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THE PECULIARITIES OF EPHESIANS AND THE EPHESIAN ADDRESS

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An important argument in favor of the encyclical theory of the epistle to the Ephesians is based upon the peculiarities found in the epistle itself. Yet these unusual features (e.g., the lack of personal greetings, the unusual statements in 1:15, 3:2, and 4:21, etc.) can all be satisfactorily explained in the light of an original Ephesian destination. After an examination of early scribal habits and the theme of the epistle, the author concludes that the peculiarities of the letter are not conclusive reasons for rejecting the strong textual and historical testimony in favor of the Ephesian address.

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

THE epistle which is commonly known as "Ephesians" has in recent years been the subject of much critical discussion. The chief question about the Ephesian letter is its authenticity: Did the apostle Paul write the letter, as the epistle claims, or is it the work of an imitator? Of lesser importance, but related to the previous question, is the problem of the address of the Ephesian epistle. To whom was the letter written?

Since the second century, the letter has been universally known as the Epistle to the Ephesians. Many modern scholars, however, in view of the omission in several manuscripts of the words "in Ephesus" (ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) in 1:1, have rejected the Ephesian destination. A widely held view, initially proffered by Beza and popularized by Ussher, is that the Ephesian epistle was not written to any particular church, but rather was an encyclical letter to a group of churches in Asia Minor. The apostle Paul, therefore, when he penned the letter, left a blank in the preface (1:1) which was to be filled in by Tychicus as he distributed copies to the various churches. In this scheme, the reading

of the *Textus Receptus* goes back to a copy sent to Ephesus, whereas the Alexandrian manuscripts p⁴⁶, **Σ**, and B stem from a copy in which the blank had never been filled up. It is hypothesized that since the epistle was distributed from Ephesus, the seat of the chief church in Asia Minor, it soon came to be known as the Epistle to the Ephesians, and the words "in Ephesus" (ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) subsequently found their way into the majority of manuscripts.¹

Arguments in favor of this view are presented in various ways by its proponents. When condensed and combined, the main lines of evidence appealed to in support of the encyclical theory are the following:

1. The omission of ἐν Ἐφέσῳ in 1:1 is supported by the oldest Greek manuscripts of the Pauline epistles: p⁴⁶, **Σ**, and B. These Alexandrian codices are generally considered to be the most reliable authorities to the text of the NT, and to many, almost always preserve the original reading.

2. Several early Church Fathers can be cited in support of the omission of ἐν Ἐφέσῳ. Origen did not know of the words in his text. Marcion attributed the epistle to the Laodiceans. Basil said that he was aware of old manuscripts which did not contain ἐν Ἐφέσῳ. Though there is disagreement on the point, the Latin Father Tertullian may not have known the words in his text.²

3. The impersonal style of the letter is inexplicable if the epistle was addressed to the Ephesian church. This argument is based on internal evidence from the epistle itself. Thiessen gives the evidence for it in detail:

The internal evidence strongly supports Aleph, B, and 67². It would be strange indeed for Paul to say to the Church at Ephesus that he knew of their conversion only by report (1:15, 4:21), since he had spent three years with them (Acts 20:17, 31). It would be equally strange for him to say that this church knew him only by hearsay (3:2) and that they must judge by what he had written as to whether or not God had given him a revelation of the truth (3:2-4). It would also seem strange that he should send no greetings to a church that he knew so

¹E. Gaugler, *Der Epheserbrief* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1966) 4. Cf. H. C. Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 243-44.

²The actual statements of these Fathers may be found in T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897) ii-iii. As far as the testimony of Tertullian goes, the problem is his use of the word *titulum*. Did he intend for it to refer to the superscript of the epistle or to the prescript of 1:1? A good discussion of this question is offered by G. Stoeckhardt, *Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians*, trans. Martin S. Sommer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1952) 14-17.

intimately. As Findley says: "Not once does he address his hearers as 'brethren' or 'beloved'; 'my brethren' in Eph. 6:10 is an insertion of the copyists. There is not a single word of familiarity or endearment in the whole letter. The benediction at the end (6:23, 24) is given in the third person, not in the second as everywhere else."³

Metzger adds that the epistle does not deal with the mistakes, needs, or personalities of one individual congregation.⁴ These writers maintain that a letter written by Paul to his beloved Ephesus should contain personal references and greetings. Since these features are absent, the epistle could not have been intended solely for the church at Ephesus.

