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COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

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COLOSSIANS: INTRODUCTION

Colossians, one of the shortest of Paul's letters, is also one of the most exciting. Writing to a young church discovering what it was like to believe in Jesus Christ and to follow him, Paul shares their sense of wonder as he encourages them to explore the treasures of the gospel and to order their lives accordingly. There is, in fact, so much evocative language – talk about the gospel, about Jesus Christ, about holiness, about the church – that it is easy to lose track of the overall thread of the letter and merely to pick out a few details. But if the details are worth having, the letter as a whole is even more so. It is not a miscellaneous collection of 'helpful thoughts'. It is a particular letter written to a particular congregation at one point in its (very early) history. To believe, in fact, that Colossians is inspired Scripture is to believe that God intended to say just these things to this church – and in so doing to address, somehow, the church as a whole.

But what were these things? And why did they need saying? And what relevance may it all have for a different church in a different place and time? Ultimately, these questions can be answered only as

we go along through the book. But certain preliminary points can be made at this stage.

1. The shape of the letter

Colossians, like many books, and for that matter like most symphonies, plays or poems, is not the sort of work that can be simply split up into successive units, like the separate inches marked on a ruler. A simple analysis of contents is therefore not sufficient to show what the book is really about. It is more like a flower, growing from a small bud to a large bud and then gradually opening up to reveal, layer upon layer, the petals that had all along been hidden inside. We may briefly observe this unfolding process, as follows.

After the initial greeting (1:1–2) comes Paul's great prayer of thanksgiving for the church at Colosse (1:3–8), which turns into intercession on their behalf (1:9–23). He prays, basically, that the young church may learn how to thank God for what he has done for them in Christ. Out of this there grows Paul's initial statement of his purpose in writing (1:24–2:5): the Christian maturity he has sought in prayer on the Colossians' behalf he is now working to produce by writing to them. With this the bud is opened fully, revealing the great central section of the letter, which itself unfolds in the same way. Paul begins with a pregnant pair of verses (2:6–7), whose basic command is to 'walk in Christ'; he then attacks certain teachings that would prevent the Colossians from doing this in the full, mature way he longs to see (2:8–19). Central to his appeal is the fact that Christians have already 'been buried and raised with Christ' (2:12) and this idea unfolds in turn (2:20–3:4) to give more detailed instructions. The double-edged appeal ('since you died with Christ ... since you have been raised with Christ ...', 2:20; 3:1) is finally amplified into the two paragraphs 3:5–11 and 3:12–17, concluding with the command (3:17) to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him – which is, more or less, the sum and substance of the whole appeal. But Paul's picture of the life of the new age is not one of generalizations. He applies it in detail to two areas of life, the home (3:18–4:1) and the world (4:2–6). The body of the letter thus concludes where it began, with a picture of God at work, through the gospel, in the world (see 1:3–8). In the final

section (4:7–18) Paul conveys greetings, from fellow-workers who are with him and to other churches in the neighbourhood of Colosse. This closing section serves as a reminder that we are dealing not simply with abstract truth but with a flesh-and-blood letter, which must be handled as such if it is to yield its secrets.

Two points about this outline (which is set out diagrammatically on pp. 47f. below) should be noted. First, Paul is not writing what we might think of as a standard theological treatise, beginning with ‘doctrine’ and ending with ‘ethics’ or ‘practical teaching’.¹ For him, all is doctrine, all is practice, all is worship, because all is Christ. Secondly, therefore, it should be observed that virtually every section and sub-section in the main body of the letter could be accurately summed up with reference to Christ himself. This indicates an important truth about Colossians: its driving force comes from that which is stated in 1:5–20. The main reason why the Colossians should give thanks to God is because of Jesus Christ; if they do this with full knowledge and understanding about who he is and what he has achieved, everything else will fall into place.

2. The circumstances of writing

Treating Colossians as a real letter means asking when, where and why it was written – and, indeed, by whom, since, though it purports to be by Paul (1:1; 4:18 and by frequent implication), not all scholars have been convinced that it was written by the apostle himself. It is possible to argue the case for Pauline authorship in a compelling fashion, but to do so here would be to duplicate the work of other recent writers.² I prefer to come at the matter by a different route, asking first why the letter seems to have been written and then, in the light of the answer we receive, drawing conclusions about its authorship, date and location.

a. Colosse

The recipients of the letter were the members of a reasonably

1. Against, e.g., Lohse, pp. 3f.; Schweizer, p. 15.

2. See, recently, O’Brien, pp. xli–xlix

young church in Colosse, a town on the banks of the river Lycus in south-east Asia Minor (modern Turkey): see the map on page 18. It was neither a large nor an important town, though it had formerly been both; it had been upstaged by its near neighbours Laodicea, ten miles away, and Hierapolis, six miles beyond that.³ The letter indicates that Paul, who seems to have concentrated on major centres of population, had not visited the town himself: the Christian community there owed its origin under God to his fellow-worker Epaphras, who had brought news of Christ from Paul to Colosse and then news of a new church from Colosse to Paul (1:7–8).

What we know of the religious life of towns like Colosse is based on inference from evidence relating to that part of Asia Minor in general and from Paul's writings in particular. (Since Colosse itself has not been excavated, there is no archaeological evidence available for saying what local cults may have flourished, or how many Jews had made their home there.) Paul alludes several times to the pagan past of his converts (1:12–13, 21, 27; 2:13; 3:5–7),⁴ and it is likely that Colosse had its fair share of the variegated religious practices which characterized the Ancient Near East at this time. In this society the old gods of classical Greek culture still had their adherents, as did the 'mystery-religions' which promised entry to a secret, higher world for those who submitted to the proper initiation. With the passage of time and the movement of people from one area to another, the lines between different cults and religious ideas could get blurred, and the phenomenon known as 'syncretism' – the mixing of religious ideas and practices from a wide range of sources – became quite common.⁵

At the same time, as Acts 13:21 puts it, Moses had representatives in every city. Each town would have one or more synagogues, and it has been calculated that around this period the adult male Jewish

3. Further details in F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (in the U.S. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*) (Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 407ff.; O'Brien, pp. xxvif.

