

Introduction to Ephesians

Historical Context

Who is the author?

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, is the author of the book.

Who are the recipients?

The recipients are saints living in the city of Ephesus. The testimony of this church was one of a strong faith and love for other saints (1:15). The letter was written primarily to Gentile believers (2:11), though there were at least some Jewish believers in Ephesus (Ac 19:8-10, 17).

There are two interesting aspects related to the recipients. First, some early manuscripts do not include the phrase “who are at Ephesus.” Second, this is not a very personal letter, which is surprising, given that Paul was in Ephesus for two years (Ac 19:10). With the exception of Tychicus, the bearer of the letter, there are no specific names or greetings given; no specific problems or problem-causing people are mentioned.

What is the relationship between the author and the recipients?

Paul briefly visited Ephesus during his 2nd missionary journey (Ac 18:19-21), and he brought Priscilla and Aquila there. During his 3rd missionary journey he stayed in Ephesus for 2 years (Ac 19:10), when he founded the church (2:1-5). While there he suffered tribulations on their behalf (3:13), a reference to events such as rejection by the Jews (Ac 19:9), the uprising of the silversmiths of the temple (Ac 19:23ff), and fighting with wild beasts (1 Co 15:32).

Paul continued to keep track of this church after he left. He had heard of their faith and their love (1:15), he gave thanks for them and prayed for them daily (1:16), and asked that they pray for him to be bold (6:19).

Paul sent Tychicus (4:12) and later Timothy (1 Tim 1:3) to Ephesus.

Where do the recipients live?

The recipients live in the city of Ephesus, a port town on the east side of the Aegean Sea. It became the most important city in the Roman province of Asia (currently Turkey). It was home to a fertility goddess, whom the Greeks renamed Artemis (see Ac 19:23-27, 35) and the Romans Diana; it was also a center for emperor worship, and sorcery was common. It had a magnificent outdoor theater, which could hold 25,000 people. It was a great commercial center. It was home to many Jews.

When was the book written?

There is some internal evidence for the date. Paul mentioned that he had a revelation (3:3) and was made a minister of the gospel (3:7). This is probably a reference to his Damascus Road experience, which was probably around 33 A.D. Paul founded the church during his 3rd missionary journey, which was from 53-57 A.D. He also mentioned three times that he was a prisoner (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), making this one of the four prison epistles (along with Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon). Paul was first imprisoned in Rome for 2 years from 60-62 A.D. So probably the book was written around 61 A.D.

What historical situation occasioned this writing?

The impetus for the letter seems to revolve around the return of Onesimus, the slave, to Philemon, his Christian master. After Onesimus' salvation (Phl 10), Paul sent him back to Philemon (Phl 12) with a letter (which we know as Philemon) carried by Tychicus (Eph 6:21; Co 4:7). Since Tychicus was heading that way, Paul took the opportunity to write letters to the churches at Colossae (the town in which Philemon lived) and Ephesus (which was on the way).

What is the author's purpose?

Unlike many of Paul's letters, there does not seem to be a specific problem or situation that he addressed. The letter is somewhat general in tone. When Paul wrote this letter, it had been about five years since he had been to Ephesus. It seems that the believers there had been extensively evangelizing the city and the surrounding areas, resulting in a new generation of believers and churches who did not know Paul personally and who did not fully understand their position in Christ. They were not living the distinctively Christian lifestyle that God intended, so Paul wrote to inform and encourage them.

Paul wrote to teach them about their position in Christ and the benefits from it: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Eph 1:18-19a NASB95).

Then he urged them to live accordingly: “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called” (Eph 4:1 NASB95).

Based upon this purpose, the missing recipients in some manuscripts, and the general nature of the letter, it is possible that Paul intended for this to be a circular letter. It was sent to the original church he founded and intended to be copied for all the new churches in the surrounding areas. On the other hand there is nothing in the letter to indicate that it was intended to be a general letter (see Co 4:16). Although it's impossible to be certain, it seems reasonable that this letter was intended both for the Ephesian church and other nearby churches.

What other book is Ephesians similar to?

There are a number of similarities to Colossians. “Without fear of contradiction it may be said that there are more...similarities between Ephesians and Colossians than between any other two New Testament letters.”¹ Both are prison epistles. Both are carried by Tychicus (Co 4:7). Both are written to churches in Asia. Many of the topics and much of the language is similar. “It has been estimated that of the 155 verses of Ephesians over half contain expressions identical with those in Colossians.”² It appears that Paul first wrote Colossians to counter a specific heresy, then rewrote it and expanded upon it in a more general fashion to create the letter to the Ephesians.

Outline

- Introduction
 - Greetings (1:1-2)
 - A Eulogy of God (1:3-14)
 - God is worthy of praise because he blessed us (1:3-6).

¹ Foulkes, 25.

² Vaughan, 11.

- God is worthy of praise because he redeemed us (1:7-10).
 - God is worthy of praise because he assigned us to be his inheritance (1:11-12).
 - God is worthy of praise because he sealed us (1:13-14).
 - Paul's First Prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-23)
 - Paul gave thanks (1:15-16).
 - Paul prayed for a spirit of wisdom and revelation (1:17-23).
- Body
 - Doctrine
 - The Power of God in Salvation (2:1-22)
 - The dead are made alive (2:1-10).
 - Jews and Gentiles are made into one new body (2:11-22)
 - The Mystery of Christ (3:1-13)
 - Gentiles are equal with Jews in the church (3:1-7).
 - Paul proclaimed Christ and explained the mystery (3:8-13).
 - Paul's Second Prayer for the Ephesians (3:14-21)
 - Paul prayed for power, comprehension, and filling (3:14-19).
 - Paul prayed that God would be glorified (3:20-21).
 - Application
 - Live worthy of the calling (4:1-16).
 - Live worthy by being humble, patient, and unified (4:1-6).
 - Live worthy by serving with spiritual gifts and being prepared by spiritual leaders (4:7-16).
 - Lay aside the old self; put on the new self (4:17-24).
 - For example:
 - Don't lie (4:25).
 - Don't sin in anger (4:26-27).
 - Don't steal (4:28).
 - Edify (4:29).
 - Don't grieve the HS (4:30).
 - Be nice to one another (4:31-32).
 - Imitate God (5:1-2).
 - Be moral (5:3-5).
 - Walk as children of light (5:6-14).
 - Walk wisely (5:15-21).
 - For example:

- Wives, be subject (5:22-24).
- Husbands, love (5:25-33).
- Children, obey and honor (6:1-3).
- Fathers, do not provoke (6:4).
- Slaves, be obedient and serve (6:5-8).
- Masters, do good things to slaves (6:9).
- Put on the armor of God (6:10-17).
- Conclusion
 - Prayer request (6:18-20)
 - Travel plans (6:21-22)
 - Benediction (6:23-24)

Theme

Paul emphasizes God's work in eternity past, the nature of salvation in the present, the love believers have for each other, and the unity in the church (especially between Jews and Gentiles). All of these move towards the theme of the book: God's ultimate design is to bring everything together again in Christ (1:10).

Works Cited

Foulkes, Francis, *Ephesians*, Rev. Ed., Tyndale NT Commentaries.

Vaughan, Curtis, *Ephesians*, Founders Study Guide Commentary.