The arguments in support of the encyclical theory at first appear to be very convincing. However, the view is open to numerous objections. Of major importance is the fact that there is absolutely no textual evidence to support the suggestion that Paul left a blank space for the addresses of the various churches after the words "who are" (τοῖς οὖσιν). The reading preserved in p⁴⁶, **N**, **B**, and others shows only an uninterrupted sequence of words. This reading, however, is most unnatural, and it is obvious by comparison with the other Pauline epistles that after τοῖς οὖσιν a geographical designation is intended to be read. Unless one is willing to resort to an emendation of the text,⁵ the only candidate with textual attestation for the original address is the reading ἐν Ἐφέσῳ, supported by the great majority of Greek manuscripts (including Alexandrinus and several other Alexandrian witnesses), the entire phalanx of ancient versions, and most early Fathers. It is, furthermore, the only address supported by ecclesiastical tradition. No other church (or group of Asian churches) ever claimed the epistle for itself. The *only* exception to this

³Thiessen, *Introduction*, 243.

⁴Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (New York: Abingdon, 1965) 235.

⁵James P. Wilson ("Note on the Textual Problem of Ephesians 1:1," *ET* 16 [1948-1949] 225-26) suggests that after τοῖς οὖσιν the numeral ἐνί is to be read. Other conjectures are the following: A. van Roon (*The Authenticity of Ephesians*, trans. S. Prescod-Jokel [Leiden: Brill, 1974], 84) suggests τοῖς ἀγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ἱεροπόλει καὶ Λαοδικείῃ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Mark Santer proposes the reading τοῖς ἀγίος καὶ πιστοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ("The Text of Ephesians 1:1," *NTS* 15 [1968-1969] 248). Richard Batey thinks οὖσιν is a corruption of Ἀσίας ("Critical—The Destination of Ephesians," *JBL* 82 [1963] 101). Though none of these emendations are unreasonable, the principal objection is over the *validity* of such a procedure in a passage where a reading with good documentary support is extant. A good critique of the conjectural readings in 1:1 is found in a recent article by Ernest Best, "Ephesians 1:1" (*Text and Interpretation: Studies in the New Testament presented to Matthew Black*, eds. Ernest Best and R. McL. Wilson [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979] 36-44).

tradition is the claim of the heretic Marcion that the letter was addressed to the Laodiceans, an assertion that Tertullian insisted was attributable to Marcion's propensity to "tamper" (*interpolare*) with the text.⁶ Thus if the words "in Ephesus" are original, the traditional view that the epistle was addressed and sent to the church at Ephesus is correct and must be accepted, regardless of whatever interpretive problems this may produce.

What of these frequently cited internal objections to the Ephesian address? Can they be answered if the traditional view is upheld? Those who favor the reading of the Chester Beatty papyrus and early uncials are convinced that the general nature of the epistle is the final argument for their position. There are, however, many scholars who see no contradiction at all between the epistle's unusual features and the *inclusion* of the words "in Ephesus." In the remainder of this article the writer would like to suggest simple alternative interpretations for the lack of personal greetings, the peculiar statements in 1:15, 3:2, and 4:21, and other internal objections to the Ephesian address in the hope of showing that there is no *necessary* contradiction between these features and the traditional view, and that, in fact, these peculiarities may possibly *best* be understood in the light of an Ephesian destination.

