

CLASS NOTES: EPHESIANS

INTRODUCTION

Authorship

Pauline authorship of Ephesians went virtually unchallenged until the nineteenth century. This is not surprising since the case for Pauline authorship is strong.

Internally one notes that, the author claims to be Paul twice in the epistle (1:1; 3:1) and a number of statements are in the first person. The author appears to be one who was personally acquainted with his recipients (see 1:15-16; 3:14; 6:19–20, 21–22) which would have been true of the church in Ephesus. The epistolary structure, vocabulary, and style are consistent with Paul's other epistles.

Externally, Pauline authorship of Ephesians had widespread and consistent support through most of church history. The Marcionite Canon (c. A.D. 140) attributes the epistle to Paul, although under the title of Laodiceans. Similarly, the Muratorian Canon (c. A.D. 180) includes Ephesians among the Epistles of Paul. Pauline authorship is also supported by the Latin and Syriac versions, as well as the early church fathers.¹ It is also worth noting that Ephesians is part of the earliest extant collection of Pauline manuscripts (P⁴⁶), a collection usually dated no later than A.D. 200.

Nonetheless, the arguments of the biblical critics have taken their toll and the majority of New Testament scholars now reject Pauline authorship of Ephesians, although many conservative scholars continue to reject this trend. Those who argue against Pauline authorship, do so

¹ A list of early church fathers who refer to Ephesians include Clement of Rome, Hermas, Barnabas, Ignatius, and Polycarp, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

along historical,² lexical,³ stylistic,⁴ and theological grounds.⁵ While these concerns are often legitimate, adequate explanations can be provided.⁶ Therefore, it does not appear that there are sufficient grounds for rejecting the clear and explicit statement of the text and the traditional attribution of the epistle to Paul.

Date

The date of Ephesians is closely tied to the issue of authorship. As noted earlier, many modern commentators have rejected Pauline authorship. If

² Historically, some have questioned the impersonal tone of the epistle (e.g., lack of personal greetings) given the rather extended relationship that Paul had with the Ephesian church according to the Book of Acts. Some have also felt that the personal references appear to be contrived and inflated (e.g., “the holy apostles,” 3:5). But Paul’s appeal in 4:1 appears to be personal. The more general tone might also be attributed to the circular nature of the epistle (if Ephesians is circular). The charge of inflation is countered by the statement in 3:8 that Paul was “the very least of all the saints.” It would seem unthinkable for a later author to refer to revered Paul in this way.

³ Critics often point to the fact that Ephesians contains thirty-five words not found elsewhere in Paul’s other writings. However, such statistical analyses are fraught with methodological problems. Furthermore, the ratio of unique terms is comparable to other undisputed Pauline epistles (Galatians [31] and Philippians [40]).

⁴ Those who reject Pauline authorship often point to perceived differences in style between Ephesians and the undisputed Pauline epistles. Three points can be made here. First, differences in style can be attributed to differences in the author’s purposes. Second, some differences might be explained through the use or not of an amanuensis. Third, if the style of Ephesians is indeed different, it begs the question why another author would not more closely follow Paul’s genuine style.

⁵ The case for rejecting of Pauline authorship is also made along theological or doctrinal lines. For example, the universal church in Ephesians appears to differ from Paul’s emphasis on the local church elsewhere. The exaltation of the Apostles (2:2; 3:5) appears to some to be evidence of a more well-developed ecclesiology than was present in Paul’s day. Some have also noted that Ephesians seems to present christological emphases different from the other Pauline Epistles. Other alleged inconsistencies involve teachings related to circumcision and marriage. However, these differences may not be as great as they might first appear. Even if one grants real differences, these differences may be attributed to differences in the circumstances and purposes or evidence of development in Paul’s thought.

⁶ For a thorough explanation and defense of Pauline authorship see Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 2-61.

this is correct then the epistle was written by an unknown author probably in the second century. However, if one concludes that Paul is the author (as the evidence would seem to suggest) then the issue of dating must be addressed by examining chronological clues within the epistle and correlating that information with other data derived elsewhere in the New Testament. Internal clues within the epistle suggest that Paul was being held as a prisoner awaiting trial at the time of writing (3:1, 4:1, 6:20). While these clues have traditionally been understood as indication of a Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:30–31) and thus a date around A.D. 60–62, recent scholarship has offered new readings of the data. These newer suggestions posit imprisonments in Caesarea and Ephesus. Nonetheless, while there is some merit to these alternative suggestions, and while there are problems with a Roman imprisonment, a Roman origin remains the most persuasive option. See the detailed discussion of this issue in the section entitled “Overview of the Prison Epistles.”

Original Recipients

The title the Epistle to the Ephesians would indicate that the original recipients of the epistle were from Ephesus. However, the accuracy of this title has been highly disputed.

Those who reject the title often propose that Ephesians was originally written as a circular letter. That is, the epistle was written with the intention of being circulated among the churches. Thus, the Ephesian church was one of the recipients, but not the only recipient of the letter. This theory is usually supported by at least four lines of evidence. First, the words in 1:1 ἐν Ἐφέσῳ (“in Ephesus”) are not found in some of the most highly regarded biblical manuscripts (i.e., P⁴⁶, [A.D. 200], a [A.D. 400], B [A.D. 400]). Second, some have also noted an impersonal tone (e.g., 1:15; 3:2; 4:21; 6:23–24) which does not appear to be consistent with the fact that Paul was well-acquainted with the Ephesian church (see Acts 19:1–20:38) nor his practice of including personal references in his other epistles. Third, Marcion in his canon suggested that what we call Ephesians was originally addressed to the Laodiceans. Fourth,

Colossians 4:16 refers to an epistle addressed to Laodicea. It has been suggested that this epistle is Ephesians. Or in any case, Colossians 4:16 suggests the practice of circulating epistles among the churches.

Nonetheless, there are good reasons to affirm the traditional identification of the original recipients as the Ephesians. First, the vast majority of extant manuscripts have in 1:1 (only five manuscripts do not have it).⁷ Second, certain internal clues suggest that Paul might be addressing a specific church (1:15-23; 2:11, 6:22). Third, in other Pauline Epistles, the phrase “to the saints who . . .” (which occurs in Eph 1:1) is followed by a specific place name (cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 1:1). Fourth, the title of the letter, ΠΡΟΣ ΕΦΕΣΙΟΥΣ (“To the Ephesians”) is attached to all Greek manuscripts even when ἐν Ἐφέσῳ (in Ephesus) is not. Fifth, some Greek manuscripts evidence a practice of omitting the original name in order to adapt it the local church. For example, “in Rome” is omitted from Codex G, 1908, and 1739. Finally, one might note that Paul is apparently capable of addressing more than one church if he wanted to (see Galatians 1:2, “to the churches of Galatia”).

In conclusion there appears to be solid reasons for maintaining that the original recipients were the Ephesians, although a circular epistle is certainly a possible option. In either case, the meaning of the epistle is not greatly affected by the issue.

Historical Setting

The historical setting of Ephesians is closely related to authorship, the original recipients, and place of writing. The first two issues have already been addressed above. The place of writing was addressed in the discussion on the Prison Epistles as a whole. In summary, the following discussion on the historical setting assumes that Ephesians was written by Paul, from Rome, to the church at Ephesus.

⁷ The practice of leaving a blank space to be filled in by the recipients is without parallel in ancient literature.

The city. Ephesus, located on the west coast of Asia Minor, was an important city. Its strategic location made it an important seaport and trade center in the province of Asia. In fact it was known as the marketplace of Asia. Ephesus was also the largest city in the province with some estimates ranging as high as 300,000 people. The city was also impressive architecturally with a 25,000 seat theater, baths, gymnasiums and the like. From a religious standpoint, Ephesus' primary claim to fame was the magnificent Temple of Artemis (Roman Diana). The temple, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was supported by 127 columns 197 feet high.

The Church. The origin of the church at Ephesus can probably be traced to the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila around A.D. 50 (Acts 18:18). According to the Book of Acts, Paul made two visits to Ephesus. The first visit was on the backside of his second missionary journey in about A.D. 51 (Acts 18:19–22). The length of the visit is not stated but it was apparently relatively short. Paul's second visit to Ephesus occurred on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:1–41). During his three years (Acts 20:31) in Ephesus, Paul baptized about twelve of John the Baptist's disciples (19:1-7), taught in the hall of Tyrannus (19:8–10), performed miracles and exorcisms (Acts 19:11–16). Apparently, Paul's ministry was so successful that a riot was instigated by idolatrous artisans (19:23–41). Sometime after the riot, Paul left the city (20:1) although later in Miletus he gave the Ephesian leaders a parting exhortation (Acts 20:13–34).

It is widely believed that Paul wrote what we call 1 Corinthians during his three year stay in Ephesus. About forty years after Paul's stay in Ephesus the Apostle John refers to the church at Ephesus which appeared to be doing relatively well (Rev 2:1–7).

As far as the writing of the Epistle is concerned, Ephesians was likely written by Paul in Rome sometime in the early sixties. During this time Paul spent two years in Rome under a form of house arrest yet enjoying a fair amount of freedom (Acts 28:30–31). The Epistle to the Philippians suggest that Paul's circumstances resulted in some unfortunate

circumstances within the Christian community (Phil 1:15–17).

Relationship to Colossians

There are obvious similarities in origin, structure and content between the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians. For example both epistles were written by Paul during his Roman captivity in the early sixties. Both epistles are associated with Tychicus, the apparent bearer of epistles (cf. Eph 6:21; Col 4:7). Both epistles were written to cities in Asia Minor. The broad structure of both epistles is similar as well. Both begin with a doctrinal emphasis and close with a practical emphasis.

Ephesians and Colossians Compared⁸

| | Ephesians | Colossians |
|---|------------------|---|
| I. Greeting | 1:1–2 | 1:1–2 |
| II. Christ's Work and Reconciling of Gentiles | 1:3–2:22 | 1:3–23a |
| III. Paul's Commission to and Concern for the Gentiles | 3:1–21 | 1:23b–2:5 |
| IV. The Gentile Christians Should Walk Worthily of Their Conversion | 4:1–5:20 | 2:6–3:17 (heresy, 2:8–23; cf. Eph 4:14, 16) |
| V. Subjection in Christ to Each Other | 5:21–6:9 | 3:18–4:1 |
| VI. Final Exhortations | | |
| A. Arm Selves against Spiritual Hosts | 6:10–17 | — |
| B. Pray, Especially for Paul | 6:18–20 | 4:2–4 |

⁸ John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 247.

| | | |
|-------------------|---------|---------------------------|
| C. Walk in Wisdom | — | 4:5–6 (related to heresy) |
| VII. Conclusion | | |
| A. Tychicus Sent | 6:21–22 | 4:7–9 |
| B. Greeting Sent | — | 4:10–17 |
| C. Benediction | 6:23–24 | 4:18 |

Both epistles share similarities in content (e.g. Christ as head of the church [Eph 1:23; Col 1:18], household relationships [Eph 5:22–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1]).⁹ The epistles share similar terminology including wisdom, knowledge, fullness, mystery, principalities, powers.¹⁰ Indeed, Goodspeed has suggested that three-fifths of Colossians is contained in Ephesians.¹¹ In the midst of these similarities two additional points need to be made. First, while the similarities are striking, the epistles are not identical. Ephesians is more contemplative while Colossians is more combative. In general, Ephesians has a more positive tone emphasizing unity and blessings whereas Colossians is negative in attacking false teachings. A second point worth making is that the specific nature of the relationship between Colossians is uncertain. Much of the discussion is hypothetical relating to which document was written first and under what circumstances. One reconstruction has Paul writing Ephesians first and then hearing of the crisis in Colossae. Then, Paul using Ephesians as a core builds his response to the Colossian heresy around it. While this is

⁹ See Moffatt for a detailed layout of the similarities. James Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, ed. Charles A. Briggs and Stewart D. F. Salmond, 3d ed., International Theological Library (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1918), 375-81.

¹⁰ A. Skevington Wood, "Ephesians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 169.

¹¹ Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Key to Ephesians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 8.

certainly possible and reasonable it is hypothetical at best.

Canonicity

For the early church, the canonical status of Ephesians was never in doubt. It has been included among every canonical list since Marcion (A.D. 140) although he refers to it as “The Epistle to the Laodiceans.” Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen appear to either allude to, or quote from, Ephesians. The church historian Eusebius appears to include it in his list of “fourteen epistles” of Paul (Ecclesiastical History, 3.3.4–7).

Purpose

Identifying the purpose of Ephesians is made difficult by the lack of certainty regarding the background circumstances. Even if one affirms, as we have affirmed, that Paul wrote Ephesians from Rome while under house arrest in the early sixties to the church at Ephesus, it is still hard to know what motivated Paul to write. Unlike Colossians, Paul does not seem to be writing to address a particular concern. The content of the epistle is fairly generic, and as noted earlier, Paul seems to be more contemplative, writing in more philosophical terms. Nonetheless, two general suggestions might be noted here. First, Paul’s purpose appears to be didactic. He wants the Church to understand their relationship to Christ and by extension their relationship to one another. Second, Paul’s intention is paraenetic. Paul exhorts the Christians to maintain the unity that they have in Christ by living in a manner consistent with who they are in Christ. Living according to this calling requires understanding, obedience, love,¹² and engaging in spiritual warfare.

Contribution

It has been argued that Ephesians is a summary of Paul’s theology.

¹² Hoehner suggests that the theme of love has a “dominant place” within the book. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 106. Indeed, references to love occur in every chapter and the term is used about sixteen times the epistle.

Although, Ephesians is not as grand as Romans, it is a succinct expression of much of Paul's theology, a concise portrait of many Pauline themes, and a clear statement of the Apostle's ethics.¹³

Literary Features and Structure

Ephesians follows a typical epistolary form. This epistle contains an introductory salutation (1:1–2), the body of the epistle (1:3–6:20), and a conclusion and benediction (6:21–24). However, as Wood observes, “While retaining the framework of a letter, Ephesians differs from the rest of Paul's compositions because of its peculiar cast. In some places it sounds like a sermon, whereas in others it seems to be a prayer. This unusual combination of the homiletical and the liturgical makes it difficult to classify its literary genre.”¹⁴

Ephesians also exhibits several interesting literary features. As Lincoln notes, “. . . the writer uses a number of stylistic techniques such as repetition, synonymy, and amplification.”¹⁵ Furthermore, “The simple repetition of key words or cognates or synonyms is another feature of Ephesians' distinctive style.”¹⁶

Message

The message of Ephesians is, “The Church as the people of God (a new humanity) is a reality that Christians need to understand and a responsibility that they need to live out.”

Analytical Outline:

- I. Paul introduces his epistle by addressing the Church at Ephesus (1:1–2).
- II. Paul explains the reality of the Church as a people of God (1:3–

¹³ Indeed, sometimes Ephesians is called “Little Romans.”

¹⁴ Wood, “Ephesians,” 17.

¹⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, Ephesians, ed. Ralph P. Martin, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), xlv.

¹⁶ Ibid.

- 3:21).
- III. Paul explains the responsibilities for the Church as a people of God (4:1–6:20).
- IV. Paul concludes his epistle to the Church at Ephesus with final plans and affirmations (6:21–24).

ARGUMENT

- I. **Paul introduces his epistle by addressing the Church at Ephesus (1:1–2).**
- II. **Paul explains the reality of the Church as a people of God (1:3–3:21).**
- A. The reality of the Church as a people of God is the work of God (1:3–14).

| | 1:3-6 | 1:7-12 | 1:13-14 |
|-------------|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| Who | The Father | The Son | The Spirit |
| What | Chosen | Redeemed | Sealed |
| When | In the Past | At the Present | For the Future |
| Why | To the Praise and Glory of God | | |

- B. The reality of the Church as a people of God is the reason that Paul prays for the Ephesians (1:15–23).
- C. The reality of the Church as a people of God is a regenerative reality (2:1–10).

- D. The reality of the Church as a people of God is a reconciliatory reality (2:11–22).
- E. The reality of the Church as a people of God is a mystery (3:1–13).
- F. The reality of the Church as a people of God is the reason that Paul prays again for the Ephesians (3:14–21).

III. Paul explains the responsibilities for the Church as a people of God (4:1–6:20).

- A. The people of God are to live in unity (4:1-16).
- B. The people of God are to live as a “new self” (4:17–32).
- C. The people of God are to live in love (5:1–2).
- D. The people of God are to live in righteousness (5:3–14).
- E. The people of God are to live in wisdom (5:15–17).
- F. The people of God are to live in the Spirit (5:18–21).
- G. The people of God are to live in harmony (5:22–6:9).
- H. The people of God are to battle in God’s strength (6:10–20).

IV. Paul concludes his epistle to the Church at Ephesus with final plans and affirmations (6:21–24).

- A. Paul announces his plan to update the Ephesians through Tychicus (6:21–22).
- B. Paul’s affirmation to the Ephesians (6:23–24).

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