

**DYING AND RISING WITH CHRIST  
IN COLOSSIANS**

**by  
James O'Neal Routt**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Colossians was written to a congregation threatened by a Jewish mystical teaching which offered a proleptic experience of salvation in the form of visionary journeys to heaven. To counter this false teaching the writer reminds the readers of the blessings they already possess, centring his argument around their participation with Christ in his death and resurrection. Christ himself is identified as God's end-time agent of reconciliation and new creation, who, through his death and resurrection, restores the cosmos to the state of harmony God intended from the beginning (1:15-20). To accomplish this task Christ identified himself with humanity's fallen state and made himself responsible for their sins. By dying their death he secured acquittal before the divine tribunal and victory over the hostile spirits (2:13-15). In his triumphal passage from death to new life he inaugurated the new age and became the founder of the new redeemed human race as a second Adam (1:18). In these events Christ acted in a representative capacity so that his experience of deliverance might be both the basis and the prototype of the salvation of believers. In conversion-baptism Christians become participants in Christ's death and resurrection as God includes them in his saving acts towards Christ by pronouncing on them the same verdict of acquittal and exercising anew the same life-giving power towards them as when he raised Christ from the dead. Thus they are made to pass with Christ out of the old fallen existence in which they were subject to the hostile spirits and the religious rules and regulations (stoicheia) of this world, and they enter the heavenly life of the new creation. Although Christians have been raised with Christ (as Paul also affirms in Rom 6), they possess this new life only in preliminary form and in hiddenness (3:3). They must yet strive to actualize this salvation by putting to death what remains within of the old existence (3:5-11) and cultivating Christlike virtues as they await the parousia, when they will enter upon this resurrection life in its fullness (3:4).**

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**CHAPTER ONE**  
**INTRODUCTION:**  
**A HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

We begin our study of the subject of dying and rising with Christ as it is developed in Colossians by placing it within the context of the broader scholarly discussion of this Pauline concept over the past century. The subject of dying and rising with Christ is a complex one, involving the answer to a number of different though inter-related questions. It is therefore in the interest of clarity that these questions, or at least the most important ones, should be identified from the start. Traditionally there have been three. The most fundamental question is that of the significance of Christ's own death and resurrection, or to state it differently, What is the Christological and soteriological framework within which the Pauline concept of dying and rising with Christ is to be understood? The second question concerns the meaning of the believer's own experience in baptism or conversion which is described as a death and resurrection. Thirdly, what is the meaning of "with Christ"? There are actually two sides to this question. First is the question of the meaning of *with*: In what sense is the believer's experience of death and resurrection linked with what happened to Christ in his historical death and resurrection? And secondly, On what principle or state of affairs is this "withness" based?

Two additional questions have come to characterize twentieth century interpretation. The first is the general question of the religious *origins* of dying and rising with Christ, that is, What, if any, were the pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices (be they Jewish or pagan) which were influential in the formulation of the concept of dying and rising with Christ as it is presented in the Pauline epistles? This question of course affects all of the questions concerning dying and rising with Christ. The second question concerns the relationship of the concept of dying and rising with Christ in Colossians to that of the undisputed Pauline epistles, especially Romans, and arises from the increasing doubt concerning the authenticity of Colossians and the quest to identify theological development within the early church. There are a number of other questions which must be answered in order to give a fully developed interpretation of dying and rising with Christ (e.g. its relation to Pauline ethics, to justification by faith, and the whole question of a progressive dying and rising), but we consider these five to be the most important, and it is on these that we will concentrate in this chapter.

To recapitulate, we may identify five basic questions which have occupied interpreters of our subject in the twentieth century.

1. What are the pre-Christian beliefs and practices which inform the Pauline concept of dying and rising with Christ?
2. What is the Christological and soteriological framework within which dying and rising with Christ is to be understood?
3. What is it that happens to believers so that they may be said to have died and risen again?

4. What is the meaning of "with Christ"? - i.e. In what sense is the believer's experience linked with Christ's so that it may be described as a co-death and co-resurrection?

5. What is the relationship of the concept of dying and rising with Christ as presented in Colossians to that of the undisputed Pauline epistles, particularly Romans?

## I. Traditional Interpretation in the Late Nineteenth Century

Prior to the start of the twentieth century three different approaches to dying and rising with Christ may be identified. We have labelled these descriptively the *regenerational* view, the *juridical* view, and the *ethical* view. The first view was the most common in this period, and as the label implies, essentially equates dying and rising with the traditional category of regeneration. According to this interpretation dying and rising with Christ constitutes respectively the negative and positive aspects of an objective transformation of fallen human nature in which the literal death and resurrection of Christ are spiritually reproduced or copied in the individual in conversion, with this transformation being symbolized in the baptismal rite. J. B. Lightfoot's explanation is representative: "Baptism is the grave of the old man and the birth of the new. As he sinks beneath the waters, the believer buries there all his corrupt affections and past sins; as he emerges thence he rises regenerate, quickened to new hopes and the new life."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, (London: Macmillan, 1879; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959) 184. Others who held this view are F. L. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977) 240-242; B. Weiss, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, trans. D. Eaton, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1882), 1.462-463; T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897) 252; A. S.

The juridical view typically finds its basis in the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement and identifies dying with Christ as justification. Since Adam's sin his descendants have stood under a divine sentence of death. Christ appeared as the Second Adam, the legally constituted head and representative of a new humanity, and in his death bore the divine judgment upon sin in the place of those who deserved it. For the believer then to have died with Christ, means that "he, *not in his own person, but in that of Christ, his representative*, suffers death as expiation; is viewed as having thereby exhausted the claim of the Law against him; and thus arrives at the happy state of justification."<sup>2</sup> There is considerable variety among those who subscribe to this view, particularly because it is frequently combined in some way with the regenerative view. However, H. C. G. Moule, whose explanation is quoted above, is typical: dying with Christ means justification - rising with Christ means sanctification.<sup>3</sup> The juridical view, broadly defined, continues to find proponents up to the present.<sup>4</sup>

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Peake, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in *The Expositors Greek Testament* ed. W. R. Nicoll, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 534; C. Hodge *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (reprint of 1886 ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 195, 197; cf. O. Pfleiderer, *Paulinism: A Contribution to the History of Primitive Christian Theology*, trans. E. Peters, vol. 1: *Exposition of Paul's Doctrine* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1877) 193-197.

<sup>2</sup>H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Cambridge: CUP, 1884) 115.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Hodge, *Romans*, 194-199; A. Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit: Ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1965) 206.

<sup>4</sup>E.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1: *Introduction and Commentary on Romans I-VIII* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 299; S. Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1981; American ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 301-307; similarly C. F. D. Moule, "The Judgment Theme in the Sacraments," in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: CUP, 1956) 446-447; A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology Against its Graeco-Roman Background* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1987) 358.

The ethical view is the corollary of the subjective interpretation of the atonement which originated with Abelard and characterized nineteenth century Protestant liberalism. The fundamental idea here is that the efficacy of Christ's atoning work consists in the subjective effects which it produces on the human heart.<sup>5</sup> Thus to die and rise with Christ means that the believer is inspired to renounce worldliness and selfishness (death to the old life) and to follow the example of Christ's love and obedience (the start of a new life). Here "with Christ" means inspired or caused by Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Finally in regard to the concept of dying and rising with Christ as presented in Colossians as compared to that of the undisputed Pauline epistles, the all but unanimous opinion among interpreters of this period is that there are no essential differences. This is important to point out at this stage, since in the following century this consensus would be completely overthrown. The dominant view today is that Paul avoided stating that the believer has already risen with Christ in baptism. And since this idea is clearly found in Colossians, many see in this a fundamental theological shift, explaining it either as a pre-Pauline notion which Paul corrects in Romans or as a post-Pauline development. At the centre of the debate is the interpretation of the future indicative verbs ἐσόμεθα in Rom 6:5 and συζήσομεν in v 8. Are these temporal futures referring to the coming resurrection of the body, or are they logical futures which refer to the new life which begins in baptism when one is raised with Christ? The nineteenth

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this view of the atonement see G. Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1931) 152-156.

<sup>6</sup> Representative of this view is G. B. Stevens, *The Pauline Theology: A Study of the Origin and Correlation of the Doctrinal Teachings of the Apostle Paul* (London: Dickenson, 1892) 32-35, 233-234.



century interpreters opted for the latter, arguing that bodily resurrection is foreign to the context, which is governed by Paul's polemic against the antinomian belief that God's grace in Christ could be enjoyed apart from a life of holiness. The future tense verbs then, according to this interpretation, indicate the necessity and certainty of the new moral life of resurrection with Christ following upon dying with Him. The two are inseparable.<sup>7</sup>

## II. PERIOD ONE: 1900-1930

### A. W. Wrede

A new era in the interpretation of dying and rising with Christ began with the rise of the History of Religions School in Germany of which W. Wrede was a leading advocate. A statement of the school's programme is found in Wrede's classic essay "Über Aufgabe und Methode der sogenannten neutestamentlichen Theologie" (1897).<sup>8</sup> The task, briefly stated, is not the exposition of the theology of the New Testament but "the history of early Christian religion and theology"<sup>9</sup> which means going beyond the boundaries of canon and employing all relevant ancient documents. The method is that of modern scientific historiography which has no place for any concept of revelation and seeks to explain each historical datum solely on the basis of the historical and religious forces at work. Included here are the influences of pre-Christian religious beliefs. For Wrede, followed by A. Schweitzer, the

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<sup>7</sup>H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Part 4, vol. 1: *The Epistle to the Romans* trans. J. C. Moore (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1897) 287; T. Zahn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1910) 301; Hodge, *Romans*, 196; Godet, *Romans*, 242-244; Weiss, *Biblical Theology*, 1:62-63. A prominent exception to the rule and harbinger of the present day view is Pfeleiderer's *Paulinism* 1:195-196.

<sup>8</sup>English translation: "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology'" in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed., trans. and introduction by R. Morgan (London: SCM, 1973) 68-116.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

background which informs Paul's religious beliefs is the Judaism of the New Testament era. Others, such as W. Bousset, found the roots of Paul's theology in pagan Hellenism. Wrede carries out this programme in regard to Paul in his short but influential book *Paulus* which first appeared in 1904.<sup>10</sup>

Another epoch-making feature of Wrede's work is his employment of what G. Aulén calls the *classic* or *dramatic* theory of the atonement.<sup>11</sup> The label *classic* comes from the fact that this was the dominant view of the church in the Patristic period. It was superseded as such only in the second millennium of the church by Anselm's satisfaction theory which in turn was adopted with modifications by the Reformers. It is called "dramatic" because, "Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ . . . fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage": sin, death and the devil.<sup>12</sup> And because Christ entered into the human state of bondage in order to accomplish this victory, the theory is summarized in the well-known dictum stemming from Irenaeus: "Christ becomes what we are, that we through His death may become what He is."<sup>13</sup> More recently it has been labelled the "participatory" theory.<sup>14</sup> According to Aulén, Wrede was the first among modern new Testament scholars to express this view, "with full

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<sup>10</sup>English translation, *Paul*, trans. E. Loomis (London: Philip Green, 1907).

<sup>11</sup>Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 20-23.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>13</sup>Wrede, *Paul*, 110.

<sup>14</sup>Thus D. E. H. Whiteley, *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974) 130-137, and E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977) 463-472. Following the same view but preferring the terminology of "interchange" is M. D. Hooker, "Interchange in Christ," *JTS* ns 22 (1971) 349-361.

clearness"<sup>15</sup> - and with Wrede not only was the pattern set for the History of Religions School, but this view of the atonement would become in the twentieth century the most commonly used framework for the interpretation of dying and rising with Christ among New Testament scholars in general.

The salient features of Wrede's interpretation of Paul's theology of dying and rising with Christ are as follows. "The misery of man consists in his habitation in the flesh"<sup>16</sup> wherein he is subject to the powers of sin, law, death and hostile spirits. To be redeemed "man must go forth from this fleshly earthly existence into a spiritual, immaterial [resurrection] existence."<sup>17</sup> Redemption comes through Christ, a pre-existent divine being, who becomes a man entering fully into this human state of misery. Through his death he defeats the powers, "and through His resurrection He enters upon a new existence, which is not subject to them"<sup>18</sup>. On what basis then do the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection come to the human race? "A great part is played in this theology by the thought that what happens to the first of an historical series happens in consequence to the whole series. Adam is the head-spring of humanity. He represents the whole race of mankind. What is true of Him is therefore true of all that are connected with Him. Since He dies, all who belong to His race also die. Christ is again the first of a series. Therefore, since He arises from the dead, all arise with Him."<sup>19</sup> The individual comes "into possession of salvation . . . through faith

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<sup>15</sup>Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 80. For an earlier statement of the theory see A. Sabatier, *The Apostle Paul: A Sketch of the Development of His Doctrine*, trans A. N. Hellier (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899) 302-305.

<sup>16</sup>Wrede, *Paul*, 103. .

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 81 (1 Cor 15:48).

and baptism . . . . The conviction of the truth of the preaching of redemption effects at once that mystic union with Christ by dint of which His death and resurrection are automatically transferred to the believer, so that he also is dead and risen again."<sup>20</sup> By this Paul does not mean the believer has undergone a spiritual death and resurrection analogous to Christ's. Since mankind's state of misery is physical, salvation can only be physical, and therefore the believer's death and resurrection must be understood as actual and literal.<sup>21</sup> The problem of course is that "the believer still wears the body of flesh, and . . . the life of glory has not yet begun."<sup>22</sup> Therefore it must be understood that "Paul's words *anticipate* what the future is to bring."<sup>23</sup> But Paul could use this language of anticipation because to his way of thinking "the redemption is already a perfect truth, because Christ *has already* died and risen again." The believer has only to await "the *outward realization* of that which, in the ideal sense has already happened."<sup>24</sup> He could, furthermore, use this language of anticipation because he believed the drama of redemption had already begun. Christ's death and resurrection constituted the first act of the eschatological salvation, "an act which must be followed swiftly and of necessity by all the rest."<sup>25</sup> The blessings of salvation, however, are not entirely deferred to the future. As a present share in the resurrection life of Christ, the believer is granted the Spirit of God, as the guarantee and first fruits of "the perfect harvest yet to come."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 108-109.

What then is the origin of this doctrine of redemption? Paul was a Jewish theologian before he became a Christian. On the basis of certain Jewish apocalyptic books he viewed the coming Messiah as a celestial divine being who would inaugurate the New Age by vanquishing the evil powers of the world. "In the moment of his conversion when Jesus appeared before him in the shining glory of His risen existence, Paul identified Him with his own Christ, and straightway transferred to Jesus all the conceptions which he already had of the celestial being."<sup>27</sup> In particular, since this Jesus had accomplished redemption through his death and resurrection, Paul equated this with his celestial Messiah's conquest of evil powers.<sup>28</sup>

### **B. W. Bousset**

The most influential representative of the History of Religions School was W. Bousset.<sup>29</sup> In his classic study *Kyrios Christos* (1913; 2nd ed. 1921)<sup>30</sup> Bousset explains Paul's view of dying and rising with Christ within the broader context of his Adam-Christ theology. Each person's state of misery consists in the fact that he or she has been born into the race of Adam from whom "the stream of unrighteousness and sin, of condemnation and death has been poured into the world."<sup>31</sup> Adam and his descendants are made of earthly material (1 Cor 15:48), and together they constitute a somatic unity (the body of sin, the body of death). From Christ, the second Adam, on the other hand proceeds "righteousness, deliverance and life."<sup>32</sup> Christ and the

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 151.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 153-154.

<sup>29</sup>W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems*, trans. S. M. Gilmour and H. C. Kee (New York: Abingdon, 1972) 230.

<sup>30</sup>W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, trans. J. E. Stealy (New York: Abingdon, 1970).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

new humanity in Him are made of heavenly material and also together constitute a somatic unity. Salvation means transference from the corporeity of the first man to that of the second; and this is made possible through the death and resurrection of Christ.

To explain how the death and resurrection of Christ effects this deliverance, Bousset employs the same basic view of the atonement seen with Wrede. Christ, the Son of God, entered into the sphere of Adamic humanity, taking upon himself sinful flesh (Rom 8:3). His death therefore meant deliverance for himself from the entire world of flesh, sin, guilt and death (Rom 6:9-11). His resurrection meant entry into a new sphere of existence where these things cannot follow.<sup>33</sup> This deliverance which Christ experienced in His death and resurrection then becomes the *prototype* of the believers' deliverance. Through baptism they repeat in analogical fashion that which Christ experienced. They are supernaturally delivered from the Adamic sphere of sin and death, and exalted to the sphere of righteousness and life. This death and resurrection with Christ is "a fact accomplished once and for all."<sup>34</sup> There is no ongoing ethical struggle with "the old Adam" or a daily dying to sin. "The great break lies behind them . . . ." The old human nature ("the old man") has been put to death; "the newness of life is here. The Christians have only to walk therein as one strolls about in springtime sunshine (Rom 6:4)."<sup>35</sup>

But where did Paul get this idea of salvation as dying and rising with Christ? Following the lead of others in the History of Religions School,<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 180

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 181.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>For a history of interpretation see G. Wagner, *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries* trans. J. P. Smith (London: Olivier and Boyd, 1967) 7-32.

Bousset claims Paul derived this interpretation of baptism from the pre-Pauline Hellenistic Church, which understood baptism in terms of the initiation sacrament of the mystery religions.<sup>37</sup> In this cultic experience the initiate was said to share in the fate of the deity who had died and risen to life again, such as Attis, Adonis, or Osiris. The initiate thereby experienced liberation from the world, death and fate and received the gift of immortality. Paul took this as his point of departure but pushed out beyond it to transform what was only a cultic experience into a religion of greater ethical, spiritual and intellectual dimensions.

Bousset's distinctive contribution to this interpretation, which he shared along with R. Reitzenstein, is his stress on the significance of Gnosticism. Before Paul's day, in the syncretistic climate of the Hellenistic world all of the various mystery deities had come to be understood in terms of the basic Gnostic myth of the redeemer god who sinks down into matter (i.e. he dies), is held prisoner there, and then is elevated again to the heavenly world (i.e. he rises).<sup>38</sup> According to Bousset the version of the myth which most influenced Paul was first identified in modern times by Reitzenstein and based on the tractate *Poimandres* in the Corpus Hermeticum.<sup>39</sup> In this myth the god Anthropos, the Primal man, suffers defeat falling into the world of matter then is victoriously restored to heaven. His experience has now become the type for the destiny of the pious. Like him they have fallen into matter, and like him they are to rise once more to heaven. This will not take place finally until death, but even

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<sup>37</sup>Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 157-158; 194.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 188-189.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 190-194; 267-268.

now in this life, in the mystery of the sacred initiation the heavenly journey of the soul can be experienced.<sup>40</sup>

It is within this "spiritual atmosphere" according to Bousset that Paul's Adam-Christ theology arose along with his concept of dying and rising with Christ. Of course "a powerful reshaping has taken place."<sup>41</sup> In the myth the Primal Man is at the same time the one who falls into matter and is raised up again. "Paul on the contrary allots the roles to two different persons, the first and the second Adam."<sup>42</sup> Christ's death, moreover, is a deliverance not a defeat, and Paul says nothing about the pre-existence of souls or a fall from the heavenly world. Nevertheless, the parallels are close and especially the main idea: "The pious person experiences in mystical fellowship the same thing which the divine hero previously and fundamentally has experienced in exemplary power. The experience of the believers is only the consequence, victoriously being worked out, of the once given beginning. One simply closes the switch and the electrical current flows through."<sup>43</sup>

### C. A. Schweitzer

Among the most important of twentieth century studies on dying and rising with Christ are A. Schweitzer's two volumes *Paul and His Interpreters* (1911), and *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (1930).<sup>44</sup> Two

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 268.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 193, 196, 198.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 196.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>44</sup>A. Schweitzer, *Paul and His Interpreters: A Critical History* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1912); *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1931). For a helpful analysis see A. Thiselton, "Biblical Classics: VI. Schweitzer's Interpretation of Paul," *ExpTim* 90 (1979) 132-137.



questions are central to this study: (1) What is the origin of Paul's religious ideas (Judaism, Hellenism, or both)? (2) What is the fundamental concept in Paul?

In his first volume Schweitzer examines the answers given to these questions by Continental scholars in the historical - critical tradition from F. C. Baur to R. Reitzenstein. Schweitzer's conviction (following R. Kabisch and W. Wrede) is that Paul can only be understood on the basis of Jewish eschatology, and he offers an important critique of the view which sought to explain Paul's mysticism on the basis of Hellenistic mystery religions and Gnosticism. He argues as follows:

1. There is a fundamental difference in terminology between Paul and Hellenism. Hellenism uses the language of rebirth but never resurrection.<sup>45</sup>

2. There is a chronological problem: it is only from the second century onwards that the mysteries were widespread in the Roman world, and our knowledge is almost exclusively of these later mysteries. "Paul cannot have known the mystery-religions in the form in which they are known to us, because in this fully-developed form they did not yet exist."<sup>46</sup>

3. There was no common theology to the mystery religions. Attempts to define one have been pieced together from fragments.<sup>47</sup>

4. There is no Redeemer god in the mystery religions analogous to Christ. This is a reconstruction. One never encounters an incarnate being who comes into the world to redeem men by dying and rising.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Schweitzer, *Paul and Interpreters* 191.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 191-192; cf. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 90.

<sup>47</sup>Schweitzer, *Paul and Interpreters*, 192-193.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 193.

5. There is no basis for Reitzenstein's theory that the model of Paul's Christ is the Primal Man of Gnostic mythology. Paul's concept of Christ as the second Adam is not mythological but *eschatological*.<sup>49</sup> "It is by His coming in the flesh and His dying and rising again that He first becomes man from whom a new humanity can go forth. Since the humanity destined to Messianic glory, which takes its rise from Him, follows as the second humanity after the humanity which proceeds from Adam, Paul speaks of Him as a second Adam . . . . For He is thus not a Primal Man, but a second Adam, and this in consequence of His resurrection, by which he becomes the ancestor of those who are appointed to the resurrection."<sup>50</sup>

In his second volume Schweitzer argues his case that Paul's conceptual framework is eschatology, and the fundamental thought supported by this framework is "being in Christ" which is conceived of as having died and risen with Christ.<sup>51</sup> Schweitzer traces Paul's doctrine of dying and rising with Christ to a reformulation of his thinking brought on by the delay of the parousia. Paul's upbringing in Judaism had led him to expect the Messianic kingdom to follow immediately upon the coming of the Messiah. The elect of that generation would survive the pre-Messianic tribulation and enter alive into the Kingdom.<sup>52</sup> As it happened, however, the Messiah came but without inaugurating the Kingdom. Moreover, some believers had already died while awaiting His return. Would they then miss out on the glories of the kingdom at His return and need to await the general resurrection at the end of the kingdom? Paul's solution to this dilemma was to fashion his doctrine

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 220-221.

<sup>50</sup>Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul*, 167.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 88.

of dying and rising with Christ: in baptism all believers, in mysterious quasi-physical fashion, share in the dying and rising again of Christ, as a result of which they are made "capable, on the return of Christ, of immediately receiving, whether they are then surviving or already dead, the resurrection state of existence."<sup>53</sup>

There was a further problem which led Paul to his mystical doctrine of dying and rising with Christ. According to traditional expectation "a resurrection of those who had died was only to take place when the supernatural age had dawned. If Jesus has risen, that means for those who dare to think consistently, that it is now already the supernatural age."<sup>54</sup> Yet "judged by external appearance it was still the natural world-age."<sup>55</sup> Thus Paul's expectation had to recast itself to fit the facts: in the period between the resurrection of Jesus and His return the natural and supernatural worlds are intermingled.<sup>56</sup> The natural world in its outward appearance continues as normal, but the powers of the supernatural age which were "manifested in the dying and rising of Jesus were already at work in those who are elect to the Messianic Kingdom."<sup>57</sup>

It is also within this eschatological context that Schweitzer finds Paul's concepts of the sacraments. Baptism corresponds to the act of sealing seen in Ezek 9 and *Pss. Sal.* 15 whereby the godly are distinguished from the wicked in the world and thus given assurance of deliverance in the day of judgment and of entering the coming kingdom.<sup>58</sup> This ceremony of baptism is void of

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 98.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 229-230.

any symbolism of burial and resurrection<sup>59</sup> and is intrinsically effective apart from faith.<sup>60</sup> In regard to the latter Schweitzer does not differ from those who see the Hellenistic mysteries as the model of Pauline baptism.

Schweitzer discovers the basis of Paul's concept of dying and rising with Christ in the eschatological concept of the predestined solidarity of the elect with the Messiah and with one another.<sup>61</sup> Those within this solidarity or corporeity possess a common quasi-physical nature which is susceptible to the powers of death and resurrection in the same way that fuel is susceptible to fire. And just as flame quickly spreads to the fuel to which it is brought in contact, so the dying and rising of Christ are communicated to the individual in baptism.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, this dying and rising is not a single event completed in baptism, but an ongoing affair with the dying manifested in suffering and the rising being a process of formation which is the work of the Spirit.<sup>63</sup>

All the blessings of redemption flow from this state of being-in-Christ. Believers receive the Spirit which is the life principle of the supernatural state of existence - with ethics for Paul being "nothing else than the Spirit's working".<sup>64</sup> Also since they now belong to the supernatural world they have been liberated from the law and the dominion of angelic powers, particularly the angel of death.<sup>65</sup> On the subject of forgiveness Schweitzer sees two independent conceptions operating in Paul's theology. The first Paul received by tradition and is juridical in nature. It interprets Christ's death

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 262.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 19, 21; *Paul and Interpreters*, 225.

<sup>61</sup>Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul*, 104.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 294.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 188, 112.

as a sin-offering making possible the forgiveness of those who believe. The second is peculiar to Paul and based on his doctrine of dying and rising with Christ. "This forgiveness of sins is brought about by the fact that Christ has come in the fleshly body, and by his dying and rising again has made the flesh, with all the guilt belonging to it, as though it were not. And the forgiveness is obtained, not by faith but by the believer's being freed, through his dying and rising again with Christ, not only from the being-in-the-flesh, but also from the sin which is bound up with that state."<sup>66</sup> These two conceptions of forgiveness do not logically belong together, and it is only by "ingenious reasoning" that Paul has inserted the former into the latter so that in his theology justification by faith has become "a subsidiary crater, which is formed within the rim of the main crater - the mystical doctrine of redemption through being in Christ."<sup>67</sup>

While no one accepted Schweitzer's interpretation of Paul as a whole, his work was nevertheless a milestone for at least three reasons. The first is his early and insightful critique of attempts to find the background to Paul's concept of dying and rising with Christ in Hellenistic religion.<sup>68</sup> The most penetrating critiques were to come in the decade of the sixties and after. Second and most important is his eschatological interpretation of dying and rising with Christ: as the death and resurrection of Christ marked the beginning of the New Age, so dying and rising with Christ means deliverance from the powers of the present age and entry into the new. Thirdly, of long lasting significance has been his argument that justification by faith is not

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 222.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 225.

<sup>68</sup>For other early critiques of this interpretation see especially H. A. A. Kennedy, *St. Paul and the Mystery Religions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913); J. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (reprint of 1925 ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

the primary idea in Paul but rather it must be understood within the broader more fundamental framework of the eschatological redemption through sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ.

### III. Period Two: 1931-1960

#### A. Interpretations of With Christ

Three interpretations came into prominence in this second period which, though differing considerably in their conception of it, all agreed that the believer does not simply *copy* or *repeat* the dying and rising of Christ, but *shares* directly in those original saving events.

#### I. Corporate Personality

The concept of corporate personality was first expounded by the Old Testament scholar H. W. Robinson as an explanation for "the defective sense of individuality" observed among primitive people, and which he believed was operational in ancient Hebrew society as well. In *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (1911) he wrote, "We find men dealt with, in primitive legislation and religion, not on the basis of the single life which consciousness binds together for each of us, but as members of a tribe, a clan or a family; hence the familiar practice of blood-revenge, or the idea that the sin of one (e.g. Achan) can be properly visited on the group to which he belongs, and into which his own personality, so to speak, extends."<sup>69</sup> Robinson went on to

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<sup>69</sup>H. W. Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1926) 8; for his later and better known works on corporate personality see *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

suggest in this book that the relation of Adam to the race and of Christ to His body, the church, is to be understood in terms of corporate personality.<sup>70</sup>

Among the first to apply the concept of corporate personality to dying and rising with Christ was C. H. Dodd in his 1932 commentary on Romans.<sup>71</sup> In regard to Rom 6:1-14 he explains, "in order to understand the argument here, we must bear in mind the teaching of the last chapter, that Christ is the inclusive Representative of the people of God, or redeemed humanity, which constitutes in union with Him a sort of corporate personality, as natural humanity may be regarded as a corporate personality 'in Adam,' its inclusive representative. That which Christ did and suffered on behalf of mankind is the experience of the people of God as concentrated in Him."<sup>72</sup>

This interpretation is of course quite similar to the earlier, more traditional view that Adam and Christ acted as the respective heads and representatives of the two humanities. Dodd's interpretation, however, represents a development on this earlier view in two important respects. First, it is based on what was considered at the time to be a modern scientific view of ancient Hebrew thought. And secondly, believers are seen, not simply to repeat the experience of Christ; rather, when they enter the community of redeemed humanity, the history of Christ, its inclusive representative, becomes their history. In this sense they *share* in the actual historical death, burial and resurrection of Christ. In terms of their personal life history, this participation bears fruit in an inward experience of spiritual death and new life.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, 121, 188.

<sup>71</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932).

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 186.

<sup>73</sup>*Romans*, 89, 90; see also Dodd's, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936) 148-149.

This interpretation gained a solid following in the ensuing decades (e.g. W. D. Davies, E. Best, G. R. Beasley-Murray, G. Wagner, W. Grundmann, R. Schnackenburg, H. Ridderbos),<sup>74</sup> and became the major alternative to the tradition following Bousset which found the background to dying and rising with Christ in pagan Hellenistic religion. There is much that is valid in this interpretation as presented by Dodd. Problematic, however, is the terminology of "corporate personality," and the way Robinson and others actually developed and used it. This was to come under scrutiny by Old Testament scholars in the third period.

## 2. Sacramental Presence

A second approach which sees the believer united with the original saving events is O. Casel's theory of "presence in mystery". For Casel the historical death of Christ on Golgotha is *made present* in a mysterious yet real and objective way in baptism. As a result, the believers' dying is actually accomplished *with Him*.<sup>75</sup> J. Schneider, following H. Schlier, also holds that the believer is joined with the original saving events, but it is with the death and resurrection of Christ made "sacramentally present," which is

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<sup>74</sup>W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 109; E. Best, *One Body in Christ: A Study in the Relationship of the Church to Christ in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul* (London: SPCK, 1955) 56; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 136-137; Wagner, *Pauline Baptism*, 292-293; W. Grundmann, "σύν-μετά," *TDNT*, 7 (1964) 789; R. Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of Saint Paul*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964) 114-115; H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. J. R. De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 38-39, 61-62, 408-409.

<sup>75</sup>O. Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship and Other Writings*, ed. B. Neunheuser with a preface by C. Davis (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962). See also the extended discussions of Casel's theory by Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 145-149 and F. A. Morgan, "Romans 6:3a: United to a Death Like Christ's," *Ephemerides Theologicae Louvanienses* 59 (1983) 286-288.



the *likeness* (Rom 6:5) of, but not identical to the actual historical death and resurrection.<sup>76</sup> The implication of these interpretations is that by being brought forward in time Christ's death and resurrection are prolonged or repeated in one way or another (sacramentally or in mystery) in baptism.

### 3. Contemporaneity

While Casel saw the believer united directly with the Christ event by bringing it forward in time to baptism, according to W.T. Hahn's theory of "contemporaneity" the reverse takes place: the cross and resurrection remain fixed while the believer is brought to them. This conception was formulated in dependence upon Kierkegaard, and Hahn summarizes it as follows: "in this 'with Christ' Paul sees himself transplanted into contemporaneity with the cross and resurrection with Jesus Christ, and in such a manner that he gains a real participation in this once-for-all event and eliminates all spatial and temporal separation."<sup>77</sup>

#### B. E. Käsemann

In the generation following the publication of his book, Bousset's Gnostic interpretation of Paul was further developed and given wide currency through R. Bultmann and his students. Perhaps the most radical expression of it is found with E. Käsemann's 1933 dissertation *Leib und Leib Christi* in which he seeks to trace the influences of Gnosticism on the concept

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<sup>76</sup>J. Schneider, "ὁμοίωμα," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 193-195; for others who take this view see Morgan, "Romans 6:5a," 288-291.

