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The Theology of Colossians

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CHAPTER I

The background of Colossians

Much of the language and many of the ideas of Colossians perhaps strike the twentieth-century reader as puzzling; many of the terms and phrases are obscure, even in the original Greek. If it is in general true of the New Testament letters that the better we understand the situation which led to their being written, the better we understand them, then this is all the more true of Colossians. So we shall need to look with even greater care at what we know of the background to this letter than may be necessary with at least some other New Testament writings, and to consider both its readers' situation and that of the author. And it should not be forgotten that we are often as much influenced by views which we reject as we are by views which we espouse. The author of Colossians is no exception: it is perhaps as important to understand something about those against whom the letter is written, and in response to whom its theology is developed, as it is to know something of the traditions which are endorsed, adopted and adapted by its author.

THE COLOSSIAN 'HERESY' AND ITS BACKGROUND

For the most part it is assumed that the letter to the Colossians was written to combat some specific set of beliefs and practices that was being propagated in the church in the city of Colossae. That view has been challenged by M. D. Hooker because of the 'calm' with which the writer confronts this threat and the lack of a clear refutation of this false teaching. Is it not more plausible, she asks, that we have here 'a situation in

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which young Christians are under pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their pagan and Jewish neighbours? This need not be an explicit 'false teaching' current in the Colossian Church, but merely the threat of 'the pressures of the pagan environment' in which they lived, coupled with 'pressure from Jews or Jewish Christians'.¹

This alternative has not found much favour, and against it is the very specificity of the polemical references in Colossians, at times so specific in fact that we are at a loss to be sure of the exact meaning of phrases like 'taking his stand on visions' (2.18, RSV).² If the polemic is not as passionate as Paul's in Galatians or 2 Corinthians, then the explanation may be, not that Colossians is not a polemic against a particular viewpoint, but that the polemic does not come directly from the hand of Paul.³ It was, anyway, Paul's wont to be less vituperative in admonishing his converts than when criticizing outsiders who were interfering in his churches.

However, one might argue that a specific threat is unlikely because of the sheer variety of the suggestions proposed, which range from Pharisees to Gnostics or adherents of the pagan mystery cults.⁴ How are we to choose between these suggestions? (We must recall how important it is for the understanding of this, or any, letter to know as exactly as possible what circumstances occasioned its writing.)

The letter itself gives us a few clues. For a start, the writer of the letter warns its readers against being led astray by 'philosophy' (2.8), and this might be thought to be evidence in

¹ 'Were There False Teachers at Colossae?', in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley, *Festschrift* for C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 313–31, esp. pp. 316, 323, 328.

² See n. 25 below.

³ It will be assumed in this study that Colossians is not written directly by Paul, which is now the general consensus of scholars, at least on the other side of the English Channel, although it may have been written while Paul was still alive (but imprisoned and therefore unable to communicate much with the outside world himself?) and by a close associate of his; cf. A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background*, WUNT 44 (Tübingen, Mohr, 1987), pp. 70–1 and reff. in n. 10.

⁴ See the brief list in M. Kiley, *Colossians as Pseudepigraphy* (Sheffield, JSOT, 1986), pp. 61–2.

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support of E. Schweizer's comparison of the Colossian 'heresy' with the account of Pythagorean doctrine given by Alexander Polyhistor (first century BCE) and quoted by Diogenes Laertius (8.24–33).⁵ Certainly the contents of this account offer some suggestive parallels or possible parallels with our letter, quite apart from the fact that they are 'philosophy'. From the twin first principles (*archai*; cf. Col. 1.16, 19; 2.10, 15), the monad and the dyad, are ultimately derived the things in this world, formed from four elements (*stoicheia*; cf. Col. 2.8, 20), fire, water, earth and air (§25). The heavenly bodies, sun, moon and stars, are gods (§27). Souls are immortal, and when they leave the body they are stewarded by Hermes, the pure being taken to the heavenly and divine upper region, 'but the impure are not permitted to approach the pure or each other, but are bound by the Furies in bonds unbreakable' (§31). The air is full of souls who are *daimones* and heroes, sending dreams and portents to the people and animals in this world (§32 – these mediating figures or the Furies could very easily be compared with angels by those used to the Judaeo-Christian tradition; cf. Col. 2.18). Purification comes by cleansing, baths and lustrations, by avoiding contact with death and birth and every defilement, and by abstinence from various foodstuffs (meat, eggs, beans, etc.) and 'the other abstinences prescribed by those who perform mystic rites in the temples' (§33).

