A Linguistic and Exegetical Analysis of Ephesians 4.8-9 from a Grammatical, Syntactical, Contextual, and Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Ephesians 4.8-9 presents a challenging passage exegetically. The reference to Psalm 68.18 is ambiguous; it may picture Moses receiving the Torah or a king conquering an enemy army. Furthermore, Ephesians 4.9 is so closely linked to Ephesians 4.8 that one cannot validly interpret “the lower parts of the earth” (τα κατωτερα μερη της γης) from verse 9 without determining the meaning of the preceding verse. Therefore, Ephesians 4.8-9 is analyzed grammatically, contextually, and historically, in order to find the most likely interpretation for this particular passage. The study concludes that Paul in Ephesians 4.8 pictures a Davidic king conquering an enemy and applies this concept metaphorically to Christ as descending to earth, conquering sin, and ascending back to heaven.
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The epistle to the Ephesians is arguably the most majestic of all the epistles in the New Testament. It contains high and lofty theological concepts as well as rich vocabulary that encapsulates the grandeur of the topics. Yet several areas of interpretive difficulty exist in this epistle. One of the most difficult passages to interpret is found in the fourth chapter, verses 8-9. In the New American Standard Version, the larger context of the verses reads as follows:

7But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

8Therefore it says,

"WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH,
HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES,
AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."

9(Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? 10He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)

The broader context of the passage is crucial to aid in the reader’s understanding. In a general sense, the first three chapters of the epistle concern the believer’s abundance of spiritual riches, while the final three chapters discuss how to apply those riches. In the beginning of the section on practical application (chapters 4-6), the author of Ephesians begins by writing about every believer’s unity in Christ and all the things which
Christians share in common, including the same Father, Spirit, baptism, and faith (Eph. 4.4-6).

However, in the next few verses (4.7-13), the topic shifts from the unity of the Church to its distinctions in spiritual gifts (called “δοµατα”). Even though the overall idea of the passage is clear, the writer of Ephesians nevertheless seems to say several things that are interpretively challenging. Several reasons exist as to why this passage is so challenging to understand. Ephesians 4.8 is a reference to Psalm 68.18. Yet what is the context of the Old Testament passage? Who is the referent of the “he” in “he ascended on high”? Furthermore, how does verse 8 relate to verse 9 in its reference to Christ descending to the “lower parts of the earth”?

However, before determining the correct exegesis (or at the very least the possibilities) of verses 8 and 9, an important point to make is that this study presupposes Ephesians’ Pauline authorship. This presupposition is important in that much of this passage will at points be compared to other Pauline works such as Colossians as weighty considerations, and so needs a brief defense. Many modern scholars have argued that Paul was not the author of Ephesians, but rather that the epistle is pseudepigraphal and based heavily on Colossians (O’Brien 10-11). Others have argued that a better view is that Paul wrote neither Ephesians nor Colossians, but that two authors took the persona of Paul, basing much of their material on his previous work (Best 72-96). Many reasons are posed as to why the epistle of Ephesians is non-Pauline, including arguments such as different and unique vocabulary, word combinations and syntax, more advanced theology, parallelism (in the sense of borrowed ideas) between Ephesians and Colossians, style, and the appearance that the author had not met the Ephesians (O’Brien 5-13).
Nevertheless, these reasons do not seem sufficient to discredit the Pauline authorship of either epistle for various reasons. In the first place, content determines vocabulary. Therefore, if Paul wanted to write about topics different than what he discusses in epistles like Colossians, Romans, or Galatians, he would necessarily use different vocabulary to convey his ideas. On the other hand, in some points the author of Ephesians deviates so drastically from the standard Pauline epistle that it would be far too dangerous for someone other than Paul to write the epistle if he wished for the readers to believe in its genuine authorship (15). Furthermore, the similarity between Colossians and Ephesians is very understandable if one assumes that Paul wrote both epistles around the same time to audiences close in proximity (16). For these reasons, as well as many others not mentioned, the rest of this study presupposes that Paul is the author of Ephesians.

Grammatical Analysis

After arguing for the validity of Pauline authorship, a reasonable place to begin in the passage is analyzing the phrase “the lower parts of the earth” to determine what the verse would allow in meaning in terms of grammatical constraints. Rarely does the grammar and syntax of a verse leave interpretation unequivocal, but at the very least it can narrow the possibilities of valid options. In order to draw from the text the most probable meaning, one must examine both the general context of Ephesians and the grammar and syntax of the passage, as well as compare that grammar and syntax to other examples in the Bible with similar constructions.

Contextually, before listing some of the spiritual gifts of the church, Paul gives a brief theological background to explain the reason why Christians can have spiritual gifts.
He references Psalm 68.18 and applies it as a Messianic foreshadowing. Paul understands the verse in light of a risen and ascended Christ who gives gifts to men, referring in this context to spiritual gifts given to His body, the church. At this point, Paul, in an evident rabbinic style, takes a moment to comment on the word “ascended.” He argues that if Christ ascended, he must have also *descended* “into the “lower parts of the earth” (“εις τα κατωτερα μερη της γης”). What does such a phrase mean?

