

19a. Letter to the Colossians

Colossians is different in style, topic, and even audience than Paul's earlier letters, raising questions about authorship and intent. Still, much can be explained by the letter's occasional situation and still stresses the usual Christ message.

“Hope of Israel” (hymn no. 259)

1. Hope of Israel, Zion's army,
Children of the promised day,
See, the Chieftain signals onward,
And the battle's in array!

(Chorus)

Hope of Israel, rise in might
With the sword of truth and right;
Sound the war-cry, “Watch and pray!”
Vanquish ev'ry foe today.

2. See the foe in countless numbers,
Marshaled in the ranks of sin.
Hope of Israel, on to battle;
Now the vict'ry we must win!

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. (Ephesians 6:10-12)

3. Strike for Zion, down with error;
Flash the sword above the foe!
Ev'ry stroke disarms a foeman;
Ev'ry step we conq'ring go.

4. Soon the battle will be over;
Ev'ry foe of truth be down.
Onward, onward, youth of Zion;
Thy reward the victor's crown.

Occasional Situation of Colossians

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Writing from Prison



- Colossians and Ephesians are “**imprisonment**” epistles since Paul was in bonds when he wrote them
- Early Christians assume that all of these were written during his famous (and last?) imprisonment in Rome
- 61–63 if from Rome
- The traditional place of origin and date for these letters

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Overview of Colossians

- Authenticity
 - Differences in style and perceived differences in doctrinal outlook have led some scholars to suggest that it is **pseudonymous** (written by someone acting "in the Pauline tradition")
 - *These are sometimes called **Deutero-Pauline letters**, and are thought to have been written by students of Paul writing his ideas in his tradition*
 - Many of their objections can be met, however.
- Date
 - An "imprisonment letter," Colossians may have been written from Ephesus in A.D. 54–56 like Philippians and Philemon
 - *It is different enough from Philippians and Philemon that it was probably written A.D. 61–63 from Rome*
 - If pseudonymous, it may have been written in the A.D. 80's from Ephesus.
- To: Christians in Colossae
 - Together with Laodicea and Hierapolis part of an inland tri-city area in the Lycus valley of northern Asia (Phrygia)
 - Evangelized by Epaphras (the Epaphroditus of Philippians?), *it was a city that Paul had never visited.*
- Unity and Integrity: little evidence that the letter includes fragments of several letters
 - *the Christ Hymn of 1:15–20 may have been an existing hymn that antedated Paul*

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Question of Authorship

- Despite direct attribution to Paul and Timothy, some scholars dispute Pauline authorship
 - **Pseudonymity**: a text by someone else is given a false, or postured, attribution to a noted authority or other figure
 - Many of these scholars believe it came from a Pauline school or in the Pauline tradition
 - They prefer to call them **DeuteroPauline**
- Differences from the “secure” Pauline letters
 - Vocabulary: Colossians uses 87 words not found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus
 - *However, the subject and situation in the letter may have affected Paul’s diction here. Likewise Philippians, doubtlessly by Paul, uses 79 unique words*
 - Style: Colossians uses long, complex sentences in a way not found in Paul’s earlier letters
 - *Nevertheless, the practice of using scribes and the expectation of the audience could have affected the style of the letter*
 - **More significant are the apparent theological differences . . .**

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Seeming Doctrinal Differences

- **Christology**: Person and Work of Jesus
 - *New emphasis on the Christ’s eternal status and his role in creation, but this is probably a response to the false teachings that Paul is countering in the letter*
 - Absent are the usual Pauline arguments of the death and resurrection of Christ being the source of justification, but there is still an emphasis on the blood of the cross, peace, and reconciliation.
- **Ecclesiology**: Nature of the Church
 - Earlier letters use the word “church” (*ecclesia*) to refer to local congregations
 - *In this letter the Church is used in a universal sense, and Paul extends the metaphor of the body to make the Church the Body of Christ with Christ as the head*
- **Eschatology**
 - *Apparent realized eschatology (the Colossians are currently “raised in Christ”) rather than future eschatology (remember that this had been a problem for the Corinthians)*
 - *Passages in Colossians still refer to a future, final coming of Christ*

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Structure and Themes

- **Overview**

- **Opening Formula** (1:1–2)
- **Thanksgiving** (1:3–8)
- **Body** (1:9–4:6)
 - Pauline Indicative (teaching, 1:9–2:23)
 - Pauline Imperative (exhortation, 3:1–4:6)
- **Concluding Formula** (4:7–18)

- **Focuses**

- **Christ's Lordship, in order to counter the claims of false teachers**
 - probably **syncretists** who **mixed elements of Judaism, mystery religions, and early Gnosticism**
- **Christian ethics**
 - particularly the “**Household Code**” governing family and other personal relationships (very common in Greek and Roman philosophy)

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Teachings and Admonitions in Colossians

• ————— •

“I therefore, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called . . . Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (Ephesians 4:1–6)

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Pauline Indicative (Teaching, 1:9–2:23)

- Prayer of Supplication (1:9–14)
- Polemic Against the False Doctrine of Angelic Mediators (1:15–2:23)
 - Supremacy of Christ (1:15–23)
 - Christological Hymn (1:15–20)
 - The Apostolic Ministry (1:24–2:5)
 - Fulness of Life in Christ (2:6–15)
 - Warnings Against False Teachers (2:16–23)

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Colossians' Christ Hymn (1:15–20)

¹² . . . Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: ¹³Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated *us* into the kingdom of his dear Son: ¹⁴In whom we have redemption through his blood, *even* the forgiveness of sins:

¹⁵Who is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of every creature:

¹⁶For by him were all things created,
that are in heaven, and that are in earth,
visible and invisible,
whether *they be* thrones, or dominions, or
principalities, or powers:
all things were created by him, and for him:

¹⁷And he is before all things,
and by him all things consist.

¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church:
who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead;
that in all *things* he might have the preeminence.

¹⁹For it pleased *the Father* that in him should all
fulness dwell;

^{20b} by him to reconcile all things unto himself;
^{20a} And, having made peace through the blood of
his cross,
^{20c} by him, *I say*, whether *they be* things in earth, or
things in heaven.

- The hymn that follows is one of the more difficult to divide into stanzas or verses
- The hymn proper divides into two sections, the first dealing with Christ's role as **Creator** and the second with his role as **Savior**

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Colossians' Christ Hymn (Creation)

Creation

¹⁵Who is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of every creature:

¹⁶For by him were all things created,
that are in heaven,
and that are in earth,
visible and invisible,
whether *they be* thrones, or
dominions, or principalities, or powers:
all things were created by him, and for
him:

¹⁷And he is before all things,
and by him all things consist.

- Christ is the firstborn, before all other beings, including the angelic powers worshipped by the Colossian syncretists
- Under the direction of the Father, Christ was and is the creator
- "... by him all things consist" = "in him all things hold together" (NIV, NJB, NRSV)

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Colossians' Christ Hymn (Reconciliation)

Reconciliation

- "the body, the church," the church as a universal body and not as an individual, local congregation

- "who is the beginning . . . that in all things he might have the preeminence" premortality of Christ and future glory once again counter the Colossian syncretists

- "the firstborn from the dead" stresses a literal, bodily resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15)

- "by him to reconcile all things unto himself . . . having made peace through the blood of his cross"

¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church:
who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead;
that in all things he might have the preeminence.

¹⁹For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell;

^{20b} by him to reconcile all things unto himself;

^{20a} And, having made peace through the blood of his cross,

^{20c} by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven.

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Fulness of Life *in* Christ (2:6–15)

- Life in Christ contrasted with the Colossians earlier, pagan life or the system offered by the **syncretists**
- “As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him . . . **Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy** and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after **the rudiments of the world**, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all **the fulness of the Godhead bodily**.” (2:6–9)
 - **Philosophy** here
 - a manmade religious system, apparently the syncretistic combination of Jewish angelology, Greek philosophy, and early Gnosticism (emphasis on secret, saving knowledge and a spiritual over material existence)
 - **the rudiments of the world**
 - “according to **the elemental spirits of the universe**” (NRSV for *stoicheia*, divine spirits and demigods of Gnosticism between man and God)
 - **“the fulness of the Godhead bodily”**
 - *Theotetos*: “divinity, the state of being (a) God”
 - “In him, in bodily form, lives divinity in all its fullness” (2:9 NJB)

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Being “Risen with Christ” Realized Eschatology?

- In the later Pauline imprisonment letters (i.e., Colossians and Ephesians), **Paul often talks of Christians already being risen with Christ**
 - Many scholars *assume* this is referring to resurrection and hence contradicts the Corinthian letters, where Paul emphasizes that saints *are not yet* “resurrected” or “living in the spirit”
 - Yet the **participatory model** of salvation uses ordinances and life experiences (having a new life as a Christian, suffering persecution, or experiencing trials) to help us understand Christ’s Atonement
 - “Buried with him in baptism, **wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead**.” (2:12; cf. Romans 6:4)
- “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” (3:1 NIV)
 - **Hence this should not be used as a decisive argument for pseudonymity**

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Pauline Imperative

(Exhortation, 3:1-4:6)

- **New Life in Christ (3:1-17)**
 - **2 Lists of 5 Vices to Avoid (3:5-8)**
 - “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth” = “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly” (3:5 NRSV)
 - sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, “which is idolatry”
 - anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language
 - **5 Virtues to Emulate (3:12)**
 - compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience
- **Rules for Christian Households (3:18-4:1; see Household Code in Ephesians 5:21-6:9 and in Titus 2:1-10)**
- Exhortation to Prayer (4:2-4)
- Behavior Towards Pagans (4:5-6)

Concluding Formula (4:7-18)

- Introductions and Commendations (4:7-14)
 - Note Onesimus
- **Greetings to Laodicea and Final Instructions (4:15-18)**
 - First hint of the developing practice of encyclicals or “circular letters”
 - “And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the *epistle* from Laodicea.” (4:16)