

Colossians 2:6-10

“The Fullness of the Deity”

“Therefore as you have received Messiah Yeshua the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.”

The Apostle Paul recognizes the Colossians as largely being firm in their faith in Yeshua, as he communicates, “For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Messiah” (Colossians 2:5).⁶² He then instructs them, “as you have received Messiah Yeshua the Lord, so walk in Him.” The Colossians received (Grk. *parelabete, παρελάβετε*) the gospel message as a valid tradition handed down to them, with some commentators noting a possible parallel with m.*Avot* 1:1: “Moses received Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to elders, and elders to prophets.”⁶³ Just as the Torah would have been considered a reliable tradition, handed down and preserved over many generations of Israelite and Jewish leaders, so should the good news of Messiah Yeshua now be considered as just as reliable a tradition.

Noting many of the things the Apostle Paul will be discussing throughout Colossians ch. 2—which are manifold—Witherington indicates, “it is quite characteristic of Asiatic rhetoric to throw a cornucopia of images and metaphors at the audience, trusting that one or the other will lodge in their brains.”⁶⁴ Paul’s purpose is doubtless to reaffirm to the Colossians what Yeshua has accomplished for them, and how their lives are to be focused around Him—lest they even think about being influenced by the false teachers (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:4; Galatians 1:6)! Colossians 2:6-4:6 composes the main body of Paul’s letter, and as he expresses, receiving Yeshua is *not enough*—as one must continue forward in Him.

As the identity of Yeshua is a major feature of Colossians, Paul is specific to say that his audience did not just receive Messiah Yeshua, but rather *ton Christon Iēsou ton Kurion* (τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον)—“the Messiah Yeshua the Lord” (Colossians 2:6). This plays directly into the Christological assertions immediately made in Colossians 2:8-9. The Colossians had properly received Messiah Yeshua and recognized Him as Lord (not just “Master”)⁶⁵—and now there was a serious danger that some, if not many of them, could be persuaded against this as Yeshua was advocated to just be one of any number of mediatorial beings between humanity and God the Father.

Recognizing Yeshua as Lord is one of the earliest confessions of Messianic faith (Philippians 2:11; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3), because it is a declaration not only that Yeshua is to be the One a man or woman follows after—but **most significantly because a human being must state that God Himself has had to provide salvation**. Even while not being able to fully understand it as a new Believer, it is still nevertheless a requirement that one recognize Messiah Yeshua as Divine to be saved. Having received Messiah properly stands in

⁶² This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*.

⁶³ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 672. Cf. Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 93; O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 105.

⁶⁴ Witherington, *Philemon-Colossians-Ephesians*, 154.

⁶⁵ Cf. *BDAG*, 220.

In most English Bibles, the title that is rendered as “Master” in reference to Yeshua is *Despotēs* (δεσπότης).

stark contrast to the human traditions Paul will refer to (Colossians 2:8), and then refute (Colossians 2:18-19).

Before addressing some of the major theological issues of the false teachers' philosophy, Paul acknowledges how most of the Colossians have been doing the right thing. They were "rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Colossians 2:7, RSV).

Sometimes, English translations do not adequately convey the pattern for faith that Paul establishes with the Greek verbs, seen in the clause *errizōmenoi kai epoikodomoumenoi en autō kai bebaioumenoi* (ἑρριζωμένοι καὶ ἐποικοδομοῦμενοι ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ βεβαιούμενοι), more accurately rendered by the NASU as "having been firmly rooted and...being built up in Him and [being] established in your faith." The first verb, *errizōmenoi* or "having been firmly rooted," is a perfect passive participle, describing the past action of God in rooting people properly in faith via His Spirit. The second two verbs, *epoikodomoumenoi* and *bebaioumenoi*, "building" and "establishing," are present tense passive participles, describing current actions of God in seeing that His people are built up and established. It should not be difficult to detect how being rooted in Yeshua leads to a Believer being built up and strengthened during the course of life. There is a likely thematic connection between Colossians 2:7 and Ephesians 2:20, where the faith of Believers has "been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Messiah Yeshua Himself being the corner stone."

The growth language that Paul uses in Colossians 2:7 has been appropriated from the Tanach and the Apocrypha. Jeremiah 17:7-8 could certainly be in mind, as "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit." The verb *hrizō* (ῥιζόω), "to make to strike root: metaph. to root in the ground, plant" (LS),⁶⁶ employed in Colossians 2:7, is used of Wisdom in Sirach 40:15, where "I took root [*hrizō*] in an honored people, in the portion of the Lord, who is their inheritance." Similarly in Psalms of Solomon 14:2-4, "to those who live in the righteousness of his commandments, in the law, which he has commanded to us for our life. The Lord's saints will live by it forever; his saints are the Lord's paradise, the trees of life. Their planting is rooted [*hrizō*] forever; they will not be plucked out all the days of the heavens."

Of most importance, though, would be Paul's wider word to the Believers in Asia Minor, that they might be "rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3:17).

If the Colossians hold onto the tradition (Grk. *paradosis*, παράδοσις) that they have been handed down about Yeshua's Lordship via the Apostle Paul, and via their fellow servant Epaphras (Colossians 4:12), then they will have no problems. But if they veer from this course, then they will be subject to things which are at best of human origin, and at worst find their origin in paganism.⁶⁷

The principal statement, which will address a great deal of the Colossian false teaching (or as some prefer, Colossian heresy), is absolutely loaded with some descriptions that have to be laid forward very carefully, if the larger context is to make any sense. Paul admonishes the

⁶⁶ LS, 718.

⁶⁷ I am fully aware of the fact that in certain quarters of today's Messianic movement, the word "tradition" is viewed with a great deal of disdain or disgust. Yet, tradition in all its forms is not at all condemned by the Holy Scriptures—because ultimately the Bible is something that has been handed down and is a tradition in and of itself. Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 94 reminds us,

"Protestants sometimes overlook that 'tradition' in the NT has this better sense as well as a worse one; it is good to recognize and hold fast the true tradition, while rejecting all tradition that runs counter to the gospel."

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Colossians, “Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elemental forces of the world, and not based on Christ” (Colossians 2:8, HCSB). Certainly in a very general sense, this verse could be used in contemporary preaching to warn people against pursuing modern and post-modern strains of thought that will do nothing more than take people away from Yeshua the Messiah and Biblical faith. Suffice it to say, there was an ancient precedent for this among Paul’s audience.

Who are the false teachers in Colossae? All Colossians 2:8 tells us is *mē tis* (μή τις) or “no one.” Sadly, this rather ambiguous description is one of only a few direct references to the false teachers in Colossae. Some think that “no one” in Colossians 2:8 could be a reference to their leader. The Colossians are warned against an empty, vain philosophy that could lead them astray. Bruce, representing the position of many evangelical interpreters, considers that the problem “appears to have been basically Jewish, but to have included features of pagan affinity...The Jewish law certainly figures in it, but it is associated with an asceticism which was not characteristic of the mainstream of Jewish life.”⁶⁸ Bruce sees possible connections between the Colossian error and later *Merkavah* mysticism, which could be best described as a kind of Jewish Gnosticism.

The Colossians are not to be taken “captive” (NASU), made “a prey of” (RSV), or carried “away as spoil” (YLT) by the false teachers, possibly akin to “kidnap.” To convey how serious this is, Colossians 2:8 employs the verb *sulagōgeō* (συλαγωγέω), often used in a classical sense to describe people taken away in battle⁶⁹—which would certainly be an indication that Believers are engaged in spiritual warfare (cf. Ephesians 6:10-20). While he is confident in the Colossians’ current stability (Colossians 2:5), Paul by no means thinks that he can just write to them without giving them some kind of warning. Witherington offers us some important thoughts to consider as Paul composes his main instruction:

“Paul is speaking into a rhetorically and philosophically saturated environment...Paul therefore is in the awkward position of not being able to speak directly and in person to his audience, thus losing a good portion of the rhetorical arsenals (gestures, tone of voice, etc.). Yet still he must offer an even more powerful and philosophically substantive act of persuasion than is given by those who are beguiling the Colossians.”⁷⁰

The readers of the letter are warned against being taken captive *dia tēs philosophias kai kenēs apatēs* (διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης), “by philosophy and empty deceit” (Colossians 2:8, RSV). There could be a connection with the parallel word in Ephesians 5:6, “Let no one deceive you with empty words [*kenois logois*, κενοῖς λόγοις], for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” False knowledge or wisdom is an issue that is certainly confronted throughout the Pauline Epistles,⁷¹ and as 1 Timothy 6:20 well-summarizes, “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly *and* empty chatter *and* the opposing arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’”

It can be pretty clear from an English reading the kind of thing that Paul wants the Colossians to be on guard against. It is also clear why he wants them to be on guard, as whatever the false teaching or philosophy might be will inevitably lead them away from Messiah Yeshua. But *how* this will manifest itself is an issue that is undoubtedly affected by the presuppositions one brings to the letter. The present participle *sulagōgōn* (συλαγωγῶν), rendered as “takes you captive” (Colossians 2:8, NASU), is not a frequent term used in Greek. It could be

⁶⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁶⁹ Thayer, 594.

⁷⁰ Witherington, *Philemon-Colossians-Ephesians*, 154.

⁷¹ 1 Corinthians 1:17-31; 8:1; 13:8; 1 Timothy 1:3-11; 4:3-16; 2 Timothy 2:18; 3:5-7.

easily changed by writing a *nu* (ν) in place of a *lambda* (λ), to the genitive (indicating possession) noun *synagōgōn* (συναγωγῶν) or “synagogue.” Among a few commentators, Wright is one who proposes “that Paul uses [*synagōgōn*] because it makes a contemptuous pun with the word *synagogue*: see to it that no-one snatches you as a prey...from the flock of Christ, to lock you up instead within Judaism.”⁷² And in Dunn’s estimation, “the Colossian Jews included some effective apologists and rhetoricians in their number.”⁷³ Their view is that the warning is “Do not let anyone in-synagogue you.”

From this angle, Judaism is just considered to be another philosophy. This would be similar to how the historian Josephus spoke of “that philosophy which is contained in those writings” (*Against Apion* 1.54),⁷⁴ and “The Jews had for a great while had three sects of philosophy peculiar to themselves” (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.11),⁷⁵ referring to the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees. Philo would similarly refer to the “philosophy according to Moses” (*On the Change of Names* 223).⁷⁶ Commentators like Wright⁷⁷ and Dunn are persuaded that the Colossians as former pagans needed to be warned against joining the Jewish Synagogue, as Wright says, “What Judaism might offer to ex-pagan Christians is in fact just another local and, one might say, tribal religion,”⁷⁸ similar to the “elementary principles” they were once subject to prior to finding faith.

Is the *philosophia* (φιλοσοφία) that Paul warns the Colossians against really First Century Judaism? Moo actually observes how, “The word provides no help...in identifying the false teaching in Colossae.”⁷⁹ The only thing that just about all commentators on Colossians can agree about this philosophy was that it was *ou kata Christon* (οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν), “not [in] accord with the Messiah” (Colossians 2:8, CJB/CJSB).

Other than the minority proposal that the philosophy warned against was Judaism, there are two other possibilities that an interpreter has to consider:

1. Outright pagan philosophy
2. Pagan philosophy that had influenced the Jewish Synagogue, which was particular to Colossae/the Lycus Valley region

While *philosophia* does appear in ancient Jewish literature to refer to Judaism itself, it should be no surprise that *philosophia* was also used to describe various other religions, cults, and mysterious sects particular to the broad First Century. O’Brien indicates, “those who practiced magic called themselves ‘philosophers’ as they sought by rights, initiations and magical spells to capture the allegiance of men.”⁸⁰ Dunn has to similarly agree that “philosophy” had a much broader ancient use: “It is a term which many apologists for all sorts of religious and pseudo-religious teaching would use because of its distinguished pedigree, as subsequently in relation to the mysteries.”⁸¹

The Apostle Paul labels this philosophy in Colossians 2:8 to be *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) or “the elementary principles of the world.” It is not difficult at all to see a connection to his previous word about the Galatians also being subject to “the weak and worthless elemental things” (Galatians 4:9; cf. 4:3) that they should have left behind in

⁷² Wright, *Colossians-Philemon*, 100.

