

CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL, HIERARCHICAL AND EGALITARIAN: SOCIAL-POLITICAL USES OF THE CONCEPT OF “HOME” IN GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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KEY CONCEPTS

Home; politics; conservative and liberal; hierarchical and egalitarian; Greco-Roman antiquity; early Christianity; Paul

ABSTRACT

The cognitive linguist George Lakoff has argued that in the human brain two concepts of the family are mapped onto two contrasting political concepts, which reveal two kinds of systemic morality: a hierarchical, strict and disciplining father morality of conservatives on the one hand, and an egalitarian, nurturing parent morality of progressives or liberals on the other. Taking Lakoff's thesis as point of departure, I offer a critical comparison of social-political uses of the concept of “home” in the early Roman Empire and Pauline Christianity. For this case study I engage primarily with the work of John Dominic Crossan, a prominent scholar of early Christianity within its Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts. Although “home” does not constitute the focus of his analysis, a close reading of his *oeuvre* does allow us to identify and highlight this as a crucial theme in his work. The focus will be on the patriarchal home under Greco-Roman imperial conditions as model of the imperial system, the Pauline egalitarian concept of the Christian home and house churches, and the deuterio-Pauline return to the imperial model. By comparing these case studies from another epoch and another culture, the

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validity of Lakoff's thesis will be tested and our understanding of the concepts "liberal" and "conservative" will be enriched.

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to understand conservative and liberal/progressive modes of thinking, the cognitive linguist George Lakoff developed a theory of conceptual metaphor. According to this theory the human brain maps concepts from one domain onto another, which reveal distinctive systemic moralities.¹ Crucial to his thesis is that two opposite concepts of family, will structure two opposite concepts of politics. On the one hand conservatives hold to a strict, disciplining and hierarchical father model of the family, which serves as paradigm for their ideal form of government. On the other hand progressives maintain an egalitarian, nurturing and supportive parent model of the family, which simultaneously constitutes the ideal of their political system.² Although Lakoff emphasises that there are many shades between these opposite world views, the two poles may in his view help us to map our options as a matter of systemic morality – an argument that he elaborated in *Moral politics* (1996) and has explained in numerous subsequent publications, lectures and interviews.³

Despite the fact that his investigation is mostly limited to the contemporary United States, Lakoff nevertheless surmises that his theory may have general validity. In this article I will use his theory and test its validity with reference to two case studies from another period and from elsewhere, namely from the early Roman Empire and from Pauline Christianity. In my reading of these case studies through Lakoff's theoretical lens, I will engage primarily with the work of John Dominic Crossan, one of the most important contemporary scholars of the historical Jesus and early Christianity.⁴

The critical questions then are: To what extent does an analysis of concepts of the family in these cases help us to understand the social-political ideals in each case? Do we observe correspondences between the one conceptual domain and the other, from the *oikos* (home) to the *polis*, that may be expressed as conservative and liberal systemic moral options? If so, how may we characterise or define these correspondences as an expression of different value systems, moral principles or world views? And finally, once we have clarity on these conceptual metaphors,

1 "Conceptual metaphor" refers to the carrying over (*metapherein*) in the brain from one domain or frame to another.

2 Lakoff correlates these positions to conservative Christian fundamentalists (strict father model of God) and liberal Christians (nurturing parent model of a graceful God).

3 See list of references for a selection of Lakoff's lectures and interviews on the internet that deal with this issue.

4 For a survey of Crossan's numerous publications, awards and activities, see his website at <http://www.johndominiccrossan.com>. In footnotes I will give an indication of key scholarly publications on which his analysis draws.

may we argue for one system rather than the other as a matter of moral choice in a democratic society?⁵

SOCIAL-POLITICAL USES OF THE CONCEPT OF “HOME” IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

In 31 BCE, having defeated at Actium on the north-western coast of Greece the fleet of his opponents Marc Anthony and Cleopatra, Octavian became the first sole ruler of the Roman Empire. Assuming the new name of Augustus he propagated and consolidated his authority as *Pater Patriae* (father of the fatherland) not only in Rome but throughout the empire by means of grand architectural projects, monumental sculptures, inscriptions, ritual ceremonies, conservative marriage laws, elevated titles and sponsored poetry.⁶

In his *Acts of the Divine Augustus* (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*), for example, of which copies were prominently displayed in the major cities of the empire, he included the Altar of Peace (*Ara Pacis Augustae*) as a monument that was erected on the *Campus Martius* (the Field of Mars, the god of war) in his honour by the senate and at which an official animal sacrifice was to be performed each year. The sacrificial procession sculpted on its outside wall depicts not only solemn priests of the major state cults with veiled attendants, but also Augustus among the imperial family with a number of children. The women are conservatively dressed in *stolae* of matrons that fully cover their bodies. For Augustus the extension of Roman “peace” across the empire was based in the cultivation of the *mos maiorum* (ie, the idealised customs of the ancestors), specifically a return to traditional piety and conservative family values (cf Crossan & Reed 2004: 93-95).

This message was not only propagated in sculptural programmes and inscriptions, but was also decreed by law. The Julian laws rewarded married couples with children, but prosecuted adultery. Men were to get married, and divorced women or widows were to remarry. Married couples with children received “tax breaks, an accelerated climb up the political ladder, and even better seats at the theater” (Crossan & Reed 2004: 96). As Crossan and Reed (2004: 96) aptly summarise the point: these laws “took much of what had been in the private realm under the jurisdiction of the *paterfamilias*, the male head of the household, and subjected it to public or civil law, under the *Pater Patriae*, the ‘Father of the Fatherland’.”

To celebrate the arrival of the new golden age effected by his return to traditional values Augustus ordered a festival of ten days, the *saeculum* games of 17 BCE. The

5 I will only hint here at the implication of such a choice. Lakoff himself offers a more elaborate reflection on the implication. A famous defence of liberal education is offered by Nussbaum (1998).

6 Zanker (1988) offers a detailed and most compelling analysis of Augustus’ use of images for imperial propaganda.

poet Horace was commissioned to compose a hymn, which was duly performed by a number of young men and girls. The hymn pointedly begins: “Rear up our youth, O goddess [of fertility], and bless the Father’s [ie Augustus’] edicts concerning wedlock and the marriage law, destined, we pray, to be prolific in new offspring” (Crossan & Reed 2004: 99).

Although his ideal to return to conservative family values was frequently opposed and ignored (consider, eg, the numerous alleged affairs of his only child Julia, the claim that unmarried men were outnumbering the married, the poems that got Ovid exiled, the many erotic scenes and brothels unearthed at Pompeii and elsewhere), Augustus continued to insist on their restoration as basis of the empire (cf Crossan & Reed 2014: 96-97). This control of the father over family members is, moreover, evident not only in the suppression or monitoring of Eastern cults of ecstatic women devoted to Dionysos/Bacchus and castrated *galli* worshipping the mother goddess Cybele at Rome (Crossan & Reed 2014: 250-255), but also from the way in which subjugated peoples were portrayed in sculptural images in the provinces during and after the rule of Augustus.

In the city of Aphrodisias in Asia Minor, dedicated to the goddess of love who has as her consort Mars the god of war, imperial conquest is sculpted in large as rape. Passing through the plaza of its *Sebasteion* (a sacred space with a temple for the imperial cult, set apart for honouring the emperors as gods), one could observe between the columns of the porticoes in sculpted relief the subjugated provinces personified as women. “Conquered by Augustus,” they are now “submissive to the *pater patriae* in the Roman family” (Crossan & Reed 2014: 268). In one panel the emperor Claudius stands over Britannia, pinned by his knee to the ground, his left hand holding her by the hair, his right hand ready to pierce her with a spear. In another panel Nero “stands astride a slumped Armenia,” grasping her left arm to prevent her from “complete collapse”, and holding “his sword ready in the other hand” (Crossan & Reed 2014: 268-269). Elsewhere in these galleries the defeated provinces are displayed as trophies, “elegantly dressed females”, “quiet and submissive, under Caesar’s control”, “part of the empire, concubines of the *pater patriae*...members of his global family” (Crossan & Reed 2014: 18, 269). From *paterfamilias*⁷ to *pater patriae*, by the phallus and the sword, patriarchal power exerted itself hierarchically in the private bedroom and on the imperial battlefield.

