Philippians, Colossians

Alright, let’s go ahead and get started. Let’s open with prayer: Father, thank you for such a beautiful day outside and because of that I pray that we will be able to focus our attention on the portions of the New Testament that we will be thinking about and covering. Father I pray that as always we would become more aware of and more familiar with the original context in which the New Testament books were written and as a result of that we would be better to equipped to understand how they continue to speak to us today as your very word and revelation to us. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Are you all waiting for a quiz? I would never do that on a week that you’ve had an exam, at least not yet anyway. So let’s open up another piece of the early church’s mail and we’ll open a letter written to the church at Philippi the book that we call: the Letter to the Philippians.

The first thing to ask is: what do we know about the city of Philippi that might help us orient ourselves a little bit to the context in which the letter of Philippi is written? First of all the letter to the city of Philippi was a town that is in what today would be the Northern part of Greece that country known as Macedonia. The city Philippi was named after the father of Alexander the Great, Philip. You remember Alexander the Great the mighty general the one that basically Hellenized the whole world and spread Greek culture and language throughout the inhabited world. His kingdom extended larger then any other kingdom basically until Rome came along. It was after his father Philip that the city of Philippi was named. It was basically what was called a Roman colony that meant the Philippi was the home of veterans from the Roman army and they would come to Philippi to settle. The reason they would do so was because it was there they could be free of taxation. They had a tax exempt status living in Philipi and it’s to that city that Paul addresses the letter to the Philippians to a church or churches that had settled there.

Philippians is one of those books that we’re going to cruise over rather quickly.
We spent a little bit of time on books like 1 Corinthians and Ephesians but we’ll sail through Philippians quite quickly. I want to jump right into asking, why did Paul write this letter? Why a letter to the Philippians church? There seems to be a number of things going on in Philippi. First of all is Paul seems to write to explain his circumstances in prison. Remember Philippians is one of those books that we have designated as, or the students of the New Testament designate as the Prison Epistles. That is because when you read this letter Paul makes clear references to his imprisonment during the time of his writing. Although probably at this point it is more accurate to describe Paul as under house arrest. We often envision when we think of Paul’s imprisonment, we think of him chained to a soldier perhaps or in some dark dungeon writing this letter by candlelight or whatever. But most likely Paul has a lot more freedom and you certainly can get that impression when you read Philippians.

In fact, Paul’s pretty confident in Philippians that he will be released from prison and from his house arrest but Paul then writes this letter from prison and one of the purposes is he seems to write to explain his circumstances in prison and to explain that despite his circumstances and perhaps despite of some of the expectations of the Philippians, Paul’s circumstances in prison have not turned to the determent of the gospel nor does it mean the defeat of the gospel nor does it mean the victory of the Roman Empire. Instead Paul makes clear that his circumstances in prison have actually turned out for the advance of the gospel in the Roman Empire for Jesus Christ. So again perhaps some of his readers wanted to know if his imprisonment meant that it was something serious that had happened or this could have happened to the determent of the gospel. What the implications were for their own faith in Jesus Christ? So Paul writes to assure them that his situation in prison does not, mean that the gospel has not continued to advance and does not mean that Jesus Christ is not Lord. So he seems to write to explain why it is he is in prison to explain his circumstances.

A second reason is clearly Paul writes to thank the Philippians for their financial support. Now it’s interesting to compare this letter with the letter of the 1 Corinthians. Remember in 1 Corinthians when Paul went to the city of Corinth he refused their
financial support and probably the reason he did that was wrapped up with the situation of the Corinthians and the way they were treating their leaders. So Paul did not want his relationships with the Corinthians to be confused as a patron-client type relationship or a relationship where you have Cephus and others competing for the attention and following of different disciples so perhaps, to avoid those kind of notions, Paul refused the any financial support from Corinth instead he worked on his own. He set up his own shop made his own living. Yet with the Philippian church it appears to be something very different so that in Philippi Paul was happy to receive their financial support so that he could devote himself to full time ministry. So it depended upon on the circumstances whether Paul accepted the financial support of the people he ministered to or not. In the case of the Philippians he did receive financial support and he wants to now thank them for that too and even encourage them to continue that in his ministry.

