

Colossians
Introduction
March 1, 2009

I. Introduction

Colossae was inland or east from Ephesus by about 100 miles. It was part of the Roman province of Asia. The church located there was apparently mainly a Gentile church (1:21); there is no indication that Paul ever visited it.

Today, Honaz, known in antiquity as *Colossae*, is a town and a district of Denizli Province in the Aegean Region at the edge of the Lycus Valley of Turkey. It covers an area of 504 km² (195 sq mi), and the population is about 25,000 (1990 census).

By the time that Paul writes his letter to Colossae, the city was in strong decline, having once been a great city. The reasons for the decline are not well known; some suggests that the road system was changes which resulted in the decline. Colossae was overshadowed by its near neighbors of Hierapolis and Laodicea. 30 years later, Laodicea was one of the seven churches receiving a letter from John in Rev. 3:14-22, perhaps the scariest of the Revelation letters.

Philemon lived in this city, and Paul was apparently familiar with him and his family.

II. Overall with Ephesians

The overlap between Colossians and Ephesians is rather huge. Remember that Paul wrote these two letters about the same time, and that the two cities were close together. (Note: Liberal scholars find difficulty with Ephesians. They start with a speculation that Ephesians was not written solely for Ephesus, but was a circular letter for all the cities in and around the Roman province of Asia—today southeastern Turkey only. Others go further and suggest that Ephesians might have been written by someone else, to explain the book of Colossae. Obviously, in this study, we will assume that the two books were written as we have received them from Paul.)

While the overlap can be viewed even greater than the following, it would include:

<u>Ephesians</u>	<u>Colossians</u>
1:7	1:14
1:10	1:19-20
1:19	2:12
3:2	1:25

4:2-4	3:12-15
4:16	2:19
4:22-24	3:9-10
4:32	3:13
5:6-8	3:6-8
5:15-16	4:5
5:19	3:16
5:19ff	3:16ff
6:19-20	4:3-4
6:22	4:8

These are only a few examples. Actually, almost every verse in Ephesians has a counterpart in Colossians, generally in the same sequence. See William Hendriksen's Ephesians commentary for a more thorough examination of this overlap.

III. "The Colossians Heresy"

Many suggest that the following three errors were in Colossae (among hundreds that have been put forth):

Libertinism

Gnosticism

Jewish influence on Christianity concerning the law

John Calvin suggested that it was a different "Jewish influence"...that access to Christ comes through celestial beings. Clearly, Col 2:8 and other passages imply that some heresy was in force, but we do not know which one or of exactly what its teaching might have been. Note that Col. 2:18 references the "worship of angels."

While we will discuss the heresy as we proceed through the book, some aspects of it are:

Col. 2:8—False philosophy driving believers away from Christ

Col. 2:11,16-17, etc.—Christ need for Jewish ceremonialism

Col. 1:16, 2:15, 2:18—Angel worship

Col. 2:20-23 – Asceticism

Since no known heresy has ever had all of these ingredients, it is probably best not to assume that we know what the heresy was. Perhaps, Paul was addressing more than one affecting Colossae.

Gnosticism places special meaning on many of the words emphasized in the book, such as knowledge, wisdom, philosophy, fullness, and mystery. This is not evidence that the Gnosticism was the heresy...rather, much more likely, that Gnostics took these words used here by Paul and also elsewhere and twisted their meaning to their preference.