

Gary E. Weedman, “Reading Ephesians from the New Perspective on Paul,”¹ *Leaven*, Summer, 2006, pp. 81-92. Reprinted by permission.

Introduction

Since the publication of E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*,² several scholars have taken up a major thesis of this seminal work critiquing the “traditional” understanding of Judaism as a legalistic religion of works-righteousness, extending it to new understandings of the role of the apostle Paul and of his writings. James D. G. Dunn was the first to coin this revised view as the “new perspective on Paul.”³ While there are many “new perspectives” today, each shares a common view that Paul is speaking as a Jew and within the context of a Second Temple Judaism that was not grounded in a works-righteousness view of salvation. Rather, proponents of the new perspective see that when Paul argues against the Law, he aims at those Jews and Gentiles who were trying to impose the “boundary markers” of the Law—circumcision, dietary practices, and Sabbath observance—on Gentiles who wanted to become part of the group acknowledging Jesus as Lord.

In the last twenty-five years the many works written with this view as a controlling paradigm have largely focused on the undisputed letters of Paul—especially Romans, Galatians, and 2 Corinthians.⁴ I want to investigate the letter to the Ephesians to see how it might add to this conversation. Discussion of the relationship of Ephesians to the new perspective of Paul has been strangely silent.⁵ One obvious reason, of course, is that many contemporaries consider Ephesians

¹ The substance of this paper was delivered at the International Society of Biblical Literature, Groningen, Netherlands, July 27, 2004.

² E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis, MN. Fortress, 1977).

³ James D. G. Dunn, “[Chapter] 7 The New Perspective on Paul,” *Jesus, Paul, and the Law. Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY. Westminster 1990). Since Sanders’ and Dunn’s groundbreaking work, several scholars have expanded and modified the basic thesis in his work to such an extent that it is no longer accurate to speak of “the new perspective on Paul,” but rather “new *perspectives* on Paul.” However, in this presentation, I will use the commonly accepted description of “the new perspective.”

⁴ This literature, supporting, modifying, or rejecting the new perspective is extensive and readily available to scholars.

⁵ For example, Sanders (1977) has one reference to Ephesians in a footnote while including many to Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians. Dunn (1990) has five mostly parenthetical references and two footnotes. Dunn (2001) has four passing citations plus five footnotes. James D. G. Dunn, ed. *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (Grand Rapids, MI. Eerdmans, 2001). While the undisputed letters—Romans, Gala-

to be written by someone other than Paul. However, since the letter purports to be from Paul and is, in many ways at least, “Pauline,” I want to see how it corresponds to the core ideas of the new perspective, irrespective of the actual author and the uncertainty of the recipients. For the sake of convention, I will use “Paul” as the imputed author and “Ephesians” as the implied recipients.

Reading the letter from the new perspective allows us to see Paul urging a Gentile audience not to disregard the heritage of Israel or of the Law. It is a sometime subtle message, one which begins in the opening praise, continues through the thanksgiving section, emerges strongly in the description of their pre-conversion lives, appears and reappears in the prayer and parentheses, and then implicitly pops up in the paraenesis section. Like a Paganini theme in a Rachmaninoff score, the message that these Gentiles should honor the heritage of Israel into which they have been included is played in different ways, but with the same underlying figure.

In doing such a reading as this, *I intend to examine five issues about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in Ephesians as they relate to the new perspective*: (1) the “we-you” language, especially in the opening doxology, 1.3-14, (2) the use of the “saints,” (3) the description of the “Gentiles” before their conversion, (4) the meaning of Paul’s “mystery,” and (5) the meaning in 2.14, 15 of “in his flesh...he has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances.”⁶

Relationship of Jews and Gentiles. The “We-You” Language in Eph 1.3-14

Imagine sitting in a church in a city in Asia Minor in the late first century, having heard that an emissary had come with a message from the great apostle Paul. The reader of the day stands and begins. “Blessed be the God...who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph 1.3). “Yes,” the listener thinks, “Paul is right; God has blessed all of us in such great ways. I was a Gentile, living a reprobate life, looked down upon by the local Jews, but now, thanks be to God, we have been included with the Jews as God’s special people.” The reader goes on, “he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless” (Eph 1.4). “Yes,” the listener thinks, “God has certainly chosen me; there is no other way that I could be here today.” The reader continues, “He has made known to us the mystery of his will” (Eph 1.9). Again, the listener nods in solemn agreement. But then, the surprise. The reader pauses, looks up from the manuscript with a slight smile and says, “In him you also...were marked with the seal” (Eph 1.13). The hearers, a bit dumbfounded at first, realize that they have been cleverly tricked. “I thought Paul was talking about us Gentiles,” thinks the Gentile listener. “But it does not seem to be so—he was talking about Jews!”

That is the scene that I imagine from this passage. That is the effect, I believe, the author of the passage intended. It is my understanding that most of the time the author explicitly and intentionally refers to Jews when he speaks of “us” or “we” and to Gentiles when he speaks of “you.” I believe that he does so in order to impress upon this predominantly Gentile audience their dependence on Israel for their current position in the church.

tians, 2 Corinthians—are dealt with extensively in the literature, there are no available treatments that focus on Ephesians, other than Thielman. Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law. A Contextual Approach*. (Downers Grove, IL. InterVarsity, 1994) who has six and one-half pages in a 336 page book.

