The Roman Empire and Christ the King

A few weeks ago, in studying for Ephesians 1:19-23, I came across this article by John P. Lotz. In it, Lotz examines ancient Roman coins found in Asia Minor that are part of the homonoia cult. The Greek word homonoia simply means “oneness.” There was an entire cult movement within the Roman empire fueled by the imperial authorities that emphasized homonoia or oneness. It was believed that oneness and uniformity between the ancient cities of the empire would ensure lasting imperial peace, or what historians call Pax Romana (“the peace of Rome”). As studies have shown, this unity and peace were more ideal than real, but it’s interesting to note how the Apostle Paul may have had some of these imperial policies in mind when writing about the true supreme King, Jesus Christ, who brings a true peace and unity in His person and work (see Ephesians 1:10). The excerpt below is the conclusion of the article and highlights what Paul understood: all rivals (ancient and present) to Christ’s kingship are blasphemous and futile attempts to do what only Christ can accomplish.-SP

[...] The themes of unity and oneness occur throughout the epistle to the Ephesians. But these themes do not occur against a neutral back-drop, rather, they are expressed as a revolutionary part of God's work of reuniting all things under the headship of Christ. The imagery here is intentionally provocative. Augustus had also been hailed as the world ruler under whose headship peace and prosperity had been secured, yet we know from the examples of the cities in Asia Minor in subsequent years that the Pax Romana was more often an ideal than a practical reality. In fact, social and political tensions were still major issues, and the unruly administrations of Caligula, Nero, and Vespasian stand as harsh reminders of the limits to peace at the height of Roman rule. Unity and oneness were themes that contemporary orators preached as well, stressing the importance of embracing homonoia instead of engaging in rivalries and disputes. The rise in the use of homonoia in popular slogans and in political speeches in the late first and early second centuries A.D. helps reveal the amount of discord that was current under the surface of political compliance to Rome, and the later involvement of Roman emperors in promoting concord (ομόνοια) confirms suspicions of a latent disunity at the local and provincial levels throughout the empire.

Unity is a pressing concern of the writer of Ephesians. This is an understandable concern when viewed against the back-drop of the increasing inter-city rivalry of the late first century, and helps broaden our understanding of some of the nuances the writer's choice of words and images could have had. C.E. Arnold has already alluded to some of the dimensions the “power language” can have had in the context of the Magical Papyri, but it is also possible to see specific political images evoked and challenged as well. One such image occurs in Ephesians 1:21.

In the Thanksgiving and Prayer, the writer prays that the recipients would have the eyes of their hearts enlightened in order that they might know the hope to which God has called them, the riches of his inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for believers. This incomparably great power the writer identifies as that same power which both raised Christ from the dead, and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms “...far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in this present age, but also in the one to come.” In the context of the religious milieu of the first century, these are lofty assertions, but in the context of the political world, these were provocative and seditious words. In Plutarch's warning to the young political aspirant he conscientiously recommended that the supremacy of Rome in all affairs be acknowledged and not infringed upon, but here the writer of the epistle refuses to consign God's power merely to the realm of religion and the great hereafter, but situates Christ's supremacy fundamentally in the present age. Christ is seated far above all possible authorities and powers, as well as “...every title that can be given.” To the listeners hearing these words, the titular rivalries between the leading cities of Asia Minor may have appeared as comparatively obvious examples of the meagerness of worldly power in light of Christ's
heavenly supremacy, as well as the undeniable shortcomings of the many attempts to broker concord and peace in the name of homonoia. The best attempts at political unity were continually succumbing to the rivalries that broke out between the leading cities over the titles that Rome could give them, and very often the discord handicapped trade and generally dampened the well-being of the neighboring cities. Political discord may even have been a form of resistance against Roman rule, and contemporary orators were aware of the compromises such protests could engender for a city. Paul's prayer that the eyes of the believers hearts might be enlightened can be seen in direct contrast to the short-sightedness of the many rivalries that were constantly being pursued by the cities in their struggle to secure the appearance of power and prestige, but which were often ways in which they further subjugated themselves to Roman manipulation.

In contrast to the precarious bonds of homonoia, the writer proclaims Christ as having permanently broken through the barriers and the “dividing wall of hostility” that separated Jews and Gentiles (who were far less like one another than Ephesians and Smyrneans), and further, established peace between the discordant races in his own person. Throughout the epistle, the unity that God has established in Christ is defined in terms far superior to anything else, encompassing all things and being fulfilled in the Church, which is his body. In the ears of the hearers of the epistle, Christ through the Church and not the Emperor through his empire is the real source for hope for peace and unity, and the focus of the good news of the gospel of reconciliation and forgiveness. The message Paul and his followers proclaimed was one that extended throughout the dimensions of first century A.D. society, from religion through politics, and its stark contrasts between light and darkness, good and evil, this world and the one to come were no mere Gnostic metaphors, or the escapist fantasies of an apocalyptic sect, but were situated in the midst of the day to day intercourse of life in first century society where oppression, disempowerment, political ambition, compliance, resistance, and rebellion all had their share in forming the world-views of slaves as well as sophists. The mere titles that could be allocated to the politically emasculated cities of Asia Minor were shallow consolations in the light of Roman hegemony.

That Christ reigned in heaven at God's right hand, and that his power extended not only into the next age, but was rooted in the present one, could hardly have failed to escape comparison with the governors of provinces, or even the emperor, whose power and rule offered only timid promises of peace and empty slogans of harmony and concord.