

COSMIC LORDSHIP AND DIVINE GIFT-GIVING: PSALM 68 IN EPHESIANS 4:8

by

TIMOTHY G. GOMBIS

Cedarville University

Abstract

The use of Psalm 68 in Eph. 4:8 has proved to be one of the most difficult interpretive problems in this enigmatic letter. In this article I will engage and critique a leading interpretive proposal and then offer an alternative reading that exploits the elements of divine triumph and divine warfare in Ephesians, and that satisfactorily accounts for the quotation and elaboration by the writer in vv. 9-10.

1. *Introduction*

The writer of Ephesians quotes Ps. 68:18 (MT 68:19; LXX 67:19) in Eph. 4:8 in order to give scriptural warrant for Christ's giving of gifts to the church. The major interpretive difficulty in this text is that while in Ps. 68:18 Yahweh "receives" (קָבַץ; ἔλαβε) gifts from men, in Eph. 4:8 Christ "gives" (ἔδωκεν) gifts to the church, a change by the writer which, according to C.L. Mitton, "almost reverses the meaning of the actual text."¹ It is also difficult to discern just what the author means by speaking of the descent and ascent of Christ, and what relationship this movement has to the quotation from Psalm 68. These problems are well-known, but thus far have proved intractable. After surveying the current interpretive options, P.T. O'Brien concludes that "None of the above-mentioned suggestions fully solves this difficult crux."² After providing a critique of what is currently a widely accepted and well-supported interpretation, I will offer a new proposal regarding the use of Psalm 68 in Eph. 4:8.

¹ C.L. Mitton, *Ephesians* (London: Oliphants, 1976) 145.

² P.T. O'Brien, *Ephesians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 293. For a rehearsal of proposed solutions, see R. Schwindt, *Das Weltbild des Epheserbriefes: Eine religions-geschichtlich-exegetische Studie* (WUNT 148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002) 399-429; M. Bouttier, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Éphésiens* (CNT 9B; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1991) 180-2; E. Best, *Ephesians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 378-82.

2. *The Descent of Christ as the Spirit*

A proposal that has been advocated by several major scholars on Ephesians, and that W.H. Harris recently has defended at length in a recent monograph, is that this passage has to do with the ascent of Christ in his resurrection and subsequent descent to earth as the Spirit in order to fill the church and empower it with spiritual gifts.³ Those who argue along this line claim that the change in the citation of Psalm 68 from “received” to “gave” comes from a Christian tradition, perhaps even a first century text that the author of Ephesians adopted for his own use.⁴ This tradition most likely expressed the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost through the imagery of Psalm 68, as is evident in Acts 2:32-33.⁵

In support of the contention that the descent of Christ is subsequent to his ascent, Harris argues that the writer shapes the *midrash* in vv. 9-10 to correspond to the movement of Moses in *Targum Psalms* 68, according to which Moses first ascends to receive the law from God and then descends the mountain to give the law to the people.⁶ Harris also attempts to draw connections between Psalm 68 and Jewish Pentecost celebrations, and between Psalm 68 and the giving of the Spirit in Acts, in an effort to establish that the author of Ephesians is reflecting an early Christian tradition that associated Pentecost, Psalm 68 and the giving of the Spirit.⁷ He then suggests that the use of the ascent/descent imagery in Ephesians 4 serves as an anti-Moses polemic, contrasting Moses who ascended Sinai and descended with the Torah,

³ W.H. Harris, III, “The Ascent and Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4:9-10,” *BSac* 151 (1994) 198-214; idem, *The Descent of Christ: Ephesians 4:7-11 and Traditional Hebrew Imagery* (AGJU 32; Leiden: Brill, 1996); G.B. Caird, “The Descent of Christ in Ephesians 4, 7-11,” in *Studia Evangelica II* (ed. F.L. Cross; Berlin: Akademie, 1964) 535-45; idem, *Paul’s Letters From Prison* (Oxford: University Press, 1976) 73-75; A.T. Lincoln, “The Use of the OT in Ephesians,” *JSTNT* 14 (1982) 18-24; idem, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Dallas: Word, 1990) 246-7; E. Mouton, *Reading a New Testament Document Ethically* (AcBib 1; Atlanta: SBL, 2002) 92-94.

