

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON  
FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC



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J.K. MCKEE



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by John Kimball McKee

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Front cover image is of the mountain range of Denizli, Turkey, adjacent to Ancient Colossae

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

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  
Editor, TNN Online

# 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."<sup>1</sup> 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 Colossians<sup>2</sup> (Grk. *Pros Kolossaëis*, ΠΡΟΣ 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.<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup>

The early Christian Church of the Second-Third Centuries C.E. recognized genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians,<sup>7</sup> 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 agreed<sup>8</sup> 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."<sup>9</sup> Its entry further concludes, surprisingly, "The links between Colossians and PHILEMON support authenticity" (*IDB*),<sup>10</sup> 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*).<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

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

<sup>8</sup> Obviously excluding those scholars who deny Pauline authorship of all his attributed letters.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

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

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

<sup>13</sup> 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.