

ESSAY

Paul in Prison: Ephesus or Rome?

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In the books of 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul refers to hardships in his ministry in Asia, specifically Ephesus (1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 15:32; 2 Corinthians 1:8; 4:8-12; 6:4-5; 11:23-25). However, the multiple imprisonments Paul mentions are not fully reflected in Luke's account of Paul's ministry — Luke only records a

does not note. Clement of Rome, for example, specifically says of Paul, “Seven times he bore chains.”¹

This is relevant to the question of where Paul was “in chains” when he wrote the books popularly referred to as his “prison epistles” — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Philippians is different enough from the other three that it could have been written from a different imprisonment, but that has not been the traditional view. Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon are obviously written about the same time and were delivered by Paul’s companion, Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7).

N. T. Wright, the leading evangelical New Testament scholar of our day, posits an Ephesian imprisonment (early to mid 50s AD, as much as 8-10 years earlier than the Roman imprisonment of Acts 28) as the place where Paul was confined and from which Paul wrote these epistles: “Before looking at the other options, I should stress that I side with the majority of contemporary scholars, who think that the place where Paul was imprisoned at that stage was Ephesus.” No such imprisonment is mentioned in Acts, but Wright views that as no obstacle. He explains, “The matter is clinched, for me, by Paul’s proposal of a visit to Philemon in the near future (verse 22). From Ephesus, that would be easy and natural. When he was in prison in Caesarea he was planning to go to Rome, and a visit to Colosse would not be part of such a journey. When under house arrest in Rome, he was still hoping to go on to Spain.³ To place this letter in Ephesus, in the middle of Paul’s ministry (before his final visit to Corinth), is easy and natural, and would date it in the early or middle 50s.”

What factors favor an Ephesian imprisonment? Would an Ephesian imprisonment help us understand the life and ministry of the apostle Paul?

consider the various journeys referred to in the prison epistles. To begin with, Onesimus, Philemon's slave, fled from Colossae to either nearby Ephesus or faraway Rome. Also, Epaphras traveled from Colossae to wherever Paul was being detained in order to inform Paul about the church in Colossae and ask for Paul's help in dealing with false teachers.

In both cases, an Ephesian imprisonment makes these journeys easy. Hearing the report from Epaphras, Paul wrote the book of Colossians and assigned Tychicus the work of delivering both Ephesians and Colossians, and we must assume also the book of Philemon, since Philemon was a member — perhaps the leading member — of the church in Colossae. Again, sending Tychicus from Ephesus would have been a journey of just a few days, not a difficult supposition. In Philippians, which might have been written somewhat later than Colossians and Ephesians, Paul speaks of sending Timothy to visit the church and indicates his own plan to visit, assuming he would be released (Philippians 2:19-24). Even though Philippi is somewhat farther from Ephesus than Colossae, it is much closer than Rome and the trip would not have been difficult.

In his biography of Paul, Wright elaborates: "Other than Ephesus, the only places where we know Paul was in prison are Caesarea and Rome. When he was in Caesarea, he had already said farewell to the churches around the Aegean shoreline. When he was in Rome, he was intent on going farther west, to Spain. Even if he had changed his plans and decided in Caesarea to revisit Ephesus or had decided in Rome to return to the East one more time, it is not likely that his primary destination would have been a small town up the Lycus valley. So the guest room in Colossae provides the telltale hint that Paul was in prison in Ephesus."⁴

1

Thus, the Ephesian hypothesis seems also to be supported by what Paul wrote about his missionary plans, which he had already communicated to the church in Rome — probably in AD 57 shortly before going to Jerusalem. At that time, he wrote to the Roman church that he would first deliver the special offering for the poor to the church in Jerusalem. Then, he would stop by Rome and from Rome, he planned to go on to Spain (Romans 15:22-29). If Paul's plan

in Rome, as in Acts 28, traveling back to Colossae and Philippi, first, before going to Spain, for he would have to backtrack over 1000 miles before resuming his plan.

Thus, all in all, the numerous journeys referred to, including especially Paul's plan to visit Philemon but also his plan to visit Philippi (Philippians 2:24), makes the theory of an unmentioned Ephesian imprisonment attractive.

But this has not been the traditional view. So we have to ask: are there problems with the view of Ephesus at the place of Paul's imprisonment?

Profoundly significant is the fact that there is no mention of Paul in prison in Ephesus either in Acts or in Paul's epistles. This, in my view, is no small problem since an Ephesian imprisonment (if it had actually happened) would have been the most significant of all Paul's detentions, the place where he composed his most theologically mature epistles. Beyond this, there are at least five complications, some more serious than others.

