

INTRODUCTION AND COL. 1:1-14

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Introduction

I. Authorship - Letter states it is from the Apostle Paul. Some scholars argue against Pauline authorship claiming that the language, style, and teaching differ from that of Paul, but most agree that these arguments are not weighty enough to overthrow the traditional view. As put by D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2005) 520-521:

It seems, then, that the arguments against Pauline authorship are not decisive. They do not reckon sufficiently with the fact that a mind like Paul's was capable of adaptation to new situations and to the adoption of new vocabulary and new concepts when older ones do not meet the need. They also fail to give a reason for addressing the letter to the unimportant town of Colosse. Surely an imitator would have selected a city of some importance, such as Laodicea or Hierapolis. In view of the letter's claim and of the many undoubtedly Pauline features it manifests, we should accept it as an authentic Pauline writing.

This is supported by a number of links with Philemon, which almost all scholars take to be a genuine letter of the apostle. . . . In light of such references it is difficult to argue that Colossians was not written by Paul.

II. Audience

A. City of Colossae (also spelled Colosse)

1. Colossae was situated in Phrygia (modern Turkey) on the southern bank of the Lycus River. It was on the early main road from Ephesus to the Euphrates. The site was discovered in 1835, but it has not been excavated.

2. In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus called it "a great city of Phrygia," and a century later Xenophon called it "a populous city, wealthy and large." By Paul's day, however, Colossae had dropped off considerably in importance. Fifty years or so before Paul, Strabo referred to it as a "small town."

3. Laodicea, ten miles to the west, had developed into a prosperous city during the first century B.C. and Hierapolis, twelve miles to the northwest, also surpassed Colossae.

4. According to Tacitus, Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60-61, but it was rebuilt. It's not clear whether and to what extent Colossae was damaged

by this particular earthquake. Orosius later wrote that Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae had all fallen by earthquakes, but Eusebius (A.D. 215) dates that destruction to 62-64.

B. People of Colossae - Phrygians and Greeks but also Jews who had been settled there from Mesopotamia by Antiochus III in the second century B.C.

C. Church at Colossae

1. Paul did not personally begin the congregation at Colossae (2:1).

2. Acts 19:9-10 indicates that Paul's daily evangelistic discussions in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus, which went on for two years, were so effective that all of Asia heard the word of the Lord. This implies that Paul's converts or co-workers spread the gospel into the interior of Asia Minor. These plantings fall within the sphere of Paul's apostolic ministry to the Gentiles, even though he was unable to visit all of them.

3. The church in Colossae was started by Epaphras (1:7), who was a native of Colossae (4:12). Paul describes him as "our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful minister of Christ on [our] behalf" (1:7) and as "a slave of Christ Jesus" (4:12). It seems likely from 4:13 that the churches in Laodicea and Hierapolis also were the result of his efforts.

4. Paul's allusions to the pagan past of the group (1:21, 2:13, 3:5-7) suggests that almost all of them were Gentile converts.

5. Laodicea is mentioned in Rev. 3:14-22 as a wealthy church. Colossae appears to have continued as a Roman city for centuries (based on coins and inscriptions).

III. Circumstances of writing

A. Paul's situation

1. He is in prison (4:3, 18), and Aristarchus is his fellow prisoner (4:10). There's a debate about whether Paul is imprisoned in Ephesus or Rome when he wrote Colossians and Philemon. I'm with those like F. F. Bruce, Peter O'Brien, Markus Barth & Helmut Blanke, Donald Guthrie, D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo who think Rome is more likely.

2. Accepting Rome as the site of the imprisonment, the letter was most likely written during the early part of Paul's first Roman imprisonment, around A.D. 60-61.

B. Situation in Colossae

1. Epaphras had come from Colossae to visit Paul. During his visit, he voluntarily or involuntarily shared for a time in Paul's imprisonment (Phlm. 23 - "my fellow prisoner").

2. Epaphras undoubtedly wanted to encourage Paul about the progress of the gospel in the Lycus Valley, but probably the main purpose of his visit was to seek Paul's advice on how to deal with a false teaching that had arisen in Colossae.

3. There is much debate about the particulars of what is called the "Colossian Heresy." What we know about it is by deduction from Paul's arguments against it. The following appear to be marks of the heresy:

a. The teaching was set forth as "philosophy" (2:8) which implied some special insight or secret wisdom.

b. It claimed to be based on venerable "tradition" (i.e., of ancient and revelational character) and was supposed to impart true knowledge and insight (2:18, 23).

c. There was a keen interest in spiritual beings (1:16, 2:10), which probably includes what Paul refers to in 2:8 and 2:20 as the "elements [or elemental spirits – RSV, NRSV] of the universe." According to O'Brien (WBC, 131-132), "the majority of commentators this century have understood the 'elements of the universe' in Galatians and Colossians as denoting spiritual beings, regarded as personal and active in the physical and heavenly elements."

d. There were elements of mysticism (2:18), asceticism (2:16, 20-23), and Judaism (2:11-13, 16-17).

