a first-century Jew like Paul uses a word like *peace*—even if he is writing in Greek—then one cannot miss the overtones of the Hebrew notion of *shalom*. Here is a word that is overflowingly rich in meaning. On one level it refers to well-being: may things go well with you. But this is a well-being that encompasses all of life. Shalom has to do with blessing, richness, abundance and a far-reaching harmony that permeates and characterizes all of our relationships.

Since you are asking me to "hear with Old Testament ears," could you give an example of this from the Old Testament?

Sure—consider Ezekiel. On two occasions Ezekiel speaks of a "covenant of peace" that is characterized by a renewed fruitfulness in the land: there is no longer enmity between humans and wild creatures, drought gives way to showers of blessing, barren trees again can be harvested, the people of Israel experience political security because they are at peace with their neighbors, socioeconomic oppression is replaced by liberation, and the hungry are fed (Ezek 34:25-31). But such shalom, wholeness and well-being in all of our social, ecological, political, agricultural and economic relationships is rooted in a restored relationship with God. There can be a covenant of peace, says Ezekiel, only because God promises, "My dwelling shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (37:27). We see then that for Ezekiel, peace is rooted in grace. There can be such wholeness, such creationwide shalom, only if God enters into our conflict-ridden, distorted, oppressive and broken reality with initiatives of grace.

And you were trying to convey that with "may you experience the all-encompassing shalom and wholeness that is received as a wonderful gift from God our Father"?

Well, yes, for those with ears to hear.

That's a pretty high expectation.

Why do you say that?

Because the ideas are so alien. This sense of shalom as well-being in all of our relationships is far removed from any notions of well-being that I meet in my life. I mean, not only is our culture preoccupied with individual well-being—"my" inner peace, "my" level of affluence and comfort—but there is no sense that such peace is rooted in grace.

Of course not. Grace, after all, is a fundamentally relational idea. We receive grace

[3]To get a thorough overview of this history, see Stephen C. Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861-1986*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

as a gift from an other. But the idea of peace or well-being that you are describing is so individualistic that it could never depend upon an other. In fact, in the competition of the marketplace other people are usually an impediment to our success, rather than being the very foundation of shalom. But it goes even deeper than that. The problem isn't just individualism, it is the sense that well-being is an accomplishment, a product of our own ingenuity, skill and hard work. If this is true, then who needs grace?

The biblical understanding of grace—the whole matrix of understanding that lies behind Paul's use of the word—is predicated on the idea of a radical gift.

And our society knows nothing of gift, nothing of anything that is free, that cannot be commodified.

Precisely. So when Paul says something as seemingly unremarkable and innocent as "Grace to you and peace from God our Father," he is carrying a whole weight of meaning from the tradition of Israel, and saying something deeply subversive of a culture that views well-being in terms of the autonomous achievement of the solitary individual.

Why didn't you put all that stuff in the targum?

It would have got too long, and targum isn't the only genre we want to use in this book.

Can I ask one more question?

About the targum?

Yes.

Well, let's not talk the targum to death. There is an intentional evocative quality to this genre that perhaps gets lost if it is explained too much.

But the evocative nature of the targum is expressive of both your imaginative application of the text and serious exegesis. Right?

Yes.

Then let me ask one more exegetical question.

OK, shoot.

I want to hear more about your views of truth. You seemed to describe truth as personified. I think you said something about truth "hollering itself hoarse out on the streets." Are you suggesting that truth isn't so much something that we discover as it is something that discovers, or searches out, us? And if so, why?

Well, look at the text again. Paul describes the good news of Jesus as "the word of the truth . . . that has come to you" (Col 1:5-6). And then he goes on to say that this word of truth is active; indeed "just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves" (1:6). Now try again to hear this text with Old Testament ears. Where have you ever met something like truth seeking folks out and having a dynamic effect in the lives of those who respond to its advances?

The only time in the Old Testament I can think of where truth seeks us rather than our seeking the truth would be in Proverbs, where we meet Wisdom calling and inviting people to follow her and not Dame Folly.[4]

There you have it. And where is she calling out?

In the streets, the public squares, at the busiest corners and at the entrance to the city gates.[5] *All right, I see your point. But where did you get that "hollering itself hoarse" line from?*

We borrowed it from a friend.[6]

So you are hearing in Paul's language of the word of truth "coming to you" a personification of truth similar to what we see happening with wisdom in Proverbs. But it seemed to me that you had more than that to say about truth. Didn't you relate truth to discipleship and to the practice of justice, art, stewardship, education and evangelism? How does truth relate to these things? And have you rejected the link between truth and verifiable knowledge, or truth and objective facts?

Let's start at the end of your question. First, remember that William's problem with the Bible is that every time he begins to read this ancient text he feels that he is getting "punched in the face with the absolute." We think the absolute he is meeting in the Bible is something that is alien to the text. What he is struggling with is a view of knowledge (or "epistemology") that aspires toward a sense of objective and absolute finality. And this, we contend, is an epistemology that is imposed on the text by those who have embraced Enlightenment definitions of truth. We want to encourage a reading of Scripture that unabashedly abandons such objectivism for a more holistic understanding of knowing.

Second, we acknowledge the force of the postmodern complaint that "all thought that pretends to discern truth is but an expression of the will-to-power—even domination—of those making the truth claims."[7] While the targum makes no explicit reference to the way postmodernity makes "truth" into a problem, these issues are in the background, and we will need to return to them later in this book.

But your questions about the targum have been exegetical. And this leads us to the third thing going on in the targum when we are expanding on the language of truth, knowledge, wisdom and understanding in the text. In stark contrast to an objectivist epistemology that esteems distance, detachment, universality and abstractness, we discern in the biblical literature an understanding of truth that affirms intimacy, con-

[4]Proverbs 1:9—9:18. Educational theorist Parker Palmer grasps this point beautifully when he writes, "I not only pursue truth but truth pursues me. I not only grasp truth but truth grasps me. I not only know truth but truth knows me. Ultimately, I do not master truth but truth masters me" (*To Know As We Are Known* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983], p. 59).

[5]Proverbs 1:20-21.

[6]Calvin G. Seerveld, *For God's Sake, Run with Joy* (Toronto: Wedge, 1972), p. 33.

[7]J. R. Snyder, introduction to Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), p. xii.

nectedness, particularity and concreteness. At root, in the Hebrew Scriptures truth is a matter of fidelity. Indeed the Hebrew word *emeth* was translated in the King James Version as "truth" but is rendered "faithful" in almost all modern translations. To say that God is true therefore means "that he keeps truth or faith with his people and requires them to keep truth or faith with him."[8] Truth, then, is a decidedly personal, social and relational concept in the Scriptures. To know the truth, and to be known in the truth, is fundamentally a matter of covenantal faithfulness, manifest in the concreteness of daily life within a particular community at a particular time. No wonder the old English term for truth was *troth*. Parker Palmer puts it this way: "To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known . . . to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will."[9]

While this is striking all kinds of intuitive chords in me, I have trouble imagining what it would look like. Can you give me some Old Testament examples of this, as you did when we were talking about shalom?

Yes, in fact we can even connect this discussion about truth with shalom. Consider Psalm 85. This is a prayer that is concerned with the restoration of the land of Israel after the exile. Expectantly listening for "a word of shalom" from Yahweh (v. 8), the psalmist proclaims:

> Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
> that his glory may dwell in our land. (v. 9)

And when that glory, that presence of the Holy One, takes up residence in the land again, then

> Steadfast love and truth will meet;
> righteousness and shalom will kiss each other.
> Truth will spring up from the ground,
> and righteousness will look down from the sky. (Ps 85:10-11, our translation)

Steadfast love, truth, righteousness and shalom are all inextricably related in a biblical worldview. And when God restores covenantal shalom to the land, then truth, or faithfulness, will permeate life so deeply and fully that it will seem as if truth springs up from the ground. To this understanding of truth as covenantal fidelity, notions of detached distance and abstract universality are decidedly alien.

