
INTRODUCTION TO THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Max Turner, "[Ephesians, Letter to The.](#)" ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009), 270.

EPHESIANS, LETTER TO THE i-fee´zhuhnz [Πρὸς Ἐφεσίους **Pros Ephesious**]. No writing in the NT contains such wide-ranging, such profound, and such celebratory theology as this relatively short writing. Not surprisingly, it has been deeply influential in the life and thought of the church. Calvin regarded it as his favorite NT book, and Coleridge perhaps gave it the ultimate accolade when he pronounced it "the divinest composition of man." Some NT scholars have hailed it as the "quintessence" and "crown" of Paulinism. Others have been less generous, judging it a distortion of what Paul would have said-or even an attempted corrective to what he taught-written by a later "disciple."

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Bibliography

A. Authorship Issues and the Relation to Colossians/Philemon

From the time of Ignatius (martyred ca. 110 ce) until the late 18th cent. ce, Pauline authorship of the letter was assumed. But from the 19th cent. onward there have been growing doubts, if little consensus on the matter. Of the seven major commentaries listed in the bibliography, Best, Lincoln and Schnackenburg conclude against Pauline authorship, while Barth, O’Brien and Hoehner conclude in favor of authenticity, and Muddiman argues that about half of our “Ephesians” is Paul’s original letter to the Laodiceans (compare Col 4:16), which has been heavily interpolated by a later writer. Monographs devoted to the matter are divided on the question as well (Mitton against Van Roon for Pauline authorship). Two questions invite attention: 1) On what basis is Pauline authorship challenged/defended? 2) What does it matter?

One cardinal observation must be made that will affect both questions: Ephesians is ostensibly (whether really or pseudepigraphically) a companion letter to Colossians and Philemon (*see* COLOSSIANS, LETTER TO THE; PHILEMON, LETTER TO). It contains one-third of the wording of Colossians, and that, in turn, comprises one-quarter of Ephesians. Thematically, Ephesians largely parallels the sequence of topics in Colossians, missing out merely the Colossian “hymn” (Col 1:15–20), and the more detailed aspects of Paul’s response to the “false-teaching” in Col 2, while adding the striking eulogy (Eph 1:3–14 [partly reflecting material in the Colossian hymn]); the ecclesiology of the “one New Man” uniting Jew and Gentile in one

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heavenly temple (2:11–22); the remarkable teaching on the enabling nature and unifying purpose of Christ-given ministries (4:7–16); the expansion of the household codes on husband-wife relations (5:22–32; compare Col 3:18–20), and the commanding “spiritual warfare” passage, which sums up and closes the letter-body (6:10–20). The two letters are also similar in style, language and theology, and are both conveyed by the same coworker, Tychicus, who has the same remit for each letter (Eph 6:21–22 is virtually identical in its wording to Col 4:7–8). Judgment on the authenticity of Ephesians will necessarily depend in large part on whether Colossians may be judged Pauline, and whether the relationship of similarities and differences between the two letters supports or subverts such a claim on behalf of Ephesians.

Those who dispute Pauline authorship of Colossians largely do so on these grounds: 1) stylistic (arguing that the semi-liturgical long and cumbrous sentences, the heaping up of redundant synonyms and qualifying genitives, and the overloading with loosely dependent clauses contrasts too strongly with Paul’s more usual argumentative rhetoric); and 2) theological, e.g., the letter’s more developed cosmic christology; its emphasis on Christ as the head of the universal church, his body (unlike metaphors in 1 Cor 12 and Rom 12, which refer the “head,” and its various component organs, to the local congregational “body,” rather than to Christ); its spatial/above-below, and strongly “realized eschatology,” rather than Paul’s more normal horizontal/two-age temporal, future-orientated, emphasis, etc. Exactly the same criticisms, of course, are made of Ephesians, which shares these features.

