

## EPHESIANS

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WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 50

# Ephesians

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*To the Already and Not Yet  
First Wo/man US President:  
Love Trumps Hate*



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## Abbreviations

2 Clem	2 Clement
AB	Anchor Bible
AcBib	Academia Biblica
AJSR	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung. Part 2, Principat.</i> Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
Arist. <i>Pol.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Politics</i>
<i>Barn.</i>	<i>Barnabas</i>
BCE	Before the Common Era
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
<i>BibSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CE	Common Era
Clem. Al.	
<i>Strom.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis</i>
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series
<i>Dial.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
Did.	Didache
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
FSR	Feminist Studies in Religion
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
<i>Gos. Thom.</i>	<i>Gospel of Thomas</i>
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
<i>Ign. Poly.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To Polycarp</i>
<i>JAC</i>	<i>Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JFSR</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
<i>JJRS</i>	<i>Japanese Journal of Religious Studies</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JRE</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>JSNTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series

LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LTQ	<i>Lexington Theological Quarterly</i>
LXX	Septuagint
N/A <sup>26</sup>	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , 26th ed.
NIV	New International Version
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NPR	National Public Radio
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
N*T	New Testament
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
<i>Pol. Phil.</i>	<i>Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians</i>
PSQ	<i>Political Science Quarterly</i>
RQ	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
RSR	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SD	Studies and Documents
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
<i>Spec. Leg.</i>	Philo, <i>On the Special Laws</i>
STD	Doctor of Sacred Theology
SymS	Symposium Series
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
UNT	Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCS	Wisdom Commentary Series
<i>WuD</i>	<i>Wort und Dienst</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>



## *Preface and Acknowledgments*

The dedication “To the Already and Not Yet First Woman US President” seeks to mark the social-political location of the writing of this Wisdom Commentary. This commentary on Ephesians was written during the 2016 US presidential election campaign, in which Hillary Rodham Clinton was the first wo/man to run for president as the nominee of a major political party. She won the popular but lost the Electoral College vote. As the Women’s March movement demonstrated, we already have a woman president who is the “people’s president.” But we do not yet have a woman president! Instead we have a president who issues executive orders that ban immigrants from Muslim countries, enforces increased deportation of undocumented residents, or issues a presidential memorandum declaring that the Dakota Pipeline’s (DAPL) completion is in the national interest—to mention just a few presidential decrees. It seems that hate and prejudice are trumping love every day!

Although Hillary Rodham Clinton was extremely qualified for the presidency, the vitriolic sexism she encountered was intense and palpable. Calls to “lock her up” and “burn the witch” were heard at the Republican convention and all through the land. To Trump supporters and many mainline Republicans this was an “uppity woman” who needed to be taught subordination and deference to male power. In a short essay in *Time*, Deborah Tannen, a feminist scholar of linguistics, has pointed to this “double bind” that made a woman presidential candidate like Hillary Clinton come across as inauthentic and untrustworthy. To quote her:

A double bind means you must obey two commands, but anything you do to fulfill one violates the other. While the requirements of a good leader and a good man are similar, the requirements of a good leader and a good woman are mutually exclusive. . . . Male candidates can have it both ways but Clinton can have it no ways. . . . The most difficult aspect of the double bind is that it is invisible; we think we are just reacting to the candidates as individuals. Yet, even the words to talk about women are drenched in gender.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to recognize the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) of this feminist commentary on Ephesians, whose injunction “wives should be submissive” was once again reinforced, whereas its message on love lost out!

It is important to recognize how the rhetoric of Ephesians still shapes our religious and political discourses and imaginations. Against this backdrop the commentary examines the political understandings of marriage and household in Ephesians as well as the roles that such understandings have played in the formation of early Christian communities and that still shape such communities today. To bring notions of Scripture and politics together can have an irritating, upsetting, and disturbing effect and can jar religious imagination and sensibilities.

Moreover, insofar as Scripture is also claimed to be the liberating word of a just and loving G\*d,<sup>2</sup> the rhetoric of liberation appears contradictory to and incongruent with a scriptural rhetoric that advocates domination and submission. And yet both the imperial language of domination and its violence and the democratic language of communal love are encoded in Christian Scriptures. They have shaped not only religious but also cultural self-understandings and ethos throughout the centuries and still do so today. Such language of subordination and control does not just belong to a forgotten historical past. Rather, as language of Scripture, it is performative language that still determines not only Christian but also political identity and praxis today. This commentary seeks to enable readers to recognize such rhetorics of struggle against and accommodation to kyriarchal<sup>3</sup> mind-sets and structures today.

Needless to say, like all intellectual work, the publication of a book—especially a commentary—always owes its existence to much planning, teamwork, and labor. This one is no exception but presupposes much

1. Deborah Tannen, “The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Disliking Hillary Clinton,” *Time* (March 15, 2016).

2. See n. 3 on p. xlvi on the use of G\*d.

3. See n. 9 on p. xlvi for an explanation of this term.

collegial work. Foremost, I want to thank the main editor, Prof. Barbara Reid, who has initiated and shepherded this Wisdom Commentary series. Without her tremendous work, organizational skills, and genius this feminist series would not have been born. Words are not able to express the importance of this series today and in the years to come. Special thanks are also due to the publisher of the academic department at Liturgical Press, Hans Christoffersen, for making this project possible, for his tireless attention to its development, and for his enthusiastic support of the project.

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I am once again grateful to my research assistants, Ms. Kelsi Morrison-Atkins and Ms. Heather McLetchie-Leader, for tirelessly supporting the research for this book. I am grateful to Kelsi, not only for researching and checking out books, copying and scanning articles, and proofreading my texts, but also for tirelessly assisting me in the work for FSR Inc. on my sabbatical leave while she very successfully passed comprehensive exams. I also owe to her the list of abbreviations. I am grateful to Heather for polishing my English, proofreading my text, and giving me critical substantive feedback. Heather also deserves special thanks for establishing the bibliography.

I am also very indebted to the Rev. Dr. Linda Maloney, the editor of this volume, for her thorough and careful reading of the manuscript and her expert suggestions to improve it. I greatly appreciate her work, her care, and her suggestions at a time when she was overburdened with other projects of her own.

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Carol P. Christ is an internationally renowned Goddess theologian. She has written or edited eight books on feminist the\*logy, including *Rebirth of the Goddess* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997), the first feminist theology; *She Who Changes: Re-Imagining the Divine in the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), a feminist process philosophy; and, with Judith Plaskow, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), which introduces embodied theological method.

Teresa Forcades i Vila is a physician, the\*logian, and Benedictine nun in the mountain monastery of Sant Benet de Montserrat (Catalonia, Spain), master of divinity (Harvard, 1997), doctor in public health (Barcelona, 2004), and doctor of sacred theology (Facultat de Teologia de Catalunya, 2007). Her publications in English include *Crimes and Abuses of the Pharmaceutical Companies* (Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia, 2006) and *Faith and Freedom* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016).

Fulata Moyo is a scholar-activist who interrogates religious resources in search of gender justice. She is the World Council of Churches programme executive and has been a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School. Her research-activist interests focus on how women's storytelling and the\*logies inform the quest to end sexism and violence against women. She defines sexuality as embodied spirituality of interconnectedness with mother earth, and sexual intercourse as part of lovemaking helping lovers to experience the spiritual climax. See Fulata Mbanomoyo, *A Quest for Women's Sexual Empowerment through Education in an HIV and AIDS Context*, PhD thesis (UKZN, 2009), 26, 270.

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## *Author's Introduction*

The best-known and most-quoted passage in the letter to the Ephesians is probably the following:

Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. (Eph 5:22-24)

Sarah Tanzer has therefore correctly stated that “the household code is the inescapable focus of any feminist commentary on Ephesians, because it is the only passage in Ephesians which explicitly addresses women and is about women.”<sup>1</sup> Over the centuries, the epistle to the Ephesians has been used, on the one hand, in support of andro/kyriocentric (i.e., male-/Lord-centered) mind-sets, norms, and texts that continue to inculcate wo/men’s<sup>2</sup> second-class status and subordination. On the other hand,

1. Sarah J. Tanzer, “Ephesians,” in *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 2: *A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 325–48, at 325.

2. In order to lift into critical consciousness the linguistic violence of so-called generic male-centered language, I substitute the term “wo/men” with a slash to replace the inclusive “men.” To use “wo/men” as an inclusive generic term invites male readers both to think twice and to experience what it means not to be addressed specifically. I also use the term to avoid an essentialist depiction of “woman” and to stress the instability of the term. Wo/man is defined not only by gender but also by race, class, and colonial structures of domination. Thus, “wo/men” can also be equivalent to “subordinated people.” Where it is encountered in my writing, the reader is called to reflect on who the term is including, and excluding, in a given instance.

the the\*logical<sup>3</sup> vision and cosmic language of Ephesians have fascinated readers and commentators alike. Aware of this double-edged character of Scripture, this commentary series seeks to read Christian Scriptures—the Hebrew Bible and the New\* Testament<sup>4</sup>—through a critical feminist lens,<sup>5</sup> searching for the liberating words of Divine Wisdom. Texts like Ephesians 5:22-33 make this task difficult and problematic. Such texts then call for both critical and constructive commentary.

A scriptural text such as Ephesians 5:22-24 continues to justify the religious legitimization of wo/men's second-class citizenship in society and church. Since this text is still proclaimed over and over again at weddings as the "word of G\*d" and used in the\*logical arguments against wo/men's ordination, a hermeneutics (i.e., a method or theory of interpretation) of suspicion is called for. Such an interpretive approach places on all andro/kyriocentric texts the label, "Caution, could be dangerous to your health and survival," in order to adjudicate "what G\*d, for the sake of our [i.e., wo/men's] salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred scriptures [such as Ephesians]."<sup>6</sup>

3. Whenever I use the asterisk—most notably, in "the\*logy," "G\*d," and "New\* Testament"—I want to communicate that the word is so marked in order to signal a problem. I write the\*logy in this open form in order to avoid the genderization of G\*d. The\*logy means "speaking about G\*d," *theos* being the masculine form of the Greek word for G\*d. Carol Christ has suggested that we use the noun *thealogy* (in Greek, *thea* is the feminine form and means "Goddess"). See especially also Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, *Goddess and God in the World: Conversations in Embodied Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017). However, this language also reinscribes gender into the Divine. Since Western languages such as Greek, Latin, and even English are gendered and use the masculine as the norm, I seek to interrupt and make conscious this grammatically masculine or feminine determination of the Divine. I have therefore replaced the masculine form of *theos* with the asterisk (*the\*s* and the\*logy) in order to draw attention to this linguistic problem, which is at one and the same time a theoretical orientation.