⁶ Here and throughout the NRSV is used unless otherwise noted

At times in the “we-you” language, even in the undisputed letters of Paul, the author may be using an editorial “we,” including himself and the recipients in the term (Rom 8.28). At other times the first person includes the author and co-workers, and the second person “you” includes the congregation addressed (1 Thess 1.2; 2 Thess 1.3). Still, at other times the distinction may be between early believers and those who have come to faith recently, whether Jew or Gentile.⁷ In other instances the author may use the first person in creedal statements or other common confessions that have some epideictic quality (1 Cor 8.6; 2 Cor 1.2). While this passage has some of the characteristics of the latter, the rhetorical surprise at the end is all the more striking. The hearers would have understood the first person in just that way—in a poetic and inclusive sense—only to have been “tricked” into learning that they were, in fact, not part of that “we” group after all.⁸

The sentence which begins this passage has received much attention primarily because of its unusual structure—unusual, at least, for most syntax in the NT. The sentence begins in 1.3 and does not arrive at a full stop until 1.14—202 words.⁹ The sentence has drawn attention for many years, described by one scholar as “the most monstrous sentence conglomeration that I have encountered in Greek.”¹⁰ Markus Barth says that it is “one infinitely long, heavy and clumsy sentence, replete with dependent clauses, excurses, specifications, repetitions, and the like.”¹¹ There are almost as many ways to divide the sentence into parts as there are interpreters of the passage.

⁷ See Donald Jayne, “‘We’ and ‘You’ in Ephesians 1.3-14,” *ExpTim* 85 (1974), 151-52, and R. E. Wilson, “We and You in the Epistle to the Ephesians,” *SE* ed. F. L. Cross, TU 87 (Berlin. Akademie-Verlag, 1964), 676-80; also see Margaret Y. MacDonald, “The Politics of Identity in Ephesians,” *JSNT* 26.4 (2004), 419-44, and MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, MN. Liturgical Press, 2000), 203-04.

⁸ In the undisputed letters of Paul there are examples of the use of the first person to refer to “Jews” and the second person to refer to Gentiles. For example, Gal 3.13-14, “Christ redeemed us [Jews] from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us [Jews]...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.” See Terrence Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles. Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* (Minneapolis, MN. Fortress, 1997), 180, 240. See also Terrence Donaldson, “The ‘Curse of the Law’ and the Inclusion of the Gentiles. Gal 3.13-14,” *NTS* 32 (1986), 94-112.

⁹ Ephesians has a number of uncharacteristically long sentences. 1.3-14; 15-23; 2.1-7; 3.2-13, 14-19; 4.1-6, 11-16; 6.14-20; the first three of these are a praise, a thanksgiving, and a prayer. It should be pointed out, however, that this is not the longest sentence in the letters traditionally attributed to Paul (see Col 1.9-20).

¹⁰ “[D]as monströseste Satzkonglomerat...das mir in griechischer Sprache begegnet ist.” Ed. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Berlin. Teubner, 1913), 253.

¹¹ Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* AB 34 (Garden City, NY. Doubleday, 1974) 77.

After explaining more than a dozen different reconstructions of the structure of this sentence,¹² Lincoln concludes with a quotation from J. T. Sanders, “every attempt to provide a strophic structure for Eph 1.3-14 fails.”¹³ But then he proceeds to present his own structural analysis of the passage based upon the placement of aorist participles and the “in Christ” phrases.¹⁴ Hoehner demonstrates the confusion even more by diagramming forty-three different ways that the sentence has been divided, dating from 1904 to 2001.¹⁵

Part of the difficulty, at least, is that the sentence reflects elements both of Paul’s Hellenistic and his Jewish background. The sentence is actually a clever combination of a Hebrew praise, a *berakhah*, and a Greek rhetorical device, *hypotaxis*, one subordinate clause generating yet another and then another and then another.

From the Jewish perspective, Newman describes the background for such *berakhah* and gives examples of them, both in and out of the Bible.¹⁶ Kirby provides additional examples of first century praises.¹⁷ From such analyses, it is apparent that there was great fluidity and spontaneity available in the use of such eulogies. That there are so many variations of structures for this sentence may be proof that no intricate and obvious structure is intended for this *berakhah* beyond a description of the salvation history of the people of God. In fact, Newman suggests the futility of trying to impose some structure upon the passage since it was customary for such blessings to pile up one phrase after another without any overall structure depending on the circumstance that brought forth the praise.¹⁸

From the Greek perspective, however, the use of the Greek rhetorical figure overlaying the *berakhah* does give it a structure—that of a Greek period. Robinson has shown that the sentence is not such a “monstrosity” after all, as Norden claimed; rather it has many parallels in Greek and Roman oratory of the Hellenistic period, following the normal convention of a rhetorical period, especially for epideictic oratory.¹⁹ Quoting a nineteenth century grammarian of classical rhetoric,

¹² Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*. WBC 42 (Dallas, TX. Word, 1990) 10-19.

