

‘Once You Were in Darkness’: The Past of the Readers of Ephesians

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SUMMARY

This article surveys and analyses how the Epistle to the Ephesians portrays the pre-conversion past of the predominantly Gentile Christian readers. After methodological considerations in the introduction, the essay gathers all such references. After a summary, the function of

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht und analysiert, wie der Epheserbrief die Vergangenheit einer vorwiegend heidenchristlichen Leserschaft vor ihrer Bekehrung darstellt. Nach methodologischen Betrachtungen in der Einführung trägt die Studie all diese Angaben zusam-

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article expose et analyse la présentation que l'on trouve dans l'épître aux Éphésiens du passé pré-chrétien de ses lecteurs en majorité d'origine païenne. Après des considérations méthodologiques, l'auteur enregistre toutes les références à ce passé. Puis il considère la fonc-

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1. Introduction

Recent academic study of Ephesians has paid attention to issues of authorship and pseudonymity, to the particular historical situation for which the letter was 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,¹ 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 and its implications for issues of authorship and the nature of the letter.² While

this portrayal in the argument of the letter is described before the question of the legitimacy of this portrayal is discussed. A final section relates the exegetical discussion to the present-day understanding of non-Christian religions and draws some conclusions for the mission of the church.

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men. Nach einer Zusammenfassung wird die Funktion dieser Darstellung im Argument des Briefes beschrieben, bevor erörtert wird, ob diese Darstellung legitim ist. Der letzte Abschnitt schlägt eine Brücke von der exegetischen Diskussion zum gegenwärtigen Verständnis nicht-christlicher Religionen und zieht daraus Schlussfolgerungen für die Aufgabe der Kirche.

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tion de cette évocation du passé des lecteurs dans l'argumentation et pose ensuite la question de la légitimité de cette manière de la présenter. Dans la dernière partie de l'article, l'auteur propose des applications de ses conclusions exégétiques pour la façon dont on peut considérer aujourd'hui les religions non chrétiennes et tire des conclusions pour la mission de l'Église.

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touching on a number of these issues, the focus of this essay is different.

In current New Testament studies issues of identity have received a fair amount of attention.³ Such studies primarily focus on the new identity of the believers and the new community which they constitute and/or to which they now belong. Particular attention has been paid to the various strategies applied in *the construction of this new identity*.⁴ What constitutes the identity of early Christians vis-à-vis other religious and social groups in the ancient world such as Jewish synagogues, Hellenistic mystery religions or the ancient associations?⁵ In such discussions, one

significant aspect of identity is often neglected, namely the *former* identity and behaviour that the new converts have left behind or should have left behind.

Building and maintaining identity play a major role in Ephesians. Carson and Moo note that 'in general there is an effort to give Paul's readers a distinctively Christian identity'.⁶ While not employing the concept and language of identity, Arnold describes three areas where Ephesians aims at constructing the new identity of the readers:⁷

Being converts from a Hellenistic religious environment – mystery religions, magic, astrology – these people needed a positive grounding in the Pauline gospel from the apostle himself. 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].

A particular emphasis in the construction of the believers' new identity 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'.⁸ A further noteworthy feature is the contrast between the former spiritual state of the readers with all its implications ('then') and the present state under faith with all its implications ('now'), although such contrasts also occur elsewhere in the New Testament.⁹ Ernest Best has rightly noted that 'The contrast between pre-Christian and Christian existence is a commonplace in scripture (e.g. Rom 6:12-14; 8:13; 1 Pet 1:18; 2:10)'.¹⁰ Ephesians contains several statements regarding the former spiritual state of the readers (primarily in chapters 1-3) and the corresponding behaviour that they have left behind or are admonished to leave behind (primarily in chapters 4-6).

Ephesians can be read as a two-pronged exercise in early Christian identity building: dissocia-

tion from the readers' pagan past and the building of their new Christian identity in status and conduct; or, to use the language of construction: *de*-construction of their past status and behaviour and construction or perhaps *re*-construction of their new identity.

Best has examined these contrasts in Ephesians and has identified 'Two Types of Existence' – so the title of his study. He notes that 'Both types are stated in absolute and relative terms, and this creates problems. The two types are described most clearly in Ephesians 4:17-21; 4:22-24; 5:8 and 5:15-18'.¹¹ After surveying the passages which contrast *conduct*,¹² Best summarises the statements on the former *spiritual status* of the readers as follows:

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).

The present essay focuses on the portrayal of Gentiles before coming to faith. While obviously including the passages on conduct (to which Best refers and which he treats in detail in his commentary on Ephesians¹³), it wants to argue a more comprehensive case. First, what is said throughout the letter about the past that the readers left behind or should leave behind? Second, what is the function of this portrayal for determining and building the identity of the readers now that they believe? Through dissociation this 'old identity', however negatively it is portrayed, still functions in the construction of the new identity and its corresponding behaviour. Finally, we briefly survey explanations for this portrayal and discuss its legitimacy and abiding significance. In all three quests we shall return to Best's descriptions and analyses of these types of existence.

There is consensus that Ephesians addresses predominantly readers of Gentile Christian background:

... since a large portion of the argument of the letter relates to the acceptance of Gentiles as believers and since the readers are addressed in the second plural as Gentiles who have forsaken pagan ways (2:1f; 3:1; 4:17), the majority of them must have been Gentiles.¹⁴

On a number of occasions there is a differentiation between statements in the second person plural

directly addressing the readers (e.g. 1:3-12, 14; 2:2-10) and statements in the first person plural (1:13; 2:11).¹⁵ Some scholars have seen in the first person plural a reference to Jews or Jewish Christians (which is definitely the case in 1:3-12, as there is a contrast to Gentiles, v. 13); other exegetes have taken it to refer to Paul ('royal we' or *pluralis maiestatis*) or to Christians in general.¹⁶

Despite the several references to the former state and conduct of the readers, our quest is not obvious. Carson and Moo rightly note that in Ephesians 'in general there is an effort to give Paul's readers a distinctively Christian identity'.¹⁷ The clear focus of Ephesians is *not* on the former life but on the change brought about by God's saving grace and on the readers' new status and privileges and the behaviour required in view of the former. Their past does not appear for its own sake and does not receive nuanced appreciation. It only serves as the negative backdrop for their present existence.

How does the extensive portrayal of Christians contribute to our quest? Do all positive statements on the status and privileges of the readers imply that they were lacking both prior to their conversion? Do all imperatives imply that the behaviour demanded of them under faith was lacking previously? For example, when the Christian children are called to obey their parents (6:1), does this suggest that there was no obedience previously or that their present obedience has a new quality as it is 'in the Lord'? When Christian slaves are called to exemplary conduct 'not only while being watched, and in order to please their masters' (6:5), does this suggest that non-Christians slaves would not act in this way? Does the charge to Christian masters to stop threatening their slaves in 6:9 suggest that some or all masters would have done so before their conversion?

