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Putting the 'P' in Philippians

To truly understand any book in the New Testament, it is first necessary to know why the text was written. In the "Letter of Paul to the Philippians" this reasoning has great influence on the meaning of the text. Factors such as authorship, place, time, and circumstances of the writing each play a significant role in this writing.

Philippians starts with the greeting, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" (Phil 1:1). However, most scholars feel that the letter is the work of Paul alone. It is written in the singular with objective references to Timothy, and Timothy is not even included in the final salutation. The letter also "bears the stamp of Pauline authorship" (Tenney 763). Since there are no major objections to these views, I would have the tendency to favor them.

The factor of the writing with the most discrepancies seems to be the place of origin. From the words of Paul, there is no doubt that he was in captivity when he wrote the letter. The question is over where he was being held. There are three major views on where he was when this text was constituted. The first and more traditional view is that Paul was being held in Rome. Georg Kümmel points out that the references to the Praetorian Guard and imperial servants serve as strong references towards the city of Rome. He also shows that the situation of Paul's imprisonment implies his being held in Rome (325).

Nonetheless, there are some serious problems with Rome being the place of writing for the letter. In Paul's writings to the Philippians,

he implies at least four travels from Philippi to Rome and back by various messengers. This journey is one that takes many months to complete, but Paul was only held in Rome for two years (Kümmel 325-6). This point alone puts a large hole in the argument for the city of Rome.

There are some other factors that hurt the possibility of Rome being the site for Philippians. From Rome, Paul had made it known that he planned to continue west to Spain to spread the gospel further. However, he makes arrangements in his letter to visit Philippi upon his release, which is a lengthy trip toward eastern Rome. This makes Rome's use as the origin all the more unlikely. Paul also "polemicizes" against Judaizers in his letter to Philippi. According to Kümmel, this polemicizing does not fit well at all with the period of Paul's Roman imprisonment (326).

In order to find alternatives to the Roman origin, other cities of Paul's imprisonment must be identified. Various cities played host to Paul as a prisoner during his lifetime. Two likely candidates here for the origin of the letter are the cities of Caesarea and Ephesus.

Oeder of Leipzig first introduced the idea that Paul may have written the letters from Caesarea in 1731 (Martin 25). The travel distance here is faster because it is primarily a sea route. As for the trip westward, it is conceivable from this view because Caesarea is to the east of Philippi. Therefore, both visits may be made in one journey (Kümmel 328-9). Another plus in the favor of Caesarea may be that even though Paul was imprisoned there for two years, there is no letter currently dated from his stay (Harmon 5). However, it is strongly contested that the "size and type of Christian community at the scene of Paul's imprisonment do not favor Caesarea" (Martin 25).

The city of Ephesus is the last of the major candidates for being home of the letter. Kümmel demonstrates the argument for Ephesus in four points: 1) both the Praetorian Guard and imperial slaves can be claimed

for Ephesus, 2) the literary style fits better with the early letters than those of captivity, 3) the trial in Philippians 1-2 is different from that in Acts 23, and 4) Philippians 3 fits in with Paul's polemicizing of the Judaizers (329-331). The problem with using Ephesus as the site of the letter is that these points, even the imprisonment of Paul at Ephesus, cannot be confirmed with the sources available today (Kümmel 331, Harmon 6).

Another problem with identifying the origin of the letter can be found in Spivey and Smith's Anatomy of the New Testament. They show that the letter to the Philippians may be "a composite of three Pauline letters or fragments" because of the documents loose structure (329). This makes finding the place where the letter was written even more difficult.

Kümmel then points out that "the question where Philippians was written cannot be answered with any certainty" (332). Still, most scholars believe that "the old view that the epistle was sent from Rome is still by far the most probable" (Harmon 6). Nonetheless, I feel that there are too many difficulties for Rome to be the place of origin. Despite the criticism of the theory for Caesarea I feel, from the evidence presented before me, that it may be the most likely candidate for the origin of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Since the place where Paul wrote this letter cannot be determined to any definite lengths, it is hard to give an exact date for the writing. Scholars estimate that the text may have been written as early as 53 CE if in Ephesus (Kümmel 332), or as late as 63 CE if it was created in Rome (Martin 36), with the dates for Caesarea lying somewhere in between. Since the time period of the origin of this letter is fairly confined, I feel that the letter could have been written anywhere in that range. However, since I favor Caesarea as the place of origin

for the letter, I will have to go with the estimated date for that city -- 59 CE (Harmon 8).

One thing that really makes Philippians stand out is that it is a very personal letter from Paul. That makes the immediate historical circumstances that influence the letter extremely unclear. The common view on the intent of the letter is that Paul wants to thank the community of Philippi for their gift of money and love that was delivered to him by Epaphroditus. Along with this he shares with the community his wellbeing to comfort them (Kümmel 323-4).

However, many scholars tend to disagree with this common view. One reason for this is that Paul does not give thanks for the gift until near the conclusion of the letter. Many feel that it is more likely for Paul to be writing to assure the appropriate welcome for Epaphroditus upon his return (Tenney 764). This is because Epaphroditus was brought near his death while doing Christian service for the community of Philippi, and they should now respect him more for that (Kümmel 324). Other scholars feel that the letter was written to assist the church in Philippi through some of its struggles (Martin 40-1), but this is rather unlikely concerning the very personal nature of the letter. After reading the text, I would have to agree with the majority of scholars that the intent of the letter is to assure the proper welcome for the messenger Epaphroditus.

When all these points are considered, "The Letter of Paul to the Philippians" becomes much clearer. The employment of the letter within the circumstances presented, depending on which view it is placed in, can give you various interpretations of events and ideas. An overall view of these ideas allows us to understand the role of Paul in Christianity, and even the role of Christians, in even more detail. The main factor is still what the Bible has always been about -- interpretation.

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