

EPHESIANS 3:2-13: POINTLESS DIGRESSION, OR EPITOME OF THE TRIUMPH OF GOD IN CHRIST?

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I. Introduction

Ephesians 3 consists of a prayer report by Paul,¹ which is interrupted just as it begins by a long digression (3:2-13), wherein he discusses the ministry given to him by God on behalf of his readers. He then returns to the report of his prayer (3:14-19) before concluding with a doxology (3:20-21). While many regard the whole of Ephesians as an enigma,² this passage is perhaps more puzzling than any other, as commentators have had difficulty discerning the logic that drives it, and the manner in which it relates to the rest of the letter.

Martin Kitchen has concluded recently that the digression simply is irrelevant to the argument of Ephesians—an unnecessary and distracting detour. He regards the letter as pseudonymous, claiming that Eph 3 is the post-Pauline author's "construction of Paul," whereby he portrays Paul as a person of prayer, the ideal self-sacrificial minister, and as one who has received a divine commission. But with respect to the purpose of the digression, Kitchen concedes that "one is still left wondering why the writer devotes twelve verses to an exposition of Paul's status."³

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¹ Though I regard Paul to be the author of Ephesians, my argument is unaffected by authorship issues, since one might argue that a pseudonymous author had the same motivation as that which I claim drove Paul to digress from his prayer report.

² It is customary for commentaries and monographs on Ephesians to include a tribute to the epistle's mystifying qualities. John Muddiman (*The Epistle to the Ephesians* [BNTC; London: Continuum, 2001], 7) claims, "No letter of Paul is so confused and confusing in its form and structure." For N. A. Dahl ("Gentiles, Christians, and Israelites in the Epistle to the Ephesians," *HTR* 79 [1986]: 38), "Ephesians is a sublime yet elusive document." E. J. Goodspeed (*The Meaning of Ephesians* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933], 15) famously warned, "Ephesians is the Waterloo of commentators."

³ Martin Kitchen, *Ephesians* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1994), 30. See also Roy R. Jeal, *Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians: The Ethos of Communication* (SBEC 43; Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2000), 174-75. Other commentators who regard Ephesians as pseudonymous view the post-Pauline author as adopting various strategies in Eph 3. For example, Margaret Y. MacDonald argues that the author assumes Paul's identity, appealing to his divinely given apostleship to gain authority for his own message (see her *Colossians and Ephesians* [SPS 17; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000], 268-72). See also Michel Bouttier, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Éphésiens* (CNT 9B; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1991), 133.

More typically, the digression is viewed as an apostolic defense, much like those found in other Pauline letters. Ernest Best, for example, argues that the digression is a justification of Paul's unique apostleship and message. Paul was not just one of the apostles, he was *the* apostle to the Gentiles, and the digression provides the grounds upon which he can describe himself in this way, recounting how he was made an apostle and describing the authority with which he speaks.⁴ Clinton Arnold reads this passage along a similar line, claiming that the digression is aimed at establishing Paul's apostolic credentials.⁵

These readings, however, fail to do justice to key features of this passage. The digression is not in any sense an explanation or defense of Paul's apostleship, nor an account of how he came to be the apostle to the Gentiles, though this is a common assumption. Although the digression is framed by Paul's ministry on behalf of his Gentile readers ("on behalf of *you Gentiles*," v. 1; "which are *your glory*," v. 13), his imprisonment and "afflictions" (θλίψεσιν) are decidedly more important factors, both in vv. 1 and 13. Paul concludes the digression by stressing his desire to put to rest any potential concerns his readers might have because of his situation ("therefore I ask that you not lose heart at my afflictions," v. 13), not by hoping that he has clarified the contours of his apostleship.

