

Doctrinal Issues in Colossians
Part 1 (of 4 parts):

Heresies in the Colossian Church

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During the middle years of the first century, the Apostle Paul addressed a letter to the church at Colosse, a city in the southwestern portion of Asia Minor. Whereas the apostle had sent a letter that came to be known as Ephesians to a group of churches of which Colosse was a part, he felt it necessary to write a letter directly to the Christians at Colosse (as well as to those in nearby Laodicea,, Col. 4:16) to correct some deviations from orthodox thought. These deviations, grouped together, are referred to as the Colossian heresy.¹ What was this heresy and who were the heretics? Many pages have been written in response to these questions. This article surveys the many views on these opponents of Paul at Colosse and the nature of their error.

Perspectives on the Colossian Heresy

One writer says 44 opinions on the identity of these opponents have been held by 19th- and 20th-century scholars.² Some say Paul's opponents were pagans who were influenced by the mystery religions

¹ Morna Hooker has disputed the existence of a heresy in the Colossian church. Instead she believes Paul was warning his addressees not to be influenced by the pressures of the contemporary culture, in the way a preacher might do today, rather than addressing a particular group in the congregation (Morna D. Hooker, "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973], 315-31).

² J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings*, Novum Testamentum Supplement (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 3-4.

of the day.³ Others think they were Judaistic in outlook, with such differing perspectives as Merkabah mysticism or apocalyptic Essenism.⁴ Still others believe the opponents were of a Gnostic stripe⁵ that was either Jewish or pre-Christian in nature. Another theory is that the foes at Colosse represented a syncretistic group who shared views from several of the above groups.⁶

ESSENISM

In 1879, J. B. Lightfoot wrote a 40-page essay on the Colossian heresy that is still referred to in discussions on this subject.⁷ Lightfoot began by noting the Judaistic character of the problem, citing references to the Sabbath, new moons, and other Jewish elements.⁸ He also recognized a type of mysticism that was not Jewish (a view discussed later in this article). He considered these Jewish elements and the mysticism as Gnostic tendencies, and his essay develops the fusion of these two elements, rather than debating one over the other. Lightfoot's discussion is less concerned with the chronology of the problem (i.e., when Gnosticism came on the scene) than with how it developed. In this connection he formulated his theory of a link with the Essenes, a Jewish sect more mystic and legalistic than the Pharisees. According to Lightfoot, strict adherence to Mosaic Law and asceticism characterized this little-known group of Jews.⁹

To distinguish the Essenes further, Lightfoot described them as abstainers from marriage, meat, wine (they ate bread and vegetables), body oil, and gratification of physical desires.¹⁰ This is similar to Gnostic dualism. Compared to Judaism, they were unorthodox

³ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 127-30; and Randall Argall, "The Source of a Religious Error in Colosse," *Calvin Theological Journal* 22 (April 1987): 6-20.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, "The Colossian Heresy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (July–September 1984): 195-208.

⁵ Gunther Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," in *Conflict at Colossae*, ed. Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), originally published as "Die Haresie des Kolosserbriefes," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 73 [1948]: 11-20 and reprinted in *Das Ende des Gesetzes* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1952], 139-56), 123-45.

⁶ H. M. Carson, *Colossians and Philemon*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 12, 15-18.

⁷ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (1879; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 73-113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

in their view on the immortal soul housed in a "prison-house" body, in their refusal to sacrifice at Jerusalem, and in their involvement (possibly) in some sun worship. Other divergences include angel worship, attempts at magic (involving the use of herbs and charms), and an exclusive spirit regarding knowledge.¹¹

However, did the Essenes ever travel to or reside in Colosse? Lightfoot quotes Philo, who said the Essenes were not limited to the Dead Sea area, where their monasteries were located, but that they had settlements in Judea, Palestine, and Syria.¹² From these Jewish dispersions he concluded it is highly conceivable that they spread into Asia Minor. The Jewish exorcists spoken of in Ephesians were similar to those of the Essenes, as reported by Josephus, the well-known Jewish historian.¹³ While conclusive proof is not available, Lightfoot felt this Judaistic tendency was not fully Pharisaic in nature, but more easily fit in with the Essenes.