Third and the last purpose Paul does seem to need to address a couple of problems in the church. One of those problems is disunity and it seems to me at least as I read the letter, its not clear exactly that there are some disputes and quarrels in the church. I’m not exactly sure why that’s the case but when you read the letter, especially in chapter 2 and in chapter 4 towards the end of the letter its clear that there are arguments and disputes. The church is in danger of being disunited. So Paul writes to try to calm this disunity or calm these quarrels and to keep the church united. You can see when you compare this to a book like 1 Corinthians and elsewhere what one of the biggest things that had Paul so upset was when the church was in danger of being divided. More than anything Paul wanted to preserve the unity of the church. When it was in danger of division, strife or conflict that’s one of the things that really got Paul ticked off when he wrote to the church. So disunity, the fact that for some reason there were some Philippians in the church that were quarreling. There was dissention and perhaps the church is in danger of division.

The other one in chapter 3 of Philippians, Paul is once again confronting a situation very similar to the one he did in Galatians. That is, the group of individuals that we call Judizers who have infiltrated the church some have even suggested that there was
a group that at every turn in his ministry dogged Paul and almost followed him around
and tried to undercut his ministry. They promoted a teaching that said faith in Jesus
Christ was not enough and said that one must submit to the law of Moses. One must
identify as a Jew in order to the truly belong to the people of God.

So you can see where in a sense Paul’s gospel that he is going to preach that is that
Gentiles can be become Gods’ people solely based on faith in Jesus Christ. They don’t
need to submit to the Mosaic law, you can see where that gets him into problems with
those who were zealous for Judaism and those who were zealous for the law of Moses as
the defining factor that you were God’s people. Those are the persons that seemed to
cause the most problems for Paul and so we see these Judiazers crop up again in
Philippians chapter 3. When you read chapter 3 it sounds again like Paul is addressing
much the same problem that he did back in the book of Galatians.

So those are at lest three of the ma in purposes that lie behind the writing of
Philippians. Paul explains the circumstances for being in prison and that his
imprisonment doesn’t mean weakness, that is does not conflict with the power of the
gospel, nor does it hinder the spread of the gospel. He writes to thank the Philippians for
their financial support and to encourage them to continue. Then he does write to deal with
a couple of problems in the church like disunity for some reason, quarreling and fighting
and the problems of Judiazer once of again slipping in and undermining Paul’s ministry
and the gospel that he preaches that Gentiles can become God’s people solely by faith in
Jesus Christ apart from the Mosaic law.

Now one question that gets raised you see with any book I don’t know how much
of it is our desire to have things in a nice neat package. So we can have a very quick
sound bite or quick reference to summarize an entire book. But usually when we look at
New Testament books we are prone to ask what is the dominant theme. Is there always a
primary theme that unifies the entire book? That’s been asked of Philippians numerous
times the problem is that Philippians seems to yield different answers. For example, some
have suggested that “joy” is the main theme of Philippians. I can think off the top of my
head a number of books particularly popular books that are entitled something to do with
joy in relationship to Philippians. So some have suggested that as the main theme of Philippians. There are some who suggest suffering is the main theme of Philippians. Some have combined them and said, “joy and suffering” is the main theme. Others have suggested “sharing or participation in the gospel” is the main theme because you find Paul especially at the beginning and the end of his letter as I have said encouraging the Philippians to continue to participate in the gospel through their financial support of Paul. So some have said participation in the gospel is the dominant theme. Another possible theme could be correct thinking although I have never seen this purposed. This is a proposal that I certainly think is possible when you read throughout the book notice how many times Paul tells the reader to have this mind in them or to think this way or to think the same thing. He says that over and over again so you can argue based on the number of the references to words of thinking and thinking correctly and thinking the same thing that thinking could be the dominant theme of Philippians. Unity would be another theme that some have suggested is the main theme of Philippians. So again the problem is that is Philippians itself seems to yield a variety of answers to that question “what is the dominant theme.”

