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978-0-521-09410-8 - The Letters of Paul to the Ephesians to the Colossians  
and to Philemon

G. H. P. Thompson

Excerpt

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## THREE LETTERS OF PAUL

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### WHY WE READ THEM TOGETHER

The letters to the Ephesians, to the Colossians and to Philemon are conveniently taken together for several reasons:

(i) Destination. All three letters were written to churches and people in the Roman Province of Asia (see map, p. ix). The letter to the Colossians was intended for the church at Colossae, and also for the near-by church at Laodicea, to which it was to be passed on (Col. 4: 16, 'And when this letter is read among you, see that it is also read to the congregation at Laodicea, and that you in return read the one from Laodicea'). Similarly, the letter to Philemon, though mainly intended for an individual Christian, is also being sent to Colossae, the home of Philemon, who is the master of the runaway slave Onesimus. The destination of Ephesians is not so clear. In the N.E.B. the opening greeting is: 'From Paul . . . to God's people at Ephesus'. But, as the N.E.B. footnote makes clear, 'at Ephesus' is omitted in some of the important manuscripts. Marcion (see below, p. 3) seems to have conjectured that Ephesians is the letter, mentioned above, that Paul had written to Laodicea. But this cannot be considered more than a guess. The most likely explanation is that Ephesians was meant to be read in a number of churches in the Province of Asia, of which Ephesus was one.

(ii) Paul in prison. All three letters were written when Paul was undergoing imprisonment (e.g. Eph. 4: 1, 'a prisoner for the Lord's sake'; see also Col. 4: 18, and Philem. 9). They are therefore, with the letter to the Philippians, called 'captivity letters'.

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(iii) Tychicus. Colossians and Philemon were clearly written in the same period (see below, p. 114), and Tychicus, Paul's 'dear brother and trustworthy helper', is taking the runaway slave Onesimus and (most likely) the two letters back to Colossae (Col. 4: 7-9). Tychicus is being sent by Paul 'to let you know all about us and to put fresh heart into you'. He is mentioned in a similar way in Eph. 6: 21-22.

(iv) Common Theme. There are close resemblances of language between Ephesians and Colossians, and passages that are parallel to each other. The main subject of each, too, is the unique status and place of Jesus in our efforts to understand the world and its meaning.

The three letters are therefore closely linked together, and throw light on each other.

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## THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE EPHESIANS

\* \* \* \* \*

## THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE LETTER

The view is sometimes held that the Revelation of John opens (chapters 2-4) with seven letters to seven churches, because the author already knew of a collection of Paul's letters addressed to the seven centres of Christianity—Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and Thessalonica (see map, p. x). The Revelation was written about A.D. 96, and this evidence would mean that our letter to the Ephesians was known and valued by that date.

The earliest reference to Ephesians seems to be in the letter known as 1 Clement. This was written by Clement, Bishop of

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Rome, to the Corinthian Church about A.D. 96. He does not quote directly from Ephesians, but there are indications that he knows it. In 1 Clement 46: 6 the question is asked: 'Or have we not one God, and one Christ, and one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And is there not one calling in Christ?' This may well be a reminiscence of Eph. 4: 4-6, 'There is one body and one Spirit, as there is also one hope held out in God's call to you; one Lord. . . one God and Father of all. . .' Moreover, in 1 Clement 36: 2 and 59: 3 there is the unusual and uncommon phrase 'the eyes of our heart' (i.e. our understanding), which have been 'opened' by the coming of Jesus. This is most easily explained as an echo of Eph. 1: 18, where the N.E.B. translation, 'your inward eyes' is literally, in the original Greek, 'the eyes of your heart'. Such evidence suggests that Ephesians was known and used in the Christian Church by A.D. 96.

In the Christian literature of A.D. 100-150 there are references and allusions to this letter. This literature includes the letters of Bishop Ignatius (A.D. 98-117), the writings of the Shepherd of Hermas (about A.D. 148), and the letter of Bishop Polycarp to the Philippian Church. In the last mentioned letter, written about A.D. 150, Ephesians is quoted as part of the sacred scriptures (12: 1, 'Only, as it is said in these scriptures, "Be ye angry and sin not", and "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath"'). This is a reference to Eph. 4: 26, which the N.E.B. translates: 'If you are angry, do not let anger lead you into sin; do not let sunset find you still nursing it.' By the middle of the second century A.D., the letter quite obviously has a recognized place among the letters of Paul and was regarded as an authoritative writing for the guidance of the Church. For example, between A.D. 140 and 160 Marcion of Sinope made his famous protest against the authority given by the Church to the Old Testament, and to prove his point drew up his own collection of authoritative writings. For this purpose he was able to edit and use a collection of Paul's letters which had been in existence for some time and included Ephesians.