⁴ Caird, “The Descent of Christ,” 541.

⁵ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 159-69.

⁶ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 143; Caird, “The Descent of Christ,” 540-2; cf. also J.-N. Aletti, *Saint Paul Épître aux Éphésiens* (ÉBib NS 42; Paris: J. Gabalda, 2001) 216; Bouttier, *Éphésiens*, 182-4; R. Penna, *Lettera agli Efesini: Introduzione, versione, commento* (Scritti delle origini cristiane 10; Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1988) 187-8. *Targum Psalms* 68:19 reads, “You ascended to heaven, Prophet Moses (נבייא סליקתא לרקיע משדה); you led captive captivity (שביהא שבייהא); you learned the words of Torah (אלפהא אלהתא להון מרגן לבני נשא); you gave them as gifts to the sons of men (אוריהא פיהנמי).”

⁷ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 143-70.

and Christ who ascended in victory and descended—as the Spirit—giving gifts to the church.⁸

This view also requires an identification of Christ and the Spirit, since it is Christ who descends as the Spirit. Harris claims that in several other places in the Pauline epistles, there is a virtual identification between Christ and the Spirit, pointing to the same passages upon which Caird built his case.⁹ Harris argues that this same dynamic occurs in Ephesians. He claims that an inseparable relationship is indicated by the author's noting that the sealing of the Spirit in 1:13 takes place "in Christ."¹⁰ This connection is strengthened in the prayer in 3:14-21, where the result of the author's request that his readers be strengthened with power by the Spirit (v. 16b) is that Christ is made to dwell in their hearts (v. 17a).¹¹ Harris also implies that such a connection is made in Eph. 5:18, suggesting that the phrase ἐν πνεύματι corresponds to the ἐν Χριστῷ formula that dominates the letter's first three chapters.¹²

Finally, Lincoln, Caird, and Harris claim that this view is validated by the location to which Christ, as the Spirit, descended. The phrase τὰ κατώτερα [μέρη] τῆς γῆς is read as a genitive of apposition so that Christ is seen as having descended to the earth itself ("the lower parts, that is, the earth").¹³ Harris bases this claim on the "surprisingly large number of appositive genitive constructions, distributed throughout the epistle," and he cites 14 possible examples.¹⁴

While this proposal has a number of respected proponents and has been argued at length in several places, it fails for a number of reasons. First, the several connections that Harris, following Caird, attempts to make between Psalm 68 and Pentecost, and between Psalm 68 and the giving of the Spirit in Acts, are unconvincing. There is simply no textual evidence of the use of Psalm 68 in Acts 2, which may account for the highly tentative manner in which Harris states his conclusion:

⁸ Harris, "The Ascent and Descent of Christ," 212; idem, *The Descent of Christ*, 160.

⁹ Rom. 8:9-10; 2 Cor. 3:17; 1 Cor. 15:45 (Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 182-9; Caird, "The Descent of Christ," 537).

¹⁰ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 190.

¹¹ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 191.

¹² Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 192.

¹³ Caird, *Paul's Letters From Prison*, 75; Harris, "The Ascent and Descent of Christ," 204. A majority of commentators reads the phrase this way, though certainly as part of different interpretations (cf. Bouttier, *Éphésiens*, 183; A. Lindemann, *Der Epheserbrief* [ZBK NT 8; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985] 77; R. Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* [trans. H. Heron; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991] 178-9).

¹⁴ Harris, "The Ascent and Descent of Christ," 204.

“On the whole . . . it seems quite probable that an allusion to Ps. 68:19 was present in the underlying tradition used by Luke in Acts 2.”¹⁵

Second, there is no hint of an anti-Moses polemic in Ephesians, nor of an attempt to understand the movements of Christ in light of Moses.¹⁶ The giving of gifts by Christ is not set in opposition to the giving of the law by Moses, nor is the reception of the law in view in Ephesians at all. It is illegitimate to bring into Ephesians any notion of a law/grace contrast, as Harris attempts to do.¹⁷ Further telling against any anti-Torah polemic is the author’s refusal to exploit obvious opportunities for this purpose. For example, he does not develop the reference to Christ defeating the Mosaic Law in Eph. 2:11-16 into an anti-Torah polemic to any noticeable degree. If anything, it is at precisely this point that the letter begins to reflect an appreciation for the ethical resources to be mined in the OT (cf. Eph. 4:25; 5:31; 6:2, 3).

