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Paul, Roman Empire, and Ekklēsia

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In my opening talk I briefly mentioned that we, Asian Christians, need to cultivate the art of friendship in various areas of life. The Bible needs to be approached, at least for me, in the spirit of friendship. Now I would like to share with you parts of my own friendship and struggle with the Bible, particularly with Paul the apostle.

Broadly speaking, this lecture consists of two focuses. First, I would like to introduce a paradigm shift which has occurred in the Pauline scholarship. It highlights the imperial context of Paul's life and praxis, and understands Paul's apocalyptic worldview in terms of anti-imperial divine politics. Then, I will try to provide a sympathetic yet critical evaluation of Paul's rhetoric from an Asian feminist theological viewpoint. Before we launch into main discussion, however, a few preliminary remarks need to be made regarding some basic historical-critical information and hermeneutical reflection.

What Paul?

To discuss Paul is to step in an area full of complexity. This complexity consists of a number of factors. First of all, **the historical Paul** is one of the most controversial figures in history. He was born a diaspora Hellenistic Jew with Roman citizenship. He persecuted the Christians, and after the experience of the revelation of Christ, he became the adamant champion of what he had tried to eradicate earlier. The major cultural categories which are now taken as the fundamental cornerstones of Western civilization, that is, Hellenism, Judaism, Roman Empire, and Christianity, intersect in this single figure. Not only has Paul a checkered career, his writings are also ranked as one of the most difficult and complicated writings in the history of Western literature. To make it worse, his letters are neither a biography nor a theological treatise, which systematically reflects the structure of one's theological thought world. Paul's letters are *ad hoc* writings, which were written to address the particular issues of incipient Christian communities as a substitute for his presence. Therefore, it is difficult to grasp the consistent thought world of Paul on the basis of the letters characterized by contingency and particularity.

Second, the image of **the public and ecclesial Paul** has been formed on the basis of **the canonical Paul**. The canonical Paul, in turn, has been molded under the impact of the writings of his disciples, that is, the deutero-Pauline letters including the Pastorals. While

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the church has traditionally classified thirteen letters as Pauline, historical criticism demonstrated that only seven letters are undisputedly authentic (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). The problem is that the deutero-Pauline letters are often different from, and even in contradiction to, the authentic letters of the historical Paul in terms of their theological and ethical perspectives. Therefore, although there are still disputes over the authenticity of Ephesians and Colossians, our discussion will be confined to the undisputed seven letters.

This historical development has given rise to political problems, which is our third point. While Paul is often hailed as the greatest apostle in Christian history, the use of Pauline letters has been dangerous, even poisonous for many marginalized groups in society. Certain passages of Paul's texts or certain doctrines based on them are infamous for their historical collusion with slavery, misogyny, and anti-Judaism. For instance, white preachers and slaveholders in the US heavily exploited the household codes in the deutero-Pauline texts, and thus legitimated slavery with the authority of Paul. The description of Paul's missionary journeys in Acts has functioned as a model of colonial conquest and expansionism. Therefore **the political Paul** is even dubbed "the apostle in the service of death." Since such a conservative, oppressive, and dangerous portrait of Paul has drawn chiefly on the deutero-Pauline letters, it is a significant step to reconstruct the thought world and praxis of the historical Paul, which is in distinction from what is later espoused by the deutero-Pauline letters.

The screen is already complex with our recognition of the existence of many **Pauls**. Reading Paul and wrestling with all kinds of rereading of Paul sometimes feels like juggling with a tangle of strings as baffling as the fabled Gordian knot. The state of affairs becomes even more complicated by my own reading strategy as an Asian feminist Christian. The interpretation of the Bible is not the project of excavating a single objective, value-free, and neutral meaning preserved intact in the text, but the ongoing process of dialogue between the text and the reader, which produces multiple meanings. The social location of the interpreter matters in this process. When the interpreter becomes more aware of her/his own presuppositions and develops a specific reading strategy, a more accountable construction of the meaning of the texts would hopefully come out.

