



ETB: Ephesians 2:1-10

ISTOCK PHOTO

HIS WORKMANSHIP

A Word Study

By Steve Booth

NOT BEING VERY ARTISTIC myself, I have learned to appreciate art and beauty in fresh ways through the eyes of my son, who is a gifted painter and sculptor. What he is able to create, seemingly out of nothing, constantly surprises and delights me. I am reminded anew that God Himself is not only the Maker, but also the Craftsman that stands behind all that is beautiful and delightful in this world.

Exodus records the Lord appointing Bezalel to oversee the design and construction of the Tabernacle: “I have filled him with God’s Spirit, with wisdom, understanding, and ability in every craft to design artistic works in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut gemstones for mounting, and to carve wood for work in every craft” (Ex. 31:3-5).¹ Chapters 35-39 describe in detail how Bezalel and the other skilled craftsmen completed this assignment from the Lord. The Lord’s glory afterwards filled the Tabernacle (40:34).

Perhaps the apostle Paul had these events in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of

time for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). His wording is interesting at this point. No other New Testament writer used *poiema*, the Greek word for “workmanship.” Paul himself used it only one more time, in Romans 1:20. The basic meaning is something made or done, a work, or a creation.² But what picture was Paul painting for his readers by employing this particular word?

In Secular Culture

Most people in the secular Greek culture to whom Paul wrote were fully conversant in Greek mythology. Greeks believed their gods, especially Zeus, made all things.³ Concerning human works, the people’s thoughts about construction (*poiema*) might range from houses and temples to the work of the local artisan who made a bowl or a piece of jewelry. Some classical Greek poets used the related word *poietae* in a specialized sense to mean “poet.” Thus, for those who were part of secular Greek culture, *poiema* could include physical workmanship or intellectual creation.⁴

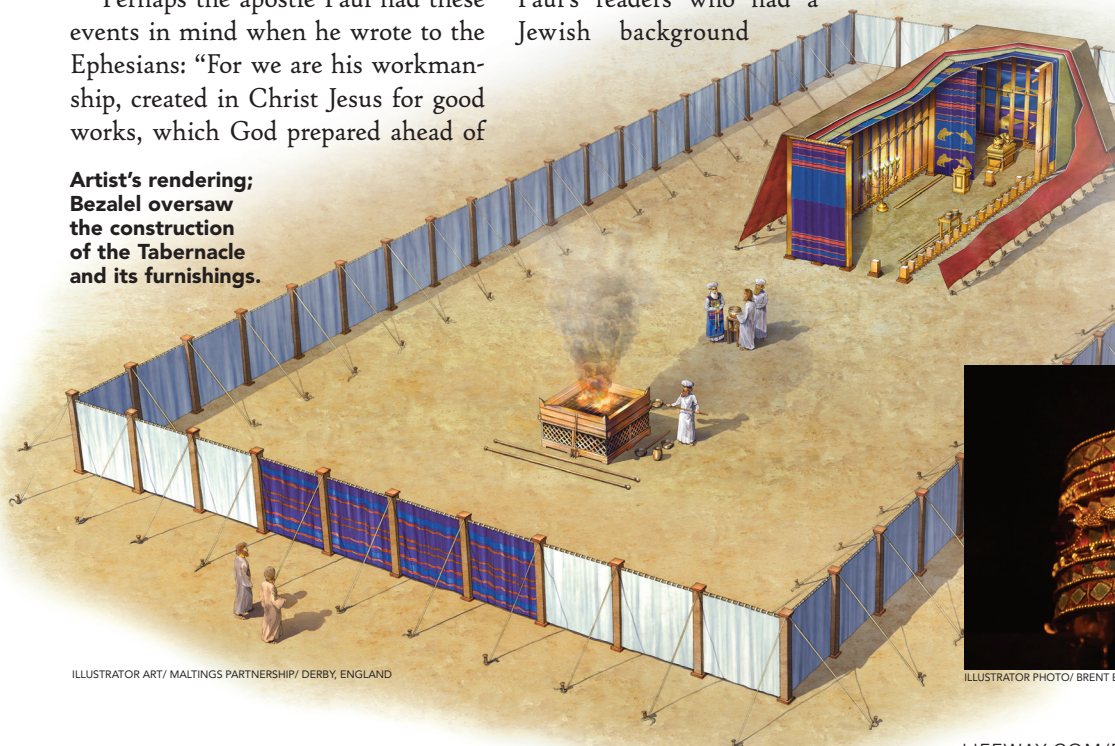
In the Septuagint

Paul’s readers who had a Jewish background

would have been familiar with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. *Poiema* occurs twenty-nine times in the Septuagint, twenty of these are in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Book of Ecclesiastes uses the term to speak primarily about the works of people, which are futile. God will judge these deeds, whether good or bad.⁵ When Ecclesiastes references the works of God, the primary point is that they are unfathomable.⁶ The three occurrences of *poiema* in the Psalms each refer to God’s fearful and wonderful deeds (Pss. 64:9; 92:4; 143:5, “the work of your hands”).

