

THE IMPRISONMENT THAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED (AND THE LETTERS PAUL COULD HAVE WRITTEN THERE): A RESPONSE TO BEN WITHERINGTON

JOEL WHITE*

Abstract: *This article is a response to Ben Witherington's contention that Paul was never imprisoned in Ephesus and thus could not have written the Prison Epistles there. After reviewing the evidence for and against an Ephesian imprisonment, much of which Witherington overlooks, it is concluded that Paul was imprisoned in several places on his missionary journeys and that it is likely that Ephesus was among them. The possibility that Paul wrote Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians during that period of incarceration is weighed against the traditional view of Roman provenance and found to offer a somewhat more satisfactory explanation of the evidence.*

Key words: *imprisonment, Ephesus, Prison Letters, Rome, Ben Witherington III*

In a recent article in this *Journal*, Ben Witherington has argued against the possibility that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus.¹ This theory has gained traction in recent years among scholars who, for a variety of reasons, have begun to question the traditional view concerning the provenance of the so-called “Captivity Epistles” or “Prison Letters” in Rome, which commands majority support among scholars.² One great obstacle hinders broader acceptance of the theory of Ephesian prove-

* Joel White is Hochschuldozent für Neues Testament and Director of International Exchanges at the Freie Theologische Hochschule Gießen. He may be contacted at white@fthgiessen.de.

¹ Ben Witherington III, “The Case of the Imprisonment that Did Not Happen: Paul at Ephesus,” *JETS* 60 (2017): 525–32.

² Cf., e.g., J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 32; C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (CGTC; Cambridge: University Press, 1968), 24; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 32; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 40–41; Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 46; David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon* (ZECNT 12; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 23–25.

Some scholars argue that the Prison Epistles were written in Caesarea. Cf., e.g., Martin Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon* (HNT 12; 3rd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1953), 52; Werner Georg Kümmel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (20th ed.; Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1980), 305–306; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an die Kolosser und an Philemon* (KEK 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), 14–15; Bo Reicke, “Caesarea, Rome, and the Captivity Epistles,” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday* (ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin; Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 278–80; J. J. Gunther, *Paul: Messenger and Exile: A Study in the Chronology of His Life and Letters* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1972), 98–104; J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 61–85; E. Earle Ellis, *The Making of New Testament Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 266–75. This is problematic for the same reasons the theory of Roman provenance is (see below) as well as several others, which cannot be reviewed here. Still, the proposal certainly cannot be ruled out *a priori*, since we know from Acts that Paul was held in prison there for a period of two years.

nance: We do not know for certain that Paul was, in fact, imprisoned there. Neither he nor Luke mentions a period of incarceration in Ephesus, hence Witherington's description of it as "the imprisonment that did not happen." Still, his brief article demands a response, not least because he has, in my opinion, neither dealt with the strongest arguments for an Ephesian captivity nor identified the strongest argument against it.

I. THE PROVENANCE OF THE CAPTIVITY EPISTLES

First, a word should be said about the epistles themselves. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon all intimate that they were written during a period in which Paul was incarcerated (cf. Eph 6:20; Phil 1:13, 17; Col 4:3, 10, 18; Phlm 10, 13). None of them names the place of writing, and only Philippians reveals any information about the circumstances of Paul's captivity. In that letter, Paul mentions in passing that the "Praetorian Guard" (πραιτώριον) is responsible for his oversight, which lends some weight to the argument that it was written in Rome. There is, however, no compelling reason that the other three Captivity Letters must be assigned to the same period of incarceration, though traditionally, of course, all four have been thought to have been written during Paul's internment in Rome. Internal evidence does make sufficiently clear, however, that Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians were all composed, probably in that order, during a comparatively short period and thus in the same place. There is, for instance, a remarkable degree of agreement between the greeting lists in Philemon (23–24) and Colossians (4:10–14), and there is so much thematic overlap between Colossians and Ephesians, not to mention virtually identical notices concerning Tychicus (Eph 6:21–22; Col 4:7–8), that one must have served as a general template for the other.

