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The Purpose of Ephesians 3:2–13, Once More

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Abstract: Recent attempts to address the purpose of the digression in Eph 3:2–13 have failed to capitalize on the significance of this text’s climax in Eph 3:13a. This essay addresses this issue via a literary analysis of the passage and the wider context of the letter. In terms of the actual digression, the statements in Eph 3:2–12 provide the basis for the exhortation towards faithful Christian service in Eph 3:13a. Furthermore, the digression builds upon the missional depiction of the Church in Eph 1:23 and 2:19–22 and also prepares the reader for the brief, yet important, references to opposition in Eph 4:14 and Eph 6:10–20. Ultimately, the digression in Eph 3:2–13 addresses Paul’s description of his imprisonment in Eph 3:1 and implores the reader to participate in the Church’s identity as Christ’s “body” and “fullness” (Eph 1:23), despite the very real possibility of suffering for the sake of the gospel.

Key Words: body, Christian ministry, Ephesians 3, fullness, mission, perseverance, structure, suffering, temple

Paul’s letter to the Ephesians has long held a prominent place within the Christian community. Yet this deeply profound text is not without its fair share of challenging interpretive issues. Various historical questions (for example, the identity of its author, the identity of its recipients, the purpose of this letter, and the letter’s setting) still loom large over this text. Yet, Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is not without literary conundrums as well, particularly the function of the digression in Eph 3:2–13. While the probing studies of T. Gombis and A. Sherwood have brought some measure of clarity to this particular issue, they do not sufficiently explain the place of this passage within the overall letter. In this essay, I will argue that Paul’s digression in Eph 3:2–13 builds upon the missional emphasis in Eph 1–2 and encourages Christ-followers to faithfully participate in the Church’s mission, even in the face of opposition from a hostile, unbelieving world.

History of Interpretation

Ephesians 3:2–13 is widely viewed as a digression with the debate centering around its precise function within the letter. For some scholars, Paul’s digression comprises a random set of statements that are completely unrelated to his larger concerns in this letter. J. Kirby, for example, describes Eph 3:2–13 as a “long parenthesis” that bears no apparent connection to the rest of the letter. For other scholars, this digression (in various ways) is an integral part of Paul’s overall argument and holds an important rhetorical function within the letter. T. Gombis’s influential study on this question marks something of a watershed moment within this debate. Prior to Gombis’s study, those who argued that this passage was related to the overall argument generally viewed this text as some form of apostolic defense (either of Paul or a pseudonymous author).

The argument within this article will largely build upon Jeal’s conclusion regarding this text (Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians: The Ethos of Communication [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2000], 164, 174).

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1. The authorship of Ephesians continues to be a subject of debate within the academy. The answer to this question, however, does not significantly affect the argument of this paper. I will therefore refer to the author of Ephesians as “Paul.”


4. Generally speaking, those who view Ephesians as a pseudonymous composition argue Eph 3:2–13 was composed to remind Gentile readers of their indebtedness to the apostle Paul with a view to buttressing the (pseudonymous) author’s authority and strengthening the reader’s bonds to the apostolic tradition. Cf. A. Lincoln, Ephesians, WBC 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 171; R. Schnackenburg, Brief an die Epheser, EKKNT 10 (Zürich: Neukirchner, 1982), 131. Scholars who support the Pauline authorship of Ephesians generally argue this text builds upon Eph 2:11–22 by describing the history behind Paul’s role as apostle to the Gentiles. E.g., C. Arnold, Ephesians, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 179–80; H. Hoehner, Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 417; F. Thielman, Ephesians, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 187, 189–90; E. Best, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 292. R. Jeal helpfully accounts for the significance of Eph 3:13 by suggesting Paul intends the digression to explain his role in the Gentile mission and avert any discouragement the original readers might experience because of his imprisonment. The argument within this article will largely build upon Jeal’s conclusion regarding this text (Integrating Theology and Ethics in Ephesians: The Ethos of Communication [Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2000], 164, 174).
This approach is problematic because it does not explain Paul’s external viewpoint in vv. 10–12 and it fails to account for the minimal role criticism of Paul’s apostleship plays in this letter.

Gombis’s article on this issue essentially argues that the digression in vv. 2–13 is a “defense of the triumph of God in Christ.” According to Gombis, Paul has narrated God’s victory in Christ within Eph 1:20–2:22, and this portion of the letter provides the immediate context for Eph 3:2–13. Gombis then suggests Paul’s reference to his imprisonment in Eph 3:1 leads him to answer the question, “If Christ Jesus is exalted to the position of cosmic supremacy over the powers ruling the present evil age, then why is Paul in prison?” in Eph 3:2–13. According to Gombis, Paul answers this question by placing his earthly ministry (including his current imprisonment) within its cosmic context. From Gombis’s perspective, Paul’s defense of God’s triumph over the powers consists of a two-fold argument. First, Paul depicts himself as a “recipient of divine revelation” in Eph 3:3–7. Second, Paul portrays himself as an “agent of divine triumph” as his ministry gives rise to the creation of the Church (vv. 8–9), whose existence establishes the efficacy of God’s plan and thereby vindicates him before the powers (v. 10).