Defenders of Colossians (and of Ephesians) respond: 1) that the style is close to that of the parts of Paul where he abandons adversarial-styled argument for more neutral forms, and where he turns to more general teaching, prayer, thanksgiving/praise, and exhortation. In fact, stylometric analysis suggests that both Colossians and Ephesians are closer to that of the center of the Pauline corpus of the thirteen letters ascribed to him than is 1 Corinthians—despite their relatively extensive use of pre-formed material (traditional confessions, hymnic material, vice/virtue lists, household codes), etc; 2) the so-called conceptual developments between the uncontested letters and Colossians (with Ephesians) are nearly always prepared for in the earlier letters, and are best accounted for as changes of emphasis elicited by the false-teaching threatening the Lycus Valley congregations. On the assumption that the latter was a brand of Jewish(-Christian?) apocalyptic mysticism that commended asceticism and rigorous nomism as a means to visionary ascent to receive heavenly wisdom and join in the “worship of angels,” one may account for many of the letter(s)’ moves. The cosmic christology and Christ’s eschatological victory over the powers (already found in such passages as 1 Cor 8:6; 15:24–25; Rom 8:23–29; Phil 2:9–11, and in the many christological uses of Ps 110:1) is expanded, and brought into focused engagement with any speculative interest in the angelic “powers,” by such passages as Col 1:15–20; 2:9–15; Eph 1:20–23. Spatial eschatology, contrasting continuing earthly/fleshly existence with the heavenly eschatological existence in which we already participate in union with Christ, was an important polemical feature of Gal 4:25–28 and Phil 3:14, 19–21. But it is hardly surprising that it receives special focus—along with strongly relational head-body/Christ-church imagery, and a striking “realized” emphasis—precisely in a



context where some are advocating a quite different kind of participation in heavenly ascent and relation to the powers (one that threatens the sufficiency of Christ: Col 2:18–19; see esp. Col 2:10, 12–13; 3:1–4; Eph 1:3, 19–23; 2:1–6). On the positive side, the way Colossians meshes with Philemon, and especially the inclusion of lengthy (otherwise redundant?) greetings from named coworkers (4:10–14//Phlm 23–24), is generally understood to favor authenticity (see PAUL, AUTHORSHIP).

If Colossians is to be accepted as Pauline, then the features they share would *prima facie* support the Pauline authorship of Ephesians too. But it would also be possible to argue that the shared features simply show a later writer’s dependence on our Colossians (though there is scant evidence of purely literary dependence in either direction), while his modulation of and additions to it reveal the writing to be post-Colossian and pseudepigraphic.

The main arguments against Pauline authorship of Ephesians may then briefly be laid out, and partly responded to, as follows.

One of the earliest and most influential objections to the authenticity of the letter was that it assumes the hearers would “surely,” but crucially “may not,” have personal knowledge of Paul’s apostolate (3:2), and, correspondingly, that Paul has only “heard” of the readers’ faith (1:15). Both points are allegedly inconsistent with his relatively long (ca. two and one-half year) ministry in Ephesus (compare Acts 19:8–10). But on an understanding that Paul wrote Ephesians from Rome (ca. 62–64; see below), there would have been many converts in Ephesus who would not have personal knowledge of Paul (which city he left some six years earlier), and Paul will have only “heard” of their then-status of faith—and that of his own erstwhile converts—from his co-workers from the Lycus Valley. But all this rather misses the real point: “Paul” matches the deliberately ironic “assuming you have heard of [my] ministry” (3:2) with a syntactically matching ironic “assuming you heard of him (= Christ) ..” (4:20). The irony presumes that the readers know both about Christ and about Paul.

Many find Ephesians to be uncharacteristically overdependent on another “Pauline” letter—Colossians (and to echo passages of others): the real Paul never so closely shadows himself, it is claimed. In defense of Pauline authorship one may reply that it would hardly be surprising that Colossians and Ephesians share so much in common if they were both written at the same time, and were sent to Ephesus and its hinterland of the Lycus Valley towns (see §B, below). We have no such other “paired” Pauline letters with which to compare. As Richards has shown, letters by Paul destined to be read at a public meeting for worship would be composed and also read publicly; in various drafts, with coworkers chipping in (for the impressive list of the coworkers present, see Col 4:7–14), and with pre-formed material added (use of which is extensive, and often parallel, in both letters; most noticeably in the *Haustafeln*, Col 3:18–

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4:1//Eph 5:21–6:9). In such circumstances one might expect a good deal of linguistic, thematic, and conceptual cross-fertilization, especially if the letters face analogous situations.

