

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript
Episode 225
Introducing the Book of Colossians
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Episode Summary

This episode opens our new book study on Colossians. Disputes over the book's authorship and date contribute directly to the major content issue of the book—the nature of the “Colossian heresy.” The so-called “Colossian heresy” is the label used by scholars to describe Paul's theological opposition in the city and church of Colossae. Elements of the false teaching Paul confronted are reminiscent of Gnosticism. However, the mature Gnostic theologies known to scholars today did not take shape until the second century A.D. and thereafter. Other items Paul addresses are obviously related to Jewish opposition. Could these two theologies be related?

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, episode 225: Introducing the Book of Colossians. I'm the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he's the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike! How are you?

MH: Pretty good. Busy as usual. Anxious to get into a new book.

TS: Yeah, the voting was pretty exciting! At first, the initial winner looked like it was Exodus. It came on strong, but then slowly but surely, Colossians came back and took it by a landslide. Very interesting.

MH: Yeah, it's like one of those sausage races you see at the ball parks, you know? In between innings. [laughter]

TS: Yeah, it's always fun to see what people vote for, and how it works. I like that part of it. I'm glad we do that. Mike, I have gotten some emails about, “Why don't you do this?” Look, I'm sorry your book didn't win. That's how competition works. The good thing is, since Colossians is so short, we'll have another vote again for another book.

MH: There are a lot of places to camp in here, so...

TS: Whatever it is, it's going to be shorter than Exodus.

MH: Oh, yeah! [laughs]

TS: Mike, also, I want to announce... I guess people know that over the last two weeks our conference has sold out. About a week and a half ago, our Naked Bible Conference sold out, which is awesome. We want to thank everybody who's going to be attending. We're excited about that.

MH: Yep, it'll be fun.

TS: Yeah! It's going to be a lot of fun! So now we're going to announce that we're going to do livestreaming for the event. So if you can't make it, we're going to livestream the event. You can go get your ticket to that livestream on NakedBibleConference.com, and this is one way you can support the Naked Bible and everything we do.

MH: Yeah, that's a big development. I'm glad we can do that.

TS: Absolutely. We're still a good month away, so plenty of time to go get your livestreaming virtual ticket. NakedBibleConference.com is where you can go get more information about that and get your ticket. We hope you'll join us live. I'm super-excited about how much fun it's going to be.

MH: Oh, yeah, I'm looking forward to it. I'm looking forward to hearing the papers—the *presentations* is a better way to put that. It's not going to be a paper-reading. It'll just be fun. I like all the speakers, I like all the topics. I'm looking forward to it, too, so... Yeah, I'm going to be doing my own presentation, but I get to hear some good stuff, too. I can't wait.

TS: And you'll be emceeing it, too.

MH: I'm sure that'll be memorable. [laughter]

TS: Alright, Mike. Well, I guess this is the first of many episodes on Colossians.

MH: Yeah, let's just jump in here. So, for those of you who might be new to a book study series (depending on when you started listening to the podcast), when we start a book study, we devote the first episode to introducing the book. And I don't mean a dry, dusty run-through of date, occasion, setting, authorship, blah, blah, blah. I'm not going to read an outline of the book to you. What we try to do is discuss some things that we're going to run into—discuss things that will help orient the audience to the book. And in that way, you preview some of the sorts of things you're going to be talking about.

5:00

And Colossians is actually kind of easy to do with respect to those goals. So what we're going to do today is really talk about three things: authorship, date, and this thing called "the Colossian Heresy." Those three things are interrelated. The Colossian Heresy is essentially what occasioned the book. Paul is ministering in Colossae, and he has some problems. There's a lot of false teaching that has permeated the group. He's getting opposed by competing teachers and ideas trying to essentially undermine what he's doing. And collectively, there's this thing called the Colossian Heresy that he is combating. What it actually is, is really a matter of academic scholarly debate. So we're going to get into that. In part, it's related to issues of authorship and date, and I think you'll see why as we go through. But I'm going to be dipping into a few good reference sources here. I'll tell you where the quotations come from. Basically, I can safely say that anything I'm going to cite here, I'm going to recommend you have. I get asked all the time about resources, and there are some good ones here that are going to help us zero in and fix on the Colossian Heresy—just get us ready for the book. So I'm going to start here with a selection from the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (DPL). This is the entry by Peter O'Brien. O'Brien also wrote the Colossians Commentary and the Word Biblical Commentary series. But he spent a lot of his academic career on Colossians, and some of Paul's other smaller letters. And he writes in DPL:

The letter makes clear that the apostle Paul is the writer, not only in the opening greeting (Col 1:1), but also in the body of the letter (Col 1:23) and at its conclusion (Col 4:18). The character of Paul, as we know it from other letters, shines throughout this letter. There was no dispute over the authenticity of Colossians in the early period of the church, and the letter was included in Marcion's canonical list as well as in the Muratorian canon (*see Canon*). [MH: The latter is 7th-8th century A.D; Marcion's is older. But those are important canon lists.] However, the Pauline authorship has been challenged on a number of occasions in the last one hundred and fifty years. The grounds presented concern the language and style of the letter, and the supposed differences between Colossians and the theology of the main Pauline epistles.

Now I also want to read a little bit from the *Lexham Bible Guide* on Colossians. I'm going to plug these just for a second here. Full disclosure here: I work for Faithlife, and Lexham is our imprint. But the *Lexham Bible Guides* are really useful. These are books that the people responsible for creating them actually combed through commentaries and pulled out really good paragraphs on all sorts of things: verses, topics, whatever. They're very useful. So at one point, the Lexham Bible Guide says this:

Paul's authorship of Colossians was unchallenged for most of history. With the rise of critical scholarship in the 19th century, however, scholars questioned the letter's authenticity. As a result, many scholars now regard Colossians as a

“deutero-Pauline” letter—that is, a pseudonymous writing composed by a follower of Paul in his name.

