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# I Introduction to Colossians



## BACKGROUND AND SETTING

### The Wider Contextual Setting

The city of Colossae (*Kolossai*) belonged to the region of ancient Phrygia and could be found in the Lycus Valley. Located in western Anatolia (modern Türkiye/Turkey), Phrygia was an old and distinct territory with its own culture, language, and religion centuries before the arrival of Rome. Phrygia's home was originally along the Sakara (*Saggarios*; Latin *Saggarius*) River in northwest Anatolia, and its civilization peaked in the eighth century BCE, extending far south beyond Colossae. Major empires conquered it, from the Persians to Alexander the Great to even the Celtic tribal warlords who had migrated from the north.[1] Each conqueror desired to control the trade routes running east to west. Centuries before Paul, the Persian Xerxes the Great camped near Colossae on his way to Greece, as did the Persian Cyrus. Herodotus says that Xerxes arrived at Colossae and described it as a "considerable city of Phrygia" (*Herodotus* 7:30).[2] Both saw the Lycus Valley as a strategic gateway to the west (see Map 1).

Eventually the prosperity of Laodicea and Hierapolis dominated the valley, and soon the city of Colossae began to decline. Ptolemy, Alexander's successor in the fourth century BCE, refers to many cities in the region but fails to mention Colossae.[3] The region fell to Rome in the second century BCE, and by 25 BCE Rome had devised a plan to subdivide

[1] S. Mitchell, "Ethnography and Settlement of the Anatolian Celts," in *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 42–58.
[2] See Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 14–16, for classical references.
[3] Ibid., 16.



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Map 1 Map of the Mediterranean.

the area into provinces, with Phrygia split among the imperial provinces of Asia, Bithynia, and Galatia. A generation before Paul, Strabo could write that Colossae was a "small town (*polisma*)."[4] While Ptolemy also lists many towns of importance, he fails to even mention Colossae (see Map 2).

Nevertheless, Phrygian culture persisted in the Roman period and is represented today in over seventy tombstones showing "Old Phrygian" in their writing (something a Roman or Greek tombstone would rarely do).[5] In the widely shared culture of Greco-Roman Hellenism, Phrygia was like Wales or Scotland in the United Kingdom: sharing in the whole but distinctly apart in its deeper interests; preserving its own language as well as it could while resisting absorption by the larger empire.

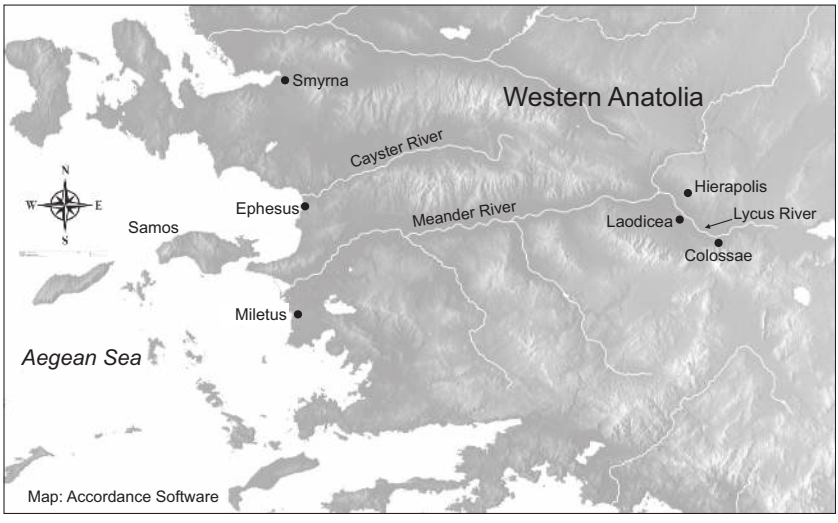
Thus, Colossae was in Roman provincial "Asia" but had a background of Phrygian regional culture. It was located about 120 miles east of the great

[4] Strabo, *Geography*, 12.8.13. Lightfoot remarks, "Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul is addressed . . ." (16).
[5] S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 174.

