

The False Teaching in Colossae¹

Paul does not present a systematic response to the false teaching permeating Colossae at the time. We can identify some of the false teaching by noting the responses Paul gave to the heretics.

- Paul emphasized the supremacy of Christ (1:15–19), and this emphasis suggests that the false teachers undercut the high Christology Paul advocated. They even may have spoken warmly and appreciatively of Christ, but to them he could have been only a created being. For Paul, all the divine fullness dwelt in Christ.
- Paul warned against being deceived by human philosophy (2:8)—empty human speculations without divine revelation. This error may have been an early development of Gnosticism, which became fully developed in the second century.
- Some effort was made to impose Jewish practices on the Colossian believers. Paul mentioned circumcision (2:11), dietary regulations and religious festivals (2:16), and human tradition (2:8).
- Asceticism was a characteristic of the heresy (2:21–23). This asceticism imposed restrictions on the body and demanded abstinence from certain objects or practices.
- The false teaching involved the worship of angels (2:18). Perhaps this feature described the worship of angels as intermediaries between the highest God and the physical universe. This development of an angelic hierarchy was a characteristic of later Gnosticism.

The content of the heresy was eclectic. It contained a mixture of Jewish legalism, Greek speculation, and the mysticism of the Orient. Some of the elements seen in Colossae emerge fully developed in later Gnosticism or in the Oriental mystery religions. However, we must avoid identification of this heresy as Gnosticism, for the Jewish features of the false teaching do not resemble Gnosticism. The location of Colossae near an important trade route between East and West may have allowed the city to become a collecting point for ideas from several different cultures.

¹Thomas D. Lea and David Alan Black, *The New Testament : Its Background and Message*, 2nd ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 452.

III. THE HERESY²

The description of the false teaching as a heresy has been challenged on the grounds that Paul was preparing his readers to resist the pressures of contemporary society without having any particular line of teaching in mind.² But it is more likely that the apostle is dealing with a specific situation and it will be convenient to refer to this situation as a heresy. It is never easy to reconstruct the precise tenets of a heresy when the only data available are indirect allusions in the course of a positive statement of doctrine intended to counteract it. Yet such is the situation in the Colossian epistle. It is impossible to determine whether or not this heresy had any coherent form, and we must content ourselves with extracting those particular emphases with which Paul deals and which he immediately recognized as constituting a definite danger to the Christian church.¹

a. Its Christology

It is clear enough that the false teaching was in some way detracting from the Person of Christ, for Paul lays great stress upon his preeminence (1:15–19).² This was a tendency which became fully developed in the Gnosticism³ of the second century.

²Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, Series Taken from Jacket., 4th rev. ed., The master reference collection (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996, c1990), 565.

²Cf. M. D. Hooker, 'Were there False Teachers in Colossae?' in *Christ and Spirit* (ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley, 1973), pp. 315–331. N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (1986) p. 27, inclines to the same opinion. R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (1974) pp. 9–19, entitled his discussion 'The Colossian Philosophy.'

¹For a general discussion of the heresy, cf. G. Bornkamm, *Das ende des Gesetzes* (²1958), pp. 139 ff. (= *ThLZ* 73 (1948), cols. 11 ff.).

²F. O. Francis (StTh 16 (1962), pp. 109–134) denies that the Colossian errorists did not accept the pre-eminence of Christ. He thinks on the contrary that what they lacked was perception of the reconciliation and fullness which was theirs in Christ. Francis suggests that the major obstacle was a failure to apply this to themselves. This consideration may be worth pursuing.

³In discussions on New Testament heresies it is important to define as precisely as possible the meaning attached to the word Gnosticism. Without excluding the possibility of much earlier roots, the term itself is restricted to the somewhat amorphous systems of the second century which Irenaeus and Hippolytus are concerned to combat (cf. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem*, 1958, pp. 64–68). Earlier tendencies towards Gnosticism of this systematic type are labelled 'pre-Gnostic' or 'incipient Gnosticism'. It is better, therefore, not to speak of a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism (although its existence is not improbable) since as Wilson points out (p. 261), such a Gnosticism would be more a 'tendency of accommodation' than a system. In its widest sense, Gnosticism was an atmosphere breathed in by many other systems than those which affected the Christian church, including most contemporary thought, Hermetica, philosophy and mysteries. But such a wide use of the term can lead only to confusion in New Testament studies. Cf. also R. P. Casey, 'Gnosis, Gnosticism and the New Testament', in *The Background*

b. Its philosophic character

The apostle specifically warns against ‘philosophy and vain deceit’(2:8), which suggests a tendency on the part of some of the Colossians to be attracted by it. It cannot be determined with any certainty in what sense Paul uses the word ‘philosophy’, but it is generally supposed to point to Hellenistic elements. It is possible that the use of the terms πλήρωμα (‘fullness’) in 1:19, γνώσις (‘knowledge’) in 2:3, and ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος (‘neglect of the body’) in 2:23 may also be drawn from the same general background. All these terms were in use in second-century Gnosticism.¹

c. Its Jewish environment

Many such features are reflected in the epistle. The most conclusive is the reference to circumcision (2:11, 3:11), which Paul finds it necessary to put into its true Christian perspective. The warning against human ‘tradition’ (2:8) would be an apt reference to the familiar Jewish tendency to superimpose the traditions of the elders upon the ancient law, but it could also be understood of Gentile tradition in view of its close association here with philosophy.² The ritual tendencies found in 2:16, where the readers are urged not to allow anyone to judge them in respect of meat or drink, or feasts or new moons or sabbaths, are predominantly, if not exclusively, Jewish.³

of the New Testament and its Eschatology (ed. Davies and Daube, 1956), pp. 52–80. Casey concludes that ‘The New Testament requires no explanation, either as a whole or in any of its parts, in terms of an hypothetical primitive Gnosticism’ (p. 80).

¹ For the view that behind the presentation of Christ in Colossians is the Greek conception of Cosmos, cf. R. S. Barbour, *SJT* 20 (1967), pp. 257–271. The Gnostic solution to the problem of man’s relation to the Cosmos was a God-man. But Paul presents Christ as ruler of the Cosmos, who by means of his death and resurrection has gained the victory on earth. T. H. Olbricht, ‘Colossians and Gnostic Theology’, *Restor Quart* 14 (1971) pp. 65–79, holds that the opponents’ theology is one in which history has little importance. Paul is said to develop cosmic theology because of its relevance to his opponents.

² F. F. Bruce, (*Colossians, NLC*, 1958, p. 231 n.) agrees it might be Jewish or Gentile. C. F. D. Moule (*Colossians and Philemon*, p. 60) inclines to see here the tenets of Palestinian Judaism, but he cites 1 Pet. 1:18 as possibly a reference to pagan traditions. C. A. Evans, ‘The Colossian Mystics’, *Biblica* 63 (1982), pp. 188–205, interprets the errors against the background of Jewish mysticism. F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, pp. 17–26, discusses the ‘heresy’ and mentions Calvin’s view that the proponents were Jews embracing mysticism of the kind contained in Dionysius’ Celestial Hierarchy, with its nine orders of the angels. Cf. J. Lahmemann, *Der Kolosserbrief, Komposition, Situation und Argumentation* (1971), pp. 63–107, for a discussion of syncretistic elements in the Colossian heresy.

³ E. F. Scott, *Varieties of New Testament Religion* (1946), pp. 145–146, does not appear to give enough weight to these Jewish indications when he describes the heresy as ‘essentially pagan’, although a strong pagan influence was undoubtedly present.

d. Its angel worship

In Jewish thought angels performed a mediatorial function in relation to the law although there is no evidence at this stage of any tendency to worship them. It is at least possible that some teacher with a Jewish background may have developed the mediatorial agencies into objects of worship. Such a process is not difficult to imagine, although it would have been strongly resisted by orthodox Jews with their tenacious monotheism. Nevertheless belief in an angelic hierarchy is particularly marked in *1 Enoch* and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. It was the direct result of Jewish transcendental theology, which demanded an efficient mediatorial system to bridge the ever-widening gap between man and God.¹ On the other hand it has been suggested that Colossians 2:18 does not relate to worship of angels, but to God.² Perhaps the false teachers did not keep these wholly distinct.³

e. The elements of the world

These elements or στοιχεῖα may be understood in two ways, either as elementary spirits or as elementary teaching. Although there is no earlier warrant for the former meaning many commentators consider it to be the more probable in the context of the Colossian epistle. In this case it would be a reference to the powerful spirit world which was at that time widely believed to control the affairs of the natural world. If it means 'elementary teaching' it would presumably describe a purely materialistic doctrine concerned only with this world.⁴ It is, however, possible to see good sense in both meanings.⁵

f. Exclusivism

It is possible that there was a tendency towards exclusivism among the false teachers since Paul seems to be at pains to express the allinclusiveness of Christianity (*cf.* Col. 1:20, 28; 3:11). It is significant that in 3:28 Paul states his aim to be to present every man as perfect, since 'perfection' was regarded in most Gnostic circles as the privilege of the few.

¹ For the view that angelology was the predominating feature in the Colossian heresy, *cf.* Maurice Jones, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians* (1923), pp. 27–47.

² F. O. Francis *StTh* 16 (1962), pp. 109–134. F. F. Bruce (*BJRL* 48 (1966), pp. 268–285) mentions a Nag Hammadi text which shows that some Jewish sects believed that God created the world through angels.

³ *Cf.* A. F. J. Klijn (*INT*, 1967, p. 115) who suggests an angel cult in which planets and angels were not kept strictly distinct.

⁴ C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, p. 92, understands it in this sense. E. Percy, *op. cit.*, p. 167, prefers the alternative reading.

⁵ *Cf.* F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians* (1984), pp. 99–100. For a discussion of the meaning, *cf.* E. de W. Burton, *Galatians* (*ICC*, 1921), pp. 510–518; F. F. Bruce, *Galatians* (1982), pp. 193–194.

From this somewhat fragmentary evidence it may safely be deduced that the heresy was of syncretistic Jewish-Gnosticizing type.¹ One suggestion is that there was here a Jewish Gnosis influenced by Iranian ideas.² Another is that pagan Phrygian influences were present.³ A combination of ideas would have found ready acceptance in Asia with its flourishing cults and its considerable Jewish population. In Colossae in particular the worship of the heathen goddess Cybele was deeply rooted and showed a tendency towards love of extravagances among the people. Oriental speculation would easily spread along the trade routes of the Lycus valley and be hungrily absorbed by the populace.

In his famous discussion of the Colossian heresy, Bishop Lightfoot⁴ identified it with a form of Essenism which while fundamentally Jewish nevertheless contained many extraneous features, some of which at least were similar to those prevalent among the Colossians. It advocated a rigid observance of the Jewish law together with severe asceticism. There may also have been some form of sun worship linked with an esoteric doctrine of angels. Since Lightfoot's day much more is known of the Essenes through the discovery of the Qumran Library and although no evidence has come to light supporting angel worship, the tenets of the sect show a similar phenomenon of a Jewish basis intermixed with extraneous elements.⁵ This evidence testifies to the existence of such mixtures of ideas in one part at least of contemporary non-conformist Judaism in the first century of our era.¹ It may easily have spread from Palestine to the receptive province of Asia Minor, although there is no definite evidence that it did.²

¹ All the Gnostic systems were syncretistic, blending all types of thought from highest philosophy to lowest magic (*cf.* Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 69), but the Colossian heresy gives no indications of those elaborations which were characteristic of second-century thought.

² G. Bornkamm (*Das Ende des Gesetzes*, 1958, p. 150) has no doubt about this. His use of Gnosis rather than Gnosticism is supported by R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament*, pp. 31 ff., especially pp. 55 ff. Yet Bornkamm tends to connect too closely the concept of Gnosis and Gnosticism. As Wilson remarks, 'a considerable leap of faith is involved in the assumption that these pre-Christian ideas already carried with them the full implications of the alleged Gnostic Redeemer-myth' (p. 57). *Cf.* E. Haenchen, *RGC*, II, col. 1654; H. M. Schenke, *ZTK* 61 (1964), pp. 391–343.

³ L. B. Radford, *Colossians and Philemon* (WC 1931), pp. 57–77, appeals to such ideas as the moon cult, the cults of Attis, Sabazius and Cybele, Egyptian theosophy and perhaps Mithraism (p. 75). But the Colossian heresy probably had a far simpler background than this.

⁴ R. D. Shaw, *The Pauline Epistles* (1924), p. 283.

⁵ *Colossians* (1900), pp. 71–111. Reprinted in *Conflict at Colossae* (eds. F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks, 1975), pp. 13–59.

¹ *Cf.* Millar Burrows, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1955), pp. 246–272; K. G. Kuhn, 'Die Sektenschrift und die iranische Religion' *ZTK* (1952), pp. 296–316. Many features common to the Colossian heresy and the Qumran Sect are mentioned by W.D. Davies, 'Paul on Flesh and Spirit', in *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (1958), pp. 166–168. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 74, calls the scrolls pre-Gnostic, not Gnostic proper. *Cf.* also E. M. Yamauchi, 'Qumran and Colosse', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121 (1964), pp. 141–152; E. W. Saunders,

Even if Lightfoot's theory is not accepted³ it seems undeniable that the heresy in question is closer to Essenism than to developed secondcentury Gnosticism. There is an absence of reference to elaborate systems of intermediaries which dominated the later systems and this would be incredible if the author had before his mind developed Gnosticism. Such omission would not of course be a problem if Marcionism was in mind, but this is highly improbable. (See later section on the authenticity of the epistle.) Moreover, in Marcionism there was an antithesis against anything Jewish,⁴ but in the Colossian heresy the reverse is true.⁵ There is certainly no trace of the peculiar doctrines of Cerinthianism, with its distinction between the human Jesus and the divine Christ. At most the connections with Gnosticism are of the vaguest kind and point to an incipient Gnosticism which had not as yet been formulated into a fixed system.¹ There has been continuing stress on syncretistic influences including ideas from neopythagoreanism, Iranian and Egyptian influences,² and also on Jewish mysticism.³ The latter has gained most favour among scholars.

'The Colossian Heresy and Qumran Theology,' in *Studies in the History and Text of the New Testament in Honor of K. W. Clark* (eds. B. D. Daniels and M. J. Suggs, 1967) pp. 133 ff.

² Cf. A. Lukyn Williams' detailed discussion of later angel worship among the Jews, *JTS* 10 (1909), pp. 413–438. More recently, see J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (1973), pp. 172–208.

³ F. F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, pp. 22–23, speaks of Jewish nonconformity rather than Essenism.

⁴ This is not to deny that many Gnostic ideas may have been introduced through the channel of Hellenistic Judaism, at least through its more lax adherents. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gnostic Problem* (1958), p. 182, calls it a bridge across the gulf between the Graeco—Oriental and Jewish—Christian worlds of thought. The two main antisemitic tendencies characteristic of Gnosticism were depreciation of the God of the Old Testament and repudiation of the Jewish law. It was only in Marcionism, however, that these tendencies were so thoroughgoing as to lead to the attempt to expurgate everything Jewish.

⁵ Cullmann, 'The Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the Beginnings of Christianity', *JBL* (1955), pp. 213 ff., finds the Jewish character of the teaching behind the Colossian heresy (and that reflected in the pastoral epistles) suggestive of a pre-Christian Jewish Gnosticism.

¹ This conclusion is supported by E. Percy's suggestion that the heresy was a form of Jewish Christianity with a strong mixture of later Greek speculation and ascetic piety but with no direct contact with Gnosticism (see his discussion *op. cit.*, pp. 137–178). Cf. Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 97 ff., for a full discussion of early Gnostic sects, and G. Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligion* (1951), for the evidence of the Nag Hammadi Library on the early history of Gnosticism.

² E. Schweizer, in 'Die "Elemente der Welt". Gal. 4:3, 9; Col. 2:8, 20', *Verborum Veritas* (ed. O. Bocher and K. Haacker, 1970), appealed to neopythagoreanism, where all the elements except sabbath-keeping were present. Cf. also Reitzenstein for Iranian influence, and M. Dibelius for Isis influence as in

the *Metamorphoses of Apuleius of Madaura* (Eng. tr. *Conflict at Colossae*, ed. F. O. Francis and W.A. Meeks, 1975), pp. 65–121.

³ Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, p. 20, refers to the Naassenes and mentions R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism: An Anthology* (1961), pp. 106–107. See also M. Krause, 'The Christianization of Gnostic Texts', in *The New Testament and Gnosis* (ed. A.J. M. Wedderburn and A. H. B. Logan, 1983), who points out the contribution of the Nag Hammadi texts where Christian expansions are found. Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 23–26, himself favours some contact with the Merkabah mysticism among the Jews. Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (⁵1971), pp. 39–78, and P. Schafer, 'New Testament and Herkhalot Literature', *Journal of Jewish Studies* 35 (1984), pp. 19–25. Cf. also C. A. Evans, 'The Colossian Mystics', *Biblica* 63 (1982), pp. 195–205. A. J. Banstra, on the Colossian errorists in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (eds. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney, 1974), pp. 329–343, rejects the view that the false teachers were Gnostics, favouring instead teachers of Jewish mystical asceticism. For a useful collection of essays by Lightfoot, Dibelius, Bornkamm, Lyonnet, and Francis, relating to the Colossian problem, cf. *Conflict at Colossae*.

Response to the false teaching (Col 2:8–23).³

At last Paul proceeds to engage with the syncretistic “philosophy” that was threatening the church. He begins by reminding the readers that as Christian believers they have received the fullness of God, since they have received Christ in whom there resides all of this fullness. This staggering statement goes beyond anything that Paul has said earlier, but it is the logical outcome of all that has been said about being united with Christ, putting on Christ, Christ living in Paul (Gal 2:20) and receiving the Spirit. What is new is the way in which Paul sees Christ as incorporating God in his body. But again it is the logical outcome of all that has been said earlier about Christ being the image of God, the Son of God and even being called God (Rom 9:5). It could be that it was the threat posed by the false teaching about the principalities and powers, perhaps with divine powers distributed among them, that led Paul to draw the logical conclusions from his earlier teaching and recognize that God was uniquely present in Christ, and, if so, that through Christ the divine power is conveyed to believers.¹⁴

Next he implies that believers do not need to be circumcised, because spiritually they have undergone the equivalent in their baptism.¹⁵ Bodily circumcision was understood as an outward symbol of the cutting away of sin from the heart. But Christian baptism, as a symbol of cleansing from sin but also of union with Christ in his death and therefore of death to sin, was analogous. It would seem to follow that, since there has been a spiritual circumcision, there is no need for physical circumcision for Gentiles.

It is often said that Colossians goes beyond what Paul said in Romans 6 by speaking here of Christians as having been raised with Christ, whereas there (it is argued) the resurrection is still future (Rom 6:5) and they merely live in newness of life (Rom 6:4). This is a misreading of Romans and of Colossians, since it is palpable that what Paul says in Romans in terms of newness of life (while still in this world) is the same as what he says here in terms of what can only be a spiritual resurrection. The difference is that in Romans Paul speaks of believers being baptized into the death of Christ and being buried with him through baptism, so that they may share new life with him, whereas in Colossians he says that they were buried with him in baptism and raised with him. This might be taken to imply that the new life is something subsequent to baptism in Romans but simultaneous with it in Colossians; but, whereas Paul is quite clear in Romans and elsewhere that physical resurrection is in the future, he equally clearly teaches that believers are already enjoying new life with Christ (Rom 6:11; Gal 2:20). The difference is verbal.

³I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology : Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 371.

¹⁴We might be tempted to think that this statement means that for Paul individual believers are “divinized”, or made divine, and thus have a status similar to that of Christ. Elsewhere Paul claims that believers are being transformed into a glorious state (2 Cor 3:18), but the full realization of this is future (Col 1:27). Probably Paul means no more than that the divine power in all its fullness, that is, in more than sufficient measure to counterbalance the power of the hostile forces in the universe, is at the disposal of believers.

¹⁵Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, pp. 296–97, doubts whether the “philosophers” were demanding circumcision of Paul’s Gentile converts; against him see Bevere, *Sharing in the Inheritance*, pp. 65–73.

The basic point is repeated in greater detail. Some slight confusion is possible because Paul uses *death* to refer to two different experiences, the situation of people who are dead in sin and therefore dead so far as responding positively to God is concerned (Col 2:13), and then the situation of believers who die to the world (Col 2:20) and are “buried” (Col 2:12) through union with Christ in his death and become alive to God.

Two related facts are then introduced. The first is that this union with Christ in his resurrection was accompanied by forgiveness of sins (cf. Col 1:14). Paul imagines a list of sins committed against God that is taken and nailed to the cross on which Christ died, in accordance with the custom of placing a placard on a cross to indicate the offense for which the criminal was being punished (Mk 15:26). The implication is that Christ has suffered for sins and they no longer count against the offenders: there is forgiveness available for them.

The second fact is that on the cross Christ somehow triumphed over the principalities and powers. Whether this means that Christ disarmed these enemies or that he divested himself of them (NRSV mg.), he defeated them and then, like a Roman general celebrating with a triumphal procession he led them in chains to execution. They no longer have any power over against him.¹⁶

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, the metaphor used here implies that they no longer exist; Paul may, however, mean no more than that they are powerless where the authority of Christ is recognized.

