

The Cosmic Christ

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24 & Ephesians 1: 15- 2: 10

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If you think the language and images of Ephesians are alien and bizarre, *they are*. Confusing, run-on sentences, strange talk of “powers and dominions,” vague references to “the ruler of the power of the air” and something going on in the “heavenly places,” having something to do with Christ, all make for quite the theological puzzle. It is easy to pass right over these verses, thinking like the psalmist “t is so high I cannot attain it.” Or we might casually read over them, take what we can with a surface meaning and hope we’re not verging on heresy.

In order for these verses to speak to us we have to first try to enter their world, to understand the text based on their terms. We have to step outside our perspective and enter into the skin of a first-century recent convert to Christianity, a former pagan Gentile or faithful Jew who now finds herself worshipping Jesus in a community of believers called the assembly, the *ekklesia*, what we would call the church.

One very helpful bit of information is to know something about the first-century worldview, how they envisioned the world, a view that runs throughout the Bible. In the ancient worldview, it was assumed that “everything earthly has a heavenly counterpart, and everything heavenly has an earthly counterpart. Every event participated in two different dimensions of reality – the earth and the heaven.” For example, “if war begins on earth, then there must be, at the same time, war in heaven between the angels of the nations in the heavenly council. Likewise, events initiated in heaven are mirrored on earth. This is a symbolic way of saying that every material reality has a spiritual dimension, and every spiritual reality has physical consequences.” Everything consists of visible and invisible entities. According to Rabbi Hoshaiyah, writing from the third century, once, when the angels who serve God in heaven asked God when the New Year was going to be, God answered them, ‘You ask me? You and I, we will ask the law court below!’ According to the Talmud, after the temple of Jerusalem had been destroyed, the ministering angels, thinking of the correspondence between the earthly and the heavenly, begged God not to

destroy the heavenly dwelling place as well.¹ Can you see the connection between the heavenly and the earthly?

Now add to this picture a region just between heaven and earth. There in that murky place between heaven and earth the ancients believed, including the author of Ephesians (maybe Paul, we're not sure), lived all kinds of demons – some good, some not good – who ruled that middle place and thus shaped the lives of women and men and the direction of history. For the writer of Ephesians it was the powers, the dominions, the rulers, and authorities of that middle place that have enslaved and dominated human life, to the degree that human life itself was being hindered and held back from its God-appointed purpose and destiny. Sin was holding them back and for Ephesians sin was attributed not to something gone awoul in the soul or self, but due to the ruler of this sub-lunar area. It's these principalities and powers who are messing up God's plans and making life miserable unto death. It is the “ruler of the power of the air” who held sway over the world – *that is, until Jesus Christ*.

The first-century citizens of the Roman Empire understood themselves living in a vast, complex web of powers that were not under their control. Just as the abusive power of the Empire controlled their earthly life, the heavenly powers were shaping their lives, as well. Constrained, trapped, controlled by powers both earthly and heavenly, the individual was almost a pawn in a larger, cosmic, chess game. Instead of seeing sin as something one *did*, sin was understood as something someone was *in* – and *in deep*. One couldn't help but sin because you were being influenced by malevolent powers. And sometimes that is how we still experience sin as part of a *system*, a network or web of powers that we find ourselves caught in and cannot get out of. When we are caught in someone else's sinful actions. Sometimes we are the victims of systemic sin, like the hungry and poor who are the victims of a sinful societal system that will not care for them, or when we live in a system that will not care for the sick, the young or the old. That's sin. When we find ourselves in abusive relationships or families, in toxic work environments, and violent societies, we feel helpless and out of control. And sometimes trapped in those environments, caught in despair we sin, we lash out in anger or worse, *we abuse*, become toxic or violent. It's because the system is corrupt or broken or trapped and we have become victims. And victims usually become, unless grace intervenes, the very ones who victimize. Can you see the system of sin? *It's the same destructive, violent system that put an*

¹ Quotations and illustrations taken from Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1998), pp. 15ff.

innocent man to death on a cross, a victim of a cruel empire that had no room for the competing power of love, put to death by an emperor who could not tolerate competing gods.

But it's that very demonic system that Jesus took on and conquered in order to free us. Jesus took on the powers that seek to destroy and reversed their hold over our lives. That's what Ephesians is praising God for. The author wants his listeners to know and lay claim to what has been revealed to us, so that with the "eyes of their heart enlightened" (what a beautiful phrase) they may know "the hope to which he has called" them, "what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according the working of his great power." Listen to this language: "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."

