

INTRODUCTION TO 51ST BIBLEBOOK

THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS (A.D. 60-61)

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A. THE WRITER OF COLOSSIANS.

The letter to the Colossians says that the writer is “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.” Although Timothy was associated with Paul in his ministry in the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey), which included the city of Colossae, and was present with Paul at the time of the writing, he was not the writer, because all through the letter *Paul writes in the first person singular*. Several of the early Christian Church leaders testify that Paul was the writer of the letter to the Colossians. In about A.D. 300, Eusebius writes that the entire Christian Church accepted the fourteen letters of Paul as written by Paul. The church fathers Origen in A.D. 225, Clement of Alexandria in A.D. 190, Tertullian in A.D. 190 and Irenaeus in A.D. 170 all quote from the letter to the Colossians and ascribe it to Paul. Thus, both the internal as well as external evidence points to the apostle Paul as the writer.

B. THE RECIPIENTS OF COLOSSIANS.

According to Colossians 4:12, Epaphras was a native from Colossae and he had joined the team of Paul’s fellow workers. It is therefore most probable that he was the one who preached the gospel in Colossae and founded the church there. Philemon 1:2-3 relates that the church at Colossae met in the house of Philemon. Apphia was most probably his wife and Archippus his son. *During the first two to four hundred years of the history of Christianity, the Christians did not have church buildings as we know them today*. Christians met in houses and there were many Christians who practised hospitality and made their home available for Christians to meet together. Colossians 4:12 and 15 says that Epaphras was the main person who worked in the three cities in the Lycus valley, Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis. He was always wrestling in prayer for them that they might stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. Colossians 4:15-16 says that Paul sent his greetings to the Christians living in Laodicea and to the church at Laodicea that met in the house of Nympha. Paul exhorted the Christians at Colossae saying, “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. The three cities Hierapolis, Laodicea and Colossae were situated along the Lycus river in the Lycus valley, about 160 kilometres east of Ephesus. Both Colosse and Laodicea were situated along the main road between Syria in the east and Ephesus in the west.

C. THE OCCASION, DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING COLOSSIANS.

When Paul wrote Colossians, he was a prisoner in chains. There is nothing that contradicts the traditional view that Paul wrote the letters Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians and Philippians during his first imprisonment in Rome. The measure of freedom, which according to these letters Paul enjoyed during his imprisonment, harmonises with Luke’s report in Acts 28:30-31 concerning his imprisonment at Rome. While he was imprisoned in Caesarea from A.D. 57-59, he did not have such freedom. Some people think that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus rather than Rome, because that would explain his writing to churches nearby. But there is no evidence in the letters themselves or in Acts that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus. In Acts 19, Luke writes in detail about Paul’s three years stay in Ephesus and does not even allude to an imprisonment there. Luke himself was not even in Ephesus during that time. But according to Colossians 4:14, Luke was present with Paul during his imprisonment and writing of these letters. Also Aristarchus was Paul’s fellow prisoner (4:10). According to Acts 27:1-2 and 28:16, Luke as well as Aristarchus definitely went with Paul to Rome, where he was imprisoned. Also 1 Peter 5:13 relates that Mark was present in Rome about that time. As we have seen in the introductions of Ephesians and Philippians, the letters to the Colossians, Philemon and Ephesus were written first in Rome between A.D. 60-61 and sent by Tychicus to these places in the province of Asia (4:7). Philippians was written later in Rome towards the end of A.D. 61. Luke, Aristarchus and Philemon were no longer with him when he wrote Philippians (4:7,10,14,23)¹. The Letter was sent by Epaphroditus to Philippi.

Paul was imprisoned by way of house arrest. He stayed in his own rented house in Rome, but was chained to a Roman soldier who had to guard him (4:3,18). He was free to receive visitors. Besides Aristarchus, the following people were with him in Rome: Timothy, Tychicus, Onesimus, Justus, Epaphras, Mark, Luke and Demas (4:7-14)². He asked the Christians in Colossae to pray that God would open a door for him to proclaim the gospel (4:3). Luke says that Paul indeed preached the gospel of the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ to whomever he could while he was imprisoned³.

¹ Philippians 2:19-30

² Philemon 1:23-24

³ Acts 28:30-31

In Philemon 1:22 Paul asked that a guest room be prepared for him, because he expected to be released from prison soon. After his release from his first imprisonment in Rome, Paul travelled widely from A.D. 62-64 before he was again imprisoned in Rome. During that time he most probably also visited Colossae.

D. THE PURPOSE OF WRITING COLOSSIANS.

According to Colossians 1:7, during his first imprisonment in Rome, Paul received a visit from Epaphras. Epaphras was the faithful minister of Christ working in the three cities in the Lycus valley. He had travelled between 1600 to 2100 kilometres from Colossae to Rome to report to Paul how the Christians in those cities were doing! Colossians 1:3-8 says that his report was favourable. But according to chapter 2 and 3, there were two great dangers facing the Christians at Colossae.

