

## Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 240

Colossians Q&A

November 3, 2018

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### Episode Summary

Dr. Heiser answers your questions:

- Why is there a perceived lack of acknowledgement of the Holy Spirit in some passages, such as Colossians 2:2? [3:20]
- Do English Bible translations insert the word “other” in places where it didn’t appear in the Greek, as the Jehovah’s Witness translation does in Colossians 1? [12:50]
- Were the proto-Gnostics and Kabbalists using the elements (earth, wind, fire, air) as tools in their ceremonies or to invoke the entities that they thought ruled the elements? [15:00]
- Is there a historical proof that Hermetic texts influenced later Zoroastrian doctrines and practices? [20:45]
- Could Colossians 2:16 really be saying that the Colossians had started to observe the feasts of Yahweh and were being judged for doing so? [26:00]
- Was it Paul’s poor vision that compelled him to occasionally mention that he wrote something “in his own hand?” [31:15]
- Are the terms “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in Colossians 3:16 headings for the Psalms in the LXX, and is Paul directing believers to sing anything other than the Psalms? [34:00]
- How might the use of an amanuensis have factored into the work of some of the other NT writers besides Paul? [40:10]

### Transcript

**TS:** Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, episode 240: Colossians Q&A. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike, how are you doing this week?

**MH:** Pretty good. Do we want to talk about our epic fantasy face-off in our football league, or not?

**TS:** Yeah, we can. I was competitive. I lost by five points. If I had started my normal people, rather than trying to make a big move, I would have won. But I didn't do that. I swung for the fences. I picked up some new guys. I tried to do something big. It didn't pan out. It backfired. But, hey, I came five points short. At least I made them sweat a little bit.

**MH:** This is Mori's greatness right here, because I had bye-week troubles and he put on his draft wizard hat, and I was able to fill the gaps.

**TS:** Yeah, you're crushing it...

**MH:** That's what great teams do.

**TS:** You're leading it. You're #1 in the league. I think you've only lost one game, so you're 7 and 1.

**MH:** I'm 7 and 1, yeah. It makes me wonder now how in the world I lost that other game. I must have done something while Mori was asleep and I didn't have his supervision.

**TS:** You're crushing it. It's not fun for us guys here on the bottom, just trying to find a way to get into the play-offs. It's amazing how fast the time goes! It's almost over.

**MH:** I know.

**TS:** It's already halfway through. It's already November. Where does the time go?

**MH:** I'll take it. Because in my other leagues, I can't buy a win. It's just... I'm struggling to stay at 500. A couple I'm underneath. It's just a weird, weird season. But there you go. The Pugnacious Pugs have Patrick Mahomes, [laughs] so that solves a lot of problems!

**TS:** ...who went to my college. So since he's doing so well, I just pretend like I'm doing well, because he's my college quarterback. So, "Go Red Raiders!"

**MH:** He's the real deal.

**TS:** He is. It's awesome. Alright, Mike, I want to remind everybody that we're going to be in Denver in a couple of weeks: Friday, November 16<sup>th</sup>, at 7:00pm in the Upper Room at the Denver Community Church. It's free to the public, open to everybody. We hope you'll join us. Bring your questions. Hopefully, we'll have a good time.

**MH:** Yeah, we usually have a good time at those things, so I would expect no less.

**TS:** Sounds good. Alright, Mike, we've got a handful of questions here, specifically about the book of Colossians. I'm ready if you are.

**MH:** Yep. Let's jump in.

**TS:** Alright. Our first one is from Leon:

3:20

**I was raised a Trinitarian and I am still one, but I find some difficulties in the New Testament concerning the Holy Spirit. Often (or almost every time) Paul greets a church it is with the phrase "Grace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" without mention of the Holy Ghost. Colossians 2:2 describes the mystery of the gospel as the Father and Son's plan. Again, no mention of the Holy Ghost. In Revelation, we see this amazing throne room scene, but again, very little of the Holy Ghost. So what are we to make of this as Trinitarians? Why is there a perceived lack of acknowledgement of the third figure of the Trinity?**

**MH:** You know, I think the key word there is *perceived*. I would say it's a misperception. Generally, this (the angle of the question) feels like a hermeneutic of exclusion (an interpretive approach that is fixated on exclusion). In other words, it's the idea that if something isn't mentioned everywhere or even mentioned in a preponderance of places with specific phrasing, that it has no role. I think that's flawed. If you actually look at Colossians 2:2, it doesn't seem to really say what I think is lurking in the mind of the questioner here (in the mind of Leon). So let me just read that (Colossians 2:1-2):

5:00

**For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, <sup>2</sup>that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ...**

God's mystery isn't the Holy Spirit; it's Christ, because Christ's work on the cross is a thing that unites Jew and Gentile, because he is the promised seed mentioned in Genesis 12:3 and other places after God divorced the nations—that it was through Abraham's seed (one particular seed, of course) where the situation would be reversed. And the seed there has to be physical, so it *has* to be Christ, so it really has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit anyway in that sense in that verse. So I think we're over-reading (or maybe under-reading) Colossians 2:2 with this hermeneutic of exclusion. Christ is the mystery—the means by

which salvation would be provided. And so the wording makes sense in terms of what the subject matter is.