Josephus, who at one time was an Essene, wrote about certain characteristics of the Essenes that may correlate with tendencies in the Colossian heresy.¹⁴ He spoke of their strict asceticism, their negative attitude toward marriage, their belief in the body as a prison, and their high view of angels. Concerning their whereabouts, he wrote, "They occupy no one city, but settle in large numbers in every town."¹⁵ He also pointed out that Jews had been in the Lycus Valley for some time. Josephus recorded that 2,000 Jews were brought to Lydia and Phrygia by Antiochus III from Babylon and Mesopotamia in the second century B.C.¹⁶ In Hieropolis, graves have inscriptions of a Jewish nature. Flaccus, a Roman governor, in 61 B.C. forbade Phrygian Jews to send gold to Jerusalem for the temple tax.¹⁷ Agreeing with Lightfoot, Hendriksen quotes passages from Josephus, Philo, and Pliny indicating that the Essenes were not restricted to Judea.¹⁸ However, though the Essenes lived in various places other than the Dead Sea, no evidence exists that they lived in the western

¹¹ Ibid., 87-92.

¹² Ibid., 95. On Essenism being in Palestinian Syria see Philo *Quod omnis probus liber sit* ("Every Good Man Is Free"), Loeb Classical library, vol. 9 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), XII, 75:53-54.

¹³ Flavius Josephus *Life of Flavius Josephus* xviii (Philadelphia: David McKay, n.d.), 10.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ralph Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 209-10.

¹⁸ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 19-20.

portions of Asia Minor. Their strict Judaistic and communal practices would seem to argue against their association with the pagan world represented in Colosse.

MERKABAH MYSTICISM

Along with most scholars, Bruce views the Colossian heresy as primarily Jewish in its origins.¹⁹ Certain mystic elements definitely existed in Judaism, as is evident from the letter to the Galatians. The source of these mystic elements, Bruce suggests, was Judaistic sects, not Greek or Iranian influences, though he is quick to recognize the syncretistic element of all the above mentioned sects as being pertinent to the heresy at hand in Colosse. While affirming Lightfoot's scholarship on the Essene/Qumran community, Bruce feels the Jewish mysticism present at Colosse is too broad to be labeled Essene or Qumran, but that it falls into what may be called "Jewish nonconformity," a term used for labeling some radical Jewish tendencies that were scattered afar.²⁰

Calvin held that a nontraditional Judaism had influenced the Colossian congregation.²¹ He wrote that the false teachers were Jews influenced by Platonic thought, as seen in Dionysius.²²

A form of mystic thought that may have been influential in Colosse is "Merkabah mysticism," named for the vision Ezekiel had of God on the throne above the heavenly chariot (Ezek. 1:15-26).²³ For a glimpse of this vision a radical obedience to the letter of the Law was crucial, coupled with a period of asceticism varying from 12 to 40 days. If all went well, ascent into heaven could be attempted if one also had the blessing and aid of the angels to counter the opposition of evil forces in the angelic realm.

Merkabah mysticism, called Jewish Gnosticism by Scholern, a recognized authority on this subject, was present in its early form in 1 Enoch 14:8-23, dated in the early first century B.C.²⁴ Enoch's heavenly journey echoes Ezekiel's account and Daniel's description in Daniel 7.

¹⁹ Bruce, "The Colossian Heresy," 195-208.

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 416.

²¹ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians* (1548), English translation (Edinburgh, 1965), 297-98, quoted in F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 19.

²² Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁴ G. G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960), 1, as quoted in Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, 21.

Whether the phenomenon at Colosse was the kind of Jewish mysticism argued by Bruce is difficult to ascertain. Certain elements of this nontraditional Judaism may be explained by Paul's references in 2:18 to "self-imposed humility" (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ), "angelic worship" (or "worship of angels," θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων), "things he has seen" (ἃ ἑώρακεν), and "entrance" (ἐμβατεύων) into the heavens. These excessive or heightened spiritual experiences displayed by the errorists at Colosse may have been similar to the practices and claims known among the Jewish mystics, of which Bruce writes.²⁵ They may also be explained, however, as similar to phenomena in the pagan world or as allusions to developing Gnosticism. Argall argues that the mysteries of the pagan community offer better support for these practices.²⁶

GREEK PAGAN CULTS

Many scholars, especially of the last century, saw correlations between the Colossian heresy and the pagan world.²⁷ Often these scholars believe that even the apostle was affected by this pagan thought in the development of his theology.²⁸ Others believe Paul was merely responding to influences of pagan culture that sought to infiltrate this church. Some say this pagan thought was Neopythagoreanism, others say it involved the mystery religions, and others argue that it was pre-Christian Gnosticism.