First, the hypothetical Ephesian imprisonment would have to have been "house arrest," as was clearly the case in Rome (Acts 28:30) and seemingly the case in Caesarea (Acts 24:23). But if we suppose that Paul's statements in his Corinthian correspondence allude to an imprisonment in Ephesus, they do not sound at all like the house arrest in Rome — where Paul was not doing anything like fighting with wild beasts (1 Corinthians 15:32) or despairing of life (2 Corinthians 1:8). Luke tells us that when under "house arrest" in Rome, Paul was able to receive guests, visit with companions, and labor for the Gospel unhindered, including time and opportunity to write. Unless an imprisonment in Ephesus could have afforded the same "luxuries," it would not fit the circumstances described in the "prison epistles," where we see companions in abundance. If Paul had been under "house arrest" in Ephesus, he would have needed the help of the church there, as well as the friends named in the prison epistles.⁵ Concerning Ephesus, however, there is no evidence anywhere of the local church's concern for their great apostolic founder nor of a "house arrest" with corresponding "luxuries." Nor does the hypothesis of an Ephesian imprisonment afford a basis for assuming "house arrest." In both Caesarea and Rome, Paul had the favor of the magistrates in charge, which Luke indicates was the reason he was given such freedom. The

Second, even if we take into account the proximity of Ephesus to Colossae, the imprisonment in Ephesus would still have had to be relatively long for Paul to have entertained the many visitors referred to in his letters as coming and going, to have written the epistles, and to have them delivered. Paul was in Ephesus at most for 3 years (Acts 20:31). When and how long could he have been in prison in order for all these visits to occur and the epistles to have been written? Was he in prison for half of the time? Nothing in the book of Acts suggests the possibility of such a significant interruption in Paul's Ephesian ministry. Fitting a significantly long Ephesian imprisonment into Paul's Ephesian ministry creates a time problem.

Third, there is another time problem, for there must be enough time for Paul and Mark to be reconciled before Paul wrote Colossians. At the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas differed sharply about Mark's fitness for the ministry (Acts 15:36-40). We do not know of the subsequent ministry of Barnabas and Mark, but by the time Paul wrote Colossians, Mark was a trusted co-worker (Colossians 4:10). The Ephesian hypothesis posits just a few years from the trouble with Barnabas and Paul, whereas the traditional view of a Roman imprisonment allows about 10 years

2

— enough time for Mark to prove himself as a laborer for the Gospel — which would be essential to reconciliation — and for Paul to reevaluate and accept him. This is not to mention that there is early evidence of Mark in Rome, but no evidence of Mark in Ephesus, unless we hypothesize an Ephesian imprisonment.

Fourth, on N. T. Wright's view, the prison epistles were written before the book of Romans, sometime in the early or perhaps mid AD 50s. What this implies for Paul's theology is important, for what is usually understood to be Paul's most advanced and mature teaching about the body of Christ, seen in both Ephesians and Colossians, would have already been — on the Ephesian imprisonment hypothesis — part of Paul's instruction to the churches even before he wrote Romans. Thus, the Ephesian hypothesis suggests that even in epistles supposedly written after Ephesians and Colossians, Paul would have made no reference to his most advanced theological insights, in spite of the

Fifth, and I think most devastating for the Ephesian hypothesis, Luke was not with Paul in Ephesus. In the book of Acts, Luke's "we" sections leave out the period in Ephesus (cf. Acts 16:10-16; 20:6 ff.).⁷ But both the epistles to Colossians and Philemon specifically mention Luke as being with Paul when he wrote these letters. Thus, while Luke was apparently not with Paul in Ephesus, we know that he was with Paul in Rome (Acts 28:16).

The traditional view that Paul wrote from Rome during the period of house arrest depicted in Acts (28:16, 30-31) fits both the content of the letters in the context of Paul's theological development, as well as the historical situation presupposed in Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians. Assuming Philippians was also written from the same Roman house arrest, it may reflect the situation of a time rather later. After being in house arrest for a long time, Paul perhaps began to suspect that his case would not be so simple (Philippians 2:17), especially since by then there were those in Rome who sought to add to his afflictions (Philippians 1:15-16). Still, Paul is thankful that the Gospel has been spread among the whole praetorian guard (1:12-13) and Caesar's household — both pointing to a Roman imprisonment. He seems confident that he will be released and be able to visit the church in Philippi again (1:19-26; 2:24).

The traditional view does require that Paul made significant adjustments in his travel plans. But there is nothing unnatural about that. At the time he wrote of his intention to go to Spain (AD 57), he did not know that he would be arrested in Jerusalem, stay in Caesarea for two years (AD 57-59) and then, finally, visit Rome in chains (AD 60-62). Since God had intervened to revise Paul's plans, Paul would have had little choice in the matter. In particular, if we assume that Paul wrote Colossians and Philemon from Rome about AD 60 — long after his initial plans had been radically interrupted — Paul's devotion to Philemon and Onesimus — "my son Onesimus" and "my own heart" — as well as his gratitude to the Philippians, demanded that he rethink his missionary itinerary to include a visit to the churches in the East, including the little church in Colossae, before returning to Rome and perhaps going on to Spain — if indeed, he ever was able to fulfill that part of his hope for the ministry.

