

12 Colossians. The Cosmic Christ: Sophia-Wisdom Liberates Us from Elitist Philosophies

Outline

Greeting, 1:1-2

Thanksgiving, 1:3-8; supplication, 1:9-14

Hymn: Sophia-Wisdom and the Cosmic Christ, 1:15-23

Paul's unique apostolate, 1:24-2:5

Authentic faith vs. vain human philosophies, 2:6-23

Praxis within the new community: vices, virtues, 3:1-17

Code for patriarchal households (Haustafel), 3:18--4:1

Evangelization and discretion with outsiders, 4:2-6

Tychicus and Onesimus' trip with personal news, 4:7-9

Final greetings and blessing, 4:10-18

1. Author: Tychicus? Biblical scholars today commonly conclude that Colossians and Ephesians do not come from Paul himself but from younger colleagues. They also consider Colossians to be the first deuterio-Pauline letter (80 AD) and that Ephesians represents a later expansion (90 AD), probably by a different author. Colossians and Ephesians possess similar styles and theologies. Since the city of Colossae was destroyed by earthquake in 60-61 AD without being reconstructed, no church was there when the letter was written. Perhaps since Tychicus writes the letter in the name of "Paul" ("absent" corporally not only in space but also in time, 2:5), Laodicea (2:1; 4:15-16) may be the church to which the letter is directed (some six miles from the destroyed Colossae in what is now Turkey).

2. Paul, Colossians and Ephesians. If we compare the theology of the seven letters written by Paul himself (Romans, 1 - 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon) with Colossians and Ephesians, these significant differences appear:

- Paul spoke of the church as the “body” of Christ in which all share certain charismatic gifts (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Romans 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 6:12-20); Colossians and Ephesians, however, change the metaphor and speak of Christ as the “head” of the body (Colossians 1:18; 2:19; cf. 2:10 = universe; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:15-16);

- Paul described believers as liberated from sin (singular, a power; Romans 6) and emphasized justification (Romans 3--4; Galatians); Colossians and Ephesians speak rather of forgiveness of sins (plural; Colossians 1:14; 2:13; 3:13; Ephesians 2:1; 4:32);

- Paul himself (the “least of the apostles”) humbly acknowledged the importance of the other apostles (1 Cor. 9:5; 12:28-29; 15:7-9; Galatians 1:17, 19) and refused to enter into or claim authority in territories evangelized by others (Romans 15:20); in Colossians, however, God has entrusted the preaching of the Gospel uniquely to Paul, who undertakes to assure that it is preached to every person in the entire world (1:23-24, 28); this Paul of Colossians has apostolic authority over churches he never visited (1:25; 2:1-2)--and his sufferings and oppressions, like Christ’s, even have a substitutionary dimension for all (1:24; cf. 4:3, 10, 18)!

- For Paul himself, Christian hope refers to the very act of waiting (Romans 5:2-5), focused on the future resurrection; Paul insists that the believers have died with Christ but they have not yet been resurrected with him (Romans 6:5, 8; Philippians 3:11-12). In Colossians and Ephesians, however, eschatology is something already basically “realized”, affirming that believers are already raised and ascended with Christ (Colossians 2:12-13; 3:1-4; Ephesians 2:6; cf. 1 Cor. 4:8-13; 2 Timothy 2:17-18).

3. Women and the Cosmic Christ. Colossians at first appears to address only males (“brothers”, 1:2). The domestic code, however, exhorts wives before husbands (3:18-19), and the church in Laodicea appears to have met in a house headed by a woman (Nympha, 4:15). Moreover, in Jewish tradition, divine Wisdom (Sophia, Colossians’ central theological focus) is a feminine figure, and Colossians presents Jesus as her incarnation (1:15-20).

