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STUDIES AND OBSERVATIONS

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Picturing Paul Against Empire: The Gospel of the Apostle to the Gentiles in Imperial Perspective

Harry Maier

*Professor of New Testament Studies, Vancouver School of Theology
Faculty member at Green College, University of British Columbia*

(This is the manuscript of Maier's inaugural lecture as full professor of Vancouver School of Theology, which he presented on November 14, 2005, in that institution's Epiphany Chapel. The reader will derive greatest benefit from this article by viewing the images identified in the text. The author has facilitated this by providing in the endnotes Internet addresses for each image, current as of March 2006. Finally, let the reader note that Maier dedicates the manuscript of this lecture to the memory of Maurice F. Wiles, 1924-2005. – Managing Editor)

... what strikes me as the most significant feature in the development of intellectual disciplines is that the most important changes occur when somebody succeeds in seeing the subject from a new perspective. It is a new frame of reference rather than new particular facts (though the former is often set off by the latter) which is most productive of advance. Now when you see something from a new perspective, everything is altered. The element of identity that persists through a change of that kind is not to be sought in any key set of particulars which remain totally unaltered; rather it is to be found in a continuing similarity of shape or character which is compatible with some change in every particular. – Maurice F. Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1974), p. 7.

No other figure in the western tradition, save Jesus of Nazareth, has been viewed from more perspectives than Paul of Tarsus. If a chief reward of the scholarly life is to succeed in seeing a subject from a new vantage point and thereby change the way every particular is

perceived then the study of Paul has repaid richly on its investment. The Lukan Paul the Missionary of Acts, the cosmic Paul of Colossians and Ephesians, Paul the institution-defender of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, Marcion's supercessionist Paul, Paul the gnostic pneumatic of Valentinus, Augustine's introspective Paul, Luther's Paul of the liberated conscience, the mystical Paul of Albert Schweizer, Paul the apocalyptic, rabbi Paul, Paul the (radical) Jew, Paul the Evangelical climax of the covenant – these are but a fraction of the varying and often competing perspectives by means of which new frames of reference have been offered for seeing Paul and for interpreting letters which the author of the second letter to Peter says “contain things hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16).

Each in differing ways reflects the social locations of Paul's interpreters. Perspectives are, after all, only possible if one is situated in a place and in the case of Paul's interpreters place has counted for much, whether it be Luke's mixed community of Jews and Gentiles seeking legitimacy for eating together and living a mixed communion near the end of the first century, or Augustine's Constantinian Paul who has renounced Judaism to spread an empire-wide Christian Gospel, or Luther's late Medieval, nominalist Paul who offers declarative justification to believing sinners, or the post-Holocaust Jewish Paul anguishing for Israel while gathering a rich harvest of Gentile salvation in fulfilment of Israel's destiny to be a light to the Gentiles at the end of days. In each case, there is no Paul without his interpreters, and there is no apostle without history. Take away his audiences who come to his letters with all the complexities of their historical and social location and his words are but marks on a page. And precisely because his letters contain so many things “hard to understand” not to mention apparently inconsistent with one another, the *corpus Paulinum* fits well what Umberto Eco calls the “Open Text.” In contradistinction to the “Closed Text” where meaning is relatively straightforward and vantage points more or less determined or determinable from the outset, the Open Text urges upon its readers an experimentation and play of vantage points. Open Texts release innumerable competing interpretations and direct attention toward interpreters' choices and strategies for deciding on one set of interpretations over another.

In what follows I want to open up Paul yet again, to offer another vantage point for seeing the apostle, arising out of and situated in the

social location of my own contemporary context – namely Empire as the orienting point for reading the apostle’s letters. I have cited Maurice Wiles’ concept of perspective advisedly, because in what follows – if you will allow the mixed metaphor for a moment – I want to attend to how Paul may have “looked” when people heard his letters, and in attending to how he looked then, to take up how he might “look” to us today when we in turn go about listening to him. My aim is to interpret Paul, standing with the apostle, as it were, before the monuments and other imperial media that celebrated the achievements of Roman imperial power as ushering in a divinely appointed civil order.

I consider the space between Paul and imperial iconography as a site of complex transaction between colonized and colonizer, between imperial subjects and political overlords, and the transformations that occur for both as a result of the negotiation. Such a monumental perspective invites a programme for interpreting Paul and his successors that moves beyond a purely literary-exegetical reading of texts and urges a widening of viewpoint to include the visual political culture of Antiquity and its uses of iconography to construct social and religious identity.

The Julio-Claudian period during which New Testament Pauline Christianities took shape and expanded is remarkable for its empire-wide broadcasting and strategic deployment of imagery designed to convince the residents of a far-flung imperium that they were the beneficiaries and rightly dominated subjects of a divinely appointed order.¹ During the life of Paul and his New Testament successors imperial iconographers celebrated the reigns of their overlords either as morally legislated and militarily or diplomatically achieved utopias – the realisation of a returned Golden Age – or as bringing about a social order closely associated with Golden Age images of bliss. Erected and displayed everywhere across the Empire, this imagery invited its predominantly illiterate inhabitants iconographically to configure themselves as characters in a divine drama of a heavenly peace brought to earth, and to locate themselves as viewers in varying degrees of subjection.² In other words, imperial iconography became a potent site of self and communal formation, negotiated in different ways depending on one’s social location.

Picturing in Empire

As I will show shortly, the case for adopting an iconographical perspective to picture Paul arises from the evidence itself and once attended to helps to bring into dramatic political and societal relief features of Pauline theologies passed over or distorted by a purely theological apolitical reading or by a limited literary, lexicographical approach to Paul's letters. New Testament Pauline texts offer a potent vantage point for investigating the formulation of self and community in an imperial situation. Attention to imperial iconography allows us to "see" Paul from a new perspective, formulating ideals against the visual backdrop of imperial portraits of a divinely appointed social order.