Can you hear what's being claimed here? Raising Jesus from the dead and seating him on the throne of God's power signals that something radical and irreversible has occurred in the world. *The exaltation of the risen Christ with God in the heavenly places will have profound impact upon the earthly places. Christ broke through that murky area influenced by the powers and dominions and demons that hinder and enslave and destroy and is now in authority and power far above every other authority or power or ruler.* The good news of the gospel is that those powers no longer have any ultimate authority over the world. The good news is that we're free, saved from those demonic forces. So that even when we were dead in our sin, God made us alive together with Christ. The resurrection, you see, has cosmic implications because Jesus now becomes a cosmic Christ, who died not just for me and my soul, but, as John's gospel put it, for the world, and not just the world, but, as it reads in Greek, the *cosmos* –*for God so loved the cosmos* (John 3:16 – and see John 3:17!). *The gospel is cosmic. Amazing!*

Ephesians then invites us to go even further. With the exaltation comes *identification*. It's not enough to know that Christ has broken through the dominions and now sits enthroned with God. The text reads, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in sin,...raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." When we believe in and through Jesus, we are brought into the very presence of God

and invited to live from that perspective, to know, first-hand what are the “immeasurable riches of his grace.” This does not come at some point in the future in the great Hereafter; the future is now. *Once* you were dead, *but now* you are alive in Christ Jesus, raised up with him. The follower is asked to believe now – *already* – this is the state of our lives.

Then Ephesians takes us ever farther up into the heavenly realm. Later on in 2:18 and then again in 3:12, the author says that the resurrection marks something new in the heavens, that Jew and Gentile will be grafted together into one body to reveal the glory of God. “So he came and proclaimed peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.” And then in 3:12, speaking of the eternal, mysterious purpose of God now unfolding before their eyes in the resurrection, “This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that God has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through the faith of Jesus.” This Greek word “access” is an *imperial* word; it means having access to the emperor, it means having access to the throne, to the seat of power.² *The author wants his church members to know, to realize, to fathom and apprehend the kind of power available to them, because of Christ we are able to go to God with confidence and boldness, and claim the benefits that a true Emperor is able to offer all people – the immeasurable riches of God’s grace, and love, and mercy.* Ephesians wants to embolden and strengthen them to realize who they are, to realize the kind of world they are living in, to know the power available to them, the access offered.

Why is this so important? This is more than just trying to boost their self-image and make them feel good. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” And why have we been saved from cosmic domination by this grace? “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” And with this comes the further unfolding of God’s mystery of the ages. The cosmic Christ has freed us so that God can now work through us in a new way, that we might do the works of God in a way that could not be done when the *cosmos* was enslaved. The cosmic Christ has saved us, for we are what he has made us, *poiema* in Greek, meaning, “new creation,” it is connected with the work “poem,” God is writing a poem through us. It can also mean creating a work of art, that we are God’s masterpiece and that God is continually forming

² Pheme Perkins, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Volume XI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 401.

us into something together that will free us to do God's work, so that through you, through us together the fullness of God might fill all things. There is divine election here, we are called, predestined before the beginning of time, predestined not for injustice or even for salvation (as some Calvinists would read it), but called to do *the good works of God*. We are chosen, but chosen to do something. With the call comes responsibility.

This all seems rather "pie in the sky," so heavenly minded, but no earthly good, so fantastical. It's tough to claim any of this is true when we read the news and see how complex the world is becoming and fear is on the rise (no wonder religious fundamentalism of all stripes is growing so fast, because it is all based on fear). The world for the Ephesians was equally tough; probably more than ours, where being Christian was really a life and death choice. Yet, their courage and confidence and boldness are remarkable. It was texts like these that provided hope. But it shouldn't surprise us, because, as they would say, it was not *their* courage or confidence or boldness, but what they came to believe and know about themselves and the world through Christ. Their courage and confidence come from knowing Christ. That makes all the difference.

So, remember who you are and what you have at your disposal in Christ; live from that knowledge. Claim your calling, and don't be afraid of it. Christ is reigning in power and we sit with him. Know who you are. We are royalty.

At the end of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the four children who saved Narnia from the rule of the White Witch, Peter, Edmund, Susan, and Lucy, are crowned by Aslan, the Son of the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea, who is a Christ-figure in Lewis' marvelous tale. Amid the deafening shouts of praise from Narnia, Aslan's powerful voice rises above it all and says, "Once a king or queen in Narnia, always a king or queen. Bear it well, Sons of Adam! Bear it well, Daughters of Eve!"³ Bear it well. Bear it well.

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³ C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), p. 179.