


The attributes of God in Ephesians and Colossians – A comparison



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The so-called 'disputed' Pauline letters – Ephesians and Colossians – are significantly different from the 'undisputed' Pauline letters. Since the beginning of the historical critical movement, it has been recognised that Ephesians and Colossians are more similar to each other than any other Pauline letter. Scholars debated about these letters' dependency upon each other, and many focussed on the similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. This article is an approach to contribute to the debate by comparing Ephesians and Colossians with regard to their characterisations of God. The attributes of God in these letters were interpreted within the letter structures as part of persuasion strategies, keeping in mind the socio-historical background and purpose of the letters. Where necessary, word studies were done. Finally, the attributes of God in Ephesians and Colossians were compared. It was concluded that these two letters were written each with a specific purpose in mind and that the attributes of God (as Father or Son or Holy Spirit) featured in these letters as shaped by the purpose. This article indicates that the similarities in the attributes of God do not speak louder than the differences and that these letters are unique in similarities as well as differences.

Contribution: As New Testament Studies fit perfectly in the scope of *In die Skriflig*, this article on the attributes of God in Ephesians and Colossians is relevant. The research results reported in this manuscript, fill a theoretical research gap, as it offers a comparison between the attributes of God in Ephesians and Colossians and serves as a contribution to the debate on the similarities and differences between the two letters.

Keywords: Ephesians; Colossians; attributes; characterisation; God; disputed Pauline letters.

Introduction

Ephesians and Colossians are referred to as the 'disputed' Pauline letters. These letters are significantly different from the 'undisputed' letters of Paul (Bird 2009:4; Klein et al. 2006; Sumney 2008:2–9). There are, however, also differences between Ephesians and Colossians. Ephesians seems to be more theological in nature, while Colossians seems to be more situationally oriented (Bird 2009:16; Fowl 2012:30; Klein et al. 2006). Scholars agree that Ephesians focusses on the unity of the body of Christ (Gundry 2012:461), while Colossians focusses on Christ as head of the body (Gundry 2012:456).

However, the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians are more similar to each other than to any other Pauline letter. Best (1997) writes that this 'has been recognized since the beginning of the historical critical movement'. Hering (2006:139) explains that this has caused various theories in this regard. Questions arising from this are the following: Which letter is dependent on which letter? Which letter came first? Some scholars say Ephesians is dependent on Colossians (e.g. Bird 2009:3; Merklein 1973; Mitton 1951). Others claim that Colossians is dependent on Ephesians (e.g. Holtzman 1872). Still others hold the theory that the common material in the two letters is a result of a third independent source (e.g. Best 1997).

Much has been written on the similarities between the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, and various issues have been compared:

- Authorship and date of writing (Sumney 2008:2).
- Common material in these two letters (see e.g. Hering 2006:139).
- Paul being in prison (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Col 4:3; Gundry 2012:454).
- Tychicus as bearer of both letters (Eph 6:21–22; Col 4:7; Bird 2009:3; Fowl 2012:18).
- Common themes (Fowl 2012:22): Praise for the faith and love of both the intended audiences (Eph 1:15; Col 1:4, 8); Praying for the readers to grow in the knowledge of the Lord, to receive

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spiritual wisdom and understanding, and to know the will of the Lord (Eph 1:17; 5:17; Col 1:9–10); The exhortation to be holy in both Ephesians 4:17–5:13 and Colossians 3:1–17; The exhortation to put off the old man, to put on the new man, being renewed in their minds and being strengthened by the Spirit in both Ephesians 3:16, 4:23–24 and Colossians 3:9–10; Exhortations to submit in relationships in both Ephesians 5:21–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1.

- Common theological concerns such as ‘mystery’, ‘raised with Christ’ and ‘church’ (Bird 2009:3).
- Eschatology in both letters (see e.g. Fowl 2012:22; Wessels 1987).
- Verbal similarities (see e.g. Fowl 2012:20; Muddiman 2001:8) and
- Similarities in phraseology (see e.g. Best 1997).

I delivered a paper on the attributes of God in Ephesians at the 2021 EABS virtual conference and decided to contribute to the debate on the similarities and differences between Ephesians and Colossians by comparing the two letters with regard to the characterisation of God.

My paper on the attributes of God in Ephesians has already been published (Cornelius 2021), and it will be used as a source in this article. Like in the case of Ephesians, the attributes of God in Colossians will be identified and interpreted within the letter structure as part of persuasion strategies, keeping in mind the socio-historical background and purpose of the letter, and where necessary word studies will be done. In the end the attributes of God in Ephesians and Colossians will be compared.

The socio-historical background of the letters

Arnold (2002) describes Colossae as ‘religiously pluralistic’ – meaning that different Greco-Roman gods and goddesses were worshiped there. Christians in these areas experienced a syncretism of ideas, beliefs and philosophies, and they feared the spirits connected either to wildlife or ancestors or agriculture.

