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Style and Genre in Ephesians

O M T O'Donovan

The authorship of Ephesians is an increasingly open question in current discussion. We therefore welcome all the more warmly the following contribution to the debate which is based on a paper given to the TSF group in Oxford.

The reader of modern times is used to regarding literary style as an expression of personality something akin to handwriting: *le style, c'est l'homme*, it is said, and the assumption that this is the key to the study of the Pauline epistles is made too often for it to be remarkable. A different principle, sometimes appealed to by students of the Ephesian epistle, is to treat literary style as an indication of mood; its peculiarities are ascribed to the mellowness of encroaching age, solitary meditation in the prison cell and the satisfaction of work completed. But to *litterati* of the ancient world, acutely conscious of stylistic variation and technique, the functional aspects were all-important. An author's style was determined by the kind of work he was producing. The competent orator and writer had different styles for different tasks.

The New Testament writers, except possibly the author to the Hebrews, were not cultured *litterati*, but the same principle can fruitfully be applied to their work. We must ask of any New Testament book, 'What job was it meant to do?' Yet this question too needs care, for *genres* of writing were not born into the neat, classified columns in which the critics have marshalled them, but had, like everything else, to grow and differentiate themselves. We may say, '1 Corinthians is a letter', and be fairly sure that we have said almost everything of importance about the *genre* of that piece; but it is not enough to say, 'Ephesians is a letter'. We may, of course, say that Ephesians is a *bad* letter, that the author lacked Paul's genius for epistolary communication; but we may equally say that Ephesians is a letter, and something else as well. In this study we shall ask what that something else may be, and suggest that the stylistic and other features often brought against Pauline authorship may be as well accounted for by a careful description of the letter's *genre*.

1. Ephesians and Colossians

Ephesians has set out to improve upon the style of Colossians. When we read the earlier epistle after the later one, we are struck by its comparative ungainliness, its failure to achieve the same resonance which marks Ephesians, and by the poor balance between clauses. The correspondence of Ephesians 5:

20 to Colossians 3: 17 (notorious because they don't correspond exactly), looks conspicuously like the conscious polishing of a very ungainly sentence: 'And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him' (Col. 3: 17);¹ '... giving thanks always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father' (Eph. 5: 20).

On other occasions the roughness of Colossians is altered by the insertion of a balancing phrase or the excision of an uncomfortable expression. At Colossians 1: 25 the phrase, 'according to the dispensation of God which was given me' is not quite clear (it is a variation upon Paul's more normal phrase, 'according to the grace that was given me'), and the subsequent words, 'to you-ward to fulfil the word of God', stumble incoherently; in Ephesians 3: 2 the same elements are put together to make a rotund conditional clause, 'if so be that ye have heard of the dispensation of that grace of God which was given me to you-ward'. At Colossians 3: 6, 'for which things' sake cometh the wrath of God' clings unhappily to the tail-end of a clause, but in Ephesians 5: 6 it is rounded out to independence: 'for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the sons of disobedience'. Modern taste, I suspect, prefers the casual style of Paul's dialectical epistles to this 'turgid' diction, but we must allow that such fulsomeness may have been quite self-conscious, not the result merely of some editor's rewriting of Colossians in thicker ink. The clausulae of Ephesians are perfect, the climaxes magnificent, and the final words of the Epistle are a rhetorician's masterstroke.

2. Ephesians, 1 Peter and baptism

At this point we turn to another work which offers interesting parallels with our own. The First Epistle of Peter is in its way as mysterious a document as Ephesians, and the similarities which the one bears to the other may seem only to deepen the mystery. At the lowest level they have between them the New Testament monopoly on two words: *eusplanchnos* appears in both as part of a list of virtues (1 Pet. 3: 8; Eph. 4: 32), and *akrogoniaios* appears in both (1 Pet. 2: 6; Eph. 2: 20) in expositions of Isaiah 28: 16. They share a number of words and phrases which belong otherwise only to the later New

¹ Quotations from the English Revised Version, which I have adapted to bring into line with the BFBS text at Col. 3: 16, to correspond more literally to the Greek at Col. 3: 17, and to impose a different interpretation of the words at Col. 1: 25 and Phil. 1: 27.