What, then, of the possibility that Paul was imprisoned for a period in Ephesus and wrote either three or all four of the Captivity Letters there? Witherington views the proposal as a passing fad that will soon fade away.³ In doing so, he ignores one bit of ancient evidence—the second-century Marcionite Prologue to Colossians which places Paul in Ephesus when he wrote that epistle—as well as the fact that the theory has enjoyed steady support among European scholars since Deissmann first proposed it well over a century ago.⁴ It is thus more than twice as old as the socio-rhetorical criticism that Witherington has so enthusiastically embraced.⁵ In any case, quite a few more recent scholarly studies have concluded that

³ Witherington, "Imprisonment", 525.

⁴ Cf. Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt* (Tübingen: J. F. B. Mohr, 1908), 13 n. 2. Both Wilhelm Michaelis, *Die Gefangenschaft des Paulus in Ephesus und das Itinerar des Timotheus: Untersuchungen zur Chronologie des Paulus und der Paulusbriefe* (NTF 1/3; Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1925), and George S. Duncan, *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry* (London: Houghton & Stoddard, 1929), offered full-length studies in support of Deissmann's suggestion.

⁵ Cf. Vernon K. Robbins, "Socio-rhetorical Interpretation," in *Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (ed. D. E. Aune; Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 192–219.

Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus, probably only briefly,⁶ and numerous commentators believe that Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians (the latter two to the extent that they deem them authentic Pauline letters), or Philippians, or all four, derive from that period.⁷

II. THE EVIDENCE FOR IMPRISONMENT IN EPHESUS

To be sure, arguments are not (or should not be) won by appealing to authorities, however erudite, so we turn to the evidence in favor of an Ephesian captivity. Witherington seems to think there is only one argument to consider, and a very weak one, at that: Paul's reference to "fighting wild beasts" at Ephesus in 1 Cor 15:32.⁸ It may be readily conceded that (1) as a Roman citizen, Paul would hardly have faced such a fate; (2) if he had, he could hardly have survived it, and therefore (3) the usage is likely metaphorical. Still, the metaphorical language must refer to some extreme situation that he was facing in Ephesus; this is a point to which we will return presently.

Stronger arguments can, however, be mustered. There is, first, the Marcionite Prologue already mentioned, which offers early support for a tradition placing Paul in prison in Ephesus. There is, more importantly, Paul's statement in 2 Cor 11:23 in which he speaks of multiple imprisonments. According to Clement of Rome, who may be preserving a reliable Roman tradition, Paul was, in fact, imprisoned on seven different occasions (1 *Clem.* 5:6). Since Paul wrote 2 Corinthians before his incarceration in Caesarea and Rome, he cannot be referring to these periods of internment. The night Paul spent in a jail in Philippi (Acts 16:24) may be included among them, but that leaves several others that are not accounted for either by Paul or Luke. Interestingly, in his lengthy greeting list at the end of Romans (which also predates his known periods of incarceration in Caesarea and Rome) Paul sends

⁶ Cf., e.g., Wolf-Henning Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter. Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis der paulinischen Mission* (WMANT 50; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1979), 241; Werner Thiessen, *Christen in Ephesus. Die historische und theologische Situation in vorpaulinischer und paulinischer Zeit und zur Zeit der Apostelgeschichte und der Pastoralbriefe* (TANZ 12; Tübingen: Francke, 1995), 111–38; Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 237; Alfred Suhl, *Die Briefe des Paulus: Eine Einführung* (SBS 205; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2007), 146–51; Paul Barnett, *Paul: Missionary of Jesus* (After Jesus 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 217; Heike Omerzu, "Spurensuche: Apostelgeschichte und Paulusbriefe als Zeugnisse einer ephesischen Gefangenschaft des Paulus," in *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie* (ed. J. Frey, C. K. Rothschild, and J. Schröter; BZNT 162; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 295–326, esp. 326; Rainer Riesner, "Pauline Chronology," in *The Blackwell Companion to Paul* (ed. S. Westerholm; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 20; E. P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle's Life, Letters, and Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 130–31.

