

EPHESIANS

FRANK THIELMAN



Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

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Series Preface

The chief concern of the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (BECNT) is to provide, within the framework of informed evangelical thought, commentaries that blend scholarly depth with readability, exegetical detail with sensitivity to the whole, and attention to critical problems with theological awareness. We hope thereby to attract the interest of a fairly wide audience, from the scholar who is looking for a thoughtful and independent examination of the text to the motivated lay Christian who craves a solid but accessible exposition.

Nevertheless, a major purpose is to address the needs of pastors and others involved in the preaching and exposition of the Scriptures as the uniquely inspired Word of God. This consideration affects directly the parameters of the series. For example, serious biblical expositors cannot afford to depend on a superficial treatment that avoids the difficult questions, but neither are they interested in encyclopedic commentaries that seek to cover every conceivable issue that may arise. Our aim, therefore, is to focus on those problems that have a direct bearing on the meaning of the text (although selected technical details are treated in the additional notes).

Similarly, a special effort is made to avoid treating exegetical questions for their own sake, that is, in relative isolation from the thrust of the argument as a whole. This effort may involve (at the discretion of the individual contributors) abandoning the verse-by-verse approach in favor of an exposition that focuses on the paragraph as the main unit of thought. In all cases, however, the commentaries will stress the development of the argument and explicitly relate each passage to what precedes and follows it so as to identify its function in context as clearly as possible.

We believe, moreover, that a responsible exegetical commentary must take fully into account the latest scholarly research, regardless of its source. The attempt to do this in the context of a conservative theological tradition presents certain challenges, and in the past the results have not always been commendable. In some cases, evangelicals appear to make use of critical scholarship not for the purpose of genuine interaction but only to dismiss it. In other cases, the interaction glides over into assimilation, theological distinctives are ignored or suppressed, and the end product cannot be differentiated from works that arise from a fundamentally different starting point.

The contributors to this series attempt to avoid these pitfalls. On the one hand, they do not consider traditional opinions to be sacrosanct, and they

are certainly committed to doing justice to the biblical text whether or not it supports such opinions. On the other hand, they will not quickly abandon a long-standing view, if there is persuasive evidence in its favor, for the sake of fashionable theories. What is more important, the contributors share a belief in the trustworthiness and essential unity of Scripture. They also consider that the historic formulations of Christian doctrine, such as the ecumenical creeds and many of the documents originating in the sixteenth-century Reformation, arose from a legitimate reading of Scripture, thus providing a proper framework for its further interpretation. No doubt the use of such a starting point sometimes results in the imposition of a foreign construct on the text, but we deny that it must necessarily do so or that the writers who claim to approach the text without prejudices are invulnerable to the same danger.

Accordingly, we do not consider theological assumptions—from which, in any case, no commentator is free—to be obstacles to biblical interpretation. On the contrary, an exegete who hopes to understand the apostle Paul in a theological vacuum might just as easily try to interpret Aristotle without regard for the philosophical framework of his whole work or without having recourse to those subsequent philosophical categories that make possible a meaningful contextualization of his thought. It must be emphasized, however, that the contributors to the present series come from a variety of theological traditions and that they do not all have identical views with regard to the proper implementation of these general principles. In the end, all that matters is whether the series succeeds in representing the original text accurately, clearly, and meaningfully to the contemporary reader.

Shading has been used to assist the reader in locating salient sections of the treatment of each passage: introductory comments and concluding summaries. Textual variants in the Greek text are signaled in the author's translation by means of half-brackets around the relevant word or phrase (e.g., "Gerasenes"), thereby alerting the reader to turn to the additional notes at the end of each exegetical unit for a discussion of the textual problem. The documentation uses the author-date method, in which the basic reference consists of author's surname + year + page number(s): Fitzmyer 1992: 58. The only exceptions to this system are well-known reference works (e.g., BDAG, LSJ, TDNT). Full publication data and a complete set of indexes can be found at the end of the volume.

Robert W. Yarbrough
Robert H. Stein

Author's Preface

Many people provided substantial encouragement and practical help in my work on this commentary, and I wish to express my sincerest thanks to them all. My greatest debt is to my wife and children, and particularly to my wife, Abigail, for her constant encouragement from beginning to end. Dean Timothy George, Associate Dean Paul House, and many others within the community of Beeson Divinity School provided not only the time and practical resources necessary for producing such a book but also an environment of friendship, academic rigor, and Christian nurture that made the already-enjoyable task of working on Ephesians even more pleasant. In particular, Mike Garrett, theological librarian at Samford University, gave enormous help in acquiring and locating books and articles. Robert Yarbrough, Wells Turner, and the editorial team at Baker Academic read the manuscript with meticulous attention to detail and provided a wealth of perceptive suggestions for its improvement. The book is much better than it would have otherwise been because of their involvement, and I am deeply grateful for the time and thought they devoted to it.

Thanks also to the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* for use of material copyrighted by the TLG and the Regents of the University of California. The TLG provided assistance in puzzling out the meaning of many Greek terms and supplied access to a number of Greek texts that would have otherwise been difficult or impossible for me to consult.

It is hard to imagine a more edifying, enriching text on which to work than Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have labored over its interpretation for this commentary. My prayer is that the commentary would quickly get out of the way after bringing the reader to the text, and that the text would, in its turn, help the reader understand the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ.

Frank Thielman
Lent 2010

Introduction to Ephesians

The Authorship of Ephesians

Although Ephesians presents itself unambiguously as a letter from Paul the apostle, the genuineness of this claim has frequently been questioned, beginning in the late eighteenth century (Hoehner 2002: 6). At first this may seem surprising, but the practice of composing fictional letters in the name of some influential person was reasonably common in Greco-Roman antiquity and seems to have been particularly popular from the third century BC to the first century AD.¹

The practical reasons and moral justification for the practice were varied and complex. Some pseudonymous letters were probably innocent fictions. The ten *Epistles of Anacharsis*, supposedly from a Scythian prince to various influential Greeks, puts Cynic philosophy and morals into the mouth of a well-known non-Greek from the sixth century BC. The fictional nature of the corpus becomes patently clear in epistle 7, addressed to “Tereus, the Cruel Despot of Thrace” (Malherbe 1977: 45). Any attentive reader would realize that if Anacharsis were really writing to the king of Thrace, he would not begin with an insult, however disapproving he may have been of the king’s rule. The insult, says Rosenmeyer (2001: 211), was instead for the entertainment of the readers of the corpus. Here, then, the author of the letter was not trying to deceive but to provide entertaining instruction.

Just as clearly, however, pseudonymous letters were sometimes written to deceive their readers. Donelson has made a good case that the author of “Plato’s” *Ep. 12* intended to deceive the document’s readers into thinking it was a real letter from Plato to “Archytas.”² This brief missive acknowledges receipt of certain treatises from Archytas, and Plato claims to have “the utmost possible admiration” for the author of these treatises. *Epistle 12* also serves as a cover letter for certain treatises that Plato is sending to Archytas, which, although incomplete, Archytas is to preserve according to a prearranged plan between the two that Plato mentions but does not describe. The letter seems to be part of an ingenious scheme to provide Plato’s own approval for treatises

1. Metzger (1972: 10) comments, “There is scarcely an illustrious personality in Greek literature or history from Themistocles down to Alexander, who was not credited with a more or less extensive correspondence.” Cf. the list in Rosenmeyer 2001: 194. For the texts of many of these letters, see Hercher 1873; and for a more accessible sampling, see Malherbe 1977.

2. Bury (1961: 607) points out that the authentic Plato spelled this name “Archytes.”

that the real author of the letter has himself forged (Donelson 1986: 25–26; cf. Bury 1961: 607; Wilder 2004: 100–101).³

Similarly, a number of the pseudonymous Socratic epistles describe networks of specifically named friends and attend to often-elaborate details of everyday life in ways that look realistic. *Epistle 21*, from the Socratic “Aeschines to Xanthippe, the wife of Socrates,” for example, opens with the information that Aeschines “gave Euphron of Megara six measures of barley meal and eight drachma and a new coat for you so that you can make it through the winter” (Malherbe 1977: 271, trans. S. K. Stowers; Donelson 1986: 33). Donelson thinks these attempts at verisimilitude serve two purposes. They give the letters the necessary air of reality to make their readers believe they are genuine, and once this conviction is established, the people presented in the letters, particularly Socrates, then become examples of how the Cynic philosopher should live (Donelson 1986: 33–42; Wilder 2004: 99).

Between honest fiction and forgery lay a whole range of possibilities. The letters supposedly from Socrates in the *Epistles of Socrates and the Socratics*, for example, contain a number of references to the details of everyday life that may betray the author’s effort to deceive his readers into thinking the letters are genuine (Wilder 2004: 95).⁴ But they also contain third-person references to “Socrates.” These references give away the letters’ fictional nature so obviously that it is difficult to think the author was intentionally trying to deceive anyone.⁵ It is difficult to tell, then, whether the author intended to deceive the letters’ readers or only to create a realistic fictional setting for letters that he intended his readers to regard as imaginative.

Although the body of evidence for pseudonymous Christian letters in antiquity is slim, they probably fell along a similar continuum. It is easy to think that the fictional exchanges of letters between Paul and the Corinthians, Paul and Seneca, and Christ and Abgar, for example, were honest fictions. Their form as an exchange of correspondence may have been intended to signal that they were not authentic documents but edifying fabrications.

There is also ample evidence, however, for deceptive pseudonymity in the early Christian movement, some of it unscrupulous. By the second century, letters to the Laodiceans and Alexandrians were circulating in support of Marcion’s heresy, but as the Muratorian Canon puts it, they were “forged in Paul’s name” (63–65, trans. Metzger 1987: 307). A different letter from “Paul” to the Laodiceans appeared around the same time and is itself an attempt to deceive but nevertheless urges its readers not to “be deceived by the

3. A similar deception may lie behind the opening of *Ep. 13* (which follows “Plato’s” trademark epistolary greeting, “Do well”): “Let this greeting not only commence my letter but serve at the same time as a token that is from me” (trans. Bury 1961).

4. E.g., “Mneson of Amphipolis was introduced to me in Potidaea” (*Ep. 3.1*; Malherbe 1977: 229, trans. S. K. Stowers).

5. E.g., “You have not understood correctly if you think that Socrates would do something for money which he had not already decided to do without charge” (*Ep. 1.21–23*; Malherbe 1977: 221, trans. S. K. Stowers; cf. Rosenmeyer 2001: 208).

vain talk of some people who tell tales that they may lead you away from the truth of the gospel which is proclaimed by me” (3).⁶ The Pseudo-Clementine Homilies, probably written early in the third century, begin with a “letter” of Peter to James that is concerned to keep Peter’s “word of truth” free from misrepresentation (2.2; cf. 3.2), but expresses this concern in a document forged in Peter’s name. The late fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions (1.1; ANF 7:391) was forged to look as if it were a letter written by “the apostles and elders to all those who from among the Gentiles have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,” and yet it includes an entire paragraph warning its readers not to “receive those books which obtain in our name, but are written by the ungodly” (6.3.16; Donelson 1986: 18).⁷

The Apostolic Constitutions sharply raises the question of what led some early Christians to adopt deceptive tactics even while decrying the immorality of deception. Apart from the deception about its authors, the work upholds high standards of fairness, decency, and truthfulness, encouraging its readers to treat others as they would like to be treated (1.1.1), not to seek revenge (1.1.2), and to be careful in one’s use of words (2.1.1). A bishop must, among other upstanding qualities, not be a false witness or a dissembler (2.2.6). What motivated the authors of this text to engage in behavior that seems to be inconsistent with such high moral ideals?

