

THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

● 1. *Who wrote the Letter to the Philippians?*

1.1. What does Phil 1:1 indicate about the authorship of the Letter to the Philippians?

1.2. Paul uses the first person singular throughout Philippians (1:3-4, 7-9, 12-27, 30; 2:2, 12, 16-20, 22-25, 27-28, 30; 3:1, 4, 7-14, 17-18; 4:1-4, 9-18), and even refers to Timothy as distinguished from himself (2:19-24). When he does use the first person plural, Paul refers to believers in general (3:3, 15, 20; 4:21) or he refers to what he and Timothy (and possibly Silvanus) did when they were in Philippi and founded the church there (3:17). In the letter Paul also makes several personal references: some recent events in his life (1:12-14); his views about living and dying (1:21-24); his special relationship with Timothy (2:19-24); some autobiographical details (3:4-6); his gratitude for gifts sent to him from the Philippians (4:14-18).

What do these data imply about the real or, at least, the principal author of the Letter to the Philippians?

1.3. Paul does not say explicitly who would be carrying his letter to Philippi, but he may hint at it in Phil 2:25. Based on this passage, who was the most likely candidate as the letter carrier?

● 2. To whom was the Letter to the Philippians written?

2.1. Who were the intended readers of the Letter to the Philippians, according to Phil 1:1?

2.2. The preposition “with” (sun) should be taken inclusively, so that Paul’s meaning is “to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus in Philippi, *including* the overseers and deacons.” These were two offices in the church at Philippi, denoting the leaders of the church. The reference to “the overseers and deacons” as intended readers is unique in Paul’s letters. In fact, references to overseers and deacons anywhere in Paul’s letters occur only in the Pastoral letters (1 Tim 3; Titus 3), although he does refer to those with the spiritual gift of leadership (Rom 12:8), to those who exercise authority in the church (1 Thess 5:12) and to those who teach (Gal 6:6). Luke, however, does refer to the fact that, on his journey to Jerusalem, when he stopped at Miletus, Paul called to himself the elders from the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:28). Luke also indicates that, as early as his first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas were appointing elders in the churches that they founded (Acts 14:23). Why Paul centered out “the overseers and deacons” at Philippi as intended recipients of the letter is unknown.

2.3. Philippi was a Macedonian town, bordering Thracia. Situated on the summit of a hill, it dominated a large and fertile plain, intersected by the Egnatian Way. It was northwest of Mount Pangaea, near the River Gangites and the Aegean Sea. In 358 BCE Philip II of Macedonia enlarged and fortified a pre-existing settlement called Krenides (“little fountains”), renaming it Philippi after himself (see Strabo, *Geog.* 7. fr. 41). According to Appian, the name of the city was also Datus (*Bell. civ.* 4.105). The Romans conquered Macedonia at the battle of Pydna in 168-67 BCE, at which time the territory was divided into four administrative units (Livy, *Roman History*, 45.29). After the defeat of Brutus and Cassius, Philippi was further enlarged and settled by Roman veterans of the battle of Philippi (42 BCE) and later by soldiers loyal to the defeated Marcus Antonius in the battle of Actium (31 BCE) (Dio Cassius 51.4). After the battle of Philippi, Antonius and Octavius made Philippi a Roman colony and renamed it Colonia Julia Philippensis in honor of Julius Caesar. Luke describes it correctly as “a Roman colony and principal city of the district of the region of Macedonia” (Acts 16:12). To be a Roman colony meant the conferring of jus Italicum, which made the citizens of Philippi full Roman citizens, so that the colonists had the same rights with respect to transfer of land, payment of taxes, local administration and law as those living in Italy. After the battle of Actium, in honor of Octavius (Augustus), the name was expanded to become Colonia Augusta Julia Philippensis. At this time, the city was populated by ethnic Romans, Macedonians, Greeks and even Jews (Acts 16:13); the inhabitants of the city, however, considered themselves Romans (see Acts 16:21). The city was ruled by two collegiate magistrates, whom Luke calls stratêgoi (Acts 16:22, 35, 36, 38); the Latin equivalent of stratêgos

with the church. What Luke would have done in Philippi during these years is unknown. According to 1 Thess 3:1-2, Paul and Silas sent Timothy from Athens back to Thessalonica to check on the progress of the church there; Timothy may also have visited the church at Philippi at this time (see Acts 18:5). It seems also that Silas also left Athens and went to Macedonia, perhaps to Philippi, because Luke reports that both Timothy and Silas rejoined Paul from Macedonia (Acts 18:5). While he was in Thessalonica, the Philippians sent more than one gift of money to Paul, which enabled Paul not to take financial support from the Corinthians (Phil 4:15-16; 2 Cor 11:8-9; 8:1-3).

