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The Relevance of Ephesians 6:10-20 to the Ephesian Letter

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Ephesians 6:10-20 is one of the most popular passages in the New Testament. Most lay people are acquainted with the armor of God in Ephesians 6 having learned it in Sunday School or having heard it preached from the pulpit as the armor used by the Christian each day for his spiritual battle. For the student of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, this passage not only encourages and exhorts, but it raises some specific questions. For instance, what is the relationship of this portion of Scripture with the rest of the book? Why does Paul use this imagery of a soldier at the end of this Epistle? The answers for these questions are not immediately apparent. It is the purpose of this article to present a response to these questions that would enhance one's appreciation for this portion of God's Word. To accomplish this, an effort will be made first to identify the purpose of this passage. After this introductory material is completed, the author will then give four reasons for this pericope's relevance to the rest of the letter.

Controversy of Ephesians 6:10-20

One of the main problems the student encounters from this passage is the use of the military imagery in such detail at the end of a letter in which it has not been otherwise used. Carr reflects the confusion this causes when he says, "The sudden appearance here in the New Testament of an otherwise rare

description of the Christian life in military terms . . . is noticeable."¹ It may be rare in New Testament literature, but it is even more rare in the Ephesian Epistle! The use of military imagery, however, is not without precedent in the New Testament or even in Paul's writings. Paul alludes to military images in Romans 13:12; I Corinthians 9:7; II Corinthians 6:7; 10:3-4; Philippians 2:25; I Thessalonians 5:8; Philemon 2; and II Timothy 2:3-4, "Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who has chosen him to be a soldier." Military imagery is not foreign to Paul's writings. The difference is that there is no other passage in the New Testament where such an extended warrior image is used, and its inclusion here does not seem to be immediately relevant at first glance. Critics have cited this as evidence for questioning its authenticity. Such critics may say, for instance, that the reason for the military imagery is that the writer of the epistle knew the Ephesian believers were facing persecution. This argument, however, assumes a late date for the Epistle (i.e. A.D. 91). Moreover, there is no internal evidence that believers were told to stand strong in the face of persecution; in fact, they are told that their struggle is not with flesh and blood (6:12).

Arnold proposes another solution to the purpose of Ephesians 6:10-20 when he writes that,

The call to acquire divine strengthening for the purpose of engaging the spirit-forces of evil (Ephesians 6:10-20) is not an irrelevant appendix to the epistle. It is a crucial part of the paraenesis to which the rest of the epistle has been pointing.²

¹Wesley Carr, *Angels and Principalities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 104.

²Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 103.

It will be now demonstrated that Arnold's statement finds support from a rhetorical analysis of the book.

Rhetorical Purpose of Ephesians 6:10-20

A rhetorical outline of the book of Ephesians gives some insight into the relevance of 6:10-20. Paul begins the book with an exordium (1:1-23) for the purpose of gaining the good will of the readers. This consists of the opening, the berakah, and the long thanksgiving and prayer. The author then moves into the narratio (2:1-3:21) which gives information on which the recipients can base their decisions or actions. Essentially the exordium and the narratio are the first half of the epistle. The exhortation begins in 4:1 and extends through 6:9. In this section are the moral imperatives for the recipients.³ This section is referred to as a paraenesis. The last section is called the peroration and its purpose is to bring the address to a conclusion while arousing the audience's emotions.⁴ It functions as the conclusion of the preceding paraenetic material and of the book as a whole. Paul uses the military imagery to stir up the reader's emotions, and to confront them with the spiritual battle before them.

Paul was a master of the eloquent climax, known in ancient rhetoric as the "peroration." In the letter to the Ephesians, this eloquent summary (6:10-17) consists of an extended metaphor that compares the Christian life to a military battle and the Christian's resources to a set of armor. The passage

³This rhetorical outline is taken from Gordon H. Lovik, "Greek Exegesis—Ephesians" (unpublished class notes in 312 Greek Exegesis—Ephesians), Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 1994; and Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990).

⁴Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 432.

gains its forcefulness through the vividness and aptness of the metaphors, the underlying plot conflict, and the use of parallelism.⁵

The author arouses the emotions through energetic language. Paul tells them to "be strong" (6:10), "stand" (6:11), and "wrestle" (6:12). This picture arouses the emotions of struggle against spiritual forces which will eventually be defeated. The symbolic wearing of spiritual armor only heightens the intensity of this picture. The reader can picture himself putting on each piece of armor and then at the climax of readiness, dropping to his knees to pray (6:18).

