



Truth

On Tough Texts

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Who Were the Recipients of the Epistle to the Ephesians?

Ephesians 1:1

PAUL, AN APOSTLE OF JESUS CHRIST BY the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus.” Perhaps you are thinking, “How could this verse possibly be a tough text?” Well, incredibly, there is a major controversy concerning the Epistle to the Ephesians that has arisen in recent years. While some do not consider this very important or crucial, I am convinced that it is a significant issue. The issue is this: exactly *to whom* was Ephesians written? “But doesn’t this verse clearly tell us?” you ask. Ah, but that is precisely the problem. The key words **at Ephesus** are the words under dispute!

From a personal perspective, I am greatly troubled by this issue. In my early study and exposition of Ephesians back in the late 1980s, I was sucked into and accepted the view I am about to refute. In my second 3-1/2 year study and exposition during 2003-06, I spent weeks studying this issue and am convinced of its importance. Like Pauline authorship (which is denied by liberal scholarship), *in spite of the fact* that the entire Early Church regarded this as a letter that had been sent to the *Ephesians* by *Paul*, this has been challenged in recent years. It is believed by many that it was not, in fact, addressed to the Ephesians but was rather a circular letter.

The first extremely significant fact about this is that the first man to question the recipients of the letter was the 2nd Century Gnostic heretic Marcion. Reading Paul’s request in Colossians 4:16 that the Colossians and Laodiceans should exchange letters, he concluded that “the letter to Laodicea” mentioned there actually refers to this letter to the Ephesians. Based on that single opin-

ion, he actually altered the copy of the Greek text he had from “at Ephesus” to “at Laodicea.” But this was irrefutably proven to be an absurd conclusion. Except for his altered copy, *not one single manuscript* contains the heading, “to the saints that are at Laodicea.”¹ It has been further shown that Marcion, as one writer puts it, “cut and slashed texts to suit his purposes in an astounding manner.”² Tertullian, a contemporary of Marcion, wrote: “Instead of a stylus, Marcion employed a knife.” He went on to say that Marcion even changed the title of the letter.³

I mention this not only because of its historical importance, but also to say that modern thought is really not much different. The whole question of the destination of this letter actually revolves entirely around a textual issue. The real issue is this: because the words “at Ephesus” do not appear in the oldest Greek manuscripts, then some other destination is implied. But when we *objectively* and *honestly* analyze the textual evidence, we must conclude otherwise. The simple fact of the matter is that *only six* manuscripts omit the words “at Ephesus” while all others, thousands in fact, contain them. Among these six are the revered, but arguably questionable, 4th Century codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. It is argued that since they are the oldest, they are the best, which is the foundation of the modern textual criticism. But this argument has been shown by several conservative scholars to be illogical. How can it possibly be rational to accept a handful of manuscripts—which are in fact suspicious to begin with and actually contradict each other some 3,000 times—over thousands of other copies that

say something different and agree among themselves? The fact is, to say that older is *always* better is absurd, and any first semester student of logic would recognize it.⁴

We might also add, it has been shown by two scholars that it's very possible that the reason these wrongly revered 4th Century manuscripts omit the words "at Ephesus" might well be the result of Marcion's tampering with the text 200 years earlier.⁵

It's also conveniently ignored that while Sinaiticus and Vaticanus omit the words "at Ephesus" in the *text*, they still retain the *title* of the letter, "*The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*."⁶ The same is true of the Chester Beatty papyrus manuscript (P46) dated A.D. 200, which is the earliest extant manuscript of Paul's epistles. It, too, has *Pros Ephesious* ("to Ephesians") at the top of the first page. Why the contradiction? Why is it retained in the title but not in the text? We also should note that Vaticanus includes the words "in Ephesus" in the margin.

Another manuscript that is cited as not containing the words "in Ephesus" is the 12th Century Codex 67. But the truth here is that originally it actually *did* contain the words but some later "correctionist" deleted them apparently to make it conform to Vaticanus!⁷ Doesn't this bother anyone?