Third, the attempt to identify Christ with the Spirit in Ephesians runs into insuperable problems. Though the activities of God, Christ, and the Spirit are closely related in Ephesians, there are no grounds for identifying Christ with the Spirit in Eph. 4:8-11. Admittedly, the functions of Christ and the Spirit are related in the texts cited by Harris and Caird, but the two are not identical. The primary role of the Spirit in Ephesians is to mediate the work and presence of Christ, along with the power of God, to the church. Notions of identification and union in Ephesians apply to the relationship between Christ and the church—a relationship that is animated by the Spirit.

¹⁵ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 169.

¹⁶ A similar problem plagues the proposal of T. Moritz, who claims that the appropriation of Psalm 68 is a polemical move by the author directed against Jewish uses of the psalm that speak of the giving of Torah by God through Moses (*A Profound Mystery: The Use of the Old Testament in Ephesians* [NovTSup 85; Leiden: Brill, 1996] 71-85). According to T.R. Yoder Neufeld, “In Ephesians, the identification of Christ is not with Moses . . . but with the victorious God of Psalm 68” (*Ephesians* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2002] 177).

¹⁷ “It is even possible that ἡ χάρις in Ephesians 4:7 is intended to convey a subtle contrast: Moses brought down the Law from Sinai to give to men, but to each believer, Christ brought down not law but grace” (Harris, “The Ascent and Descent of Christ,” 212). It is inappropriate to adduce certain elements in Eph. 2 in order to draw such a law/grace contrast in Ephesians, such as the polemic against boasting (vv. 8-10) or the destruction of the Mosaic law in the death of Christ. These issues are unrelated to matters involving discussions of the Mosaic law in Romans and Galatians, where one might more plausibly draw such a contrast, though in light of recent work on these letters, one might have little ground for doing so.

The Spirit and Christ, therefore, work together in Ephesians, but are not identical.

That Christ himself remains in view throughout the entire discussion, vis-à-vis the Spirit, is indicated by the presence of the personal pronoun αὐτός, which serves to emphasize that it is precisely the one who descended who also ascended, that is, Christ, not the Spirit.¹⁸ Though the Spirit is mentioned in connection with major features of unity for the church in 4:4, and the readers are instructed to “maintain the unity of the Spirit” in v. 3, the Spirit is not in view in vv. 7-16. The focus here is on the ascended Christ and his giving gifts to the church, not on the relationship of “spiritual gifts” to the Holy Spirit. This view depends on the assumption that the readers would make an implicit connection between the descent of Christ and the giving of the Spirit by Christ to the church, since this connection is nowhere in the present text, nor anywhere else in Ephesians. According to Harris, the readers would have already known that it was at Pentecost that the Spirit was given to the church and they would have read the descent of Christ to “the lower parts of the earth” in terms of the giving of the Spirit to the church. Harris’ conjecture at this point, however, is dependent on other speculative features of his proposal, making this extremely unlikely.

This also highlights the illegitimacy of supporting this reading of Ephesians with the Acts passages that, according to Harris, appropriate imagery from Psalm 68 (Acts 2:33; 5:31).¹⁹ In Acts 2:33, the ascended Christ receives what was promised from the Father and then pours out the Spirit on the apostles. This is in contrast to the scenario advocated by Harris, where Christ first ascends, and then descends as the Spirit. The same is true of Acts 5:31-32, where Christ is exalted by God, who then gives the Spirit “to those who obey him” (v. 32). The pattern in Acts—Christ ascending after his descent and then giving the Spirit—contradicts Harris’ claims in two important ways. First, an ascent follows a descent, not the reverse, and second, it is the Spirit who is given to the church, not Christ.

The current status of Christ, according to Ephesians, also militates against this reading. Far from portraying Christ as having descended as the Spirit, the author depicts Christ as presently occupying the position of supreme Lord over the cosmos, the exalted place from which

¹⁸ G.D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 699.

