

# EPISTLE OF PAUL CALLED "EPHESIANS"

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**Approximate date:** 60-62 C.E.

**Time period:** season of great expansion of the gospel among those needing encouragement

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Asia Minor, and eventually Ephesus

**People:**

Paul, Tychicus

**People mentioned:**

Yeshua the Messiah

**Places:**

Ephesus (disputed)

**Key Themes:**

spiritual blessings we receive via redemption in Yeshua / the great transforming abilities of the Messiah at work in a Believer / unity of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in the Body of Messiah / Paul's ministry work among the nations / the ability to be strengthened by God / unique spiritual gifts given to each member of the Body of Messiah / demonstrating true transformation via good, godly conduct in the world / proper place of husbands and wives in marriage, children and parents, slaves and masters / putting on the full armor of God

**Key Scriptures:** Ephesians 2:8-13; 4:1-4, 22-24; 6:10-17 / **Greeting** (1:1-2);

**Doxology** (1:3-14); **Thanksgiving and Prayer for the Readers** (1:15-23);

**Doctrinal Section** (2:1-3:21); **The Practical Section** (4:1-6:17); **Conclusion** (6:18-24)<sup>1</sup>

**Theological Summary:** The letter that has come to be known as "Ephesians" has been traditionally classified among the Prison Epistles (also including Philippians, Colossians, and

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<sup>1</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 536-540.

Philemon). The Epistle of Ephesians has a significant amount of controversy associated with it, as there are issues surrounding its intended audience, its authorship, and among theologians today, its contents. The authorship of Ephesians is not widely challenged by conservatives, in spite of the fact that the letter lacks a personal greeting. The author plainly identifies himself as Paul (1:1; 3:1), and he does indicate that he is in some kind of confinement (4:1; 6:20). While a strong defense has been made in favor of genuine Pauline authorship of Ephesians, most liberal theologians today deny that Paul wrote this letter.

Was the Apostle Paul the author of the Epistle of Ephesians? The letter was known to various Christian leaders by the end of the First Century and early Second Century, such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Hermas, and Polycarp,<sup>2</sup> requiring Ephesians to have been written by the late First Century. Explicit Pauline authorship is attested by the late Second Century, as Irenaeus would testify, “the blessed Paul declares in his Epistle to the Ephesians, that ‘we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones’ [Ephesians 5:30]” (*Against Heresies* 5.2.3).<sup>3</sup>

Claims against genuine Pauline authorship of Ephesians have been present in New Testament studies since the Nineteenth Century. Those who doubt that Paul is the author of Ephesians tend to offer support for their position, claiming that some of the letter’s theological themes<sup>4</sup> and various terms employed,<sup>5</sup> are not witnessed in the agreed-upon genuine Pauline letters.<sup>6</sup> But if the Apostle Paul is not the author of Ephesians, then who is it? Those who deny Pauline authorship of Ephesians might propose that someone in Paul’s inner circle, like Onesimus or Luke, composed it sometime after his death. Generally among liberals, though, one finds the view that some kind of anonymous members of a Pauline school, a collection of second generation Believers wanting to honor the Apostle and his legacy, wrote this letter in his honor to preserve his teaching legacy. Some liberals, who deny Pauline authorship of Ephesians, are keen to point out that this does not mean abandoning the letter’s theological and spiritual value.<sup>7</sup> A liberal like Furnish, perhaps surprisingly, has to admit, “At least in a general way, the overall structure of Ephesians conforms to that of the other letters in the Pauline Corpus” (*ABD*).<sup>8</sup>

Those who would affirm genuine Pauline authorship of Ephesians would take issue with the claims that the theological themes of the letter are too unique to be from the Apostle, as well as the idea that the employment of various terms places the letter outside of the

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<sup>2</sup> G. Johnston, “Ephesians, Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 2:108.

Clement of Rome: *1 Clement* 36:2 (Ephesians 4:18); 59:3 (Ephesians 1:18); 46:6 (Ephesians 4:4-6); Ignatius: *To the Smyrnaens* 1:2 (Ephesians 1:23; 2:16); *To Polycarp* (Ephesians 4:2ff); 5:1 (Ephesians 5:25); Polycarp: *To the Philippians* 1:3 (Ephesians 2:8); 12:1 (Ephesians 4:26).

<sup>3</sup> *BibleWorks 8.0: Schaff, Early Church Fathers*.