Secondly, I would say the Spirit is included along with Jesus in statements about the gospel elsewhere. How can we possibly conclude that the Holy Spirit isn't part of the gospel (the plan) in a number of passages? Let me just give you a few examples from Paul, since Paul was the author of Colossians. There are a number of these that we could look at.

**Romans 1:4**

**The son (Jesus) was declared to be the son of God in power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by his resurrection from the dead.**

You have verses like that that link the Spirit to the resurrection, which is the key to the plan's fulfillment. So how in the world can we say the Spirit isn't an equal partner in all of this?

**Romans 8:2**

**For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.**

It's the Spirit who baptizes people into the body of Christ. And inclusion in the body of Christ is where you get your assurance of salvation. It's indispensable. You have Christ's body. Who is the mechanism by which individuals are joined to that body (united to Christ, to use another Pauline phrase)? Well, it's the Spirit.

**Romans 8:9**

**You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.**

Again, the whole mechanism about the body of Christ. The Spirit in these passages is absolutely indispensable. The Spirit is required for these things to be true.

**Romans 15:16**

**[Paul] was called to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God so that the offering of the Gentiles would be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.**

Again, you have that link. So in this case, you even do have the Spirit brought into the discussion of this union of Jew and Gentile. So the Spirit doesn't get

excluded. He might get excluded in some places where Paul is talking about Christ as the mystery. The mystery itself is this inclusion. But here we have the Spirit as the one who brings it all together. "Sanctified by the Holy Spirit."

I'll just do some rapid fire here. In 1 Corinthians 6:11, Paul mentions several sins in the preceding verses, and he says:

**Such were some of you, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God.**

If that isn't... Just look at the way these are juxtaposed.

**"You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."**

Jesus and the Spirit are set side by side there. God the Father isn't there. If we're operating by a hermeneutic of exclusion, is God out of the picture now? No, there's no requirement that all three persons be mentioned in passages that relate in some way where there's a doctrinal item (in this case, the mystery of the gospel). There's no requirement that all three persons need to be mentioned in passages that discuss that thing. There's no rule for that. And so to observe where the Spirit is not included in some of these and conclude, "I guess he's not equal," that's just a flawed approach, even though I can see how people could be steered in that direction by someone who wants them to focus on the exclusion. Let me try to find another one here.

**2 Corinthians 13:14**

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.**

Well, they're all three in there. Sometimes they are; sometimes they're not.

10:00

**Galatians 3:14**

**So that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles [there's that *mystery* thing from Colossians], so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.**

Linking the Spirit into the mystery there. Even though the Spirit isn't mentioned in Colossians 2:2, he's brought into the equation in other passages. I think you get the point at this point. Who gives us everlasting life? Is it Jesus or is it the Spirit? We might be inclined to think of John 3:16, "Oh, that's Jesus. It's the work of Jesus." Well, the Holy Spirit is actually talked about that way in certain passages.

**2 Corinthians 3:6**

**Who has made us sufficient to be ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**

**Galatians 6:8**

**The one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.**

**Ephesians 2:18**

**For through him, we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.**

You have all three there. So this is something for the general listener here to be wary of. Don't let people steer you in a certain direction through the hermeneutic of exclusion. It's tactically not kosher (if I can put it that way) because there is no rule that says that all three persons have to be listed in every passage that talks about a subject that all three persons have something to do with. You might get all three of them there. Maybe in the preponderance of the verses you don't. But if you get two out of three in all of the other ones and it's very evident that all three have a role to play in the same thing, well, that tells you something, too. It tells you that all three are at the same level. It tells you that all three are indispensable. It tells you that all three... If you pull one out, it's not going to work. You need all three. And so the way we think about the Godhead, I think we need to be careful in our methodology. The last thing I would say here is the very idea of the New Covenant (think of the whole question from this angle), which Jesus says his body and blood are the guarantors of, unites Christ and the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit was part of the prophesied New Covenant in the Old Testament. Passages in Ezekiel and Jeremiah specifically mention the Spirit in connection with the New Covenant. And there is Jesus in the Upper Room saying, "This is my body and blood of the new covenant." The Spirit belongs there. The Spirit is an equal partner. So we need to be careful about our method here.

**TS:** Heath has our next question. He asks:

12:50

**The New World Translation Bible of Jehovah's Witnesses puts the word "other" in Colossians 1. "...By him all [other] things were created... he is before all [other] things." Some JW apologists defend this by saying lots of English bible translations insert "other" in various places where it doesn't appear in the original Greek. How would Mike respond to that?**

**MH:** Except for that one. [laughs] Here's how I would respond to it. I'd say it's silly. I think this is Colossians 1:16 that the phrasing is drawn from. If you're going to do this in Colossians 1:16, it's contrived. It's a purely contrived theological

insertion by the Jehovah's Witnesses. There's nothing in the Greek text to justify inserting the word "other." And we know the drill: the Jehovah's Witnesses just do this sort of thing because they can't win the argument with exegesis of the text that actually *is* there. "So now we have to insert words that aren't there so we can win our argument." That's a little thing I like to call "cheating," but this is what they do. They just move the goalposts when they need to. They cheat.

I think it would be interesting to have the shoe on the other foot. This would be like anti-Jehovah's Witnesses inserting or deleting things in verses to make them look even worse. How about inserting the word "God" every time the name Jesus appears just because the two are juxtaposed *in certain verses*? In certain verses, we get God and Jesus. Well, why don't we just put "God" everywhere where the name Jesus appears? "See, Jesus is God. Look at that. It belongs here because it shows up in some other verse." It's ridiculous. It's silly. I'll bet the Jehovah's Witnesses would cry foul if we did that. If they're going to cry foul there, then they need to stop just putting words in passages that try to make their theology. It's cheating because they can't win the argument on exegesis.

**TS:** Marisa from Slovenia has two questions:

15:00

**I have a question about the passage about the Colossian Heresy (Colossians 2:8). I've read some commentaries on the *stoicheia*. Did the proto-Gnostics and/or some Kabbalistic sects employ the elements of water, fire, earth, and air literally as some kind of tools in their ceremonies, or was it rather invoking the entities that were supposed to rule these elements by some "spiritual bribes" or "passwords"? Is there a connection to the passage in Matthew 12 where the Pharisees accused Jesus of using the power of Beelzebub?**

**MH:** Jesus never used... We actually covered this when we did an episode on exorcism as part of the messianic mosaic. I can't remember what number it was. We have had discussions both in that episode and I think one other Q&A about Jesus and exorcism. Or maybe I'm thinking about part of my *Demons* book.

At any rate, what's interesting about Jesus with exorcism (let's just start there) is that there *were* exorcists in the Jewish tradition in antiquity. The kabbalah stuff is so much later... I really don't even think we need to care about what somebody's saying about the Bible 1000 years after the biblical period, because they're just making stuff up in kabbalah. It's just mystical stuff. But there *were* exorcists in the first century. They left writings; they left different incantations on different objects. This is a whole sub-discipline of biblical scholarship. And what's interesting is Jesus doesn't...

Let me back up and say it this way: the incantations and such within the Jewish community when it came to exorcism (and you can apply this to the Christian tradition, too) all have some appeal to a higher authority to cast out a demon.



Jesus never does that. Scholars have noticed this. He doesn't use formulaic phrases. He doesn't do the kinds of things that his contemporary exorcists (even those within his own community) do. He doesn't appeal to a higher authority because he doesn't *need* one. He *is* the authority over demons. This is something that stands out within the whole context of exorcisms in the Gospels. So they're going to accuse him by using the power of Beelzebub because they know he's not doing it in their name or with their consent or with their approval. And he's also not doing it the way they do it. And they don't want to believe that he actually is the higher power to which they have to appeal. [laughs] So what's left? "We're just going to say he's appealing to some entity that's more powerful than the demons, and the only candidate you really have for that is Beelzebub (the satan figure). So there's a certain logic to why they say this, and it can be kind of comical if you really know the backdrop of this. And it's pretty poignant in terms of its theology that here's the one standing before them that needs no higher authority and, in fact, is equal to the authority that they appeal to. They don't realize it, or they're unwilling to accept it.

Now, the earlier part of the question about the *stoicheia*... It is true, when we talked about the *stoicheia* that one of the contexts in which that term is used is to refer to water, fire, earth—the fundamental elements of the universe as they were conceived back in the first century. So we can't necessarily conflate that understanding of *stoicheia* (the fundamental elements) with the *stoicheia* who are spirit beings, even though there are texts that do have them overlapping to some extent (because of the very ancient idea that, for instance, the elements of weather were controlled either by God or some other entity or something like that). So there was this cosmic battle going on behind things that people experienced meteorologically or just in terms of natural catastrophe—that sort of thing. So it's conceivable that they could have done this.

I'm not a student of Gnostic ritual, so I'm not aware of any specific examples. However, I *am* aware that the Manichean sect, who (if you know something about the Manichees, it's an early Jewish mystical sect)... They actually did part of this. You can find these sorts of things in their ritual language and their ceremony. And of course, the Greek mystery religions did use these elements. You can find them as part of ceremonial statements or phrases, rituals—that sort of thing. So there's a verbal element and then there's a physical element, as well. They would use fire and water and whatnot.

