

# The Message of Colossians and Philemon

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The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians, and most especially his letter to Philemon, are two of the most elusive texts of the Apostolic Scriptures for today's Messianic community. Our current level of engagement with Colossians is often with having to respond to Christian colleagues who quote Colossians 2:16-17 at us for being Torah observant, and we have to scramble to try to understand what is really being said. *Beyond this, we really do not read Colossians.* I actually find Colossians and Philemon—which were written at the same time as the same people are listed in the closing greetings (Colossians 4:10-14; Philemon 23-24)—to be very easy to follow. We just have to read them in their entirety, and remind ourselves that Paul is not writing to Twenty-First Century Believers.

Colossians is a part of the series commonly called the Prison Epistles (also including Ephesians and Philippians), traditionally believed to have been written during the Apostle Paul's confinement in Rome (Acts 28:30). Epaphras, one of the Colossian Believers who had likely come to faith by Paul's preaching tenure in Ephesus (Acts 19:9-10), which was only about 100 miles away from Colossae, had traveled all the way to visit the Apostle. A complicated circumstance had arisen in Colossae. Epaphras, who had been one of the main people to share the gospel of Yeshua with his hometown, was disturbed so much that he journeyed 1,500 miles all the way to see Paul, who could then craft a letter to send back to a congregation of Believers for whom he served as a kind of "grandfather."

Many commentators are widely agreed that the circumstance which had arisen in Colossae was that a strange mix of religious and philosophical errors—Greco-Roman, mysterious, proto-Gnostic, and even Jewish—was infecting the assembly. False teachers had promoted the idea that Yeshua the Messiah was but one of many intermediaries between God the Father and humankind. These errorists promoted a false philosophy, involving some kind of angel worship and asceticism. While there were Jewish elements within this error, we cannot at all assume that it was exclusively Jewish, as history does show how in the Diaspora the local paganism could influence the local Judaism. Throughout his letter, Paul uses terms like *gnōsis*, *plērōma*, and *sophia*—knowledge, fullness, and wisdom—to directly subvert the false teaching that was denigrating the Lord. The good Apostle must carefully choose his words, showing how the work of Yeshua completely trumps the false philosophy, and how He is supreme over all spiritual forces.

Paul and Timothy extend greetings to the Colossians (Colossians 1:1-2), and after doing so express how they are not only thankful for them (Colossians 1:3), but how "we have heard of your faith in Messiah Yeshua and of the love you have for all the saints" (Colossians 1:4). This is a word of confidence that regardless of what is going on in Colossae, the Believers there are going to do the right thing, as they are beneficiaries of the good news and have understood it well (Colossians 1:5-6). Epaphras, who has traveled to see Paul, has spoken well of their faith (Colossians 1:7-8).

Paul really is quite gracious to express how much the Colossians mean to him, and how "we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9). The Colossians are Believers who will be able to lead lives pleasing to the Lord, bearing good fruit, being strengthened, and being able to have endurance (Colossians 1:10-11). They make up a part of the Father's inheritance of the saints, having been rescued from darkness and brought into light, the Kingdom of His Son (Colossians 1:12-13). Paul asserts to them that in the Messiah "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14).

How serious is it to recognize who Yeshua is? Interpreters are largely agreed that Colossians 1:15-20 composes some kind of an early hymn used by the First Century *ekklēsia*. Within this hymn, some of the terms used such as "image of...God," "firstborn over all creation," and "the beginning" are likely appropriated from the figure of Wisdom, seen in Proverbs, the Apocrypha, and Philo.<sup>1</sup> In ancient Jewish literature, Wisdom was an impersonal force that

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<sup>1</sup> Image of God (Wisdom 7:26; Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.43); firstborn (Philo *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4:97); beginning (Proverbs 8:23; Wisdom 6:22).