Testament books. More substantially they both contain passages on the incorporation of the Gentiles (1 Pet. 1: 10ff.; Eph. 3: 2ff.), they both contain exposition of Isaiah 28: 16 which makes Christ the 'cornerstone' of the church (1 Pet. 2: 2ff.; Eph. 2: 18ff.), they both contain passages on the glorification of Christ based upon that most common of testimonia, Psalm 110: 1 (1 Pet. 3: 22; Eph. 1: 20f.), and they both contain a long passage of ethical counsel and make extensive use of the same primitive ethical catechesis (1 Pet. 2: 18ff.; Eph. 5: 22—6: 9).² Both begin with a long and florid *berakah*, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who . . .', which imposes certain stylistic similarities upon their opening chapters, notably the repeated use of the relative pronoun and long sentences. Both have been suspected, such is their stylistic elevation, of being wholly, or in part, composed of liturgical material, and both hint that they may be especially interested in baptism. It may be added that both are written to Gentile churches, and that 1 Peter is a genuine example of what it is sometimes suggested that Ephesians may be, a circular letter to everyone in general and to no-one in particular.

If the connexion of 1 Peter with a baptismal address is accepted (and it seems plausible), then it represents a type of writing which developed in the Christian church outside the circles in which Paul moved. Peter's letter-writing is nourished by the pulpit, Paul's takes its stand in the market square. The one apostle lived his life in young churches, the other at least partly in established churches with traditions attached to them. Paul had a spontaneity which Peter lacked. 1 Peter, on the other hand, belongs to a school of preaching and writing which Paul had no part in forming. It is not written to make a particular point, to counter a particular heresy or to teach a special doctrine. It is a general exhortation, with an eye cocked to the possibility of persecution and half an eye to the needs of baptismal candidates; it has much to say about the bread-and-butter ethics of Christian living; it deals with its principal doctrines (in particular, the atonement) only by way of digression; it is formal, solemn, rhetorical, a pulpit-letter. And it is these same formal characteristics that the Epistle to the Ephesians also displays, and our task must be to discover why St Paul or some admirer chose to adapt material from one of his occasional letters to write a discourse in this style.

But we must not exaggerate the formal solemnity of the style. There is no need to suppose the quotation of large blocks of liturgical material, still less to entertain such extreme theories as that propounded by F. L. Cross, that the main part of 1 Peter is the celebrant's text in an Easter eucharist.³ The liturgical

material quoted in the *Didache* (9f.) is still simple and primitive, and should warn us that extensive and elaborate liturgy would be an anachronism in the first century. Perhaps we may suggest an extempore style, such as may be found today in some Protestant churches, where definite and traditional shapes and a familiar stock of vocabulary governs, and makes possible, unprepared preaching and prayer. By comparing the opening sections of Ephesians and 1 Peter we may guess that a baptismal address would begin with a stylized *berakah* in general terms, and would then turn to address the candidates with a strong 'ye', the second person plural which is prominent in both letters.

We are suggesting, then, that much that is strange about Ephesians may be properly understood in terms of formal and situational restraint. On the one hand the rewriting of phrases from Colossians and the heavy, ponderous style, on the other the superficiality of the letter-form, the formality of the courteous conditional clause at 3: 2 (cf. 1 Pet. 1: 17; 2: 3), and the coolness (some would say smugness⁴) of the personal references to Paul's life and ministry, may be evidence not for the authorship of the letter but for its *genre*. If we are to go beyond this to say that St Paul himself could have written this work which bears his name, we are bound to make some suggestions as to why he should have set his hand to write this kind of a letter; and having done this we must show, first, that it was germane to his purpose to draw upon the ideas of his own letter to the Colossians, and second, that there is nothing in the ecclesiastical situation presupposed by the epistle that would have been inconceivable in the apostle's life-time.

3. Gentile and Jew

The fluctuation between 'we' and 'ye' in chapter 1, which we have supposed to be generic to this kind of discourse, Ernst Käsemann takes to mark the juxtaposition of liturgy and paraenesis, and so fails to see how the author uses this fluctuation at its first appearance to introduce the principal message of his letter.⁵ It draws a clear dividing line between the 'we who had before hoped in Christ' and the 'ye also' who are the objects of the address (1: 12f.), and although it is not immediately made explicit that 'ye' are Gentiles and 'we' are Jews, there is more than one suggestion that it is the new *Israel* into which the new believers have been sealed: 'the Holy Spirit of promise' and 'the redemption of God's own possession' refer the readers to the destiny of God's covenant people. They are reminded that they once walked according to the dispensation of this (pagan) world,

² Cf. E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St Peter* (Macmillan, 1946), pp. 363ff.

³ F. L. Cross, *1 Peter, A Paschal Liturgy* (Mowbray, 1954).

⁴ C. L. Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford, 1951), p. 15.

