

Lesson 1

Overview and Background

Introduction

Colossians, Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon are part of a collection of New Testament books referred to as *the prison epistles*. Twice in the epistle Paul mentions being confined (4.3, 18). It is most commonly believed Paul wrote to these churches while imprisoned in Rome.² If that is the case, then Paul would have penned this letter sometime between 60–62 AD. It is important to note that many modern scholars dispute the authorship of the book. This is due to how the book is written in a completely different style from the authentic Pauline epistles. Witherington does a good job defending Paul’s authorship by explaining that he spoke the words while Timothy wrote them down, using Asiatic rhetoric. “Colossians is written in a style effective for reaching the audience in the Lycus valley. (It is) deliberately chosen and probably reflects the skill of the composer...”³

The Colossian church was located about 120 miles east of Ephesus and was in close proximity to two other churches in the Lycus River valley. Laodicea was around eleven miles downstream to the northwest and Hierapolis was around fifteen miles northwest, sitting on the opposite riverbank with a view looking down on Laodicea in the valley 300 ft below. During the five centuries leading up to Jesus, Colossae was a principal city of the region, being centered on the main trade route between Ephesus and the Euphrates. By the first century AD, however, the city had diminished in its importance.

2 During the 19th century some biblical scholars proposed Colossians was written while Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea. Others believe Paul was held for an amount of time while he was in Ephesus on his third missionary journey. In 2 Corinthians 11.23 Paul says he had been in many prisons, so it is likely he is referring to a place or occasion recorded in the New Testament.

3 Witherington, Ben, III. *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007, p. 102.

Roman historian Strabo refers to it as a small town⁴. Many historians regard the city as being *socially unimportant* by this time period.

The entire region was known for its wool production. It is said that neighboring Hierapolis had perfected the process of dyeing wool and its reddish-purple coloring became known as “colossinum.”⁵ Laodicea was founded in the 3rd century B.C. and named after the wife of the Seleucid king Antiochus II. Besides wool production, Laodicea was renowned for its school of medicine and banking center. The entire region suffered from recurring earthquakes. One struck the area around 60–61 AD. Laodicea was destroyed, but because of its wealth its citizens rebuilt the city with zero assistance from the Roman government. Colossae was completely destroyed. Not as wealthy as its neighbors to the north, it was only partially rebuilt and mostly deserted. One writer mentions that following the earthquake, much of the population of the city relocated. The city was completely abandoned during the 8th century and completely destroyed during the 12th century. Hierapolis was known as “the holy city.” It was home to the temple of the mother-goddess cult of Cybele.⁶ Hierapolis was also a popular tourist attraction because of its mineral hot springs. The cave where the spring emerges was thought to be an entrance into the lower world.

In his 19th century commentary, Lightfoot says the following regarding Colossae:

While Laodicea and Hierapolis both hold important places in the early records of the Church, Colossæ disappears wholly from the pages of history. Its comparative insignificance is still attested by its ruins, which are few and meagre, while the vast remains of temples,

4 Strabo, *Geographies*, 12.8.13. Strabo. *The Geography of Strabo. Literally Translated, with Notes, in Three Volumes*. Edited by H. C. Hamilton. Medford, MA: George Bell & Sons, 1903.

5 Thurston, Bonnie Bowman. *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians : A Literary and Theological Commentary*. Reading the New Testament Series. Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys Publishing, 2007.

6 Cybele was the Phrygian and Greek deity of the earth and of walls and fortifications. In Rome she was known as *Magna Mater* (Great Mother).

baths, theatres, aqueducts, gymnasia, and sepulchers, strewing the extensive sites of its more fortunate neighbours, still bear witness to their ancient prosperity and magnificence. It is not even mentioned by Ptolemy, though his enumeration of towns includes several inconsiderable places. Without doubt Colossæ was the least important church to which any epistle of St Paul is addressed.⁷

The Religious World of the Lycus Valley

Many Phrygian natives and Greek settlers populated the area. Three centuries before Antiochus III relocated several thousand Jews from Mesopotamia and Babylon to the area. By the first century AD there appears to have been a large and thriving Jewish community. However, Judaism appears to have been practiced with some laxity.⁸ In addition to this, archaeological evidence points to extensive worship of the Ephesian god Artemis, Zeus from Laodicea, as well as Egyptian gods Isis and Sarapis. Hierapolis was a chief center of mystical religion. The city had a large number of temples and many of its religious practices were adopted from the East and especially Egypt.⁹

Christianity in the Lycus Valley

As previously mentioned, it appears Paul never personally visited Colossæ. Paul did, however, reside in Ephesus for three years, Acts 20.31. During this time *all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks*. We can only assume that during this time one of Paul's fellow-laborers (Epaphras) took the gospel into the Lycus valley. Besides Colossians and

7 Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*. 8th ed. Classic Commentaries on the Greek New Testament. London; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1886.

8 It is thought that Jews in Phrygia often combined the office of ruler of the synagogue with "responsible participation" in the pagan cults. See: Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984.

9 Lightfoot: On a coin of Hierapolis, Pluto-Serapis appears seated, while before him stands Isis with a sistrum in her hand; Waddington *Voyage* etc. p. 24. See also Mionnet 4. pp. 296, 305; Leake *Num. Hell.* p. 66. The worship of Serapis also appears at Colossæ with an inscription recording a vow to this deity; Le Bas *Asie Mineure* inscr. 1695 b.

Philemon, the only other record in the New Testament regarding churches in this area is found in Revelation 3.14–22.

It is interesting to note that toward the end of the first century it appears that Philip the evangelist and at least two of his prophesying daughters moved to the area.¹⁰ Church historians record that a church building in the ancient city was dedicated to the name of Philip.