In 1970 Edward Schweizer noted correlations between the Colossian problem and a first-century B.C. document that had Neopythagorean strains, as opposed to Platonic thought.²⁹ All aspects of the two matched up except those pertaining to the Sabbath. This exception at Colosse led him to conclude that Neopythagorean and Jewish thought had merged and that Sabbath observance helped purify the soul from earthly things, thus aiding it in its ascent to Christ's dwelling place.³⁰

Other significant theories that gained popularity were the Iranian Redemption myth, suggested by Reitzenstein in 1921,³¹ and the initiation into the Isis mysteries, studied by Martin Dibelius in

²⁵ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, 21.

²⁶ Randall Argall, "The Source of a Religious Error in Colosse," 6-20.

²⁷ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians*, 19.

²⁸ Edwin Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 21-27, 36-51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

1917.³² While both contain interesting analogies and similarities to the Colossian error, most connections have been deemed coincidental.

Though most scholars agree that the Jewish element is fundamental to the heresy at hand, some have attempted to emphasize the impact of Hellenism on the church at the time. Lohse, for example, rejects the Jewish dimension to the heresy as he speaks of the different regulations in the epistle that seemingly reflect Judaism.

The "regulations," however, were not thought of as a sign of allegiance to the God of Israel, who had chosen his people from among all other nations as the community of his covenant. Rather they are thought of as expressing man's submission to the "angels," "powers," and "principalities," under whose control man has come through origin and fate. Consequently the adherents of the "philosophy" cannot be considered Essenes, members of the Qumran community or proponents of heretical Jewish propaganda.³³

Whereas the practice of circumcision would convince most that Jewish practices were in view, Lohse responds by saying, "This seemed to point to a decisive act of initiation (2:11) through which a person was accepted into the community of those who in right wisdom and knowledge served the 'elements of the universe.'"³⁴ Circumcision, in other words, was part of the initiation into the mysteries.

Argall argues that the mystery spoken of in Colossians 2:18 suggests the Greek cults of the time rather than incipient Gnosticism.³⁵ Along with Dibelius, Argall says that the term ἐμβατεύων in that verse is more closely related to the inscriptions at Apollo's temple at Claros (second century A.D.) than the apocalyptic view of a heavenly ascent.³⁶ He bases this on a reexamination of several apocalyptic passages: I QH 6:13; 4 Ezra 6:6; Sibylline Oracles 3:24; 4:41-42, 181, 183; the Syrian Apocalypse of Baruch 21:7-10; and the Apocalypse of Abraham 19. He also refers to evidences of the initiatory rites of the pagan mystery religions.³⁷ In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (sixth century B.C.), the members being initiated were to keep secret the "holy things" shown to them.³⁸ These rites took place at Eleusis in Greece and were also practiced later in Roman times. Argall writes that since ancient writings tended to be vague, this vagueness carried

³² Ibid.

³³ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 129-30.

³⁴ Ibid., 130.

³⁵ Argall, "The Source of a Religious Error in Colosse," 6-20.

³⁶ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 15.

over in the mystery being explored and refuted at Colosse. He suggests that sacred Greek mystery religion is behind ἃ ἐόρακεν.³⁹ Paul's information on this matter was either secondhand and vague, or he did not feel it was necessary to discuss it in detail. Argall also points out similarities between the Apuleius' initiation rites of Isis, in *Metamorphoses*, which refer to death and resurrection, and the discussion in Colossians 2:8-3:4, on Jesus' work on the cross.⁴⁰ He says the Greeks applied portions of the Isis and Osiris myth to Demeter.⁴¹ In Plutarch's account in *Isis and Osiris* 15-16, Argall notices an unmistakable link to Demeter. If this mysteriousness was thought by the Greeks to be spiritual, then perhaps the "mysteries" in Colossians were a polemic against that philosophy.

GNOSTICISM

Many hold that the Colossian heresy was Gnosticism. Until the rise of higher criticism in the early 1900s, the origins of Gnosticism were thought to be decidedly Christian. The roots of the Gnostic heresy were believed to be in Christianity. While scholars may never agree on a definition of Gnosticism, and while theological bantering on essential components in Gnosticism will continue, an inescapable element of incipient Gnostic thought during biblical times must be recognized. It is important to note, however, that biblical writers were not fighting a known foe called Gnosticism.