Such a vantage point could not be more timely than in our own cultural situation in which empire of another form seeks to construct us as individuals and integrate us into communal formations destructive of ourselves as individuals and of planetary well being. If there is no interpretation without place, the case for adopting the imperial perspective expresses the commitment to responsible exegetical stewardship of the biblical witness in the Canadian context at the start of a new millennium. To picture Paul against Empire is to situate him against the backdrop of Roman might; it is also to observe him in the light of our own imperial context and its prevailing iconographies and visual codes. If in Paul's context the visual served to form identities in a largely illiterate social world, today the visual also forms identities though not so much in a literate as a post-literate or post-textual world. As in Paul's ancient context, the visual dominates our contemporary western society, even if on different terms.

Critical reflection on contemporary visual culture has resulted in a vast scholarly repertoire for considering how imagery and representation and the narratives they both explicitly and implicitly express form viewers to become particular kinds of spectators.³ Images persuade us to live out prescribed roles and interpret ourselves according to the metaphors privileged by predominant visual codes. The critical literature dedicated to the analysis of this is interested in considering the forms of spectatorship engendered by the visual as well as the ways in which spectators actively make the visual their own and at once articulate and resist prescribed modes of meaning. In contemporary culture, the visual has become the privileged site of engendering meaning and desire, especially the

trans-national desires of capital. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of image and capital as furnishing the context for the communal and individual self-construction of our global order, especially in the developed and developing world. As twin themes, image and capital furnish the backdrop both for cultural formations and political ones. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and especially as a consequence of the adoption by the Bush administration of a military doctrine of pre-emptive strike (outlined in the White House paper, “The National Security of the United States of America”) notions of Empire have increasingly come to the forefront of the political imagination.⁴ Increasingly one sees the phrase Pax Americana as analogue to the Pax Romana – the Roman peace celebrated by imperial propagandists in the New Testament period and beyond – as the appropriate title for the social order we are presently living through.

My own preference, however, is to speak rather of an empire of capital, an empire without an emperor or any single nation for that matter, but which expresses a system of acquisitive domination.⁵ This desire for acquisition is fuelled in no small measure by the images that go with it convincing subjects of the rightful necessity and inevitability of certain modes of domination. While determining influences of the foreign and economic policies of a state as powerful as America are not to be minimised, it is important to nevertheless to situate those policies in the larger trans-national enterprises of capital and the strategies to assure its dominion in fashioning the human imagination and desire. As opposed to a Pax Americana as analogue to Pax Romana, I prefer to speak of a *pax pecunia* – or peace offered through capital. This *pax pecunia* offers an eschatological vision to achieve an oikoumenh or economy – a trans-ethnic vision of global unity centred around the desire for purchase and expenditure. Capital is eschatological since it is predicated on the promise of increasing return and prosperity. Its futurist orientation reflects its origins in the Christian west with its powerful cultural mythologies of progressive sanctification and the promise of a history completed in the material bounty and satisfaction of a New Jerusalem with bejewelled gates and streets covered with gold. Refracted through a Christian lens, the eschatological promise of capital looks longingly to the future and happily sacrifices life and spends the present to possess it. That promise conspires with the visual in contemporary culture. Erecting

desire, it deploys strategies of illusion to arouse an acquisitive identity and then, through modes of visualisation, to make the self and society envious of themselves as they might be – ersatz identities contemptible of the self and the world as it is and willing to wipe out everything, to lose its soul as it were, to possess the earth.

To picture Paul against Empire is to situate oneself in this position of the visual, to return to it, to insist on reflecting upon it, to make the Church as the site for addressing it and inviting *metanoia*, repentance, the transformation of mind, placed locally, enfolded in the present and in the company of one's neighbour, amidst the old contemptible self. It is to follow Paul in urging an alternative vision – an intentional poetics of seeing that worships with eyes wide open to the travail and suffering of the world capital-fuelled desire would gloss over and urge us to avert our eyes. On such an account, a reading of Paul that fails to locate text and community of interpretation in a visual empire of the interminable expansion of capital, and instead transforms it into a purely theological reflection on an other-worldly justification by faith secured by an atoning sacrifice, is one that risks turning Christian faith into a further instance of acquisitive desire: right confession in the coffer flows and the soul to heaven goes. In our societal context the imaginary is tempting Christianity into a contemporary Babylonian Captivity as it articulates and promotes beliefs directly legitimating of the enterprises of capital and their associated fantasies (bigger and newer churches, larger parking lots, numerical growth as measure of success, the obliteration of Christian difference on the way toward a global one-size fits all mass-produced Christianity mediated by theologically dubious popular religious markets to fit a mass-produced economic humankind, and so on), or works as a foundation for it to function free of critique and analysis.

Picturing Paul against Empire is to come to the text from the particularity of this social context and to seek insight into the strategies of capital and visual culture to draw attention away from the proclamation that already in water and bread and wine and the promise of God one possesses all that one could ask for or imagine in order to be freed for expending self for the sake of the other. Such a picturing of Paul against Empire will be this-worldly. It will insist not upon a future utopia that is nowhere (as the etymology of the term implies) but the desiring imagination, but the specifically local and

the concrete present as the site for encountering an alternative oikoumenh of trans-national abundance.

