The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, are two of the most overlooked letters in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) by today's Messianic community. Too frequently, our engagement level with Colossians is limited to words which Paul issued about Torah practices like Sabbath-keeping or kosher eating, or about *something* being nailed to the cross. Because Christian friends and family often use partial quotes from Colossians to refute Messianic Believers who are Torah observant, we often try to avoid Paul's letter. And like many of today's evangelical Protestants, Paul's letter to Philemon is totally avoided, simply because we do not know what to do with the issue of slavery. Ignoring these two letters cannot be allowed to continue any longer.

Colossians and Philemon, two letters of Paul written together, are actually not too difficult to understand when read as a whole—and when one consciously makes a point to interpret them for their original, First Century audiences *first*. What was the false teaching circulating among the Believers in Ancient Colossae? Was it first Jewish, and then pagan—or first pagan, and then Jewish? When the Apostle Paul uplifted Messiah Yeshua, was he simply claiming that He was like the impersonal force Wisdom—or something much more than Wisdom? Did Paul really affirm Yeshua as being the Deity—God Himself incarnated as a human? How were things like the Sabbath and appointed times improperly used by the false teachers—in an ascetic philosophy designed to appeal to the cosmic powers, over which the Messiah had prevailed? What can readers learn about the mystery of the ages, and how the power of the good news can change anyone? What role does a letter like Philemon play in our reading of the Bible?

In the commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*, Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee shows us why today's Messianic Believers need not be afraid of these two letters any more. An array of scholastic opinion is considered in regard to these two texts, especially the various proposals made about the false teaching which disrupted the Believers in Colossae. Contemporary applications for some negative trends being witnessed in today's Messianic movement are also proposed, especially in terms of the false philosophy and worship of angels refuted by Paul. Colossians and Philemon are both important letters for us to understand, as today's Messianic community strives to move forward in its reading of the Pauline Epistles.

COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON
FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. McKEE

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.blog

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ABBREVIATIONS AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
Ara: Aramaic
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)
CJSB: Complete Jewish Study Bible (2016)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
ECB: *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
EJ: *Encylopaedia Judaica*
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)
Ger: German
GNT: Greek New Testament
Grk: Greek
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
Heb: Hebrew
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
KJV: King James Version
Lattimore: The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore (1996)
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
LXX: Septuagint
m. Mishnah
MARV: Messianic Apologetics Revised Version*
MT: Masoretic Text
NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
NEB: New English Bible (1970)
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
NIV: New International Version (1984)
NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)

* This is a modified and adapted edition of the public domain World Messianic Bible (WMB).

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
NT: New Testament
OT: Old Testament
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version (2014)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)
WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)

PROLOGUE

How many times have you heard a Messianic Bible teacher quote from Colossians at a *Shabbat* service? If you can count the number of times on a single hand, then you are not alone. How many times have you heard a Messianic Bible teacher even quote from Philemon? I hate to say this, but the only Messianic teacher I have ever heard refer to Philemon, has actually been *myself*. Colossians and Philemon are two letters of the Pauline corpus which do not get a great deal of attention within Messianic circles (that is, when Paul's epistles are even addressed). We often just do not know what to do with these two letters, even though Colossians may get a quote here or there to make a teaching sound exciting. At best, we might find a tertiary level of engagement, but we do not know that much about the content, message, and purpose of Colossians-Philemon.

In 2008 we just finished a Bible study of the Epistle of Ephesians, a six-chapter letter which undoubtedly has connections to Colossians. It would be inappropriate of me to continue our Wednesday Night Bible Study program and skip over Colossians-Philemon, especially given all of the connections which we see between Ephesians and Colossians. In all likelihood, Colossians was written immediately prior to Ephesians, and so we will be examining the first letter written before the more general letter was composed.

Having been in the Messianic movement since 1995, I have always wondered why short books of the Bible like Colossians and Philemon often do not merit a great deal of our attention. Is it because they are so short that we already think we know what they mean, and we really do not think that we need to expel the time or effort to understand them? Is it because these texts make us go back to an historical period in the First Century which causes us to feel uncomfortable? Is it because when Paul asserted that *something* had been nailed to the cross/execution-stake (Colossians 2:14), today's Torah observant Messianics would like to just act as though this statement were not present in our Bibles? Furthermore, might some of the refutations which Paul made against ancient proto-Gnosticism (Colossians 2:18, 20), actually have some contemporary applications which would disturb some populist teachings floating around today's Messianic world? And Philemon, it obviously forces us to deal with the question of slavery. *We just don't want to "go there."*

I suppose there are more questions I could list from examining Colossians-Philemon, which relate to our present Messianic non-engagement with these two letters. As we prepare to embark upon a study of these two letters—which in case you are wondering were written at the same time, as the same people who greeted the Colossians (Colossians 4:9-15) were the same who greeted Philemon (Philemon 22-24)—I write this during a season when Messianic

Biblical Studies themselves are in a severe state of flux. Regardless of whether we deal with the Apostolic Scriptures or the Tanach (or preferably *both*), there is a shift which is beginning to take place, as individuals start to realize that only addressing the weekly Torah portion is not enough for their spiritual diet. Entire sectors of the Bible have been overlooked by us for far too long. Colossians is a text frequently referred to by Christians, who think that we are in error for committing ourselves to a life of Torah obedience. So obviously, it is high time we examine Colossians and Philemon—not only for what *they* say about it—but also for what it might teach *us* and how we may need to improve.

Many of you do know that in recent years, old theological debates over Christology—the identity of the Messiah—have arisen in the Messianic movement. Is Yeshua the Messiah Divine, or was He just a human being empowered by God? Colossians has some things to teach us about this (Colossians 1:15-20; 2:9). A much lesser debate, but one which is obviously significant to anyone who follows the Scriptures, is what we are to do with Philemon. Was this just a one-page letter which Paul wrote to a First Century colleague, which made it into our Bibles by happenstance? What does it have to tell us about the First Century social setting and composition of who many of the early Believers were? How many of us have found ourselves *assuming things* about the First Century, which we should not be assuming?

Because there has been so little attention given to Colossians-Philemon in the Messianic world, I am actually very excited about what we are all going to learn. I have been convinced over the past few years that many of the answers our faith community needs are found in these kinds of short books of the Bible, which unfortunately, very few people read *much less discuss*. As we mature as a movement—and actually read texts like Colossians-Philemon—I believe God will mold us to be more effective for His service. We may be shown some things which make us feel uncomfortable at first, revealing some things among us which need to be improved and/or changed, **but it will make us stronger and more able to accomplish His tasks in the long term.** Are there any "Colossian" congregations to be found today's Messianic movement? What would be their strengths and weaknesses?

What do you think you are going to learn as a Messianic Believer preparing to examine Colossians-Philemon? Have you even sat down and read the entire text of these two letters before? Have you really contemplated what it means to "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth," because "When Messiah, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory" (Colossians 3:2, 4, NASU)? Likewise, what was Paul's intention of saying, "Let the word of Messiah richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16, NASU)? As much as we may think we have to sort through negative admonitions and rebukes, and then encounter Paul's opinion of slavery, we actually do have some significantly positive things to contemplate.

Just like you, I am looking forward to this being yet another opportunity to learn more about the masterpiece of God's Word!

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics

This update of *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic* (2024), mainly involves a refresh of the material, as well as a smoothing over and streamling of some arguments. Also considered, are new theological and spiritual developments, which have taken place within the Messianic community. These most especially include some of the experiences our family has had, in relocating from Central Florida back to North Texas (late 2012), and then getting reintegrated into the Messianic Jewish movement (2013-present). I hope and pray that this commentary can continue to be a useful resource for many.

COLOSSIANS