Some scholars have understood “lower parts of the earth” as referring to the earth (Wallace 99), while others believe that the phrase refers to the grave or possibly to hell (Wuest 100). Still others argue a different view altogether, challenging the chronological order for Christ’s ascent and descent. Since there is uncertainty about whether the descent comes before or after the ascent, some scholars hold that the descent of Christ refers to the Holy Spirit’s descent at Pentecost (although this particular position will be discussed in a later section) (Harris 196-97). The reason for the vast difference in the interpretation of this text lies in part in how one understands the genitive phrase “της γης.” Although one may be able to give other interpretations, the three main uses of the genitive which scholars have posed as a valid interpretation of τα κατωτερα μερη της γης are the partitive genitive, the comparative genitive, and the genitive of apposition (Turner 215).

*Valid Grammatical Interpretations*

The first interpretation to examine, then, is the partitive genitive. A partitive genitive has the semantic idea that the head noun is a part of the genitive phrase. An example of the partitive genitive would be found in the sentence, “The kitchen is a room (head noun) of the house (partitive genitive, the head noun is a part of the genitive phrase).” Understanding τα κατωτερα μερη της γης in this way is certainly possible and
perhaps is the most straightforward. The New Testament has multiple examples of the partitive genitive, although Koine Greek often seems to use prepositions such as εκ instead of the partitive genitive (Harris 47). A good example of the partitive genitive is found in John 2.1 with the phrase “ἐν Κανὰ της Γαλιλαίας (in Cana of Galilee).” In this example, the head noun Cana is a part of the larger area Galilee. If one interprets τα κατωτέρα μέρη της γης as a partitive genitive, with “lower parts” being the part of the genitive phrase “of the earth,” such an understanding would interpret the text to mean that Christ descended into the earth’s depths. The two possible specific locations to which a partitive genitive might refer are either Hell or the grave (Hoehner 533-536). As shall be discussed shortly, however, the more likely interpretation for this partitive genitive would be as a reference to the grave.

Another valid way to interpret τα κατωτέρα μέρη της γης is as a comparative genitive (48). To make a comparison in Koine Greek, a genitive is used as the noun against which the head noun is compared (Wallace 110). For example, in 1 Peter 1.7, the author writes “το δοκιμιον υµων της πιστεως πολυτιµοτερον χρυσιον (the genuineness of your faith which is more precious than gold).” Since the word κατωτέρα is indeed a comparative adjective, the syntax of the phrase allows a comparative genitive as a valid option of interpretation, rendering the phrase to mean “the parts lower than (or below) the earth.” Although the comparative genitive in this context would not seem to cause one to understand the meaning to be any different from the partitive genitive, it differs in one key aspect: its force is much stronger in being below the earth and therefore leaves little room to understand the reference to be anything other than hell. In this sense, taking the phrase as a comparative genitive nearly forces the exegete to conclude that Christ went to
hell after he died. However, Andrew Lincoln makes a valid point in his commentary on Ephesians by mentioning that if the author of Ephesians had wished to reference hell using a comparative genitive, he more than likely would have used the superlative form “κατωτατα” instead of using the comparative form “κατωτερα,” since such is the only form used when referencing Hades in the Septuagint (245).

The final way in which many scholars will interpret this phrase is as a genitive of apposition. The genitive of apposition is defined as a rough equivalent of its head noun. In other words, the genitive of apposition clarifies or names more specifically that to which the head noun refers (95). For example, the genitive of apposition occurs in the sentence, “He lives in the country (head noun) of the United States of America (genitive of apposition, clarifying ‘country’).” If applied to Ephesians 4.9, the phrase “τα κατωτερα μερη της γης” would be rendered “the lower parts, namely, the earth.” Of all three ways to interpret this passage, this way would be the clearest in that there is no ambiguity as to where Christ went. Understanding the phrase in this way says nothing more than that Christ went to the earth from heaven.

Therefore, how one interprets the genitive use of της γης drastically affects the location to where Christ went. Although the author seems to intend to contrast Christ’s ascent into heaven to his descent into the lower parts of the earth, the syntax nevertheless remains ambiguous. One may understand the author to be making a contrast between heaven and earth. Another may interpret the “lower parts of the earth” as a reference hell, since the audience is composed of Greek Ephesians who may very well have understood the idea of the “lower earth” to refer to Hades (the Greek word for the Jewish concept of Sheol). Such a sense may indeed be how the early church understood the verse, since
several early church documents such as *The Apostle’s Creed* state that Christ descended into hell. Another interpretation, however, would take the phrase to mean that Christ had to descend to *earth*, live, die on the cross, and resurrect from the dead in order to ascend into heaven. Another interpretation understands the phrase to refer to earth and the Holy Spirit’s descent on the day of Pentecost (O’Brien 295).

