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The Portrait of the Readers Prior to Their Coming to Faith According to Ephesians

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1. Introduction

In recent academic study of Ephesians attention has been paid to issues of authorship and pseudonymity, to the particular historical situation for which the letter has been written, to the reconstruction of the relationship between Jewish Christian and Gentile Christians and how it is addressed in the letter, to the conceptual background of the head-body metaphor, to the religious background of the letter either in some form of Gnosticism or in the Old Testament and Hellenistic Judaism and to the portrayal of Paul in the letter and its implications for issues of authorship and the nature of the letter.¹ To some of these issues we shall return in this essay.

In current New Testament studies issues of identity have received a fair amount of attention.² Such studies primarily focus on the new identity of the believers and the new community which they constitute. Particular attention has been paid to the manner of *the construction of this new identity*. What constitutes the identity of early Christians vis-à-vis other religious and social groups in the ancient world such as Jewish synagogues or Hellenistic mystery religions or the ancient associations? What is their origin and ethos? In

¹ For convenient surveys see Udo Schnelle, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (UTB; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007: pp. 355–57, D.A. Carson and D. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd Edition (Downers Grove, IL: Zondervan, 2005), pp. 492–94.

² See the two recent Scandinavian major research projects documented in: Bengt Holmberg (ed.) *Exploring Early Christian Identity*. (WUNT 226; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Bengt Holmberg and Mikael Winninge (ed.) *Identity Formation in the New Testament* (WUNT 227; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) and many other monographs on more defined aspects; a fine survey is Bengt Holmberg, “Understanding the First Hundred Years of Christian Identity,” in Holmberg (ed.) *Exploring Christian Identity*, pp. p. 1–32.

such discussions, one significant aspect of identity has often been neglected, namely the *former* identity and behaviour that the new converts have left behind?

Issues of identity also play a major issue in Ephesians. Carson and Moo note that in the letter “in general there is an effort to give Paul’s readers a distinctively Christian identity.”³ While not employing the concept and language of identity, Arnold describes three areas where Ephesians aims at constructing the new identity of the readers:

Being converts from a Hellenistic religious environment—mystery religions, magic, astrology—these people needed a positive grounding in the Pauline gospel ... Their fear of evil spirits and cosmic powers was also a great concern, especially the question of where Christ stands in relation to these forces [1]. Because of their pagan past, they also needed help and admonishment in cultivating a lifestyle consistent with their salvation in Christ, a lifestyle free from drunkenness, sexual immorality, stealing and bitterness [2]. Although there were many Jewish Christians (and former God-fearers) in the churches of the region, the flood of new Gentile converts created some significant tensions. Their lack of appreciation for the Jewish heritage of their faith prompted some serious Jewish-Gentile tension in the churches [3].⁴

A particular emphasis in the construction of the believers’ new identity in Ephesians is their new status “in Christ,” an expression which occurs 34 times in the six chapters of the letter and describes the “corporate solidarity of believers with their resurrected and exalted Lord.”⁵

A further noteworthy feature of Ephesians is the deliberate contrast between the former state with all its implications (“then”) and the present state under faith with all its implications (“now”), although such contrasts also occur in other New Testament books.⁶

³ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction*, p. 491.

⁴ Clinton E. Arnold, “Ephesians, Letter to the,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin (ed.) *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), pp. 238–49 (246).

⁵ Arnold, “Ephesians,” p. 247.

⁶ For example, in Rom 6:12–14; 8:13; 1 Pet 1:18; 2:10; survey in Peter Tachau, “*Einst*” und “*Jetzt*” im Neuen Testament: Beobachtungen zu einem urchristlichen Predigtschema in der neutestamentlichen Briefliteratur und zu

Ephesians contains several statements regarding the former spiritual state of the readers (primarily in chapters 1–3) and regarding the behaviour that they have left behind or are admonished to do so (primarily in chapters 4–6). Ephesians can therefore be read as a two-pronged exercise in early Christian identity building: dissociation from the readers' pagan past and identification with their new Christian identity in status and conduct. Or, to use the language of construction: *de*-construction of their or past status and behaviour and construction or perhaps *re*-construction of their new identity in Christ.

Ernest has examined these contrasts in Ephesians and has identified "Two Types of Existence," so the title of his article.⁷ He notes that "Both types are stated in absolute and relative terms, and this creates problems. The two types are described most clearly in Eph 4:17–21; 4:22–24; 5:8 and 5:15–18."⁸ After surveying these passages which contrast *conduct* (pp. 140–43), Best briefly describes the statements on the former *spiritual status* of the readers: "The contrasts identified here are put elsewhere in the letter in quite another way without the discussion of actual details of conduct. Unbelievers are dead in sin (2:1, 5) and belong to the sphere of the devil (2:2); they are under the control of 'the powers' (6:12) and subject to the wrath of God (2:3)."⁹

The present article focuses on the *portrayal of Gentiles before coming to faith in Ephesians*. While obviously including the passages regarding *conduct* which Best examines, it argues a more comprehensive case.¹⁰ What is said throughout the letter about the past that the readers left behind or are strongly urged to do so? A second quest is for the function of this portrait for shaping the identity of the readers now that they believe. Through the rhetorical device of dissociation, this "old identity," however negatively it is portrayed, functions in the construction of the new identity and the behaviour which it entails.

There is consensus that Ephesians addresses predominantly readers of Gentile Christian background (as such the readers are

seiner Vorgeschichte (FRLANT 105; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972); see also E. Best, *Essays in Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), p. 140.

