

Introduction to Colossians

I. The authorship of Colossians

A.) The epistle to the believers in Colossae was written by the apostle Paul.

1.) Personal Background:

a.) Paul was a Jew from Tarsus, capital of Cilicia, in Asia Minor. Acts 21:39

1.) Tarsus was considered a cosmopolitan city with varied cultural influences [oriental, Hellenic etc...]

2.) The city was known as an important center for learning, especially philosophy.

b.) In addition, he was a Roman citizen. Acts 22:29

c.) Paul was raised in Jerusalem. This may be seen in the use of ἀνατεθραμμένος in Acts 22:3

d.) He was educated in the Law by the renowned Pharisee, Gamaliel.

2.) The approximate age of Paul at the time of the epistle to the Colossians:

a.) Paul (Saul) is “a young man” at the stoning of Stephen which occurred in 35 AD (Acts 7:58).

1.) The word “young man” is the noun, νεανίας (NEANIAS). This word occurs 3x in the NT: Acts 7:58, 20:9, 23:17. The primary definition is a youth or young man between the ages of 24-40 yrs. old.

2.) According to Jewish custom, young men entered life as a “rabbi” in the sect of the Pharisees at approx. 30 years old. ISBE

3.) By the time of the stoning of Stephen, Paul had attained a position of leadership. It is highly unlikely that his position of leadership would be given to a “new” Pharisee.

4.) Rather, it is highly probable his position was attained through his zeal (Acts 26:10-12, Philip. 3:5-6)

5.) Due to his credentials and zeal as a Pharisee, it would not be unreasonable to allow 5 yrs from the time he entered the sect (30 yrs old) until he gained his position at the stoning of Stephen.

6.) This would make Paul approximately 35 yrs old in 35 AD. Also, this age would fall within the age range of 24-40 years old which is indicated by νεανίας (NEANIAS).

b.) Paul authored this epistle in 61 AD along with Philippians, Philemon, and Ephesians. This was during his first Roman imprisonment which occurred after his third missionary journey. In Philemon 1:9, Paul refers to himself as “aged” (πρεσβύτερης-PRESBUTES – : Lk 1:18, Titus

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2:2, Phlm. 1:9). The noun is defined as an old man or aged person. Biblically, trying to establish the age range is unviable. However, some extra-biblical Greek sources indicate “aged” refers to man between 50-56 yrs old.

B.) At the time of writing [ca 61 AD] Paul was imprisoned in Rome. He was literally a prisoner and not a metaphorical prisoner of Christ. Col. 4:10, 18, Philemon 1:23

- 1.) Paul came to be in Rome via his 2 year imprisonment in Caesarea under the procurator, Felix and his successor, Porcius Festus [ca 60 AD]. Acts 24:27, 25:14
- 2.) In an audience with Porcius Festus, Paul exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar for justice. Acts 25:10-12, 21, 25
- 3.) During this first Roman imprisonment, Paul was permitted to stay by himself, guarded by a soldier. In addition, he was able to stay in his own rented quarters, welcoming all who came to him. However, it is unclear where he received the funds to rent quarters. Acts 28:16, 30
- 4.) This imprisonment was during the reign of Nero [54-68 AD].

II. Addressees

A.) This epistle was sent to “the holy and faithful brothers” in Colossae. It is likely that the primary composition of this group of believers was Gentile Col. 1:2, 21, 27

- 1.) Epaphras, a Gentile, was their evangelist. Col 1:7
- 2.) Apparent scarcity of OT allusions.
- 3.) The sins listed in 3:5-7 have a distinct Gentile slant. Cp 1 Cor 5:1

B.) The city of Colossae was located in Asia Minor, in the region of Phrygia on the Lycus River.

- 1.) Colossae was approximately 13 mi. from Hierapolis [Ἱεραπόλις, Col 4:13], 10 mi. from Laodicea [Λαοδικεία, Col.4:16], and 100 mi. from Ephesus.