4. I write New\* Testament, or N\*T, also called the "Christian Testament" or "Second Testament," in an effort to call attention to the politics evoked by the designation "new."

5. For the articulation of my own feminist lens, see my recent books *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, Gender and Kyriarchal Power* (Cambridge: FSR Books, 2016); *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The\*logy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011); *Changing Horizons: Explorations of Feminist Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013); *Empowering Memory and Movement: Thinking and Working across Borders* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

6. See the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*). Different churches have different teachings on how to interpret Scripture. The Dogmatic Con-

Several years ago one of my students worked hard to marshal the scholarly arguments regarding Ephesians 5:22-33 in order to convince the pastor not to read this text in the liturgy at their wedding. After a long conversation the student thought their arguments had convinced the pastor not to use the text. However, on the day of the wedding they learned that the pastor had not respected their wishes. Despite their arguments and requests, the pastor proclaimed and preached on this text, calling for wifely submission. Sharing this experience in class after the wedding, they could barely contain their tears but assured us that they would never visit that church again.

As a text of Sacred Scripture, Ephesians 5:22-33 inscribes and enacts subordination and inequality not only in marriage but also in the church. It continues to shape not only the understanding of Christian marriage and family but also Roman Catholic and Protestant fundamentalist understandings of church and ministry. Official teachings use this text to define "priesthood" (or "ministry") as a male-only function, arguing that, because Christ was male, a priest, as an icon of Christ, must also be male. Christ's maleness is taken as an important sign of their relationship to the *ekklēsia*,<sup>7</sup> which, according to Ephesians 5, is Christ's wife and thereby symbolically typed as feminine. Hence, it is argued, the ordination of wo/men is not merely a matter of church discipline but is divinely revealed in Scripture. Ephesians and other New\* Testament

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stitution on Divine Revelation states: "Since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred scriptures. . . . Seeing that, in sacred scripture, God speaks through human beings in human fashion, it follows that the interpreters of sacred Scriptures, if they are to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words. In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention must be paid, among other things, to *literary genres*. The fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts, and in other forms of literary expression." *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), iii, 11-12.

7. The Greek term *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklēsia*) is commonly translated as "church." However, the term more accurately refers to the democratic assembly or forum of full citizens who come together to decide issues pertaining to their rights and well-being. Hence, in this commentary, I use the term in its transcribed form, *ekklēsia*, rather than the usual translation, "church."

texts of subordination are used as primary kyriarchal proof-texts for injunctions to subordination and exclusion. These interpretations, too, must be clearly labeled as dangerous to health and survival!

## Questions of Interpretation

A critical reading of the letter to the Ephesians as “words of the manifold wisdom/Wisdom of G\*d” (Eph 3:10) addressed *both* to freeborn and slave wo/men in the past when the letter was written and to wo/men today when it is read calls for critical evaluation and a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion. What do I mean by the label “feminist”? I work with a bumper-sticker definition of feminism that states: “Feminism is the radical notion that wo/men are people.”<sup>8</sup> Wo/men are not beasts of burden, handmaids, or servants; wo/men are full citizens. This definition of feminism alludes to the democratic motto “We, the people!” and asserts that wo/men are full, decision-making citizens with all rights and responsibilities in society and religion.

The slash in “wo/men” also intends to signify that there is no unified essence shared by all wo/men but rather that the category “woman” is always already fractured and inflected by other structures of oppression, including race, class, sexuality, immigrant status, and so many others. Therefore a critical feminist analysis cannot restrict itself to a gender-critical perspective but must go further to an intersectional analysis insofar as wo/men are not just defined by gender but also by race, class, ethnicity, age, and other social-political identity markers.

Since a feminist reading and interpretation seeks to make visible and audible wo/men as social-historical-religious agents, it needs to engage in an analysis not only of gender but more broadly of kyriarchy.<sup>9</sup> Thus, depending on the context, this way of writing “wo/men” can also be understood to include marginalized and subordinated men. The understanding of wo/men as full citizens in society and religious community asserts that all wo/men are empowered to make decisions for their own and their children’s well-being.

8. This definition of feminism is ascribed to rhetoric scholars Cheri Kramarae and Paula Treichler.

9. I have introduced the analytical terms *kyriarchy/kyriocentrism*, which are derived from the Greek *kyrios* (*emperor, lord, master, father, husband*) in order to specify that in Western societies the system of domination and exploitation is not just patriarchal but kyriarchal—that is, it is defined not just by gender but also by race, class, ethnicity, imperialism, and age. See *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, Gender and Kyriarchal Power* (Cambridge: MA: FSRBooks, 2016), 4 n. 4.