⁷ Best, *Essays*.

⁸ Best, *Essays*, p. 139.

⁹ Best, 1997, p. 143?

¹⁰ At the beginning of his article, Best places the descriptions mentioned above in the overall argument of the letter (*Essays*, p. 139).

directly addressed in 2:11; 3:1; 4:17).¹¹ Two comments on methodology are in order. Firstly, despite the several references to the former state and conduct of the readers, our quest is not obvious. The clear focus of Ephesians is *not* a description and evaluation of the former life of the readers (there is very little of this in the Bible) but on the change brought about by God's salvation in Christ and on the believers' new status and privileges and the required behaviour in view of the former. Their past does not appear for its own sake and does not receive nuanced appreciation. It only appears as the negative backdrop (the "plight") for their present existence (the "solution").

Secondly, how does the extensive portrayal of *Christians* in the letter contribute to our quest? Do all positive statements on the status, privileges and conduct of the readers imply that they were lacking all this prior to their conversion? Do all imperatives necessarily imply, that the behaviour demanded of the readers was lacking previously? For example, when the Christian children are called to obey their parents (6:1) does that suggest that this was not the case previously or that their present obedience has a new quality as it is "in the Lord?" The portrayal of the readers' past would become far more nuanced and complex if these indirect conclusions were included. I have not done so because of the constraints of space and in view of the methodological problems referred to.

2. The portrayal of Gentiles prior to faith in Ephesians

The former existence of the readers is described as a life "in trespasses" which need to be (and can be) forgiven through the redemption through the blood of Jesus (1:7). Eph 2:1 describes the spiritual consequences of such trespasses: the readers were once spiritually "dead through the trespasses and sins in which they once lived."¹² The verse combines a statement on the former state of the readers ("dead") with a statement on their behaviour or the consequences of that state. In this state, they were "following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit

¹¹ A helpful discussion of the author of Ephesians can be found in Carson & Moo, *An Introduction*, pp. 480–86 and in Arnold, "Ephesians," pp. 240–42. They survey the debate and list several persuasive arguments for Pauline authorship. For an assessment as deutero-Pauline see: Schnelle, *Theologie*, pp. 344–46. Following their arguments, I refer to the author as Paul. However, our quest is not dependent on issues of authorship.

¹² Repeated in 2:5: "we were dead through our trespasses"; see Best, *Essays*, pp. 69–85.

that is now at work among those who are disobedient.”¹³ The readers once lived among those who are disobedient (to God and his will) in the passions of their flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and they were by nature children of (God’s) wrath, like everyone else (2:2–4). This is a sweeping statement on the state of people prior to coming to faith: disobedient in the passions of their flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses and by nature recipients of divine wrath and judgment.

Ephesians 2 contains a number of statements which define the Gentile readers negatively vis-à-vis Israel. They were Gentiles by birth (“nations according to the flesh”) and therefore not born into the chosen and spiritually privileged community of Israel (2:11). They were called the “un-circumcision” by the Jews (“called the circumcision”). Due to this default, they did not participate in the covenants and promises given to the people of God. At one time they also were without Christ (2:12) and all the spiritual benefits derived from knowing him and believing in him, which the letter so amply describes. The promise of and actual coming and ministry of the Christ, Israel’s Messiah, is—at least to start with—a particularly Jewish privilege (see Rom 1:16, “to the Jew first,” 9:5: “from them by natural descent came the Messiah;” the words “having no hope” in 2:12 and the contrast in 2:13 “But now in Christ Jesus”—the Christ is identified as Jesus of Nazareth—might indicate that the promise of the Messiah is in view here).

The letter continues the former negative characterisation in view of Israel’s status and privileges: being without Christ, they were “*aliens* from the commonwealth of Israel, and *strangers* to (in 4:18: “alienated from the life of God”) the covenants of promise” (2:12; this is repeated positively in Eph 2:19: “you are no longer strangers and aliens”). The readers did not belong to the chosen people of God and did not know and share in the various covenants and the promises which this special relationship entailed for the present and the future. Therefore they “had no hope and were

¹³ Schnelle, *Theologie*, p. 348, notes that this emphasis is due to the particular religious-cultural situation in Ephesus: “The noteworthy emphasis on the power of God or Christ in Eph 1:15–23; 3:14–19, 20–21; 6:10–20 becomes explicable against the background of this religious situation and points to a religious insecurity of many new church members. To them the letter proclaims: God’s power surpasses all diabolic powers, the rulers of darkness and the spiritual beings of evilness in heavenly realms (see Eph 6:12)” (translation from the present author). This is also reflected in the “christology of exaltation and dominion” of the letter (Schnelle, *Theologie*, p. 353).

without God in the world" (2:12c). Recognition and veneration of the true God was impossible without sharing in the commonwealth of Israel, as strangers from the covenants of promise and without Christ.

Once the readers were far off from God and his people, now they have been brought near (2:13). This is repeated in Eph 2:17: once they were "far off" (2:17) while the Jews were near. Now there is reconciliation to one body. The hostility between the Gentiles and the Jews has been removed (2:14). Now enmity has been put to death by the cross (2:16). The readers' former life was characterised by alienation from God and his promises and by hostility to God's people (2:16).

