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Perceiving God's Voice: Divine Guidance for Everyday Believers

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Abstract

Vagueness exists amongst Christians regarding what it is like to experience divine guidance practically. This problem is aggravated by conflicting perspectives on the will of God, whether or not his will is discoverable, and how Christians are to go about seeking it. This article seeks to reveal what we can reasonably expect to experience when God speaks, by considering perspectives on the will of God as well as its discoverability, and the levels of awareness and certainty of divine communication as evidenced by selected biblical characters. The article shows that the ways in which Christians experience divine direction are as unique and varied as each individual relationship with God is unique and varied. It shows, furthermore, that we should have, as our primary concern, a focus upon fostering a deep and intimate relationship with God, out of which direction and instruction will naturally and invariably flow. Finally, it shows that the primary way in which God communicates with us today is by means of the subtle and unobtrusive guidance and direction of our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

In Old Testament times, God's primary method of communication was by means of prophets (Num 12:6; Deut 18:14–22; 2 Chr 36:15). In this current era, God has spoken to believers by his Son (Heb 1:2). Moreover, as he promised through the prophet Ezekiel, God has undertaken to place his Holy Spirit within believers and to move their hearts to follow his decrees and to keep his laws (Ezek 36:26–27). Jesus pointed towards the fulfilment of this promise in John 16:13, assuring his disciples that the Holy Spirit would guide the people of God into all truth. The apostle Paul confirmed the fulfilment of this promise in his letter to the Philippian church, verifying that it is 'God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose' (Phil 2:13). Today's believers are enormously privileged in that they are able to be led by the Spirit of God (Rom 8:14). We are fellow workers with God (1 Cor 3:9) and are encouraged to 'discern what is the will of God' (Rom 12:2). A problem we face is that the scriptures do not provide us with a formula to help us with this task of discernment.

2. Problem

In a survey that was conducted amongst four churches in Muldersdrift, Gauteng, South Africa, eighty-six per cent of the respondents expressed a high level of certainty that their last experience of divine guidance was of divine origin and not merely a product of their own imagination (Goosen 2013:24). It is significant to note, however, that ninety per cent of the very same respondents felt that it was possible that 'they may be oblivious to the guidance that the Holy Spirit provides' (Goosen 2013:23). Fifty-eight per cent, furthermore, opted in favour of a person having to learn to recognise the voice of God, as opposed to simply and definitely knowing the voice of God when the person hears it (Goosen

2013:26). A summary of these three findings highlights the concern: the ability for the believer to recognise the voice of the Holy Spirit is not automatic—discernment is a learned skill, and we are all at different levels of learning, no doubt making mistakes as we grow.

The situation is further aggravated by the environment in which some of us find ourselves learning to discern. Often, the terminology that Evangelicals use to articulate their Christian experience is unnuanced and unexplained and therefore potentially misleading (Cole 2007:276). It is not uncommon in modern evangelicalism to hear someone unreservedly state that they have 'heard the voice of God' or that the Lord has 'spoken' this or that. When phrases such as these are used, the opportunity for assumption immediately presents itself. Because we are accustomed to using such terminology with individuals who are embodied, visible and audible, our assumptions can be skewed. Moreover, our attempts at learning to perceive the voice of God will be governed by and impacted by these assumptions.

Karkkainen (2008:14) rightly suggests that we err when we begin to base our expectations upon what we assume others to have experienced. Trying to establish precisely what others have experienced is a challenge not only because our experiences are subjective in nature, but also because our testimonies about our experiences are influenced by our biases. As Norman Geisler (1999:785) suggests, our perspectives or worldviews dictate our experience of and interpretation of reality. Understanding a person's perspective or worldview as it pertains to God and his communication with modern believers must therefore provide some insight into just what a person means when they say that God spoke. We move on, then, to a consideration of three major perspectives on this topic, which are commonly held by Christians today.

3. The Will of God and its Discoverability

Louis Berkhof (2000:29–40) explains that while the invisible God is transcendent and incomprehensible, He is also imminent and can be known, albeit imperfectly, through various means. As we embrace the biblical mandate to be co-labourers with God, who are led by the Spirit and seek to know his will, however, we begin to ask which of these ‘means’ are applicable or even helpful for us to use in the decision-making process. In his work entitled, *How then should we choose?* Douglas Huffman (2009) shows the various ways in which Christians either consciously or unconsciously tackle this problem by presenting three major schools of thought on decision-making and the will of God: the traditional or specific will view, the wisdom view and the relationship view.

3.1. Traditional or specific will view

The traditional view is the default perspective that is most commonly held by Christians today (Petty 1999:29). The understanding is that God has a specific will for each individual, that his will can be discovered, and that it is the responsibility of the believer to seek and obey it (Friesen 2004:35). It is held that ‘God’s plan can be discerned by looking carefully into a combination of circumstances, spiritual promptings, inner voices, peace of mind, and the counsel of others’ (Petty 1999:30). Proponents of this perspective emphasise inner promptings (also commonly referred to as impressions, the inner witness and the still small voice) as revelatory and reliable sources for guidance (Petty 1999:31). The modern believer should be capable of hearing the voice of God, both within and outside of the scriptures, through direct supernatural communication (Deere 1996:66).

3.1.1. Arguments in favour of the traditional or specific will view

Those who hold to the traditional view refer to a number of key verses to support their contention that the designer of the universe has a specific will for every person (Huffman 2009:24). It is shown that God is concerned with specifics (Matt 10:29–30). God provided specific instruction to many of the biblical characters, under both the old and new covenants: Abraham and Lot (Gen 12:1–4; 19:12–22); Elijah (1 Kgs 17:2–6); Phillip and Peter (Acts 8:26–29; 10:9–24); Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–4).

It is shown, furthermore, that God causes all of these specifics to work together, so as to ensure that everything conforms with the purpose of his will (Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11). David indicated in Psalm 139:16 that all of his days were ordained before any one of them came to be. Jeremiah was likewise set apart to be a prophet to the nations even before he was formed in the womb (Jer 1:5). It follows that this could be true of all people, for to all those who were carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, Jeremiah writes, 'I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' (Jer 29:11).

3.1.2. Objections to the traditional or specific will view

At least three major objections have been raised against the traditional view. The first objection is that the view cannot be applied practically. When faced with a decision, Christians are given 'no criteria in Scripture for distinguishing the inner impression of the Spirit from the impression of the self or from any other potential "voice"' (Huffman 2009:115). The perspective fails us because we cannot know with any real certainty 'what text of Scripture, what impression in prayer, what specific circumstance, or what word from a fellow believer means anything' (Huffman 2009:97). The traditional perspective therefore

struggles with the risk of subjectivity. If the source of our knowledge is subjective, our conclusions will be subjective and uncertain (Huffman 2009:115). Consequently, ‘the complete clarity promised by the specific will view is not the experience of God’s people’ (Huffman 2009:89). The traditional perspective implies that if a person is incapable of effectively discerning the will of God, the person must either not have attained a sufficient level of holiness, or must simply be spiritually defective (Friesen 2004:39). Perhaps more probable is that there are committed and sincere believers who consistently do all of the things recommended by the traditional perspective only to find that their theology does not match their experience.

The second objection to the traditional view is that it challenges the biblical concepts of wisdom and free will (1 Cor 7:39; 1 Thess 3:1). Those who hold to the traditional view try to dodge the obvious issue of one having to consult God for any and every decision by suggesting that we do not need to consult God for the mundane choices we face every day. This practical necessity causes the traditional view to default to the wisdom view (Huffman 2009:87). We can only differentiate between mundane choices and important choices by exercising wisdom.

The third objection to the traditional perspective is that the concept of ‘finding’ the will of God is actually a pagan notion (Waltke 1995:11). The argument is that when we seek to find God’s will, we are attempting to discover hidden knowledge, to penetrate the divine mind, by supernatural activity. Finding the will of God in this sense is ‘really a form of divination’. When we are motivated to pray harder, meditate more, follow impressions and look for signs in an attempt to divine God’s will, we are in error. These activities bear an unsettling resemblance to the ways in which pagans seek divine guidance.

3.2. Wisdom view

Garry Friesen (Huffman 2009:102) summarises the wisdom perspective according to the following four principles:

1. Where God commands, we must obey.
2. Where there is no command, God gives us freedom (and responsibility) to choose.
3. Where there is no command, God gives us wisdom to choose.
4. When we have chosen what is moral and wise, we must trust the sovereign God to work all the details together for good.

These principles suggest that for those who embrace the way of wisdom, all that is required for guidance is comprehensively revealed in Scripture (Friesen 2004:120). Christians facing morally neutral decisions are free and responsible to choose between two or more equally good options. The believer should not be burdened by a preoccupation to discern the will of God in every decision, but should rather strive to develop a moral skill to understand and apply the commandments of God to situations and people (Petty 1999:144). Proponents of the wisdom view do not discount outright the authenticity and value of subjective impressions. What they suggest is that impressions are not revelatory or authoritative (Friesen 2004:92). They consider impressions to be providential input and not revelation (Petty 1999:173). Consequently, impressions can be more fully enjoyed because they do not carry with them the risk of misinterpretation.

3.2.1. Arguments in favour of the wisdom view

From passages such as John 12:49–50; 15:15; 16:12–15, 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:3, proponents of the wisdom perspective argue that the Bible is completely sufficient for the faith and life of every believer (Petty 1999:88). They argue that we should not expect

additional truths from the mind of God to be provided to us because the full riches of complete understanding have been provided through Christ, ‘in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Col 2:2–3).

It is further argued that there is a strong biblical emphasis upon the supremacy of wisdom (Prov 4:7). From Colossians 1:9–10 and Philippians 1:9–11, we see that a true understanding of the will of God comes through the acquisition and application of wisdom (Petty 1999:136). According to Paul, our ability to test and approve the good, pleasing and perfect will of God improves as we are transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:1–2). We can come to understand the will of God by living a careful and examined lifestyle, making every effort to be wise in every decision (Eph 5:15–17).

Those who hold to the wisdom view also argue against the belief that God communicates his will to believers, because of the understanding that God does not have a specific individual will for each and every detail of a person’s life (Huffman 2009:26). It is suggested that much of the confusion regarding how we are to go about seeking God’s divine guidance can be eliminated if we settle once and for all just how many wills God has. To the commonly accepted categories of ‘decretive will’ and ‘preceptive will’, the traditional view has added a third category of ‘individual will’, which, it is argued, lacks valid biblical and theological support (Huffman 2009:106). Scripture often uses the phrase ‘will of God’ to refer to God’s sovereign decretive plan. Examples of this include Ephesians 1:5, 11; James 4:15; Romans 15:32; 1 Peter 3:17. Those who hold to the wisdom perspective argue from Deuteronomy 29:29 that this sovereign decretive plan of God is secret. We are to resign ourselves to the fact that we cannot know the secret things of God, and should focus instead on what God has revealed—the

words of his law. By doing so, we shift the focus away from the decretive will of God to the preceptive will of God. We concern ourselves not with unfathomable things, but with concrete precepts that have been set down in Scripture (Petty 1999:74).

3.2.2. Objections to the wisdom view

The wisdom view is criticised for placing too much of an emphasis upon human reasoning (Blackabys 2002:5). Because of our degenerate condition, and because we are so significantly influenced by our environments, it is argued that we are incapable of enjoying pure biblical objectivity (Deere 1993:46). The scriptures teach that even the best human thinking can never measure up to the wisdom of God (Isa 55:8–9). As such, we are never to depend upon our own understanding (Prov 3:5) and should never be making decisions apart from God's involvement (Jer 17:9; Rom 3:9–18).

It is further suggested that the wisdom view is pneumatologically inadequate (Huffman 2009:164). It does not thoroughly address the fact that Christ resides within the regenerate believer by his Spirit (Gal 2:20). By excluding the possibility that God speaks directly to our spirits by his Spirit, we are eliminating a major avenue in our communion with him. By dismissing the feelings and impressions we experience, we turn something dynamic and growing into a sterile formula (ed. Huffman 2009:166).

Finally, the wisdom approach is accused of quenching the Spirit by turning the decision-making process into an objective intellectual exercise, leaving no room for God (Huffman 2009:170). The perspective fails by not encouraging 'a radical openness to the Spirit, an eagerness to know Christ intimately and to respond with joy to the inner witness of the Spirit'. What we need, Smith (Huffman 2009:173) explains, is an 'approach to discernment and decision-making that (1)

takes account of the immediate presence of Christ in our lives, and (2) enables us to respond to God, to our world, and to our circumstances with both heart and mind’.

3.3. Relationship view

The relationship view acknowledges much of what the other perspectives propose, with a few distinctions (Huffman 2009:174). It is argued that we are not, as the wisdom view suggests, to function independently or autonomously. The scriptures call each individual to an intentional response to the will of God. Decision-making must occur ‘within the created order, that is, within the nature and purpose of God for humanity within creation and thus within God’s redemptive intention’ (Huffman 2009:176). We are encouraged to pray that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and we are enabled, by grace, to make decisions that are consistent with the reign of Christ.

God’s participation does not negate the legitimate exercise of human volition—we remain free agents, created in the image of God, with the capacity to choose. God will not choose for us, for this would violate the very nature of his creation (Huffman 2009:177). Given our natural limitations and a propensity towards sin, we are encouraged to make use of three resources that empower us to choose well: the scriptures, the community of faith, and the Holy Spirit. The initiative that the Holy Spirit takes to be involved, to guide and empower and enable us to choose well, suggests that the issue is not whether there is a specific will for each person and whether this will can be known. ‘Rather, the fundamental issue is whether or not there is immediacy with God—a relationship of intimacy and communion—that makes possible this kind of knowledge of the particular will of God.’ Smith (ed. Huffman 2009:178) labours to point out two factors that should shape any

discourse on divine guidance and decision-making: particularity and ambiguity. Firstly, 'the wonder of God's redemptive work and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is that, now, God speaks into the specifics of our lives, into our particularity'. As such, each Christian must pay particular attention to their conscience (Rom 14) and discern how general biblical principles hold sway in their particular situation. Secondly, the issue of ambiguity: we 'recognise, perhaps even with a mixture of frustration and anxiety, that we "see through a glass, darkly"' (1 Cor 13:12). Our decisions 'are inescapably compromised by the presence of sin in our hearts and minds'. This reinforces the need, once again, for us to understand that the disclosure of the will and purposes of God are centred in Christ (Huffman 2009:183). We must understand, furthermore, that we 'live now in the era of the Spirit, wherein Christ is known and experienced by the presence of the Spirit' (Huffman 2009:185).

3.3.1. Support for and implications of the supremacy of relationship

An acknowledgment of the primacy of a relationship with Jesus Christ is not unique to the relationship view. Ambassadors from each of the perspectives on the will of God identify relationship as a key factor for effective discernment. A number of inferences can be drawn from their observations.

Firstly, relationship precludes the concept of discernment by means of a formula. The most important key to ensuring that we are led of God is to place our confidence in Christ (Deere 1993:182). From the account of the seven sons of Sceva, we see that a reliance upon formulas or traditions will never ensure success (Acts 3:12–13). The most significant factor in the discernment equation is Jesus (John 12:1–3). There is a risk of finding safety in theology, clinging to dogma and facts about Christ rather than enjoying a vibrant relationship with him

(Blackabys 2002:11). This is precisely the sort of preoccupation that Christ condemned in the Pharisees (John 5:39–40).

Secondly, it is within the context of relationship that God reveals his will. Only our communion with God provides the appropriate framework for communications between us and him. God seeks to fully engage ‘the faculties of free, intelligent beings who are socially interacting with agape love in the work of God as his collaborators and friends’ (Willard 1999:96). By fostering a relationship with Jesus, we learn how to be attentive to him, ‘as an immediate experience and as a dynamic of our Christian experience’ (Huffman 2009:198).

Thirdly, our ability to discern is progressive and proportionate to the depth of our relationship (Blackabys 2002:234). Abraham, whom the Bible describes as a ‘friend of God’ (Jas 2:21–23), took a lifetime to develop his faith. It took more than forty years before he ‘knew God well enough to be entrusted with His most difficult assignment (Gen 22:1–3)’. The gospels likewise provide an account of how the disciples came to know Jesus. ‘The more time they spent with Him, the more they knew His nature. They learned He was trustworthy and gentle (John 10:3–4, 27). They came to understand that He would lay His life down for them’ (Blackabys 2002:236). Throughout their work, the Blackabys (2002) labour to show that when we relate to God, we are relating to a Person; it follows that the more time we spend with him, the better we will come to know him.

Fourthly, God’s communication with each of us is unique to our particularities of personality and circumstance. How God communicated with Saul (Acts 9:3–6) was necessarily different, for example, from how He communicated with Ananias (Acts 9:10–12) or even Cornelius (Acts 10:3–6). The belief that God communicates differently and personally with each and every individual is consistent

throughout the work of Dallas Willard. He explains that people need to understand that 'recognising God's voice is something they must learn to do through their own personal experience and experimentation' (Willard 1999:108).

Fifthly, relationship is reciprocal. The quality and extent of our knowledge of other people (and of God) depends more on them than on us (Packer 2004:37). Our part is to give our attention and interest, making a concerted effort to make ourselves available to seek. We should approach prayer and meditation being ever mindful of the fact that we are meeting with a real Person; it follows that we need to do more than just talk—we are to listen as well (Deere 1993:211). Even then, however, we should remember that experiencing God is a matter of grace. The initiative must lie with God, 'since God is so completely above us and we have so completely forfeited all claim on His favour by our sins' (Packer 2004:44).

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we see that enjoying a relationship with God is the purpose of our existence (Packer 2004:35). From John 17:3 and 1 John 1:1–4, we see that God created us for fellowship with him (Blackabys 2002:15). The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (Ferguson 2001:19). According to Jesus, the definition of eternal life is the knowledge of God (John 17:3). While we are not to boast of wisdom, strength and riches, we are encouraged to boast about this: that we know God (Jer 9:23–24).

All that we have considered thus far in terms of preparation for and the actual task of discernment pales into insignificance when we consider this principal purpose of man. With their priorities in place, the apostles were able to face not just decision-making, but endured beatings, stoning, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights and hunger for the cause

of Christ (2 Cor 6:5–6; 11:25). Surely, the obstacles in the decision-making process must fade to insignificance when we consider our options in light of the overriding joy of knowing God. We cannot agree more with Douglas Huffman's (2009:247) beautiful conclusion when he writes,

Believers are to become more like Christ, taking on His character (cf. Romans 8:29; 2 Peter 1:3-4). In getting to know God in worship, study of His Word, and obedience to His commands, Christians develop the characteristics of Christ, Who always did God's will. As believers become more like Christ, they will find themselves more often in God's will (in any sense of the term). When they come to difficult decisions, they ask God for wisdom. Then, in faith, they make choices for God's glory, trusting God has provided all the appropriate information to lead to the right decisions.

While each of these perspectives is helpful, it is probably not realistic to assume that the average Christian would hold to any one specific perspective all the time. Huffman (2009:240) rightly suggests that the three categorisations are too tidy, and that there are many who would adopt elements from a variety of perspectives. Moreover, while these perspectives certainly provide a helpful framework for decision-making, none of them truly help us to address the original problem, namely, what it is like to experience divine guidance practically. Perhaps the only way to combat wrongful assumptions about what it is like to experience the voice of God is by considering what the scriptures say about the ways in which some of the biblical characters experienced his voice.

4. Awareness and Certainty of Divine Communication

A consideration of how different biblical characters experienced the voice of God suggests that the results of the survey that was conducted in Muldersdrift were not contradictory (Goosen 2013:25). Different biblical characters showed evidence not only of varying levels of awareness of the fact that God had spoken, but also varying levels of certainty about what God had spoken. These differences might be logically organised into two broad categories: while there are ways in which God 'can and may' communicate with us, there are also ways in which God 'does and will' communicate with us.

4.1. God can and may (speak unmistakably)

As we look through scripture, we see that in some instances, God chose to speak in an extraordinary fashion.² At other times, the Scriptures simply tell us that God spoke.³ Regardless of the vehicles of communication employed, however, 'the Bible's overall testimony is that when God spoke, people knew it was God and they knew what He was saying' (Blackabys 2002:257).

With a few possible exceptions (1 Sam 3:1–10; Num 22:21–39), we do not read that God spoke and that the biblical characters were unaware that God had spoken. Neither do we read that God spoke and that the biblical characters spent time trying to discern if what they had heard was indeed the voice of God. As a general rule, we simply read that

² Genesis 15:1; 16:7; 37:5–11; Exodus 3:1–4; 4:1–8; 19:16–19; 20:18; 33:11; Numbers 22:21–35; 27:21; Deuteronomy 4:33, 36; 18:18–22; Judges 6:36–40; 1 Samuel 3:1–10; Job 40:6; Isaiah 20; Daniel 5; Matthew 2:12–13; Luke 3:22; 9:35; 24:13–35, 36–37; Acts 8:26; 9:3–6; 9:10–12; 10:9–16; 21:10–11; 22:17–21; 27:23–25.

³ Genesis 6; 12:1; Joshua 4:1; Isaiah 38:4; Jonah 1:1–3; Acts 13:2.

God spoke, that the person heard and acknowledged that God had spoken, and that the person then responded in some way or another.

An especially high level of certainty of the fact that God had spoken can be safely assumed when what was required of the hearer was unusual or extraordinary. As Jack Deere (2001:109) writes, when God instructed people to do something out of the ordinary, ‘He did it with such clarity that they did not wonder whether the command came from Him or from their emotions.’

Abraham, for instance, would have obeyed God’s instruction to sacrifice his only son had God not intervened at the raising of the knife (Gen 22). Ezekiel built a model of Jerusalem and spent more than a year acting out symbolic plays as a sign of doom from the Lord (Ezek 4). Such enactments are not exclusive to Ezekiel, for Isaiah walked naked and barefoot through Jerusalem for three years (Isa 20:2-3). The apostle Paul did not waste any time second-guessing whom he had encountered on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–6). For the rest of his life, as he was compelled by the Spirit, he pressed on to share the gospel of Christ, despite the risk of imprisonment, hardships and perhaps even death (Acts 20:22–24). These are not the actions of men who were uncertain about what God had instructed them to do. These were men with conviction. Their attention to detail, coupled with their willingness to suffer pain and humiliation, testifies to the fact that they were absolutely certain that God had spoken.

The scriptures suggest, however, that a person can experience an especially high level of certainty of the fact that the Holy Spirit is communicating something even when he speaks subjectively or inwardly. The prophet Jeremiah, for instance, suggested that the prompting of the Holy Spirit was so intense and incessant that he grew weary from it. Eventually, he reached the point where he was incapable

of suppressing the urge to speak the words that God had placed within his heart. He explained that the urgency he was experiencing was like a 'fire shut up in his bones' (Jer 20:9). Gaebelien (1986:503) says of the prophet that he suffered a 'divine compulsion' when he wrote that 'he found out the impossibility of denying his call. He learned that it was irreversible and that God's word was irrepressible'.

We should, therefore, remain mindful of the fact that God is omnipotent and is not limited to the use of any one given method of communication. Since God is sovereign, he reserves the freedom and the ability to communicate with any individual in whatever way he may choose (Ps 115:3; 135:6; Dan 4:35; Rom 9:19–21). It is, therefore, not unreasonable for us to believe that God can and may communicate with any one of us today in a clear, unmistakable and perhaps even extraordinary fashion.

4.2. God does and will (speak subtly)

The Bible consists of sixty-six different books, composed by many different authors, over a period of around one thousand six hundred years, with a break of approximately four hundred years between the Old and New Testaments, where God was silent. Taking this into consideration, it becomes quite apparent that while God can and may speak dramatically, he has done so rather infrequently, to very few people, over a vast period of time. The scriptures themselves testify to the fact that in the days of Samuel 'the word of the Lord was rare' (1 Sam 3:1).

While dramatic forms of communication were infrequent, it does not mean that God did not continue to communicate with his people in other ways. It has always been God's intention to communicate inwardly, through the subtle and unobtrusive guidance and direction of people's hearts and minds, as alluded to in Ezekiel 36:27, which reads,

‘And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.’ We already see evidence of this sort of guidance in the Old Testament, in the account of Nehemiah, who experienced something like what might be referred to as an ‘inward prompting’. We read that he was motivated simply by that which ‘God had put within his heart to do’ (Neh 2:12; 7:5).

Later, during the apostolic era, a period in history where we can be certain of the fact that God was speaking clearly and unmistakably, there are passages that suggest that God also communicated less obviously or subtly. In these instances, the hearers appeared to show evidence of hearing the Spirit of God with a less than absolute sense of certainty. Following the council at Jerusalem, the apostles sent word to Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, providing official instructions for them on the basis that it ‘seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us’ (Acts 15:28). In Acts 16:6–7, we read of how Paul and his companions were ‘kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia’. Likewise, when they came to the border of Mysia and tried to enter Bithynia, ‘the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to’. During his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul states, ‘And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there’ (Acts 20:22).

Some might object that these verses do not explicitly show that God’s communication in these instances was any different from how he communicated with people throughout the rest of the book of Acts. However, it seems reasonable to assume that a different form of communication is precisely what Luke was implying, given that he commonly made use of far less ambiguous language in his account of how the Holy Spirit communicated with members of the early church. In Acts 8:29, for instance, he simply writes, ‘The Spirit told Philip, “Go

to that chariot and stay near it.” In Acts 10:19, as Peter was pondering the vision he had just seen, Luke tells us that ‘the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs.”’ Likewise, while the church in Antioch were worshipping and fasting, we read that ‘the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”’

It is also significant to note that the gentle voice of God can be overlooked or disregarded. Dallas Willard (1999:90) writes that it may be ‘possible for someone who regularly interacts with the voice of God not even to recognise it as something special’. The scriptures support the idea that the voice of God can either be so inconspicuous in nature, or the hearer so otherwise engaged so as to render the voice of God practically imperceptible to the hearer. A verse that perhaps speaks most pertinently to the possibility of being oblivious to the voice of God is Job 33:14, which reads, ‘For God does speak—now one way, now another—though man may not perceive it.’ Not surprisingly, the results of the empirical study conducted in Muldersdrift showed that ninety per cent of the respondents considered it possible that God may have been guiding them on a regular basis but that they were simply unaware of it (Goosen 2013:23).

4.3. Further arguments in favour of subtle guidance as the preferred method of communication for modern believers

God's intention to communicate inwardly and unobtrusively with his people is also consistent with a number of biblical principles. The first is that God is Spirit, and that he longs for us to commune with him in ‘spirit and in truth’ (John 4:24). Christians are encouraged to walk by the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 25), set their minds on the things of the Spirit (Rom 8:5) and pray at all times in the Spirit (Eph 6:18). We see from 1 Corinthians 2:13–14 that the things of God are ‘Spirit-taught’ and that a

person without the Spirit cannot accept or understand the things of God ‘because they are discerned only through the Spirit’. The ways in which a spiritual God communicates with his people must, therefore, be fundamentally different from how physical people commonly communicate with each other. As Louis Berkhof (2000:66) writes, ‘By ascribing spirituality to God we also affirm that He has none of the properties belonging to matter, and that He cannot be discerned by the bodily senses.’

