

# Colossians

## Authorship

Pauline authorship of Colossians has been undisputed until recent times. Its impressive connection with Philemon and the general external evidence argue strongly for it being a letter of Paul's.<sup>1</sup>

## Date

Paul wrote this letter during his first Roman imprisonment, most likely before the writing of Philippians, making its date the winter of A.D. 60/61.<sup>2</sup>

## Original Readers

Paul is writing to Christians living in the town of Colosse situated in the Lycus Valley, about one hundred miles east of Ephesus. It may be that the church had been established during Paul's extended ministry in Ephesus, since Acts 19:10 indicates that "all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks." However, this does not necessarily mean that Paul had personally founded it.

## Occasion

The primary reason for this letter can be detected from the book's contents. Paul was obviously addressing some form of heresy that had had the effect of minimizing the sufficiency of Christ, thus endangering the Colossian believers' full realization of their spiritual potential.

## Special Issues

The main issue facing the interpreter of Colossians is the identification of the specific heresy that is being countered by Paul. It apparently had Jewish as well as philosophical elements and probably strains of pagan myth and ritual. Geisler thinks that it amounted to "seminal Gnosticism" that "denied the deity of Christ."<sup>3</sup> An important study by Clinton Arnold focuses on the local beliefs and practices of this area, an area which historically manifested religious pluralism and syncretism. He concludes that this "Lydia-Phrygian spirit" which had "permeated many of the cults, and to some degree, even Judaism . . . included a tendency toward the worship of one high god served by many intermediary beings, ecstatic

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<sup>1</sup> See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. revised (Downers Grove: IL, 1990), 572-77.

<sup>2</sup> See "Appendix: "Dating of the Captivity Epistles."

<sup>3</sup> Norman L. Geisler, "Colossians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament Edition*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck editors (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 668.

forms of worship that sometimes led to the abuse of the body, a strong belief in dangerous spirits and powers, and the practice of invoking divine intermediaries for deliverance, protection and assistance.”<sup>4</sup> This view of the religious background is helpful in understanding Paul’s emphasis on the preeminence of Christ and on the way certain aspects of realized eschatology<sup>5</sup> are presented (cf. 3:1-4). This understanding is preferable to viewing the heresy as some sort of proto-Gnosticism, though some elements are common with that second century movement.

### Theme Statement

As the full embodiment of God, Christ alone is able to bring the believer into a full experience of a life that is free from spiritual oppression and the dictates of the flesh.

### Outline

- I. Introductory Greeting: Paul greets the faithful believers at Colosse. ....1:1-2
- II. Prayer of Thanksgiving: Paul expresses his appreciation for the Colossian believers’ faith and love. ....1:3-8
  - A. They had displayed faith and love as evidence of their hope. ....1:3-5
  - B. They had been fruitful and were growing.....1:6-8
- III. Preface: Paul presents the preeminence and preciousness of Christ as the foundation for his message.....1:9-23
  - A. Paul prays for a proper perspective for the Colossians. ....1:9-12
    - 1. The basic need: A knowledge of God’s will. ....1:9
    - 2. The envisioned result: A life adorning the Lord. ....1:10-12
      - a. They will have a conduct that pleases Him. ....1:10a
      - b. They will perform effective deeds. ....1:10b
      - c. They will increase in the knowledge of God. ....1:10c
      - d. They will experience divine enablement for perseverance.....1:11
      - e. They will be thankful for their right of inheritance. ....1:12
  - B. Paul presents the person of Christ.....1:13-23
    - 1. Paul presents the preeminence of Christ. ....1:13-18
      - a. He is the possessor of the kingdom of the redeemed. ....1:13-14
      - b. He is the image of the invisible God. ....1:15a
      - c. He is the firstborn over creation. ....1:15b
      - d. He is the source, agent and reason for the creation of all things, personal and impersonal. ....1:16
      - e. He is before all things. ....1:17a
      - f. He is the sustainer of all things. ....1:17b
      - g. He is the head of the body, the church.....1:18a
      - h. He is the firstborn from the dead.....1:18b

<sup>4</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 310.

<sup>5</sup> “Realized eschatology” pertains to certain predictive statements in the New Testament that some systems of interpretation hold to already have been fulfilled.

- 2. Paul presents the preciousness of Christ.....1:19-22
  - a. He manifests the fullness of God. ....1:19
  - b. He reconciled all things to Himself.....1:20-22
- 3. Paul pronounces a warning about continuance in the faith.....1:23
- IV. Body: Paul prescribes Christ alone as the measure and mediator of life in its fullness.....1:24-3:17
  - A. Paul propounds the mystery of Christ as the focus of his ministry. ....1:24-2:7
    - 1. This mystery is the explanation for Paul’s service.....1:24-29
      - a. Its advent: the mystery was revealed to Paul and entrusted to him as a stewardship.....1:24-26
      - b. Its content: the mystery is Christ’s indwelling presence in the Gentiles as their hope of glory. ....1:27
      - c. Its intent: the mystery of Christ’s presence makes the perfection of life a reality.....1:28-29
    - 2. This mystery is the essence of Paul’s mission. ....2:1-7
      - a. His conflict is for the encouragement of their hearts. ....2:1-3
        - 1)Through their union in love.....2:1-2a
        - 2)Through assurance in their minds.....2:2b
        - 3)Through knowledge of the mystery. ....2:2c-3
      - b. His concern is for the stability of their faith. ....2:4-7
        - 1)A faith that resists persuasive arguments. ....2:4-5
        - 2)A faith that results in Christ-like conduct. ....2:6-7
  - B. Paul prescribes the person of Christ as the sole resource for life. ....2:8-3:17
    - 1. Summary Exhortation: Christ alone is the source of completeness and victory in life.....2:8-10
      - a. They need to guard against a philosophy of living that is sourced in human tradition and elemental spiritism rather than Christ. ....2:8
      - b. They need to realize that Christ is fully God.....2:9
      - c. They need to realize that in Christ they possess all resources for living life. ....2:10
    - 2. Prescriptive Application: Christ alone is the resource for living life. ...2:11-3:17
      - a. In Christ the believer is already fully established in the spiritual domain. ....2:11-23
        - 1) Exposition of union with Christ: The believer is alive together with Christ in His victory over the power of sin. ...2:11-15
        - 2) Application of union with Christ: The believer need not resort to the worldly realm for the experience of life. ....2:16-23
          - a) Legalism does not yield life because things are the shadow and Christ is the substance.....2:16-17
          - b) Mysticism does not yield life because Christ is the Head who nourishes the body. ....2:18-19
          - c) Asceticism does not yield life because Christ has died to the world. ....2:20-23
      - b. In Christ the believer has the capacity to manifest the new man in the earthly domain. ....3:1-17
        - 1) Exposition of the union: Christ is the believer’s life.....3:1-4

- 2) Application of the union: The believer is to choose the characteristics of the new man. ....3:5-11
  - a) The old habits must be put off. ....3:5-8
  - b) The new man has been put on. ....3:9-11
  - c) The new habits must be put on.....3:12-14
  - d) The peace of God must rule. ....3:15
  - e) The word of Christ must indwell. ....3:16
  - f) The name of Jesus must be honored. ....3:17
- V. Epilogue: Paul details specific ramifications for daily living. ....3:18-4:6
  - A. Formal relationships must reflect God’s order. ....3:18-4:2
  - B. The spiritual relationship will pursue God’s interests. ....4:3-4
  - C. Social relationships will reveal God’s graciousness. ....4:5-6
- VI. Final greeting and Instructions: Paul encourages the readers through the fellowship of the ministry. ....4:7-18
  - A. Paul passes on greetings from some of his associates.....4:7-15
  - B. Paul delivers final exhortations and a benediction. ....4:16-18

### Theme Statement

As the full embodiment of God, Christ alone is able to bring the believer into a full experience of a life that is free from spiritual oppression and the dictates of the flesh.

### Theme Development

In dealing with a special brand of heresy, characterized by what many have called the “Lydian-Phrygian spirit,”<sup>6</sup> Paul sets forth Christ as the full embodiment of Deity who alone is able to deliver from the spiritual forces arrayed against the believer and who, by virtue of his resurrection life, is alone able to empower the believer to authentic, God-honoring behavior. Colossians is a sublime statement of the preeminence of Christ over all creation and unto every good thing.

#### I. Introductory Greeting: Paul greets the faithful believers at Colosse (1:1-2).

In a characteristic greeting, Paul writes as an apostle to believers who have demonstrated faithfulness to Christ, wishing them grace and peace from the Father and Son.

#### II. Prayer of Thanksgiving: Paul expresses his appreciation for the Colossians believers’ faith and love (1:3-8).

Paul thanks God for the believers at Colosse for their faith, hope, and love, the three cardinal marks of the early church (cf. 1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thess 1:3). They have been founded in the faith in the same manner as all other churches and are evidencing fruit (1:6-8). This positive

<sup>6</sup> Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism*, 310.

foundation in Christ assures Paul that his prayer for them is proper and potentially effectual (1:3-5).

III. Preface: Paul presents the preeminence and preciousness of Christ as the foundation for his message (1:9-23).

As a preface to his specific reaction to the particular heresy that is threatening the church, Paul pens one of the greatest hymns of praise to Jesus in Scripture. Christ's absolute preeminence will become the key to addressing those elements in the Colossian heresy which were sub-Christian, and in reality hostile to the accomplished work of the Savior.

A. Paul prays for a proper perspective for the Colossians (1:9-12).

Before he instructs, Paul, prays that his readers will be filled with a knowledge of God's will in such a way that they will be able to apply spiritual truth in very practical ways (1:9). This application will cast a positive light on the Lord and will bring them into an ever more perfect experience of Christ-like living (1:10-11). This, after all, is their birthright (1:12).

B. Paul presents the person of Christ (1:13-23).

1. Paul presents the preeminence of Christ (1:13-18). The believer's inheritance has been made possible because the Father, as an act of love, has delivered them into the kingdom of His Son (1:13). However, this deliverance had not been without cost; the Son had paid the redemption price with His own blood (1:14), despite the fact that he had existed from eternity in the form of God, and had been involved integrally in creation in every capacity (1:15-17). The capstone of Christ's redemptive mission is the formation of his body the church, of which he himself is the head (1:18). Hence, believers have been brought into organic union with the creator and sustainer of the universe.

2. Paul presents the preciousness of Christ (1:19-22). Paul returns to the theme of redemption, just introduced in connection with Christ's preeminence (1:14). He wishes to emphasize the personal benefit of reconciliation with God—that it has overcome their alienation and enmity. The outcome of such redemption is guaranteed access to the Father.

3. Paul pronounces a warning about continuance in the faith (1:23). This conditional warning is not to be taken as casting doubt upon the readership's chances of inclusion in God's realm. Rather, it warns them that there are ways in which a believer may stand before God as deserving of blame and reproach. The judgment seat of Christ comes to mind as posing just such a reality (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-17; 2 Cor. 5:9-11).

IV. Body: Paul prescribes Christ alone as the measure and mediator of life in its fullness. (1:24–3:17).

Having prefaced his remarks by an exposition of Christ as preeminent over all of creation and precious in redemption, Paul now takes up the specific challenge to Christ's exclusive role as the sole empowerment for the present living of life.

A. Paul propounds the mystery of Christ as the focus of his ministry (1:24–2:7).

1. This mystery is the explanation for Paul's service (1:24-29). Christ has made possible a whole new way of approaching and living life, a way that had not previously been clear, even through the Jewish Scriptures. This "mystery" is the fact that the perfect God-Man, the resurrected Savior, has taken up residence in Gentile believers (1:26-27). Paul has received special revelation of this truth as well as the divine commission to proclaim it (1:24-25). It is his responsibility to preach Christ in such a way that every believer might come into full conformity to his life (1:28). Paul has diligently carried out this proclamation with evident success (1:29). This alone explains the apostle's self-sacrificial service on behalf of believers in general (1:24).

2. This mystery is the essence of Paul's mission (2:1-7). Paul's specific concern for the believers at Colosse is the threat to the stability of their faith (1:4-7) brought on by uncertainty of their standing in Christ with respect to the mystery just mentioned (cf. 1:27). Christ is the source of all that one needs to know about living life as God has intended (2:2-3). He is also the standard by which they are to live as they grow in their faith (2:4-7). Paul is concerned that these believers are in danger of being deceived by an erroneous approach to living the Christian life (2:4).

B. Paul prescribes the person of Christ as the sole resource for life (2:8–3:17).

The apostle now takes up the specific heresy that was being foisted upon the church. He is apparently reacting against a strange concoction of human wisdom, Jewish superstition, veneration of angels, and pagan mythology, all combined with Christian teaching to form a poisonous brew, capable of robbing them of the full experience of life in Christ.

1. Summary Exhortation: Christ alone is the source of completeness and victory in life (2:8-10). Rather than taking the elements of 2:8 as a separate aspect of the Colossian heresy, it is probably better to understand it as a summary statement of "the philosophy" that is being propounded. It is "empty deceit" based on human tradition, which has its roots in "personalized

spiritual forces”<sup>7</sup> rather than Christ, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells, and in whom believers already have everything effectual for overcoming the powers of darkness (2:9-10).

2. Prescriptive Application: Christ alone is the resource for living life (2:11–3:17). Having delivered the general warning about the dangers of the heresy, Paul now specifies how the philosophy has erred in two basic areas of life and how Christ is the answer to each one. These two general sections are introduced by a treatment of the believer’s union with Christ, followed by specific ramifications appropriate to each.

First, because believers are alive together in union with Christ, they have become associated with him in his victory over the spiritual forces of wickedness (2:11-15). As a result they do not need to resort to the devices of the worldly realm in an attempt to neutralize such spiritual opposition, things like legalism (2:16-17), mysticism (2:18-19), and asceticism (2:20-23). All of these are attempts to manipulate God into protecting man and performing for his benefit. Christ has already provided victory and blessing.

Second, because believers have been raised with Christ and possess him as their own life (3:1-4) they have the derived capacity to live like he lived while on earth. Thus, each believer is responsible for putting off the habits of the old man and putting on the habits of the new (3:5-14). Love, peace, mutual encouragement, worship, divinely-inspired service, and a spirit of gratitude will evidence the vitality of the believer’s life lived in dependence on the Lord (3:14-17). These are things that pagan cults, Jewish superstition, and angelic adulation could never produce.

V. Epilogue: Paul details specific ramifications for daily living (3:18–4:6).

The Christian life is to be lived out in everyday life, as Paul’s staccato enumeration of relationship responsibilities plainly shows (3:18–4:6). The Christian life is supernaturally motivated and enabled, as the body of the epistle has shown. It is also intensely practical in terms of every day life.

V. Final greeting and Instructions: Paul encourages the readers through the fellowship of the ministry (4:7-18).

Perhaps to establish the universality of the experience of Christ that he has just written about, Paul indulges in a rather long list of greetings. Several of those mentioned are from

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<sup>7</sup> Arnold makes a compelling case for the idea of spiritual forces being behind the phrase “basic principles of the world” (*stoicheia tou kosmou*); see *Colossian Syncretism*, 158-94.

Colosse. All serve as examples of life lived out of the fullness of Christ (4:7-15). Attention to apostolic teaching is the key to progress in the faith (4:16-18).

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## Appendix

### Dating of the Captivity Epistles

The reason that Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon are called prison, or captivity, epistles is because of the explicit references to the author's bonds (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil 1:7, 13, 14; Col 4:18; and Phlm 1, 9). Since the author had relative freedom to receive visitors and carry on extensive correspondence "captivity" rather than "prison" may be the best descriptive term for grouping these works. Furthermore, three of these may be grouped as coming from the same time and place, namely Colossians, Ephesians and Philemon. This is due to the mention of Tychicus as being the bearer of two of the letters (cf. Col 4:7 and Eph 6:21) and the mention of Onesimus as being Tychicus' companion (cp. Col 4:9 with Phlm 10–12). In addition Archippus is greeted in the salutation of Philemon (v. 2) and addressed in the epilogue of Colossians (4:17). On the basis of this internal evidence Harrison summarizes: "These three epistles, then, emanated from the apostle at the same time and must have originated at one place."<sup>8</sup> Besides the lack of such links with Philippians, that letter is also set off from the other three by its much more positive tone with respect to Paul's expectation of imminent release (Phil 1:25).

The dating of Ephesians has been complicated in modern times by questions about its authenticity and its destination. Guthrie summarizes the traditional arguments for Pauline authorship as being (1) its self-claims (Paul's naming of himself and the many first person references) (2) its external attestation (its general acceptance as a work of Paul and wide circulation by the middle of the second century) (3) its Pauline structure (4) its language and literary affinities (5) its theological affinities and (6) its historical data.<sup>9</sup> With respect to the last evidence, Guthrie notes that the lack of reference to the fall of Jerusalem (which would be *apropos* to the Jew and Gentile discussion) and "the absence of a developed ecclesiastical organization" point to an early rather than latter date.<sup>10</sup> After examining the arguments against Pauline authorship,

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<sup>8</sup> Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 293.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 496-99.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 499.

Guthrie concludes, “that the weight of evidence is inadequate to overthrow the overwhelming external attestation to Pauline authorship, and the epistle’s own claims.”<sup>11</sup>

However, Pauline authorship notwithstanding, there are still difficulties in identifying the destination of Ephesians. This is due to the lack of the words ἐν Ἐφεσῶ (en Epheso) in the salutation of some manuscripts, the seeming lack of familiarity with the readership (cf. 1:15; 3:2; 4:21) and the absence of reference to specific individuals in the concluding section (6:21–24).<sup>12</sup> Two possibilities for the textual variant are either that the destination reference was dropped, particularly in Egypt, for liturgical reasons or that it was originally intended as a circular letter.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the exact destination, the close connection with Colossians argues for a Roman captivity origin. Harrison puts the three connected letters (Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon) around the middle of the Roman detention<sup>14</sup>, which would be, according to the chronology worked out above, the winter of A.D. 60/61.