Ultimately, Gombis’s analysis of Eph 3:2–13 highlights the paradoxical nature of Paul’s argument in this text and clarifies how the digression builds upon Eph 1:20–2:22. His work thus provides a significant corrective to readings of this text that minimize its place within the letter, either by simply viewing it as a mere defense of Paul’s apostleship or untying it from Paul’s overall argument. Nonetheless, while Gombis traces the argument of Eph 3:2–13 well, he fails to account sufficiently for: (1) Paul’s shift from addressing his own ministry in vv. 2–9 to discussing the Church’s role in the divine plan in vv. 10–13; (2) the significance of Paul’s reference to Christ’s faithfulness in v. 12; and (3) the climax of Paul’s argument in v. 13, particularly in terms of the meaning of the infinitive ἔγκακεῖν.

Aaron Sherwood has also attempted to address the purpose of Paul’s digression in Eph 3:2–13. His work on this subject primarily involves a discourse analysis of the text that seeks to reveal its inner logic and clarify how it is related to the remainder of the letter. Sherwood’s analysis is particularly helpful because it points to the central place of v. 13 within the argument of vv. 2–13 as the “explicit conclusion” of the entire text. This leads Sherwood to conclude that the digression’s main aim is to demonstrate that Paul’s “imprisonment does not cast doubt on either God’s eschatological plan or the audience’s involvement in it but instead demonstrates the efficacy of God’s plan and the audience’s part within it.”

For Sherwood, this particularly involves the reality that the Gentile audience has benefitted from God’s use of Paul to promote their own doxa.

From his analysis of Eph 3:2–13, Sherwood concludes Paul’s digression primarily validates his prior argument and provides the basis for the prayer/doxology that commences at Eph 3:14. According to Sherwood, Eph 1:3–2:22 describes God’s redemptive plan and work within salvation history but does so from the viewpoint of Paul’s reader. The digression then, according to Sherwood, focuses on Paul’s role in God’s plan but returns to the first person plural language that dominates Eph 2 at Eph 3:12; the digression thus wraps Paul and the reader up into God’s plan and provides a dual portrait of God’s work in salvation history. Having addressed the natural concern raised by his comments concerning his incarceration in Eph 3:1 within the digression and having shown his imprisonment actually is for the reader’s doxa, Sherwood suggests Paul is then

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11 Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethnē,” 100.

12 Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethnē,” 100.

13 Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethnē,” 108. For Sherwood, the use of the noun δόξα in v. 13 is largely Paul’s way of summarizing the positive outlook the reader should have towards Paul’s apostleship that is based on his description of his ministry and involvement in God’s plan within vv. 2–12.


15 Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethnē,” 109. Due to his emphasis on the relative clause ἡ ἡγίασεν ἡ δόξα Θεοῦ in Eph 3:13b, Sherwood places great stress on the Gentile reader’s accrual of benefits from Paul’s participation in the divine plan. However, his analysis of the text largely bypasses the significance of the exhortation in v. 13a and does not account for the Gentile reader’s own active participation in God’s plan for cosmic reconciliation. Gombis, likewise, does not account sufficiently for the significance of these two features of the text.
While Sherwood’s treatment of this passage is insightful, his overall argument is problematic in three ways. First, he fails to note that this letter concerns more than just how Christ-followers benefit from God’s plan; it also addresses (at some length) how believers participate in God’s plan (cf. Eph 1:23; 4:11–16; 6:10–18). Second, and related to the first problem, he largely ignores Eph 3:13a in his analysis and wrongly treats the subordinate clause in Eph 3:13b (ἥτις ἐστίν δόξα ὑµῶν) as the central portion of Paul’s conclusion in the digression. This void in Sherwood’s analysis seems to contribute to his failure to account for the importance of the Church’s participation in God’s plan within this letter. Third, he interprets the noun δόξα in Eph 3:13b within the honor-shame dynamic of Greco-Roman culture, rather than viewing it as a shorthand reference to eschatological salvation (cf. Rom 8:18, 21; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:18). Sherwood’s misinterpretation of the noun δόξα in v. 13 then leads him to interpret the Gentile audience’s involvement in God’s plan purely in terms of the reception of the benefits of the gospel and minimize their role in the missio dei. Ultimately, Sherwood’s overemphasis on Eph 3:13b (rather than Eph 3:13a) leads to a rather limited account of how Paul’s digression resonates with the rest of the letter.

