

IVP Bible Background Commentary:

Ephesians

Introduction

Authorship. Although scholars often dispute the authorship of Ephesians, most of the so-called non-Pauline words, phrases and stylistic features appear at least occasionally in letters that everyone agrees were written by Paul. Many differences between Ephesians and earlier Pauline letters are insignificant. For example, some note that “the genuine Paul” speaks of Christ as the head (1 Cor 11:3) and the church as his body (Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 12:12) only separately. But ancient philosophers sometimes used the body metaphor with the head and sometimes without it, and requiring Paul always to express himself the same way in his few extant letters, although other writers did not, is hardly fair to Paul.

Unlike many of his earlier letters, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians seem to have been written after Paul had experience in presenting Christianity in an ancient academic context, where he would have used philosophic language to communicate to his hearers (Acts 19:9). That Paul could adapt his language to his audience, including those to whom the sort of Stoic language in Ephesians appealed, is evident elsewhere in his writings (e.g., Rom 1; 1 Cor 8); such language is more pervasive in Ephesians and Philippians, with somewhat more Middle Platonic language in Colossians. Although the dispute over the authorship of Ephesians will continue in scholarly circles, this commentary works from the position that Paul wrote it.

Genre. Paul’s exhortations in the letter cover several main themes, all of which the recipients’ situation seems to have elicited (although he uses standard forms to describe them). This point would argue against the idea that Ephesians is merely a “letter essay” communicating general truths.

The abundant parallelism and repetition in the letter have been compared with Hebrew poetry, but they were also used in epideictic rhetoric (i.e., in orations of praise concerning gods or humans). Worship language is more common in the first three chapters of the letter, which elaborate the sort of introductory prayer and thanksgiving that often appeared in ancient letters. As he usually does, Paul here blends the different ancient categories of rhetoric: the exhortation parts of his letter are “deliberative,” intended to persuade the readers to a particular course of action; other parts of his letter are “epideictic,” such as where he praises God and praises the church that is to reflect God’s glory to creation.

It is possible that Paul, drafting other letters at the same time (e.g., Colossians), used a scribe for some letters

to help him adapt his basic message for different situations in different churches.

Situation. Paul writes this letter from prison, probably in Rome. As readers in the Ephesian region of Asia Minor would know, he had been arrested on the charge of having brought a Gentile into the temple (Acts 21:28–29; 28:16). Racial or cultural division between Jew and Gentile was a major issue in the Ephesian church (cf. Acts 19:17), and Paul was one of the best qualified writers of antiquity to address both sides intelligently.

From his detention under Roman authorities (probably in Rome), Paul is also aware of the possibility of imminent persecution and the need for the church to be a good witness in society (cf. especially comment on Eph 5:21–6:9). He is also aware of the church’s struggle with its own background in the occult practices of Asia Minor—magic (Acts 19:19), astrology and attempts to escape the astrological power of Fate (cf. comment on Eph 1:8–11, 19–23; 3:9–11).

Commentaries. The most thorough and useful are Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, AB 34, 34A, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974); and A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990). Those unable to wade through the Greek, however, may prefer another commentary, such as G. B. Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, New Clarendon Bible (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1976); George Johnston, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*, Century Bible (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1967). For a fuller discussion of Ephesians 5:18–6:9, the reader may consult Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women and Wives* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1992), pp. 133–224, 258–79.

1:1–2

Introduction

As notes in most translations point out, not all manuscripts include “in Ephesus” (v. 1). Many scholars have argued that Ephesians was originally sent to a number of churches, of which Ephesus was only the most prominent. (Thus it would be a “circular letter,” like imperial edicts.) But because all these churches would presumably be in the area around Ephesus, the history of the Ephesian church will help us understand the background to this letter (see Acts 19:1–41).

“Grace” and “peace” were variations of standard greetings; what is significant here is that they are “from God the Father *and* the Lord Jesus Christ.” See further the introduction to Paul’s letters and comment on Romans 1:1–7.

1:3–14

Praise for Salvation

The opening, or *exordium*, of Paul's letter includes a benediction ("Praise be to God"—NIV, or "God be praised") and a prayer; ancient letters commonly included either prayers or thanksgivings, although Paul's elaboration of them here is unusual. Many Jewish prayers would begin with "Praise be to God who [helps his people in some way]." In Greek, 1:3–14 is one long praise to God; this one recounts, as Jewish prayers often did, God's redemptive plans and acts on behalf of his beloved people.

In these verses as many as eleven different terms used for Israel in the Old Testament are applied to believers in Jesus. Because the church in Ephesus comprised both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 19:17), and Jews and Gentiles had different cultural practices, the church may have had cultural and ethnic tension. Paul reminds believers that whatever their ethnic or cultural background, they are all one people in Christ and must work together for God's purposes.

1:3. Today we distinguish between "the heavens" in a scientific sense (i.e., the outer atmosphere and the rest of the universe except the earth) and the spiritual place God lives. But in Paul's day he did not need to make this distinction to communicate to his readers; they divided "the heavenly realms" differently from the way we do. Almost everyone in the ancient world believed that the heavens had numerous levels (often three or seven), that different spiritual beings (various kinds of angels, demons, stars, etc.) lived in different levels and that God or the purest spiritual beings lived in the highest heaven. In much Jewish teaching, the spirits of the righteous would live with God there after death. "Heavenly realms" (NIV) can thus mean both "where God is" (as here) and "where the angelic powers live" (as often in Ephesians).

1:4–5. The Old Testament declares that God "predestined" or (literally) "chose" Israel in Abraham to be his covenant people and adopted them as his children, but that his people often fell short of the covenant. Paul explains that in a practical sense one becomes a member of God's covenant by Christ, not by one's background.