4. See O'Brien, pp. xxviiiif, citing Moule, p. 29.

5. For all this, see now the full treatment in H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Eng. Tr. (Fortress, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 164–203.

population in the neighbouring area of Laodicea was about eleven thousand. (Rome at this time had between forty and fifty thousand Jews, out of a total population of around a million, excluding slaves.)⁶ We know from a variety of sources that Judaism, in one form or another, was attractive to many pagans weary of the confused, often amoral religion of their own background, and it is likely that Christianity would make a similar impression on pagan hearers. It would therefore be easy (as we know from Galatians) for young converts to Christianity to become muddled, and to imagine that, having become Christians, they must complete the process by becoming Jews. It is this tendency that Paul is resolutely opposing in, for instance, Galatians, and in Philippians 3. It is my contention that a similar danger was the reason for the writing of Colossians, at least chapter 2. But this is a controversial claim, and must be advanced in various stages.

b. The problem of Colossians

Scholars have long held that Colossians was written to combat a particular danger within the young church. False teachers were inculcating spurious doctrines and practices, demoting Christ from his position of unique pre-eminence, and encouraging various dubious mystical and ascetic religious practices. But there is no agreement on the identity of these teachers or the nature of their teaching. Some suggest a pagan cult of one sort or another; others, some form of sectarian Judaism; others, an early form of Gnosticism; others, a blend of some or all of these. Recently an attempt has been made to trace affinities between the Colossian heresy and the teaching of the Pythagorean philosophy.⁷

6. For Laodicea, see O'Brien, p. xxvii; for Rome, see G. La Piana, 'Foreign Groups in Rome During the First Centuries of the Empire', *Harvard Theological Review* 20, 1927, pp. 183–403.

7. See the surveys in F. O. Francis and W. Meeks, eds., *Conflict at Colosse* (SBL/Scholars' Press, 1975); O'Brien, pp. xxx–xli; Schweizer (who takes the 'Pythagorean' view), pp. 125–134. Schweizer is wrong, incidentally, when he says that Caird 'posits a Jewish-Stoic movement' (p. 126, n. 1); Caird (pp. 163f) discusses this possibility but does not recommend it.

We cannot here discuss each of these solutions, let alone the arguments surrounding them. The problem, in its essence, could be stated as follows. (a) There are clear Jewish elements in what Paul is opposing, and yet there are many things which look more pagan than Jewish – the actual worship of angels (2:18), and ascetic practices which appear to deny the importance of the created order (2:2ff). (b) On the other hand, while much of what Paul is opposing can be fitted into an essentially non-Jewish framework, there are certain features (for instance, the reference to circumcision in 2:11), which remain obstinately and uniquely Jewish. No syncretistic religion has yet been discovered which had exactly this blend of things pagan and Jewish; nor is this a mere accident of our limited historical knowledge, since it is in fact difficult to conceive of even the possibility of such a blend. (c) The problem, therefore, is to find a hypothesis which will account for the polemic of Colossians both in outline and in detail. If, at the same time, such a hypothesis can help to explain the significance of the poem in 1:15–20, and of the particular form and content of the ethical exhortations in chapter 3, it will gain added strength.

c. The underlying solution: polemic against Judaism

The answer I wish to offer is essentially simple, but some of the supporting arguments involve more technical complexity than is appropriate in a volume such as this. What follows is therefore a summary of the essential points, some of which will be amplified further in the commentary.

Within the overall drift of the argument of the letter two features stand out: (a) the centrality of Christ throughout and (b) the emphasis, within chapter 2, on 2:11–12 and 2:13–15. The latter passages assert that the Colossian Christians have already been ‘circumcised’ and that God has dealt with the ‘written code ... that was against us’. I believe that these features are best explained on the assumption that Paul is warning the reader not to be taken in by the claims of Judaism, which would try (as in Acts 15:5) to persuade pagan converts to Christianity that their present position was incomplete. On the contrary, Paul declares: in Christ you have already been ‘circumcised’, and have been set free from any claim that the Jewish law might make on you. No-one must therefore

attempt to exclude you from the inner circle of God's people (2:16, 18, 20). The master-stroke in Paul's argument is thus that he warns ex-pagans against Judaism by portraying Judaism itself as if it were just another pagan religion. It is a 'philosophy' (2:8), developed by human tradition (2:8, 22): and to follow it is to return to the same type of religion the new converts had recently abandoned. A good deal of chapter 2 in particular can therefore be understood as characteristically Pauline irony (see the commentary for details).

This hypothesis has three particular strengths.

i. The underlying view of Christ in the letter (set out particularly in 1:15–20) is that he has taken the position which Judaism assigned to the Jewish law. Having Christ, therefore, the new converts already possessed all they needed: Judaism had nothing more to offer them.

ii. A contrast with Judaism enables several passages in the letter to gain in significance. Paul's argument amounts to a redefinition of the cardinal Jewish doctrines of monotheism and election. With Christ at the centre, he presents a new view of God and his people. Thus (e.g.) in 1:12ff. Paul declares that the church has had its own 'exodus', and is the heir to the true promised land. In chapters 2 and 3 he stresses that the church already lives in the 'age to come' that Jews expected, and is therefore under no obligation to submit to regulations that were essentially a preparation for that age.

iii. This position enables us to understand the many parallels between Colossians and several other well-known Pauline passages, such as Galatians 3–4, Romans 7:1–6, Philippians 3:2ff., and particularly 2 Corinthians 3–5, which offer several very important parallels to Colossians. In each of these passages, albeit in different ways according to context, Paul contrasts Judaism and the gospel of Jesus Christ in ways which cohere well with Colossians.