¹³ J. T. Sanders, “Hymnic Elements in Ephesians 1-3,” *ZNW* 56 (1965) 214-32.

¹⁴ Lincoln, 15-19.

¹⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians. An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI. Baker, 2002), 160-61.

¹⁶ Carey C. Newman, “Ephesians 1.3—A Primer to Paul’s Grammar of God,” *RevExp* 95 (2001), 89-101.

¹⁷ J. C. Kirby, *Ephesians, Baptism, and Pentecost* (London. SPCK, 1968), 83-89.

¹⁸ Newman (2001), 97-98.

¹⁹ I remember my graduate school days in Professor Glanville Downey’s Greek Oratory class trying to outline the subordinate constructions in Demosthenes’ “On The Crown.”

Robinson posits the definition of a period as “a compound sentence with one or more subordinate clauses, in which *the meaning is kept suspended to the close* [emphasis mine].”²⁰

I want to extend Robinson’s point, that it has many parallels in Greek oratory, and claim that it is a clever rhetorical figure of exquisite periodic structure culminating in a *rhetorical surprise*. And the surprise is not revealed, the “*meaning is kept suspended to the close*,” as Robinson says, in this case until the “also you” of 1.13. That is what the more than forty attempts to discover the structure seem to miss.

The question is how does this rhetorical surprise function at the beginning of the letter? What does the author intend to accomplish by such a rhetorical surprise? As with many of the openings of letters in the NT, the issues to be addressed and developed are introduced early. Given the questions about authorship, the recipients, the time period, and the occasion of this letter, it is impossible to reconstruct the problem from such normal contextual background. The external evidence does not help to reconstruct the circumstances that are addressed by the letter. Thus, we are restricted to relying upon the rhetorical analysis of the text itself.

The audience, mainly Gentile, is caught by surprise and is led to understand that while they live in God’s favor because of Jesus Christ, they do so also by standing on the shoulders of Israel. It was Israel who was blessed, chosen, predestined, favored, redeemed, graced, recipients of the “mystery,” the first to hope—all of these characteristics coming to fullness as they participated “in Christ” (1.3-12). In contrast, the Gentiles, instead of such a long description as above, are said here simply to have heard, believed, and been sealed. Israel was blessed, chosen, predestined, favored, redeemed, graced, recipients of the “mystery,” the first to hope; the Gentiles heard, believed, and were sealed. The contrast is striking.

Furthermore, they are sealed with the Holy Spirit, who is described as the “down payment” (*arrabōn*) of *our* (i.e., the Israel’s) inheritance. Israel has had the inheritance all along as the covenant people; the Gentile believers have received the down payment of it and share in it along with the original inheritors.

Thus, from this opening soaring praise, containing an unexpected surprise, Paul distinguishes two groups—Jews and Gentiles, and in so doing, emphasizes the foundational role of the Jews and the covenant in bringing the Gentiles into relationship with God. Rather than a deprecating view of Israel and the Law, Paul cleverly posits the valuable role of Israel in bringing the Gentiles into relationship with God; such a reading is assisted by the new perspective of Paul.

Relationship of Jews and Gentiles: The “Saints” and the Gentiles

Following this *berakhah*, Paul continues with similar liturgical language in the traditional “thanksgiving” section that follows, still distinguishing between the two groups. The theme, played simply with a few notes in the *berakhah*, he now develops with great flourish in this thanksgiving section and beyond it.

In so doing he introduces a word that he uses repeatedly throughout the letter, which is one more indication of this underlying motive to have the Gentiles understand and appreciate the role of Israel in their relationship to God; it is the word “saints,” first appearing in 1.15, and then

²⁰ Charles J. Robbins, “The Composition of Eph 1.3-14,” *JBL* 105/4 (1986), 677.

1.18, 2.19, 3.8, 4.12, and 6.18. In each case I take the referent to be *Jewish* believers.²¹

He offers thanks for the recipients, at least partly, because they have a “love toward all ‘the saints’” (1.15). The point is not that they merely demonstrated the general characteristic of love, but rather this love was directed toward “the saints.” They were already beginning to exhibit the kind of behavior that Paul is advocating for them in this letter. Of course, we do not know how the recipients manifested this “love toward all the saints.” Paul told the Corinthians and churches in Galatia to receive weekly collections, which he would then take to Jerusalem for the “saints” there who were needy. Perhaps the recipients of this letter had demonstrated such love in concrete ways with a monetary gift.

