

EPHESIANS: A BACKGROUND STUDY

by

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Introduction

The book of Ephesians is charged with weighty doctrines that reveal the glory of the Triune God. Father, Son, and Spirit are seen in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians as operating from before the foundation of the world for the redemption of the church. Paul's doctrine of the church shines in Ephesians unlike any other epistle. It serves to humble the reader, stimulate lofty thoughts of God, motivate worship, and encourage Christ honoring conduct. It has received no shortage of attention by men throughout history. Alongside Romans, the epistle to the Ephesians towers over Paul's thirteen known epistles in its exaltation of the glory of God and His grace toward the church. Therefore, prior to carefully exegeting Ephesians, it is important to gain an understanding of the epistle's authorship, its recipients, its historical background, and its themes and central message.

Authorship of Ephesians

To the casual reader of the epistle to the Ephesians, it is immediately clear that the author testifies to his own identity. The opening verse reads, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God . . ." (Eph 1:1).¹ The writer again identifies himself as Paul in 3:1. However, in spite of the clear claim to Pauline authorship, scholars in the last few centuries have found reason to doubt that the apostle Paul really wrote the letter. Prior to investigating the claims of these scholars, an assessment of the internal evidence of the epistle and the evidence provided in the writings of the early church will be summarized.

¹ All Biblical texts are taken from the New American Standard Bible (1995 Update Edition), unless other wise noted.

As stated, the writer of the epistle clearly claims to be the apostle Paul (1:1, 3:1). If the writer is indeed the apostle Paul, one would expect that any personal testimony of the author within the epistle would be consistent and not contradictory with what is known about the apostle Paul. In 3:1-13, the apostle Paul identifies himself as a prisoner for the gospel (see also 4:1, 6:20) and as the apostle to the Gentiles (see also Gal 2:7-8). This of course is consistent with what is known about the apostle Paul during this time period. Therefore, the personal testimony of the author is consistent with Pauline authorship.

The testimony of the early church provides overwhelming support to the claim of Pauline authorship. In fact, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that the first challenges to Pauline authorship surfaced.² The writings of early church history not only frequently mention or reference this epistle, but they also attest to Pauline authorship.³ Irenaeus, in reference to Ephesians 5:30 said, “even as the blessed Paul declares in his Epistle to the Ephesians, that ‘we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones.’” Irenaeus attributed Ephesians to Paul on other occasions also. In addition, Marcion, the Muratorian Canon, and Tertullian all attested to Pauline authorship. Peter O’Brien notes, “In the third century it was regularly attributed to Paul by both the orthodox and their heretical opponents.”⁴

² Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 4.

³ For a brief summary of reference to the Ephesians in the writings of the early church, refer to Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 2-6.

⁴ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 4.

On account of the internal evidence and the early church's attestation it is clear that the apostle Paul was the author of Ephesians. Therefore, the burden of proof is on those who doubt or reject Pauline authorship. There are various reasons provided by those who reject the traditional view of Pauline authorship. For example, Andrew Lincoln sets forth four reasons that when their cumulative force is considered lead him to reject Pauline authorship.⁵ First, the point of view of the author of Ephesians evidences an author later than the apostle Paul. Second, the theological emphases in Ephesians are too different from Paul's other epistles. Third, the language and style of Ephesians is significantly different from those letters whose Pauline authorship is undisputed. Fourth, the close relationship of Ephesians to Colossians is evidence that somebody other than Paul copied the epistle. The three reasons that I consider to be most compelling will be investigated.⁶

Assessment of the Impersonal Nature of Ephesians

The primary reason that some believe the point of view of the author evidences an author later than Paul is the letter's impersonal tone. In 1:15 the author speaks of having heard of the Ephesians' faith, as if he was not previously acquainted with it before someone told him. In 3:2-4 Paul has to remind or inform them of his apostleship as if they had never heard of it. Because Paul had planted the church in Ephesus (Acts 19), he would have been familiar with their faith already and they would have been familiar with his apostleship. According to C. Leslie Mitton

⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary. vol. 42. (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), lx-lxviii.