There are certain obvious problems with this position, which may be answered as follows.

i. It is true that Paul never here uses the word 'law' (*nomos*) or commandment (*entolē*), which feature prominently in some of his other discussions of Christianity and Judaism (e.g. Romans,

Galatians).⁸ But I shall argue in the commentary that (a) 2:13ff. is best understood as an oblique reference to the Jewish law; (b) 1:15ff. is best taken as an ascription to Christ of the position some Jews gave to their law;⁹ (c) the language used of Christ in 2:3 is almost certainly borrowed from ‘terms used by Judaism concerning the law’, so that Paul ‘here substitutes Christ for the Law’;¹⁰ (d) the regulations referred to in 2:16 fit the Jewish law and nothing else. In addition, (e) 2 Corinthians 3 – 5 demonstrates that Paul is quite capable of mounting a full-dress argument about the old and new covenants in which the words ‘law’ and ‘commandment’ do not appear. Finally, and most importantly, (f) it is likely that Paul has avoided these key terms for a good reason: namely, that they still carry, for him, positive as well as negative connotations (see Rom. 3:31; 7:12, 16; 8:4, 7). In warning the Colossians against the present Jewish use of the law, he is not going to fall into the trap of denying the divine origin of the law itself.

ii. The things Paul is attacking (angel-worship, ascetic practices and ‘philosophy’) do not look particularly Jewish. This, indeed, is the basis of the usual alternative theories, which postulate some kind of syncretistic religion. But (a) several scholars have recently pointed out the close connection between the attack on angel-worship in 2:18 and various aspects of Judaism;¹¹ (b) it is easier to understand the references to asceticism (2:20–23) as contemptuous and ironic, and the close parallel with Mark 7:5ff. increases the probability that the

8. See E. Schweizer, ‘Zur neueren Forschung am Kolosserbrief (seit 1970)’ in *Theologische Berichte* 5, eds. J. Pfammatter and F. Furger (Zürich, 1976), pp. 163–191, here at p. 174; O’Brien, p. xxxi; Gnifka, pp. 163f.

9. See M. D. Hooker, ‘Were there False Teachers in Colossae?’ in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: In Honour of Charles Francis Digby Moule*, eds. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley (CUP, 1973), pp. 315–331.

10. O’Brien, p. 96, citing Isa. 33:5–6; 1 Baruch 3:15–4:1; Eccles 24:23 (this should perhaps have read 24:1–23); 2 Baruch 44:14; 54:13; and secondary literature.

11. See further F. O. Francis, ‘Humility and Angelic Worship in Col. 2:18’, *Studia Theologica* 16, 1962, pp. 109–134; C. C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (SPCK/Crossroad,

target of the polemic is the Jewish law: (c) Philo and Josephus, Jewish writers of the first century, both use the word 'philosophy' to describe Judaism, or particular parties within it, to pagans,¹² and there is no reason why Paul should not have done the same – particularly if his purpose here is precisely to describe Judaism as 'just another religion'.

My hypothesis, then, is that all the elements of Paul's polemic in Colossians make sense as a warning against Judaism. The way to maturity for the people of God does not lie in their becoming Jews, but rather in their drawing out, and applying to personal and communal life, the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This means that those theories which find parallels to certain aspects of the Colossian 'situation' in Gnosticism, mystery religions or other philosophies, such as Stoicism and Pythagoreanism, are not necessary.¹³ Nor are they even sufficient: they fall by their own weight, since they fail completely to explain the passage about circumcision in 2:11ff., and the extremely Jewish appearance of 2:16ff.

If we thus place Colossians alongside Galatians and other passages in which Paul's polemic is aimed at Judaism, we see many clear parallels. But at the same time there are important differences. In Galatians Paul clearly faces a present and active opposing faction, and is seriously concerned lest his converts' faith be undermined. In Colossians his argument and tone suggest that the same is not true here. This has led at least one recent scholar to question whether there really were 'false teachers' in Colosse whose work and doctrine Paul was trying to undermine.¹⁴ This suggestion

1982), especially ch. 4. Rowland (p. 409) cites Col. 2:16ff. as 'evidence of a considerable degree of Jewish influence on the beliefs and practices of Christian communities in Asia Minor'.

12. Philo *de Somn.* 2:127; *Leg. ad Gai.* 156, 245; *De Mut. Nom.* 223; *Omn. Prob. Lib.* 88; *Jos. Bell.* 2:119; *Ant.* 18:11. See also 4 Macc. 1:1; 5:10, 5:22; 7:7–9; and compare Schweizer, p. 136, n. 8.

13. See above, p. 25, n. 7. This criticism applies particularly to the elaborate theories of Martin and Schweizer. For discussion of the view of G. Bornkamm see Gnllka, pp. 165f.

14. See Hooker, 'Were there False Teachers in Colosse?'

finds additional support in, for instance, Paul's thanksgiving for the church and its faith (1:3–8), and particularly in his comment in 2:5 that they are in good order and that their faith in Christ is firm.

There is, in fact, nothing in the letter which *requires* us to postulate that Paul is opposing actual false teachers who were already infiltrating the church. The main emphasis of the letter is on Christian maturity. Paul knew well enough that his footsteps had been dogged, elsewhere in Asia Minor, by those offering a different sort of 'maturity', seeking to win over ex-pagan Christians to observance of the Jewish law. It is quite natural that he should issue such a warning in the course of his positive message, not merely because the danger might be pressing at some future point, but because it enabled him to highlight, by contrast, the fundamental fact that Christians are members, in Christ, of the true people of God, the true humanity. To suggest, then, that there are opponents actually present in Colosse (however fashionable such suggestions may be) may well be to read too much between the lines. This does not mean, of course, that Paul's readers would have had difficulty in understanding what he was talking about. The fact of a large Jewish minority presence in the cities and towns of Asia Minor at this period would have meant that thoughtful ex-pagans would be quite capable of recognizing the target of Paul's polemic, even if they did not at once see all its subtleties.

