

Who Wrote Ephesians? An Online Postscript

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I chose not to provide detailed discussion of who wrote Ephesians in the commentary because it is not crucial for understanding the meaning of Ephesians for Christian faith and life. However, the question of who wrote Ephesians is of interest to some readers, so here are the reasons why I believe the Letter to the Ephesians was written by Paul himself. Readers who want more than this brief overview may consult some of the major scholarly writings on the topic.¹

The two main positions among scholars are (1) that the apostle Paul himself is the author of the letter and (2) that Ephesians is “pseudonymous,” written in Paul’s name by a loyal disciple to sum up Paul’s teaching and to apply it to a new situation fifteen to twenty-five years after the Apostle’s death.

Many people today assume the pseudonymity of Ephesians because they have heard this is the conclusion of most scholars who have studied the matter. In his 1997 book *Introduction to the New Testament*, Raymond E. Brown states that “the evidence has pushed 70 to 80 percent of critical scholarship to reject” authenticity, the view that the Apostle himself wrote Ephesians.² Brown’s impression of the scholarly consensus, however, is mistaken. In a detailed study published in 2002, Harold Hoehner surveys the positions on the authorship of Ephesians scholars since 1792 (279 authors, 390 works) and then summarizes the results in three tables.³ Hoehner’s study indicates that in the twentieth century, only during the 1970s and the 1980s did a majority of the scholarly works on Ephesians assert that Paul was not the author. During those two decades the percentage of scholarly works favoring pseudonymity was 54 percent and 58 percent respectively—considerably less than Brown’s “70 to 80 percent of critical scholarship.” By the 1990s the tide had reversed, evenly dividing the percentage of authors publishing critical works on Ephesians.

1. For brief scholarly overviews, see Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 627–30, in favor of pseudonymity; and C. E. Arnold, “Ephesians, Letter of,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 240–43, in favor of authenticity. For those who want detailed discussions, see the introductions of the major scholarly commentaries. Works that argue for pseudonymity include Ernest Best, *Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1990); Margaret McDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000); and Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991). Works that argue for authorship by Paul include Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1–3* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974); Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); Peter T. O’Brien, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

2. Brown, *Introduction*, 629.

3. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 9–20.

I reference Hoehner's statistics not as an argument for Paul's authorship but merely to show that the question is not settled. Rather than "counting scholars," it is better to weigh the evidence. Most of the arguments on both sides can be understood by those who are not biblical scholars.

External Evidence

The "external evidence" in favor of Paul's authorship of Ephesians—that is, the testimony of the manuscript tradition and of ancient authors—is as strong as that of any of Paul's undisputed letters. Ephesians appears in all the ancient collections of Paul's writings, including those that omit the Apostle's letters to individuals (1–2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon). It is true that the Letter to the Hebrews, an anonymous work, is often also included in these collections, but from Origen on, many ancient authorities challenged the view that Hebrews was authored by Paul, while the Pauline authorship of Ephesians was never questioned.

The use of Ephesians in early Christian writings points to the first-century Church's belief that it was written by the apostle named in the text. Ephesians is the first New Testament book referenced in early Church writings that have come down to us. St. Clement's letter to the Corinthians around AD 96 contains a few phrases that seem to be drawn from Ephesians, including a prayer to "open the eyes of our heart that we might know you" (alluding to 1:18) and an exhortation to "let each be subject to his neighbor" (alluding to 5:21).⁴ St. Ignatius of Antioch (AD 35–108), writing to the church in Ephesus, addresses his readers as "imitators of God" (see Eph 5:1), and in his letter to St. Polycarp of Smyrna he refers to the armor of God (see Eph 6:11–17). Polycarp (AD 65–135), in his letter to the Philippian church, quotes Eph 4:26 and refers to it as Scripture. St. Irenaeus (130–200) cites Ephesians numerous times, naming Paul as the author, as does Tertullian (160–220) and St. Clement of Alexandria (150–215). The heretic Marcion (d. 160) regarded Paul as the author of Ephesians, as did some of the gnostic authors of the late second century and the orthodox Muratorian Canon (late second century). The clear external evidence pointing to Paul as the author of Ephesians places the burden of proof on contrary hypotheses.

Objections to Paul's Authorship

The first objections to Paul's authorship of Ephesians arose among Scripture scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century on the basis of "internal evidence," that is, content that seemed inconsistent with Paul's authorship. Four main reasons for questioning the authenticity of Ephesians have been proposed: (1) its depiction of Paul and his relation to his readers, (2) its vocabulary and style, (3) its theology, and (4) its unique relationship to the Letter to the Colossians. We'll look at each of these in order.

