

Study 1: Introduction to Ephesians

Introduction

The Ephesian letter is rich in its teaching and doctrine, and provides a key in our understanding of the New Testament churches. We see the Corinthian church in great detail (and it's not a pretty picture!), but we only see it for a short period of time. In contrast, we see the Ephesian church over a period of more than 40 years, and we can see its growth and development over that time.

The Ephesian letter is written as a “call to faithfulness” to help the brethren focus on God’s purpose for us.

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Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the whole book in a single sitting, and a few days later read it again.

Read the notes as a review of the study

Count how many times “in Him” or “in Christ” occur in the book

How many occur in each chapter?

What does this tell you about how Paul builds his argument?

Notes for study 1: Introduction to Ephesians

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It is written as a "call to faithfulness" to help the brethren focus on God's purpose for us.

The Recipients of the Letter

The letter is addressed "...*To the saints who are in Ephesus...*" (1:1), however some of the earlier manuscripts omit this verse, which leads some to think that it was added later (in the second century). This view is discussed in the following comments from the NIV Bible Commentary:

Various solutions have been proposed to the lack of "in Ephesus" in 1:1. Of these, the best is to see this letter as a circular letter. On this view Ephesians is a letter intended to be read by Christians living in the Roman province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital. It was not addressed to any particular local congregation, but to all. From Ephesus it was circulated throughout the churches of Asia, no doubt by means of a courier (possibly Tychicus; cf. 6:21; Col 4:7). An alternate acceptable view is that at some stage copies of this letter were sent to other churches with the original destination erased, so that the church could fit in its own name. A few manuscripts omit "in Rome" from Ro 1:7, giving rise to a similar conjecture that this letter was also used for more a general distribution. (NIVBC).

However, the structure of the letter (and hence the derivation of its purpose) perfectly fits with Paul's warning to the elders (Acts 20:28-31), and subsequently to the other things that we know about the Ephesian church from the other New Testament letters.

The establishment of the church in Ephesus goes back to Acts 18:19 (AD 53), where Paul had a good reception in the Synagogue whilst visiting the city. He was returning to Antioch at the close of his second journey, and did not want to delay his return by staying in Ephesus at that time. He returned about 6 months later on his third journey, and spent 2 ½ years there – the longest he spent anywhere. Some scriptures say "...*by the space of 3 years...*" (Acts 20:31) which literally means that he spent some of the time over the three years in Ephesus. A time longer than 2 ½ years does not fit with where we know he went on his third journey. A fuller discussion of the times can be found in my Acts study.

On the return from his third journey (AD 58), Paul does not actually go to Ephesus, but calls for the elders of the church to come and visit him at Miletus about 30 km (20 miles) away.

Over the period of around 5 to 6 years, the church had begun, grown, and they had appointed leaders (elders).

Counting this visit, Paul had made three visits with the brethren at Ephesus about 5 years before he wrote the letter. He obviously had a great deal of affection for them (and they for him). His final parting with the brethren in Acts 20 is one of the most emotional sections in the whole book of Acts.

In my view, Paul was heading for Ephesus on his second journey when he was "...*forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia...*" (Acts 16:6 NKJV), and he was consequently directed to Macedonia.

The Author of the Letter

Paul is almost universally ascribed as the author, although the absence of 1:1 from some early manuscripts takes away the specific address. However both the internal evidence and the external evidence are strong in support of Paul's authorship for the letter.

Internal evidence

As well as 1:1, Paul also ascribes himself as the author in 3:1 and as "...*the minister to the Gentiles...*" in 3:7-8. The style of the letter is very consistent with Paul's writing, and the closing remarks (6:21-24) consistent with the other letters written at the time (Colossians & Philemon).

External evidence

Regarding external evidence, Ephesians was widely circulated and accepted as one of Paul's letters by the middle of the second century. It was listed in the canon of Marcion (c. A.D. 140) and in the Muratorian Canon (c. A.D. 180). That is, this letter was unhesitatingly assigned to Paul from the time when the NT corpus began to be recognized in the mid-second century. (NIVBC).