2. The portrayal of people prior to faith

We begin with *direct* statements regarding the readers prior to their conversion. We follow the argument of the letter rather than employing a thematic approach, such as distinguishing between assertions on the state of the readers and on their behaviour, and dividing both areas into further subsections. (This will be our approach in the summary in 3.1.) This is followed by the indirect implications for the readers before coming to faith from the portrayal of Christians in Ephesians 1.¹⁸

2.1 Direct statements on the readers prior to faith

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). Ephesians 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; this is repeated in 2:5, 'we were dead through our trespasses'.¹⁹ 2:1 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 that is now at work among those who are disobedient' (2:2).²⁰ All Christians, including the Gentile 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' (2:3-4). This is a sweeping statement on the pre-conversion state of people: disobedient in the passions of their flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and by nature recipients of divine wrath and judgment.²¹

Ephesians 2 also 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'²²) and therefore not born into the community of Israel (2:11). They were called the 'un-circumcision' by the Jews (who are 'called the circumcision'). Due to this default, they did not participate in the covenant and promises of the people of God.

But the negative comparison is not only with Israel: they were also at one time without Christ (2:12) and all the spiritual benefits derived from knowing him and believing in him which the letter so amply describes. Then the letter returns to the former negative characterisation in view of Israel's status and privileges: without Christ, they were 'aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers (alienated from, also in 4:18²³) to the covenants of promise' (2:12). This is repeated positively in 2:19: 'you are no longer strangers and aliens'. The readers did not belong to the people of God and did not know and share in the various covenants and the promises which these covenants entailed for the present and the future. Therefore they had no hope and were 'without God in the world' (2:12c). Here it seems that recognition and

reverence of the true God is impossible without Christ, without sharing in the commonwealth of Israel and as strangers from the covenants of promise.

Once the readers were far off, now they have been brought near (2:13, 17). Now there is reconciliation to one body. The hostility between the readers and the Jews has been removed (2:14), put to death by the cross (2:16). Their former life was characterised by alienation from God and his promises and by hostility to the people of God (2:16) which is an indication of spiritual blindness.

Further direct statements occur in chapters 4 and 5, the paraenetic part of the letter, where they function repeatedly and extensively as the negative backdrop for the admonition.²⁴ What is said here draws on the previous characterisation of Gentiles. The readers must no longer live as the Gentiles live. This argument starts with the spiritual state and attitudes and then moves on to specific unacceptable forms of behaviour: Gentiles live in the futility of their minds (4:17; see 'dead through trespasses' in 2:1, 5).²⁵ They are darkened in their understanding and alienated from God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart (4:18, previously they were described as aliens from the commonwealth of Israel). Against this darkness divine enlightenment is necessary (1:18: 'that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know ...'²⁶). They have lost all spiritual sensitivity, they have abandoned themselves to licentiousness and they are eager to practise every kind of impurity. The contrast to their present state and required behaviour 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). Their corrupted and deluded minds need 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). Divine renewal, true righteousness and holiness were previously absent.

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). Previously their *anger* led them to sin (4:26). 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 work honestly with their hands;²⁷ 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. Previously the Holy Spirit was not in them. They must put away *all bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling and slander*, together with all *malice* (4:31) which characterised their former life. Instead, 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). For 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).²⁸ The theme of spiritual darkness recurs in 5:8: 'For once you were *in darkness*, but now in the Lord you are light.' Darkness as a metaphor for the spiritual state of people in alienation from God is a recurrent biblical theme.²⁹ If the fruit of the light is 'all that is good and right and true' (5:9), then the darkness in which the readers once lived is to be associated with all that is bad, wrong and false.

This spiritual darkness is not without practical consequences, namely 'unfruitful works' (5:11) which are now to be brought to the light. The practices of the Gentile 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, what they apparently used to do previously) and not to 'be foolish' (5:17). They are not to 'get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery' (5:18).

Possibly the charges of the Ephesian household code (5:22 – 6:9) also allow for some indirect conclusions.³⁰ Do these instructions suggest that the non-Christian wives are not subject to their husbands? Do the husbands not love their wives appropriately? Do children not obey their parents (6:1) or do fathers provoke their children to anger, rather than bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (6:4)? Similar questions can be raised with regard to slaves and masters (6:5-9).

Also of significance is 6:11, which 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' which is available to Christians will be defenceless before the devil and unable to withstand (whether or not they even see a need and desire 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 – knowingly or unknowingly – are under 'the rulers', 'the authorities', 'the 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 unable 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' (6:16). They are not aware of this precarious state. Therefore they do not try to resist Satan and have no desire to do so. To what extent non-Christians are in this way indirectly characterised as also under 'attack' by Satan is not clear nor is there discussion of the extent to which Satan may be blamed for their darkened state.

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.³¹

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 the former idolatry of the readers, as is the case in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 ('how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God') and in Romans 1:21-23.

Ephesians 6:11 admonishes believers to stand against the wiles of the devil. While it is mentioned that their struggle is not against human enemies but against spiritual forces (see above), nowhere in the letter is the bleak state of Gentiles prior to

their conversion 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 that need to be taken into account.³² Best has also noted that next to the *absolute* statements, Ephesians also contains some '*relative*' statements on contemporary culture: 'Indeed, part of what the author says shows that he recognized the existence of good in the world.'³³ When the author writes about behaviour, he employs some ethical terms drawn from contemporary non-Christian ethics.³⁴ In addition to these ethical terms (however they are to be evaluated) there is further evidence: Despite all the negative attributes, the readers are assured that they were chosen by God in Christ even before the foundation of the world and 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 regardless of their state prior to conversion. Despite their (still) being spiritually dead through their trespasses, in his great love God was at work and saved them by his grace (2:4), through faith and not through their own doing (2:9). Therefore all human boasting is excluded. The readers are now what God has made them to be, created in Christ Jesus for good works (2:9-10), which God prepared beforehand to be their way of life in the present. Their pre-conversion life, however dark and displeasing to God, was already under his claim.

Ephesians 3:15 speaks of God as the 'Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name'. This privilege applies not only to the Jewish people who are mentioned on several occasions.³⁵ Once there were 'two humanities' (2:15); now there is one new humanity in their place as God made peace between them.

2.2 Indirect conclusions from the state of the Christian readers

Our distinction between *direct* statements on Gentiles prior to faith and *indirect* conclusions from the portrayal of the Christian readers for the sake of clarity is artificial as both categories overlap and are inseparably linked. As we have seen in Ephesians 4-6, most of the statements in the letter regarding the Christian readers allow some indirect conclusions about their previous state. What

they now have and practise under faith, they lacked and did not do previously.³⁶

There is too much material on the present positive state of the readers in the letter to gather and analyse here. The contrasts in Ephesians 1 have to suffice here to indicate the scope and range of the implicit negative conclusions: now the readers are saints and faithful in Jesus Christ, previously they were neither. Now they enjoy grace and peace from God their Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1 and 2). Previously there was enmity; now they are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (1:3). Previously they were excluded from these spiritual blessings. They were chosen to be holy and blameless before Christ in love (1:4); previously they were neither holy nor blameless. Now they are adopted as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will and contribute to the praise of his glorious grace (1:6); previously they were not his children and did not contribute to the praise of God's grace. Now they have redemption through Jesus' blood/death, the forgiveness of their trespasses (1:7); previously they lacked redemption and forgiveness. The riches of God's graces are now lavished upon them; previously this was not the case. The mystery of God's will has now been made known to them (1:9); previously they did not know the will of God or divine mysteries. In Christ they have obtained an inheritance, 'having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplished all things according to his counsel and will' (1:11); previously they were without inheritance and promise.

