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# The Meaning of Ephesians

## *Competing Christianities in Second-Century Ephesus*

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### Abstract

The reception history of Ephesians presents many difficulties fundamentally related to the textual variant in Eph 1:1. The lack of an address to the letter destabilizes the connection that the letter has to the city of Ephesus. The earliest references to the letter in the second century show that the link between the epistle and the city was not obvious. This article offers a proposal for how Ephesians and Ephesus became tied to one another. Ephesian Christians claimed their foundations went back to either Paul or John. The earliest texts (e.g., Acts and the *Acts of John*) disagree about who evangelized the city first. Ambiguity regarding Ephesus's conversion continued as late as the fifth century. This article argues that the address to Ephesus was added to an otherwise general letter in the Pauline corpus to legitimize claims that Paul was the first evangelist to the city of Ephesus.

### Keywords

Ephesians – Ephesus – Paul – John – Acts – Acts of John – reception history – patristics

## 1 Introduction\*

Edgar Goodspeed once referred to the epistle to the Ephesians as “the Waterloo of commentators.”<sup>1</sup> Even the most intrepid scholars meet their match in the vexing issues of authorship, date, and provenance of Ephesians—issues that Goodspeed recognized were crucial for understanding the meaning, function, and history of the text. The present article is in many respects dedicated to Goodspeed’s ingenious work on Ephesians, which has often been overlooked. I want to assess the *function* of Ephesians in the setting of the Pauline corpus upon its emergence in the second century.<sup>2</sup> Why was this letter, which was attributed to Paul, later addressed to Ephesus? How does this connection to Ephesus affect the letter’s function within the Pauline corpus? I will suggest that Ephesians played a key role in arguments over the apostolic legacy of the city of Ephesus—arguments that, interestingly enough, are related to issues of canonicity and authority of early Christian texts.

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- 1 E.J. Goodspeed, *The Meaning of Ephesians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933) 15.
- 2 This is not to say that Ephesians was written in the second century. My focus is on its emergence as a used and cited text, which does not occur before the second century. Although some commentators have continued to posit Pauline authorship of Ephesians in the first century, such as M. Barth, *Ephesians* (ABC; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1974) and A. van Roon, *The Authenticity of Ephesians* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), this notion cannot be maintained. See especially E.J. Goodspeed, *The Key to Ephesians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) v–vii; C. Leslie Mitton, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: Its Authorship, Origin and Purpose* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 7–24; J. Gnllka, *Der Epheserbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1980); A.T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), lxi–lxxiii; P. Perkins, *Ephesians* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 15–20; E. Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 20–25; J. Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (BNTC; London: Continuum, 2001) 2–24; C.H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 7–11; M. Hüneberg, “Paulus versus Paulus: Der Epheserbrief als Korrektur des Kolosserbriefes,” in *Pseudepigraphie und Verfasserfiktion in frühchristlichen Briefen* (eds. J. Frey et al; WUNT 1/246 Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 387–409; A. Dettwiler, “Erinnerung und Identität—Erwägungen zur Pragmatik und Theologie des Kolosser- und Epheserbriefes,” in *Memory and Memories in Early Christianity: Proceedings of the International Conference held at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne (June 2–3, 2016)* (eds. S. Buttica and E. Norelli; WUNT 1/398; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) 285–312; A. Dettwiler, “Ephesians,” in *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries Volume Two. From Thomas to Tertullian: Christian Literary Reception of Jesus in the Second and Third Centuries CE* (eds. J. Schröter and C. Jacobi; London: T&T Clark, 2020) 11–18.

Ephesians is often interpreted to concur with the testimony of Acts 18–20, of Paul's time in Ephesus which, combined with Paul's mention of being in Ephesus in 1 Cor 16:8, and his mention of Timothy being with him (cf. 1 Cor 16:10; 2 Cor 1:1), clarify that Paul was in Ephesus at some point during his missionary activity. But Paul's primacy in Ephesus did not go uncontested: John the son of Zebedee was also remembered as the first apostle in Ephesus, as was another person named John, often titled "the elder." Portions of the *Acts of John* emerged in the second century and, combined with the letter addressed to Ephesus in Revelation (2:1–7)—a work also attributed to a certain John—the primacy of persons named John in Ephesus was just as defensible as Paul's in literature in circulation by the mid-second century. In the first part of this essay, I will address the various sources that, by the second century, were claiming that different apostles had evangelized in Ephesus.

This is not a new idea. Several scholars, most recently Trebilco<sup>3</sup> and Tellbe,<sup>4</sup> have established that there were multiple Christian groups in Ephesus in the second century and that at least two of them may broadly be classified as "Pauline" and "Johannine." While it is difficult to assess specific interactions between these groups, I will argue in the second part of this essay that some literary comparisons strongly suggest that these two broad groups were moving in different directions and, importantly, *they were establishing traditions of apostolic authority* as a means of legitimizing their own groups within Ephesus. The result of this argument will lead to the third part, in which I will argue that the letter now known as "Ephesians" played an integral role in this debate over apostolic authority. In particular, Ephesians legitimated claims that Paul's thought and theology came first in Ephesus in opposition to groups and texts that would suggest otherwise. Ephesians, I will argue, played a pivotal role as *Pauline propaganda* in a period of rivalry and contestation in Ephesus.

## 2 Paul and John in Ephesus: The Main Sources

The earliest sources linking Paul to Ephesus are from the NT. In 1 Cor 15:32, Paul vaguely refers to Ephesus in a series of conditional clauses: if, he says,

3 P. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (WUNT 1/166; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); P. Trebilco, "Reading Ephesians in Ephesus: A Letter to Pauling and Johannine Christ-followers?" in *Ephesus as a Religious Center under the Principate* (eds. A. Black, C.M. Thomas, and T.W. Thompson; WUNT 1/488; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022) 161–187.

4 M. Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective* (WUNT 1/242; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

"I fought beasts in Ephesus" (ἐθριομάχησα ἐν Ἐφέσῳ) in a typically human fashion (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον), "what would I gain" (τί μοι τὸ ὄφελος) if the dead aren't raised? A more explicit statement comes in 1 Cor 16:8, where Paul confirms he is writing to the Corinthians from Ephesus: "I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost" (ἐπιμενῶ δὲ ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἕως τῆς πεντηκοστῆς). Notably, he mentions here also several names, including Timothy (1 Cor 16:10), Apollos (1 Cor 16:12), and Priscilla and Aquilla (1 Cor 16:19). It is clear in the context that the latter two are with Paul in Ephesus, whereas it is not entirely certain if Timothy and/or Apollos are with Paul.

In many ways, Acts 18–20 align well with 1 Corinthians. In Acts 18:18–22, Paul arrives in Ephesus on his way to Syria and leaves behind his new companions, Priscilla and Aquila, while he goes into synagogues and engages the Jews in discussion. After a short time, Paul leaves and stations his companions in Ephesus until he returns. There is a brief interlude in 18:23–28 in which Acts claims that Apollos arrived and evangelized in Ephesus. Only at the beginning of Acts 19 does Paul return to Ephesus to find "disciples" already there (εὗρεῖν τινὰς μαθητάς). Paul's presence in Ephesus, combined with the mention of Apollos and Priscilla and Aquila, conform to what Paul says in 1 Cor 15 and 16: he was indeed staying in Ephesus at some point. If anything, however, both 1 Cor and Acts are unclear whether Paul was *the first* to bring the gospel to Ephesus. The mention of "disciples" already there, together with Apollos's activity there in Acts 18:23–28 only heighten the ambiguity of who evangelized in Ephesus first. Regardless, by the second century<sup>5</sup> at least two texts related to Paul and his missionary activity confirm that he spent time in Ephesus.

By this same time period, stories and texts began to emerge mentioning another apostle (or multiple apostles) active in Ephesus: John. Revelation and at least some of the *Acts of John* were composed by the mid-second century.<sup>6</sup>

5 It is almost certain that the canonical book of Acts reached its final form in the early second century. See, e.g., B.L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament: The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 225–250; D.E. Smith and J.B. Tyson, eds., *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report* (Eugene, OR: Polebridge, 2013).

6 The textual histories of both narratives are debated and, in the case of the *Acts of John*, quite complicated. See K. Schäferdiek, "The Acts of John," in W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (2 vols; trans. R. McL; Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965) 2:152–167; H.-J. Klauck, *The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008) 18; R.I. Pervo, *The Acts of John* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2016) 16; E. Junod and J.-D. Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis* (CCSA; 2 vols; Brepols: Turnhout, 1983) 2:694–700; P.J. Lalleman, *The Acts of John: A Two-Stage Initiation into Johannine Gnosticism* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998) 270. On the date of the Apocalypse see, e.g., J. Frey, "Das Corpus Johanneum und die Apokalypse des Johannes: Die Johanneslegende, die Probleme der johanneischen Verfasserschaft und die Frage der Pseudonymität der Apokalypse," in *Poetik und Intertextualität der*

In Revelation, an author who calls himself John claims to have had a revelatory experience on the island of Patmos—not far off the coast of Ephesus—and proceeds to write to the “churches which are in Asia” (Rev 1:4), beginning with Ephesus itself (Rev 2:1–7).<sup>7</sup> There are disputes over the identity of this “John,” whether it is the son of Zebedee, who is identified as the “beloved disciple” and author of the fourth Gospel, or perhaps “the elder” who purportedly wrote the Johannine epistles.<sup>8</sup> The identity of this John is not important for the present investigation. I only wish to highlight here that by the mid-second century<sup>9</sup> there existed an apocalypse attributed to *someone named John* on Patmos who wrote a letter to Christians in Ephesus.

The *Acts of John* also claims that an apostle named John came to Ephesus, maintaining this John was the first Christian missionary to arrive in Ephesus, unambiguously denying that Christianity was present in Ephesus prior to John’s arrival.<sup>10</sup> The composition history of this text is heavily debated, but I only wish to highlight here that some portion of the *Acts of John* existed prior to 150 CE.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps even earlier than this, according to Eusebius (*HE* 3.39.4–6),

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*Johannesapokalypse* (eds. S. Alkier, T. Hieke, and T. Nicklas; WUNT 1/346; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015) 71–133, esp. 118–133.

7 D.E. Aune, “The Social Matrix of the Apocalypse of John,” *Biblical Review* 26 (1981) 16–32 even suggested that the seer of Revelation had his home base in Ephesus.

8 On the Johannine traditions and legacy see R.A. Culpepper, *John the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000).

9 For the mid-second century date, Justin already referred to this text as composed by an “apostle of Christ” (*Dial.* 81.4); see Frey, “Das Corpus Johanneum,” 107.

10 See, e.g., *Acts of John* 39.4–6: “Thus even you [Ephesians] were unchangeable toward real godliness until today, as you were being corrupted by your ancestral religious worship” (οὕτω καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀμετάθετοι ἕως σήμερον πρὸς τὴν ὄντως εὐσέβειαν γεγονάτε ὑποφθειρόμενοι ἐν τοῖς παλαιοῖς ὑμῶν θρησκείμασι); *Acts of John* 41.1–3: “Having said this, [John] preached as follows: O God, the God who exists above all so-called gods; the God who has been neglected in the city of the Ephesians until today [...]” (καὶ εἰπὼν ταῦτα προσήύξατο οὕτως· ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὑπὲρ πάντων λεγομένων θεῶν ὑπάρχων θεός· ὁ μέχρι σήμερον ἐν τῇ Ἐφεσίων πόλει ἀθετούμενος); *Acts of John* 58.3–5: “Brothers, it is already time for me to descend into Ephesos. For I agree with those who remain there that they should not be neglected for a lengthy period having no person to support them” (ἀδελφοί, ἤδη με καιρὸς τὴν Ἐφεσον καταλαβεῖν συντίθεμαι γὰρ τοῖς ἐκεῖ μένουσι, μήπως ῥαθυμήσωσι πολλῶ χρόνῳ μὴ ἔχοντες ἄνθρωπον τὸν ἐπιστηρίζοντα αὐτούς). Cf. T.W. Thompson, “Claiming Ephesus: Pauline Legacy in the *Acts of John*,” in *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries C.E.* (eds. J. Schröter and C.K. Rothschild; WUNT 1/301; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013) 379–400.

11 Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 2.694–702; Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 5–68. Notably, Lalleman identifies three sections of the story: A (AJ 18–86; 106–108; 110–115), B (AJ 87–93; 103–105) and C (94–102; 109) (cf. Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 25). Of these sections, C is identified by Lalleman, following Junod and Kaestli, as a “Gnostic” interpolation into an

Papias (ca. 120–135 CE) says that there were two Johns in Ephesus, “the Lord’s disciple” and “the elder.”<sup>12</sup>

These sources, then, comprise the earliest and most stable evidence for explicit references to Paul and John in the city of Ephesus and lead us to further inferences about the contextualization of other sources. If Paul was still in Ephesus when he wrote 2 Corinthians, then Timothy appears to have been with Paul in Ephesus (2 Cor 1:1). That seems to have been the assumption of the author of the Pastoral Epistles, since there “Paul” reminds “Timothy” he told him to “remain in Ephesus” (1 Tim 1:3) and “Paul” hints that “Timothy” was present with him in Ephesus (2 Tim 1:18) and tells him he “sent Tychicus to Ephesus” (2 Tim 4:12). The author of the Pastorals thus uses direct knowledge of Paul in Ephesus (with Timothy) to construct an epistolary correspondence related to that city.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the Johannine Epistles have often been contextualized in Ephesus, and Frey has shown that the five “Johannine” texts (Gospel of John, 1–3 John, and the Apocalypse) were circulating as a corpus as early as the second century.<sup>14</sup> The connections between Ephesus and these other Johannine texts are highly plausible, but it is important to remember that they are not based on *internal* criteria: neither the Gospel of John nor the Johannine Epistles mention the names John or Ephesus. The connections between the Pastoral and Johannine Epistles (plus the Gospel of John) and the apostles Paul and John in Ephesus constitute secondary evidence to earlier texts (1 Cor, Acts, Rev, and AJ). This evidence taken altogether—both the explicit and implicit—has led several scholars to conclude that there were (at least) two broad Christian groups in Ephesus in the second century: a “Pauline” group and a “Johannine” group.

### 3 “Pauline” and “Johannine” Christians in Ephesus

Relying on the many texts mentioned thus far, Trebilco has convincingly argued that there were multiple Christian communities in Ephesus in the second century: (1) the community that received the Pastorals; (2) the community

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otherwise “non-Gnostic” text (see, e.g., their interpretation of AJ 94–96 in Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 2:621–627).

12 Fragments of Papias’s writings are typically dated to the early second century. See C.E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: OUP, 2004) 384.

13 To be clear, it is possible that the Pastorals were composed in/around Ephesus. This does not, however, constitute direct reference to Paul’s actual activity there, but rather speaks to his legacy in the city, about which I will say more below.

14 Frey, “Das Corpus Johanneum,” 109–117.

opposed in the Pastorals; (3) the Johannine community who received the Johannine Epistles (and Revelation?); (4) the group that had split from the Johannine community.<sup>15</sup> Broadly speaking, there was a “Pauline” contingency and a “Johannine” contingency. Trebilco admits that these groups probably knew about each other and, in his assessment, we have no reason to suggest that they were hostile toward one another.<sup>16</sup>

Muddiman concurs that various churches existed in Ephesus in the “Johannine” and “Pauline” traditions and agrees that they were not hostile to each other *per se*, but also were not united.<sup>17</sup> Tellbe further agrees that “Pauline” and “Johannine” groups existed in the second century, though he doubts the “coexistence theory” of previous scholarship and advocates for a “more fluid model, which will allow for groups who identified with the Pauline tradition as well as groups who identified with the Johannine traditions, and also for the existence of groups that may have been influenced by both or none of these traditions.”<sup>18</sup> Tellbe’s idea is attractive and accounts for a picture of plurality, multivalency, and lack of explicit collaboration.<sup>19</sup> The existing texts, moreover, suggest that these various groups preserved competing traditions about Ephesus’s evangelization.<sup>20</sup>

For example, the *Acts of John* appears to be in literary relationship with canonical Acts, even though the former claims a different story about Ephesus, and a different apostle, from the latter.<sup>21</sup> Regarding their relationship, Thompson argues that *Acts of John* intentionally contradicts Acts, by showing no knowledge of Paul’s activity in Ephesus.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Thompson argues, *Acts of John* replaces Paul as the main character, and John frequently “outperforms” Paul when their trials are comparable.<sup>23</sup> Not only is Paul completely missing from the narrative, John is recognizably portrayed as commissioned

15 Cf. Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 646.

16 Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 626.

17 Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 35–41.

18 Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus*, 22–39.

19 See also Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 623–624.

20 In this regard I find convincing the reconstruction of S. Witetschek, who interprets the churches of the Apocalypse (i.e., the Johannine faction) as in conflict with the Pauline faction. However, I am less convinced of his argument for success of the Pauline mission in Ephesus, which I find too reliant on the narrative of Acts. See S. Witetschek, *Ephesische Enthüllungen 1: Frühe Christen in einer antiken Großstadt. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach den Kontexten der Johannesapokalypse* (Biblical Tools and Studies 6; Leuven: Peeters, 2008) 350–418.

21 See Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 74–98; Thompson, “Claiming Ephesus,” 379–400.

22 Thompson, “Claiming Ephesus,” 389.

23 Thompson, “Claiming Ephesus,” 390.

by God as an apostle to the gentiles<sup>24</sup>—a role typically assigned to Paul in the canonical texts—and John’s commission (οἰκονομίαν) sounds similar to Paul’s commission (οἰκονομίαν) in 1 Cor 9:17.<sup>25</sup> When compared to Acts and Paul’s epistles, the *Acts of John* seems to establish deliberately a tradition about the apostle John and his activity in Ephesus as a counternarrative to those about Paul. Thompson writes: “the authors of the *Acts of John*, in noticeable contrast to those who would affirm Paul’s own role and influence in Ephesus, have expunged Paul from his place of primacy vis-à-vis Ephesian Christianity and have offered an alternative and competing portrait of Christian origins and belief.”<sup>26</sup> By the sixth century, the *Acts of John by Prochorus* told a more elaborate form of this story, where Paul still plays no role and Ephesus is converted entirely at the hands of John.<sup>27</sup> The apocryphal texts thus appear to expurgate Paul from Ephesian evangelization and promote John as the premier apostle to Ephesus.

The canonical story may be up to something similar. Acts 19 is ambiguous, as I said earlier, regarding Paul’s role in Ephesus’s evangelization, asserting that Apollos came before Paul<sup>28</sup> and, more important in the present argument, that the teachings of someone named “John” were also there before Paul. Paul talks to the followers of this “John” about their baptism and their pneumatology: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (εἰ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐλάβετε πιστεύσαντες; Acts 19:2). Unsurprisingly within the narrative context of Acts, these disciples reply that they know nothing of Paul’s pneumatology, but rather were baptized “into John’s baptism” (εἰς τὸ Ἰωάννου βάπτισμα, 19:3). In the context of Acts 19, this is almost certainly a reference to John the Baptist,

24 *Acts of John* 112.1–2: “O [God], who has chosen us for apostleship to the gentiles, O God, who has sent us into the world [...]” (ὁ ἐκλεξάμενος ἡμᾶς εἰς ἀποστολὴν ἐθνῶν· ὁ πέμψας ἡμᾶς εἰς τὴν οἰκουμένην).

25 *Acts of John* 113.22–23: “Therefore, now, O Lord, when I have completed the commission entrusted to me by you [...]” (νῦν οὖν κύριε ὅτε ἦν ἐπιστεύθην οἰκονομίαν παρὰ σοῦ ἐτέλεσα). On this particular sequence in the narrative see I. Czachesz, *Commission Narratives: A Comparative Study of the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts* (Studies on Early Christian Apocrypha 8; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 113–120. Note, however, that Czachesz argues that these particular portions of the *AJ* were added at a later stage, in the “last quarter of the second century” (122).

26 Thompson, “Claiming Ephesus,” 390.

27 See most recently J.E. Spittler, “The Acts of John by Prochorus,” in *New Testament Apocrypha: More Noncanonical Scriptures* (3 vols; ed. T. Burke; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023) 3:262–361. A similar story appears in the fifth-century Syriac *History of John*. On this Syriac text see J.A. Lollar, *The History of John the Son of Zebedee: Introduction, Texts, and Translations* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2020).

28 This has been noted by most commentators in the past. See Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus*, 22.



but what is striking is that the phrasing here is almost identical to a statement by the Baptist from the Gospel of John, which was normally attributed to John the son of Zebedee.<sup>29</sup> Although this “John’s” teachings arrived in Ephesus before Paul, Acts portrays the understanding of baptism and pneumatology as inferior to Paul’s. Indeed, baptism and the Holy Spirit play a central role in the Luke-Acts narrative.<sup>30</sup> If one compares their roles in Acts to the Johannine literature, especially the Gospel of John, there is quite a difference.<sup>31</sup> Could the “John” mentioned in Acts 19 be a cipher for the John remembered in Ephesus by the early second century?<sup>32</sup> Given the almost non-existent role of John the son of Zebedee in Acts, one wonders if the “John” mentioned in Acts 19 is intended as a subtle critique of the “Johannine” faction veiled as a reference to the Baptist.<sup>33</sup>

29 Cf. Acts 19:4 where they quote the typical line of the Baptist. Paul says, “John baptized a baptism of repentance for the people speaking for the one coming after him so that they might believe” (Ἰωάννης ἐβάπτισεν βάπτισμα μετανοίας τῷ λαῷ λέγων εἰς τὸν ἐρχόμενον μετ’ αὐτὸν ἵνα πιστεύσωσιν). The phrasing here is close to John 1:27 and the emphasis on believing is consistent with themes in the Fourth Gospel.

30 See, e.g., R.P. Menzies, “The Spirit in Luke-Acts: Empowering Prophetic Witness,” *Pneuma* 43 (2021) 409–441, who argues that Luke-Acts presents a pneumatology that is distinct from both Paul and the Johannine literature.

31 This is an old and often discussed matter in NT scholarship. See, e.g., the essays in P. Dragutinović, K.-W. Niebuhr, and J.B. Wallace, eds., *The Holy Spirit and the Church according to the New Testament: Sixth International East-West Symposium of New Testament Scholars, Belgrade, August 25 to 31, 2013* (WUNT 1/354; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), especially C. Karakolis, “The Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts: Personal Entity or Impersonal Power? A Synchronic Approach,” 87–109; A. Dettwiler, “The Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John from a Western Perspective,” 149–171.

32 Acts suggests that although Paul did not arrive first at Ephesus, his form of baptism (εἰς τὸν Ἰησοῦν as opposed to βάπτισμα μετανοίας) was the only form that would bring about the Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit plays such a prominent role in Luke-Acts, it is not surprising that the author would value the reception of the Spirit as the identification of “true” conversion. Somewhat ironically, the view of the Spirit in Luke-Acts does not exactly mirror the role of individual sanctification that we find in Paul’s letters. See D. Marguerat, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts: A Western Perspective,” in *The Holy Spirit and the Church*, 111–128. Rather, Acts’ support of “Paul’s” teaching on baptism seems to belong to the author’s project of harmonization and idealization of the “early church” and Paul’s idealized role in that project.

33 See the comment by Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus*, 28: “anyone who rejects the historical value of Acts 19 must face this question: why should Luke have been concerned about local conditions and about local linguistic usage, if he was not concerned to convey a reasonably reliable account of the early Pauline mission to Ephesus? Is it really reasonable to claim that Luke wrote his account, say for the second or third generation of Christ-believers, and deliberately conveyed an incorrect account of Paul’s mission to Ephesus? That Luke may have exaggerated his version of what actually happened in

Not only, then, were there multiple Christian communities in Ephesus from the second century onward, there were also multiple, competing traditions about how the city itself was converted. I suggest that Acts and the *Acts of John* give the impression of contesting opinions regarding who exactly evangelized Ephesus, and such contestation perhaps coincided with other socio-religious controversies (such as those reconstructable from the Pastoral and Johannine Epistles). These early sources display tensions with each other regarding the evangelization of Ephesus that are divided between, broadly speaking, “Pauline” and “Johannine” loyalties. Both contingencies had texts authorizing their apostle’s legacy in the city (e.g., 1 Cor; Rev; Acts; *Acts of John*) and both later claimed pseudonymous letters by their apostles (e.g., the Pastorals, the Johannine Epistles). Lalleman argues that *Acts of John* in its early form served as propaganda for the Johannine contingency<sup>34</sup> and similar motives cannot be ruled out for how “Luke” tells his account of Paul. It is within such a context as this that I will argue Ephesians emerged, to serve as a pivotal form of Pauline propaganda as the “original” apostle to the city, and thereby lending further *legitimacy, credibility, and authority* to the Pauline group.