THE UNUSUAL FEATURES OF EPHESIANS

On the surface, it appears strange indeed that Paul would include no greetings in an epistle addressed to a church in which he had served for nearly three years. The facts, however, seem to present us with a different situation. Lenski, for instance, calls the arguments from the impersonal style of the letter "unconvincing."⁷ He points out that 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians all lack personal greetings, yet all were written to congregations founded by Paul, as was the church at Ephesus. On the other hand, the Epistle to the Romans has more greetings than any other epistle of Paul, yet this church was *not* founded by the apostle. Of the nine Pauline epistles which are addressed to churches (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon being excluded), five lack personal greetings (2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Ephesians), and four contain them (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and Philippians, this latter epistle not mentioning any individuals by name). Lenski writes:

⁶*Adv. Marc.*, V 17, quoted by Brook Foss Westcott, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) xxiii.

⁷R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1951) 334.

Why this difference? This is the real question and not the one regarding Ephesians alone. A blanket answer regarding the five cannot be given. Each letter stands by itself whether it is with or without greetings from or to individuals or from churches. That means that we can give only very tentative and partial answers to the questions as to why five letters are minus greetings, why four have greetings, and why these greetings are what they are, in one letter (Romans) a long list, in one only a summary (Philippians), both of these letters being different from the other two as far as greetings are concerned. As regards Ephesians, personal greetings are not missed by those who see the exalted subject and tone of the epistle.⁸

Lenski, in another place, concludes:

Therefore, the presence or absence of greetings determines neither whether a congregation was founded by Paul nor whether a letter written by him is intended for only one or for several congregations whether these were founded by him or not.⁹

In a similar vein, Guthrie discusses the remarkable number of personal greetings in the Roman epistle, a phenomenon which has prompted some scholars to conclude that chapter 16 of Romans was originally sent to Ephesus and later attached to the book of Romans.¹⁰ In the course of that discussion he makes the following observation:

There would be no parallel if this long series of greetings were sent to a church such as Ephesus which Paul knew well, for the only other occasion when he appended many personal greetings was when writing to Colossae which he had never visited. It was apparently against his policy to single out any individuals in churches that he knew well since he considered all the Christians to be his friends. But in a church like Rome, where he was not personally known, it would serve as a useful commendation that so many of the Christians there were his former acquaintances.¹¹

In other words, it seems that the better Paul knew a church to which he was writing, the fewer personal greetings he included.

If Guthrie's observation is correct, and there is no reason to doubt it, one should expect a noticeable *lack* of personal greetings in

⁸Ibid., 684-85.

⁹Ibid., 334.

¹⁰Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975) 400-404.

¹¹Ibid., 401. Harry Gamble, Jr. (*The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 48) writes: "Are these greetings not rather the exception which prove the rule: Individuals are not greeted in letters to churches with which Paul is personally acquainted."

an epistle written by Paul to a church he had founded and in which he had served for three years. Thus the argument for the encyclical theory based on the lack of personal greetings in Ephesians can be logically used to yield the opposite result.

The other features of the epistle are also explainable. The fact that Paul "heard" of their faith (1:15) may refer only to recent intelligence.¹² Years had gone by since Paul had been in Ephesus. In the meantime, the congregation no doubt had grown, and there were probably many new members whom Paul did not know personally when he wrote this epistle. This verse may be a reference to them. Yet another possibility exists. Paul could write to people whom he had never met that he had heard of their faith (Col 1:4), but he could also say to his friend and co-worker (συνεργός) Philemon, "I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints" (Philemon 5). Lenski writes in this regard: "One may hear about persons whom one has never met (the Colossians) as well as about persons whom one has met (the Ephesians, Philemon)."¹³ For Paul, therefore, to say that he had "heard" of these believers' faith and love does not necessitate the conclusion that he had not previously known them. The verse can easily be interpreted as a reference to the progress of the Ephesian Christians since Paul's departure from Ephesus.

Eph 3:2 is another verse which is often used to support the circular hypothesis, where Paul writes, ". . . if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you." The focus here is upon the words "if indeed you have heard" (εἰ γὰρ ἠκούσατε), which seem to imply that the recipients of this letter had *not* heard all of this. The force of εἰ γὰρ, however, is not doubt, but certainty. Hendriksen writes:

A strict literal translation of what Paul actually writes is perhaps impossible in English. The nearest to it would be something like this: "If, indeed, you have heard." Cf. A.V., "If ye have heard"; A.R.V., "If so be that ye have heard." However, that type of rendering will hardly do, since it might suggest that Paul is questioning whether or not the Ephesians, by and large, have ever heard about the task committed to him by his Lord.¹⁴

¹²Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1856) xii.