What the Jews had experienced (described in 1:12) now also applies to the Gentiles: 'in him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit' (1:13); previously the word of truth was unknown to them and they had not received the seal of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit is the pledge of their joint inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory (1:14); previously they neither had this pledge nor redemption. They were not part of God's own people and their lives did not contribute to the praise of his glory; they were not characterised by faith in the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints (1:15, 3:18: 'with all the saints'). They were not part of a wider, translocal community.³⁷

Previously the readers did not benefit from the author's intercession on their behalf (1:17) and

presumably also from other intercession. Now God gives them wisdom and revelation so that they come to know him, and be enlightened to know the hope to which they have been called (1:18). Previously they had neither divine wisdom nor revelation and did not know God. They were without hope in the world. The readers now share in the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints and benefit from the immeasurable greatness of his power (1:19). Previously they did not share in this inheritance, were not part of 'the saints' and did not benefit from the immeasurable greatness of God's power. They have become part of the church (1:22), the assembly of the people of God, the body of Christ. Previously they did not belong to the church or the body of Christ.

A similar analysis of Ephesians 2-6 would yield far more material than can be analysed and summarised in this essay.

3. Summary³⁸

Altogether Ephesians paints a bleak – and at first sight an 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. This suggests that their state and conduct are inextricably linked. Gentiles 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 lack sensitivity (4:19), they are disobedient to God (2:2) and live without God in the world (2:12). They are corrupted and deluded by its lusts and they are by nature under the wrath of God (2:3).

Secondly, Ephesians 2 describes their state as one of deficiency vis-à-vis Israel.³⁹ They belong to 'the nations', not to the privileged people of God. They do not bear the covenant sign and are alien from Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise (2:12-13). They are far off (2:17) from God and his covenant people.

Thirdly, their state is described passively as under the dominion of supernatural evil forces. They follow the course of this world and the ruler of the power of the air (2:2). They are exposed to the schemes and attacks of the devil (4:26; 6:11-18). Some of these statements suggest an active contribution by the Gentiles to this situation; for example, they have hardened hearts and are disobedient.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹

Gentiles are portrayed as following the passions of the flesh (2:3) and as 'greedy to practise every kind of impurity' (4:19). Ephesians 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, 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.⁴²

However, the picture is more nuanced as there are some unexpected exceptions: despite all negative characteristics, some Gentiles were chosen by God in Christ and came to faith (1:4). They had been destined for adoption as God's children according to the good pleasure of his will (1:5).⁴³ The merciful and loving God cared enough about them to save them by his grace (2:4-5, 8). Salvation was God's gift to them, independent of their works or achievements (2:9).⁴⁴ Works, which the Gentiles obviously did not have, are excluded, as is 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).

Other than these exceptional statements, Ephesians makes absolute statements on the readers' past and at times on Gentiles in general. There is no differentiation regarding state (all seem to be equally affected) or behaviour (all Gentiles seem to conduct themselves as described above).⁴⁵ We shall return to this observation once we have examined the rhetorical function of this portrayal in the argument of the letter.

4. Function

This portrayal of the readers has several functions which will now be discussed briefly.

4.1 Paraenesis

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. Let us look at this aspect 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?⁴⁶

In order to find an answer, Best turns to ethical instruction in the New Testament in general.⁴⁷ Drawing on the well-known distinction between indicative and imperative,⁴⁸ he notes that 'The author was required, then, to express in absolute terms the position of believers so that he could make that position into a springboard for his advocacy of good conduct.'⁴⁹ This procedure can be seen in Ephesians 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.'⁵⁰ However, Best overlooks the fact that the absolute negative portrayal of the readers' past ('unbelievers') serves to paint the present indicative – from which the imperatives follow – all the brighter.⁵¹ 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. Thus this portrayal in Ephesians has a particular but limited function. Tachau emphasises this repeatedly in his detailed treatment of Ephesians 2:

So steht hier nicht die Geschichte der Heidenchristen im Allgemeinen zur Diskussion, sondern das alte heidnische und das neue christliche Sein der Adressaten... Das Schema dient damit hauptsächlich der Heilsgewissung der Adressaten. ... Auf die Vergangenheit wird trotz ihrer ausführlichen Schilderung in 2:1-3 und 11f um des Kontrastes willen verwiesen; sie ist aber nicht eigentlich Gegenstand der Betrachtung. ... Vielmehr dient die Erwähnung der Vergangenheit ausschließlich der Qualifikation der Gegenwart. Das 'einst-jetzt'-Schema hat die Funktion, das Herausgenommen-Sein der Christen aus ihrem Herkunftsbereich zu verdeutlichen.⁵²

So Ephesians does not present a neutral, objective and generally applicable description of people before coming to faith and probably does not intend to do so.⁵³ The portrayal serves particular purposes and is shaped by them. Sellin speaks of the 'status of liminality' of recent Gentile Christian believers and observes:

Die Einst-Jetzt-Schematisierung entspricht im Prinzip dem 'Schwellenstatus' der Heidenchristen. Sofern diese neubekehrt sind, ist für sie eine Orientierung an den neuen 'Werten' erforderlich, wobei es zur kontrastiven Perhorreszierung des alten, überwundenen Status kommt.⁵⁴

On the question of the *Sitz im Leben* of early Christian paraenesis, Sellin notes:

Eine hinreichend universale Funktionsbestimmung hat aber erst ein soziologischer Beitrag von Leo G. Perdue erbracht, der sich dem soziologischen Modell von Victor Turner anschließt: Die Paränese gehört in den Zusammenhang des Übergangs von einem gesellschaftlichen Status in einen anderen. Den Übergang begleiten die *rites de passage* ..., die drei raum-zeitliche Phasen enthalten: Separation (von einer Gruppe und dem entsprechenden Status) – die Schwellensituation – die Reintegration im neuen Status. In solche Übergangssituation gehört die Paränese, die den Übergang begleitet. ... Auf der 'Schwelle' kann Mahnrede im Rückblick auf den alten Zustand destrukturierend, im Vorblick auf den neuen konfirmierend wirken. Hierher gehört das 'Einst-Jetzt-Schema', das gerade im Epheserbrief eine große Rolle spielt.⁵⁵

Although this severe criticism of the former state serves the present purposes of paraenesis well, it is still problematic to argue in this way.⁵⁶

4.2 Building identity and ethics

Closely related to paraenesis 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.⁵⁷

Karl-Gustav Sandelin observes that the societies in which the early Christian communities lived

'were characterised by religious activities manifested in temples, art, priestly hierarchies, rituals, banquets, processions and ways of life' and notes that 'For many early Christians that world formed a mission field'.⁵⁸ He further observes:

Those who were converted to the new religion were mostly supposed to look at their former life critically as a life that was morally and religiously depraved (e.g. 1 Cor 12:1; 1 Petr 4:3f). The danger lay in a relapse into the religious behaviour which preceded conversion.⁵⁹

If the converts are to learn 'to look at their former life critically', Ephesians goes a long way in assisting them to do so and to see it 'as a life that was morally and religiously depraved'.⁶⁰ In this way the portrayal of the readers' pre-conversion condition contributes to the construction of early Christian identity. We see in Ephesians a combination of deconstruction of their former state and conduct and a re-construction of the new identity and ensuing behaviour.

