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978-0-521-09409-2 - The Letters of Paul to the Philippians and to the
Thessalonians

Kenneth Grayston

Excerpt

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THE LETTER OF PAUL
TO THE PHILIPPIANS

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THE LETTER OR LETTERS

Philippians hangs together rather less successfully than most of Paul's letters. There is no problem about the early part (1: 1 — 3: 1), which begins with the familiar thanksgiving and prayer, describes Paul's situation, appeals for unity and obedience, discloses plans to send Timothy and Epaphroditus to Philippi, and seems to be coming to an end with suitable farewell messages. But at this point there is a remarkable interruption: with scarcely any warning, Paul launches into a vigorous attack on opponents, one thing leads to another, and the original mood is not resumed until 4: 2 at the earliest. Here are the farewell messages (4: 2–9) and the letter seems to be coming to an end. But then it starts up afresh, with a long and elaborate thanksgiving for a gift which the Philippians had sent to Paul by Epaphroditus (4: 10–20). And at last there is a real closing paragraph (4: 21–3).

There may have been perfectly good reasons for this lack of coherence, but many scholars are persuaded that the present Letter to the Philippians contains as many as three Pauline letters (or part-letters) joined together in somewhat disordered fashion. Several plausible re-arrangements are possible. There is a letter of gratitude, contained in 4: 10–20, for the gift of the Philippian church when Paul was in some kind of trouble, and conveyed by one of their number called Epaphroditus. This letter was sent soon after the delivery of the gift.

In a second letter, contained perhaps in 1: 1 — 3: 1 and 4: 2–9 (perhaps also 4: 21–3, though these verses could be the ending of any of the letters), Paul tells them how things have

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An Outline of the Letter

gone with him since he last wrote. He is in prison and expecting to be tried on a charge that may mean death. His companion is Timothy, whom he proposes to send to Philippi on a visit of inspection, as soon as his affair has been settled. Epaphroditus has been seriously ill and is therefore sent back to Philippi as bearer of the letter. Other news is given of the situation of the church in the city where Paul is imprisoned, and there is an appeal for unity and harmony among the Christians of Philippi.

The remainder, 3: 2 — 4: 1 (unless 4: 2–9 should be included here), is part of a third letter attacking dangerous opponents and countering their views with Paul's own principles of renunciation and striving for perfection. Perhaps this letter was sent after the other two, but it contains no indication of Paul's situation or of the position at Philippi. Indeed, the readers are not identified though it seems that they have had previous letters from Paul.

This division of the letter is persuasive, as far as it goes; but it is difficult to see why someone at an early time should have combined three letters in this strange order. It would be worth while taking the division seriously if it solved some problems of the letter that cannot otherwise be understood. It can scarcely be said that it solves any problems of interpretation: since the letter is in any case rather disjointed, each main section has to be interpreted on its own whether it is three letters or one. On the other hand it may contribute something to the question about where the letter was written.

AN OUTLINE OF THE LETTER

CHAPTER I

- 1–2 Greeting
- 3–11 Thanksgiving and prayer
- 12–26 Paul's situation
- 27–30 Unity and obedience
 - the beginning of an appeal for Christians to behave worthily of Christ

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CHAPTER 2

1-18 Unity and obedience
 the theme is continued and Christians are urged to have a common mind, and especially (in verses 5-11) to take account of the model provided by Christ

19-30 Future plans

CHAPTER 3

1-21 Loss and gain
 things that must be given up for the sake of gaining Christ

CHAPTER 4

1 Loss and gain (concluded)
 2-9 Final appeals
 10-20 Gratitude for a gift
 21-3 Close

PAUL'S IMPRISONMENT

Paul is in prison, expecting a trial which may result in his execution, but more probably an acquittal—in which case he will visit Philippi again. This is made clear by such remarks as the following: 'when I lie in prison or appear in the dock' (1: 7), 'the issue of it all will be my deliverance' (1: 19), 'whether through my life or through my death' (1: 20), and 'when I am with you again' (1: 26).

There are three other New Testament letters written by Paul from prison—Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon—which are closely related in ideas, wording and people mentioned. Apart from the mention of Timothy in the opening verses of Colossians and Philippians, there are no such links between Philippians and the other three.

Where could Paul have been imprisoned? Acts mentions only three imprisonments: at Philippi (16: 23-40) when the gospel was first preached there; at Caesarea (23: 35 — 26: 32)

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for two years awaiting trial on Jewish charges; and at Rome (28: 16–31) after his appeal to Caesar. But in 2 Cor. 11: 23, which must have been written before the imprisonment at Caesarea, Paul says that he was ‘more often imprisoned’ than his rivals. Therefore Acts probably omits some occasions of imprisonment.

The references in Phil. 1: 13 to ‘headquarters’ (in Greek, *praetorium*) and in 4: 22 to the ‘imperial establishment’ (R.S.V., ‘Caesar’s household’) would suit an imprisonment in the provinces as well as in Rome. But if we rightly interpret passages in the letter to mean that Paul was facing the possibility of judicial execution, then Rome was the place of his imprisonment. From anywhere else, as a Roman citizen he could appeal to Caesar. What the letter discloses of Paul’s relations with his companions and the local Christians suits the statement of Acts 28: 30–1 that ‘he stayed there two full years at his own expense, with a welcome for all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the facts about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and without hindrance’.

