

The Letter to the Ephesians



Ancient Ephesus was a significant Greek city located on the west coast of what is now Turkey. It was a major centre for trade, culture and religion, known for its well-preserved ruins, including the Library of Celsus, the Temple of Artemis, and the Grand Theatre.

As with Colossians, so with Ephesians the authorship and date of the letter are disputed. It is presented as coming from Paul, but unusually he does not seem to know anyone in the community. He mentions his co-worker Tychicus, as the one sent to bring news about himself (Ephesians 6:22), and no doubt to deliver the letter. Tychicus also appears in the final greeting in the Letter to the Colossians where he is commended to the community in almost identical fashion.

As in the letters to the Colossians and Philemon, Paul is described as being in prison (Ephesians 6:20), in Rome, according to tradition, sometime between CE 60-62. Some scholars however, are of the opinion that Ephesians was written later, in the last two decades of the first century. Paul and Luke, the author of Acts, wrote in the midst of the excitement and energy of the early mission. They were not anticipating the questions of future historians. So today looking back across the centuries it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the data in Paul's letters, Acts and the fragments we have from Roman inscriptions, and secular sources of the first century.



Tychicus



THE LIBRARY OF CELSUS IN EPHESUS

From a literary perspective there is a remarkable similarity between Ephesians and Colossians, to the extent that Ephesians could be described as a commentary on, or a development of, the letter to the Colossians. Just under half the verses in Ephesians have parallels in Colossians, and the two letters share various words that rarely occur anywhere else in the New Testament.

For example, Colossians and Ephesians both refer to the mystery of God, God's will, and Christ in you, the mystery revealed by the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles (Colossians 1:26-27; Ephesians 1:9-10). The word 'mystery' carries the meaning of a secret plan which cannot be accessed by humanity unless God chooses to reveal it. The plan is to draw creation into unity in Christ, and the instrument of that unity is the Church, not just a collection of communities but a worldwide body that finds its unity in Christ, its head. This unity is particularly revealed in the gathering of Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ to create a new humanity (Ephesians 2:15).

*"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord."
(Ephesians 2:19-21)*



TEMPLE OF ARTEMIS, EPHEBUS

The theological development of Colossians by Ephesians can be perceived also in the exhortation to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-33. As in Colossians, the author of Ephesians gives practical advice to the members of the Christian household, husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters. The advice is given not to individuals as such, but to individuals in their relationship with a significant 'other'. The style of the exhortation owes much to the 'Household Codes' already in use in Greek and Latin households. These codes reflect the moral teaching of the time and cultural how the relationship between different groups should be ordered.

There are, however, some subtle differences between the Pauline exhortations and the Graeco-Roman codes, which tended to focus on the authority of the husband over the wife. This section of Colossians begins with the rather stark injunction 'Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord' (Colossians 3:18). This instruction does not go down well in a contemporary context and may not have been acceptable even within the community being addressed. In turn, husbands are told to love their wives and never treat them harshly. The fact that Paul had to exhort the husbands not to treat their wives harshly would suggest that such treatment was widespread.

Ephesians treats the relationship of the husband to his wife at much greater length than any of the parallel Graeco-Roman examples. The model for the husband's leadership of the family is not to be found in the norms of ancient society, but, rather, in the way that Christ exercises the power of headship over the body of the Church, nourishing and caring tenderly for his body, the Church (Ephesians 5:23). This passage is not really a comment on marital relationships, then, but an indication of how all Christians should behave towards one another in general (Ephesians 5:21). To be subject to one another out of love is the criterion for a renewed humanity, who far from lording it over one another allow Christ to be the Lord. The image of husbands caring for their own bodies (Ephesians 5:28-29) probably reflects the attitude of those males in Graeco-Roman society who had sufficient wealth and leisure to devote much time to the care of their bodies, which were regarded as indicators of their virility, courage and nobility. So, the author begins from contemporary social and structural realities and offers the possibility of transcending them in the light of the example of Christ.

The letter concludes by describing marriage as a great mystery. The author reminds his audience that marriage has already been linked in scripture to the story of the creation of man and woman into a unity (Genesis 2:24). Now he connects it to his central theme of the mystery of God's plan to bring humanity together in the love revealed in Christ (Colossians 5:30-32). In the Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, we find the Greek word *mysterion* translated into Latin as *sacramentum* - the foundation of the Church's understanding of marriage as a sacrament. Today we might wonder whether Paul received this insight while attending a wedding ceremony or from his experience of meeting people in long and faithful marriages.

MYSTERION (GREEK) SACRAMENTUM (LATIN)

*"Therefore be imitators of God,
as beloved children.
And walk in love, as Christ loved us
and gave himself up for us,
a fragrant offering
and sacrifice to God."
(Ephesians 5:1-2)*



Question for Reflection

How does this letter help us to see the Church as Christ's body and to show tenderness and compassion for all who seek Christ's body in their local Church?

