

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON
FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. MCKEE



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Back cover image is of the Ephesus Road

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ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

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

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

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	KJV: King James Version
Ara: Aramaic	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament</i> by Richmond Lattimore (1996)
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Liddell & Scott)
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	LXX: Septuagint
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	m. Mishnah
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	MT: Masoretic Text
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	NIB: <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	NIGTC: <i>New International Greek Testament Commentary</i>
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	NICNT: <i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	NIV: New International Version (1984)
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
Ger: German	NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
GNT: Greek New Testament	NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
Grk: Greek	NT: New Testament
<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community	orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world
HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	OT: Old Testament
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)	PreachC: <i>The Preacher's Commentary</i>
Heb: Hebrew	REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible	RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>	t. Tosefta
IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>	Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>	Thayer: <i>Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>	TDNT: <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>

TEV: Today's English Version (1976)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TNIC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New
Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)

Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New
Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*
Yid: Yiddish
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

PROLOGUE

How many times have you heard a Messianic Bible teacher quote from Colossians at a *Shabbat* service? If you can count the number of times on a single hand, then you are not alone. How many times have you heard a Messianic Bible teacher even quote from Philemon? I hate to say this, but the only Messianic teacher I have ever heard refer to Philemon has actually been *myself*. Colossians and Philemon are two letters of the Pauline corpus that do not get a great deal of attention within Messianic circles (that is, when Paul's epistles are even addressed). Often we just do not know what to do with these two letters, even though Colossians may get a quote here or there to make a teaching sound exciting. At best, we might find a tertiary level of engagement, but we do not know that much about the content, message, and purpose of Colossians-Philemon.

In 2008 we just finished a Bible study of the Epistle of Ephesians, a six-chapter letter which undoubtedly has connections to Colossians. It would be inappropriate of me to continue our Wednesday Night Bible Study program and skip over Colossians-Philemon, especially given all of the connections that we see between Ephesians and Colossians. In all likelihood, Colossians was written immediately prior to Ephesians, and so we will be examining the first letter written before the more general letter was composed.

Having been in the Messianic movement since 1995, I have always wondered why short books of the Bible like Colossians and Philemon often do not merit a great deal of our attention. Is it because they are so short that we already think we know what they mean, and we really do not think that we need to expel the time or effort to understand them? Is it because these texts make us go back to an historical period in the First Century that causes us to feel uncomfortable? Is it because when Paul asserts that *something* has been nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14), today's Torah observant Messianics would like to just act as though this statement were not present in our Bibles? Furthermore, might some of the refutations that Paul makes against ancient proto-Gnosticism (Colossians 2:18, 20) have some contemporary applications that would disturb some populist teachings floating around today's Messianic world? And Philemon, it obviously forces us to deal with the question of slavery. *We just don't want to "go there."*

I suppose there are more questions that I could list from examining Colossians-Philemon that relate to our present Messianic non-engagement with these two letters. As we prepare to embark upon a study of these two letters—which in case you are wondering were written at the same time, as the same people who greet the Colossians (Colossians 4:9-15) are the same who greet Philemon (Philemon 22-24)—I write this during a season when Messianic Biblical Studies themselves are in a severe state of flux. Regardless of whether we deal with the Apostolic Scriptures or the Tanach (or preferably *both*), there is a shift that is beginning to take place as individuals start to realize that only addressing the weekly Torah portion is not enough for their spiritual diet. Entire sectors of the Bible have been overlooked by us for far too long. Colossians is a text frequently referred to by Christians who think that we are in error for committing ourselves to a life of Torah obedience. So obviously, it is high time we examine Colossians and Philemon—not only for what *they* say about it—but also for what it might teach *us* and how we may need to improve.

Many of you do know that in recent years old theological debates over Christology—the identity of the Messiah—have arisen in the Messianic movement. Is Yeshua the Messiah Divine, or was He just a human being empowered by God? Colossians has some things to teach us about this (Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9). A much lesser debate, but one that is obviously significant to anyone who follows the Scriptures, is what we are to do with Philemon. Is this just a one-page letter that Paul wrote to a First Century colleague that made it into our Bibles by happenstance? What does it have to tell us about the First Century social setting and composition of who many of the early Believers were? How many of us have found ourselves *assuming things* about the First Century that we should not be assuming?