4.3 Respect for the Jewish believers

The portrayal of the readers' past also functions beyond implementing Christian ethics in view of the specific situation in which the readers are addressed. Schnelle observes regarding their situation:

Die Situation der angeschriebenen Gemeinden wird offenbar durch Spannungen zwischen Juden- und Heidenchristen geprägt. ... ihr Verhältnis zu den Judenchristen ist der alleinige Inhalt der Unterweisung Epheser 2:11-22 und zugleich eines der dominierenden Briefthemen. Der Epheserbrief entwirft das Konzept einer Kirche aus Heiden- und Judenchristen, die miteinander den Leib Christi bilden.⁶¹ Damit reagiert der Autor auf eine gegenläufige Entwicklung in den kleinasiatischen Gemeinden: Die Judenchristen stellen bereits eine Minderheit dar, und die Heidenchristen sehen in ihnen nicht mehr gleichberechtigte Partner.⁶²

In order to address and alleviate such tensions between Gentile and Jewish Christians,⁶³ the author reminds the Gentile Christian readers of their dark past and their inferiority and deficiencies vis-à-vis Israel as God's chosen people. In this way the Gentile Christian readers are put in their proper place vis-à-vis their fellow Jewish believers: they are to appreciate what they are now because of Christ's undeserved intervention (chapter 2)

and to appreciate their Jewish fellow believers into whose heritage they have been included. Without this inclusion into Israel the Gentile readers would be 'nothing'. Therefore, although now a minority in the communities, the Jewish Christians are to be respected (cf. 1 Cor 8, Rom 14-15). Schnelle expresses this concern and the ensuing argumentation as follows:

Die These des Eph ist klar und eindeutig: Israel ist Gottes Volk und hat seine Bundesverheißungen; die Heiden haben nichts. Das ist die Ausgangsposition. Da aber geschieht das unbegreifliche Wunder, dass Christus den Zaun zwischen Heiden und Juden, das Gesetz mit seinen Geboten, niederreißt und so den Heiden den Zugang zu Gott in der einen Kirche eröffnet (2:11ff).⁶⁴

Paul Tachau argues similarly: 'Die Vergangenheit der Adressaten wird jetzt betont vom Standpunkt der Juden aus anvisiert ... „Einst seid ihr keine Juden gewesen“'.⁶⁵ This reminder to the Gentile readers of their former state and of the privileges of Israel is noteworthy in view of the prevalent and often open and violent anti-Judaism of the ancient world.⁶⁶ This aspect has not sufficiently been noted in the discussion of early Christian identity formation.

However, there is no room for contempt on the side of Jewish Christians either. They are reminded that despite their dark state, Gentiles are under God's claim: Israel's God is the 'Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name' (3:15). This privilege is not limited to Abraham and his descendants. All the readers have been saved not through their own merits but by grace. (Eph 2 contains several statements in the first person plural, 'we', including Christians of Jewish origin.) Tachau observes that Ephesians also relativises Jewish identity:

Doch ist mit der Wendung 'die ihr die Unbeschnittenheit genannt werdet von der sogenannten Beschneidung die am Fleisch mit Händen vorgenommen wird' gleichzeitig eine relativierende Distanz den Juden gegenüber eingenommen.⁶⁷

In this regard Ephesians is similar to the discussion in Romans 9-11 where Gentile Christians are called to respect the natural branches on the olive tree and are warned not to overestimate their own spiritual privileges and take them as granted and irrevocable; see particularly Romans 11:17-22:

do not boast over the branches ... but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. ... God will not spare you. ... God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off ... So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are ...

In Romans 14-15 the readers are encouraged to mutual tolerance and respect.⁶⁸

4.4 Spiritual analysis

What is said about the readers' past implicitly applies to their present day neighbours and relatives and provides a spiritual analysis of the world in which the Christians continue to live. The environment that is characterised in this manner is likely to react with surprise and discrimination against Christians. However, this issue is not directly addressed by Ephesians. Says Best: '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 the author of Ephesians gives his readers'.⁶⁹

In this regard there are remarkable analogies to 1 Peter, such as Peter's observation: 'They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme' (4:4). 1 Peter applies the honorific titles of Israel to the predominantly Gentile Christian readers and addresses such reactions and the Christian response to them in some detail, for example in 4:12: 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you'.⁷⁰ Related to this 'spiritual analysis' is an observation by Best:

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 they were enmeshed as well as from their own sinful and dark lives.⁷¹

4.5 Evangelism

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: 'The world outside is evil; men and women must be won into the community from it'.⁷² A number of recent studies have argued that Paul expected all Christians to be involved in sharing

the Gospel;⁷³ that this is also in view in Ephesians has been argued by Best:

... 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. What we find in Ephesians is similar to what we see in sects: The outside world is evil; men and women must be won into the community from it.⁷⁴

Despite this assessment of the outside world, Ephesians does not demand complete withdrawal. Sandelin has observed regarding other Pauline literature:

Despite the condemnation of polytheism and idolatry, Philo and Paul still accept that their co-religionists have social contacts with unbelievers ... Paul does not object to an invitation to a meal given at an unbeliever's home.⁷⁵

These functions of the portrayal of the readers' pre-conversion past go a long way in explaining its negative character, but the question of its legitimacy remains. In a time of tolerance and political correctness, few people would get away with such absolute estimates.

5. Legitimacy

We begin by summarising how Best has addressed the question of legitimacy. He first refers to similar statements in Pauline literature (Rom 1:18-32) and notes that the contrast of light and darkness (found in Eph 5:8) also appears in Romans 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-5 and Colossians 3:9-10 as well as in Old Testament (Isa 42:6-7; 49:9) and Jewish thought.⁷⁶ Hardness of heart also appears in the Old Testament with regard to Gentiles. Best concludes:

... there was much in the theological atmosphere in which the author of Ephesians was brought up to condition him into making absolute statements about the outside world, for it is highly probable that he was Jewish.⁷⁷

While this indicates the origins of the ingredients of this portrayal and that the author does not stand alone with his assessment, it does not in itself render this argument legitimate. Several questions come to mind: What are the potential consequences of such arguments? Do these laudable ends justify the means employed? Is it legitimate to reach these goals 'at the expense' of the Gentiles? Is this what the author is really doing?

Best moves on to analyse the 'absolute' position in respect of Christian existence in Ephesians.⁷⁸ He notes that converts tend to 'see their pre-conversion life in the blackest of colours' and that 'Paul had a very grave view of his own pre-Christian past'.⁷⁹ The readers were in large parts converted Gentiles:

When they looked back on their past lives, they saw them as full of sin. Before their conversion they had not thought very much about sin or realised its seriousness in God's eyes. Now with a wholly new vision, their past became darkened.⁸⁰

While Best's observations are valid (and may be supported by modern analyses of the experiences and perspectives of converts), our question is different: if converts *themselves* have this perspective on their own pre-conversion life, it is *their own interpretation* of their lives, however one-sided it may be; but the author of Ephesians primarily speaks about *the past of others* (although the focus is on their new status and the privileges in which they now share).