⁷ Cf., e.g., N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (INTC; Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1986), 21–39; Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1991), 96–98; Ulrich Luz, "Der Brief an die Kolosser," in *Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser und Kolosser* (ed. J. Becker and U. Luz; NTD 8/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 185; Michael Bird, *Colossians and Philemon* (NCCS; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 15; Sylvia C. Keesmaat, "Colossians," in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament* (ed. M. Aymer, C. B. Kitredge, and D. A. Sánchez; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 558; Detlef Häußer, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Philipper* (HTA; Witten: SCM Brockhaus/Gießen: Brunnen, 2016), 24–28.

⁸ Cf. Witherington, "Imprisonment," 526–27.

along greetings to Andronicus and Junia, his “fellow prisoners” (Rom 16:7). Could it be that Andronicus and Junia, like Aquila and Priscilla, fellow Jewish believers in the church in Rome, are back in the imperial capital after having been expelled under the Claudius Edict (Acts 18:2) and, also like them, spending time in Ephesus with Paul (Acts 18:18–19; 1Cor 16:19) before returning to Rome (Rom 16:3)? We cannot say for sure, but somewhere along the way and prior to the mid-50s, Paul was imprisoned with them.

In light of the biblical data, then, Witherington’s argument that, since Paul was a Roman citizen, he could not have been imprisoned for any length of time outside of Rome is specious.⁹ Paul himself testifies that he was, indeed, incarcerated on several occasions in places far from Rome. Further, according to Luke he was held in Caesarea for a period of two years (cf. Acts 24:25). Certainly, his incarceration in Ephesus, if in fact he was imprisoned there, would not have been nearly as long, but there is no reason to conclude that what was clearly possible in Caesarea would have been impossible in Ephesus.

Since we know, then, that Paul was imprisoned in several places other than Rome and Caesarea, it would be unreasonable to rule out *a priori* one of those locations as the place where Paul composed the Prison Epistles simply because we cannot identify them with certainty. If Witherington had been willing to concede that much, he would have been, I believe, forced to conclude that, among the many places where Paul could have been incarcerated during his missionary journeys, the strongest case can be made for Ephesus. Certainly, something grave happened there, though Paul, for reasons unknown to us, was hesitant to talk about it in any detail. We noted above his metaphorical claim to have “fought wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Cor 15:32). This is likely a veiled allusion to the extreme adversarial circumstances he faced there. Paul refers to this more directly in 1 Cor 16:9, where he states that he has “many adversaries” in Ephesus. Even more dramatic is Paul’s account in 2 Cor 1:8–11 of the “affliction” (v. 8: θλίψις), “sentence of death” (v. 9: τὸ ἀπόκριμα τοῦ θανάτου), and “deadly peril” (v. 10: τηλικοῦτος θάνατος) he endured in Asia, which here must mean Ephesus. Whatever circumstances he was referring to were so extreme that he was “burdened beyond all strength and despaired of his very life” (v. 8). This language could, of course, denote any number of difficulties, but one possibility is certainly a period of incarceration while waiting for execution (if the “sentence of death” is taken literally, which can by no means be ruled out). Luke, too, is aware that Paul faced serious difficulties in Ephesus (Acts 20:19).

III. THE EVIDENCE AGAINST IMPRISONMENT IN EPHEBUS

The mention of Luke at this juncture demands, however, that supporters of an Ephesian imprisonment deal squarely with the most serious problem facing the theory that the Prison Epistles were written there. For we know that Luke was present when Paul wrote Philemon (24) and Colossians (4:14), but the so-called “we”

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 528–29.

passages in Acts (16:10–17, 20:5–15, 21:1–18, and 27:1–28:16), where Luke recounts events in the first person plural, do not include Paul's stay in Ephesus (Acts 19:1–41), though they do cover the period of Paul's imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:16–31).¹⁰ Some commentators, who might otherwise be inclined to assign the Prison Letters to Ephesus, draw back from that conclusion for precisely this reason.¹¹

