

CHRISTOLOGY

I N ■ C O L O S S I A N S

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SALVATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST ALONE—that is the heart of the Christian gospel. It was the basis of the gospel preached by the apostle Paul as well. Yet Christians ancient and modern have had trouble living as if this fundamental of the faith was indeed valid. The obstacles we face in life are so great. The temptations are so numerous. The enemy is so powerful. Is our faith in a living although invisible Christ really enough to save us? When we are weak or afraid, the urge is strong to begin to doubt whether the Christ we have confessed as Lord is really able to secure our redemption.

An angel figure from the ruins of the Roman city of Hierapolis. False teaching being spread to the early church at Colossae included the heresy of angel worship.

COREL PHOTO

Lesson Reference:

FBS: Colossians 1:1-29; 2:6-19;
3:1-17

The first readers of Colossians suffered from this same problem. Paul complimented the Colossians for their “faith in Christ Jesus” and their “love” for “all the saints” (1:4, NIV). Yet he was concerned that certain errant views had gained a foothold in the Colossian church that called into question the all-sufficiency of Christ for salvation. Paul wrote these Colossian Christians to remind them that in Jesus Christ alone they had full access to the “invisible God” (1:15). Only in the mysterious indwelling of Christ’s Spirit could they have any “hope of glory” (1:27). Paul used the doctrine of Jesus as the Christ—known as Christology—to bolster the Colossians’ faith in that Christ as their only sufficient Savior.

Paul apparently wrote this letter to a group of Christians he had never seen. He indicated in the letter that the church in Colossae had been established by his associate Epaphras (1:7). The church at Colossae was probably established during Paul’s extended stay in Ephesus in A.D. 52–55. During this time Paul dispatched Epaphras on a mission inland up the Meander and Lycus Rivers. Epaphras succeeded in establishing mission works in several cities in this river valley, including

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Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (4:13). Paul’s Letter to the Colossians was intended to formalize his relationship with these new churches. It may have been one of a pair of circular letters he had sent both to Colossae and to Laodicea (see 4:15–16).

In Paul’s day this particular region of Asia would have had a sizable Jewish population.¹ However, the Colossian church was primarily Gentile in makeup (1:21, 27; 2:13). Paul warned his readers of the futility of a set of beliefs that compromised the principle of the sufficiency of Christ for salvation. Scholars have traditionally termed this

set of beliefs the “Colossian heresy.” The exact substance of this errant teaching has been the subject of heated debate. Paul nowhere detailed the contents of this teaching in Colossians. But we may recover some of the basic principles that were at issue. This false teaching emphasized the “worship of

Lower left: Architectural fragment in ancient Colossae. Colossae had not been excavated when this picture was taken.

Below: Unexcavated ancient structure in Colossae.

Lower right: Figure of a Lar. The Lar familiaris, a spirit associated with the dead, was worshiped in private homes along with the di Penates, guardians of the household larder.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/KELSEY MUSEUM/ANN ARBOR (386/19A)

angels” (2:18). It stressed the importance of religious visions (2:18). It stressed radical self-denial as a pathway to holiness (2:21). And it accented the need to observe certain days of the calendar in order to be right with God (2:16).

Scholars are not united over the origins of these teachings. Some students see in these teachings the influence of the pagan mystery cults that were popular in the Greek culture of the day. Mystery cults were pagan religious groups that promised personal salvation to those who dedicated themselves to the worship of a particular god or goddess. This worship often included a secret initiation rite that introduced the convert to the “mysteries” of the deity. Paul’s use of the term “mystery” to describe the Christian experience in Colossians (1:26–27; 2:2) has reminded some interpreters of the initiation rites employed in these mystery cults.² Others have specu-

lated that the Colossian heresy was a form of gnosticism (NOSS-ti-siz-um). Gnosticism was a widespread philosophy that claimed that the physical world is entirely evil and that persons are saved out of it by gaining secret knowledge (Greek *gnosis*) about spiritual, divine realities. These interpreters have said that Paul’s use of the term “fullness” to describe Christ’s relationship to God in 1:19 and 2:9 recalls the use that later gnostic teaching made of

that term.³ Still other scholars see an entirely Jewish backdrop to the heresy at Colossae. Paul’s references to extreme self-denial (2:21); the observance of festivals, new moons, or sabbaths (2:16); and the worship of angels (2:18) may have indicated some type of overzealous interest in the Jewish law or some sort of Jewish mysticism as the problem at Colossae.⁴

Although debate continues as to the exact theological nature of the problem at Colossae, scholars agree that the basic problem there was one of Christology—the study of what it means to affirm Jesus as the Christ or Messiah. For Paul, affirming Jesus as Christ meant that “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3, NIV), that God raised Christ from the dead and

Left: Mandaic (Syriac script) incantation bowl. The angel Gabriel and various idols and spirits are invoked to protect Chosroes, son of Apra-Hormiz, and his family.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (554/26)
Below: Cornice stone in ancient Colossae.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (11/30/16)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (11/30/10)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (11/30/14)

exalted Him as Lord (Phil. 2:9-11), and that only the Lord Christ is sufficient to deliver us from the power of sin (Rom. 8:31-39). Apparently, some of the Colossian Christians had doubts about Christ's full sufficiency to secure salvation for humans. So the Colossians had begun to explore other avenues of access to God. Drawing on various ideas from mystical Judaism and pagan Greek religion, these young Christians sought assurances of their salvation outside the gospel message about Jesus Christ.