Paul in Perspective

To return to Paul, it would be difficult to underestimate the power and prevalence of imperial iconography in the apostle's social world, as well as its importance in shaping the local political and religious culture of the civic world in which Pauline Christianity took root and flowered. It is therefore remarkable that this "monumental perspective" for viewing Paul has received so little scholarly attention.⁶ There are several reasons for this. The most obvious one is that Paul and his successors did not draw pictures or sculpt statues, but wrote letters. As a consequence, the medium of the written text has required scholars to develop competences and skills in lexicography not iconography. Where the relation of the New Testament to its imperial political context has been considered it has been primarily and justifiably by way of literary parallels and contrasts.⁷ The less obvious reason for lack of attention to the iconographical political context of Pauline Christianities is the absence of evidence of explicitly Christian iconography until well into the second century. As a consequence, some interpreters have hastened to conclude that earliest Christianity was self-consciously aniconic – opposed to images – in its rejection of a pagan world rife with polytheistic religious imagery. One well-argued but ultimately unpersuasive case reasons that Paul's insistence that Jesus is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; 1 Cor. 15:45) disqualified uses of iconography that *per se* implied the legitimacy of pagan religious iconography celebrating others as gods.⁸ And some go further to argue that attention to imperial culture and metaphor in the shaping of Christianity is a blind alley since early Christians were so opposed to the pagan political culture of their day that they could scarcely have appropriated its motifs and imagery to give voice to their own cherished ideals and practices.⁹

These are anaemic arguments. In the first place, to borrow a quotation, the absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. It is an argument from silence to conclude from the all too few fragments that survive from earliest Christianity outside the New Testament that iconography did not play an important role in the shaping of Christian identity.

More to the point, to consider earliest Christianities in the light of imperial iconography is not to seek a linear relation of cause and effect, but to witness both from the perspective of what Adela Yarbro Collins names the cultural situation of imperial rule.¹⁰ Earliest Christianity did not drop out of heaven, self-formed and ready made, it developed through the complexities of cultural negotiation and appropriation that belong empirically to every historical phenomenon. To attend to cultural situation as opposed to direct linear influences is to bring the right nuance to the question of the relation of Roman imperial iconography and political ideology to the development of New Testament Pauline theologies, institutions, and practices. The metaphor of cultural negotiation (which I prefer to Collins's "cultural situation") speaks to the give and take barter of cultural formations. It invites New Testament exegetes to consider how Paul, as his other religious contemporaries similarly living through the culturally colonizing practices that defined what we call the Roman Empire, both assembled and disassembled imperial norms and ideals in his articulation of Jesus as Lord and Son of God.

In the cultural situation of imperial domination of local cultures, as in other analogous processes of colonization, colonizer and colonized are not self-contained entities that bounce off one another like so many billiard balls, but are complexly elastic, the colonizer reformed even as he reforms, the colonized refracting even as she reflects the colonizers wishes and desires back to himself. To picture Paul against Empire is to explore processes of what Fernando Ortiz names "transculturation," namely "the extremely complex transmutations of culture" resistant to simplistic conceptions of assimilation, acculturation, deculturation, or the rejection of culture.¹¹

The cultural negotiation of imperial rule was a cultural process whereby cultural doubling was not so much a cloning as an often subtle renegotiation of the dominant on other terms. The Roman Empire celebrated its emperors for their military prowess in imposing peace upon otherwise factious peoples and achieving a world-wide peace. For their earthly achievements they were hailed as lords and sons of god having upon their their death attained apotheosis and enthronement amongst the gods.¹² To make that celebration compelling it broadcast images of Caesar as victor and divine son across its vast dominion, as in the *Gemma Augustea*.¹³

Paul's letters offer a transculturation of this language and narratives of military victory and apotheosis. Here the political motifs of lordship and sonship are applied – not to the conqueror of far-flung territories, but rather to the victim of an imperially dominated people, the crucified Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. His is the victory, to him is ascribed the language of divine sonship, and through his death is a transethnic unity of peoples won. For Paul to borrow and deploy this language and these ideals was at once to appropriate and to inflect, to inscribe an imperial mode of domination and simultaneously to contest it. For him to celebrate his listeners – Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female – as predestined “to be conformed to the image of [God’s] Son” (Rom. 8:29), or as enthroned *with* Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6; cf. Col. 3:1), as one of Paul’s disciples so provocatively suggests, was in the very act of an imperial appropriation of a widely dispersed imperial motif to democratize and universalise, and hence reconfigure if not implicitly contest, hierarchical, eschatological imagery reserved in the political iconographical programme of the day for Caesar. The result of this was one of the more dramatic recontextualisations of imagery in the ancient world – a new perspective, to return to the image with which our discussion opened, by means of which everything is altered.

Once attention to the imperial cultural situation of early Christianity is adopted, then, motifs deployed by Paul to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ and to communicate the ideals associated with the reign of Christ as lord take on a strikingly imperial looking profile. They also invite a reconsideration of the processes of transculturation that occurred as a developing Christian faith took root and expanded through the social networks of the Roman Empire. They urge interpreters who would otherwise spiritualise Pauline theology and direct their eyes heavenward to understand its intention as celebrating a heavenly set of ideals to keep their feet planted on the ground and keep their eyes open to the political, this-worldly dimensions of Paul’s understanding. For those already convinced of the importance of attention to Roman imperial politics and ideals in the interpretation of Paul, attention to iconography brings into striking visual relief parallels and points of contact of the Pauline corpus with literary imperial themes and motifs. And for those who like the mess of politics, considering the spaces of the contact – what Marjorie Pratt has called “the contact

zone” of colonizer and colonized – the spaces between text and iconography promises means to be swept up in the hermeneutical flows, counter-flows, and cross-currents that are inherent in the exercise of power and the “arts of domination” and resistance.