¹³Lenski, *Ephesians*, 388.

¹⁴William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967) 151.

Lenski agrees:

It is difficult to imitate the little intensifying $\gamma\epsilon$ in English; our "indeed" is a little too strong. The condition of reality with its gentle particle [sic] states the matter in a mild and polite form: "if, indeed, you have heard" (the Greek is satisfied with the aorist "heard," the simple past fact), meaning: *I know that you have*.¹⁵

Therefore, Hendriksen prefers to translate the words $\xi\iota\ \gamma\epsilon\ \eta\kappa\omicron\upsilon\sigma\alpha\tau\epsilon$ "for surely you have heard,"¹⁶ so as to avoid implying that they had not heard the apostle. Or, as Vincent says, "the words are a reminder of his preaching among them."¹⁷

The words $\xi\iota\ \gamma\epsilon\ . . . \eta\kappa\omicron\upsilon\sigma\alpha\tau\epsilon$ appear again in 4:21: "if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus." To some, this verse indicates that the readers of this epistle had not learned Christian truths through Paul and therefore shows that Paul could not have been writing to the Ephesians. Yet here again, Paul is not implying doubt, but certainty, in his remark. Vincent says: "The indicative mood implies the truth of the supposition: *If ye heard as ye did*."¹⁸ Furthermore, the emphasis of Paul's statement is upon the teaching of Christ in contrast to the teaching of men. But Paul is not stating here that he had never instructed these believers or that he did not know them personally. When Paul wrote to congregations with which he was not personally acquainted, he always mentioned that fact.¹⁹ Of the thirteen Pauline epistles, only two epistles fit into this category (unless Ephesians be admitted): Romans and Colossians. In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul specifically mentions his desire to visit them and to see them for the first time (1:8-15). In Colossians, Paul writes: "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face" (2:1). Yet, in the Epistle to the Ephesians there is nothing even similar to this.

The argument that points out that Ephesians does not deal with the mistakes, needs, or personalities of a single congregation, and therefore is a circular letter, is also explainable and may be dealt with briefly. As far as mistakes or needs are concerned, Tenney points out

¹⁵Lenski, *Ephesians*, 465-66 [italics added].

¹⁶Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 151. Cf. The New English Bible, "for surely you have heard."

¹⁷Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3. 380.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 394.

¹⁹See Stoeckhardt, *Ephesians*, 22.

that Ephesians was not written to novices in the Christian faith, but to those who had achieved some maturity in Christ.²⁰ Lenski notes that there was little need for correction in this epistle because Paul had received only good news from Ephesus (1:15). He writes:

This explains the general character of Paul's letter. Ephesians is unlike any other of Paul's letters in that it treats a great subject for the sole purpose of edification only.²¹

As far as Paul's personal interest in the Ephesian church goes, the Apostle does mention that Tychicus was to make an oral report about Paul's condition and plans to the recipients of the letter. The very wording of Eph 6:21-22, being almost identical to Col 4:7-8,²² implies that Paul had a definite church in mind when he wrote the epistle. Referring to these two passages, Stoeckhardt writes:

To every unprejudiced reader these words clearly convey the following facts: Paul had entrusted to his faithful co-laborer Tychicus both of these Letters, the one to the Colossians, the other to the Ephesians, in order that he should deliver them to those for whom the Letters were intended, and Paul had also given Tychicus a companion, Onesimus, who was to return to his master in Colosse. No one doubts that Tychicus did exactly that with which he had been charged.²³

It seems certain, then, that Tychicus reported Paul's condition and plans to the Ephesian church, just as he did in Colosse. Could this not be an indication of Paul's personal concern for the believers in Ephesus?