Let me try to get at this a different way: in the modernist view of truth, when truth is absent the result is error. What happens if biblical truth is absent?

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[8]Thomas Torrance, "One Aspect of the Biblical Conception of Faith," *Expository Times* 68, no. 4 (1957): 112; quoted by Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 259.

[9]Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known*, p. 31.

That is a great question. You can really know the truth, in this biblical sense, only when the truth is embodied or incarnated in the life of the community in the land. When truth "perishes" (as Jeremiah 7:28 puts it), then the sociocultural and ecological consequences are disastrous. Using the analogy of marriage, what happens if truth perishes in a marriage, if there is no more troth in the relationship and trust has been broken?

I guess that usually results in divorce.

That's right, and this is precisely the language we find in Hosea:

> Hear the word of Yahweh, O people of Israel;
> for Yahweh has a divorce case against the inhabitants of the land.
> There is no truth or steadfast love,
> and no knowledge of God in the land.
> Swearing, lying, and murder,
> and stealing and adultery break out;
> bloodshed follows bloodshed.
> Therefore the land mourns,
> and all who live in it languish;
> together with the wild animals
> and the birds of the air,
> even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hos 4:1-3, our translation)

Because truth is deeply relational, when there is no truth or intimate knowledge in the land, all human relationships are broken. Everything from our social and personal to our ecological relationships takes on the pall of death when there is no truth.

And "bloodshed follows bloodshed."

Yes, bloodshed follows bloodshed. There is something ironic about Hosea's comment when read in light of the postmodern suspicion that large-scale truth claims invariably serve to legitimate violence. In contrast, Hosea insists that it is the *absence of* truth that gives rise to ever-escalating bloodshed.

What about the way you interpret Paul's prayer that the Colossians be filled "with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (1:9)? It seemed to me that you suggested a similarly relational and this-worldly approach to that language. Does this also have Old Testament roots?

Indeed it does. And here we meet a problem that doesn't come from postmodern suspicion about truth but, more tragically, from the church's own dualism.

What do you mean?

Well, whenever we meet language about "spiritual wisdom" and a knowledge that is related to God's will, we tend to think of some kind of otherworldly, spiritual realm that is related only tangentially to the here and now. But this is as bad a mistake as reading the language of truth through a modernist, objectivist lens.

Sort of like embracing Plato along with Kant.

Yes, that would be a good way to put it. Remember: hear the New Testament with Old Testament ears. Language of wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures has nothing to do with otherworldly contemplation and everything to do with being attuned to the wise ways God engages creation. That is why the whole book of Proverbs is about wise life "in the land" (Prov 2:20-22), and Isaiah can illustrate what wisdom is by appealing to how a farmer knows when and where to plant crops and the proper way to harvest and process those crops (Is 28:23-29).

What is "spiritual" about that?

In biblical perspective, "spirit" has to do with the direction of one's life in creation. And just as truth must be enfleshed in sociocultural, political and ecological relations, so also is a spiritual wisdom and understanding a matter of knowing, or intimately discerning, the direction that God would have us go in our life at a given time.

Consider Isaiah's prophecy of the coming Messiah:

> The spirit of Yahweh shall rest on him,
> the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
> the spirit of counsel and might,
> the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (Is 11:2)

Here we have all the words that Paul employs in his prayer for the Colossians: *spirit, knowledge, wisdom* and *understanding*. And what will the Messiah do with this Spirit-endowed knowledge, wisdom and understanding?

> He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
> or decide by what his ears hear;
> but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
> and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. . . .
> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
> and truthfulness the belt around his loins. (Is 11:3-5)

This wisdom and understanding, this knowledge that is received as a gift of the Spirit, is for justice. If the Messiah wears truthfulness (or faithfulness) as the belt around his waist and is filled with wisdom and understanding, then that knowledge will be evident in the way he redresses real, this-worldly socioeconomic injustice.

Then the text concludes with these words:

> They will not hurt or destroy
> on all my holy mountain;
> for the earth will be full of knowledge of the LORD
> as the waters cover the sea. (Is 11:9)

Isn't that amazing? Just as the psalmist talks about truth springing "up from the ground" (Ps 85:11), so does the prophet envision the whole earth as full of the knowledge of God.

If this is what Paul has in mind when he uses the language of knowledge, wisdom and understanding in his prayer, then we must read it as a prayer that the Colossian community will have a knowledge that will transform all of their communal life. Remember, Paul prays for this kind of knowledge to grow in the community "*so that* you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:10). Just as the word of truth is "bearing fruit . . . in the whole world," so also must the recipients of this truth, those who are filled with this knowledge, bear the historical, cultural fruit of the gospel in their lives. In our targum we attempt to envision what that might look like for us today.

So what you are saying is that Paul's language of truth, knowledge, wisdom and understanding in the first chapter of Colossians carries these kinds of Old Testament overtones, and that is why you employ Colossians against the modernist preoccupation with objectivity.

That's right.

Then I have two quick questions. First, are you relativists?

No, but that will have to wait for further discussion later in the book.

All right. Then second, would the first-century recipients of this letter have gotten the point? Would Gentile converts have heard these Jewish overtones in Paul's language? Or wouldn't they have been more likely to have heard this language of truth, knowledge, wisdom and understanding in terms of their own cultural context, which was influenced by Greek thought and Roman social and political structures?

This is another important question. But we need to spend some time in that first-century context before we can begin to answer it. So let us introduce you to Nympha.

—3—

PLACING COLOSSIANS

Discerning Empire

Nympha's Story

It began like every other day, with visits to my weavers and dyers in Colossae and inspection of their work.[1] After a few meetings with merchants to whom I was selling cloth, I enjoyed a leisurely visit with some friends, long unseen. Nothing out of the ordinary.

But then my day took a totally unexpected twist: a messenger arrived with news about a letter from Paul. That would have been exciting enough, but the letter was carried by *the* scandal of the house churches in Colossae: Onesimus, runaway slave. Can you imagine? Along with Tychicus, envoy of the apostle, Onesimus came as a bearer of a letter to the very community where his master, Philemon, was a prominent leader.

Even though I was only visiting Colossae (followers of Jesus meet in my house in Laodicea), I decided I had to be there for the reading of the letter. So I sent my tutor to cancel my evening appointment, and I hastened with some anticipation to the meeting where Paul's letter would be read.

But I can see that I have jumped in too quickly. Let me begin at the beginning, and maybe you will understand my excitement. My name is Nympha, and I am a textile manufacturer. My father was one of the most illustrious merchants and benefactors Laodicea has ever known. Over his lifetime he excelled in the careful craftsmanship that made his cloth and dyes sought after throughout the Lycus Valley and even beyond. As his reputation grew, so did his lands, with many farms around Laodicea,

[1]While the following narrative is fictional, we suggest that it is also historically plausible. See the reference to Nympha in Colossians 4:15.

Hierapolis and Colossae coming under his control. These farms are now the backbone of my wealth; on them I grow flax and wheat, olive groves and vineyards, and fertile pasture for my many oxen and sheep. The flax and sheep, of course, provide linen and wool for my business. As you may know, the dyers of Colossae and Hierapolis produce some of the most sought-after purple cloth in Asia Minor, and I am fortunate to have some of them in my employ.[2]

Of course, my farms do not only produce for my business. As is the custom here, I also for many years provided wheat and oil, wine and oxen for the imperial feast days and sacrifices in Laodicea. Indeed, until a year or so ago my business enabled me to be an important benefactor to my city, and my civic duties were considerable, as befits the daughter of a wealthy merchant. I have been high priestess of the emperor cult, priestess of Demeter, a priestess of the ancestral gods, one of the committee of ten responsible for public revenues and the collection of tax, a builder of the city gates and restorer of the gymnasium, and the provider of oil for the gymnasium during the imperial games.[3] And, of course, my dyers were privileged to be responsible for the provision of purple cloth to the provincial high priests of the imperial cult. I should perhaps mention that my husband is still one of the leading benefactors of our city.