The author's statements concerning others must be set in the context of his statements about his own status and that of the group to which he belongs. In Ephesians 3:8 he portrays himself as the very least of the saints. (However, note the rhetorical function of such statements.) In 1:3-12, the first plural references are likely to refer to Jewish Christians, in contrast to the Gentile Christian readers who are directly addressed in Ephesians 1:12-13: 'so that *we*, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.⁸¹ In him *you* also, when *you* heard the word of truth ...'. In this context the author also speaks of the trespasses of this group (1:7). Whatever is said about the present status of Jewish Christians (which they had obtained before the Gentile Christians), is what they lacked previously (see above).

Other first person plural references are likely to be inclusive (Jewish and Gentile Christians; 1:14?; 1:19; 2:3-10, 14, 18; 3:12, 20; 4:7, 13-15, 25; 6:12, 24).⁸² They contain a number of negative statements regarding the past which also apply to Jews, including the author: 'All of us once lived ... in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ... when we were dead through our trespasses ...' (2:3, 5).

In the remainder of his discussion Best refers to

the sectarian nature of Early Christianity (in the sociological sense of the term) and notes:

Experience of small sects shows that they tend to take a very pessimistic view of what lies outside their group. Intent on drawing firm lines around themselves, they depict in the darkest of colours those who do not belong to them.⁸³

He further notes:

So not only the common beliefs of Christians but also pressure from outside would have driven them in on themselves and led them to judge the outside world harshly (5:16; 6:13).⁸⁴

He then lists evidence in the letter for its inner-community focus which is to be seen in the body of Christ metaphor and in details of the paraenesis⁸⁵ and concludes:

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.⁸⁶

While Best's observations go a long way in explaining the origin of this portrayal of the readers' past, he does not raise the issue of the legitimacy of this analysis.

What are we to make of this portrayal of non-Christians in post-modern times and in formally politically correct societies which promote – and cannot but promote – tolerance and respect for all their members? 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 the functions which it had for the original readers. In many cases these functions are sorely needed. Furthermore, this portrayal helps us to understand at least some of the world in which we live. Significant events of the history of the world, for example, the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust, indicate that something is fundamentally wrong with people which cannot be accounted for by humanistic anthropology.

No, a mere repetition of the portrayal in Ephesians would be problematic if it led to contempt of non-Christians. However, it does not necessarily lead to contempt. Ephesians also has salvation in view – and this is where the emphasis lies! The people portrayed so darkly are not beyond hope and salvation (see the exceptional statements above). The vision of Ephesians is that people come

to faith, independent on race, age, social status, etcetera. The sombre assessment of pre-conversion life must not undermine the respect which all people deserve. One example of such undermining has to suffice. In her article 'Preparing the Church to Nurture First Generation Christians' [from a Hindu background], G. Mondol, herself an Indian convert from Hinduism, identifies a number of specific areas of failure on the part of the church in nurturing Hindu converts. In this context, Mondol speaks of 'a superiority complex by Christians'.⁸⁷ Among other factors, such a superiority complex – not limited to the Indian context and not limited to Hindus! – derives from the many positive statements in the New Testament on the new identity and privileged status which Christian believers enjoy and – perhaps also – from the negative statements about the spiritual state of people prior to coming to faith.⁸⁸

If such statements should lead to a 'superiority complex', they have been thoroughly misunderstood. Christians need to remember that many of those whom they encounter are also chosen and predestined. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37) illustrates that love is to extend to all people. In addition, one needs to remember that this portrayal appears in a letter that has its focus elsewhere. It says far more about the new status and privileges and conduct offered and required by the Gospel. Whether and to what extent these and other considerations require a drastic modification of the portrayal of Gentiles in Ephesians remains open to debate.⁸⁹

6. Epilogue

A direct application 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.⁹⁰ However, instances of this have become far and few between and most missionaries and pastors would – like Ephesians itself – rather focus on the new life than on the pre-conversion lives of the people to whom they minister.⁹¹

However, in today's missiological discussion and in the theological thinking (which is with few exceptions a new appreciation!) of people outside of Christianity in the past five decades,⁹² people prior to faith are assessed much more positively than in Ephesians. To name but one example: the

portrayal in Ephesians is far from considering non-Christians to be anonymous Christians, as Karl Rahner did. Those trying to reach non-Christians look for and do find points of contact within their context. In this context, what are we to do with the one-sided 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? While the portrayal of Ephesians may not be true for all non-Christians, it certainly applies to some and explains their behaviour by which not only they themselves but also many others are affected and under which they suffer.

In non-Western contexts 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 ‘natives’ and of their conduct was (and perhaps continues to be) influenced – if not significantly shaped – by the biblical portrayals of ‘Gentiles’.⁹³ Such assessments by Christians were not only ‘spiritual exercises’ and limited to winning ‘lost souls’. They were also essential ingredients of power discourses and concerned not only matters of religion but led to or included from the beginning contempt for other aspects of ‘native’ cultures. Some of this was even reflected in the terminology used; for example, the Latin word *paganus* refers to the ‘country dweller’ or ‘rustic’ and as such to an ‘uncivilised’ or less civilised person. People characterised by these portrayals were (and are) often not taken seriously and were treated accordingly – in mild cases as inferiors to be guided and trained until they grow in knowledge and Christian conduct, in other cases as second-class people if not worse.⁹⁴

As long as biblical texts on people prior to coming to faith are considered canonical and are used in the liturgy and the proclamation of the church – and have an important function in this context following their functions in the original context! – as well as in its popular and academic teaching of doctrine, we need to find ways of taking these texts seriously. At the same time we must find ways of learning from their reception-history and include an awareness of the actual and potential misuse which they have suffered and continue to suffer in some contexts.

Endnotes

- 1 At times with an anti-imperial edge: ‘Der kosmische Herrschaftsanspruch Jesu Christi steht hier bewusst im Gegensatz zum Kaiserkult’, Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 6th edn, UTB 1830 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007) 356.
- 2 For surveys see Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 355–357; D.A. Carson and D. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 492–494; and Clinton E. Arnold, ‘Ephesians, Letter to the’, in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (eds), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995) 238–249. Older research is described in detail by Helmut Merkel, ‘Der Epheserbrief in der neueren exegetischen Diskussion’ in W. Haase (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.25.4 (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1987) 3156–3246.
- 3 See e.g. two recent major Scandinavian research projects documented in Bengt Holmberg (ed.), *Exploring Early Christian Identity*, WUNT 226 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) and Bengt Holmberg and M. Winnige (eds), *Identity Formation in the New Testament*, WUNT 227 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) and monographs on more defined aspects; a fine survey is Bengt Holmberg, ‘Understanding the First Hundred Years of Christian Identity’, in Holmberg, *Exploring*, 1–32.
- 4 One example is Paul Trebilco, *Self-designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- 5 So far little attention has been paid to the trading communities of the ancient world; see now T. Terpstra, *Trading Communities in the Roman World: A Micro-Economic Institutional Perspective*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 37 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).
- 6 Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 491.
- 7 Arnold, ‘Ephesians’, 246; see also Clinton E. Arnold, ‘Introducing Ephesians: Establishing Believers in Christ’, *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 39 (1996) 4–13.
- 8 Arnold, ‘Ephesians’, 247.
- 9 For a survey see Paul Tachau, ‘Einst’ und ‘Jetzt’ im Neuen Testament: Beobachtungen zu einem urchristlichen Predigtschema in der neutestamentlichen Briefliteratur und zu seiner Vorgeschichte, FRLANT 105 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972).
- 10 Ernest Best, ‘Two Types of Existence’ in Best, *Essays on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997) 139–155, 140.
- 11 Best, ‘Types’, 139.
- 12 Best, ‘Types’, 140–143.
- 13 Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark,