But a number of objections have been offered to this traditional view. For one thing, Paul and the Philippians were in frequent communication. Presumably news of his imprisonment had reached Philippi, the Philippians had collected money and sent it by Epaphroditus, who had been seriously ill (though we do not know when or where), and a report of this illness had gone to Philippi. It is possible (though perhaps not likely) that someone had brought back the information that the Philippians were worried about Epaphroditus. That required at least three journeys to or from Philippi since Paul was imprisoned; and there were more to come. Timothy was to visit the church and report back, by which time Paul hoped to be free to visit them himself. Now the journey from Rome to Philippi was complicated—360 miles by road from Rome to Brundisium, then by ship to Dyrrachium, requiring one or two days, and another 380 miles along the Via Egnatia

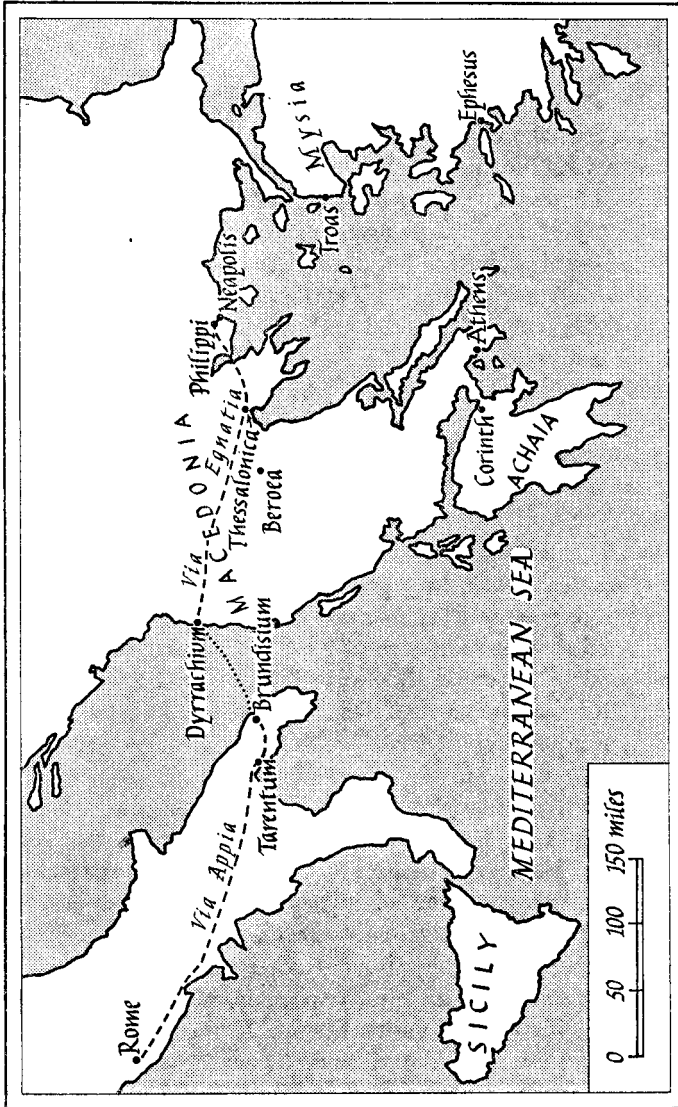
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PAUL AND PHILIPPI

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Paul's Imprisonment

to Philippi. At the standard rate of travel of 15 miles a day, each journey would require 50 days.

There was, of course, plenty of time for all this journeying during the period of two years at Rome mentioned in Acts. But would Paul wait so long to acknowledge the Philippians' gift? (If, however, 4: 10–20 is a separate letter containing his immediate reply, the question needs no answer.) Would Paul have said that he hoped to be coming before long (2: 24) if in fact he could not possibly arrive for at least six months? Ought we not to look for an imprisonment nearer Philippi?

The importance of these supposed journeys can be exaggerated, since it is quite possible to take the view that Epaphroditus did not have to wait for news before setting out with the gift; that he fell ill in the course of his journey, and was sent home at once. But there are other objections to Rome. Paul proposed to visit Philippi again, but according to Rom. 15: 24 and 28 he planned to go on from Rome to Spain. This may simply mean that after his arrest the situation changed, but it could possibly mean that, when writing Philippians, he was imprisoned at an earlier stage of his life. Caesarea would be possible, since he could then visit Philippi on his way to Rome. But the journey from Caesarea to Philippi, though shorter, is equally complicated; and at Caesarea Paul could appeal to Caesar—as in fact he did (Acts 25: 11).