## 1. *Androcentric Language and Translation*

A feminist interpretation of Ephesians—or of any other text—must pay special attention to the function of male-centered, androcentric language. To quote *The Inclusive New Testament*, published by Priests for Equality, “Language, seemingly innocuous and inconsequential, is in reality an area which reveals unconscious attitudes, prejudices, stereotypes and patterns of discriminatory thinking. Conversely, care in language is a first and necessary step in raising consciousness.”<sup>10</sup>

This translation of the New\* Testament recognizes that the androcentric language of the N\*T subsumes wo/men under generic terms such as “men” or “slaves.” However, N\*T texts are not only androcentric, that is, male-centered; they are also kyriocentric, that is, elite male- or master-centered.

Such grammatically and linguistically shaped gendered, raced, and classed language does not simply divide humans into two equal separate groups exclusive of each other: male and female. Rather, it orders them asymmetrically, placing the masculine as the standard, making the feminine the exception in every class and race. In so doing it more highly ranks and valorizes the masculine gender. For instance, in his *Theory of Language*, published in 1788, James Beattie maintains (on the\*logical grounds) that biological sex is the primary basis for noun classification because “beings superior to man” are spoken of as masculine in most of the modern tongues of Europe, on account of their dignity. The male being is, according to these theories, the “nobler sex.”<sup>11</sup>

In Western language systems, masculine terms function as “generic,” connoting both men and women. In such language systems man/male/masculine/he stands for human and male, whereas woman/female/feminine/she lacks this generic sense and connotes only femaleness. In other words, Western languages (including the biblical languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin) are androcentric, that is, male-centered. Grammatically, androcentric “generic” Western languages explicitly mention wo/men only as problematic, the exception to the rule, or specifically, as particular individuals. In all cases one has to adjudicate in light of contextual linguistic markers whether wo/men are meant to be included or not.

10. Priests for Equality, *The Inclusive New Testament* (Hyattsville, MD: Quixote Center, 1994).

11. James Beattie, *The Theory of Language in Two Parts* (London: A. Strahan, T. Cadell, and W. Creech, 1788).

In addition, Western androcentric languages and discourses do not just marginalize wo/men, or eliminate us from historical cultural-religious records. As andro/kyriocentric languages they also construct the meaning of being a “woman” or being a “man” and do so differently depending on one’s social status. What it means to be female/woman/feminine depends not so much on one’s sex as on one’s location in the social-symbolic kyriarchal status system. The meaning of “woman” is therefore unstable and ever-shifting, depending less on its sex/gender relation than on its socio-systemic contextualization.

For example, the category “woman” is used today interchangeably with female/feminine and thus has become a “naturalized” generic sex-based term, although until very recently it was used as an appellation for lower-class females only, often in distinction to the term “lady” (Greek: *κύρια/kyria*; Latin: *matrona*). In this light, one can perceive the slippage, cultural-constructedness, and historical ambiguity of the term “woman” much more easily, since this discursive appellation readily reveals its race, class, and colonial bias. Not only has “lady” been restricted until very recently to wo/men of higher status or educational refinement; it also has functioned to symbolize femininity and “true womanhood.” Thus, a statement such as “slaves were not women” offends our “commonsense” understanding, whereas a statement such as “slaves were not ladies” makes perfect sense.

In the Western androcentric language system the lady/mistress/mother is the “other” of the lord/master/father. All wo/men (both male and female) who are marked as “inferior” by race, class, religion, or culture—as the others of the other—are labeled “feminine.” One can illustrate how such supposedly generic language is read, for example, with reference to the famous text of Galatians 3:28, which states that in Christ there is “no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” Generally Galatians 3:28 is understood as referring to three different characterizations: Jew and Greek as religious/ethnic characterizations, slave and free as socio-political class determinations, and male and female as referring to biological sex/gender differences. However, such an understanding of the text tacitly substitutes a gender-specific reading for a generic one when it infers, on the one hand, that Jew and Greek, slave and free are terms naming only man/male and, on the other, that only the third pair, “male and female,” refers also to wo/men. However, generic language, terms such as “Jews or Greeks” or “slave or free,” connote not only men but also wo/men. Hence the text needs to be read as “neither Jewish nor Greek wo/men,

neither slave nor free wo/men, neither male and female." This example indicates the difficulties androcentric language poses for an adequate historical translation and religious-the\*logical understanding of biblical texts such as Ephesians.

## 2. Translation and Interpretation of Androcentric Language

### A. TRANSLATION

While the question of how to translate androcentric, male-centered biblical language has received much attention since the 1970s and 1980s in feminist writings, biblical commentaries and scholarly translations have devoted less consideration to this issue. Whereas the NRSV translation renders masculine terms such as "brothers" or "sons" inclusively, to mean "brothers and sisters" or "children," it has retained the masculine pronoun "he" to refer to G\*d and has refused to modify the masculine G\*d-language of biblical texts. Since the NRSV translation is mandatory for this commentary, a simple reading of the text already inculcates that G\*d is male.