Date and Occasion of the Letter

Date:

The letter was written whilst Paul was in prison (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), however we are left to deduce during which imprisonment. He is known to have been imprisoned in Caesarea, and in Rome, and is also said to have been imprisoned in Ephesus. It is highly unlikely that he would have written to the church at Ephesus from prison in Ephesus itself. This leaves two possibilities – either he wrote from prison in Caesarea, or he wrote whilst under house arrest in Rome. The timing of his Caesarean imprisonment (AD 58-60) was quite soon after his last visit with the Ephesian elders (AD 58 – Acts 20:38; c/f Acts 21:10 – 25:3).

The most likely time therefore was during his first imprisonment in Rome whilst on house arrest. This puts the timing around 62 or 63 AD, and the Ephesian letter is highly regarded as one of Paul's "prison epistles" along with Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

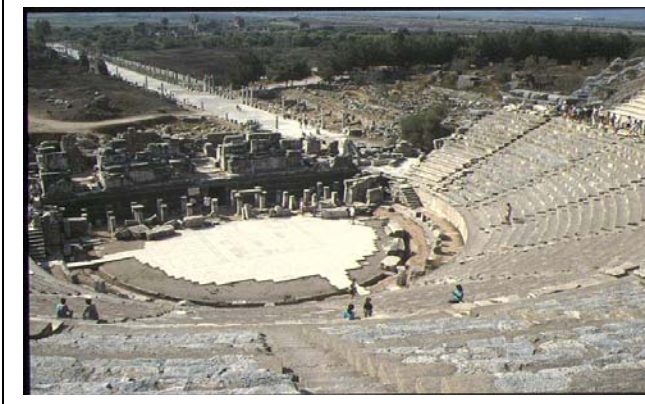
Occasion:

The letter forms one part of a trilogy, along with Colossians and Philemon, that deal with Christ and the church (Ephesians), Christ and us (Colossians), and relationships between brethren (Philemon).

Paul had warned the elders that some of them would "...*depart from the faith and draw away other disciples with them...*" (Acts 20:30) and the letter is written as a call to faithfulness (see my outline) so that the brethren would remain faithful in spite of the pressures.

During the Roman imprisonment, the runaway slave Onesimus has come to Paul. He is sent back to Philemon in Colosse along with Tychicus, a native from Ephesus to accompany him. Paul writes the three letters (Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians) and sends them with Tychicus.

Background to the Letter



The culture was geared around the Roman governance of the area as a pro-consulate, and the Greek culture that had inhabited the site for hundreds of years. The Greek culture was centred on the worship of the God Artemis, (also called Diana). Whole industries had grown around supporting the temple of Diana, and making silver “charms” with Diana engraved on them. The practice of “magical arts” in the city was also a major industry.

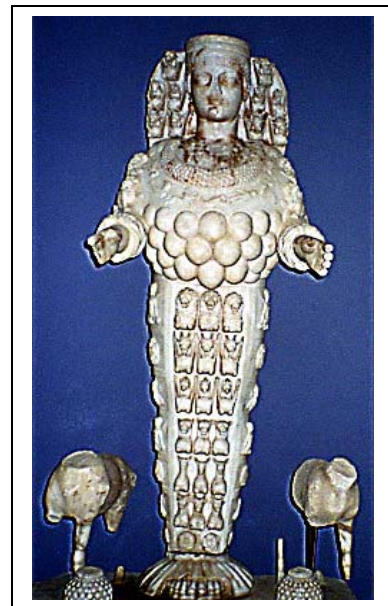
Ephesus was a major city in the region called “Asia minor”. It was the major center of the region for trade, culture, commerce, politics and religion. With a population of around 200,000 it was the fourth largest city in the world at the time (the others were Rome, Byzantium (Constantinople / Istanbul), and Alexandria). Other cities in the area in New Testament times are those addressed as “The seven churches of Asia” in Revelation chapters 2 and 3: Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea; and Colosse.