So my suggestion is that Philippians does not have a main theme. Paul is writing trying to communicate a number of things. I mean think about it, although this is not a precise analogy, but think about it when you a sit down to write a letter sometimes you write for a very specific purpose such as to secure a job or to address a problem such as a product, if you were writing to a company. But at other times you may write a letter just to ramble, especially if you were writing an informative letter. You might jump around different topics your just divulging information or dealing with a number of topics that may not have one over-arching unifying theme. In my opinion, Philippians is that way. So attempts to isolate the theme of Philippians as unity, or joy or suffering or whatever I think they all fall short and all of those are themes, and they are all legitimately found in Philippians, but that’s because Paul is simply addressing a number of issues and simply wandering around touching on a number of themes and topics that he wants to address in the Philippian church.
Alright, I said that I want to move through Philippians rather quickly, there is one text I want to slow down and want to look at in just a little bit of detail. It is found in the second chapter of Philippians and in fact usually this is the text in Philippians that gets all the attention for the most part. It starts in verse 6 of chapter 2, actually, back up to verse 5 where Paul says, “Let the same mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus who though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself” or I actually like think the NIV is the most accurate here, “he made himself nothing or he made himself of no reputation by taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness and being found in the human form he humbled himself and become obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him, [that is Jesus,] the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and earth and everything under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.”

Now there are two ways that we could approach this. By the way, this section is one of the sections in the New Testament that is labeled a Christological hymn. The other one is found in Colossians that we will deal with later on; hopefully we will get to Colossians today. But in the book of Colossians we find another section that is known as a Christological hymn. And part of the debate is if you have a Bible that sets poetic sections or hymnic sections apart in verse form your Bible probably does that to Philippians 2:6-11. That is because this section is widely regarded as a hymn, or at least some kind of exalted prose or poetic type of language. There is debate did Paul write this or is Paul simply using or quoting from a 1st century hymn or poem that he is familiar with much like we would quote somebody at length and put quotation marks around it. But I am not interested in trying to determine did Paul write this or has he borrowed the hymn. No matter what the case we still have to deal with what it is doing in its context and what it says. The first thing is, notice the structure of this hymn. The structure of this hymn actually takes a “U” shape. It begins with Jesus Christ referred to as in the form of God, actually a reference to Jesus’ preexistence with God but then the hymn begins a
downturn at the bottom of the “U” where he takes on human form and is made in the likeness of the human being but it goes even further. He humbles himself even to the point of death and death on a cross. But then, see you have reached the bottom of the “U” shape. Then the hymn takes an upward turn so that now at the very last few verses Jesus Christ is exalted far above in the heavenly realm and is given a name that is above every name so that everyone will bow at the name of Jesus.

So the hymn looks like this so called Christ hymn in Philippians chapter 2 Jesus Christ’s heavenly status even although he was in the form of God he did not consider that equality with God as something to be exploited for his own use. But he surrendered that to the point of becoming a human being and humiliating himself to the point of death on the cross. But that wasn’t the end of the story, the plot takes a turn upwards to Jesus’ exaltations actually if this was accurate this should be higher then this in the sense I’m convinced that in this hymn Jesus just doesn’t get restored to the same position that he had before but he receives something that he did not have before now as the one who was humiliated. Now he is exalted and he receives the name to which every knee will bow and confess he is Lord. So Jesus’ exaltation I think results in status that he didn’t even have before.