The abstinence practised by the Pythagoreans invites comparison with various aspects of the position criticized by Colossians, in particular the prohibitions of touching and eating, and the denial of the body's desires mentioned in 2.21–3. It would be tempting, too, to compare the writer's exhortation in 2.16 that the Colossians should not let themselves be judged in respect of food and drink, but that list goes on to mention the observance of festivals, new moons and sabbaths.⁶ The last item

⁵ This is most easily accessible in R. D. Hicks' translation (quoted here) of the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, LCL (London, Heinemann, 1925), vol. 2, pp. 340–9. Cf. E. Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: a Commentary* (London, SPCK, 1982; ET of EKKNT (Zürich, etc., Benziger/Neukirchen, Neukirchener, 1976)), p. 132.

⁶ This triad is found in almost identical terms in the LXX of 1 Chr. 23.31; 2 Chr. 2.3; 31.3; Hos. 2.13 and Ezek. 45.17, where it quite clearly refers to Jewish rites; cf. Isa. 1.13.

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in this list is the clearest evidence which we have that there is a Jewish element in the position against which the writer is contending and that it may not just be 'a pagan philosophy with some Jewish influence'.⁷ We do well to recall how widespread ascetic practices were amongst various groups of that day, and to reflect, too, how widespread was the claim to be a 'philosophy'; it is, for instance, used by Philo of Alexandria and other Greek-speaking Jews to describe Judaism.⁸

Thus it is also worth comparing at this point the account given by Hippolytus of Rome⁹ concerning a certain Alcibiades of Apamea in Syria who came to Rome with a book which he claimed that one Elchasai had got from Parthia (*Refutatio omnium haeresium*, 9.13.1). This text had originally been revealed by an angel of gigantic proportions, who was the Son of God, and was paired with a female angel called the Holy Spirit (cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 19.4.1–2). (Hippolytus' account may draw on the preaching of Alcibiades, and the contents of the book of Elchasai, and his own knowledge of an Elchasaite group, and this may be the reason for some tensions in his account.) According to Hippolytus¹⁰ obedience to the Jewish Law, including circumcision, was part of the Elchasaite message as propagated by Alcibiades in Rome (9.14.1). They also practised baptism, and indeed a second baptism if a baptized person had been sexually impure (9.15.1). The accompanying purifications included calling on seven 'witnesses', namely heaven, water, the holy spirits, the angels of prayer, oil, salt and the earth; 'these constitute the astonishing, ineffable and great mysteries of Elchasai which he reveals to

⁷ E. Schweizer, 'Christ in the Letter to the Colossians', in *RevExp* 70 (1973), pp. 451–67, here p. 454.

⁸ Reff. in, e.g., J. Gnilka, *Der Kolosserbrief*, HTKNT 10/1 (Freiburg, Herder, 1980), p. 122.

⁹ Cf. A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects*, NovTSup 36 (Leiden, Brill, 1973), pp. 114–21. This account has many parallels with that which Epiphanius of Salamis gives of the 'Ossaean' or 'Ossenes' (*Panarion*, 19.1.1–6.4 – Klijn–Reinink, pp. 154–61; note that they believe that Epiphanius' account is independent of Hippolytus – p. 63).

¹⁰ Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 19.1.5; 19.5.1: Elxai 'did not live according to the Law', and the Ossenes 'rejected the books of Moses', yet they followed 'the Jewish way of life in observing the sabbath, circumcision and doing everything the Law prescribes'! (Cf. also Klijn–Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, pp. 258–9.)

