

10 Ephesians. The Cosmic Church (3:10): Freedom from Nihilism and Anti-Judaism

Outline

Greeting, 1:1-2

Praise to God for the Spirit's blessings, 1:3-14

Prayer for believers (wisdom, power), 1:15-23

Delivered from death, SEATED with Christ in Heaven, 2:1-11

Christ tore down the wall separating Jews and Gentiles, 2:12-22

God welcomes Gentiles into the universal inclusive Church, 3:1-13

Prayer and praise for God's cosmic parental love, 3:14-21

WALKING worthily: Community life (one body: unity and diversity), 4:1-16

New life of those baptized into Christ, 4:17-24

Concrete instructions for praxis: walk in love, 4:25--5:7

Walk illuminated by Christ's light, 5:8-20

Patriarchal households: subversive submission of women and slaves, 5:21--6:9

THEREFORE STAND: Spiritual warfare against oppressive powers, 6:10-20

Tychicus' mission, greetings and final benediction, 6:21-24

Introduction. Ephesians appears to be an amplification, an expansion, of Colossians with quite similar style and theology. Like Colossians, Ephesians probably does not come from Paul himself but from a colleague around 80-90 AD (but cf. 1:1; 3:1; 4:1; 6:19-20). Although Paul had spent three years in Ephesus (Acts 20), Ephesians makes no reference to anyone there and includes no personal greetings. Moreover, the words "in Ephesus" (1:1) are missing in the earlier Greek manuscripts (see NRSV HCSB note). Therefore, the document appears to be more a treatise sent as a circular letter to the churches in Asia Minor (now Turkey), carried by Tychicus (6:21), possibly the actual author (as in the case of Colossians; cp. 4:7).

The structure of Ephesians is similar to that of Paul's letters: the first section (1:3--3:21) consists of prayers (1:3-23; 3:14-21) and theological affirmations (2:1--3:12); the second (4:1--6:20) contains exhortations regarding praxis (see Romans 1:18--11:36, affirmations; 12:1--15:13, exhortations.) However, Ephesians differs from Paul's letters in that it includes a blessing (1:3-14; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:3-11) together with thanksgiving (1:15-23; cf. Romans 1:8-15; 1 Cor. 1:4-9). Ephesians 1--3 focuses on God's sovereign grace (the Good News), while 4--6 speaks of human freedom and responsibilities.

1. Contrast: Ephesians and Paul. In 80-90 AD, 15-25 years after Paul's death (65 AD), the hope of Jesus' imminent return had diminished, since it is hardly mentioned in Colossians (Col. 3:4), while Ephesians speaks principally of a hope already fulfilled (a "realized eschatology"; Eph. 1:12, 18-19; 2:12-13; 4:4; cf. 1:13-14, 21; 2:7; 4:30; 6:17 [cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:8, "the hope of salvation"]), or of God's purpose in creating a new inclusive human community and thus of uniting all things in Christ.

- As a consequence, Ephesians speaks in spatial terms of a distinction between earth and heaven (1:20; 2:6; see Colossians 3:1-2) and not so much of the temporal distinction of two ages, characteristic of Paul himself (Romans 13:11-12; 1 Thessalonians; 1 Corinthians 7).

- For Paul "salvation" was future ("we will be saved through [Christ] from the wrath," Rom. 5:9, 1 Thess. 5:9), while in Ephesians it is past, "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (2:5, 8-10; see 1:13; 6:17; Col. 1:13). Ephesians thus speaks of a past experience of "salvation" by faith, while Galatians and Romans emphasize "justification" (past) and "salvation" (future; --> liberating justice below). For Paul the resurrection also was future (Romans 6:45), while in Ephesians we already share Christ's resurrection (2:6; see Col. 3:1).

- For Paul the church was a local assembly in a house and described as "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12-26; Romans 12:4-5), but in Ephesians the inclusive church is universal, even cosmic (3:10; Col. 1:18, 24; cf. 4:15) and the metaphor focuses on Christ as "head/source" of the body (1:22-23; see Col. 1:18).