Was Paul, then, envisaging an attempt by non-Christian Jews to persuade the converts to move lock, stock and barrel from the church to the synagogue? Or was he really more anxious about Christians who were attempting to combine allegiance to Christ with observance of the Jewish law – the militant 'Jewish Christians' whom we meet at various points in the New Testament (Acts 11:2–3; 15:5; Gal. 2:12; Titus 1:10)? A decision here is difficult. It is by no means as clear as most commentators assume that the teaching Paul is opposing made room, officially, for Jesus Christ within its system. The one verse which might suggest this is 2:19; the attack is to be expected from people who, though claiming to belong to Christ, are not 'holding fast' to him as the head of the body, but are in fact allowing the Torah to take his supreme place. But the word usually translated 'holding fast' (*kratōn*) can not only mean 'holding

on to', of something already grasped, but also 'grasping' of something one does not already hold. It could, therefore, refer to people who had never belonged to Christ at all (NIV 'he has lost connection with the Head' goes beyond the Greek). Furthermore, Paul's claim in Colossians is that, in clinging to the badge of circumcision and the ethical safety-net of the Jewish law, those who want to lure ex-pagan Christians into full synagogue membership are making a category mistake. They are trying to persuade those who have entered the new age to step back into the old. This criticism applies not so much (as in Galatians) to the 'Jewish Christian' position, but to Judaism itself.

This interpretation of Paul's polemic raises, of course, the question of whether Paul is, here and for that matter elsewhere, guilty of anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism.¹⁵ Space forbids the full discussion that this question warrants, and I must simply summarize the fuller argument that could be made.¹⁶ It is true that a caricature of Paul has dominated scholarship for a long time, in which he is opposed to all things Jewish simply because of their Jewishness, and in which he attacks Judaism for holding doctrines which, it now appears, were not held in quite that form at all. This picture has now been replaced in many scholarly circles by a new one, its mirror image, in which Paul has no (or next to no) critique of Judaism at all.¹⁷ Somewhere between these two extremes lies the truth, and Colossians is in fact an important part of the relevant evidence for deciding the issue.

Where, then, does the truth lie? Paul believed that Jesus was the Messiah; that with Jesus' death and resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit the new covenant had been inaugurated (2 Cor. 3); that the people of Jesus Christ were the true people of God, the sole inheritors of the promises to Abraham (Gal. 3; Rom. 4); and that the

15. See e.g. R. R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (Seabury, 1974), pp. 95–107. The often shrill tone of this book should not be allowed to deafen its readers to the many important points that it has to make.

16. See now J. G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (OUP, 1984).

17. See e.g. K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Fortress, 1976).

gospel events provided a sharp critique of *all* humanity, Jews not excepted, and therefore a warning to Jew and Gentile alike to find salvation in Christ, the only place where it was available. This only makes Paul anti-Jewish to the extent that it also makes him 'opposed' to fallen humanity in general; but this 'opposition' is not one of hatred, but of concerned love (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; etc.). Paul makes no effort, as later anti-Semitism (including the *soi-disant* 'Christian' variety) has done on occasion, to argue that the synagogue, or Jewish customs and institutions, or Jewish people themselves, should logically cease to exist. He continued to attend synagogue.¹⁸ He argues that Jews still have the right, and the chance, to hear the gospel, to believe in Jesus Christ, and so to be saved (Rom. 11:11-32, itself an argument against an incipient 'Christian' anti-Semitism which would argue that Jews cannot now be saved).¹⁹ If this be anti-Judaism, it is nothing for a Christian to be ashamed of. The only alternative is to deny that Jesus is the Messiah, that God raised him from the dead and so demonstrated that his death was the means of dealing with sin (1 Cor. 15:14, 17), that the Spirit of Jesus is the Holy Spirit of God, who brings into being the people of God of the 'new age'. Paul has hard words to say against those who deny these things, whether explicitly or (by their desire to combine Christianity with orthodox Judaism) implicitly. If Romans 9 - 11 is anything to go by, he would have had equally hard words to say against those who, in the name of the Jewish Messiah, persecute Jews or deny them their rights, including the right to practise their ancestral religion. There is no political programme concealed in Paul's

18. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Fortress, 1983), p. 192.

19. I have argued this position at length in ch. 4, of *The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans*, unpublished D. Phil. thesis (Oxford University, 1980). I do not think that Romans 11 refers either to a large-scale last-minute conversion of 'all Jews' (whatever that might mean) or to a way of salvation for Jews which is other than through faith in Jesus Christ. See too S. C. Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, 2nd edn (Hodder/IVP, 1984), p. 42.

theological polemic. If subsequent generations have turned it into such a programme, that is scarcely his fault. He knew the difference between church and state (Rom. 13:1–7), between the argument that Judaism is theologically obsolete as the way of salvation and the idea that it is the enemy of a ‘Christian’ state (and therefore to be eliminated).

Paul’s critique of Judaism does not aim, as in the old caricature, at ‘legalism’, the supposed attempt to earn righteousness through good works. It aims at the position of national superiority which Judaism had thought to claim on the basis of God’s choice of her. Observance of the Law, the national charter, was designed not to earn membership in the covenant but to embody and express it. For Paul, the gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah reveals that God has all along had a different end in view. National Israel, with her Law, was simply the preliminary stage in this plan, which always envisaged an eventual world-wide family.

3. Authorship

But did Paul himself really write Colossians? So far we have assumed that he did; but scholarly opinion is by no means unanimous on the point. There is not even agreement on where the weight of argument must lie if the issue is to be settled. Some of those who doubt Colossians’ authenticity build their case on theology, saying that the style of the letter does not provide a clear enough indication.²⁰ Others, happy to say that the theology of the letter is substantially Pauline, think that the style alone forces us to say that someone other than Paul wrote it.²¹ This suggests, actually, that neither the style nor the theology is as decisive in mounting an argument against authenticity as some have suggested. More recent work has shown that an excellent case for Pauline authorship can still be made out.²² I wish here simply to focus on certain points which further advance this case.