So when it comes to those two things, yeah, you can find examples there. I don't know specifically about the Gnostics, though. Gnosticism tends to be this amalgamation of streams that flow into what would become Gnosticism. So I wouldn't be surprised; I just don't know any specifics. This is actually a good thesis question. If Marisa was a graduate student, I'd say, "That's a good idea. Do a survey of the literature, and tell me if you find anything, and if you do, that's your thesis." So that's the best I can do with that one.



**TS:** Alright, Marisa also wants to know:

20:45

**Mike mentioned Egyptian Hermeticism as one of the sources of the proto-Kabbalah. Is there a historical proof that Hermetic texts influenced later Zoroastrian doctrines and practices? Or did they both evolve from a common root?**

**MH:** [sighs] Yeah, it's really difficult. On one hand... Let's just start with Egyptian Hermeticism. We have to realize that what we think of as Egyptian Hermeticism was produced in the Hellenistic era (the Greek era)—because it's in Greek. We don't have Egyptian texts that refer to themselves in this way. Egyptian Hermeticism produced in the Hellenistic era was presented as the teachings of the god Thoth. Well, it would be kind of nice if we had an Egyptian original that could validate that idea. But we don't. This material is Hellenistic in origin.

Now since that's the case, the Hellenistic Empire was one that preceded... How do I want to put this? If you think of the flow of biblical history, you've got your Babylonian Empire, you've got your Persian Empire, then you've got the Greek Empire; then you've got the Romans. So yes, Hellenism preceded the New Testament era (the Gnostic era) by several centuries. We get that. Zoroastrianism, though, was a precursor to this. Zoroastrianism would actually be something around before (technically) the Egyptian Hermeticism that is actually Greek. They are pretty close, though, so it would not be a surprise at all if there were some cross-fertilization here. And this is typical of Hellenistic culture. When Alexander spread his empire, he didn't root out all pre-existing religion and that kind of stuff and just dump it—throw it away—or ban it. He doesn't do that. He does focus on syncretism. He wants to Hellenize what's there. Not eliminate what's there and replace it with only Greek thinking, but he wants to “baptize” it, if I can use that catch phrase. He wants to inject Hellenistic thinking into that and marry the two, and then come out with somebody who is positively predisposed toward him and his empire and Greek culture. So you're naturally going to have some relationship here between them. But chronologically and technically speaking, if we're talking about this thing we know as Hermes Trismegistus and all that sort of stuff (the Greek title of the Egyptian god Thoth), that's Greek in origin so it would actually come after the Zoroastrianism. In most of the tractates... Let me just look up something really quick here... I think I have a little entry on Hermes Trismegistus. This is from Barrett's *New Testament Background*, 1987. He writes:

Hermes Trismegistus (Thrice-Greatest Hermes) is the Greek title of the Egyptian god Thoth. Trismegistus probably represents an Egyptian expression meaning ‘very great’, and served to distinguish the foreign god from the native Greek Hermes. In most of the tractates Hermes himself, or a similar divine figure, communicates secret knowledge (gnosis) about God, about creation, or about salvation, to a disciple, who is sometimes but not always named. The revelation is

generally given in the form of a dialogue in which the disciple's share is limited to asking questions and expressing admiration... The date of the Hermetic writings cannot be established with certainty, but it seems probable that most of them were composed between AD 100 and 200...

25:00 **MH:** You're still in the throes of the Hellenistic world. Even though the Romans are in power, the world speaks Greek. Why was the New Testament written in Greek? Because everybody spoke Greek. Greek culture had spread everywhere. So you're still basking (if I can use a positive term like that) in Greek thought in these eras. So this is definitely after the Persian period (so first or second century). We have to just keep this in mind with respect to this question. Since Alexander had a policy of syncretism (marrying things together) rather than their eradication, it's certainly possible that you're going to find similar streams or threads in both corpuses—the Zoroastrian literature and the Greek literature of the Hermes Trismegistus.

**TS:** Justin had a question about **Colossians 2:16**.

26:00 **Torah observant Christians say evangelical Christians interpret this verse wrong and that Paul was really saying the reverse: the Colossians had started to observe the feasts of Yahweh and were being judged for doing so. Is this interpretation possible?**

**MH:** I'm not completely sure what the question is angling for. Is the idea of the question that Jewish believers were criticizing Gentiles for not doing Jewish things? Or is the idea that Gentile believers were criticizing some among their own number for doing Jewish things? That second one seems to be where this is going, but I'm not quite sure.