Feminists have pointed out since the 1970s that the generic masculine is the epitome of sexism in language<sup>12</sup> and argued that the singular "they" was used by Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and George Bernard Shaw to indicate inclusion. Jane Austen, for instance, repeatedly uses statements such as "everybody has their failing." However, the Victorian grammarians made it a matter of schoolroom dogma that one could only say "Everybody has *his* failing," with the understanding that "he" stood in for both sexes. As their slogan had it, "The masculine embraces the feminine."<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in 1850 an Act of the British Parliament gave official sanction to the then recently invented concept of "the generic he." This new law declared that "words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females."<sup>14</sup>

12. See especially Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times* (New York: Doubleday, 1977).

13. Geoff Nunberg, "Everyone Uses Singular 'They,' Whether They Realize It or Not," NPR, January 13, 2016, accessed June 7, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/01/13/462906419/everyone-uses-singular-they-whether-they-realize-it-or-not>. Geoff Nunberg is the linguistic contributor on NPR's *Fresh Air*.

14. Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing for Writers, Editors, and Speakers* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1980), 36–37.

## Ephesians 1:1–2:22

# G\*d's Great Love: Cosmos and *Ekklēsia*

### Greetings and *Berakah*/Blessing (1:1-14)

Like the genuine Pauline letters, Ephesians is framed as a letter by greetings in the beginning and concluding wishes of peace and blessings (postscript). It mentions the apostle Paul explicitly as the sender of the letter. However, this authorship is debated in Ephesian scholarship. The letter's introduction of the apostle Paul points ahead to Ephesians 3:1-12, where Paul's apostolic authority is asserted as integral to the purpose of the letter. As written by a later Pauline follower, this structuring of the letter skillfully claims the voice and authority of the apostle since, as "the reference to Paul as the sole author of the epistle makes clear, the focus is on Paul's unique place in relation to God, Christ/Messiah and community."<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the preface of the letter is completely patterned on the genuine Pauline letters, since it mentions Paul first, as the sender (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1), who has received the title "apostle of

1. Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, SP 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 195.

## Ephesians 1:1-14

<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

<sup>2</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. <sup>5</sup>He

destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

<sup>7</sup>In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace <sup>8</sup>that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight <sup>9</sup>he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, <sup>10</sup>as a plan for the

Jesus Messiah" (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1) according to the will of G\*d (2 Cor 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1). It addresses the recipients both as saints (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1), who are in certain places (e.g., Corinth, Philippi, Rome, or Ephesus), and as faithful in Messiah Jesus. The name "saints," or "holy ones," is the standard designation for the recipients of the letter (Eph 1:15, 18; 2:19; 3:8, 18; 4:12; 5:3; 6:18).

The preface concludes with a blessing that calls G\*d "Father" and Jesus Messiah "*Kyrios*." *Kyrios* means "Lord," which is an elite male title. Feminist the\*logy has problematized both titles: Father and Lord. We therefore need to place here the warning sign: "Caution: could be dangerous to your health and survival!" We must do so, however, not simply to reject these titles but, more important, to draw attention to how their meaning is construed. This is necessary, as we are so used to seeing such domination-, male-centered language in Scripture that we tend to overlook the need to read these titles against their imperial/kyriarchal grain.

As pointed out in the introduction, the location of the saints and faithful "in Ephesus" is controverted, because those words are omitted in a number of the earliest manuscripts. Scholars have proposed different theories to explain this lacuna. The original address might have been to the saints "being in Hierapolis" or "being in Laodicea," locations a later scribe replaced with Ephesus, the metropolis of the Roman province of Asia Minor. Rather than reducing such textual variants to a single "original text," textual critics have argued more recently that we should

fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. <sup>11</sup>In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, <sup>12</sup>so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ,

might live for the praise of his glory. <sup>13</sup>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; <sup>14</sup>this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

appreciate the plurality of textual transmissions.<sup>2</sup> In addition to textual variants, it is important to explore the different possibilities of historical location in order to understand the rhetorical situation of the letter. Rather than placing the male author at the center of interpretation, it is vital to focus on the social location of the recipients when reading against the grain in order to interrogate the text's world of vision. Whether the letter was sent to Laodicea, Hierapolis, or Ephesus, it is important to see that all of these places are located in the Roman province of Asia; hence the rhetorical-historical situation is shaped by the culture and politics of this province.

The Greek text of 1:3-14 consists of one long sentence with a string of subordinate participial and prepositional clauses. Translation into English compels scholars to break up this long sentence into shorter ones. While the NRSV translation clears up the sentence structure, it does not eliminate androcentric/masculine G\*d language. Instead, it makes it worse by keeping the masculine for the divine while using inclusive terms for humans.

Conscientized to the problem of generic masculine language, feminist readers will not be able to appreciate this beautiful the\*logical blessing because it speaks of G\*d and Christ in exclusivist masculine terms. Since such a translation is the\*logically incorrect because it ascribes masculine gender to G\*d and essentializes Jesus' masculinity rather than Jesus' "Messiahness," it is not able to convey the the\*logically rich meaning of this traditional Jewish blessing.