The Letter to Philemon



Philemon

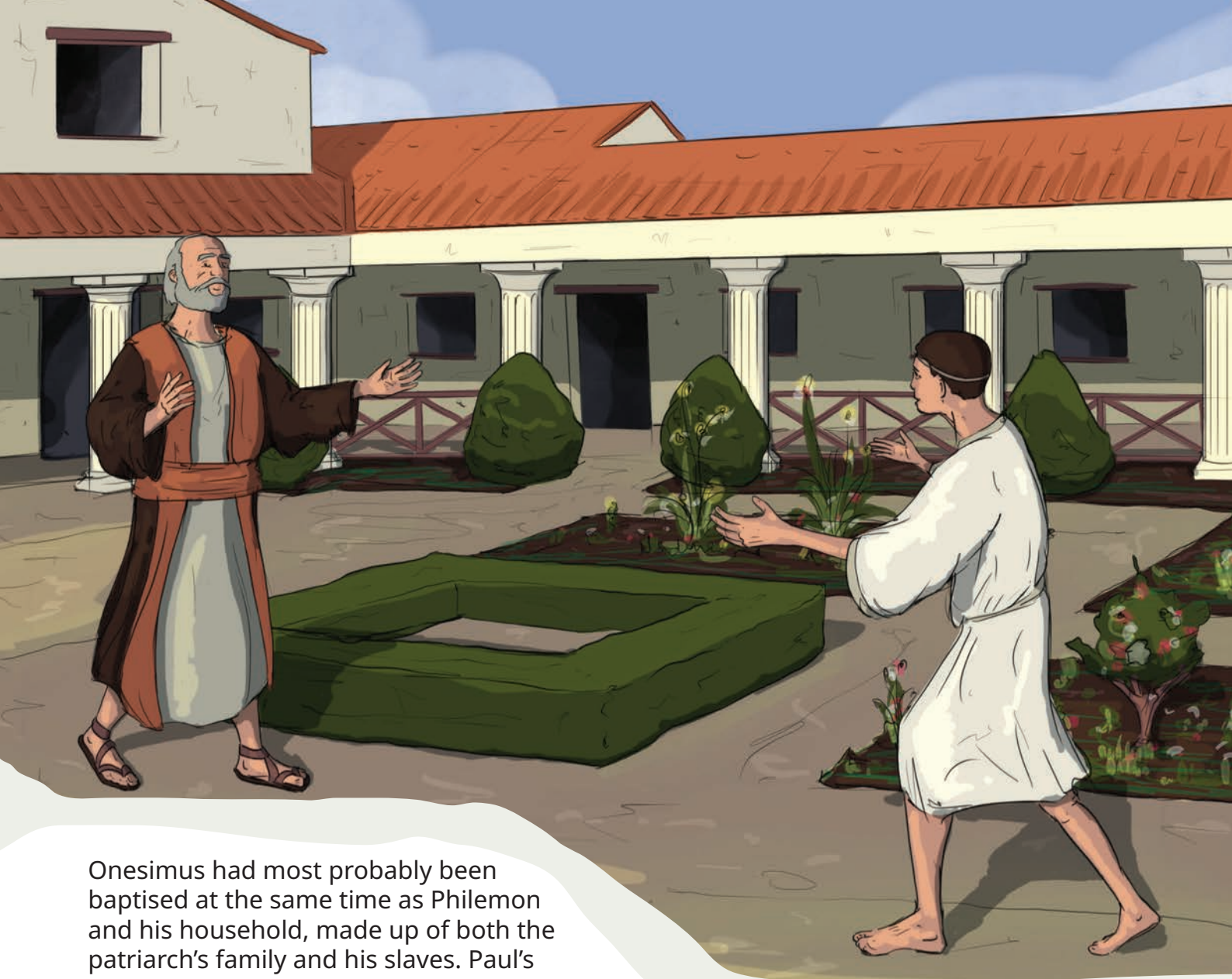


Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters and is the last of the Pauline writings to appear in the New Testament canon. Paul is again writing from prison, perhaps from Ephesus. It was composed after the letter to the Philippians but before Colossians, suggesting a date around 58 CE.

It is presented as a personal letter to Philemon, but it is very likely that the intention was always that it should be heard by the whole community who gathered at his house. Paul writes about Philemon's slave Onesimus, who for some undisclosed reason had fled from home and become a close co-worker with Paul. He is mentioned warmly in the letter to the Colossians: 'Tychicus... is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you' (Colossians 4:9). Paul, who has valued his help, reluctantly sends Onesimus back to Philemon and asks Philemon to welcome him back no longer as a slave but as a brother.

"I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints..."
(Philemon 1:4-6)

Slavery was an accepted fact of life in Graeco-Roman society, and the letter does not formally address its abolition or the question of flawed societal structures. By sending Onesimus back, Paul is simply acknowledging the reality of life in a highly stratified society, in which the freedom that went with citizenship (which Paul enjoyed) was considered a privilege not a right. On the other hand, household slaves had a measure of security that would have been beyond the reach of many poorer people. But when Paul asks Philemon to treat his slave as a brother, he is inviting him to enter a radically new relationship which transcends existing social structures.



Onesimus had most probably been baptised at the same time as Philemon and his household, made up of both the patriarch's family and his slaves. Paul's reason for his request is indicated in verse 6, 'I pray that the sharing (Greek *koinonia*) of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ'. In this sentence, which does not translate easily from the original Greek (as is often the case with Paul's letters) we meet again an important term which Paul used also in the letter to the Philippians – *koinonia*. The root meaning of *koinonia* is a relationship that brings about active sharing in a common enterprise - in this case the creation of a relationship of love in Christ that embraces not just the individuals but includes the whole community. The Greek describes this relationship as being 'into Christ' (*eis Christon*). In other words, it is a relationship that is not yet complete but involves discovering, maturing, and growing into our true identity. This relationship begins and is sustained by faith.

Paul's previous letters all display a concern for unity and a fear of the community breaking up into unreconcilable divisions. Factional divisions destroy the growth to communal identity in Christ, which is the goal of the Christian enterprise. Growth into Christ (the new Adam) is growth into the humanity God intended us to be. We become human together, not in isolation.

Question for Reflection

How can our faith help us to discover, mature and grow into our true identity?