Because there has been so little attention given to Colossians-Philemon in the Messianic world, I am actually very excited about what we are all going to learn. I have been convinced over the past few years that many of the answers that our faith community needs are found in these kinds of short books of the Bible, which unfortunately, very few people read *much less discuss*. As we mature as a movement—and actually read texts like Colossians-Philemon—I believe God will mold us to be more effective for His service. We may be shown some things that make us feel uncomfortable at first, revealing some things among us that need to be improved and/or changed, **but it will make us stronger and more able to accomplish His tasks in the long term**. Are there any “Colossian” congregations to be found today’s Messianic movement? What would be their strengths and weaknesses?

What do you think you are going to learn as a Messianic Believer preparing to examine Colossians-Philemon? Have you even sat down and read the entire text of these two letters before? Have you really contemplated what it means to “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth,” because “When Messiah, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Colossians 3:2, 4)? Likewise, what is Paul’s intention of saying, “Let the word of Messiah richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16)? As much as we may think we have to sort through negative admonitions and rebukes, and then encounter Paul’s opinion of slavery, we actually do have some significantly positive things to contemplate.

Just like you, I am looking forward to this being yet another opportunity to learn more about the masterpiece of God’s Word!

J.K. McKee
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COLOSSIANS

INTRODUCTION TO COLOSSIANS

When was the last time you really studied Colossians, for more than just a snippet of information, or a sound byte here or there? Colossians can be a very easy-to-overlook text in one's Bible study, largely because the only reference we have to the Colossian Believers is seen in this letter. There is no reference to who the Colossians were outside of the epistle that bears their name, with no direct information given to us in the Book of Acts. N.T. Wright mentions how "it is easy to lose track of the overall thread of the letter and merely...pick out a few details."¹ Most examinations of Colossians only focus on the high points of what its author is countering, so much so that not enough attention is often given to the positive features of what he says. This can only exemplify the need for people to read Colossians as a whole, hopefully motivating them to examine it verse-by-verse. Just as the Apostle Paul desires Yeshua the Messiah to be "all, and in all" (3:11), so must our faith experience – and engagement with Colossians – be.

The Epistle to the Colossians² (Grk. *Pros Kolossaëis*, ἸΠΟΣ ΚΟΛΟΣΣΑΕΙΣ) invites us into a very complex, ancient religious world, where Believers in Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) can be affected by any one, or many, diverse religious streams of error. We know from history that errant religious streams affected many of the Christians of the Second and Third Centuries, but not enough are aware of how negative religious influences crept into parts of the Jewish Synagogue several centuries earlier. While it contains important doctrine that cannot be excluded from one's understanding of God and the Bible, Colossians is not a major theological treatise as much as it is a letter of admonition to a group of Believers that Paul is concerned about, having been informed about them from Epaphras (1:7). Commentators who approach Colossians have the task to piece together what *they think* might have been the original circumstances necessitating this letter, and thus to correctly interpret what was actually being communicated.

It is difficult for one to avoid the fact that Colossians does address some kind of false teaching (2:8-13). But what were the specifics of this false teaching? Who were the false teachers bringing in error? Many are agreed today that Colossians likely addresses some kind of Gnosticism and/or mysticism affecting the Colossian Believers. But was it a proto-Gnosticism, something relatively undefined and unorganized, or the kind of full-blown Gnosticism that we see in the Second-Third Centuries C.E.³ Theologically, Colossians is known for presenting an advanced Christology (1:15-20), and for refuting some kind of dangerous syncretism that affected a group of Believers (2:6-23). Yet the details which required these things and others to be addressed, are largely left to informed speculation and recognizing that confused people have to be put back on the proper course of faith.

Both conservatives and liberals recognize the unique connections – both theological and linguistic – that exist between Colossians and Ephesians,⁴ but beyond this there are many disagreements. It is difficult to fully reconstruct the events that required Colossians to be written. There are different proposals made about what the religious errors countered in Colossians actually are. And, even the authorship of the letter itself is disputed, with many denying that the Apostle Paul had a direct hand in its composition.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 19.

