

AN EXEGESIS OF EPHESIANS 3:20-21

TRANSLATION

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do abundantly more than we could ever ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ belongs glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

The epistle to the Ephesians may be roughly divided into two equal parts of exposition (1-3) and exhortation (4-6). Ephesians 3:14-21, therefore, constitutes the culmination of the first part of the epistle and as such draws together many of the thoughts of the preceding chapters. In these verses the author's deepest desires for his audience pour forth in the form of an urgent prayer consisting of intercession (vv.14-19) followed by an exuberant doxology (vv.20-21), the subject of the present exegesis.

EXEGETICAL NOTES

[3:20] Τῷ δὲ δυναμένῳ ὑπὲρ πάντα ποιῆσαι ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ὧν αἰτούμεθα ἢ νοοῦμεν.¹ The author has just uttered a request that might legitimately be described as inconceivable, but by praising God in this way he reassures his readers that God is able to do just that. The combination of ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ,

¹ Some manuscripts omit ὑπέρ (e.g. $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$ D F G). Given the redundancy of the preposition (in view of ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ), it is understandable why it would be omitted (i.e. to create a smoother text), whereas it is considerably less conceivable why it would be added (So Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd edn (London: UBS, 1994), p. 536). Such redundancy, which is characteristic of the author, and the important external support from the primary Alexandrian Uncials ($\mathfrak{A}$ and B), as well as the Byzantine tradition, favour the inclusion of ὑπέρ.

which denotes ‘an extraordinary degree, involving a considerable excess’² with ὑπὲρ πάντα (‘above everything’) generates a sense of the unrivalled and unimaginable power of God. The author deliberately stretches his language to accomplish the maximum amount of superlative force. (It would seem to be one of those rare occasions where the author’s intention coincides with the results the *Amplified Bible*!).³

κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἡμῖν. This clause may be taken one of two ways. (1) A qualification of ποιῆσαι indicating that God’s ‘doing’ is ‘in accordance with the power at work in us’, or (2) a qualification of αἰτούμεθα ἢ νοοῦμεν indicating that the ‘asking and thinking’ is ‘in accordance with the power at work in us’. Muddiman prefers the latter on the basis that the former implies a limitation to God’s power, which creates a tension with the previous clause.⁴ Lincoln, however, notes that in terms of syntax, it is more likely to be the former.⁵ In view of the author’s use of this phrase elsewhere (1:19) it is probably better to interpret the clause as a qualification of ποιῆσαι. Furthermore, this does not necessarily imply any limitation to God’s power since the purpose of the κατὰ clause is to clarify the sphere within which the aforementioned power operates.

[3:21] αὐτῷ ἡ δόξα ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ εἰς πάσας τὰς γενεὰς τοῦ αἰῶνος τῶν αἰώνων, ἀμήν. The ascription of glory to God is a fairly typical way of concluding prayer in Jewish and early Christian circles, but that it should be found ‘in the church’ is unique in the NT. The order ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ apparently caused discomfort for some

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd edn (New York: UBS, 1989), §78:34.

³ ‘Superabundantly far over and above’ (*The Amplified Bible*).

⁴ John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Black’s New Testament Commentaries; London; New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 175.

⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Word Biblical Commentary 42; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), p. 216.

copyists⁶ but it is entirely appropriate in view of the ecclesiological picture the author has been painting. The Church is blessed in the heavenly realms in Christ by the God who chose her before the creation of the world (1:3-4). The Church is the fullness of him who fills all things (1:23), the resurrected and exalted (2:6), eschatological new humanity (2:11-22), through whom God manifests his manifold wisdom to the heavenly authorities (3:10). It is quite natural therefore, that the Church should be identified as the sphere within which God is glorified.

This rather exalted depiction of the one universal Church is one factor which has led many commentators to dispute Pauline authorship. Lincoln, for example, states that 'the concentration on this sort of ecclesiology with its vision of the universal Church as one (4:4), holy (5:26, 27), catholic (1:22, 23), and apostolic (2:20) in all probability reflects a stage beyond that of the ministry of Paul'.⁷ Although it is undoubtedly true that the ecclesiology of Ephesians is distinctive to some extent, it is not impossible that this ecclesiological development came from the apostle Paul, who was, after all, a pioneering theological thinker. Besides, the use of ἐκκλησία, for example (which primarily denotes the universal Church whereas in the earlier letters it denotes the local church), need not be considered discontinuous with Paul since he can also use the term to denote something more universal (e.g. 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13). Rather, the more general use of the term in Ephesians may be due to the more general nature of the letter.

Furthermore, it would be unnecessarily hasty to rule out the possibility that ἐκκλησία sometimes has a twofold nuance.⁸ Although it is the Church universal in which the author ascribes glory to God, and perhaps anticipates the

⁶ D* F G invert the order to maintain the priority of Jesus Christ.

⁷ Lincoln, p. lxiv.

⁸ See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 26, 268.

eschatological glory of God,⁹ this glorification of God is presently manifested in the local congregations, in particular those churches that received this letter. It is also significant that 'in the Church' is coordinated with 'in Christ Jesus'. It is in Christ, in the domain of his rule that glory to God can be found in the Church. This important qualification inextricably connects ecclesiology and Christology. The glorification of God is found in the Church solely because she is in Christ (cf. 1:3-14).¹⁰

Finally, the temporal expression εἰς πάσας τὰς γενεὰς τοῦ αἰῶνος τῶν αἰώνων is without parallel in the NT and captures the idea that the glorification of God will be endless. The author anticipates that throughout every generation and for time indefinite the Church in Christ will be found giving glory to God.

CONCLUSION

It is in the author's prayer reports (1:15-23; 3:14-21) that his deepest desires for his audience become plain. In this solemn and urgent petition, it becomes clear that an increased comprehension and practice of Christian love is one of the author's chief concerns. The emphasis upon unity (e.g. 4:3-5), especially between Jews and Gentiles (e.g. 2:11-22), was most likely the impetus behind the author's petition. It would appear that certain Christians had become proud and boastful on account of their mystical experiences, causing the Church to rupture and divide. This was a profound violation of the author's vision of the Church and explains much of the content of 3:14-21 as well as the whole epistle.¹¹

⁹ So Muddiman, p. 176; Lincoln, p. 217.

¹⁰ See O'Brien, p. 25-29, 268-269.

¹¹ On the purpose of Ephesians, see Jody A. Barnard, 'Unity in Christ: The Purpose of Ephesians', *Expository Times*, 120, No. 4 (2009), pp. 167-71.

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