¹⁹ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 159-69.

he gives χάρις to his people. It goes against the flow of the context—and this will be made clear in light of the following proposal—to have Christ descending back to earth, even as the Spirit, after he has ascended to his exalted position as cosmic Lord.²⁰

Lastly, given the cosmic situation of the church throughout Ephesians—i.e., its existence “in the heavenlies”—and the various images utilized to speak of the church, it is extremely odd that the writer would designate the descent of Christ in the person of the Spirit to the church as descending τὰ κατώτερα [μέρη] τῆς γῆς (“to the lower parts, that is, the earth”). One would have expected some other expression if the writer had a descent to the church in mind. In Eph. 1:22, the writer states plainly that Christ has been given, as head over all things, “to the church.” In 5:25-33, Christ and the church are depicted as being joined inseparably through the imagery of marriage. The writer betrays no reticence in speaking plainly about the unity of Christ and the church and that this is actualized by the Spirit, who mediates the presence of Christ and the power of God to his people. Thus it would be highly exceptional for the writer to designate the church with the euphemism, “the lower parts, that is, the earth.”²¹

In the end, much of this view is based on speculation and its strength or weakness depends on how well it accounts for all the data in the text. What ultimately undermines this reading is that many of the pillars upon which it is constructed are faulty to the point of extreme improbability. If another proposal can adequately account for the data with fewer problems and less speculation, then that view ought to be preferred.

3. *The Triumphant Warrior Blesses His People*

As mentioned above, the quotation of Ps. 68:18 (MT 68:19; LXX 67:19) is problematic because of the replacement of “gave” (ἔδωκεν) for “received” (ἔλαβε; ἔλαβες), so that the citation in Eph. 4:8 reads: ἀναβὰς εἰς ὕψος ἠχμαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλωσίαν, ἔδωκεν δόματα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις (“having ascended on high, he led captive a host of captives, he gave gifts to men”).

²⁰ M. Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (AB 34; Garden City: Doubleday, 1974) 433.

²¹ If the author had a descent to the earth in view, F. Mußner states that “hätte er einfach schreiben können: ‘hinabgestiegen auf die Erde’” (*Der Brief an die Epheser* [ÖTK NT 10; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1982] 123).

The center around which the entire discussion in vv. 7-10 turns is the matter of the giving of gifts to the church by Christ. This is evident from the piling up of words for “gave” or “gift” and the *inclusio* formed by the appearance of such words in vv. 7 and 11. In v. 7, the author claims that “to each one of us, χάρις was given (ἐδόθη) according to the gift (δωρεᾶς) of Christ.” The main verb in the quotation from Ps. 68:18, the OT text at the core of this passage, is ἔδωκεν, pointing to the giving of gifts to men by the exalted Yahweh. Then, rejoining the main discussion in v. 11, the author claims that “he gave” (ἔδωκεν) gifted leaders to the church.²² Clearly, then, the writer’s burden in the initial assertion (v. 7), the quotation of Ps. 68:18 (v. 8), and the ensuing exposition (vv. 9-10), is to explain how it can be said that Christ has given χάρις to the church.

In what follows, I will argue that the author’s use of ἔδωκεν in Eph. 4:8 is no “reversal” of meaning. The author is doing more than citing merely one verse within the psalm in order to provide his SCRIPTURAL warrant; rather, he is looking to the movement of the psalm as a whole. The imagery of divine warfare present in this context indicates that the ideology of divine warfare, and the pattern utilized in its expressions, provides the key to understanding the author’s aim in appropriating Psalm 68 to speak of the giving of χάρις to the church.²³ He depicts Christ as the triumphant Divine Warrior who, after he has ascended his throne, blesses his people with gifts. The subsequent elaboration in vv. 9-10 draws this out and confirms that this is the manner in which the Psalm 68 quotation is being used.

As I have argued elsewhere,²⁴ the author of Ephesians employs the ideology of divine warfare in order to state and defend the claim that Christ has been exalted over the powers and authorities ruling the present evil age (Eph. 1:20-23). This ideological tool was used widely in the ancient Near East, as well as in the OT, in order to assert the

²² The phrase “to each one of us” (ἐνὶ ἑκάστῳ ἡμῶν) refers to the church as a whole and the χάρις that is given to the church is the gifted leaders that are named in v. 11 (O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 287; Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, 175-6; Best, *Ephesians*, 376-7; contra H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar* [Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1971] 191; Mußner, *Epheser*, 122).