² Please note that in spite of the common reference to Colossians as "the Book of Colossians," I am going to purposefully refer to the text as either the Epistle to the Colossians or Paul's letter to the Colossians, and not use this reference. By failing to forget that this text is a letter written to a specific audience in a specific setting, we can make the common error of thinking that this was a text written *directly to us*. Our goal as responsible interpreters is to try to reconstruct what this letter meant to *its original audience first*, before applying its message in a modern-day setting.

³ That is, the kind vehemently protested against by Church Fathers like Irenaeus in his *Against Heresies*, and best epitomized by the Nag Hammadi literature.

⁴ Previously addressed in the author's commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.

WHO WAS THE AUTHOR OF THIS LETTER?

The Epistle to the Colossians is part of a collection commonly known as the Deutero-Pauline letters (also including: Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, Titus), meaning that not all theologians agree that it was written by the Apostle Paul. The text of Colossians itself claims some degree of Pauline authorship, with the Apostle Paul extending opening greetings to his audience (1:1, 23). It is very hard to dismiss the closing claim, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand" (4:18), a practice that he employed to apparently authenticate all of his letters (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:17). Douglas J. Moo points out, "The letter's claim to be written by Paul is no casual matter. It is a claim built into the warp and woof of the letter, elaborated with detail after detail."⁵ No one from ancient times denied genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians, and many find it difficult to assume that its author is completely pseudonymous. Indeed, unlike its companion Ephesians which does not list any major personal references, it is quite difficult to assume pseudonymity when real, genuine people are listed as extending greetings to the Colossians (4:7-17; cf. Philemon 2, 23, 24), with the courier Tychicus carrying the epistle to them (4:7).

The composition of Colossians is closely connected to the composition of Philemon, precisely because of the personal references seen in both letters. Most of the same people who extend greetings to the Colossians also extend greetings to Philemon:

PERSONAL REFERENCES AND GREETINGS	
COLOSSIANS	PHILEMON
...Timothy our brother... (1:1)	...Timothy our brother... (1)
Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you his greetings; and <i>also</i> Barnabas's cousin Mark (about whom you received instructions; if he comes to you, welcome him)...Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Yeshua the Messiah, sends you his greetings...Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and <i>also</i> Demas (4:10-12, 14)	Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Messiah Yeshua, greets you, <i>as do</i> Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers (23-24)
Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it" (4:17)	...and to Archippus our fellow soldier... (2)
...and with him Onesimus, <i>our</i> faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your <i>number</i> ... (4:9)	I appeal to you for my child Onesimus... (10)

One feature of Colossians that should be noted is how it opens up with both Paul *and* Timothy extending greetings (1:1), and so some kind of Timothean involvement with the letter is not at all impossible. The only part of Colossians that is actually attested to have been written by Paul's own hand is the closing

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp 28-29.

salutation (4:18). Supposed stylistic differences appearing in Colossians, which may not appear in some of Paul's other letters, could easily be the result of Paul employing an amanuensis or secretary in writing down the letter or assisting him in its composition. Timothy, because of his being mentioned by name, has often been proposed as a possible co-author of Colossians. F.F. Bruce does observe, though, "if Paul and Timothy were in any degree joint-authors of a letter, the probability is that, while the literary style might be Timothy's, the ultimate authorship would be Paul's."⁶

The early Christian Church of the Second-Third Centuries C.E. recognized genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians,⁷ and there was no dispute over Colossians' authorship in the further ancient centuries. While it is true that the Epistle to the Colossians may not have been appealed to in early Christian teaching as much as its companion, Ephesians, the authorship of Colossians was never an issue.

It was not until the Nineteenth Century with the emergence of liberal German scholarship when Colossians' stated authorship via the Apostle Paul was questioned, with it then being classified among the so-called Deutero-Pauline Epistles. A fair number of today's New Testament scholars, similar to Ephesians, consider Colossians to be pseudonymous, perhaps as many as sixty percent. Yet many who consider Ephesians to have been written by a successor of the Apostle Paul, in a kind of "Pauline school," do in fact consider Colossians to be authentically Pauline in its theological scope, with Ephesians to perhaps be further from Paul, a reworked epistle based on Colossians.

