

Vehicles of Divine Mystery: Paul's Danielic Self-Understanding in Ephesians 3

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Abstract²

Recent applications of social identity theories in Pauline studies have highlighted the importance of considering Paul's self-understanding as a window through which to interpret his letters. Though this insight has proved fruitful with regard to Paul's earlier letters, its application in the later prison letters has been inconsistent. This article examines the precedence for Paul's self-characterization in Ephesians 3 as Christ's prisoner "for the sake of you Gentiles", and as one of the "holy apostles and prophets" who have received God's mystery by revelation and for which he "kneels" in prayer. It is argued that aspects of the language resonate with the characterization of Daniel in Babylonian exile and that Paul portrays himself as a vehicle of God's revelation in the mold of Daniel. External evidence is also adduced in support of this interpretation, which if correct, may have some implications for interpreting the later prison letters.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Need for Constructing the Self-Understanding of Paul in Ephesians

Recent applications of social identity theories to Paul have emphasized how consideration of the apostle's own self-understanding as portrayed in a particular letter significantly influences the direction of interpretation (e.g.,

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Hodge 2005:270-288; Keay 2005:151-155; Esler 2003). Paul's perennial self-descriptions in his letters—for examples, as an apostle, as slave of Christ, as a “maternal” and “paternal” pastor, as prisoner, and so on—were not merely aimed at buttressing his teaching authority. They also provide us, his twenty-first century interpreters, with a window for ascertaining how he expected his statements to address the issues for which the letters were designed.

Self-identities, as noted by Gerd Baumann, are in reality fluid constructs (1999:91-94). They are “multiple and situation specific”, such that the person “activates, or brings to the fore a certain component or components of his or her self-concept in a particular context” (Esler 2003:271). In each letter therefore, “Paul, the real author” portrays himself in a specific way as “Paul, the implied author”. And it is this particular implied self-concept which must shape the exegesis of that letter. The often generalized characterization of Paul as a former Pharisee, with largely Jewish apocalyptic leanings but frequently influenced by Hellenistic philosophy, proves inadequate for interpreting individual letters (Soards 1987:20).

To be sure, Paul was not being duplicitous in regularly refining his self-portrait in order to be “all things to all men” (1 Cor 9:22). On the contrary, he was following the contemporary philosophical conventions of “pedagogical adaptability”, in which effective teachers honed their personalities and styles to suit the types of pupil(s) and the teaching situations (Glad 1995:2; cf. Malherbe 1970:203-217).³ The dynamism in the apostle's self-characterizations was for that matter not only natural but also necessary for his success as a communicator of the gospel. Attridge's (1997:377) comment is therefore apposite—“Paul's adaptable behaviour is not idiosyncrasy or simple opportunism, but part of a consistent and recognized strategy for building and developing a community of morally committed individuals”.

Although these insights have tremendously transformed Pauline studies, the applications have tended to focus on his earlier epistles to the relative neglect

³ See for example a discussion of the parallels between the writings of Philodemus of Gadara, the Epicurean philosopher (110-135 B.C.) and the New Testament in Fitzgerald and colleagues (2004). It is interesting that the concept of “pedagogical adaptability” has been revived in recent discussions of Philosophy of education.

of the later prison letters. Considering the fact that some of these prison letters cover the final stages of Paul's career and contain significant data regarding his personal reflections on his apostolic mission, this deficit is clearly undesirable. The hope of this article, therefore, is to make a modest contribution to redressing some of this shortfall.

Constructing the specific self-concept that Paul portrays in his letter to the Ephesians is particularly critical for the letter's exegesis. For, the usual background contextual issues that are taken for granted with other letters are not as clear-cut with Ephesians. Firstly, the purpose(s) of the letter is shrouded in scholarly dispute.⁴ That any of the diverse opinions could be correct illustrates the difficulty. Secondly, and for several reasons, the situational context of the letter is also uncertain.⁵ Consequently, the exhortations are to be regarded as general and should not be used to construct the situational context of the epistle.

Thirdly, though it is patent that Paul wrote Ephesians from prison (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20), it will be exegetically misleading to transfer, wholesale and without refinement, the self-concept portrayed in the other prison letters, especially, Philippians. Ephesians has an interesting literary relationship with Colossians and Philemon, and the three letters were probably written and sent around the same period (Hoehner 2002:104-106; Bruce 1984:230; Macdonald 2000:4-6). Yet, whereas Colossians addressed a particular congregation and Philemon was sent to a specific person and situation, Ephesians is general, and should therefore be approached in its own right.

⁴ Was Ephesians meant to be a systematic reflection on the nature of the apostle's Gentile mission (Hoehner 2002:9-34)—in which case it might have been "a letter of reminder and of encouragement" as noted by Nils Dahl (1978:141)? Or are we to construe Ephesians as an exposition of the gracious work of God in human history, as posited by John Stott (1979:24), or an encouragement towards Jewish and Gentile Christian unity in the universal church as argued by Marcus Barth (1974:56), or an elucidation of the influence and conquest of the evil powers as posited by Clinton Arnold (1989:167)?

⁵ It appears that Ephesians was a circular letter from Paul to several churches in Asia Minor, including those in Ephesus—a view expressed as early as the second century by Tertullian (A.D. 155-230) and Origen (A.D. 185-254). Marcion, the heretic (A.D. 110-160) also regarded Ephesians to have been a letter to Laodicea. Most conservative commentators hold to this view, even though some, e.g., Black 1981: 73, disagree.

With this deficiency of contextual information, the construction of Paul's self-understanding as portrayed in Ephesians becomes crucial as a prerequisite for the letter's exegesis.

1.2. The problems with constructing Paul's self-understanding in Ephesians

Thankfully, the apostle has given us significant amount of information for making such a construction. In Ephesians 1:1, he states that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. And in Ephesians 6:20, he describes himself as an "ambassador in chains". Prior to that in Ephesians 3:1, he introduces himself in a self-referential manner as "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles". This self-introduction leads to a rather long digression in which he describes himself as one of God's "holy apostles and prophets" who through the Spirit have received revelation of God's mystery "to preach to the Gentiles". This statement, together with the fact that he was witnessing the fulfillment of God's purposes in his missionary enterprise (Eph 2:11-18), leads him to "kneel" before the Father in intercession.

Even though this self-description generally correlates with the portrayal of the apostle in his other letters, there are slight variations. The explicit link of his imprisonment with the reception of revealed mystery in Ephesians 3 is new. The nearest parallel is Colossians 1:24-26. Yet, even there, he refers in general to his sufferings as a proclaimer of the mystery of the gospel⁶ rather than directly linking his imprisonment to being a vehicle for revelation of God's mystery.⁷ Secondly, Paul's inclusion of himself as one of the apostles and prophets, and his qualification of these agents as "holy", though compatible with his portrayal of the recipients as "saints" (e.g., Eph 1:1), have

⁶ Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, the apostle cites his imprisonment as an example of his suffering to which his disciples were to aspire and at least not be ashamed of (Phil 1:7; 13-17; 2 Tim 1:8; 2:9; Phlm 1:10-13; 2 Cor 6:5) or as merely an emblem of his authority allowing him to exhort other believers (Phlm 1:1, 9) and plead for intercession on his behalf (Col 4:3; 18).

⁷ I am grateful to Dr Bill Domeris, my DTh supervisor with the South African Theological Seminary, for introducing me to this terminology.

nevertheless been labelled by a number of scholars as uncharacteristic of Paul (e.g., Lincoln 1990:lxiii).

Thirdly, his self-characterization as “less than the least of all God’s people” (Eph 3:8), though chimes with 1 Corinthians 15:9 where he calls himself “least of the apostles”, is slightly different and needs further clarification. And finally, the mention of Paul’s posture as he prays is also new in his letters. The three other occasions on which he refers to kneeling in his letters are all part of quotations from the Old Testament and not describing his own posture.⁸ In any case, standing was the usual praying posture of the ancient Jews and earliest Christians, even though kneeling is also mentioned in the gospels and Acts.⁹ How then do we explain these variations in Paul’s self-portrait in Ephesians?

1.3. Pseudonymity of Ephesians is a misconceived approach

Among critical commentators, the commonest approach to explaining these variations is to argue that the letter was written, not by Paul, but by an imitating disciple after his death. Lincoln, for example, describes Ephesians 3:1-13 as “supporting the pseudonymous framework on which the [subsequent] paranaesis rests” (1990:171). Arguing also that the self-characterizations were meant to maintain a “Pauline façade” for the epistle, or even a “Paulology”, Robert Wild boldly asserts, “The author—and probably, too, the original recipients of the letter—knew that there was no question of Paul still being a prisoner—he had been dead for some thirty years” (1984:289; see also Hoehner 2002:9-20 for a list of commentators who so argue).

Claims that Ephesians is pseudonymous imagine a “static” Paul who did not hone his self-characterizations to suit different circumstances. Paul’s likely use of a scribe-secretary to write Ephesians, thus accounting for the epistle’s distinctive language and style, does not amount to pseudonymity. Despite the

⁸ Rom 11:3 cites 1 Kgs 19:18, and Rom 14:11 and Phil 2:10 both cite Isa 45:23.

⁹ Matt 17:14; Mark 1:40; Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60, 9:40, 20:36, 21:5. Acts 20:36 will be discussed later.

claims to the contrary,¹⁰ it would not have been acceptable to the earliest Christians to have knowingly endorsed the writing of a presumed imposter who, in the same deceptive breath, exhorts his readers to “put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour” (Eph 4:15).

As cogently demonstrated by Jeremy Duff (1998) with regard to the prevailing negative attitudes of the ancient Mediterraneans to pseudonymous works, the earliest Christians had scruples about plagiarism and pseudonymity (cf. Wilder 1999:156-158). The ethical implications of speculating the pseudonymity of Ephesians are, for that matter, grave indeed. Pseudonymity as an explanation of the variations in the apostle's self-characterization in Ephesians 3 is, therefore, at best premature and misconceived, and so must be rejected.¹¹

1.4. Paul's Danielic self-understanding as solution to Ephesians 3

Rather than sheltering under a theory of “Pauline façade”, a more fruitful approach to explain the “implied” self-portrait of Paul in Ephesians 3 lies in first granting that the one who claims to be “I, Paul” is the apostle Paul himself. The next step should then be to investigate what would have been the precedence for this variation of Paul's self-understanding in the epistle, and, following that, to formulate how this refined self-portrait was designed to fit the first readers and the themes and issues for which the letter was written.

In what follows, I shall examine several parallels between the self-concept portrayed by Paul in Ephesians and the prophet Daniel. By summarizing how in his other letters, Paul frequently defined his apostolicity in the mould of the

¹⁰ See for example David Meade who claims that pseudonymity was not thought of as fraudulent (1987), and Boring who views the acceptance of pseudonymity in the New Testament by a number of evangelical scholars as a positive development (2004:358-367).

¹¹ In my view, it goes to the core of questioning the ethical validity of the Scriptures when it is argued that someone other than Paul, for whatever reasons, even “pious” ones, would deceptively claim to be “I, Paul” while at the same time branding other teachers as “cunning and crafty” for using “deceitful scheming” (Eph 4:14). For a recent discussion of the ethical implications of speculating pseudonymity of Scripture in general, both for the earliest Christians and their twenty-first century counterparts, see Wilder (2004:258) who concludes his published dissertation on the subject by arguing that ancient pseudonymous writers aimed to deceive their readers. Positing pseudonymity of Ephesians may therefore be construed as potentially impugning the integrity of the earliest Christians.