As an Asian feminist Christian theologian, I think that my reading strategy of Paul consists of two moments, a deconstructive reconstruction on the one hand, and a critical evaluation on the other hand. Above all, it is important to distinguish the historical Paul from the canonical Paul, in order to do justice to and restore the liberative vision of the historical Paul, who devoted himself to anti-imperial alternative divine politics. This reconstruction could mark a steppingstone toward counteracting the practice of discrimination, sanctioned by and implemented under the authority of Paul in history, and overcoming it. It is something like defeating the Bible by the Bible, Paul by Paul. On the other hand, however, Asian feminist Christians pay due attention to the fact that the language, rhetorical practice, and images the historical Paul himself employed are often problematic. In light of the "total liberation" Asian feminist theological subjects aspire to, it is troubling to find a contradiction that even the historical Paul himself was not free from the androcentric language and the discriminative rhetorical practice, while engaging in liberative anti-imperial vision. Therefore, my reading strategy allows myself neither a blind acceptance of

the historical Paul nor a simple denouncement of him. I am in constant dialogue and negotiation with his texts, opening up myself to the liberative and inspirational power which his vision holds and at the same time posing my critical questions to his thought world. This reading posture consists of both appreciation and critical evaluation. I have called this ongoing dialogue with the text "the hermeneutics of compassion in detachment".[2]

Situating Paul and *Ekklēsia* in the Context of Roman Empire

Paul lived under the political reign of the Roman Empire, and it is indispensable for the understanding of his letters to construe the political, social, and cultural nexus of imperial domination. Intriguingly enough, however, due attention was not given to the imperial context of Paul's life until recently. This is partly because of the entrenched tendency of Lutheran-Protestant reading of Paul that views Paul's life-long struggle only over against Judaism. The doctrine of justification by faith is understood to signify that human beings are justified not by works of the law like in Judaism, but by faith in Jesus Christ alone. In the traditional Protestant reading, the doctrine of justification is interpreted not only in light of anti-Jewish perspective, but also in terms of individual sin and salvation, which is individualistic and depoliticizing. We can't discuss all the related exegetical details here, but we only need to get reminded that Paul also said in Romans 7: "What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! . . . So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good." When we pay due attention to this kind of Paul's positive evaluation of the Jewish law, then we realize that his view on Judaism and the law is not simply and one-sidedly negative, as some of supersessionists argue, but it is more complicated and dynamic. By the term "supersessionism," I mean the anti-Jewish theology which argues that the Jewish people are now abandoned by God and replaced by Christianity. History has witnessed a number of instances in which this kind of Christian theology ended up with the dehumanizing anti-Jewish discrimination. Theology is very political, whether we are aware of it or not.

Recently some New Testament scholars started to highlight the importance of the Roman Empire in the study of Paul's letters. The investigation of the emperor cult and the imperial patronage system in the Roman Empire illuminates how pervasively imperial power relations operated in political-religious and social-economic domains in the first-century Mediterranean societies, and how consciously Paul engaged in anti-imperial agenda. This broadened and broadening perspective allows us to perceive Paul's enterprise primarily over against Roman imperial "religio-politics," not chiefly over against Judaism.

The face of historical scholarship is always shifting, especially when we come to gain more information about ancient society through archaeological discovery or the outcome of classical studies. This new information is striking, because many biblical terms, with which we are familiar, turn out to have derived from ancient political culture. Paul's favorite theological terminologies echo the politically-loaded language of imperial ideology. In Roman political theology, the gospel (*euangelion*) was related to the birth and life of Caesar,

[2] Hyunju Bae, "Dancing Around Life: An Asian Woman's Perspective," in *The Ecumenical Review* (2004), 56/4, 390-403.

the Saviour who was hailed to bring the good news to the world. Faith (*pistis*) referred to the faithfulness and loyalty of, and towards, Caesar and Rome. "*Dikaiosynē*," in Greek, now translated as "justification" or "righteousness" in the New Testament, referred to the "justice" established and enforced by Caesar. Peace (*eirēnē*) indicated the undisturbed order created by Roman military conquest. And salvation (*sōtēria*) referred to the salvation already realized by Augustus and his successors. All these terms loom large in the letters of Paul. Roman politics was very theological, and Paul's theology was very political. "The gospel of Jesus Christ" was proclaimed by Paul in the period when "the gospel of Caesar" had been well established in cities such as Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth.