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Map 2 Map of the Aegean Sea and western Anatolia focusing on Ephesus to Colossae (the Lycus Valley).

coastal city of Ephesus, and its "mound" was identified in 1835. Today it can be found in the verdant Lycus Valley, whose Lycus River flows into the larger Meander River running west to Miletus.[6] Three cities, about twelve miles apart, were located in this valley – Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colossae – but they were a part of a larger network of cities that were important centers of Roman trade and government (Apamea, Pisidian Antioch, Tralles, etc.). We should imagine abundant trade passing through the Lycus Valley, interacting with its citizens, and following a route west (joining the Meander Valley) and northwest to Ephesus.[7] Roman efficiency had built an impressive network of roads across this region that moved troops and goods safely and rapidly. By the early first century CE, Colossae was a small though significant Roman city still overshadowed by its

[6] E. Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of the New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 155.

[7] The Meander (or Maeander) River (today: the Menderes; Greek *Maiandros*) is 240 miles long and winds considerably as it descends west. Its patron deity was Miandros, one of the water gods in the Greek pantheon. The river gave us the English word "meander," which is to ramble through the countryside.

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neighbors, as referred to in Col 4:13. Laodicea was the financial and administrative center in the region, and Hierapolis' mineral springs attracted many visitors from afar in search of medicinal cures.[8]

The region was tremendously fertile and known for its wool and dyed cloth.[9] The geographer Strabo remarks about the region: "The country round Laodicea produces sheep that are excellent, not only for the softness of their wool, in which they surpass even the Milesian wool, but also for its raven-black color, so that the Laodiceans derive splendid revenue from it, as do also the neighboring Colosseni from the color which bears the same name."[10] To the south of the valley, the high Cadmos Mountains were the source of the Lycus River and gave the region a never-ending supply of water. In antiquity and even today, people have viewed the water from the Cadmos as healing and therapeutic.

The success of Colossae came to an end sometime in the mid-first century (late in Paul's life) when an earthquake damaged it severely (along with Hierapolis and Laodicea). Tacitus says that the earthquake was so terrific that twelve cities in Asia were ruined in one night (he gives their names).[11] Rome immediately rushed to their aid, offering money, tax relief, and construction help. Unfortunately, the city of Colossae was not rebuilt, nor has it been excavated even to this day.[12] All that remains are surface debris and a partially visible, unexcavated theater that could host about 5,000.[13]

[8] See W. M. Ramsay, *The Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1897), 1–121.

[9] Strabo, *Geography*, 12.8.16; Pliny, *Natural History*, 11.51; Herodotus, 7.30. Describing Hierapolis, Strabo comments: "[I]t was the fertility of its territory and the prosperity of certain of its citizens that made it great."

[10] Strabo, *Geography*, 12.8.16.1–2, translation: The Loeb Classical Library, *Strabo*, 8 vols., 5:511.

[11] Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.47; Pliny refers to it as well, calling this earthquake under the reign of Tiberius "the greatest within the memory of humanity" (*Natural History*, 2.86).

[12] Many have tried to gain permission to excavate, but the Turkish authorities have denied them. This was true mid-century (see H. W. Mare, "Archaeological Prospects at Colossae," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 7 (1976) 39–59) and continues to be so today: M. Trainor, "Colossae? Colossal in Name Only?" *BAR* 45.2 (2019) 44–50; M. Sauter, "Where Is Biblical Colossae? The Unexcavated Site of Colossae Awaits to Be Excavated," *BAR* (online) June 14, 2023. The most recent archaeological report (over 800 pages) is A. H. Cadwallader, *Colossae, Colossians, Philemon: The Interface*. Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus/Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments, Band 127 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023); see the review by P. Foster, "Understanding Colossae through Material Culture," *ExpT* 135.1 (2023) 18–20.

[13] See A. H. Cadwallader and M. Trainor, eds., *Colossae in Space and Time: Linking to an Ancient City*. NTOA 94 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); M. Trainor, "Colossae: The State of Forthcoming Excavations," *JSPL* 1 (2011) 133–135.