2. The occasion for the letter⁴

Although the community's life and conduct offer no cause for reprimand, the author of the letter is deeply worried that the community, unsuspecting and innocent as it is, may be led astray by false teaching and become the victim of deceivers. For this reason the community is urgently warned and admonished concerning the distinction between correct and false preaching: "Be on your guard that no one snares you by philosophy and empty deceit" (βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης, 2:8*). This warning points out the danger which threatens the community. Some persons have appeared who call their teaching "philosophy" (φιλοσοφία) which apparently refers to the secret information of the divine ground of being, the proper perception of the "elements of the universe" (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, 2:8*, 20*), and the way which must be taken in order to be in the proper relation to them. These elements of the universe, represented as strong angelic powers, determine not only the cosmic order but the destiny of the individual. Thus man must serve them in cultic adoration and follow the regulations which they impose upon him (2:16–23*): careful observance of the particular holy times—

⁴Eduard 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), 2.

* 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)

* 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)

* ¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.

¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

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,

¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

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"?

²² All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings.

festivals, new moon, Sabbath (2:16*)—as well as imposed abstinence from certain food and drink.

The outline of this teaching can be inferred from the polemical statements in the letter's second chapter. This teaching could have made some impression even on Christians, for it promised protection from cosmic powers and principalities. A Christian might have supposed that he had not (or not sufficiently) received such protection in the Christian proclamation and in the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins. In addition, adherents of this teaching, as well as members of the community who paid attention to them, presumably supposed that this "philosophy" could very easily be united with Christian faith. Indeed, faith is only brought to its true completion by this combination. This, however, raises the critical question: is the preaching of the gospel to be drawn into that varicolored mesh of the syncretism of late antiquity, or is the proclamation of the crucified, resurrected and exalted Christ to be taken as the exclusively valid answer which applies to all man's questions and searchings?

In order to oppose this "philosophy," the letter to the Colossians at its very beginning refers back to the hymnic confession with which the community is familiar (1:15–20*); from this hymn the letter develops its message, in which Christ is proclaimed as Lord over all the world. In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (2:9*); he is the head of all powers and principalities (2:10*), he is the head of his body, the Church (1:18*). The whole fullness and the forgiveness of

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 2:16–23](#) (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)

* ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

²⁰ and through 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. [Colossians 1:15–20](#) (NRSV)

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

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

sins, as well as the gift of new life (1:12–14*; 2:12–15*), has come to the man who has been buried with Christ in baptism and has been raised with him by faith in the power of God who raised Christ from the dead (2:12*). This man cannot and may not devote himself to a worship of angels and to enslaving regulations, for he has already died with Christ to the elements of the universe (2:20*). On the one side is Christ, as he was preached and received in faith, and on the other is “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία) which in truth is “empty deceit” (κενή ἀπάτη, 2:8*). This opposition ought to be clearly and sharply perceived by the community through the aid of the apostolic teaching which is once again presented to them.

* ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. [Colossians 1:18](#) (NRSV)

* ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,

¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. [Colossians 1:12–14](#) (NRSV)

* 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.

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,

¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. [Colossians 2:12–15](#) (NRSV)

* 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 2:12](#) (NRSV)

§ 1. THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE⁵

COLOSSAE (or Colassae, see 1:2) was situated in Phrygia, on the river Lycus, a tributary to the Maeander. Herodotus speaks of it as πόλις μεγάλη (7³⁰); Xenophon, as πόλις οἰκουμένη καὶ εὐδαίμων καὶ μεγάλη (*Anab.* i. 2. 6). Strabo, however (12⁸), only reckons it as a πόλις. Pliny's mention of it amongst the "*oppida celeberrima*" (*H. N.* v. 32, 41) is not inconsistent with this. It is after enumerating the considerable towns that he speaks of "*oppida celeberrima, praeter jam dicta*," thus introducing along with Colossae, other small and decayed places. Eusebius (*Chron. Olymp.* 210. 4) records its destruction (with that of Laodicea and Hierapolis) in the tenth year of Nero. Tacitus (*Ann.* xiv. 27) states that Laodicea, "*ex illustribus Asiae urbibus*," was destroyed by an earthquake in the seventh year of Nero. (See Introduction to *Ephesians*.)

The Church at Colossae was not founded by St. Paul, nor had it been visited by him (1:4, 7–9, 2:1). These indications in the Epistle agree with the narrative in the Acts of the Apostles, which represents his journeys as following a route which would not bring him to Colossae. He is, indeed, related to have passed through Phrygia on his second and third missionary journeys; but Phrygia was a very comprehensive term, and on neither occasion does the direction of his route or anything in the context point to this somewhat isolated corner of Phrygia.

In his second missionary journey, after visiting the Churches of Pisidia and Lycaonia, he passes through τὴν Φρυγίαν καὶ Γαλατικὴν χώραν (Acts 16:6), *i.e.* the Phrygian region of the province of Galatia, or the Phrygo-Galatic region. (The τὴν before Γαλατικὴν in the Text. Pec. is not genuine.) Thence he travelled through Mysia (neglecting it, παρέλθοντες) to Troas. Thus on this journey he kept to the east of the valley of the Lycus. On his third journey, he founded no new Churches in Asia Minor, but confined himself to revisiting and confirming those already founded (Acts 18:23). From the Galatic and Phrygian region he proceeded to Ephesus by the higher lying and more direct route, not the regular trade route down the valleys of the Lycus and the Maeander. On this Lightfoot and Ramsay are agreed, the former, however, thinking that Paul may have gone as far north as Pessinus before leaving Galatia; the latter (consistently with his view of the meaning of "Galatian" in Acts) supposing him to have gone directly westward from Antioch to Ephesus. Renan supposes him to have traversed the valley of the Lycus, but without preaching there, which is hardly consistent with the form of expression in 2:1. The founder of the Church at Colossae was apparently Epaphras; at least it had been taught by him (see 1:7, where the correct reading is καθὼς ἐμάθετε, not καθὼς καὶ ἐμάθετε).

The Church appears to have consisted of Gentile converts (1:21, 27, 2:13); certainly there is no hint that any of the readers were Jews, and the circumstance that the founder was a Gentile Christian would have been unfavourable to the reception of his preaching by Jews. But they were clearly exposed to Jewish influences, and, in fact, we know that there was an important Jewish settlement in the neighbourhood, Antiochus the Great having transplanted two thousand Jewish families from Babylonia and Mesopotamia into Lydia and Phrygia (*Joseph. Antt.* xii. 3. 4), thus forming a colony which rapidly increased in numbers. See Lightfoot, *The Churches of the Lycus*, in his Introduction. He gives reasons for estimating the number of Jewish adult freemen in the district of which Laodicea was the capital in B.C. 62 at not less than eleven thousand (p. 20). The Colossians were now in danger of being misled by certain false teachers, whose doctrines we

⁵Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1909), xlvii.

gather from the counter-statements and warnings of the apostle. That there was a Judaic element appears from 2:11, 14, 16. It does not appear, indeed, that circumcision was urged upon them as a necessity, or even as a means of perfection. There is nothing in the Epistle even remotely resembling the energetic protest against such teaching which we have in the Epistle to the Galatians. The ascetic precepts alluded to in the Epistle were not based on the Mosaic law, for St. Paul says they were derived from the tradition of men. The law, too, laid down no general precepts about drinks (2:16). These rules seem to have been connected with the worship of angels (2:16–21). The false teachers claimed an exclusive and profound insight into the world of intermediate spirits, whose favour it was desirable to obtain, and by means of whom new revelations and new spiritual powers might be attained. It was with a view to this that the body was to be treated with severity.

In the three points of exclusiveness, asceticism, and angelology, the Colossian heresy shows affinities with Essenism, which, as Lightfoot remarks, had an affinity with Gnosticism, so that it might be called Gnostic Judaism. Historically, indeed, we do not know of any Essenism outside Palestine. But there is no need to assume an identity of origin of the Colossian heresy and Essenism; the tendencies were not confined to Palestine. And Phrygia provided a congenial soil for the growth of such a type of religion. It was the home of the worship of Cybele, and Sabazius, and the Ephesian Artemis. In philosophy it had produced Thales and Heraclitus. The former declared τὸν κόσμον ἔμψυχον καὶ δαιμόνων πλήρη (Diog. Laert. i. 27).

The natural phenomena of the region about Hierapolis, Laodicea, and Colossae were well calculated to encourage a belief in demoniac or angelic powers controlling the elementary forces of nature. There was, for example, at Hierapolis (and still is) an opening, called the Plutonium, which emitted a vapour (sulphuretted hydrogen) fatal to animals which came within its range. Strabo relates that the eunuchs employed about the temple were able to approach and bend over the opening with impunity—holding in their breath (μέχρι ποσοῦ συνεχόντας ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τὸ πνεῦμα), yet, as he adds, showing in their faces signs of a suffocating feeling. See Svoboda, *The Seven Churches of Asia*, 1869, p. 29 sqq.; Cockerell *apud* Leake, *Journal of a Tour in Asia Minor*, 1824, p. 342. A comparison of Cockerell and Svoboda's experiments shows that, as Lavarde also implies, the vapour is not always equally fatal. The region was noted for earthquakes.

Notwithstanding its affinities with Gnosticism, the Colossian heresy must be regarded as belonging to an earlier stage than the developed Gnosticism usually understood by that name, even earlier, indeed, than Cerinthus. There is, for example, no allusion to the aeons of later Gnosticism, nor to the properly Gnostic conception of the relation of the demiurgic agency to the supreme God. "That relation (says Lightfoot) was represented, first, as imperfect appreciation; next, as entire ignorance; lastly, as direct antagonism. The second and third are the standing points of Cerinthus and of the later Gnostic teachers respectively. The first was probably the position of the Colossian false teachers. The imperfections of the natural world, they would urge, were due to the limited capacities of these angels to whom the demiurgic work was committed, and to their imperfect sympathy with the supreme God; but, at the same time, they might fitly receive worship as mediators between God and man; and, indeed, humanity seemed in its weakness to need the intervention of some such beings less remote from itself than the highest heaven." Hence the references in the Epistle to the ταπεινοφροσύνη in connexion with this angel worship.

St. Paul assures his readers, with an authority which he clearly expects them to accept, that the gospel they had learned from Epaphras required no such addition as the false teachers

pressed upon them. He points out to them that they are members of a body of which the Head, Christ, was supreme above all these angelic powers of whatever kind.

7. The Problem at Colosse⁶

The Christians at Colosse faced a major threat to their orthodoxy. Like many letters, this one countered a specific movement threatening to remove the church from Christ. Paul affirmed the centrality of Christ in both doctrine and practice. While most commentators agree that a problem threatened the church, there is no consensus as to its exact nature. A brief survey of the primary historical contributions follows, along with an overview of the data. Details of the situation await the commentary section.

(1) *The Data*

The criteria for discovering the context suggest fertile ground for speculation. Paul dealt with a specific heresy; but because he basically answered problems rather than describing them, the situation of the church remains obscure. Specific data come from two complementary approaches: the general content of the epistle and the specific texts that discuss the problem.

The general content encompasses many sections. They include the prayer for knowledge to do the will of God (1:9–11), the hymn to Christ (1:15–20), the sufferings of the apostle explained in mystical terminology (1:27–2:5), the confrontation of the false teachers (2:8–3:4), and the ethical portions employing the vice and virtue lists (3:5–17).³⁰ Each has had interpreters who claimed either heretical contexts or tendencies for these portions. For the most part, however, defining the heresy consists of analyzing 1:9–20 and 2:8–3:4. The significant features of 1:9–20 are the cosmic presentation of Christ, his role in creation and redemption, and his authority because of his death on the cross. Colossians 2:8–3:4 contains more detailed elements to consider.

Others refer to the number of unusual words in the epistle. In the Greek text there are 34 *hapax legomena* and 63 words which occur less than 5 times in the New Testament. Significantly, of the *hapax legomena*, 83 percent occur in 1:9–3:17, the passage considered most reflective of the heresy. Of this 83 percent, 38 percent occur in 2:8–3:4. The same general phenomena occur in words used less than 5 times in the New Testament. Fully 80 percent occur in 1:9–3:17, with 32 percent occurring in 2:8–3:4. The technical use of other terms, such as *plērōma* (fullness), *philosophia* (philosophy), *embateuō* (go into great detail), and *gnōsis* (knowledge), are discussed much. A major question remains whether these words are really technical terms. Are they catchwords from other religions? Are they doctrinal statements from the heretical groups? Could Paul simply have been employing unusual terminology because of the heresy he opposed? In this century, earlier interpreters often saw technical definitions. M. Dibelius, for example, built a case

⁶Richard R. Melick, vol. 32, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, electronic ed., Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1991), 171.

³⁰The passages which contain polemical elements have been identified by C. A. Evans, “The Colossian Mystics,” *Bib* 63:2 (1982) 192–94. The sections are identified along with the nature of the polemic. He identifies the following polemical portions: 1:1–2; 1:3–8; 1:9–14; 1:15–20; 1:21–23; 1:24–29; 2:1–7; 2:8–15; 2:16–19; 2:20–23; 3:1–4; 3:5–11, 12–17; 3:18–4:1; and 4:2–6, 7–18. Every portion of the epistle is included. The value of his list is the grouping together of the verses along with the polemic he brings.

for the context on the technical use of one term alone (*embateuō*).³¹ On the other hand, M. Hooker claimed that the terms suit the situation and do not reflect the heresy itself.³² Although her suggestions do not receive universal acceptance, her concerns show the relative subjectivity involved in making such judgments. At any rate, building conclusions on the data requires tedious and disciplined exegesis of the individual words and the several passages involved.

The major text for determining the context is 2:8–3:4. There several matters call for attention. They include: “fullness” (*plērōma*) (2:9); “delights in false humility and the worship of angels” (2:18); “what he has seen” (2:18); “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” (2:21); and “self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body” (2:23). Recently many have considered these as phrases from the heretical teachers themselves. If they are not actual quotes, they must be terms particularly suited to the teachings advocated by the heretics. They became a vehicle for countering the philosophers in their own terms. The concentration of these rare terms in 2:8–3:4 confirms the obvious: This text provides the *locus* for determining the problem which Paul countered.

(2) Historical Context

The context addressed by the apostle shapes the concrete meaning Colossians has today. Indeed, the task of discovering the context has led to various suggestions which have rightly colored the presentations of both entire commentaries on Colossians and even Pauline theology as a whole. The quest for context began in earnest in the nineteenth century and developed into a science in the twentieth.

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CONTRIBUTIONS. Two significant works dominated the nineteenth century. The direction-setting work of F. C. Baur questioned the integrity of the epistle and dated it after the lifetime of Paul. This opened the door to many second-century contextual suppositions. He worked also for an evolutionary explanation of the phenomena of Christianity and its writings and invited comparisons between Christianity and non-Christian parallels. In many ways, all subsequent study reacts to Baur. Some support him, some modify him, and others counter him.

By far the most lasting contribution of the nineteenth century was the work of J. B. Lightfoot in his *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*.³³ Lightfoot's conclusions remain viable one hundred years after his commentary, and many arguments simply repeat or expand his views. He saw the problem as an incipient Jewish Gnosticism which characterized the Essenes. The religious and philosophical parallels pointed to an early date of the epistle written by the apostle Paul. He left a twofold legacy: the idea of incipient Gnosticism and the Jewish nature of the heresy.

³¹ M. Dibelius, “The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites,” *Conflict At Colossae*, ed. F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks, 2nd ed. SBLSPS 4. (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1975), 61121.

³² M. D. Hooker, “Were there False Teachers in Colossae?” *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honor of Charles Francis Digby Moule*, ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley (Cambridge: University Press, 1973) 315–31.

³³ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1879).

TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONTRIBUTIONS. Twentieth-century interpreters develop and shape one or more of the ideas of the nineteenth century. Some, such as Dibelius³⁴ and Lohse,³⁵ reaffirm the Gnostic or “pre-Gnostic” context. Others, such as S. Lyonnet,³⁶ F. Francis,³⁷ F. F. Bruce,³⁸ W. Hendriksen,³⁹ A. Bandstra,⁴⁰ and O’Brien,⁴¹ hold to a more Jewish context.

The first major essay of the twentieth century was written by Dibelius.⁴² He studied the Isis initiation in Apuleius and, impressed particularly by a technical use of the term *embateuō*, determined that Colossians addressed a similar initiatory rite. For him, Colossians provides proof that Christianity joined with a mystery cult of the “elements” by about A.D. 56.⁴³ This occurred before the time of Paul. Paul’s task, therefore, was to demonstrate the distinction between the cult and Christianity. Many objections arise. Dibelius does not explain the distinctive element of Christianity that made it survive. He states its survival depended on its exclusivity, but the exclusive nature is unexplained. Further, Christianity dominated the Isis cult by offering a better solution to life. Lyonnet’s evaluation is representative of the reservations among contemporary scholars. He states regarding Dibelius’s analysis of the temple rites: “But the sense of the passage is one of the most controversial, the text itself is scarcely certain, and it would be imprudent at least to erect a whole theory on this single term.”⁴⁴

³⁴ Dibelius, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, und Philemon*, HNT, 3rd ed. rev. by H. Greeven (Tübingen: Mohr, 1953).

³⁵ Lohse’s comments, being more recent, reflect this tradition better. He says: “Consequently the adherents of the ‘philosophy’ cannot be considered Essenes, members of the Qumran community or proponents of heretical Jewish propaganda. ... because of the emphasis placed on knowledge as well as its world-negating character, [but they] can be termed Gnostic or, if a more cautious designation is desired, pre-Gnostic” (129).

³⁶ S. Lyonnet, “L’étude du milieu littéraire et l’exegese du Nouveau Testament: Les adversaires de Paul a Colosses,” *Bib* 37 (1956): 27–38, which is translated as “Paul’s Adversaries in Colossae,” *Conflict at Colossae*, 1147–61.

³⁷ F. O. Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” *Conflict at Colossae*, 163–95.

³⁸ F. F. Bruce, *Ephesians and Colossians*, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 165–69.

³⁹ Hendriksen, *Colossians and Philemon*, 17–21.

⁴⁰ A. J. Bandstra, “Did the Colossian Errorists Need a Mediator?” *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 329–43.

⁴¹ O’Brien, xxxviii.

⁴² Dibelius, “The Isis Initiation.”

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁴ Lyonnet, 150.

Later scholars modify Dibelius's position. G. Bornkamm argues that the problem was a Gnosticized Judaism that added pagan elements.⁴⁵ These included Iranian-Persian elements and Chaldean astrology. Thus syncretism resulted. Although the Gnostic position has faded in popularity, some still advocate it.

The contemporary climate understands Paul's letter in a Jewish context. Three significant writers contribute to this understanding, though they, in their own way, built on the work of Lightfoot. Lyonnet leads the way in several penetrating articles.⁴⁶ He states that the terms used to support the ties between Christianity and Gnostic cults occurred outside Gnostic circles but persisted in other philosophies as well. Particularly, they often occurred in Jewish (Christian) contexts. He concludes that the opponents were Christians attracted to Judaism.

Francis also sees a Jewish Christian context, but it was a context of mystical asceticism.⁴⁷ The terms employed could well be Jewish rather than Greek, including "humility to the flesh," "entering [*embateuō*] into visions," and "worship of angels." These concepts and similar terminology appear at Qumran and, for Francis, may well represent a like religious group. Bandstra confirms Francis's arguments and notes that the Gnostic influence at Colosse was not clearly established.

The prevailing view, therefore, is that the Colossian heresy was some form of Judaism. Most likely it was typical of reactionary Judaism, such as practiced at Qumran, since many of the terms occur in that literature. Little has been done, however, to trace the connection between Qumran and Colosse.

(3) *The Jewish Context*

Historical inquiry reveals a sizeable Jewish community in the Lycus valley at the first century. Josephus recorded that Antiochus the Great (223–187 B.C.) imported two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylon to Lydia and Phrygia.⁴⁸ Lightfoot calculated the Jewish population at A.D. 62 to be more than eleven thousand adult freemen, plus women, children, and possibly slaves.⁴⁹ The entire Jewish population, however, "would probably be much larger than this partial estimate implies."⁵⁰ The attractions of the areas were of some concern to the Jewish

⁴⁵ G. Bornkamm, "Die Haresie des Kolosserbriefes," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 73 (1948): 11–20. This is reprinted in *Conflict at Colossae*, 123–45.

⁴⁶ In addition to "Adversaries," mentioned above, he wrote "Col 2, 18 et les Mysteres d'Apollon Clarien," *Bib* 43 (1962): 417–35; and "Saint Paul et le gnosticisme: la lettre aux Colossiens," *Le Origini delo Gnosticismo*, ed. U. Bianchi (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 538–61.

⁴⁷ Francis, 163–95.

⁴⁸ See Josephus, *Antiquities* XII.iii.4.