This problem is, however, not insurmountable. While the “we” passages provide positive confirmation that Luke was present in certain places, it cannot, as a matter of logic, be concluded that he was never present in places not covered by those passages; such arguments from silence can carry no such weight, especially if other considerations lend credence to the postulate. In Luke's case, it should be noted that a period of at least five years lies between the first and second “we” passages (Acts 16:10–17 and 20:5–15), during which Paul's stay in Ephesus falls. We do not know where Luke was during this time, but certain details of his account of the events in Ephesus strongly suggest that he was familiar with the city (cf. Acts 19:9, 27, 29). If he had learned that Paul was in prison, it is not unreasonable to assume that he would have visited him there and perhaps even witnessed the process against him.

Why, then, is this incident not included in a “we” passage? For one thing, Luke felt no compulsion to report everything of import that happened to Paul; he makes no mention, for instance, of Paul's confrontation of Peter during the so-called Antioch incident (cf. Acts 15:1–2 with Gal 2:11–14).¹² Further, Luke does not use “we” passages simply for autoptic purposes; that is, they do not merely function to confirm that “I was there, and I witnessed this.” Rather, as Thornton demonstrates in his exhaustive study of the “we” passages, they highlight events in Paul's ministry that Luke deems to have special salvation-historical significance; that is, they serve to confirm that “I witnessed this important event.”¹³ If Thornton is correct, we should not expect that Luke will always note when he was with Paul, but only when he thinks that the events he has witnessed mark some progress in *Heilsgeschichte*. The long period that Paul spent in Ephesus may very well not to have had such significance to him. Further, if Paul was reluctant to describe in detail what egregious circumstances he had to endure in Ephesus, Luke may have been so, too.

¹⁰ It should, however, be noted that the final “we” passage only definitively proves that Luke accompanied Paul to Rome (cf. Acts 28:16). It gives no information about the length of Luke's stay with Paul.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Moo, *Colossians*, 44.

¹² Cf. Omerzu, “Spurensuche,” 314.

¹³ Cf. Claus-Jürgen Thornton, *Der Zeuge des Zeugen. Lukas als Historiker der Paulusreisen* (WUNT 56; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1991), 360–67.

IV. WHY NOT ROMAN PROVENANCE? PROBLEMS WITH THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

The thesis that Paul wrote the Prison Letters—or at least Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians—during a period of incarceration in Ephesus must, therefore, be deemed tenable. We must still ask, however, whether it is preferable to the traditional view that they were composed in Rome. The basis for any such assessment must certainly be the circumstances surrounding the composition of Paul's letter to Philemon, about which we have the most information. Witherington is correct that a runaway slave from Colossae would have a good chance of escaping apprehension in Rome,¹⁴ but he downplays the difficulty that a runaway slave would have in getting there in the first place. If Onesimus stole money from Philemon, as seems likely (cf. Phlm 18), he certainly could have afforded passage to Rome, but the professional bounty hunters to whom Witherington refers would have had an easy job of rounding up wayward slaves trying to board ships for Rome at a port city within reach of Colossae, and time considerations argue against an overland journey to Rome (see below).

Another aspect that Witherington ignores is the question of whether Onesimus was, in fact, technically on the run or rather intentionally trying to get to Paul, so that he could appeal to him to intervene with Philemon in the capacity of an *amicus domini*.¹⁵ If the latter is the case, Onesimus would not have chosen his destination based on where he could live more easily on the lam but solely based on Paul's location. He might, however, have been more inclined to undertake such a risky endeavor if he knew Paul was in nearby Ephesus, since he would have been looking for someone within easy reach who could exert influence on his master.

These considerations are by nature somewhat speculative. Of greater import are hints in the letters of Philemon and Colossians that raise questions about the likelihood that they were composed in Rome. The first is the unusual request that Philemon prepare a room for Paul, since the latter is hoping to be released from captivity soon—otherwise it makes no sense at all—and come to Colossae (Phlm 22). Though Witherington downplays the argument,¹⁶ this is in fact rather curious if Paul is in Rome. If he were to be released from there, he would presumably make

¹⁴ Witherington, "Imprisonment," 530.