Agrarian Abundance and Military Peace

The Augustan age represents a self-conscious and strategic broadcasting of politically oriented imagery designed to convince its viewers that the inhabitants of the Roman Empire were the beneficiaries of a divinely appointed means of bringing the diverse subjects of the Roman Empire into an overarching imperial unity under the lordship of Caesar. Strategically placed images of the emperor at the central intersections of public life – in the market, the court, on temples, the theatre, and so on – as well as stylized and repetitious portraits of the emperor on coins associated with images of military prowess, global victory, personified virtues, and abundance distributed across the Empire by generous largesse invited the inhabitants of Rome’s imperium to insert themselves as characters in the epic narrative or Rome’s achievement in civilising the world and bringing about a worldwide peace mirroring the heavenly peace of the gods. This imagery tended to cluster around two broad themes of an agrarian utopia and theologies of military victory.¹⁴

In the case of agrarian themes, the imperial achievements and the emperor and his household were celebrated by disseminating across the empire pictures of natural rural abundance and fertility, represented by images of deified nature and cosmic powers.¹⁵ Here natural bounty tells the story of nature, humans, and the gods at peace with one another, an abundance embodied in and guaranteed by the reign of Caesar. *The Altar of Peace*, erected on the Field of Mars, to celebrate Augustus’s military victories over Spain and Gaul in 13 BCE, is emblematic of the Augustan deployment of natural imagery and sets the tone for imperial iconography that was to spread across the Empire in the decades to come.¹⁶ The altar was built at a right angle to a mausoleum constructed by Augustus to house his and his family’s remains. Before it stood a great sundial oriented so that on 23 September, Augustus’ birthday, the horologium – an Egyptian obelisk with a great globe at the top – would cause the sun to cast a shadow through the open door of the mausoleum onto the altar. By such a spatial organization of monuments, Augustus assured that in

life and in death his reign would be interpreted as a cosmic achievement.¹⁷ The mausoleum itself is remarkable for the way it is covered with representations of nature's abundance and fertility. Its exterior is richly ornamented with friezes of vines, flowers, fruits and plants both real and imagined, in the midst of which birds are in flight bringing food to their nestlings and exotic animals crawl. Here is a world teeming with life and birth – the image of an earth renewed as a consequence of Augustus's achievements.¹⁸ Positioned on the monument at eye-level, it is here the viewer is situated – living, as it were, amidst the plenty and fecundity of Augustan abundance and in the honour code of ancient Greco-Roman society therefore made beholden to the gift of the nature's produce achieved by the emperor's successes. They invite viewers to place themselves within the bounty represented before them.¹⁹

Included amongst the reliefs above the viewer, at the entrance of the altar, is a representation of the female goddess of peace, Pax, seated with infants on her lap.²⁰ One reaches for her breast, the other hands her a piece of fruit that has just been taken from a great cluster of fruits piled over her womb. Flowers and plants magnified out of proportion shoot up around her. At her left and right are female personifications of the winds on land and sea, turned to face the goddess, their powers in the service of securing and guaranteeing the abundance at the relief's centre. Beneath the wind on land an overturned water jug waters the plants shooting up around it; underneath the wind on sea, a sea monster similarly turns to Pax, submissive to the power above it. A bull and sheep rest and graze peacefully below the goddess's seat.

Pax herself is an eclectic image that combines traditional iconography usually reserved for the goddess of harvest, Ceres, with her veil and stalks of grain, and the earth goddess Tellus, with her landscape and rocky seat. The relief as a whole captures in an instant a celebratory mood and tone – all works together in harmony, balance and symmetry. As such it captures in an instant Augustan ideals and achievements. The infants on Pax's lap express the achievement of the moral legislation of Augustus passed a few years earlier, punishing adultery and rewarding reproduction of children, restoring traditional Roman family values to the civic order. The personified winds around a divinity who is at once goddess of peace, harvest, and earth express a cosmic and earthly peace that guarantees imperial

prosperity. This is the world as Augustus wants it imagined and viewers are to insert themselves into this landscape as the grateful beneficiaries of a reign that brings abundance and peace. As the viewer stands before the monument before her are the vines and flowers described above. The seated goddess with the winds dwarfs the viewer, cosmic powers enthroned and working above to assure the benefaction bestowed below.

The Altar of Peace is a stunning iconographical representation of a political and religious ideology that was broadcast throughout the whole Roman Empire. While Rome had its altar of peace, other cities had other imperial monuments on which similar images could be found. But most importantly were the coins that were struck by imperial mints and that were circulated through every corner of the empire, carried by the richest and the poorest of its inhabitants. Augustus and his successors took advantage of coins as the medium to communicate their ideals and celebrate their achievements. Coinage in particular became a potent means of spreading this message and disseminating widely the message that Rome through its emperors was bringing the world abundance and peace. Great attention was given to the formulation of a relatively small repertoire of images repeated far and wide to offer shorthand, stylised expressions of Roman achievement. Repeatedly one discovers on coins cornucopiae, enthroned divinities giving gifts of harvest, sheaves of ripe corn, and emperors distributing gifts of grain.²¹ Like the Altar of Peace, such coins communicated to their users that the agrarian based economy they worked in was part of a transnational divinely blessed abundance and natural fecundity brought about by an imperial regime established by the gods.

