

COLOSSAE AND THE COLOSSIANS

(Douglas Moo)

In his classic commentary on the letter, J. B. Lightfoot claimed that "Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed." Colossae had not always been so insignificant a city. Located in the Lycus River valley of west-central Asia Minor, Colossae was apparently the most important city in its vicinity in the fourth and third centuries before Christ. It was known as being the center of a thriving textile industry, to the point that a certain kind of high-quality dark red wool was known as "Colossian wool." Its prominence was due especially to its location at the crossroads of two well-traveled highways: one that ran east and west, connecting the coastal cities of Ephesus (120 miles to the west) and Sardis with the interior east; and another running north and south. When, however, the latter road was moved west to pass through Laodicea, Colossae began to decline. In Paul's day it was not as large or important as the neighboring cities of Laodicea (twelve miles to the west) or Hierapolis (fifteen miles northwest). Both these communities also had Christian churches (see Col. 2:1), and Paul wrote a (now lost) letter to the Laodiceans (see Col. 4:16). An earthquake devastated the area sometime in the early 60s. We know that Laodicea was quickly rebuilt (as Tacitus suggests; and see Rev. 3:14-22, probably written in the 90s) and that Colossae eventually was rebuilt also, though we do not know how quickly. The city has been in ruins (which have never been excavated) for centuries.

Geographically, Colossae belonged to the region of Phrygia and in Paul's day was part of the Roman province of Asia. Its location on an important highway at a time of considerable mobility and the mixing of different ethnic groups that typified the Roman Empire meant that the population of Colossae was very diverse. A majority were undoubtedly Gentile, but we have good reason to think there was also a substantial number of Jews. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III ("the Great") had settled two thousand Jewish families in the general area in 213 B.C. (Antiquities 12.3.4). And the Roman man of letters Cicero, in the first century B.C., refers to the Roman seizure of a significant amount of money contributed by Jews in the area to support the Jerusalem Temple (the "temple tax"; see Cicero's letter Pro Flacco 28). The diversity of population and exposure to the latest ideas via travelers on its major highway meant that Colossae was a place where many different religious and philosophical viewpoints thrived and probably mixed together. This diversity helps explain the apparently syncretistic religious movement that was affecting the Colossian Christians and that gave rise to the letter. At the same time, as we will see below, this diversity makes it notoriously difficult to pin down the exact contours of this movement.

As far as we know, Paul had never visited Colossae, and he certainly was not the founder of the Christian community there (see Col. 2:1). This honor goes to Epaphras, whom Paul warmly commends in the letter (1:7-8; 4:12-13). It is likely that Epaphras was a convert of Paul's from the time of his almost three-year ministry in Ephesus on the third missionary journey (Acts 19). As a major commercial center, Ephesus was a place that people from all over the province would visit, and it was in this way that, through Paul's ministry in Ephesus, "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). Epaphras, we may surmise, was one of those who heard the word of the Lord from Paul and believed. He was



himself from Colossae ("one of you" [4:12]), and so we can imagine him preaching the good news there and establishing a Christian church in the town. He had traveled to where Paul was in prison "for the sake of the gospel," and had, apparently, even joined Paul in his imprisonment (in Phlm. 23 Paul calls him a "fellow prisoner"). He was not able, then, to travel back to Colossae with the letter that Paul writes, so Paul commissions Tychicus to do this job instead (Col. 4:7-8). Epaphras's reason for making this trip to visit Paul was almost certainly that he wanted to enlist the apostle's help in dealing with a dangerous yet slippery variation on the Christian gospel that had arisen in the community. Paul writes to a community, then, that he has "grandfathered" through his "son," Epaphras.

The letter suggests that most of the Christians in Colossae were Gentiles. Paul describes the conversion of the Colossian Christians in terms that, while perhaps not altogether impossible to apply to Jews, more naturally describe those who were at one time "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). See especially Colossians 1:12 - "[the Father] has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light" - and Colossians 1:21 - "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior." Paul's mention of the fact that it was "among the Gentiles" that God had chosen to make known his mystery (1:27) points in the same direction. The sins that characterized these believers before they came to Christ - "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (3:5) - are also more typically Gentile than Jewish. In addition to these positive indications, there are also two arguments from silence that cohere with (though certainly do not prove) a mainly Gentile audience: the lack of any explicit Old Testament quotations; and the lack of any explicit reference to the law.

Colossae in the Time of Paul