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worthy pupils' (9.15.2; cf. 9.15.5).¹¹ At a later point Hippolytus mentions the Elchasaïtes using incantations and baptisms 'in their acceptance of the elements' or 'as they acknowledge the elements' (10.29.3, *stoicheia* again), and the seven 'witnesses' may well therefore in this tradition be described as *stoicheia*. Certain days are also significant because they are under the influence of 'wicked stars of impiety' and no work is started on them. The sabbath too is to be honoured in this way (9.16.2–3), even if the avoidance of work on it is thereby given a motivation worthy of Gnostic revaluations of Jewish traditions.

Now at one point Hippolytus notes the similarities of these Elchasaïte teachings to those of the Pythagoreans, and indeed claims that they were borrowed from them (9.4.1–2; cf. 9.17.2). It is true that he has in mind the Pythagoreans' doctrine of transmigration and their astrological skills, but it is apparent that most of the parallels which could be detected between the Pythagoreans and the background to the Letter to the Colossians could equally well be found in these accounts of Elchasaïte teaching, and the latter shows even closer parallels in its vision and its belief in angels and in its observance of the Jewish Law, at least according to some accounts. The origins of these Elchasaïte traditions in the early second century,¹² are later than the likely date of Colossians and lie further to the East, in Parthia and Syria, but they were known in Rome too, and they still show the sort of blend of idea and practice that could conceivably have arisen anywhere where there were Jews or Jewish Christians living in a pagan environment and seeking to blend their traditions with those around them. To that extent it may serve as an instructive parallel without our in any way needing to suggest that precisely this group, or even one derived from it, was present in Colossae.

¹¹ For Epiphanius there are two groups of seven witnesses, the first being 'salt, water, earth, bread, heaven, air and wind', the second corresponding to Hippolytus' list – *Panarion*, 19.1.5–6. *Panarion*, 30.17 lists eight which seem to be a fusion of elements of both lists (cf. the synopsis in Klijn–Reinink, *Patristic Evidence*, pp. 57–8 n. 3).

¹² Cf. the often rather similar ones found in the Pseudo-Clementine literature (a body of writings ostensibly by Clement, the first-century bishop of Rome, but probably dating from fourth-century Syria although they contain earlier traditions).

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In such a group a veneration of *stoicheia* in the sense of certain selected physical elements or ‘constituent parts’¹³ of the world may have been coupled with a Jewish linking of these elements with angelic powers and an observance of the Jewish Law or parts of it. For both the passages which we have considered suggest that it would be very misguided to distinguish too sharply between the two possible senses of *stoicheia* as physical elements and as powers, benign or malign, controlling human life. However, the way in which Paul treats service of the Jewish Law as service of the ‘elements of the world’ in Gal. 4.3, 9 should warn us that the opponents in Colossae need not have regarded their religion as a worship of the elements (or indeed as a ‘worship of angels’, 2.18) any more than Jews so regarded theirs, or any more than they regarded it as merely a matter of human traditions (2.8; cf. 2.22). In other words, this phrase, ‘elements of the world’, may be a polemical and contemptuous denigration of their beliefs like Jewish polemic against pagan cults as the worship of sticks and stones (cf. the contemptuous reference in Wis. 13.2). For a Greek would have interpreted the phrase, ‘the elements of the world’, primarily as a reference to the physical elements that make up the world, however much they may also have been regarded as exercising a quasi-personal influence on human life.¹⁴ After all, Paul also takes the term ‘flesh’, *sarx*, that commonly denotes the physical stuff of the human body, and treats it as a quasi-personal power that exercises a baneful influence on our lives.¹⁵ A similar polemic against the ‘elements’ and their influence should not then cause surprise, particularly in view of the widespread belief at that time that the course of human lives was dictated by heavenly bodies. As L. Hartman points out, the author of Colossians seems to share with the world of that time the belief that the ‘cosmos . . . was alive, filled and swayed by all sorts of

¹³ So the argument of N. Kehl, *Der Christushymnus im Kolosserbrief: eine motivgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Kol 1,15–20*, SBM 1 (Stuttgart, Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967), ch. 6.