Strictly speaking, Paul's apostleship is irrelevant to Eph 3:2-13. While he mentions the revelation to the apostles and prophets (v. 5), he makes no attempt to justify his right to be among this group, merely noting that these were the people to whom the mystery had been revealed. There simply is no evidence in this context that this is an apostolic defense. Not only is there a complete lack of a polemic against anyone attacking his apostolic credentials, but a similar absence of an indication of the substance of any such attack.⁶ Further, his discussion of suffering is unlike that in 2 Cor 3-4, where suffering points to the authenticity of Paul's ministry.⁷

Why, then, does Paul digress, and what is he talking about? I intend to answer these questions, and especially to counter the claim that Paul's digression is pointless, or that it adds nothing essential to the argument. First, however, we must understand the context of the letter to this point.

⁴ Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 292.

⁵ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of Its Historical Setting* (SNTSMS 63; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 86. See also Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (WUNT 2.4; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981), 20-21.

⁶ This differs from 2 Cor 10, where Paul refers to the substance of the attacks against him before responding by drawing a contrast between himself and his opponents.

⁷ This dissent from the more traditional reading of Eph 3:2-13 is strengthened by recent objections of several scholars to the manner in which Gal 1-2 typically has been read. According to Bernard Latagan ("Is Paul Defending His Apostleship in Galatians? The Function of Galatians 1.11-12 and 2.19-20 in the Development of Paul's Argument," *NTS* 34 [1988]: 411), interpreters too often read Galatians through the lens of the Corinthian correspondence with the result that Paul's purpose must be defensive. Paul's autobiographical remarks in Galatians, however, have more than a defense of his apostleship in view. He presents his own experience as an example of the working of the gospel—the actualization of the grace of God (B. R. Gaventa, "Galatians 1 and 2: Autobiography as Paradigm," *NovT* 28 [1986]: 313; John M. G. Barclay, "Paul's Story: Theology as Testimony," in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* [ed. Bruce W. Longenecker; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002], 138-40). I will argue that Paul adopts a similar strategy in Eph 3.

II. Context

As I have argued elsewhere, Eph 2 employs the ideology of divine warfare in order to state and defend the claim that Christ has been exalted far above the powers and authorities ruling the present evil age (Eph 1:20-23).⁸ This ideological tool was used widely in the ancient Near East in order to assert the supremacy of a nation's deity, and appears throughout the Old Testament with reference to the God of Israel. The ideology of divine warfare followed a typical pattern: Respective deities engage in conflict, with the eventual victor proclaimed supreme among the gods and given the right to build a house/temple at which the people gather to celebrate the deity's ascendancy. Thus the following pattern emerges: conflict, victory, kingship, house-building, celebration.⁹

This mythic pattern is implicit in the structure of The Song of the Sea in Exod 15, which celebrates the victory of the God of Israel over the Egyptian army. Yahweh is described as a "man of war" (אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה) because he cast Pharaoh's chariots into the sea (v. 3) and shattered the enemy with his powerful right hand (v. 6). Because of his triumph, it is only fitting that Yahweh is declared the universal sovereign ("Yahweh will reign [יִמְלֹךְ] forever and ever," v. 18). The song then anticipates the building of Yahweh's temple, where his people will celebrate his supremacy (v. 17).

Divine warfare imagery appears throughout Ephesians (4:8-10; 6:10-18),¹⁰ and this basic pattern determines the structure of Eph 1:20-2:22. In 1:20-23, Paul states that Christ has been exalted to the position of Cosmic Lord, situated "far above" the powers and authorities that rule the present evil age. Such a bold claim cannot pass without defense. The assertion that Christ has been installed as Cosmic Lord must be vindicated by a display of his credentials as universal sovereign, his triumphs over all competing powers. Such vindication is found in 2:1-16, which elaborates the triumphs of God in Christ over the rebellious powers. These powers formerly had held people captive in death through transgressions and sins (2:2), but God in Christ has freed believers from their grip, giving them life, raising them, and seating them with Christ in the heavens (2:5-6). Humanity had been divided by the Law, and such divisions were exacerbated by the destructive and divisive work of the powers (2:11-12). But in his death, Christ has created the new humanity made up of believers from any and every race and nation (2:13-16). Because of his victory in achieving peace (2:17), Christ has the right to build his temple, which stands as a lasting monument to his triumph (2:20-22). His temple consists of the people of God, the church, the place where God in Christ dwells by his Spirit.¹¹

⁸ Timothy G. Gombis, "Ephesians 2 as a Narrative of Divine Warfare," *JSNVT* 26 (2004): 403-18.

