

WAS PAUL A JAILBIRD? A RESPONSE TO THE RESPONSE

BEN WITHERINGTON III*

I note with interest the recent response to my article. It seems we had best go back to linguistic basics for a moment. Let's start with the Greek word *δεσμός*. This word literally means chain, bond, a string or ligament, or some other kind of impediment that hinders a person. What the word does *not* mean, in the first instance, is prison, or jail. Hence the translation "prisoner" is not necessary, or really very accurate. There is, however, a related word, *δέσμιος*, which means "one who is bound," and sometimes by extension that means a "prisoner," but even that does not necessarily mean one is in prison. It can mean one is under house arrest, chained to someone, or in some way detained by authorities.

This brings me to Acts 28.16, where we hear that Paul was chained to a person but was under house arrest. This, I submit, is the condition of Paul when he wrote Philemon, Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians (assuming Paul is responsible for these four documents). They should be called the Captivity Epistles, not the Prison Epistles, unlike, say, 2 Timothy where Paul seems more clearly incarcerated. Notice how many translations render Col 4:18 quite rightly as "remember my chains" but insist on translating *δεσμός* elsewhere as referring to imprisonment. A little more consistency would be helpful from translators! Ephesians 4:1 is the place where we find the word *δέσμιος*, but notice Paul says he is a "prisoner of Christ," or better, "in bonds because of Christ." He does not say he is a prisoner of Rome or Ephesus or anywhere else.

In my recent article, published last fall in *JETS*,¹ I made clear that there is no positive case to be made for Paul being a prisoner in Ephesus. Here I am pointing out what I did not say there, namely that lexically there is no reason to interpret the Greek words mentioned above to mean anything other than that Paul was in chains, as Acts 28 says explicitly.

Another term is of interest, a very different term. Students of Paul's Greek have long noted his penchant for creating or using compound nouns beginning with the prefix *συν* ("with," or "co-"), so *συνεργός* means "co-worker," etc. At Col 4.10 and Philemon 23, something interesting is said about Aristarchus and Epaphras. They are called *ὁ συναιχμαλώτός μου*, and it is often translated "my fellow prisoners." Now an *αἰχμά* in Greek is a spear, and *άλωτός* comes from the word

* Ben Witherington III is Jean R. Amos Professor of NT for Doctoral Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary, 204 N. Lexington Ave., Wilmore, KY 40390. He may be contacted at ben.witherington@asburyseminary.edu.

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

which means “captured.” Literally, then, the phrase means “my fellow captured person.” The word for “prison” is simply not part of that word.

Δεσμωτήριον is indeed the word for “prison,” but one has to know the context to decide whether the cognate terms refer merely to being in chains or being in prison. In the case of a Roman citizen like Paul, being in chains is far more likely. As in Caesarea, so in Rome Paul was under house arrest, in chains. And of Paul being *either* in chains or in prison in Ephesus—the NT says exactly nothing. Clement in 1 Clem 5:6–7 says Paul had been seven times *in chains* (δεσμά). There is no reason at all to render that text “in prison.”

This all has a bearing on the response in this issue of *JETS* to my article about there being no evidence of an Ephesian imprisonment. For example, in this response we hear—these letters “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).” Actually, we hear no such thing. What we hear in all likelihood is that Paul is in chains. And let’s be clear that in the case of house arrest, one is not in jail. Indeed, one has to provide one’s own quarters, as Acts 28 indicates. Roman citizens were not regularly or knowingly thrown into jail by Roman officials. So, again, when we hear about Paul being in chains we should not assume he is “in jail.”

I do, however, take the point in that response that it is possible that Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were not written from the same place as Philippian. This is possible, but I think unlikely considering the content of those letters. There are various hints that Paul expects to be free before long, for instance, in both Philemon and Philippians. They seem to reflect the same situation in Paul’s life. And the *personalia* in Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians suggest the same provenance for those documents.

Furthermore, it is hardly likely that Paul wrote a letter “to the Ephesians” from Ephesus, when Ephesians itself indicates that Tychicus will convey the information to the audience in the form of bringing this letter and adding oral comment. There is no need for a letter if Tychicus is in Ephesus and can simply go and tell people what Paul has in mind (see Eph 6:21–22). It is furthermore clear that Ephesians, particularly the end of Ephesians, is heavily indebted to Colossians. It would seem likely that they were both composed at the same time and from the same place, one being a particular letter, the other a circular letter. If Ephesians is not composed in Ephesus, then it is probable that neither was Colossians.

What of the so-called Marcionite Prologue to Colossians mentioned in the response? At best, this is likely a second-century guess about Colossians, and it probably provides no independent evidence about the provenance of the letter. One would do well to spend some time reading J. B. Lightfoot’s frequent critiques of the speculations of von Harnack and other German scholars of that period like F. C. Baur about such matters, speculations that lack historical grounding in the evidence from the first century AD.² Frankly, I would not want to take Marcion’s word or that of one of his surrogates for anything about Paul’s letters, or for that

² E.g. see the three volumes I recently transcribed and edited for the *Lightfoot Legacy* series for IVP.

matter Luke's Gospel. And I must take exception to the snide remark about historical rhetorical criticism. Anyone who has bothered to read patristics knows that various of the Church Fathers read Paul's letters rhetorically. The work of Margaret Mitchell, among others, has made this clear. My approach to the subject is not modern at all but rather in line with what one finds, for instance, in Chrysostom. If one wants a modern approach to rhetorical criticism, Vernon Robbins is an excellent example.

Finally, 2 Cor 11:23 uses the word *φυλακή*, which can indeed in some circumstances mean a prison, but it can also mean a guard post, or simply the place where someone is guarded or *watched*. It need not refer to someone being formally incarcerated in a jail. Interestingly, its basic meaning is "watch," and it is the word used for the watches of the night (see, e.g., Matt 14:25 with the reference to the fourth watch). My point is this. Second Corinthians 11:23 does not prove Paul was in jail numerous times. It likely means he was detained or chained various times. We have only the one clear reference to Paul briefly being in jail in Acts 16, and Paul had the get-out-of-jail-free card—his Roman citizenship. Even with a word like *φυλακή*, one should not simply *assume* that someone was in jail. The Romans did not use jailing as a form of punishment. It was simply a holding pattern until a case was resolved. Due attention to the linguistic data and the historical context does not suggest Paul was in prison in Ephesus ever. I stand by my arguments in the original *JETS* article and see no reason to revise them.