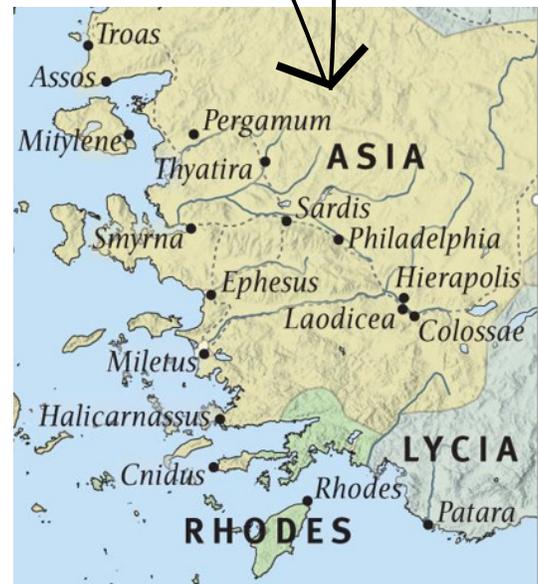


Lesson 3

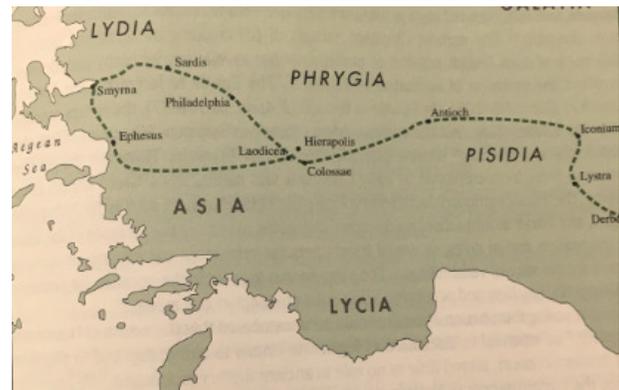
The Background and Setting of Colossians

The City of Colossae At the time of Paul's letter, Colossae was part of a tri-city area along the Lycus River; the other two cities were Laodicea and Hierapolis (which are both mentioned in the letter – 2:1; 4:13-16). Colossae was by far the oldest of the three and played a leading role in the region. This region was part of the Hittite Empire until its decline around 1200 BC when it became the southwest part of the then dominant kingdom of Phrygia. Under Cyrus the Great, it was merged into the Persian Empire in the middle of the 6th century BC. Subsequently, it became part of Alexander the Great's Greek Empire (334 BC) and then, upon his death (323 BC), part of the Seleucid monarchy. It was during this time that Laodicea and Hierapolis were founded. The kingdom of Pergamum (including the Lycus Valley) briefly asserts itself and gains independence until Antiochus III regains control. To bring stability to the region, Josephus reports that Antiochus sent 2,000 Jewish families to the area. But once Rome and Antiochus clashed, Pergamum aligned itself with Rome. Consequently, when Rome defeated Antiochus and imposed on him the Peace of Apamea in 188 BC, Rome restored to Pergamum its territories. Shortly, the last king of Pergamum, Attalus, died without heirs and he bequeathed his kingdom to Rome in 133 BC. Four years later, Rome organized the province of Asia.



During the time of Persian rule, ancient historians (Herodotus and Xenophon) report that Colossae was a large city as evidenced that both Xerxes and Cyrus could find provisions there for their armies while encamped there. Its wealth was, in part, based on its strategic location along the major road from the Aegean Coast to the east (see map at lower right).

By the time of the 1st Century, Laodicea (and perhaps Hierapolis) surpassed Colossae in importance. Rome centered their government operations for the region in Laodicea. Around 60, the three cities were destroyed by an earthquake(s). It appears that Laodicea was able to quickly rebuild. The rebuilding of Colossae seems to have occurred, but the details are uncertain. The primary lack in our information is that, although the location of Colossae was found in 1835, it has yet to be excavated like Laodicea and Hierapolis.



The Gospel in Asia On his 2nd Journey, Paul had a desire to take the gospel to Asia, but he was "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). But on his 3rd Journey,

Paul went to Ephesus where he labored for (more than?) two years (Acts 19:8,10). Epaphras, an associate of Paul, was the one to first take the gospel to Colossae (Col. 1:7). This is consistent with Acts 19:10 "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." Further, it appears that Paul had not visited Colossae prior to writing Colossians, but he does anticipate visiting there once he is released from custody (Phm 22).

Roman Custody Although the historical record regarding Roman custodies is incomplete, we do know that there were several reasons one might be held in custody: protection, remand, awaiting sentence, awaiting execution, coercion, and sometimes punishment. From a third-century Roman jurist we understand that there were three principal categories of Roman custody:

- 1) Prison – most severe form for the worst offenders,
- 2) Military Custody – primarily used to ensure prisoners would appear for trial, etc., and
- 3) Free Custody – charge of the prisoner was given to an individual.

For both prison and military custody, a prisoner could be physically chained (to guard(s) or some structure). But, at times, Roman writers refer to 'chains' metaphorically to stand for confinement.

Paul's Custodies Acts only records four Roman custodies Paul endured: Philippi (16:19ff), Jerusalem (21:27ff), Caesarea (23:23ff), and Rome (28:16ff). But there must have been other custodies since when Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 11:23 that he had been in "far more imprisonments" than others, Acts only records the Philippian imprisonment up to that time.

Two other custodies have been proposed:

- 1) Ephesian Custody during 3rd Journey – proponents cite 1 Cor 15:32 ("fought with beasts at Ephesus"), 2 Cor 1:8 ("affliction in Asia"), and Rom 16:3-4 (since Aquila and Priscilla was with Paul in Ephesus on 3rd Journey, 1 Cor 16:19).
- 2) A Second Roman Custody – proponents cite the difficulty of placing the Pastoral letters within the framework of Acts (which ends during Paul's first custody in Rome), which would be resolved if Paul was released for a period and then rearrested and put to death under Nero (according to Eusebius citing Origen).

The Biblical text and the traditions are not conclusive whether either these imprisonments occurred.

Paul's Prison Letters Based on comments within the letters, four of Paul's letters have been generally grouped as 'prison letters': Ephesians (3:1, 13; 4:1; 6:20), Philippians (1:7, 13, 14, 17, 30), Colossians (4:3, 18), and Philemon (1, 9, 10, 13). Of the four custodies recorded in Acts, only the Caesarean and Roman custodies were of sufficient length for Paul to have composed letters.

Philippians contains several statements that strongly suggest that Paul was in Rome at the time he wrote that letter: "the whole praetorium (lit.)" (1:13), he is facing the possibility of death (1:20ff; 2:24; which is particularly persuasive since Paul, as a Roman citizen, could always appeal to Rome had he been imprisoned elsewhere); and "Caesar's household" (4:22).

Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon were written at the same time, thus from the same imprisonment. Early traditions favor Rome as the place of writing and most scholars conclude the same. Several, however, believe Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus. The persuasive point for them is that they believe it is more reasonable that Onesimus would flee to Ephesus than to Rome since Ephesus was close. (Is it not just as reasonable that he would more likely to flee to Rome since it was far away? And, Luke, according to Acts, is not in Ephesus when Paul was supposedly in prison there.) Personally, I am not convinced that there was an Ephesian imprisonment. And, although I see good arguments in favor of Caesarea being the place writing, I am going to proceed with the hypothesis that they were written while Paul was in Rome.