4. Interpreting the marks of the heresy

a. F. F. Bruce suggests that this was a Phrygian development in which a local variety of Judaism had been fused with a philosophy of non-Jewish origin – an early and simple form of Gnosticism. It appears that spiritual beings (*στοιχεῖα*), including angels, were seen as intermediaries between heaven and earth. They somehow controlled one's communication with or access to God. In order to have "fullness" with God, one had to placate or appease these spiritual powers.

b. Peter O'Brien says in "Colossians, Letter to the" in Gerald F. Hawthorne and others, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 149 that it was a kind of Judaism

in which asceticism and mysticism were featured and where angels and principalities played a prominent role in creation and the giving of the Law. They were regarded as controlling the communication between God and man, and so needed to be placated by keeping strict legal observances.

...

Many recent scholars . . . consider that the false teaching, which advanced beyond Epaphras's elementary gospel, is to be read against the background of ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety (as evidenced, for example, at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true "fullness." "Self-abasement" (Col. 2:18, 23) was a term used by opponents to denote ascetic practices that were effective for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries and participating in mystical experiences.

IV. Relationship to Philemon

A. Both are written by Paul from prison; both include Timothy as a sender; both refer to Epaphras (Col. 1:7; Phlm. 23) and Archippus (Col. 4:17; Phlm. 2); both include Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke among Paul's companions (Col. 4:10, 14; Phlm. 24); and both refer to Onesimus (Col 4:9; Phlm. 10).

B. Philemon is a resident of Colossae. We know that because Archippus is in Colossae (Col. 4:17) and Philemon is in the same place as Archippus (Phlm. 1-2). Tychicus and Onesimus are traveling to Colossae with Paul's letter to the Colossians (Col. 4:7-9). Since Onesimus is a slave who ran away from Philemon (Phlm. 10, 16), they must also be carrying Paul's letter to Philemon (otherwise Onesimus wouldn't be returning to his master's congregation).

C. Guthrie states: "[Philemon's] close connection with Colossians makes it virtually certain that the two epistles belong to the same period and the most probable theory is that Tychicus accompanied by Onesimus took them both to Colossae at the same time (i.e., during the first Roman imprisonment)."

Col. 1:1-14

I. Opening (1:1-14)

A. Greeting (1:1-2)

1. Paul follows the standard oriental and Jewish letter form but adapts it to his own purpose. The prescript typically gave the name of the sender and the addressee and contained a greeting (such as "peace be with you").

2. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy the brother, ²to the saints in Colossae, the faithful brothers in Christ: grace to you and peace from God our father.

a. He identifies himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" to establish or reinforce his credentials because in this letter he is going to refute the false teaching and vouch for Epaphras's instructions.

b. Paul wants them to appreciate, to comprehend more fully, the grace and peace that God has given them in Jesus Christ.

B. Thanksgiving (1:3-8)

1. The form of ancient letters often included a thanksgiving to the gods. Paul adapts that model to his message.

2. **³We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when praying about you, ⁴having heard of:**

a. **your faith in Christ Jesus** - They had surrendered to Jesus Christ and were continuing to trust him as their Savior and Lord.

b. **and the love you have for all the saints** - Their faith was manifesting itself in practical expressions of care and concern toward all of God's people. That is what true love is; it serves other people (Gal. 5:13; 1 Jn. 3:16).

3. **⁵on account of the hope which lies prepared for you in heaven.**

a. Their "faith" and "love" were based on their "hope." This is an unusual elevation of hope. Normally, all three terms correspond (see 1 Thess. 1:3; Gal. 5:5-6; Rom. 5:1-5). It appears that the false teachers were trying to rob the Christians of their hope for the future (1:23), perhaps in a way similar to 2 Tim. 2:18 (resurrection had already occurred).

b. "Hope" here means the content of their hope, that for which they hope. The Christian hope is variously described by Paul as salvation (1 Thess. 5:8), righteousness (Gal. 5:5), resurrection of an incorruptible body (1 Cor. 15:52-55), eternal life (Tit. 1:2, 3:7), and God's glory (Rom. 5:2). This is the hope they previously heard about in the gospel Epaphras presented to them (1:5b-6a).

c. In what way are faith in Christ and love for the saints based on this hope?

(1) The eternal blessings held out in the gospel draw people to faith. It is the only answer to death! This is not an illegitimate motivation for heeding the gospel. The more materialistic our society becomes, the less able people are to entertain even the possibility of eternal blessings. It is crucial that we counter such a world view by radiating our own confidence in eternal life, by living like we believe it. We cannot capitulate to materialism by reducing the appeal of Christianity to a life-improvement program.

(2) This expectation of future blessing fuels one's ongoing faith and exercise of Christian love. It has consequences in the here and now. It gives strength and endurance for the marathon of life. In 1 Cor. 15:19 Paul says they are to be pitied if hope in Christ is limited to this life, if there is no resurrection. In 15:32 he says, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

d. This hope "lies prepared in heaven." "Lying prepared" was a common phrase for denoting the certainty of the thing for which one is waiting. It was already prepared so there was no question of "if," only "when." The fact the Christian's hope lies prepared "in heaven" reinforces this idea. It is kept where no power can touch it. (Of course, this does not mean a Christian cannot apostatize. He is speaking on the assumption of faithfulness.)

e. This "glory" for which they hope (1:27) is now hidden from man's view, but it will finally be revealed when the focus of their hope, Jesus Christ, is revealed (3:4).