The Altar of Peace was erected as a consequence of military victories in Spain and Gaul. The Latin word for peace, *pax*, meant for Romans pacification, or the cessation of war by the force of arms. If on the outside of the Altar of Peace images of natural abundance were displayed, the inside of the altar included representations of conquered peoples, brought to heel by Roman military prowess. The altar was erected on the Field of Mars the Roman god of war and Augustus's ancestor. Only fragments remain of the altar's relief depicting subject peoples – an iconographical programme that recurred with some regularity throughout the capital. To gain a fuller sense of what these sought to communicate, we turn our attention to

another monument, this time outside of Rome, in Asia Minor, at the city of Aphrodisias, thus named because it was home to the worship of the goddess Aphrodite or Venus. Aphrodisias became a site of imperial importance because, like Mars, Venus was considered one of Augustus' divine ancestors.²²

In 1971 an imperial monument was discovered dedicated to the worship of the imperial household.²³ Like the Altar of Peace it is stunning. Constructed over the period of some 40 years, begun under Tiberius (reigned 14-37 CE) and completed under Nero (54-68 CE), it is not only contemporary with the undisputed letters of Paul, it was also erected in an area Paul was active.

Looking west from the street, through an open two-storey gateway at the temple complex's entry, an ancient viewer would have seen a long and narrow courtyard (c. 14 x 90 m.) ending in a temple at the far end raised on seven steps.²⁴ Entering into the courtyard she would have seen two long three-storey porticoes on either side of the courtyard, towering 12 m. above her. The immediate impression would have been one, therefore, of the vertical. On the second and third storeys of each portico were some 50 female statues lined up from the entry gate at one end to the temple to the other representing nations Augustus and his successors had conquered, as well as relief depicting emperors as olympian like gods surrounded by divine cosmic powers assuring their military triumph, portrayed in postures of military victory over their vanquished enemies.²⁵ The impact on a first-century viewer would have been dramatic. Along the narrow courtyard the eye would have been drawn by a long line of uninterrupted statues to the temple at the far end where the emperor was to be rightly worshiped, thus preserving the benefits of a world-encompassing rule. The statues representing incorporated peoples in distinctive ethnic costume expressed a unity in diversity that was at the heart of the Augustan cosmopolitan imagination. From whatever province or frontier she may have originated in a far-flung Empire she would have found a representation of herself with which to identify and thereby incorporate herself into Rome's imperial reach. Dwarfed by representations of Olympian like emperors and cosmic powers rising high above she was encouraged to insert herself in a cosmos of powers towering over her to mould and fashion her tiny identity. Such a dramatic complex of images urged a form of spectatorship by means of which the vertical and horizontal lines of

empire were inscribed on the viewer's body, inserting it as a member of the subject nations, a small beneficiary living under the imperium of the gods and their appointed emperor enthroned high above.

Like the Altar of Peace in Rome, the temple complex dedicated to emperor worship in Aphrodisias offers a potent collage of images emblematic of what was broadcast to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire, that the peace, abundance, and order arising from Caesar's rule were gifts bestowed by the gods through the emperor to the world. The temple at Aphrodisias expresses a Roman Theology of Victory in which all the peoples and ethnic groups distributed across a vast Empire are united under one cosmic and divine political rule and together are the recipients of a universally enjoyed fertility and abundance. That theology celebrated Rome as divinely established master of the world thanks to its piety and good morals.

As in the case of images of natural plenty, the Roman theology of victory similarly was broadcast in a carefully stylised simplicity through the Empire. Imperial mints repeatedly published coins with conquered nations personified as kneeling subjects or seated downcast mourning females before enthroned emperors or symbols of Roman military prowess.²⁶ Everywhere one would have used coins with images of winged victory striding across the globe, or emperors being crowned by the Goddess Victory, atop arches of victory.²⁷ Like the images of nature's bounty, such iconographical programmes were designed to impress upon the inhabitants of the Empire that the civil order was a divinely achieved and directed dominion.

Paul in the Contact Zone

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, s/he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come. (2 Cor. 5:17)

[T]he creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons [and daughters] of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now ... (Rom. 8:19-22)

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.... For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field ... (1 Cor. 3:6)
But if some of the branches were broken off, and you [Gentiles], a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of

the olive tree, do not boast over the branches ... For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you ... And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.” (Rom. 11:17,21,23-24)

Whatever the abundant biblical parallels and motifs that may be invoked as accompaniment and backdrop for these texts, these images were at home amidst images of imperial rule and agrarian abundance broadcast across the Empire. Paul’s vision of a creation set free from bondage to Sin and Death, renewed by God’s raising of Jesus from the dead, transformed by the power of the Spirit, is a picture of self and world that is at home in the Roman Empire, though with some startling transculturation, as we will see. Similarly the Pauline Gospel celebrating the incorporation of all, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28; also 1 Cor. 12:13), barbarian and Scythian under the lordship of Christ who “is all and in all” (Col. 3:11) strikes a powerful imperially resonant chord when placed against the backdrop of Roman representations of nations incorporated into the Roman pax. The Colossian vision of the cosmic rule of Christ extends to the farthest and remotest corner of the Roman Empire – to Scythia, an area described by one Roman historian as the fantasy space of the imperial imagination.²⁸ Striking a tone that is immediately recognisable as imperial, the author to the Colossians expresses the reach of Christ’s transnational imperium by celebrating Paul as the emissary who has preached a gospel that “is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world” (Col. 1:6). The same author represents Christ as one who makes peace (eirhnopoiew – Col.1:20) and reconciles (apokatallassw – Col. 1:22) – the former term appearing in Antiquity only in contexts celebrating imperial achievement and the latter belonging to the technical political vocabulary of diplomacy. For Paul and his successors Christ’s rule issues forth in images of limitless abundance, expressed especially by reference to the innumerable offspring of Gospel promise (Gal. 3:15-19, 29; 4:27-28; Rom. 8:19; 9:6-11; 1 Cor. 4:14-15; Eph. 1:5). The term “Gospel” itself is a political term that appears nowhere other than the Augustan political culture of Paul’s day and those hearing and using it would have immediately recognised it as such.²⁹