emanated from God, often acting behind the scenes in history, and so the false teachers might have simply thought that the Messiah was a similar (created) force. While Yeshua is identified as possessing these same qualities of Wisdom, Yeshua is ultimately *much more* than Wisdom, being a person. Yeshua the Messiah was the Agent used by the Father to create the universe, yet He is also the fullness of the Deity (cf. Colossians 2:9) in human flesh, crucified so that peace and redemption might come to sinners, and was resurrected from the dead. Yeshua stands supreme as the One for whom all things in the universe were made, reigning infinite. **No such claim is ever made of Wisdom.** *Yeshua desires a personal relationship with us, after all!* The hymn affirms,

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn<sup>2</sup> over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created for him and by him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the [assembly]; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:15-20).

Yeshua is no mere minor force sent by God. The Colossians had once been sinners, but thanks to the sacrifice of Yeshua they can now stand holy, “without blemish and free from accusation” (Colossians 1:21-22). Yet this requires the Colossians to continue in their faith, “not moved from the hope held out in the gospel” (Colossians 1:23a), a message that has significant worldwide importance (Colossians 1:23b).

While Paul knows Colossian Believers like Epaphras and Philemon (discussed further) personally, and probably a few others, he does not know most of the Colossian Believers personally. He reminds the Colossians about his ministry service for the Lord (Colossians 1:24-25), specifically the great mystery of “Messiah in you, the hope of glory” that equalizes all people—Jewish and non-Jewish—in Him (Colossians 1:26-27). Paul says, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Messiah. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:28-29). The Apostle Paul is by no means someone just trying to gain a following or impress people with some slick teaching; he is a servant of Yeshua empowered by Him to see that lives are changed **and that the great mystery of the ages be manifest to all.** Paul desires all to know Yeshua’s salvation, and for all to be empowered by Him!

Paul has had to endure much for the gospel, things that will benefit those in Colossae, Laodicea, and the surrounding Lycus Valley—people he has not seen in person (Colossians 2:1). Paul states, “My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Messiah, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:2-3). These words are surely uplifting words for any Believer to hear or read, but the purpose for Paul making these claims would have been quite significant for those under the influence of the false teachers: “I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments” (Colossians 2:4). Paul might not be with the Colossians in person, but he knows what has been going on because of Epaphras. He also knows that the Colossians have a firm faith in the Lord, and will not be led astray if they take his instruction seriously (Colossians 2:5).

As human beings, we tend to often think that admonishing people has to be an entirely negative experience. While there are certainly letters from Paul like Galatians or 1 Corinthians, where some severe negative tones can be easily detected, such is not the case with Colossians. Confidence is expressed in the Colossians, as Paul instructs them, “So then, just as you received Messiah Yeshua as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Colossians 2:6-7). While the false

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<sup>2</sup> The title “firstborn” is used in the Tanach to speak of one who possesses a high, preeminent status, even if one is not the first actually born in a family line (Genesis 49:3-4; Exodus 4:22; Psalm 89:27; Jeremiah 31:9).

philosophy will not really influence the Colossians, they still need to know why it is wrong, and why they should not feel “unenlightened” because they have chosen not to embrace it.

The Apostle Paul is clear to tell the Colossians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of the world rather than on Messiah” (Colossians 2:8). The false teaching circulating in Colossae, then, originates in human ideas and not ideas consistent with who Yeshua is. Paul summarizes for the Colossians what Yeshua has done for all of them, as the Deity in bodily form, who has provided redemption by His crucifixion and resurrection—having to assert **what is not of vain human tradition**. Only by knowing Him can a person partake of salvation:

“For in Messiah all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Messiah, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Messiah, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Colossians 2:9-12).

Yeshua the Messiah, as the Deity, reigns supreme and provides a circumcision of the heart unto salvation. Paul reminds the Colossians, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Messiah” (Colossians 2:13)—speaking of how the same power that resurrected the Lord also changes sinful people! By the work of Yeshua the *cheirographon* or “certificate of debt” (Colossians 2:14, NASU) has been nailed to the cross and paid for. While this is commonly thought by some to be the Torah of Moses, it is actually the record of human sin, perhaps also to be viewed as the pronouncement of condemnation that hung over Yeshua as He was dying on the cross (Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19)—penalties that stood against sinners which have now been remitted.