While in Ephesus, Paul sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia; no doubt, they visited the church at Philippi on that journey (Acts 19:22). Paul himself probably visited the Philippian church about four years or so after his first visit to the city on his third missionary journey, after he left Ephesus, because he traveled through Macedonia on his way to Achaia, where he stayed three months, probably during the winter (Acts 20:2-3a). It seems incredible that Paul would travel the Egnatia Way as it wended its way through Philippi and not visit this beloved church. Of this probable visit, however, nothing is known, except that the Philippians became willing participants in Paul's collection project (2 Cor 8:1-5; 9:2). Paul was in Philippi again a few months later, at Passover, but Luke provides no details about Paul's activities in the city at that time (Acts 20:3b). After an interval of a few years, the Philippians sent another gift of money to Paul when he was a prisoner in Rome (Phil 4:15, 17); how they knew of Paul's situation and need is unknown. Epaphroditus was sent by the church at Philippi with the gift of money and in order to "minister to my needs" (2:25-30; 4:10-20). It is probable that Paul wrote a previous letter to the Philippians, which is no longer extant, because what he writes in Phil 3:1 implies that he has written to them earlier: "I do not hesitate to write to you the same things again." He may have written this letter after Epaphroditus's arrival and may have informed them in it that Epaphroditus had fallen ill, because the Philippians knew of his illness and were concerned for him (2:26) (The fact that the Philippians knew that he was ill distressed Epaphroditus). The Philippians probably sent a letter to Paul; evidence for this is the fact that the Letter to the Philippians, in part, seems to be a response to a letter in which the Philippians requested information about Paul's well-being and the progress of his trial (1:12), assured him of their prayers for him (1:19), asked him whether he would be soon returning to Philippi (1:25-26), expressed their concern for the health of Epaphroditus (2:26) and possibly apologized for not having sent money sooner (4:10-11; see 2:17, 25, 30).

At the time of his writing of his Letter to the Philippians, Paul intends to send Timothy to Philippi in the near future (2:19-23), and expects also to visit them afterwards (2:24; see 1:25-26). Apparently, Paul has abandoned or suspended temporarily his plan to evangelize in Spain.

2.5. What do Phil 4:15-16; 2 Cor 11:8; Phil 1:3-8; 2:12; 4:1 indicate about the relationship between Paul and the Philippian church?

● 3. *When was the Letter to the Philippians written?*

3.1. What do Phil 1:7, 13-14, 17 indicate about Paul's situation at the time of writing his letter? What do Phil 1:19, 25; 2:24 indicate about Paul's expectation for the future? What can you conclude about the date of the composition of the Letter to the Philippians from these data? (It must be remembered that Paul was arrested in Jerusalem between 54-58, spent two years in prison in Caesarea sometime during the period of 54-60, and then was sent as a prisoner to Rome between 56-60, where he remained under house arrest for at least two years, during the period of 56-62.)

Some have argued that Paul was uncertain about the ultimate outcome of his incarceration, vacillating between the positive statements in Phil 1:19, 25; 2:24 and negative statements in which he allegedly is contemplating his death. This allows them to date this letter from the time of Paul's imprisonment during Nero's persecution in the mid-60's when Paul was executed. (Often that Paul was twice a prisoner in Rome is denied.) In 1:21-23, Paul writes, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better." Some have interpreted this to mean that Paul is thinking that his execution is a real possibility and is reflecting on whether he would rather die or continue living. Likewise in Phil 2:17 "But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon he sacrifice and service of your faith" is taken to mean that Paul is thinking about his impending death in metaphorical terms as being sacrificed to God. It would seem too tenuous, however, to interpret Phil 1:21-23; 2:17 :19-20 as evidence that Paul entertained some pessimistic

thoughts about the possible outcome of his incarceration. Rather, in 1:21-23, after more than two decades of apostolic ministry, Paul was thinking about what his preference for the future, and in 2:17 he was reflecting in general on his entire apostolic career and comparing it to a drinking offering being poured out to God. For these two passages to count as evidence that Paul was unsure of the outcome of his impending trial would require some explicit reference in them to his situation as a prisoner expecting to be executed.

3.2. In Phil 1:12-13, Paul says that the fact that he is in chains because of Christ has become known “to whole praetorian.” The term praetorian (praetōrion = Latin praetorium) probably denotes the contingent of Roman soldiers constituting the Praetorian Guard (see references to them in Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.46; Suetonius, *Nero*, 9). Although it can also refer to the official residence of a Roman governor (in the New Testament, see Mark 15:16 = Matt 27:27; John 18:28, 33; 19:9; Acts 23:35), the word praetorian in Phil 1:13 seems to refer to people because the second half of the phrase “and all the others” likewise refers to people, and these two are coordinate terms. These elite troops had their headquarters in Rome, but were also stationed in cities where there was a Roman governor. Both Caesarea and Rome fall into this category of city. But Paul’s reference in Phil 4:22 to “those of Caesar’s household” (hoi ek tēs Kaisaros oikias = Latin domus or familia Caesaris), i.e., those slaves and freedman in the service of the emperor, who send greetings to the Philippians strongly points to an imprisonment in Rome.

3.3. If he wrote it as a prisoner in Rome, Paul may have written the Letter to the Philippians well after his arrival in the city. Evidence for this is the fact that the events of which Paul writes or are implied in his letter would have required a considerable amount of time to transpire. Sufficient time is needed for the following chain of events, which entails four journeys between Rome and Philippi.

- After Paul arrives in Rome, a messenger travels to Philippi and tells the Philippians of this;
- In response to hearing that Paul is in Rome, the Philippians collect money and send it with Epaphroditus to Rome (2:25; 4:18);
- Epaphroditus becomes seriously ill while in Rome, and almost dies; a messenger travels to Philippi and tells them of this, perhaps delivering a letter sent by Paul detailing the event;
- A messenger travels from Philippi to Rome, so that Paul and Epaphroditus become aware of the fact that the Philippians know of the latter’s illness and are worried for him, perhaps by means of a letter sent from the Philippian church (2:26).

This chain of events would require four journeys either from Rome to Philippi or from Philippi to Rome. The distance between the two cities is c. 1300 km (c. 800 mi.) and a journey between them would take between one month and two months to complete, depending on several factors. Moreover, these events probably did not necessarily occur one right after the other with no intervals of time between them, and generally people did not travel by ship during the winter months. It is not known exactly how long Paul remained incarcerated after his arrival in Rome, because Luke’s account of Paul’s apostolic ends with Paul having been under house arrest in Rome for two years,

but not yet released. But, given this evidence, Paul could have been in Rome longer than two years before he wrote his letter.

It is possible to argue, however, that the length of time needed for this series of events is actually half of what is usually thought, because only two journeys between Philippi and Rome may be required. The first two journeys would be unnecessary if the Philippians had heard that Paul was on his way to Rome and then sent Epaphroditus to Rome before Paul arrived in the city. In this case, Epaphroditus could have arrived in Rome at the same time or even before Paul. If so, then only two journeys between the two cities are required: a messenger travelling from Rome to Philippi to tell of Epaphroditus's illness and one from Philippi to Rome to tell of their concern for Epaphroditus. Evidence that this may have been what happened comes from the Book of Acts. In Acts 27:1-6, Luke makes the point that Aristarchus traveled with Paul and his entourage from Caesarea to Myra in Lycia. The fact that Luke specifies that Aristarchus was "a Macedonian from Thessalonica" (27:2) may imply that Aristarchus was on his way home and therefore parted company with Paul in Myra and went to Thessalonica, from which he hailed. If so, then he would have travelled through Philippi along the Egnatian Way and would no doubt have told the Philippian believers that Paul was on his way to Rome as a prisoner. The delay caused by Paul's shipwreck would give Epaphroditus enough time to catch up to Paul and even overtake him to his destination.

Given all the data, what is the range of possible dates for the composition the Letter to the Philippians?

● 4. *Where was the Letter to the Philippians written?*

Based on your conclusion regarding the date of its composition (see Phil 4:22), where was Paul when he wrote the Letter to the Philippians?

4.2. The Marcionite prologue confirms that Paul wrote the Letter to the Philippians from Rome: "The Philippians are Macedonians. They persevered in faith after they had accepted the word of truth and they did not receive false prophets. The apostle praises them, writing to them from Rome in prison by Epaphroditus."

4.3 Paul indicates there is some resistance to him from some Christians in Rome. He writes:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the good news, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the good news; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment (1:12-17)

It is not clear exactly why not everyone was appreciative of Paul and his work, but the ill-will shown to him by some may have had something to do with his views on gentiles and the Law.

● 5. *What is the Letter to the Philippians?*

Outline of the Letter to the Philippians

A. 1:1-11: This represents the introduction of the letter.

1. 1:1-2: This is the salutation of the letter.

2. 1:3-11: Paul gives thanks for the Philippians because they shared in the expense of Paul's preaching of the gospel. Paul expresses his confidence that God will complete the good work that he has begun in his readers. He prays for the Philippians that they would increase in love and knowledge in order that they may be blameless on the day of the Christ.

B. 1:12-4:20: This represents the main body.

1. 1:12-26: Paul describes his present circumstances as a prisoner, expressing his confidence of being released. He makes reference to some who preach Christ from envy and rivalry, hoping to annoy him. Paul explains that for him to live is Christ and to die is a benefit; although he would rather depart and be with Christ, he believes that he must remain in this world.

2 1:27-2:18: Paul gives a series of exhortations to the Philippians.

a. 1:27-30: Paul exhorts the Philippians to be steadfast in the face of persecution. He tells them that their suffering is a privilege granted to them by God.

b. 2:1-2: Paul exhorts his readers to be unified, being humble and looking to the interests of others.

c. 2:3-11: Continuing his exhortation to humility, Paul gives the example of Christ. He quotes a hymn that describes how Christ, being equal with God, humbled himself to the point of death on the cross.

d. 2:12-18: Paul exhorts his readers to work out their salvation with fear and trembling and to do all things without murmuring and complaining. He describes himself as being poured out as a drink offering.

3. 2:19-30: Paul tells the Philippians that he plans to send Timothy and eventually Epaphroditus to them. He explains how Epaphroditus, one their own, almost died of an illness in his service to Paul, but has now recovered.

4. 3:1-4:1: Paul warns his readers against false teachers, who advocate circumcision. He explains that, unlike them, he puts no confidence in his achievements, for whatever he has gained he counts as nothing because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ. He says that his only desire is to be found in Christ, having a righteousness that comes apart from the law, but comes through faith in Christ. He says that his aim is to know Christ, the power of his resurrection and a sharing in his death and that he reaches for the goal of the prize of the heavenly calling of God in Christ Jesus. He encourages his readers to imitate him, warns them against libertinists and explains how Christ will transform the body of their humiliation into the body of Christ's glory.

5. 4:2-9: Paul gives a series of exhortations.

6. 4:10-20: Paul acknowledges the generosity of the Philippians in sending him money with Epaphroditus. Although he says that he has learned how to be content in any circumstances, Paul is appreciative of this financial assistance.

C. 4:21-23: This represents the conclusion of the letter, including greetings and a benediction.

5.2. Integrity of the Letter to the Philippians

5.2.1. Some have argued that the Letter to the Philippians is not a single letter, but consists of two or three letters. In addition, the hymn in 2:6-11 is thought to be pre-Pauline.

A. The Christological hymn in 2:6-11 is thought to be taken over by Paul in the service of his exhortation to humility. The reason for suspecting that the apostle did not write the hymn is that it contains too many instances of non-Pauline vocabulary to have originated with Paul.

B. Because Phil 3:1a "Finally, brethren, rejoice in the Lord..." looks like the conclusion of the letter, some have proposed that 3:1b-4:20 represents interpolated material. The fact that the same phrase occurs in 4:8 is said to be evidence of a conclusion from another letter: "Finally, brethren, whatever is true..." The conclusion begun in 3:1a is thought to resume in 4:21-23 with greetings and a benediction. This letter is said to be the one that Paul sent with Epaphroditus when he returned to Philippi after a severe illness. It is also suggested by some that sections of 4:1-9 may also have been part of this letter.

C. Among those who argue that 3:1b-4:20 is not original to the letter beginning in 1:1, there is disagreement as to whether 3:1b-4:20 consists of one letter or two. Some divide 3:1b-4:20 into two separate documents, based on difference of content. Phil 4:10-20 is taken to be part of a letter that Paul wrote immediately after Epaphroditus arrived in Rome, thanking the Philippians for the money that they sent. All or part of 3:1b-4:9 is thought to be from a polemical letter that Paul wrote warning the Philippians against Judaizers.

5.2.2. While it is arguable that the Christological hymn in 2:6-11 is pre-Pauline, the evidence that the Letter to the Philippians consists of more than one letter is weak. The criterion for suspecting that there is more than one letter is literary untidiness, which is taken to indicate the presence of literary seams. But what is not considered is the improbability that a later redactor would leave evidence of his sources. Why, for example, did this hypothetical redactor not remove Phil 3:1a “Finally, brethren, rejoice in the Lord...” when this would wrongly lead the reader to expect the conclusion of the letter? Besides, Paul uses a similar “finally”-clause in 1 Thess 4:1, well before the actual conclusion of the letter. It is more probable that Paul and/or his amanuensis adopt an “untidy” literary style, similar to that found in 2 Corinthians.

6. Why was the Letter to the Philippians written?

As already indicated, Paul was probably responding to a letter from the Philippian church when he wrote his Letter to the Philippians. What do the following passages indicate about Paul’s purpose in writing the letter?

6.1. Phil 4:10-18; 2:25

6.2. Phil 2:25-30

6.6. Phil 4:2-3