⁷³ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 147.

⁷⁴ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 777.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 477.

⁷⁶ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 360.

⁷⁷ Cf. Wright, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 100-101.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁹ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 186.

⁸⁰ O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 109.

⁸¹ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 147.

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paganism.⁸² Geisler indicates one view of how the *stoicheia* “may refer to the evil spirits who inspire...heresy and over whom Christ triumphed.”⁸³ The elements or *stoicheia* being wicked things of the world is something certainly attested in ancient Jewish literature. *Testament of Solomon* 8:1-2 in the Pseudepigrapha relays a scene of how King Solomon saw seven distinct angels of darkness: “When I, Solomon, saw them, I was amazed and asked them, ‘Who are you?’ They replied, ‘We are heavenly bodies [*esmen stoicheia*], rulers of this world of darkness.”⁸⁴ Wisdom 13:1-2 in the Apocrypha further explains,

“For all men who were ignorant of God were foolish by nature; and they were unable from the good things that are seen to know him who exists, nor did they recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world.”

In Ancient Hellenistic Judaism, *stoicheia* sometimes took on its meaning as seen in Platonic philosophy, representing the forces of air, fire, wind, and water. Philo would refer to how “some nations have made divinities of the four elements, earth and water, and air and fire. Others, of the sun and moon, and of the other planets and fixed stars. Others, again, of the whole world. And they have all invented different appellations, all of them false” (*Decalogue* 53; cf. *On the Eternity of the World* 144).⁸⁵ In O’Brien’s estimation, “It is probable that in the syncretistic teaching being advocated at Colossae these *στοιχεῖα* were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man’s access to God’s presence.”⁸⁶ It was thought that only by appealing to these forces via some kind of physical denial or pain, would one’s spiritual needs actually be met (Colossians 2:18).

While we are convinced that *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* is used in the letter to the Colossians to refer to either elemental components of the universe, or some kind of angelic/demonic spiritual powers that the Colossians were being told they needed to appeal to, it is true that not all interpreters are agreed. Moo indicates how *stoicheion* “is a ‘formal’ word, meaning ‘fundamental component’ or ‘element’...It can, for instance, refer to the letters of the alphabet, the notes of a musical scale, or the propositions of geometry.”⁸⁷ However, it would seem that all are agreed, as D.G. Reid points out, “interpreters of Paul must focus on *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* as a linguistic unit.”⁸⁸ (With this in mind, I do not think it is inappropriate to conclude that if the issue in Colossians 2:8 are demonic/angelic spirits involved with pagan philosophy, that the *ta stoicheia tou kosmou* in Galatians 4:3 are also involved with ancient pagan practices that affected parts of the First Century Synagogue.)⁸⁹

⁸² In the author’s commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, he discusses how these “weak and worthless elemental things” cannot specifically be the appointed times of Leviticus 23, but rather are likely proto-Gnostic and mystical Jewish practices associated with them adhered to by the Judaizers/Influencers. If this is not the case, then the good Apostle Paul could actually be found to associating God’s ways in the Torah with paganism.

Also consult the entry for Galatians 4:8-11 in the *Messianic Sabbath Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁸³ Geisler, in *BKCNT*, 677.

⁸⁴ D.C. Duling, trans., “Testament of Solomon,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1, pp 969-970.

⁸⁵ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 522.

⁸⁶ O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 132.

⁸⁷ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 187.

⁸⁸ D.G. Reid, “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the Universe,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 229.

This article (pp 229-233) includes a summation of views present in contemporary Pauline scholarship.