1:6. One reason God chose Israel was for them to bring him glory (Is 60:21; 61:3; Jer 13:11); so central was revealing his glory that even his acts of judgment were meant to turn people to him (Ex 7:5; Amos 4:6), the real source of life (Jer 2:13).

1:7–8. God had redeemed Israel (i.e., freed them from slavery) through the blood of the Passover lamb. The blood of animal sacrifices in the Old Testament indicated that the price paid for forgiveness was a life. Paul blends these images here.

1:9–12. It was a common Jewish belief that history was moving through many stages to its climax, when everything would be put under God's rule. Some philosophers argued that the whole universe was permeated by God and would be absorbed back into him.

Like Jewish writers who adapted the language of such philosophers, Paul believes that history moves toward a climax of subordination to God, not absorption into him. The Old Testament and Judaism recognized that God had a sovereign plan in history to bring it to this climax. On "inheritance" (KJV, NASB, NRSV) see comment on 1:13–14. On God's ultimate purpose here, see comment on 3:8–11.

1:13–14. A wax seal would have a mark of ownership or identification stamped in it, identifying who was attesting what was inside the container that had been sealed. Because it was commonly understood that the Spirit would be made especially available in the time of the end, Paul here speaks of the Spirit as a "deposit" (NIV)—a term used in ancient business documents to mean a "down payment." Those who had tasted the Spirit had begun to taste the life of the future world that God had promised his people.

After God "redeemed" (see comment on 1:7–8) Israel from slavery in Egypt, he led them to their "inheritance" or "possession" in the Promised Land. Later Jewish literature viewed the world to come as Israel's ultimate "inheritance," and early Christian writers used this language the same way (Mt 5:5; 25:34; Rom 8:17; 1 Cor 6:9; Jas 2:5). For Paul, Christians are God's people, redeemed but waiting for the completion of their redemption; as with Israel of old, God's presence among them is the assurance that he will take them into the land he has promised (cf. Hag 2:5).

1:15–23

Prayer for Revelation

1:15–16. Like pious Jews, pious Christians apparently had a time set aside for prayer each day. Many pious Jews prayed several hours a day, and if Paul continued such a custom we can understand how he could pray for all his churches.

1:17–18. Jewish people commonly prayed for enlightened eyes to understand God's Word; the Old Testament also spoke of opening one's eyes to God's Word (Ps 119:18) or to other spiritual realities (2 Kings 6:17). Some Jewish sources characterized the Spirit of God as the "Spirit of wisdom" (the Old Testament especially emphasizes this: e.g., Ex 28:3; 31:3; 35:31; Is 11:2; cf. Deut 34:9).

Rhetorically skilled writers often introduced major themes in their introduction, and Paul is no exception. He is about to explain the points that he has been praying for them to understand. On "inheritance" see comment on 1:13–14.

1:19–20. A daily Jewish prayer viewed God's ability to raise the dead in the future as the ultimate example of his power. Paul agrees, but for Paul the decisive event has already happened: the first installment of the future resurrection has taken place. The position to a ruler's right

was a position of great honor and authority; to be seated at God's right hand was to be enthroned as ruler of the cosmos, even if not all his enemies had been destroyed (Ps 110:1). On "heavenly places" see comment on 1:3.

1:21–23. Exorcists and magicians tried to manipulate powerful spirits by invoking their names (see comment on Acts 19:13); the supremacy of Jesus' name above all other names means that he is higher than all the spirit-powers being invoked and could not be exploited.

Paul uses standard terms of his day for the demonic and angelic powers at work behind the political structures of the world, powers that were thought to direct the earthly rulers and peoples (v. 21). Most people in Paul's day believed that the world was run by Fate, which was usually expressed by the stars (which were viewed as heavenly beings), and most of these people did not believe one had any hope of escape from Fate. Some of the mystery cults, however, like the cult of Isis, gained popularity by claiming power to free initiates from Fate.

Jewish people commonly believed that the heavenly powers ruled all the nations except Israel; some later teachers explained that Israel had been lifted above those heavenly powers in Abraham their ancestor. Paul says that those united with Christ had also been raised above those powers. His words would be a great encouragement to Christians who had been converted from an occult background (cf. Acts 19:18–20).

Jewish people especially viewed these heavenly powers as "angels of the nations," spiritual beings who stood behind earthly rulers and guided their rule (cf. Dan 4:35; 10:13). (Although the details are developed more in later Jewish texts, the roots of the idea are as early as Daniel and the LXX of Deuteronomy.)

Such beings were the ultimate expression of the spiritual division among different peoples, but Paul says that this distinction has been transcended in Christ—again making a point relevant to a congregation experiencing ethnic or cultural tensions. Thus Christ's body is "that which is filled by him who fills all"—"all" indicating especially representatives of all peoples in the church (4:6–10; cf. 3:19; 5:18).

2:1–10

Exalted with Christ Above Sin

Paul continues to explain God's gracious exaltation of the Christian with Christ.

2:1–2. Most Jewish people believed that Satan or the chief of the heavenly angels of the nations ran the whole world except for Israel. "Ruler with authority over the realm of the air" was a natural title for his dominion; it was commonly believed that evil spirits dominated the lowest realm of the heavens (i.e., the atmospheric realm), far

below the realm of God's highest angels and his throne. "Air" was the usual term for the atmospheric heaven.