The question, then, of whether the phrase “the lower parts of the earth” refers to the earth (genitive of apposition), the grave (partitive genitive and possibly comparative genitive), or hell (comparative genitive and possibly partitive genitive) greatly depends in part on grammar and syntax. A possible angle from which to approach the issue is to analyze the words “κατωτερα,” (“lower”) “μερη,” (“parts”) and the genitive form of the word “γης” (“of the earth”). Analyzing these different words in their different forms may very well give a better idea as to the more likely options of how one ought to interpret this verse.

**Word Analysis of κατωτερα and μερη**

Using the computer program Gramcord, researching these words in their different cases becomes fairly simple. The preliminary search consisted of finding every instance of the word “κατωτερα” in order to better understand its meaning. Unfortunately, according to Gramcord, “κατωτερα” occurs only once in the entire New Testament, in *Ephesians 4.9*. Walter Bauer’s authoritative Greek lexicon defines “κατωτερα” as simply meaning “lower” without any special nuances (425). Therefore, the bulk of the research relies on the two words of “parts” and “earth.”

The next step is in researching the uses of the word μερος. However, before researching this word, a caveat must be made in terms of textual criticism. In the fourth
version of the United Bible Societies’ *The Greek New Testament*, the editors note that the presence of the word µερη in the original autograph of Ephesians 4.9 is somewhat questionable (*The Greek New Testament* 662). As some have pointed out, this word may have been inserted in later versions of the text as an explanatory word, thus reflecting the copyist’s understanding of the text and not the original text itself (Harris 44). Therefore, before examining this word grammatically, it is first necessary to examine it from a textual level to determine whether or not it merits further study.

As already stated, the United Bible Societies (UBS) place a considerable amount of doubt on whether µερη is authentic to the original text. From a category of A to D, with A being very sure and D being very doubtful, the UBS classify the word µερη as letter C, which they state indicates a fair amount of doubt (*The Greek New Testament* 2*). Perhaps one of the soundest treatments of the textual issue of the presence or absence of µερη is found in W. Hall Harris’s book *The Descent of Christ*. He argues that the manuscript evidence supports the word’s presence (40-45). The reason is that there is a greater number of manuscripts which are weighty in nature to provide evidence that µερη ought to be included.

Before giving specific data for textual attestation, it is important to understand the category system developed by Greek scholar Kurt Aland as a manner in which to weigh the textual merits and authority of each manuscript based on factors such as age and potential for outside influence (Aland 105-106). A category I is the weightiest category for manuscripts, which always ought to be used in textual evaluation, followed by category II (weighty but containing some outside influence) and category III (weighty in authority, but less than category I and II). In addition, Aland includes category IV and V
manuscripts, but these are generally not weighty enough for special consideration. In reference to Ephesians 4.9, only one category I manuscript (P46) supports the omission of \( \mu\varepsilon\rho\eta \), while five category I manuscripts support its inclusion (\( \varepsilon, A, B, 33, 1739 \)) (Harris 42). Similarly, one category II manuscript and two category III omit \( \mu\varepsilon\rho\eta \) while seven category II manuscripts and six category III include it, as do all the Byzantine minuscules and lectionaries and the majority text (42). With no other variables present, textual criticism usually prefers the shorter reading to the longer one, assuming that copyists tended to add words and phrases to the manuscripts rather than omit text. However, despite textual criticism’s preference toward shorter text variants, the weight of manuscript evidence in this specific case seems to greatly support the inclusion of \( \mu\varepsilon\rho\eta \) rather than its omission.

Therefore, assuming that \( \mu\varepsilon\rho\circ \) is original to Ephesians 4.9, the first search in Gramcord which returned results consisted of every occurrence in the New Testament of the word “\( \mu\varepsilon\rho\circ \)” (“part”) without a limit on the case, followed within two words’ space of any noun in the genitive. The search returned eleven results (Matt. 2.22, Matt. 15.21, Matt. 16.13, Mark 8.10, Luke 15.12, John 21.6, Acts 2.10, Acts 23.6, Acts 23.9, Eph. 4.9, and Col. 2.16), several of which were particularly helpful in determining the uses of “\( \mu\varepsilon\rho\circ \)” with the genitive. The construction of “\( \mu\varepsilon\rho\circ \)” followed by the genitive commonly occurs when referring to geographical locations. Five of the eleven verses were of this nature (Matt. 2.22, Matt. 15.21, Matt 16.13, Mark 8.10, and Acts 2.10). For example, in Matthew 16.13, the author writes, “\( \varepsilon\lambda\theta\omega\nu\ \delta\varepsilon\ \alpha\iota\varsigma\sigma\sigma\omega\ς\ \varepsilon\iota\zeta\ \tau\alpha\ \mu\varepsilon\rho\eta\ \kappa\alpha\iota\sigma\sigma\alpha\rho\varepsilon\iota\varsigma\ \tau\zeta\ \phi\iota\iota\pi\rho\sigma\upsilon\varsigma\)…” (“Now after Jesus had come into the parts of Caesarea Philippi…”). This passage, along with the other five verses, could be interpreted two
valid ways. First, it could be understood to refer to several specific parts of the greater area of Caesarea Philippi, thus understanding the text as a partitive genitive. Second, one could take this to mean the parts (or district), which is Caesarea Philippi (genitive of apposition). Because both are possible interpretations, the text at the very least reveals that such a construction is not ambiguous merely in the passage in Ephesians.