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EPHESIANS

*Who wrote Ephesians?*

## WHO WROTE EPHESIANS?

The opening greeting of the letter would suggest that Ephesians was written, dictated or commissioned by the Apostle Paul himself (1: 1, 'From Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus, . . . to God's people'). That has been the accepted opinion from the early period of the church onwards until more recent times. For various reasons the theory is often put forward today that Ephesians dates from the period after the death of Paul. On this view the letter is an example of so-called 'pseudonymous' writing (something written by one person under the name of another). Such a method could be used in the ancient world in various circumstances and for different reasons. First, it could be a thorough-going attempt to publish a writing under the name of some authority in order to gain circulation and acceptance for it. Secondly, students were sometimes given the academic exercise of writing, for example, a speech as it might have been composed by some great man of the past. Thirdly, 'pseudonymity' took another turn in some Jewish writings. Here the writer put his message in vivid imagery and in the form of visions which were supposed to have been seen by some great hero of the remote past. The visions are depicted as having been hidden and unknown for many years until the appropriate moment comes. Hence these writings are called 'apocalyptic', i.e. revealing and uncovering God's purpose. An illustration of this is the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, where the hero Daniel is depicted as looking forward over the future course of history. Fourthly, 'pseudonymity' is also thought to have been used as a literary device whereby one wrote in the name of a recognized authority of the past to show: (a) that the viewpoint expressed was the kind of approach that that authority would have taken and (b) that the writer owed his own understanding of the subject entirely to the other person.

When Ephesians is dated after Paul's death, it is usually considered to be 'pseudonymous' in the fourth sense. We have

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to imagine a devoted disciple or close associate of Paul following this supposed convention and writing in his master's name. A full discussion is obviously impossible here, but the question has to be asked: Was this literary device, as described above, a recognized tool of the time? We should have to imagine a certain situation arising after the death of Paul, and then someone publishing Ephesians *in Paul's name* to deal with it. Such an idea has been readily accepted, but it would be more convincing if examples were forthcoming from this period of people writing letters or other documents in the name of another with the above motives in view. As far as the present writer knows, such examples are lacking. No true comparison can be drawn between the procedure of the Jewish 'apocalyptic' writers and the procedure that we are considering. In the one case, an ancient figure looks forward over a vast span of history, and sees visions of God's future purposes; in the other, you have a letter written in the name of someone who has died in the recent past and who has been personally known to the 'pseudonymous' writer. Serious reservations must therefore be held about this fourth kind of 'pseudonymity' and doubts expressed whether it was in use in the early church.

## WHAT IS MEANT BY AUTHORSHIP?

In the time of Paul there were three senses in which a person could be the author of a letter:

(i) He could 'wield the pen' and actually write the letter for himself.

(ii) He could employ a secretary and dictate the letter. This modern business method was the custom of the time.

(iii) He could give the gist of what he wanted to say to his secretary, and leave the latter to do the composition, which the author could check and correct later. For example, Cicero, a prominent Roman politician of the first century B.C., had letters composed for him in this way by his secretary, Tiro.

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Paul normally used method (ii). His letter to the Romans, for instance, was dictated to Tertius (Rom. 16: 22, 'I, Tertius, who took this letter down, add my Christian greetings'). In accordance with the custom of the time the sender would add the final greeting or concluding section in his own handwriting. In copies of ancient letters that have survived, reference is made to a change in the writing at this point. Moreover Cicero, already mentioned, in one of his letters to his brother Quintus, alludes to the fact that he has written the last section in his own handwriting ('When I had written these last words, which are in my own hand, your Cicero came to dinner'). In several of his letters Paul draws special attention to the fact that the final section is in his own handwriting (e.g. Col. 4: 18, 'This greeting is in my hand—PAUL. Remember I am in prison. God's grace be with you'). In Gal. 6: 11, Paul draws attention to the fact that he is now writing himself, and humorously points out that he is using larger letters than his secretary ('You see these big letters? I am now writing to you in my own hand').

Whether Paul ever used method (i) is doubtful, but the possibility of his use of method (iii) must not be ruled out. There may have been circumstances, due to imprisonment or other factors, that forced Paul on occasions to give a fair amount of scope to his secretary or representative.

Against this background is it possible to speak of Paul as the author of Ephesians, or is there something about the letter which demands that it must have been written after his death?

## WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS?

(1) *Language*

The language of Ephesians is akin to that of Paul's other letters, but it also has a large number of new words and phrases which do not occur in such letters as Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians, which are

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normally accepted as Paul's letters belonging to his lifetime.

We may take the following examples:

'in the heavenly realms'	(1: 3)
'his Beloved'	(1: 6)
'graciously bestowed'	(1: 6)
'the first to set our hope'	(1: 12)
'community'	(2: 12)
'dividing wall'	(2: 14)
'dwelling'	(2: 22)
'tossed by the waves'	(4: 14)
'devil'	(4: 27)
'potentates'	(6: 12)

The use of new words and phrases can be a very insecure guide in deciding whether a work is written by a particular author. If this method is to be successful, there are two important needs: (a) the treatise being examined must be on a larger scale than Ephesians, big enough for some kind of statistical analysis; (b) a far larger sample of an author's work is required for comparison than we have in the case of Paul, so that we can judge satisfactorily how wide and rich his vocabulary can be. It is also true that the range of an author's words increases with his widening experience, and that new words may be called for in new situations. For example, the phrase 'tossed by the waves and whirled about by every fresh gust' (4: 14) is not used elsewhere in the Pauline letters, but here it can be said to be demanded by this particular context: the contrast that is being drawn between the stability of the Christian faith and the fickleness of the false theories of life put forward in the contemporary world. Terms may also be taken up from the people against whom one is arguing. In 3: 18, there is reference to 'the breadth and length and height and depth'. The mention of the four dimensions together is found only here in Paul's writings, and may well have been taken over from the language of those who practised magic (the 'deceitful schemes' of 4: 14). Some of the new terms may

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also be due to the fact that in the circumstances in which Ephesians was written a fair amount of scope was given to Paul's secretary or representative.

A parallel is sometimes seen between the vocabulary of Ephesians and that in works like 1 Clement (already mentioned), the Gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, 1 Peter and Hebrews, all of which, it is claimed, were written towards the close of the first century A.D. In that case Ephesians ought to be dated to the same period. The relation between Ephesians and these other writings cannot be discussed in detail, but it is important to notice that there is no firm agreement on the dating of these documents. 1 Clement is by common consent placed about A.D. 96, but for the Gospel of Luke and the Acts various dates in the period A.D. 60-100 are often suggested. 1 Peter has been dated as early as A.D. 64-65 or as late as A.D. 111-112, while Hebrews is usually dated about A.D. 75 or even earlier. It must not be ruled out that some of these writers may have known Ephesians (as is almost certainly the case with 1 Clement). Similar language can also be accounted for in different writings by the fact that they may be drawing on a common tradition or source.

The evidence from the language of Ephesians is inconclusive in deciding whether the letter was written after Paul's death.

*(2) Style*

This is thought to be much more cumbersome and involved than Paul's normal livelier style. It has been likened to a 'slowly moving, onwards-advancing mass, like a glacier working its way inch by inch down the valley'. A good illustration of this style can be found in Eph. 1: 3-14. In the Greek text it is one complicated sentence moving slowly and heavily forward; in the N.E.B. translation it is split up into shorter sentences, but something of the original effect can be seen. The same style can be seen very clearly in Eph. 1: 18, 'I pray that your inward eyes may be illumined, so that you may know what is the hope to which he calls you, what the wealth and



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glory of the share he offers you among his people in their heritage, and how vast the resources of his power open to us who trust in him.'

It is difficult to know just how flexible and varied an author's style can be unless we possess a larger quantity of his writings than we do in the case of Paul. The rather cumbersome style of Ephesians is paralleled in other letters of Paul, e.g. Rom. 3: 21-26, which is a single sentence in the Greek, 'But now, quite independently of law, God's justice has been brought to light. The Law and the prophets both bear witness to it: it is God's way of righting wrong, effective through faith in Christ for all who have such faith—all, without distinction. For all alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine splendour, and all are justified by God's free grace alone, through his act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus...' But what is unusual is that in Ephesians this style is sustained without much relief for long sections. Such a feature may lead us to conclude that here Paul's secretary or representative has been given scope in the composition of the letter.

*(3) The Parallels between Ephesians and Colossians*

The striking similarities between the two letters are obvious. But in some of these parallels, words and phrases are used in different senses and in different connections. Some examples are as follows:

(a)	EPHESIANS	COLOSSIANS
	'strangers [Greek: 'alienated'] to the community of Israel' (2: 12)	'estranged [Greek: 'alienated'] from God' (1: 21)
	'For he is himself our peace' (2: 14)	'making peace' (1: 20)
	[Jesus] 'has broken down the enmity' (2: 14)	'you were his [God's] enemies in heart and mind' (1: 21)

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'to reconcile the two' (2: 16)

'to reconcile the whole universe' (1: 20)

'God has reconciled you to himself' (1: 22)

In Ephesians the 'alienation' and the 'enmity' are between the Jews and the Gentiles; in Colossians they are between human beings and God. In Ephesians the 'peace' and 'reconciliation' are between Jews and Gentiles; in Colossians they are between God and all his creation.

## (b) EPHESIANS 3: 5-6

## COLOSSIANS 1: 26-27

'In former generations this [i.e. the secret] was not disclosed; but now it has been revealed that through the Gospel the Gentiles are joint heirs with the Jews.'

'to announce the secret hidden for long ages... The secret is this: Christ in you, the hope of a glory to come.'

In Ephesians God's secret is his plan of uniting Jew and Gentile, which is revealed to the leaders of the Church; in Colossians the secret is Jesus Christ himself and is made known to God's people.

## (c) EPHESIANS 3: 2

## COLOSSIANS 1: 25

'You have heard how God has assigned the gift of his grace...'

'I became its servant by virtue of the task assigned to me by God'

Here 'assigned the gift' and 'the task assigned' are translations of the same Greek word, which can be rendered as 'stewardship', 'assignment' or 'arrangement'. It is often held (as shown by the N.E.B.) that in the passage from Ephesians the word means 'giving' or 'assigning', while in Colossians it is used in the sense of 'stewardship', i.e. of Paul's office as an apostle. In Eph. 1: 10 and 3: 9, the phrase 'put into