One of the most important effects of Yeshua’s atoning sacrifice is that any of the lesser spiritual powers, which could once claim dominance over people, are now powerless to do so for those who are in Him. The Messiah has “disarmed the powers and authorities” (Colossians 2:15; cf. Ephesians 1:20-21). To try to appeal to those forces, **when Yeshua as the Deity and as Redeemer was supreme over them**, would make little sense. The Colossians were to easily reject any false philosophy that subtracted from whom Yeshua was, and His accomplished work.

Paul will continue by summarizing other features of the false philosophy. The most difficult verses of Colossians, for today’s Messianics, are found in how Paul instructs his audience to not allow themselves to be judged about various features of the Torah. He says, “do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day” (Colossians 2:16). Many think that Paul has just said that these things are unimportant for all Believers, failing to recognize what these things meant *to the false teachers in Colossae*. How were these Torah practices integrated into the false philosophy? Is Paul speaking against *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and kosher eating as a normal part of obedience to God? Or is he speaking against these things connected to how the false teachers might have associated them with their ascetic practices and angel worship (Colossians 2:18ff)? If the latter is the case, then Paul is speaking against the misuse of these Torah practices, and for the Colossians not to take judgment because they might not share the same opinions about them as the false teachers.

The Apostle Paul does not downgrade the significance of Torah practices like *Shabbat*, the appointed times, or kosher eating. Yet he does point out, “These are a shadow of the things to come,<sup>3</sup> but the substance belongs to Christ” (Colossians 2:17, ESV). If some areas of Torah observance were caught up into the false philosophy of the errorists, the most that the errorists could see would be shadows. But if these things are observed properly, as a part of the sanctification process and in demonstrating good works (Matthew 5:16ff), then the shadows that

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<sup>3</sup> Note how the NIV has improperly translated the present tense participle *tōn mellontōn*, with the past tense “things that were to come.”

Also be aware of how “*mere*” has been added to the NASU, and “only” to the RSV, renderings.

they possess can easily be seen to point to the substance of the Messiah. The Sabbath, appointed times, and even dietary laws teach God's people important things about His holiness, as well as of His plan of salvation history for the world. Understanding the shadow allows Believers to more greatly appreciate the substance.

It is sad that many Christian laypersons reading Colossians 2:16-17 forget to read the surrounding context, because immediately Paul warns the Colossians about the dangerous features of the false philosophy. This was an error that advocated "self-abasement and the worship of the angels" (Colossians 2:18, NASU) in an effort to induce visions. Even if one views "worship of angels" as not being actual worship directed *to angels*, but people trying to participate *with* angelic worship in Heaven—things off limits for normal people were still being accessed. People trying to appeal to angels for spiritual help, rather than going to the Lord Himself, according to Paul, have "lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (Colossians 2:19).

The Colossians are not to be like the fickle people of the world, allowing themselves to be influenced by the ascetic superstitions of the false teachers like "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Colossians 2:21), which ultimately have no use in curtailing sinful urges (Colossians 2:23). And while some may be tempted to associate these things with regulations seen in the Torah, they are labeled as being "based on human commands and teachings" (Colossians 2:22), an indication that they are not of Divine origin. The Sabbath, appointed times, and dietary laws were taken up into this whole mess of ideas—being improperly used—and the Colossians were not to let the false teachers intimidate them.