In 1.18 he declares that he wants them to know the hope to which they have been called and “what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.” Two times before, he has discussed the “inheritance.” First, in the *berakhah*, he declared that Israel was the recipient of this inheritance: “In Christ, we [i.e., Israel] have also obtained an inheritance” (1.11). Second, in 1.14, 15 he declared that the Holy Spirit was the Gentile’s partial payment, the *arrabōn*, of “our” (i.e. Israel’s) inheritance. Now, this *inheritance* is described as “his,” that is to say, God’s, to give to them for their enjoyment; he describes this gift as “a glorious inheritance among the saints.” Again, the subtext of this message is that Israel is a beneficent people as far as the Gentiles are concerned. Israel had the inheritance, it was theirs, but, as to the prodigal son, the Father has extended their inheritance to this wayward child.²² The implied message is that the Gentiles, therefore, should be appreciative of their elder brother, Israel.²³

The next use of “saints” is in 2.19. After recounting the lives of the Gentiles before their reconciliation in some detail (2.1-2), and then asserting that Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between “us” (i.e. “us” Jews and “you” Gentiles), he declares to the Gentile audience. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone” (Eph 2.19-20). Again, the subtext is the same as before; the Gentile believers have come lately to the table; the “saints,” that is, Israel, were already at the meal. Gentiles are adopted children in God’s family; Israel is the biological child of the father. They have been added to a Jewish building constructed by Jewish leaders, apostles

²¹ D. W. B. Robinson, “Who Were the Saints?” *RTR* 22 (1963). 45-53.

²² There are some who believe that the “saints” in this passage refer to the angels, a frequent use of the term in the Qumran community, 1QS 11.7, 8; 1QH 11.7, 8. Lincoln (1990, 60) believes that the word refers to all of God’s people. However, the progression from 1.11 and 1.15 suggests otherwise to me.

²³ It should be noted that Paul uses somewhat the same expression, “riches of his glory” in Rom 9.22-24. “²²What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; ²³and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— ²⁴including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”

and prophets, with Jesus as the cornerstone. In 3.5 Paul returns to the important role of apostles and prophets as (1) they relate to the new status of believing Gentiles and (2) as they relate to Israel and the revelation of “the mystery.”

The fourth time he uses the word, “saints,” is in 3.8. After beginning in 3:1, “This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles,” he then interrupts the flow of the sentence and explodes with a description of his own role in this work of bringing Jew and Gentile together (3.2-7). He was given a special measure of God’s grace (3.2); the mystery was revealed to him personally (3.3); it was revealed to other apostles and prophets (3.5). Before he wrote this self-description, the focus had been on God as the primary actor, who in his providence chose Israel through whom all nations would be blessed. Now Paul interjects himself as the dominant emissary of this mission to the Gentiles. Yet, his purpose here is not to defend his apostleship as in the Corinthian correspondence, but rather to posit the important role of Israel in the project. So, lest they think too much of his role in the matter, he demures that this mission was given to him even though, “I [Paul] am the very least of all the saints.” The emphasis is the importance of “the saints,” Israel, and not Paul—thus the diminution of his stature.

The fifth use of “saints” is in 4.12. After the extended opening praise and thanksgiving section, establishing that the Gentiles have been included in the inheritance of Israel, the author continues in exalted liturgical language in the paraenetic section of the letter to summarize the nature of the unity. After quoting part of Psalm 68, the author continues with one of his dazzling, never-ending sentences with one subordinate clause emerging after another. In the midst of the description of unity, he says, “The gifts he [Christ] gave were that some would be [for the church] apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.”

He continues in another set of subordinate clauses:

¹²To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

While the passage generates much discussion about its several parts, my focus here is on the role of the “saints,” who are prepared by the Jewish leaders—apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers—and who, in turn, are to serve the church in such a way that it will realize its unity and completedness in bringing the Gentiles into fellowship and effecting unity.²⁴ Thus, we have here the same emphasis that Paul has made earlier; the Jewish nation was chosen, predestined for this service, resulting in the unity of humankind and the universe.

He uses the phrase one last time in 6.18, “in supplication for all the saints.” One of his final admonitions to the recipients is to continue praying for the saints. As in all of the previous instances in the letter, I take it to mean here the Jewish Christians, as well.

Once more the new perspective reading of the text has occasioned an understanding of Paul’s

²⁴ Thus, I take the succeeding clauses in the verse to be subordinate and not coordinate. See Peter T O’Brien. *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI. Eerdmans, 1999), 301-04 for a discussion of the various views on this issue.

use of “saints” in such a way as to underscore the important role Israel played in bringing Gentiles into relationship with God.

Relationship of Jews and Gentiles: The Contrast of “the Gentiles” with Israel

Paul impresses upon his readers an indebtedness to their Jewish predecessors, also, in the way that he contrasts their “former” lives as Gentiles with Israel. While it seems that the author does not want to rebuild that “middle wall” between Jew and Gentile by making too much of the historical differences between the two groups, he nonetheless does emphasize a fundamental difference in the history of the two groups and thus the special status that Israel enjoyed from that difference. While the primary purpose of this section (2.1-22)²⁵ is to emphasize that the two groups, Jew and Gentile, have become one, an underlying “convictional paradigm” is the vital role that Israel has played in that process.²⁶ Paul speaks here as Jew; the world is still divided between “Jews” and “the Gentiles.”