As you can imagine, my business requires me to travel considerably within the Lycus Valley. It was during one of my visits to Colossae about a year ago that I met another textile merchant named Lydia, also a seller of purple cloth.[4] And she told me something that changed my world. She began by telling me the good news about Jesus, the anointed Messiah of the Jews and the savior not only of the Jews but of the whole earth! I questioned her closely and in some astonishment, for we all know that Caesar is the one worshiped as savior of the whole world, for he has brought peace and prosperity to the whole of his kingdom by the might of his arm and by the blessings of the gods on his rule.

My astonishment grew as Lydia responded to my concerns not with arguments but with a story, the story of the God of the Jews. Now, no doubt you are familiar with the stories about the origin of this Jewish people. I, at least, had heard how they had their

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[2]"Colossae was famed for her wool, which was dyed purple/red. Its distinctive tint was known as *colossinus*" (Edwin Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1980], p. 157).

[3]All of these positions were held by a wealthy woman, Menodora, daughter of Megacles from Sillyon in Pamphylia. See Riet van Bremen, "Women and Wealth," in *Images of Women in Antiquity,* ed. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 223, 237n6; and Richard Gordon, "The Veil of Power," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society,* ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 135-36.

[4]According to Acts 16:14-15, Lydia came from Thyatira in Asia Minor. This gives us an interesting insight into how far a woman may have moved in her lifetime from her place of birth, since the impression one gets in Acts is that her household and her home are now in Philippi. On the importance for Thyatira for dyeing, see Yamauchi, *Archaeology of New Testament Cities,* p. 53, and references there. He also quotes a text in which Philippi honors a purple dyer named Antiochus, the son of Lykus, also a native of Thyatira

origins in Egypt, from where they were expelled because the Egyptians feared contagion from their skin disease, and how they wandered for seven days until they took over Mount Sinai. Stopping there, they proclaimed the seventh day a sabbath for their nation and took the precaution of not associating with foreigners because of their condition. As I understood it, these were still their practices to this day.[5]

But this wasn't the story that Lydia told. Rather she began by talking about the God who had made the whole world and everything in it. This God chose one man, a wandering Aramean named Abraham, out of the nations of the earth, and promised that a great nation would come from him, a nation through which the whole earth would be blessed. When this man's descendants were later made slaves by the Egyptians, this God heard their cry and rescued them, drowning the Egyptian armies in the sea. For forty years their God bore with them, nourishing them in the wilderness until they entered the land that was promised to them. This God gave the Israelites a king, David, and promised that one of his descendants would rule over all other empires forever.

Well, this was certainly a different telling of the story from the way I had heard it! But Lydia wasn't finished. She went on to say that God had kept his promise by sending a savior who was indeed a descendant of David: Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus performed many signs and wonders, healing many who were sick and proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God. But the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not understand that he was the one promised to them, and they handed him over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, to be crucified. His followers thought that was the end. "Imagine their amazement," Lydia exclaimed, "when they discovered that God had raised him from the dead! He now sits at the right hand of God, and those who have his Spirit are able to do signs and wonders in his name, healing the sick and casting out demons."

My head was spinning. But before I could interrupt, Lydia explained, "This is why we proclaim him as Lord. Forgiveness of sins comes only through Jesus. Peace is given only through Jesus. And he will come again, to establish his rule on earth in righteousness." Her enthusiasm was both infectious and worrisome. And it seemed to carry her on, as if she had to tell me the whole story right then and there.

Throughout the empire, Lydia told me, there are groups of people who worship this Jesus as Lord and Savior. Some were God-fearers as she was, some have turned from the worship of idols to this living Jesus, and some are Jews who have embraced Jesus as the Messiah of their people.[6] Whoever they are, these people meet together

[5]This telling of the origins of the Jewish people is from Pompeius Trogus *Universal History* 36, found in Justinus's *Epitome*; see Molly Whittaker, *Jews and Christians: Graeco-Roman Views* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 88.

[6]Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel but had not undergone a complete conversion to Judaism (which involved circumcision) were known as God-fearers. Acts 16:14 tells us that Lydia was a worshiper of God.

without distinction according to patron or client, slave or freeborn, Jew or Gentile, male or female. They share a feast that recalls the death and resurrection of Jesus, and they learn the story of the God of the Jews, whom Jesus proclaimed.

Well. What would you do if you heard such a story? It was the most bizarre thing I had ever heard—bizarre and downright dangerous. "Lydia," I said, "why on earth would you ever want to believe such a story? Why on earth would you ever want to worship such a king and lord? Look at you! You've got all that you need: money, prestige and social standing. You have contributed much to the glory of your city and the glory of the empire, and for that you have assurances of your own position and power. Why would you risk all that for the worship of this Jesus? Think of what could happen. Why, if someone unsympathetic heard you they might think you were suggesting that Caesar isn't our lord and savior. They might think you didn't appreciate the peace and prosperity that Rome has brought. Don't you see the kind of trouble you could get into with this way of thinking? Remember that although you are rich, you are still a woman. You could lose it all, just like that!"

"But that's the point," she said, "I *don't* believe that Caesar is our savior. I *don't* believe that he has brought peace and prosperity. And I *don't* worship him or any of the other gods, any more."

I must have had a stunned look on my face, because she continued more gently. "Look, Nympha," she said. "Look at the Roman peace. Yes, it is peaceful here, but at what price? Only if we promise subservience to the empire, only if we pay our taxes. And for those who don't? The land where this Jesus is from is Judea, and all the people of that land want is to live in peace and worship their own God, not Caesar. And has Caesar given them peace? No. Only death and destruction, demolishing their cities, enslaving the inhabitants, demanding taxes that drive the small landowners to slavery and revolt.[7]

"All over the empire we see the results of this 'peace': on the coins we are paid for our products, on the gates of our cities, in our temples, in the victory parades that accompany imperial worship. Our coins have Pax, the goddess of peace, on one side, and weapons on the other. Our gateways depict the emperor's victories over his enemies. This is peace by the blood of the sword.

"And yes, we benefit from this peace. You own many farms, Nympha, and you do so because of the taxes your tenants were unable to pay to Rome. Those taxes are supposed to ensure peace, but they also make it possible for the wealthy to buy peasant farms very cheaply and even take their owners into slavery. This peace is good for you. And it has been good for me, too. But it isn't good for everyone. This peace divides—it makes the peasants hopeless and the wealthy even wealthier.

"But the peace of Jesus is different. The peace of Jesus isn't imposed by violence.

[7]On imperial presence in Galilee and Judea see Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1995); and Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2001), pp. 1-53.

Quite the opposite! You see, the reconciliation Jesus brings is accomplished through his own death on a cross, where he took evil upon himself until it had totally exhausted itself. This is a peace for the whole of the cosmos, for the whole of creation. This is a freedom for all people, slave and free, male and female, even the Scythian and barbarian. The peace of Jesus doesn't come just for those who have but for those who have nothing."