The second principle is that Christians are called to live lives of faith (Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). Faith, by definition, is not something based upon visible or audible evidence. As Hebrews 11:1 shows us, faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This concept of faith presupposes that Christians are unlikely to live their lives with an abundance of empirical evidence, visible or audible, confirming the truth of that which they believe (2 Cor 5:7). Jesus himself noted that there would be some who would believe and would be counted blessed despite their not having seen or heard anything to validate their faith in the gospel (John 20:29). That we are required to live faith-based lives is reinforced by the fact that God has already revealed himself to us, both generally (Rom 1:20) and specially (2 Tim 3:16).

The third principle is that God has designed the universe so as to ensure that people are able to function as free agents. While God is sovereign, and while his decretive purposes will stand, we are afforded the freedom to make real choices with real consequences (Deut 30:19). As Sproul (2009:44) explains, we willingly submit to the process of sanctification, which ‘involves a radical reprogramming of the inner self’. God does not manipulate or wrestle anybody into a decision or a course of action. Instead, as the author of Philippians writes, ‘It is God

who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil His good purpose' (Phil 2:13). Of this verse, Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1999:364) explain that 'man is, in different senses, entirely active, and entirely passive: *God producing all, and we acting all*. What He produced is our own acts. It is not that God does some, and we the rest. God does all and we do all.' As such, in a very real sense, we are not merely servants on standby for instruction, but collaborators with God (1 Cor 3:9), people who are promised guidance and instruction but still reserve the freedom to choose their own path in life (Ps 32:8; John 16:13).

5. Conclusion

Unlike Old Testament believers, who needed to look to the prophets to hear what God had to say, today's believers are privileged in that they are able to be personally led by the Spirit of God and discern his will. However, the scriptures do not provide us with a formula to help us with this task of discernment. We do not begin the journey of learning to discern with a definition of what it is like to experience the voice of God practically. We make wrongful assumptions, based upon careless terminology others use to describe their experiences. We assume, furthermore, that God speaking to us must be something like our speaking with another person.

Each of the perspectives on the will of God and its discoverability advocated today offers some helpful guidelines on how the Christian can go about the task of discernment. It is advisable, however, to heed some of the objections that have been raised against any one preferred perspective. One might be best served adopting positive elements from each of the perspectives, while being careful to commit to the common principles held by each. They all agree that God's Word is the primary source of guidance, but that God can give specific, even miraculous, direction to individual believers if and whenever he chooses. They all

agree that the Holy Spirit plays a significant role in the guidance of believers, but that God expects us to exercise our free will and make wise, considered and mature decisions. They all agree, furthermore, that there cannot be discernment apart from relationship: having a relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ is of the utmost importance. In seeking to know and become more like Christ, we naturally and invariably do all of the things necessary for us to become effective perceivers of the voice of God.

We often try to establish an expectation of what the voice of God is like from the biased testimonies of the subjective experiences of other believers. It is far more preferable, however, to base our expectations upon the ways in which some of the biblical characters seemed to have experienced the voice of God. In doing so, we see that dramatic forms of communication were very rare – the exception, rather than the norm. We see, furthermore, that it has always been God’s intention to place his Spirit within us and for his Spirit to work quietly and inconspicuously, causing our hearts and minds to align with his character, and ultimately directing us to make free choices that are consistent with his purposes. We see, finally, that even those who had ears finely attuned to the voice of the Spirit, those who penned the very words of God, were not always absolutely certain about what God was saying. We should, therefore, not place our hope in a methodology of discernment, but rather place our trust in God, the One who promises that those who earnestly seek him will find him (Prov 8:17; Jer 29:13).

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Paul's Apocalyptic Interpretation of Reality: A Case Study Analysis of Ephesians 1:15–23

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Abstract

This journal article builds on the work of an earlier essay (Lioy 2014a) to undertake a case study analysis of one representative passage in Paul's writings, through the prism of its apocalyptic backdrop. The major claim is that the apostle's eschatological worldview exercised a controlling influence on his writings, both directly and indirectly. The corresponding goal is to validate the preceding assertion by exploring the apostle's end-time interpretation of reality in Ephesians 1:15–23.

1. Introduction

In an earlier essay (Lioy 2014a), I maintained that new creation theology was a defining characteristic in Paul's letters, and 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:2 was analysed as a representative passage to demonstrate this assertion. One could also examine the apostle's writings through the comparable prism of its apocalyptic backdrop. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Pearsall 2014), the adjective 'apocalyptic' is derived from the Greek noun *apokalypsis*, which is usually translated 'revelation', 'disclosure', or 'unveiling' (cf.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1 Cor 1:7; Gal 1:12; Rev 1:1). Pitre (2013:23–4) identifies three interrelated categories of thought associated with the preceding terms: (1) a 'genre of literature in existence' from around 250 BC to AD 250; (2) a 'social and religious worldview' prevalent during this general period; and (3) a preoccupation with the 'cataclysmic end of the cosmos'.

Concerning the apocalyptic genre, Collins (1992b:283) defines it as 'revelatory literature' that has a 'narrative framework' and in which a 'revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient'. Collins additionally elucidates that 'over several hundred years', the preceding literary category neither 'remained static' nor was 'consistently uniform'. De Boer (2002:22) clarifies that the eschatological horizon 'encompasses' both the 'present age' and the 'one to come'. Aune, Geddert, and Evans (2000:46) advance the discussion by explaining that an apocalyptic interpretation of reality focuses on the Creator's 'imminent intervention into human history'. God does so in a 'decisive manner' to rescue the righteous remnant and 'punish their enemies'. The process includes 'destroying the existing fallen cosmic order' and 'restoring or recreating the cosmos in its original pristine perfection'.

The above outlook reflects the 'eschatological expectation characteristic of early Jewish and early Christian apocalypses' (Aune, Geddert, and Evans 2000:46). Collins (2000:43) points out that even though the 'New Testament only contains one apocalypse, the book of Revelation', an 'apocalyptic worldview' was 'much more widespread' among the New Testament writers. As de Boer (2002:33) observes, they believed that from 'beginning to end', the 'whole of God's saving activity' in the Messiah was 'apocalyptic'. It stands to reason, then, that the multivalent nucleus of Paul's teaching was situated against an end-time scenario, and that taking the latter into account is a useful heuristic tool to clarify

and illumine the metanarrative of his theological discourse (cf. Aune 1993a:30; Branick 1985:664; Bronson 1964:287; Collins 1992a:290; Keck 1984:241).² By way of example, in his letters the apostle directed believers not to pattern their behaviour after the beliefs, morals, and values of this present, depraved era (cf. Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 2:6, 8; 3:18; Gal 1:4; Eph 2:2; 1 Tim 6:17; 2 Tim 4:10).³

In keeping with the preceding observations, the major claim of this journal article is that Paul's eschatological worldview exercised a controlling influence on his writings, both directly and indirectly. This includes, as the analysis of Schreiner (2013:579) demonstrates, the apostle's view of 'salvation, redemption, justification, reconciliation, adoption, triumph over evil powers', and other categories of thought. The corresponding goal is to validate the latter assertion by exploring Paul's apocalyptic interpretation of reality in the following representative passage in his letters: Ephesians 1:15–23.⁴ The choice of

² For a deliberation of the apocalyptic character of Paul's theology, cf. Beale (2011:249–316); Beker (1982:29–53; 1990:19–36, 61–103; 2000:135–81); Gaventa (2007:79–82, 137–47); Guthrie (1981:803–10, 828–40, 856–63, 879–81, 890–1); Ladd (1997:402–3, 595–614); Macky (1998:1–14); Marshall (2004:421–60); Martyn (1997:85–156); Ridderbos (1997:29–32); Schreiner (2001:31–4, 55–60, 78–85; 2013:543–80); Vos (2000:299–304); Wenham (1995:321–6); Wright (1992:2–7).

³ Admittedly, the prevailing view within academia is that Paul wrote seven of the thirteen letters attributed to him (i.e. Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon). Supposedly, the remaining six (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, and Titus) were authored by an unnamed admirer and imitator of the apostle. On the one hand, in the biblical world, pseudonymous writing was common; yet, on the other hand, the unique literary features found in the disputed Pauline letters may be due to their distinctive purposes and to the timing and conditions of their writing. Furthermore, numerous early Christian writers unanimously ascribed these epistles to Paul. For these reasons, it is sensible to affirm the traditional view that the apostle wrote all thirteen letters attributed to him (cf. Carson, Moo, and Morris 1992:231–5; deSilva 2004:685–9; Gundry 2012:384–7).

⁴ Due to the limitations of space in this essay, only one of numerous passages within the Pauline corpus is the focus of the case study analysis appearing in section 4;

this text is motivated, in part, by the recognition that, as stated by Barth (1986:170), it focuses attention on the 'political and cosmic relevance' of the Son's 'resurrection', both for the present age and for the coming one. Specifically, his triumph over the grave establishes a 'new and good order' over the 'whole universe'.

The above perspective has the advantage of accommodating—rather than clashing with or marginalising—an array of corresponding theological views found within the Pauline corpus.⁵ For example, in keeping with my own confessional Lutheran tradition, Paul's apocalyptic interpretation of reality mirrors the important distinction Lutherans make between law (which was especially central during the era of the old covenant) and gospel (which is the premier expression of God's grace in the era of the new covenant; cf. John 1:14–17; Bayer 2003:58–66; 2007:71–74; Forde 1997:23–48; Mueller 1934:44–7). Indeed, Bayer (2007:30) clarifies that 'for Luther an apocalyptic understanding of history, time, and existence is central'.

A short synopsis of two Pauline passages helps to illustrate the foregoing introductory remarks. To recap the analysis put forward in Lioy (2014a:68–79), Paul's apocalyptic interpretation of reality is

nonetheless, for the sake of argument, the remainder of the discourse in section 1.0 illustrates the validity of the journal article's major claim by providing a short synopsis of the apostle's eschatological view found in two other representative passages.

⁵ Beker (1990:19) affirms that 'Jewish apocalyptic motifs dominate Paul's thought'. Furthermore, Beker (2000:135) maintains that the 'coherent center of Paul's gospel is constituted by the apocalyptic interpretation of the Christ-event', namely, the Messiah's 'death and resurrection' (p. 148); nonetheless, Beker's latter claim seems too sweeping, for as Branick (1985:675) surmises, 'what Paul's apocalyptic means ... remains an open field of theological reflection'. More generally, there currently is no scholarly agreement regarding a possible overarching theme or theological nucleus to Paul's writings. For a candid assessment of the prominent, representative views, cf. Thielman 2005:219–33.

brought into sharp relief in 2 Corinthians 5:17–19. Specifically, the believers’ spiritual union with the Saviour results in their becoming a ‘new creation’ (v. 17).⁶ The implication is that when repentant sinners trust in the Son, they are regenerated. God brings about this inner recreating of the believers’ fallen nature. Indeed, he is the sole author of this second creation, just as he was of the first (v. 18). Furthermore, with the advent of the Messiah, a new era has begun in which the conversion of individual believers is part of God’s larger plan to bring about the renewal of the entire universe, concluding with the new heavens and new earth (cf. Isa 65:17; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1). Paul responded to this profound display of God’s mercy by becoming a minister of reconciliation. This consisted of announcing to the world that the Son’s redemptive work made it possible for the lost to be forgiven of their trespasses and restored in their relationship with the Father (2 Cor 5:19).

The analysis appearing in Lioy (2011:128–42) dealing with Romans 5:12–21 also indicates how heavily it was influenced by Paul’s salvation-historical metanarrative. In particular, he declared that in the primordial garden, Adam introduced sin and death into the world by transgressing God’s command. All human beings, as descendants of Adam, are under the dominion of sin and death. In order for God’s redemptive plan and salvific promises to be fulfilled, a new humanity is necessary, starting with a new (or second) Adam. He is none other than the Lord Jesus, the suffering Servant of Isaiah 52:13–53:12. According to Paul, whereas Adam introduced the old era of death, the Messiah introduced the new era of resurrection and eternal life (cf. 1 Cor 15:21–22). At the Saviour’s Second Advent, the present age with its evil and futility will end and a new age of life and joy will blossom (cf. Rom

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from scripture are taken from the 2011 NIV.

8:18–25; Gal 1:14). Even now, the new epoch has appeared, for the Son's resurrection has made the believers' resurrection a reality (cf. Rom 1:4). Indeed, Jesus' resurrection signals that the end-time resurrection promised in Ezekiel 37 has arrived.

An examination of the above-mentioned passages indicates that, as Schreiner (2013:543) infers, an 'already but not yet' 'tension characterizes Paul's thought', that is, one involving an inaugurated or partially realised eschatology. After all, believers right now are simultaneously saints and sinners (in Latin, *simul justus et peccator*). Moreover, they still die and await a future resurrection (cf. Bayer 2007:202–3; Marshall 2004:459–60; McGrath 1993:195). While Jesus' followers have not yet been physically resurrected as a result of trusting in him, Romans 8 reveals that they wait in eager anticipation for the arrival of that future day when their redemption is fully completed (cf. Lioy 2011:142–51). In the interim, with the Son exalted to the right hand of the Father, believers have the abiding presence and power of the life-giving Spirit. In turn, he guarantees that the physical resurrection of believers will occur in the future (cf. Rom 8:21–25; 2 Cor 1:21–22; Eph 1:13–14). By virtue of belonging to the second Adam, believers can rest assured that they will triumph over death on the last day. Then death, as the last enemy, will be destroyed (cf. 1 Cor 15:26; Lioy 2011:152–68).

2. Paul's Apocalyptic View of Reality against the Backdrop of Diverse Cultural Contexts

Before dealing with the diverse cultural contexts prevalent in Paul's day, it is important to articulate the scope and substance of his apocalyptic view of reality. As illustrated in the previous section and dealt with at length in the following section, this end-time perspective formed the foundation and superstructure for the apostle's writings. The

consummation of the ages also provided the starting point, trajectory, and end point for his thinking. Longnecker (2002:89), in his overview of current ‘scholarly interest’ in ‘Paul’s epistolary discourse’, calls attention to the ‘narrative features’ of the apostle’s ‘theology’, along with his ‘symbolic universe’ (p. 93), ‘thought world’, ‘worldview’, and the like. These sorts of referents denote the presuppositions that formed the basis of Paul’s apocalyptic ‘beliefs and convictions’ about reality. In turn, the apostle articulated his theological views by utilising various literary genres found within his writings.⁷

In this essay, I operate under the supposition that five key premises arise from Paul’s eschatological mindset, and form the building blocks of his narrative discourse, as follows:

1. Since the dawn of time, the forces of darkness (i.e. Satan, sin, and death) have threatened to undermine the cosmic order, including humankind.
2. The Father has triumphed over these malevolent entities through his Son’s redemptive work on the cross.
3. Believers, through their baptismal union with the divine-human Son, are co-participants in his victory won at Calvary.

⁷ Paul communicated his understanding of the drama of salvation-history using a variety of conventional literary forms, including the following: (1) blessings and doxologies (e.g. liturgical prayers); (2) creeds (i.e. confessions of faith or formal statements of belief); (3) hymns and poetry (i.e. songs of praise); (4) vice-and-virtue lists (which were not meant to be systematic or exhaustive); (5) household codes (i.e. lists of duties within the context of household relationships; e.g. between husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves); and (6) chiasm (i.e. reverse parallelism for rhetorical effect theological emphasis). For an overview of these multifarious narrative techniques, cf. Brown (1997:409–21); Gray (2012); Klauck 2006:299–354; Matthews (1992:290–3); O’Brien (1993:550–3); Stowers (1986); Weima (2000:640–4).

4. Because the Son reigns supreme over every aspect of the believers' life, all their thoughts, feelings, and actions must be submitted to his rule.
5. Believers are a foretaste, down payment, and guarantee of the Father fulfilling his promise to reclaim and restore the entire created realm, all of which will be finalised at the second advent of his Son.

In keeping with observations made in the first section of this essay, along with those appearing in Lioy (2014a:59), the apocalyptic metanarrative found within Paul's letters did not arise in isolation; rather, it shows strong affinities with the eschatological literature written during the period of Second Temple Judaism.⁸ The unmistakable consequence is that the apostle's thinking and reasoning were firmly rooted within mainstream Jewish thought. Specifically, in the Old Testament, the Lord declared through his prophets that he would enact a new covenant in which his people would be given the desire and ability to keep his law (cf. Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 11:19–20; 36:26–27). The prophets also pointed to the day when God would bring to pass the universal blessing promised to Abraham (cf. Pss 22:27; 47:1–9; 72:17; 86:9; 96:1–13). The covenantal mercies pledged to David would also include Gentiles (cf. Isa 55:3–5; cf. Lioy 2011:233–7).

To summarise the discourse found in Lioy (2014a:59–68), in the first century AD the Jews still awaited the fulfilment of God's saving promises, the coming of his kingdom, and the worldwide blessing that was pledged to Abraham. Some religious factions in Judah, such as the

⁸ For a synopsis of the background information from relevant Old Testament passages and extra-canonical Jewish writings, cf. Lioy 2014:59–68. Also, for a listing of representative scholarly sources having pertinent background information, cf. the entries contained in fn. 8 (pp. 59–60).

Pharisees and the Qumran community, devoted themselves tirelessly to keeping the Mosaic Law, presumably to usher in the fulfilment of what God promised long ago to Israel. The burning hope was for a day when the Romans (or whoever the oppressor might be at the time) would be ousted, giving God's chosen people complete control of the Promised Land, Jerusalem, and its temple.

In stepping back from the preceding observations, it is clarifying to recognise that the Spirit enabled Paul to move beyond the distorted convictions of the religious elite of his day and view the created order through a set of Christocentric and Christotelic lenses. Regarding the latter, Wright (2013:46) opines that that while Paul 'remained a deeply Jewish theologian', he 'rethought and reworked every aspect of his native Jewish theology' as a result of his encounter with the risen Saviour. Accordingly, in the apostle's evangelistic outreach to Jews and Gentiles, he taught that the new creation had dawned and a new Israel of God had been formed (cf. Gal 6:15–16).⁹ In this new era of redemptive history, repentant, believing Gentiles are incorporated into the people of God and made fellow citizens with believing Jews in his kingdom (cf. Eph 2:13; 3:6; Lioy 2010:97–100). Such a unity has occurred because God's saving promises to Abraham are even now becoming a reality.

⁹ Galatians 6:16 contains a closing benediction, in which the referent of the Greek phrase *Israél tou theou* ('Israel of God') remains debated. One option is to take the preceding *kaí* as a simple connective meaning 'and', so that the corresponding phrase specifically refers to Jewish believers (in contrast to Gentile Christians). A second option interprets *kaí* as functioning epexegetically (i.e. in an explanatory way) and carrying the meaning 'even' or 'that is'. In this case, *Israél tou theou* denotes the newly constituted people of God, which includes both regenerate Jews and Gentiles. Given Paul's remarks in 4:26–28 and 6:15, the second option has stronger contextual support (cf. Pss 125:5; 128:6; Rom 2:29; Phil 3:3; Bruce 1982:274–5; Edwards 2005; Guthrie 1984:152; Hendricksen 1968:246–7; McKnight 1995:302–4; Silva 1996:184; Rapa 2008:638; Ridderbos 1984:227).

Paul's apocalyptic outlook not only engaged the diverse metanarratives within Second Temple Judaism, but also the polymorphic views of reality that prevailed throughout Greco-Roman culture. The importance of recognising this cosmology—especially the eschatological or teleological beliefs of Rome—is thrown into sharp relief by the recognition Kim (2008:xii) made that there is a deficit of 'recent commentaries on the Pauline epistles' which seriously consider the 'imperial cult and ideology' of Rome. Aspects of this pagan worldview were characterised by emperor worship and a veneration of a pantheon of gods and goddesses (especially at public festivals and civic rituals). Also, the dogma promulgated by the Roman imperial court taught that it was the focal point of unending peace and prosperity. Moreover, it was alleged that the emperor was divine and reigned absolutely over an enduring dynasty.

The good news Paul heralded sharply contrasted with the above propaganda and its variegated political and religious narratives. According to Crossan and Reed (2004:x), the nature of the 'clash' remained 'nonviolent'. Against the backdrop of imperial Rome's narrative world, the apostle declared that there is one Creator and Lord of the cosmos, namely, the God of Israel. Paul also taught that forgiveness, peace, and eternal blessing came through union with Israel's promised, incarnate Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Furthermore, the apostle maintained that ultimate reality was centred in the crucified and risen Lord. Indeed, Paul believed that the Redeemer would one day return to vindicate the righteous and judge the wicked (cf. Lioy 2003:150–1; 2010:7–11, 89–94; 2011:227).

On the one hand, White (2009:305) maintains that within the Pauline corpus there is a 'lack of explicit statements' concerning Rome that could be interpreted as being either 'subversive' or 'anti-imperial'; on the other hand, Wright (2009:79) concludes from his examination of the

Pauline corpus that within it there are ‘more than just echoes’ of the ‘rhetoric of imperial Rome’. Wright (2013:1306) is even more incisive when he deduces from his analysis that Paul sought to outmanoeuvre, discredit, and eclipse Rome’s ‘grandiose claims’. Burk (2008:321), though, cautions that whatever ‘challenge’ Paul’s letters offered to Rome’s ‘pagan pretensions’, it did not arise explicitly from the apostle making ‘some conscious intention to mimic the language of imperial propaganda’; instead, it was more of a conclusion drawn implicitly from what he wrote.

Admittedly, there is no scholarly consensus on whether the nature of the preceding confrontation was either predominately implicit or explicit. That unresolved debate notwithstanding, the following chart identifies the pronounced disparities existing between Roman imperial ideologies in the first century AD and the counter-cultural message Paul proclaimed (revised and augmented from Longenecker and Still 2014:336–8):¹⁰

¹⁰ Roman imperial ideologies were neither monochromatic in their beliefs, nor monolithic in their discourse, nor uniform in their practices. For differing approaches concerning the imperialistic and polytheistic ideations of ancient Rome, especially in relation to the monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity, cf. Ando (2000:19–48; 2009:1–18); Aune (1993b:786–96; 2000:917–26); Brown (1997:83–93); Crossan and Reed (2004); Elliott (2004; 2008:25–57); Georgi (2009); Horsley (2004); Kim (2008); Oakes (2005); Price (2004); Wright (2009:59–79; 2013:279–347).

Roman Imperial Ideologies	Paul's Counter-Cultural Message
<p>Religious syncretism (or the merging of differing religious beliefs into one system) holds sway. All religious pathways lead to an idyllic afterlife and no single group has the right to an exclusive claim on truth.</p>	<p>There is only one God, who is the Creator; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, who is the Architect of the universe and the Author of life. Moreover, only through faith in the Son does anyone have access to the Father in heaven (cf. Rom 5:1–2; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:4–6).</p>
<p>The emperor, Augustus (whose name means 'the exalted one'), is 'son of the deified' (in Latin, <i>divi filius</i>) and 'son of god' (in Latin, <i>dei filius</i>; i.e. the adopted son of Caesar, who himself is a god).</p>	<p>Jesus, the messianic 'seed of David', is the true 'Son of God' (cf. Rom 1:3–4; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 2:20; Eph 4:13).</p>
<p>The emperor is the 'Saviour' and supreme ruler of the world.</p>	<p>Jesus is the one and only Saviour of the world and the exalted Lord of the cosmos (cf. Phil 2:9–11; 3:20; Col 2:9–10).</p>
<p>The emperor is to be worshipped.</p>	<p>Only the God of Israel is to be worshipped. All other objects of veneration constitute idolatry (cf. 1 Cor 8:4–6; Gal 4:8–11; 1 Thess 1:9–10).</p>

<p>The pantheon of gods and goddesses favour Rome and bring the world under Rome's control.</p>	<p>The Father is bringing the entire created order and the whole of history under the control of His Son (cf. 1 Cor 15:23–28; Eph 1:20–23; Phil 3:20–21; Col 1:15–20).</p>
<p>The Roman Empire is sovereign, a reality decreed by the chief deity, Jupiter, and actualised for endless ages to come by the three female personifications of destiny, the Fates.</p>	<p>Only the God of Israel is sovereign and eternal. All other claimants to sovereignty will be eliminated, and all the nations will become obedient to the Son's unending reign (cf. Rom 1:5; 15:12; 16:26). Accordingly, people are summoned to repent and become citizens of God's kingdom (cf. Col 1:13; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5).</p>
<p>The birth of a miraculous child named Augustus inaugurates a new era. It is a golden age in which Rome transforms society into a utopia characterised by universal justice and peace.</p>	<p>The entire universe languishes under the curse of physical decay and moral chaos. Only Jesus' life, death, and resurrection inaugurate a new era of righteousness and reconciliation between sinful humans and the justifying God (cf. Rom 5:9–11; 8:18–23; 2 Cor 5:17–21).</p>

<p>The Roman Empire is the guarantor of tranquillity, affluence, and security throughout the world.</p>	<p>The Messiah's atoning sacrifice at Calvary is the only basis for true harmony and everlasting blessing for redeemed humanity (cf. Rom 15:33; 16:20; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 5:23; 2 Thess 3:16).</p>
<p>The new era involves the unification of the nations under the emperor's rule.</p>	<p>The Son brings together the nations within his spiritual body, the church (cf. 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Eph 2:14–18; Col 3:11).</p>
<p>Crucifixion is one means the Roman government uses to eliminate any miscreants who threaten the imperial vision for a perfect society.</p>	<p>The Father raised his crucified Son from the dead, and in doing so overturned the unjust verdict rendered by the potentates of the world (1 Cor 2:6–9).</p>
<p>Rome's cultural heroes are renowned for their wealth, fame, and power. The latter are seized by brazen self-interest, ruthless competition, and savage violence.</p>	<p>Jesus' followers live in ways that are cruciform in nature. Indeed, the Cross is the premier expression of God's power and wisdom, both during the present age and for all eternity (cf. Rom 6:3–8; 1 Cor 1:18–25; 2 Cor 4:10; Gal 2:20; 5:22–26; 6:14; Phil 2:1–8; 3:10; Col 2:11–12, 20).¹¹</p>

¹¹ For a thorough deliberation of this point, cf. my forthcoming journal article titled, 'Paul's theology of the cross: a case study analysis of 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10'. In the latter essay, I examine one representative passage in Paul's writings through the prism of his crucicentric thinking (especially in dialogue with a confessional Lutheran perspective).