<sup>77</sup>W. T. Hahn, *Das Mitsterben und Mitaufstehen mit Christus bei Paulus* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann, 1937) 97, quoted from Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 151.

of the "body of Christ" in the Pauline corpus.<sup>78</sup> Up to this point in our survey, the Epistle to the Colossians - whether it was accepted as genuine (e.g. Wrede) or not (e.g. Bousset and Schweitzer) - was not seen to differ materially from the Pauline homologomena in respect to its concept of dying and rising with Christ. With Käsemann, however, comes a new point of departure: the author of Colossians, he argues, is a thorough-going Hellenist who, in contrast to Paul, fashions his concept of dying and rising with Christ completely around the Gnostic Redeemer myth.

The version of the myth which Käsemann finds in Colossians was first distilled by Bultman from the researches of Reitzenstein and Bousset and based primarily on Mandaean and Manichean sources.<sup>79</sup> According to this myth the Primal Man, in his fall from the heavenly world, is torn to pieces by the demonic powers, and these pieces are imprisoned as the individual "selves" of the "pneumatics" of mankind. A redeemer who is a faithful copy of the Primal Man is sent to the earth from the heavenly world and is also imprisoned by the demonic powers. Reascending, he defeats these powers and thereby accomplishes redemption for himself and opens the way for the fallen spirits who will follow. Cosmic redemption is completed when all the lost splinters are gathered upward and the body of the Primal Man is restored to its state at the beginning.

The following is a summary of Käsemann's interpretation of dying and rising with Christ in Colossians. The individual's state of misery consists in his being imprisoned in the kingdom of darkness (Col 1:13). The means of

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<sup>78</sup>E. Käsemann, *Leib und Leib Christi: Eine Untersuchung zur paulinischen Begrifflichkeit* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1933).

<sup>79</sup>E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (London: Tyndale, 1973) 22-25, 29-30; Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 350-354.

this imprisonment according to Col 2:11 is the "body of flesh". This "body" is a corporate entity which is the evil complement of the *soma* of the heavenly redeemer and the redeemed. It was built by the demonic world rulers (στοιχεῖα, Col 2:20, or principalities and powers) and is also to be identified as the "old man" of 3:9.<sup>80</sup> Redemption is achieved by Christ, the heavenly redeemer who himself becomes imprisoned in the "body of flesh" by the demonic world rulers. The cross becomes the place of struggle and victory over these powers of darkness. Here Christ "stripped off" the body of flesh (2:11) which was at the same time a "stripping off of the principalities and powers" (2:15). In his ascent to heaven a new cosmic body, "the body of Christ," was created into which the way was now opened for the redeemed to ascend.<sup>81</sup>

It is at this point that Käsemann is able to define the meaning of dying and rising with Christ in Colossians. What Christ experienced on the cross is reproduced in baptism for the believer.<sup>82</sup> Death and burial with Christ means stripping off "the body of flesh" (2:11) and thus being rescued from the dominion of the demonic rulers of this aeon (1:13; 2:20). Käsemann interprets resurrection with Christ in 2:12 in terms of *heavenly ascension*. As the cross was a station on the heavenly journey of the ascending redeemer where he defeated the powers of darkness, so in baptism the believer, having been released from the clutches of these same powers, ascends to a new sphere of power, the "body of Christ". As such there is reconciliation and new creation in that the Christian "has returned to the

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<sup>80</sup>Käsemann, *Leib*, 140.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 142.

place where the world stood at the beginning."<sup>83</sup> To summarize then, for Käsemann, dying and rising with Christ in Colossians means the transference from one dominion to another - from one corporeity to another, from the "body of flesh" to the "body of Christ;" and all of this is to be understood within the framework of the Gnostic Redeemer myth.

Käsemann next contrasts this deutero-Pauline concept of baptism with that of Paul. While the author of Colossians speaks of participation with Christ in His death and ascent to heaven (which he calls resurrection), Paul exercises "eschatological reservation". The Christian has only the cross, while he looks forward to the resurrection in the end-time (Rom 6:4,5; 8:19; 2 Cor 5:4; Gal 6:8). This represents an early stage of the view which finds mature expression in an important article first published in 1962.<sup>84</sup> Its essentials are as follows:

1. The pre-Pauline Hellenistic church understood Christianity as a mystery religion.<sup>85</sup>

2. The basic assumption of this movement was that through union with Christ in his death, resurrection and exaltation, the goal of salvation has been reached: death and the other powers of the old aeon have already become subject to Christ; temptation is no more, and the Christian has only to demonstrate his heavenly freedom.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Cf. E. Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 162-163.

<sup>84</sup> "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. by W. J. Montague (London: SCM, 1969; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 108-137.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 125, 136.

3. This belief is seen in the hymnic fragments of Col 2:12,13; Eph 2:5,6, 5:14, the Corinthian enthusiasts who say there is no resurrection and the heretics of 2 Tim 2:18 who say the resurrection has already happened.<sup>87</sup>

4. Paul opposed this brand of "present eschatology" and sought to correct it in the direction of the future hope of primitive Christian apocalyptic. This is seen clearly in Rom 6:4,5. While agreeing that baptism reproduces in Christians the death of the Redeemer, Paul cautions that Christ's heavenly life becomes theirs only in the sense that it makes possible the new obedience "which demonstrates the working of the power of the risen Lord upon us."<sup>88</sup> The experience of resurrection itself is reserved for the future. This is Paul's anti-enthusiastic "eschatological reservation."

5. Paul's paraenesis is dictated by this apocalyptic tension between present and future eschatology. The Christian has indeed undergone a change of lordship by dying with Christ in baptism and therefore by right belongs to God. However, as long as he remains in the world he will be menaced by death and the other cosmic powers which continually demand his obedience, and he will be determined by the sphere to which he submits himself. Christian existence in this world is, therefore, characterized by the possibility of choosing between these two spheres, and thus Paul's indicative of present redemption must be conditioned by the continual imperative to reaffirm the new obedience to God.<sup>89</sup>

This interpretation that Romans represents the correction of a pre-Pauline Hellenistic enthusiasm represented by Colossians has become

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 125; Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 5.

<sup>88</sup>Kasemann, "On the Subject," 132.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 136; see also Kasemann, "The Righteousness of God' in Paul," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, 176.

popular today particularly among continental scholars.<sup>90</sup> It replaces the older view as represented by Bousset and Bultmann that Paul's adherence to the mystery religions based theology of the Hellenistic church extends to a belief in an already realized resurrection with Christ.

### C. R. Bultmann

Bultmann's interpretation of dying and rising with Christ is the product of his distinctive method of demythologizing.<sup>91</sup> According to Bultmann Paul employs two mythological thought-complexes to describe the death and resurrection of Christ. The first is that of Jewish cultic and juridical thinking which presents Christ's death as a sacrifice to expiate sin.<sup>92</sup> The second, following Bousset as mentioned above, is that of the Hellenistic mysteries and the Gnostic Redeemer myth, whereby the believer is said to be freed from the powers of this age: sin, law and death.<sup>93</sup> However, Bultmann adds, it is clear that Paul "found none of these thought-complexes and none of their terminologies adequate to express his understanding of the salvation-occurrence."<sup>94</sup> Yet he preferred the mythology of Hellenism to that of Judaism because through the former the meaning of the resurrection comes into its rightful place - even though for Bultmann it was not an historical event like the cross<sup>95</sup> - and thus Christ's death and resurrection together "could be interpreted as happening actually to and for and in

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<sup>90</sup>Cf. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 1.

<sup>91</sup>E.g. see his classic essay "New Testament and Mythology" (1941) in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* ed. and trans. S. M. Ogden (London: SCM, 1984) 1-43 (especially 9-15).

<sup>92</sup>R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1952) 1.297-298.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 140-144, 166-167, 174-181, 298-299.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 300.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 198-199; "New Testament and Mythology," 36.

man."<sup>96</sup> It is at this point that Bultmann's anthropological or existential re-interpretation (demythologizing) comes to the fore. The salvation occurrence reaches the individual in the proclamation of "the word which accosts the hearer and compels him to decide for or against it."<sup>97</sup> Dying and rising with Christ takes place when the hearer responds in faith. This "signifies the utter reversal of a man's previous understanding of himself - specifically, the radical surrender of his human 'boasting'"<sup>98</sup> (cf. the ethical view of nineteenth century liberalism). Dying and rising with Christ is furthermore not to be seen as a once-and-for-all experience at conversion, but something which the believer continues to experience throughout his life (2 Cor 4:10,11), because the decision of faith itself must be continually made anew in each concrete situation.<sup>99</sup> Finally, on the meaning of "with Christ," Bultmann's interpretation resembles Casel's. He claims that because of the nature of this preaching and the response it evokes, "God has made this event [i.e. Christ's death] the eschatological occurrence, so that lifted out of all temporal limitation, it continues to take place in any present moment, both in the proclaiming word and in the sacraments."<sup>100</sup>

#### D. W. D. Davies

An important contribution in the quest for the religious antecedents of Pauline baptism was made by W. D. Davies in his 1948 study *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*.<sup>101</sup> After examining and then dismissing the claim that

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<sup>96</sup>Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.300.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 302.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 300; cf. "New Testament and Mythology," 40.

<sup>99</sup>Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.299; "New Testament and Mythology," 19.

<sup>100</sup>Bultmann, *Theology*, 1.303.

<sup>101</sup>See above note 74.

Paul's concept of dying and rising with Christ could have been influenced either directly or indirectly by the mystery religions,<sup>102</sup> Davies suggests that a far more likely parallel is to be found in the ancient Jewish passover liturgy recorded in the *Passover Haggadah*, which he believes was arranged by Gamaliel II (80-120 C.E.), "and the fact that he did arrange a ritual implies that it had long been in use in some form."<sup>103</sup> Davies quotes the liturgy as follows, "in every generation *each one of us* should regard himself as though *he himself* had gone forth from Egypt, as it is said (Exod 13:8): 'And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which the Lord did unto **ME** when I came forth out of Egypt.' Not our ancestors alone did God redeem then, but He did **US** redeem with them as it is said (Deut 6:13): 'And He brought **US** out from thence that He might bring **US** in to give us the land which He sware unto our fathers.'"<sup>104</sup>

The following points of comparison with Paul are noteworthy.

1. There is the idea of the unity and solidarity of the community throughout its history so that each individual can be said to have participated in the saving events by which the community was founded. Davies also sees this same mode of thought at work in the Old Testament citing Amos 3:1, Josh 24 and Deut 26:5-6. He explains this as an example of Israel's corporate conception of personality.<sup>105</sup>

2. In the Passover ceremony itself, this participation is affirmed through ritual actions symbolizing aspects of the saving event.

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<sup>102</sup>Davies, *Paul*, 88-98.

<sup>103</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 103, emphasis his.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.



3. Perhaps most striking is the statement, "He did us redeem *with* them," which is a closer parallel to the Pauline "with Christ" language than anyone has adduced from the mystery religions.<sup>106</sup>

4. Through the Exodus Israel was set free from slavery to Pharaoh; through the death and resurrection of Christ the Christian is set free from slavery to sin.

Noting that Paul uses the Exodus event to illuminate other aspects of the Christian life, e.g. 1 Cor 5:7 ("Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed"), and 1 Cor 10:1-2. ("all were baptized into Moses"), Davies concludes "it is not impossible, then, that [Paul's] conception of dying and rising with Christ . . . is derived from the same world of thought as is indicated for us in the liturgy of the Passover . . . i.e. just as the true Jew is he who has made the history of his nation his own history, so the Christian is he who has made the history of Christ his own."<sup>107</sup> Thus, Paul is the herald "not of a new mystery but of a new Exodus."<sup>108</sup>

#### **IV. PERIOD THREE: 1961 - PRESENT**

##### **A. Criticisms of the History of Religions School**

##### **1. The Gnostic Redeemer Myth**

One of the most distinctive and important developments in twentieth century interpretation of dying and rising with Christ has been the theory that Paul fashioned his Adam Christology on the superstructure of the Gnostic Redeemer myth derived from paganism. This theory, as we have seen, was first developed by Reitzenstein and Bousset; it was then refined

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<sup>106</sup>Cf. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 344.

<sup>107</sup>Davies, *Paul*, 107.

<sup>108</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

by Bultmann and given wide currency through his own writings and that of his students particularly E. Käsemann, - and, as will be seen shortly, it provides the framework for R. Tannehill's interpretation of dying and rising with Christ. This theory, however, was subjected to searching criticisms by C. Colpe in an important study published in 1961, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule*<sup>109</sup> Colpe argued that the Redeemer myth did not exist in Paul's day, that it was pieced together by modern scholars from later materials - and some of these materials are themselves dependent on the New Testament.<sup>110</sup> Colpe's arguments proved convincing, and within a decade Käsemann himself would write, "Reitzenstein's 'redeemed Redeemer' has been buried."<sup>111</sup> M. Hengel comments similarly: "It is to the credit of C. Colpe . . . that he brought this hypothetical construction crashing down."<sup>112</sup>

## 2. The Mystery Religions Theory

Of the numerous attempts to overthrow the theory of Paul's dependence on the Mystery Religions, the most thorough treatment to date is G. Wagner's monograph *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries* which first appeared in German in 1962.<sup>113</sup> In this impressive study Wagner sifts through the documentary remains of the various mystery cults seeking to answer his basic question: "Can we find a myth of a dying and rising or

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<sup>109</sup>C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961); see also his "New Testament and Gnostic Christology," in *Religions in Antiquity, Essays in Memory of E. R. Goodenough*, ed. J. Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968) 227-243, especially 235.

<sup>110</sup>Colpe, *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, 186-193.

<sup>111</sup>E. Käsemann, "The Problem of a New Testament Theology," *NTS* 19 (1972-73) 238; cf. *idem, Commentary on Romans* trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 144.

<sup>112</sup>*The Son of God*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 33, n. 66.

<sup>113</sup>See above note 36.

resuscitated god whose fortune is regarded as fundamental for the cult, and in whose worship rites actualizing, repeating, or representing that fortune are celebrated - rites that give the person by whom or to whom they are done such a fellowship with the god that allows his initiates to share in his fortune?"<sup>114</sup> Wagner concludes that no such myth or rites are to be found;<sup>115</sup> rather it is the Hebrew concept of "corporate personality" which constitutes the background of Paul's thought in Romans 6.<sup>116</sup>

Impressive as his documentation and analysis are, Wagner's book, unlike Colpe's, failed to sweep the field.<sup>117</sup> The advocates of the mystery religions theory - if perhaps made more cautious, remained nevertheless unconvinced.<sup>118</sup> Wedderburn identifies the basic flaw in Wagner's study as his attempt to find complete parallels in the mysteries. He thereby failed to recognize that the prevailing theory requires only partial, fragmented ones, since according to this theory Paul is not directly dependent upon the mysteries; rather he modified baptismal traditions of the Hellenistic church which had been fashioned on the analogy of the mysteries.<sup>119</sup> The examination of this more nuanced theory is the object of Wedderburn's own lengthy and erudite monograph *Baptism and Resurrection* published in

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<sup>114</sup>Wagner, *Pauline Baptism*, 61.

<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 259-267 for conclusions.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 292-293.

<sup>117</sup>Cf. M. Simon, "The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* Fifty Years Later," *Religious Studies* 11 (1975) 135-144.

<sup>118</sup>E.g. Kasemann, *Romans*, 161; R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Berlin: Topelmann, 1966) 2; U. Schnelle, *Gerechtigkeit und Christusgegenwart: Vorpaulinische und paulinische Tauftheologie*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986) 78-79, 208-209, n. 418. Cf., however, M. Hengel's judgment that Wagner's book is "a work which must be challenged in many places but the basic tenor of which certainly cannot be refuted." *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 164, n. 56.

<sup>119</sup>Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 38, 39; cf. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ*, 2.

1987.<sup>120</sup> In the end, however, his conclusion is the same as Wagner's: "the mysteries were not saying the same thing as Paul, nor was Paul borrowing his ideas from the mysteries."<sup>121</sup> It remains to be seen how the advocates of the mysteries theory will respond to this latest challenge, but we have made Wedderburn's conclusion a starting point and assumption of this present study.

### B. R. C. Tannehill

The standard study on our subject for the past generation has been R. C. Tannehill's *Dying and Rising with Christ* published in 1966.<sup>122</sup> Tannehill's views place him within the tradition stemming from Reitzenstein and Bousset and most closely resemble those of Bultmann and Käsemann.<sup>123</sup> In spite of Colpe's work, of which Tannehill appears to be unaware, the Gnostic Redeemer myth provides the basic structure of his interpretation. Humanity in Adam is enslaved to demonic powers within a corporate entity called the body of sin, old man, body of flesh, etc.<sup>124</sup> Christ bore this corporate body in himself to the cross where it was put to death (Rom 6:6; 7:4; Col 2:11). In His resurrection Christ became the corporate person of the new aeon. Redemption consists of the transference of the individual in baptism from the old corporeity (old dominion, old aeon) to the new. This is what Tannehill calls "dying with Christ." Demythologized (following Bultmann), the believer dies in the sense that he surrenders his human

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<sup>120</sup>See note 4 above for bibliographic information.

<sup>121</sup>Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 396.

<sup>122</sup>See note 118 for full bibliographic information.

<sup>123</sup>In his preface Tannehill states that he studied under Käsemann "for a short time," and his monograph is dedicated to Käsemann among others.

<sup>124</sup>Tannehill, *Dying and Rising*, 22-30, 49.

boasting.<sup>125</sup> It happens *with Christ* in the sense that the believer appropriates the continuing *effects* of the once for all historical event of the cross (*pax*, Bultmann).<sup>126</sup> Thus, Tannehill in essence also follows the subjective ethical view of nineteenth century liberalism. On the subject of resurrection with Christ Tannehill follows Käsemann: although the believer participates in "eschatological life" from conversion, "rising with Christ" will not be a past event until the parousia; the past resurrection with Christ of Colossians and Ephesians represents a pre-Pauline view which Paul has "modified."<sup>127</sup> Dying and rising with Christ are continuing realities for the believer both in ethical action<sup>128</sup> and in suffering.<sup>129</sup> In both cases this means living a life of dependence upon God and one in which human boasting is excluded.

### C. Corporate Personality in Recent Interpretation

We have seen that there are two major streams of interpretation regarding dying and rising with Christ in the twentieth century. One finds the foundations of Paul's thought in pagan Hellenistic religion and is represented in the current period by R. C. Tannehill. The other finds it in certain corporate patterns of thought observed in the Old Testament and early Jewish literature, and typically identifies these with H. W. Robinson's concept of "corporate personality". We have so far encountered this view in our discussions of C. H. Dodd, W. D. Davies and G. Wagner. The most noteworthy representative of this view in the current period is R.

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 125-126.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 40, 42, 73, 126.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 77-83.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 84-123.

Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul* <sup>130</sup> In recent years however New Testament scholars have been compelled to rethink their position on the Old Testament-Jewish roots of dying and rising with Christ as a result of two important articles by Old Testament scholars criticizing Robinson's theory.

The first article, by J. R. Porter, appeared in 1965 and concerns "the legal aspects of the concept of 'corporate personality' in the Old Testament."<sup>131</sup> Porter chose this area because "writers who have discussed 'corporate personality' believed that it is precisely in the realm of law that this principle can be most clearly seen and most indubitably applied."<sup>132</sup> Porter examines six showcase examples in the Old Testament where Robinson believed the principle of "corporate personality" was most clearly manifested - the most characteristic feature of these being the notion of communal responsibility (e.g. the case of Achan in Josh 7 and the law of blood-revenge). Porter concludes that as far as Hebrew law is concerned there is no need to resort to the notion that the community constituted a "psychical unity" as required by the theory of "corporate personality". Rather the law operated on the basis of individual responsibility and punishment, but it was conditioned by - and herein lies his explanation for all but one of Robinson's examples - "the notion that a man can possess persons in much the same way as he possesses property and by early

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<sup>130</sup>See especially 113-116; see also Ridderbos, *Paul* 38-39. and Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 136-137.

<sup>131</sup>J. R. Porter, "The Legal Aspects of the Concept of 'Corporate Personality' in the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965) 361-388.

<sup>132</sup>*Ibid.*, 362.

religious beliefs about the contagious nature of blood, holiness, sin and uncleanness."<sup>133</sup>

In the second article, which appeared in 1970, J. W. Rogerson examines the psychological and anthropological underpinnings of Robinson's theory.<sup>134</sup> Rogerson first establishes that Robinson operated with two different definitions of "corporate personality" in the Pre-exilic Period. The first he calls "corporate responsibility". This is based on the observation that "in primitive legislation men were not dealt with on the basis of the single life, but as members of a tribe, a clan, or a family."<sup>135</sup> The second definition assumes a "psychical unity between the members of a social group"<sup>136</sup> and "depends on the inability of the individual clearly to recognize the limits of his own personality."<sup>137</sup> It is in this sense that Robinson spoke of Adam and Christ as "corporate personalities" and was, in fact, the predominant sense in which he used the term. For this definition Robinson was dependent upon anthropological theory, particularly the writings of L. Levy-Bruhl, in which he sought to describe the "pre-logical" way primitive peoples think. Rogerson then goes on to show that Levy-Bruhl's methods are no longer accepted, that anthropologists today seriously question his theories, and that "the phenomena he sought to explain have been more satisfactorily explained in other ways by field anthropologists."<sup>138</sup> Rogerson concludes that while the Scriptures do contain corporate patterns

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<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 380.

<sup>134</sup>J. W. Rogerson, "The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: a Re-Examination," *JTS* ns 21 (1970) 1-16.

<sup>135</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 9.

of thought, Robinson's theory of "corporate personality" is fatally flawed, and the term ought to be dropped altogether from biblical studies.<sup>139</sup>

How then does this affect the use of "corporate personality" by New Testament scholars to explain dying and rising with Christ? In actual practice, it does not appear that any of the New Testament scholars we have cited used "corporate personality" *explicitly* in the objectionable way that Robinson used it - i.e. that it is a holdover from primitive mentality and involves an inability to distinguish clearly between Christ and the church of which he is the head.<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, it has become necessary for students of Paul who trace dying and rising with Christ to corporate thought patterns in the Old Testament and Judaism to drop the term "corporate personality" and to reassess the lines of continuity between the Old Testament and Paul. The results of this reassessment can be seen in the recent monographs of S. Kim and A. J. M. Wedderburn. Both describe the believer's relationship to Christ in terms of solidarity and representation and trace the roots of this concept to "the tradition which he [Paul] inherited from Israel of a series of representative figures [e.g. Adam, Noah, Abraham and Jacob] upon whose actions the destinies of successive generations in some measure depend."<sup>141</sup> It will be recalled that this is essentially the same principle which Wrede identified as informing Paul's thought.<sup>142</sup> Wedderburn also recognizes in Paul's thinking the operation of the same corporate pattern of thought seen

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<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>140</sup>An example of someone who did follow Robinson to this extent is C. A. A. Scott, *Christianity According to St. Paul* (Cambridge: CUP, 1927) 156-157.

<sup>141</sup>Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 356; Kim, *Origin of Paul's Gospel*, 301; cf. 190-191; so also essentially Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 113-116. Cf. E. Schweizer, *Lordship and Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1960) 45-46.

<sup>142</sup>Wrede, *Paul*, 81; cf. Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul*, 167.



in the ceremony of the Passover whereby each individual Jew is said to have participated in the saving events of the Exodus.<sup>143</sup>

#### **D. Colossians as a Post-Pauline Development**

While the view remains popular that the concept of a baptismal resurrection with Christ in Colossians represents the pre-Pauline Hellenistic enthusiasm which Paul corrects in Romans 6, there has been a marked trend in recent years towards the interpretation of Colossians as a post-Pauline development.

1. P. J. Achtemeier argues that the delay of the parousia caused a shift in the thinking of the primitive church from a future expectation to an increasing "emphasis on realities which are now at work in the world."<sup>144</sup> This shift manifests itself in Colossians and Ephesians as a claim to an already realized resurrection and lies along a trajectory towards a fully developed Gnosticism.<sup>145</sup> The shift is less pronounced in the Pastoral Epistles where a kind of balancing of emphasis between present and future is seen.

2. Wedderburn traces this same basic trajectory, but accounts for it differently. "At the time of Romans the idea of resurrection was as yet conceived of in such physical terms that Paul found himself unable to speak of resurrection existence or of Christians having been raised with Christ, despite the parallel idea of having died with Christ . . . . It is only with his successors . . . that the parallelism of the structure of Paul's thought was

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<sup>143</sup>Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 344, n. 9; idem "The Soteriology of the Mysteries and Pauline Baptismal Theology," *NovT* 29 (1987) 72.

<sup>144</sup>P. J. Achtemeier, "An Apocalyptic Shift in Early Christian Tradition: Reflections on Some Canonical Evidence," *CBO* 45 (1983) 239.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid.*, 247.

completed in Ephesians and Colossians, but still with a future dimension retained (Col 3:4). By the time of 2 Tim 2:17-18 this tension between present and future may have been dissolved entirely in favour of the present, a dissolution which the author of 2 Timothy roundly condemns."<sup>146</sup>

3. The most comprehensive developmental theory is offered by G. Sellin.<sup>147</sup> According to Sellin it was neither the mystery religions nor Gnosticism which led to the spiritualization of apocalyptic language of resurrection in Colossians and Ephesians but Hellenistic Judaism as represented by *Joseph and Aseneth*.<sup>148</sup> In this ancient tale Aseneth's conversion to Judaism is described as re-creation and the passage from death to life, which Sellin interprets as the transference from transitoriness to eternal timeless being. Sellin claims this concept of life as a purely spiritual matter belongs to the Alexandrian-wisdom tradition and stands in contrast to the "apocalyptic" concept of resurrection as future and bodily.<sup>149</sup> Sellin then identifies this wisdom interpretation of life as the conceptual setting of the denial of the resurrection at Corinth<sup>150</sup> and offers the following explanation as to how this concept fared in the Pauline circle. The first step towards the spiritualization of the apocalyptic language of resurrection was taken by Paul himself in Romans 6. Here the apostle uses the traditional apocalyptic terminology of future resurrection (vv 5,8), but combines with it

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<sup>146</sup>A. J. M. Wedderburn, "Hellenistic Christian Traditions in Romans 6?" *NTS* 29 (1983) 350; cf. *Baptism and Resurrection*, 71, 72, 232, 393.

<sup>147</sup>G. Sellin, "Die Auferstehung ist schon geschehen: zur Spiritualisierung apokalyptischer Terminologie im Neuen Testament," *NovT* 25 (1983) 220-237.

<sup>148</sup>For this theory Sellin is dependent on the work of E. Brandenburger, "Die Auferstehung der Glaubenden als historisches und theologisches Problem," *Wort und Dienst* 9 (1967) 15-33, especially 24-27. For a convincing rebuttal to Brandenburger's claim that conversion in *Joseph and Aseneth* is presented as a present resurrection, see Wedderburn, *Baptism*, 218-222.

<sup>149</sup>Sellin, "Die Auferstehung ist schon geschehen," 226.

<sup>150</sup>*Ibid.*, 226-227.

the Hellenistic-Jewish idea of conversion as the passage from death to life (v 13). These two conceptions of life co-existed in Paul's mind, but in the post-Pauline period there was a crisis in apocalyptic which led to a semantic shift whereby the terminology of resurrection was emptied of its apocalyptic content and replaced by the Hellenistic concept of life. This is the meaning of baptismal resurrection with Christ in Col 2:11-13.<sup>151</sup> It is also what is meant by the false teachers in 2 Tim 2:17-18. The reason this teaching was condemned in 2 Timothy, Sellin conjectures, is that by the time it was written (sometime after 80 C. E.) persecution by Rome had arisen, and there came the need for the assurance of a better life after death and hence the "Reapokalytisierung" of resurrection terminology.

## **V. SUMMARY**

Having surveyed chronologically the major developments in the interpretation of dying and rising with Christ in this century, we are now in a position to summarize the answers given to the five questions which we identified at the beginning of this chapter.

### **1. Religious Backgrounds**

The tracing of the pre-Christian religious antecedents of dying and rising with Christ has been a central concern of interpreters in this century. Scholars using the same basic methodology have been divided between two very different answers to this question. Early in the century the theory was developed in Germany that Paul's model for dying and rising with Christ was the dying and rising deities of the mystery religions. To this was soon added

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<sup>151</sup>Ibid., 232.

the theory that the Gnostic myth of a Primal Man furnished the framework for Paul's Adam-Christ theology. This theory gained a strong following, reaching its zenith with Tannehill's monograph. In the decade of the sixties the Gnostic Redeemer myth was discredited and the mysteries theory strongly challenged. The heirs of this tradition in the present period are divided between those who cling to the mysteries theory which continues under heavy attack (e.g. by Wedderburn), and those who have turned to Hellenistic Judaism for the source of dying and rising with Christ (e.g. Sellin). The alternative approach has been to trace the origin of Paul's thought to the Old Testament via inter-Testamental Judaism. Perhaps of greatest significance has been the insight that Paul viewed the death and resurrection of Christ as the dawn of the age to come, and thus to die and rise with Christ means that one is transferred into this new age. The other major contribution of interpreters in this tradition has been the tracing of the origins of Paul's concept of the relation of Christ to the church to Jewish notions of solidarity and representation, as exemplified particularly in the relationship which was seen to exist between Adam and fallen humanity, and in the solidarity of each successive generation of Israel with the generation which experienced the saving events of the Exodus.

## 2. The Christological and Soteriological Framework

Whether based on the Gnostic Redeemer myth or more conventional OT-Jewish notions of Adam, the Pauline Adamic Christology has generally provided the framework for understanding dying and <sup>rising</sup> with Christ. Beyond this, an interpreter's view of the *atonement* has, as a rule, served as the foundation or starting point for explaining what it means to die and rise with Christ. This was seen in the nineteenth century with the juridical and ethical

views of dying and rising. The major development in this area in the twentieth century has been the rise of the "classic" (dramatic or participatory) theory of the atonement. According to this view Christ made himself one with humanity in its state of bondage to the powers of this world. His death and resurrection meant victory over and deliverance from these powers. Thus, to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection is to participate with him in his victory and deliverance.

### **3. The Death and Resurrection of the Believer**

There are basically four answers which have been given to the question of what is meant by the believer's death and resurrection in baptism. The *regenerational* view was most common in the nineteenth century and typically identifies dying and rising with the spiritual transformation which takes place in the individual at conversion-baptism. The *juridical* view identifies some aspect of dying and rising with justification and is usually combined in some way with the regenerational view. The *ethical* view is like the regenerational view, only it limits dying and rising to the subjective effects which Christ's atoning work makes upon the human heart. The fourth view - which we may call the *participationist*, since it is the correlate of the classic or participatory theory of the atonement - has come into prominence in the twentieth century. This view defines dying and rising (or simply dying) with Christ in terms of liberation from the powers of this age (sin, law, death, and the hostile spirits) and transference into God's rule. Those who limit the baptismal experience to *dying* with Christ (in relation to this view or any of the others) identify the parousia as the time at which resurrection with Christ will be accomplished.

#### 4. The Meaning of "with Christ"

The greatest diversity of interpretation has been observed in answer to the question of the meaning of "with Christ." These interpretations fall broadly into two categories. There is first the view that what happened to Christ is in some sense *repeated* or *copied* in the experience of the believer. This was the most common view in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and could be based on any of the soteriological models of dying and rising in use at the time: the mysteries theory, the shared nature concept of the Gnostic Redeemer myth (cf. also Schweitzer) or the idea that Christ is the representative and head of the new humanity as Adam was of the old. Wrede's interpretation that the language of having died and risen with Christ *anticipates* what will soon happen literally to the believer may be seen as a variation on this view.

The common notion in the second category of interpretation is that "with Christ " means the believer gains a direct and literal *share* in that which happened to Christ. There are four ways in which this has been construed. First there is the view that believers share in the actual events of the cross and resurrection in the person of Christ their *representative*. Second is the view that believers share in the original event in the sense that they partake of its continuing effect. Third is the mystical teaching of Casel and others that these events are in some way brought forward in time and made present for the believer. The fourth is Hahn's concept of contemporaneity, according to which the barriers of space and time are abolished so that the believer is, as it were, transported back and actually made a participant in the original saving events.

## 5. The Relation of Colossians to the Pauline Homologomena

There are at present three principal approaches to the question of the relationship of the theology of resurrection as set forth in Colossians to that of the undisputed epistles of Paul. One group of scholars claims there are no essential differences between the two. Another group representing the dominant continental opinion sees in Colossians the later expression of a pre-Pauline Hellenistic enthusiasm which Paul had endeavoured to correct in Romans. The third and most recent approach regards the theology of Colossians as a post-Pauline development.