Is it so impossible for the Epistle to the Colossians to be authentically written by Paul, with problems so abounding for it to be a direct product of the eminent Apostle? Many of the claims that liberals make against genuine Pauline authorship regard some stylistic differences with other letters that all scholars are agreed⁸ are direct products of Paul (Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon). Those who advocate pseudonymity for Colossians have a much more difficult task, when compared to Ephesians, because unlike Ephesians the letter to the Colossians is fairly personal. Liberal resources like *IDB* are forced to indicate, "Whereas Ephesians is dull and impersonal, Col. 2:6-4:6 is lively with personal feeling; definite people and places appear (1:2, 5-8, 27; 2:1; 4:7 ff, 13). We have to do with a real letter."⁹ Its entry further concludes, surprisingly, "The links between Colossians and PHILEMON support authenticity" (*IDB*),¹⁰ at least recognizing that the authorship an interpreter accepts for one letter must be accepted for the other. And few liberals today actually deny genuine Pauline authorship of Philemon.

Even though many liberals assume that the authorship of Colossians is pseudonymous, it is still recognized that "The overall structure of Colossians conforms to that of the typical Pauline letter" (*ABD*), and "Most of the lexical differences between Colossians and the letters that are certainly Paul's do not weigh very heavily against Pauline authorship" (*ABD*).¹¹ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, holding to genuine Pauline authorship, conclude in their New Testament introduction that "Differences in vocabulary may be accounted for in part by his use of words needed to oppose a new heresy."¹² So in this case, the circumstances that Colossians originally addressed required a variance of vocabulary, not seen in the other Pauline letters. In fact, Ben Witherington III goes a step further, indicating how,

"[T]he expansive and redundant nature of the style of Colossians is...characteristic of Asiatic rhetoric, which was characterized by long lugubrious sentences, piling up synonyms for rhetorical effect, and the absence of conjunctions so that the sentences keep flowing in the torrent of eloquence."¹³

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 30.

⁷ Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:64.

⁸ Obviously excluding those scholars who deny Pauline authorship of all his attributed letters.

⁹ G. Johnston, "Colossians, Letter to the," in George Buttrick, ed. et. al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 1:659.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Victor Paul Furnish, "Colossians, Epistle to the," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1090, 1093.

¹² D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 518.

¹³ Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 18.

Other claims against genuine Pauline authorship for Colossians regard what are considered to be theological differences seen between Colossians and the agreed-upon genuine Pauline letters.¹⁴ It is thought that there is a stress upon the life of the resurrection to be experienced now (2:12-13), as opposed to it being something exclusively of the future (Romans 6:5; Philippians 3:11-12). There is no language of “justification” seen in Colossians, as is seen elsewhere in Paul. Some themes first appearing in Galatians are developed further in Colossians 2:8-23, thought to be the hand of a Pauline successor. Paul’s apostleship appears to be presented as universal to those who have never seen him (2:1-2), a reflection of those who came after him. And, those who deny Pauline authorship often argue that Colossians is combating a much later, full-fledged Gnosticism seen in the late First or early Second Century C.E., rather than an incipient proto-Gnosticism in the mid First Century C.E.

But is the authorship of the Apostle Paul for Colossians completely in doubt? There are many good reasons for us, in fact, to believe that Colossians **was simply written late in Paul’s ministry**. It is a unique letter addressing some specific circumstances conveyed to him by the Colossian Epaphras, and the letter was carefully crafted for a series of complex needs—tailored for what the audience needed to hear. It need not be thought that the theological themes seen in Colossians are in conflict with other letters, agreed upon by all, to have been written by Paul.

Yet if Paul is not the author of the Epistle to the Colossians, than who was it? Was it simply an anonymous Believer in Asia Minor who wanted to honor Paul? Or could it have been Timothy, the other name mentioned in the opening greeting?