After the concentration of statements on the former state and behaviour of the readers prior to faith in Ephesians 2, further direct statements occur in chapters 4 and 5 in the admonishing part of the letter. There they function repeatedly and extensively as the negative backdrop for the admonition addressed at the readers. What is said in Ephesians 4 builds on the previous characterisation of Gentiles. The ethical charge is clear: Now, being part of the people of God, *the readers must no longer live as the Gentiles live*. The argument starts with the spiritual state and attitudes and then moves on to concrete unacceptable behaviour:

Gentiles live in the futility of their minds (4:17; see "dead through trespasses" in 2:1, 5). They are darkened in their understanding and are alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and their hardness of heart (4:18, previously they were described as aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and as strangers and aliens). Against this darkness divine enlightenment is necessary.¹⁴ They have lost all spiritual sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness and are eager to practice every kind of impurity. The contrast to the present state and required behaviour of the readers is clear: "That is not the way you learnt in Christ" (4:20).

The readers have been taught to put away their former way of life (4:22) which is characterised as the "their old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts" (4:22). The corrupted and deluded spirit of their minds needs to be divinely renewed (4:23). This "old self" needs to be replaced with a "new self," "created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (4:24). True righteousness and holiness was lacking previously.

¹⁴ Eph 1:18, "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know"; see Carson and Moo, *An Introduction*, p. 495.

The following verses address virtues that are to replace their former behaviour: *falsehood* in words towards neighbours is to make place for truth (4:25, as the Christians are now members of one another in the one body). Previously their *anger* led them to sin (4:26; persisting in anger over longer periods). Formerly they made room for *the schemes of the devil* in their lives (4:26–27). At least some the readers were *thieves* (4:28), now they are to labour and work honestly with their hands.¹⁵ Sharing with the needy, rather than *stealing*, is to be their ideal. *Evil talk* is no longer to come out of their mouth (4:29), rather edifying and graceful words. Now their behaviour is not to grieve the Holy Spirit (4:30, with which they have been sealed for the day of redemption, something which they lacked previously). To be removed is *all bitterness* and *wrath* and *anger* and *wrangling* and *slander*, together with all *malice* (4:31) which characterised their former life. Now there is to be mutual kindness, tender-heartedness and forgiveness.

What used to characterise their lives is again mentioned at the beginning of chapter 5 as the dark backdrop for the required present life: “But fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed must not even be mentioned, as it is proper among the saints. Entirely out of place is obscene, silly, and vulgar talk” (5:3). No fornicator, no impure person, or a greedy person (that is an idolater) will partake in the kingdom of Christ and of God (5:5). For such behaviour the wrath of God comes on those who are *disobedient* (5:6; an active state like “dead through trespasses,” not mere ignorance). Therefore the believers are called not to be associated with them (5:7). Gentiles whose lives are characterised by fornication, impurity, greed and disobedience to God come under his wrath.

The theme of spiritual darkness recurs in Eph 5:8: “For once you were *in darkness*, but now in the Lord you are in the light.” Darkness as a metaphor for the spiritual state of people in alienation from God is a recurrent biblical theme.¹⁶ If the fruit of the light is “all that is good and right and true” (5:9), then darkness is to be associated with what is bad, wrong and false. This spiritual darkness is not without practical consequences, namely “the unfruitful works of darkness” (5:11) which are to be brought to the light. Gentile practices are so perverted that it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly (5:12). The readers are called to live not as unwise people (5:15; in the Old Testament sense in

¹⁵ See Best, *Essays*, pp. 179–88.

¹⁶ See H. Conzelmann, *TbWNT VIII*, pp. 424–46 and H.C. Hahn, “Licht/Finsternis”, *TbBLNT*, (1300–1318) 1307–1310.

which the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, Prov 1:7) and not to be foolish (5:17). They are not to get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery (5:18).

Also of significance is Eph 6:11. It places the Christian readers in a struggle against the devil. If Christians use the spiritual equipment that is at their disposal, they will be able to withstand this onslaught. By implication, those without the “spiritual armour” provided by God will be defenceless before the devil and unable to withstand him and will therefore be under his dominion. Christians find themselves in a struggle not against enemies of blood and flesh. Other people are under “the rulers, the authorities, cosmic powers of this present darkness under the dominion of spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6:12). Other people are indirectly characterised as not able to withstand now and on that evil day and as unable to stand firm as they lack what is available to believers (6:13–18; i.e. the belt of truth around their waist, the breastplate of righteousness, the proclamation of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God). They are exposed without protection to “all the flaming arrows of the evil one” and under his attack.

Carson and Moo observe on the cosmology of Ephesians that the cosmic conflict against “principalities and powers” for which only the whole armour of God is adequate, depicts a world of dangerous opponents, sweeping from pure abstractions through demonology to literary personification. The breath of the vision invests the nature of the Christian struggle with breath-taking significance, while offering assurance that God and his gospel provides the only solace and hope.¹⁷

This is what people prior to faith lack in this world of “dangerous opponents.”

In view of the bleak portrayal of Gentiles prior to coming to faith in general, it is noteworthy that Ephesians does not contain direct references to literal idolatry or the former idolatry of the readers, as is the case, for example, in 1 Thess 1:9 (“how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God”) or in Rom 1:21–23. In Eph 5:5, idolatry occurs metaphorically for greed.

Christians are admonished in Eph 6:11 to stand against the wiles of the devil. While it is mentioned that their struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, authori-

¹⁷ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction*, p. 494.

ties, cosmic powers of this present darkness and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, nowhere in the letter is the bleak state of Gentiles prior to coming to faith directly attributed to the devil or superhuman powers. Yet there is no doubt that they were “following the ruler of the power of the air” (2:2). Christians are charged no longer to make room for the devil (4:27).