⁹ Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 83-88.

¹⁰ On the appearance of the imagery of divine warfare throughout the letter, see Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians* (BCBC; Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2002), and "Put on the Armour of God": *The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (JSNTSup 140; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

¹¹ The pattern in this passage, then, is as follows: lordship (1:20-23), conflict-victory (2:1-16), victory shout (2:17), celebration (2:18), and house-building (2:20-22). The pattern in Eph 2 is similar to that which appears in OT poetic texts, which typically begin with acclamations of the kingship of

III. *An Epitome of the Triumph of God in Christ*

I will argue that the purpose of the digression is to explain Paul's description of himself as a prisoner in Eph 3:1. It answers an objection that might arise in the minds of the readers regarding Paul's being a prisoner. He has just narrated the triumphs of God in Christ that vindicate the exaltation of Christ to the position of cosmic lordship. This is followed by Paul's reporting that he is in prison, which raises the question: If Christ Jesus is exalted to the position of cosmic supremacy over the powers ruling the present evil age, then why is Paul in prison? Why has the exaltation of Christ resulted in the defeat and humiliation of his servant? This looks less like triumph than a glaring defeat at the hands of the powers that supposedly have been put under the feet of the sovereign Lord Christ. As George Caird states, "Paul's imprisonment might give the impression that he was the victim, not the victor, of the powers of the old world order."¹² This apparent discrepancy must somehow be explained, and the digression in vv. 2-13 makes plain that the imprisonment of Paul is not a defeat, but rather epitomizes the triumph of God in Christ. Paul does this by revealing to his readers the cosmic dimensions of the ministry given to him by God, and that his imprisonment—far from hindering his ministry—actually serves to magnify the triumph of God.

Paul's strategy throughout the digression is to develop the paradox of his situation—at the same time that Paul occupies an utterly weak and shameful position as a prisoner,¹³ he fulfills his cosmically crucial commission as the administrator of the grace of God.

That Paul senses the need to clarify the nature of his situation is indicated by the manner in which he commences the digression in v. 2 (εἴ γε ἠκούσατε . . . "surely you have heard . . ."). The expression εἴ γε makes explicit an underlying assumption,¹⁴ which in the present context is that his readers would surely be happy to have Paul praying for them since, even though he is a prisoner, he plays a cosmically vital role in God's unfolding plan of salvation. Paul's ironic reference to himself as "the prisoner of Christ" would have resonated with those who were fully aware of the contours of his ministry. But Ephesians most likely is written to churches that are unfamiliar with him, and he needs to make explicit the paradox of his situation so that his imprisonment might rightly be understood.

Paul tells his readers that God has given to him "the administration of the grace of God" (τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ v. 2). The cosmic significance of such a stewardship can hardly be overstated. God has chosen Paul to

Yahweh before elaborating on such claims utilizing ⲓ constructions. For example, Ps 24:1, 2: "The earth is Yahweh's . . . for (ⲓ) he founded it . . ." (see also Exod 15:1, 19, 21; Pss 47:8; 48:5; 98:1, 9).

¹² G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 67.

¹³ Imprisonment in the Greco-Roman world "carried devastating dishonor and shame connotations" (B. M. Rapske, "Prison, Prisoner," in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* [ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000], 829).

¹⁴ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 226.

be the agent of his salvation in the world.¹⁵ As we will see below, it is by means of the proclamation of the gospel by Paul that God calls the church into being, bringing people from darkness to light, freeing them from bondage to sin, and demonstrating thereby his triumph over the powers ruling the present evil age.

That this commission was given to Paul "according to the exercise of [God's] power" (κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ, v. 7b) is an especially significant claim, since the exertion of God's power appears at key points in Ephesians. By the working of his power, God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heaven (1:19-23). It is also by the working of the power of God that the church grows in the knowledge of the love of Christ (3:16-19, 20), and engages in conflict with the powers and authorities (6:10). The commission of Paul to his ministry by the exertion of the power of God has a similar cosmic significance.