2. See, for example, the work of Eldon J. Epp, e.g., "Textual Criticism," in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. idem and G. W. Macrae (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 75–126.

*The Sumerian Pattern  
of Servitude in Ephesians*

[T]hrough an enormous network of mythological narrative, every aspect of culture is cloaked in the relationship of ruler and ruled, creator and created. . . . [Sumerian] legend endows the Sumerian ruler-gods with creative power; their subjects are recreated as servants. . . . [This new narrative was] deployed with the purpose of conditioning the mind anew.<sup>3</sup>

This provocative statement is found in a chapter titled “The First Major Sexual Rupture” in a collation of writings, *Liberating Life: Woman’s Revolution*, by imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan. According to Öcalan, who clearly had been reading authors like James Mellaart, Marija Gimbutas, and Heidi Goettner-Abendroth, the values of societies that preceded

Sumer in the Near East were entirely different.<sup>4</sup> Earlier societies practiced “primitive socialism, characterized by equality and freedom, [which was] viable because the social order of the matriarchy did not allow ownership.” Moreover, in such societies, people regarded nature as “alive and animated, no different from themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

Ephesians follows the Sumerian pattern. Expressing a strong doctrine of chosenness and (pre)destination, it reserves all creative power to God. It thus is not surprising that this text enjoins Christians—particularly wives, children, and slaves—“to be subject” to their masters.

It has been argued that biblical monotheism redefines the notion of service when (or insofar as) it insists that only God—not kings or mammon—is worthy of being served. Yet this leaves intact the idea that creativity is restricted to God and that the

3. This argument is more fully developed in Carol P. Christ, “A Servant of All or a Lover of Life,” *Feminism and Religion* (June 27, 2016), <https://feminismandreligion.com/2016/06/27/shall-i-be-a-servant-to-all-or-shall-i-love-the-world-ever-more-deeply-by-carol-p-christ/>.

4. James Mellaart, *The Neolithic of the Near East* (New York: Scribners, 1975); Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); Heidi Goettner-Abendroth, *Societies of Peace: Matriarchies Past, Present and Future; Selected Papers, First World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, 2003; Second World Congress on Matriarchal Studies, 2005* (Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2009).

5. Öcalan, *Liberating Life: Woman’s Revolution*, trans. International Initiative (Cologne: International Initiative Edition; Neuss: Mesopotamian Publishers, 2013), 14–15.

proper human role is to “serve” God. The notion that only God is to be served all too easily reverts to the notion that God’s earthly representatives (kings, priests, ministers, rabbis, imams, gurus, holy men, generals, fathers, husbands, the wealthy, landowners, slave owners, and so forth) are to be served in God’s name. Certain Christian texts suggest that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28) yet this also did not prevent Christianity from institutionalizing hierarchical notions of service.

I suggest that all notions that human beings were created to “serve” or “be subject to”

(God or anyone else) should be excised from our religious and political vocabularies.

To understand this insight and to incorporate it into our religious and political vocabularies would require a radical revolution in the way our thoughts and actions continue to be structured by the Sumerian legend.

*No more service to God and country.*

*No more servants of God.*

*No more servants of all.*

Isn’t it enough to love the deity with all our hearts and all our neighbors—human and other than human—as ourselves?

*Carol P. Christ*

## TRANSLATION MATTERS

In order to give a sample of an inclusive translation using the gender-neutral singular pronoun “they/them/their,” I will add here such an inclusive translation for the beginning of this long sentence. Unfortunately, I cannot change the whole text because publication rules require that the commentary use the NRSV translation.

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and parent (Father) of our leader (Lord) Jesus Messiah (Christ), who has blessed us in Messiah (Christ) with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, <sup>4</sup>just as they (he) chose us in Messiah (Christ) before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before them (him) in love. <sup>5</sup>They (He) destined us for adoption as their (his) children through Jesus Messiah, according to the good pleasure of their (his) will, <sup>6</sup>to the praise of their (his) glorious grace that they (he) freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. <sup>7</sup>In them (him) we have redemption through their (his) blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of their (his) grace <sup>8</sup>that they (he) lavished on us.

Whereas the undisputed Pauline letters refer first to the concrete situation of the community addressed, *Ephesians* begins with a eulogy or *berakah* that, in characteristic Jewish language,<sup>6</sup> spells out the blessings bestowed on the recipients. This introduction is shaped by Jewish liturgical language and blessing formulas, language that is used in the psalms of Scripture and the texts of the Qumran community.<sup>7</sup> In Greco-Roman rhetoric a eulogy is characterized by eloquence and offers a tribute of praise for a benefactor.

This eulogy/blessing/*berakah* is a rich introduction to the whole epistle in the language of liturgy and praise. It is a the\*logical introduction in the deepest sense of the word because it starts with G\*d, who is not qualified as ruler but as a parent, whereas Jesus, as leader, is called Messiah. Here G\*d is seen as the parent of the Messiah as well as a rich benefactor and householder who has bestowed salvation/well-being and spiritual blessings in “the heavenlies” on speaker and audience (us) through the Messiah Jesus (v. 3). Such spiritual blessings are bestowed on the congregation of the holy ones, the saints.