Although much of his work and his writing is intended to protect “the Gentiles” from the segments of Judaism that maintain an exclusivist attitude toward all non-Jews, in this instance he subtly reminds these Gentiles whom he has defended that they need to remember that they are being added to a community that has a long history of relationship with God.²⁷ This understand-

²⁵ Some see 2.11-22 as a complicated chiasmus. See Clark M. Williamson and Ronald J. Allen, *Interpreting Difficult Texts. Anti-Judaism and Christian Preaching* (London. SCM Press, and Philadelphia. Trinity Press, 1988), 76; Giovanni Giavini, “*La Structure Litteraire D’Eph. II.11-22,*” *NTS* 16 (1969-70) 209-11; J. C. Kirby, *Ephesians, Baptism and Pentecost* (London. S.P.C.K., 1968); K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids. Eerdmans, 1976); Ian H. Thomson, *Chiasmus in the Pauline Letters* JSNTSup 111 (Sheffield. Sheffield Academic, 1995), 84-115; Roy R. Jeal, *Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians.*

The Ethos of Communication, *Studies in Bible and Early Christianity* 43 (Lewiston, NY. Mellen, 2000), 146-63.

²⁶ For the definition of “convictional paradigm” and how it functions in Paul’s understanding of Israel and the Gentiles, see Terrence Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentiles. Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World.* (Minneapolis. Fortress Press, 1997).

²⁷ It is important to note this emphasis is that Gentiles are being “added to” the group—they are not “displacing” Israel in God’s economy. This is an emphasis Paul makes in Rom 11.17. “If some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among them and became a partaker with them, do not boast over the branches” (translation mine). Unfortunately, the RSV, NRSV, et al. translate *en autois* as “in their place” rather than “among them.” Paul could have said “instead of” or “in their place” if that is what he had meant. Such a translation could give impetus for the supersessionist attitude that begins to develop in the second century, a position certainly not characteristic of Romans or Ephesians.

ing of what Paul is doing here is consistent with Donaldson's view that Paul has always had an underlying conviction of "proselytizing" Gentiles; before his "call" on the road to Damascus, this task was done through circumcision; afterwards, the task is done through Jesus Christ.²⁸

He begins this "Gentile" description in 2.1, 2.²⁹ They were "dead through the trespasses and sins... following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air." The author then, perhaps so as not to strike too much of an exclusivist tone, interrupts this Gentile description, identifying the "we" group, that is, "Jews," with the Gentiles, "All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh... we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else" (2.3). As a prelude to the unity he expands upon later in the letter, he then says, "even when we were dead through our trespasses, [he] made us alive together with Christ" (2.5). He continues this interruption of the Gentile description, describing the unifying work of Christ (2.6-10).

The author then returns to his original purpose, the condition of the "Gentiles" before they experienced this unity in Jesus Christ. They were [1] "called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' ... [2] without Christ, [3] aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and [4] strangers to the covenants of promise, [5] having no hope and [6] without God in the world" (2.11, 12). Each of these six descriptors stands in direct contrast to what he has said or implied about Israel in this letter.

(1) Over against "the uncircumcision" group, they, of course, were "the circumcision," having the mark of the original covenant with God. While it is true that Paul did not insist upon circumcision for Gentiles as a requirement to participate in the community of faithful, and while it is true that being "in Christ" was now the mark of acceptance for Gentiles by God (and for Jewish believers), circumcision was still "there" and practiced by Jews, at least as a reminder to them, and here to Gentiles, that it was Israel who was the original "elect," the recipients of God's grace. The "circumcision" that Gentiles now enjoyed, one experienced by being "in Christ," was prefigured by the physical circumcision that Israel had observed.³⁰ The subtle message is that these Gentiles are to recognize and appreciate that history.

This is a theme that appears in the undisputed letters of Paul. He asks "what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom 3.1, 2). The gospel was "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1.16). Near the end of Romans he wrote that "Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom

²⁸ See Donaldson (1997), 248.

²⁹ This method is reminiscent of the descriptions of Gentiles found in the Qumran writings and in other writings from Second Temple Judaism. See Donaldson (1997) who also cites *Jubilees*, *Fourth Ezra*, *the Testament of Moses*, and *Pseudo-Philo* as other writings that make this same emphasis about "the Gentiles."

³⁰ See Barth 34 (1974), 276.

15.8, 9).³¹ While Paul opposed those, Jew or Gentile, who would impose circumcision on Gentile believers, his problem is not with circumcision itself. He does not speak pejoratively of it, but rather about its improper imposition. He was the apostle to the “uncircumcision” in the same way that Peter was the apostle to the “circumcision” (Gal 2.7, 8).