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- 2.) In Colossae and the neighboring cities of Hierapolis and Laodicea, there was a sizeable Jewish population.
 - 3.) Historically, the worship of angels was prevalent among the populace. Of the angels, Michael was the chief. He was considered to be the protector of the city. This is due to a legend that said he appeared to the people and saved the city from a flood.
- C.) Paul, himself, had never visited this church. Col 1:4, 2:1, 5
- D.) Epaphras had informed Paul about the current state of affairs concerning the Colossians. They were making progress in their Christian walk and possessed a measure of corporate growth. Col 1:7
- 1.) The Colossians are addressed as “the holy and faithful brothers in Christ.” This would seem to indicate that they understood what it meant to be holy and faithful within the sphere of Christ. Col. 1:2
 - 2.) Paul would not have considered Epaphras a “faithful servant of Christ” if his instruction and content of his teaching [i.e. doctrine] was sub-par. Col 1:7, 2:7, 4:12
 - 3.) Paul had heard about their love for all the saints. Col 1:4
 - 4.) It would appear they were familiar with their future, eternal reward [SG3]. Col. 1:5, 10-12
 - 5.) Their “orderliness and steadfastness” of faith in Christ is source of rejoicing for Paul. Col 2:5
 - 6.) Paul exhorts the Colossians, as having been rooted and currently being built up in Christ and being established in the faith, to continue walking in Him. Just as they had formerly been taught. Based on these characteristics as a whole, it would not appear that the Colossians were spiritual babies. Col 2:6-7
- E.) The epistle was to be read aloud before the Colossians and forwarded to the Laodicean church for the same purpose. Col 4:16

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- F.) Paul also sent a letter to Laodicea which was to be read and then sent to Colossae. However, this letter has been lost and is not a part of the canon.
- III. Time of writing
- A.) Traditionally, as previously mentioned, this epistle, along with Philippians, Philemon, and Ephesians was authored by Paul in ca 61 AD while imprisoned in Rome. Admittedly, this is contested but when the evidence is examined, this traditional view is the most probable.
- 1.) Rival theories regarding the place of origin: Ephesus, Caesarea or Rome?
- a.) Ephesus: Although Paul was there for 3 yrs., there is no proof that Paul was imprisoned for a prolonged period. Further, Mark and Luke are not known to be with Paul in Ephesus. Acts 20:31, Col 4:10, 14, Philemon 1:24
- b.) Caesarea: When compared with the other “prison epistles,” Paul expected his release from imprisonment. If Paul had been expecting release in Caesarea, he also would probably expect to be lynched. In any case, Paul “left” Caesarea as a prisoner enroute to Rome. This was due to his appeal to Caesar with Porcius Festus. In terms of a date, it is generally accepted, although not fixed, that Porcius Festus succeeded Felix as procurator in Caesarea in ca 60 AD. Acts 23:12ff, 24:3-4, Phil 1:25, Philemon 1:22
- c.) Rome: The epistle to Philemon is directly linked to Colossians. Their origins are by the same author, in the same time frame, and originated in the same place. Examine the parallels:
- 1.) Timothy is mentioned in the greeting. Col 1:1, Philemon 1:1
- 2.) Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke and Demas send greetings. Col 4:10-14, Philemon 1:23-24
- 3.) Archippus is mentioned. Col 4:17, Philemon 1:2

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- 4.) The slave, Onesimus, is mentioned and Paul appeals to Philemon on his behalf. Col 4:10, Philemon 1:10
- 5.) Paul is imprisoned in both epistles. Col 4:10, 18, Philemon 1:1, 23
- 6.) In Rome, Paul was permitted to receive visitors. This would explain why Tychicus and Onesimus had access to him. Acts 28:16, 30, Col 4:7-9
- 7.) Based on these similarities, it would appear that these epistles were sent in the same time frame. Furthermore, Philippians, another “prison epistle” possesses some similarities to Philemon.
 - a.) Paul expects his release from prison. Phil 1:25, Philemon 1:22
 - b.) Interestingly, Paul alludes to the praetorian guard and Caesar’s household. This would establish a connection with Rome.

B.) Paul was sent to Rome by Porcius Festus in ca 60 AD. Allowing for reasonable travel time to include violent storms, ship wrecks, snake bites etc.. [see Acts 27-28:4] Paul would have arrived in Rome ca 61AD. This would begin his first Roman imprisonment during the reign of Nero [54-69 AD].

