

Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Translation of Die Briefe an Die Kolosser Und an Philemon., Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 127ff.¹

The Teaching of the "Philosophy"¹¹³

From the short quotations and catchwords which the author of Col cites in the context of his instruction to the community, the main features of the teaching which threatened to engulf the community can be reconstructed with some certainty. The "philosophy," which claimed to be based on venerable tradition (2:8*), was supposed to impart true knowledge and insight.¹¹⁴ Such knowledge is concerned with the "elements of the universe" (2:8*, 20*) which are conceived as angelic powers (2:18*) and cosmic principalities (2:10*, 15*). One has to establish the right relationship to them through obedient worship; only thus is it

¹Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon.*, Translation of Die Briefe an Die Kolosser Und an Philemon., Hermeneia--a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 127.

¹¹³ Cf. the excursus or introductions of the commentaries, especially Lightfoot, 71–111; Dibelius-Greeven, 38–40. Cf. further Martin Dibelius, "Die Isisweihe bei Apulejus und verwandte Initiations-Riten," SAH 1917 = *Aufsätze* 2, pp. 30–79; Percy, *Probleme*, 137–78; Günther Bornkamm, "Die Häresie des Kolosserbriefes," *ThLZ* 73 (1948): 11–20 = *Aufsätze* 1, pp. 139–56; Werner Bieder, *Die kolossische Irrlehre und die Kirche von heute*, Theologische Studien 33 (Zürich: 1952); Stanislas Lyonnet, "L'étude du milieu littéraire et l'exégèse du Nouveau Testament. § 4. Les adversaires de Paul à Colosses," *Biblica* 37 (1956): 27–38; Stanislas Lyonnet, "St. Paul et le gnosticisme: la lettre aux Colossiens" in: *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. Ugo Bianchi (Leiden: 1967), 538–61; Hegermann, *Schöpfungsmittler*, 158–99; Josef Gewiss, "Die apologetische Methode des Apostels Paulus im Kampf gegen die Irrlehre in Kolossä;," *Bibel und Leben* 3 (1962): 258–70; Hans-Martin Schenke, "Der Widerstreit gnostischer und kirchlicher Christologie im Spiegel des Kolosserbriefes," *ZThK* 61 (1964): 391–403; Werner Foerster, "Die Irrlehrer des Kolosserbriefes," in *Studia Biblica et Semitica, Festschrift für Th. Vriezen* (Wageningen: 1966), 71–80.

*⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. [Colossians 2:8](#) (NRSV)

¹¹⁴ Cf. the terms σοφία (wisdom 1:9*, 28*; 2:3*, 23*; 3:16*; 4:5*), σύνεσις (insight 1:9*; 2:2*), γνῶσις (knowledge 2:3*), ἐπίγνωσις / ἐπιγινώσκειν (knowledge/to know 1:6*, 9*, 10*; 2:2*; 3:10*).

*²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, [Colossians 2:20](#) (NRSV)

*¹⁸ Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, [Colossians 2:18](#) (NRSV)

*¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. [Colossians 2:10](#) (NRSV)

possible to gain entry to the “pleroma” (2:9*) and participate in the divine fulness (2:10*). The relationship between the “elements of the universe” and the “fulness” is not entirely clear; the powers could be understood as representatives of the divine fulness or as dangerous principalities who block the way to the “fulness” and allow free passage only after they have received due reverence.¹¹⁵ In any case, man can be suffused with the divine “fulness” only after he proves himself subservient to the angels and powers in the “worship of angels.” He voluntarily declares himself prepared (self-chosen worship 2:23*) to “be ready to serve” (2:23*) as he pays homage to the angels in cultic worship (2:18*) and as he promises to obey what they enjoin upon him. Through his asceticism he withdraws from the world (putting off the body of flesh 2:11*; severe treatment of the body 2:23*), observes the special sacred days and seasons (2:16*), and adheres to the regulations which prohibit him from either tasting or touching certain foods and beverages (2:16*, 21*). Thus he orders his whole life according to the laws, which as the ordering principles of the macrocosm also prescribe the regulations that obtain in the microcosm of human life; he submits himself to them in humble readiness to serve.