A contrast between “we” and “you” emerges in vv. 13-14, something commentators have struggled to explain. Some scholars argue that the author is contrasting Jewish (“we”) and Gentile (“you”) Christians. Others have pointed out that there may be an attempt here to distinguish the recipients from other Christians. Pheme Perkins has proposed that, as is the case in other Pauline letters, the speaker distinguishes himself rhetorically from the audience.<sup>8</sup> Andrew Lincoln in turn stresses correctly that “the ‘we’ and ‘us’ refers to all believers,”<sup>9</sup> but in so doing they obliterate the distinction. As I have argued in the introduction, I understand the “we” as referring to all members of the Jewish messianic community, including the “you,” since the “you” who were formerly Gentiles are now members of this community.

When speaking of the Messiah Jesus the text vacillates between understanding the Messiah as a historical individual called Jesus and as a corporate Messianic realm in which the recipients live, or as an era in

6. Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians*, SNTSMS 130 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35–45.

7. For the interpretation of *Ephesians* with reference to the Qumran writings see especially Pheme Perkins, *Ephesians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), and Joachim Gnilka, *Der Epheserbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1971).

8. Perkins, *Ephesians*, 42–43.

9. Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 37.

which G\*d chose “us” before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before G\*d in love. G\*d destined us, the recipients, for adoption as “children” through the death of Jesus Messiah, in whom we have deliverance from bondage and forgiveness of trespasses, language associated with baptism.<sup>10</sup>

This messianic focus of the eulogy is hard to miss, since “in Messiah Jesus” occurs in nearly every verse and is repeated ten times in one way or another. However, the meaning of “in Messiah Jesus” is difficult to translate since the text vacillates between the understanding of “in the Messiah” as a corporate messianic location and the understanding of Messiah Jesus as a historical individual. Ephesians 1:10 refers to the summing up and bringing together of all things, the whole cosmos, “in Messiah Jesus,” who is the Beloved.

G\*d chose the recipients in Messiah Jesus before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before G\*d in love (1:4). The recipients of the letter are in the Messiah Jesus, who is called the Beloved (1:6). Throughout the letter, love (ἀγάπη/*agapē*) is a key *topos*, since the verb and noun are used twenty-one times.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on the topic of love in Ephesians “seems to furnish the key to the purpose of the book.”<sup>12</sup> The place of the believer is being “in love” (ἐν ἀγάπῃ) and being “in Messiah” (ἐν Χριστῷ). This place of the saints “in love” and “in Messiah” is located in the “heavenly places [ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις, lit.: in the heavens]” (1:3, 20; 2:6).

The “heavenlies” are a place that transcends the limits of human experience. They are not only a place where G\*d dwells but also a sphere in which hostile powers are active (3:10; 6:12). Whereas the biblical view of the world generally speaks of heaven, earth, and underworld—the place of the dead and the demons—Ephesians does not know a realm that is under the earth, below the human world. Rather, it shares the first-century understanding of the universe in which the earth is at the center of a cosmos, surrounded by the planets that circle from east to west around the earth. The sun, moon, and planets circle the earth. The G\*ds were no longer near but far away in the heavens, which were multiple.

10. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 200.

11. Ἀγάπη/*agapē* and its derivatives occur in Ephesians in the following places: 1:4 (2x), 15; 2:4 (2x); 3:17, 19; 4:2, 15, 16; 5:2 (2x), 25 (2x), 28 (3x), 33; 6:21, 23, 24. See John Paul Heil, *Ephesians: Empowerment to Walk in Love for the Unity of All in Christ* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007), 2.

12. Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 105.

The region from the earth to the moon was one in which decay and death occurred. Earthy, heavy, watery, and dark substances tended toward the earth. Fire and air tended toward the heavens. . . . Spiritual beings, sometimes depicted as demonic, could be associated with the planetary spheres and their power to dictate the fate of humans and nations.<sup>13</sup>

In its heavenly ascent after death the soul had to travel through the dangerous world of the demons to the world of G\*d.

In the heavenlies, at the right-hand side of G\*d's throne, the Messiah is seated. The realm of the Messiah Jesus is envisioned as above the realm of the spirits and demons. G\*d is seated on top of the realm of the spirit-powers, which is in the highest of heavens. The "heavenlies" reach down to earth but do not encompass it. Rather, the expression "all things" (τὰ πάντα), which is divided into a heavenly and an earthly realm, is the most comprehensive notion that encompasses heaven and earth, all beings, angel, demon, and human (1:11, 23; 3:9; 4:10, 15).<sup>14</sup> Messiah Jesus is enthroned above all the heavens "in order that Messiah Jesus might fill all things" (4:10). Ephesians envisions Messiah Jesus as completely filling the cosmos by drawing all things into himself. Messiah Jesus, the Beloved, is uniting and filling the universe with *agapē*, "love."<sup>15</sup> This is the mystery, the secret, that has been made known as G\*d's will: "the summing up of the All in Christ."<sup>16</sup>