The answer is clearly not that ancient Greco-Roman society was more tolerant of forgery than modern society (Metzger 1972: 12–13; Wilder 2004: 41–49; J. Marshall 2008: 788–89). Inserting one’s own material into the writings of others was an offense serious enough in ancient Athens to merit exile (Herodotus, *Hist.* 7.6). Cutting out passages from another’s writing could result in a librarian’s termination in ancient Pergamum (Diogenes Laertius, *Vit. phil.* 7.34). Claudius (Suetonius, *Claud.* 5.15.2) ordered that the hands of a forger be amputated.⁸ Galen (*De libris propriis liber* [Kühn 1821–33: 19.8–10]) complained bitterly against the forgery of works in his name as well as unauthorized additions, subtractions, and changes to his texts. Jerome (*Ruf.* 3.25) angrily charged his erstwhile friend Rufinus with forging a letter under his name that contained an embarrassing “confession.”

There is no reason to think that early Christians were any more tolerant of forged documents than anyone else in the prevailing culture (Wilder 2004:

6. This is not the letter mentioned in the Muratorian Canon, since it shows no hint of Marcionism. On the date and identity of the letter, see J. K. Elliott 1993: 544. I have used Elliott’s translation.

7. Whether the fifth-century Epistle of Titus, the Disciple of Paul was intended to deceive is difficult to tell. On one hand, the only aspect of the text that renders it either pseudepigraphic or a letter is its title and subscription. On the other hand, it is easy to think that the author of such an emotional screed against sexual intimacy—with its frequent misrepresentation of the meaning of Scripture, lavish use of spurious texts, and unscrupulous scare tactics—would also try to deceive readers into thinking that the text originated with “Titus, the Disciple of Paul.” It is clear, in any case, that this is a highly polemical document, desperate to win a victory in the battle to keep ascetic practice alive among Christians.

8. Suetonius seems to view it as an unusually cruel punishment.

35–63), and so the motive behind the production of documents written in the name of the apostles and clearly intended to deceive their readers remains something of a mystery. Donelson (1986: 18–19) has reasonably offered the Platonic idea of the “noble lie” as the motivation. In the *Republic*, Plato spoke briefly of a lie that does not merit abhorrence—the lie told to enemies in time of war or to a friend who must be dissuaded from some insanity or foolishness (2.382c; 3.389b, 414c–e).⁹ Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 7.9; *ANF* 2:538), writing in the late second century, adopted this ethic, and it is possible that some authors of forged apostolic documents justified their actions to themselves in the same way.¹⁰

If the noble lie was a moral compromise of last resort in time of crisis, then for early Christian forgers the crisis seems to have been the battle for apostolic support of Christian truth. Marcionites, gnostics, Ebionites, and orthodox all seem to have used pseudonymity as a means of lending historical credibility to what, in their view, were absolutely critical religious truths. Donelson’s judgment (1986: 17) appears to be correct: “Christian pseudepigraphy found its main impetus in doctrinal disputes, the endless argument between orthodoxy and heresy.”

Precisely here, however, the view that Ephesians is pseudonymous runs into problems. Despite occasional scholarly attempts to argue the contrary (e.g., Smith 1977; Merz 2000), Ephesians is not a polemical document. Although it mentions false teaching and certainly does not want its readers to be seduced by it (4:14; 5:6), there is no theological battle raging behind the text that might justify the extreme measure of a “noble lie” in violation of the author’s otherwise high standards of honesty (4:15, 24–25; 5:9; 6:14).¹¹

It is perhaps more plausible that the author thought of himself as a doctor lying to a sick patient (cf. Plato, *Resp.* 3.389b; Clement, *Strom.* 7.9). His readers seem, after all, to have been discouraged (Eph. 3:13), and perhaps they needed a word from Paul so badly that a lie was justified in this instance. It is difficult to imagine, however, that such an author would think of his readers as benefiting from a forged Pauline letter any more than they could benefit from the genuine Pauline letters already in circulation (e.g., Philippians) or from a pastoral letter written either without a name attached (cf. Hebrews, 1 Clement) or in the author’s own name (cf. Ignatius’s letters). Even if a letter from “Paul” provided some advantage, the author’s high personal standards

9. Cf. also Exod. 1:15–22; Josh. 2:2–7; 6:25; James 2:25. See Speyer 1971: 94n4; Best 1998: 12.

10. Clement is only the first known in a long line of other church fathers who also defended the “necessary lie” (Speyer 1971: 94–95).

11. Cf. Fischer 1973: 15: “A serene tranquility appears to lie over the whole letter. In this, the letter to the Ephesians is essentially different from all other writings that critical research regards as pseudepigraphs.” (Ein heiterer Friede scheint über dem ganzen Brief zu liegen. Darin unterscheidet sich der Epheserbrief wesentlich von allen anderen Schreiben, die innerhalb der kritischen Forschung als Pseudepigraphen angesehen werden.) Fischer is talking about supposedly pseudepigraphical writings in the NT.

for truthful speech would probably have prompted him to choose a less morally ambiguous option than forgery.¹²

Is it possible that the author wrote with no intention to deceive his readers? As we have just seen, the *Epistles of Anacharsis* seem to have been written in good faith as fictional documents, and it is just possible that the three bodies of fictional letter exchanges mentioned above (Paul and the Corinthians, Paul and Seneca, Jesus and Abgar) were innocent exercises in epistolary fiction writing. Ephesians, however, does not look like an innocent fiction. Nothing in the letter betrays to the casual reader its fictional character. Paul refers to himself in the first person (e.g., 3:1; 4:1; 5:32), and a realistic portrait develops in the letter of an apostle suffering for his faithfulness to what God has called him to do (3:1, 13; 4:1; 6:19–20). If the letter is pseudonymous, then it is difficult to see this portrait as anything other than an attempt to lend an air of authority to the letter that could come to it only if it were thought to be the product of one of Christianity's foundational figures on the verge of martyrdom. In the complicated world of ancient pseudonymity, it is certainly possible that someone other than Paul wrote Ephesians with no intention to deceive, but that scenario does not seem likely.

This means, in turn, that if Ephesians is pseudonymous, it is something of an anomaly among Christian pseudonymous letters.¹³ It urges its readers to speak truthfully, but resorts to lying about its own author without any clear moral justification. As the rest of this introduction and the commentary itself will try to show, however, there is no need to picture the author of this text in this way. The text makes sense as an authentic letter from Paul to Christians in Ephesus, written at the end of a lengthy period of imprisonment and thus after nearly all of his undisputed correspondence (i.e., Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philipians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon).

The Literary Character of Ephesians

If scholars debate the authorship of Ephesians, there is virtually universal agreement that it is a difficult and, for Paul, an unusual text. Chrysostom

12. The author of the *Sentences of Pseudo-Phocylides*, according to many scholars, wrote pseudonymously to show Jewish readers that their traditional customs were compatible with the best ethical teaching of the Hellenistic world (W. Wilson 2005: 3–8). If this was the author's intention, then he clearly wrote deceptively at the same time that he encouraged truthfulness (lines 7, 16–17, 48, 50), and he did not write to address any obviously polemical situation. These characteristics might provide an analogy to a pseudonymous Ephesians, especially if the purpose of Ephesians was to ease tensions between Christians and their Greco-Roman environment. Apart from the difference in literary genre (one text is a poem and the other a letter), however, the purpose and deceptive intent of *Pseudo-Phocylides* is far from certain. Moreover, the idea that the household code in Ephesians was written to ease tensions between Christians and the wider society (MacDonald 2000: 159–69, 337–38; Osiek and MacDonald 2006: 118–43; cf. Merz 2000: 132, 146) runs aground on the countercultural nature of the household code itself (5:25; 6:9) and of the letter generally (2:1–3; 4:17–19; 5:3–14).

13. This is true even if, for the sake of argument, we assume that the five other disputed letters in the NT Pauline corpus are pseudonymous.

called the letter *ὑπέρογκος* (*hyperonkos*), a term that can mean both “sublime” and “difficult” (*PGL* 1440).¹⁴ Origen, whose introduction to the letter is probably preserved in Jerome’s commentary, thought Paul had “heaped up more obscure ideas and mysteries unknown to the ages in this epistle than in all the others” (Heine 2002: 78). Erasmus believed that Peter had Ephesians in mind when he said, “In these Epistles there are certain things difficult to understand” (*CWE* 43:299; cf. 2 Pet. 3:16).

Three features of the letter’s style are particularly unusual. First, Ephesians has a high number of long sentences, some of them extraordinarily long. In more objective terms, Ephesians has 2,422 words in the NA²⁷ edition and, according to the punctuation in that text, has 64 sentences. In contrast, Galatians has 2,230 words in 102 sentences.¹⁵ Six sentences in Ephesians are especially long: 1:3–14, 15–23; 2:1–7; 3:1–7; 4:11–16; 6:14–20 (van Roon 1974: 107n3; cf. Percy 1946: 185), each of them with so many subordinate clauses and digressions that the reader tends to get lost along the way.

Second, Ephesians is full of grammatical and lexical ambiguities that affect the meaning of the text. Does Paul pray in 1:17 that God will give his readers a wise spirit or that he will give them God’s Spirit, who in turn will give them wisdom? In 1:18, does he pray that God will give his readers a wise spirit or the Spirit? In 1:23, does the church fill up the one who fills all things, or is it full of the one who fills all things? Does it fill up the one who is entirely filled, or is it full of the one who is entirely filled? Why does Paul begin the sentence after 1:23 with “and” when it has no clear connection to what precedes it (2:1)? When Paul says that his readers once walked “according to the Ruler of the realm of the air, of the spirit of the one now at work among the sons of disobedience” (2:2), does he refer to a hierarchy of spiritual enemies, or does he elaborately describe one of these enemies (presumably the devil)? When he says that Christ “tore down the middle wall of the partition, the enmity in his flesh” (2:14), do the terms “middle wall,” “partition,” and “enmity” all refer to the same object? Did Christ destroy them “in his flesh,” or was the enmity Christ tore down somehow located “in his flesh”? In 2:21, does “every building” hold together in Christ, or does “the whole building” hold together in him? Does Paul command his readers to be rooted and grounded in love in 3:17, or does he say that they have been rooted and grounded in love? The letter’s final sentence pronounces a blessing on those who love Christ “in incorruption” (6:24), but what could this phrase mean?

14. Chrysostom uses *ὑπέρογκος* elsewhere to mean “difficult” (*PGL* 1440), and this is a common meaning of the term in the LXX (Exod. 18:22, 26; Deut. 30:11; 2 Sam. 13:2). In the NT, *ὑπέρογκος* is used of “bombastic” speech (Jude 16; 2 Pet. 2:18; BDAG 1034). Cf. Theophylact, *PG* 82:1033.

