Participation "In the Heavenlies" in Christ: Deification in Ephesians

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Abstract: Paul’s expression “in the heavenlies” provides an intriguing showcase of the power dynamics of the divine–human relationship (e.g., 1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). While scholars have identified the theme of union with Christ as an interpretive key for understanding believers’ position in the heavenlies, few have provided adequate attention to “in the heavenlies” according to the significance of theosis. I argue that a patristic idea of theosis offers an interpretive lens in understanding believers’ lives in the heavenlies. Thus, this study aims to situate the discussion on the heavenlies vis-à-vis the conversation around theosis in the New Testament.

Keywords: adoption; co-sharers; heavenlies; mystery; participation; put on God’s armor; seated with Christ; theosis

1. Introduction

“In the heavenlies” (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις) is an expression distinctive to Ephesians, which provides an intriguing showcase of the power dynamics of the divine–human relationship (e.g., 1:3; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12).¹ In the discussion of the heavenlies in Ephesians, scholars such as Thomas G. Allen point out the solidarity between Christ and his people in the heavenlies (Allen 1986, pp. 103–20). Allen observes that “the clear association between Christ’s exaltation (1:20) and the believers’ exaltation does, we think, provide an important glimpse and clue into the way Ephesians envisions the bond between Christ and believers” (Allen 1986, p. 103). M. Jeff Brannon pushes the discussion forward that “the notion of union with Christ” can be “an interpretive key for understanding believers’ heavenly status in Eph 2:6” (Brannon 2011, p. 33, n. 154).² This observation leads to the question: What are we to make of this example of union? What might be the significance of the phrase “in the heavenlies” for understanding the divine–human relationship in the letter?

In recent Pauline scholarship, there has been growing interest in the discussion of the examples of union with regard to a patristic concept of deification/theosis (e.g., Rom 8:16; 12:2; 1 Cor 15:28; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:24; 5:1; Phil 3:21).³ In this regard, we could situate Brannon’s observation vis-à-vis the conversation around theosis in the New Testament. Building on Brannon, we may add the observation that a patristic idea of theosis offers an interpretive lens in understanding believers’ lives in the heavenlies. For this purpose, this study reflects on the importance of “in the heavenlies” for understanding how the divine–human relationship can be conceived within the letter, especially with respect to theosis. By theosis, I mean believers’ participation in the heavenlies in Christ, such that the attributes of God—God’s authority, power, and mystery—are reflected in the lives of believers. Yet, this study does not aim to offer a definite answer to the question of theosis itself in Ephesians. Instead, I demonstrate that “in the heavenlies” offers an inviting locus for considering Paul’s theological vision in terms of believers’ participation in God, namely, theosis. Thus, this study shows that believers’ lives in the heavenlies can be understood in terms of deification language from later in Christian history.
In what follows, I begin by discussing the notion of deification in patristic thought, with respect to the patristic language of “participation”. I show how deification is conceptualized by the church fathers and other scholars who reflect on this notion. I then consider the conceptual background of the heavenlies that may be relevant in Jewish thought along with the nature of the heavenlies in Ephesians. Then, I examine all the occurrences of “in the heavenlies” (1:3; 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12) to explore Paul’s participatory language (e.g., υἱοθεσία, συνεγερίω, συγκαθίζω, συγκληρονόμος, συμμετέχω, ἐνθέω) in terms of theosis. While participation has been one of the primary metaphors for theosis in Pauline studies,^4 what remains to be explored in the field is how Paul’s participatory terminology about heaven relates believers’ lives to God in the heavenlies in terms of theosis.

2. The Notion of Deification in Patristic Thought

Given the complexity of the notion of deification/theosis in patristic views, a comprehensive description of the term theosis is not within the purview of this article. Instead, I attend to the patristic language of “participation” in understanding the concept of theosis. In the patristic Christian tradition, theosis has often been understood as believers’ transformative participation in God’s life. Irenaeus of Lyons articulated the participatory dynamics of God and the human as follows: “These attributes [i.e., incorruption and immortality] belong to God alone; we can only participate in them if God first unites himself to the human race through the incarnation of the Logos. Individual human beings may then be united with Christ through filial adoption, which enables them to participate in the divine attributes of incorruption and immortality” (Russell 2004, p. 106). In a similar vein, Athanasius articulated the view that the transformation of human life is inaugurated by the incarnation of God in Christ (De Inc. 54). For Athanasius, deified flesh of Christ is the very means by which human beings can partake of God. That is to say, when human beings are said to “participate in the divine nature, it means that the Son communicates himself to them”, since the essence of God is shared with the Son to whom God wholly communicates himself (Ibid., pp. 181–82). Athanasius nuances the relationship between God and the human that “the Father and the Son are united by essence and nature; the Son and believers are united by adoption and grace” (Ibid., p. 180). This indicates that the church fathers viewed the distinction between creator and creatures. Norman Russell observes that in patristic thought, there is a “fundamental reliance on the theme of participation, which offers a way of understanding on the ontological level how Becoming can share in Being, or the created in the uncreated, without abandoning its contingent status” (Ibid., p. 203). Thus, for the church fathers, participation in the attributes of God is not an ontological fusion between God and human beings, even as human beings participate in the attributes of God. According to Russell, most the church fathers assumed a model of deification in the metaphorical (attributive) sense. Ben C. Blackwell adds, “It is metaphorical because humans do not become something other than human; they exist differently, but still as humans . . . With attributive deification humans remain ontologically distinct but participate in divine attributes” (Blackwell 2016, pp. xxii–xxiii). Building on this patristic thought, I assume the metaphorical (attributive) sense in articulating theosis in Ephesians. That is, I maintain the view of the church fathers that the distinction between creator and creatures remains, even as human beings participate in the attributes of God. As Markus Barth observes, “The notion of an ultimate mystical union between God and [the hu]man, heaven and earth, in which all distinctions vanish cannot be traced in Ephesians” (Barth 1974, p. 91, n. 95, emphasis mine).