3. Paul's Apocalyptic Interpretation of Reality in Ephesians 1:15–23

The preceding section helps to establish the broader narrative framework and theological context in which Paul's apocalyptic interpretation of reality was embedded. This holds true for Ephesians 1:15–23, the representative passage from the apostle's letters to be examined in the present section.¹² To pave the way (so to speak), it is worthwhile first to consider several important introductory matters in the following paragraphs. To begin, when Paul wrote, he was no longer an evangelist on the move; instead, the references in 3:1 and 4:1 to the apostle being a 'prisoner' (*désmios*) and in 6:20 to his status as an 'ambassador in chains' (*presbeúo en halúsei*), indicate he was incarcerated in Rome (perhaps around AD 60).¹³ According to Acts

¹² In this section, the latest editions of the Nestle-Aland / United Bible Societies' *Novum Testamentum Graece* have been used. Also, unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are my personal translation of the respective biblical texts being cited. Moreover, I have intentionally refrained from filling every paragraph and page in this portion of the journal article with an excessive number of formal citations from secondary sources. So, for the sake of expediency, the following are the lexical and grammatical sources I consulted in the researching and writing of the corresponding discourse: *A dictionary of biblical languages: Greek New Testament* (J Swanson); *A grammar of the Greek New Testament* (N Turner, JH Moulton, and WF Howard); *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (FW Danker, ed.); *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament* (H Balz and G Schneider, eds.); *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains* (JP Louw and EA Nida, eds.); *Greek grammar beyond the basics: an exegetical syntax of the New Testament* (DB Wallace); *Greek New Testament insert* (B Chapman and GS Shogren); *Lexham Theological Wordbook* (D Mangum, et al., eds.); *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis* (M Silva, ed.); *The Lexham discourse Greek New Testament* (S Runge, ed.); *The new linguistic and exegetical key to the Greek New Testament* (CL Rogers); *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (G Kittel and G Friedrich, eds.); and *Theological lexicon of the New Testament* (C Spicq; JD Ernest, ed.).

¹³ The scholarly literature on Ephesians is extensive. Also, the majority of relevant exegetical and theological works frequently convey the same sort of information on

28:30–31, even though Paul was kept under house arrest, he had the freedom to receive visitors, as well as to write and send letters. Most likely, the apostle's first Roman imprisonment did not end with a death sentence passed by the despotic Nero; instead, it seems that Paul undertook one more missionary journey before being rearrested and executed in Rome about AD 62–67.

The church to which Paul directed Ephesians was not opposing him and his teaching; rather, it was by and large a thriving congregation that was ready to receive advanced instruction in theology and ethics. The apostle's colleagues, Tychicus and Onesimus, could have dropped off one letter at Ephesus while on their way to deliver two other epistles in Colosse (cf. Eph 6:21–22; Col 4:7–9; Phlm 1:10–12). Hoehner (2002:248) addresses the claim that Paul did not write this letter by noting that it had been 'five or six years' since he was in Ephesus, including extended periods of incarceration (cf. Acts 24:27; 27:9; 28:11, 30). Most likely, there were 'many new believers' whom the apostle personally knew. Furthermore, if Ephesians was a 'circular letter', he would not have met 'many in the satellite churches in western Asia Minor'. The general nature of the majority of the teaching in Ephesians may indicate that from the start Paul intended it to be an encyclical communique that would be read by a network of congregations dispersed over a wide geographical region. This may explain why there were no greetings directed to specific individuals and why the apostle did not seem to have firsthand knowledge of the epistle's recipients (cf. 1:15; 3:2; 4:21).

this Pauline passage. So, for the sake of expediency, the following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discourse: Abbott (1979); Allen (1986); Arnold (2010); Barth (1986); Best (1998); Bruce (184); Edwards (2005); Foulkes (1979); Haberer (2008); Hendricksen (1967); Hoehner (2002); Howard (1974); Jeal (2000); Kuhn (1968); Lenski (1961); Lincoln (1990); Perkins (2000); Robinson (1979); Thielman (2007; 2010); Wood (1978).

Ephesians contains two distinct, though related, parts. Chapters 1–3 reminded readers of their privileged status as members of the Messiah’s spiritual body, the church, which occupied an important place in the Creator’s plan for the universe. Chapters 4–6 appealed to the readers to conduct themselves in a way that was consistent with their godly calling, rather than conform to the pagan society in which they lived. Throughout the first chapter, Paul maintained that God has given Jesus’ followers, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status, every spiritual blessing. Moreover, the Creator’s grand design is to bring everything in the cosmos together—whether in heaven or on earth—under the Messiah’s authority. God also planned that all believers—Jews as well as Gentiles—not only will receive an eternal inheritance, but also will become the Father’s prized possession based on the Son’s atoning sacrifice at Calvary.

Verses 4–6 focus on the Father’s selection of repentant sinners in eternity past, while verses 7–12 deal with the Son’s death on the cross in space and time to redeem the lost. In verses 13–14, Paul shifts the focus to the activity of the Spirit in designating Jesus’ followers as his own special possession. The adverbial use of *kaí* (‘also’) plus the pronoun *hymeis* (second person, nominative, plural; ‘you’), along with *kaí* plus the participle *pisteúsantes* (aorist, active, plural; ‘after believing’), signalled the apostle’s inclusion of his non-Jewish readers to his discourse. Succinctly put, they too were incorporated into the Son’s spiritual body. Put another way, Jewish believers and Gentile Christians formed one united church.

Furthermore, the two nominative participial clauses—introduced by *akoúsantes* (aorist, active, plural; ‘after hearing’) and *pisteúsantes*, respectively—established the context for the sealing ministry of the Spirit. The latter included the two-stage process the Father used to bring

about the regeneration of pagan Gentiles. First, they listened attentively to evangelists such as Paul heralding an eternally relevant, historically grounded, and factually accurate message. This truth-filled oracle (*lógon tes aletheías*) was none other than the good news revealing how the Ephesians could be saved (*to euaggélion tes soterías*). Second, they responded by putting their faith in the Son, with the result that they experienced the new birth. In turn, the Creator identified the converts as his own by bestowing on them the promised Holy Spirit (in which *epaggelías* is understood to be an attributive genitive; cf. Luke 24:49; John 14:16; Acts 1:4–5; 2:33, 28–39; Gal 3:14; 4:6).

As an aside, Bayer (2003:50–5; 2007:126–34) observes that when viewed through the prism of speech–act theory, the good news is understood to be a performative utterance, namely, one that conveys a specific promise or assurance.¹⁴ Also, the declaration of the gospel is efficacious, in that it actualises for the first time a reality that did not previously exist. To be precise, God uses the heralding of the good news to initiate, establish, and preserve a relationship between himself and the unsaved. Furthermore, the declaration of the gospel makes the presence of faith operative within them, whereas before unbelief prevailed. Faith is not considered a work, but merely a response of the broken heart to the saving work of God.

According to Bayer (2003:258), ‘God’s Word is *verbum efficax*, an efficacious Word. It never returns void, but does what it says’ (cf. Isa 40:6–8; 55:10–11; Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 1:24–25). Bayer (2007:63) also notes that the ‘scriptures are not simply printed words to be read off a page’; more importantly, they are ‘life-giving words that stimulate our

¹⁴ Bayer’s application of speech–act theory to the proclamation of the gospel is based, in part, on the work of the British philosopher and linguistic analyst, JL Austin, especially the posthumous publication of his lectures titled *How to do things with words* (1975). Austin presented the latter in 1955 at Harvard University.

senses and emotions, our memory and imagination, our heart and desires'. So, with respect to the 'Christian life' (p. 22), 'God is the active subject'; in contrast, the 'Christian is the object of God's action'. Wright (2014) echoes the preceding mindset when he points out that the 'theology of the word' articulated by Paul is a 'life-transforming energy', one that 'immediately results in a new community, not just new ideas'. Moreover, in keeping with the apostle's apocalyptic view of reality, the Spirit works through the proclamation of the gospel to bring about a 'new creation' in 'fulfilment' of the 'age-old divine purpose' foretold in the Old Testament.

Expressed differently, when the promise of salvation is made, the Spirit uses the divine pledge to bring about the salvific reality being articulated. Previously unregenerate hearers are enabled to believe the good news and experience the inner vivification of their fallen human nature. In a sense, God's creative word is an eschatological declaration that has invaded the present age, with the result of ushering believers into the divine kingdom. Correspondingly, the new birth is the result of God's gracious action. The Father sovereignly brings it about (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; Titus 3:5) when people put their faith in the Son for eternal life (cf. Eph 1:13; 2:8–9). It is a new start for believing sinners, who are transformed by the Spirit in their volition, emotions, and actions (cf. Rom 12:1–2). This inner renewal is neither the result of people, apart from the Spirit, willing themselves to change by acquiring knowledge, nor the consequence of one's own insular, private monologue; instead, the new birth is entirely the work of the triune God, and becomes a reality when people receive the Son for salvation

through the heralding of the good news (cf. John 1:12–13; 3:6; Titus 3:5; Jas 1:18; 1 Pet 1:23; 1 John 4:10).¹⁵

Returning now to the main discussion, by using the Greek verb *esphragísthete* (aorist, passive, indicative; ‘were sealed’; Eph 1:13), Paul may have raised a number of images in the minds of his readers (cf. Esth 3:10; Dan 6:17; 2 Cor 1:22). At that time, seals (made from precious metals and hard stones) were put on documents to vouch for their authenticity. Seals were also tattooed on soldiers and slaves, branded on livestock, and attached to goods (such as sacks of grain or fruit) being shipped to indicate right of possession and safeguard protection. Sometimes seals represented an office in the government. Any of these uses of seals might symbolise a part of the Spirit’s work in the lives of those who trusted in the Messiah. In short, the apostle indicated that the Father’s gift of the Spirit (received by divine grace) identified Jesus’ followers as God’s spiritual children.

In Ephesians 1:14, Paul figuratively referred to the Spirit as the believers’ ‘guarantee’ (*arrabón*; or ‘pledge’) that they belonged to the Father and that he would do for them what he had promised in his Son (cf. 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). In the apostle’s day, a deposit was an initial payment assuring a retailer that the full purchase price would be forthcoming. The Spirit’s abiding presence confirmed that at the end of

¹⁵ A teaching known as ‘decision theology’ tethers assurance of salvation to one’s self-initiated choice to believe. In this view, the actions of the penitent (namely, what they perceive, reason, intuit, and experience) are what convince them they have enough faith to be saved. Put another way, their confidence is based on independent acts of their will, including their decision to believe, their consciousness of their belief, and their awareness of their conversion experience. Ironically, the outcome is not assurance, but a crisis of faith. The latter is characterised by unending bondage due to the presence of nagging inner doubts about the reality of their spiritual status (cf. the Lutheran notion of the *Anfechtung*, or a terrifying dread of God’s condemnation and judgment; Bayer 2003:182–4, 252–3; 2007:104–6; Cary 2005:448–50; 2007:266–7; McGrath 2011:224–8; Scaer 1983:15–8).

the age, believers would receive the final instalment of their eternal ‘inheritance’ (*kleronomías*; Eph 1:14; cf. Ezek 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–30). By this Paul meant that the Creator would bring to completion the ‘redemption’ (*apolútroisin*; Eph 1:14) of those whom he acquired (*peripoiéseos*) as a result of Jesus’ death on the cross. In keeping with what Paul stated in verses 6 and 12, he once more noted that the Father’s plan of salvation would bring him unending honour and splendour.

As with verses 3–14, verses 15–23 are one compound sentence in the original. Paul had discussed at length God’s eschatological plan of redemption centred in the Messiah, and the apostle was convinced his readers were truly regenerate. He indicated his certitude by means of the conjunctive phrase *diá touto* (‘because of this’; v. 15). Furthermore, the apostle’s adverbial use of *kagó* (‘even I’ or ‘I in particular’) shifted the focus back to himself. The inclusion of the nominative participial clause—introduced by *akoúsas* (aorist, active, singular; ‘having heard’)—established the context for his statement in verse 16.

Specifically, Paul was enthused to learn about the steadfast ‘faith’ (*pístin*; v. 15) of his readers in the Saviour, along with the ‘love’ (*agápen*) they regularly displayed toward their fellow believers (‘*hagíous*’; i.e. those in a saving relationship with God). Even though the apostle founded the congregation in Ephesus, as noted earlier, he had not seen the believers for several years, due to his imprisonment; nonetheless, Paul could receive visitors and mail, and through one or both of these means, he heard encouraging news about the Ephesians’ spiritual health. In response, whenever the apostle prayed (*proseuchon*; v. 16), he not only remembered (*mneíon*) his readers, but also never stopped (*paúomai*; present, middle, indicative) thanking (*euchariston*; present, active, participle) God for the Ephesians.

Next, through the use of the conjunction *hína* ('that'; v. 17), Paul introduced the nature of his petition to God, whom the apostle referred to as the 'glorious Father' (taking the phrase *ho patér tes dóxes* as an attributive genitive).¹⁶ Specifically, Paul asked that the majestic Creator would increase the Ephesians' discernment and deepen their insight in their spiritual understanding of Him, in which *sophías* ('wisdom'; i.e. sagacity and prudence) and *apokalýpseos* ('revelation'; i.e. something fully disclosed) are taken as attributive genitives of *pneuma* ('spiritual').¹⁷ The apostle's readers were already God's children as a result of their trust in the Son; but Paul wanted the Ephesians to receive a heightened awareness concerning their relationship with the Lord. The latter required more than just intelligence or hard work; according to Colossians 1:9, it was provided by the Spirit (especially, as noted earlier, through the ministry of God's Word; cf. John 14:26; 16:13).

Ephesians 1:18 and 19 detail some of the specific ways Paul wanted his readers to grow in their knowledge of God. The apostle used the figurative expression *toús ophthalmoús tes kardías* ('the eyes of the heart'; v. 18) to refer to the capacity of the believer's mind to understand.¹⁸ In Jewish thinking during the first century AD, the heart was viewed as the centre of one's personality, feeling, and faith, as well as the source from which one's words and actions originated (cf. Ps 10:11, 13; Prov 2:2; 22:17; 23:12; Matt 12:34; 15:19; 22:37; John 14:1; Rom 10:10). Paul asked God to flood the light of his truth into the Ephesians' souls. The apostle's request echoed the truth of Isaiah 60:19,

¹⁶ Cf. Exod 24:17; Isa 4:2; 35:2; 60:2, 13.

¹⁷ Cf. Exod 28:3; Deut 34:9; Zech 12:10; Wis 7:7; 1 Cor 4:21; Gal 6:1.

¹⁸ Arnold (2010:106) thinks Paul 'created' the 'metaphor' appearing in Ephesians 1:18, since prior to the apostle the expression cannot be found in any 'Jewish or secular literature'. In contrast, Thielman (2010:98) maintains that Paul used 'imagery that was common in the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds for gaining religious knowledge and insight'.

in which the Lord not only promised to redeem his people, but also to be their everlasting light, especially through the work of his Servant (cf. Isa 49:6; 51:4; Rev 22:5). As a result of God's transforming grace at work in the Ephesians' lives, they would more fully grasp the implications of their salvation. Colossians 1:10 adds that, in terms of everyday living, the regenerate would learn how to become increasingly fruitful, pleasing to God, and honouring to him.

The apostle's petition in Ephesians 1:18–19 contained three elements (signalled by his threefold use of the Greek interrogative pronoun *tís*). First, Paul prayed that his readers would have a sharpened awareness of the 'hope' (*elpís*; or 'confident expectation') associated with God's summons (*kléseos*) of them to eternal life (cf. Col 1:5, 27). Second, the apostle asked that the Ephesians would more fully appreciate the 'wealth' (*ploutos*; Eph 1:18) connected with the Lord's 'inheritance' (*kleronomías*) of them (cf. Col 3:24). The latter included the glorious (*dóxes*; Eph 1:18) certainty of their being citizens with all God's 'holy people' (or 'saints'; *hagiois*) in heaven. Third, Paul requested that his readers would truly grasp the many ways God freely and sovereignly operated to achieve his purposes in their lives (v. 19). According to Colossians 1:11–12, the Creator especially wanted his children, when faced with affliction, to remain steadfast (or persevering), patient (or emotionally calm), joyful, and thankful.

To intensify his point rhetorically in Ephesians 1:19, Paul used three Greek synonyms in tandem: the verb *hyperbállon* (present, active, participle), which denotes what is extraordinary, immeasurable, or incomparable; the noun *mégethos*, which points to what is infinitely enormous; and the noun *dynámeos*, which referred to what is absolute and supreme in power. The apostle emphasised that Jesus' followers were the object and beneficiaries of the Creator's limitless strength (*tou*

krátous tes ischyúos), which he demonstrated (*enéргеian*) above all in the Messiah's resurrection and exaltation. Edwards (2005) draws attention to the paradox that 'God's incomparable power' is unveiled in the ignominy of the Son's death on the cross.

Paul's use of the Greek verb *enéргеken* (perfect, active, indicative; 'brought about') in verse 20 conceptually links it to his use of the lexically related noun *enéргеian* ('working') in verse 19. When the Son died on the cross, his enemies thought they had ended his existence; yet, the bonds of death were broken as a result of the Father raising the Son immortal from the grave. For a period of 40 days, Jesus ministered on earth to his followers (cf. Acts 1:3). Then, as Paul explained in Ephesians 1:20, the Son ascended into the sacred abode of heaven and assumed his place of highest honour and authority at the right side of the Father's throne (cf. Exod 15:6; Pss 16:8; 48:10; 110:1; Isa 41:10; Matt 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 16:19; Heb 1:3; 1 Pet 3:22).

The dominion of the Son—who is God incarnate (cf. John 1:1, 14, 18; Col 1:15, 19; 2:9)—extended over all entities throughout the cosmos (cf. Col 2:10). In the first century AD, speculation about spiritual beings (including angels and demons) was common among both Jewish and pagan writers.¹⁹ Elaborate theories were devised about these entities. Also, they were arranged in various hierarchies, assigned supernatural powers, and venerated as if they were divine (cf. 1 Enoch 60:10–12; 61:10; 2 Enoch 20–22; Jub 2:2; 2 Macc 3:24; T Levi 3:14–22; Col 2:8, 16–18). Paul was aware of such attempts to understand the metaphysical realm; yet, without agreeing with the preceding speculations, the apostle affirmed that no creature, whether on earth or in heaven, and whether natural or supernatural, exceeded the Saviour's majesty and rule, for he was preeminent over all creation (cf. Col 1:15).

¹⁹ For an analysis of what scripture teaches about Satan and his minions, cf. Lioy 2014b:4–7.

In Ephesians 1:21, Paul stressed that from God's transcendent throne room in heaven, Jesus reigned supreme over the following four supernatural forces: *arches* ('ruler'), *exousías* ('authority'), *dynámeos* ('power'), and *kyriótetos* ('dominion'). Furthermore, the apostle declared that the Messiah alone controlled the destiny and actions of all angelic and demonic powers, both in the present era and in the one to be inaugurated at his Second Advent. Verse 22 added that the authority of the risen Messiah was not merely over celestial beings, but encompassed every aspect of creation, including temporal human powers.

When considering the discourse in section 2 above about Roman imperial ideologies, it is useful to stress the affirmation made by Hoehner (2002:279) that while there is in Ephesians 1:21–22 a 'definite influence from Jewish sources', it is also important to take into account the widespread 'pagan environment'. Best (1998:175–8) concurs that the Judaic and Hellenistic cultural contexts (i.e. 'political, social, and economic') are both important to consider. Thielman (2010:106) adds that Paul's use of 'terminology' is a 'skillful blend of language' derived from the Hebrew sacred writings and the 'Greco-Roman environment' prevalent at Ephesus and elsewhere. Perkins (2000:383) goes further in surmising that 'when Ephesians is read over against the ideology of the Roman imperial cult', the letter's homage to the risen and glorified Messiah 'appears to copy the style of speeches in praise of the emperor'. Even so, it is prudent to be mindful that, as Burk (2008:322) notes, 'Paul's gospel' expressed more of an 'implied' (rather than an unequivocal) censure of Rome's 'imperial pretensions'.

In an allusion to Psalm 8:6, Paul revealed that the Father brought everything in the universe under the Son's total control (*hypétaxen*; aorist, active, indicative; Eph 1:22; cf. Gen 1:26; 1 Cor 15:27–28; Heb

2:6–9). Furthermore, it was for the benefit of the ‘church’ (*ekklesia*; Eph 1:22) that the exalted Lord ruled preeminently (*kephalén*; ‘head’) over everyone and everything (cf. Eph 4:15; Col 1:18). Lincoln (1990:67) describes the ‘church’ as the ‘Christian community in its totality’. Similarly, Paul referred to the redeemed corporately throughout the world as the Saviour’s metaphysical ‘body’ (*soma*; Eph 1:23; cf. 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:4, 12, 16; 5:30; Col 1:24). One interpretive option, as noted by Bruce (1984:276), is that the exalted Son fills the church with his ‘life, attributes, and powers’. Correspondingly, as Edwards (2005) observes (reflecting the view of several early church leaders), the ‘risen Christ is the soul of the church’.

Paul added that the Messiah’s presence and power not only includes believers, but also that he exercises dominion over the whole universe. Because he is the eternal, self-subsistent Creator, every aspect of contingent reality depends on him for its existence (see Ps 36:9; John 1:3–4). Thielman (2007:816) posits that the ‘hegemony God intended humanity’ to exercise over the entire created realm is being brought to fulfilment through the ‘Messiah’s kingly rule’. Paul accentuated this truth by pairing the Greek noun *pléroma* (‘fullness’; Eph 1:23) with the verb *plerouménou* (present, middle, participle; ‘fills’),²⁰ and putting together two forms of the adjective *pas* (*panta*, accusative plural, with *pasin*, dative plural; cf. Col 3:11). In sum, believers found all their spiritual needs completely satisfied, not by participating in the pagan teachings and secretive rituals of the mystery religions, but only in union with the Redeemer (cf. John 4:13–14; 6:35).

²⁰ For an extensive listing of scholarly works deliberating the challenging exegetical and interpretive issues connected with Ephesians 1:23, cf. Hoehner (2002:294). Also, for an assessment as to why *plerouménou* is best understood to be a middle, rather than a passive, participle, cf. Arnold (2010:116–20); Howard (1974:351–4).

With respect to Paul's apocalyptic interpretation of reality in Ephesians 1:15–23, Allen (1986:104) discerns that the Son's 'exaltation above all the powers of the universe' is the grounds for the 'believers' resurrection and enthronement'. They have been freed from 'death in sins', the 'powers of this world', and the 'passions' of their sinful state. Against this backdrop, Marshall (2004:451) opines that Jesus' followers 'live in a new situation', one that is 'determined by the fact of Christ, crucified and risen'. Ladd (1997:596) extends the preceding thought by adding that the 'new life of the Age to Come' signifies the soil in which Christians are planted, grow, and thrive. Beale (2011:303) takes the analysis further by clarifying that since believers are the 'actual beginning of the end-time new creation', it is imperative for them to 'act the way new creatures act'. The latter includes 'viewing all of reality from the perspective' of Jesus' 'word', rather than the depraved 'viewpoint of the world' (cf. Rom 12:1–2; Gal 5:24–26).

4. Conclusion

This journal article builds on the work of an earlier essay (Lioy 2014a) to undertake a case study analysis of one representative passage in Paul's writings through the prism of its apocalyptic backdrop. The major claim is that the apostle's eschatological worldview exercised a controlling influence on his writings, both directly and indirectly. The corresponding goal is to validate the preceding assertion by exploring the apostle's end-time interpretation of reality in Ephesians 1:15–23.

To accomplish the latter objective, a short synopsis of two Pauline passages—2 Corinthians 5:17–19 and Romans 5:12–21—is undertaken in the introductory first section. One relevant insight arising from these texts is that there is an 'already but not yet' dynamic tension in Paul's writings. As Romans 8 reveals, while Jesus' followers have not yet

been physically resurrected as a result of trusting in him, they wait in eager anticipation for the arrival of that future day when their redemption is fully completed.

In the second section of the journal article, the scope and substance of Paul's apocalyptic view of reality is articulated. Specifically, five key premises are noted as forming the building blocks of his eschatological discourse. It is then observed that the end-time metanarrative found within the apostle's letters did not arise in isolation; rather, it shows strong affinities with the apocalyptic literature written during the period of Second Temple Judaism. That said, the Spirit enabled Paul to move beyond the distorted convictions of the religious elite of his day and view the created order through a set of Christocentric and Christotelic lenses. Another finding is that Paul's future-oriented ethos engaged the polymorphic views of reality that prevailed within Greco-Roman culture. Indeed, the good news the apostle heralded contrasted sharply with the latter propaganda.

The background information presented in the second section helps to establish the broader narrative framework and theological context in which Paul's apocalyptic interpretation of reality was embedded. This holds true for Ephesians 1:15–23, the representative passage from the apostle's letters examined in the third section of the journal article. A thoroughgoing analysis of this text indicates that an eschatological mindset pervades Paul's theology. For instance, in keeping with what was noted earlier, there is a tension between the 'already and the not yet'. Specifically, the salvation of believers has already been inaugurated, but not yet fully consummated. In addition, the future hope of salvation is an anchor for all of life, for it represents ultimate reality and the certain destination of believers.

An analysis of Ephesians 1:15–23 indicates that themes Paul deliberated there resonate with the broader theological discourse found in his other New Testament writings. To illustrate, when the Creator’s end-time promises are realised, he will be glorified, honoured, and praised as God (cf. 2 Cor 1:30). Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (cf. Phil 2:10–11). The entire cosmos will be reconciled to the Son (cf. Col 1:20), and the Father’s plan to sum up all things in his Son will be completed (cf. Eph 1:10). Moreover, Paul made it clear that believers will marvel at and enjoy God’s grace for endless ages (cf. Eph 2:7; 3:10; 2 Thess 1:10). In turn, the missionary task that animated Paul and other believers down through the centuries will be completed, and God’s eschatological plan of including Jews and Gentiles in his kingdom will have reached its consummation (cf. Rom 9–11; Eph 2–3).

As affirmed by this essay’s deliberation of Ephesians 1:15–23, the suffering of the present era one day will be just a memory, the agonies that prevail now will seem small compared to the beauty that has dawned, and the glorification God promises will be a reality (cf. Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:16–18). Furthermore, the supremely exalted and risen Lord of Ephesians 1:20–23 will return to judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous. Those who are in union with the Son by faith will be raised from the dead to worship the triune God in heaven for all eternity. In contrast, unbelievers will be punished forever, God’s saving work in believers will be finished, and any talk of ‘not yet’ will be passé. Finally, the structures of the present cosmic order will cease, and a world of endless joy will commence.

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The Passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources from the Nag Hammadi Library, and its Relationship with the Fourth Gospel

Michael Makidon and Dan Lioy¹

Abstract

Although the passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources from the Nag Hammadi Library and the passion of Christ in the Fourth Gospel seem to share many commonalities, the Valentinian understanding of the passion events has much less to do with the historicity of the crucifixion, suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ than with what they symbolised. Likewise, the passion can only be properly understood in light of the Valentinian myth, through which the Valentinians understood their theology. The following article analyses the passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources from the Nag Hammadi Library in light of its relationship to the Fourth Gospel.