As German scholars and higher critical thinking came on the scene in the early 20th century, they spoke of a pre-Christian Gnosticism. Baur and the Tubingen School disputed the traditional date and authenticity of the Colossian letter, citing un-Pauline thought, the Cerinthian dispute (Cerinthianism being a second-century phenomenon), its dependence on Ephesians, and the early-going assumption of Gnosticism as the problem being addressed.⁴²

Though not originally his view, Bultmann is given credit for noting the so-called Gnostic Redeemer myth. In an article written in 1925 with help from the History of Religions School, he stated the following as vital parts of the Gnostic Redeemer myth.⁴³

1. "Primal Man" of Light falls and is shredded by demons, so his remains, the sparks of light, are the pneumatics of mankind.

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1965), 551.

⁴³ Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 29-30.

2. Demonic influences, through sleep and forgetfulness, try to keep these sparks from recalling their former state.

3. The redeemer, another Light being, is sent from the transcendent deity in the lowly, deceptive form of man in order not to arouse the demon awareness.

4. This redeemer revives the interest of the sparks, or pneumatics, in their origin and gives them the necessary knowledge (gnosis) for their "re-ascent" to heaven.

5. The redeemer ascends, defeating the demons and providing a path for the spirits to follow.

6. Cosmic redemption happens as the souls of men gather and collect upward, thereby in effect, redeeming the redeemer. In the end, Primal Man is reconstituted and restored.

Bultmann interpreted the Gospel of John along these lines, assuming the author was a former Gnostic.⁴⁴ Obviously this led to some less than orthodox conclusions concerning Christ.

As a religious system, Gnosticism came of age in the second century.⁴⁵ Since the authenticity of the Book of Colossians is not the primary issue at hand and the vast majority of scholars have accepted it as canonical, the issue here is to distinguish between mature Gnosticism of the second century A.D. and its incipient form, which existed in Judaistic sects for many years in the Lycus Valley.

To ascertain the existence of a decidedly pre-Christian Gnosticism is difficult. The Nag Hammadi texts reflect an awareness of Gnostic ideas by the church fathers, but history remains fairly silent on things like a Gnostic "church," rules of faith, canon, and any authoritative teaching for Gnostic initiates. No extant manuscripts support pre-Christian Gnosticism. So one can say that Gnosticism existed no earlier than Christianity⁴⁶ and that it most likely grew from interaction with various sources along with Christianity.

CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

Many scholars who have rejected the idea of a pre-Christian Gnosticism, believe nonetheless that some form of Gnostic thought developed from Christian beliefs that later became the Gnosticism of the second and third centuries A.D. Usually this early Gnostic thought is referred to as incipient or proto-Gnosticism.

One of the earliest accounts of Gnostic thought refers to Dositheus.⁴⁷ Some claim he taught Simon Magus, the arch-Gnostic.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 29-34.

⁴⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 551.

⁴⁶ Roy Yates, "Colossians and Gnosis," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 (1986): 49-68.

⁴⁷ Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism*, 57.

Whether Dositheus can be considered a true Gnostic is questionable. Danielou hypothesizes that Dositheus was the "missing link" between the pre-Gnostic Dead Sea Scrolls and the more mature Simonian Gnosticism.

Justin Martyr, refers in his Apology to Simon Magus,⁴⁸ who is mentioned in Acts 8:9. In that document, written in Rome in A.D. 154, Simon is described as a magician from Samaria, who became famous because of supposed miracles he performed on the Island of Tiber. He is also mentioned in the Acts of Peter, an apocryphal work. In the eyes of the Samaritans, Simon, according to Justin, was "above every principality and authority and power" (cf. Eph. 1:21). Simon is regarded by most early church fathers as the "Father of heresy" and was the first to be labeled a "Gnostic."