<sup>4</sup> Johnston, “Ephesians, Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 2:108; F.W. Danker, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 2:109-110; Victor Paul Furnish, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 2:540.

<sup>5</sup> Johnston, “Ephesians, Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 2:109-110; Furnish, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 2:540, 541.

<sup>6</sup> The agreed-upon genuine Pauline letters, by both liberals and conservatives, are: Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon.

<sup>7</sup> Johnston, “Ephesians, Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 2:112.

<sup>8</sup> Furnish, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 2:535.

Apostle's composition ability. Those supporting genuine Pauline authorship of Ephesians draw the attention of readers to the kind of epistle Ephesians was intended to be, and how some unique vocabulary would needed to have been employed for the circumstances the author intended to address. "The versatility of Paul himself is obvious enough from his acknowledged writings and is broad enough to accommodate the rich theology of Ephesians" (Marshall, *ECB*).<sup>9</sup> In Marshall's dialoguing with a somewhat liberal audience in *ECB*, he actually calls the author of Ephesians "Paul" in quotation marks.<sup>10</sup> A sound case, when evaluating the positions of liberals who deny genuine Pauline authorship of Ephesians, can be made for genuine Pauline authorship—as the arguments against its themes or vocabulary coming from the Apostle himself are not as strong as purported.<sup>11</sup>

*Who was the audience of Ephesians?* Going by what most readers of the letter tend to encounter, it is to be historically recognized that Ancient Ephesus became the third most important city for the early Messianic community, after Jerusalem and Antioch. Ephesus was a major emporium and urban center in the Eastern Roman Empire, standing on the most direct sea and land route to the eastern provinces. It was a major center of Artemis (Diana) worship, boasting a huge temple. The early Messianic community established a major presence in Ephesus, so significant that it is one of the assemblies that Yeshua directs a word to in the Book of Revelation. In the Epistles of 1&2 Timothy, one witnesses how Paul's disciple Timothy served the Ephesian Believers with great care.

Not enough laypersons are actually aware of the significant debate, even among conservatives who accept genuine Pauline authorship, as to who the target audience of the epistle entitled "Ephesians" really was.<sup>12</sup> When encountering Ephesians 1:1 in the RSV, for example, one reads: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are also faithful in Christ Jesus." The words *en Ephesō* (ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) are missing from the oldest manuscripts.<sup>13</sup> Noting that "in Ephesus" is not present in some of the earliest copies of the letter, as well as seeing that the author is not too personally acquainted with the audience (1:15; 3:2; 4:21)—which seems strange considering that Paul spent three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31)—there have been various propositions as to what the purpose of "Ephesians" was. As Marshall notes, "it remains curiously impersonal and general in its contents, so that it is very difficult to pick up any clues that would enable us to reconstruct the situation and the identity of the recipients" (*ECB*).<sup>14</sup>

While there are conservatives who will argue that the Epistle of Ephesians was written to the Ephesians, there are many others who would argue instead that the letter, which would

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<sup>9</sup> I. Howard Marshall, "Ephesians," in *ECB*, 1386; cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 510.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> For a defense of genuine Pauline authorship of Ephesians: Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 496-499, 509-528; C.E. Arnold, "Ephesians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 240-243; Carson and Moo, 486.

<sup>12</sup> Danker, "Ephesians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 2:110-111, 113; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 528-535; Furnish, "Ephesians, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 2:535; Arnold, "Ephesians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 243-245; Carson and Moo, pp 488-490.

<sup>13</sup> Aland, *GNT*, 654.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall, in *ECB*, 1385.

become known as “Ephesians,” was actually a general epistle written by Paul to congregations in Asia Minor. The oldest Greek copies of Ephesians actually have a blank space, where “in Ephesus” appears in later copies, giving support to the idea that Paul’s courier Tychicus (6:21) could have carried this letter to various assemblies, and then written their name in this space. “It is widely held that Ephesians, designated as a circular, was written at the same time as Colossians and Philemon and was probably taken to various churches in the province of Asia by Tychicus” (Guthrie).<sup>15</sup> Carson and Moo further describe how, “Perhaps the best form of the circular-letter theory is that which sees Paul as having sent such a letter with Tychicus when he sent Colossians and that the letter was copied and circulated from Ephesus. Since it was a circular, there would be a blank instead of the name of the recipients, but the letter would be known to be associated with Ephesus, and in time that name was attached to it.”<sup>16</sup>

