

EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE PHILIPPIANS

Approximate date: 61 C.E.

Time period: first imprisonment of Paul

Author: the Apostle Paul

Location of author: Rome (majority view), Ephesus or Caesarea (minority view)

Target audience and their location: largely non-Jewish Believers in Philippi

People:

Paul, Timothy, palace guard, Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, Clement

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah, Caesar's household

Places:

Philippi, Macedonia, Thessalonica

Key Themes:

thanksgiving for the faith and generosity of the Philippians / rejoicing in imprisonment for Messiah / need to imitate the humility of Yeshua / need to place one's confidence in God and not in works of the flesh / pressing toward maturity like running a race / need to get along in the local congregation / need to focus on spiritually edifying things

Key Scriptures: Philippians 1:9-10, 21-23; 2:5-11; 3:8, 20-21; 4:4, 8 / **Greeting** (1:1-2); **Thanksgiving** (1:3-8); **Prayer** (1:9-11); **Paul's Present Circumstances** (1:12-26); **Exhortations** (1:27-2:18); **Timothy and Epaphroditus** (2:19-30); **Warnings Against False Teachers** (3:1-4:1); **Further Exhortations** (4:2-9); **Acknowledgment of the Gifts** (4:10-20); **Concluding Salutation** (4:21-23)¹

Theological Summary: The letter to the Philippians is commonly classified among the Prison Epistles (also including Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon). Genuine Pauline authorship of Philippians has not been substantially challenged by either conservatives or liberals, per the many personal references witnessed in this letter (even though the latter may argue that some sections of Philippians are non-Pauline, or that the letter has been strung together from

¹ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 561-563.

various fragments of other writings by Paul to the Philippians).² Paul composes this letter from prison (1:13-14), even though it is debated where Paul was imprisoned when Philippians was written. Largely, Philippians is a letter of personal thanks, as the Philippian congregation of Believers helped support Paul financially (4:15-20; cf. 2 Corinthians 11:7-9). The great advantage, of a letter like Philippians, is that there is no detection of a major crisis, problem, or false teaching that has erupted. Philippians is a letter of thanks and appreciation from the Apostle Paul to some of his closest friends,³ who have always been kind and courteous to him.

The city of Philippi was named after King Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. It was the place of a decisive battle in 42 B.C.E. between the Second Triumvirate of Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus against the Roman Republicans. The victory of Octavian resulted in the city being made a Roman military colony. The people of Philippi were chiefly Roman, and many retired military personnel resided there. "Philippi had been thoroughly colonized by the Romans after 30 B.C., but the city was still more Greek in culture than Roman" (*NIDB*).⁴ Philippi, as a Roman colony, would be administered not that much differently than Rome itself. Philippi did not have a large enough Jewish presence to warrant a synagogue. "[E]vidently, because of the strong Roman consciousness of the citizens, the Jews were not allowed to have a synagogue within the city walls, so they had only a place of prayer outside the west gate at a river (Acts 16:13)" (*ISBE*),⁵ which was the first place Paul would have gone when evangelizing. Philippi was the first European congregation established by Paul (Acts 16:11-40).⁶ Being aware of the high Roman patriotism of the city of Philippi, can certainly unlock some difficult statements that Paul makes in his letter (cf. 1:27; 3:20).

The traditional view of the composition of Philippians is that this letter was written by Paul from Rome in about 61. C.E., when the Apostle was under house arrest (Acts 28:30), possibly getting ready to go to trial or final sentencing (cf. 1:7, 13, 17). This view went largely unchallenged until the early Twentieth Century, when some examiners began to suggest that the letter may have been written from Ephesus at a slightly earlier date. The principal reason in support of this view is that Ephesus and Philippi were geographically closer than Ephesus and Rome. At the same time, when witnessing the presence of terms like praetorium (1:13) or Caesar's household (4:22), this would lend some strong support for a Roman imprisonment, although these terms could also have been used in any city in the Empire where there was an imperial garrison and administrative staff.⁷ Whether or not Rome or Ephesus was the composition locus of the letter does not affect its overall theology.⁸ Some other examiners of

² Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 555-559; John T. Fitzgerald, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 5:319-322; G.F. Hawthorne, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 709; Carolyn Osiek, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *EDB*, 1049; Charles A. Wanamaker, "Philippians," in *ECB*, 1394.

³ Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 541-543.

⁴ Lorman M. Petersen, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *NIDB*, 782; cf. Hawthorne, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 707-708; Wanamaker, "Philippians," in *ECB*, 1394.

⁵ B. Reicke, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 3:837.

⁶ Cf. Petersen, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *NIDB*, 781; Hawthorne, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 708.

⁷ G.S. Duncan, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *IDB*, 3:790; Reicke, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 3:839.

⁸ F. Foulkes, "Philippians," in *NBCR*, 1126.

Philippians consider Caesarea to be the letter's place of origin. Rome, however, is still generally regarded as the default choice for the letter's place of origin.⁹

What cannot be explained, of course, is why there would be some in the Messianic community today who would think that Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians in Hebrew or Aramaic. The Jewish community in Philippi at the time seems to be miniscule at best. The largely Greek and Roman audience that Paul writes to in Philippians would have had no difficulty understanding Greek, the international language of business and commerce in the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet, a written Greek origin for Philippians does not at all discount the Tanach intertextuality seen in the letter. It is also true that the hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 bears some Semitic rhythms,¹⁰ a good indication that Paul has imported a piece used by the early Believers, into his composition.

On the whole, the theology of Philippians is not very complicated, as there is seldom a negative rebuke in this letter, although the message of Philippians is very rich. Paul thanks the Philippians for sending him a financial gift (1:5; 4:10-19), he encourages the Philippians to rejoice in the face of their circumstances (1:27-30; 4:4), he wants the Philippians to be unified (2:1-11; 4:2-5). Paul writes that he is sending Timothy and Epaphroditus to them to instruct them (2:19-20). The *Carmen Christi* hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the most important parts of the epistle, as it has helped inform theologians and examiners as to the pre-existence of Yeshua, His Incarnation and service for humankind, and His exaltation as LORD (cf. Isaiah 45:23).¹¹

While writing to an almost entirely non-Jewish audience in Philippians, the Apostle Paul strongly affirms his own Jewishness. He testifies that he was "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee" (3:5). But he also testifies of the grand superiority of Yeshua over his human pedigree and achievements: "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Messiah" (3:7). While Paul does not discount his Jewish upbringing, it is inferior to him knowing Yeshua as his Lord. Did Paul write this because there were many retired Roman soldiers in Philippi, who might think that their military careers were superior to knowing the Jewish Messiah? Thankfully, Paul sent Timothy and Epaphraditus to Philippi to instruct the Philippian Believers in what they needed to know (2:19, 25). The Jewish character of Paul is certainly present in Philippians, but he writes very carefully to a unique non-Jewish audience in Philippi.

There are some unanswered questions that expositors have not been able to fully answer, regarding Paul's warning to the Philippians, "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision [those who mutilate the flesh, RSV]" (3:2). Who are the dogs? Who are those who promote a false circumcision? There is discussion as to whether or not these people would ever even encounter the Philippians, and if so, these remarks

⁹ For a summary of all options, see: Reicke, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 3:838-839; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 545-555; Fitzgerald, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 5:322-323; Hawthorne, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 709-711; Carson and Moo, pp 503-506.

¹⁰ Carson and Moo, pp 499-500.

¹¹ Reicke, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 3:840; Hawthorne, "Philippians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 711-712; Carson and Moo, pp 500-503.

would be only a warning to the Philippians that they could show up. Among a spectrum of interpreters, some favor Judaizers/Influencers who advocated non-Jewish Believers being circumcised as proselytes, some favor those who adhered to proto- or incipient-Gnostic beliefs, and others favor some kind of libertines who disregarded any moral authority.¹² Carson and Moo offer us the worthwhile summary: “The references to Jewish practices make it clear that either Jewish opponents or Judaizers were involved, who may well have held to some opinions that were later taken up into the great gnostic systems.”¹³

