

PHILIPPIANS
FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. MCKEE



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This volume is dedicated to the life and ministry of
Kenneth Kimball McKee (1951-1992)
a husband, a father, a servant of Jesus Christ

"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...For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself" (Philippians 1:21-23; 3:20-21, NASB).

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ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
Ara: Aramaic	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
ASV: American Standard Version	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	KJV: King James Version
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore</i> (1996)
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Lidell & Scott)
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	LXX: Septuagint
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	m. Mishnah
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	MT: Masoretic Text
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NIB: <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NIGTC: <i>New International Greek Testament Commentary</i>
exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own	NICNT: <i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
Ger: German	NIV: New International Version (1984)
GNT: Greek New Testament	NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
Grk: Greek	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community	NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)	NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
Heb: Hebrew	NT: New Testament
	orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world

OT: Old Testament
PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TEV: Today's English Version (1976)
TLV: Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant (2011)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)

TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*
Yid: Yiddish
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

PROLOGUE

In 2006, I finished a lengthy project by writing a commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Hebrews is a unique text, as many verses can easily be taken out of context by someone who is unfamiliar with the historical circumstances surrounding its composition. Some well-meaning Messianics can assume that its author may be putting down God's Torah by saying, "since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never...make perfect those who draw near" (Hebrews 10:1, RSV). For Messianic Believers today, these kinds of misunderstandings can be easily solved by examining the text as a whole, and knowing that the statement being made is that the Torah itself cannot provide final redemption for a person. The Law of Moses is designed to show a person that he or she cannot be made perfect without Divine intervention, revealing our need for salvation in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ).

Hebrews has some statements that are admittedly difficult to understand without going to some lengths to reconstruct the background events its author probably addresses. It is a complicated text for today's Messianic community to understand. While I view Hebrews as a very important text of Scripture, as it affirms the Divinity and humanity of Yeshua, His superiority over the world, as well as His final sacrifice, there are other books in the Apostolic Scriptures that affirm these very same things using less complicated language. We can more easily reconstruct the historical setting behind them. As I was completing *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*, I began to pray and ask the Lord to direct me to "the next book" of the Bible that needed to be examined. The answer that I kept receiving was: **Philippians**.

Other than the obvious fact that Philippians is only 4 chapters compared to Hebrews' 13 chapters, and would not take as long to work through, Philippians, just like Hebrews, has statements in it that, which if not carefully understood in their original First Century context, can be interpreted as meaning something other than what they are saying—particularly as they relate to the validity of the Torah and the faith heritage that we have inherited from Judaism. The challenge that this presents is immense, because unlike Hebrews which is ultimately anonymous, we know that the author of Philippians is the Apostle Paul—something recognized by conservative and liberal commentators alike. If we cannot reconcile Paul's words in this letter to the words of Yeshua that uphold the Torah (Matthew 5:17-19), then what are we to do? I accept Paul's words as inspired of God, and think that we need to work through some of Philippians' "problem verses." I believe you will discover that we can do this without difficulty.

Paul's Epistle to the Philippians is very easy to overlook when compared to some of his others. Some of Paul's major letters include: Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians, and all offer us some foundational teaching regarding the role of Yeshua in our lives, the spread of the gospel, and/or some negative circumstances that arose in the First Century *ekklēsia*. Philippians is a short letter with few negative remarks, if any, made to its audience. It is generally a letter that people turn to when they need encouragement during difficult times, or are looking for a way to thank someone for being generous. It is not often a text we think of when it comes to "deep theology," but it speaks profoundly to the condition of much of today's emerging Messianic movement.

The Philippian assembly was largely made up of non-Jewish Believers with a handful of Jews in a Roman, Gentile pagan environment. They were a very small group of people on their own in the colony of Philippi. Paul addresses the Philippians with great affection, thanking them as his close, trusted friends. His exhortation to them is to be humble, contrite, and always be about the loving work of God. His only negative words are to beware of false teachers and for two women in the congregation to get along. On the whole, these are not difficult things for us to consider, and anything negative would largely represent the "garden variety" problems of any fellowship of Believers.

These are not the challenges that Philippians presents to today's Messianic Believers. The ethnic composition of the Philippian assembly, its location, the miniscule number of Jews in the fellowship, and then the fact that Paul may have *better personal relations* with a largely non-Jewish fellowship compared to some of the largely Jewish fellowships elsewhere, makes more than a few Messianics scratch their heads. This is probably why few Messianic Bible studies have ever been conducted examining Paul's letter to the Philippians.

The Philippian assembly is an example and model that has been preserved for us in Scripture of a type of fellowship that has existed throughout the centuries. It is a small group of people on their own in a largely hostile environment. As we rediscover and integrate the distinct Hebraic and Jewish character of Yeshua's and Paul's teachings into our faith, Messianics will often minimize or disregard the importance of classical studies for understanding the history of the Scriptures, in particular the Apostolic Writings. But in understanding any of the Pauline Epistles and their unique audiences, this factor cannot be ignored. Ironically, knowing about the Greco-Roman history of Philippi is *the* element that has been largely missing in a proper Messianic handling of Philippians, and holds the key to many of the answers we need.

When we gauge the development of today's Messianic community with Philippians, we see some distinct parallels. Since the mid-1990s, increasingly more numbers of non-Jewish Believers have been embracing their Hebraic Roots and have been drawn into Messianic congregations. In most of these congregations, the number of non-Jews far outweighs the number of Jews. While the first Messianic Jewish congregations were planted in regions with traditionally large Jewish populations, such as the East Coast or West Coast of the United States, or highly urban areas, the Messianic movement is now branching out to places that do not have large Jewish populations. It is branching out in rural communities and in states and provinces where the total number of Jews is only in the few thousands, if not the hundreds. These are the fellowships that are largely, if not entirely, non-Jewish. But our Heavenly Father, for some reason or another, has used sincere Believers who want to obey Him to form these Torah communities with His blessing.

Our call as Believers in Yeshua, whomever we may be, is to witness to the world around us by a testimony of good works. These good works are primarily demonstrated in how we are to treat others with respect, compassion, and with the love of God. **These are all concepts commanded by and exemplified throughout the Torah.** Paul writes the Philippians, "it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Messiah" (1:9-10, ESV).

This would be the same prayer that I would have for any small Messianic fellowship that thinks that it is alone and irrelevant. Paul wrote the Philippians as beloved friends thanking them for their support of his ministry and for helping him. Today, regardless of how small (or even how large) we may be, we need to likewise grow in God's grace *and* His discernment. If we can do this, then we can have the satisfaction of knowing that we are faithfully performing the work of His Kingdom. If we can live like the Philippians lived, then we can possibly avoid the more major sins that Paul has to address in his longer letters. But what warnings might Paul be issuing to us – were he living today – that are seen in Philippians?

J.K. McKee
Editor, *Messianic Apologetics*

INTRODUCTION

Paul's letter to the Philippians¹ (Grk. *Pros Philippēsiōus*, ΠΡΟΣ ΦΙΛΙΠΠΗΣΙΟΥΣ) is not a text that is frequently examined by the Messianic community today. It causes many Messianic Believers to deal with a place and setting that they are generally uncomfortable with in the Apostolic Scriptures: the Roman world. In a Messianic movement that is dominated with a great deal of focus on the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language, and Jewish studies, our ability to deal with other groups of people in the First Century is admittedly in need of some serious help. We must use a text like Philippians to gauge where we are today as a faith community, so we can learn to truly serve the Lord in diverse circumstances. If we cannot understand the diverse cultures of the Bible—in *both* the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures²—how are we to understand the diverse cultures that we find today, *which are many more?*

Philippians marks the entry of the gospel message into the continent of Europe, and it forces anyone who wants to understand it for what it is linguistically, culturally, and theologically to engage with Greco-Roman classicism. As Ralph P. Martin explains it, “the main influx into the fellowship was from the heathen world.”³ The mission for obedient followers of the God of Israel to go out into the pagan world is seen throughout the Tanach. Many of the Pharisees of the First Century B.C.E. interpreted Jeremiah's prophecy, “O LORD, my strength and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of distress, to You the nations will come from the ends of the earth and say, ‘Our fathers have inherited nothing but falsehood, futility and things of no profit’” (Jeremiah 16:19),⁴ as meaning that they were to go out and make converts of the nations. They anticipated a day when men and women would turn away from their vain religions and come en masse to the Holy One of Israel.

This is, to a degree, what we see when the Macedonian man appears to Paul in a vision, proclaiming “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). Paul responded and went to Philippi, and the God of Israel dramatically entered into the lives of some people. A congregation of largely non-Jewish Believers was founded in this city that is known today for demonstrating a great deal of hospitality and generosity to Paul, in spite of their likelihood of being poor people. This congregation is seldom rebuked by Paul except for some minor problems, and Paul's letter to them is a communication of close friendship and thankfulness.

The Epistle to the Philippians is easily shuffled aside by many Church-attending Christians, often because of its short size at four chapters. Those who do examine Philippians are often not aware of its profound historical background in First Century classicism, and First Century Jewish theology. Few are aware of its many embedded references to concepts and themes seen in the Tanach (Old Testament), because there is seldom an exact quotation made. At most, those who read Philippians just examine it to be

¹ Please note that in spite of the common reference to Philippians as “the Book of Philippians,” I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Philippians or Paul's letter to the Philippians, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant *to its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

² It has been my observation that while the current Messianic handling of the First Century cultures is largely in need of serious improvement, particularly when it comes to adopting a proper attitude toward the Greeks and Romans, many of the same who are indignant toward these cultures have no idea how culturally diverse the Tanach actually is. Whereas the Apostolic Scriptures span a broad period of approximately 120 years, the literature of the Tanach spans anywhere from 2,200 to 4,000 years with many, many more cultures to consider than just the Greeks or Romans.

For a further discussion of this issue, consult the author's article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation.”

³ Ralph P. Martin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, Vol 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), pp 17-18.

⁴ For a further discussion of this, consult the author's article “You Want to Be a Pharisee.”

encouraged during times of difficulty. While this is certainly important—and should by no means be discouraged—there is much in Philippians that we miss out on understanding. Its profound impact on our understanding of who Yeshua is for the redeemed, His centrality in their lives, and for born again Believers to express happiness and generosity in whatever circumstances they face—cannot be overstated.

Philippians, as any book of the Bible should, does present some challenges to us as people of faith. It causes us to wonder why Paul does not rebuke these people as he does in other letters. How can we be like the Philippians? It causes us to think about giving generously with our spiritual gifts *and* financial resources. How can we be generous and gift-giving to those who need it? Most importantly, it does cause us to consider the place of Yeshua in our lives, and whether or not our pedigree, upbringing, and human achievements are superior to His work for us. How can we be conformed to Yeshua's example as individuals?

For any generation, Philippians also asks questions about the transforming power of the gospel of salvation and how it reaches beyond not only cultural and societal barriers, but also gender barriers. Philippians forces readers to not only deal with the spread of the gospel in the Roman world, but also how women played an integral part in the congregation at Philippi. It is really no surprise why many evangelical laypersons today want to quickly read through Philippians and then move on to something else. It is even no bigger a surprise that Messianics on the whole seldom examine this letter for the standard that it holds before us.

What can we learn from Philippians to be more effective in the Lord's service as Messianic Believers today?

PAUL AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE PHILIPPIANS

All authorities in the emerging Christian Church of the late First and early Second Centuries acknowledged legitimate Pauline authorship of Philippians. We see this letter quoted as early as the late First Century in *1 Clement*, and the early Second Century in the writings of Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. Almost all modern commentators, both conservative and liberal, believe that the Apostle Paul is the author of Philippians. Only those who deny Pauline authorship of all of his attributed letters deny Pauline authorship of Philippians. The key areas that give support to Pauline authorship of Philippians are the facts that the letter bears a great deal of autobiographical material, particularly Philippians 3:4-6. Gerald F. Hawthorne points out, "An abundance of special Pauline vocabulary appears throughout Philippians."⁵ Some commentators think that among the Pauline Epistles, Philippians is the most personal of them all.

The expanse of the gospel into Philippi certainly signaled a major development in the progress of our faith, as the good news of salvation in Yeshua began to enter into totally pagan, Gentile areas, often with little or no Jewish population. The events of Paul's first visit to Philippi are recorded by Luke in Acts 16:6-40, which occurred during his Second Missionary Journey into the Mediterranean. Some important events occurred in Philippi during this visit, which led to the establishment of an assembly of Believers in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ).

As Paul, Silas, and Timothy were traveling throughout Asia Minor, they had to be very sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading as to where they were to go and minister (Acts 16:6-7), and they made their way to the city of Troas (Acts 16:8). While in Troas, Paul sees a vision of a Macedonian man who urges them to cross over and help them (Acts 16:9). Paul obeys the vision, and makes haste to go into Macedonia, "being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them" (Acts 16:10, NRSV). Some are convinced that this Macedonian man was most probably Luke, as Acts 16 shifts in language at 16:10 to referring to "we," which would include its author.

It takes two days for Paul and his associates to make it to Philippi as they must travel by sea to an island called Samothrace, and from there to Neapolis, the port city of Philippi (Acts 16:11-12). As is Paul's pattern he looks to find a synagogue to assemble with. Philippi, however, is a Roman colony with a miniscule Jewish community, and all he finds is a small Sabbath gathering that meets out by a riverside—that appears to be

⁵ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians*, Vol. 43 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), xxviii.

dominated by women (Acts 16:13). While he shares Yeshua with this small group of Jews, a non-Jewish God-fearer named Lydia opens her heart to the things he says, and she and her household were immersed (Acts 16:14-16).

On either the following Sabbath, or later during the week, Paul and his companions go to the riverside gathering and encounter a demon-possessed slave girl on the way. She would not leave Paul alone, but kept rightfully shouting “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17, ESV). Luke records that “She kept this up for many days” (Acts 16:18, NIV), but that Paul eventually got tired of the harassment and cast the demon out of her. This girl was employed as a soothsayer who would predict fortunes for others, and her owners saw that her ability to make them profit was gone. As a result, they had the two Jews Paul and Silas dragged in before the Roman authorities, and accused them of bringing in foreign religious ideas (Acts 16:19-21). They were both stripped and beaten publicly (Acts 19:22), and then thrown into prison (Acts 16:23).

While in prison, the jailkeeper has them firmly secured so they could not easily move (Acts 16:24). In spite of their extreme discomfort Paul and Silas demonstrate a great peace as they pray and sing songs of praise to the Lord, with their fellow prisoners no doubt looking at them very strangely (Acts 16:25). As they are praying, a great earthquake shakes the prison that unfastens their bonds and opens the prison doors (Acts 16:26). The jailor sees this and prepares to perform a ritual suicide for his failure to keep the prisoners incarcerated, when Paul cries out not to harm himself, telling him that they are all still there and that no one has left (Acts 16:27-29). The jailor confirms this (Acts 27:28), and has no choice but to go before Paul and Silas and say, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 27:30). He is a prime example of a person ready to turn his back on his previous religion and way of life, having just seen the power of the God of Israel at work. That evening the jailor washes Paul and Silas’ wounds, he and his household are immersed, and he offers them a meal (Acts 16:31-34).

The next day Paul is asked very carefully by the city leaders to leave Philippi, when they discover that they illegally arrested and flogged a Roman citizen (Acts 16:35-39). Paul actually asks the city leaders to lead them out personally, declaring “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out” (Acts 16:37, NIV). Paul likely emphasizes his Roman citizenship so the Philippians can recognize him as “one of them,” who may have seen or heard him being accused of bringing in “foreign Jewish errors.” To quell some of their xenophobia, Paul uses the law of Rome to his advantage to gain credibility. He shows how it is not he, but the civic leaders of Philippi who have made a grave mistake.

After this takes place, Paul and Silas leave the prison and go to the home of Lydia. Having encouraged their new Philippian brothers and sisters, they move on to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1).

Three main events occurred in Philippi that would have seriously affected the beginnings of the Philippian congregation:

1. The conversion of Lydia
2. The exorcism of the demon-possessed slave girl
3. Paul and Silas’ arrest and beating, and the subsequent conversion of the Philippian jailor

Lydia, the God-fearing non-Jewish woman, by default becomes the first leader, and certainly coordinator, of the small group of Philippian Believers. We do not know what happened to the slave girl, as some think that she too became a Believer in Yeshua, but others think that the Scriptural silence of the matter is best left as is. Donald Guthrie notes, “Whether the girl became a [Believer] we are not definitely told, but the others no doubt formed the nucleus of the Philippian [assembly].”⁶ The Philippian jailor and his family, as well as others whom Paul encountered at the riverside, were certainly early members of the Philippian congregation.

⁶ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 541.

Commentators and theologians are often not in agreement as to the role that Acts 16:6-40 should play in one's examination of Philippians. Liberals often assert that Acts 16:6-40 does not give us a great deal of important background material, and perhaps that it only "provides [a] little help in interpreting the Letter to the Philippians beyond confirming the prominent role of women in the church."⁷ They make light of the fact that neither Lydia nor the Philippian jailor are mentioned in Paul's letter. Of course, this does not conclusively prove that they are unimportant figures in the initial growth of the Philippian assembly that will not later affect the spiritual development of this group of people. Conservatives often place more value on the background of Acts 16:6-40, recognizing that the Philippian congregation developed properly according to Paul's instruction to them, and that they were a vibrant group of people he thought fondly of.⁸

There are some clues that indicate that Paul probably visited the Philippian congregation once or twice again after establishing it. He writes the Corinthians, "I will come to you after I go through Macedonia" (1 Corinthians 16:5), which would have primarily included the Philippians. Later he also writes them, regarding an anxious visit to Troas, "I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia...For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within" (2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:5). Acts 20:6 indicates, "We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days; and there we stayed seven days" on Paul's return trip to Jerusalem.

What is perhaps most significant regarding the Philippians and Paul's ministry is their constant generosity. Leander E. Keck points out that Philippi "became the only congregation that supported his work financially."⁹ *ISBE* further notes, "it was mainly in that city that he was occupied with his great collection for Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1; 9:2; Rom 15:26)."¹⁰ Somehow, even with very little time spent in Philippi—at least compared to some of the other congregations he ministered to—the Philippians were dedicated in their spirit of giving generously to Paul and his mission.

We can assume that between his first visit and the composition of this letter that the Philippian congregation had grown in number, especially as Paul makes mention of "bishops and deacons" (1:1, RSV). A man named Epaphroditus (2:25) presumably rises to become either one of the major leaders, or the major leader, of the Philippian congregation between Paul's first visit and the composition of his letter to the Philippians. As Paul attests, "I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (4:18, NIV). Epaphroditus visits the imprisoned Paul and gives him a generous financial offering from the Philippians. Paul commends him because he almost died on his journey to see him (2:27).

The traditional view surrounding Philippians' composition that is followed by many past and present interpreters may be summarized in the following points:

1. The Philippians hear that Paul is imprisoned
2. Epaphroditus, who is a leader of the Philippian assembly, is sent to bring him support
3. Paul writes the Philippians, telling them he is sending Timothy back to them
4. Paul expresses a desire to visit them again
5. Paul warns the Philippians about false teachers

WHERE WAS PAUL WHEN HE WROTE THIS LETTER?

Philippians is generally known as being one of the Apostle Paul's Prison Epistles, also including: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul makes mention of his imprisonment in Philippians 1:13-14:

⁷ Jouette Bassler, "The Letter of Paul to the Philippians," in Walter J. Harrelson, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, NRSV (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 2099.

⁸ If you have not done so already, please consult the Appendix for commentary on Acts 16:6-40, Paul's first visit to Philippi.

⁹ Leander E. Keck, "The Letter of Paul to the Philippians," in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 845.

¹⁰ B. Reicke, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 3:837.

“As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” (NIV).

There are only three specific instances in the Book of Acts that we can actually consider to be “imprisonments.” These include Paul’s first visit to Philippi (Acts 16:23-40), Paul’s detention in Caesarea (Acts 26-27), and Paul’s voyage to Rome, notably his waiting to appear before Caesar for two years (Acts 28:30). Interpreters and scholars are not agreed as to where Paul was when he wrote his letter to the Philippians, based on clues that are seen in the text and comparison with Acts—other than the fact that he was clearly under confinement. They are generally divided among three broad categories:

1. Ephesus in 53-55 C.E.
2. Caesarea in 57-59 C.E.
3. Rome in 61 C.E.

Before 1900, the dominant traditional view present in conservative and most liberal circles was that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome. This view was largely based on Acts 28:30-31, where Luke writes “he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Yeshua the Messiah with all openness, unhindered.”¹¹ The text of Philippians gives some important clues that theologians have used to conclude that the letter was written from Rome.

Paul’s confinement took place at or near a Praetorium. He writes, “it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ” (1:13, NRSV). This would have been a palace guard of several thousand. It is likely that the soldier who guarded Paul on the way to Rome, Julius (Acts 27:1, 3), was of the Praetorian regiment. Paul makes further reference to “those of Caesar’s household” (4:22) who had received the gospel, who would have been the various employees and servants of the Roman emperor or “those who belong to the imperial establishment” (NEB). Most significantly, Paul describes his ability to preach freely, writing the Philippians, “most of the brethren have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment, and are much more bold to speak the word of God without fear” (1:14, RSV). This would have required a large community of Believers present at or near where Paul was confined, which Rome certainly had.

Hawthorne summarizes, “From the second century Marcionite prologues attached to Paul’s epistles...until the eighteenth century, everyone accepted without question the ‘fact’ that the Philippian letter was written from Rome.”¹² Critiques against the traditional location of composition began to emerge with comparative studies in classical works, and most importantly renewed contact with the locations of the Bible. One argument that is commonly used against a Roman composition of Philippians concerns Paul’s usage of *praitōrion* (πρατώριον), “Lat. Praetorium, the residence of the Governor, Government-house” (LS).¹³ The Praetorium need not have existed only in Rome, but could have referred to Roman governmental offices in many locations throughout the empire. In Mark 15:16¹⁴ Yeshua the Messiah is taken to the Praetorium in Jerusalem to be mocked and beaten, and Acts 23:35¹⁵ records that Herod had a Praetorium in Caesarea where Paul was confined.

While another location is possible than the traditional Rome, much of the evidence is unclear to suggest another place. A few have suggested, in support of Rome, that the Philippians’ contribution was made so that Paul would have a more comfortable confinement in Rome, living “in his own rented house” (Acts 28:30, NIV). This is not the first time the Philippians sent a generous gift to Paul, having done so earlier while he was

¹¹ Note that this would have been different than Paul’s second imprisonment, where he actually found himself in chains in a dreary dungeon (2 Timothy 1:16).

¹² Hawthorne, xxxvii.

¹³ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 666.

¹⁴ “The soldiers took Him away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium), and they called together the whole Roman cohort” (Mark 15:16).

¹⁵ “[H]e [Felix] said, ‘I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,’ giving orders for him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium” (Acts 23:35).

in Corinth (4:15-16; cf. 2 Corinthians 11:9). No imminent martyrdom describes the preceding events in Acts 23-24, as Paul has traveled to Rome having made an appeal to Caesar. Agrippa told Festus, "This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar" (Acts 26:32), but Paul had used his appeal to travel to Rome, as the Lord told him, "take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also" (Acts 23:11). Advocates of the traditional view consider Paul's remarks to the Philippians to be a report on how his mission to Rome has proceeded.

Critics of the traditional Roman composition of Philippians do validly point out that Paul experienced several periods of confinement (2 Corinthians 11:23; Romans 16:7). Many conservatives and most liberals do not adhere to the traditional view that Philippians was written from Rome. But as Martin asks, "If the case for the Roman origin is open to criticism...what better alternative is possible?"¹⁶

The only other confinement period in Acts that could correspond as a possible location of composition for Philippians would be Caesarea, where Paul was located for a period of two years (Acts 23-26). Examiners who support this location do so because they suggest that if Paul had been imprisoned in Caesarea, his ministry work would have still been focused on the Eastern Mediterranean, including Philippi. Contrary to this, they say, if he had been imprisoned in Rome the likelihood of him continuing this Eastern ministry is greatly reduced, as Paul expected Rome to be a new hub that he could use to minister to the Western Mediterranean, particularly Spain (Romans 15:24, 28).

Not a great number of theologians, conservative or liberal, support the conclusion that Caesarea was the location of Paul's imprisonment and the place of Philippians' composition. The *WBC* volume on Philippians by Hawthorne (that is frequently referred to in this commentary) does adhere to a Caesarean composition of this letter. He says, "the assumption made in this commentary is that Philippians was written by Paul from prison in Caesarea about A.D. 59-61."¹⁷ If Caesarea is the location of Philippians' composition, Paul would likewise have needed a place where he could preach freely. Guthrie makes the important point, "The Philippian epistle makes it clear that Paul's imprisonment had caused many to become courageous in preaching the gospel (1:14), but this presupposes a place possessing a church of some size...Caesarea does not easily fit this requirement."¹⁸ Luke records in Acts 24:23 that the only major freedom Paul had in Caesarea was "that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs" (RSV). In Rome, Paul would have been given considerably more freedom, being subject to a kind of house arrest.

Ephesus is more widely adhered to as an alternative for a Roman composition of Philippians. The principal reason in support of this view is that Ephesus and Philippi were geographically closer than Ephesus and Rome. Those who adhere to this position commonly argue that the long distance between Rome and Macedonia, and Paul's desire to quickly send Timothy and Epaphroditus to the Philippians (2:19-30; 4:18), favors a much closer location. "The terms in 1:13; 4:22; PRAETORIUM and CAESAR'S HOUSEHOLD have no necessary reference to Rome. Members of Caesar's administrative staff (*domus Caesaris*) were, as we know from inscriptions, to be found at Ephesus, as elsewhere throughout the Empire" (*IDB*).¹⁹ Archaeological inscriptions in Ephesus do indicate that the city had a Praetorium, which Paul could have been referring to. But Peter T. O'Brien does have to point out, "there is no known instance of the governor's headquarters of such a province being called a *praetorium* at this time. Troops were not normally stationed in senatorial provinces since they were ruled by civil authority."²⁰

While Ephesus is an interesting suggestion, and it has found support among various conservatives, the major problem with an Ephesian composition for Philippians is that we have no record of Paul ever being imprisoned in this city. Acts 19:23-41 records that a riot occurred during Paul's visit. Some think that Paul's reference to Priscilla and Aquila risking themselves for Paul in Romans 16:3-4 is a reference to them helping

¹⁶ Martin, 25.

¹⁷ Hawthorne, pp xliii-xliv.

¹⁸ Guthrie, pp 546-547.

¹⁹ G.S. Duncan, "Philippians," in George Buttrick, ed. et. al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 3:790.

²⁰ Peter T. O'Brien, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 22.

him in Ephesus, but this supposition is in turn often based on the belief that Romans 16 is not original and was originally written to the Ephesians and not the Romans. This is not a view that many conservatives are willing to adopt. Keck summarizes, "The case for Ephesus...rests on what we infer from Phil. and other letters but is undercut by the lack of explicit mention in Acts of an imprisonment there. Scholars are therefore divided in their views on this question."²¹

The difficulty that Ephesus does remove is the long distance it would have taken for Epaphroditus to have traveled between Philippi and Rome, or Philippi and Caesarea. Adherents of an Ephesian composition for Philippians often hold to a metaphorical interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:32, where Paul writes "I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus," possibly either a reference to the difficulties that he had in the city, or the violence of the mob. Martin points out, "Paul may be describing, in a vivid way, the hostility of men against him rather than his fate in which he was literally condemned *ad bestias* in the arena...his privilege as a Roman citizen would exempt him from such a punishment."²² This does add some validity to the idea that Philippians was composed during some kind of possible detainment of Paul while in Ephesus. The Philippians could have quickly heard about this and dispatched Epaphroditus with a contribution to help Paul.

The most serious challenge, though, to an Ephesian composition of Philippians is that it is ultimately arbitrary and an argument from silence. Hawthorne notes, "The fatal flaw in the Ephesian imprisonment hypothesis is that it is totally built on conjecture."²³ There is no direct evidence that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus.

In spite of the evidence that some present in favor of alternative locations for Philippians' composition, a **Roman composition for this letter is the default position.** B. Reicke comments, "Geographical details...point toward Rome. The distance between Rome and Philippi is not greater than that between Caesarea and Philippi" (*ISBE*).²⁴ Robert H. Gundry further points out, "Time for the journeys between Rome and Philippi would require only four to six months *in toto*. Allowance for intervals between the journeys still keeps the whole amount of required time well within the two years that we know Paul spent in Rome (Acts 28:30)."²⁵ **Our analysis of Philippians will stand by the traditional view that the letter was written by Paul when he was in Rome.** However, I will concede that the Ephesian hypothesis adhered to by some conservatives does make some legitimate points that cannot be easily disregarded.

Whether or not Rome or Ephesus was the location of composition for Paul's Epistle to the Philippians does not seriously affect its overall theology or our interpretation of the text. Philippians will be more strongly affected by forms of ancient letter writing. Gordon D. Fee makes the key point, "Letter-writing, which was something of an 'art' in pre-typewriter, pre-computer Western culture, was...taken with great seriousness by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Formal schooling would have included instruction in letter writing."²⁶ The Roman Senator Cicero, a contemporary of Julius Caesar from the First Century B.C.E., summarizes how important proper written communication would have been for Paul's time: "Letter writing was invented just in order that we might *inform those at a distance* if there were anything which it was important for them or for ourselves that they should know" (*Epistulae ad Familiares* 2.4.1).²⁷

The two main types of letters that would have existed in the First Century C.E. would have been friendship letters and moral exhortations. The Apostle Paul, a student of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and member of the Pharisaical School of Hillel, would have been trained in this procedure. Greek philosophy and language were studied by those of the Rabbinical school of Gamaliel, a practice detailed in the Talmud (*b.Sotah* 9b).²⁸

²¹ Keck, in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 846.

²² Martin, 27.

²³ Hawthorne, xxxix.

²⁴ Reicke, "Philippians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 3:838.

²⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 404.

²⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

The Latin version can be accessed online at <<http://cicero.missouristate.edu/~cicero/Epistulae/adFam/fam02.htm>>.

²⁸ "Our Rabbis taught: When the kings of the Hasmonean house fought one another, Hyrcanus was outside and Aristobulus within. Each day they used to let down denarii in a basket, and haul up for them [animals for] the continual offerings. An old man there, who was learned in Greek wisdom, spoke with them in Greek, saying: 'As long as they carry on the Temple-service, they will never surrender to

There is historical evidence that the Rabbinical School of Gamaliel not only trained its pupils in the Tanach Scriptures and proper hermeneutics, but also trained them in Greek language and philosophy. The reason for this was that these Rabbis often had close dealings with the Roman government and authorities, and it is not improbable to conclude that these Rabbis were also sent out on teaching missions beyond the Land of Israel. Paul, in his apostolic ministry, certainly did go on several extended missionary journeys into the Diaspora. It is by no means a stretch to conclude that he knew how to write a letter using basic Roman conventions—taught to him as a part of his rabbinic training, no less—and that he used such methods to encourage continuing godly behavior among his various audiences.

While various examiners do not agree that Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from Rome, what will affect our approach to the text considerably more, is who the Philippians were *in relation to Rome*. Even if one adheres to an Ephesian or Caesarean composition for Philippians, Rome will still undoubtedly come into the equation as all of these cities were a part of the Roman Empire. We will encounter Paul making some significant appeals to the Hebrew Scriptures using methods found in a distinctively classical style of writing.

Aside from the debates about where Paul was when he wrote Philippians, there are some things that we do know for certain. Paul's greeting indicates that Timothy was present with him when he wrote this letter (1:1). Paul intends to send Timothy to the Philippians (2:19-24), whom they already knew going back to his first visit to them (cf. Acts 16:6-40). Paul also probably wrote this letter because he knew of some fellow Believers who were traveling to Philippi, likely Ephaphroditus' return trip, and he had a ready means at transporting a letter (2:25-30; 4:18).

WHEN DID PAUL WRITE THIS LETTER?

Any dating for Philippians is contingent on accurately determining the letter's point of origin. Concurrent with the traditional Roman composition for Philippians, with Paul being under house arrest in Rome, 61 C.E. is often proposed for the dating of this letter.

When Paul writes Philippians, he is reflecting on his older age and expresses a desire to die and be with the Lord. He exclaims, "For to me, to live is Messiah 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" (1:21-22). Furthermore, some have suggested hints of martyrdom expressed in these words.

Perhaps most significant regarding the date of Philippians is the view of some commentators that the text is a composition of several letters that he wrote to Philippi, disjointed at 3:2. The two-letter hypothesis espouses that the arrival of false teachers in Philippi necessitated the writing of a second letter. Over time, it is said that what makes up our canonical 3:2-4:9 became integrated as an interpolation into a previous letter, 1:1-3:1 and 4:10-23. Two-letter advocates claim that "Those convinced of the unity of Phil. offer psychological theories to explain Paul's abrupt change of mood."²⁹ But this is not something uncommon to Paul. Literary unity of Philippians can be maintained as Hawthorne explains,

"There is certainly a disjointedness about Philippians, and Paul does interrupt himself at 3:1*b*. But this should not be surprising in a personal, almost conversational, letter written by a man accustomed to abrupt shifts in style."³⁰

you'...For Rabbi said: Why use the Syrian language in the land of Israel? Either use the holy tongue or Greek! And R. Joseph said: Why use the Syrian language in Babylon? Either use the holy tongue or Persian!—The Greek language and Greek wisdom are distinct. But is Greek philosophy forbidden? Behold Rab Judah declared that Samuel said in the name of Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel, What means that which is written: Mine eye affecteth my soul, because of all the daughters of my city? There were a thousand pupils in my father's house; five hundred studied Torah and five hundred studied Greek wisdom, and of these there remained only I here and the son of my father's brother in Assia!—**It was different with the household of Rabban Gamaliel because they had close associations with the Government;** for it has been taught: To trim the hair in front is of the ways of the Amorites; but they permitted Abtilus b. Reuben to trim his hair in front because he had close associations with the Government. Similarly **they permitted the household of Rabban Gamaliel to study Greek wisdom because they had close associations with the Government"** (*The Soncino Talmud*. [Judaic Classics Library II](#). MS Windows 3.1. Brooklyn: Institute for Computers in Jewish Life, 1996. CD-ROM).

²⁹ Keck, in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 846.

³⁰ Hawthorne, xxxi.