Paul's ministry, then, is unaffected by his present circumstances. But Paul does not stop at merely describing the pivotal role he has been given in the cosmic purposes of God, nor does he downplay his unfortunate situation. Rather, he exults in his present occupation of a shameful, weak, and humiliating position. He glories in his imprisonment, calling himself "Paul the prisoner." Further, he claims that it was specifically to him as the one who is "less than the least of all the saints" (ἐμοὶ τῷ ἐλαχιστοτέρῳ πάντων ἁγίων) that this grace was given (v. 8a), stressing his own unworthiness and lack of fitness for the task. Paul emphasizes his utter weakness and inability so that the triumph of God in Christ might clearly be seen. If Paul were in a position of political strength or earthly power, the clarity of this display to the evil powers might, in some measure, be diminished. Paul, therefore, highlights his humiliation and weakness.

A similar rhetorical strategy is at work in several OT narratives in which Yahweh the Divine Warrior provides deliverance, and in which the human agent of his salvation is portrayed as completely lacking in credentials and fitness for the task. The narrative of David versus Goliath in 1 Sam 17 is an excellent example. In light of the overwhelmingly terrible threat that Israel faces in the "champion" Goliath, the narrative stresses that what is needed is a "man" powerful enough to fight him. The word "man" appears 17 times in the narrative, but never with reference to David, who is, rather, a "son of Jesse" (v. 12), a keeper of only a "few sheep" (v. 28), an errand-boy, sent to bring supplies and food to his brothers—among the "men of Israel" (v. 19)—at the battlefield, provisions that point to the

¹⁵ Paul describes this commission as having been given to him by God. The phrase "was given to me" (δοθείσης μοι) is repeated in vv. 2 and 7, and Paul claims that he "was made a minister" (ἐγενήθην διάκονος) of the gospel in v. 7. Passive verbs dominate the digression, pointing to God's action in Paul's commission, specifically his calling him to this cosmic ministry, and revealing the mystery to him. It is not the activity of God in general, nor simply his initiative that is stressed here, but rather the activity of God *specifically in Paul's ministry*. See Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mystery: Meaning and Content* (ConBNT 8; Lund: Gleerup, 1977), 98. This provides further confirmation that Paul's imprisonment is no cause for alarm, nor is it an indication of divine disapproval of Paul or his ministry. Rather, God's working in power in the ministry of Paul continues despite his earthly circumstances.

lowly stature of David's family.¹⁶ In the eyes of Saul and the "men of Israel" David could not be more unqualified for the task at hand. This immense disparity between the need of the moment and the ability of David to meet it serves to cast the conflict in explicitly *theo*-logical terms (vv. 45-47), as a battle between the God of Israel and the gods of Philistia, so that the triumph clearly is that of "Yahweh of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (v. 45), who delights to use utterly unqualified agents (in the eyes of the world) to accomplish his purposes.

Just as David's apparent lack of fitness for the task magnified the triumph of the Divine Warrior, Paul's imprisonment and portrayal of himself as "less than the least" of all the saints points to the greatness of the triumph of God in Christ, and shows the true character of his situation as a prisoner. The digression amounts to an apocalyptic perspective of his ministry, locating it strategically within the cosmic conflict.¹⁷

Paul continues to expound the paradox of his ministry in two ways: He claims that he has been the recipient of divine revelation (vv. 3-7), and then elaborates on how his proclamation of the gospel facilitates the vindication of the triumph of God over the powers (vv. 8-10).

1. *Paul is a recipient of divine revelation.*

The first aspect of this cosmic commission is that Paul has been the recipient of divine revelation (vv. 3-7).¹⁸ Whereas in the past God kept knowledge of the mystery hidden from humanity, he has now chosen to reveal it through a select group of people, one of whom is *Paul the prisoner*. He claims first that the mystery was "made known" (ἐγνωρίσθη) to him "according to revelation" (κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν). His grasp of the mystery should be evident from what he has written thus far (v. 3b), and when the letter recipients hear it read, they will be able "to understand" (νοῆσαι) his "insight" (σύνεσιν) into "the mystery of Christ" (τῷ

¹⁶ Leo Krinetzki, "Ein Beitrag zur Stilanalyse der Goliathperikope (1 Sam 17,1-18,5)," *Bib* 54 (1973): 211.

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham's description of the Book of Revelation is particularly useful in articulating the function of the digression in giving a "cosmic" interpretation of Paul's imprisonment: Paul gives an apocalyptic perspective on his imprisonment in that the digression "communicates a disclosure of a transcendent perspective on this world. It is prophetic in the way it addresses a concrete historical situation . . . and brings to its readers a prophetic word of God, enabling them to discern the divine purpose in [Paul's] situation and respond to [his] situation in a way appropriate to this purpose" (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993], 7). Chantal Reynier (*Évangile et Mystère: Les Enjeux Théologiques de L'Épître aux Éphésiens* [LD 149; Paris: Cerf, 1992], 27) notes the presence of apocalyptic features in Eph 3:2-13 but claims that it has substantial differences from descriptions of the apocalyptic genre: "Le vocabulaire est apocalyptique mais le genre ne l'est pas. La question qui se pose alors est celle de la fonction de ce vocabulaire car la présence du vocabulaire apocalyptique constitue une donnée essentielle pour saisir la problématique du texte" (p. 28). While we agree with Reynier's assessment regarding the categorization of this text vis-à-vis the genre "apocalyptic," we may say that the whole of Ephesians partakes of an apocalyptic worldview and that in Eph 3:2-13 the readers of this letter are given an apocalyptic vision of the imprisonment of Paul.

¹⁸ That this is a distinct unit is indicated by the *inclusio* formed by the repetition of τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης in vv. 2 and 7 (Andreas Lindemann, *Der Epheserbrief* [ZBK NT 8; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985], 57).

μυστηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Paul had prayed for their special insight (Eph 1:17-18), and thus far has been giving them a cosmic view of the lordship of Christ and of the situation of the church, pulling back the veil of visible reality and giving them a view of events from a perspective that includes heaven and earth. That Paul is the special agent of God in working out his purposes in this world ought to be clear from their reading (or hearing) the letter thus far.

In further support of his contention that he occupies an important position of cosmic significance, Paul states that he is a member of the privileged group to which the revelation of the mystery was made known. Whereas formerly the knowledge of the mystery had been hidden ("not made known," οὐκ ἐγνωρίσθη) from all humankind ("the sons of men," τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων), God has now chosen to reveal it "to his holy apostles and prophets" (τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀποστόλοις αὐτοῦ καὶ προφήταις).¹⁹

Some scholars assume that the main focus of the digression is the church and its relationship to the mystery,²⁰ but this makes little sense of the fact that Paul only briefly mentions the content of the mystery in v. 6. He simply states that Gentiles are now "fellow heirs" (συγκληρονόμα), "fellow-members of the body" (σῶσσωμα), and "fellow sharers in the promise" (συμμέτοχα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας), and then moves on.

In vv. 3-7, then, Paul gives his readers an accurate portrait of the strategic importance of his position as the recipient of revelation. He is not merely a prisoner of Rome suffering defeat at the hands of the powers ruling this present evil age. Rather, it is precisely in this humiliated state that he also has the privileged status as a recipient of divine revelation by the Spirit.

2. Paul is the agent of divine triumph.

In vv. 8b-12, Paul discusses the actual task involved in the commission given to him by God. Not only is he in a privileged position because of his knowledge of the mystery of Christ, but he goes on to make the extraordinary claim that he

¹⁹ The contrast here is absolute, rather than relative, so that Paul regards the mystery as revealed for the first time through the apostles and prophets. See Reynier, *Évangile et Mystère*, 143-45; Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (WUNT 2.36; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 201; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1971), 150; Joachim Gnllka, *Der Epheserbrief* (HTKNT 10.2; Freiburg: Herder, 1971), 167; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (trans. H. Heron; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 133; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990), 177; Best, *Ephesians*, 305-7; contra Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, 64; Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mysterion*, 102-3; Robert L. Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 147-51. The language in the passage implies an absolute comparison, especially with its emphasis on the "hiddenness" on the one hand, and the "revelation" or "making known" of the mystery on the other. While the participation of Gentiles in the salvation of the end-time was envisioned in the OT, this specific new move of God in the church, in which Jews and Gentiles are on equal footing because of faith in Christ, was not foretold (Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 177). As Bockmuehl notes (*Revelation and Mystery*, 201), the point is not degrees of revelation, but the fact that what was previously unknown and beyond human knowledge, is now disclosed by God.

²⁰ E.g., Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God," 128.

is the agent of divine triumph—the one through whom God accomplishes and vindicates his triumph over the powers ruling the present evil age. In vv. 8b-9 Paul claims that his proclamation is the means God uses to call the church into existence, and in vv. 10-12, he notes that this is then the means by which God's triumph is vindicated before the powers.

a. *Paul's preaching is the means of the creation of the church.* Paul begins to delineate what is involved with his commission (ἡ χάρις αὐτή, "this grace") in v. 8b, by stating that he is "to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ" (τοῖς ἔθνεσιν εὐαγγελίσασθαι τὸ ἀνεξίχνιαστον πλοῦτος τοῦ Χριστοῦ). This is followed by a second infinitive in v. 9, φωτίσαι, connected by καί, so that in addition to being called to preach, he is further commissioned "to enlighten everyone what is the administration of the mystery" (καὶ φωτίσαι πάντας τίς ἡ οἰκονομία τοῦ μυστηρίου). Most scholars agree that the two infinitives (εὐαγγελίσασθαι and φωτίσαι) are not set in synonymous parallelism (i.e., describing only one task with two expressions), but that in some way φωτίσαι in v. 9 elaborates or builds upon εὐαγγελίσασθαι in v. 8b.²¹ But this further elaboration is left unexplored, so that it is largely regarded as in some way filling out the picture of how the mystery is made known, perhaps involving a further impartation of information.

There is good reason, however, to see the following dynamic at work in Paul's argument. The second infinitive is built upon the first so that it is the result of the activity of the first. In other words, the proclamation of Paul in v. 8b (εὐαγγελίσασθαι) is the means by which the church is called into existence, and it is this emergence of the church through the preaching of Paul the prisoner that is in view in v. 9a when Paul speaks of "enlightening all/everyone (πάντας) what is the administration of the mystery." Paul is claiming, therefore, that the cosmically wide-ranging enlightenment regarding the mystery is *an actual demonstration of it*, rather than having to do with his speaking of its content. It is by actually *seeing the church in existence* that "everyone"—*primarily the cosmic powers*—is made to be enlightened as to the manner in which God is working out his plan of salvation.²² The enlightenment spoken of here, then, is not *informational*; it is *demonstrative*.

This reading makes good sense of the final phrase of v. 9, describing God as the one who "creates all things" (τῷ τὰ πάντα κτίσαντι)—a direct reference to the creation spoken of in this very verse.²³ God is the one who, in the beginning, called all things into being, and again he creates out of nothing, calling the church into being through the proclamation of Paul. This is consistent with the

²¹ Schlier, *Epheser*, 152; Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mystery*, 106-7; O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 243; Jeal, *Integrating Theology and Ethics*, 171.

²² The πάντας in v. 9, along with the prominent role the powers and authorities play in this passage, indicates that this enlightenment primarily has these cosmic figures in view. See the discussion on v. 10 below. The πάντος in v. 9 is most likely original, but its inclusion or exclusion has little effect on the argument presented here. If it is excluded, the sense is that Paul's commission is to "bring to light what is the administration of the mystery," instead of his "enlightening all" as to its content.

