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Inheritance in Paul and Ephesians

by D. R. Denton

Dr. Denton's contribution examines the view of 'inheritance' in Paul's Hauptbriefe and Ephesians in order to assess the validity of a suggestion that the differences in usage reflect a difference in authorship.

In an article by P. L. Hammer published in 1960¹ a difference was detected between the Pauline concept of inheritance, as it appears in Romans and Galatians, and the understanding of the term in Ephesians. Briefly, the conclusions were that whereas in Paul *kleronomia* is oriented toward the past, the use in Ephesians is oriented toward the future.² Moreover, for Paul the content of the inheritance is Jesus Christ, who is also the heir.³ As heir, he is also the means whereby others become heirs. This is the chief concern of the term *synkleronomos*.⁴ On the other hand, the significance of this word in Ephesians is quite different — it describes the relationship between members of the church, specifically, Gentiles and Jews.⁵ Thus it is an ecclesiological term, whereas for the apostle it is primarily christological and soteriological.⁶ Finally, it is suggested that these differences point in the direction of the deutero-Pauline character of Ephesians.

In the second volume of his *New Testament Foundations* Ralph Martin refers to this article in support of the contention that Ephesians uses certain words in a different manner from the authentically Pauline way of expression.⁷

My concern is not with the issue of the authorship of Ephesians, but with the alleged difference between the Pauline and Ephesian use of the *kleronomia* word group. I do not believe this alleged difference can be substantiated.

I

Hammer's study is based on those passages where the writers demonstrate their own use of the terms. He is not concerned with 'passages where they largely repeat traditional formulations'.⁸ This involves the

¹ P. L. Hammer, 'A Comparison of KLERONOMIA in Paul and Ephesians', *JBL* 79 (1960), 267-72.

² Compare, e.g., Gal. 3:18 with Eph. 1:13,14.

³ As clearly in Gal. 3:16.

⁴ Rom. 8:17.

⁵ Eph. 3:6.

⁶ Cf. M. Barth's succinct summary in *Ephesians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1974), 117.

⁷ R. P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (2 vols.; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 2. 230, n. 15.

⁸ Hammer, 'Comparison', 268 and n. 13.

exclusion of Eph. 5:5; Gal. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:9,10; 15:50, all of which refer to inheriting the kingdom of God.

Two comments are to be made about this point of methodology. First, as a result of omitting such verses Hammer's understanding of Paul's teaching on inheritance is unbalanced. This shows up in the following way. He concludes that Christ is the content of the inheritance.⁹ By contrast, Hester in his monograph, which is (so far as I am aware) the most detailed study of inheritance in Paul, concludes that the inheritance is especially the kingdom of God, precisely on the basis of the verses Hammer omits.¹⁰ Further, as Eph. 5:5 uses the same language, we actually have a point of agreement between Ephesians and Paul.¹¹ The alleged difference between the two writings has therefore been heightened by the omission of a common factor as a result of the author's approach.

Secondly, even if 'to inherit the kingdom of God' is a traditional formulation, since the writers use it we may assume that they accept the truth of the concept. Thus it forms part of their view of inheritance even if it does not constitute their unique contribution to the topic. To omit it is to grasp their teaching only partially.

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II

Hammer stresses that Ephesians' use of *kleronomia* is oriented toward the future.¹² Ephesians 'does not regard the content of inheritance as a present reality'.¹³ While it is readily acknowledged that in this letter the stress is placed on the future possession of the inheritance, yet the viewpoint expressed in this quotation is not an accurate assessment of the epistle.

Hammer's assessment overlooks the relation of the Holy Spirit to the inheritance in 1:13,14. 'In him you also . . . were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it . . .' To be sure, the writer says of our inheritance 'until we acquire possession of it'¹⁴ (and Hammer¹⁵ quotes the verse

⁹ *Ibid.*, 270, 271. See the criticism of this (as presented in Hammer's unpublished dissertation) in J. D. Hester, *Paul's Concept of Inheritance* (SJT Occasional Papers 14; Edinburgh/London: Oliver and Boyd, 1968), 65, n. 1.