## VI. THE NATURE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This thesis is intended to be a comprehensive exegetical investigation of the theme of dying and rising with Christ in Colossians. We believe such a study addresses a need at the current stage of the ongoing debate for at least two reasons. First, of all the New Testament texts on dying and rising with Christ, those of Colossians are arguably second in importance only to those of Romans;<sup>152</sup> yet in comparison to Romans, Colossians has remained relatively neglected in the discussion of this topic. While a number of monographs in the past generation have been devoted to Romans chapter six,<sup>153</sup> we are aware of no comparable examination of dying and rising in Colossians.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup>Thus e.g. Ridderbos, *Paul* 212; R. P. Shedd, *Man in Community* (London: Epworth, 1958) 185.

<sup>153</sup>H. Frankemölle, *Das Taufverständnis des Paulus; Taufe Tod und Auferstehung nach Röm 6* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970); I. T. Blazen, "Death to Sin According to Romans 6:1-14 and Related Texts: An Exegetical-Theological Study with a Critique of Views," (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1979); F. M. Gillman, *A Study of Romans 6:3a. United to a Death Like Christ's* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992) summarized in *Ephemerides Theologicae Louvanienses* 59 (1983) 267-302.

<sup>154</sup>There have, however, been a number of monographs written on Colossians in recent years whose subject matter is related to our theme. The most useful of these for

The second reason concerns the increasing diversity of opinion as to where the concept of dying and rising with Christ as seen in Colossians fits in the development of early Christian thought. It is our conviction that this debate could be served by an investigation which has made this theme in Colossians its central focus.

We will seek to show that the pre-Christian religious ideas which inform the concept of dying and rising in Colossians are those of the Old Testament - Jewish expectation of the end-time salvation particularly those of reconciliation and new creation. Also significant is the concept of corporate solidarity and representation as seen in the relationship of Adam to his race. Christ in his death and resurrection is both the agent of this salvation and the prototype of redeemed eschatological humanity as a second Adam. For Christians to have died and risen with Christ means that God, acting on the principle of corporate solidarity, has included them in his saving acts towards Christ their representative and prototype. Their experience of this eschatological redemption, however, is conditioned by the tension between the now of that which the Christian has already entered into and the not yet of that which will be "manifested" at the parousia. We also hope to show that Colossians, while maintaining a distinctive outlook, presents a view of dying and rising with Christ which is consistent with that seen in the undisputed Pauline epistles. In doing this we have attempted for methodological reasons to maintain a neutral position on the issue of authorship, assuming neither authenticity nor pseudonymity.

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the present study have been F. Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene der Schöpfung: Untersuchungen zur Formalstruktur und Theologie des Kolosserbriefs* (Vienna: Herder, 1974); G. E. Cannon, *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983); H. E. Lona, *Die Eschatologie im Kolosser - und Epheserbrief* (Würzburg: Echter, 1984); and T. J. Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).



This study has been arranged as follows. The next three chapters are foundational, dealing with the setting of dying and rising within the epistle: chapter two shows the place of our theme within the structure of Colossians; the Colossian heresy (as reflected in 2:16-23) is examined in chapter three; chapter four looks at the so-called Colossian hymn (1:15-20), and focuses on the questions of pre-Christian religious background and the significance of Christ's own death and resurrection. The central text on dying and rising, 2:11-12, is the object of investigation in chapter five. The questions addressed here are the meaning of the baptismal death and resurrection of the believer, the meaning of "with Christ," the symbolism of baptism and the relationship of the concept of resurrection with Christ in Colossians to that of Romans. The relation of dying and rising to forgiveness and rescue from cosmic powers is taken up in chapters six (on 2:13-15). Chapter seven seeks to determine the meaning of having died with Christ to "the *stoicheia* of the world" (2:20). Chapter eight (on 3:1-4) explores the heavenly dimension in relation to dying and rising, and the eschatological tension between past resurrection in baptism and future resurrection at the parousia. In chapter nine (on 3:5-11) the subject of paraenesis based on dying and rising is considered. A brief final chapter summarizes the conclusions of our investigation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EPISTOLARY ANALYSIS

The purpose of this chapter is to determine where the texts on dying and rising with Christ in Colossians fit within the structure and argument of the epistle and thereby to lay the groundwork for our subsequent analysis of these texts. Research in recent decades into the genre of the New Testament epistolary literature has shown that the Pauline letters are structured according to a conventional pattern,<sup>1</sup> the knowledge of which can be useful as an interpretative tool. Our procedure will be to analyse the structure of Colossians as it is shaped and developed within this conventionalized epistolary format. The recent work of G. C. Cannon on this subject is the most careful and methodical of which we are aware, and our own analysis owes much to his results.<sup>2</sup> Cannon's basic outline for Colossians is as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>For a history of research up to 1970, see J. L. White, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter: A Study of the Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle*, 2nd ed. (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1972) 43-45.

<sup>2</sup>We refer here to his chapter "The Structure of Colossians," 133-174 in *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians*.

I. Salutation	1:1-2
II. Thanksgiving	1:3-23
III. Body of the Letter	1:24-4:9
A. Body-opening	1:24-2:5
B. Body-middle	2:6-4:1
C. Body-closing	4:2-9
IV. Letter-closing	4:10-18

Our analysis will be limited to the thanksgiving and body of the letter.

## I. THE THANKSGIVING SECTION 1:3-23

The thanksgiving section of a Pauline epistle typically follows the opening salutation and "telegraphs" the main themes of the letter.<sup>3</sup> It begins with a formal statement of thanksgiving (the εὐχαριστῶ statement) in which the writer gives thanks to God for the good condition of the addressees. This is sometimes followed by a prayer that this condition might continue, and ends with a doxology or some statement of a liturgical nature.<sup>4</sup> In Colossians the εὐχαριστῶ statement is found in 1:3-8, the prayer of intercession in vv 9-11 and the liturgical closing in vv 12-23.

The thanksgiving section of Colossians begins with a declaration of the writer's thankfulness (v 3) for the faith and love of the Colossian Christians (v 4). These virtues are the result of their knowledge of the hope which has been laid up for them in heaven, which they heard "in the word of truth, the gospel" (v 5). Verses 6-8 further describe this gospel: its nature is to produce this kind of fruit wherever it goes in the world (v 6), and it was brought to them by Epaphras (v 7) who has also borne testimony to the virtue produced by this gospel in their lives (v 8). In essence then,

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<sup>3</sup>R. W. Funk. *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God: The Problem of Language in the New Testament and Contemporary Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 257, 269.

<sup>4</sup>Cannon, *Traditional Materials* 141-143.

thanksgiving is given because the gospel of secure hope in heaven has produced Christian virtue in the Colossians. The intercession of 1:9-11 runs similarly: the writer prays that the Colossian believers, having made a good start, might advance even further in their knowledge of God's will (v 9) with the result that their lives will become all the more virtuous (vv 10-11).

Common to both the εὐχαριστῶ statement (vv 3-8) and the intercession (vv 9-11) is the basic idea that the knowledge of God's saving work revealed in the gospel of Christ results in a lifestyle of Christian virtue. It is here that the two major themes of this epistle are announced. The writer is concerned first that his readers might understand all that God has done for them in Christ (1:12-23; 2:9-15), and secondly that this understanding might bear fruit in a lifestyle befitting their status as the people of God (2:16-4:6).

In his article "The Transition From Opening Epistolary Thanksgiving to Body in the Letters of the Pauline Corpus," J. T. Sanders<sup>5</sup> identifies three formal characteristics which mark the end of the thanksgiving section in the Pauline epistles. The first of these is a transitional formula which signals the start of the body of the letter.<sup>6</sup> The second is the presence of an "eschatological climax" in the verses immediately preceding this introductory formula. Third, since Jewish prayers typically begin as well as end with a blessing or thanksgiving formula, Sanders claims that a blessing formula or some liturgical equivalent is to be expected at the close of the thanksgiving section in New Testament letters.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *JBL* 81 (1962) 348-362.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 349-357.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, see 361 for his summary.

Using these criteria Cannon identifies Colossians 1:12-23 as the closing of the thanksgiving section. He argues that vv 12-20 contain confessional and hymnic material,<sup>8</sup> and following E. Lohse, he interprets εὐχαριστοῦντες in v 12 as an imperatival participle introducing this liturgical section with a summons to praise.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, with its emphasis on the "already" aspect of salvation, this section is clearly eschatological in nature.<sup>10</sup> Finally, in v 24 he finds a transitional formula (called a *Joy Expression*) which signals the beginning of the body of the letter.<sup>11</sup>

This liturgical closing describes the salvation which the gospel proclaims and the one by whom it has been effected. This serves to develop one of the two principal themes of the epistle namely the nature of God's saving work through Christ. In vv 12-14 redemption is set forth in language which echoes the Old Testament: Christians have gained a share in the inheritance of the saints; they have been rescued out of the dominion of hostile spirit powers and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son. Verses 15-20 go on to extol this one by whom the salvation described in vv 12-14 was won and under whose rule they now stand. Topically it divides into two sections of three verses each. He is pre-eminent both in relation to the original created order (vv 15-17) and in relation to God's eschatological new creation which Christ has inaugurated through his death and resurrection (vv 18-20). The final verses of the thanksgiving apply the redemption described in vv 18-20 to the readers. As in vv 12-14 their former state of alienation (v 21; cf. v 12) is contrasted with their present state of

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<sup>8</sup>Cannon, *Traditional Materials* 148; cf. 12-32.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 148; cf. E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, trans. W. R. Poehmann and R. J. Karris, ed. H. Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 38-39.

<sup>10</sup>Cannon, 148-149; cf. Sanders, "Transition from Thanksgiving to Body," 356-357.

<sup>11</sup>Cannon, 152; cf. White, *Body of the Greek Letter*, 22, 48.

salvation (v 22; cf. v 13). The section ends (v 23) with the parenthetical provision that continuation in this state of redemption is contingent upon their perseverance in faith in the gospel which they originally heard.

To summarize, the thanksgiving section centres on the gospel and consists of three parts. In vv 3-8 thanksgiving is given because the hope of secure and complete salvation made known through the gospel has borne the fruit of Christian virtue in the Colossian Christians. In vv 9-11 prayer is offered that an even deeper understanding of God's saving purposes might result in an ever more virtuous and worthy lifestyle. Together these two sections telegraph the twin themes of the epistle: (1) the need to understand the full and secure blessings of salvation God has bestowed on believers through Christ, and (2) the need to conduct their lives consistently with these blessings. The language of the closing section, vv 12-23, is liturgical in nature and summons the readers to praise God for this salvation and his Son through whom it has been achieved.

## II. The Body of the Letter 1:24-4:9

In his programmatic study *The Body of the Greek Letter*, J. L. White states, "The body of the letter, in both Paul and the private Greek letter is the 'message' part of the letter, containing the primary information which the addressor wishes to convey."<sup>12</sup> The body consists of three sections: (1) the body-opening which "introduces the most pressing matter of mutual concern;"<sup>13</sup> (2) the body-middle in which this matter is carried forward and developed;<sup>14</sup> and (3) the body-closing whose function is "to repeat the

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<sup>12</sup>White, *Body of the Greek Letter*, 94.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 96-97.

occasion for writing and to lay the basis for future correspondence."<sup>15</sup> Colossians follows this basic pattern: the body-opening is found in 1:24-2:5, the body- middle in 2:6-4:1, and the body-closing in 4:2-9. It is in the body-middle that all of the texts appear in which dying and/or rising with Christ receive explicit mention (2:11-13; 2:20; 3:1-4). Our purpose here is to show how these texts are related to the central message of the epistle.

### **A. The Body-Opening 1:24-2:5**

In 1:24-29 the writer sets forth the nature of his work as a minister of the gospel. He has been entrusted by God with the privilege of knowing and proclaiming among the nations of the world this long hidden mystery of God's saving purposes through Christ.<sup>16</sup> It is his aim by admonishing and instructing each individual to bring all believers to a mature and deep understanding of these truths (cf. 2:2,3). For this task he has been divinely empowered and even his sufferings serve his ultimate end.

It is at this point (2:1) that the writer arrives at "the most pressing matter of mutual concern." He desires that his readers in particular might attain to this maturity of understanding. His purpose is spelled out in vv 2,3: "that their hearts might be encouraged, having been knit together in love and [attain] to all the wealth of certainty which understanding brings, [indeed] to the knowledge of God's mystery, namely of Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden." Verse 4 shows there is a polemical thrust to this purpose. There are present in the area of Colossae advocates of a system of beliefs which runs contrary to the gospel which

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>16</sup>With Lohse we take the words *Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν* in v 27 to refer to the proclamation of the gospel of "Christ among you." *Colossians* 76.

they heard in the beginning. The readers indeed have not given way to this aberration (v 5), but the threat is nevertheless a cause for concern. The purpose of the letter, then, is to encourage, renew and strengthen the readers in their understanding of the gospel of Christ, that they might continue to progress towards Christian maturity and avoid the subtle snares of the false teachers.

### **B. The Body-Middle 2:6-4:1**

The function of the body-middle of the Greek letter is to carry forward and develop the information introduced in the body-opening.<sup>17</sup> White observes that in the Pauline letters the body-middle typically consists of two parts. "The first of these two parts is always a tightly organized theological argument; the second part, immediately following, is less tightly constructed, and is the place where the principles espoused in the preceding part are concretized. The message introduced in the body-opening consequently, is developed according to its theoretical and practical aspects respectively."<sup>18</sup> This is, in fact, an accurate description of the structure of the body-middle of Colossians. After an introductory summary statement in 2:6-8, the "tightly organized theological argument" is developed in 2:9-15 followed by the application of these principles to the Colossian situation in 2:16-4:1.

Verses 6-8 function as the hinge of the epistle giving both a summarizing conclusion to the body-opening, especially 2:1-5, and a summarizing introduction to the body-middle. The Colossian Christians are exhorted to continue in the teachings (both Christological and paraenetic)

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<sup>17</sup>White, *Body*, 96.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 97.



which they received at the time of their conversion and not to be led astray by the false teachers. The tightly organized theological argument (vv 9-15) is introduced by ὅτι and consists of one extended Greek sentence explaining *why* the readers should follow Christ and not the false teachers. It is because the active presence and power of God indwells Christ (v 9; cf. 1:19), and in him Christians have become partakers of the fullness of the eschatological redemption and reconciliation (2:10) first described in 1:12-23.<sup>19</sup> This salvation is next presented in terms of participation with Christ in his death ("the stripping off of the body of flesh" 2:11, cf. 1:22) and resurrection (2:12-13; cf. 1:18b), reconciliation (2:13b-14; cf. 1:20) and liberation from the dominion of hostile spirits (2:15; cf. 1:13,20). The numerous parallels in terminology and concepts between 1:12-23 and 2:9-15 indicate that the latter is a development upon the former,<sup>20</sup> and together they serve to implement the letter's purpose of deepening the readers' understanding of the gospel of Christ. We observe, then, that the first mention of dying and rising with Christ occurs in the theological core of the epistle and therefore occupies a central place in the writer's argument.

In 2:16-4:1 the argument set forth in 2:9-15 is applied to the situation at Colossae. This applicational section divides into two parts. The first part, 2:16-3:4, is polemical. Here the writer addresses directly the problem of the false teachers, and it is in these verses that our clearest glimpse into the nature of the heresy is to be found. The legalism, mysticism, and asceticism advocated by the errorists are all to be eschewed, because in Christ every blessing for which they would have the Colossians strive and more has

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<sup>19</sup>J. Ernst, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an Philemon, an die Kolosser, an die Epheser* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1974) 201.

<sup>20</sup>Cannon, 156; cf. Zeilinger, *Erstgeborene der Schöpfung*, 55.

already been made theirs. This argument unfolds in four subsections: 2:16-17; 2:18-19; 2:20-23; and 3:1-4. The last two of these are explicitly predicated on the Colossians' participation with Christ in his death (2:20; 3:3) and resurrection (3:1).

In the second part of the practical section of the body-middle, 3:5-4:1, the application to the theological core of 2:9-15 continues but in a different vein. This is the paraenesis section of the letter<sup>21</sup> and probably rehearses paraenesis first given to the Colossians orally at the time of their baptism.<sup>22</sup> By dying and rising with Christ Christians have passed out of the old earthly existence and into the new. As such they must strive to conduct their lives in a manner appropriate to their status as God's chosen people, putting off the vices which characterized their old sinful lives (3:5-11), cultivating Christ-like virtues (3:12-16), and bringing every area and relationship in their lives under the lordship of Christ (3:17-4:1).

To summarize, the body-middle of Colossians develops and carries forward the central message of the epistle. Following the pattern typical of the Pauline letters, it divides into two principal sections: a concise theological argument in 2:9-15 and an applicational section based on it in 2:16-4:1. In 2:9-15 the writer reminds the Colossian Christians of the fullness of their salvation in Christ, in that they have participated in his death and resurrection, being liberated from sin and the dominion of hostile spirits. Therefore they must not allow the false teachers to rob them of their assurance of this (2:16-3:4), but continue striving to live in a manner befitting their status as the redeemed people of God (3:5-4:1).

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<sup>21</sup>The starting point of the paraenesis section in Colossians is disputed. For a survey of views see Lona, *Eschatologie im Kolosser-und Epheserbrief*, 173; cf. also Zeilinger, *Erstgeborene*, 63.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Cannon, 51-94.

### **C. The Body-Closing 4:2-9**

Cannon writes, "In general the Pauline body-closing functions (1) to repeat the occasion for writing, (2) to express confidence that the readers will fulfill his desire for them (or warn them against the consequences of not fulfilling them), and (3) to express his desire or promise to visit them."<sup>23</sup>

The repetition of the occasion for writing is most clearly seen in 4:3-4 where the writer returns to the subject of "the mystery of Christ" and his mission to proclaim it. In the body-opening he lays the ground work for the letter by explaining that it was his divinely appointed mission to proclaim this mystery with the goal of leading everyone to a mature understanding of it. The letter itself then is an attempt to discharge this duty with regard to the Colossian and Laodicean Christians.

A clear-cut expression of confidence that his readers will fulfill his desire for them is missing from the body-closing. However, as Cannon observes, the request for prayer in 4:3-4 for his ministry of proclaiming the mystery "indicates that he did have confidence in them and that they would heed the injunctions that he had made in the letter."<sup>24</sup>

The "visit talk" appears in 4:7-9. Since the writer is presently in prison and unable to come himself, he refers them to one whom he is sending as his surrogate, i.e. Tychicus. As the writer's concern in the letter was to encourage the hearts of his readers (2:2), so also is the purpose of his emissary's visit: "that he might encourage your hearts" (4:8).

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 159; cf. White, 97-99.

<sup>24</sup>Cannon, 161.

### **III. SUMMARY**

1. The purpose of the Colossian epistle was to encourage those menaced by a subversive teaching to hold fast to the message of Christ, which they had received originally, so that they might maintain their assurance and continue to live in a manner befitting their status as God's redeemed people.

2. The message of God's work of redemption through Christ is set forth most succinctly in 2:9-15. This passage functions as the tight theological argument of the body-middle which is then developed in terms of its practical aspects in the remainder of the body-middle, 2:16-4:1. Thus, it may be seen that 2:11-15, the central text in Colossians on dying and rising with Christ, plays a primary role in the message of the epistle.

3. A second passage in which this message of Christ is laid out is 1:12-23, the liturgical closing to the thanksgiving section. This introduces a number of concepts which are then picked up and developed further in 2:9-15. The key concepts for our purposes are introduced in 1:15-20. Thus, a proper investigation of 2:11-15 must include an analysis of this text. Chapter four of this thesis will be devoted to this task.

4. The other two texts in which dying and rising receive explicit mention, 2:20 and 3:1-4, belong to the direct polemic against the heterodox teachers. It is therefore apparent that an examination of the Colossian heresy is also necessary for a proper understanding of our topic. This examination will be taken up in chapter three.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**THE COLOSSIAN HERESY**  
**COLOSSIANS 2:16-19**

The Colossian epistle was written against the backdrop of an insidious false teaching which threatened to subvert the faith of the Colossian believers. In the introduction to his response to this false teaching the writer cautions them, "make sure that no one captivates you with the empty lure of a 'philosophy' of the kind that human beings hand on based on the principles of this world and not on Christ" (2:8, NJB). At the centre of his message both in its theoretical and practical dimensions is the emphasis that Christians have died and risen with Christ. Thus, an essential prerequisite for understanding the epistle's message of dying and rising with Christ is to understand something of the error to which this message is intended as a corrective.

The nature of the Colossian error has been the object of numerous studies over the past century.<sup>1</sup> During much of this period the prevailing view has been that the heresy was either a form of Gnosticism or some other

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<sup>1</sup>For history of interpretation see C. Evans, "The Colossian Mystics," *Biblica* 63 (1982) 189-192; P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) xxxiii-xxxviii. Many of the major contributions to this subject have been collected and published in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies*, ed. and trans. with introduction and epilogue by F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973).

syncretistic phenomenon which was largely pagan in nature.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, the opinion has gained ground particularly among English-speaking scholars, that the false teaching is best explained against the background of Jewish mystical and ascetic piety of the type found in the apocalyptic writings, and which in its later developments in Judaism came to be known as Merkabah mysticism.<sup>3</sup> According to this theory the fundamental problem with the errorists was not their Christology *per se* but their teaching that through various ascetic techniques the individual can experience a mystical journey to heaven to learn divine mysteries and look upon the angelic worship of God. It will be argued below that this theory offers the best explanation for the polemic found in Colossians.

While information about the Colossian error may be gleaned from several parts of the epistle, the decisive material is to be found in 2:16-19. Our investigation will therefore concentrate on these verses, but we will take into consideration other relevant texts as the issues arise.

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<sup>2</sup>E.g. M. Dibelius, "The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites" in *Conflict at Colossae*, 61-121; G. Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," in *Conflict at Colossae*, 123-145; Lohse, *Colossians*, 127-131; E. Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. A. Chester (London: SPCK, 1982) 125-134; Lona, *Die Eschatologie im Kolosser - und Epheserbrief*, 192-232.

<sup>3</sup>F. O. Francis, "Humility and Angelic Worship in Colossians 2:18," *Studia Theologica* 16 (1962) 109-134 (also 163-195 in *Conflict at Colossae*); A. J. Bandstra, "Did the Colossian Errorists Need a Mediator?" in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 329-343; O'Brien, *Colossians*, xxx-xli; Evans "Colossian Mystics," 188-205; C. Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions and the Exaltation of Christ in the Letter to the Colossians," *JNT* 19 (1983) 73-83; R. Yates, "The Worship of Angels' (Col. 2:18)," *ExpTim* 97 (1985-86) 12, 15; Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae*, 149-170; J. Sumney, "Those Who 'Pass Judgment': The Identity of the Opponents in Colossians," *Biblica* 74 (1993) 366-388. Cf. also F. F. Bruce, "The Colossian Heresy," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (1984) 195-208 who combines this interpretation with some of the key elements in the "syncretistic" interpretation. For Jewish background see especially I. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkabah Mysticism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980) and G. Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965).

## I. Calendrical Observances and Dietary Regulations (2:16-17)

The inferential οὖν introducing v 16 marks one of the pivotal points of the letter. As seen in our last chapter the immediately preceding passage, 2:9-15 constitutes the central theological argument of the epistle's body-middle: through the death and resurrection of Christ Christians have already entered upon the fullness of the eschatological blessings. In vv 16-17 the writer makes his first application of this argument to the practices and attitudes of the errorists: they must not allow the errorists to sit in judgment on them for their failure to keep various dietary regulations and calendrical observances ("feasts, new moons and sabbaths"). The writer further explains in v 17 that these religious regulations and observances belong to the age of anticipation and foreshadowed Christ's coming (ὅτι ἐστὶν σκιά τῶν μελλόντων). Now that he has come and the new age has dawned, such practices are obsolete.

What inferences about the nature of the false teaching can be drawn from this brief argument? It is fairly certain that the practices mentioned in v 16 find their basis ultimately in the Mosaic legislation. Only the Jews celebrated the Sabbath, and the terms "feasts, new moons and Sabbaths" (or their equivalents) often occur in combination in the OT and other ancient Jewish literature (e.g. LXX Hos 2:13; Ezek 45:17; 1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 2:4; 31:3; *Jub.* 1:14 and 1QM 2:4).<sup>4</sup> It is also virtually certain that the writer has in mind the Old Testament dietary laws in his reference to eating and drinking in v 16, since it seems unlikely that he could have described such practices as "a shadow of the things that were to come" unless they were based on the Hebrew Scriptures.

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<sup>4</sup>Lohse, *Colossians*, 115; Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption*, 163.

The nature of these regulations concerning food and drink require further consideration. Other passages in Colossians give evidence that teachings of the errorists went beyond the ordinary Old Testament dietary rules to include demands of an ascetic nature.<sup>5</sup> The fact that their practices are described as involving "severe treatment of the body" (v 23), "humility" (v 18) and rules against "tasting" (v 21) almost certainly points to the practice of fasting. Such asceticism, however, is foreign to the Old Testament which requires only one day of fasting each year (Lev 16:29). The Old Testament, moreover, contains virtually no general regulations regarding drinks. Only blood and liquid from a contaminated vessel were forbidden absolutely (Lev 7:26-27; 11:34; 17:10-14). In addition, the Nazirite was to abstain from all products of the grapevine (Num 6:3-4), and the Aaronic priests, when ministering in the Temple, were to avoid all intoxicants (Lev 10:9; Ezek 44:21). This, however, is not necessarily evidence of non-Jewish elements in the Colossian error. In the New Testament era fasting had become one of the most important religious activities of the Jews, being valued across a wide spectrum including the Pharisees, Philo, the Therapeutae and the Rabbis.<sup>6</sup> Rigorous fasting, often including abstinence from wine, was a distinctive feature of Judaism's ideal righteous individual (e.g. *Jdt* 8:6; *T. Isaac* 4:1-6; *I Enoch* 108:9; *T. Sim* 3:4; *T. Jud* 15:4; *T. Jos* 3:4). It was furthermore an important ascetic technique in Jewish mystical piety as we will see in our discussion of v 18.

We believe therefore the evidence of Col 2:16-17 supports the theory that the false teaching was basically Jewish in nature. But was there a

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<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, *Colossians* 138; Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 193.

<sup>6</sup> J.Behm, "νήστεις," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 929-931.



significant admixture of paganism as indicated by the writer's characterization of it as "philosophy" (2:8) and "according to the στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου" (2:8,21)?<sup>7</sup> Such a conclusion is by no means necessary. Both Philo and Josephus refer to Judaism as a "philosophy,"<sup>8</sup> and in Galatians Paul can refer to the rites and observances of the Judaizers as the στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου<sup>9</sup> (Gal 4:9; cf. v 3). We may also note that the description of the false teaching at Colossae as being "according to the commandments and teachings of men" in 2:22 echoes Jesus' description of the Pharisees in Matt 15:9, which in turn is based on Isa 29:13. We therefore judge the theory to be sound that the Colossian error was a form of Judaism. It remains however to be asked whether this Colossian teaching is to be identified with the Judaizing movement which Paul confronted in his epistle to the Galatians.<sup>10</sup> Certain points of similarity could suggest this. Like the Colossian errorists, the Judaizers enjoined the keeping of the Jewish dietary regulations and calendrical observances (Gal 4:10; 2:12). There is also some similarity of argumentation, e.g. the reference to the στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου, the argument that the law was of temporary value until the coming of Christ (cf. Gal 3:23-25 with Col 2:17), and in Christ there is no longer any distinction between Greek and Jew (cf. Gal 3:28 with Col 3:11). But there are also

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Dibelius, "Isis Initiation," 82-83; Lohse, *Colossians*, 99; Ernst, *Kolosser*, 194.

<sup>8</sup> In Philo *Leg.* 156; *Mut* 223; in Josephus, *War* 2.119; *Ant.* 18.11; cf. also 4 Macc 5:11.

<sup>9</sup>In chapter seven of this study we will argue that the term στοιχῆα in Gal 4:3,9 and Col 2:8,20 refers to the elemental rules, rites and regulations which make up all religions outside of Christ, including Judaism.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. N. T. Wright's position, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1986) 24-30 who argues that it is Judaism itself which is the object of the polemic; similarly M. D. Hooker, "Were there False Teachers in Colossae?" in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley (Cambridge: CUP, 1973) 327-330. Both Hooker and Wright, however, doubt there was a specific group of false teachers actually present in Colossae.

notable differences which would rule out this identification. Colossians contains no arguments regarding justification, the law<sup>11</sup> or the work of the Spirit. While circumcision was a major point of contention in Galatians, there appears to have been little if any interest in it at Colossae,<sup>12</sup> where, in contrast to the Judaizers, there was a significant interest in ascetic practices and, as will be shown in our discussion of v 18, visionary experience.

## II. Ascetic Practices and Visionary Experience (2:18a)

The second application of the argument in Col 2:9-15 unfolds in vv 18, 19. As in v 16, the writer begins with a warning to his readers not to submit to the judgmental, elitist attitude of the false teachers: μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύτω. The verb καταβραβεύω is rare in Greek literature and appears only here in the New Testament. The simple verb βραβεύω means to "decide, control, rule" (cf. 3:15).<sup>13</sup> The compound καταβραβεύω thus should probably be translated here to "condemn."<sup>14</sup> The following words are descriptive of the errorists' practices and give the basis of their judgmental attitude: θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἑώρακεν ἑμβατεύων. These words lie at the centre of the debate concerning the nature of the Colossian error and therefore call for careful analysis.

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<sup>11</sup>Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 105; E. Schweizer, "Christianity of the Circumcised and Judaism of the Uncircumcised: The Background of Matthew and Colossians," in *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity*, ed. R. Hamerton-Kelly and R. Scroggs (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976) 250.

<sup>12</sup>Based on the argument of Col 2:11 many scholars believe the errorists enjoined circumcision, e.g. Lohse, *Colossians*, 102, and Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Oxford: OUP, 1976) 192. Other scholars doubt the legitimacy of this inference such as Schweizer, *Colossians*, 142 and O'Brien, *Colossians*, 115.

<sup>13</sup>E. Stauffer, "βραβεύω," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 637-638.

<sup>14</sup>Following Lohse, *Colossians* 117 and O'Brien, *Colossians*, 141.

The expression θέλων ἐν is probably best explained as a septuagintalism corresponding to the Hebrew אָרְפָּה, "to delight in."<sup>15</sup> The objects of the false teachers' delight are ταπεινοφροσύνη and θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων. This first term is most commonly translated "humility" in the New Testament. Normally it refers to the Christian virtue of humility (e.g. Phil 2:3 and Acts 20:19), and this is obviously the case in Col 3:12. However, its use here and in v 23 as something advocated by the errorists calls for a different interpretation. Some scholars have understood it to refer to a pretentious, affected disposition of lowliness.<sup>16</sup> Noting the connection between this term and worship in v 18 (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων) and v 23 (ἐθελοθρησκία), Lohse argues that it concerns cultic conduct and describes "the eagerness and docility with which a person fulfills the cultic ordinances."<sup>17</sup> A theory recently defended by C. Rowland connects ταπεινοφροσύνη with the genitive τῶν ἀγγέλων so that this "humility" is that which is practiced by the angels towards one another and beheld in heavenly visions (ὃ ἑώρακεν), and which in turn the visionaries sought to emulate in their own daily lives (cf. v 23).<sup>18</sup> The term ταπεινοφροσύνη,

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. 1 Sam 18:22; 2 Sam 15:26; 1 Kgs 10:9; Ps. 111:1. G. Schrenk, "θέλω," *TDNT* 3 (1965). 45; Lohse, *Colossians*, 118.

<sup>16</sup>E.g. Lightfoot, *Colossians*, 196; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philamon, and to the Ephesians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 117; and N. Kehl, "Erniedrigung und Erhöhung in Qumran und Kolossa," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 91 (1969) 374-83 who believes that the "humility" referred to in Col 2:18, 23 was of the type advocated in the Qumran community.

<sup>17</sup>Lohse, *Colossians*, 118; similarly Ernst, 210 and W. Grundmann, "ταπεινός," *TDNT* 8 (1972) 22.

<sup>18</sup>Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions," 75-77; followed by Sumney, "Those Who 'Pass Judgment,'" 376-377.

however, is readily separated from the genitive construction, and the motif of angelic humility in Jewish literature is both rare and late.<sup>19</sup>

The most convincing interpretation is that ταπεινοφροσύνη in v 18 has reference to the practice of fasting and other ascetic rigours as preparation for visionary experience.<sup>20</sup> We have already noted that fasting appears to have been a characteristic of the false teaching (cf. v 21 "do not taste" and v 23 "severe treatment of the body"). In the Old Testament the expression "to humble oneself," שָׁפַל הָאָדָם, was used for fasting and was characteristically rendered in the LXX with the use of the verb ταπεινώω (Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27, 29, 32; Isa 58:3, 5; Ps 34:13; see also Jdt 4:9, 2 Esdr 8:21; Sir 34:26).<sup>21</sup> The noun ταπείνωσις is used to denote fasting in 2 Esdr 9:5, *T. Jos* 10:2, *Joseph and Aseneth* 10:17 and *1 Clem* 53:2 and 55:6. Tertullian three times inserts the word ταπεινοφρόνησις into his otherwise Latin text as a technical term for mortification which includes fasting.<sup>22</sup> Finally in *Sim* 5,3,7 and *Vis* 3, 10,6 Hermas employs the precise term found in Col 2:18,23, ταπεινοφροσύνη, to denote fasting.

That the humility (= fasting) advocated by errorists was a preparation for visionary experience is strongly suggested by the following words in v 18 which speak of seeing "the worship of angels." In Judaism the concept of fasting as a preparation for receiving visions and divine revelation has its

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<sup>19</sup>The only certain instance of this motif which Rowland cites is *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan* 23a (cf. also *3 Enoch* 18). The other texts illustrate the much more common motif of the angelic worship of God.

<sup>20</sup>The Moffatt Translation; C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1957) 104; Francis, "Humility and Angelic Worship," 114-115; Caird, *Letters From Prison*, 198; A. T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1981) 111; O'Brien, *Colossians*, 142.

<sup>21</sup>For further discussion see Kehl, "Erniedrigung," 368-369; and Behm, *TDNT* 4.927.

<sup>22</sup>*De Jeunio* 12, 13, 16; cf. Lona, *Eschatologie im Kolosser*, 200,201.

roots in the Old Testament (cf. Moses in Exod 34:28 and Deut 9:9; Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:8-9; and Daniel in Dan 9:3, 21, 10:3-5, 12), and became a standard motif in the apocalyptic literature (cf. 4 Ezra 5:13, 20; 6:13, 35; 9:23-25; 12:51:13:1; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 9:2-3; 12:5-6; 43:3; 47:2-3; *Apoc. Abr.* 9:7-10).<sup>23</sup> Fasting also has this fundamental significance in the passages in Hermas and Tertullian cited above. In Hermas *Vis* 3, 10, 6, for example, the writer is puzzled by a vision and requests understanding; he is then told in a vision, "every request needs humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη): fast therefore and you shall receive what you ask from the Lord."<sup>24</sup>

In some cases the result of fasting is entrance into the heavenly realm (e.g. *Apoc. Abr.* 9:7-10; 15B:2; *Apoc. Ezra* 1:2-7; *3 Enoch* 15B, 2). There is a strong interpretative tradition dating from at least the early second century B.C.E. to the effect that Moses' ascent to Mt. Sinai, which involved a forty day fast, was in reality a visionary ascent to heaven.<sup>25</sup> According to the various accounts of his heavenly visions Moses not only received the law, but learned the secrets of history past and future (*Jub.* 1:26; 4 Ezra 14:5), heard the heavenly music (Philo *Som.* 1.36), and beheld "the heavenly Jerusalem" (*2 Apoc. Bar.* 4:5), "the paths of paradise" (*Bib. Ant.* 19:10), the tree of life (*Bib. Ant.* 11:15) and "countless legions" of angels (*3 Enoch* 15B:2.). Philo also allegorizes Moses' ascent to the mountain as the soul's ascent to heaven (*QE* 2.40). Finally, in Jewish Merkabah mysticism fasting was one of the

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<sup>23</sup>Behm, *TDNT* 4.929 and D. S., Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 169-170.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Francis' discussion, "Humility and Angel Worship," 115.

<sup>25</sup>Evidence for the early date of this tradition is seen by its appearance in *Ezekiel the Tragedian*, 68-82. See also Targum to Psalm 68:9; *Exod. Rab.* 43:4; *b. Shabb.* 88b; *b. Sukk.* 5a; *Pesiq. R.* 96d; Philo *Mos.* 1.158; cf. Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism*, 89; and W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and Johannine Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967) 156-158, 205.

most important techniques prescribed for those wishing to ascend to the divine throne.<sup>26</sup>

### III. The Worship of Angels

We have already noted that the genitive construction *θησκειά τῶν ἀγγέλων* in v 18 suggests some type of involvement with the heavenly realm, but what precisely is in view? The majority of interpreters have understood this phrase to mean that the errorists worshipped angels.<sup>27</sup> In support of this view is the fact that with the noun *θησκειά* the object of worship is typically expressed with the genitive.<sup>28</sup> Also there is a certain amount of evidence - though references are few and generally late - for the veneration of angels among the Jews.<sup>29</sup> The chief objection to this interpretation, however, is that angel worship would involve a violation of one of Judaism's most cherished and distinctive beliefs (cf. Deut 5:7; 6:4), and thus one would have expected a more vigorous criticism by the author, be it Paul or an admirer writing in his name.<sup>30</sup> This difficulty is avoided, however, if we accept the view, which has gained a notable following in recent years, that *τῶν ἀγγέλων* should be read as a subjective genitive, so

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<sup>26</sup>Gruenwald, 99-100; P. Alexander, "3 (Hebrew Apocalypse of ) Enoch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1: *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983) 233, 249.

<sup>27</sup>E.g. Lohse, 118-119; R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1973) 93-94; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 159; Ernst, *Kolosser*, 210; J. Gnillka, *Der Kolosserbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1980) 149-150.

<sup>28</sup>K. L. Schmidt, "θησκειά," *JNT* 3 (1965) 156.

<sup>29</sup>See the evidence discussed in A. L. Williams, "The Cult of the Angels at Colossae," *JTS* 10 (1909) 413-38 and W. Carr, "Two Notes on Colossians," *JTS* ns 24 (1973) 499-500; and especially L. W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord* (London: SCM, 1988) 28-35.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 112; Evans, "Colossian Mystics," 197; Yates, "Worship of Angels," 112.

that what is in view here is the angels' own worship of God.<sup>31</sup> While it is true that the objective genitive is the more common with θρησκεία, the subjective genitive does occur (e.g. 4 Macc 5:7) and therefore each case must be judged by the context. This is illustrated by two occurrences of θρησκεία in close proximity to one another in Josephus' *Antiquities* Ἰουδαίων in 12, 253 is a subjective genitive while τοῦ θεοῦ in 12, 271 is objective.

Also strongly favouring this interpretation is the fact that in late Jewish and early Christian accounts of heavenly visions, it is a standard motif for the visionary to be permitted to look upon the angelic worship of God (e.g. *Asc. Isa* 7:13-9:33; *T. Levi* 3:4-8; *1 Enoch* 14; 36:4; Rev 4). Moreover, in some cases the visionary is allowed to participate in the angelic liturgy (e.g. *Asc. Isa* 7:37; 8:17; 9:28, 31, 33; *T. Job* 48-50; *3 Enoch* 1:12; *Apoc. Abr.* 17; *Apoc. Zeph* 8; cf. also 1QH 3:20-22; 11:10-11; 1QSb 4:25-26). We conclude that the Colossian errorists advocated fasting in order to induce heavenly visions so that the mystic might gaze upon the angelic liturgy and join with them in their worship of God. To this interpretation Lohse has objected that the expression in v 23, ἐθελοθρησκία, "self-chosen worship," indicates that the worship which the writer finds objectionable is an activity of humans and not of angels.<sup>32</sup> This criticism however is not an obstacle to our interpretation since, as A. T. Lincoln points out, "the worship of v 23 *is* performed by humans as they join in the angels' worship. It is precisely the worship which involves participation in

<sup>31</sup>Francis, "Humility," 126-130; Bandstra, "Colossian Errorists," 331; Evans, "Colossian Mystics," 196-197; Lincoln, *Paradise*, 112; Carr, "Two Notes," 499-500; Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions," 74-75; Yates, "Worship of Angels," 13; O'Brien, 142-143.

<sup>32</sup>Lohse, 119, n. 36; followed by Martin, *Colossians*, 94 and Schweizer, *Colossians*, 159.

angelic worship by means of ascetic techniques that Paul can designate as 'self willed.'<sup>33</sup>

#### IV. "Entering" (2:18b)

The next phrase in this description of the practice of the errorists - ἃ ἐώρακεν ἐμβατεύων - is perhaps the most difficult in the epistle. Several textual emendations have been suggested in order to make sense of these words within their context,<sup>34</sup> but none has proved convincing. It seems best therefore to accept the text as it stands and assume the obscurity of the words is due to the author making use of some of the jargon of the errorists.<sup>35</sup> The first two words are easily translated "the things he has seen," and no doubt point to a claim of visionary experience by the false teachers.<sup>36</sup> The real difficulty lies with the participle ἐμβατεύων. The meaning of this verb is "to enter," and the following usages are attested.

1. To enter something, e.g. a country, a city, a ship, a sanctuary, or heaven.<sup>37</sup>
2. To enter forcibly, to invade (e.g. 1 Macc 12:25; 13:20).
3. To enter into possession of property, to inherit (e.g. Josh 19:41, 51 and frequently in the papyri).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Lincoln, *Paradise*, 223, n. 9; so also O'Brien, *Colossians*, 143.

<sup>34</sup>For a list of proposed emendations see Lohse, 119, n. 30.

<sup>35</sup>So for example, E. F. Scott, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1930) 54-55; Lohse, 119; O'Brien, 142.

<sup>36</sup>Moule, *Colossians*, 104.

<sup>37</sup>For references see H. Preisker, "ἐμβατεύω," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 535; for references to entry into the heavenly realm see Evans, "Colossian Mystics," 45.

<sup>38</sup>Moulton and Milligan, 205-206; F. O. Francis, "The Background of EMBATEYEIN (Col 2:18) in Legal Papyri and Oracle Inscriptions," in *Conflict at Colossae*, 198.



4. In a metaphorical sense: to enter into the details of a subject, i.e. to investigate or research (2 Macc 2:30; Philo *Plant* 80).

Some scholars believe this fourth metaphorical meaning is to be read in our text with ἃ ἑώρακεν as the object of ἐμβατεύων.<sup>39</sup> According to this reading the false teachers are described as striving after esoteric knowledge by entering into painful investigation of what they saw in their visions. There are, however, two syntactical considerations which make this view improbable. First, the verb ἐμβατεύω is normally intransitive, and that which is "entered" is usually designated by εἰς plus the accusative.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, it is far more natural to understand as the antecedent of the relative pronoun ἃ the immediately preceding phrase "humility and the worship of angels."<sup>41</sup>

A second possibility, and one which is able to avoid these syntactical difficulties, finds its basis in the usage of ἐμβατεύω in the second century C.E. inscriptions of the Oracle of Apollo at Claros in the vicinity of ancient Ephesus. These inscriptions tell of enquirers undergoing a ceremony of initiation into the mysteries as preparation for *entering* the oracle sanctuary to consult the deity. From this evidence many scholars have concluded that ἐμβατεύω is a technical term in the language of the mysteries, and thus its appearance in Col 2:18 indicates that similar mystery rites were a part of the Colossian error.<sup>42</sup> The phrase ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων would then be

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<sup>39</sup>E.g. E. Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an die Kolosser und an Philemon*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1930) 124; A. D. Nock, "The Vocabulary of the New Testament," *JBL* 53 (1933) 133; Preisker, *TDNT* 2.535-536; NIV; cf. NEB.

<sup>40</sup>Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions," 75-76.

<sup>41</sup>Following the same pattern as seen in the neuter plural relative in 2:17 and 3:6; cf. Lohse, 120.

<sup>42</sup>This interpretation was first developed by Dibelius "Isis Initiation;" more recent representatives of the view are Lohse, 119-21; Martin, *Colossians* 94-95 and Bruce, *Colossians* 120-122.

translated "as he had visions of them during the mystery rites."<sup>43</sup> Critics of this view have argued that ἐμβατεύω does not stand alone for initiation in the Claros inscriptions, and in fact it refers to an act which is subsequent to the initiation and not part of it.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the fact that other verbs are used in contemporary oracle texts for the act of entering the oracle chamber strongly favours the view that there was no fixed terminology in use.<sup>45</sup> A further problem for this interpretation is that it pictures the Colossian error as being highly syncretistic in nature, whereas in the preceding two verses (2:16,17) the writer treats it not only as a form of Judaism, but one whose practices foreshadow the coming of the gospel of Christ. It seems unlikely that within the space of two verses he could give such divergent and seemingly contradictory accounts of the same religious phenomenon.<sup>46</sup>

The least problematic of the interpretations which have been suggested for this difficult clause is that it refers to visionary entry into heaven of the type observed in late Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic Jewish literature.<sup>47</sup> This fits the pattern of our earlier conclusions regarding "humility and the worship of angels": the pious mystic fasts, ascends to heaven and there gazes upon the angels in their worship.<sup>48</sup> A common

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<sup>43</sup>So Lohse, 121.

<sup>44</sup>Nock, "Vocabulary of the New Testament," 132; Preisker, *JNT* 2.535 and Francis, "Humility," 120-121.

<sup>45</sup>Francis, "Background of EMBATEYEIN," 201.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Francis, "Humility," 121.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 122-125.

<sup>48</sup>This interpretation also takes ταπεινοφροσύνη as the antecedent of ἃ and thus something seen in visions. Although this may appear unlikely (cf. the objections of Rowland, *JNT* 19 [1983] 184, n.4) as Francis has pointed out, "this is a common pattern: instruction in humility for the purpose of obtaining visions is itself the subject of visions" ("Humility," 130). Cf. also Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic*, 180 who refers to a passage in the Hekhalot writings in which it is reported that Rabbi Akiba learned these ascetic techniques "before the throne of glory and was told to teach the secrets to his colleagues."

feature in these accounts is for the mystic, having once ascended to heaven, to be confronted by a door or series of doors which he must *enter* in order to explore the various chambers of heaven. A clear example of this is seen in *3 (Greek) Baruch* 2:2: "and taking me, he [the angelic guide] led me up to the first heaven and showed me a very large door. And he said to me, 'let us enter through it,' and we entered . . . ." (see also 3:1,2; 11:1, 5; *1 Enoch* 14:8, 10, 12f.; *T. Levi* 2:6-7; 5:1; *3 Enoch* 1:1, 6; 2:2; 31:2; cf. *b. Hag.* 14b; 4 Ezra 4:7,8).<sup>49</sup> It is also worthy of note in this regard that the stereotyped introduction to heavenly vision in the apocalyptic writings is the appearance of an opening or door in the heavens (Ezek 1:1, Acts 7:56, 10:11; Rev 4:4; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 22:1; *T. Abr.* 7:3; *Hermas Vis.* 1, 1, 4; *T. Levi* 2:6; cf. *Asc. Isa* 6:9,10).<sup>50</sup> On at least one occasion (*T. Levi* 2:5,6) the visionary is said to enter heaven through this portal: "then sleep fell upon me and I beheld a high mountain and I was on it. And behold the heavens were opened and an angel of the Lord spoke to me: 'Levi, Levi, enter!' and I entered the first heaven" (cf. also *Asc. Isa* 6:9-10).

Beyond the conclusion that heaven is the implied place of entry in Col 2:18 F. Francis has argued that ἐμβατεύω here also carries the connotation of "entering into the possession of property," so that what the errorists actually sought by entering heaven was a proleptic experience of salvation or "a portion of the Lord."<sup>51</sup> While Francis is probably guilty of over-interpreting the verb here, this is nevertheless an important insight into the motivation for heavenly ascent in Jewish apocalyptic mysticism. According to the

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<sup>49</sup>The precise term ἐμβατεύω is not observed in these texts. In the Greek texts the word typically used is εἰσέρχομαι.

<sup>50</sup>Gruenwald, 63; Rowland, 53, 78.

<sup>51</sup>Francis, "Background of EMBATEYEIN," 198-199.

apocalyptic worldview paradise and the age to come exist now in heaven, the world above. Typically it is at death that the righteous are taken to heaven, there to enter the joys of paradise.<sup>52</sup> But for the pious mystic, who by an exceptionally pure life and the proper ascetic techniques is able to gain entrance to heaven, these blessings of salvation could be experienced even now in this life.<sup>53</sup>

With this insight all the pieces of the puzzle come together to reveal the essential nature of the Colossian error. It was the eschatological salvation itself which the false teachers held on offer - albeit a fleeting, transitory experience of it. As such this teaching constituted a claim that there are additional requirements and benefits of salvation for which Christ, through his death and resurrection, has not provided and which the ordinary Christian has not attained. It is thus within this context that we are to understand the writer's emphasis in the epistle on realized eschatology and the superiority of salvation in Christ: all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are to be found in him (2:3); by sharing in his death and resurrection believers already partake of the blessings of the new creation (2:9-15); indeed, they no longer belong to the present world (2:20) but have entered spiritually into heavenly existence (3:1-3).

## V. Criticisms of the Errorists (vv 18b-19)

In the final participial clause of v 18 the writer delivers the first of two polemical judgments against the false teachers: εἰκῆ φυσιούμενος ὑπὸ

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<sup>52</sup>Cf. *1 Enoch* 60:8; 70:3f.; *2 Enoch* 43:3A; *Apoc. Moses* 37:5; *T. Abr.* 20:14A; *Apoc. Abr.* 21:6; *T. Job* 40:3; 52:10-11; *Luke* 23:43; *Asc. Isa* 11:34-35.

<sup>53</sup>Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 17-18; cf. also Gruenwald, 15; J. J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death," *CBO* 36 (1974) 30-37.

τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ. The verb φυσιόω, "to blow up," "to puff up," is used only figuratively to signify a puffed up attitude of pride and conceit (cf. 1 Cor 8:1). This conceit has arisen in connection with the false teachers' visions of the heavenly worship. Conceit towards others of lesser attainment is itself a deplorable attitude and worthy of condemnation - and all the more so in those who would make a show of their "humility" (ταπεινοφροσύνη). It is though, perhaps, an understandable human failing in the case of those who have experienced genuine revelations of the heavenly realm. No doubt Paul himself would have succumbed to such an attitude in view of his privileged visionary experience, were it not for the "thorn in the flesh" which was given him (2 Cor 12:7). Yet the writer to the Colossians says these false teachers are puffed up "without basis" (εἰκῆ).<sup>54</sup> His point here is not that in spite of their visions the errorists have no justifiable grounds for pride. It seems rather this is his way of denying the validity of their visions. The errorists have no basis for boasting, because they have had no true experiences of heaven.<sup>55</sup> The source of their conceit, and thus, we may assume, of their so-called visions, he goes on to say, is their "mind of flesh" (τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκός). The genitive τῆς σαρκός is qualitative (cf. 1:22; 2:11) reflecting Hebrew usage. Comparable usages include "eyes of flesh" (Job 10:4), "arm of flesh" (Jer 17:5; 2 Chr 32:8) and "hand of flesh" (1QH 15:12). "Flesh" in each of these contexts refers to that which is merely human and therefore weak, mortal and earthly as opposed to that which is of God. Thus, the writer denounces the errorists' visions and their resulting

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<sup>54</sup>F. Buchsel, "εἰκῆ," *JNT* 2 (1964) 380.

<sup>55</sup>Ernst, 211; cf. Lam 2:14, Jer 14:14; 23:26,27.

conceit as the product, not of any supernatural agency, but of their own purely human minds.<sup>56</sup>

In v 19 the writer delivers the second of his judgments against the errorists' preoccupation with heavenly experience, this time considering the Christological implications. They are "not holding fast to the head" (οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν), i.e. to Christ. The verb κρατέω translated here "to hold fast" means the opposite of ἀφίημι (cf. LXX Cant 3:4) and with the negative οὐ should be rendered with the single idea of "abandoning" or "rejecting."<sup>57</sup> This statement is only meaningful if we assume that the false teachers had been baptized and claimed to be Christians.<sup>58</sup> It would further explain the subtlety and deceptiveness of their teaching (cf. 2:4,8) if we may surmise that in their heavenly worship with the angels they claimed not only to praise God but Christ who sat at His right hand (cf. Col 3:1).<sup>59</sup> The key to understanding the charge that the errorists were "rejecting Christ" is to be found with the image of Christ as head of the body, the church, which is developed in the statement introduced by ἐξ οὗ. The fundamental idea in this image is that the head is the controlling organ of the body.<sup>60</sup> This control, however, is mediated through the workings of the various members of the body one towards another, so that believers can only be *directed* by the head in so far as they take up their proper place within the body.<sup>61</sup> Here then is the point of the writer's criticism: by their insistence that heaven is

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<sup>56</sup>F. W. Beare, "The Epistle to the Colossians," *Interpreter's Bible* vol 11 (New York: Abingdon, 1955) 204.

<sup>57</sup>M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples*, trans. J. Smith (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 148 and O'Brien, 146.

<sup>58</sup>*Psce*, Wright, *Colossians*, 28.

<sup>59</sup>As does Francis, "Humility," 133.

<sup>60</sup>See our discussion below of κεφαλὴ in 1:18, chapter four, 103.

<sup>61</sup>Lohse, 122; Lona, *Eschatologie*, 213.

the proper place to worship God and experience the blessings of salvation, the errorists were rejecting the function of the body of Christ on earth.<sup>62</sup> But by cutting themselves off from the body with their insistence on individualistic mystical exploits they were in effect cutting themselves off from the head. In this way the writer turns the tables on them: through their ascetic exercises and rigorous rule keeping the errorists sought a personal experience of salvation; the result instead was atrophy and death, severed from Christ, the head of the body.

## **VI. SUMMARY**

1. The false teachers at Colossae promoted a Christian version of the Jewish mystical piety seen in the apocalyptic literature and later Merkabah mysticism. They emphasized the need of keeping the Jewish calendrical observances and dietary regulations as well as fasting and other ascetic practices. By means of these ascetic practices they sought to gain visionary entrance into heaven where they could learn divine mysteries, look upon the liturgy of the angels and join them in their worship before the throne of God.

2. Such heavenly ascent amounted to an experience of salvation, since according to the apocalyptic outlook it was, as a rule, only after death that the righteous could enter heaven. Thus, this challenge to strive after heavenly entrance carried with it by implication the claim that there were additional requirements and benefits of salvation for which Christ through his death and resurrection had not provided, and which the ordinary Christian had not yet attained. This teaching therefore constituted a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel.

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<sup>62</sup>Evans, "Colossian Mystics," 199-200.

3. In order to counter this error, the writer reminds his readers of the blessings of the gospel which are already theirs, emphasizing the superiority of these blessings to those the false teachers hold on offer. In point of fact, these visionary experiences of which the false teachers boast are not true revelations but merely the product of their own minds. Moreover, growth toward spiritual maturity is not to be gained by individualistic mystical exploits but by taking up one's proper role within the corporate body of Christ (2:19), growing in one's understanding of the gospel and the proper application of its truths to one's daily life.



**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**THE CONCEPTUAL SETTING OF DYING AND RISING**  
**WITH CHRIST IN COLOSSIANS**  
**COLOSSIANS 1:15-20**

The purpose of the present chapter is to address the question of the soteriological and Christological framework within which our subject of dying and rising with Christ is set in the Colossian epistle. In doing this we will also be addressing the issue of the pre-Christian religious antecedents of our subject. For this purpose our investigation will centre on Col 1:15-20. Although lacking any explicit reference to dying and rising with Christ, this text is, nevertheless, of vital significance, since, as we noted in chapter two, many of the terms and concepts developed in 2:9-15 (the passage containing the central text of the epistle on dying and rising with Christ) are first introduced in 1:12-23. In fact, the essential theology of this programmatic section is concentrated in vv 15-20. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to make a thorough investigation of this passage in order to gain a proper understanding of these concepts which are later developed and applied in terms of the Christian's union with Christ in his death and resurrection.

In vv 12-14 the Colossian Christians are exhorted to give thanks to the Father because of the salvation he has accomplished for them through his beloved Son. In vv 15-20 the reasons for thanksgiving continue, but the focus shifts to a description of Christ, God's agent of redemption. Because of

its elevated style and unusual vocabulary, this passage is widely believed to consist of traditional material of a liturgical nature and is conventionally known as the Colossian hymn.<sup>1</sup> Topically the hymn divides into two parts: vv 15-17 declare the pre-eminence of Christ over creation; vv 18-20 declare his pre-eminence in redemption or new creation. In addition to this conceptual symmetry, the two halves of the hymn display certain formal parallels. In the opening verse of each the phrase ὅς ἐστιν is followed by two phrases descriptive of Christ, the second in each case beginning with the relatively rare word πρωτότοκος.<sup>2</sup> Each of these in turn is followed by the phrase ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ (vv 16,19) which introduces an explanation for the preceding predication about Christ. Other parallels will be noted in the course of our investigation. Taken together these parallels within the hymn provide helpful clues to its interpretation.

### I. The Image of the Invisible God (v 15a)

The hymn opens with a relative clause describing God's "beloved Son" (v 13) as εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου. The depiction of God as ἀόρατος ("invisible" or "unseen") in contrast to Christ as εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ implies that Christ is the *visible* image of God. The same idea is to the fore in 2 Cor 4:4 where Christ is also called "the image of God." Thus, to a congregation being urged by false teachers to seek heavenly ascent in order to look upon the

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<sup>1</sup>The issues of authorship, original wording and strophic arrangement of this passage are not relevant to our study. Among the more important investigations to address these issues are: E. Kasemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, 149-168; J. M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20," *JBL* 76 (1957) 270-287; N. Kehl, *Der Christushymnus im Kolosserbrief* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967); and J. G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption, a Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) 94-114.

<sup>2</sup>This term occurs eight times in the NT and only one other place in the Pauline epistles. It is, however, quite common in the LXX.

divine glory and learn heavenly mysteries, the writer declares, quite appropriately, that God cannot be seen by human eyes, but in the person of his Son he is made manifest.<sup>3</sup> But in what sense is Christ said here to reveal God? Is this, as most interpreters take it, an instance of Wisdom Christology - i.e. as Wisdom is called "an image of his [God's] goodness" (Wis 7:26; cf. also Philo's *Leg. All.* 1.43), so Christ, as the true Wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:30), is said to be God's image?<sup>4</sup> Or is it to be understood on the basis of Gen 1:26,27 where the first parents of the human race are said to have been created "after the image of God"? And if so, is this an instance of the same kind of Adam Christology as seen in 1 Cor 15:45-49 where Christ is identified as the Adam of the end-time?<sup>5</sup>

That a connection with Gen 1:26,27 is intended here is indicated by two lines of evidence. The first concerns the use of the phrase εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ. While Wisdom is never called "the image of God," but only "an image of his goodness," which is not the same thing,<sup>6</sup> not only does the phraseology of Gen 1:27 appear in our text, but it appears in the context of *creation*. The same may also be said of the only other NT text where Christ is called "the image of God," 2 Cor 4:4, since Gen 1:3 is cited only two verses later. To the

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<sup>3</sup> Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions and the Exaltation of Christ in the Letter to the Colossians," 82,83.

<sup>4</sup>Representatives of this view include: Lohse, *Colossians*, 46-48; Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption*, 102,103; R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (London: Lutterworth, 1965) 214,215; E. Schweizer, *Colossians*, 64,65; J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1980) 180,181.

<sup>5</sup>Thus e.g. G. Kittel, "εἰκὼν," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 395,396; M. Black, "The Pauline Doctrine of the Second Adam," *SJT* 7 (1954) 174,175; R. Scroggs, *The Last Adam. A Study in Pauline Anthropology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966) 97-99; G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Oxford: OUP, 1976) 175-177; N. T. Wright, "Adam in Pauline Christology," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1983 Seminar Papers*, ed. K. H. Richards (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983) 384-387; idem, *Colossians and Philemon*, 68-70.

<sup>6</sup>A point recently made by J. Fossum, "Colossians 1:15-18a in the Light of Jewish Mysticism and Gnosticism," *NTS* 35 (1989) 187.

objection that the Genesis account cannot be in view in these texts because Adam there is said to have been created "in" or "after" the image of God,<sup>7</sup> it needs only to be observed that in late Jewish texts humans are frequently referred to in the absolute sense as "the image of God" (i.e. without any preposition) while the connection with Gen 1:26,27 remains perfectly clear.<sup>8</sup> Paul himself in 1 Cor 11:7 could say of the man that he is "the image and glory of God." Moreover, in *Op.* 146 Philo can describe each descendant of Adam as the visible image of the creator (cf. *QG* 1.4). And of particular relevance for Col 1:15a is *Mos* 2.59-65. In this passage the world after the flood is described as a new creation<sup>9</sup> with Noah, as it were, a second Adam, "the beginner of a second generation of mankind" (60).<sup>10</sup> Noah and his family, moreover, are described in language reminiscent of Gen 1:26,27 and Col 1:15a: they are "born to be the likeness of God's power and image of His nature, the visible of the Invisible (εἰκὼν τῆς ἀοράτου φύσεως ἐμφανής, 65)."<sup>11</sup>

The second line of evidence is based upon the undisputed allusion to Gen 1:27 in Col 3:10. Here the "new person" is said to be renewed according to the image (κατ' εἰκόνα) of his creator. Can these two references to the image of God be unrelated? The logic of the Wisdom interpretation of 1:15

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<sup>7</sup>Thus e.g. S. E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 104, n. 6.

<sup>8</sup>E.g. *2 Enoch* 30:10; *4 Ezra* 8:44; *Wis* 2:23; *Life of Adam* 14:1,2; 15:2; 37:3; 39:2,3; *Apoc. Mos* 10:3; 12:1; 33:5; 35:2.

<sup>9</sup>When the waters of the flood receded the world "shewed itself renewed with the likeness which we may suppose it to have worn when originally it was created . . ." (64).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. also *QG* 1.96; 2.56; *Praem.* 22,23, and *Abr.* 46.

<sup>11</sup>For further discussion of this passage in Philo and its relation to Adam see J. R. Levison, *Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism from Sirach to 2 Baruch* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) 78,79.

says yes.<sup>12</sup> However, as we mentioned earlier, the theology of the Colossian hymn is programmatic for the body of the epistle. In particular the writer displays an unmistakable pattern of taking up Christological statements from the hymn and developing them in their soteriological dimensions in the body-middle (2:6-4:1). Hence, (a) the statement in 1:19 that all the fullness dwells in Christ is picked up in 2:9, whereupon the writer declares (v 10) that Christians also have been made full in him; (b) the idea of the believer's resurrection with Christ in 2:12-13 is a development on "the firstborn from the dead" in 1:18; (c) reconciliation in 2:13 is an application of 1:20; (d) Christ's lordship and pacification of the spirit powers in 1:16,20 is developed in 2:10,15 and (e) the concept in 1:18 of Christ as the head of the body, the church, is developed in 2:19 and 3:15. There should therefore be no doubt that the reference to the image of God in 1:15 and 3:10 also belong to this pattern. And since 3:10 bears an undisputed allusion to Gen 1:27, it follows that the description of Christ in 1:15 as "the image of the invisible God" must be understood as a Christological interpretation of Gen 1:27.<sup>13</sup>

The question, however, still remains to be answered as to whether the writer intended here to portray Christ in the role of a second Adam (cf. 1 Cor 15:45-49; Rom 5:12-19). While some hold this view,<sup>14</sup> others believe that Christ is identified here as the pre-existent divine image and archetype

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<sup>12</sup>Thus e.g. Schweizer, *Colossians* 67.

<sup>13</sup>In addition to those listed in note 5 above, scholars who see an allusion here to Gen 1:26 include: N.A. Dahl, "Christ, Creation and the Church," in *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology*, 434; J. Jervell, *Imago Dei: Gen 1:26f. in Spätjudentum, in der Gnosis und in den paulinischen Briefen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1960) 200,201; H. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 71; Bruce, *Colossians*, 58; J. Jeremias, "'Αδάμ," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 143; T. E. Pollard, "Colossians 1:12-20: a Reconsideration," *NTS* 27 (1980) 574; P. Pokorný, *Colossians. A Commentary*, trans. S. S. Shatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

<sup>14</sup>See note 5 above.

according to which Adam was created - so that Christ is *the* image of God, and Adam was created *according to* this image.<sup>15</sup> Often cited in support of the latter is the fact that Philo interprets Gen 1:26,27 along similar lines, with the Logos being "the image of God," which in turn becomes the model according to which the human race was fashioned (*Leg. All.* 3.96; cf. *Op.* 24,25; *QG* 1.4; 2.62). This interpretation is attractive, but the following considerations lead us to believe that it is *Adam* and not his divine prototype with which Christ is identified in this text.

1. There is no evidence in the context of 2 Cor 4:4 or Col 1:15 for this type of Philonic reinterpretation of Gen 1:26,27 which distinguishes between a heavenly prototype who is the image of God and an earthly copy who is made "after the image."<sup>16</sup>

2. The context instead points in a different direction. The relative pronoun ὅς introducing v 15 refers back to God's "beloved Son", in v 13 who has rescued Christians from Satan's dark domain and transferred them into his own kingdom. This reference to Christ in v 13 as Son and king obviously identifies him as the Messiah, the end-time heir and ultimate fulfillment of the promises to David (cf. Ps 2:7; 89:27; 2 Sam 7:14).<sup>17</sup> In what connection then does the writer explain the eschatological Davidic king in words which echo Gen 1:26,27: "the image of the invisible God"? The answer, it would seem, lies with the OT-Jewish tradition which identified the Messiah as the Adam of the end-time. The tradition is rooted in Isaiah 11 where the prophet looks to the future when "a shoot from the stump of Jesse" (v 1) will

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<sup>15</sup>E.g. Jervell, *Imago Dei* 217; A. E. J. Rawlinson, *The New Testament Doctrine of the Christ* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926) 127; Bruce, *Colossians*, 58; C. A. Wanamaker, "Philippians 2:6-11: Son of God or Adamic Christology?" *NTS* 33 (1987) 181.

<sup>16</sup>Ridderbos, *Paul*, 71,72.

<sup>17</sup>See e.g. Schweizer, *Colossians*, 52.

restore the conditions of paradise where "the wolf will dwell with the lamb" (vv 6-9).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in *T. Dan* 5:10-12, a text which obviously belongs to this tradition, there appears, as in Col 1:13-15, the additional motif of deliverance from Satan: the coming Messiah will liberate the captives of Beliar and then usher them into a restored Eden (cf. *T. Levi* 18:10-12). This insight provides an important clue to the fundamental theological structure of the hymn, and we will return to it presently.

3. Support for an Adamic reference in Col 1:15a may be found in v 18b. It is widely recognized that the description of Christ as "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead" represents him as the founder of the new redeemed human race, i.e. as a second Adam.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as we noted earlier, the hymn falls into two halves which display striking parallels in language and thought. The fact that the presentation of Christ in v 18b in an Adamic role is parallel in form and wording to v 15 (ὅς ἐστιν . . . πρῶτότοκος . . . ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ) suggests that the Adam motif is also to be seen in v 15 with v 18b picking up and developing this previously introduced notion.

4. This is not to deny that the writer is concerned to highlight the revelatory function of the resurrected and exalted Christ. The idea of Christ's visible appearance also seems to be to the fore in 2 Cor 4:4-6, since he is spoken of there in terms of radiance and glory.<sup>20</sup> The hymn writer is

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<sup>18</sup>See further S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, trans. G. W. Anderson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956) 182, 383.

<sup>19</sup>Thus, Kehl, *Christushymnus*, 80; L. S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (Westminster: Dacre, 1941) 291; Fuller, *Foundations of New Testament Christology*, 215; J. L. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (London: SCM, 1970) 171; Martin, *Colossians*, 59; Zeilinger, *Erstgeborene der Schöpfung*, 183; Gniska, *Kolossenerbrief*, 70. See further our treatment of this text below.

<sup>20</sup>Most interpreters believe this text reflects Paul's experience of Christ on the Damascus road, e.g. A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second*

aided in the formulation of his belief that Christ revealed God in that ancient Israel also conceived of Yahweh as having human form. In the various throne theophanies of the OT and later apocalyptic God is consistently encountered as "a figure like that of a man" (Ezek 1:26; cf. Exod 24:10; 1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6:1; Dan 7:9; Rev 4:2,3; *1 Enoch* 14:20; *T. Levi* 5:1). It is not, however, "that Israel regarded God anthropomorphically," wrote G. von Rad, "but the reverse, that she considered man as theomorphic."<sup>21</sup> It is against this background that we are to understand the statement in Gen 1:26,27 that the first humans were created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the tradition was widespread in the Judaism of the NT period that before the fall Adam manifested the glory of God (*Apoc. Mos* 20:2; 21:6; *2 Enoch* 30:11; *3 Apoc. Bar.* 4:16),<sup>23</sup> and some accounts imply that this was a constituent of the image.<sup>24</sup> The notion that Adam displayed the image in a unique way appears in the later *b. Baba Bathra* 58a: Rabbi Bana'ah was visiting the burial caves of the Patriarchs and had seen the cave of Abraham, but "when

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*Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1915) 121; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975) 106; D. M. Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1961) 48; S. Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 5-11; against V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 250,251.

<sup>21</sup>G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, vol. 1: *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962) 145; cf. Scroggs, *Last Adam* 98,99. See also the more cautious and nuanced comments on this subject by J. Barr, "Theophany and Anthropomorphism in the Old Testament," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 7 (1960) 31-38. The fact, however, that God reveals himself in human form and that this form is characteristic of his essential being does not mean there are no figures of speech in the OT commonly known as anthropomorphism. Poetic references to God's hands, feet, ears, nose and various activities such as rising early in the morning are not to be taken literally.

<sup>22</sup>Concerning Rabbinic opinion that the image of God meant God and humans share the same bodily form, see M. Smith, "On the Shape of God and the Humanity of the Gentiles," in *Religions in Antiquity*, 315-326.

<sup>23</sup>See also H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1928), 4:887, 940,941,1126; Scroggs, *Last Adam*, 26,27; Jervell, *Imago Dei*, 100,101.

<sup>24</sup>Kim, *Origin of Paul's Gospel*, 260,261.



he came to the cave of Adam, a voice came forth from heaven saying, thou hast seen the likeness of my likeness (i.e. Abraham), my likeness itself (i.e. Adam) thou shalt not behold."<sup>25</sup> Thus, in his day the first Adam was the locus of God's revelation of himself in the world; correspondingly Christ, the eschatological Adam, is the true revelation of God because in his resurrection humanity he displays the pristine image and glory of God which Adam possessed in the beginning.

We have argued thus far that the description of Christ in Col 1:15a as εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου is rooted in Gen 1:26,27, and that he is cast in the role of Adam. By doing this, the writer portrays the resurrected Christ as occupying the same position of supremacy and glory in relation to the created order as Adam did before the fall. But beyond this, what was the writer seeking to communicate by relating Christ to Adam in this context? To answer this question it is necessary to understand that salvation in the Colossian hymn is presented as *new creation*. This is seen most readily in the parallels between vv 16 and 20. By comparing the protological creation of "all things" in v 16 with the eschatological "making of peace" and "reconciliation" of "all things" in v 20 the writer is indicating that salvation means the restoration of the lost harmony of the original creation.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, then, the portrayal of Christ in v 18 as the "beginning" and "firstborn from the dead" means that he is the new Adam of this new creation. Hence, if our conclusion is correct that Christ is also portrayed in terms of Adam in v 15, then this too belongs to the hymn's theology of new creation .

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<sup>25</sup>See further Jervell, *Imago*, 97.

<sup>26</sup>See below our treatment of v 20. Cf. 2 Cor 5:17-21, where reconciliation is spoken of in terms of καὶνὴ κτίσις, and Eph 2:15-216, where "making peace" involves the creation of a καινὸς ἄνθρωπος; see further Jervell, *Imago Dei*, 203.

The idea that the end-time will bring a restoration of the original creation has its roots in the OT prophets,<sup>27</sup> and became one of the fundamental images by which late Jewish and early Christian writers conceived of the eschatological salvation. This motif is particularly prominent in the apocalyptic writings. A striking example of this motif, and one which builds on the notion of Isa 11:1-9 that the Messiah will restore paradise is *T. Levi* 18:10-12:

And he [the Messiah] shall open the gates of paradise;  
 He shall remove the sword which has threatened since Adam,  
 And he will grant to the saints to eat of the tree of life.  
 The spirit of holiness shall be upon them.  
 And Beliar shall be bound by him.<sup>28</sup>

The principle is well summarized in the *Epistle of Barnabas* 6:13: "See, I make the last things as the first." The main idea in portraying the eschatological salvation in this way is, as N. Dahl writes, "that the end will bring the final realization of what from the beginning was the will of God the

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<sup>27</sup>There will be a new heavens and a new earth (Isa 65:17; 66:22; cf. Gen 1:1); the land of Israel will become like the garden of Eden (Isa 51:3; cf. Ezek 36:35); the fruitfulness of the earth will be restored (Ezek 34:26-27; 47:12; Isa 4:2; Amos 9:12; cf. Gen 3:17); wild animals will no longer be a danger (Isa 11:6-9; 65:25; Ezek 34:25); the world will again be at peace (Isa 2:4; 11:6; cf. Gen 4:8); the serpent will be punished (Isa 27:1; 24:21); and death will be abolished (Isa 25:8; 26:19; cf. Gen 2:17). On this subject see further E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. A.W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958) 325-326; L. Goppelt, *Typos. The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* trans. D. H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 32-34.

<sup>28</sup>See also *1 Enoch* 90; IQS 4.7-8, 20-25; 4 Ezra 7:32-36; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 51:8-12; *Apoc. Mos* 13:2-5; *T. Dan.* 5:10-13; Rev 22:2-5; *Odes Sol.* 11. On this subject see further Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 280-284; P. Volz *Die Eschatologie der jüdischen Gemeinde im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter*, 2nd ed. (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1966) 113-117; A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Adam and Christ: An Investigation into the Background of 1 Corinthians XV and Romans V, 12-21* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Cambridge University, 1970) 67-73.

creator, who is himself the first and the last."<sup>29</sup> This is the basis for understanding the interplay of soteriology and cosmology in Col 1:15-20. The resurrected Christ is portrayed as occupying the same place in the cosmos as Adam did before the fall, because it is the writer's purpose to show that God's all encompassing plan of salvation is to bring about the restoration of that which he intended for the human race and the world from the very beginning.

To many Jewish writers in the NT period God's intent for eschatological humanity was represented by Adam in his glorious existence before the fall.<sup>30</sup> In the age to come they looked for a restoration to the righteous of "all the glory of Adam" (1 QS 4.23; CD 3.20; IQH 17.15; cf. *2 Apoc Bar.* 51:10-12; 54:15, 21). In the Pauline writings, however, Adam is not featured primarily as the perfect man before the fall, but as the bringer of sin and death (Rom 5:12-21, 1 Cor 15:21-22). Rather, it is the resurrected and exalted man Jesus Christ who embodies the perfect realization of God's intent for humanity. As such he is a second Adam and thus the first patriarch of the new human race.<sup>31</sup> This conclusion is of fundamental significance for our study of dying and rising with Christ in Colossians, since it is primarily within this conceptual framework that our subject is to be understood. We will seek to show from v 18 of the hymn and other statements in Colossians that as the new Adam, Christ mediates his perfected humanity to all those who through faith and baptism are united with him in his death and resurrection.

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<sup>29</sup>Dahl, "Christ, Creation and Church," 429; cf. Russell, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 282.

<sup>30</sup>Scroggs, *Last Adam*, 23-29.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 106-107.

## II. The Firstborn of All Creation (v 15b)

Christ is further described in v 15b as *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως*, "the firstborn of all creation" - an expression clearly intended as a parallel to the description of him in v 18 as "the firstborn from the dead" (*πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν*). The following two verses, introduced by the words *ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ*, explain his position as firstborn on the basis of his role as God's mediator in creation, just as the description of him as "firstborn from the dead" in v 18 is explained in vv 19-20, using the same introductory formula, on the basis of his role as God's mediator in the new creation. The term *πρωτότοκος* is common in the LXX, and means in literal usage simply "the one born first." However, because the firstborn was typically the special object of the father's affections and received a double share of the inheritance (Deut 21:17; cf. Gen 25:29-34), the term came to be used in a transferred sense of one especially loved or supreme in rank irrespective of considerations of temporal priority or birth.<sup>32</sup> Two noteworthy OT texts which display this transferred sense are Exod 4:22 where God calls the nation of Israel his firstborn, and Ps 89:28 (LXX 88:27) where God declares of the Davidic king, "I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth." The description of Christ as "the firstborn of all creation" in Col 1:15b therefore is to be understood as a declaration that he occupies the place of supremacy in relation to the created order. The question to be answered, however, is whether this affirmation of supremacy is to be understood as a further development of the Adam motif introduced in the first half of the verse - and thus focusing on the humanity of Christ -

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<sup>32</sup>E.g. Zech 12:10; Jer 31:9; *Jub.* 18:15; 19:29; *Pss. Sol.* 13:9, *3 Enoch* 44:10.

or does it characterize him as the eternal divine Son, following the explanation in vv 16-17 where his place of supremacy is said to be based on his work as the pre-existent divine agent of creation in line with the OT-Jewish image of Wisdom?

In view of this explanation in vv 16-17, a *prima facie* case exists for interpreting "the firstborn of all creation" in terms of the Wisdom motif.<sup>33</sup> Wisdom is said to have been the first of God's creative works in the beginning (Prov 8:22-31; Wis 9:9), born "before the mountains had been shaped" (Prov 8:25) - though in reality Wisdom is not to be understood as a created entity separate from God but as a personified divine attribute.<sup>34</sup> Wisdom, moreover, is portrayed as God's companion and consort enthroned at his side (Sir 24:3; Wis 9:4; cf. Prov 8:30), and in regard to creation she functions variously as architect, builder and sustainer (Prov 3:9; Wis 7:21; *2 Enoch* 30:8).<sup>35</sup> Philo at one point calls her "the firstborn mother of all things" (*QG* 4.97). On several occasions Philo also calls the Logos God's "firstborn son" (πρωτόγονος υἱός; *Conf. Ling* 62; 146; *Agr.* 51; *Som.* 1.215), though the relation of the Logos to Wisdom is unsystematic with the Logos sometimes assuming the role of Wisdom (e.g. *Agr.* 51), sometimes Wisdom's offspring (*Fug* 109). On this reading of Col 1:15 the writer has combined two quite different motifs to describe the exalted Christ - one drawn from the Adam tradition ("the image of the invisible God"), the other from the Wisdom tradition ("the firstborn of all creation"). Such a juxtaposition is not so incongruous as it may appear at first sight, since Philo

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<sup>33</sup>The great majority of scholars support this view, e.g. Lohse, *Colossians*, 48; Dunn, *Christology*, 189; Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 151-152; Bruce, *Colossians*, 58-60; Ernst, *Kolosser*, 161; O'Brien, *Colossians*, 44.

<sup>34</sup>See further Dunn, *Christology*, 174.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 104-105.

makes use of both motifs in his presentation of the Logos.<sup>36</sup> This should not be taken to mean that the writer has patterned his description of Christ after Philo's Logos.<sup>37</sup> Rather it indicates the existence in early Jewish thought of an exegetical tradition in which Wisdom and Adam motifs were merged.<sup>38</sup> Both Philo and the hymn writer have made use of this tradition, but to very different ends. That there is a synthesis of Adam and Wisdom motifs in Col 1:15-17 seems certain, but there is much to suggest that the Wisdom theme does not actually come into play until v 16, even though it is used to explain v 15b, and that "the firstborn of all creation" belongs essentially to the portrayal of the resurrected Christ as the new Adam, filling out the characterization of him in v 15a as "the image of the invisible God."<sup>39</sup> The following points support this conclusion.

1. As we noted earlier the pronoun ὅς which serves as the subject of v 15 refers back to God's "beloved Son" in v 13. This designation identifies Christ not as the eternal divine Son but as the Messiah, the end-time heir to the throne of David (cf. Ps 2:7; Mark 1:11).<sup>40</sup> It therefore stands to reason that the correlative term *firstborn* in v 15b should likewise be taken in the Messianic, i.e. human sense (cf. Ps 89:26,27).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>E.g. *Spec. Leg.* 1.81: The Logos "is the image of God through whom the whole universe was framed." See further D. Steenburg, "The Worship of Adam and Christ as the Image of God," *JNT* 39 (1990) 104-105.

<sup>37</sup>As e.g. Scott claims, *Colossians* 20.

<sup>38</sup>Thus, Steenburg, 101-106; see further G. G. Stroumsa, "Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," *HTR* 76 (1983) 269-288.

<sup>39</sup>For a history of interpretation of v 15b in the patristic period see Lightfoot, 148-150. Among the fathers who took it to refer to Christ in his humanity are Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine and Theodore of Mopsuestia.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Lohse, 38; Schweizer, *Colossians* 52.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. *Pss. Sol.* 13:9 where these same two expressions appear in synonymous parallelism: "for he will admonish the righteous as a *beloved Son* and his discipline is as for a *firstborn*."

2. In every other passage in the NT where *πρωτότοκος* is used of Christ, the reference is to his humanity (Luke 2:7; Rom 8:29; Col 1:18; Heb 1:6; Rev 1:5). The only text where there is a degree of ambiguity is Heb 1:6, though the great majority of scholars hold that the designation "firstborn" here is meant to characterize the exalted Christ as heir to the throne of David based on the citation in the previous verse of Ps 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14.<sup>42</sup>

3. While the term "firstborn" is only rarely used of Adam in Jewish literature outside the NT, such instances are no more rare than those in which Wisdom is so designated.<sup>43</sup> Most noteworthy for the interpretation of Col 1:15b is the use of *πρωτότοκος* and *εἰκὼν* in Rom 8:29 to explain how the resurrected Christ has become the beginning and pattern of the new

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<sup>42</sup>Thus B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Macmillan, 1892; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 23; E. Kasemann, *The Wandering People of God*, trans. R. A. Harrisburg and I. L. Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 99-100; G. W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972) 17; P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 59-60; R. M. Wilson, *Hebrews* (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1987) 38-39; W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1991) 26-28; K. H. Bartels, "πρωτότοκος," *NIDNTT* 1 (1975) 668. H. W. Attridge is undecided - *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 56-57.

<sup>43</sup>In the late Rabbinic text *Num. R.* 4 Adam is called "firstborn of the world." In Wis 10:1 he is called the "firstformed father of the world" (similarly 7:1 and *Bib. Ant.* 13:8). Philo repeatedly calls Adam the first earthborn man (*πρῶτος, γηγενής*), *Op* 136; *QG* 1.20.21; 2.17; cf. 1.25.51.52). But he reserves the unqualified sobriquet "firstborn" (*πρωτόγονος*) for the Logos, which according to his Platonic scheme is to be identified with the "man" created after the image of God in Gen 1:27 - the account of Adam's creation not coming until Gen 2:7. The Logos is therefore the eldest-born (*πρεσβύτατος*) image of God (*Conf.* 147). But does this not suggest that *πρωτόγονος* in Philo should be recognized not as a Wisdom but as an Adam motif which he has appropriated to his Logos concept based on his tendentious interpretation of Gen 1:27? Additional evidence that such an appropriation has taken place appears in *Agr.* 51 where God is said to be king and the Logos is his firstborn son whom he has appointed governor over the world "like some viceroy (*ὑπαρχος*) of a great king." This passage finds a direct parallel in *Op* 148 where Adam is said to be God's viceroy, *ὑπαρχος*, second to him in authority. Moreover, as Steenburg points out in this connection, "While the idea of the Logos regulating creation expresses a Wisdom theme, the description of this role being one of authority or rule is probably a development of the idea of Adam's rule over creation by virtue of his being in God's image" ("Adam and Christ as the Image of God," 105).

humanity as the eschatological Adam.<sup>44</sup> The same theology underlies the use of *πρωτότοκος* in Col 1:18, and, we would argue, the usage in v 15 is likewise best understood as an Adam motif.

4. The title "firstborn of all creation" is well suited to Adam since he is frequently featured in Jewish literature as king over the creation.<sup>45</sup> It was in fact for this purpose, according to Gen 1:26, that Adam was created in the divine image. Von Rad explains that just as earthly kings used to set up images of themselves in their domains as a sign of their authority, so God set Adam on the earth as his viceroy to represent the divine dominion and authority.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the title "firstborn of all creation" in Col 1:15b may be seen as drawing out and developing the meaning of the preceding phrase, "the image of the invisible God."<sup>47</sup> The exalted Christ as the image of God is the emblem and representative of the divine authority over the entire creation, as was the protological Adam in the beginning.<sup>48</sup>

5. The picture of the protological Adam as world ruler coincides to a large degree with that of the ideal Davidic king in the Psalms. He is God's Son (Ps 2:7), his firstborn (89:28), seated at his right hand (110:1), and ruling in his stead (cf. 2:7,8). The royal Son's empire is the world: he rules "from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth" (72:8; cf. 2:8); as God's firstborn he is the highest of the kings of the earth (89:28), and they must

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<sup>44</sup>See J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988) 483-485; Kasemann, *Romans*, 245.

<sup>45</sup>E.g. *Jub.* 2:14; *Wis* 10:2; *2 Enoch* 30:12; 31:3; *Sir* 17:2-4; *4 Ezra* 6:46,54; *Life of Adam* 14:1-3; *Apoc. Mos* 10:3; 24:4; *Philo Op* 148; *OG* 1.20; 2.56). See further Jervell, *Imago*, 201; and Scroggs, *Last Adam*, 46.

<sup>46</sup>Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1.146; *TDNT* 2.392.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. the parallel statement in v 18b where the title "firstborn from the dead" draws out and develops the meaning "the beginning."

<sup>48</sup>On this understanding of the phrase there is no difficulty in reading the genitive as partitive; cf. N. Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the Greek New Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1965) 124.



serve and do homage to him (72:11).<sup>49</sup> Hence, when Isaiah takes up this theme, he proclaims how the end-time Davidic king endowed with the Spirit of Yahweh (11:2) will, by his worldwide rule of righteousness (vv 3-5), restore the condition of peace and harmony which God intended from the beginning (vv 6-9). This fits the picture of Christ in Col 1:15: he is God's firstborn Son (cf. Ps 89:28), who, as the end-time heir to the throne of David, is lord of all creation, as Adam was in the beginning.

The great difficulty with this interpretation of v 15b in terms of Adam typology is of course the explanation of the following causal clause, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα. It is argued that Christ cannot be presented as belonging to the creation, as our interpretation requires, if it was through him that everything came into being.<sup>50</sup> A number of church fathers sought to resolve this difficulty by claiming that the creation in view in vv 15-17 is the eschatological new creation.<sup>51</sup> But this view must be rejected; v 16 clearly refers to the protological creation.<sup>52</sup> Rather the text's line of argument must be that the resurrected and exalted man Jesus Christ is worthy to occupy the place of supreme honour and authority within the creation because *prior to entering human existence he was the protological agent through whom God created all things*. Though such a statement may seem contradictory to modern sensibilities, it is by no means unique. In Heb 1:2 Christ is described as God's "Son, whom he appointed heir of all things (κληρονόμον πάντων), through whom also he created the world." There is

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<sup>49</sup>See further von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1.320.

<sup>50</sup>E.g. Martin, *Colossians* 57-58; L. R. Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn Over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *JETS* 31 (1988) 63-64.

<sup>51</sup>See Lightfoot, 148-150; Abbott, 213.

<sup>52</sup>Also unconvincing is Caird's argument (*Letters from Prison*, 178) that v 16 means "God so designed the universe that it was to achieve its proper meaning and unity only under the authority of man (Gen 1:28; Ps 8:6)."

much to suggest that this passage conveys the same essential message as Col 1:15b-16. First of all, the terms *heir* and *firstborn* belong to the same conceptual field, as both connote possession, authority, rulership. Hence, the two expressions "heir of all things" and "firstborn of all creation" are roughly synonymous.<sup>53</sup> Secondly, "heir of all things" is best understood as an eschatological designation based on Ps 2:8 ("Ask of me and I will give you the nations as your inheritance").<sup>54</sup> Confirmation of this appears in Heb 1:3-4 where Christ is said to have inherited this rank and title of "Son" upon his exaltation and heavenly enthronement.<sup>55</sup> Third, while Christ's eschatological heirship is not explicitly said to be based on his protological creativity as in Col 1:15,16, the juxtaposition of these two motifs in the same sequence is at least suggestive of such a relationship.<sup>56</sup> Thus, we find the same basic line of the thought in Heb 1:2 as in Col 1:15b-16: he who is the incarnate eschatological lord of creation was the protological agent of creation. Finally, we may note that there are other parallels between these two passages including the notion of Christ being the visible manifestation of God (Heb 1:3a; cf. Col 1:15a) and governor of the universe (Heb 1:3b; cf. Col 1:17). The hymnic nature of these two texts lends credence to the theory that a common liturgical tradition underlies both.<sup>57</sup>

We conclude, then, that in Col 1:15 both the description of Christ as "the image of the invisible God" and as "the firstborn of all creation" are best explained on the basis of Adam typology. The Wisdom motif, though used to

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<sup>53</sup>Thus Helyer, "Firstborn Over All Creation," 66.

<sup>54</sup>Thus Käsemann, *Wandering*, 98-99; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 40; Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 12.

<sup>55</sup>See Käsemann, *Wandering*, 98-99; Lane, 16-17.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Westcott, *Hebrews*, 7: "The universal heirship of Christ is illustrated by, if not based upon, His creative activity."

<sup>57</sup>Thus Helyer, "Firstborn of all Creation," 66.

explain v 15b does not appear until v 16. The presentation of Christ in an Adam-like role belongs to the wider presentation of salvation in the hymn as new creation, or the restoration of all things in the end-time to their original protological state of perfection. As Adam in the beginning was lord over the entire creation and displayed the undiminished image and glory of God and therefore God's perfect intent for humanity - so now in the person of the resurrected Christ, a man once more occupies this place of supremacy in the world manifesting the pristine image of God. Having introduced this theme in v 15, the writer takes it up again in v 18, where he develops it soteriologically: Christ is the Adam of the end-time in that he is firstborn from the dead and therefore the beginning of the new redeemed race.

### **III. The Mediator and Governor of All Creation (vv 16-17)**

The portrayal of Christ in his Adam-like role of supremacy over the creation is followed by the explanation (introduced by ὅτι) in vv 16-17 identifying him as God's mediator in the original creation. This argument, as we noted earlier, finds a direct parallel in the soteriological section of the hymn where the portrayal of Christ in v 18b as the new Adam of the redeemed human race is followed by the explanation in vv 19-20 identifying him as God's mediator in the new creation. The section, vv 16-17, falls into three parts - with each emphasizing from a different angle the pre-eminence of Christ in relation to the creation: (a) his role in the creation of the universe is the focus of v 16; (b) his temporal priority to the creation is the subject of v 17a; and (c) in v 17b he is the governor of creation.

In the first clause of v 16 Christ is identified as the one "in whom" (ἐν αὐτῷ) God created all things. The reference is to the exalted man Jesus Christ, but he is identified here with the pre-existent Lord. This does not

mean, as O. Cullmann argued, that Christ pre-existed as a divine man.<sup>58</sup> Rather, it means the one Christians now know as the resurrected and exalted man, Jesus, is to be identified with the one who - before he entered into human existence - was God's agent in creation.<sup>59</sup> And it is this role as God's protological agent which serves to justify the declaration of v 15b that he occupies the place of supremacy in the created order. After an explanation of "all things" in the mid-section of the verse, the idea of Christ's relationship to the original creation is taken up again: "all things were created through (διὰ) him and for (εἰς) him." Thus, in the beginning God created ἐν, διὰ and εἰς Christ. It is interesting to note that in the corresponding passage of the soteriological section of the hymn, vv 19-20, the writer has artistically woven these same three prepositions, following the same sequence, into his explanation of Christ as God's agent of the new creation.

The meaning of the statement in v 16 that all things were created "in Christ" is disputed. A number of scholars both ancient and modern have taken this to mean that Christ is the "sphere" within which the universe was made, understanding it along the lines of Philo's Logos which he described as the place where the original pattern or blueprint for the visible universe was first fashioned (*Op.* 16-20).<sup>60</sup> But this notion is foreign to the context. The "all things" of v 16 does not refer to the invisible world of ideas in the Platonic sense but to the actual created universe which includes all things visible.<sup>61</sup> Instead the preposition ἐν is better understood in a causal or

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<sup>58</sup> *The Christology of the New Testament*, trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963) 176-177.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, *Colossians*, 69.

<sup>60</sup> Lightfoot, 151; Scott, *Colossians*, 21; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 69; Bruce, *Colossians*, 61.

<sup>61</sup> Lohse, 50-51, n. 29; Peake, 504; Abbott, 214.

instrumental sense.<sup>62</sup> Taken in this way the "through him" (δι' αὐτοῦ) of the final clause of v 16 appears as a parallel statement forming the type of thought rhyme familiar from Hebrew poetry. Thus the central idea here is the role of the pre-existent Christ as God's agent in creation. This idea is widespread in the NT literature (John 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2), and, as we saw earlier, draws on the well-known image in the OT and later Jewish writings of the personified divine attribute Wisdom, who was God's agent in creation.<sup>63</sup>

The final prepositional phrase in v 16, εἰς αὐτόν, indicates that the universe was made for Christ; it has him as its goal and therefore exists to give him glory.<sup>64</sup> While this statement finds parallels in Jewish literature relating to Adam,<sup>65</sup> Israel (*As. Mos* 1:12) and the Messiah (*b. Sanhedrin* 98b) as the goal of creation, given the fact that our text has been describing Christ as a divine agent, the most relevant parallels are no doubt 1 Cor 8:6, Rom 11:36 and Heb 2:10 where God himself is said to be the goal of creation. Thus, taken together these three prepositional phrases serve to emphasize Christ's comprehensive involvement in the original creation of all things and therefore justify the description of him in v 15b as the lord over all creation.

In the middle of v 16, bracketed between the first and final clauses, the author defines more exactly what he means by "all things." The two contrasting pairs "in heaven and on earth" and "visible and invisible" emphasize that what is in view is the entire created order in the most comprehensive sense. Most likely the visible things are to be identified with

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<sup>62</sup>Thus Abbott, 214; Peake, 504; Lohse, 50, n. 129; Gibbs, 104, n. 2; Wright, *Colossians* 71.

<sup>63</sup>For discussion see especially Dunn, *Christology*, 163-176.

<sup>64</sup>Wright, *Colossians* 73.

<sup>65</sup>Cf. 4 Ezra 6:54-59; see also von Rad, *New Testament Theology*, 1.144.

the material creation including the celestial bodies, while the invisible things are the denizens of the spirit world which next become the focus of attention.<sup>66</sup> The terms *θρόνοι*, *κυριότητες*, *ἀρχαί* and *ἐξουσίαι* are designations for various classes of angelic princes. Outside of the NT these beings are encountered in a number of Jewish and early Christian descriptions of the heavenly realm (e.g. *T. Levi* 3:8; *1 Enoch* 61:10; *2 Enoch* 20:1; *Asc. Isa.* 7:21; *T. Adam* 4:3-8),<sup>67</sup> and no doubt are mentioned here because of the emphasis they received from the false teachers at Colossae. The writer's purpose is to underscore the absolute superiority of Christ to all these spirit powers. These powers are also mentioned on several occasions in the NT particularly in the Pauline corpus (1 Cor 15:24; Rom 8:38; Col 2:10, 15; Eph 1:21; 6:12; cf. also 1 Pet 3:2) and are frequently portrayed either in actual or potential opposition to Christ's rule.<sup>68</sup> In Col 2:14,15 Christ is said to have conquered the principalities and powers through his death on the cross<sup>69</sup> - a statement which develops the theme originally introduced in 1:20. In 1:16, however, these angelic powers are not seen as hostile but subject to Christ as their creator. Both statements find their explanation within the framework of the epistle's theology of new creation. In the original creation the powers were subject to Christ (v 16), but, as the reader is led to assume from v 20, they (or some of them) subsequently joined in a cosmic rebellion. By his death on the cross Christ reconciled or pacified the powers (1:20; 2:15) and

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<sup>66</sup>W. Michaelis, "ὄρατός," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 369; Bruce, *Colossians* 63.

<sup>67</sup>On this subject see W. Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, vol. 1: *The Powers* (Basingstoke: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1988) 13-21.

<sup>68</sup>Against the novel interpretation of W. Carr, *Angels and Principalities* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981) 52-66. For a convincing defence of the traditional view that these powers are typically hostile, see C. Arnold, "The 'Exorcism' of Ephesians 6.12 in Recent Research: A Critique of Wesley Carr's View of the Role of Evil Powers in First-Century A.D. Belief," *JSNT* 30 (1987) 71-87; see also Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 55-60.

<sup>69</sup>See our treatment of this text below in chapter six.

thereby re-established that headship over them (2:10) which was his from the beginning by right of creation (1:16).