On the challenge of anachronism with regard to the use of theosis as a category in New Testament texts, M. David Litwa’s observation is noteworthy: “The debate is not whether Paul had a ‘doctrine’ or ‘theory’ or ‘idea’ of deification. Rather, the question is whether an aspect of Paul’s soteriology can be called ‘deification’, by which I mean ‘sharing in God’s reality through Christ’” (Litwa 2008, p. 117). Additionally, Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s comments are apt here: “Semantic phenomena can exist in concealed form, potentially, and be revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs that are favorable
for such disclosure” (Bakhtin 1986, p. 5). For instance, in the account of Exodus, there are scenes where God imparts his wisdom and insight to the people of Israel to build the heavenly tabernacle on earth (Exod 31:3; 36:1–2). Bezalel, Oholiab, and every skillful one to whom God empowers his knowledge, skill, and understanding participate in and enact God’s wisdom and understanding on earth. Further, God empowers Moses to divide the waters, such that Moses’s hand becomes the instrument of God’s own power. Although the writer of Exodus does not explicitly use the language of theosism, the motif of God’s empowering his people in Israel’s history can be understood in terms of union with God, namely, theosis. Building on these observations, although there is no explicit reference to theosis in Ephesians, this study focuses on the theological witness set forth within the text of Ephesians that can be understood in terms of theosis. It shows that Paul’s participatory language (e.g., νοῦθεσια, συνεγερμω, συγκαθίζω, συγκλησιμωσις, συμμετοχος, εὐνος) can be called deification, by which I mean sharing in God’s authority, power, and mystery through Christ.

3. The Conceptual Background of the Heavenlies and Its Nature in Ephesians

Before examining all the occurrences of “in the heavenlies”, it is worth noting the conceptual background of the heavenlies and its nature in Ephesians. Paul uses the terms ἐπουράνιος and οὐράνιος interchangeably to denote the same reality in Ephesians (e.g., 6:9). The similarity between the heavenlies and heaven is found in 1:20, where some manuscripts (B 365 629) opt for οὐράνιος instead of ἐπουράνιος, though it may tell us that a particular scribe understood heaven and heavenlies this way. Andrew T. Lincoln nuances their relationship that “whereas οὐράνιος can be used in various contexts and with varying shades of meaning, including the eschatological, ἐν τοις ἐπουράνιοις in this letter particularly places heaven in a Pauline eschatological perspective . . . . Heaven is viewed as caught up in the history of redemption, and for Paul heaven is now caught up in this history in the light of its new focus, Jesus Christ” (Lincoln 1973, p. 479).

In the discussion of the heavenlies, scholars have often viewed that the proper background for understanding the heavenlies is the Jewish view of heaven. Lincoln observes that Paul assumes the Jewish conception of heaven, which is the “cosmic”, “transcendent”, and “atmospheric” heaven (e.g., Gen 1:1; Ps 147:8; cf. Matt 6:26), and is thus understood as the realm of “the upper or higher part of created reality” (Ibid., p. 479). Building on Lincoln, Brannon points out that in the Old Testament, the term σαμαρ generally refers to the space above the earth (Brannon 2011, p. 102). From the analysis of the heavenlies/heaven in various Jewish and Greek writings, Brannon argues, “The heavenly life which Jesus revealed, though it can be experienced on earth, is still associated with heaven and consequently that which is in contrast to the earth” (Ibid., p. 70). Brannon then concludes that in Ephesians, “the most appropriate meaning for the five occurrences of the expression is a local one”, such that the heavenlies “always refer to that which is spatially distinct from earth” (Ibid., pp. 14, 39, 71, 87, 92, 100, 204, 217).

While there is indeed a local connotation in the heavenlies/heaven as found in the Old Testament, the Jewish conception of heaven is not necessarily confined to any particular location such as the sky. In Israel’s history, the presence and dominion of God in the heavenlies/heaven are not confined to a location distinct from earth but are depicted as encompassing both heavenly and earthly realms (e.g., Ps 11:4; Isa 66:1). In addition, the temple signifies a realm that unites heaven with earth. That is to say, the temple embodies the presence and dominion of God on earth (e.g., 1 Kgs 9:2; 2 Chron 7:1). This fits the apparent temple language used to describe what God is building through believers on earth in Ephesians (2:21–22). In this view, believers become the locus of the presence of God on earth (2:22). Believers embody the presence of God on earth, such that they participate in the heavenlies/heaven on earth. In this way, heaven is embodied in the lives of believers. I thus suggest that the heavenlies are to be better understood as the dimension of existence and authority where believers participate in God’s life. In Ephesians, Paul speaks of the existence of a variety of powers in the heavenlies—God (1:3), Christ (1:20), believers (2:6), and
other powers (3:10; 6:12). This suggests that the heavens are operative and determined by the dimension of existence and, in Barth’s words, “by the exertion of power” (Barth 1974, p. 103)\(^{14}\), and, also, that God exercises his authority over “things in heaven and on earth” (τὰ ἐπὶ τοὺς οὐρανοὺς καὶ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, 1:10, 20; cf. Ps 11:4; Isa 66:1) points to the reality that the heavens are not bound to any spatial location such as the sky. In God’s reign through Christ (1:3–4), earth participates in heaven and, thus, believers participate in the heavens.\(^{15}\) Moreover, Paul describes that the evil powers in the heavenlies (6.12) wield their influence in the air (2:2) which “includes the earth itself”.\(^{16}\) In this light, the heavens include the invisible and visible and, thus, heaven and earth. As Robert Hermans observes, “Le ciel, la vie dans la proximité de Dieu, est déjà maintenant la vraie réalité de notre existence” (Hermans 2011, p. 413).\(^{17}\) The heavens, then, ought to be better understood as the dimension of existence and authority in which believers participate in God’s heavenly blessing in Christ (1:3).

