

## Ephesians: Background

- **Context:** Written in 61-62, when Paul was a prisoner in Rome (cf. 3:1, 4:1). Paul is sending the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon, in the care of Tychicus. He also sent along the letter to the Colossian church.
- **Relationship to Colossians:** “What is even more unusual is that the whole letter is so heavily dependent on Colossians: passage after passage can be explained as a rewriting of the key themes of Colossians, and about a third of its actual wording is taken over.” [IVP *New Bible Commentary*]
- **Style:**
  - Ephesians has a liturgical style, and contains two major prayers
  - “To the over-confident Corinthians he stressed the ‘not yet’; to the Galatians, wondering whether they should embrace the law to ensure salvation, he stressed the ‘already’. Colossians and Ephesians both stress the ‘already’ to encourage believers who are prone to fear the spiritual powers of the universe.” [NBC]
- **Themes:**
  - *Reconciliation of all creation in Christ*, most notably reconciliation of *Jew and Gentile* (2:10-16), creating a new humanity as the ultimate expression of Christ’s redeeming work, and reconciliation of humanity in general (2:17-18)
  - Christ’s *victory over the spiritual powers* for the sake of the church. Jewish and Gentile unity is the sign given to these powers of their present and ultimate defeat in Christ (ch. 3)
  - “‘*Unity of the Spirit*’ (4:1-16) by the way they ‘walk’, that is, by the way they live out the life of Christ in their corporate relationships, including their worship (4:1-5:20), and in their Christian households (5:21-6:9). All of this is brought into final focus in 6:10-20, where through the weapons and armor provided by Christ and the Spirit they are urged to stand as one people in their ongoing conflict with the powers” [Fee]
- **Structure:**
  - The new life in Christ, with all its spiritual blessings (1:3-2:10)
  - The new humanity/society in Christ (2:11-3:21)
  - The new standards of unity and purity entailed by this society (4:1-6:9)
  - How to protect this unity against spiritual attack (6:10-20)

- **The culture of the day, and spiritual forces:<sup>1</sup>**

Widespread in the Greco-Roman culture of Paul’s day was the belief that the world is populated by a multitude of suprahuman powers in constant conflict with each other. Human beings could become pawns and players in the rivalry and struggles that marked out the otherworldly realm. The spirit world could envelop the concrete world, as demonic spirits, and spiritual forces were thought to be alive and well, influencing human circumstances and destiny.

The Letter to the Galatians demonstrates that Paul could envisage the world in similar ways. So, for instance, he speaks of the Galatians having been ‘enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods’ prior to their Christian commitment (4:8). Moreover, Paul, having been transformed by God, claims to that ‘Christ lives in me’ (2:20), and hopes that his efforts among the Christians in Galatia will result in Christ being ‘formed in you’ (4:19). Paul expects the formation of Christ to be evident within the social relations of Galatian Christians, and this, for Paul, is first and foremost a matter of moral character; that is, Christian transformation is to be enacted in the giving of oneself for the benefit of others (5:13; 6:2) after the manner of Christ’s own selfless giving (1:4;

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce W. Longenecker, “Until Christ is Formed in You: Suprahuman Forces and Moral Character in Galatians,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, 92 (1999)

2:20). As Paul envisages the situation in Galatia, however, he perceives other spiritual realities to be at work, suprahuman forces that foster forms of moral character contrary to that of Christ and his people.

- **Authorship:** While the letter claims to be written by Paul, many (most? <sup>2</sup>) scholars think otherwise:
  - **Not Paul:**
    - The vocabulary is somewhat different from the other Pauline letters
    - Even though Paul has a history with Ephesus, the letter has little of a personal nature
    - The style is somewhat different from his other letters, having longer sentences
    - Some scholars find significant differences between the theology in Ephesians and that in the rest of Paul's letters
    - Conclusion: Probably written by a second-generation disciple so immersed in Paul's teachings that he could write as if he were Paul himself
  - **Yes, Paul:**
    - The words "in Ephesus" in 1:1 are not found in the most ancient and reliable texts, and so are not authentic. So this letter may either be a circular letter to the churches in Asia minor (say, the churches Tychicus will pass escorting Onesimus back to Philemon in Colosse); or it could be to a specific church along that route, such as Laodicea (making it the letter referred to in Col 4:16).
    - "Why should we expect such an original mind as Paul's to stay within the confines of a limited vocabulary and in inflexible style? Different themes require different words, and changed circumstances create a changed atmosphere." [Stott]
    - "I find 'Paul varying from himself' ... an easier historical scenario to imagine than that of a Paulinist of the undoubted brilliance of this author finding it necessary to clothe himself in Paul in order to express his concerns." [Fee] "The man who could write Ephesians must have been the apostle's equal, if not his superior, in mental stature and spiritual insight... Of such a second Paul early Christian history has no knowledge" (F. F. Bruce, quoted in Stott).
- **Useful Resources:**
  - Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*
  - D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, chs. 10-11
  - John W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*
  - Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, ch. 9
  - Raymond Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, ch. 3
  - D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, vol. 2. The Mar 25 entry, and the entry on Eph 3, summarize some important background on the Greek understanding of "mystery," and on Eph 5:21, "submit one to another."

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<sup>2</sup> In 1983, Raymond Brown estimated that 80% of scholars think Paul didn't write Ephesians, and 60% think he didn't write Colossians. Stott and the IVP *New Bible Commentary* and Fee think Paul is the likely author.