"But what does this have to do with the story of the Jews?" I asked. "How do the practices of this Jesus arise out of a religion which is about taking many holidays and despising foreigners?"[8]

Then she told me the story of Israel again, this time as the story of a God who came to free his people, who were enslaved under a foreign empire. According to Lydia, this God called Israel to establish a society of justice and righteousness, where the orphan and the widow were to be cared for and no one was to live in poverty. She told me how this God came in Jesus to save not only Israel but the whole world, not by arms and might but by his own blood, crucified on a Roman cross. Then she told me again that this Savior is the true Son of God, the One that God raised from the dead, and that he now sits as our true Lord at the right hand of God, our true Father.

I questioned her more closely about the followers of Jesus. Why would anyone want to risk worshiping this Jesus? Why believe that Jesus, not Caesar, brings peace? And what difference does this belief make in the way they live their lives?

Lydia continued to tell me about the communities that worship Jesus. She told me how they care for one another without regard for social status and how they challenge the economic system of the empire by sharing all that they have, so that none goes in need.[9] She told me stories of healings that have happened in some places. She told me how Jews and Gentiles are eating together at the same table, how women and men are proclaiming the gospel together, how slave and free are worshiping together as one. She told me how they practice forgiveness for all, reconciling their differences rather than fighting things out. She went on to explain how these communities are proclaiming a society counter to that of the empire by not accepting the social distinctions and divisions that we find everywhere we turn, by not accepting the way of vengeance. Rather, this community is proclaiming a gracious welcome and healing in Jesus that gives hope rather than despair. This is a community based on the kingdom of Jesus, she said, a fellowship grounded in love and forgiveness, rather than the hierarchical society of the empire based on status, wealth and race.

I don't need to tell you how upsetting this conversation was. In fact, it was deeply

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[8]In the ancient world, the Jewish practice of keeping sabbath, together with the observance of food laws which inhibited social interaction with Gentiles, led to a reputation for sloth and despising strangers.

[9]On the early Christian community as an alternative economic community, see Anthony J. Riciutti, "The Economics of the Way: Jubilee Practice Among the Early Christians According to the Acts of the Apostles" (Ad Fontes Institute for Christian Studies, 2001).

disquieting. Proclaiming a lord other than Caesar could result in immediate imprisonment and a closer view of the imperial games than anyone would want—not as a spectator but as a participant on the losing side. I was glad that Lydia and I were speaking in the women's quarters of the house we were visiting. Although our tutors had accompanied us to oversee business transactions in town, they were not permitted into this wing of the house and were passing their time on the street outside. However, their presence nearby reminded us of our tenuous social standing.

You see, what Lydia was telling me was nothing less than treasonous, a threat to the empire. When, in a hushed tone, I told her so, she acknowledged that the followers of Jesus were being persecuted, and the persecution came from both sides. While some claimed that they were blasphemers against the God of Israel, others insisted that they were a threat to the security of the empire. In fact, she was carrying messages from a follower of Jesus, Paul, who was in prison in Philippi and who had proclaimed the good news to her. He sent words of encouragement to the assemblies of believers in the regions of Lydia and Phrygia and throughout the empire.

We talked far into the night about this Jesus, and when we did retire, mine was a restless sleep. As we parted in the morning I remained unconvinced. Everything around me testified that Caesar was lord and that peace and prosperity had come through him. And such peace and prosperity testified to his status. Didn't Horace write, "Thine age, O Caesar, has brought back fertile crops to the fields"? And didn't Horace also say that the emperor "has wiped away our sins and revived the ancient virtues"?[10] Ever since I was a little girl during the glorious reign of Augustus, I had been taught that Caesar brought us forgiveness of our sins. After all, were not the gods blessing us in all that we did?

Throughout the next few weeks I gazed around as I went about my business. Everywhere I turned there were images of Caesar. When I walked to the market, I saw his image in the square. I saw his image in the theater, in the gymnasium, in the temples. And the coins with which I transacted my business all bore his likeness. Even my household was full of his image, from the idol of the emperor in the atrium to images on my jewelry and utensils and paintings on my walls.[11] I noticed that my clay lamps were decorated with symbols of Roman victory, and my father's seal ring, which I kept but no longer used, was decorated with a kneeling Parthian, a symbol of Rome's dominance over its enemies.[12]

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[10]Horace *Odes* 4.15.

[11]Paul Zanker sums up the ubiquitous character of imperial images well: "Soon political symbolism could be seen on every imaginable object made for private use, indeed on virtually everything that could be decorated at all: jewelry and utensils, furniture, textiles, walls and stuccoed ceilings, door jambs, clay facings, roof tiles, and even on tomb monuments and marble ash urns" (*The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990], p. 266).

[12]Ibid., pp. 266-67.

But it wasn't just what I looked at. The whole rhythm of my life, especially in the city, was shaped by the empire. There were an astonishing number of feasts and festivals, all dedicated to the emperor and his reign.[13] Even the athletic games and the gladiatorial fights were all in honor of the emperor and the wonderful blessings he had bestowed on us. Such games and festivals were indeed for the upbuilding of the community: we were all, slave and free, rich and poor, united in thanksgiving to the emperor for all he had given us.

The more I looked, however, the more I noticed that nothing ever changed. For example, I had never before noticed, or perhaps I had never really cared to notice, that the very structure of the theater for the games was set up so that slave and free never needed to see each other. We were all worshiping the emperor, but we were doing so within the clearly prescribed roles that the empire had set for us. At the banquets, I ate the double portion due to a benefactor of the city, while the slave next door ate his much smaller and inferior portion, all in honor of the emperor.

I began to notice other things that Lydia had mentioned. I visited my farms near Laodicea, and for the first time I saw the despair in the eyes of those who were now slaves on the land they once owned. I saw that while peace had brought prosperity for me, it had also brought greater poverty to these proud farmers. Was Caesar indeed good news for these people?

I was disturbed. Lydia had offered a challenge to my faith in the empire. I knew that her story and mine couldn't both be true. Either Caesar had brought forgiveness of our sins, fruitfulness and peace through the great victories he had wrought, or Jesus had brought forgiveness of our sins, fruitfulness and peace through his paradoxical victory on a Roman cross. But this seemed impossible, unimaginable!

It was also clear that Lydia's story of Jesus could not be happily accommodated by the imperial regime. Devotion to Jesus was not like devotion to Isis or Apollo. These gods and their cults were no threat to the empire. Actually such private devotion, it was believed, made one a better citizen and enhanced one's public duty to the empire. Jesus, however, created a problem. His lordship clearly precluded Caesar's, and the guarded privacy of my conversation with Lydia notwithstanding, it was clear that following Jesus could not be a private matter but would have to be a public faith, transforming public life.

I decided that I needed to see what the society created by this Jesus would look like, but I was nervous about doing that at home in Laodicea. So the next time I was in Colossae, I sought out some followers of Jesus.

I was astounded by what I saw. It was pretty much as Lydia had said: men and

[13]According to Zanker, there were sixty-seven days of regularly scheduled games (ibid., p. 147). In addition, there were occasional festivals to celebrate the safety of the emperor and to extol his victories over enemies. See John K. Chow, "Patronage in Roman Corinth," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 107.

women, slaves and free, Jews, Scythians, barbarians and Romans all meeting together in peace to talk about this Jesus, pray to him, share a meal in remembrance of him, and struggle with what following Jesus meant for their daily life in the empire. It was an unheard-of gathering of people in the Roman empire. This isn't to say there weren't struggles. Social divisions and hierarchical relationships that have been entrenched for ages and reinforced by the emperor do not change overnight. But at least these people struggled! At least they had some vision and hope for a better way to live together![14]

And that hope was rooted in the memory of Jesus—a memory they kept alive with an astounding meal. At this meal none appeared to be superior to the other. All received equal portions of bread and wine, and none went without. I was amazed at the love they had for one another and for this Jesus they worshiped.

