

# EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS

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**Approximate date:** 60-62 C.E.

**Time period:** season of extreme error in parts of the Body of Messiah, during the first imprisonment of Paul

**Author:** the Apostle Paul

**Location of author:** Rome

**Target audience and their location:** Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Colossae

**People:**

Paul, Timothy, Epaphras, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Luke, Demas, Nympha

**People mentioned:**

Yeshua the Messiah, Laodiceans

**Places:**

Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis

**Key Themes:**

the complete redemption available in Yeshua / the supremacy of Yeshua over the Creation / warning against vain human philosophies / the Divinity of Yeshua the Messiah / warnings against asceticism, and those who would improperly judge others / setting one's heart and mind on things of the Lord / properly conducting oneself as a member of the community of faith

**Key Scriptures:** Colossians 1:15-20, 27-28; 2:9-10 / **Greeting** (1:1-2); **Thanksgiving** (1:3-8); **Prayer** (1:9-12); **An Exposition on the Doctrine of Messiah** (1:13-2:23); **Practical Section** (3:1-4:6); **Conclusion** (4:7-18)<sup>1</sup>

**Theological Summary:** The letter to the Colossians is commonly classified among the Prison Epistles (also including Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon). The author of Colossians is stated to not only be Paul (1:23), but we see the closing attestation, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (4:18). The Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Colossians

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 581-584.

has not been significantly disputed by many conservatives,<sup>2</sup> even though it is doubted by many liberals. Claims against Pauline authorship are usually offered on the basis of the themes witnessed in the letter, and its vocabulary.<sup>3</sup> It is important to be aware, however, that not all liberals are convinced that Pauline authorship of Colossians is something so impossible.<sup>4</sup> It is also understandable, that given the mention of Timothy as a co-sender of the Epistle to the Colossians (1:1), that Timothy could have played some kind of a role in the letter's composition as Paul's amanuensis. Specific terms appearing in Colossians, which do not appear in the agreed-upon genuine Pauline letters,<sup>5</sup> may be the result of the false teaching that needed to be countered.

Colossians is unique, because the Biblical record does not attest that the Apostle Paul ever visited Colossae, yet there is a large amount of personal involvement in his letter. Paul is not personally, or at least directly acquainted, with the Colossians. Paul does, however, know a great deal about the Colossian assembly through Epaphras (1:7-8), a dedicated servant who took the time to visit Paul during his imprisonment, to inform him of the situation(s) that had arisen in Colossae. The city of Colossae was located in Asia Minor on the trading road between Ephesus and the Euphrates River. Apparently, the gospel message had been carried to Colossae by Epaphras, who was a native of the city (4:12), during Paul's three-year ministry tenure in Ephesus (1:7-8; cf. Acts 19:10), and an assembly of Believers had been established.<sup>6</sup>

Those who accept genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians consider the letter to have been written in the same general time frame of Ephesians and Philippians, likely between 60-62 C.E. from Paul's imprisonment in Rome.<sup>7</sup> The actual composition of the Epistle to the Colossians is tied to that of the Epistle to Philemon, given the fact that the same people, who extend greetings to the Colossians, are the same ones who extend greetings to Philemon (Colossians 4:10-14; Philemon 23-24). For this reason, many commentaries on Colossians are often paired with Philemon. The Epistle to the Colossians and the Epistle of Ephesians do have some kind of a relationship, given the considerable overlap in their contents, but there are debates as to which letter was written first. Is Colossians a condensed version of Ephesians? Or, is Ephesians an expanded version of Colossians? Many today opt for Colossians being written before Ephesians (see the entry on **Ephesians** for more details).

Paul's audience in the Colossian assembly was predominately non-Jewish. Colossae was originally a Phrygian city, but later Hellenized.<sup>8</sup> It was a major trading center for many centuries prior to Roman expansion, but in the First Century C.E. had become secondary to

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 572-577; P.T. O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 150-151; Carson and Moo, pp 517-520.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Paul Furnish, "Colossians, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 1:1092-1094.

<sup>4</sup> G. Johnston, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:658-659; Morna D. Hooker, "Colossians," in *ECB*, 1404.

<sup>5</sup> The agreed-upon genuine Pauline letters, by both liberals and conservatives, are: Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. F.F. Bruce, "Colossians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:733; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 654-655; O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 147-148.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce, "Colossians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:733; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 577-580; O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 152; Carson and Moo, pp 521-522.