¹⁰ Hester, *Paul's Concept*, 79, 80, 88, 89. His concluding words are: 'It (inheritance) is best summarized by the designation, "the Kingdom of God".'

¹¹ C. L. Mitton, *Ephesians* (New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1976), 181.

¹² An interesting twist to the usual claim that salvation, which is eschatological in Paul, is already achieved in Ephesians. Barth's (*Ephesians*, 117) comment 'I' is very expressive.

¹³ Hammer, 'Comparison', 269.

¹⁴ Some commentators take this clause to refer to God's final redemption of his people, as does NEB. Hammer apparently accepts the RSV translation, which he quotes, and

with this in mind), but this is preceded by a reference to the Holy Spirit as the *arrabon* of our inheritance. And, as is well-known, this word means more than 'guarantee' (RSV); it means first instalment, down payment.¹⁶ It conveys the idea that the Spirit who guarantees our inheritance is also himself a part of it, the part which has already been experienced.¹⁷ With reference to the particular case at hand, Mitton writes, 'The gift of the Holy Spirit is that part of our inheritance which we may enjoy here and now in this mortal life.'¹⁸

In other words, Ephesians, like Paul, knows a present aspect of inheritance.¹⁹

III

Conversely I believe that Hammer overstates the present aspect of inheritance as depicted in the Pauline homologoumena. As indicated previously (I. above), he omits the references which repeat traditional formulations. But precisely these verses, and all of them without exception, are decidedly eschatological in their orientation. And although they might not reflect Paul's own contribution, they do reflect his beliefs. So, Gal. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:9,10; 15:50 reveal a future aspect of inheritance in the apostle's writings.²⁰

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So do other references, which Hammer has neglected. Most clear of all is Col. 3:24 which reads: 'knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance (*kleronomia*) as your reward.'²¹ The tense of the verb makes abundantly clear that there is a truly eschatological side to

which I believe suits the context better, because it is our inheritance which is in question. Either way, it does not affect the point I am making.

¹⁵ Hammer, 'Comparison', 269.

¹⁶ See the fine explanation of this word in Mitton, *Ephesians*, 62, 63.

¹⁷ The conclusion of J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan (*The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952) 79) runs: 'The above vernacular use amply confirms the NT sense of an "earnest", or a part given in advance of what will be bestowed fully afterwards, as 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5, Eph. 1:14.' Cf. G. E. Ladd, (*A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 371), 'An *arrabon* is promise, but it is more than promise; it is also realization' and J. D. G. Dunn ('Spirit and Kingdom', *Exp. Tim.* 82 (1970) 36), 'The Spirit not only guarantees the full inheritance; he is himself the beginning and first part of that inheritance.'

¹⁸ Mitton, *Ephesians*, 62.

¹⁹ Barth (*Ephesians*, 117) comes to the same conclusion from a different approach.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians does not fit Hammer's picture of Paul's understanding of inheritance. Not only are the references all future, but other features are lacking too: the allusion to the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham and Christ as the content of the inheritance.

²¹ Hammer makes no mention at all of this verse, not even in the footnotes. He does not indicate that he excludes it on the grounds of non-Pauline authorship of Colossians.

Paul's teaching on the subject and that a future orientation is not restricted to Ephesians.

Further future aspects of inheritance are found in Rom. 8:17-23.²² In this passage sonship leads to the idea of inheritance. When we ask what is inherited we receive a twofold answer, both parts of which still lie in the future: glory (8:17) and the redemption of the body as that element which is still lacking in our full adoption (8:23).²³ Paul's thoughts project into the future. Vv. 18-23 are wholly eschatological, as he looks forward to the time of final redemption which encompasses both creation and believers.

The view that Paul's orientation is toward the past is not the full picture then. More accurate is the conclusion of Hester. Chapter 3 of his study is devoted to the question, 'When do the heirs inherit?' His answer is that 'it is the essence of Inheritance that it *is*, and yet *is not*'.²⁴ Paul's position on inheritance is one of 'already but not yet', and both of these elements form an essential part of his teaching.²⁵ This is in line with the present-future tension which is typical of Paul's outlook and which characterizes many of the terms used in his eschatology.²⁶

And Ephesians' teaching about inheritance depicts this same tension and dual outlook.²⁷ The key to it is the Holy Spirit, who links the present possession and the future expectation of the believer's inheritance.²⁸

IV

Hammer makes the point that *synkleronomos* in Ephesians has a different meaning from that which Paul gives it. In Rom. 8:17 believers are fellow-heirs with Christ, whereas in Eph. 3:6 the term deals with the relationship between members of the church. While this is true, again the contrast is too sharply drawn.

