Ephesians is unlike many of Paul’s letters in that it neither polemicizes nor defends. It celebrates. Other letters may also start with a benediction of God for God’s interventions or a thanksgiving and prayer over the addressees, but then the shoe drops on the hearers concerning all the things that are going wrong among them and need remediation. Not so here. An opening paragraph of praise to God celebrates God’s primordial choice of the hearers, in company with all who are “in Christ,” for the marvelous destiny of adoption into God’s household, of being made “holy and blameless in love” in God’s estimation, of being redeemed from their former sins through Christ’s offering of himself, of being sealed with God’s Holy Spirit for their future and final redemption as God’s own possession (1:3–14). The fact that the addressees have been incorporated in this marvelous mission of God leads to thanksgiving and prayer on their behalf, that their own minds and hearts would be opened even wider to grasp the hope that God has set before them, the scope of God’s redemption among the peoples of the world, and the magnitude of the life-giving power of God at work among them, a magnitude to be gauged by Christ’s exaltation from the grave to the right hand of God above every competing authority (1:15–23).

The celebration continues: first, of the resurrection that God has graciously granted the addressees along with all who trust in Christ in the form of delivering them from the living death of their sinful way of life and creating them afresh to walk in “good works” (2:1–10); second, of the reconciliation that Christ has achieved among formerly hostile people groups (Jews and Gentiles) and between all human beings and the God whom they had alienated by their sins (2:11–22). This leads – after a brief reminder of the particular grace God had shown Paul and the latter’s
faithful exercise of his divine commission on the addressees’ behalf (3:1–13) – a second time to prayer over the addressees, that Christ would fully inhabit them and they would fully inhabit the broad space of Christ’s love for them (3:14–21).

Celebration then gives way to instruction as the second half of the discourse maps out the kinds of practices that cohere with living more fully into “the new person” and new humanity that God’s indefatigable power is bringing into being within and among them and, conversely, identifies the kinds of practices that are no longer compatible with their divinely appointed destiny (4:1–6:9). The vision of Ephesians from beginning to end is one of Spirit-driven and Spirit-empowered transformation, offered on the basis of God the Father’s gracious benevolence, secured by the Son’s giving of himself on behalf of all who would trust in him and by the Son’s taking into himself all who would trust in him. Yielding fully to this process – and standing firm against every force that would undermine it (6:10–20) – is essential if the addressees are to arrive at the good end that God has appointed for them in his grace and set his abundant power to work among them to achieve.

Ephesians has been described as “the quintessence of Paulinism” and, indeed, no one doubts that it seeks to represent, in some fashion, the essence of Paul’s calling, mission, message, and vision for the congregations he planted throughout the eastern Roman Empire. But there are many questions: Is this discourse Paul’s own, or does it represent an early interpretation of Paul? Whom does the discourse actually address? What kind of text is it, and how should we think about the relationship of its parts? What purpose does so general a discourse serve in the life of the emerging Christian movement? We will give attention to each of these questions as we attempt to discern the text’s setting in the life (or afterlife) of Paul and of the congregations he and his team planted.

**GENRE AND STRUCTURE**

Ephesians presents itself straightforwardly as a letter, addressing its hearers with the customary epistolary formula as adapted by Paul and other early

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1 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 229.
Genre and Structure

Christian authors (see commentary on 1:1) and closing with several familiar epistolary conventions (see commentary on 6:19–24). Liturgical forms dominate the opening – a berakah (1:3–14) celebrating the favors God has shown those who are in Christ followed by a report of a prayer the author offers on the addressees’ behalf (1:15–23) – which would be congenial to the setting in which Ephesians would be read to the Christian audiences assembled for worship.2 These are followed in turn by further elaboration on the salutary interventions of God in Christ (2:1–22), God’s intervention in Paul’s life, turning Paul into an agent of God’s favor (3:1–13), and a further prayer (3:14–21). The second half of the letter exhibits the author’s “paraenetic aim” as “the author gives his admonition on the basis of the addressees’ new standing ‘in Christ’ – a standing which is clearly enunciated in the introductory eulogy.”3 It elaborates the kind of practices and goals that constitute a suitable, full-bodied response of gratitude to the superabundant favor that God has shown, particularly in light of the two primary changes God has effected among the hearers in Christ (their deliverance from the death characterized by “trespasses and sins” and from the mutual alienation brought about by longstanding ethnic hostilities).4