<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 147.

cities like Laodicea.<sup>9</sup> The Phrygians were a subjugated people mentioned all the way back in works such as Homer's *Illiad*. In the Fifth Century B.C.E. when Colossae was at its peak, the people would have largely spoken Phrygian,<sup>10</sup> but Hellenization brought Greek as the dominant language of business: "During the Hellenistic and Roman periods the use of the Greek language naturally spread in this region" (*IDB*).<sup>11</sup> There was also a large number of Jews in Phrygia, with it being estimated that in the First Century C.E. as many as 7,500 Jewish freemen were present in the region.<sup>12</sup> "The Jews of this region were known for their laxity in observing their law" (*IDB*).<sup>13</sup> The claim by some Messianics that Paul would have written to the Colossians in Hebrew or Aramaic is without historical merit, especially when the Jews of Colossae, widely lax in their observance of the Torah, would not have been really using either. A written Greek origin for Colossians is well-assured, given that the only other major linguistic option for Paul would have been a local dialect like Phrygian.

The Colossian congregation became a hub of doctrinal problems, all of which necessitated a personal visit from Epaphras to Rome to meet with Paul. The religious background of the Colossians would have been consistent with the standard Greco-Roman pantheon of deities, but there is some evidence of worship to Egyptian deities as well,<sup>14</sup> and the probable presence of mystery cults in the region also begs some questions. This religious diversity likely came from Colossae having been a center of trade, although at the time of the letter, Colossae's influence was waning.

"[T]he Colossae of Paul's day seems to have been a cosmopolitan place in which differing cultural and religious elements mingled" (O'Brien).<sup>15</sup> What was the Colossian false teaching, then? Some conclude that it was Jewish, some conclude that it was pagan, and others conclude that it was an amalgamation of errors.<sup>16</sup> That the Apostle Paul has to carefully direct his words to the false teaching is something detectable throughout his letter. Because Paul had not encountered the Colossians directly, he had to carefully subvert whatever false ideas were circulating in Colossae. Generally speaking, interpreters today have opted for the Colossian false teaching involving some kind of mix of a diverse number of influences, ultimately choosing a false teaching that combined elements of paganism and mystery religion with the local Judaism. The evil factors some have suggested that were present in Colossae were "syncretistic influences including ideas from neo-pythagoreanism, Iranian and Egyptian influences, and also...Jewish mysticism" (Guthrie).<sup>17</sup> While one will likely find materials on Colossians where Gnosticism is suggested as an errant component of the false teaching, this would have to be classified as a proto- or incipient-Gnosticism, which would later develop

<sup>9</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, "Colossae," in *ABD*, 1:1089.

<sup>10</sup> Johnston, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:658.

<sup>11</sup> F.V. Filson, "Phrygia," in *IDB*, 3:806.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, "Colossae," in *ABD*, 1:1089.

<sup>13</sup> Filson, "Phrygia," in *IDB*, 3:807.

<sup>14</sup> Arnold, "Colossae," in *ABD*, 1:1089.

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 147.

<sup>16</sup> Johnston, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *IDB*, 1:660; Bruce, "Colossians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:733-734; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 565-571; Furnish, "Colossians, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 1:1090-1091; O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 148-149.

<sup>17</sup> Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 571.

into the more developed Gnosticism confronted in the Christian writings of the Second and Third Centuries.

We see a variety of issues at hand that Paul must address in his letter, all of them critical to place in the context of the Colossian false teaching being subverted. The errant ideas and influences present included: asceticism (2:18), angel worship (2:18), a depreciation of Yeshua's Divinity as some kind of intermediary no different than the angels (1:15-20; 2:2-3, 9), supposed visions (2:18), and a reliance on worldly wisdom (2:4, 8). The warning about "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on *visions* he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind" (2:18), adequately summarizes a good part of the false teaching. As such, Paul urges the Colossians not to be taken captive "through philosophy and empty deception...according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah" (2:8). How things like the Sabbath, or the appointed times of the Torah were connected to the false teaching (2:16), is certainly something debated among expositors. While it has been tempting among many to quote these verses by themselves, thinking that the Colossians have been led astray by Jewish errors—one cannot ignore the placement of the Sabbath or appointed times *alongside* of self-abasement and asceticism.