Old Testament prophets, and how Ephesians shares with the Book of Daniel the themes of reception of God's mysteries by revelation and the fulfilment of the plan of God in human history, this article will propose that several facets of Paul's self-concept in Ephesians 3 are also located in Daniel. With the help of external evidence, it will then be argued that by the early sixties A.D., the Danielic self-understanding would have resonated well with Paul in Roman prison and his readers in Asia Minor. The possible implications of this proposal will then be enumerated.

2. Paul's prophetic self-understanding of his apostolicity

In Ephesians 1:1, Paul introduces himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus". What did he mean by this self-description? In Galatians 2:8, he definitely understood his apostolicity as at par with the other apostles and with Peter in particular (McLean 1991:70). The only difference that he consistently maintained was that he was an apostle to the Gentiles. This self-concept as apostle to the Gentiles was no doubt instilled in him at his conversion and call, when God described him as "my chosen instrument *to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings*" (Acts 9:15; cf. Acts 22:13-15; 26:15-17, emphasis added).

This self-concept is reinforced in Paul's letters. In Romans, for example, he insists that his ministry to the Gentiles would eventually result in the conversion of the Jews (Rom 11:11-13). To the Galatians, he goes as far as positing a "division of labour of the spread of the gospel" (Hodge 2005:270)—Peter to the circumcised, Paul to the uncircumcised (Gal 2:7-8). Consequently, it can be surmised that Paul understood his apostolicity in functional terms as related to his missionary work among the Gentiles. His self-introduction in Ephesians 1:1 as an apostle was no different.

Yet, even though Paul is never given the title of a prophet, he regarded these missionary apostolic functions as charismatic and prophetic in nature. As I shall shortly show to be prominent in both Ephesians and Daniel, this prophetic function included revealing new and unknown divine mysteries and interpreting existing scripture with new wisdom and understanding (Hall II 1982:218). To Paul these prophetic revelatory and interpretative functions

were all centred in the person of Jesus and the operation of the outpoured Holy Spirit.

It is granted that Paul made definite distinctions between Christian prophets and apostles (e.g., 1 Cor 12:28). Yet, if we adopt M Eugene Boring's definition of an early Christian prophet as "an immediately inspired spokesman for the risen Jesus who received intelligible oracles that he felt impelled to deliver to the Christian community" (1982:16), then Paul operated in the prophetic tradition. It is no wonder therefore that he often described himself in the mould of the Old Testament prophets (Nickelsburg 1986:202; see also Sandnes 1991).¹²

Sandnes rightly points out that "Paul's concept of apostlehood was the basic point in common with the essential features of the OT prophets", and that apostlehood for Paul theologically "moves beyond and transcends [Christian] 'prophets'" (1991:18). Nevertheless, it cannot be dismissed as irrelevant that Paul understood himself as operating in the mould of the Old Testament prophets. Like the Old Testament prophets, Paul's apostolic mission involved prophetic proclamation of God's mysteries, being "possessed" or "captured" by God's Spirit, suffering and rejection, intercession on behalf of God's people, and humility in the conduct of these functions (Lindholm 1967).¹³ As Acts 20:17-38 shows, all these functions were evident in Paul's missionary work at Ephesus.

A few specific examples will suffice to illustrate this prophetic self-understanding of Paul's apostolicity. When Paul states in Galatians 1:15-16 that he was "set apart from birth" to preach among the Gentiles, he was describing his self-understanding in the mould of the prophet Jeremiah, who was equally consecrated before he became an embryo for a similar function to the Gentiles (Jer 1:5 cf. Isa 42:6-7, 16; 9:1; 8:16-17, 61:1-2; 51:4-5; 49:6).

¹² The two concepts of are sometimes used together in the Bible. In 1 Kgs 14:6 for example, Ahijah the prophet performs both functions as God's emissary and prophet to Jeroboam. Similarly, the gospels depict the sending of the apostolic emissaries in parallel terms to the sending of the Old Testament prophets (Luke 11:49; Matt 10:41; 23:34). It is also important to note how in Acts 13:1, Paul is listed among one of the "prophets and teachers" of Antioch.

¹³ For example, Jer. 7:3-4, 22-28, 17:19-27, 14:11, 31-31-34; Hos. 6:2-6; Ezek 3:16-21, 18:1-32; Amos 5:21-25; Micah 6:1-8; and Hab 3:1-2.

Likewise, in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, Paul's statement that "God tests our hearts" is an allusion to Jeremiah who also confessed how the Almighty judges and tests the "hearts and minds" of the righteous (Jer 11:20; 12:3). Furthermore, in Romans 9:3-4, Paul portrays himself in the mould of Moses—as one who was willing to be "cursed and cut off from Christ" for the sake of the salvation of the Israelites (cf. Exod 32:31-33). In the same way, Richard Hays has also shown how in several passages, especially in Romans, Paul adopts Isaiah's language as his own to show their fulfilment in his ministry (1989:226).¹⁴

Consequently, it is fair to conclude that Paul's self-understanding of his mission as an apostle sent by God to teach Gentile kings and their peoples was firmly grounded in the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Of the Old Testament prophets, Daniel would seem as good a candidate as the others for such self-definition. After all Daniel's immense influence in the inter-testamental period on the Qumran Essenes,¹⁵ and in the first century, in Jesus and the New Testament authors, is widely acknowledged (e.g., Beale 1980:163-170; 1984:413-423; Beasley-Murray 1993; Collins 1993). This influence is also manifested in Ephesians 3, to which we now turn.

3. Paul's Danielic self understanding in Ephesians 3

After expounding the fulfilment of God's plan for the Gentiles through his apostolic mission in Ephesians 2:11-18, Paul's intention, it appears, was to proceed on to prayer (Eph 3:14-18) and then to exhortation (Eph 4-6). However, before then, he interrupts himself with a digression to describe his apostolic mission to his readers who did not know him that well (Eph 3:2).

¹⁴ It has also been frequently argued by scholars that in those passages where Paul describes himself as a slave of Christ, he sees himself as imitating the Servant of Yahweh passages of Isaiah in which he shares in the Lord's suffering for the sake of God's people (e.g., Fredriksen 2002: 235-260). In addition, in a number of passages where Paul uses the OT to support his apostleship, it is to the OT prophets that he alludes to (e.g., Phil 2:16; 1 Cor 9:16 [Jer 20:9 cf. Amos 3:8], 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10 [Jer 1:10]). The ancient Jews tended not to regard Daniel as a prophet, even though Jesus labeled him as such (Matt 24:15; Mark 13:14).

¹⁵ WS Hall has argued that the interpreters of Qumran regarded their charismatic expository function in the same way that Daniel approached the interpretation of dreams. Interestingly, by examining how Paul interpreted OT passages in pericopes such as Rom 9-11, Hall also concludes that like Paul, the "prophets practiced charismatic exegesis" (Hall 1982:218).

This is one of the main internal evidences suggesting that Ephesians was a circular letter.

In the digression, Paul hones several of the self-introductory remarks in ways that echo the prophet Daniel. These refinements include the self-reference “I, Paul”, the focus on revelation of mysteries and its link to his imprisonment, the use of the term “holy” to qualify the “apostles and prophets”, the apparently self-deprecating characterization as “less than the least of God’s people”, and the reference to his kneeling posture in prayer.

Two caveats are necessary before proceeding to examine these parallels. Firstly, Paul perceived himself in his own right as Christ’s apostle and *not* as an imitation of Daniel. Though his Danielic self-understanding affirmed his apostolicity in the line of the Old Testament prophets, Paul also emphasized his distinctiveness. Secondly, the construction of self-identities from literature does not depend on exact correspondence of words. Instead, it is the overall composite portrait that the correspondences depict which is in view.

3.1 “I, Daniel” in the Book of Daniel and “I, Paul” in Ephesians

The self-reference, “I, Paul”, is used by the apostle on six occasions. In two of them (2 Cor 10:1; Gal 5:2), he uses “I, Paul” to precede an authoritative and solemn statement. In 1 Thessalonians 2:18, he uses it to single himself out from among his team members in a particular, personal matter. And in Philemon 1:19, “I, Paul” is used to do both. In the remaining two, in Colossians 1:23 and Ephesians 3:1, the self-reference is used to describe his mission as a receiver and proclaimer of God’s mystery. “I, Paul” in Ephesians 3:1 is therefore Paul’s familiar way of writing, even though its emphatic timing near the beginning of what was meant to be a prayer report makes it slightly different from Colossians 1:23.

There is a strikingly similar use of self-referencing associated with the reception of God’s revelation and prayer report in Daniel. On seven occasions in the book of Daniel, the prophet uses the phrase “I, Daniel” (Dan 7:5; 8:15,

27; 9:2; 10:2, 7; 12:5).¹⁶ In all of them, the self-reference is used to report the reception of revelation. Daniel 9:2-3 in particular links the self-reference to revelation and prayer report. It reads, “In the first year of his reign, *I, Daniel*, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes” (NIV, emphasis added).

As we shall shortly see, this description of Daniel as a vehicle of revelation who interprets existing scripture in a new way is also characteristic of how Paul portrays himself in his other letters, and especially in Ephesians 3. For now, it is pertinent to acknowledge the similarities between the self-references in Daniel 9:2-3 and Ephesians 3:1. In both, they are placed before their self-descriptions as vehicles of divine revelation who report their prayers.

3.2 Daniel as an exiled prophet and Paul as an imprisoned apostle

Paul understood his sufferings as affirming his apostolicity (Shreiner 2001:87-102). His imprisonment was an important emblem of these sufferings (e.g., 2 Cor 6:5; 11:23; Phil 1:7). However, the emphasis on his imprisonment as a symbol of his apostolicity became more pronounced in the later prison letters, so that in Colossians, he could simply use the coded phrase, “Remember my chains” (Col 4:18) as an authoritative signature to the letter. Likewise, in Philemon, he repeatedly employs his imprisonment as an authoritative symbol to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus back (Phm 1, 9, 10, 13, 23, and 23).

Indeed, in Ephesians, his imprisonment not only indicated his authority as an apostle on the basis of which he exhorts the readers (Eph 4:1). In addition, Paul regarded his imprisonment as turning him into a *presbeuō*, “an envoy”, whose mission was to “fearlessly” declare the mystery of the gospel (see Bash 1997:81-138 for an examination of ambassadorial language in Paul). It is no

¹⁶ On two other occasions, he uses “me, Daniel”—Dan 7:28 and 8:1. Though there is a tendency for critical scholars to regard Daniel as pseudonymous and inauthentic, Jesus (e.g., Matt 24:15 & Mk 13:14) and the New Testament writers regarded both the prophet and the book as authentic.

wonder therefore that in Ephesians 3 the apostle describes himself as “*the prisoner of Christ Jesus*” who receives and conveys God’s revelation. Even more striking is Paul’s statement that his imprisonment is “for the sake of you Gentiles” (Eph 3:1). What was the precedent for Paul’s linking of his imprisonment to being a vehicle of divine revelation in the service of “you Gentiles”?

There is a long biblical tradition that links the isolation of a prophet—whether in exile or imprisonment¹⁷—with reception of God’s revelation. Moses, for example, received his revelatory call while in exile in Midian (Exod 3). However, this does not parallel what is being described in Ephesians 3. Jeremiah was also imprisoned for his prophetic utterances. Yet, and again, this is not a good fit for Ephesians 3, since the imprisonment of Jeremiah occurred in his own country (Jer 37-40). A number of Old Testament prophets, Jonah and Nahum being prime examples, were specifically sent to minister to Gentile nations. But, they could not be described as being in isolation in the same way as Paul was.¹⁸ Daniel, however, is one Old Testament prophet who, while in captivity, literally performed his mission as an “envoy” in the service of Gentiles, revealing God’s mystery.

The particular imprisonment of Paul associated with Ephesians is unknown. Judging by his request for prayer to enable him speak God’s mystery with boldness (Eph 6:20), the situation would have been similar to the Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28:16-31 where the apostle was more or less under “house arrest”. In that case, Paul’s condition in prison at the time of writing Ephesians bears some resemblance to the situation of the captive Daniel in the Babylonian royal courts. Though a captive, Daniel, a receiver and interpreter of God’s mysteries was nevertheless free to be Yahweh’s witness to Gentile kings and peoples.

¹⁷ Musonius Rufus’ statements about *parrhësia* in *Phoenix* 391-392 (by Euripides) indicates that, at least, some people in ancient times equated exile to imprisonment. Interestingly, *parrhësia* is the term Paul uses in Eph 6:20 to describe his proclamation of the gospel, “freely”, while in chains.

¹⁸ Elijah’s Mount Horeb “still small voice of God” experience is another example (1 Kgs 19). In Acts several revelatory experiences occur in prison (Acts 5:18; 12:7; 16:26; 27:21-25). And John had his visions in the isolated island of Patmos (Rev 1:9).

The link between Paul's imprisonment and being a vehicle of God's revelation "for the sake of you Gentiles" in Ephesians, is therefore not out of place. Paul's self-understanding in relation to the Ephesians, for reasons which I shall shortly investigate, was being expressed in similar terms to that of Daniel in Babylonian exile. This would especially have been so for Paul, having begun to see the fulfilment of the "kingdom of Christ and God" (Eph 5:5), a concept that dominated the prophecies of Daniel (e.g., Dan 2:44; 4:3; 34; 6:26; 7:14; 18; 7:22; 27). Though there is no direct evidence to the effect, this correspondence between Paul and Daniel would have been even more so if Paul, like some of his contemporaries, also regarded Rome as the "new Babylon" (cf. 1 Pet 5:3).

3.3. Daniel and Paul as vehicles of divine revelation of mysteries

One of the prominent theological themes of Ephesians is the concept of divine revelation of mystery. To be sure, Paul makes references to being a vehicle or steward of God's mystery in his other letters.¹⁹ However, the emphasis in Ephesians is marked. *Mustērion* (six times) and its lexical and semantic cognates such as insight and knowledge (fifteen times), purpose and plan (fourteen times), wisdom (three times), understanding (three times), and enlightenment (once) are frequently referred to, and are directly linked to Paul's mission. Scholarly discussions of the possible precedents for this theology have rightly located it in the Old Testament concept of the revelation of the secrets of the Divine Council (Brown 1958:417-433). In the context of the Old Testament prophets, this denotes God's gracious act of allowing a human being to share in the secrets of His Council (e.g., Jer 23:18; Amos 3:7; Isa 6:8).

Though present in several Old Testament passages, it is in the Book of Daniel that the concept of *mustērion* is fully developed and acquires the two related meanings in which Paul also uses them in Ephesians—as "that which is factually known but not understood; or ... that which is both unknown (or

¹⁹ Of the 27 occurrences of "mystery" in the NT, 20 are by Paul—Rom 11:25; 16:25; I Cor 2:1, 7, 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; II Thess 2:7; I Tim 3:9, 16. Outside Paul's letters, four are in Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7) and three in parallel passages in the gospels (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10).

rather, forgotten) factually and also not understood" (Mare 1965:79; cf. Lawson 1997:61-76). In fact the word *mustērion* occurs only once in the whole of the Septuagint, and that is in Daniel 4:6.

The correspondences between the portrayal of Paul in Ephesians and Daniel in the book that bears his name, is therefore made prominent by focusing on the concept of *mustērion*. In particular, three parallels may be drawn between the two books in relation to the concept—(a) regarding its definition, (b) in the way mystery is said to be revealed to the saints or "holy people" through the Spirit, and (c) in the way mystery is related to the fulfilment of God's purposes in human affairs.²⁰

Like Ephesians, mystery in Daniel is defined in two complementary ways. On the one hand, mystery regards the ability of the prophet to receive *de novo* revelation through the Holy Spirit—that is, revelation that was not previously made known to others (Dan 2:28; cf. Eph 3:9). On another level, mystery in both Daniel and Ephesians describes the interpretation of revealed information, including Scripture, in far more extensive and new ways (Dan 9:2; cf. Eph 3:5; see also Freyne 1982:7-23).

A second parallel between the two books with regard to revelation of mysteries is the active role played by the Holy Spirit as Revealer of mysteries (Dan 4:8-9, cf. 4:18; 5:11-14; 6:3 and Eph 1:17; 3:5, 16). It is not an anomaly therefore that Paul should categorize himself among the "holy" apostles and prophets. For, on four occasions, Daniel is similarly described as one in whom "the Spirit of the holy gods" resided (Dan 4:8-9, 18; 5:11). It has to be noted that "prophets" in Ephesians 3:5, as in the rest of the epistle, refers to "Christian prophets". Nevertheless, Paul's inclusion of himself among the foundational pillars of the church shows how he elevated the revelatory functions of prophets.

Thirdly, Daniel's visions of the establishment of the Kingdom of God in the affairs of men and through the agency of God's "holy people" (Dan 8:24 and Dan 12:7; cf. Thomas 1997:191-210) may also have influenced Paul's self-

²⁰ The limits of space allow only a brief discussion of these parallels. The reader is respectfully directed to the excellent treatment in e.g., Bruce 1984: 310-323 and Bockmuehl 1997:42-48.

concept in Ephesians. For, in both books God's purposes are fulfilled through the agency of the "saints" (Dan 7:18, 21-27; Eph 1:18; 3:18; 4:12). Daniel's emphatic statement that "the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever" (Dan 7:18; cf. Dan 7:27) perhaps lies behind Paul's prayer for the Ephesians that they might "know the hope to which he has called you, *the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints*" (Eph 1:18, emphasis added). In addition, just as Daniel depicted the spiritual warfare waged by the "horn" against "the saints" in Daniel 7:21, so also does Paul describe the spiritual battle between "the saints" and the evil powers in Ephesians 6:10-18.

Of course, Paul is at pains to stress the distinctiveness of his stewardship of God's mystery. In his case, the mystery is the *extent* of the "total inclusion of the Gentiles into the commonwealth of God's people in fulfillment of the new covenant promise of God" (Grindheim 2003:536). In this respect, Paul goes further than Daniel in the interpretation and application of the divine mystery. Frank Theilman's summary of the line from Daniel to Paul is therefore correct—"Daniel described the divine mystery in general terms as the eventual establishment of God's eternal kingdom; Jesus defined it more specifically as His proclamation of God's kingdom; and Paul described it more specifically still as the constitution of a new people, from among both Jews and Gentiles, through the atoning death of Christ on the cross" (1996). It is in this sense that the apostle Paul could insist that the mystery that he proclaimed was "for ages past kept hidden in God" (Eph 3:9). God revealed his mystery in unanticipated ways and degrees in his mission.

3.4. The "lowliest of men" in Daniel 4:17 and "less than the least" in Ephesians 3:8

A number of commentators have made much of Paul's self-deprecating declaration that he was "less than the least of God's people" (Eph 3:8). It is, for example, argued that the description is rather "like false modesty ... artificial and exaggerated" (Mitton 1976:125). To some, therefore, the statement in Ephesians 3:8 represents a clumsy attempt by a pseudonymous

writer to imitate Paul.²¹ This is despite the fact that elsewhere, the apostle similarly describes himself as the “worst of sinners” (1 Tim 1:15).

There is however an Old Testament precedent to this depiction of God's instruments in Daniel 4:17. As part of reporting his dream, Nebuchadnezzar states, “The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and *sets over them the lowliest of men*” (Dan 4:17, emphasis added). The Aramaic *šēpal ʾānāšîm* literally means “the basest, worst and despised of human beings”. It is such people, in the words of Nebuchadnezzar, that God sets over “the kingdom”. This is clearly a Semitic euphemism affirming the grace of God by which He uses the lowliest and despised of human beings to fulfil His kingdom purposes.

Accordingly, just as in Matthew 11:11, Paul in Ephesians 3:8 was not “exaggerating” his self-portrait in a ridiculous manner. Neither is Ephesians 3:8 evidence of a clumsy mimicker. Rather, in characterizing himself as “less than the least of God's people”, who had received the knowledge of God's mystery, Paul was simply restating his prophetic credentials. The revelation of the mystery of the kingdom came through the “least and the despised” of human beings (cf. Ps 25:14; Sir 3:19; 4:18; see also Viviano 2000:41-54).

3.5. Kneeling during prayer in Daniel 6:10 and Ephesians 3:14

Another peculiarity of Ephesians 3 is the depiction of Paul's kneeling posture in prayer. It is interesting simply because the apostle does not state his posture during his other prayers in all of his letters. Yet, it is reported by Luke in Acts 20:36 that Paul solemnly knelt in prayer with the Ephesian church leaders during his farewell on the beach of Miletus. Hence, Paul's kneeling posture in Ephesians 3:14 is not an anomaly.

²¹ If Ephesians were pseudonymous, then Eph 3:8 should be regarded as a calculated ploy by the writer to deceive his readers. For, one would rather have expected a pseudonymous writer *not* to have used such denigrating terms of his hero Paul. A profound ethical question is therefore posed by regarding Ephesians as pseudonymous and needs addressing by its proponents.

Nonetheless, the depiction is still striking for its rarity in Paul's letters and calls for further comments on the possible precedents. In the Old Testament, kneeling in prayer is reported only in Daniel 6:10, even though the Greek translation of 1 Chronicles 29:20 also states that the whole congregation of Israel "bowed their knees" in worship. Daniel's dramatic three-times-a-day kneeling in prayer, each time with his windows open in defiance of the king's decrees, constituted an imagery that must have been deeply etched in the minds of the Diaspora Jews of Babylonian descent, some of whom, as we shall shortly argue, may have been Christians in Ephesus. When Paul therefore reports that he "kneels before the Father", he was evoking a strong Danielic imagery that would have resonated with some of his readers. Like Paul, Daniel was a man of intercession who was deeply concerned about the progress of God's kingdom.

In a summary, the self-portrait that Paul depicts in Ephesians 3, as "Paul, the implied author", though correlates with the imagery of him in his other letters, is also slightly adapted for the specific readers of this letter. These refinements have correspondences in the prophet Daniel and are reflections of "pedagogical adaptability" in which ancient teachers honed their self-portrait to suit the pupils and the teaching situation.

4. External supporting evidence for the proposal

Two further questions now engage our attention. Firstly, what possible socio-historical situation in Ephesus and/or Asia Minor in general necessitated the refinement in the apostle's self-portrait? Secondly, how does the Danielic self-portrayal contribute to elucidating the epistle as a whole? These questions will be answered by drawing from the implications of external evidence. Though not direct, the evidence supports the view that Paul and his readers would have shared a bond related to the Danielic portrait.

4.1. Delivered from "wild beasts" and "the mouth of the lion" in Ephesus

In 1 Corinthians 15:32, Paul indicates that he fought "wild beasts" in Ephesus. Most recent commentators understand this statement as metaphorical (e.g., Thiselton 2000:1252; Fee 1987:770), even though in the past, several scholars

did understand it literally (e.g., Osborne 1966:225-230). Paul's Roman citizenship is usually cited as militating against the possibility of a literal "feeding" him to wild beasts.²² In the metaphorical sense, "fighting wild beasts" describes clashes with opponents in the city (e.g., LXX Ps 21:14; cf. Malherbe 1968:71-80).

Yet, if the phrase is metaphorical, it is still remarkable that Paul used it on only one occasion to depict his specific opponents in Ephesus. Opposition to the apostle was after all common in most of the cities he visited. How then did he come to associate the specific opposition in Ephesus with "fighting wild beasts"?

The anti-Paul riot in the theatre of Ephesus (Acts 19:29-41), though does not mention "wild beasts", may well have contributed to Paul's use of the metaphor in association with the city. For, as will shortly become apparent, there is evidence that gladiatorial fights with lions occurred in the theatres of Rome and Asia Minor during Paul's time. Archaeological excavations of ancient theatres in Asia Minor have also unearthed several mosaics and wall paintings of fights between humans and wild animals (see Wiedemann 1992:26-27, figures 5d, 6 and 8). Though these artifacts probably postdate Paul's time, the evidence discussed below suggests that gladiatorial fights with lions did occur in Rome and other parts of the Empire as early as the mid forties A.D.. The anti-Paul riot of Acts 19 may therefore have occurred in a theatre which hosted such gladiatorial sports. Consequently, it is most probable that Paul's statement that he "fought wild beasts" in Ephesus, if metaphorical, was related to this riot.

If that be the case, it is conceivable how Paul would have reflected on the riot in the Ephesian theatre in Danielic terms.²³ Like Daniel, who was eventually freed from his enemies by the king, so was Paul freed from the rioters by the city clerk (Acts 19:35). As noted by Jobes (2005:313-314), during the first century B.C. and especially among the Qumran Essenes, where Danielic imagery was influential, conflict with opponents was sometimes described

²² MacDonald argues that the statement was rather aimed at denying a legend (1980:265-276).

²³ Seneca notes in *Clem 1.25.1*, that the lion was regarded as the "the wild beast par excellence" for the gladiatorial fights in the ancient theatres.

using Daniel's experiences. Perhaps, therefore, the nature of the conflict with the opponents in the Ephesian theatre caused Paul to perceive himself in the mould of Daniel who was similarly faced with opposition and was literally "fed" to lions.

Paul's reference to escaping from "the mouth of the lion" in Ephesus in 2 Timothy 4:17, written perhaps some months after Ephesians, is also striking and confirms such a conclusion. Most recent critical commentators also regard this reference as metaphorical, and some even argue that it is pseudonymous and dependent on 1 Corinthians 15:32 (Harding 2001:12). If, however, 2 Timothy is accepted as it is, as written by Paul, then the use of this phrase, even if metaphorical, would seem to confirm the above thesis that Paul regarded his experiences in Ephesus in Danielic terms.

On the other hand, there is concrete evidence to suggest that Paul most probably meant his statement in 1 Corinthians 15:32 to be taken literally. The "feeding" of certain categories of convicted criminals to gladiatorial lions, even if Roman citizens, is a well-attested historical fact (Wiedemann 1992:67).²⁴ The ancient Roman historian, Gaius Suetonius (A.D. 69–130), documented for example, that as early as A.D. 37-41, during the reign of Emperor Gaius Caligula, "Many men of honourable rank were first disfigured with the marks of branding-irons and then condemned to the mines, to work at building roads, or to be thrown to the wild beasts" (*Lives of the Caesars I*, Book IV, Section XXVII)²⁵.

Similarly, the historical writer Dio Cassius (*Dio's Roman Histories* 59.10.3), reports that around the late thirties A.D., with "shortage" of condemned criminals, Emperor Caligula instructed that ordinary bystanders should be arrested and thrown to feed the lions of the theatres. Though Dio wrote a century after the purported incidents, the attestations regarding Caligula's cruelties are multiple. Therefore, the fact that such incidents could have occurred at all supports the plausibility that Paul meant 1 Corinthians 15:32 to

²⁴ See also Josephus' description of forcing criminals to fight wild beasts (*Wars of the Jews* 7.38).

²⁵ Quotations of Ancient works are from @ <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/loeb/> accessed August-September 2008.

be taken literally. At least he may have thought that the rioters in Ephesus were about to “feed” him to the lions. For, he also described his experiences there in Asia Minor as the “sentence of death” (2 Cor 1:9).

There is more external evidence in support of the probability that 1 Corinthians 15:32 is a literal description. Aulus Gellius recorded an eyewitness account by Apion during the reign of Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-45) in which a runaway slave, Androclus, was thrown to the lions of the circus of Rome—”There were there many savage wild beasts brutes remarkable for their huge size ... the vast size of the lions excite wonder ... There was brought in, among many others who had been condemned to fight with the wild beasts the slave of an ex-consul; the slave’s name was Androclus” (*Attic Nights* 5.14.7-11).

As Wiedemann notes, these executions through feeding “criminals” to lions occurred in several places of the Roman Empire outside Rome (1992:26-27; cf. Paschke 2006:489-500). Eusebius also reported the execution of Roman citizens in as far away as Spain and Gaul. Many of these citizens were executed by “feeding” them to lions (*Ecclesiastical History* V.1.44 & 50). Considering that the Ephesian riot occurred at least a decade after these incidents, it is highly likely that Paul’s description in 1 Corinthians 15:32 literally occurred.

It may be concluded therefore, that whether the descriptions in 1 Corinthians 15:32 and 2 Timothy 4:17 are metaphorical or literal, Paul, without a doubt, had an experience in Ephesus which, in his reckoning, was similar to Daniel’s in Babylonian exile. The experience resulted in his Danielic self-understanding, especially in relation to the Ephesian churches. And this Danielic self-portrait became part of his means of reinforcing the bond he had with his readers.²⁶

²⁶ The Danielic significance of Paul’s references to fighting wild beast is also noted by Hippolytus in his commentary on Dan 3:29, when he asks: “For if we believe that when Paul was condemned to the beasts the lion that was set upon him lay down at his feet and licked him, how shall we not believe that which happened in the case of Daniel” (*ANF* 05.176). The several post-biblical apocryphal portrayals of Paul in combat with lions may have been influenced by the above texts.

4.2. Babylonian origins of Jews in Asia Minor and the Ephesian congregation

A subsidiary question now needs addressing—would the first readers of the epistle have been so familiar with the story of Daniel to the extent that Paul's Danielic self-portrait would have resonated with them? In other words, would the first readers of Ephesians have grasped the Danielic overtones of Ephesians 3?

The answer to this admittedly difficult question may lie in another piece of circumstantial evidence related to the readers of Ephesians. Though it is apparent that the recipients of the letter were mostly Gentiles, some of them were Jews—hence the focus on Jewish and Gentile unity in the letter (see Yee 2005). In any event, the evidence from Acts suggests that the Jews of Ephesus and its surrounding region, unlike those in other regions, were more receptive to the gospel (e.g., Acts 18:19-21; 24-28; 19:1-10).

More specifically, there is well-attested evidence in Josephus that many of the Jews of Asia Minor were of Babylonian origins (e.g., *Antiquities* 14.10.22; 14.10.23-25, 16.6.1; 16.6.1-7). F. F. Bruce (1984:3-15) traces the backgrounds of some of these Jews to as far back as the Old Testament times. Some, in Sardis for example could be traced to the time of the prophet Obadiah (1984:6). It is also multiply reported and supported by the evidence in 2 Maccabees 8:20, that, in 214 B.C., Antiochus III settled thousands of Babylonian Jews in Asia Minor. Josephus notes for example that about 2,000 families from Babylonia were specifically settled in the Lycus Valley to help stabilize the region during his reign (*Antiquities* 12.149). These settlers were enabled to thrive with provisions of houses, cultivatable land, exemption from taxation and self-rule (see also Safrai 1974:434; Rostovtzeff 1951:491).

It will not be a stretch too far of the historical imagination that descendants of some of these Babylonian Jews also became members of the congregations who received the epistle. To these Jews, the story of Daniel would have been pivotal to their self-identity in a Gentile environment. Similarly, the “God-fearing” Gentiles among them who became Christians would have been familiar with Daniel, a Jewish prophet who ministered in the corridors of power in a Gentile kingdom. Accordingly, the story of Daniel and his

compatriots may have been part and parcel of the collective memory of the congregations which received the letter to the Ephesians.²⁷

If this piece of circumstantial evidence is correct—and it is circumstantial because it requires verification as to whether the recipients really knew about Daniel—but if it is correct, then Paul would have had good reasons to portray himself in Ephesians in the mould of Daniel. With typical “pedagogical adaptability”, Paul was employing the Danielic self-portrait to bond himself to his readers and so increase his chances of success as a communicator.

5. Implications of the proposal

The above interpretation and the evidence adduced in its support, if correct, have a number of implications for the interpretation of Ephesians. First and foremost, it undermines the approach in critical scholarship that denies Pauline authorship of Ephesians. The variations in the apostle's self-concept are not only explainable, but were also conducive to his success as a communicator. His twenty-first century interpreters would similarly be best served by taking this flexibility into account.

Secondly, the above findings demonstrate the utility of considering the distinctive self-concept portrayed by Paul in each of his letters. In introducing himself in Danielic terms in Ephesians 3, Paul no doubt was adapting his apostolic self-portrait in such a way as to evoke the authority inherent in that image. He was also closely associating himself with the recipients in such a manner as to make his instructions achieve their maximal rhetorical effect. The exhortations in Ephesians 4-6 should consequently be seen as deriving their authority from the Danielic self-portrait. Additionally, it indicates that Ephesians 3 is an important prism through which to interpret the whole epistle.

Thirdly, there may also be benefits in examining the other distinctive themes of Ephesians against the background of the Danielic self-portrait. Paul's focus on “principalities and powers”, the theme of “inheritance” of the possession of the saints, and the emphases on the work of the Holy Spirit within the

²⁷ On the role of Collective Memory in Social Identity Theory, see Esler & Piper (2006:23-44).

eschatological community of God appear to resonate with similar theological themes in the Book of Daniel. Studies exploring the trajectory of these themes from Daniel to Ephesians could therefore prove illuminating.

Finally, it is granted that theories about “progression” of Paul's self-definition must be approached with due care and tentativeness. Yet, if the above proposal is correct, it suggests that Paul's self-understanding, and perhaps his philosophical and psychological response to his imprisonment, as portrayed in Ephesians, progressed beyond what is depicted in Philippians. During the time of the imprisonment associated with Philippians, the apostle reflected on how his incarceration was not only leading to the boldness of other preachers, and his own increased opportunities to witness for Christ. It also resulted in a further self-evaluation of the worth of his life (Phil 1:11-26).

By the time of the imprisonment associated with Ephesians, however, Paul perceived his captivity as another affirmation of his apostolicity. He also became more explicit in articulating the link between the imprisonment and his role as a vehicle of divine revelation. It is being proposed that the prophet Daniel provided Paul with the precedent for this self-understanding.

This implication will have to be tested in 2 Timothy. If it is correct, as most conservative scholars believe, that 2 Timothy was Paul's final letter, then it has to be tested whether Paul's Danielic self-portrait is also pressed in 2 Timothy. If so, this insight may make a modest contribution to charting the possibly progressive spectrum of the self-portrait of the apostle in all the five prison letters.

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