1. Introduction

The passion of Christ in the Valentinian Sources (VSS)² from the Nag Hammadi Library (NHL), when compared to the Fourth Gospel (FG), appear quite differently and must be understood within the Valentinian

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

² List of abbreviations on page 76.

myth. The events of the last days of Christ bear more meaning symbolically than historically. While the crucifixion includes the idea of redemption on the cross, the cross symbolises the barrier between the physical and spiritual. The suffering takes on the meaning of being detained within the physical realm, the death is the separation of the physical from the spiritual, and the resurrection describes the reunification and restoration of the spiritual body with the Pleroma. Thus, while the passion events appear in the VSS, they must be understood within the Valentinian myth. The following sections will further analyse the passion of Christ within the Valentinian myth.

2. The Crucifixion of Christ

There are several passages in the VSS that refer to the crucifixion of Christ. The GT states that he was ‘nailed to a tree’ (*auqftf auše*, 18:24; 20:25). Ménard believes that this reference should be taken spiritually. In other words, Christ was enslaved to humanity, which would be consistent with the death of Christ in the VSS (1972:88). Theodotus equated the cross with the boundary between the unfaithful and faithful and the world and the Pleroma. He pictured Christ as the head and Jesus as the shoulders carrying the seed to the Pleroma (*Exc* 42).

IK 5:30–32 and 13:25–37 both refer to the ‘cross’ (*stauros*). The latter may be a Valentinian interpretation of John 19:26–27 (Pagels and Turner 1988a:83). Both picture Jesus looking down from the cross. Just as the author of the IK describes the saviour as being ‘bent over the cross’ (*ntaurek<ts> hijm pestaurus*, IK 13:27), Irenaeus uses the phrase ‘extended himself beyond the cross’ (διὰ τοῦ Σταυροῦ ἐπεκταθέντα, *Haer* I:4.1). Irenaeus uses this to describe the impartation of Sophia’s form. Thomassen argues that these passages do not demonstrate that the saviour truly suffered or was incarnated. Rather, it should be viewed as an ‘emanation process’ (2006:187). This is compatible with the

terminology of extension in IK (2:28ff; 8:34; 11:26–13:20l; 14:28ff). GP 63 explains the emanation process in the context of the crucifixion.

GP 63:21–24 describes Jesus as the Eucharist, and calls him ‘the one who is spread out’ (*petporš ebol*). The Valentinian idea of mutual participation is in view. Through death, Christ divides himself and extends to those he will redeem (*Exc* 36:1–2) (Magnusson 2006:144–147). Thomassen writes, ‘The chief expression of this meaning of the incarnation of the Saviour is the crucifixion: at the cross the Saviour ‘extends’ himself into matter, symbolised by his spreading out the limbs of his body and letting them be fixed to a piece of wood’ (2009:182). The purpose of the extension is for the aeons to move from a spiritual potential to intelligent beings and for deity to manifest himself as a ‘oneness-in-plurality’ (2006:277). When the incarnation ended, the spirit was released from the body and returned to the spirit realm. Thus, the cross, like the boundary for the Sophia, separates the spiritual realm from the material realm. Theodotus’s writings bear this out as well (*Exc* 42). Moreover, one of Pleroma’s boundaries is called *σταυρός* (*Haer* I:2,4; 3:1,5; *Ref* VI:31,5; 34,7; *Exc* 22:4; 42:1). Thus, the Valentinian language of extension and spreading out should be viewed in the context of emanation and mutual participation.

VE 33:16–38 refers to Christ, the ‘cross’ (*še*), and the ‘nail wound’ (*šō<ft>*). It also refers to his descent (33:34), which was necessary to rectify the situation with the aeons of the Pleroma, the exiled Sophia, and human corruption (Pagels and Turner 1988b:163). The perfect form ascends to the Pleroma. The body was detained by the limit, which is part of the suffering of Christ. Christ had a spiritual body before his incarnation (33:34). Jesus receives Christ in VE 39:29–30. This is consistent with the Valentinian division of Jesus and Christ. The crucifixion should be viewed as the division between the spiritual and

physical. The cross is not the place where the saviour physically died and was then buried; he was released taking the spirituals with him to reunite with the Pleroma. Thus, the crucifixion should be seen as a marker between the world and the Pleroma (*Exc* 42).

The crucifixion in the VSS takes on the connotation of revelation, and the cross serves as the boundary between the spiritual and physical, but the Valentinians still retained the idea of redemption. The saviour had to be crucified in order to extend to those he came to redeem (*Exc* 36:1–2). The FG also sees the crucifixion as a redemptive act, but the Valentinians have redefined the cross in terms of a boundary to integrate it with their myth of reunification and final harmony within the Pleroma.

3. The Suffering of Christ

In the IK, Jesus ‘had [borne] the suffering’ (*[ti] mine aphisē*, 5:36), but the author refers to the body as a ‘temporary dwelling’ (*pandokeio[n]*, 6:31). This may indicate that the temporary dwelling, or Jesus, may have suffered, but the spiritual body did not experience any pain. The son was sent after the spirituals and spread over the cross and proclaimed the edict of the Father. This language is consistent with the eastern idea of mutual participation, and implies a spiritual body and a spiritual understanding of the suffering of Christ.

The GT states that he suffered (19:19–20:15). The context seems to demonstrate that Jesus truly suffered and the passion was revelatory not soteriological (Attridge and MacRae 1985:58). GT 20:31 states that he clothed himself in perishable rags. Ménard does not agree with those who think this passage demonstrates the reality of Christ’s suffering. He explains, *‘Il dépasse aussitôt l’histoire et la figure du christ est à nouveau sublimée entre le réel et le symbolique. Le Christ-Jésus n’est*

que le mythe de l'Ursprung, de cette origine céleste dont chacun doit reprendre conscience (p. 21)³ (1972:96–97). Passages such as GT 20:31 and 31:1–6, where the material ones did not see the son, support Ménard's theory. Theodotus also confirms this by stating that while the body suffered, Christ had already left (*Exc* 62).

TT 113:31–34, 114:35, and 121:11–14 also describe the *Logos* suffering. The latter states that the material ones persecuted Jesus (Attridge and Pagels 1985:455). TT 65:4–17 describes the Valentinian idea of extension and spreading out. Thus, the suffering should be understood in this light since the *logos* is an emanation of the aeons (76:2–30). The 'flesh' (*sarks*) of Christ in TT 114:1–11 comes from the *logos* not the archons of the world. Irenaeus explains that the Valentinians believed that Christ had an 'animal' or 'fleshly' nature (ψυχικός) but was not 'material' (ὕλικόν, *Haer* I:5,6). Harvey argues that Apollinarian first believed that the body of Christ was heavenly and not truly earthly (Harvey 1857:52–53). He explains, 'The doctrine of Valentinus, therefore, as regards the human nature of Christ was essentially Docetic. His body was *animal* but not *material*, and only visible and tangible...' (1857:52–53). Yet, as has already been demonstrated, this Docetism has to be qualified. The incarnation did occur in some sense. The VSS do not affirm classic Docetism, for in their system Jesus did truly inhabit a bodily form. The tripartite distinction in the VSS may have come from Paul's language concerning the body in 1 Corinthians 15:44, 50. Paul contrasts the 'spiritual body' (σῶμα πνευματικόν) and the 'natural body' (σῶμα ψυχικόν). The 'flesh' (σάρξ) cannot inherit the kingdom and the 'perishable' (ἡ

³ Translation: He now goes beyond the story and the person of the Christ (which is) once again sublimated between the real and the symbolic. Jesus, the Christ, is not only the myth of the Ursprung, but is from this heavenly origin of which everyone shall regain consciousness.

φθορά) cannot inherit the ‘imperishable’ (τὴν ἀφθαρσίαν). The Valentinian idea that the body is a shell is a familiar Platonic idea (*Gorgias* 493a; *Cratylus* 400c) (Plato 1963:275, 437). As this dissertation has already argued, the suffering of the Logos finds no parallel in Hellenistic or Jewish Literature. This concept must have been influenced by the suffering of Jesus, who was the Logos, in the FG. The fact that the FG did not elaborate on this aspect of the passion as much as the Synoptics provides opportunity for the Valentinians to make extensive use of the FG.

The suffering of Christ in the VSS either takes on the meaning of being detained in the earthly realm or is explained by dividing Jesus, the one in the body, and Christ (*Exc* 62). The fact that the Logos suffered provides a glimpse of the FG’s influence in the VSS. Nowhere other than in the FG is suffering associated, through Jesus, with the Logos.

4. The Death of Christ

The TR does imply the son of man’s death (46:14–17). Yet, the use of the title son of man suggests a distinctively Valentinian understanding of his death, namely that the son of man would lead to the restoration of the Pleroma (Peel 1985:152–153). The son of man restored the spirituals to the Pleroma (TR 44:30–33) and unified the spiritual component of Christ with the Pleroma (Bock 2006:104). Bock argues that Christ’s death was only spiritual in the VSS, but there seems to be a psychic component as well. Death is the separation of the inward members from the outward members so that one can take on new flesh (47:4–8) and a garment of light (45:30–31). This separation is consistent with Theodotus in *Exc* 62—the body of Jesus suffered while Christ was deposited in the Father’s hand. A quotation from Paul is included in TR 45:25–28 (Thomassen 2006:83n1). In fact this mixes two Pauline passages: Romans 8:17 and Ephesians 2:5–6. In the context

of the TR, the spirituals are also ‘wearing’ (*phorei*) him. Some have seen this as a reference to the ‘kosmos’ (*kosmos*) rather than the saviour (Layton 1979:17, 56, 61; Layton 1981:202n53), but Peel believes that it should be translated ‘him’ rather than ‘it’ (1985:163). In TR 45, life comes from death (cf. *Phaedo* 71c-d). Death is necessary so that life can come out of it. This is consistent with the Middle Platonic dualistic ideas of the world of being and the sphere of becoming and corruption, as well as the idea of the intelligible and sensible worlds. Pagels explains this dual nature by stating that ‘the divine spirit within him could not die; in that sense he transcended suffering and death’ (1979:90). Through the act of ‘swallowing up death’ (*ōmnk m-pmou*), the saviour provided a way to ‘immortality’ (*ntnmntatmou*, TR 45:20–23). This passage contains clear references to mutual participation and returning to the Pleroma. Thus, this should be seen as relocation from earth to the Pleroma and a release from the physical body.

GP 52:35–53:14 implies the death of Christ in the phrase ‘laid down his life.’ GP 68:27–29 quotes Mark 15:34. The author’s interpretation of the Markan text includes the phrase ‘he had departed’ (*ebol hm*). Ehrman translates it ‘he was divided’ (2003:224) and explains that the author interpreted these words as if Christ had abandoned Jesus at the cross. Hence he was divided. This is consistent with Irenaeus’s assessment of Valentinian theology (*Haer* III:16,1). It also recalls Theodotus’s statement that while the body suffered, the soul of Christ was deposited in the Father’s hand (*Exc* 62).

TT 115:3–8 also speaks of the death of Christ: ‘Not only did he take upon [himself] the death of those whom he thought to save, but he also accepted their smallness.’ It does not make a docetic qualification, but the term ‘smallness’ (*šēm*) in 115:6 was used of psychic beings in 89:9–10. The psychic Christ redeems the psychic beings, namely Christians

(Thomassen 2006:65). The psychic Christ was born from the Demiurge according to Irenaeus (*Haer* I:7,2), who also states that the psychic Christ suffered as a ‘mystery’ or a ‘symbolic representation’ (μυστηριωδῶς) (Thomassen 2006:73). This implies that he did not truly suffer or die. IK 5:30–38 also speaks of the death of Christ. When combined with the statement that the body is a ‘temporary dwelling’ (*pandokeio[n]*) in 6:31, a Valentinian view of this event seems clear. Pagels sums up the data well: ‘None of these sources [VSS] denies that Jesus actually suffered and died; all assume it. Yet all are concerned to show how, in his incarnation, Christ transcended human nature so that he could prevail over death by divine power’ (1979:115). Yet the death of Christ is often couched in the language of mutual participation. Thus, one should not equate the death of Christ in the VSS with that of the FG. Death in the Valentinian paradigm includes division, swallowing, and departure. Pagels attributes this to the fact that the Valentinians were the first theologians and were working out the theological issues (1979:114–116). The Valentinians certainly existed in the first centuries of Christianity, but their views were not exclusively based on biblical accounts. There is no evidence that there was an early GT tradition that influenced the FG as Barrett suggests (1982:62–63). On the contrary, the GT demonstrates that the author, most likely Valentinus himself, did not have a well-formed Valentinian theology at this stage (i.e. lack of Sophia and no split between Jesus and Christ). Rather, their theology competed with orthodox understandings of the death of Christ. On the other hand their constant use of the FG and other canonical books makes it clear that they attempted to explain their beliefs about Christ’s death within a Christian framework.

The death of Christ in the FG is viewed as an event in time, which occurs for the sins of the world (1:29). The death of Christ in the VSS, while necessary, separates the inward and outward members so that a new form of flesh (TR 47:4–8) can be assumed. The difference lies in

the Valentinians' desire to explain their chief myth, the ultimate harmonization and restoration of the Pleroma.

5. The Resurrection of Christ

The resurrection should be seen as restoration in Valentinian theology (*Exc* 7:5; 61:5–8; 80:1–2; *Heracleon* frg. 15; TR 44). As has already been discussed, the other elements of the passion are consistent with this view. The Valentinian theology of the resurrection is described in the TR. It treats the resurrection of Jesus and the spirituals as if it has already happened (45:25–46:2; 49:16–30). Now if we are manifest in this world wearing him, we are that one's beams and we are embraced by him until our setting, that is to say, our death in this life. We are drawn to heaven by him, like beams by the sun, not being restrained by anything. This is the spiritual resurrection which swallows up the psychic in the same way as the fleshly (45:25–46:2). The author of the TR writes: 'We suffered with him, and we arose with him, and we went to heaven with him.'

The use of the title son of man in 46:14–17 suggests a Valentinian understanding of the death and resurrection. The son of man restores the spirituals to the Pleroma (44:30–32) (Peel 1985:152–153). Just as the son of man ascends in the FG, the same can be said of the son of man in the VSS. However, the FG describes Jesus ascending to heaven while the VSS describe him reuniting with the Pleroma. The resurrection is the separation of the inward members from the outward members (47:36–48:3). The mind and thought are separated from the body at death (Plato, *Timaeus* 28a). In Plato's *Republic* (IV), the allegory of the cave demonstrates this connection. The cave represents the world of becoming and those outside the cave represent the world of being. In the TR, the resurrection is revelation of what is (48:34–35) and the

filling of deficiency on the part of the Pleroma (49:4–5). The resurrection is spiritual (45:40–46:2) and came into being through Jesus (46:16–19). It swallows up the psychic and fleshly (45:40–46:2) and restores those that will be saved to the Pleroma (44:30–32). Peel believes that Pauline mystical language has influenced the author of the TR. The author's 'realized eschatology' has been influenced by passages like Romans 6:5–8, Ephesians 2:5ff, and Colossians 2:12ff. Paul speaks of this audience's crucifixion and death as a figurative, past event. The Valentinians may have understood the death of sin and the new life in a corporate sense and thus applied it to their restoration with the Pleroma.

In the VSS, Sophia plants her spiritual seeds into human bodies; they are educated, baptized, and return to reunite with the Pleroma. (Thomassen 2006:186) VE 33:16–38 implies the resurrection of the saviour in that the perfect form ascends to the Pleroma. The ascension also includes the idea of clothing himself again. GT 20:32 describes the saviour as 'putting on imperishability' (*afti hiōōf ntmntat teko*), referring to the spiritual substance (Ménard 1972:101). With this pneumatic state comes 'knowledge and perfection' (*nnousa unemn oujōk*, 20:38–39) and the perfection ascends to the Father (21:8–11). Thus, the resurrection in Valentinian theology should be seen as release and reunification with the Pleroma.

The author of the GP also explains that in some sense Jesus was resurrected before he died (56:15–20). Thus, the resurrection in the GP and TR is present. Just as Jesus has already risen, so the spirituals must also rise. Layton explains that it 'involves the ... laying aside of flesh, first by anticipation, then literally' (1979:96). This resurrection is achieved through gnosis (1979:58–59). The author of the TR ignores sin, the crucifixion, and the future bodily resurrection. Layton finds that the concept of resurrection in the TR is 'pre-eminently a category of the

here and now...’ Because of this, a future judgment is absent and the concept of a resurrected body does not exist, apart from becoming the body or the church. He concludes by admitting, ‘The author has therefore dressed a quite non-Pauline theology in a thin and tattered Pauline garb’ (1979:211). The garb may seem less thin and tattered if it is recognized as being woven from both Pauline and Johannine ideas. The FG views eternal life as a present reality predicated on belief in Jesus. The Valentinian resurrection comes through knowledge of one’s origin and destiny. The Valentinians may have clothed their theology with both Pauline and Johannine concepts.

6. Conclusion

Both the FG and the VSS from the NHL describe the passion of Christ as an historical event, which included a physical cross, suffering, a literal death, and a physical, bodily resurrection of Christ. Nonetheless, the historical events are far less important for the Valentinians. The true meaning of these events can be found in what each of the four pieces of the puzzle represents. For the Valentinians, the barrier between the physical and spiritual (cross) and the suffering of being within the early realm were overcome through the death of Christ, which the resurrection followed. These last two events caused the separation of the inward (spiritual) and outward members (physical) and allowed the restoration of the spirituals to the Pleroma. Thus, the Valentinian description of the passion event describes the Valentinian myth, restoring the fall of Sophia through the Valentinian idea of mutual participation where the spirituals become a spiritual body with the saviour, reunifying together into the Pleroma.

Abbreviations

Exc	<i>Excerpta ex Theodotus</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
FG	The Fourth Gospel
GP	The Gospel of Philip
GT	The Gospel of Truth
Haer	<i>Against Heresies</i> (Irenaeus)
IK	<i>The Interpretation of Knowledge</i>
NHL	Nag Hammadi Library
Ref	<i>Refutations of all Heresies</i> (Hippolytus)
Strom	<i>Stromata</i> (Clement of Alexandria)
Tim	<i>Timaeus</i> (Plato)
TR	The Treatise on the Resurrection
TT	The Tripartite Tractate
Val	<i>Against the Valentinians</i> (Tertullian)
VE	<i>A Valentinian Exposition with Valentinian Liturgical Readings</i>
VSS	The Valentinian Sources

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Reshaping South African Indigenous Theology on God and Sin: A Comparative Study of Augustine's Confessions

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Abstract

Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, is one of the most influential church fathers whose views helped to shape modern Protestant theology. Many of his works are still studied by modern theologians. As an African he contributed to shaping a bible-focused theology that transformed Europe and the world. Many African theologians dream of reaching the international stature of Augustine. However, African theology in the present context differs greatly from the Greek-Roman world to which Augustine was accustomed. The continent is a boiling pot of different cultures, religions and conflicting worldviews. South Africa during the apartheid era was divided into different classes. The Christian community was divided by race and ideology. Western-style education and Christian missions brought a sense of awareness in the black South African communities. During this period, two types of theologies flourished. The first is Black Theology that is political and the second is South African Indigenous theology that sought to present theology in a way that connects and is easily acceptable to black South African communities. The

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

South African Indigenous theology flourished with the African Indigenous Church groups, which currently enjoy more than six million members. The churches are diverse and syncretise Christian theism with African traditional religions. I will examine how the views of Augustine in *Confessions* could influence African Indigenous theology in South Africa.

1. Introduction

This work will examine how the notion of divine providence and sin in African Indigenous Theology can be reshaped to present a more biblical view. The notion of divine providence and sin are fundamental in understanding African Indigenous theology in South Africa. Many theological views practised in black South African cultures are founded on these two views. I believe that when these views are reshaped to reflect the truth expressed in the scriptures, most of the theological concerns expressed by Western theologians can be dealt with.

Bediako (2004:49) states that there are two types of African theologies in the post-missionary era. The first is the liberation theology, which is the product of the anti-apartheid movement. This is known as Black Theology. Black theology is a product of the oppressed in trying to understand and deal with their political environment. Black Theology sees God as the fighter against and rescuer of the oppressed from tyrannical governments. The second is the focus of this research. It is the theology that is generally held by African Indigenous Church groups (AIC). The theology practised by African indigenous churches is not as political as Black Theology. African Indigenous Theology practised by African indigenous churches seeks to present Christianity that connects with black African cultures. Syncretism of western Christian theology and traditional African religions is evident in their views of God and life after death. In the South African black cultures

God the creator is supreme but distant. He is not involved in the life of mankind. The ancestors play a very important role in the affairs of mankind. There is a common understanding of the role of ancestors in black South African cultures. These common factors of God and sin make it easier to construct an African indigenous theology which can be acceptable throughout South Africa.

The AIC churches have steadily increased, while many denominations were either stagnant or slowly declining. The largest of the AIC church groups is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC). The ZCC increased from 3.8 million members in 1996 to 4.9 million in 2011, while other AIC church groups increased from 216 000 adherents in 1996 to 1.8 million in 2011 (StatsSA 2001:25; StatsSA 2012:19-20). These churches represent a type of Christianity, particularly in Black rural communities. In addition, more AIC churches are evident in urban sectors as well. This is due to the increased migration of black South Africans, moving from rural to urban sectors to find better jobs. It is essential that African indigenous churches formulate theologies that reflect the truth of the bible. The nature of the AIC churches makes them ideal for an effective church plant and growth. They do not need permanent structures and do not require extensive financial expenditures. Although there are some positive elements of the AIC churches, the theology that is commonly practised causes great concerns which have spiritual and social impact. Some of these result in the undesired person being ostracised, and even at times the individuals may be killed. What will be examined are the views of Augustine expressed in the *Confessions*, to see how they can help to reshape African Indigenous theology in South Africa. Augustine is viewed as one of the most influential Church Fathers. His writing had great influence on both Catholic and Protestant theologians, including Luther and Calvin. In addition, the *Confessions* is the focus of most work by current scholars. My focus is on how Augustine's views, as an

African Church Father, could reshape current African indigenous theology to be more biblical and social-conscious.

2. God's Divine Providence

Divine providence is understood as God's active role in the affairs of the world. The debate on the notion of divine providence is on whether or not mankind has free will (Jensen 2014:1). There are generally four views on divine providence; God causes all things, God directs all things, God controls by liberating, God limits his control (Helseth, Craig, Highfield and Boyd 2011). I will not debate these views, but will focus on how Augustine understood divine providence, and how his view can help to reshape African Indigenous theology in South Africa.

2.1. Augustine's view of God's divine providence

The first three chapters of Augustine's Book 1 focus on the greatness of God. In Book 1, chapter 4, Augustine goes on to present the dichotomy in the nature of God. Augustine (1.4.4) states,

Most high, most excellent, most potent, most omnipotent; most merciful and most just; most secret and most truly present; most beautiful and most strong; stable, yet not supported; unchangeable, yet changing all things; never new, never old; making all things new, yet bringing old age upon the proud, and they know it not; always working, ever at rest; gathering, yet needing nothing...

The first few descriptions Augustine uses are superlatives, such as 'Most high', to distinguish God above all other deities. He then presents the dichotomy of 'most secretive and most truly present', 'always working, ever at rest', 'sustaining, pervading, and protecting; creating, nourishing, and developing; seeking, and yet possessing all things', 'Thou dost love, but without passion; art jealous, yet free from care;

dost repent without remorse; art angry, yet remainest serene. Thou changest thy ways, leaving thy plans unchanged; thou recoverest what thou hast never really lost' (1.4.4). This presentation of God may be deliberate to present God as a multi-dimensional being in contrast to the pagan gods. God is known and unknown, mysterious and yet revealed himself to mankind. This is a God who cannot be fully known to mankind, and although there is a sense of dichotomy in God, there are no contradictions. The majesty of God is great, but he is, in some sense, predictable due to his consistent moral nature.

Augustine believed in God's providence over all aspects of human life. Crosson (2003:74) believes that Book V is the centre and the pivotal point where Augustine is aware of God's active role in his life. Crosson (2003:75) states the following: 'First of all, Book Five itself is a center, a midpoint. And it happens that that middle of the book is the point where the narrator, looking back, first attributes to God's acting on him, to God's guiding him, something he had decided to do for what seemed at the time purely his own reasons - to go to Rome.' Although I agree with Crosson on his view regarding Augustine's awareness of God's providence in bringing him to accept God's divine truth, there is evidence that in the early parts of the *Confessions* that Augustine, now an older and wiser man, mentions God's providence in the daily life of mankind. Augustine sees God's providence from the moment of conception. Augustine (1.6.7) states,

And yet the consolations of thy mercy have sustained me from the very beginning, as I have heard from my fleshly parents, from whom and in whom thou didst form me in time-for I cannot myself remember. Thus even though they sustained me by the consolation of woman's milk, neither my mother nor my nurses filled their own breasts but thou, through them, didst give me the food of infancy according to thy ordinance and thy bounty which underlie all things.

Augustine not only acknowledges God as the one who created him, but sustained him through determining how much milk his mother and nurse could give him. There are several references throughout Augustine's *Confessions* that make direct references to God's active role in the lives of mankind. Still focusing on his early years Augustine (1.11.17) acknowledges God as his keeper during the time he was sick and states the following:

Thou didst see, Oh Lord, how, once, while I was still a child, I was suddenly seized with stomach pains and was at the point of death-thou didst see, Oh my God, for even then thou wast my keeper, with what agitation and with what faith I solicited from the piety of my mother and from thy Church (which is the mother of us all) the baptism of thy Christ, my Lord and my God.

Augustine (1.11.18) during his reflection on this period asks what God's plan was by healing him, while preventing him from being baptised when he had asked to be. Augustine believes in God's judgment of preventing him from being baptised, but letting him continue in the path that he took. Augustine believes that everything that happened to him was necessary for God's plan for his life.

2.2. The African indigenous theological perspective on divine providence

Bujo and Muya (2006:52) state,

On the contrary, belief in the providence is so strong in Africa that one could well say that God is almost everywhere, and everything ends up being contemplated starting from this transcendence. It gets manifested in the sacrifice of the first fruits. The first fruits of crops, of hunting and fishing, are offered to God as Master of the universe and as the Providence One.

Bujo and Muya (2006:53) further explain that God in the general African perspective is seen as the creator and the sustainer of life. He explains that the divine can mediate in human affairs through various ways, and at times manifest themselves as natural animals. This belief is evident in both traditional and Christian theology. In the South Africa Pedi culture to which I belong, the supreme God is called *Modimo*. Traditionally he is distant, and his involvement in human affairs is limited. Instead, those who are involved in the affairs of mankind are *badimo*, ancestors. It is not a coincidence that *modimo* and *badimo* seem similar as *mo* is a prefix for the singular while *ba* is for the plural. *Modimo* is translated as deity, while *badimo* in a literal translation means deities. Although *modimo* is regarded as the Supreme Being, most veneration is directed to *badimo* that are directly involved in the affairs of the mankind; both in blessings and curses. This view of ancestors as deities is not limited to the Pedi culture, but applies to many African cultures (Wiredu 2013:29).