20. E.g. Lohse, pp. 89–91.

21. E.g. Schweizer, pp. 18f.

22. O’Brien, pp. xli–xlix.

First, there are some general problems with attributing Colossians to someone other than Paul. Putting the letter in the post-Pauline period, as has been the fashion in some circles, makes the personal allusions, and particularly those of chapter 4, very hard to explain.²³ But making it contemporary with Paul, and yet assigning it to a different hand, as Schweizer does (he suggests Timothy), is to solve one (supposed) problem by creating another. We know nothing whatever of Timothy's literary capabilities, and examples from other areas of human art (such as the completion, by Süssmaier, of Mozart's *Requiem*) do not encourage us to suppose that creative genius can be 'caught' even by long familiarity with the master and his work. In particular, we may well wonder whether anyone other than Paul himself would have been so bold with his irony, so characteristically terse and pregnant in his theological statements and Old Testament allusions. Deliberate imitations – as, if not by Paul, we must suppose Colossians to be – are usually wooden, self-conscious things, not flowing and vibrant as this letter is.

This leads us to considerations of style. It is true that there are several details of verbal usage which make Colossians stand out just a little from the undoubted Pauline letters.²⁴ But almost all of these, when examined, turn out to be of little significance, as Lohse admits.²⁵ Each epistle has words that are peculiar to it, so that finding such words in Colossians tells us very little. And all the supposed oddities of wording can in fact be paralleled from the other letters.²⁶

23. Leaving aside the whole question of pseudonymity, i.e. whether the practice of writing books in someone else's name was as widespread in the early church as is sometimes thought, and if so, what the criteria might be for deciding whether a particular work was an example of this. On this matter see the discussion (in relation to 2 Peter, though the argument admits of wider application) of J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (SCM Press, 1976), pp. 186ff.

24. Details in Lohse, pp. 84–88; more fully in W. Bujard, *Stilanalytische Untersuchungen zum Kolosserbrief als Beitrag zur Methodik von Sprachvergleichen* (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1973).

25. Lohse, p. 91.

26. Lohse considers *ho estin* (1:24; 3:14 and perhaps 1:27 – there are MS

The style of argument, it is true, is not the same as that in Romans or Galatians, where question-and-answer dialogue, and detailed treatment of Old Testament passages, make up a good part of the argument. But the other letters indicate that this was by no means the only style that Paul could adopt. And in fact Colossians does appear typically Pauline in other stylistic respects. Themes are stated briefly or poetically, and then developed further: in 1:15–20 and 2:6ff., for instance, we find a very similar pattern (poetic statement, followed later by detailed application) to Philippians 2:6–11 and 3:2ff., and other similar passages.

The real weight of the argument against Pauline authorship lies, I believe, on the question of theology.²⁷ Here again the case is not as strong as it is sometimes made to seem. To begin with, a general point. The popular idea that the Captivity Epistles (our two letters, with Ephesians and Philippians) show a more developed, and hence later, theological position than do the (supposedly) earlier ones rests on a mistake. We are able to chart changes in (say) Calvin's mind by studying the differences between successive editions of the *Institutes*, and it might appear easy to do the same with Paul and his letters. But this appearance is deceptive. The greater historical distance between us and him; the very small amount of relevant comparative material; the 'occasional' nature of the letters – all these warn us to be on our guard against over-hasty conclusions. Artists, writers and composers by no means always show a unilinear development in their work. And when, in fact, we enquire where (other than with Ephesians)

variants in each instance) to be an exception. But there are parallels for this kind of explanatory phrase in Gal. 3:16 (*hos estin*; some MSS have *ho estin*); 2 Thess. 3:17; and Eph. 1:14; 5:5; 6:17. Parallels from

Thessalonians and Ephesians will not of course impress those who consider those letters, too, inauthentic. But the verse in Galatians shows that this kind of phrase is perfectly possible for Paul.

27. Schweizer comes and goes on this question. On the one hand he claims (pp. 18f.) that the author follows Paul 'completely in vocabulary and theological concepts'; but in the commentary itself he frequently attempts to drive a wedge between the theologies of Paul and of Colossians.

Colossians finds its closest ties, we receive a bewildering variety of answers. The theology of Colossians does not evidence a uniformly 'late' view, but links itself to major themes in almost all of Paul's other letters. The Christology fits well with Philippians 2:6–11; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 8:9; while the ironic critique of Judaism, and the argument for seeing Christians as the true covenant people, belong with Romans 2:17–29; Philippians 3:2–11 and 2 Corinthians 3, and with Galatians as a whole. The references to the church as Christ's body (18, 24; 2:19) should not be seen as a radical departure from 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 (Christ as the whole body, not just the head) but as different uses of the same underlying metaphor. Finally, the pregnant and difficult verse about suffering (1:24) can be understood only if we line it up with 2 Corinthians 1:3–11; 4:7–18 and Romans 8:17–25. The simplest hypothesis by far is to see all these letters as proceeding from the same pen in the same period of six or eight years. They all reflect not only the needs and problems of the individual churches to which they were addressed, but also the same overall theological position, however many different expressions it may find.

Colossians does not, it is true, mention the doctrine of justification. (It is, however, frequently implicit, for instance in 3:10–13.) But behind this difference (which only applies, anyway, to Romans, Galatians and Philippians 3:2ff.) the similarities with the other letters are very striking. The real centre of Paul's thought, as of his life, is not justification, but that which underlies it and gives it its polemical cutting edge, namely, the crucified and risen Jesus, seen as the revelation in action of the one creator God, the God of Abraham, appearing on the stage of history to fulfil his purposes and promises and to create for himself a world-wide people. The doctrine of justification, vital though it is, is but one way of stating this central truth: it cannot be used as the measuring-rod of Paul's whole thought. That position belongs to Christology: and that, arguably, is what Colossians is all about. That this in no way relativizes justification, or subordinates it to other doctrines in a way which tames or muzzles its polemical nature, should be clear from my treatment of 2:6–23.