Viewing the letter we now call Ephesians, as originally an epistle to various assemblies of Messiah followers in Asia Minor would have been something that eventually made its way to Ephesus, given the importance of Ephesus for the First Century *ekklēsia*. The Ephesians could have been one in a series of intended audiences for the letter, and that is why the letter did come to be known as “Ephesians.” Yet, given its rather broad theological tones, Paul’s visit to Ephesus in Acts can, at best, be used as indirect background material. Ephesus does play a role in understanding Ephesians, but only in a general or indirect sense. Also important to keep in mind is how viewing the letter we now call “Ephesians,” as a general epistle written to assemblies in Asia Minor, could very well answer the question of what letter Paul sent to Laodicea, which was to be read to the Colossians (Colossians 4:16). While some have searched endlessly for a non-extant Epistle to the Laodiceans,<sup>17</sup> such a letter coming from Laodicea, could very well have been the general epistle that came to be known as “Ephesians.”

It is undeniable that the Epistle of Ephesians and the Epistle to the Colossians have some kind of a relationship, as there is a great deal of overlap often witnessed between the themes of the two letters<sup>18</sup> (Ephesians 1:4/Colossians 1:22; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14, 20; Ephesians 1:15-16/Colossians 1:4, 9; Ephesians 3:1-5/Colossians 1:25-27; Ephesians 3:9/Colossians 1:26; Ephesians 4:2/Colossians 3:12; Ephesians 4:31-32/Colossians 3:8, 12; Ephesians 5:19-20/Colossians 3:16-17; Ephesians 6:21-22/Colossians 4:7-8).<sup>19</sup> If one accepts genuine Pauline authorship of both Ephesians and Colossians, then Ephesians and Colossians being written at around the same time is probable. (There are some scholars who consider Colossians to be authentically Pauline, but Ephesians to not be. Colossians was used, then, as a basis for Ephesians as a second generation doctrinal piece.)<sup>20</sup> Was Ephesians written first, then being “compressed” into Colossians? Or, is Ephesians a more expanded and generalized version of Colossians? More expositors tend to favor Ephesians being written after Colossians.

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<sup>15</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 530.

<sup>16</sup> Carson and Moo, 489.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Charles P. Anderson, “Laodiceans, Letter to the,” in *ABD*, 4:231-233.

<sup>18</sup> Danker, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 2:110; Furnish, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 2:536-537; Arnold, “Ephesians, Letter to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 242-243.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Marshall, in *ECB*, 1386.

<sup>20</sup> Danker, “Ephesians, Epistle to the,” in *ISBE*, 2:112; Judith M. Gundry-Volf, “Ephesians, Letter to the,” in *EDB*, 413.

Guthrie details, "The close connection between this epistle and Colossians has a direct bearing on its purpose. The same themes are dealt with although in a modified way. It seems probable that the apostle, with the positive doctrine of the Colossian letter still in his mind, wrote it down again in a general way without the specific background of the heresy."<sup>21</sup> Carson and Moo also observe,

"It is not unreasonable to think of Paul as producing Colossians with a specific situation in mind, and not long after, as writing Ephesians with broader purposes. It is also possible that he made use of an amanuensis and allowed him some freedom in one or another of the letters."<sup>22</sup>

Arnold astutely directs us, "The precise nature...of the relationship between Ephesians and Colossians continues to stand in need of careful research from a literary, linguistic and theological perspective."<sup>23</sup> At the very least, readers of both Ephesians and Colossians may find clarification on an issue, from additional statements made in either letter.

The traditional place of Ephesians' composition is regarded as being Rome, likely between 60-62 C.E. A few believe that a fair case can be made for Paul actually being imprisoned in Ephesus itself, but this would require an earlier dating.

No case for a Hebrew or Aramaic origin of this letter has ever been made by either conservative or liberal examiners. Given the likely Roman origin of the letter, and a Greek-speaking audience encompassing parts of Asia Minor in the vicinity of Ephesus, a Greek composition of the letter is definite. However, simply because the letter was written in Greek does not mean that it should be separated from its Jewish-Pauline context. "Although the OT quotations in Ephesians are not numerous...there are many allusions evidenced by the author's dependence on OT phraseology, terminology and concepts" (Arnold).<sup>24</sup>

The Epistle of Ephesians is sometimes described as having a "meditative quality" (Gundry).<sup>25</sup> It is also observed that "Colossians has in it the intensity, rush, and roar of the battlefield, while Ephesians has a calm atmosphere suggestive of a survey of the field after the victory" (*NIDB*).<sup>26</sup> Ephesians emphasizes the final authority and supremacy of the Messiah Yeshua (1:10, 22), but also His grand service for Believers via His atoning sacrifice (2:16; 5:25). The letter has no specific false teaching in mind to address (even though some connections may be seen to the Colossian false teaching). Ephesians focuses on important themes such as the fulfilled life that Believers have in Yeshua (1:1), the mystery of God's people fully understood in Yeshua (3:1-6), and the different spiritual gifts that God has given to each one of us (4:1-16). Paul also discusses the proper balance of Believers' personal lives and their relationships with others, specifically in the context of marriage (4:17-6:9).

