

23.10

Where Was Paul When He Wrote to Philemon?

We know that Paul wrote to Philemon from prison (see Philem. 1, 9, 23), but he appears to have been in prison many times and in many places (2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23). Of course, some of his multiple imprisonments may have been overnight lockups, such as those reported in Acts at Philippi (Acts 16:23–39) and Jerusalem (Acts 23:10–31). He would not have had time for crafting letters on those occasions.

Most scholars believe that Paul was in prison for a considerable time in three locations:

- **Ephesus** (ca. 54–55). The New Testament never actually mentions an imprisonment of Paul in Ephesus, but Paul does say that he experienced ordeals there (1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:8–9), and it seems likely that these included imprisonment.
- **Caesarea** (ca. 58–60). The book of Acts reports that Paul was in prison in Caesarea for what appears to be a two-year period (Acts 23:33–26:32).
- **Rome** (early 60s). The book of Acts also says that Paul was in prison in Rome (Acts 28:16, 30).

A majority of scholars think that Paul writes to Philemon from either Ephesus or Rome. The decision between these two locations (and

dates) usually is related to another decision about a completely different matter: the question of whether Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians.

Philemon and Colossians have many similarities (e.g., they name many of the same people, including Archippus and Onesimus).

Scholars generally conclude that these similarities must be explained in one of two ways: either (1) Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians around the same time that he wrote Philemon and under similar circumstances, or (2) someone else had a copy of Paul's letter to Philemon and borrowed the personal references to make a pseudonymous letter to the Colossians appear to be an authentic Pauline composition.

The Three Possibilities

Let's take the last possibility first. If Paul did not write Colossians, then we may consider the letter to Philemon on its own terms, without any reference to what is contained in Colossians. Where is Paul? Ephesus seems to be the most likely location, because it is a much shorter distance from Colossae; Onesimus could have made his way to Ephesus much more easily than to Rome. In addition, Paul's request to Philemon to have a guest room ready for him in Colossae when he is released from prison (Philem. 22) would make more sense if he were only 110 miles away.

But what if Paul did write Colossians? That would complicate matters because the ideas expressed in that letter are more developed than

what we find in other letters of Paul. Most scholars who think that Paul wrote Colossians assume that he did so very late in life (otherwise, why wouldn't some of those ideas pop up in other letters, ones written later than Colossians?). If Colossians has to be regarded as one of Paul's last letters, and if Philemon was written at the same time as Colossians, then both Philemon and Colossians probably should be viewed as products of the Roman imprisonment rather than the Ephesian one.

In support of this position, scholars also note that some of the persons named in Philemon (and Colossians) are associated with Rome in other New Testament writings: Mark (if it is the same Mark) is associated with Rome in 1 Peter 5:13; Luke is associated with Rome in 2 Timothy 4:11 (and in Acts 28:16 if Luke is the author of Acts); Demas is associated with Rome in 2 Timothy 4:10; Aristarchus is said to have been with Paul in both Ephesus (Acts 19:29) and Rome (Acts 27:2).

A few scholars have suggested the "compromise" solution that Paul is writing to Philemon from Caesarea, but this has not gone over well: Caesarea is also a long way from Colossae, and the imprisonment there does not allow for Colossians to be produced at the end of Paul's life.

Conclusion

Most scholars who believe that Paul wrote Colossians think that both Philemon and Colossians were written in Rome around 60–61 and

then carried to Colossae by Tychicus (Col. 4:7–8), accompanied by Onesimus (Col. 4:9).

Most scholars who believe that Paul did not write Colossians usually think that he wrote Philemon from Ephesus around 54–55 and that someone else later used Philemon as a guide to create a pseudonymous letter to the church at Colossae.