

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 *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php

An Ephesian Imprisonment of Paul

BENJAMIN W. ROBINSON

CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE traveler who spends a day or more wandering through the ruins of the old city of Ephesus, as they are now uncovered, visits a square tower on a small elevation, and learns from his fluent guide that it is "the prison of St. Paul." Not recollecting anything in the New Testament which speaks of any such imprisonment, and noting the remark of the guide-book that the tradition is "pure fancy," he dismisses it from his mind.¹

But how did such a legend arise? Its appearance is all the more difficult to account for because of the absence of any direct allusion to it in the New Testament. If there were any mention of it in the canonical accounts of Paul's life, we should set the guide's identification aside as one more groundless attempt to make definite a biblical reference. Of course I am not here concerned with the little elevation remarked upon by the fluent guide, for that can hardly have been a prison. Our concern is with the larger question as to the historical probability of any imprisonment of the apostle anywhere in Ephesus. For there must have been a traditional imprisonment already in men's minds when they located it at this particular spot.

Such a tradition may be found in the so-called Acts of Paul and Thecla. Professor Bacon has kindly reminded me of the imprisonment of Paul at Ephesus mentioned in these Acts. Professor Ramsay is of the opinion that

¹ The suggestion for this article I owe to Professor Deissmann of Berlin, who holds Ephesus to be the place of writing of the four imprisonment epistles (mainly on the ground of the statements in regard to Onesimus, which Paul makes in the epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon).

much of the local detail in the Acts is historically accurate (cf. *E.B.* art *Apocrypha*). The legendary sufferings of Paul which are a part of the tendency of the time to picture the Apostles as martyrs may most naturally be regarded as founded upon some basis of historical fact. In these Acts it is, in fact, "hard to distinguish where history ends and romance begins" (Ramsay, *St. Paul, the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, p. 26; cf. also p. 106). The ruin at Ephesus to-day and the imprisonment mentioned in this document are two witnesses, quite possibly independent of each other, both testifying to the existence of a tradition that Paul was at some time imprisoned in Ephesus.

For those of us who are not quite convinced by Harnack's latest word and who still hold to the Ephesian destination of the sixteenth chapter of Romans, Rom. 16 7 is another indication of an imprisonment of Paul at Ephesus. "Salute Andronicus and Junius, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners." It would at least not be unnatural to suppose that in sending greetings to these men of Ephesus who had been in imprisonment with him, he is referring to an Ephesian imprisonment. If not, where had these men been in prison with Paul?

Further we note in this chapter that he salutes Prisca and Aquila (vs. 4), "who," he says, "for my life laid down their own necks." As Paul is writing this also to Ephesus it was probably in Ephesus that these two had risked their lives to save Paul. They had been with Paul during his whole three years of work in Ephesus, on his third journey (cf. Acts 18 19 with 1 Cor. 16 19).

There are many other indications of the trouble which Paul had in Ephesus. The account in Acts would indicate serious persecution at two different points in his Ephesian sojourn, once when he was obliged to leave the Synagogue and go to the School of Tyrannus (Acts 19 9, "Some were hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude"); and a second time when Demetrius, the silversmith, invoked the mob spirit in order to save his business, vs. 23 ff. Of particular interest in connection with

the latter uprising is the fact that Aristarchus was one of those seized by the mob (Acts 19 29), and that in Col. 4 10 Paul mentions Aristarchus, certainly the same man, as his fellow-prisoner, "Aristarchus my fellow-prisoner saluteth you." (I shall refer to this verse again.)

Further, 1 Cor. 16 9 (written from Ephesus) speaks of *ἀντικείμενοι πολλοί*, "many adversaries." Again in 1 Cor. 15 32 (*ἐβηριομάχησα*), he says he has fought with wild beasts in Ephesus.

In 2 Cor. 1 8 ff., he speaks of his *θλίψις ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ*, "our affliction which befell us in Asia . . . that we despaired even of life. . . . We . . . have had the sentence of death within ourselves . . . (but) God delivered (*ἐρύσατο*, rescued) us out of so great a death," language whose most natural interpretation points to the apostle's having been held in durance and having been subsequently delivered.

In the same letter he says (11 23) that he has been very often in prison (*φυλακαῖς περισσοτέρως*). (He said that before either the Cæsarean or the Roman imprisonment.) If we suppose an imprisonment in Ephesus, we are but localizing one more of these imprisonments of which he speaks.²

The epistles of the captivity are commonly dated from Rome. Now how much better does an imprisonment at Ephesus suit the conditions presupposed in these writings. Paul was in prison when he wrote the little note to Philemon about the runaway slave who had come to him. The accepted way of deciding where the letter to Philemon was written, is to take the two great imprisonments of Paul (one at Cæsarea, and one at Rome) and to ask the decisive question, as Jülicher does, "Where would a runaway slave from Colossæ be most likely to make his way, to Cæsarea? or to Rome?" And Jülicher decides that he would be more likely to run to Rome than to Cæsarea. *Ergo*, the letter was

² Those who accept the theory that the author of the Book of Acts desired to exhibit the Roman government in a favorable attitude toward Christianity will on that theory be easily able to account for the omission of an Ephesian imprisonment of Paul if it took place, as is most likely, at the hands of the Roman authorities.

written at Rome. Of course, in seeking to settle the question a great many special matters ought first to be thoroughly studied, *e.g.* the free distribution of bread at Rome, and whether there is discoverable any marked tendency of runaway slaves in all parts of the Empire, to go to the imperial capital.