The second half of Paul's letter to the Colossians is spent addressing the lives of those who "have been raised with Messiah," who should set their "hearts on things above, where Messiah is seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1), reigning supremely. Believers have their lives found in Him, and will experience much greatness when the Messiah returns (Colossians 3:2-4). He lists a number of serious sins that are not to be found in the lives of his audience (Colossians 3:5-9), precisely because they "have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10). The power of the Messiah to change people is so magnificent, because "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Messiah is all, and is in all" (Colossians 3:11). What Paul tells the Colossians to manifest in their lives—by the transforming power of Yeshua—is something that the false philosophy of the errorists cannot bring:

"Let the peace of Messiah rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Messiah dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Yeshua, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:15-17).

Paul issues some important instructions to the Colossians on the home life of Believers, and some of the roles that husbands, wives, children, and slaves all play (Colossians 3:18-4:1; cf. Ephesians 5:22-6:9). The fact that slaves are mentioned should immediately remind us that this word was indeed given against a First Century C.E. background. What would these instructions have meant to ancient people? Only by acknowledging this first, can we properly apply its principles today.

The final request Paul asks of the Colossians is to continue to pray for him, as he is in jail and will need to discern the opportunities when he can declare the gospel message (Colossians 4:2-5). He similarly encourages them, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Colossians 4:6).

Paul's letter to the Colossians ends with a series of greetings from the mixed group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers helping him in Rome (Colossians 4:7-15). These include the courier Tychicus, who also took with him the general epistle that would become "Ephesians" (Colossians 4:7; Ephesians 6:21). Onesimus, the runaway slave who features prominently in Paul's letter to Philemon, is considered to be "our dear and faithful brother," and he will be traveling

with him (Colossians 4:9). The Jewish Believers are Aristarchus, John Mark, with whom Paul had patched up previous differences (cf. Acts 13:13; 15:39), and a man named Jesus Justus (Colossians 4:10-11). Take important notice of the fact that a normal Jewish man of the Diaspora would indeed have the Greek name *Iēsous*. This is not only proof that *Iēsous* is a legitimate Jewish transliteration of *Yeshua* and not the name of a pagan god, but also that when the Apostles proclaimed salvation in the name of *Iēsous*, it was a normal name that Greek-speaking Jewish men had.

Epaphras, who has yet to return home to Colossae, is attested by Paul to be “one of you and a servant of Messiah Yeshua...He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured” (Colossians 4:12). Paul gives Epaphras some approving words, for the ministry work he has performed in the Lycus Valley (Colossians 4:13), which would be quite helpful when he did finally return home. Also extending greetings to the Colossians are Luke the doctor and Demas (Colossians 4:14). Paul wants the Colossians to greet the congregation that meets in the home of Nympha, a woman, on his behalf (Colossians 4:15). He also commends the special ministry of Archippus (Colossians 4:17), whatever that might have been.

Paul requests that this letter he has sent to the Colossians be read in the congregation of the nearby Laodiceans as well. He also tells them that they will be receiving a letter that he wrote to the Laodiceans (Colossians 4:16). Although many proposals have been made, there are some good reasons for us not to think that this is a non-extant “Epistle to the Laodiceans.” Given the evidence of the oldest manuscripts of Ephesians 1:1 lacking “in Ephesus” (see RSV), the letter coming from Laodicea could very well be the general epistle that became known as “Ephesians,” which had been circulated in the same vicinity of Asia Minor.

The imprisoned Paul is sure to write the final part of his message to the Colossians, with his own hand: “Remember my chains. Grace be with you” (Colossians 4:18).

When examining Paul’s letter to the Colossians, we would be at a complete loss to not also examine Paul’s letter to Philemon. Philemon was written at the same time, by simple virtue of the fact that the people who extend the Colossians greetings, also extend Philemon greetings (Philemon 23-24).<sup>4</sup> Most Bible readers avoid considering Philemon because of its small size at just twenty-five verses. Most others avoid considering Philemon because they do not know what to do with the issue of slavery in the Bible, and how Paul is sending back Onesimus, a runaway slave *but* a Believer, to his owner Philemon. What was Philemon to do with Onesimus? Philemon is a unique epistle in the Pauline corpus, actually being a personal letter between Paul and a fellow Believer in Messiah Yeshua. We get a unique glimpse into not only First Century Mediterranean culture, but also Paul as a man.