⁸⁹ A small few, based in a very anti-Torah interpretation of Galatians 3:19-20 (cf. Deuteronomy 33:2, LXX), actually conclude that (demonic) angels delivered the Law to Israel as a form of Divine punishment. From this angle, keeping the Torah had to be conducted in conjunction with angelic mediation and/or approval, meaning that God originally did not want to give humans any kind of Law or commandments. This view of the Torah is often rooted in a Higher Criticism that not only wants to deny any Divine origin of the Pentateuch, but also often denies its Mosaic origin. It is clearly a long way

In Colossians 2:8 Paul further describes this philosophy as *kata tēn paradōsin tōn anthrōpōn* (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων), that it is “according to human tradition” (RSV). The issue in Colossians 2 is **human tradition and philosophy**, which should primarily be considered things present in ancient pagan religion. Witherington actually renders this as “according to [mere] human traditions.”⁹⁰ It is often thought that there is a connection purposefully made with Mark 7:8, where Yeshua chastises various Pharisees: “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition [*tēn paradōsin humōn*, τὴν παράδοσιν ὑμῶν],” where various Pharisaic interpretations of God’s Torah are derided. How much of the tradition confronted in Colossians actually was Jewish, Hellenistic, and from the mystery cults of the Lycus Valley has not at all been agreed upon by interpreters.

Moo gives us some important thoughts on how the traditions likely refuted by Paul indeed do relate to the material elements of the world and paganism, partially based on the previously quoted Wisdom 13:1-2 reference: “[The] tendency to ‘spiritualize’ or ‘divinize’ the material elements was a strong cultural current that the people of God had to fight against...The characterization of pagan religion as involving worship of physical elements as well as warnings against it are found throughout Jewish and early Christian apologetics.”⁹¹ Moo actually makes a reference to Deuteronomy 4:19, where it is warned, “And *beware* not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.” This only adds to the problem of the Colossian error including asceticism and self-denial (Colossians 2:18).

So, in warning the Colossians about vain philosophies and human traditions, we see that Paul takes language used to specifically describe the base elements of the Earth—employed in contemporary Jewish writings to refer to how the pagans have divinized various aspects of God’s good Creation. While pagan philosophy and tradition are principally in view, given the fact that Ancient Israel in the Torah is given warnings against them, this pagan philosophy would have impacted the Jewish community in Colossae, which in turn affected the assembly of Messianic Believers. Various external rituals and an ascetic lifestyle would be rigidly imposed as people were seeking after secret or mystical knowledge.

Paul is warning the Colossians not to be deceived by the false and vain philosophies of the heathen Greeks around them, many of whom embraced proto-Gnostic and mystical ideas, who in turn affected the local Judaism. If they accept such a philosophy, then the Colossian Believers would likely be persuaded against the Divinity of the Messiah, and the Biblical practices that they should be following as members of God’s people. It is possible, also, that many of the Colossian Believers were still being influenced by family members, former friends, and/or associates who advocated errant religious beliefs. And most especially and more specifically, they were influenced by some Jewish Believers who practiced things that mirrored their former life in paganism. **The philosophy advocated by the false teachers was not according to Messiah, meaning that it did not have Him at its center or as its focus.**

The main reason the Colossians were warned against the contemporary philosophy floating around their region—something “not based on Christ” (Colossians 2:8, HCSB)—is

from simply living the way that God has asked of His people in the Holy Scriptures, where “You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you” (Deuteronomy 5:33; cf. 30:6).

And once again, normative Jewish practice and Torah keeping of the First Century does not appear to be the issue in Colossians.

⁹⁰ Witherington, *Philemon-Colossians-Ephesians*, 152.

⁹¹ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 191.

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because “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9, NASU). **This is one of the most direct statements in the entire Bible that points to Yeshua the Messiah being Divine, the LORD God in human flesh.** It also points to a local, pagan-Jewish synthesis of errors being the problem confronted in this letter, and not Judaism in general. Colossians 2:9 includes a reiteration of what Paul has asserted previously in Colossians 1:19 about the Father’s fullness dwelling in Yeshua. The philosophy that Paul refutes would have eventually caused people to deny Yeshua as God.

