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EPAPHRODITUS' SICKNESS AND THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS

by COLIN O. BUCHANAN

FEW New Testament scholars will take seriously the assertion, based on the computer's findings with regard to the distribution of particles in the Pauline letters, that the Epistle to the Philippians is not properly to be ascribed to Paul. They will consider rather that any theory which denies Philippians to Paul supplies by that same token its own "reductio ad absurdum". But recent literature on this epistle has underlined two important questions, respecting (i) its unity and (ii) the date and place of its composition. Mr. Buchanan, now curate at Cheadle Parish Church, Cheshire, prepared this study of these two questions while he was a theological student at Tyndale Hall, Bristol.

IN *New Testament Studies* for January, 1961¹ the Rev. B. S. Mackay argues cogently against the Rev. B. D. Rahtjen² for the unity of Philippians. In his last section he meets an objection to the unity which might be stated thus :

(a) 2: 25-30 requires us to believe that at least one journey from Paul's place of imprisonment to Philippi preceded the sending of that section of Philippians.

(b) 4: 10-20 is clearly a first letter of thanks for the gift Epaphroditus brought, and was apparently sent soon after Paul received the gift.

Therefore (c) these two sections of the letter cannot have been sent on one and the same occasion.

F. W. Beare has the same argument,³ but many commentators (even if they regard 3: 1b-4: 3 as an interpolation) do not like the conclusion (c). (a) seems impregnable, because news of Epaphroditus' sickness has clearly reached Philippi before this section was sent (2: 26). Accordingly (b) is regularly avoided or denied. Ramsay and Dodd do not comment on the difficulty,⁴ and Duncan has to admit that "it may seem strange that the gift was not acknow-

¹ Vol. VII, No. 2.

² *N.T. Studies*, Vol. VI, No. 2.

³ *Epistle to the Philippians* (Black, 1959), p. 4.

⁴ W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, pp. 357-359; C. H. Dodd, *N.T. Studies*, p. 97.

ledged earlier."⁵ Michael frankly denies (b), and says some previous correspondence had passed between Paul and the Philippians, the former sending grudging thanks with the news of Epaphroditus' illness, and the latter sending a hurt reply.⁶ Guthrie also inclines to this view.⁷ It seems however to conflict with 4: 18, which very strongly suggests the gift has recently arrived, and that this is genuinely the first acknowledgement.

Mackay, however, challenges premise (a), suggesting that Epaphroditus fell ill on his journey, and not at the place of Paul's imprisonment. This, he claims, is suggested by "a careful examination of the language of 2: 30." In this he is surely right, but too tentative—and, as this surprisingly far-reaching thesis seems to have had little airing in the last fifty years,⁸ the purpose of this study is to show firstly just how probable the thesis is, and, secondly, to draw from it certain conclusions about the unity, purpose, place of origin and date of Philippians.

I. THE PLACE OF EPAPHRODITUS' ILLNESS

What was the Philippians' *leitourgia* (2: 30), to complete which Epaphroditus fell ill? *Leitourgia* has a strong sense of official and commissioned service, as opposed to the less definite *diakonia*. It is rare in the New Testament, being used thrice of priestly service (Luke 1: 23; Heb. 8: 6; 9: 21), once of a contribution of money (2 Cor. 9: 12), and twice in Philippians (2: 17; 2: 30). Phil. 2: 17 is difficult and Lightfoot renders it "their faith (or their good works springing from their faith)."⁹ 2: 17 also calls it a *thusia*, which in 4: 18 definitely connotes the gift, or rather the giving, of money. The cognate *leitourgeō* has a parallel usage—being used once of priestly service (Heb. 10: 11), once of New Testament worship (Acts 13: 2), and once of ministering a cash contribution (Rom. 15: 27). The noun *leitourgos* in Phil. 2: 25 suggests the same meaning¹⁰—as Epaphroditus is the *leitourgos* of Paul's *chreia*, which word also refers to a monetary lack in 4: 16 (and cf. 4: 19 where the metaphor is drawn from money). Thus, *prima facie*, *leitourgia* in 2: 17 and 2: 30 seems to refer to the sending of

⁵ *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*, p. 85.

