

PERSPECTIVES OF COLOSSIAN 'PHILOSOPHY': THE MEANING OF INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS

Abstract

The academic research dedicated to the way in which the author of the Epistle to Colossians relates to the Old Testament can be found in several recent specialized works by the Bible scholars Gordon Fee, G. K. Beale, C. Beetham and Jerry L. Sumney. One of the remarkable characteristics of the epistles of the Apostle Paul is that the Apostle takes over the old testamentary language in contexts in which the recipients are expected to understand not only the allusion or echo but also to recognize their implications. In this context, Colossian philosophy has a predominantly Jewish character – not a mystical one, but one anchored in a Jewish understanding of the law, circumcision and holidays.



DEACON OLIMPIU-NICOLAE BENEÀ

Faculty of Orthodox Theology
"Babes-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca
olimpiu.benea@ubbcluj.ro

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Introduction

One of the most debated issues regarding the interpretation of the Epistle to the Colossians is the one related to the nature of *philosophy* (Bornkamm 1952, 139-56; Hegermann 1961: 164; Malingrey 1961, 105-6) against which the Apostle Paul is motivated to answer in his epistle. An influential theory in the academic space, originating in the late nineteenth century, defines this *philosophy* as belonging to a syncretist, proto-Gnostic movement, in the form of the religion of mysteries (Zetterholm 2011, 136-9). However, the arguments in favour of such a theory are insufficient (Zetterholm 2011, 138), which led many biblical scholars to identify the Colossian *philosophy* with a form of Jewish Hellenistic-Gnostic mysticism. Recently, G. H. van Kooten, suggested

that philosophy could be identified with middle Platonism (van Kooten 2003, 138-9).

The mention of *circumcision* (2:11), food, drink, holidays, new moons, and Sabbaths (2:16), underscores the Jewish origin of philosophy (Dunn 2005, 23-5). Given the nature of the diversity of first-century Judaism, Colossian *philosophy* may have offered "a Jewish alternative to a Christ-centric Judaism" (Zetterholm 2011, 138).

It is evident from the description made by the Apostle Paul in the greeting addressed to the Church in Colossae, that the recipients were "faithful saints and brothers" (1:2). If these were not only Philemon's "church in the house" (Flm 2), but also the "church in the house" of Nymphas (4:15), we should note the existence of several *houses*, which have become places of worship in Colossae.

In this context, one can identify a crisis generated by a group of teachers from Colossae who tried to undermine the Gospel preached by the Apostle Paul, through a sustained approach of the Colossian Christians, who remained "believers in Christ" (1:2), with a different teaching (Dunn 2005, 25).

In order to interpret the epistle as correctly as possible, we need to identify this different teaching in as much detail as possible. What we have in the Epistle to the Colossians is only a part of the whole turmoil, namely the apostle Paul's response to the problems of Colossae, which were told to him by Epaphras. The Apostle Paul and the false teachers are indirectly engaged in a polemical dispute, in which the Colossian believers are only active auditors. What those teachers might answer in the polemical dispute can only be inferred by analyzing the nature of the Apostle's response in the light of the cultural context that we would know about the world of the first century in Colossae. But, in our opinion, this whole process would be inaccurate, because we would resort to secondary resources in the interpretation of the New Testament text, without first exhausting the main resources, such as the other books of the Holy Scriptures.

The Apostle Paul's response demonstrates that the recipients knew what the false teachers were saying, so he alludes only to their teaching in a few points. That is why the diversity of opinions on Bibles on this subject is also explained.

Next, we will emphasize some records of the text concerning the doctrinal error in Colossae, and then we will evaluate the main options of the Bibles, in their light, to try to define that teaching. Although we do not know the exact nature of the different teaching in Colossae, we will start our approach from the internal arguments of the epistle (Col 2:4.8.16.18), in which we observe clear warnings to the Christians of Colossae regarding the immense danger they were facing.

The Colossian 'philosophy'

The teachers of this error had an appealing discourse, their *deceptive* words bearing in them the ability to deceive Christians (2:4). Deception is defined in the context of a lack of "full understanding for the knowledge of the mystery of God the Father and of Christ" (2:2). Apostle Paul is constantly preoccupied in his epistles with the danger of the presence of such teachers (Ga 1:8; 4:17; 5:12; 6:12-13; 2Co 11:4-5.13-15.20-23; 12:11; Flp 3:2.18-19; 1 Tim 1:3-7; 4.1.3; 6:3-5). Compared to these explicit, and sometimes even harsh, texts in their expression, the language used in the Epistle to the Colossians is "quite restrained" (Dunn 2005, 25). The apostle Paul does not use the phrase, false teachers, instead, he uses a general expression about them: *μηδεις* (2:4.18) or *τις* (2:8.16). Nor is it very clearly described what the wrong teaching was.

What we can synthesize about this teaching, in general themes, are some observations (Rowland 1995, 220-9):

1. Doctrinal error was a deceptive and vain philosophy (2:8). The word *philosophy* was applied to a wide range of belief systems in the ancient world, suggesting very little about the origin or nature of the teaching (Malingrey 1961, 105-6). What we can understand, however, is that this teaching involved a coherent system.

2. Doctrinal error was closely related to "human teaching"/ "human ordinances and teachings" (Col 2:8.22). The similarity of the phrase to that of the Savior's words denouncing "the tradition of men" (Mc 7:5-13) suggests the Jewish nature of the teaching, although the language is too general to reach a clear conclusion to this effect.

3. Doctrinal error was dependent on the "stiches of the world" (Col 2:8) (Beekes and van Beek 2010, 1396). Although we cannot determine at first sight the strict meaning that the expression would have in the epistle, it is not certain whether this expression was used by the *false teachers* in describing their own teaching, or whether the Apostle Paul chose to apply it to their teaching.

4. Doctrinal error does not belong to *Christ* (Col 2:8).

5. Doctrinal error sustained commandments concerning restrictions on food and drink and the Jewish holy days (2:16).

6. Doctrinal error appreciated an ascetic discipline (2:18.23).

7. The attention of doctrinal error was directed to the angels (2:18). The phrase "worship of angels / ministry of angels / ministry of angels" is one of the most debated by Bibles in the context of interpreting the epistle, being the *turning*

point in the reconstruction of the erroneous teaching in Colossae. It may refer to an increased veneration offered to angels by men, or to a participation of men in the ministry performed by angels. Also relevant in this respect is the relationship between the reference to *angels* and the references to “beginners and masters” (1:16.20; 2:10.15).

8. The doctrinal error emphasized the *visions* of the error teachers in Colossae (2:18).

9. The teachers of doctrinal error suffered from pride: “being sobered with the mind, ... the fleshly one” (2:18).

10. The teachers of doctrinal error did not have a relationship with the *head* of the body, Christ (2:19). The apostle Paul, stating the phrase, “not according to Christ” (Col 2:8), suggests that the teachers of error claimed to be Christians.

11. The teachers of doctrinal error propagated various commandments – which the Apostle Paul calls *worldly* – as an important expression of spiritual growth (2:20-23).

Although the general observations of the Colossian text are sufficient to reconstruct the teaching that affected the life of faith of those in the entire area of the Lycus Valley, we must clarify some details of the text that are not very clear as to their relevance in the definition of Colossian teachings, such as the term *fullness* – *πλήρωμα* (1:19; 2:9-10), interpreted as a Gnostic or Stoic element of false teaching (Scott 1927, 266; Aletti 1993, 113-8), or *circumcision* (2:11.13; 3:11), considered to be a landmark for an understanding of the Jewish nature of the error.

That is why we will briefly recall three more important perspectives proposed for elucidating the problem.

First, it proposes the idea of a *proto-Gnosticism* that would have influenced Christian thought in Asia Minor. Since the form of a coherent system in Gnosticism can only be found in the second century, there is talk of incipient Gnosticism as a factor of influence. From this perspective was very focused on the research of the nineteenth century and of the first part of the XXth century. However, recent studies demonstrate less and less influence of proto-Gnostic aspects in Colossians (Beetham 2008).

Secondly, since Colossae was a cosmopolitan location, with a population open to influences coming from any part of the Roman Empire, it insists on religious and philosophical syncretism (Dibelius 1936, 167; Hooker 1973, 315-31), without it being possible to conclude its exact nature (Bradley 1972, 17-36). The most relevant study for this perspective is by Prof. Clinton Arnold, in which he states that “The Colossian ‘philosophy’... represents a combination of Phrygian folk belief, local folk Judaism, and

Christianity. The local folk belief has some distinctive Phrygian qualities, but it also has much in common with what we could also describe as magic or ritual power". In the reconstruction he proposes, Arnold insists on the veneration of angels, as the centrality of the syncretist movement against which the Apostle Paul writes his epistle. But most of the evidence presented for the *popular belief* of Colossae belongs to sources from the II-III century.

Although the syncretistic perspective touches on the problem of Judaism, it does not discuss it in a satisfactory way regarding the interpretation of the texts of Col 2:16-23.

A third perspective is that of Jewish mysticism. It is a proposal that, in recent years, has won over more and more Bible scholars on its side (Francis 1962: 109-134; Lane 1978: 216-8; Sappington, 1991). The perspective starts in its argumentation from the interpretation of the phrase *θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* (Col 2,18). The phrase in Greek also allows the use of the subjective genitive (the ministry of angels), not just the objective one (worship of angels). For the Jewish apocalyptic context, the use of the subjective genitive in Col 2.18 is taking shape (Murphy 2012, 307-54). In many Apocrypha (Isaac 1983, 5-89 (10); Vermes 2010, 143), the authors are caught up, in their visions, in the heavens where the worship of angels before God takes place, so that the meanings of the words accompanying the phrase *θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων*, *ταπεινοφροσύνη* and *ἡ ἐόρακεν ἐμβατεύων*, suggests humility on the one hand – in the sense of fasting preparatory to such an experience – and on the other hand, detailed accounts of what they have seen. In such a context, teachers in Colossae would be involved in ascetic practices, such as fasting, in preparation for experiencing visions in which they would serve God with angels (Elliott and Reasoner 2011; Scott 1997, 101-19). This perspective would solve certain details of the Jewish worship mentioned in Col 2, and the Apostle Paul's response would be one that would touch exactly the essence of the problem: believers do not need *additional* mystical experiences when they are *in Christ*. Moreover, arguments would be made for the authentic experiences of the Apostle Paul in 2 Cor 12:1-6 and of the Apostle John in Revelation 1:10, experiences that did not start from the premise of searching for them on purpose.

There are, however, a few unresolved issues to this perspective. First, the interpretation *θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* – the worship of angels – is not supposed to be entirely persuasive. Secondly, it does not explain the reason why the Apostle Paul demonstrates the superiority of Christ over the heavenly powers in Col 1,16.20; 2,10-

15. To avoid this answer, the proponents of *Jewish mysticism* argue that the *angels* of Col 2:18 are not identical to the *Powers and Dominions* of the rest of the epistle. Third, the notion of *commandments* (2:20) is not sufficiently resolved, which has a deeper meaning than mere preparation for mystical experiences.

A second presupposition is related to the definition of *intertextuality*. We assume the perspective that the quotes and allusions of the Old Testament (Berkley 2000, 17-66; Mihailos 2011, 8-10) used in the New Testament, respectively in the Epistle to Colossians, are carriers of the meaning of the context to which they belong in the Old Testament (Stanley 1992, 73-9, 341-2, 349, 351; Albl 1999, 65-9, 286-90; Beale 2012, 6-8). Fr. Augustine said in this regard: "quanquam et in vetere Novum lateat, et in Novo Vetus pateat". With regard to the meaning of intertextuality, we do not support its postmodern perspective which posits that references to previous texts have a new meaning completely different from the original meaning to which they belonged (Beale 2008, 23; Beale 2011, 2-3).

Old Testament allusions in the Epistle to the Colossians

In the opinion of recent Bible scholars, the Epistle to the Colossians contains only Old Testament allusions and no explicit quotations. The most important text, in this sense, is Col 3:1, in which Christ is described as "sitting at the right hand of God", a clear allusion to Ps 109:1 (LXX), one of the most quoted texts in the New Testament. Also in Col 3, speaking of the new man who "renews himself in the image of him who built him" (Col 3:10), the Apostle Paul makes "an ineluctable allusion" to Ec 1:26. The call for servants, "fearing the Lord" (3:22) and the statement that "he that doeth iniquity shall receive his iniquity; and bias cannot be – ὁ γὰρ ἀδικῶν κομίζεται ὃ ἠδίκησεν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν προσωποληψία" (3,25) are consistent, first of all, with the Old Testament texts Dt 10:20; Pr 1:7; 3,7; Ecc 5:7 (cf. Sir 1:11-30; 2:7-9), and, secondly, with Dt 10:17 (cf. Sir 35:15). Suggestive of Col 3:22 and 3:25 is the text of 2 Par 19,7, which joins the exhortation "be it the fear of the Lord (φόβος κυρίου) over you" by the explanation that "to the Lord, our God, there is no injustice (ἀδικία)".

The studies dedicated to understanding the way in which the author of the Epistle to the Colossians relates to the Old Testament can be found in several recent specialized works of the Bible scholars Gordon Fee, G.K. Beale, C. Beetham and Jerry L. Sumney. In order to have an overview of these texts, we will present a table with the passages from the Colossians and their Old Testament references observed in the approaches of these authors.

VT references	Colossians
Gen 1:28; Jer 3:16; 23:3	Col 1:6
Ex 31:3; Is 11:2.9	Col 1:9-10
Ex 6:6-8. Motive „exodus”	Col 1:12-14
2 Sam 7:12-18	Col 1:13
Pr 8:22-31	Col 1:15-20
Gen 1:26-28; Ps 88:28; Ex 4:22-23	Col 1:15
Gn 1:1	Col 1:18
Ps 67:16-19	Col 1:19
Dn 2	Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3
Pr 2:2-6; Is 45:3	Col 2:2-3
Dt 30:6; Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36:26-27; 44:7.9	Col 2:11
Gen 17:11.14.23.24.25 Ez 44:7.9	Col 2:13
Exodus – Deuteronomy Hos 2:13; Ez 45:17; 1 Par 23:31; 2 Par 31:3	Col 2:16
Is 29:13-14	Col 2:22
Is 29:13	Col 2:20-23
Ps 109:1	Col 3:1
Gen 1:26-27	Col 3:9-10
Dt 7:6-8	Col 3:12
Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16	Col 3:20
Dt 10:20; Pr 1:7; 3:7; Ecc 5:7 (cf. Sir 1:11-30; 2:7-9) Dt 10:17 (cf. Sir 35:15) 2 Par 19:7	Col 3:22.25
Dn 2:8	Col 4:5

One of the remarkable characteristics of the epistles of the Apostle Paul, in the opinion of Gordon D. Fee, is that the Apostle takes over the Old Testament language in contexts in which the recipients are expected to understand not only the allusion or the echo but also to acknowledge their implications. Given the predominantly oral culture of the first century, in which the lack of reading and writing, characteristic of the majority of the population of the Roman Empire, was compensated especially with a very well-developed memory of oral discourse, we can understand that even with regard to religious texts there was a special emphasis on memorizing the texts or sacred history recounted – such as the Septuagint in the Pauline churches. Based on St. Luke's testimony in the Acts of the Apostles, the mission of the Apostle Paul always began in the Jewish synagogues, a place where there were also *God-fearers*, as did the centurion Cornelius (FA 10:2), who accepted the preaching about Christ. This fact suggests that the members of the Christian communities who responded to the preaching of St. Paul were people versed in terms of knowledge of the Scriptures. Therefore, the Apostle Paul, knowing these details about the recipients in Colossae, insists on allusions rather than on Old Testament quotes.

In light of this perspective of intertextuality, which emphasizes the deep connection between the text of the Epistle to the Colossians and the Old Testament text, we consider that the Church of Colossae consisted of both Hellenistic Jews converted to Christianity and *God-fearing* pagans, active participants also converted, to whom they were added, during epaphras' missionary activity, new converts. The epistle of the Apostle Paul responds to a doctrinal error which, in the light of the mentioned Old Testament allusions, was not at all foreign to the Jewish practice and understanding of the Septuagint.

Conclusions

Thus, we can assert that these doctrinal errors were predominantly Jewish in nature—not a mystical one, but one anchored in a Jewish understanding: of the law – as wisdom; of the temple – as the place of God's presence; circumcision – as a sign of entering God's people; of the Sabbaths, new months, and feasts—as inviolable sacred days; of the commandments related to “eating and drinking” – as laws concerning food restrictions (*clean/unclean* – FA 10:14-15). These errors are answered by the Apostle Paul, emphasizing that: Christ is Wisdom (Col 2,3; 1,15-20); Christ is the place of God's presence – “in him [God] pleased to dwell all fullness” (Col 1:19); Christ's sacrifice

“cut us off” from the “body of the flesh” by uniting in the burial “with him by Baptism” (Col. 2:11-13); the reality of the *kingdom* (Col 1:13) “is of Christ” (Col 2:17), the food, the drink, the holidays, the new moon, the Sabbaths – specific to the Jewish cult – being only *a shadow* of this reality (Col 2:16).

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