Regarding the role of ancestors in African belief, Tanye (2010:108) states,

At death, the God-given spirit departs and starts its journey back to the world of the spirits. From the spirit world, it maintains contact with the living and mediates between the spiritual world and the earthly family and often visits their family members in their dreams in concrete creatures such as snakes, hyenas, caterpillars, butterflies, etc. or through direct contact with the living through possession.

This veneration of the ancestors is often translated into many African Indigenous Church (AIC) movements in South Africa.

Gilliland (1986) has excellent classifications of the AIC church movement. Gilliland (1986:266–270) places the AIC churches into four

groups. The first one is the Primary evangelical-Pentecostal group. These are the churches that have direct connection with European and American church groups that helped to establish the indigenous churches, and are often bible-based. The leaders often received Western theological training (Gilliland 1986:267). The second group, Secondary evangelical-Pentecostal, is similar to the first group, but with fewer trained leaders and often without external connections. In addition to adhering to true biblical messages they rely more on the supernatural than the first group (Gilliland 1986:268). The third and fourth groups, Revelational indigenous and Indigenous eclectic, rely more on personalities and the supernatural than on the bible (Gilliland 1986:269–270). These groups incorporate the traditional African belief that ancestors are mediators to God.

In the South African context, it is difficult to place all AIC churches into these categories, as many are independent churches without any allegiance to a specific denomination. The largest AIC church group in South Africa is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) that has more four million members which include neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe and Namibia (StatsSA 2001:25; StatsSA 2012:19-20). The ZCC theology includes the worship of ancestors and other African traditional spirituality (Oomen 2005:153). Although on the surface ZCC churches and many other African Indigenous churches seem to have a Christian view of God, it places God at a distance with the ancestors filling the vacuum.

2.3. A juxtaposition of Augustine's view and African indigenous theology on providence

One of the contrasts between the Augustinian view of God's providence and the African Indigenous theology in the South African context is the view of the role of God in this human life. Augustine sees God as both

the creator (1.6.7) and keeper (1.11.17) of life. I agree with Crosson's (2003:75) view that Augustine became aware of God's providence when he understood God's active role in bringing him to Ambros to receive the Gospel. But the view of God's active role is different from African Indigenous theology that views God as a distant being. Although Bujo and Muya (2006:52) believe that God in the African religions reveals himself to mankind through various ways such as creatures, in the South African context these manifestations are believed to be of the ancestors. The ancestors in the black South African cultures can work through animals and even possess people to fulfil their plans.

There are three reasons why Augustine's view is better than the African Indigenous theology practised by the AIC churches in South Africa. The first reason is that the African Indigenous theological view of God conflicts with the biblical view of God who reveals himself directly to mankind. Throughout scriptures there are references to God revealing himself to individuals (Gen 6:13; 12:1–5; Exod 3:1–21, 33:1–21; Acts 9:1–19; Rev 1:8, 17–20; 22:7–16), to the nation through public manifestations (Exod 13:21–22; 19; 1 Sam 5), and through heroic actions of individuals (1 Sam 11; 14; 1 Kgs 18). More so, the incarnation of Christ can be understood as the combination of all these elements; God revealing himself to individuals through personal encounters (Matt 8:5–13; 9:20; Luke 7:37–39), public displays of miracles witnessed by the multitudes (Luke 18:35; John 2:11; 9:1–12), and the heroic actions and ministries of the Apostles (the Book of Acts).

The second reason is that the reliance on the ancestors is very troubling, as the spirits always seek to be appeased. Ancestors are human spirits and there are no criteria for indicating who can be an ancestor. In other words, anyone, regardless of how they lived on earth, can attain deity. There is no heaven or hell, only spiritual and physical realms. In

addition, there is no indication that a person who lived an immoral life can change and be good. The expectations depend on each ancestor and not on any specific criteria. This creates great uncertainty, as one does not really know whether or not the ancestors have been appeased; only when one experiences either good or bad fortune. Uncertainty creates fear and suspicion in the community and family. One is not free to take responsibility for his or her own life, but has to be careful not to make the ancestors angry and disappointed. What makes it so difficult is the lack of coherency in the belief. In the Pedi (Northern Sotho) and Shangaan cultures there is no specific hierarchy among the ancestors. Each ancestral spirit can demand different things, even if it contradicts the demands of other spirits. This creates anxiety in the lives of individuals and families. The notion of a personal and loving God, who is superior, as mankind's expectations of God is consistent and revealed. It eliminates anxiety on the part of individuals and communities, and gives individuals charge of their own lives. God is involved in the lives of mankind, but mankind is responsible for each decision made. Each individual is responsible for living a moral life revealed in the scriptures, and each person knows the fruit of the kind of life he or she lives.

The third and last reason is that the African Indigenous theology practiced by the AIC churches in South Africa robs individuals and society from having a direct communion with the one true God. The focus is on the veneration of ancestral spirits, and the connection between mankind and God does not exist. Mankind is always at the mercy of the ancestral spirits, which display great inconsistencies in their expectations. The ancestors can control whom one marries or where one lives. People do not have the freedom to control their environment or their lives. More so, the ancestors can manifest their presence in a manner that can torment individuals. The reliance on ancestral spirits easily strips individuals of self-confidence. Reliance on the ancestors makes mankind unable to take responsibility for their

decisions and the outcomes thereof. Everything is seen as the will of the ancestors. If a person gets a promotion or a good harvest, then it is seen as the blessing of the ancestors. If an individual loses his or her job or receives bad news, then it is seen as the will of the ancestors. People do not have to take responsibility for their own lives or face the consequences of their actions. The spiritual focus is on the invocation of the blessings from the ancestors on the individuals through appeasement.

In contrast, Augustine, although acknowledging God's providence, believes that every decision still belongs to each individual. The consequences of his decision to steal pears (2.4–7) or to play games instead of studying (1.19.30) were not seen as God's fault, but the results his own sinfulness. For example, Augustine (5.8.14) reveals the motive for his going to Rome. Although he acknowledges God's work in his life, Augustine also acknowledges personal motivations for his decision. The motive of the reputation of the students and the academic environment appealed to him. The notion of mankind taking responsibility for their actions is evident throughout Augustine's reflection on his life. African Indigenous theology does not encourage this, and it is vital for the development of black Africans in South Africa. It creates a trend where blame is placed elsewhere and not on the individuals. Augustine's view is essential as it empowers individuals to take charge of their lives. It causes each individual to evaluate his or her life through choices made. Good results can be seen as God's blessings, but at the same time it does not negate the will and intellect of the individuals. There can be no scapegoat to take responsibility for each individual action. More so, the veneration of the ancestors can be abused by those who do not even believe in them. Ndumiso Ngcobo (2014) in *Eat, Drink and Blame the Ancestors* as a Zulu man documents situations in his life where he and people that he knows misuse the idea

of ancestors to get out of trouble and to indulge in binges on meat and liquor dedicated to the ancestral spirits. A theology that makes mankind accountable to one true God enforces the idea that each decision is important, and that one is responsible for one's life.

This is evident in the black South African community, which often places blame for the current failures on apartheid. For example, the unemployment rate in South Africa among black South Africans is high. Statistics South Africa (StatsSA 2014:6) states,

Black Africans account for 79,3% of the working age population but they are underrepresented among the employed (73,0%) and over-represented among the unemployed (85.7%) and the not economically active population (83,3%). Compounding the dire labour market situation of Black Africans, is that an even larger percentage (87.4%) of those that are unemployed have been looking for work for one year or longer.

In addition, there is more power blackout due to the lack of sufficient power production. In January, 2015 the current president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, blamed apartheid for the lack of adequate infrastructure (du Plessis and Makinana 2015:www.citypress.co.za/news/zuma-blames-apartheid/). Twenty years after the fall of apartheid, black South Africans still find it easier to blame the past regime for the present failures than to take responsibility for the current situations. In May 2008 the world witnessed xenophobic attacks in South Africa. The attacks lasted a couple of weeks, and African foreigner business owners and residents were the focus of the attacks. There was another spell of xenophobic attacks in 2014, and in February 2015 there were still some incidents of xenophobic attacks. The attacks were concentrated primarily in black settlements and townships. The motivation for these attacks was economic. With a large number of black South African being unemployed, the blame was put on the foreign nationals, and not

the government or their own choices they had made. The targets were foreign-owned businesses that employed local workers. The actions do not correspond with the logic behind the motivation for the attacks. However, this is not surprising, as the culture of passing blame is entrenched in black South African communities. A theology that encourages individuals and communities to take responsibility for their lives and decisions is needed to transform the South African society.

3. The Difference in the View of Sin

Augustine's view of sin expressed in the *Confessions* and African Indigenous theological perspective differ greatly. Augustine's writings express a specific view of sin. In the Book 1 Augustine expresses his belief in the inherent sinful nature of mankind. Augustine (1.6.8) observes that infants have selfishness and pride, as they seek to be served. In addition, Augustine (1.7.11) states, 'Hear me, O God! Woe to the sins of men! When a man cries thus, thou showest him mercy, for thou didst create the man but not the sin in him'. He believes that God created mankind but not the sin in him. Augustine (1.7.12), also, observes that he was never innocent, but guilty of sin as he was conceived in iniquity (meaning that he inherited a sinful nature from his parents). This concurs with the biblical descriptions of the fallen nature of mankind, that no one is good and man is incapable of being good (Ps 12:1–2; Rom 3:9–20). Augustine believes that mankind sins not only because they have to, but because they enjoy sin. An example that he uses is the situation where he stole a bunch of pears as a young man. Augustine (2.4.7) says that he did not steal the pears because he was hungry but states,

Behold, now let my heart confess to thee what it was seeking there,
when I was being gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to

evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own undoing. I loved my error-not that for which I erred but the error itself. A depraved soul, falling away from security in thee to destruction in itself, seeking nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself.

Sin is delightful, as it is that which is in the heart (Jas 1:14). Sin is attractive and easily lures individuals (Wannas 2014:xxxvi). Augustine's view differs from African Indigenous theology. Kunhiyop (2008) in *African Christian Ethics* contrasts African and Western moral laws. Kunhiyop (2008:8) states that 'African moral laws are passed down orally from generation to generation and they become absolute guide to the communities. The elders and the ancestors decide on moral laws that are deemed good for the communities.' This applies to the Christian community as well. According to the African Indigenous Churches, the concept of church is based on the African idea of an extended family (Oduro 2008:62). Obedience to the leaders and elders is necessary, as disobedience can cause communal disunity and suffering. Sin, therefore, is breaking communal laws and bringing hardship on the community (Kunhiyop 2008:8). In the South African context, hardships are often interpreted as retribution by the ancestors. Therefore, if calamity befalls a community, it is customary to find the culprit and either excommunicate the individual, or even at times kill the individual. Mob justice in black communities is not uncommon. Those killed are often criminals and people suspected of practising harmful witchcraft. They are often viewed as those responsible for calamities in communities. However, in the present context, xenophobic attacks can be grouped under this principle as well. The presence of foreigners is seen as a curse that brings hardships and unemployment in the community. The only way to bring back good fortune is to get rid of those responsible. Therefore sin is not individual-based but communal. The focus is on the well-being of the community. Shaun Smillie (2010),

a reporter of African Eye News Service, reported on the criminal case of a man who killed his relative and consumed parts of his body because he believed that the ancestors instructed him to do so. Adam Ashforth (2005) in *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* focuses on crimes, many violent, attributed to the belief in the ancestors. Many of these cases come from ritual killings of members of the AIC church groups. Although it is essential to note that not all AIC churches encourage this belief it is undeniable that most do. Syncretism of Christianity and African traditional beliefs blurs the lines between biblical morality and cultural allegiance.

Both Augustine's and the African Indigenous theological views have their weaknesses. Augustine's weakness is not theological, but rather based on the focus of his presentation. Augustine's focus in the *Confessions* is primarily on the individual and not on the effect of sin on others. The *Confessions* focuses on Augustine's reflection on his life. There are some references to how his sins affected his mother, but these are limited and they serve as admiration of his mother's faith in God. Unfortunately, Augustine does not mention the effects his decisions had on the woman with whom he fathered a son. There are short references to the woman and the son, but he avoids mentioning how his selfish ambitions affected them. Augustine (6.15.25) uses a passive voice, creating a perception that the decision to remove the son's mother was not his. The reader of the *Confessions* is left with an unanswered question of who removed the woman from Augustine's life. Was it his mother due to her desire to see her son married to a legitimate wife, or was it God through his divine providence through circumstances and people that caused the woman to leave? These are questions that are not answered in the *Confessions*.

There is biblical evidence of the effect of sin on the community. There is the effect of Cain's murderous act on his family (Gen 4), the sinful nature of mankind that brought judgement on the earth (Gen 6), the stubbornness of Pharaoh that brought suffering on Egypt (Exod 7–12), the rebellion that brought forty years of wandering in the desert (Num 14), Achan's sin at Ai (Josh. 7). There are numerous other examples in the scriptures that can be found. The communal aspect of sin has a biblical premise. However, this does not make African Indigenous theology superior to Augustine's view of sin.

The African Indigenous theological view of sin in the South African context prevents mankind from taking responsibility for his sinful actions. There are two main reasons why the communal view of sin, alone, is insufficient. The first reason is that it does not correspond with the biblical notion of sin. Sin is regarded as disobedience to God's commandments and laws. Each individual is responsible for his or her actions. The sons of Aaron disobeyed God regarding the laws of the sacrifice. Their sins did not affect the community, but God punished them for their transgressions (Lev 10:1–3). The same occurred with the sons of Samuel (1 Sam 3:11; 4:14–18). Each individual will be judged based on his actions against God's moral law (Heb 9:27). Just as each individual's unrighteousness is judged, so is each individual's faith rewarded with eternal life (John 3:16–17; Rom 10:9–10). The judgement of God is not based on communal consensus but on the individual's responsibility to God.

The second reason why the communal view of sin, alone, is insufficient, is that it creates ethical and a theological enigma. This notion encourages a relative view of ethics. Everything depends on the consequences of the actions. Adultery cannot be deemed wrong if there are no negative consequences that will affect the community. Therefore God's absolute moral law becomes obsolete. There is binding moral

law, but only the consequences of the actions matter. If lying and cheating can benefit the community, then they can easily be accepted as good and noble even though they may, theoretically, be bad (Pollock 2012:37). In addition, everything is relative, as it will depend on the good of each local church community. The African Indigenous theological view is based on the notion of evil and suffering. The emphasis has been on avoiding suffering and embracing the good in life. During apartheid the leader of the ZCC church encouraged its members to support the regime and not oppose it, as opposition would bring suffering to the community (Oomen 2005:153). The focus was not on whether or not apartheid was based on moral grounds, but the focus was on the retribution of the state on the community. In African Indigenous theology there are moral absolutes that are based on the bible, but the commands from the ancestors supersede these moral laws if they can bring good fortune to both individuals and the community.

Good fortune and suffering are the measuring rod of whether or not the individual or community has pleased God and the ancestors. Suffering is seen as punishment from the ancestors due to disobedience. Augustine views all the pain and suffering as meaningful to work to establish God's divine plan on earth, (Crosson 2003:75). Therefore, suffering and pain are part of fallen mankind's existence, but they find meaning within God's divine providence. Not all suffering is due to the individual's or communal sin. African Indigenous theology in South Africa encourages the wait-and-see approach. If there is suffering, then one has to bring some sacrifices and perform rituals to appease the ancestors and to cleanse one from all the misfortunes attached to the individual or community. After the ceremonies one continues with his or her own life and waits for good fortune to come. The passive nature of this view is dangerous, as one simply waits on the decisions of the ancestors. Whatever happens is based on the will of the spirits. For this

reason, South Africa performs cleansing rituals annually for the country to get rid of all the misfortunes in the land, so that the spirits can bless the country. Both President Mbeki and President Zuma attended and performed the annual cleansing rituals. Augustine creates a balance between the sovereign act of God and the responsibility of mankind for his life. This balance is needed when dealing with sin and suffering.

4. The Difference in the View of Suffering

The view of suffering in South African Indigenous theology is connected to its view of sin and divine providence. Augustine sees God as an active deity in the lives of mankind, whether or not they realise it. The South African Indigenous theological role of a distant God leaves a practical question of the existence of evil and suffering. The view of the ancestors attempts to fill the vacuum by attributing suffering and blessings to the active role of the ancestors. Taking Augustine's position would lead to the question of the existence of evil and suffering. Augustine (12.7.7) maintains that when God created the world everything was good and perfect. There was no sorrow and sadness. Everything changed due to rebellion and disobedience to God of both angels and mankind (13.8.9). Unfortunately, Augustine does not mention suffering caused by natural disasters, but focuses on man-caused suffering. The man-caused suffering is due to sinful acts that affect both the perpetrators and the victims, such as the man from whom he stole the pears, or the suffering of his mother when he ran away to Rome and Milan. Augustine acknowledges social suffering as part of the fallen human existence with the poor and the needy. However, he focuses on the Christian response to suffering. Augustine (13.18.22) states,

Thus, O Lord, thus I beseech thee: let it happen as thou hast prepared it, as thou givest joy and the capacity for joy. Let truth

spring up out of the earth, and let righteousness look down from heaven, and let there be lights in the firmament. Let us break our bread with the hungry, let us bring the shelterless poor to our house; let us clothe the naked, and never despise those of our own flesh.

The call for truth and righteousness indicates the strong presence of falsity and unrighteousness causing concern. These can be seen as contributors to the social ills of mankind. Augustine, however, does not dwell on the causes of suffering, but on the Christian response to it. He calls for a pragmatic response rather than a spiritual response, with feeding the hungry, finding shelter for the homeless, clothing the naked and taking care of one's kin. The South African black communities differ in their responses to dealing with suffering. There is a general view that suffering is the curse of the ancestors. The responses range from support for the individual by trying to appease the ancestors, to bringing good fortune to the suffering individual, to rejection as he or she may be considered the cursed member of the family. The severity of the treatment of the offender differs according to the perceived view of the suffering by the community. The suffering of the community may result in the perceived offender being excommunicated or, in some cases, being killed by mob justice. Augustine's view places the responsibility on Christians to help the sufferer. This is a very practical view that will help to create an African theology which not only coheres with the scriptures, but one that encourages social responsibility. This can be acceptable to many South African black communities, as it corresponds with their communal view of family. There has never been any assurance that once the person is removed from the community the suffering will cease. The biblical view of caring for the poor and the needy is essential to ensure both the well-being and development of the

community. This view is what is needed to be enforced in South African Indigenous theology.

5. The Way Forward in Reshaping South African Indigenous Theology

It is a near impossible task to transform the South African Indigenous theology, as everything is relative to each local congregation. The ZCC church, for example, is the largest AIC denomination in South Africa but it lacks theological coherence. There are several common practices in local churches, such as drinking a special tea that is considered holy, the use of holy water from the river near the headquarters in Limpopo and the use of the badge for both identification and protection. However, what I have noticed when I visited several local churches is that their views of spirits, the bible and divine providence differ. Each local church leader has a different view of the Bible, sin and the role of baptism. Therefore, dealing with each theological view would be impossible. Both the view of God's active role in mankind and sin are fundamental in encouraging a more biblical coherent theology.

There have been attempts and suggestions on how an authentic African theology can be developed. The primary suggestion for creating an authentic African theology focused on presenting Jesus Christ as an ancestor. Bénézet Bujo (1992) in *African Theology in its Social Context* presents Jesus as a Proto-Ancestor. Bujo (1992:77–92) states that Jesus founded and sustains the Christian community through the ages, and through his earthly life has realised all the moral attributes found in the idea of ancestors in African communities. The concept of Jesus as an ancestor has been championed by many African scholars, such as Charles Nyamiti (1985) in *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*, and Francois Kabasele Lumbala (1991) in *Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother*. Although I support the need for

presenting an authentic African theology, it is dangerous to associate Jesus with the ancestors. My first criticism is that not only would it create a theological problem that the western theological community would struggle to accept, but the view of ancestors differs in each local community. Even though there are some similarities, the specific notion of ancestors should be taken into consideration (Reed and Mtukwa 2010:148). In the Tsonga-Shangaan and the Northern Sotho (Pedi) cultures in the Limpopo province, like all black South African cultures, there is a belief in the ancestors. The highest honour that the ancestors can bestow on a family member is calling the individual to be a traditional healer, *n'anga* in tsonga and *ngaka* in pedi. The ceremony of initiation bears a close resemblance to Christian baptism. This can pose some difficulties in communicating baptism to the local people. However, in neither the Tsonga and Pedi cultures are there criteria for who can be an ancestor. This is different from the Zulu culture in the Kwazulu-Natal province which has broad criteria of who can be an ancestor. The inconsistencies and different views of different cultures and local communities will make it difficult to present a consistent view of Jesus as an ancestor, even a Proto-Ancestor.

The second criticism of presenting Jesus as an ancestor is that it compromises the Christian theological notion of the deity of Christ before the incarnation. Houlden (2003:9) expresses this concern on the grounds of contrasting definitions and characteristics of ancestors. What needs to be taken into consideration is that ancestors are primarily human spirits that attain deity after death. In cultures that do not have criteria on who can be an ancestor, the only qualification is death, while those that do have criteria the focus is on living an ethical life and obedience to the ancestors. Presenting Jesus as an ancestor in South Africa can encourage an Apotheotic view of Christ; that Christ was a man who was deified due to his obedience to God. This compromise of

the deity of Christ can have an effect on the message of the Gospel. Reed and Mtukwa (2010:150) make an interesting observation that ‘the anger or blessings of the ancestor is directed to those who consider this ancestor their ancestor—that is, family or clan members.’ This means that the boundary of influence is limited to kinship or some kind of recognition and acceptance. If the role of the ancestors is limited to their kin, associating Christ will limit the role of God to Christians and those that recognise him, only. The rule of God will not be absolute over all nations in the world, but only over those that profess to be Christian. This will create some challenges in Christian Eschatology that sees the second coming as judgment on all nations (Rev 19-21) (McConkie 2010:121). In addition, the primary mediatory role of the ancestors would still define God as a distant being, who cannot relate to mankind. The mediatory role of the Jesus as an ancestor, or the Proto-Ancestor (Bujo 1992:77–92), cannot be seen in the same light as the Jesus the High Priest (Heb 4:14–16). Jesus is not only a mediator, but the sacrificial lamb to reconcile God and mankind (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:18–20). God cannot be seen as a distant deity, but active in the lives of mankind.

Augustine’s view expressed in *The Confessions* of an active God is the best way to start reshaping African Indigenous theology in all the different contexts. The notion of an active God who can communicate and reveal himself to mankind will solve many of the theological problems facing the African Church. This view will challenge the necessity for the notion of the ancestor. If God came to redeem mankind, then the role of ancestors becomes unnecessary. Individuals and societies become accountable to God directly and not to other forces. Therefore, the view of sin is not just about the commands of what is believed to be the ancestors, but rather on God’s law revealed through the scriptures. True African theology is a theology that breaks the barrier between mankind and God, and mankind can develop

through individual relationship with God and social transformation that reflects the rule of God.

6. Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the differences between Augustine's and African Indigenous theological views on God's providence and sin. These two points are essential in shaping a true African theology. Augustine's view of an active God who is concerned with the affairs of mankind is necessary, and serves as a stepping stone to other theological issues in African theology. This will pose a challenge to the role of ancestors in African Christian theology. This is the reason why I do not encourage the association of Christ with ancestors as advocated by Nyamiti (1984), Kabasele Lumbala (1991) and Bujo (1992). This will pose many theological difficulties that will hinder the Gospel being fully understood and accepted. The only way is to present Augustine's view of God who is involved in the affairs of mankind to the point of dying on the cross. More so, Augustine's view of suffering encourages a social response that can be easily accepted by the Black communities in South Africa. This view will help to develop individuals and societies as people take more control of and responsibility for their lives. African theology should aim at creating a balance between a belief in the divine and holy God who is involved in the lives of mankind, and mankind bearing responsibility for both their lives and the consequences of their sinful actions. These are the foundations of a true biblical African theology. Further research is needed on practical strategies to reshape South African Indigenous theology. The strategies should not focus on the African Indigenous churches only, but reshaping the overall traditional view of God in Black communities. It is easier to focus on AIC churches and their theology, but if the notion of an existing yet distant God still exists in Black communities, it would not stop the re-

emergence of the African-Christian syncretic theology. The battle would be like fighting the mythological seven-headed Serpent with problems that will keep on re-emerging. Whatever strategies will be employed they ought to have a cultural impact.

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Does Acts 15:9 Refute Intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile Distinction?

David Woods¹

Abstract

This study examines Peter's comment in Acts 15:9, that God made 'no distinction' between Gentile and Jewish Jesus-believers in purifying their hearts by faith, to determine whether the text teaches that the ecclesia is composed of an undifferentiated mix of people from the two groups. Textual analysis shows that the comment could be interpreted at a lexical level as a denial of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction, but the context of Acts 15:1–29 demands a narrower interpretation: there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in terms of how they are saved, but they remain distinct in other respects. Both Peter's speech and James' verdict provide strong evidence that the leaders of the nascent ecclesia made distinction between its Jewish and Gentile members, upholding Jews' obligation to Jewish Law and faith tradition, whilst imposing only a few moral prohibitions on Gentile believers.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

While Acts 10:1–11:18 records the watershed event in which Gentiles are declared pure by God (Woods 2012), 15:1–29 describes a related and equally important event often called the Jerusalem council. The council ruled that Gentile believers are not subject to the Law (Torah) except for a few necessary rules (15:19–20; 28–29); the decision is variously referred to as the apostolic decree, James’ verdict, the Jerusalem council ruling, and so on. In 15:7–9, Peter retold the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about God’s work among the Gentiles, alluding to the Cornelius incident mentioned above, and claimed that God ‘made no distinction between us [circumcised Jews] and them [uncircumcised Gentiles].’² Here, as in 11:12, Peter used the word *diakrinō*. Previously, I discussed difficulties of translating it as ‘distinction’ in 11:12 (partly explaining diverse translations), and concluded that ‘dispute’ is a better translation there (Woods 2014a). In 15:9, there is strong interpretive agreement among English Bibles which translate it as to ‘make a distinction’, ‘put a difference’ or ‘discriminate’ between circumcised and uncircumcised believers in Jesus. Being preceded by a negative adjective, the text indicates that God made no such distinction. Acts 15:9 is thus used as a proof text in the case against making any distinction within the ecclesia³ between its members descended from

² Biblical quotes are taken from the Lexham English Bible unless otherwise specified.