- 1998). At the beginning of his essay, Best places the descriptions mentioned above in the overall argument of the letter, Best, 'Types', 139-140. This is the context in which they have a particular function.
- 14 Best, *Ephesians*, 4; see also Best, 'Types', 139-140; Best, *Ephesians*, 1-6 and Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 347-348.
- 15 A helpful discussion of the author of Ephesians can be found in Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 480-486 and in Arnold, 'Ephesians', 240-242. They survey the debate and list several persuasive arguments for Pauline authorship. Following their arguments, I refer to the author as Paul. For an assessment as deuterio-Pauline see Best, *Ephesians*, 6-40 and Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 344-346. Our quest is not dependent on issues of authorship. [Ed.: See also the article by Rüdiger Fuchs in the previous, the present and the next issues of this journal.]
- 16 First person plural references to Christians are 1:14, 19; 2:3-10, 14, 18; 3:12, 20; 4:7, 13-15, 25; 6:12, 24. On a number of occasions the author also writes in the first person singular. In 3:8 he refers to himself as the very least of all the saints. 6:22 seems to refer to Paul and his co-workers.
- 17 Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 491.
- 18 This outline follows an approach that has proven helpful in my *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith*, WUNT II.108 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).
- 19 See Ernest Best, 'Dead in Trespasses and Sins (Eph 2:1)' in Best, *Studies*, 69-85. Tachau, *Einst*, 102 observes that the metaphorical use of the adjective 'dead' (Eph 2:1, 5) also appears in Hellenistic Judaism, 'womit dem Ausdruck auf Götzendienst hingewiesen wird'. Interestingly, Ephesians does not refer to the former idolatry of the readers (see observations below). On 'trespasses', Tachau, 104, notes: 'Doch gilt natürlich weiterhin, dass die konkreten 'Übertretungen' gewissermaßen als pars pro toto die vorchristliche Vergangenheit insgesamt kennzeichnen.'
- 20 Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 348 notes that this emphasis is due to the particular religious-cultural situation in Ephesus: 'Die auffällige Betonung der Macht Gottes bzw. Christi in Eph 1:15-23; 3:14-21; 6:10-20 dürfte auf dem Hintergrund dieses religiösen Umfelds zu verstehen sein und weist auf eine religiöse Verunsicherung vieler neuer Gemeindemitglieder hin. Ihnen verkündigt der Eph: Gottes Macht steht über den teuflischen Gewalten und Mächten, den Herrschern der Finsternis und den Geistwesen der Bosheit in den himmlischen Bereichen (vgl. Eph 6:12).' This is reflected in the 'Erhöhungs- und Herrschaftschristologie' of the letter (353-354).
- 21 Tachau, *Einst*, 137: 'Die Vergangenheit der Adressaten wird jetzt betont vom Standpunkt der Juden aus anvisiert ... „Einst seid ihr keine Juden gewesen“'. On the role of this perspective, Tachau notes: 'Das Bemühen des Verfassers geht dahin, das Gegenüber von heidnischer Vergangenheit und christlicher Gegenwart auf dem Hintergrund jüdischer Terminologie zu verdeutlichen. Offensichtlich verfolgt er damit bestimmte Absichten: Die heidenchristliche Leserschaft muss davor gewarnt werden, sich gegenüber den Judenchristen bevorzugt zu dünken. Zu diesem Zweck wird auf ihre Vergangenheit im Unterschied zu den Heidenchristen verwiesen.'
- 22 Tachau, *Einst*, 99 notes: 'Auffallend selten ... werden die Heiden direkt im polemischen Sinn als solche (*ethnè*) angeredet'; on this term as a designation for outsiders see Paul Trebilco, 'Creativity at the Boundary. Features of the Linguistic and Conceptual Construction of Outsiders in the Pauline Corpus', *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014) 185-201, 194-200.
- 23 Tachau, *Einst*, 99 writes on the verb: 'In der LXX bezeichnet der Begriff häufig den Götzendienst (so etwa Hos 9:10; Jer 13:27; 19:4; Ez 14:5; vgl. auch Ps 57:4 und 3 Makk 1:3), doch ist beachtenswert, dass niemals die Heiden damit gemeint sind, sondern nur diejenigen, die vorher Jahwe verehrten. Im NT hat der Begriff eine Veränderung erfahren, wenn er sich jetzt auf die Heiden als Götzendiener beziehen kann'.
- 24 On the paraenesis of Ephesians see G. Sellin, 'Die Paränese des Epheserbriefs', in E. Brandt (ed.), *Gemeinschaft am Evangelium. FS Wiard Popkes* (Leipzig: EVA, 1996) 281-300. Tachau, *Einst*, 103 observes: 'Eine Charakterisierung der Vergangenheit durch Begriffe, die vom konkreten Handeln der Adressaten abgeleitet sind, findet sich lediglich in Kol und Eph.'
- 25 Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 355: 'An die ethische Grundlegung in Eph 4:1-16 schließt sich eine scharfe Kritik des Lebenswandels der Heiden an (Eph 4:17-5:20). *Er ist die Folge eines von Gott losgelösten Lebens*, die Heiden befinden sich vor Gott in der Situation der Entfremdung (Eph 4:18)' (italics CS); see also Trebilco, 'Creativity', 196-198.
- 26 See Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 495.
- 27 See Ernest Best, 'Ephesians 4:28: Thieves in the Church', in Best, *Studies*, 179-188.
- 28 Tachau, *Einst*, 99 observes on the catalogue of vices in Ephesians 5:3-4: 'Die aus der hellenistisch-jüdischen Propaganda und Apologetik gegen das Heidentum erwachsenen Lasterkataloge sind auch vom NT übernommen und in die Paränese eingebaut. Auch hier dienen sie der Kennzeichnung heidnischer Lebensweise. Aufgrund des Charakters dieser Kataloge wäre es verfehlt, jedes einzelne Laster auf einen konkret anvisierten Tatbestand zu beziehen. In der Summe der einzelnen Ausdrücke beschreiben die Kataloge vielmehr allgemein das Heidentum.'