The Context of Ephesians 3:2–13

The appropriate point of departure for appreciating the context of Eph 3:2–13 is Paul’s introductory berakah in Eph 1:3–14. This literary unit highlights various spiritual benefits Christ-followers have received as a result of their mystical union with the risen Messiah (cf. Eph 1:3) and introduces the central theme of the letter in Eph 1:10. In context, Paul’s statements in v. 10 are a development of the preceding comments concerning the “mystery” (µυστήριον) that God has planned in the Messiah (v. 9). According to v. 10, this “mystery” involves the implementation of God’s plan for “the fullness of time.” Paul highlights the purpose of this divine

16 According to Sherwood, the digression in Eph 3:2–13 is to be read with Eph 2:1–22, and both texts “exhibit the realization of God’s purposes from both the audience’s and Paul’s perspectives, so that they compose a joint narratio that is doubly forceful in providing a reason for the prayer and doxology beginning with the resumptive τούτου χάριν in 3:14” (“Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethni,” 109).


18 Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are derived from the ESV.
The final text that is relevant for establishing the literary context of Eph 3:2–13 is Eph 2:1–22. While Eph 2:1–22 comprises two distinct textual units, they are nonetheless linguistically and theologically related. More specifically, Eph 2:1–10 and Eph 2:11–22 are: (1) linguistically linked together through the presence of the “once-now” schema in vv. 1–4 and vv. 11–13; and (2) theologically connected as parallel accounts of new creation. Ephesians 2:1–22 also builds upon the description of Christ’s victory over the powers in Eph 1:20–22. The literary relationship between these two texts suggests Eph 2 (broadly speaking) describes the establishment of a new “temple” in Eph 2:19–22.

The Rhetorical Function of Ephesians 3:13a

Paul’s comments in Eph 3:13a represent the climax of the digression and contain the key that unlocks the relationship between the digression and the remainder of the letter. The climactic nature of Eph 3:13a is principally evident in the introductory conjunction διό and the presence of an exhortation (αἰτοῦµαι µὴ ἐγκακεῖν...). The conjunction διό functions as a coordinating inferential conjunction that introduces independent clauses. As such, it presents the reader with statements that draw a “deduction, conclusion, or summary to the preceding discussion.” Additionally, the verb αἰτοῦµαι... then builds upon these two contextual features of Eph 1:10–22 by suggesting that while Christ has already conquered the powers, the Father’s ultimate goal of cosmic unity is not yet complete. Paul’s depiction of the Church in Eph 1:23 (as the earthly presence and representative of the risen Christ), in turn, gives the Christian community a significant role in expanding the impact of Christ’s victory and advancing the new creation inaugurated by his sacrificial death. Paul’s statements in Ephesians 1:23 thus introduce his conception of the Church’s identity in this letter and prepare the reader for his extended explanations of how the Church serves as Christ’s “body” and “fullness” of Christ in both Eph 4:11–16 and Eph 6:10–20 (see below).25

23 See Hoehner for an extensive survey of secondary literature related to the meaning of the participle πληρουµένου in Eph 1:23 (Ephesians, 296–99).

25 For now, it is worth noting that the proclamation of the gospel represents one of the means by which the Church serves as the “fullness” of Christ in both of these texts (cf. Eph 4:15; 6:17). Cf. Arnold, Ephesians, 119; Meyer, Kirche und Mission, 43–46, 140–41, 144–45. Additionally, the use of the noun εὐαγγέλιον in Eph 1:20–22 suggests that while the Church proclaims the gospel, the Father’s ultimate goal of cosmic unity has not yet been attained. Paul’s enumeration of the triumphs of God in Christ demonstrating that the powers ruling the present evil age are indeed subject to the Lord Christ.26 This triumph in Christ represents the outworking of the cosmic plan introduced in Eph 1:10 and is conveyed through: (1) the death-life imagery in Eph 2:1, 5; (2) the new creation language in Eph 2:10, 15; (3) the horizontal and vertical reconciliation depicted in Eph 2:11–18; and (4) the establishment of a new “temple” in Eph 2:19–22.

26 Ephesians 2:1–10 is primarily an anthropological and individualistic account of new creation in Christ, while vv. 11–22 focuses on a corporate depiction of new creation (cf. Eph 2:10, 15).
29 BDAG, διό, 250.
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The Content of Ephesians 3:2–12

The digression in Eph 3:2–13 is driven by Paul's reference to his imprisonment in v. 1, with a particular concern to clarify the phrase ὑπὲρ ὑµῶν τῶν ἐθνῶν (v. 1b). Scholars generally divide the digression into three major sections: vv. 2–7, vv. 8–12, and v. 13. The first section primarily focuses on the origin of Paul's apostleship and the content of his proclamation as “apostle to the Gentiles.” The second section then addresses the respective roles of Paul and the Church within God’s plan for cosmic unification (cf. Eph 1:9–10).