(2) Over against the group, “without Christ,”³² the messiah was theirs first of all; it was to Israel first of all that the messiah came. Nine times in the opening *berakhah* (1.3-12), Israel is connected to the messiah with a phrase such as “in him” (1. 7, 10), “through Jesus Christ” (1.5), “in the Beloved” (1.6), “in Christ” (1. 3, 4, 9, 11), “on Christ” (1.12). Over against that opening description in the *berakhah* of the privileges of Israel being “in Christ,” the Gentiles were outside until the gospel was extended to them through the agency of Israel’s representative, Jesus Christ. Paul had come to see Christ as coming to Israel and doing for Israel what the Torah could not do—bringing the Gentiles into relationship with God without becoming Jews, thus fulfilling the eschatological purpose of Israel in God’s purpose for the universe.³³

(3) Over against being “aliens” to the commonwealth of God, Israel was always the citizens, born into citizenship through the covenant God made with Abraham. Whether in kingdom realized, in captivity, or in a kingdom that awaited full restoration, Israel always had the promise of being restored fully as God’s “kingdom.” With that citizenship came rights and privileges that only God could grant. The Gentiles well knew the benefits of Roman citizenship, whether or not they experienced them. However, they had come only lately to understand and to experience the new citizenship in God’s “commonwealth.” Paul points out that once they have been joined to this body, which had long realized what it meant to be part of God’s kingdom, they were “no longer strangers and aliens, but you [Gentiles] are citizens with the saints [Jewish believers]” (Eph 2.19).

(4) Over against “strangers” to the covenants, “covenant” was the central focus of these Jewish believers’ ethos as a people. Again, in the opening *berakhah* Paul described in at least nine different ways how Israel was “elected.” They were “blessed” (1.3), “chosen” (1.4), “destined...for adoption” (1.5), graced (1.6), grace bestowed upon (1.6), redeemed (1.7), lavished with grace (1.7, 8), recipients of the revelation of the mystery (1.9), recipients of the inheritance (1.11), and “destined according to the purposes of him” (1.11). Each of these actions connected Israel to the covenant and distinguished them from the Gentiles. As he did in the opening, Paul now reminds his Gentile audience of the continuity of relationship between the Jews and God.

(5) Over against a condition of hopelessness, Israel lived with an eschatological “hope” of a

³¹ See Terrence Donaldson (1997), 94-106 for a discussion of syntactical issues of this passage as well as a summary of the views of Luther, Calvin, and Käsemann on this passage.

³² “Without” more properly in the NRSV than “separate from” in the RSV, NEB, NIV, JB. The Gentiles were not merely “separated” from the Messiah as individuals; there were Jews, of course, who were “separated from” the Messiah individually. They, as a class, were without any hope for or anticipation of the Messiah.

³³ See Donaldson (1997) 236.

restored kingdom, now understood by Paul to come through the work of the messiah. Among the characteristics of believing Israel mentioned in the opening of the letter, he could say that “we...were the first to set our hope on Christ...for the praise of his glory” (1.12). Now united with this believing Israel, Paul could say to these Gentiles that they shared in the “one hope of your calling” (4.4).

(6) Over against the Gentile “atheists,” (2.12), Israel saw itself as the most theistic people in the world. It was not so much that the Gentiles were actually atheists, but rather that they did not have access to the God of Israel except by becoming proselytes. So now they were “reconciled” to God...through the cross (2.16) and “have access in one Spirit to the Father” (2.18).

Relationship of Jews and Gentiles: The “Mystery” Revealed

The use of the term “mystery” is another indication of the subtle message about the dependent relationship between the Gentile readers and the Jewish heritage, and an indication that the author wants them to have an appreciation of the role that heritage has played in their relationship to God.

He introduced “mystery” first in the *berakhah* section (1.9) saying that one of the consequences of Israel’s election was that it received an understanding of the “mystery” of his will. The word is much discussed in the literature,³⁴ but Paul uses the term in much the same way that it is used in 2 Maccabees 13.21 and Daniel 2.18-30, meaning a “plan of battle.” Alexander the Great would explain, after a battle, how the various parts of the battle plan fitted together for a total plan of victory—that session was called *ton mūsterion*; we might translate it, “the strategy session.” Paul saw the mystery as a great plan of victory that involved Israel as a primary agent and that had become clear in Paul’s own lifetime and in his call to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

He comes to the word again in 3.3-6,

[A]nd how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words [i.e., in the *berakhah*],⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

In 1.9 it was the “we” group who had the mystery made known to them. In 3.3 it is Paul, as a particular agent of that group, who has the mystery revealed. Now, in 3.5 it is the “holy apostles and prophets” who have the mystery revealed.³⁵

³⁴ See. Barth 34 (1974), 123-27; Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New Testament* (Philadelphia. Fortress Press, 1968); Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mysterion. Meaning and Content* (Lund. CWK Gleerup, 1977); Hoehner, 428-43; O’Brien, 223-52; Lincoln (1990) 30-31, 174-76, 193-95, 380-84; J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (London. Macmillan, 1909), 234-40; John T. Trinidad, S.J., “The Mystery Hidden in God. A Study of Eph. 1.3-14,” *Biblia* 31 (1950), 1-26; Galen W. Wiley, “A Study of ‘Mystery’ in the New Testament,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6.2 (1985) 349-60.

³⁵ These early Jewish church leaders will come into play later in Eph 4.11, 12.

through it.

How could Paul be advocating to his Gentile audience a salutary view of the Law if he says in this passage that the Law has been abolished? Does not the passage on the surface support the old paradigm? To the contrary, I believe that this passage is most consistent with the new perspective and with the major thesis of this paper.