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Estimates are that the city held a population of about 25,000, making it far smaller than its two neighbors in the valley that today display extensive remains of temples, baths, theaters, aqueducts, gymnasia, and monumental ruins.

## Rome

The Roman imperial presence in remote regions such as western Anatolia has now become clearer. Today epigraphic and ancient architectural remains – including many still passable Roman roads – attest to the widespread presence of Roman culture. But it is important to recall the inner workings of Roman politics to see how turmoil in Rome was putting pressure on cities like Colossae and its Christian community.

The late first century BCE was a time of turbulence in Rome. Julius Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE was followed by his successors falling into war – which ended at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, leaving Octavian (or Augustus) as emperor. Despair and concern gripped many Roman elites, who felt that the republic had been lost. To a degree, their fears were not unfounded: The Roman republic, for which they felt enormous pride, had been lost, only to be replaced by an empire (Imperial Rome) with strictly centralized governance under the charismatic Augustus and his successors.

Augustus brought a revival to Rome that was nothing short of eschatological. Turmoil could be replaced by tranquility and insecurity by peace if only Rome and its provinces entered into a new social contract. Augustus built a renewed professional military that secured "the roads" and the barbarian borders, cleared the Mediterranean of pirates, and began a massive revitalization of infrastructure that inspired Romans to believe in the power of Rome again. Commitment to this vision could be seen in the new temples built rapidly in every province. The elite did as they had always done: sponsoring civic projects on a grand scale, whose remains are with us to this day.

It was this "Augustan" program of cultural renewal – revival, really – complete with a mythology blending nationalism with religious piety that no province could avoid. Roman imagery was everywhere, and we can imagine that even in remote valleys like the Lycus one could not escape the pressures to conform to the new imperial world of Roman religion and life. Paul Zanker's fascinating *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*

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provides abundant pictures of how everything from family altars to coins bore homage to Augustus and the new Roman vision.[14] Coins depicted Augustus' defeat of the Parthians and his distribution of olive branches to compliant subjects. Jewelry depicted kneeling Parthians and Augustus as victor. Mirrors, lamps, hairpins, tables, and wall art employed the same images. In some cases, statues of Augustus imitated ancient Greek images of Hercules. That this was going on in the Lycus Valley can be seen with a brief trip to the modern archaeological museum at Ephesus.

But this was not simply propaganda; this was mythology – an eschatology – that swept up the imagination of the empire. Moral and cultural renewal led to new festivals, buildings, games, temples, and arts, all heralding a new age. A golden age was dawning. Images of fertility and victory decorated buildings as the sculptor's chisel reflected the sentiment on the street. Rome was back. Power had returned. Augustus would march into Anatolia like Alexander the Great and reestablish Roman hegemony.

Perhaps the best representation of this is the statue of Augustus found at the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta, north of Rome.[15] Originally cast in bronze, it was copied frequently in marble and presented Augustus as warrior-savior, relaxed and with a jaunty stance, his right arm uplifted and pointing to the future, spear held firmly. Defeated Parthians pay homage on his breastplate (or cuirass). He is the image of a Greek athlete, young and virile, echoing the golden age of Greece – which the Romans admired.[16] But this type of image became the standard. Even after Augustus' death (14 CE) the renewal continued, and depictions of Tiberius and Caligula used the same imperial style.

This mythology also integrated religion directly. Augustus proclaimed divine authority for the "Julian family" (descending from Julius Caesar), and this began with the posthumous deification (or apotheosis) of Caesar himself. In 17 CE the first coin of a deified Caesar appeared, and soon after

[14] Zanker, *The Power of Images*.

[15] This was the villa owned by Augustus' third wife, Livia Drusilla. The statue was discovered in 1863, and it is 6 feet 10 inches tall (2.08 meters) and weighs 2,200 pounds (1,000 kilograms). Today it can be seen in the Vatican Museum in Rome. Scholars believe it is a marble replica of an original bronze statue.

