

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

The Dates and Provenance of the Imprisonment Epistles of St. Paul.

BY PROFESSOR C. J. CADOUX, M.A., D.D., OXFORD.

My friend Professor C. H. Dodd of Manchester has contributed to the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* for January a valuable article on 'The Mind of Paul.' In the course of it he discusses the problem of the date and place of writing of the Epistles to Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians. As all students of the Apostle's life are aware, it has been recently argued in certain quarters that some or all of these letters (instead of having been written, as hitherto believed, at Rome) were written either during the Apostle's imprisonment at Cæsarea (Ac 24²²⁻²⁷), or during an otherwise unrecorded imprisonment at Ephesus during the two years he spent there on his Third Missionary Journey (Ac 19⁸⁻¹⁰). It is very troublesome to be for ever held up by uncertainties as to the dates of these important letters; and the greater thanks are due to those who, like Professor Dodd, make serious and thorough attempts to reach a really satisfying solution of the problem. If on some details I incline to conclusions different from his own, I am grateful to him for marshalling the relevant arguments with such thoroughness and care.

Professor Dodd's discussion takes the form of a critique of the theories advanced in 1929 by Dr. G. S. Duncan in *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*. He gives as his reason for this method that, since—of the advocates of the Ephesian hypothesis—'hardly two . . . hold it in the same form,' it is simplest to concentrate on a recent elaboration. He assumes the Pauline authorship of all four Epistles, and treats them more or less together. I think it has to be observed that the disagreement of its champions is no more a discredit to the Ephesian hypothesis than it is to the Roman, for there is no general agreement in regard to the details of this latter either. Moreover, the assumption of the Pauline authorship of all four Epistles hampers the investigation. There are objections to the Pauline authorship of Colossians, and still more so to that of Ephesians: but their gravity varies according to the dates to be assigned to these writings. Dr. Dodd's own conclusion is an illustration of this. He places all four Epistles in the period of the Roman imprisonment, and concludes his discussion thus: 'The precise order of the epistles

within the captivity group is a more delicate question which we need not here decide. On the whole it seems probable that *Philippians* followed rather than preceded the others, but this view is not altogether without difficulties.' The last statement is well within the truth. For reasons to be noticed presently, it is very necessary to put *Philippians* fairly well on in the Roman period, if it is to be put there at all. But to suppose that, after writing 1 and 2 Corinthians and Romans in A.D. 55-57, Paul wrote in A.D. 60 two Epistles so widely differing from these in style and thought as do Colossians and Ephesians, and then in A.D. 61 or 62 produced an Epistle so similar to Romans and Corinthians as is *Philippians*, is well-nigh impossible. If Colossians is Pauline, and still more if Ephesians is so, their only natural place is sometime after all the other Epistles we have named had been finished.

I therefore suggest that the most helpful course is to concentrate on one Epistle at a time, taking them in the order of decreasing simplicity. If any settlement of the simpler problems is possible, the light of it ought to be useful when we come to the more complex.

Let us start then with *Philemon*, the least contentious of the group, since not only is its Pauline authorship—like that of *Philippians*—unchallenged, but its brevity excludes awkward questions of style, theology, etc. Dr. Dodd does not discuss the Cæsarean hypothesis; but it is worth our while just to look at it, if only that we may have a clear conscience in passing it by. It has in its favour two facts, namely, that when Paul wrote to Philemon, he was in prison (vv.^{1, 13, 23}), and that Luke was with him (v.²⁴): both these conditions were features of the Cæsarean imprisonment. But there is a difficulty which seems fatal. When Paul wrote, he expected soon to be able to visit Colosse (v.²³); whereas, when he was at Cæsarea, he had—so far as we know—no expectation of visiting the province of Asia again (Ac 20^{26, 38}): though he had not yet appealed to Cæsar (Ac 25¹¹), he intended to go to Rome (Ac 19^{21, 23}, Ro 1⁹⁻¹⁵) and on from there to Spain (Ro 15^{24, 28}). I do not see how this objection is to be rebutted. There are also minor difficulties: (1) that Cæsarea was not a very likely place for a fugitive slave from Colosse to reach, and (2) that

the Epistle does not allude to the Evangelist Philip and his daughters, who, as we know, resided at this time at Cæsarea (Ac 21^{8f.}; cf. 24¹¹) and were presumably among those who ministered to Paul (Ac 24²³).

