

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 Iychicus, 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,

¹While 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 Lycaean 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

²Colossae 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).

³All of these positions were held by a wealthy woman, Menodora, daughter of Megacles from Silyon 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.

⁴According 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

⁵This 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.

⁶Gentiles who worshipped 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.”

“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.

⁷On 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 despoiling 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 worshipping 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 worshipping 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

⁸In 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.

⁹On the early Christian community as an alternative economic community, see Anthony J. Ricciutti, “The Economics of the Way: Jubilee Practice Among the Early Christians According to the Acts of the Apostles” (M.Phil.F. thesis, 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

¹⁰Horace *Odes* 4.15.

¹¹Paul 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 worshipping 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

¹³According 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 worshipped.

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.

¹⁴The 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.

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

¹⁶See 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.

¹⁷On 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.