It may be seen, therefore, that the "unusual" features of this epistle can be understood just as easily, if not more easily, by holding to the traditional view. As a result, proponents of the Ephesian destination feel justified in their denial of any contradiction between the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ and the contents of the letter. Assuming, however, that the Ephesian Christians were the epistle's original addressees, how does one account for (1) the textual variation in 1:1, and (2) the general nature of the letter? These are valid questions which must be addressed. That both of these questions can be satisfactorily answered in the light of an Ephesian destination is the focus of the remaining discussion.

²⁰Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 318.

²¹Lenski, *Ephesians*, 327-28.

²²See Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 25, for the comparison.

²³Stoeckhardt, *Ephesians*, 25.

THE VARIANT READING IN 1:1

If the Ephesian address is original, is there any evidence to explain the omission of the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ? The usual reasons for accidental omission, such as homoioteleuton, homioarcton, itacism, etc., do not seem to apply in this case. It is also difficult to explain the omission on the basis of an error of the ear, memory, or judgment. A remote possibility is that the name "Ephesus" was abbreviated and somehow in its shortened form overlooked by a careless scribe. No evidence exists, however, that Christian scribes ever accepted into their system of contractions the names of cities.²⁴ If accidental omission is ruled out as a plausible explanation for the shorter reading, there remains only the possibility of an intentional omission. But why would a scribe want to excise these words from his copy?

Perhaps the most plausible answer to this question is that the address was deleted in order to convert the epistle into a catholic letter. By the omission of the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ, the epistle would lose its specific address and thus acquire a more general pertinence. This hypothesis has the following arguments in its favor. First, van Roon has pointed out that there was a "tendency in ancient Christianity to stress the ecumenical validity of the epistles of Paul."²⁵ This tendency may have prompted the omission of geographical indications in the Pauline letters. Second, an example of the careful omission of place names is actually found in Rom 1:7 and 15. In these verses the ninth century majuscule Boernerianus (G) omits the words ἐν Ῥώμῃ after τοῖς οὐσίῳ. The editorial committee of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament interpreted the omission "either as the result of an accident in transcription, or more probably, as a deliberate excision, made in order to show that the letter is of general, not local, application."²⁶ In this connection, Gamble made a study of the textual history of Romans, an epistle which has been preserved in three basic forms: one of fourteen chapters, another of fifteen, and a third of sixteen. Both of the shorter forms omit the last chapter, which is replete with personal references. Gamble came to the following conclusion about this phenomenon:

Therefore the emergence of both the fourteen- and the fifteen-chapter forms of the text must be sought at a later point in the

²⁴Only Jerusalem, the "Holy City," was included among the *nomina sacra*.

²⁵Van Roon, *Authenticity of Ephesians*, 81.

²⁶Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: The United Bible Societies, 1971) 505.

tradition of the letter, and we have seen that of the various possibilities only an early effort to "catholicize" the Roman letter suffices to explain the origin of the shorter and generalized textual forms.²⁷

Gamble goes on to explain that to some scribes of the ancient world the Roman epistle could not maintain both a specific address and catholic relevance. As a result, the shorter forms of Romans were created.²⁸

If Gamble's conclusions are correct, the Roman epistle is a clear example of what van Roon mentioned was the tendency in early Christianity, namely, to make Paul's epistles catholic. Why could this same thing not have happened in Ephesians? The possibility that it could have happened is strengthened by the impersonal style and general theme of the epistle. On the surface at least, the fact that Ephesians contains no personal greetings and addresses itself to the theme of the universal church makes the epistle appear that it was intended for a wider circulation than Ephesus alone. In Romans, the greetings in chap. sixteen had to be omitted as well as the place designation in order to give the epistle a catholic appearance; in Ephesians, the form was already suited to such editing.