- 29 See Hans Conzelmann in Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* VIII, 424-446 and H.C. Hahn, 'Licht/Finsternis' in Lothar Coenen & Klaus Haacker (eds), *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000) III (1300-1318) 1307-1310.
- 30 On the household code see Ernest Best, 'The *Haustafeln* in Ephesians (Eph 5:22-6:9)' in Best, *Studies*, 189-203.
- 31 Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 494; see also Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of Its Historical Setting*, SNTS.MS 63 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Peter T. O'Brien, 'Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church' in D.A. Carson (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984) 110-150.
- 32 This is in contrast to Romans 1:18-32.
- 33 Best, 'Types', 147. On page 143 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.' Best, 146-147, also notes that Ephesians is inconsistent in how Christians are portrayed: '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.'
- 34 Best, 'Types', 147-148, concluding: '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.' (148)
- 35 In Romans 9:4, 'sonship' is a particular privilege of Jews. Tachau, *Einst*, 139: 'Auch die Ausdrücke fern und nahe (2:13) dürften auf das Verhältnis von Juden und Heiden zu beziehen sein, obwohl sich im AT keine Belege finden lassen, die die Heiden als 'Entfernte' ansprechen. Erst in späterer Zeit wird diese Terminologie auf die Heiden bezogen.' Ephesians 2:12 notes that the readers were alien from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise having no hope and without God in the world. Once they were far off (2:13).
- 36 On the contrast between 'then' and 'now' in NT paraenesis see Tachau, *Einst*; on baptism as the marker and moment of the transition from then to now see T. Vegge, 'Baptismal Phrases in the Deuteropauline Epistles', in D. Hellholm, T. Vegge, O. Norderval, C. Hellholm (eds), *Ablution, Initiation and Baptism: Late Antiquity, Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, BZNW 176.1 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2011) 497-556.
- 37 See Christoph Stenschke, 'Issues of Power, Authority and Interdependence from a Biblical Perspective', *The South African Baptist Journal of Theology* 20 (2011) 233-261.
- 38 I summarise only the *direct* statements on Gentiles prior to their coming to faith. The portrait would become far more nuanced and complex if all *indirect* conclusions were included.
- 39 Tachau, *Einst*, 141: 'Dabei wird der vorchristliche Zustand z.T. von jüdischen Gesichtspunkten aus geschildert.'
- 40 This portrayal resembles that of Gentiles in Romans 1:18-32, see R. Dabelstein, *Die Beurteilung der 'Heiden' bei Paulus*, Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981) and that of Luke-Acts; for a summary see Stenschke, *Portrait*, 379-382. 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.
- 41 Best, 'Types', 145-146.
- 42 As e.g. in James 3:1-12; the NT follows the OT wisdom tradition in this regard; for the background see W.R. Baker, *Personal Speech-Ethics in the Epistle of James*, WUNT II.68 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995).
- 43 Cf. Acts 18:10; see Stenschke, *Portrait*, 293-294.
- 44 These key statements on the soteriology of Ephesians are often read in an unreflected Protestant manner with *Jewish* readers in mind: these statements aim at excluding any form of righteousness through works of the law and boasting of such righteousness. (This reading will also be influenced by Galatians and Romans, where righteousness through the law is explicitly addressed!) The Jews were aware of the law and of righteousness through the law; they went a long way in achieving this righteousness and were therefore prone to boasting. These statements are all the more striking when it is kept in mind that they primarily address readers with a *Gentile* background. What they were not even aware of and could not present is not required for salvation as it is the gift of God.
- 45 E.g. Ephesians does not mention God-fearers or proselytes as exceptional Gentiles (see Best, *Ephesians*, 4). They constitute a significant aspect in the Lukan portrayal of Gentiles prior to their

coming to faith; see Stenschke, *Portrait*.

- 46 Best, 'Types', 149.
- 47 Best, 'Types', 149-150.
- 48 See, however, the recent criticism of this concept, e.g. in F.W. Horn and R. Zimmermann (eds), *Jenseits von Indikativ und Imperativ*, Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik / Context and Norms of New Testament Ethics I, WUNT 238 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).
- 49 Best, 'Types', 149-150.
- 50 Best, 'Types', 150.
- 51 Arnold, 'Ephesians', 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)'.
- 52 Tachau, *Einst*, 140, 142, 143.
- 53 Appreciation of this particular function will help our following discussion of the legitimacy of this portrayal of Gentiles.
- 54 Sellin, 'Paränese', 299.
- 55 Sellin, 'Paränese', 287, with reference to L.G. Perdue, 'The Social Character of Paraenesis and Paraenetic Literature', *Semeia* 50 (1990) 5-39. Summarising Turner, Perdue, 10, refers to liminality as a state of 'inbetwixt and inbetween': 'Paraenesis in this first phase [of liminality] is subversive, designed to undercut the validity of the prior social world. ... During this phase of the liminal experience, 'ritual leaders' construct for the novices a new social reality and instruct the novices in the roles and responsibilities they are to assume once aggregation (reincorporation) occurs.' On pages 23-26 Perdue surveys the 'social function of paraenesis'.
- 56 The author does not necessarily imply that prior to their coming to faith the readers and other Gentiles always and only conformed to this portrayal which serves the argument and intention of the letter.
- 57 Best, 'Types', 155.
- 58 Karl-Gustav Sandelin, *Attraction and Danger of Alien Religion: Studies in Early Judaism and Christianity*, WUNT 290 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) xii.
- 59 Sandelin, *Attraction*, xii.
- 60 Sandelin continues: 'Warnings against idolatry are therefore most understandable (e.g. 1 Cor 10:14; 1 John 5:21).' In view of this observation it is surprising that Ephesians does not directly address the former idolatry of the readers or warn against it (see e.g. Rom 1:23; Gal 5:20; 1 Thess 1:9). In Ephesians 5:5 greed is identified as idolatry; see Brian S. Rosner, *Greed as Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). In comparing Paul and Philo on idolatry, Sandelin, *Attraction*, 134 concludes: 'When Paul and Philo take their stand against the danger of idolatry, they do so in contexts which differ from one another to a great extent: ... Philo warns people born as Jews against Gentile religion, and only indirectly mentions the problem of backsliding to their former religion among proselytes.'
- 61 The emphasis on the unity of the Church has often been noted; see, for example, Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991) 22-35. C. Leslie Mitton argues that the letter was written against 'the danger of the largely Gentile readership disowning their Jewish heritage' (according to Arnold, 'Ephesians', 245). Arnold, 246, notes in his survey of opinions 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.'
- 62 Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 347-348, with reference to K.M. Fischer, *Tendenz und Absicht des Epheserbriefs* (Berlin: EVA; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973) 79-94, who writes 'Keine Frage behandelt der Eph. klarer und dringender als das Verhältnis von Heiden- und Judenchristen in der Kirche' (79). This case has also been argued by Ralph P. Martin (according to Arnold, 'Ephesians', 245). Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 490-491, are more cautious and merely note: 'Some point to a possible tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians and think Paul is trying to secure unity.' Later on they note: 'Apparently Paul thought his readers needed to be exhorted to pursue unity and a distinctively Christian ethic' (491). Cf. Arnold, 'Ephesians', 246.
- 63 Fischer, *Tendenz*, 79 rightly observes that Ephesians sees the danger of boasting in a one-sided manner with the Gentile Christians (as they are being addressed).
- 64 Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 356, with reference to Fischer, *Tendenz*, 80.
- 65 Tachau, *Einst*, 137.
- 66 For surveys see C. Stenschke and editors, 'Apologetik, Polemik und Mission: Der Umgang mit der Religiosität der "anderen"' in K. Erlemann, K.L. Nöthlichs, K. Scherberich and J. Zangenberg (eds), *Neues Testament und antike Kultur III: Weltauffassung, Kult, Ethos* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2005) 244-253, 245-246; and G. Bohak, 'Gentile Attitudes toward Jews and Judaism' in John J. Collins and D.C. Harlow (eds), *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 668-670.
- 67 Tachau, *Einst*, 140.
- 68 Best, 'Types', 150 notes the similarities between

Romans 1:18–32 and the portrayal of Gentiles in Ephesians. See also the paraenesis in Romans 12:3, 16: ‘... I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ... Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.’