Nevertheless, Colossians, the first deutero-Pauline letter, also is the first to include a domestic code (Hau斯塔fel) for patriarchal households (3:18--4:1) and consequently has received much critical examination in modern feminist studies. We should note that the letter also includes lists of virtues and vices (adaptations of the Ten Commandments to the preferred Greco-Roman genre; Colossians 3:5-9, 12-17). Probably we should

interpret the specific domestic code exhortations as subordinate to the general advice directed to the house churches. Nympha's house (4:15), headed by a woman and also the place where the church met, would not have had a patriarch and could represent an alternative model. In later Greek manuscripts the female name Nympha was changed to the masculine form Nymphas!

The household code is directed to three human pairs: wives-husbands, children-parents, and slaves - owners. The code addresses the weaker persons first and gives most detail for slaves (3:22-25), probably because the church consisted primarily of slaves, women, and other socially weak persons. Notably, children are to obey both parents (3:20) but only fathers need to be exhorted to treat their children kindly (3:21). For some reason, the husbands addressed tended to be "bitter" with their wives also (3:19). Perhaps the patriarchs' bad mood with their children and wives was due in part to the practice of sexual asceticism, especially on the part of the women (2:20-23; cf. 1 Cor. 7:1). Moreover, as "heads" of patriarchal households in tension with house-churches often headed by women, the males could have felt insecure, like captains of sinking ships.

The inclusion of the domestic codes (Haustafeln) in 1 Peter, the deutero-Pauline letters (Colossians and Ephesians), and the pastorals (1 Timothy and Titus) indicates that a growing number of husbands and slave owners were converted and formed part of the house-churches (often headed by women). One can discern a certain dialectical tension between the house-churches, which reflected the liberty and radical equality of early Christianity (Colossians 3:11), and the traditional patriarchal households with their hierarchies of power and traditions of submission (3:18--4:1). The same dialectic may be seen in Paul's letter to the Romans, where the Apostle's instructions to the house-churches in Rome (12:1-21) create a highly subversive context for his instructions concerning submission to imperial authorities (13:1-7).

The letters like Colossians, which include submission codes, also give evidence of maintaining the priority of the radical and subversive tradition of the Gospel. The church in Laodicea met in a household headed by the woman Nympha (Colossians 4:15), while Onesimus, a slave voluntarily freed by Philemon, was a co-worker with Paul (4:9). The supreme authority of Jesus, in whom dwells the fullness of divine Wisdom/Sophia, makes all claim of human authority relative (see "in the Lord," 3:18; cf. 3:20, 22-24).

Neither the codes for patriarchal households nor the virtues and vices lists in Colossians give us universal "morals" or "ethics" (Greek philosophical concepts absent from the entire Bible). The letter instead

speaks of Christian praxis as a “walk” (1:9-10; 2:6-7; [3:7]; 4:5; see chapter on Ephesians) guided by the search for complete divine wisdom (4:2-6). To emphasize that Wisdom (Greek: Sophía; see philo-sophia) was a feminine figure in Hebrew tradition, Mary Rose D’Angelo¹ suggests the following translation:

She is the image of the unseen God (Genesis 1:26-27),
first-born of all creation (Proverbs 8:22).
In/by her was created everything
in the heavens and on earth (Proverbs 3:19-20; 8:22-30),
seen and unseen:
whether thrones or principalities, rules or authorities.
All things were created through her and for her,
and she is before all and the all subsists through her;
She is the head/source of the body the church/assembly;
she is the beginning/rule,
that she might be preeminent among all
because in her the pleroma [divine fullness] was pleased to dwell,
and through her to reconcile the all to her,
whether on heaven or on earth” (Colossians 1:15-20a).

D’Angelo concludes that in Colossians this hymn to the feminine Sophia-Wisdom is applied to the historical man, Jesus, who “made peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20b) and was resurrected (Col. 1:18b). In Colossians this divine Sophia-Wisdom, who was revealed fully in the man Jesus Christ, stands opposed to all purely human philosophies (syncretic mixtures of legalistic Judaism and Oriental religions) that promoted an extreme asceticism, insisting in the abstention from sexual relations and certain foods and which insisted in circumcision and observance of the Jewish Sabbath (2:8, 16, 21-23; see 1 Cor. 7:1; 1 Timothy 4:1-5, 23).