Ephesians is often alleged to use such key Colossian theological terms and concepts as *head*, *body*, *mystery*, and *fullness*, in different and essentially post-Colossian ways. For example, in Col 2:19 Christ is said to be the **kephalē** (κεφαλή, “head”) from which the whole body, supported by joints and ligaments, grows with divine growth. Virtually the same is said in Eph 4:15b–16. But, those who argue for theological difference between the two letters allege that in Colossians Christ is “head” of the cosmic body, the universe, while in Ephesians Christ is identified as **kephalē** of the ecclesial body, the church (Eph 4:16) instead (*see* HEAD, HEADSHIP). This is alleged to show the use of **kephalē** in a new (and non-Colossian) linguistic and conceptual sense, and to reveal that author has either misunderstood Colossians, or disagreed with its cosmology and attempted to correct it by his ecclesiological counterpart. But one can argue that there is no linguistic difference in the sense of the word here: in both Colossians and Ephesians it simply means “head” (in the sense “chief, or lord, over”), and there is no reason why Christ should not be “head” of two different entities (if “head” of the cosmos, then surely also “head” of the church, as Eph 4:16 claims). Earlier in Colossians Paul says that Christ is head/Lord of both the church (1:18) and of the cosmos (1:15–17; 2:10), so in this case any linguistic argument collapses. Indeed, in my view (along with major commentaries), in Col 2:19 Jesus is not identified so much as head of the cosmic body, but more precisely as head of the ecclesial body.

It is frequently argued that the form and structure of Ephesians differ from all known Paulines in that the letter does not respond to specific situations/problems, and in that its first part (chaps. 1–3) is mainly eulogy, and prayer-report, not concrete theological argument or polemic. But this judgment confuses form and style with content and function. True, the style of address is not Paul’s usual argument or expository discourse; rather, it is thankful, prayer-filled celebration and exhortation, written with the zeal, idealism, and enthusiasm of the visionary. The writer is convinced that he himself powerfully experiences the very “Spirit of wisdom and revelation” that he prays for his readers (1:17), and that the eyes of his own heart have thereby been opened to comprehend the rich glory of the gospel (1:18–2:8; 3:2–10). By this Spirit he is deeply united with the ascended Lord (1:3; 2:5–6). By the same Spirit (3:16) he has begun to know the depths of the love of Christ and to be filled with the eschatological fullness of God (3:18–19). And it is as one full of this Spirit (5:18) that he speaks. As for its content, the church throughout the centuries has found in Ephesians some of the apostle’s most important theological teaching. As we shall see, that teaching would mesh most especially well with the situation envisaged at Colossae, or places nearby, such as Laodicea, where the Colossian false-teaching was as yet only a potential threat. Indeed, if our Ephesians also reflects the content of the lost letter to the Laodiceans, then the mutual exchange of letters (Col 4:16) could be expected to reinforce the impact of Colossians.

As for theological emphasis, it has been held that Ephesians collapses Paul’s eschatological tension between present and future salvation into a purely realized version thereof. Ephesians is



said to exchange final “justification by faith,” and future parousia-resurrection hope, for a fully realized “salvation and co-resurrection” by faith (Eph 2:1–10), in a way that goes well beyond Colossians. Equally, Ephesians allegedly gives a centrality to the “universal church” and its “unity” unimaginable in the undisputed Pauline epistles, and barely foreshadowed in Colossians. But the view that Ephesians collapses Paul’s eschatology, and thereby distorts his soteriology, is a serious misinterpretation that we must address in more detail below, and requires improbable readings of such passages as Ephesians 1:9–10, 13–14, 18, 21; 2:7, 21; 3:21; 4:13, 15–16, 30; 5:16; 6:11–14. It may be admitted that Ephesians has a more developed and pervasive concept of the “oneness” of the church across the then-known world, and of its role as “body” and “fullness” under Christ’s “headship,” than is explicit in previous Paulines, even Colossians. But it is clear that Paul really did from the beginning regard “the church” as fundamentally some single unified heavenly/eschatological congregation, not merely as individual local congregations (see Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6; and 1 Cor 15:9, where Paul refers to his having persecuted “the church”). Similarly he regards apostles and prophets to be appointed in “the church” (1 Cor 12:28: surely not meaning a plurality to each single congregation), and himself as part of the one “temple of God” with the distant Corinthians (“we are the temple of the living God,” 2 Cor 6:16). It is equally clear, not least from his christological uses of Ps 110 and of OT Yahweh texts, that he regards Jesus as filling/controlling the church universal. One should also remember that Paul’s final mission as a free apostle was to take up a collection from his Gentile congregations with the aim of publicly sealing their union with the Jerusalem church. He knew the bid was fraught with dangers (Rom 15:25–33) and those dangers materialized in the form of his arrest and prolonged (two-year?) imprisonment in Caesarea and then Rome. Given two to four years’ incarceration, with little more to do than reflect and pray, it would not be surprising for him to reach the christocentric understanding of the unity of the church as Christ’s body that begins to emerge in Colossians and is clearly developed in Ephesians.