69 Best, *Ephesians*, 3.

70 See Christoph Stenschke, “... das auserwählte Geschlecht, die königliche Priesterschaft, das heilige Volk” (1 Petr 2.9): Funktion und Bedeutung der Ehrenbezeichnungen Israels im 1. Petrusbrief, in Berthold Schwarz und Helge Stadelmann (eds), *Christen, Juden und die Zukunft Israels: Beiträge zur Israellehre aus Geschichte und Theologie*, Edition Israelologie 1 (Frankfurt/Main, Berlin, Bern: Peter Lang, 2009) 97–116; and Christoph Stenschke and A. Graser, ‘Coping with Discrimination in the First Epistle of Peter and in Modern Social Psychology’, *International Journal of Religious Freedom* 5 (2012) 101–112.

71 Best, ‘Types’, 152. We do not know how the readers of Ephesians looked at their pre-Christian lives. Did they share the perspective of the author?

72 Best, ‘Types’, 154.

73 See Mark J. Keown, *Congregational Evangelism in Philippians: The Centrality of an Appeal for Gospel Proclamation to the Fabric of Philippians*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2008); Robert L. Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007) and Christoph Stenschke, ‘Paul and the Mission of the Church’, *Missionalia* 39 (2011) 167–187.

74 Best, ‘Types’, 154; see also Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 11 (Downers Grove: IVP Apollos, 2001) 166–167. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* 16th ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001) 134 writes on Paul’s own motivation: ‘He 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.’ On page 137 Bosch also notes that in the context of witness, Paul can refer 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 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 are remarkably free from condemnation.’ For a recent study see Trebilco, ‘Creativity’. Further insights will be gained from interdisciplinary studies of the identity construction processes in sects and from studies on conversion.

75 Sandelin, *Attraction*, 159, who says on page 151: ‘The Christians are not forbidden to associate with adherents of alien religion, but within the Christian community no idolaters are accepted.’

76 Best, ‘Types’, 150–151; see also G. Gilbert, ‘Jewish Attitudes toward Gentiles’ in Collins and Harlow, *Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 670–673. On the significance of the Old Testament for Ephesians see Thorsten Moritz, *A Profound Mystery: The Use of the Old Testament in Ephesians*, NT.S 85 (Leiden: Brill, 1996). Prior to this, Best, ‘Types’, 143, already noted: ‘The author is not alone in the way he depicts contemporary culture. It is found in Jewish writers and in other parts of the NT (Matt 12:39; 16:4; cf. Mark 4:12; John 12:40; Rom 11:8, 2 Cor 3:14)’ and raised the question: ‘Was the ancient Gentile world – the author does not describe the Jewish world, for those to whom he is writing had not previously been Jews but Gentiles – really as bad as he paints it?’ (143). After a brief survey of non-Jewish ethics in antiquity Best, 146, concludes: ‘The pagan world then was much less deplorable than it appears to have been from Ephesians.’

77 Best, ‘Types’, 151; see also his discussion in *Ephesians*, 423–425.

78 Best, ‘Types’, 151–152.

79 Best, ‘Types’, 152; see e.g. Philippians 3:3–11; Romans 7:7–25; 1 Timothy 1:15; 3:8. Best, 152, notes that ‘it is possible that even Jews could look back to their past lives lived in darkness and their conversion to Christianity as the time when they began to see and became “light”’. The author speaks of himself in Ephesians 3:8 as ‘the very least of all the saints’. See Eve-Marie Becker, ‘Polemik und Autobiographie: Ein Vorschlag zur Deutung von Phil 3:2–4a’ in Oda Wischmeyer and Lorenze Scornaienchi, *Polemik in der frühchristlichen Literatur* (BZNW 170; Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2011) 233–254.

80 Best, ‘Types’, 152. Again we must note, against Best, that we do not know how the readers themselves thought of their pre-conversion past. What we have is the author’s assessment.

81 For detailed discussion see Best, *Ephesians*.

82 In Ephesians 6:22, the plural likely refers to Paul

- and his co-workers.
- 83 Best, 'Types', 152-153.
- 84 Best, 'Types', 153, although he notes elsewhere that such pressures are not addressed by the letter.
- 85 Best, 'Types', 153-154.
- 86 Best, 'Types', 155; on apostasy see Sandelin, *Attraction*.
- 87 In E. Alexander and R. Thomson (eds), *Walking the Way of the Cross with our Hindu Friends* (Grassroots Mission Publications, 2011). As I had no access to the volume itself I refer to the extensive review of it by C.B. James, 'Walking the Way of the Cross with Hindu Friends', *Dharma Deepika* 17 (2013) 70-83, 71-72.
- 88 Other factors which Mondol identifies are 'lack of loving acceptance and compassion for the new follower, derogatory and ignorant comments about those of the other faiths, ... behaviour that supports the theory that Christians are only interested in conversion, isolation versus embracing of a first generation Christian, divisions in the Church and converts having no real home being caught between two communities and cultures'. These factors may also be influenced by the negative portrayals of the readers' pre-Christian past in the New Testament.
- 89 Best, *Ephesians*, 414-425 (commentary on 4:17-19) raises crucial issues in interpretation.
- 90 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 experience some kind of conversion or revival.
- 91 This has not always been the case, see e.g. Knut Schäferdiek, *Quellen zur Christianisierung der Sachsen, Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte* 33 (Leipzig: EVA, 2010).
- 92 Early prominent examples were the Dogmatic Constitution Regarding the Church Lumen Gentium 16 and the Declaration Regarding the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions Nostra Aetate of the Second Vatican Council from the years 1964 and 1965. A remarkable Protestant document drafted by the Kammer für Theologie der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland in 2003 is *Christlicher Glaube und nichtchristliche Religionen: Theologische Leitlinien*, EKD Texte 77 (Hannover: Kirchenamt der EKD). For surveys of this new appreciation of non-Christians see H.A.G. Blocher and W.A. Dyrness, 'Anthropology, Theological' in William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (eds), *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church* (Grand Rapids, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008) 42-45; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 474-489; D.G. Burnett, 'Anthropology' in John Corrie (ed.), *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations* (Nottingham, Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007) 20-22; and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, 'Religions, Theology of', in Dyrness and Kärkkäinen, *Dictionary*, 745-753.
- 93 To what extent this also applies to non-Western missionaries past and present is beyond my scope. Such portrayals should not be seen independently of their function in the identity formation and identity preservation. However, even a persuasive explanation of the function does not necessarily justify the way in which 'others' are portrayed and 'function' in inner-community discourse. There is 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, 'Anthropology', 21).
- 94 See the efforts of Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566) in Latin America, who tried to convince his fellow Christian Spaniards that native Americans were indeed *humans* and must be treated accordingly; see Mariano Delgado, *Stein des Anstoßes: Bartolomé de las Casas als Anwalt der Indios* (St. Ottilien: Eos, 2011). See also 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' (R. Musasiwa, 'Contextualization', in Corrie, *Dictionary* (66-71) 67): 'Its religious thrust sought to rehabilitate African religious traditions by attempting to demonstrate their compatibility with the Christian faith' (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' (67).