⁶ It is beyond the scope of this brief background study to evaluate the entire debate over authorship. For a full treatment, reference Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 2-61.

these verses make it “clear that the writer and the readers were unknown to each other.”⁷ Lincoln states, “Missing is his personal presence of the undisputed letters with its passion, urgency, joy, and anger . . . The tensions and struggles of Paul’s ministry are no longer apparent.”⁸ This leads Lincoln to reason that someone other than Paul wrote the letter. Furthermore, he argues that his view is supported by the lack of personal greetings that Paul’s other letters contain.

All of this reasoning does not hold up under further scrutiny. Paul does not include personal greetings in 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, or 1 and 2 Thessalonians, all books in which Pauline authorship is rarely denied.⁹ The impersonal character of the letter could be due to the fact that the letter may have been addressed to various churches in the area of Ephesus. The greeting in 1:1 is “To the saints who are at Ephesus”, not to the church at Ephesus. As Harold Hoehner states, “Hence, it is reasonable to think that this letter would go to the many satellite churches in a wide geographical area and thus lack the personal touch.”¹⁰ Given the fact that it may have been five to six years since his visit to Ephesus, the church certainly would have experienced growth during this time such that other churches may have been planted in the vicinity. Therefore, Paul could be speaking of hearing of the faith of the Ephesians because there were new believers that were not there at the time he was. Therefore, the impersonal nature of the letter does not demand an author different than Paul.

⁷ C. Leslie Mitton, *Ephesians*, (London, England: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1976), 3.

⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lxiii.

⁹ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23

Assessment of the Different Theological Emphases in Ephesians

Non-Pauline authorship advocates highlight the differences between the theological emphases of Ephesians and the emphases of other widely accepted Pauline letters as evidence that Paul was not the author.¹¹ As Hoehner does, it is best to break down the differences into soteriological, ecclesiological, and eschatological categories. With respect to soteriology, Paul does not focus on the cross of Christ in Ephesians (except for in 2:16), as if it is no longer important. Instead the author of Ephesians focuses on the resurrection of Christ and His Lordship over all things. Furthermore, Paul does not speak of having died with Christ, but rather having been raised with Christ. It also appears that Paul contradicts what he says in Romans where he asserts the law is not abolished by the gospel (Rom 3:31) and Ephesians 2:15 speaks of abolishing the law. Finally, there is no reference to justification in Ephesians, while there is reference to good works.

With respect to ecclesiology, the emphasis is on the universal Church and not the local church. The emphasis on ecclesiology overshadows Paul's typical Christological focus. Ephesians 2:11-22 focuses on the replacement of Israel, in favor of the church which is the new creation of God. This appears to contradict Paul's statements concerning Israel's future in Romans 11. This indicates a more developed eschatology, reflective of a date later than the apostle Paul.

With respect to eschatology, the second coming is not in focus in this epistle. The focus in the epistle is on the Church's continued existence in the world, though 1:14, 4:30, and 5:5

¹¹ There are various examples provided by non-Pauline authorship advocates. The ones provided in this paragraph are characteristic and derived from Lincoln in *Ephesians* (lxiii-lxv); and Mitton in *Ephesians* (5-6).

appear to speak of the consummation. Lincoln believes this is because the expectation of the parousia that is evident in Paul's other writings has faded into the background with progress of time, indicating that Paul did not write this letter.¹²

Once again, the reasoning of the non-Pauline authorship advocates is fallacious. It seems to operate on unchallenged assumptions. The assumption is that the same author will only write about a limited few topics and is not allowed to go beyond these. To the contrary, it must be asserted that different emphases do not mean different authors. The teaching of the apostle Paul should be understood to be the comprehensive body of his teaching and not solely that which is from certain epistles to the exclusion of others. Furthermore, it seems that non-Pauline authorship advocates are constraining God to using Paul to emphasize only certain doctrines, like justification. Their view does not fully appreciate the divine origin of Ephesians. God did not want every epistle to say the same thing or else there would be no need for additional epistles. However, because there was more in the mind of God to communicate to His people, He used the apostle Paul to emphasize different truths which, when properly understood, are not contradictory to other revealed truths. The apparent contradictions identified can be explained by closer examination of the contexts of the verses in question. Careful exegesis that does not rely upon false either/or dichotomies will yield a rather harmonious view of these different emphases.¹³

¹² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lxiv.

