

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

01. Introduction



Re the 'Acts of the Apostles' by Luke

Luke was a close companion of Paul in his mission.

Luke was a historian: 'I have decided, after investigating everything carefully, to write an orderly account for you so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (Luke 1:3-4).

First century historians used all the tools of rhetoric to impress the reader, and they were expected to create speeches, but only after 'investigating everything carefully.'

born in Tarsus

“I am from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city” (Acts 21:39).

According to Jerome (died c.420), Paul’s parents emigrated to Tarsus from Gischala in Galilee (*Commentary on Philemon* 23-24).

He refers to himself in his Letter to Philemon (c.54AD) as a προεσβύτης (in his 50’s).



Saul was a Jew

‘I was circumcised on the eighth day’ (Philippians 3:5).

- In his Letter to the Philippians (3:5), he refers to himself as ‘a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.’
- Given the name ‘Saul’ (Acts 7:58).

- He was a 'Pharisee' (Philippians 3:5; see Acts 26:5)
- He studied in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, 'educated strictly according to our ancestral Law' (Acts 22:3).
- He inherited Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28).

33AD

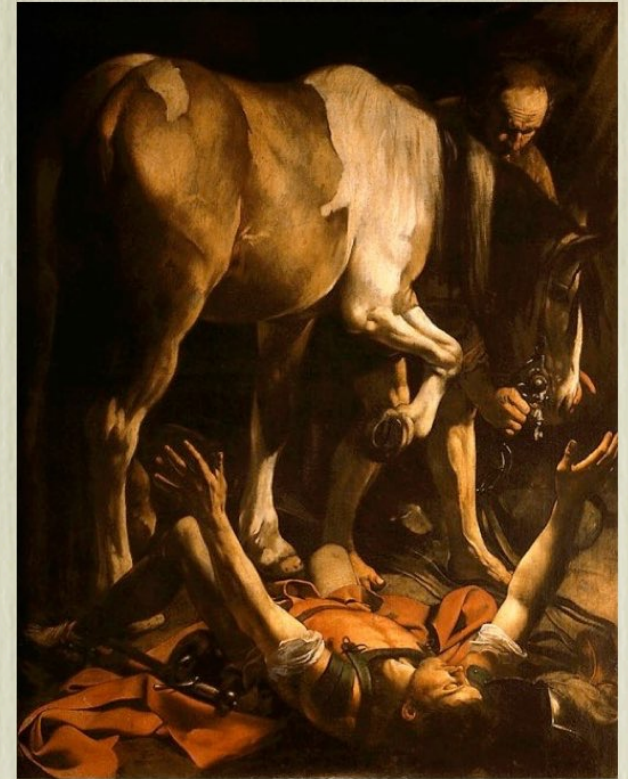
‘The members of the council dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man (νεανίας, 37?) named **Saul**. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. And **Saul** approved of their killing him’ (Acts 7:58-60)

- Paul claims to have been ‘intensely zealous in persecuting the Church of God and was trying to **destroy it**’ (Galatians 1:13; see Philippians 3:6; Acts 9:1-2, 22:4, 26:9-11).

34AD

His Encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:13-18).

‘As Saul was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do”



Acts 9:3-6

‘I received the Gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Galatians 1:12).

‘God called me through his grace and was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles’ (Galatians 1:15-16).

‘Have I not seen the Lord’ (1 Corinthians 9:1).

‘He was seen also by me’ (1 Corinthians 15:8).

Acts 9:17-19

‘Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus.’

‘I went away at once to Arabia,
and afterwards I returned to
Damascus’ (Galatians 1:17).

‘Arabia’ (The Nabataean kingdom)
(Acts 9:20-25)



37AD

‘In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands’ (2 Cor 11:32-33).

Saul pays a short visit to Jerusalem ‘to talk things over with Cephas’ (Galatians 1:18)

37-45AD

‘Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:21-23).



46AD

‘Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people’ (Acts 11:25-26).

Saul visits Jerusalem with Barnabas and Silas and confers with Peter, John & James concerning conditions for accepting Gentiles into the Christian community (Galatians 2:1-10; Acts 11:27-30)

47AD

Sent on mission

Acts 13:1-4

‘In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers ... While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus.’

After Paul and Barnabas met Sergius Paulus, the proconsul of Achaia, Luke begin to called Saul 'Paul' (the name Paul uses in all his letters). Do he and the proconsul happen to have the same Roman name, or did the proconsul, upon his conversion, offer Paul patronage?

47-48AD

After leaving Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas travelled through the southern town of the Roman Province of Galatia



48AD

‘They sailed back to **Antioch**, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed’ (Acts 14:26).



Acts 14:27-28

When they arrived back at Antioch, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.



Acts 15:1-2

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

48AD

Paul writes from Antioch to Galatia

Letter to the Galatians

49AD

Shortly after writing to the Galatians Paul went with Barnabas to the [Assembly in Jerusalem](#) which decided that Gentiles could be welcomed into the community as Gentiles.

To help harmony in a Christian community of Jews and Gentiles, the Council concluded that the Gentiles should follow only the instructions in Leviticus that applied to Gentiles living in a Jewish territory.

Gentiles were asked to abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from πορνεία.

49AD

Paul returns to Galatia, accompanied by Silas. They are joined by Timothy.

Acts 16:11

Mission to Macedonia

‘We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi.’



Acts 17:1

They left Philippi and came to Thessalonica.



They were forced to leave the Via Egnatia and escape to Beroea

But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as **Athens**; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

Acts 17:13-15



‘After a brief stay in Athens **Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.**’ (Acts 18:1).



We know from a letter written by his brother, Seneca, that Gallio, who was proconsul of Achaia while Paul was in Corinth [Acts 18:12-16] retired before the completion of his term.