What also astonished me was how they saw their actions as a prophetic witness against the rule of Caesar. They knew that their actions, the way they embodied their faith together in their community, challenged all that Roman society held dear. They spoke of themselves as a new family, a new humanity, those who had left darkness for light,[15] who were now bringing, through their small house meetings, nothing less than reconciliation for the whole world.[16] They saw themselves as a living embodiment of the forgiveness and healing Jesus had brought for the world.

I went away deeply disturbed and wrestling with what the worship of Jesus would mean for my life. These Christians had such a comprehensive vision, but following Jesus would come at a high cost for me. Living such a life would mean ceasing to be a benefactor for the emperor cult, giving up my position as provider of wheat and oxen for the imperial festivals, purging my house of all that bore the image of Caesar and his victories. It would mean ceasing to participate in the imperial festivals and games. It would mean refusing to participate in the give-and-take of benefactor and client, bestowing monetary and social favors on those who sang my praises and danced attendance on me. It would mean distancing myself from the communities and societies that had given my life meaning.

I began to attend more regularly the meetings of those who follow Jesus. They welcomed me in, even though they knew that my position in the community could prove a threat to their security. They were prepared to practice such a risky love, they explained, because their Lord embodied such love even to the point of death on a cross. So I wanted to know more about this Jesus. The life of this assembly of Jesus followers awakened in me an insatiable curiosity about Jesus and his story.

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[14]The story of Acts records in a number of places such struggles in relation to economic sharing and the inclusion of Gentiles. See Acts 5:1-11, 6:1-7 and chapter 15. See also 1 Corinthians 8 and 11:17-34, as well as Galatians 2:1-14.

[15]See Colossians 1:13, Ephesians 5:8 and 1 Peter 2:9; and compare Romans 13:12.

[16]See 2 Corinthians 5:16-21 and Colossians 1:15-20.

I don't know how to explain it, but the more I met with this community and the more I learned about Jesus, the more I wanted to join them in following him. And the more I followed Jesus, the less enamored I became with Caesar.

One day in a conversation with these Christians I found I was using the word *we*. I had, almost without noticing it, thrown in my lot with Jesus and his followers. I had become a Christian. The Christian community in Laodicea now meets as an assembly in my house.

But it has not been easy. My husband wasn't at all impressed with my purging of the imperial imagery from our household, especially since some of our artworks had been commissioned in Rome and were quite expensive. And the question we have been struggling with as a community is this: how far do we need to go? What does it mean to be faithful to Jesus as Lord over all of our life?

We have begun to hear other stories of what following Jesus means: stories of slaves who are freed, stories of wealthy people who sold all that they had and gave it to the assembly. There are even stories of some who refuse to follow the empire's laws regarding compulsory marriage.[17]

In our communities here in Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae, tensions have been rising. We have tried to follow the lead of Judaism in resisting the emperor cult by observing alternative feasts and festivals, and by withdrawing as much as possible from the aspects of our culture which have been taken over by the empire. But the stories we hear have raised wider questions: Should we free our slaves? Should I indeed be selling my purple cloth to the imperial high priests? Should I give back the farms that became mine because peasant owners could not pay their debts? What does it mean to use my wealth for the pride of the city and the empire, now that I no longer honor the emperor? And underlying all of these is the question of the persecution that some in our communities faced already for our suspected resistance to Rome. Is this going to continue? How much are we expected to bear?

Now you can see why the news of a letter from the apostle Paul caused me to drop everything and rush off to the meeting. Surely Paul would have some wisdom for us on these issues. And if the runaway slave Onesimus accompanies this letter, then surely Paul will have something to say about the problem of slavery that has been vexing us. If Paul were here in person, our question would be clear. How ought we to be followers of Jesus at the heart of the empire? What does it mean to be Christians here in Colossae or Laodicea? Surely this letter would answer some of our concerns. I could hardly wait to hear it.

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[17] On those who sold all and gave it to the assembly, see Acts 4:32-37. As part of his restoration of morality in the empire, Augustus passed legislation which contained "major penalties for those who remained unmarried . . . as well as rewards and privileges for parents of several children" (Zanker, *Power of Images*, p. 157). On refusing to follow imperial marital legislation, see 1 Corinthians 7.

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 then 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-

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[18]On 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.

[19]See 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.

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

[21]Ibid., pp. 72-73.

[22]Thus 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.

[23]See *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 *Ju-*

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

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

[25]Ramsey MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 285* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press,

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

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[26] A 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).

[27] For 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.

[28] Zanker, *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

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[29]Stanley 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.

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

[31]An 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).

[32]For 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.

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[33]Seal 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).

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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CONTESTED FRUITFULNESS IN THE SHADOW OF EMPIRE

When we ask our students to tell us the biblical story in its briefest outline, we are always struck by the different overarching themes that are used to structure that telling. It may be that the theme of forgiveness dominates, or God as all-powerful, or redemption, or God's concern for the oppressed. Sometimes the role of women in moving the story forward is emphasized, or the theme of life in the midst of barrenness. All of these are legitimate ways to structure a telling of the events we find in the Bible; each of them gives a special insight into God and how God interacts with humanity and creation.

In this chapter we want to explore one particular way of telling the story that we believe to be central for an understanding of Colossians: that is, the biblical story in the face of the empire. Such a telling gives us insight into both how Paul would have understood this story and what this story says to us in the disquieted empire of global capitalism.[1]

Telling the Story

The very shape of the Scriptures roots Israel's story deeply in the context of empire. The creation account of Genesis 1 was written in the face of an empire that sought to relegate its captive people to the role of slaves, forced to do menial tasks of service that were beneath the status of the gods.[2] And Israel finds its most ancient roots as a

[1]On Paul's use of imperial language throughout his writing, see Sylvia C. Keesmaat's two articles, "The Psalms in Romans and Galatians," in *The Psalms in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten Menkes (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004), and "In the Face of Empire: Paul's Use of the Scriptures in the Shorter Epistles," in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley Porter (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004).

[2]See J. Richard Middleton, "The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24 (1994): 8-25; and J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be:*

nation in a context of slavery to one of the greatest empires of all time: Egypt. Israel's God hears the cry of those who are ground down by the empire and acts not only to free this oppressed people from the imperial oppression but also to defeat the empire: "horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Ex 15:1)! Who is Yahweh? The One who overthrows empire, that's who!

On these accounts of creation and exodus rest the twin pillars of Israel's belief: monotheism and election. In the face of the gods of Babylon, the empire that would hold the peoples of the world in bondage, there is only one God, ruler of heaven and earth, who has created humanity in God's own image. This one God, true ruler of all, is the heart of monotheistic belief. But alongside that is election: this one, true God has chosen Israel, rescued it from the belly of Egypt, the empire that would stamp out God's people by killing Israel's children. God has called this people Israel to be a light for the nations, a blessing to the whole world. On these two pillars rest the whole of the biblical story.

As the story unfolds, concerns of empire are never far from Israelite consciousness. On Mount Sinai, Israel is given the law and called to be a people whose collective life is antithetical to that of any empire. If the empire is a place of slavery and death, then Israel is called to be a people of jubilee, where slaves are released and life renewed. The laws that God gives point to such an end: laws regarding care for the foreigner, orphans, widows and the poor; laws of gleaning; laws forbidding the charging of interest, the keeping of a collateral pledge and the withholding of wages overnight; laws for seeing that one's kin do not fall into slavery; and laws of redemption for slaves and for the land.[3] All of these things are counter to the ideology of empire, which relegates foreigners, orphans, widows, the poor and slaves to particularly demeaned positions in the midst of an already demeaned humanity.