4. Deification and Participation in the Heavenlies

4.1. Election/Adoption as Deification

The first occurrence of “in the heavenlies” is in 1:3, where God blesses his people with every blessing in the heavenlies (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις) in Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ). The prepositional phrase “in Christ” is often used to indicate that “God’s acts towards believers are performed through Christ or are in some way conditioned or associated with Christ” (Campbell 2012, p. 94). Gorman notes that “Paul’s ‘in Christ’ language and theology, once labeled ‘Christ mysticism’” is now called “participation in Christ” or “union with Christ” (Gorman 2023, p. 476).\(^{18}\) According to Gorman, “To be in Christ is to live in the sphere of his lordship, his dominion” (Ibid., 2023, p. 479). The preposition “in”, then, includes a relational sense that involves the participatory dynamics of Christ and believers. That is, believers live in the sphere of Christ’s lordship and sovereignty, thereby being empowered by Christ. From this view, Paul’s juxtaposition of “in the heavenlies” and “in Christ” suggests that the heavens are operative in the sphere of Christ’s dominion.

In discussing believers’ experience of God’s blessing in the heavenlies, Paul uses the term ἐκλέγω (“choose”, 1:4) to describe God’s electing activity. It appears that God’s election denotes a transcendent activity because it is described as having happened “before the foundation of the world” (1:4; cf. 1:5; 2 Kgs 19:25; Isa 22:11). At the same time, however, Paul shows that God’s transcendent electing activity becomes the earthly material reality in Christ, who enters the time of history as human flesh (1:4).\(^{19}\) The incarnation of Christ is hinted at in 1:7, where Paul describes that believers are redeemed through the blood of Christ. In this way, God’s transcendence (heavenly) and immanence (earthly) are compatible in Christ.\(^{20}\) That is, the heavens are operative on earth in Christ. As Christopher Rowland observes, “Transcendent reality would be realized on earth [in Christ], not in heaven or some transcendent world” (Rowland 2017, p. 135).

Paul shows that God’s electing activity in the heavenlies is revealed in God’s adoption (νικηφορία) through Christ (1:5).\(^{21}\) Thus, to participate in God’s blessing in the heavenlies is to be included by adoption within the family of God. To put it another way, to be adopted by God is to participate in God’s blessing in the heavenlies. Paul’s use of νικηφορία (“adoption”, 1:5) is often used to refer to believers’ privileges of legal heirs (cf. Rom 8:23; 9:4). The implication is that those who are adopted as God’s children participate in and inherit God’s life in the heavenlies. In patristic thought, the language of adoption is often understood as a process of deification. Athanasius viewed that “the Father and the Son are united by essence and nature; the Son and believers are united by adoption and grace” (Russell 2004, p. 180). Additionally, Origen posited that participation in God’s life “implies some kind of kinship both among co-participants and between participant and participated” (Ibid., p. 148). For Origen, participation is the means by which the filial union of God and believers is made. This view resonates with Paul’s description of the divine–human relation, since Paul presents the participatory dynamics of God and believers in terms of adoption,
namely, *kinship* (1:5). Through Christ, believers become God’s family and heirs, thereby participating in and enjoying God’s blessings and inheritance in the heavens, which can be understood as a process of deification.

### 4.2. Exaltation as Deification

The next occurrence of “in the heavens” is in 1:20, where God has raised Jesus up from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavens (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις). Paul describes that God puts his power to work “in Christ” and that every ruler and authority and power and dominion are subject to Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God (1:20–22). The idea of sitting at God’s right hand is found in the Old Testament, where the psalmist says, “The Lord says to my lord, Sit at my right hand” (110:1, NRSV). By alluding to the messianic figure in Ps 110.1, Paul presents Christ as one who has supreme authority and power (cf. Matt 22:44; 26:64; Acts 2:34–35; 1 Cor 15:25; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1). As Rowland observes, “There is an affinity of Paul’s views with those known in rabbinic sources, where a second power is given authority alongside God (e.g., bHagigah 15a; 3 En. 16). These were exactly the views which were typical of the early Christians, including Paul, who on the basis of Psalm 110 gave the exalted Christ a position of prominence and divine authority, albeit derived from God the Father (1 Cor 15:24–28; cf. Matt 22:44)” (Rowland 2017, p. 137). In addition to Christ’s enthronement in the heavens, Paul speaks of the *extension* of Christ’s supreme authority and power to believers. In 2:6, Paul talks about believers’ exalted position in the heavens in Christ. There is a clear connection between the exaltation of Christ in the heavens (1:20) and the exaltation of believers (2:6), since believers are depicted as being “in Christ”, who is seated in the heavens. Exaltation is, thus, a reality in which believers come to share by virtue of their participation in Christ. Being exalted in the heavens in Christ, then, is one of theosis, Paul’s way of presenting the union of Christ and believers. In the flow of Paul’s argument in the letter, believers’ exalted position in the heavens in Christ (2:6) can be thought to result from the bestowal of God’s blessings to them in the heavens in Christ (1:3). That is, God’s blessings enable and empower believers to experience and participate in the life of God in the heavens. It is in (ἐν) and through (διὰ) Christ, then, that believers participate in the heavens, thereby sharing in his authority and power. While Paul does not describe that believers participate in Christ’s authority and power here but that they are seated in the heavens in order to receive the riches of God’s kindness (2:7), they not only benefit from God’s kindness but also share in the rule and power of Christ by virtue of their union with Christ. As Joshua W. Jipp adequately observes, “What is true of the king and his rule is applied to the king’s subjects such that the church shares in the messianic king’s rule over the evil powers and thereby participates in all of the benefits of the king’s rule” (Jipp 2014, p. 258). Rather than merely being the recipients of God’s actions, believers are called “to fill the created world with the presence of its king. This is the force of Paul’s claim that the church is “the fullness of the one filling all things in all places” in 1:23 (Ibid., p. 269, emphasis original). This implies that just as all powers are subject to Christ (1:22), so they are subject to believers insofar as they are exalted and thus seated with Christ in the heavens.

