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Authorship of Ephesians

At least three scenarios for authorship of Ephesians are possible, and all three have attracted considerable support from interpreters in the modern era.

Ephesians Was Written by the Apostle Paul

A common proposal is that Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians to deal with specific issues in that congregation, and then, while those thoughts were still fresh in his mind, he composed a more general letter to be taken to various churches in Asia Minor, perhaps sending the original to the favored church of Ephesus and entrusting them with the responsibility of copying and disseminating it for him. A rough analogy to such a process might be found in the letters of Galatians and Romans, the first written to deal with a particular situation, and the second covering much of the same ground in more general terms.

Scholars who favor this scenario usually play down the significance of the letter's distinctive features and explain them in light of context and circumstances. Paul may have used an amanuensis or secretary to compose the letter, and the fact that he was in prison (literally in chains? [see 6:20]) may have meant that he had to grant that person more latitude with regard to the actual wording than he would have done under ideal circumstances. Furthermore, the letter

reflects Paul's mature thinking, presenting more settled reflection than is evident in letters that were composed in response to immediate crises in his congregations. Its distinctive perspectives do not have to be viewed as contradictory to what is in the other letters; they may be considered representative endpoints for the trajectories of thought that are evident elsewhere.

Ephesians Was Written by One of Paul's Disciples after His Death

According to this view, the author was someone who wanted to express what the apostle Paul would have said were he still around. One version of this theory holds that *Ephesians* is simply a posthumous publication, composed soon after Paul's execution as the letter that Paul had intended to write and presenting (in the language of one of his disciples) what had been on the apostle's mind in his final days. Another version of this theory allows that *Ephesians* may have been written some years later (in the 70s or 80s) by someone who felt authorized to speak for Paul and who thought that writing in his name was an appropriate way to honor him and keep the Pauline tradition alive.

In any case, if the letter was in fact produced by one of Paul's disciples, who might that person have been? Timothy is listed as a coauthor for *Colossians*, so his name comes to mind. Other suggestions are more creative: Onesimus, the runaway slave whom Paul sent back to Philemon and who, according to some traditions,

later became a bishop in Ephesus (see chap. 23, “Historical Background” in the printed book); Luke the physician, who may be the author of the Gospel and Acts, and who is said to have been with Paul during his Roman imprisonment (Col. 4:14; Philem. 24); or Tychicus, the presumed bearer of the letter, who is then thought to have copied what Paul said about him in Colossians (4:7) and placed it at the end of Ephesians (6:21) as something of a secret signature.

This is all speculation, of course, and scholars who hold to this theory of authorship usually are content to ascribe Ephesians to “Paul’s best disciple,” by which they mean one who possessed the brilliance and eloquence to produce a theological masterpiece, along with the humility to give his departed teacher the credit for it. Those who hold this view maintain that it accounts both for the basic continuity with Pauline thought that is evident in Ephesians and for those elements that they do not believe can be attributed to the apostle: what we have in Ephesians is the ideas of Paul filtered through the mind of an extraordinarily gifted apprentice.

Ephesians Was Written by a Later Admirer of Paul Who Had Not Actually Known Him

A third position allows that Ephesians was written by someone who wanted to use Paul’s revered name to promote his own ideas (and who, no doubt, thought that he was honoring the apostle by giving him credit for those ideas and so continuing his legacy). Scholars

who hold to this view often claim that Ephesians has much in common with the works of church leaders who wrote in the second century. Its elevation of the church, in particular, marks a transition from the Christianity of Paul's day to what may be termed "early catholicism." The assumption is that the person or group responsible for Ephesians was familiar with Colossians and accentuated the movement toward high ecclesiology that was already evident in that writing; in copying the style and format of that letter, the author of Ephesians for some reason failed to reproduce the greetings and other personal elements that would have made Ephesians look more like a typical Pauline production.

Nevertheless, the letter managed to gain acceptance almost immediately as a genuine letter of Paul; such acceptance may have been facilitated by its intrinsic appeal (as beautiful and elegant), by its superficial contact with Pauline terminology, and by its elevation of ecclesiastical authorities (2:20; 3:5; 4:11), who, after all, were in the position to make judgments on whether a work was genuine. Scholars who hold to this view tend to read Ephesians as expressive of a decidedly post-Pauline perspective that reveals how Christians of a later generation had developed some of his ideas in directions that he himself may not have taken.

Conclusion

These different views regarding the authorship of Ephesians lead to different ways of interpreting the letter. As one scholar has noted,

Ephesians is variously read as “the mature fruit of Paul’s thought,” “an inspired re-interpretation of Paul’s thought,” or “the beginning distortion of Paul’s thought”¹

1. See Nils Dahl, “Ephesians,” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 268.

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