In either case, though, I would say that Paul's statement in the very next verse answers this question. Colossians 2:16 says:

**<sup>16</sup>Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food or drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or Sabbath.**

I'm going to assume that the question is that Torah-observant Christians are saying, "These Christians at Colossae were starting to do Jewish stuff and then getting criticized from people within their own community, or maybe even Jews." It's hard to believe that Jewish believers would criticize them for doing this, because that would be what they wanted or they might feel good about it. "They need to become more like us." So it seems to me that maybe what the question is angling for is you have Gentiles criticizing other Gentiles for doing Jewish things. Regardless of that, the next verse to me answers the question. Here's the next verse:

**<sup>17</sup>These [these questions of food, drink, festival, new moon, or Sabbath] are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.**

The law is not the reality of our right standing with God. Christ is. He is the substance. When we went through Colossians, we camped a little bit on this term—the Greek term translated “substance” here in the ESV. We talked about how it’s a term that was used to represent that which is real—reality. So it’s the reality of our right standing with God that Paul has been talking about earlier in the passage of being rooted and built up in him. It’s not being rooted and built up in the law. The reality of our right standing with God is Christ. It is not the Torah. It is not the law. If a follower of Jesus wants to be Torah-observant, fine. If he doesn’t want to be Torah-observant, fine. This is the point.

But even if you say they (these Gentiles) were being unfairly criticized for doing Jewish things, the Torah-observant Christians that are probably in the background of this question want people to follow the law. Fine. If you have a messianic congregation and you want to observe the Jewish calendar and you want to observe Sabbath and you want to teach for whatever reason that you should do this or that—food and drink—okay, so long as it doesn’t topple the gospel. So long as it doesn’t replace the gospel. Because these things are a shadow of things to come. They’re a dim glimpse. But the reality is Christ. Paul is explicitly clear here. These things do not replace the gospel. The gospel does not depend on them. The gospel didn’t get to be the gospel through the assistance of the law and its rituals. I don’t know how else to say it. If Torah-observant Christians use scripture to convince Gentiles they should be Torah-observant in terms of salvation, then they are suggesting that Christ is insufficient. That’s clearly not a biblical New Testament teaching. Why convince someone of the shadow when they already possess the substance?

So this is as Paul makes it, I think, an issue of preference and nothing more. So don’t let anyone pass judgment on you, either, for not doing it or for doing it, because these things are a shadow. Christ is the substance. Anyone who makes the Torah more than Christ or flips this around (that the Torah is the substance and Christ is the shadow) is just acting on some inner impulse to want salvation to be linked to their performance or personal practice. Let’s just be honest about it. They have some sort of guilty conscience or some sort of internal need to want to be congratulated in some way, that they contributed something through their own works to their salvation. That is contrary to New Testament teaching about the nature of the gospel.

**TS:** Christopher asks:

**I have always heard in sermons that the primary reason that Paul used a scribe while writing his letters to the churches was due to poor vision (possibly, even though not necessarily, connected to the thorn in the flesh**

**referred to in 2 Corinthians 12:7). Is it possible that the reason that Paul emphasized that he wrote in his own hand in Colossians 4:18 (along with 1 Corinthians 16:21, Galatians 6:11, 2 Thessalonians 3:17, and Philemon 19) is due to having cataracts or similarly poor eyesight which made it difficult or clumsy for him to write himself as opposed to using a scribe—particularly in light of his writing being referred to as large in Galatians 6:11?**

**MH:** Yeah. And the “large” reference there may just refer to Paul’s use of capital letters, not necessarily size. Is it possible that this is a poor vision thing? Sure, it’s possible. But there’s no evidence for it. That’s just being honest. It’s a speculation. It’s all it is. There’s nothing that rules it out. There’s nothing that really suggests it either. It’s pure speculation. In our last episode on Colossians, I mentioned an article on this phenomenon (literacy and using scribes) that got into this whole thing about being able to write (and not just read or speak) a language that wasn’t your first language in the ancient world. I would recommend that. That article is accessible to my newsletter subscribers. The bigness of the letters may have been to emphasize Paul’s *ability* to write. It may have just been use of uncial letters. These are all speculations as to why that particular comment is made. Is it plausible? There are lots of other reasons offered in that article that are also speculation (because Paul doesn’t actually tell us and neither does any other verse), but that are certainly workable and make sense. So I don’t think I could bring myself to say that this is implausible. I would say it’s probably less plausible than some of the other options. But if people are interested in this, if you subscribe to the newsletter, you can go and get that article. I don’t remember the author off the top of my head, but you can listen to the episode on Colossians 4 where I give the title. But if you’re in the newsletter archive where I keep the articles, you can see the title of the article, anyway. “With my own hand” or something like that is in the title. So you can get that and read the whole thing. It’s actually pretty lengthy and kind of interesting as far as scribal habits and the use of secretaries (use of an amanuenses) in the ancient world.