⁵ Ernst Käsemann, 'Ephesians and Acts', in L. E. Keck, J. L. Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts* (SPCK, 1968) p. 288ff.

(the 'we' in 2: 3 is liturgically influenced again, as for a confession), until God, the riches of whose mercy occasion wonder and awe, brought them to life together with Christ. This again is applied in the second person: they are 'the Gentiles in the flesh', the so-called uncircumcision by the so-called circumcision, strangers to the community of Israel and to the promises of the covenant (2: 11f.). The effect of Christ's work, explains the author with a reference to Isaiah 57: 19, has been to break down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile. The recipients of his letter are no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (2: 19f.). So he can say later (3: 14) that every *tribe* in heaven and earth takes its name from the one Father.

There is no particular situation to which Ephesians is directed. And yet neither this fact, obvious to all, nor the close dependence of the letter upon that to the Colossians, should allow us to suppose that there is no situation at all to which it is directed. A theological treatise abhors a historical vacuum. Käsemann, appreciating this, conjectures that the Gentiles to whom the author wrote were in need of being humbled; their place in the church was of privilege and not of right; they were *parvenus*, built onto a foundation that had been laid before them. N. A. Dahl suggests that the recipients of the letter were newly baptized Christians, members of churches which Paul (the author) had not founded.⁶ This would provide a circumstantial explanation for the apostle's use of the *genre*; perhaps he was asked to produce a baptismal letter to be read in certain churches on Easter Day or Whitsunday, and took the opportunity of teaching these new Gentile congregations the lesson of humility. Or else he may simply have adopted the form of a baptismal address as a literary device, useful for its gentle, patronizing and authoritative tone which fitted what he had to say. But there is no crisis, no sudden and particular need, lying behind the Epistle to the Ephesians, but rather a general sense that certain churches, over whom Paul had no immediate authority, needed to adopt a more respectful attitude to their Jewish brethren and to the church at large. This conspiracy of message and form accounts for some features which have seemed puzzling. The phrase 'holy apostles and prophets', for example (3: 5; cf. 2: 20), is not quite what we expect in the mouth of Paul, their often critical contemporary. And at 4: 11, the section on gifts which derives from 1 Corinthians 12, it has been observed that the list progresses from first-generation gifts (apostles and prophets) to second-generation gifts (evangelists, shepherds, teachers). But the so-called 'second-generation feel' of these verses does not entitle us to pin a date to the composition of

Ephesians; it simply reminds us that every new group of catechumens is a second generation in the church, and that the Gentiles, according to unquestionably Pauline theology, were late arrivals to the gracious purposes of God (Rom. 11: 17ff.).

4. Gnosticism and Christian maturity

It is generally accepted that the Epistle to the Colossians was written to counter an early manifestation of gnosticism. For the purposes of his polemic Paul opened up several new veins of theology which are prominent in this letter and in Ephesians. He spoke of Christ as the repository of all the treasures of *wisdom* and *knowledge* (Col. 2: 3), as the locus of all the *plerōma*, 'fullness', of Godhead, and also of his indwelling presence as the *mystery* which was hid from all ages. These new theological concepts were fashioned dialectically: Paul was seeking to capture his opponents' philosophical ground, just as years earlier he had adopted the Corinthians' *syneidesis*, 'conscience', into his vocabulary and so into the moral theology of Christendom.⁷ These new debating tools were not to be thrown away when they had been once used: Paul was constantly in touch with churches which were exposed to gnostic teaching (there are echoes of the same controversy in Eph. 4: 17ff.; 5: 6), and they were useful articles of his theological vocabulary. But living theological vocabulary could never remain static. Dialectical requirements continued to fashion them, so that the 'mystery' of Ephesians is not, as in the earlier epistle, the indwelling Christ, but first the 'summing up' of all things in Christ (1: 9) and secondly the incorporation of the Gentiles into the church (3: 6). There is nothing surprising about this change of reference, for we expect jargon to be constantly reapplied, and the difference in the content of the mystery is simply the difference in the content of the two letters. Such parrying with words will, it is true, blunt the weapon's edge in the end, as the words in question become accommodated to their Christian environment.

In the case of the word *plerōma* our study is complicated by the fact that it first occurs in a long quasi-liturgical passage at Colossians 1: 15-20 without explanation. This passage, believed by Bultmann and others to have had a previous history as a Christian hymn,⁸ is full of interest: it first uses the idea of Christ as 'head', and it is so high-flown in its style that some scholars have thought it a later addition to Colossians which postdates Ephesians. But the sense of *plerōma* throughout Colossians is the same: the whole fullness of Godhead, rank upon rank of gnostic emanations, rests in Christ. The changes we find in the later letter are again those that we might expect, for now it is the church which is to be filled,

⁶ I have had to rely on the report of Dahl's views given by J. C. Kirby, *Ephesians, Baptism and Pentecost* (SPCK, 1968), pp. 40ff.

