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## Authorship of Colossians

Colossians is somewhat different from the undisputed letters of Paul in both style and theology.

- Style: Colossians uses more long sentences (both 1:3–8 and 2:8–15 are just one sentence in Greek), more redundant adjectives (e.g., “holy and blameless and irreproachable”; 1:22), far more participles and relative clauses, and far fewer conjunctions.
- Theology: Colossians is said to evince a higher Christology, a more developed ecclesiology, and a more “realized” view of eschatology (i.e., more emphasis on present benefits than future hope).

These observations lead scholars to question whether the letter was actually written by Paul or whether it should be regarded as a pseudepigraphical composition. At least three scenarios are possible.

### ***Colossians Was Written by Paul the Apostle***

A number of scholars think that Colossians was indeed written by Paul. They note that there are stylistic differences between Colossians and the other letters of Paul, but they assume that these can be explained by Paul’s use of a secretary or amanuensis—

someone who did not simply “take dictation” but instead had responsibility for crafting the letter as a literary composition. This person’s role may have been weightier with regard to this particular letter, because Paul was in prison and unable to participate as actively in the composition of the letter as he might have done otherwise. Furthermore, those who believe that Paul wrote the letter think that the theological developments noted above can be explained as a consequence of Paul responding to the false philosophy at Colossae.

Most scholars who see Paul as the author of Colossians think that the letter probably was written near the end of his life, from his final imprisonment in Rome (since that would allow for the greater development of ideas that do not recur in other letters). It is also assumed, however, that he wrote the letter prior to the earthquake that hit the city in 61. Thus a likely date for Colossians would be around 60, early in Paul’s Roman imprisonment. He sent the letter to the church by Tychicus (4:7), with instructions that it be read aloud to the church and then exchanged with the church of Laodicea, which was in possession of another letter (4:16).

**Alternative Suggestions:** According to one suggestion, Paul may have written the letter from Caesarea, where he was kept in prison for two years before being sent to Rome (see Acts 23:31–26:32).<sup>1</sup> According to a second suggestion, Paul wrote Colossians during a still earlier imprisonment in the city of Ephesus.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Colossians Was Written by a Disciple of Paul***

A second proposal allows that Paul did not write this letter himself but, rather, that the author was someone closely associated with Paul and well versed in his theology. For instance, the letter might have been written by Timothy, who, doing his best to express what Paul would have wanted to say, included Paul's name as coauthor. Some scholars have even suggested that Paul was still alive and was willing to authorize the letter (and sign it), even if everything was not worded exactly as he would have preferred, had the conditions of his imprisonment not prevented him from taking a more active part in the actual composition. If some such scenario lies behind the production of Colossians, then the date and provenance would still be as suggested above, around 60 from Rome.

### ***Colossians Was Written by Later Followers of Paul's Theology***

Some scholars think that the development of ideas evident in the letter evinces a second generation of thought not likely to have been embraced by Paul or his contemporaries. Accordingly, according to this idea, the letter must have been written several years after Paul's death. It may have been produced within a circle of Pauline devotees who felt that they could confidently affix his name to the piece. This proposal resolves both the anomaly of the letter's distinctive style and the problem of its distinctive theology. It does seem curious to some, however, that Pauline students would choose as the

destination for a pseudepigraphical letter the church in Colossae—a church that Paul did not found and had never visited, in a town that in 61 had been destroyed by an earthquake. The usual rationale offered for this seemingly odd choice of Colossae is that the Pauline students were using Paul’s letter to Philemon as a reference, and that letter had been sent to Colossae (where Philemon apparently lived).

Other scholars, however, think that if this theory is accepted, then the alleged signature to Colossians (4:18) and putative personal references that are contained in this letter would have to be regarded as a deliberate attempt to deceive readers into believing that the letter had been penned at an earlier time, by Paul himself. Would Paul’s students have perpetrated such a fraud? Those who advocate for such a scenario believe that this is an anachronistic view of “authorship”: the ancient world, they claim, was open to the literary fiction of pseudepigraphical writing and did not consider it deceptive. Proponents of this view usually date Colossians to the 80s and view it as marking a transitional phase between the authentic theology of Paul represented by the seven undisputed letters and the “deutero-Pauline theology” that comes to fuller expression in the (also pseudepigraphical) letter to the Ephesians.

### ***Conclusion***

The decision about whether Paul wrote Colossians usually depends on the amount of latitude that an interpreter is willing to grant Paul

with regard to consistency of expression and development of thought. The question becomes this: Is it possible (or likely) that the person responsible for the undisputed letters could also have thought this way and allowed his thoughts to be expressed in this manner?

1. See Bo Reicke, "Caesarea, Rome and the Captivity Epistles," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P Martin (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1970), 277–86.

2. See Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 2nd ed., NCenBC (London: Oliphants, 1978), 22–32.

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