Now a couple things about this hymn. First of all the Christology of it this hymn has what called a very high Christology that is a clear reference to Jesus’ heavenly pre-existence the fact that he exists in the very form of God. I also want to draw your attention to an interesting Old Testament quotation in this section. If you don’t need to turn there I will but if you were to go back to Isaiah chapter 45 in the Old Testament Isaiah chapter 45 in verse 23, is God’s speaking to Israel through Isaiah the prophet. So this is God referring to himself. I am going to back up and read verse 22 “he says turn to me, God says to Israel, turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth for I am God and there is no other.” Well that is interesting God is a asserting his absolute uniqueness that there is no other God besides him. Then he says again these are God’s words to Israel, “by myself I have sworn from my mouth has gone fourth righteousness a word that shall not return to me, every knee should bow and every tongue confess.” Interestingly that is
the very verse that gets applied to Jesus in Philippians chapter 2. We see, this is not the beginning of, but we see a phenomenon that will occur numerous times in the New Testament, that is, a text that in the Old Testament referred to God gets applied to Jesus Christ. What is interesting about this one is in Isaiah chapter 45 it is in context of the absolute uniqueness of God. He says, “I am God and there is no other.” So how can this text get applied to Jesus Christ a text in the Old Testament that affirms the absolute uniqueness of God that there is no other God? How can that text get applied to Jesus Christ, if he is not in some sense God himself? So that is why I say this hymn or poem has a very high Christology. Jesus is in the very form of God he preexists as God and in the end he is exalted in and text that applies or refers to the uniqueness of God against all other Gods gets applied to Jesus Christ as the one who will receive the universal worship of all creation. Now despite this high Christology and the emphasis on Jesus’ Lordship and his absolute uniqueness as God. He humbles himself and takes on human form.

It is important to back up and ask: what’s the purpose of this hymn? Is Paul teaching us a Christology lesson about who Jesus is and his nature? Well there is certainly some truth in that but its important to examine how this text functions in its context. The most important text in Phil. 2 is not verses 6-11 the most important text is verses 1-4 of chapter 2 where Paul says this, “If there’s any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, if any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion in sympathy, make my joy complete.” This is Paul addressing the Philippians to be of the same mind. There’s that thinking language being of the same mind, being in full accord and in the same mind and having the same love. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better then yourselves let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Then comes our text, “now have this mind in you that was also in Jesus Christ. So primarily this hymn or poem with this very exalted Christology is primarily functioning as a model for the kind of behavior that Paul wants to see in his readers in chapter 2:1-4 it’s an example of the lack of selfish ambition. It’s the example that kind of sacrificial love and concern for others that Paul wants to see in his readers in verses 1-4. Now he gives an example of that from Jesus himself in verses 5-
11. So this is important to understand. This text is not just there to satisfy your curiosity about who Jesus is, although that is important, but this is meant as an ethical model for what it means to live out this self-sacrificing love and this lack of selfish ambition that Paul wants to see in his readers from chapter 2:1-4.

Any questions on Philippians? I said that is the only text that I wanted to slow down and look at. The main thing that I want you to focus on is the overall purpose of the letter. Why did Paul write it? What is he trying to accomplish? The poetic and hymnic structure did not rhyme like our poetry today. It often rhymes in sounds or our hymns we sing in church or our praise songs. The tendency to rhyme and ends of lines rhyming with each other that’s not the case necessarily here. There are other factors that suggest that it is a hymn or exalted prose type of writing, that is a good question.

Hopefully you can begin to see the New Testament our understanding of theology of who God is and who Jesus is come from writings that were produced in very specific historical circumstances. Paul is addressing real churches with real problems and the trick is to understand how we understand the theology from letters that were addressed to very very specific situations and circumstances.

So let’s open another piece of the early church’s mail and again following the canonical order in the New Testament, not the chronological order in which they were written. The next book we want to look at is the book that was written to the city of Colossae. It is a book that we know you know from your New Testament as the letter written to the Colossians. This is a slightly blurry map of southwestern Asia Minor or modern southwestern Turkey. Here’s the city of Ephesus we talked a little bit about, although again, I don’t think that the letter to the Ephesians was written to Ephesus. It was probably written a lot of these cities. But you will notice inland from Ephesus; a ways is the city of Colossae. Here are actually a couple of other pictures. This is the tell, the mound, of the city. This is a modern picture of where the ancient Colossae would have been. This is what’s left of the amphitheater in the city of Colossae. Let’s look at a modern day depiction of Colossae. What do we know about the ancient city of Colossae.