It is further argued that since Paul sends no greetings to the people in a church he labored in for three years, this implies that Ephesians was actually a circular letter, that is, not one sent to the single church but a general one sent to many churches. "Surely he knew everybody," it is argued, "so why wouldn't he send greetings?" This is not proof, however, because other Epistles lack such greetings. One scholar adds another perceptive point:

[This] argument is two-edged, for Paul's long years of labour at Ephesus must have made him acquainted with so many Christian people there, that their very number may have prevented him from sending any salutation. A roll far longer than the epistle itself might have been filled, and yet the list would have been by no means exhausted. Omissions might have given offence. . . .⁸

Still another commentator makes this observation:

The better he knows the parties addressed, and the more general and solemn the subject, the less he seems to give of these individual notices.⁹

In other words, personal greetings are far from being the most important issue, rather the lofty truths that the Epistle presents. This reminds me of the "user friendly" churches in our day, which are more concerned about being "touchy-feely" than they are about Truth. In this Epistle, Paul presents some of the grandest truths he ever

penned, so it is easy to assume that presenting these far exceeded any need for personal greetings.

Henry Alford, 19th Century biblical scholar, adds another objection to the circular theory. He writes that it is "[improbable] that the apostle, who in two of his Epistles (Second Corinthians and Galatians) has so plainly specified their encyclical character, should have here omitted such specification."¹⁰ Indeed, Galatians 1:2 makes it clear that Paul is writing to "the churches of Galatia," and II Corinthians 1:1 declares that that letter was meant not only for "the church of God which is at Corinth" but also "with all the saints which are in all Achaia." In both cases Paul makes it clear that the letter is meant to be circular, so if Ephesians was purposely designed to be such a letter, why does he not make that equally clear?

One verse that is cited as "proof" that Paul didn't write this letter directly to the Ephesians is 1:15, "Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints." Albert Barnes sums up the argument and then answers it this way:

The argument is, that he writes to them as if they were strangers to him, and that it is not language such as would be used in addressing a people among whom he had spent three years. . . . But this inference is not conclusive. Paul had been some years absent from Ephesus when this epistle was written. In the difficult communication in those times between distant places, it is not to be supposed that he would hear often from them. Perhaps he had heard nothing after the time when he bade farewell to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus (Ac 20), until the time here referred to. It would be, therefore, a matter of great interest with him to hear from them; and when, in some way, intelligence was brought to him at Rome of a very gratifying character about their growth in piety, he says that his anxiety was relieved, and that he did not cease to give thanks for what he had heard, and to commend them to God in prayer.¹¹

Likewise, Charles Hodge writes:

As Paul was the founder of the church in Ephesus and had labored long in that city, it has always caused people to wonder that he should speak of having heard of their faith, as though he had no personal acquaintance with them. This expression is one of the reasons why many people think, as mentioned in the Introduction, that this letter was addressed not to the Ephesians alone or principally, but to all the churches in the western part of Asia Minor. It is, however, not unnatural that the apostle should speak in this way about so large and constantly changing a congregation after being absent from them for a time. Besides, the expression need

mean nothing more than that he continued to hear about their general welfare.¹²

John Eadie agrees and boldly states:

It is wrong to argue from this expression . . . that the apostle had no personal knowledge of the persons whom he addressed. This was an early surmise, for it is referred to by Theodoret. Some, says he, have supposed that the apostle wrote to the Ephesians, *os medepo theasamenos autous*, (as having never seen them.) But some years had elapsed since the apostle had visited Ephesus, and seen the Ephesian Church; and might he not refer to reports of their Christian steadfastness which had reached him? Nay, his use of the word may signify that such intelligence had been repeatedly brought to him.

Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown make still another point:

“Ever since I have heard.” Not implying that he had only heard of their conversion: an erroneous argument used by some against the address of this Epistle to the Ephesians; but referring to the report he had heard since he was with them, as to their Christian graces. So in the case of Philemon, his “beloved fellow laborer” (Phm 1:1), he uses the same words (Phm 1:4,5).

We could also cite R. C. H. Lenski, who makes the same point, as well as Eadie’s. Finally, Matthew Poole puts the matter very simply with this comment:

He was an eyewitness of their first believing, but here he speaks of their increase and constancy in the faith since, of which he had heard by others.