³The problem of terminology continues to hinder communications (see Woods 2014b:101). By ‘ecclesia’ I mean *Christ’s community, whether Jew or Gentile*, since ‘church’ is generally seen as a non-Jewish (and often anti-Jewish) entity. (Even the term ‘Jew’ is problematic; see Mason (2007). It is also dubious as to whether Jewish Jesus-believers in the NT ever identified themselves using the label ‘Christian’, which similarly has a non-Jewish sense—hence terms like ‘Jesus-believer’, ‘Christ-follower’ etc. in my writing. See *Table 1* and surrounding discussion on labels in Woods 2014b:114–115.) I previously used the transliteration, *ekklesia* (from ἐκκλησία), but ‘ecclesia’ seems a better balance between the needs of readability and contrast with the (non-Jewish, Christian) church, notwithstanding the apparent Latin-ness (and hence Roman Catholic-ness) of the spelling.

Israel and those from the nations. However, to cease differentiating between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus creates difficulties in interpreting other biblical texts, especially prophecies relating to the nation of Israel (e.g. Rom 11). Therefore, a closer inspection of what Peter meant by ‘no distinction’ in 15:9 is warranted, which this paper sets out to do. However, a brief overview of distinction theory is needed first in order to frame the study.

Distinction theory—that of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction—says that Jewish Jesus-believers have a different role and responsibility within the ecclesia to Gentile believers, just as Israel was divinely elected for a special and unique service among the nations (Gen 12:1–3; Exod 19:3–6; Jer 31:31–37; Ezek 37:26–28; Rom 9:4–5; 11:1–5). A relatively small but growing proportion of scholars, several of whom I have cited, precedes me in developing this concept. Both *distinction theory* and *intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction* are my own labels for a biblical interpretation that others already pioneered using terms such as ‘bilateral ecclesiology’ (Kinzer 2005), ‘unity and diversity in the church’ (Campbell 2008), ‘Torah-defined ecclesiological variegation’ (Rudolph 2010) and ‘dual expression’ churches or congregations (Juster n.d.). For my research, I deliberately chose ‘distinction’ over less objectionable synonyms like ‘differentiation’ because so many English Bibles use ‘distinction’ to translate *diakrinō* in Acts 15:9 (and some in 11:12) and *diastolē* in Romans 3:22 and 10:12. By using ‘distinction’, I do not mean to imply superiority of Jewish believers over Gentile believers, but rather that Jews within the ecclesia should be distinguishable in theologically significant ways from Gentiles. This distinction is most visible in the response of Jewish Jesus-believers to Torah.

These texts (Acts 11:12; 15:9; Rom 3:22 and 10:12), together with Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 2:15 and Colossians 3:11, are the key texts of the NT which apparently deny that the ecclesia should distinguish between its Jewish and its Gentile members. They have been used together as a bulwark against distinction theory, though I have already argued that two of them (viz. Eph 2:15 and, to a lesser extent, Acts 11:12), have been misinterpreted in Christian tradition (Woods 2014b and 2014a respectively). I found that these two texts provide no obstacle to the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction.

Reverting from that overview of distinction theory, this paper seeks to answer the same question of another text: *Does Acts 15:9 affirm Christian tradition by teaching that the ecclesia is composed of an undifferentiated mix of Jewish and Gentile Jesus-believers?* A surface reading of the text suggests it is a substantial obstacle to distinction theory since it explicitly states that God ‘made no distinction’ between the two groups. However, the whole discussion revolves around the differing covenantal obligations of ‘us’ (from the speakers’ perspective, i.e. Jews) and ‘them’ (Gentiles). The Jewish apostles, elders and brothers (15:23) decided not to place on the Gentiles any greater burden (legal obligation, explained below) than a few ‘necessary things’ (commandments, 15:28). Subsequent events in Acts suggest that the *us-and-them* classification persisted; it did not fall into disuse after the Jerusalem council. Moreover, the narrative presupposes that circumcised Jewish believers remain bound to the Torah. In fact, Israel’s covenantal obligation to Torah is a foundation of distinction theory. From these observations, the continuation of Jew-Gentile distinction appears axiomatic in the early ecclesia described in Acts. Therefore, the application of Acts 15:9 as evidence against distinction theory needs investigation, which is the purpose of this paper.

The method used is simply to examine the key phrase in the Greek text of Acts 15:9 to see if ‘no distinction’ is an appropriate translation from a lexical perspective, and if there are any notable variant readings to consider. Thereafter, a study is undertaken of the immediate context of the Jerusalem council (15:1–29) to determine whether it supports the outcome of the textual analysis, or if the context presupposes a different sense of the word ‘distinction’. The conclusion reviews the findings of the textual and contextual analyses which seem to be inconsistent *prima facie*. It then discusses distinction theory as a possible solution, before making a final judgement on the key question. Reflection on the implications of the study is reserved. In another paper, I present an historical analysis of later events recorded in Acts (from 15:30 onwards) to determine whether or not they are consistent with the findings of this study (see Woods 2015).⁴

2. Textual analysis

Peter used the word *diakrinō* in an important statement in his speech to the council of apostles and elders who had gathered in Jerusalem over the question of whether Gentile believers needed to be circumcised. In Acts 15:8–9, Peter argued that ‘God, who knows the heart, testified to them *by giving them* the Holy Spirit, just as he also *did* to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing [purifying] their hearts by faith.’⁵ He concluded that Gentiles should not be subjected to the yoke of the Law (discussed in detail below), noting that ‘*we* [Jews]

⁴ The original version of the paper appears in my thesis (referenced above) and may appear in revised format in a future publication.

⁵ The difficulty with ‘cleanse’ is its cognate relation to ‘clean’, which is used ambiguously in English Bibles as both the opposite of ‘impure’ (whether ritually or morally) and of ‘unclean’ (a term applicable to some animals and foods, but never to humans). This ambiguity reinforces a misinterpretation of Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9–16, as readers may view ‘unclean’ as the opposite of ‘pure’ (See Woods 2012).

will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way those [Gentiles] also *are*.' (15:11).

This text in Acts 15:9 is simpler to treat than its counterpart in Acts 11:12 because there are no notable variant readings; God '*outhen diekrinen metaxy hēmōn te kai autōn*'. (RP uses '*ouden*' instead of '*outhen*' but this has no impact on the translation since both mean 'nothing' in this context.) English translations are practically unanimous in their interpretation of *diakrinō* here as 'making a distinction,' or 'putting a difference.' Indeed, de Graaf (2005:739) points out that 'to make a distinction' is a 'well-attested' sense of *diakrinō*. The objects of the verb are explicitly identified ('us' and 'them'), unlike in 11:12. Also, the verb is in active aorist indicative form, a simple manner of recounting an event. On these grounds, it would appear that 15:9 refutes distinction theory, since God himself plainly made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Instead, he gave his Spirit to Gentiles who heard the message of the gospel and believed, thus testifying to them just as he had done for Jewish believers, and he similarly purified their hearts by faith (15:7–9). The doubting, wavering or hesitating sense of *diakrinō* (see Woods 2014a) cannot be considered in 15:9 for the sentence to be coherent. Regardless of the nuance, whether judging, differentiating or separating the two groups, the general sense is to make a distinction between two parties. Thus '*outhen diekrinen*' clearly indicates that God made no such distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in his gracious deeds to them.

The textual analysis is thus easily concluded. However, the immediate context and subsequent events recorded in Acts should be examined to determine whether Peter's statement in 15:9 has any applicability for the ecclesia. Did God remove Jewish particularity so that the ecclesia would become an undifferentiated mix of Jews and Gentiles—a non-Jewish Christian church—or did he merely disregard Gentile

strangeness (foreignness) in that he purified them by the same means as he did Jews?

3. Contextual Analysis

3.1. Narrative outline

The flow of the narrative describing the Jerusalem council follows, itemised by verse numbers in Acts 15:

Verse 1: Some men from Judea taught the brothers at Antioch that they cannot be saved unless they are circumcised according to the Mosaic custom.

Verse 2: Paul and Barnabas strove hard and debated against the men from Judea. Paul, Barnabas and other (possibly Gentile) representatives from the ecclesia in Antioch were appointed to take the issue to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

Verse 3: They travelled from Antioch through Phoenicia and Samaria, ‘telling in detail the conversion of the Gentiles [in Antioch]’ which brought great joy to all the brothers in those places.

Verse 4: The ecclesia in Jerusalem received the travellers and heard the same report.

Verse 5: Some Jesus-believing Pharisees objected, supporting the claim of the men from Judea in verse 1. Not all the believing Pharisees did so, but ‘*tines*’ (some).⁶

⁶ Note that Paul himself remained a Pharisee (Acts 23:6).

Verses 6–7: The apostles and elders met to discuss the matter and had a long debate. If the events of 15:22 followed immediately, then the whole ecclesia of Jerusalem was assembled. It appears likely that the objectors mentioned in 15:5 were present, as well as delegates from Antioch, and certainly Paul and Barnabas (15:12).

Verses 7–11: Peter gave a short speech in which he recalled God’s choice to bring the Gentiles to faith through the gospel, giving the Holy Spirit to them, and making ‘no distinction between us and them, cleansing [purifying] their hearts by faith.’ Peter rhetorically asked the motive for subjecting the Gentile disciples to the yoke (of the Law), pointing out that the means of salvation for Jews and Gentiles is the same for both: ‘through the grace of the Lord Jesus.’

Verse 12: Barnabas and Paul described ‘all the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ to the whole group.

Verses 13–21: James responded. Referring to Peter’s testimony and citing the prophet Amos, he concluded that Gentile believers in Jesus only need to observe a few basic restrictions.

Verses 22–23: The whole ecclesia in Jerusalem decided to send Paul, Barnabas, Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas to the ecclesia in Antioch (and Syria and Cilicia, v. 23) with a letter recording the decision.

Verses 23–29: The contents of the letter: salutations; invalidation of the circumcision agitators of 15:1; endorsement of the four messengers; and a terse record of the council’s decision.

This brief outline suffices to support the following contextual analysis of Peter's claim that God had 'made no distinction between us and them' (15:9).

3.2. Background

3.2.1. A prevailing assumption

Those among the Pharisees in the Jerusalem ecclesia who believed it was necessary to circumcise Gentile believers and command them to observe the Law of Moses (15:5) were surely doing the same with their own sons, yet this was apparently of no concern to anyone at the meeting. It may even be surmised that all those present did so, since that was their Law and custom and Jesus had instructed them to 'do and observe everything' that the Jewish authorities determined (Matt 23:2–3)—even the seemingly trivial matters of the Law (23:23). Had they abandoned the Law themselves it would be very strange to debate at length (15:7) whether or not Gentile disciples of Jesus had to observe the Law.

If the Gentile brothers were becoming fully-fledged Jews there would have been no need for debate, but only the circumcision faction held that such conversion was required (Acts 15:1, 5).⁷ The brothers mentioned in 15:1 were Gentile believers, since otherwise the men from Judea would not have perceived the need for them to be circumcised. Gentiles were the subject of the conversation in Phoenicia and Samaria in 15:3, of the report in Jerusalem in 15:4, of the dispute in 15:5, and of

⁷ Unfortunately, the label 'circumcision faction' or 'circumcision party' may mislead readers into thinking that the other Jewish believers in Jesus, including the apostles, were opposed to circumcision and, by inference, Torah-observance in general. Rather, the label denotes a sub-group of Jewish Jesus-believers who insisted on *Gentile* believers being circumcised.

the council meeting in 15:6–21, as well as the addressees of the letter in 15:23–29. Finally, when the letter concerning the Gentile believers was read in Antioch, they were probably those who rejoiced the most over the ruling, and they were the most encouraged (15:31). The letter did not contain any encouragement specifically for Jewish believers in the ecclesia in Antioch. The ‘long message’ by Judas and Silas that further ‘encouraged and strengthened the brothers’ (15:32) surely explained the events and decision of the Jerusalem council in much more detail than the short letter itself.

Bauckham (2013:180) affirms the assumption that Jewish believers were to continue observing Torah after reminding his readers of biblical prophecies that produced an expectation for the nations to worship the God of Israel in the eschatological age (p. 178). The logic is very compelling, especially after dispelling the notion that Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9–16 meant that Jewish food laws were *passé* (see Miller 2002; Woods 2012). The oft-assumed abolition of Mosaic Law would have been a momentous occasion in biblical history, at least equal to the Sinai event.⁸ It would also be difficult to reconcile with some key texts (such as Matt 5:17–19; 23:23; Acts 21:20–24; Rom 2:13–16; 3:31; 7:12, 14; 10:16) and it would have obviated the need for the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, since no Jewish believers would be arguing for Gentile observance of the Law if they weren’t keeping it themselves (see Rudolph 2013:23; Wyschogrod 2004:209). Employing the biblical method of *kal v’khomer* (‘light and heavy,’ or *a fortiori*): if it was hard for the apostles and elders to avoid putting the yoke of the Law on Gentile disciples, how much harder it would be to remove the same yoke from the neck of the Jews on whom God placed it! It took ‘no little strife and debate’ (15:2) in Antioch and ‘much debate’ in

⁸ Acts 2, which records how God gave his Spirit to Jesus’ disciples, does not suggest any change in status of the Law. In the new covenant, the Spirit internalises the Law (Jer 31:31–33; Heb 8:10; 10:16), thereby affirming it.

Jerusalem (15:7) even before Peter, and later James (after further evidence was presented, 15:12) reached a conclusion concerning Gentile believers' obligation to the Law. How much greater would have been the difficulty to cancel the Law for Israel? *The prevailing assumption concerning the Law at the time of the Jerusalem council, therefore, was that all Jews (including Jesus-believing Jews) were subject to it.* The *status quo* of the time is crucial for the exegesis of Acts 15:9a.

3.2.2. Derivation of the four prohibitions

The prohibitions for Gentile disciples in Acts 15:20 may be related either to the Law for resident aliens (e.g. Bauckham 2013:183; Dauermann 2012; Michael and Lancaster 2009; Skarsaune 2002:170) or to the Noachide laws (Flusser and Safrai 2012; Stern 1992:278 and 2007:154–156)—or both, whilst implying much more (Janicki 2012). In the first case, the same Law applies to the whole community, Jewish and Gentile, but it makes different requirements for different sub-communities. Gentiles dwelling among Israel ('resident aliens,' to use the Lexham English Septuagint translation) had the lowest level of legal obligation;⁹ women had some laws applicable uniquely to them; priests and Levites had their own laws too. Yet all of these regulations were contained in the same Torah, and all its subjects enjoyed similar benefits of legal protection and of blessing. Thus, according to the first view, when God purified Gentile believers in Jesus without their becoming Jewish proselytes they were expected to submit to the commandments for resident aliens. Since Paul described Gentile believers as 'fellow citizens of the saints [of Israel] and members the

⁹ Leviticus 17:10, 12, 13 and 18:26 specifically include resident aliens in their commandments.

household of God' (Eph 2:19), he may well have mentally classified them together with aliens dwelling in the midst of Israel.

Further to the prescriptions for aliens living among Israel, Judaism sees all humans as 'Noachides' (descendants of Noah) and hence subject to the commandments God gave in his covenant with Noah (Gen 9:1–17). Thus the Noachide laws were established from the Noachide covenant and are universally applicable, at least from the Jewish perspective. The rabbinic tradition, expressed in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 56a) distills these prohibitions to seven and presents them as the minimum standard for righteousness of Gentiles before God. The view that the four prohibitions in Acts 15:20 derive from the Noachide laws assumes an earlier, coarser, oral form of them which banned idolatry, sexual immorality, the consumption of blood (assumed to be the purpose of those who strangle animals)¹⁰ and murder. (*Tou haimatos* ('from blood') in Acts 15:20, may be taken as a ban on drinking blood or on bloodshed, i.e. murder.) For more information on the derivation of the Noachide laws and their possible use in the apostolic decree, refer to Neuhaus (2012); Flusser and Safrai (2012); Michael and Lancaster (2009:59); Payne (2013); Stern (1992:277). (Also see Lev 17:10–16 and Abodah Zarah 8:4–8 in the Tosefta.)

In a third option, Janicki argues that the situation of Gentile members of the new covenant was not as simple as that of resident aliens or of Noachides (2012:37, 49–72). Though the principles of both standards provided guidance for the apostolic decree in Acts 15, the legal derivation thereof was more complex, and the anticipated application of the Law to Gentile believers was much more extensive. 'Gentiles in Messiah have a status in the people of God and a responsibility to Torah that far exceeds that of the God-fearer of the ancient synagogue and that

¹⁰ In Jewish tradition, the prohibition against the consumption of blood derives from Genesis 9:4–5 which simultaneously prohibits consuming strangled animals.

of the modern-day Noachide’ (Janicki 2012:50). In any case, however the four prohibitions were derived, consensus is that the source was the Torah—the Law of Moses. *Therefore, the apostles and others at the Jerusalem council regarded the Law as applicable and authoritative.* This is an important point for understanding the background, or historical context, of the decision expressed in Acts 15:20.

3.3. Peter’s speech

3.3.1. Was ‘no distinction’ meant in a general or a restricted sense?

A key question to be addressed is whether or not the means of salvation mentioned in Acts 15:11 implicitly restricts the eradication of distinction in 15:9 to soteriological matters only. That is, does the fact that Gentiles are saved in exactly the same way as Jews really mean that *all* distinctions between them are removed or, at least, theologically inconsequential? Or did Peter simply mean that God made no distinction between them in terms of how they are saved?

According to the text, Gentiles heard the message of the gospel and believed (15:7), whereupon God ‘testified to them *by giving them* the Holy Spirit, just as he also *did* to us [Jews]. And he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing [purifying] their hearts by faith’ (15:8–9). Peter closed by stating that the faith and salvation of himself and his Jewish companions would materialise in the same way as for the Gentiles: ‘through the grace of the Lord Jesus’ (15:11). His conclusion (discussed further below) brought the central concern into sharp focus: the means of salvation. God’s equal treatment of the Gentiles meant that they were saved the same way that Jews were, without distinction. However, none of Peter’s words suggest the undoing of Jewish particularity in general.

3.3.2. *The example of Cornelius*

When considering God's salvation of the Gentiles, it is helpful to revisit the Cornelius incident in Acts 10 when the Spirit was first given to them, and Peter's report of it in 11:1–18. In 10:34–35, Peter said, 'God is not one who shows partiality, but in every nation the one who fears him and who does what is right is acceptable to him.' Peter thus indicated that Jews have no advantage concerning acceptability to God, who gave Cornelius and his household his Spirit without requiring their conversion. Being Jewish was apparently not the criterion for receiving God's favour, but rather right attitude (fear of God) and conduct, as demonstrated by Cornelius. Nevertheless, at no point does the narrative of Acts imply, let alone state, that Jesus-faith cancels Jewish observance. Thus Peter said, 'To this one [Jesus] all the prophets testify, that through his name everyone [whether Jewish or Gentile] who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins' (10:43).

Similarly, the angel who appeared to Cornelius, a Gentile, said that Peter would speak words by which Cornelius and his household would be saved (11:14). Peter did *not* say, 'Surely no one can withhold *circumcision* for these [Gentile believers].' Instead, he spoke of withholding water for washing (baptizing) them (10:47). Gentile believers were to be washed from impurity to make them pure, but they were not to be circumcised to make them Jewish. Neither were Jewish believers told to forsake their faith tradition. The Jew-Gentile boundary apparently remained intact in Peter's view, in spite of God's surprising salvation of Gentiles who believed the gospel. The earlier Jerusalem conference (11:1–18) confirmed this in its climactic statement: 'God has granted the repentance *leading* to life to the Gentiles also!' The salvation that God had already provided for Israel was now also accessible to the nations without their becoming Israelites. Apparently, God's impartial treatment of all nations (10:34–35) was not a

revocation of Israel's particularity, but an affirmation of his fairness in issuing salvation.

3.3.3. *On the Law*

Returning to the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, Peter accused those who demanded Gentile circumcision of putting God to the test (15:10), as though God had not already made his acceptance of the Gentiles clear. In the same sentence, Peter referred to the Law as 'a yoke that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.' The verb 'have been able,' *ischuō*, appears in aorist active indicative form which need not be taken as a perfected action, as though Jewish believers no longer bore the yoke of the Law. To assume a past tense, 'were able,' which the ASV, KJV (1900), NCV, NKJV, NLT all do in following the tradition of the AV/KJV of 1873, is a theological imposition on Peter's generation since there is no hint in the text that Jewish believers had forsaken the Law. Accordingly, most modern translations opt for the more appropriate wording, 'have been able.'

Acts 15:11, which speaks of salvation, starts with the emphatic disjunction, *alla*, contrasting it to the previous sentence on responsibility to the Law. This contrast de-couples any perceived connection between Law and salvation, expressing that both Jews and Gentiles 'will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.' However, the contrast does not convey any antinomian sentiment. It simply shows that salvation is by grace; it is not—as the circumcision proponents thought—by bearing the yoke of the Law. Thus Gentile disciples were not required to observe the Torah in the same way as Jews. Rudolph (2010:12–13 fn. 53) reaches a similar conclusion:

I interpret Acts 15:10–11 to mean that Jews experience soteriological blessing 'through the grace of the Lord Jesus' and not by Torah

observance according to the standards of Pharisaic halakhah (note the Pharisaic context of the demands in Acts 15:5). It does not follow from this statement that Peter considered Jesus-believing Jews exempt from the responsibilities of Jewish covenantal life stipulated in the Torah or that he considered these responsibilities necessary for salvation. He may have viewed them as commandments of God for Jews, the observance of which did not have a direct bearing on salvation. Similarly, the apostolic decree lists a number of ritual ‘requirements’ (ἐπιτάγαι) for Jesus-believing Gentiles (Acts 15:28–29) but there is no indication that they are necessary for salvation.

3.3.4. *Language and logic*

An additional contrast to the one made by the disjunction (‘but’) is also evident in the *us-and-them* language of 15:10–11. Peter clearly identified with Israel which bears the yoke of the Law, not with the Gentile disciples whom he said should not do so. Nevertheless, he said, ‘we’ (Jews) and ‘those’ (Gentiles) are both saved by grace. In other words, Peter distinguished between Jewish and Gentile believers in relation to Torah in 15:10, and 15:11 he contrasted this distinction with their common means of salvation. Far from refuting distinction theory, Acts 15:10–11 validates it firmly.

Similar validation is found in Paul’s writings. God’s salvation by grace is common to the circumcised and uncircumcised alike *as they are*; members of neither party are to alter that condition (1 Cor 7:17–24). Additionally, those who are circumcised are obligated to keep the whole Law (Gal 5:3). Combining these texts creates a syllogism with the ‘necessary conclusion: All those who are born as Jews are obligated to live as Jews’ (Kinzer 2005:73). By the same token, Gentile believers are to continue to live as non-Jews. Moreover, the mutual dependence of Jews and Gentiles on Jesus’ grace expels the notion that intra-

ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction is a distinction of priority (i.e. that Jews are superior) and demands that it has the sense of differentiation.¹¹ The theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction holds that the two groups are distinct from one-another in a theologically significant way, not that one group is superior to another (see Woods 2014b:102).

3.3.5. *Purity and sanctification*

Peter's speech, therefore, does not dismiss the distinction of Jews from Gentiles *in general* but only in a *soteriological* sense. A similar but more nuanced interpretation is presented by Bauckham (2013), who sees Acts 15:9 as referring to the end of Jew-Gentile distinction among all believers in relation to moral purity, which was a far greater concern than ritual purity. The type of impurity of concern late in the Second Temple period was that which resulted from the wickedest sins, particularly idolatry, sexual immorality and murder (p. 179), as we might expect from the Noachide commandments and from the Torah's regulations for aliens living among Israel. Jews were wary of being defiled by the widespread moral impurity of Gentiles and thus had to constantly avoid contact with them, most especially in table fellowship, which they regarded as intimate (p. 180). (Note the accusation that Peter ate with uncircumcised men in Acts 11:3.) The purification of hearts in Acts 15:9 is a reference to Ezekiel 36:16–36 in which God's people are purified and enabled to keep his commandments (p. 180). Peter said that Gentiles had been purified in the same way—not through circumcision but by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8–9). Thus, among Jesus-believers, the distinction between pure Jews and impure Gentiles fell away because God had purified them all from moral impurities. Surely, the purification of Gentiles also enabled them to keep God's

¹¹ This differentiation is made public largely by Jewish observance of specific laws required of them but not of Gentiles, pre-eminently that of circumcision.

commandments too, but apparently the Law did not apply to Gentiles in the same way as to Jews. With the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy, 'it became possible to envisage the messianic people of God as a community of both Jews and Gentiles, the former observing Torah, the latter not' (Bauckham 2013:180). Thus, in Bauckham's view, Jew-Gentile distinction was erased in regards to purity, but retained in regards to Torah-obligation.

In addition to God's purification of Gentiles, they were also sanctified by his gift of the Spirit (10:44).¹² Thus there is another sense in which the distinction between Jews as God's holy (set apart, or sanctified) people and Gentiles as common (not set apart unto God) was removed: God himself had sanctified Jesus-believing Gentiles just as he had done with the nation of Israel long before. The Gentiles' purification and sanctification, plus their close fellowship with Jews and unity with Israel (see Woods 2014b on Eph 2:15) are all elements of their salvation. Indeed, the purpose of the Jerusalem council was to determine the requirements for salvation of Gentiles (Acts 15:1, 5) which the previous passage hinted at in closing: God 'had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles' (14:27). Faith is the way of sanctification, purification and salvation for both Jews and Gentiles alike, without distinction (15:7–9, 11). Yet faith does not by any means nullify the Law (Rom 3:31, also notable in Israel's Torah-observant heroes of faith, Heb 11:32–40)—the very Law that distinguishes between Jew and Gentile, and that the apostles applied differently to Gentile believers.

3.3.6. Review of Peter's speech

Thus the evidence in Peter's speech all testifies that *the distinction which God did not make between Jews and Gentiles in Acts 15:9*

¹² Also see 10:28, 47 which allude to both sanctity and purity, the latter by mentioning water baptism and Spirit baptism.

pertained to how they were saved. Peter’s words do not suggest in any way that the Law no longer applied to Jews, nor that all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles had been erased. Acts 26:17–18 implicitly confirms the soteriological domain of Peter’s speech in 15:7–11 by way of parallel. In it, Paul recounted how Jesus had assured him that he would rescue him from both Jews and Gentiles (26:17) in order to bring them to repentance ‘*so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me*’ (26:18). Here we see that both Jew and Gentile may be forgiven of their sins through repentance and sanctified by faith in Jesus, equally together joining the fellowship of the saints. In this regard, there is no distinction—Jews and Gentiles are saved in the same way. As to Jewish customs and obligation to the Law, the *status quo* was assumed.