In large measure, Paul’s comments in Eph 3:2–7 equate the “mystery” of vv. 3–6 with the divine “grace” God has tasked him with stewarding in v. 2. While the phrase εἰ γε ἠκούσατε in v. 2a syntactically contains the main subject and verb in this text, it nonetheless semantically subordinate to the remainder of v. 2 (τὴν οἰκονοµίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης µοι εἰς ὑµᾶς) that contains the actual thrust of this text. Paul presents himself in v. 2 as a recipient (τὴν οἰκονοµίαν µοι εἰς ὑµᾶς) of “the stewardship of God’s grace” (cf. B. Merkle, Ephesians, EGGNT (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 85, 98; Thielman, Ephesians, 220; D. Clark, “Discourse Structure in Ephesians, with some Implications for Translators,” BT 58 (2007): 47; contra, Lincoln, Ephesians, 191).

32 Cf. Arnold, Ephesians, 181; Hoechner, Ephesians, 467.
33 Cf. Arnold, Ephesians, 181; Hoechner, Ephesians, 467.
34 E.g., Lincoln, Ephesians, 168.
35 Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethne,” 102. Somewhat similarly, vv. 3b–4 (καθὼς ἐν τῷ µυστηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ) is a more obvious parenthetical comment in this text.
36 BDAG, οἰκονοµία, 697.
37 Paul's comments in v. 3a likely refer back to his Damascus experience, yet they also build upon (once again) the statements concerning the divine plan in Eph 1:9–10. The noun µυστηρίον is generally understood as a divine secret that was previously hidden but has now been revealed. E.g., see Hoehner, Ephesians, 214, 428–34.
38 The similarity in content between Eph 2:11–22 and Eph 3:3–6 suggests Paul is referring here to his statements in the former passage regarding the union of Jew and Gentile in Christ (cf. Arnold, Ephesians, 187; Baugh, Ephesians, 227–28).
39 Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethne,” 103.
40 Given the explanation of the “mystery” in v. 6, it is likely that the precise nature of the concealment of the “mystery” to the “sons of men” in v. 5a particularly pertains to the relationship between Jew and Gentile within the new covenant community. The OT certainly speaks to the salvation of Gentiles (cf. Isa 44:1–4).
with a parenthetical description (using language that evokes v. 2) of Paul’s status as a διάκονος of the gospel through the operation of divine power.

Paul’s comments in Eph 3:8–12 primarily focus on the nature and the ecclesiological/cosmic implications of his apostolic ministry. Paul first emphasizes the unmerited nature of his apostolic ministry (v. 8a) and does so in a manner that draws upon his comments in v. 7. His self-deprecatory comments in v. 8a are then followed by a two-fold summary of the purpose (conveyed via the infinitives εὐαγγελίσασθαι and φωτίσαι in vv. 8b–9) of his apostolic ministry. The first purpose of Paul’s ministry according to v. 8b concerns the proclamation of τοῦ ἀνεξίχθειν πλοῦτος τοῦ Χριστοῦ to Gentiles. The second purpose Paul associates with his apostolic ministry in v. 9 involves the revelation (φωτίσατο) of God’s “mystery” to all humanity and likely refers back to the “mystery” in vv. 3–6 (cf. Eph 1:9–10). The next major step in Paul’s argument is a statement concerning the ultimate purpose (ὑπὸ) of Paul’s ministry (cf. v. 10).

According to v. 10, as Paul performs his role as apostle to the Gentiles, the multi-ethnic ἐκκλησία formed through the proclamation of the gospel provides concrete evidence of the realization of God’s plan for cosmic unity. Paul’s comments in v. 8 are closely linked to v. 7 through: (1) the repetition of the noun χάρις and the verb δίδωμι; and (2) the pronoun αὕτη.

43 Paul creates a number of intratextual allusions back to Eph 1:9–10 at this point in the digression. The primary parallels between these two texts include: (1) the noun ἁγιορεία (1:10; 3:9); (2) the noun μυστήριον (1:9; 3:9); (3) the phrase τὰ πάντα (1:10; 3:9); (4) the verb γνωρίζω (1:9; 3:10); (5) language evocative of the powers (1:10; 3:10); and (6) the references to the heavenly realm (1:10; 3:10). Cf. Arnold, Ephesians, 197; Best, Ephesians, 322; Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ekklesia” 105, n. 17.

44 Cf. Merkle, Ephesians, 94.

45 Paul’s comments in v. 8 are closely linked to v. 7 through: (1) the repetition of the noun χάρις and the verb δίδωμι; and (2) the pronoun αὕτη.

42 The second purpose Paul associates with his apostolic ministry in v. 9 involves the revelation (φωτίσατο) of God’s “mystery” to all humanity and likely refers back to the “mystery” in vv. 3–6 (cf. Eph 1:9–10). The next major step in Paul’s argument is a statement concerning the ultimate purpose (ὑπὸ) of Paul’s ministry (cf. v. 10). According to v. 10, as Paul performs his role as apostle to the Gentiles, the multi-ethnic ἐκκλησία formed through the proclamation of the gospel provides concrete evidence of the realization of God’s plan for cosmic unity.