While the empire is preoccupied with images that represent its own power and hegemony, Israel is called to image a counterreality in a countercommunity. While the empire is frantically caught up in the management of production and consumption, Israel is called to a sabbath keeping that acknowledges the gift character of its life in the land. And while the empire is sustained on the backs of slaves and an economics of oppression, a sabbath-keeping Israel images its God by caring for the poor, the stranger and sojourner, the widow and orphan. The care of the marginalized—those who have no standing ground in the community—is antithetical to the constant striv-

[3]Caring for aliens, orphans, widows and poor: Exodus 22:21-27; 23:9; Leviticus 19:9-13, 33-34; Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 15:2-11; 24:10-21; 26:12-13; 27:19; Jeremiah 7:5-7; also Proverbs 14:21, 31; 22:9; 28:27; 31:9, 20; Isaiah 1:16-17; 58:7; Ezekiel 18:5-13. Laws of gleaning: Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19-21; cf. Exodus 23:10-11. Laws forbidding the charging of interest: Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-38; Ezekiel 18:5-13; cf. Ezekiel 22:7. Laws forbidding the keeping of a collateral pledge, or withholding of wages, overnight: Exodus 22:25-26; Deuteronomy 24:12-15. Laws for seeing that one's kin do not fall into slavery: Leviticus 25:35-38. Laws of redemption for slaves and for the land: Leviticus 25;

ing for power, dominance and hierarchy that characterizes the empire. Israel is called to be an alternative socioeconomic witness to the empire.

When Israel enters the Promised Land, it faces its greatest challenge not to become like the empire it left behind. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that such an empire is very seductive. When the Israelites ask for a king "like the other nations," God warns them that when they have such a king to rule over them they will indeed become "like the other nations," a people enslaved to the will of the ruler and his concern for empire. Such a king will rule Israel in the same acquisitive way as the emperors of the day. He will take their sons for soldiers, he will take their daughters as royal servants and to keep the harem well stocked, he will take their wealth for his treasury, and he will take their produce for his imperial household (1 Sam 8:5-18). He will take, take, take. In the land of gift, the king, "like the nations," will take. Under such a king Israel will mimic the empire in which sons and daughters are commodities to be used for the glory and feeding of the ruler, where land is a commodity for the satisfaction of the elite, where animals and slaves are property to be expropriated and made productive. And when Israel becomes an empire like the nations, its people will become like the people of the nations: slaves for the imperial good, crying out to their God, just as they did in Egypt (1 Sam 8:18; cf. Ex 2:23).

As the story unfolds, this is precisely what happens. The story of the monarchy is a tension-filled testimony to how even the kings chosen by God find it hard not to behave like the imperial powers around them. From David's rape of Bathsheba, to the rape of Tamar, to Solomon's slave labor for the building of the temple and his palace, to Jezebel's framing of Naboth in order to seize his land, the kings of Israel demonstrate that imperial ethics have now come to characterize Israel (2 Sam 11; 13; 1 Kings 5:13-16; 21).

It is the prophets who most tellingly deconstruct the imperial distortions of Israel. The covenant people do not care for aliens, widows and orphans, or the weak and injured (Is 1:23; 10:2; Jer 5:27-29; 7:5-7; 22:3-6; Ezek 22:7; 34:1-6; Zech 7:8-14; Mal 3:5). Failing to practice mercy and justice (Is 5:7; Jer 22:13-17; Hos 12:7-8; Amos 5:7; 6:12; Mic 6:1-12), Israel grinds down the poor and needy (Is 3:14-15; 10:2; 32:7; 58:3; Jer 2:34; Ezek 22:29; Amos 2:6-7; 4:1; 5:11; 8:4-8; cf. Job 24:9-14; Ps 37:14; 109:16). The people have been engaged in the consumptive practices of empire, filling their land with silver and gold, horses and chariots, buying up neighbors' fields until nothing is left but industrial farms-as-business that kill community (Is 2:7; 5:8). Moreover, they consistently engage in business deals that exploit the poor (Amos 8:5-6).

Exile is God's answer to Israel's imperial ways. If Israel is going to live out of an imperial imagination, then it may as well be taken fully into captivity by the empire. And so it is that in 587 B.C. Israel's leaders and merchants are taken to the heart of Babylon and its temple and land are left desolate.

Then, as enslaved people once again, Israel begins to dream anew what it means to be followers of Yahweh, counter to the empire. Jeremiah contains one of the first words to this people in exile about how to live in the shadow of the empire:

> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:5-7)

In the face of an empire that would deny your humanity, the prophet says, do those things that God called you to at the beginning of the story, those things that are linked to bearing the image of this God. Plant gardens, eat the good fruit they produce, be fruitful and multiply. Even in exile Israel is called to fulfill the creational mandate of Genesis 1:28-29. This is, of course, profoundly ironic, because the whole reason these people are in exile is that they were unable to fulfill that calling when they lived in their own land.

So in a sense Jeremiah is saying, "You were unable to fulfill this calling in your own land. Now your task is to fulfill your creational calling in the midst of exile. This is no place to capitulate, to become like the empire that has enslaved you." In the face of hopeless bondage, Jeremiah is calling the people to live lives of hopeful obedience, fruitful lives of building and planting, tending and keeping.

But Jeremiah doesn't stop there. He doesn't stop with a call to live lives of wholeness that upbuild only the community of exiles. He extends this call outward. In the midst of an oppressive empire, in slavery, the exiles have a mission. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile," he says, "and pray to the LORD on its behalf" (Jer 29:7).

You've got to admit that this is a bit of a tall order. The exiles might say, "Okay, I'll build and plant and multiply and carry on an obedient life. But seek the welfare of the empire, of Babylon? Seek the welfare of my oppressors? How on earth can that be expected?" But that is exactly what they are called to do. This small, vulnerable group of refugees has a responsibility for the larger community in which they find themselves. They are to work for its welfare.

This call is profoundly subversive—right up there with "Pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44)—precisely because it is completely antithetical to all the empire could ask or imagine. The empire wants nothing more than to break the spirit and the will of the foreigner in its midst. But with the call to seek the welfare of the empire, the exiles are living out of the vision and hope of Genesis, for the good of the empire itself. This is a call to be God's people by bringing shalom and healing in places of brokenness and despair. And what could be more broken and more in need of healing than the place of oppression, the heart of the empire?

But these are more than words of courageous hope for the exiles: they also contain an element of judgment. Israel had always been called to be a blessing to the nations, to bring light to the Gentiles, a healing covenant for the peoples. Israel had not fulfilled this call in its own land. So it is required to fulfill the calling in exile: to work for the welfare, the blessing, of the Gentiles in Babylon. Israel may have been unfaithful all along, but God is determined that somewhere, somehow, God's people will begin to live as they are called. In the heart of the empire they are called to live a life of community that is paradoxically in direct challenge to all that the empire stands for, while seeking the welfare of the empire itself.

In the face of empire, Jeremiah proclaims a subversive word of the Lord that completely counters Israel's imperial experience. Under the oppressive rule of Babylon and Assyria, the Israelites are still called to build a faithful community and to live subject to a different kind of rule and kingship, one where imperial might and power is used for feeding the hunger of the people and binding up their wounds.

These visions of an alternative kingdom and a different kind of ruler fueled Jewish expectation for the next few centuries. Although the Persian empire permitted the Jews to return to their land, the return was tinged with disappointment. Israel was still a client state, and it remained so, first under Persia, then under the Greeks, then under Rome. One empire after another, and brief periods of independence, served only to give hope to dreams of one day being a free people with no king but God. That the experience of empire cast a shadow over Israel's self-understanding can be seen starkly in many of the intertestamental writings.[4] Under that shadow Israel longed for a true return from exile, a new exodus from under the oppressive weight of empire.[5]

That such hopes were alive in the hearts of the early Christian community can be seen in the Gospel of Luke, which takes pains to situate Jesus very firmly in the setting of the empire of his day. Three times at the beginning of the Gospel we are told very precisely who are the imperial rulers over Israel (Lk 1:5; 2:1-4; 3:1-2). Jesus is born into a world of violent, all-encompassing imperial control, where Emperor Augustus is registering the whole world for the purposes of taxation. Those taxes would then fund his military and building projects, in service of Roman "peace" maintained by an army quick enough to stamp out any dissension or discord. In the face of many levels of imperial control—the divinely sanctioned sovereignty of the emperor, the military power of the empire, together with an economics of oppression managed by client kings and priestly collaborators—a Mes-

[4]For examples, see 4 Ezra 4:23-25; Tobias 4:5-7; Baruch 3:6-8; 2 Maccabees 1:27-29; 1 Enoch 85-90.

