

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY: ITS SOURCE AND NATURE

Biblical scholars continue to wrestle with the historical source and nature of “the Colossian heresy.” “By ‘the Colossian heresy’ is meant the ‘philosophy and empty deceit’ against which the Colossian Christians are put on their guard in Colossians 2:8.”¹ There are numerous questions related to this topic, and many remain largely unanswered. While a great deal of research has been completed, and scholars propose conclusions, it remains a source of frustration for many New Testament interpreters, pastors, and laymen. **I will argue that “the Colossian heresy” is an internal false teaching primarily from Jewish influences that threatens to corrupt the church by undermining the sufficiency of Christ.**

There are a number of issues to wade through. Is this a systematic set of beliefs (a philosophy) or random teachings welded together? Is it right to call it a heresy? From what groups did it originate and what did it primarily involve in its teaching? Was it a Jewish or Gentile sect? Was it coming from inside the church, outside the church, from the synagogue, or simply a hodge-podge of ideology in a Hellenistic city? Are these teachings Gnostic, proto-Gnosticism, or can they be explained apart from this philosophy? We will begin by examining “the Colossian heresy” in the first part of this paper and then move to seeing how to interpret key phrases from Colossians 2:8-23 based on our observations.

Part 1: The Colossian Heresy

I must first mention a couple of details about the letter to frame the discussion. Paul wrote around 60-61 AD to the Church in Colossae, a Phrygian city in Asia Minor near the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.² Because of its location on a highway, it remained a highly diverse city in Paul’s day. Gentiles would have comprised the largest portion of its population, but we know there was a Jewish presence.³ The church there was likely started by Epaphras (converted under Paul’s preaching in the not too distant city of Ephesus). The lack of direct OT quotations but the mention of Jewish concerns (Sabbaths, circumcision, etc.) seems to indicate the church would have had both a Gentile and Jewish makeup.

The Source of the Philosophy

There are several options for who started this teaching and the most comprehensive summary can be found in *Conflict in Colossae*.⁴ H. Wayne House provides a summary of the most common options.

¹ F.F. Bruce, “The Colossian Heresy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (1984), 195.

² P.T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word Books, 1982), liv.

³ James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 21.

⁴ F.O. Francis and W. A. Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1973).

Some say Paul's opponents were pagans who were influenced by the mystery religions of the day. Others think they were Judaistic in outlook, with such differing perspectives as Merkabah mysticism or apocalyptic Essenism. Still others believe the opponents were of a Gnostic stripe that was either Jewish or pre-Christian in nature. Another theory is that the foes at Colossae represented a syncretistic group who shared views from several of the above groups.⁵

Recent studies have shown us that the breadth of Judaism(s) in the first-century can account for the mystical, apocalyptic, and ascetic features in this book. Since Paul mentions Jewish concerns such as circumcision and Sabbaths, most scholars today lean toward a sect of Judaism—with local elements mixed in—as the origin of the dangerous teaching in Colossae. “The Colossian ‘philosophy’...represents a combination of Phrygian folk belief, local folk Judaism, and Christianity.”⁶ To again quote House: “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.”⁷ **This primarily Jewish, but still syncretistic, source provides a likely answer to the origin of “the Colossian heresy.”**

A related question is if this came from inside the church? At this time, many Jewish Christians would have continued to meet in local synagogues. “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.”⁸ Christian Stettler takes a similar stance and argues that all of the elements are consistent with some form of first-century Judaism. “Those who ‘condemn’ the Colossian Christians must then be the local Torah-observant Jews.”⁹

Douglas Moo sees the Colossian heresy as primarily a teaching from within. “The letter gives no indication that the Colossians faced teachers who had come to them from outside their community. Indeed, by warning about people ‘who have lost connection with the head [Christ]’ (2:19), Paul implies that the threat arose from among fellow Christians.”¹⁰ **In light of 2:19, it seems most likely that the false teaching had either begun in or was still a part of the church.**

⁵ H. Wayne House, “Heresies in the Colossian Church,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992), 46.

⁶ Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief in Colossae* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 243.

⁷ House, “Heresies,” 59.