Scholars have viewed that believers’ participation in Christ entails participation in the events of Christ’s narrative, including his death, resurrection, and ascension (Campbell 2012, p. 408). In 2:5–6, Paul uses three verbs (συζωοποιέω, συγεγείρω, συγκαθίζω) to portray believers’ participation in the events of Christ’s narrative: God has made believers alive with (συζωοποιέω) Christ, raised them up with (συγεγείρω) Christ, and seated them with (συγκαθίζω) Christ in the heavens (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις). With regard to the dynamic of deification at work in believers’ participation in the narrative of Christ, Blackwell’s observation is apt: “Christ, in fact, embodies deity, and Christ’s divine ontology is revealed through his functional narrative of death and life. And believers are filled with Christ and thus embody a narrative of death and life in the past, present and future, which allows them to participate in deity through him” (Blackwell 2016, p. 142). In this light, the nature of believers’ participation in the heavens is the participatory union...
with the life of Christ. Life in Christ enables and empowers believers to participate in his death and exaltation (cf. Rom 6:1–8; Gal 3:27–29). Thus, believers embody and share in the life of Christ’s being made alive, raised up, and seated in the heavenlies, such that they participate in God’s life in the heavenlies (2:5–6).

Here, we should bear in mind that God’s raising believers in the heavenlies is far from the bodily removal from earth because they physically live in Ephesus (1:1), and they hope to live long on the earth (6:3). Thus, the nature of believers’ participation in the heavenlies is about present participation on earth. Given that συνεκκαθήσεγ ("co-seated with", 2:6) is in the aorist, that believers are exalted and seated with Christ in the heavenlies is not merely a future reality after their deaths. Instead, it is already a reality in the experience of believers in Christ.27 Although there may be some futuristic sense in believers’ exalted position in heaven, Paul puts emphasis on the present reality of believers’ life in Christ. Christopher Rowland and Christopher R. A. Morray-Jones adequately observe, “Futurist eschatology is present in Eph 1.14; 2.7; 4.10; 5.5, 27; 6.8, 13, yet it has to be admitted that there is alongside it a greater emphasis on the present possession which the ecclesia enjoys in Christ” (Rowland and Morray-Jones 2009, p. 173).28

4.3. Divine Mystery: Union of Jews and Gentiles as Deification

The next occurrence of “in the heavenlies” appears in 3:10, which deals with the relationship between believers and the powers (earthly and heavenly) in the heavenlies (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις). In context, Paul speaks of the mystery of God that has been hidden from the ages, namely, the incorporation of the gentile people into the people of God (3:6).29 Paul describes that the gentile people are incorporated into the people of God as co-heirs of the promise in Christ (3:6, 11). Constantin R. Campbell points out that the concept of incorporation in Paul is “bound up in the metatheme of ‘union with Christ’”, such that it denotes the “corporate dimensions of membership in Christ’s body” (Campbell 2012, p. 413). By being incorporated into the people of God, then, the gentile people become members of God’s family who participate in God’s heavenly blessings in Christ (cf. 1:3–4). The theme of the incorporation of the gentile people into the people of God is connected to Paul’s discussion in 2:11–15, where Paul talks about the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles (2:12, 17) and between God and humanity (2:14–15).30 Paul describes that the crucified Christ brings the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles (2:13; cf. 1:7), through which God and humanity (both Jews and Gentiles) are united as its consequence (2:16).31 Jesus’s blood thus enables the gentile people to transition from the position of aliens to the position of God’s family and God’s legal heirs (2:13). That is to say, the union of Jews and Gentiles through Jesus’s blood enables the gentile people to be united with God as they come to participate in God’s promise Jews receive and enjoy.32 In this way, Jews and Gentiles become one people of God, belonging to the same body (συνόροφος) in Christ (3:6). In discussing the transformed position of the gentile people (3:6), Paul uses participatory language that can be understood in terms of theosis. That is to say, the gentile people become God’s family and co-heirs (συγκλησονόμος), thereby participating in God’s promise (ἐπαγγελία) as co-sharers (συμμέτοχος, 3:6).

