

Critical Issues Commentary

A BIBLICALLY BASED COMMENTARY ON ISSUES THAT IMPACT YOU

MARCH/APRIL 2002

ISSUE NUMBER 69

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY PART 1

UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES

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“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” (Colossians 2:8)

The danger of being “taken captive” by the same heresy that was threatening the Colossians is as real today as it was in first century Colossae. The Greek word for “taken captive” means “to carry off as spoil.”¹ The plunder of the battle turns out to be those who are the victims of the false teachers and there are many. The Holy Spirit inspired and preserved Paul’s writing on this so that all Christians of subsequent generations would be warned and preserved from this devastating error. However, most contemporary Christians are unaware of what the issues were in Colossae and how the Colossian “philosophy” is being promoted today in several different forms. What is at issue is the sufficiency of Christ as proclaimed through the Gospel. In this article we shall examine the issue from the Book of Colossians and the first century religious world in Asian minor, and thereby identify the nature of the Colossian heresy. This will give us the tools we need to apply the Scriptures to current issues.

What is clear is that Paul is emphasizing the sufficiency of Christ. This makes it equally clear that whatever was the nature of the false teaching circulating among the Christians at Colossae, it called into question the sufficiency of Christ, the secure position of those who are “in Christ,” and the adequacy of

the finished work of Christ on the cross in delivering believers from the hostile powers. Paul says, “[I]n Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority” (Colossians 2:10). Coupled with the powerful “Christ Hymn” of Colossians 1:15-20, it is evident that His exalted status over all of creation, including the hostile powers, was being undermined by false teachings and teachers.

THE STOICHEIA OF COLOSSIANS 2:8 & 2:20

Paul issues three warnings to his readers which are essential in helping us to understand the nature of the Colossian Heresy. We will examine these later. First, however, we need to discuss two Greek words so that the warnings can be understood in proper context. These words are not often used in the New Testament and we shall have to look at evidence for the meaning of these words to understand the issues. Thankfully, recent research has shed much light on the meaning of these terms and the situation in Colossae.² Colossians 2:8 (cited at the beginning of this article) warns about a philosophy that amounts to empty deception. The sources of the “philosophy” are: “the traditions of men,” and “the elementary principles of the world.” The Greek word for “elementary principles” is

stoicheia. Determining the meaning of this term is essential since it is used twice in Colossians 2 (verse 8 and verse 20).

The problem is that the term stoicheia has a broad range of meanings. These include “elementary instruction (like abc’s), the physical elements (earth, wind, fire and water in ancient understanding), or spirit beings seen to rule over the elements (elemental spirits.)”³ Clinton Arnold has provided exhaustive research on this term as used in religious contexts (both pagan and Jewish) in the ancient world. He wrote an entire chapter on the subject of the stoicheia.⁴ What is compelling about his research is the broad range of material from which he draws. He concludes that the stoicheia are evil, hostile powers.⁵ It was these that both Jews and Pagans feared as is shown by many examples cited by Arnold. They feared the stoicheia because it was widely believed that these controlled “fate.” After rejecting other interpretations, Arnold summarizes his view: “It is more likely that ‘the philosophy’ was indeed teaching that the stoicheia controlled the heavenly realm, but the concern was much more directed toward their hostile influence on matters of daily life — causing sickness, effecting a curse, bringing poor crops, plagues, earthquakes, and ‘natural’ disasters.”⁶ Pagans and Jews alike (and evidently some Christian teachers at Colossae) were looking for help in averting the work of the stoicheia in their lives. Much of the popular folk religion of the day was focused on this.

Previous interpretations of the Colossian heresy centered about Jewish Mysticism or Gnosticism.⁷ Clinton Arnold’s ground breaking work on the subject provides a veri-

table mother lode of research material from ancient inscriptions, magical amulets, extra-canonical Jewish writings, and Greek mystery religions which shows how key Greek words (like *stoicheia* and *emba-teuein*) were used in the religions of the day. Neither Gnosticism nor Judaism can explain all of the terminology in Colossians 2. Some of it is Jewish and other parts of it distinctly pagan. What Arnold shows is that Jews and Pagans believed in popular folk religion that crossed over the traditional boundaries of major religions. What they had in common was the idea that evil forces threatened their well-being and that certain “magical” practices were necessary to avert their influence.