A couple of interesting things, first of all, the city of Colossae was one of the
smallest and probably one of the least significant cities to which Paul wrote a letter. Unlike cities like Ephesus and Rome that played important roles politically or economically like Corinth. Colossae appears to be a rather insignificant city. It appears to have been destroyed to by an earthquake sometime in the middle of about 60 A.D. So it is a rather insignificant city. However; the other thing that we know about the letter is that Paul apparently did not visit the city itself. This is one of the few city’s that Paul writes a letter to that he himself did not plant the church or play a role in that or had not visited personally. And there are several verses scattered throughout Colossians that give you that impression I think chapter 2 verse 1, he says, “for I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those in Laodicea and for all those who have not seen me face to face.” So he seems to categorize the Colossian Christians as a part of this group that he has never seen face to face. Instead someone else has planted the church in Colossae yet he finds it necessary to write a letter to the church in this city.

One thing that is very interesting with Colossians in the next part of your notes is that in several places it over laps closely with Ephesians due to the extent that the vocabulary and the similarities that you find in the synoptic problem. Remember when we were talking about Matthew, Mark and Luke and we said that the wording not just the order of the events in the concepts, but that the wording was so similar that there must a been some relationship between Matthew, Mark and Luke. We suggested that Mark was probably written first and then Matthew and Luke utilized Mark and also other sources. That same kind of similarity is evident between these passages that I have listed in your syllabus between Ephesians and Colossians. I am not going to take time to read them but if you sometime even in an English translation compare them you can’t help but note the similarities down to the exact words that were used.

So how do we explain this? Perhaps most likely a possible scenario is that Paul might have written Colossians first to address some specific situation or problem and we will see what that problem is in just a moment. Then Paul thought that basically what he wrote would be beneficial for a much broader audience. So he writes and includes much of the information from Colossians and addresses it to a much wider readership not in
response to any specific problem. So that probably accounts for the similarities. Some suggest that Paul did not write one of these letters. Perhaps he wrote Colossians and then some later author copied parts of Colossians to produce Ephesians but I think that it is more likely that Paul used the material twice. Once to address a very specific situation in Colossians you will see what that is, and then again to address a much more general situation and general audience.

Now the question is, what problem might Paul have been addressing? Or another way to put it, was there some kind of false teaching or some kind of problem in the city of Colossae to cause Paul to write? This has been debated because Paul does not come out and actually say this when you read Galatians. Remember we talked about Galatians if you go back and read that book it is very very evident and clear that Paul is addressing some kind of false teaching or problem. However, when you read Colossians it doesn’t come across quite as strongly in fact, the only evidence that you have that Paul might be addressing some kind of problem or false teaching does not come until chapter 2 about a third of the way through the letter, whereas in Galatians Paul jumps right into the problem and says that, “I am astonished that you have so quickly turned from the gospel.” But in Colossians you don’t get any hint that there is anything wrong in the church of Colossae until you get a third of the way through the book until well into chapter 2. So because of that some have said that Paul doesn’t seem to be addressing any situation or specific problem or some kind of false teaching that has infiltrated the church as he did in Galatia.

Others are convinced because of verses like chapter 2 in verse 4 the second one should be verse 8. But in chapter 2, verse 4, this is the first hint that you get that there is any problem Paul finally says in after an entire chapter and then in verse 4 of chapter 2, “I am saying these things so that no one might deceive you with fine sounding arguments” and that is all he says. Then verse 8 to skip down a couple verses “see to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit according to human traditions and elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ.” There’s the second hint that we get that there might be something wrong but I think it comes even
more clear when we jump ahead to verse 16 of chapter 2, Paul says, “therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festivals or new moons or Sabbaths. These are only shadows of what is to come but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you insisting in humility and the worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by human ways of thinking and not holding fast to the head, which is Jesus Christ.” Then I’ll skip down to verse 20 “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe why do you still live as if you still belong to the world? Why do you submit to the regulations do not handle, do not taste, do not touch.” So because of those verses most today are convinced that, yes, Paul was addressing some kind of deviant teaching there is some kind of teaching that had infiltrated or maybe was just beginning to infiltrate the Colossian church that had Paul concerned and that is why he sits down to write this letter to head it off or to combat this teaching. He is afraid that some of the Colossians might be duped into thinking it is correct or some might be considering becoming apart of the following.