What is implicit is made explicit especially in Paul's letter to the Philippians, where political titles associated with imperial military victory ascribed to Christ – Saviour and Lord (Phil. 3:20) – are directly connected with notions of inhabiting a transnational imperium won by Jesus' death and exaltation in resurrection, in "our commonwealth (politeuma) ... in heaven" (3:20). Roman imperial iconography would have helped to make such language compelling, especially its representations of subject peoples on their knees before conquering emperors. Particularly potent from such an imperial iconographical perspective was the Pauline eschatological hope that in the fullness of time "at the name of Jesus every knee [would] bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10-11; cf. Eph. 1:20-23; 3:14-15).³⁰ The imperial imagery of triumph is most extensively deployed in 1 Thessalonians, addressed to a church inhabiting the imperial capital of the Roman Province of Macedonia, with a large population of Roman settlers. Paul awaits the return of the Lord Jesus whose coming he represents drawing on the imagery of the ritualised reception of the visiting emperor– the imperial *adventus* – with all the associated paraphernalia of a trumpet call and the dignitaries going forth to meet him (1 Thess. 5:16-17).³¹ And just to drive the point home, he insists that it is precisely when people say "There is peace and security" (5:3) – terms that precisely appear on Roman monuments and coinage – that the unexpected *adventus* will arrive catching people unaware. "May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" Paul wishes the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5:23; compare 2 Thess. 3:16) – concluding an extraordinary series of self-consciously deployed imperial metaphors anticipating the imminent *adventus*.

Thus, the apostle set aside from his mother's womb to proclaim a Gospel of full inclusion of all peoples wherever and whoever they were, of a universal triumph of God in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus reflects in the fullest sense of the term an imperial situation of Empire. Those who heard that Gospel and embraced it were at once caught up in a sophisticated imperial negotiation of a movement trading in political slogans and images. Again, Marjorie Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zone" opens a fertile avenue of investigation of how religious identities centred

around the Lord Jesus at once replicated and contested similar tropes and motifs associated with dwelling under the Lord Caesar. The phrase “contact zone” refers “to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths ...”³² The social space opened by the Altar of Peace and the temple complex of Aphrodisias offers a place of cultural meeting in an asymmetrical power relation of Roman dominion in which through a variety of means the inhabitants of an Empire are socialised to live in ways conducive to the functioning of Empire. The apostle who urges his readers to pay their taxes and offer honour and reverence to those it is due (Rom. 13:1-7) famously offers a means of such supportive functioning. But at a deeper level, the thereby colonized also engage in spirited decolonization. For the victory Paul celebrates, and the inclusion of all people’s in God’s global embrace he has been called to extend to the nations, while drawing on the language of Empire precisely disrupts imperial modes of domination and control. This he does by making the site of this inclusion and peace with God and with one another the symbol not of the dominant, but the dominated – the cross. If the Roman peace is a pacification of enemies won by the power of the sword, the peace Paul celebrates is one that is achieved not through the death of the conquered, but the death of the Lord. “Therefore, since we are righteoused (δικαιωθέντες) by faith (ἐκ πίστεως), we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:1, 6-8) Whereas in the contemporary political imagination it is the impious who die before the pious divinely appointed emperor who extends his global rule and saves the world from ruin, in this account, it is Christ who lays down his life.

This is a counter-imperial vision couched paradoxically in imperial terms that reverses the hermeneutical flow of Empire even as it swims in its currents. Paul’s letters represent what James C. Scott calls an “art of political disguise” in as much as what at first glance seems to imply a replication of imperial ideals of dominating lordship, and so offers a means of socialising Paul’s audience into

prevailing institutions of hierarchical exploitation, upon closer investigation reveals its exact opposite.³³ The strong are to care for the weak; the dishonoured one, the crucified Jesus, in a fantastic reversal, becomes the exalted one. The last is first; the dead lives. This offers a symbolic inversion of the world and of imperial ideology in general and as inversion turns the known world upside down. The abundance that arises from this alternative communal order is one that lives in suffering love for the sake of the other which is the fulfilling not of the laws of the Caesar, but the law of Christ (Gal. 6:1-2). Such a transnational order of natural abundance rests not on the piety of the emperor, or his ability to enact forms of legislation that will guarantee a right mode of civil functioning to assure divine blessing and the *pax deum*, or peace of the gods. Still less, is the peace that is being celebrated here one that arises from the wielding of the sword, or the threat of violence. Rather Paul proffers an understanding centred on a portrait of God's self-giving and urges upon Paul's believers a living out of self-giving found in the event of Jesus' death for others. This is finally an extra-legal order that cannot be legislated to be attained, but rests on the self-giving of God for creation and the similar self-giving of self for one's neighbour.

This means that when Paul celebrates the dominion or lordship of Jesus, while the image is an imperial one, its logic divests that form of Empire invested in legislation, military might, and political domination. Such Empires are doomed to failure; they are incapable of recognizing the wisdom of the cross; the rulers of this age crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:6-8). It is not amongst the powerful and the elites that such a Gospel is proclaimed, Paul reminds the fractious Corinthians, but it is amongst the marginalised and weak, the foolish, and the low (1 Cor. 1:26-31). For this reason one carries about the death of Jesus, the paradoxical dying that is living, the giving that is receiving, and the laying down of one's life that is its raising up again (2 Cor. 4:7-12). If Paul speaks in the language of Empire and is even colonized by it, he does not replicate it. Rather he refracts and refocuses it, and transforms its images so that they serve a different end. The result is a hybrid form of imperial dominion that is at once and is not Empire. The apostle who bears on his body the crucifixion of Jesus (Gal. 5:17) and urges his audiences to be imitators of him (Phil. 3:17; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1) offers a counter-inscription of Empire on the self that enters into the temple complex of Aphrodisias and

views the glories of Rome with different eyes. The one who exhorts the Colossians to remember Paul's chains (Col. 4:18) insists on a reconfiguring of the politics of domination so that one always sides with the dominated, the crucified, the righteous sons and daughters of Abraham who for God's sake "are being killed all day long... accounted as sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom. 8:36) because it is in suffering solidarity with the victims of Empire that one conquers in a counter-imperium of love (8:37-39).