But is Colossians 2:9 just a statement of dogma that we are to accept without question, or was it delivered in a specific context that we are to not overlook—with errant philosophies being refuted? How are we to understand *en autō katoikei pan to plērōma tēs Theotētos sōmatikōs* (ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς)? Does this only mean, as the ISR Scriptures (1998) renders it, “in Him dwells all the completeness of the Mightiness bodily”? There is a big difference between the rendering “Deity” (RSV, NASU, NIV, TLV, et. al.) or “Godhead” (KJV), and just “Mightiness.”⁹²

It is not improper to assume that thoughts such as those seen in Psalm 68:16 are in view: “Why do you look with envy, O mountains with *many* peaks, at the mountain which God has desired for His abode? Surely the LORD will dwell *there* forever.” The Hebrew verb *yashav* (יָשָׁב) is rendered with *katoikeō* (κατοικέω) in the Septuagint, the same verb appearing in Colossians 2:9 for *to plērōma tēs Theotētos* dwelling in Yeshua. Yet while the Psalmist may be concerned with God’s presence dwelling on a mountain, or in a Temple, the Apostle Paul’s description is about God actually filling up a human body. Moo indicates how “God in his fullness has not taken up residence in and therefore revealed himself in a building but in a body,” and as a result this makes “Christ as the focus for God’s presence and as the nucleus of God’s people.”⁹³

The source text is very specific with what dwells in Yeshua’s body, employing the term *theotēs* (θεότης), or “Deity” (sometimes rendered as “Godhead”), actually appearing with the definite article, making *tēs Theotētos* “the Deity.” This is different than the more general term *theiotēs* (θειότης), often just meaning “Divinity.” TDNT summarizes how *theotēs* “occurs in the NT only in Col. 2:9. The one God to whom all deity belongs, has given this fullness of deity to the incarnate Christ.”⁹⁴ Contrary to this, *theiotēs* only regards how “something is divine, whether a god or imperial majesty,”⁹⁵ perhaps only regarding supernatural forces. Paul uses *theiotēs* in Romans 1:20 to describe God’s “eternal power and divine nature.”⁹⁶ So, while it is not at all incorrect for us to speak about Yeshua’s “Divinity” — **Yeshua is Divine in a much greater sense than just being a supernatural entity.** He is *the Deity* manifested in a body—and *the Deity* is everything that makes God out to be God! Witherington properly concludes,

“There is a reason Paul uses the term ‘godhead’ (*theotēs*), rather than just ‘god-likeness’ (*theiotēs*). He believes that Christ is not just one among many supernatural creatures like the angels. He believes that in Christ and Christ alone dwells the fullness of the godhead. This is most certainly a claim that Christ is himself divine, not merely that the divine presence dwells in Christ.”⁹⁷

⁹² To be fair, the ISR Scriptures (2009) has made a slight improvement with, “Because in Him dwells all the completeness of Elohim-ness bodily.”

⁹³ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 193-194.

Here, it is useful for us to be reminded how *plērōma* (πλήρωμα) can mean, “*sum total, fullness*” (BDAG, 829).

⁹⁴ E. Stauffer, “*theotēs*,” in TDNT, 330.

⁹⁵ H. Kleinknecht, “*theiotēs*,” in *Ibid.*, 331.

⁹⁶ Grk. *autou dunamis kai theiotēs* (αὐτοῦ δυνάμις καὶ θειότης).

⁹⁷ Witherington, *Philemon-Colossians-Ephesians*, 170.

But why does Paul make a point to describe Yeshua possessing the fullness of the Deity in a body? Is there a purpose to this? *There is*. Consider how John 1:16 attests, “For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace.” Similarly, consider how Moses desired to see the Father’s glory and see the greatness of His love and compassion, but was unable to completely do so as no sinful mortal at the time could see God in such radiance and live (Exodus 33:18-20). The fullness of this Deity—not just Divinity—was present in Yeshua’s body so that God’s fullness could interact directly with humanity. John 1:17 further describes how, “the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.” The reason for God being made manifest in the Person of Yeshua was that those obstacles which originally separated people like Moses from His complete presence would now be removed.