The letter is claimed to evince a post-Pauline veneration for the apostle (esp. 3:5!) and perspective on Paul’s ministry as completed. But while Eph 3:2–13 graphically portrays Paul’s apostolic ministry and accomplishments; what is said there is not essentially different from (e.g.) Rom 15:14–21 and Col 1:23–2:5. There is no explicit indication that his task is over; in contrast see 6:19–20. The reference to “holy apostles and prophets” (Eph 3:5) in the foundation of the heavenly temple (compare 2:20) has been taken to mean those founding-generation ministries have ended. But that is an anachronistic reading. Ignatius, who knew the letter to the Ephesians, regarded prophets as on-going, and robustly included himself as inspired by the Spirit (Rom 7:2). The language in Ephesians 3:5 is better explained as semi-polemical. The false teachers on the Colossian horizon regard themselves as holy visionaries, and look down on Gentile believers as unholy, and dub them the **akrobystia** (ἀκροβυστία), literally “the foreskin” (Eph 2:11). Paul’s sally in 3:5 identifies those apostles and prophets who clarified the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers as God’s one people as the more truly “holy” visionaries. In what ways is the question of Pauline authorship important? From a historical-critical view it is essential to isolate the discrete message of the writer’s original discourse, even should it seem

contrary to Paul on important issues, so the questions discussed above are critical. But what status should the possibility of an “anti-Paul” reading have for a “biblical/canonical” interpretation? Probably little. The Tychicus passage shows the writer wishes the letter to be read with Colossians (and Philemon), and its canonical inclusion with the Paulines demands it be given a Pauline reading. We may take two heuristic examples. First, the suggestion has been made that the eschatology of Ephesians is entirely “realized,” and a corrective to Paul’s future-orientated vision. But when Ephesians is read with its partner-letter, Colossians (esp. Col 3:1–4), let alone with the other Paulines, in some more canonical reading, then such an interpretation would be entirely subverted. (And in fact the hypothesis has been shown to be quite wrong, even on an isolated reading of Ephesians: compare 1:14, 18; 2:7; 4:30; 5:16; 6:8, 13). Second, we may take Van Kooten’s view that Col 2:19 speaks of Christ as head/lord of the universal body, with its cosmic uniting joints and ligaments, while Eph 4:16 (mis-)uses the same language to “correct” the Colossian cosmic christology in favor of an ecclesial one of Christ as the head of the church-body. But, of course, any canonical reader will read the more ambiguous Col 2:19 in the light of the clear Eph 4:16, and, in our view, will be more safely guided to the meaning of each passage.

B. Destination, Occasion, and Purpose

According to most ancient manuscripts Eph 1:1*b* was addressed to “the saints who are in Ephesus, namely (= **kai** [καὶ] “and”) those who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” Some important manuscripts lack “in Ephesus,” but all are headed “to the Ephesians,” and in Paul’s letter-addressee slot the phrase “who are” is always followed by a location, “in X.” That does not mean the letter was primarily intended for Ephesus, but at least that one copy was sent there. As Paul’s envoy, Tychichus, accompanying the returning slave Onesimus, and with a full letter to his master’s Colossian church, could not just pass through Ephesus to the Lycus Valley towns (Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis) without some communication to the major city in which Paul had had such a prolonged ministry. “Ephesians” would serve the need, and also brace them against their endemic fear of Artemisian powers (Arnold, 1989). But our “Ephesians” was probably a copy of a letter intended primarily for the church in Laodicea (why Marcion knew it as the letter to the Laodicians referred to in Col 4:16). The themes shared with Colossians suggest a prophylactic against the false-teaching incipient in Colossae (only a short day’s walk past Laodicea).

