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The Drama of Ephesians

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The Drama of Ephesians

Participating in the Triumph of God
Before we begin our study of Ephesians we need to ask ourselves, What in the world is Ephesians and what are we supposed to do with it? Every semester I ask my students in New Testament Literature a similar question: What is the New Testament, and what do we do with it? Do we use it to prop a door open? Are we using it rightly if we put it under the leg of a shaky table in the student coffee shop? Or should we use it as a decoration on a bookshelf? We usually agree that it is possible that a New Testament might serve these purposes, but they are not the most appropriate uses of a New Testament. It is, after all, Christian Scripture, and the people of God use it rightly when they read it to understand God and his ways with his people. In our case, we need to talk about what sort of thing Ephesians is and what we are supposed to do with it.

This may seem somewhat unnecessary, since obviously Ephesians is a New Testament letter, part of the authoritative collection of Christian Scriptures. We are supposed to study it for one or more of several reasons. We might study it to mine from it theological truths that we can then arrange and fit into a tidy system of theology. Or we might seek to extract from Ephesians some nuggets of truth that we can apply throughout our day—sort of a "thought for the day" approach to handling Ephesians. Others, the scholars among us, may want to scan Ephesians closely for clues into the historical situation that this letter is supposed to be addressing, finding out about the Pauline or post-Pauline communities in Asia Minor to which this epistle most likely was sent.
Each of these approaches has some merit, but we are going to do something different with Ephesians, based not only on what it means to be Christian but also on how the letter presents itself to us. In this chapter, we will address the nature of Ephesians, seeking to answer the questions, What is Ephesians and how does it work? And, What in the world should we do with it?

**Drama**

Ephesians is often read as if it is a doctrinal treatise, as if Paul sat down during one of his missionary journeys and composed a series of reflections on various theological topics. After all, this is how we modern Christians often do theology—we address first this topic and then that one. We might talk about the doctrine of salvation, making a few points on controversial issues, then move to the doctrine of the church, doing the same. Surely Paul did this, wandering from discussion to discussion before making some ethical applications of his doctrinal principles. Just as he does in his other letters, Paul first lays out his doctrinal position and then lays out a system of ethics based on the doctrine. Even if we recognize fairly quickly that this scenario is a bit of a modern imposition on a first-century situation, this remains the default setting for many of us when we read and interpret Ephesians. On this conception of things, Paul is discussing abstract truths that are timeless and that fit together in a neat doctrinal system—a system that exists somewhere outside of Ephesians but to which all the theological items in Paul’s letter refer.

So, for example it is evident that in Ephesians 1, Paul discusses the topic of predestination, or divine election. “Well,” we may say, “Paul is here supporting the doctrine of divine election—that doctrine whereby God chose individuals before time began to receive God’s salvation.” With that conclusion in hand we may be tempted to think that we have done our job of Bible interpretation, allowing us now to move on to application. Here, we aim to find some practical way of living out the truth of election—we want to apply the doctrinal truth that we have discovered through interpretation of the text of Ephesians. After cast-
ing about for ways to apply this truth from Scripture, we may say, "We can grow in thankfulness for God having chosen us before time began," or "The application of the theological truth of election is that we should realize that our salvation had nothing to do with our own free choice but must be chalked up to God’s sovereign and gracious plans."

It may be obvious from my tone that I have something else in mind when it comes to reading and appropriating Ephesians. In fact, I do. There is nothing wrong with people coming to Scripture with the aim of doing what it says—if only we had more of that! My objection to this general approach to Bible interpretation is that we are not rightly reading Ephesians if we view it as a collection of facts or theological truths that need to be extracted, removed from their contexts and arranged into a doctrinal system in another setting. Ephesians is not a doctrinal treatise in the scholastic sense of that term. It is, rather, a drama in which Paul portrays the powerful, reality-altering, cosmos-transforming acts of God in Christ to redeem God’s world and save God’s people for the glory of his name. A narrative approach to Paul’s letter, therefore, is far more appropriate than a scientific approach.