**μερη as a Partitive Genitive**

It seems that the New Testament contains only two verses which clearly illustrate what appear to be clear uses of the partitive genitive (John 21.6 and Luke 15.12) and two other verses which demonstrate the genitive of apposition. The first verse which seems to show unequivocally μερος with the genitive as a partitive genitive is John 21.6, which says, “βαλετε εις τα δεξια μερη του πλοιου το δικτυον” (“Cast your net into (on) the right parts (side) of the boat”). Although one might be tempted to consider this a genitive of possession (“the boat’s right parts (side)”), it does not seem completely valid to consider the right side as belonging to the boat, unless one allots for the possibility of personifying inanimate objects. Greek scholar Daniel Wallace also makes a distinction between the partitive genitive as applying to inanimate objects and the genitive of possession as applying to animate objects (Wallace 84). A good understanding of John 21.6, then, is that the right side is part of the boat. Therefore, the partitive genitive is not only a possible interpretation, but indeed seems to be the most probable interpretation. In view of its similarity to Ephesians 4.6, John 21.6 has a plural head noun followed by a singular genitive, which is exactly the same as the Ephesians passage. In this regard, these two verses share a very similar construction, so lending possible support to the partitive interpretation.
The second verse which is perhaps best understood as a partitive genitive is Luke 15.12, which says, “πατερ, δος µοι το επιβαλλον µερος της ουσιας (Father, give to me the part of [your] property that falls to me).” In this verse, the phrase µερος της ουσιας is best understood as a partitive genitive, meaning that the son was asking the father for a portion (or part) of the property that he owned. Thus, this example also demonstrates how the partitive genitive can occur very easily with µερος. Although this verse is not as similar in nature to Ephesians 4.9 as is John 21.6 in terms of plurality, this passage nevertheless demonstrates the clear grammatical possibility that Ephesians 4.9 could be interpreted as a partitive genitive.

µερη as a Genitive of Apposition

A notable verse which seems to demonstrate well µερος used as a genitive of apposition is Colossians 2.16: “µη ουν τις υµας κρινετω εν βρωσει και εν ποσει η εν µερει εορτης η νεοµηνιας η σαββατων” (“Therefore do not let anyone judge you in regard to food and in drink or in a part [or matter] of a feast or new moon or Sabbath day”). The word “µερει” (in the dative case) is followed by the word “εορτης,” or “of a feast.” It seems that the best translation here for the word µεραι is to use the word “matter” or “affair,” according to the options that are listed in Walter Bauer’s Greek lexicon (506). Paul is specifying the word “part” or “matter” by using the genitive words for feast, new moon, and Sabbath day. In other words, he is saying “do not lest anyone judge you in a matter of a feast or new moon.” In this context, the matter (or possibly “issue”) is the feast or new moon or Sabbath day. Thus, it seems that the best understanding for µερος in this context is as a genitive of apposition. This verse may also be particularly significant because of its Pauline authorship and the overall similarity shared between Colossians
and Ephesians, as mentioned previously. Therefore, this verse appears to illustrate an example wherein Paul uses the genitive of apposition with the word μερος.

The second example of the genitive of apposition is found in Acts 23.9, which reads, “τινες γραμματεων του μερους των Φαρισαιων διεµαχοντο (some of the scribes of the part of the Pharisees began to protest violently).” The phrase μερους των Φαρισαιων is translated in several versions of the Bible as the “Pharisaic party” (NASB and ESV). In essence, the word μερος is a general category followed by the more specific noun των Φαρισαιων, a very strong construction to suggest a genitive of apposition. Although some might initially interpret this phrase as a genitive in simple apposition (since the head noun is also in the genitive), this understanding would be inaccurate because μερος must be in the genitive only because it must modify either γραμματεων or τινες (both of which are valid options). Nevertheless, the best option seems to be to interpret this phrase as a genitive of apposition.

From the results, the evidence in pure statistics suggests that the interpretation for μερος followed by a genitive noun can justifiably go either way for a partitive genitive or genitive of apposition. Therefore, while the results are somewhat disappointing in that they do not suggest any sort of overwhelming tendency toward one particular interpretation, they are at the very least informative, indicating that both interpretations are seemingly valid.

