

Paul's Letter to the Colossians

01. Introduction



Re the 'Acts of the Apostles' by Luke

Luke was a close companion of Paul in his mission.

Luke was a historian: 'I have decided, after investigating everything carefully, to write an orderly account for you so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (Luke 1:3-4).

First century historians used all the tools of rhetoric to impress the reader, and they were expected to create speeches, but only after 'investigating everything carefully.'

born in Tarsus

“I am from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city” (Acts 21:39).

- Born early in the first decade AD



He refers to himself as a **πρεσβύτες** (generally 49-56) in his Letter to Philemon (composed c.54AD)

Luke (Acts 7:58) refers to him as a **νεανίας** (generally 21-28) at Stephen's martyrdom (c. 34AD).

Saul was a Jew

‘I was circumcised on the eighth day’ (Philippians 3:5).

- In his Letter to the Philippians (3:5), he refers to himself as ‘a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.’

- Given the name ‘Saul’ (Acts 7:58). In all his letters he calls himself ‘Paul’. Luke refers to him as ‘Paul’ only after the meeting with the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:7). Did they share a family name, or did the proconsul offer him patronage?

- He was a 'Pharisee' (Philippians 3:5; see Acts 26:5)
- He studied in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, 'educated strictly according to our ancestral Law' (Acts 22:3).
- He inherited Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28).

33AD

‘The members of the council dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man (νεανίας, 37?) named **Saul**. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. And Saul approved of their killing him’ (Acts 7:58-60)

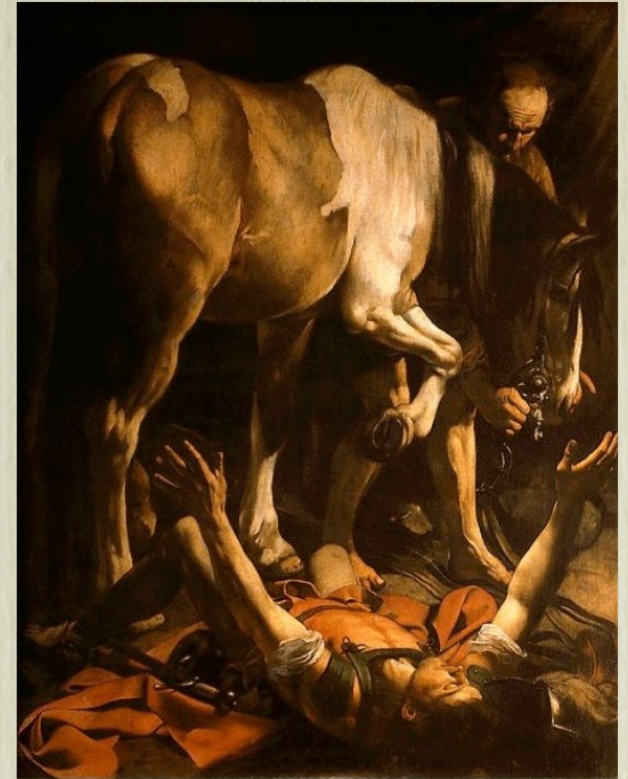
- Paul claims to have been ‘intensely zealous in persecuting the Church of God and was trying to **destroy it**’ (Galatians 1:13; see Philippians 3:6; Acts 9:1-2, 22:4, 26:9-11).

34AD

His Encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus

(Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:13-18).

‘As Saul was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do”



Acts 9:3-6

‘Have I not seen the Lord’ (1 Corinthians 9:1).

‘He was seen also by me’ (1 Corinthians 15:8).

‘I received the Gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Galatians 1:12).

‘God called me through his grace and was pleased to reveal his Son in/to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles’ (Galatians 1:15-16).

Acts 9:17-19

‘Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus.’

‘I went away at once to Arabia,
and afterwards I returned to
Damascus’ (Galatians 1:17).

‘Arabia’ (The Nabataean kingdom)
(Acts 9:20-25)



37AD

‘In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands’ (2 Cor 11:32-33).

Saul pays a short visit to Jerusalem ‘to talk things over with Cephas’ (Galatians 1:18)

37-45AD

‘Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:21-23).



46AD

‘Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people’ (Acts 11:25-26).

Saul visits Jerusalem with Barnabas and Silas and confers with Peter, John & James concerning conditions for accepting Gentiles into the Christian community (Galatians 2:1-10; Acts 11:27-30)

47AD

Sent on mission

Acts 13:1-4

‘In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers ... While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus.’

48AD

‘They sailed back to **Antioch**, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed’ (Acts 14:26).



Acts 14:27-28

When they arrived back at Antioch, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.



Acts 15:1-2

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

48AD

Paul writes from Antioch to Galatia

Letter to the Galatians

49AD

Shortly after writing to the Galatians Paul went with Barnabas to the [Assembly in Jerusalem](#) which decided that Gentiles could be welcomed into the community as Gentiles.

To help harmony in a Christian community of Jews and Gentiles, the Council concluded that the Gentiles should follow only the instructions in Leviticus that applied to Gentiles living in a Jewish territory.

Gentiles were asked to abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from πορνεία.

49AD

Paul returns to Galatia, accompanied by Silas. They are joined by Timothy.

Acts 16:11

Mission to Macedonia

‘We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi.’



Acts 17:1

They left Philippi and came to Thessalonica.



They were forced to leave the Via Egnatia and escape to Beroea

But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as **Athens**; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

Acts 17:13-15



‘After a brief stay in Athens ‘Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.’ (Acts 18:1).