There are some noteworthy *exceptions* to this bleak picture of Gentiles prior to faith that need to be taken into account for a comprehensive understanding. Ernest Best has also noted that next to the *absolute* statements (surveyed above), there occur some “*relative*” statements on contemporary culture in Ephesians: “Indeed, part of what the author says shows that he recognized the existence of good in the world.”¹⁸ Best notes that when the author writes about behaviour, he employs some ethical terms drawn from contemporary non-Christian ethics (147f) and concludes: “This means that his image of pagan society and of the actual pre-Christian life of his readers cannot have been as dark as he says.”¹⁹

In addition to these verbal parallels (however they are to be evaluated) there is further evidence. Despite all negative attributes, the readers are assured that they were *chosen by God in Christ even before the foundation of the world* and thus long before their eventual conversion (1:4). Even then they had been destined for adoption as God’s children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will (1:5), apparently irrespective of their state prior to coming to faith. Despite their (still) being spiritually dead through

¹⁸ Best, *Essays*, p. 147. Best observes that this is also the case in Jewish writings on Gentiles: “Jewish authors were not consistent in employing dark colours. In so far as they recognized that God is the God of all peoples, who would in the end be gathered to God, their view of the Gentile world cannot have been entirely negative (Isa 45:22; 51:5; 56:7, Sir 1:9f, 1 En 10:21). Josephus, whose own associations in Judaism were with Pharisaism, compares Stoics and Pharisees with no intention of denigrating either (*Vita* 12), and so evaluates Stoicism positively” (*Essays*, p. 143). Best also notes that Ephesians is not consistent in how Christians are portrayed in the letter: “If its author asserts that believers are now light and not darkness, much that he writes shows that he realized that darkness still existed among them. ... there would have been no point in the author’s warning the readers so strongly against these sins if some believers had not been committing them. ... In fact, every instruction the author offers in respect of what he considers true conduct and every warning against sinful conduct is an admission, that there are those who have failed in the community” (*Essays*, p. 146).

¹⁹ Best, *Essays*, p. 148.

their trespasses, God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved them, was at work and saved them by his grace (2:4; see Rom 5:8). They had been saved by grace through faith and not their own doing, rather it was the gift of God (2:9). Therefore all human boasting is excluded (2:9). The readers are now what God has made them to be, created in Christ Jesus for good works (2:10), which God prepared *beforehand* to be their way of life in the present. Their life prior to coming to faith, however dark and displeasing to God it was, was already under his claim and salvific purpose and power.

In addition, Eph 3:15 introduces God as the “father from whom *every* family in heaven and on earth takes its name.” The privilege of divine fatherhood applies not only to the Jewish people who are mentioned on several occasions in the letter (in Rom 9:4, “sonship” is a particular privilege of Jews).

To sum up: altogether Ephesians paints a bleak and absolute picture of Gentiles prior coming to faith. Firstly, their spiritual *state* is described as one of spiritual darkness (5:8, including the unfruitful works of darkness, 5:11) and of deadness in trespasses and sins (an expression that indicates that their state and conduct is closely linked). They live in the futility of their minds (4:17), are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart (4:18). They have lost all sensitivity (4:19), they are disobedient to God (2:2), live without God in the world (2:12), their old self is corrupted and deluded by its lusts and they are by nature under the wrath of God (2:3).

Secondly, their state is described in Ephesians 2 as one of deficiency vis-à-vis Israel. They belong to “the nations,” not the privileged people of God. They do not bear the covenant sign and are alien from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise (2:12). They are far off (2:17) from God and his covenant people.

Thirdly, their state is described passively as under the dominion of forces other than themselves. They follow the course of this world and the ruler of the power of the air (2:2). They are exposed to the schemes of the devil (4:26) and exposed without protection to the onslaught of the devil (6:11–18). Some of these statements suggest an active contribution by the Gentiles to this situation (e.g. they have hardened hearts and are disobedient).²⁰

²⁰ This portrayal resembles that of Gentiles in Romans 1:18–32 [see R. Dabelstein, *Die Beurteilung der “Heiden” bei Paulus* (BbET; Frankfurt: Lang Verlag, 1981) and F. Matera, *God’s Saving Grace: A Pauline Theology*

Fourthly, their *state* is closely linked to their behaviour. Best rightly observes: “The sins of the Gentile world condemned by ... Ephesians are principally sexual perversions (‘licentiousness’ in 4:19 should be given this wide sense and not restricted to fornication alone ...) and covetousness.”²¹ Gentiles are portrayed as following the passions of the flesh (2:3) and as greedy to practice every kind of impurity (4:19). Eph 5:3 mentions fornication and impurity of any kind and greed (see also 5:5, 12).

In addition to the two emphases identified by Best, they are characterised by falsehood and anger, as thieves, evil talkers, by obscene, silly and vulgar talk, by bitterness, wrath, wrangling, slander and all malice (4:31), by lack of wisdom, foolishness and drunkenness. Therefore, a third emphasis next to sexual perversions and greed, is on sins of the tongue.²²

However, there are some unexpected exceptions to this portrayal: despite all negative characteristics, some Gentiles were chosen by God in Christ and come to faith (1:4). They had been destined for adoption as God’s children according to the good pleasure of his will.²³ The merciful and loving God cared enough about them to save them by his grace (2:4; “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ...”; see also 2:8). Salvation was God’s gift to them, independent of their works or achievements (2:9).²⁴ Acceptable works, which the Gentiles obvi-

(Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 88–102] and that of Luke-Acts [for a summary see C. Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith* (WUNT/II 108; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), pp. 379–82, according to Luke, Gentiles are characterised by ignorance, rejection of God’s purpose and revelation in history, idolatry, materialism, moral-ethical sins, under the power of Satan and under divine judgement].