⁶ *Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Moffatt Commentary), pp. xxi-xxii, 219.

⁷ *The Pauline Epistles* (Tyndale Press, 1961), pp. 142, 148, 157.

⁸ It is suggested among others by Conybeare and Howson, Beet and Findlay.

⁹ *Epistle to the Philippians*, p. 19.

¹⁰ Beare for one gives it that meaning (*op. cit.*, p. 98).

money to Paul¹¹—the collecting of it being the task of the whole Philippian church, and the thing then lacking being the actual conveying of it to Paul. And it was to fulfil this lack (2: 30) that Epaphroditus risked and nearly lost his life.

Normally, however, commentators see the *leitourgia* as twofold—involving the sending of the money on the one hand and attendance on the apostle on the other. We should observe that this would be unlikely, if the messenger was expected to bring an acknowledgement of the gift and news of the apostle back to Philippi (which *ceteris paribus* was quite probable). Also the double sense is not required by the text of 2: 25-29. The phrase “companion in labour” is obviously inconclusive—as it may just mean that Epaphroditus was engaged in the same spiritual battle as Paul, but not necessarily in the same place. Michael argues (from Bengel)¹² that, as Paul only says he has “sent” (and not that he has “sent back”) Epaphroditus, the messenger is regarded as a member of Paul’s team. But, as he was also a Philippian, Paul “ought” to have said he was sending him “back” on any view of the passage. Paul’s failure to do so helps nobody in the argument. And the “necessity” (2: 25) Paul felt need not have been in defiance of the original service (putatively to attend on Paul) to which Epaphroditus was commissioned. It could equally well be that Paul, having bemoaned the lack of trustworthy companions (2: 21), was tempted to retain the Philippian (quite apart from the latter’s commission), but Epaphroditus insisted on returning and changed Paul’s mind.

Thus the twofold *leitourgia* is not required by the passage. If Epaphroditus was only commissioned to take the money, then he risked his life (2: 30) in getting that money to Paul. And even if the commission was twofold, then the great emphasis is still on the first part of it—and the nature of the risk supports the probability that he fell ill en route. The risk of death was by sickness (cf. 2: 26-27, 30) which seems incongruous to attendance on the apostle (Plummer and Lumby suggest over-exertion, whilst Beet considers contagion). We know nothing of Timothy’s running such risks. The consistent explanation of the whole passage is thus that Epaphroditus ran the risk either in undertaking the journey at all, or in pressing on with it after falling ill. To assume with most commentators that he fell ill whilst attending on the apostle commits us to the following unproven premises :

¹¹ As Lightfoot, Abbott-Smith and others agree.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

- i. That the *leitourgia* included such attendance.
- ii. That such attendance was indeed the major and obvious part of the *leitourgia*.
- iii. That attendance on the apostle exposed Epaphroditus (though not apparently anybody else) to the risk of death by sickness.

All of these premises are dubious—and to doubt only one is virtually sufficient to entail that Epaphroditus fell ill on the way.

If he fell ill en route, then, as Mackay says, that news could reach Philippi whilst he was still on his way to Paul. Mackay, however, postulates that he would wish to conceal the news. More probably he would attempt to let the church know, so that a relief could be sent after him. He did not, however, apparently say he was near death (2: 27), or had not reached that condition when he sent the message. And, if his messenger were trustworthy, then, as Lightfoot says,¹³ he would know that they knew he was sick (2: 26), without hearing from them again. On his recovery he would be grieved at the false alarm he had sent, and doubly desirous to hasten back. We do not know if a relief was sent; possibly in time of persecution no such man could be found. As to Paul's sorrows (2: 27), the first arose from his own imprisonment, the second would have been the news that Epaphroditus had died on the way to him.¹⁴

Thus Epaphroditus recovered and duly delivered the gift and news from Philippi and of his own journey. Philippians is a quite natural reply arising solely from the gift and the news from Philippi, and from Paul's imprisonment and his love for the Philippians. The vital passages 2: 25-30 and 4: 10-20 can easily have been written on the same occasion, once the "impregnable" premise (a) has been abandoned. The place and date of origin remain to be considered.