Paul's Relation to His Readers

In Ephesians 1:15 the author mentions "hearing" about the faith and love of his readers, and in 3:2 he remarks, "if, as I suppose, you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that

4. Clement also seems to refer to 4:4–6 and 4:18 (Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 2–3). If these are indeed allusions to Ephesians (some scholars dispute them), they are the earliest extant references to a New Testament writing.

was given to me.” This suggests a lack of personal acquaintance between Paul and a substantial portion of the intended readership. In addition, the depiction of the role of the “holy apostles and prophets” in 3:1–13 could seem like a later writer recalling revered founders rather than the Apostle describing himself.

Paul, however, uses “holy” (*hagios*) repeatedly to refer to all Christians and does not hesitate within the undisputed letters to declare unabashedly his divine calling and authorization.⁵

The fact that many of his intended readers have learned of Paul’s ministry indirectly and that Paul has “heard” of their faith and love is entirely consistent with a circular letter written after several years’ absence to a growing population of Christians spread over a large metropolitan area and the province of Roman Asia.

Vocabulary and Style

Although the author of Ephesians uses about eighty words not found in the undisputed letters, most of those who subscribe to the hypothesis of pseudonymity no longer consider the difference in vocabulary to be significant, since Galatians uses about the same number of words not found in the other six undisputed letters.⁶ On the other hand, the elegant literary style of Ephesians differs so much from the earlier letters that it constitutes a widely held reason to question Paul’s authorship. This style difference can be detected by reading Ephesians in English but is even more apparent in Greek. The author heaps up prepositional phrases, participle phrases, relative clauses, and strings of nearly synonymous nouns and verbs in long sentences (1:3–14; 3:14–19; and 4:11–16 are among the longest sentences in the New Testament). Scholars describe this style as “pleonastic,” which means “full” or “abundant.” The author uses words intended to excite the imagination of the reader, such as “rich” or “riches” (six times) and “glory” or “glorious” (eight times). This distinctive style occurs especially in the first three chapters, where the author employs a demonstrative rhetorical style.

Nevertheless, possible explanations for the unique style of Ephesians that are consistent with Paul’s authorship exist and are mentioned below.

Theological Differences from the Undisputed Letters

Regarding the third objection—theological differences—the Christology, eschatology, and ecclesiology of Ephesians are clearly developed beyond that of the undisputed letters. Ephesians presents Christ as the head of the cosmos, as “head over all things . . . the one who fills all things in every way” (1:22–23). This differs from the language that appears in the undisputed letters, though it has strong affinities with Col 1:15–20.

This Christology, however, may be explained equally well as Paul’s response to ideas circulating in Asia Minor about the influence of spiritual principalities and powers (see 6:12; Col 2:15). By means of this language, the Apostle affirms Christ’s divine supremacy as he does elsewhere (1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:9–11).

It is true that Ephesians offers a “realized eschatology” that emphasizes the completeness of the blessings already enjoyed by Christians (1:3) and does not use expressions like

5. See, for instance, Rom 1:5 and 15:18 (entrusted by the Lord Jesus with grace and apostleship among the Gentiles); 1 Cor 15:8–10 (a chosen witness to the risen Lord, like the other apostles); Gal 1:15–16 (set apart by God before his birth, like Jeremiah); Gal 2:7–9 (divinely empowered apostle, like Peter).

6. Brown, *Introduction*, 628.

parousia or “the day of the Lord” found in the undisputed letters. The clearest example of this “realized eschatology” is 2:6, where the author describes believers as already “seated . . . with him [Christ] in the heavens” (very similar to an idea expressed Col 3:1–3). Besides being a novel and challenging idea, it stands in tension with Paul’s ironic comparison of his present suffering with the self-assurance of the Corinthian Christians, who think they are already reigning (1 Cor 4:8–10).

Nevertheless, a realized eschatology is not absent from the undisputed letters (Rom 6:3–11; 8:29–30). Moreover, Ephesians holds fast to a future hope (see 1:10, 14, 21; 2:7; 4:30; 5:27) and warns readers about a future judgment (5:5), as Paul does in the undisputed letters (1 Cor 6:9–10).

Finally, the ecclesiology of Ephesians presents a number of elements that seem to be new. The term “church” refers in Ephesians to the universal Church, while in the undisputed letters it usually refers to the local community. The image of the Church as the body of Christ differs in Ephesians and Colossians from the undisputed letters in that Christ is described as the *head* of the body, a comparison not made elsewhere. Furthermore, only Ephesians likens the relationship of Christ and the Church to that of husband and wife (5:21–33). Finally, Ephesians presents the whole Church (rather than individuals or the elect) as the object of God’s saving action in Christ (1:22–23; 5:25–27).