¹⁴ Cf. Philo, *Vit. Mos.*, 1.96; 2.53; *Vit. cont.*, 3.

¹⁵ Because of the Galatian opponents’ stress on the physical rite of circumcision their version of Christianity can be contemptuously dismissed as a matter of ‘flesh’ as opposed to ‘spirit’ (Gal. 3.3). This is at least part of the reason for Paul’s choice of the former term to characterize their position.

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living powers', and he points out how even so sophisticated a Jew as Philo could treat the heavenly bodies, not as gods, it is true, but as God's lieutenants exercising power over the world.¹⁶

Such a background is the more plausible because the region of Phrygia (to which Colossae was reckoned to belong in the Roman period) possessed a considerable Jewish population. We do not hear specifically of Jews at Colossae, but the chances that there were some are high. One often reads, moreover, that the Jewish population of Phrygia were noted for their syncretistic beliefs and their blending of their traditions with those of surrounding paganism, yet the evidence for this is somewhat precarious.¹⁷ If we want somewhat clearer, but by no means incontrovertible, evidence of Jews involving themselves more deeply in the life of their pagan environment, we must look slightly further afield: at Miletus on the coast there was a place in the theatre reserved for 'Jews who are also God-fearing' (*theosebion*)¹⁸ and in nearby Iasus we read of a certain Nicetas from Jerusalem, who *may* have been a Jew, contributing 100 drachmae to the festivals of Dionysus.¹⁹ It is not impossible that some such spirit of give and take may have existed between Jews in Colossae and their neighbours and that it is to this blend of Jewish and non-Jewish religiosity that we owe the ideas against which the author of Colossians warns.

In such a setting it is easy to see how Diaspora Jews might partially assimilate their faith to the prevailing culture around

¹⁶ 'Universal Reconciliation (Col. 1,20)', in *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt*, 10 (1985), pp. 109–21, here p. 112, quoting Philo, *Spec. leg.*, 1.13–20.

¹⁷ Cf. W. M. Ramsay, *The Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia, Being an Essay of the Local History of Phrygia from the Earliest Times to the Turkish Conquest* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1897), p. 674. But there is no need for Julia Severa, who built a synagogue in Acmonia and who was also a high-priestess of the imperial cult, to have been a Jewess, despite Ramsay's assertion that it is 'obvious' that she was (p. 650). This is evidence, however, for influential patronage of the Jewish community there in the first century CE – cf. E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol. 3.1 (Edinburgh, Clark, 1986*), p. 31. Ramsay himself grants this argument here is 'a matter of speculation and uncertainty, where each step is more slippery than the preceding one' (*ibid.*); if his important first step is so uncertain perhaps we should not follow him down that path.

¹⁸ *CII*, 748, second–third century CE. But cf. Schürer, *History*, p. 167, which inclines to the view that 'God-fearing' Gentiles may have been called 'Jews'.

¹⁹ *CII*, 749, mid second century BCE.

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them, identifying as angels the cosmic forces which their pagan neighbours believed controlled the world and their personal destinies.²⁰ The restrictions imposed upon them by the Jewish way of life could also be coupled with ascetic traditions found in contemporary paganism. These remain legal requirements, the *dogmata* of 2.14, commands to which one submits (*dogmatizesthe*, 2.20)²¹ by obeying prohibitions on touching or drinking certain things. The focus would then not be on the Jewish Law as such, but on those of its commandments, perhaps with other, yet more rigorous ones added to them, which would form the basis for an ascetic way of life.²² At the same time they are Jewish commandments, and F. Zeilinger may therefore be correct in seeing many of the statements of Colossians as seeking to outdo claims made for the Law, particularly in Jewish wisdom traditions, and to replace it with Christ.²³ It is also true that Col. 3.11 would have added point if the Colossian church were exposed to Judaizing pressures. Otherwise it is hard to see why this verse is included, especially when the Jew–Greek distinction of Gal. 3.28 is emphasized by the addition of that of circumcision–uncircumcision.