⁴⁹ Lightfoot, 20. He came to this conclusion by noting that a contraband temple offering was taken by Flaccus, the propraetor of Asia. The contraband offering was twenty pounds of gold from the single district. He estimated the amount per family.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21. He pointed out that there were larger seizures from neighboring areas.

scholars. Reflecting a concern for the northwestern migration to the area, one rabbi wrote, “The wines and the baths of Phrygia have separated the ten tribes from Israel.”⁵¹

The New Testament also bears witness to a sizeable community of Jews in the area. Acts 2:9–10 states that Jews from Asia and Phrygia were at Pentecost. Many of the books of the New Testament reflect Jewish Christian interests there. Paul’s writings are instructive in this regard. For example, Galatians counters the energetic activities of Judaizers; Ephesians obviously deals with two religious communities which had to realize their unity (2:1–11); and 1 Timothy may reflect theological problems prompted by study of the Old Testament and the law (1:8–11). The writings of John reflect the cultural mixture as well. The Gospel of John contains many elements intended to persuade a Jewish audience of the messiahship of Jesus, and the Revelation is similar in genre to the Jewish apocalypses of conservative Judaism. Significantly, all of these New Testament books address situations in Asia Minor and deal with problems which are, at least in part, Jewish. Many have also compared them with Gnostic elements assumed in their teachings. Clearly, a study of their contexts reveals there was a large and vocal Jewish element in the area. It also reveals that many Jews converted to Christianity.

Finally, the ministry of John the Baptist spread quickly and significantly into this area. Although John lived a short time, his ministry enjoyed a worldwide impact. Acts 18:24–26 records the ministry of Apollos, who apparently advanced the teachings of John the Baptist at Ephesus. Apollos’s influence may have been significant by the time he met Priscilla and Aquila. Much later, about A.D. 85–95, John the apostle wrote his gospel from around Ephesus. A distinctive of this writing is the large space devoted to John the Baptist and his witness to Jesus. It would seem that forty years after Apollos the impact of John the Baptist would be diminished, yet the apostle John thought it significant enough to build upon it for his Gentile readers.

The tie between the Essene Jews and the Colossian church may be the misunderstood influence of John the Baptist. Years ago Dibelius commented, “The Christian congregation probably borrowed baptism, as an eschatological sacrament, from the circle of John the Baptist. But the Christians of the hellenistic world felt the need to understand it as a hellenistic mystery.”⁵² There is an obvious connection between John the Baptist and the Palestinian Christian communities. Possibly, the relationship extended into Asia Minor, where disciples of John the Baptist turned to Christ. When they did, they brought their ascetic and strict ethical concerns with them into the church.

Conceptual and theological factors support the strongly Jewish nature of the Epistle to the Colossians. Obvious ties existed between reactionary Judaism and Christianity in the Lycus valley. Naturally a conflict between them arose.

(4) *The Focal Text: Colossians 2:8–3:4*

In discussing Paul’s argument in Col 2:8–3:4, three matters emerge. First, an introductory statement provides a cryptic analysis of the problem. Second, the primary concerns are detailed. Finally, the problem is carefully defined and exegetical solutions are suggested. This important section serves as a window to the theology of Colossians.

⁵¹ B. Sabb. 147.b.

⁵² Dibelius, “Isis Initiation,” 95.

INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT. Paul introduced the problem in 2:8. Set in a context of watchfulness lest the Christians be captured, the verse discusses both the medium and the measurement of the heresy. The medium is “hollow and deceptive philosophy.” Two matters emerge here. First, the teaching characterized itself as a philosophy (no doubt Paul referred here to the position of the adversaries). This articular noun, occurring only here in the New Testament, points to a specific and organized formulation of thought. A similar articular construction occurs in v. 14 (*tois dogmasin*), which confirms this observation. Paul did not decry philosophy itself, but this particular formulation. Second, the teaching led nowhere. It was empty and deceiving. The problem, then, was not simply random or periodic speculations about life in the hope that something good would come. This system of thought appears organized and aggressive.

Paul measured the teaching by three instructive criteria. Together they profile the teaching in a way that reveals its destructive nature. First, it was *traditional*. Although the phrase “human tradition” points to the source of the teaching, it may not point to antiquity. Paul’s point was not that the teaching was old; rather, it was human.

Second, the teaching “depends on . . . the basic principles of this world” (*kata ta stoicheia tou kosmou*). This much-discussed phrase may be technical or nontechnical since both may occur in the New Testament.⁵³ Technically, it refers to a tenet of the heretical teachers and/or the supernatural beings believed to exert their power and influence over the physical and human world. If the technical use occurs here, it is the only such use of the phrase in the New Testament. Nontechnically, it refers to imperfect teachings or conditions. The elements of the world contrast with the higher truths of Christianity. Favoring this view, the passages outside of Colossians refer to the physical elements (2 Pet 3:10, 12) or elementary matters generally (Gal 4:3–9) or the basics of the Christian faith specifically (Heb 5:12). Either position reconciles easily with a Jewish context for the teaching, though the so-called pre-Gnostic elements call more naturally for the technical application. Whatever position is taken, clearly Paul regarded the *stoicheia* as inferior and, in that sense, elementary.⁵⁴

Finally, the heretical doctrine was non-Christian (*ou kata Christon*). This by itself does not suggest it was outside the church. It does mean that it belonged outside the church. The real problem here is involvement in Christian matters with a non-Christian orientation.

Together these three characteristics provide understanding about the false teaching. It was a nonrevelational, spiritually juvenile, sub-Christian system of thought.

PAUL’S CONCERNS. Paul identified several concerns. They may be understood broadly in theological categories, moving to specific matters within each category. After a presentation of the thematic arrangement of the passage, a brief interpretation is offered.

Thematic Arrangement. The passage deals with both theology proper and practice. Thematically, the first of the theological sections addresses soteriology in a chiastic literary pattern. The chiasm (from the Greek letter *chi* [X]), which is an inverted relationship between the syntactic

⁵³ For a nontechnical use of στοιχεῖα, see Heb 5:12 and 1 Pet 3:10, 12. The technical use, if it is employed, is best represented here.

⁵⁴ The use referring to supernatural beings is preferred by Martin, J. Moffatt, F. C. Baur, Dibelius, A. Deissmann, and Lohse, among others. Preferring the nontechnical are Hendriksen, H. Meyer, E. Burton, Moule, Lightfoot, and Bandstra.

elements of parallel phrases, includes both supernatural beings and the regulations, what may be classified loosely as angel worship and asceticism. The chiasm of 2:9–15 is as follows:

A	For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every <i>power</i> and <i>authority</i> .	
B	<i>In him you were also circumcised</i> , in the putting off of the sinful nature, <i>not with a circumcision done by the hands of men</i> but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.	
B'	When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, <i>having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us</i> and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.	
A'	And having disarmed the <i>powers</i> and <i>authorities</i> , he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.	
A	who is the head over every <i>power</i> and <i>authority</i>	B'
	having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us	
B	In him you were also circumcised ... not with a circumcision done by the hands of men	A'
	And having disarmed the <i>powers</i> and <i>authorities</i> , he made a public spectacle of them	

The uniting theme is soteriological. The work of Christ, specifically his death, holds the two sections together.

The second of the theological sections describes the practical aspects of Christ's death in terms of Christian attitudes toward the law. Two imperatives provide the literary key, dividing the passage into two applications. The first relates to asceticism (vv. 16–17): "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink." The second refers to angel worship (vv. 18–19): "Do not let anyone ... disqualify you." Since they discuss the practical applications of soteriology, they speak to a theology of sanctification.

The two concerns of asceticism and angel worship unite the passage. A matrix of thought and the outline take note of both. Angel worship is dealt with in vv. 9–10, 15. The concept of asceticism is addressed in vv. 11–14.

Finally, Paul spoke of the application of these theological truths *in practice*. Colossians 2:20–3:4 present positive principles, as well as strong warnings, to be observed in the Christian life. These also grow out of theological foundations, as was typical for Paul. Thematically, two inter-related patterns reveal the connection of these sections. First, 2:20–3:4 speaks of the implications of union with Christ. In characteristic Pauline terminology, Paul linked Christian living to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Second, these two themes extend the teaching of 2:8–19. The semantic parallels reveal this motif.

This thematic overview suggests an outline with parallel focal points. It is as follows:

- Introduction (2:8)
- Theological Implications of the Heresy (2:9–19)
- Soteriological Implications (2:9–15)
- (Death with Christ)
- Sanctification Implications (2:16–19)
- (Life with Christ)

Practical Implications of the Heresy (2:20–3:4)
Soteriological Implications (2:20–23)
(Death with Christ)
Sanctification Implications (3:1–4)
(Life with Christ)

The passage seems cluttered from an organizational perspective because of the interchange between theological principles and their extensions into life. The particulars of Christian living presented here, however, occur in the theological section. This reveals Paul's integration of thought and practice. The specifics, such as diet, days, do's and don't's, concretely illustrate the point. When Paul moved to sanctification, he left behind the particulars. After all, as Paul reminded the Romans in a similar context, the "kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17). A preoccupation with the things of earth *in any fashion* distracts one from the kingdom of God.

Interpretation. The thematic and literary analysis aids interpretation. A survey of contents demonstrates that each section of the text reveals Paul's polemic.

The previous survey reveals that the theological passage divides into two areas: soteriology (2:9–15) and sanctification (2:16–19). The soteriological section contains two matters: "angel worship" (2:9–10, 15) and "asceticism" (2:11–14). The two receive almost equal emphasis. Syntactically, the outside members of a chiasm receive primary emphasis. On one hand, Paul concerned himself more with the cosmic Christ, a seeming fascination of the Colossians. On the other hand, the ascetic problem occupied more space in the text.

In dealing with this issue, Paul confronted two typically Jewish problems which plagued the church. Fascination with supernatural beings characterized many groups of Jews from the time of Daniel through the Intertestamental Period.⁵⁵ This specific infatuation was needless. In his work, Jesus dominated them. He created them (he is their head, 2:9–10; see also the hymn to Christ of 1:15–20). When many rebelled, for Paul focused here on the evil supernatural beings, Jesus conquered them, embarrassing and exposing them publicly (2:15). They deserved *no* following.

The other Jewish problem stems from the heart of Jewish life. In vv. 11–14 Paul addressed circumcision and the law. Perhaps these represent the entire system since in Rom 2:17–29 these two focal points characterize Judaism (the law in vv. 17–24; circumcision in vv. 25–29). Circumcision was no longer necessary. Spiritual circumcision, the more important matter (cf. Rom 2:29), occurred at baptism when one identified with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (see Col 2:11–12 where syntactically being buried and being raised explain baptism). Physical circumcision introduced one to the spiritual blessings of Israel and to the requirements of the law. Here Paul argued that *neither* circumcision *nor* the requirements of the law continue in effect.

Similarly, at the time of conversion, forgiveness occurred. Paul related this to the law with specific terminology suggesting a legal framework and system.⁵⁶ Surely Paul meant that Christians no longer fear the condemnatory aspects of the Commandments. They have no obligation to them. Neither of these perspectives, however, characterized the heretics of Colosse.

⁵⁵ Of course, these references may refer to the Hellenistic speculation about the supernatural. The point is that there is no reason why this cannot be considered natural to Judaism.

⁵⁶ The phrase is "handwriting of ordinances." There are, of course, many problems interpreting the phrase.

Thus the soteriological heresy failed to appreciate the central place of Jesus. Rather, its advocates accepted a supernatural hierarchy other than the Trinity and gave themselves to scrupulous and legalistic requirements which they assumed commended them to God. This indeed was the heart of the problem and even today is still one of the roots of secularism.

The issue of sanctification, viewed from a theological perspective, extends these errors of thought into errors of life. Colossians 2:16–17 explains that the legal requirements of the law prepared the way for the Messiah. They lacked the substance that Christ would bring. They were external and did not deal with the heart of the matter (Paul explained the latter in 2:23).

Similarly, readers were not to become preoccupied with the “worship of angels,” as some were prone to do. Until recently the phrase “worship of angels” was a thorn in the flesh for interpreters. Most understood the genitive construction as objective, the worship *directed* to angels. The interpretation fit the incipient Gnostic viewpoint well, but it was difficult to reconcile with the strongly Jewish flavor of the passage. Francis devoted himself to the phrase and found that it bore striking similarity to the Essene community of Judea. As a part of their worship, the Essenes sought to worship *with the angels*. They aspired to higher forms and expressions than normal, hoping to worship with the angels.

A study of the phrase “voluntary humility” confirmed Francis’s viewpoint. He noted evidences of self-imposed hardships of fasting which allowed the believer to enter new vistas of religious experience. They probably believed self-induced trances evidenced their super-spiritual position.⁵⁷ The religious experience came from fasting and strenuous, voluntary self-deprivation. The writer used the term “humility” (*tapeinophrosynē*) to describe these rigorous religious activities.

When the two concerns of “worship of angels” and “voluntary humility” are understood in this fashion, one complements the other. Gnostic and pre-Gnostic speculations become unnecessary, though the possibility of the pre-Gnostic influence remains. The point is that two seemingly dissimilar religious activities join in one religious outlook. Whatever interpretation holds, clearly Paul addressed a religious community endangered by mere human tradition.

The problem was not likely entirely Jewish in origin. Paul’s detailed argument about Jesus as the Creator and Redeemer, particularly with reference to supernatural beings, suggests a more Hellenistic orientation. The fact that he continually called them “principalities, rulers, thrones, and dominions” suggests a greater categorization of angelic beings than is normally found in Scripture. For this reason, a probable explanation is that the heresy was primarily Jewish, particularly in its origins, but had some secular elements included, which later became part of a Gnostic system of thought.

Practicality. When Paul turned to *praxis*, his reference points remained salvation (conversion) in 2:20–23 and sanctification (Christian living) in 3:1–4. Regarding conversion, Paul asked, “Why are you willingly subjecting yourself to regulations?” After liberation from a legal system, obeying such a system again was a step backward. Three reasons are given for not submitting to regulations. First, the believers had died with Christ. This mystical but experiential union means that ties to this world have been severed. Second, submitting to these commands assumed a this-world orientation. Third, these things have no lasting value—they perish when used and have no real effect on the lusts of the flesh. The principle espoused is that any spiritual slavery—volunta-

⁵⁷ This evidence occurred in Hermes, particularly.

ry or otherwise—other than a slavery to Christ robs one of spiritual freedoms. A preoccupation with matters confined to this age saps spiritual energy.

The principle Paul elucidated relates only to external, amoral matters. In 3:5–17 he clearly commanded the readers to be known by qualities of character which accompanied their new life. Sloppy or careless living has no place among Christians. Unfortunately, too many times Christians give scrupulous attention to such regulations as found here while overlooking the weightier matters of a moral nature. The development of Christian character brings eternal rewards.

Finally, Paul turned to the practical aspects of sanctification or Christian growth (3:1–4). These are to desire and delight in things above rather than things below. Christians must focus on Christ. Three reasons provide incentive.

First, Christians are raised with Christ. As death with Christ satisfies the past life, their resurrection with Christ opens new dimensions of living.

Second, Christ is life. This does not mean he provides life, which, of course, he does. Here Paul stated that Christ is the life principle. Believers are sustained for time and eternity by the spiritual power given to them by Christ. Unbelievers, of course, have a different life principle. Natural eyes cannot see what makes Christians live as they do. Their motivations, values, and actions seem strange. The life principle remains hidden.

Third, Christians will triumph with Christ. Someday he will manifest himself, when he comes to this earth again. The unseen spiritual realities will break through this age, and the now-secret source of life will be manifest. At that time, all Christians will share in the glory of the revealed Christ. There is an eschatological verification of the truthfulness of Christianity, and Christians anxiously await that great day. These more important concerns were to attract the interests of the Colossian Christians.

Paul's accusations were devastating. The system of thought threatening the Colossian church was of human tradition, it was elementary, and it was non-Christian. Theologically, it divorced Christ from his place in the Godhead and separated itself from Christ. It invalidated Christ's death. By adding its requirements of human effort, it made the death of Christ insignificant, if not unnecessary. Practically, the heretics alienated themselves from Christ, the source of real life. No doubt this, too, resulted from their natural perspective. Human ideas do not embrace the thoughts of the Spirit, and human eyes do not see them.

(5) Conclusions

Having surveyed matters of the context of the Epistle to the Colossians and the primary focal passage, Col 2:9–3:4, the situation may be related to the subject at hand. This problem appeared within a religious community. Even if incipient Gnostic elements surfaced, they were certainly secondary. The deeper problem may have been the age-old clash of the human mind versus the Spirit or human tradition versus the revelation in Christ. Similar issues may exist in the relationships between Christianity and philosophy, psychology, natural science, and the behavioral sciences. At many points, merely human ideas attempt to reformulate Christian truth, to remake it in their image. While not blatantly secular, such situations reveal the priority of reason over revelation.

On the other hand, the problem also arises when Christianity becomes only tradition. The specific practices addressed in Colosse may well have had revelational roots. They were extensions of Old Testament law. Orthodoxy without orthopraxy leads to *de facto* secularism. Creeds without conviction and structure without substance lead the unsuspecting away from God. If the previous concern were reason over revelation, this one was the priority of assent over action.

The answer lies in a positive and comprehensive commitment to Christ. Human reason and tradition do not necessarily contradict revelation. Indeed, the *imago dei* consists in part of a structured, organized capacity to think and act. Theological reflection provides the answers. The origin of secularism is separation from the source of spiritual life. To counter the subtle philosophy that threatened Colosse centuries ago, Christians today will find it imperative to know Christ personally and intimately, theologically and practically. They must never allow any philosophical system, whether good or bad, to replace that relationship.

THE TROUBLE AT COLOSSAE⁷

We now turn to the more contentious issue of why the letter was written. There is general agreement that one reason, probably the primary reason, was to counteract teaching that might become or already was either attractive or threatening to the baptized in Colossae, particularly with regard to their appreciation of the full significance of Christ. Beyond that, however, views vary quite considerably. Before we enter the debate, however, some preliminary comments are called for.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

There has been a long tradition of speaking of “the Colossian heresy” or “false teaching” as that which Paul sought to attack and refute, a tradition that continues to the present. The language is potentially misleading in the two assumptions that are bound up in the phrase.

One is that there was already a clear conception of “Christian orthodoxy,” with clearly delineated boundaries marking off this “Christianity” from other religious groupings of the time and distinguishing it from all counterfeits and perversions (“heresy”). Such a view can no longer be sustained, at least in that simple form. The fact is that the term “Christianity” itself had not yet been coined (in our sources it does not appear for another half century or so).¹¹ And since the work of W. Bauer, it is much harder than once was thought to speak of “orthodoxy and heresy” as well-defined and uniform categories in the second century, let alone the first. This is true to such a degree that if one persists with the idea of “orthodoxy,” it would be hard to deny that some of the forms of earliest “Christianity” would be better designated as “heresy,” at least as judged by the subsequent course of theology.¹²

To say this is not to deny, of course, that there was already a system of belief and praxis that we with hindsight can properly call “Christian.” It is rather to caution against the assumption that that system was already fully rounded and agreed upon and that its boundaries were already clearly defined. In contrast, all the evidence of the New Testament documents, Paul’s letters in particular, indicates that the new movement centered on Christ Jesus was in process of defining itself, of developing its own selfunderstanding and drawing its boundaries. Of course there was already, more or less from the beginning, so far as we can tell, the primary identity marker and boundary of baptism in the name of this Jesus and confession of him as Lord. But this confession stood more at the *center* of Christian self-definition, whereas the *circumference* was still partial and vague (hence the problems confronting Christian communities such as those in Galatia and Corinth). Alternatively expressed, if the christological *unifying* factor of earliest “Christianity” was firmly stated and powerfully cohesive, the *diversity* of formulations in diverse situations and confrontations functioned as centrifugal forces to pull the same “Christianity” into a variety of

⁷James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996), 23.

¹¹It first appears in Ignatius, *Magnesians* 10:3; *Philippians* 6:1.

¹²This is Bauer’s principal thesis in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971/London: SCM, 1972); cf. Caird 160–61.

forms that in effect left the question “Is this also Christianity?” not always clear or the answers agreed.¹³

We should also be alert to the fact that to describe the practitioners of the Colossian “philosophy” (2:8) as “heretics” or “errorists” may be totally to misrepresent them, the character of their “philosophy,” and the threat they posed to the Colossian believers (cf. Schrenk 3350), and may indeed amount to little more than cheap and unworthy name calling. For titles like “heretic” or “errorist” reduce the system represented by those so labeled to the status of no more than a corrupt growth on Christianity as the main plant, their whole system of religion summed up and sweepingly dismissed solely as “error.”¹⁴ This may be effective populist demagoguery, but it is hardly responsible historical judgment. In more or less complete contrast, as will become clearer in the following paragraphs, the Colossian “philosophy” seems to have been quite separate from the Colossian Christian group, and probably much more established and influential on its own account. We do no justice to Christianity if we demean its early rivals by using such language and incapacitate our texts from serving as role models for a Christianity keen to respond to its contemporary challenges.

The second assumption often bound up in talk of “the Colossian heresy/false teaching” is that the Colossian church was in crisis with a vigorous group of teachers in Colossae attempting to subvert the gospel as preached by Paul and actively campaigning to draw the Colossian Christians (believers in Jesus) into a different system of belief.¹⁵ This impression is probably a half-subconscious effect of two factors external to Colossians.

One of those factors is that Galatians seems to provide a model for the sort of confrontation that Paul had with “false teaching”; as Paul confronted what he saw as a virulent threat to the gospel in Galatia, so also, it is readily deduced, in Colossae.¹⁶ Now there certainly were active “troublemakers” in the Galatian churches (probably other Jewish Christian missionaries) whom Paul denounces in no uncertain terms (see, e.g., my *Galatians*). But there is nothing in Colossians like the fierceness and explicitness of the denunciations that are such a feature of Galatians (Gal. 1:6–9; 3:1–3; 4:8–10; 5:2–12). Most striking is the contrast between the polemical epilogue to Galatians, summing up Paul’s continuing deep anxieties (Gal. 6:11–17), and the relatively calm and untroubled conclusion to Colossians (Col. 4:7–17).

The other factor external to Colossians is the continuing influence of F. C. Baur’s reconstruction of early Christian history a century and a half ago. Baur saw that history as determinatively shaped by a massive and long-running confrontation between Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity, with Colossians in particular as a form of Christian Gnosticism confronting Ebion-

¹³ See further my *Unity*.

¹⁴ Even Sappington in his otherwise fine study falls into this trap (ch. 6: “The Colossian Error”). “The Colossian heresy (or false teaching)” continues to serve as the most convenient shorthand for most commentators.

¹⁵ E.g., Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 127, speaks of a “teaching which threatened to engulf the community”; and Gnllka, “Paulusbild” 181, speaks of “an acute danger,” “the acute threat.”

¹⁶ E.g., Pokorný 106 speaks of “a passionate polemic against a heresy,” and J. T. Sanders, *Schismatics* 190, 198, speaks of “a Jewish heresy” and “Judaizers.”

ism.¹⁷ In the present century the dominant tendency has been to understand the threat to the Colossian Christians more simply (!) in syncretistic terms, as we shall see shortly, but the idea of a confrontation with false teaching or “heresy” or “error” still persists.

In contrast, the mood in Colossians is surprisingly relaxed: a lengthy development section (1:9–2:7) before the first clear warning notes are sounded (2:8); a central section with firm rebuttal and relatively restrained polemic limited to 2:16–23; and a still longer concluding section with extensive parenesis, again giving no clear evidence of false teaching being countered (3:1–4:6), prior to the untroubled conclusion already mentioned.¹⁸ Moreover, there is only one passage (2:19) that lends *prima facie* weight to the idea that the “philosophy” was already embraced by one or more of the Colossian Christians themselves (Wolter 149, 162–63; DeMaris 67), and even that is open to another interpretation (see on 2:19). Perhaps, then, as M. D. Hooker in particular has argued, the situation in Colossae, with its threat and potential trouble, was quite different¹⁹ — not a “false teaching” targeted on and already winning support among the members of the church(es) in Colossae, but simply the temptation to conform to more traditional or pervasive ideas and practices, or the attractiveness of teachings on offer from one or more other groups in Colossae (2:4) that might for quite understandable reasons appeal to some of the Colossian baptized.²⁰

In attempting to identify the character of the threat to the Colossian baptized, at least as viewed by the writer of the letter, it is inevitable that the discussion should focus on the only section where the warning and rebuttal is explicit, namely 2:8–23 (so also particularly Lähnemann 49–53; Sappington 144–49; DeMaris 43–45). This does not exclude other passages from consideration, but anything they add to the discussion will be at best allusive, and the strength of the allusion will depend on the clarity gained from that central section, where the outlines are clearest. Currently two main options are held by those who have studied the material most closely.

GNOSTICIZING SYNCRETISM ... ?

One is the model of Hellenistic or pre-Gnostic syncretism. This is the continued outworking of the late nineteenth-century move away from Baur, in which, in reaction to Baur’s overemphasis on Jew-Gentile tensions, the focus of research switched to the larger socioreligious context of the

¹⁷ F. C. Baur, *Paul: His Life and Works*, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1875) 6–21, 26–31. See further my *Partings* ch. 1.

¹⁸ “More admonitory than argumentative and ... most accurately characterized as a letter of exhortation and encouragement” (V. P. Furnish, *ABD* 1.1090).

¹⁹ Hooker, particularly 131–36, followed by Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* 27–28; cf. Yates, “Worship” 14. Cf. also Schenk, “Kolossierbrief” 3350: not a polemic but an attempt to immunize the Christian readers against the possibility of being misled.

²⁰ As an interesting example of how features of a letter can be used to argue quite diverse cases we may note the argument of Kiley 63–65 and Nielsen 104–7 that the indefiniteness of the attack in Colossians is proof of its inauthenticity.

churches founded by Paul in Asia Minor and Greece — first the mystery religions²¹ and then the syncretistic soup of religious philosophical ideas that cohered into the later Gnostic systems.

The most influential recent treatments have been those of Bornkamm (“Heresy”) and Lohse.²² For convenience we focus on the latter. Lohse sets out the case (*Colossians and Philemon* 127–31) by noting the various elements in the letter that, either by the frequency of their mention or more explicitly, can be linked to the Colossian “philosophy” (2:8). But in setting them out he also correlates them into a system that is his own construct and not part of the evidence. Thus he notes the emphasis in the letter on “wisdom” (1:9, 28; 2:3, 23; 3:16; 4:5), “insight” (1:9; 2:2), and “knowledge” (1:6, 9–10; 2:2–3; 3:10) and the references to “the elements of the universe” (2:8, 20), which, quite fairly, he associates with the angels of 2:18 and the cosmic powers of 2:10 and 15. But he further assumes that the knowledge is concerned with the latter (the cosmic elements, etc.), and that it is only by establishing a right relationship with the cosmic powers that one can “gain entry” to the “pleroma” (2:9) and participate in the divine fullness (2:10). “Man can be suffused with the divine ‘fulness’ only after he proves himself subservient to the angels and powers in the ‘worship of angels’ ” Quite fairly he deduces that observance of regulations and ascetical practice is enjoined by the philosophy (2:16, 21, 23), but he further deduces that the philosophy took the form of a mystery cult, with talk of circumcision in 2:11 pointing to “a decisive act of initiation” and ἐμβατεύειν in 2:18 indicating initiatory mystery rites. And finally he suggests that the Colossian syncretism would have tried to find a place for Christ within this synthesis.

It should be evident how much of the plausibility of the Gnostic/mystery cult hypothesis depends on the links thus postulated; the “syncretistic” (fusion of different elements) character of the philosophy is more the effect of the way Lohse has fused the various elements listed above than of actual connections indicated in the text of the letter. Thus, in particular, he ignores the fact that the wisdom/knowledge/insight motif is focused largely on the theme of God’s “mystery” (1:25–2:3), which is thoroughly rooted in the Pauline conviction of God’s purpose to include Gentiles in his saving purpose. Since the theme of divine fullness in 2:9 most probably depends on the earlier reference in the “hymn” of 1:15–20, Lohse’s thesis requires the questionable

²¹ Most influential here has been Dibelius, “Isis Initiation,” whose interpretation, however, hangs entirely on one word (ἐμβατεύων) in 2:18 (but see the comments below on that verse).

²² For their influence see Maurer; Conzelmann 148; Cerfaux, *Christian* 479–82; R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 4–5, 9–19; Lähnemann *passim*; P. Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975) 195; G. Strecker, “Judenchristentum und Gnosis,” in *Altes Testament — Frühjudentum — Gnosis*, ed. K.-W. Tröger (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1980) 261–82 (here 273); Gnlika, *Kolossierbrief* 163–69; Findeis 346–47; and Argall 14–20. It was popular in the 1960s and 1970s to characterize Colossians as countering the Gnostic soteriology/christology of the heretics with a more radically Gnostic soteriology/christology (Schenke, “Widerstreit” 403; Grässer 152; H.-F. Weiss, “Gnostische Motive” 315). Cf. Schmithals 120–21 and W. Marxsen’s description of Colossians as “christianized” (near Gnostic) heresy (*Introduction to the New Testament* [Oxford: Blackwell/Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968] 177–86). Gunther 3–4 provides a fascinating list of no less than forty-four different suggestions regarding the identity of Paul’s opponents in Colossae, two-thirds of them envisaging some sort of syncretistic or Gnostic mix.

corollary that the hymn was derived from (or at least expresses) the Colossian philosophy; besides which the idea of God filling all things is again thoroughly Jewish (see on 1:19). The circumcision-uncircumcision antithesis (2:11–13) presupposes a Jewish perspective and the characteristic Pauline concern to overcome that antithesis (3:11); in contrast to which the suggestion that “circumcision” indicates an act of initiation into a mystery cult is baseless (see further below, pp. 33f.). Likewise the suggestion that 2:18 has in view visions of angels seen during mystery rites in the Colossian cult (Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 114, 120) should probably be abandoned²³ since the verse can be more plausibly interpreted of entering the heavenly temple to worship with the angels (see on 2:18). Finally, and despite the widespread assumption to the contrary, nothing in the letter itself clearly indicates that the Colossian philosophy fitted Christ into its schema (2:19 hardly indicates this),²⁴ or that the Colossian “philosophy” should be regarded as some kind of corruption of Christian belief in Christ (“Christian heresy”).²⁵ Given the popularity of the (pre-)Gnostic hypothesis, we should simply also note the lack of any clear indication of the dualism that is indispensable to the hypothesis of a Gnosticism properly so called and of any good reason to interpret verses like 2:11–12, 21 and 23, or even 1:13 and 3:2, in terms of ontological dualism.²⁶

There is too much in all this that has to be abstracted from the context or read into the text. Only if a more plausible hypothesis is not forthcoming would it be necessary to return to the hypothesis of gnosticizing syncretism to look at it afresh and to see whether the weaknesses of Lohse’s reconstruction could be remedied without introducing further stresses into the text.

... OR JEWISH?

In recent years the pendulum has begun to swing back toward recognition of more distinctively Jewish features in the Colossian threat, stimulated in large part by the continuing impact of the

²³ Note also Pokorný’s comment: “We are not able to demonstrate that the gnostics esteemed and venerated angels” (117–18). Despite this he speaks of the Colossian “gnostics” (112–20).

²⁴ Cf. particularly Francis, “Christological Argument,” who finds “nothing that urges the conclusion that the error itself was distinctly christological at all” (203); Sappington 174–76.

²⁵ Contrast particularly Lindemann, *Kolossierbrief* 81–85, who compares the Colossian teachers with the German Christians of the Nazi period in Germany (7, 81–82, 88–89).

²⁶ 1:13 and 3:2 could, however, quite properly be described as expressing an eschatological or apocalyptic dualism (see the comments below on 1:13).

Dead Sea Scrolls.²⁷ This is the direction in which my own study of the text has led, and it is incumbent on me to explain why in a little more detail.

(1) First, we need to recall the information already provided above, that Colossae, and the other Lycus valley cities, probably had substantial Jewish ethnic minorities. This implies the presence of (probably) several synagogues in Colossae, bearing in mind that just as almost all churches at this time were house churches (see on Col. 4:15), so many Jewish gatherings for prayer must have been in private houses. If the pattern indicated in Acts and implied in Paul's letters applies here, we probably have to envisage a church made up initially of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles or proselytes (mostly the latter if 1:12, 27 and 2:13 are any guide), some of them drawn from (or indeed still members of) the synagogue (which would give the affirmations in 3:11 and 4:11 more point).

Moreover, we must avoid the later stereotype that Jews and Christians became clearly separate and distinct from each other almost from the first. On the contrary, there is clear evidence that many Christians, not least Gentile Christians, continued for a long time to regard the synagogue as equally their home and so to attend both church and synagogue. Over the next hundred years "Barnabas" had to warn Christians against becoming proselytes (*Barnabas* 3:6), Ignatius had to warn his Asia Minor readers further down the Meander against "living in accordance with Judaism" and against "judaizing" (*Magnesians* 8:1; 10:3), and Justin Martyr spoke likewise of Christians who had adopted Judaism and "gone over to the polity of the law" (*Dialogue* 47.4). So, too, we have to take serious note of the exhortations of such as Origen (*Homily on Leviticus* 5:8; *Selecta on Exodus* 12:46) and Chrysostom (*Homilia ad Judaeos* 1, PG 48.844–45) warning Christians against attending synagogue on Saturday and church on Sunday, not to mention the canons of the fourth-century Council of Laodicea (Canons 16, 29, 37, and 38) forbidding Christians to observe Jewish feasts and keep the sabbath (see, e.g., Trebilco 101).

In other words, the members of the different groups in Colossae — synagogue and church — would probably not be strangers to each other or ignorant of each other's beliefs and practices — to put the point no more strongly.

(2) We know too little of diaspora Judaism in this period, but what we do know gives us a number of clear pointers. First, there is a persistent record of Jews being anxious to maintain their distinct religious identity and of being given the right to do so. Most often mentioned are the rights of assembly and places of prayer (synagogues), payment of the temple tax, freedom from military service, and the right to live according to their own laws, often with particular reference to sabbath and food laws. Laodicea features in one of these decrees (Josephus, *Antiquities*

²⁷ See particularly Francis, "Humility"; for the influence of Francis see Kehl, "Erniedrigung," especially 371–74; Carr, "Notes" 496–500; Lincoln, *Paradise* 112; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 141–45; Evans, "Colossian Mystics"; Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions"; Wink, *Naming* 80 n. 93; Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians* 22–26 (26: "an early form of *merkabah* mysticism"), who has changed his mind from his first edition (166: "a Judaism which had undergone a remarkable fusion with ... an early and simple form of gnosticism"); Fowl 126–29; Yates, *Colossians* 55–56; Aletti, *Épître aux Colossiens* 196–99, 211–13; and especially the whole thesis of Sappington.

14.241–42), and a Jewish inscription from Hierapolis (*CIJ* 777) also mentions the feasts of Passover and Pentecost (Trebilco 12–19 and 199 n. 70; Feldman 70).

We cannot, however, assume from this that the Judaism of the Colossian synagogues was wholly uniform — any more than was the Judaism (or Judaisms) in the land of Israel, of which we have more information. Around their common features, the “sects” of Palestinian Judaism displayed a striking diversity of specific belief and halakhic practice.²⁸ So with diaspora Judaism as well as with infant Christianity we should hesitate to envisage or speak of a regular pattern of orthodoxy as the norm. Rather we might expect that something at least of the diversity of Palestinian Judaism was reflected in the diaspora. This is not to suggest that there were flourishing groups of Pharisees and Sadducees in Colossae, but it does suggest that the older idea of Lightfoot that the Colossian “heresy” was a form of or shared characteristics with Essenism may have more credibility than at first appears (cf. more recently Foerster and Saunders). That the diversity of religious belief and practice in the land of Israel could be transposed into the diaspora is confirmed by the presence of a community of Samaritans on the island of Delos in the Aegean who called themselves “Israelites who pay firstfruits to holy Mt. Gerizim” (Schürer 3.71). And nearer home we should recall that Paul himself seems to have experienced or practiced mystical ascent (2 Cor. 12:1–7 — a period of his life probably to be located in Cilicia [Gal. 2:21; Acts 11:26]), that according to Acts 19:1–3 Paul subsequently met a group in Ephesus who had received “John’s baptism,” and that the seer of Revelation’s characteristically Jewish apocalyptic visions are said to have taken place in Patmos (Rev. 1:9; note the often observed parallel between Rev. 3:14 and Col. 1:15).²⁹

At the same time the evidence of Jewish syncretism in these diaspora communities is lacking, despite older claims to the contrary.³⁰ The easy both-and solution to the dispute about the Colossian “heresy” — viz. neither Jewish nor Hellenistic syncretism, but Jewish/Hellenistic syncretism — is not supported by the evidence regarding the Jewish communities in Asia Minor (see now Kraabel; Sanders, *Schismatics* 191–96). And one should hesitate to speak of “Jewish Gnos-

CIJ Corpus Inscriptionum Judicarum

²⁸ See, e.g., my *Partings* 12–13, 18.

²⁹ *Sibylline Oracles* 4, which is sometimes thought to have originated in Asia Minor (4.107 refers to the destruction of Laodicea by earthquake and 4.150–51 to the Meander), has some curious parallels with Colossians that may indicate that it underwent a sectarian Jewish redaction (6–7, 33–34, 165–70).

³⁰ See Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians* 12–13; Trebilco ch. 6; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile* 74. R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 18–19, is quite unjustified in claiming that “the synagogues [of Phrygia] had a reputation for laxity and openness to speculation drifting in from the hellenistic world.” Pokorný 20, 116; Wolter 160–61 are still influenced by the older view. Wedderburn 6–12 is more circumspect, drawing a parallel with the clearly syncretistic teaching of Elchasai, which emerged in Syria about fifty years later. Even so, it should be clear that a certain amount of social interaction between different ethnic groups within a society structured on the system of patronage should not be described as “syncretism” any more than the practice commended by Paul in 1 Cor. 5:10 and 10:27. On the famous Julia Severa inscription from Acmonia see Trebilco 58–60.

ticism” or “Gnostic Judaism” at this period without firmer evidence than Colossians itself,³¹ unless “gnostic” is being used in a diluted sense more closely equivalent to “apocalyptic” or “mystical.”³² The evidence we have from elsewhere in first-century Judaism is that, for example, while Jewish apologists were very willing to make use of Greek philosophies and categories like the figure of “wisdom,” and while apocalyptists and mystics were keen to explore the revelations of the heavens, it was all done within circles who maintained a firm Jewish identity — and not least, or rather, particularly when they sought thereby to enhance the stature of Judaism in the eyes of others (see also below). Certainly, as we shall see, the categories used in Colossians itself have to be judged as consistently closer to those used in Jewish writings current at the time than to the later Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi.

(3) Nor can we assume that the diaspora Jewish synagogues were closed off from the communities in which they lived, despised by their neighbors and living a sort of ghetto existence; here, too, we must avoid stereotypes drawn from later history. On the contrary, we know several cities in Asia Minor where the Jewish community and synagogue were well integrated into the social and civic life of the city.³³ And the few details we have from the Lycus valley cities, including a number of Jewish epitaphs in Hierapolis, only serve to strengthen the impression that the Jewish communities (some Jews at least) would have been respected and well integrated into the business and community life of these cities (Schürer 3.27–28).

Conversely we should not assume that the Jews of Colossae would have been vigorously evangelistic. Here again the broader picture is clear: on the whole, Jewish communities were content to have their rights to practice their ancestral religion affirmed, without attempting to convert others to what was essentially an ethnic religion (the religion of the Jews); at the same time, however, they welcomed Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism (of whom there were many) and were pleased when such God-fearing Gentiles asked for circumcision and so became proselytes.³⁴ In some contrast, the compulsion to mission was a distinctive feature of the Jewish group that identified themselves by reference to Jesus the Christ.

³¹ See, e.g., those cited by Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 129 n. 120.

³² It is this correlation that enables Scholem to speak of Jewish *merkabah* mysticism as a kind of “Jewish gnosticism” in *Jewish Gnosticism*.

³³ Trebilco studies particularly Sardis, Acmonia, and Apamea, all within a 150-mile radius of Colossae. On Aphrodisias see particularly J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias* (Cambridge Philological Society Supp. 12; Cambridge, 1987). On the level of social intercourse between Jews and Gentiles see, e.g., S. J. D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HTR* 82 (1989) 13–33; E. P. Sanders, “Jewish Association with Gentiles and Galatians 2:11–14,” in *Studies in Paul and John*, J. L. Martyn FS, ed. R. Fortna and B. R. Gaventa (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 170–88; my *Galatians* 119–21.

³⁴ On God-fearers (or God-worshippers) in Asia Minor see Trebilco ch. 7, and on lack of missionary outreach (proselytizing zeal) within the Judaism of the period see S. McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); M. Goodman, “Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century,” in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the*

This is not to say, however, that diaspora Jews were shy in explaining themselves. As already mentioned, we know of several apologies on behalf of Jews and Judaism, in which Jewish history (particularly Moses) and the peculiar beliefs and practices of the Jews are explained or expressed in categories and language more conducive to winning the respect of cultured Hellenists.³⁵ Philo is only the most striking example of a well-educated Jew who used Platonic and Stoic philosophy to demonstrate the rational and religious power of Judaism. And Josephus would not have been the only Jew writing in Greek to describe the different Jewish “sects” as “philosophies” (see on 2:8).³⁶ We may also assume that the tradition of a Jewish apologist engaging in dialogue with others neither began nor ended with Trypho.³⁷ Apology, it should be noted, is not the same as evangelism or proselytism, and, more important, it serves as much the purpose of boosting the self-confidence of those who wish to win respect of neighbors and business associates as of explaining the unfamiliar to interested outsiders. At all events, it is more likely than not that the Jews of Colossae included those more than ready (and able) to explain their religious practices to inquirers and even to take some initiative in providing an apologetic exposition of Judaism in the public forum.

THE COLOSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

Against the background just sketched out, it has to be said, the threat to the church in Colossae makes perfect sense. The implications of 1:12, 21–22; 2:13; and 3:11–12 in particular are that the presuppositional framework of thought for both writer and recipients focuses on Jewish covenantal distinctiveness and privilege (see on these verses). Elements in 2:8–10, 15, 18, 20, and 23, which have seemed to some to require a hypothesis of Hellenistic or more explicitly (pre-

Roman Empire, ed. J. Lieu, et al. (London: Routledge, 1992) 53–78; also *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) ch. 4.

