

Colossians

Background and Analysis

by Matt Miller

Nestled within the picturesque Lycus Valley, Colossae sat on the main trade route between Ephesus and the Euphrates River for many years. It was positioned in the southwest region of Phrygia on rising ground (1150ft.), along the Lycus River, a tributary of the Meander. This city that was once called, “a populous city, large and well off” by the celebrated ancient historian Xenophon (c.430-c.354 B. C.), was part of a network of three cities that were important to trade in this region. Twelve miles to the west was Laodicea and twelve miles to the northwest was Hierapolis. Each of these cities was well known for the textile industries they supported. Wool making and dyeing contributed to the economic health of the region. Colossae, in particular, was famous for its production of fine, dark red wool, called Colossinum.

Xerexes is thought to have passed through the region in 481 BCE, making a stop in Colossae. Eighty years later in 401 BCE, Cyrus the Younger is believed to have traveled its way. Of the three cities, Laodicea had the most advantageous position along the trade routes and over time, began to grow and eventually became an assize town, *coventus juridicus*, for the region. Within this area, lived a considerable Jewish population. Roman rulers often offered Jews free citizenship because they were believed to be beneficial for the local economy because of their industriousness. As they prospered in the area, more families immigrated, bringing the Jewish population in the region near 50,000. Considerable diversity within the Lycus Valley in general, and in

Colossae in particular, could be expected because of such an influx of Jews. This diversity brought different religious beliefs and practices to the community and to the marketplace.

Laodicea's position at the junction of the Lycus and the Meander Rivers, allowed it to supplant Colossae as the more dominant center for trade in the region. As Colossae's economic power was diminished because of Laodicea, its population began to decrease as well. Soon the trade route that had brought life to this community had been diverted to Laodicea, and Colossae became a "second-rate market town." Another contributor to the decline of this once influential city was an earthquake that was believed to have destroyed the city. Colossae was never able to recover. By the eighth century, Colossae had become a quarry for those living in other areas of the Lycus Valley.

When the Gospel was first preached in Colossae, presumably by Epaphras (1:7), and when this letter was written, to "the holy and faithful brothers at Colossae", it was not the bustling center of commerce it had been in previous centuries. Despite being the smallest city to receive an epistle from the Apostle and one that he most likely never visited (I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those in Laodicea and for those that have not met me personally... 2:1), it contains some of the most powerful proclamation about Christ in all of Scripture. While being addressed to those in Colossae, it was to be circular letter, one that was to be read to all the churches in the region. (After this letter has been read to you, see that it is read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. 4:16)

Until the last century, little debate about the authorship had occurred. However, in the 1920's and 30's a constituency of thinkers supported the idea that the letter did not

have Pauline authorship, as is indicated in the first and last verses (Paul, an apostle... and I, Paul write this greeting in my own hand.), rather that it was “deutero-Paul,” written by one or more of his disciples. This line of thinking has continued to this day and has posited that the letter lacks the typical Pauline eschatological edge and that it does not line up with the typical theology of Paul. These arguments, while presenting interesting differences between Colossians and other letters of Paul that remain unchallenged, do not sufficiently support the belief that Paul is not the author. While he uses language that is different than that of other letters, the stylistic and substantive differences are not enough to overturn the established belief that he wrote the epistle himself or supervised its authorship. It is reasonable to believe that Paul would have presented the same theological truths in different ways according to context he was addressing without being inconsistent with himself. Certainly, use of alternate means of expression should not preclude the work from being genuinely Pauline.