But with the data which we have is it not a hard supposition that Onesimus would run either to Cæsarea or to Rome? Think of the distance from Colossæ in the interior of Asia Minor to the Ægean coast, a week's journey, even with good horses! And then think of the distance from that coast, whether by sea or by land to Rome, on the west coast of the second great Mediterranean peninsula! Where would a poor slave get the money to make this journey which to-day would perhaps be paralleled, if a boy from a St. Louis family ran away to London or Paris. And how would Paul get the means to send him such a long journey back? These have always been serious difficulties in the Rome-hypothesis. But Cæsarea could offer nothing better. Ephesus, on the other hand, would be a most natural destination for the escaping slave. He would make for the nearest town. In Onesimus' day there was no well-known free soil to which he could flee and be safe, as our negroes fled to Canada before the Civil War. Onesimus' horizon would not be large. He would want to go far, but Ephesus, of which he must have known and heard not a little, would surely be his limit. He could go the whole distance on foot. He would not need to be at the expense or risk the exposure of embarking on board a ship. He would have been more or less familiar by hearsay with Ephesus, the greatest city of Asia, while none of his fellows are likely ever to have been in Rome.

There are other facts which would speak for Ephesus as the place of writing. Paul expresses to Philemon a lively hope (vs. 22) that he will soon visit him. "Get ready the guest-room," he says, "for I hope that through your prayers I shall be granted unto you." The request would sound perfectly natural and reasonable if written at Ephesus and

in the expectation of a near release, but written from Rome it would have an artificial, unrealistic, and almost jesting air totally foreign to the intense and practical soul of Paul. Paul's plan of operation, moreover, so far as we know it, was to go from Rome westward to Spain (Rom. 15 28). The only reason scholars (*e.g.* Lightfoot) have had for supposing him to have changed that general plan lies in the long-standing theory that the epistles of the captivity were written from Rome, a supposition which, of course, begs the whole question at issue.

Wherever we put the letter to Philemon we must put the letter to the Colossians and the letter to the Ephesians (granted their genuineness). Paul would not, of course, have written a letter to the Ephesians from Ephesus. But that Ephesus was the sole destination of "Ephesians," I think scarcely any one would hold in view of the textual uncertainty of ἐν Ἐφέσῳ and the impersonal nature of the letter. Marcion's identification of this letter with the letter to Laodicea mentioned in Colossians (4 16) appeals to me very strongly. The introductory sentence in Ephesians would seem to indicate a particular church which he had not yet visited, "Having heard of the faith in the Lord which is in you."

Colossians and Ephesians each mention his bonds (Eph. 3 1 4 1 6 20, Col. 4 3. 18). Ephesians mentions them as something so well known and so near at hand that the readers are like to "faint" at his "tribulations" (3 13), and he writes to "comfort" their "hearts" (6 22). This language, if addressed to a comparatively near church like that of Laodicea, would very fittingly describe an Ephesian imprisonment. On the other hand, does it not seem unnatural, to say the least, to think of the apostle as using such expressions in a letter which would take several weeks to reach its destination? To the present writer there is to be felt in them a sense of relative nearness in distance like that already referred to in the words "Get ready the guest-room" (Phile. 22).

Again, considering the statement in Acts, that Paul

carried on the evangelization of Asia from Ephesus as a center (cf. Acts. 19 10), it would seem natural for him to say (Col. 2 1) "how greatly I strive for you and for them at Laodicea and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh," *i.e.* in Asia. But written from Rome it would be a little strange that he should speak in general of all those who had not seen his face, *i.e.* all in the whole empire. From the view point of Ephesus the classification of the people in Colossæ and Laodicea, and perhaps we may say western Asia Minor in general, among those who had seen his face and those who had not, seems reasonable and natural, for he had covered that territory fairly well. But such a classification of the entire population of the Roman Empire seems a little absurd notwithstanding the apostle's Herculean efforts to reach its many provinces.

Here may be added a consideration of the personal salutations in Colossians 4 (= Phile. 24). Three, only, of the names have any bearing on the question. Tychicus (Col. 4 7) is with Paul. Apart from two indefinite references to Tychicus in the pastoral epistles, all we know of him comes from Acts 20 4. That is, the only definite information we have concerning him is that he was with Paul at Ephesus and accompanied him when he left Ephesus for Macedonia.