All of these aspects of “Church,” however, are either anticipated in the undisputed letters or relatively modest theological developments, and none runs counter to Paul’s teaching found there. In fact, Paul uses “Church” (Gk: *ekklēsia*) for the whole Christian people in the undisputed letters (e.g., 1 Cor 12:28; Gal 1:13). But this is unremarkable wherever it appears since the Septuagint normally uses *ekklēsia* for the whole of God’s people (typically translated “assembly” or “congregation”), and this universal meaning is particularly appropriate in a letter intended to be circulated in many local churches. The notion of Christ as the Bridegroom of God’s people was common currency in the early Church (see commentary on 5:25–27), and application of that analogy to marriage, the distinction between the body of Christ and its head, and the idea of the whole Church as the object of Christ’s salvation do not seem beyond the theological imagination of the apostle Paul.

Relationship of Ephesians to Colossians

A combination of strong similarities yet real differences between Ephesians and Colossians has led some scholars to conclude that these two works were written by two different authors. Some hypothesize that Paul wrote Colossians and that a later disciple wrote Ephesians. Others suppose both letters were written by later disciples, with varying opinions about which was written first.

Ephesians resembles Colossians in its overall structure, the topics it treats, and the order in which the topics are treated. Besides a number of terms that are found in the New Testament only in Ephesians and Colossians, there is an exact correspondence of thirty-two words between Eph 6:21–22 and Col 4:7–8. These verses at the end of each letter introduce Tychicus, the bearer of the letter, and explain that he will inform the readers of the other news about Paul and encourage them. These similarities demonstrate a literary relationship between the letters, namely, that the author of the second (whichever letter was written second) was familiar with the first.

Despite these similarities, however, there are significant differences between Ephesians and Colossians. Colossians addresses a problem of false teaching to which the members of that community were exposed (Col 2:4, 8, 18–23); Ephesians does not warn against any particular false teaching. Colossians emphasizes the centrality and sufficiency of Christ;⁷ Ephesians emphasizes the dignity and unity of the Church.⁸ Although Ephesians uses some of the same distinctive terms as Colossians—“body,” “fullness,” “mystery,” and “stewardship”—it sometimes uses them differently. For example, in Col 1:27 and 2:2 the mystery is “Christ”; in Eph 3:4–6 the mystery is the fact “that the Gentiles are coheirs . . . copartners in the promise in Christ.”

What are we to make of these similarities and differences? Some commentators, such as Andrew Lincoln, find indications that the author of Ephesians adapted material from Colossians and see this as the strongest argument against Paul’s authorship.⁹ Other scholars, such as Ernest Best, analyze the differences between the two letters and find it more likely that the author of Colossians used Ephesians.¹⁰ Finally, a third group of scholars thinks it perfectly conceivable that the similarities are due to the fact that a single author wrote both letters at about the same time and that the differences are best explained by the distinct purposes of the letters and by the flexibility of his genius.¹¹

In sum, the similarities and differences between Colossians and Ephesians can be explained in various ways and do not weigh heavily, if at all, against Paul’s authorship.

Difficulties with Pseudonymity

Although it is a commonplace to regard some New Testament books as pseudonymous, the difficulties with the hypothesis of pseudonymity in Ephesians deserve closer examination.¹² While it is true that pseudonymous writings circulated among Greeks, Jews, and Christians in the Roman Empire, there are difficulties with the idea that Ephesians was one of them. First, with a few exceptions, before the middle of the second century the pseudonymous works of Jews and Christians were usually prayers, apocalypses, and collections of sayings or narratives, not letters. Second, pseudonymous works were usually attributed to famous personages of the distant past. The few clearly pseudonymous and noncanonical early Christian letters we have were all written at least fifty years after the death of their supposed authors.¹³ But if Ephesians is pseudonymous, it was written within fifteen to twenty-five years of the Apostle’s death during a period when the authenticity of Paul’s letters was regarded as a matter of great importance (see 1 Cor 16:21; Gal 6:11; 2 Thess 2:2; 3:17). It seems improbable that a letter known to be pseudonymous could have won acceptance in early collections of Paul’s letters (2 Pet 3:16).¹⁴ While we lack explicit information about Christian attitudes toward

7. Col 1:13–20; 2:9–15; 3:1–4, 11, 15–16.

8. Eph 1:22; 2:15–22; 3:10; 4:4–6; 5:25–30.

9. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, xlvii–lviii.

10. Ernest Best, “Who Used Whom? The Relationship of Ephesians and Colossians,” *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 72–96; and Best, *Ephesians*, 20–25.

11. For example, see Arnold, “Ephesians, Letter of,” 242–43, and other studies he cites.

12. See O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 37–45.

13. The others are 2 *Clement* (mid-second century), 3 *Corinthians* (AD 160–170), and the *Epistle of Paul to the Laodiceans* (late third or fourth century). The dating of the *Epistle of Barnabas* is disputed, although late in the first quarter of the second century seems most likely.