Now, the counter to this... If you read a good, solid, exegetical commentary, and you read the introductory sections, you’ll find the pushback. There are many “Paulisms” in this letter. When commentators talk about authorship and style and all that kind of stuff, what they’re talking about is how every writer has typical ways of saying certain things—stock phrases, word order, ways that they typically do things. And so, there are those who say, “Well, you know, there’s stuff in Colossians that just doesn’t look like Paul or sound like Paul’s other letters—the ones that nobody fights about.” But the pushback is, well, there *are* lots of Paulisms in *this* letter, Colossians, that are in the undisputed ones. So, okay, so you get some new stuff, big deal. Colossians is also in P46. That’s a papyrus—a very famous papyrus—that’s widely known as the earliest existing copy or collection of Paul’s letters. The point is, if pseudepigraphy was widespread in the ancient world (and it was), it’s funny how no one in antiquity thought that way about Colossians. It’s only when you get into the 19th century that these things come up. However, I’m going to go back to DPL—*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*—O’Brien notes this:

Yet there are linguistic differences between Colossians and the other Pauline letters: thirty-four words appear in Colossians but nowhere else in the NT, twenty-eight words do not occur in the other Pauline letters, and ten words Colossians has in common only with Ephesians. But in assessing these statistics it ought to be borne in mind that many of these words appear in the hymnic paragraph of Colossians 1:15–20 or in interaction with the false teaching, either as catchwords of the Colossian philosophy or as part of the author’s polemic. Further, *hapax legomena* [those are words that appear only one time] and unusual expressions turn up in considerable numbers in the other Pauline letters; the absence of a word or concept may be due to the different subject matter being discussed.

10:00

So I think that’s a good... it’s a fair pushback. When it comes to disputing Pauline authorship, you would expect different vocabulary to be in different letters. And as this DPL quote points out, all of Paul’s other letters have unique vocabulary, too. What’s the big deal? And unique vocabulary is due in part to what is being discussed—the subject matter. And I think the quotation here does a good job of pointing that out. Now, back to *Lexham Bible Guide*. Why is this important? Who cares? The LBG says:

Those who think someone other than Paul wrote Colossians date the letter to the 70s—that is, sometime after Paul’s death. For those who hold to Pauline authorship, the date of the letter is contingent on the location of Paul’s imprisonment. Some (Dunn) argue Paul wrote Colossians, along with the other

“prison letters,” while imprisoned in Rome and date the letter to the early 60s... A date of composition in the mid- to late 50s is often proposed by those who believe Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea.

So the date depends on when Paul was in jail, and where, so there's dispute there. Scholars disagree. If you're going to accept Pauline authorship, it's 50's or 60's. If you don't, it's going to be sometime later, after Paul's death. The date of the 70's was mentioned here.

Now again, who cares? Why does it matter? Well, there's really two reasons why it matters, the surface reason being an integrity issue. “Well, the epistle says that it came from Paul's hand, so we can't deny that, or else we impugn the letter.” Okay, I get that. But the bigger issue is the relationship of the letter and its contents to the specific false teaching—the specific heresy—that Paul is being confronted with—that Paul has to deal with. So we have here this whole issue of the Colossian Heresy. Here's the real issue. The stuff that Paul's shooting at in Colossians has certain affinities with Gnosticism, and Gnosticism as full-blown systems of thought—like Gnostic theology. There are different theologies of Gnosticism, just like there are different theologies of Christianity—you've got Protestant version, Catholic version, Orthodox version—they all have a different way of articulating certain theological points, and they have disagreements. It's the same thing with Gnosticism—there's no one Gnostic system. All those systems are much later than Paul's lifetime, well into the 2nd century (that's the 100's—40 or 50 years or more after Paul's dead) and on past the 2nd century. How does that work? If the things that Paul is shooting at sound like Gnosticism, but according to Gnosticism's own primary text (like the *Nag Hammadi* gospels) those systems developed much, much later, what's going on here?

So the whole issue of date matters. And some scholars want to push Colossians even beyond the 70's, to get it up close to the end of the 1st century for this reason, as Gnosticism's system (in terms of what it would become as a system) starting to become developed. So that's why the date of Colossians has been kind of a hotbed of academic disagreement or discussion, because the things that Paul has to address sound a lot like Gnosticism.

Then you have to ask yourself, how does that work? Now in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (another excerpt here) O'Brien writes:

For scholars such as E. Lohse the supposed theological differences between Colossians and the generally accepted Pauline letters are decisive against the apostolic authorship of Colossians, even if the grounds of language and style are not.

See, just that one sentence says that, boy, the subject matter of Colossians is so much like Gnosticism that Paul couldn't have written it. So a lot of scholars think that. Back to the quote:

Some have argued that the post-Pauline author's christology belonged to a later period of church history when classical Gnostic influences had begun to assert themselves.

15:00

Did you catch that sentence? When we read through Colossians, Paul is not only going to be shooting at certain items of false teaching, but the christology—the way he talks about Jesus, in the fullness of his deity. They're going to say, "Look, if Colossians was written later because what it's shooting at looks a lot like Gnosticism, then Paul's christology must be later, too. Whoever wrote Colossians must have been influenced by later church history people that we don't know." And what they're going to do is they're going to take that and say, "Well, the original church didn't think thoughts like "Jesus was God." That's a later invention." You see where this goes, and the logical train of thought that it follows.

So the issue of finding a coherent explanation as to how Paul could be shooting at something that looks like Gnosticism before there was Gnosticism is important. The christology of the New Testament (and Paul was a major articulator here)... This is a big deal as far as Trinitarianism, the deity of Christ, and whatnot. There are those who love to put all this stuff late. It's like a Bart Ehrman or something like that. They love to push it late so that they can say, "Well, the original disciples never would have thought Jesus was God. Jesus himself never would have said he was God." All this kind of nonsensical talk. My big beef with that is, what about the Two Powers of Heaven stuff? What about the Second Temple Jewish binitarian monotheism? It's like that just gets forgotten, which is a big reason why I think it's important. These ideas—the ideas that are the foundation of Trinitarian thinking, or Christ as deity along with the Father as deity, the two persons in one but sharing one in the same essence... Of course, you get three with trinitarianism. We need to realize that the foundations for that kind of thinking are in the Second Temple period. They're B.C. They're before Jesus ever showed up. They're before there ever was an early church. So it's not coherent to move that stuff later, but people will use the content of an epistle like Colossians and try to push the authorship of that book later so they can try to make this argument that high christology—Trinitarian thinking—was not part of the original Jesus movement, the original church.