The problem with giving credit to Simon for Gnosticism lies in the account in Acts, which refers to him as a magician.⁴⁹ While some would argue that Luke was watering down Simon's position as a full Gnostic, no such evidence exists. In fact Cervaux, who has done extensive studies on Simonianism, concludes that the Gnostic themes developed in the second century evolved from Simon's followers and were credited to him by the church fathers.⁵⁰

SYNCRETISTIC RELIGION

Another position on the error at Colosse is that it was a combination of parts of many of the foregoing views. As Carson suggests, the resultant religious amalgam in the Colossian church is an attempt by these errorists, whether Jews or Gentiles, to advance beyond apostolic Christianity.⁵¹ Christ was not openly rejected by these heretics; He was merely relegated to a lesser place, as another of the angels or one of the intermediaries between God and man. The terms *πλήρωμα*, *τέλειος*, and *γνώσις* in Colossians, rather than indicating the developed thinking of Gnostic sects, instead were consistent with a first-century writing.⁵² Many of the various influences coming together at Colosse developed into later second-century Gnosticism. This amalgam may be graphed as follows.⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid., 58-59.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 58-63.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁵¹ Carson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 17.

⁵² Ibid., 12.

⁵³ Adapted from *ibid.*, 12-18.

CHRISTIANITY

Salvation through -----|
Christ alone

JUDAISM

Salvation through -----|
keeping the OT Law The Colossian heresy was an
amalgam of doctrines that
did not reject Christ openly, -----|
but displaced His

MYSTERY CULTS

Salvation through -----|
special knowledge preeminence and distorted
salvation. Second-Century
Gnosticism

GREEK PHILOSOPHY -----|

Angel worship
Asceticism Libertinism was not -----|
Libertinism addressed in Colossians, but
was found in later
Gnosticism.

The Nature of the Colossian Heresy

While the origin of the problems at Colosse is somewhat difficult to track historically, the nature of the problem is easier to ascertain. Certain characteristics of this false religion are reflected in the terms and phrases used by the Apostle Paul in Colossians.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE HERESY

Lohse notes that this heresy was touted as a philosophy built on tradition.

The "philosophy," which claimed to be based on venerable tradition (2:8), was supposed to impart true knowledge and insight. Such knowledge is concerned with the "elements of the universe" (2:8, 20) which are conceived as angelic powers (2:18) and cosmic principalities (2:10, 15). One has to establish the right relationship to them through obedient worship; only thus is it possible to gain entry to the "pleroma" (2:9) and participate in the divine fulness (2:10).⁵⁴

The false teaching Paul combated had roots in "human tradition" (2:8) and was set against that which was in Christ. Evidently these false teachers had tried to use "tradition" to build a philosophy that had a well-established base. The marks of this erroneous

⁵⁴ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 127-28.

teaching bore both theological and practical aspects. Lohse sets forth the underlying impetus of this doctrine:

Man can be suffused with the divine "fulness" only after he proves himself subservient to the angels and powers in the "worship of angels." He voluntarily declares himself prepared (self-chosen worship, 2:23) as he pays homage to the angels in cultic worship (2:18) and as he promises to obey what they enjoin upon him. Through his asceticism he withdraws from the world (putting off the body of flesh, 2:11; severe treatment of the body, 2:23), observes the special sacred days and seasons (2:16), and adheres to the regulations which prohibit him from either tasting or touching certain foods and beverages (2:16, 21).⁵⁵

These practical dimensions of the error related to the way it viewed the Person of Christ and His redemptive work. The false philosophy (Col. 2:18) claimed to have knowledge not yet discovered by the average Christian. In so doing it denied the all-sufficiency and pre-eminence of Christ. Paul therefore urged the Christians not to be lied astray by following after "the elements of this world" (τά στοιχῆα του κόσμου), which are opposed to Christ (v. 8). Whether these refer to "regulations" of asceticism, angelic powers, or elemental spirits, the impact is the same. Paul wrote that these are not needed by the Christian because Christ is the "fulness" of deity (v. 9) and believers have all fullness by being in Him (v. 10).

ASCETICISM

Along with tradition being the fundamental tenet of the heresy addressed by Paul, a strong asceticism is evident. It surpassed the normal legalism of the Jewish Pharisees and most Hellenistic cults of that day. This asceticism led to two extremes. One was the deprivation of the human body. This included ignoring the needs and wants of the flesh in an effort to transcend the physical realm and ascend into the spiritual, which would supposedly help an individual attain a closer communion with God, the true Light.⁵⁶ The other ascetic extreme was abuse in the form of licentiousness. This school of thought held the physical body in such contempt that it was seen as something to abuse, sexually or otherwise. In Colosse the heresy included an abstinent type of behavior, as seen in their words, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch" (Col. 2:21).

