

Chapter 6

THE SHADOW AND THE SUBSTANCE: EARLY RECEPTION OF PAUL THE JEW IN THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

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Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* (Republic VII 514 a 2–517 a 7) is a staple of Western philosophical tradition. Even the marginally literate have a vague awareness of it, whether they know the details or what those details mean. In a nutshell, those who have managed to live in the light of the world of ideas assist those who are shackled to the world of shadows to leave their chains behind and emerge to live as complete human beings in their own right, no longer to be manipulated by the orchestrations of others in power who also live in and control the world of shadows. And yet, those who are shackled to the world of shadows are inclined not to believe, but do violence to, the one who has returned from the light to persuade them to free themselves.

The letter to the Colossians is a small piece of that Western tradition shaped by Platonism, and it may be the indulgence of fantasy to suggest that this letter was also influenced by Plato's *Allegory*. Colossians is not to be read, however, without some awareness of its contemporary cultural and philosophical context. The letter was written in a period labeled by scholars as Middle Platonism, dating roughly from the first century BCE to the third century CE (Witt 2013; Dillon 1996; Berchman 1985). An examination of the reception and development of Paul's thought in the letter to the Colossians warrants some consideration of the identity of the Colossian philosophy, to be understood in this Hellenistic, Roman milieu of Middle Platonism (DeMaris 1994: 98–133).

The Colossian philosophy has been identified as Gnosticism, Judaism, Jewish mysticism, Judaizing Platonism, and several other intriguing suggestions. The text of Colossians indicates a philosophical tradition rooted in a Hellenistic background. Gilbert Murray characterized Hellenism as “the period of the failure of nerve” (Murray 1955: 123–72). It was a time of great spiritual and personal turmoil for the individual. The expansion of Roman imperium eastward in the second and first centuries BCE only would have added to the complexity of this angst of the individual and crisis of personal identity, particularly in Asia Minor where the syncretism of Greek religion and local cultic traditions was common.

The widespread maneuvering of political forces made territorial and national instability a commonplace. Eduard Lohse described the religious conditions of the period in terms of “overpowering forces against which one could not assert oneself.”¹ In the Hellenistic period *εἰμαρμένη* (“fate”) and *ἀνάγκη* (“force” or “necessity”) were generally believed to be two inescapable forces that denied humans the freedom they desired; a sort of fatalism that one could only submit to and then do one’s best in this life to attempt to work oneself into the best possible position against all odds. This was perceived by many to be a maddeningly impossible situation, which is why it was described by Murray as “the period of the failure of nerve.” One might even consider Sophocles’s fifth-century tragedy, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, to be an example of a sort of predecessor along the intellectual trajectory toward Hellenistic fatalism, with its rhetorical emphasis on the inability of human beings to control (*κρατεῖν*) their own destiny.

A Greek philosophical environment is suggested by the language of Colossians. Eduard Schweizer identified a Pythagorean text with very close similarities of language and thought to Colossians 2. “There is a most interesting text from the first century B.C., in which almost all the motifs which we find in Colossians 2 appear” (Schweizer 1976: 251; Diels 1954: 448.33ff.; Diog. Laert. VIII.24ff.). In this Pythagorean text Diogenes Laërtius, quoting Alexander Polyhistor, reports that one Pythagorean characteristic involved a series of antitheses, for example, “up/down” (*καὶ τὰ ἡμῖν κάτω ἐκείνοις ἄνω*) and “light/darkness” (*φῶς καὶ σκότος*). In Col. 1:12f. those saints who have been redeemed “by the light” (*ἐν τῷ φωτὶ*) are contrasted with the “authority of darkness” (*τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους*). And in Col. 3:2 the author encouraged the Colossians to “think about the things above, not the things on the earth” (*τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μὴ τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς*).