Interestingly, of the thirteen epistles of Paul, only Romans, 1 Corinthians,²⁹ and Ephesians contain addresses which were tampered with by copyists. The fact that in all three of these letters the specific recipients are omitted in some manuscripts leads Gamble to write:

It is not difficult to suppose, therefore, that at an early time Paul's letters were adapted for more general use in an unsophisticated and rather mechanical way by textual revision which aimed at omitting specific matter. The short form of Romans which omits the address can be understood as a consequence of this interest, and we probably have to do with the same cause for the variants in the addresses of 1 Corinthians (1:2) and Ephesians (1:1), as Dahl has suggested. According to evidence, precisely these three letters enjoyed the greatest ecclesiastical use in the late first and early second centuries, and so would seem to have called for some resolution of the problem of particularity.³⁰

²⁷Gamble, *Textual History*, 128.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹The variant in 1 Cor 1:2 involves the transposition and/or possible omission of a specific reference to Corinth. In Col 1:2 there are differences in the spelling of "Colossians," but this hardly relates to the present discussion.

³⁰Gamble, *Textual History*, 117-18.

Gamble is referring to an article by N. A. Dahl in which he shows that the particularity of the Pauline epistles was a major problem in the ancient church.³¹ He points out that for early Christians it was no easy task to see how epistles which were written to particular churches (or individuals) under particular circumstances could be regarded as catholic, and therefore could be read in all the churches as relevant to believers in general. In the conclusion of his article, Dahl writes:

I Corinthians, Romans and Ephesians are the three epistles which are most often echoed in writings of pre-Marcionite Christian authors. It is reasonable to assume that these epistles circulated among the churches before the publication of a Corpus Paulinum. Each of them, I would think, was published in separate editions; in such editions the particular addresses could be left out in order to make the letter "catholic." Some vestiges of them are still left in the textual tradition of the collected corpus.³²

Dahl goes on to show that as the years passed by and these epistles came to be published and distributed in the Pauline Corpus, the problem of their particularity eased. The epistles of Paul, even the ones which dealt with the most particular subject matter (as Philemon), came to be read in all the churches "as Scriptures relevant to the whole church and not simply as historical documents."³³

Therefore, it may have been no mere coincidence that Ephesians was one of the three Pauline epistles to have its address tampered with. This letter was uniquely suited to just such an editorial corruption: it lacks direct personal greetings; its theme is the universal church; it contains certain phrases which *en apparence* imply catholicity. For these reasons, the hypothesis that the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ were omitted to convert the letter from a specific writing to a particular church into a letter intended for all believers may be accepted as a plausible explanation for the reading of p⁴⁶, **Σ**, **B**, and others. Then, in the course of time, it came to be generally recognized that the letters of Paul, as canonical and therefore catholic, no longer needed to be "adapted" for the more general use, and the shorter format of the address was rejected. If this hypothesis is correct, the *absence* of a place designation, and not its presence, should be considered anomalous.

³¹Nils A. Dahl, "The Particularity of the Pauline Epistles as a Problem in the Ancient Church," *Neotestamentica et Patristica: Freundesgabe Herrn Professor Dr. Oscar Cullmann zu Seinem 60. Geburtstag Überreicht*, ed. W.C. van Unnik (Leiden: Brill, 1962) 261-71.

³²*Ibid.*, 270-71.

³³*Ibid.*, 271.

THE GENERAL THEME OF THE EPISTLE

When all the evidence is considered, the peculiarities of the Ephesian epistle are at least as difficult to explain on the encyclical hypothesis as they are for the Ephesian destination. However, many writers feel that a case could be made that the peculiarities of the epistle are *best* understood in the light of the general purpose of the letter rather than the encyclical theory. Hodge, for instance, admits that the unusual features of the epistle are remarkable, but he goes on to point out that "they prove . . . nothing more than the apostle's object in writing this epistle was peculiar."³⁴ What was Paul's purpose in writing Ephesians? It seems clear from the general content and spirit of the letter that it was not for correction primarily, nor does it appear that there were special needs which required attention. Rather, in Ephesians Paul seeks to magnify the Christian church and to remind his readers of their glorious union with Christ (chaps. 1-3) and of the duties which arise from such a union (chaps. 4-6).³⁵ Paul's great subject is the church, the universal body of Christ.

