

Trump's imperial golden age

Augustus and Nero also offered peace and security for those who fell in line. Paul critiques them in his epistle to the Romans.

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In his victory speech in November, Donald Trump made a promise:

And every citizen, I will fight for you, for your family and your future, every single day I will be fighting for you with every breath in my body. I will not rest until we have delivered the strong, safe, and prosperous America that our children deserve and that you deserve. This will truly be the golden age of America.

Promises of an American golden age may appear innocent to some. But as a New Testament scholar, I find them unsettling. They remind me of the golden ages heralded by the Roman emperors Augustus and Nero and their supporters. Much like the golden age offered to the United States today, the Roman golden age promised plenty, peace, and security for those who fell in line with its prerogatives.

My research on Paul and his context has convinced me that when he writes in Romans about the creation longing and groaning for liberation (8:19–22), he is subtly critiquing the emperor and his imperial golden age. What's more, throughout Romans Paul exhorts readers to inculcate practices and perspectives that subvert imperial logic. The letter functions at the communal level, then, as a counterpoint to imperial agendas and actions. It commends instead collective and individual lives lived in congruence with the self-giving—rather than other-harming—crucified Christ (15:3; 14:15; 3:24–25).

But it's easy for us who do not inhabit Paul's world to miss his implied critique. We must pause, therefore, to re-familiarize ourselves with Roman imperial rhetoric and practices before we can discern Paul's appraisal and its timely message for our own era.

In the first centuries BCE and CE, court poets, coins, statues, gifts of grain, and military actions proclaimed that the son of god—the Roman emperor Augustus and, later, Nero—had initiated a golden age of abundance and peace. Imperial forms of communication promised flourishing for those willing to submit to the emperor's "god-ordained" rule. This rule and its consequent golden age purported to provide incomparable peace and plenty for people, especially Roman citizens and wealthy free and freed men. It promised nonhuman flourishing as well: fields shining gold with grain, trees and vines heavy with fruit, wild beasts tamed and contained. All of this on account of the religious devotion and tactical successes that only the emperor, as son of god and head of the body politic, could deliver.

A shining example of this imperial perspective can be found in the words of Horace, who lauds Caesar Augustus quite explicitly in *Odes* 4.15:

Your rule, Augustus,
Has brought bounty
to our fields . . .

Reined in the recklessness of those who would swerve
From the straight course, banished wickedness,
And called us back to those ancient ways
By which the Latin name,

The power of Rome, the fame and majesty
Of her empire have been gloriously extended
From where the bright sun first rises
Even to its westernmost bed.

While Caesar stands guard, no turmoil at home,
No arms abroad can unbalance the peace,
And no wrath that forges swords
Shall beset our cities.

According to this paeon, Augustus initiated a time of agricultural abundance, societal security, and political dominion and peace: a golden age. Such sentiments are echoed by Virgil: “You’ve heard his coming promised—Caesar Augustus! Son of a god, he will bring back the Age of Gold” (*Aeneid*, 6.913–916). Four decades later, during Paul’s day, Nero’s supporters believed he had brought the golden age to “a second birth” (Siculus, “Eclogue 1”).

To be sure, Italy and its Mediterranean neighbors did enjoy a certain form of peace after the Roman Republic transitioned into an empire under Augustus. And Rome, as the empire’s capital city, experienced unparalleled abundance, peace, and religious revitalization, particularly while Augustus ruled. For free, wealthy, male citizens, the imperial world did indeed glitter brightly.

However, just below the age’s thin gold veneer, we discover that peace, prosperity, fertility, and abundance did not benefit everyone—and did not bring true, natural fertility. Instead, the luxuries the few enjoyed required the exploitation, domination,

and impoverishment of many members of creation, human and nonhuman alike. The gold glimmering on the surface of Roman rhetoric masked a rotten core of slavery, eviction, extraction, and murder.

There are a variety of imperial activities we could study in order to expose the rot underlying the Roman Empire. Over the past decade I've chosen to study its approaches to agriculture and the food supply. Imperial provinces and territories—along with the emperor's personal estates—provided the food to power the empire's military, nourish its governing authorities, and pacify its capital's able-bodied men, who might have rebelled were it not for the emperor's regular gifts of grain. Yet all this agricultural abundance ultimately degraded ecosystems and exploited people, especially those in colonial territories and on imperial estates.

In the 50s and 60s CE, near the end of Paul's ministry, Nero's own golden age of agricultural abundance relied not only on his inheritances from imperial predecessors but also on nefarious acquisitions. After ordering Seneca to take his own life, Nero confiscated his former adviser's vast agricultural lands in Egypt. The emperor also took control of six estates in the province of North Africa, in and around modern Tunisia, when he had their owners murdered. Their combined holdings amounted to half of the province. With all this prime land, Nero successfully expanded his access to the ancient world's most important commodity: grain.

Under Roman rule, provinces, territories, and imperial estates had to pay exorbitant taxes and tributes. Subjected peoples had to relinquish food without just compensation. This meant that residents often resorted to cutting down forests and cultivating ecologically vulnerable lands in order to feed their families. Ultimately, Roman expansion and luxury exacerbated deforestation, erosion, the siltation of waterways, and desertification. And all of this both relied upon and drove a complex system of human slavery.

These political, environmental, social, and religious circumstances formed the world in which Jesus and Paul lived their lives and died their deaths. Is it any wonder, then, that in one of the most moving sections of Paul's epistle to Rome, we hear a subtle critique of Rome's propaganda, propaganda claiming that an imperial son of god had ushered in the golden age?