In the Pythagorean text *τὰ στοιχεῖα* (cf. Col. 2:8, 20) are referred to as the physical Empedoclean elements: fire, water, earth, and air, which combine to form *κόσμον ἔμψυχον*, the animate universe (Diog. Laert. VIII.25). Here the animate force of nature as *εἰμαρμένη* or “fate” is that which gives the *στοιχεῖα* (fire, water, earth, and air) to order all things both individually and as a whole. This *εἰμαρμένη*, which brings order to the *στοιχεῖα*, also together with *ἀνάγκη* was thought to render the fate of human beings uncertain, and thereby became a force

1. See Lohse (1986b: 233–44): “Superstitions and notions of fate, the yearning for miracles, and fascination with astrology and magic, all of which found numerous adherents in the Hellenistic period, make it evident that people were in the throes of deep anxiety and uncertainty about life. Threatened by powers and demons, by illnesses and unforeseen strokes of fate, one lived in suspense and fear and felt subject to overpowering forces against which one could not assert oneself. People strove, through all sorts of practices and precautionary measures, to arm and protect themselves against fate. The question of how to escape a dismal turn of events or to liberate oneself from fear required an answer. This answer was given to them by the mystery religions, which promised deliverance to man, by offering him a saving power that afforded resistance to suffering and even to death” (Ryholt 2003: 175–76; Lewis 2013: 88ff.).

with which the Hellenistic world felt the need to contend, and now by extension the Colossians subjugated by the Romans in the period of Middle Platonism and all the insecurities attending the pressures of conforming to a forced *Romanitas* (Diog. Laert. VIII.27; Jonas 1963: 43).

There is a transcendence and immortality spoken of in the Pythagorean text. The soul is distinct from life; it is immortal since it comes from immortal *aether* (διαφέρειν τε ψυχὴν ζωῆς, ἀθάνατον τ' εἶναι αὐτήν) (Diog. Laert. VIII.28). There is a sharp dualistic distinction between matter and spirit. The author of Colossians made clear the non-dualistic, non-docetic nature of Christ's person and work by referring to Christ's body and flesh in hendiadys (Col. 1:22: ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου).

"Angel" worship is referred to in the Pythagorean text. "All the air is filled with souls, and these are called *daimones* and heroes" (Diog. Laert. VIII.32). They are intermediate beings of the air, beings who in their final transmigration were impeded in their journey because they had not reached purity of soul, and so could not approach the purest element *aether*. "And for them (δαίμονάς τε καὶ ἥρωας) are made purifications and lustrations, all divination and omens, and the like" (Diog. Laert. VIII.32). On this Col. 2:18 comes to bear where the author of the letter refers to the worship of angels (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων).

Further similarity of language between the Pythagorean text and Colossians is in the use of ἀπτεσθαι (Col. 2:21). The word was used with reference to prohibitions of certain foods in order to maintain sacred separation between the gods and human beings. The context of Colossians 2 may indicate such a prohibition. On the other hand, there is another side (more negative) to such dietary prohibitions. "And Aristotle said in his *Concerning the Pythagoreans* that he [Pythagoras] instructed others to refrain from beans because they are like genitals, or because they are like the gates of Hades" (Diog. Laert. VIII.34). Whether an element such as this may be ascertained in the meaning of ἀπτεσθαι in Col. 2:21 is not clear. The accumulation of the various pieces of evidence should probably not be dismissed. If such a connotation is to be attributed to Colossians it is as well possibly derived from Jewish dietary restrictions which may have had some influence at Colossae, or as is more likely the case, it refers to a combination of Neopythagorean and Jewish practice.

The use of the terms δόγμα and δογματίζεσθαι at 2:14 and 2:20 may provide further evidence for language and thought affinities between the Colossian philosophy and Pythagoreanism. Schweizer argued that "the use of the term δόγματα instead of ἐντολαί (or νόμος) for the commandments to be observed would be consistent with the usage in the writings of contemporary Pythagoreans" (Schweizer 1976: 254). The Pythagorean text reads: φησὶ δὲ καὶ Ἀριστόξενος τὰ πλείστα τῶν ἠθικῶν δογμάτων λαβεῖν τὸν Πυθαγόραν παρὰ Θεμιστοκλείας τῆς ἐν Δελφοῖς.² This would also possibly indicate a move in a direction away from

2. Diels I, 97.23 = Diog. Laert. VIII.8; see also Diels I, 100.41 = Porphyry. V. Pyth. 18; Diels I, 191.26 = Iamblichus. V.P. 226; Diels I, 464.1; 466.31.