On this basis, Ephesians can be considered a mix of two primary letter types – the congratulatory (insofar as it celebrates the addressees’ new identity, status, and destiny in Christ) and the advisory (insofar as it outlines the path to living in a manner worthy of these favors).5 The discourse as a whole recalls a pattern familiar from Deuteronomy, “the ‘covenant speech’ pattern in which a reminder of what God had done on behalf of his people was followed by a call to keep his commandments.”6 It is not precisely the case that Ephesians exhibits “an arrangement that

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4 Holland Hendrix (“On the Form and Ethos of Ephesians,” USQR 42 [1988]: 3–15, 9) has captured the dynamics of Ephesians well when he describes it as a discourse “in which the author recites the universal benefactions of God and Christ and proceeds to stipulate the appropriate honors, understood as the moral obligations of the beneficiaries,” but not when he specifies its form as “an epistolary decree” that is most similar to honorific decrees in the Greco-Roman city.
5 See Pseudo-Demetrius, Epistolary Types 11, 19. Andrew T. Lincoln, Ephesians, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), xli.
6 Lincoln, Ephesians, xl.
Introduction to Ephesians

proceeds from theological argument (Eph 1–3) to ethical exhortation (4–6),”7 since the first half of the text does not present an “argument” in any real sense. As William Barclay rightly said of the opening chapters, “this is the language of lyrical prayer, not the language of argument or controversy or rebuke.”8 In its move from celebration of God’s mighty acts of deliverance in Christ (and prayers that the addressees will fully grasp the magnitude of this deliverance) to exhortations concerning how to live into God’s purpose that they should all be “blameless and holy before him in love” (Eph 1:4), Ephesians has the character of a “liturgical homily” with the minimum epistolary requirements.9

Ephesians, like most if not all New Testament documents, would have been performed orally in the midst of a gathered assembly and not read by individuals from the printed page. This life-setting renders the promotion of “epistolary analysis” versus “rhetorical analysis” moot. The letter is oratory in its delivery.10 Ephesians, however, does not exhibit any typical oratorical form – not that scholars have failed to parcel out its contents into the components of the typical judicial oration. Such an oration would begin with an introduction or exordium, which set out briefly the matter to be demonstrated and rendered the hearers receptive and well-disposed toward the speaker. A narratio followed, which was a strategic narration of the events of the case, reconstructed in the manner most favorable to the accused by the speaker for the defense and in the manner most prejudicial against the accused by the speaker for the prosecution. This might be

10 Bruce C. Johanson, To All the Brethren: A Text-Linguistic and Rhetorical Approach to 1 Thessalonians (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987), 42–43; Lincoln, Ephesians, xli. For a defense of rhetorical analysis and proposals for its judicious application to Paul, see David A. deSilva, The Letter to the Galatians, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 62–91.
followed by a propositio, summing up the points to be demonstrated to make the case stick; a section devoted to “proofs” (probatio), marshaling all the available evidence for one’s case, would certainly follow. The speech would end with a conclusion or peroratio, which might consist of a brief summation, appeals to pity (if a defense speech) or indignation (if an accusatory speech), and parting reminders of the speaker’s own credibility and shots at the opposing speaker’s lack of credibility. A deliberative speech, which sought to give advice concerning a course of action to be taken in the future to meet a present challenge, would follow essentially the same pattern save for the lack of a narratio since, as Aristotle quipped, no one can narrate the future (Rh. 3.16.11).

