

Backstory to Colossians
John Whittaker

The City: Colossae

- Location
 1. Approx. 100 miles east of Ephesus
 2. In the fertile Lycus river valley, a district of lush, green hills.
 3. Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:13) were neighboring cities in the Lycus valley.
 4. In its early years it was the point at which the major routes East from Ephesus and Sardis joined. The route from Sardis was moved, causing the commercial importance of Colossae to decrease.

- Status
 1. In the fourth and fifth centuries B.C., it was wealthy and large due to its wool industry.
 2. By Paul's time it was described by a contemporary geographer as a "small town" (Strabo, Geog. 12.8.13.
 3. It was not a commercial and social center.

- People and Makeup
 - It was primarily populated by Greeks and native Phrygians.
 - Approx. 2000 Jewish families were settled in the area in the second century B.C.
 - Thus by Paul's time Colossae had a large Jewish population.
 - Consequently, Colossae was a place where a variety of cultural and religious elements mingled.
 - This likely provided fertile soil for the speculative philosophy in the church about which Paul was concerned and was writing to refute.

Authorship

- Colossians claims to be written by Paul: 1:1, 23; 4:18
- Internal Evidence
 1. It fits Paul's character
 2. It fits the history of the times
 3. It is closely tied to Philemon which no one doubts to be Pauline

- External Evidence
 1. It was included in the Muratorian Canon
 2. It was used by the churches in the second century
 3. It was never questioned until the last century

Date

- We aren't 100% certain
- Traditionally Rome
- About A.D. 60-62

THE BACKSTORY: Here's what we know for certain

The Church

- Started by Epaphras, a "faithful servant of Christ," not Paul (1:7).
- Paul had apparently never been there (2:1).
- The church was most likely started about the time of Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 19:9-10).
 1. During Paul's extended stay in Ephesus he preached and taught in the school of Tyrannus for two years.
 2. Out of this grew intense evangelistic activity through which "all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10).
 3. It seems that under Paul's guidance several coworkers planted churches throughout the province of Asia.
- One such co-worker was Epaphras who was a native Colossian and was responsible for the founding of the church in Colossae, and probably those in Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:13)

The Occasion of the Letter

- Paul under arrest, possibly/traditionally in Rome, waiting for trial
- Epaphras visits Paul
 1. Shared the progress of the gospel in the region around Colossae
 2. He shared the particular problems at Colossae
- The colossian church needed more complete grounding in Jesus and the gospel
- They appear to be experience some influence by some sort of teaching that is subverting their stability and sufficiency in Christ.
- This has traditionally been referred to as the "Colossian Heresy"
 - Read Colossians 2:16ff. It's like you're sitting in the living room listening to someone talk on the phone and hearing only their side of the conversation and you're trying to figure out what's going on with the person on the other end of the line.
 - So as we listen to what Paul says we can infer some things about the false teaching that was causing problems in the church at Colossae.
 - Sounds like there was an elitist, exclusivist attitude
 - There was definitely a Jewish element
 - (1) Circumcision
 - (2) Observing Jewish holy days
 - (3) dietary laws

- Ascetic element
 - (1) Don't handle, etc. 2:21
 - (2) self abasement 2:23

- Philosophical and mystical element
 - (1) Philosophy and vain deceit 2:8
 - (2) Taking a stand on visions 2:18
 - (3) Worship of angels 2:18

- What is this?
 - Gnosticism - The traditional answer
 - But even though it has many of the features of Gnosticism, none of Gnosticism's distinctives are stated.
 - Full-blown Gnosticism doesn't appear until the mid- second century
 - It didn't grow out of a vacuum, however, and the kind of religious syncretism seen at Colossae provides a root for it.

 - Jewish Apocalypticism
 - Such as the seen in the Dead Sea scrolls
 - Such groups incorporated many of the above elements; the philosophical element doesn't fit, however.

 - Some sort of Jewish mysticism
 - Such groups usually had a conceptual view of the world/spiritual world with God on his throne at the top and the individual worshipper at the bottom. And in between were successive levels the worshipper needed to pass through in order to achieve an vision of the glory of God.

 - An angel was usually said to govern each level; and each level was a stage. Secret knowledge was required to pass to the next layer.
 - 1QH 2.13 "thou hast made me an interpreter of knowledge in the wonderful mysteries" (in Bruce NICNT, p. 22 n. 93).
 - The goal was to pass successively through each stage until you achieved some sort of ecstatic, mystical experience in which you had a vision of God.
 - Gershom Sholem (leading authority) describes it as a preoccupation with "the ascent of the soul from the earth, through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos, and its return to its divine home in the 'fulness' of God's light" (in Bruce, NICNT, 24).
 - To pass from one stage to the next you had to:
 - Be ritually pure
 - Deny bodily comforts
 - Know the name of the angel over that level

 - A lot of this fits with what Paul says about the Colossian false teaching, but we don't know for sure if this is exactly what they were dealing with.

At any rate, it was something like this ... something that involved spiritual visions, angels, keeping the Jewish calendar and food laws, and things like that in order to achieve an experience of the fullness of God.

That's why Paul emphasizes that Jesus is the fullness of God and that if we are in Jesus we already have that fullness in Him (2:9-10).

So the theme of the letter is:

CHRIST IS ALL; YOU NEED NO SUPPLEMENTS!

Paul's goal is to help the original readers and us realize that Christ is enough. We don't need Christ plus mystical experience or Christ plus anything in order to know God in all his fullness. All we need is Christ.