



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Colossae: The City and Its Religions Colossians in Context

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The City of Colossae

1. By the mid-first century AD, Colossae was a small agrarian town in western Asia Minor (modern Türkiye).
 - a. It was located about 120 miles east of Ephesus in the Lycus River valley, in the region of Phrygia.
 - b. The city was near the base of Mount Cadmus (elevation 8,435 feet), eleven miles SE of Laodicea and fifteen miles SSE of Hierapolis (Arnold 2002, 371).
 - c. Herodotus claimed it was located near a river that ran underground for two-thirds of a mile; that is not literally accurate, but the Lycus River does run in a narrow gorge (Yamauchi 1980, 155), further indication of the area's rugged terrain.
2. What we can discern about the city's history is based on testimony from writers including Herodotus, Xenophon, Strabo, and Pliny the Elder.
 - a. It had apparently thrived during the five centuries before the Christian era as the principal city of the Lycus valley; Pliny included it in a list of famous cities.
 - b. Inscriptions and extant coins indicate that it was still considered an important city during the Roman imperial period (beginning 27 BC), but was increasingly overshadowed by Laodicea, established by Antiochus II in the 3rd century BC (Arnold 1992, 1089; Yamauchi 1980, 157).
 - c. Strabo includes it in a list of small towns in his *Geography* (12.8.13); this is taken by some to indicate that Colossae's size and influence had been diminished by the first century AD, but the presence of a gap in Strabo's text suggests the situation he describes may not refer to Colossae (Arnold 1992, 1089).
3. The economic success of Colossae and neighboring cities was primarily derived from their textile industries and location.
 - a. Colossae was famous for the distinctive purple color of its wool, commonly called *colossinus*.
 - b. The prosperity of the cities was enhanced by their position on the major trade route leading from the Aegean coast inland through Asia to the East (Arnold 1992, 1089).
4. Two ancient writers (Tacitus, Eusebius) attest to a severe earthquake that rocked the region in the

early 60s AD.

- a. Laodicea suffered extensive damage, and we can surmise Colossae did as well.
- b. It appears the quake struck not long after Paul's letter was written (Arnold 2002, 372).¹

Cultural-Religious Setting

5. Though the city has not been excavated (work began in July 2025; McDowell and Arnold 2025), evidence of a theater, necropolis, and acropolis has been found; the latter measures 180 by 370 feet (55 by 114 meters) (Yamauchi 1980, 159).
6. A number of Colossian coins help create some impressions about the city, especially concerning the gods who were worshipped and may have been featured around the acropolis.
 - a. The evidence points most frequently to the worship of the Ephesian Artemis (huntress) and the Laodicean Zeus, but also to others including the local moon god Men, Selene, Demeter, Helios, and Athena, as well as the Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis (Arnold 1992, 1089).
7. Phrygia was also renowned in the ancient world for its fascination with all things magical and mysterious (Johnson 2010, 349).
 - a. The cult of the mother goddess Cybele originated in Phrygia (Johnson 2010, 349).
 - b. Hekate, the goddess of witchcraft, also had a presence there (Arnold 2002, 373).
8. There was also a significant Jewish population.
 - a. Josephus reports that in response to "a sedition in Phrygia and Lystra," Antiochus III (223–187 BC) removed 2,000 Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylon and resettled them in western Asia (Josephus *Ant.* 12.147–153) where they became part of the Asian culture by the first century BC (O'Brien 1993, 147).
 - b. From a reference in the writings of Cicero to the amount of Temple tax confiscated by the proconsul Flacus in 62 BC, scholars have inferred that there were as many as 7,500 Jewish freemen in the district (Arnold 1992, 1089).
 - c. In thinking about Judaism, we need to take into account "that first-century Jews expressed their faith in a variety of ways, particularly in the Diaspora" (Garland 1998, 27 n. 33).²
9. This means that Colossae was a religiously pluralistic environment.
 - a. In pluralistic environments, "it was common for a person at this time not only to worship more than one god or goddess (polytheism), but also for the religions themselves to reflect a borrowing of ideas and forms of worship from one another. Such a blending of religious ideas is called *syncretism*" (Arnold 2002, 373).
 - b. In Phrygia, beliefs contributing to this syncretism would have included:
 - 1) Belief in dangerous spirits and powers (even good deities, if offended, could manifest their

¹ Arnold comments that, in light of the earthquake, "Paul's eloquent words about Christ as Lord of creation must have been especially meaningful to the believers after this event" (Arnold 2002, 372).

² Garland notes that "the Dura-Europa synagogue provides ample evidence for this" (Garland 1998, 27 n. 33). The synagogue was discovered in 1932 at Dura-Europos, Syria, and the last phase of construction was dated to 244 CE ("Dura-Europos synagogue," *Wikipedia*, accessed April 9, 2026). The reality of this diversity in Judaism suggests two ideas: (1) Judaism was not monolithic, even before the Temple destruction in 70 AD. (2) In the case of Colossae, the Jews who were transferred from Mesopotamia and Babylon in the first century BC had been there since the early 6th century BC. Without discounting Jewish uniqueness in the ancient world (e.g., monotheism, food laws, etc.), they doubtless absorbed some things from their surrounding culture[s] that, to some extent at least, influenced their beliefs and practices in ways that distinguished them from Judean Judaism.

- anger).
- 2) Worry about being cursed (not in the sense of profanity).³
 - 3) The fear of spirits associated with the wildlife, agriculture, and the intersection of roads.
 - 4) Belief in astral spirits, the zodiac, planetary deities, and the constellations.
 - 5) Fear of the underworld and gods and goddesses such as Hades and Hekate.
 - 6) Not least, they had to be wary of the spirits of deceased ancestors and of the untimely dead (Arnold 2002, 373–374).
- c. There were also appeals to “angels” and other divine beings for protection and deliverance; these appeals were present in both pagan cults and Judaism.⁴
10. One final aspect of religious practice in the area is the manifestation of extreme forms of behavior in the context of worship, which often led to the abuse of the body, rituals of self-mutilation, and flagellation, as well as fasting and other forms of self-denial (Arnold 2002, 374).
11. These practices were known to both Paul and his readers (someone else’s mail) and doubtless play a role in what he says about the supremacy of Christ and the particulars of the human philosophy they were facing (cf. Col 2.6–23).

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³ Curse tablets have been discovered in Asia Minor (Arnold 2002, 373).

⁴ In a sidebar, Arnold discusses Plutarch’s *Dread of the Gods*, an essay on the fear of the gods among the common people of the Roman Empire (Arnold 2002, 374).