¹³ Hoehner provides a more detailed assessment of the apparent contradictions in *Ephesians* (49-58).

Assessment of Ephesians Dependence on Colossians

It is the argument from the literary dependence of Ephesians upon Colossians that Lincoln finds most decisive and that Mitton found ultimately convincing for non-Pauline authorship.¹⁴ Among commentators it is undisputed that there is a relationship between Colossians and Ephesians. For example, referring to statistics provided by Mitton, Lincoln states “of the 1570 words in Colossians, 34 percent reappear in Ephesians, and conversely 26.5 percent of the 2,411 words in Ephesians are paralleled in Colossians.”¹⁵ In addition to common words and vocabulary, there is a heavy thematic similarity between the two books.¹⁶ Lincoln identifies close verbal links within the sections that parallel one another in addition to the terminological links outside the parallel sections.¹⁷ For example, Ephesians 4:17-24, which discusses putting off the old and putting on the new, is dependent on Colossians 3:5-11 which discusses the same theme with similar verb usage. These obvious similarities lead to the conclusion that Ephesians is dependent on Colossians, thus pointing away from Pauline authorship.

In reviewing both Lincoln’s and Mitton’s work, it seems like they are drawing false conclusions based on the fact that they start with the assumption that Paul did not write the letter. Then they speculate as to how the two works could be so similar. The speculation results in a nice story about someone writing Ephesians who read and re-read Colossians, a relatively

¹⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, New Testament Theology, ed. James D. G. Dunn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84; Mitton, *Ephesians*, 8.

¹⁵ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, xlvi.

¹⁶ O’Brien provides a chart comparing the themes of the two books in *Ephesians* (9-10).

¹⁷ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, li-ii.

unimportant and forgotten letter in the early church, until it was almost known by heart.¹⁸ A sample speculation from Lincoln is when he states, “It is one thing for a writer to reproduce the same ideas in the same words or even in different words, but it is quite another for a writer within a short period of time to reproduce the same words and phrases to express different ideas.”¹⁹ One is tempted to ask, why is this is so unlikely? It only appears one would accept this kind of argumentation if you assume your conclusion as a starting point. O’Brien takes Lincoln to task, providing evidence that there is evidence that says Colossians is in fact dependent on Ephesians.²⁰ If Paul wanted to communicate similar truths to similar audiences, it should not be a surprise that there are similarities in structure, themes, and vocabulary.

Final Assessment of the Authorship Issue

As stated, Lincoln believes it is the cumulative force of his arguments than lead to the conclusion that Paul did not write Ephesians. He believes the non-Pauline case is further strengthened by the fact that Pauline advocates always have a counterargument to or another possible way of looking at the evidence provided by non-Pauline advocates. He states, “When such a defense [counterargumentation] has to be reproduced again and again, doubts must begin to be raised about the tenability of the position being defended.”²¹ Again, one is tempted to question Lincoln’s conclusion, how is his non-Pauline case strengthened by the fact that his

¹⁸ Mitton, *Ephesians*, 8.

¹⁹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lxvii.

²⁰ O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 14-16.

²¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lxix.

arguments can be answered effectively? It seems that being able to answer the arguments raised against the clear textual tradition of Pauline authorship would in fact weaken the non-Pauline case, not strengthen it. The many arguments posed by non-Pauline advocates have not held up under further scrutiny. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that Paul himself wrote the letter, just like 1:1 and 3:1 claim.

Destination of the Epistle

The question of who Paul was addressing in this epistle has been a great source of debate among scholars. Clearly it has been handed down to the present day as being sent to the saints in Ephesus as is reflected in all the major English translations. The debate arises from doubt concerning the original reading of Ephesians 1:1, where some of the oldest manuscripts, particularly the reliable Alexandrian manuscripts, omit “ἐν Ἐφέσῳ” (“in Ephesus”).²² When combined with the impersonal nature of the epistle, this manuscript evidence causes some to conclude that this reading was not in the original manuscripts. Further investigation of the manuscript evidence and the attestation of church history will lead to the conclusion that the reading of “in Ephesus” is acceptable.

First, it has been stated that some of the oldest and best manuscripts in the Alexandrian tradition have omitted “ἐν Ἐφέσῳ.” Hoehner observes that these words were only omitted from three Alexandrian texts that had poor geographical distribution. On the other hand, the words were included in other Alexandrian manuscripts that most likely have textual traditions behind them that date earlier than those that omit the words. Furthermore, the geographical distribution

²² Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 528; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 47.

of those manuscripts that include the words is much wider than those that omit it.²³ All of the manuscripts since the end of the fourth century include the words and all of the manuscripts since the end of the second century include the superscription “*ἰς τοὺς Ἐφεσίου*” (“to the Ephesians”).²⁴ Furthermore, Guthrie notes that in the early church Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian all attest to the original recipients as being the Ephesians.²⁵ On the basis of the manuscript evidence and its corroboration by church history, it is safe to conclude that this epistle was written to the saints in Ephesus.

The Dating of the Epistle

Both 3:1 and 4:1 help in determining the date of authorship where Paul references himself as a prisoner (3:1 and 4:1). Though there is some debate regarding where Paul was imprisoned, this is typically understood to be a reference to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome explained in Acts 28:14-31.²⁶ Those who reject Pauline authorship tend to date Ephesians between 70 and 90 A.D. However, as has been demonstrated, it is best to accept the traditional view of Pauline authorship. This means that Ephesians was written sometime between A.D. 60 and 62.

²³ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 145-146.

²⁴ Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Translated by Howard Clark Kee, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1975), 352.

²⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 528.

²⁶ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 309; For a more detailed explanation as to the relationship between the place and date of the writing of this epistle, reference Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 92-97.

Historical Background of Ephesians

Ephesians does not appear to be a polemical letter, making it difficult to determine from the letter if any historical information would be significant to the interpretation of the book or helpful in understanding the background of the readers. Nevertheless, a reconstruction of the historical background will provide valuable insight to the student in understanding the weightiness of Paul's words to the Ephesian mind.

The City of Ephesus

Ephesus, the capital city of its region, was located on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), just a few miles from the Aegean Sea and three hundred miles east of Corinth.²⁷ Its position on the mouth of the Cayster River provided a harbor for the city that connected it with the various shipping routes.²⁸ Furthermore, it was at the end of the "Royal Road" which was constructed during the reign of Darius I (522-486 B.C.) and which still served in Roman times as one of the major roads.²⁹ Hoehner states, "The fact that Roman milestones showed distances from Ephesus to other cities in Asia Minor indicates the importance of this city."³⁰ According to Hiebert, "it was the great commercial center of western Asia Minor, ranking with Antioch and Alexandria as the three greatest trading centers in the eastern

²⁷ D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Volume 2 The Pauline Series*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1977), 253.

²⁸ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 86-88.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

Mediterranean.”³¹ The population would have been between 200,000 and 250,000 people, making it the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria.³²

There is general agreement in the literature that two structures in Ephesus were the primary attractions of the city. The first was a theater, mentioned in Acts 19:31. This theater could seat approximately twenty-five thousand people.³³ The second structure was the temple of Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus. Hoehner, drawing from the ancient historian Pliny, states that the dimensions of this temple in its first century form were 225 by 425 feet with 127 columns that were 60 feet high and 6 feet in diameter. These dimensions make the temple in Ephesus the largest structure in antiquity, earning it a place on the list of the seven wonders of the world.³⁴

Given its strategic location, it was able to exert a widespread influence on the region not just commercially, but also religiously. Acts 19:27 refers to Artemis as the one “whom all of Asia and the world worship.” Apparently, Artemis was so great and magnificent that not only did she command the worship of the city of Ephesus, but also all of Western Asia Minor.³⁵ Ephesus

³¹ Heibert, *New Testament*, 253.

³² Paul Trebilco, “Asia,” In *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco Roman Setting*, vol 2, ed. by Gill, David W. J., and Conrad Gempf, 291-362, In *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, ed. by Bruce Winter, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 307.

³³ Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1974), 242.

³⁴ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 83.

³⁵ Thorsten Moritz, “Summing Up All Things: Religious Pluralism and Universalism in Ephesians,” In *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. by Clarke, Andrew D., and Bruce W. Winter, 101-124, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 102.

was a strategic city for Paul to plant a church from which the gospel could spread into the local region and beyond.

The Pagan Religion of Ephesus

It is nothing short of a divine miracle attesting to the authority of Jesus Christ that the early church was planted in the city of Ephesus. As Tenney states, “the new faith in Christ had to fight its way against entrenched religious beliefs that had been in existence for centuries.”³⁶ Therefore, an understanding of Artemis and her associated cult practices can provide an important foundation for understanding the concepts mentioned in this epistle regarding the salvation of the Ephesians, the supremacy of Christ over heavenly powers, and the behavior of the Gentiles that was to be forsaken.

Worship of the pantheon of Graeco-Roman gods began to decline around the time of Christ due to the trivial infighting between gods, the influence of philosophy, and the abandoning of faith in gods who could not protect or assist their worshippers.³⁷ However, the text of Acts leads to the conclusion that the cultic practice in Ephesus had not declined by the first century. Ephesian society was built upon its goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans). This idolatry extended itself into all avenues of Ephesian society, affecting culture, politics, education, family, and economy. Through this pervasive influence, every individual would have been affected, at

³⁶ M.C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey Revised*, rev. Walter M. Dunnnett, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 65.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 66-67

least in part, by the cult of Artemis. The cult included the practice of magic, sacred prostitution, and mystical visions.³⁸

The practice of magic was prolific in Ephesus, earning the city a reputation for being the center for this type of cult practice. Clinton Arnold quotes Bruce Metzger as saying, “Of all ancient Graeco-Roman Cities, Ephesus, the third largest in the Empire, was by far the most hospitable to magicians, sorcerers, and charlatans of all sorts.”³⁹ The historical evidence corroborates the testimony of Acts 19:19 which says that some of Ephesus’ first converts were magicians. The recognition of a spirit world that influenced all aspects of life was the crux of the practice of magic in Ephesus. Magicians, through charms, spells, and other means would manipulate the good and bad spirits for the benefit of the people. Arnold states, “With the proper formula, a spirit-induced sickness could be cured, a chariot race could be won, sexual passions could be enhanced, etc. Conversely, great harm could be brought to another person through the utterance of a curse.”⁴⁰ Magic was used to abate the fear of the demonic realm that was prevalent.⁴¹ Paul’s frequent references to the heavenly powers (1:21; 3:10; 6:12) become clearer when one understands them in light of the magical practices in Ephesus.

³⁸ Moritz, *One God, One Lord*, 103-105.

³⁹ Bruce M. Metzger, “St. Paul and the Magicians,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 38 (June 1944): 28; quoted in Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 14.

⁴⁰ Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18

In addition to understanding the practice of magic, it is equally important to gain knowledge of the centerpiece goddess of Ephesus. It is agreed that Artemis was “supreme in divine power and place.”⁴² In fact, Acts 19:35 alludes to the fact that she may have been thought to have come directly from heaven. The following description by Arnold is helpful in understanding how supreme her power was understood to be.

The rows of lion, steers, and other animals depicted by relief on her skirt demonstrate the compelling authority she was believed to have possessed over all powers since mythical antiquity. Likewise, the fact that the signs of the zodiac were so prominently displayed around her neck would assure the devotee that Artemis possessed an authority and power superior to that of astrological fate . . . the Ephesian Artemis is the only divinity to depict visually her divine superiority with the signs of the Zodiac.⁴³

It is possible that Paul had this in mind when he extolled the supremacy of Christ’s authority and power over everything, which would include Artemis (1:20-23). Artemis would have been connected with the practices of magic at that time because her supposed supreme power could command the evil spirits who opposed her worshippers, which would have included the demons of the dead and the demons of nature.⁴⁴

It appears that there was hardly an avenue of life untouched by her influence. The festivals Artemision (held annually from March-April) and Thargelion (May-June) were held in her honor and helped extend her influence.⁴⁵ Furthermore, she would oversee theatrical and

⁴² Lewis R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, vol. 2, (Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press, 1896), 480.

⁴³ Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-23

⁴⁵ Trebelico, *The Book of Acts*, 321.

athletic performances.⁴⁶ According to Arnold, her devotees had a strong missionary drive that motivated them to plant sites for Artemis worship throughout the area.⁴⁷ Artemis also influenced Ephesian economics as her temple was the center for banking and financial transactions.⁴⁸

Judaism in Ephesus

Ephesians has much to say regarding the relationship of Jew and Gentile within the church. Therefore, it is helpful to have some understanding of the presence of Judaism in ancient Ephesus. When Paul initially went to Ephesus, he found some men who had been baptized into the baptism of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-10). Paul started out his ministry in Ephesus by speaking in the synagogue for three months.⁴⁹ Acts 19:13 speaks of seven Jewish exorcists in Ephesus, all of whom were sons of the Jewish chief priest. It appears that first century Judaism in Ephesus was affected by the magical practices of the pagan Ephesians.

Ephesian Church History

The history of the Ephesian church can be reconstructed from the New Testament books of Acts and Revelation. The first mention of Ephesus is on Paul's second missionary journey

⁴⁶ Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1981), 20.

⁴⁷ Arnold, *Power and Magic*, 20.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

⁴⁹ Josephus records the presence of Jews in Ephesus before the time of Christ in *The Antiquities of the Jews* (14.10.13-14.10.19). Reference Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, Translated by William Whiston, (United States: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 380-381.

when, in the Autumn of A.D. 52,⁵⁰ after a year and a half stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11), he went to Ephesus accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:18). After reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue, Paul was asked to stay. He declined and departed after a very brief stay, though he expressed his desire to return (Acts 18:19-21). Apparently, Paul left his traveling partners in Ephesus because when the Jewish man Apollos came to Ephesus to proclaim Christ, they were there to help clarify his teaching (Acts 18:24-26). It is not clear from the text what success Priscilla, Aquilla, and Apollos had in establishing a church.

Paul's second trip to Ephesus was during his third missionary journey which started in the spring of A.D. 53. Later in A.D. 53 Paul came to Ephesus and encountered twelve men who had been baptized by John the Baptist, as stated earlier (Acts 19:1-7). These men were baptized in the name of Jesus and are the first recorded converts in the city of Ephesus. Paul remained in Ephesus, boldly reasoning in the synagogue for three months (Acts 17:8). Some became hardened and disobedient, forcing Paul to take the new disciples to reason with them in the school of Tyrannus (Acts 17:9). This continued for two years with such a great impact that many Jews and Greeks heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:10). Not only was the word of the Lord going out, but many miracles were being performed. Luke's report is astounding, "God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out" (Acts 19:11-12). Because the name of Jesus was being magnified a great fear fell upon Jews and Greeks throughout Ephesus (Acts 19:17). Many of the magicians were converted and even

⁵⁰ All dates with reference to Ephesian church history are approximate and provided by Hoehner in *Ephesians* (89-97).

burned their books in front of everyone. After counting the price of the burned books, it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver, about fifty thousand days of income (Acts 19:18-19).⁵¹ Before Paul finally left the city, he faced opposition from a local silversmith named Demetrius who made silver shrines of the goddess Artemis. The new message being proclaimed was a direct attack on idolatry because Paul was saying that, “gods made with hands are no gods at all” (Acts 19:26). The silversmiths were no longer making the money they used to because not as many people were buying idols. Afraid of losing money, Demetrius began to proclaim to the crowds that Paul’s message defamed their magnificent Artemis (Acts 19:27-28). This caused a great uproar which led to Paul’s departure from Ephesus in the spring of A.D. 56 (Acts 20:1).

Paul’s final encounter with the Ephesians was on his trip to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey in the Spring of A.D. 57. His ship stopped in Miletus and he sent for the Ephesian elders. Acts 20 records his farewell to the elders as he reminds them of his ministry to them and exhorts them to beware of false teachers. This would be the last time Paul saw the Ephesians. Paul would be imprisoned later that year, and then be taken to Rome which is where he wrote the letter to the Ephesians.

It is possible to draw some conclusions regarding the state of the church when it received the letter from Paul. First, the church had been established and elders were overseeing it (Acts 20:17). Second, the church consisted of both Jews and Gentiles as has been described. Third, at least some of the Gentiles in the church had been converted out of the practice of magic. Fourth, the church was well known in the city because of the rapid spread of the word of God, the miracles performed by Paul, and the great commotion cause by Demetrius. Therefore, it is

⁵¹ Ibid., 90

plausible that the Ephesians faced continuing persecution due to the economic strain placed on the silversmiths. Finally, Ephesus had proved to be a strategic location because all in Asia had heard the word of the Lord which was spreading from Ephesus (Acts 19:10).

Two other references to Ephesus are worth mentioning in this brief treatment of Ephesian church history. In 1 Timothy 1:3 Paul exhorts Timothy to remain in Ephesus to protect the church from strange doctrines. Paul's admonition and prophecy to the church about false teachers (Acts 20:28-30) had come to pass and Timothy was there refuting falsehood and teaching pure doctrine. The final reference that needs mentioning is Jesus' message to the church in Ephesus through John in Revelation 2:1-7. From this letter, it is clear that the Ephesians had successfully held off the false teachers (Rev 2:2-3). However, they had left their first love, Jesus Christ, and desperately needed to repent, despite the encouraging affirmation that they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6).⁵²

The Themes and Purpose of Ephesians

As has been stated, Ephesians is not a polemical book like Colossians or Galatians. It does not address a specific problem or situation. Therefore, it is challenging to determine an overarching purpose for the epistle. Various attempts have been made to determine the purpose. O'Brien summarizes five scholarly suggestions for the purpose of Ephesians.⁵³ First, some have

⁵² The identity of the Nicolaitans is uncertain, though Robert Thomas tends to agree with the assessment of the early church. That is, they were a "sect of licentiously antinomian Gnostics who lapsed into their antinomian license because of an overstrained asceticism" (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary*, ed. Kenneth Barker, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 148).

⁵³ O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 52-57.

seen Ephesians to be a letter to new Gentile Christians to live out the implications of their faith and baptism. In other words, it is a renewal of baptismal vows. Second, it is a polemical letter either addressing Gnosticism of a Jewish kind or addressing disunity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Third, a spiritual crisis of some sort needed to be addressed, like persecution. Fourth, the apostle was written to explain the power of Christ over the evil spirits that converts from the Artemis cult feared. The letter was written to exhort them to a new lifestyle. Hoehner notes that this view, advocated by Arnold, “has some valuable insights to the text of Ephesians, but there is insufficient evidence from the letter itself to support this as the main purpose of the letter.”⁵⁴ Fifthly, a particular purpose should not be attributed to the letter. This view is held by Lincoln who says, it is better “to respect the distinctiveness of this letter’s lack of specificity by concentrating on the general implications of the letter itself and by being content with the correspondingly general contours of the setting that may be cautiously reconstructed.”⁵⁵