All these comments should demonstrate just how ridiculous this whole theory is.

Another important point here is that omitting “at Ephesus” makes the verse not only grammatically incorrect but even unintelligible. The verse therefore says, “to the saints which are,” a statement that makes no sense and one which we find hard to accept that Paul would write. Paul always includes the destination of his letters, so why not here?

To answer this, the critic argues—and this is perhaps the most absurd theory of all—that the two clauses “to the saints that are . . . and to the faithful” imply a blank space; perhaps multiple copies were made and the name of each church was inserted in the copy sent to it. But this just begs the question and assumes that these few manuscripts are correct in omitting “at Ephesus.” More importantly, in fact, such a fill-in-the blank document was, as one writer puts it, “without parallel in the annals of the primitive Church. It is, as far as I am aware, essentially a modern notion.”¹³ In other words, to prop up their position, somebody just made up the idea

of a blank space in the manuscript, despite the fact that such a practice was unknown in that day.

I must say again, this issue greatly troubles me. It does so because it is important in view of biblical authority. *This theory challenges the clear text of Scripture that is supported by the majority of the Greek manuscripts.* Sadly, the majority of modern commentators and expositors spew out this unfounded theory. In essence, they say, “Well, since those six manuscripts don’t have ‘at Ephesus,’ then this was probably just a circular letter in which they perhaps just wrote in the name of the church before they sent the copy.” Every time I read such a statement, written by a godly and intelligent man, it simply amazes me at how undiscerning we have become. Why do we want to hold on to some ridiculous theory that has not one shred of support but makes no positive contribution to the text?

As I pondered this, I thought of an analogy. The same evangelicals who most certainly reject evolution because it is a God-rejecting and totally improvable theory, then turn right around and accept a ridiculous and pointless theory such as this. After careful examination of this theory, I am totally appalled at its widespread acceptance and the cavalier attitude with which it is treated.

We should also point out, not only do the majority of Greek manuscripts include “at Ephesus,” but so do *all* the ancient versions (translations) of Ephesians *without exception*, as do *all* the ancient commentaries on Ephesians.

Another 19th Century scholar, John Eadie, who wrote one of the most authoritative commentaries on Ephesians, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, is very difficult to argue with when he sums up this matter:

We are therefore brought to the conclusion that the Epistle was really meant for and originally entitled [sic] to the church at Ephesus. The strong external evidence is not weakened by internal proof or statement; the seal and the inscription are not contradicted by the contents. Such was the opinion of the ancient church as a body, as seen in its [manuscripts], quotations, commentaries, and all its versions; of the mediaeval church; and in more modern times of the commentators Calvin and [many others].¹⁴

It could not be clearer, therefore, that the Church has, through the ages, universally accepted the fact that this Epistle was written *by* Paul and addressed *to* the Church at Ephesus.

Why make such an issue of this? I do so because only in recent years have both of these been challenged, and challenged even by Evangelicals. I for one refuse to be sucked into anything that in any way weakens, waters

down, compromises, or casts doubt upon Scripture. *And that is exactly what this theory does.* Evangelicals and Fundamentalists today have been sold a bill of goods by so-called “scholars” who in reality merely undermine the Word of God with their speculations.

The fact is that for people today to argue against the authenticity of the words “at Ephesus” is total folly. We say again, the real issue here is textual. This whole thing would not even arise were it not for modern Textual Criticism that ignores (and even scoffs at) the Traditional (Majority) Text theory, which holds that the true text of Scripture has been providentially preserved in the majority of Greek manuscripts. Burgon again writes:

In the face of this overwhelming mass of unflinching evidence to insist that [Sinaiticus and Vaticanus] must yet be accounted right, and all the rest of Antiquity wrong, is simply irrational. To uphold the authority, in respect of this nonsensical reading, of *two* MSS confessedly untrustworthy in countless other places,—against *all* the MSS—*all* the versions,—is nothing else but an act of vulgar prejudice. . . . It is absolutely unreasonable for men to go out of their way to invent a theory wanting every element of probability in order to account for the omission of the words [in Ephesus] . . .¹⁵