²³ Several scholars have noted the imagery of triumph present here (Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, 177; Aletti, *Éphésiens*, 215-16; Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 706; Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 177), but none has drawn on the ideology of divine warfare to explain the author’s use of Ps. 68.

²⁴ T.G. Gombis, “Ephesians 2 as a Narrative of Divine Warfare,” *JSNVT* 26 (2004) 403-18.

supremacy of a nation's deity. The ideology of divine warfare followed a typical pattern: Respective deities engage in conflict, with the eventual victor being proclaimed supreme among the gods and then given the right to build a house/temple at which the people gather to celebrate the deity's ascendancy. This basic pattern can be seen throughout Ephesians, especially in Ephesians 2, which serves to vindicate the claim that Christ is exalted to cosmic supremacy over the powers and authorities by listing his triumphs over them (2:1-16), giving Christ the right to erect his temple as a monument to his supremacy (2:20-22).

While Eph. 1:20-2:22 contains the basic elements of the mythological pattern (conflict, victory, kingship, victory shout, house-building, procession, celebration), texts wherein this configuration is found often contain several other elements, such as the development of the threatening situation, theophany, the restoration of fertility, or the blessing of the people. These last two elements are closely related in that they are two recurring blessings that the exalted deity confers upon his people or upon creation. That is, the sequence in this mythology usually closes—after the deity has processed to and assumed his throne—with the deity restoring the fertility of the created order and blessing his people with peace or salvation in some form. For example, in *Enuma elish*, Marduk, after he defeats Tiamat in battle, claims his throne as supreme among the gods, restores fertility, and blesses his people with protection and refuge (Tablets VI, 71-VII, 144; see *ANET* 60-72). Similarly, in Psalm 29, after Yahweh demonstrates his superiority over the forces of chaos and his cosmic kingship, he gives strength to his people, blessing them with peace (v. 11). The same feature is found in Isa. 43:16-21, where the imagery of the triumph of Yahweh over the machinery of war, along with the sea and mighty waters (vv. 16, 17), is followed by Yahweh blessing the people with fruitfulness in a dry place (v. 20).

Psalm 68, which is quoted in Eph. 4:8, celebrates Yahweh as the conquering Divine Warrior, and utilizes the pattern of divine warfare to portray him as such.²⁵ Significantly for our purposes, it contains this element of blessing after victory and enthronement, as it depicts Yahweh conquering his enemies and then blessing his people with gifts. In the psalm, Yahweh processes to his throne after a military victory, and on the way he receives tribute from his people (v. 18), familiar imagery in the ancient Near East. Upon his ascension to his throne, Yahweh

²⁵ P.D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 306.

then turns and gives gifts to his people: In v. 35, Yahweh is praised for the awesome power he projects from his heavenly throne, from which “the God of Israel himself gives strength (יָעַז) and power (וְהִעֲזָמֹתָ) to the people” (v. 35b).

In our view, the imagery of Yahweh ascending to his heavenly throne from which he blesses his people is what the author aims to capture in the quotation in Eph. 4:8. He is not simply quoting one verse—Ps. 68:19 in abstraction from the remainder of the psalm—but rather appropriating the narrative movement of the entire psalm. In this manner, the author portrays Christ as the victorious Divine Warrior who has the right to give gifts to his people because of his triumphs. Reading Ephesians through the lens of the ideology of divine warfare solves this difficult and hitherto intractable problem of the appropriation of Psalm 68 to speak of Christ giving gifts to the church.

One might object that the pattern of divine warfare is inappropriately applied to this text because of the great distance between the main features of the pattern in 1:20-2:22 and the appearance of the blessing of the people in 4:8. But much of Ephesians 3 is a digression from the main outline of the letter’s argument, so that the beginning of Ephesians 4 continues directly from 2:22. Further, the digression does not obscure from view the theme of divine triumph, but is directly related to it, in that the author is heading off a potential objection to his claim that Christ has been exalted as Cosmic Lord.²⁶

This reading makes good sense of the enigmatic phrase “he led captive a host of captives” (ἤγαλώτευσεν αἰχμαλώσιον) in v. 8. The author leaves this phrase undeveloped in his elaboration on the quotation, but it is likely an allusion to the defeat of the powers and authorities by the victorious Divine Warrior, Christ.²⁷ This confirms that the imagery of divine warfare is prominent in this passage, and that it rightly serves as an interpretive lens for understanding the quotation and elaboration, in contradistinction to the proposal of Harris, who claims that

²⁶ Cf. T.G. Gombis, “Ephesians 3:2-13: Pointless Digression, or Epitome of the Triumph of God in Christ?” *WTJ* 66 (2004) forthcoming.

²⁷ F. Mußner, *Christus, das All und die Kirche. Studien zur Theologie des Epheserbriefes* (TThSt 5; Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1955) 44; C.E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of its Historical Setting* (SNTSMS 63; Cambridge: University Press, 1989) 56-57; Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, 176; Mouton, *Reading a New Testament Document Ethically*, 91. Yoder Neufeld leaves open the possibility that the phrase could point to Christ’s having taken “captivity” itself captive, a reference to the freeing of humanity from the grip of the powers and authorities who had previously held people in a state of death by tempting them to sin and rebel against God (Eph. 2:1-3) (*Ephesians*, 177).

this text contains an anti-Mosaic or anti-Torah polemic. The gifting of the church by Christ is not portrayed in either of these ways, but rather is based on his triumphs over his enemies, who, in Ephesians, are the powers and authorities.

While this explains the change in the quotation from “received” in Psalm 68, to “gave” in Eph. 4:8, we must now discuss how this relates to the elaboration of the quotation in vv. 9-11. In v. 9, the author draws out what he means by quoting from Ps. 68:18 by asking τὸ δὲ ἀνέβη τί ἐστὶν (“now this ‘he ascended,’ what is it?”).²⁸ He claims that it can only²⁹ indicate that there is also a descent to “the lower parts of the earth” (τὰ κατώτερα [μέρη] τῆς γῆς). In line with the view set forth here, the descent to “the lower parts of the earth” is taken as a reference to the grave, and it is the death of Christ that is particularly in view. This is the natural meaning of the phrase in light of similar phraseology with reference to Hades, the abode of the dead.³⁰

²⁸ According to D. Wallace, even though “only one word from the preceding quotation of Ps. 68:18 is repeated, the idiom suggests that the whole verse is under examination” so that the question the author is asking is “what does the quotation from Ps. 68:18 mean?” (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 238).

²⁹ The form of expression used to answer the question in v. 9a is εἰ μὴ ὅτι καὶ κατέβη, so that the question, “now what is this, ‘he ascended?’” is answered; “if not that he also descended . . .”

³⁰ According to Mußner, “Im Brief ist zwar vom Ort der dämonischen und satanischen Macht die Rede . . ., doch vom Ort der Toten, der Scheol, ist nirgends ausdrücklich die Rede, wenn nicht mit den ‘unteren Teilen der Erde’ dieser angesprochen ist, was durchaus der Fall sein kann, ohne daß deswegen die Idee des Descensus Christi ad inferos dahinterstehen müßte” (*Epheser*, 123). Bouttier, however, eliminates the possibility that this phrase can be a reference to the grave because of the cosmology of Ephesians: “Mais nous sommes alors embarqués dans des représentations cosmologiques incompatibles avec celles de l’épître: l’existence d’un monde souterrain n’y est pas attestée” (*Ephésiens*, 182). But this wrongly links a reference to the abode of the dead with a *descensus ad inferos*. While this consideration regarding the cosmology of Ephesians may militate against the descent into Hades, it is no objection against a reference to the grave. Schwindt sees several traditions at work in the quotation of Psalm 68, and is ambivalent about narrowing down the location of the descent of Christ: “Gleich ob Eph damit auf die Inkarnation oder den Unterweltsgang anspielt, ist ihm der Descensus Ausdruck von Christi Erniedrigung, die ihn aus Liebe zur Kirche zur Lebenshingabe führt” (*Das Weltbild des Epheserbriefes*, 430). Further, he claims that some reference to a *descensus ad inferos* cannot be completely ruled out by this consideration concerning the cosmology of Ephesians raised by Bouttier: “Dennoch kann nicht leichthin ausgeschlossen werden, daß hier von Christi Gang in die Unterwelt die Rede ist, denn im Volksglauben ist die mythische Unterweltstopographie nie ganz zum Erliegen gekommen” (395). While we cannot deny that this text provides fertile material for the development of the doctrine of the *descensus ad inferos*, it seems that all that is in view in this text is a descent to the grave, the abode of the dead.