So I guess the mediating position would be Paul is addressing some kind of false teaching but the situation doesn’t seem to be as dire or as serious as it was in Galatia. Or again go back to Galatians where from the very first verse he skips the thanksgiving and says, “I am astonished that you would so quickly turn from the gospel” until chapter 2. So maybe we should infer from this that there is a false teaching but it is not as serious or hasn’t yet infiltrated the church and started actually to lead people astray. But can we be more specific? What is this teaching that Paul is combating? Like I said, when we looked at Galatians just about everyone agrees that Paul is addressing Judaizers, that is Jewish Christians who are trying to force Gentiles to submit to the law of Moses. Faith in Jesus Christ is not enough but one must submit to the Mosaic Law and live life as a Jew in order to be God’s people. That’s fairly clear.

But Colossians is a little bit different. In fact, there have been a number of proposals and explanations to what might be going on. What is this teaching that seems to have Paul concerned and worried that he must warn the Colossian not to be deceived or led astray? The problem is the evidence seems to go in a number of ways. For example; if
I read chapter 2 verse 8 “see to it that no takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition.” So whatever this teaching was Paul labeled it a philosophy and he saw it based on nothing more then human tradition and could deceitfully lead the Colossians astray. So we could ask what could fall under that description of a philosophy based on human description or human tradition?

Let’s read a little bit further starting in verse 16. He says, “therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or observing festivals or new moons or Sabbaths.” What does that suggest about the nature of this teaching? Who would observe new moons, festivals or Sabbaths? Jews. In fact that three fold phrase new moons, festivals and Sabbaths is found in the Old Testament. Interestingly it’s also found in the Qumran literature, the Dead Sea scrolls. So I’m convinced that whatever this false teaching is it is some kind of Judaism.  Paul again is dealing with Judaizers who he sees endanger of leading his readers astray. In fact, it used to be very common to let me read about this one here. “ Do not let anyone disqualified you insisting on humility and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by human way of thinking.” Now whatever it is worships angels or is involved in some way with worshiping the angels. Then it goes on and says, “why do you submit to its regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch” which seems like some kind of extreme aesthetic practice of avoiding physical pleasure or physical contact with certain things.

Now some have suggested what you have actually going on here is an amalgamation of several religious philosophies and beliefs. So you have a little bit of Judaism and a little bit of Gnosticism maybe. We talked all about these things. You have a little bit of other pagan religion. Some of the things that we talked about way back at the beginning of the semester some have said this is some kind of syncretism of Jewish beliefs and other pagan beliefs. The problem is there is really no evidence that happened that Judaism would syncretize to the extent that some are suggesting with the false teaching behind Colossians. From what we know of most Jewish religions although they were influenced by Hellenism and Greek ways of thinking is still they would have been concerned to maintain their purity as the people of God.
So I am convinced that there is no need to look outside of Judaism for the false teachers behind the Colossians. There are two possibilities number 1: we actually have a number of texts that we call Apocalypses that is these are texts that resembles the books of Revelation and Daniel that is a accounts of a someone’s visionary experience where they ascend to heaven. They see heavenly realms which includes angelic beings and included in some apocalypses are visions of angels worshiping and even joining angels in worshiping. Some suggest even places where angels themselves must be placated to worship. So this this mystical visionary type experience was a common phenomenon in Judaism. Again you can read all of these apocalypses. We have English translations. They didn’t make it into the Old or New Testament but they still testify to what many Jews thought in the first century.