There is therefore no need to reject the Pauline authorship of Colossians, nor to imagine that its authenticity must be defended by

the hypothesis that Paul wrote it when he was older, more settled and mellow, than he had been when writing Romans or Galatians. Indeed, that view hardly fits 2:6–23, or for that matter Philippians 3:2ff. Colossians can be seen as simply one more example of that vivid and brilliant theological writing which characterizes, uniquely, everything Paul himself wrote.

4. Date and place of writing

Finally, then, we must consider when and where the letter was written. The reference to imprisonment (4:3, which refers to the author's being 'in chains' – always assuming, as most do, that this is not to be taken metaphorically) has linked the letter not only with Philemon (see below, p. 198) and Ephesians (cf. Eph. 6:20), but also with Philippians, where literal imprisonment is brought into the explicit argument of the letter (Phil. 1:12–30). These four letters have therefore frequently been grouped together as 'letters from prison', and all four may well have been written from the same prison at about the same time. The strong ties of Colossians with Ephesians and Philemon support this, though Philippians does not so obviously bear, as one might say, the same *Opus* number. If we try to use these data in order to tie down at least Colossians and Philemon (we will discuss presently the problems raised by the special relationship between our letter and Ephesians), we find at least three possible periods of imprisonment: those in Ephesus (inferred from 2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Cor. 15:32), Caesarea (Acts 24:27) and Rome (Acts 28:16ff.). (That there were periods of imprisonment other than those recorded in Acts we know from the references in 2 Cor. 6:5 and 11:23.)

Arguments for each of these three cities as the location of some or all of the prison epistles have been advanced by different scholars with skill and ingenuity, and the issue remains finely balanced. (Thus, for instance, the references to the praetorian guard and to Caesar's household, in Phil. 1:13 and 4:22, could indicate Rome; but they could equally well suggest the Roman garrison at Ephesus or Caesarea.) Colossians has, however, increasingly given me the impression of a letter to a church which, very young in the faith, needs to be strengthened, informed about what has actually hap-

pened to its members in their becoming Christians, taught how to pursue Christian maturity, and warned against a threat most dangerous for those only recently converted from paganism. If this is correct – and such a hypothesis is of course incapable of cast-iron proof – it would suggest Ephesus as the location. During Paul’s imprisonment, his fellow-workers have been busy on his behalf (1:7, if the reading ‘on our behalf’ is correct). Among them is Epaphras, who has preached the gospel in Colosse (a little over a hundred miles inland) and the surrounding area, and who has returned to Paul with news of the new church there. This fits well with the letter to Philemon. Despite some contrary suggestions,²⁸ I believe that it is much more likely that Onesimus would have gone to Paul in Ephesus than in Rome, and much easier for Paul both to send him back and perhaps (if Phlm. 14 is so to be understood) to request that he be returned to him again. Onesimus was after all a runaway slave, with a price on his head; however good the Roman roads were, a double and perhaps a triple journey between Rome and Colosse would be asking a lot. Paul himself did not find it that easy to get to Rome. In addition, it seems unlikely that, having seen Rome as a staging-post on the way to Spain (Rom. 15:22–29), Paul would be hoping to visit Philemon soon after his impending release.²⁹

The personal details in 4:7–17 fit well with this hypothesis. Mark, at present with Paul, may be about to pay the Colossians a visit (4:10) – quite unlikely if he is in Rome or Caesarea. Tychicus and Onesimus will tell the Colossians ‘everything that is happening here’ (4:9); a reference, perhaps, to events which could not safely be written down. Epaphras, himself a Colossian, is at present with Paul (4:12). The

28. E.g. C. H. Dodd, *New Testament Studies*, 2nd Edn (Manchester University Press, 1967), pp. 94f.

29. See Phlm. 22, and the commentary on that verse. For a full statement of the argument for Ephesus, see G. S. Duncan, *St. Paul’s Ephesian Ministry* (Hodder, 1929), and his subsequent articles in *ExpT* 67, 1955–6, pp. 163–166; *NTS* 3, 1956–7, pp. 211–218, and *NTS* 5, 1958–9, pp. 43–45. See also Stuhlmacher, pp. 21f.; Houlden, p. 139; Lohse, pp. 165–167, 188; H. Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 2, pp. 130ff.

presence of Luke (4:14) is not, as sometimes suggested, a problem.³⁰ Acts 19, granted, gives no sign of his presence in Ephesus with Paul (i.e. it is not a passage in which the writer says ‘we’ in referring to the movements of Paul and his companions). But (a) if Paul was in Ephesus for three years it is perfectly possible that Luke was with him for some, though not all, of that time, arriving and departing at different moments to the apostle; (b) even if Luke was there, and even if he did write Acts,³¹ he was under no compulsion to record every imprisonment Paul suffered, and may well in fact have omitted to mention several which were of comparative insignificance. He tends only to record those from which some lessons can be learnt (e.g. Acts 16:16–40).

An extra argument for the Ephesian origin of Colossians, not usually noticed, is the close similarity we have already noted between our letter and 2 Corinthians, written (for the most part, at any rate) while Paul was on his way from Ephesus to Corinth, and referring to the sufferings Paul had undergone during his stay in Asia (2 Cor. 1:8). If we were to date Galatians during this same period,³² the similarities between that letter and Colossians would also be of interest.

I am therefore inclined to put Colossians (and its companion piece, Philemon) in the period between 52 and 55 (or possibly 53 and 56), while Paul was working in Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10).³³ It should

30. See Schweizer, p. 26.

31. See now the restatement of the case for Lucan authorship of Acts in I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP/Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 44–46. Compare M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, Eng. Tr. (SCM Press, 1979), pp. 66 ff. and idem, *Between Jesus and Paul* (SCM Press, 1983), pp. 97–128.

32. Galatians has been dated both in the late 40s and in the middle 50s: see the discussion in J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, pp. 55–57. Schweizer (pp. 127f.), noting the parallels between Colossians and Galatians, argues from them that Galatians is aimed, as he thinks Colossians is, not at Judaism or Jewish Christianity but at some sort of syncretism. This seems to me exactly the wrong way round.