[5]For a reading of first-century Judaism in terms of a story still waiting for resolution, a story of exile still longing for return, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), esp. pp. 268-72; these themes are further developed in Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Min-

siah is born and an alternative peace is announced.[6]

Luke doesn't situate his story so clearly in an imperial context just because he is a historian and delights in the details of historical accuracy. There is more at stake here: Luke tells us about rulers and empire because he is concerned with setting the context of power. Such a context is evident throughout the gospel story as Luke highlights the way the kingdom of Jesus subverts and overthrows the kingdom of Rome. So the song of Mary audaciously proclaims a God who throws down the rich and powerful and raises up the poor and lowly (Lk 1:46-55). And Luke makes sure that we understand John the Baptist's Isaiah-style proclamation of a return from exile in the context of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was the ruler of Galilee (Lk 3:1-6; cf. Is 40:3-5). No one would miss the subversive overtones to this proclamation.

As Luke tells the story, almost everything Jesus did or said was an implicit challenge to the empire and its way of working in the world. Jesus begins his "Nazareth manifesto" in Luke 4 by placing himself in the tradition of Isaiah, announcing good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoner and enslaved, and sight for the blind (Lk 4:18-20; cf. Is 61:2). Then Jesus goes on to indicate that in the kingdom he proclaims there will be welcome and healing even for the despised Gentiles (Lk 4:21-30). And this word of good news to the poor is enacted in strange ways: banquets that include both the rich and the poor, and food multiplied for the peasants who follow him.[7] The rich are welcome if they are willing to sell all that they have, become as lilies of the field and little children, worship God rather than mammon, and become poor.

In this new social order everything is redefined from the bottom up; but the bottom does not then participate in the power grabs that have characterized the top. No, those who are the greatest in Jesus' kingdom are to be like those who serve (Lk 22:24-27). This is a kingdom in which the master comes home from a banquet and serves the waiting slaves (Lk 12:35-38). This is a kingdom where the ruler is enthroned on a cross—the Roman empire's instrument of torture—and in such an enthronement wins freedom and life for his people. And then he calls his followers to do likewise.

In Luke, Jesus' whole life is framed by questions of whether to submit to the empire in the paying of taxes. His birth to two peasant parents is in the midst of a trek to be enrolled for taxation (Lk 2:1-7); his ending is in the midst of questions of whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor (Lk 20:20-26); and the charge against him at his trial is that he forbade the people to pay imperial taxes and set himself up as a king over against the emperor (Lk 23:2).

These themes were central to the stories that first-century Christians learned about

[6] "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'" (Lk 2:13-14).

[7] The account of the feeding of the five thousand ends with the statement "And all ate and were filled" (Lk

Jesus and the history of Israel. We have focused largely on Luke's telling of the Jesus story, although the proclamation of a kingdom antithetical to the empire is present throughout all the tellings in the Synoptic Gospels.[8] It is the Jesus met in these stories that the early Christian community followed. It is this Jesus who enamored Nympha and revolutionized her life.

We have focused on Luke's version of the tale because it is likely that his story would have been known to the Colossian church. At the end of the letter to them, Paul conveys greetings from "Luke, the beloved physician" (Col 4:14).[9] It is therefore reasonable to assume that either through Tychicus or previously, the Colossians have heard Luke-shaped stories of Jesus.

Now, it could be contested that the Colossians were not completely immersed in the story of Israel, especially since they were primarily pagan converts to Christianity. Two points need to be made here. In the first place, converts bring with them to their new faith the passion and zeal of conversion. They invariably throw themselves into their new faith and learn everything they can about its beliefs and story. In the second place, Paul's immersion in the story would have shaped his writing and articulation whether or not the community to which he was writing would have understood all his allusions and references. As we shall see as we look at Colossians, however, it seems evident that the story of Israel was a foundational story for the writer of the epistle.

Fruitfulness in the Face of Empire

Although Colossians contains no overt quotations of Israel's Scriptures, it is rich in allusions that not only appeal to Israel's story but also deepen the critique of empire that we have been exploring so far in this letter. This critique begins in the first ten verses of Colossians 1, which contain two provocative references to bearing fruit:

> You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. (1:5-6)
>
> For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him,

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[8]For example, as Richard A. Horsley notes, "Mark's Gospel was an alternative way of conceiving history. History was not running only or primarily through Rome and her empire, but God, who acted previously to deliver, establish and renew a people, is active again now in Jesus delivering and renewing people" ("Submerged Biblical Histories and Imperial Biblical Studies," in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah [Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998], p. 161). See also Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2001), and Richard Horsley, *The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

[9]That the Luke referred to here is the same as the author of Luke-Acts is an ancient tradition that can be found in Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.4.1-7; 3.14.14-15; 5.8.3; 6.25.6.

as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. (1:9-10)

The Colossian community was surrounded by a claim of fruitfulness and fertility, a claim rooted in the oppressive military might of the empire, in the controlling social structures of the empire, and in evocative images of lush fertility found on the buildings, statues and household items that shaped their visual imagination.[10] It was a claim that incessantly called everyone to acknowledge that Rome was the source of fruitful abundance. In the midst of scarce resources, one could share in that abundance and partake of that fruitfulness only if one remained faithful to the empire and the structures, oppressive or not, that made the empire powerful.

This was no new claim. Throughout its history, Israel not only lived in the shadow of empire but also constantly grappled with the claims of empire to be the source of abundance, security and fertility, whether those claims were made by Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Rome or even its own rulers. In Egypt the abundance of the empire resulted in the captivity of the people; in the wilderness Israel longingly remembered the secure fertility of the empire; and in the land God gave Israel, Solomon demonstrated that even an Israelite king could behave like the ruler of an empire, reveling in the abundance that comes from extensive and oppressive military control.[11] When Israel behaved like an empire, it was not surprising that it embraced imperial gods of guaranteed fertility who sanctioned the expropriation of fruitful land from peasant landowners.[12] Then, under the imperial control of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, Israel painfully discovered that the preferred economics of empire is to enslave the producers of food and resources, so that the fruit of their labor ends up on the table of the elite. By the first century, the people of Israel knew that the promise of abundance within a secure empire was a lie.

Throughout all of Israel's history, however, there had been a countertestimony, a witness to an alternative social vision that challenged the claims of empire. The fruitfulness of Yahweh, and the fruit that Israel was called to bear, was central to that countertestimony. Yahweh is recalled as the Creator who graciously supplies abundance for humanity and the rest of creation (Ps 104; 146). Moreover, according to the psalmist, such fruitfulness is linked to justice and righteousness (Ps 146:5-9). In God's rule, fecund authority is practiced for liberation and shalom.

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[10]See Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 171-79, for descriptions of the link between fruitfulness and military might, as well as the ubiquity of images of fruitfulness.

[11]See Genesis 47; Exodus 16:3; 1 Kings 4:20-23; 21. On 1 Kings 4:20-23, see Walter Brueggemann, "'Vine and Fig Tree': A Case Study in Imagination and Criticism," in *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp. 91-110.

