

# Letter to the Colossians



## Colossians - Scholarly Views and Background

There are even scholarly views that differ on when the letter was written. The letter itself asserts that it was written while Paul is imprisoned, probably at Ephesus. This means that Paul would have written Colossians some time before his Letter to the Romans. Some have difficulty with that view because The Letter to the Romans lacks some key concepts such as “body of Christ,” the relation of baptism to resurrection, and emphasis on Christ’s future coming. Another group of scholars feel that since the Letter to the Colossians lacks the emphasis on justification by faith present in Galatians and Romans, that the authorship can’t be Pauline. That assumes such exhausts Paul’s message and that Paul could not adapt his thought to the situation in Colossae. This imposes an unwarranted limitation on Paul’s intelligence, versatility, and originality. The apostle whose settled policy was to be “all things to all men” for the gospel’s sake was certainly capable of confronting the false knowledge and worldly elements taught at Colossae with the true knowledge and spiritual power of Christ. While he opposes the teaching which he attacks, he takes up some of its distinctive terms and shows how the truth which they vainly try to convey is embodied in Christ, the perfect revelation of God.

We are never directly told who the author’s opponents are; yet, most of the author’s theological thought is developed in argumentation against them. Terminology dealing with “wisdom” and “knowledge” plays a significant part in the presentation. While this kind of language was common to Jewish literature of the time, it was part of Gentile modes of thought as well.

The recipients of the letter to the Colossians are warned against a “human tradition” which is characterized as “philosophy and empty illusion” (Col. 2:8). From this warning it has usually been inferred that there was a particular form of teaching current in the Lycus valley, to which the church of Colossae and the neighboring churches were exposed. This teaching was superficially attractive, but in fact its tendency was to undermine the gospel. While details are unclear, this “human tradition” is referred to as the “Colossian heresy.” There seem to be elements of angel worship, gnosticism (secretive

knowledge known to the select), some elements of Judaizing legalism (like the Galatians) wrapped up in a form of mysticism which tempted its adepts to look at themselves as a spiritual elite.

Paul tries to show against the rivals, who apparently have combined elements from Judaism, Christianity, and paganism, that wisdom and knowledge can only be interpreted properly when they refer to Christ. His unique position as the agent and Lord of creation, the conqueror of the elements and cosmic powers, is to be acknowledged. Through him alone comes redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Christians, as members of his body, the church, are freed by their baptism from any sort of submission to regulations and ascetical acts which are meant to serve these inferior elements and powers. Anyone who tries to impose such restraints on the Christian's freedom to serve Christ alone must not be listened to; such teaching falls outside the apostolic tradition.

This freedom attained by Christ must, in turn, be exercised in his service. Freedom in Christ brings with it certain responsibilities. Therefore, the letter includes several instructions on what to avoid or what to strive for and specific instructions for Christian households. The whole manner in which Christian life is lived is characterized by the author as "giving thanks."

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Colossae, the home of the church to which Paul's letter to the Colossians was addressed, was a city in the Lycus valley of Western Anatolia (Asia Minor). Two neighboring cities, also in the Lycus valley, are mentioned in the letter-Laodicea and Hierapolis. The Lycus valley was not evangelized by Paul himself: it is plain from Col. 2:1 that he was not personally acquainted with the churches there. He had certainly met individual members of those churches like Philemon of Colossae, who indeed appears to have been one of his converts. The preaching of the gospel and planting of churches in the Lycus valley were evidently the work of Epaphras, whom Paul calls his "fellow-slave" and "fellow-prisoner."

The only direct information the NT supplies about Christianity in the Lycus valley is contained in the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, and in the letter to the Laodicean church in Rev. 3:14-22. The last-named document shows how the churches of the Lycus valley shared the general prosperity of their environment.