But second I am convinced too another possibility is the references to food and drink. He says, “don’t’ let anyone judge you on matters of food or drink.” The references to new moons, festivals and Sabbaths the worship of angels in visions and harsh treatment of the body, humility and even boasting of what one had seen is interestingly all of these elements can be found in the Essene or in the Qumran community. They are testified in the Dead Sea Scrolls. So I wonder if the Judaism Paul is combating is not either this apocalyptic type Judaism that emphasizes mystical visions and visionary experiences or whether it may have been a Judaism like the Essenes in the Dead Sea community that valued strict observance of the law and of the Sabbath. They observed ceremonial purity avoiding contact with certain things. There’s even references there are even some documents in the Qumran community that testify to this mystical experience of actually worshiping with the angels joining the angels in the heavenly realms.

So in my opinion I think Paul is not addressing some syncretism or some amalgamation of Jewish and pagan beliefs all mixed up in one, but I think that he is addressing a Judaism of the day that is either an apocalyptic type or an Essene or Qumran type of Judaism. The problem is this Judaism has now become attractive to some of his readers and now Paul must warn them about the danger of giving in to this teaching or
going along with this this mystical type of Judaism this apocalyptic type or Essene or Qumran type of Judaism.

So to summarize then, the purpose of Colossians is Paul then will write Colossians to stop and warn his readers not to be led astray by this false teaching, this Judaism that offers an alternative to the life that they have in Christ Jesus. So Paul’s going to write to warn the Colossians not to give in to this Judaizing teaching as an alternative to what they have in Christ Jesus and what he is going to do emphasize. They have everything they need in Christ Jesus. They don’t need what this mystical Qumran type of Judaism has to offer them. With their asceticism and their worship of angels and visionary experiences, they don’t need that as a substitute for what they have in Christ, because they already have everything that they need in Christ Jesus.

Alright, any questions so far? This is about the background of the book and what Paul is doing and what he is writing. I actually hope to develop this more in writing because its never really been proposed. Most people are convinced that when you read Colossians it is a mixture of Judaism and other pagan religious thoughts like Gnosticism and other pagan religious beliefs all rolled up into one. But again I am not convinced that is the case and I don’t think that we have to look beyond Judaism to find all the elements and the teaching that Paul addresses in Colossians. So I hope to develop that more at some point so I am testing this out. So someday it may turn up to be wrong, but I don’t think it is.

What is the theme of Colossians? If I were to provide a main theme and maybe not “the” main but “a” main theme that would be: the Supremacy of Christ. In fact, that’s what Paul argues all throughout his letter that because of the supremacy and absolute sufficiency of Christ they don’t need what this mystical type of Judaism and its experiences have to offer them. In fact as we are going to see Paul’s main problem with this false teaching, this Jewish religion, is not just theological but it’s also ethical. His problem is this Judaism and all its aesthetic practices and its mystical experiences does nothing to defeat the power of sin. But they do in Christ have the ability to overcome sin and its power by virtue of being joined with Christ and his death and resurrection. They
have everything they need to overcome sins power. So why would they want to buy into this Judaism whose aestheticism and mystical experiences do nothing to overcome sin and overcome the desires of the flesh? So the superiority or the supremacy of Christ over all things is a dominant theme in Paul.

Paul develops that theme very early in his letter all the way back in chapter 1. Here is the second of the so-called Christ hymns. We already looked at one back in Philippians 2:6-11. Here’s the second one Colossians chapter 1:15-20. Again some people ask well did Paul write this or is he borrowing a preexisting hymn. Is he using a hymn or a poem that the early church knew of and used? Now Paul’s using it because it says what he wants to say or did Paul write this and again I am not interesting in settle this question.