While Colossians 2:9 includes a direct refutation against any who might hold Yeshua to just be a human Messiah, or a human Messiah empowered by God—it also refutes the idea that Yeshua was just a spirit and did not possess a body. Recall how in 2 John 7 it is stated, “those who do not acknowledge Yeshua the Messiah *as* coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antimessiah.” At least by the end of the First Century, more refined Gnostic ideas had advocated that Yeshua the Messiah was not a physical person. Colossians 2:9 lays out a delicate balance of Yeshua being both God and human, which the *Carmen Christi* hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 (cf. Isaiah 45:23) confessed quite early for the ancient Messianic Believers (discussed previously).

Not at all to be overlooked is how not only was God’s fullness expressed “bodily” in interacting with people, **but most importantly via specific acts of redemption**. This meaning is captured in the NEB rendering, “For it is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied.” And we should not casually disregard—even if we do hold to a high Christology of Yeshua being God Incarnate—some of the thoughts of those who might hold to a lower Christology. Dunn describes, “the present tense indicates this function of Jesus as ongoing: Christ in his historical embodiment still brings the character of deity fully to focus.”⁹⁸ This would mean that it is not enough for us to simply affirm “fullness” present in Yeshua, we have to see the actions of “fullness” present in the teachings and works of Yeshua, and in the proclamation of the gospel today.

How would the use of *plērōma* subvert any proto-Gnostic or errant mystical teachings circulating in Colossae? Donald Guthrie remarks how “It was believed that the Pleroma was so transcendent that it was necessary for a long succession of intermediaries to connect man with God, of which the last in the succession was Christ.”⁹⁹ Paul asserts that any other intermediaries between the Colossians and God the Father, most notably angels (Colossians 2:18), were not necessary to appeal to precisely because the *plērōma* “dwells” in Yeshua. The present active indicative verb *katoikei* (κατοικεῖ), in Colossians 2:9, presents this as a current action, meaning that God’s fullness did not just come onto Yeshua and then leave and go to some other intermediary. Lincoln states, “Since the totality of deity is embodied in Christ, there can be no grounds for a person who confesses Christ to seek God or fullness elsewhere or to think that the way to this divine fullness is through cosmic intermediaries.”¹⁰⁰

Colossians 2:9 is one of the most direct statements in the Apostolic Scriptures supporting the fact that Yeshua is God. Yeshua being a Divine Messiah, and not just a human Messiah, is a fiercely debated issue in sectors of today’s Messianic movement. I commend Messianic Jewish

⁹⁸ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 152.

⁹⁹ “Colossians,” in D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1147.

¹⁰⁰ Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:623.

The Nature of Yeshua in the Pauline Epistles and Hebrews

teachers like David H. Stern for affirming the Apostles' teaching on Yeshua's Divinity,¹⁰¹ as too frequently there is a temptation to try to totally synthesize Apostolic theology with current Jewish concepts of the Messiah. Worse yet, there are those who only want to view Jesus as a good Jewish teacher, but nothing more. As Stern comments, "This verse poses a challenge to non-Messianic Jews who attempt to reclaim Yeshua for Judaism by making him over into a great teacher, a wonderful man, or even a prophet, but yet a merely human figure and nothing more."¹⁰² Perhaps we should once again consider some critical Tanach prophecies of the Messiah, and His close identification with the LORD God?

"For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God [*El gibor*, אֱלֹהֵי גִבּוֹר], Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

"Behold, *the days are coming*," declares the LORD, "When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, "The LORD our righteousness [*ADONAI tzidqeinu*, אֲדֹנָי צְדִיקֵינוּ]" (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, *too little* to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity [*mimei olam*, מִיְמֵי עוֹלָם]" (Micah 5:2).

The most specific evidence of Yeshua as Divine Savior for the Colossians is how "you have been filled in him" (Colossians 2:10, ESV), *este en autō peplērōmenoi* (ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι). Rather than seeking the *plērōma* via external means, access to *to plērōma tēs Theotētos* and to God's power is something that they have already experienced in recognizing Yeshua as Lord (Colossians 2:6). They have been "made complete" (Colossians 2:10, NASU) only by Yeshua! 2 Peter 1:4 may include a parallel explanation: "For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust." The power of God accessible via faith in Yeshua should enable a person to overcome the temptations of sin.