Paul also shows another aspect of deification in discussing the agents of the divine mystery. First, Paul presents himself as an agent who participates in the divine mystery “by the operation of his power” (κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς δυνάμεως σωτῆρος, 3:7). Next, Paul describes that through (διὰ) the community of Christ (ἐκκλησία), the mystery of God is now (νῦν) revealed to the rulers and powers in the heavenlies (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις, 3:10).33 That is, the mystery of God, the incorporation of the gentile people into the people of God, is revealed through Paul and other believers.34 This goes to the dynamic of theosis. Being empowered by God (“by the operation of his power”, 3:7), believers communally participate in God’s purpose and mystery,35 such that they become the reflectors and revealers of the very mystery of God, making it known to the rulers and powers in the heavenlies (3:10).36

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Paul also shows another aspect of deification in discussing the agents of the divine mystery. First, Paul presents himself as an agent who participates in the divine mystery “by the operation of his power” (κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς δυνάμεως σωτῆρος, 3:7). Next, Paul describes that through (διὰ) the community of Christ (ἐκκλησία), the mystery of God is now (νῦν) revealed to the rulers and powers in the heavenlies (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις, 3:10).33 That is, the mystery of God, the incorporation of the gentile people into the people of God, is revealed through Paul and other believers.34 This goes to the dynamic of theosis. Being empowered by God (“by the operation of his power”, 3:7), believers communally participate in God’s purpose and mystery,35 such that they become the reflectors and revealers of the very mystery of God, making it known to the rulers and powers in the heavenlies (3:10).36
4.4. Putting on the Armor of God as Deification

The last occurrence of “in the heavenlies” appears in 6:12, where Paul talks about believers’ warfare with the evil powers in the heavenlies (ἐν τοῖς ἐπωνομαζομένοις). Paul shows that it is not only God, Christ, and believers who are in the heavenlies but also the spiritual forces of evil, the rulers and powers dwell in the heavenlies (6:12; cf. Job 1:6; Dan 10:13). Scholars such as W. Hall Harris III contend that the ultimate defeat of the evil powers appears as a future event (Harris 1991, p. 87). The subjugation of the powers to the exalted Christ, however, is depicted as the present condition rather than merely a future event in Ephesians. Paul’s use of the aorist ὑπέταξεν in 1:22 strongly argues that all powers, presumably including the evil powers and principalities (6:12), are completely and presently subject to Christ. This view is consistent with Paul’s description of Christ, who is presently seated at the right hand of God, thereby reigning over every power (1:20). In this power dynamic, Paul exhorts believers to be strong “in [the] Lord” (ἐν κυρίῳ) and calls them to be equipped with God’s power to stand against (πρὸς) the wiles of the devil (6:10–12; cf. 2:6). Richard B. Hays observes that to be in Christ is “to enter the sphere of his lordship and thereby to be enlisted on his side in the war against the enslaving power of Sin” (Hays 2008, p. 342). In Paul’s description in the letter, to be equipped with God’s power is to “put on” (ἐνδύω) God’s armor (6:11). In the Greco-Roman world, clothing expressed who one was. A garment was considered to be part of its wearer, such that a garment is identified with its wearer. Campbell notes that “the use of the metaphor [of clothing] creates the meaning that believers are to be defined in some way by their ‘wearing’ of Christ” (Campbell 2014, p. 75). In this light, believers’ identity is transformed by putting on Christ. Paul’s language of putting on Christ can thus be understood as becoming like Christ, a concept that resonates with a patristic idea of deification. In the same way, putting on the armor of God is becoming like God, which can be understood in terms of theosis, namely, participation in God’s authority and power.

In 6:14–17, Paul alludes to Isaiah’s vision to describe the image of putting on the armor of God. In describing the belt of truth (6:14), Paul alludes to Isa 11:5, where a messianic figure, who comes out from the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1), is equipped with righteousness and faithfulness to rule the earth (Isa 11:4). Additionally, in portraying the breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation (6:14, 17), Paul alludes to Isa. 59.17 (cf. Isa 11:5; Wis. 5:18), where God puts on “righteousness like a breastplate and a helmet of salvation on his head” (NRSV) to judge the evil. Moreover, in describing the image of the gospel of peace (6:15; cf. 4:3), Paul alludes to Isa 52:7, where Isaiah declares the reign of God: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, Your God reigns” (NRSV). The effect of Paul’s allusion to Isaiah’s vision would be that just as God rules and reigns the earth and judges evil, so believers, equipped with God’s armor, participate in the very authority and power of God. In this sense, being equipped with the armor of God (6:11–12), believers exercise God’s authority over the evil powers in the heavenlies in the same way Christ exercises his authority over every power in the heavens (1:20–22). In this way, the dynamic of putting on the armor of God can be understood in terms of theosis as it qualifies and empowers believers to participate in and enact God’s own authority and power against the evil powers in the heavenlies.

5. The Significance of Deification and Theological Implications

The understanding of deification allows the nature of Paul’s participatory language in the letter of Ephesians to come into sharper focus. As discussed above, participation in God for Paul entails adoption, being raised and seated with Christ in the heavenlies, the union of Jews and Gentiles, and putting on the armor of God. What deification allows readers of Ephesians to see is that believers’ participation in the heavenlies is not simply a static reality in heaven but one of ongoing relational dynamics of God and believers (cf. 1:22–23; 2:20–22). Being empowered by God (3:7), believers come to share in the mystery of God in the heavenlies. Being strengthened by God (6:10), believers come to stand against evil
powers in the heavenlies. By putting on the armor of God (6:11), believers come to exercise God’s own authority and power over evil powers. Participation, then, is a dynamic process of deification that shares in what God is in the heavenlies.

Moreover, it is worth noting the theological implications of the discussion about the heavenlies. First, believers’ lives have transformative potential in the heavenlies. Believers are called to experience and participate in God’s abundant life (1:3), with the result that they are transformed by their participation in God’s life in the heavenlies. The nature of believers’ transformative participation in God’s life is not a futuristic thing after their deaths but the divinely empowered life in the present, such that God’s attributes (authority and power) are presently reflected and experienced in the lives of believers in the heavenlies. Second, the discussion about the heavenlies informs who believers are in Christ. Believers are not only the recipients of God’s actions but they are also co-heirs and co-sharers in God’s life (3:6), who fill the world with God’s presence (1:23) and reveal God’s mystery to the rulers and powers in the heavenlies (3:10), according to Paul’s presentation in the letter.