The passage is a rousing call to the readers to summon all their energies in firm resolve to live out the sort of Christian existence in the world to which the whole letter has pointed. The battle imagery arouses a sense of urgency and intensity. At the same time, the passage does not provoke any feeling of panic or fear but conveys the sense of confidence and security that the readers can have in the midst of a bitter combat.⁶

Therefore, the first reason for the relevance of this passage is a rhetorical one. This passage functions as an effective peroration: that is, it brings to a motivational conclusion the thoughts of the author.

General Context of Ephesians

A second reason for the relevance of this passage is that it is a restatement in a different form of much of the material that

⁵Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 319.

⁶Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 432.

the author had already covered. This idea is closely linked to the rhetorical one. In its function as a conclusion, Paul wants them to live how he has already taught them in order to win the battle. As Wild says:

To put it another way, I believe that the fight with the powers was understood by the author of Ephesians as intimately involved with such things as working with one's hands (4:28), avoidance of evil talk of various sorts (4:29-30), and concern for the due relationships of the human household (5:22-6:9).⁷

The information given in Ephesians 6:10-20 is not new material for the recipients. Paul tells them to be strong (6:10) which reminds them of the stress on God's power shown in the resurrection (1:19-21), the strengthening available through the Holy Spirit (3:16), and God's power at work in believers (3:20), all of which Paul discussed earlier in the letter. He has warned them of human craftiness (4:14), but now he warns them of the "wiles of the devil" (6:11). He points out the 'kosmocrats' (6:12) and others which reminds the recipients of Christ's exaltation above the principalities (1:21) and of the same phrase used but not speaking of evil powers in 3:10. The author speaks of the realm that the evil powers control as darkness in 6:12, and he had earlier called it darkness in 4:18 and 5:8, 11.

The pieces of armor are not bringing new material to the readers either. Truth has been spoken of in 4:25 and 5:9 before the girdle of truth (6:14a). The breastplate of righteousness (6:14b) can remind the readers of righteousness mentioned in 4:24 and 5:9. Peace (6:15) is also in the greeting (1:2), in several verses in 2:14-18, and 4:3. Faith was mentioned several times (1:1, 13, 15, 19; 2:8; 3:12; 4:5, 13) before the shield of

⁷Robert A. Wild, "The Warrior and the Prisoner: Some Reflections on Ephesians 6:10-20," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (April 1984): 298.

faith (6:16). Salvation (6:17) was also spoken of in 1:13; 2:5, 8; and in reference to the picture of the church in 5:23. The pericope of 6:10-20 does not bring new or irrelevant material to the recipients but restates much of the material from all the previous sections of the letter in an effective conclusion to remind the readers of their obligation "to stand."

Not only are there links with what has preceded through the restatement of main themes and the explicit repetition of terminology, but there is also a more implicit connection with the paraenetical section of which this pericope forms the conclusion. The appeals for unity and maturity, for living out the life of the new humanity, for truthful and edifying talk, for honest work, for love, for purity in word and deed, and for wise and Spirit-filled living in marriage, family, and work all depend on believers appropriating the resources they have in God and Christ and resisting the forces that pull in the opposing direction.⁸

Lincoln states it exactly: the believer can only stand as he uses God's strength to live out the lessons learned in Ephesians. The Apostle Paul has emphasized the unity of the church and in this final section he tells them the true enemy is not each other ("flesh and blood") but the unspiritual hosts (6:12). So another idea for the relevance of this passage is that it is a restatement in a memorable way of material previously covered.

Cultural Milieu of Ephesus

A third reason for Paul to include this pericope in the Epistle is because of the cultural milieu of Ephesus. When Paul was in Ephesus (Acts 19), the silversmiths whipped the crowd

⁸Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 439.

into a frenzy because Paul's preaching had turned many away from worshipping the goddess Diana (i.e Artemis in Greek). The town clerk finally dismissed the assembly and thus the danger to Paul and others was averted. This narrative illustrates the intense devotion to Artemis which characterized citizens of Ephesus. It would have required courage for a believer to break from the cultic worship.

Adherents of this cult had a strong missionary zeal to promote Artemis; in fact, there were temples to Artemis in other cities of Asia Minor. This cult aggressively recruited and would not have sat idly by while its members became Christians. The temple also functioned as the financial center of the city: money could be deposited or borrowed at the temple.⁹ Worship at the temple involved the service of temple prostitutes. Paul knew that these believers would find the picture of a soldier an inspirational analogy to help them cut ties with the cult. Christian men in Ephesus had previously taken part in the worship of Artemis and are now called to stand against the false worship and immorality. In this culture, a believer would have to stand strong.

Although background studies give information that aids understanding of this passage, it must be emphasized that nowhere in Ephesians does Paul actually mention the cult of Artemis. There is no concrete internal proof that Paul was alluding to it. What is found are many indications that fit with the situation at Ephesus.