²¹ Best, *Essays*, pp. 145ff.

²² As, for example, in Jas 3:1–12; the New Testament follows the Old Testament wisdom tradition in this regard; for the background see William R. Baker, *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James* (WUNT/II 68; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995).

²³ Eph 1:5; cf. Acts 18:10; see Stenschke, *Luke’s Portrait*, p. 293.

²⁴ Often these key statements on the soteriology of Ephesians are read with *Jewish* readers in mind: these statements aim at excluding any form righteousness through the works of the Law and boasting of such righteousness (this understanding is influenced by Galatians and Romans, where righteousness through the law is explicitly addressed). The Jews had the law and righteousness through the law and went a long way in achieving this righteousness and therefore prone to boasting (see Phil 3:6).

ously did not have, are excluded, as is any human boasting (2:9). They had been created in Christ Jesus for good works which God had prepared beforehand to be their way of life in the present (2:10). God is the father from whom every family takes its name, including the families of the readers (3:15).

Other than these exceptional statements, Ephesians makes absolute statements on all Gentiles. There is no differentiation regarding state (all seem to be equally affected) or behaviour (all Gentiles seem to conduct themselves as described above).²⁵

3. Function and significance

This portrayal of the readers prior to their coming to faith has several functions in the rhetoric of the letter:

1) The dark portrayal of their past reminds the readers to appreciate their new status and to implement the new conduct that the letter calls for in some detail. Their former plight is painted in dark colours so that the solution provided in the Gospel shines all the more brightly regarding their status and their new behaviour. In more detail:

Best rightly observes and asks: “An absolute position in respect either of the Christian life (that it is pure light [with reference to Eph 5:8]) or of the world outside the Christian community (that it is pure darkness) is impossible. What, then, led the author into the position where he appears to be making such absolute and impossible assertions?”²⁶ In order to find an answer, Best turns to ethical instruction in the New Testament in general.²⁷ Drawing on the well-known distinction between indicative and imperative, Best notes that “The author was required, then, to express in absolute terms the position of believers so that he could make that position

These statements are all the more striking when it is kept in mind that they primarily address readers with *Gentile* background. What they were not even aware of (the Law) and could not practice (good works) is not required for salvation, as it is the gift of God.

²⁵ Ephesians does not mention God-fearers or proselytes as exceptional Gentiles. They constitute a significant aspect in the Lukan portrayal of Gentiles prior to their coming to faith; see Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait*. Luke notes exceptional Gentiles also apart from Diaspora Judaism, e.g. Acts 28:2.

²⁶ Best, *Essays*, p. 149).

²⁷ Best, *Essays*, p. 149.

into a springboard for his advocacy of good conduct.”²⁸ This procedure can be seen in Eph 5:8: “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light.” Best concludes: “But whereas this shows that *there is a theological justification for the author’s absolute statements in respect of believers*, there is no parallel in respect of *unbelievers*.”²⁹ However, Best overlooks that the absolute negative portrayal of the readers’ past (“unbelievers”) serves to paint the present indicative of salvation, their new identity—from which the imperatives follow!—all the brighter.³⁰ In addition, the pre-Christian conduct appears as the negative backdrop for the new Christian conduct now required of the readers. The negative portrayal of previous conduct serves to motivate Christian conduct in the present.

Therefore this portrayal in Ephesians has a particular, but also a *limited function*. Paul Tachau has emphasised this repeatedly in his detailed treatment of Ephesians 2:

Therefore *not the history of the Gentile Christian in general* is under discussion, but the old pagan and the new Christian existence of the addressees (1972: 140). ... The contrast between then and now serves primarily to assure the addressees of their salvation. ... Despite the detailed descriptions in Ephesians 2:1–3 and 11f, reference to the past is made for the sake of the contrast; but the past is not really the subject of reflection (142). ... Rather, the references to the past serve exclusively to qualify the present existence. The “then-now” scheme employed here functions to emphasise

²⁸ Best, *Essays*, p. 149. See, however, the recent criticism of the indicative or imperative concept, e.g. in Friedrich Wilhelm and Ruben Zimmermann (ed.) *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ* (KNNTE/CNNTTE I; WUNT 238; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

²⁹ Best, *Essays*, p. 150; italics are the present author’s.

³⁰ Arnold, “Ephesians,” p. 247, describes the ethical argument of Ephesians as follows: “behavioural change is not only possible, it is part of their divine calling and God’s purpose for them (Eph 1:4; 2:10; 4:1). They have access to God’s power which will enable them to resist temptation (Eph 6:10–18). They are enabled by the risen Christ himself who has endowed the church with gifted people who depend on him for leadership and provision (Eph 4:11–16). Finally, they have an example in Christ himself who modelled self-sacrificial love and service (Eph 5:2).”

that the Christians have been taken out of the space of their origin.³¹

Ephesians therefore does not present a neutral, objective and generally applicable description of people before coming to faith.

Closely related to admonishment is an observation of Best regarding the danger of apostasy or the continuance of former behaviour: “Ephesians, then, evinces a great interest in the life of the community and little in that of the world outside, except to depict it in the darkest of colours. *The more darkly the picture is painted, the less likely the members are to fall back into its ways.*”³²

In this way the portrayal of the reader’s pre-conversion condition makes an important contribution to the construction of early Christian identity. Ephesians combines de-construction of the pre-conversion state and conduct and a re-construction of the new identity in Christ and its ensuing behaviour.

2) In view of the specific situation within the Christian communities addressed, the portrayal of Gentiles prior to their coming to faith in Ephesians also functions beyond implementing Christian ethics. Schnelle observes regarding the situation of the readers:

The situation of the congregations addresses is apparently characterised by tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians ... their relationship to the Jewish Christians is the sole content of the instructions in Ephesians 2:11–22 and at the same time one of the dominant themes of the letter. Ephesians sketches the concept of a church of Gentile and Jewish Christians who together constitute the body of Christ.³³ In doing so, the author reacts to a development in the opposite direction in the churches of Asia Minor: The Jewish Christians are already in a minority and the Gentile Christians no longer see them as equally entitled partners.³⁴

³¹ Tachau, “*Einst*” und “*Jetzt*”, p.143; “once you were without Christ, now you are in Christ Jesus”, italics and translation are the present author’s.

³² Best, *Essays*, p. 155; italics are the present author’s.

³³ Arnold speaks of “the danger of the largely Gentile readership disowning their Jewish heritage” (“Ephesians,” p. 245). He notes in his survey of research on the life setting and purpose of Ephesians: “Gentile believers are strongly in view ... and there is a need for the readers to receive teaching and admonishment on unity and a distinctively Christian lifestyle” (“Ephesians,” p. 246).

³⁴ Schnelle, *Theologie*, p. 374. Carson and Moo are more cautious and merely note: “Some point to a possible tension between Jewish and Gen-

In order to address and alleviate such tensions between Gentile and Jewish Christians, Ephesians reminds the Gentile Christian readers of their dark past (their former position and former deplorable conduct) and their inferiority/deficiencies vis-à-vis Israel. Their past is deconstructed. In this way the Gentile Christian readers are put in their proper place vis-à-vis their fellow Jewish believers: they are to appreciate all that they are now (without any merits of their own, 2:8; there was nothing that they could contribute to this new status; through Christ they have what is described in 2:19) and are to appreciate their fellow Jewish believers into whose heritage they have been included. Although they probably have become a minority in the congregations of Asia Minor, the Jewish Christians are to be respected. Without this inclusion into the people of God, the Gentile readers would be “nothing.” Schnelle expresses this concern and ensuing argumentation as follows:

Against the backdrop of an increasing Gentile Christian anti-Judaism Ephesians stands up for an *equally entitled inheritance of the Jewish Christians in the body of Christ*. The thesis of Ephesians is clear and unambiguous: *Israel is the people of God and has her covenantal promises; the Gentiles have nothing. This is the point of departure*. But then the incomprehensible miracle happens: Christ tears down the wall between Gentiles and Jews, the Law with its commandments, and in this manner gives to the Gentiles access to God in the one church (2:11).³⁵

On the function of this perspective, Tachau writes:

The author endeavours to make clear the contrast between Gentile past and Christian present against the backdrop of Jewish terminology. In doing so, he obviously pursues particular intentions: *The Gentile Christian readers are warned to consider themselves privileged vis-à-vis their fellow Jewish Christians. For*

tile Christians and think Paul is trying to secure unity” (*An Introduction*, p. 490). Later on they note: “Apparently Paul thought his readers needed to be *exhorted to pursue unity* and a distinctively Christian ethic” (*An Introduction*, p. 491; italics are from the present author). Says Arnold, “Ephesians,” p. 246: “Although there were many Jewish Christians (and former God-fearers) in the churches of the region, the flood of new Gentile converts created some significant tensions. Their lack of appreciation for the Jewish heritage of their faith prompted some serious Jewish-Gentile tension in the churches.”

³⁵ Schnelle, *Theologie*, p. 356. Translation and italics are from the present author. See Eph 2:11.

*this purpose the letter refers to the Jewish Christians' past in contrast to the Gentile Christians.*³⁶

This reminder of the Gentile readers of their own former state and implicitly of the privileges of Israel into which they have been included is particularly striking in view of the prevalent and often open and violent anti-Judaism of the ancient world.³⁷ This backdrop has not sufficiently been noted in the discussion of early Christian identity formation.

However, the exceptional statements noted above counterbalance the absolute portrayal. There is no room for contempt on the side of Jewish Christians either. They are reminded that despite their dark state, the Gentiles are under God's claim: Israel's God is the "father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name" (Eph 3:15). This privilege is not limited to Abraham and his descendants. All the readers have been saved not through their own merits but exclusively by divine grace.

3) What is said here about the pre-conversion state of the readers implicitly applies to their present day neighbours and relatives and provides a *spiritual analysis* of the world in which the Christians continue to live (although they will have experienced it differently before their conversion) The environment characterised in this manner is likely to react with surprise and discrimination over against Christians. However, this is not directly addressed by Ephesians as Best rightly observed: "Although in almost all the other NT writings Christians are seen as subject to outside pressure, if not persecution, this is not reflected in any counsel Ephesians gives its readers."³⁸

Related to the function of the portrayal as "spiritual analysis" is an observation by Best. He states:

Another factor in the way the readers looked at their pre-Christian lives may have been the need to explain the failure of others to see the light as they themselves had done. Perhaps it resulted from the sinful and dark culture in which

³⁶ Tachau, "*Einst*" und "*Jetzt*", p. 137; translation and italics are from the present author.

