

18.9

How Many Letters to Philippi?

Polycarp, a second-century bishop, mentions letters of Paul to the Philippians. Did Paul write more than one letter to this church? Some scholars believe that the letter to the Philippians in our Bibles is actually a composite of two or three letters that Paul wrote at different times.

- 3:1a; 4:8–9, 21–23 sound like possible conclusions to letters
- 3:1b–4:3 has a different tone than the rest of the letter (warnings against enemies in a letter that is otherwise happy and confident)
- 4:10–20 expresses thanksgiving for a gift, which typically came at the beginning of a letter rather than at the end
- 2:25–30 speaks of Epaphroditus returning to Philippi after a protracted illness, but 4:18 refers to him as if he has just arrived

A “two-letter theory” suggests that Paul wrote one letter (3:1b–4:20) when Epaphroditus first arrived and another letter (1:1–3:1a; 4:21–23) after Epaphroditus recovered from sickness. A “three-letter theory” suggests that Paul wrote an early thank-you note (4:10–20), a follow-up letter that was hopeful and confident (1:1–3:1a; 4:4–7, 21–23), and a third letter to address problems in the church (3:1b–

4:3; 4:8–9). In either case, a later editor is supposed to have woven the different letters together to form the one that we now have in our Bibles.

There is no solid evidence to support these proposals, but many scholars think that Philippians makes better sense when its contents are reorganized into two or three different compositions. Others find such theories an unnecessary imposition; they assume that Paul dictated the letter over a period of time in a way that allows shifts in his thought and mood.