33. See Robinson, *ibid.*, pp. 46f., and compare G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (Duckworth, 1955), p. 209.

be emphasized, however, that this, like all theories about the location of the captivity epistles, is simply a hypothesis. All that is claimed is that this particular hypothesis makes sense of the various bits of data involved; that it does so within a simple framework; and that it helps to explain certain features of the evidence in a particularly helpful way. Its especial significance for our understanding of Colossians is that it highlights the message of the letter as instruction given to a very young church.

If this solution is correct, we should be in a position to see its effect on the relationship between Colossians and Paul's other letters. We have suggested already that the similarities with 2 Corinthians are so striking as to constitute an extra argument for this dating, and that questions of theological differences with Romans and Galatians are not as weighty as is sometimes imagined. But the relationship between Colossians and Ephesians is obviously a special case. To read the two letters side by side is to be struck over and over again by close similarities of argument and wording, even though Ephesians lacks the Christological poem and the attack on false teaching which form the main features of Colossians.

This evidence poses a problem which is, fortunately, more tricky for students of Ephesians than for students of Colossians. By common consent, the two letters can be regarded as, in some senses, a rough draft and a fair copy of similar material. (In some senses, but not in all: Colossians is a perfectly good letter as it stands, highlighting different ideas; but where they overlap Ephesians looks the more polished.) Four main explanations of this phenomenon have received scholarly support:

- i. Paul wrote Colossians first and then, perhaps soon afterwards, wrote Ephesians;
- ii. Paul wrote Ephesians first, and then used some of the same material, in a different context, in writing Colossians;
- iii. Paul wrote Colossians, and then an interpreter or friend used it as the basis for 'Ephesians', writing it as if it came from Paul;
- iv. Paul wrote neither Ephesians nor Colossians, the latter being by an imitator of Paul and the former by an imitator of Colossians.

I have already argued that the fourth solution is unlikely. If we understand Paul's overall theology aright, Colossians falls comfortably within it. In addition, the idea that Ephesians, that majestic and

noble work of art, is a copy of a copy ought to be regarded as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the theory. The third alternative is logically quite possible, and not particularly improbable in terms simply of literary style and content. It is quite conceivable that an early admirer of Paul would attempt to think his thoughts after him, drawing them together into a well-rounded whole: but, as we saw earlier, there is no reason to suppose that keeping company with a great writer produces of itself literary genius. Nor is it as easy as is often assumed to reconcile the exalted tone and material of Ephesians with the idea that the personal details of chapter 3, and of 6:19–22, are mere attempts at verisimilitude. And, as regards theology, the enlargement of Pauline horizons I have suggested, to show how Colossians coheres with Romans or Galatians, will comfortably take in Ephesians as well.

The choice between the first two solutions will depend on how we envisage Paul's mind at work in two different situations. It is not necessarily helpful to think only in terms of 'first draft' and 'final draft'; Paul was writing letters, not a doctoral dissertation. It is quite conceivable that somebody should pen an exalted piece of prose or even poetry and then, not long afterwards, write a letter into which a good deal of the earlier material would find its way, almost subconsciously, while more specific issues were being handled in a less formal style. It is misleading, also, though extremely popular, to think of Paul as working out his ideas from scratch while in the act of dictating. It is more likely by far that themes long mulled over are merely receiving fresh expression.

There is one argument which could tip the scales in favour of the chronological priority of Colossians. It appears from some very early manuscripts that the letter we call 'Ephesians' may not, originally, have borne an address.³⁴ The letter might, in that case, have been intended as a 'circular'. Even if the longer reading (including the address to Ephesus) is original, the manuscript variation shows at least that the letter was very early employed in this fashion, perhaps because it was believed that Paul had here deliberately drawn together the threads of his other writings, Colossians included. If

34. See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, p. 601.

the hypothesis of an Ephesian imprisonment fits Colossians, it is not inconceivable that Ephesians might have been a circular written, around the same time, to the church in Ephesus as it waited for his release, and also to the various churches which, like those in Colosse and Laodicea, had been planted in the neighbouring areas.³⁵

Whichever letter came first, there is no evidence of a modification of ideas or a change in theology. Rather, parallel passages in the two letters may justifiably be used for mutual illumination. In none of his letters – not even Romans – does Paul attempt a full-dress presentation of ‘everything he believes’. He draws out of his well-stocked repertoire of exegesis and theology only what he needs for each occasion. We may understand him better if, instead of playing off different writings against each other, we allow them to interact and interlock. And that, I believe, is achieved if we locate Paul in Ephesus, in the early 50s, while he is writing Colossians.

5. The message of Colossians – then and now

I have suggested that in Colossians Paul is drawing upon his overall theological understanding to help his readers find that genuine human and spiritual maturity which God wills for his people. God has done what the law, and ‘Wisdom’, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, to achieve reconciliation, he dealt with sin on the cross, so that the life which the law had sought to give, the true life of God’s people, might be brought to expression in those who, through faith and baptism, belong to Jesus Christ. The church need look – must look – nowhere else for forgiveness for the past, for maturity in the present, or for future hope. Faced with a young church in a small town in up-country Asia Minor, Paul has written a letter in which he has distilled his understanding of some of the greatest themes in theology.

35. This means that we do not have to accept the argument of Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, p. 64, that Ephesians, if authentic, rules out an Ephesian imprisonment as the place of origin for itself, and by implication for Colossians. For the possibility that Ephesians is the ‘letter from Laodicea’ of Col. 4:16, see the commentary on that verse.