Paul is evidently addressing some concerns that have caused confusion in the new church. While it is difficult to discern the exact nature of the problem, the heresies can be inferred by examining the points Paul makes to refute the teaching. His emphasis on Christ in the first chapter as the “image of the invisible God,” indicates those who were presenting their false teaching, thought of Christ as a created being and therefore, not equal to God. Paul makes it clear that “all things were created by Him and for Him” (1:16b), even the very angels that were held up for worship by the false teachers. (2:18) He emphasizes that these teachings have an appearance of wisdom, “with their self-imposed worship, with their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body.” (2:23) To believe that any outward action would somehow earn an individual higher standing

with God, ran completely counter to everything for which Paul stood. He recognized that these false teachers were puffed up with idle notions by an unspiritual mind. (2:18)

Also of primary concern were the “fine-sounding arguments” (2:4) and the “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depend on human tradition and the basic principles of this world.”(2:8). Paul’s desire to share with them the “full wisdom and knowledge,” indicates the presence of Greek thought within the congregation. However, because Paul addresses certain Jewish elements such as, eating and drinking laws, religious festivals, New Moon celebrations and Sabbath days (2:16), indicates the contingent of Jews within the congregation. Thus, it is evident that the false teaching that was being faced in Colossae and challenged by Paul was both Jewish and Hellenistic in nature. This syncretistic viewpoint was commonly held throughout the ancient Near East and was an attraction to young and uninstructed believers. Some of these ideas remained unchecked and developed into what later became Gnosticism. While this teaching may not have overrun the church, it was evidently significant enough for Paul to write this letter.

Despite the infiltration of dangerous ideas, the church in Colossae was a community dedicated to the faith and to one another. “...we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love you have for all the saints.” (1:4) Paul also believes that their faith is growing, just as faith in Christ is growing the world over. (1:6) If Epaphras was the one who planted this church, he created a community that was flourishing and formidable. “...[Paul] delights to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.” (2:5) The Colossians are challenged to “continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught...” (2:6,7) By growing

together as a community of faith in Jesus Christ, these disciples could hope to withstand these false teachings.

In the final chapter, Paul's list of greetings is second in length only to that in the book of Romans. It includes some of those who are imprisoned with him; those Jews that are "for the Kingdom of God," and others who are faithful to the congregations in that region. Included in this list of people is Onesimus, the slave of Philemon and subject of the book of the same name. It has been suggested that because the list of greetings within Colossians and Philemon contain many of the same individuals, these letters may have been written and sent at the same time. It is possible that Philemon was an influential member of one of the churches in the Lycus Valley, even Colossae itself.

Paul also indicates the centrality of the house church of this time. "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church that meets in her house." (4:15) In I Corinthians and Romans, Paul also presents the house church as an important component of this growing Christian community. Without official recognition as an organized religion until Constantine and the Edict of Milan in the 4th Century, the home was the most natural and effective way for believers to gather for worship, prayer, and celebration of the Lord's Supper. Without opportunity for fellowship and the development of community the church would face even more difficulty.

In writing this letter to the Colossians and other members of this region, Paul is attempting to stop the spread of false teaching that would encourage a righteousness that is based on a special knowledge or the worship of some angel or heavenly being other than Jesus Christ. He is establishing for them that acceptance before God is not attained by honoring special days or certain ceremonies but rather by faith in Christ alone. He is

encouraging them to trust in Jesus and what he has accomplished through his death and resurrection. As the image of the invisible God, Christ is set above all the angelic beings, and before the keeping of any rituals, that might make the Colossians believe they could earn their own righteousness. Paul tells them, “Once you were alienated from God because of your evil behavior, but now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body, through death, to present you holy in his sight, free from blemish, and without accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.” (1:22,23) While struggle will still take place in this life, those in Christ have been united with him and will appear with Christ, when he appears in glory.

Resources:

www.ourfatherlutheran.net/biblehomelands/sevenchurches/colossae/colossae.htm

<http://www.wehlt.flinders.edu.au/colossae/>

www.newadvent.org

www.enjoyturkey.com/Tours/Interest/Biblicals/Collosae.htm [their spelling of Colossae]

www.gospelcom.net

www.biblicalturkey.org/html/colossae.html

www.theologywebsite.com/nt/colossians.shtml

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