Word Analysis of γη

The second search involved finding any noun in any case which immediately precedes the genitive form of the word “γη” (earth). This search yielded a much larger sample of forty-three verses. The uses of the genitive were much broader, such as the use
of the objective genitive in Revelation 11.4 (“κυρίου τῆς γῆς” or “Lord of (over) the earth”). Examples of the partitive genitive occur in this sample as well, but they do not seem as obvious. One example of the partitive genitive is in Mark 13.27 with the “farthest end of the earth” (ακρον γῆς). In this verse, the end certainly appears to be a part of the earth. Other instances of the partitive genitive seem to occur in verses like Matthew 12.40, 12.42, Luke 11.31, and Hebrews 1.10. Although a closer inspection may yield possible variants in interpretation, no obvious use of the genitive of apposition occurred in these forty three verses with the possible exception of Ephesians 4.9. This finding may be significant, since it may suggest a tendency for Greek speakers to shy away from using the genitive of apposition with the word “γῆς.” On the other hand, since content and context ultimately determine grammatical structures, one might argue that the New Testament does not discuss such an idea elsewhere, and so would not use such a grammatical construction.

The third Gramcord search was an attempt to see how many comparative adjectives in any case preceded within two words’ space the word γῆ in the genitive. The intent for this search was to see if any other verse or verses in the New Testament uses some form of comparative adjectives with the earth to describe either Sheol or, more likely, hell. This search returned no results. The lack of results is revealing in that it seems that the New Testament does not tend to use any comparative adjective with γῆ to refer to hell.

*Grammatical Conclusions*

In view of the pure grammatical and syntactical data available, it seems more probable, statistically speaking, for the partitive genitive to be the correct interpretation.
It appears that while Greek speakers do not mind using the partitive genitive or genitive of apposition with the word μερος, the genitive noun γης is almost never used in apposition in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the possibility remains for the partitive genitive, the genitive of apposition, and the comparative genitive, although the option of the comparative genitive seems least likely both from the data and from the other logical considerations.

Since γη does not seem to be used appositionally in the New Testament (except perhaps in Ephesians 4.9), one must consider other factors which would validate interpreting κατωτερα μερη της γης in such a way. Another notable factor to consider is the stylistic tendency of the author of Ephesians. As some have noted, Paul seems to use the genitive of apposition relatively frequently in this epistle, nearly fifteen times by some estimations (Wallace 100). Possible examples of the author’s use of the genitive of apposition are found Ephesians 2.20 (although this may also possibly be subjective genitive), and Ephesians 1.1 and 1.2 (as an example of simple apposition). Furthermore, Paul uses the genitive of apposition in other epistles as well, such as in Romans 4.11 (“και σημειον ελαβεν περιτοµης” [“and he received the sign of circumcision”]), and 2 Corinthians 1.22 (“και δους τον αρραβωνα του πνευµατος” [“and gave the guarantee of the Spirit”]). Therefore, because of the author’s tendency toward using the genitive of apposition, the pure statistical data ought not skew the interpretation one way or the other. Rather, it ought to demonstrate the valid possibilities of interpretation: the genitive of apposition, the partitive genitive, and (less likely) the comparative genitive.
Contextual and Historical Background of Ephesians 4.8 and Psalm 68.18

After having discussed the grammatically possible options for interpreting κατωτέρα μέρη τῆς γῆς, it becomes necessary to broaden the scope of the passage to the context of the previous verse, Ephesians 4.8. This verse is a quotation of Psalm 68.18, although some modified language exists in the quote, most notably in changing the word “received” to “gave.” In Ephesians, Paul quotes the Psalmist as saying “When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives and gave gifts to men.” However, the NASB translates Psalm 68.18 as follows: “You have ascended on high, You have led captive Your captives; You have received gifts among men, Even among the rebellious also, that the LORD God may dwell there.”

Upon comparing Psalm 68.18 with Ephesians 4.8, it seems that Paul misquotes or distorts the verse by replacing the word “received” with the word “gave”—two seemingly very different words in meaning (at the very least to the English speaker). The question that arises, then, is this: How can one justify changing a verse so drastically to prove a point? In order to answer the first issue of the translation of Psalm 68.18, its context and historical background need to be examined, followed by the different possible interpretations, including traditional rabbinic interpretations in order to best explain this difference. Such information will provide understanding of the issues involved both in Paul’s quotation and how he applies the verse to Christ’s ascent and descent in Ephesians 4.9.

The Context of Psalm 68

First, then, it is important to look at the context from which Paul draws his reference in order to determine the proper idea to which he compares Christ
metaphorically. Psalm 68 is largely a psalm of praise to God for what He has done in the history of Israel. According to the superscription in Psalm 68, this is a “Psalm of David.” If one interprets this superscription in a traditional way, the meaning is that the psalm was written by David. In part because of the superscription, many believe that David is the subject of much of this psalm, including verse 18. However, not all commentators agree on such an interpretation for verse 18.

