Darko, Daniel K.

No Longer Living as the Gentiles: Differentiation And Shared Ethical Values In Ephesians 4.17–6.9

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William R. G. Loader
Murdoch University
Murdoch, Australia

This work is a revision of a thesis presented to the University of London in 2006. In it the author, Daniel K. Darko, Adjunct Professor at the University of Scranton, seeks to address a tension that he detects in scholarship on Ephesians between treatments of 4:17–5:21 and 5:21–6:9. Chapter 1 explores that tension. Whereas most scholars see the former as sharply differentiating the community from outsiders, variously understood as reflecting ethical concern or social withdrawal, the most common interpretation of the household code sees it serving to enhance the community’s relation with its world, either by enabling it to adapt to community norms or apologetically to display that its own communities are in no way disruptive of what people considered good and orderly. The rest of chapter 1 deals with methods. They include textual analysis, comparative analysis of the text with Greco-Roman and Jewish moralists of the time, and social identity theory, a carefully nuanced discussion identifying current approaches and their applicability. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of authorship, destination, and the relationship between Ephesians and Colossians in which Darko inclines toward Pauline authorship, sees the letter addressing some concrete situation in Asia Minor, and indicates that he will view Ephesians in its own right and not through the lens of Colossians.
Chapter 2 discusses the rhetoric of differentiation in 4:17–5:21. Beginning with 4:17–21, it argues that the author uses Jewish language to differentiate Christians (Jews and Gentiles) from outsiders, who might even include Jews, though that is not the focus and a matter of conjecture. The emphasis is not on social withdrawal but on depicting the outsiders, using rhetoric typical both of Paul and of Stoicism, as having ignorant minds and hardened hearts. The author seeks, however, not to analyze outsiders but to set them in contrast to the insiders, to promote “a strong sense of identity and bond among the believers” (38). With regard to the exhortation to put off the old and put on the new humanity (taking the infinitives as imperatival), the author is engaging in reinforcement of group identity, in part by exaggeration of selected areas (represented by their old life) compared with who they are now. “That they maintain a higher moral standing does not necessarily suggest social withdrawal” (41). The notion of a renewed mind and being clothed with holiness and righteousness, which has parallels in Plato and Philo, is part of the rhetoric of differentiation. Similarly, the language light and darkness, unlike its use at Qumran, is not about “withdrawal or introversionist stance” but about identity with Christ, and the light’s moral excellence reflects an ethic that “does not differ from what one find in other Graeco-Roman moral discourse” (56). This is also true of the contrast between wisdom and folly, a common motif in Greco-Roman moral discourse. Here it is framed by christological and theological terms that govern its meaning. There is little interest in defining what is foolish, and nothing in the contrast suggests a call for social isolation or withdrawal. Accordingly, Darko concludes that “the contrastive patterns form part of the author’s strategy to demarcate clear identity and moral boundaries between his readers and outsiders” (66) and so “to enhance positive group identity and a bond of unity among ingroupers” (67) rather than attempt to make social comparison or to promote social withdrawal.

In chapter 3, Darko begins his analysis of the household codes by challenging the widespread assumption that the household code in Ephesians is likely to have had a similar function to that of 1 Peter, namely, apologetic, and to be related to the link between good household management and the state. He succeeds in showing that household instructions sometimes occur without that link and that they are consistently patriarchal. In addition, he challenges the notion that there existed a nonpatriarchal or hierarchical Christian household order that the author of Ephesians was adapting to the norms of the wider community.

In his discussion of the command to wives to submit to husbands, Darko notes that this is in part a function of age, since husbands were usually at least ten years older. He also emphasizes the close link between the household code and what precedes, so that, as in Stoicism, we should see this advice on marriage as belonging to what it means to be wise—in contrast to Cynics, who saw marriage as folly. The concern with household order
might well reflect concerns of the day about women who were not submissive. Wifely submission was a norm, but Ephesians adds to that norm the perspective of “in the Lord,” which gives a christological basis for the instruction in which Christ’s headship serves both as an analogy and as motivation, though in codes of the time the notion of love, including mutual love between husband and wife, was commonly a feature. Similarly, the instructions about children’s obedience and the fathers’ role in discipline were fairly standard but are given a religious impetus by being set within the framework of the lordship of Christ (94). The instructions concerning slaves likewise match elite standards of the day, and while “believing slaves have a new identity and are referred to as” servants of Christ, “in reality it is only a redefinition of their identity in ideological terms” (97). Masters are placed under some restraint, being accountable to a heavenly master.

Reviewing all three pairs, Darko notes that each begins with instructions to the weaker of the two; each takes standard instructions and gives them a Christian framework in a way that reinforces differentiation and identity; and the author employs the standard instruction about wives’ submission, husband’s love, obedience of children and slaves to “promote internal cohesion in a community with a distinct identity in Christ, as one finds in the previous admonition in 4.17–5.21 (99). Thus, rather than seeing the household code as standing out from its context as different, he argues that it belongs closely with what precedes and serves the same purpose (99). As there, nothing indicates that the author is attempting a critique of community standards or making an apologetic case for the Christian community. A consideration of the fictive family language in Ephesians, which echoes that of the undisputed letters, shows that the household code and this language share common values, so that the household codes are to be seen as microcosms not of the state, as in Aristotle, but of the church that it thereby reinforces. The household code “absorbs or shares wider social values and norms” and “reinforces the significance of moral integrity and places them in a Christological framework” (106). This is not to be seen as a surrender of an alternative egalitarian system of household order, for which we have no evidence, for purposes of conformity to society or apologetics, but as part of the author’s wider agenda of building solidarity and identity.

In his final chapter Darko explores the theological explanation for the differentiation and use of shared ethical values in Ephesians. Thus he notes the language of new creation, the importance of Christology, God’s action in Christ, being “in Christ,” and being body, holy temple, and fictive family. The church is contrasted with the world to which its members once belonged. “While physically believers and unbelievers may dwell in the same vicinity, town or village, there is a spatial duality that implies ‘two worlds’ in which forces of evil are operative in the realm of unbelievers while the believers live in Christ” (117). At the same time, the conventional household values espoused in the name of Christ and this new identity cohere with at least elite values of the time. In this respect at
least part of the wider world is affirmed, but it is as God had intended in creation and intends in the consummation of all things, so that there is no need to distance from such values. Using social identity theory, Darko notes that these theological explanations enhance both the cognitive awareness of being special and the emotional sense of belonging and being one, and do so also by contrasting the believers both with what they once were and what the world now is, thus emphasizing identity by contrasting “us” with “them.” “They are set apart by virtue of the new identity in Christ but in reality the substance of the ethical aspirations are moral ideals that are shared by other moralists” (126). “Thus difference is created, accentuated or exaggerated where in reality there is none, in order to prompt the sense of peculiar ‘us’ vis-à-vis ‘them’” (126).

The work represents a substantial and well-argued challenge to views that see household codes as always apologetic and compromising. It makes a major contribution to our understanding of what is going on in identity formation in Ephesians and gives a sobering assessment of the extent to which in effect Christian claims reflect common values of the time. This in turn raises questions whether the theological frame in Ephesians does or might do more than that and, not least, what constitutes ethical integrity and its basis today.