I have demonstrated two matters thus far. First, multiple sources attest to both Paul and John as missionaries to Ephesus. 1 Corinthians and Acts explicitly mention Paul, and Revelation mentions a “John.” Later texts associated with these two names (the Pastorals, the Johannine Epistles, Gospel of John) had implicit links to Ephesus in developing traditions. Based on the evidence of these sources, one might draw the conclusion that there were actual groups in Ephesus who claimed the respective apostles as their founders: a “Pauline” group and a “Johannine” group. Some of the sources (e.g., *Acts of John* and Acts) may contain subtle critiques of the other apostle, and I have suggested that these critiques ought to be linked to the respective groups, each claiming that their apostle was the first to evangelize the city. I will now turn to the letter to the Ephesians and propose how this document fits within this matrix of sources.

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Ephesus is one thing, but it is not reasonable to assume that he should be totally wrong in his description of Paul’s mission to Ephesus.” I would respond that recounting history and filling in gaps in that history with tendentious claims are not mutually exclusive, as Bruce Lincoln has demonstrated in his studies on myth and history (e.g., *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars: Critical Explorations in the History of Religions* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012] *passim*, esp. 53–62). It is perfectly conceivable that “Luke,” “an admirer of Paul” (Tellbe, 28), can accurately recount that Paul was in Ephesus and taught there for a long period of time and, at the same time, intentionally (mis)represent Paul’s teachings and ideas as superior to any and all others.

34 Lalleman, *Acts of John*, 47.

#### 4 Ephesians as Pauline Propaganda

A well-known textual variant exists in the opening line of Ephesians: several early mss lack the inscription ἐν Ἐφέσῳ in the original scribal hand.<sup>35</sup> This variant is particularly noteworthy because, without the address, there is nothing to link this letter specifically to Ephesus. Goodspeed recognized this in the 1930s, saying that the letter “reflects no definite, localized, historical situation which it is intended to meet,”<sup>36</sup> but is rather an amassing of Pauline thought and theology: “it is altogether built up of Pauline materials [...] it reads like a commentary on the Pauline epistles.”<sup>37</sup> The missing title is key to the letter and its function: first, it shows there is nothing to explicitly link the letter to Ephesus; second, it reveals important information regarding the date and reception of the letter as “to the Ephesians.”

Early evidence for “Ephesians” is scarce. Irenaeus († ca. 200) seems to mention it as Paul’s letter “to the Ephesians” (*epistula quae est ad Ephesios*) in reference to Valentinians, which *could* suggest that the letter was known by this title in the mid-second century.<sup>38</sup> However, Irenaeus is the first person to mention “Ephesians” as the title, writing in the *late* second century; prior to him it appears that no one knew it as addressed to Ephesus. According to Tertullian († 240), Marcion of Sinope († ca. 160 CE) referred to “Ephesians” by another name: *to the Laodiceans*. While discussing Paul’s letters, Tertullian says, “I pass over here even another epistle [of Paul’s] which we have by the title ‘*To the Ephesians*,’ but the heretics ‘*To the Laodiceans*’” (*Praetereo hic et de alia epistula, quam nos ad Ephesios praescriptam habemus, haeretici vero ad Laodiceos*, Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 5.17.1). There was, of course, an epistle to the Laodiceans

35 It is missing in P46, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, 6, 424c, and 1739. See L. Omanson, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament: An Adaptation of Bruce M. Metzger’s Textual Commentary for the Needs of Translators* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006) 384–385. Despite it lacking in these mss, Nestle-Aland 27 and 28 editions have retained it in the text. See B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Freiburg: Stuttgart, 2007) 532.

36 Goodspeed, *Key to Ephesians*, v.

37 Goodspeed, *Meaning of Ephesians*, 8, 23.

38 L. Bormann, “Zur Datierung des sogenannten Epheserbrief,” in *Die Datierung neutestamentlicher Pseudepigraphen* (eds. W. Grünstäudl and K.M. Schmidt; WUNT 1/470; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021) 169–202, here, 174. The Ignatian Corpus could also be an early mention, though there are good reasons to believe that the “Ignatian” letters were composed as late as 180 CE. See J.N. Bremmer, “The Place, Time and Author of the Ignatian Letters: an onomastic approach,” in *Die Datierung neutestamentlicher Pseudepigraphen*, 405–433.

circulating by the third century,<sup>39</sup> but here Tertullian is clearly referring to what he knew as “Ephesians,” which Marcion called “Laodiceans.”<sup>40</sup> We may assume, then, that Marcion’s version of this letter had neither the inscription in 1:1, nor was it known by the title “to the Ephesians.” This suggests, then, that the *terminus post quem* for the title “to the Ephesians” is after Marcion, or after 160 CE.

Tertullian is corroborated by Epiphanius of Salamis († ca. 400) who quotes from Marcion’s text and throws further shade at Marcion:

But in his own Apostolic Canon, as he called it, [Marcion] also added, of the so-called Epistle to the Laodiceans [...] “(There is) one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all (εἷς κύριος, μία πίστις, ἓν βάπτισμα, εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων, ὁ ἐπὶ πάντων καὶ διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν).” [...] In agreement with the Epistle to the Ephesians, Marcion, you have also gathered these testimonies against yourself from the so-called Epistle to the Laodiceans. Thus, at the end of the work, we may find what you have to say by reading it and, by finding what your teachings are, see through your heretical inventions, the three first principles with no first principles of their own which are different from each other. For the holy apostle’s thesis and his authentic preaching are nothing like this, but are different from your fabrication. He plainly meant, “(There is) one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, the same Father of all, the same above all, the same through all and in all”—through the Law and the prophets, and in all the apostles and the rest.”<sup>41</sup>

39 On this text see especially P.L. Tite, *The Apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans: An Epistolary and Rhetorical Analysis* (TENT 7; Leiden: Brill, 2012).

40 Cf. Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 5.17.1 where Tertullian quotes directly from what he calls “Ephesians” and what Marcion called “Laodiceans.”

41 Trans. Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book 1 (Sects 1–46)* (2nd edition; Leiden: Brill, 2009) 360–361. προσέθετο δὲ ἐν τῷ ἰδίῳ ἀποστολικῷ καλουμένῳ καὶ τῆς καλουμένης πρὸς Λαοδικέας [...] “εἷς κύριος, μία πίστις, ἓν βάπτισμα, εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων, ὁ ἐπὶ πάντων καὶ διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν.” [...] συναθρόντως μὲν τῇ πρὸς Ἐφεσίους, ὦ Μαρκίων, καὶ ταύτας τὰς κατὰ σοῦ μαρτυρίας ἀπὸ τῆς λεγομένης πρὸς Λαοδικέας συνήγαγες, ἵνα ἐπὶ τῷ τέλει τοῦ συντάγματος μάθωμεν ἀναγνόντες τὰ παρὰ σοὶ καὶ γνόντες τὰ κατὰ σέ καταγνώμεν τῶν διὰ σοῦ ἀλλοτριῶς ἐπινενοημένων τριῶν ἀνάρχων ἀρχῶν διαφορὰς πρὸς ἀλλήλας ἔχουσῶν. οὐχ οὕτως γὰρ ἔχει ἡ τοῦ ἁγίου ἀποστόλου ὑπόθεσις καὶ ἡσφαλισμένον κήρυγμα, ἀλλὰ ἄλλως παρὰ τὸ σὸν ποιήτευμα. σαφῶς γὰρ ἔφη “ἓνα κύριον, μίαν πίστιν, ἓν βάπτισμα, ἓνα θεὸν τὸν αὐτὸν πατέρα πάντων, τὸν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ πάντων, τὸν αὐτὸν διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πᾶσι,” διὰ τε νόμου καὶ προφητῶν καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν ἀποστόλοις καὶ ἐν τοῖς καθεξῆς.

The passage Marcion quotes, according to Epiphanius, is verbatim from Eph 4:5–6.<sup>42</sup> Marcion may have thought that “Ephesians” was a copy of the letter “Paul” ordered the Colossians to pass on to Laodicea (Col 4:16). Whatever the case, Marcion’s copy of “Ephesians” clearly lacked an address to Ephesus in the first half of the second century. Origen of Alexandria’s text of “Ephesians” also lacked an address: the opening section reads, “*to the saints who are and are faithful in Christ Jesus*”—which is precisely what the text would be if lacking “in Ephesus.”<sup>43</sup> Origen puzzles over this strange line: “In Ephesians only we find the heading ‘to the saints who are,’ and we inquire what the phrase in place—‘to the saints who are’—is able to mean, except that it is redundant?”<sup>44</sup> Origen knew the letter as “Ephesians” by the third century—as did Jerome in the fourth, who transmits Origen’s text for us—but the text itself lacked the address. The title “Ephesians” must have been attached to the letter between the time of Marcion and Tertullian, ca. 160 and 240 CE, even though some copies continued to lack an address in the text well into the third century.

In the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea knew the letter as “to the Ephesians,” but strikingly claims that the letter had *always* lacked an address. In his treatise *Against Eunomius* he writes:

Given the fact that God is both Truth and Life, I think it is to be expected that those who were not united by faith to the God who exists, but affiliated themselves with non-existent falsehoods through the error of idolatry, are designated as “not existing.” For they have been deprived of the Truth and have alienated themselves from Life. Furthermore, when he was writing to the Ephesians, whom he treated as people genuinely united through knowledge to *He Who Is*, he gave them a particular name, “those who exist,” when he said: *to the saints who exist and are faithful in Christ Jesus*. **For this is how our ancestors have transmitted the verse to us and how we ourselves have found it in the oldest copies.**<sup>45</sup>

42 εἰς κύριος, μία πίστις, ἐν βάπτισμα, εἰς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ πάντων, ὁ ἐπὶ πάντων καὶ διὰ πάντων καὶ ἐν πάσιν (NA28).

43 τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Cf. H.Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 98.

44 Cf. R.E. Heine, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3. ἐπὶ μόνων Ἐφεσίων εὐρομεν κείμενον τὸ τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσι· καὶ ζητοῦμεν, εἰ μὴ παρέλκει προσκείμενον τ(ῷ) τοῖς ἁγίοις <τὸ> τοῖς οὖσι, τί δύναται σημαίνειν;

45 *Adv. Eun.* 612.31–40. Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius* (trans. M. Delcogliano and A. Radde-Gallwitz; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011) 157 (bold

This leads to two basic conclusions. First, most early copies of “Ephesians” lacked the explicit address in 1:1 at least up to the fourth century;<sup>46</sup> second, despite lacking the address, it was still known as “Ephesians” as early as the writings of Irenaeus around 180. Trebilco summarizes some possible reasons for associating the letter with Ephesus despite lacking an explicit address: (1) Ephesus was the place of the letter’s composition; (2) some early copyist knew the traditions about Paul in Ephesus and thought it was a plausible location for a letter lacking an address; (3) a Pauline “school” developed in Ephesus after Paul’s death (perhaps at the σχολή of Tyrannus) and composed Ephesians (and the Pastorals) in the name of Paul.<sup>47</sup> Bormann suggests that Ephesus became an obvious address for the letter with the mention of Tychicus in Eph 6:21.<sup>48</sup> However, none of these explanations is satisfactory. If the origins of the letter in Ephesus were so well-known, why was it not known to Marcion? The mention of Tychicus is interesting, but he is also mentioned in Col 4:7, so Marcion’s solution is more sensible: it was the letter to Laodicea mentioned by Paul. The letter has always been attributed to Paul, but given the confusion in ancient sources it is unclear why the letter eventually became linked to Ephesus only. Why not to Laodicea? Why Ephesus? What was at stake?

One possibility, I suggest, is that the letter contests the notion that *John* evangelized Ephesus, not Paul. Such an objection appears in a little-discussed passage from the early fifth century. A statement by Theodore of Mopsuestia († 428) shows that there was still debate about the evangelization of Ephesus and what role Ephesians played in that debate well into the fifth century. In his commentary on the minor Pauline epistles, Theodore addresses claims that Paul arrived in Ephesus *after* John. Theodore objects and says that Paul’s impersonal tone in “Ephesians” is due to the fact that he had not yet visited Ephesus when he wrote:

The greatest astonishment has come upon me because of those who have said that blessed Paul gave some special praise to the Ephesians for this reason, namely, to show how he accepted the tradition of those

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added). ἐπεὶ γὰρ ὦν καὶ ἀλήθεια καὶ ζωὴ ὁ Θεός, οἱ τῷ Θεῷ τῷ ὄντι μὴ ἡνωμένοι κατὰ τὴν πίστιν, τῇ δὲ ἀνυπαρξίᾳ τοῦ ψεύδους οἰκειωθέντες διὰ τῆς περὶ τὰ εἰδῶλα πλάνης, εἰκότως, οἶμαι, διὰ τὴν στέρησιν τῆς ἀληθείας, καὶ τὴν ἀπὸ τῆς ζωῆς ἀλλοτρίωσιν, μὴ ὄντες προσηγορεύθησαν. ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς Ἐφεσίοις ἐπιστέλλων ὡς γνησίως ἡνωμένοις τῷ ὄντι δι’ ἐπιγνώσεως, ὄντας αὐτοὺς ἰδιαζόντως ὠνόμασεν, εἰπὼν· τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσι, καὶ πιστοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. οὕτως γὰρ καὶ οἱ πρὸ ἡμῶν παραδεδῶκασι, καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν τοῖς παλαιαῖς τῶν ἀντιγράφων εὐρήκαμεν.

46 Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 98.

47 Trebilco, *Early Christians in Ephesus*, 90–94.

48 Bormann, “Zur Datierung,” 177–178.

teachings that John the Evangelist had given them long ago. For they seem to have made this assertion only by conjecture, because that most blessed John is said to have been with the Ephesians.<sup>49</sup>

Certain people known to Theodore regard the tone of Ephesians as evidence of John's previous ministry in Ephesus prior to Paul's arrival. Theodore rejects this claim and maintains Pauline priority in this case.

They supposed that blessed John the Evangelist first handed over to the Ephesians the account of true religion. For they did not understand that John was with the Ephesians at a later time, since he lived up to the time of the Emperor Trajan, beginning from Nero, by whom Paul was beheaded and in whose time the Jewish war had its beginning. For at the time of this war it came about that all the apostles withdrew from Judea. And it was at that time that John went to Ephesus and dwelt there up to the time of Trajan, as I have said. But Paul appears to have sent them the letter when he had not seen them [...] and who would be so foolish as to suppose that if John had been present, he would have left Timothy to manage the church? Moreover, it is necessary to take into consideration this fact in addition to what has been said, namely, that [Paul] saw the Ephesians long before he was taken to Rome from Judea, as anyone can clearly learn from the Acts of the Apostles. As a result, it is evident from all sides that he wrote this to them long before John's stay there.<sup>50</sup>

49 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *The Commentaries on the Minor Pauline Epistles* (trans. R.A. Greer; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010) 175. This text survives only partially in Greek. I give the combined Greek and Latin text from Greer: ἐπὶ λθέν μοι σφόδρα θαυμάζειν ἐκεῖνα τῶν εἰρηκότων *beatum Paulum propter hoc uel maxime laudare Ephesiorum fidem, ut ostendat quemadmodum recepit dogmatum illorum traditionem quae ab Iohanne euangelista ad eos dudum fuerat facta. uidentur enim illud dixisse absolute ex sola coniectura, eo quod et fuisse dicatur ad Ephesios beatissimus Iohannes.*