The area is not far from the narrow straits between the Aegean and Black seas known as the Dardanelles – major theatres of war during the first and second world wars, near which was the famed Galipoli peninsular.

The city was famous for its huge theatre with a seating capacity of 50,000 and the Temple of Diana (or Artemis) which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. [Some of the others were the Egyptian pyramids, The hanging gardens of Babylon, The lighthouse at Alexandria, The Colossus of Rhodes].

In the time of Paul, a harbour existed near the city, but it has since silted up and is now 5 km (3 miles) away. Great wide paved roads such as the Arcadian way went through the city linking the centres of trade of the harbour and the Agora (marketplace).

Today, the ruins of Ephesus are one of the greatest places to visit to understand what life would have been like in ancient times. The ancient theatre is still very much like it would have been when Paul addressed the Ephesians there as recorded in Acts 19.



The style of the letter

Ephesians has been variously described as *a tract dressed up as an epistle* and as *like a commentary on Paul's letters*. Whichever way we look at it, it goes right to the heart of the issues in Paul's writings.

It contains an extended celebration of God's accomplishment, revealing His eternal purpose in Christ, then another lengthy discussion in which God's gifts towards man and the church are outlined.

Outline of the letter

The following outline is adapted from Bruce¹

The New Humanity A Devine Creation

- 1:1-2 *Greetings and salutation*
- 1:3-14 *Introductory eulogia*
- 1:15-23 *Introductory thanksgiving and intercessory prayer*
- 2:1-10 *The saving grace of God*
- 2:11-22 *The incorporation of the Gentiles*
- 3:1-13 *Intercessory prayer resumed, and the mystery of Christ*
- 3:14-19 *Intercessory prayer concluded*
- 3:20-21 *Doxology*

The New Humanity In Earthly Life

- 4:1-3 *Exhortation to Unity*
- 4:4-6 *Confession of Faith*
- 4:7-16 *Provision for Spiritual Health and Growth*
- 4:17-5:20 *Christian Conduct*
- 5:21-6:9 *Be Subject*
- 6:10-17 *Be Strong in the Lord*
- 6:10-20 *Watch and Pray*
- 6:21-24 *Personal notes and Final Benediction*

An alternative outline view of the letter (my view):

- 1:1-2 *Greetings and salutation*
- 1:3-23 *Look at the blessings that you have in Christ – why would you want to go anywhere else?*
- 2:1-22 *Look where you've come from – why would you want to go back there?*
- 3:1-21 *The church (not Judaism) was God's eternal plan and purpose!*
- 4:1-24 *There's a spiritual war going on – don't get caught in the crossfire!*
- 4:25-5:33 *Hang in there – a call to Godly living*
- 6:1-24 *Stand and fight the battle!*

¹ Bruce, p. 247-248

Selected Bibliography

The following references will be used and quoted from during the studies. The full reference of the books are quoted here, and only their abbreviated title and page number will be quoted in the studies.

Cogdill

Cogdill, Roy E: “The New Testament: Book by Book – A 26 Lesson Outline series covering the entire New Testament”
Cogdill Foundation Publications, P.O. Box 403 Marion Ind. 46952

Fee & Stuart

Gordon D Fee & Douglas Stuart: “How to Read the Bible Book by Book”
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 49530 ISBN 0-310-21118-2

Bruce

Bruce, F.F.: “The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to The COLOSSIANS, to PHILEMON, and to the EPHESIANS”
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI. ISBN: 0-8028-2510-9

Weed

Weed, Michael R: “The Letters of Paul to the Ephesians, the Colossians, and Philemon”
The Living Word Commentary,
Sweet Publishing Company, Austin Texas ISBN 0-8344-0055-3

Veloso

Veloso, Mario: “Ephesians: Prison Papers from a Captive Ambassador”
Pacific Press Publishing House, Boise, Idaho ISBN 0-8163-0601-X