We thus see from this brief analysis a confirmation of Lakoff’s theory of a conservative, hierarchical family structure being mapped onto a conservative,

7 The philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd (2012: 24) aptly defines the structure and role of the Roman *paterfamilias*:

“The *familia* was not like our modern nuclear family...It displayed the traits of many different societal spheres which diverge into well-defined communities, such as the family, the state, industry, and the church in a more highly developed culture...The head of the *familia* was usually the oldest male member, the *paterfamilias*, who wielded the power of life and death over all – over his wife, his children, his slaves, and his so-called clients”.

hierarchical political system. Just as the father of the house exerts strict discipline over the women, children and slaves of his household, so does the emperor attempt through strict laws and violent force as the father of the fatherland over his subjects and subjugated peoples within his political domain.

But do we find evidence of an alternative view of “home” and *polis* in this same period? To answer that question we next analyse the Apostle Paul’s concept of “home”.

SOCIAL-POLITICAL USES OF THE CONCEPT OF “HOME” IN PAULINE CHRISTIANITY

Paul, a diaspora Jew, born and educated in Greek culture in the city of Tarsus, capital of the Roman province of Cilicia, came to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the expected Jewish messiah (*Christos* in Greek, Christ in English) with whom God was to begin the restoration of a just order. His was an egalitarian vision in opposition to Rome’s, that he intended to implement in small house churches in major cities of the Roman Empire around the middle of the first century CE.

In his letter to house churches in Galatia, Paul summarises his programme: for those ritually initiated or baptised into these house churches “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female” (Gal 3:28). What is crucial in these house churches in the Roman Empire is not hierarchies and discriminations on the basis of gender, class and ethnicity, but the collaboration of diverse talents to empower and build a community of justice for which the familial terms of “brothers” and “sisters” are appropriated.

The central metaphor that Paul uses to convey this message of diversity, but no hierarchy, for building the Christian house churches, is that of the body. In the Platonic tradition the body was used as a metaphor to justify the status of head over feet, of thinkers over manual labourers. In Paul, however, it is redeployed to argue for the equal importance of the different parts of the body for building the Christian community. Imagining the church as Christ’s body, consisting of individual Christians with diverse talents, ethnic identities and classes (cf 1 Cor 12:13), Paul tells the house churches in Corinth:

A body is not one single organ, but many. Suppose the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, it does belong to the body none the less. Suppose the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, it does still belong to the body. If the body were all eye, how would it hear? If the body were all ear, how could it smell?... The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you’; nor the head to the feet, ‘I do not need you.’ Quite the contrary: those organs of the body which seem to be more frail than others are indispensable (1 Cor 12:14-17, 21-22, NEB translation).

A few examples to illustrate this programme are discussed below.

We first look at the concept of gender. Paul insists that women and men are to be equal both at home and in the house churches. In deciding on abstinence and intercourse in the private space of the home, for example, there should be mutual agreement between husband and wife (cf 1 Cor 7). And in the house churches, most importantly for Paul, women often play leading roles. From Corinth, port city and capital of the Roman province of Achaia, Phoebe, a deaconess and benefactor of a Corinthian house church and of Paul himself, will take Paul's letter to the house churches in Rome and supposedly read it to them (cf Rom 16:1-2). Junia is presented as a prominent apostle in a house church at Rome (cf Rom 16:7), and of the married couple Prisca and Aquila, Paul's co-workers in the tent-making business at Corinth and hosts of house churches in Corinth and Rome, it is the female Prisca that is notably mentioned first by Paul (in Rom 16:3). Women clearly played a prominent role in Paul's Christian communities.⁸