6. Conclusions

This article reflected on the importance of the phrase “in the heavenlies” for understanding how the divine–human relationship can be conceived within the letter of Ephesians. My intent in this article has been to show that “in the heavenlies” offers a useful locus for considering the letter of Ephesians in terms of theosis. For this purpose, I examined the notion of deification in patristic thought, with particular attention to the language of participation. I also considered the conceptual background of the heavenlies and suggested that the heavenlies are to be better understood as the dimension of existence and authority. I then examined all the occurrences of “in the heavenlies” in Ephesians (1:3; 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12) to demonstrate how believers participate in the heavenlies as sharers in God’s authority, power, and mystery. By doing so, this study sought to demonstrate how Paul’s participatory language relates believers’ lives to God in the heavenlies in terms of theosis. By attending to Paul’s terminology about heaven in the letter, this study shed light on “in the heavenlies” vis-à-vis the conversation around theosis in the New Testament.

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Notes

1 The expression “in the heavenlies” (ἐν τοῖς ἐπιφανείαις) appears five times in Ephesians (1:3; 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12), but occurs nowhere else in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor 15:40; 48; Phil 2:10; Heb 3:1; 8:5). See Lincoln (1981, pp. 140–44). Unless noted otherwise, all translations from NA28 are my own. Additionally, the authorship of Ephesians is not within the purview of this article. This study focuses on the theological witness of the text itself rather than on the historical identity of the author. For the sake of convenience, I refer to the author of Ephesians as “Paul” (1:1). On Paul’s authorship, see, e.g., O’Brien (1999, pp. 1–45); Johnson (1999, p. 412); Heil (2007, pp. 5–6).


4 With regard to Paul’s participatory language, Keating (2004, p. 151) identifies two possible word groups: μετέχειν and κοινωνεῖν (e.g., Rom 15:27; 1 Cor 10:14–22; Phil 2:1; cf. Heb 2:14–15; 6:4; 12:10; 2 Pet 1:4). Hays (2008, p. 348) points out the connection between Paul’s participatory language and patristic ideas: “Paul’s participationist eschatology has continued to play a particularly important role in shaping the thought and spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy. For this reason, a careful reading of Eastern
patristic sources might well provide further insight into Paul's language of participation in Christ”. On the significance of Paul's participatory language, see Sanders (1977, p. 552): “The main theme of Paul's theology is found in his participationist language”, that is, Paul's theology focuses on the theme of union with Christ. See also Gorman (2009, p. 8), who suggests that the notion that believers' participation in Christ is “the core of Paul's theology”, though “theosis may not be the only word to describe the full soteriological process in Paul”. According to Gorman (2009, p. 7), “Theosis is transformative participation in the kenotic, cruciform character of God through Spirit-enabled conformity to the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected/glorified Christ”.


For further discussion on the divine attributes of incorruption and immortality in patristic thought, see Blackwell (2016, pp. 46–50, 60–64).

For various deification models in patristic thought, see Russell (2004, pp. 1–3).

Blackwell (2016, p. xxiii, n. 10) suggests that “being a metaphor does not mean that something is not real”.

Luz (2004, p. 134, emphasis original) points out that “[Pauline] mysticism is primarily understood as ‘experience of God’ or, more specifically, the experience of the overcoming of distance, the unio, the communion, or connection with God”. Here, Pauline mysticism is not confined to “the form of fusion with the divine” but “the form of the communion with it” (Luz 2004, p. 135). According to Luz (2004, p. 143, emphasis original), “Paul’s ‘mysticism’ is an expression of his experience of Christ and in particular of his participation in Christ”.

See also Harris (1991, p. 75), who understands that the heavens refer “primarily to the uppermost part of the created order”. The heavens are also understood as the firmament (e.g., Gen. 1.7). Lincoln (1973, p. 479) notes that “the upper limits of the firmament were regarded as concealing a presently invisible created spiritual order” (e.g., 2 Kgs 6:17; Job 1:6; Zech 3:1).

For an extensive discussion of the heavens/heaven in Jewish and Greek writings, see Brannon (2011, pp. 38–110).

Similarly, Lincoln (1973, p. 469) contends, “Since the phrase [in the heavens] is clearly used as a formula in Ephesians and one would expect it to retain the same meaning throughout, this interpretation must be rejected in favour of the ‘local’, for other references (cf. especially i. 20) just will not bear such a non-local interpretation”. Lincoln interprets the heavens as the abode of God to which Christ has ascended and, thus, transcends human understanding (cf. 1:20; 2:6; 4:10). See also G. B. Caird (1976, p. 33), who suggests that the heavens are concerned with “the invisible, spiritual environment, as contrasted with the visible, tangible environment. It is the realm of all the unseen forces”. Caird argues that the heavens are contrasted with the earthly realm, namely, the visible environment. For further discussion on a local translation, see Barth (2017, p. 91), who views the heavens as “locative”.

Cf. Brannon (2011, p. 103) contends that “when we encounter the term ἑπουραγίος or ἐν τοῖς ἑπουραγίοις in Ephesians, we should expect a reference either to the sky, the firmament, or the dwelling place of God’”.

See also Thielman (2010, p. 47); Hanson (1980, p. 138).

The notion of human participation in the heavens is located within Jewish mysticism and apocalyptic traditions, see Francis (1962). Scholars such as John Ashton locate Paul within mystical and apocalyptic traditions, see Ashton (2000).


“The sky, the life in the proximity of God, is already now the true reality of our existence (on earth)”; all the French translations are mine.

Hays (2008, pp. 339–47) nuances what participation in Christ entails: belonging to God’s family, being in “political or military solidarity” with Christ, participating in the church, and living within the story of Christ.

See also Newman (1996, pp. 238–39, emphasis original): “That election found expression ‘in him’ places the elective event within the scope of history. Painting election as simply, or even primarily, a pre-temporal (and therefore decidedly unhistorical) decree devalues or ignores a real incarnation”. Barth (2017, p. 81) identifies “in Christ!” as the central motif in Ephesians. It points to the way God’s electing activity is revealed, and, as such, God’s election is qualified “in Christ”. On the dynamics of God’s election in Christ, see Harink (2010, p. 299); Dahl (1956, p. 432).

Desmond (1995, p. 201) observes the relation between transcendence and immanence: “transcendence in innerness, transcendence in the between, transcendence beyond reduction to immanence, and yet at work in the intimacy of immanence”. God’s transcendence and immanence can thus exist together without displacing the other. Both transcendence and immanence are embraced within the purview of divine agency, while not dislocating the human as an agency distinct from God in Christ who enters the time of history as human flesh. If the subject is Jesus Christ himself, then the agent is the one God-human person, such that human and divine agency cannot be distinguished but constitute an ontic equivalence. Everything Christ does he does as God and a human being. But, if the subject is other human beings, then we may speak of a divine agency that precedes and exceeds human agency while acting also in some cases as that human agency. That is to say, God can act beyond the realm of human agency, while simultaneously acting in human beings through Christ, who empowers them to participate in the heavens which is God’s life.

For discussions on Jewish or Greco-Roman conceptions of adoption that lie behind Paul’s discussion, see Blackwell (2016, p. 143, n. 103).
On the relation between Origen and Ephesians, see Heine (2000, pp. 149–57); Heil (2002); Layton (2000, pp. 373–411).

Barclay offers three different models by which to understand the relationship between divine and human agency in Paul—“competitive”, “non-contrastive transcendence”, and “kinship” models. For further discussion on these three theoretical models, see Barclay (2008, pp. 1–8). The theme of divine and human agency has been the subject of discussion among Pauline scholars. See, e.g., Barclay (2008); Maston (2017).


For an extensive discussion on the connection between the exaltation of Christ and the exaltation of believers, see Allen (1986, pp. 103–7); see further pp. 107–8 for the discussion on the historical background of 1:20 and 2:6.

The term εὐγενεία ("raise", 2:6) is used to mean occasionally “the making of a king or other leader” in the Old Testament (e.g., Deut 18:15, 18; Judg 2:16, 18; 3:9, 15). Similarly, the term καθισμός ("cause to sit down", 1:20; 2:6) is to be understood in the sense of honor, power, and role given to believers. See Barth (1974, pp. 237–38).

On the views of the present or realized eschatology in Ephesians, see Wold (2017, p. 227); Rowland and Morray-Jones (2009, p. 173).

Similarly, Wold (2017, p. 228) observes: “An aspect of [Jewish] mystery developed in Ephesians is present participation with angelic beings in the heavenly realm” (cf. 1QS 11:5–8). See also Lincoln (1973, p. 471): “Through the Christ event the eschatological, the spiritual, the heavenly have become a present reality for believers”.

Wold (2017, p. 227) notes that among the Pauline letters, Ephesians is “disproportionately interested in mysteries with seven occurrences (1:9; 3:3, 4, 5, 9; 5:32; 6:19)”. Elsewhere in the Pauline letters, the theme of mystery appears in Col 1:26; 27; 2:2; 4:3; Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:3; 15:51. For further discussion, see Bockmuehl (1990).

The absence of the term “Jews” in Ephesians does not preclude Jews within the purview of this letter because the very name Jews is evoked in Paul’s arguments when Paul mentions the distinction created by circumcision and refers to his audience as those “who are aliens to the polity of Israel and strangers to the covenants of the promise” (2:11–13). This implies that Gentiles have now become God’s people through Jesus Christ (2:13), participating in the covenants of the God of Israel that were considered to be reserved for Jews. While Paul explicitly employs “you” (ε̱υ) to indicate the Gentiles in 3:1, Paul implies that the people of gentile background to whom he is writing (i.e., not of Jewish background) have been adopted into the family of Israel in 4:17. As he does in other letters, Paul speaks of the Israelite past and present (and therefore the Jewish past and present) to make sense of the life of his readers of gentile background. In Paul’s letters, Gentiles are frequently associated with Jews (e.g., Rom 9–11). In this light, the relation between Jews and gentiles is at stake in Ephesians. Cf. Thiessen (2016) contends that Paul deals with only the gentile problem in Gal 3–4.

Paul describes that Jesus breaks down the wall between two earthly hostilities (Jews and Gentiles) in his flesh (2:14, 16). Rowland (2017, p. 142) observes: “The criterion of the true divine mystery is a crucified messiah”. According to Rowland (Ibid., p. 139): “The divine is revealed in the world of flesh, not through heavenly ascent but in the cross of Christ and the lives of his followers, especially his apostle, whose path involves affliction and death” (e.g., 2 Cor 3–4). For further discussion on the nature of divine mystery, see Rowland (2017, pp. 139–44); Martyn (2005, pp. 89–123).

Brannon (2011, pp. 181–82) summarizes well the dynamic at work in 3:6–11: “The mystery of God” is “the complete union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through the union of both with Christ. It is this double union, with Christ and with each other, which is the substance of the ‘mystery’. Since the central theme of Ephesians is ‘the uniting of all things in heaven and earth in Christ’, a natural outworking of this ἀνακεφαλαιωσθαι is the union of Jews and Gentiles through Christ”. The term ἀνακεφαλαιωσθαι (1:10) also appears in Rom 13:9, where Paul describes that the laws are summed up in one sentence, “love your neighbor as yourself”. This way of taking ἀνακεφαλαιωσθαι leads us to read 1:10 in a sense that God sums up all things in heaven and on earth together in one person, Jesus Christ.

The identity of “the rulers and powers in the heavens” in 3:10 is not specified. They could be both earthly and heavenly powers. See Rowland and Morray-Jones (2009, p. 174). In 6:12, the rulers and powers are identified as the evil powers. On the nature of the evil powers in 6:12, Fowl (2012, p. 204) observes that “Paul’s point here is not to produce a precise list of the species that inhabit the heavenly realms, but to signify the vast multiplicity of demonic forces allied against the church”. Since the four groups “rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers, and the spiritual forces of evil” in 6:12 are distinguished from the enemies of heaven in Christ, a natural outworking of this ἀνακεφαλαιωσθαι is the union of Jews and Gentiles through Christ”. The term ἀνακεφαλαιωσθαι (1:10) also appears in Rom 13:9, where Paul describes that the laws are summed up in one sentence, “love your neighbor as yourself”. This way of taking ἀνακεφαλαιωσθαι leads us to read 1:10 in a sense that God sums up all things in heaven and on earth together in one person, Jesus Christ.

As Lincoln (1973, pp. 474–75) observes: “What is in fact proclaimed to the powers is the manifold wisdom of God, which is probably seen here not so much as realized in the person of Christ as in the progressive and varied drama of redemption which reaches its culmination in the Church”.

Cf. Maston argues that the Hadayot, which may descend from the Essenes, resembles a Pauline understanding of the divine–human relationship. Based on the comparative study of Pauline texts (e.g., Rom 7–8) and the Hadayot, Maston (2017, p. 20) argues that the human agent is not merely the passive receiver of God’s action: “What emerges from the Hadayot is not a denial of human agency, but a restored human agent empowered and continuously sustained by a gracious divine agent”. Maston does not, however, articulate the God–human relationship in terms of theosis. He does not press it further that God empowers human beings to participate in God’s own power. The motif of God’s empowerment appears in the letter, where God imparts his wisdom, revelation, and mystery to believers (1:18–9; cf. 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19). Paul prays that believers know the love of
Christ that surpasses knowledge so that they may be filled with all the fullness of God (3:18–19). Being empowered by God, believers manifest the fullness of God, his love, wisdom, and revelation. In the Pauline letters, God’s empowerment of wisdom and revelation is generally associated with the work of the Spirit. For instance, see 1 Cor 2:10, where God reveals the mystery through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. Luz (2004, p. 137) views that Pauline mysticism is linked to the gift of the Spirit: “The gift of the Spirit seems to me to be the experiential basis of Pauline Christ-mysticism”. In a similar vein, Origen articulated the view that the nature of the dynamic participation in God’s life is trinitarian: “It is impossible to become a partaker of the Father or the Son without the Holy Spirit” (De Prin. 1.3.5). For a discussion on God’s empowerment in Israel’s history, see Brueggemann (2014, pp. 231–32).

36 Cf. In the Old Testament, it is Yahweh who is often depicted as revealing mysteries in heaven (e.g., Dan 2:28). Paul shows this aspect in 1:17–18, where God bestows revelation on his people.

37 With regard to the co-existence of God and evil powers in the heavens (ἐν τοῖς ἐπουροχώριοις), Brannon (2011, pp. 192–94) argues that as envisioned in the apocalyptic literature (e.g., 2 En. 7, 18; 3 Baruch 2–4), the spiritual powers of evil are in the lower heavens, whereas believers are seated with Christ in the highest heaven. Yet, Brannon does not provide sufficient textual evidence with regard to the highest heaven and the lower heavens in Ephesians (cf. 2 Cor 12:2). According to Paul’s description in Ephesians, the rule of the exalted Christ indicates his sovereign authority and power over all other powers: all powers are “under his feet” (ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ, 1:22), namely, under his sovereign authority and power. Similarly, Hermans (2011, p. 412) observes: “La manière dont cette exaltation au-dessus de toutes les forces cosmiques est décrite, notamment l'énumération de toutes les forces hostiles à Dieu qui pourraient encore se dresser dans le présent et dans l'avenir, souligne la suprématie absolue du Christ sur toutes ces puissances”: “The way in which this (Jesus’s) exaltation above all cosmic forces is described, including the enumeration of all the forces hostile to God that might still stand in the present and in the future, emphasizes the absolute supremacy of Christ over all these powers”. See also Lincoln (1990, p. 472).

38 In the Pauline letters, the motif of putting on Christ is often associated with baptism, which enables believers to participate in Christ’s life; that is, the heirs of God’s inheritance (e.g., Gal 3:27–29). Additionally, Paul presents putting on Christ as putting on the armor of light which is God’s (Rom 13:12). In 1 Cor 15, moreover, Paul describes that believers will wear the imperishable form of existence as a garment which is like Christ’s resurrected body. In this way, Paul links the theme of putting on Christ with believers’ transformed identity.

39 The cross-reference in the margin of Eph 6:14–17 in NA28 points to Isa 11:5; 52:7; 59:17 LXX.

40 In Ephesians, Paul uses various metaphors (e.g., head and body, temple and building) to describe the ongoing relational dynamics of Christ and believers that press toward unity/oneness in Christ. For Paul’s use of metaphors in the letter, see Campbell (2014, pp. 67–84).

References


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