In Corinth Paul met Aquila and Priscilla. Like Paul they worked with a needle, making canvas shades for the market-place, as well as tents and coverings for the caravans and other cloth and leather goods (Acts 18:3).

Paul stayed in Corinth **a year and six months**,
teaching the word of God among them' (Acts 18:11).

Acts tells us that Paul was in Corinth where Gallio was proconsul. We can conclude that Paul was in Corinth before the onset of winter in 50. He left Corinth in the spring of 52

Letters to the Christian community in Thessalonica

52AD

‘Paul sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila ... When they reached Ephesus he left them’ (Acts 18:18-19).



Acts 18:21 – 19:1

52AD

‘Paul set sail from Ephesus, landed at Caesarea and went up to Jerusalem ... and then down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia ... and came to Ephesus.



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Josephus tells us that there were five hundred cities in the Roman province of Asia – a thickly populated and agriculturally and commercially prosperous area. Ephesus itself, reconstructed and embellished by Augustus and Tiberius, is estimated to have had a population of between two and three hundred thousand in the middle of the first century. Located at the mouth of the Cayster river, it commanded the richest hinterland in the province. The main trade routes, whether by land, sea or river, went through it.

52-55AD

‘Paul entered the Ephesus synagogue and for three months spoke out boldly, and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God. When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord’ (Acts 19:8-10).

Among the major cities linked to Ephesus by a Roman road were Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea – the cities addressed in the Book of Revelation (chapters 2-3) towards the end of the century. Paul was in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). For two of those years he lectured in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), laying the foundations for a thriving Christian community in the province. Luke is content to sum up this most successful period of Paul's missionary life in one brief verse: 'all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord' (Acts 19:10).

Ephesus: 52-55AD

Letters from Ephesus

First Corinthians 53AD

Philemon 54AD

Colossians 54AD



Paul is the author

Though prior to the nineteenth century no one doubted that Paul was the author of Colossians, today many seem to take it for granted that the Colossians speaks to a situation from a later period and was composed not by Paul but by a disciple some time after Paul's death. The personal details, so they argue, were included to capture the feeling of Paul's letters and to remind the readers not only of Paul's teaching but also of the fact that even after his death he was still with them 'in spirit' guiding them and encouraging them in their Christian lives.

It is not easy for us to envisage such a practice, but it was quite widespread and quite accepted in the first century of our era, and does not therefore in itself pose a problem in the acceptance of Colossians as an inspired work of the New Testament. However, I find their arguments unconvincing and will be treating Colossians as a letter composed by Paul himself.

Colossians does have ideas and so **vocabulary** that set it apart from other letters. However, these differences can be adequately explained by the different situation which Paul was addressing. More significant are differences in **style**. As regards style, however, we need to keep in mind the role of the scribes whom Paul used in composing his letter. If Paul told a scribe what he wanted to say and left the composition to him, the letter would obviously reflect the scribe's style while faithfully expressing Paul's ideas.

However, without having recourse to such a suggestion, and on the supposition that Paul dictated the letter word for word, the differences in style still do not argue against Paul being the author. We need to recognise that any author, including Paul, can use different styles for different purposes. This was an even more relevant factor in Paul's day than it is today, as one of the elements of education was training in the use of various styles.

In any case, the main arguments advanced against accepting Paul as the author are based not on style but on the **content** of the letter. There is a new stress on the lordship of Jesus resulting from the fullness of divinity that he enjoys. The focus is rarely on God and the Spirit is hardly mentioned. The gospel is spoken of in terms of 'mystery' in a way that is new. In a way of speaking that is not found in earlier letters, baptised Christians are said to have already been raised with Jesus and to share in the fullness which he has as head of the church.

It is argued that these ideas are new and demonstrate a later development of thought. Other scholars, however, see these ideas as perfectly consistent with Paul's thought and adequately explained by the special situation in Colossae which Paul is addressing

After examining the issue, Jean-Noël Aletti in his commentary on Colossians writes: 'All things considered, our understanding of authenticity having happily evolved in these last years, one is able to declare not only that the letter is Pauline, but that it is very probably written by Paul' (*Saint Paul: Epître aux Colossiens* (1993) page 280.

Likewise, in the Anchor Bible commentary published in 1994, the authors, Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, after seventy pages of exhaustive investigation of vocabulary, style, and content, including a comparison with Ephesians, and having examined the arguments on both sides of the question, come to the following conclusion: 'The most solid and safest working hypothesis for the reading and exposition of Colossians is still the assumption that it was Paul who wrote, or rather dictated, the whole letter himself' (page 125).

One of Paul's constant concerns was for the unity of the church. He is continually exhorting his readers to open themselves to the grace that is drawing them to an ever fuller sharing in the communion of love with God that is being offered them by Jesus. Paul is continually confronting tendencies for one group to consider itself superior to another: whether it be Jews thinking themselves better than Gentiles (Galatians); or charismatics thinking themselves better than their non-charismatic brothers and sisters (1 Corinthians); or Gentiles thinking themselves better than Jews (Romans).

We find the same concern here as Paul writes to a community that is being tempted, through contact with surrounding pagan cult, to adopt certain ascetical practices. There is a danger that the ascetics will think of themselves as better than the non-ascetics. It is this that accounts for the intensity of Paul's focus on Jesus. Nothing must be allowed to distract them from 'devotion to the Messiah' (2 Corinthians 11:3), who is inviting all believers to share the intimacy of his risen life.