

INTRODUCTION

THE CITY

Colosse had been a thriving and important city several centuries before Christ, but by the time this letter was written its importance had diminished considerably, and it was overshadowed by its neighbors Hierapolis and Laodicea, both short distances to the west. Colosse was approximately 100 miles east of Ephesus, located in the Lycus valley in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It was located on a major trade route moving inland from the coast.

A severe earthquake had shaken Laodicea either in 60 or 64 AD, and it is supposed Colosse, being near, would also have suffered. This may have been one cause of a decline in population.

The primary economic significance of the city was due to textiles, and a highly prized wool came from the area. The site of the city was rediscovered in 1835, but it has not been excavated. The city is mentioned in the New Testament only in Paul's letter.

THE CHURCH

Paul would have been in the general vicinity of Colosse during his Ephesian ministry (Acts 19) but there is no reference in Acts to a visit there, though Ephesus did become a mission center (Acts 19:10). In Colossians 1:4 Paul states that he had heard of the faith of the Colossians, and in 2:1 he speaks of those who had not met him personally. These notes, and the references to Epaphras in 1:7f and 4:12f, have led to the con-

clusion that Paul had not personally visited the city (though he anticipated doing so – Phlm 22), and that Epaphras was the evangelist who founded the church (1:7f). Epaphras may also have founded the congregations in Hierapolis and Laodicea (Col 4:13,16).

Several Christians from Colosse are named by Paul, including Nympha, Archippus (Col 4:15,17), Philemon, Apphia (Phlm 1f), and, of course, Epaphras. Epaphras had gone to visit Paul and is designated in Philemon 23 as Paul’s “fellow prisoner” (see the notes there). The text of Colossians indicates the membership was primarily Gentiles, though the “heresy” which Paul opposed contains Jewish elements (see 2:16f and the discussion there).

OCCASION

Personal information is generally shared in letters like Colossians. This would be especially important because there would be concern over Paul’s condition as a prisoner. The most likely theory is that Epaphras traveled to see Paul, primarily because of concern over certain teachings that were troubling the church and seemed to seriously diminish the significance of Christ. For some reason (imprisonment – Phlm 23?) Epaphras was unable to carry Paul’s letter back to Colosse, so that task was entrusted to Tychicus, who also carried a letter to Philemon, and who was accompanied by Onesimus, a runaway slave (Col 4:7-9; Phlm 12,17).

But the troublesome teaching is the chief burden of the letter. Paul describes this heresy in 2:8,16-23, and in the rest of the book he attacks it, either frontally or in more subtle ways. The nature of the heresy has been a continuing puzzlement to scholars, and many theoretical explanations have been offered. It seems to have involved Jewish elements (2:16f), angelic worship (2:18), and extreme asceticism (2:20-23). But attempts at more precise definition have had to recognize ambiguities in the text, problems with seeing a coherent rela-

tion of the elements of the false teaching, the incompleteness of Paul's description (remembering he had to rely on the reports of others), and finding any known teaching from the period that embodied all these elements. See the discussion in the commentary proper.

The effect of this teaching was to lessen the significance of Christ's saving work. If the tenets of the heresy provided the path to salvation, then Christ's sacrifice was not as important. The heresy seems to have imported another form of works salvation, much as the circumcision party in the church attempted to do. Paul attacks the error by a powerful affirmation of Christ's identity (1:15-20) and his role in salvation. His thesis was that an understanding of Christ and life in him would completely refute the heresy. In addition to the magnificent texts in 1:15-20 and 2:9-15 he constantly makes references to benefits which the heretics sought after, but which only Christ truly gave. These included such things as wisdom, knowledge, and fullness (cf. 1:9). Note also the references to the mystery (1:26; 2:2). Even the ethical appeals from 3:1-4:6 powerfully emphasize the relation of the ethical life to Christ (note the references listed before 3:1).

PAUL'S LOCALE

The commonly accepted tradition holds that Paul wrote Colossians and Philemon from the Roman imprisonment described in Acts 28. The apostle does not name the city from which he writes, but numerous factors support Rome. Luke (Col 4:14) and Aristarchus (Colossians 4:10) were with him there, and were in Rome according to Acts 27:2 (the "we" implies Luke). Acts indicates Paul's Roman imprisonment was not unduly restrictive (Acts 28:30f) and this fits the relatively unfettered activities described in Colossians 4:7-15. Onesimus was with Paul (Col 4:9; cf. Phlm) and it is quite possible he had migrated to Rome to lose himself in the urban populace. If we accept the Roman hypothesis, Colossians would be dated in the early 60s.

Due to the perceived presence of problems with a Roman origin, however, other locales have been suggested. One is Caesarea, since that is the only other Pauline imprisonment documented in Acts. This theory has not gained any significant following, since the circumstances described in Acts do not fit those depicted in Colossians and Philemon, especially Paul's expectation to visit Colosse (Phlm 22). From Caesarea Paul expected only to go to Rome, and before his appeal to Caesar he was kept in continual uncertainty.

A more likely case has been formed for Ephesus. It was relatively close to Colosse and could thus conveniently explain Paul's travel plans (i.e., an eventual trip to Rome after a detour to Colosse). Paul did encounter some problems in Ephesus (1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:8-12; 6:4f; 11:23-25; and perhaps 1 Cor 15:32). They might have included prison, but Acts gives no evidence of it, and details are uncertain enough to disallow any definite conclusion. Since Luke details Paul's problems so carefully, it seems strange he would not mention an Ephesian imprisonment had there been one. Further, Acts has no indication Luke was even in Ephesus. He was left in Philippi on Paul's second tour, and did not resume the apostle's company till the third tour (Acts 16:16,40; 20:5). If Colossians was written from Ephesus, it would be dated in the early to mid 50s.

The case for Ephesus depends, in part, on certain perceived weaknesses in the Roman view. One is the divergence between Paul's announced intent to go to Spain (Rom 15:28) and his desire to return to Colosse (Phlm 22). In our comments on Philemon 22 we have argued that a change of plans by Paul is a reasonable supposition. Another objection is the distance from Rome to Colosse, well over 1000 miles. If Paul expected Onesimus to be returned to him (see notes on Philemon) that seems a long distance for him to be sent only to retrace his steps. However, the Roman road system was good, and Paul's honor demanded that he send Onesimus and give Philemon the option of voluntary response, whatever the distance. We do not think Paul could have written as he did to Philemon and not have sent Onesimus.

A third argument has to do with Paul's request for lodging with Philemon (v. 22). Would he have made such a request when so many miles and days away? But once we accept Paul's intent to visit Colosse (perhaps to deal with the heresy) and consider his graciousness in dealing with Philemon, the request seems reasonable enough.

A fair case can be made for Ephesus, but we hold that the case for Rome is the stronger alternative.

OUTLINE

- SALUTATION – 1:1-2**
- I. THANKSGIVING – 1:3-8**
- II. PAUL’S PRAYER FOR THE COLOSSIANS – 1:9-14**
- III. THE HYMN ABOUT CHRIST – 1:15-20**
- IV. THE HYMN APPLIED – 1:21-23**
- V. PAUL’S MINISTRY TO THE CHURCHES AND TO THE COLOSSIANS – 1:24-2:5**
 - A. Paul’s Labors in God’s Power – 1:24-29**
 - B. Warning Against Being Deceived – 2:1-5**
- VI. RECEIVING CHRIST AS LORD – 2:6-15**
 - A. Continue in Christ: Don’t Be Deceived! – 2:6-8**
 - B. “In Christ” – 2:9-12**
 - C. Death to Life – 2:13-15**
- VII. WARNINGS AGAINST THE HERESY – 2:16-23**
 - A. Don’t Lose the Prize! – 2:16-19**
 - B. Shun Worldly Rules! – 2:20-23**
- VIII. SEEK THE THINGS ABOVE – 3:1-4**
- IX. THINGS TO PUT TO DEATH – 3:5-11**
- X. THINGS TO PUT ON – 3:12-17**
- XI. RULES FOR THE CHRISTIAN HOUSEHOLD – 3:18-4:1**
 - A. Husbands and Wives – 3:18-19**
 - B. Children and Fathers – 3:20-21**
 - C. Slaves and Masters – 3:22-4:1**
- XII. FINAL EXHORTATIONS TO PRAYER AND PROPER BEHAVIOR – 4:2-6**
- XIII. FINAL INSTRUCTIONS AND GREETINGS – 4:7-18**

- A. Tychicus and Onesimus – 4:7-9**
- B. Greetings – 4:10-15**
- C. Concluding Instructions – 4:16-18**