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2:1–4; 49:5–6). Paul, however, here is suggesting the OT does not directly address the reality that God’s plan for salvation history is for Gentiles to have a place of equality with Jews in the Messiah (cf. Gal 3:28; Eph 2:15; Col 3:1). Cf. Thielman, Ephesians, 197–98, 203.

The noun πλοῦτος in v. 8b conveys the notion of abundance and is used elsewhere in this letter to point to the “lavish nature of God’s relationship to his people” (Eph 1:7, 18; 2:7). Cf. Thielman, Ephesians, 213. When correlated with Jesus Christ in this text, the noun πλοῦτος would then refer to the limitless grace (cf. Eph. 1:7; 2:7) that “belongs” to Jesus Christ and is found in union with Jesus Christ.

46 For example, some have argued that Paul’s plea in Eph 3:13a involves a purpose (conveyed via the infinitives εὐαγγελίσασθαι and φωτίσαι in vv. 8b–9) of his apostolic ministry. The first purpose of Paul’s ministry according to v. 8b concerns the proclamation of τοῦ ἀνεξίχθειν πλοῦτος τοῦ Χριστοῦ to Gentiles. The second purpose Paul associates with his apostolic ministry in v. 9 involves the revelation (φωτίσατο) of God’s “mystery” to all humanity and likely refers back to the “mystery” in vv. 3–6 (cf. Eph 1:9–10). The next major step in Paul’s argument is a statement concerning the ultimate purpose (ὑπὸ) of Paul’s ministry (cf. v. 10). According to v. 10, as Paul performs his role as apostle to the Gentiles, the multi-ethnic ἐκκλησία formed through the proclamation of the gospel provides concrete evidence of the realization of God’s plan for cosmic unity. Paul’s comments in v. 8 are closely linked to v. 7 through: (1) the repetition of the noun χάρις and the verb δίδωμι; and (2) the pronoun αὕτη.

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46 The objective reading of the phrase τῆς πίστεως αὐτοῦ in Eph 3:12 is admitted the reading preferred by most commentators. See Merkle for a summary of the arguments in favor of a subjective reading of τῆς πίστεως αὐτοῦ in v. 12 (Ephesians, 98). While Merkle himself prefers the objective reading, he does state “[t]hough the obj. gen. is slightly more likely, the subj. gen. cannot be ruled out” (Ephesians, 98). Finally, the dominance of the objective reading in v. 12 could stem from the lack of attention to the meaning of the infinitive εὐαγγελίσασθαι in Eph 3:13 (see below).


49 Barth, Ephesians, 348.
A careful analysis of the infinitive ἐγκακεῖν further clarifies Paul’s message to the Ephesian believers in Eph 3:13a. The infinitive ἐγκακεῖν is a form of the Greek verb ἐγκακέω. Commentators generally associate the verb ἐγκακέω with an emotional response of something akin to discouragement. Hoehner, for example, suggests the verb ἐγκακέω means to “grow weary or lose heart.”\(^{55}\) While the emotional response of discouragement is certainly an aspect of the verb’s meaning, BDAG offers two definitions of the verb ἐγκακέω (“to lose one’s motivation in continuing a desirable pattern of conduct” or “to be afraid in the face of a great difficulty”) and supports the former.\(^{56}\) While BDAG notes “some” scholars favor the second definition, a close examination of the four other uses of the Greek verb ἐγκακέω in the Pauline corpus suggests the referent of this verb involves two particular components: (1) an emotional response akin to discouragement or fear; and (2) the cessation of a certain activity.\(^{57}\)

While not as obvious as in some other texts, the correlation between action and emotional response associated with the verb ἐγκακέω is nonetheless present in 2 Cor 4:1. Paul’s statements in 2 Cor 4:1 play a key role in his defense of his apostolic ministry within 2 Cor 1–7. The significance of 2 Cor 4:1 within Paul’s argument is particularly evident in the retrospective phrase διὰ τοῦτο, which likely picks up on Paul’s description of authentic Christian ministry in 2 Cor 2:14–3:18.\(^{58}\) This connection between 2 Cor 4:1–6 and the preceding discussion of genuine Christian ministry is particularly evident in the phrase ἔχοντες τὴν διακονίαν ταύτην (v. 1). The διακονία Paul is likely referring to, after all, is almost certainly the new covenant ministry depicted in 2 Cor 3. Paul’s statements in 2 Cor 4:1 are thus drawing a logical inference (signaled by the phrase διὰ τοῦτο) that is grounded in his description of new covenant ministry in 2 Cor 2:14–3:18. The logical inference that Paul is pointing the reader towards in 2 Cor 4:1 is his own personal determination to “not lose heart,” even in the face of opposition. Once again, the wider context of 2 Cor 2:14–3:18 indicates the verb ἐγκακέω establishes a close connection between an action (persistance in genuine Christian ministry) and an emotional state (the absence of discouragement).