[12]While the theme of embracing the worship of Baal permeates the narrative of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 16:29—22:40), the expropriating character of such an imperial ideology is highlighted in the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21.

Such themes of creational fruitfulness and social justice become the grounding rhythm for Israel's life before God. In every period of its history and in every genre of its literature, there is a witness to God's fruitful blessing in creation and the practice of an alternative social ethic that images God in redemption and care for creation and neighbor. The alternative social ethic of the practice of jubilee envisioned in Leviticus 25 will result in fruitfulness and peace:[13]

> If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land. And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land. (Lev 26:3-6)

Again and again the two are linked: fertility and fruitfulness in the land on the one hand, and peace and security on the other, are rooted in rejection of the militaristic consumerism of the empire and the social and economic practices that support it.

Isaiah's parable of the vineyard is perhaps the strongest example of the link between covenantal faithfulness and fruitfulness. Only when Israel is practicing justice and righteousness will she be truly fruitful (Is 5:1-7). The familiar call of Isaiah 58 "to loose the bonds of injustice, . . . let the oppressed go free" (v. 6) moves to this promise of fertility: "You shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail" (v. 11). The chapter ends with a call to observe sabbath rather than pursue consumptive economic practices (Is 58:13-14; see also Ezek 34; Mic 4:1-5; Zech 8:1-16).

Of course, while the promise of fertility is rooted in faithfulness to an alternative covenantal way of life that God outlines in Torah, the story reveals how unfaithfulness and idolatry result in barrenness and drought. For when Israel believes the words of empire rather than the words of Yahweh, when Israel tries to guarantee fertility and abundance by means of promiscuous idolatry and abusive and consumptive economics, it is made desolate (Is 24:4-12; Hos 4:1-3). In the face of such judgment, it is no surprise that the prophets describe Yahweh's coming salvation in terms of fruitfulness and safety for the whole of creation and peace in the land (Is 19:9; 32:14-20; 41:18-19; 43:19-20; 55; Ezek 34:25-31; Zech 8:12-13). While Israel was looking for peace in political alliances, worshiping the gods of the empire, following the fashion of the fertility gods, and engaging in a militaristic economics, Yahweh was shaking his head: "She did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil" (Hos 2:8). Nonetheless, God's restoration of the people will still be a matter of fruitfulness in a milieu of peace: "For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit,

[13]Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Sabbath and Jubilee: Radical Alternatives for Being Human," in *Making a New Beginning: Biblical Reflections on Jubilee* (Toronto: Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative, 1998), pp. 15-23.

the ground shall give its produce, and the skies shall give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things" (Zech 8:12).

These counterimperial themes of fruitfulness and peace set in the context of Israel's covenant come to their climax in Jesus. The community that Jesus envisions not only results in fruitfulness but is itself a manifestation of the fruitfulness of Yahweh. At key points in the Gospel narratives we meet metaphors and language of fruitfulness. For instance, the parable of the sower, which sets the stage for all the other parables, reaches its zenith in those who hear the word and understand it and bear fruit and yield a hundredfold, or sixty or thirty (Mt 13:23; Mk 4:20; Lk 8:15). This is fruit that grows out of being rooted in the word of Jesus. Again, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (or the Sermon on the Plain, in Luke), Jesus uses the metaphor of a tree being known by its fruit (Mt 7:16-20; Lk 6:43-45). This is the summation of a long discourse where Jesus describes the fruit that the people are called to bear: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk 6:27-28). This was already strange advice to give to people who quite justifiably looked forward to a day of vengeance on their imperial overlords. But Jesus takes it even further by commanding his followers to offer the other cheek when abused, not withholding their shirt when they are oppressed in a court of law, giving to those who beg, lending without expecting in return, withholding judgment, giving and forgiving (Lk 6:29-30, 35-38). Such fruit will indeed result in abundance: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Lk 6:38). This is an image of overflowing abundance growing out of generosity—a generosity of heart as well as possessions. Indeed that is the fundamental link between loving your enemies and giving without expecting in return: a generosity of spirit is needed for both. That is what we call grace.

This is the fruit that the community forming itself around Jesus is called to bear; and it is fruit that refuses to engage the empire on its own terms. It refuses to let enemies be enemies, to let debtors be debtors. As the parallel passage in Matthew shows, reconciliation is the fruit of this kingdom (Mt 5:2-26). This is an ethic in which the generosity of God overcomes the violence and economic exploitation of the empire. And once they are so overcome and undermined, the empire begins to crumble.

Colossians Revisited

So here's the question. When Paul employs the metaphor of fruitfulness in his opening section of this letter, what echoes and overtones does this language carry? Wouldn't this language reverberate with fruitfulness as a dominant metaphor in the conflicting narratives of this community's life? If the empire encodes in the imagery of everyday life—on public arches, statues and buildings—the claim that Rome and its emperor are the beneficent provider and guarantor of all fruitfulness, then can a

claim that the "gospel" is bearing fruit "in the whole world" be heard as anything less than a challenge to this imperial fruitfulness? Especially if we remember that the word *gospel (euangelion)* is the very same term that the empire reserves for announcements of military success and pronouncements from the emperor, doesn't it become clear that there is something deeply subversive in what Paul is saying here? Whose gospel is the source of a fruitfulness that will last and sustain the world—the gospel of Caesar or the gospel of Jesus?

And what kind of fruitfulness are we talking about? Paul tells the Colossians that the gospel of Jesus bears a fruit in their lives that is fundamentally different from the fruit of the empire. The fruit of this gospel is rooted not in military might and economic oppression but in the practice of justice and sacrificial faithfulness. This is a gospel that bears fruit "in every good work" of forgiving generosity and therefore undermines the hoarding abundance touted by the empire.

But it is not just Roman narratives of fruitfulness that reverberate with Paul's language here. For those with ears to hear, Paul is evoking a larger narrative counter to that of empire: Israel's story as it comes to its fulfillment in the story of Jesus.[14] When Paul says that the gospel is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world and that the knowledge of God in Christ results in a life worthy of the Lord, bearing fruit in all kinds of good works, his language echoes the stories of Jesus, the prophets' promises of restored fruitfulness, the Torah's connection of fruitfulness to justice and obedience, and the very foundational calling for humanity to bear fruit and multiply. Remember our hermeneutical advice earlier in this book: always hear the New Testament with Old Testament ears. Paul, as a convert rooted in the best traditions of pharisaic Judaism, could do nothing other than to think and write in the metaphors and images of that tradition. When he uses a metaphor as seemingly common as "bearing fruit," the whole scriptural tradition of Israel is informing its meaning.

And what a powerful and liberating meaning this is! Just as Israel was called to be a fruit-bearing community in the shadow of various empires making arrogant claims to provide fertility and abundance to their people, so also does this small Christian community in Colossae struggle to bear the fruit of a gospel that is counter to the dominant ideology all around them.

For those in the community who had learned the history of Israel vis-à-vis other empires, together with the countertestimony of the law and the prophets, Paul's language would have evoked a whole other way of political and economic being in community, rooted in Torah and God's calls to justice and care for the disfranchised. This path of covenant faithfulness leads to a fruitfulness for the whole earth that God alone can provide. For those who knew the story of Jesus, Paul's language sug-

[14]Sylvia Keesmaat has explored these themes in greater depth in "Scripture, Law and Fruit: Paul and the Biblical Story," *Pro Rege* 27, no. 4 (June 1999): 10-19.

gested a call to an alternative ethic in the face of the empire, an ethic rooted in Jesus and his act of reconciliation on the cross. For those in Colossae with ears to hear, Paul's scriptural allusions evoke a whole new world and way of life. And as we shall see, that alternative world and liberating way of life form the heart of Paul's teaching in Colossians.