I'm hoping that you can see this clearly, what the strategy is here by those who would oppose these ideas. Back to the quote here—the DPL. In fact, I'm going to back up to the last sentence:

Some have argued that the post-Pauline author's christology belonged to a later period of church history when classical Gnostic influences had begun to assert themselves. But it is unnecessary to resort to full-blown Gnostic influences of the second century as a possible background. If a Jewish background of an ascetic mystical kind is likely, then there is no need to look beyond the apostolic age, and certainly Pauline authorship is not ruled out on this account.

Now, that's an important idea. What O'Brien is saying there is... He's setting his readers up for where he's going to continue in his own essay there. But he's saying, "Look, some of these things that look like Gnosticism, if we can find them in Judaism—if we can find them in the Second Temple period—then this whole issue of pushing the authorship of Colossians way forward is just pointless." And I agree, it is pointless. When it comes to the history of Gnosticism (and we're going to get into this a little bit), there are a couple of scholars that are important. Edwin Yamauchi's contribution is pretty noteworthy. He has a book that's out of print, but you can still find it used on the internet. If you're interested in the kind of things we've already talked about (and will talk about) in this episode, I recommend it. It's called *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*. It's 1983, it's the second edition. I have an older copy of it. But it's an important work. His work has shown that the ideological or theological strands that contribute to later full-blown Gnostic systems were around much earlier than the 2nd century A.D.—all the way back into the Second Temple period. So Yamauchi specifically tackles this problem. Now, Yamauchi is the author of an entry in the *Dictionary of New Testament Background on Gnosticism*, and I'm going to quote from his article briefly. He writes:

20:00

Because of the variegated nature of Gnosticism, it is difficult to fit every gnostic teacher into a common framework. Marcion, who advocated the concept of two gods, the god of the OT and the god of the NT, has many affinities with the Gnostics, yet he lacked their mythology and emphasized faith rather than saving *gnōsis*. A major branch of Gnosticism, which followed the teachings of Valentinus, was heavily influenced by Platonism. Scholars have recognized another branch of Gnosticism, which has been termed Sethianism, a more mythological system that exalted the OT figure Seth as a key revealer.

It should be noted that the ancient sources of these movements and their Christian critics do not use the term *Gnosticism* and rarely used the term *Gnostics*. M. A. Williams has therefore called upon scholars to abandon the term. But it is not likely that his proposed substitution, "biblical demiurgical traditions," will be adopted. But his reminder that "Gnosticism" is a scholarly construct should always be borne in mind.

What he's really saying is that one does not need to move Colossians to the 2nd century to have some context or frame of reference to what Paul is addressing in

the book. You can find this stuff earlier than the 2nd century. Even though you've got the full-blown systems later and some of the stuff Paul shoots at kind of looks like he's shooting at those ideas, there are strands that flow into what would become full-blown Gnosticism that you could find much earlier. Now, I should point out, before I get into some of those strands, that this isn't just an evangelical bugaboo. There are Jewish scholars that agree with this assessment, that this stuff is lurking in Jewish mystical texts of the Second Temple period. It's not an evangelical Christian thing. Jewish scholars agree, too. I'm going to quote just one little paragraph from a journal article by Joseph Dan: "Jewish Gnosticism?" It's from *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2:4 (1995). This is going to be on page 328. He writes:

There is a typological proximity between Jewish mystical concepts and Gnostic ones, a proximity which increases, paradoxically, as time-space and geographical space increase between it and historical Gnosticism. There are also some basic, profound differences which separate Jewish mysticism from the Gnostic type of religiosity.

So he's saying, "Look, there's older Jewish stuff that has certain Gnostic strands in it that are going to become really important ingredients in the recipes that will become Gnostic systems. So it's not just evangelicals saying this to save Paul and save their christology and all that kind of stuff. Jewish scholars who muck around in this material (the Second Temple period), they know this is true. And honestly, it's really not hard to find.

So what are we talking about here by terms like "Jewish Gnosticism" and "Jewish mysticism"? Or "mystical Judaism"? What elements of Judaism in the Second Temple period contributed to later Gnostic theologies? What are we talking about here? Well, in broad strokes, Colossians gets into what might be called "speculation about angels". Let's just start there: speculation about angels. Now, some of you already know from *Unseen Realm* that Colossians is one of the books that mentions the *stoicheia*—the "elementals," the "elements or elemental principles." You know how different English translations render the term differently, variously. So Colossians does get into this worship of angels—speculation about angels. That's just one example. Once you start talking about angelic abilities and duties and hierarchies, etc., the question of how Jesus relates to those beings naturally arises. When I go out to speak on *Unseen Realm*, you start talking about the sons of God and invariably there's someone in the audience that says, "What about Jesus? I thought Jesus was the Son of God. Who's he now with all these other Sons of God running around in the supernatural world?" It's that kind of thing. Once you start speculating about angelic ranks and hierarchies and powers and responsibilities (which Judaism did—did a lot of that—and Paul gets into a lot of that in Colossians)... Once you start doing that, the issue of "How do we distinguish Jesus from this?" comes up. It's just natural. And that, in part, explains Paul's emphasis in the book of

Colossians on the supremacy of Christ to angels. He has to get into that as he's addressing some of this speculative stuff.

