

An Introduction to the Epistle to the Ephesians

THE NAME OF THE EPISTLE

The Letter is generally called ‘Ephesians’ because that was the designation included in the bulk of early Manuscripts. However it is generally agreed that it was more of a circular letter addressed to a number of churches in Asia Minor, and probably those in the Lycus Valley, one of which was the church at Laodicea mentioned along with Hierapolis in Colossians 4:13-15. Colossians itself was one of those churches, and others are mentioned in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of the Book of the Revelation. Even so, the name Ephesians is convenient. Most of all—even accepting the fact that it may have been a circular letter, each with its name inserted—it means the church was in a location, i.e. that a local church existed¹. This puts it into the practical realm of life.

IS IT A PAULINE LETTER?

It was accepted as Paul’s letter in the early church—accepted without dispute. Ignatius, Polycarp, and perhaps Clement of Rome made use of it. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian saw Paul as its author. Paul’s name is present in 1:1 and 3:3 and he speaks of himself in 3:2-8 (cf. 4:1; 6:19). He often addresses the Gentile Christians from the standpoint of his being a Jew (cf. 1:12; 2:1, 11).

Even so, critics in the 18th century began to question Paul’s authorship on many lines, and this enquiry has continued ever since: so much so that many conservative scholars do not think Paul wrote the Letter. The discussion is too long and varied for us to include here so we recommend reading of articles in Bible and Theological Dictionaries and Commentaries—a number of which can be found in the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

What is clear is that the Letter is Pauline in essence, i.e. it is not against the materials Paul has written in the Letters which all agree are Paul’s. Some would claim that much of the thinking in the Epistle is *beyond* what Paul writes elsewhere, especially if Colossians is also taken to be written by someone other than Paul. At the same time, there are strong arguments for Pauline authorship, and students must read both and come to their conclusions. On many grounds I am convinced Paul was the author, as it seems to me the claim that it was written by someone who had obtained most—if not all of Paul’s letters—who, having soaked himself in Paul’s mind produced this remarkable Letter.

There is nothing in the NT that is higher in its grandeur, in its thought, and in its revelatory content and quality. It certainly is not synoptic of Paul’s teaching. If its style

¹ Tychicus ‘the beloved brother and faith minister’ is mentioned in Ephesians 6:21-22 and Colossians 4:7-9 and was one who accompanied Paul (Acts 20:4; cf. I Cor. 16:1-4). Paul also intended sending him to Titus (Titus 3:12) and so it is thought that Tychicus was linked with Ephesus and so the letter was entitled to bear that name.

seems to differ somewhat to others of his Letters, then 1, as a writer of many years, know a good writer can produce a piece of literature which transcends anything he has written both in content and style. H.J. Cadbury In *New Testament Studies*, V (Jan. 1959) asks the question, ‘Which is more likely—that an imitator of Paul in the first century composed a writing ninety or ninety-five per cent in accordance with Paul’s style or that Paul himself wrote a letter diverging five or ten per cent from his usual style?’ Whilst the possibility exists that the Letter was dictated by the Apostle in prison, and whilst some editing could have happened by an amanuensis, we cannot conclude that style alone—i.e. differences in style, vocabulary², (etc.) from other writings—determines non-Pauline creation.

An objection has been raised to the different use of the same words in Colossians and Ephesians³. Everett H. Harrison in his *Introduction to The New Testament*, p. 313, shows that such uses are not mutually exclusive but to some degree inclusive.⁴ There is no reason why the two letters should not have come from the one hand, since uses of words may differ from context to context.

One wonders that some writer should attempt to emulate Paul,⁵ and then transcending much of his written thought—seek to attribute this ‘advance’ to the Apostle when the innate character of the book denies the principle of emulation, and of a false claim to authorship. Its almost transcendent nature is alone a guarantee of its canonicity.

THE PRIMARY DRIVE OF THE EPISTLE

Because of the nature of the Letter some have thought that it could not be Pauline because the writer does not speak of the advent or appearing of Christ—something which he present with great force in other Epistles. It is curious how it has escaped such commentators that in fact the whole Letter moves towards the summation of all thing (cf. Malt. 28:20), and seeks to open the eyes of the readers to the ‘glorious inheritance in the saints’ and such matters.

The primary drive of the Epistle is ‘the summation of all things in Christ’, otherwise known as ‘the reconciliation of all things’ (Col. 1:19-21: cf. Ephes. 2:11-22) , the ‘filling up’ of all things (4:10). Indeed so intimately linked together is the whole text of the Epistle in this Introduction we would be required to go from point to point, and even from verse to verse, in order to delineate the main thrust of the writing. For this reason we have given the following headings to cover the various elements of the Letter, but their integrating element is the drive for unity. Having completed out study of the text, it would be good to return to look at these particular elements in the light of the unifying theme of unity.

