

EPHESIANS

Dr. G. Roger Greene

Source/s: Personal knowledge; John Polhill, *Paul & His Letters* (Broadman & Holman, 1999), 219-229; 329-333; 354-377; Cf. Acts 19:1-20

Where? (Location and relevant points)

Put simply, Ephesus was the largest and most powerful city in Asia, the city where sea and overland trade routes met. The basic location is the western coast of Asia Minor, although the recipients of the letter may be debated (see below). The last king of Pergamum ceded his kingdom to the Romans in 133 B.C.E., whereupon Asia was organized as a Roman province with Ephesus as its capital. Roman milestones in Asia were calculated on the number of miles to Ephesus. With a population estimated at 250,000 or more, it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire of Paul's day. It had an inland harbor (now silted up), from which "Harbor Street" (1735 feet long) led to a massive theater estimated to seat 25,000 (cf. Acts 19:29ff.). Ephesus was a cult center for the worship of the nature goddess Artemis, protector of life and insurer of fertility. Worship of Artemis dominated Ephesian religious life. The temple of Artemis was considered one of the "seven wonders of the ancient world," central to both civic pride and cultural and commercial well-being (cf. Polhill, 224-25).

Ephesus was a strategic city that was Paul's headquarters during his Second Major or Collection Campaign. It became an important early church center, also associated with John the apostle and John the seer. It was a site of later church councils.

When? (Time frame in Paul's ministry)

Ephesians is identified as a "prison epistle" of Paul. According to Polhill, Paul wrote the three letters of Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians at some point during his continuous period of Roman custody, i.e., during the period of 57-62 CE (Polhill, 329). He leaves the question open as to the exact time, whether it was the traditional period of imprisonment in Rome or the time before Paul sailed for Rome. Polhill himself, however, is inclined to attribute Colossians/Philemon and Ephesians to a Caesarean imprisonment, which would be spring to fall 59 CE (Polhill, 329). The present writer would date the letter to 60 CE and written not long before Paul's martyrdom.

Who? (Nature of the congregation)

The church was apparently predominately gentile as understood from the content of the letter (cf. Eph 2), although Acts 19:8 initial work was done by Paul in the synagogue at Ephesus. It was a congregation of various backgrounds and nationalities, although it is assumed that Jewish-Christian members made up the minority within the congregation.

Why? (Reasons for writing)

The letter has no polemical content. The purpose of Ephesians is tied to questions of authorship and recipients (cf. final note). Assuming the epistle is Pauline, Paul expresses the “passion of his entire ministry—the oneness of Jew and gentile in Christ” (Polhill, 359) in a post-Collection period of incarceration. He reflects upon the mystery of the gospel and its implications for living life before God with a spirit of responsibility and praise. The present writer would agree with C.H. Dodd that Ephesians represents the “crown” of Paul’s letters. It rivals Romans and reflects the maturity of Paul’s understanding of the Gospel of God

What? (Significant matters of content)

Polhill (354) suggests that Ephesians is unique among the letters of Paul, in that it is written in the lofty style of worship and praise and lacks the occasional nature of Paul’s other letters. The letter is easily divided into the two parts of theological reflection/affirmation (the “indicative,” Eph 1-3) and the ethical implications (the “imperative,” Eph 4-6) of the Christian gospel. For these purposes, the present writer suggests the following brief outline for informational purposes, which may be compared with that of Polhill (360-61). A more thorough purposeful, exegetical, and detailed outline is also supplied by the current writer as a separate document for our current study. The two outlines are of varied nature and are presented with different purpose in mind.

1. Greeting (1:1-2)

2. The Indicative: Theological Reflection and Affirmation (1:3-3:21)

- A. Doxological and prayerful praise to God for the mystery of the gospel (1:3-1:23).
- B. The new life of unity in the gospel (2:1-22)
- C. Paul’s prayer of stewardship and comprehension of God’s mystery (3:1-21)

3. The Imperative: Ethical Implications of Union with Christ (4:1-6:20)

- A. The unity of the church (4:1-16)
- B. Abandonment of pagan lifestyle (4:17-5:20)
- C. Mutual subjection in personal relationships (5:21-6:9)
- D. Survival of the saints (6:10-20)

4. Conclusion of the Letter (6:21-24)

Notes (Additional issues, points of relevance)

The question of authorship looms over any consideration of this letter and mere dogmatism does not settle the issue. While questions pertaining to authorship were not raised before the 18th century, perhaps the majority of scholars today assume a non-Pauline provenance. The main lines of argument revolve around (1) *vocabulary and style*, (2) *literary relationships with other epistles* (notably, Colossians), (3) *theological differences* (particularly as it pertains to Christ and

eschatology), and (4) historical *suggestions of church development beyond Paul's lifetime* (notably, "early catholicism"). Contemporary arguments for and against Pauline authorship are delicately balanced, although the present writer would agree with Polhill that a good case can be made for setting Ephesians within the context of Paul's own ministry (Polhill, 359) and, as the present writer would add, within Paul's own maturity and post-Collection experience. While alternative viewpoints of authorship have been expressed, none has won the field. Thus, in the present writer's judgment the most likely author is Paul, who himself varied from his usual style and theology on the basis of his mature reflection upon the gospel and his own ministry. Indeed, in the present writer's estimation, Ephesians is one of the most significant of Paul's letters that we have. It represents the latest and most mature perspectives of Paul available to us. This leads to a second significant question.

To whom is the letter addressed? Earliest textual witnesses (*p*⁴⁶, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, 1739) omit the words "in Ephesus." Marcion (c. 140 CE) designated the epistle "To the Laodiceans" (cf. Col 4:16). Many suggest that the letter was an encyclical, with copies being distributed to several churches in Asia Minor, perhaps by Tychicus (Eph 6:21-22). The three "Pauline" churches of the Lycus Valley were Laodicea (Col 2:1, 13, 16), Colossae, and Hierapolis (Col 4:13)—all within a ten-mile radius. All three cities were leveled by an earthquake in 60/61 CE. Polhill suggests the three letters of Colossians/ Philemon/Ephesians were written from Caesarea c. 57-59 CE. While a plausible scenario, the present writer suggests that the two letters of Philemon and Colossians were written from Rome, along with Ephesians and Romans 16, c. 60-61 CE (cf. Col 4:10). The personal references at the end of both Philemon and Colossians would suggest this. Ephesians and Romans 16 are likewise "paired" letters. The letters were carried by Tychicus (Eph 6:21; Col 4:7; 2 Tim 4:12). None of the letters give any awareness of the earthquake of 60/61 CE, which suggests writing prior to that time. If Ephesians is written later than the earthquake and from Rome, Paul apparently had no knowledge of that contemporary or slightly earlier event.