Conceiving of Ephesians as a collection of theological artifacts that need to be excavated by interpretive archaeologists digging around for nuggets of truth and arranging them in a doctrinal catalog ends up blinding us to the powerful dynamic of what Paul is doing in this letter. Thinking in terms of a drama allows the letter to unfold in all its richness and complexity. A narrative framework includes movement and action. It draws attention to character development, opening up for us perspectives on God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the church that we otherwise would miss if we narrowed our vision to looking merely for facts. Such facts might work nicely in a textbook or an encyclopedia, but they do not ignite a compelling vision of living as the people of God in the new world created by the resurrection power of the Spirit. Reading Ephesians as a drama opens up a more robust understanding of what Paul is doing in this letter, as well as an understanding of how Paul talks about these things, rather than altering them to fit our modern theological categories.
We want to read with the grain of Ephesians, not against it. Regarding Ephesians as a drama and hearing Paul invite followers of Jesus to enter into and faithfully perform the divine script is to read in a way that resonates with some of its key features. Not only are there several narratives found within Ephesians—the story of God’s triumphs (Eph 2) and the account of Paul’s life and ministry (Eph 3)—but also Paul talks about truth in dramatic terms in Ephesians 4. In Ephesians 4:15, Paul says that as churches grow, they are to increasingly take the shape of Christ, looking more and more like him. They do this by “truthing in love.” The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), along with most other major translations, brings this into English as “speaking the truth,” since “truthing” is quite an odd way of speaking. But there is only one Greek word here—“truth”—and Paul uses it in a verbal sense, indicating that truth is something that the church is to do, not just to know and to speak.

A few verses later, Paul uses two more strikingly odd expressions. Referring to the destructive behaviors found in the world, Paul says in Ephesians 4:20-21 that this “is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus” (emphasis added). This is the only place in the New Testament where such unique expressions are found. Paul is referring to Jesus’ life as the master performance of the truth and the church’s task of studying Jesus’ life—his words, his actions, his way with people. Studying Jesus, according to Paul, gives us wisdom as we set about to perform the drama of the gospel.

The framework that Paul utilizes in Ephesians, therefore, is dramatic. His vision of truth is something that Jesus performed. Truth is not merely a set of facts. This truthful, life-giving and transformative performance is something the church is to study, talk about, learn and, ultimately, to perform. In doing so, the church will grow up into Christ, embodying the life and love of God on earth.

Thinking in dramatic terms engages us more completely as humans, including our God-given capacity for imagination. Drama expands the horizons of our imaginations so that we can begin to conceive of how our lives might be caught up into the mighty work of God in redeem-
ing his beautiful but broken creation. If we see the outworking of God’s salvation in the world as a powerful, divinely driven story that is unfolding by the power of the Spirit, overtaking and enveloping all of creation, we can begin to gain a vision for how we can play our role in this great, surprising and invigorating narrative.

There is a definite difference between this conception of reading Ephesians and a typical modern approach to Bible interpretation. Conceiving of the task of Bible reading as the discovery of isolated principles in the text that need to be recognized, extracted and arranged in a systematic outline of theology leaves interpreters in a situation where there is no demand that they experience transformation. That is, interpreters who might be living wayward lives can happily engage in Bible reading with no change or without being drawn into a richer relationship with God and other believers. On a modern conception of the interpreting individual, the task of interpretation is relatively isolated from the rest of life—I, as an individual, can sit down, read my Bible, recognize and isolate one or two truths from Scripture and get up and go on with my life, regardless of whether I ever do anything with these truths I have found in Ephesians. I may find some way to apply these things to some aspect of my life, but if I do not, there will not be any marked difference in how I conceive of my place in this world, how I conduct myself in relationships or how I play a role in society.

But if we think in terms of a compelling and inviting drama that communities seek to inhabit and perform, this demands the participation of the whole person and of entire communities. God does not merely aim to inform or to provide Christians with material for an abstracted theological system that I am supposed to prune and maintain in good order. God wants to radically transform communities, made up of individuals and their complex and varied relationships with one another and others. He wants to shape our imaginations and our life trajectories, our vision of the world and our conception of ourselves and others. There is nothing about us and our communities and the world that God is willing to leave untransformed by his grace, love and power. Conceiving of Ephesians as a drama wonderfully fits God’s comprehensive, redemptive mission.
A closely related notion is that of improvisation. This is what skilled performers do, those who have so fully entered into the script that they can perform the drama with adjustments given new situations, new challenges and new opportunities. Ephesians, since it is a narrative, must be played out in an infinite variety of ways by skillful and faithful communities that seek to embody the redemption of God in local settings. Not every performance of Ephesians will look the same, since the conditions in various situations throughout the world differ in countless ways. The manner in which a community of Jesus followers acts out the gospel will look different in Belfast from how it is performed in Biloxi, and even more different from those recitals in Baghdad and Bakersfield. As we will see throughout this discussion, this is no threat to the gospel but is anticipated by its very nature. The gospel is robust enough to speak afresh to locations in every time and place, and God’s Spirit is powerful to invade and redeem every location to claim every place for the glory of his name.

Most importantly, however, by conceiving of Ephesians in dramatic terms we are being faithful to the one true God as we read Scripture. While this reading strategy may be slightly uncomfortable for some readers, to regard Ephesians as an abstract collection of various theological discussions is a modern imposition on this first-century text. After all, Paul is not a modern intellectual, formed in a post-Enlightenment Western culture, but a thoroughly Jewish follower of Jesus steeped in the worldview of the dramatic and narratively shaped Scriptures of Israel. I do not doubt that my asking readers to leave a scientifically oriented worldview and to enter a narrative frame of thought is an easy or insignificant thing. But for those who are hesitant, I would ask you to consider the extent to which our familiar interpretive approaches have served to stop up our ears to God’s always devastating and always renewing word of life.

Some of our approaches to handling Scripture do not fit the nature of Scripture. We may consider, for example, an approach to reading Shakespeare with the goal of learning about social practices of sixteenth-century England. This would be interesting, and we may
increase our familiarity with Shakespeare in the process, but we would not have arrived at the heart of what Shakespeare himself was getting at. He wrote plays to be performed, not a set of resources to be mined for other purposes. We may go so far as to say—and certainly trained Shakespearean actors might say this of us—that we misread Shakespeare by pursuing such a strategy.

I do realize that this approach to Ephesians will strike some of us as slightly unnatural, something we are not used to. Paul’s mind, however, was shaped by the grand drama of Scripture and its many smaller narratives. For him to write in narrative form, then, would be completely natural. In the very least, why not taste and see if such an approach to reading Ephesians helps you to see how the resurrection power of the gospel might be unleashed for the good of the world and the glory of God in Christ? Grant to me, gentle reader, the opportunity to prove this to you. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Ephesians, then, is a drama, portraying the victory of God in Christ over the dark powers that rule this present evil age, and the letter becomes a script for how God’s people can continue, by the power of the Spirit, to perform the drama called the triumph of God in Christ.¹

**APOCALYPSE**

Not only does Ephesians have a narrative shape, but with regard to its function, it is an apocalypse. This word means “revelation.” Saying that Ephesians has an apocalyptic function does not mean that the letter is filled with bizarre and mind-bending imagery. Ephesians is very unlike the biblical books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation. There are no bowl judgments and heavenly visions of three-dimensional wheels here. But while the lack of these features keeps Ephesians out of the literary genre that scholars call apocalyptic, it does partake of an apocalyptic worldview and has an apocalyptic function. Ephesians functions as an apocalyptic text in this crucial sense: It gives us a heavenly interpretation of reality.

Let’s take a look at the history and function of apocalyptic to shed some light on the character of Ephesians. When we read the history of
Israel, we can see that the need for apocalyptic arose during times of intense crisis. An example of this might be a threat to national security. Emergencies like this created a sharp tension, a disconnect between existence as the people of the God who supposedly ruled all of creation and their intense experience of suffering. And this tension needed to be relieved. Apocalyptic, in this sense, functioned as a sort of apologetic, answering the pressing existential question, How is it that we are the beloved people of God and yet are oppressed by his enemies? How can our God indeed be the Most High God, the sovereign ruler of creation, if we suffer so painfully?

An excellent example of this is found in 2 Kings 6, where the king of Aram is trying to capture Elisha, who is staying, along with his servant, in the town of Dothan. The king of Aram has sent a great army to Dothan and has the city surrounded (2 Kings 6:13-14). When Elisha's servant awakes the following morning, he sees the city surrounded by the Syrian army and, understandably, begins to panic, recognizing that this is a time of crisis. He says to Elisha, "Alas, master! What shall we do?" (2 Kings 6:15). Elisha responds in a way that must have sounded utterly outrageous to his servant: "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them" (2 Kings 6:16). What is Elisha smoking so early in the morning? What happens next is key for our grasping the nature of apocalyptic. Elisha then prays, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:17). Though the text does not say so, we may surmise that the servant's fears were eased because of this heavenly—and more complete—vision of reality. From a heavenly perspective, it is not the prophet and his servant who are surrounded by a threatening army but the Arameans who are surrounded and at the mercy of God and his heavenly host.

There are several key components here that typically appear in apocalyptic situations. First, an intense crisis looms; the town is surrounded by the Syrian army, pointing to imminent doom and destruction. Second, the threat is verbalized; Elisha's servant announces the threatening
situation. Third, the prophet's use of specific language points to the function of an apocalypse. He prays that God would open the eyes of his servant so that he might see what is true about reality. To this point, the servant functions to describe the situation from an earthly point of view—we're surrounded; this is not good! But when his eyes are opened to what is really going on and he is given a heavenly interpretation of reality, he is greatly calmed, and the tension created by their being in the service of the Most High God and this imminent threat to their personal survival is relieved.

Similar situations crop up from time to time in Israel's history, mostly during times of national crisis when the people, or perhaps a king or another key figure, needed to understand exactly what God was up to. It is understandable, therefore, that during the intertestamental period, apocalyptic became an increasingly common and influential genre in Jewish literature. The people of God were under the thumb of pagan national powers. This ongoing oppression called for a word from the Lord—they needed an explanation for why they were in exile. Had God rejected his own precious people? Was he not sufficiently powerful to protect them from defeat at the hands of their enemies? Had God lost his throne in some cosmic battle with the Babylonian gods? The result is a range of texts from various quarters during this period attempting to explain how it is that the God of Israel can still be regarded as the Most High God over all the earth.

My point here is that we ought to consider Ephesians from this perspective. While the letter is very unlike the book of Revelation, it does contain some similarities to the situation in 2 Kings 6. Because of this, along with some other common features, we can say that the letter has an apocalyptic function and partakes of an apocalyptic worldview.

A Heavenly Vision of Reality
First, Paul begins his letter with a prayer that his readers might see themselves and their situation from a renewed perspective. In Ephesians 1:17-19, he prays, much like Elisha had done, that God would open the eyes of his readers so that they might gain a heavenly vision of reality.
This is the prayer that Paul wants to see God answer as communities hear and ponder his letter:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your heart being enlightened so that you will know the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

Are we in need of such a renewed perspective? This book is written from the fundamental conviction that we are in desperate need of the transforming and life-giving vision that Ephesians portrays. Our postmodern world is inhabited by people and communities in a wide variety of situations. There are those who are tired and burned out with life, jaded and depressed. Because of hypocrisies they have witnessed in supposedly Christian communities, the salvation that the God of Jesus Christ offers to all who call on God’s name may appear to them as nothing but a cruel joke. That road has been traveled already, and people who tout this gospel line are interested only in money and what they can get from unsuspecting, gullible losers. No one is sincere—there is nothing that is not for sale. Such people need a transforming vision of hope, the drama of redemption that captures the heart and fires the imagination with visions of grace, wholeness, healing and life.

Others are oppressed and abused, held captive in enslaving economic situations. The gospel proclamation that there is forgiveness of sins and the hope of a place in the kingdom of God does not do much for an empty stomach, a jobless future and crushing debt. Such people yearn to witness and experience a community that is transformed by a heavenly vision of reality, a community committed to performing the drama of Ephesians by the power of the Spirit that unleashes resurrection power and meets real needs, giving life to those trapped in poverty and abuse, bringing relief, restoration, dignity, joy and hope.

My guess is that those who are reading this book are probably like me, doing pretty well in this world, enjoying a fairly comfortable life as we travel the road of upwardly mobile middle-class America. We,
too, desperately need a heavenly vision of reality so that we will not be hoodwinked into thinking that life is all about maintaining social status and accumulating stuff. Our default behavior is to interpret the world and our lives according to our own earthly vision of reality, taking into account only that which we can see and account for in natural terms. Simply by living in this world and going through our day-to-day patterns of life the conviction is subtly reinforced to us that this is all there is. We come to think and live as if everything that happens in our lives has only earthly causes, as if the real entities running the world and ordering our lives are national powers, corporate entities or the companies for which we work. It is supremely difficult, as many of us have come to see, or at least we can say that it is not natural, to envision our lives from the conviction that Christ is cosmic ruler of all things.

As I hope to demonstrate in this book, the complex dynamics up and running in our world influence us in powerful ways, affecting the way we think, feel and live. The conviction is pressed on us that this world is all there is and that reality is fully and completely constituted by what I can see from this earthly perspective. Given all of this, Ephesians functions to jerk us out of this conviction and to expand the horizons of our imagination so that we envision reality from the perspective that Jesus Christ rules this world and longs for us to enjoy his redemptive reign.

Ephesians, then, functions to radically alter and reorient our vision of reality in the most comprehensive sense. Paul wants us to inhabit a new story, to take on a new and renewed set of practices, to see ourselves as part of a radically different and outrageously life-giving story of God redeeming the world in Jesus Christ. In order to participate in this, we need a radical reorientation of our vision of the world. This is what Ephesians aims to do for us, and in that sense it provides a heavenly vision of reality—a conception of reality that we can gain in no other way than by letting the drama of Ephesians become the dominant interpretive framework through which we view God, ourselves, others and the world.
THE COSMIC STAGE

A second feature of the apocalyptic worldview of Ephesians is that it has a cosmic scope. That is, the drama of Ephesians unfolds on a stage that includes both heaven and earth. In ancient worldviews, and in many cultures in the world today, the drama of everyday life included suprahuman actors—personal beings that inhabit the heavens and control the destinies of individuals and nations as well as the courses of people's daily lives. As we will see in the next chapter, there are more actors on the cosmic stage than we typically imagine. There are suprahuman beings—cosmic figures that exist and operate on a level above humanity—that play a prominent role in the drama of Ephesians, and that, surprisingly, continue to exercise great influence in our world today.

In modern Western worldviews, shaped as they are by scientific rationalism, there is little room, if any, for thinking about such suprahuman characters. This is another reason why Ephesians has remained a mystery to many interpreters who are working from a horizontal vision of reality—these figures do not show up on the radar screen. They are hidden from view in our day, so we do not take them into account when we read this letter and when we think about our daily lives. In this sense, many of us conceive of reality with the assumption that heaven is closed, shut off from our lived realities. We think in terms of earthly causes and effects, and we explain social realities from an earthly perspective, and historical movements have solely natural causes. The explanatory power for us as moderns comes from things we can see and feel and document.

But for Paul, the stage on which reality is played out involved an "open heaven," to use Christopher Rowland's phrase. In the ancient world, all earthly events had parallels in the heavens. If a certain nation, for example, was defeated in battle by another, this was a sign that in the heavens the god of that first nation was weaker than the second and had lost in cosmic combat to the opposing god. And on an individual level, in order to make one's way in the world and guarantee relational and economic success, one had to pray to any number of divine personalities for favor. While such ideologies and practices
are widespread throughout the ancient world, the intimate involvement of heavenly beings in daily life on earth—on both individual and corporate levels—is also reflected in Jewish tradition that served to shape Paul’s worldview.

I will discuss this further in the next chapter, but for now we must note that as we read Ephesians the frame of reference for the action that unfolds is cosmic. We are on a stage with fellow actors who are not human. This is no cause for alarm, however, since, as we will see, Christ is highly exalted over the powers and authorities and protects and empowers us with God’s own infinite strength. But if we ignore the setting of the drama, we will not rightly understand the performance to which we are being called.

**Crossover of the Ages**

A final feature of Paul’s apocalyptic worldview must be mentioned here. According to the dramatic scene that Paul sets for us, we currently inhabit two ages at the same time; we live at the crossover of the ages. Let me explain.

According to Jewish expectation, stemming from the Scriptures of Israel, the people of God were waiting for the climactic salvation of God to arrive. This was not supposed to be merely a spiritual reality that existed, as we say today, in our hearts, but rather the day of the Lord when God was going to act decisively and cosmically to transform the entire creation. They were waiting for him to wipe out the old age of sin and death and make all things new. Perhaps most on the minds of Jews during Paul’s day was God’s promise to both end the sojourn of the people of God among the nations and restore Israel to a life of flourishing in the promised land. Even though many Jews had returned to the land, they were still living in a condition of exile. They were ruled harshly by the dominant Roman Empire—the pagan enemy of the God of Israel. Jews were waiting for their God to return to save Israel and judge the nations, establishing Israel as the true inhabitants of God’s Kingdom. Jewish expectation, therefore, looked like what is shown in figure one.
Paul’s gospel is that the kingdom of God has indeed arrived with the pouring out of the Spirit of God on God’s people, now made up of Jew and Gentile, people from every nation integrated into one new people. What is unique about the New Testament revelation, however, is that while the new age has arrived, it is not yet present in its fullness. God has accomplished salvation decisively in the death and resurrection of Christ, but we await the full restoration of creation at the day of Christ, the future day of judgment and salvation. So, we say that salvation is already but not yet, or that the work of God to restore creation has been inaugurated and will be completed at the future day of Christ.

We live, therefore, between the times. We are situated after the death and resurrection of Christ but before his return, when God will completely restore creation. That future day will bring in the fullness of God’s new creation—a new heaven and a new earth with Christ ruling as King on earth. Our present circumstance, according to Paul, looks like what is shown in figure two.
There are two ages up and running: the new age, begun in Christ by the power of the Spirit, and the old age, or the present evil age, which is still ruled by the fallen powers. This is why our current existence as followers of Jesus is filled with tension. We find ourselves in desperate need of an apocalypse—a life-giving revelation to explain our paradoxical and often bizarre sojourn through this world. Why is it that, though we are the people of God, the one who rules the universe, we still experience pain and loss? Why do we feel empty and long for something more? Why is creation in such a battered state? Does God care? Does God even know? Why do I feel like the customary answers to these questions are not fully satisfying? Am I sinning by feeling so torn about God and God’s promises of salvation in Christ? We will have lots to say about questions like these as we sit down to hear Ephesians and its life-giving word of revelation, but for now we need to note that this is what Paul’s conception of reality looks like.

**DIVINE WARFARE**

One of the most well-known features of Ephesians is the unique and
rhetorically powerful passage that closes the letter (Eph 6:10-18). Since letter openings and closings typically anticipate and sum up key features of the letter body, it would be no surprise if we found that combat motifs appeared throughout Ephesians. As we will see, the language, imagery and dramatic impulses of divine warfare saturate Ephesians, making it imperative that we understand how the imagery of divine warfare works so that we can come to grips with the narrative contours of Ephesians.

First, some background. In the ancient world, nations utilized the imagery of divine warfare as a rhetorical tool to proclaim the supremacy of their deity. A fundamental conviction of the nation of Israel, for example, was that their God was the supreme God over all of creation, having no competitors that were serious threats to his sovereign power. This rhetorical framework allowed Israel to assert God’s supremacy over all other deities, to elaborate how God’s kingship was manifested in his many victories over the gods of other nations and to understand why God was worthy of worship, loyalty and celebration. This distinctive pattern, laid out helpfully by Tremper Longman and Dan Reid in *God Is a Warrior*, contains the following elements, usually in this order, though with some variation in different biblical passages:

- Kingship
- Conflict/Victory
- Celebration
- Victory Shout
- Temple-Building
- Blessing

This structure first appears in Exodus 15, known as The Song of the Sea, composed to celebrate the victory of the God of Israel over the Egyptian army. God is called a warrior because he hurled Pharaoh’s chariots into the sea (Ex 15:4) and shattered the enemy by his powerful right hand (Ex 15:6) (conflict/victory). Because of this triumph, it is only fitting that God is declared the universal sovereign (Ex 15:1, 18) (kingship). The song then anticipates the building of God’s temple (temple-building), where Israel will celebrate his supremacy (Ex 15:17) (celebration).
This structure also determines the shape of a large number of the psalms. Psalm 24 is a liturgy for the worshipers of God as they enter the temple to celebrate in worship. The psalmist makes the claim in Psalm 24:1 that all creation belongs to the God of Israel—everything in it is God’s and God’s alone. In the ancient world these are fighting words. The God of Israel—and no other god—is the ruler over creation, and no other god is even a threat to God’s rule. This is a victory shout, a proclamation of triumph, and not simply an assertion of fact. Why can the psalmist make such a claim? He draws out what he means in Psalm 24:2, using imagery that is largely lost on us as modern Bible readers. To say that God “founded it on the seas and established it on the rivers” is not to make scientific claims about the tectonic plates of the earth floating on the seas. This is, rather, a polemical assertion that though the forces of chaos that threaten to rip apart the fabric of creation were at work to undo God’s good creation—the sea and the rivers representing these forces—God has worked powerfully to triumph over these forces and to hold creation together as God’s good world designed for habitation by God’s people. Because of this victory in battle over these destructive forces, God is celebrated as the “King of glory,” “strong and mighty,” “the Lord of hosts” (Ps 24:8, 10). This psalm, then, contains the main elements of the imagery of divine warfare: conflict/victory (Ps 24:2); victory shout (Ps 24:7-10); assertion of kingship (Ps 24:7-10); activity in the temple (Ps 24:7-10); celebration (Ps 24:3-6).

This narrative structure is especially prominent in the so-called Zion psalms. In the first of these, Psalm 46, the nations are called on to consider the deeds of Yahweh (Ps 46:9) and to acknowledge his sovereignty over the nations (Ps 46:11) (kingship). His unique status is based on his power to provide stability for the city of Jerusalem in the face of cosmic upheaval and to protect the city in which he dwells despite the roaring of the nations (conflict/victory). Because of his mighty deeds, Yahweh dwells as king over all the earth in his temple on Zion (Ps 46:5) (temple-building).

This literary structure, functioning as a tool for asserting and elaborating on the sovereignty of God, therefore had a polemical purpose. A
polemic is an argument, a bold assertion of a position with an elaboration in defense of that assertion. The argument, in these scriptural examples, was being made by the people of Israel as they proclaimed the sovereignty of the God of Israel. Amid competing claims by other nations that their gods were supreme—claimants to the title of "Great King over all the earth"—Israel confessed in their worship and proclaimed in their preaching the supremacy of their God over any other pretender to that title.

This conceptual framework, the pattern of divine warfare, and the polemical purpose associated with it are vital for understanding the narrative shape of Ephesians—how the argument of the letter works and how its structure hangs together. As I indicated earlier, Ephesians has often been read as a wandering discussion of various theological themes and doctrinal matters that can be utilized to construct abstract theologies of the church and its relationship to Christ. But Ephesians has a tightly woven narrative structure that is driven by the pattern of divine warfare. The first clue that this is the case is that the well-known conclusion to the letter begins with the exhortation to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power" (Eph 6:10). This repeats a phrase that appears initially in Ephesians 1:19, pointing to a literary framing device called an inclusio, marking off the beginning and end of Paul's argument. This device forms a sort of parenthesis around the main body of the argument and indicates that Paul's thesis statement is found in Ephesians 1:20-23, just after the first appearance of the phrase "strength of his power." That is, if the summary of Paul's argument appears after the use of this phrase in Ephesians 6:10, it is quite likely that his thesis statement follows the initial appearance of the same phrase in Ephesians 1:19.

As we will see in chapter four of this book, in Ephesians 1:20-23 Paul makes the claim that Christ has been exalted over the powers and authorities, which is a claim to cosmic lordship over the destructive and chaotic powers that rule the present evil age. This claim to lordship is then elaborated throughout Ephesians 2, listing the victories over the powers that oppress humanity and seek to destroy God's world. Other
elements of the pattern of divine warfare are found in Ephesians 2, but we will wait a bit to discuss this further.

Ephesians, therefore, is also a polemic in which Paul asserts the triumph of God in Christ over the powers that rule the present evil age and explains the manner in which the people of God are to inhabit this victorious drama, let it orient and shape their lives together as a community. When they do this, when the people of God play their roles faithfully as the Spirit-empowered body of Christ on earth, they participate in and perform God’s polemic. Through his people, God is asserting and defending his own sovereign victory over the forces that are seeking to destroy his good creation and thwart his purposes of redeeming those aspects of creation that are broken and enslaved to Satan, sin and death.

Fostering Communities of Discernment: Cultural Criticism

It is time now to draw together some of the things we have discussed in this chapter and talk about what is going to be required of us as readers of the divine script called Ephesians. We noted that Paul prayed for his original readers to have a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God, which is consistent with other apocalyptic writers. This points to a key component in apocalyptic texts and situations—the demand on the part of the audience to become communities of discernment. Ephesians demands that we develop the skills of cultural analysis and cultivate a shrewd and critical vision of the world. We must do this so that we can effectively develop and foster the heavenly vision of reality that Paul wants for us.

We must be people who discern, who seek to know what the will of the Lord is. Living in this world, in the time of the crossover of the ages, requires discernment because our engagement with reality involves paradox and contradiction. It is not a straightforward or easy thing to live during this age, the time between the cross and the day of Christ. Not everything is as it seems; reality is not what it appears to be, and we must pray and reflect on how we can have an imagination that is shaped by Ephesians and not by this world.
As we will see in the next chapter, because we are not the only actors on the cosmic stage and because the powers and authorities who rule the present evil age are intimately bound up with cultures in every part of the world, skillful and faithful performance of the drama of God's redemption is necessarily going to involve our being cultural critics. Culture is not neutral, and the various, multifaceted, complex and subtle ways of life and thought that are up and running in our culture at every level are perverted in some way by the fallen and malignant powers and authorities. This means that we will have to actively develop an ability to see through cultural patterns so that we can identify ways of life that have evil and destructive origins and consider how we can develop and foster ways of life that unleash the transformative and redemptive power of God.

I do not mean that we need to develop a critical posture toward culture in that cultural expressions of visual art and music are bad in themselves. Far from it! In fact, artists, novelists and musicians are God's good gifts to us as we seek to discern how the powers have perverted culture so that we find ourselves participating in destructive patterns of life. Artists have been gifted by God with the vision to see through the pretensions that dominate our experience and to express these in ways that allow us to take note of them, opening up windows into the true nature of reality so that we can imagine more promising and life-giving patterns of conduct.

We will ponder repeatedly how our inhabiting two realms simultaneously means that our present existence is not neutral but constantly contested. We live in hostile territory—enemy territory, in fact. God's beautiful world has been hijacked by dark forces, and he is in the process of taking it back. He has not finished this mission yet, so we still find ourselves living under the rule of hostile powers in some way. Our identity, therefore, is always being contested, with hostile forces relentlessly and constantly bearing down on us in subtle but pervasive ways to shape how we envision ourselves, others and the world, and to determine the seemingly available options for how we should conduct ourselves in the world. Therefore, we must do all that we can to live in
this world with shrewdness, always being aware of the constant pull into destructive patterns of life. We so easily fall into these when we do not live purposefully. The people of God are called to resist harmful ways of life that prevent us from embodying God's drama of redemption. We must develop and foster patterns of life that can become performances of the redemptive power of God in the world.

We faithfully read Ephesians, therefore, when we seek to gain discernment for living Christ-oriented, cross-shaped lives in this present age, rather than when we merely gather data to inform our doctrinal systems, polish and ready them for inspection by others. Let's dig in, then, and prepare to have our minds and hearts transformed by a compelling vision of the enlivening and life-giving roles we can perform in the resurrection-powered drama of God's great salvation in Christ.