James Thompson suggests that Ephesians 1:3–23 represents the exordium of the letter as oral discourse. This is unobjectionable since almost all texts have an “introduction” of some kind, and these introductions typically include “introducing the themes that follow and making the audience favorably disposed.”11 Suggesting that 2:1–3:13 “functions as the narratio of the argument” is more problematic: 12 The passage is certainly a narrative of God’s salutary interventions in the lives of those who have joined the Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean (and, as such, it continues and elaborates upon the celebration of the same in 1:3–14), but that does not make it a narratio. It does not set up a “stasis” or thesis to be proven; there is no issue that emerges as particularly in question. In short, there seems to be no actual “argument” in Ephesians for a narratio to “set up.” It is again unobjectionable when Thompson labels 4:1–6 the propositio, for indeed 4:1 (at least) functions as a kind of thesis statement for the remainder of the discourse, as the author lays out what it looks like to walk in a manner worthy (or unworthy) of God’s calling, as elaborated in the first half of the discourse. However, to call 4:7–6:9 the probatio of the discourse (further dividing it into two “proofs,” 4:7–16; 4:17–6:9) is highly misleading for, again, nothing is demonstrated in these chapters.13 Rather, a
way of life is elaborated as the author lines out the contours, both positive and negative, of such a life. This is not the stuff of a probatio. It is precisely this kind of imposition of the labels of the parts of the standard outline of a speech to portions of a Pauline letter without considering the distance between the two that has tended to bring the discipline of rhetorical criticism of the New Testament into disrepute. It follows as a matter of course, then, to label 6:10–20 the peroratio of the discourse, which, like the exordium, is appropriate insofar as most discourses also have conclusions that tend to serve a basic set of functions.14

The essential mismatch between the typical parts of a classical oration and Ephesians comes from the fact that Ephesians is neither judicial nor deliberative rhetoric. If it must be likened to any of the three standard modes of public oratory in the Greco-Roman world, it would fall within the broad realm of epideictic rhetoric. While budding rhetoricians were most exercised in the composition of the funeral oration as the public form of epideictic oratory that they would most likely be called upon to perform, it encompassed all manner of “discourse, oral or written, that does not aim at a specific action or decision but seeks to enhance knowledge, understanding, or belief, often through praise or blame, whether of persons, things, or values. It is thus an important feature of cultural or group cohesion.”15 As a discourse that begins with a celebration of the benefits bestowed by the Deity and ends with the commendation of the values and

“salvation . . . by God’s grace through faithfulness,” to be developed in 2:3–11; 3:1–21; and 2:10 announcing the theme of “believers as God’s workmanship created as a body politic upon Christ’s good works, in which they are then to walk,” to be developed in 4:1–6:19. The artificiality of this outline is evident from the fact that the “theme of salvation . . . by God’s grace through faithfulness” is already being developed in 2:1–10. Additionally, what distinguishes the prayer of 1:3–6 from the prayer of 3:14–21, such that the former functions as part of an exordium and the latter as part of a probatio, is the more as Paul is fulfilling the same function (“as suppliant”; Long, “Paul’s Political Theology,” 292) in both? Thomas Winger’s division of the discourse into proofs (2:1–10, 11–22; 3:1–13; 3:14–21; 4:1–16) and refutations (4:17–5:2; 5:3–14, 15–21; 5:2:6–9) is even more artificial, especially as he equates “contrasts” (which accurately reflects a good deal of the later hortatory material) with the stuff of “refutations.” Thomas Winger, Ephesians, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 160–61.