²³ Gnlika, *Epheserbrief*, 203.

new creation language used with reference to the church throughout Ephesians (2:10, 15; 4:24), and with biblical polemical passages that speak of creative power as one of the key distinguishing features of the true God over against all other entities regarded as deities.²⁴ This same polemical edge is present here: In the face of the powers and authorities who are powerless to create, and whose rule over this present evil age is characterized by destruction, division, and leading humanity astray into idolatry, God's power is demonstrated by his ability to create the "new humanity" (Eph 4:24), and to set it in the midst of enemy territory, thus confounding the evil powers.

This also explains the appearance of the church in v. 10. There is a sense of movement from v. 8b to v. 10 where the church emerges into view—from the starting point of the preaching of Paul to the Gentiles in v. 8b to the appearance of the church in v. 10. But at what point does the church come into view? My contention that the church is called into existence by means of the preaching of Paul accounts for this progression. As Paul the prisoner preaches the riches of Christ, God calls the church into existence, and this process facilitates the display of God's wisdom in v. 10.²⁵

The "enlightenment" in v. 9, then, does not refer to Paul's ministry of proclamation directly, as if his explanation of the content of the mystery helps people to understand it more clearly. Rather, the church's very coming-into-existence is in view, so that the entire cosmos is enlightened as to the administration of the mystery through the object lesson of the church's coming-into-being.

b. Paul's preaching is the means of God's vindication before the powers. Not only is Paul's preaching the means by which God calls the church into being, but the church's coming-into-existence in this manner serves to display the variegated wisdom of God to the rebellious powers. The *ἵνα* at the beginning of v. 10 is connected to the infinitive clause in v. 9b so that Paul brings to light the administration of the mystery "in order that (*ἵνα*) the variegated wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies through the church (*διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας*)."

The triumph of God in Christ takes place in two ways in this passage. First, the powers are made to know the wisdom of God "through the church" (*διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας*, v. 10). Paul is not here charging the church with the task of preaching

²⁴ Several passages reflect this polemical strategy whereby the creative power of Yahweh, the living God, is set against the gods of other nations, who not only cannot create, but are regarded as non-existent. "For all the gods of the peoples are idols (*אֱלֹהִים*), 'worthless things, vanity', but Yahweh *made* (*עָשָׂה*) the heavens" (Ps 96:5). In Acts 14, the crowds regard Paul and Barnabas as gods and attempt to offer to them sacrifices. The apostles' response reflects this OT tradition: They "tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things (*ματαιῶν*) to a *living God, who made* (*ἐποίησεν*) the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them'" (Acts 14:14-15).

²⁵ Paul certainly would affirm that the church is called into existence through the preaching of the other apostles and prophets, as well. His argument in this passage, however, is more narrowly focused, dealing only with the effectiveness of his own ministry despite his imprisonment.

to the powers, as Walter Wink argues,²⁶ but claiming that the manner in which God has made known his multi-faceted and many-splendored wisdom to the evil powers is by confounding them and their rule over this age in his creation of the church. The powers have ordered the present evil age in such a way as to exacerbate the divisions within humanity created by the Law (2:11-12). God confounds the powers, however, by creating in Christ one unified, multi-racial body consisting of formerly divided groups of people. And it is the existence of the church as such a body set within the hostile environment of the present evil age that proclaims to them the wisdom of God.

But the mere existence of the church set within "enemy territory" is not all that is in view here. Paul is also stressing *the manner* in which the church comes into being. The means of the creation of the church by God—"the God who creates all things"—is *the proclamation of Paul the prisoner*, the one who is less than the least of all the saints. In his current situation, Paul is in a position of utter defeat at the hands of the powers, being completely in their grasp. Seen in terms of the present age, he could not be in a weaker, more shameful, or more vulnerable position. Yet, astonishingly, it is by his preaching of the gospel that the creative power of God is unleashed and engaged, and the church, the arena of the triumph of God, is called into being, thereby displaying the wisdom of God to the powers.

This paradoxical dynamic at work in v. 10 is the same as that in 1 Corinthians, where God "destroys the wisdom of the wise" by choosing the foolish and the weak to shame the wise and the strong (1 Cor 1:19-27). In living out this paradox, Paul is following the pattern of humiliation and exaltation set by his Lord, whereby in his shameful death, by being utterly defeated, Christ triumphed over the evil powers (Eph 2:13-16; 4:8-10; Phil 2:8-11; Col 2:15).

This paradoxical situation magnifying the triumph of God in Christ is still in view in v. 12, where Paul teases out the irony. He mentions the blessings of "boldness" or "freedom of speech" (*παρρησίαν*) and "access in confidence" (*προσαγωγήν ἐν πεποιθήσει*)—while he is in prison, a position in which he most likely enjoys little or no freedom or confident access to anything or anyone of consequence. Those who find themselves "in Christ," however, enjoy the privilege of boldness to approach the throne of the sovereign God of the universe, and of such access they may have full confidence, because of the faithfulness of Christ ("through his faithfulness," *διὰ τῆς πίστεως αὐτοῦ*).²⁷

²⁶ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 89-96. The proclamation spoken of in v. 8 has the Gentiles in view, and nowhere is the church given the commission to preach to the powers.

²⁷ A subjective genitive (as opposed to an objective genitive—"faith in him") rendering fits this context well as it focuses on the faithfulness of Jesus to the will of God as the means by which the blessings given to believers are secured. Ian G. Wallis (*The Faith of Jesus Christ in Early Christian Tradition* [SNTSMS 84; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 131) notes that constructions with *διὰ* and a reference to Christ in the genitive are similarly used elsewhere in Ephesians (1:5, 7; 2:16; 2:18) (see also O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 250; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 115-16). For a concise and helpful review of the debate between subjective and objective genitive readings of *πίστις Χριστοῦ*, as well as

Based on his reinterpretation of his current situation and how it serves to magnify the power and triumph of God over the powers and authorities, Paul urges his readers in v. 13 not to lose heart (ἐγκακεῖν) upon hearing about his imprisonment and afflictions (θλίψεσίν). They have reason to rejoice, since such afflictions, far from being a source of defeat or discouragement, are working to bring about his readers' eschatological glory (ἥτις ἐστὶν δόξα ὑμῶν, "which are your glory"). The logic here is quite similar to that in Phil 1, where Paul claims that, just as God exalted Jesus based on his submission to a humiliating death, his imprisonment is working for his own salvation (v. 19), and that the suffering that his readers endure is a sign of their salvation and of eschatological judgment for those who persecute them (v. 28). Both contexts justify Paul's imprisonment, explaining that his being in prison does nothing to hinder the cause of the gospel nor does it signal some sort of defeat for the purposes of God. This is the same conclusion reached in Eph 3:13: Paul's readers have no reason to despair at his sufferings and his present situation, since it is his paradoxical ministry to the Gentiles—the workings of which he has outlined in full—that facilitates their eschatological glory.

IV. Conclusion

Paul's digression in Eph 3:2-13 is not pointless, nor is it merely an explanation of the origin and nature of his apostleship. Rather, it plays a strategic role in the unfolding argument of Ephesians, in that it explains for Paul's readers how his current situation, which appears to contradict the triumph of God in Christ, is actually an epitome—a concrete manifestation—of that triumph. It beautifully captures the paradoxical nature of Christian life and ministry in this present age: God's triumph and power are seen most clearly in working through human agents who occupy positions of weakness and shame.²⁸

a discussion of the "faithfulness of Christ" tradition in the NT, especially Romans and Galatians, see Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham's God: The Transformation of Identity in Galatians* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 95-103.

²⁸ A previous draft of this paper was read at the Post-Graduate Biblical Studies Seminar, St. Mary's College, University of St. Andrews in April 2003, and at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta in November 2003. I am grateful for the response and suggestions received on those occasions. I am particularly grateful to Oliver Crisp, Daniel Gurtner, Darian Lockett, and Steven Watkins for their more extensive engagement with my argument.

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