If Cæsarea has to be abandoned, the choice lies between Ephesus and Rome. Either of these would be a natural place for Onesimus to flee to: Ephesus was a big place, and easily reached from Colosse; on the other hand, though Rome was a very long way off, it was as a hiding-place the safer for that very reason. Nor can we lay more than a very little weight on two other arguments: (1) that, whereas we know that Paul was in prison at Rome, we do not know that he was so at Ephesus (yet he may well have been: the stay at Ephesus was troublous, as 1 and 2 Corinthians show, and Acts tells us extremely little about it), (2) that whereas we know that Timothy was with Paul at Ephesus (Ac 19²²), we do not know that he was so at Rome (yet, of course, he may have been so). These two arguments, then, besides being inconclusive, cancel one another out.

We pass on, therefore, to two more important considerations. One of these tells strongly for Ephesus—the prospect of an early visit to Colosse (v.²²): if Paul wrote to Philemon from Rome, we should have to suppose—without any further warrant—that while there he changed his plans, abandoned his intention of visiting Spain, and decided to go again to Asia. Yet even so the words ‘withal prepare me also a lodging’ (v.²²) do not sound very natural when we remember how far from Colosse Rome was. But strong as this point is, it is matched by a fact on the other side. When Paul wrote, Luke was with him (v.²⁴): now we know that Luke was with Paul at Rome; but we can be fairly sure that he was *not* with him at Ephesus: the Ephesus-story (Ac 19–20¹) contains extremely few incidents and details, and is not among the ‘we-passages’ of Acts. Which of these two conflicting arguments is the stronger? Surely the latter, to which it is harder to find a satisfactory answer than it is to the former.

Two minor facts come in to reinforce this tentative decision in favour of Rome. The Marcionite Prologue to the Epistle supports it, and so does the term *πρεσβύτης*, ‘the aged,’ which Paul uses of himself (v.⁹). We do not know the date of his birth; but since his stay at Ephesus fell about A.D. 54–56, and his imprisonment at Rome A.D. 60–62, he would have been five or six years older if he wrote to Philemon from Rome than if he wrote to him from Ephesus.

I hold, therefore, that Dr. Dodd is correct in placing Philemon in the Roman period, though he assesses the comparative value of the arguments somewhat differently from myself.

The next Epistle to consider is clearly *Philippians*, since its Pauline authorship is unchallenged. Once more we may begin by setting aside as inconclusive and as mutually destructive the arguments based on the facts that, when he wrote, Paul was in prison, and that he had Timothy with him (1⁷. 7. 13. 17). Nor can we depend on the mention of the *πραιτώριον* (1¹³), or *οἱ ἐκ τῆς Καίσαρος οἰκίας* (4²²), since both of these might admittedly have been found at Ephesus or at Cæsarea. The Marcionite Prologue, which says that the Epistle was written from Rome, may also (in view of the large number of other arguments) be dismissed as slight: it is perhaps based on a hasty inference from 1¹³ and 4²². The hope that he would visit his readers again (1²⁶ 2²⁴) in any case rules out Cæsarea, and would, for reasons already given, tell strongly in favour of Ephesus, were it not that our conclusion regarding Philemon has already compelled us to assume that while at Rome Paul changed his plans and decided to travel east again.

Dr. Dodd rightly emphasizes one important fact, which points persuasively to Rome. When Paul wrote, his life hung in the balance (1²⁰⁻²⁴ 2¹⁷); and it is natural to suppose that, being in prison, he feared a capital sentence at an impending trial. But being a Roman citizen, he need not have felt such fear anywhere but at Rome. Everywhere else, he could always avert the death-sentence by an appeal to Cæsar (Ac 16³⁷ 22²⁵⁻²⁹ 25¹⁰⁻¹²). Furthermore, the misunderstandings with which he felt himself surrounded (Ph 1^{15. 17} 2^{20f.}) are more easily explicable at Rome than elsewhere.

Rome has, therefore, unquestionably a very strong case. But we have yet to consider what there is to be said for Ephesus. The strongest argument in favour of Ephesus is as follows. Between the time of Paul's first visit to Thessalonica (Ph 4^{15f.}) and Corinth (2 Co 11^{8f.}) and the time when he wrote *Philippians*, the *Philippians* had had no suitable opportunity of contributing to his support (Ph 4¹⁰). If he is writing at Rome, this disability of the *Philippians* must have lasted for about nine years, during which he had actually passed through *Philippi* twice (Ac 20^{1f. 3. 6}) and spent later two years waiting in prison at Cæsarea. It is very difficult to believe that throughout this long period the *Philippians* were unable (however willing) to make him any gift. Whereas, if he was writing from Ephesus,