It is interesting that those who interpret the text of Colossians, denying Pauline authorship, still cannot deny some kind of Pauline connection. Morna D. Hooker thus refers to the author of Colossians as “Paul” in quotation marks in *ECB*.¹⁵ James D.G. Dunn considers that if Colossians really is Deutero-Pauline, then it must be one of the very early Deutero-Pauline texts, and similarly that it should be considered “Pauline” in quotation marks.¹⁶ And lest we think that many who deny genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians have a low opinion of the role that it plays in theology, this is simply not true when we evaluate many of their thoughts. Many commentators who hold to Colossians being Deutero-Pauline very much consider it to have a significant role in our spiritual and theological experiences today. Andrew T. Lincoln summarizes,

“If...it was intended for a specific group of readers in Asia Minor after Paul’s death and came from one of Paul’s close followers, it is reasonable to believe that its readers would have known of such a significant event as the death of the apostle and, therefore, would have taken the letter as a product of a trusted Pauline teacher who was presenting his teaching not simply as his own but as in the Pauline apostolic tradition.”¹⁷

Dunn is notable among those who deny Pauline authorship of Colossians, taking a somewhat different approach. He describes his view of how “it is difficult to envisage a scenario where 4:7-17 can be easily explained on a full-blown post-Pauline (say, fifteen years after his death) hypothesis,”¹⁸ namely all of the personal interactions that are depicted between “Paul,” his associates, the Colossian audience, and the overlap

¹⁴ Summarized by Morna D. Hooker, “Colossians,” in James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, eds., *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 1404.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 19.

¹⁷ Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 582.

If you are Messianic Believer, currently struggling with various assertions made in Colossians (i.e., 2:14), and you find liberal commentators denying Pauline authorship to be an appealing reason to dismiss the text as valid Scripture—**think again!** Lincoln describes how those denying genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians is similar to how “In the Jewish Scriptures writings are attributed to great personages like Moses, David, Solomon, and Isaiah...[being] written in [their] name” (*Ibid.*), but not actually being written by any of them. So, if you are going to deny genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians, you are *also* required to hold the Torah to the same standard, and you must consider the many proposals made regarding non-Mosaic authorship of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Few Messianics today (including this author) are willing to accept the JEDP documentary hypothesis, though. (Much less consider the Torah to be Ancient Israel’s “mythology”!)

For a further discussion, consult the author’s entries on the Pentateuchal books in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁸ Dunn, 37.

with Philemon. He concludes that the most likely author of Colossians was, in fact, Paul's disciple Timothy. He describes, "We may...envisage Paul outlining his main concerns to a secretary (Timothy) who was familiar with the broad pattern of Paul's letter-writing," also commenting, "we should perhaps more accurately describe the theology of Colossians as the theology of Timothy, or...the theology of Paul as understood by Timothy."¹⁹

As already mentioned, a Timothean composition and/or authorship of Colossians, via the Apostle Paul's direct guidance, does not seem impossible—at least among all of the alternatives available. (From this angle, at least, Timothy writing Colossians would not be that different from the possibility of Baruch being the author of Lamentations, and not Jeremiah.)²⁰ Carson and Moo indicate, "Certainly this theory is preferable to the one that judges the present 'shell' to be non-Pauline."²¹ Witherington likewise considers Timothy "perhaps as a coauthor...but at least as a co-authority addressing these audiences [Colossians-Philemon, Ephesians]."²²

This commentary accepts genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians, but we will be engaging with some commentators who deny it in varying degrees (Hooker, Lincoln, Dunn). I do not think it is at all a stretch to say that Timothy did have some role in its composition, though, either as an amanuensis or one who counseled Paul on what he needed to say to the Colossians.²³

PAUL AND HIS RELATIONSHIP TO THE COLOSSIANS

The only reference to the Asian (Minor) city of Colossae that appears in the Bible is in the letter that bears the title "Colossians." But this does not mean that the good Apostle Paul had no relationship, even an indirect one (cf. 2:1), with the Colossians. The Colossian who receives the most amount of attention in Paul's letter is Epaphras, who Paul says "is one of your number" (4:12). Archippus was also a leader among the Colossian Believers (4:17).

While there is no record in the Book of Acts that Paul ever visited Colossae, we do know that Paul had spent about three years proclaiming the gospel and teaching in the adjacent city of Ephesus during his Third Missionary Journey (52-55 C.E.; Acts 18:23-21:16). It was during this time that Paul was able to lecture in the hall of Tyrannus for two years, and "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10), meaning that the message spread throughout the region. Epaphras had likely been converted to faith in Yeshua during this time, and he took the gospel that Paul preached back to Colossae (1:7-9), presumably his hometown. Many Colossians had received it with eagerness.