Likewise, Cornelius (2021) pointed out that the environment of Ephesus was haunted by demons, troubled by magic and controlled by idolatry. Not only did the Ephesians worship the Greco-Roman gods (such as in the case of Colossae), but they also worshiped the emperor. Although the letter to the Ephesians is seen by many as a circular letter, not addressed to a particular church with a specific socio-historical background, Gundry (2012:463) states that it can be a circular letter ‘addressed to various churches in the vicinity of Ephesus’. One can thus still consider the religious background of Ephesus to be a role player in the construction of this letter.

What remains to be said, is that both these letters were aimed at environments where the Greco-Roman gods were seen to be superior to humankind, ageless, deathless, not limited to

physical restrictions, amoral, anthropomorphic with human traits, emotions and intentions, which claimed deity, and demanded worship (Cornelius 2021). The people in these areas were expected to worship these gods and the emperors out of fear and they had to perform rituals to receive mercy, to keep them happy and to live in peace under their control. It is against this religious background that the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians present a god with particular characteristics.

The purposes of these letters

The purpose of Ephesians seems to be to encourage non-Jewish Christians to appreciate the dignity of their calling, and this letter serves to encourage the body of Christ to live according to this calling (Cornelius 2021).

Swindoll (2017:110) says the overall theme of Colossians is that ‘Jesus Christ is sufficient as our Lord, our Life and our Leader’. Therefore, the whole letter is all about Christ. A proper view is given of Jesus as ‘antidote for the Colossian heresies and as a foundation for Christian life and doctrine’ (Swindoll 2017:108). Swindoll (2017:107) explains that the young believers in Colossae still needed to grow in faith in the adequacy of Christ that would help the Colossians to be strong enough for the false teachers who approached them.

While Ephesians focuses on the church as body of Christ (Eph 1:22–23; 2:19; 5:23–24) who needs to reshape their lives, Colossians accentuates Christ as the head of this body (Col 1:18).

The letter structures of Ephesians and Colossians

Before the presentations of the characteristics of God in these two letters can be compared, it is important to first compare the structural outlines of these letters in order to compare the appearance of these characteristics within the different letter sections. The following is the author’s interpretation of the structures of these letters (see Table 1).

The above outlines for these letters are the results of an interpretation of the rhetorical persuasion strategies used in every letter-section. The thanksgivings (Eph 1:15–23 and Col 1:3–8), doxology (Eph 1:3–14) and prayer (Col 1:9–14) are all taken to be part of the letter-opening as this is the typical section to get the attention of the recipients and to make them favourable towards the author. Cornelius (2021) shows how the ancient rhetorical persuasion strategies of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* are used to reach these goals. By praising God, giving thanks to God, and praying for the recipients, the author already attempts at the very beginning of his letter to persuade the recipients of his relationship with God (*ethos*), of his care for the recipients (*pathos*), to motivate the readers to behave holy in thankfulness (*pathos*), and at the same time, to remind them of who God is (*logos*).

TABLE 1: The letter structures of Ephesians and Colossians.

| Ephesians | Colossians |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Letter-opening (1:1–23) Sender, recipients and greeting (1:1–2) Doxology (1:3–14) Thanksgiving and prayer (1:15–23) | Letter-opening (1:11–8) Sender, recipients and greeting (1:1–2) Thanksgiving and prayer (1:3–14) |
| Letter-body (2:1–6:20): Letter-body-opening (2:1–3:21) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sinfulness and salvation (2:1–10) • Peace and unity (2:11–22) • Paul is a preacher to the Gentiles (3:1–13) • Prayer (3:14–21) Letter-body-middle (4:1–6:18) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • live a life worthy of your calling (4:1–16) • live as children of the Light (4:17–5:21) • exhortations to wives and husbands (5:22–33) • exhortations to children and parents (6:1–4) • exhortations to slaves and masters (6:5–9) • put on God's armour (6:10–18) Letter-body-closing (6:19–20) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final requests (6:19–20) | Letter-body (1:15–4:6): Letter-body-opening (1:15–2:5) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The supremacy of Christ (1:15–23) • Paul's labour for the church (1:24–2:5) Letter-body-middle (2:6–4:1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live in Him (2:6–23) • Live holy (3:1–17) • Exhortations to household (3:18–4:1) Letter-body-closing (4:2–6) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final instructions (4:2–6) |
| Letter-closing (6:21–24) | Letter-closing (4:7–18) |

The letter-body is subdivided into opening, middle and closing. Cornelius (2021) explains that the opening of the letter-body serves the function of *narratio* – to provide background for the main arguments in the middle – while the closing gives the final requests or commands. Klauck's book (2006) on ancient letters and the New Testament is a source that properly takes into consideration the epistolary structure of New Testament letters. The above interpretation of the structure of Ephesians is in line with Klauck's (2006:316) interpretation (2006:316). The above interpretation of the letter to the Colossians differs, however, from Klauck's interpretation (2006:321) of the structure only in one regard. Klauck is of the opinion that the argument on the supremacy of Christ in Colossians 1:15–23 is a 'Christ hymn' as part of the letter-opening with the function of the *exordium* (see Klauck 2006:322). I am, however, of the opinion that Colossians 1:15–23 (whether a hymn or argument) is part of the letter-body-opening, preparing the readers for the main arguments in the letter-body-middle.

In the letter-body-opening in Ephesians 2:1–3:21, the author reminds his readers of his role among them (Eph 3:1–13) and what God did for them in Christ (2:1–10; 11–22) in order to prepare them for the exhortations to live a life worthy of their calling in the letter-body-middle. In the same way, the author of Colossians uses Colossians 1:15–2:5 in the letter-body-opening to remind the readers of his role among them (Col 1:24–2:5) and who Christ is to them (1:15–23) in order to prepare them for the exhortations in the letter-body-middle (6–4:1) to live in Christ.

The question arises now: How is God characterised in the different sections of the letter structures of these two letters?

A comparison of the letter-openings of Ephesians and Colossians

With regard to letter-structure, the resemblance between the two letters is remarkable. Both letters' letter-openings include

the name of the author, the name of the readers, a greeting, a doxology and a thanksgiving.

The attributes of God in the letter-opening – Sender, receiver, greeting

In Ephesians God is magnified right from the beginning in the letter-opening where the author identifies himself, addresses and greets his readers. The author identifies God in these first two verses as Christ sending out people as apostles according to his will (Eph 1:1) and as the source of grace and peace (v. 2) (Cornelius 2021). We find an almost identical description in Colossians 1:1–2 where the author aims at persuading his readers that he was an apostle of Christ Jesus (ἀπόστολος χριστοῦ ἰησοῦ – 1:1), according to the will of God (διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ – 1:1) and he also wishes his readers a grace and peace coming from God. The only difference between these two letters is the fact that Ephesians mentions a dual source for the grace and peace, namely God the father and Jesus Christ (ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ – Eph 1:2), while in Colossians, God the father is the single source of grace and peace (χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν – Col 1:2). Both these letters introduce God in the first two verses as a Superpower with incommunicable attributes¹ (attributes which are exclusive to God), namely that God is the one who does things according to his will, who can call people, who brings grace and peace into the lives of people.

The attributes of God in the letter-opening – Doxology

The outburst of the author's praise to God in Ephesians is something not found in the letter-opening of Colossians. Cornelius (2021) shows how the author of Ephesians uses this praise to God to persuade his readers of his good character, as he knows God and is willing to praise him. In the same doxology, he informs his readers about the character of God and, as he reminds the readers of their experience of salvation in God, he motivates them to be holy and blameless accordingly. Of the attributes mentioned in the doxology of Ephesians, six of the 10 attributes appear in other parts of Colossians (see Table 2).

God's power and control in the form of choosing and predestining are thus not mentioned at all in Colossians. The role of the Spirit as a deposit of believers' inheritance does also not feature in Colossians. In fact, the role of specifically the Holy Spirit is totally absent in Colossians.

The attributes of God in the letter-opening – Thanksgiving and prayer

Cornelius (2021) discusses the author's use of the persuasion strategies of *pathos*, *ethos* and *logos* in the thanksgiving, and prayer in Ephesians 1:15–23. Cornelius points out that the author of Ephesians makes statements about the character and nature of God in the thanksgiving in his attempt to thank

¹ See Bavink (1979) and Grudem (1994) for the distinction between *communicable* and *incommunicable* attributes.

God, to affect the emotions of the readers and to persuade them of his relationship with God, his sincerity, his care and his compassion for them. The author also asks God to give the readers wisdom and revelation and enlighten their minds. In all of this, the author does this by stating facts about God.

In Colossians 1:3–14, the author thanks God for the readers' faith and love (vv. 3–8) and asks God to let them understand his will (vv. 9–14). In this, the author makes statements about the nature and character of God, and *inter alia* reminds the readers of the identity of their God. This is an example of the use of the persuasion strategy of *logos*, as the author uses logic to make his point. In the same process, the author aims at persuading the readers of his character in order for them to trust him – he persuades them of his care and compassion in interceding on their behalf. These are examples of the persuasion strategies of *pathos* and *ethos* – the author affects the readers' emotions so that they will trust his character.

In the following table (Table 3), the different attributes of God, as it features in the thanksgivings and prayers of the two letters, will be compared.