the interval would be from two to five years, which Paul had spent mostly in the East. Dr. Dodd parries the force of this argument by observing that, while at Ephesus, Paul was making his collection for the Jerusalem-church and was anxious to keep free from all suspicion of self-seeking, that the Macedonians were going through a period of economic distress (2 Co 8¹⁻⁴), and that therefore Paul must needs have avoided accepting a gift from them. But, even allowing for the collection and the poverty, it is difficult to understand why they should have prevented the Philippians from helping Paul personally when he visited them afterwards on his way to Jerusalem, and still more when he lay in prison at Cæsarea. 2 Co 11^{8f.} 12¹⁴⁻¹⁶ show that his refusal to live at the expense of others was a special precaution observed by him in the case of the Corinthians only.

I am disposed to think that this argument is of greater force than that based on his fear of death; for, although a judicial sentence is *suggested* by his language, it cannot be said to be *required* by it. There were other dangers to which his life was exposed; and 2 Co 1⁹⁻¹⁰ 11²³ ('in deaths oft') indicate how grave they were, especially at Ephesus. Strong, therefore, as the danger of death makes the case for Rome, the inability of the Philippians to help him makes that of Ephesus, in my opinion, still stronger.

There are four subsidiary points which confirm our perhaps diffident inclination to Ephesus. (1) Paul, when he wrote, hoped to send Timothy to Philippi (2¹⁹⁻²³); and we know that, when at Ephesus, he did so (Ac 19²²; cf. 1 Co 4¹⁷ 16^{10f.}), whereas we have no such information regarding Rome, from which place, moreover, a journey to Philippi would be a much more serious undertaking than one from Ephesus. (2) When Paul wrote, no fewer than four journeys between Philippi and the place of his incarceration had been made, namely, (a) the Philippians must have heard of his being there, (b) Epaphroditus had brought Paul a present from Philippi and fallen ill (Ph 2^{25, 27} 4¹⁶), (c) news of his illness had reached Philippi, and (d) he had learned that fact (2²⁶). Moreover, not only Timothy (2¹⁹⁻²³), but Epaphroditus also (and that despite his recent serious illness—2²⁵⁻²⁷) are shortly to be sent to Philippi. When we consider that to travel from Rome to Philippi involved a land-journey of some 730 miles, as well as a sea-passage, all this going and coming is difficult to believe, notwith-

standing the *length* of the imprisonment at Rome. If Paul were writing at Ephesus (a few days' sail from Philippi), it is far more intelligible. (3) In Ph 2¹² and 4^{14f.} Paul refers to the visit he had previously paid to his readers: the language is not precise, but it contains no allusion to more visits than one, and would be slightly more natural if one visit had been made than if three had been. (4) Finally, Paul makes no mention of Luke. Luke was not with him at Ephesus: at Rome for some time he certainly was, and at Cæsarea probably for the whole two years. This is by no means final, for Luke may have had to leave him at Rome; but so far as it goes, it fits Ephesus (or Cæsarea) better than Rome.

I have not knowingly omitted any pertinent argument; and I am bound to say that a systematic survey of the various points, and an attempt to assess their comparative value, seem to me to make the Ephesian origin of Philippians much more credible than a Roman origin. If that conclusion be correct, the way is open to accept Colossians as Pauline. For if Colossians, as Pauline, it was written at the same time as Philemon (cf. Col 4⁹⁻¹⁷ with Philemon), which—as we have seen—was written at Rome. If Philippians was also written at Rome, it must have been written well on in the two years' period (to allow time for the journeys backwards and forwards); and, indeed, Dr. Dodd proposes to put it *after* Colossians. But, as I have indicated, the style of Colossians makes this sequence almost impossible. Indeed, I do not think it is too much to say that, if Philippians was written at Rome, Colossians and Ephesians must both be pseudonymous.

I have no space now in which to discuss the problem of Ephesians; I simply record my tentative opinion that the arguments against its being from Paul's hand are strong. But it is hard to believe that *both* Colossians and Ephesians are pseudo-Pauline; for the differences in their theological thoughts combine with the extensive imitation of Colossians, which the author of Ephesians has practised, to suggest very strongly that Colossians is a genuine Pauline letter (which it may well be if Philippians was written at Ephesus), and that Ephesians is a pseudonymous letter by some unknown writer who had fully grasped the universalism of the Pauline gospel, and who made free use of Colossians to set his convictions forth.