Paul’s letter to the Philippians tends to be highly valued by today’s evangelical Christians, on various levels. “Although not a theological treatise, *Philippians* does have a great deal to say about God and his ways with people, about Christ Jesus and about Christians and how they should live in this world” (Hawthorne).¹⁴ Those who are going through difficult times, similar to Paul in his confinement, have passages from *Philippians* to reflect upon and gain encouragement from. Paul’s desire to depart and be with the Messiah in Heaven (1:23) has brought great comfort to those Believers facing death. Similarly, Paul’s words about the resurrection and the bodies of the redeemed being transformed (3:20-21) have brought great comfort to those who have lost loved ones, knowing that Yeshua will return and the reign of Heaven will be brought to the Earth. The Apostle Paul desires to be identified with his Savior in as many areas of his own life and service as possible (3:8-11), and so should any born again Believer likewise wish to have such a close identification with the Lord Yeshua. The tenor of *Philippians* 2:12-13, emphasizing “work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” has borne much significance for those Christian theological traditions that focus on the significance of human free will.

Discussions on Christology from the *Carmen Christi* hymn of *Philippians* 2:5-11 are certainly quite important for any reader of *Philippians*. The considerable development in properly understanding the term *harpagmos* (ἄρπαγμός)¹⁵ in 2:6, which has been often rendered as “grasped,” has widely affirmed that Yeshua did not use His equality with the Father “as something to be exploited” (NRSV) or as “something to be used to his own advantage” (TNIV).¹⁶ Yeshua’s exaltedness was largely put aside for Him to serve fallen humanity, be humiliated, and be sacrificed to atone for sin. Yeshua’s exaltation at the Father’s right hand, and His integration into the Divine Identity as YHWH, are assured by the intertextual allusion to Isaiah 45:20-23. Of particular interest to examiners should be the connections that Hawthorne has detected between *Philippians* 2:5-11 and John 13:3-17, in how “an incident from the life of Christ...provides an almost perfect model for the movement of the Christ hymn of *Philippians* 2.”¹⁷

¹² Cf. Fitzgerald, “*Philippians, Epistle to the,*” in *ABD*, 5:323; Hawthorne, “*Philippians, Letter to the,*” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 711.

¹³ Carson and Moo, 511.

¹⁴ Hawthorne, “*Philippians, Letter to the,*” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 707.

¹⁵ “**some**th. to which one can claim or assert title by gripping or grasping, **some**th. claimed” (*BDAG*, 133).

¹⁶ Cf. Carson and Moo, pp 499, 501.

¹⁷ Hawthorne, “*Philippians, Letter to the,*” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 712.

Today's Messianic movement has a somewhat uncertain relationship with the Epistle to the Philippians. There are struggles among many Messianic Believers, who are unable to fully focus on Yeshua the Messiah as the center of their spiritual identity. Statements which appear to be negative about Judaism and the Torah tend to be overlooked (3:8-9), and are not carefully analyzed for what they would have meant to the largely Roman Philippians. If the Apostle Paul could think of his Jewish pedigree and achievements as effectively being "worthless" in view of Yeshua, by extension this meant that any Roman Philippian achievements were "less than worthless." There are likewise Messianic struggles over the Christological assertions from Philippians 2:5-11, as understanding the *Carmen Christi* hymn will need to play a key role in discussions our faith community has regarding Yeshua's Divinity and humanity. Perhaps most difficult of all, though, the Epistle to the Philippians forces Messianic Believers to directly engage with First Century Greco-Roman society and issues, given the historical setting of Ancient Philippi. Paul's letter to the Philippians, at present, may be too commonly avoided by various Messianics, in no small part due to the overstated and rather simplistic "Greek mindset" rhetoric that one finds in too many quarters. There is much room for future improvement and refinement, for our collective Messianic engagement with Philippians.¹⁸

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON PHILIPPIANS:

1. Did you note that there were any "serious" problems or situations mentioned in Paul's letter to the Philippians? What are your thoughts about what Paul tells the Philippians to be aware of?

¹⁸ Consult the author's commentary *Philippians for the Practical Messianic* for a more detailed examination of Philippians.

2. Do you think that Paul is deriding his Jewish heritage and the Torah in Philippians 3:2-8?

3. What section of Paul's letter to the Philippians strikes you as being the most spiritually important?

4. Have you ever encountered a Messianic fellowship or congregation like the one Paul wrote to in Philippi? If so, what were its strengths and weaknesses?

REFLECTION ON PHILIPPIANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's letter to the Philippians: