

The Authorship and Destination of Ephesians

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The Letter to the Ephesians is considered by many to be one of the most poignant and moving epistles of Paul recorded in the New Testament. Since the 19th Century, however, the letter's authenticity has been under question, with certain scholars viewing the letter as a mere reproduction of Pauline themes written pseudonymously.

The destination of the Letter similarly has been under question, though for a great deal longer, and this for several reasons. The most obvious is the absence of the words 'in Ephesus' in the oldest Greek codices of the Pauline epistles (p⁴⁶, χB) and some old codices known to Basil. This led to much debate over the possible reasons for the omission, leading to several suggested possibilities; including that it was written by Paul as a circular letter, destined for a group of churches; or that it was written by someone other than Paul as an introduction to his letters. Considering the lack of personal content in the letter these seem all the more plausible, as the author does not seem to refer to the recipients personally anywhere, or mention a defining characteristic of the church to which he is writing.

The fact remains, however, that the epistle's Pauline authorship was not questioned at all it would seem, by any at the time of its writing, nor since, until the 19th Century. This is a fairly strong indication of Pauline authorship from anyone's perspective, as C. L. Mitton, who favours non-Pauline authorship, observes: "Pauline authorship can rightly be assumed until it is disproved"¹.

It seems prudent first to surmise that the author was clearly either Paul (with the possibility of an editor or secretary altering the text) or someone impersonating him. Twice referring to himself as Paul (1:1 & 3:1) and twice using the popular Pauline expression that he is a "prisoner of Christ" (3:1 & 4:1), as well as the tone throughout the letter of blatant assumption that the readers would know of him,² firmly points towards either Pauline authorship or an imitator.

With this in mind, the first body of evidence to be considered is that of the difference in the language of Ephesians compared to the undisputed Pauline epistles. After detailed textual analysis, it is found that Ephesians has ninety³ words not used elsewhere in the Pauline writings. For example, the author of Ephesians uses the

¹ C. L. Mitton cited by Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Rev. ed.), Inter-Varsity Press, 1990, p.498.

² D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1999, p.306. Although the letter implies that the readers should know of the author, it is not necessarily implied that they are acquainted with him/her.

³ 90 is quoted from Mitton but Harrison has 93 (or 106 including repetition). P. N. Harrison, *The Problem of the Pastoral Epistles*, Oxford University Press, 1921, p.145; C. Leslie Mitton, *New Century Bible: Ephesians*, Oliphants, 1976, p.4.

word *diabolos* (meaning ‘devil’), whereas Paul in the undisputed letters prefers to speak of ‘Satan’;⁴ and such words as “wantonness” and “citizenship” appear in Ephesians but nowhere else in the Pauline Epistles.⁵

However, the work of P. N. Harrison in discussing *The Problem of the Pastoral Epistles* can be used to show that this amount of vocabulary deviation is actually quite normal. In his study of the *Hapax Legomena* (words that occur in no other writing in the New Testament), he finds that Ephesians has only 4.6 such words per page, which is comparable to, or less than, all other Pauline epistles.⁶ More specifically, Harrison’s count of words which appear in only one book of the Pauline Epistles similarly shows that the figure for Ephesians is by no means out of the ordinary, in fact there is no reason to suggest an abnormality in Ephesians based on such a count.⁷ At any rate, the study of such occurrences must be viewed with considerable care, as it seems hard to view the majority of the texts of the New Testament as having enough length for a basic word count to produce an accurate representation of the author’s standard vocabulary. Furthermore, with the different texts addressing varying subjects; some comparable, others unique; it would seem considerably foolish to rely on such study when forming any conclusions.⁸

⁴ Mitton, op. cit., p.4.

⁵ Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.308.

⁶ Harrison finds that Romans has 4 per page, 1 Corinthians has 4.1, 2 Corinthians has 5.6, Galatians has 3.9, Philippians has 6.2, Colossians has 5.5, 1 Thessalonians has 3.6, 2 Thessalonians has 3.3, 1 Timothy has 15.2, 2 Timothy has 12.9, Titus has 16.1, and Philemon has 4 such words per page. Harrison, op. cit., p.20.

⁷ Harrison finds that while Ephesians (with 6 chapters) has 93 words unique to it, Romans and 1 Corinthians (both 16 chapters) have 261 and 266 respectively, 2 Corinthians (13 chapters) has 197, Galatians (6 chapters) has 85, Philippians and Colossians (both 4 chapters) have 76 and 58 respectively; 1 Thessalonians (5 chapters) has 41 and 2 Thessalonians (3 chapters) has 26. (ibid., pp.140-147). This means that Romans and 1 Corinthians have approximately 16.5 such words per chapter, 2 Corinthians has 15, Galatians has 14, Philippians has 19, Colossians has 14.5, and 1 & 2 Thessalonians have just under 9; while Ephesians has 15.5. Now this approximation is not in itself accurate, as chapters have varying lengths in themselves. However, it should provide a semi-accurate indication and there is nothing suggesting an abnormality in the figures for Ephesians, especially when it is considered that the figure for Ephesians falls nicely in-between the figures for Romans, 1 Corinthians and Philippians, and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and 1 Thessalonians, which together are the least disputed epistles of Paul.

⁸ Guthrie further points out that ‘it is not unusual for Paul to use new words when dealing with new subject-matter, and this objection could only carry weight if it could be shown that Paul could not have used the new words in question. But this cannot be substantiated.’ Guthrie, op. cit., p.509.

Objections are similarly raised when it is considered that some words and expressions have different meanings in Ephesians than in other Pauline writings. The most notable example of this being Paul’s use of ‘ecclesia’ to refer to *local* churches in other Pauline writings, and the use of this word to refer to the *universal* church in Ephesians.⁹ Similarly we find that the style of Ephesians differs from undisputed Pauline writings in several ways. Firstly, Paul’s characteristic ‘energy’ and ‘incisiveness’, especially evident in Romans, seems absent in Ephesians.¹⁰ Secondly, the author of Ephesians uses very long sentences (e.g., 1:15-23 & 3:1-7) and has a quick use of synonyms (e.g., 1:19).¹¹

However, the structure of the epistle is consistently Pauline (that is, with an opening greeting, thanksgiving, doctrinal exposition, ethical exhortations, concluding salutations and benediction), and is similar to Paul’s other writings in the basing of moral appeal on theological arguments, which Donald Guthrie argues, ‘is an integral part of the apostle’s approach to practical problems.’¹² Overall, the letter shows an abundance of Pauline features and a few interesting differences.

As regards the content of the epistle, while there is certainly a background of Pauline themes,¹³ there are also two particularly spurious themes. First is a view of marriage (recorded in 5:25-33), which many believe to be inconsistent with the view expressed in 1 Corinthians 7. In the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul actively discourages marriage,¹⁴ whilst in Ephesians, the relationship of a husband and wife is likened to the relationship of Christ and the Church: “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church”¹⁵. This is a fairly elevated position to give to an institution which elsewhere he discourages. As such, many believe these two views to be somewhat contradictory.¹⁶

However, to a certain extent the difference in the underlying message can be traced to the circumstances of the letters: when writing to the Corinthians on this matter, Paul is encouraging them to live in such a way as to serve God wholeheartedly, suggesting that if marriage were to interfere with their service to God they should not get married. When writing to the Ephesians, however, the author is imparting guidance to believers concerning various forms of relationships, and how these relationships are to function. The author simply uses the relationship of Christ and

⁹ Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.307.

¹⁰ Mitton, op. cit., p.4.

¹¹ Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.308.

¹² Guthrie, op. cit., pp.497-8.

¹³ Ibid., p.498.

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 7:1, 8, 27; cf. 7:32, 34, 38, 40.

¹⁵ 5:23.

¹⁶ Mitton, op. cit., p.6.

the Church to illustrate the proper relation of a married couple. Although some feel that this view of marriage is un-Pauline, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes that he had ‘promised the church to *one husband*, to Christ, so that he might present them as a pure virgin to him.’¹⁷ As such, it is clear that the theme in question is neither in contradiction with 1 Corinthians 7, nor is it unique to Ephesians, being found with a certain resemblance in 2 Corinthians.