Paul, who was essentially consistent in his use of ἐντολαί (commandments) and νόμος (law) in his letters with reference to the prescriptions and teachings of Jewish law. The use of δόγμα, in fact, never appears in the undisputed letters of Paul. Schweizer pointed to the fact that there was a “Jewish Pythagoreanism in existence in the early second century BCE in Alexandria” (Schweizer 1976: 249).

Schweizer (1976: 249) cites Hengel (1974: 245; cf. also 166ff.), who made an interesting connection between Pythagoras, Orpheus, and the Law of Moses. According to Aristobulus, Pythagoras and Orpheus had been taught by Moses’s law. And here, according to Hengel, is the source of Pythagorean speculation about the number seven and the Jewish Sabbath. This may explain the presence of σαββάτων in the polemic of Col. 2:16, although it is highly conjectural, relying on the evidence of a source (Aristobulus) who lived centuries removed from Pythagoras. Hicks indicates the extensive influence Pythagoreanism had in the first century BCE. “Between Alexander Polyhistor in the first century B.C. and the threshold of the third century A.D. there had been an enormous increase in neo-Pythagorean literature, mostly dealing with mystical properties of numbers and with ethics based upon theology” (Diog. Laert. VIII.24: p. 341, n. a).

Schweizer presents evidence for a connection between the lists of five vices and virtues in Colossians and how the number five held significance for the Pythagorean teaching on symphony.³ On the basis of this evidence, Schweizer maintained the presence of cosmic speculation and Pythagorean ethics in Colossians 3.

One of the central points of interpretation around which there are obvious differences of opinion is the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου of Col. 2:8, 20. Does this phrase refer to the inanimate, fundamental teachings of the “philosophy,” or to the animate, daemonic, spiritual forces behind those fundamental teachings? Answers to this question usually divide along the lines of understanding the Colossian philosophy as either “Gnostic” or some other characterization.

In his nineteenth-century commentary, J. B. Lightfoot presented his classic excursus on the Colossian philosophy. He observed the presence of two elements in the philosophy: Judaism and theosophic speculation. He argued that these elements combined to form a Judaeo-Gnostic heresy (Lightfoot 1981: 73–133).

3. Schweizer (1976: 251f.): “That we are on the right track is, perhaps, shown by the puzzling fact that we find in Colossians 3:5, 8, 12 three lists of five vices or virtues. Even more puzzling is the description of the first five vices as ‘members which are still on the earth,’ and the whole imagery of ‘putting off the old man with his deeds’ or ‘putting on the new man,’ interpreted as ‘putting on’ the five virtues. The number five is rather central in Pythagorean speculations. It plays a role in their doctrine of symphony (Diels I, 110.12; 410.2; 429.12, 24, 26). It appears in a cryptic remark of Empedocles about the ‘five wells’ (369.14). Above all, five is the number of the elements or forms out of which everything has come into being (108.21; 412.16; 440.13). . . . That there are in Colossians 3 constantly five vices and fives [*sic*] virtues—a fact up to now is only explicable from Manichean texts of the third century A.D. or later—may point to a Pythagorean background in which cosmic speculation had already been ethicized.”

Lightfoot interpreted τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ as “the rudiments, the elementary teaching.” He argued that the context does not allow for an interpretation of the phrase as animate spirit beings, but “The context suggests some mode of instruction, e.g., τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων here, and δογματίζεσθε in ver. 20.” He quoted Clement and Tertullian for support, although he conceded that “a large number of the fathers however explained the expression to refer to the heavenly bodies (called στοιχεῖα), as marking the seasons, so that the observance of ‘festivals and new-moons and sabbaths’ was a sort of bondage to them.” Lightfoot called this a “false interpretation” (Lightfoot 1981: 180).

In his sixth homily on the Colossian letter, based on Col. 2:6-15, John Chrysostom identified the στοιχεῖα with the sun and the moon, and called them the weak and beggarly elements after Gal. 4:9. He argued that the author of Colossians was not referring specifically to “the observances of days but in general of the present world to show its worthlessness: for if the world be nothing, much more then its elements.” He went on to argue, “Having first shaken to pieces the Grecian observances, he next overthrows the Jewish ones also. For both Greeks and Jews practice many observances, but the former from philosophy, the latter from the Law” (Chrysostom 1843, Hom. VI, 247–248). The Greek of this text makes it clear that what Chrysostom viewed as the problem of Col. 2:8 was the teaching of the Colossian philosophy.

C. F. D. Moule presented an argument based on a lack of external evidence for interpreting τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ as animate spirit beings.⁴ Moule’s argument that evidence outside the New Testament is lacking for interpreting the phrase as animate spirit beings is a common one.

E. D. Burton, in his classic commentary on Galatians, gives us a brief but excellent excursus on the meaning of the phrase in the context of the Galatian problem. Burton made an argument similar to Moule’s that “what is not clear is that this usage [‘angel,’ ‘spirit,’ or ‘god’] belongs to the first century AD” (Burton 1980: 513). There are only three occurrences of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ in the New Testament. Two of them occur in Colossians, one at Gal. 4:3. Burton commented on the use of the phrase in Galatians: “It no more follows that the στοιχεῖα are personal because of the previous ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους than that ὁ νόμος is personal because personified as παιδαγωγός” (Burton 1980: 517). The same argument should apply to the uses of the phrase in Colossians.

In his discussion of the Colossian philosophy Ralph P. Martin tried to rationalize the equation of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ with “powerful

4. Moule (1957: 91–92): “There is no reason to deny that a belief in demonic powers is natural in this context—see on v. 15 below, and cf. Eph. vi. 10ff. (where terms like κοσμοκράτορες can be paralleled from astrological writings of later days); but in view of the absence of evidence outside the N.T. for any such sense of στοιχεῖα until later times, it seems reasonable to take it here to mean simply ‘elementary teaching.’”

spirit intelligences.”⁵ Martin argued that the στοιχεῖα in later Greek religious and philosophical systems were identified with the elements of the natural or physical universe, which were in turn given personification in mythic systems. Martin (as also Moule) used caricature to describe Hellenistic religious traditions, referring to them as “infantile” and “kindergarten stage.”⁶ However, Hellenistic religions were anything but child’s play. In addition to the fact that Martin presented a caricature of the view which is in opposition to the one he has chosen, his conclusion about the στοιχεῖα does not follow. Even though the στοιχεῖα received metaphorical personification in the Greek mythic systems that does not necessarily warrant that the author of Colossians thought the στοιχεῖα actually were “powerful spirit intelligences.” The Greeks had far more concrete expressions for such ideas, δαίμονες for example, and these were not used by the author of Colossians. Even when the author did use a concrete expression for such a being at Col. 2:18 (τῶν ἀγγέλων), it is quite distinct from τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ.

About the στοιχεῖα Gunther Bornkamm claimed he was attempting to “avoid the suspicion of vague combinations and hypotheses.”⁷ Bornkamm argued that Paul’s polemic against “στοιχεῖα-worship in Galatians confirms the picture.” He argued that because Paul “compared” the στοιχεῖα with the ἐπιτρόποι and οἰκονόμοι of Gal. 4:2-3, and then “designated them as φύσει μὴ ὄντες θεοί [beings not gods by nature]” in Gal. 4:8, it would then follow that the Galatians must have regarded the στοιχεῖα as personal, divine beings. But this is not necessarily the case. What Bornkamm failed to see in the Galatians text is that Paul did not use ὄντες at Gal. 4:8, but οὖσιν, and so Bornkamm seems to have distorted the evidence, glossing the ambiguity, to support his position. The text of Gal. 4:8

5. Martin (1972: 13–15): “Much was made of astrology which centered on the importance accorded to ‘elemental spirits of the universe’ (2:8, 20). This is a controverted phrase. The Greek phrase runs τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ, and the key word is στοιχεῖα. . . . The basic meaning of στοιχεῖα is ‘objects which stand in a row or which form a series.’ The most natural example of these objects is letters of the alphabet, which stand together in a line to make continuous writing. From this idea it is an easy step to reach the notion of ‘elements of learning,’ or, as we say, ABC, meaning rudiments or basic principles. This is the sense of Hebrews 5:12: ‘the elementary truths of God.’”

6. Martin (1972: 13–15): “Two alternatives form the main possibilities. . . . Either, Paul is regarding the false system as ‘elementary teaching’ either by Jewish or pagan ritualists in the sense that it is materialist at heart and exclusively tied to this world and so infantile. By contrast, Paul’s gospel invites men to accept the freedom of Christ and to remain no longer in a kindergarten stage of religious taboos and restrictions (so Moule). Alternatively, Paul is branding this cult as false because it was under the control of powerful spirit intelligences which held men prey and which needed to be placated.”

7. Bornkamm (1975: 123–24): “In 2:8 Paul sets them [the στοιχεῖα] over against Christ; in 2:10 and 2:15 he calls them ἄρχαι and ἐξουσίαι and characterizes the false teaching summarily in 2:18 as θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων [worship of angels]. It follows that the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ [elements of the world] are personal, angelic powers.”

actually reads: τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς, and τοῖς οὖσιν may grammatically just as easily be a neuter plural and refer back to τὰ στοιχεῖα of verse 3, which is further reinforced by the following question of verse 9: “But now knowing God, rather being known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly στοιχεῖα?” This may be further defended by Paul’s use of φύσις elsewhere, which he never used with reference to divine nature (see BAGD: φύσις). There is only one NT use of φύσις referring to divine nature, 2 Pet. 1:4: θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως. Bornkamm made the further mistake of basing his argument of personality for the “elements” on what Paul intended to be an analogy or metaphor in his use of “guardians and trustees” (ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους) at Gal. 4:2.

Eduard Schweizer argued that the Colossian philosophy “centered around the ‘στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ’ Since all the parallels to this phrase outside the New Testament never designate anything other than the elements earth, water, air, fire (and ether), it would be difficult to understand it differently in Colossians 2:8” (Schweizer 1976: 249–50). This is the reason I have spent so much time with this phrase in this chapter. And see especially Schweizer’s note 9 where he argued, “Adoring the elements as gods (Herodotus I, 131; Philo *Vit. cont.* 3) is not the same as demonizing them; in this case, they would simply be some gods among others, and one would not use a comprehensive term like ‘the elements of the world,’ if one meant gods like Ge or Helios” (Schweizer 1976: 249–50). Schweizer’s presentation of the evidence, unlike most of the theories about the Colossian philosophy, made extensive use of Hellenistic and classical literature to support his point.

Bruce misinterpreted the meaning of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ by arguing that the Pauline use of the phrase was to equate it with animate spirit beings, and that this is an original contribution by Paul to the phrase’s meaning (Bruce 1973: 99–100). The problem with Bruce’s assertion is that this would have rendered Paul’s argument unintelligible to the Colossian recipients of the letter.

Lohse maintained that the

context as a whole shows that the elements of the universe are precisely those demonic principalities who want to exercise their tyranny over men (2:10, 15) This explanation of the concept “elements of the universe” is demanded by the context and it cannot be objected that the meaning “stars,” “elementary spirits,” or “spirits of the stars” is not attested in any non-Christian text that can be dated with certainty in pre-Pauline times. (Lohse 1986a: 99; see also Bruce 1973: 27)

In the note to this passage, Lohse actually draws up a mathematical-like equation between the phrase in question and the “rulers, authorities, and angels.” This is problematic, especially since he bases his argument on the assumption that “the confrontation of the elements and Christ already indicates that they are conceived of as personal powers” (but see Col. 2:8 and διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης). Lohse quoted a text from the Testament of Solomon (8:2; 18:2) to support his view that the στοιχεῖα are animate spirit beings (Lohse 1986a: 97). However, Burton quoted the same text in his excursus and has given the variant readings (ignored by

Lohse) that do not support Lohse's view. Burton's conclusion was that the στοιχεῖα referred to "dogmas of religion," not "heavenly bodies" or "spirits."⁸

What is at stake in the proper identification of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is the more accurate identification of the Colossian philosophy. It is more accurate to take the phrase as a reference to the δόγματα of the philosophy. Personifications of the phrase lean in the direction of identifying the philosophy as Gnosticism or a form of incipient Gnosticism, which is an unfortunate anachronism reading later systems of Gnostic speculation back into the text of the letter.⁹

According to Schweizer,

Hence we may conclude that the movement in Colossae was probably a kind of Pythagorean philosophy, embellished with rites borrowed from both Hellenistic mystery religions and Judaism. The whole movement might have grown out of a Jewish Christianity that adapted itself more and more to its Hellenistic environment. (Schweizer 1976: 255)

I think Schweizer was essentially correct.

In Galatians 4 Paul used the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου to refer to the Jewish observance of days and months and seasons and years. Paul used the phrase either as a colloquial expression familiar to the Galatians, in order to advance his argument about being enslaved to the law, or as a technical reference to a local Neopythagorean tradition with which the Galatians would have been familiar, and by analogy applied this phrase as an example of being enslaved to the law. The difference between the two is subtle, I admit, but Paul gave us no real clues

8. Burton (1980: 518): "The στοιχεῖα represent an imperfect type of teaching; in Gal. described as temporary and ended by the coming of Christ, in Col. as proceeding from men (v. 8), and also as temporary and abolished in Christ (14, 17). While, therefore, it is possible that in Gal. Paul has reference to the heavenly bodies as, on the one side, formerly objects of worship by the Gentiles, and, on the other, as governing the cycle of Jewish observances, and in Col. to the physical elements of the universe, it is more probable that the phrase means the same in both cases, and in both cases has reference to the elementary and imperfect teachings of religion.

Aside from the debatable question of the meaning of τὰ στ. τ. κοσμ. it is entirely clear that the things which Paul was dissuading the Galatians from accepting were, in fact, requirements of the law; as those from which he dissuaded the Colossians were dogmas of religion urged in the name of Judaism or some system of kindred spirit. To find the ground of the description of obedience to them as a bondage to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in a remote and unsuggested connection between them and the heavenly bodies, or the physical elements of the universe, or the spirits of these elements, when the phrase is directly applicable to them in a sense appropriate to and suggested by the context and sustained by contemporary usage, is to substitute a long and circuitous course of thought for a short, direct, and obvious one."

9. See Yamauchi's discussion of such anachronisms with reference to "Gnosticism" (1983).

as to which way he was using the phrase. Either way, to identify the στοιχεῖα with animate spirit intelligences is to read into the text evidence to support a Gnosticizing element in this region of Asia Minor, an argument which I find to be anachronistic. Paul used the metaphorical contrast between heirs and slaves. Heirs are no better than slaves because as minors heirs are under guardians and trustees (ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους) just as slaves. Guardians and trustees use the στοιχεῖα as principles to guide and restrain. Paul argued that the Galatians (and he includes himself with the first-person plural periphrastic) were enslaved to the στοιχεῖα, not to the ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους. With the coming of Christ, the transition is made from being immature (νήπιος) to being mature heirs. The Neopythagorean language of τέλειος is missing, but the idea is the same as that of Colossians. Using a then . . . now contrast in Gal. 4:8-11, Paul wrote: “But then, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to things that are not gods by nature, but now since you know God, or rather since you have come to be known by God, how do you turn again to the weak and impoverished στοιχεῖα, to which you wish to be enslaved all over again?” In Paul’s argument the enslavement is to the στοιχεῖα, the observance of the principles of the law, “days and months and seasons and years.” It is probably incorrect to add to this the issue of circumcision, since in Neopythagorean tradition the term στοιχεῖα was used to refer to cosmic speculation, which is probably why circumcision is not mentioned in Gal. 4:11.

Almost the same argument is used in Colossians 2; however, circumcision is included in the discussion as having been replaced by baptism, an argument that Paul did not make. In Romans 2, for example, Paul used an already existing Jewish metaphor for circumcision of the heart being a repentant disposition toward God as a more accurate understanding of circumcision, one used in the Minor Prophets and also found at Qumran. In Col. 2:8 the author warns his readers not to be taken captive by philosophy or vain deceit; being taken captive is certainly analogous to being enslaved, or it is at least the first stage of the process. The philosophy and empty deceit are described in terms of human tradition and τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ. This suggests the human tradition and the στοιχεῖα are tools to be used by the someone doing the captivating, rather than animate spirit intelligences. In 2:9-10 the author stressed the fullness of divinity dwelling in Christ, probably an intentional contrast to the στοιχεῖα. The fullness of the deity dwells “bodily” (σωματικῶς), no doubt setting up the argument for the shadow (σκιά)/substance (σῶμα) antithesis in 2:16-17. The author’s claim that the Colossians had themselves come to fullness in Christ would resonate with the Colossians’s Middle Platonist Neopythagorean sense of τέλειος, perfection or completion accomplished through ethics, logic, and physics. The argument about baptism is almost identical to what we have in Romans 6, until in Col. 2:14-15 the Neopythagorean language is used again, with an interesting pun between τοῖς δόγμασιν and ἐδειγμάτισεν, implying that the central teachings of the philosophy are themselves to be made a shameful spectacle of.

The language in Col. 2:16 shifts from one of being taken captive to one of being judged, and while circumcision has just been treated, here the Jewish elements of the philosophy are presented using a Middle Platonist antithesis of shadow

and substance, a contrastive metaphor pervading Platonic literature from the Academy through Middle Platonism and into Neoplatonism. The warning is not to let anyone condemn with reference to festivals, new moons, or sabbaths (cf. Rom. 14:1-12; 1 Cor. 11:27-31). Festivals and new moons are generically enough referenced to almost any Greco-Roman tradition (as well as Judaism), but the reference to Sabbath observance is uniquely Jewish indicating that the Colossian philosophy was a syncretistic community adhering to a philosophical trajectory of Middle Platonism, Neopythagoreanism in particular, combined with certain Jewish beliefs and practices, or more likely the other way around, which is why this philosophy may be appropriately characterized as a local expression of Platonizing Judaism in the Lycus River Valley region. James Dunn argues for the predominant character of the philosophy being Jewish in nature (Dunn 1996). The attraction of the community espousing this philosophy to the Colossian church was probably driven by the message of a Jewish Messiah, which to the adherents of the Jewish philosophy probably would have sounded quite infantile given their investment in the kind of philosophical speculation that required a rather rigidly ascetic ethical behavior (Col. 2:20-23).

The logic used in Col. 2:20-3:17 may very well be an effort to rival the Neopythagorean emphasis on logic and ethics. The argument is that, if the Colossians through baptism (2:12) have died to the *στοιχεῖα*, why still adhere to the ascetic prescriptions of the philosophy? It is an argument that resonates very closely with Paul's comments about dying to the law in order to experience the new life in Christ at Gal. 2:15-21. Col. 3:1-4 then asserts the logic in terms of the Platonist dichotomy of seeking the things above and not the things on the earth, again stressing that the Colossians had "died," probably implying that they had died to the earthly *στοιχεῖα*. The lists of vices and virtues in Col. 3:5-17 closely resemble the longer lists of Gal. 5:16-26, with the exception that in Colossians the lists are predictably divided into categories of five, characteristic of Neopythagorean ethical lists of vices and virtues. After Col. 3:17 the text seems to resume at 4:2, linked by the exhortation to thanksgiving. Col. 3:18-4:1 appears to be an insertion of a later Pauline community that probably had something to do with the composition of Ephesians. If Dunn is correct in his analysis (Dunn 1996: 35-39), that a conversation between Paul and Timothy led to the Colossian letter having been written by Timothy, and that this letter might possibly be counted as Paul's last, probably from Rome, then a later interpolation of 3:18-4:1 makes sense. Dunn does not argue that this is the only possibility, but that his argument requires the suspension of some evidence and the use of other evidence, no less than other arguments about the provenance of Colossians do. I find this proposal of Dunn for the author of Colossians to be attractive, if for no other reason than that most of the arguments in Colossians (stripped of their Neopythagorean style) are very close to the arguments of Paul in the undisputed Paulines.

The hymn of Col. 1:15-20 resonates with the undisputed Paulines, and as before it contains Platonizing language that would speak to the circumstances of the Colossian community. The language of "image of God" (*εἰκὼν θεοῦ*) has semantic consistencies with the "form of God" (*μορφή θεοῦ*) of Philippians 2. The creation

being created “in/by him” (ἐν αὐτῷ) in Col. 1:16 reflects similar, near identical language to 1 Cor. 8:4-6 and Rom. 11:33-36. Christ being the “first born of the dead” is similar to, but also different from, the language of 1 Cor. 15:20 where Paul referred to Christ as the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. And the language of God reconciling all things to himself in Christ is almost identical to the language of 2 Cor. 5:18. Again, the Neopythagorean/Middle Platonist ideas permeate the text. The thrones and lordships and rulers and authorities, fullness of the deity dwelling in Christ, the things on the earth and the things in the heavens dichotomy, this language sets the Colossians hymn apart from the undisputed Paulines.

Aside from the Middle Platonist/Neopythagorean language used by the author of Colossians, however, the arguments are very similar to those used by Paul in the undisputed letters. It is for this reason that I am inclined to agree with the scenario for this letter suggested by Dunn. If Timothy (a Jew from the region acc. to Acts 16:1-5) was the hand holding the pen, and the voice of Paul (a Jew) was in his head, then this would explain why the letter to the Colossians so closely resonates with the undisputed Paulines, and yet the language sounds so different. The arguments against Gentile circumcision and Sabbath observance are really no more developed in Colossians than in the undisputed letters; it is just that the language appears to have been adapted to speak directly to the Colossian philosophy. Colossians contains nothing close to the kinds of anti-Jewish polemic we read in second-century CE Christian documents like the Epistle of Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, or the Gospel of Peter.

Conclusion

The Colossian community’s message of a Jewish Messiah must have attracted the attention either of a local Jewish community with syncretistic tendencies toward the form of Middle Platonism peculiar to the Lycus River Valley region, or some other individual advocating a Judaizing Platonist philosophy also peculiar to the region, or just as likely a Platonizing Judaism observed within the synagogue(s) at Colossae, the influence of which on the Pauline community in turn evoked the response of the author of the letter. In the end the author of the letter pressed his positions by using the language of a Middle Platonist period form of Pythagoreanism that very likely further isolated the community from its Jewish heritage by discounting Jewish observances as a world of shadows to be abandoned in favor of the light.

The seeds of this kind of division would have been planted already by the Apostle Paul, in the way that he leaned into the exclusivity, the particularity of Israel’s identity as a nation now on the edge of the eschatological fulfillments of texts like Third Isaiah referring to Gentile inclusion, and the way he interpreted the story of Abraham in the Torah to reorient his own identity as a Jewish apostle of Christ to the Gentiles and thereby eventually, even if unintentionally, reorient the church’s identity as the people of God without Sabbath, circumcision, kashrut, or sacrifice.

And while Paul himself was an observant Jew, who did not begrudge his fellow Jews the privilege or necessity of Torah observance for Jewish identity and who clearly did not lay the necessity of Torah observance on Gentiles who accepted their new identity with Israel in Christ, Paul opened the door for the logical next step that as the church became more and more non-Jewish, the privilege and necessity of Torah observance for identity as God's people increasingly became a point of contention, a matter of laying aside one's world of shadows to embrace the substance of the light. The content as well as the language of Colossians, in my opinion, contributed to a movement in this direction, but it was not yet very far at all from what Paul himself had already written.

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