

FOCUSED ON THE LORD:
THE COLOSSIAN HOUSEHOLD CODE AS RELIGION

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Introduction

The Colossian household code is found in 3:18–4:1. The approach to this code primarily has started with the family in the foreground. Such an approach tends to neglect a primary feature of society in Colossae: religion. As a result the philosophical problem, also associated with religion, is also ignored. Religion plays a large factor into understanding the household code directed to the Colossians.

Religious Background

Cities active with a plethora of religions composed the region of the Lycus Valley. Brown and Dunn identify the three primary cities in the valley: Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae.¹ Of the three, Colossae went from a flourishing city to one of insignificance in the first century CE.² Despite its diminished importance, Colossae was still a city full of religious life. This can be implied from the thriving religious activity of the surrounding cities, the surrounding area, and from the Colossian letter itself.

Religion in the Lycus Valley

Under the Roman Empire, Laodicea was the most prominent city, and Hierapolis was a tourist spot.³ The commercial status of the former is well known. In addition to its healing

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 599; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 20.

² Brown, 599; Dunn, 20.

³ Dunn, 20. Dunn notes that the attraction was a “hot mineral spring,” which, according to Brown, was associated with healing. See Brown, 599.

springs, Hierapolis was home to Apollo worship.⁴ Dunn postulates with good reason that in the valley, “the cities were in such close proximity that they must have shared several features in common . . . , and there must have been daily movement among them.”⁵ It is not a stretch to think that one of the shared features was religion. Furthermore, beyond the boundaries of the Lycus lay Ephesus, the center of Diana’s temple (Acts 19:35), and it is likely that many of the valley’s residents were from Ephesus.

With the religious background of the Colossian residents still in mind, a Jewish presence in the Lycus lends support to the continued practice of Judaism there. Drawing from historical records, Dunn estimates the Jewish population in Colossae to be a few thousand.⁶ Brown supposes “more than 10,000” for the Jewish presence in Laodicea.⁷ There, and in Hierapolis, the Jews are allowed legal freedom to maintain practice of their religion.⁸ The Jews’ concern to continue on in their particular religion implies contemporary religions in the area and a desire to stand out against them.

Religious Elements in Colossians

The letter of Colossians appears to address at least a few religious elements, possibly toward individual religions, but more likely toward a “syncretistic religious system.”⁹ A few

⁴ Brown, 599.

⁵ Dunn, 21.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Brown, 599.

⁸ Dunn, 30.

⁹ Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, New International Biblical Commentary 10 (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 4.

commentators connect this system with the “philosophy” in 2:8. What is meant by this term, however, is unclear. Eduard Löhse believes this philosophy is probably “the secret information of the divine ground of being, the proper perception of the ‘elements of the universe’ . . . , and the way which must be taken in order to be in proper relation to them”; he further proposes that the Colossians believed they could merge the philosophy and their faith.¹⁰

In the recent decades, Dunn has challenged Löhse’s portrayal of the Colossian philosophy, faulting Löhse for inaccurately reconstructing the philosophy by disregarding Pauline and Jewish elements found in the letter.¹¹ Against Löhse’s hypothesis, Dunn argues for a Jewish “apologetic [,originating from at least one synagogue,] promoting itself as a credible philosophy more than capable of dealing with whatever heavenly powers might be thought to threaten human existence.”¹² While Dunn’s assessment of the philosophy is probably more accurate, what Dunn has to say here does not directly address whether the Colossians were of the type to amalgamate their beliefs.

C. D. F. Moule sees syncretism is quite probable. The Colossian error has evidence of both Jewish and non-Jewish elements and is similar to Essenism.¹³

Arthur G. Patzia identifies four major matters: astrology, Gnosticism, mystery religions, and Hellenistic Judaism.¹⁴ Much of Colossians 2 falls under the first two categories, the second

¹⁰ Eduard Löhse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971), 2–3. For a broader summary of Löhse’s position, see Dunn, 27.

¹¹ Dunn, 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 35. The entire argument is found in Dunn, 29–35.

¹³ C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 31. Moule and Dunn both refer to Lightfoot for this connection but end with different conclusions.

¹⁴ Patzia, 4–9.

addressed primarily in 2:16-23.¹⁵ Patzia connects some of the more mystery-laden verses to the mystery religions.¹⁶ As noted above, it is possible to read the Colossian philosophy as primarily a Jewish philosophy. Patzia sees the philosophy comprised of Hellenistic Judaism, but does not see the Jewish element as central.¹⁷

Whether the Colossian philosophy was a syncretistic system or a Jewish one, we may plausibly conclude that the city of Colossae was a city for which religion played a tremendous role, evidenced by the religious groups and activity within Colossae and the surrounding areas, and by the issues addressed in the letter.

Codes in Greco-Roman Society

In the first century, codes like the one found in Colossians 3:18–4:1 were meant to govern various aspects of life in Roman society.¹⁸ There are a couple of likely choices from which these may have been derived: Stoic philosophy and Hellenists. The Stoics had maxims that sought to explain “the duties of the philosopher toward the gods, parents, brethren, the fatherland and foreigners.”¹⁹ Hellenistic rulers devised law codes to provide direction for society.²⁰ Hellenistic Judaism, explains Löhse, adapted the moral framework of these codes and

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6–7.

¹⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹⁹ Angela Standhartinger, “The Origin and Intention of the Household Code in the Letter to the Colossians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 79 (September 2000): 119.

²⁰ Ibid.: 119–122. See, in particular, the codes on pp. 120–121.

taught them in the synagogues.²¹ The protocol of all the groups mentioned here did not fail to address household relationships.