The lone occurrence in the prophetic books asks: “You have turned things around, as if the potter were the same as the clay. How can what is made say about its maker, ‘He didn’t make me’? How can *what is formed* [*poiema*] say about the one who formed it, ‘He doesn’t understand what he’s doing’?”⁷ (Isa. 29:16, emphasis added). This concept matches well with the context of Paul’s statement to the Ephesians. Paul declared, “We are his workmanship,” with emphasis in the Greek text on God’s personal

Artist’s rendering: Bezalel oversaw the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings.



Below: Gold bracelet, 1st cent. BC; from the colonized region of the Black Sea. The bracelet opens using hinges on either side of the center panel. The piece is decorated with garnet, amethyst, emerald, pearl, chrysoprase, glass, and enamel.



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From Philippopolis, a 1st-cent. AD Roman mosaic of Orpheus, the Greek musician and poet. The Greek term translated "workmanship" is *poiema*, from which we get the word "poem."

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ownership of His creation. Since He is the One who created us, we have absolutely no grounds for boasting as if we made or saved ourselves (Eph. 2:8-9).

In the Ephesian Setting

The literary context shows clearly that Paul had in mind the creation account in Genesis, since "workmanship" is immediately followed by the verb "created," with God as the implied agent. We also see that this new, second creative act takes place "in Christ Jesus," much the same doctrinal teaching that Paul gave the Corinthians: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17).

Perhaps, though, both Paul and his Ephesian readers might have also thought of the artisan guilds that were widespread in all the major cities of the Roman Empire in the first Christian century.⁸ These were voluntary societies that craftsmen and tradesmen formed in order to support and enhance their professional interests. Through Paul's ministry the gospel negatively impacted the guild of silversmiths in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41). The silversmith Demetrius called together fellow tradesmen to complain about how money was now slipping through

Right: Eighth-century terra-cotta figurine depicting a potter; from Achzib, in northern Israel.



their fingers due to the drop in sales of their silver trinkets honoring the goddess Artemis. Although none of these silver relics have been discovered to date, they were likely small replicas of the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, or of the Artemis statue housed in her temple. Pilgrims from all over the ancient world who visited this shrine would have been enticed to buy these novelties as souvenirs of their sacred journey. The ensuing riot illustrates just how widespread and important this trade was for local commerce.

Additionally, when Paul wrote his Second Letter to Timothy, he warned his coworker of another foe, Alexander, the coppersmith (2 Tim. 4:14).⁹ Alexander, like Demetrius, had done Paul much harm, perhaps for similar reasons. In any event, many craftsmen of various trades were in Ephesus at the time Paul wrote Ephesians, which gives a colorful cultural backdrop to the letter. Just as God formed

and fashioned Adam from the dust of the ground, similar to the skill of a master potter, so He has created for Himself works of art for His own possession—new creations in Christ! But unlike the tiny Artemision statues, we are not to sit idly on a shelf as a remembrance from some former holiday trip. Rather we are created, not by good works, but for the purpose of performing and doing good works—specific applications for the Ephesians that Paul laid out in chapters 4-6. Thus, like our Creator, we too become artisans and craftsman, building lives and performing tasks that bring honor and glory to Him! 🕯

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. "ποίημα" (*poiema*, work) in Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 842. The NIV translates *poiema* in Ephesians 2:10 as "handiwork"; the NLT, "masterpiece"; and "God's work of art," *The New Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).

3. Herbert Braun, "ποίημα, ποιημα, ποιησις, ποιητής" (*poiema*, created work) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 458-84.

4. *Ibid.*, 466-67. Philo made a connection between this word group and poetic terminology, showing an understanding of Greek culture. In the Septuagint and in the New Testament, however, these words never have this meaning.

5. See Eccl. 8:14, 17; 12:14.

6. See Eccl. 3:11; 7:13; 11:5.

7. Paul cited this passage in Rom. 9:20. Jeremiah learned a similar lesson about God's sovereignty and work as a craftsman at the potter's house (Jer. 18:1-6).

8. Richard E. Oster, Jr., "Demetrius," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:137.

9. Although 2 Timothy does not state Timothy's location when he received this letter from Paul, we know he was in Ephesus when he received 1 Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3). Most scholars believe Timothy was still in Ephesus when Paul wrote the second letter as well (see 2 Tim. 1:18). This Alexander may also be the same person mentioned in 1 Tim. 1:20 and Acts 19:33.

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