Astrology provides a good illustration of how something like this is practiced in our day. Persons with varying religious backgrounds consult horoscopes, and take them seriously. When Hindu, Moslem, Jewish, or “Christian,” people read horoscopes, they mostly do not see this as a repudiation of their own religion, or a conversion to paganism as an organized religion. What is happening, however, is that the pagan ideas of astrology (that one’s fate is tied up in the stars — which “fate” might be averted by the right processes and information) are integrated into the person’s larger religious world view. This is what is called “syncretism.” Astrologers are quick to tell their clients that astrology works with any particular religion. What Arnold showed through his research was that, for example, Jewish angelic names can be found on pagan amulets, being invoked to help the pagan avert the influence of the *stoicheia*.⁸ There was much borrowing of material in the quest to find the right intermediaries that could be called upon for help. Arnold’s thesis is that this sort of syncretism and popular folk religion lies behind the Colossian error. His evidence has convinced me.

What ties this folk religion together is the felt need to be freed from

influence of the hostile forces. The *stoicheia* are evil, personal, spirit beings and they can be the source of a teaching. Paul asserts that “the philosophy” against which he warns, is “according to the *stoicheia* of the world” (Colossians 2:8). The source of the false teaching is twofold: the traditions of man and the *stoicheia*.⁹ There is some irony in the fact that the source of the teaching which supposedly is necessary for protection from the *stoicheia* are the very hostile forces themselves! Arnold summarizes this:

The Colossian opponents did not understand their ‘philosophy’ as imparted to them through the agency of harmful spirits, but as a tradition that was effective for averting the evil influence of these hostile forces. Paul’s polemic would have startled his readers as they realized that he was actually denouncing their ‘philosophy’ as inspired by the same malicious powers from which they were seeking protection!¹⁰

This makes sense when one realizes that the evil *stoicheia* do not mind all the attention from those who ostensibly are trying to defeat them. As long as the teachings keep the Colossian Christians from their confidence in the sufficiency of Christ and the efficacy of His finished work on the cross, they play into the hands of the evil forces they are hoping to defeat.

In Colossians 2:20 Paul uses the term *stoicheia* again, reminding the Colossians that they “died with Christ” to them. Paul wrote, “If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’” (Colossians 2:20,21). The *stoicheia* (elemental principles) no longer are a threat to those who are crucified with Christ. F F Bruce describes it like this: “You died with Christ (he says) and in that death with him (which is what your baptism was all about), your

former relation of bondage to the elemental forces of the world has been terminated.”¹¹ The ascetic regulations were likely deemed necessary for religiously warding off the *stoicheia* and their pernicious influences. Arnold nicely summarizes the issues raised in Colossians 2:20,21:

For Paul the *stoicheia* were an integral part of the present evil age. They function as masters and overlords of unredeemed humanity working through various means — including the Jewish law and pagan religions — to hold their subjects in bondage. The rules and regulations imposed by these “powers,” ostensibly through sacred and venerable religious tradition, are therefore entirely unnecessary and actually represent a reversion to a form of slavery to the “powers” themselves.¹²

Bondage to the *stoicheia* comes in forms that are cleverly disguised as religious means of freeing oneself from their influence. Those who are caught up in contemporary “spiritual warfare” teachings should take notice. The forces of darkness are all too willing to have themselves be the object of such battles — they may even inspire the means and techniques. They evidently like all the attention in as much as it keeps our attention off of Christ and what He has done, once for all.

“ENTERING”

A HIGHER SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

There is another Greek term whose meaning has been disputed, but must be understood if the warnings of Colossians 2 are to be seen in all their force. The word is *emba-teuein* and it is found in Colossians 2:18. Arnold devotes an entire chapter to analyzing how this word was used in local mystery cults near Colossae.¹³ In 1912 and 1913, scholars found that the word was used in an inscription from the sanctuary of Apollo at Claros.¹⁴ Thus *emba-*

teuein was a religious term familiar to people of Phrygia, which included Paul's readers at Colossae. The term denoted the second stage of a mystery initiation where the properly prepared devotee entered to see mysteries. What Arnold does is pull together numerous examples to reinforce this and provide a clearer picture of the claims of the elite visionaries against whom Paul warns. The person who went through the initiation usually had a visionary experience.¹⁵ This ties together embateuein with "visions" mentioned in Colossians 2:18.

The following is Arnold's summary of his extensive research on the mystery usage of embateuein and its influence on Paul's Colossian readers:

[A] technical usage of the term [embateuein] for the second stage of mystery initiation is clearly attested in the inscriptions from the Apollo temple at Claros, and this technical usage of the term is the appropriate meaning for its use in Col. 2:18. The preceding clause, "the things he has seen" . . . should be seen as the object of the participle embateuo_n. The combination should thus be translated, "entering the things he had seen." This would be a technical way of summarizing the initiate's entry into the holy chamber of the temple, where the priest would have led the person through a whole series of ecstatic visionary experiences (perhaps including ascent to heaven and/or descent to the underworld). The initiation thus served as the basis of the knowledge and authority for the opponents to judge the Colossians — those in the faction had been initiated, seen the visions, and learned from them. This mystery rite may have signified the beginning of a new and victorious life experience for the initiate in relationship to the hostile powers — the chains of fate had been broken and a new power

for warding off hostile spirits had been received.¹⁶

Those who had this experience likely had experienced it earlier, perhaps before becoming Christian. However, since it had meant so much to them, and it was widely believed that those few elite who experienced this had received immunity from the dire fate that had previously been in the hands of the stoicheia, it is likely that they held onto their elite status after embracing Christianity. Such individuals had gone through rigorous initiation rites, including things very much like the list of rules in Colossians 2.

One particular mystery liturgy has been analyzed in relationship to the Colossian "philosophy."¹⁷ The following eight aspects of it correspond to things in Colossians 2: (1) it was called a tradition; (2) the initiation delivers one from fate and hostile powers; (3) the four elements (which are commonly referred to as stoicheia in the Greek world) are seen as in opposition to immortalization; (4) vision of the gods and powers is mentioned, using the same Greek word for vision as Colossians 2:18; (5) An angel supposedly revealed the mystery — angels figure prominently in the Colossian heresy; (6) the initiate was to bring in others, just as the "philosophy" of the Colossian false teachers sought out followers; (7) Dietary and purity regulations were required as also mentioned in Colossians 2:21,22; and (8) the mystery rite had to be performed during the new moon — see Colossians 2:16.¹⁸ It is quite evident that the warnings of Paul are to be seen in light of popular religious belief and experience in first century Asia Minor.

The term embateuein in Colossians 2:18 therefore denotes the entering of a higher level spiritual experience that included visions, angels, and supposed freedom from the hostile powers that were feared by people from various religious

backgrounds who lived in the area around Colossae. There were even Jewish sources of this, where local Judaism had been mixed with ideas garnered from the surrounding pagans.¹⁹ The people feared the stoicheia and this fear was deeply rooted in the society of the day. It is obvious from Paul's polemic against the false teachers who were influencing the Christians at Colossae that his readers were tempted to believe that Christ had not fully delivered them from the hostile powers and that more was needed. The spiritual elitists who had these visionary experiences were portraying themselves as the ones who could lead the Colossians into freedom. Paul claimed that they were actually trying to carry the Christians of Colossae off as plunder!

THREE WARNINGS ABOUT SPIRITUAL ELITISM

With this background information, we can now better understand the three warnings in Colossians 2 about opponents to the sufficiency of Christ. The first we have already mentioned: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ" (Colossians 2:8). This is a warning about allowing one to be carried off as a captive or, literally, as "booty" or "plunder of war." The spiritual elitists claimed to have special knowledge and techniques that could enable one to escape the influence of the stoicheia. Ironically, they play on the idea that the Colossian Christians needed to fear the stoicheia and needed their help to escape. The truth is, however, that this was "empty deceit." The Colossian Christians were free from the stoicheia because of the finished work of Christ; the true danger was in the teachings of the elitists.

Lets make this very clear. The hostile powers no longer held the

Colossian Christians in captivity. Because when they put their trust in Christ, Christians had been transferred out of the authority of darkness (Colossians 1:13). However, there is still a battle. Now that the stoicheia have lost their previous captives to Christ, they have a new plan. The hostile powers inspire a false teaching that is believed by false teachers. These elitist teachers tell the Colossians that they are not really free from the stoicheia. These teachers tempt Christians to integrate pagan practices and traditions to their faith in order to find freedom from the hostile powers.

The elitist teachers hoped to carry their followers "away as plunder" by adding their own revelations, techniques,

and experiences to the grace of God given through Christ's finished work. The spiritual elitists play into the hands of the very stoicheia they claim to have the key to defeating. The vain deceit is their claim to special status. Their biggest lie is the claim that what Christ has already done is insufficient.

The second warning is found in Colossians 2:16: "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day." The "therefore" refers back to the truth that Christ had, through the cross, resolved their greatest problems. These were their previous state of death in sin (verse 13) and their subjection to the powers of darkness (verse 15). Christ had canceled out their debt before God (verse 14) and defeated the principalities and powers (verse 15). In spite of all that, the spiritual elitists in Colossae insisted that the faith of the Colossian Christians was defective and lacking. So they wanted to set themselves up as judges. Paul warns that we do not let them do

it!

The would-be judges wanted to tell the Colossian Christians how to eat, what religious festivals to keep, and evidently demanded Sabbath keeping. Here we see both pagan and Jewish elements. The Sabbath is the Jewish Sabbath and went from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. As we saw earlier, the pagan mystery rites had to be kept on the new moon. The food issue could be Jewish or pagan. Jews did not have rules about beverages, so that was likely a pagan stipulation.²⁰ They likely were requiring strict asceticism. Interestingly,

The spiritual elitists delight in judging others. They claim to know how to find freedom and suggest to regenerate Christians that they are not really free. Their road to "freedom" is always bondage.

In spite of this clear injunction to not allow anyone to be sit as judge in regard to Sabbath, there are many groups today who do just that!

They try to use semantic sophistry to convince us that this passage is not talking about Sabbath. Do not listen to them.

In Galatians Paul gives a similar teaching, and mentions the stoicheia in doing so:

However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain (Galatians 4:8-11).

The phrase "elemental things" here is stoicheia in the Greek. To return to religious practices of their previous lives, whether they be pagan or Jewish, is tantamount to returning to the domination of the stoicheia. Going back is slavery to "gods" who are not really gods, but spirit beings in the heavenlies, hostile forces who

seek to enslave. Any denial of the sufficiency of Christ or adding to the finished work of Christ is seen by Paul as a return to enslavement.

The spiritual elitists delight in judging others. They claim to know how to find freedom and suggest to regenerate Christians that they are not really free. Their road to "freedom" is always bondage. Paul's instruction is clear and simple: "do not let them act as your judge." How sad that so many do.

The third warning is found in Colossians 2:18: "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind." Earlier we spent some time establishing the meaning of the phrase "taking his stand on visions he has seen" which uses a word with the technical meaning of entering a second stage in a pagan initiation rite. The would-be elitists in Colossae claimed special spiritual experiences which gave them supposed freedom from the stoicheia. They were promoting their experiences and the means to receive them to the Colossian Christians. F F Bruce comments on this passage, "They pretend to have found a way to a higher plane of spiritual experience, as though they had been initiated into sacred mysteries which give them an infinite advantage over the uninitiated."²¹ If Arnold is correct, it is likely that they had actually participated in the initiation rites of one of the mysteries, and claimed that the insights and experiences gave them a special status vis- a-vis ordinary Christians.²²

The phrase "keep defrauding you" comes from a rare Greek word which denotes a referee or judge in an athletic contest.²³ Here it means "to disqualify."²⁴ The elitists take the role of referee and disqualify the true Christians. They claim to have experiences, visions, superior "humility," (how ironic), and some special relationship to angels. The meaning of

the phrase “worship of angels” has been disputed. The Greek construction can mean “angelic worship” or the “angels as objects of worship.” If one posits a Jewish source to the heresy, then the former is usually assumed. There were Jewish sects who claimed to have the secret to experiencing angelic worship, like that of the angels.²⁵

On the other hand, Arnold gives many ancient Greek sources that use similar terminology and concludes that it means “angels as objects of veneration.”²⁶ In the magical texts he references and translates, angels are named and called upon for protection from fate and the hostile powers. Some of them include Jewish and pagan names in the same text.²⁷ Rather than directly worshipping angels as if they were the highest God, they “venerated” them and called upon them for help, as being a part of the series of intermediaries between them and God. Here is part of Arnolds summary:

The texts also are a good illustration of the religious syncretism of the time. Jewish angels, as well as the names and titles of Yahweh, are mixed up with pagan intermediaries and all referred to as “angels.” The personalities of the deities and the spirits are lost in favor of a pragmatic concern about which ones have power and which ones will help.²⁸

If this was the issue in Colossae, then the “judges” claimed to have special knowledge of which angelic intermediaries (knowing their names was a key thing) could be called upon for help by using the correct formula, thus averting bad fate. Arnold presents a very compelling argument for his view.

This fits with the larger context

of Colossians 1 & 2. Paul’s claim is that Christ is the Creator and sustainer of all, that He is above all powers, that in Him is all the fullness of deity, and that in Him the Colossian Christians had been made complete (see Colossians 2:9,10 and the Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15-20). The would-be spiritual elitists denied that being in Christ was all that was necessary. They claimed that the stoicheia still had power over the ordinary Christians in Colossae and that their knowledge and experiences held the key to freedom. The “worship of angels” was likely a religious process of calling upon angels (by their secret names) as intermediaries who could thwart the influence of the hostile powers. This may seem odd, unless you consider millions of Roman Catholics (whose church has not allowed them to know that they can be truly complete in Christ by faith), who routinely call upon intermediaries such as Mary and various saints, to give help that they fear has not been provided by Christ. It is not hard to imagine that Christians who lived in the syncretistic culture of first century Asia Minor could believe in angelic intermediaries when Jews and pagans alike had similar teachings. The would-be “referees” set them selves up to judge this foolish process, calling those who truly and simply trust the finished work of Christ “disqualified.”

Further evidence that this involved a magic belief in intermediaries is found in the next verse: “and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God” (Colossians 2:19). The elitist judges take people away from that which only and truly can keep them, the fin-

ished work of Christ. The head and body analogy shows that Christian growth is not based on the work of intermediaries, be they human or angelic. The entire body receives everything needed directly from Christ. The whole view of life as being a huge gulf between them and God, filled with stoicheia, angels, fate, principalities and powers, was pressed upon the Colossians all their lives. Evidently the errorists had lowered Christ to a level of one of the intermediaries, who could possibly help them, but not directly or completely. Much more was necessary and the elitists alone supposedly knew the secrets. Paul says they are not holding onto the head.

CONCLUSION

Clinton Arnold summarizes the situation:

Referring to itself as ‘the philosophy,’ the leaders of this faction had adapted the Pauline gospel to aspects of Phrygian-Lydia beliefs and practices as well as to local Judaism. They advocated the invocation of angels for protection from the hostile powers. They appear to have overemphasized the transcendence of God and underemphasized the exalted position of Christ, functionally viewing him as a mediator, perhaps on the same level as angels. As a means of countering this teaching and giving the Colossians perspective on the relationship of Christ to the powers, Paul gives eloquent expression to a cosmic Christology. Jesus existed before the powers, he in fact created them, he defeated the hostile powers on the cross, and he will intervene in the future and bring about a universal peace in heaven as

well as on earth.²⁹
 Christ is supreme over all powers, on heaven and on earth, friendly or hostile, and we are complete in Him. Therefore — see to it know one takes you captive (2:8). Therefore — let no one act as you judge (2:16). Therefore — let know one keep defrauding you of your prize (2:18). There are various versions of the Colossian heresy popular today. These shall be the subject of our next article. May the Lord preserve each of us by His grace so richly provided in Christ.

END NOTES

1. R. C. H. Lenski, Colossians, in Commentary on the New Testament, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), Lenski writes, "Paul's imagery is true to fact: error leads its victims away like booty," 96.
2. Clinton E. Arnold The Colossian Syncretism - The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae, (Baker: GrandRapids, 1996), is the most comprehensive work that also cites many previous works on the topic.
3. Lenski, 98.
4. Arnold, chapter 6, 158ff.
5. Ibid. 192, 193.
6. Ibid. 192.
7. FF Bruce sees Jewish "mercaba mysticism" behind it, John MacArthur identifies Gnosticism. Lenski sees Judaizers as behind it.
8. Arnold 62-70.
9. Ibid. 188.
10. Ibid. 190.
11. F F Bruce, Colossians in NICNT, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1984), 124.
12. Arnold, 194.
13. Ibid. 104ff.
14. Bruce, 121.
15. Arnold, 123-126.
16. Ibid. 155,156.
17. The Mithras Liturgy, as described in Arnold, 136-139.
18. This is a summary of Arnold's material, 139, 140.
19. Arnold, 150-155.
20. Bruce 114.
21. Ibid. 117.
22. Arnold, 156.
23. Lenski128, Bruce 117 n111.
24. Bruce 117.
25. Bruce, 119 takes this position.
26. Arnold, 30-31 summarizes his findings.
27. For example see Arnold, 24.
28. Ibid. 31.
29. Ibid. 311.

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Published by Twin City Fellowship

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