14. Referring to Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian literature, Lewis R. Donelson observes, “No one ever seems to have accepted a document as religiously and philosophically prescriptive which was known to be forged. I do not know of a single example” (*Pseudepigraphy and Ethical Argument in the Pastoral Epistles* [Tubingen: Mohr, 1986], 11).

pseudonymous authorship in the first half of the second century, we know that during the last half of the second century—when Gnosticism was in vogue, pseudonymous gospels were appearing, and the canon was taking shape—Church leaders disapproved strongly of the practice of writing in an Apostle’s name.¹⁵

Some scholars who hold that Ephesians is pseudonymous speculate that its original readers in Asia Minor were fully aware that the work was not really written by Paul (since his death would have been known) but accepted the literary convention of pseudonymity on the part of someone loyal to Paul’s teaching. It is unlikely, however, that this important fact about Ephesians would have disappeared without a trace by the middle of the second century and unlikely that a work known to be pseudonymous would have been accepted into the emerging canon.

Concluding Considerations

One more point should be mentioned that touches on the distinctive style of Ephesians (shared to some degree with Colossians): Paul’s use of secretaries. In the ancient world the process of writing a book or letter was a laborious one. It was therefore common for people who had the means to entrust this task to a secretary, or amanuensis. The author of the letter might dictate everything word for word, or he might state his intentions more generally and entrust the actual composition to a trusted secretary, reviewing and approving the final product.¹⁶ There is no doubt that Paul relied on others to write down his words: at the end of Romans (16:22), Tertius, the letter writer, adds his greetings (compare, by contrast, 1 Cor 16:21; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17). What we do not know is the manner in which Paul collaborated with his coworkers and secretaries in the writing of his letters. Most of Paul’s letters, though not Ephesians, list Timothy or others as cosenders of the letter. We do know that some of Paul’s companions during his imprisonment (e.g., Luke and Mark, according to Philem 24) were rather skilled writers. The involvement of other individuals in letters authored by Paul would go a long way toward explaining differences in vocabulary and style among Paul’s writings.¹⁷

Finally, we must ask the question: if Paul did not write Ephesians, who did? Usually works written in the name of a great author are inferior, characterized by clumsy imitation and derivative thinking (see *3 Corinthians* or the *Epistle to the Laodiceans*, available online). But among the letters attributed to Paul, Ephesians is equaled only by Romans in its profundity and confident development of theological ideas expressed in earlier letters. If not Paul, then

15. The Muratorian Canon (late second century, although some say later) rejects the *Epistle to the Laodiceans* as “forged in Paul’s name.” (This seems to be a different pseudonymous letter to the Laodiceans than the one that has survived.) The author of *3 Corinthians* was deposed as a presbyter for writing in the name of an apostle, even though those who deposed him acknowledged his motive was “love for Paul.” Tertullian, in his treatise on baptism (AD 185–195), dismissed *3 Corinthians* because it was pseudonymous. Serapion, bishop of Antioch (AD 190–211), at first allowed the *Gospel of Peter* to be read in church. Later, when doctrinal problems emerged, he rejected it, affirming that pseudepigrapha in the names of the apostles and not handed on by the tradition should not be received. See O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 37–45; and Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 38–49.

16. In his series of teachings on the “theology of the body,” Pope John Paul II takes this as his working hypothesis regarding the authorship of Ephesians: “that St. Paul entrusted some concepts to his secretary, who then developed and finished them. We have in mind this provisional solution of the problem when we speak about the ‘author of Ephesians,’ about ‘the Apostle,’ and about ‘St. Paul’” (*Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein [Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006], 466n).

17. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor states, “An important implication of [the involvement of secretaries and co-authors] is that the argument from style, which has been used to determine the authenticity and inauthenticity of certain letters, can no longer be considered valid” (*Paul the Letterwriter* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995], 34).

who was this theological genius of the late first century? We must not underestimate Paul's theological flexibility or circumscribe his literary skills too narrowly. Ephesians differs from the other Pauline letters in its use of an eloquent demonstrative and deliberative rhetoric to reinforce and deepen key points of Paul's teaching in a circular letter directed to predominantly Gentile Christian communities. Which is easier to imagine: that a disciple or "school," working with earlier writings, would be able to produce a work like Ephesians twenty years after the Apostle's death or that Paul had the theological imagination to develop his own insights during the enforced idleness of his imprisonment and had the rhetorical skill to express them, assisted, perhaps, by literate coworkers such as Luke?

While the arguments proposed against the authenticity of Ephesians raise reasonable questions, they are not compelling separately or together. Nevertheless, the opinion that Paul himself authored Ephesians, like all literary-historical judgments, remains at best a probability rather than a certainty. For Catholics and most Christians, the point that is certain and that matters most is that whoever its human author was, the Letter to the Ephesians remains God's word to us.