14 Thompson, Apostle of Persuasion, 245. See also Lincoln, Ephesians, 432–40; Long, “Paul’s Political Theology,” 303; Winger, Ephesians, 161.
practices that would characterize a just and noble response to those benefits (along with the censure of inappropriate practices), Ephesians certainly fits both modern and classical definitions of this genre.16

The praise or celebration of the Deity’s salutary interventions and benefits takes the form of a “compelling narrative” in which the author “portrays the powerful, reality-altering, cosmos-transforming acts of God in Christ to redeem God’s world and save God’s people for the glory of his name.”17 The author invites his hearers and readers to inhabit this narrative and live out their roles in it as people who have been brought from darkness into light, from the death of alienation from God and one another into the life of a new community that has experienced God’s forgiveness and favor and lives into God’s consummation of God’s vision for the world.18

AUDIENCE

The manuscript tradition, along with the testimony of leading figures in the church of the second through fifth centuries, overwhelmingly locates the Christian communities addressed by this letter in the city of Ephesus.19 Ephesus was a major center for the activity of Paul and his team as reflected not only in Acts 19:1–20:3 but also in Paul’s letters. He refers,

16 In addition to Kennedy (cited in previous note), see Quintilian, Inst. 3.7.6–9; Chaim Perelman, The Realm of Rhetoric (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 19–20. Lincoln (Ephesians, xli) correctly observes that Ephesians combines epideictic and deliberative topics – for example, adding brief rationales from consideration of the consequences (see 5:5–6) – as it moves from celebration of God’s acts on behalf of the new people God has formed in Christ to the prescription of the response befitting such favor, but also that “paraenesis is not necessarily deliberative” (Lincoln, Ephesians, xlii). The recommendations of deliberative speeches are specific (as in Gal 5:1–4: “don’t get circumcised!”) while the recommendations of epideictic speeches remain more general (as in 4 Macc. 18:1–2: “Keep the Torah”).


18 Gombis, Drama of Ephesians, 23.

speaking figuratively, to having “fought with wild animals in Ephesus” (1 Cor 15:32). As he forecasts his travel plans, he anticipates staying “in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Cor 16:8–9). He remembers “the affliction . . . experienced in Asia,” where he and his team members “were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself” (2 Cor 1:8–9). If the testimony of the Pastoral Epistles can be accepted as preserving genuine historical reminiscences, Paul appointed Timothy to oversee the Christian groups in Ephesus after his own departure to Macedonia (1 Tim 1:3–4); sent Tychicus to Ephesus at some point (2 Tim 4:12), though whether or not this is the same trip on which he carried our letter (Eph 6:21) cannot be ascertained; and experienced the support of an Ephesian Christian named Onesiphorus while imprisoned in Rome (2 Tim 1:16–18). It is probably from Ephesus that members or converts of Paul’s team took the gospel to other cities in the region. For example, Paul commends Epaphras as the one through whom assemblies were planted in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea (Col 1:7; 4:12–13), a cluster of cities about one hundred miles east of Ephesus.

A number of factors, however, make some scholars reluctant to accept the traditional designation at face value. While the main text of the NRSV presents the recipients as “the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus,” a textual note in the NRSV alerts readers that “other ancient authorities lack in Ephesus, reading saints who are also faithful.” Indeed, the earliest three manuscripts – typically referred to as “Papyrus 46” (c.200 ce), Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century), and Codex Vaticanus (fourth century) – lack “in Ephesus,” as did manuscripts of Ephesians known to Origen of Alexandria (third century) and Basil of Caesarea (fourth century).20 Even these manuscripts, however, give the letter the title “To Ephesians” (whether at the start of the text or, more commonly, at the end), and Origen and Basil both refer to the letter as such. It is possible that the tradition was “invented” at an early stage, such that the testimony of the text of these manuscripts must be considered apart from the titles.