3.4. James’ verdict

3.4.1. Background

Though not beyond dispute, historical records and modern scholars indicate that James, the brother of Jesus who became the first leader of the ecclesia in Jerusalem, was known for his piety and strict observance of the Law, yet he was put to death on account of the false accusation by the high priest, Ananus, of breaking the Law (Josephus: *Antiquities* 20:199–203; Eusebius: *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1:2–3 (citing Clement); 2.23:passim (citing Clement, Hegesippus and Josephus); Woods 2012:196).¹³ Evidently James observed the Law until his death long after the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost in Acts 2:1–4. As shall be observed in his role in the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, James’ whole paradigm for Jesus-faith existed within the matrix of Torah.

¹³ Note similar false accusations made against Stephen (Acts 6:11–14) and Paul (21:21).

After calling attention of the assembly to himself, James began by extracting the key point of Peter's testimony, that 'God first concerned himself to take from among the Gentiles a people for his name' (Acts 15:13–14). This reminded the assembly that God's election was not limited to the people of Israel who, as Bauckham (2013:182) explains, were accustomed to being called by God's name (Deut 28:10; 2 Chron 7:14; Jer 14:9; Dan 9:19) in contradistinction from the nations who were not (Isa 63:19). In Acts 15:15–18, James appealed firstly to Amos 9:11–12 and then alluded to Isaiah 45:21 as evidence that it was God's—not man's—plan 'from of old' for all nations to 'seek the Lord'. That is, God had always intended for people from all nations, not only Israel, to honour him.

Since Jeremiah 12:16 and Zechariah 2:11 (LXX) both speak of Gentiles dwelling in the midst of Israel during the messianic age (Bauckham 2013:183), these prophecies presumed future application of the four prohibitions (in Acts 15:20) for aliens in the midst of Israel. Thus, Bauckham concludes, the Torah made provision in advance for these messianic-era Gentiles 'who are not obliged, like Jews, by the commandments of the Torah in general, but are obliged by these specific commandments.' That is, Gentiles whom God was to call to himself in the messianic era were only to be subjected to these few commandments of Mosaic Law—the four prohibitions that James specified in Acts 15:20.

Moreover, Leviticus 18:24–30 (referring to offences identified in Lev 17–18) shows that the Canaanites defiled themselves and the land by practising the four things James prohibited. If such behaviour even defiled the moral purity of Gentiles who did not acknowledge Israel's God, surely Gentiles whose hearts God 'cleansed [purified] their hearts by faith' (Acts 15:10) should refrain from it! In fact, 'the moral imperatives and ethical authority of the Torah were not a part of the

discussion in Acts 15,' not because they were irrelevant but quite the opposite: 'these were already well understood as essential' for Gentiles (Michael and Lancaster 2009:53). James identified these requirements as implications of Peter's position based on his (James') exegetical connection of the prophets with the Law: because Gentile believers 'are members of the messianic people *as Gentiles*, they do not require circumcision and other requirements that the Torah makes on Israelites in order to become or remain morally pure, but they are obliged by these specific prohibitions of the Torah against morally polluting practices' (Bauckham 2013:183).

3.4.2. A legally binding decision

James' words in Acts 15:19 ('Therefore I conclude...') seem to indicate that he took authority and made the final ruling regarding Gentile's obligations to the Law. Context supports this: at the conclusion of a long debate (15:7), James made a final decision. Yet James' decision was the apostles' decision and the council's decision; it was apparently even God's decision (15:28). This is shown by the unanimity of 'the apostles and the elders, together with the whole church [in Jerusalem]' (15:22) expressed in 15:22; 25, and by the consensus between the council members (namely 'the apostles and the elders, brothers,' 15:23) and the Holy Spirit (15:28). Thus terms like the 'apostolic decree' and 'James' decision' may be treated as synonyms. Yet it was more than a consensus ruling which the council claimed to have God's stamp of approval; the decision bore legal authority.

The term Luke used for James' decision, *krinō*, indicates something stronger than just an opinion. Whilst interpretations differ from one English translation to another, the most conventional use of *krinō*, 'to judge', appears most justifiable. Jesus had given authority to the apostles to set *halakhah* for the Kingdom (Matt 16:19; 18:18–20; Juster

2009; Kinzer 2005:249; Stern 1992:54, 56–58), and the Jerusalem council functioned as ‘a kind of Messianic *Sanhedrin*’ (Stern 2007:156). It was within this Jewish legal context that James issued a *halakhic* verdict—a judgement on the matter for how life in the ecclesia is to be ordered: Gentile believers are not to be subjected to the Law but must observe a few rules in order to preserve the purity of their hearts (i.e. moral purity) and to enable them to participate in table fellowship with Jews (Bauckham 2013:184).

Since the decision to be taken was *halakhic*, that is, pertaining to interpretation and application of the Law, it likely had to be based on the Hebrew scriptures regardless of the miracles to which Peter, Barnabas and Paul testified (Bauckham 2013:181–182). This explains James’ use of Amos and Isaiah. Bauckham also links James’ quotes to Hosea 3:5 and Jeremiah 12:15–16. James’ method was *halakhic midrash* (Shulam 2008:40)—a Jewish hermeneutical approach to resolve a legal question. Janicki (2012:141 endnote 22) explains it as a *ma’aseh* (‘it once happened’): ‘a halachic ruling based on the occurrence of an actual event.’ That event was the purification of uncircumcised Gentiles when Peter visited Cornelius’ home and ate with them (Acts 10), as shown by Peter’s speech (15:7–11) and James’ reference to it (v. 14). James’ decision was *legally binding* for all Gentile initiates of the new covenant; it was an application of the Law to be enforced in all ecclesia indefinitely. From this, it is apparent i) that the Law was still in full force for Jewish believers (with no hint that it would be abolished at any time); and ii) that Gentile believers need not be circumcised and subjected to the whole Law, but only to a few restrictions (15:20). In other words, Jew-Gentile distinction was re-affirmed, not only for society in general, but particularly within the ecclesia.

3.4.3. Affirmation of prophecy and apocalypse

The quote James drew from Amos 9 stated that the Lord would restore ‘the tent of David’ (i.e. the kingdom of Israel), ‘so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord’ (Acts 15:16–17). Note the marker of purpose, ‘so that’ (*hopōs*), serving as a conjunction between God’s restoration of Israel (recall Acts 1:6–8) and the salvation of the nations. The Lord’s restoration of Israel was a prerequisite for the other nations, ‘even all the Gentiles’ (15:17), to seek himself. James quoted from the LXX in which ‘humanity’ (*anthrōpos*) parallels ‘all the Gentiles’, whereas the Hebrew text (both MT and DSS) speaks of ‘Edom,’ not ‘humanity’. (‘Edom’ is spelled very similarly to ‘Adam’ in Hebrew, and the latter may be understood as humanity.) Bauckham (2013:182) assumes there was a Hebrew textual variant which the LXX followed (rather than a poor translation to Greek) and he explains that the LXX says ‘the rest of humanity will seek’ the Lord, unlike the MT in which ‘they will possess the remnant of humanity’. His point is that ‘the dwelling of David’ is an eschatological temple where all nations will go to seek God’s presence (see Isa 2:2–3; Zech 14:16), even though James was referring to the physical temple in the messianic era (pp. 182–183). Because the nations already are called by God’s name, that is, they belong to God, they ‘do not have to become Jews in order to belong to the messianic people of God’ (p. 182).

Since it was always God’s plan to choose from the nations a people for himself, James decided that the council should not ‘cause difficulty for those from among the Gentiles who turn to God’ (15:19). In other words, Gentile believers should not be obligated to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. In 15:28, this ‘yoke’ (*zygos*, 15:10) or ‘difficulty’ (*parenochleō*, 15:19) is called a ‘burden’ (*baros*): ‘it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us to place on you no greater burden...’.

Flusser and Safrai (2012) noted that the same word is used by Jesus in a similar expression in his message to the ecclesia in Thyatira: ‘I do not put upon you any other burden’ (Rev 2:24). Moreover, two of the four prohibitions mentioned in Acts 15:29 are mentioned in the letter to Thyatira and similarly in the letter to Pergamum, namely, sexual immorality and consumption of food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:14, 20).¹⁴ It would appear, therefore, that Jesus upheld the apostolic decree for the Gentile-dominated church in Thyatira almost half a century after the events of Acts 15, supporting the notion that the decree applies indefinitely to all Gentile Christians. (Note also Rev 9:20–21 and 22:15 in which idolaters, murderers, and sexually immoral people are judged, together with those who practise various other heinous sins.)

3.4.4. Four prohibitions in writing

James’ proposal to put the council’s decision in writing (Acts 15:20) should not be overlooked. Assuming he was confident that the decision would be conveyed by trustworthy men, as indeed happened (15:22; 30), why would he require it to be recorded in writing? The answer is surely that a written ruling has a certain fixedness and bears the writer’s authority, offering greater surety than an oral report. The letter was very brief, yet the written medium gave its contents the weight of legal authority and fixedness. (See Matt 4:4–10; 21:13; 26:24, 31 for some examples where the phrase ‘it is written’ is used in this way by Jesus.) The *halakhah* for Gentiles in the new covenant was set, and Luke’s written volume has ensured its permanence.

¹⁴ Combining these observations leads me to propose that the implicit object of Revelation 2:25 is the set of prohibitions in Acts 15:20 and 29, and that Jesus’ instruction to the church in Thyatira could be paraphrased: ‘Nevertheless, keep what you have—the four prohibitions specified by James—until I come.’ Such a proposal cannot be justified here.

Acts 15:20 continues by listing James' decision that Gentile believers should 'abstain from the pollution of idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.' Luke's manner of emphasising the importance of these prohibitions was to record them three times in Acts, in 15:20, 29 and 21:25.¹⁵ As explained above, the four prohibitions may have been derived from an early form of the Noachide laws, or from the commandments for aliens living among Israel, or both. Regardless, the four prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were drawn from the Torah, thus demonstrating it still to be in force. Yet this is the same Law which differentiates between Jews and Gentiles—even Gentiles living within the community of Israel and worshipping the God of Israel. The question thus arises of how such distinction could be entirely erased when God made 'no distinction' in Acts 15:9, since the Holy Spirit and the whole Jerusalem council affirmed the Law (15:25, 28). By restricting the disregard of Jew-Gentile distinction to matters of salvation, a more consistent reading of the text emerges.

Some writers, including myself, have sought to explain James' decision as purposing to remove any obstacles to Jewish believers having table fellowship with Gentile believers (e.g. Skarsaune 2002:170, quoted in Woods 2012:197 in my own case to support this view, pp. 197–199.) After all, no Torah-observing, Jesus-believing Jew would dine with Gentiles who practised idolatry, even if these Gentiles proclaimed faith in Jesus. However, Bauckham (2013:184) argues that table fellowship is not the primary reason for the four prohibitions; rather, 'they are prohibited primarily because they are pollutions of which all the people of God, Jewish and Gentile, must be free.' Bauckham presents 'close association of Jews and Gentiles,' which includes table fellowship, as a

¹⁵ Note 10:1–48; 11:1–18; 15:7–9 where Luke records the gift of the Spirit to Cornelius' household three times; and 9:43; 10:6, 32 in which Simon the tanner's occupation is mentioned three times.

secondary reason for James' prohibitions (p. 184); his argument for moral purity based on connecting the prophecies and the laws for the resident alien have already been presented. I yield to Bauckham's claim; my paper centred on the interpretation of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9–16 whilst Bauckham's chapter is a condensed version of three much greater studies undertaken by him (2013:178). Not that commensality was irrelevant as a motive for the ruling, but it was surely less significant than moral purity. Regardless, the four prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were Torah-determined bare essentials for Gentiles, whilst Jewish believers still bore the full yoke of the Law. Thus the prohibitions conveyed a distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia.

3.4.5. Moses is read

The following verse, Acts 15:21, has led to much puzzlement and conjecture among commentators. David Stern (1992:279) identified six ways to interpret it. Of these, two appear most plausible in context. The first is that interaction between Gentile believers and Jews is inevitable (presumably desirable), so Gentile believers should not ruin the possibility of fellowshiping (especially at meals) with Jews. The discussion on table fellowship above concluded that it was a secondary motive for the four prohibitions, but it was nevertheless important. Jewish contact with Gentiles was unavoidable because of the Jewish dispersion 'in every city,' not merely temporarily but 'from ancient generations', as shown by the fact that Moses is read in synagogues every Sabbath in such places. Moreover, Acts 15:20–21 (among other NT texts) implies that Gentiles ought to seek fellowship with Jews.

The other most sensible interpretation, in my view, of Acts 15:21 is that Gentile Christians would attend synagogue on Sabbath for instruction, and that they would not be accepted into the synagogue if they did not

keep the most basic commandments—those James identified in 15:20. This interpretation can be used together with the one pointing to close fellowship, even table fellowship. The purpose of Gentiles attending synagogue relates to their becoming ‘fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God’ (Eph 2:19) which would naturally require an orientation to the writings of Moses that the synagogue would provide. Yet all Jews, believers in Jesus or not, are obligated by Torah to separate themselves from idolaters, from the sexually immoral and from those who consume blood. So James’ comment in Acts 15:21 explains the need for the prohibitions in 15:20, as implied by the conjunction *gar* (because) linking the two verses.

In anticipating that Gentile believers would attend synagogue each Sabbath to hear Moses proclaimed, James affirmed the validity of the synagogue, the Sabbath and the Law of Moses (15:21), and he expected that these Gentiles would honour all three, yet without any obligation to become proselytes (15:20). One should not read this with subsequent events in mind as though James anticipated the changes to come in the ecclesia following the destruction of the temple; he expected his ruling to apply until Christ’s return and indefinitely thereafter. In fact, Jeremiah (12:16) prophesied of a coming age in which God’s consent for Gentiles to live among his people was contingent on their diligence to ‘learn the ways of my people’. Perhaps this condition was behind James’ comment in Acts 15:21. Yet Jeremiah 12:17 clarifies that even in that age, God will distinguish between the Gentiles living among Israel and the people of Israel.

By James’ reference to Moses, the synagogues and the Sabbath, and possibly also to Jeremiah’s prophecy, Acts 15:21 undermines the case against intra-ecclesial distinction of Jews and Gentiles, which hinges on the abolition of the Law. By implication, ‘no distinction’ in Peter’s

speech (15:9) should not be interpreted as a complete, or general, eradication of Jew-Gentile distinction.

Finally, Michael and Lancaster (2009:55–56) comment that the apostles’ intention for Gentile believers to learn Torah in the synagogue likely reflected an anticipation that they would begin to observe the Torah’s commandments; however, the apostles refused to *require* this of the Gentiles. Nor did the apostles specify any time-limit for Gentile believers to become thoroughly Torah observant. Nevertheless, the option of observing Torah was ‘open’ for Gentiles who wanted to do so—except for legal conversion through circumcision (p. 57). In other words, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles must remain in place, but Gentiles may otherwise take on as much of the Jewish faith tradition as they wish; indeed, it is a privilege for them to do so (p. 61–62). Michael and Lancaster suggest six ‘compelling reasons for Gentile Torah observance’ (p. 62–66) as a ‘divine invitation’ to Gentiles who might wish to surpass the minimum requirements of them, even as Jewish Nazirites did. Acts 15:21 illustrates the assumption that Gentiles would participate in synagogue meetings, including worship and instruction in Torah, yet without converting to Judaism; thus the Law, with its distinction between Jews and Gentiles, remains in place both in the synagogue and among Jesus-believers (i.e. the ecclesia).

3.4.6. Comments on James’ verdict

James’ tersely worded prohibitions in Acts 15:20 were for Gentiles who turned to God, in order for them to live in a manner acceptable to God and to their Jewish counterparts. This explains why James extracted the rules from the Law. He did not spontaneously think up some solutions to objectionable behaviour; rather, he derived his ruling from Torah and its requirements for Gentiles according to traditional Jewish interpretation. Since James based his verdict on Torah, it is illogical that

the Torah was abolished by the same verdict. Jews who came to faith in Jesus clearly remained under the yoke of the Law, whilst Gentiles were only required to observe a few essentials. Therefore, as Michael and Lancaster (2009:54) write, ‘The very existence of Acts 15 insists that the apostles recognised a legal differentiation between Jewish and Gentile believers’. Similarly, Jewish theologian, Michael Wyschogrod (2004:209) notes, ‘The verdict of the first Jerusalem Council, then, is that the Church is to consist of two segments, united by their faith in Christ.’ So, not only did James’ verdict validate the applicability of Torah for the ecclesia, it simultaneously formally established boundaries between Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia, as reflected in the differing responsibilities of Jewish and Gentile believers to the Law.

3.5. Paul’s role

Noteworthy in the narrative describing the Jerusalem council is that Paul does not argue his case. He was evidently willing to submit to the ruling the council would make. Apparently, Barnabas and Paul only testified by ‘describing all the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles’ through them (15:12) and said no more. Luke switched the order of Barnabas’ and Paul’s names (c.f. 15:2, 3), from which one might infer that Barnabas did most of the talking. If so, it would seem that Paul was confident the leading apostles would support his case. His confidence stemmed not only from Peter’s vision and encounter with Cornelius’ household (Acts 10:1–11:18), nor only on stipulations of Torah (for Noachides and for resident aliens among Israel), but also on the basis of Christ’s atonement. Skarsaune (2002:174) writes, ‘the only good reason to impose circumcision and the law on Gentiles would be that salvation came from the law, and in that case “Christ died for nothing” (Gal 2:21)’. This reasoning is in complete harmony with the

final statement of Peter in Acts 15:11 concerning the common means of salvation. To impose the Law on Gentiles who had already been saved would be to detract from the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. Meanwhile, Torah-observance by Jesus-believing Jews was assumed; it was not even tabled for discussion at the Jerusalem council of Acts 15.

Bauckham's (2013:181) view is that Paul and Barnabas had previously met with the three 'pillars' of the ecclesia in Jerusalem, Peter, James and John, to discuss the question of Gentile believers taking on the Law. This occurred even before Paul's and Barnabas' mission to south Galatia (Acts 13–14), and thus before the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. Their meeting with the senior apostles in Jerusalem is presumed to be the one mentioned in Galatians 2:1–10. This would further explain Paul's confidence in the Jerusalem council—since they had already discussed the matter and made a provisional ruling—as well as James' readiness on the day of the council with a *halakhic* ruling that entailed advanced hermeneutics combining multiple texts.

3.6. The letter from the council

The Jerusalem council concluded by writing a letter to send with Paul, Barnabas, Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas 'to the brothers *who are* from among the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia' (Acts 15:22–23). This opening address maintains the prevailing paradigm of Jew-Gentile distinction by labelling its recipients as *ex ethnōn* ('from among the Gentiles'). The address did not mean that those believers had *exited* their ethnic status, but that they, as Gentiles, were equal members ('brothers') of God's people as the Israelites. The council continued by dissociating itself from Jewish believers who had supposedly—but not—been sent by it in (15:24). These false delegates had caused confusion by upsetting the Gentile believers' minds (literally, 'souls'). In most text traditions, the reader is left to infer from 15:1 that this

disturbance was induced by telling the Gentile believers that they need to be circumcised in order to be saved. The Robinson-Pierpont edition of the Greek text states explicitly what the unauthorised men from Jerusalem had said to unsettle Gentile believers in Antioch: *'You must be circumcised and keep the law'* (15:24 NKJV).

According to the letter, the council had reached a 'unanimous decision'. They affirmed Barnabas and Paul (15:25–26), and indicated that Judas and Silas would orally report the decision (15:27), which it then summarised (15:28–29). Acts 15:28 expresses that the decision seemed to have the approval of the Holy Spirit, not just the council members. Thus the council decision bore divine authority. It was to lay 'no greater burden' (of Torah-obligation) on the Gentile brethren than the four prohibitions already explained. A closing comment notes that abstaining from the stated prohibitions was sufficient to 'do well' (15:29). However, there is no comment in the letter corresponding to 15:21 regarding Moses being read in the synagogues every Sabbath, perhaps because the synagogues of Antioch might seek to proselytise Gentile Jesus-believers.

The implications of the letter are very clear. Since it was addressed explicitly to the Gentile believers in the congregations in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, Jewish believers were not affected by the ruling. The Jewish believers referred to in 15:24—those insisting on Gentile circumcision—were overruled in their attempt to impose the Law on Gentile believers, but they were not reprimanded for their devotion to the Law. The lack of reference to Jewish believers in the congregations to whom the letter was addressed strongly confirms the underlying assumption that they are to keep the Law throughout their generations, passing it down to their children (Num 15:37–41; Deut 6). Thus, the letter from the Jerusalem council implicitly affirms the theory of

distinction; Jewish believers are assumed to be bound by Torah, whilst Gentile believers are only subject to a few ‘necessary things’ (Acts 15:28).

4. Subsequent Events

Much other data may be presented regarding the distinction made by the apostles and the early ecclesia between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. The book of Acts itself is a key source. In a subsequent paper (Woods 2015), I have examined the life of Paul following the council in Jerusalem described in Acts 15. There I found good agreement with the findings of the contextual analysis above: Luke presents Paul as a paragon of Torah-observance who, at the prompting of James and all the elders of the ecclesia in Jerusalem, took decisive action to disprove rumours that he taught Jews in the diaspora to abandon the Torah and Jewish customs (Acts 21:18–26). The remainder of Acts follows Paul’s life following his arrest under the false accusation of teaching and acting contrary to Torah (21:28). From this and the analysis above, it is clear that Paul himself kept the Law and taught other Jews to do so, whilst instructing Gentile believers ‘to observe the rules that had been decided by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem’ (16:4), that is, ‘to abstain from the pollution of idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood’ (15:20). In other words, Paul’s life and teaching provide a context which constrains our interpretation of Peter’s statement in 15:9—in giving his Holy Spirit to Jews and Gentiles alike, and equally purifying the hearts of both by faith, God was not erasing Jewish particularity. Rather, God was demonstrating his impartiality, saving both groups by grace. Subsequent events in Acts clearly demonstrate that the apostles differentiated between Jewish and Gentile Jesus-believers, especially by the differing requirements they made on Jewish and Gentile believers regarding the

Law. By his life and teaching, Paul endorsed the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. God's impartiality in 15:9 (reflecting the start of Peter's address in 10:34–35) pertained to matters of salvation; it did not signal a revocation of Israel's election.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Research aspects

This paper set out to determine whether or not Acts 15:9a refutes the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. The text reports direct speech of the apostle Peter saying that God made 'no distinction' between Jews and Gentiles in giving his Spirit to both groups and purifying their hearts by faith. Was Peter's statement intended to convey a new, general norm for the ecclesia by which all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles should be disregarded? If so, then Jewish believers should abandon their faith tradition (including Torah-observance), or else Gentile believers should convert to Judaism. The study examined both of these options in the context of Acts 15:1–29, and considered an alternative: that Peter's statement about distinction pertained to soteriology and should be limited to that theological domain.

5.2. Findings

A brief textual analysis affirmed that the text could be taken to refute the theory of distinction if viewed from a purely lexical perspective. On the surface, the phrase '*outhen diekrinen*' does appear to deny intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. The contextual analysis was much more complex, however, and demanded a more nuanced interpretation. After a sketching the narrative, two interpretive keys were presented.

Firstly, the first-century assumption that Jews were indefinitely bound by Torah should not be overlooked—something Christians looking back in time do too easily. Secondly, the four prohibitions of the apostolic decree for Gentile believers derive from Torah, whether from the laws for resident aliens (Gentiles living among the Israelites) or from the Noachide laws, or as an extension of both. This would appear to demonstrate the applicability rather than annulment of the Law. The bulk of the contextual analysis considered Peter's own words and James' verdict, followed by some observations on Paul's role in the council and the council's letter to the Gentile congregations concerned.

Peter's concluding remark in Acts 15:11 provides important context for interpreting 15:9; he emphasised that the means of salvation for Gentiles was the same as for Jews—'through the grace of the Lord Jesus'. This suggests that God's making 'no distinction' between the two groups pertained to soteriological matters. A prior incident in which the Gentile, Cornelius, and his household were given the Spirit (10:1–11:18) supports this hypothesis, especially considering Peter's remark in 10:34–35 that God shows no partiality; ethnicity is not a criterion of acceptability to him. Some technical and logical argumentation followed, including a challenge to the translation of *ischuō* in 15:10, the flaw in thinking that salvation by grace undermines the value of keeping the Law, the Jew-Gentile distinction Peter continued to make in his language (15:10–11), and a scriptural syllogism that reinforces the need of Jews (including those who follow Jesus) to observe the Law. Bauckham's view that the sense of 'no distinction' in 15:9 related to moral purity was found helpful. Further to purification, sanctification was identified as an area in which God made 'no distinction'; both purification and sanctification are components of God's salvation, however, and neither requires nor implies a termination of Jewish particularity, an end to Jew-Gentile distinction.

James' ruling provided many insights into the distinction debate. James himself was reputedly a strictly observant Jew, and his decree was wholly based on the Torah and the Prophets. In James' eschatological view, the messianic era had broken in, so it should be anticipated that all nations would acknowledge the One God of Israel and abide by the four prohibitions for Gentiles, yet *without becoming Israel*. Naturally, Gentiles who joined God's people through faith in Israel's Messiah would have to live morally pure lives, but James emphasised that the council should 'not cause difficulty' for them by imposing the same legal requirements on them that Jews bear. The decision was unanimous and legally binding. James set *halakhah* for Gentile members of the ecclesia by using the Cornelius incident as a precedent and by employing Jewish hermeneutical methods on Israel's prophetic scriptures. I proposed that Jesus implicitly endorsed the apostolic decree half a century later, in Revelation 2:24, thereby establishing its catholicity and permanence.

In order to ensure the decree was recognised as a fixed, authoritative ruling, the council followed James' request to put it in writing. This provided Luke an opportunity to reiterate the four prohibitions, which he would do yet again for special emphasis later (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25). The context provided by James' ruling makes very clear that Gentile Jesus-believers are not required to undergo a full conversion to Judaism as part of their Christ-faith, whilst Jewish Jesus-believers remained obligated to Torah observance. Nevertheless, a final, somewhat enigmatic, comment by James required special attention.

James closed with a deliberate mention of Moses (i.e. Torah) being proclaimed 'in every city from ancient generations' by means of synagogue readings every Sabbath (Acts 15:21). This likely indicated the need for Gentile believers to avoid impure behaviour in order that

they may commune, dine, and worship with Jews, who were presumed to live in purity themselves. Readers should not overlook James' implicit affirmation of Sabbath worship in the synagogues, which includes the reading of Torah. While James and the elders in Jerusalem specified minimum requirements for Gentile behaviour in the form of the apostolic decree, it seems that Gentiles were free to explore Jewish practice further and that James anticipated their spiritual development through Torah study in local synagogues every Sabbath. However, James did not cancel out differences between Jews and Gentiles in terms of obligation to the Law; rather, his words upheld the prevailing Jew-Gentile distinction, applying it even among members of Christ's body. (See Acts 21:20–25; Woods 2015.)