In Yeshua the fullness of the Deity is present in bodily form: all of the aspects of God, from His great supernatural power to His compassion. Believers do not have the fullness of the Deity present in their bodies like Yeshua, the Son, but instead because of their being redeemed in Him, they can have access to such fullness and power. As Bowman and Komoszewski explain in their book *Putting Jesus in His Place*, "because God's fullness is found in Christ personally, those who are united to Christ (who are 'in him') have the fullness of God's power and love working in their lives."¹⁰³ This is a fullness that only comes to regenerated human beings because of the relationship that we have with the Lord Yeshua.

Yeshua's status as the Deity made manifest in a human body is attendant with great power over all, as "the head of all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:10, RSV), including whatever *other* intermediaries the Colossians may have been tempted to try to appeal to. **This is not a claim made of any human.** Viewing the term *kephalē* (κεφαλῆ) as akin to "source" in Colossians 2:10—"and you have been filled in Him, who is the source of all principality and power" (PME)—makes Yeshua the very origin of all rule and authority. Lincoln aptly describes how for the

¹⁰¹ Colossians 2:9 is slightly paraphrased in his CJB/CJSB with, "For in him, bodily, lives the fullness of all that God is." The newer TLV has, "For all the fullness of Deity lives bodily in Him."

¹⁰² Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 607.

¹⁰³ Bowman and Komoszewski, 77.

Colossians, “Because of their link with the fullness of deity through Christ, by definition there can be nothing lacking about their relation with God, no deficiency that needs to be filled by further teachings and practices offered by the philosophy.”¹⁰⁴

Colossians 3:1-4

“your life is hidden with Messiah in God”

“Therefore if you have been raised up with Messiah, keep seeking the things above, where Messiah is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Messiah in God. When Messiah, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”

This part of Paul’s message, in his letter to the Colossians, serves as a positive counterpart to the previous negative critique of the false philosophy.¹⁰⁵ Instruction is specifically delivered on how Yeshua the Messiah offers power to Believers, enabling them to overcome sinful temptations—a power that the false teaching of the Colossian errorists cannot provide. The ability to live properly before God cannot be attained by the ascetic practices circulating in Colossae (Colossians 2:18-21), but instead *only* by the Colossians being united with Yeshua. The Apostle Paul teaches the Colossians about their new identity in the Messiah (Colossians 3:1-4), that they are to put off their old sinful ways (Colossians 3:5-11) and put on new godly ways (Colossians 3:12-17), and about some of the responsibilities that those who live properly have, in order to demonstrate right service to the Lord (Colossians 3:18-4:1).¹⁰⁶

Compared to what has thus far been written, the tone of the remainder of the epistle is relatively positive (simply see the contrast between Colossians 2:20 and 3:1). The emphasis is, “So if you have been raised with the Messiah, seek what is above, where the Messiah is” (Colossians 3:1, HCSB). In order for his readers to truly understand the profundity of who the Messiah is, Paul admonishes “keep seeking the things above,” specifically employing *zēteite* (ζητεῖτε), a present active imperative verb. The NIV understands this to be “set your hearts on things above,” as Colossians 3:2 will specifically admonish the audience to use their minds to *think* about Yeshua. We can be reminded of how Paul similarly instructed the Philippians, “brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

The Colossians, in considering the Lord Yeshua, are to live the life of the realm of Heaven—where Yeshua is sovereign (Psalm 110)—**while living on Earth**. Born again Believers are connected to Heaven (1 Corinthians 15:47-49; Galatians 4:26; Philippians 3:20), but not in some kind of an ethereal way. The life of Heaven will be manifested in concrete, righteous actions of faith in the saints. Lincoln observes, “In the face of the insistence on ascetic observances in order to participate in heavenly life, [the author] asserts that through God’s gracious initiative the readers have already been brought into such life.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Wright reminds us, “The Bible does not say much about heaven. But its central feature is clear: it is the

¹⁰⁴ Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:623.

¹⁰⁵ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁰⁶ Interpreters like Dunn, who would advocate that the Colossians were being persuaded against entering into the Jewish Synagogue, claim that this section of verses “provide[s] a counterweight to the evident attractiveness of the more traditional Jewish lifestyle” (Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 203).

¹⁰⁷ Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:637.