What a significance statement! *They have truly gone “out of their way” to explain a problem where no problem exists.* Against simple and overwhelming evidence, they have created a ridiculous theory—and please get this—a theory that has no positive end and no good purpose. As I researched, pondered, and wrote about this hour after hour, I finally asked, “What possible good can come out of denying the words ‘at Ephesus’ and coming up with some preposterous theory to explain the absence?” I could find only one answer—*none*. It accomplished nothing good. *All it ultimately accomplishes is to cast one more doubt on the veracity and trustworthiness of our present translations.* This, Dear Reader, upsets me, and it ought to upset every Christian who loves God’s Word. We should all be sick and tired of the constant subtle challenges to the veracity of Scripture today made by not only liberals but even Evangelicals. Instead of accepting the simple facts before them, they create theories that ultimately dishonor God’s Word.

As mentioned already, it is most interesting and instructive that most modern commentators and expositors have swallowed this view of Ephesians against the ancient evidence. It’s tragic just how gullible and undiscerning we have become. One refreshing exception, however, is the commentary on Ephesians contained in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, written by the faculty of Dallas Seminary. Harold W. Hoehner writes:

It seems better to accept “in Ephesus” as genuine because of the wide geographical distribution of

the Greek manuscripts that do include those words. Also no manuscripts of this epistle mention any other city, and none have only the word “in” followed by a space to insert a city’s name. The pre-script or title “To the Ephesians” appears in all manuscripts of this epistle. Furthermore, all the letters Paul wrote to churches mention their destinations.

Another comment in the *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* is also worth mentioning:

Some believe that this epistle may have been a circular letter addressed to a number of different churches. It seems more likely, however, that a particular congregation was in view, and there is no strong reason for rejecting the traditional destination—Ephesus.

Additionally, Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, and others, accept “in Ephesus” as genuine.

If I may share one other quotation. Writing in 1891, *after* the discovery of Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, B. W. Johnson writes in his work *The People’s New Testament with Explanatory Notes*:

The absence of at Ephesus in a few manuscripts of the fourth century, and in the Vatican, as well as all other difficulties, can be explained without the necessity of denying that the Epistle was addressed to the Ephesians. Hence the great majority of critics have agreed in following the authority of existing manuscripts and of the ancient church in the statement that the Epistle was addressed to the great congregation founded by its writer in the capital of proconsular Asia, which had enjoyed his apostolic labors for a longer period than any other of which a record has come down to us.

Two things struck me as I read that. First, any difficulties that arise can be explained without denying that the letter was addressed to the Ephesians. We have, in fact, dealt with these difficulties. The second thing that struck me, however, is even more profound, namely, “the great majority of critics have agreed in following the authority of existing manuscripts and of the ancient church in the statement that the Epistle was addressed to [the Ephesians].” In other words, in *his* day, 1891, just like throughout Church history, the majority of the church accepted this letter as being addressed to the Ephesians; that is, in *his* day there was no problem. In *our* day, however, there *is* a problem, namely, we have rejected time-honored Truth and have been sold a lie by liberal criticism.

As I continued pondering all this, I asked myself, why don’t more of us see this development? Why aren’t more of us bothered by it? Why aren’t more of the intelligent, educated, and godly men of today concerned

about all this? Why can't we recognize that the Bible is under attack from every direction? Some might ask, "So what? What's the big deal that the words 'at Ephesus' aren't there? What difference does it make?" The difference is that it is just one more subtle attack on the veracity of the Word of God. Instead of looking at Scripture rationally, let us just look at the text—the *issue is always the text*. Those who reject these well-attested words are, whether they recognize it or not, undermining the text. They say they believe in the authority of Scripture, but then tolerate and even embrace something manufactured by the liberal critic.

Another reason we make an issue of all this is because as one enters into a study of this wondrous Epistle (an Epistle that has been my passion for 20 years), like any other study, what is the first prerequisite? It is this: before studying it, one must first believe that it is God's Word. But if we swallow some liberal criticism, one might as well stop immediately because other doubts will arise. There are, in fact, other challenges to the text of Ephesians by the critic,¹⁶ so one had better decide up front whether he will stand or compromise.