As a result, Ephesians is the only epistle in the NT in which the word "church" (ἐκκλησία) means exclusively the universal church rather than the local group. Hendriksen expands on this when he says that the term "church" in Ephesians indicates "the totality of those, whether Jew or Gentile, who were saved through the blood of Christ and through him have their access in one Spirit to the Father (2:13, 18)."³⁶ Therefore, the local church at Ephesus was overshadowed in a sense by this emphasis upon the universal church, which was the central and overriding thought of the writer as he penned the letter.

When seen in its historical context, it seems only fitting that the apostle Paul should have chosen the church at Ephesus to receive this *opus magnum* on the body of Christ. The Epistle to the Ephesians was composed in A.D. 61 or 62, after many churches had been founded. Sitting in his place of confinement in Rome, Paul had the opportunity to contemplate the full significance of the new organism which had come into being and to formulate for the first time the full meaning of the doctrine of the church.³⁷ The question arose, to which church should he send the letter, and he chose by the guidance of the Holy Spirit the assembly of believers at Ephesus. But why would he have chosen the Ephesian church? Stoeckhardt writes:

³⁴Hodge, *Ephesians*, xii.

³⁵Stoeckhardt, *Ephesians*, 32-33.

³⁶Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, 63. This is not the first time, however, that Paul uses the word ἐκκλησία in its general sense. Cf. Gal 1:13, 1 Cor 14:19, and Phil 3:6.

³⁷Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 317-18. Cf. Ernest F. Scott, *The Literature of the New Testament* (New York: Columbia University, 1933) 184.

The congregation at Ephesus was the largest, the most prominent, and the best indoctrinated congregation of the Orient. At that time it was still ag'ow with its first love. This congregation was a bright light in the Lord, which with its beams illuminated wide stretches of pagan darkness. It was therefore entirely proper that the Apostle, her old teacher, who at present had no special instruction or admonitions which he wished to impress upon her, should remind that congregation of her high honor and grace, gifts of Christ, and of her communion with the Church of Christ and her high calling which as a congregation of Christ she was to fulfill in the world.³⁸

Thus the epistle was written to the Ephesians and addressed to them, but Paul used a form to emphasize the Ephesian assembly as a representative of the universal church, rather than as a local church. This was appropriate, because for Paul the local church is nothing more than the result of the expansion of the one universal church.³⁹

That a single congregation could represent the universal church is a point upon which many NT scholars agree. Lohse writes:

Whether in the plural number or singular, whenever the ἐκκλησία is spoken of, it is always a matter of the congregating of the Christian church as God's holy people. The single church fails in no way to perfectly represent the church of Jesus Christ. It is the people of God who are assembled in Thessalonika, Phillipi, Corinth, Rome, Braunschweig, Gandersheim, and anywhere else.⁴⁰

Reicke agrees:

In fact, Paul is inclined to regard each local church not only as a copy in miniature of the universal church, but as being the universal church itself, realized in this world.⁴¹

³⁸Stoeckhardt, *Ephesians*, 27-28.

³⁹Bo Reicke, "Unité Chrétienne et Diaconie," *Neotestamentica et Patristica* (Leiden Brill, 1962) 212.

⁴⁰"Ob in der Mehrzahl oder in der Einzahl von der ἐκκλησία gesprochen wird, immer handelt es sich in der Versammlung der christlichen Gemeinde um Gottes heiliges Volk. Der einzelnen Gemeinde fehlt also nichts, um die Kirche Jesu Christi vollständig repräsentieren zu können. Gottes Volk ist versammelt in Thessalonich, Phillipi, Korinth, Rom, Braunschweig, Gandersheim und wo immer sonst." Eduard Lohse, *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972) 192.

⁴¹"En effet, Paul est enclin à regarder chaque église locale, non seulement comme une copie en miniature de l'église universelle, mais comme étant l'église universelle elle-même, réalisée dans ce monde." Reicke, "Unité Chrétienne et Diaconie," 203. Cf. H. Bavinck: "In de verschillende plaatselijke vergaderingen der geloovigen komt de ééne gemeente van Christus tot openbaring," *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1911), 4. 302.

