

The Letter to the Philippians



Paul does not provide us with enough information to fix the date of the letter with any precision. He tells us that he is in prison, but according to 2 Corinthians and the Acts of the Apostles, he was imprisoned several times and even after a careful reading of these sources, we are not able to arrive at a clear picture of exactly when and where Paul was imprisoned.

Philippi was a Roman colony on a major trade route, the Via Egnatia, which linked the eastern provinces of the empire with Italy. The inhabitants included large numbers of retired soldiers, and there was no Jewish synagogue in the city. The small community there would appear to have been of Gentile origin.

Imprisonment in the Roman empire was usually the fate of those awaiting trial, or of those who had been condemned to death. Paul is aware that his imprisonment may lead to his death, but he holds onto the hope that he will be able to visit Philippi again. (1:21-24). Paul's letter can be described as a letter of friendship and encouragement from one who is suffering for his faith to a community which is also suffering (1:29).





ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF PHILIPPI

The earliest traditions suggest the letter was written in Rome, in the late fifties or early sixties. This was a long way from Phillipi, making regular correspondence difficult. However, some scholars speculate that Philippians and Philemon date from the time of Paul's earlier imprisonment in Ephesus, perhaps in the mid-fifties. References in 1 Corinthians 15:32 and 2 Corinthians 1:8-10 to difficulties in the Roman province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital, combined with the shorter distance between there and Philippi, perhaps make this location more likely.

*"I can do all things
through him who strengthens me."
(Philippians 4:13)*

There is an on-going debate among commentators about whether Philippians is in fact one letter or is made up of three pieces which were written some time apart and later woven together. The argument for three letters is partly based on the observation that 3:1 seems to be indicating a conclusion, but suddenly and abruptly engages in an attack on some opponents, without mentioning who they were. Similarly, what looks like another conclusion in 4:8-9 is followed by lines which could be interpreted as belonging to a formal opening 'Thanksgiving section' of a new letter. However, against this argument is weighed the similarity of language and theme across the whole text.



It is noteworthy that friendship has certain qualities in Paul's time. Friendship then was not primarily about close private or personal relationships as we experience it today. It was a category at home in the world of business, politics and institutions. Friendship enabled people to work together for a common goal. In 1:5 Paul thanks God for the Philippians' 'sharing (Greek: *koinonia*) in the gospel' (i.e. in the preaching of the gospel not just by evangelisation, but by their lives and their suffering). *Koinonia* expresses relationship, so the members of this community have become 'partners' (*sunkoinonoi*) with Paul (1:7).

This reflects the style of ancient letters of exhortation written by an experienced partner to a less experienced one to help them come to stand on an equal footing. We get a real sense of the deep and lasting bonds that Paul was able to create with some of his house churches from his warm words for the Philippians here: 'I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for you all... how I long for all of you with the compassion of Jesus Christ...' (Philippians 1:3-4, 8).

KOINONIA (Sharing)
SUNKOINONOI (Partners)



At the heart of the letter is the text often referred to as the 'Christ Hymn' (Philippians 2:6-11). Paul was not its author, but quotes it as part of his parenesis, his exhortation, to remind the community of what they already know. The hymn strongly suggests the pre-existence of Christ in heaven in equality with God, although the language is somewhat ambiguous. It speaks of his descent to earth as an act of great humility, even to the point where he suffered death as a slave, as a condition of his exaltation to heaven and his worldwide rule. Paul is putting before the community at Phillippi the example of how God's grace works through the humble self-emptying of Christ.

The hymn provides the foundation for Paul's exhortation throughout the letter. Christ renounced his divine status and privilege to identify with the lowly, even at the risk of his life. Paul sees his own life and ministry, and the life of the Philippians, as an imitation of Christ. The humility of Christ must be a model for their continued behaviour. And even if Paul and other members of the community should die, Christ will transform them bodily from humiliation to glory along with himself (Philippians 3:21).



Question for Reflection

What is the most challenging aspect for you when you read the Christ Hymn?