Paul’s use of the verb ἐγκακέω in 2 Cor 4:16, once again, establishes a link between action and emotion. Paul again highlights his willingness to

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\(^{51}\) Within the wider context of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul’s personal request to the Ephesian church in Eph 6:19–20 (καὶ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ … ἵνα ἐν αὐτῷ παρρησίασωμαι ὡς δεῖ με λαλῆσαι) may be understood as a personal acknowledgement of his own despondency as a result of his imprisonment. Such a reading of v. 20, however, would not sufficiently account for the immediate context of Eph 6:10–18, where Paul has outlined a variety of spiritual resources that enable the believer to “stand against the schemes of the Devil” (v. 11).

\(^{52}\) Larkin, *Ephesians*, 57.

\(^{53}\) Fowl, *Ephesians*, 114.

\(^{54}\) The clause ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν μου in v. 13a should likely be understood causally. Cf. Merkle, *Ephesians*, 99.

\(^{55}\) Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 468.

\(^{56}\) BDAG, *ἐγκακέω*, 272. LN provides a similar definition: “to lose one’s motivation to accomplish some valid goal” (*ἐγκακέω*, 319).

\(^{57}\) BDAG, *ἐγκακέω*, 272.

engage in bold speech in v. 13 (cf. 2 Cor 3:12) and then presents a two-fold rationale in vv. 14–15 for his courage, even in the face of difficult circumstances. Concerning Paul’s use of the verb ἐγκακέω in 2 Cor 4:16, it is the knowledge of eschatological hope (v. 14) and the external nature (both human and divine) of his motivation in v. 15 that undergirds Paul’s response of perseverance (ὅπως ὑπέρ ἐγκακώσετε) in 2 Cor 4:16a.59 Paul’s logic in 2 Cor 4:16 is thus similar to his reasoning in 2 Cor 4:1. That is, according to 2 Cor 4:16, boldly persevering in ministry (action) rather than giving in to discouragement (emotional response) is possible in Christian ministry, despite the very real presence of hardship and danger.

The close correlation between emotional response and action associated with the verb ἐγκακέω is also clearly present in Gal 6:9.60 Paul’s statements in Gal 6:9 are somewhat loosely connected to vv. 7–8 through the coordinating conjunction δέ.61 More specifically, Paul seems to build upon the reminder of eschatological judgment in v. 7 and the explication of that warning in v. 8 by urging believers to persist in orienting their lives around the work of the Spirit.62 Since the participle ποιοῦντες (together with the nominal phrase τὸ ... καλὸν) likely functions as a complementary participle that clarifies the sense of the verb ἐγκακέω, the link between action (the pursuit of a life centered on sacrificially serving others by the power of the Spirit; cf. Gal 5:13–14, 16, 18) and emotional response (here, the absence of enthusiasm for godly conduct) once again continues.63

The final use of the verb ἐγκακέω within the Pauline tradition occurs in 2 Thess 3:13. Paul’s statements in v. 13 are part of his paraenesis concerning how to deal with those “walking in idleness” (v. 6) in 2 Thess 3:6–15.64 At v. 13, Paul shifts from confronting the ἀτάκτως in vv. 11–12 to addressing the majority of believers in the Thessalonian church that are not engaged in disruptive behavior. The participle καλοποιοῦντες in v. 13 clarifies Paul’s admonition to the faithful believers in Thessalonica and specifies the object of the verb ἐγκακήσητε.65 Second Thessalonians 3:13 is then a plea to faithful Christ-followers to not allow the indolence of the idle to hamper their motivation to financially assist others (cf. 1 Thess 5:15). Paul’s usage of the verb ἐγκακέω in 2 Thess 3:13 then once again brings together the active pursuit of a certain course of action (engage in generous giving) and an emotional response (maintain a fervent longing despite the presence of discouragement).

Returning back to Eph 3:13a, the flow of Paul’s argument in vv. 2–12 suggests Paul is again bringing together the cessation of a certain activity with a negative emotional reaction. Broadly speaking, Paul focuses on two central ideas in the digression within Eph 3:2–12 ... the divine origin of his apostleship (vv. 2–7) and his responsibilities as “apostle to the Gentiles,” along with their earthly and cosmic impact (vv. 8–12).66 Both of these claims demonstrate the authenticity of his apostleship and involvement in God’s plan for cosmic unification (cf. Eph 1:10). At the same time, there are three important features within Eph 3:8–12 that should be accounted for: (1) the presence of a number of allusions to Eph 1:9–10 (see above); (2) Paul’s shift in focus from himself as “apostle to the Gentiles” to the Christian community in v. 10; and (3) Paul’s statement concerning the impact of Christ’s faithfulness in v. 12b. Thus, while the statements in Eph 3:2–12 principally focus on Paul’s role in the anakephalaisis of “all things” (cf. Eph 1:10), Paul makes a clear transition in v. 10 away from himself to the responsibility of the wider Christian community and the work of Christ.67 Ephesians 3:10–12 thus collectively emphasizes the identity, G. Fee’s cautious conclusion concerning the cause of their behavior is worth noting: “we simply do not know; and in fact getting an answer to this question would hardly affect our understanding of the text at all” (The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 325).

65 The participle καλοποιοῦντες in v. 13 carries the same sense as the combination of the nominal phrase τὸ ... καλὸν and the participle ποιοῦντες in Gal 6:9. The correspondence between these two texts, however, should not be overstated. Second Thessalonians 3:6–15, after all, addresses a much more specific problem.
67 Paul’s shift to the first-person plural verb ἐγκακέω in Eph 3:12 is worth noting in that it highlights the implications of the gospel (cf. Eph 2:18) for both him (even in the midst of suffering) and the reader. The sudden shift to a first-person plural verb in v. 12 highlights for the reader the reality that Paul’s imprisonment...
Church’s and Christ’s roles in the anakephalaiōsis of Eph 1:10. Additionally, Eph 3:12 provides the reader with a subtle reminder of Christ’s divinely-ordained suffering and places this entire discussion of Christian ministry within the framework of cruciformity. The digression’s climax in Eph 3:13a then clarifies the purpose of Paul’s transition at v. 10. More specifically, the exhortation in Eph 3:13a urges the reader to not allow Paul’s own cruciform suffering to undermine their willingness to participate (cruciformly) in God’s mission.

Reading the digression in Eph 3:2–13 with Paul’s description of the identity and mission of the Church in Eph 1:23, clarifies the overall logic of this text. Paul’s statements in vv. 2–12 are intended to counter any potential negative response to his self-description as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (v. 1) that might lead a Christ-follower to ignore the portrait of the Church in Eph 1:23. By establishing the divine origin of his apostleship (vv. 2–7), as well as the nature and consequences of his ministry, Paul thus attributes his imprisonment to the sovereign will and plan of God (cf. Phil 1:16).68 The exhortation in Eph 3:13a then builds upon the argument within vv. 2–12 by encouraging Christ-followers to respond to any fear that may result from the reference to Paul’s suffering in v. 1 by considering the argument within vv. 2–12.

The Function of Paul’s Plea for Perseverance within the Letter

An important aspect of Paul’s discussion of the Church’s mission in Ephesians is the opposition it will experience as it faithfully pursues its calling as Christ’s “body” and “fullness” (cf. Eph 1:10, 20–22; 3:1, 10; 4:14; 6:10–20).69 These references to hostility throughout the letter are part of the foundational motivation behind Paul’s plea “to not lose heart” in Eph 3:13a. Admittedly, other Pauline letters (particularly 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and 2 Timothy) place much greater emphasis on suffering and encouraging Christ-followers to accept suffering for the sake of the gospel. Nonetheless, Paul’s own experience in the city of Ephesus is indicative of the latent hostility that Christ-followers could experience in this text. Eph 3:12 therefore presents an implied encouragement to embrace hostility from the unbelieving world.68

Paul’s argument in this letter then grounds opposition to him and the Christian community in the cosmic nature of the anakephalaiōsis in Eph 1:10 and the opposition Christ himself experienced at the hands of the powers (implicit in Eph 1:20–22).

does not negatively affect his status as a beneficiary of Christ’s reconciling work. In context, Eph 3:12 therefore presents an implied encouragement to embrace hostility from the unbelieving world.

68 Cf. Baugh, Ephesians, 212; Fowl, Ephesians, 114.

69 Paul’s argument in this letter then grounds opposition to him and the Christian community in the cosmic nature of the anakephalaiōsis in Eph 1:10 and the opposition Christ himself experienced at the hands of the powers (implicit in Eph 1:20–22).


71 Cf. Merkle, Ephesians, 86; Larkin, Ephesians, 48; Thielman, Ephesians, 191; Sellin, Ephesus, 248; Sherwood, “Paul’s Imprisonment as the Glory of the Ethne,” 98. The dynamic nature of the “temple” in Eph 2:19–22 is principally evident in v. 21.

72 See G. Beale for further discussion of the missional nature of the temple (“Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” JETS 48 [2005]: esp. 29–31).

flows directly out of his description of Christ’s own ministry (via incarnation, exaltation, and gift-giving) in Eph 4:7–10. Additionally, the presence of the phrase ἵνα πληρῶσῃ τὰ πάντα in Eph 4:10 closely associates these two related texts with the anakephalaixía of Eph 1:10 and the description of the Church in Eph 1:23. These observations indicate Paul’s description of the efforts of the gifted leaders in v. 11 and the ἀνέγερσις of v. 12 are to be understood as part of God’s plan for cosmic unification.