Paul's basic response to this Christological crisis was to affirm Christ's all-sufficiency for salvation and to encourage the Colossians to root themselves in Christ and in no other teaching or philosophy (Col. 2:6-8).

Two aspects of Paul's response to the Colossian crisis are particularly important here. One is Paul's use of the phrase "elemental spirits of the universe" (2:8,20, NRSV). This phrase may have been a term used by those advocating false teachings at Colossae. And the meaning of this term seems to be pivotal to Paul's argument. The term translated "elements" referred in ancient Greek to the basic items in any series, such as the notes in a musical scale or the letters of the alphabet. In Greek philosophy it was used to refer to the four basic elements of the universe: earth, air, fire, and water.⁵ But the term was also used in Greek religion to refer to cosmic forces or spiritual beings who were in charge of the heavenly bodies and who attempted to control human destiny.⁶ Paul's reference to the "principalities" and "powers" in 1:16 may well be an allusion to these cosmic forces. These forces may have been astrological in nature. But some scholars see a Jewish background to these elemental spirits. In some Jewish mystical traditions, the

pagan "gods" worshiped by the Gentiles were believed to be angels whom God had put in charge over the various aspects of His creation. When mortals offered these angels idolatrous worship as gods, they rebelled against the authority of the one true God and enslaved their devotees to sin and spiritual darkness. Worshipers supposedly could placate these rebellious spirits only

Below: Minerva. From the Temple of Sulis Minerva. Found in Stall Street in 1727. Gilt bronze head from the cult statue of Minerva from the temple.
Right: Sepulchral Chest of Isochrysus. Marble. The Latin inscription may be translated: "To the departed spirits of Isochrysus."



through acts of rigorous self-denial and through worship of the angels as deities (Col. 2:18).⁷

Paul's response to this emphasis on the "elemental spirits" was to declare that they are created beings, whereas Christ Himself is eternal, uncreated, and preeminent over these powers (1:15-16). His sacrifice on the cross won Him victory over the principalities and powers, taking them captive and robbing them of their dominion over

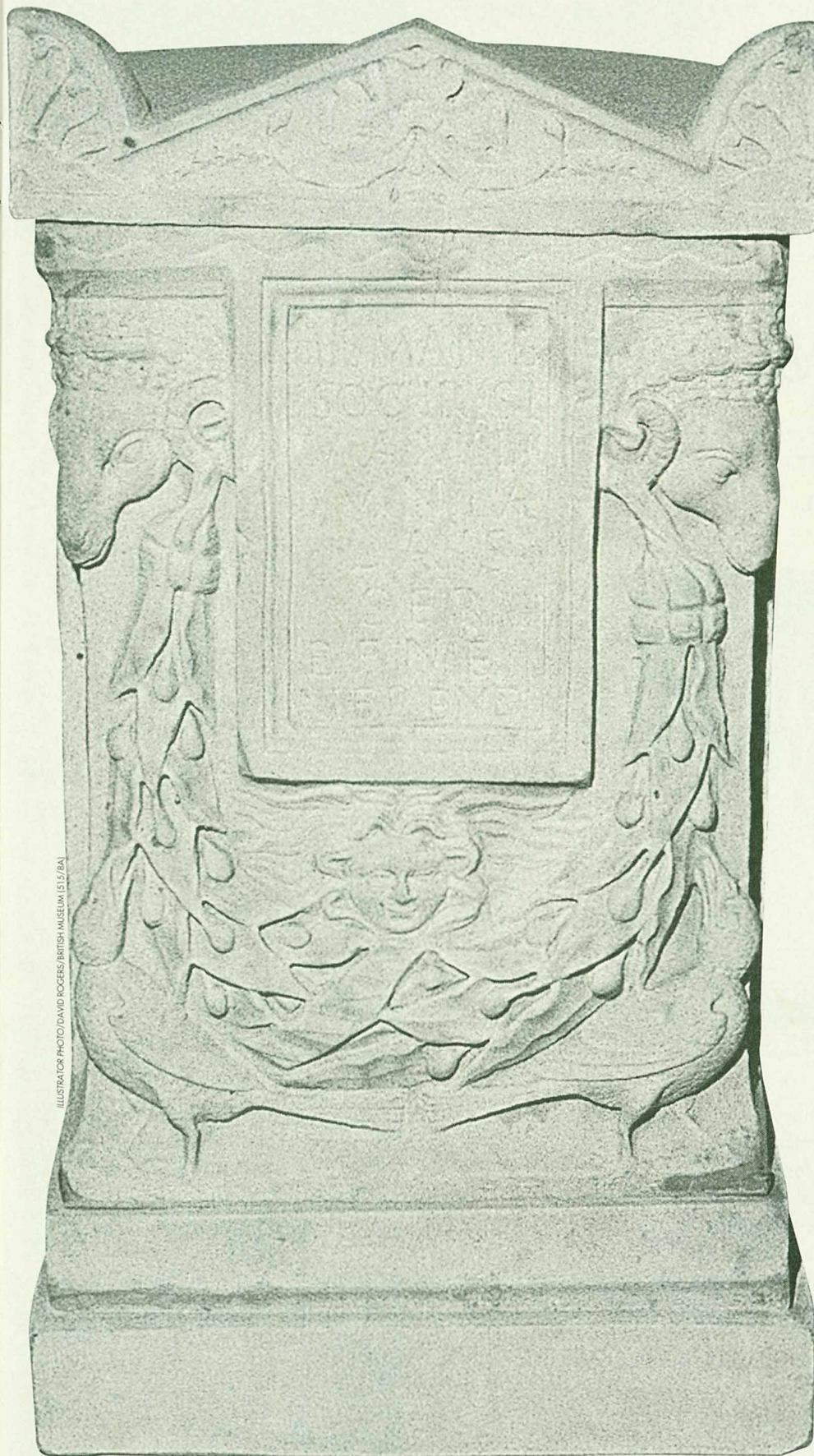
humanity (2:15).