Secondly, we look at ethnicity. In the multi-ethnic melting pot of Roman cities throughout the empire, diaspora Jews cultivated their ethnic-religious identities in synagogues (*synagogai* in Greek, referring to gatherings or meeting places), which attracted a number of non-Jews as well. The first gentile Christians were probably recruited from these non-Jewish "God-fearers" (*sebomenoi*, *theosebeis* or *phoboumenoi* in Greek). In Galatia, probably in the city of Ancara in modern Turkey, some Jewish Christians insisted that non-Jewish Celtic males who joined the house churches had to undergo the ritual of Jewish circumcision. This clashed vehemently with Paul's vision and programme. "May those Jewish Christians who preach this message to you castrate themselves!", he angrily writes to his followers in the Galatian house churches (cf Gal 5:12). For those Celts who have joined the house churches in the city of Ancyra, the distinction between Jew and non-Jew was no longer to be an issue. Male circumcision as a marker of ethnic-religious identity was to be abolished. What mattered in the new communities, in these little cells or enclaves of house churches, was an egalitarian practice that denied ethnic hierarchies in the interest of building a nurturing family committed to the spirit and cause of Christ.⁹

Thirdly, the aspect of class is discussed, ie the twofold systemic inequality between masters and slaves, as well as between haves and have-nots. In a short letter, addressed to a slave owner by the name of Philemon, Paul tries to convince Philemon that as a Christian convert he was obliged to free his Christian slave Onesimus as a matter of Christian principle. Although Paul is in prison in Ephesus, capital of the Roman province of Asia, he is nevertheless able to meet other Christians and to write this letter to his convert Philemon about Onesimus, who has fled to Paul

8 For an analysis of Rom 16, see Crossan and Reed (2004: 114-116). For a more elaborate analysis of Paul's vision of gender equality, see Crossan (2007: 172-183) as well as Borg and Crossan (2009: 48-53).

9 For a contextual analysis of Paul's letter to the Galatians, see Crossan & Reed (2004: 178-234).

to seek Paul's intervention with his master. Crucial to Paul's rhetoric is the use of familial terms: he refers to the slave as his own "child", addresses the letter also to Apphia "our sister", and appeals to Philemon as a "brother" to receive his slave back "no longer as a slave but as...a beloved brother" (Philemon 15-16). In Christian homes and house churches, Paul insists, slavery is to be abolished, since in this new nurturing family all are in principle equal.¹⁰

The problem of inequality between haves and have-nots arose around common meals in house churches at Corinth. Paul was to offer his advice. The ruins at Corinth, and even much better at Pompeii and Herculaneum which were covered by the ash and lava of Vesuvius in 79 CE, reveal an interaction between elegant houses/villas and their street-frontage shops/workshops.¹¹ This architectural intertwining explains how a few Christians of means could have interacted with the majority of poor Christians – probably the context within which the tentmakers Prisca and Aquila as well as Paul conducted their artisan business.

What was happening in these house churches at Corinth, hosted by wealthier members, was that wealthier Christians humiliated poorer members at their common meals by having the best food and drink amongst themselves and leaving the inferior food and drinks to the poorer members who often arrived later after work. Paul found this class-based discrimination, this exercise of hierarchical power, in Christian house churches morally unacceptable, since the common meal framed by the ritual breaking of bread before and the passing of a cup of wine after the meal, called the Lord's supper by Paul in remembrance of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, was supposed to precisely enact the equal sharing of food and drink among the members of the house churches. If the wealthier Christian members wanted to have their better food and drink, Paul advised, they should have had it at their home before attending the Eucharist, not at the Eucharist (cf 1 Cor 11:22). The Christian house church was meant to be a community of equals serving, nurturing and empowering each other, where class hierarchies were not to be an issue, and where the Lord's supper was to embody the vision of an egalitarian community of love (*agape* in Greek) as sharing.¹²

Paul's sense of distributive justice, however, applies not only to relations *within* house churches, but also to relations *between* house churches – particularly

10 For an analysis of Paul's letter to Philemon, see Crossan and Reed (2014:107-110). For a more elaborate analysis, see Crossan (2007: 160-164) as well as Borg and Crossan (2009: 31-45).