¹⁵ This theory, which Witherington discounts (cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 70–72), has gained significant support in the years since it was proposed by Peter Lampe (cf. "Keine 'Skavlenflucht' des Onesimus," *ZNW* 76 [1985]: 135–37). Cf. B. M. Rapske, "The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus," *NTS* 37 (1991): 187–203; John M. G. Barclay, "Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership," *NTS* 37 (1991): 161–86; Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser. Der Brief an Philemon* (ÖTK 12; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1993), 227–35; Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 34C; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 17–23; Peter Arzt-Grabner, *Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 131–43; Eckart Reinmuth, *Der Brief des Paulus an Philemon* (ThHKNT 11/II; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 15–16; Martin Ebner, *Der Brief an Philemon* (EKK XVIII; Ostfildern: Patmos/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 133–34.

¹⁶ Witherington, "Imprisonment," 529–30.

his way to the Lycus Valley via Ephesus, where he could stay with the church and easily send along word of his imminent arrival in Colossae when he could be surer of his itinerary. Also, if Paul expected release from Roman captivity soon, why would he send Onesimus ahead rather than wait and travel with him? While Paul's request makes perfect sense if he is in nearby Ephesus, it defies easy explanation if he is in faraway Rome.

More significant are the relative time spans that the correspondence between Paul on the one hand and Philemon and the church in Colossae on the other hand would demand depending upon whether Paul is in Rome or Ephesus.¹⁷ This is important because the letters to Philemon and Colossians must have been written within a comparatively short period of time. We noted above the impressive agreement in the greeting lists. Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke are all with Paul as he writes both letters, and the longer the time between their composition, the less likely it is that this same group would still be together in one place. This is perhaps one reason why many commentators, like Witherington, who prefer Rome assume that Philemon and Colossians were sent at the same time.¹⁸

A careful look at the evidence, however, suggests that another scenario is more likely. When Paul sends Onesimus back to Colossae with his letter to Philemon, he makes clear that Onesimus has recently become a believer in Jesus through his influence (cf. Phlm 10). He asks Philemon to release Onesimus into his service (Phlm 13–14; whether this implies release from slavery is a difficult question that need not concern us here). In the letter to the Colossians, which Paul sends with Onesimus and Tychicus (who is not mentioned in Philemon), however, Paul refers to Onesimus as a “faithful and beloved brother” (Col 4:9: ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφός). This terminology has been convincingly shown to have a quasi-technical sense in Paul's letters and refer to his coworkers.¹⁹ In other words, Onesimus was a new believer when he left Paul with the letter to Philemon, but part of Paul's missionary team when he set out with the letter to the Colossian church. We must therefore envision the following sequence of events: (1) Onesimus decides to seek out Paul (assuming the *amicus domini* theory) and becomes a believer during his stay with him; (2) Paul sends Onesimus back to Colossae where he is welcomed into the church as a believer; (3) Philemon sends Onesimus back to Paul, who engages him as a member of his missionary team; (4) Onesimus returns to Colossae along with Tychicus to deliver the letter to the Colossians. Trips between Colossae and Ephesus would take, as Witherington notes, as little as four days. Trips between Colossae and Rome, even if one travelled by sea via Ephesus, would necessitate several weeks, at the very least. It would seem, then, that the

¹⁷ This argument presumes, of course, that both Philemon and Colossians were written by Paul. It has no relevance if Colossians is a deutero-Pauline letter, though it may be noted in passing that many scholars who only accept Philemon as genuinely Pauline maintain its Ephesian provenance. Cf., e.g., Reinmuth, *Philemon*, 17–18; Wolter, *Philemon*, 238; Ebner, *Philemon*, 80–81.

¹⁸ Cf. Witherington, *Letters*, 24.