Let's limit our discussion to 1 Thessalonians, the extant earliest writing in the New Testament. 1 Thessalonians makes a remarkable frontal attack on Roman propaganda on peace and security (*pax et securitas*): "When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!" (1 Thess. 5:3). The slogan, "peace and security," is not Paul's coinage. He quotes it from Roman political slogan, which propagandizes imperial glory. It is surprisingly evident that Paul envisages the coming of the day of the Lord as an event that will destroy the false peace and security of the Roman hegemonic rule. It has been noted that the vocabulary Paul uses in this depiction of eschatological drama, such as coming (*parousia*), meeting (*apantēsis)*, and the Lord (*kyrios*), derives from the contemporary political culture (1 Thess. 4:13-18). The term, "*parousia*," which has never been used to refer to the eschatological coming of the Lord in pre-Christian apocalyptic literature, is utilized by Paul as a term for the eschatological coming of Jesus (1 Thess. 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 1 Cor 15:23). This term is originally a political term. It refers to the arrival of a king or Caesar for whose arrival the community must be prepared in the Hellenistic Roman political culture. Another term, "*apantēsis*," is also a political technical term. It describes the formal meeting, full of festivity, which a city should hold when a king or other high officials come to visit the city. Furthermore, the term *kyrios* for Paul is not just the religious terminology of Hellenism which denotes a variety of cultic deities as "Lord." It primarily carries the meaning of "the exalted Ruler of the Universe" (Käsemann) which is a far more comprehensive and political concept. Despite the well-known theological differences between Luke and Paul, a Lukan account of Paul's mission in Thessalonica entails some aspects which resonate with the political sermon Paul gives in his own letter. In Acts 17:1-8, Christians are accused of "turning the world upside down" because they are "all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor (*dogmata Kaisaros*), saying there is another king named Jesus." This account involves a historically accurate information on the city of Thessalonica where the imperial cult prospered. The politically charged proclamation of Paul must have caused some trouble in such a city.

Another representative passage in the Pauline letters which describes the eschatological drama is 1 Corinthians 15. To those who argue that there is no resurrection of the dead, Paul responds with the presentation of a series of eschatological events. "But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power … The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:23-26). Research has found that the poems of Horace (*Carmen Saeculare*) and Virgil (*Eclogue IV*), two eminent Roman poets, sing the birth of a coming savior of the world in similar vocabulary

which Paul uses in his expression of the eschatological drama in 1 Cor. 15 and 1 Thess. 4:13. This evidence points out that Paul perceives the eschatological triumph of God as an anti-imperial alternative vision of the world.

So far we have observed that the historical Paul had an anti-imperial alternative cosmology, guided by divine politics. Now it is important to see in what ways Paul wanted to translate this vision into concrete reality in the life of the *ekklēsia.* Paul's remarkable enthusiasm to build faith communities in such a grand scope throughout the Mediterranean world, from Asia Minor to Spain, is viewed as the attempt to organize "an international anti-imperial alternative society based in local communities."[3] According to Horsley, what we gather from 1 Corinthians is "a nascent social movement comprised of a network of cells based in Corinth but spreading more widely into the province of Achaia."[4] The term "*ekklēsia*" is now rendered the technical term for community, congregation, and church in the Christian tradition. Yet it originally signified a political assembly, that is, a regularly summoned legislative body consisting of free citizens in the Greek poleis. Paul's vision for his faith communities is revealed in his political pedagogy of Christian *ekklēsia.*

We don't have enough time to discuss all of his strategies in building *ekklēsia*, and let it suffice to indicate several characteristic of his practices. First of all, Paul appealed for the total autonomy of the *ekklēsia* as an alternative society, to the extent that it should become independent from the established judicial system. "When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? . . . are you incompetent to try trivial cases? . . . Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another, but a believer goes to court against a believer – and before unbelievers at that?" (1 Cor. 6:1-6).