² For example, there are 42 words not used elsewhere in the NT and 44 not used by Paul elsewhere. However, since subject matter often determines the use of words, the same linguistic principle—if applied to other writers—might find even more variation. Certainly vocabulary alone is not final proof of a different authorship.

³ The article on the Epistle by F.W. Danker in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Vol. 2, pp.109-114) is most comprehensive, especially in regard to the different meanings of the same words.

⁴ For example, the word *pleropita*—‘fulness’—is used differently in Ephesians to Colossians. In the first it refers to the church being Christ’s fulness. In the second it speaks of fulness being in Christ. Here there is no problem—Christ’s fulness is his own and this he gives to the church. One knows fulness in him, and the church has its fulness in him.

⁵ This is one of the many theories advanced to suggest Paul was not the original author of the Epistle.

THE TEACHING ELEMENTS OF THE EPISTLE

1. A Utter to Teach the Nature of the Church

As we have said this letter is thought to have been a circular letter probably addressed to some of the churches of Asia Minor. Whilst some other Paul's letters teach of salvation (Romans, Galatians) and yet others of Christian living (I and II Corinthians), yet this letter seeks primarily to show the nature of the unity of God, all things, and the church. It presupposes the knowledge of salvation, and builds upon it. The nature of the church is as follows:

- (i) The church is the holy people of God predestined to holiness and sonship (1:3-14).
- (ii) The church is the new temple or shrine intended to be the habitation of God (2:14-22). This makes the church's worship significant.
- (iii) The church—composed of both Jew and Gentile—is the new humanity i.e., that company of God's people which is one with Israel in being partakers of God's promises, especially of an eternal inheritance (2:14-3:11).
- (iv) The church is the family of God having God as Father (1:5; 2:18; 3:14-15, 4:6).
- (v) The church is the Bride of Christ the true Husband (5:21-33).
- (vi) To this church Christ has given the fulness of Himself, by means of which he fulfils all things. (1:22-23; 4:10)

2. A Letter to Teach the Nature of Christ

- (i) Christ is the Husband, the Head of the church, and he cares for her (5:21-33). The church being his bride takes its meaning and function from him.
- (ii) He is *to sum up* (head up, make one) all *things*. (1:9-10), and he is head over all *things* (1:20-22)
- (iii) All things *are filled up* by him (4:10), i.e. become full and real.
- (iv) He is the true *new humanity* (2:15).
- (iv) Salvation (1:7; 2:8), forgiveness (1:7; 4:31), regeneration (2:5; 4:20-22) and reconciliation (2:11-18) have come to man through him.
- (v) He has given those gifts to the church by which it may grow and reach true maturity, in love (4:7-15).

3. A Utter to Teach Christ's People How to Live

- (i) The letter teaches the true identity of the Christian believer through God's will and plan, through salvation, through reconciliation, through being members of the family of God and the household (temple) of God, and being brought to be filled unto all the fulness of God.
- (ii) It teaches the love and unity of the people of God (1:15; 4:1-6, 15,16).
- (iii) It teaches Christ's people how to live in the truth of Christ by rejection of the former life, and by being renewed in the spirit of their minds, and in particular the things that relate to this way of holiness (4:17-5:14).
- (iv) It teaches the way of worship (5:18-21).

- (v) It teaches the way of relationships within the family, the church and the community (5:21-6:9).
- (vi) It teaches the character of spiritual warfare (6:10-20)

Conclusion as to the Value and Nature of the Utter

The letter shows us the nature of the church, and its connection with God's plan for history (3:1-11). It gives identity to each member, and portrays the identity of the church in history. It shows God as Father, as Redeemer, as Glorifier and as the One Who is fulfilling His plan through Christ and his people. That is, it gives us a true sense of history, the meaning of creation, time and eternity, and so gives us an understanding of our humanity, and of our purpose in history as persons and as the people of God.

A Bibliography

(i) Articles on an Introduction to the Epistle,

The New Bible Dictionary (IVP, England, 1986), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 2 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 2, (Abingdon, New York, 1962), *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Volume 2, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1975). Introduction to the New Testament (Everett Harrison, Pickering and Inglis, London, 1964). Introduction to the New Testament (Donald Guthrie, IVP, London, 1976).