In Colossians 1:12, the author refers to God who enables (τῷ ικανώσαντι) believers. Louw and Nida (1988:679) explain

that ικανόω means to 'cause someone or something to be adequate for something'. In the context of Colossians then, it means that God is the drive behind believers in order for us to be sufficient, good enough, suitable and able to 'share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light' (Col 1:12). Klein et al. (2006) say that this phrase means that God qualified the Colossians to share in the inheritance, however, it is not explained how God qualified them. Sumney (2008:53) says this means that God prepares believers for the inheritance. It seems to indicate an active involvement of God in believers' journeys to grow closer to God. Is it a sign of God's power and control or God's love and care? Perhaps both.

A comparison of the letter-bodies of Ephesians and Colossians

A comparison of the letter-body-openings of Ephesians and Colossians

In the body-opening of Ephesians, three teachings and a doxology serve to prepare the readers for the main arguments in the letter-body-middle. Cornelius (2021) shows how these arguments prepare the readers for the exhortations in the letter-body-middle (Eph 4:1–6:18). Paul reminds the readers of how their past situation of sinfulness changed to a present situation of salvation (Eph 2:1–10), because they were united

TABLE 2: Attributes of God in Ephesian doxology compared to Colossians.

| Attributes of God in the Ephesian doxology | Mentioned elsewhere in Colossians |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Father of Jesus Christ (1:3 – πατήρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ) | God, the father of our Jesus Christ (1:3 – τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ) in the thanksgiving. |
| Blessing us (1:3 – ὁ εὐλογήσας ἡμᾶς) | - |
| Choosing us (1:4 – ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς and 1:11–12 – ἐν ᾧ καὶ ἐκληρώθημεν) | - |
| Predestining us (1:5 – προορίσας ἡμᾶς and 1:11–12 προορισθέντες ...) | - |
| The source of grace (1:6 – τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ and 1:7 τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ) | The grace of God (1:6 – τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ) in the thanksgiving |
| Wisdom and understanding (1:8 – ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ φρονήσῃ) | Wisdom and knowledge (2:3 – τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως) in the letter-body-opening |
| Mysterious will (1:9–10 – τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ) and the plan of his will (1:11–12 – κατὰ τὴν βουλὴν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ) | His will (1:9 – τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ) in the thanksgiving |
| His glory (1:11–12 – δόξης αὐτοῦ) | His glory (1:11 – τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ) in the thanksgiving |
| Redemption in Jesus (1:17 – ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν) | Redemption and forgiveness (1:14 – τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν) in the thanksgiving |
| The Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance: (1:13–14 – ... τῷ πνεύματι ..., ὃ ἐστὶν ἄρραβὼν τῆς κληρονομίας ἡμῶν) | - |

TABLE 3: Comparison of thanksgivings in Ephesians and Colossians.

| Attributes of God in Ephesian thanksgiving | Attributes of God in Colossian thanksgiving |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| God of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:17 – ὁ θεὸς τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ) | God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3 – πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ) |
| God as the father of glory (1:17 – ὁ πατήρ τῆς δόξης) | - |
| God who gives 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him' (1:17 – πνεῦμα σοφίας καὶ ἀποκαλύψεως ἐν ἐπιγνώσει αὐτοῦ) | - |
| 'God's calling' (1:18 – τῆς κλήσεως αὐτοῦ) | - |
| Mentioned in doxology | Grace of God (1:6 – τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ) |
| Mentioned in doxology | God's will (1:9 – τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ) |
| Mentioned in doxology | God's glory (1:11 – τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ) |
| - | God enables people (1:12 – τῷ ικανώσαντι ὑμᾶς) |
| - | God rescued us from darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his Son (1:13 – ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν) |
| Mentioned in doxology | Redemption and forgiveness (1:14 – τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν) |
| God's 'incomparable greatness' of His power for those who believe' (1:19 – μέγθος τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς τοὺς πιστεύοντας) | - |
| God who 'raised Jesus from the dead and seated him in the heavenly realms' (1:20 – ἐγείρας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν, καὶ καθίσας ἐν δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις) | - |

in Christ (vv. 11–22), he explains his role among them as preacher (3:1–13), and concludes the letter-body-opening with a doxology in verses 14–21.

In the letter-body-opening of Colossians, one finds two arguments in order to persuade the readers of who Christ is (Col 1:15–23) and of who the author is as labourer in the church (1:24–2:5). This section of the letter serves to prepare the readers for the exhortations in the letter-body-middle (Col 2:6–4:1).

In both letters, the authors offer arguments to persuade the readers of who the author is as servant of God (Eph 3:1–13 and Col 1:24–2:5). While the author of Ephesians focuses more on the implications of the life of Christ for believers (Eph 2:1–10; 2:11–22), the author of Colossians focuses more on the identity of Christ (Col 1:15–23) (see Table 4).

From the above table, it is clear that these two letters differ in the letter-body-openings – both in line with the different overall purposes of the letters.