Culture Jam

It is here amidst this hybrid picture of Empire that the study of the New Testament in North America must situate itself. Even as capital colonizes us all in its visual codes, inviting us to be producers and consumers, what an imperial consideration of Paul calls forth is meditation on our own imperial situation, and to become ever more conscious of those visual icons and regimes of seeing that form us to be particular kinds of spectators. If those seductive advertising models gaze out at us from their glossy finish inviting us to be dissatisfied with what we are and to long for what we may yet become, the call of the Gospel is to recognize what is already ours if we but open our eyes to recognize it. This Gospel gives us eyes to return the gaze of the illusory. The genius of Paul was his ability to negotiate a potent repertoire of images so as to formulate an alternative communal self-configuration centred in a counter-narrative that resisted the politics of domination and violence of his age. His letters addressed to often uncomprehending or misunderstanding audiences indicate the up-hill battles he and his successors faced.

"Culture jamming," a phrase made popular by Kalle Lasn, the editor of the Vancouver-based magazine, *Adbusters*, expresses well what we discover in Paul's letters and invites a potent articulation of Christian identity in our context.³⁴ Culture jamming refers the act of using existing mass media to comment on those media themselves. This is what we see Paul doing in deploying the imagery of Empire and reformulating it to reverse its flows of domination. Jamming, a musical metaphor, refers to creative and unpredictable improvisation – the juxtaposition of tropes and metaphors to achieve an unanticipated effect. For Lasn, culture jam indicates a highly individualistic form of societal rebellion by creative often ironical

commentary (for example, artists “ironizing” fashion advertisement duplicating Calvin Kline fashion ads promoting Obsession cologne but parodying them in the image of the self-consumed male narcissism of a male model obsessed with his genitals).³⁵ That individualistic expression has been rightly critiqued as itself playing into the empire of capital because of the ways in which consumerism thrives on the production of individual expression.³⁶ An alternative model of culture jam, however, centres on communal formations that seek a shared ethos couched in an alternative set of narratives about the self. For Paul communities gathered around the memory of the crucified Jesus, celebrating the one raised and living, embodied and resurrected in their gathering, were engaged in a potent formulation of culture jam. His letters offer improvisations of Empire even as they direct his communities to live the presence of the raised one in their midst.

Culture jamming on these terms is a potent metaphor for contemporary North American Christian self and communal formulation. In this empire of capital and image we discover ourselves, perhaps as never before there is a need for spirited communities of faith to find ways of living within culture without replicating it, to learn to cultivate new models of hybridity. As for Paul’s first listeners, we will not have far to look to live a provocative doubling of Empire. To gather once again around the shared memory of the crucified, both of Jesus once slain, and the contemporary slain for the sake of domination and acquisition, to insist on this memory, never to avert our gaze from it however distressing, is precisely to disrupt the anaesthetizing powers of contemporary imagery. This will require a prophetic witness to contest those theologies erected precisely to spirit us away and invite us to escape the flesh and blood particularity of our embodied, economic, societal existence. For those who would resolve the violent death of Jesus into a theory of atonement, or a way of salvation that would by-pass the body and the material features of our lives, such a witness will insist that the death of Jesus demands a commitment to lodging our faith firmly amidst the physical realities of a too often brutal existence.

To gather at the table where there is abundance more than can be asked for imagined and to seek there the metaphors for a counter-imperial way of living, in giving of ourselves for the sake of the

brutalized and disenfranchised other, this is to follow our brother Paul and learn to be imitators of him in a contemporary discipleship of culture jam. To do this is to picture with Paul against Empire.

Notes

- 1 In the following discussion I am assuming the pseudonymous authorship of Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastorals. “Pauline Christianities” expresses the diversity of the *corpus Paulinum*, including the variety of occasional theologies expressed by the uncontested letters.
- 2 See especially, Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), with the important qualifications of Jeremy Tanner, “Portraits, Power, and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 90 (2000):18-50, who challenges Zanker’s semiotic approach by rightly insisting on attention to the role of audience and individual participation in status-specific self-and communal construction of imperial visual codes. John R. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 315* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) offers an application attentive to ancient audience reception and construction, with bibliography.
- 3 The literature is vast, but a good introduction may be found with Patrick Fuery and Kelli Fuery, *Visual Cultures and Critical Theory* (London: Arnold, 2003), as well as Chris Jenks, ed., *Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Gordon Fye and John Law, eds., *Picturing Power: Visual Depiction and Social Relations* Sociological Review Monograph 35 (London: Routledge, 1988).
- 4 See <www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html>.
- 5 For a shrill account, Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (Toronto: Vintage, 2000) with the theoretical apparatus of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2000); also, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *The End of the Nation State* trans. Victoria Elliott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), “empire without emperor,” pp. 47-66.
- 6 Two notable exceptions are Larry J. Kreizer, *Striking Images: Roman Imperial Coinage and the New Testament World* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: A New Vision of Paul’s Word and World* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2004).

