

Not in Service to Empire (Part One)

“The image of the invisible God”

Reflection 61 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

We’re winding down this series on “A New World in the Morning,” but this week we’re still with it, realizing that we live in an age of great transition when the cultural forms of religion are dramatically changing, falling apart, in fact, and new patterns are coming together. And such times are stressful and at first disquieting. But by faith in God and the hope that lives within us there is every reason to suppose that people will one day look back on our times and talk of a great global spiritual awakening, a consciousness of God filling the earth as the waters cover the sea, the kind of turning point that only comes around every 500 years or so. And it will be seen as good, as truly good, as a new world in the morning.

But having said that, I offer some cautionary thoughts.

I begin with this. Two visions of greatness are always competing for the soul of our nation, and particularly right now.¹ One vision seeks empire. It sees America as good and wise and innocent. Of all the nations on earth, she alone can be trusted to rule the world, to decide what other nations can and cannot do. And she cannot be legitimately restrained by anyone else because she is the best and the wisest. She is founded on the basis of the world’s finest national constitution and she is driven by the world’s best economic system. She is the best and the wisest, and she alone can be trusted.

The other vision says that America is great not because she of all nations is good and wise and innocent, but because of all nations she knows that she is not. It is precisely our knowing that we are not angels that makes us exceptional. As our Founding Fathers knew, as the framers of our constitution knew, we are capable of both great good and great evil. In the words of George Washington in a letter to John Jay in 1786, “We must take human nature as we find it.” And so around every nexus of power, they built restraint, and checks and balances.

Now because we know that we are not angels, that we can be corrupted by unlimited power, we accept the restraints that empires refuse. We respect others. We respect other nations. We respect the human rights of others. We listen to their perspectives. We build relationships with them, and we seek to understand them. And if we never yield our own sovereignty, we freely do accept the restraints that empires refuse. And other nations seeing this welcome our preeminence, and so our preeminence endures.

It is this vision of national greatness that has kept America strong: knowing that we are not angels. There is nothing unique in world politics or world history about supposing you are the best and the wisest. ISIS supposes that. All empires have supposed that, but, as the prophet Nahum declared of the fall of the Assyrian empire, it always ends with hearts melting, knees giving way, bodies trembling and every face growing pale. This is a large and important issue in our time. It plays out in the headlines of our papers.

And so in the interest of a new world transformed by consciousness of God, I’d like to take us back to Scripture to see that Scripture, in fact, has a lot to say about this. Consider, for instance,

Colossians 1:15-20. First, its context: Colossians is a letter from Paul to a church in the city of Colossae, a small town in central Turkey, then Roman Asia Minor, in a river valley 100 miles east of Ephesus. Colossae had once been a great city, some 400 years before Paul writes his letter, but now in AD 60 it's much smaller. Yet Paul wrote to this church, we believe from Roman imprisonment, one of the most important documents anyone ever wrote.

But the modern reader can read this letter today and completely miss the elephant in the room – this historical context of the book – that the Colossian letter is first about life under an empire. It's about thrones, powers, rulers and authorities. It's about government forcing its ways on its subjects who have little or no voice in how they are governed. It's about one state forcing its ways on other states. It's about a Caesar who is worshipped as Savior of the whole world. It's about a Caesar who claims to have brought peace and prosperity by the force of arms. It's about a Caesar who claims to be God's son, pre-eminent, the firstborn, the head of the body politic, the empire. It's about a Caesar whom the first-century BC writer Horace had already said "has wiped away our sins!" It's about a Caesar whose images are everywhere. It's about a Caesar who claims that in him all things hold together.

But, in fact, much of Scripture is about empire. The book of Revelation is, for sure, about empire. So is Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount is given in response to life under an empire. But empire is the backdrop for the whole story we find ourselves in. It's the story of Abraham who left the gods of the empire to serve the living God. It's the story of Moses whom God used to rescue his people from the greatest empire of their day, Egypt. Who is this Yahweh? In Exodus 15:1, he is "the one who hurls horse and rider into the sea." It's the story of a nation founded at Sinai along lines that are anti-imperial, with no king, but instead laws protecting all the marginalized, widows, orphans, the poor and foreigners, laws to mitigate slavery, laws to eliminate poverty across generations. And when Israel herself turned imperial, exile is the eventual result. If she aspires to be an empire herself, then she will be taken into captivity by empires.

So it is throughout Scripture. The Gospel of Luke specifically situates Jesus in the setting of empire. Twice near the beginning of Luke, the reader is told precisely who the Emperor is (2:1-4; 3:1-2). The story of Jesus begins when the Emperor Augustus is registering the whole world for purposes of taxation. Jesus will be asked if it's lawful to pay taxes to the empire (20:20-26). And the charge against him at his trial is that he opposed payment of taxes to Caesar (23:2). And it is likely Luke's Gospel that the church in Colossae was familiar with.

From beginning to end, Scripture is written under the shadow of empire and contests imperial ideology.

ⁱ This section indebted to Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight*, x-xi.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week