Then, alternative society encompasses alternative economic relations. Much of the controversies which arose in Corinth had to do with Paul's rejection of the financial support from the Corinthians and his insistence upon working with his own hands, which was despised as a menial occupation in aristocratic Hellenistic culture. In this decision of Paul, we observe his agenda to counter the operation of the patronage system penetrating into his own work. He didn't want to become a "house apostle" to some specific influential Christian patrons. On the other hand, Paul's prohibition of the participation in eating of "food sacrificed to idols" relates to far broader concerns than individual religious ethics (1 Cor. 8-10). The religious life in the ancient Roman world was not about personal or individualized belief, but implicated in political, economic, and other social relations. By the sacrificial banquet, the social relations which support the status quo in the Roman Empire were ritually reinforced. When the Christian freedom remains only in the form of religious knowledge that "there is no God but one," it often falls into the danger of uncritical support of the reign of "many gods and many lords" operating in the concrete reality of the society. Paul's inhibition of the participation in pagan sacrificial food poses a number of questions especially in multi-religious Asian context, but in its original context, it was not merely a matter of religious purity, but deeply embedded in his concern of the construction of

[3] Richard Horsley, "General Introduction," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* ed. Richard Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press international, 1997).
[4] Richard Horsley, "1 Corinthians: A Case Study of Paul's Assembly as an Alternative Society," in *Paul and Empire*, 245.

alternative society as well as alternative economic relations.

Finally, Paul's political pedagogy for *ekklēsia* is demonstrated in his life-long enterprise of the collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15;24-28; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9; Gal. 2:10). Paul wanted to build an international network of *ekklēsia* in which a kind of political-economic solidarity is practiced. This enterprise, perhaps unprecedented in antiquity, created the network of horizontal reciprocity among the colonized people, in the time when all the material resources were pulled towards Rome as the hub of the universe in the vertical and centripetal movement. In other words, Paul's collection movement opened up a new channel for a horizontal and reciprocal political economy of the Christians on the international level, which stood in stark contrast to a vertical tributary political economy of the empire.

Recent scholarly endeavor to illuminate Paul's gospel in connection with his concern in international and imperial affairs helps us to debunk the traditional image of Paul whose primary interest lies only in individual salvation and religious ideas. Paul's theological scheme does not ignore the individual axis, but it is far broader than what is called the "introspective individualism" underlined by the European-Lutheran interpretation of Paul. Paul's theological vision was not limited to religious ideas and doctrines, but was far more concrete. It is inseparably intertwined with the political connotations, which constitute a crucial dimension of the world of theo-political alternatives. Paul's life-long agenda is rooted in his attempt at the construction of an alternative community and an alternative reality in its wholeness.

Paul's Apocalyptic Worldview as Anti-Imperial Divine Politics

Paul's anti-imperial perspective is guided by his understanding of the divine politics informed by the apocalyptic worldview. The argument that apocalyptic, full of grotesque images and fantasy-like speculation, lacks any interest in history does not do justice to Jewish apocalyptic. The Jewish apocalyptic, being a kind of resistance literature, takes firm root in history. The matrix of Jewish apocalyptic is a composite soil of religion and politics. It formed one trend among other reactions of oriental religions to the cultural and political invasion of Hellenistic-Roman imperialism. As such, Jewish apocalyptic eschatology was intensified when the Maccabean revolt and its miraculous victory added fuel to its flame with a strong Jewish nationalistic and political tenor. To that extent, the loss of freedom by Pompey in 63 BC was felt all the more unbearable. Beneath the subjugated surface, however, the production of apocalyptic continued. According to the theory of James C. Scott, the "hidden transcript" of the oppressed often lends itself to "an acting out in fantasy . . . of the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination."[5] Apocalyptic phenomena, whether theological or literary, might be understood as one remarkable branch