The traditional view also fits the climax of the book of Acts, with Paul in chains, but the Gospel itself being unbound and abounding. If we reject the

preached, no ministry except to those who came to him (Acts 28:0), no sending of emissaries with messages to churches? What Luke recounts as a time of earnest ministry seems to be the perfect background for the situation in the prison epistles but if the Ephesian hypothesis is accepted, the time in Rome would be reduced to something like anti-climactic inactivity.

The traditional view accounts for the evidence better. We should imagine “house arrest” in Rome as a busy affair. An approximately 60-year-old Paul would sit down for lunch with 8 companions and his Roman guard to listen to Epaphras’ report and talk together about the Colossian situation. While consulting and considering how to answer, Paul would compose his response. The rest would listen as Paul dictated the response for Timothy to write. Perhaps at another mealtime, we might imagine

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Epaphras, Onesimus and other younger Christians eagerly questioning Luke and Mark about Jesus’ life and ministry. Keeping in mind the many companions depicted in Colossians — at least ten men including Paul and his Roman guard — how many other visitors, local and distant, might have visited Paul during those busy and productive two years?

It is also relevant, I think, to note Luke’s portrayal of the ministries of Peter and Paul. As Luke presents it, Peter follows the example of the ministry of Christ in chapters 1-12 of the book of Acts. Peter preaches the Gospel, is hated by the Jews, is imprisoned and sentenced to death, then, by the grace of God he “resurrects” and appears to people who cannot believe that he is alive (Acts 12:12-17).

Then, from Acts 13 to the end, the life of the apostle Paul fits the paradigm of Christ. Paul preaches the Gospel and is everywhere opposed for his declaration of Jesus’ resurrection. Like Jesus, Paul is falsely accused and stands trial before Jews and Romans. Like Peter, he dies, in a manner of speaking (Acts 27:9 ff.), only to be resurrected to continue his ministry (Acts 27:22-26).

Imagine how oddly anti-climactic it would have been for Paul’s most-important imprisonment to have been in the middle of his ministry, in Ephesus. Contrary to Wright and much of modern scholarship, I believe —

“risen” to instruct disciples and have fellowship with his brothers in Christ as he works for the progress of the Gospel. Luke probably ended the book of Acts where he did because that was where he himself was historically — with Paul at the end of a two year imprisonment.

But, more importantly, Luke ended his narrative as he did because it was a resurrection climax, like that of the Gospels. In the end, we see Paul alive again and preaching the Gospel in Rome — as also the “prison epistles” show — like Jesus teaching the disciples after He rose from the dead. That the highest development of Paul’s Christology should come at the climax of his ministry is most appropriate.

Ralph Smith is pastor of Mitaka Evangelical Church.

[1] The words are in 1 Clement 5:7. I quote from *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, edited and translated by Bart Ehrman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 45. If we assume that Paul was “seven times in chains” or even more, the Philippian imprisonment probably serves as a good model of the typical imprisonment. In many places, Paul’s preaching led to riots or at least serious opposition from local Jews. Magistrates, fearing disorder, may have frequently arrested Paul, beat him (2 Corinthians 11:23-25) and put him in jail. Then, upon further investigation, finding out that he was a Roman citizen, being forced to release him.

[2] N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 7.

[3] I dispute this below. I think that by the time Paul was under house arrest in Rome, his plans had almost certainly changed, for at the time he wrote to the Romans, he could not have foreseen his arrest in Jerusalem, imprisonment in Caesarea, travel to Rome and house arrest there.

[4] N. T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018).

[5] Acts 28:15 tells of an official delegation from the church in Rome, greeting Paul on his arrival at the city. For the apostle Paul to be under arrest was a significant matter, involving a local church that he had not yet even visited — though he knew many members. For a full picture of prisons and visitors in

[6] F. F. Bruce wrote: “Much more decisive for the dating of Colossians is the other criterion — Paul’s conception of the Church as the body of Christ. A comparison of the setting forth of this conception in Colossians with its setting forth in 1 Corinthians and Romans suggests that Colossians marks a more advanced stage in Paul’s thinking on the subject than do 1 Corinthians and Romans. More will be said about this later in this chapter; suffice it to note here that, whereas in 1 Corinthians and Romans the common life of Christians is compared to the interdependence of the various members of a body, the head (or a particular part of the head) being one member among others, in Colossians (and Ephesians) Christ is viewed as the head of the body. This more advanced stage in Paul’s thinking may reflect his reaction to the Colossian heresy; at any rate, it is difficult to date it during his Ephesian ministry, about the same time as 1 Corinthians and earlier than Romans. It follows that an Ephesian imprisonment is out of the question as the setting of Colossians; and if an Ephesian imprisonment is out, we have to think of either Caesarea or Rome. As between these two alternatives, Rome is the more probable on all counts.” F. F. Bruce, *Paul Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Paternoster, Digital Edition, 2005).

[7] Ibid., “Luke does not appear to have been with Paul at any point during his Ephesian ministry, and we have no connected account of these years, for all their importance in the expansion of the Gentile mission.”

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