During the late 2nd century, Eusebius makes note of Apolinarius, *Bishop of Hierapolis*, who wrote extensively to the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius (161–180), seeking to inform and persuade him on Christianity. Eusebius says that Apolinarius, who he describes as a “powerful and invincible weapon,” also wrote extensively against “the heresy of the Phrygians, which had begun its innovations long before.”¹¹ Building on top of this error came the *Montanists*, who declared that the new Jerusalem would descend from heaven and appear just north of the area.¹² Eusebius refers to Montanus and his two chief women followers, Maximilla and Priscilla, as *enemies of the church of God, haters of good and lovers of evil, and poisonous reptiles who crawled all over Asia and Phrygia*.

10 ‘For in Asia also great luminaries have fallen asleep, who will rise again on the last day of the advent of the Lord, when He shall come with glory from heaven and shall search out all the saints including Philip of the twelve Apostles, who sleeps at Hierapolis⁵ with his two daughters who grew old as virgins and another daughter who lived in the Holy Spirit and rests at Ephesus.’ (This is written by the historian Polycrates and is quoted by Eusebius. Polycrates probably confuses Philip the Apostle and Philip the Deacon here, and Eusebius does not seem to notice it. They were clearly two different men, as is evident from Acts 6:2–5; 8:14–17; and 28:9. It seems fairly certain that the deacon and not the Apostle was buried at Hierapolis.) See *Eccl.* 3.31. Eusebius of Caesarea. *Ecclesiastical History, Books 1–5*. Edited by Roy Joseph Deferrari. Translated by Roy Joseph Deferrari. Vol. 19. The Fathers of the Church. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953.

11 Eusebius, *Eccl.*, 4.26.

12 Eusebius, *Eccl.*, 5.16. Montanus was a “new convert” from the Phrygian village of Ardebav. He and the two women he is associated with were Maximilla and Priscilla. They were greatly revered by the Montanists, who in many localities were called, after the latter, Priscillianists. The Montanists insisted on the complete religious equality of men and women. Human beings were but instruments of the Spirit, who might choose anyone, man or woman, ignorant or learned, as his mouthpiece.

Despite these diversions from the faith, it is said that “orthodox” Christianity remained strong in the area. Most notable are the “Canons of Laodicea,” from a synod held there around 365 AD.¹³

Going back to the first century, John MacArthur¹⁴ identifies two major issues being faced by the churches in the region:

1. The influence of Greek philosophy (*philosophy and empty deceit*, Colossians 2.8). These are also the *plausible arguments* Paul is referring to in 2.4.
2. Jewish legalism and ceremonialism (*human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world*, Colossians 2.8; Galatians 4.3, 9).

Greek Philosophy

Many in the Greek world viewed Christianity as a simplistic religion. *There had to be more than Jesus*. It appears some of the Christians wanted Jesus + knowledge, 2.18, by claiming to have visions, which would have provided more insight into things not understood regarding the divine world. Pulling out excerpts from the letter, those corrupting pure Christianity must have:

- **Denied Jesus’ humanity.** In Colossians 1.22, Paul asserts Jesus had a real body of flesh: *he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*
- **Denied Jesus’ deity.** In Colossians 2.9 Paul affirms, *For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.*

In this book, Paul is warning about philosophy and its presumptions. What is true is true not because one can reason it down to a fundamental basis of existence (air, water, fire, and earth at the time), but because it is rooted and anchored in Christ. In a very real way Paul is arguing for the Colossian Christians to pursue Jesus as Philosophy—the Source of all wisdom and knowledge.

13 Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, eds. “The Canons of the Blessed and Holy Fathers Assembled at Antioch in Syria.” *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*. Translated by Henry R. Percival. Vol. 14. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900.

14 MacArthur, John F., Jr. *Colossians*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago: Moody Press, 1992.

Judaism

Many Jews of the day wanted Jesus + Jewish ceremonialism. One tenet the Jews held on to tenaciously was the rite of circumcision. Paul asserts they had been circumcised spiritually in their baptism, 2.11. There also appears to be some issues with asceticism¹⁵, that was at a level not usually associated with Judaism. 2.20–23 also gives us some clues as to the many rules that were being made up. Paul asserts these things have nothing to do with salvation. Jewish false teachers were also intimidating Christians into observing Jewish ceremonial holidays (Sabbath, festivals, and the New Moon, 2.16). Some have suggested there are parallels between the Colossian error and the Jewish sect of the Essenes.

The Theme of Colossians

If we were going to summarize Colossians in three words, it would be: *Christ is sufficient*. Check out these verses:

- Colossians 3.11—Christ is all in all.
- Jesus is God, 2.9; Creator, 1.16; Savior, 1.20; 2.13–14; and Head of the church, 1.18.
- Christ has preeminence in everything, 1.18.

For Thought and Reflection

1. When and from where was Colossians written? By whom is the letter written?

2. What trade/industry were the cities of the Lycus valley primarily known for?

3. What were the religious conditions of the area? How do you think this could have played a role in the problems associated with the Colossian church?

15 MacArthur: “The rigid self-denial and harsh treatment of the body.” See 2.18, 23.

4. Who is thought to have planted the churches in the area around Colossae? Does it appear Paul had personally visited these churches?

5. How quickly does it appear that the churches around Colossae drifted into error?

6. During the second and third centuries, what notable heresies originated in the area?

7. What do the two main problems in the Colossian church center around?

8. Why was Greek philosophy so appealing?

9. What things were Jews trying to hold over into Christianity?

10. What is the major theme of Colossians?