

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO COLOSSIANS

#### Authorship

The epistle claims to be written by Paul the apostle (1:1, 23; 4:18). It is now generally regarded as authentic, even by critical scholars (e.g., Kümmel). Some have denied its authenticity, using arguments based on the vocabulary and theology of the epistle (supposedly different from that of the soteriological epistles), and on the nature of the heresy Paul attacks (supposedly a later form of Gnosticism). However, these arguments have been effectively answered (e.g., see E. F. Harrison, *Introduction to the NT*, pp. 326-28; and the recent commentaries by F. F. Bruce, pp. 28-33, and especially by Peter T. O'Brien, pp. xli-xlix).

#### Paul's situation

Colossians is one of the Prison Epistles, written while Paul was in prison (4:3, 10, 18), the others being Philemon (vv. 1, 9), Ephesians (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), and Philippians (1:7, 13-14). There are three major suggestions for the identity of this imprisonment:

##### 1) Ephesus, AD 51-53

There is no explicit mention in the NT of an imprisonment in Ephesus, although he was often in prison (2 Cor 11:23). Some passages suggest that he had serious troubles during his time in Ephesus (1 Cor 4:9-13; 15:32; 2 Cor 1:8; 4:7-12; 6:4-5). The closer proximity of Ephesus to the recipients of the epistles is an argument in its favor. However, this view lacks substantial historical evidence (it is mentioned in the Marcionite prologue to Colossians).

##### 2) Caesarea, AD 54-56

Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years, during the rule of Felix (Acts 23-26). However, Paul does not mention Philip in his greetings (Acts 21:8; cf. Col 4:10-11), and it is unlikely that Onesimus the slave would have sought refuge there. Also the great degree of freedom Paul had in preaching during that imprisonment (Acts 28:30-31; Phil 1:12-13) does not correspond with the limited audience in Caesarea (Acts 24:23).

### **3) Rome, AD 57-59**

This is the traditional view, as noted by the subscripts in MSS K and L (9th and 8th centuries). The circumstances in the epistles match best with the conditions of Paul's first Roman imprisonment, as described in Acts. This is especially true for the list of Paul's companions. Most scholars favor this solution.

### **Relation to other Prison Epistles**

Colossians is closely related to Philemon, being sent to the same city by the same messenger(s) (Col 4:7-9; cf. Phlm 10). The lists of those sending greetings are quite similar (Col 4:10-14; cf. Phlm 23-24):

- Aristarchus
- Marcus
- Epaphras
- Luke
- Demas

Archippus is found in both letters (Col 4:17; Phlm 2), and in both cases Timothy is with Paul (Col 1:1; Phlm 1). The message to slaves and masters in Colossians 3-4, with its emphasis on the duties of slaves, fits well with the contents of Philemon.

The contents of Colossians are quite close to those of Ephesians. Of the 155 verses in Ephesians, 78 are found basically also in Colossians. Ephesians seems to be a circular letter for the Asian churches, covering in general many of the items discussed more particularly in Colossians. Tychicus carried both letters from Paul to Asia (Eph 6:21-22; Col 4:7-8). It could be that the letter from Laodicea" mentioned in Col 4:16 is actually our Ephesians.

The other Prison Epistle, Philippians, appears to have been written later, near the end of Paul's imprisonment. Paul's mood is different, and the circumstances and companions are different.

### **Recipients**

Colosse was one of three towns of the Lycus Valley, located between the churches of southern Galatia (Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe) and those in and around Ephesus on the western coast of Asia. Paul may have traveled through these towns on his second and third missionary journeys (cf. Acts 16:6-8; 18:23; 19:1), and may have founded the church there. But it appears more likely that he had not been done so, and that the churches in the Valley were founded by others, perhaps converts from his ministry in Ephesus (perhaps Philemon and others). It seems he had not visited those churches before (cf. Col 1:4; 2:1). For an excellent summary of these churches and their background, see F. F. Bruce's commentary, pp. 3-17.

## The “Colossian Heresy”

[Good discussions: J. B. Lightfoot, pp. 73-113; P. T. O’Brien, pp. xxx-xxxviii, also the three long essays at the end of the book, on the Essenes; F. F. Bruce, pp. 17-26. The special false teaching Paul fights against in Colossians seems to have three elements:]

### 1) Jewish element

Circumcision, new moons, sabbaths, etc. (2:11-16)

### 2) Ascetic element

Denial of bodily needs and pleasures (2:20-23)

### 3) Speculative element

Special knowledge, angels, etc. (2:8, 18)

[Note the new information about *merkabah* mysticism in F. F. Bruce, pp. 23-26.]

Lightfoot demonstrated the similarities of all these elements to trends in the Jewish Essene movement. Recent study of the Dead Sea Scrolls has shown additional linkage with the Qumran beliefs. There is no need to posit a later date for this heresy; any Gnostic elements in it are not the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century.