

COLOSSIANS

STUDY GUIDE

AUTHOR

Within the past couple hundred years, the authorship of Colossians by Paul has come into question. However, there is no substantial evidence that warrants believing Paul didn't write the book. The opening verse declares Paul and Timothy as the ones sending the letter, and traditionally **Paul** is recognized as its author.

DATE

That Paul writes from prison is not questioned. What is questioned is the location of his imprisonment. While most believe it to be Rome, based on the similarities between Ephesians and Colossians which indicate the same person writing both letters within a short frame of time. However, some believe Paul might have been imprisoned in Ephesus because it was so much closer to Colossae than Rome. Paul did experience troubles in Ephesus, and while it is possible he was imprisoned there for a time, the book of Acts has no record of an Ephesus imprisonment. So, all things considered, Paul most likely wrote the epistle from Rome while he was imprisoned there, probably **around AD 61**.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Paul did not start the church in Colossae, nor had he visited it prior (Col. 2:1). Epaphras, the founder of the church, most likely encountered Paul while in Ephesus and took the gospel to Colossae (Col. 1:7-8).



While in prison, Paul met Onesimus, the slave of Philemon. Philemon, a believer, was a likely member of the Colossian church, as was Onesimus (Col. 4:9). Paul wrote to Philemon directly to address the situation of his slave, Onesimus, which gave the perfect opportunity to also write to the Colossian church to address concerns there. Since those delivering the the letter would have had to also pass through Ephesus, the quick writing of the three letters (Ephesians, Philemon, and Colossians) seemed most appropriate. One small group could take all three letters at once.

© 2024 Global Outreach Foundation. All rights reserved.

Permission is granted to reproduce or download for personal and non-commercial educational and/or religious purposes. Any other use requires written permission.

Paul wrote to the Colossians to address the issue of false teachers who were undermining the solid work of Epaphras. Introductions of this false teaching was leading to a combination of Jewish observances (Col. 2:16) and pagan speculations (Col. 2:8) which included angel worship (Col. 2:18). More about this false teaching, *Gnosticism*, can be found below.

LITERARY STRUCTURE

Introduction (1:1-14)
The Preeminence of Christ in Doctrine (1:15-3:4)
The Preeminence of Christ in Christian Living (3:5-4:6)
Conclusion (4:7-18)

GNOSTICISM

by Dean Niforatos

Gnosticism is a system of false teachings which existed during the early centuries of Christianity. Its name came from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. The Gnostics believed that knowledge was the way to salvation. For this reason, several writers of the New Testament condemned Gnosticism as false and heretical.

Paul emphasized a wisdom and knowledge that comes from God and does not concern itself with idle speculations, fables, and moral laxity (Col. 2:8-23; 1 Tim. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:16-19; Titus 1:10-16). John, both in his gospel and in the epistles, countered heretical teaching, which, in a broad sense, can be considered Gnostic.

Teachings of the Gnostics: The Gnostics accepted the Greek idea of a radical dualism between God (spirit) and the world (matter). According to their worldview, the created order was evil, inferior, and opposed to the good. God may have created the first order, but each successive order was the work of anti-gods, archons, or a demiurge (a subordinate deity).

The Gnostics believed the earth was surrounded by a number of cosmic spheres (usually seven) that separated man from God. These spheres were ruled by archons (spiritual principalities and powers) who guarded their spheres by barring the souls seeking to ascend from the realm of darkness and captivity below to the realm of light, which is above. The Gnostics also taught that man is composed of body, soul, and spirit. Since the body and the soul are part of man's earthly existence, they are evil. Enclosed in the soul, however, is the spirit, the only divine substance of man. This "spirit" is asleep and ignorant; it needs to be awakened and liberated by knowledge.

According to the Gnostics, the aim of salvation is for the spirit to be awakened by knowledge so the inner man can be released from his earthly dungeon and return to the realm of light where the soul becomes reunited with God. As the soul ascends, however, it needs to penetrate the cosmic spheres that separate it from its heavenly destiny. This, too, is accomplished by knowledge. One must understand certain formulas that are revealed only to the initiated.

© 2024 Global Outreach Foundation. All rights reserved.

Permission is granted to reproduce or download for personal and non-commercial educational and/or religious purposes. Any other use requires written permission.

Ethical behavior among the Gnostics varied considerably. Some sought to separate themselves from all evil matter in order to avoid contamination. Paul may be opposing such a view in 1 Tim. 4:1-5. For other Gnostics, ethical life took the form of freedom to participate in all sorts of indulgences. Many reasoned that since they had received divine knowledge and were truly informed as to their divine nature, it didn't matter how they lived. Such an attitude is a misunderstanding of the gospel. Paul, on a number of occasions, reminded his readers that they were saved from sin to holiness. They were not to have an attitude of indifference toward the law. They had died to sin in their baptism into Christ (Rom. 6:1-11) and so were to walk "in newness of life." John reminded the Christians that once they had been saved they were not to continue living in sin (1 John 3:4-10).

These Gnostic teachings also had a disruptive effect on fellowship in the church. Those who were "enlightened" thought of themselves as being superior to those who did not have such knowledge. Divisions arose between the spiritual and the fleshly. This attitude of superiority is severely condemned in the New Testament. Christians are "one body" (1 Cor. 12) who should love one another (1 Cor. 13; 1 John 1:1-5:21). Spiritual gifts are for the Christian community rather than individual use; they should promote humility rather than pride (1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16).

OBSERVATION WORDS

Take note of what you learn about each of these. For God, Jesus, & the Holy Spirit, note what you learn & also specific references to how Jesus & the Spirit are represented.

- **God, Jesus, Holy Spirit**
- **In/Before/Through him**
- **Wisdom**
- **Knowledge/Understanding**
- **Full/Fully/Fullness**

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- What did the Lord teach YOU through this book?

- What did you learn about God the Father?

- What were some ways Jesus & the Holy Spirit were represented? What are some things you learned about each of them?

- How do you see Christ's lordship over creation? Over the church? In regards to how believers are to treat each other?
- In what ways do you think Gnosticism still shows itself today?
- If you to preach from this book, what passage would you choose and what would be the main emphasis of what you'd want to say?

Key Word – How do you summarize the whole book in one word or short phrase?

Key Verse – What verse stands out to you as the summary of the whole book, or a verse that the Lord used to teach you something important. Why did you choose the verse you did?

Key Chapter – What chapter summarizes the book, is a turning point, or just stands out to you? Why did you choose this chapter?