⁸ Dunn, *Colossians*, 34.

⁹ Christian Stettler, “The Opponents at Colossae,” in *Paul and His Opponents*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 182.

¹⁰ Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 47. See also Moo's response on pages 55-56 to Dunn's reasoning for why this philosophy is standard Judaism.

This also begs the question of whether or not there was a coherent set of beliefs in place or merely a set of tendencies. Morna Hooker argues there is no fixed body of teaching, but that Paul is simply warning against false tendencies from outside of the community one might pick up.¹¹ Peter O'Brien sees a more systemized set of beliefs

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, 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.¹²

David Pao adds, "To label this philosophy as 'false teaching' would then provide us with a workable framework within which the various parts of this letter can be read."¹³

In light of these arguments, I see "the Colossian heresy" as a clustered body of ideas being taught, an internal threat or a threat by those very close to the Colossian church community, and as a syncretistic philosophy incorporating largely Jewish teachings—especially mystical and apocalyptic ideologies—into the Christian faith.

The Nature of the Philosophy

But what is the actual content of the philosophy? "While the origin of the problems at Colossae is somewhat difficult to track historically, the nature of the problem is easier to ascertain."¹⁴ The majority of the words, phrases, and ideas factoring into our understanding of the Colossian philosophy come from 2:8-23. However, another hurdle in trying to understand this philosophy from Paul's letter is we don't always know if something is part of the philosophy or incidental to it.

We can put the main parts of the Colossian heresy in a few large categories. First, there is clearly an emphasis on spiritual beings. The "elemental spirits of the world" (2:8, 20) are mentioned twice. Paul rebukes angel worship (2:18), and Paul talks about Jesus as conquering spiritual "rulers and authorities" (2:15). Second, there's a ritualistic element. "Great importance was attached to outward observances,

¹¹ Morna D. Hooker, "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1973), 315-31. Hooker's argument has been quite influential in recent years.

¹² P.T. O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 148.

¹³ David W. Pao, *Colossians & Philemon*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 26. "The consistency of Paul's interaction with that which challenges the centrality of Christ does argue for the presence of a definite body of teachings that deviates from the gospel that the Colossian believers had received."

¹⁴ House, "Heresies," 54.

such as feasts and fasts, new moons and Sabbaths (2:16f), and probably also circumcision (2:11).”¹⁵ Third, there’s an emphasis on asceticism and self-discipline (2:18, 20-23). And finally, with each of these elements there seems to be a spiritual elitism and pride (2:18). Among the many problems here, there is one main one consistently at their core. “Here is the essence of the false teaching: it is ‘not according to Christ’ (2:8).”¹⁶

That is as much as we know. Paul mentions some of its key aspects quickly, choosing instead to focus on Christ’s sufficiency as opposed to the insufficiency of this false teaching. He doesn’t provide an in-depth explanation, nor does he help us connect the dots between the various elements mentioned. His preferred path here is to highlight aberrant elements of the Colossian heresy—assuming the church at Colossae would have better understood the context and layers underneath these elements—and contrasting their weaknesses and failures compared to the perfect fullness found in Christ.

Part 2: Interpreting Colossians 2:16-23

Having briefly surveyed some of the issues related to the source and nature of the false teaching at Colossae, we’re in a better position to consider Colossians 2:8-23. Our focus will be on verses 16-19, since verses 20-23 seem to expand on things brought up in 16-19. The goal here isn’t to fully exegete these passages but to see how they might be interpreted in a way consistent with what I’ve suggested as the nature of “the Colossian philosophy.”

Verse 8 sets the stage for verses 16-23. The first question is what is meant by “philosophy and empty deceit?” O’Brien believes Paul uses this word—found only here in this form in the NT—because the false teachers were using it in a positive way to refer to their own teachings.¹⁷ One must be careful not to read back into the text anachronistically here as if Paul is against all “philosophy,” or deep thinking in general. Paul quotes the philosophers and poets of the day (Acts 17:22-28). He has a specific kind of philosophy in mind when he issues this warning. “Paul means neither philosophy in general nor classical Greek philosophy specifically but so-called philosophy, what is falsely termed philosophy (cf. I Tim. 6:20), ‘philosophy’ that has the mere ‘appearance of wisdom’ (cf. 2:23), almost ‘philosophizing’ or ‘intellectualism.’”¹⁸

¹⁵ J.B. Torrance, “Colossians, Epistle to The” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I Howard Marshall, A.R. Millard, J.I. Packer, and D.J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 215-16.