15. What constitutes a sentence varies from editor to editor, and the Nestle-Aland text is generous with periods. Most interpreters would recognize 1:3–14, for example, as a single sentence, since it contains no independent clauses, but the Nestle-Aland text punctuates it with four periods.

Third, Ephesians is a highly redundant text. Paul speaks of “the good pleasure of his [God’s] will” (1:5), “wisdom and understanding” (1:8), “the counsel of his [God’s] will” (1:11), “the effect of the might of his strength” (1:19), “rule and authority and power and lordship” (1:21), “the surpassing wealth of his [God’s] grace by kindness” (2:7), “the gift of God’s grace given to me according to the effect of his power” (3:7), “boldness and confident access” (3:12), being “filled up to all the fullness of God” (3:19), and “each single part” (4:16). He tells his readers to “know this, knowing that . . .” (5:5), addresses the husbands in his audience as “you—every single one of you” (5:33), and urges all his readers to be clothed “in the strength” of God’s “might” (6:10).

In addition to elements like these that contribute to the obscurity of the text, Ephesians is missing the argumentative, fast-paced feel typical of Paul’s undisputed letters. Rhetorical questions, if-then clauses, and syllogisms are virtually absent (cf. van Roon 1974: 102–3).

Since the early sixteenth century, interpreters of the letter have wondered how the Paul who wrote the other NT letters bearing his name could have produced this unusual document. “Certainly, the style differs so much from the other Epistles of Paul,” said Erasmus in 1519, “that it could seem to be the work of another person did not the heart and soul of the Pauline mind assert clearly his claim to this letter” (CWE 43:300n12). In the intervening centuries a number of other scholars went further and saw in the letter’s unusual style evidence of its pseudonymity (e.g., De Wette 1843: 81; Holtzmann 1872: 5; Moffatt 1918: 385–89; Mitton 1951: 11; Lincoln 1990: lxx–lxxvi). This evidence seemed especially compelling when it was added to the letter’s tendency to use non-Pauline words for Pauline concepts (e.g., “the devil” for “Satan” or “the heavenly places” for “heaven” or “the heavens”) or to use Pauline words in ways that, for Paul, were unprecedented (e.g., “fullness” applied to the church).¹⁶

The style of Colossians comes closest to that of Ephesians. Colossians, too, has a proportionately high number of long sentences (1:3–8, 9–20, 21–23, 24–29; 2:1–3, 8–15; 3:5–11; van Roon 1974: 107n2) and uses a number of redundant phrases strung together with genitives (e.g., “the word of the truth of the gospel,” 1:5; “the kingdom of the son of his love,” 1:13; “all the wealth of the assurance of understanding,” 2:2; “the divesting of the body of the flesh,” 2:11).¹⁷ Like Ephesians, it has one rhetorical question (2:20; cf.

16. These examples come from Holtzmann 1872: 5–6. Διάβολος appears in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 3:6, 7, 11; 2 Tim. 2:26; 3:3; Titus 2:3), but Holtzmann believed those letters to be pseudonymous. The vocabulary of Ephesians falls well within the Pauline range, but some scholars have observed that among the forty words appearing only in Ephesians in the NT and the fifty-one words that do not appear elsewhere in the undisputed Pauline letters, “many” also appear in early Christian writings composed after Paul’s time (Schnackenburg 1991: 26; cf., e.g., Lincoln 1990: lxx). Schnackenburg lists twelve such words and adds to this list five others that appear elsewhere in the NT but “predominate in the late writings.” Yet sixteen of these seventeen words appear reasonably frequently in Greek literature dating, at the latest, from the fourth century BC. Only κυριότης (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16; 2 Pet. 2:10; Jude 8) is not well attested before the first century AD (BDAG 579).

17. Several of these examples come from R. Wilson 2005: 13.

Eph. 4:9) and is about as free as Ephesians from lively argumentation (cf. van Roon 1974: 105). According to those who think Ephesians is pseudonymous, this stylistic similarity is the result of a close literary connection between the two letters: the author of one letter had access to the other letter, often used the other letter's phrasing, and wrote under the influence of its style. Usually, the author of Ephesians is thought to have used Colossians (e.g., Mitton 1951: 68–74).¹⁸

The evidence of a close connection between the two letters is compelling. Not only do the references to Tychicus give the letters the same historical setting by using virtually the same words (Eph. 6:21–22; Col. 4:7–8), but also, according to Mitton's calculations, 26.5 percent of the wording of Colossians appears in Ephesians (Mitton 1951: 57). At the same time, apart from the unusual Tychicus passage, "the most protracted verbatim correspondence does not exceed seven words, and on only three occasions exceeds five" (Mitton 1951: 63). In other words, the two letters often use the same words and phrases but without clear evidence of direct copying, except in the passage on Tychicus. After a careful investigation, Mitton (1951: 64) concludes that this complex situation suggests not that the author of Ephesians copied and edited Colossians but that his "mind was saturated with the contents of Colossians" as he wrote his letter.

This state of affairs leads, in turn, to what many scholars consider a compelling piece of evidence that Ephesians is pseudonymous. If the same author wrote both letters, then he must have written them at about the same time—the material on Tychicus gives this impression, and the literary relationship between the two letters is consistent with this scenario—yet the thought of the two letters often differs, and this sometimes happens when they use identical terms to express these divergent thoughts. Mitton (1951: 82–97), for example, finds the following points of verbal convergence but conceptual divergence between the two letters:

Colossians	Ephesians
In 2:19, Christ is the head of the cosmos.	In 4:15–16 (a passage that has clear verbal links to Col. 2:19), Christ is the head of the church.
In 1:20, 22, God reconciles (ἀποκαταλλάσσω, <i>apokatalassō</i>) all things to himself through the death of Christ.	In 2:16, Christ reconciles (ἀποκαταλλάσσω) Jews and Gentiles to one another.
In 1:26, God has revealed the previously hidden mystery to his saints (τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, <i>tois hagiois autou</i>).	In 3:5, God has revealed the mystery to his holy apostles and prophets (τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀποστόλοις αὐτοῦ καὶ προφήταις, <i>tois hagiois apostolois autou kai prophetais</i>).

18. For evidence that the borrowing went in the other direction, see Best 1997b. Complex theories about the redaction of both Ephesians and Colossians on the basis of each other or even the missing letter to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16), although improbable, reflect the inability of the prevailing theory to explain all the evidence. See, e.g., Holtzmann 1872; Muddimann 2001.

Colossians	Ephesians
The μυστήριον (<i>mystērion</i> , mystery) is consistently Christ (1:26–27; 2:2; 4:3).	The term μυστήριον varies in meaning, referring to the reunification of all things (1:9) and the unity of Jews and Gentiles (3:3–6), and elsewhere meaning something like “symbol” (5:32).
Οἰκονομία (<i>oikonomia</i>) refers to the “assignment” God has given to Paul (Col. 1:25).	Οἰκονομία refers to “the providential dispensation of God” (1:9–10; 3:9), and the change is evident even in Eph. 3:2, where the wording is very similar to Col. 1:25.
In something of a theological breakthrough, πλήρωμα (<i>plērōma</i>) is used for the relationship between Christ and God (1:19; 2:9).	In one place (1:10), πλήρωμα is used almost as it is used in Colossians, but elsewhere it refers either to the relationship between Christ and the church (1:23) or to the increasing maturity of Christians (3:19; 4:13).

Mitton (1951) argues that the differences between the two letters at precisely the points where their language seems so close to each other make it unlikely that they were written at the same time. The theology of Ephesians, often expressed in words and phrases found in Colossians, has developed too far beyond the theology of Colossians to make their nearly simultaneous composition plausible. Yet if both letters come from the same author, they must have been written at about the same time. If they come from different hands, however, the dilemma disappears.

Mitton’s analysis (1951) is largely unconvincing for two reasons. First, his initial two points are based on improbable exegesis. It is far more likely that Col. 2:19 identifies the “body” with the church than with the cosmos (cf. Col. 1:18, 24).¹⁹ If this is correct, then at this point Colossians and Ephesians are in agreement. Similarly, it is unclear why Mitton (1951) thinks that in Eph. 2:16 the main object of reconciliation is Jew and Gentile. The text certainly implies that they are both reconciled to each other, but it explicitly states that Christ reconciles both Jew and Gentile to God. At this point there is a difference in emphasis between Colossians and Ephesians, but both texts use the verb ἀποκαταλάσσω to speak of reconciliation to God.

Second, it is unclear why the terms μυστήριον, οἰκονομία, and πλήρωμα should be understood in a semitechnical sense that would not vary from Colossians to Ephesians if both came from the same author. Οἰκονομία and πλήρωμα do not appear often enough in Colossians to allow a firm judgment on how the author may have used these terms in other writings, even in other writings produced at roughly the same time.²⁰ Little help is available from the undisputed Pauline letters, moreover, since the terms are infrequent there also.²¹

19. See, e.g., Dunn 1996: 186–87; R. Wilson 2005: 225.

20. Οἰκονομία appears once in Colossians (1:25), and πλήρωμα twice (1:19; 2:9).

21. Οἰκονομία appears in 1 Cor. 9:17, and πλήρωμα in Rom. 11:12, 25; 13:10; 15:29; 1 Cor. 10:26; Gal. 4:4.

Μυστήριον appears more often—four times in Colossians and eight times in the undisputed letters—but its meaning varies in the undisputed Paulines, just as it does in Ephesians. Moreover, in Colossians the meaning of μυστήριον, at least in its first two occurrences (1:26–27), is closely connected with the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles, just as it is in Eph. 3:3–6.

Mitton’s comparison of Col. 1:26 with Eph. 3:5 is more convincing. When the thought that God revealed the long-hidden mystery τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ (*tois hagiois autou*, to his saints) is compared with the thought that he revealed it τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀποστόλοις αὐτοῦ καὶ προφήταις (*tois hagiois apostolois autou kai prophētais*, to his holy apostles and prophets), a plausible case can be made that the text of Ephesians has expanded the text in Colossians to emphasize the importance of “the church hierarchy” (Mitton 1951: 85). It is just as plausible, however, to understand Col. 1:26 as a reference to a special group of Christians to whom God revealed the mystery (Bockmuehl 1990: 184–85), and then to see Eph. 3:5 as a more detailed description of this special group.²²

The idea that the two letters are too stylistically close and conceptually different to have been written one after the other by the same author is likely to appear convincing, then, only to those who are already convinced on other grounds that Ephesians is pseudonymous. To those who are not already convinced, a literary comparison of the two letters tends to confirm that they come from the same hand at about the same time. It does not seem unlikely that an author writing two letters that often touch on similar themes would reproduce over a quarter of the content of one letter in the other letter and yet not reproduce from the first letter more than seven consecutive words until the commendation of the courier of both letters at the conclusion of each text.