The Believers who had sprung up in Colossae, forming some kind of community or *ekklesia*, would have fallen under Paul's ministerial influence—and he would have been responsible for them in some way. They were almost all non-Jewish Believers (1:21; cf. Ephesians 2:12), especially given the list of pagan vices that Paul speaks against (3:5-7). Just as Epaphras would have met Paul during his time in Ephesus, it is possible that some from Colossae had also met him and recognized him as an elder leader of the Body of Messiah.

Given the Apostle Paul's indirect relationship with the Colossian Believers, it is surmised that the letter written to them was composed at Epaphras' request. The Epistle to the Colossians could be taken as Paul representing himself as some kind of "grandfather" over the Colossian assembly.²⁴ Donald Guthrie remarks, "Probably Epaphras could not cope with the specious arguments and assumed humility of the leader of the

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁰ Consult the author's entry for the Book of Lamentations in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*.

²¹ Carson and Moo, 520.

²² Witherington, pp 24-25.

²³ For those wishing to investigate the authorship of Colossians in more detail, consult Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), pp 527-577; Peter. T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), xlii-xlix; and especially Moo, 28-41 for a thorough explanation and defense of Pauline authorship. Also consider O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp 150-152.

²⁴ Moo, 27.

false teachers and needed the greater wisdom of the apostle.”²⁵ From this vantage point, then, Colossians was put together to meet the specific needs of a confused group of individuals.

WHERE WAS PAUL WHEN HE WROTE THIS LETTER?

Colossians is considered to be one of the Prison Epistles, along with Ephesians, Philippians, and of course its companion Philemon. Paul does ask the Colossians, “pray for us...so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains” (4:3, NIV). It is most probable that the imprisonment referred to by Paul in Colossians is his detainment in Rome (Acts 28:16-31), as there is no record given of the outcome of Paul’s trial. In support of the traditional view of a Roman composition for Colossians, Luke, who is present among the “we” with Paul in Rome (Acts 28:14, 16), is also listed among those who extend greetings to the Colossians (4:14), and to Philemon (24).

Rome as the place of Colossians’ composition requires Epaphras to somehow have made his way to Rome to visit him, even sharing some kind of detainment with him as seen in Philemon 23, where Paul calls him “my fellow prisoner.” Epaphras actually having to transverse a distance of 1,200 miles from Colossae to Rome—to consult Paul in person—makes one realize how significantly bad the circumstances were for the Colossians.

Likewise to be considered, given Colossians’ connection to Philemon, is how the slave Onesimus would have escaped to Rome. This would have been one of the farthest places he could have traveled as a runaway, and being a large city he would have had many places to hide.

While many Colossians’ commentators today have little difficulty with Rome as the place of the letter’s composition, a lesser number of scholars propose Caesarea. The ancient Marcionite Prologue actually listed Ephesus as the place of origin. This is something followed by Wright, as he considers the letter to address a relatively new congregation of Believers being errantly persuaded, also considering it much more likely that Onesimus only escaped to Ephesus and not to Rome.²⁶ But this has a problem because just as Tychicus is listed as the courier who carried Colossians (3:7), so is he also the carrier for the letter that was later entitled “Ephesians” (Ephesians 6:21; cf. 1:1, Grk.) (The only way around this would be to suggest that Paul actually wrote the circular epistle “Ephesians” from Ephesus.)

Considering the fact that Colossians does represent a relatively advanced stage in Paul’s theological thought, Rome seems like the most likely place of composition.²⁷ **Our analysis of Colossians will stand by the traditional view that the letter was written by Paul when he was in Rome.**

WHEN DID PAUL WRITE THIS LETTER?

If Rome was indeed the location where Colossians was composed by Paul, then this places Colossians being written between 60-62 C.E., at around the same time of Ephesians. Conservatives such as Bruce, who accept genuine Pauline authorship, consider Colossians and Ephesians to appear later in the scope of Paul’s writings, because “his presentation of the Church [or, the *ekklesia*] as the body of Christ in Colossians and Ephesians marks a later and more advanced stage of his thought on this subject than the stage represented by 1 Corinthians (*ca.* A.D. 55) and Romans (*ca.* A.D. 57)” (*ISBE*).²⁸ Dunn, who believes in a Timothean authorship of Colossians, similarly thinks that the letter was written during 60-62 C.E., in his words being “the last Pauline letter to be written with the great apostle’s explicit approval.”²⁹

Those advocating an Ephesian authorship for Colossians propose a much earlier period, such as 52-55 C.E. And those who deny genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians propose the broad period of 65-90 C.E.

²⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 565.

²⁶ Wright, pp 35-36.

²⁷ O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 1-li.

²⁸ F.F. Bruce, “Colossians, Epistle to the,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:733.

²⁹ Dunn, 41.

There is discussion among those who accept genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians, though, as to whether Colossians-Philemon or Ephesians was written first. It is very difficult to deny a literary connection between these epistles (compare Colossians 4:7-9 and Ephesians 6:21-22). Many lean toward Colossians being the specific letter written first, with Ephesians being the more general version following. It is easy to just say that Colossians-Philemon and Ephesians were both written at about the same time.³⁰

WHO WAS THE TARGET AUDIENCE OF THIS LETTER?

The ancient city of *Kolossai* (Κολοσσαί) was located in southeastern Asia Minor, with the Colossians living along the east-west trade route between the Aegean coast and Asian interior. The road from Ephesus and Sardis made its way all to the Euphrates River and onto Mesopotamia. It is not difficult to see how the Epistles of Ephesians and Colossians are related, especially since Colossae was located only about 100 miles east of Ephesus. Colossae was located on the Lycus River along with Hierapolis and Laodicea, which is important because Paul's letter to the Colossians was intended to be read by the Laodiceans as well, and mention is made of Believers in both Hierapolis and Laodicea within Colossians (4:13). This is evidence of how the Believers in this general area were closely connected (2:1).

Paul actually instructed the Colossians' letter to be read to the Believers in Laodicea, and also that a letter he wrote to the Laodiceans would be coming to them (4:16). While some think that this is a lost letter of Paul's, this second letter could very well be what became entitled as "Ephesians," as "in Ephesus" is missing from the oldest manuscripts (cf. Ephesians 1:1, RSV), originally composed as a circular epistle for those in Asia Minor.

Much of what we know about the city of Colossae has to be pieced together from ancient witnesses, as there has yet to be any significant archaeological activity conducted at its location. The city was substantially demolished by an earthquake in the early 60s C.E., and was probably not rebuilt.

The general region of Asia Minor had once been a part of the ancient Phrygian Kingdom (Twelfth-Seventh Centuries B.C.E.), and by Paul's day had been consecutively conquered by a variety of ancient empires, including (but not limited to) the Persians, Greeks, Seleucids, and the Romans. The Greek writer Xenophon commented how during the Persian Wars, Cyrus marched through Phrygia and was brought "to the large and prosperous inhabited city of Colossae" (*Anabasis* I.2.6).³¹ The Greek historian Herodotus similarly recorded how "Xerxes...arrived at the large city of Colossae" (*Histories* 7.30).³² At one point in the past, the city of Colossae was considered to be large and prosperous, the main population being a mix of Phrygian locals, and later Greeks.

The religion in the region was syncretistic, with a great number of diverse cults. In the First Century C.E., mainline Greco-Roman religion was present, along with Roman emperor worship, as well as local mystery religions. Religious practices from the many travelers that came through Colossae were also present. "Numismatic evidence points most frequently to the worship of the Ephesian Artemis and the Laodicean Zeus, but also to Artemis (the huntress), Men, Selene, Demeter, Hygieia, Helios, Athena, Tyche, Boule, as well as the Egyptian deities Isis and Sarapis" (*ABD*).³³ Guthrie further specifies,

"A combination of ideas would have found ready acceptance in Asia with its flourishing cults and its considerable Jewish population. In Colossae in particular the worship of the heathen goddess Cybele was deeply rooted and showed a tendency towards love of extravagances among the people. Oriental speculation would easily spread along the trade routes of the Lycus valley and be hungrily absorbed by the populace."³⁴

Five centuries prior to Paul writing his letter, Colossae the city had been quite important and prosperous, but by the First Century C.E. had diminished in importance for the adjacent cities of Laodicea and/or Hierapolis (the former of which is admonished by Yeshua in Revelation 3:14). Still, even with its

³⁰ Witherington, pp 103-104.