One possible reason for putting Philippians at an earlier stage in Paul's life is that chapter 3 contains material that is closely parallel to the matters discussed in Galatians and Romans and to the personal information mentioned in 2 Corinthians. Of course, if 3: 2 — 4: 1 is part of a different letter which says nothing about Paul's imprisonment, then this cannot be an argument for putting the whole letter earlier than his Roman imprisonment. Nevertheless, many scholars have favoured the view that Paul was imprisoned during his stay in Ephesus recorded in Acts 19: 1 — 20: 1, around which period the Galatian, Corinthian and Roman letters most probably were written.

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It is not impossible that Paul was imprisoned as a result of the serious disturbance caused by the Ephesian silversmiths, though Acts 19: 23–41 does not say so. Paul indeed says that he ‘fought wild beasts at Ephesus’ (1 Cor. 15: 32) and compares himself to ‘men condemned to death in the arena’ (1 Cor. 4: 9). These remarks are usually thought to be metaphors, but it is possible that they ought to be taken literally.

It would be irregular but not impossible for a Roman citizen to be treated in this way. In 2 Cor. 1: 8–9, Paul speaks of being in such severe trouble in the province of Asia that ‘we felt in our hearts that we had received a death-sentence’. But it is not very probable that this refers to an imprisonment at Ephesus. Why should Acts suppress so serious a matter, especially as Paul’s discharge would have been a point in his favour? If Paul had really been exposed in the arena, why does he not mention it in his catalogue of troubles in 2 Cor. 11: 23–7? An imprisonment at Ephesus would make the journeys to Philippi much easier, but the evidence for it is lacking, and the probabilities are against it.

The only result of this investigation is that we cannot be quite certain where and when the letter was written. The view that divides the letter into three undermines some of the objections to Rome, and on other grounds Rome is still the most likely place for the writing of Philippians. This uncertainty is a nuisance to anyone who wishes to place the Pauline letters in their order of writing (to discover, for instance, whether there are changes in Paul’s thought in the course of his life); but it scarcely matters when interpreting the letter by itself.

PAUL AND THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH

According to the account in Acts, Paul was hindered from continuing his missionary activity in the province of Asia and was persuaded by a vision to cross into the province of Macedonia and try again there. He went by ship ‘to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, a city of the first rank in that

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district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony' (Acts 16: 11–12). Philippi enjoyed this special position because it had been settled with soldiers disbanded from the Roman army (in the years 42 and 30 B.C.) who had been granted the same rights as if their land were part of Italy itself.

Naturally the citizens were provided with priests and altars for carrying on the official worship of the Roman state, and they also had a very wide choice of Roman, Greek and foreign gods. At the time of Paul's arrival, the city of Philippi fully shared the hospitality of the age towards many forms of worship and its readiness to combine several cults into one.

Paul's first approach was made to the small Jewish community, and his earliest converts were Lydia, a business woman from the province of Asia and her staff of servants and assistants; then by chance a Greek slave-girl who was a fortune-teller, and a minor government official in charge of the local prison (Acts 16: 14–34). The writer of Acts tells a lively and impressive story about these last two converts, and about Paul's imprisonment, but there is no further information about the church. Not long afterwards Paul referred to 'all the injury and outrage which . . . we had suffered at Philippi' when he wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2: 2).

Despite this difficult beginning, a devoted group of Christians was formed and they twice sent him support when he was in Thessalonica (Phil. 4: 16). No doubt they later joined in the support given by the Macedonian churches (2 Cor. 11: 9) to Paul in Corinth and in their contribution to the common fund for relief of the Jerusalem Christians (2 Cor. 8: 1–2). During Paul's long stay at Ephesus, he sent Timothy to visit the Macedonian churches (Acts 19: 22), and then himself visited the region on his way from Ephesus to Corinth (Acts 20: 1–2, with probably another reference to the same visit in 2 Cor. 2: 13 and 7: 5–6). From Corinth he went north again and spent the Passover season at Philippi before beginning his final journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20: 6).

From the letter itself we can learn a little more. The Chris-

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PHIL. I: 1-2

tians at Philippi have their opponents and not only believe in Christ but also suffer for him (1: 28-9). They must beware of dangerous enemies of the Christian faith (3: 2-3 and 3: 18); but they must equally be on their guard against internal rivalry and dissension. There is a hint that Paul expects some disagreement with his views (3: 15); but throughout the letter he gives evidence of deep affection for this group of Christians. In no other letter does he share his inner spiritual life so freely with his readers.

* * * * *

The Apostle and his Friends

GREETING

FROM PAUL and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to **1**
 all those of God's people, incorporate in Christ Jesus,
 who live at Philippi, including their bishops and deacons.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the **2**
 Lord Jesus Christ.

* The standard beginning of an ancient letter is here filled out with special Christian language. *Paul and Timothy* (Timothy appears again at 2: 19-24) describe themselves as Christ's *servants*, using the same word that is translated 'slave' when applied to Christ at 2: 7. Such self-description would have sounded somewhat repugnant to a Greek, unless he was familiar with the Greek Old Testament where the word is commonly used to express the relation of Israelites, especially Moses and the prophets, to the Lord God. In ordinary Greek life a slave was obedient to his lord and wholly at his service; in Jewish religion the slave had the high privilege of being one through whom the Lord did his work and achieved his