⁷ Cf. C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (SCM, 1955), pp. 60ff.

⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament 1* (SCM, 1952), p. 178.

which 'contains' Christ in His fullness as Christ 'contains' Godhead (1: 23). This cosmic ecclesiology becomes the basis of the particular ethical demand which the author is making upon his readers: they, as the church, are to be filled with the fullness of God (3: 19), and their Christian maturity is to reach the 'measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (4: 13). Goodspeed's observation, that the notion of *plerōma* was losing its cosmological sense and gaining an ethical one, is perfectly correct as far as it goes, for the whole point of the Ephesian letter was to propound the cosmological basis of ethics.⁹ The same tactic which pressed the word into service against the philosophy which gave it currency now redirects it to meet the challenge of an immature Greek Christianity which undervalued its place in a Jewish church.

When he described Christ as 'the head of the body, the church' (Col. 1: 18), Paul used and expanded an idea already familiar in his letters, the church as the limbs of Christ. He had used it in 1 Corinthians to express the diversity of Christian gifts, and at first sight it seems an odd metaphor for him to have recalled for the purposes of Colossians, where he does not encourage the church to exercise diversity, but rather to maintain a unity in belief with the orthodox churches. Yet unity had also been a feature of the image from the beginning: 'In one Spirit were we all baptized into one body', Paul had written to Corinth (1 Cor. 12: 13), and it was to this side of the analogy that he could now appeal. Gnosticism was fissiparous, producing many small conventicles of the only-elect, and so Paul turned to the church as a symbol of the stability of mature Christianity. Against the scattering, individualistic gnostics with their divided *plerōma* of major and minor divinities stood the church united underneath its one Head from whom it drew nourishment and growth (Col. 1: 19). It is no longer the one Spirit that is the unifying and stabilising agent, but the Head, a change motivated by the particular failure of the Colossian church to appreciate the uniqueness of Christ (and one which Ephesians was to reverse). The needs of Colossae had made the apostle put the image back into the forge-fire and beat it into a new and more comprehensive shape.

For the Ephesian letter too the question of stability was paramount, and we are not surprised to find Paul's metaphor worked out yet further. Stability goes hand in hand with growth. 'Rooted and builded up in him, and established in your faith, even as ye were taught', urged Colossians, and again, 'from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God'. These phrases (2: 7, 19) are taken up and filled out into a full demand for Christian growth in the young and independently-minded Gentile churches: 'Speaking the truth in love, (we) may

grow up in all things into him, which is the head, even Christ; from whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love' (Eph. 4: 15f.).

This emphasis naturally tended to crowd the parousia-perspective out, and there is only one mention of the coming day of Christ in each of the two letters (Col. 3: 4; Eph. 4: 30, but also note 5: 6). This does not indicate a *milieu* in which the belief in a second coming had quietly been dropped or assimilated to a belief that the church would triumph. Rather than any second-generation embarrassment about the parousia, it was the need of the growing churches and their tendency to restlessness that prompted the new emphasis, for ecclesiology is a more stabilizing subject than eschatology. It was one of the strengths of the heretic Christianity that it offered a programme of growth to young Christians, who might otherwise have thought that nothing else was expected of them than to sit around waiting for the End. To rival this appeal there was need of an orthodox doctrine of Christian growth, a need which Paul began to meet in these two letters.

And so we are unconvinced by the claim that the author to the Ephesians slavishly adopted ideas from St Paul's letter to Colossae without fully understanding them. It is reasonable to say, as we read the two letters together, that the well-defined problems of the Colossians and the less well-defined problems of the recipients of the Ephesian letter both presented questions about Christian maturity. That St Paul should have developed a single train of thought in dealing with both is natural in view of the common genus of the questions; that there should be mutations in that train of thought is also natural in view of their specific differences.