The above accepts the tradition that the letters were written from Rome, during Paul’s imprisonment (compare Phlm 1, 9–10, 13; Col 4:10; Eph 3:1; 6:20) there (60–62 ce), rather than from Caesarea (57–59 ce), or even from Ephesus itself (sometime within 52–55 ce?). A Roman setting might best explain the developed theology of the letter. We have no unambiguous evidence of an Ephesian imprisonment at all, let alone the lengthy one presupposed by what Paul says of his relationship with Onesimus; namely, that he became Paul’s “beloved child” in prison (v. 10), had then become his very heart (v. 12), and proved himself a faithful brother and useful coworker that the apostle would dearly like to retain for the foreseeable period of his incarceration (Col 4:9; Phlm 11, 13). All this suggests a period of



weeks, more likely months-and that would be more difficult to explain on the assumption of an Ephesian confinement. Paul would be bound by law to return Onesimus to his master at the first opportunity. He could return Onesimus the relatively short overland distance from Ephesus to the Lycus Valley towns (roughly five days' walk). A Caesarean or Roman imprisonment would require Onesimus to winter with Paul as shipping (and many roads over high ground) closed from late October to March/April.

The three Lycus Valley letters share a single beating heart. The one addressed to Philemon asks for a then-unbelievable level of reconciliation and new relationship with his absconded slave, Onesimus. Onesimus is to be greeted and treated as a brother; welcomed even as Paul himself would be (Phlm 17). Colossians, and especially Ephesians, paint this radical request into the broader interpretive canvas of truly and fully cosmic reconciliation and harmony inaugurated in Christ. Both letters in different ways spell out the implications for the believers' relation to the powers, and the lifestyles that should exemplify their unity with Christ and with one another. Ephesians is much fuller in the latter respect (see §D), and more suited to a plurality of audiences.

C. Analysis

No Pauline letter manifests such rhetorical discourse-cohesion as Ephesians. The key theme of cosmic reunification, inaugurated in the believers' union with Christ, dominates the horizon in virtually every section. This involves a certain level of reinforcing repetition, yet the progress from passage to passage kaleidoscopically focuses some new perspective/outworking with each move.

1. The eulogy (1:3–14)

If Galatians is theology in the boxing ring, Ephesians is theology dancing, and the **berakhah** (בְּרָכָה, “blessing”) with which it begins is a compelling invitation onto the floor, drawing the hearers in to participate in the sequences that will follow.

Written from a Jewish-Christian perspective, it patently blesses Israel's God: the almighty author of creation and promised new creation (1:4; compare 2:15; 3:11 [compare 4:6]; 4:24), who works out his sovereign pretemporal will to the eschatological praise of his glorious grace (1:6, 11–12, 13–14). Yet that one God's identity is now supremely revealed as “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus” (1:3; compare 1:17), as that grace focuses on fulfillment in Christ of the promises made to Israel of corporate “sonship” (now, yes, but primarily eschatological: 1:5–6, as in Rom 8:23); new-exodus “redemption” from slavery/sin (1:7); “sealing” (with the Spirit: 1:13), and final “inheritance” in which God takes full possession of his people (1:14; compare 1:18 and Col 1:12) “to the praise of his glorious grace,” meaning to the acclamation of all creation at the final cosmic trial (1:14*b*, but also 1:6, 12).

The eschatological chord is thus roundly struck. As yet believers only participate in “every spiritual blessing” in part, by virtue of their union with Christ in the heavenlies (let the



Colossians errorists note) where their inheritance (1:14) is kept secure (a typical apocalyptic and Pauline theme; compare Col 1:5; 3:1–4). They have been chosen before the beginning of the world that they may stand blameless before God (1:4*b*//Col 1:22), and enter into full sonship (1:5) at its end. For the present they have only the “first installment” and guarantee of all of this in the gift of the Spirit (1:13*b*–14*a*). Discourse-analysis shows the climax of 1:3–14 to be 1:9–10: the revelation of the ineffable mystery of God’s majestic intent to “re-sum-up” (**anakephalaioō** ἀνακεφαλαιόω) all things in union/unity in Christ (compare 1:22–23; 3:3–4, 6–9, 19). The presupposition here—very much as in Col 1:15–20—is that the protological unity of creation in Christ has (through the fall) fragmented into a chaos of multiple alienations (from God, from neighbor, and from authentic self), and that the Christ-event inaugurates cosmic reconciliation and harmony. This is the vision that fires the rest of the letter. But the author does not believe the vision of 1:9–10 is already fully accomplished. He looks out onto a still largely unbelieving “old” humanity, alienated from God, from the church, and from one another; dead in sin, and under the malign influence of the Evil One (compare 2:1–5; 4:17–20; 5:11–14). Even for the church itself, the days are evil (5:15; 6:13) and beset by encircling hosts of opposing powers (4:27; 6:10–17). Her day of redemption and inheritance (1:11–14, 18; 4:30) still lies in the temporal future, which readers will naturally identify (from Col 3:4, or from the Pauline tradition generally) with the parousia.