- Paul's own letters never included Hauptfamilien (codes for patriarchal households) but focused on the new institution of the church as a fellowship of equals (Gal. 3:28). The churches were seen as paradigms of the new humanity characterized by freedom, justice/ equality, love, peace and wisdom. Married couples living with their children and slaves appear but rarely (Romans 16). However, in the six pastoral and deutero-Pauline letters, four have Hauptfamilien (Colossians, Ephesians, Titus, 1 Timothy; also see 1 Peter) which

recognize hierarchical structures and the submission of wives to husbands and slaves to their masters/owners (also see Romans 13:1-7).

- Paul himself preferred to speak of sin in the singular as a hostile power and the liberating act of God in justification (Romans 5:6-11; 7:8, 11; Galatians), but in Ephesians God simply offers “forgiveness” for sins (plural: 1:7; 2:1; 4:32; similarly, Colossians).

2. Contrast: Ephesians and Colossians. Nevertheless, although Colossians and Ephesians thus have much in common which distinguish them from Paul’s own letters (and also from 2 Thessalonians and the three --> pastoral letters), Ephesians differs significantly from Colossians and thus appears to be a later expansion, and probably from a different author.

- While the cosmic Christ is the central theme of Colossians, the central theme of Ephesians is the inclusive cosmic church, the fullness of Christ and God. Ephesians never speaks of a local church (see Col. 1:18, 24) but only of the church universal (Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32).

- Colossians is directed to a local congregation (probably Laodicea, not Colossae) and focuses on the specific problem of false teaching. But “Ephesians” (“Ephesus”, 1:1, omitted in the best manuscripts) is not directed to any specific church nor does it seek to resolve any concrete local problem. Furthermore, Colossians mentions 12 of Paul’s friends while Ephesians refers only to Tychicus, the bearer (and possible author) of the letter (6:21; see Colossians 4:7).

- Colossians contains two references to “powers” (2:8, 20; Greek: stoicheia, elements, fundamental principles). The reference in 2:20 appears to have the same meaning as Galatians 4:3 and 9, of “elements common to religion, be it pagan or Jewish.” However, the reference in 2:8 signifies “the first elements or fundamental principles of the physical universe,” since in this context the author attacks human philosophy and traditions (HCSB note 2:8). These powers and spiritual forces traditionally were interpreted as descriptions of demons. Anglican evangelical John R. W. Stott continues to defend the literal existence of the devil and demons (while recognizing that they may operate through institutions).¹ Authors like Walter Wink² deny that cosmic powers have a distinct spiritual existence and see them as the interior or spiritual essence of institutions, states and ideologies that oppress and do violence. Andrew T. Lincoln believes that the author of Ephesians accepted the literal existence of the devil and demons, but thinks that modern interpretations may help the modern reader “adapt first century mythology.”³

3. Comparison: Household Codes. Colossians includes a Haustafel (domestic code) that appears to reflect a large number of slaves in the church, but Ephesians appears to reflect the fulfillment of the hope of 1 Peter (3:1, the conversion of many husbands), since the Haustafel in Ephesians is directed primarily to husbands (5:25-33). In this text the extensive development in theology of marriage is unique in the New Testament. For Paul himself, an itinerant bachelor with the spiritual gift of abstaining from sexual relations with women (1 Cor. 7:7), marriage was an inferior state, a concession to the weakness of the flesh (1 Cor. 7:1, 6-9). However, in Ephesians marriage--although hardly a "covenant"⁴--almost achieves the status of sacrament ("mystery," 5:32), serving as the great paradigm for the relationship between Christ and the Church (5:23-30).

Like all the Haustafeln, that of Ephesians 5:21--6:9 has been strongly criticized for having functioned in later history as an instrument of oppression and violence against women and slaves. Such a text obviously should not serve as a literal guide for the church in the modern world where we do not accept the institutions of the Roman Empire, nor traditional monarchies, nor slavery, nor the patriarchal households which assume the inferiority of the woman and her submission to the man/husband. However, to be fair with such texts and not distort their intention, we must interpret them in their literary and cultural context. In the case of Ephesians the following factors are significant:

- The great theme of Ephesians is not the patriarchal family (5:21--6:9), but the cosmic inclusive church and its place in God's project to unite all things in Christ (1:1--4:16). In this universal inclusive church all are saints (1:1) and equal as sisters and brothers (6:23).

- The Haustafel (5:21--6:9) is never presented as universal "morals" or "ethics" (Greek philosophical categories absent from the Bible) but as the way to "walk" (literally, 5:15; see 2:2, 10; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8) with subversive "wisdom" (5:15) in a specific historical context of oppression.

- To walk in wisdom we must be guided by the Spirit (5:18). The imperative "be filled with the Spirit" in 5:18 is the dominant imperative in Greek grammar. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the New Testament (Eph. 2:20; 4:11) show us how sensitive the Holy Spirit is to historical and cultural change.

- The submission that the Ephesians Haustafel commands is a mutual submission (5:21), which introduces the more traditional text in 5:22--6:4. Just as Jesus took the service expected of slaves and made it

a paradigm for all his disciples (Mark 10:35-45; see 1 Cor. 9:19; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 5:13), Ephesians takes the submission characteristic of the Haustafeln and makes it a responsibility for everyone in the church.

Furthermore, mutual submission, which is the responsibility of everyone in the church, is not equivalent to the mere “obedience” that Ephesians commands of slaves and children (6:1, 5) and standards like truth, justice, wisdom, and love (4:17--5:20 and 6:10-20) always qualify the submission and obedience of the Haustafeln in 5:21--6:9).

- The sacrificial love that the Ephesians Haustafeln requires of husbands is something without parallel not only in the entire Bible but in all of ancient culture. Such love represents a strong critique and radical subversion of the self-love characteristic of patriarchal households and the Haustafeln that governed them. The Ephesians text also presents a transcendent vision of Christian matrimony unique in the Bible and in all of ancient culture. (Cf. the preference for celibacy of Paul himself and of Jesus and the prioritizing of procreation in Genesis 1:28.)

That said, we must recognize that the New Testament Haustafeln, although to a certain degree subversive in their content, also inevitably reflect their patriarchal context. Obviously, throughout church history these domestic codes have been misinterpreted and commonly functioned as instruments for the oppression of women and slaves. Hence, we should read and cite them with great caution to avoid promoting the literalist errors of religious fundamentalists, who utilize the Bible as an instrument of oppression rather than liberating justice.

4. Contrast: Empowerment for Militant Women and Slaves (6:10-20). Studies that focus exclusively on the domestic code (5:21--6:9) commonly lament its patriarchal tone but tend to forget the surprising text that follows. In Ephesians 6:10-20 we discover that the entire church--“submissive” wives and women slaves included--are to crossdress as Roman soldiers (according to the metaphors) and demonstrate more courage and militancy than history’s most famous crossdresser--Joan of Arc (1412-31)! The militant command to “stand firm” (6:11, 13-14, repeated three times) is a call to demonstrate the courage appropriate to males, especially soldiers. (In Greek the common expression for courage is “act like a male”; see andrizesthe in 1 Cor. 16:13 and the way Prisca courageously risked her neck for Paul in Romans 16:3-4). While Colossians taught that baptism for both women and men replaces circumcision (of males only) as the sign of God’s people (Col. 2:11-12), Ephesians transforms the concept of war (violence) and of soldiers (men)

to focus on a spiritual struggle where the weak of society (women and slaves) are transformed into frightening militants.

Also surprising is the fact that Ephesians 6:10-20 commands a non-violent Christian militancy, using the Word of God with the Good News of peace, as the only offensive instruments. This pro-active Christian militancy, according to Ephesians, struggles to establish an inclusive church, which does not discriminate between Jews or Gentiles, women or men, slaves or free, but welcomes all who trust in God and seek to do the good works that God commands (Eph. 2:8-10; 4:28).

Ephesians points out that spiritual forces (today we might say “ideologies with their majority propaganda”) stand behind every oppressor (persecuting Roman Empire, slave owners, or tyrannical husbands). We may better love our enemy/oppressor if we recognize that evil always transcends any oppressor and that such persons commonly act out of ignorance and fear.

Recent studies scrutinize the childhood and family psychological patterns of Hitler and other Nazi leaders, seeking to account for the Deluge of evil they produced. Attention might better be paid to the dominant ideologies and majority propaganda supporting homophobia and anti-Judaism (see Luther!), machismo, nationalism, and adoration of technology (including propaganda techniques).

5. The Poor and Oppressed. In the domestic code (Haustafel; 5:21-6:9), Ephesians pays more attention to slaves (6:5-8) than to their masters (6:9), suggesting that the churches addressed still had more poor slaves than affluent masters (see also manual labor, 4:28 --> 1-2 Thessalonians). Also, as in Colossians, the “inheritance” (1:14; 5:5) is not limited to the non-material sphere, since “spiritual blessings” (1:3) are not “non-material” (the meaning that René Descartes gave to the word “spiritual” centuries later --> 1 Corinthians 15). “Spiritual” blessings rather are all the blessings that come to us through the work of the Holy Spirit (including bodily healing and liberation from oppression).

In Ephesians, as in Colossians, wisdom, which commonly enriches, is recommended (1:17-18; 3:10; 5:15-20), and this wisdom is to be expressed especially in the wise use of time (5:16--not to be confused with the American “efficiency” that ignores persons). Ephesians repeatedly exhorts the community to avoid all greed, the cause of so much social injustice (4:19, 22, 28; 5:3-5). Above all Ephesians encourages the community to engage in manual labor and “good works” of solidarity that empower the weak (4:12) and help the poor (2:10; 4:28) --> Titus.

Paul himself most often is described as the one suffering oppression (thlipsis, 3:13), since he is unjustly detained in prison (3:1; 4:1; 6:20). Since Ephesians speaks of “salvation” as already experienced (see above), references to God’s “justification” are absent. However, we do find references to God’s liberating justice, above all to the “breastplate of liberating justice,” part of God’s armor in Isaiah 59:17, but forming part of the Christian armor in Ephesians (6:17; see also 4:24; 5:9; 6:1; cf. the apparent avoidance of justice terminology in --> 1 Thess. 5:8).

6. Sexual Conduct of Christians (--> 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8; 1 Corinthians 5-7). Although Ephesians includes instructions for patriarchal households, it names only Paul and Tychicus, both unmarried. Both Colossians (3:5-7) and Ephesians (4:17-24; 5:1-20), deuterio-Pauline letters, follow the tradition of Paul himself and interpret Christian praxis as a walk (avoiding the Greek philosophical categories of moral absolutes and ethics; Eph. 2:2, 10; 4:1, 17, 20; 5:1-2, 8, 15; Col. 3:7). They stress the person of Jesus (Col. 3:1-4, 16-17), his teaching of brotherly and sisterly love (Col. 3:14; Eph. 5:1-2), guidance of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), wisdom (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:15), and a radical new understanding of uncleanness and holiness (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:3, 5). Both letters repeat the Pauline prohibition of sexual covetousness (see the last of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5), but they introduce a new dimension when they describe covetousness as a form of idolatry (Col. 3:5; Eph. 5:5; see #1-2 in the Ten Commandments).

Ephesians refers to certain sexual sins that may not even be “named” (5:3, 12), which was misinterpreted by Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) as a reference to the sin of lust in the form of “sodomy.” This sin of “sodomy” had been invented by Peter Damian (1007-72). However, in the Bible itself Sodom is the name of a city, never of a sin.⁵ Peter’s linguistic invention and Thomas’s exegetic distortion led to centuries of confusion, oppression and violence, since “sodomy” always remained a muddled concept: Only anal sex between men? Anal or oral sex with women? Sex with animals? Any kind of sex between men? Masturbation, mutual masturbation, etc.? It proved to be difficult to explain how one could cite Paul (Romans 1:27) to explicitly condemn a sin that the Apostle supposedly said elsewhere could not even be named! This tradition of not being able to name the favorite sin of supposedly celibate clergy is ending today, after centuries of violence against sexual minorities (see the Nazi Holocaust), with costly legal decisions against Roman Catholic clergy for sexual abuse of boys and adolescents.

The Vatican, meanwhile, finally has decided that the sin that Aquinas considered unnamable in fact can be named, and even publishes detailed documents about homosexuality--never homophobia --full of bad science and worse exegesis. Nevertheless, the Pope continues to defend the self-destructing tradition of clergy "celibacy." Ephesians, however, never refers to homoerotic acts nor imposes silence regarding sins that the letter itself mentions--it simply seeks to discourage conversation that promotes sin by portraying it as attractive.⁶

7. The Physically Challenged and the Sick As in the case of Colossians, Ephesians makes no explicit references to the sick or handicapped, but does contain three metaphorical references to darkness and illumination/light (cf. baptism in Hebrews 6:4 and 10:32):

- Ephesians 1:18, "with the eyes of your heart enlightened";
- 5:8-14, a reference to baptism as illumination; light symbolizes "kindness, liberating justice, truth";
- 6:12, "this present darkness" (see the man born blind in John 9).

8. Anti-Judaism In Paul's own letters the distinction between Jews and Gentiles was fundamental and each group appears to have a clear sense of its identity (Romans and Galatians). In Ephesians, however, the Gentile recipients (3:1) appear to have a quite limited perception of their inheritance from Israel and stand in need of instruction (2:11-22). In Colossians the mystery revealed in Christ is that the divine plan of salvation includes the Gentiles, but in Ephesians (3:6-7) the mystery is the uniting of Jews and Gentiles in the same body of Christ and even the union of the cosmos (heaven and earth) in Christ (1:9-10). Andrew T. Lincoln points out how Ephesians 2:11-22 differs from other New Testament texts concerning the relationship between Israel and the church (Romans 9-11, etc.). In Ephesians 2 the terminology "have been brought near" (2:13) does not mean coming to the point of forming part of Israel but having access to God and being members of the new humanity: "Ephesians 2 describes the church as a new identity that transcends the old identities of Jew and Gentile. Such a perspective differs from that of Romans 9--11, but it has strong affinities with the acute Pauline controversy in Galatians (e.g., 3:28; 6:15-16)."⁷ The law, the mark that distinguishes Israel from the Gentiles, is abolished (Ephesians 2:15).

9. Ephesians and Modern Nihilism Jewish and Christian traditions are characterized by their "metanarratives," those great narrations that seek to discern some meaning in human history and personal life-

-the creation, the Exodus, the birth and ministry of Jesus. While post-Enlightenment modernity sought to substitute other metanarratives for the traditional ones, it still clung to the presupposition that human history and the life of each person have meaning. Jean-François Lyotard classically defined “postmodernity” as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁸

Perhaps more so than any other book in the Bible, Ephesians insists that human history and our individual lives do have meaning, since all that exists and everything that happens is “for the praise of the glory of God” (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; vv. 3-14 constitute a single prayer in the original Greek; cf. Romans 8:28-38; 11:33-36). But, is it coherent and logical to ask questions and investigate about a supposed “meaning” in life and history if a personal and infinite God does not exist (or at least personal and finite “gods”)? If we enter a disordered room that shows evidence of having been robbed, we may investigate and offer hypotheses about the “meaning” of the disorder; but if we enter a house that has been completely destroyed by a hurricane, we do not inquire about the “meaning” of the disorder but simply affirm the “cause” (impersonal).

Even in our “postmodern” era each catastrophe (an airplane crash) prompts frantic searches on all sides to discover “meaning” in what has occurred. If the crash proves to have been a terrorist act, we become indignant with the perpetrators, but we have the satisfaction of having found some “meaning” in what has occurred, and society tries to find and punish the perpetrators. But if the cause is simple mechanical failure, most likely we speak only of the “cause” but not of the “meaning” of the tragedy.

For many people today, the great “masters of suspicion” (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844-1900; Karl Marx, 1818-83; and Sigmund Freud, 1856-1939) have undermined the veracity of the metanarratives that traditionally gave meaning to life in the West. However, authors like Brian D. Ingraffia have demonstrated that the questions and criticisms that these great masters of suspicion hurled against religion in fact discredit only the traditional Platonic-Christian syncretism but fail to address the theology of the Bible itself.⁹ Moreover, Latin American theologies of liberation have produced their devastating critiques against traditional theologies and the elitist philosophies inherited from the Greeks and René Descartes (with their dualisms and dichotomies between body and soul, individualism, rationalism, etc.). As we reflect on Ephesians, we may well ask whether it really supports the traditional dominant ideologies of oppression (as traditionally read)--or is it not better read in fundamental continuity with the subversive and liberating praxis of Moses, Jesus and Paul himself.

Notes

1. John R. W. Stott, God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 267-275.
2. Walter Wink, The Powers that Be (New York: Doubleday, 1998).
3. Andrew T. Lincoln, Ephesians (Dallas: Word, 1990), 64.
4. Gordon P. Hugenberger, Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). This remarkable work of immense erudition and value for reference seeks to demonstrate, building on an exceedingly obscure text in Malachi (2:10-16), that marriage in the BIBLE is a covenant. Limited in scope to the Hebrew Scriptures, it fails to explain how such an important dogma receives no mention or support from the New Testament. Its methodology and ideology are reminiscent of the medieval debate about how many thousands of angels could dance on the head of a pin. (Malachi's poor text gets trampled beyond recognition by the hypotheses heaped upon it). Cf. William C. Countryman, Dirt, Greed and Sex, and other works in our General Bibliography.
5. Mark D. Jordan, The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), 150-151.
6. Lincoln, Ephesians, 322.
7. Ibid., 163.
8. Brian D. Ingraffia, Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), 2.
9. Ibid., 225-241; for a fascinating modern anthropological treatment of such questions, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Undoing: Social Suffering and the Politics of Remorse in the New South Africa," Social Justice 25/4 (1998): 114-142.

Bibliography (See also Colossians, “Haustafeln/Patriarchal Household Codes”)

- Barth, Marcus. Ephesians. 2 vols. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 1974.
- Best, Ernest. Ephesians. ICC. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998.
- Fong, Bruce W. “Addressing the Issue of Racial Reconciliation According to the Principles of Eph. 2:11-22.” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 38/4 (1995): 565-580.
- Furnish, Victor Paul. “Ephesians, Epistle to the.” In The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman, 2:535-542. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Ingraffia, Brian D. Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Johnson, Elizabeth E. “Ephesians.” In The Women’s Bible Commentary, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 338-342. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992.
- Lincoln, Andrew T. Ephesians. Word Biblical Commentary 42. Dallas: Word, 1990.
- MacDonald, Margaret Y. “Citizens of Heaven and Earth: Asceticism and Social Integration in Colossians and Ephesians.” Asceticism and the New Testament. Leif E. Vaage & Vincent L. Wimbush, eds. New York: Routledge, 1999, 269-298.
- Russell, Letty M. Imitators of God: A Study Book on Ephesians. New York: Mission Education and Cultivation Program Department of the United Methodist Church, 1984.
- Stott, John R. W. God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians. Downers Grove, Ill. InterVarsity, 1979.
- Tanzer, Sarah J. “Ephesians.” In Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 2:325-348. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- Wink, Walter. Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.
- Unmasking the Powers. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986.
- Engaging the Powers. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992.
- The Powers that Be. New York: Doubleday, 1998.