There appears to be a power motif in Ephesians which fits with what is known about the cult of Artemis. "One undisputed characteristic of the Ephesian Artemis is the unsurpassed cosmic power attributed to her."¹⁰ Statues of Artemis picture her as wearing the signs of the zodiac around her neck—she had more power than astrology! On her skirt were rows of impressive

⁹Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic*, 20-21.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 21.

beasts symbolizing her great power. She was worshipped as the supreme cosmic power.

The prominent and widespread cult of the Ephesian Artemis was closely linked with magical practices and beliefs. The devotees of Artemis feared the demonic realm, or the spirits of nature, and considered their goddess more powerful than these forces and thereby called upon her as their protector and deliverer.¹¹

The author of Ephesians seems to recognize this so he makes clear the reality of "principalities" (6:12), but confidently assures the readers that with the armor of God they can withstand them. Wesley Carr's response to verse 12 is to question its authenticity,¹² but by doing so he misses Paul's point (v. 12 the Ephesian believers can stand against the demonic realm). Paul has exalted Christ as above all principalities and all powers (1:19-22). This is language that the Ephesians might have heard applied to Artemis when they were lost, but now they are told that Christ is over all (even Artemis). One might even see an allusion to Christ's power in 4:8 speaking of His ascension.

Paul tells them to "be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might" (6:10). He then goes on to describe the wickedness they face in 6:12. Speaking of 6:12 one author says:

Here once again we have what is essentially a series, a heaping up of terms to describe the ineffable, invisible world-enveloping reach of a spiritual network of powers

¹¹Ibid., 27.

¹²Carr, *Angels and Principalities*, 108. For a critique of Carr's view see, Clinton E. Arnold, "The 'Exorcism' of Ephesians 6:12 in Recent Research," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30 (June 1987): 71-87.

inimical to life. The very intention of series such as this, as we have seen repeatedly, is to be comprehensive.¹³

One of the emphases of this pericope and the whole book is the power of Christ. The allusion is that this is opposed to the power of Artemis that they formerly knew.

The cult of Artemis involved some mysteries. The word "mystery" used in a cultic setting generally refers to certain rituals that are progressively revealed to initiates as they advance in their status in the cult. The Apostle Paul uses the same word to speak of the fact that Gentiles can now join equally with Jews in God's grace (Col 1:26-27). More importantly, he uses the word "mystery" in Ephesians 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; and 5:32. These mentions of mysteries could be allusions to the mysteries of the Artemis cult. While the pericope in question (6:10-20) does not specifically mention any mysteries, this writer thinks this point adds relevance to what Paul is trying to accomplish with this conclusion.

Another similarity between the cult of Artemis and the soldier image in Ephesians is that the temple of Artemis offered asylum (i.e. salvation) to those in need. Colin Hemer remarks that:

The fame of the temple as a place of refuge persists throughout its history. The safety which it afforded the suppliant was σωτηρία: the goddess was Σωτειρα.¹⁴

Those who engaged in illegal activities were unable to be prosecuted within the bounds of the Temple area. The apostle

¹³Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 85.

¹⁴Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, vol. 11 (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1986), 48.

speaks of the "helmet of salvation" in 6:17a. Once again a contrast seems to be drawn between Artemis and Christ.

It appears that this passage would be especially relevant to Ephesian recipients when one considers their city life. While not all authors agree on this point (cf. Lincoln, 440), Arnold posits a situation which does:

The situation we have envisioned in the churches in western Asia Minor corresponds with these data perfectly. Many converts were streaming into the churches—converts who were formerly affiliated with the Artemis cult, practiced magic, consulted astrologers, and participated in various mysteries. Underlying the former beliefs and manner of life of all these converts was a common and deepset fear of the demonic "powers."¹⁵

Paul needed to create a memorable conclusion to motivate them to stand strong against the influence of Ephesus.

Paul's Use of Analogies

A final reason why this section of Ephesians is relevant is because of Paul's use of other analogies in this epistle. The author of this paper would like to think that this reason is original with him, but maybe others have noticed this too. Paul uses the analogy of a body to picture the church (1:22-23; 2:15-16; 4:16), and of a building to picture the church (2:20-22). The apostle Paul uses marriage as a picture of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5). What could be a more fitting conclusion than to use another picture, that of a soldier, to symbolize the battle Christians face? In adult education this would be called a

¹⁵Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic*, 122.

simulation. It immerses the learner in a situation to drive home the lesson. Paul did this effectively.

Ephesians 6:10-20 is relevant to the rest of the epistle for several reasons. It fits the rhetorical outline of the book, it works as a restatement of truth already taught, it fits the culture of Ephesus, and it fits with other teaching pictures Paul has already used. It is no wonder that it has become a favorite passage in the New Testament.