There is one issue in the text salient to this question. What is it that he has “abolished” through the cross?³⁹ While there is some discussion whether the word should be translated “abolish/destroy,” “nullify,” or “make inoperative,”⁴⁰ the alternative translations, “nullify” or “make inoperative” may make a difference only if it is the Law in its totality that is taken as the object of that verb. Reading from the old perspective certainly encourages “abolish,” the stronger of the two alternatives. But the question is “What is the object of this participle? Is it the whole Law of Moses? Is it merely the ceremonial Law?”

There are three participles in the sentence: (1) “*making* the two one,” (2) “*destroying* the dividing wall,” and (3) “*nullifying* the hatred in his flesh, *the law of commandments in statutes*,” (my translation). Thus, Robinson correctly takes the “hatred” as the primary object of “nullify” and “the law” in apposition to “hatred.”⁴¹ Apposition or not, though, the “law” phrase is still part of the object of “nullify.” In what sense did Christ “make inoperative” (or abolish) the “law of commandments in statutes”? Why does Paul qualify “law” by the phrase “of commandments in statutes”?

Whatever he means, it is clear that he does *not* mean that Christ nullifies (or abolishes) the entire Law. In Rom 3.31 Paul used the same two words (“nullify” and “law”) in connection with one another: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means!” Whatever, therefore, he means by the “of commandments in statutes,” he is qualifying Law in a quite restrictive sense.

A clue to this restrictive sense in Ephesians is found in the parallel passage in Col 2.14:

¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.”

³⁹ Another important question is “What action is being described by the participle καταργήσας?” Seven of the most commonly used English translations take it to mean “abolished” or “destroyed” (ASV, CEV, KJV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, RSV). The word is used elsewhere in the undisputed letters of Paul in reference to the law (2 Cor 3.6-15 four times with the old covenant or its glory as the object) and in the LXX with reference to the continued building project after the Exile, there meaning “hinder” (Ezra 4.21, 23; 5.5; 6.8).

⁴⁰ Hoehner, 375, argues for “render inoperative”; Barth 34 (1974) 265, Lincoln (1990) 142, O’Brien (1999) 197 all take it as “abolish”; J. A. Robinson, 161, translates the word, as does the NEB, as “annulled.” Packer takes the word as “inoperative” in the NIDNTT 73.

⁴¹ J. Armitage Robinson, 63.

It is clear, then, from this parallel Colossians passage, that the restriction, the “statutes” refers to the “boundary markers,” those external examples that set apart the Jews from the Gentiles.⁴² The Colossians author took the phrase to mean just those characteristics as is clear from the “Therefore” in 2.16—i.e. “matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.” Likewise, this is what the Ephesians author meant in this passage.⁴³

⁴² Exactly what the author of Colossians means by *tois dogmasin* is affected by the nature of the opposition in Colossae. I am aware that there is no consensus about this question. Bevere recently argued persuasively for a Jewish background to the problem, drawing an extended comparison between Galatians and Colossians and explicating three other themes emphasizing the “Jewish ethos” of Colossians. (1) Jesus and Wisdom, (2) Christ as the embodiment of Torah, and (3) Exodus and the Work of Christ. Allan R. Bevere, *Sharing the Inheritance. Identity and The Moral Life in Colossians*. JSNTSup 226 (London. Sheffield University, 2004). Sumney concludes that the opponents, while drawing from Judaism “for some aspects of their teachings,” are not Judaizers since there is no evidence that they required circumcision. Jerry Sumney, “*Servants of Satan,*” “*False Brothers,*” and *Other Opponents of Paul*. JSNTSup 188 (Sheffield. Sheffield Academic, 1994), 211. Gunther lists forty-four different opponents suggested by scholars throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. John J. Gunter, *St. Paul’s Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (Leiden. E. J. Brill, 1973), 3-4. For other contemporary views, see Fred O. Francis and W. A. Meeks, eds. *Conflict at Colossae. A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies*. Sources for Biblical Study 4 (Missoula, MT. SBL, 1973); Richard E. DeMaris, *The Colossian Controversy. Wisdom in Dispute at Colossae* JSNTSup 96 (Sheffield. Sheffield Academic, 1994); Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism. The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Tübingen. J.C.B. Mohr, 1995); Troy W. Martin, *By Philosophy and Empty Deceit. Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique* JSNTSup 118 (Sheffield. Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). Whether or not the Colossian opponents are the same as the ones referred to here does not mitigate against the meaning of *tois dogmasin* in this passage. The point is that *tois dogmasin*, in whatever context—Jewish, philosophical, or some syncretistic religion—refers to the outward expressions that are required of adherents of that religion or philosophy and in Colossians and in Ephesians, those outward expressions are as at least partially defined in Col 2.16. Since the author connects *tois dogmasin* to the Law in Ephesians, it is logical to conclude that the reference, then, is to the outward expressions of the Law that have been nullified for the Gentile audience.