First. The Colossian Christians were in danger of falling prey to the Colossian heresy. Especially chapter 2 teaches how to deal with this danger. They are worked out under the main messages of Colossians.

Second. The Colossian Christians were in danger of slipping back into paganism with its gross immorality. Especially chapter 3 teaches how to deal with this danger.

E. THE DIVISION OF COLOSSIANS.

The letter of Paul to the Colossians may be given **the title: “The supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is the only and all-sufficient Saviour and Lord”.**

The letter to the Colossians may be divided into two parts with each two sections:

1. Part one. Colossians 1-2. Jesus Christ is the Object of the Christian’s faith.

Colossians 1. Jesus Christ is supreme in creation and in redemption.

After the opening greetings (1:1-2), Paul gives thanks for the faith, love and hope of the Christians at Colossae (1:3-8). And he prays that they may grow as Christians (1:9-12).

Then he teaches the supremacy of Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ is the Creator of everything and everything was created to serve him (1:17). He is the visible image of the invisible God and thus reveals the invisible God to people (1:15). He is completely divine, because all the fullness of God dwells in him (1:19). At the end of his life on earth he died in order to be the supreme One who reconciles people in history to God (1:20). He was the first in history to be resurrected from the dead and lives forever (1:18). Now he is sitting at the right hand of God the Father in heaven and is the supreme Lord or Ruler over everything in creation, as well as the head of the Christian Church on earth (1:18). *The great mystery which the gospel proclaims is that this Jesus Christ has come to live in the hearts and lives of Christians through his Holy Spirit (1:27).* Thus, chapter 1 teaches that *Jesus Christ is supreme above everything.*

Colossians 2. Jesus Christ is the answer against heresies.

The Christians in Colossae were still young Christians and faced the attacks of all kinds of false teachers who tried to pull them away from Jesus Christ with their so-called wisdom and knowledge. Paul proclaims that Christians will find all the answers they need in Jesus Christ, because in Jesus Christ is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3). Paul warns the Colossian Christians against several aspects of heresy in their city, which try to capture them. He warns against deceptive philosophy, because it depends on human tradition (2:8). He warns against Jews trying to enforce their ceremonialism, because the ceremonial law has been cancelled (2:14). He warns against the worship of angels and the sharing of visions, because it makes Christians unspiritual and puffed up (2:18). And he warns against asceticism with all its many rules, because it is based on human commands and teachings and is a self-imposed worship, which does not help anyone to conquer his sinful desires (2:20-23). Thus, chapter 2 teaches that *Jesus Christ is the only and all-sufficient Saviour.*

Part two. Colossians 3-4. Jesus Christ is the Source of the Christian’s life.

Chapter 3. Jesus Christ should be supreme in the Christian’s life.

Paul proclaims Jesus Christ as the Answer to all their present questions and trials. He is the only and all-sufficient Saviour of all individual Christians (3:1-17) and of different groups of Christians, like wives and husbands, fathers and children and slaves and masters (3:18-4:1). The real life of Christians is hidden with Christ in God (3:3). Therefore, Christians must not try to find answers on earth, but in heaven where Christ is (3:1-2). Paul exhorts Christians to grow in sanctification. He teaches that because Christians have already taken off their old unregenerate nature together with its practices and have put on their new regenerated nature, which is continually renewed to become more and more Christlike (3:9-10), they now have a personal responsibility to grow. They must put to death the works of their sinful nature (3:5-7) and rid themselves of every kind of evil (3:8). Instead they must clothe themselves with every kind of goodness (3:12-14). Jesus Christ must rule in their hearts and lives (3:15). The word of Jesus Christ must dwell richly in them (3:16). And everything they do must be done in service of Jesus Christ (3:17).

Chapter 4. Jesus Christ has many fellow-workers.

Paul urges all the Colossian Christians to be Christ’s fellow-workers by praying for those who preach and teach God’s Word (4:2-4). He exhorts them to witness for Christ through the quality of their lives (4:5-6).

Finally, Paul mentions several of his fellow-workers by name. The main task of a fellow-worker of Jesus Christ is “to see to it that he completes the work he has received in the Lord” (4:17).

F. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF COLOSSIANS.

1. Christians must struggle against the danger of slipping back into paganism with its gross immorality.

It seems that the majority of the Christians in Colossae were still young Christians. They had just recently converted from the darkness and sexual immorality of paganism (3:5-11). Therefore they still had *to work out their salvation*⁴ in Christ *by putting off* all kinds of sins *and by putting on* all the virtues of Christ.

All new Christians face dangers from three directions: They face attacks from their old sinful nature which can still exercise a great negative influence on regenerate Christians. They face the attacks of the evil world around them, which is often very hostile against Christians. And they have to face the attacks of Satan, who continues to be a roaring lion that always looks for someone he could destroy⁵. Paul urges these Christians not to give in to succumbing to these temptations, but to put to death the works of their sinful nature (3:5-7) and rid themselves of every kind of evil (3:8). Put off the clothes of sin and put on every kind of goodness (3:12-14).

2. Christians must struggle against the danger of falling prey to heresy (false teachings).

It seems that there were several movements of false teachers in Colossae, who were trying to force their view of life and answers to problems onto the new Christians. Especially the word '*fullness*' is a key word in this letter. Because the Colossian Christians were young Christians and did not yet feel complete as Christians, these false teachers tried to seduce them by saying that although Christ may be helpful, '*completeness or fullness*' of knowledge, holiness, power, joy, etc. cannot be found in Christ, but can only be found in their false teachings. These false teachings had the nature of '*rules and regulations*'. Instead of a '*Christ-only*' gospel, it became very much a '*Christ-plus-rules-and-regulations*'-kind of gospel. In the view of these false teachers, Jesus Christ was not sufficient for fullness of salvation. In their view, in order to attain fullness, Christians had to follow their rules and their regulations.

Paul says, "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, ... but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (2:23)⁶. He proclaims Jesus Christ as the Supreme One in creation and in salvation (1:18), the only and all-sufficient Saviour and Lord. Without Jesus Christ, people can attain no salvation or everlasting transformation. Besides Jesus Christ, no other rule or regulation or religious teaching or anything else can contribute to the complete fullness of salvation and transformation which Jesus brings!

We can distinguish four aspects of false teachings:

The first false teaching: deceptive philosophy.

According to Colossians 2:8, there was deceptive philosophy, which depended on human traditions. Certain elements of what was later known as 'Gnosticism' were already evident in the province of Asia. Gnosticism emphasised the importance of '*knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, mystery and mystic insight.*'

Against this false teaching, Paul proclaims in Colossians 2:3-4 that all "*the treasures of knowledge and wisdom*" are hidden in Jesus Christ and that Jesus Christ himself is God's mystery, the revelation of the fullness of God to man (1:26-27; 2:2-4; 4:3)!

The second false teaching: the worship of angels.

According to Colossians 1:16 and 2:15,18, there was angel worship, which replaced the uniqueness and all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ. The pagans believed that besides the sun, moon and stars in the universe, besides the kings and other human leaders on earth, the angels were a part of the powers in the universe that influenced people on earth. They would worship stars, planets, angels and emperors, because they believed that these might have good influence on their lives.

Against this false teaching, Paul teaches in Colossians 1:16-18, that all these powers in the universe and on earth were *created by Jesus Christ* and also *created for the purpose of serving Jesus Christ*, so that Jesus Christ might have '*the supremacy*' in everything in the universe. Colossians 2:15 teaches that Jesus Christ '*disarmed*' the powers and authorities, '*triumphed over*' them and '*made a public spectacle of them*' by his death on the cross.

The death of Jesus Christ has in principle conquered the power and influence of the bad angels, which are evil spirits. Angels or spirits and even so-called human '*saints*' should not be worshipped. Only Jesus Christ should be worshipped.

The third false teaching: Jewish ceremonialism.

According to Colossians 2:11,16,17 and 3:11, there was Jewish ceremonialism, which gloried in the rite of circumcision, in food-regulations and the observance of special festivals belonging to the Old Testament period.

Against this false teaching, Paul teaches in Colossians 2:17 that the whole ceremonial law of the Old Testament was only '*a shadow*' of the things that were to come and that '*the reality*' was only found in Jesus Christ.

Colossians 2:14 teaches that by his death on the cross, Jesus Christ '*cancelled*' the Jewish ceremonial law and all other rules and regulations that man had invented. He cancelled them by nailing them to the cross and thus made them

⁴ Philippians 2:12

⁵ 1 Peter 5:8

⁶ Think of all kinds of meditation and self-improvement courses advertised today

completely obsolete. And according to Ephesians 2:15 he 'abolished' the Jewish ceremonial law with its commandments and regulations and thus forbade that these rules and regulations ever again become the reason to cause division within the Christian Church. According to Colossians 2:11-12, the only true circumcision is the circumcision of the heart, that is regeneration by cutting away 'the body of the flesh', which represents the unregenerate nature of man.

The fourth false teaching: asceticism.

According to Colossians 2:20-23, there was asceticism, which went beyond Judaism in its harsh treatment of the body. Although we are not told who these people were, they resemble a very strict sect of the Pharisees or even the sect of the Essenes. The famous historian, Flavius Josephus, tells us that he once belonged to the sect of the Essenes. This was a Jewish sect, who lived in large communities all over Judea, believed in a strict code of rules and regulations, which Paul calls "the basic principles of the world" (2:8,20) and practised a harsh treatment of the body. They considered the spirit of man as being imprisoned in the physical body and tried to protect themselves from every kind of influence on their body their spirit. They could have been the same group as the sect discovered at Qumran on the west side of the Dead Sea. This sect possessed a 'Manual of Discipline' which is full of rules and regulations in the form of 'Do not touch this' or 'Do not taste that!'

Looking at all these four kinds of false teachings, we are safe to conclude that the Colossian heresy was probably a kind of syncretism, a weird mixture of various false teachings of Judaism and paganism. The available sources from secular history show that all such kind of false teachings existed.