2:3. Many Jewish people sought to explain all sin as the direct result of demonic activity (cf. especially the "spirit of error" in the Dead Sea Scrolls). Paul does not see sin as always directly inspired by demons but thinks that the world is pervaded with the devil's less direct influence (including in racial division—1:21–23); one is not delivered from this influence by one's Israelite ancestry but (vv. 4–6) through faith in Jesus.

2:4–7. This picture of God's delighting to bestow his love on his people forever develops Old Testament pictures of his special love for his people (e.g., Deut 7:6–9).

Scholars have compared the image of the exaltation of the believers in 2:6 with the fairly common Jewish image of the righteous enthroned in the world to come; Christians have begun to experience the life of the coming age in advance (see comment on 1:14). The context would drive an additional point home especially forcefully to readers once enslaved by fear of Fate or the stars: to be "seated with Christ" means in 2:6 what it meant in 1:20–21—to be enthroned over the evil powers. Christians need not fear demons, Fate or anything else; their lives are ruled by God.

2:8–10. Good works flow from what God does in us, rather than God's work in us flowing from our works. God redeemed Israel before he gave them commandments (Ex 20:1); it was always his purpose for good works to flow from his grace, even if Israel (like many people today) did not always grasp that point (Deut 5:29; 30:6, 11–14). Most Jewish people in Paul's day agreed that they were saved by God's grace in the covenant, but they did not extend this idea to non-Jews, who could not inherit the covenant by virtue of birthright.

2:11–22

United in the New Temple

2:11–13. In ancient Jewish beliefs, non-Jews could never participate in the fullness of the covenant without circumcision, although they could be saved by keeping some basic commandments. To be circumcised was to be grafted into the community of Israel, to become part of God's covenant people.

2:14–16. Paul writes this letter from prison because he has been falsely charged with taking a non-Jew inside the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 21:28). Taking a non-Jew beyond a particular dividing point in the temple was such an important breach of Jewish law that the Romans even permitted Jewish leaders to execute violators of this law. Paul's readers in Ephesus and Asia undoubtedly know why Paul is in prison (Acts 21:27, 29); thus for them, as well as for Paul, there can be no greater symbol of the barrier between Jew and non-Jew than "the dividing wall" of verse

14. But Paul says that this dividing wall is shattered in Christ. “He is our peace” might (but need not) reflect the Hebrew of Micah 5:5.

2:17–18. Isaiah 57:19 could be understood as referring to the scattered seed of Israel as those “who were far away,” but not long before this passage God had promised that his house would be for foreigners too (Is 56:3–8). This text thus fittingly expresses Paul’s point concerning the unity of Jew and Gentile in the new temple (cf. also Acts 2:39).

2:19–22. In the Old Testament, the only division in the temple was between priests and laity, but by Paul’s day architects had added barriers for non-Jews and for women (contrast 1 Kings 8:41–43); Paul says these barriers are abolished in God’s true, spiritual temple. Some other Jewish writers spoke of God’s people as his temple, but only Paul and other early Christians recognized that this new temple included non-Jews. (Paul derived the image of Christ as the cornerstone from Ps 118:22, probably via Jesus’ teaching; see comment on Mk 11:10.)

Around the time Paul was writing these words, arguing for racial unity in Christ, Jews and Syrians were massacring each other in the streets of Caesarea, a city where he had been not long before (Acts 23:23). Here Paul does not simply mimic a common stand against racism in his culture; he condemns racism and segregation of a religious institution even though he has to challenge his culture to do so.

3:1–13

The Mystery of a Unified People

The Bible had already taught that God would seek out non-Jews to join his people (Rom 16:26; e.g., Is 19:25); King David and others had welcomed non-Jews into the fellowship of God (e.g., 2 Sam 6:10–11; 8:18; 15:18–22; 18:2; 20:23; 24:18–24; 1 Chron 11:41, 46; 18:17). But to be full members of the covenant, male non-Jews had to be circumcised; by this period, men and women were also usually required to immerse themselves in water to become ritually pure. But the coming of Christ had made it clear to his apostles and prophets that by faith in Christ everyone could now approach God on the same terms.

Public speakers and writers frequently used a standard element of persuasion called *pathos*, an emotional appeal. By reminding his readers of what he their apostle had suffered for the ideal, multiethnic people that God was building, Paul appeals to them not to nullify his labors. The universal church should be all that it is called to be, a united interracial people in all its glory.

3:1–2. “Stewards” were household managers, often slaves or freedmen, with great responsibility and prestige in a wealthy home.

3:3–5. The term translated “mystery” was used in mystery cults and elsewhere, but the main background for Paul’s use of the term is in Daniel 2 and in Jewish writings (especially the Dead Sea Scrolls) that follow Daniel. There it means especially God’s plan for history, encoded in the Scriptures but understandable only to the wise or to those with the Spirit’s insight. Because most of Judaism believed that full-fledged prophets had ceased after the Old Testament prophets died, Paul’s claim that God has now actively unveiled his truth through “apostles and prophets” would underline for his hearers the uniqueness of the Christian claim.

3:6. “Heirs” refers to the Old Testament idea that the Promised Land was Israel’s inheritance; the “promise” was also a sole possession of Abraham’s descendants (and those who joined that nation by circumcision). To make uncircumcised Gentile Christians part of this same covenant would have sounded like heresy to many Jewish readers, jolting their ethnic sensitivities.

3:7. The Old Testament often spoke of divine empowerment for God’s servants (e.g., Ex 31:3; Judg 15:14); see comment on Ephesians 3:16.