*Psalm 68.18 in Reference to Moses*

Assuming Davidic authorship, some commentators, including several ancient Jewish rabbis, maintain that in the context of the passage, the event that best fits the description of ascending on high and leading captivity captive is not in reference to David, but rather refers to Moses receiving the Torah (Gruber 449). The argument some scholars have made is that Paul would have had this understanding in his mind when referencing this verse because of the rabbinic literature of the time and its influence on his thinking—though they will also admit that dating this literature before the time of Ephesians is difficult (Harris 64).

Contextually, there is merit in understanding the passage in this way. Psalm 68.7-10 speaks of Moses receiving the Torah and verse 17 again references Yahweh’s presence at Mt. Sinai. Thus, the phrase “You have ascended on high” speaks of Moses ascending Mt. Sinai, while “You led captive your captives” refers to him leading the Israelites through the wilderness. The reference to “receiving gifts among men” is a reference to receiving the Torah from God and then in turn giving the words to the people (65). Some will also state that even though the “rebellious” mentioned in verse 18 may seem to more appropriately fit war captives, they will note that viewing the Israelites as
rebellious is certainly valid in the context of the chapter—especially in verses 5-6 (O’Brien 292). Another interesting point about viewing the verse in this light is that it makes the descent subsequent to the ascent. Such an observation is significant because it would allow the verse to be interpreted to mean that the descent could symbolize the Holy Spirit descending on the Christians on the day of Pentecost after the ascent of Christ (Harris 180).

_Psalm 68.18 in Reference to David_

However, several discrepancies exist with this hypothesis. Even though Mount Sinai is referenced in the preceding verse, it is used only as a simile in the broader context of the presence of God at Mount Zion and a war scene with a multitude of chariots, later followed by a glorious procession (Psalm 68.15-27). Therefore, it would seem to be a rather drastic change in thought even though the chapter does at one point speak of Mount Sinai.

Secondly, the purpose of ascending on high, leading captivity captive, and receiving gifts is that God might have a place to dwell. Mount Sinai, although certainly filled with the presence of God in Exodus, would not seem to fit well as a location where God would dwell in any permanent sense. Mount Zion, on the other hand, is much more logical as a permanent dwelling place for the Lord, since it would soon be the location for the temple which held the Ark of the Covenant.

Lastly, leading captivity captive fits more naturally in the context of those who have been conquered in war. Since Moses led the children of Israel as those already freed from slavery in Egypt, it would seem unusual to refer to Moses leading them as one leading a host of captives. This argument is perhaps the strongest argument against the
hypothesis that the verse refers to Moses and the Torah. This point becomes even clearer when one understands in greater detail the context of slavery and, in particular, war captives in the Old Testament.

_Slavery in the Old Testament_

Indeed, one of the most critical aspects in understanding Psalm 68.18 is the idea of captivity and slavery. Although to the modern reader slavery may seem foreign, uncivilized, and unethical, nearly all cultures have, in some form or other, imposed slavery on other people (Hopkins 6). The ancient Hebrew culture was no exception. The Old Testament records instances wherein the Hebrew people would both enslave and become enslaved to other nations (e.g., Lev. 25.39-55, Deut. 20.10-14, 1 Sam. 4.9, 30.3, II Chron. 28.8).

Slavery during the Old Testament period was a common practice. Indeed, the Ancient Near East was full of slavery in countries such as Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt (Mendelsohn 2). Primarily, these slaves were used as laborers for all aspects of simple labor in society (3). Ancient Eastern countries obtained slaves through methods such as conquering other cities and taking captives, buying slaves from their own countries as well as from other countries, and obtaining them through dowries and inheritances. The Hebrews, too, also practiced slavery as a cultural norm of their time. The Old Testament certainly makes provision for the Hebrews to have slaves, but what was the nature of slavery?

Leviticus 25 is perhaps the single lengthiest legal discourse on Hebrew slavery, including the boundaries to which the slave owners must adhere. Although Hebrews could own both fellow countrymen and pagans as slaves, the law imposed fewer
restrictions on those who owned slaves from other nations. For example, Hebrews could take those who were from other countries as permanent slaves, whereas a Hebrew slave could not become a permanent part of the family inheritance (Leviticus 22.44-66). Thus, this section in the Mosaic Law makes a clear distinction between those slaves that could theoretically be gained through war with foreign nations and those which were “domestic” slaves.

A final point to make in addressing the issue of slavery is how the Hebrews were allowed to obtain slaves. According to Leviticus, one could purchase slaves from among the nation of Israel as well as from foreigners (Lev. 25.39-44). However, another way to gain slaves was indeed to capture them through battle and take them as war captives. For example, in 1 Samuel, the Philistines feared that the Israelites would fight against them, conquer them, and take them prisoners as captives of war (1 Samuel 4.9). Likewise, in this passage the Philistines mention that the Hebrew people had already served them as slaves.

However, taking war captives and making them slaves was not a practice limited only to the Hebrews and Philistines. Indeed, the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and other ancient cultures practiced this tactic as well (Mendelsohn 1). When ancient kings went to battle against another nation and were victorious, they would take the survivors of the losing side hostage, bring them back to the conqueror's country, and force them to serve as slaves (1). Therefore, this practice was not by any means foreign to the ancient world, but rather was common both among the Hebrews as well as other nations.

This concept of capturing foreigners and enemies of the kings and returning them to the country as slaves is important to the context of Psalm 68. Since this was a practice
that would have been well known to the Hebrew people, when Psalm 68.18 says, “You have led captive your captives,” the images that this passage would evoke may well have been more closely associated with slavery than with the Israelites wandering in the desert. It may indeed be more probable that this phrase is a picture meant to allude to war captives who have lost a battle. Therefore, in view of the cultural practice of slavery and how well it would fit into the context of Psalm 68.18, along with the other reasons previously mentioned, it seems more reasonable to assume that David in this psalm has in mind a military victory rather than the Hebrews in the wilderness at Mount Sinai.

_Spiritual Spoils_

Psalm 68.18 also speaks of receiving gifts among men. Again, in the historical context the concept of obtaining spoils from the war (including the captives themselves) seems to fit better than Moses receiving anything from the children of Israel. The picture here is that the army has descended Mount Zion, defeated the enemy, taken the spoils of the war, and now distributes those spoils to those in the city. In view of some of the “spoils” being those captured from the opposing army, the immediate reference to the “rebellious” seems better understood as those who were David’s enemies than as the children of Israel.

While some scholars may still maintain that this verse references Moses receiving the Law, others understand the passage to refer specifically to David ascending to Mount Zion in the context of bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (Barnes 202). This historical event is recorded in 2 Samuel 5.6-10 and 1 Chronicles 11.4-9, wherein David travels with his army from Hebron up to Jerusalem in order to conquer the Jebusites who live in the city. However, 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles both record very little of the details
of the battle—especially in reference to whether they took anyone from the city as captives and made them slaves. The most that the books state of the battle’s details is that Joab and his soldiers penetrated the Jebusites’ defense by climbing through the water shaft to gain entry into the city (1 Samuel 6.8; 1 Chronicles 11.6). Nothing, however, is explicitly said about David taking slaves from Jerusalem.

The only note that might hint toward any sort of slavery is that David “took more concubines and wives from Jerusalem, after he came from Hebron; and more sons and daughters were born to David” (1 Samuel 5.13). Although this verse does not directly record David as having slaves, it seems at least to open the possibility that David may have led a group of captives from the conquered city. If such is the case, then when David comes from the house of Obed-Edom with the Ark of the Covenant and ascends the Mount Zion, it may be that David led a host of captivity with him. Such a hypothesis would certainly shed light on the background of the psalm and thus make one’s exegesis much more straightforward.

After considering all the different possible options, it seems the most likely that a correct exegesis understands Psalm 68.18 in the context of a king returning victoriously from battle, and possibly in the context of David ascending Mount Zion to prepare the way for the Ark of the Covenant. With this understanding, Paul’s metaphorical application of this verse in Ephesians 4.8 for Christ becomes vividly descriptive. Therefore, in view of all the topics covered including the grammatical, syntactical, contextual, and historical aspects of this verse, the exegetical and theological implications can now be articulated much more intelligently.
Piecing the Information Together

As mentioned earlier, Ephesians 4 addresses the practical application of how one ought to live in view of the abundant spiritual blessing that God has given (which Paul discusses in chapters 1-3). Specifically, after having listed in verses 5 and 6 all the aspects which believers have in common such as one Lord, faith, baptism, and God, he then shifts to the spiritual differences among the church, namely, the spiritual gifts. In order to prove from Scripture that Christ gives gifts to each member of His body, Paul quotes Psalm 68.18. The New King James Version translates the passage as follows: “Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men.’” These three clauses seem to represent metaphorically three aspects of Christ’s work of salvation and in the church.

First, the ascension almost undoubtedly references Christ’s returning to heaven after having been crucified. Just as the Hebrew king returned from battle victoriously and ascended Mount Zion as a conqueror, so Christ ascended into heaven having returned victoriously. It seems that the majority of scholarship interprets the clause in this way (Lloyd-Jones 284). Thus, as Paul later points out in the next verse, His ascent into heaven also implies descending to the “lower parts of the earth” and conquering the enemies of that territory. In view of war captivity, the correct interpretation of the κατωτέρα μέρη τῆς γῆς seems more evident. However, exactly who comprise the “captivity” in the second clause?

Two views seem possible. One interpretation, in view of historical captivity and slavery, is that the enemies of Christ are seen as fallen angels who have been conquered through His death, resurrection, and ascension (Eadie 287). This view is certainly
plausible, especially considering that Paul also speaks of a similar topic in Colossians when he refers to the enemies as “principalities and powers,” stating that “[Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Colossians 2.15 NKJV). Such an interpretation implies that this verse means that Christ has, in one sense, conquered all of His enemies—both physical and spiritual—through His work on the cross.