2. The prayer report begins (1:15–2:10)

After blessing God for his rich blessing of us, Paul turns to the subject of his prayer for the believers. They will undoubtedly have heard the familiar kerygma of Christ’s death, resurrection, and exaltation to cosmic power at God’s right hand (compare the allusion to Ps 110:1 [and Ps 8:6]) that compose 1:20–23. They will have heard too that believers are incorporated in this reality (at baptism, according to Col 2:12–13, the immediately parallel passage; and compare Rom 6:4, 8, 11), as 2:1–8 asserts. But Paul’s prayer here brings new nuances. First, it is only by receiving wisdom/revelation from the Spirit (1:17) that the believer has a transformed understanding (“the eyes of the heart being enlightened,” v. 18) of this proclamation (compare also 3:14–21). In a move similar to 1 Cor 2:1–3:4, Paul implies that full/mature knowledge and revelation of God takes the believer deeper into the kerygma, rather than (e.g.) leaving it behind for arcane, less christocentric “heavenly wisdom.” Second, the power at work in believers (1:19) effecting the salvation spoken of in 2:1–8 is one with the power that raised and exalted Christ, and gave him plenipotentiary position over all other powers—including any that the Colossian/Laodicean and Ephesian believers might fear or unhealthily revere (1:20–21), and that could be evil-enticing powers (2:2; compare 6:13; as in Col 2). Indeed, far from being in thrall to the powers, and ruled by them, believers should recognize that in their union with Christ they share (proleptically?) in his position and rule above them and over them instead (2:6). Third, the means by which the vision of 1:9–10 is reached begins to be unveiled in v. 23: Christ will bring all things into complete harmony with himself, just as he now begins to fill the church, his body, as the head (lord) given to it.

Ephesians 2:8–10 has often been taken as non-Pauline, because it speaks of Christians as people who “have been saved by faith” in the past (using a perfect tense), and 2:5–6 because it spiritualizes Paul’s resurrection hope, and locates it in the believers’ conversion-initiation. But the companion letter, Colossians, uses the same “co-resurrection/made alive” metaphor (Eph 2:5–6 = Col 2:12–13; compare 3:1) for conversion-initiation without any loss of the literal resurrection hope (3:4), and so there is no reason to believe the metaphor is instead its replacement in Ephesians. And the only “salvation” that is “past” in this passage is precisely the all-changing transfer from death to life by faith union with Christ’s (more starkly, Col 1:13; compare Rom 6).

3. Jew, Gentile, and cosmic reconciliation/unity (2:11–22)

This centerpiece of Eph 1–3 juts out prominently as a digression from the prayer report. It emerges from 2:11 that some are dismissively labeling Gentile believers as “the foreskin”-hardly Paul’s own chosen term to address them (he uses **akrobystia** only in polemical Judaizing contexts). While Paul regularly faced opponents who took variations of this stance, it is most probably the Colossian false teachers he has principally in mind, and his riposte is that they are the so-called circumcision, but a quasi-idolatrous one-one merely “made with human hands,” not the significant God-given circumcision of the heart (or totality of the flesh, as the par. Col 2:11 puts it).

Then, while allowing the salvation-historical privilege of empirical Israel (they are “the near” to God of Isa 57:19 in 2:12–13, 17), Paul declares Christ’s death wins a double reconciliation (2:14–18). In a horizontal dimension the cross tears down (in principle) the wall of alienation/hostility keeping apart the two ancient divisions of mankind (Jew and Gentile), previously generated by the Law, and allows the former two to be re-created as one new humanity in Christ (2:14–15). But in a vertical dimension the cross also reconciles both these groups to God (2:16–17), creating a church “in Christ” that thereby already exemplifies (to the world, and even to the heavenly hosts; compare 3:10) the beginnings of the cosmic reunification promised in 1:9–10, and messianic peace (2:18) of Isa 57:19 and 52:7 (christologically interpreted). This is not a systematic theology of Israel and the church (though it comports well with Rom 9–11), but a theological account of the relationship of Jewish and Gentile believers as one body, indeed as together the one eschatological holy heavenly temple in the Lord, indwelled by God’s Spirit (2:19–22). On the smooth walls of that divine edifice there is no toehold for those who regard Gentile believers as second-class citizens of God’s household, excluded by their lack of holiness from the heavenly realms. Nor, for that matter, is there foothold for complacent unbelieving Jews, who thereby walk as children of wrath in the peril described in 2:1–3, and in need of the reconciliation to God described in 2:16. Defining for who belongs to the heavenly temple-city is faith in Christ and the sealing of the indwelling Holy Spirit (1:14; 2:18, 22).

