

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD IN CHRIST
DIVINE WARFARE IN THE ARGUMENT OF EPHESIANS¹

Timothy G. Gombis

The Letter to the Ephesians finds itself in an odd situation. While it has held an esteemed position in the history of the Christian church and has been a rich resource for Christian theology through the centuries, it has been a puzzle for New Testament scholars and has endured some rather unflattering descriptions. It has been called ‘confusing’, an ‘enigma’, and ‘sublime yet elusive’. This state of affairs in Ephesians scholarship has come about because of the difficulty involved in discerning the internal coherence of the letter. While scholars agree on the presence of major themes within the letter, such as corporate unity, the people of God and cosmic Christology, the manner in which they are integrated into an argument remains a mystery. If there is anything approaching a consensus on this matter, it is that the letter is largely a reinterpretation of the essence of Pauline theology for a new generation of Christians. As such, Ephesians does not contain an argument, but is rather a pastiche of Pauline traditions woven together by a Pauline disciple. Complicating matters further for those attempting to find a coherent argument is the appearance of works arguing that there is no integral relationship between the two halves of the letter: chapters 1–3 and 4–6. One recent monograph has argued that the unity of Ephesians is not found in a thematic or theological coherence, but rather in a rhetorical scheme.

This letter, then, which has been so influential and which has enjoyed a place of such prominence in the Christian tradition has come to be regarded as only barely coherent and, as a result, has suffered relative neglect in New Testament scholarship. Recent attempts to situate the letter in a first-century context have provided no help in discerning the argument of its author. A fresh reading, therefore, is

¹ Abstract of a Ph.D. thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2005. Supervisor: Dr. Bruce W. Longenecker.

needed, one that seeks to determine whether there is a coherent argument within Ephesians, and how this argument unfolds.

In this thesis, I argue that Ephesians does indeed contain an argument and that it has a tight coherence that binds together the letter's two halves. When read through the ideology of divine warfare from the ancient world, the argument comes into view. This argument has to do with asserting and defending the triumph of God in Christ over all competing cosmic powers. The author claims that God has triumphed over the powers ruling the present evil age in raising Christ from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavenlies, installing him as Lord over 'all things' (1:20-23). This triumph of God in Christ is then elaborated throughout the remainder of the letter, where the author lists the triumphs of God in Christ (2:1-22) and notes how Paul, as the servant of the cosmic Lord Christ, participates in this triumph even while his earthly situation appears less than triumphant (3:2-13). He also explains how the church is to participate in this triumph and how the people of God play a strategic role in the Divine Warrior's programme of advertising his triumph to a cosmic audience (4:1-6:9).

In chapter 2, I develop the pattern of divine warfare from the ancient Near East. This ideological tool was utilized throughout the ancient world to assert and substantiate the supremacy of a national deity, and it followed a typical pattern. A deity could rightly be worshiped as the supreme sovereign over all creation on the basis of his/her victory in conflict with other deities, or over the forces of chaos. On the basis of the deity's supremacy, (s)he had the right to have a temple built in his/her honor, to which the deity's people would gather in worship and celebration.

In the third chapter, I discuss the pervasive sense of enslavement to cosmic powers found throughout the ancient world. The author of Ephesians asserts and defends the cosmic lordship of Christ over the 'powers and authorities', but how would such language have been understood? Indeed, would it have been understood at all? I demonstrate in this chapter that the argument of Ephesians would have resonated across all traditions in the ancient world because of this pervasive sense that earthly life was determined and governed by various supra-human powers. I examine selected evidence from a broad spectrum; first from the magical papyri from the ancient world, then two Greco-Roman intellectual leaders, and finally, Jewish tradition.

I apply the pattern of divine warfare to Ephesians 1:20–2:22 in the fourth chapter, demonstrating that reading this passage through the lens of this ideological tool reveals the author's rhetorical strategy. The author's concern is to assert the lordship of Christ over the powers and authorities that rule the present evil age (1:20-23). This lordship is vindicated by a rehearsal of the triumphs of God in Christ throughout Ephesians 2, where God in Christ has freed people from bondage under the control of the powers, raising people from death and seating them with Christ in the heavenlies (2:1-10). Further, he has overcome the deep division within humanity created by the law. The evil powers hijacked God's good gift of the Mosaic Law and perverted it into a source of alienation, bitterness and division. In his death, Christ conquered this enmity by uniting both Jew and Gentile in Christ in one New Humanity (2:11-16). Because of these triumphs, Christ has the right to build his temple, which he has done in creating the church, the place where God in Christ dwells by the Spirit (2:19-22).

In the fifth chapter, I demonstrate how this reading accounts for the enigmatic digression, Ephesians 3:2-13, which interrupts the letter's second prayer report (3:1, 14-21). The author's digression is necessary because he must answer a potential objection to his announcement of the triumph of God in Christ. This triumph might be called into question by his mention in 3:1 that Paul is a prisoner for the cause of Christ Jesus. That is, if God has indeed installed Christ as cosmic Lord over all things, how is it that Paul, his emissary, is in prison – an apparent defeat? The purpose of the digression is to explain this paradoxical situation, demonstrating that Paul's execution of his ministry while in prison is actually an epitome of the triumph of God in Christ. His imprisonment is bringing about the eschatological glory of the Gentiles (3:13), and despite the shame of being a prisoner, he continues to occupy the cosmically significant position as administrator of God's grace. It is through Paul's preaching that God calls the church into being, which then points to the triumph of God by demonstrating his manifold wisdom to the powers ruling the present evil age (3:10). Even in apparent defeat, God demonstrates his triumph.

In the sixth chapter, I argue that Ephesians 4:1-16 is not simply a call for unity, but rather a discussion of the equipment and empowerment of the church by God for its task of engaging in divine warfare against the evil powers. The church is the earthly manifestation of the triumphant warrior Christ and, as such, is called to participate in the triumph of God in Christ. This reading of Ephesians 4:1-16 also

facilitates a satisfying solution to one of the most stubborn interpretive problems in Ephesians – the quotation of Psalm 68 in Ephesians 4:8. I argue that the author did not cite this text mistakenly – that is, out of context – as some writers claim, but rather appeals to the narrative logic of Psalm 68, a strategy made clear by reference to the ideology of divine warfare. Only when the argument of Ephesians is read against the background of this divine warfare imagery does the author's citation of that scriptural passage make sense.

The same is the case for understanding how the exhortatory portion of Ephesians is integrally related to the first half of the letter, as demonstrated in the final chapter. The author portrays the church as the people of God residing in enemy territory – the present evil age ruled by the powers and authorities who seek to lead humanity astray from obedience to God – and the task of the church is to participate in the triumph of God in Christ by realizing its identity as the new creation people of God even while set in this hostile environment. When new creation life flourishes in Christian communities, the triumph of God in Christ over all competing cosmic forces is advertised to the powers and authorities in the heavenlies.