- ⁷ See especially, Dieter Georgi, *Theocracy in Paul's Praxis and Theology* trans. David E. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1987); Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); *Paul and Politics: Ecclesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (2000); *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (2004). This represents a return to a focus prevalent amongst German New Testament scholars a century ago, represented, for example, in the still definitive treatment by Adolf Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R.M. Strachan (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910).
- ⁸ Thus, C. Kavin Rowe, "New Testament Iconography? Situating Paul in the Absence of Material Evidence," in Annettee Weissenrieder, Frierdericke Wendt and Petra von Gemünden, *Picturing the New Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 289-312.
- ⁹ Thus, Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Ann Arbor, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 92-99; Martin Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God* trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1976), p. 28.
- ¹⁰ Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Worship of Jesus and the Imperial Cult," in Carey C. Newman, Joames H. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis, eds., *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 243-57.
- ¹¹ Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, 4 ed., trans Harriot de Onís (Duke: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 97-103.
- ¹² For full discussion see, J. Rufus Fears, *Principis a Diis Electus: The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome* (Rome: American Academy at Rome, 1977); Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979).
- ¹³ The image can be viewed at:
<<http://etext.virginia.edu/users/morford/aug16.jpg>>.
- ¹⁴ For an introduction to the twin themes of military pax and agrarian utopia see Dieter Georgi, "Who is the True Propeht?" *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986): 100-26
- ¹⁵ For an excellent discussion see Zanker, *Images*, pp. 167-238; Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 90-155.

- 16 Images of the altar may be found at:
 <http://wings.buffalo.edu/AandL/Maecenas/rome/ara_pacis/thumbnails_contents.html>. For full discussion, Zanker, *Images*, pp. 172-83; Galinsky, pp. 141-55.
- 17 For a drawing of the mausoleum, sundial, and altar see:
 <<http://www.wisc.edu/arth/ah201/19.html>>.
- 18 For an image of the vegetation frieze see:
 <<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/rome/image1915.htm>>.
- 19 A good sense of the position of the viewer vis-à-vis the monument as a whole may be seen in the photo found at:
 <<http://www.gtuss.org/hjimages/pages/APA%20Right%20Front%20Corner.htm>>.
- 20 For the image, see:
 <http://wings.buffalo.edu/AandL/Maecenas/rome/ara_pacis/ac661804.html>.
- 21 For numismatic imagery representing cornucopiae:
 <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classic/wilson/coin/ric252.htm>> (goddess Pax holds a cornucopia);
 <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classic/wilson/coin/ric303.htm>> (ears of grain in a wagon drawn by imperial quadriga).
- 22 For a map of the ancient Mediterranean basin, see:
 <<http://www.nyu.edu/projects/aphrodisias/>>.
- 23 For a repertoire of images as well as discussion of their imperial meaning, see R.R.R. Smith, "The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias," *Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987): 88-138.
- 24 For an artist's reconstruction see:
 <<http://www.friedmund-hueber.at/huaphro3.htm>>;
 see also <<http://www.gtuss.org/hjimages/pages/Plan%201.htm>>;
 a photo of the contemporary remains can be seen at:
 <<http://www.gtuss.org/hjimages/pages/Sebasteion%20Whole.htm>>
- 25 For example, one relief depicts a deified Claudius conquering a female personification of Britain:
 <http://www.kzu.ch/fach/as/gallerie/rare/ka/ka_pages/aphrodisias/aphro_08.htm>;
 Claudius is represented as a divine power with personifications of sea and land in service to him:
<http://www.gtuss.org/hjimages/pages/Claudius.htm>.
 Another relief represent Nero as a divinity victorious over a conquered female personification of Armenia:
 <<http://www.indiana.edu/~leach/c414/2005/sebastaion11.jpg>>.

- ²⁶ See for example, the numismatic image of a kneeling Parthian – so popular in the first century that people wore the image on their rings: <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classic/wilson/coin/ric288.htm>>; another striking image is of a crocodile with the inscription, *Aegypto capta* (Egypt vanquished): <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classic/wilson/coin/ric275a.htm>>.
- ²⁷ Augustus on a triumphal arch: <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classic/wilson/coin/ric131.htm>>. Victory atop globe: <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classic/wilson/coin/ric255.htm>>; Augustus with foot on globe holding broken prows of enemy ships and Victory on obverse: <<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classic/wilson/coin/ric256.htm>>.
- ²⁸ Thus, D. Braund, “The Caucasian Frontier: Myth, Exploration and the Dynamics of Imperialism,” in P. Freeman and D. Kennedy, *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East* 2 Vols. (Oxford: OUP, 1986), vol. 1, pp. 31-49, esp. pp. 36-38.
- ²⁹ See for example, the inscription at Priene inaugurating cult dedicated to the worship of Augustus and his family. The inscription heralds Augustus’ birth as a “saviour” who brings about “good tidings” (eu0aggelion; l. 41, Victor Ehrenberg and A.H.M. Jones, eds., *Documents Illustrating the Reign of Augustus and Tiberius*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), pp. 81-82.
- ³⁰ A point regrettably not noticed in otherwise excellent studies on the parallels with and possible influence of the imperial cult on the Philippians Hymn: David Seeley, “The Background of the Philippians Hymn (2:6-11),” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 1 (1994) 49-72; Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Mikael Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State: Christians, Jews, and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans, and Philippians* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001).
- ³¹ For a good summary of imperial parallels with scholarly literature, Tellbe, *Paul*, pp. 127-30.
- ³² Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone” in Peter Gibian, ed. *Mass Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 61-72, esp. p. 63.
- ³³ For the “arts of political disguise,” James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 136-82.
- ³⁴ Kalle Lasn, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge – And Why We Must* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

³⁵ See <<http://www.adbusters.org/spoofads/fashion/obsession-m/>>.

³⁶ Thus, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: Why Cultures Can't be Jammed* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2004).