³⁵ See particularly the wisdom and philosophical literature and fragments of lost Judeo-Hellenistic works in *OTP* 2.477–606, 775–919; C. R. Holladay, *Fragments from Hellenistic Jewish Authors* (4 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars, 1983, 1989, 1995, 1996); see also J. J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

³⁶ With reference to Schweizer’s thesis that the Colossian philosophy was a kind of “Jewish Pythagoreanism” (*Colossians* 131–33; “Christ” 452–54; “Christianity”), which has influenced Wedderburn, *Colossians* 4–7, and Wolter 159–62, we should note: (a) the thesis depends too much on a particular interpretation of the στοιχεία in 2:8, 20 (see the comments below on 2:8), apart from which there is nothing distinctively Pythagorean about the features of the philosophy (listed by Schweizer, *Colossians* 133); and (b) Josephus was able to describe the Essenes as “a group that follows a way of life taught to the Greeks by Pythagoras” (*Antiquities* 15.371) as part of his commendation of the Jewish sects by presenting them in Greek garb (see further Schürer 2.589–90). Such considerations would explain why the Colossian philosophy might give the *impression* of Pythagoreanism without owing anything substantive to it in fact.

³⁷ See particularly R. L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (New Haven: Yale University, 1971) 28–30, 35–38, 41–43, 50–53.

)Gnostic syncretism, can more easily be seen to fit within Judaism (see on these verses), including the emphasis on wisdom (also in 1:9, 28; 2:3; 3:16; 4:5) and fullness (also in 1:9, 19, 25; 2:2; 4:12);³⁸ and indeed within a Judaism, somewhat surprisingly, given the different tone of its challenge and of the epistolary response, not so very different from that promoted in the Galatian churches (see pp. 136f. below). And, most striking of all, several other elements are so clearly Jewish that no other hypothesis will serve (see on 2:11–14, 16–17, 21–22).³⁹ In other words, the hypothesis of a syncretistic religious philosophy with only some Jewish elements is both unnecessary and highly implausible,⁴⁰ and easy talk of “Gnostic Judaism” at this stage is probably a sign of a too casual historical imagination.

None of the features of the teaching alluded to in 2:8–23 resist being understood in Jewish terms, and several can only or most plausibly be understood in Jewish terms (cf. particularly Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* 24–27). To be more precise, the division of the world into “circumcision and uncircumcision” (2:11–13; 3:11) and the observance of the sabbath (2:16) would generally be recognized in the ancient world as distinctively Jewish, as indeed also food and purity rules (2:16, 21) when set alongside circumcision and sabbath (see on 2:11, 16, 21); so distinctively Jewish are they, indeed, that any non-Jew adopting them would be said to be “judaizing” (adopting a Jewish way of life — see, e.g., my *Galatians* 129). As Schenk 3351–53 observes, calendar piety, food laws, and circumcision cannot be regarded as random elements of some syncretistic cult, but are the very norms that provide and confirm the identity of Israel (similarly Harrington 157–58 and J. T. Sanders, *Schismatics* 190). In other words, the number of distinctively and definitively Jewish features are such that it is scarcely possible to envisage the Colossian “philosophy” as a non-Jewish core that has attracted Jewish elements; at most we have to speak of an apocalyptic or mystical Judaism transposed into the diaspora that has been able to make itself attractive to those sympathetic to Judaism by playing on familiar fears and making more impressive claims.

The main proponents of the Colossian “philosophy,” therefore, almost certainly have to be understood as belonging to one of the Colossian synagogues. If indeed there were Jews in Colos-

³⁸ But can we deduce that the Colossian philosophy was laying claim to a *higher* wisdom (as, e.g., Lähnemann 33 suggests)?

³⁹ Several, e.g., Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* 129 n. 119, point out that the concept “law” is absent from Colossians. But since the law’s most prominent features for diaspora Jews (circumcision, food laws, sabbaths, and purity regulations) are specifically mentioned (2:11, 13, 16, 20–21), the fact that the term “law” itself is lacking is of no great moment. See also Wright’s more robust rebuttal of the point (*Colossians and Philemon* 25–26) and the comments below on 2:16.

⁴⁰ Schweizer, *Colossians* 128: a “world view ... with little more than Jewish trimmings”; Stegemann 530: “a few Jewish bits and pieces (*Versatzstücken*), nothing to do with Judaism itself”; Gnika, *Kolossierbrief* 168: “a Jewish shell (Gehäuse) filled with an alien spirit.” The most recent discussions of the opponents in Colossae pursue essentially the same line: ascetic visionaries who have drawn on Judaism for some aspects of their teachings (Sumney 386), or a syncretistic blend of “popular Middle Platonic, Jewish and Christian elements that cohere around the pursuit of wisdom” (DeMaris, here 17). Kiley 61–62 provides a useful enumeration of the options canvassed over the past hundred years. See also n. 34 on 2:18.

sae confident in their religion (2:4, 8), above all in the access it gave them to the worship of heaven (2:18) through faithfulness to what were traditional (Jewish) observances (2:16, 21–23), then we should not be surprised if they professed such claims in dialogue and debate with other Colossians. And if there then grew up in their midst a new version of their own teaching, proclaiming the Jewish Messiah and the fulfillment of ancient Jewish hopes (note again particularly 1:12 and 3:12), then, again, it would hardly be a surprise if some of the more outspoken and self-confident members of the synagogues spoke dismissively of the beliefs, devotions, and praxis of the new movement as compared with their own.

In short, given the various factors outlined above, including the probable origin of the Colossian church from within synagogue circles, the likely presence of Israelite sectarianism within the diaspora, the lack of other evidence of Jewish syncretism in Asia Minor, and the readiness of some Jews to promote their distinctive religious practices in self-confident apology (see above), we need look no further than one or more of the Jewish synagogues in Colossae for the source of whatever influences were thought to threaten the young church there. The more relaxed style of the polemic in Colossians and the absence there of anything quite like the fierceness of the reaction in Galatians further suggests that what was being confronted was not a sustained attempt to undermine or further convert the Colossians, but a synagogue apologetic promoting itself as a credible philosophy more than capable of dealing with whatever heavenly powers might be thought to control or threaten human existence. To describe this as a “heresy” is quite inappropriate, and to brand it simply as “false teaching” (maintained by Colossian “errorists”!) reduces that teaching to its controverted features while ignoring what must have been many points in common between the Jews and Christians in Colossae.⁴¹

⁴¹ For a fuller exposition of the case summarized above see my “The Colossian Philosophy: A Confident Jewish Apologia,” *Biblica* 76 (1995) 153–81.

THE THREAT TO FAITH AND THE “COLOSSIAN HERESY”⁸

A. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The letter to the Colossians has been described as “Paul’s vigorous reaction to the news of the strange teaching which was being inculcated at Colossae” (Bruce, 165). The apostle became aware of the threatened danger and the need to rebut the error which lay at the heart of this strange aberration of the apostolic kerygma. So he warns the community, which is apparently unsuspecting and innocent, not to be misled by plausible but false arguments (2:4). They are to be on their guard lest they are kidnaped from the truth and led into the slavery of error (2:8). The congregation is urgently warned and admonished regarding the distinction between true and false teaching.

This erroneous teaching has normally been described as the “Colossian heresy” and the nature of it has been discussed for more than one hundred years since Lightfoot wrote his important commentary on Colossians in 1875. There is still considerable difference of opinion as to exactly what was this false teaching that threatened the peace and stability of the Colossian Christians and their near neighbors. (For a bewildering variety of opinion as to the identity of the opponents at Colossae see J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul’s Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* [NovTSup 35; Leiden: Brill, 1973] 3, 4, who lists forty-four different suggestions of nineteenth and twentieth century NT scholars.)

B. WAS THERE A “COLOSSIAN HERESY”?

Nowhere in the letter does Paul give a formal exposition of the heresy, and its chief features can be detected only by piecing together and interpreting the apostle’s positive counterarguments. In fact, it has recently been questioned by Hooker (*Christ*, 315–31) as to whether these counterarguments point to the existence of a “Colossian heresy” at all. Paul puts the Romans and Philippians on their guard against certain false teachings and wrong practices (Rom 16:17–20; Phil 3:2, 18, 19) without therefore implying that these practices had actually invaded the congregations in Rome and Philippi. Might he not be doing the same thing in Colossians? Hooker points out that, unlike the situation with the Galatians, there is no evidence that the church at Colossae had succumbed to distressing error (cf. 1:3–8; 2:1–5). It is argued that evidence is also lacking for the existence of false teaching with regard to Christ. She claims there were no such heretics in the Colossian community and that a more likely explanation of the situation is that young converts were under external pressure to conform “to the beliefs and practices of their pagan and Jewish neighbours” (*Christ*, 329). Paul’s statements about the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ’s work in creation and redemption (1:15–20) are a reminder that they need look nowhere else than to Christ for a completion of salvation and his exhortations are to be understood as general warnings.

⁸Peter T. O'Brien, vol. 44, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), xxx.

NovTSup Supplement(s) to *Novum Testamentum*

NT New Testament

cf. *confer*, compare

Hooker's thesis contains much that is appealing: it has stressed again Paul's positive statements about the life and stability of the congregation (1:3–8; 2:5) and reminded us that there is nothing in Colossians like the strong indignation found in Galatians where Paul sees the very foundations of the faith being shaken. Further, Hooker has warned that in attempting to reconstruct the situation behind Paul's writings there is the danger of arguing in a circle (*Christ*, 319). Perhaps therefore one has to speak in terms of tendencies rather than a clear-cut system with precise and definite points. Nevertheless in our judgment her thesis has not taken sufficient account of the language of chapter 2:8–23, with its references to “fullness,” specific ascetic injunctions (such as “Do not handle! Do not taste! Don't even touch!” v 21), its statements about the Colossian Christians being taken to task over food and holy days, and its unusual phrases which are best interpreted as catchwords of Paul's opponents (see the exegesis of 2:8–23). One also wonders whether her thesis really accounts for the emphasis on “realized eschatology” in the letter. Her contention, on the other hand, that the letter as a whole, especially chapter 1:15–20, is to be read as a polemic against the Jewish Torah (“both creation and redemption are completed in Christ because he has replaced the Jewish Law,” and “Jesus Christ had indeed replaced the Torah as the revelation both of God's glory and of his purpose for the universe and for mankind. It is this fundamental truth which is expressed in Colossians ...,” in *Christ*, 329, 331), is rather surprising in the light of the absence of terms such as “law” and “command” in the epistle (cf. H. Weiss, “The Law in the Epistle to the Colossians,” *CBQ* 34 [1972] 294, and Schweizer, *ThBer* 5 [1976] 174).

C. SOME DISTINGUISHING MARKS OF THE “HERESY”

Although Paul gives us no formal exposition of the false teaching there are several crucial passages where he appears to be quoting slogans or catchwords of the opponents and these serve as invaluable clues in any attempt to understand the nature of what is being advocated at Colossae. To begin with the teaching was set forth as “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία, 2:8) based on venerable tradition (the term παράδοσις, “tradition,” was used apparently to draw attention to the antiquity, dignity and revelational character of the teaching; Paul, however, rejects any suggestion of divine origin: it was the tradition of men, pure and simple) and was supposed to impart true knowledge and insight (2:18, 23).

The following phrases appear to be catchwords of the opponents which Paul quotes in his attack on the false teaching (for a detailed examination of these expressions see the relevant exegetical sections):

- 2:9 (cf. 1:19), “all the fullness” (πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα)
- 2:18 “delighting in humility and the worship of angels” (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων)
- 2:18 “[things] which he has seen upon entering” (ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων)
- 2:21 “Don't handle, don't taste, don't even touch” (μὴ ἅψη, μὴδὲ λείψῃ, μὴδὲ θίγῃς)
- 2:23 “voluntary worship” (ἐθελοθρησκεία), “humility” (ταπεινοφροσύνη), and “severe treatment of the body” (ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος).

In addition to these citations the apostle asserts that the false teachers took the members of the congregation to task over food regulations and with respect to holy days (2:16, 20, 21). Observance of these taboos in the “philosophy” was related to obedient submission to “the elemental spirits of the world” (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, 2:8, 20), an enigmatic phrase that also appears in Galatians (4:3 cf. v 9; for a brief survey of the main lines along which this phrase has been interpreted see 129–132).

D. INTERPRETING THESE DISTINGUISHING MARKS

How then are these unusual features to be understood? What was the nature or, if one cannot be too specific, what were the tendencies of the false teachers? No complete agreement has been achieved among scholars (Kümmel, *Introduction*, 339) concerning the nature of the teaching. Basically, however, it seems to have been Jewish. Evidence of this is seen in the part played in the “philosophy” by legal ordinances, food regulations, the sabbath, new moon, and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar (cf. Bruce, *Paul*, 413). Reference is made to circumcision (2:11) though it does not appear to feature as one of the legal requirements.

But what kind of Judaism? Was it some sort of “Jewish nonconformity” or “nonconformist Judaism,” to borrow Matthew Black’s recently popularized wider term (*The Scrolls and Christian Origins* [New York: Scribner’s, 1961] 166; cited by Bruce, *Paul*, 416; note especially the latter’s treatment of the “Colossian heresy,” 412–17, to which I am indebted)? It does not seem to have been the more straightforward Judaism against which the Galatian churches had to be warned, a Judaism probably brought in by emissaries from Judea. Bruce (*Paul*, 413) suggests the Colossian heresy was “more probably a Phrygian development in which a local variety of Judaism had been fused with a philosophy of non-Jewish origin—an early and simple form of gnosticism.” The synagogues in Phrygia seem to have been exposed to the influences of Hellenistic speculation and with these the tendencies to religious syncretism. Ramsay (*Cities*, 2. 637, *passim*) drew attention to the example—no doubt an extreme case—of a Jewish lady who was both honorary ruler of the synagogue and priestess of the imperial cult!

In the Colossian false teaching a special place was apparently given to angels, as agents in creation and in the giving of the law. One form of belief in angelic agency in creation appears in Philo (cf. H. Chadwick, “St. Paul and Philo of Alexandria,” *BJRL* 48 [1965–66] 286–307, especially 303), another in Justin Martyr. The latter referred to certain Jewish teachers who took the words “let us make man” (Gen 1:26) and “as one of us” (Gen 3:22) to indicate “God spoke to angels, or that the human frame was the workmanship of angels” (Justin, *Dialogue* 62; cf. Bruce, *Paul*, 413).

The angelic agency in the giving of the law is mentioned by Paul in Galatians 3:19, as well as in Acts 7:53 and Hebrews 2:2, and it is attested in contemporary Jewish literature (cf. the earlier Jub 1:29 as well as the Mek. on Exod 20:18; Sifre on Num 12:5; and *Pesiq. R.* 21). In the Colossian false teaching these angels were to be placated by keeping strict legal observances. The breaking of the law incurred their displeasure and brought the lawbreaker into debt and bondage to them (cf. Col 2:12–15). These angels are included among the στοιχεῖα (a term already used

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Mek. Mekilta

Pesiq. R. Pesiqta Rabbati

with reference to angels at Gal 4:3, 9), and were “not only elemental beings but dominant ones as well—principalities and powers, lords of the planetary spheres, sharers in the divine plenitude (πλήρωμα) and intermediaries between heaven and earth” (Bruce, *Paul*, 414). Apparently they were thought to control the lines of communication between God and man. All this was presented as a form of advanced teaching for a spiritual elite. Epaphras had instructed the Colossian Christians only in the first steps and they were now being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge to attain to true “fullness” (πλήρωμα). To do this they must follow a path of rigorous asceticism until finally they become citizens of that spiritual world, the realm of light.

In the following sections, although not intended as a history of research, the major scholarly contributions over the last hundred years to an understanding of the Colossian “philosophy” are examined. In this treatment I am particularly indebted to the survey of Francis and Meeks (*Conflict*, especially 209–218). We begin with:

E. LIGHTFOOT: ESSENE JUDAISM OF A GNOSTIC KIND

Lightfoot (71–111; cf. 347–417) regarded the Colossian heresy as a form of Judaizing *gnōsis* which he traced back to the Essenes. He argued (a) that Essene Judaism was “gnostic,” marked by the intellectual exclusiveness and speculative tenets of gnosticism (this term expresses “the simplest and most elementary conceptions” of theosophic speculation, shadowy mysticism and spiritual intermediaries; it does not, according to Lightfoot, refer to “a distinct designation of any sect or sects at this early date”; cf. Francis and Meeks, *Conflict*, 209); (b) that this kind of Jewish thought and practice had established itself in this part of Asia Minor during the apostolic age; and (c) that the Colossian heresy was a type of gnostic Judaism, since it was clearly Jewish in its basis, and was marked by several distinctive features of gnosticism: an intellectual elite (with its insistence on wisdom and knowledge), cosmogonic speculation (with an emphasis on angelic mediation, the πλήρωμα, and so on), asceticism and calendrical regulations (cf. Bruce, *Paul*, 415).

More recently the discovery of the Qumran material with its points of contact in phraseology (e.g. “his body of flesh,” τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, at Col 1:22; cf. 2:11 and note 1QpHab 9:1, 2) and its references to a sect that observed a heterodox calendar, its sabbath regulations, food distinctions, asceticism, an insistence on wisdom and knowledge, involving a special understanding of the world, of angels, etc, have led some to consider that the Colossian philosophy was an offshoot of the teaching of the Qumran community. So W. D. Davies (“Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Flesh and Spirit.” *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl [New York: Harper, 1957] 166–69) maintained that there were clear allusions to the Qumran writings recognizable in the ascetic rules and the worship of the principalities and powers, while P. Benoit (“Qumran and the New Testament.” *Paul and Qumran. Studies in New Testament Exegesis*, ed. J. Murphy-O’Connor [London: Chapman, 1968] 17) was of the opinion that circumcision, the exact observance of food laws and the festal calendar together with speculation about the angelic powers coincided with the views of the heterodox Jews living by the Dead Sea.

But in spite of the striking parallels one cannot identify the Colossian heresy as a variety of Essenism or of the Qumran doctrine. For example, we do not find in the letter to the Colossians

e.g. *exempli gratia*, for example

ed. edited, edition(s), editor

any reference to an insistence on ceremonial washings, which seem to have played a significant role among the Essenes in general and at Qumran in particular. Baptism is mentioned in Colossians not as the true counterpart to heretical washings but in connection with the “circumcision made without hands” (Col 2: 11, 12; E. M. Yamauchi, “Sectarian Parallels. Qumran and Colossae,” *BSac* 121 [1964] 141–52, after a careful assessment of the evidence from the scrolls, concluded that the Colossian heresy was not to be equated with Essene heterodoxy. Some of its features were quite dissimilar to Qumran’s views, while others had greater affinities with the Gnostics of Chenoboskion; apparently the Colossian heresy reflected a stage of doctrinal evolution subsequent to Jewish heterodoxy and before the development of later Gnosticism).

F. DIBELIUS: A PAGAN MYSTERY CULT

One of the most influential contributions to an understanding of the Colossian heresy was that of Martin Dibelius in an essay which first appeared in 1917 (the English translation, “The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites,” has been published in *Conflict*, 61–121). Beginning his investigation with the mystery cults Dibelius examined the unusual term ἐμβατεύω (“enter” found at Col 2:18; see the relevant exegesis of this verse) used to describe initiates entering the sanctuary so as to consult the oracle on completion of the rite. From the inscriptional data discovered in the sanctuary of Apollo at Claros, Dibelius argued that the term signified mystery initiation. The Colossian Christians, without abandoning their Christianity, joined with their non-Christian teachers in a cultic life given over to the powers and were initiated into a cosmic mystery devoted to the elements (στοιχεῖα). The Colossian heresy was a Gnostic mystery; since the practice of this strange cult was independent of the church Dibelius considers this to have been an instance of pre-Christian Gnosticism.

Dibelius’ preoccupation with ἐμβατεύω (“enter”) in the above-mentioned inscriptions is the most significant factor in his reconstruction of the Colossian heresy. No importance is attached to the fact that the Clarion Apollo was an oracle sanctuary and no oracle is mentioned in Colossians. Also because Dibelius fixed his attention on the independent, pagan character of the cult he rejects any Jewish influence at Colossae (note the critique of Dibelius in *Conflict*, 210, 211, where it is also argued that Lohse [especially 127–31], while recognizing the Colossian allusions to apparent Jewish tradition, follows Dibelius’ model faithfully. Accordingly, the regulations mentioned in chapter 2:21, etc point neither to Essenism nor heretical Judaism but to a Gnostic or pre-Gnostic mystery cult: some Colossian Christians believed initiation and submission to the powers would perhaps open the way to Christ).

G. BORNKAMM: A SYNCRETISM OF GnosticIZED JUDAISM AND PAGAN ELEMENTS

The important article of Günther Bornkamm, first published in 1948 and translated into English as “The Heresy of Colossians” (*Conflict*, 123–46) concluded that the Colossian false teaching was a pronounced syncretistic religion. Bornkamm adduced material from a wide range of religious movements in order to throw light on its various facets. He argued that the root of the heresy was to be found in a gnosticized Judaism, into which Jewish and Iranian-Persian elements, in addition to Chaldean astrological influences, had been uniquely synthesized and linked with the Christian faith. Inasmuch as Bornkamm understands the heresy as Gnosticism of a Jewish origin he is closer to Lightfoot than to Dibelius (Francis and Meeks, *Conflict*, 211; Conzelmann, 132, and H. M. Schenke, “Der Widerstreit gnostischer und kirchlicher Christologie im

Spiegel des Kolosserbriefes,”; ZTK 61 [1964] 391–403, generally follow Bornkamm’s reconstruction of the heresy; Conzelmann understands Gnosticism as a broad spiritual movement, not properly a religion, while both he and Schenke consider the Gnostic opponents in the church understood themselves to be Christians). His approach to the practice of a mystery, however, is similar to that of Dibelius, except that Bornkamm recognized the difficulty of Dibelius’ presentation which located the source and actual practice of the heresy outside the church. Bornkamm therefore understood the mystery as being within the congregation. The heresy was a Christian error, the decisive characteristic of which was the opponents’ teaching about the principalities and powers: Bornkamm postulates that the opponents gave Christ an integrated place among these powers. But Colossians does not say this (Francis and Meeks, *Conflict*, 212).