5. The doctrine of the church

Käsemann's happy comment, that Ephesians refrains from tackling heresy directly, but confronts it with 'the fascinating spectacle of una sancta ecclesia', poses the final problem for Pauline authorship, whether the teaching of the epistle about the church is conceivable in the apostle's lifetime. For one thing, it seems to be assumed that Jew and Gentile are now finally united: the work is done, the two races are reconciled to God in one body, the middle wall of partition is broken down, the enmity killed, and both have access by one Spirit to the Father (2: 14ff.). Could the issue of Gentile status in the church still have been alive when these words were written, for we must suppose it to have been alive throughout the apostle's life-time (Phil. 3: 2, e.g.)? But the theology of the united church is certainly Pauline in content: it is the same argument by which the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles justified the existence of Gentile churches to both Gentile and Jew, that is here used against Gentile separatism, a re-

⁹ E. J. Goodspeed, *The Meaning of Ephesians* (Chicago, 1933), p. 51.

minder that the obverse of privilege is responsibility. And in fact we must treat the past tenses as theological, not historical. The writer has no intention of commenting upon the actual state of Jew-Gentile relations in the church as they were in his day, but means rather to draw out the implications of Calvary. The aorist speaks of what was done on Good Friday once for all, and prepares the way for imperatives summoning Christians to realize that achievement in experience, 'giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (4: 3).

We would be glad to have some check upon the development of the teaching in the early church about church unity. Some help may be afforded by the changing meaning of the word *pistis* in the later New Testament documents. It is often said that the developed meaning of the word is 'body of belief' or 'creed', but something like 'religion' in our modern sense of religious allegiance would be more accurate. A good example of its use in a context of church unity is Hebrews 4: 2, following with the English revisers the reading of the papyri, 'they were not united by faith with them that heard'. One of the aspects of his correspondents' church life which disturbed the author of this epistle was loss of unity, and so he referred them to the fate of the Israelites in the desert, who were not of the same *allegiance* as those who obeyed. Jude, in urging his readers 'to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints', i.e. the historically authenticated religious tradition, uses the same word in the same context when he says that the Lord who saved his people from Egypt ended by destroying *tous mē pisteusantas*, those who, like the angels who would not keep their place in the hierarchy, were disloyal (5).

The wilderness reference common to Hebrews and

Jude seems to be a commonplace in preaching about unity, for we find it, though without the word *pistis*, in St Paul himself, at 1 Corinthians 10: 1ff. and by allusion at Philippians 2: 14f. *Pistis*, in its 'developed' sense, is also used by St Paul. When he writes, 'that ye stand fast in one Spirit, with one soul striving for the faith of the gospel' (Phil. 1: 27), *pistis*, though still at this stage in need of a defining genitive to help it out, has for him essentially the meaning it has for Jude and Hebrews: loyal adherence to the gospel-religion unites the obedient in its defence. The tendency of this argument is to suggest that materials for an anti-schism polemic were being assembled from an early period in the New Testament church, and this makes what we find in Ephesians, with its *mia pistis, hen baptisma* (4: 5), rather less surprising. The *una sancta ecclesia catholica* was not born to adulthood in this epistle, but grew from early days through the adolescence of 1 Corinthians 12 to the maturity of Colossians, Ephesians and Revelation.

Here too we may say that the arguments intended to show that Ephesians could not have been written in the apostolic age fail to carry conviction. They fail because they treat interpretative questions as merely historical questions. The special features of the Epistle to the Ephesians certainly demand an explanation; but an explanation which undertakes simply to identify the supposed pseudepigraphist can never explain, but poses the questions again in another form. Why did he work *so*, and not *so*? What is required is a three-dimensional examination which asks questions about the meaning, the setting and the purpose of the letter. Such an examination, we believe, places it quite naturally in the first-century apostolic church, and allows us to give its claim to Pauline authorship full weight.

The Third Arm: Pentecostal Christianity 2

Greg S Forster

In this concluding part of his contribution on modern Pentecostalism, Mr Forster explores more deeply the nature of charismatic experience and proceeds to an evaluation of the Pentecostal movement.

Baptism in the Spirit

What is this experience which Pentecostals call baptism in the Holy Spirit? I hesitate to embark on this section; I can claim no great personal experience as a pastor in this field, and my treatment of the material which I have will be that of an anthropologist, which may seem offensive to some, though offence is not

intended. Also, the language used in describing each individual's intensely personal experience is the property of the peer group within which they converse. Their experience will also be shaped by the peer group's expectations.

These expectations are that the Holy Spirit, who was formerly 'with' the believer, and through whom he was reborn, now comes to be 'in' him,¹ to fill and to empower for service. The two-stage pattern is justified from those passages, particularly in Acts, where people are (*prima facie*) converted, and sub-

¹ Jn. 14: 17; 3: 5. Cf. M. C. Harper, *Power for the Body of Christ*, ch. 2.