A comparison of the letter-body-middles of Ephesians and Colossians

Ephesians

Cornelius (2021) shows that, as the purpose of Ephesians seems to be to encourage Gentile Christians to appreciate the dignity of their calling, this letter serves to encourage the body of Christ to live according to this calling. In line with this, the main arguments in the letter-body-middle exhort the readers to live a life worthy of their calling (Eph 4:1–16), to live as children of the Light (vv. 17–5:21), how to behave as wives and husbands (5:22–33), as children and parents (6:1–4), as slaves and masters (vv. 5–9), and to put on God's armour (vv. 10–18). In these main arguments, the attributes of God serve the arguments.

In the exhortation to the readers to live a life worthy of their calling (Eph 4:1–16), three incommunicable attributes of God are mentioned: God being the father of all (v. 6); Christ being the head of the church (v. 15); and God giving gifts to believers (vv. 7–8). The logic behind this argument is that the readers as believers need to live a life worthy of their calling, because they are called and gifted by a supernatural being, namely God.

The command to live as children of the Light (Eph 4:17–5:21) means to ask for the Lord's will (5:17). God's communicable attributes of forgiveness (Eph 4:32) and love (5:1–2) are the examples to follow by the readers. The communicable attribute of God's wrath is set as a warning of what might follow if they are not obedient.

In the rest of the letter-body-middle of Ephesians follow exhortations to wives and husband (Eph 5:22–33), parents and children (6:1–4) and masters and slaves (vv. 5–9) as well

as a final argument to put on God's armour (vv. 10–18). In these arguments, God's attributes come as an example for the husband's behaviour – the incommunicable attribute of Christ being the Head (Eph 5:23), God's love for the church and his surrender in Christ (vv. 25–27). In the exhortation to the masters and slaves, the readers are reminded of and motivated by the communicable attribute of God who will reward good behaviour (Eph 6:8). The final argument to exhort the readers to put on God's armour (Eph 6:10–18) is an encouragement to the readers to be strong in the mighty power of the Lord (v. 10). Cornelius (2021) shows how 'the armour of God' can be understood as 'the armour that God supplies'. In God's plan thus, he provides the armour to live a new life.

Colossians

In the letter-body-middle of Colossians, three main exhortations contribute to the purpose of the letter, namely to exhort the readers to grow in faith in the adequacy of Christ that would help the Colossians to be strong enough for the false teachers who approached them. In the letter-body-opening, the readers were reminded of who they were in Christ and now follow exhortations to live in Christ (Col 2:6–23), to live a holy life (3:1–17) and to behave as a household (vv. 18–4:1). Klein et al. (2006) confirms that Paul turns in Colossians 2:6 to instruct the readers about their faith, after mediating on Christ (1:15–20) and after reflecting on his role as servant of Christ (1:24–2:5).

Sumney (2008:125) explains that the first exhortation in Colossians 2:6–23 serves to exhort the readers to reject the false teachings and 'provides theological rationales for doing so'. The theological rationale is to rather live in Christ. In order to persuade the readers to be obedient to the exhortation to live in Christ (Col 2:6–23), the author refers to God's incommunicable attributes, namely his power (v. 12), the fact that God lives in Christ in bodily form (v. 9), God making believers alive with Christ (v. 13), disarming and triumphing over all powers and authorities (v. 10), being the One to make the church as body grow (v. 19), and Christ as the head over every power and authority (v. 10). Sumney (2008:125) says this section highlights the person and work of Christ in order to persuade the readers to reject the false teachings. While explaining how Christ has changed their lives, the communicable attribute of God who forgives (Col 2:13–14) is the only communicable attribute mentioned in this argument. What the author communicates here, is that the false teachings are 'worthless and incompatible' with Christ (Sumney 2008:132). As the readers' lives have been changed because of the Saviour Jesus Christ, the author now turns to the next exhortation, namely to live a holy life (Col 3:1–17).

In the exhortation to live a holy life (Col 3:1–17), a warning about the wrath of God (v. 6) is given to scare the readers. Louw and Nida (1988:490) describe ὀργή as 'a divine punishment based on God's angry judgement ... because of evil'. Bird (2009:100) reminds us that this 'wrath' (ἡ ὀργή)

TABLE 4: Comparison of attributes of God in letter-body-openings of Ephesians and Colossians.

