Colossians: Introduction-Recipients, Place of Origin, Date and Contents of the Epistle

Lesson # 2

Colossians 1:2 identifies the recipients of this letter as being the church at Colossae which was an insignificant city in the Roman Empire during the first century A.D. and was located in the Lycus River Valley of west-central Asia Minor.

However, during the third and fourth centuries before Christ, the city was very important because of its thriving textile industry.

It held great prominence during this time because of its location because it was at the crossroads of two great highways.

One of these ran east to west and connected the cities of Ephesus and Sardis to the interior east.

The other ran north and south.

However, Colossae began to decline when the latter was moved west to pass through Laodicea.

Thus during the mid-first century A.D. Colossae was not as important as Laodicea which was twelve miles to the west or Hierapolis which was fifteen miles northwest.

The city of Colossae belonged to the Roman province of Asia and belonged to the region of Phrygia.

The population of Colossae was ethnically very diverse because of its location on an important highway when travel was increasing in the Empire and different ethnic groups were mixing with each other.

It appears that most of these people were indeed Gentile.
However, there was in all likelihood a substantial Jewish population.

This is indicated by the fact that Josephus mentions two thousand Jewish families being settled in the area in 213 B.C. by Antiochus III the Great.

Also, Cicero mentions the Romans in the first century A.D. seizing a significant amount of money from the Jews in the area to support the Jerusalem temple.

The city of Colossae was more than likely evangelized during Paul’s stay in Ephesus since Acts 19:10 states that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”

It appears that Epaphras served as the apostle’s personal representative for the evangelization of the Lycus Valley region which included Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12-13).
Paul had in fact never met the church in Colossae (Col. 1:4 8; 2:1) but he was confident he would do so according to Philemon 22.

He in fact might have passed through Colossae during his third missionary journey (Acts 18:23; 19:1).

The burden of proof rests with an Ephesus and Caesarea origin since church tradition holds to Paul writing Philemon and Colossians while under house arrest in Rome.

A critical factor in a Roman origin of this epistle is that Luke is with Paul during his imprisonment (see Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24).

This is supported by Acts since it makes clear Paul’s Ephesian ministry does not occur in a ‘we’ section of Acts.

The traditional view, that Paul was in Rome when he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, is still by far the best view.

Paul had two Roman imprisonments: (1) A.D. 60-62: Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon (2) A.D. 68: 2 Timothy, Hebrews.

The apostle Paul wrote Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon during his first Roman imprisonment while he was awaiting his appeal before Caesar and he was actually permitted to have his own rented quarters in Rome with a Roman soldier guarding him (See Acts 28).

The city of Rome is favored by many expositors as the place of origin for Paul’s epistle to Philemon and Colossians.

However, there has been debate among scholars as to where Paul was imprisoned when he wrote these two epistles.

Three solutions have been typically advanced: (1) Rome (2) Ephesus (3) Caesarea.

The traditional answer and one that this author holds to is that Paul wrote the letter from Rome during his imprisonment there (cf. Acts 28:30).

Philemon 1, 9, 10, and 23 record Paul as a prisoner.
If one compares this epistle to Colossians 4:7-17 and in particular the names, it shows that Philemon was sent from the same place as Colossians.

Tychicus was entrusted with delivering the Philemon epistle and Onesimus was his companion on the journey to Colossae.

This was the same Onesimus mentioned in Philemon 12.

If Colossians is Pauline as this author’s has argued then it must be one of the four so-called prison epistles with the others being Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon.

If it can be determined that Paul wrote Philemon from Rome in approximately 61 or 62 A.D. while awaiting his appeal before Caesar, then Colossians must have been written at the same time and sent out at the same time since both epistle share as we noted many similarities.

Colossians 1:1-2 contains the salutation of the letter which is followed by Paul expressing thanksgiving for the faith and love of the Colossian church.

Then, in Colossians 1:9-14, the apostle prays for the love and spiritual growth of the church.

This is followed by a hymn to Christ in Colossians 1:15-20 which brings out the truth that Christ is the image of the invisible God and that He is active in the creation and sustaining of all things.

It also declares that all of creation is for Him and that He is the head of the church.

Paul then in Colossians 1:21-23 goes on to affirming the fact that Christ reconciled all things to Himself by making peace with a holy God through His death on the cross.

Next, in Colossians 1:24-29, the apostle then mentions his past work for the church and the purpose of which was to produce spiritual growth among believers.

Then, in Colossians 2:1-8, Paul expresses his present concern that the Colossians will not be deceived by worldly philosophy from Satan’s cosmic system.
In Colossians 2:9-15, he communicates to them the sufficiency of Christ by affirming His authority (2:9-10), His omnipotence (2:11-12) and that He is the victor in the angelic conflict with Satan and his kingdom (2:13-15).

Then, in Colossians 2:16-20, he warns them again about submitting to legalistic false teaching which was undoubtedly originating from the Judaizers.

Paul in Colossians 3:1-4 reminds the Colossian church of their position in Christ in that they have died with Christ and have been raised and seated with Him at the right hand of the Father.

Consequently he exhorts them to appropriate by faith their position in Christ in order to experience victory over the sin nature (Colossians 3:5-11).

He brings out another consequence of their position in Christ, namely that they are the elect of God and holy people who are the object of God’s love and thus are to live accordingly exercising God’s love toward each other which will produce unity among them (Colossians 3:12-17).

In Colossians 3:18-4:1, the apostle Paul presents instructions for wives, husbands, children, slaves and their masters in the Colossian church.

This section is rounded off with injunctions for the church to pray and to be wise in their behavior with the non-Christian (Colossians 4:2-6).

The apostle informs the Colossian church that Tychicus will bring them news of his circumstances in Rome during his first Roman imprisonment (Colossians 4:7).

This is followed in Colossians 4:8-15 by a number of greetings to the Colossians from a number of Paul’s companions.

Then we have an injunction to circulate this letter and to exchange it with the one to the Laodiceans as well as a command for Archippus (Colossians 4:16-17).

We have then Paul asserting he wrote this letter with his own hand and requests prayer with regards to his imprisonment in Rome and then gives a final benediction (Colossians 4:18).