The Letter to the Colossians



Colossae was an ancient city in what is now Turkey. A significant city from the 5th century BCE onwards, it had dwindled in importance by the time of Paul, and was notable for the existence of its local angel cult.

Although Colossians bears Paul's name, scholars question whether Paul actually wrote the letter. The early Church assumed so, but since the mid-19th century scholars have noted differences of vocabulary, theology and style from Paul's other letters. These suggest that while Paul may not have composed the letter himself, it might have been written by one of his close missionary companions or someone who wanted to perpetuate his legacy, such as Timothy, or even Epaphras (Colossians 1:1,7, 2:1), who is presented as the one who founded the church in Colossae.

Closely associated with the question of authorship is the matter of dating. On three occasions the author refers to himself as being in prison (Colossians 4:3,10,18). Paul's final imprisonment was in Rome (61-63 CE) before his execution. Was it from Rome that Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon in Colossae and asked him to prepare a guest room (see Colossians 4:9; cf. Philemon 22)? That would have been an extremely long and arduous journey. Perhaps, then Paul might have been imprisoned in nearby Ephesus, in the early sixties, given that he was at the heart of several riots there because of his preaching a few years before (cf. Acts 19)? On the other hand, some commentators argue for a much later date for the letter towards the end of the first century CE, taking their cue from what appear to be references to syncretistic beliefs in chapter 2, since we know several cults based on esoteric knowledge (Gnosticism) began to infiltrate some Christian communities.



THE ROAD FROM LAODICEA TO COLOSSAE

The author, whether Paul or not, comes across as less combative than the Paul of the earlier letters. There are still references to Jewish practices, circumcision, Sabbaths and issues relating to food and drink. However, the earlier debates about the Law and justification are no longer immediately relevant and the polemic is now generalised rather than directed against specific groups or individuals.

The theology of the author is consistent with that of the undisputed Pauline letters but shows a more developed understanding of the divine nature of Jesus Christ. This is expressed in the 'Christ Hymn' in Colossians 1:15-20 which, like the Hymn in Philippians, was already known to the community.

It has a more cosmic dimension than its counterpart in Philippians, however. Christ is described as the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Colossians 1:19). There seems to be an echo here of the way divine wisdom is presented in Proverbs 8:23-27 and in other Jewish wisdom texts. The reference to the fullness (Greek *pleroma*) of God dwelling in him implies that Christ has primacy over the whole cosmos and that the great powers considered so influential in the ancient world (such as the elemental spirits of the universe referred to in Colossians 2:8) have no real potency at all.

*"Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."
(Colossians 2:6-7)*



From this perspective, Paul is no longer viewed as the humble slave (Greek: *doulos*) of Jesus Christ, imitating Jesus who suffered the death of a slave, but as the servant (Greek *diakonos*) of the divine mystery revealed in the death and resurrection of the cosmic Christ which is part of God's plan of God 'to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven' (Colossians 1:19-23). That 'mystery' is now being worked out in the lives of prayer and service of the believers in Colossae. The author can still speak of the local community as a 'church' (Greek: *ekklesia*), but this term now expands to encompass the larger Church, the collection of all the local churches (Colossians 1:18).

DOULOS (Slave)

DIAKONOS (Servant)

EKKLESIA (Church)

Having warned the community not to let itself be undermined by philosophies, cults and ascetic practices which were circulating at the time, the author addresses some practical matters. While avoiding vices they are to cultivate the virtues which will enhance the renewal begun in their baptism: 'Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against each other, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive. And above all these put on love...' (Colossians 3:12-17)

This process of growth into the image of Christ is leading to the ending of social distinctions (there is to be no distinction between slave and free, Colossians 3:11). However, the author still accommodates a code of behaviour based on the extremely hierarchical structures that existed in the typical household of the time, not just between the family and their slaves (Colossians 4:1), but even between husbands and wives. While wives must obey their husbands, husbands must love their wives and never treat them harshly (Colossians 3:18-19). Relating theological realities to real life is still a work in progress.

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Question for Reflection

How does the Christ Hymn help you to reflect on Christ in his risen reality and our relationship with the rest of the world?