Could the person who produced both letters, however, be Paul? If so, what can explain their unusual style, and the particularly odd style of Ephesians? A wide variety of explanations has emerged from those who think the letter is authentic. Perhaps Paul wrote as he did because of Ephesus’s reputation as a seat of philosophical learning (Chrysostom, *Hom. Eph.*, prologue; *NPNF* 13:49) or of superstition (Theophylact, *PG* 124:1033). Perhaps an amanuensis is responsible for the peculiarities (Erasmus 1535: 591). Perhaps the subject matter was unusually sublime and thus demanded an unusually sublime style of composition (Alford 1857: 25). Perhaps “the epistle . . . takes the form of a prayer, and has the elevation of language which is natural in prayer” (E. Scott 1930: 121). Perhaps freedom from difficult pastoral problems fed a more “reflective mood” and prompted Paul to adopt a liturgical style of writing (O’Brien 1999: 7; cf. Robinson 1904: 10–11).

Whether any of these specific theories, or some other scenario, prompted Paul to write in an unusual way is less important than the plausibility that he could write this way if circumstances demanded it. Two pieces of evidence reveal that he could.

22. See the exegesis of Eph. 3:5 below.

First, the Paul of the undisputed letters could write in a variety of styles. First Corinthians 13:1–13 illustrates this well enough, but if 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1; Phil. 2:6–11; and Rom. 16:25–27 all come from Paul (and arguments to the contrary are not convincing), then Paul was clearly a versatile writer.²³ This is what we would expect, however, in a writer with Paul’s level of education. “I believe everyone knows,” says Dionysius of Halicarnassus, “that, in discourse, variation is a most attractive and beautiful quality” (*Comp.* 19, trans. Usher 1974–85). Dionysius is discussing the need for stylistic variation within a single discourse, but the point is still applicable to Paul’s ability to produce two letters as different as Ephesians and, say, Galatians.

Second, the long sentences and broken syntax that appear in Ephesians also show up elsewhere in the Pauline corpus. The length and redundancy of Eph. 1:3–14 is remarkable, but if we are willing to admit the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, then this kind of sentence is not unprecedented in a Pauline composition. Both Eph. 1:3–14 and 2 Thess. 1:3–12 are roughly the same length, contain a torrent of words, and have a number of emphatic redundancies. Both also appear in the opening prayer sections of each letter. The long, complex sentences in Eph. 2:1–3; 3:1–7, 8–12, 14–19; and 4:11–16 are also similar to 1 Cor. 1:4–8 and Phil. 1:3–7 (Percy 1946: 202). The broken syntax and digressive nature of Eph. 2:1–7 and 3:1–19 are not unlike Rom. 5:12–18 and 2 Cor. 2:12–7:7. Paul, then, could certainly write in the way that the author of Ephesians wrote. Only the high concentration of long, complex sentences and digressions in a single, short composition makes the style of this letter unusual. It is easy to imagine, however, that the circumstances of Paul’s imprisonment, and the need to dictate letters with little opportunity to revise them, accounts for this unusual element of the letter’s character.²⁴

The Recipients of Ephesians

Ephesians is the most general letter within the Pauline corpus.²⁵ The only associate whom Paul mentions is Tychicus. He sends no greetings, thanks no

23. For the same general point with respect to Ephesians, see Witherington 2007: 2.

24. It is also possible, as Witherington (2007: 4–25) argues, that Paul dictated the letter in a more Asiatic style than was his custom because he was writing to the province of Asia, where the most famous practitioners of Asiatic rhetoric had flourished (e.g., Hegesias of Magnesia). Hellenistic Jewish authors did sometimes compose in the Asiatic style (see Wifstrand 1948: 217–19, who cites Prov. 20:9; 22:13 LXX; T. Levi 4.1; and T. Gad 3.2–3 as examples), and the long sentences, redundancy, coinage of new words, and wordplays in Ephesians would fit the Asiatic profile (Sellin 2008: 64, 85n61). It is important, however, to be cautious on this point. Most of Ephesians does not have the studied, self-conscious quality of Asiatic rhetoric. The long sentences and sometimes broken syntax of Ephesians betray the voice of someone who could have composed in the Asiatic style if time were available, but who did not have the luxury to sort out the details of its complex techniques in this particular letter.

25. At first it might seem that the general nature of Ephesians counts against its authenticity, but after a careful study of ancient pseudepigraphical letters, Bauckham (1988: 488) observes that “not many pseudepigraphal writers wished to produce generalized didactic works, and those who did preferred other genres [than the letter], such as wisdom literature.”

one among his readers, reviews no travel plans, and seems to have a limited knowledge of his readers' circumstances. He has heard of their faith in the Lord Jesus and love for all the saints (1:15) but can only assume that they fully understand the nature of the responsibility God has given him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (3:2) and that they have received accurate instruction in Jesus's ethical teaching (4:21). This is especially puzzling since, if the letter went to Ephesus, Paul had spent between two and three years working among Christians in that city (Acts 19:10; 20:31).

As it turns out, however, the two words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ (*en Ephesō*, in Ephesus) in the letter's first sentence form the only indication in the text of the letter itself that it was intended for Ephesus, and those words are missing in some of the letter's oldest manuscripts. If it did not go specifically to Ephesus but was a more general letter, perhaps to Christians throughout the Roman province of Asia, then its general character is more understandable. Much hangs, then, on the solution to this textual problem, and unfortunately it is one of the most difficult textual problems in the New Testament.

The earliest manuscript witness to the text of Ephesians is the third-century Alexandrian manuscript \mathfrak{P}^{46} . It contains no reference to Ephesus but instead addresses the letter τοῖς ἁγίοις οὖσιν καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (*tois hagiois ousin kai pistois en Christō Iēsou*). This might mean either "to the saints who are also believers in Christ Jesus" or, taking the participle to mean "current" or "local," something like "to the local saints and believers in Christ Jesus" (cf. Best 1997a: 8–9; MHT 3:152; *pace* BDF §413.3). Although impressively early, this reading appears only in this one manuscript and so is unlikely to represent what Paul wrote.

Other early Alexandrian witnesses (\aleph , B, 1739, 6, 424c) also give a reading that omits ἐν Ἐφέσῳ, although, unlike \mathfrak{P}^{46} , they place the article τοῖς in front of οὖσι[v]. Judging from Tertullian's claim that Marcion changed the traditional title of the letter so that it referred not to Ephesus but to Laodicea (*Marc.* 5.17.1; cf. 5.11.12), Marcion's text of 1:1 may have either been without a place name or had the name Laodicea rather than Ephesus in it. Since Tertullian charges Marcion with corrupting only the title of the letter, moreover, even he may have been working from a version without a place name in its text (Meyer 1880: 4–5; *pace* van Roon 1974: 74–75).

Origen's comments on Eph. 1:1, written AD 233–44 (Heine 2002: 47), reveal not only that he had before him a text that read τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσι (Gregg 1901–2: 235) but that he did not quite know what to make of this phrase grammatically. He understood it as a reference to "the saints who are" and then commented, "We ask what the phrase 'who are' can mean, if it is not redundant when added to 'the saints'" (Heine 2002: 80). He then explained the phrase as a reference to the derivation of the existence of Christians from the God whom Exod. 3:14 describes as "he who is." The God "who is" made Christians "those who are," and therefore Christians should boast only in God and not in themselves (cf. 1 Cor. 1:28–29).

Basil the Great, writing between 363 and 365, not only read τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσι καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ but also claimed that this was the traditional reading. Those before him, he says, had handed it down, and among the copies of the epistle available to him, the old ones had this reading (Basil the Great, *Adv. Eunom.* 2.19 [PG 29:612–13]). Like Origen, he comments on the unusual grammar: “[Paul] called them ‘existing’ in a special way, saying, ‘to the saints who are and to believers in Christ Jesus’” (my trans.).²⁶

Because of this impressive evidence from the most ancient manuscripts and from the fathers, many scholars adopt this reading as original. Acceptance of the reading, however, entails two problems. First, the reading presents almost insuperable grammatical difficulties. Both Origen and Basil were native speakers of ancient Greek, and their understanding of the phrase weighs against rendering it simply as “to God’s people who are steadfast in Christ Jesus” (Goodspeed 1933: 18) or “to the saints, who are also faithful in Christ Jesus” (e.g., Lincoln 1990: 1). “To the saints who are and to believers in Christ Jesus” is really the only way to take the phrase, but as Origen and Basil seemed to realize, at face value this makes no sense. The phrase τοῖς οὖσιν needs a place name after it (Zuntz 1953: 228–29), just as it has in Phil. 1:1 (τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Φιλίπποις, *tois ousin en Philippiis*, to those who are in Philippi), 2 Cor. 1:1 (σὺν τοῖς ἁγίοις πᾶσιν τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ Ἀχαΐᾳ, *syn tois hagiois pasin tois ousin en holē tē Achaia*, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia), and Rom. 1:7 (πᾶσιν τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ῥώμῃ, *pasin tois ousin en Rhōmē*, to all who are in Rome). It is true that in text-critical matters the most difficult reading is usually correct. This rule applies, however, only when at least some sense can be made of the more-difficult reading, and making sense of the text as it stands in these witnesses is nearly impossible.

Some scholars recognize this difficulty and seek to relieve it by proposing various emendations of the text and theories about how the reading in **8** and **B** arose. One theory claims that Paul, or the pseudonymous author, wrote the letter as a circular document and left a space after τοῖς οὖσιν, intending that a place name should follow it when it was copied for the churches in different geographical locations (e.g., Lightfoot 1893: 392; Zuntz 1953: 228n1; Luz 1998: 108). If this is correct, however, it is difficult to know why the preposition ἐν is also missing.

Another theory claims that the original text read τοῖς ἁγίοις καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (*tois hagiois kai pistois en Christō Iēsou*, to the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus; cf. Col. 1:2) and that early in its textual history a scribe inserted the words τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἐφέσῳ. Unfortunately, he inserted these words just before the καί of the original text, creating an awkward phrase. The memory of the letter as a general document not addressed to any specific church persisted, however, and a copyist corrected the text simply by leaving out ἐν Ἐφέσῳ and producing virtually unintelligible Greek (Best

26. ὄντας αὐτοὺς ἰδιαζόντως ὠνόμασεν εἰπών· τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσι καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

1997a: 17–24). This theory, however, is improbable because it requires such a complex textual history for the phrase over a short period of time (Lincoln 1990: 3; cf. Best 1997a: 24; 1998: 99–100).

Recognizing this problem, others offer a similar yet simpler suggestion: Paul or the pseudonymous author originally addressed the letter to the churches in Hierapolis and Laodicea (cf. Col. 4:13). This would explain, it is said, both Paul's directions to the Colossian church that they should read the letter from Laodicea (Col. 4:16) and Marcion's claim that the letter should be titled "To the Laodiceans." The text of 1:1 would then have been τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἱεραπόλει καὶ ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ, πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (*tois hagiois tois ousin en Hierapolei kai en Laodikeia, pistois en Christō Iēsou*, to the saints who are in Hierapolis and Laodicea, believers in Christ Jesus). An attempt to make the letter applicable to the whole church led a scribe to leave out the two ἐν clauses, in the process producing a perplexing grammatical construction (van Roon 1974: 80–85; Lincoln 1990: 3–4). If this is what happened, however, it is difficult to know why the scribe left behind the troublesome καί and did not simply omit the whole phrase ἐν Ἱεραπόλει καὶ ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ (Best 1997a: 14).