IV. Reason for Writing

- A.) Epaphras traveled to Rome and informed Paul about the circumstances in Colossae [and environs]. Col.1:8
- B.) It would seem Archippus was left in charge. Col. 4:17
- C.) It may be surmised that Epaphras sought Paul’s advise concerning a heresy which had arisen. The church at Colossae [and Laodicea] were under pressure from this heresy which had a marked Jewish slant. Col 2:8, 11, 16,18, 20-21, 3:11

V. Purpose

- A.) The primary purpose of the Colossian epistle was to combat and refute the heretical [gnostic] teaching which had arisen in the region.

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B.) While the specific heretical teachings as a whole are not delineated, we may infer by Paul's refutation that elements of the heresy included:

- 1.) The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ was not upheld. Col 1:15-19
- 2.) The presence of mystery cults. Col. 2:26-27
- 3.) Philosophy and empty deception according to the traditions of men and elemental principles of the world. Col. 2:8
- 4.) Jewish ritual including circumcision, dietary restrictions, feast and Sabbaths. Col 2:11, 16, 20-22
- 5.) False humility and the worship of angels. Col 2:18
- 6.) Asceticism. 2:23

C.) In addition to his refutation of the heresy, Paul exhorts the Colossians to continue walking in sound doctrine and he gives practical details on how this might be accomplished. Col 2:6, 8, 3:2, 5, 8, 12-14, 17-23, 4:5

VI. Content – Outline –

A.) Initial greeting. 1:1-2

- 1.) Paul states the fact that he is an apostle of Christ by the will of God.
- 2.) Timothy is also mentioned in this greeting as he was in Philemon 1:1.

B.) Paul and co give thanks to God the Father for the Colossians. 1:3-6

- 1.) Paul had been informed of their faith in Christ.
- 2.) In addition, he has heard of their love for all the saints.

C.) Praise for Epaphras. 1:7-8

- 1.) Paul considers Epaphras a beloved fellow slave and faithful servant of Christ.
- 2.) He evangelized the Colossians and taught them sound doctrine.
- 3.) Epaphras informed Paul of the situation in Colossae.

D.) Paul and co. are praying and petitioning God on behalf of the Colossians. 1:9

- 1.) He asks that the Colossians be filled up with the full knowledge of God's will.

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- 2.) Also, that they be filled up with all wisdom and spiritual understanding.
- E.) The purpose of Paul's prayer and petition. 1:10-11
- F.) The reward, deliverance and redemption of the believer by God in Christ.
1:12-14
- G.) Paul expounds upon the the pre-eminence of Christ. This section emphasizes the creative aspect of Christ as deity. 1:15-18
- H.) Christ is introduced as the figurative head of the body, the universal church. All things are reconciled to God through Him, through His spiritual death.
1:19-23
- I.) Paul is a servant of the church. 1:24-25
- J.) The "mystery" is revealed to the saints and among the Gentiles. 1:26-29
- K.) Paul proclaims his great struggle for the believers in Colossae, Laodicea and those who had never seen him. 2:1-5
- L.) Paul exhorts the Colossians to continue to walk in Christ. 2:6-11
- M.) The Colossians are positionally identified with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection [retroactive positional truth]. In addition, all transgressions are pardoned via Christ's work on the cross. 2:12-15
- N.) Paul commands the Colossians not to let anyone judge them in regard to eating, drinking, feasts, new moon, or Sabbaths. A reply to Jewish gnostics.
2:16-20
- O.) The Colossians are enjoined to recognize the worthless nature of worldly viewpoint and traditions. Instead, they should recognize their position in Christ 2:20 – 3:4
- P.) Prohibition against various sexual sins, sins related to anger and lying. 3:5-9
- Q.) Believers have put on the new self without regard to race or social status. 3:9-17
- R.) Commands for the family unit: wife, husband, and child. 3:18-21
- S.) Commands to slaves and masters. 3:22-4:1
- T.) Exhortations relating to prayer, behavior and speech. 4:2-6

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U.) Tychicus and Onesimus will inform the Colossians about Pauls circumstances.

4:7-11

V.) Epaphras, Luke, and Demas send greetings. 4:12-14

W.) Final greetings and instructions. 4:15-18