³⁷ For a survey, see Gideon Bohak, "Gentile Attitudes toward Jews and Judaism," in J.J. Collins and D.C. Harlow (ed.). *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 668–70.

³⁸ E. Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), p. 3.

they were enmeshed was as well as from their own sinful and dark lives.³⁹

4) Finally—and likewise not directly addressed—this dark portrayal of their own previous life serves to motivate the readers to share their faith with others. A number of recent studies have argued that Paul expected all Christians to be involved in sharing the Gospel.⁴⁰ That this is also in view in Ephesians despite the counsel in Ephesians 5:7 (“Therefore do not be associated with them”) has been argued by Best, who says that “it would be wrong to say that Ephesians is uninterested in winning outsiders, for 3:1–13 has set out the revelation that the gospel should be taken to the Gentiles. ... The outside world is evil; *men and women must be won into the community from it.*”⁴¹

The late South African missiologist David Bosch writes on Paul’s own motivation:

Paul sees humanity outside Christ as utterly lost, en route to perdition ... and in dire need of salvation (see also Eph 2:12). The idea of imminent judgment on those who “do not obey the truth” ... is a recurring theme in Paul. Precisely for this reason he allows himself no relaxation. He has to proclaim, to as many as possible, deliverance “from the wrath to come” ... He is Christ’s ambassador; God makes his appeal to the lost through Paul and his fellow-workers.⁴²

Bosch also notes that in the context of witness, Paul refers to non-Christians in fairly neutral terms:

It is true ... that Paul often portrays non-members of the community in rather negative terms. I have already referred to some of the expressions he uses in this regard. Other

³⁹ Best, *Essays*, p. 152.

⁴⁰ See Robert L. Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* (PBM; Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007) and Christoph Stenschke, “Paul and the Mission of the Church,” *Missionalia* 39(2011): pp. 167–87.

⁴¹ Best, *Essays*, p. 154; italics are from the present author. See also Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (NSBT 11; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 166.

⁴² David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 16th Edition (ASMS 16; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), p. 134.

terms include “unrighteous”, “nonbelievers”, and “those who obey wickedness”. And yet, it is not words like these, or others such as “adversaries” or “sinners”, which become technical terms for non-Christians. There are ... really only two such technical terms in Pauline letters: *hoi loipoi* (“the others”) and *hoi exo* (“outsiders”). Both of these carry a milder connotation than some of the other more emotive expressions Paul sporadically uses ... and a remarkably free from condemnation.⁴³

Significance

A direct application of this portrayal and its functions might be simple in contexts where people convert in classical fashion from “heathendom” to Christianity and need to be reminded of their former status and of the conduct that they are now called to abandon in their pursuit of their new privileges.⁴⁴ However, instances of

⁴³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 137

⁴⁴ Paul addresses first generation Christians who have come from paganism, not readers or converts in the context of a long-standing Christian tradition or nominal Christians who experienced some kind of conversion or revival. More recent discussions of conversion have distinguished between conversion “from above” (understood theologically) and “from below” (sociologically). See: Scot McKnight, “Conversion,” in John Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 71. McKnight briefly sketches the biblical understanding of fallen humanity (“Conversion,” p. 71). In the section on “conversion from below,” he emphasises context: “Each ‘convert’ has a context, for there are no ‘generic’ humans or Christians. ... Each context shapes conversion: contexts involving one’s social milieu, perceptions of the human selfhood, one’s psychological and sociological health, as well as one’s location in a social circle or trend” (“Conversion,” p. 72). These different contexts “will inevitably shape how the gospel is heard, how the gospel can be presented and how the individual will respond” (“Conversion,” p. 72). McKnight concludes: “A theologically-informed understanding of ‘context’ will emphasise that a universal ‘context’ is that humans are ‘cracked icons’. The human condition is thus a non-negotiable and universal feature of Christian mission theology” (“Conversion,” p. 72). However, how these different perspectives are to be related to each other and which perspective is to take precedence in case of disagreement is less clear; see also Scot McKnight, *Missions and Conversion Theory*. *Mission Studies* 20 (2003): pp. 118–39, and the important study of Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

this have become far and few in between and most missionaries and pastors of today would—like Ephesians—rather focus on the new life than on pre-conversion life and culture.

The theological assessment (and largely new appreciation!) of people outside of Christianity in the past five decades has become more positive than the portrayal of Ephesians.⁴⁵ Those trying to reach them look for and do find points of contact within the culture and religion of the addressees.⁴⁶ What are we to do in this cli-

⁴⁵ For surveys of this new appreciation of non-Christians see H.A.G. Blocher and W.A. Dyrness, “Anthropology, Theological,” in W.A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (ed.) *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 42–45; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 474–89; D.G. Burnett, “Anthropology,” in J. Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, pp. 20–22, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Religions, Theology of,” in Dyrness and Kärkkäinen (ed.) *Global Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 745–53. Early prominent examples were the *Dogmatic Constitution regarding the Church Lumen Gentium* 16 oder die Declaration regarding the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* 1f of the Second Vatican Council from the years 1964 und 1965.