An examination of these codes shows similarities between them: they deal with wife-husband, children-parent, and citizen-government relationships. The undergirding reason for doing well in these relationships is to please the gods. In other words, the motivation behind these codes was a religious one.

Having established the religious lifestyle of the Colossian inhabitants, and the religious stimulus for one living in the Roman Empire to establish acceptable familial and societal relationships, we now move to the household code in Colossians.

Colossians Household Code

Commentators such as Brown, Löhse, and Dunn see significance with the phrase “in the Lord,” which occurs in verses 18 and 20; similar references occur throughout the passage: “fearing the Lord” (v. 22), “for the Lord” (v. 23). Brown and Löhse each describe these phrases as the Colossians’ “new motivation” to relate to each other.²² Brown adds to this set the phrase “Master in heaven,”²³ and Löhse sees the exhortation to “serve the Lord Christ” (3:24) as part of this new motivation.²⁴ Dunn believes these references guide the code overall.²⁵

The continuous and prevalent mentions of the Lord indicate the centrality of Christ in the Christian’s life, even at the household level. Recalling that the thrust of the Greco-Roman codes

²¹ Löhse, 155.

²² Brown, 608; Löhse, 156.

²³ Brown, 608.

²⁴ Löhse, 156.

²⁵ Dunn, 244.

in general was to please the gods, this new motivation to live together in the Lord and by fearing him indicates that the Lord is supreme, an idea not unfamiliar to Hellenistic Judaism: “Instead of worship of the gods, stress was now laid on obedience to the one god, whose commandments had to be kept.”²⁶ New to both those coming from the pagan religions and those from Judaism was the fact that Christ is the Lord.

In recent years, the Colossian code has been understood in terms of the wisdom theme. Dunn pointed this out in his critique of Löhse.²⁷ Andrew T. Lincoln wrote an article several years later on this theme, seeing the code as a directive to live wisely. He takes this from Paul’s prayer for the Colossian church to be filled with wisdom (1:9), and from the references to Christ as wisdom (2:2–3).²⁸ He further connects wisdom to wise living, fear of the Lord, its heavenly origin and its earthly ethic, and thanksgiving.²⁹ Standhartinger takes issue with this third point, but offers a seemingly weak argument against the Lincoln’s reading that the code exhorts the church’s members to exert care in its earthly relationships.³⁰ Rather, Lincoln’s insights are quite plausible, given that immediately preceding the household code is an admonition for the Colossian members to teach each other in all wisdom (3:16). One can hardly move past this verse without coming to the code and connecting the two. The wisdom motif would have been noticeable to the religious, particularly to those familiar with Hellenistic Judaism.

²⁶ Löhse, 155.

²⁷ Dunn, 28.

²⁸ Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Household Code and Wisdom Mode of Colossians,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 74 (June 1999): 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 104–109.

³⁰ Standhartinger: 124.

The Code for the Modern Reader

Many have interpreted the words and their order in Colossians 3:18–4:1 as timeless and absolute. Is this really the case? The three things we have established concerning the household code are its religious foundation, its focus upon Christ, and its being an expression of a practical way to live out wisdom. We must now consider, particularly who is addressed and what is said to them. It is hoped that by delving into the text at this point, the application will be self-evident. The conclusion will serve to make the application found here more explicit.

Six groups (here paired together as three) are addressed in the household code: wives-husbands, children-fathers, and slaves-masters. They are all addressed in the imperative. The command to the first of each pair is always qualified with “in/for the Lord.” This phrase probably points back to 3:17, where the admonition is to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (NRSV). Some possible reasons that these groups are addressed in this way are because (1) the prominence of priestesses in pagan temples might be seen as a signal for Christian women who now are priestesses unto the Lord to dominate their husbands, (2) children might feel that their place in this new Jesus religion would give them permission to dishonor their parents, and (3) slaves probably felt they should be freed now that they are aligned to Christ.³¹

Those who constitute the second of the two pairs are not addressed as doing something “in/for the Lord.” Perhaps it is implied here that they are to stand in the stead of the Lord—this would require that their actions be representative of Christ. Husbands are to love their wives (3:19); the word translated “love” is the same use of Christ’s love for the church. Fathers are told to not provoke their children (3:21); apparently the fathers were habitually provoking their

³¹ Patzia, 91. This footnote goes with point (3) only.

children—the negative used and the tense of the word translated “provoke” indicates the halting of an action in progress. Masters are told to treat their slaves properly (4:1), and are reminded by way of implication that the standard is the Lord as the impartial judge.³²

Many often reference this last pair as support that the code is not applicable to modern readers today: we generally do not have the kind of slavery that existed then. It is interesting, then, that the author does not seek to do away with slavery in that time. As Patzia noted, “Christianity was not a revolutionary movement bent on destroying the existing world order.”³³ Christians were to work within the existing order but live in and exemplify the virtues of Christ.

Conclusion

The household code in Colossians was formed largely in the social context of the time. Underneath the daily activities subtly lay foundation of religion. Ethical life was guided by the desire to satisfy the gods. The Colossian Christians were now directed to please the Lord alone. Their relationships were to be oriented around living for the Lord and living like the Lord

The twenty-first century Christian lives in a world different from that of the Colossians. Yet, the principles are still the same: one’s life must be oriented around the Lord, and our relationships must demonstrate Christ to each other. Although the society is less patriarchal than it was then, the husbands and wives must express the love of Christ for one another. In a time where it seems children are more prone to disrespect parents, the household code encourages children and parents toward love and respect in Christ. The orientation of the Christian’s life around Christ compels us toward love for God and love neighbor.

³² Dunn, 258–260.

³³ Patzia, 91.

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