

TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 12

TNTC

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

For
Richard Gorrie
and
Lori Parisi

TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 12

GENERAL EDITOR: LEON MORRIS

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

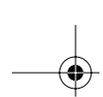
AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

N. T. WRIGHT



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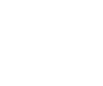
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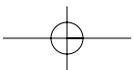
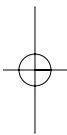
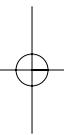
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GENERAL PREFACE

The original Tyndale Commentaries aimed at providing help for the general reader of the Bible. They concentrated on the meaning of the text without going into scholarly technicalities. They sought to avoid ‘the extremes of being unduly technical or unhelpfully brief’. Most who have used the books agree that there has been a fair measure of success in reaching that aim.

Times, however, change. A series that has served so well for so long is perhaps not quite as relevant as when it was first launched. New knowledge has come to light. The discussion of critical questions has moved on. Bible-reading habits have changed. When the original series was commenced it could be presumed that most readers used the Authorized Version and one could make one’s comments accordingly, but this situation no longer obtains.

The decision to revise and update the whole series was not reached lightly, but in the end it was thought that this is what is required in the present situation. There are new needs, and they will be better served by new books or by a thorough updating of the old books. The aims of the original series remain. The new commentaries are neither minuscule nor unduly long. They are exegetical rather than homiletic. They do not discuss all the critical questions, but none is written without an awareness of the problems that engage the attention of New Testament scholars. Where it is felt that formal consideration should be given to such questions, they are discussed in the Introduction and sometimes in Additional notes.

But the main thrust of the commentaries is not critical. These

books are written to help non-technical readers to understand their Bible better. They do not presume a knowledge of Greek, and all Greek words discussed are transliterated; but the authors have the Greek text before them and their comments are made on the basis of the originals. The authors are free to choose their own modern translation, but are asked to bear in mind the variety of translations in current use.

The new series of Tyndale Commentaries goes forth, as the former series did, in the hope that God will graciously use these books to help the general reader to understand as fully and clearly as possible the meaning of the New Testament.

Leon Morris

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I well remember my first meeting with a biblical commentary. I was eighteen years old at the time, and was asked to lead a Bible Study group of six or eight contemporaries. The book we were to study was the letter to the Colossians, and the commentary which was lent to me was that by H. M. Carson, in the Tyndale series. It was just what I needed: lucid, informative, stimulating. I little thought then that I would one day be asked to write the volume that would replace it; and, when that invitation came, I accepted with a sense of gratitude, hoping that I might be able to do for another generation what Carson had done for me.

Study of Paul in general, and of Colossians in particular, has moved on by leaps and bounds in the last twenty years, and in starting again from scratch to work on the text I have tried to take account of what has been thought and written in the intervening period. This means, among other things, that I have made use of several works that, due to the different designs of various series, are able to include a wealth of technical detail that is outside the scope of this book: I think particularly of the commentaries of Lohse, Schweizer, O'Brien and (on Philemon) Stuhlmacher. I have frequently found, however, that older writers such as Lightfoot, Abbott and Williams still have a rich contribution to make, and are in no way superseded by more modern studies.

My debt to Professors G. B. Caird and C. F. D. Moule extends far beyond my grateful use of their respective commentaries. Both of them have given generously of their wisdom and friendship and have

helped me to understand not only the New Testament but the very nature of Christian scholarship. There are no words to express my sadness at George Caird's untimely death, which took place just after I had written the first draft of this preface. I had been looking forward eagerly to his comments on what I had written, and can now only guess at what they might have been. If this book reflects in any small way the academic rigour which he practised and taught, and the excitement which I always felt in exploring the New Testament under his guidance, I shall be proud.

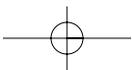
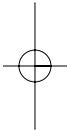
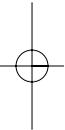
Faced with the choice of basing the commentary on either the Revised Standard Version or the New International Version, I chose the latter, not because it is necessarily better but because, in my recent experience, a great many Christians have begun to use it. I have ventured to say from time to time where in my opinion its generally fine rendering of Paul could be improved. One of the good things about the plethora of modern translations currently available is that, by their very differences, they force readers of the Bible to ask searching questions about what the original text actually said. It seems to me, in this context, that the purpose of a commentary is (ultimately) to answer such questions by giving the text back to the reader uncluttered by a mass of glosses. To that end, this book has two aims: first, to clear up potential ambiguities or obscurities, so that the reader is able to hear, as nearly as possible, what the text itself says; second, to open the reader's eyes to see the text, and those parts of Paul's thought which it reflects, as a whole, over and above the mass of detail. In order to achieve these objects, I have not hesitated to give my own interpretation of several major questions which are raised by the text itself. All interpreters need to arrive at some position or other from which they can survey the land before them, and I hope that those who have accustomed themselves to looking at Colossians from other angles will at least try to see it from this perspective and assess whether it makes any more sense.

I was once accused in print of being naive for having written some positive remarks about the church. I am as well aware as anyone else of the weaknesses of the modern Western church. But I have persisted in holding to, and expounding, Paul's view (as it seems to me) of the church as the people of the new age. That I am still happy to do this is in large measure a tribute to the church within whose

fellowship much of this book has been written. The Anglican Diocese of Montreal, and within it the parish of Hudson, Quebec, and the Diocesan Theological College, have shown me that it does indeed make sense to speak and write of the church as a loving and supportive community. In particular, two groups of enthusiastic lay people (one at Christ Church Cathedral in Montreal, and one in Hudson) listened to the substance of the book as a series of lectures, and offered a good deal of valuable support and comment. My colleagues Brian Walsh and Cathy Hird read the whole book as it came off the word processor, and gave me a great deal of help and constructive criticism. Our librarians at McGill, and those at l'Université de Montréal, have made my load considerably lighter, as has Mrs Darlene Fowler-Churchill by helping me learn how to process my words on a computer instead of typing them. The staff and editors of the Inter-Varsity Press have been patient in waiting for this book and shrewd in their handling of it. Dr Leon Morris has been the source of both considerable encouragement and wise criticism. I am grateful to them all, and hereby absolve them from any implication in the weaknesses which, despite their best efforts, this work still contains.

The book is dedicated to two remarkable people who, in their different ways, have helped me to see in practice, to understand, and to experience what Paul was talking about. It was Richard Gorrie who, nearly twenty years ago, put into my hands Carson's commentary on Colossians, and who thus, and in countless other ways, pointed me in the direction which led to the present task. It was Lori Parisi whose wise help and counsel ensured that I got on and finished it. The book belongs, in several important senses, to them as much as to me. To my parents and children, I owe a great debt (not least to my son Julian, for helping me with the map): to my dear wife, a debt greater still.

N. T. Wright



CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

AV	The Authorized (or King James) Version, 1611.
BAGD	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (trans. of W. Bauer, <i>Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch</i>), ed. by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich; second ed. revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and F. W. Danker (University of Chicago Press, 1979).
BDF	F. Blass and A. Debrunner, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , trans. and revised by Robert W. Funk (Cambridge University Press, 1961).
Eng. Tr.	English translation.
EVV	English versions.
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i> .
Ign.	Ignatius, letters of: <i>Eph.</i> , <i>Ephesians</i> ; <i>Rom.</i> , <i>Romans</i> ; <i>Philad.</i> , <i>Philadelphinas</i> ; <i>Pol.</i> , <i>Polycarp</i> .
JB	The Jerusalem Bible, 1966
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> .
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> .
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> .
LXX	The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).
NEB	The New English Bible: Old Testament, 1970; New Testament, ² 1970.

- NIV The Holy Bible: New International Version: Old Testament, 1978; New Testament, ²1978.
- NTS* *New Testament Studies*.
- OCD* *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. M. Cary et al. (Oxford University Press, 1949).
- RSV The Revised Standard Version: Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, ²1971.
- SBL Society of Biblical Literature.