The other important aspect of Paul's response to the problems at Colossae was his use of the "Christ-hymn" in Colossians 1:15-20. The rhythmic qualities of the Greek attest to the hymnic character of this passage. Scholars debate whether Paul composed this hymn himself or whether he adapted it from some other source.⁸ Clearly, however, this hymn is the core of the Christology of Colossians. This hymn declared Christ to be the image of the invisible God, the One through whom the universe was created, and the One through whom the universe will eventually be reconciled to God.⁹

Several ideas dominate this hymn and drive home the concept of Christ's sufficiency. Verses 15 and 16 stress the superiority of Christ as Creator. Christ is the visible manifestation of the invisible God (v. 15). The term "first-born over all creation" as applied to Christ does not imply that He is a created being.

The phrase instead refers to Christ's preexistence prior to creation and to His sovereignty over it.¹⁰ In verses 17-18 the hymn highlights Christ's continuing activity in the created order. Christ is the One who literally holds the universe together. His sovereignty is not limited to His past creative acts. It also extends to His present redemptive activity as the One who was "firstborn among the dead" and "head" of the church (v. 18).¹¹ Paul used the expression "firstborn among the dead" because he believed that God's raising of Christ signalled that the general resurrection of the dead and the final judgment could not be far away (1 Cor. 15:20). Christ's status as "head of the body, the church" extends the metaphor that Paul used elsewhere of the church as the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12).

Finally in Colossians 1:19-20 the hymn stresses Christ as the "fullness of



God." In gnostic thought the term "fullness" was used to refer to the sum total of intermediary spirits that lay between humans and God. The Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, used this same Greek term to describe how God's glory "filled" the earth (Ps. 72 (71):19; Isa. 6:3). Paul commanded this term and applied it to Christ (v. 19; 2:9; see also Eph. 1:23; 4:10). Christ is the only and all-sufficient mediator between God and sinful humanity.¹² Furthermore, Christ's reconciling and mediating work does not apply only to humanity. The scope of Christ's reconciling work on the cross extends to all the universe, aiming to reconcile all of creation to fellowship with God (Col 1:20).

Paul's attempt to get the Colossians to reaffirm the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ over everything in the universe speaks powerfully today to Christians who are plagued by the same doubts as those shared by the Colossians. In the face of even the deepest spiritual needs, Jesus Christ is still our all-sufficient Savior, capable of redeeming us from the powers of darkness and preserving us from all forces that seek to separate us from God's love.

¹Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.149.
²Peter O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 44 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), xxxi-ii-xxxviii.
³*Ibid.*
⁴*Ibid.*
⁵E. Plümacher, "STOICHEION," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 277-278.
⁶O'Brien, *Colossians*, 132; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 27.
⁷O'Brien, *Colossians*, 132; G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology*, completed and edited by L. D. Hurst (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 102.
⁸Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 352-353.
⁹Bruce, *Epistles*, 27.
¹⁰Guthrie, *Theology*, 355-356.
¹¹Guthrie, *Theology*, 356-357.
¹²*Ibid.*; O'Brien, *Colossians*, 51-52; D. S. Lin, "Fullness," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 320.

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