Paul's apparent quietude throughout the council suggests he was completely confident in an outcome that would vindicate his stand against the agitators for circumcision (Acts 15:1–2), likely based on the work God had already done among the Gentiles (without converting to Judaism) in the Cornelius incident and his own experience (15:12), plus his prior meeting with Peter, James and John in Jerusalem (Gal 2:1–10).

The letter from the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:22–29) was written to assure Gentile believers that they did not need to be circumcised or take on the yoke of the whole Law, but only to abstain from four particularly offensive practices. It thereby sustains the making of distinction between Jews and Gentiles (as suggested even in its address) by imposing different requirements on Gentiles to those that were applicable to Jews, including the Jewish leaders of the ecclesia. The remainder of the book of Acts contains further clear evidence of distinction-making by Paul especially, and also by James and all the elders in Jerusalem, as portrayed most graphically in 21:17–26. This evidence is presented in the subsequent paper.

5.3. Intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction as a possible solution

The immediate context, from Acts 15:1–29, of Peter’s statement that God made no distinction between Gentiles and Jews (15:9), strongly contradicts the idea that the apostles terminated all prevailing distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. The contextual evidence is consistent: it all weighs in favour of making such a distinction, even among members of the ecclesia. In the discussion of the Jerusalem council, Jewish believers in Jesus were assumed to remain under the jurisdiction of Mosaic Law, whilst it was determined that Gentile believers were not to be subjected to it, except for four universal prohibitions. Thus, Peter’s observation in 15:9 cannot mean that God removed *all* distinctions between Jews and Gentiles.¹⁶ Another explanation of Peter’s statement is necessary; in what sense did God make no distinction between Jews and Gentiles?

The answer I have already presented is found in Peter’s speech itself. Several key aspects of salvation are found therein: the giving of the Holy Spirit, the purification of hearts by faith, and the grace of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:8–9, 11). His closing words in 15:11 strongly suggest that God’s non-differentiation of Jews and Gentiles pertained to the common means of their salvation: grace. This notion is evident in other texts in Acts such as 10:1–11:18 and 26:16–18. It explains the continued Torah-observance of the Jewish leaders of the ecclesia found in the contextual analysis above, covering 15:1–29, and in the

¹⁶ The possibility of a ‘third race’ that is neither Jewish nor Gentile in nature was not discussed since it is not suggested by the text. In a related paper on the ‘one new man’ of Ephesians 2:15, I addressed this topic and argued that the ecclesia is a corporate entity comprising Jews and Gentiles united in Christ, not *former* Jews and Gentiles (Woods 2014b:113–122; 125). Unlike the Gentiles’ ‘former way of life, the old man’ (Eph 4:22), the faith tradition of Jewish members of Christ’s body is not to be cast off upon their spiritual regeneration.

accompanying paper, covering 15:30–28:31. Given that tension—between God making no distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers, and the ecclesia doing the opposite—the explanation makes sense: God made no distinction between the two *in terms of how they are saved*, but he did not abolish the existing distinction *in general*.

Restricting the scope of the ‘no distinction’ phrase to matters of salvation unlocks the possibility of an ecclesiological structure that has generally been dismissed in the history of the Christian church. A new theological vista is revealed when one views the ecclesia as a community comprised of Jews *as Jews* and Gentiles *as Gentiles*, united in Christ yet distinct in practice. In this perspective, both groups are entirely dependent of Jesus’ grace for their salvation, yet Jews retain the distinctive practices of their faith tradition in accordance with the Law, so that the ecclesia is visibly a twofold entity. Each member of Christ is to remain in his calling, whether as a Jew or as a Gentile (1 Cor 7:17–24 and see Rudolph 2010, 2011; Tucker 2011). I posit that such duality is the realisation of God’s plan, portrayed in the prophets, to incorporate all nations in his kingdom, faithful Gentiles becoming ‘fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God’ (Eph 2:19), no longer ‘alienated from the citizenship of Israel’ (2:12). The sense is that of accompaniment, not replacement; it speaks of unity with humility, not triumphalism of one over the other; it requires reconciliation, not competition.

5.4. Concluding statement

In the context of Acts 15:1–29, Peter’s comment in 15:9 that God made ‘no distinction’ between Gentile and Jewish believers in Jesus cannot be taken to mean that he abolished Jewish particularity altogether, blending the two into a homogenous, non-Jewish community. Rather, Peter meant that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile in

terms of how they are saved, since both depend entirely on the grace of the Lord Jesus. Yet even within the ecclesia, each person was regarded either as a Jew or as a Gentile, and was expected to live accordingly; Jewish believers in Jesus were expected to observe the Law and Jewish tradition, whilst Gentile believers were only required to observe the four prohibitions of James' decree and were not required to become Jews.

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Review of Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*

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Bird MF 2014. *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

1. Introduction

It is fair to surmise that after more than two decades in which Pauline Studies dominated conservative New Testament scholarship, Gospels Studies is beginning to receive more attention among evangelical students. However, this renewed interest appears to be suffering from the dearth of weighty research monographs that critically evaluate the methodological questions underpinning the subject area. *The Gospel of the Lord* is one of a small number of recently published books devoted to meeting this need. Significantly, the book won the Christianity Today 2015 Biblical Studies Book of the Year Award (Christianity Today, 2015), and so deserves serious attention in the conservative tradition of scholarship.

The author himself is a widely published conservative evangelical scholar who lectures in Theology at the Ridley Melbourne College of Mission and Ministry in Australia (cf., Bird 2015; 2013). He notes in his preface to the book: ‘If my reading of the scholarly scene is correct, then “Gospels” is very probably the next big thing in biblical studies’ (2014:vii), a view with which I am in complete agreement. It is on this

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

basis that Bird sets himself the agenda of addressing the big methodological questions of the origins of the gospels, their literary nature and the manner in which they ought to shape our theological discourse. Having read the book twice now, it is my view that it should be a must-read for evangelical students planning postgraduate research in Gospel Studies.

In this extended review I intend to summarise the salient points made by the book and make some critical evaluative comments regarding a number of judgements and issues Bird addresses, particularly in the light of his stated aim to provide sound foundations for students of the gospels. I shall conclude at the end by providing my own evaluation of the role and limitations of the book in contemporary gospels scholarship.

2. Summary of Contents

The book consists of six chapters, with an extensive and helpful bibliography and indexes of names, subjects, Scripture and ancient texts. Each chapter examines a more or less standalone topic related to the gospels; thus it at first appears to be a monograph. Moreover, each chapter also contains an extensive excursus, often a chapter's length on its own. These address issues closely allied to the chapter's topic. All together then, the book is a comprehensive analysis of key foundational issues germane to gospels research. I shall now summarise and critique each chapter in turn.

2.1. Chapter 1: From Jesus to gospels

This brief five-page introductory chapter is devoted to laying out the four key questions which the book intends to answer. The first question is the historical question: how and why were the stories, teachings, and

events in Jesus' life put together and recalled? The second question is a sociological one: how were these stories, teachings and events transmitted between individuals and groups and generations to the point at which they were written down? The third question is a literary one: what were the written sources employed for constructing the present canonical gospels? The fourth question is a literary-theological one: why do we have four and not just one gospel?

The brief clarification of these questions in the chapter is then followed by an excursus which examines the theo-lexicographical background and provenance of the word εὐαγγελίου from which our English 'Gospel' is derived. Bird sets out a series of arguments to establish that εὐαγγελίου was associated in the ancient Greco-Roman world with delivery of good news of victory from the military battlefield. Yet he argues that its use in the New Testament derives from its Old Testament equivalent as expressed in accounts such as in 2 Samuel 18, 1 Kings 1, Psalm 68, 96, and especially in Isaiah 40–66. Its reception and use in the Intertestamental literature is also examined. Bird's emphasis of the εὐαγγελίου terminology in the Old Testament is an important contribution of the book since contemporary scholarship has tended to more readily associate it with its Greco-Roman origins.

Within the New Testament itself, Bird argues for a trajectory in which the terminology of εὐαγγελίου that was first used by Jesus, filtered through the apostles, particularly Paul, to end eventually with the evangelists. Bird mounts a series of vigorous arguments against the assertion in certain sections of scholarship that a difference existed between the sense in which Jesus used the term εὐαγγελίου and how it was employed by the post-Easter Christian community. Bird argues that on the contrary, Jesus' preaching of the εὐαγγελίου was in direct continuity with the Church's preaching of the same. 'The good news of

God's victory in Isaiah turns out to be God's victory in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Thereafter, the story of Jesus' messianic work for God's kingdom becomes determinative for the content of the church's gospel' (2014:17).

I found this chapter to be very cogent and helpful since it carefully formulates the key questions to be answered in subsequent chapters, sets out the agenda for the book, and provides reasonably comprehensive and weighty discussions on why answering these questions matters. However, even though along the line, Bird discusses the issue, I think it would have been appropriate also for him to have raised the theological question of what was special about the canonical Gospels to have so quickly commanded the high status of inspired scripture at the same level of the Old Testament Scriptures. As I say, this question is somewhat addressed at various points of the book, but in my view it merits a whole chapter, since it goes to the foundations of why the gospels are what they are.

2.2. Chapter 2: The purpose and preservation of the Jesus tradition

The second chapter is devoted to analysing why and how the Jesus tradition was preserved to the point of eventually being fixed in the written form. Bird believes answering the question of the purpose for which the tradition was preserved is necessary so as to address 'scholarly suspicion' (2014:21) regarding the historical veracity of the traditions in the gospels. At the root of this scholarly scepticism is the assumption that given their theological commitments, the evangelists could have played fast and loose with the oral traditions about Jesus. This question then goes to the foundations of the historical method, *inter alia*, why would the evangelists be interested in accurately preserving the historical elements of the Jesus traditions? So one way of addressing this question is to show that yes, there was a useful historical

rationale for preserving the traditions about Jesus in the gospels. In Bird's words, 'If we can identify the purpose that the Jesus tradition had in the early church, then we have arrived close to a satisfactory explanation for its enduring existence' (2014:23). That is what the second chapter sets out to do.

Bird sets out four reasons why the Church preserved the Jesus tradition in its systems of memory. First of all, he argues that the Church's fundamental preaching on faith based on the death and resurrection of Jesus necessitated the presupposition that a historical Jesus once lived prior to his death. Providing an account of precisely what the living Jesus did was thus of necessity an integral part of their preaching.

Secondly, Jesus' teachings were of so considerably practical importance to the Church that it was necessary for the historical contexts in which he taught them to be preserved. An account of the traditions about Jesus, then, was necessary to provide a context for the practical teachings of the Church. Thirdly, the first Christians needed to preserve the account of Jesus' life, teachings and events because the tradition enabled the Church to define itself against other Jewish groups with whom it was involved in a constant existential struggle. Fourthly, in sociological terms, Jesus was regarded by the first Christians as founder of a new movement. In that case, one would expect that his first followers would have huge interest in cataloguing and preserving the history of Jesus' life. These four reasons provide the historical rationale for the preservation of the tradition about Jesus.

As to the manner and instruments used for the preservation of the Jesus tradition itself, Bird evaluates a number of arsenals which the first Christians deployed for retaining the memory. Such arsenals include pedagogical devices such as poetic renditions of Jesus' sayings and mnemonics, rabbinic pupil style note-taking, vivid accounts by

eyewitnesses, who often had their stories purposefully linked to their names so ensuring durability of the stories, activities by the earliest Christians that imitated some of Jesus' actions and so entrenched memories of Jesus' practices, the authentication of teachers as *bona fide* custodians and transferees of the traditions, and the whole church community taking responsibility for preserving the tradition. So, to the question as to why and how the first Christians preserved the Jesus tradition, Bird's answer is that the church had many justifications as well as the sufficient varieties of means to preserve the accounts of what happened in Jesus' life.

The excursus in Chapter 2 examines the often vexed question of evangelical scholarship and its interface with critical approaches to the Gospel. Bird puts the issue this way: 'How does all this scholarly stuff square with a view of Scripture as inspired, infallible, containing a message of salvation, and embodying our Christian hopes?' (2014:67). To this question, Bird proposes an approach he calls, 'believing criticism', an approach which maintains that the Bible is the inspired word of God 'but contends that we do Scripture the greatest service when we commit ourselves to studying it in light of the context and processes through which God gave it to us' (2014:68). This involves a 'hermeneutic of trust' (2014:72) as well as the willingness for evangelicals to do the hard graft of addressing the difficult questions that the gospels pose to modern minds. I find Bird's articulation of his approach to scholarship quite refreshing.

This is another good chapter as it robustly addresses the sceptical stance of a number of New Testament scholars to the gospel stories. In that regard, the chapter makes important arguments for using the gospels as the most important sources for historical research into Christian origins.

However, as a line-up of Bird's interlocutors in the chapter indicates, several of the objections that he devotes the chapter to address were raised not by contemporary scholars, but by nineteenth-century scholars such as Bultmann, Käsemann, and Dibelius, admittedly scholars who albeit continue to exert a degree of sway in Gospels studies. Even so, it seems to me that the nature of the objections has slightly changed and so needed a bit more nuanced analysis in the chapter. Among those in contemporary scholarship who object to the historical pedigree of the Jesus traditions in the gospels, the tendency is to stratify the gospel materials into categories with different degrees of authenticities. Some of the accounts such as the miracles are often practically, if not overtly, discounted, and other stories are regarded as significantly embellished with only a tiny kernel of historical tradition worth accepting.

In such a situation, the task of providing an account of the preservation of the traditions to the point of their fixing in the written form goes beyond establishing the purpose for which they were preserved. It also raises the issue of the sacred context in which the stories were preserved. In other words one crucial factor that may have necessitated and controlled the preservation of the traditions is the miraculous nature of many of these traditions, especially the resurrection itself. The people who told the stories thus knew that they were narrating stupendous revelatory events. Put another way, rather than being embellishments, the miracles in fact played a role of sacred guarantors of the preservation and transmission of the tradition. Bird could have addressed this wider effect of the miracles in the preservation of the traditions.

2.3. Chapter 3: The formation of the Jesus tradition

The aim of the third chapter is to establish the best theoretical model of oral transmission of the Jesus tradition capable of explaining the literary nature of the gospels. Bird does this by surveying the merits and

demerits of five different models. He rightly rejects the first model which posits that such a quest is ultimately futile because, as it is claimed, the oral tradition is irretrievably lost or bore little relationship to contents of the gospels in the first place. The second model is directly opposite to the first, and posits that an extremely 'fluid, free and flexible' situation existed whereby stories about Jesus mixed effortlessly with folklore, myths and legends. This model is also to be rejected because the New Testament indicates that among other things, the first Christians were particular in ensuring precision in the transmission of the tradition.

The third model employs historical accounts on how rabbinical pupils of the second century onwards functioned to postulate that among the first Christians, there were equivalent formally controlled mechanisms for memorising Jesus' teachings. Bird identifies some significant attractions of this model and argues that it is likely that at least some of Jesus' teachings and parables would have been recorded and memorised by his disciples. After all they frequently addressed him as Rabbi. Bird nevertheless highlights a number of limitations of this model which necessitate augmenting it with less formal means of transmission of the tradition. The fourth model proposed principally by Werner Kelber argued for a form of controlled oral transmission regulated by the common laws of folklore of the culture and era. This approach, Bird rejects because of its inauthenticity.

Bird's preferred model is derived from Kenneth Bailey's 1990s socio-anthropological work among Middle Eastern villagers which documented how oral traditions were informally controlled by the Mediterranean societies. 'On this model, the tradition is transmitted informally: anyone in the community can theoretically participate in the retelling of stories and sayings. It is also controlled, however, since the traditions are owned by the community at large' (2014:92). Building on

this model, Bird maps out a theory of social memory among the first Christians that explains the manner in which the whole community informally ensured the stability of the Jesus traditions. ‘It is apparent that “memory” was an important category in determining what the Gospels contained and also how they preserved a tradition about Jesus’ (2014:104).

The first Christians, Bird argues, felt it as a key element of their responsibility to ‘faithfully recall’ the works and words of Jesus. Bird points out that several factors impinge upon what was remembered and what was forgotten, even within a large group of Christians immensely affected by the events of Jesus’ life. Moreover, the believers’ current experiences played a role in shaping this social memory. Social memory, he argues, is ‘a negotiation between relics of the past and the contingencies of the present’ (2014:107). Even so, these factors do not, on the whole, undermine the veracity of the recall.

The chapter finishes with an excursus which sets out several factors and reasons why the Form Critical movement which devoted itself to addressing the same questions of the chapter failed. In a gist, that quest lacked a compelling account of how the traditions could have been stabilised to the point in which they ended up in the written form.

I find Bird’s arguments in favour of social memory theory as underpinning the transmission of the Jesus tradition as robust and worthy of serious consideration. My only wish is that Bird could have combined this social memory model with elements of the formal control model evaluated earlier. Bird certainly argues for the viability of elements of the formal control model, but he hesitates to incorporate these elements into his ultimately preferred model of informal control through social memory theories.

One other area on which I would have liked Bird to shed some light is the claim by the first Christians that the Holy Spirit played a role in maintaining and shaping this memory (e.g. Luke 12:12; John 14:26, 16:13). It is true that this chapter is devoted to historical investigation of the phenomenon. It is thus somewhat understandable that Bird avoids theological explanations of the kind of social memory that the Gospels themselves indicate was at play in preserving the traditions. Even so, the fact that at least some of the people involved in retaining this memory invoked this pneumatological explanation means that the social memory model needs further augmentation with consideration of the self-understanding of the first Christians as enabled by the Spirit to remember the traditions. In fact, it is significant that Bird cites John 2:22 as one support for his theory of the role that social memory played in preserving the tradition. In that case, he could have highlighted this other Johannine pneumatological account of the preservation of the traditions.

2.4. Summary of Chapter 4: The literary genetics of the gospels

The fourth chapter is dedicated to surveying some of the proposed solutions to the Synoptic Problem and the Johannine Question. After laying out the literary features of the Synoptic Problem, Bird evaluates six categories of proposed solutions, each with their proponents and advantages on the one hand, as against their disadvantages and vehement critics. Bird himself supports an eclectic approach, the Holtzmann-Gundry hypothesis, which basically posits ‘(1) Markan priority, (2) Matthew used Mark and Q, (3) Luke used Mark and Q; and (4) at a later point, Luke incorporated Matthew into his own work’ (2014:156). Bird admits that this makes the situation rather complicated, but thinks the complexity of evidence requires that multifarious solution.

I am not wholly convinced, however, about this approach, especially since it regards the hypothetical Q as central to the solution. Bird asserts, ‘I believe in Q because, despite its potential misgivings, it allows us to hold together a literary connection between Matthew and Luke that is indirect enough to explain their varied order and divergent utilization of the double tradition’ (2014:187). Yet his specific proposal of a Q-like document which is much less fixed than the hypothetical Q that is often postulated by a section of scholarship would not appear to bear the weight of explanation of the double tradition that he ultimately puts on it.

With regard to the Johannine Question, Bird highlights the significant similarities and yet differences between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics: ‘While comparing [John] with the Synoptics may not be quite like comparing apples to oranges, it certainly is like comparing oranges to mandarins’ (2014:193). He examines nine different proposed options for explaining the relationship, but opts again for an eclectic approach which envisages ‘spasmodic interpenetration of Synoptic and Johannine traditions across each other in pre-literary stages’ (2014:212). Despite this proposal, Bird is of the opinion that if John knew the Synoptics, he nevertheless ‘applies that knowledge in a way that makes his Gospel look somewhat removed and distant from them’ (2014:212).

The excursus in Chapter 4 is a collection of Patristic statements and quotations regarding the order and relationships between the gospels. Quotations from Papias, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine among others are reproduced without commentary.

Perhaps due to the multitude of divergent solutions to the Synoptic Problem that are evaluated, I found this chapter not as stimulating as the previous ones. It is evidently no fault of Bird’s, for the cluttered

situation indicates continued scholarly bafflement by the problem. All the same, I wonder whether Bird could not have simplified the account by eliminating some of the largely abandoned proposals such as the Lessing hypothesis.

2.5. Summary of Chapter 5: The genre and goal of the gospels

The fifth chapter of the book logically follows the previous chapter by posing the question as to the literary genre and form of the Gospels. As Bird points out in his introduction to the chapter, this question is fundamentally important for both historical and hermeneutical reasons: ‘Genre matters because genre creates a framework of expectation between an author and readers by appealing to known literary frames of reference’ (2014:222). In other words this question sets the parameters in which readers of the gospels are to interpret those works.

Bird approaches the task in three big steps. First of all, as he does in the previous chapters, he again reviews five options that have been proposed as suiting the genre of the gospels, namely, as a distinct category of Christian writings, a sub-category of first-century Jewish literature, an aretology (Greco-Roman biography of a ‘divine man’), a sub-type of Greco-Roman novel, and a Greco-Roman biography. For each option, Bird examines the merits of the proposal and delineates their shortcomings. He argues in favour of the last option, but points out that given the significant diversity of ancient Greco-Roman *bioi*, a more precise characterisation of the specific type of *bioi* that the gospels are is required.

Bird next devotes himself to establishing the contours of the literary phenomenon that the gospels are as a way of identifying their precise genre as *bioi*. He identifies the openings of all four canonical gospels as placing them in the category of biographies. He then argues that several of the designations attributed to the gospels by the Church Fathers, such

as regarding them as ‘sayings of Jesus’, ‘memoirs of the apostles’ and their supplied titles as ‘Gospels’; these designations Bird thinks, constitute as evidence that the earliest readers regarded these *bioi* as closely tied to Christian proclamation, the kerygma. It is this conclusion which then leads Bird to argue that the Gospels are specific type of *bioi* which may be labelled as ‘biographical kerygma’. As kerygma, the Gospels theologically, christologically and inter-textually adapt the biography genre to fit the primary task of proclamation by the first Christians.

I am somewhat sympathetic to the broad outline of Bird’s proposal. It certainly recognises the three key literary features of the gospels, namely as historically biographical, as literarily continuous with the Old Testament and as theologically conveying the kerygma of the Christians. I wonder, however, whether in characterising the gospels as ‘biographical kerygma’ and not a ‘kerygmatic biography’, Bird may be in danger of losing something of the gains that have been made in recent Gospels scholarship in establishing the genre of the gospels as *bioi*.

My quibble here may be a touch pedantic, and perhaps less than fair to Bird. All the same, it appears to me that if in our quest to precisely identify the specific genre of the gospels, the emphasis is placed on its kerygmatic nature at the expense of its essentially biography nature, then it is only a small step to reducing the re-appreciation of the historical viability of the contents of the gospels as biography. After all, as Bird himself notes in his critique of the ‘luminaries of the form-critical school’ (2014:223), it is this school’s exaggeration of the kerygmatic nature of the gospels which resulted in their discounting of the gospels as ‘expanded cult legends shaped by Christian preaching of the risen Christ’ (2014:224). As I say, this is far from Bird’s intention

and belief. Nevertheless, in the light of the evidence he mounts, it might have been better to regard the precise genre of the Gospels as ‘kerygmatic biography’ rather than his proposal of “biographical kerygma”.

The chapter closes with another helpful excursus on the non-canonical gospels specifically regarding the features that differentiate them from the canonical gospels. This again is an important question given the current proliferation of myths in the popular imagination that these non-canonical gospels represent the accounts of marginalised minority Christians. Bird’s conclusion is that ‘The rejection of “other” Gospels by the proto-orthodox and orthodox churches was neither arbitrary nor merely political’ (2014:293). He points out that these ‘other’ gospels were rejected because (a) the Jesus they describe bears no semblance with the Jesus described in the sacred writings, (b) the vocabularies they deploy with regard to their affirmations about God, creation, sin, ethical behaviour and salvation are frequently ‘esoteric, elitist and erroneous’, and (c) they appear very late on the scene and cannot be historically proven to be traceable in origins to the first followers of Jesus.

2.6. Summary of Chapter 6: The fourfold gospel of Jesus Christ

The final chapter is devoted to examining one of the curious features of the New Testament, namely, why did the early church decide to keep all four Gospels, that is, the tetrevangelium, in parallel in the canon? Put differently, why did they decide to keep the tetrevangelium in this form rather than choosing one gospel with a single story or even one which harmonised all four gospels into a single account? Bird underlines this question as requiring both historical and theological answers and proceeds in the chapter to address it. Essentially, he evaluates an amount of historical evidence to account for the emergence of the four gospels as a single collection central to the worship and doctrinal

proclamation of the Church. He also examines how various harmonies of the gospels emerged and notes that despite their general popularity, these harmonies were never considered as viable replacements of the fourfold gospels. On the contrary, the early Church theologians, from Irenaeus to Augustine developed theological accounts to undergird and justify the maintenance of the fourfold nature of the gospel as ‘plurality in unity’ (2014:326). The excursus of the final chapter examines the extant manuscripts of the gospels and argues for their essential stability.

3. General Evaluation and Conclusion

In my view, Bird has made an extremely important contribution to contemporary gospel scholarship, coming as it has at the cusp of a new wave of interest in historical Jesus and gospels research. In the first place, his review and evaluation of theories on the shape and development of the pre-literary Jesus tradition is a masterclass in careful historical methodology and research.

Secondly, his proposal applying insights from socio-anthropological models of memory to underline the stability and preservation of these traditions has several advantages in its favour. As I have pointed out in this review, however, this model needs to be augmented with the fact of the self-understanding of the first Christians as enabled by the Holy Spirit to guarantee the integrity of this social memory.

Thirdly, Bird’s major contribution is to progress the current scholarly discourse regarding the genre of the Gospels as *bioi* to establish their precise sub-genre. Again, I have argued that his proposal that we may regard the gospels as ‘biographical kerygma’ could inadvertently displace them from their primacy as biographies. I have therefore suggested that the label ‘kerygmatic biography’ would be more suitable.

Finally, Bird is to be commended for providing readers with a significant amount of extra materials in the excursus at the end of each chapter. Most conservative students will find these materials to be useful for their research into the gospels. It is for these reasons and to this particular constituency that I highly commend the book.

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Since *Conspectus* is a scholarly publication that is evangelical in its theological orientation (i.e. predominately classical and historically orthodox in its interpretive approach), submissions entirely void of a theological component (i.e. engagement with the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures), along with submissions that deny, either directly or indirectly, the key tenets put forward in the SATS statement of faith, will not be considered for publication. It is in the discretion of the editorial board to make the decision, and their decision is final. *Conspectus* is a refereed evangelical theological e-journal published biannually by the South African Theological Seminary (www.satsonline.org). The journal is a publication for scholarly articles in any of the major theological disciplines.

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Based on the recommendations made by the reviewers, the editor compiles the feedback for the author, indicating any changes that are required prior to publication. The final decision as to which changes are required lies with the senior editor. When the required changes are substantial, the revised submission is returned to the reviewers so that they can confirm that the deficiencies which they raised have been adequately addressed.

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