⁴³ Roetzel argues that *tois dogmasin* was added to the original text in Ephesians by a redactor who was trying to ameliorate the conflict between Jews and Gentiles, emphasizing that it was not the Law but the outward signs of the law that were being abolished. Calvin Roetzel, “Jewish Christian—Gentile Christian Relations. A Discussion of Ephesians 2.15a,” *ZNW* 4 (1983), 81-89. Thus, he also sees the phrase denoting not the

So, rather than supporting the old perspective of Paul, it actually is support for the new paradigm; Paul is wanting the Gentile audience to realize that, while they are free from the boundary markers of Judaism and have been included in the original inheritance of Israel through the death and resurrection of Jesus, they are also to be appreciative of the role that Israel and the Law have played in effecting this unity.

There is another subtle clue that Paul wants these Gentile readers to have an appreciation for the Law. The extended paraenesis (chapter 4.1-6.20—longer than in any of the undisputed letters of Paul) is at least a subtle hint that they are not quite so free from “law” as they may think. While the traditional division between the “doctrinal” section (chapters 1-3) and the “paraenetic” section (chapters 4-6) is not as readily accepted today as in the past, nonetheless, there is certainly a difference in tone and style. The imperative, used once in Chapters 1-3, occurs forty times in Chapters 4-6. Thielman notes this extended emphasis on the Law also:

Just as in the law holiness is a consequence of observing the difference between clean and unclean (Lev 20.24-26), so Paul tells the church to avoid “uncleanness” and to walk in morally upright ways, “as is fitting for the holy”... This moral cleanliness, moreover, is defined in certain instances by the Mosaic covenant.⁴⁴

In fact, Paul even appeals to the Law as the basis for one of his topics in this paraenesis section—“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” “Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth” (Eph 6.1-3).

Again, we see the confluence of Paul’s Hellenistic and Jewish backgrounds coming into play. There is certainly the resemblance with part of this material to the ethical treatises and the “household rules” common to the Greek world of the first century.⁴⁵

But Paul is not merely adding one more ethical treatise to the Hellenistic corpus. He is, rather, building on the foundation of the unity that he has described as it has been achieved through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. Because they are now united, Jew and Gentile, into a new humanity, they must live in certain ways, not as entry requirements into the group, but rather as a result of their new existence. In the same way that the Law proscribed how to live a “holy” life marking them as the people of God, now this newly united people of God must still live in ways that mark them off from the world.

entire Law but rather some outward manifestations that were points of controversy between Jews and Gentiles.

⁴⁴ Thielman, 225-26. Thielman does, however, believe that the “Mosaic law in the form it took at Sinai... has been abolished.”

⁴⁵ The literature concerning New Testament parenetic material, including the “household rules,” is extensive and well-known. Hoehner surveys and categorizes the views concerning the “household rules” of more than two score authors, including ancient writers (Aristotle, Arius Didymus, Philo, Josephus, et al.) as well as contemporary ones (from Dibelius in 1919 to the end of the twentieth century). Hoehner, 720-29.

Thus, the inclusion of this paraenetic section is once again an admixture of Paul's Greek and Jewish background. He is providing the "household rules" in the tradition of Greek philosophy. He is also instructing them how to live no longer "as the Gentiles live," thus extending the Law to this extent.

Conclusion

If Ephesians is indeed written by someone other than Paul, it then becomes the *oldest* explication of the "new" perspective on Paul. If Paul is the author, then the letter is consistent with the major position of the new perspective. In either case, the author's theme in the letter presages a potential problem that becomes actualized in the second century and comes to dominate much of Christian theology in later centuries, the view that the church replaces or supercedes Israel.

While Paul spends considerable time defending Gentiles against those, whether Gentiles or Jews, who try to impose the boundary markers of ethnic Israel on believing Gentiles, in Ephesians he defends against Gentiles in Asia Minor the role of Israel in effecting the inclusion of the Gentiles into the "elect" of God. Because of what is generally seen to be a salutary tone in the letter, the attitude of the Gentiles toward Israel does not appear to be an acute problem, but perhaps he detects the potential of the problem that does become acute. In this respect, then, Ephesians is more consistent with the theme of Romans 9-11 than Galatians, 2 Corinthians, or even Colossians.⁴⁶

Paul does not address in this letter how the relationship of Israel and the newly incorporated Gentiles is to be precisely realized in an ongoing way. He does affirm that Israel and the Gentiles now have equal status before God and that the Gentiles have this status not because of the Law but through Jesus Christ. He also affirms that the members of this newly constituted "one body" are to live no longer "as the Gentiles"; rather they are to demonstrate corporate and personal behaviors that evidence their elect status. He does not address, however, the ongoing relationship of the Law to Israel. His focus is on the Gentile audience, though, and not primarily to believing Jews. Furthermore, he may not have thought it necessary to focus too much on this topic, given his expectation of the imminent consummation of the age.⁴⁷ Ephesians, when read from the new perspective on Paul, well fits into this understanding of Paul's motivation.

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⁴⁶ See Henry Chadwick, "Die Absicht de Epheserbriefes," ZNW (1960), 148.

⁴⁷ See Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond. Knox, 1960) for an explication of how Paul's eschatological views shaped his understanding of Jewish-Gentile relationships.