⁴⁶ For the need, legitimacy and methods of contextualisation see Steven B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002); Timoteo D. Gener, “Contextualisation,” in Dyrness and Kärkkäinen (ed.) *Global Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 192–96; Timoteo D. Gener, Lorenzo C. Bautista, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theological Method,” in Dyrness and Kärkkäinen (ed.) *Global Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 889–98; David Gilliland, “Contextualization,” in A. Scott Moreau (ed.) *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 225–27; Juan Francisco Martínez, “Acculturation,” in Dyrness and Kärkkäinen (ed.) *Global Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 1–2; Sudhakar Mondithoka, “Incarnation,” Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, pp. 177–81; Roy Musasiwa, “Contextualization,” in Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, pp. 566–71; A. Neely, “Incarnational Mission,” in Moreau (ed.) *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, pp. 474–75; P. Solomon Raj, “Inculturation,” in Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, pp. 181–84, and Robert J. Schreiter, “Local Theologies,” in Dyrness and Kärkkäinen (ed.) *Global Dictionary of Theology*, pp. 500–502. These surveys indicate that while many attempts have been made to contextualise or inculturate the Christology and soteriology of the New Testaments [for African christologies see Joseph D. Galgalo, “African Christology,” in Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, pp. 2–5, and Musasiwa, “Contextualization,” p. 568], relatively few attempt have been made at contextualising New Testament anthropology. One reason

mate with the portrayal of Ephesians? What is its positive contribution? Is it a necessary—even if politically incorrect—reminder of why people need salvation and an affirmation that they definitely need it? Does this portrayal help Christians (and others) to explain the world in which they live?

In the African context the issue is also burning for other reasons. In many cases, the assessment by missionaries and by other Western Christians of the spiritual state of the local population and of its conduct was influenced—if not significantly shaped—by the biblical portrayals of “Gentiles,” be they of non-Jews or of non-Christians.⁴⁷ This assessment was not only a mere “spiritual exercise” and was not limited to underlining the need of winning these “lost souls.” It also was, at least at times, an essential ingredient of power discourses and concerned not only matters of religion but led to or included from the beginning misgivings or contempt for other or all aspects of indigenous cultures. People characterised by these portrayals were often not taken seriously and were treated accordingly—in mild cases as inferiors to be guided and trained

for this lack is that it is more difficult to find functional substitutes, which happens “when a deeply rooted non-Christian cultural form is taken over and given new Christian content, meaning and purpose” (Musasiwa, “Contextualization,” p. 569). Musasiwa notes that in Zimbabwe and other African countries, “Every critical function of African Traditional Religion has a substitute in those African Independent Churches. ... This enables the followers of African Independent Churches to live holistic lives, thus avoiding the common phenomenon of African Christians having one foot in the church and another foot in African Traditional Religion” (“Contextualization,” p. 569; see Stan W. Nussbaum, “African Initiated Churches,” in Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, pp. 5–7, and Victor R. Atta-Baffoe, “African Traditional Religion,” in Corrie (ed.) *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, pp. 10–12.

⁴⁷ There some ambiguity in the following statement in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974: “Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because man is God’s creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he has fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic. The Gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture” (quoted according to Burnett 2007:21). Musasiwa (“Contextualization,” p. 70) demands that “Contextualisation must respect the authority of the Bible as the primary source of theology. ... It is therefore necessary that any form of contextualisation must be guided by the core of biblical doctrines as formulated and understood in the tradition of the church.”

until they grow in knowledge and Christian conduct, in other cases they were treated as second-class people if not worse.⁴⁸

What is the enduring significance of this portrayal of non-Christians in post-modern times? May we, must we repeat the portrayal and assessment of Ephesians without modification? The answer is “yes” and “no”:

Yes, because for the community of faith this portrayal still has all or some of the functions which it had for the original readers. In many cases the functions described above are still very much on target. Furthermore, this portrayal helps to understand at least some of the world in which we live. While the absolute portrayal of Ephesians may not be directly applicable to all non-Christians, it does apply to some and explains their behaviour by which many others are affected and under which they suffer. Significant events from the Holocaust to the Rwandan genocide and the day to day living in a society with one of the highest crime rates in the world indicate all too clearly that something is fundamentally wrong with people that cannot be accounted for by positivistic anthropologies.

No, a mere repetition of the portrayal in Ephesians would be problematic if it led to contempt of non-Christians and feelings of superiority on the side of believers. However, this is not necessarily the case. The emphasis in Ephesians is on salvation: the people portrayed so darkly are not beyond hope and salvation. The letter says far more on the new status and conduct opened up by the Gospel than on the former life. Christians need to remember that many of those whom they encounter are chosen and predestined. The assessment of pre-conversion life must not impinge on the respect that is to be shown to all people. The vision of Ephesians is that people come to faith, independent of race, age, social status or

⁴⁸ See Burnett, “Anthropology.” More recent missiological thinking and practice, including many scholars from areas formerly evangelised by missionaries from the West, is characterised by a far more nuanced approach. Early expressions of inculturation were typified by “indigenisation theology” (Musasiwa, “Contextualization,” p. 67): “Its religious thrust sought to rehabilitate African religious traditions by attempting to demonstrate their compatibility with the Christian faith” (“Contextualization,” p. 67). For example, John Mbiti, who developed this inculturation theology further, suggested that “Christianity is already an African religion and therefore does not need to be indigenised as if it were a foreign religion in the first place. He sees African traditional religion as *praeparatio evangelica* and Christianity as fulfiller rather than destroyer of African traditions” (“Contextualization,” p. 67).

whatever else. Those who experience salvation will remember that it was by grace only.