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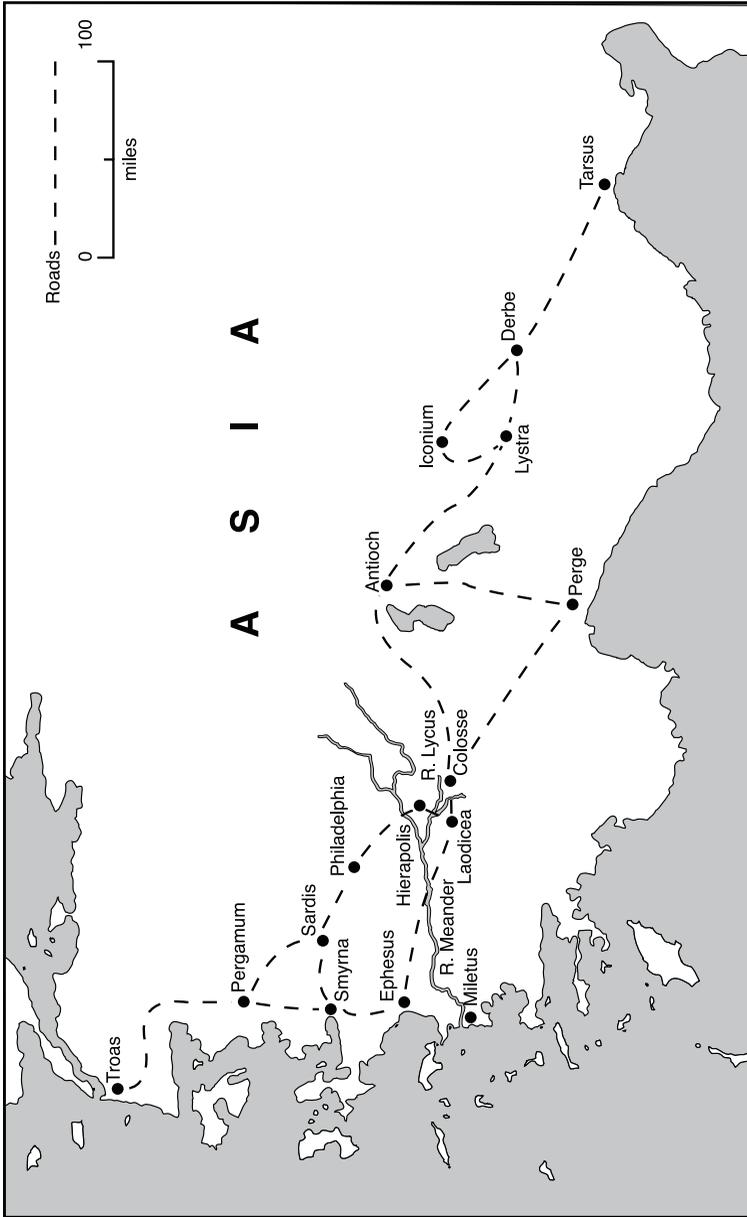
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Asia Minor in the time of Paul

With you is Wisdom, she who knows your works,
she who was present when you made the world;
she understands what is pleasing in your eyes
and what agrees with your commandments ...

She will guide me prudently in my undertakings
and protect me by her glory.
Then all I do will be acceptable,
I shall govern your people justly
and shall be worthy of my father's throne.

Wisdom 9:9, 11-12 (Jerusalem Bible)

O loving Wisdom of our God!

When all was sin and shame,

A second Adam to the fight

And to the rescue came.

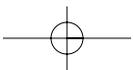
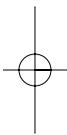
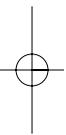
John Henry Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius*

If anyone is in Christ – new creation!

The old is gone, the new has come ...

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

2 Corinthians 5:17, 19 (author's own translation)



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 15:21 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

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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

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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; Gnllka, 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 Gnilka, 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.