In summary, there is absolutely no valid reason whatsoever to doubt that the Epistle to the Ephesians was written by the Apostle Paul to the Church at Ephesus. It is, in fact, foolish, irrational, and destructive to do otherwise. Might it still have been circulated among other churches? That is certainly possible,¹⁷ but that in no way detracts from the fact that it was addressed by Paul to the Ephesians.

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NOTES

- ¹ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, three volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993 Reprint).
- ² R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians* Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1937, 2001), p. 337.
- ³ Cited in John Burgon, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark* (Oxford and London: James Parker and CO., 1871, Reprinted by The Dean Burgon Society), p. 106.
- ⁴ Theologian and philosopher Gordon Clark, who taught logic for 50 years, provides an excellent example: "It is not true that the oldest manuscripts are always the best. If the original X were copied in A.D. 110, and this copy was copied in A.D. 120, and so on to A.D. 200, there would be ten generations between the original and the final copy. Each step would incorporate an error or two. But suppose another copy was made directly from X in A.D. 210. This manuscript would be *later* than A.D. 200, but it would be only *one* step away from the original, not ten steps; and would therefore be better than the more ancient copy. This would be true even if all errors were accidental. But now suppose that *two* copies of the original were made: one contains a few accidental mistakes, but the other was written by a man who wanted to change the message and who therefore deliberately altered the text. In this case, and this case did in fact occur, the earlier manuscript would be *worse* than

the majority of very late copies with their purely accidental mistakes. Manuscripts [Sinaiticus and Vaticanus] are *supposed* to be two copies of the same earlier manuscript. They attest the same readings. But can it be shown that this earlier, now non-existent manuscript was a good copy? Might it not be the one Marcion mutilated?" (*Ephesians*, [Trinity Foundation, 1986], p. 3, emphasis added).

- ⁵ Lenski (p. 338) and Clark (p. 3).
- ⁶ Noted in *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975).
- ⁷ Lenski (p. 337) and John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998; reprint of 2nd Edition, 1861), p. xxii.
- ⁸ Eadie, p. xxx.
- ⁹ Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown.
- ¹⁰ Cited in Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown.
- ¹¹ *Barnes Notes on the New Testament* (electronic edition in *The Online Bible*).
- ¹² *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994. Electronic edition, Logos Library Systems).
- ¹³ Burgon, p. 104.
- ¹⁴ Eadie, p. xxxiii.
- ¹⁵ Burgon, pp. 99 and 108 (emphasis in original).
- ¹⁶ E.g., the words "through Jesus Christ" in 3:9 and "with his flesh and blood" in 5:30.
- ¹⁷ Charles Hodge writes: "The assumption that this letter was designed specially for any one church but intended equally for all the churches in that part of Asia Minor has met with more favor. This view, first suggested by Archbishop Ussher, has been adopted, and variously modified, by many others. The great objection to it is the overwhelming authority in favor of the reading "in Ephesus" in the greeting and the unanimous testimony of the early church. Perhaps the most probable solution of the problem is that the letter was written to the Ephesians and addressed to them, but being intended specially for the Gentile Christians as a class, rather than for the Ephesians as a church, it was designedly thrown into such a form as to suit it to all such Christians in the neighboring churches, to whom no doubt the apostle wished it to be communicated. This would account for the absence of any reference to the peculiar circumstances of the saints in Ephesus."

D. Edmond Hiebert also writes: "The Epistle was written to the Ephesians and addressed to them, but . . . the Apostle intentionally cast it into a form which would make it suitable to the Christians in the neighboring churches and intended that it should be communicated to them." (*An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, p. 266).

Harold Hoehner concurs: "Even so, the epistle may still be considered a circular letter, with Ephesus being the primary church addressed since Paul had stayed there so long and since it was the capital city of the province of Asia. This helps explain the absence of personal names of Ephesian believers. If this epistle were routed to other churches after the Ephesians read it, it may have gone to Laodicea and Colosse, for Paul in writing Colossians urged the believers there to "read the letter from Laodicea" (Col. 4:16), possibly a reference to the Ephesian epistle." ("Ephesians" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1984]).