For example, C. Arnold cites a text that reads: “I have been initiated, and I went down (κατέβην) into the [underground] chamber of the Dactyls, and I saw/the other things down below (κάτω).”³¹ While some have pressed such parallels in order to develop and support a doctrine of the *descensus ad inferos*, all that is in view in Eph. 4:9 is a reference to the descent of Christ to the grave—pointing to his death—as the author is not interested here in developing the activities of Christ vis-à-vis any underworld deities.³² We simply want to establish the point that the phrase in v. 9 points to the grave as the place to which Christ descended, and that this reference has in view the death of Christ.

This finds confirmation from Eph. 2:13-16, where the author writes of the death of Christ as the means whereby he triumphed over the powers. He states that the basic division within humanity—the division between Jews and Gentiles—has been overcome “by the blood of Christ” (ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Further, these two groups are part of the one body of Christ “through the cross” (διὰ τοῦ σταυροῦ), and it is by the cross that Christ has put to death the enmity that existed between them. By his death Christ has triumphed over the divisive effects of the enemy powers who have so ordered this present evil age as to create and exacerbate divisions within humanity.

This also makes sense against the background of the death and resurrection motif present in Eph. 1:20-21, a text that is closely related to 4:8-11. As M. Huie-Jolly has demonstrated, the death and resurrection motif appears throughout the NT—e.g., Phil. 2:6-11—and is closely associated with the ideology of divine warfare.³³ The descent

³¹ Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic*, 57. This text appears as PGM LXX in H.D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation: Including Demotic Spells* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 297-8.

³² Contra Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic*, 58. For a survey of the development of this doctrine and its relationship to Eph. 4:8, see Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 1-14. L. Kreitzer develops a somewhat similar line of thought, that the descent of Christ into the lowermost parts of the earth is a veiled reference to the Plutonium of Hierapolis, so that Christ’s descent and ascent “stands as a powerful expression of his conquering the forces of death and triumphantly claiming the city of Hierapolis as his own” (“The Plutonium of Hierapolis and the Descent of Christ into the ‘Lowermost Parts of the Earth’ (Ephesians 4,9),” *Bib* 79 [1998] 381-93). Apart from his suggestion that “the lowermost parts of the earth” may be a distant allusion to this geological feature of Hierapolis, there is no indication in the context of Ephesians 4 to confirm Kreitzer’s thesis. Further, the underworld remains outside the worldview encountered in Ephesians, in which the conception of the cosmos consists of two parts—heaven and earth (Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 245).

³³ M.R. Huie-Jolly, “Threats Answered by Enthronement: Death/Resurrection and the Divine Warrior Myth in John 5.7-29, Psalm 2 and Daniel 7,” C.A. Evans and J.A. Sanders (eds.), *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel: Investigations and*

of Christ in v. 9, therefore, is a reference to his descent to the grave—the abode of the dead—and has in view his death by which he triumphed over his enemies. This explains why the writer can apply to Christ the imagery of Yahweh, the victorious Divine Warrior, from Psalm 68, who ascended his heavenly throne after his triumph in battle. The ascent of Christ is a victorious ascent because in his death he triumphed over his enemies. The answer to the question in v. 9a (“what is meant by this ‘he ascended?’”), then, is that Christ has the right to ascend his throne and bless his people with gifts on the basis of his triumphs over his enemies.