3:8–11. Some pre-Christian Jewish texts also speak of God showing the angels his power and glory through his people, and thus receiving their praise. Because these heavenly “rulers” were viewed as angels of the different nations, the unity of the church displayed the rule of God, whose authority transcended that of the angels and all earthly boundaries. On “stewardship” see comment on 3:1–2; on “mystery” see comment on 3:3–5. The point is that the church, a people destined to bring eternal glory to God, represents God’s ultimate purpose in history (see 1:9–12), and all Christians should find their life’s purpose in their role in that ultimate purpose (see 4:11–13).

3:12. “Boldness” often applied to the sort of frank speech appropriate among friends; here, conjoined with “confident access” (NASB), it probably relates to the certain place all members have in the household of God (2:18).

3:13. Many Jewish and Christian writers believed that a certain measure of suffering would have to be fulfilled before the end would come (cf. Rev 6:11). If Paul alludes to this idea here, he may be encouraging his readers that, as their missionary, he is experiencing some of the church’s requisite suffering that is to usher in the end. He may also mean that they share his glory because they have helped him in his ministry (cf. Mt 10:41) or that he suffers for the purpose of serving the body of Christ as a whole. Cities could view their local athletes as competing on their behalf in regional contests.

3:14–21

Prayer for Empowerment

3:14. Jewish prayers were usually offered standing, but kneeling or prostration was sometimes used (in the Old Testament cf. 1 Kings 8:14, 22, 54; Gentiles typically prostrated themselves also before rulers). Greeks rarely knelt to pray; like Jewish supplicants, they normally stretched out their arms with hands facing the gods being invoked (in the heavens, in the sea or toward statues).

3:15. Here Paul may mean that all peoples and families (“every fatherhood”; see notes in NIV, NRSV) reflect God’s own fatherhood over the world; thus one would have to expect God’s concern for all peoples (e.g., Gen 12:3). (Families “in heaven” may refer to the guardian angels of the nations.) Ancient writers often spoke of God as father and sometimes spoke of paternal authority in families as deriving from the example of God. The Roman father was also a supreme authority figure, with the right to rule all descendants as long as he lived.

3:16–17. Although Paul derives some language from the Greek world (see comment on 2 Cor 4:16 for “the inner person”), his ideas here are not particularly Greek. Old Testament accounts associated the Spirit especially with prophetic endowment but also with purity, strength and prowess or ability to fulfill whatever God calls one to do; the Old Testament sometimes also presents internalizing the Bible as a way to overcome sin (e.g., Ps 119:11). Israelite piety also recognized God as the source of strength (e.g., Ex 15:2; Ps 18:1–2; 27:1; 59:17; 119:28; Jer 16:19). When Paul speaks of the ability to live rightly because Christ himself lives in the believer through the Spirit, these points from the Old Testament are probably the closest parallels to his idea in ancient literature; rarely did anyone suggest that one’s moral life would be empowered by the presence and activity of God. Paul advocates total reliance on grace, even in the believer’s ability to perform righteousness.

3:18–19. Many take “breadth and length and height and depth” to describe how all creation is filled with God’s glory or as a description of the immeasurable vastness of his love. Some have suggested that Paul continues the temple image (2:18–22), describing the perfect cube proportions of the holy of holies in the Old Testament, although the idea is not explicit here. But the text almost certainly applies the language of divine Wisdom (e.g., Job 11:5–9; cf. Job 28:12–28; Eccles 1:3) to God’s love; cf. “manifold” (multifaceted) wisdom in 3:10.

3:20–21. Jewish people customarily ended their prayers with a blessing to God; sometimes the blessings closed with “forever and ever” (cf. 1 Chron 16:36; Ps 106:48). It was likewise customary to respond to prayers and benedictions with “Amen.”

4:1–16

One Body, Many Members

Ancient persuasive speeches and letters often engaged in a detailed argument, but Paul to this point has mainly used “epideictic,” or “praise” rhetoric. He has praised the church, calling it to be what God had planned for it to be. He now turns to a standard part of persuasive rhetoric, however, the *exhortatio*, or exhortations. This type of argument fills the rest of the book until the closing *peroratio*, or rousing conclusion, of 6:10–20.

4:1–2. Although gentleness was a recognized virtue, most Greek writers viewed “meekness” in the sense of “humility” negatively, unless it was the socially appropriate self-abasement of a social inferior to a superior. On Paul’s captivity (probably in Rome), see comment on 6:20.

4:4–6. Some Jewish texts (especially in Philo and 2 Baruch) suggested that Israel was united because God was one. These texts would never have united Jew and Gentile in one people, however, even though all the nations were admittedly joined in common humanity. Paul’s language sounds closer to Stoic philosophical language about the unity of creation. But even the common Greek rhetorical theme of concord (unity, peace) does not match Paul’s emphasis on the unity that believers in Jesus share and must live out.

4:7–8. Paul adapts the text of Psalm 68:18, as ancient expounders of Scripture often did, to make his point (a later targum of the Psalms rewords it the same way he does). This psalm refers to God’s “going up” at Mount Sinai, as Jewish interpreters recognized, and Paul applies the principle of God’s arising to Jesus. (In some Jewish traditions, Moses ascended all the way to heaven to receive the law; if Paul or any of his readers knew such traditions, it would make the application of this psalm to Jesus all the more vivid. But it is questionable how widely known this tradition was in Paul’s day.) Paul’s point is in harmony with the image of the psalm, although he changed its language; once a conqueror had received tribute and plunder from the defeated (as in Ps 68:18), he distributed most of these spoils to his soldiers (as here).

4:9–10. Paul interprets and applies the text just cited, the way a good Jewish teacher would. “Lower parts of the earth” probably means the realm of the dead, hence that Jesus had died (Ezek 32:24), although it could mean his descent from heaven to become a servant at his incarnation (Phil 2:7; cf. Ps 139:15).