The problem at Colosse was a conflict between Christ and the "elements" of the world. Colosse was a great melting pot, and as such there was probably pressure for the people there to be accom-

⁵⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁶ T. K. Abbott, *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, The International Critical Commentary (1897; reprint, Edinburgh: Clark, 1977), 274.

modating religiously as well as socially. Paul, however, reaffirmed Christ's preeminence and used harsh language in dealing with the heretics' "empty" philosophies.

As observed earlier, it is commonly held that strong Judaistic elements existed at Colosse.⁵⁷ Lightfoot's view on Essenism supports this, and historical evidences show a strong Jewish presence in the Lycus Valley and Phrygia. However, the fact that Jews lived there is not in itself an adequate reason for laying the Colossian heresy squarely on Jewish shoulders. Evidence of Hellenistic cultic practice in the area affirms at best a syncretistic hypothesis for the problems addressed by Paul at Colosse. An examination of Judaistic elements in Colosse is in order, however.

Paul's references to observing feast days, new moons, circumcision, dietary laws, and the Sabbath clearly point to Judaism. The Jewish flavor in the epistle is impossible to overlook, though some have pointed to obscure similarities between these observances and some cultish practices at the time and have tried to bypass Judaism altogether. However, the Judaism addressed in Colossians seems to be of an extreme nature that may have been foreign to most other forms of Judaism. Some have called it Jewish Gnosticism, but that is presumptuous, since it is difficult to prove that Gnosticism existed in the first century. It is true that radical Jewish sects such as the Essenes existed and entertained incipient Gnostic qualities and were involved in ascetic practices. Both the Essenes and the Colossian heretics taught that knowledge (*γνῶσις*) belongs only to the spiritually elite, and that knowledge is a complicated process involving asceticism, self-denial, and dualistic philosophy.

COSMOLOGY

According to Martin the term *στοιχεῖα*, translated "elements," was being addressed by Paul as antithetical to Christ (Col. 2:8).⁵⁸ Martin then discusses Greek thought on the elements (air, water, fire, and earth), which were deified by philosophers of the time. He quotes Pythagoreans such as Diogenes Laertius (of the third century A.D.) who made a distinction between the "upper" air and the "lower" air, saying that the upper air with the sun, moon, and stars was treated as a god. Martin views Paul's words as a polemic against this type of Greek astrological worship, which was being practiced along with acceptance of the true cosmic headship of

⁵⁷ F. F. Bruce, "Jews and Christians in the Lycus Valley," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (January—March 1984): 3-15.

⁵⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 19:73), 10.

Christ.⁵⁹ Paul sought to eliminate any rule of the *στοιχεῖα* and to affirm the believer's freedom in Christ.

Bruce advocates that Merkabah mysticism and the idea of heavenly ascent relates well to Colossians 2:18.⁶⁰ In discussing the *στοιχεῖα*, Bruce refers to the heavenly ascent, which involved seven planetary bodies guarded by their respective gatekeepers, seen as polytheistic deities. He also sees a close connection between *στοιχεῖα* of Colossians and Paul's words in Galatians about the observance of days, months, seasons, and years (Gal. 4:9-10).⁶¹ Whereas Paul in no way believed in gods of the lights and stars, he realized the enslaving power that astrology had in pagan society, and that Christ frees people from this kind of bondage, a strong theme in Colossians. So this connection with Galatia has merit.

CHRISTOLOGY

While the errorists in Colosse mixed religions—Judaistic legalism and Hellenistic cult practices—they evidently did not deny Christ outright. Subtlety is evident in their syncretism. Vaughn points out that the heresy in Colosse was all the more dangerous because while not denying Christ, it dethroned Him.⁶² No matter what is held concerning the heresy's origin, Paul's response in the letter addressed a diminished view of Jesus Christ. From the dualistic viewpoint on the evil of matter (the physical), it follows that giving preeminence to the physical Person of Jesus Christ would pose serious problems to the philosophical system of the heresy.

This devaluing of Christ is implied in the much-debated phrase on "angel worship" in Colossians 2:18: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels [*θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων*], taking his stand on visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind" (RSV). Two interpretations are given on what angel worship implies. One view is that this is the veneration of angels as mediatorial beings between man and God, who aid men's spiritual "ascent." In Greek thought the deification of astrological observances also could be what Paul was referring to, since the Greeks paid homage to the astrological forces that supposedly controlled their fate.