Acts 18:11, 18

Paul stayed there a year and six months ... He said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila.

It would seem that Paul arrived in Corinth before the onset of winter in the year 50 and left at the same time as Gallio in the spring of 52.

Letters to the Christian community in Thessalonica

52AD

‘Paul sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila ... When they reached Ephesus he left them’ (Acts 18:18-19).



Acts 18:21 – 19:1

52AD

‘Paul set sail from Ephesus, landed at Caesarea and went up to Jerusalem ... and then down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia ... and came to Ephesus.



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Ephesus: 52-55AD

Letters from Ephesus

First Corinthians 53AD

Philemon 54AD

Colossians 54AD



Acts 20:1

Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia via Troas (55).



‘When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia’ (2 Corinthians 2:12-13).

After spending the winter of 55-56 among the communities which he had founded in Macedonia five years previously (Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea), it seems that during 56 he carried out a wider mission in the area. He mentions in his Letter to the Romans, written from Corinth during the winter of 56-57, that he had journeyed as far as Illyricum (Romans 15:19; Acts 20:2). The Via Egnatia would have taken him from Philippi or Thessalonica to Apollonia on the Adriatic coast. It is quite a short journey north to Illyricum (Dalmatia).

2 Corinthians 1-9
(from Macedonia 55)

2 Corinthians 10-13
(from Macedonia 56)



‘Paul came to Greece where he stayed for three months’ (Acts 20:1-2).

Letter to the Romans



57AD

From Corinth to Macedonia
to Troas and Miletus, to
Jerusalem (Acts 20:3 - 23:32)



57-59AD

At Caesarea
awaiting trial

Acts 23:32- 26:32

From Caesarea to
the churches in the
East.

'Ephesians'



Paul was under house arrest in Caesarea for two years (58-59) when Felix was procurator of Palestine (Acts 24:27). Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus in 59, who sent Paul to Rome for trial before the Emperor. Paul was under house arrest in Rome 'for two whole years' (Acts 28:30), awaiting trial (from 60 to 62).

Letter to the 'Ephesians'

The traditional title of this letter comes from the fact that most ancient manuscripts begin with the words:

Paul, an apostle of the Messiah Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus

and are faithful in the Messiah Jesus:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father

and the Lord Jesus the Messiah (Ephesians 1:1-2).

However in our earliest papyrus codex (P⁴⁶) and in two of the most important fourth century parchment codexes (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus) the letter is addressed 'to the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.' Ephesus is not mentioned.

It is not a letter written by Paul specifically to the community in Ephesus

The author says that he has ‘**heard**’ about their faith and love (1:15): an expression found also in his letter to the Colossians (1:4). Paul never lived in Colossae. He lived and worked in Ephesus for three years! Furthermore the letter lacks any personal memories!

When speaking of his own apostolic commission, he writes: ‘**Surely you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you**’ (3:2). These words would sound strange to a community who had experienced Paul’s preaching for such a long period.

When speaking of Christ, he writes: ‘**Surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus**’ (4:21). Had he been writing to Ephesus he would have reminded them of what he himself had taught them.

So, either Paul is not the author, or he is not writing specifically to the community in Ephesus.

1. Could Paul be the author?

The ideas that are special to Ephesians are not only consistent with Paul's thought but express a number of his central convictions.

The number of words that are found only in Ephesians can be satisfactorily explained by the unique nature of this letter.

The most serious objection to Pauline authorship is the style. Everyone agrees that the style in which Ephesians is written is significantly different from the style of any of the other Pauline letters. On this criterion, Jean-Noël Aletti, without being dogmatic on the issue, comes to the conclusion that it is more probable that the author is not Paul (Saint Paul, Epître aux Ephésiens, 2001, page 32).

However, a number of observations may be in order.

The first is the fact that students were schooled in practising different styles as part of their education.

The second is that Ephesians is unique among Paul's letters and in such a way that a different style could well be expected. All Paul's other letters are written to specific churches. Paul is involved in controversy, defence, and the cut and thrust of argument. He is also concerned with the problems and questions of particular churches.

If 'Ephesians' is a general letter written to Gentile churches in the east, it is understandable that it is free from these characteristics. Since it is a more reflective (we might say prayerful) letter, that in itself could perhaps explain the difference in style.

Even if we look at Romans, which is written to a community with which Paul was not especially involved, we still find a good deal of argument, countering of contrary opinions and the need and desire to have constant recourse to Scripture.

We find none of these elements in Ephesians. It seems to me that its very uniqueness justifies us in not being surprised at the uniqueness of its style, and in not being persuaded that this difference demands another author.

The Anchor Bible commentary on Colossians by M. Barth and H. Blanke (1994), referring to the similarities and differences between Ephesians and Colossians (in subject matter, vocabulary and style) concludes: 'At about the same time, but in addressing different congregations in different situations, one and the same author wrote both letters'(page 114). The author in their opinion is Paul.

In his 1999 commentary on Ephesians P.T.O'Brien comes to the same conclusion as Barth & Blanke.

It is important to add that a firm decision on authorship is not essential for an appreciation of this inspired and magnificent letter, which does offer us an excellent overview of a number of Paul's central insights.

I suggest that, finding himself confined in Caesarea, hearing that the problems he tried to counter in Colossae were spreading in Asia, and before he found himself in a new situation (Rome), with a new mission field opening up (Spain), Paul decided to write a general letter to the Gentile churches in the east, picking up some of the ideas he had earlier covered in Colossians, but extending the content to give a summary of key aspects of his gospel.

The fact that 'in Ephesus' appears in many manuscripts is perhaps because it was the Ephesian copy of the circular letter that was used when compiling Paul's letters.

General Letter to the communities in the East