This teaching, in which knowledge and legal observance are closely joined, is clearly syncretistic. Since the cosmic powers control the fate of men, they are worshipped. Above the All is enthroned the one deity who, as the “fulness,” contains the fulness in himself. Insofar as the “philosophy” demands in strict legal terms the observance of special days and the keeping of food prohibitions, an important contribution

*¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. [Colossians 2:15](#) (NRSV)

*⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, [Colossians 2:9](#) (NRSV)

¹¹⁵ Cf. Ernst Käsemann, *RGK*³ 3, col. 1728: “Any conclusion drawn about the viewpoints of the heretics must remain fragmentary. Were the powers worshipped because they were considered dangerous or because they represented the heavenly fulness?” Schenke, “Widerstreit,” 392–99 tries to demonstrate that the worship of the angels was a cult of hostile powers, since he wants to find a basis for his view that the “philosophy” was Gnostic in character. Nevertheless the possibility that the “elements of the universe” were considered representatives of the “fulness” cannot be excluded. Thus, Bornkamm (*Aufsätze* 1, 140, cf. p. 146) thinks that the “elements” were taken to be divine principalities: “Apparently the heretical teaching held that in the ‘elements of the universe’ the ‘fulness’ of the deity dwells. This is clear from the manifestly polemical and antithetically formulated clause in Col. 2:9*: ‘because in him dwells the entire fulness of deity bodily’ (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς cf. 1:19*).” In no way is it possible to follow Schenke (“Widerstreit,” 397f) in his identification of the “elements of the universe” with the archons of Gnosticism.

*²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence. [Colossians 2:23](#) (NRSV)

*¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; [Colossians 2:11](#) (NRSV)

*¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. [Colossians 2:16](#) (NRSV)

*²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? [Colossians 2:21](#) (NRSV)

to this philosophy has also been made by the Jewish tradition.¹¹⁶ The “regulations,” however, were not thought of as a sign of allegiance to the God of Israel, who had chosen his people from among all other nations as the community of his covenant. Rather they are thought of as expressing man’s submission to the “angels,” “powers,” and “principalities,” under whose control man has come through origin and fate. Consequently the adherents of the “philosophy” cannot be considered Essenes,¹¹⁷ members of the Qumran community¹¹⁸ or proponents of heretical Jewish propaganda.¹¹⁹ Rather their teaching is one made up of

¹¹⁶ Since in Asia Minor and especially in the cities of the Lycus Valley there was a strong Jewish settlement (cf. above p. 9), we must assume that the Jewish element in the syncretistic “philosophy” came from this source. The Magical Papyri, for their part, give evidence of the extent to which the syncretism of late antiquity adopted Jewish names and terms. Also in the Christian Gnosticism of the second century, heterodox Jewish concepts became effective on a large scale. Qumran texts that have recently come to light show that syncretistic influences did not stop at the boundaries of Judaism (cf. above p. 102, n. 58 on 2:11*). The fragment Q 4 QCry indicates that in the Qumran community the view existed that the constellation in whose sign a man was born determined his physical appearance—strong or frail—and what portion of light and darkness he would possess. Cf. John M. Allegro, “An Astrological Cryptic Document from Qumran,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 9 (1964): 291–94; Jean Starcky, “Un texte messianique araméen de la Grotte 4 de Qumrân,” in: *Mémorial du Cinquantenaire de l’École des langues orientales anciennes de l’Institut Catholique de Paris* (Paris: 1964), 51–66; Jean Carmignac, “Les Horoscopes de Qumrân,” *Revue de Qumrân* 5 (1965–66): 199–217; J. Licht, “שוקיים סימן לבחירה (צד)

(חדש בתורתם של אנשי כת מדבר יהודה) *Tarbiz* 35 (1965–66): 18–26; Mathias Delcor, “Recherches sur un horoscope en langue hébraïque provenant de Qumrân,” *Revue de Qumrân* 5 (1965–66): 521–42. Thus, some circles of Judaism held that the course of a man’s life was already predetermined by the stars before birth. On the problem of syncretism in Judaism cf. further the important reference found in Morton Smith, “Goodenough’s Jewish Symbols in Retrospect,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 60f: “Margalioth’s recovery of ‘Sefer ha Razim’ (The Hebrew edition is now in the press in Israel), however, has given us a Hebrew text, written by a man steeped in the OT and the poetry of the synagogue, which yet contains prescriptions for making images and prayers to pagan deities, including Helios, who are conceived as gods subordinate to Yahweh.” Cf. Mordecai Margalioth, *Sefer ha Razim* (Jerusalem: 1966).

¹¹⁷ In his learned treatise Lightfoot referred to the Essenes, but he did not in fact claim that there must have been a direct dependence: “But indeed throughout this investigation, when I speak of the Judaism in the Colossian Church as Essene, I do not assume a precise identity of origin, but only an essential affinity of type, with the Essenes of the mother country” (p. 92f).

¹¹⁸ Ever since the Qumran texts were discovered, a connection between the teaching of the Qumran community and the “philosophy” of Col has been frequently suggested. Beside the articles of W. D. Davies and Pierre Benoit cited above (p. 115, n. 11) cf. A. R. C. Leaney, “‘Conformed to the Image of His Son’ (Rom. 8:29*),” *NTS* 10 (1963–64): 478: “It is striking that the tradition of men, which is according to this—worldly elements, is coupled with ‘philosophy’ (II.8) and the elements of it are such as found at Qumran (II.16–18).” Lyonnet, “Colossiens”, 429–32 also reckons with strong Jewish influences, possibly

diverse elements which, because of the emphasis placed on knowledge as well as its world-negating character, can be termed Gnostic or, if a more cautious designation is desired, pre-Gnostic.¹²⁰ A Gnostic understanding of the world is also exhibited in the desire to be filled with divine power as well as in the boastful arrogance of those who think they have experienced such fulness and possess wisdom and knowledge.

The cult, as it was performed by the adherents of the “philosophy,” probably took the form of a mystery.¹²¹ This is not only indicated in the expressions which Col quotes: “as he had visions of them during the mystery rites” (2:18*), “self-chosen cult” and “honor” (2:23*), but through the reference to “circumcision.” This seemed to point to a decisive act of initiation (2:11*) through which a person was accepted into the community of those who in right wisdom and knowledge served the “elements of the universe.” The particulars of this act—whether circumcision was actually performed or whether the act of initiation only bore this Jewish name which was understood figuratively as the “putting off the body of flesh,” i.e.

from Qumran. Cf. further S. Zedda, “Il carattere gnostico e giudaico dell’ errore colossese nella luce dei manoscritti del Mar Morto,” *Rivista Biblica* 5 (1957): 31–56; Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Sectarian Parallels: Qumran and Colossae,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (1964): 141–52; Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran and Modern Biblical Studies* (New York: Doubleday & Co. Anchor Books, rev. ed. 1961), 201–02. Against such suppositions, however, one must maintain that at Qumran it is exclusively the rigoristic demand of undivided obedience to the law which determines the strict interpretation and observance of the purificatory and food laws as well as the scrupulous keeping of the calendar and of the days of rest laid down in the Torah. The elements of the “philosophy” taken from Jewish tradition are not impregnated with the idea of radical legalism as is the case at Qumran, but they are subordinated to the service of the elements of the universe. Cf. Lohse, “Christologie und Ethik,” 157f; Braun, *Qumran* 1, pp. 228–32.

¹¹⁹ Hegermann, *Schöpfungsmittler*, 162, thinks “it is a question of heretical Jewish propaganda.” That is hardly the case. The concept “law” (νόμος) is absent in Col, and the polemic against the “philosophy” takes a completely different tack than that against the Judaizers in Gal.

¹²⁰ Cf. Dibelius-Greeven, 38–40, and Bornkamm, *Aufsätze* 1 p. 147: “Col leaves no doubt that in the Colossian heresy we are confronted with a variant of Jewish Gnosticism.” Cf. also Leonard Goppelt, “Christentum und Judentum im ersten und zweiten Jahrhundert,” *Beiträge zur Förderung christlicher Theologie* 2, 55 (Gütersloh: 1954), 137–40: “Gnostic Judaism” (p. 140). Percy, *Probleme*, 176–78, however, denies that there is a connection between the Colossian false teaching and Gnosticism. Yet he admits: “On the other hand, however, the Colossian false teaching clearly has this in common with Gnosticism, that it represents a kind of syncretism of Christianity and non-Christian late—Hellenistic piety of a speculative bent” (p. 178). Likewise, Hegermann, *Schöpfungsmittler*, 163, wants to doubt the Gnostic character of the “philosophy.” Nevertheless, he admits that pre-Gnostic influences could be at work. Stanislas Lyonnet, “St. Paul et le gnosticisme: la lettre aux Colossiens” in *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo*, ed. U. Bianchi (Leiden: 1967), 538–61 also emphasizes that the term Gnosticism must be used with great caution.

¹²¹ Cf. Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, authorized trans. (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1911), 205: “All the Oriental religions assumed the form of mysteries.”

ascetic withdrawal from the world—can no longer be discerned. In any case, one sought to make the sacramental initiation more attractive and more appealing by dressing it up in a Jewish term.¹²²

Since it was the commonly accepted opinion of the time that one could undergo several initiations and be a member of different mystery—cult communities at the same time, those who were attracted to this teaching¹²³ probably assumed that it was advisable also for a Christian not to refuse the knowledge offered and not to disdain the perfecting power that this “philosophy” made available. Of course, while adhering to this philosophy, these Christians did not want to surrender their faith in Christ. One probably desired rather to bolster it with additional protection. For the forgiveness of sins conferred in baptism did not seem to provide adequate security against the cosmic principalities and the powers of fate. To be sure, the polemic of Col does not give a clear picture of how these Christians tried to define the relationship of the powers and principalities to Christ. Undoubtedly, however, they endeavored to find a place for Christ through a synthesis that accorded with the syncretistic character of the “philosophy”—perhaps this way: only through submissive worship of the angelic powers is the way opened to Christ who is enthroned beyond the powers and principalities.¹²⁴ Whoever pays homage to them and observes their laws and prescriptions is protected from the pernicious effects produced by the “powers” and “principalities.” In this way alone is entry to the divine fulness assured. The knowledge about the synthesis between faith in Chr-

¹²² Cf. Bornkamm, *Aufsätze* 1 pp. 145–47; Lohse, “Christologie und Ethik,” 158. On the other hand, Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums* 3 (Stuttgart and Berlin: 1923 = Darmstadt: 1962), 488f has put forward a daring but equally unfounded proposal about the origin of the “Judaistic movement in Colossae;” the evangelist Philip, mentioned in Acts, and his daughters settled in Hierapolis—as Papias of Hierapolis says (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3, 39, 9). Thus “the supposition can be made that his appearance in Hierapolis, which then also included the neighboring cities, is connected with the Judaistic movement in Colossae; the appeal to revelations corresponds quite well with the prophetic abilities of his daughters.”

¹²³ Following Dibelius-Greeven, 38, one should distinguish “between those leaders of the ‘philosophy’ (2:8*), i.e. the cult of the elements, who are not members of the Christian community at Colossae and those members of the Christian community who were won over by their propaganda.” Cf. also Dibelius, *Aufsätze* 2, p. 56; further Foerster, “Irrlehrer,” 72f who maintains, however, that the opponents were Jews who espoused tendencies related to those of the Essenes and “are found outside of the community” (p. 72).

¹²⁴ Cf. Bornkamm, *Aufsätze* 1 p. 140f, who maintains: “The mythological and Christological expression of this teaching must have been that the opponents understood the ‘elements of the universe’ themselves as the ‘body’ of Christ or as its members, and Christ as the embodiment of the elements of the universe” (p. 141). Schenke, “Widerstreit,” 398, judges the case this way: “The Gnostics attacked in Col, of course, also worshipped Christ, and indeed as Savior. This is not said in the letter, because it was entirely taken for granted.” The text, however, lends no secure support to such an unequivocal statement. Only cautious conjectures can be made about the kind of faith in Christ that the adherents of the “philosophy” held.

ist and worship of the elements of the universe, thus achieved, filled adherents with the feeling that they had attained the true insight and were superior to other Christians.¹²⁵

To this community into which the “philosophy” was trying to make inroads, the author of Colossians states with unequivocal clarity that a synthesis of this kind is absolutely impossible. Whoever joins the “philosophy” turns his back on Christ. One must make a decision: either “according to the elements of the universe” or “according to Christ” (2:8*). Whoever declares his humble readiness to bow before the elements of the universe has thereby separated himself from the Head, who alone gives life and power to the body (2:11*)—no matter how much such an adherent of the “philosophy” thinks that his newly acquired knowledge makes him superior to the others, and no matter how much he proudly boasts and haughtily passes judgment on others. In truth, what fills him and makes him proud is nothing other than “his earthly mind” (2:18*). What he considers fulness will soon be revealed to be emptiness and inner shallowness. He is a slave to the shadows, which long since had to give way, for the light which floods everything dispersed them.

In Christ and nowhere else dwells “the entire fulness of deity bodily” (2:9*). In him alone is fulness, for he is the “head of all powers and principalities” (2:10*). He presently exercises his lordship as head of his body, the “church.” Only by belonging to the church as the body of Christ can a person adhere to Christ the head. He who has been baptized into him, he who has died and has been raised with him (2:11f*, 20*), has thereby also died once and for all to the “elements of the universe.” He is no longer petrified by the powers of fate, and the elements of the universe have lost all possible claims on him (2:20f*). He is freed from the compulsion to view the things of the world in anxious awe and regulate his use of them according to certain taboos. For food and drink are created to be used and should be gratefully accepted as God’s good gifts.

The answer to the “philosophy’s” dualistic understanding of the world is not stated in terms of a Christian metaphysic. Rather, the author of Col confronts the “philosophy” with an antithesis that is historically grounded: the crucified, resurrected and exalted Christ is the Lord, and beside him there can be no other. While the “philosophy” conveys its esoteric tradition only to initiates and to those who possess understanding, the proclamation of the Lord is directed to the entire world and to everyone. Christ is preached among the nations. On his cross the certificate of indebtedness that stood against us was destroyed (2:14*). God has forgiven us all our sins (2:13*). To have forgiveness of sins, however, also means to be free from the powers and principalities, who on the cross of Christ were subjected to ridicule

¹²⁵ Sectarian groups, who like the “philosophy” of Col advocated the worship of a highest divine being and service determined by legal regulations, still existed in Asia Minor in the fourth Christian century. On the sect of the so-called Hypsistarians, cf. Bornkamm, *Aufsätze* 1 pp. 153–56.

*¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. [Colossians 2:11–12](#) (NRSV)

*²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹ “Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? [Colossians 2:20–21](#) (NRSV)

*¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. [Colossians 2:14](#) (NRSV)

*¹³ And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, [Colossians 2:13](#) (NRSV)

and shame (2:15*). Whoever is baptized into Christ is placed under the dominion of the beloved Son of God, who as Lord holds in his hands authority over the whole world as well as the salvation of those who belong to him—freed for the new life of obedience that confesses his rule. This is what matters now: “If, therefore, you have been raised with Christ, seek that which is above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Consider that which is above, not that which is on earth” (Εἰ οὖν συνεγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστὶν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθήμενος· τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς 3:1f).¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Cf. Bultmann, *Theology* par. 59, 2 = Vol. 2, p. 205.