Another view, held by many of the early church fathers, maintains that the captivity is composed of those who had formerly belonged to the enemy army (Satan and the sinful nature) and have now been made captives to Christ (287). Such an understanding would seem to correspond well with the overall theology of Ephesians, which emphasizes the reconciliatory work of Christ who redeemed those who “formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2.2). This interpretation is also reasonable in that it harmonizes with Ephesians 4.11, which says, “καὶ αὐτὸς ἐδωκεν τοὺς μεν ἀπόστολους, τοὺς δὲ προφητάς, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστας, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδάσκαλους (And He Himself gave some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, and some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers).” Because of the proximity of the war captives in verse 8 to the “τοὺς (some)” in verse 11, it seems most reasonable to interpret this definite article as anaphoric, referring to the members of the captivity. An important point to mention is that the list of gifts in Ephesians 4.11 are not meant to be exhaustive. Thus, the “captivity” in verse 8 would include those with other gifts as well. The point is, however, that the members of the captivity include the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and others.
On this point, scholar Ernest Best also believes that the “gifts” are actually the people themselves, not gifts to the people (197). Therefore, the verse appears to indicate that Christ descended from Heaven and fought a battle in which He took captive those enslaved by Satan. It would be more reasonable to assume, then, that the battle Christ fought was on earth, since the captivity consists of the redeemed church (the alternative theoretically being that Christ went down to hell itself to take out the captivity who would later become apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—an unconventional and far less appealing proposition). In light of this understanding, and because of the valid possibility for understanding κατωτέρα μερή τῆς γῆς as a genitive of apposition, the best exegesis seems to be that Ephesians 4.8-9 does not speak of Christ descending into hell, but rather of his descending to earth to conquer sin and redeem His church through the cross and the resurrection.

The final issue in the passage, as seen earlier, is that Paul writes, “gave gifts to men,” instead of, “received gifts among men.” Semantically, these two ideas would appear to be opposite. If, then, Paul wishes to convey a metaphor of Christ conquering, one wonders how he can rationally change the word “received” to “gave” without damaging the text in its accuracy or even validity. Because the Septuagint translates the word for “receive” as λαμβάνω (take or receive), one cannot appeal to the Septuagint as the reason for the change, since λαμβάνω cannot be understood to mean give in any sense (Bauer 464-465).

Scholars have posed several options which might reconcile this seeming inaccuracy, including interpreting the Hebrew word for “receive” as “give,” suggesting that Paul had a faulty memory or a bad manuscript, or that he was reading the quotation
from a translation of the Psalms which used the word “give” instead of “receive” (O’Brien 290). However, in view again of the historical context of war captivity, perhaps the best explanation is simpler than the previous suggestions. Some scholars hold that Paul is not intentionally misquoting or using a faulty manuscript as reference. Rather, he is merely broadening the scope of what Psalm 68.18 speaks of, and pictures Christ both receiving gifts as the spoil from the defeated enemy and distributing the gifts to those among His army (Lloyd-Jones 150). The theological implication with this view, then, would be that Christ has not only conquered His enemies, but has also, because of His victory, distributed the “spoils” (symbolic of spiritual gifts) to those of His kingdom. Such an interpretation seems to fit well using the metaphor of ancient Hebrew captivity.

Conclusion

The findings, then, of the entire study lead to a conclusion which must take into account the grammar, context, and history of the text. After considering numerous relevant aspects to this passage, the best interpretation seems to be that Ephesians 4.8 speaks of a Davidic King descending from Mount Zion, conquering the enemy, ascending Mount Zion with captives from the enemy army, and then distributing the war spoils, which are captives, to his army as gifts. Paul then takes this image metaphorically to represent Christ descending to the lower parts, namely, the earth, conquering sin, returning with those who had been enslaved by Satan, ascending back to heaven, and delivering the “gifts,” namely those who were captives, to the church.

Because modern readers are generally unaware both of the grammatical possibilities for interpretation as well as the culture and history behind Hebrew life in the Old Testament, the metaphor which Paul uses might easily escape their full
comprehension. Only after one understands the grammatical, syntactical, contextual, and historical aspects of the passage can one begin to grasp both the meaning and some of the finer nuances to the text of Ephesians 4.8-9. Admittedly, even a study such as this does not automatically reveal the exact meaning of a verse. There is certainly the possibility of error in understanding even after evaluating so many different valid options. Nevertheless, such a study undoubtedly sheds light on important aspects to consider. To remove a passage from its culture is to remove a vital aspect of context. To ignore grammatical considerations is to search blindly for meaning. However, when one takes time to investigate a text at each level of exegesis, one will undoubtedly reap better insight into the finer meanings of the Scriptures.
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