The dating of Colossians is closely tied to the evidence for the dating of Ephesians and Philemon. While the material relating to Onesimus and Philemon fit better against an Ephesian captivity as opposed to a Caesarean imprisonment, there is insufficient reason to overthrow the traditional Roman imprisonment view for either of the alternatives. Guthrie, in accepting a Rome origin, thinks that Colossians would have had to have been written during the middle or later half of Paul’s time there in order to allow for the news of his plight to have spread to the Lycus valley communities and for Epaphrus to have sought Paul out (cf. Col 1:7; 4:12).<sup>15</sup>

Philemon is addressed to the owner of the slave Onesimus who had found the way from his native city of Colosse to Rome where Paul was imprisoned. Colossians and Philemon belong to the same period. Guthrie thinks it likely that Tychicus, accompanied by Onesimus, was the bearer of both letters to Colosse.<sup>16</sup> The date, then would be the same as that for Colossians, that is winter A.D. 60/61.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 527.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ibid., 528-33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 529-30.

<sup>14</sup> Harrison, *Introduction*, 301.

<sup>15</sup> Guthrie, *Introduction*, 580.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 664.

Philippians presents a more complex situation with respect to destination and dating. Paul's close association with the church at Philippi, well established through the record of Acts, leaves very little doubt as to the authenticity and destination of the letter. The real question is the origin of the letter given the nature of the church's interaction with the apostle during the period in question. Paul is clearly a prisoner (Phil 1:7, 13, 16). At issue is the identification of the imprisonment. Rome has always been the traditional opinion, however more recently cases have been made for Caesarea and Ephesus.

Robinson has recently argued for the Caesarean context for the prison epistles.<sup>17</sup> However Guthrie concludes that were the Roman hypothesis to prove faulty, the Ephesian alternative would "probably be unchallenged."<sup>18</sup> One of the main reasons for entertaining the Ephesian imprisonment hypothesis as being the context for the Philippian correspondence has to do with the number of back and forth visits reflected in the letter in light of Philippi's relative proximity to Rome versus Ephesus. On the surface there needs to be sufficient time for news of Paul's situation to come to Philippi, Epaphroditus' arrival in Rome with a gift for the apostle, the messenger's falling ill and its news reaching the home church, followed by Paul's receiving a report of the church's concern over their emissary's condition. Guthrie demonstrates the plausibility of such rather extensive travel falling well within Paul's two-year stint in Rome, noting that numerous Roman writers confirmed the contention of Bishop Lightfoot that a month was sufficient time for a journey from Rome to Philippi.<sup>19</sup>

Another problem is the supposed conflict between Paul's statement that seems to indicate that he viewed his death as imminent, on the one hand, and his expectation of receiving word from Timothy regarding the Philippians' welfare on the other (cp. 2:17 with 2:19). This would be problematic with the greater distance involved between Rome and Macedonia. The answer, of course, is that Paul's true expectation is that he will be released (cf. 1:25), the reference in 2:17 being a hypothetical worst scenario with respect to his service on behalf of the church's faith.

Finally, Paul's anticipated itinerary upon release has raised objections to Rome as the place of writing. The record of Acts, coupled with the Roman correspondence, leaves the very

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<sup>17</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 57-85.

<sup>18</sup> Guthrie, *Introduction*, 555.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 547-49.

definite impression that Paul has his sight set inexorably upon Spain as his next field of missionary endeavor. This seems to go against his stated intention to visit Philippi soon (cf. 2:24). However, Paul's plans had changed more than once in his missionary work (e.g. in his intentions regarding visits to Corinth). There is no necessary conflict between a proposed visit to Philippi upon release from Rome (a movement East) before resuming his long held goal of ministry in the far West. At any rate there are no compelling reasons to deny Rome as the site of Paul's imprisonment on account of distances and itinerary.

The references in Philippians to Caesar's household and the praetorium (1:13), the relative freedom to carry on correspondence and receive companions, and the expression of a sense of imminent acquittal all serve to support the traditional view that Paul wrote Philippians from Rome, probably toward the end of his captivity, likely late in A.D. 61. This conclusion, in turn, leads to, at least, the opportunity for a visit to Spain and the necessity of a final imprisonment, which provides the possible backdrop to the Pastoral Epistles.