There are various parts of the Epistle of Ephesians, which are understandably quite important for today's evangelical Christians. Sections which uplift the supremacy of Yeshua the Messiah, and the great reconciliation to the Father that people are to experience in Him as

<sup>21</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 536.

<sup>22</sup> Carson and Moo, 481.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold, "Ephesians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 243.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>25</sup> Gundry, "The Prison Epistles of Paul," in *A Survey of the New Testament*, 397.

<sup>26</sup> Edward M. Blaiklock, "Ephesus," in *NIDB*, 315.

Savior, are obviously most significant. Also key, for today's Body of Messiah, are noting a respect for its diversity, as born again Believers have each been given a variety of gifts, talents, and skills that are to benefit everyone (4:4-6, 11-13). A great amount of discussion and debate, though, over the family instruction (5:21-6:4) given, has been witnessed in the past two to three decades, among complementarians and egalitarians, as Paul appears to deliberately subvert some ancient Greco-Roman *and* Jewish views of the sexes in the First Century Mediterranean. This particularly concerns the concept of mutual submission of Believers to each other (5:21, 30), and what the term *kephalē* (κεφαλή) or "head" means (5:23), as either "authority" or "source."<sup>27</sup> If the latter is to be preferred, then it definitely implies that husbands are to treat their wives with a great deal of respect—like their own bodies (5:28)—as woman came from man. Those in the Messiah are to regard themselves as incorporating a "one new humanity"<sup>28</sup> (2:15, NRSV/CJB/TNIV) that has emerged as a direct result of His sacrificial work.

It is worth noting that throughout much of post-Reformation history, various Protestant traditions (particularly the Reformed Church) have **not** looked at Ephesians 2:15 as abolishing the Mosaic Torah in its entirety, but instead just the so-called "ceremonial law." A correct interpretation of this will take into consideration what "the barrier of the dividing wall" (2:14) actually represented for an ancient First Century audience.<sup>29</sup>

For Messianic Believers today, the Epistle of Ephesians is often highly valued. Paul expresses the unity that Jewish and non-Jewish people are to have in Messiah Yeshua as a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (2:11-12; 3:6). Anything that unnecessarily separated these two distinct groups of human beings should be regarded as inoperative in Him. Yet in much of the contemporary Messianic movement, what such a Commonwealth of Israel represents has been debated.<sup>30</sup> There are struggles witnessed as to what the "one new humanity" actually is and what was abolished by Yeshua's sacrifice (2:15), if this was not the Torah of Moses. Few of today's Messianics are that well informed, or even aware, of the discussions in evangelical Christianity over mutual submission in the home, and some rightful criticisms of what has been commonly (and incorrectly) called "male headship." While Ephesians is a highly regarded text of the Apostolic Scriptures by many Messianics, there is much room for improvement, and more detailed examination will need to take place in the future.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Consult the FAQ, "Male Headship."

<sup>28</sup> Grk. *kainon anthrōpon* (καὶνὸν ἄνθρωπον).

<sup>29</sup> Consult the FAQ, "Ephesians 2:14-15."

<sup>30</sup> Consult the FAQ, "Commonwealth of Israel."

<sup>31</sup> Consult the author's commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic* for a more detailed examination of Ephesians.

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON EPHESIANS:

- 1. To what degree do you believe that Paul expected his non-Jewish audience to be associated with "Israel"?**
- 2. According to Ephesians, what kind of good conduct do you think Paul expected his audience to have? What kind of conduct are we expected to have today?**
- 3. What issue(s), described in Ephesians, do you think deserves further investigation on your part? on the part of today's Messianic community?**
- 4. Have you ever encountered a Messianic fellowship or congregation like the one(s) Paul writes to in Asia Minor? If so, what were its strengths and weaknesses?**

## REFLECTION ON EPHESIANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's letter of Ephesians:*