¹⁶ Moo, *Colossians*, 60.

¹⁷ O’Brien, *Colossians*, 109.

¹⁸ Murray J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 92.

This type of philosophy is one of empty deceit. Paul clearly sees the philosophy as a threat to the spiritual maturity of the Colossian Church. It is empty, deceitful, and will carry them away from Christ as captives if they're not careful to steer away from it. This "empty deceit" stands in stark contrast to the fullness of truth and knowledge found in Jesus (1:5; 2:3).

This "philosophy of empty deceit" is "according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (2:8). Notice the threefold repetition of "according to" (*kata*). First, it is human tradition as opposed to God's Word, similar to how Jesus uses the language against the extra-biblical traditions of the Pharisees in Mark 7:3-13.¹⁹ This suggests the false teaching rooted its prestige in a long-standing history. O'Brien summarizes the next phrase as referring to "the principalities and powers which sought to tyrannize over the lives of men (cf. 2:10, 15)."²⁰ An elevation of spiritual beings—whether it be angels, demonic forces, or other—would be consistent with either a Jewish or Pagan understanding of the Colossian Heresy. Whatever the meaning of this phrase, we know that its most fundamental feature is that it is "not according to Christ." This interpretation of 2:8 fits well with a primarily Jewish-syncretistic understanding of the Colossian heresy.

As we move to verse sixteen, we again see the elitism and ritualism of the false teachers passing judgment on "questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or Sabbath" (Col. 2:16). Verses 16-23 contain the thickest concentration of the Colossian philosophy. Paul is likely using actual words or phrases from the philosophy. As I stated earlier, the overall argument and the focus in these verses on the religious nature of the teachings inclines me toward it being primarily Jewish. As Dunn notes, "It is true that restrictions on diet were not confined to Jews in the ancient world."²¹ However, the focus on dietary laws, religious festivals, and Sabbaths is best understood as a Jewish question and was certainly an issue for the first-century church (see 1 Corinthians and Romans).

...the particularities envisaged here points fairly firmly to an essentially Jewish faction in Colossae who were deeply critical of Gentile Christian failure to observe the Jewish food laws....only if Gentiles were assuming identity markers which Jews had always understood as distinctively theirs, would Jews, who otherwise lived (for the most part) in mutual respect with their Gentile fellow citizens, have found it necessary to be so critical and condemnatory. The criticism here is that of the traditionalist devout Jew against would-be fellow religionists whose claims he could not really or fully accept.²²

¹⁹ Dunn sees this as further confirmation it comes from the Jewish sect because they are the ones tying it to their long-standing tradition. Dunn, *Colossians*, 148.

²⁰ O'Brien, *Colossians*, 110.

²¹ Dunn, *Colossians*, 173.

²² Ibid., 174.

For those living in Paul's day, food and drink were a controversial subject, especially when it came to cleanliness (Heb. 9:10) and Jew-Gentile relationships (Rom. 14:17). In Romans 14, food divided the weak and strong, which likely parallels the way some are passing judgment on the Colossians in 2:18, 21-23. Peter O'Brien explains the Jewish origin as a Nazirite vow. "These are more stringent regulations of an ascetic nature apparently involving the renunciation of animal flesh and of wine and strong drink, after a Nazirite fashion. They follow from the demand of 'severe treatment of the body' (v 23), whereby abstinence from certain food is required (v 21; cf. 1 Tim 4:3)." ²³

Alongside judgments over food and drink, Paul mentions a festival, new moon, and Sabbaths. These terms are often grouped together in the OT as special days dedicated to God (Hos. 2:13; Ezek. 45:17; 1 Chr. 23:31; 2 Chr. 2:3). Paul is not against holy days or religious festivals, but here we see he is against their misuse. Dunn concludes "that all the elements in this verse bear a characteristically and distinctively Jewish color." ²⁴ Because of the connection with the "elemental spirits of the world," O'Brien argues that it likely suggests a combination of Jewish teachings combined with a focus on astral powers overseeing the stars and calendar. ²⁵ Douglas Moo suggests a background of Jewish philosophy incorporating syncretistic beliefs.

Most interpreters, however, persist in thinking that the false teachers had integrated the observance of Jewish special days into a larger syncretistic system...On the whole, then, it seems best to view the practices in v. 16 as basically Jewish in origin and perhaps even orientation while still recognizing that they have been taken up into a larger mix of religious ideas and practices. ²⁶

Had Paul argued against these views by showing how they're corruptions from the true OT faith, we might have more reason to see the Colossian philosophy as solely Jewish. However, the clearly Jewish focuses—food and festivals—and the non-traditional Jewish elements of astral powers seems to fit best with Moo's conclusion that this is likely a Jewish teaching where other views have been mixed in.

The next major exegetical hurdle is verse 18: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions." As Moo rightly notes, "This verse furnishes the most important evidence about the false teaching, but it is arguably the most difficult verse in Colossians to interpret." ²⁷ The phrase translated in the ESV as "insisting on asceticism" is translated in the NIV as "delights in false humility." I won't go into the support for each choice because there are good

²³ O'Brien, *Colossians*, 138.

²⁴ Dunn, *Colossians*, 175.

²⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians*, 139.

²⁶ Moo, *Colossians*, 224.

²⁷ Ibid.

arguments on both sides. But I agree with David Pao that “insisting on” is the better term because it more closely fits with the false teachers condemning others for the practices they insist on. “The final part of this section (vv. 20-23), which argues against ascetic practices, also suggests that the false teachers are not simply being content with such practices among themselves; they are also imposing them on the Colossian believers.”²⁸ This would fit well with O’Brien’s already mentioned interpretation of a Jewish (possibly even Nazarene) focus on food rituals and whether one should say no to certain foods and drinks. The context of verses 21-23 implies that a Jewish focus on asceticism and ritual was the means to holiness, as well as the means to spiritual elitism (cf. 2:21-23).

The next phrase can be translated as worshipping with angels or worshipping the angels. Jewish mysticism and Jewish syncretism in Asia Minor can account fairly well for either of the translations.²⁹ N.T. Wright believes it could be as simple as an over-preoccupation with angels that might be called worship.³⁰ Whether the phrase means angel worship, veneration of angels, or invocation of angels, the point stressed throughout Colossians is that Jesus alone is supreme (cf. Heb. 1:13). Jesus stands above all principalities, powers, rulers, and angels, so he alone should be worshipped (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15).

The next phrase says they go on in details about visions, or what they’ve seen. It’s unclear what these visions refer to, and it’s debated whether the visions are created through the asceticism or tied to the angel worship. What is clear is these man-made ideas emphasized spiritual beings, experiences and visions, personal tradition, and asceticism as their self-created means of spiritual maturity. They have not held fast to Jesus (19) and they’ve taught a faith not according to Christ (8).

I believe verses 16-18 indicate a primarily Jewish source to the Colossian philosophy, as well as further support that the false teachers must have either been in the church at Colossae or close to it (such as the local synagogue). Since the Church was still wrestling through its relationship to Israel and the Jews, it often led to confusion about how “Jewish” the Christians should be. The fact that the Colossians might give in to the judgment and insistence of the Colossian philosophy makes much more sense if it’s coming from local Jews in some relationship to the Christians in Colossae. While the source and exact nature of the Colossian philosophy is difficult to grasp, what’s evident is that anything not according to Christ (whether tradition, philosophy, self-discipline, etc.) is a danger to the Church.

²⁸ Pao, *Colossians*, 188.

²⁹ See: Pao, *Colossians*, 189; Moo, *Colossians*, 227.

³⁰ “The people he is opposing spend so much time in speculations about angels, or in celebrating the fact that the law was given by them, that they are in effect worshipping them instead of God.” N.T. Wright, *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 122.

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