

Introduction to Philippians

Authorship

Philippians is almost certainly a letter authored by Paul. While this has been disputed from time to time, Paul is the most commonly accepted author. Of course, one of the most conclusive evidences of this authorship is in the letter itself, the very first verse, with the words “[From] Paul and Timothy” (Philippians 1:1). It is observed that the writing style, personal descriptions, and names of friends are another giveaway that it is a genuine letter from Paul (O'Brien, 1991, p. 9).

Additionally, it was most likely just Paul who wrote the letter, not Timothy (Hawthorne, 1993, p. 708). This is further supported by the use of personal pronouns, “I,” “me,” “my,” which occur fifty-one times in the letter. This article also says that, historically, the Church has accepted the letter as from Paul.

In the 1840s, F.C. Baur challenged the authorship of Philippians, which is the only well known challenge to date. One of his convincing arguments was that the hymn of Philippians (2:6-11) was most certainly not the style of Paul. This argument has been thrown-out in more recent commentaries (Hawthorne, 1993, p. 709)(O'Brien, 1991, p. 10).

Date and Place of Writing

The letter was written while Paul was serving a serious prison sentence (1:7, 13, 14), potentially ending his life (1:20-24). As to his place of imprisonment, there are four different ideas, the most prominent and longest-held of which is Rome, acquiring most of its accreditation from the book of Acts. The differing opinions are gathered from other letters written around the same time as Philippians that reference Paul and his imprisonment. Whatever the city Paul was held in, we know it had to have a praetorium (1:13) as well as people belonging to the house of Caesar (4:22). We know Timothy was with him (1:1, 2:19-23), that Paul planned to visit Philippi upon his release, and that several trips had already been made between his place of imprisonment and Philippi, so where he was held must have been within relatively close proximity to Philippi (Hawthorne, 1993, p. 709).

Along with Rome, it is also possible that the letter may have been written from Ephesus, gaining its integrity from, among other things, the fact that it was significantly closer to Philippi and would have been more accessible to those visiting Paul in prison. There is also possibility of Corinth, which coming from the fact that there was a “house of Caesar” there, which Paul references in his letter to the Philippians (4:22). Finally, Caesarea could be where Paul was held (Acts 23:35).

The date of writing is more dependent on where Paul was imprisoned; the dates are gathered from other letters that were written by other authors, referencing Paul and his imprisonment in that city at that time. As to which of those references is the time he was imprisoned writing Philippians is where the debate lies. If the letter was written from Rome, which is the most likely candidate, Paul wrote it sometime between A.D. 60 and 63. If written

while in Ephesus, between A.D. 54 and 57. If written from Corinth, about A.D. 50. Finally, if it was written in Caesarea, it was written between A.D. 58 and 60.

Recipients

As the name implies, and the greeting confirms (Philippians 1:1), the letter is written to the Church of Philippi in Macedonia, the first Church that Paul founded in Europe. The Philippians are obviously a group that is dear to Paul since the letter is the most personal of all of his letters (Hawthorne, 1993, p. 707). It is also evident that the members of the Church care about him since they visit him frequently.

Paul brought the gospel to Philippi with his companions Silas, Timothy, and Luke. While on their way to Bithynia, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia who begged them to come and help them (Acts 16:9). Upon arriving, Paul discovered that there was no synagogue in the city, just a small house of prayer outside the city gate (16:13). Paul presented the gospel to the few women that gathered there. One of the women, Lydia, believed along with her family whom she told. She allowed Paul and his companions to stay at her home for the remainder of their visit (16:14-15). It was from this event that Paul's ministry was started, and the Church in Philippi was founded.

Historical, Cultural and Social Context

The culture is rather hostile towards the Church in Philippi (O'Brien, 1991, p. 27). There have been many false teachers pressuring the leaders of the Church, which is why Paul so strongly wants to impose a good moral example upon them; the opponents in the society of Philippi could possibly be gentiles (Philippians 1:27-28), or "legalists" who were unbelieving Jews (3:2). One thing is for sure: The opponents are "enemies of the cross." (3:18-19) (O'Brien, 1991, p. 27).

The culture of Philippi in Macedonia was unique because it was a military outpost, populated with veterans of Emperor Octavian's wars. Though it was not located *in* Rome, it was part of the Roman Empire, and thus citizens were exempt from land and poll tax. Citizens were also entitled to protection under Roman law (Hawthorne, 1993, p. 707).

Though Paul encourages the people of the Church to adhere to the Roman law when it does not directly contradict the Biblical law, he also warns them to not become content to live in the ways of their culture; to conduct themselves as Christ would have them (1:27). It was inevitably not easy to live in Philippi and be part of the Church, which was undoubtedly persecuted (Hawthorne, 1993, p. 708).

Occasion of the Letter

Paul was prompted to write because of the gifts they have sent him through Epaphroditus (4:18). While visiting Paul, Epaphroditus became ill and had to stay longer than expected; part of the letter is to assure the Philippians that Epaphroditus did arrive and fulfill his duty, almost dying in the process (2:30). Paul also wanted to encourage and enlighten the Philippians in the way of Christ.

Purpose of the Letter

Paul encourages the Philippians that they are citizens not of this world, but of Heaven (3:20), and that they should not conduct themselves in the same manner as the unsaved: They

should shine like stars (2:15), not complain (2:14), and make sacrifices pleasing to God (2:17). He also warns them against selfish ambition and encourages them to remain humble (2:3), reminding them to boast only in Christ, to act as he did, and take the nature of a servant (2:7).

Additionally, Paul's letter was written to provide an example for the Philippians, himself being in prison, to how a believer should accept physical suffering for the work of Christ. More aptly, Paul wants to warn the Philippians against dangers which he has seen other Church's be torn apart by. The errors can be described as "thinking that the boundaries of Christianity are defined by the Mosaic law and that Christians who have "arrived" spiritually can do anything they like with their bodies"(Thielman, 2002, p. 346). Paul says that Christians must always stay attentive to Christ's teaching, no matter how "arrived" they think they are. Paul also warns the Philippians against quarrelling, reminding them that this may taint their witness.

Essentially, Paul is trying to encourage the Philippians to maintain the image of Christ in their conduct. He wants them to look to Christ for their answers, not society or peers. More personally, he uses his own example, suffering in chains for Christ, as an example for them and us to follow.

Works Cited

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