The second theme most often viewed as un-Pauline in Ephesians, is that of the author’s apparent view of the Apostles. In 2:20, the author places the Church on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, which is at variance to Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians that Christ is the foundation of the Church.¹⁸ Further, in Ephesians 3:5 the author refers to the “*holy apostles*”. It is firstly believed by many commentators that the illustration from 1 Corinthians 3 is irreconcilable with the illustration from Ephesians 2; and secondly, it is claimed that Paul, being an apostle, would not place the apostles in such an exalted position as to be the foundation of the church, and called ‘*holy*’.¹⁹

The illustration from Ephesians, however, does not end with the apostles and prophets as the foundation: the author continues that Christ is the chief cornerstone,²⁰ that is, the apostles and prophets are still clearly in a position subservient to Christ. It seems that when Mitton claims that Paul wouldn’t place the apostles in a foundational role in the Church (a Church we now refer to as the ‘*Apostolic Church*’) he imposes or at least expects false humility.²¹

As regards to content, all undisputed Pauline epistles at some point refer to the *parousia* (the second coming of Christ), while Ephesians is believed by some to ignore this.²² Certainly, the epistle is lacking in a focus on this theme, although the ‘day of redemption’ in the second coming, is mentioned (several times),²³ as is the impending wrath of God.²⁴

¹⁷ 2 Cor. 11:2.

¹⁸ 1 Cor. 3:11.

¹⁹ Mitton, op. cit., pp.4-5; Guthrie, op. cit., pp.506-7.

²⁰ Eph. 2:20.

²¹ False humility, from my reading of Paul, is not a characteristic I’d expect from him. It is not unknown for the apostle to talk of the holiness of his work (2 Cor. 1:12), his perfect Jewish upbringing and knowledge of the law (Php. 3:4-6), and his lack of use of ‘the rights of the apostle’ (Rom. 9:15). In all of these he wrote truthfully of things as they were, why would he not also write truthfully on the founding of the Church on the Apostles, an act of Jesus himself (Mt. 16:18)?

²² Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.307; Mitton, op. cit., p.6.

²³ 1:14; 4:30 & 6:8.

²⁴ 5:6.

Looking at Ephesians as a whole, however, we see that many of the themes have their closest parallels in the undisputed Paulines,²⁵ although those who oppose Pauline authorship claim that this is a result of imitation rather than authenticity. In fact, E. J. Goodspeed claimed that out of 618 short phrases into which Ephesians may be divided, no fewer than 550 could be matched in the undisputed epistles.²⁶ It is seen that Colossians especially shares a remarkable resemblance to Ephesians, with many themes, statements and arguments repeated exactly in both. Opponents of Pauline authorship of Ephesians claim that it would be impossible for one mind to write the two letters with such similarities, but also with such differences;²⁷ whereas those in favour of Pauline authorship suggest that Paul wrote Colossians first, and then after a time allowing the themes to develop in his mind, wrote Ephesians. The latter seems to allow for the subtle differences and expansions of themes in Ephesians as well as, if not better than, the former suggestion.²⁸

And so after considering the evidence, we are left with an epistle that has a definite Pauline character, attests to itself as Pauline and was accepted without question as Pauline for almost two millennia. Nevertheless, some problems remain. As mentioned previously, the lack of any direct reference to a destination of the letter in the most reliable manuscripts, as well as the lack of any references to distinct traits of the Ephesian Church or the Ephesian people lead to some interesting theories. The first is the possibility that Paul wrote the letter, after writing Colossians and meditating on its themes, to a group of churches. In this case, we could assume that Tychicus (mentioned in 6:21-22) was the messenger carrying a copy addressed simply ‘to the saints’, and as each Church received their copy, a new copy was made with the name of the next church in the title (thus becoming, ‘to the saints in Ephesus’). In this way, only the copies currently lacking a destination Church and the copies to the Ephesians survived.

This suggestion happily accounts for many earlier difficulties. Firstly, Marcion’s belief that Ephesians was actually the letter to the Laodiceans²⁹ can be reconciled with the probability that the Laodiceans would have received a copy of this circular

²⁵ Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.307; Guthrie, op. cit., p.498.

²⁶ Goodspeed, “Meaning of Ephesians; Key to Ephesians”, cited by A. Skevington Wood, “Ephesians” section in Frank E. Gaebelein (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary volume 11: Ephesians-Philemon*, Zondervan, p.6.

²⁷ For example, in Ephesians the “Mystery” (3:3-6) is the unity of the Jews and Gentiles in Christ, whereas in Colossians it is Christ (2:2).

²⁸ Carson/Moo/Morris, op. cit., p.306.