¹⁹ Cf. E. Earle Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (ed. E. Earle Ellis; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3–22; repr. *NTS* 17 (1970–71): 438–52, esp. 13–14; Olrog, *Paulus*, 101–6; Thornton, *Zeuze*, 207–10.

above scenario could, with reasonable periods between travels back and forth, have been absolved within the space of a month or two if Paul was in Ephesus, whereas a period of at least a half a year seems likely the minimum if Paul was in Rome.²⁰ As we saw above, the agreement in the greeting lists of Philemon and Colossians presumes a short interval between the letters and therefore speaks for Ephesus.

Thus, the traditional view that Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians were written during Paul's captivity in Rome is not without difficulties.²¹ In any case, the provenance of the Prison Letters in Rome cannot be assumed or even given the benefit of the doubt. It must be weighed against the equally likely scenario that they were written during some other period of imprisonment, the location of which we do not know for certain, though Ephesus must be considered the most likely possibility.

V. QUESTIONS REGARDING THE THEOLOGY OF COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS

There is one final issue that must be addressed regarding the possibility that the Prison Letters, particularly Colossians, were written by Paul in Ephesus.²² Though the practice of establishing the chronology of the Pauline letters based on their theological emphases raises serious methodological questions,²³ many scholars assume that Colossians reflects a later stage in Paul's theological development, and

²⁰ Because of the crucial grain trade, we have the most reliable data about travel times between Alexandria and Rome, a distance of 1,250 miles (roughly the same as the distance between Rome and Ephesus and for much of the journey the same route). In his definitive study on the subject, Lionel Casson estimates that the easterly journey could take as little as two weeks, whereas the westerly journey would take a minimum of a month, and perhaps as much as two months, due to prevailing winds. Cf. *Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 297–99.

²¹ It should be noted that these same difficulties apply to the theory that these letters were written in Caesarea and that they do not apply to Philippians.

²² Most scholars in the English-speaking world now seem to accept the Pauline authorship (or oversight) of Colossians. In 1997, Raymond E. Brown made the determination in his *Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday), 610, that “about 60% of critical scholarship holds that Paul did not write [Colossians].” Given the number of scholars who have affirmed Pauline authorship since then, that percentage would likely need to be revised downward significantly. Cf. Paul Foster, *Colossians* (BNTC; London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 67. A majority of scholars dispute the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, however, so we leave it aside for the purpose of this argument, though it applies to that letter, as well.

²³ It is not at all clear that one can, in fact, trace the development in Paul's theology across his letters, given that they were all written with the space of roughly a decade and a half. Cf. Andreas Lindemann, “Paulus und die korinthische Eschatologie: Zur These von einer ‘Entwicklung’ im paulinischen Denken,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 377–99, und Dieter Sänger, “Die Adressaten des Galaterbriefs und das Problem einer Entwicklung in Paulus’ theologischem Denken,” in *Beiträge zur urchristlichen Theologiegeschichte* (ed. W. Kraus; BZNT 163; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 247–75. Even if this were possible, theological considerations should not be brought to bear on the question of the relative chronology of Paul's letter, since such argumentation is inevitably subjective and usually circular. Cf. Michaelis, *Gefangenschaft*, 7–8; Klaus Haacker, “Rezeptionsgeschichte und Literaturkritik: Anfragen an die communis opinio zum Corpus Paulinum,” *TZ* 65 (2009): 209–28, esp. 226; Norbert Baumert and Maria-Irma Seewann, *Israels Berufung für die Völker. Übersetzung und Auslegung der Briefe an Philemon, an die Kolosser und an die Epheser* (Paulus neu gelesen; Würzburg: Echter, 2016), 43–46.

therefore follow Ernst Käsemann's dictum regarding the dating of the letter: "Wenn echt, um des Inhaltes und Stiles willen so spät wie möglich."²⁴ Indeed, it has become conventional wisdom that the letter's Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and view of the nature of apostolic ministry have advanced beyond Paul's understanding of these as reflected in the *Hauptbriefe*.²⁵ This naturally precludes assigning Colossians to the period of Paul's Ephesian ministry (53–55 CE) since that would require a date of composition roughly the same as 1 Corinthians and before 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Galatians (assuming with the majority the traditional later dating of the latter).