Again it is more important to ask how does this hymn function? Starting in verse 15, “He is the Image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers. All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together. He is the head of his body the church. He is the beginning the firstborn from the dead. So that he might have preeminence or have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and though him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

Now one of the reasons I think why putting this hymn so early in the letter was because if he can get them to buy into that and after seeing this exalted depiction of Christ in this Christological hymn, hopefully they’ll be more inclined to accept his warnings to avoid this false teaching. Hopefully they’ll agree with him that this false teaching, this mystical Judaism really has nothing to offer them if they hear this hymn and hear this poem they will hopefully understand that they have everything they need in Christ. They don’t need what this mystical Judaism has to offer, its aestheticism and its visionary mystical type experiences.

Now just a few things to say about this hymn, first of all, notice how the hymn is
divided first of all in verse 15-17 Jesus is being portrayed as the Lord over the first creation alluding to Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Now Jesus is seen as the primary agent of the creation of the universe. So Paul portrays Jesus as Lord over the first creation over the entire universe. He is Lord over the heavens and the earth and all and everything in heaven and earth owe their existence to Jesus Christ. However Paul is also convinced of the fact that Jesus is Lord over Creation. That means that he is able to bring creation to its true goal through his death and resurrection. He has now established a new creation. And the assumption is the same assumption is that sin has caused a dislocation, sin has in a sense ruined the first creation so that now God must institute a new creative act to bring creation to its goal of a new creation and now Paul is convinced that that has happened through Jesus Christ. So he is not only the Lord over the first creation but over new creation. As Lord over the first creation he is able to bring creation to its intended goal of its brand new created act.

That has already in this the idea that he shares with the Ephesians in the book of Ephesians. This has already been demonstrated through the church. The church is the first installment of new creation. Where God is beginning to reconcile all things to himself actually by Jesus’ resurrection he’s called the firstborn from the dead. Jesus’ resurrection is the inauguration of the new creation. But the creation of the church as a reconciled humanity is also part of this new creative act that Jesus Christ has now inaugurated.

A couple of other things, though Jesus’ is portrayed as the image of the invisible God and also the firstborn of all creation interestingly these are terms in the old testament and in Jewish literature that were applied to wisdom. Wisdom was seen as the image of God. Wisdom was seen as existing alongside of God. Wisdom was seen as the agent of creation but now Paul although most Jews in the first century and before and after would have identified wisdom with the Torah, the law, Paul says, “No, Jesus Christ is the true embodiment of God’s wisdom.” So Paul uses categories from wisdom, God, the creator, the being to which all things are created, the firstborn of all creation. Much of that language reflects how the Old Testament and other Jewish literature portrayed wisdom. So Jesus is being portrayed as the wisdom of God, the true revealer of God.
However, this phrase is also interesting, the firstborn of all creation. We might tend to read that in the wrong way but this phrase actually comes out of Psalm 89 which is a psalm about the Messiah, the Davidic King. There “firstborn” clearly refers to sovereignty and authority over creation. So calling Jesus the firstborn of creation has nothing to do with the fact that Jesus was created or that there’s a time that he did not exist and now he comes into existence. Firstborn has nothing to do with actual birth or production. It has to do with status and sovereignty. So in Psalm 89 the King is the firstborn because he is the Sovereign ruler over all creation. So by calling Jesus the firstborn of creation it is a term of his authority and sovereignty over the entire creation as the Davidic King in fulfillment of Psalm 89.

So again the author piles all these phrases up from wisdom literature in the Old Testament to depict Jesus as the Sovereign ruler over all creation, the first creation and the second creation, the new creation, so that the conclusion is: what more do the readers need? What could they possibly find in this mystical type of Judaism this Qumran or Essene type or apocalyptical type of Judaism. What could they find, or possibly find in that that could supplement or provide an alternative to what they have in Christ? So after this exalted hymn of Christ in the rest of the letter, Paul is going to begin to argue more detail based on that. Why is it that the reader should be aware of and not give in to this Judaism, this false teaching? Why is it they should simply trust in their union with Jesus Christ as providing everything they need? The rest of the letter will argue that, and we’ll look at that on Friday.

Transcribed by Elizabeth Owens
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt