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Ephesians 2:14-16: A History of Recent Interpretation

by Michael S. Moore

Our second brief contribution on Ephesians in this issue offers a useful survey of recent scholarship on a key passage in the letter. The author is minister of Allentown Church of Christ in Whitehall, Pennsylvania.

Ephesian studies have recently been conducted through the twin veins of form-critical analysis and that school of thought which seeks to interpret the letter, especially those materials which are thought to be liturgical, against the background of a unified Gnostic myth.

I. Form-Critical Analysis

Gottfried Schille has built upon the speculations of H. J. Holtzmann who long ago attempted to determine the authenticity of the letter.[1] Instead of elaborating upon the minute similarities between the Ephesian-Colossian correspondence from a literary point of view,[2] Schille suggested critiquing the *forms*, particularly noting the differences between the paranetic and liturgical forms in the letter. If the letter was written to more than one city, the writer (Schille reasoned) would certainly have chosen to communicate his message through the well-known liturgical channels of prayers and hymns. He suggested the presence of at least four such hymnic passages in chapters 1-3: 1:3-12; 20-3; 2:4-10; 14-18.[3] R. Deichgräber attempted to disprove the hymnic character of 2:14-16, primarily because he believed that the 'both' and the 'two' are 'too much related to the context'.[4] Therefore, 2:14-16 could not have been quoted material.

Schille, however, was certainly influenced by the tantalizingly bold

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[1] H. J. Holtzmann, *Kritik der Epheser-und Kolosserbriefe*, 1872, quoted in C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 72ff.; Gottfried Schille, *Liturgisches Gut im Epheserbriefe*, Göttingen University Dissertation, 1952, quoted in J. C. Kirby, *Ephesians: Baptism and Pentecost* (London S.P.C.K., 1968), 5.

[2] J. Moffatt rejected Holtzmann's thesis on the basis that 'the literary criteria are too subjective' as early as 1918 in his *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, 3rd Rev. Ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1918), 157. Perhaps the initial failure of Holtzmann's thesis to be accepted prompted G. Schille to apply form-critical analysis to the letter.

[3] G. Schille, *Liturgisches*, 2-3, quoted in Kirby, *Ephesians*, 6. Schille apparently based his statements concerning the hymnic character of 2:14-18 on Ernst Käsemann, 'Epheserbrief', *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 2 (1958), 519, quoted in Jack T. Sanders, 'Hymnic Elements in Ephesians 1-3', *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 56 (1965), 215, note 10.

[4] Reinhard Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967), 166, quoted in J. T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), 15, n. 1.

speculations claiming Gnostic redeemer-motif backgrounds for the letter introduced by Heinrich Schlier some twenty years earlier.[5] Schlier noted the concept of the Redeemer who destroys the wall between Deity and humanity in the Mandaean literature,[6] discovered parallels in the writings of Ignatius[7] and Eusebius,[8] and concluded that the Ephesian material, even though it antedates these sources by perhaps 150 years, together with the Mandaean and patristic sources must have relied upon a common myth.[9] Sanders astutely noted that the 'historical religious situation which might have provided the possibility for such a common background was not, however, discussed' by Schlier.[10] It was merely postulated in the wake of Reitzenstein's discoveries concerning the existence of a mythological *Anthropos* redeemer.[11]

II. Gnostic Mythological Background

In Eph. 2:14-18 Schlier claimed that Pauline theology had taken this unified Gnostic myth about a divine Redeemer and re-interpreted it through the Christian salvation event.[12] Derwood Smith challenged this unified mythological background for Eph. 2:14-18,[13] exploring the possibility that

there is not simply one unified thought system lying behind Ephesians but

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5 Heinrich Schlier, *Christus und die Kirche im Epheserbrief* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930), quoted in Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 88 as 'the fullest evidence' for Gnostic backgrounds.

6 *Ibid.*, 20ff., in Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 88. *Cf.* also E. S. Drower, *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), 5: 'He crossed over the worlds and came and rent the firmament and revealed himself.'

7 *Cf. The Epistle of Ignatius to the Trallians* 9:4: (speaking of Christ) '. . . rent asunder that means of separation . . . and cast down its partition wall.'

8 *Cf.* Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* I, 13, 20, concerning Christ who 'rent the partition' (φραγμὸν)'.

9 Schlier, *Christus und die Kirche*, 23, quoted in Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 88, n. 3.

10 Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 89.

11 *Ibid.*, 88. *Cf.* Richard Reitzenstein, *Die Hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), 12-13, 419.

12 Schlier, *Christus und die Kirche*, 83-85, quoted in Derwood Smith, 'The Two Made One: Some Observations on Eph. 2:14-18', *Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 1 (April 1973), 48, n. 9.

13 Smith follows in the wake of several whom he recognizes in a bibliographical note. *Cf.* Smith, 'The Two Made One', 47, n. 4, especially N. A. Dahl, 'Das Geheimnis der Kirche nach Eph. 3:1-10', *Zur Auferbauung des Leibes Christi*, edited by Edmund Schlink and Albrecht Peters (Kapel: Johannes Stauda-Verlag, 1965), 63-75.

rather that the author has brought together traditional materials of various origins in order to express his theological concerns.[14]

This kind of exegetical approach is more open to a broader base — to the frank investigation of Jewish cosmological and proselyte terminology, rabbinical tradition, Asian empire motifs, and the possible similarities between the mystery religions and Pauline thought.

III. Hymnic Backgrounds

Even though the unified Gnostic backgrounds of this passage have been seriously questioned, the uncertainties surrounding the hymnic characteristics still serve to keep the issue alive. Schlier himself, under pressure from E. Percy, F. Mussner and others, retreated from his original stance to record at least *some* Jewish background influences, albeit a form of 'Gnosticizing Judaism'.[15] The seed of the problem, however, is embedded beneath several layers of theoretical postulations by scholars mostly from the form-critical school — ideas which have been constructed upon 18th and 19th century probes.[16]

As early as 1742 J. A. Bengel marvelled how the passage 'quasi rhythmo canticum imitatur'.[17] Eric Haupt published his opinion in 1897 that the 2:14-18 pericope was an excursus or a digression,[18] an opinion shared by Martin Dibelius in 1927.[19] Some three years later Schlier pub-

[14] Smith, 34, concludes with Käsemann, 'Ephesians and Acts', *Studies in Luke Acts* edited by L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Nashville: The Abingdon Press, 1966), 288, that Ephesians sits atop a 'mosaic of early Christian traditions'. *Cf.* Smith, 47, n. 4.

[15] *Cf.* Ernst Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser-und Epheserbriefe* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1946), and 'Zu den Problemen des Kolosser-und Epheserbriefes', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 43 (1950-51), 178-94, and Franz Mussner, *Christus, das All und die Kirche* (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1955), quoted in Smith, 'The Two Made One', 47, n. 3.

[16] Not to mention the Fathers who attacked every conceivable tenet of Gnostic heresy, *e.g.* Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V, 14, 3, who asserted very early that if one 'pretends that the Lord possessed another substance of flesh, the sayings respecting reconciliation (here, he quotes from Eph. 1:7; 2:13,15) will not agree with that man', recognizing the fundamental gap between Christian and pagan thinking regarding reconciliation.

[17] J. A Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Tübingen: Schramm, 1742), quoted in Markus Barth, *The Anchor Bible: Ephesians, Chapters 1-3* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1974), 261.

[18] Erich Haupt, *Die Gefangenschaftsbriefe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1897), quoted in Smith, 47, n. 6.

[19] Martin Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon* (*Handbuch zum Neuen Testament*, rev. by Heinrich Greeven, 12; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953), quoted in Smith, 47, n. 6.

lished his unified-Gnostic-mythological-background thesis,[20] the spark that kindled fiery responses in support of it,[21] and against it.[22] In this work, *Christus und die Kirche im Epheserbrief*, Schlier had hitherto only advanced to the point of recognizing the excursive nature of the passage, in line with Haupt and Dibelius. It was Schille's form-critical analyses, following Ernst Käsemann's lead, who claimed to have discovered quoted liturgical material lying behind 2:14-18, that changed Schlier's mind, bringing him into basic agreement with Schille's findings.[23]

Jack Sanders was critical of Schlier's attempt to integrate Jewish and Gnostic background materials, noting a lack of direction in his references to parallels in Jewish literature, his understanding of pre-Christian Jewish mythology, and the rather extensive implications 'involved in accepting the quoted character of Eph. 2:14-16'.[24] Yet Sanders himself has based the bulk of his speculations regarding the hymnic elements in Ephesians 1-3 upon J. M. Robinson's attempts to root the prayer formulas beginning in 1:3 and 1:15 in early Jewish Christian liturgical practices — 'particularly hymns and hymn-like prayers'.[25] He stated that Robinson's evidence 'seems likely to be generally accepted',[26] then declined to even footnote the thrust of the Robinson thesis, which was presuppositional to his own. If H. Schlier has failed 'in tying this hymn to pre-Christian Judaism',[27] it must be acknowledged here that Sanders has also failed to adequately confirm

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20 Heinrich Schlier, *Christus und die Kirche*, quoted in Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 88f.

21 *Cf.* Peter Pokorny, *Der Epheserbrief und die Gnosis* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1965), Gottfried Schille, *Liturgisches Gut im Epheserbrief* (Göttingen University Dissertation, 1952), and Ernst Käsemann, 'Das Interpretationsproblem des Epheserbrief', *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 86 (1961), 1-8, quoted in Smith, 47, n. 2.

22 *Cf.* above, 4, n. 1.

23 *Cf.* above, 2, n. 1. Heinrich Schlier's modified position can be found in his later work, *Der Brief an die Epheser* (Dusseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1957), quoted in Smith, 34. Smith claims that Schlier's later work, which 'brought in a whole new area of background sources' — particularly Jewish sources — gave 'the impression of a compromise and (lacked) the sharpness of focus which was characteristic of his original work in 1930'.

24 Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 90.

25 *Cf.* J. M. Robinson, 'Die Hodajot-formel in Gebet und Hymnus des Frühchristentums', *Apophoreta, Festschrift für E. Haenchen* in *Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 30 (1964), 194-235, quoted in Sanders, 'Hymnic Elements', 214, n. 2.

26 Sanders, 'Hymnic Elements', 214.

27 Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 91.

the supposition that Eph. 2:14-16 is pre-Pauline, quoted, hymnic material by simply asserting such on the basis of form-critical analyses.[28]

Therefore, the entire supposition that pre-Pauline quoted material lies behind this passage remains simply another interesting option. More importantly, however, the liturgical emphases, whether Gnostic or Jewish, can now be more sanely examined alongside the possibility that the author may in fact be drawing upon a much more diverse traditional base. Smith observes:

> Whether or not an actual hymn is being quoted in this section, the author has certainly employed traditional materials in order to develop an interpretation of Isa. 57:19.[29].

The quotation that needs to be raised in this connection is this: Why must the author of Ephesians, in a context in which nearly all are agreed that Gentiles are being addressed,[30] have *exclusively* employed either Gnostic or Judeo-Gnostic hymnic material in order to elaborate an Old Testament quotation? Why could he not also have looked to Jewish proselyte terminology or Asian empire motifs? Does such an exegetical presupposition do justice to the author's attempt to communicate the mystery of reconciliation to a divided church in a divided Asia? In order that the dividing wall of technical speculation might be broken

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[28] *Cf.* Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Chapters 1-3*, 261. After carefully reviewing the criteria for quoted material Barth concludes: 'It is indeed probable, but not certain, that earlier material was used' because if 1:3-14, 20-23; 2:4-7,10 can be considered Pauline 'psalms', then the 'formal idiosyncrasies of 2:14-18, including the simultaneous treatment of diverse topics, do not disprove Pauline origin' of the excursus. In fact, Pauline authorship could only be disproved if the 'unification of Jews and Gentiles' motif were absent or contradicted in other Pauline writings, yet note Gal. 2:11-21; 3:13-29; 1 Cor. 1-3; 10:16-17; Rom. 1:8-3:31; 9-11.

[29] Smith, 48, 8, recognizes the author's allusions to Isa. 57:19 in v.13, the return to Isa. 57:19 combined with elements from Isa. 52:7 in v.17, and the fundamental usage of εἰρήνη in 2:14. *Cf.* Barth, 277, who suggests that Paul's equation of 'far off' with 'Gentiles' stems from the last step in a long Jewish exegetical tradition. *Cf.* also J. J. Meuzelaar, *Der Leib des Messias* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1961), 61-66, especially 75: 'Apparently Paul applies to the Gentiles in the church what was valid among Jews only for proselytes' (quoted in Barth, 276, n. 98). Barth further suggests that the Ephesian author may have been quoting from a liturgy for proselytes that included a citation from Isa. 57.

[30] *Cf.* however Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament: Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1840), 44, who interpreted τὰ ἔθνη in 2:11 as those 'under the dominion of the flesh, subject to the control of carnal appetites and pleasures'.

down and the meaning of this hymn-like excursus revealed, Nils A. Dahl has suggested that

> information from other Pauline epistles, Acts, and other early Christian, Jewish, Greek, or Gnostic documents should not be brought in until the epistolary situation has been clarified as far as possible on the basis of internal evidence. Points of similarity . . . should be noted, but not used in such a way that the results of contextual exegesis are pre-judged.[51]

[51] Nils A. Dahl, 'Paul and the Church at Corinth According to 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21', *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, edited by W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), 317-18. *Cf.* also R. Deichgräber's initial objections, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus*, 166, quoted in Sanders, *Christological Hymns*, 15, n. 1.