But what may this all mean for the church at the end of the twentieth century? There are few, if any, Christians in the Lycus valley today. True, there are plenty of young churches elsewhere in the world, in need of growth to Christian maturity, but few if any of them will need Paul's warnings against the blandishments of Judaism. Again, by no means all modern Christians were practising members of a pagan religion before their conversion (though some were; and it is possible to view modern Western materialism as a sort of paganism, even if a rather boring one). These quite obvious points indicate that there is a gap, a distance, between our modern situation and that of the Colossians, and we should not lightly brush it aside. Nor can we casually solve the problem by elevating Paul's words into 'timeless truths', or by postulating such entities on the basis of what he says. One of the dangers with that approach is that it divides Scripture up into two sorts of material – that which is timeless, and that which is 'culturally conditioned'. In fact, *all* writing, including the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, is totally 'culturally conditioned'. It is only *within* the local, historically and culturally conditioned message of Paul to Colosse that later generations, ourselves included, may hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

The Spirit and the church: there lie the clues which can help us to understand how we get from the ancient text to the modern situation. Paul intended his letters to be read out in church (4:16), and this reminds us that we cannot understand them in a purely individualistic setting. Each mature Christian has, of course, the responsibility to 'test all things'. But Christian truth is a *corporate* possession. The church is the context within which we should expect to have wrong ideas gently corrected and right ones gently suggested, and where we in turn may contribute to the same activities. This will mean active membership in a local church and perhaps a variety of Christian groups; it should also involve careful listening to Christians of other backgrounds and periods of history.

To set biblical interpretation within the context of the church, however, makes sense only if we hold a clear belief in the Spirit who enables the church to *be* the church. To hear Paul's words as if addressed to ourselves, we must understand ourselves both as parts of the same Spirit-filled community that he was addressing and as being ourselves indwelt by the Spirit who enabled Paul to write what

he did. This will not solve all our problems of understanding or interpretation at a stroke. It will set them in the context where they can be worked at with faith and hope and (especially between disagreeing parties) love. It is part of God's plan for his people that they should wrestle, in reading the Bible, with puzzles and problems that a library of mere timeless truths would never produce, and thus to grow into a maturity appropriate for fully human beings.

We cannot, therefore, treat Colossians as merely a handbook of systematic theology. Systematic theology is a vital discipline, but reading the New Testament is not the same discipline. We cannot merely take Paul's composition apart and put its bits into other compositions of our own. We must listen to him in his own terms. That is when we will hear not only what he intended but also, perhaps, unexpected overtones and echoes which fit our own context. We must therefore make two journeys: the historian's journey, getting back to the original meaning, and the theologian's or preacher's journey, returning to our own time and place charged with the responsibility, under God, of speaking to our contemporary church and world of what we have heard. Biblical commentaries (certainly those in the present series) aim mainly to tackle the first journey. Even this, however, cannot be done without some degree of sympathy for the subject-matter, and the process of dialogue with the text necessary to achieve this will result in some pointers, at least, towards contemporary application. The attempt to hear what Paul was saying to the church in Colosse may, then, help us to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church today.

These two tasks will almost certainly not be identical. Not every church will need to be warned against a religion that exalts angels or encourages pseudo-spiritual asceticism. (Both, in fact, are right out of fashion in many Christian circles today, though there are some areas where they, or other things like them, flourish.) It would be wrong, in any case, to see Colossians as a warning against a 'super-spiritual' religion, against the idea that one is already living in heaven and can therefore sit light to earthly responsibilities.³⁶ On the

36. My interpretation of Colossians, and of its message for today, thus differs quite drastically from that proposed by R. C. Lucas in his

contrary, Paul is writing to assure the Colossians that they really are, even now, citizens of heaven. There is, no doubt, a danger of proud over-confidence for those who believe this. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians partly in order to avert such a threat. But there is equal danger in failing to realize and enjoy all that it means to belong to Christ, to thank God for it and to live in the appropriate manner. This is perhaps a danger to which Protestants, anxious lest they give the church too high a status, are particularly subject. That seems to be partly why Colossians, and especially Ephesians, have been regarded in some quarters as incompatible with 'Pauline' – by which is often meant 'Protestant' – thought. For Paul, the church is the Body of Christ, already seated with her Lord in the heavenly places, as well as being called to suffer and work and witness in the world. To realize that one is complete in Christ is sure proof against the dangers of immature Christianity – the constant search for spiritual novelties, the unnecessary anxieties and fears over status or requirements, the pride over small 'achievements' – which threaten Christians in the modern world no less than in the ancient world.

The application of the polemic in Colossians 2 presents a particular problem. Some Christians, no doubt, need to be warned that to step into Judaism, or to attempt to combine it with Christianity, is to step back from the new age into the old. Others must not assume that this warning against Judaism is aimed primarily at 'legalism' or 'ritualism'. The emphasis of Paul's attack is against the adopting of a 'national' or racial religion in preference to faith in the one who is Lord of all. The closest modern parallel might well be the idea that Christians should encourage each nation or race to follow its own particular gods. This suggestion is related to the extremely important point that each race, or individual, should be *allowed* (by the state) to follow its, his or her own god or gods. But it makes quite a different point, which would be valid only if we were

commentary. I believe he is correct in his analysis of certain 'super-spiritual' trends in contemporary Christianity, and in his argument that they accord more with the spirit of the age than with genuine Christian faith. But I do not think that this is what Paul is talking about in Colossians.

falsely to identify religion and the law of the land. The view in question often claims that the same god is revealed in all the different religions; but this is not Paul's position. Christ is not one deity (certainly not a 'Western' one, as is sometimes claimed) among many. He is supreme over all. Monotheism has always been a scandal, as Paul well knew when he confronted Corinthian polytheism with the claim 'for us there is but one God ... one Lord' (1 Cor. 8:6). This is his great claim in Colossians, too. It stands over against all idolatry, modern or ancient, and all theological relativism.

Within the life of the church, then, the letter to the Colossians will always have an important part to play. We, too, need to become mature as Christians and as human beings. We need to grow in our knowledge of who God is, of what he has done for us in Jesus Christ, and of how we can express our gratitude in worship and life. We, too, need the warning that true maturity, whether Christian or human, is not to be had by any other road. We are not Colossians, but we are Christians. Therein lies the problem of hermeneutics, and its solution.