[5] "The hidden script" is an offstage or backstage discourse which is uttered by the powerless in the social space free from a watchtower. It voices the radical dissent from or the sharp criticism, even curse, against the powerful which much be suppressed in their open relationship with power or in the public transcript." The existence of twofold discourse is a product of "the dialectic of disguise and surveillance." The subjugated and powerless always engage in "the infrapolitics" as the arts of resistance behind the pretense of obedience. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

of the "arts of resistance" which embodies itself in the inspired imagination of reversal. The history of Palestinian Judaism between Daniel and Bar Kochba, which was tragic and excruciating, produced Jewish apocalyptic and, as such, it is regarded as an earliest evidence of resistance against the cosmopolitanism and cultural optimism of Hellenistic Roman imperial domination.

Paul grew as a member of Diaspora Judaism which was familiar with the Jewish apocalyptic vision and became the apostle for the gentiles after the experience of the revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:16). Although this crucial experience contributed to the fundamental transformation of Paul's apocalyptic viewpoint and a Jewish nationalistic fervor was replaced by his vision of universalism, Paul did not lose the concern with the destiny of the Jewish people,[6] nor the political sensitivity inherent in apocalyptic. Paul's perspective is radically revised by the revelatory experience of Jesus Christ, but his Christology is inseparably intertwined from the broader theo-centric horizon, characterized by the apocalyptic cosmology.

When Paul prophetically narrates the apocalyptic drama of war which portrays the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ and the final moment of consummation when God can be all in all (1 Cor. 15:20-28), he is responding to the apocalyptic question regarding the ultimate sovereignty of the world as well as the ultimate ownership of the earth. Indeed, Paul's apocalyptic language is full of "political electricity" inasmuch as he provides an explicit answer to the question of ownership of this world. Paul characterizes the present in which the Roman imperial domination glorifies the *Pax Romana* as the "evil age" (Gal. 1:4) as well as the time when "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers" (2 Cor. 4:4). "The present form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:31) and its rulers "are doomed to perish" (1 Cor. 2:6). Roman imperial mythology was armed with realized eschatology, underlining its embodiment in the rule of emperor, the "god on earth" (Virgil). Paul argues that a final destruction of cosmic forces will completely replace the present imperial order and thus restore the sovereignty of God. Paul's apocalyptic drama signals his engagement in the "war of myths" (Amos Wilder).

The cross of Jesus should be situated in such a theo-centric apocalyptic horizon. Especially in 1 Corinthians, one can find a symmetry of language between 1 Cor. 2:6-16 and 1 Cor. 15, which share the apocalyptic meaning field in the use of vocabulary. In the former passage, Paul ascribes the death of Christ, crucified on a Roman cross, to the "rulers of this age" who are "doomed to perish" (1 Cor. 2:6), and mocks them for being devoid of divine wisdom. Even though Paul does not take any interest in identifying any individual responsible for Jesus' crucifixion such as Pilate, this feature of Paul cannot be taken as an instance of obscuring or mystifying the death of Jesus. Other contemporaries such as Josephus never questioned the legitimacy of Roman rule and order, while reporting the cruelties of Roman governors in detail. In contrast, Paul's anti-imperial agenda is remarkable. The crucifixion of Jesus "reveals 'the rulers of this age,' indeed 'every rule and authority and power' – procurators, kings, emperors, as well as the supernatural 'powers' who stand behind them –

[6] Cf. "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:2-3).

as intractably hostile to God and as doomed to be destroyed by the Messiah at 'the end'"[7] Indeed, Paul's accusation goes beyond Pilate to encompass all heavenly and earthly powers which are antagonistic to God. Paul has never "denationalized" the cross, but has rather "internationalized" it by bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ, a Jew who lived in the colonized land, was crucified on a Roman cross, and was raised by God, to the other cities in the ancient Mediterranean world.