Aristarchus (Col. 4 10) is a fellow-prisoner of Paul at the time he writes. Now Aristarchus we know from Acts to have been in Ephesus, and to have been seized by the mob at the time of the uprising (Acts 19 29). And further we know from Acts that he left Ephesus at the time Paul did. The only other mention of Aristarchus in Acts or in the New Testament is that he sailed in the same boat with "us" from Cæsarea. That boat went only as far as the coast of Asia. There is no indication that he was a prisoner on the boat, or that he ever went to Rome, much less that he was in prison in Rome with Paul. In fact, the positive indication of Acts 27 2 is that Aristarchus went only as far as Asia, for the statement that Aristarchus was with "us" is in the same sentence with, and in a way subordinated to,

the statement that the ship was sailing "to the places on the coast of Asia," for he was "a Macedonian." The explanation of his presence on the boat is that he was on his way home.

Further, Epaphras, whose home is at Colossæ (Col. 4 12, "who is one of you"), is Paul's fellow-prisoner (Phile. 23). Certainly it is far more natural to suppose that a man of Colossæ would be in prison in the great center of Asia Minor than in Rome.

The problem of Philippians stands by itself. There may have been a detachment of the "Pretorian guard" in Ephesus. The phrase "Cæsar's household" would make no great difficulty. *oikia* is not the word for palace, and imperial officers were in later inscriptions called slaves of Cæsar. But the general situation of Paul is different in Philippians, and we may perhaps concede that it was written from Rome while still holding to an Ephesian origin of the other three. He is much less hopeful than in Philemon and Colossians. Nevertheless we ought perhaps also to remember that it would be much easier for the Philippians to hear of Paul's need in Ephesus and minister to it, than that word should travel four times between Rome and Philippi, a journey of several weeks at least. The whole paragraph (Phil. 2 19-30) receives new light and meaning if read with the possibility in mind that it may have been written at Ephesus. May we not use again in this connection the argument that the supposition of a place at a much shorter distance from Philippi than Rome was, gives a decidedly more practical atmosphere to the apostle's hope of seeing his readers again and to his thanks for their solicitude and for their actual ministrations?

Though the evidence gives no mathematical certainty, the writer does not doubt that when the question has once been carefully and frankly considered, Ephesus will appear to be a far more probable place for the writing of Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians than either Rome or Cæsarea. The argument is cumulative. That Paul was at some time imprisoned in Ephesus is first suggested by

the ruin of his "prison" pointed out there to-day. The suggestion is upheld by the existence of an early tradition that he was imprisoned there (Acts of Paul and Thecla). Paul's mention of Aristarchus, who was seized by the Ephesian mob, as a fellow-prisoner, his mention of fellow-prisoners in Rom. 16, and many other references to trouble in Ephesus make an imprisonment there highly probable. And immediately the possibility is fairly grasped, it appears how much better such an imprisonment explains many facts in connection with the letters to Philemon, to the Colossians, and to the Ephesians. Onesimus runs from Colossæ, not to Cæsarea or to Rome, but much more naturally to Ephesus. Paul's vivid expectation of soon visiting Colossæ is more intelligible. Epaphras, a man of Colossæ, is then imprisoned in Ephesus, not in distant Rome. Tychicus we know definitely to have been aiding Paul in Ephesus, and Aristarchus because of his championing Paul was imprisoned there. All three of these men are with Paul as he writes.

The transfer of the authorship of the imprisonment epistles from Rome to Ephesus is an opinion that will progress but slowly even if a very great preponderance of evidence in its favor should be accumulated. Bible students will be slow to take leave of the mistress of the world and go even to the metropolis of Asia Minor. It has been a great delight to think of the gospel as spreading through the Pretorian guard and so into the Italian legions at large. But after all anything that makes the life and work of Paul more natural and clear must ultimately be welcomed. Indeed, we may say, the glories of old Rome are not by any means lost through the Ephesus theory from the portrayal of Pauline Christianity; for Paul of course wrote his epistle to the Romans, and went there himself. On the other hand, is there not a great and new interest added to the picture of Paul's work in Asia Minor, and is there not fresh light thrown upon the imprisonment epistles by thinking of them as written, like the other epistles of Paul, from a point relatively close to the people for whom they were destined? And is not the very fact that our theory thus brings these

short epistles into the same class with Paul's other letters something of an argument in favor of the theory itself? He was not so very far from Rome when he wrote Romans, not so very far from Corinth when he wrote Corinthians, probably not so very far from Galatia when he wrote Galatians, not so very far from Thessalonica when he wrote Thessalonians. It would at least introduce the element of consistency in the matter of writing his letters from places reasonably near to their destination if we were willing to say that Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and perhaps Philippians were written from Ephesus.