Really, one need go no further than the letters of the apostle Paul to see this, as, for instance, when he writes to the church at Corinth, "Ye are the body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:2). In fact, Paul regarded the Corinthian believers as "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2). Thus Reicke could observe: "The totality of the church is for St. Paul the primary fact; its localization is but a corollary of it."⁴²

There is therefore no problem in saying that the epistle was written and addressed to the Ephesians, if one also understands that the epistle's focus is upon the body of Christians as a class, rather than upon the Ephesians as a local church. Ephesus, as the seat of the "great mother church," had the right to receive such an epistle. But *in keeping with his theme* Paul may have used a style to suit it to all Christians, including those in the neighboring churches to whom it would invariably be communicated.⁴³ (Perhaps it is in this sense that the Ephesian epistle should be considered "encyclical.")⁴⁴ Thus the *general nature* of the epistle does not argue against the Ephesian address as such, but rather may simply be in keeping with the *general theme* of the epistle.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The encyclical theory grew out of the uncertainty regarding the reading of 1:1 and offers to many the most plausible explanation of why the two words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ are missing from such early and noteworthy manuscripts as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. Because it is supported by seemingly unanswerable internal arguments, numerous scholars are convinced that this view is the most credible. However, though much could be said for such a line of evidence, these arguments cannot be considered as conclusive for there are alternative interpretations for each. All of the internal objections have been answered satisfactorily by capable scholars in the light of an Ephesian address. In fact, some of these peculiarities, much more than being objections to the Ephesian destination, may instead be taken as supports for it. For example, the fact that Ephesians lacks personal

⁴²"La totalité de l'église, c'est pour saint Paul le fait primaire, sa localisation en est seulement un corollaire." Reicke, "Unité Chrétienne et Diaconie," 203.

⁴³Hodge, *Ephesians*, xiii.

⁴⁴Referring to the collection and distribution of the Pauline epistles, F. F. Bruce writes: "But when his letters were published in one *corpus* (and even earlier, if they circulated in smaller collections), it was because the authority of each, and of all together, was believed to extend beyond the first addressees to the Church at large." ("New Light on the Origins of the New Testament Canon," *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, eds. Richard Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974] 10.)

greetings is apparently more in keeping with Paul's policy than if he had attached a long series of greetings, and therefore becomes a possible argument in favor of the traditional address.

Furthermore, the textual phenomenon in 1:1 seems to argue for the Ephesian address rather than against it. It would appear that either the words ἐν Ἐφέσῳ were intentionally added or intentionally omitted. From both intrinsic and transcriptional evidence it is not difficult to decide in which direction the change went. On the one hand, the reading ἐν Ἐφέσῳ is characteristically Pauline, and its omission would be a singular exception among all of the epistolary addresses in the Pauline Corpus. The omission also leaves the text with insoluble syntactical problems which make the translation and interpretation of Ephesians 1:1 without ἐν Ἐφέσῳ extremely difficult, if not impossible.⁴⁵ On the other hand, there is good reason to believe that a scribe may have omitted the words "in Ephesus." By so doing he would have given the epistle the appearance of being universally addressed. With its absence of personal greetings and its general theme, the Ephesian epistle was uniquely suited to just such a corruption.

In addition, the fact that the epistle's focus is upon the universal church, and not upon the Ephesians as a local church, does not argue against the Ephesian destination as such. To proceed from the impersonal style of the letter to the conclusion that therefore Paul could not have been writing to a local congregation is a *non sequitur*. The general theme of Ephesians provides an adequate explanation for the general nature and style of the epistle.

Plausible as the encyclical theory may seem, when the evidence is considered the traditional view appears to best account for all the facts: the textual variation in 1:1, the non-local flavor of the epistle, the universal tradition of the church that the letter was written to the Ephesians, and the weighty documentary evidence in support of the Ephesian address. As a result, it may be concluded that the peculiarities of the letter are not conclusive reasons for rejecting the strong textual and historical testimony in favor of the Ephesian destination.

⁴⁵F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975) 213.