50 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentaries*, 175–177. *existimantes τὸν Ἰωάννην τὸν εὐαγγελιστὴν πρῶτον τοῖς Ἐφεσίοις παραδεδωκέναι τὸν τῆς εὐσεβείας λόγον· οὐκ ἐνενόησαν γὰρ ὡς Ἰωάννης τοὺς ὑστέρους χρόνους παρ' Ἐφεσίοις ἐγένετο, διαγενόμενος ἄχρι τῶν Τραϊανοῦ τοῦ βασιλέως καιρῶν, ἀπὸ τῶν Νέρωνος ἀρξάμενος, ἀφ' οὗ Παῦλος ἀπετμήθη τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ ὁ Ἰουδαϊκὸς πόλεμος ἀρχὴν ἔδεξάτο. ἐπὶ τοῦτο γὰρ δὴ τοῦ πολέμου πάντας μὲν ἀναχωρήσαι τοὺς ἀποστόλους τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἐγένετο· τότε δὲ καὶ Ἰωάννης εἰς τὴν Ἐφεσον γενόμενος διετέλεσεν ἐπ' αὐτῆς, ἄχρι τῶν Τραϊανοῦ διαγεγονῶς ὡς ἔφην καιρῶν. Παῦλος δὲ οὐδὲ τεθεαμένος αὐτοὺς ἐπιστέλλων φαίνεται· [...] τίς δὲ οὕτως ἡλίθιος ὥστ' ἂν οἰηθῆναι ὅτι παρόντος Ἰωάννου Τιμόθεον ἐπὶ τῷ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν οἰκονομεῖν κατελίμπανεν; ἔτι καὶ τοῦτο πρὸς τοῖς εἰρημένοις λογίζεσθαι χρή, ὡς Ἐφεσίους ἐθεάσατο πολλῷ πρότερον ἢ ἐπὶ τὴν Ῥώμην ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἀναχθῆναι ὅλως, ὡς ἐν ταῖς πράξεσιν τῶν ἀποστόλων μάθοι ἂν τις σαφέστερον· ὥστε φαίνεσθαι αὐτὸν πανταχόθεν πολλῷ πρότερον τῆς Ἰωάννου διατριβῆς ταῦτα γράφοντα πρὸς αὐτούς.*

What is significant here is that Theodore appears to confirm what was argued in the first two sections above: there were those who claimed Paul's primacy in Ephesus and those who claimed John's. Importantly, Theodore recognizes that "Ephesians" does not easily fit the traditional chronology of both Paul's and John's presence in Ephesus. Moreover, he grapples with the fact that the link between the letter and the city is not obvious. In the end, Theodore is convinced that this letter was written by Paul and that it supports the narrative of Acts that Paul was the first apostle to Ephesus. In fact, I suggest this is how the letter was intended to be used by the end of the second century.

Muddiman and Trebilco have both suggested that Ephesians was composed in Ephesus, which is why it became known as "Ephesians" despite lacking an address.<sup>51</sup> This is a possible explanation. Given the theme of unity, Muddiman goes on to argue that Ephesians was written to *both* the Pauline and Johannine factions in the city.<sup>52</sup> Both Muddiman and Trebilco see thematic and theological continuity between Ephesians and Johannine literature, including the Gospel of John.<sup>53</sup> While this hypothesis is possible, it fails to account for multiple issues. First, it would not explain why Marcion did not seem to know that it was a letter from/to Ephesus. Second, it does not explain the lack of address—why not address it to "the churches" in Ephesus if it was really intended to be delivered there? A letter with no address makes little sense, in the end.<sup>54</sup>

So what is the meaning of Ephesians? I think Goodspeed provides the best answer. Goodspeed demonstrated two crucial points that have lasted in Ephesians scholarship: (1) Ephesians used Colossians as a rubric for its form; (2) there is nothing unique in Ephesians in terms of ideas; it is an amalgam of Pauline thought and theology, particularly of ideas from Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians. This is not to say that the argument of Ephesians is not distinct, only that it is made up of elements already present in Paul's other letters.<sup>55</sup>

51 Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 59–62.

52 Muddiman, *Ephesians*, 37.

53 Cf. P. Trebilco, "Reading Ephesians in Ephesus: A Letter to Pauling and Johannine Christ-followers?," in *Ephesus as a Religious Center under the Principate* (eds. A. Black, C.M. Thomas, and T.W. Thompson; WUNT 1/488; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 161–187. For references of other scholars who argue for such continuity see fn. 2.

54 Bormann, "Die Datierung," 175. Admittedly, other letters in the NT also appear to lack specific address, including the Johannine Epistles, so this is not a firm refutation of the Muddiman/Trebilco hypothesis. My thanks to Kelsie Rodenbiker for pointing this out to me.

55 Cf. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lviii.



Goodspeed then proposed that the purpose of “Ephesians” was to serve as a “cover letter” for a Pauline corpus: it was never intended to be delivered to a particular place, but rather to serve as a summary of Pauline thought and theology.<sup>56</sup> This is where most scholars have departed from his theory. There is simply no evidence Ephesians was used as such. Or is there? The earliest Pauline corpus consisted of Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians—letters linked by their concern for the collection for the Jerusalem church.<sup>57</sup> Most of the ancient collections of Paul’s letters are arranged according to length, yet, as in the current New Testament order, Galatians is typically listed before Ephesians, even though the latter is longer than the former by more than 1,000 characters.<sup>58</sup> The transposition of these two epistles in the sequence is likely intended to keep Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians together as a unit. This means that “Ephesians,” in most manuscript cases, actually *does* function as the opening letter for the remaining Pauline letters in the corpus.<sup>59</sup>

“Ephesians,” then, was intended as an epitome of Paul’s thought and theology as presented in Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, and Galatians,<sup>60</sup> and to serve as an introduction to the rest of the Pauline corpus. Lincoln emphasizes that Ephesians is a distinct representation of Pauline thought, even though it is built entirely of components of other Pauline texts.<sup>61</sup> In this respect, “Ephesians” could serve to condition the reader for how to interpret Paul’s ideas. The idea of conditioning a reader’s response and interpretation via other texts together in a collection or even a specific manuscript is not unprecedented.<sup>62</sup>

56 This is the theory expounded in *The Meaning of Ephesians*. For a summary of the theory and its contribution to scholarship, see Mitton, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 45–54.

57 Cf. Rom 15:14–32; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15; Gal 2:1–10.

58 D. Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994; repr. Bolivar, MO: Quiet Waters, 2001), 48–54.

59 Cf. Trobisch, *Paul’s Letter Collection*, 54.

60 On the knowledge of Rom, 1–2 Cor, and Gal by the author of Ephesians, see U. Luz, *Der Brief an die Epheser* in *Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser und Kolosser* (eds. J. Becker and U. Luz; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 111.

61 Lincoln, *Ephesians*, lviii. See also Dettwiler, “Erinnerung und Identität,” 302: “Entstehungsgeschichtlich besteht die Originalität des Eph darin, auf der Grundlage des Kol—seine zentrale Referenzgröße—und in Anreicherung genuin paulinischen Materials eine theologische Abhandlung in Briefform geschaffen zu haben, die in ihrer Kohärenz beeindruckt.”

62 See, e.g., W. Iser, “Interaction between Text and Reader,” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (eds. S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 106–119. A convincing argument has been made for late antique scribes conditioning the way in which the *Acts of Thekla* were read by placing the story at the end of the “Book of Women” (Ruth, Esther, Judith, and Susann). Cf. C. Burris, “The Syriac *Book of Women*: Text and Metatext,” in *The Early Christian Book* (eds.

Hüneburg suggests that “Ephesians” may have emerged to combat the use of Paul’s letters by groups considered to be in “error,” particularly those who used Colossians, such as Valentinians, Marcionites, and “docetic” Christians.<sup>63</sup> To use Hüneburg’s phrase, Ephesians literarily sets “Paul” against Paul.

Andreas Dettwiler rejects this interpretation of Hüneburg, since this would indicate that the author intended to suppress Colossians, which the author could not abandon outright, since he believed it was written by Paul. Instead, Dettwiler suggests we understand Ephesians as a “*paulinisierende Fortschreibung* des Kol.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, the author produced Ephesians as a continuation of Colossians but in a more Paulinized fashion, thereby introducing an ideological tension within the Pauline corpus. Moreover, Ephesians redescribes the image of Paul as an authoritative figure in a manner that goes beyond the genuine Pauline epistles.<sup>65</sup> In the words of Gerber, the author “hebt die paulinische Theologie aus ihrer Situationsbezogenheit, dem Streit über die Bedeutung der Tora für die nichtjüdischen Völker, und ebnet so den Weg zur anthropologischen Rezeption der paulinischen Soteriologie und zur ekklesiologischen Vision einer orts- und traditionsübergreifenden Kirche.”<sup>66</sup> This, I suggest, gave the author authoritative leverage against any potential (mis)use of Paul’s ideas or letters. By situating Ephesians between the proto-Pauline collection (Rom, 1–2 Cor, Gal) and the rest of the collection (including Colossians), the writer leverages (and expands) Paul’s authority in order to condition the reading of the Pauline corpus in general.

These arguments together strongly suggest that “Ephesians” was not written to solve issues between the Pauline and Johannine contingencies in Ephesus (as argued by Muddiman and Trebilco), but *only* to the Pauline Christians, to solve internal ambiguities of “Paul’s” ideas. This theory of “Ephesians” origins can explain why Marcion had no awareness of the letter’s connection to Ephesus, it explains the place of the letter in Paul’s corpus, and it explains the pseudonymous authorship of “Paul.” What it does not explain is *why Ephesus*? It is clear that this letter was known to Marcion by the mid-second century. It was only *after* Marcion that it became firmly known as “Ephesians.”

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W.E. Klingshirn and L. Safran; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007) 86–98.

63 Hüneburg, “Paulus versus Paulus,” in *Pseudepigraphie und Verfasserfiktion*, 387–409.

64 Dettwiler, “Erinnerung und Identität,” 302 (emphasis in the original).

65 Dettwiler, “Erinnerung und Identität,” 307–311.

66 C. Gerber, “Paulus lebendig—und Paulus literarisch: Der Epheserbrief in der Lektüre Luthers und Calvins aus der Perspektive historisch-kritischer Exegese,” in *Reformato-rische Paulusauslegungen* (eds. S. Krauter and M. Nägele; History of Biblical Exegesis 5; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023) 503–533, here 503.

Thus, the letter's connection to Ephesus—and specifically to “Paul” writing a letter to Ephesus—is only dateable to the second half of the second century at the earliest.

Strikingly, we know very little about Christianity in Ephesus during this time period, beyond what the sources discussed here provide.<sup>67</sup> In fact, for content beyond the NT and the *Acts of John*, we are almost entirely reliant on sources transmitted by Eusebius of Caesarea. This is important since, as Georges demonstrates, Eusebius appears to downplay the importance of Ephesus as a Christian centre, despite it being the capital of Asia Minor. According to Georges, Eusebius's estimation of Ephesus is conditioned by the Quartodeciman debate about the date of Easter, which took place in the late second century.

Eusebius frames the Quartodeciman controversy as one between “the dioceses of all Asia” (τῆς Ἀσίας ἀπάσης αἱ παροικίαι) led by Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, and the “churches throughout the rest of the world” (ταῖς ἀνὰ τὴν λοιπὴν ἅπασαν οἰκουμένην ἐκκλησίαις), the latter whom Eusebius claims “from apostolic tradition they kept the custom which still exists” (ἐξ ἀποστολικῆς παραδόσεως τὸ καὶ εἰς δεῦρο κρατήσαν ἔθος φυλαττούσαις).<sup>68</sup> The Asian churches, Eusebius says, were of the opinion that Easter should be observed with Passover, on the fourteenth day of the moon. In justification of this practice, Polycrates wrote to Victor and makes some interesting claims:

Therefore we keep the day undeviatingly, neither adding nor taking away, for in Asia great luminaries sleep, and they will rise on the day of the coming of the Lord, when he shall come with glory from heaven and seek out all the saints. Such were Philip of the twelve apostles, and two of his daughters who grew old as virgins, who sleep in Hierapolis, and another daughter of his, who lived in the Holy Spirit, rests at Ephesus. Moreover, there is also John, who lay on the Lord's breast, who was a priest wearing the breastplate, and a martyr, and teacher. He sleeps at Ephesus. And there is also Polycarp at Smyrna, both bishop and martyred, and Thraseas, both bishop and martyr, from Eumeneae, who

67 Cf. T. Georges, “Die ephesischen Christen in nachneutestamentlicher Zeit: Erwägungen zur christentumsgeschichtlichen Bedeutung der Stadt Ephesos und ihrer Darstellung bei Euseb von Cäsarea,” in *Ephesos: Die antike Metropole im Spannungsfeld von Religion und Bildung* (ed. T. Georges; Civitatum Orbis Mediterranei Studia 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 321–336; J.N. Bremmer, “Historical and Imagined Christianity in Ephesus: From Antoninus Pius to Constantine the Great” (forthcoming). My thanks to Jan for making his paper available to me, from which I learned a great deal.

68 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* v.23.1–2. Trans. from Lake, LCL, 503.

sleeps in Smyrna [...]. All these kept the fourteenth day of the passover according to the gospel, never swerving, but following according to the rule of the faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, live according to the tradition of my kinsmen, and some of them have I followed.<sup>69</sup>

Polycrates enlists the authority of multiple apostolic figures, including Philip's daughters, John the son of Zebedee,<sup>70</sup> and Polycarp. In response, Eusebius says, Victor attempted to cut off the churches of Asia, including Ephesus, but was dissuaded by none other than Irenaeus. Strikingly, it is Irenaeus who must point out to Victor that the authority on which Polycrates lays his argument is apostolic. Irenaeus writes to Victor and relates to him that when Polycarp had stayed at Rome, bishop Anicetus had tried to persuade him against the observance of Easter on the fourteenth day. However, Irenaeus writes:

neither was Anicetus able to persuade Polycarp not to observe it, inasmuch as he had always done so *in company with John the disciple of our Lord and the other apostles with whom he had associated*; nor did Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it, for he said that he ought to keep the custom of those who were presbyters before him.<sup>71</sup>

69 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* v.24.2–6. Trans. Lake, LCL, 505–507. ἡμεῖς οὖν ἀρραδιούργητον ἄγομεν τὴν ἡμέραν, μήτε προστιθέντες μήτε ἀφαιρούμενοι. καὶ γὰρ κατὰ τὴν Ἀσίαν μεγάλα στοιχεῖα κεκοίμῃται· ἅτινα ἀναστήσεται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς παρουσίας τοῦ κυρίου, ἐν ᾗ ἔρχεται μετὰ δόξης ἐξ οὐρανῶν καὶ ἀναζητήσει πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους, Φίλιππον τῶν δώδεκα ἀποστόλων, ὃς κεκοίμῃται ἐν Ἱεραπόλει καὶ δύο θυγατέρες αὐτοῦ γεγηρακυῖαι παρθένοι καὶ ἡ ἑτέρα αὐτοῦ θυγάτηρ ἐν ἁγίῳ πνεύματι πολιτευσαμένη ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἀναπαύεται· ἔτι δὲ καὶ Ἰωάννης ὁ ἐπὶ τὸ στήθος τοῦ κυρίου ἀναπεσὼν, ὃς ἐγενήθη ἱερεὺς τὸ πέταλον πεφορεκῶς καὶ μάρτυς καὶ διδάσκαλος· οὗτος ἐν Ἐφέσῳ κεκοίμῃται, ἔτι δὲ καὶ Πολύκαρπος ἐν Σμύρνῃ, καὶ ἐπίσκοπος καὶ μάρτυς· καὶ Θρασέας, καὶ ἐπίσκοπος καὶ μάρτυς ἀπὸ Εὐμενείας, ὃς ἐν Σμύρνῃ κεκοίμῃται [...] οὗτοι πάντες ἐτήρησαν τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς τεσσαρεσκαίδεκάτης τοῦ πάσχα κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, μηδὲν παρεκβαίνοντες, ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸν κανόνα τῆς πίστεως ἀκολουθοῦντες· ἔτι δὲ κάγω ὁ μικρότερος πάντων ὑμῶν Πολυκράτης, κατὰ παράδοσιν τῶν συγγενῶν μου, οἷς καὶ παρηκολούθησά τισιν αὐτῶν. ἑπτὰ μὲν ἦσαν συγγενεῖς μου ἐπίσκοποι, ἐγὼ δὲ ὄγδοος.

70 Building on the work of M. Hengel, R. Bauckham has pointed out that the “John” referred to by Polycrates may have actually been John the Elder, whom, Hengel postulated, Papias regarded as both the beloved disciple and the author of the Gospel (cf. M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* [trans. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1989]). I am less interested in the question of which John this is than I am in the fact that it is the same John as in the Gospel and who is regarded as being an apostle in Ephesus. See R. Bauckham, “Papias and Polycrates on the Origin of the Fourth Gospel,” *JTS* 44.1 (1993) 24–69.

71 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* v.24.16, trans. Lake, LCL, 511–513 (emphasis added). οὕτε γὰρ ὁ Ἀνίκητος τὸν Πολύκαρπον πείσαι ἐδύνατο μὴ τηρεῖν, ἅτε μετὰ Ἰωάννου τοῦ μαθητοῦ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ἀποστόλων οἷς συνδιέτριψεν, αἰεὶ τετηρηκότα, οὕτε μὴν ὁ Πολύκαρπος τὸν Ἀνίκητον ἔπεισεν τηρεῖν, λέγοντα τὴν συνήθειαν τῶν πρὸ αὐτοῦ πρεσβυτέρων ὀφείλειν κατέχειν.

Irenaeus explains that Polycarp enlisted the specific authority of John the son of Zebedee to authorize his practice, while Anicetus only vaguely referred to the local traditions at Rome.

The appeal to apostolic tradition plays a role here. On the one hand, Eusebius admits that Polycrates (and Polycarp before him) would not relent in observing Easter on the 14th of Nisan because this is how John the apostle supposedly celebrated it. On the other hand, in response to the Asian churches, Pope Victor (and Anicetus before him) appealed to localized Roman traditions in their defense. A synod was held in Rome in 193 and then in Ephesus just after. In a previous generation, it had been Polycarp vs. Anicetus. Now, it became Victor vs. Polycrates; in both cases, it was Rome vs. Ephesus. By the late second century, John was appealed to as the apostolic authority behind local Asian customs. In the case of Rome, who could fill such a role? Rome in many respects became the city of Peter and Paul, as both purportedly died there and Paul in particular had written to the church there.<sup>72</sup> Ephesus could appeal to John's apostolic authority in their region, as the *Acts of John* makes clear. Rome could appeal to Paul's apostolic authority, as the narratives surrounding his death there demonstrate.<sup>73</sup> The dispute between Rome and Asia thus can be reduced to a contestation over apostolic authority, already in the late second century. It is in this context that I suggest "Ephesians" became Ephesians.

The link between Ephesians and Ephesus can be explained if we view it as an attempt to leverage Paul's apostolic authority over Ephesus as the "original" apostle to the city. A cover letter designed to summarize "correct" Pauline theology could serve as the perfect connection between Paul's teachings—already linked to Rome—and the city of Ephesus—already linked to John. In the Quartodeciman debate, the Asian presbyters explicitly appealed to John as apostolic authority for their practice. Eusebius recognizes John's authority but nevertheless remains a staunch supporter of the Roman side of the debate. Georges thus views Eusebius's downplay of Ephesus as a reaction against the Asian churches taking the "wrong" side in the Quartodeciman controversy.<sup>74</sup>

Notably, Victor does not appear to have a very convincing case on his side. Even Irenaeus admits that appealing to John is important. Victor's only recourse is to have the Palestinian bishops write their own letter in which they

72 Cf. D.L. Eastman, *The Many Deaths of Peter and Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

73 D.L. Eastman, *The Ancient Martyrdom Accounts of Peter and Paul* (WGRW 39; Atlanta: SBL, 2015) xxi.

74 Georges, "Die ephesischen Christen," 332–336.

side with Rome, once again appealing to traditions of anonymous “succession of the apostles” (ἐκ διαδοχῆς τῶν ἀποστόλων).<sup>75</sup> The nameless apostolic tradition must be weighed against explicit appeal to Jesus’s purported “beloved disciple.” Eusebius appears to assume the matter was settled with the letter from the Palestinian bishops. I suggest a further attempt may have been made to leverage Rome’s authority: addressing one of “Paul’s” letters to Ephesus, the very city opposed to Rome in the debate.

I propose that it was during the Quartodeciman debate that the address to Ephesus was added to “Ephesians.” Adding an address to the letter to Ephesus provided further links between Paul and Ephesus and thereby established Paul as an *apostle to Ephesus*, even more firmly and explicitly than Acts or 1 Corinthians could. This move added further credibility to Paul’s activity in Ephesus, as Theodore believed it did in the fifth century. If Paul was the “first” apostle to Ephesus, as Theodore assumed he was, and Paul’s teachings are the foundation of Rome’s teachings, then they are also the foundation of *Ephesus’s* teachings. Thus, by becoming “Ephesians,” this letter served as further leverage to subjugate Ephesus to the authority of Rome in the midst of controversy: Ephesus was not *only* John’s city, it was *Paul’s* city, too. Making “Ephesians” into Ephesians, introduced tension within the Asian appeal to apostolic authority. Whose authority mattered more, Paul’s or John’s?

## 5 Conclusion

Ephesians presents many difficulties for interpreters. It is unclear who wrote it, when and where it was written, to whom it was written, and for what purpose. I have tried to sort through some of the evidence to solve some of these questions within the letter’s reception history. Broadly speaking, the earliest sources claim that both Paul and John were in Ephesus at times, and the sources are ambiguous about who was there first. Early texts, like Acts and *Acts of John*, claimed either Paul or John was the “original” missionary to the city. As time went on, John’s legacy became more solidified in Ephesian memory than Paul’s. By the end of the second century, during the Quartodeciman debate, it was to John that the Asian presbyters appealed for their authority, not Paul.

But this appeal did not go uncontested. Starting with Ephesians as we have it now and working backwards, I have suggested that the text originated with no address and was designed to be read as a cover letter for the second

<sup>75</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* v.25.1.

part of the Pauline corpus. Without the address in Eph 1:1, it is difficult to place this letter within Paul's historical legacy, and ancient writers also dealt with this issue. In the second century, it is debated to whom this letter was addressed. Even after this became common knowledge, people like Theodore of Mopsuestia testify that there was still unease with how exactly this letter fit within Paul's missionary legacy at Ephesus. By late antiquity, Ephesus was *John's* city, not Paul's. I suggest that this tension between apostolic authority and legacy began in the second century and "Ephesians" is a byproduct of that tension. Ephesians served to reinforce Paul's status in Ephesus as the premier apostle. By the fourth century, Eusebius was willing to overlook Ephesus entirely in his discussion of Easter: Ephesus's authority was beneath Rome's.<sup>76</sup> The label "Ephesians" contributed to that outcome. But Theodore testifies that doubts about Paul and Ephesians in Ephesus lingered into the fifth century, as Ephesus was becoming the focal point for new controversies. All these commentators, from Tertullian to Theodore, struggled to overcome the very same issues regarding Ephesians, Paul, and Ephesus that we are still struggling with today. Perhaps it was their Waterloo, too.

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76 Georges, "Die ephesischen Christen," 334: "Die johanneische Tradition, die Euseb Ephesos in den Büchern 3–5 der Kirchengeschichte ja mehrfach attestiert hat, und auf die Polykrates sich offensichtlich auch berufen hat, kommt in Eusebs Augen in diesem Konflikt gerade nicht zum Zuge: Ephesos hat sich mit seiner Osterfestpraxis von der apostolischen Tradition zugunsten eines kaum belastbaren, alten Brauches verabschiedet."