(ii) Commentaries on the Epistle to the Ephesians

Here there is vast range. The simplest would be my own *Ephesians* (NCPI, n.d.), and the Tyndale Commentary *Ephesians* (F. Foulkes, Tyndale, London, 1963). The devotional commentary *Ephesian Studies* by Bishop Handley Moule is a gem (H.C.G. Moule, Pickering and Inglis, London, n.d.). The reprint of J. Armitage Robinson's *Commentary on Ephesians* (Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1st Edition 1903, reprint 1979) is one of the finest. Modern writers are Marcus Barth (*Ephesians*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, New York: 2 vols.), C. Leslie Mitton, *Ephesians* (New Century Bible, Oliphants, 1976), George Johnston *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon* (New Century Bible, Oliphants, 1967), T.K. Abbott, *Ephesians and Colossians* (ICC Series, T&T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1977).

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Four Thematic Studies in the Epistle to the Ephesians

STUDY ONE: THE LOVE OF GOD AND MAN

1. The Love of God to Man

- (i) 1:5-6—God's predestinating love.
- (ii) 2:4—God's saving and transforming love.

2. Man's Love to God

6:23— Man's agape to Christ.

3. Knowing the Love of God (See '1' above).

See 4:11-19—love by Christ and the Spirit (cf. '5' (below)).

4. The Love of Man to Man

- (i) 1: 15; 4:2—'Love to all the saints', 'forbearing one another in love'.
- (ii) 4:15—'trusting it in love'.
- (iii) 4:16—The Body upbuilding itself in love.

5. Living in Love (see '4' above).

- (i) 5:2ff. 'walking in love'.
- (ii) 5:21—'husbands loving their wives'.

STUDY TWO: THE FATHER AND THE FAMILY

1. God is the Father of Christ and of Us

1:2-3; 2:18; 3:14; 4:6; 5:1; 5:20; 6:23.

2. The Father of glory

See 1: 17-18 (cf. Romans 6:4; John 17:1-3, 22-26).

3. Coming to the Father

See 2:11-18.4.

4. Living in the Father

- (i) 1:3ff.; 2:4ff.; 6:23—receiving from the Father
- (ii) 2:18ff.; 3:14; 4:6—being in the Father, under and with Him.
- (iii) 5:1—imitating the Father as His children.
- (iv) 5:20—giving thanks to the Father.

5. Being the Family of the Father

- (i) 1:5f.—Being sons.
- (ii) 2:18—becoming sons and family.
- (iii) 5:21 to 6:19—living as the family before the Father.

‘STUDY THREE: THE PRINCIPLE OF THE MYSTERY I

1. Introduction

The word ‘mystery’ is used directly six times. It is a secret disclosed to faith by the Spirit of God but otherwise impenetrable to Man.

2. The Mystery of His Will

See 1:9-14; cf.3:11-this his God’s plan for ‘the fulness of time’ and which will be fulfilled because He had willed to do so. It is that all things will be unified in Christ.

3. The Mystery: the Mystery of Christ

- (i) 3:1-7— ‘the mystery’ and ‘the mystery of Christ’ are related to 1:9-14, but in this case constitute that part of the unification which is making both Jew and Gentile as one, i.e. ‘the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body’ and share the inheritance together (cf. Gal. 1-7).
- (ii) 3:4—the term ‘mystery of Christ’ tells us Christ is a mystery himself as well as the agent of God’s mystery.
- (iii) 3:7-12—‘the plan of the mystery’ is linked with ‘the mystery of his will’, and is indeed the outworking of it. On the one hand it is contained in ‘the unsearchable riches of Christ and on the other is ‘the manifold wisdom of God’ which is revealed made known-to those whom God chooses should know it.

4. The Mystery of Marriage

See 5:21-33. This is really the mystery of the marriage of the Bride and the Lamb (cf. Rev.19:6-10; 21:1ff.), but is used in order to bring revelation of what true human marriage is.

5. The Mystery of the Gospel

See 6:19-20. Again the gospel is an undisclosed secret until proclaimed in the power of the Spirit (cf. I Cor. 1:17-2:5; 1 Thess. 1:5, etc.).

STUDY FOUR: LIVING IN HOLINESS THROUGH LOVE

1. The state of Man Because of the Fall

- (i) 2:1-3— in a state of death, of internal evil, bondage to the word and its ruler, and being under wrath.
- (ii) 2:11-12—the Gentiles outside the covenant, without God and hope.
- (iii) 4:17-19—as in Romans 1:19ff: minds darkened, ignorant, morally callous.

2. Deliverance from Evil by Grace

- (i) 3:4-10—love out of mercy delivers from sinful evil.
- (ii) 2:13-22—‘Gentiles and Jews made one and the temple of God..

3. The New Life Lived in Holiness and Love

- (i) 1:3-4—holiness predestined for the elect of God
- (ii) 4:1-4— Triune unity and the growth of the church via gifts and love.
- (iii) 4:25-6:9—the new holy family living together.
- (iv) 6:10-20—the new people of God withstanding the forces of evil,.