4. which [hope] you previously heard in the word of the truth, the gospel "that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in all the world, so also among you, from the day in which you heard [it] and understood the grace of God in truth,

a. All over the world, this gospel (of heavenly hope) they had heard was producing fruit and growing.

(1) The gospel was spreading throughout the world in which Paul operated (e.g., Damascus, Tarsus, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus).

(2) "Producing fruit" refers to the good deeds done by those influenced by the gospel (see Phil. 1:11).

(3) "Growing" points to the increasing number of converts.

b. It had also continued to produce fruit and to grow among them since the day they heard and came to know "the grace of God in truth."

(1) The gospel had continued to produce good deeds and converts among the Colossians. It did not stagnate.

(2) This process began for them when they first heard and understood the gospel message as the truth. They embraced that message, and the rest is history.

5. ⁷as you learned [it] from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave, who is a faithful minister of Christ on [our] behalf, ⁸who also told us of your love in [the] Spirit.

a. They heard and understood the grace of God (the gospel) by learning it from Epaphras. The statement that they "learned" the gospel from Epaphras suggests that he had given them some type of systematic instruction.

b. Epaphras, a short form of Epaphroditus, was a very common name. Paul calls him "our beloved fellow slave" and "a faithful minister of Christ on [our] behalf," thus vouching that they had received the true apostolic gospel. He was Paul's representative in Colossae.

c. Epaphras had reported that the community's life was filled with a love generated by the Holy Spirit, enabling it to come to the help of all the saints.

C. Intercessory prayer report (1:9-14)

1. ⁹For this reason, from the day we heard [about you] we have not stopped praying and asking [God] on your behalf,

a. Paul continues the prayer report he began in vv. 3-5. He not only gives thanks to God for their faith and love but also intercedes for them because they have been incorporated into Christ. ("For this reason" means because of the gospel's effectiveness among them.)

b. The intensity of their intercessory prayer is indicated by the use of synonyms, "praying" and "asking." As for consistency, he says "we have not stopped." What a pastoral heart!

2. Purpose of intercession

a. in order that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

(1) The knowledge is ultimately from God. He is the one who fills a person with knowledge of his will.

(2) The "knowledge of God's will" with which Paul wants them to be filled is a knowledge "in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." It is true, spiritual insight not the bogus teaching of the heretics that masquerades as wise.

(3) Paul has thus prepared the way for the instruction he intends to give.

b. ¹⁰**in order that you may walk worthily of the Lord [with] a desire to please in every way** – True knowledge of God's will is designed to lead to righteous behavior. The greater one's spiritual wisdom and understanding, the more one's life should change for the better.

c. Paul elaborates on what is involved in living a life worthy of the Lord by enumerating the types of things he hopes will result from the increased spiritual understanding for which he is praying:

(1) **bearing fruit in (the form of) every good work** – Paul is hoping that increased knowledge will result in more abundant good works in their lives. We must know what God wants of us if we are to conform to his desires; and the more clearly we see God's will for mankind, what he has done for us in Christ, the more we are compelled to work.

(2) **increasing in the knowledge of God** – The greater one's insight into the desires and plan of God, the greater one's understanding of God himself. Such knowledge helps free us from caricatures of God.

(3) ¹¹**being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience** – The greater one's grasp of God's will for mankind, what he has done for us in Christ, the greater one's endurance in the face of trials. Also, the more certain one is that one has heard *God's* will rather than a human's will, the greater one's strength to carry on.

(4) **and joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father** – With increasing spiritual understanding comes increasing appreciation of what God has done for us in Christ.

d. Paul reminds them of the basis of their thanksgiving: **who has qualified you for the share of the allotment of the saints in the light. ¹³He rescued us from the dominion of the darkness and transferred [us] into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.**

(1) God qualified or fitted them to share in the inheritance of God's people! As Gentiles, they had jumped from ignorance of God to heirs (see Eph. 2:11-13).

(2) This inheritance is in a greater realm or dimension than earthly things that are subject to decay and the ravages of war and nature (see 1 Pet. 1:3-4). It is in "the light," the age to come; it belongs to a spiritual dimension.

(3) At conversion God delivered them (or "us," meaning all Christians) from an alien power, the "dominion of darkness." In Lk. 22:53, after Jesus' arrest, he says, "But this is your hour - when darkness reigns." The power or authority of

darkness is the realm of Satan's authority (Acts 26:18). Until their conversion, they were in his power.

(4) God transferred or transplanted them from that realm into the kingdom of his Son. These two realms are so radically different that they are referred to as darkness and light.

(5) In this kingdom of God's Son there is "redemption." This implies liberation from imprisonment and bondage. Redemption is intimately linked to the person of Christ; it is "in him" that we possess it. This redemption is equated with the forgiveness of sins.