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4. Paul's apostolic ministry to reveal the mystery (3:2–13)

After momentarily resuming his prayer report in 3:1, Paul breaks off into a second digression. His calling is to make known the revelation of the MYSTERY of the unsearchable riches of Christ (3:8–9) and the manifold wisdom of God (3:10), he insists. What is that? It is nothing less than that the Gentiles are co-heirs, co-body members (a neologism), and co-sharers in Christ and his benefits (3:6). It is this revelation that makes the apostles and prophets the holy foundation of Christ's temple (2:20). He then makes the surprising assertion that it is the church (built on this foundation, and living as an exemplification of the cosmic unity to come) that makes known God's wisdom to the heavenly principalities and powers. This statement is best explained as delicious irony served up in a situation where some prefer to think that the angelic powers reveal heavenly wisdom to the church.

5. The prayer report resumes and climaxes (3:14–19)

The prayer is again for the revelatory and hermeneutical work of the Spirit (compare 1:17) that brings Christ (his life and molding influence) into the heart of the believers—captivating the core of their existence with love (3:17), and thereby enabling them more fully to understand the immensity of Christ's love (3:18–19). Paul uses the metaphor of a three-dimensional space, seen from the inside, and stretching out to all receding horizons. Are they the dimensions of the cosmos? The heavenly temple? The celestial body of Christ? We are not told: we are just left with the image of unfathomable vastness. To understand this love would be to be filled with all God's fullness—from which we are probably to infer that Christ filling of the church (1:23), and eventually of “all things” (1:23; 4:10), means to bring them under the power of his uniting, reconciling, and transforming love.

6. Exhortation to live out the gospel of cosmic reconciliation and unity in Christ (4:1–6:20)

The whole second part of Ephesians consists of ethical exhortation that is thoroughly grounded in the vision of the church in chaps. 1–3 (the “therefore” of 4:1 should be taken seriously), and supported by further teaching. It is clear from the extent of the material that another purpose of the letter is to provide a general ethical teaching for the predominantly Gentile addressees. The ethic promoted is decidedly community orientated, not individualistic, for the “new man” (4:23–24) is first and foremost a relational being, in counterpart to the “old man” (4:22) marked by alienations.

a. Opening exhortation to a life that expresses new creation unity (4:1–6). Following the familiar Pauline call to live a life worthy of their calling (4:1), Paul first spells this out in 4:2 as living the qualities of the new-creation personhood he explains in 4:17–5:2, and, second, as a call urgently to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). The importance of this latter call is then hammered into the drumbeat of two triads of cardinal confessional unities (“one body, one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism”), and climaxes finally with the “one God ... in all” (4:6).

b. Ministries as Christ's victory gifts to promote united growth into Christ (4:7–16). The unity for which Paul calls is no wooden uniformity, but likened to a harmoniously growing body, where each part contributes to the whole (4:7, *16b*). Yet this is not egalitarianism: a variety of church leaders—mainly those with teaching functions—are given prominence, both as Christ's ascension gifts to the church (4:8–12; using what was probably already a christological hymn based on Ps 68:19 [LXX 67:19]), and as the ligaments and sinews that hold the body together and thus shape its growth (4:16). The goal of all this is mature unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son (4:13, rather than childlike vacillation, being blown around by the contrary winds of deceitful false teaching, 4:14; compare Col 2:22), and a corporate growth into a mature man of the stature of Christ (4:13), which can also be expressed as the body growing "into" Christ, its head/lord (4:16), in love.

c. Exhortations to abandon the life of the "old man/humanity" and to live according to the new-creation humanity revealed in Christ (4:17–6:9). This does not indicate a shift away from the centrality of the theme of unity, but merely a different way of presenting it—as becomes clear in the first two subsections.