A second view on "worship of angels" is that it means man's at-

⁵⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁰ Bruce, "The Colossian Heresy," 201-4.

⁶¹ Ibid., 196.

⁶² Curtis Vaughn, "Colossians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 11:168.

tempt to worship God as the angels do, namely, in His presence and glory. In the Merkabah school, to complete one's ascent and to even take part in the worship of God with the angels was seen as a deep honor. This latter view takes τῶν ἀγγέλων ("of angels") as a subjective genitive. Francis holds to this interpretation.⁶³ However, the errors Paul cited in Colossians 2:23 seem to refer not to some form of worship, but rather to a strict asceticism that is a form of human wisdom.⁶⁴ The first view, the exalting of the angels, seems to be what Paul was addressing. This erroneous angelology diminishes the role of Christ, reducing Him to less than divine and making Him simply another go-between in man's quest for the "true light." In truth, however, Christ is not merely one of many mediators with God; He is the only One (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15). He is the only "Link" that connects man and God, for He alone is both at once.

SOTERIOLOGY

As the Colossian heretics turned their attention from Christ, the Head, they vainly attempted to attain righteousness through asceticism, dualism, and self-abuse. The freedom presented by Christ was being exchanged for slavery to the elements of this world. It is truly ironic that if the Colossian errorists had the Merkabah "ascent" in mind along with physical self-abuse, this belief was exactly what was enslaving them to this "temporal" plane. They were forsaking true freedom from the only One who could give an individual a heavenly "audience."

EXCLUSIVITY

Another unfortunate error of this system was the way its teachers sought to limit access to its benefits to certain Christians. Only the enlightened, similar to later Gnosticism, could participate in the higher experiences of the cult. Guthrie says that "Paul seems to be at pains to express the all-inclusiveness of Christianity (cf. Col. i. 20, 28, iii. 11). It is significant that in i. 28 Paul stated his aim to be to present every man as perfect."⁶⁵

As an interesting sidelight, the traits of false teachers here seem to differ little from those expounded by the Apostle John several decades later. In both Colossians and 1 John the identification of the errorists centers on the questions, "What do you think of Christ?" and "How do you treat your fellow Christian?"

⁶³ Fred O. Francis, "Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18," in *Conflict at Colossae*, 176-80.

⁶⁴ Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 14.

⁶⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 548 (italics his).

Paul's Response to the Colossians

In his response to the church at Colosse, Paul made it clear that the gospel they had heard was indeed in Christ (1:4). Epaphras, who had evangelized the Colossians, was sent by Paul as a faithful minister of Christ (v. 7). There is no doubt that the Colossian believers' beginnings were orthodox, for Paul was pleased with their spiritual progress (v. 8).

To dilute in any way the Person of Christ is to open the door for any number of heresies, as pseudo-Christian sects have shown throughout history. He has been called a great teacher, a prophet, the "son" of God (in the sense of being His progeny), a god, and other titles, but Christianity alone describes Him as a Person with full deity, a member of the monotheistic Godhead. Syncretism cannot compromise on the foundations, and the Person of Christ is vital to what can rightfully be called "Christian."

Conclusion

Many have set forth arguments regarding the identification of the errorists at Colosse. Some believe the heretics were primarily Jewish, while others say they were Gentiles. Those arguing for a Jewish contingent usually view them as members of the Essenes or a group like the Merkabah mystics rather than the type of Judaistic legalism found at Galatia. Those who believe the opponents were Gentiles, or at least Hellenistic, think Neopythagorean or mystery religion roots were present. Along with this group of scholars are those who believe the Colossian church was influenced by Gnostic elements. Those who reject pre-Christian Gnosticism, however, do think there were embryonic or incipient forms of thought (perhaps proto-Gnostic), which eventually solidified in the Gnosticism of the second century A.D.

No single view has arguments that can lead to its being endorsed exclusively. It is best to recognize that both Jewish and Gentile elements were present in the Colossian heresy, many of which were generally shared by the populace in the highly charged world of the first century, especially in the syncretistic and Hellenistic mood of Achaia and western Asia Minor. Many of the elements developed into the Gnosticism of the second century but with far more elaborate philosophical-religious views than are found in Colossians. The most one can say of the error in Colossians is that it was a syncretism of Jewish, Gentile, and Christian features that diminished the all-sufficiency of Christ's salvation and His personal preeminence.

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