In v. 10, the author states that “he himself who descended is also the one who ascended” (ὁ καταβὰς αὐτός ἐστιν καὶ ὁ ἀναβάς), thereby stressing the humiliation/exaltation pattern that is already present in the passage.³⁴ In this, it is similar to Phil. 2:6-11, where the humiliation/exaltation pattern is also employed, and where there is also a statement of extreme exaltation. Following his descent to the grave, Christ, the victorious one, also ascended to his throne “far above all the heavens” (ὑπεράνω πάντων τῶν οὐρανῶν). This last phrase in Eph. 4:10 recalls the language of exaltation in 1:21-22, where Christ is exalted “far above” (ὑπεράνω) all powers and authorities. In fact, the exaltation of Christ over the powers most likely is in view, as τῶν οὐρανῶν is a metaphor of simple replacement referring to the powers by mentioning the locus of their dwelling.³⁵ This high exalted status has its goal in the sovereign reign of Christ over the whole cosmos, which is evident from the final clause in v. 10: ἵνα πληρώσῃ τὰ πάντα (“in order that he might fill all things”).

The reading for which we have argued answers the claim by Harris that his proposal alone adequately accounts for the writer’s elaboration on the quotation from Ps. 68:18.³⁶ Several points may be made in response. First, the elaboration is necessary because the writer had to explain that it was Christ who ascended and was victorious since the imagery has to do with Yahweh in Psalm 68. Further, the writer’s strategy throughout this letter is to identify Christ as the Divine Warrior,

Proposals (JSNTS 148; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 191-217. Cf. also J.L. Kovacs, “‘Now Shall the Ruler of this World be Driven Out’: Jesus’ Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20-36,” *JBL* 114 (1995) 227-47.

³⁴ Barth, *Ephesians*, 434. The pronoun αὐτός is the emphatic pronoun and not the identifying pronoun, since there is no definite article present (Best, *Ephesians*, 386).

³⁵ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 296.

³⁶ Harris, *The Descent of Christ*, 173-4, 177.

utilizing the same imagery that had been used to speak of Yahweh in the OT in order to include Christ in the identity of the unique God of Israel.³⁷ This was done in 1:20-23 and throughout Ephesians 2. It makes sense, then, for the writer to portray Christ as the exalted and victorious cosmic Lord and to do so by applying to him the imagery used of the conquering Yahweh from Psalm 68. Third, he needs to elaborate on just what kind of ascension this is: It is a victorious ascension, giving Christ the right to give gifts to his people. In answer to his own question—"what is the meaning of this ascent?"—the writer states that the ascent of Christ is the triumphant procession of the conquering Warrior to his throne, from which he will bless his people with gifts.

Our proposed reading makes good sense of the data in the context and provides a satisfying answer to the hitherto intractable problem of the change of verbs in v. 8. It also makes good sense of the imagery of triumph over the powers that previously has been recognized as being present in the text, but which, until now, has not been placed properly within a coherent framework. This view also does justice to the death and resurrection—or, humiliation and exaltation—imagery present in the text, while also integrating it into other major passages in Ephesians, especially 1:20-23.

4. Conclusion

The appearance of ἔδωκεν in Eph. 4:8 is no surprise, then, and ought to be viewed as neither a reversal of the meaning of Ps. 68:19, nor as a "mistake."³⁸ The author has no intention of quoting Ps. 68:19 verbatim, but rather has in mind the full narrative movement of the entire psalm. He thereby appropriates the imagery of Yahweh ascending his throne after a victory and refocuses it christologically. Consequently, Christ is depicted as the triumphant divine warrior who defeats his enemies in his death, ascends his throne as the exalted and

³⁷ Cf. R. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998). Bauckham's work is particularly relevant at this point: "The profoundest points of New Testament Christology occur when the inclusion of the exalted Christ in the divine identity entails the inclusion of the crucified Christ in the divine identity, and when the Christological pattern of humiliation and exaltation is recognized as revelatory of God, indeed as the definitive revelation of who God is" (46).

³⁸ Mitton, *Ephesians*, 148.

victorious Lord, and blesses his people with gifts. When analysed against the backdrop of the divine warfare mythology of the ancient world, the fact that Christ blesses his people with gifts is not at all surprising, and neither is the novel appearance of ἔδωκεν in the author's citation of Ps. 68:18.³⁹

³⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Bruce Longenecker and Dr. Oliver Crisp for reading and commenting on previous drafts of this article.

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