The language of mystery is used extensively in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3; 4:9; 5:32; 6:19). Scholars now widely agree that this language is derived from Jewish-apocalyptic the\*logy, in which G\*d is seen as the revealer of mysteries.<sup>17</sup> Such a mystery is revealed to the recipients but not to the public. Whereas in the mystery religions the privileged group who knows the secret are the initiates, in Judaism they are the people of G\*d. They are now in possession of the mystery that has been hidden and

13. Perkins, *Ephesians*, 37–38.

14. Gnilka, *Epheserbrief*, 65.

15. There are different Greek words for the English word "love": ἔρως = erotic passionate love; φιλία = nonsexual love between friends; ἀγάπη = loving-kindness, unconditional love. See excursus below (pp. 21–22). The Goddess Isis was called *Agapē Theōn*, "Love of Gods." See R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

16. Ernest Best, *Ephesians: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, ICC (New York: T&T Clark, 1998), 137.

17. Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 20–30, 57 n. 168.

unknown until now (see Col 1:26-28; 2 Cor 2:6-10). This mystery “sums up” all things in heaven and on earth in “the Messiah Jesus.”

What is the significance of the definite article before the word *χριστός*, “Christos,” Messiah? The author uses the definite article in the phrase “in the Messiah” in 1:10, 12, 20; as well as at 2:5, 13; 3:4, 8, 17, 19; 4:7, 12, 13, 20; 5:2, 5, 14, 23, 24, 25, 29; 6:5—a use of the article before *χριστός* that is more frequent than in any other writing of the Pauline letter collection. Ernest Best discusses this matter but comes to the conclusion: “The article with Christ has no particular messianic significance at 1.10.”<sup>18</sup> However, Best does not discuss the probability that the definite article defines Jesus as the Messiah because he works with the dualism Judaism-Christianity as two different religious communities.

G\*d has made known to us in Jesus Messiah a mystery G\*d intended “for the administration [*οικονομίαν*] of the fullness of the times.” The Greek word *οικονομία*/*oikonomia* is usually translated as “plan” because, it is argued, household management consists in action plans. However, as was pointed out in the introduction, in ancient political discourse *οικονομία*, the management of the household, was the task of the *matrona* (Greek: *κύρια*), whereas state-management was that of the *dominus* (Greek: *κύριος*). The All is here envisioned as the household of G\*d that is administered in the domain of the Messiah. G\*d is envisioned as the *matrona*, the *κύρια* of the household who takes care of all its members and the whole cosmos. She does so in and through the Messiah, Jesus, who is “the Beloved.” This female image of G\*d, the “world manager or house-keeper,” corrects the male image of G\*d as the kyriarchal lord and ruler. The abundance of praise in this introductory eulogy is addressed to G\*d imaged as a female householder who takes care of the world.

#### *An Alternative Concept of God*

The concept of an all-powerful God who destines certain people for salvation before the creation of the world, distinguishes between children of light and children of darkness, and places all creation under his [*sic*] feet as he rules from the high heavens

is profoundly problematic on numerous levels. It attributes all agency to God, negating the possibility of human freedom. It denies the complexity of human beings, all of whom contain some admixture of good and evil. And it turns God into a dominating male other who

18. Best, *Ephesians*, 145.

has been used to justify myriad forms of human domination. But if one rejects this idea of God, what might replace it?

I see God as the creative energy that underlies, animates, and sustains all existence; God is the Ground of Being, the source of all that is, the power of life, death, and regeneration in the universe. God's presence fills all creation, and creation simultaneously dwells in God. God is the reality that unifies creation. Believing in God means affirming that, despite the fractured, scattered, and conflicted nature of experience, there is a unity that embraces and contains diversity and connects all things.

In this view God is neither a locus of consciousness nor a source of unalloyed good. Wholeness or inclusiveness carries more theological weight than goodness. The world as I experience it has little use for human plans and aspirations. The earth, bounteous at one moment, at another can be blighted by drought or washed away by terrible storms. We can be astounded by the care, altruism, and intricate interdependence found everywhere in nature and also by its predation and violence. When we look at ourselves we find the same, often ambiguous, mixture of motives and effects.

To deny God's presence in all this is to leave huge aspects of reality outside of God. Where then do they come from? How are they able to continue in existence?

But while the creative energy flowing through the world may have no moral purpose, the notion of God's unity or oneness provides substantial grounding for moral reflection and action. To say that the divine presence that animates the universe is *one* is to say that we are all bound to each other in the continual unfolding of the adventure of creation. In the human family, for all our differences, we are more alike than unlike. All of us are faces of the God who dwells within each of us; the same standards of justice should apply to everyone. When we harm, diminish, or oppress anyone we harm ourselves. And this is true not simply of human beings but also of the whole of creation. We are linked to each other in a remarkably complex, intricate web of life. God cannot redeem the world for us, but as creatures who, in our better moments, are able to glimpse and appreciate our place in the larger whole, we can act in the interests of that whole and the individuals and human and biotic communities within it.

*Judith Plaskow*

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