II. THE PLACE OF ORIGIN OF PHILIPPIANS

Traditionally the letter was written from Rome. But the Ephesus advocates, who have abounded in the last forty years, have mostly made the number of journeys the lynch-pin of their theory.¹⁵ Duncan also writes: "we do not get . . . the impression

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹⁴ On this reconstruction the question why Paul refrained from healing Epaphroditus miraculously does not arise—he did not even know he had been ill until he had recovered and completed his journey. However, one instance of the apostle's refraining apparently remains—2 Tim. 4: 20.

¹⁵ See e.g. Deissmann's article in *Anatolian studies presented to Sir W. M. Ramsay* (1923), pp. 121 ff.

that the journeys, accomplished or in prospect, involved a very great degree of hardship. . . ."¹⁶ But the above reconstruction shows that Epaphroditus risked and nearly lost his life on the journey. And the two journeys (from Paul to Philippi and back) preceding the writing of Philippians have disappeared. Thus the many, easy journeys are now substantially one, hazardous one, and the Ephesus argument is completely reversed. The presumption in favour of Rome becomes very strong.

The nature of the journey will further support this presumption. The fact that the messenger risked death through illness (and not persecution, brigands or shipwreck) points to a land journey at a bad time of year, or through difficult terrain, or both. This suggests that Epaphroditus attempted to cross the Via Egnatia, where snow may lie from January to March and the risk of exposure would be considerable from Autumn onwards. Ephesus (and Caesarea too) is reached by sea from Philippi. Paul is not risking the messenger's life in returning him, so the time of year is probably the vital factor in the original risk.

This raises the question of the occasion of the gift. Duncan easily shows that they had not "lacked opportunity" (4: 10) in the ten years after their first gifts,¹⁷ before Paul reached Rome. T. W. Manson says that, if this is from Rome, it is a "sarcastic rebuke".¹⁸ On behalf of Rome there are three possible replies :

i. That "they had long been anxious to assist him but had hitherto lacked the means" (Wicks).¹⁹ Although Paul was accessible often, their poverty prevented a gift (cf. 2 Cor. 8: 2). But they raised money for the Jerusalem church in that time although they were poor. And the gift for which he sends thanks was sent when they were being persecuted (1: 27-30)—a curious time for a rise in affluence.

ii. That Paul would not accept personal gifts whilst the collection scheme was on (Dodd).²⁰ Duncan holds it had not started when Philippians was written (which is unlikely on his dating), but could in any case say that the imprisonment altered the case.

iii. Better than these is the strong probability that Paul *always* refused gifts on principle²¹—and that was why they "lacked op-

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 81.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

¹⁸ *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xxiii (1939), p. 190.

¹⁹ *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI, p. 122.

²⁰ Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

²¹ Scott (in his introduction to Philippians in the *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI) approaches this view—but says Paul made an exception for the Philippians.

portunity". A natural and consistent reconstruction, starting from his first departure from Philippi, is as follows :

The Philippians sent once to him at Thessalonica (4: 16), 100 miles away. They sent again, but Paul had had to leave. The Thessalonian Christians, who expected him back (1 Thess. 2: 18), held the gift in trust. Ultimately Silas and Timothy collected it and brought it to Corinth (2 Cor. 11: 9). They reported that the gift had caused a smear campaign in Macedonia, and this he has to quieten (1 Thess. 2: 5). He therefore ruled that in future churches were not to send him gifts (cf. 1 Cor. 9). The "other churches" (2 Cor. 11: 8) fit the picture, if the Bereans gave him gifts when he left, and the Philippians were the only ones who *sent* money after he had left (Phil. 4: 15). Thus Paul can use the singular in writing to Philippi, and the plural in writing to Corinth, to emphasize his respective points.

On this view, that the "lack" was a prohibition by Paul, the Philippians defied the ban in sending Epaphroditus with money. Hence the unexpectedly late place in the letter Paul gives to his thanks, and the equivocal nature of them. 4: 10-20 is thus easily explicable—Paul is delicately hinting that, grateful though he is, he does not want them to do it again. It is a masterpiece of tact.

When would they defy the ban? Most probably before they knew of Paul's situation at Rome. They knew he was apprehensive of the welcome he would receive in Rome, and they heard that he was on his way there in Autumn 59 (adopting Ramsay's dating). A fair reading of Acts 27 shows that Aristarchus went home to Thessalonica when Paul changed ship at Myra, and would thus bring the news to Philippi en route. As Luke looked back after the shipwreck and other adventures, he deliberately mentioned Aristarchus by name to distinguish him from Paul's own party. Ramsay has turned opinion from this view (which is Lightfoot's by origin).²² Ramsay makes Luke and Aristarchus quasi-slaves on shipboard to give Paul status—and he places Colossians (where Aristarchus is mentioned in 4: 10) before Philippians.²³ If quasi-slaves *are* necessary, Luke and Timothy are better candidates. From Acts 21: 30 onwards no Christian is mentioned by name in narrative except Aristarchus. Timothy is only mentioned, even before 21: 30, when he joins or leaves Paul's party (and we might read Acts 16: 11-40 and never know he was at Philippi). Hence

²² Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 35..

²³ Ramsay, *op. cit.*, pp. 315-316, 349-360.

Luke's "we" in Acts 27 may well include Timothy and probably excludes Aristarchus.

Thus Epaphroditus would seem to have set out from Philippi in late Autumn or early Winter 59/60. After nearly dying in N.W. Greece he finally reached Rome very soon after the apostle (who probably arrived by mid-March). This date of arrival was maintained by Lightfoot,²⁴ and admitted to be possible by Dodd²⁵—but neither contemplated that he arrived with his sickness already over, and thus able to return immediately.

None of this is to deny that Paul may have been in prison in Ephesus—as he may have been (cf. 2 Cor. 11: 23). But, even if he was, there remains little reason to argue that Philippians was written then, when once the lynch-pin of the Ephesus theory has been removed.

III. THE DATE OF THE EPISTLE

This defence of the Roman origin has led to an unusually early dating of the epistle in the period of Roman imprisonment. The supposed web of journeys and Epaphroditus' sickness have regularly led to a dating (amongst Rome advocates) in the second year of imprisonment. But without them the *prima facie* conclusion must be in favour of an early dating, as has been shown. The letter does indeed appear to be Paul's first report from a new situation (1: 12). Could it be the first report from his prison at Rome? If Epaphroditus was anxious to return, then the date would be about May or June 60—say ten weeks after Paul's arrival. This must be defended in relation both to the other "prison epistles" and also to Paul's circumstances.

i. The other "prison epistles". If Colossians and Philemon are from Rome then the following points of relationship must be considered :

(a) In literary terms Philippians seems to follow Romans and precede Colossians. This was Lightfoot's contention,²⁶ but literary criteria are not very cogent.

(b) In theological terms the other prison epistles show a "maturer" formulation of doctrine. This also is not weighty.

(c) In Philippians Paul's imprisonment is news. In the others it is taken for granted.

(d) The minor characters are important. In Colossians a whole circle of friends attends Paul. In Philippians he has "no

²⁴ Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

²⁵ Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 97, n. 1.

²⁶ Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-44.

man likeminded" to Timothy. Acts suggests Paul arrived in a small party, and that friends started to arrive when news spread that he could receive them without hindrance (Acts 28: 31).

However, two of the friends mentioned in Colossians and not in Philippians cause difficulty. One is Aristarchus. But he almost certainly did *not* arrive with Paul (see above) and therefore suggests a later date for Colossians. The other is Luke. But the Acts narrative only has eyewitness accounts for a few days after the arrival in Rome—so he probably left Rome then and returned later. This easily accounts for the lack of mention of him in Philippians.

There is therefore good reason to put Colossians after Philippians—and this is admitted by some commentators on Colossians,²⁷ though by hardly any since Lightfoot on Philippians!

ii. Paul's circumstances. The early date is so unfashionable that few even attempt to refute it on these grounds. Martin does, however, note five objections.²⁸ Changing his order, they are:

(a) The supposed journeys—the resolution of which is now seen to favour, if not to require, the early date.

(b) "A length of time is required for the growth of hostility to the apostle (1: 15 ff.)."²⁹ But it was probably there full-grown before he arrived. Knox writes that when Paul wrote Romans he had reason to fear that "some initial misunderstanding and suspicion"³⁰ needed to be overcome. If so, Paul's arrival would be a likely time for an outbreak of hostility.

(c) "The legal issue of the trial is still in balance at the time of writing, and this points to the end of the captivity."³¹ But does it? Even if 1: 7 and 1: 20 really suggest legal proceedings have started, such proceedings need only be those before Felix and Festus from which Paul has appealed. Actually both verses (as 1: 17) seem rather to point to Paul's determination in *all* circumstances (including future ones) to "defend" the gospel.

(d) "If Philippians was written from Rome it is necessary

²⁷ E.g. Beare in the *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI, p. 134.

²⁸ R. P. Martin, *Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Tyndale Press, 1959), pp. 18-21.

²⁹ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³⁰ J. Knox in the *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 360.

³¹ Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

to postulate an unfavourable development in the apostle's relations with the authorities which led to a change for the worse in his conditions and prospects."³² Is it indeed incompatible with Acts 28: 30-31? Acts does not suggest that Paul would never contemplate death. Furthermore in Philippians Paul anticipates deliverance (1: 25; 2: 24). So it could be during his early days at Rome. He could not be expected to foresee a two year delay. As to his freedom, Acts does not preclude chains (Acts 28: 16; cf. Phil. 1: 7), nor Philippians visitors (Phil. 2: 19-30; cf. Acts 28: 31). Any difference in tone arises from these facts:

(1) Even "free custody" looks worse to the prisoner than to the historian.

(2) Luke gives only a thumbnail sketch, and was probably not present for most of the time.

(3) If Luke wrote after Paul was released, then by that time Paul himself might have used different language to describe his experiences now softened by the passage of time.

(e) "A length of time is required . . . for the progress of the gospel in the place of his confinement (1: 12 ff.)."³³ This is the most serious objection to the early date. It would *prima facie* take a long time for the whole praetorian guard (9,000 strong) to hear the gospel. This *prima facie* conclusion is, however, upset by the five following considerations:

(1) Paul is reporting the unusual. The event is of God, not man. It is not susceptible to the test of what is *a priori* probable. The message has spread fast.

(2) "The *whole* praetorian guard" is not literal. If so then so is "and to all the rest" (1: 13), and so is "the whole world" (Rom. 1: 8, etc.). Men of each cohort or century of the guard had heard, not each man of each cohort.

(3) It is not true that those that had heard had all heard the whole gospel. Paul only says that they knew he was imprisoned for Christ, which had advanced the gospel. But the knowledge of many would be rudimentary.

(4) Paul had no monopoly of ministry. Timothy and perhaps some others (1: 14) would be in position to speak to the guardsmen also. If any guardsmen were converted then the message would spread much quicker.

³² *Idem*, pp. 20-21.

³³ *Idem*, p. 18.

(5) Paul was no contemptible dreamer in the guardsmen's eyes. When he reports "the things which happened unto me" he refers back to the voyage, the shipwreck and the winter on Malta, as well as the weeks in prison. He must have been received by the guard from a fairly awed escort. His presence in the storm and his miracles on Malta would be duly reported. Stories about him would be current from the start. The praetorians were fairly idle (except during palace revolutions) and Paul could quickly become a centre of attention—indeed a unique and extraordinary prisoner, and worth a visit.

Thus there is no reason why 1: 12-14 should not have been written within ten weeks of Paul's arrival in Rome. If Epaphroditus fell ill on the way, then the text of 2: 25-30 is literally true still, the unity of that passage with 4: 10-20 is maintained, and the letter originated from Rome in the early days of Paul's imprisonment. Paul is reporting first impressions of a new situation, thanking the Philippians delicately for the gift which he has just received, and commending back to them the brave messenger who had run such risks to reach him in the first place.

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