²⁹ Recorded in Tertullian, “The Five Books Against Marcion”, 5:11, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers vol.iii*, Master Christian Library (8th Ed. CD-ROM), Ages Digital Library, released 2000, p.811.

letter. There is also the possibility that this letter is the letter to which Paul refers in Colossians: “read the letter from Laodicea”.³⁰ The lack of a distinct audience would also explain the less ‘argumentative’ style of the letter as well as its broader choice of themes. Even the use of ‘ecclesia’ to refer to the universal church finds its place in this theory, as does the lack of personal information about the recipients. This theory raises some problems of its own though: no ancient authority extant refers to such a circular epistle, and it is not clear whether such a custom existed as to leave blank forms in a letter to be labelled *seriatim* after publication.³¹

A second suggestion to account for the seeming problems in Ephesians comes from Goodspeed. After studying the similarities and differences of Colossians and Ephesians, Goodspeed concluded that the best explanation would arise from an author other than Paul, but who knew Colossians very well. This was based mainly on the distinct characteristic of Ephesians, that it seems to borrow whole phrases from other Pauline texts to an extent not found elsewhere, and beyond the plausibility of a single common author.

Goodspeed’s theory, is that a devoted friend of Paul’s, upset at the extent to which Paul was forgotten in the various churches after his death, found Paul’s letter to the Colossians and Cherished it – virtually memorising it. At some point this friend came across the *Acts of the Apostles*, and guessed that the other churches mentioned in Acts may also have letters from Paul. The information in Acts would have led him to Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Rome, where he was successful in finding more letters. The devoted friend, after reading these, realised what a treasure in teaching he had accumulated, but knew that the collection was addressed to specific Churches, with specific situations, often outdated already.

So he decided to gather those themes from the letters he had collected most appropriate to his day in order to compile them into one letter, using direct quotation wherever possible to allow Paul to speak for himself.³² He then may have meant Ephesians to be a covering letter or introduction for the Pauline Corpus. Goodspeed suggests that the compiler was Onesimus, who was named in Col. 4:9.

However, this theory similarly raises problems of its own, especially in the fact that in no list of the Pauline letters does Ephesians appear at the end or at the beginning (those positions which would be expected from an introductory letter), nor does it explain why the author chose the Ephesian Church to ‘write to’, nor the lack of

official destination in the best surviving manuscripts.³³ Also in such a situation a mention of the late composition or some questioning of authorship within the Early Church would be expected, but none is found.

Finally, certain aspects of the imitation of Paul do not fit well here. As an introduction to a Pauline collection, a certain amount of allusions to Paul as the writer would be expected, especially since the compiler copied Pauline writings so often and so faithfully. But why would the compiler include personal remarks from Paul³⁴ that could only be imitation (rather than a copy) except in seeking to distinguish the letter as an epistle in itself? In this light we must view the compiler as seeking to write an authoritative letter, passing it off as an authentic letter of Paul rather than a letter of introduction to the other Pauline writings. This conclusion does not fit well with Goodspeed’s theory.³⁵

Although I feel that the former, circular epistle theory is the most likely, it is still possible that the historically believed situation is accurate: Paul wrote the epistle and wrote it (only) to the Ephesians. The total lack of evidence suggesting that Ephesians was ever doubted previous to the 19th Century adds a vast amount of weight to the claims of its authenticity, and so should ensure that a relatively large amount of evidence would be required before contemplating anything to the contrary.

While the theory of Goodspeed, supported by Mitton, is entertaining, it lacks a motive, and evidence supporting the theory is severely limited. While fitting some circumstances well, it ignores the total acceptance of Pauline authorship at the time, and places its composition well after Paul’s death, when surely its authority, even if pseudepigraphic, would have received some question from those at the time.

There is no definitive proof or guide to who the author of the Letter to the Ephesians was, nor when it was written, nor to whom it was written. The evidence, however, can be used to decide which of the given scenarios seem most plausible. Based on external attestation, it is certainly easiest to persist in the conclusion that the epistle is of Pauline origin and Ephesian destination. However, with the inclusion of internal considerations, it seems that the vast majority of characteristics of the letter are explained best if the letter is viewed as a circular letter, intended for many churches, written by Paul.

³⁰ Col. 4:16.

³¹ F. F. Bruce, E. K. Simpson, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians*, Eerdmans, 1975, pp.18-19.

³² The compiler’s previous acquaintance with Colossians would explain the predominant use of it when compiling.

³³ Mitton, op. cit., pp.8-9.

³⁴ 6:21-22.

³⁵ Mitton, op. cit., pp.7-8.

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