11 See Wallace-Hadrill (1996) for a standard analysis of the architectural layout of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

12 For an analysis of class divisions in the Corinthian communities, see Crossan and Reed (2004: 338-341). For a more elaborate analysis of Paul's argument against the division between rich and poor in the Corinthian house churches, see Crossan (2007: 166-172). Theissen (1982) offered the crucial sociological analysis of the Corinthian class divisions, on which Crossan and others have drawn. Theissen, however, characterised Paul's vision as one of love patriarchy – an aspect that Crossan does not engage with (cf Strijdom [2001] for a discussion of Theissen's *Liebspatriarchalismus*).

between the wealthier Gentile house churches and the poorer Jewish Christian church of Jerusalem. Amongst the leaders of the latter were Peter and James, the brother of Jesus, who held the conservative position that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised and had to maintain kosher dietary rules. On this issue Paul had fundamentally clashed with them in Antioch, after which Paul decided to focus his Christian mission on uncircumcised gentile God-fearers in the capital cities of Asia Minor and Greece.

Fourteen years later, he tells us in Galatians, he visited the Jerusalem church, whose leaders then agreed that his mission to uncircumcised gentiles was in order and that they would limit themselves to the circumcised (cf Gal 2). According to Paul, they agreed that he would send financial assistance from the gentile communities to this poor community in Jerusalem. In Romans he announces that he was on his way to take a collection from house churches in Macedonia and Achaia to the poor Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem, and expressed the hope that they would accept the gift (Rom 15:25-31). In exhorting the Corinthians to contribute to the collection, Paul underlines the principle of fair distribution amongst Christians, “in which”, as Borg and Crossan (2009: 224) summarise it, “God’s family all get an equitable share of God’s world”. We thus see a Paul attempting to hold conservative and liberal Christians together around the central issue of distributive justice (cf Borg & Crossan 2009: 223).

By the end of the first century CE, however, conservative gentile Christians came to write epistles in Paul’s name that betrayed Paul’s radical vision and programme by reverting to the systemic hierarchies of the Roman home and empire. These are the so-called pastoral epistles of Titus and Timothy in the New Testament canon, which most historical-critical scholars consider deutero-Pauline on the basis of their stylistic and conceptual differences from the authentic Pauline letters.¹³ Here slaves are to be told to obey their masters (cf Titus 2:9), and wives “are told to be silent in church and pregnant at home” (1 Tim 2:8-15 paraphrased by Crossan & Reed 2004: xiii). In Titus 2:9:

Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior (NRSV translation).

And in 1 Timothy 2:11-15:

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. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will

¹³ For a clear presentation of the arguments on the basis of which historical-critical scholars distinguish between authentic Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters, see Conzelmann and Lindemann (2004) and Perrin and Duling (1993).

be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty (NRSV translation).

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We are left then with two moralities: conservative and liberal, hierarchical and egalitarian. And we have to make a choice on how we want to live in this world. Lakoff admits that our choices are not always clear-cut. There are indeed many grey areas and shades. Hardly ever would we find a pure liberal or a pure conservative. Even the historical Paul with his egalitarian vision would not apply it to men having sex with men or women having sex with women (cf Rom 1:26-27; cf Strijdom 2001), or from our perspective use rhetorical skill to relentlessly manipulate readers (as is clearly the case in his letter to Philemon), or exercise his love in a patriarchal way (cf Strijdom 2001).

Nevertheless, in Paul's vision and communities we see a serious attempt to construct an egalitarian and nurturing home which could serve as an alternative to the dominant model of the Roman family and *polis*. We may, in my view, then rightly credit Paul as a precursor of our modern negotiations on liberal human rights *against* systems that dehumanise people on the basis of race, class and gender, and see him as a grassroots activist *for* the fair distribution of material resources.¹⁴ These are social-political values that are reflected in different concepts of the family, as Lakoff argued for contemporary America and I illustrated for Paul's Greco-Roman world that we need to argue with as we continue our task to formulate and implement political and educational policies within our immediate contexts.

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¹⁴ In Strijdom (2008) I elaborate this argument in more detail.

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