CHAPTER THREE

THE POLITICAL IN EPHESIANS

My comparison of Ephesians and Colossians demonstrated the prominence of the motif of peace, especially the horizontal dimension with its emphasis on the stability, unity, and flourishing of the community. When we situate Ephesians within its cultural milieu, we find that the topic of peace between and within peoples is common in Greek and Roman writings, especially political discourses περὶ εἰρήνης and περὶ ὀμονοίας. Before noting specific conceptual parallels and topoi between Ephesians and these political discourses, it may be helpful to lay out the political landscape of Ephesians in broad strokes. I begin with my working definition of “the political.”

Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explicate fully the concept of “the political” or to chart its change in meaning through history, some brief comments may help in framing the discussion of this chapter. The proper subject matter of “the political” is debated, and opinions concerning it are usually themselves political. At an abstract and culturally generic level, the concept of “the political” refers to “a field of activity in which power is exercised or contested and in which collective forms of ‘association and dissociation’ are realized.”1 The emphasis of “the political” lies not so much in the structure and form of political institutions but in the activities or political fields “in which issues of identity and organization are both addressed and expressed.”2

With this understanding, one can appreciate several activities as being political. These include the generation and distribution of

1 Ryan K. Balot, Greek Political Thought (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 2. Regarding fields of association and dissociation, Christian Meier, The Greek Discovery of Politics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 4, writes, “The political denotes a ‘field of association and dissociation,’ namely, the field or ambience in which people constitute orders within which they live together among themselves and set themselves apart from others. It is at the same time the field in which decisions are made about order and delimitation, as well as other questions of common interest, and in which there is contention for positions from which these decisions can be influenced.”

2 Dean Hammer, The Iliad as Politics: The Performance of Political Thought (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 26–27. See also my discussion on “the political” on page 19 of chapter one.
wealth, the deliberation of ethical behavior and individual responsibilities especially in regard to its impact on the well-being of the community, the rise and resolution of conflicts that threaten the integrity of the community, the debate over legitimate authority, and cultic practices. In the study of these activities, we may come across political institutions, “but these institutions should be regarded as instances of political processes—a particular set of formalized relationships that emerge from, are constituted by, and continue to be altered through political activity.”

In the ancient Greek world, Thomas Sinclair argues, political activity and thought regarding communal flourishing revolve around “three bases—maintenance of adequate subsistence, character (ἦθος) of the people, and political institutions or constitution (πολιτεία). We tend to separate the study of these three into Economics, Ethics, and Politics; Greek thinkers kept them together. The study of behaviour and of goods and supplies were as much part of πολιτική as questions of forms of government.” Although Aristotle kept these three elements in balance, other thinkers may emphasize one or the other, depending on the social and political environment and the audience whom they were addressing. An example of such differing emphases

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3 Hammer, The Iliad as Politics, 27.
4 Thomas A. Sinclair, A History of Greek Political Thought (2d ed.; Cleveland: World, 1967), 3. Ancient Greek political thought stands in contrast to the modern period. Modern political thought emphasizes “the ideals of justice, freedom, and community which are invoked when evaluating political institutions and policies” (Will Kymlicka, Contemporary Political Philosophy [Oxford: Clarendon, 1990], 1). See also Agnes Heller, “The Concept of the Political Revisited,” in Political Theory Today (ed. David Held; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 340, who argues that “the practical realization of the universal value of freedom in the public domain is the modern concept of the political.” With the separation of the public and the private, the political sphere is portrayed as separate and distinct from personal, family, and business life. Political institutions are equated with the government and the proper concerns of political thought is “the nature of, and the proper ends of, government” (David Held, ed., editor’s introduction to Political Theory Today [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991], 3). Modern political study also tends to be separated from other disciplines. Within academia today, the political, economic, social, and educational systems are divided into separate entities resulting in the highly specialized, but separate, disciplines of Politics, Economics, Sociology, Education, Religion, and Ethics.

5 R. G. Mulgan, Aristotle’s Political Theory: An Introduction for Students of Political Theory (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 52, writes, “Aristotle’s approach to politics reminds us that the spheres of economics, law, morality, and education are not isolated but closely interdependent.”