| Attributes of God in the letter-body-opening of Ephesians | Attributes of God in the letter-body-opening of Colossians |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| - | Christ as the image of God (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ – 1:15) |
| - | Christ as the firstborn (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως 1:15) |
| God as creator (αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν ποιήμα – 2:10) | Christ as the creator of all things (ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα – 1:16) |
| - | Christ as the One before all things (πρὸ πάντων – 1:17) |
| Christ in whom the building is joined together (ἐν ᾧ πᾶσα οἰκοδομὴ συναρμολογουμένη – 2:21) | Christ as the One in whom all things are held together (τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν – 1:17) |
| - | Christ as the Head of the body (ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος – 1:18) |
| - | Christ as Supreme (ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων 1:18) |
| Christ reconciles (ἀποκαταλλάξῃ – 2:16) | Christ as the One through whom God reconciled all things (ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν – 1:20, 22) |
| - | Christ as the hope of glory (ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης – 1:27) |
| The ‘mystery of Christ’ (τὸ μυστήριον 3:3–4) | Christ as the mystery of God (τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ – 2:2) |
| - | Christ as the One in whom all wisdom and understanding is hidden (ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφοί – 2:3) |
| Christ unites (ὁ ποιήσας τὰ ἀμφότερα ἓν – 2:14) | - |
| Christ destroys dividing wall (καὶ τὸ μεσότοιχον τοῦ φραγμοῦ λύσας – 2:14) | - |
| Christ abolishes law (τὸν νόμον...καταργήσας – 2:15) | - |
| Christ making peace (ποιῶν εἰρήνην – 2:15) | - |
| Christ preaching peace (εὐηγγελίσαστο εἰρήνην – 2:17) | - |
| Christ gives access to the Father (ὅτι δι’ αὐτοῦ ἔχομεν τὴν προσαγωγὴν ... πρὸς τὸν πατέρα – 2:18) | - |
| Christ as cornerstone of household (ὄντος ἀκρογωνιαίου – 2:20) | - |
| Love of Christ (ἀγάπη – 3:18–19) | - |
| - | God commissioning people to preach or be a servant (κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ – 1:25) |
| Wrath of God (ἡμεθα τέκνα φύσει ὀργῆς 2:3) | - |
| God made us alive with Christ (συνεζωποίησεν τῷ χριστῷ – 2:5) | - |
| God raised us up in Christ (συνήγειρεν – 2:6) | - |
| God loves (ἀγάπην αὐτοῦ – 2:4) | - |
| God is graceful (πλουτοῦ τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ – 2:7) | - |
| God is kind (2:7 ἐν χρηστότητι ἐφ’ ἡμᾶς – 2:7) | - |
| God as creator (αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν ποιήμα – 2:10) | - |
| God’s power (τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ – 3:7) | - |
| God’s grace (κατὰ τὴν δωρεάν τῆς χάριτος – 3:7) | - |
| God’s wisdom (σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ – 3:10) | - |
| Mystery of God (μυστήριον – 3:10) | - |
| Eternal purpose of God (πρόθεσις τῶν αἰώνων – 3:11) | - |
| God the Father (πατήρ – 3:14–15) | - |
| God being able to do more than one can imagine (τῷ δὲ δυναμένῳ ὑπὲρ πάντα ποιῆσαι ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ὧν αἰτούμεθα ἢ νοοῦμεν – 3:20) | - |
| God strengthens through his Spirit (κραταιωθῆνα – 3:16) | - |

should not be seen as God’s ‘capacity for violence’, but as his ‘righteous indignation of holiness towards moral evil’.

In the rest of the exhortation to live a holy life, the focus is on the attributes of Christ: him being seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1), Christ as the life of a believer (v. 4), Christ being all and in all (v. 11), forgiving (v. 13) and as the source² of peace (v. 15).

In the exhortations to the household (Col 3:18–4:1), an assurance of an inheritance from God is offered (see Sumney 2008:250). The persuasion strategy of pathos is used – an emotional appeal is made in order to persuade the slaves by promising them the Lord’s future reward with an inheritance (Col 3:24).

See Table 5: a comparison of the attributes of God in the letter-body-middle sections of Ephesians and Colossians.

² The genitive noun τοῦ χριστοῦ in Colossians 3:15 is interpreted as indicating the source of the ‘peace’ – thus a peace coming from Christ (see Sumney 2008:229).

A comparison of the letter-body-closings of Ephesians and Colossians

Cornelius (2021) shows that the author of Ephesians does not mention any attributes of God in the last requests in Ephesians 6:19–20 in the letter-body-closing. In the case of Colossians, the mystery of Christ (Col 4:3) is mentioned in the final instructions in the letter-body-closing in Colossians 4:2–6.

A comparison of the letter-closings of Ephesians and Colossians

In the letter-closing in Ephesians 6:21–24, the author wishes the readers peace (εἰρήνη – 6:23) and love (ἀγάπη – 6:23) ‘with faith from God the father and our Lord Jesus Christ’ (μετὰ πίστεως ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς καὶ κυρίου ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ – 6:23), and then another wish for grace (χάρις – 6:24). Although God is not specifically mentioned in these verses as the source of peace, love and grace, the author

TABLE 5: Comparison of attributes of God in letter-body-middle sections of Ephesians and Colossians.