When Persis Heard Paul's Sermon on Hagar

We have so far concentrated on interpreting Paul in terms of his anti-imperial divine politics. This stage constitutes the first moment of my reading strategy, which deconstructs the traditional distortion of Paul and reconstructs the vision of the historical Paul. Given the dangerous and detrimental use of the Pauline letters in history, it is an imperative to restore the liberative horizon of the historical Paul. Having said this, it is now the time for the second stage of critical evaluation from the Asian feminist perspective. The question goes like this: "Yes, Paul intended to be liberative. But how liberative was he?"

The historical Paul was far more women-friendly in comparison to some of his so-called right-wing disciples. The author of the Pastoral Letters argues that "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Tim. 2:11-12). But can we imagine that the historical Paul possibly made such rude remark to Prisca who had risked her neck for Paul (Rom 16:3)? Furthermore, she was a teacher to Apollos, an Alexandria-born theologian with eloquence and knowledge (Acts 18:26). Paul showed great respect and comradely affection to many women leaders in early Christianity, including Prisca. There is another contrast between the historical Paul and his disciples. The historical Paul preached the justification by faith and advocated ascetic life style as more preferable (1 Cor. 7), while the Pastorals says that women "will be saved through childbearing" (1 Tim. 2:15). It is good to know that the historical Paul did not write the Pastorals.

However, we also need to acknowledge that although the historical Paul was not a male-chauvinist who would reject any meaningful relationship with women, his symbolic universe and discourse were not free from deep-seated androcentrism, contradictions, and ambivalence towards women and the feminine gender. Paul's ambivalence creates the ambivalence of Asian feminist Christian readers of his letters.

We might entertain a historical imagination of what Persis, most likely a Persian slave woman, would have felt if she had happened to hear Paul's sermon on Hagar, an Egyptian slave woman. Paul holds high respect towards Persis (Rom. 16:12). Paul often indicates his affection for particular Christians, especially coworkers, by calling them "my beloved [name]" (Rom. 16:5, 8-9). But Paul says "*the* beloved Persis," which probably suggests his acknowledgement of the esteem that Roman Christians have for her. Paul describes her further as having "worked hard in the Lord," using a word he employs elsewhere for his own apostolic labors (Phil. 2:1) and for the work of leaders within local congregations (1 Thess. 5:12). Despite her multiple social marginalization, she was clearly a pillar of an

[7] Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 112-13.

important early Christian community.

If Persis had had a chance of hearing the reading of Galatians in her community, what would she have felt? In Galatians, Paul tries to confirm that the Gentiles become the descendants of Abraham, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, not by the works of the law. The allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Gal. 4:21-31 provides an example in which Paul exploits the concept of the patriarchal biological succession as an explanatory frame to divide two different realms, one created by faith in Jesus Christ, and the other, by works of the law. The child of the free woman symbolizes the new covenant and the status of the children of the promise according to the Spirit, while the child of the female slave refers to the old covenant and the status of the children of the law according to the flesh. In this dualistic scheme, the destiny of a slave woman, reproductively abused and abandoned, is being taken for granted. Intriguingly enough, Paul does not pay attention to the divine grace poured towards this forsaken slave family in Gen. 16 and 21. Both Persis and Hagar are women of triple marginalization. As gentile slave women, they are characterized by the oppression of racism/ethnic-centrism, classism, and sexism. To that extent, it would not be farfetched to imagine that Persis could have identified herself with Hagar's tale in Genesis, in which the divine protection embraces a gentile slave woman in the face of harsh exploitation in the real world. Now Persis listens to Paul's narrative, which has no room for divine interaction with Hagar, and which doesn't put in question the harsh destiny of a slave woman.

One might argue that Paul just relies on contemporary cultural and social customs. However, hasn't he just declared that all discriminations and distinctions based on race/ethnicity, class, and gender are abolished in Christ? "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Why does Paul seek to make his argument for justification by faith more effective, by evoking the legitimacy of slavery and its dehumanization of a slave woman which he has just before denounced? Is Paul aware of the power of language which reproduces and perpetuates the "habit of mind" and the conventional thinking, which in turn uncritically serves to support institutional injustice or the injustice implemented in the daily social life? Even if Persis had been fully convinced of Paul's message of the justification by faith as well as his anti-imperial alternative vision, she must have been perplexed and disappointed at this allegory, which is far from being fully egalitarian.