[16] See Zanker, *The Power of Images*, 190. Images of *Primaporta Augustus* abound on the web. See also H. O. Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," *JSNT* 27.3 (2005) 323–349; H. O. Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text, and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

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Augustus was labeled *divi filius* or "divine son" on currency. Images portrayed Caesar ascending to heaven in a chariot, and his heavenly rising star appeared on coins. Augustus intended for his two grandsons, Gaius and Lucius, to succeed him, and quickly this divine identity was attached to them. Their untimely deaths made Augustus reluctantly choose a military commander named Tiberius to follow him (who was the adopted son of his third wife, Livia). This kept the Julian flame alive.[17]

Imperial propaganda represented the two options set before every region: One could be defeated like the Parthians – which was the warning – or one could enjoy the *pax* (or peace) of Rome and flourish. Overall, this so-called *Pax Romana* was contagious, causing some provinces to join the new order with zeal, but others (such as Judea) continued to look at it warily. This was a world order demanding compliance in exchange for peace. And this unmasked its reality: This *pax* was also a fiction. Some regions would not comply, and this led to war. As Tacitus later remarked, "Peace there was, without question, but a bloody one" (*Annals*, 1.9.5; 10.4).[18]

This detour has been necessary because it draws us into the world that every Colossian knew intimately. This was the air they breathed. It was impossible to live in Colossae and not be profoundly aware of imperial expectations and imperial promises. Temple participation was akin to political loyalty; *pietas* (piety) for the gods was the norm; home decor announced one's embrace of imperial symbols and mythologies. This may be analogous to the British royal cypher "ER" (*Elizabeth Regina*) and its stylized crown that appear on British passports and mailboxes (pillar boxes) in the UK. I also think of the portraits of Queen Elizabeth (the "queen mum") often found on kitchen walls throughout the UK in the late twentieth century.

A church planted in such a setting would have to deal with these realities and ask what costs its members would incur if they rejected this mythology and instead embraced a different narrative of salvation. What if they followed a different *divine son*? Paul will discuss this in Colossians, but

[17] Tiberius' father was the distinguished patrician Tiberius Claudius Nero. His mother, Livia Drusilla, divorced her husband and went on to marry Augustus, becoming the emperor's third wife. Tiberius became the second emperor of the imperial period in 14 CE, ruling until 37 CE.

[18] Cited in Zanker, *The Power of Images*, 187.

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he will have to navigate this intense environment of religious–political conformity with care, and any criticism of it will have to be coded carefully.

We also have to remember that most of the Colossians would not have been able to read this letter (illiteracy was widespread), and so when Paul sent it, the letter came with a courier who would read it and interpret its meaning. This public reading served as an announcement – a "forthright social, economic and political announcement that King Jesus rules the cosmos."[19] Colossians offers, then, a worldview, a reframing of salvation and an implied upending of Rome. Jesus was the supplier of true salvation and the *telos* toward which history had been moving.

## Roman Imperial Religion

It is impossible to imagine life in antiquity without religion. The "irreligious" or secular life is a modern invention that the ancient world did not know. Human destiny involved an interplay with "the gods," whose secrets were ferried to humanity through priests, oracles, and mysteries of innumerable varieties. The gods' anger or generosity shaped common life. Blessing or placating them was a human duty. In this sense, Colossae, like every Roman city, was steeped in religion, with many forms of syncretism where ancient faiths merged with new Roman beliefs. Jews lived alongside these cults – and soon, Christians joined them. But in each case, it was inevitable that common Roman religious instincts would infiltrate these monotheistic faiths. The same is true today. Most churches in the world have to some degree absorbed the civil religions or political eschatologies that forever present themselves as more exciting or convincing than the gospel itself.[20] The Colossians were no different.

The Hellenistic world was a time of cultural syncretism. There were few beliefs about one universal god (except among philosophers, and then only in the later Roman era), but instead religious practice was usually local and linked to one's region or culture. Often these gods merged, and what was once Greek took on a Roman name (Zeus was eventually identified with

[19] McKnight, *Colossians*, 2. See also P. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990) 3–27.