This sort of Judaism would then at first sight be somewhat different in character from that which motivated the opponents whom Paul encountered in Galatia. There Paul's opponents seemingly demanded obedience to the Jewish Law in a form in which that obedience had traditionally been interpreted, but here there beckons a form of Diaspora Judaism which indeed also maintains the external observances of

²⁰ E. Käsemann, art. 'Kolossierbrief', in *RGG*³ (1959), vol. 3, p. 1728, poses the alternative, 'Are the powers honoured because they are considered dangerous or because they represent the heavenly "fullness"?' but these are not necessarily alternatives; it could be thought dangerous to neglect or ignore the heavenly 'fullness'.

²¹ This verse strongly suggests that these regulations were linked to the *stoicheia*, for 'dying to' the latter entails that one should no longer let *dogmata* be imposed on one. The *dogmata* are in force because of the position accorded to the elements.

²² An abstinence which goes beyond any requirements of the Law seems to have been characteristic of some Diaspora Judaism of the period – A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans*, Studies of the NT and Its World (Edinburgh, Clark, 1989), pp. 33–4.

²³ *Der Erstgeborene der Schöpfung: Untersuchungen zur Formalstruktur und Theologie des Kolossierbriefes* (Wien, Herder, 1974), pp. 92, 106–7 et passim.

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Judaism, but sets them within a new, more mystical and speculative framework that owes much to the pagan world around, as well as perhaps to mystical traditions within Jewish thought.²⁴ Even in Galatians too we could more easily understand how Paul could with such apparent daring identify the service of the Law with his converts' pre-Christian service of the 'elements of the world', if indeed his opponents there linked the service of the Law to the angelic powers who had given the Law, powers which Paul slightly treats as part of this world (Gal. 4.3, 9). In Gal. 3.19 Paul would then be revaluing the angels' role by treating it as a sign of the Law's inferiority rather than a reason to venerate it. If a difference between the opposition in Colossae and that in Galatia is to be sought, it should perhaps rather be found in the basis upon which those opponents presented their appeal: the indications are that in Galatia the opponents argued for the abiding validity of the Jewish Law, prescribed as binding on Christians by the Jerusalem church, whereas in Colossae appeal seems to have been made to visionary experience, however one translates the enigmatic words of Col. 2.18.²⁵

What remains uncertain is whether the proponents of this teaching against which Colossians is written were Christians, putting forward their views as the true form of Christianity, as was the case in Galatia, or whether they existed outside the Christian community as a seductive alternative to it. Was their 'philosophy' one which presented a rival to Christ or one which accorded Christ a too subordinate place in it? Or the writer of Colossians may have regarded them as propounding a rival faith, but if Colossians was written early enough, before Christianity and Judaism had become clearly distinct from one

²⁴ An identification of the opponents in Col. which F. F. Bruce traces back to Calvin – 'Colossian Problems 3: The Colossian Heresy', in *BSac* 141 (1984), pp. 195–208, here p. 197. He himself suggestively compares Jewish mysticism (pp. 201–4).

²⁵ It is very hard to take 'what he has seen' as dependent on *embateuōn* as in the RSV or NEB; the accusative following this verb usually denotes a place. 'Things which he has seen when entering [where? heaven?]' must then qualify 'self-abasement and worship of angels' (cf. F. O. Francis in F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks (eds.), *Conflict at Colossae*, SBLBSB 4 (Cambridge MA, Scholars, 1975), pp. 163–95). Paul's opponents in 2 Cor. 10–13 may well also have appealed to visionary experiences if we can infer that this was what drove Paul to recount his own vision in 12.1–4.