



Introduction

(1:1-2)

Where was the letter sent?

The New International Version has the words **to the saints in Ephesus** but many other modern translations delete the words *in Ephesus* from the translation of the text, and simply announce that this is a letter from Paul. Why the discrepancy?

There is a tremendously fascinating mystery about whether or not this book was ever intended for the Ephesians in particular. For centuries no-one challenged the widely-held belief and tradition that originally Paul wrote this letter to the church in Ephesus in Asia Minor. But recent scholarship has raised various questions about its destination. Serious questions have also arisen in recent years as to who wrote the epistle. Did it really come from the hand of the apostle Paul or was it written by someone else? Before we plunge into the content of this book we need to consider some of these preliminary questions.

The fact that a majority of versions contain the words, 'in Ephesus', and other versions don't, is not because Bible translators are being hyper-critical or arbitrary. The problem boils down to a question of *textual criticism*. A person doesn't have





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to be a Greek scholar or a professional theologian to take some interest in this science. Textual criticism is the attempt to reconstruct, as accurately as possible, the original Greek text of the New Testament.

When this letter was written in the first century, it was written in the Greek language. Then it went to its destination, where it was read and preserved before being copied for the next generation. Those copies were then copied, and soon copies were spread all over the world, wherever Christians were to be found. The original letter that was penned by the apostle has long since been lost but various copies have survived down to this day.

Scholars in textual criticism examine very carefully all the surviving copies of the New Testament literature. And it has been said, of the manuscripts that survive that they agree 99 per cent with each other because the copying process in the Ancient World was carried out very carefully and meticulously. We do, however, find some discrepancies in the copies. So there are copies of this letter which have the words 'in Ephesus', and other copies that omit those words.

The majority of surviving manuscripts contain the words 'in Ephesus'. That is the reason why, for centuries, the church kept this particular designation and variant in the English version of the New Testament. There are only two or three significant copies that do not have these words. The unfortunate problem is, however, that two of the very finest and most trustworthy of the surviving manuscripts from the ancient world are the very copies that don't have the words 'in Ephesus'. For this reason, the evidence is almost equally weighted for and against the inclusion in the text of the term 'in Ephesus'. So it is possible that the designated destination was never part of the original epistle.





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There are other factors that biblical commentators consider have a bearing on this decision. We know from Luke's record in the Acts of the Apostles that, during his third missionary journey, Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years. A congregation developed there in which he obviously had a very important and vital ministry. Normally, whenever Paul writes back to churches where he knows individuals personally, he gives personal greetings to his dear brothers and sisters who are still alive in those congregations. That kind of personal communication is glaringly absent from the letter to the Ephesians. This does not necessarily prohibit the possibility that the original destination was the Ephesian congregation, but it provides added support for the idea that perhaps this letter was not originally destined specifically for the congregation at Ephesus.¹

The majority viewpoint today is that, in all probability, the epistle to the Ephesians was written originally as a circular letter. Rather than the apostle writing a specific message to a particular congregation concerning a definite problem that had arisen, Paul wrote an epistle that he intended would be

¹ Having been linked with the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, I believe the Bible to be the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. We need, however, to distinguish textual criticism (which I call lower criticism) from what is often referred to as Higher Criticism (higher critical scholars carry no brief for the inspiration of the Scriptures and say that in the original there were errors and mistakes). Lower criticism is called 'lower' because it doesn't involve any academic criticism of the content of Scripture itself. Its analysis is simply focused on the question of trying to reconstruct the original manuscripts. The reason why textual criticism has been such a fascinating and rigorous scientific process is because the church has confessed her belief that the original manuscripts were written under divine inspiration. But classical Protestantism, for the most part, has been very careful to say that our belief in the infallibility and inspiration of Scripture is not a belief in the inspiration of translations. We recognize that translations differ from each other, and sometimes even contradict each other. Conservative Christianity has been very jealous to say that inspiration belongs only to the original autographs of Scripture.





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circulated to all of the churches in Asia Minor. This explains why Paul refrains from his normal, specified greetings to particular individuals. It seems likely that Paul, towards the end of his life, had a burden to write to the church in general, a synopsis of the revelation that was given to him as the apostle of Jesus Christ, a summary of the great truths of Christianity. What follows is written on the assumption that this letter was originally written by the apostle to be circulated to a large number of churches in Asia Minor.

Ephesus in the first century

The book of Revelation contains messages to seven cities of Asia Minor. Asia Minor was, in Paul's day, the Roman province of Proconsular Asia. The book of Revelation speaks of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

These seven cities were arranged around the urban hub of the province, with Ephesus occupying a strategic point. If Ephesians was a letter intended for all the churches in the area, it may have followed a circular route round these cities.

Ephesus itself was the gateway to Asia. It was at the mouth of the important Cayster River and functioned in a way similar to colonial Pittsburgh (Fort Pitt). Pittsburgh was called the 'Gateway to the West' because of the formation of the Ohio River that flows west to the Mississippi. Waterways were crucial links of transportation and commerce before the advent of mechanized travel. A highway to Ephesus also served as a hub for caravan travel (much as Chicago did for rail transportation). In ancient history the Greeks and the Romans both vied for control of Ephesus because of its strategic military and commercial location.

Ephesus was famous for its great temple, a shrine to the goddess Diana (or Artemis in Greek). The temple of Diana





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was one of the seven wonders of the world. It was 425 feet in length and 220 feet in breadth. Architecturally it was composed of 127 white marble columns, each 62 feet high. It was opulently decorated with ornate carvings and priceless paintings. Its chief attraction, however, was an image of Diana said to have fallen directly from heaven to earth. The temple was so popular among pagans that Ephesus emerged as the religious center of all Asia.

A stadium was built near the temple during the reign of Nero (AD 54–68), coinciding with Paul's visit between 53–56. The stadium had a seating capacity of about 25,000, at a time when Ephesus had a population of about 250,000 people. This stadium was the scene of the riot against Paul and his friends.

The temple of Diana had close links to local commerce and it was also a tourist center. The temple cult involved worship of Diana as fertility goddess and as goddess of the woods and hunt. Diana's image represented the figure of a crowned woman with multiple breasts to signify fertility. In addition to the Diana cult, Ephesus was also known as a center of occult arts and practices.

The account of Paul's sojourn in Ephesus (Acts 19) indicates that the apostle had conflicts with various branches of the pagan community. These conflicts were a direct result of Paul's powerful ministry in the area:

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:8-10).



In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke reports that God worked extraordinary miracles by Paul, so that **even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them** (19:12).

Paul's impact on the practitioners of the occult resulted in a massive book-burning: **A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas** (Acts 19:19).

Luke's comment about the value of the books that were burned indicates the commercial crisis that was involved in Paul's influence against paganism. The current value of the fifty thousand drachmas is close to \$500,000.

The reaction of those with a vested commercial interest in the pagan practices was swift:

About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: 'Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshipped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.'

When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' (Acts 19:23-28).

The riot at Ephesus was triggered by Paul's teaching that 'man-made gods are no gods at all'. Christianity makes no peace with



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idolatry. The scene at Ephesus was that of the triumph of the gospel over pagan idolatry.

The temple of Diana was once one of the seven wonders of the world. Today it has no members. Diana was not so great after all.

Was Paul the author?

The first verse identifies the author as Paul, the apostle. It reads, **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.** There are no variant manuscript readings that would suggest a textual problem here in copying or transmission of the original; all the texts agree that Paul was its author. This fact went unchallenged for virtually 1,800 years of church history. Only with the advent of modern forms of criticism has his authorship been questioned. There are now many in the critical world who have become convinced that Paul did not, in fact, write this letter to the Ephesians.

The reasons that are set forth to argue against Paul's authorship of Ephesians include the following considerations. First, there is an unusually large number of instances of what are called *hapax legomena*, a technical term that refers to words which occur only once in the body of a person's total literary output. In other words, if we catalogue all the letters that we know were written by Paul, construct a vocabulary list of his language, and count up the number of times he uses each word, we discover that there were certain words which occur only once in all his writings. In Ephesians we have almost fifty of these words. If Paul did write it, how can we account for this?

We can begin by noting that the style of the letter is affected by the fact that it is a 'circular'. Such letters are more formal than personal ones. Further the tone of Ephesians is





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so contemplative at points, that it sounds more like a prayer than a letter, more like a doxology than a sermon. Such a style demands its own vocabulary.

Is it not arrogant to assume that the apostle Paul's knowledge, linguistic skills and vocabulary were so limited that he did not have the capacity to write a letter in which he uses forty-nine words that he does not use elsewhere? Frankly, I give virtually no credence to the whole issue of *haparx legomena* as a method of determining authorship.

A second consideration brought forth is that Paul makes no mention of any personal friends or co-laborers in the Ephesian letter. Since Paul had been the founder of the Ephesian congregation, it seems rather strange that he doesn't make any direct mention of these people. This argument falls, however, if this letter was intended to be a circular epistle to a large number of churches.

A third argument set forth against Paul's authorship is this: the author of Ephesians speaks of the prophets and the apostles as being the *foundation* of the church (2:20). Critics say that this is inconsistent with the teaching of Paul found elsewhere in his epistles, where he says that the only foundation that can be laid for the church is Christ Jesus. It is unthinkable, so the argument goes, that a genuine apostle would pre-empt the glory and pre-eminence of Jesus by inserting himself and his cohorts in that primary position of being the foundation of the church.

In response, it can be argued that, rather than being contradictory, these pictures are completely harmonious. In describing the church as a building, Paul speaks of Jesus as the cornerstone. Now the cornerstone is that which holds the foundation together. In the metaphor, Jesus is not the complete foundation, but he is the chief building block, the chief cornerstone, that holds it all together.



Also, what Paul says about the apostles being the foundation is not inconsistent with what other authors of the New Testament wrote. For example, in the book of Revelation, in the vision that is unfolded of the New Jerusalem, we are told that the foundation of the heavenly city is the apostles (21:14). Therefore the metaphor of the apostolic group being the foundation of the church is consistent with the overall teaching of the New Testament. So far from it indicating that Paul is trying to usurp or supplant the authority of Christ, he is simply communicating what Jesus himself taught in the Gospels, that he would build his church upon the apostles.

Paul is very concerned, not only in this epistle but consistently through his writings, to call attention to the significance of the apostolic office. It was necessary for his readers to understand that an apostle was not one who spoke, or wrote, or taught, his own opinions. That is why, in the first verse of Ephesians, Paul says he was **an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God**. The word that is translated *the will* is a form of the word *theleme* (*thelemetos*), which is a strong word indicating Divine sovereignty. Paul is declaring that he is an apostle, not by self-appointment, but through the authoritative decree, the sovereign will of Almighty God.

There is every reason to affirm what the epistle claims, namely, that it was written by the apostle Paul to the churches in Asia Minor.

QUESTIONS:

1. What is textual criticism?
2. How can textual criticism be helpful in biblical interpretation?



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3. What evidence is there which shows that Ephesians may have been a circular letter rather than a letter specifically written to the Ephesians?
4. What is the difference between higher criticism and lower criticism?
5. What made Ephesus such a strategic city for the gospel?
6. What changes did the gospel bring to the city of Ephesus?
7. Why are some modern day scholars convinced that Paul did not write Ephesians?
8. Where does Paul claim that his Apostleship comes from?