[20] Writing this in the USA during the period between 2015 and 2025, I can't help but think about how civil religion and its political entailments have captured the imaginations of countless conservative Christians.

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Jupiter, Artemis with Diana, Poseidon with Neptune). If you were Roman, it was expected that you observed Roman forms of devotion. If a city was a Roman colony, one could expect to see multiple temples devoted to Roman deities and, after the fall of the republic, to the emperor. Someday archaeologists will likely find the remains of a Roman temple at Colossae just as we have at Ephesus, Laodicea, and Hierapolis.

In the Roman period, one of the first features of religious piety was a commitment to the *pax deorum* (peace with the gods). This was a harmonious relationship with the gods that could prevent war, public disasters, plague, and famine, and could lead to both national and personal prosperity. In times of crisis, placating these gods was critical: Temple sacrifice, prayer, and elaborate liturgies each aimed to rectify the situation. But also, watchfulness for impiety was critical. In the Roman imperial period, divine blessing for the emperor became a common public duty.

The Romans had their own pantheon, headed by Jupiter Optimus Maximus (Jupiter, the Best and Greatest), and he was a part of *dii consentes* (the twelve united gods) that oversaw Rome's fate. Temples to these were abundant. But many more divinities also existed. These were often nameless, and they were viewed as divine actors who could hamper life or bless it. Many of these were continuations of old regional gods that were vastly popular among ordinary people.[21] To orchestrate the *pax deorum* there were numerous orders of priests, each tasked with bringing this peace. Public divination was vital to their work when they needed to diagnose the source of calamities. Among them were *augures*, priests who interpreted the meaning in the movement of birds (who lived close to the heavens). *Haruspices* were priests who interpreted the entrails of sacrificed animals.

Under imperial Rome, devoted residents of Colossae would have participated in each of these practices. In the first century, most religious activity would have focused on the emperor, thanksgiving for his life, and prayers for his prosperity (and thus the prosperity of Rome), and, in this sense, religion joined with patriotism, demonstrating one's fidelity to the empire. A family might also have a small altar in their home, paying homage to deceased relatives or to the gods whose will directed their lives.

[21] Centuries later, Augustine listed the countless gods as if to ridicule common Roman religion, *City of God*, 4.11.

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## Mystery Religions

But imperial religious devotion was not the only religious option in Colossae. In addition to all of these formal activities, there were also *mystery religions*, whose popularity was sweeping the Hellenistic world by the first century BCE. The Greek term *mystēs* meant "initiate," and a *mystērion* was a ritual of initiation. Marvin Meyer summarizes their purposes:

> The mysteries advocated salvation for individual followers who chose to seek initiation into the mysteries and thus to draw close to the divine and to each other. . . . They celebrated the death and new life that may be experienced not only in nature but also in the world of humankind.[22]

Followers of the mysteries believed that their rituals and liturgies as well as their experiences were so sacred that they devoted themselves to secrecy, and even today we know little about them. Most of their practices were private and did not include the public display of faith found in temples. But we do know that they had sacred symbols, purification rituals, meals, and initiation rites. They employed the imagery of death and life liberally as a metaphor for the initiation–transformation. In a fragment attributed to Plutarch, we read about a cult initiation as a death:

> At first there is wandering, and wearisome roaming, and fearful traveling through darkness with no end to be found. Then, just before the consummation, there is every sort of terror, shuddering and trembling and sweating and being alarmed. But after this a marvelous light appears, and open places and meadows await, with voices and dances and the solemnities of sacred utterances and holy visions. In that place one walks about at will, now perfect and initiated and free, and wearing a crown, one celebrates religious rituals and joins with pure and pious people.[23]

Some sources describe public parades that invited onlookers to join. The *Metamorphoses of Apuleius* describes a colorful cult parade carrying an

[22] M. Meyer, "Mysteries," in *DNTB*, 720. See also M. Meyer, ed., *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and D. Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries: Cosmology and Salvation in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[23] Cited in Meyer, "Mysteries," 721.

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