This historical imagination resonates with a kind of dilemma that Asian feminist Christians often experience in their struggle. Asian feminist Christians who suffer from multiple colonialisms influencing the life of Asian women in church and society hope to collaborate with those fellows who advocate for anti-imperial egalitarian alternatives. In light of "total liberation" Asian feminist theological subjects yearn for, the uncritical androcentric practice of fellow Christians in ideas and language is just perplexing. Ideas and language, which are not fully egalitarian, perpetuate patriarchal practice and institution in church and society. Patriarchy and androcentrism are imperialistic and colonizing in terms of their power of domination which alienates, marginalizes, and silences women. The macro-vision of anti-imperial horizon cannot be incarnated into our reality if it doesn't take root in the micro-level democratizing, de-imperializing, and depatriarchalizing practice in the conversation, sermon, and theological discourse in our daily life, among the faith community of colleagues and friends.

Conclusion

As an Asian feminist Christian living in the 21st century, I recognize the importance of recent attempt of Pauline scholarship, which highlights the imperial context of the production of Paul's letters and his anti-imperialist agenda. It is a significant corrective to the traditional Western paradigm which interprets Paul only in terms of apolitical individualism and christo-centric straightjacket. However, Paul's anti-imperial rhetoric and discourse turn out to be incomplete and not critical enough from an Asian feminist theological perspective.

As we have seen, the interpretation of the Pauline texts is not a simple matter because of many levels of complexity involved. A well-known New Testament scholar once compared the experience of reading Paul's text to "feeling like a traveler overwhelmed by vertigo in an Alpine region surrounded by steep, cloud-covered peaks, who often does not know how to follow on and how he is going to last the journey" (Bornkamm). I have learned to live with this sense of vertigo, as it is increased when an Asian feminist Christian perspective is put in gear. For instance, in Korean Christianity, the dual potentialities of the Pauline texts have been well attested. On the one hand, Paul's letter inspired the enthusiasm for liberation. An anti-imperial independence activist during the Japanese occupation in Korea, named Chang Chun-Ha, wrote in his memoir, titled "The Stone Pillow," that on his running away from Japanese military troops he had read 1 Corinthians and identified the Pauline reference to "God wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages" as the hope for liberation and national independence. Of course, he was greatly empowered by this vision. He was a theological student, and carried the New Testament written in Greek as the only companion in his dangerous journey of struggle. Later, after the national liberation, he became one of those beacons for the decades-long democratization struggle in Korean society. On the other hand, when women's ordination had been denied for more than 60 years in my denomination (PCK) until 1994, it had been Paul's authority which its opponents adamantly drew on. Under the name of Paul, women's lives are still restricted and adversely affected in many Christian denominations of Asia.

Thus, my own social location as a Korean/Asian feminist Christian continues to illuminate the process of my ongoing dialogue and friendship with Paul's letters. It means that I read them both sympathetically and critically. My reading of the Bible is inseparably intertwined with some fundamental hermeneutical questions. Can we formulate and practice a reading model which neither discards the potentiality of constructive inspiration of the Bible nor disregards the dangerous and detrimental effects of the Bible? We Christians read the Bible as God's Word for us today. How can we, then, analyze it critically enough so that we would never reinscribe the systems of oppression and discrimination inscribed in biblical language into our own contemporary life world? It is not an easy job to bear the seemingly unbearable tension that ensues from this complex negotiation with the text. One realizes that those questions raised are not merely theoretical, but also invites a practice of spirituality and mentality which matches this complex hermeneutical struggle. One might need real help to make this sense of vertigo somewhat bearable, even inspirational. That's why I need to simply and humbly seek God's grace when engaging in the complex process of biblical interpretation.