| Attributes of God in the letter-body-middle of Ephesians | Attributes of God in the letter-body-middle of Colossians |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| God as the father of all (πατήρ πάντων – 4:6) | - |
| Christ as the head of the church (ἡ κεφαλὴ – 4:15; κεφαλὴ τῆς ἐκκλησίας – 5:23) | Christ as head over all powers and authorities (ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας – 2:10) |
| God as giver of gifts (ἔδωκεν δόματα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις – 4:7–8) | - |
| The Lord's will (τὸ θέλημα τοῦ κυρίου – 5:17) | - |
| God forgives in Christ (καθὼς καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐν χριστῷ ἔχαρισατο ὑμῖν – 4:32) | God forgives (χαρισάμενος – 2:13–14; ἔχαρισατο – 3:13) |
| Christ loves (καθὼς καὶ ὁ χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς 5:1–2; καθὼς καὶ ὁ χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν – 5:25–27) | - |
| God giving Himself up in Christ (καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν – 5:25–27) | - |
| God rewards good behaviour (τοῦτο κομίζεται παρὰ κυρίου – 6:8) | God rewards with an inheritance (τὴν ἀναπαύοισιν τῆς κληρονομίας – 3:24) |
| Power of the Lord (τῆς ἰσχύος αὐτοῦ – 6:10) | Power of the Lord (τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ – 2:12) |
| - | God lives in the body of Christ (ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ – 2:9) |
| - | God making believers alive in Christ (συνεζωποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ – 2:13) |
| - | God helping the church grow (τὴν αὐξῆσιν τοῦ θεοῦ – 2:19) |
| - | Wrath of God (ἡ ὀργὴ τοῦ θεοῦ – 3:6) |
| - | Christ sitting at the right hand of God (ἔστιν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθήμενος – 3:1) |
| - | Christ as the life of believers (ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν – 3:4) |
| - | Christ being all and in all (ἀλλὰ [τὰ] πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν χριστὸς – 3:11) |
| - | Christ as source of peace (ἡ εἰρήνη τοῦ χριστοῦ – 3:15) |

TABLE 6: Comparison of attributes of God in Ephesians and Colossians.

| Ephesians: Incommunicable attributes of God | Colossians: Incommunicable attributes of God |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Power and control (1:1, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, 17, 18, 19; 2:10, 15; 3:3–4, 7, 9, 11, 20; 5:17; 6:10) | Power and control (1:1, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 25; 2:2, 10) |
| The source of peace (1:2; 6:23) | The source of peace (1:2; 3:15) |
| The source of grace (1:2, 1:6; 6:24) | The source of grace (1:2, 1:6, 3:15) |
| Father of Christ (1:3, 17) | Father of Christ (1:3) |
| Father of all (3:14–21) | - |
| Redeemer and Saviour (1:7, 10, 12, 13–14; 2:5, 6) | Redeemer and Saviour (1:13–14, 20, 22; 2:13, 15; 3:13) |
| Giver of wisdom and knowledge (1:17) | Wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ (2:3) |
| Giver of blessings and gifts (1:3) | - |
| Strengthening humans through His Spirit (3:16) | - |
| Head and cornerstone of the church (1:22; 4:15; 5:23) | Head of the body (1:18) |
| Ephesians: Communicable attributes of God | Colossians: Communicable attributes of God |
| Grace (1:7, 2:7, 3:7) | Grace (1:2, 6; 4:18) |
| Mercy (2:5) | - |
| Love (2:4; 3:18–19; 5:1–2; 5:25–27; 6:23) | - |
| Wrath (2:3; 5:6) | Wrath (3:6) |
| Wisdom and understanding (1:8; 3:10) | Wisdom and understanding (2:3) |
| Uniting people (2:14, 16; 2:21) | - |
| Forgive (4:32) | Forgive (1:14; 2:13–14; 3:13) |
| Kind (2:7) | - |
| Making and preaching peace (2:14–15) | - |
| Reward people (6:8) | Reward people (3:24) |

does mention that the love comes 'with faith from God'. In light of the fact that these blessings repeat the letter-opening blessings of grace and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ (Eph 1:2), it can be assumed that these blessings are all meant to be coming from God (see Bray 2011:408; Klein et al. 2006).

In the letter-closing in Colossians 7:7–18, a reference is made to 'grace' in the typical final greeting in 4:18. Although the author does not specifically mention God as the source of this grace in this particular verse, one can assume that this grace 'is mediated to the church and the world through Christ' (see Sumney 2008:282). One can assume that this blessing is a repetition of the grace-blessing used in the letter-opening (Col 1:2) – thus an attribute of God through Christ.

Conclusion

The incommunicable and communicable attributes of God in the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, can be summarised as follows (see Table 6).

From the above table it might seem as if Ephesians elaborated much more on the attributes of God than Colossians. It is, however, not true. With regard to the attributes of God in these two letters, there are indeed quite a number of similarities. However, both letters have its own peculiar pictures of the nature and character of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit – clearly influenced by the purposes of each letter.