This bit of conventional wisdom is long overdue for reassessment. Though the case cannot be argued in detail here, I am increasingly struck not so much by the differences, but rather the parallels between the theology of Colossians and the Corinthian correspondence: (1) The cosmic Christology of the former (cf. esp. Col 1:15–20) looks like nothing so much as a poetic restatement of thoughts expressed by Paul in 1 Cor 3:21–23; 15:25–28. (2) Regarding the ecclesiology of Colossians, which some scholars deem advanced because the body representing the church now has a head (cf. Col 1:18), it should be noted that both components necessary for this insight were present in Paul's thinking when he wrote 1 Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 11:3; 12:12–13). They merely needed to be combined and reformulated, and Christ's words of institution (1 Cor 11:23–26) would seem to invite precisely that synthesis. (The critical objection that such a straightforward move—combining a head with a body is, after all, no great conceptual leap—would not have occurred to a creative genius like Paul but readily dawned upon his deutero-Pauline imitators strikes me, I must confess, as absurd.) Further, the fact that the church in Colossians is a universal entity seems to be an explication of what Paul assumes throughout the Corinthian correspondence: that the "church" is larger than the congregation in Corinth.²⁶ (3) Paul's theology of apostolic ministry as it is expressed in Col 1:24–27 has been shown to be very similar to that expressed in 2 Cor 5:17–6:2.²⁷ (4) There is, to be sure, no doubt that the eschatology of Colossians differs, at least in terms of emphasis, from that of the letters to the Corinthians. But this merely reflects the different problems Paul was addressing. In Corinth, Paul was facing off with the pneumatics and countering their overzealous appropriation of eschatological existence, so he naturally emphasizes the "not yet." In Colossae, false teachers were implying that faith in Christ needed to be supplemented by ascetic rigor and

²⁴ Ernst Käsemann, "Kolossierbrief," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (ed. K. Galling; 3rd ed.; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1959), 3:1728. Translation: "If genuine, as late as possible due to the style and the content."

²⁵ Cf. Carl R. Holladay, *Introduction to the New Testament: Reference Edition* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2017), 599–601; Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (UTB 1830; 9th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 363–66.

²⁶ Cf. 1 Cor 1:2; 3:21–22; 4:17; 6:15; 7:17; 10:16–17; 11:23–25; 14:33b; 15:3–7, 22; 16:1, 19; 2 Cor 1:1; 2:12; 8:1, 23; 9:2; 11:9–10; 12:13; 13:13.

²⁷ Bruce T. Clark, *Completing Christ's Afflictions. Christ, Paul, and the Reconciliation of All Things* (WUNT 2/383; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 128–57; Joel White, "Paul Completes the Servant's Sufferings (Colossians 1:24)," *JSP* 6 (2016): 181–98, esp. 194–95.

visionary experiences, so Paul points them to what they “already” have in Christ. Even in Colossians, however, the eschatology is not nearly as “realized” as often assumed.²⁸ Ultimately, then, the argument that the theology of Colossians (and by extension Ephesians) must reflect a later stage of Paul’s thought is unconvincing.

VI. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A close examination of the biblical data calls into question Ben Witherington’s decision to reject out of hand the theory that Paul was incarcerated in Ephesus and could have written three or all four of the Prison Epistles there. This is not to say that the case for Ephesus is an open and shut one. We do not, in fact, know for sure that Paul was imprisoned there. Still, he himself maintains in 2 Cor 11:33 that he endured imprisonment multiple times during his missionary journeys (and these do not include Caesarea and Rome, which came later), and among the places where Paul could have been imprisoned, Ephesus stands out prominently. There are several indications in Paul’s letters that he faced severe adversity there. If he was imprisoned there, it seems likely for a number of reasons that he wrote the letters of Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians during that period of captivity. Ben Witherington’s article has hardly settled the issue; in fact, it points out the need for a more thorough assessment of the evidence.

²⁸ Cf. Todd D. Still, “Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized Is It?,” *NTS* 50 (2004): 125–38.