Now, some examples from Jewish literature that constitute strands of later Gnostic thought... Let me just give you a few. Martha Himmelfarb is a well-known Second Temple Judaism scholar. She specializes in Jewish mysticism and apocalypticism and all that kind of stuff. She has an article on the *Book of Jubilees*, and I'm just going to use this as an example because I think it's illustrative. Her essay appears in a book called *Enoch and the Mosaic Torah: The Evidence of Jubilees*. So it's a book that collects a bunch of essays about the book of Jubilees. And her article is entitled "The Book of Jubilees and Early Jewish Mysticism." So here's a selection from that article. She writes:

25:00

Does the book of Jubilees belong to the history of Jewish mysticism? Jubilees contains neither a vision of the *merkabah*, the chariot throne of God from the book of Ezekiel, nor ascent to heaven, the features central to the Jewish mysticism of antiquity as delineated by Gershom Scholem in his pioneering work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Yet Jubilees shares other significant features with other texts of the second temple period that are often associated with early Jewish mysticism such as the Book of the Watchers (1 En 1–36) and the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice [also known as the *Shabbat Shirot* in Hebrew], as well as with the *hekhalot* texts...

I'm just going to break in here again. *Hekhalot* is a plural for *hekhal*—temples. And these are visions of divine temples (plural) in the supernatural world. There's a lot of that in the Dead Sea Scrolls. So back to the quote... So Jubilees is associated with early Jewish mysticism that you'd find in the book of the Watchers, the songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice...

...as well as hekhalot texts, the literature of the fully developed *merkabah* mysticism is of late antiquity. And while scholarly literature on early Jewish mysticism has in general paid little attention to Jubilees, it figures prominently in Rachel Elijor's recent book on early Jewish mysticism, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism*.

Now, I've become pretty well familiar with Elijor's book, *The Three Temples*, because of a book I've been working on (good grief, for two years off and on) on astral theology and biblical thought and how that relates (or shouldn't be abused by) weird stuff that people say about biblical prophecy today. There's a lot of speculation in the Dead Sea Scrolls, for instance, about temple visions and visions of the heavens. And when you get into the heavens, you get into celestial objects, you get into the stars, you get into astral theology and all that kind of stuff. So this is a big deal in Second Temple Judaism. And because that's where the angels live—the angels live in the heavens, as well. Some of them thought

they either *were* the stars, or they were associated with the stars, or guard the stars—there’s all this speculation. This is angelic speculation. And that’s the kind of stuff you see Paul having to deal with in Colossians.

So it’s very easy to see, if you’re familiar with Second Temple Jewish stuff about visions of the heavens, visions of God’s throne room, visions of angels and other supernatural beings and celestial beings... If you’re familiar with that, you can read the book of Colossians and go, “Okay, I know what he’s tracking on here.” You don’t have to say, “How could he have gotten this stuff, because we don’t have Gnosticism yet? I guess Paul didn’t write the book.” That’s very easy if you’re familiar with Second Temple Jewish literature to know what he’s dealing with here.

And so I think the Himmelfarb quotation is useful, and let’s use it a little bit. She mentions here, as important features to Jewish mysticism, a couple of things. Visions of the *merkabah*, the throne chariot of God from the book of Ezekiel (it’s Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 10), and then she mentions ascents to heaven—ascending to heaven—these visions of having a heavenly throne room experience. So as far as the ascents to heaven, I would recommend that listeners go back and listen to episode 57 of this podcast. That’s when we talked about Acts 22, and we tied that into Paul’s experience mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12, where some people think Paul had a near-death experience or something. He sees visions of God that he can’t talk about, and all that. It actually relates to something in Paul’s life that is mentioned in Acts 22. So if you go back and listen to episode 57, you’ll hear us discuss Paul’s vision—his ascent to the heavens and what he sees there, and how that ties in to certain Second Temple Jewish texts.

30:00 For our purposes here, I want to go off in a bit of a different-but-related trajectory: the *merkabah* visions. The *merkabah*—it’s a Hebrew term for the throne chariot of God. If you think about Ezekiel 1... (We had a series on Ezekiel. For me, it doesn’t seem too long ago, but I guess Ezekiel 1 was quite a while ago.) Ezekiel sees a vision of God with the four cherubim. The cherubim have the four faces, and they’re underneath the throne—all that stuff. And when we were in that subject, I talked about how the four faces of the cherubim correspond to the four cardinal points of the Babylonian zodiac and how this relates to Babylonian astrology and what’s going on here—why you would use this imagery and put Yahweh on the throne instead of Marduk and all that kind of stuff. You can go back and listen to that. For our purposes here, just remember that the *Merkabah*—the vision, throne chariot of God—the vision in Ezekiel 1 became a real point of interest in later Judaism. Kind of like today, lots of people speculate on what in the world was going on there. What does that mean? How do we understand that?

Now, that’s where I want to camp a little bit, because I want to quote to you some specific examples from some Dead Sea Scrolls that relate visions, not only of the throne chariot of God, but *multiple* throne chariots and multiple ‘*elim* (gods). ‘*Elim*

is the plural for *El*—one of the typical words for deity. So in the Dead Sea Scrolls, you have lots of visions where you've got lots of throne chariots flying around that are somehow piloted or associated with these beings—supernatural beings—'*elim* and plural *elohim*. And if you think back to my book (*The Unseen Realm*), *elohim* plural... these are terms you would use, not assigning a specific set of attributes to these beings. We don't have polytheism here. This is the Second Temple period. This is after the Exile, folks. This is why I've protested so much (beginning in my dissertation, all the way to right now) that terms like '*elim* and *elohim* are not about polytheism, because the biblical writers do not assign a specific, unique set of attributes to that term—to either term. You'd use these terms to say, "This is a member of the spiritual world." That's it.

Now, at the Naked Bible Conference, I'm actually going to get into this subject because my topic is "Divine Plurality." I can't remember what title I gave it on the Naked Bible Conference website, but my topic is about divine plurality in the Septuagint and in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and we're going to get into some of this stuff. I'm going to read a couple examples here, because you've got these weird visions in Jewish literature that involve multitudes of heavenly beings that are not called angels. They're called '*elim* and *elohim*, and this is going to be an idea that is going to become adapted into later Gnostic systems. Later Gnostic systems are going to have different terms for these guys. They're going to call them—just think about it—*archons*, or *aeons*.

And so this is a good example (these *merkabah* visions in the Dead Sea Scrolls) for the kind of angelic speculation that was current in Judaism of Paul's day and even before Paul's day, that would have been something for him to address and to distinguish Jesus from in his letter. You do not need to move Colossians way front into the Gnostic era (or something close to the Gnostic era) to justify the content of the epistle. Paul would have been familiar with this stuff from his own context: Second Temple Judaism. So this notion of using the content of Colossians to say that christology is a later invention of the early church is bogus. That argument doesn't pay attention to the primary sources of Paul's own Jewish context. I'm going to give you a couple of examples. I have two texts here—they're both *Shabbat Shirot* texts—"Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice." Numerically, the Qumran material, one is from 4Q405, the other is from 11Q17. I'm not going to give you the column numbers and all that kind of stuff. When we produce the transcript, Brenda can produce the column numbers and all that stuff. The English translation here is from Garcia Martinez in his book on the... He's a co-author—it's a Dead Sea Scrolls study edition. I'm just going to read you a couple lines from these texts, the *Shabbat Shirah* texts:

1 perfect light, the multicolouredness of a most holy spirit [...]

Ellipses—the text breaks. There's a lot of ellipses. This is a fragmentary text, so "dot, dot, dot."

35:00

2 high places of knowledge, and at his footstool [...]
 3 the appearance of the glorious form of the chiefs of the kingdom of the spirit[s]
 of [...]
 4 his glory. And in all their movements the gates of [...]
 5 the flashing of lightning (?) [...] ... to crush. The gods of [...]
 6 among them run g[o]ds like the appearance of coals [of fire ...]

So now you have a line from Ezekiel—actually, two lines from Ezekiel—but it's pluralized. We don't just have one deity and throne, we've got multiple.

7 going around. The spirits of the holy of holies [...]
 8 of the holy of h[ol]ies, spirits of the gods, et[ernal] vision [...]
 9 and the spirits of the gods, in the forms of flames of fire around [...]

When we go a little bit down in the text, we read another line here.

15 And the chariots [MH: plural!] of his inner shrine praise together, and their
 cherubim [MH: all of these *merkavot* have cherubim—not just God's!] and the[ir]
 ophanim [MH: “wheels”] bless wonderfully [...]
 16 the chiefs of the construction of the gods. And they praise him in his holy
 inner shrine.

And the second *merkabah* text... Let me just pull out a couple lines again, and I'll skip the dots here. Probably the people who do the transcripts are blessing me now. We have here:

2 by [ordinance they are] steadfast in the ser[vice of ...] a seat like the throne of
 his kingship in [his glorious inner shrines. They do not sit ...]
 3 his glorious chariots [...] holy cherubs, shining ophanim, in the in[ner shrine ...
 spirits of gods ... purity ...]

It's just weird stuff. These are Jews... Think about this: These are the Dead Sea Scrolls, okay? These are Jews writing about multiple throne chariots in language drawn from Ezekiel 1, which only had one throne chariot, okay? So you look at a text like this, and scholars classify these sorts of texts as Jewish Mysticism—Jewish mystical texts. There's a lot of this stuff at Qumran—a lot of these multiple beings in the throne room of God. They each get their own little chariot along with the big chariot—the one that really matters—God's own chariot. But they all get their own little chariots. These are Jewish writers speculating on what must the presence of God look like, or be like? What goes on up there? And there's just a truckload of this kind of material at Qumran and in Second Temple Jewish texts.

40:00

This is the kind of thing... This kind of speculation is not Gnostic, because there is no Gnosticism at the time this stuff is written. This kind of speculation went on in Judaism—Second Temple period Judaism. And so we would expect Paul at some point to run into this, and he does at Colossae. And when he writes about it, he has to articulate how Jesus is distinct, how Jesus is not just one among equals. He's different. He is ontologically different. His status is different. So again, we would expect, if we're familiar with this older material... This predates Paul, it predates the birth of Jesus. We would expect Paul to run into this. So the supposition that the content of Colossians has to be late, it's just bogus. Now think about it: when did people start to doubt the authorship of Colossians? I just read you some introductory passages. It was in the 19th century. When were the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered? The next century. See, this is a good example of people, and even today—scholars... It just flabbergasts me how scholars can repeat arguments based on out-of-date material. The guys—their heroes—writing in the 19th century criticizing the authorship of Colossians didn't have access to any of these *Shabbat Shirot* texts. They didn't know they existed. They were in a cave somewhere in Qumran. But since we have this material—and frankly, I would suggest that they should have gone back and read the pseudepigrapha a little bit more closely, too... But these are the most blatant examples. Since we have this material today, this argument about the authorship of Colossians being based on the lateness of angelic speculation is just nonsense. It's out of touch with data. It's out of touch with primary sources. We would expect Paul to have to tackle this.

Now, I'm going to throw a third one in here, just because I think it's interesting. But this has nothing really to do with Colossians, per se. Because what I'm going to talk about here isn't really specifically mentioned or referred to in the epistle, but I want to give you a third one just so that you know that there would be stuff in the pseudepigrapha that still might get scholars to think about connecting Colossians with Gnosticism or some kind of thinking like that. The Dead Sea Scrolls in my mind torpedo the whole criticism of Pauline authorship, but I'm going to throw this one in just because I think it's interesting.

The third one is the figure of Sammael. Sammael is a name for Satan. It's a name that occurs in pseudepigraphical texts of the late 1st century and the early 2nd century. And this is where Gnosticism as we know it is really starting to take form (its systems). One of those texts is the *Ascension of Isaiah*, which scholars agree is a mixture of Jewish and Christian authorship. Both a Jewish and Christian hand worked in this text—composed things in this book.

Now, in the ascension of Isaiah, the devil gets the name Sammael. The name means, "the blind god." That's the key point. The name means, "the blind god," which is a designation found in later Gnostic texts for the Demiurge. The Demiurge is a term that means, "the maker." And if you're not familiar with Gnostic thinking, you could go up to YouTube; I have a YouTube lecture that's

quite dated (My hair is more brown, and I've got more of it, I guess) about Gnosticism, where I introduce one of the Gnostic systems—Gnostic cosmology.

The short version of this is, for a lot of Gnostic cosmology (not all of it, but some of the more noteworthy systems of Gnostic cosmology) the maker of heaven and earth—the God who created heaven and earth, the God of Genesis, the God of the Jew, the God of the Old Testament—is a wicked guy. Because he's not the true God in Gnostic cosmology. The God of the Bible is a created evil being known as the Demiurge or the blind god, and other things, as well. He creates humanity to be slaves, and all this kind of stuff. The true god is some ethereal thing—ethereal presence, or whatever, out there in the universe—that gives birth to aeons. He basically pinches little pieces of himself off and creates aeons. These are super high-level divine beings. If you put them all back together, if they all formed in a group, they are the fullness of the true god, because all the pieces come back together. The *Pleroma* is the Gnostic term for that. And one of them goes astray (Sophia) and she winds up creating the Demiurge (which is the God of the Jew, the God of the Bible), and he's wicked and evil. So that's it in a nutshell.

So the fact that Gnostic texts refer to the Demiurge as Sammael (and here you have a 1st century text, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, using the same term), it gets scholars to wonder, "Okay, here we have an element of Gnosticism that has maybe some sort of Jewish context." But most scholars say, "No, this is part of the Christian element because we know there's no devil in the Old Testament," which is sort of a misnomer, but we know why they say that, because the word *satan* is never used of the serpent in the Old Testament. (If you've read *Unseen Realm*, this is all familiar stuff to you. I can't go back and rehearse my book to a new audience. Please read *The Unseen Realm*. This is why I wrote it. And here on the podcast, we use it as touchpoint now and again, like we're doing now.) But there will be people that say, "the idea of a devil is just totally foreign to the Old Testament. It's a New Testament invention. And here, it's probably even a late 1st century invention," or something like that. Boy, isn't it interesting, that the devil figure gets this name (Sammael) here in this late 1st century or early 2nd century text—somewhere on the cusp, right around 100, let's just call it 100 A.D.—so it's after the early church, it's after the life of Paul. And here we have this name show up, and that name is going to be used later in full-blown Gnostic texts for the Demiurge—for the evil Maker. Isn't that interesting? This is a point by which scholars are going to try to argue that certain ideas that we have in our New Testament now have nothing to do with the original Jesus movement—that they are later inventions. I'm going to read you a little bit from... And if I'm reading these sources, let's not assume that any of these authors land anywhere in particular on this, because honestly, I don't know where they would land on some of these things. But I'm going to read from Charles Worth's Volume II, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Michael Knibb is the one who did the treatment of the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*. He writes this:

45:00

The demonology of the *Martyrdom of Isaiah* is a matter of some interest. The leader of the forces of evil, who has at his disposal a host of subordinate angels (2:2; cf. 5:9), is called variously Sammael (1:8, 11; 2:1; 5:15f.), Beliar (1:8f.; 2:4; 3:11; 5:1, [4], 15), and Satan (2:2, 7; 5:16). These three names, which are, of course, well known from other sources, appear to be used synonymously, and there is no real evidence to support the view of Charles that Sammael is subordinate to Beliar. Two other names are also applied to this figure. The first, Malkira, is given in 1:8 as an additional name of Sammael and means in Hebrew "king of evil." The second, Matanbukus (2:4; there is a corrupt variant in 5:3, Mekembekus), apparently derives from a Hebrew expression meaning "gift of desolation."

In different places both Beliar (1:9; 3:11; 5:1) and Sammael (2:1) are said to dwell in the heart of Manasseh, and it is under the inspiration of Beliar (or Sammael) that Manasseh, at the instigation of a Samaritan, has Isaiah put to death.

Okay, so *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah*... This is the pseudepigraphical book that has Isaiah sawn in half, that the book of Hebrews might be referring to. It's kind of a chicken-or-egg sort of question, as far as the date of those works go. But we're not going to rabbit-trail into that. Now, all of that has led scholars to ask whether Sammael is behind part of the Book of Enoch, because there's something going on in the Book of Enoch that kind of is similar. In the so-called *Animal Apocalypse*, which is 1 Enoch 85-90, we get some interesting things here. Now, I'm going to quote from my *Demons* book that isn't published. This is actually my first draft manuscript about the *Animal Apocalypse*, and I think you'll get the drift of why some scholars wonder about, is there a connection between 1 Enoch and the *Ascension of Isaiah* that takes us into this whole devil question, which takes us into the date of Colossians and all that stuff. So this is just extra stuff here. So I write in my manuscript:

The so-called *Animal Apocalypse* (1 Enoch 85-90), a highly symbolic retelling of the history of Israel, also reflects the Deuteronomy 32 worldview. In his scholarly commentary on this portion of 1 Enoch, Patrick Tiller describes it as follows: [The *Animal Apocalypse*] is presented as an allegorical dream of the antediluvian patriarch, Enoch, in which he sees a story about bulls, sheep, various animals that prey on the sheep, and humans who interact in various ways with the sheep and bulls. Each element in the story is primarily a sign for some object of human history outside of the story. Cattle represent humans from the time of Adam to Noah, some of the early Shemites, and the restored humanity of the ideal future. Sheep represent Israel. Various unclean predatory and scavenging animals and birds represent the Gentile nations. Stars represent the fallen Watchers, and humans represent other angelic figures, except for the owner of the sheep, who represents God.

Hannah [MH: another scholar—this is still me writing] notes that, in the *Animal Apocalypse*:

[T]he Lord of the Sheep (i.e., God) hands over the sheep (i.e., Israel) to the oversight of seventy Shepherds [MH: there's the Deuteronomy 32 Worldview connection right there], that is, to seventy angels, which, of course, recalls the seventy angels of the Angelic Patron Legend. This period covers the Babylonian captivity (1 En 89:55-71), the limited restoration under Zerubbabel and Joshua (1 En 89:72-77), the Persian and Hellenistic hegemonies (1 En 90:1-7), and especially the crisis under the Seleucids which resulted in the Maccabean revolt (1 En 90:6-19)...

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The seventy shepherds overtly represent the angelic patrons of the Gentile nations. Their role is oppression of the sheep (Israel). The writer of 1 Enoch 85-90 cleverly subverts the Deuteronomy 32 worldview, where Israel is Yahweh's exclusive possession and the sons of God were allotted to the nations:

[MH: I'm quoting somebody else now]
[I]n turning Israel over to the nations, God in effect turns them over to the nations' heavenly patrons... [T]he author of the *Animal Apocalypse* has taken the concept of the angelic guardians of the nations and stood it on its head, so to speak. Here the angelic patrons function not so much as guardians of the Gentile nations, although they are that to be sure, nor even as angels charged with leading the Gentiles astray, as in *Jubilees*. Rather, they function as a means of punishing Israel.

Now part of the seventy shepherds... Part of this whole thing in the *Animal Apocalypse* (and here's where we link back to Sammael) is the seventy shepherds *blind* people to the truth. (Remember, the Sammael means "the blind god," "the blind demon.") And so scholars wonder if the writer of *1 Enoch* 85-90 is thinking the same thing as the *Ascension of Isaiah* writer—that the leader of the seventy shepherds is Sammael, the blind demon. Because that term is used in later Gnosticism for the God of the Old Testament, scholars just look at that and go, "Hmm." It's just interesting. There's this connection between a text where, let's call it 100 A.D., and Gnosticism. And the whole idea of blinding people, "Where did we read that before? Oh, yeah, Paul writes about that, too: 'the god of this world has blinded the eyes of those who don't believe.'" They'll use this information to try to make the content of some of Paul's theology later than Paul. That's the point. They'll dip into this content to make what Paul says in different epistles (Colossians is a big one, but now we're reading in 2 Corinthians)... They'll dip into this and they'll say, "Look, this can't be by Paul's hand because it reflects a text in 100 AD—it reflects the Gnostic text that comes even later." Never mind the fact that Beliar is in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Never mind that kind of stuff. Never mind that fact that when Paul talks about the god of this world

blinding the eyes of those who don't believe, he's drawing on Isaiah 6:9-10. "No, no, no, no. Paul can't be thinking about Jewish texts of his own period. He can't be thinking about the Old Testament. He must be not the author. It's awkward, but he must not be the author of this material, because we can find it in a text that's around 100 AD and in Gnostic texts that are a little later than that, so Paul didn't write this stuff." This is how academia works, folks. This is how it works.

55:00 Now, I don't want you to go away and think that this is what scholars do all the time. There are scholars, I think (I don't think, I *know*, because I know a lot of them, and at the Naked Bible Conference, we're trying to introduce you to some people who are highly regarded in various fields) who understand that there's more than one way to skin this cat. There's more than one way to think about what we find in Colossians and other epistles of Paul that doesn't require us to say, "Paul didn't write this stuff." Because when you go down that road, then you have to think thoughts—and you're led to think thoughts—that, "If Paul didn't write this stuff, what about all this high christology in here? If Paul didn't write that, then that means this wasn't around in Paul's day, and that would mean that the early church didn't think that stuff about Jesus, did they?" This is how academics work. There's more than one way to skin the cat. Often, what you get... I'm just going to be blunt. I've been in academia now for—good grief—20, 25 years. Academics have biases. They just do. Why? Because they're people. They often present their argument either with selective citation of material or they favor material in the way they discuss it. They might mention something that contradicts them in a footnote, but they're going to ride the other stuff to the end of the page. That's just what they're going to do. And so, you should be thankful that there are people who devote their lives to mucking around in all these texts and paying lots of money to get degrees and spending their lives doing something as obtuse as chasing prepositions across a corpus. This is important stuff. Somebody has to do this, because there are going to be people (like me and other people) who use this data. We can tap into this data and present a fuller picture of what's going on. And we can say things like, "Look, this is an unnecessary conclusion to draw based on the data—not based on what I want to believe, but based on the data."

Here at the podcast, we try to be data-driven for a reason. And honestly, we don't have to make anything up. There's so much data here. We want to present data to you and tell you why scholars land where they do—how they make their arguments, what they're doing. Because if you encounter this stuff out there in the wild world of Christian Middle Earth (or just Middle Earth), you get the impression (especially if the scholar's a good writer) that, "Oh, man, this must be true—this must be the way to look at it. There's just no other way to look at this. Look at all these citations and footnotes, and blah blah blah." No, that's why it's important to be able to tap into the primary data yourself or get notes from somebody who does and just gives it all to you, not just a little slice, and talks about, "How do we think about the data? Well, here's one way that scholars think about the data. Let's probe that for logical coherence and weaknesses, shall we?"

Let's do that. And here's another way to look at it. Let's probe that. And here's another way to look at it. Let's probe that."

This is what we try to do—what I try to do in what I write. It's what I try to do in the podcasts, what I'm trying to do in this episode. You need to know that there's nothing new under the sun. There just isn't. And no matter what you're going to run into out there in the wild world of Middle Earth, somebody else has thought about that differently. The question is, where do I find that guy? Where do I find that woman who has devoted himself or herself as a scholar to a more—dare I say—honest presentation? And in some cases, that is the right word, but just to a fuller presentation of the data. And then, can I find the people who are willing not just to parrot the party line of academia and present merely one way to look at the data? Because there's always more than one way to think about data. There just is. There's always one more way to do that—more than one way to skin that cat. You've got to find scholars (regardless of where they land, regardless of their confessional stance) that will do that for you. And they're perfectly willing to be wrong, they're perfectly willing to expose you to full presentations of all the possibilities. That's gold when you find somebody like that, regardless of where they land.

So veer toward the end here, to land the plane... How should we think about the Colossian Heresy? Where does this leave us? And I think you can sort of answer the question already, by virtue of what we've covered. In Colossae... Let me just go back to the Lexham Bible Guide—it has a nice little paragraph on this:

Colossae was a relatively small agrarian town located in the region of Phrygia in western Asia Minor. It was part of a triad of cities along with Laodicea and Hierapolis, all of which were situated in the Lycus River Valley (see Col 2:1; 4:13, 15; compare Acts 16:6; 18:23). An earthquake devastated the region surrounding Colossae in AD 61. Paul's letter to the believers in Colossae was probably written before this event. Although the people of Colossae were mostly Gentile, Moo (2008, 26–27) cites passages in Josephus and Cicero that suggest the city also had a substantial Jewish population.

Paul definitely had Jewish opponents. The city of Colossae was primarily Gentile, but you've got a significant Jewish representation there. NT Wright (let's just throw him in here) writes:

The city of Colossae was distinguished by its various spiritual beliefs. According to [Clinton] Arnold (2002, 372–74), the "spiritual climate" of Colossae included beliefs in "dangerous spirits and powers" (see Col 2:8, 15), invocations of angelic and other divine beings for protection, and "ecstatic forms of worship" that often involved forms of bodily abuse (compare Col 2:18). According to Barth and Blanke (1994, 10–12), the people of Colossae also participated in various "mystery religions." On the whole, syncretism—the blending of different religious beliefs

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and practices—seems to have been the prevailing approach to religion in Colossae (see Wright 1986, 24–25).

And I think it's a good way to present it, because you have mystery religion stuff that we're going to run into, you've got Jewish mysticism that apparently was part of what was going on in this church, you've got Jews in Colossae that are going to question Paul about circumcision and worshiping on certain days... It's just all happening. Let me just throw in another selection from Wright. This is from his *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*. He writes:

The problem, in its essence, could be stated as follows. (a) There are clear Jewish elements in what Paul is opposing, and yet there are many things which look more pagan than Jewish—the actual worship of angels (2:18), and ascetic practices which appear to deny the importance of the created order (2:2ff). (b) On the other hand, while much of what Paul is opposing can be fitted into an essentially non-Jewish framework, there are certain features (for instance, the reference to circumcision in 2:11), which remain obstinately and uniquely Jewish...

The problem, therefore, is to find a hypothesis which will account for the polemic of Colossians both in outline and in detail. If, at the same time, such a hypothesis can help to explain the significance of the poem in 1:15–20, and of the particular form and content of the ethical exhortations in chapter 3, it will gain added strength.

So what Wright is basically saying is that what we have, the Colossian Heresy, is an amalgam. It's just a mixture of... I wanted to say that it's like Christian Middle Earth. [laughs] It's just a mixture of strange stuff. Some of it is Jewish, some of it's pagan, some of it's a baby birthed from the combination of Jewish and pagan stuff—it's its own thing, it's a hybrid, whatever. This is the stuff Paul's running into. But you don't need to push Paul so late because he's running into angelic speculation—all this really weird stuff about the Powers... He's running into it in Judaism. There are certainly specific Jewish things that Paul is addressing in the book. So the best approach is to presume that what Paul is confronting here is a group of Judaizers, and then speculations about angelic powers that probably at least some of those Judaizers brought into the discussion and that some of the pagans in the city brought into the discussion. It really doesn't have to be that complicated. So this is the kind of thing that we're going to run into in the book. I think Wright's trajectory is a good one—that it's an amalgam of all this stuff. You can't just put one label on it. But we don't need to.

But for our purposes today, to wrap up the episode, what I want you to get out of this is a little more familiarity of how scholarly thinking works—why things like date and authorship and the circumstances in the book can become important, specifically as it relates to Colossians. You need to come away from this episode

understanding that Paul wrote this epistle. There's no good reason to doubt that he wrote this epistle. Therefore, there's no good reason to doubt that Paul's christology was Paul's christology. Lo and behold, it's (as I say in *Unseen Realm*, and as I say in a number of places)... There's a lot of stuff that Paul says that reflects Jewish binitarian monotheism, too. And then you've got the Old Testament presenting the two Yahweh figures. In other words, Paul's the perfect guy. All this stuff converges in him. He is a Jew who's highly educated. He knows the Old Testament well; he knows the context of his own faith very well. But he's the apostle to the Gentiles. He knows the pagan mind pretty well, too. So all that converges in the epistle to the Colossians. And this just gives you an idea of the kind of stuff we're going to run into as we track through the book.

TS: Needless to say, Mike, I am super-excited. That's one of the reasons why I was lobbying for Colossians to win the vote, because...

MH: Did you stack the vote, Trey? [laughter]

TS: What, what, did I say that out loud? I meant, uh, it legitimately won. [MH laughs] No influence from my part. I didn't mess with the data. No, but seriously...

MH: Scouts' honor. [laughs]

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TS: I might have voted twice, I'm not sure. I'll admit to that. But nonetheless, I'm super-excited for this book. And the whole data-driven point is... Phew, coming on 14, 15 years, when I first discovered you, that's one of the things that attracted me to you is because... I don't know if it's because I'm an IT guy, and I am data-driven myself, and so when you find that in other areas, you gravitate towards that. And you were one of the first that was applying that to the Bible. And I think for a lot of other listeners like myself, that was part of the draw to you specifically. And on the podcast now, as well, it's because you use the data—you take logic and the data into consideration. That's what we're trying to get people to go back to or start doing.

MH: Ultimately, at the end of the day, knowing that what you believe is based on data (from its own context and within its own context) is a whole lot better than having to conclude that, "Well, what we believe, we believe because some church authority said it somewhere in the Middle Ages." That's just not satisfactory because we assign authority to the biblical text, and so that where we have to go back to the text in its own context, we try to do that. I try to do it. And to bring up the conference again (which I don't mind doing), I go looking for these people. I've read the material, and I know most of them personally. I've met all of them at least once. And this is what we're trying to do. We want to introduce the audience to more scholars trying to do this sort of thing.

TS: Next week, chapter 1, we kick it off.

MH: We jump into chapter 1.

TS: We want to thank everybody who voted in the poll. I'm super-excited about this book of Colossians. And I just want to thank you all for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.