A second and less-frequently noticed problem with the reading of **Ⲙ** and **B** is that virtually all the manuscripts that join them in omitting the place name belong, like them, to the Alexandrian text type. Although the Alexandrian text is both ancient and conservative, this limited geographical spread of the reading must count against it (Hoehner 2002: 146).

This leaves the reading of the vast majority of witnesses, including a number that belong to the Alexandrian text type. Thus A, 33, 81, 1175, 1881, and 104, all with Alexandrian affinities, have the reading τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἐφέσῳ καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ (*tois hagiois tois ousin en Ephesō kai pistois en Christō Iēsou*, to the saints who are in Ephesus and believers, in Christ Jesus). In addition, the correctors of **Ⲙ** and **B** as well as the Western codices D, F, and G have this reading (although D, like **ⲡ**⁴⁶, omits the article before οὖσιν). A wide variety of Byzantine witnesses—including K, L, and P, and other witnesses whose text type is difficult to determine—have it also. Ancient versions and fathers from a wide geographical spread join these witnesses in including the place name "Ephesus" in the letter's text. This geographical diversity of witnesses, including some from the conservative Alexandrian tradition, weighs heavily in favor of treating this reading as original.

Three problems, however, attend this conclusion. First, it is difficult to know how the reading without the place name ever arose and gained such prominence in the Alexandrian tradition if the letter was originally addressed to Ephesus. Long ago Ellicott (1859: 1–2) hinted that a dispute in the early church over whether John the apostle or Paul established the church at Ephesus may have led to the erasure of the letter's destination.²⁷ Meyer (1880: 9–10) thought

27. See, e.g., Theodore of Mopsuestia (Swete 1882: 112–18); Theodoret of Cyrus (R. Hill 2001: 2.31–33); Severian of Gabala (Staab 1933: 304–5).

critically inclined scribes noticed that the letter seemed to address readers whom Paul did not know personally (1:15; 3:2; 4:21–22). The scribes, he maintained, then deleted the place name because they felt that it was inconsistent with the account of Paul’s extensive ministry in Ephesus according to Acts. Van Roon (1974: 81–82) and Lincoln (1990: 4) argue, more plausibly, that scribes erased the original text’s geographical specificity in an effort to make it more universally applicable. This certainly happened with the text of Romans in Codex G where references to Rome in 1:7 and 1:15 disappear, leaving a text in which Paul writes to “all who are beloved of God” (πᾶσιν τοῖς οὖσιν ἀγαπητοῖς θεοῦ, *pasin tois ousin agapētois theou*) and in which Paul desires to preach merely “to you,” the readers (οὕτως τὸ κατ’ ἐμὲ πρόθυμον καὶ ὑμῖν εὐαγγελίσασθαι, *houtōs to kat’ eme prothymon kai hymin euangelisasthai*).²⁸

Second, the reading τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἐφέσῳ καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ is itself strange Greek. The article in front of οὖσιν ἐν Ἐφέσῳ seems to bind the phrase tightly to ἁγίοις as an attributive modifier and to leave πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ to refer to a separate group. The phrase might be naturally translated, “to the saints who are in Ephesus and to believers in Christ Jesus” as if Paul is addressing two groups, saints in Ephesus on one hand and believers in Christ Jesus on the other hand. The letter itself, which presumes that Paul speaks to a unified body of believers, contradicts this meaning (Best 1997a: 4; 1998: 98). The scribe who copied Codex D apparently perceived the problem and omitted the article before οὖσιν to solve it.

Third, if the reading with the place name is correct, then it is difficult to explain the nature of the letter, especially if it is an authentic letter of Paul. It is hard to imagine Paul saying to a group whom he knew well that he had “heard” of their faith and love (1:15), especially since in his letter to the Colossians a nearly identical expression implies that his readers “have not seen my face in the flesh” (Col. 1:4; 2:1). The difficulty becomes even worse when Paul says to his readers that he assumes (εἴ γε, *ei ge*, if, as I assume) they have heard about the responsibility God gave him to preach to the Gentiles (Eph. 3:2), and that he assumes (εἴ γε) they both heard Christ preached and were taught in him (4:21). As Abbott (1897: 78) said long ago, “No preacher addressing those whom he himself had taught would ordinarily express himself in this way.” Even if the letter is pseudepigraphic, it is hard to imagine that the author was unfamiliar with the many references to Paul’s Ephesian ministry both in the apostle’s own letters (1 Cor. 15:32; 16:8; 1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:18; 4:12; cf. Ign. *Eph.* 12.2) and in Acts (18:19–21; 19:1–20:2, 17–38) or that, knowing this tradition, he would portray Paul and the Ephesians as only vaguely familiar with each other.

Although the arguments and evidence on both sides of the debate have persuasive elements, on balance the arguments in favor of reading “in Ephesus” seem to outweigh those against it. Even the early manuscripts that omit the place name in 1:1 indicate in their subscriptions that the letter went “to

28. Cf. van Roon 1974: 81; Lincoln 1990: 4; Best 1997a: 5; Dahl 2000: 170–72.

the Ephesians” (Metzger 1994: 543; Sellin 2008: 66), and both Origen and Basil, despite their omission of a place name from 1:1, believed that Paul had written the letter to Ephesus. There is concrete evidence, moreover, for the tendency of scribes to tamper with the texts of Paul’s letters in order to make them more universally applicable. The omission of “in Rome” in Rom. 1:7 in Codex G would parallel the omission of “in Ephesus” from Eph. 1:1. The same tendency is apparent in Tertullian’s comment when discussing whether Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “But of what consequence are the titles, since in writing to a certain church the apostle did in fact write to all?” (*Marc.* 5.17 [ANF 3:465]; van Roon 1974: 81; Dahl 2000: 167; Lincoln 1990: 4).

The grammatical difficulty of translating τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἐφέσῳ καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ as “to the saints who are in Ephesus and [who are] believers in Christ Jesus,” moreover, has probably been exaggerated. Such ancient Greek commentators as Chrysostom (fourth cent.), Theodoret of Cyrus (fifth cent.), and Theophylact of Achrida (eleventh cent.) found nothing odd in the phrase. They express no confusion over whether “saints” and “believers” refer to two different groups and make no comment on the unusual nature of the Greek (*NPNF* 13:50; R. Hill 2001: 2.33; *PG* 124:1033; cf. Oecumenius of Tricca, *PG* 118:1169). The phrase seems to have been readily intelligible to these native Greek speakers.

The most serious difficulty in the way of taking ἐν Ἐφέσῳ as original is the assumption throughout the letter that Paul and his readers are not personally acquainted with each other. How could a letter to a church where Paul had labored for nearly three years be so impersonal? The answer lies in understanding the circumstances of Paul and the Ephesians at the time of the letter’s composition.

The Date and Setting of Ephesians in Paul’s Career

As impersonal as it is, Ephesians does provide three specific pieces of information that allow us to situate its composition historically by correlating the letter both with Acts and with other Pauline letters. First, if the contested phrase “in Ephesus” is original, then the letter was written after Paul’s ministry in the city. He had spent between two and three years in Ephesus (Acts 19:10; 20:31), probably the years AD 52–54 (Schnabel 2004: 1220), and had found great success in establishing a Christian community there, especially among Gentiles (Acts 19:17–20, 26; 1 Cor. 16:9; Schnabel 2004: 1206–31; Trebilco 2004: 134–52). Since Paul wrote the letter to Gentile Christians (Eph. 2:11; 3:1; 4:17) and there is evidence only for Jewish Christians in Ephesus before his arrival in the city (Trebilco 2004: 125–27; cf. Acts 18:19–21, 27), he must have written Ephesians after his departure.²⁹

29. As early as the fifth century, interpreters of Ephesians debated whether Paul wrote Ephesians before or after his ministry in the city. Severian of Gabala (Staab 1933: 304) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (Swete 1882: 112) favored the idea that Paul wrote Ephesians before visiting Ephesus. Theodoret of Cyrus argued against it (R. Hill 2001: 2.31).

Second, Paul was in prison (Eph. 3:1, 13; 4:1; 6:20), and the way he requests his readers' prayers at the end of the letter may mean that he was awaiting a judicial hearing. He urges them to pray that he will boldly make known the mystery of the gospel despite his imprisonment. He is, he says, "an enchained ambassador" (6:19–20). This metaphor and Paul's request for prayer conjure up the image of a political envoy who has somehow become the prisoner of the king to whom he is to deliver an important message, a message he fears the king will not want to hear.

Acts describes two imprisonments of Paul, one relatively brief imprisonment in Philippi before Paul's three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 16:23–34) and one long confinement that included two years in Caesarea (24:27), a winter as a prisoner at sea and on the island of Malta (27:9–28:14), and two years under "a very light form of military custody" (Rapske 1994: 182; Acts 28:30–31).³⁰ During the Roman phase of this long confinement, a soldier guarded Paul (28:16), but he was allowed to invite people to meet with him (28:17–28) and to receive drop-in visitors (28:30). Although wearing a "chain" (28:20), then, his circumstances were not desperate, and he had enough freedom that Luke could describe his ability to proclaim the kingdom of God as "unhindered" (28:31).

Acts does not mention all Paul's imprisonments (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23–25), but this second lengthy imprisonment, especially the two years in Rome (from spring 60 to sometime in 62), coheres nicely with the picture of Paul's circumstances in Ephesians. Paul describes himself in the letter as wearing "a chain" (6:20), yet to produce a letter like Ephesians, he would need enough freedom to allow a secretary to visit him in order to take down his dictation.

Third, at the conclusion to Ephesians, Paul commends Tychicus to the letter's readers. Since finding a trustworthy letter courier often presented problems in Roman antiquity, saying something about the courier at the end of a letter was common as a way to urge the letter's recipients to make sure the courier had performed his task honestly or to assure the recipients that the courier was trustworthy (Richards 2004: 177–85; Head 2009: 283–84, 297). Couriers also often supplemented the letters they carried with oral information not contained in the letter itself (Head 2009: 286, 289, 293–98). Although Paul does not say that Tychicus is the letter's courier, his commendation of Tychicus as a "beloved brother" and "faithful servant" and his comment that Tychicus will tell the letter's readers about Paul's circumstances (6:21–22) fit the courier profile.

Tychicus shows up in Acts as part of the group that accompanied Paul on his journey from Greece to Jerusalem a few months after his Ephesian ministry had ended (Acts 19:21; 20:2–4). Luke says that he was from the province of Asia (Acts 20:4), and most occurrences of the name Tychicus outside the NT come from Rome (Hemer 1990: 236). We can plausibly imagine Tychicus, then,

30. Following Schnabel's chronology (2004: 1262, 1267, 1270), these would have been the periods from summer 57 to autumn 59, winter 59–60, and spring 60–62 respectively.

as someone with connections both to Rome and to Asia, perhaps specifically to Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:12). If so, he was a natural choice as the courier of a letter from one place to the other.

Even more significantly, Tychicus also appears near the end of Colossians, in a commendation that shares thirty-two words with the commendation of Tychicus in Ephesians, including two long stretches of words with consecutive agreement, the first consisting of ten words and the second consisting of nineteen words (Col. 4:7–9). Clearly, the two letters share a close relationship, and it looks very much as if the author of one letter copied the commendation from the other letter, although which is the original and which the copy is impossible to determine with certainty.

Two explanations for this oddity jump to mind. First, a pseudonymous author could have become bored with his standard procedure of using the language of the other letter but not copying it exactly for long stretches. Here at the end he finished his fictional or forged letter with a nearly precise duplication of Tychicus's commendation. This is an inconsistent procedure, but certainly not impossible in the often-inconsistent world of ancient pseudonymity. Second, Paul may have dictated one letter very soon after dictating the other and instructed the secretary taking down his words to reuse the first commendation of Tychicus in the second letter. This too may at first seem strange, but an almost exact precedent for it appears in two genuine letters of Ignatius, both written in close proximity to each other and sent with the same courier to two different destinations (Ign. *Phld.* 11.2; Ign. *Smyrn.* 12.1).³¹ This second explanation has a concrete historical analogy to back it up and thus is more probable.

If Ephesians and Colossians are authentic letters written at about the same time, then the much more specific historical information in Colossians can fill in some of the blanks left behind by the general nature of Ephesians. From Colossians we learn that Paul took full advantage of his freedom to receive visitors during the period when he wrote these letters: Epaphras, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Jesus-Justus, Luke, and Demas were with him (Col. 1:7; 4:8–14). We also learn that someone named Archippus was part of the Colossian church, which means that Paul's Letter to Philemon—addressed in part to Archippus—went to people in the church at Colossae. In Philemon, Paul once again sends greetings from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (23–24), and the letter's subject is the slave Onesimus (10) who accompanied Tychicus on his journey to Colossae with the letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:9). We know from the Letter to Philemon that Paul hoped to be released from his imprisonment and to travel east to Colossae (22), and this fits with the picture of Paul under light military custody writing toward the end of his imprisonment and with his hearing before Caesar in mind—his expectation that he would be released and free to travel in the East would not, in this case, be unrealistic.³²

31. On Ignatius's reasons for doing this, see Richards 1991: 72.

32. Rapske (1994: 177–91) argues that Paul was under such light custody because the case against him was weak. This means that Philippians, where Paul is uncertain about the outcome

To summarize, Paul wrote Ephesians near the end of his two-year imprisonment in Rome and at roughly the same time as Colossians and Philemon, in AD 62. He was chained to a Roman soldier during this period but free to receive visitors. These probably included a secretary who took down the letters at Paul's dictation. Paul sent all three letters with Tychicus, a trustworthy Christian coworker from Asia who was also with him in Rome.

The Circumstances That Prompted Ephesians

Why send Ephesians at all? The letter's lack of obvious direct engagement with details of its readers' lives has opened the door to a wide range of ideas about the circumstances that prompted Paul, or the pseudonymous author, to write it.

These approaches have ranged from the claim that Paul had no circumstances among his readers in mind when he wrote the letter, to detailed descriptions of what in the readers' circumstances prompted specific features of the letter. Robinson (1904: 10), for example, believed that Paul's house arrest in Rome and freedom from pressing theological controversies prompted him to produce "one supreme exposition, non-controversial, positive, fundamental, of the great doctrine of his life, . . . the doctrine of the unity of mankind in Christ and of the purpose of God for the world through the Church." On the other end of the spectrum stands, for example, Kirby, who considered the letter an attempt of an Ephesian Christian to fill a request from the church at Corinth for any letters the Ephesian church might have from Paul. Since the Ephesian church had no letter of its own, he composed a letter in Paul's name, using a liturgy from the worship of his church that had some historic connections with the synagogue's Pentecostal liturgy and with Paul's own prayers during his ministry in Ephesus (Kirby 1968: 169–70).

Examples of both very general and very specific approaches to Ephesians could easily be multiplied, but neither interpretive strategy is convincing. Because of their speculative nature, none of the highly specific proposals has gained anything like a consensus. They can aid the interpretation of the letter by bringing attention to elements of its background that might otherwise suffer neglect, whether Hellenistic Judaism (Smith 1977), gnosticism (Schmithals 1983), the OT (Moritz 1996b), or the popular religious environment of Asia Minor (Kreitzer 2007: 42–53), but they often fail to recognize the difference between what is historically *possible* and what is historically *probable*. Dozens of very specific scenarios for the letter's production are consistent with the evidence the letter provides because that evidence is so skimpy. For the same reason, however, it also becomes difficult to argue that any one of these specific theories is more probable than its competitors.

The idea that the letter corresponds to no specific needs among its first readers (e.g., Meyer 1880: 29; Eadie 1883: li; Alford 1857: 19) also fails as a viable

of his imprisonment (1:19–26; 2:23–24), was probably written not at the end of Paul's Roman imprisonment but either at its beginning (Lightfoot 1896: 30–46) or, perhaps, during an otherwise unknown imprisonment in Ephesus five years earlier (Thielman 2003).

interpretive strategy since the letter does express concern for its readers on specific topics. Paul prays that they might have a better understanding of what God has done for them in Christ (1:18–23), that Christ might dwell in their hearts (3:17), and that they might understand the massive size of Christ’s love for them (3:18–19). In addition, he wants his readers to work together as they remain faithful to the teaching of the church’s founders and its present leaders (4:1–16; cf. 2:20) and to avoid compromise with the harmful moral standards of their unbelieving environment (4:17–19; 5:3–18). When these concerns are coupled with Paul’s request that his readers not be discouraged because of his suffering for them (3:13), it is not too speculative to think of the letter as a response to a certain weariness in the readers’ commitment to the gospel. It is also reasonable to imagine that this discouragement has led to disunity and moral compromise with the surrounding culture (cf. Lincoln 1990: lxxxv–lxxxvii).

Is it possible to go any further than this? A number of scholars have emphasized the interpretive importance of two elements of the letter’s cultural environment—the religious culture of first-century Ephesus and the complex relationship between earliest Christianity and Judaism. When these elements are combined with the general sketch just given of the readers’ needs, a picture emerges of the readers’ circumstances that, while not very specific, is both historically probable and hermeneutically helpful.

First, for centuries the letter’s interpretation has been linked with the religious culture of Ephesus, particularly with the city’s reputation as a center of magical practice and of the worship of Ephesian Artemis, often identified with the goddess Diana. Jerome, who seems to rely heavily on Origen’s commentary at this point, claims that Paul speaks more about “obscure ideas and mysteries” and about the origins, power, and destiny of the demons in Ephesians than anywhere else in his letters. He does this, Jerome says, because the environment in which Christians in Ephesus had to live was obsessed with demons and magic and was saturated with idolatry, particularly the worship of “multi-breasted Diana” (Heine 2002: 77–78).³³ In more recent times, the vibrant interest of first-century Ephesians in what Paul calls “the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (3:10; cf. 2:2; 6:12), including Artemis, has received confirmation from careful studies of the ancient city (Strelan 1996; Schnabel 2004: 1206–14; Trebilco 2004: 19–37; Brinks 2009), and Arnold (1989) has made a persuasive case for understanding the concept of “power” in the letter against this background.³⁴

It is also important to understand the letter in light of the prominence of the imperial cult in the civic life of Ephesus and its environs. Visual depictions

33. The Romans identified Artemis with the Italian hunting goddess Diana. Ancient images of Artemis depicted her with a number of smooth, oval objects attached to her chest. According to Trebilco (2004: 21–24; cf. Schnabel 2004: 1212), however, they are probably not breasts, and Artemis was not a fertility goddess, as early Christian polemic sometimes claimed. She seems to have been connected with benevolence, protection, and power over other supernatural beings.

34. *Pace* Strelan (1996: 86–88), it is reasonable to associate Artemis with magical practices. In addition to Arnold 1989: 22–24, see Trebilco 2004: 21n64, 150n206.

of Augustus's deity and the hegemony of his family permeated the urban centers of the first-century Roman world. Philo, writing at a time virtually contemporaneous with Paul, puts it this way:

The whole habitable world voted [Augustus] no less than celestial honours. These are so well attested by temples, gateways, vestibules, porticoes, that every city which contains magnificent works new and old is surpassed in these by the beauty and magnitude of those appropriated to Caesar and particularly in our own Alexandria. (*Embassy* 149–50, trans. Colson 1939; cf. Lucian, *Apol.* 13)³⁵

Worship of the emperor and his family, particularly of Augustus, was a prominent feature of life at all societal levels in Asia during the latter half of the first century. Ephesus was an especially important center of the imperial cult (Friesen 2001: 128). Municipalities often had their own imperial temples and, as a mid-first-century coin from Hierapolis demonstrates, celebrated their reverence for such gods as Dionysus alongside their worship of the family of Augustus (Friesen 2001: 61). Between AD 11 and 13 Ephesus constructed a temple dedicated to “Ephesian Artemis; to Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of god; to Tiberius Caesar, son of Augustus; and to the demos of the Ephesians” (Friesen 2001: 95).

Imagery celebrating Augustus's imposition of unity on the world through conquest appears in first-century sculpture in Aphrodisias and announces that the world as it presently exists is the work of the gods and Augustus (Friesen 2001: 86, 90). The message that the emperors were warrior gods, defeating their foes and bringing order to the world, appeared on coins and on the reliefs of imperial altars (one of them found at Ephesus). Sometimes this imagery depicted the warrior emperor trampling his enemies underfoot (Price 1984: 182).

Perhaps most important for our purposes, however, is the imperial and provincial restructuring of time so that it revolved around Augustus. About 9 BC the provincial council of Asia voted to redesign the calendar of the province so that the calculation of time was centered on the birthday of Augustus. The edict of the proconsul Paullus Fabius Maximus that announced this idea spoke of how Caesar Augustus had ended a period of deterioration and suffering for the world and “restored the form of all things to usefulness” (τῶι γε χρησίμῳι . . . σχῆμα ἀνώρθωσεν, *tōi ge chrēsīmōi . . . schēma anōrthōsen*; OGIS 458 lines 6–7). The decree of the council (or “koinon”) that instituted the new calendar spoke of him as “a savior” (σωτήρ, *sōtēr*) and a “god” (θεός, *theos*) and said that the day of his birth was “the beginning of good tidings to the world” (ἤρξεν . . . τῶι κόσμῳι τῶν . . . εὐαγγελίῳν, *ērxen . . . tōi kosmōi tōn . . . euangeliōn*; OGIS 458 lines 35, 40).³⁶ Friesen argues that although this adjustment of the calendar had valuable practical results, since it simplified

35. On the whole theme, see Zanker 1988: 297–333.

36. Here I follow the translation and interpretation of these inscriptions in Friesen 2001: 32–36, 123–26.

a previously unwieldy and complicated system, the real significance behind the reform lay elsewhere:

The realignment of Asia's calendars was not presented as a pragmatic proposal because pragmatism was not the paramount issue. The proconsul's proposal and the koinon's response demonstrated that the issue was the *meaning* of time. The proconsul argued that time had been determined by the birth and achievements of Augustus. He had saved the world from itself, ending warfare and returning order and conformity. The beginning of the year and the beginning of each month were to become a commemoration of his birth. Augustus would make sense of time. (Friesen 2001: 125)

Friesen goes on to argue that a "fundamental goal" of the imperial cult was to communicate to the populace that the rule of the imperial household was eternal. An inscription from the middle of the century speaks of the "eternal" rule of Claudius and his house, and another inscription from Ephesus closer to the end of the century (during the reign of Titus) proclaims "the permanence of the rule of the Romans" (Friesen 2001: 130).³⁷

Imperial worship in Asia, moreover, was not simply a matter of the imposition of political propaganda from society's elites on a skeptical populace, but was apparently embraced enthusiastically by many provincials at a variety of societal levels (Price 1984; Friesen 2001: 126, 128). For many first-century inhabitants of Asia, the imperial cult offered a compelling explanation of how the political structure of the world received its current shape and how this current shape was related to the ancient cosmological myths that featured the traditional gods (Friesen 2001: 123–27; cf. Momigliano 1987: 92–107).

In this same context it would have been difficult for Christians to avoid seeing a direct conflict between the "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον, *euangelion*) about the Messiah Jesus and the "gospel" (εὐανγέλιον) that coins, statuary, reliefs, temples, and the calendar proclaimed about Augustus, his successors, and Roman rule generally. When Paul tells his readers that God has given Christ victory over all authorities that would compete against him (1:21; cf. 4:8), therefore, it is likely that he includes in his thinking the close alliance between local deities and the deified members of the imperial family, whether living or dead. When he says that God put all things "under [Christ's] feet" (1:22), readers who had seen depictions of Rome trampling its conquered peoples underfoot would take heart that the ultimate victory belongs to Christ.³⁸ When Paul says that

37. On the use of the term αἰών on coins and in inscriptions to stress the eternity of the emperor and of Rome, see Nock 1934: 85–86.

38. Cf. his use of the terms οἱ ἄρχοντες and ἐξουσίαι in a political sense in 1 Cor. 2:6; Rom. 13:1–3; and Titus 3:1. The argument here is not that Paul believed spiritual powers controlled the governments of the various nations (e.g., Cullmann 1951: 192–93; Caird 1956: 1–30), although this view was certainly current during his time, and it is possible that he held it (Deut. 32:8–9 LXX; Dan. 10:13, 20–21; Jub. 15.31–32; 3 En. 14.2; 26.12; Luke 4:6; Rev. 12:18–13:1; Origen, *Cels.* 8.63; Wink 1984: 26–35; Schwindt 2002: 363–64). Nor is the argument that Paul has begun to "demythologize" the powers and view them as symbols "of

God is administering the times in Christ (1:9) and is summing up all things in him (1:10), that his victory over all rule and authority is not only a present but also an eternal victory (1:21), and that he intends to lavish his kindness on his people in Christ for eternity (2:7), Paul's readers could easily have understood this language as an assertion that Christ, not Augustus and his successors, is the Lord of time and that only his reign is eternal.

Second, many interpreters have suggested that the letter's concern with the connection between Judaism and Christianity provides a window onto the circumstances of its first readers. Again, this is an old approach to the letter's background. Calvin took Paul's description of his calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles in 3:1–13 to mean that he wanted to prevent among the Ephesians the kind of problem that developed in Galatia. The apostle warned the Gentile Ephesians against the efforts of itinerant Jewish Christians to impose the law on them and to question Paul's apostleship (1965: 122). F. C. Baur (2003: 2.1–44) focused on 2:14–18 and argued that Ephesians was a pseudonymous second-century document that used gnostic and Montanist concepts in an attempt to draw Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity together into a single unified church. Similarly, Schlier (1957: 19) thought that Paul used gnostic language and concepts in the letter to refute a type of "Jewish-Christian Gnosis." Käsemann (1958: 518; 1966: 291) believed the letter used concepts from gnostic mythology to remind Gentile Christians of their Jewish roots at a time when Gentile Christianity had become dominant and "pushed aside" Jewish Christianity. Ephesians attempted to bring unity and order to a church threatened by this division (Käsemann 1971: 120–21; cf. Fischer 1973).

Many details of these proposals are unconvincing. Ephesians 3:1–13 looks less like a defense of Paul's Gentile-oriented mission against people who were questioning it than an announcement of that mission to people who may have heard of it only in vague terms (3:2) or forgotten its importance (3:4). The once-popular interpretation of Ephesians through the lens of gnostic mythology, moreover, has fallen precipitously from favor, and with good reason: it rests largely on texts that postdate Ephesians by centuries (e.g., Barth 1974: 16–17; Arnold 1989: 7–13; Sellin 2008: 59).³⁹

the real determinants of human existence" (Wink 1984: 61–63; cf. Caird 1976: 46–47). Paul is saying instead in Eph. 1:20–22a that God has made Christ victorious over every power that seeks to harm God's people or to claim ultimate sovereignty over them. Paul is thinking of powers located "in the heavenly places" (1:20; cf. 3:10; 6:12), but among these powers would be the demonic forces that Rome identified with the deified members of the imperial household. As Revelation shows, from the perspective of persecuted Christians, the power of these demonic forces to create havoc in the world made itself felt among Christians most forcefully in the reigning emperor and in the cultic, military, and political machinery through which he ruled the empire.

39. Ephesians probably does participate in the general movement in late antiquity away from Greek rationalism and toward "higher wisdom through revelation" (Hengel 1974: 1.210–18). Its participation in this movement, moreover, probably explains its use of concepts and language that later became popular within gnostic religions (cf. Schwindt 2002: 508).

The idea that the circumstances of the letter's first readers led the author to address the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, however, is well founded. It rests firmly on 2:11–22 (cf. 3:6), where Paul emphasizes the plight of unbelieving Gentiles in their position outside Israel and the reconciliation that Gentile believers now experience with believing Jews and with God.

The most useful approaches to the letter, then, will place its interpretation within the context of popular Greco-Roman religion, the imperial cult, and Judaism that formed the background of Christian life in Ephesus in the first century. Both Lincoln and MacDonald have offered helpful ideas about how to do this.

Lincoln (1990: lxxiii, lxxxv–lxxxvi) tentatively puts the letter during a period of disorientation among Pauline Christians in the decades following the apostle's death, probably between AD 80 and 90. Without Paul's defining presence and organizational abilities, his churches would have lost a sense of identity, and disunity may have become a problem (cf. Fischer 1973: 40–48; Schnackenburg 1991: 34). These problems—combined with a fading hope in the parousia, the decline of interest in the Jewish roots of Christianity, and the ever-present pressure to accommodate their way of life to the prevailing culture—Lincoln argues, probably prompted the letter's composition. The author wanted to remind his readers of their Christian identity, of Paul's important role in establishing this identity, and of their responsibility to live in a way that was consistent with it. At the same time, he wanted to give them advice that would help them lower the level of tension between their communities and the prevailing culture. The household code serves this function (Lincoln 1990: 360).

Similarly, MacDonald believes that Ephesians responded to problems faced among Christians in Asia Minor during the time of Domitian (emperor 81–96). This setting would account for two major aspects of the letter.

First, MacDonald believes that Ephesians tries to negotiate the complicated relationships between Roman society, Judaism, and Christianity under Domitian's reign. Domitian attempted to prevent any noncompliance with the tax that Rome imposed on Jews after their war with Rome (66–70) by prosecuting those “who without publicly acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews, as well as those who concealed their origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon their people” (Suetonius, *Dom.* 12.2, trans. Rolfe 1997–98). At the same time Jews were experiencing this oppression, they also maintained their status as an ancient, tolerated religion within the empire.

This complicated situation led to a correspondingly complex relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Even Gentile Christianity must have looked like Judaism to most Romans, and Christians might sometimes have appreciated the protection that Judaism could provide since it was an older, better-known religion. Christians may have also sometimes distanced themselves from Judaism when the relationship became a disadvantage, as, for example, under Domitian's taxation policies.⁴⁰ Ephesians sought to negotiate this undulating

40. MacDonald follows S. Wilson 1995 at this point.

terrain with an approach that portrayed Christianity both as rooted in Israel and as Israel's replacement (2:11–22; MacDonald 2004: 234–37).⁴¹

Second, MacDonald argues that the ethical character of the epistle fits well within a period after Paul's death and the loss, as a consequence, of the cohesion and direction he could provide for the Christian community. In Paul's absence, new leadership structures developed, and these needed legitimation, so the author of Ephesians tied the foundational role of apostles and prophets (the charismatic leaders, like Paul, of the past) with the leadership structures in place in his own time—evangelists, pastors, and teachers (4:11; cf. 2:20; 3:5; MacDonald 2000: 20, 292, 299). As alienation of believers from their culture increased, assimilation to the ethics of the prevailing environment would also increase. The author of Ephesians responded by emphasizing, on one hand, the stark difference that should prevail between the ethics of his readers and their cultural environment (2000: 21; 2004: 422–28), and on the other hand, that the social structures of the households in which they worshiped posed no visible threat to the social structures of that environment (2004: 439–42; cf. Osiek and MacDonald 2006: 118–43).

The analyses of Lincoln and MacDonald are similar to each other in their basic outline. The letter responds to problems that developed in Christian communities in Asia Minor because Paul, with his charismatic authority, had disappeared from the scene and because Pauline Christians in this area were feeling increasingly marginalized from their societies. In addition, Christianity and Judaism were separate entities by this time, yet they were confused with each other by the surrounding and largely unsympathetic culture, and this made life difficult and complex for both groups.

As the commentary will show, I find this picture of the circumstances that called forth Ephesians largely convincing. I do not, however, believe it is necessary to locate Ephesians in the period after Paul's death to account for these circumstances. If Paul wrote the letter around AD 62, near the end of the Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28, then he had been confined in various places for nearly five years and absent from Ephesus for over seven years.⁴² This is enough time for the conditions that produced Ephesians to develop.

To begin with, it is unnecessary to wait until Domitian's reign to find Christians struggling with the social complexities of living within Roman society as a group that maintained Jewish roots but was emerging from Judaism. Already by the time Paul wrote Galatians, some Jewish Christians were trying to avoid persecution by imposing Jewish customs, such as circumcision, on Gentile Christians (Gal. 6:12). It is easy to imagine that the reason behind this otherwise enigmatic action involved the refusal of all Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile, to participate in certain expressions of the imperial cult.

41. Cf. Chadwick's view (1960: 148) that Ephesians links Judaism to Christianity because of "einer apologetischen Notwendigkeit" (an apologetic necessity).

42. For the chronology, see Acts 20:3, 6, 16; 24:27; 27:9; 28:11, 30; 1 Cor. 16:8; and the discussion in Schnabel 2004: 1220, 1223, 1257, 1262, and 1267.

Since Jewish sacrifices on behalf of the emperor and his activities were viewed as a participation in the imperial cult from the Roman perspective, Jews were exempt from other, more common expressions of devotion to the emperor, expressions they would have viewed as idolatrous (Hardin 2008: 102–10; cf. Price 1984: 207–22; Winter 1994: 133–35). Jewish Christians may well have discovered that by making Christian assemblies look thoroughly Jewish, they were saving the entire group from persecution (Winter 1994: 136–37; cf. Hardin 2008: 114–15).