A Closer Look: The Text of Ephesians 1:1

The absence of the phrase “in Ephesus” in our three earliest extant manuscripts poses an important problem in reconstructing the likeliest form of the original text. The rules of textual criticism give priority to the shorter reading, since scribes were more prone to introduce additions than deletions, and to the more difficult reading, since scribes were more prone to smooth over than create problems. According to both principles, “in Ephesus” should be regarded as a later scribal addition, one perhaps motivated by the desire to attach an available Pauline letter to a major center of Pauline activity that otherwise lacked such a letter. Churches in Rome, Achaia, and Macedonia could boast of having been addressed by the Apostle; would he have failed to write to Ephesus, the center of his mission in Asia, as well? The difficulty with this theory is the absence of alternative suggestions from anyone in the second or third centuries (including the absence of witnesses not designating the letter, whether in the text of 1:1 or by the title, as having been sent to Ephesus). An alternative theory is that “in Ephesus” was in fact original, but that the copyist of an early and influential manuscript omitted it in order to make a letter that was already admittedly quite general and widely applicable more obviously and directly relevant to its wider readership. A similar phenomenon can be observed in the manuscript tradition of Romans, with “in Rome” omitted from Romans 1:7 in a few witnesses. A mediating theory posits that the author, intending the letter to circulate to Christians in cities beyond Ephesus, had left a blank space in his original for the name of each city to be supplied. If this were the case, however, one would have expected for there to be some evidence in the textual tradition of these other names at 1:1.

The verse is comprehensible with or without the phrase “in Ephesus” (“to the holy who are also faithful”), though Origen – a native Greek speaker – did have difficulty with his text that lacked “in Ephesus.” He read this as “to the holy ones who are, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus,” appealing in the end to God’s disclosure.

22 The sole dissenting voice was that of Marcion, who, according to Tertullian (Adv. Marc. 5.17.1), claimed Ephesians to have been written to the Christians in Laodicea (and thus the letter mentioned in Col 4:16).
23 Clinton E. Arnold, Ephesians, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 28.
24 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 447.
25 Mark Santer, “The Text of Ephesians 1:1,” NTS 15 (1969): 247–48, provides a hypothetical reconstruction of the development of the variants from an original “to the holy and faithful ones who are in Christ Jesus” to the messier “to the holy ones in Ephesus who are also faithful in Christ Jesus,” but his theory, as he himself admits, rests entirely on conjecture.
of his name as “the one who is” in Exodus 3:14 to explain the sense. In this instance, however, the longer and less difficult version appears to me to be the more original. The syntax of the clause including the place name aligns perfectly with Paul’s syntax in five other letters in which he uses a participial form of the verb “to be” and a prepositional phrase locating those he describes (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:13; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 2:14). These parallels suggest that there should have been an original place name, and that was most probably “Ephesus.”

The addressees are primarily Gentile Christians, as they are consistently and explicitly addressed as Gentiles: “remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called ‘the uncircumcision’ . . . were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” (Eph 2:11–12); “this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds” (4:17, emphasis mine). This suggests that first Paul and his team, then the converts they left behind, had their greatest and most lasting missionary success among the non-Jewish residents of Ephesus.

According to the narrative in Acts, Paul brought his initial church-planting work in Corinth to a close and traveled with Prisca and Aquila to Ephesus. He left them there as a kind of advance guard to get settled and begin the work of preaching while he himself made a trip to Jerusalem and retraced his steps through Galatia and Phrygia to visit and encourage the churches he had planted there years before (Acts 18:18–23). He would return to Ephesus and stay there for two years (Acts 19:1–20:1), perhaps the fall of 52 CE through the fall of 54 CE. This means that some of the addressees of Ephesians may have been Christ-followers for as many as nine years by the time they heard this address, while others will have been very recent converts, assuming that members of Paul’s team continued to be active in and around Ephesus and that the converts themselves were

26 See, further, Harold W. Hoehner, Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 144–48 and Frank Thielman, Ephesians, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 11–16. Thielman (Ephesians, 14) rightly notes that all the MSS omitting the phrase come from the Alexandrian text tradition, limiting their value as possibly representing a local, though early, variant.

27 Murphy-O’Connor, St. Paul’s Ephesus, 201–2.