Understanding the hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 is also important for readers, especially for being informed as to the early Christological controversies in the First Century Body of Messiah.<sup>18</sup> Was Yeshua the Messiah just an exalted figure, perhaps like that of the figure of Wisdom seen in much ancient Jewish literature? Or, is Yeshua the Deity Himself, with the hymn employing some subversive language to what had been circulating in Colossae, in order to establish the Messiah's supremacy? The meaningless, humanistic philosophy countered in Colossians was surely depreciating the Messiah being the Divine Son of God. One of the most direct statements regarding Yeshua's Divinity appears in Colossians 2:9: "For in Him all the fullness of [the] Deity<sup>19</sup> dwells in bodily form."

In contemporary Christianity, when Colossians is appealed to, it is viewed as a letter to refute how modern Believers "are tempted to go along with the philosophy of the times" (Carson and Moo).<sup>20</sup> Alas, though, there is probably not as much appreciation for Colossians among lay readers, compared to Bible expositors trying to evaluate the problems and challenges faced by the First Century *ekklēsia*.

The Epistle to the Colossians has a wide amount of contemporary importance for today's broad Messianic movement, even though our collective engagement with Paul's letter tends to be a bit low. It can be difficult when Messianics encounter statements such as, "Basically the heresy was Jewish" (Bruce, *ISBE*),<sup>21</sup> although whatever it involved it was not a "straightforward form of Judaism" (Bruce, *ISBE*).<sup>22</sup> This involves a little careful historical

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<sup>18</sup> O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Grk. *tēs Theotētos* (τῆς θεότητος), with the definite article "the."

<sup>20</sup> Carson and Moo, 529.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce, "Colossians, Epistle to the," in *ISBE*, 1:733.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

examination, that many Messianics are not sensitive enough to do in their reading of the letter.

Colossians ch. 2 is often a problem chapter for today's Messianic community for a variety of reasons. What does "having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (2:14), really communicate? Is this "certificate of debt" (*cheirographon*, χειρόγραφον) the Torah? Is it the record of sin and/or the capital penalties of the Torah, absorbed by Yeshua's sacrifice? This is probably a place where Messianics need to take a cue from those post-Reformation Protestant interpretations, which have viewed "the certificate of debt" as involving the record of sin, and the capital punishment of the Torah declared upon Law-breakers, nullified via His sacrifice. The Law of Moses and its standard of holiness for God's people, being nailed to the cross, would not be an appropriate interpretation of Colossians 2:14.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most frequently quoted verses from Colossians, to any Messianic Believer, is: "no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day" (2:16). Does this mean that these practices are unimportant? What Colossians 2:16 says need not be difficult at all, if it is textually recognized that Torah practices like the Sabbath, appointed times, or some kind of kosher eating—were caught up together with other ascetic observances (2:18-23), designed to appeal, or even appease, the cosmic powers (2:15). Inappropriate Sabbath keeping or appointed time observance was caught up in association with some very ungodly activities. Torah practices in general, as a part of the early Messianic community's standard lifestyle, are not in view.<sup>24</sup>

Being informed as to the different contours of the Colossian false teaching, the larger questions that the Epistle to the Colossians asks today's Messianic movement are quite substantial. Are there similar errors present in the Messianic community, like those refuted, or at least subverted, by Colossians? There are surely those within the Messianic world who deride Yeshua the Messiah as the Divine Savior, there are those who entertain some kind of mystical or secretive ideas about God, and there are those who are a bit ascetic in their Torah observance. It is easily observed that the Epistle to the Colossians is not a frequently accessed text among Messianic Believers—read in its entirety. The Epistle to the Colossians has some rather firm (if not damning) words that can be applied to Messianics who give some deal of credence to the views and perspectives of the Jewish mystical tradition (Kabbalah), in their personal spirituality or theology. In the future, having a much fuller appreciation for the message of Colossians is likely to be quite critical for the emerging Messianic movement and doctrinal issues being debated.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Consult the FAQ, "Colossians 2:14."

<sup>24</sup> For a further review of Colossians 2:16, consult the author's article "Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?" (appearing in *Torah In the Balance, Volume I*).

<sup>25</sup> Consult the author's commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic* for a more detailed examination of Colossians.

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## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON COLOSSIANS:

**1. What do you think is the principal message of Paul's letter to the Colossians? How might reading Paul's *whole letter* alter one's perceptions of what he says, when only select verses tend to be quoted or examined?**

**2. Examining Colossians 2, what were the major errors that the assembly at Colossae was facing? How does understanding these issues possibly alter one's perception of single verses appearing in the chapter?**

**3. Have you ever encountered a Messianic fellowship or congregation like the one Paul wrote to in Colossae? If so, what were its strengths and weaknesses?**

## REFLECTION ON COLOSSIANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's letter to the Colossians:*