³¹ Xenophon: *The Persian Expedition*, trans. George Cawkwell (London: Penguin Books, 1949), 59.

³² Herodotus: *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin Books, 1954), 456.

³³ Clinton E. Arnold, "Colossae," in *ABD*, 1:1089.

³⁴ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 569.

decline the city of Colossae did exhibit some importance within the Lycus Valley, as “The economic success of the cities of this valley was derived primarily from their textile industries. Colossae was famous for the distinctive purple color of its wool, which was commonly called *colossinius*” (ABD).³⁵

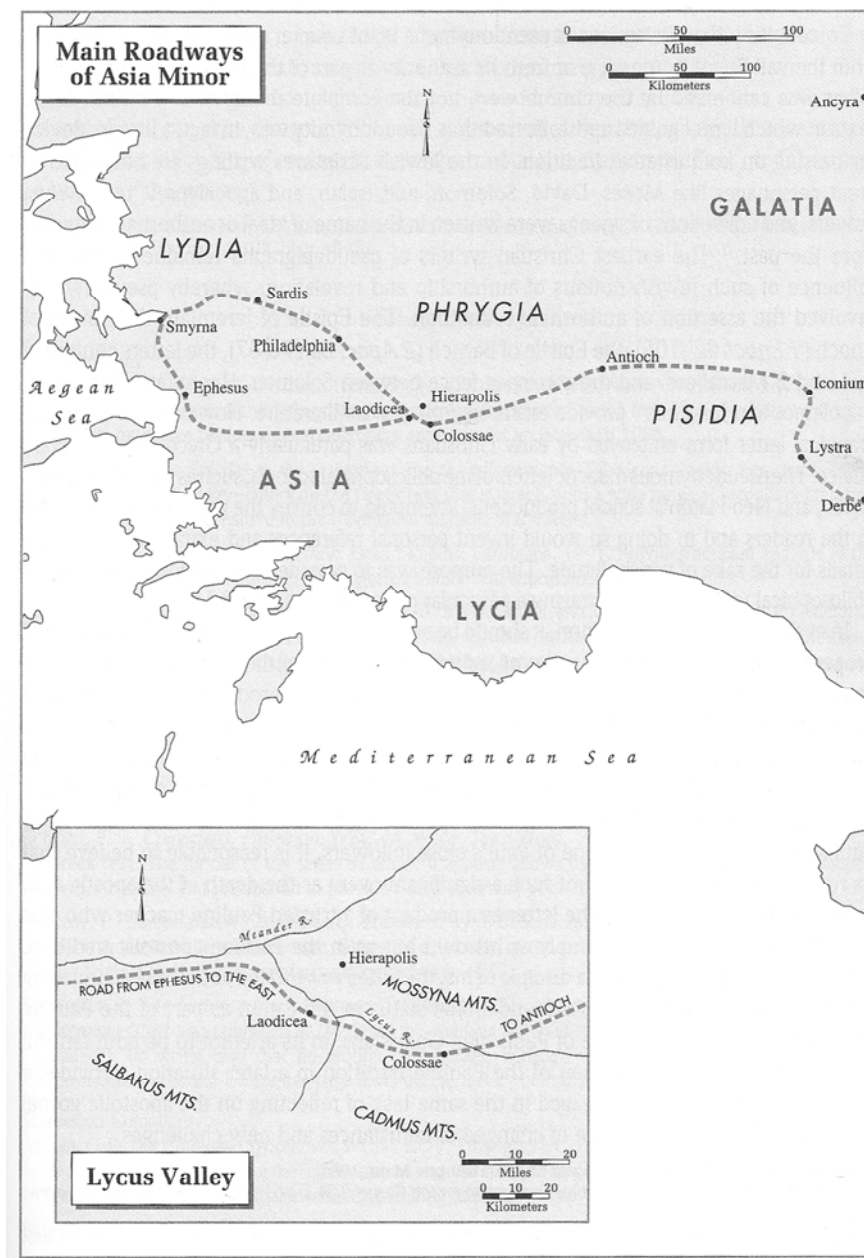


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³⁵ Arnold, "Colossae," in ABD, 1:1089.

Cf. Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, pp 3-8 for a more detailed historical overview of the cities of the Lycus Valley.