4:11. “Apostles” were literally commissioned messengers carrying out their sender’s mission; as such, they were backed by the sender’s authority to the extent that they accurately represented that commission; in the New Testament, the term applies to commissioned agents of Christ authorized in a special way (more authoritatively than others) to declare and propagate his will. “Prophets” were spokespersons for God, whose role was known from the Old Testament and continued in the church; apostles were to prophets perhaps as prophetic judges (e.g., Samuel

and Deborah) or leaders (e.g., Elijah and Elisha) were to other Old Testament prophets—with special rank and authority.

“Evangelists,” as proclaimers of good news (the message of Christ), were seen as “heralds,” again a type of messenger. “Pastors” were literally “shepherds” (used for overseers in the Old Testament, e.g., Jer 23:2–4), elsewhere in the New Testament identified as overseers of local congregations (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet 5:1–2); they were called to shepherd God’s people by declaring his message accurately (Jer 23:18–22). “Teachers” were expounders of the Scriptures and of the Jesus tradition; if they functioned like Jewish teachers, they probably offered biblical instruction to the congregation and trained others to expound the Scriptures as well.

As in many ancient lists, some of these terms may overlap considerably (the Greek indicates an especially strong overlap between “pastors” and “teachers”). They share a common focus and basis of authority as bearers of Christ’s message. The authority is resident in their message and spiritual gifting; as in the case of Jewish teachers of God’s message (as opposed to the chief priests), none represents institutional authority in the sense of a supralocal church hierarchy, which does not seem to appear until the early second century. Together these ministers of God’s Word were to equip all God’s people for their ministry (4:12–16).

4:12. The term for “training” or “equipping” was used in the Greek world to describe the work of philosophers and teachers.

4:13–16. The images of a person growing into maturity and a ship being tossed about by waves were common in Paul’s day. The image of growing to maturity was rarely applied to a whole community of people as here, but the point would have been no less easy to grasp. Paul’s image is a generic one, lacking standard Jewish images for the end time; he probably therefore refers to the church’s need for maturity in general, rather than specifically predicting its completion in the end time.

4:17–5:2

Living the New Life

4:17–19. Greek writers often developed their moral exhortation by contrasting opposites, as Paul does here. Literature from this period demonstrates that most Jewish people would have described non-Jews in language similar to that which Paul uses (cf. also Lev 18:3, 24–30; 20:23–24; Deut 26:16–19). What is significant is that Paul refuses to call ethnically Gentile Christians “Gentiles” any longer; they may be ethnically Gentile, but they are to be *ethically* Jewish. Premarital sex, homosexual intercourse and idolatry were typically Gentile sins from which nearly all Jews abstained. By contrast, pagans were raised this way;

many Greek boys were ushered into “manhood” by an older man’s molestation. “Walk” (KJV, NASB) means “behave”; see comment on Gal 5:16; “hardness of heart” is common in the Old Testament (e.g., Ex 4:21; Ps 95:8).

4:20–24. The “new self” (v. 24) is literally “the new person,” who is (literally) “created according to God,” which means according to his image or likeness. Paul probably alludes to the way God originally made Adam and Eve in his image, and says that the new person that a Christian has become is equipped with moral purity because he or she is made like God morally. Thus, he points out, one should live like it—as blamelessly as Adam and Eve did before they disobeyed. “Clothing” and “unclothing” provide a natural image, used in the Old Testament and Greek literature, for “putting on” and “putting off” or “removing” some kinds of behavior (Job 29:14; Ps 109:18; especially Is 61:3, 10; see comment on Rom 13:12), other attributes (2 Chron 6:41; Ps 93:1) and so forth.

Jewish wisdom writers and Greek philosophers could have agreed with Paul’s emphasis on “renewing the mind”; they understood that one’s attitudes and values affected one’s lifestyle. But Paul’s basis for renewal differs from theirs; he bases it on the new kind of life available in Christ, a kind of life that most Jewish people expected only in the world to come (after the resurrection of the dead).

4:25. Except for 4:30 and 4:32–5:2, most of Paul’s moral exhortations in 4:25–5:2 are the sort that most ancient moralists uttered. Exhortations to truthfulness, labor, opposition to slander and so forth were standard. These are not sins attributed only to Gentiles (cf. 4:17–19) but those with which Jewish people also struggled.

Paul’s way of overcoming moral problems differs from that of other ancient moralists (4:22–24, 32), but he can find common ground with many moralists in his culture who oppose the same wrongs that he does. Despite many points in common with the ethics of his culture, however, Paul often cites the Old Testament as his ethical authority; his exhortation to truthfulness here echoes a line from the commandments listed in Zechariah 8:16–17, where truthfulness may be opposed to false witness in a legal setting.

4:26. The exhortation to avoid sinning while angry is from Psalm 4:4; on the wickedness of those who hold anger overnight, cf. Hosea 7:6; the Essenes and some Greek philosophers also required that disputes be settled the same day. Learning to speak in the most helpful way (4:29) was also stressed.

4:27. The image here is probably one of warfare, and that the one who sins surrenders ground to the devil’s side (cf. 6:10–20).

4:28. Judaism valued laboring with one’s hands and sharing with the poor. Although Greek artisans no doubt prided

themselves in their work, the aristocracy throughout the Mediterranean world disdained work with one's hands as the duty of the lower classes.

4:29. Ancient wisdom literature often emphasized learning to speak rightly (cf. 4:25; 5:3–4); many sayings in Proverbs emphasize the idea, including the encouragement to speak gracious, uplifting words (e.g., 12:25; 15:23; 25:11; cf. Zech 1:13).

4:30. “Grieving” the Spirit reflects a serious offense; in Isaiah 63:10 (one of only two Old Testament texts to use the title “holy spirit”), it refers to Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness, which led to their rejection by God. Similarly, Israel’s rebellion against the Spirit led Moses to sin with his mouth according to Psalm 106:33 (cf. Num 20:10; Deut 3:26). On “sealing” as a sign attesting that no one had tampered with the sealed merchandise, see comment on Ephesians 1:13–14. The Ephesians must preserve their attestation for the day when their redemption would be complete (the Old Testament “day of the Lord,” when he would judge the world and vindicate his people).

4:31. Vice lists were a common literary form in the writings of ancient moralists; sometimes all the vices listed pertained to a particular topic, as here (anger).

4:32–5:2. Other moralists, including Greek and Roman non-Christians and Philo, appealed to the imitation of God for a standard of ethics. But non-Christian writers of Paul’s day could not cite the example of a god who had lovingly sacrificed himself for his people (4:32–5:2). (Some scholars have appealed to the example of the Titan Prometheus, who suffered for his betrayal of divine secrets to people. But it is not clear that Prometheus expected the severe punishment he received, and the example would not have been prominent; given the punishment of the Titans and wounds inflicted on immortals in Greek mythology [e.g., the wounding of Ares in the *Iliad*], Prometheus cannot offer a pre-Christian parallel to the Christian idea of Jesus, who, though divine, voluntarily offered himself for humanity. Furthermore, the qualitative difference between Greek and Jewish conceptions of deity makes comparison between the stories of Prometheus and Jesus even less likely.)

On God’s accepting someone as a fragrant aroma, cf. Ezekiel 20:41 (his saved people); Ephesians 5:2 means that God accepted Jesus as a sacrifice (see Gen 8:21; Ex 29:18).

5:3–20

More Exhortations

5:3–6. Premarital and other immoral sex, insolent speech and sexual humor were as common in ancient pagan society as they are today. Paul did not water down God’s standards to accommodate the culture; instead he warned that those who engaged in this lifestyle would not be among God’s people in the world to come. On vice lists

and “inheriting” the kingdom of God, see comment on 1 Corinthians 6:9–10.

5:7. Here Paul does not advocate total separatism (like that of the wilderness community of the Dead Sea Scrolls), or even the partial separatism that Judaism’s food and sabbath laws imposed on Diaspora Jews. But many in Greco-Roman society would have branded Christians as antisocial for refusing to take part in immoral conversation and, even more, in the pervasive civic religious cults which were regarded as a mark of local loyalty.

5:8–13. Jewish texts often used “light” and “darkness” to contrast good and evil, and Paul milks this image here. Some Greek religious groups known as “mystery cults” emphasized night initiations, and some of them were also connected with sexual immorality; because some Roman critics of all foreign religions associated Christians with immoral cults, Paul has all the more reason to wish to dissociate Christianity from cults he already regards as pagan. People could enact deeds in darkness of which they would have been ashamed in public (cf. Is 29:15; 47:10).

5:14. Some commentators have suggested that here Paul cites an expository paraphrase of Scripture, like a targum on a text such as Isaiah 60:1 or perhaps Daniel 12:2. Others think that Paul cites an early Christian prophecy or song, composed by either Paul or another prophet (cf. 1 Cor 14:37). Either suggestion is possible, or a combination of the two (a prophecy or song based on biblical texts); in any case the quotation was no doubt familiar to both Paul and the letter’s first hearers.

5:15–17. “Redeeming the time” (KJV, literally) probably means “making the most of the time”; cf. Ps 90:12. The LXX of Daniel 2:8 uses the phrase for trying to gain a delay. (The other possible interpretation is bringing redemption to the present evil age.) That a “time of evils” would affect how the prudent behaved is also expressed in Amos 5:13. In Jewish tradition “wisdom” and “foolishness” had much more to do with morality than they did in pagan thought (e.g., Jer 29:23).

5:18. In Greek, the commands of verses 19–21 flow out of Paul’s command to “be filled with the Spirit” and express the nature of Spirit-filled living. Drunkenness was scandalous behavior in Judaism (cf. Prov 23:20–35).

Many people in the ancient world believed that drunkenness could produce a sort of inspiration or possession by Dionysus, god of wine. Dionysus’s most active worshipers yielded control of themselves to him and performed sexual acts or acts full of sexual symbolism (often to the distaste of conservative Romans). Here Paul may contrast this behavior with inspiration by God’s Spirit. People did not think of Dionysus every time someone became drunk, however; drunkenness was more commonly associated simply with loss of self-control. It was standard practice in both the late-night banquets of the rich and the taverns of the poor.

5:19. Both Greeks and Jews commonly believed that music could come by inspiration, an idea that appears in the Old Testament as well. Paul emphasizes the kind of worship that Jewish people celebrated in the temple (e.g., psalms and hymns); we cannot be sure whether most other Jewish gatherings, such as those in synagogues, included the singing of psalms and hymns in this period. “Spiritual songs” probably refers to Spirit-inspired songs (cf. 1 Chron 25:1–6), possibly spontaneous, which would clearly distinguish Christian worship from nearly all worship in antiquity (cf. 1 Cor 14:15).

5:20. The only ancient writers (Jewish writers and some Greco-Roman, especially Stoic, writers) who stressed thanking God for everything were those who believed that God (whether the Stoic Fate or the personal God of Judaism) ruled the course of events.

5:21–33

Wives and Husbands

The section 5:21–6:9 addresses what we call “household codes.” In Paul’s day, many Romans were troubled by the spread of “religions from the East” (e.g., Isis worship, Judaism and Christianity), which they thought would undermine traditional Roman family values. Members of these minority religions often tried to show their support for those values by using a standard form of exhortations developed by philosophers from Aristotle on. These exhortations about how the head of a household should deal with members of his family usually break down into discussions of husband-wife, father-child and master-slave relationships. Paul borrows this form of discussion straight from standard Greco-Roman moral writing. But unlike most ancient writers, Paul undermines the basic premise of these codes: the absolute authority of the male head of the house.

5:21. The final expression of being filled with the Spirit is “submitting to one another” because Christ is one’s Lord. All the household codes Paul proposes are based on this idea. But although it was customary to call on wives, children and slaves to submit in various ways, to call *all* members of a group (including the *paterfamilias*, the male head of the household) to submit to one another was unheard-of.

5:22–24. Most ancient writers expected wives to obey their husbands, desiring in them a quiet and meek demeanor; some marriage contracts even stated a requirement for absolute obedience. This requirement made sense especially to Greek thinkers, who could not conceive of wives as equals. Age differences contributed to this disparity: husbands were normally older than their wives, often by over a decade in Greek culture (with men frequently marrying around age thirty and women in their teens, often early teens).

In this passage, however, the closest Paul comes to defining submission is “respect” (v. 33), and in the Greek text, wifely submission to a husband (v. 22) is only one example of general mutual submission of Christians (the verb of v. 22 is borrowed directly from v. 21 and thus cannot mean something different).

5:25. Although it was assumed that husbands should love their wives, ancient household codes never list love as a husband’s duty; such codes told husbands only to make their wives submit. Although Paul upholds the ancient ideal of wifely submission for his culture, he qualifies it by placing it in the context of mutual submission: husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, by willingly laying down their lives for them. At the same time that he relates Christianity to the standards of his culture, he subverts his culture’s values by going far beyond them. Both husbands and wives must submit and love (5:2, 21).

5:26. This “washing” probably alludes figuratively to the bride’s prenuptial washing (of course, washing was natural before any occasion on which one wished to impress another positively). After this washing the bride was perfumed, anointed and arrayed in wedding clothes. The betrothal ceremony in Judaism also came to be called “the sanctification of the bride,” setting her apart for her husband. The “word” naturally refers to the saving gospel of Christ (1:13).

5:27. After the bride’s preparation (5:26), the next stage in a Jewish wedding was the bride’s removal from her father’s house to the groom’s house, followed by the bride’s introduction into the groom’s home. “In glory” (NASB) or “splendor” (NRSV) also fits the image of the passage, appropriate to the bridal array.

5:28–32. Although Greek and Roman moralists sometimes alluded to the unity of husband and wife, the image was especially prominent in Judaism, which shared Paul’s and Jesus’ dependence on Genesis 2:24, mentioned explicitly in Ephesians 5:31. The head-body analogy of 5:23 here becomes an image of unity rather than one of authority.

5:33. Writers sometimes closed a book or section with a concluding summary; Paul here summarizes the point of 5:21–32: the wife should respect her husband, and the husband should love his wife. Although ancient moralists expected wives to respect their husbands (and Jewish teachers also expected the reverse), moralists usually also emphasized the wife’s “obedience”; Paul’s exhortation to wives here would thus strike most ancient readers as quite weak.

6:1–4

Children and Fathers

Jewish and Greco-Roman writers unanimously agreed that children needed to honor their parents, and, at least till they grew up, needed to obey them as well. The command

to honor one's parents was in the Old Testament (Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16) and included living in such a way as to bring honor on them in a godly society (Deut 21:18–21). Many Jewish writers believed that honoring one's parents was the most important commandment.

At the same time, children were often taught through beating, which was standard in child rearing and education; fathers were considered responsible for their education. Paul is among the minority of ancient writers who seem to disapprove of excessive discipline (6:4). (Greek and Roman society was even harsher on newborn children; because an infant was accepted as a legal person only when the father officially recognized it, babies could be abandoned or, if deformed, killed. Early Christians and Jews unanimously opposed both abortion and abandonment. This text, however, addresses the discipline of minors in the household.)

6:5–9

Slaves and Masters

Masters often complained that slaves were lazy, especially when no one was looking. Paul encourages hard work but gives slaves a new hope and a new motive for their labor.

Paul says that slaves, like wives, should submit to the head of the household as if to Christ, but this duty is again *reciprocal*. Only a few writers in the ancient world suggested that slaves were in theory their masters' spiritual equals (cf. Job 31:13–15), and so far as we know only Paul goes so far as to suggest that in practice masters do the same for slaves as slaves should do for them (6:9).

When Aristotle complained about a few philosophers who thought that slavery was wrong, the philosophers he cited did not state matters as plainly as Paul does here. Paul confronts the practical issue of how slaves can deal with their situation, not whether slavery should be abolished (an issue not relevant to his point in the context of household codes); even a violent revolution could not have ended slavery in the Roman Empire. But the way he deals with the issue leaves no doubt where he would have stood had we put the theoretical question of slavery's abolition to him: people are equals before God (6:9), and slavery is therefore against God's will. For more on slavery in general, see the introduction to Philemon.

6:10–20

Divine Armor

Although Paul does not follow a formal rhetorical outline in Ephesians, 6:10–20 functions as a *peroratio*, a rousing conclusion. Philosophers sometimes described their conflict with wicked ideas as wrestling in an athletic contest or a war; they also used lists of virtues, the general idea of which Paul incorporates here. Aspects of Paul's

conclusion resemble the exhortations that generals gave to their armies before battle.

