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0521615976 - 'And the Two Shall Become One Flesh': A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5: 21-33

J. Paul Sampley

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION OF PROBLEM
AND PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, studies in Ephesians have begun to enter into a new phase. Previous investigations of the epistle were dominated by questions of authenticity, relation to Colossians and the homologoumena and by dogmatic inquiries into themes that by historical accident occur in Ephesians. The newer approach to the study of Ephesians is dominated primarily by the hypothesis that the document is a unique, syncretistic collection of a variety of traditions extant in the early church. Ernst Käsemann has clearly posited this viewpoint in his insistence that Ephesians be understood as a mosaic of early Christian traditions and conventions that reach far beyond a compilation of fragments from the Pauline homologoumena.¹ As Käsemann puts it: 'The entire letter appears to be a mosaic composed of extensive as well as tiny elements of tradition, and the author's skill lies chiefly in the selection and ordering of the material available to him.'² While recognizing that the Ephesian mosaic is complex and composed from sources more diverse than the homologoumena, more recent contributions to the study of Ephesians have attempted to assess not only the origin and extent of the traditions incorporated in Ephesians but also the new messages and purpose conveyed through this association of diverse materials. Studies of a dogmatic or thematic nature, however, properly continue, although, in and of themselves, they contribute little to the advancement of the study of Ephesians.

¹ Käsemann's approach is of broader scope and purpose than earlier attempts such as those represented by Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Meaning of Ephesians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933) and C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: Its Authorship, Origin and Purpose* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1951). Käsemann himself explicitly distinguishes his work from that of Mitton: cf. 'Ephesians and Acts', *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Nashville: The Abingdon Press, 1966), p. 297, n. 1.

² *Ibid.* p. 288.

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At this stage in the study of Ephesians, further detailed and critical investigation is required on the following matters: (1) the full range of traditions incorporated in any given passage of Ephesians must be more carefully and critically identified and, insofar as possible, traced to their sources. In this procedure a more critical methodology and more judicious application of it ought to dominate the quest for the identification of the sources of the traditions incorporated in Ephesians. (2) When the traditions in a given passage have been identified as fully as possible, the attention of the investigator should be turned to an examination of the train or movement of thought achieved by the author in his assimilation of these diverse traditions. It is in a context provided by such rigorous investigation that (3) the passage may be examined in its function in the entire epistle. The understanding of the entire letter, its purpose and occasion, may thereby be improved. The results of such an investigation offer not only an increased understanding of Ephesians, but also promise further insight into the life and worship of the early church as it found its place *vis-à-vis* the world.

To be sure, such a critical investigation of Ephesians must be the shared task of many exegetes and will occupy the attention of scholarship for some time to come. Eph. 5: 21–33 has been chosen for this investigation for several reasons. First, it is a passage that has vexed exegetes. Second, it is heavily laden with conventional formulations such as the *Haustafel* and the *hieros gamos* of Christ and the church, each of which has been the subject of independent studies. Third, it represents the opening section that deals with the family as the microcosmic unit that reflects the cosmic purposes of God.

Eph. 5: 21–33 is also ideally suited for such detailed investigation since it is an identifiable and isolable literary unit whose themes and concerns are integral to the remainder of Ephesians and thereby provides a small vantage point for surveying the purposes and concerns of the author in the entire epistle.

The investigation that follows will be guided by an identification and assessment of the material incorporated into 5: 21–33 and will assess the author's creative association of diverse formulations into a flow of thought.¹ Since the concerns of 5: 21–33

¹ This study of 5: 21–33 and its traditional materials represents an effort to examine the traditions that may be traceable to the richness of pre-

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relate to matters dealt with in the remainder of the epistle certain ramifications for the study of Ephesians will result.

Since Ephesians stands out so clearly as a mosaic of traditions current in the early church, the detailed study of such a passage will offer as a by-product further insight into the complex of traditions circulating in the early church as well as increased understanding of the hymnic, liturgical and catechetical traditions of the early Christians.

During the course of the following investigation three statements by Ernst Käsemann will be kept in view. The first, that Ephesians is a mosaic of traditional materials,¹ is a working hypothesis of this study. The scrutiny and analysis of that part of the mosaic contained in 5: 21–33 is a task basic to this investigation. The other two statements by Käsemann, however, are retained for examination in the light of possible results of this study. Käsemann asserts that the recipients of the epistle to the Ephesians, being themselves Gentiles, are in danger of divorcing themselves from their Jewish heritage as preserved in Jewish Christianity. 'Eine heidenchristliche Gemeinde . . . die Bindung an das Judenchristentum zu vorlieren droht.'² Rom. 11 is cited by Käsemann as a similar case where Gentile Christians are warned against taking any pleasure whatsoever from the possible exclusion of the Jews and the inclusion of Gentile Christians in their place. Whereas in Romans Paul argues against such haughtiness by reference to various OT passages, Käsemann asserts in his third statement that the author of Ephesians is scarcely interested in the OT as a context for understanding the present life of the church. In comparing Luke and Ephesians, Käsemann declares that 'Luke relates this [the history of Christianity] backward to the history of Jesus and to the Old Testament – matters in which Ephesians, despite several Old Testament reminiscences, is scarcely interested'.³ Whereas there can be no quarrel with Käsemann that the author of Ephesians lacks interest in the history of

Ephesian Christian conventions and adopted Jewish traditions contemporary and prior to Ephesians. By this focus I intend no judgment about the light that may be cast upon 5: 21–33 from the gnostic and more purely Hellenistic traditions.

¹ *Ibid.*

² 'Epheserbrief', *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (RGG)*, 3rd ed., II, 518.

³ 'Ephesians and Acts', p. 293.

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Jesus, the study that follows indicates that serious questions can be raised against this third assertion of Käsemann.

It is understandable that 5: 21–33 has vexed interpreters. It is structurally akin to the remainder of Ephesians in that its style is complex and its sentences long. Its laconic reference to traditional materials undoubtedly summoned to the early reader's mind a complex of traditions available to the researcher only by arduous investigation. This stylistic convolution and laconic reference to traditional formulations extant in the early church, however, need not cause the interpreter to despair of understanding, but impose more rigorous requirements on him. Too often, in complex constructions such as 5: 21–33, the interpreter is tempted to express his frustration at the difficulty of understanding by crediting the author of the passage with ineptitude, carelessness or obtuseness. The style, content and scope of Ephesians do little to ease this temptation. As Markus Barth has observed: 'There are extremely long sentences into which apparently is pressed in rather obscure, helpless, un-aesthetical, or disorderly fashion, almost every topic between heaven and earth.'¹ About the passage to be examined in this study, F. C. Synge makes a similar, but more reserved, comment when he states that 'verses 22–33 constitute a strangely elaborated, not to say laboured passage'.²

¹ Markus Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Chicago: The Judson Press, 1959), p. 15.

² F. C. Synge, *St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians: A Theological Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1941), p. 49. Markus Barth and Synge are noted here only as examples of the frustration expressed by many commentators on Ephesians. Others could equally well have been cited. E. F. Scott, for example, speaks of 5: 27 as a 'digression' (*The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1930, p. 240) and calls vv. 31 and 32 'a flight of speculation' (*ibid.* p. 244). C. L. Mitton suggests that the marriage imagery of Christ and the church may well have been 'somewhat unnaturally forced into the context from an outside source' (*The Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 146). F. W. Beare, commenting on the phrase 'as to the Lord' in v. 22, states: 'The writer has allowed himself to be carried a step too far in pressing the analogy between the marriage relationship and the relationship between Christ and the Church' ('The Epistle to the Ephesians', *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick. Abingdon Press, 1953, x, 719). In so doing, Beare suggests that the author's thought in 5: 21–33 is not entirely disciplined. Still further examples could be cited. The ensuing study will assume that the author's thought is ordered and calculated throughout, unless overwhelming evidence calls for a judgment to the contrary.

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After a preliminary analysis of the place of 5: 21–33 in the epistle to the Ephesians, the investigation will proceed from an identification and analysis of the traditional formulations in 5: 21–33 and passages especially related to it, to the movement or train of thought in the passage, and finally to a verse-by-verse analysis. The study will close with the assessment of conclusions and implications for the investigation of Ephesians.

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CHAPTER II

OUTLINE OF THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS AND THE AUTHOR'S KNOWLEDGE OF HIS READERS

In order to understand the place of the *Haustafel* in the epistle to the Ephesians, and in order to establish a context for the entire investigation, there follows an outline of the epistle.

Ephesians bears many of the formal characteristics of the epistolary style common to the *homologoumena*.¹ There is the opening greeting (1: 1-2) that credits the letter to Paul. In 6: 23-4 there is the conventional benediction. In place of the customary thanksgiving found in five letters of the *homologoumena* immediately following the greeting, there is in Ephesians, as in 2 Corinthians (1: 3 ff.), a section that opens with the blessing of God the Father (1: 3 ff.). Within the body of the letter a division is made rather easy by the appearance of a doxology at the close of chapter 3 (3: 20-1). As in the *homologoumena* there is no absolute distinction between theological and ethical or didactic and hortatory sections. Throughout Ephesians these are interwoven.

The letter opens with the greeting 'to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus' (1: 1-2). There follows the blessing and praise of God for his blessing received in and through Christ, his beloved, in accordance with God's plan and purpose (1: 3-14).

Structurally, 1: 15-2: 10 may be considered a unit because of its special relationship to Ps. 110. In 1: 15 ff., the author, having heard of the readers' faith and love, gives thanks for them and prays that they may know that they are called by God to a hope, an inheritance and a power as a consequence of what God has 'accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at the right hand in the heavenly places. . . ' (v. 20). Ps. 110: 1 provides the language for portraying Jesus as

¹ In the *homologoumena* I include Rom., 1 and 2 Cor., Gal., Phil., 1 Thess. and Philem.

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sitting at the right hand of God (v. 20). That Eph. 1: 15–23 uses Ps. 110 has long been recognized.¹ Compare Ps. 110 (109): 1 κάθου ἐκ δεξιῶν μου ἕως ἄν θῶ τοὺς ἔχθρους σου ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου with Eph. 1: 20, 22 ἐγείρας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν καὶ καθίσας ἐν δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις . . . καὶ πάντα ὑπέταξεν ὑπὸ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ.

The section 1: 15–23 is related to 2: 10 in what is described in 1: 15–23 of God's doing in and to *Christ* is said in 2: 1–10 to include the *believers*. The verbal parallels between 1: 20 and 2: 6 are striking verification that the thought begun in chapter 1 about Christ in terms of Ps. 110 is completed in chapter 2: 'he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places . . .' (1: 20); 'and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (2: 6).²

In addition to the language from Ps. 110 which speaks generally of exaltation and of sitting at the right hand of God, there is related the terminology of life and death so that 2: 1 ff. opens with the assertion 'You he made alive'. The present situation of the Christians' being alive is set in contrast to that time when they were dead 'through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked'.³

This introduces a theme involving a contrast of the readers' predicament apart from Christ and their new situation resulting

¹ For example, cf. T. J. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), p. 31. Cf. also Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1961), esp. pp. 45–51.

² The first finite verb of 2: 1–10 occurs in v. 5 and the material prior to that (2: 1–5) depends upon the verb in 2: 5: συνεζωοποίησεν; he, God, made alive with Christ (τῷ χριστῷ). The addition of the incorporative prefix συν reiterates the connection between what was said of Christ in 1: 15–23 with what is said about the believers in 2: 1–10. Significantly, the other two main verbs that follow immediately in v. 6 also have the same prefixed preposition συν. Those verbs are συνήγειρεν and συνεκάθισεν: 'God . . . made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (2: 4–6). Συνεκάθισεν (2: 6) is the same root verb found in Ps. 110 (109): 1 (κάθου) and imported into Eph. 1: 20 (καθίσας). The prepositional phrase ἐν δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ (Eph. 1: 20, cf. Ps. 110 (109): 1) is not repeated in Eph. 2: 6 since the phrase ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις associated with it in 1: 20 is sufficient to carry the point in 2: 6.

³ Cf. 1: 20 ἐγείρας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν and 2: 6 συνήγειρεν.

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from God's action in Christ. This theme is important in every chapter of Ephesians except chapter 6. The description of the former circumstances of the readers (2: 1–3), that they were children of wrath, captive to the desires of body and mind and the passions of the flesh, points up the significance of God's action in Christ: 'But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ' (2: 4–5).

The section 2: 11–22 also focuses upon the difference between the former predicament of the readers and the present situation and calls upon them to remember what characterized their earlier life. The contrast is set up in terms of phrases such as 'at one time', 'but now'.¹ The previous circumstances are dwelt upon for the purpose of emphasizing the blessings of the present in which the readers are told that they now stand as 'fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God' (2: 19). The conclusion of chapter 2 states that this household of God rests upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone.

The initial verses of chapter 3 claim for Paul an important role as one of the chief conveyors of 'the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel' (v. 6).² Chapter 3, especially vv. 1–13, is set forward as a semipersonal statement, but in fact says more about the mystery of Christ than about Paul himself. The mystery of Christ mentioned in v. 4 is specified in v. 6 as: 'how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel'. For Paul, preaching the gospel is equivalent to preaching 'the unsearchable riches of Christ' (v. 8). Disclosed in this gospel is God's plan (οἰκονομία) which involves a particular role for the church. In 3: 10, for the first time, the author specifies the function of the church. It is a mission of profound importance

¹ This corresponds to the way that Rudolf Bultmann characterizes one division of his *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 190 ff., viz. that dealing with what he takes to be Paul's speaking of 'Man prior to the Revelation of Faith'. Cf. also the corresponding 'Man Under Faith', *ibid.*, pp. 270 ff.

² The third chapter opens with an anacoluthon – 'For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles... ' – that is resumed in 3: 14: 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father... '

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and cosmic in scope: 'that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purposes [πρόθεσις] which he [God] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord' (vv. 10–11). Chapter 3 closes with the author's prayer for the readers (vv. 14–19). The benediction in vv. 20–1 concludes not only the third chapter, but the whole first section of the epistle to the Ephesians.¹

The paraenetic section of the letter begins with 4: 1. All of chapter 4 might be entitled 'Lead a life worthy of the call to which you have been called' (4: 1).² This admonition to a life worthy of the calling is expressed in mutually reinforcing ways. The author appeals to the broad use of unity shared by all those who are called (4: 1–6). It is a solidarity founded on 'one hope. . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all' (vv. 4–6). This unity provides the context for the discussion of a variety of gifts, which variety should work 'for building up the body of Christ' (v. 12). The imagery of the body of Christ and of Christ's headship (v. 15) enables the author to express his concern for unity among believers. In this way he can speak of 'bodily growth' and a resultant upbuilding of the body in love.

The passage 4: 17–32 establishes the background for the injunction to imitation of God in 5: 1 f. The readers must 'put off your old nature' (v. 22) and 'put on the new nature'. Putting off the old nature means that they no longer walk as the Gentiles (vv. 17–19). The injunctions of 4: 25–32 provide

¹ The close of chapter 3 has two noteworthy points of contact with Eph. 6. At the end of chapter 3, it is the author's prayer that the readers be 'strengthened with might' through the Spirit. The section in Eph. 6: 10 ff. exhorts the readers: 'Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might' (v. 10), and in v. 18 grounds this injunction to 'be strong' in the action of the Spirit: 'Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.' Eph. 6: 10–20 is, in effect, the closing statement of the letter and is a development of the theme that concludes the first half of the epistle.

² 4: 1 by its reference to 'the calling to which you have been called' possibly harks back to 1: 18: 'that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you'. The association of 'hope' and 'call' in 4: 4 – 'you were called to one hope that belongs to your call' – confirms the possibility of a relation between 4: 1 ff. and 1: 18. The emphasis has, however, shifted to a question of unity and the 'one hope' of 4: 4 is now a basis for concord.

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guidelines for their new life. When they put on the new nature, the one 'created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (v. 24), it follows that they will no longer lie, sin, steal, etc. (vv. 25 ff.). Instead, they will 'be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you' (v. 32). In short, putting on the new nature created after the likeness of God (4: 24) signifies that they imitate God (5: 1), or, to put it differently, they walk in love (5: 2).

'Walking in love' is expounded in 5: 3-20 by the use of two antitheses. The readers of the epistle are urged to 'walk as children of light' (v. 8). Conversely, they are warned not to be 'sons of disobedience' (v. 6; cf. 2: 2). This 'walking in love' is further explicated in the exhortation to walk as wise men, not as unwise men (v. 15). The language in this section, 5: 3-20, is heavily laden with materials paralleled in Qumran and in the OT.¹ It closes with the exhortation: 'Be filled (πληροῦσθε) with the Spirit' (v. 18). Dependent upon the verb πληροῦσθε are five participles, the last of which, ὑποτασσόμενοι, stands at the conclusion of this section, 5: 3-20, in v. 21.

5: 21 plays a peculiar role in the train of thought of chapter 5. It functions as a heading for the entire following section, 5: 22-6: 9, but is probably also to be considered structurally dependent upon πληροῦσθε of v. 18. Thus it is a transitional statement.

5: 21 to 6: 9 is the *Haustafel*, or the table of household duties that exist in the mutual relationships of the family. Addressed in order are wives (5: 22), husbands (5: 25), children (6: 1), fathers (6: 4), slaves (6: 5) and masters (6: 9).

A quantitative assessment of the *Haustafel* role in Ephesians shows that it contains 1/8 of the total letter and consists of 1/5 of the paraenetic section. Its total function in the letter will be the subject of one of the closing phases of this study.

Following upon the *Haustafel* is the final substantive statement of the epistle (6: 10-20). It consists of an exhortation that may be summed up in the words of its opening verse: 'Be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might' (v. 10). The author urges his readers to stand fast by means of taking upon themselves 'the whole armor of God' (vv. 11, 13). The framework

¹ Cf. K. G. Kuhn, 'Der Epheserbrief im Lichte der Qumrantexte', *NTS*, 7, 334 ff.