Cornelius (2021) discussed how God's power and control is communicated in Ephesians by mentioning God's sending

out of apostles into the world (Eph 1:1), choosing (v. 4), predestining (v. 5), the mystery of his will (1:9; 3:3–4; 3:9; 5:17), the plan of his will (1:11), the glory of God (vv. 12, 17), calling (v. 18), his power (1:19; 3:7; 6:10), him being the creator (2:10), abolishing the law (v. 15), and his eternal purpose (3:11). This God, Ephesians 3:20 states, can do 'more than what we can ask or imagine' (ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ ὧν αἰτούμεθα ἢ νοοῦμεν).

In Colossians, God's will (Θέλημα – Col 1:1, 9), greatness or glory (δόξα – v. 11), and mystery (Μυστήριον – 2:2) also appear. While Ephesians make use of πρόθεσις and Προορίζω to refer to God's plan and purpose, Colossians make use of οἰκονομία³ (Col 1:25). God's power and control is also presented in Colossians 2:10 (ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας) as God triumphing over all powers and authorities, God enabling people (τῶ ικανώσαντι ὑμᾶς – 1:12) and as God causing the church as body to grow (τὴν αὐξησῶν – 2:19). It seems as if Colossians focuses more on the power and control of God in his involvement in the church and this makes sense if one keeps in mind the overall purpose of Colossians – to persuade the readers that Christ is the head of the body.

God is portrayed in Ephesians 1:7 as Redeemer and Saviour by referring to him bringing together all things in Christ (v. 10), to his Spirit as a deposit for our inheritance (vv. 13–14), raising Jesus (v. 12), making us alive with Christ (2:5), raising us up with Christ (v. 6) – all through Christ our Saviour (5:25–27) who made the church holy and blameless (v. 27).

God's redemption and saving are mentioned in Colossians 1:14 and Colossians proves this in referring to God as rescuing people from darkness (v. 13), bringing them into the Kingdom (v. 13), making them alive with Christ (2:13), disarming and triumphing over power and authorities (v. 15), reconciling all through the blood of Christ (1:20, 22). Colossians 1:13 defines God as the one who 'rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought (or transferred) us to the Kingdom of His Son'. Bird (2009:43) shows on this 'tightly packed expression' characterising God as the Saviour who rescues and transplants people 'into a whole new territory'. Bird (2009:43–44) explains that the author of Colossians frames salvation in terms of the exodus. When the author refers to the kingdom of his Son, kingdom is placed 'in proximity of the Son' – the Son is thus indicated to be 'the sphere of the Father's saving activity' (Bird 2009:44). What is interesting in Colossians is that Christ Jesus in whom God redeemed and saved the world is described in much greater detail than in Ephesians.

In Ephesians the role of Jesus Christ is clear in God's role as Redeemer and Saviour – God reveals his mystery in Christ (Eph 3:3–4) as Saviour (5:25–27), giving redemption and forgiveness (1:7) and making the church holy and blameless (5:27). That is why Christ's love (Eph 5:1–2, 25–27) and peace (2:14) are mentioned, as Jesus as the head and cornerstone of the church (2:20; 4:15; 5:23), joins us together (2:21) and gives us access to the Father (2:18).

³ According to Louw and Nida (1988:358) this word refers to God's plan or purpose.

As the purpose of Colossians is, however, to proclaim Christ as the head of the church, much more detail is given about the identity of this Jesus. In Colossians 1:16, the author says Christ is supreme, and then adds that He is the mystery of God (2:2; 4:3). Not only did the Father redeem and forgive through him (Col 1:14), and reconciled all through his blood (vv. 20, 22), but God lives in him in bodily form (2:9). He is the image of God (Col 1:15), the firstborn of God (v. 15), he was before all things (v. 17), he is all and in all (3:11), in him all things are held together (1:17), in him all wisdom and knowledge is hidden (2:3), he is the hope of glory⁴ (1:27), and seated at the right hand of God (3:1). This Jesus is the life of the believer (Col 3:4) – as head over every power and authority (2:10).

While the attributes of Christ are more expanded in Colossians, the role of the Holy Spirit is not mentioned at all. Ephesians mentions the Spirit as our deposit for our inheritance (Eph 1:13–14) through whom we are sealed (4:30) and strengthened (3:16).

Does this comparison between Ephesians and Colossians with regard to the attributes of God contribute to the debate about the relationship between these letters? Does it prove that Ephesians is more dependent on Colossians or the other way around? From the research results of this study, it is clear that these two letters were written each with a specific purpose in mind and that the attributes of God (as Father or Son or Holy Spirit) featured in these letters as shaped by the purpose. The similarities in the attributes of God do not speak louder than the differences. These letters are unique in similarities as well as differences.

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⁴ The genitive τῆς δόξης can be interpreted as an objective genitive, meaning that the glory is what is hoped for. Sumney (2008:106) says the 'hope of glory' points to the Parousia – and the content of the hope is future glory in Christ.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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