The Old Testament has many pictures of Israel as God's warriors, and God himself appears as a warrior in full armor, dealing out his justice (Is 59:17; cf. Wisdom of Solomon 5:17–20). But although Paul borrows his language from the Old Testament, the image Paul's words in this paragraph would have evoked for most of his readers is that of a Roman soldier ready to do battle. Most adults who heard his letter read would have seen Roman soldiers and could relate this image to their spiritual warfare against the demonic powers at work in the world; God who fought for them had supplied them his armor.

Paul omits some pieces of the Roman soldier's armor in his description; for instance, since he mentions only one offensive weapon, he uses the sword but omits the lance (the *pilum*). Paul probably has no particular purpose in correlating specific strengths of the Christian with specific armor body parts (cf. 1 Thess 5:8); rather, he wants his readers to know that they need all of them to be victorious.

6:10–11. In the day of battle, Roman soldiers were to stand their ground, not retreat. As long as they stood together on a flat, open field and did not break ranks, their legions were considered virtually invincible.

6:12. Some people in the Old Testament learned that the nature of their battle was spiritual (cf. Gen 32:22–32; Dan 10:10–21), although in both Daniel and Paul the battle was fought by prayerfully submitting to God and doing his will, not by directly addressing the hostile powers (Dan 10:12–13, 21). Some pagan deities were called “world rulers,” and terms for high ranks of good and evil angels were becoming popular in this period; “spiritual beings of wickedness” is idiomatic Greek for “evil spirits,” a Jewish and New Testament term.

6:13. The “evil day” could refer generically to any time of judgment or testing (e.g., Amos 6:3), but some scholars think it applies specifically to the period of intense tribulation Jewish people expected prior to the end of the age (cf. Dan 12:1), which Paul elsewhere may have regarded as present (cf. Rom 8:22–23). For “stand” see comment on 6:10–11.

6:14. The “belt” or “girdle” may refer to the leather apron beneath the armor or to the metal belt protecting the lower abdomen. The “breastplate” normally consisted of leather overlaid with metal, and it protected the chest in battle; like the helmet (6:17), it was used only in battle, not for normal wear. Roman soldiers were to face forward in battle, side by side, so the armor needed to protect only their front. In view of Isaiah 59:17 (cf. Wisdom of Solomon 5:18), this “breastplate of righteousness” is truly “God's armor” (6:13).

6:15. Soldiers needed to wear sandals or boots (technically the Roman *caliga*, a half boot) so they could advance toward the enemy undistracted about what they might step on; this gear was essential to their “preparation” for battle. Paul takes the image especially from the herald of Isaiah 52:7 who announces good news: sharing the message of Christ advances God’s army against the enemy’s position.

6:16. Roman soldiers were equipped with large rectangular wooden shields, four feet high, the fronts of which were made of leather. Before battles in which flaming arrows might be fired, the leather would be wetted to quench any fiery darts launched against them. After Roman legionaries closed ranks, the front row holding shields forward and those behind them holding shields above them, they were virtually invulnerable to any attack from flaming arrows.

Because the Greek and Roman god of passion (called Eros and Cupid, respectively) was said to strike with flaming arrows, some of Paul’s readers may have thought specifically of the temptation of lust in this verse, although Paul probably intended the image to cover more than that danger (cf. Ps 11:2; 57:4; 58:3–7; 64:3; perhaps 120:1–4; Prov 25:18).

6:17. The bronze helmet, equipped with cheek pieces, was necessary to protect the head; though essential garb for battle, it was normally not worn outside battle. For the phrase “helmet of salvation” see Isaiah 59:17; cf. comment on Ephesians 6:14. The sword (*gladius*, 20–24 inches long) was a weapon used when close battle was joined with the enemy and the heavy pikes that frontline soldiers carried were no longer practical. Thus Paul implies that the battle is to be joined especially by engaging those who do not know God’s word (the gospel) with its message, after one is spiritually prepared in the other ways listed here. Paul’s ministry was thus particularly strategic, because it included close-range battle advancing into enemy ranks (vv. 19–20).

6:18–19. If prayer for one another (v. 18) continues the figurative image of warfare in the preceding context, it might relate to how the soldiers had to stand together in their battle formation, covering one another by moving as a solid unit. A Roman soldier by himself was vulnerable, but as a unified army a Roman legion was virtually invincible. “Watching” or “being alert” may also be military language (suggested by Jesus; cf. Mk 14:38). Prayer in the Spirit probably implies *inspired* prayer (cf. 1 Cor 14).

6:20. Ambassadors were to be received with all the respect due the ones who sent them; as heralds, they were to be immune from hostility even if they represented an enemy kingdom. Paul, an “ambassador” of the greatest king and the greatest kingdom (6:20) is instead chained in Rome for

his mission of peace (6:15). In Greek literature, a true philosopher was characterized by his “boldness,” or frank speech.

Like 3:1–13, this section adds *pathos*, or feeling; although its most important function is to solicit prayer, it also sets an example for the church.

6:21–24

Closing Greetings

6:21–22. Mail and other news were normally carried by travelers, because the Roman Empire had no official postal service except for imperial business.

6:23–24. The Old Testament promised God’s covenant love to all who loved God (Ex 20:6; Deut 5:10; Neh 1:5; Dan 9:4; cf. 1 Kings 8:23); here the promise applies specifically to those who love the Lord Jesus Christ.¹

¹ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Eph.