**TS:** Robert has our next question:

34:00

**I’ve heard that the terms, “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16) are the headings/titles for the Psalms in the Septuagint. Is this true? And if so, is there any reason to believe that Paul is directing the Colossian believers to sing anything other than the 150 biblical Psalms in this passage?**

**MH:** I can handle the second part of the question with the first. No, this isn’t really plausible, so the second part of the question just falls by the wayside. Let’s put it this way. This argument doesn’t make sense for the several reasons. This has me wondering [laughs] if Robert is a worship leader under assault somewhere. The argument doesn’t make a whole lot of sense for a couple of reasons.

First, if you search for the term *psalmoi* (that's the nominative plural) in LXX you'll find that it occurs in certain passages that aren't the Psalms and that are not really referring to the content of the Psalms. An example would be 1 Samuel 16:18. This is the same chapter where David is the shepherd boy and Samuel has come to town and is going to anoint him, and David's out in the field when Samuel's looking at his brothers. David isn't king. He hasn't really done anything except tend sheep. So there he is. And in 1 Samuel 16:18, you get this reference:

**<sup>18</sup>One of the young men answered, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, a man of good presence. The LORD is with him."**

So David was out there because he's a young man. This is before he has any status. It's before the David and Goliath thing in chapter 17. So somebody knows that there's this shepherd kid out there that can play a mean harp. [laughs] He knows music. He's skillful in playing. This "skillful in playing" idea is the same term. So he's singing things. It doesn't say that he is writing them. It's just a neutral reference using this term because he's singing songs. He might be composing them. We don't know. There's nothing that requires it—nothing elsewhere that states that David was out there saying, "I'm going to be writing songs here. I'm going to collect them. Because I'll bet masses of Israelites will want to read these and sing them themselves." There's no indication of that. He's trying to put his time to good use. He's entertaining himself (or maybe somebody else). So you have neutral references that use the term.

Second, the last term ("spiritual songs") is *odais*, which gets translated into English as "odes." It undermines the idea of the question (that we're only referring to the 150 Psalms here in Paul's reference to "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs") because there are plenty of odes that were composed prior to Paul's time that are not in the 150 Psalms. Some of them are in the pseudepigraphical literature. Some of them wind up in the Septuagint, which Paul has access to. So the term is used widely outside of the biblical material. It's also used in the Septuagint of unnamed music prior to the creation of the psalter. Judges 5:12:

**Awake, awake, Deborah. Awake, awake, break out in a song.**

Break out in an ode—it's the word *odai*. You have it used in places in Scripture, in the Septuagint, that are not the Psalms. Exodus 15:1; the song of Moses:

**Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD saying...**

That's not in the Psalms. Deuteronomy 32:44:

**Moses came and recited all the words of this song. In the hearing of the people, he and Joshua the son of Nunn...**

So you can't really say that when Paul penned, "Hey, sing to yourselves in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs," that he was isolating his thoughts to the 150 Psalms that we have in the psalter.

Third, I would also add that the logic of the question is flawed because... What I mean is this. Just because the Psalms are a focus of that statement (because we have Paul's reference to the Psalms)... They're going to form the bulk of what a Jewish believer would have known—and even Gentiles, because they're reading the Septuagint. That doesn't mean that other things are excluded. In other words, Paul doesn't stick a prohibition in there: "Speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and absolutely nothing else, because it's ungodly." Paul doesn't actually express an exclusion of other things. The logic is akin to saying that since 2 Timothy 2:15 (in ESV):

**Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth...**

(King James has "study to show thyself approved")... This logic about the music here is akin to saying, "In light of what 2 Timothy 2:15 says (the part of being approved by God is rightly handling the word of truth, which is scripture), that we shouldn't be allowed to read anything else. It's just silly. That's not the point of what's being said. The point is to elevate something or direct people to something else, something they can sing. It's not to exclude everything else. So the approach, the argument, just doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me.

**TS:** Alright. Mark has our last question:

40:10

**I was hoping that Mike could spend 3 or 4 minutes giving a rundown of how the amanuensis use may have factored into some of the work by other New Testament writers. This comes to mind with the thought of his comments on the authorship of Hebrews as being someone who was at a very high level of Greek grammar usage.**

**MH:** Yeah, Mark also emailed me this and I thought this was worth tacking on, because, hey, it's Colossians. So we might as well. This is going to be more than three or four minutes, because I had come across a book on first century letter writing and the use of amanuenses. E. Randolph Richards wrote *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection*. It's an InterVarsity Press title from 2004. So I'm going to read parts of this. It's probably a little overkill on what Mark is asking, but I think he will find it interesting and maybe somebody else out there in the audience will, too. Let me read first before



I get to Richards... I was more familiar with Comfort's book, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism*, so let me read a little section from that, and then I'll go to Richards' book because Richards is more focused. But what Comfort says is still worthwhile here. Comfort writes:

According to the custom of the day, the amanuensis or secretary of official documents was often the same person who carried the document to its destination and read it aloud to its intended audience. Since this person had been present at the time of writing, he could explain to the hearers anything that needed explaining. Since most people were not literate (on average, only 10 percent of the population in Hellenistic times could read), they depended on oral reading for communication. Thus, for example, some of the epistles written by Paul could have been delivered by his amanuensis, who would then read the letter to the church and explain anything that needed explaining. In this light, it is possible that Tychicus was Paul's amanuensis for Ephesians (see Eph. 6:21–22) and Colossians (see Col. 4:7–8). He wrote down the epistles for Paul, as Paul dictated, and then delivered them to the Ephesians and Colossians. Most likely, the letter to the Ephesians is the encyclical epistle that traveled with Tychicus to Ephesus, Laodicea (see Col. 4:16), and other churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor. (See commentary on Eph. 1:1 in chap. 7.)...

Let me just stop there. If you assume that he is the amanuensis, that makes a lot of sense. We just don't know for sure.

This epistle is probably one and the same as the letter Paul mentions in Colossians 4:16, where he tells the Colossians, "See to it that you also read the letter from Laodicea." This language indicates that a letter (presumably written by Paul) would be coming to the Colossians from Laodicea. Since it is fairly certain that Ephesians was written and sent at the same time as Colossians (Tychicus carried both epistles and was very likely Paul's amanuensis for both—see Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7–9), it can be assumed that Paul would expect that the encyclical epistle known as Ephesians would eventually circulate from Colossae to Laodicea.

So that's what Comfort says. Now, I want to read you... Richards has a whole book on secretaries, composition, collection—procedurally how this was done, drawn from contemporary Greek and Roman sources (letter writing, especially). So what I'm going to read you here, and what Richards' book focuses on, is Paul. So this is about the writing of letters, not necessarily the Gospels, but letters, which is a good part of the New Testament. So Richards begins this way:

Paul's writings show clear evidence of careful composition. They were not dashed off one evening in the flurry of mission activity... [MH: And then he quotes Betz, which is a major commentator on Colossians.] Betz argues:



[T]he very employment of an amanuensis [secretary] rules out a haphazard writing of the letter and suggests the existence of Paul's draft and the copy by an amanuensis, or a sequence of draft, composition, and copy.

45:00

**MH:** In other words, if you're going to use an amanuensis, you would *use* that guy. There's going to be some process of dictation, and then talking about how to say this and how to say that. "Oh, hey, that sounds better than what I have. Let's cross that line off and replace it." There's going to be a process to producing this letter that, by definition, the end product is going to be a careful thing. It's going to be well put together—well crafted. It's going to hit all the things that it needs to hit. So that's to say, if you're going to use one of these secretaries, this is to be expected. It's not just a haphazard, "I've got to fire this thing off and here you go." Paul's going to put some thought into this. That makes a lot of sense. Elsewhere, Richards says:

The use of a secretary is complicated further by the flexibility available to the sender. The author could grant to the secretary complete, much, little or no control over the content, style and even the form of the letter. The examination of ancient letters below [MH: he's going to go into a bunch of these] reveals that the role of the secretary may be described as a spectrum. At one extreme the secretary was a transcriber who had no input in the letter, taking strict dictation from the author. At the other extreme the secretary composed the letter for the author. Most letters fell somewhere in between...

On this spectrum we can mark the two clear extremes; the middle area is less clearly defined. In the case of a transcriber, the author dictated the letter that was then recorded verbatim by the secretary. If a final polished copy was prepared later, the contents remained unchanged. In this role the secretary was merely a transcriber. On the other extreme the secretary was the true composer of the letter. In this role the author instructed his secretary to send a letter to someone for some general purpose without specifying the exact contents. For example, an author could tell the secretary to write a letter to an associate in a particular town to tell him that he had been providentially delayed in coming and that when he was able, he would visit. It was possible to compose a personal letter from such general guidelines because of the highly stereotyped nature of most Greco-Roman letters, including even personal letters.

The gray area in between these two extreme roles needs further elaboration. In this middle area, the secretary contributed in some way to the content of the letter. Perhaps the secretary, who usually had more training in letter writing than the author, edited the author's contents to conform better to epistolary standards. For example, the writer recited his letter while the secretary made

extensive notes, or perhaps he even gave a rough draft to the secretary. In this role the secretary was more an editor, because he was responsible for minor decisions about syntax, vocabulary and style. He remained, however, within the strict guidelines of the writer's oral or written draft. The secretary could also be permitted more latitude, working from notes that were far less extensive. In this broader role, the form, syntax, vocabulary and style as well as specific pieces of content were contributed by the secretary, who usually was more experienced in matters of epistolary expression, while the general content and perhaps argumentation remained the author's. Thus, a secretary's role ranged from transcriber to contributor to composer...

(This editorial idea.) So then he proceeds to elaborate on all that in his book, and he even talks about things like dictation speed, because the examples he pulls out... He has examples from Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, and Pliny the Younger, and there's even evidence of shorthand in letters where scribes... If you see shorthand in a letter, it's probably the guy's just dictating. He's rattling it off and the scribe is using some shorthand. Then he'll go back and put all that into words that everybody knows. Because not everybody knows shorthand. You can have *that* process going on. So Richards' book talks about a lot of these features that you find in contemporary examples.

But at the end of the day, we don't actually know what Paul procedurally did. Did he use one of these methods or all of them? Did he shun some and favor others? We just don't know. What we know is that he used an amanuensis. And agreeing with Betz here, that argues that this wasn't just something where he's like, "Okay, I've got five minutes now. I've got to shoot this letter off to the Ephesians." [laughs] No, there was a lot more thought put into it, procedurally. This is something that's going to not just get spied out and then sent. "Where's the UPS envelope? I've got to get this thing out of my hair as soon as possible. I hope it's Amazon Prime." There's nothing like that. They're going to take some time. Paul is going to make sure that he addresses what needs to be addressed on any given occasion. I think we can conclude from things like the end of Paul's letters (when he says "hi" to people and he makes personal comments) that Paul is in the room. This isn't a case where Paul just gives some vague instructions and then at the end the scribe just sort of makes people up. No, Paul is in the room. He has a personal attachment to a number of these people.

50:00 And it's not just at the end of the letters when Paul does these personal things in the course of his letters. While an amanuensis might be skilled professionally in how you construct a letter and what the proper form is, Paul is the one who is an expert in the scriptures. It's Paul that needs to produce that kind of content. But he's working with an amanuensis in some way. So I think what we learn through this is, going back to Betz' pithy comment about, "If you're going to use one of these guys, then you make the best use of them." It's not just a robot. This is another individual. "Hey, is this clear? Is there something you don't understand?"

Or that person might suggest something like, “I know lots of people over in Colossae, and if you said it this way they’ll get it.” There’s going to be some give and take here.

So it’s kind of fascinating, but at the end of the day we don’t actually precisely know. It might heighten the significance of Paul, at the end of a letter like Colossians, saying, “Hey, I’m putting my own hand in this. I’m not...” Go back and read that other article that we talked about in Colossians 4. If Paul can write, and it’s not just speculation... There are some good reasons to think—a case can be made—that Paul wrote the letter to Philemon himself. If that’s the case, Paul’s saying, “Look, I’m not just somebody who can’t write and has to dictate everything and hope this guy is worth my money. I can write, and I’m going to put this final indication into my letter. I’m going to sign this with my own hand.” Maybe even in big letters. For whatever reason he would say that, who knows? Again, it’s all speculative at a number of these points.

But I think at the very least, we can know that Paul approached his letters with care and that because of the nature of their content, they’re not something that just anybody could produce, in terms of content. Yes, maybe the form of the letters, because letters do follow form. You can read a study of New Testament epistles, and you’re going to run into that every time. What were the stock elements of how we do letters? We do this, too. “Dear So-and-So...” I remember in grade school, being taught how to write a letter. There’s the opening salutation. Then what you do in the first paragraph is a bit formulaic. You talk about the weather, whatever. “How are you doing?” There’s a greeting. There are just parts of writing a letter. Then at the end, you sign off in certain ways, “Sincerely, Mike.” I was taught to do this. It’s a very simplistic thing. As a child in grade school, they taught us how to do that. But anyone who has been to law school knows there are ways to write a legal brief so that the person who reads it knows that you’re competent. Because if you don’t do it that way, they’re going to think that you’re incompetent. “How in the world did you get a law degree?” There are just ways to do certain things in the literate world that have to be learned and observed, both for the sake of communication and also for the sake of having the person on the other end feel confident that the person who wrote this knows what they’re talking about.

So, yes, an amanuensis is important to get all of those things right so that Paul can’t be accused of being a hack. But on the other hand, it’s Paul. And Paul has a command of the scriptures. He has a command of doctrine. He spent a lot of time with the original apostles. That content isn’t something that can just be produced by anybody. It has to be produced by someone who’s there, at least in terms of the post-resurrection context, and who knows the scriptures well. So I think it’s instructive to take this little rabbit trail.

**TS:** Alright, Mike. Well, that's all the questions we have for this episode. Is there anything else you'd like to mention? This is it. If you have any more Colossians things to get off your chest, now's the time to do it.

**MH:** Nope. I think that's all I have for the episode. Good questions.

**TS:** Alright. Yep, we appreciate everybody who sent in their questions. Please continue to do so at [TreyStricklin@gmail.com](mailto:TreyStricklin@gmail.com). And I want to thank Mike for answering their questions and everybody else for sending in those questions. And I want to thank everybody else for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.