During Paul’s lifetime Christians in Ephesus experienced some of the same tensions. Paul first proclaimed the gospel in Ephesus in the synagogue and stirred up considerable interest, with the result that some Jews became “disciples” (Acts 18:19–20; 19:8–9). By the end of his work in Ephesus, however, most of the Christians were Gentiles. This is clear from Demetrius’s concerns that his business of making images of Artemis, his personal reputation, and the reputation of the goddess herself were suffering because of the “great crowd” Paul had persuaded to abandon idolatry (19:23–27; Trebilco 2004: 169). In the riot that resulted from Demetrius’s concerns, the unbelieving Gentile crowd seems to have lumped unbelieving Jews together with Christians as opponents of Artemis (19:34). The reason the Jews put “Alexander” forward as a spokesperson, then, was probably to defend their rights as Jews and to dissociate themselves from the unpopular Christians (19:33–34). In a careful study of Acts 19, Trebilco (2004: 160) observes that “there was a risk that the general population would indulge in anti-Jewish agitation, since they would make no distinction between Jews and Christians.”

It is easy to imagine the Jewish and Christian communities in Ephesus drifting farther apart over the next seven years as Jewish Christians dwindled in number or assimilated into the new culture of the church. By the time Paul wrote Ephesians, it may well have been necessary to remind believers in the city, by now an almost entirely Gentile group, of the value of its Jewish heritage (Eph. 2:11–13) and of the necessity of unity with the few Jewish Christians who still identified themselves as Jews (2:14–22; 3:6). This was certainly necessary from a theological perspective, but a renewed realization of their connectedness to Judaism may have also helped Christians in Ephesus become more intelligible to their unbelieving Gentile neighbors. In turn, this may have lowered the level of tension between the mainly Gentile Ephesian church and the prevailing culture in which it existed. This tension had been there from the beginning of Paul’s ministry in the city (Acts 19:23–34; cf. 1 Cor. 15:32; 16:8–9; 2 Cor. 11:23; Trebilco 2004: 58–67, 83–87; Thielman 2003), and it probably continued in the years after his departure (Rev. 2:3).⁴³

The letter’s concern with unity need not be limited, however, to unity between Jews and Gentiles. Well within Paul’s lifetime, Christianity in Ephesus was diverse. Apollo and the “brothers” who wrote a letter of commendation

43. If 2 Timothy was written to Ephesus (Trebilco 2004: 206–9), then it would provide further evidence for continued suffering among Christians there (2 Tim. 1:8; 2:3, 11–13; 3:12; 4:5).

for Apollos to the Christians in Achaia (Acts 18:24–27) had only a loose connection with Paul. These “brothers,” moreover, were probably Jewish Christians associated with the synagogue in Ephesus where Apollos preached (18:24–28; 1 Cor. 16:8; Trebilco 2004: 115–27). There is certainly no indication of tension between these believers and Paul (1 Cor. 16:8), but “their existence at least suggests that all of the Christians in Ephesus did not owe allegiance to Paul, and that there was a pre-Pauline group in the city” (Trebilco 2004: 126). The Ephesian church, moreover, was organized according to households (Acts 20:20; 1 Cor. 16:19–20; cf. Eph. 5:22–6:9), with perhaps thirty to forty people meeting in each household (Trebilco 2004: 98, 184–86). This situation would naturally foster diversity as households differed from one another in belief, practice, social standing, and loyalties (Trebilco 2004: 98).

Once again, it is easy to imagine the house churches in Ephesus developing in their own directions during Paul’s seven- to eight-year absence from the city. Perhaps some Jewish Christians had never really left the synagogue and now had little enthusiasm for displays of unity with Gentiles who had believed the gospel under Paul’s preaching. These Jewish Christians did not trace their spiritual lineage to Paul in the first place, and now association with Gentile Christians meant only increased trouble with their unbelieving Gentile neighbors. Perhaps other house churches began to develop in the ascetic and speculative directions that became a problem later when 1 Timothy was written to Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3–7; 4:1–4). Without the cohesive influence of occasional visits from Paul, his coworkers, or messengers bearing his letters, seven years is ample time for house churches that were once affiliated with one another more or less loosely to dissolve into discrete groups that were either disinterested in or hostile to one another.

In such a situation, Paul could not assume that he was writing to Christians who knew him well, who were aware of his calling, or who had learned the Christian tradition in the way that he typically taught it to his converts (cf. Eph. 3:2; 4:21). At the same time, he would understandably feel some apostolic responsibility for all Ephesian Christians since he had worked in their city so long, had been instrumental in the large increase in numbers of Christians in the city, and knew some Christians there reasonably well.⁴⁴ It is not implausible that an important theme of his letter to them would be the need for unity among believers across ethnic (2:11–22; 3:6), socioeconomic (4:28), and social lines (5:22–6:9). The situation was not unlike the circumstances that produced the Letter to the Romans: there too Paul was unknown to many of those to whom he wrote, but he still felt some apostolic responsibility to bring unity to the divided church (Rom. 1:13–15; 11:13; 15:14–16).

It is also plausible that Paul would emphasize in his letter the need to recognize the important place both of the “apostles and prophets” who first brought the gospel to Ephesus and of the evangelists, pastors, and teachers

44. On the large increase in the numbers of Christians through Paul’s work in Ephesus, see Trebilco 2004: 134–52.

now continuing the foundational work of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 4:11–12; cf. 2:22; 3:5). Christians in Ephesus needed to work together harmoniously to bear an effective witness to the inimical powers that their efforts to frustrate God’s work were doomed to failure (3:10). They also needed to work together to bear effective witness to the wider society that its hopeless way of life (4:17–19) could be transformed by the gospel (5:11–14). Accomplishing these goals, however, would entail agreement on the founding principles of the gospel, laid down by the apostles and prophets. It would also entail working together with the variety of leaders that Christ had given to the church in Ephesus to aid its growth in maturity. It is true, then, that the references to “apostles and prophets” in Ephesians look back to the founding of the community, but this backward look may well have become necessary between the time Paul left the city and the end of his Roman imprisonment.

To summarize, Paul wrote Ephesians after an absence from the city of more than seven years and after nearly five years of imprisonment, during which the Ephesian house churches had received little or no news of him. Jewish Christians had existed in the city before Paul’s first visit to it. Although certainly not hostile to Paul at the time, they had never been closely connected with the mainly Gentile house churches that flourished during Paul’s nearly three years of ministry. In Paul’s absence, the groups that had never been closely associated with Paul and the Pauline house churches went in various theological and social directions. At the same time, tensions between the city’s Christians and the wider Greco-Roman environment—with its imperial cult, devotion to Artemis, and interest in magic—continued.

Near the end of his period of “light” imprisonment in Rome, Paul heard that the Christians in Ephesus who knew him were discouraged by his suffering and their lack of contact with him (3:13). He probably also learned that most Christians in the city, whether they knew him or not, were disunified and tempted to assimilate to the culture they had left behind at their conversion. They were certainly not in imminent danger of apostasy (1:15), but they needed a reminder of (1) the power and grace of the one God, to whom they had committed themselves at their conversion; (2) the role that, as the church, they were playing in God’s plan to unite the whole universe in Christ and under his feet; and (3) the ethical responsibility that God’s grace and their role in God’s plan placed upon them. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians is his response to this need.

The Structure of Ephesians

The structure of the letter is a mixture of organization and spontaneity. At one level, it seems to be carefully planned. Paul moves from prayers of praise (1:3–14; 3:20–21), thanksgiving (1:15–16a), and intercession (1:16b–23; 3:1, 14–19), and descriptions of how God has used his power to bless his people in Christ (2:1–3:13), to admonitions about how to live in ways that are consistent with these blessings (4:1–6:20). He begins with a benedictory prayer that

anticipates many of the letter's main themes (1:3–14) and ends with a stirring call to action that sums up much of its message (6:10–20).

At another level, the letter is more extemporaneous. The line dividing one section from the next is sometimes unclear (2:1; 5:21), the syntax is frequently obscure or broken (1:18; 2:1–3, 5; 3:1–2, 17, 20, 21; 4:2–3, 16; 5:9; 6:24), and lengthy digressions are common (2:2–3, 14–18; 3:2–13). The following outline attempts to trace the unfolding of the letter's thought with its mixture of planned structure and free-flowing discourse.

- I. Prescript and greeting (1:1–2)
- II. Blessing God who has blessed his people in Christ (1:3–14)
 - A. Praise to God for his grace in making believers his people (1:3–6)
 - B. Praise to God for his grace in redemption and revelation (1:7–10)
 - C. Praise to God for making his people heirs and giving them hope in Christ (1:11–12)
 - D. Praise to God for the conversion and future salvation of Paul's readers (1:13–14)
- III. Thanksgiving for conversion and intercession for understanding (1:15–23)
 - A. Thanksgiving for faith and love, and intercession for illumination (1:15–19)
 - B. God's great power displayed in Christ and for the church (1:20–23)
- IV. From children of wrath to new creation (2:1–10)
 - A. Children of wrath like all the rest (2:1–3)
 - B. Objects of God's mercy (2:4–7)
 - C. The nature and consequences of God's grace (2:8–10)
- V. From existence without God to membership in the people of God (2:11–22)
 - A. The special plight of the Gentiles and God's response (2:11–13)
 - B. Christ is the believing community's peace (2:14–18)
 - C. Gentile Christians as an integral part of God's household (2:19–22)
- VI. Paul's divinely given task and his suffering for the Gentiles (3:1–13)
 - A. Paul's role in the administration of the mystery (3:1–7)
 - B. How Paul fulfills his task (3:8–13)
- VII. Paul prays for his readers' inner strength and praises the God who can give it (3:14–21)
 - A. Paul prays for his readers' inner strength (3:14–19)
 - B. Paul praises the God who is able to strengthen his readers (3:20–21)
- VIII. The growth of the church toward unity and maturity (4:1–16)
 - A. Christian unity and its theological basis (4:1–6)
 - B. The gifts of the victorious Christ cultivate the body's maturity (4:7–16)

- IX. A reminder of how to live as new human beings (4:17–5:2)
 - A. No longer walk as “Gentiles” but as a new human being (4:17–24)
 - B. Living as human beings newly created in God’s image (4:25–5:2)
- X. Avoiding and transforming the deeds of darkness (5:3–14)
 - A. Avoiding sexual immorality and greed (5:3–7)
 - B. From avoidance to transformation (5:8–14)
- XI. Wise conduct within the household (5:15–6:9)
 - A. Introduction: Wisdom and the life filled in the Spirit (5:15–20)
 - B. Submission in the believing household (5:21–6:9)
 - 1. Wives and husbands (5:21–33)
 - 2. Children and parents (6:1–4)
 - 3. Slaves and masters (6:5–9)
- XII. Standing against the strategies of the devil (6:10–20)
 - A. Wearing God’s protective armor (6:10–17)
 - B. Persevering in watchful prayer (6:18–20)
- XIII. A concluding commendation and a final prayer-wish (6:21–24)
 - A. Tychicus and his mission (6:21–22)
 - B. Peace, love, faith, and grace for the letter’s recipients (6:23–24)