4. Slaves (the Poor) and Liberating Justice. The domestic code (Haustafel; Colossians 3:18-4:1) suggests that the church addressed (1:2) consisted mainly of women (3:18) and slaves (3:22-25), since women are the first group mentioned and slaves receive the most attention (see 1 Cor. 1:26-29). The instructions to slaves seek to dignify their person and manual labor (3:23-24). Slaves as well as masters are to avoid oppressing (‘adikÈo --> Philemon) and to remember that God’s just judgment is impartial, without “respect of

persons” (3:25). The standards for slave owners include justice (dik-term) in the sense of “equality” (isûteta, 4:1) with their slaves (James 1:9?). Such pastoral attention dedicated to slaves was not designed to maintain them in their status as slaves (1 Cor. 7:21) but to free them from shame in their manual labor, something looked down on in the Greco-Roman culture (3:23-24), and to give them hope for the future. The “inheritance” (3:24) promised to the slaves (mainly Gentiles) would not be so much a celestial immortality as the world’s “land” justly distributed among all, just as in Israel at the time of Joshua (Joshua 13--21; Matthew 5:5; Romans 4:13).

Slavery most commonly resulted from overwhelming debts. Perhaps for this reason in Colossians Jesus’ message of forgiveness replaced Paul’s emphasis on justification (Colossians 1:14; 2:13; 3:13). In accord with the provisions of the jubilee which Jesus proclaimed (Luke 4:18-19), every 50 years slaves had to be freed, debts canceled (forgiven), and the land again justly redistributed (“the inheritance”; Leviticus 25). While slaves waited for the jubilee year to come they could acquire wisdom (according to Proverbs 8:1-21, wisdom enriches).

In the Roman Empire slaves commonly were freed after some years of good service or at the death of their masters. Ancient systems were not based on the racism that was foundational to the slavery better known to us from more recent European and American history. Colossians gives us evidence that Philemon had voluntarily freed his slave Onesimus, as Paul had requested (Philemon 8-22; Colossians 4:19). Therefore, in the house-churches the traditional distinctions between “slave and free” ceased to exist for the baptized, and in the community of equals the only recognized Lord was Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; cf. the original, radical form in Galatians, where even the distinction between “male and female” is transcended).

However, slaves still were expected to obey their masters “in everything” (3:22), which in Greco-Roman culture would include complying with the sexual demands of their masters (cf. the prohibitions of irresponsible and unjust sexual activities in 3:5).

5. Sexual Minorities and Anti-Judaism. Although feminist and African-American studies have examined the domestic codes for patriarchal households with a critical eye, they have not sufficiently scrutinized the place of sexual minorities (an overlapping category) in the house-churches. In Romans 16 Paul greets only three married couples in a chapter that names 29 people. However, even more remarkably,

among 12 persons mentioned by name in Colossians (11 men, not counting Jesus, and one woman) not one is married. The only household named explicitly is that of Nympha, a woman (4:15). The patriarchal code exhorts wives to be submissive to their husbands, but the only woman mentioned by name is the head of her own household and a leader of the church that met in her house in Laodicea!

Moreover, the situations of all 12 persons named in Colossians (single/widowed/ divorced) shows that the church (like Jesus' original circle) represents an alternative to the patriarchal households--in effect the deconstruction of such households. The letter comes from "Paul" and his longtime companion, Timothy (1:1). Although patriarchal codes emphasized the submission of slaves, the conclusion of Colossians reveals that Onesimus, Philemon's slave (Philemon 10-11), has been set free (voluntarily, as Paul had requested) and is Paul's emissary (Colossians 4:9). Onesimus, Luke and Tychicus are called Paul's "beloveds" (Colossians 4:7, 9, 14). Tychicus (4:7-8), bearer of the letter (perhaps the author), and Epaphras (1:7-8; 4:12-13; Acts 19:10) appear to follow the lifestyle of Paul and Timothy as an itinerant same-sex pair.

In addition, Colossians names three colleagues of Paul and Timothy who also continue being Jews (literally "of the circumcision"): Aristarchus, Mark (Barnabas's cousin), and Jesus/Justus (4:10-11), single men with the lifestyle of unmarried itinerants. Obviously, like Paul in Galatians and Philipians, the author of Colossians does not oppose circumcision of male Jews but rather the imposition of circumcision and the Law on Gentile males. According to Colossians, baptism, of both women and men, now takes the place of circumcision (males only), as a sign of belonging to the people of God (2:11-12). Neither Paul (1 Corinthians 7) nor Colossians was interested in promoting the physical fertility that God had commanded in Genesis 1:26-28 but in the multiplication of the house-churches (1:6) and the fruit of the Christian character (1:10). Inasmuch as baptism in the early centuries was performed with the baptized naked, having taken off their old clothing to dress in new clothes, Colossians speaks of the new life in Christ as stripping off the vices of the previous life to be clothed with the virtues of the new life (3:9-10).

In the early years the house-churches probably met primarily in houses headed by women or itinerant couples (like Prisca and Aquila) and not in traditional households (Romans 16). Colossians appears to represent a second stage where more household patriarchs were converted, and that prompted the development of household codes (radically modified by the Lordship of Jesus Christ, with priority given to weaker members). Nevertheless, Colossians demonstrates that the non-patriarchal ecclesiastical structures

continued and formed the basic context for the patriarchal household codes. Colossians' inclusion of so much information "subversive" to patriarchy demonstrates that the letter does not represent a type of male conspiracy to place every Christian in a patriarchal household.

Although Colossians by style and theology is closely related to Ephesians, also remarkable is the way it includes references to situations and nine persons mentioned in Paul's letter to Philemon:

- Paul in jail plus Timothy, co-sender (Colossians 1:1; Philemon 1);
- Epaphras, founded the church (1:7-8) and intercedes for her (4:12-13; Philemon 23, jailed with Paul);
- Onesimus, now colleague (4:9), before slave (Philemon 10-18);
- Archippus, minister (4:17); not a son of Philemon(?) (Philemon 2);
- Aristarchus, jailed with Paul, and Mark, Barnabas' cousin (4:10; Philemon 24);
- Luke, beloved physician, plus Demas (4:14; Philemon 24);

(Also Tychicus, 4:7-9, "bearer" of the letter, may have been its actual author; cf. Ephesians 6:21; Titus 3:12; 2 Timothy 4:12; Acts 20:4).

Of 11 men named in Colossians, nine had already been named in Philemon (exceptions: Tychicus and Barnabas). Philemon names a woman, Apphia, traditionally considered to be Philemon's wife but most likely an unmarried leader in the church. Colossians speaks of Nympha and the church in her house (4:15) but includes the first of the codes for patriarchal households (Haustafeln), commanding submission on the part of wives. None of the 11 men named in Colossians is married, six are mentioned in pairs, and the patriarchal household (not the same as today's "nuclear family") is mentioned only in the code. If Archippus (4:17), like Onesimus, earlier formed a part of Philemon's patriarchal household (Philemon 2), he now, also like Onesimus, has been freed of this structure.

6. The Physically Challenged. Colossians makes no reference to the physically challenged or the sick, but see the metaphor of darkness in 1:13; cf. the opening of the eyes in Ephesians 1:18.

7. Colossians and Post-Modernity. "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8).

“Modernity” begins with the individualistic and rationalist philosophy of René Descartes (“I think, therefore I exist”) and the classical Greek philosophies with their dualisms and dichotomies (see above all the positivism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with its claims to autonomy, supposed objective and definite knowledge, totally positive evaluation of knowledge, and its blind faith in technology and the myth of progress). Post-modernity questions or rejects all these articles of faith so universally accepted for centuries in the West. And above all, post-modernity is characterized by the negation of all “metanarrations” that traditionally gave meaning to human life in the West (see under Ephesians).

Dealing with Colossians, evangelical theologian Brian D. Ingraffia concludes that “the condemnation of ‘empty and deceptive philosophies’ should not be read as a rejection of wisdom and intelligence (against Nietzsche).” Rather, Colossians “rejects the dualist philosophy of the earliest Gnostics in Colossae, which is, ironically, a philosophy similar to the nihilist defamation of the world that Nietzsche condemns in his attack against Christianity.” Nietzsche’s attack against Christianity cannot be used to condemn biblical theology, since Colossians “attacks the same type of other-worldly philosophy.”²

Further, we may suggest that Colossians 2:8 is similar to the intent in post-modern thinking of rejecting modern claims of having achieved objective knowledge, a supposed “neutrality” without presuppositions and without faith. On the contrary, according to Colossians 2:8 all human thought proceeds either from purely human traditions or from Christ. Objectivity and neutrality are myths of humans who idolatrously claim to take over God’s unique role (Genesis 3). Both science and post-modern philosophy recognize that all human thought begins with certain assumptions, from an ideology or a faith that we cannot demonstrate scientifically. For Colossians, only two types of philosophy exist:

(1) those that start with accepting Christ’s authority (a subversive authority that frees from all oppression and injustice), and

(2) philosophies dominated by human traditions, which aid oppression with their elitist ideologies and their majority propaganda (see contemporary discourse that speaks incessantly of morals, ethics, family values--categories and terms utterly foreign to biblical theology). A Reformed Dutch philosophical current exists which anticipated post-modernism by insisting in the presuppositions behind all human thinking.³

House-churches vs. Haustafeln (Codes for Patriarchal Households)

Colossians 3: 18--4:1 (80 AD)

3:18, wives submit

19, husbands love

20, children obey

21, parents do not provoke

22-25, slaves obey

4:1, owners be just

1 Peter 2:11--3:12 (80 AD)

(Community Code; see 2:13-17)

SUBMISSION

2:13-17, all, to authorities

18-25, servants to masters

3:1-6, wives to husbands (but religious freedom)

HONOR

3:7, husbands to wives

MOTIVES/PURPOSES

2:13, "for the Lord's sake"

15, "silence the ignorance of the foolish"

2:21, Christ's example

3: 1, win the husbands (evangelism); cf. 3:15

3: 7, prayers without hindrances

Ephesians (90 AD)

5:21, mutual submission

22-24, wives to husbands

25-33, husbands love wives

6:1-3, children obey

4, parents do not provoke

5-8, slaves obey

9, owners do not threaten

[Cf. the dialectic in Romans with the

instructions to the five house-churches

(12:1-21 and 16:1-27) with the submissive

submission to the Roman Empire in 13:1-7.]

Titus 2:1-10; 3:1-2 = (90 AD) = 1 Timothy 2:8-15; 6:1-10

(Congregational Codes: widows, the rich)

2:1, introduction

2, older men

2:8, men

3-5, women, older and young

9-15, women

6-8, young men

9-10, submission of slaves

6:1-2, slaves

3:1-2, submission to authorities

Notes

1. Mary Rose D'Angelo, "Colossians," in Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1994), 2:313-314.
2. Brian D. Ingraffia, Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 75.
3. See the works of Abraham Kuyper and Hermann Dooyeweerd; also in the United States, Cornelius Van Til and Nicholas Wolterstorff. For the growing opposition to homophobia in this tradition see the works of Hendrik Hart and James Olthuis cited in William D. Dennison, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism and the Roots for Transformation: an Introductory Essay," in Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 42/2 (June, 1999), 287.

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