Further questions about this reconstruction have also been raised: granted the syncretistic nature of the religious situation in Phrygia (and Martin, NCB, 4, 5, has drawn attention to this with references to the cult of Cybele, the great mother-goddess of Asia, which flourished in Phrygia [cf. Strabo]; the widespread worship of Isis in Paul’s day [cf. R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971] 130, 131); the linking of Iranian cosmology and astrology with the redemption-mystery of the religion of Mithras and its early arrival in the Asia Minor region (as well as the syncretistic Judaism already noted) one can legitimately ask whether such a composite religion as portrayed by Bornkamm actually existed. Even if some of Bornkamm’s parallels to the Colossian situation are apt, should we suppose they are integrated in the way he has suggested? Francis and Meeks (*Conflict*, 212) point out that because models are not identical with the data, “they inevitably incorporate features not in the data”; Bornkamm postulates that the opponents gave Christ an integrated place among the powers, but Colossians says nothing of this. Bandstra (*Dimensions*, 330), for his part, suggests that the unusual nature of the syncretistic religion postulated by Bornkamm “results from a methodology in which inferences are made from the givens of the epistle that are not actually supported by the course of the argument in the epistle.”

Lähnemann (*Kolosserbrief*) combined features of Lightfoot’s model (Phrygian Judaism) with that of Dibelius (the mystery cult) although he excluded Gnosticism. So the Jewish community in the Lycus valley region provided the sectarian setting for a combination of factors similar to “Phrygian nature religion with its ecstatic rigorism, Iranian mythology regarding the elements, Greek wisdom and mystery religion” (Francis and Meeks, *Conflict*, 214). The opponents at Colossae were non-Christian who incorporated Christ into their πλήρωμα.

H. LYONNET: JUDAIZING SYNCRETISM

Lyonnet, partly by way of response to Dibelius’ reconstruction, considers it is unwise to build a whole theory of a pagan mystery at Colossae on the basis of one term, ἐμβατεύω (“enter”). Turning to the Qumran material one finds an interest in calendar, dietary regulations, visions and angels. He suggests that the expression “worship of angels” denotes the pattern of regulations of the moral life intended to honor the angels through whom the Mosaic law was given. Lyonnet rejects a pagan Gnostic background for the vocabulary of Colossians. Some terms (e.g. πλήρωμα, “fullness,” and σῶμα, “body”) are simply vocabulary familiar to Paul drawn from popular usage, while other terms (ἄρχαί, “rulers”; ἐξουσίαι, “authorities,” etc) have a Jewish background, as may be noted from comparable language in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. Lyonnet

thus chooses a Jewish model over against a pagan one and this, according to Francis and Meeks (*Conflict*, 213) appears to presuppose a widely held view of early Christian history, namely, that Jewishness is to be identified with both temporal priority and doctrinal purity. Apparently because this theory appears to be self-evident Lyonnet does not give reasons as to why “the ‘Jewish’ *possibility* is more *probable* than the ‘pagan’.”

I. FRANCIS: JEWISH CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL ASCETICISM

A fresh approach to this problem of the Colossian philosophy was made by Francis in his 1962 article on Colossians 2:18 (reprinted in *Conflict*, 163–95; this was followed by a further paper, *Conflict*, 197–207). He examined the controversy as a whole, and especially this verse, “against the background of ascetic and mystic trends of piety” (*Conflict*, 166).

Francis demonstrated that ταπεινοφροσύνη (2:18, 23) was a term used by the Colossian opponents to denote ascetic practices (it was frequently employed in Jewish and Christian literature to denote fasting and other bodily rigors: see on 2:18) that were effectual for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries (*Conflict*, 167–71). Regarding the word ἐμβατεύω he argued it did not seem to denote “initiation” in the Claros inscriptions (as Dibelius had claimed) but that its specific significance in those inscriptions was impossible to determine. Instead the term was used broadly in the OT and the papyri with the connotation of “entering into possession of” something (for details see on 2:18), and that in conjunction with ταπεινοφροσύνη at Colossians 2:18 it had to do with some kind of heavenly entrance (*Conflict*, 171–76, 197–207).

Regarding the phrase θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων (“worship of angels”) although the dominant interpretation since Dibelius had understood this as an objective genitive, signifying the worship directed to angels, and was therefore taken to be evidence of a pagan feature in the heresy which must be syncretistic rather than entirely Jewish, Francis argued convincingly that the phrase ought to be taken as a subjective genitive, “the angels’ worship (sc. of God),” so indicating that the entrance into heaven reached its climax in joining in the angelic worship of God. According to Francis and others who have developed his arguments such a liturgical climax could be paralleled in many Jewish/Christian sources of ascetic-mystical piety. These sources were also helpful in illuminating the concepts of “humility” and “entering” (*Conflict*, 176–81; cf. Bandstra, *Dimensions*, 331). If Francis is right in his understanding of this enigmatic phrase, and we consider a good case has been made out by him (see on 2:18), then the only reference used in support of the idea that the principalities and powers were actually worshiped by the false teachers at Colossae falls to the ground.

According to Bandstra’s development of Francis’ arguments a related Jewish tradition (as evidenced in 1QH, 4 Ezra, 2 Apoc Bar and the Apoc Abr) expressly affirmed that “*creation, present fellowship with God, and, in some instances, judgment, are the result of God’s personal and unmediated action*” (Bandstra, *Dimensions*, 332, 333, his italics). At Qumran, for example, in addition to a fellowship with angels at the end-time, the members of the community believed themselves to be joined with the angels in common praise of God as part of their present experience (1QH 3:21–23; 11:10–14; cf. 1QS 11:7, 8; 4QDb). The elect have direct fellowship with the angels and the heavenly world without needing anyone as a mediator to bridge the distance

sc. scilicet, that is to say or understand

1QH Hôdâyôt (*Thanksgiving Hymns*) from Qumran Cave 1

between God and man. Bandstra carries the argument concerning Colossians 2:18 a step further (drawing in ascetic-mystical parallels to 2:2, 3 as well) and posits the hypothesis that the opponents at Colossae might have affirmed that a divine intermediary was not needed to achieve their mystical experiences; and that God, personally, by unmediated action, effected creation and gave them immediate understanding of the cosmic and redemptive mysteries. Angels would be important in such a system as God's messengers to give instructions concerning the requirements for and participation in the visionary experiences (*Dimensions*, 339). This kind of opposition could account for Paul's pointed insistence that Christ the Lord is mediator of creation and redemption. He is the one in whom all the invisible powers were created and who is head over them all.

Francis' presentation treats the error at Colossae within the bounds of Jewish-Hellenistic piety as marked out by Lightfoot, though he makes no use of Essene-Gnostic labels. The asceticism, cosmology and exclusiveness which Lightfoot isolated are taken up in Francis' model of Jewish ascetic-mystical piety. The preoccupation with mystery initiation stemming from Dibelius' reconstructions is rejected as resting on a mistake. Also, the almost universal assumption that the Colossian opponents worshiped angels is regarded as the repetition of an ancient error resting on meager, irrelevant evidence. At the same time observations made concerning correspondences between the text of Colossians and Hellenistic religious phenomena are not necessarily rejected—whether they are called Gnostic or not.

J. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In the midst of such a bewildering variety of hypotheses concerning the nature of the Colossian heresy (assuming it is even right to speak of a "Colossian heresy" at all) it might well be asked whether certainty is attainable. Many factors restrict our understanding. We are outsiders to the original communication. The writer could presuppose that the readers knew certain things. Others could be brought to their attention by the merest allusion. Some matters that are explicit may be peculiar to the relation between the writer and the Colossians.

But in spite of such qualifications (cf. Francis and Meeks, *Conflict*, 215–17) it does appear that recent scholarly work on the Jewish-Christian ascetic and mystical background has been helpful in illuminating the meaning of several of these difficult expressions in the polemical sections of Colossians (2:16–23). This is not to suggest, however, that (1) Paul's language (even when quoting the phrases of his opponents) has been fully comprehended, or that (2) the false teaching was simply Jewish without any admixture of pagan elements such as appear to have been prevalent in Phrygia.

In the light of these observations we turn to:

PAUL'S HANDLING OF THE COLOSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

Although one is not unmindful of a build-up in Paul's presentation in chapter 1 (and we shall have cause to return to this shortly), it is not until chapter 2:4 ("I am saying this in order that no one may deceive you with persuasive language") that the apostle *expressly* points to the dangers facing the congregation. He is aware of the methods employed by the false teachers and issues a strong warning to the Colossians to be on their guard (βλέπετε, 2:8) lest the proponents carry them away from the truth into the slavery of error (συλαγωγέω, to "carry off as booty," at 2:8 is both a rare word and a vivid one, showing just how seriously Paul regarded the evil designs of those seeking to influence the congregation): these spiritual confidence tricksters were trying to ensnare the congregation "through philosophy and empty deceit" (διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης, 2:8). Although the false teachers had set forth their philosophy as "tradition"

(παράδοσις, 2:8), thereby drawing attention to its antiquity, dignity and revelational character, Paul rejects any suggestion of divine origin. It was a human fabrication (described as “the tradition of *men*”) that stood over against the apostolic tradition which centered on “Christ Jesus as Lord.”

Paul’s reply to this “human tradition” (2:8) is “to set over against it the tradition of Christ—not merely the tradition which stems from the teaching of Christ but the tradition which finds its embodiment in him” (cf. Bruce, *Paul*, 417; at 2:6 the verb παρελάβετε, “received,” is a semi-technical term to denote the receiving of a tradition, and here the apostle states the readers have received Christ as their tradition). He is the image of the invisible God (1:15), the one who incorporates the fullness of the divine essence (2:9). Those who are incorporated into him have come to fullness of life in him who is master over every principality and power. They need not seek, since they cannot find, perfection anywhere else but in him. It is in him, the one in whose death, burial and resurrection they have been united (2:11, 12), that the totality of wisdom and knowledge is concentrated and made available to his people—not to an elite only, but to all. Further, he is the sole mediator—and a mediator was certainly needed—between God and mankind.

The apostle’s criticisms of the advocates of the Colossian philosophy with their false notions and aberrant behavior are trenchant, even devastating (2:16–23). Because of their false legalism the proponents failed to recognize God’s good gifts and his purpose in giving them, namely, that all should be enjoyed and consumed through proper use (v 22). The things covered by the taboos were perishable objects of the material world, destined to pass away when used. The taboos themselves, which belonged to a transitory order (v 17), were merely human inventions that lay no claim to absoluteness but stood over against the revelation of the will of God (note the exegesis of “according to human commands and teaching,” v 22). To place oneself under rules and regulations like those mentioned in verse 21 is to go back into slavery again—under the personal forces overthrown by Christ (v 20). As death breaks the bond which binds a subject to his ruler so dying with Christ severs the bond which bound the Colossians to the slavery of the principalities and powers. And they must not go back on that life-shattering event. Although the prohibitions (of which v 21 contains illustrations: “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t even touch!”) carry a reputation for wisdom in the spheres of voluntary worship, humility and severe treatment of the body, they were without any value whatsoever. Such energetic religious endeavors could not hold the flesh in check. Quite the reverse. These man-made regulations actually pandered to the flesh (v 23).

Regarding the false teachers themselves the apostle’s words are just as severe: anyone who laid claim to exalted heavenly experiences or visions as a prelude to fresh revelations was puffed up. Such people apparently claimed that they were directed by the mind. “Yes,” says Paul, “a mind of flesh!” If they boasted they were acquainted with divine “fullness,” then all they were full of was their own pride (v 18)! Worst of all, the self-inflation and arrogance in these private religious experiences come from not maintaining contact with Christ, the head (v 19). No doubt those who sought to make inroads into the community presupposed that they were Christians. Indeed, how else could they have expected to have their views taken seriously? But they face the most serious of condemnations: they are severed from the very one who is the source of life and unity.

In his reply to the Colossian heresy Paul expounds the doctrine of the cosmic Christ more fully and systematically than in his earlier epistles. Hints certainly appear in Romans (8:19–22) and 1 Corinthians (1:24; 8:6; 2:6–10) but a range of points is spelled out in more detail in Colossians 1:15–20 and 2:13–15. The former is a magnificent hymnic passage in praise of Christ as

the Lord in creation and reconciliation. Predicates and activities employed in the OT and Judaism of the personalized Wisdom of God are applied to the one who had been so ignominiously crucified only a few years before. Far from the angels playing a part in creation, Christ is the one through whom all things were created, including the principalities and powers which figured so prominently in the Colossian heresy. All things have been made in him as the sphere (ἐν αὐτῷ, 1:16) and through him as the agent δι' αὐτοῦ, v 16). Indeed, he is unique for he is the ultimate goal of all creation (εἰς αὐτόν, v 16). And this magnificent passage emphasizes that even the cosmic principalities and powers, from the highest to the lowest, are all alike subject to Christ.

The hymn goes on to celebrate him as head of the new creation (vv 18–20): here too he is the “beginning,” this time as the “first-born from the dead”; his is a primacy in resurrection. In the old creation he was the “head” of every principality and power (2:10) in the sense of being their author and ruler; in the new creation he is “head” of his body, the church, not simply in the sense of ruler or origin, but because he is so vitally united with his people that the life which they now live is derived from his life, that life which he lives as first-born from the dead.

It would be foolish for the Colossians to be misled by the false teachers into thinking it was necessary to obey the angelic powers through whom the law was given as though they controlled the lines of communication between God and man. That way was now controlled by Christ, the one mediator. The principalities and powers had held the Colossians in their grip through their possession of a signed IOU, a bond with its damning indictments. But God stripped these evil authorities, divesting them of their dignity and might, and had cancelled the bond, nailing it to the cross when Christ died. God exposed to the universe the utter helplessness of these principalities, leading them in Christ in his triumphal procession. He paraded these powerless powers so that all the world might see the magnitude of his victory (2:13–15).

Let those who through faith-union with Christ shared his death and resurrection not serve those elemental spirits which Christ had conquered. The Colossian heresy with all its taboos was “no syllabus of advanced wisdom; it bore all the marks of immaturity” (Bruce, *Paul*, 418). Why should those who had come of age in Christ go back to the apron strings of infancy? Why should those whom Christ had freed submit again to this yoke of bondage?

In his handling of the Colossian heresy Paul places his emphasis on realized eschatology (see especially on 2:12; 3:1–4). Within the “already-not yet” tension the stress falls upon the former, called forth by the circumstances of the letter. The Colossians have a hope laid up for them in heaven (1:5; cf. 3:1–4), they have been fitted for a share in the inheritance of the saints in light (1:12), having already been delivered from a tyranny of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (1:13). Not only did they die with Christ; they were also raised with him (2:12; 3:1; cf. v 3). The “already” of salvation needed to be asserted again and again over against those who were interested in “fullness” and the heavenly realm, but who had false notions about them, believing they could be reached by legalistic observances, a knowledge for the elite, visionary experiences and the like. The readers, therefore, were instructed that Christ had done all that was necessary for their salvation. They had died with Christ, been raised with him and given new life with him. Let them now zealously seek the things above (3:1, 2), that new order centered on the exalted Christ, and let them as a consequence show that true heavenly-mindedness meant they would be of the utmost earthly use (note the following injunctions of vv 5, 8, 12 and 3:18–4:1).

*Background Material.*⁹

To identify the teaching that endangered the church at Colossae is a difficult task. The problem is not insufficient data, but the opposite. Historical research has uncovered a wealth of information about the religious beliefs and practices that proliferated in the 1st-century Roman world. Asia Minor was a particularly fertile region for religions. Many people even belonged to more than one religious sect, and it was common to select ideas and practices of several religions. Christians were not exempt from those tendencies.

Colossian Heresy. Paul gave no formal definition of the Christian heresy in Colossae. Rather, he dealt with a number of issues without precisely identifying them. If one is given only the answers to a number of questions, however, it may be possible to re-create the questions from them. The reader of Colossians must attempt to define the tenets of the false teaching on the basis of Paul's response to them.

Some scholars have concluded that the heresy rose out of the flesh-spirit dualism that became characteristic of later Greek and oriental Gnosticism. The later Gnostics taught that the material order of things is evil, so only what is free from matter is good. Other scholars, noting Paul's injunctions against certain food laws, festivals, sabbaths, and external circumcision, have concluded that the false teaching rose out of Jewish beliefs. Since the tendency to blend a variety of ideas was so prevalent, both theories are probably true.

Paul regarded the heretical teaching as a "philosophy" based on human tradition (2:8). His prayer for the Colossians (1:9–11) and certain other remarks (1:26–28; 2:2, 3) suggest that he was countering the notion that for certain people "philosophy" led to some special, perhaps magical, understanding. That philosophy was based on "the rudiments of the universe."

That phrase, "the rudiments of the universe," is open to two main lines of interpretation. (1) The basic meaning of rudiments is "objects that stand in a row or series," such as the letters of the alphabet. It can readily be extended to mean rudimentary principles or basic teaching. Such is the meaning in Hebrews 5:12, where the term refers to the "first principles" of God's Word. (2) The Greeks applied the phrase to the four physical substances they thought made up the world: earth, water, fire, and air.

A 1st-century B.C. Greek text, referring to the followers of the philosopher Pythagorus, uses several of the same words that Paul applied to the Colossian heresy. A messenger of the highest gods carries the soul through all the elements of the world, from the lowest of earth and water to the highest. If the soul is pure, it remains in the highest element. If not, it is returned to the lower ones. The required purity is achieved by self-denial and certain cultic observances. The upper air contains the sun, moon, and stars, regarded as gods who control human destinies. In addition, the atmosphere around the earth is filled with spirit powers who are to be revered. In that way the elements of the world become associated with the gods and spirit powers who hold all people captive and determine their fate. With the help of magical knowledge and cultic ceremonies human beings could not only escape from the destiny imposed by the spirit powers but even manipulate them for their own advantage.

⁹Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Map on Lining Papers. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988), 498. GEORGE E. CANNON

To summarize, the phrase “rudiments of the universe” can refer either to basic religious teaching or to the spirit powers of the universe. The statements in Colossians make the latter meaning probable. Through his cross Christ has triumphed over the rulers and authorities and has publicly exposed them (2:15). They do not rule the world order; he does (1:16–20). The divine “fullness” dwells in Christ, not in a remote deity (1:19; 2:9). The spirit powers are under the authority of Christ (2:10) and owe their existence to him (1:16). The “worshiping of angels” (a practice probably including homage paid to heavenly powers) is so wrong that it may have disastrous consequences (2:18).

Main Features of the Heresy. A major dogma of the Colossian philosophy seems to have asserted that God was remote and inaccessible. Two factors point in that direction. First, the fascination with the angels and spirit powers just discussed seems to indicate that the remote God was accessible only through a long chain of intermediaries. Christ seems to have been regarded as one of them, perhaps enthroned above them. Second, the philosophy evidently held to a dualism that separated the high God from creation. To approach him seekers first had to be delivered from the evil influence of the material order.

How could human beings short-circuit or manipulate the angelic star powers who hindered them from reaching the high God? How could they be delivered from the enslaving power of matter? The philosophy evidently offered magical wisdom and insight as the answer. Through worshiping angels and observing special days and cultic practices (2:16–18), seekers could placate or please the intermediaries and get through to the divine “fullness.” By voluntary self-abasement, self-denial, and the achievement of visions (2:18, 21–23) they could escape the pull of the material order. The practice of self-denial through abstinence from food and possibly from sexual relations (“touch not” in 2:22) seems to have been limited to special seasons for attaining the “vision” of God. Otherwise the philosophy seems to have permitted freedom to engage in libertine practices (3:5–11).

*III. Purpose*¹⁰

While in prison Paul was visited by Epaphras (1:8), and it was his generally unfavorable report on the Colossian church that prompted the apostle to take up his pen. Epaphras told of influential but false teachers who preached a kind of asceticism, introduced speculation about the origin of the world, and emphasized knowledge (Gk. *gnōsis*). The exact nature of the so-called Colossian heresy is not made clear in Paul's letter, but it must have embraced elements from Judaism and incipient Gnosticism. At any rate, the false teachers were challenging Christ's preeminence and distracting the Colossians from the power of the gospel.

In replying to Epaphras' complaints, Paul first urged the Colossian Christians not to entangle themselves in unnecessary ethical rules (2:16–23), to put off the truly "earthly" lifestyle, and to live a Christian life centered in love (3:5–17). Second, he strongly stressed the centrality of Christ's role in creation and redemption (1:16, 22; 2:13–15), which was loftier than that of the angelic powers worshipped by the Colossians (1:16). Third, the apostle expressed his view that knowledge must not replace faith (1:23; 2:10) or the wisdom found in Christ (1:28).

¹⁰Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*, Rev., Augm. Translation of: *Bijbelse Encyclopedie*. Rev. Ed. 1975. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 228.

The exact nature of the false teaching is not very clear, though Colossians suggests that its advocates called it a “philosophy” and emphasized “the elemental spirits of the universe,” visions and worship of (or alongside) angels, the observance of special festivals (including sabbaths), and certain ritual and ascetic regulations (including circumcision and the avoidance of certain foods). Many modern scholars have tried to identify the teaching more precisely, linking it with pagan mystery cults (Martin Dibelius), Gnosticism (Bornkamm), or apocalyptic Judaism (Fred O. Francis). Others have urged that the “false teaching” is not Christian at all, but simply a form of diaspora Judaism (Morna Hooker, James D. G. Dunn). A sizable Jewish population is known to have existed in the area of Colossae in the 1st century.¹¹

¹¹David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 270.

Background: The immediate cause for this letter was the appearance at Colossae of Christian teachers announcing a ‘philosophy’ or ‘tradition’ (Col. 2:8) to which the author of Colossians took strong exception. The exact identity of this so-called Colossian heresy is much debated. There are links with Judaism: the teachers demanded circumcision (Col. 2:11), the observance of festivals, new moons, and sabbaths (2:16), dietary restrictions (2:16, 21), and what the author terms the ‘worship of angels’ (2:18). This last, clearly alien to more traditional Judaism, probably represented an effort to propitiate the heavenly powers or ‘elemental spirits’ (2:8, 20)—in Judaism these could be called ‘angels’—who were thought to control the movements of the stars and planets and thereby to influence human destiny. Those who observed the ascetical and ritual practices advocated by the teachers sought harmony with God and with the ruling spirits of the cosmos, a harmony perhaps confirmed by visionary experiences (Col. 2:18). While some have ascribed these teachings to Gnostic or Essene sources, they more likely derive from a form of Jewish Christianity modified by influences from Hellenistic astrology and perhaps from the pagan mystery cults. The reference in Col. 4:11 to the few Jewish Christians who remain as co-workers of Paul perhaps reflects this situation.¹²

¹²Paul J. Achtemeier, Publishers Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Includes Index., 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 175.

V. Reason for the Epistle¹³

Two matters brought the church in Colossae especially before Paul and occasioned the writing of this letter. First, he was writing to Philemon in Colossae sending back his runaway, but now converted, slave, Onesimus (Phm. 7-21). He could also take the opportunity of writing to the whole Colossian church. Secondly, Epaphras had brought to Paul a report of that church, which included many encouraging things (1:4-8), but apparently also disquieting news of the false teaching that threatened to lead its members away from the truth of Christ. This news pressed the apostle to write as he did.

VI. The false teaching

In his characteristic manner Paul meets the challenge confronting the Colossian church by positive teaching rather than point-by-point refutation. Thus we do not know fully what it involved, but we may infer three things: **1.** It gave an important place to the powers of the spirit world to the detriment of the place given to Christ. In 2:18 he speaks of ‘worship of angels’, and other references to the relation of the spiritual creation to Christ (1:16, 20; 2:15) appear to have similar significance.

2. Great importance was attached to outward observances, such as feasts and fasts, new moons and sabbaths (2:16f.), and probably also circumcision (2:11). These were presented proudly as the true way of self-discipline and the subjection of the flesh (2:20ff.).

3. The teachers boasted that they possessed a higher philosophy. This is clear from 2:4, 8, 18; and we may assume also that Paul, in his frequent use of the terms ‘knowledge’ *gnōsis* and *epignōsis*, ‘wisdom’ (*sophia*), ‘understanding’ (*synesis*) and ‘mystery’ (*mystērion*), was counter-ing such a view.

Some (*e.g.* Hort and Peake) have maintained that Jewish teaching could sufficiently account for all these different elements. Lightfoot argued that the false teaching was that of the Essenes, and we now have considerable knowledge of the Essene-like sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls, though we do not know of the presence of such a sect in the Lycus valley in the 1st century AD. Others have identified the Colossian heresy with one of the Gnostic schools known to us from 2nd-century writers. We may not label it precisely. Syncretism in religion and philosophy prevailed in those days. We would probably be near to the truth in calling the teaching a Judaistic form of Gnosticism.

Paul deals with its three errors as follows:

1. It is a misguided humility, he tells the Colossians, that exalts angels, and emphasizes the functions of the spirit powers of good and the fear of the principalities of evil. Christ is the Crea-

¹³D. R. W. Wood, *New Bible Dictionary* (InterVarsity Press, 1996, c1982, c1962), 216. F. FOULKES

f and the following (verse, *etc.*)

ff and the following (verses, *etc.*)

AD *anno Domini*

tor and Lord of all things in heaven and on earth, and the Vanquisher of all evil powers (1:15ff.; 2:9ff.). All the fullness (*plērōma*) of the Godhead is in Christ. (Here too Paul was probably taking and putting to a Christian use one of the key words of the false teaching.)

2. The way of holiness is not by an asceticism that promotes only spiritual pride, nor by self-centered efforts to control the passions, but by putting on Christ, setting one's affections on him, and so stripping off all that is contrary to his will (2:20ff.; 3:1ff.).

3. The true wisdom is not a man-made philosophy (2:8), but the *'MYSTERY' (revealed secret) of God in Christ, who indwells those who receive him (1:27), without distinction of persons (3:10f.).

*Main Features of the Heresy*¹⁴

A major dogma of the Colossian philosophy seems to have asserted that God was remote and inaccessible. Two factors point in that direction. First, the fascination with the angels and spirit-powers just discussed seems to indicate that the remote God was accessible only through a long chain of intermediaries. Christ seems to have been regarded as one of them, perhaps enthroned above them. Second, the philosophy evidently held to a dualism that separated the high God from creation. To approach him, seekers first had to be delivered from the evil influence of the material order.

How could human beings short-circuit or manipulate the angelic star powers who hindered them from reaching the high God? How could they be delivered from the enslaving power of matter? The philosophy evidently offered magical wisdom and insight as the answer. Through worshiping angels and observing special days and cultic practices (2:16–18), seekers could placate or please the intermediaries and get through to the divine “fullness.” By voluntary self-abasement, self-denial, and the achievement of visions (2:18, 21–23) they could escape the pull of the material order. The practice of self-denial through abstinence from food and possibly from sexual relations (“touch not” in 2:21) seems to have been limited to special seasons for attaining the “vision” of God. Otherwise, the philosophy seems to have permitted freedom to engage in libertine practices (3:5–11).

¹⁴Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale reference library (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 301.

2. The Church and Doctrinal Questions.¹⁵

While it is possible that Paul may have visited this area on his way to Ephesus by way of the Lycus and Maeander valleys (Acts 18:23; 19:1) and that he may have founded this church, few scholars draw the latter conclusion. Most agree that Epaphras, the companion of Paul, started the church at Colossae (Col 1:7), most likely in the home of Philemon, whose famous runaway slave, Onesimus, became a companion of Paul's in ministry (Philem 2, 10, 22; 2 Tim 4:20; Col 4:9). Paul's awareness of the church was probably due to the reports from Epaphras (Col 4:7–17; Philem). Colossians 2:1 suggests that he had not been there when he wrote the letter, but later he made plans to visit Colossae (Philem 22).

When that church faced a significant doctrinal threat, Paul, the likely author of the letter to the Colossians, addressed a number of doctrinal issues that were surfacing in the city. Primary among these issues was the identity of Jesus Christ, which Paul dealt with by citing a hymn of the early church (Col 1:15–20), but also Jewish legalistic concerns (Col 2:8–14) and behavioral issues (Col 3:1–17). A strange and imprecise syncretism or mixture of elements found in Hellenistic mysticism and Hellenistic Judaism appears to have influenced or concerned the small church at Colossae. This syncretistic milieu included the worship of angels, understanding the identity of Jesus and matters of ethical behavior. While these issues were a part of the so-called Colossian heresy that Paul confronted, the precise nature of these religious concerns is still not clear. It is unlikely that what is later called Gnosticism was current during the time when Paul wrote, but early strands of that philosophy were likely present in that community. Nothing in the first century, however, can clearly be equated with the Gnosticism of the second century.

See also ASIA MINOR; EPHESUS.

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¹⁵Stanley E. Porter and Craig A. Evans, *Dictionary of New Testament Background: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000). S.v. "Colossae," by L. M. McDonald

WUNT Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

ABRL Anchor Bible Reference Library

ed. edition; editor(s), edited by

SBLBS SBL Sources for Biblical Study

MT Masoretic Text (standard Hebrew text of the Old Testament)

Herm Hermeneia

McRay, “Colossae, Colossians,” *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (2 vols.; 2d ed.; New York: Garland, 1997) 1:269–70.

4. The Threat to Faith and the “Colossian Heresy.”¹⁶

4.1. Was There a “Colossian Heresy”? Nowhere in the letter does the apostle give a formal exposition of the “heresy”; its chief features can be detected only by piecing together and interpreting his positive counterarguments. Several recent scholars have questioned whether these counterarguments point to the existence of a “Colossian heresy” at all. They prefer to speak in terms of tendencies rather than a clear-cut system with definite points and suggest that the young converts were under external pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their Jewish and pagan neighbors (Hooker). This view rightly stresses Paul’s positive statements about the life and stability of the congregation (Col 1:3–8; 2:5) and warns against the danger of arguing in a circle when reconstructing the situation behind Paul’s writings. However, in the light of Colossians 2:8–23 with its references to “fullness,” specific ascetic injunctions (Col 2:21), regulations about food and holy days (*see* Holy Days), unusual phrases which seem to be catchwords of Paul’s opponents and the strong emphasis on what Christ has *already achieved* by his death and resurrection, it seems appropriate to speak of a “heresy” which had just begun to make some inroads into the congregation.

4.2. Some Distinguishing Marks of the “Heresy.” The teaching was set forth as “philosophy” (Col 2:8), based on “tradition” (*paradosis* denotes its antiquity, dignity and revelational character), which was supposed to impart true knowledge (Col 2:18, 23). Paul seems to be quoting catchwords of the opponents in his attack on their teaching: “all the fullness” (Col 2:9); “delighting in humility and the worship of angels,” “things which he has seen upon entering” (perhaps “entering into visions”; Col 2:18); “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t even touch!” (Col 2:21); and “voluntary worship,” “humility” and “severe treatment of the body” (Col 2:23). Further, the keeping of these taboos in the “philosophy” was related to obedient submission to “the elemental spirits of the world” (Col 2:20; *see* Elements/Elemental Spirits).

4.3. Interpreting These Distinguishing Marks. No complete agreement has been achieved among scholars as to the nature of the teaching. Basically the heresy seems to have been Jewish, because of the references to food regulations, the Sabbath and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar. Circumcision is mentioned (Col 2:11) but did not appear as one of the legal requirements. (Wright argues for an exclusively Jewish background to the heresy.)

But what kind of Judaism? Apparently it was not the more straightforward kind against which the Galatian churches had to be warned, but was one in which asceticism and mysticism were featured and where angels and principalities played a prominent role in creation and the giving of the Law. They were regarded as controlling the communication between God and man, and so needed to be placated by keeping strict legal observances.

A number of important suggestions has been made as to the nature of the Colossian “philosophy,” ranging from a pagan mystery cult (Dibelius) and a syncretism of gnosticized Judaism and pagan elements (Bornkamm)—the “worship of angels” (Col 2:18) was regarded as a pagan element in the false teaching, but should be understood as “the angelic worship [of God]”—to Essene Judaism of a gnostic kind (Lightfoot) and Judaizing syncretism (Lyonnet).

¹⁶Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 148. S.v., “Colossians, Letter to the,” by P. T. O’Brien

Many recent scholars, however, consider that the false teaching, which advanced beyond Epaphras's elementary gospel, is to be read against the background of ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety (as evidenced, for example, at Qumran). It was for a spiritual elite who were being urged to press on in wisdom and knowledge so as to attain true "fullness." "Self-abasement" (Col 2:18, 23) was a term used by opponents to denote ascetic practices that were effective for receiving visions of heavenly mysteries and participating in mystical experiences. The "mature" were thus able to gain entrance into heaven and join in the "angelic worship of God" as part of their present experience (Col 2:18).

5. Paul's Handling of the Colossian Philosophy.

Although there is a build-up in Paul's presentation in the first chapter, it is not until Colossians 2:4 ("I am saying this in order that no one may deceive you with persuasive language") that the apostle *expressly* points to the dangers facing the congregation. He is aware of the methods of the false teachers and issues a strong warning to the Colossians to be on their guard lest they be carried off as spoil (Col 2:8, *sylagōgeō*, "kidnap, carry off as booty," is a rare and vivid word, showing just how seriously Paul regarded the evil designs of those seeking to influence the congregation); these spiritual charlatans were trying to ensnare them by their "philosophy and empty deceit" (Col 2:8). Although they set forth their teaching as "tradition," Paul rejects any suggestion of divine origin. It was a human fabrication ("according to *human* tradition") that stood over against the tradition of Christ—the tradition which stems from the teaching of Christ, which also finds its embodiment in him (Col 2:6).

In a magnificent passage of praise exalting Christ as the Lord in creation and reconciliation (Col 1:15–20), Paul asserts that Christ is the one through whom all things were created, including the principalities and powers (*see* Principalities and Powers) which figured so prominently in the Colossian heresy. All things have been made *in* him as the sphere, *through* him as the agent and *for* him as the ultimate goal of all creation (Col 1:16).

Those who have been incorporated into Christ have come to fullness of life in the one who is master over every principality and power (Col 2:10). They need not seek perfection anywhere else but in him. It is in him, the one in whose death, burial and resurrection they have been united (Col 2:11–12), that the totality of wisdom and knowledge is concentrated and made available to all his people—not just an elite group.

Christ Jesus is the sole mediator between God and humankind. The Colossians are not to be misled by the false teachers into thinking it was necessary to obey the angelic powers who were said to control the communication between God and humankind. That way was now controlled by Christ who by his death is revealed as conqueror of the principalities and powers (Col 2:13–15; *see* Triumph).

The apostle's criticisms of the advocates of the Colossian philosophy, with their false notions and aberrant behavior, are devastating (Col 2:16–23). Because of their legalism, the false teachers failed to recognize God's good gifts and his purpose in giving them, namely, that all of them should be enjoyed and consumed through their proper use (Col 2:22). The things covered by the taboos were perishable objects of the material world, destined to pass away when used. The taboos themselves, which belonged to a transitory order (Col 2:17), were merely human inventions that laid no claim to absoluteness but stood over against the revelation of the will of God (cf. Col 2:22). To place oneself under rules and regulations like those of Colossians 2:21 is to go back into slavery again—under the personal forces overthrown by Christ (Col 2:20). By his death he had freed the Colossians from bondage to the principalities and powers. They must not turn their

backs on that life-changing event. Although the prohibitions (cf. Col 2:21) carried a reputation for wisdom in the spheres of voluntary worship, humility and severe treatment of the body, these practices were in fact spiritually and morally bankrupt. Such energetic endeavors could not hold the flesh in check. Instead, these self-made regulations actually pandered to the flesh (Col 2:23).

In his reply to the false teaching Paul expounds the doctrine of the cosmic Christ more fully than in his earlier letters (*see* Christology). Hints had previously appeared in Romans 8:19–22 and 1 Corinthians 1:24; 2:6–10; 8:6 but a more detailed exposition is given in Colossians 1:15–20 and 2:13–15. Against the false teachers who boasted in their exalted spiritual experiences, their fresh revelations and their participation in the divine fullness, the apostle’s criticisms are trenchant: they are arrogant and in danger of being separated from Christ (Col 2:18–19).

In his handling of the Colossian false teaching Paul places his emphasis on realized eschatology (*see* especially Col 2:12; 3:1–4). Within the “already-not yet” tension the stress is upon the former, called forth by the circumstances of the letter. The Colossians have a hope laid up for them in heaven (Col 1:5; cf. 3:1–4), they have been fitted for a share in the inheritance of the saints in light (Col 1:12), having already been delivered from a tyranny of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Col 1:13). Not only did they die with Christ; they were also raised with him (Col 2:12; 3:1; cf. 3:3). Although the “not yet” of salvation does feature in the letter (*esp.* Col 3:4), the “already” needed to be asserted again and again over against those who were interested in “fullness” and the heavenly realm, but who had false notions about them, believing they could be reached by legalistic observances, a special knowledge, visionary experiences and the like (*see* Visions). Christ has done all that was necessary for the Colossians’ salvation. They had died with Christ, been raised with him and given new life with him (*see* Dying and Rising with Christ). Let them now zealously seek the things above (Col 3:1–2), that new order centered on the exalted Christ (*see* Exaltation), and let them as a consequence show true heavenly-mindedness (cf. Col 3:5, 8, 12 and 3:18–4:1).

3. Purpose. The apostle wrote (a) to establish the Colossians in the true faith by exposing the deadly nature of the heretical teaching (1:23; 2:4, 7-8, 16); "Why do you submit to ...?" (2:20) may mean that the menace was making serious inroads; possibly he has one particular teacher in mind (2:4, 8, 16, 18), but this cannot be proved; (b) to instruct them in the Christian way of life (2:20; 3:1, 5, 12, 18 ff); (c) to encourage them to promote mutual love and harmony (2:2; 3:12-15; 4:8); and (d) to give news of the company at Rome and send greetings to his friends (4:7 ff).

What was the Colossian heresy? Apparently a mystery cult in which visions played a part (1:26-27; 2:2, the Christian use of "mystery" as a revealed secret; cf. the esoteric teaching of Qumran, 1QS 4.18; 5.11; 9.16-20; see DEAD SEA SCROLLS). More specifically: (a) the heretics assailed Christianity as an immature faith and denied the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as divine revealer and redeemer from sin. Paul dubbed it an empty deceit, based on mere human tradition (cf. Mark 7:8). Christ is the beloved Son of God, the Savior of the universe, victor over the angelic powers, mediator of the whole creative process (1:13-20; 2:15--at the Cross, according to RSV mg.). (b) The angelic powers were to be worshiped as well as Christ--or above Christ? (1:16; 2:8-20). These stoicheia are the planetary and starry spirits that affected man's birth and destiny; probably also the angels standing behind the Mosaic law. It is believed that the heretics regarded the angels as intermediaries between holy, transcendent deity and the material world where man lives. The names of the angels played an important role among the ESSENES, and we find the same element in the Qumran literature. (c) Certain ascetic and liturgical practices were regarded as essential to the maturity or perfection of salvation. Paul mentions "food and drink" rules, possibly abstinence from meat and wine, and Jewish observances like New Moon, sabbath, and circumcision (2:11 ff). Should baptism be added? (Cf. 2:11-12, 20; 3:1-3, 10; and the lustrations so common at Qumran.) There is hardly enough evidence for a heretical practice of baptism. Paul vigorously objects that the Colossian usages constitute a new and negative legalism and deny the reality of faith union with the living Christ, "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3).

Thus the heresy seems to have been a syncretistic cult drawn from pagan and Jewish sources, perhaps by Gentile converts (2:13) who had enjoyed previous contacts with the synagogue. The Judaism in question may have been Essene or Zadokite (cf. 1QS 2.24 for "humility" and "charity"; CD 2.3, 13, for "wisdom"; 1QS 4.22 for "knowledge"; 1QH 3.21-22 and 11.11-12 for an "inheritance among the holy ones"; angels have been noticed above; Col. 1:12-13, "light ... darkness," reminds one of Qumran dualism). We may have to do with a pre-Christian Jewish "gnosticism," though not necessarily with fully developed speculative system like that of Basilides or Valentinus. See GNOSTICISM.

¹⁷ Current document: iPreach 2006 > Dictionaries, Handbooks, and One Volume Commentaries > Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible > THE INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY of the BIBLE > DICTIONARY ENTRIES > C > *COLOSSIANS, LETTER (accessed March 6, 2008).

b. Identity and theology of Colossian opponents.¹⁸ The precise identification of the Colossian opponents has proved to be elusive. In addition to the difficulties of determining whether the language of the opponents has been adopted (e.g., whether “philosophy” or “mystery” was a self-designation) or of distinguishing polemic from independently formulated arguments, this project has been beset by recurring exegetical difficulties: (1) whether angels (2:18) were understood as malevolent or beneficial; (2) whether the stoicheia (2:8, 20; cf. Gal 4:3-9) referred to these angels or to the four primal elements, the Jewish law, or religious regulations; (3) whether *threskeia ton aggelon* (2:18) consisted in worshiping angels or in the angelic worship of God; (4) whether *embateuo* (2:18) referred to initiation into a mystery cult or to entering heaven; (5) whether ritual and ascetic practices (2:16, 20-23) were necessary prerequisites for salvation or required acts of subservience. This constellation of disputed issues has further resulted in conflicting descriptions of the opponents' theology. Most scholars concur that it was a synthesis of several religious traditions (including Gnosticism, Phrygian religious practices, Hellenistic philosophy, and Jewish apocalyptic and mysticism), although no consensus exists on the role Judaism played in their theology.

J. B. LIGHTFOOT 18793 understood the Colossian theology as a mixture of heterodox Jewish sabbath observance and dietary laws with a Gnostic interest in wisdom, cosmology, intermediary beings, and asceticism. DIBELIUS similarly argued (F. Francis and W. Meeks [1975] 61-121; followed by Lohse) that angels and the stoicheia were enslaving deities and that *embateuo* was a technical term for initiation into a mystery cult; he concluded that the opponents proclaimed a gnostic mystery religion that required preparatory ascetic practices and lacked any significant Jewish elements. G. BORNKAMM (Francis and Meeks, 123-45) understood the angels as positive forces who imposed ritual and ascetic practices; in contrast to Dibelius, he balanced pagan and Persian influences with the Jewish origin of these practices and cosmology. Recently parallels between the Colossian philosophy and Hyp. Arch., Eugnostos, Soph. Jes. Chr., Ap. John, and Zost. have been cited. Rejecting this widely held theory of Gnostic origins, Lyonnet explained the Colossian philosophy purely on the basis of the Essene interest in purity, wisdom, angelology, and the law found in the DEAD SEA SCROLLS (Francis and Meeks, 147-61).

A more convincing theory of Jewish origins argues for parallels with Jewish apocalyptic (see APOCALYPTICISM) and mystical literature: Francis (Francis and Meeks, 163-207) argued that *threskeia ton aggelon* should be understood as the angelic worship of God glimpsed during a mystical ascent; this foretaste of heaven assured the adherent of salvation. A third line of interpretation (most recently C. Arnold [1995]) draws significantly on archaeological evidence (see ARCHAEOLOGY AND BIBLICAL STUDIES) and argues that the Colossian theology was a synthesis of Judaism (of varying degrees) with local Phrygian religious expression, including asceticism, interest in intermediary beings, and folk belief. A final line of interpretation understands the Hellenistic philosophical schools as the key to the Colossian philosophy. Schweizer links the Colossian interest in ritual laws, asceticism, and the four primal elements (stoicheia) to Pythagoreanism. R. DeMaris (1994) argues for a blend of Middle Platonism with Jewish and Christian elements, while T. Martin (1996) identifies the opponents as Cynics. In view of such diverse results, further

¹⁸ J. B. MACLEAN, iPreach 2006 > Dictionaries, Handbooks, and One Volume Commentaries > Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation > Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation > DICTIONARY > C > COLOSSIANS, LETTER TO THE

investigations should refine a reliable methodology for analyzing polemical literature and must contain a historically grounded explanation of the origin of the particular syncretism observed.

THE "PHILOSOPHY" OPPOSED IN THE LETTER¹⁹

A Variety of Proposals. Despite, and probably because of, the somewhat meager evidence provided by the letter, the academic industry of publishing books and articles on the teaching that provoked the writer's response shows no signs of abating. This commentary is not the place for interaction with the mass of secondary literature that also shows little sign of reaching a consensus. All that can be done here is to mention some of the more recent proposals, to caution the reader about the difficulties involved in any reconstruction, and then to provide a brief and tentative sketch of what appears to be the most plausible view.

In the past, scholars looked to a Jewish form of Gnosticism or to Jewish mysticism or to Hellenistic mystery cults or to neo-Pythagoreanism or to a syncretistic mix of some of these as the background that provides the identity of the philosophy. Recent monographs and commentaries have offered further variations. Sappington develops the view that some form of Jewish mysticism is the distinctive ingredient of the teaching, providing a full examination of the similar pattern of ascetic and mystical piety to be found in a number of Jewish apocalypses.¹³ The distinctive contribution of DeMaris is to introduce Middle Platonism into the discussion as the context in which the letter's debate about achieving knowledge was conducted. He sees the teaching being opposed, therefore, as a mix of "popular Middle Platonic, Jewish and Christian elements that cohere around the pursuit of wisdom."¹⁴ As the title of his monograph suggests, Arnold also finds a mix.¹⁵ He provides the fullest investigation of local inscriptional and literary evidence, particularly that which deals with the practice of magic. For him the syncretistic teaching contained Jewish (cultic observances) and pagan (mystery cult initiation) elements that cohered within the general framework of magic and folk religion. Two further contributors to the debate refrain from a syncretistic solution. Dunn, in his commentary and in an article that preceded it, holds that the teaching was purely Jewish, a diaspora "synagogue apologetic promoting itself as a credible philosophy more than capable of dealing with whatever heavenly powers might be thought to control or threaten human existence."¹⁶ Martin, on the other hand, views it as purely Hellenistic, claiming that Cynic teachers entered the Christian assembly to observe and then delivered a critical invective against Christian practices, to which the author of Colossians responds.¹⁷

The very number and variety of proposed solutions to the identity of the philosophy should caution against any overly confident claims to reconstruct it. Although the writer's prescription for curing the ailment he believed to be a threat to the well-being of his readers comes across reasonably clearly, the ailment itself defies any really accurate diagnosis. The writer had no reason for defining more exactly the teaching involved. He expects his readers to know perfectly well what he was talking about, and so he merely touches on some of its features, using some of its catchwords and slogans. Since the evidence the letter provides is piecemeal, it pushes the interpreter beyond the text to find an explanatory framework for the fragmented reflection of the teaching and its practices, found in the writer's response. Determining which does greatest justice to all the elements in the letter's polemic remains the criterion for

¹⁹ Andrew T. Lincoln, iPreach 2006 > Commentary Series > The New Interpreter's Bible > v. 11: 2 Corinthians to Philemon > NIB Volume XI > THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS > THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS > THE 'PHILOSOPHY' OPPOSED IN THE LETTER (accessed March 6, 2008).

evaluating the various proposals. Some of them fail to explain parts of the letter adequately, but in itself this criterion still allows for a number of competing hypotheses.

There are at least two further difficulties in any attempt to employ the letter to reconstruct the alternative teaching. How many of the writer's direct references to the philosophy in this polemical letter can be taken as straightforward description rather than negatively slanted caricature? And if reconstruction is based on the part of the letter that is in direct interaction with the opposing teaching, is it legitimate to see other parts of the letter as having the teaching more indirectly in view and to use their discussion to complete the reconstruction?

Despite the difficulties, and provided that one remains both self-conscious about how to proceed and tentative about one's conclusions, it is still worth the effort to take up the letter's clues, to point to similar concepts in the thought of that time, and thereby to endeavor to sketch the best picture available of the teaching in view. After all, this teaching caused the writer enough concern to provoke a response to it, and some historical reconstruction is necessary if we are to appreciate that response as fully as possible. This sketch will proceed in three stages. It will begin with the explicit terminology mentioned in 2:18, move to a more disputed issue involving 2:8, 20, and then suggest a general characterization of the teaching. Other aspects will be discussed in the course of the commentary.

Visionary Experience and Asceticism. Two major features of the philosophy, as the writer depicts it, appear to be the claim to visions (and "the worship of angels" associated with such visions) and ascetic practices (including fasting as a preparation for visionary experiences). Even this feature involves questions of interpretation, however, since 2:18, in which it is mentioned, has a number of difficulties. In it the readers are urged not to let anyone who (literally) "takes pleasure in or insists on self-abasement and the worship of angels, which he has seen when entering" disqualify them. The term *tapeinofrosyne* (*tapeinophrosyne*), rendered here, as in the NRSV, as "self-abasement," as opposed to the NIV's "false humility," occurs three times in Colossians (2:18; 2:23; 3:12). In its third occurrence, it denotes the positive virtue of humility, but that does not appear to be in view in the first two instances where it is connected with the philosophy. Because of its close association with worship in both cases, it is likely that it stands for some cultic practice rather than a disposition of lowliness and was a quasi-technical term in the philosophy for fasting. This makes sense in a context in which practices connected with food and drink (2:16); regulations about not handling, not tasting, not touching (2:20-21); and an emphasis on severe treatment of the body (2:23) are mentioned.¹⁸

This interpretation gains further strong support from the use of *tapeinophrosyne* as a technical term for fasting in Tertullian¹⁹ and in The Shepherd of Hermas.²⁰ Cognate terms are also employed in the LXX for "fasting" in contexts where the practice is an expression of abasement before God (e.g., Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27, 29, 32; Isa 58:3, 5; Ps 34:13-14). Fasting was also frequently a preparation for visionary experience and the reception of divine revelations (Dan 10:2-9; 4 Ezra 5:13, 20; 9:23-25; 2 Bar 5:7-9; 12:5-7; 43:3). Sometimes it is the preparation specifically for entrance into the heavenly realm.²¹ All this is highly relevant to Col 2:18, where the two elements associated with fasting are "the worship of angels" and visionary experience.

But what was this “worship of angels”? It was often assumed that the phrase referred straightforwardly to humans worshipping angels, either in place of or alongside Christ or God. But if that were the case, it is very strange that the writer is not more forthright in his condemnation of such a practice instead of simply mentioning it in passing. An attractive case has been made by F. O. Francis,²² however, that the phrase should be taken as involving a subjective rather than an objective genitive construction and thus refers to the angels' worship—that is, the worship in which the angels are engaged. What has this to do with humans? Fasting would be the preparation that enabled human beings to share in heavenly worship with angels. The notion of participation in angelic worship was a common one in Second Temple Judaism. It is found in apocalypses²³ and in the Qumran literature where the community on earth is described as having liturgical fellowship with the inhabitants of heaven.²⁴ It is by no means foreign to the NT (cf. 1 Cor 11:10; Heb 12:22-23; Revelation 4:1; 5).

On the other hand, C. E. Arnold has mounted a strong case for taking the objective genitive not as actual worship of angels by humans but as the writer's way of describing the philosophy's practice of invoking angels in order to deal with the threat of hostile powers. He relies heavily on the evidence of the Greek magical papyri, believing that, although most date to the third and fourth centuries CE, they reflect ideas and practices that go back to the first century CE and earlier and that are corroborated by the lead curse tablets and magical amulets in use in this earlier period.²⁵ He shows convincingly that in both Jewish and pagan sources angels were invoked for protection, for revelations, for cursing other humans, for warding off evil, and for dealing with evil spirit powers. They were intermediaries who were also associated with the planets and stars and were viewed as being active in influencing the fate of humans. Moreover, the evidence for a syncretistic mixing of Jewish angelic and pagan divine names in magical practice is clear. Elements of Jewish belief about angels and actual Jewish names for angels could be combined with pagan deity cults. Frequently the setting for invoking angels is a visionary experience and the invocation is connected with stringent purity regulations.

Arnold bolsters his argument by isolating the evidence of this type of veneration of angels in popular Judaism and in paganism in Asia Minor, claiming that the invocation of angels in the context of magical practices was a major feature of Phrygian-Lydian folk belief.²⁶ Add to this his demonstration that the term *qrskei;a* (*threskeia*) in the sense of worship rather than religion was overwhelmingly employed with the genitive for the object of worship, and his case for treating the phrase “the worship of angels” as the writer's polemical depiction of the practice of invoking angelic help becomes a very strong one indeed.²⁷ He rightly distinguishes between calling on, invoking, and praying to angels and an “angel cult” in which these intermediaries were the objects of adoration and worship. Although there is evidence of the latter in some of the pagan material, he finds none in Jewish or Christian texts and inscriptions. He shows easily, however, that the author of Colossians was not the only one to dub the veneration entailed by invocation as “worship of angels.”²⁸

In deciding between these two interpretations, we should recall that the evidence for taking the key phrase as a subjective genitive is very weak. In the two examples of *threskeia* in a subjective genitive construction that are usually cited (4 Macc 5:7 and Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 12.253), the reference is to the religion of the Jews, not to their act of worship; and there appear to be no texts where this term is employed for angelic activity. For this reason, and in the light of the case made by Arnold, it

is more likely that “worship of angels” refers to the practice of invoking angels, a practice that the writer of Colossians, in line with his unfavorable evaluation of the philosophy as a whole, deems no better than worshipping angels. The practice may well have fulfilled the same functions that it did in popular magic—namely, coping with the threat of evil powers and providing special knowledge—but there is no need to follow the rest of Arnold's analysis and connect all of the philosophy's features with the magical tradition. It is one thing to see magic as being part of the religious milieu that helps to explain the appeal of the philosophy, but it is another to make magic the key that unlocks the door to the whole philosophy.

The next part of 2:18 fills out the reconstruction of the philosophy. What is insisted on by its proponents are fasting and veneration of angels “which he has seen when entering.” The syntax could be construed as “entering into what he has seen,” but it is more natural to take the neuter plural relative pronoun as modifying the whole of the preceding phrase, as in the previous verse, 2:17, and later in 3:6. The mention of “seeing” is a reference to what has been observed in visions. It may appear strange that fasting was part of what was seen in visions, but again such a feature was not uncommon in apocalyptic writings where instruction in fasting for the purpose of obtaining visions could itself be the subject of visions. The most likely reference of the participle translated “when entering” (ejmbateu;wn embateuon) is to the visionary entering the heavenly realm. This, after all, is where a visionary is most likely to see and invoke angels; in apocalyptic writings, visionary experience was frequently conceived of in terms of the translation of the spirit and its entry into heavenly places (see, e.g., Rev 4:1-2).²⁹ The evidence of Col 2:18, then, indicates an insistence on fasting as preparation for visionary experience and invocation of angels in the heavenly realm.

The “Elemental Spirits of the Universe” and Dualistic Cosmology. Fasting, purity regulations, obtaining wisdom, visions, and even invocation of angels can all be found in various traditions within Judaism. Why not then simply conclude that the teaching being opposed was a particular strand of Judaism? This does not explain enough of the writer's emphases that appear to be directed against a strong dualistic strain in the philosophy. The stress in the hymnic material on Christ's agency in both creation and redemption and his reconciliation of heaven and earth, the insistence that God's presence and saving activity were in the physical body of Christ (1:22; 2:9), the discussion of “the body of flesh” in 2:11, and the treatment of the heavenly and earthly realms in 3:1-5 all suggest that the Jewish elements in the teaching had been assimilated into a framework that treated the earthly realm and the body as inferior and evil in contrast to the heavenly realm. In other words, the strands typical of Jewish apocalyptic writings and of popular Judaism now appear to be functioning within a Hellenistic dualistic cosmology. In addition, it is a reasonable inference from the letter's language about the principalities and powers (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15) that the philosophy held such heavenly powers to be threatening and hostile and in need of appeasement.³⁰ While belief in evil powers in heaven is, of course, found in Jewish apocalypses, their role as intermediaries who had to be placated is much more difficult to discover and far more closely akin to the function of similar powers in Hellenistic cosmology.

A key question in this regard is how to interpret the phrase *ta; stoicei'a tou' ko;smou* (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) in 2:8, 20. A minority of scholars take the phrase to refer to elementary principles or rudimentary teachings of the world (NIV, “the basic principles of this world”). But since the genitive is “of the world” and not “of this world,” “world” in this context is most naturally taken to denote the cosmos.

The term *stoicheia* itself means first of all the component parts of a series and came to be applied to the physical components of the cosmos—earth, fire, water, and air (see 2 Pet 3:10, 12).³¹ In Hellenistic thought these parts were believed to be under the control of spirit powers. Together with the stars and heavenly bodies they could be conceived of as personal forces who controlled the fate of humans. For this reason the majority of interpreters opt for a translation such as “the elemental spirits of the universe” (NRSV). This also fits well the context of thought in the letter, for elsewhere the writer emphasizes Christ's supremacy and victory over just such spiritual agencies. It is significant also that, when the same phrase was employed by Paul in Gal 4:3, 9, it was to warn Gentile Christians that to turn to the law would be equivalent to returning to their previous enslavement to the *stoicheia*, who are linked with their pagan deities, designated by Paul as “beings that by nature are not gods” (Gal 4:8).

One difficulty for this interpretation is that explicit use of *stoicheia* to refer to personified cosmic forces outside the NT is first found later in the Testament of Solomon 8:1-4; 18:1-5, where they are described as the cosmic rulers of darkness (see also Col 1:13). Moreover, the date of Pseudo-Callisthenes, in which King Nectabenos of Egypt is said to control the cosmic elemental spirits by his magical arts, is uncertain.³² Given other pointers in the direction of such a reference, there is no reason why the NT might not be the first extant source for this explicit usage. Arnold, however, claims that these references and those in the magical papyri³³ belong to traditions that predate the actual writing and originate in the first century CE or earlier.³⁴ In any case, the book of Wisdom could earlier speak of the elements, referring to earth, air, fire, and water (Wis 7:15), and then condemn Gentiles for treating these elements as gods: “They supposed that either fire or wind or swift air, or the circle of the stars, or turbulent water, or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world” (Wis 13:2 NRSV). Philo also speaks of the *stoicheia* as “powers”³⁵ and reports worship of them as named deities.³⁶ Jewish apocalyptic literature had also already paved the way for this development by associating angels closely with the elements and heavenly bodies.³⁷

In all probability, in the philosophy against which the letter is directed these elemental spirits were classed with the angels and were seen as controlling the heavenly realm and as posing a threat both to human well-being and to access to the divine presence. It was thought that an effective means of placating such powers was the rigorous subduing of the body in order to gain visionary experience of the heavenly dimension and to invoke the assistance of good angels in dealing with the hostile spirits. Through such visions also special knowledge and access to the divine presence could be obtained. This program as a whole, claiming to be wisdom (see 2:8, 23) and incorporating elements of Jewish calendrical and dietary law observances (2:16), appears to have been offered to the readers to supplement the apostolic gospel they had heard, so that in the view of the writer it undermined the sufficiency of what God had done in Christ. It reduced Christ to just another intermediary between humans and God, to one among a number of links to the heavenly dimension, one among a number of means of dealing with the hostile powers.

One of the chief concerns of Hellenistic religious thought was how a person could escape from the lower earthly realm and reach the heavenly world and the divine. Usually the purified soul was believed to ascend after death and to remain above. It was possible, however, to experience this ascent of the soul during one's lifetime and to enter the heavenly sphere through various ecstatic experiences.³⁸ It was, of

course, primarily the mystery cults that fostered this way of ascent. Often such cults demanded strict discipline, but their attraction was that by such means and through initiation into secret rites they promised freedom from the evil body, enlightenment, privileged knowledge, access to the heavenly realm, and union with the god or goddess. As people came to the view that, despite the apparent order of the heavenly regions, there were powers in them opposed to humanity, not only mystery religions but also magic flourished in order to influence the cosmic powers favorably. The philosophy being advocated in the Lycus Valley area, in which Colossae was located, would have spoken to these same needs, and, with certain features analogous to concerns of the mystery cults and magic traditions, would have seemed attractive for the same reason.

The “Philosophy” as Syncretistic. Despite the attempts of some scholars to avoid this conclusion, it seems clear from 2:18-19 that the one insisting on fasting and invocation of angels through visionary experience is viewed by the writer as a believer who is in some spiritual danger. This person is “puffed up without cause through a fleshly mind” (2:18) and is “not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body...grows with a growth that is from God” (2:19 NRSV). The participle “holding” (kratw'n kraton) is singular in its Greek form and so does not refer to the readers but to the same person who was in view with the earlier singular form of the participle “insisting” (qe;lwn thelon). It would make no sense for the writer to depict someone who made no claim to a relationship to Christ in the first place as not holding fast to Christ. This factor alone would appear to rule out viewing the philosophy simply as Judaism. Nor is there any evidence for use of the verb “to hold” meaning “to have an initial intellectual grasp,” which would be required on the hypothesis that a Cynic critic of Christian worship is being described. Instead the proponent(s) of the teaching have taken a number of elements from Judaism and the Christian gospel and linked these with typical cosmological concerns from the Hellenistic world. It is quite plausible that a Hellenistic Jew who had left the synagogue to join a Pauline congregation or a Gentile convert who had had some previous contact with the synagogue would advocate such a philosophy, and the writer evidently was concerned that it might appeal to others among his preponderantly Gentile Christian readers. To label such teaching Hellenistic Jewish syncretism is not, therefore, simply an “easy both-and solution”³⁹ but an eminently plausible and fitting description of its components.

Obviously the Pauline gospel had a base in particular congregations in the Phrygian area, which included the Lycus Valley. It is equally clear that there was a strong Jewish presence in the area, because in 200 BCE Antiochus III had settled two thousand Jewish families in Lydia and Phrygia. It is not at all surprising, then, to find knowledge of specific features of Judaism in the syncretism that could have been picked up from the teaching of local synagogues. Jewish cultic regulations and calendrical observances have a role, but it remains significant that there is no mention of the law as such, as would surely be expected if the teaching were a straightforward variety of Judaism. It is also significant in this regard that the writer dismisses such elements as simply human tradition. This does not sound like the Paul of Galatians or Romans dealing with the law and having to account in his arguments for the claim that such observances were commanded by God, nor is it like the use of the charge of human tradition in Mark 7:1-13, where it is directed against the oral tradition. In addition, circumcision is mentioned in 2:11, but it functions in the writer's argument primarily as a metaphor for dealing with the physical body as a whole. The cultic

and calendrical items and the interest in visionary experience also found in Judaism appear, then, to have been put to markedly different use in the philosophy.

The concepts of heaven and earth played an important part in Jewish thought, the apocalyptic writings included an increasing emphasis on the transcendent realm, and Hellenistic Judaism evidenced some similar cosmological concerns to those suggested for the philosophy. Yet in none of these strands was there the strong cosmological dualism that Colossians appears to combat. Such spatial concepts, however, readily lent themselves to a dualistic framework, which, as we have seen, was current in Greco-Roman cosmological speculation. Still, cosmological dualism and an emphasis on special knowledge do not mean that there should be an identification of the philosophy with Gnosticism. At most what is suggested are certain “gnosticizing” tendencies. It is not until the Gnosticism attested in the Nag Hammadi documents that some of the letter's terminology is found in a clearly identifiable gnostic schema.