²² W. Foerster, 'Kleronomos', *TDNT* 3 (1966), 783.

²³ Likewise Hester, *Paul's Concept*, 97, 102.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 98-104. It is to be noted that, since Ephesians does not form part of Hester's study, his conclusion cannot be influenced by the future elements there. He informs us, in the preface, that he is concerned primarily with Romans 4, and 8, Galatians 3 and 4.

²⁶ Cf. Dunn, 'Spirit and Kingdom', 36, 37; N. Q. Hamilton, *The Holy Spirit and Eschatology in Paul* (*SJT Occasional Papers* 6; Edinburgh/London: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), 26-40.

²⁷ Barth (*Ephesians*, 117) agrees with this judgment: 'The use made of inheritance terminology proves that Paul follows in Ephesians the same lines of eschatological thought as he does, for example, in Rom. 8.'

²⁸ This conforms with the explanation of Paul's eschatological perspective given by J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975), 308-11 and Hamilton, *The Holy Spirit*, 26-40.

In the case of Ephesians, the term describes the oneness of Jewish and Gentile believers. Gentiles are fellow-heirs, members of the same body as believing Jews. Now although Paul does not use the term *synkleronomos* with this sense in Galatians or Romans, yet I suggest that the concept is there, without the word. Indeed, it is precisely in the 'inheritance' passages (Galatians 3 and Romans 4) that this is to be found.

In Galatians 3 Paul argues (from the singular 'offspring') that the heir is Jesus Christ (v.16).²⁹ But this leads to the idea, at the end of the chapter, that believers are heirs too, in him. 'And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise' (v.29). The line of argument in verses 25 to 29 runs: in Christ believers are sons of God, and so if they belong to Christ they are Abraham's offspring, and therefore heirs. But who are these believers whom Paul is addressing? Gentiles. The point is that through faith in Jesus they have become heirs of God's promise to Abraham (cf. vv.8,14).³⁰ That is, implicitly, they have become heirs along with Jews who believe. This is even clearer when one takes into account v.28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for you are one in Christ Jesus.' It is precisely the theme of oneness among believers as fellow-heirs, that is taught here.³¹ Thus Paul presents the concept, though not the term (as in Eph. 3:6). Indeed, it could reasonably be said that Eph. 3:6 sums up and epitomizes in one word the teaching of Gal. 3:26-29.

Thus Hammer's alleged difference between the Pauline and Ephesian concepts of inheritance cannot be maintained. In part, the distinction that he finds is based on a methodology which affects the conclusion. Beyond that, his other points of difference are not found to be valid when one looks more closely at the passages from which they are derived, supplemented by several references which were overlooked. Both

²⁹ Hammer ('Comparison', 270, 271) makes this point strongly.

³⁰ Similarly Rom. 4:9-17. Paul argues that the inheritance is available to all who believe; i.e., both Jews and Gentiles receive the inheritance and both are sons of Abraham, who is thus the father of all believers.

³¹ I now find this opinion corroborated by the view of J. Eichler ('Inheritance', *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (3 vols.; Exeter: Paternoster, 1976), 2. 302), e.g., 'Through Christ the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs with them. Paul stresses again and again that in Christ all believers without distinction are children of God and inheritors of the promise.' He supports this with references to Gal. 3:23-29 and Rom. 4:13,14.

Paul and Ephesians reflect present and future aspects in their understanding of inheritance, an 'already but not yet' tension. Likewise they both depict the concept of Jews and Gentiles as fellow-heirs, the only difference being that Ephesians uses the term which is absent from the *Hauptbriefe*. Therefore, with reference to 'inheritance' there is a remarkable similarity between these writings.