

COLOSSIANS & EPHESIANS

Celebrating the Cosmic Christ and Unity in Christ.

The Deutro-Pauline Letters

Deutro-Pauline (literally meaning ‘second Paul’) is the name given to those letters in the New Testament that bear Paul’s name but which scholars believe were probably not written by the apostle himself. Whereas today such a practice might be regarded as fraudulent, we must judge it in the context of the ancient world in which all of these letters took shape. Renowned biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown explains the nature of these letters well:

‘What is being suggested is that one of the Pauline “school” of disciples took it upon himself to write a letter in Paul’s name because he wanted it to be received authoritatively as what Paul himself would say to the situation being addressed. ... Attribution of the letter to Paul in these circumstances would not be using a false name or making a false claim that Paul wrote the letter. It would be treating Paul as the author in the sense that the authority behind the letter was intended as an extension of his thought – a taking on of the great apostle’s mantle to continue his work.

[Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997.]

Indeed such a practice was quite common in the ancient world and was also prevalent in the Hebrew scriptures. Important biblical traditions were attributed to central figures in Israel’s history such as Moses, David and Solomon even though many of these traditions only took shape centuries later. Similarly, the authority and status of the Book of Isaiah was in no way diminished or compromised even though later disciples of the prophet were inspired to write in the tradition of Isaiah and add to his work for almost two centuries after his death.

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE PAULINE AND DEUTRO-PAULINE LETTERS

Among the thirteen New Testament letters that bear the name of Paul, the letter to the Colossians has a unique place. Scholars almost universally accept that seven are from the hand of the apostle (Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon). A large majority of scholars believe that Paul did not write the Pastoral Letters (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus) or Ephesians, and a growing majority now think the same regarding 2

Thessalonians. That leaves Colossians, whose authorship continues to a subject of intense debate.

A small majority of biblical scholars and Pauline experts favour the conclusion that Paul is not the author of Colossians but a number of them think that Paul may still have been alive and may even have had some input into its composition. Colossians has accordingly been aptly described as a 'bridge' between Paul himself and those who continued his ministry and wrote further letters in his name.

While Colossians bears many striking resemblances to Paul's letters, a number of factors have led scholars to question Pauline authorship. This letter makes extensive use of terms and vocabulary not found in any of Paul's other letters while several key concepts like "righteousness" and the Pauline emphasis on the death/resurrection of Christ as the means to justification are notably absent from Colossians. In terms of style, Colossians is distinctively different, written in a series of extraordinarily long sentences overflowing with synonyms. Whereas, in the undisputed Pauline letters, the term "church" usually refers to a local Christian community, here it seems to be used in a more universal sense encompassing all believers. Colossians is marked moreover by a pervasive insistence on the benefits that Christ has *already* bestowed (Col 1:13-14) rather than on the benefits that await the believer. Here also Christ is portrayed in more cosmic terms than in Paul's other letters although this emphasis may be attributable in part to opponents' emphasis on the power of heavenly entities.

Whilst the question of authorship continues to be debated, what is certain is that whoever wrote Colossians knew Paul's letters, and perhaps the apostle himself, but who developed a unique style and theological outlook. The enduring value of this letter is that reminds believers in every generation that nothing is to displace the primacy of direct relationship with God "in Christ."

The close connections between Colossians and Ephesians will be discussed in the section on Ephesians.

The background to Colossians

Colossae was a town situated some 100 miles south east of Ephesus in the heart of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) where the towns of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col 4:13) formed a triangle, each approximately 10 miles from the others. Colossians indicates that Epaphras (Col 1:7; 4:12-13; Phm 23) had founded the Church in Colossae and had at least helped in the other two centres. It appears that Paul had never visited Colossae (Col 1:4, 9; 2:1) although it may have been at his prompting that Epaphras undertook his evangelizing mission.

The author, whom we call 'Paul' for convenience, writes this letter to refute a false philosophy (Col 2:8) that apparently sought to distort the proper understanding of Christ's uniqueness. What can be discerned about the proponents of this rival philosophy is sketchy and uncertain but they apparently blended elements from Judaism, pagan cults and mystery religions. Note the references to 'circumcision' [2:11], the 'new moon and the Sabbath' [2:16], the emphasis on special dietary regulations [2:21] and the mediating role of angels [2:18] which all feature prominently in Jewish tradition. These were combined with pagan beliefs about the power of "the elements of the universe" [2:8] that held that cosmic spirits dominated the entire world including the heavenly bodies (the moon and stars) which in turn influenced human affairs. This 'philosophy' apparently proposed a hierarchical system of heavenly beings in which Christ was subordinate to angelic powers to whom worship was ultimately due. Colossians rigorously refutes such notions as hollow and delusive and unequivocally asserts the supremacy of Christ over all creation.



READ THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS NOW

With this general background in mind read Colossians slowly and carefully.

- What does the letter call its listeners to believe of Christ?
- What does the letter demand of its readers?

NOTES

The introduction to Colossians follows the pattern of Paul's other letters with a warm greeting and thanksgiving. Paul's prayer for the community in Col 1:9-12 invokes the very virtues that they need right now as they confront false teaching: knowledge, wisdom, understanding, a well lived Christian life, endurance, patience and joy.

The Christological Hymn

The key element in this letter's presentation of Christ comes in its Christological Hymn in Col 1:15-21. Here, as in Philippians 2, the author appears to draw on a pre-existing Christian hymn, familiar perhaps to his audience, and uses it as a basis for refuting the false philosophy menacing the faith of the community. As it stands it is an extraordinarily beautiful meditation on Jesus as the pivot on which, first, God's creation of the world (verses 15-18a) and, second, God's reconciliation of the world (verses 18b-20) turned.

Many scholars suggest that this hymn may originally have been a hymn to personified female wisdom in the tradition of Prov 8:22-31 and Eccl 24:1-22 where God's chief attribute, infinite wisdom, is celebrated as the source of all creation and the means by which God communicates God's purpose to the world. If so, then it appears that the early Christian community adopted these ready made wisdom traditions and applied them to Jesus.

The hymn's deliberate emphasis on all things being created and reconciled in Christ underlines the superiority of Christ over all principalities and powers. The hymn moreover makes clear that Christ is the ruler of the entire cosmos and the one through whom, by the blood of the cross (Col 1:20), all creation and all peoples, including the Colossians themselves, have been reconciled with God. This exalted understanding of Christ, often referred to as a high Christology, becomes the foundation of Paul's polemic against the philosophy of those who seek to distort the community's faith. Since Christ is supreme over all cosmic powers and since through faith believers now live "in Christ" (Col 2:7) they have no need of any other power or intermediary. The absolute superiority of Christ over the "principalities and powers" in whom the false teachers place their trust is portrayed vividly in the image of Christ making a public spectacle of them by parading them in a victorious procession like a general with prisoners of war (Col 2:15). It would be nonsense therefore for Christians to revert to a position from which God has set them free.

Instructions for Christian Living

In typical Pauline fashion the letter moves from questions of belief to the issue of how Christians are to live (Col 3:1-4:6). The writer's basic premise is set out in Col 3:1-2: *"So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."* Having listed various vices to be avoided the letter goes on to list different virtues that ought to be exhibited by those who 'have clothed themselves with the new self' (Col 3:10). Finally, in a section often referred to as a 'Household Code' the author speaks specifically to different members of the household emphasising how the mystery of God, revealed in Christ Jesus, ought to manifest itself in the way they live their lives.

THE HOUSEHOLD CODES

The New Testament contains 5 lists specifying the respective responsibilities of each member of the household: Col 3:18-4:2, Eph 5:21-6:9, Titus 2:1-10, 1 Tim 2:8-15; 5:1-2; 6:1-2 and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7. These are often referred to as 'household codes.' There is little doubt that these codes were influenced by similar contemporary ethical lists. But the motivation in each of these codes is distinctively Christian. These rules are for households under the "Lordship of Christ." The readers are encouraged to submit to these rules as a way of submitting to Christ and living "in the Lord" (Col 3:18, 20, 22).

How are we as Christians today to evaluate these ethical instructions given that they clearly reflect the hierarchical patriarchal authoritarian understanding of society prevalent in the first century? Such an understanding of society, in which wives for example were subject to their husbands, was taken for granted in the time of Paul. As we have already seen [when discussing the case of slavery in the Letter to Philemon], Paul's concern, rightly or wrongly, lay not in challenging such structures directly but rather on addressing how Christians ought to live in society. His question seems to be 'How should we live as Christians in this society which is ours?' The answers Paul proposed for his own time and context will hardly satisfy the modern reader nor should they! They were directed at Paul's own time, not ours. But the original question that inspired these household codes remains the same. How are we to live as Christians in this society which is ours? To Paul's original question we must discover answers that are adequate for our own context today.

Baptismal Allusions in Colossians.

Scholars often encourage readers of Colossians to be particularly attentive to its allusions to baptism, for example Col 1:12-14. Elsewhere the

writer describes baptism as a “spiritual circumcision” reminding believers that “when you were buried with him [Christ] in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12). Those who have died with Christ (in baptism) and “whose life in Christ is hidden with God” (Col 3:3) are encouraged to “clothe” themselves (Col 3:12) with the virtues appropriate to their new life “in Christ”. The understanding of baptism as the believer’s incorporation into the death and resurrection of Christ is very similar to that of Paul in Romans 6 and lays emphasis on the intimate union with the risen Lord by which believers share in his life. At the heart of Paul’s theology lies the unwavering conviction that through baptism and Christian living believers live now “in Christ” (Col 2:6, 12-13; 3:3-4). Such sentiments resonate powerfully with Paul’s own experience described in Galatians: “*I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*” (Gal 2:20).

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

UNITY IN CHRIST

Deutro-Pauline and yet quintessentially Pauline.

Though the majority of scholars today believe that the Letter to the Ephesians was penned by a hand other than Paul, most agree that it captures the very essence of Paul’s theology. Indeed C.H. Dodd referred to Ephesians as “the crown of Paul’s theology.”

As in the case of Colossians, the elevated prose and literary style of Ephesians mark it out as distinctive. Eph 1:3-14, for example, is a single sentence in the original Greek. The letter’s devotional tone and quasi-liturgical language differ sharply from the impassioned rhetoric we typically associate with Paul. Whereas Paul’s letters speak to the particular concerns and circumstances of a specific community, Ephesians speaks to the challenges facing the Church at large. Like Colossians, Ephesians seems to have a more universal understanding of church / *ekklesia* and lays greater emphasis on what Christ has already achieved both in the world and in believers. These and other factors lead scholars to believe that it is unlikely that Ephesians comes from the hand of the apostle himself.

Ephesians: A ‘Sister Letter’ to Colossians

Ephesians’ dependence on Colossians is obvious even to the casual reader. 75 of its 155 verses parallel verses or phrases in Colossians, making them more similar than any other two letters that bear Paul’s name. Many of the themes prominent in Colossians are clearly paralleled in Ephesians.

These close parallels, as well as phrases taken from Romans, Philemon and other letters indicate to scholars that the writer of Ephesians was familiar with Paul's writings and drew extensively on them in the composition of this letter.

Dating Ephesians.

The internal evidence of Ephesians seems to reflect a time in Church history significantly later than the lifetime of the apostle. The reference in Eph 2:20 to the apostles and prophets as the church's foundation seems to imply that these figures belong to the past rather than the author's own generation. The equality of Gentiles and Jews in Christian fellowship appears no longer to be a source of controversy but an accomplished fact, something that occurred only after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. The letter is alluded to by Ignatius of Antioch in a letter to Polycarp in 110 CE and many scholars suggest a composition date in the late 80s / early 90s CE as most probable. If so, Ephesians represents the voice of a second/third generation believer who knew Paul's theology and writings well but who developed them even further to compose a remarkable summary and synthesis of Paul's thinking on how Christ and the Church fit into the mystery that is God's plan and purpose.

Ephesians: A Letter or a Meditation?

Apart from the formal beginning and conclusion (Eph 1:1-2; 6:20-21) Ephesians lacks many of the elements we associate with Paul's letters. Nowhere does he address his listeners familiarly as "brothers." There are none of the personal greetings and references that give Paul's letters such an intensely personal and intimate quality. By comparison, Ephesians reads almost as a sophisticated meditation, a prayerful and thoughtful reflection, composed to provide an updated summary of Paul's vision tailored to meet the needs of a largely Gentile and cosmopolitan church.

The fact that the words 'in Ephesus' are lacking in the oldest and best manuscripts has led some scholars to suggest that this letter was in fact meant to be circulated among several churches in Asia Minor. Indeed Eph 1:15 and 3:2 seem to suggest that Paul and the readers had only heard of each other whereas Acts 19 speaks of Paul spending three years in the city. If this letter were intended exclusively for the community at Ephesus it seems strange that not a single member of the community is named in the course of the letter. Indeed Tychicus, the bearer of the letter, is the only individual named in the entire correspondence.



READ EPHESIANS NOW

With this general background in mind read the Letter to Ephesians slowly and carefully.

- *What strikes you about the tone and style of the letter as you read it?*
- *What according to Ephesians is the ultimate goal and purpose of the divine plan?*
- *What does this letter call Christians to?*

NOTES:

Ephesians is unique in that it combines the customary opening thanksgiving with an extended blessing prayer (Eph 1:3-14) – what in the Jewish tradition is called a *berekah*. This opening prayer serves as an overture to the entire letter, clearly establishing the central theme of unity in Christ: God's "*plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things in earth.*" (v.10). Unity is proclaimed as the unequivocal goal and purpose of the divine plan: a unity in which the people of Israel and Gentiles share fully and equally. The inclusion of the Gentiles is no longer imaged as the grafting of a Gentile olive branch onto a Jewish olive tree (as it had been in Romans 11:17) but as "*an entirely new creation*" (Eph 2:15). The thanksgiving that follows (Eph 1:15-23) acknowledges the faith and love of the recipients who through faith and baptism have now become part of God's eternal plan.

Christ: The source and instrument of 'at-one-ment.'

Eph 2:1-3:21 constitutes the heart and soul of Ephesians as it seeks to spell out the meaning of Jesus within God's eternal plan for all humankind. God, "*out of the great love with which he loved us ... made us alive with Christ*" (2:4-5). In Christ sinners have become believers and the spiritually dead have been brought to life by faith, which is the gift of God (Eph 2:1-10). There is a deliberate emphasis on what God has *already* achieved in Christ: believers are *already* raised up and exalted in Christ (v.6). Eph 2:11-22 goes on to celebrate Christ as the source and instrument of this unity which is and has always been the goal and purpose of God's eternal plan. Christ is spoken of as the 'peacemaker' or what biblical scholar Neal Flanagan has vividly described as the "*creator of at-one-ment.*"

The letter goes on to recall how God's grace has reached out to its Gentile recipients so that they who were once far off have now been brought near in Christ. The dividing wall of hostility [imaged perhaps on the wall that had separated the Court of Israel from the Gentiles' Court in the Temple] has been torn down and the community of Israel and Gentiles have become a new humanity; fellow citizens and co-heirs in the household of God (Eph 2:20).

"In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3:5-6). The heart of Paul's theology and mission is wonderfully summarized and synthesized in these verses: Jews and Gentiles are 'at-oned' with Christ, and in Christ with God. The divine plan, God's "eternal purpose" (Eph 3:11), God's "mystery" (Eph 3:5), Christ's life, death and resurrection all serve the same goal: namely, UNITY. What builds unity therefore is God's work, what disrupts unity is attributable to sin. This then is the mystery, the good news of which Paul has been made servant and minister (Eph 3:7).

This section closes with a doxology [a hymn or prayer praising God's glory] in Eph 3:20-21. It is almost as if merely thinking of God's incredible mystery compels the writer to praise God.

Instructions for Christian Living.

As in other Pauline letters, the writer of Ephesians moves naturally from matters of belief to how this ought to affect the lives of believers. In its opening verses the letter had stated that God had chosen its intended Gentile recipients *"to be holy and blameless before him [God] in love"* (Eph 1:4) and the remainder of the letter now spells out what such a calling implies. The writer begins by listing seven manifestations of unity that ought to characterize the Christian life (Eph 4:4-6) and insists that the diverse gifts of the Spirit equip Christians to build up the unity of the body of Christ. Whereas such a diversity of charisms was a source of tension in 1 Corinthians¹², now it is seen as contributing to the overall unity of the church.

Drawing on baptismal imagery, where the newly baptized put off their old clothes for the descent into the water and reappeared in new white garments immediately afterwards, believers are urged to divest themselves of the works of darkness and death which characterized their former way of life and to clothe themselves in light and life. The letter contrasts two ways of 'walking', corresponding to light and darkness, truth and falsehood, good and evil (Eph 5:6-20). Ephesians, like Colossians, is replete with baptismal allusions (Eph 1:13; 2:5; 4:4-6, 22-25) and baptism remains a constant undercurrent to the letter's message.

Ephesians 5:21-6:9 sets forth an extended household code specifying the respective duties and responsibilities of care of husbands/wives, parents/children, masters/slaves with an emphasis, as in Colossians, on the subjection of the second to the first. The writer however prefaces this list of specific duties with a general exhortation that applies equally to all: *"Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ"* (Eph 5:21).

The last section of the letter urges believers to put on the 'armour of God' which consists in truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, salvation, the word of God and prayer (Eph 6:10-20).

Rich in spiritual insight, Ephesians creatively summarizes many of the main Pauline themes. Even if not written by the apostle himself, it is nevertheless a significant celebration of early Christian understanding, an achievement worthy of the great apostle himself and certainly worthy of our attention in prayer and study.

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