The ministerial goals of unity and growth towards maturity in v. 13 then comprise key features of the divine plan. Paul’s references to false-teaching in Eph 4:14 (“every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes”), generally speaking, depict heterodoxy as a threat and impediment to the objectives outlined in v. 13. While there are no direct references to false-teachers in the letter, the presence of the noun μεθοδεία in both v. 14 and Eph 6:11 does suggest Paul envisions “the powers of darkness as actively inspiring various forms of dangerous teaching (Gal 4:8–10; 2 Cor 11:13–15; Col 2:8).” Paul thus pictures heresy as part of the opposition to the divine plan for cosmic unity in Christ put forward by the powers.

Two related preliminary issues concerning Eph 6:10–20 require attention before examining the relationship between Eph 3:2–13 and Eph 6:10–20. First, scholars often view Paul’s statements in Eph 6:10–20 as a concluding summary to the body of this letter. The patent emphasis Paul places on the Church’s conflict with the powers then confirms the prominence of this theme within the letter. Second, while spiritual warfare is generally conceived of as a solo affair involving a single believer’s confrontation with malevolent cosmic forces, this is not an entirely accurate way of conceiving Paul’s depiction of the Church’s conflict with the powers in this text. This incomplete account of spiritual warfare in Eph 6:10–20 fails to account for this text’s rhetorical function as a summary of the entire letter, particularly its new creation theme and discussion of the Church’s mission. Ultimately, Eph 6:10–20 serves as an explanation (along with Eph 4:11–16) of how Christ’s σώμα is to execute its task of serving as his πλήρωμα (cf. Eph 1:23).

Four textual features within Eph 6:10–20 clarify how this text builds upon Eph 3:2–13. First, Paul’s exhortation to “be strong in the Lord” and impediment to the objectives outlined in v. 13 (along with Eph 4:11–16) of how Christ’s σώμα is to execute its task of serving as his πλήρωμα (cf. Eph 1:23).

In summary, Paul’s plea for perseverance in faithful ministry within Eph 3:13 anticipates the references to opposition within Eph 4:11–16 and Eph 6:10–20. The description of the Church in Eph 1:23 thus plays a critical role in the rhetorical development of this letter. Yet, before Paul explains how the Church is to serve as Christ’s σώμα and πλήρωμα, his own experience with opposition from the powers leads him to present a

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76 At the same time, this ἵνα clause in v. 14 also likely modifies the verb ἁγιοῦσα in v. 11 and expresses a negative purpose underlying the giving of the gifted leaders in v. 11 (Merkle, Ephesians, 131; Hoehner, Ephesians, 560).
78 A. Lincoln’s analysis of this text is particularly helpful in this regard, though his suggestion that Paul constructs this text as a peroratio modelled after speeches delivered by military generals is problematic (“Stand, Therefore …: Ephesians 6:10–20 as a Peroratio,” Biblst 3 [1995]: 102–9). Cf. L. Cohick, The Letter to the Ephesians, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 407–8; Thielman, Ephesians, 411–14.
81 The passive imperative ἔνδυναµοῦσθε in Eph 6:10 likely has an active sense, though the passive voice is intended to communicate the reality that this empowerment comes from an external source (cf. Thielman, Ephesians, 417; Merkle, Ephesians, 210).
82 Cf. Deut 32:8–9; Ps 82:1–8; Dan 10:12–14, 20–21; 12:1; 1 Cor 2:6–8; 8:5.
theological account of his apostolic ministry in Eph 3:2–12 and, on the basis of those statements, exhort Christ-followers to resist the temptation to yield to external opposition.

Conclusion

The digression in Eph 3:2–13 weds together two central issues within this rich letter. First, Paul’s discussion of the Church’s mission in Eph 1:23 and Eph 2:19–22. Second, Paul’s brief references to opposition within two key texts that provide more extensive descriptions of the Church’s mission (cf. Eph 4:11–16; 6:10–17). Rather than primarily functioning as a defense of Paul’s apostleship, as some claim, Paul’s statements in Eph 3:2–12 closely correlate his ministry with divine agency, describe his ministry as the “apostle to the Gentiles,” and explicate the far-reaching consequences of his ministry. Through these statements in Eph 3:2–12, the apostle assuages any concern the reader might have about his imprisonment by establishing God’s sovereignty over his ministry and current situation. Paul then points the reader to the logical conclusion of his digression by imploring the reader to persist in faithful Christian service (Eph 3:13a), despite his own present hardship. The exhortation in Eph 3:13a then prepares the reader to embrace “the work of ministry” and “be strong in the Lord,” even in the face of opposition (cf. Eph 4:12, 14; 6:10–17).