The opening of Philemon includes greetings consistent with the other Pauline letters (Philemon 1-3), with Philemon not only addressed, but also acknowledgements of his wife Apphia, and Archippus as a member of their home congregation. Philemon is lauded by Paul because of his faith in the Lord, and his goodness toward others (Philemon 4-6). Paul is sure to tell his friend, “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints” (Philemon 7). Everything that Paul tells Philemon is leading up to him explaining what has happened regarding the runaway Onesimus.

Paul carefully says, “although in Messiah I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love” (Philemon 8-9a). He reminds Philemon that he is “an old man and now also a prisoner of Messiah Yeshua” (Philemon 9b). Somehow in that prison confinement he encountered the runaway Onesimus, who had fled to Rome to get away from his master and hide. Onesimus is one “who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become both useful to you and to me” (Philemon 10-11). While we might not know all the details of why Onesimus fled from Philemon, and how he

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<sup>4</sup> The greetings to Philemon do notably exclude Jesus Justus (Colossians 4:11), who was probably just not present when Paul’s letter was written.

encountered Paul in Rome, **this runaway slave had become a born again Believer**. What was Philemon going to do now that he was returning home?

Paul says, “I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you” (Philemon 12). Paul has a great amount of love and affection for Onesimus, and so should Philemon. Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus in Rome for some ministry service (Philemon 13), yet he had to respect Philemon as his owner (Philemon 14). He tells Philemon how, “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (Philemon 15-16a). Maybe it was God who had Onesimus run away, so that when he returned Philemon could show him a great kindness. The referral to “no longer as a slave” is as close as Paul gets to suggesting that Philemon manumit Onesimus from his slave status. Paul indicates how “He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and a brother in the Lord” (Philemon 16b).

It would seem quite unlikely that given how Onesimus is a fellow Believer now, a brother of Philemon in the Lord, that Paul would want him to remain a slave. Paul informs Philemon, “if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me” (Philemon 17). Paul expects Philemon to treat Onesimus as an equal, a clear indication that he would have to release him. So serious is Paul, that any expenses Onesimus has accumulated—either in having stolen money from Philemon, or lost earnings from Philemon’s estate because of his absence—Paul himself is willing to pay, with a note in his own handwriting (Philemon 18-19a). Yet Paul is also able to tell Philemon how “you owe me your very self” (Philemon 19b), in that Philemon was a direct beneficiary of Paul’s ministry service just as Onesimus.

Paul is confident that this instruction he has delivered to Philemon will be followed (Philemon 20-21), and he expresses hope that he can come and visit him soon, being released from prison (Philemon 22). After his associates in Rome greet Philemon and his home congregation (Philemon 23-24), Paul closes by wishing them all grace (Philemon 25)—something they would surely need to show as Onesimus was returning. We can be rest assured that Philemon released Onesimus, because not only did the Epistle to Philemon get collected into the Biblical canon, but there was even a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus who served in the early Second Century. *This could have been the Onesimus featured in Philemon.*

Neither Colossians nor Philemon need to be avoided by Messianic Believers any more. These are not difficult letters to understand, although they do sometimes remind us that we need to read texts of Scripture for what they meant to their *original audiences* first. Messianics needs to recognize how Colossians 2:16-17 appears in a rebuke about the false philosophy circulating in Colossae, and directly pertains to how *Shabbat*, the appointed times, and dietary laws were caught up in the errorists’ asceticism. Similarly, Philemon does portray a scene of a runaway slave returning home, something which Twenty-First Century people admittedly read with difficulty. I think that today’s emerging Messianic movement can actually learn much from both of these epistles, as we consider not only the broad religious diversity of the early *ekklēsia*, but the broad religious diversity we face today, with all of its complex issues.

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