i. Exhortation to put off the old, and clothe oneself with the new man (4:17–24). The "old man"—more or less equated with their erstwhile Gentile existence—is alienated from God, and typified by callousness and lusts (4:18–19, 22). This whole type of personhood is to be "put off," like soiled clothes, and the new-creation humanity, modeled on Jesus, is to be put on. What this entails is then clarified in:

ii. Exhortation to live the truth patterned on Jesus (4:25–5:2) and to live out the light that shines from Christ (5:3–14). The ethic commended is profoundly relational, and community-building love. The first exhortation to speak only the truth with one's neighbor is thus grounded in the assertion "for we are members one of another" (4:25). The contrast with the old is clearest in 4:31–32: relationship-damaging behavior (anger, bitterness, etc.) is resolutely to be shunned; tenderness and Godlike forgiveness to be embraced. Believers are called to imitate God, as he is revealed in the cruciform self-giving love of Christ (5:1–2). The words *unity*, *reconciliation*, and *peace* do not appear; but their substance is apparent throughout.

iii. Exhortation to live out the wisdom the Spirit gives in corporate charismatic worship (5:15–20) and in harmonious households (5:21–6:9). The christology of Christ filling his people to the whole fullness of God (1:23; 3:17–19; compare 4:10), which otherwise only God can do (compare 3:19), and of uniting all things in himself, so that he is all in all (1:10, *23b*), as God is (4:6), includes Christ within the identity of the one God of Israel, and evokes a Spirit-led binitarian worship (5:19–20: the first explicit call to worship Christ in the Paulines [and contrast the call to the worship of angels in Col 2:18]). The same Spirit also leads in the down-to-earth cruciform commitments, and mutual submissions, that make the household an expression of the gospel of peace and cosmic reconciliation. To illustrate this, Paul uses the

same preformed household codes he incorporated into Colossians (3:18–4:1)-there probably because the return of Onesimus to his master, Philemon, made treatment of household relationships a significant agenda item for the Colossian church. In Ephesians, however, there is a new take. The *Haustafeln* (household codes) do not promote an egalitarian, strictly reciprocal mutual submission-parents are not told to obey their children; nor masters their slaves-but instead the husband-wife relationship is expanded as the prime example of what the gospel of cosmic unity looks like when earthed in human relations. The marriage envisaged is seen to mirror the Christ-church relationship between self-giving loving “head” and submissive beloved “body” in a relationship fulfilling and transcending the “one flesh” union of Gen 2:24 (*see* BODY OF CHRIST).

7. Final summons to spiritual warfare in the armor of God (6:10–20)

This is not a new “topic,” but a striking military metaphor to sum up all that has been said so far. The church is addressed as cohort (this is no individualistic lone soldier facing the “hosts of wickedness”!). It holds the high ground but must withstand the attacks of the principalities and powers and world rulers of darkness (6:12). The enemy tactic (as we learn from 2:1–3, etc.) is to scatter humanity into multiple alienations. But Christ’s cohort must stand unified together, with the armor of God himself (the description draws on Isa 59:17; Wis 5:17–18), and the accoutrements of the messiah (Isa 11:5): these are none other than the very righteousness, truth, hope, and faith the letter has described and urged. And, slightly ironically, the boots that will give them firm footing they need against the attack is the good news of messianic “peace” (6:15; compare 2:18) in cosmic reconciliation.

D. Theological/Contemporary Significance

Every theme/passage of the letter has been important for theology, but special mention may be made of the following: 1) the emphasis on the inaugurated eschatology of cosmic reconciliation and unity, for which the apostle suffered signally, has put the issue at the center of the gospel, rather than relegating it to a pragmatic adiaphoron. It has fueled the challenge to a culture of individualism, and encouraged new, more relational views of the nature of the self and personhood. It has also been the inspiration of the ecumenical movement, and of post-apartheid attempts at reconciliation in South Africa; 2) Ephesians 2:11–22 has provided a paradigmatic starting point for the church’s attempts to address Jewish-Christian dialogue and racial hostility; 3) Ephesians 4:7–16 has played a significant role in the understanding of the purpose and facilitating functions of ministry; 4) Ephesians 5:22–32 has been one of the most influential biblical passages on Christian marriage and its relationship to the mystery of the gospel; 5) The treatment of union with Christ and the “powers” (esp. Eph 1–2, 6) has brought strength and courage to the church throughout history, not least in countries more aware of the demonic dimension of spiritual experience. *See* CHURCH, IDEA OF THE.

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AB Anchor Bible

NTS New Testament Studies

ICC International Critical Commentary

WBC Word Biblical Commentary

BNTC Black’s New Testament Commentaries

EvQ Evangelical Quarterly

¹ Max Turner, “[Ephesians, Letter to The](#),” ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006–2009), 270.