In Romans 8:19–22, Paul insists that nonhuman creation eagerly expects the imminent revelation of the “sons of God,” who—quite remarkably—are the siblings

and co-heirs of their crucified brother, Jesus Christ. Creation anticipates this “apocalypse” because it has unwillingly been subjected to frustration, currently is enslaved to destruction, and in the future will experience God’s liberation alongside the fully liberated and glorified children of God.

Although the word *decay* in modern English translations might lead us to conclude that creation’s slavery entails natural processes of chemical decomposition, Paul’s use of *phthora* primarily denotes death and destruction. “Slavery of/to destruction” implies that agential forces destroy creation. Unfortunately, the phrase “bondage to decay” obscures this important facet of meaning—and leads readers to conclude that only God could possibly ameliorate creation’s natural, inevitable decay. But when we understand Paul’s wording more precisely, we are poised to look for any forces or agents that hasten or cause creational destruction.

According to Paul’s logic, these forces are set in motion, at least in part, by human beings. In Romans 5:12–21, Paul correlates the first human’s sin with the enslaving forces of sin and death that consequently entered the world. He also identifies humans as those whose “feet are swift to shed blood” and whose actions leave a trail of “ruin and misery” (3:15–16).

When Paul turns to consider the wider creation in chapter 8 he’s admittedly vague; he doesn’t explicitly state that humans enslave creation or cause its oppressed status. But in light of his earlier discussion of human transgression in chapter 5, he does imply as much.

The logic goes something like this: human transgression resulted in slavery to sin and death, but God’s grace in Jesus Christ brings about liberation, right relating and living (justification and sanctification), and resurrected life with God (glorification). So when Paul indicates that creation is enslaved to destruction but will be liberated when God liberates and glorifies God’s children, he establishes a correspondence between nonhuman creation’s condition and that of humanity. Creation’s liberation comes on the heels of humanity’s glorification—the point at which human sin presumably ceases (8:17–23; 6:6, 9, 15, 17). The flip side of this coin, of course, reveals that creation’s slavery tracks closely with human sin. We might say, then, that Paul correlates creation’s “slavery of destruction” with sinful human activity, at least in part.

Whether or not we adopt Paul's cosmology, we can recognize his prophetic vision. Creational degradation goes together with human transgression (especially greed), and vice versa: human justice nurtures creation's health and wellbeing. To be sure, we humans cannot prevent all the ways in which creation undergoes destruction, death, and decay. In fact, death and decay are good and life-supporting cycles in our world. Yet there are better and worse forms of death, different degrees of destruction.

The question Paul's letter prompts us to ask, then, is this: Should we continue to enslave creation to destruction, knowing that God ultimately will liberate it? Or, more pointedly: Should we pursue a golden age of abundance despite the ways it will intensify creational destruction and work in opposition to God's work of liberation? I hope we will answer with the sort of words Paul uses elsewhere in Romans: "By no means!" (6:1-2).

As a body of people liberated from the control of sin and death (6:6-18), Christians have the opportunity to give ourselves in service not to a human-wrought golden age but to God and God's righteousness and justice. (The underlying Greek term, *dikaio sunē*, means both.) We can refuse to bask in the golden glow of this age and its earthly leaders. We, like our siblings of long ago, can resist offering our embodied selves as tools of injustice for sin, instead offering ourselves to God as those alive from the dead and our embodied selves as tools of justice for God (6:11-13). We have the privilege of offering our living bodies as sacrificial gifts to God in liturgical service (12:1).

This service, in turn, demands lives lived according to the rule of Christ-like love (12:9; 6:6-8). This is so much the case that Paul expects Christ followers to bless—to make happy—those who persecute them and to avoid acting vengefully (12:14-19). Christian love leads us not only to extend hospitality to friends and strangers (12:13) but also to share food and drink even with enemies (12:20). And when Christians eat, we make sure the food we consume destroys no one for whom Christ died (14:15).

The worldwide body of Christ is called to live our lives according to a profound truth: true human liberation and flourishing stand together with the liberation and flourishing of nonhuman creation. And the Creator God—the God who called a subjugated people out of slavery, this God's incarnated, faithful, self-giving, crucified, resurrected, and enthroned son, and this God's life-giving Spirit—*this* God

enables and secures creation-wide liberation by loving and rectifying enemies, by liberating people and planet from slavery (5:8–10; 8:21).

While this truth and its implications provide timely forms of guidance and encouragement, Paul's implied critique of the world around him in Romans 8 also presses us to expose the ways in which corporate bodies and governing authorities inadequately regulate and prevent destructive human activities. We live in an era when the US federal government ignores scientific evidence and curtails scientific study of the environment and human health by eviscerating the Environmental Protection Agency and rescinding federal funding for research and development. Paul's honest assessment of the natural world's enslaved status and destroyed condition stands as example and witness.

So will we attend with Paul to the whole creation? If so, we'll hear the groans of creation's nonhuman and human members who are suffocating under the gold veneer of this age—those who are abused, targeted, neglected, cut down, exploited, expelled, and killed so that an age of gold might shimmer forth. With them, we'll likely express our own groans in the midst of the pain, death, and destruction taking place around and within us. But all the while we may discern God's Spirit groaning right along with us—with the whole creation—as the Spirit longs with us for the liberation to come.