It is best to see Ephesians as a combination of the fourth and fifth suggestions offered by O’Brien. There is some merit to what Arnold has said so long as his purpose is not read into every section of the book. As is evident in the discussion earlier on the Historical Background, Arnold has detailed some important aspects of the religious climate in Ephesus. These should be seriously weighed in understanding how the readers would have been encouraged by the epistle. However, as Hoehner noted, there is insufficient textual evidence to make this the main purpose. Furthermore, as the fifth position suggests, to identify one purpose for the book could be superimposing on the text what is not there. Could it be that the apostle Paul, as a pastor and

⁵⁴ Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 101.

⁵⁵ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lxxiv.

missionary, wanted to write a general epistle, highlighting certain themes to expand their understanding, their high calling, and how to live in light of it? With that stated, the best approach to understanding the overall picture Ephesians paints is to identify the key themes of the book and its central message.

There are several theological themes that run through the book of Ephesians. The role of the three members of the Trinity is prevalent throughout the book and how they function in salvation, in the church, and in sanctification. Ephesians teaches the supremacy of Christ as all things will sum up in Him (1:10). Furthermore, He is the head over all things (1:22-23), His pleasure is the goal of Christian conduct (5:10), and His glory is the goal of the church (3:21) and of all social relationships (5:22-6:9). The church is also a key theme as Ephesians discusses its head (1:22, 5:23), its creation from Jewish and Gentile believers (2:11-22), its function in the purpose of God (3:8-10), its unity, and its growth (4:10-16). Heavenly powers also find a key part in Ephesians as they are mentioned in 1:21, 2:2, 3:10, and 6:12. The practical themes of truth (4:15, 21, 23, 25; 5:9) and love (4:2, 15, 16; 5:2, 25, 28, 33) are found in Ephesians as relates to the believers walk (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15).

The central message of Ephesians is the high calling of the church (Eph 1-3) and the conduct that this high calling demands of the church (Eph 4-6). The high calling of the Church is based on the divine plan of salvation which is initiated, purposed, and carried out by the Triune God in Christ (1:3-14), who gave Jesus Christ as head over all things to the Church (1:20-23). Once dead in sin, the members of the church, whether Jew or Gentile, have all been recipients of the regenerating work of a merciful and loving God (2:1-10), and have now been brought into the one body of Christ, the church (2:11-22). The church, by God's grace, is to radiate His manifold wisdom to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places (3:1-12). As a result of this high

calling, the members of the Church are to live transformed lives such that the body of Christ is united (4:1-10, 17-32, 5:1-21). In order to bring about the required transformation of walk, God has provided people with various gifts to build up the body (4:11-16). Now that they have been saved, the supremacy of Christ is to be reflected in their social relationships, including marriage relationships, parent-child relationships, and master-slave relationships (5:22-6:9). Finally, because the Church has been called into God's household, they are to fight with God's armor against their new enemy, the devil (6:10-20). In conclusion, the central message of Ephesians is to magnify God for His gracious election of the church, accomplished by the redemption of Christ, and as a result of this undeserved position, the entire disposition and direction of the church's life, on a corporate and individual level, both in thought and deed, is to be reflective of the Savior, who is the head of the Church.

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Letter to the Ephesians Historical Background: Ephesians is the great Pauline letter about the church. It deals, however, not so much with a congregation in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor as with the worldwide church, the head of which is Christ (Eph 4:15), the purpose of which is to be the instrument for making God's plan of salvation known throughout the universe (Eph 3:9-10). Ref.: [_www.usccb.org/bible/scripture/](http://www.usccb.org/bible/scripture/) New American Bible, Personal Study Edition, pages 430-431 Ephesians Selected Inspirational Verses 1:3-6 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, 4as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be.