Verse 17 continues the commentary on the statement in v 15b that Christ is the "firstborn of all creation." The pronoun αὐτός in the first clause is emphatic ("he himself") and emphasizes the contrast between Christ and the created things just listed in v 16.<sup>70</sup> There is some ambiguity with the phrase πρὸ πάντων: Does it assert superiority of rank (he is "above all things"), or temporal priority (he is "before all things")? In favour of the former is (1) the fact that the only other occurrences of this phrase in the NT, Jas 5:12 and 1 Pet 4:8, clearly indicate rank; and (2) the stated purpose of the hymn is to assert the pre-eminence of Christ in all things (v 18c). The most natural reading of the preposition, however, is temporal following the typical usage in the Pauline writings and the rest of the NT (cf. especially John 17:5, 24).<sup>71</sup> Yet implied in this declaration of his temporal priority to all things is an affirmation of his superiority over all things.<sup>72</sup>

With the second clause of v 17 the hymn writer passes from discussing Christ's role as pre-existent mediator and goal of creation to his present role as sustainer and unifying principle of the universe: καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν. The preposition ἐν is instrumental (cf. v 16), and the perfect tense of the verb συνίστημι emphasizes the continuous nature of this sustaining activity. Apart from Christ the universe would disintegrate and return to its primeval state of chaos. The concept of a divine agent which sustains and governs the universe finds a number of parallels in the literature of Hellenistic Judaism. Wisdom "deploys her strength from one end

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<sup>70</sup>Abbott, 217.

<sup>71</sup>Thus Lohse, 65; Gnailka, 66 and most commentators.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. Lohse, 52; Bruce, 65; O'Brien, 47.

of the earth to the other, ordering all things for good" (Wis 8:1).<sup>73</sup> According to Philo, the Logos is the "bond of all existence" which "holds and knits together all the parts" (*Fug.* 112); according to Wis1:7, this is the function of "the Spirit of the Lord," and according to Sir 43:26 it is "by his word [that] all things consist" (cf. Heb 1:3). In summary, then, the universe is dependent upon Christ for its continued existence and unity. The implication of this statement, as with the other statements in vv 16-17, is that Christ is supreme over all the universe.

#### IV. The Head of the Body, The Church (v 18a)

With the words καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος, τῆς ἐκκλησίας, the hymn passes from a cosmological to a soteriological perspective. The first half of the hymn, vv 15-17, presents the exalted Christ as lord over the creation - like Adam in the beginning - on the basis of his role as God's agent in creating and now sustaining the original creation. In the second half of the hymn, vv 18-20, Christ is the lord of the eschatological, new creation - the Adam of the end time - by virtue of his role as God's agent in restoring the fallen creation to its original state of harmony.

The majority of scholars hold that in an earlier form of the hymn, v 18a belonged topically with vv 15-17 so that *the body* of which Christ is said to be head was the cosmos. By adding the phrase τῆς ἐκκλησίας, however, the writer of Colossians transformed an originally cosmological declaration into an ecclesiological one.<sup>74</sup> But such a reconstruction, it must

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<sup>73</sup>Cf. Steenburg, 102.

<sup>74</sup>Thus e.g. Kasemann, "Baptismal Liturgy," 150-152; Lohse, 42-43; Martin, *Colossians* 56, 59.



be pointed out, is entirely hypothetical,<sup>75</sup> and our concern in any event is only with the text as it stands. Nevertheless, as the text stands it does imply that Christ is head over the cosmos; the full thought is, as Christ is head of the universe, so also (καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν) is he head of the body which is the church. This conclusion is confirmed by the statement in 2:10 that he is head (ἡ κεφαλὴ) of all rule and authority - the reference being to his reestablished headship over the hostile powers by virtue of his victory on the cross (cf. 1:20; 2:15). The meaning of this headship *vis-à-vis* the cosmos is that Christ occupies the place of authority and supremacy over it. The metaphorical usage of κεφαλὴ as "ruler" is well attested in the LXX (rendering שׂרָר) and appears elsewhere in Hellenistic Jewish writings.<sup>76</sup> This usage, however, did not necessarily carry with it the implication that what was subject to the head is a *body*. Hence, it would be a mistake to conclude in 2:10 that the conquered powers are presented as Christ's body - or that the cosmos is his body in 1:15-17. The head-body metaphor in Colossians is reserved for the relationship of Christ to the church.

The image of the church as a body already appears in 1 Cor 12:12-27 and Rom 12:4-5. There the focus of the metaphor is on the unity of the church amid diversity and the mutual interdependence of the members. In Col 1:18 is added the new idea of Christ as the head of the body, with the emphasis now being on his relationship to the church as head. This position is one of supremacy and authority by virtue of his work as redeemer (cf. vv

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<sup>75</sup>F. F. Bruce calls it "an unwarranted exercise of the imagination," *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 420. Others who reject this view include Kehl, *Christushymnus*, 93, 97; Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption*, 105; O'Brien, 50; Wright, *Colossians*, 74, n.2.

<sup>76</sup>E.g. LXX Deut 28:13; Judg 10:18A; 11:8,9,11A; 2 Kgdms 22:44; 20:12A; Ps 17 (18): 43; Isa 7:8,9; 9:14-15; Jer 38:7; Lam 1:5; Josephus, *War* 4.261 (cf. 3.54); Hermas, *Sim* 7.3. See also J. A. Fitzmyer, "Another Look at ΚΕΦΑΛΗ in I Corinthians 11:3," *NTS* 35 (1989) 506-510.

19-20).<sup>77</sup> That this is the point of the metaphor is made explicit in the final clause of the verse: "that in everything he might be pre-eminent." He is pre-eminent in both creation and the church (viz. the new creation).

The image in v 18a is that of the head as the controlling organ of the body.<sup>78</sup> While it has been denied that such a concept was current in the first century,<sup>79</sup> this is not the case since Philo makes repeated and unambiguous use of it in his writings. He declares, for example, in *Spec. Leg.* 3.184 that "nature conferred the sovereignty of the body on the head" (cf. *QG* 1.3). The head, moreover, "is the temple of the mind" (*QG* 1.5) which is the ruling part of the body (*Leg. All.* 1.61-62; *Mos.* 2.82).<sup>80</sup> This image of Christ as head or ruler of the body is picked up and developed in two texts in 2:6-4:1, the central argument of the epistle. In 2:19 the head is said to govern the body as each member is related to Christ in obedient service resulting in unity and growth.<sup>81</sup> Again in 3:15 the body is said to achieve harmony and, by implication, spiritual growth as the church submits to Christ's rule.

To sum up, v 18a introduces the soteriological section of the hymn: as Christ is lord or head of the created order, so also is he head of the church,

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<sup>77</sup>Thus the great majority of scholars e.g. Lohse, 54; Schweizer, *Colossians* 72; Martin, *Colossians*, 59; Kehl, *Christushymnus* 97; Ernst, 170; Best, *One Body*, 129. Other interpreters e.g. E. F. Scott, 24; Bruce, 68; and O'Brien, 50 see the added notion here of the head as the body's source of life.

<sup>78</sup>E. Schweizer, "σῶμα, κτλ.." *TDNT* 7 (1971) 1076.

<sup>79</sup>See S. Bedale, "The Meaning of κεφαλή in the Pauline Epistles." *JTS* ns 5 (1954) 212.

<sup>80</sup>See further *Som.* 2.207; *Mos.* 2.30; *QG* 2.9; *T. Zeb.* 9:4. In addition see the examples listed by W. Grudem, "Does ΚΕΦΑΛΗ ('Head') Mean 'Source' or 'Authority over' in Greek Literature? A Survey of 2,336 Examples." *Trinity Journal* 6 ns (1985) 38-59.

<sup>81</sup>Best, *One Body*, 127. Pace Schweizer, *TDNT* 7.177 n.491, who claims the accent in the metaphor has shifted here from the head as ruler to that of the source of power (cf. O'Brien, 148; Fowl, *Story of Christ* 113). Regarding the current debate over whether κεφαλή carries the sense "source," see the helpful excursus in P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1989) 141-145.

his body. The following clause, v 18b explains the basis of this headship and provides insight into the underlying reality of this image.

### V. The Beginning, the Firstborn from the Dead (v 18b,c)

Christ's place of supremacy in the church is further explained by the statement ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν. The term ἀρχή, usually rendered "beginning," signifies "primacy," whether in time or in rank.<sup>82</sup> It was used in philosophy for a fundamental law or first principle,<sup>83</sup> and some interpreters believe this is the sense in v 18.<sup>84</sup> On this reading, because Christ is the image of God (cf. the parallel wording ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν in v 15) and firstborn from the dead, he is the first cause and principle, or pattern of all those to follow him in his passage from death to life. We would argue, however, that the usage here is more readily explained along the lines of LXX Gen 49:3 (cf. Deut 21:17) where ἀρχή and πρωτότοκος are used in tandem to designate the founder of a people.<sup>85</sup> This meaning for ἀρχή is strikingly illustrated in Philo's portrayal of Noah as a second Adam. In *Abr.* 46, Noah is said to be the founder (ἀρχηγέτης) of a new human race,<sup>86</sup> since he was the "last (τέλος) of those who lived before the flood and first (ἀρχή) of those who lived after it" (cf. *Mos* 2.60; *Praem* 23; *QG* 1.96). Moreover, as "the beginning (ἀρχή) of the second genesis of the human race [Noah] was worthy of the same kingship as the man (made) in the likeness

<sup>82</sup>G. Dellling, "ἀρχή, κτλ.," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 479.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>84</sup>Thus Abbott, 217; Dellling, 484; H. Bietenhard, "ἀρχή," *NIDNTT* (1975) 166; Zeilinger, 182; Wright, *Colossians* 74.

<sup>85</sup>Thus Gibbs, 106; Martin, *Colossians* 59; O'Brien, 50; cf. Lohmeyer, 63; Lohse, 59, n.173; Pokorný, 83.

<sup>86</sup>Cf. *Op.* 136 where Adam, as the first (πρῶτος) man, is called the "the founder of our whole race;" see also 142 and *QG* 1.23.

and form (of God)" (*OG* 2.56; cf. 2.17).<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Christ is said to be *the beginning* in Col 1:18b, because he is the founder of the new eschatological humanity, the church. He is therefore the Adam of the end-time, occupying the same position of headship to the new humanity as Adam does to the old.<sup>88</sup>

The nature and meaning of Christ's headship in relation to the church is further defined in the phrase ΠΡΩΤΟΤΟΚΟΣ ΕΚ ΤΩΝ ΝΕΚΡΩΝ: he is "the firstborn from the dead." In v 15 the phrase "the firstborn of all creation" describes Christ as occupying the place of supremacy in relation to the entire order which came into being through his mediation in the beginning; here in v 18 he is similarly declared to hold the place of supremacy in relation to the church because he is the firstborn from the dead. Because this statement regarding Christ's resurrection provides the point of departure for the epistle's subsequent discussion of the Christian's resurrection with Christ, it is deserving of special attention.

We begin with a consideration of the pre-Christian religious background of this statement. As we have already seen, salvation in our text is presented within the framework of the OT-Jewish concept of new creation. The underlying principle of this expectation is that the end-time will see a restoration of the original conditions which God intended from the beginning. A central feature in this scheme is the conviction that death was not a part of that original intention but entered the world only as a result of

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<sup>87</sup>The reference here is to the "man" created on the sixth day (Gen 1:26,27) whom Philo explains earlier is not the molded man, Adam, but the Logos.

<sup>88</sup>Thus Kehl, *Christushymnus*, 80; Zeilinger, 183; Martin, *Colossians*, 59; Gnifka, 70.

Adam's sin.<sup>89</sup> Correspondingly, the hope was widespread that the eschatological salvation would mean the abolition of death and the resurrection and restoration to the righteous of the glorious immortal existence Adam knew before the fall.<sup>90</sup>

Using this as our interpretive framework and taking into account the preceding context, we are able to put together the following picture of Christ as "the firstborn from the dead."

1. The resurrection of Christ is not an isolated event but marks the dawning of the eschatological age of new creation. It is the initial event of the end-time resurrection of the dead in general (cf. 1 Cor 15:20; Acts 26:23).<sup>91</sup>

2. As the firstborn from the dead Christ embodies God's perfect intention for humanity. This perfect humanity was possessed in the beginning by Adam, when he was created in the image and likeness of God, but through sin death entered the world, and this original perfection was lost. The resurrection of Christ was an act of new creation: in his resurrection humanity the effects of sin and death have been removed; that which is fallen has been restored.<sup>92</sup> Hence, he is the Adam of the end-time displaying the original pristine humanity which God intended from the beginning, and as such he is God's archetype for the eschatological new humanity restored to the image of God (cf. Col 1:15; 3:10).<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup>Thus 4 Ezra 3:7; 7:116-119; 2 Apoc. Bar. 17:3; 23:4; 48:42-43; 54:15; 56:6; *Bib. Ant.* 13:8-9; *Apoc. Mos.* 14:2; Wis 2:23-24; Sir 25:24; Rom 5:12. See further M. C. de Boer, *The Defeat of Death* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) 39-91.

<sup>90</sup>E.g. Isa 25:8; Dan 12:2; 4 Ezra 8:53; *Bib. Ant.* 310; *Apoc. Mos.* 13:3-4; Rev 21:4; cf. IQS 4:7-8, 23.

<sup>91</sup>See further Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul*, 98; O'Brien, 51; Pokorný, 84.

<sup>92</sup>See our discussion above on page 88; also Scroggs, *Last Adam*, 100-102.

<sup>93</sup>Zeilinger, 183.

3. It was only with his resurrection that Christ became the Adam of the new humanity. The fact that he rose from *amongst the dead* (ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν) indicates that in his earthly life and death Christ was identified with the fallen race of the first Adam. Paul makes the same point in Rom 6:9,10 where he refers to Christ as having been subject to the powers of sin and death, and in Rom 8:3 where he says Christ came in the likeness of the flesh of sin (cf. Gal 4:4; 2 Cor 5:21).<sup>94</sup> Hence, Christ's resurrection meant his own deliverance from the old era of fallenness, sin and of death, and his entry into the sphere of the new creation and the life of the age to come.

4. As the first man to experience this deliverance from death and restoration to the glorious existence which Adam knew before the fall, Christ has become the founder and head of the new human race. This presentation of Christ as a second Adam provides one of the essential clues to the meaning of the later description of salvation as dying and rising *with* Christ. The first Adam, acting as the head and representative of his race, brought condemnation and death on all (Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:21,22) through his sin. Christ's death and resurrection by which he experienced deliverance from the fallen state may be understood to bring deliverance to all who are united to him on the basis of this same notion of solidarity and representation. Acting as the corporate representative of this new race, Christ died and rose for all so that when believers are united with him God includes them in his saving acts towards Christ with the result that they are made to experience this same deliverance *with Christ*

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<sup>94</sup>See further Dunn, *Christology*, 110-113; on Rom 8:3 see especially Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.379-381 and F. M. Gillman, "Another Look at Romans 8:3: 'In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh'," *CBO* 49 (1987) 597-605.

5. Finally the question should be asked: If Christ has inaugurated this new human race by virtue of being the firstborn from the dead, when and by what means is the "birth" of the remainder of this race? In 1 Cor 15:20 Paul characterizes Christ in his resurrection from the dead as "the firstfruits (ἀπαρχή) of those who have fallen asleep;" and according to v 23 those who belong to him will be raised at his coming. It might be assumed, therefore, that the same futuristic perspective is implicit in Col 1:18: it is at the parousia that Christians will follow Christ in his passage from death to resurrection life (cf. Col 3:4).<sup>95</sup> While the Colossian epistle does anticipate a future of glory for believers at Christ's coming (3:4), the accent falls on the present realization of eschatological blessing: already believers are incorporated into the life-giving event of the new creation. This is made plain in 2:11-15: through faith and baptism Christians have been united with Christ in his death and *resurrection*<sup>96</sup> But it should be seen that the writer's subsequent exposition of dying and rising with Christ serves merely to draw out and develop something which is already more or less implicit in 1:18. For if the church constitutes the new human race of the new creation, and if Christ is the head of this race and the inaugurator of the new creation by virtue of his passage from death to life, is it not implicit that those who make up the church are those who have followed him, at least on a spiritual level, in this passage from the death of the old, fallen creation to the life of the new creation (cf. 1:13,14,21,22)? In other words, Christ is not the firstborn who awaits the "birth" of the rest of the family, but he is the firstborn among many brethren (cf. Rom 8:29), because Christians already

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<sup>95</sup>E.g. O'Brien, 51, seems to make this assumption.

<sup>96</sup>Zeilinger, 186; Bruce, *Colossians*, 71; E. F. Scott, 24.

have been incorporated into his resurrection; in baptism they have laid aside the old Adamic existence and put on that of the new Adam and the new creation (cf. 3:9,10).<sup>97</sup>

To summarize, 1:18b is to be understood against the background of the OT-Jewish expectation that the end-time salvation would bring the abolition of death and the restoration of that which God intended for the creation from the beginning but was lost through the sin of Adam. As the firstborn from the dead, Christ has become the beginning - i.e. the founder and prototype - of redeemed, eschatological humanity, as a second Adam. This new human race is made up of those who share his life, since they have been incorporated into the founding event of the new creation, his passage from death to life. Hence, it is through his resurrection that Christ has come to occupy the place of headship in this new race, which is the church (v 18a).

The final clause of v 18 ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων says nothing new but serves to summarize the essential point of v 18a,b and to reaffirm the basic theme of the hymn.<sup>98</sup> In vv 15-17 Christ is said to be supreme in relation to the creation as Adam was in the beginning because he is the one through whom God made the universe and now governs it. This is followed in v 18a,b by the affirmation that Christ is supreme in relation to the church, because as the first to rise he has become the new Adam of the redeemed race of the new creation. Thus he has become pre-eminent in all things (v 18c).

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<sup>97</sup>Zeilinger, 186.

<sup>98</sup>Ernst, 170-171.



## VI. The Mediator of the New Creation (vv 19-20)

The final two verses of the hymn serve to substantiate the description of Christ in v 18a,b and form a parallel with vv 16-17. As the words ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ in v 16 introduce an explanation of Christ's Adam-like position as lord of the creation based on his preexistent role as God's agent and governor of the creation, so in v 19 the same three words introduce an explanation of his position as the new Adam of the new creation based on his role as God's agent in bringing about the new creation. The basic argument of vv 18-20 runs as follows: all the fullness dwelt in Christ so that reconciliation could be accomplished through his death on the cross, and thus he became the head of the church, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.<sup>99</sup>

### A. The Indwelling of all the Fullness (v 19)

The first issue to be settled in v 19 is that of the subject of the verb εὐδόκησεν: Is it "God" or "all the fullness"? Many interpreters believe "God" or "the Father" must be supplied on the assumption that it is God and not the impersonal "all the fullness" who exercises pleasure, reconciles and makes peace (v 20).<sup>100</sup> This reading, however, is difficult syntactically since normally when εὐδοκέω is followed by an infinitive, both have the same subject; this is the case in each of other seven NT texts where this construction appears.<sup>101</sup> The difficulties are avoided, however, if "all the

<sup>99</sup>Peake, 507; cf. Abbott, 218; M. Dibelius and H. Greeven, *An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1953) 18; Pokorný, 86.

<sup>100</sup>Thus the RV, "For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fullness dwell." Similarly the AV, TCNT, Weymouth, JB, NEB, TEV, NASB, NJB, NIV; Lightfoot, 158; Peake, 507; A. L. Williams, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: CUP, 1907) 51; Lohmeyer, 65, n. 4; G. Schrenk, "εὐδοκέω," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 741; G. Delling, "πλήρωμα," *TDNT* 6 (1968) 303.

<sup>101</sup>Thus Luke 12:32; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 1:21; 2 Cor 5:8; Gal 1:15; 1 Thess 2:8; 3:1. An exception to this pattern is seen in 2 Macc 14:35.

fullness" is seen not as something impersonal but as a circumlocution for God (cf. the RSV "all the fullness of God").<sup>102</sup> The key to this reading is found in 2:9 where the writer picks up the point of 1:19 in order to make a soteriological application and adds for clarification the genitive τῆς θεότητος: "for in him dwells all the fullness *of deity*." This reading of 1:19 therefore leads to essentially the same outcome as the view which supplies "the Father": God was pleased to dwell in Christ and through him to reconcile all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor 5:19). But in what sense is this divine indwelling of Christ to be understood?

Traditionally it has been seen as an affirmation of the deity of Christ.<sup>103</sup> Typically this interpretation follows the lines of Chalcedonian orthodoxy: in the incarnation the divine and human natures were united in the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man. Yet it should be recognized that if "all the fullness" is understood as the divine nature, the wording of the text also permits an Adoptionist or Nestorian interpretation.<sup>104</sup> The hymn does indeed present Christ as a pre-existent divine person who became a man (cf. vv 15-17), but the wording of v 19 regarding a divine decision and indwelling of Christ, as we will seek to show, is best understood along quite different lines.

The verb εὐδοκέω often appears in Jewish writings to denote God's purpose or choice (e.g. LXX, Ps 39:13; Matt 3:17; Gal 1:15).<sup>105</sup> His decision to

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<sup>102</sup>Thus Abbott, 218-219; Lohse, 57; Schweizer, *Colossians* 77; Ernst, 171; O'Brien, 51; Pokorný, 60; M. J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 49-50; the Moffat Version, REB, NRSV.

<sup>103</sup>E.g. Lightfoot, 158-159; Abbott, 219; Williams, *Colossians* 52-53; Wright, *Colossians* 75-76; Harris, 49-50; H. W. House, "The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992) 187; cf. TCNT, TEV, NEB.

<sup>104</sup>Ernst, 171; Dunn, *Christology*, 193.

<sup>105</sup>See Schrenk, *TDNT* 2.738-741.

dwell on Mt. Zion is recorded in LXX Ps 67:16 in language strikingly close to that of Col 1:19, εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς κατοικεῖν ἐν αὐτῷ. Similar language is used in reference to the temple in the Targum on 1 Kgs 8:27, "Has it really pleased the Lord to cause his Shekinah to dwell among men who live on the earth?" (cf. 2 Macc 14:35; LXX Ps 131:13-14). These parallels have led some to conclude that in Col 1:19 "Christ is portrayed as fulfilling the role assigned to the Temple in the Old Testament."<sup>106</sup> The parallels are indeed unmistakable, but they need indicate no more than the writer's use of conventional Jewish phraseology regarding God's choice of dwelling place, and there are other "places" which fit this description.

In *I Enoch* 49:2-4 the notions of God's pleasure and dwelling appear in relation to the Spirit and the Messiah: "The Elect One stands before the Lord of the Spirits . . . In him dwells the spirit of wisdom, the spirit that gives thoughtfulness, the spirit of knowledge and strength and the spirit of those who have fallen asleep in righteousness . . . . For he is the Elect One before the Lord of the Spirits according to his good pleasure." This text clearly draws (1) on Isa 11:2 which speaks of the ideal Davidic king being endowed with the Spirit of Yahweh and (2) on Isa 42:1 which reads, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights (Theodotion = εὐδόκησεν; cf. Matt 12:18); I have put my spirit on him."<sup>107</sup> The notion of the bestowal of the divine Spirit upon the Messiah seems a

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<sup>106</sup>Thus P. Beasley-Murray, "Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn Celebrating the Lordship of Christ," in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday* ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980) 169-183; Dellinger, *TDNT* 6.303; similarly M. Barth, *Ephesians: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1-3* (New York: Doubleday, 1974) 204.

<sup>107</sup>Cf. the Targum on Isa 42:1: "My chosen in whom my Word takes pleasure, I will put my Holy Spirit on him." Here "my Word" serves as a periphrasis for God, similar to the use of "all the fullness" in Col 1:19.

more likely background to Col 1:19 than that of the dwelling of God in the temple, since Christ has already been presented in the context in Messianic terms (esp. v 13), while the temple motif is otherwise absent.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, as we argued earlier, the portrayal of Christ as the Adam of the end-time, first introduced in v 15, is itself probably rooted in Isa 11:1-9. Here these two motifs are woven into a single image: the Spirit of God will rest on the ideal king (v 2; LXX: the Spirit will *fill* him, ἐμπλήσει) and enable him to rule the earth with wisdom and righteousness, executing judgment upon the wicked (vv 3-5) and imposing a universal peace so that the conditions of paradise are restored (vv 6-9a), "for the earth shall be full (תָּלֵא, ἐνεπλήσθη) of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (v 9b; cf. *J. Levi* 18:4-12). This picture in its essence fits that of Col 1:19,20: the active presence and power of God indwells his Son, the new Adam, enabling him to be God's end-time agent of reconciliation and peace, i.e. of new creation. We therefore conclude that v 19 is properly understood against the background of the OT-Jewish expectation of the Messiah's endowment with the Spirit for the work of new creation (Isa 11:1-9; 42:1; *1 Enoch* 49:2-4; *J. Levi* 18:4-12).

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<sup>108</sup>A number of interpreters make this identification of the *pleroma* with the Spirit based on the divine proclamation at Jesus' baptism which is derived from Isa 42:1: "you are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα, Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; Matt 3:13. These include G. Munderlein, "Die Erwählung durch das Pleroma. Bemerkungen zu Kol. 1.19," *NTS* (1961-62) 264-276; Kehl, *Christushymnus* 121-124; A. J. Bandstra, "Pleroma as Pneuma in Colossians," 96-102 in *Ad Interam, Opstellen over Eschatologie, Apocalyptiek en Ethiek*, ed. T. Baarda, J. Friet and G. T. Rothuizen (Kampen: Kok, 1975); Pokorný, *Colossians* 84-86.

## **B. Reconciliation Through Christ (v 20)**

To review briefly, vv 19-20 constitute a two-step explanation of the statement of v 18a,b that Christ holds the supreme place in the new creation as the beginning, the firstborn from the dead. The first step (v 19) identifies Christ as the one God has chosen to indwell by his special presence and power, i.e. by his Spirit. Next, in step two (v 20), the explanation, and indeed the hymn itself, reaches its high point: because of this special indwelling Christ could become God's agent of reconciling the cosmos to himself.

In v 16 Christ is described as having been God's agent in creating "all things" (τὰ πάντα) in the beginning. Now in v 20 he is said to be the one through whom God purposed to reconcile "all things" (τὰ πάντα) to himself, a statement which receives elaboration in the following exegetical clause, "making peace by the blood of his cross." Presupposed here is the notion that a rupture had taken place subsequent to the creation in which the original harmony of the cosmos had given way to a state of conflict and estrangement. Thus, it became Christ's mission to overcome this enmity and restore his creation to its original state of harmony.<sup>109</sup> In this picture of Christ's death effecting the restoration of the creation we have already recognized the basic outline of the OT, Jewish and early Christian concept of salvation as new creation.<sup>110</sup> The essential feature here is that the last things shall be as the first, so "that the end will bring the final realization of what from the beginning was the will of God the creator."<sup>111</sup> This notion that the end-time will see a restoration to all the creation of the peace and harmony it knew in the beginning finds poetic expression in Isa 11:6-9 where

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<sup>109</sup>Lohse, 20; O'Brien, 53.

<sup>110</sup>See above pages 86-87.

<sup>111</sup>Dahl, "Christ, Creation and Church," 429.

the world of the Messiah's reign is described as a new Eden in which "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and . . . the lion will eat straw like the ox . . ." and, "they will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain."<sup>112</sup> This parallel with v 20 taken together with the other points of contact observed earlier between the Colossian hymn and Isa 11:1-9 supports the conclusion that the hymn writer has made use of the expectation rooted in Isa 11:1-9 (cf. *T. Levi* 18), reshaping and reinterpreting it in terms of the death and resurrection of Christ.

But what, to be more specific, is the nature and scope of the reconciliation of the creation envisaged in Col 1:20? Does it mean, as Origen believed, that nothing ultimately will be lost? Or is its scope more limited, and if so, in what way? That the scope of Christ's reconciling death is absolutely comprehensive would seem to be left in no doubt by the final line of v 20 where that which is reconciled is said to include all things "whether on the earth or in the heavens."<sup>113</sup> While Kehl maintains that the reference must be limited to humanity,<sup>114</sup> these words surely are meant to be as all-embracing as the creation through Christ described in v 16 where the things in heaven and on earth are said to include the "visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers." The scope then of Christ's reconciling work is absolutely universal: nothing is to remain outside of Christ's dominion; in the new creation God's purpose is to restore everything to its original, divinely intended order.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup>This parallel is noted by Best, *One Body*, 116; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 71.

<sup>113</sup>Cf. H. Traub, "οὐρανός, κτλ.," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 517.

<sup>114</sup>*Christushymnus*, 159-160.

<sup>115</sup>Martin, *Colossians*, 60; Lohse, 59; O'Brien, 55-56.

The more difficult question is the *nature* of this universal reconciliation. To discover the text's meaning in this regard requires a look at the elaboration of v 20 found in vv 21-23 and in 2:9-15. In vv 21-23 the writer takes up the subject of the reconciliation of the human race. Formerly the Colossians were alienated and hostile in mind (v 21), but through Christ's death they have been reconciled so that they can now stand before God at the last judgment holy, blameless and without accusation (v 22) - though this remains contingent upon their remaining steadfast in faith (v 23). In other words, reconciliation is limited to those who believe. However, from the hymn's perspective of reconciliation as new creation it may be seen that those who are reconciled constitute the new human race under the new Adam, so that the human race as such is reconciled and restored through this new beginning. In 2:9-15 the writer again takes up the application of Christ's reconciling death to humanity but includes also its impact on the hostile spirit powers. By his death on the cross Christ triumphed over these powers and led them as his captives as in a victory parade (v 15), thereby re-establishing his headship over them (v 10) as it was in the beginning (cf. 1:16). Hence, pacification and subjection (cf. Phil 2:10,11) are perhaps the more appropriate terms to describe the nature of Christ's death in relation to the hostile powers rather than the English word reconciliation.

Finally we may note that this elaboration of the meaning of 1:20 in 2:13-15 involves the notion of salvation as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. On the cross Christ made himself responsible for humanity's sin, died to blot out the accusing document by which the hostile spirits exercised dominion and, having thereby won the victory over them, he passed from death to heavenly life. Christians also, through their union with Christ in faith-baptism (vv 12-13), are made to share in this death and

triumphant passage into eternal life.<sup>116</sup> Thus it may be seen that the cosmic reconciliation of 1:20, which is new creation, provides the broader theological context for understanding this discussion of dying and rising with Christ in 2:13-15.

## **VII. Summary**

1. Although lacking any explicit mention of dying and rising with Christ, the Colossian hymn is nevertheless of programmatic significance for the understanding of our subject, since the central exposition in the epistle on dying and rising, 2:9-15, constitutes in effect an elaboration and soteriological application of this earlier exposition regarding Christ and the significance of his death and resurrection.

2. The broader religious framework for the hymn is found in the OT-Jewish concept of salvation as new creation, i.e. the idea that the end-time will bring the restoration of God's original intent for the creation. Within this framework Christ is portrayed as God's agent of the protological creation as well as of the eschatological new creation. Hence, Christ has come to hold the place of supremacy in all things (1:18c).

3. This place of supremacy is presented in terms of the figure of Adam, and follows the expectation that the end-time Messiah will be world ruler like Adam in the beginning, presiding over a restored paradise (cf. Isa 11:1-9).

4. It is through his death that Christ has reconciled or restored the creation to its original state of peace and harmony (1:20). In his resurrection he inaugurated the new age becoming the founder and prototype of the new

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<sup>116</sup>Col 2:13-15 is the subject of chapter six of this study.



redeemed human race (v 18a,b). The significance of these statements is developed in terms of dying and rising with Christ in 2:11-15.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**DEATH AND RESURRECTION WITH CHRIST**  
**COLOSSIANS 2:11-12**

In Col 2:11,12 the writer introduces into his argument the concept of death, burial and resurrection with Christ. Our analysis of the structure of Colossians in chapter two showed that these verses belong to the central theological argument of the body-middle of the epistle, 2:9-15. This argument is focused on Christ and the salvation the Colossians have received in him, and is aimed at reinforcing their understanding of the gospel in the light of the counterclaims of the false teachers who would lead them astray according to their own worldly and human teachings. In the first of this three part argument (vv 9,10) the writer picks up on his point previously made in 1:19: in Christ all "the fullness of the deity dwells bodily." We argued in chapter four<sup>1</sup> that this language belongs to a tradition stemming from Isa 11:1-9 regarding the endowment of the Messiah by the Spirit and refers in the context of Colossians to the active presence and power of God indwelling Christ and enabling him to be God's agent of reconciliation and new creation. The following statement in Col 2:10a καὶ ἔστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι means the Colossians have become the objects of God's end-

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<sup>1</sup>See 112-113.

time reconciling work through Christ (cf. 1:21,22). The nature and means of this reconciliation are next developed in vv 11,12 in terms of the moral and spiritual transformation which comes through union with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection.

### **I. Dying With Christ (v 11)**

Verse 11 falls into three parts:

- a. ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποίητῳ
- b. ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός
- c. ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ

The principal statement appears in part a. The other two parts are logically subordinate and serve to explain the meaning of this "circumcision made without hands."<sup>2</sup>

#### **A. A Circumcision Made without Hands (v 11a)**

The adjunctive καί of v 11a, loosely linking this relative clause to the preceding, is not exegetically significant and is best left untranslated<sup>3</sup> - "in whom you were circumcised." To insert "also" into this clause, as most versions do, is wooden and gives the impression that v 11 describes

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Lona, *Die Eschatologie im Kolosser - und Epheserbrief*, 148; Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul*, 67.

<sup>3</sup>As in the JB, TEV, and Moffatt versions. On the common NT phenomenon of this conjunction immediately following the relative pronoun which apparently serves no practical purpose see M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. J. Smith (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 156, section 463. This construction appears in Colossians four other times: 1:29; 2:12; 3:15; 4:3. For a complete list of occurrences in the NT see Zerwick, 156, n. 1.

blessings separate from and in addition to that of being made full in Christ (v 10a), whereas in fact vv 11-15 constitute an explanation of this filling.<sup>4</sup>

The phrase ἐν ᾧ introducing v 11 stands in connection with the four preceding ἐν αὐτῷ statements of this section: Christ is the one in/by whom believers must walk (v 6), the one in/by whom they are rooted and built up (v 7), the one in whom all the fullness of deity dwells (v 9), and the one in/by whom they are made full (v 10). The repetition of the phrase clearly emphasizes the centrality of Christ in opposition to the false teachers who, in the writer's view, would relegate him to a place of secondary importance. The phraseology ἐν Χριστῷ is a common and distinctive feature of the Pauline epistles. It is, however, not a fixed formula but varies in force according to context.<sup>5</sup> The usage in Col 2:10,11 belongs to the class of texts in which God does something to people "in Christ."<sup>6</sup> This could simply mean God acts "through Christ's agency." However, the context suggests a local flavour, so that Christ is presented here not simply as the mediator of salvation but more specifically as the "place" or person in whom salvation is.<sup>7</sup> The explanation of this "circumcision" which is "in Christ" is closely linked with the further description of salvation in v 12 in terms of burial and resurrection *with* Christ. As we will show later in our examination of this verse, this statement is based on the concept of Christ as the inclusive representative through whom God acts towards the human race. In baptism-conversion Christians are incorporated into a relationship of solidarity with

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<sup>4</sup>Thus Scott, *Colossians* 44; J. Lähnemann, *Der Kolosserbrief. Komposition, Situation und Argumentation* (Gutersloh: Mohn, 1971), 120; Gnifka, 130; J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 155; O'Brien, 114.

<sup>5</sup>For a helpful catalogue of usages see Best, *One Body in Christ* 1-7; cf. also A. Oepke, "ἐν," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 541.

<sup>6</sup>See Best, *One Body*, 4, 5, category number 5.

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Best, *One Body*, 8; Lona *Eschatologie*, 149.

Christ, the representative and head of the new human race. As a result, they are caught up "with" Christ and thereby made to share in that which God accomplished for him on their behalf. This would suggest that the ἐν does indeed bear a local sense in 2:11.<sup>8</sup> Christ is the mediator of salvation to believers because in baptism they are "placed into" him and thus are made to share in those saving events which he experienced.

The writer characterizes the circumcision Christians have received as περιτομῆ ἀχειροποιήτῳ, thus distinguishing it from physical circumcision, which is described in Eph 2:11 as that "which is made in the flesh by hands" (ἐν σαρκὶ χειροποιήτου). The adjective χειροποιήτος is used exclusively in the NT to set in contrast that which is made by human hands and that which is fashioned by God (cf. Mark 14:58, Acts 7:48; 17:24; Eph 2:11; Heb 9:11, 24).<sup>9</sup> Hence, to describe something as ἀχειροποίητος is to say that it is the work of God. Of the three occurrences of this term in the NT, all refer to the realities of the new order. In Mark 14:58 it is the new temple. In 2 Cor 5:1 it is the resurrection body. In Col 2:11 it is the new circumcision. The reference is to the transformation from the old life to the new, thus picking up on ideas set forth earlier in 1:21,22.<sup>10</sup>

The sudden introduction of the notion of circumcision into this context is surprising. The common explanation for its appearance here is that physical circumcision was being advocated by the false teachers as a prerequisite for entering into the fullness of the divine blessings.<sup>11</sup> If this were the case, the writer's remarks would be particularly fitting since the

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Oepke, 542; Best, 5; cf. A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 21-22, 105.

<sup>9</sup>E. Lohse, "χειροποίητος, κτλ.." *JNT* 9 (1974) 436; O'Brien, 115.

<sup>10</sup>O'Brien, 116.

<sup>11</sup>Lightfoot, 183; Peake, 524; E. F. Scott, 44; Lohmeyer, 108; Beasley-Murray, 102-103, Gnllka, 133; Wright, *Colossians* 104.

gift of a divinely wrought circumcision implies the inferiority and indeed the obsolescence of physical circumcision.<sup>12</sup> The difficulty with this theory, however, is that no reference is made to circumcision in 2:16-23, the only section in the epistle in which the practices of the errorists are directly addressed. If physical circumcision was of any importance to the false teachers, why is it not mentioned here?<sup>13</sup> Thus, the question of why this image is introduced in 2:11 must remain an open one.

The use of the term circumcision in a transferred, ethical sense is first seen in the Old Testament. The person whose heart was uncircumcised was hostile to God and rejected his law (Lev 26:41; Jer 9:25, 26; Ezek 44:7,9; cf. Jer 6:10). In times of apostasy God summoned his wayward people to circumcise their hearts and no longer be stiff-necked (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4). The only passage in the Old Testament where God himself is said to perform this work of circumcision is Deut 30:6. A time is pictured when the people of Israel will have been scattered among the nations because of their sin (v 1), and God promises to gather them and restore them to the land (vv 3-5). He will then circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants (v 6a). As a result they will henceforth love the Lord wholeheartedly (v 6b), obey his commands (v 8) and experience prosperity in the land (v 9).<sup>14</sup> This same basic pattern of a future reconciliation and divinely wrought transformation of the heart, though employing different images, is a prominent feature in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In Jer 31:33 God declares, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts" (cf. 24:7

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<sup>12</sup>Bruce, *Colossians*, 103-104, O'Brien, 115.

<sup>13</sup>Abbott, 250; Zeilinger, *Erstgeborene*, 143, 144; Schweizer, *Colossians* 142, O'Brien, 115.

<sup>14</sup>See further D. E. Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 73.

and 32:39,40)<sup>15</sup> and in Ezek 26:36, "a new heart I will give to you . . . and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (cf. 11:19,20).<sup>16</sup> This expectation of an eschatological moral transformation appears repeatedly in the Jewish literature of the NT era, and at times may be seen as a corollary of the principle of new creation that the last things will be as the first (cf. *1 Enoch* 10:20,21; 92:5; *Jub.* 4:26; 1QS 4:20; *Apoc. Mos* 13:5; 4 Ezra 6:26-28; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 73:4; *T. Levi* 18:9, 11; *Sib. Or.* 3.373-80).<sup>17</sup> In *Jub.* 1:23 the image of circumcision resurfaces. Looking ahead to "the day of the new creation" (v 29), when he will descend and dwell in the midst of a restored Israel (vv 17,26,27; cf. 4:26), God declares, "I shall cut off the foreskin of their heart and the foreskin of the heart of their descendants. And . . . I shall purify them so that they will not turn away from following me from that day and forever."<sup>18</sup> To conclude, the concept of a circumcision of the heart originates in the Old Testament where the prophets foretold that it would be one of the blessings of the end-time. This expectation was also current in the Jewish writings of the NT era of which the Pauline epistles form a part. Hence, Col 2:11a can be seen as declaring that in Christ the long awaited transformation of human nature has arrived.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Forming a backdrop to this statement is the prophet's repeated emphasis on the moral corruption of the heart and the inability of humans to cleanse it (2:22; 10:23; 3:23; 7, 9); von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2.16, 17.

<sup>16</sup>Gowan, *Eschatology in Old Testament*, 74.

<sup>17</sup>E. Sjöberg, "Wiedergeburt und Neuschöpfung im palastinischen Judentum," *Studia Theologica* 4 (1951-52) 70, 71.

<sup>18</sup>Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 2. 54; see further H. J. Hoover, "The Concept of New Creation in the Letters of Paul," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, the University of Iowa, 1979, 37-41.

<sup>19</sup>Other early Christian references to spiritual circumcision include Rom 2:29; Phil 3:3; *Odes Sol.* 11:1-3; *Barn.* 9:1-9; *Gos. Thom.* logion, 53.

## **B. The Stripping off of the Body of Flesh (v 11b)**

### **1. The Image of Removing a Garment**

This spiritual circumcision is explained in part b of v 11 as consisting in "the putting off of the body of flesh"(RSV). This statement is enigmatic and has led to a variety of interpretations. The first issue to be settled is that of the broader image to which the phrase belongs. Does it belong to the image of circumcision, so as to say: as in physical circumcision the foreskin is cut off, so in spiritual circumcision the entire "body of flesh" is put off? Or does it belong to the image of burial and resurrection with Christ in v 12, so that "the putting off of the body of flesh" describes the death which the burial of v 12 marks? Or do the two images overlap? In favour of the second alternative is the widely recognized fact that the language of v 12 is dependent upon the primitive kerygmatic sequence "Christ died . . . was buried and has been raised" (1 Cor 15:3, 4; cf. Rom 6:3,4).<sup>20</sup> Unless "the putting off of the body of flesh" is understood as a reference to death - and thus constituting the first member of the sequence- the sequence is left truncated. Moreover, we are left with a burial in v 12 but without a death or a body to be buried. It seems best then to take v 11b as a reference to the convert's union with Christ in his death.<sup>21</sup> But what of the image of circumcision? Clearly the phrase "in the putting off of the body of flesh" explains the circumcision made without hands and is in turn explained by the phrase "in the circumcision of Christ." Hence, to do justice to the evidence it would appear that the two images are superimposed. While circumcision is the dominant image of v 11, the imagery of v 12a has

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<sup>20</sup>See Lohse, 103; Beasley-Murray, 152.

<sup>21</sup>Thus e.g. O'Brien, 116; Beasley-Murray, 152; Lona, 151.



intruded into the middle of it, so that spiritual circumcision is explained in terms of union with Christ in his death.

The term ἀπέκδυσις, translated in the RSV as "putting off," occurs only here in the New Testament and nowhere else in Greek literature independently of Colossians.<sup>22</sup> The same may be said of the cognate verb ἀπεκδύομαι in 2:15 and 3:9 with the single exception of Josephus *Ant* 6.330 where it appears in one manuscript as a variant of the rare double compound μετεκδύομαι which seems to be the correct reading.<sup>23</sup> The uniqueness of these terms to Colossians is remarkable and has led some to suggest that the writer may have coined them for special emphasis on this occasion,<sup>24</sup> possibly in response to some claim of the errorists. These words are formed from ἐκδύσις and ἐκδύω, which normally refer to the removal of clothing, and often with the more vigorous connotation of stripping.<sup>25</sup> The addition of the preposition ἀπό serves to intensify the action thus specifying a more complete or violent stripping off.<sup>26</sup> Since ἐκδύσις/ -δύω generally refer to the removal of clothing it would appear that the writer has departed momentarily from the image of circumcision and introduced a new image in which the "body of flesh" is pictured as a garment which is violently or totally stripped off (cf. the use of the same metaphor in 2:15 and 3:9).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and adaptation of 4th ed. by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich; rev. 2nd ed. F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 83 (henceforth BAGD).

<sup>23</sup>A. Oepke, "ἀπεκδύω," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 318; J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 56; Lightfoot, 189.

<sup>24</sup>Moulton and Milligan, 56; J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body. A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM, 1952), 42; Lightfoot, 189.

<sup>25</sup>E.g. Matt 27:28; Luke 10:30; LXX Gen 37:23; 1 Kgdms 31:9.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. ἐκδέχομαι, "to wait," and ἀπεκδέχομαι, "to await eagerly."

<sup>27</sup>J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908-76) vol. 2 (1928): *Accidence & Word-Formation*, by J. H. Moulton and W. F. Howard, 310.

This basic image of the body as a garment is relatively common in Jewish and Christian literature of the NT period.<sup>28</sup> Resurrection is frequently pictured as the donning of a new body (cf. 4 Ezra 2:39; 1 Cor 15:3,4), while death is the putting off of the old, natural body. Although the latter image is not so common, a well known example is seen in 2 Cor 5:4 where Paul refers to death as being unclothed (ἐκδύσασθαι).<sup>29</sup> It seems best therefore to identify the "stripping off of the body of flesh" in Col 2:11 as a metaphorical expression for death. Understood in this way the image fits perfectly with the notion of burial in the following verse, since typically burial marks the death of the one buried. In addition, W. A. Meeks may well be right to see in this metaphor a reflection of a ritual action related to baptism whereby disrobing in preparation for immersion symbolized death.<sup>30</sup> Two factors in the context tend to favour this theory. First, it would help to explain the sudden introduction of the metaphor of removing a garment into a context dominated by the image of circumcision. Secondly, since the other two members of the death-burial-resurrection triad in v 12 reflect (as we will argue below) symbolic actions associated with baptism - burial as descent into the grave of the baptismal waters, and resurrection as

<sup>28</sup>See 1 Enoch 62:15, 16; 4 Ezra 2:39, 45; 2 Apoc. Bar. 49:3; IQS 4:7, 8; 2 Enoch 22:18, 19; Sib. Or. 2, 245, 46; Apoc. Abr. 13:14; Philo Leg. All. 2. 55; Mig. 192; Quis Her. 5A; Odes Sol. 8:9; 15:8; Asc. Isa 7:22; 8:14, 26; 9:2, 9, 17, 24-26; 11:35, 40; Gos. Truth 20:23-32; Gos. Phil. 66:18. For the similar metaphor of the body as a tent see 2 Cor 5:14; 2 Pet 1:13, 14; Wis 9:15; and Diogn. 6:8.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Gos. Phil. 66:18; Gos. Truth 20:30, 31.

<sup>30</sup>W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 155; idem, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13 (1974) 183-184; cf. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection* 370. The earliest extra-canonical texts which refer explicitly to the removal of garments in connection with baptism probably date from no earlier than the latter half of the second century (e.g. Odes Sol. 11:9, 10; 15:8; Gos. Phil. 75:24, 25). For a discussion of the evidence see R. Scroggs and K. Groff, "Baptism in Mark: Dying and Rising with Christ," *JBL* 92 (1973) 537-538; Lincoln, *Ephesians*; 265.

ascent - it is natural to expect that a similar symbolic action was also associated with the death.

## 2. The Body of Flesh

We have seen that the phrase ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός explains the circumcision made without hands, and in doing so it describes a death. Our understanding of the nature and results of this death depends to a large degree on the interpretation of the disputed phrase σῶμα τῆς σαρκός: What is it? and From whom is it stripped off?

The Majority Text inserts τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν between σώματος and τῆς σαρκός ("the body of the sins of the flesh," AV). Though the shorter reading is undoubtedly the original,<sup>31</sup> the insertion bears witness to an early interpretation of the phrase in terms of sinful conduct. The expression σῶμα τῆς σαρκός is a genitive of quality, reflecting Hebrew usage.<sup>32</sup> Such constructions with σῶμα are a familiar feature of the Pauline epistles: τῆς ἁμαρτίας (Rom 6:6), τοῦ θανάτου (Rom 7:24), τῆς ταπεινώσεως and τῆς δόξης (Phil 3:21). Both σῶμα (body) and σὰρξ (flesh) are common terms in the Pauline epistles, each displaying a range of usage. The latter is particularly notorious in this regard. The actual genitival combination, σῶμα τῆς σαρκός, however, is rare and appears elsewhere in the NT only in Col 1:22 where it obviously designates the physical body.

When it comes to an assessment of the meaning of this phrase in 2:11, however, there is considerable dispute. On the basis of the two questions

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<sup>31</sup>Manuscript evidence for the shorter reading includes  $\phi^{46}$ ,  $\kappa^*$ , A, B, C, D\*, E, G, P.

<sup>32</sup>E. Bless and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. F. W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) section 165 (henceforth BDF); J. H. Moulton, *Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol 3 (1963): *Syntax* by N. Turner, 212,213.

stated earlier - What is "the body of flesh"? and From whom is it stripped off? - interpreters fall into two groups. One group identifies it as the physical body which Christ "wore" and which was stripped off in his crucifixion. Hence, Christians are circumcised spiritually *through* the death of Christ. For the majority of interpreters, however, it is the converts themselves who "wear" the body of flesh; their circumcision *consists in* its removal and, given the spiritual nature of this operation, it cannot (so it is claimed) refer to the convert's physical body. Rather the body of flesh which is stripped off is variously identified as sinful behaviour,<sup>33</sup> or the sinful nature,<sup>34</sup> or the self as determined by sin<sup>35</sup> or one's entire manner of existence in the present world.<sup>36</sup>

We wish to argue, however, that the phrase σῶμα τῆς σαρκός is best understood as a reference to the physical body. To begin with, this reading requires only simple and commonplace meanings for σῶμα and σὰρξ. The precise expression, σῶμα τῆς σαρκός, as we indicated earlier, is rare. The only other occurrence in the NT is Col 1:22 where a reference to the physical body is clearly in view. Here Christ is said to have reconciled Christians "in his body of flesh by his death." In ancient Greek texts outside of the NT it is found twice: both texts are Jewish in nature, and in both it designates the physical body. According to Sir 23:17 a type of person who multiplies sin is "a fornicator in his body of flesh." In *1 (Greek) Enoch* 102:5 the righteous dead are exhorted not to grieve even though, "the body of your flesh fared not in your life according to your holiness," for an eternal reward awaits

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<sup>33</sup>Lightfoot, 184; Ernst, 202; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 142, 143.

<sup>34</sup>Peake, 525; Williams, *Colossians*, 92; E. F. Scott, 144, 145; Martin, *Colossians*, 81, 82; Gnilka, 132; C. S. Rodd, "Salvation Proclaimed II. Colossians 2:8-15," *ExpTim* 94 (1982) 37, 38; NEB, NIV, REB.

<sup>35</sup>Robinson, *Body*, 131; Bruce, *Colossians*, 104.

<sup>36</sup>Zeilinger, 144; cf. Ridderbos, *Paul* 229; Lona, 150.

them. Finally, in the light of our earlier observations that the construction  $\sigma\acute{\omega}\mu\alpha$  τῆς σαρκός reflects Hebrew usage, it is relevant to consider the usage of the equivalent Hebrew expression  $\text{גוֹיָהוּ בְשָׂר}$  which is found twice in texts from the NT era. In 1QpHab 9:2 the wicked priest is said to have suffered the "horrors of evil diseases and . . . vengeance upon his body of flesh." And in 4QpNah 2:6 there is described a scene of warfare in the last days (cf. Nah 3:3) where the multitude of the slain is so great that the combatants "shall stumble upon their body of flesh" - i.e. upon the corpses. These five instances of this phrase suggest strongly that this phrase was a conventional Jewish expression for the physical body. But what of the evidence for this meaning in Col 2:11? The evidence is based on our conclusion made earlier that the "stripping off of the body of flesh" belongs to the image of burial and resurrection in the following verse so that it constitutes the first member of the kerygmatic sequence death, burial, resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15:3,4). That the image is one of *bodily* death (as opposed to death in some general spiritual sense) is seen from the fact (a) that burial and resurrection are, by the nature of the case, actions involving the body<sup>37</sup>, (b) that the image of the body as a garment is a commonplace in late Jewish literature<sup>38</sup>, and (c) that the language of "stripping off the body" is easily recognized in this context as a metaphorical expression for physical death.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>This is the traditional understanding of resurrection in ancient Jewish belief. It has been challenged in recent years by H. C. C. Cavallin in his book *Life After Death* (Lund: Gleerup, 1974) where he argues that some Jews of the NT period envisaged a non-somatic resurrection (see especially his chart on page 197). For a convincing rebuttal in support of the traditional view see Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 167-180.

<sup>38</sup>See above note 28.

<sup>39</sup>See above 126-127.

Our conclusion, then, is that σῶμα τῆς σαρκός in v 11b is best understood, at least on the surface of things, as a reference to the physical body. This leaves unanswered the important question of how the stripping off of the body of flesh is related to the spiritual circumcision of the convert. This question, however, can only be answered by first determining *whose* body of flesh is in view here and therefore whose death.

The common answer for those who follow our exegesis up to this point is that the σῶμα τῆς σαρκός is the body which Christ wore and which was stripped off in his crucifixion.<sup>40</sup> According to this view believers are understood implicitly to share in this death, just as they share his burial and resurrection in v 12, and this constitutes their spiritual circumcision.<sup>41</sup> Support for this reading is seen in the fact that the language of v 11b is used elsewhere in Colossians to describe the death of Christ. In 1:22 the phrase σῶμα τῆς σαρκός refers to his physical body in which he suffered death. And in 2:15 his death whereby he defeated the cosmic powers is called his "stripping off" (ἀπεκδυσάμενος; cf. the NEB margin, "he stripped himself of his physical body").<sup>42</sup> Thus, given these usages and the reference to Christ's burial in v 12, a good case can be made for taking "the stripping off of the body of flesh" in v 11 as a description of Christ's own death. What we wish to argue, however, is that while it is correct to see this statement as a description of *the death Christ died*, the death itself is predicated of the

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<sup>40</sup>Lohmeyer, 109; Käsemann, "Baptismal Liturgy," 162; Moule, *Colossians*, 96; Tannehill, 50; Beasley-Murray, 152, 153, 157; Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology with Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1976; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 41; O'Brien, 116, 117; C. Burger, *Schöpfung und Versöhnung* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975) 94.

<sup>41</sup>"Christ's body was stripped off in his death, he was buried, he was raised; in him the Colossian Christians stripped off their body of flesh, were buried with him in baptism and were raised with him therein." Beasley-Murray, 115, 116.

<sup>42</sup>For our defense of this disputed reading of 2:15 see below 191-198.

convert. In other words, the language of Christ's physical death is applied to Christians, so that what is actually designated is their death with Christ. To clarify, this is the same as saying, the death Christ died was crucifixion, but when Paul writes, "I am crucified with Christ," (Gal 2:19) he is referring to his own spiritual death with Christ.

Those who take the view that it is Christ's death which is described directly rather than the convert's death with him, translate vv 11-12a along the following lines: "in whom you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands in the stripping off of *his* body of flesh, that is, in the circumcision which Christ endured [i.e. his death] being buried with him in baptism . . . ." The fatal flaw in this interpretation is the lack of αὐτοῦ or some other word or phrase to indicate that the body in question belongs to Christ and not to the convert.<sup>43</sup> In defense of this reading, however, R. H. Gundry insists that no such defining indicator is required if the phrase ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (v 11c) is taken in apposition to the preceding phrase and read as an objective genitive (as above).<sup>44</sup> We would agree with Gundry to the extent that v 11c involves a reference to the death of Christ,<sup>45</sup> yet it is more natural to take "the stripping off of the body of flesh" (v 11b) as a description of what happened to the Colossians when they became Christians. This phrase describes that in which (ἐν) their circumcision/death consists, while the following phrase (v 11c) sets forth the circumstances in which (ἐν) it was accomplished. This reading of v 11 is supported by a comparison with the pattern of v 12: just as it is the Colossian Christians

<sup>43</sup>So Caird, 193; Lohse, 103, n. 68; Zeilinger, 145; Gnifka, 132.

<sup>44</sup>Gundry, *Soma*, 41; alternatively Moule suggests, "The identification of the baptized with Christ is regarded as so close as to render a specifying pronoun out of place" (*Colossians*, 95).

<sup>45</sup>This interpretation will be defended in section C below.

who are said to have been *buried* and *raised*, so it is their *death* which is described in the previous verse. On Gundry's reading of v 11 it is only Christ's death that is explicit; the convert's must be inferred. To conclude, in answer to our earlier question, it is not Christ's body of flesh that is designated in v 11 but the Colossian Christians', and its stripping off is their circumcision/death.

The difficulty with this interpretation of course is that the Colossians obviously did not die physically in baptism,<sup>46</sup> the περιτομή ἀχειροποίητος must be understood as a spiritual operation. For this reason many interpreters simply conclude that σῶμα τῆς σαρκός in this context cannot bear its usual meaning of the physical body but must be taken in some immaterial spiritualized sense such as the sinful nature, and for evidence of this they point to the parallel in 3:9, where the "old person" is said to have been stripped off (ἀπεκδύω). But this approach fails to do justice to the evidence seen above that this phrase refers to the physical body. This problem is avoided, however, if "the stripping off of the body of flesh" is seen in the first instance as the description of a physical death, but then interpreted in a non-literal sense. That this is the proper approach is again seen from the pattern of v 12: the convert is said to have been *buried* and *raised*. These too are actions involving the body; they happened in a literal, physical sense to Christ, but when used to describe what happened to the Colossians in baptism, they must be understood in a non-literal sense. Thus in v 11 the phrase τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός describes a physical death, because it is the death Christ died. But because these words are applied to the convert they must be understood - like burial and

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<sup>46</sup>Cf. Wright, 106; Rodd, "Colossians 2:8-15," 37.



resurrection - in a non-literal sense. This happened "in Christ" (v 11a) and "with Christ" (vv 12, 20).

To sum up, we have sought in this section to answer two basic questions regarding the meaning of *σῶμα τῆς σαρκός* : What is it? and From whom is it stripped off? We saw that interpreters are divided broadly into two camps on these issues: (1) those who say that *σῶμα τῆς σαρκός* is the physical body, and thus belongs to Christ, and (2) those who say the body is the believer's and thus must be understood in a non-physical sense. In our attempt to answer these questions we have concluded that each view is partly correct. The first is correct in saying that *σῶμα τῆς σαρκός* refers to the physical body, and "the stripping off of the body of flesh" describes the death Christ died. The second group rightly sees this as a spiritual operation which is applied to the Christian. The proper interpretation, as we understand it, is that the realistic language of Christ's death is applied to Christians and must therefore be understood as a description of their spiritual death with Christ. This usage finds a parallel in Paul's declaration of Gal 2:19, "I have been crucified with Christ."

Our investigation must now focus on the nature of this spiritual death with Christ. First of all, we wish to determine what it is that happens in the status and experience of Christians so that they may be said to have undergone this spiritual death or circumcision which consists in the stripping off of the body of flesh. Secondly, we wish to understand the relationship of this spiritual stripping off of the body of flesh performed on believers to the physical death Christ experienced as the stripping off of his body of flesh. This second question is essentially that of the meaning of "with Christ,"<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Cf. chapter one, 1, 3.

though formally the *συν-* terminology does not appear until the following clause where *συνταφές* is used of the burial with Christ in which this death with Christ is sealed.

### 3) Stripping Off the Body of Flesh as Dying with Christ

In order to answer the question regarding the believers' spiritual experience of death, we must look to the succeeding context, and anticipate some<sup>of</sup> our conclusions to be developed later in this study. Two texts refer specifically to such a spiritual *death*. Both belong to the writer's polemic against the false teachers' advocacy of obedience to their rules and regulations. In 2:20 he demands, "If you died with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?" Shortly thereafter he admonishes them not to set their minds on the things of the earth, "For you died . . ." (3:2,3). The significance of the Colossians' spiritual death in each statement is the same: having died they no longer belong to this world, and thus they should act accordingly. The *world* in this context must be understood in terms of this present evil age, the realm of fallenness and sin (cf. Gal 1:4).<sup>48</sup> Death with Christ has removed them from this world, and as a result of their spiritual resurrection with him they now belong to the world above, which is the realm of the new creation and the age to come (3:1-3).<sup>49</sup>

Two additional texts are of direct relevance for understanding the believer's death with Christ. The first is 2:14,15, where Christ, through his substitutionary death on the cross - described as the stripping off of his

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<sup>48</sup>See further chapter seven, 219-220 and 235-236.

<sup>49</sup>See further chapter eight, 245-246.

body (ἀπεκδυσάμενος; cf. NEB margin)<sup>50</sup> - is said to have blotted out the Colossians' record of sin and defeated the hostile spirit powers which exercised authority over them because of it. The Colossians' spiritual death in v 11, as the stripping off (ἀπεκδύσις) of the body of flesh, must then be understood as their sharing with Christ in his death for them as his own stripping.<sup>51</sup> Dying with Christ in this regard means the blotting out of their sins, reconciliation to God, and deliverance from the dominion of death and the hostile spirits (cf. 1:13,22).

The final text of relevance to our understanding of the Christian's "spiritual death" is 3:9. Here the writer admonishes the Colossians to cease lying, since (in baptism) they "stripped off (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι) the old person with his deeds." As we will seek to show in our later investigation of this passage, the old person refers to the convert as a member of Adam's fallen race and belonging to the old era of sin and death.<sup>52</sup> The stripping off of the old person refers to the Colossians' death with Christ in which they were delivered from or "stripped off" that old Adamic state of being.

To summarize, the Colossians' spiritual death consists in the forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the world, the domain of hostile spirits, and the old Adamic existence. In a word, the writer to the Colossians portrays dying with Christ as the reversal of the fall, or at least the negative aspect thereof. The positive aspect is entry into the life of the new creation which is rising with Christ.

This leads us now to our question regarding the relationship of this spiritual death which Christians experience in conversion-baptism to the

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<sup>50</sup>See above note 42.

<sup>51</sup>In defense of this interpretation see below chapter six, 182-183.

<sup>52</sup>See below chapter nine, 285-288 .

physical death Christ died on the cross. To reiterate, the link between the two is seen in the fact that in 2:11 the writer employs the language of Christ's physical death, "the stripping off of the body of flesh," to describe the spiritual experience of believers. In the same way he speaks in v 12a of their co-burial (συνταφέντες) with him in baptism. This usage would suggest that to the writer's way of thinking what happens to Christians in baptism is in a sense the spiritual equivalent of what happened to Christ in his death on the cross. Thus, to follow through on this perspective, if the Colossians' spiritual death is presented as the negative aspect of the reversal of the fall, i.e. as deliverance from fallen Adamic existence, then we should understand Christ's death as his own experience of this deliverance. That this is in fact the writer's understanding is confirmed in other, more direct statements. We saw in our study of the Colossian hymn that Christ, in his role as God's agent of reconciliation and new creation, identified himself with humanity's state of fallenness and death (1:18) so that his own deliverance from this fallen state and his entry into the life of the new age might become the pattern and means for the salvation of all.<sup>53</sup> In 2:13-15 we see a more detailed explanation of this redeeming death and deliverance. In order to secure forgiveness and life for his people Christ made himself responsible for their sins and thereby subjected himself to the hostile spirits which exercised authority over humanity because of the indictment of sin against them. By dying their death he blotted out this condemning document, defeated the hostile powers and secured entry into the life of the age to come.<sup>54</sup> Hence, Christ has become the redeemer of fallen humanity by

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<sup>53</sup>See chapter four, 108.

<sup>54</sup>See chapter six, especially 190-191.

sharing their lot and undergoing redemption himself.<sup>55</sup> Because he first experienced deliverance from the realm of sin and death, they can experience this same deliverance on a spiritual level in conversion-baptism. Therefore, the connection between the spiritual death and resurrection of Christians and the physical death and resurrection of Christ is seen first of all in the fact that in his death Christ experienced in primal power the redemption which he brings his people, and they in turn are seen as having experienced, in some sense, what he experienced. Christ's experience is, in other words, the prototype of Christian salvation.

We saw earlier that one of the older views of the meaning of dying and rising with Christ is that in conversion-baptism Christ's death and resurrection are spiritually reproduced in the believer. Our own analysis of the Colossian material up to this point places us in substantial agreement with this interpretation. Yet a closer examination of this material, particularly of the *συν-* terminology, reveals there is more to this concept of sharing with Christ than simply a spiritual repetition of his deliverance. In ordinary (i.e. literal) usage the *συν-* prefix on a verb typically indicates that the action takes place together with another or others at the same time and in the same location.<sup>56</sup> For example, the verb *συσταυρόω*, used of the Christian's crucifixion with Christ in Rom 6:6 and Gal 2:19, is also employed to describe the literal co-crucifixion of the two thieves together with Jesus in Matt 27:44, Mark 15:32 and John 19:32.<sup>57</sup> The verb used of the burial of

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<sup>55</sup>This perspective on the the death of Christ will be recognized as a version of the classic ( dramatic or participatory) theory of the atonement. See chapter one, 7-8 cf. also 11, 23-24.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. W. Grundmann, "σύν-μετά," *JNTS* 7 (1971) 770-771.

<sup>57</sup>See further the use of *συνποθνήσκω* (cf. 2 Tim 2:11) to describe a literal co-death in Mark 14:31; Philo *Spec. Leg.* 1.108; Sir 19:10.

believers with Christ, συνθάπτω (Col 2:12a; Rom 6:4), also appears in Josephus' account of the burial of King Amon with his father (*Ant* 10.48). In this instance though the burial is in the same place, the two acts of internment are separated by a period of years (cf. Herodotus 5,5). An instance of a co-burial occurring also at the same time is seen in Thucydides 1, 8, 1 which refers to the burial of weapons with their deceased owners. Thus, if literal usage is any guide to the meaning of the NT statements concerning the death and burial of Christians with Christ, then the biblical writer must be understood to say not simply that Christians have experienced something *like* the death and burial of Christ, but they have in some sense been made to share in these self same events. Yet, while the notion is readily intelligible that Christians experience spiritually the same kind of deliverance that Christ experienced in his death and resurrection, the idea that they have also participated together with him in these events is not. Christ's death and resurrection were in the distant past and far away - be it from the point of view of the first century Colossians or modern day believers. How then can Christians truly be said to participate in these events?

The answer to this question is not to be found in an inner subjective experience of mystical contemplation on Christ's passion.<sup>58</sup> Neither should it be sought in the notion of Christ's death being brought to the baptized by being continued<sup>59</sup> or repeated,<sup>60</sup> nor in the idea that they are transported

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<sup>58</sup>As thought by A. Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, 2nd ed., trans. W. E. Wilson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957) 182, cf. 149.

<sup>59</sup>Thus O. Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship*; for a critique of Casel's theory see Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 145-149 and G. C. Berkouwer, *The Sacraments*, trans. H. Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 119-122.

<sup>60</sup>Thus Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* 1.303. For a critique of this view see Tennehill, 73.

back to this event by abolishing the barriers of space and time.<sup>61</sup> The answer rather is to be found in the thought-structure underlying the explanations of Christ's death and resurrection in 1:18 and 2:13-15. The statement in 2:13 that the Colossians were spiritually dead but have been made alive together with Christ (συνεζωποίησεν ὑμῖς σὺν αὐτῷ) finds its basis in Christ's own substitutionary and representative death and victory described in vv 14,15.<sup>62</sup> As we pointed out earlier, this representative death, characterized as the stripping off of his body (ἀπεκδυσάμενος, v 15), must be understood in connection with the Colossians' spiritual death with him in v 11 as the stripping off of the body of flesh (ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός). The logic underlying this connection between Christ's death *for* the Colossians and their death *with* him would appear to be that which is spelled out in 2 Cor 5:14: "one died for all therefore all died." In other words, the death of the one is considered the death of all, because he died in their place, as their representative.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the Colossians may be seen as having been included in what happened to Christ because that which he experienced, he experienced on behalf of all who would be joined to him in the future. They were present in the person of their representative.

This same principle of representation is observed in Rom 5:12-19 where the sin of the one man Adam is said to have brought condemnation and death to all, "because all sinned" (ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον, v 12) - that is, they all sinned in the sin of Adam.<sup>64</sup> In other words, they sinned, as it

<sup>61</sup>Thus W. T. Hahn, *Das Mitsterben und Mitaufstehen mit Christus* (see above chapter one, 22). For a critique of this view see Tannehill, 4; Ridderbos, 408; and Schnackenburg, 150-154.

<sup>62</sup>Cf. Grundmann, *TDNT* 7.785.

<sup>63</sup>See further P. E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 194.

<sup>64</sup>Here in this much disputed text we follow what has been called the classic Protestant interpretation as represented e.g. by Stevens, *Pauline Theology*, 37; Davies, *Paul and*

were, *with Adam*, and God includes them in his verdict of condemnation on him, their representative (v 18). The basis for this line of reasoning lies in the OT-Jewish concept of the solidarity of the group (family, clan, tribe, race) with its founder and head. Paul further reasons in Rom 5:15-19 that Christ occupies a position in relation to Christians parallel to that which Adam holds to his race: as the disobedience of the one man, Adam, brought condemnation and death to many, so the obedient death of the one man, Christ, leads to the verdict of justification and life for those who are united to him (cf. 1 Cor 15:21,22). It is furthermore on the basis of this principle of solidarity and representation that Paul goes on in Romans 6 to speak of Christians as having died *with* Christ. Turning now to the Colossian epistle and the question of the basis there for Christ's representative relationship to his people and their participation with him in his dying and rising, although we do not see the same parallel between Adam and Christ delineated so explicitly as in Romans, the essential elements of this theology are nevertheless observable. By describing him as the "beginning, the firstborn from the dead" in 1:18, the writer identifies Christ in his deliverance from death as the founder and head of the new redeemed human race - that is, as the Adam of the end-time. Thus, just as Adam in his sin acted inclusively for all his descendants so that all may be said to have participated in his act, so Christ in his death and deliverance acted inclusively for his race so that the baptized may be said to have participated with him in these events.

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*Rabbinic Judaism*, 32; A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949) 215; E. E. Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957) 58-60; F. Prat, *The Theology of Saint Paul*, trans. J. L. Stoddard, 2 vols (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1945) 1.214-218; Shedd, *Man in Community*, 108-109; J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959/65) 1.186; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 126; Ridderbos, *Paul* 96-99; Turner, *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* 116-118; D. Moo, *Romans* 1-8 (Chicago: Moody, 1991) 338-340.



A final issue to be addressed concerns how this inclusiveness is to be understood. Based on what we have seen so far, it might easily be concluded that the death and resurrection of Christians with Christ date from the time of Christ's death and resurrection in 30 C. E. For if Christ's death and resurrection are singular, unrepeated events which took place long ago in Jerusalem, then Christians must have died and risen then and there with him: they were "in Christ" when he died and rose again.<sup>65</sup> That this is not, however, the perspective of the Colossian epistle is seen in 2:13. Prior to their conversions the Colossians were spiritually dead, and it was only as they believed and were baptized that God made them alive with Christ. Hence, there is a tension seen between Christ's inclusive death and resurrection for his people and their death "with him" which takes place in their own personal life history. The resolution of this tension must be found in the concept of the solidarity of the race with its founder and head, and the perspective that what has happened to the head of the race happens also to the members. Prior to baptism no relationship of solidarity exists between Christ and Christians; their solidarity is with Adam and his race. But in conversion they are united to Christ, incorporated into his body (cf. 1:18a; 1 Cor 12:13), and as a result, what is true of the head of the body *becomes* true of each of its members. His history becomes theirs; they become participants in his past death and resurrection.<sup>66</sup> In this way it could be said that the baptized are "caught up" and involved in these past events,<sup>67</sup> though there is no actual firsthand participation as if "time travel" occurs. Rather, it

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<sup>65</sup>Thus e.g. J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 209. Cf. Moo, *Romans 1-8* 381, who refers to this line of reasoning but rejects it.

<sup>66</sup>Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 115; Beasley-Murray, 138; Ridderbos, *Paul* 404.

<sup>67</sup>E.g. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 358; cf. Schnackenburg, 205; Ridderbos, 408.

is a mediated participation based on the principle of solidarity: Christ alone died on the cross, but God reckons his death as the death of all (cf. 2 Cor 5:14).<sup>68</sup> This same basic principle of solidarity finds expression in the well-known statement in the Mishnah relating to the Passover: "In every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt" (*Pesah.* 10.5). And thus each can say in the words of the *Passover Haggadah*, "Not our ancestors alone did God redeem then, but he did us redeem with them."<sup>69</sup>

The establishment of this relationship of solidarity in conversion-baptism brings with it a spiritual transformation in the life of the baptized in which God acts anew towards them as he acted towards Christ in his dying and rising. He includes them in the same verdict of condemnation and acquittal which he pronounced on their representative.<sup>70</sup> In this God associates Christians with Christ in his death so that their spiritual death may be spoken of in the language of the death Christ died - "the stripping off of the body of flesh" (Col 2:11). Thus, their sins are blotted out, they are reconciled to God and they pass out of the dominion of the hostile spirits (cf. 2:14,15; 1:13) and the realm of fallenness and sin (cf. 2:20; 3:3,9). God furthermore associates them with Christ in his passage into the life of the new creation by exercising anew the same power towards them as he did when he raised Christ from the dead (cf. 2:12,13). Through the principle of

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<sup>68</sup>The difficulty that arises for our thinking through the distance between the once-for-all event of cross and resurrection of Christ and our attainment of salvation ensuing here and now at any given time, is dissolved in that mode of thought." Schnackenburg, 114.

<sup>69</sup>Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 102-104 (see also chapter one above, 28-30, regarding Davies' study); Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 343-345; L. B. Smedes, *All Things Made New: A Theology of Man's Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 143-145.

<sup>70</sup>A. J. M. Wedderburn, "Some Observations on Paul's Use of the Phrase 'in Christ' and 'with Christ,'" *JNT* 25 (1985) 90-91; idem, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 349-351.

solidarity, then, God includes Christians in his saving acts towards Christ, their representative, who thereby serves as the prototype of their salvation.

To conclude, the spiritual reality which stands behind the description of the convert's death in 2:11b as "the stripping off of the body of flesh" is departure from Adamic existence in this fallen, sin-determined world. This is but the negative aspect of the believer's experience of salvation; the positive is entry into the life of the new creation, and this corresponds to resurrection with Christ (2:12). This spiritual experience of salvation takes place "with Christ" in that he identified himself with humanity's fallen condition and died and rose as their substitute and representative. When believers are united to Christ they are made to participate in what happened to him, as God, on the principle of solidarity, includes them in his saving acts towards Christ. They too are acquitted of sin, delivered from the sphere of fallenness and introduced into the life of the new creation.

### C. The Circumcision of Christ (v 11c)

In 2:11c the believer's spiritual circumcision is further described with the words ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, "in the circumcision of Christ." These words have been understood, broadly speaking, in two different ways. According to the more traditional view, the genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ defines this circumcision as that which comes through Christ, and which is to be distinguished from literal circumcision - thus, it is a "Christian" circumcision.<sup>71</sup> The other option is to read the genitive as objective: the circumcision of Christ is the circumcision which he himself underwent in his

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<sup>71</sup>E.g. Abbott, 251; Williams, 92; E. F. Scott, 45; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 193, 194; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 143; Bruce, *Colossians*, 104; Gnllka, 132; Harris, 102, 103.

death, as the stripping off of his body of flesh (cf. 2:15).<sup>72</sup> What suggests the objective reading is the fact that the preceding phrase, "in the stripping off of the body of flesh" describes the death of the believer in the realistic language of the death of Christ. There is needed some accompanying expression to indicate that this death is meant to be understood as a participation in the death Christ died. For example, in Rom 6:6 and Gal 2:19 when Paul similarly speaks of his spiritual death using the language of crucifixion he adds the *συν-* prefix to the verb *σταυρώω* to indicate that this death is a participation in Christ's death. Moreover, in Col 2:12 the convert's burial and resurrection are shown to be a sharing in the burial and resurrection of Christ by the use of the *συν-* prefix (*συνταφέντες αὐτῷ . . . συνηγέρθητε*). In the absence then of any other explanatory device in v 11 it would seem the phrase *ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ* should be recognized as serving the function of a "with Christ" statement.<sup>73</sup> Christians have died in the stripping off of the body of flesh in that it was a sharing in Christ's death as the stripping off of his body of flesh; they were circumcised in his circumcision - they died in his death.

## II. Burial with Christ (v 12a)

As the Colossian converts died by participation in the death Christ died, so they were "buried with him in baptism," *συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ*. The sequence death, burial, and in v 12b, resurrection, is rooted in the primitive Christian confession recorded in 1 Cor 15:3,4, "that Christ

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<sup>72</sup>Those who understand the genitive as objective include C. A. A. Scott, *Christianity According to St. Paul*, 36; Lohmeyer, 109; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 96; Käsemann, "Baptismal Liturgy," 162; Tannehill, 50; Beasley-Murray, 152, 153; Gundry, *Soma*, 41; Martin, *Colossians*, 82; Burger, *Schöpfung*, 94; O'Brien, 116, 117.

<sup>73</sup>Thus Tannehill, 49; O'Brien, 117, 118.

died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day . . . ." In this confession the burial of Christ in the grave emphasizes the reality of his death. In the same way burial in baptism stresses that a real death has taken place.<sup>74</sup> By introducing the image of burial here, the writer, therefore, underscores what he has just said regarding spiritual death. The old life has indeed come to an end. The "body of flesh" was laid in the grave. Out of this grave there has arisen a wholly new life (v 12b).

The phrase ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ<sup>75</sup> connects this burial explicitly with the rite of baptism. In Rom 6:4 co-burial with Christ is similarly said to take place through baptism (διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος). This does not necessarily mean Colossians is dependent on Romans at this point.<sup>76</sup> It is more likely that both draw on the same baptismal tradition.<sup>77</sup> The term βαπτισμός is used in the NT independently of baptism to mean dipping or washing (Mark 7:4, 8; Heb 9:10). Thus, with its usage here in reference to the rite of baptism the emphasis falls on the act of immersion itself.<sup>78</sup> With this reference to baptismal immersion in connection with death and burial with Christ the writer is reminding his readers of their experience of conversion when they publicly expressed their faith in Christ through a symbolic re-enactment of the salvation events in the baptismal ceremony. Death with

<sup>74</sup>Lohse, 103; Zeilinger, 145.

<sup>75</sup>This reading is supported by  $\phi^{46}$ ,  $\kappa^c$ , B, D\* and others. While βαπτίσματι has equally good manuscript attestation ( $\kappa^*$ , A, C, D<sup>c</sup> and others), βαπτισμῷ is to be preferred as the more difficult reading, since βάπτισμα is the more common word for baptism and occurs in the parallel text of Rom 6:4. B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 623.

<sup>76</sup>On the theory of literary dependence see E. P. Sanders, "Literary Dependence in Colossians," *JBL* 85 (1966) 40, 41.

<sup>77</sup>Pokorný, 133.

<sup>78</sup>Lona, 155; cf. A. Oepke, "βαπτισμός, κτλ.." *TDNT* 1 (1964) 545.

Christ, as we suggested above, was symbolized by the laying aside of one's garment (cf. "the stripping off of the body of flesh") in preparation for entering the water. Burial was symbolized by the convert's momentary disappearance below the surface of the water, from which he or she emerged to new life.<sup>79</sup> In this act which introduced them into union with Christ in his death and resurrection, the Colossians experienced a death to the old order sealed by burial and resurrection to a new life.

### III. Rising with Christ (v 12b,c)

In vv 11-12a the writer has focused on the negative aspect of salvation - deliverance from the old order of fallenness and sin through participation with Christ in his death and burial. In v 12b,c he takes up the positive aspect of this salvation - entry into the new creation through participation with Christ in his resurrection.

#### A. Raised with Him (v 12b)

The introductory phrase ἐν ᾧ καί displays a certain ambiguity regarding the antecedent to the relative pronoun. Does it refer to baptism ("in which")<sup>80</sup> or to Christ ("in whom")?<sup>81</sup> Many scholars have argued forcefully for a reference to Christ on the basis of the frequent occurrence of

<sup>79</sup>Thus e.g. Lightfoot, 184; Scott, 45; Beasley-Murray, 133; Bruce, *Colossians*, 105. That this symbolism was employed in the NT period is disputed. Ridderbos (*Paul*, 402) for example denies that immersion symbolized burial. Dunn (*Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, 154-156) affirms the symbolism of burial but denies that emergence from this baptismal grave signified resurrection.

<sup>80</sup>Thus Lightfoot, 185; Abbott, 251, 252; Peake, 525, 526; Williams, 93; Beasley-Murray, 153, 154; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 146; Lona, 156; Pokorný, 133; Wright, *Colossians*, 107, 108; Harris, 104. Virtually all modern English translations follow this view: RV, TCNT, Weymouth, Moffatt, RSV, NEB, TEV, JB, REB, NRSV.

<sup>81</sup>Thus Lohmeyer, 111; Dibelius-Greeven, 31; Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 68; Grundmann, *TDNT* 7.792, n.122; Lohse, 104, n.71; Dunn, *Baptism*, 154, 155; Zeilinger, 146; Gnifka, 134; O'Brien, 118, 119.

"in him" statements in the context either in the form ἐν αὐτῷ (vv 6,7,9,10) or ἐν ᾧ (v 11). It is further argued that ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε in v 11a should be seen as directly parallel with ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε with each introducing a new line of thought: "In him also you were circumcised . . . In him also you were raised." Thus it is argued that since baptism is linked only with burial and not with resurrection, emergence from the baptismal waters could not be understood to symbolize resurrection with Christ.<sup>82</sup>

In spite of the evidence adduced in favour of this interpretation there is much to suggest that the reference in question is not to Christ but to baptism. First of all, since the term βαπτισμῷ immediately precedes ἐν ᾧ, it is more natural to take it as the antecedent rather than the more distant αὐτῷ. In the same way the καί is more naturally seen as linking συνηγέρθητε with συνταφέντες than with περιετμήθητε in v 11a.<sup>83</sup> Both the συν- prefix and the complementary ideas of death (i.e. burial) and resurrection serve to bind these two verbs together. Moreover, to take βαπτισμῷ as the antecedent of ᾧ creates an exact parallel with v 12a: buried with Christ in baptism - raised with Christ in baptism. Finally, to regard Christ as the antecedent of ᾧ creates the awkward and difficult to understand statement that *in* Christ believers were raised *with* Christ. It is true that *in Christ* and *with Christ* are similarly juxtaposed in Eph 2:6, but the word order is different, and there is no such parallel to be found in Colossians itself.<sup>84</sup> We conclude that both burial and resurrection with Christ are presented in v 12 as occurring in baptism: "buried with him in baptism in which also you were raised with him." If this is correct, then the

<sup>82</sup>See especially Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 67 and Dunn, *Baptism*, 154-156.

<sup>83</sup>Harris, 104.

<sup>84</sup>Harris, 104; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 146.

implication is surely present that as immersion in baptism symbolized the finality of death in burial, so emergence from the baptismal grave symbolized resurrection to new life.<sup>85</sup>

The statement that Christians have been raised with Christ, *συντηγέρθητε*, must be seen as a development on the earlier statement of 1:18b that Christ is "the firstborn from the dead." We saw in chapter four that the conceptual framework to which 1:18b belongs is that of the OT-Jewish concept of the eschatological salvation as new creation. The harmony of the original creation was destroyed by sin, resulting in alienation and the entry of death into the world. The salvation of the end-time would bring a reversal of the fall, reconciliation with God and the abolition of death.<sup>86</sup> The declaration that Christ is the firstborn from the dead means his resurrection marks the turn of the ages and the beginning of the new creation. Moreover, as the first to rise, he has become the founder of the new eschatological humanity as a second Adam. The death of Christ in this context is indicative of his solidarity with Adam's fallen race and his subjection to the rule of sin and death (cf. Rom 6:9,10). His resurrection then means his own experience of deliverance from death and entry upon the life of the new age. But the fact that he is the *firstborn* from the dead means his deliverance from death is the prototype of the deliverance of those who will make up the new human race. This is the point which is taken up in 2:12 with the statement that Christians have been raised with Christ. In baptism-conversion they have been incorporated into the founding event of the new creation. With

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<sup>85</sup> Early testimony to such symbolism appears in the second century *Shepherd of Hermas*: "They had need," said he, "to come up through the water that they might be made alive, for they could not otherwise enter into the kingdom of God unless they put away the mortality of their former life . . . The seal, then, is the water. They go down then into the water dead, and come up alive." (*Sim.* 9.16).

<sup>86</sup> See below 86-88 and 105-106.



Christ they have been delivered from the old era of fallenness, sin and death and become partakers of the life of the new age in which there is reconciliation with God through the forgiveness of sins (2:13). This then is the positive side of salvation: having stripped off in death the old fallen Adamic existence, they have risen to a new and morally transformed existence as members of the race of the new Adam who are being renewed according to the image of God (3:9,10). In spite of his use of the language of resurrection in 2:12,13, it is clear that the writer to the Colossians does not mean that the ultimate goal of the eschatological salvation has already been attained. There still remains a "not yet" dimension to this new life. This dimension is the focus of 3:1-4 which we will investigate in chapter eight. Christians possess this resurrection life only in preliminary form and in hiddenness; they will know it in its fullness only at the parousia when they are revealed with Christ in glory.

For the majority of scholars today the teaching of Colossians that Christians have been raised with Christ in baptism stands in sharp contrast to the perspective of Romans 6 where resurrection with Christ (it is claimed) is considered only as a future bodily event.<sup>87</sup> This conclusion is based on the future tense verb ἐσόμεθα of v 5 ("For if we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, *we shall* certainly also be united with him in the likeness of his resurrection.") and συζήσομεν of v 8 ("But if we have died with Christ, we believe that *we shall* also *live* with him."). Prior to the early decades of the twentieth century the consensus of opinion was that these verbs are logical not temporal in force and serve to emphasize the necessity and certainty of the newness of resurrection life following on from dying

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<sup>87</sup>Thus e.g. Käsemann, "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," 125; Tannehill, 10; Lohse, 103, 104, 134, n.3, 180; Ernst, 203; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 144.

with Christ.<sup>88</sup> Hence, Colossians and Romans were understood to be in substantial agreement regarding resurrection with Christ. If, however, Paul refrains in Romans 6 from speaking directly about a past spiritual resurrection with Christ and instead points his readers to the certainty of their future physical resurrection with him, as most currently believe, then a significant cleavage exists between the two epistles on this subject, and this has led to a variety of explanations to account for this phenomenon. At one end of the spectrum are those who see no fundamental disagreement in the assumptions of the two epistles; only the differing circumstances which called them forth required an emphasis on future eschatology in one and realized eschatology in the other.<sup>89</sup> At the opposite end of the spectrum is the view that the belief in an already realized resurrection attested in Col 2:12,13 and Eph 2:6 is identical with the teaching of the heretics of 2 Tim 2:18 who claim "the resurrection has already happened" (cf. 1 Cor 4:8; 15,12). This "eschatological enthusiasm" was first developed in the pre-Pauline Hellenistic church, and it is this erroneous teaching which Paul seeks in Romans 6 to correct with his emphasis on the future resurrection.<sup>90</sup> Lying somewhere in between these two poles are those who see the teaching in Colossians of a present spiritual resurrection with Christ as a later development on the theology of Romans 6 either by Paul himself or a

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<sup>88</sup>E.g. Meyer, *Romans*, 287; Hodge, *Romans*, 196; Weiss, *Biblical Theology*, 162-63; Godet, *Romans*, 243, 244, 247; Zahn, *Römer*, 301.

<sup>89</sup>Thus e.g. Thornton, *Common Life in the Body of Christ* 59, 60; Ernst, 203; O'Brien, 120, 121; Pokorný, 131; M. J. Harris, *Raised Immortal: Resurrection and Immortality in the New Testament* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1983) 102-104.

<sup>90</sup>Thus e.g. Käsemann, "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," 125; Jervell, *Imago* 257; Tannehill, 10-12; E. Schweizer, "Dying and Rising with Christ," *NIS* (1967-68) 5-8; J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1980) 163, 225; Brandenburger, "Die Auferstehung der Glaubenden als historisches und theologisches Problem," 21, 22, 27. For a fuller discussion of this view and its history see Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 1-5.

follower writing in his name - though opinions vary as to the nature of this development and the circumstances which gave rise to it.<sup>91</sup> Our own view of this issue is that the traditional interpretation is the correct one. Paul does indeed teach in Romans 6 that believers are raised with Christ in baptism - in spite of his use of future tense verbs in vv 5,8 to say so - and Colossians, therefore, stands in agreement on this subject.<sup>92</sup>

A number of considerations support this conclusion.

1. First of all, there is no evidence in Romans 6 that Paul is responding to a type of over-realized eschatology which held that the resurrection has already happened. The point at issue is the objection or distortion that his gospel of grace should lead to a life of sin (v 1).<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup>Achtemeier e.g. considers the delay of the parousia as the cause of this shift ("Apocalyptic Shift in Early Christian Tradition," 239). Wedderburn believes Paul's followers merely extended the idea of a spiritual dying with Christ to include also a spiritual rising and thus imposed a symmetry on Paul's otherwise asymmetrical teaching (*Baptism*, 232; "Hellenistic Christian Traditions," 350). Sellin, on the other hand, traces this development to the influence of Hellenistic Judaism ("Die Auferstehung ist schon geschehen," 226-227, 232; on this view as well as that of Achtemeier and Wedderburn see above chapter one, 38-40). Others who regard Colossians as a later development upon Romans 6 include, Lona, 168, 170, 171; O. Kuss, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Regensburg: Pustet, 1963-78) 1.315; Dunn, *Baptism*, 155; F. Hahn, "Taufe und Rechtfertigung: Ein Beitrag zur paulinischen Theologie in ihrer Vor- und Nachgeschichte," in *Rechtfertigung: Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann* *Rechtfertigung zum 70 Geburtstag*, ed. J. Friedrich, W. Pöhlmann and P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1976) 100, n. 20.

<sup>92</sup>Twentieth century scholars who have supported this view include A. Oepke, "ἀνίστημι, κτλ.," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 368, n. 14; Prat, *Theology of Saint Paul* 1.224; E. Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe* (Lund: Gleerup, 1946) 110; Nygren, *Romans*, 234; Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 38; J. Schneider, ὁμοίωμα," *TDNT* 5 (1967) 167; Murray, *Romans*, 1.219, 223; F. J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. H. Knight (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961) 161; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 179; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 207-209; Frankemölle, *Das Taufverständnis des Paulus*, 61, 71, 119; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 194; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.308, 312; B. Frid, "Römer 6,4-5: Εἰς . . . τὸν θάνατον und τῷ ὁμοιώματι τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ als Schlüssel zu Duktus und Gedankengang in Röm 6, 1-11," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 30 (1986) 199; J. A. Fitzmyer, *Romans. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 435.

<sup>93</sup>Lona, 170.

2. In answer to this erroneous inference Paul argues that Christians have died to sin (v 2) through baptism into Christ's death (v 3) and burial (v 4a) "so that as ( ἵνα ὡσπερ) Christ was raised from the dead . . . we too (οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς) might walk in newness of life" (v 4b,c). Hence, death and burial with Christ result in being "raised" to "walk in newness of life," and this new life is, through the use of the ὡσπερ-οὕτως construction, said to be the moral analogue of Christ's resurrection and life.<sup>94</sup>

3. The γάρ of v 5 indicates that the following conditional sentence is intended to confirm the argument of v 4.<sup>95</sup> It is generally recognized that the apodosis (v 5b) is elliptical and the words σύμφυτοι τῷ ὁμοιώματι and αὐτοῦ must be supplied from the protasis to complete the sense. The expression "the likeness of his resurrection" is to be understood on the basis of the analogy set forth in v 4 between Christ's resurrection and the believer's new life; correspondingly "the likeness of his death" must be the believer's own death to sin which is like Christ's death to sin (cf. vv 2,10).<sup>96</sup> Paul's argument is that if the death of Christians to sin has occurred, as he assumes (cf. vv 2,3), then their entry into a morally upright life must follow as a certainty. Understood in this way ἐσόμεθα expresses the logical consequence following from the protasis. On this reading the argument of v 5 is simple, direct and in harmony with the rest of the context. If, on the other hand, ἐσόμεθα is read as a temporal future and "the likeness of his resurrection" as a reference to the resurrection of the body, then the argument becomes at best confusing, since the reader is left wondering how

<sup>94</sup>Meyer, *Romans*, 265; Murray, *Romans*, 1.216; Frid, "Römer 6, 4-5," 196.

<sup>95</sup>Cranfield, *Romans*, 1.306.

<sup>96</sup>Thus Godet, *Romans*, 242, 243; Murray, *Romans*, 1.218; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 207, 208; Frid, "Römer 6, 4-5," 196-199; Dunn, *Romans*, 1.317; Morgan, "United to a Death Like Christ's," 295-298 - Morgan identifies this as the traditional view.

the certainty of future resurrection guarantees a morally upright life in the present.<sup>97</sup> Such a line of argument is, in fact, quite foreign to the context as is made clear in vv 11,13.

4. The argument of v 5 is reiterated in v 8. Again the death of Christians with Christ is assumed in the protasis and from this is deduced that they will share his life (συζήσομεν αὐτῷ). The meaning of this argument is developed in vv 9-11: the finality of Christ's death and the certainty and irreversibility of his resurrection give assurance to Christians that they too, like Christ, have risen to and shall continue in their new life. Verse 11 sums up the argument of v 8: they must reckon themselves to be now alive to God. Hence, the belief in v 8 that they will live with Christ is defined in v 11 in terms of an active step of faith that they now possess this new life in Christ.<sup>98</sup>

5. Finally, and perhaps the most unequivocal indicator in Romans 6 that resurrection with Christ is considered a present reality, is the exhortation of v 13 for believers to present themselves to God *as those who have been brought from death to life* (ὡσεὶ ἐκ νεκρῶν ζῶντας). This concluding imperative sums up the argument of vv 1-11 and calls upon believers to actualize in their daily experience the reality of their resurrection with Christ.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>For an attempt to sort through the logic of such an argument see esp. Blazen, "Death to Sin According to Romans 6:1-14," 412-419.

<sup>98</sup>Cranfield, 1.312.

<sup>99</sup>Advocates of the view that vv 5,8 refer to future bodily resurrection with Christ argue that vv 11,13 mean believers have indeed entered spiritually upon eschatological life, even resurrection life, but have not yet been *raised with Christ* (e.g. Käsemann, *Romans*, 177 and P. Siber, *Mit Christus leben* [Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971] 237-248). The attempt, however, to find within 6:1-13 a distinction between being raised with Christ (vv 5,8) and possessing resurrection life (vv 4,11,13) is not convincing. The resurrection of vv 5,8 and the resurrection of vv 11,13 are the same reality. Verses 11,13 merely sum up and apply the preceding argumentation; vv 5,8 supply the indicative upon which the imperatives of vv 11,13 are based.

In view of this evidence we see no basis for the claim that Colossians departs radically from the theology of Romans 6. Both epistles present the believer as having been united with Christ in his passage from death to new life. There are indeed differences in emphasis due to the pastoral concerns of each letter, but on the subject of resurrection with Christ in conversion-baptism there is substantial agreement. Moreover, in neither epistle does the affirmation of a present possession of eschatological life mean the ultimate has already been attained. There remains a "not yet" dimension to the new existence which is manifest in the exhortations to strive towards a life of holiness (Rom 6:12-23; Col 3:1,2,5-17) and which looks forward to a future consummation of what was begun in baptism (Rom 8:23; Col 3:4).

#### **B. Faith and Resurrection (v 12c)**

In the final section of Col 2:12 the writer takes up the subject of the role of faith in relation to resurrection with Christ: in baptism the Colossians were raised up with Christ through their "faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead." This statement first of all serves to disqualify the claim that the sacrament of baptism operated on the baptised in a quasi-magical fashion independent of faith.<sup>100</sup> Baptism is indeed the means by which Christians are joined with Christ in his death and resurrection (cf. διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος in Rom 6:4), but this is so precisely because the symbolic actions which those coming to Christ perform and submit to in the baptismal rite are the vehicle by which they express publicly their faith in God.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>See e.g. K. Lake, *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul* 2nd ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1914) 365; Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 18, 19, 21; Prat, *Theology of Saint Paul*, 1223.

<sup>101</sup>Thus E. F. Scott, 45; W. F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1948) 81-83; Dunn, *Baptism*, 145, 227.

Faith then, as expressed through a symbolic re-enactment of resurrection in baptism, serves as the means whereby resurrection to new life becomes a reality in the experience of the believer.<sup>102</sup> The object of this life-giving faith is said to be "the working of God" who raised Christ from the dead.<sup>103</sup> As in Rom 4:24 and 10:9 (cf. 1 Thess 4:4; 1 Pet 1:21) saving faith is defined specifically in terms of belief in the miracle of the resurrection.<sup>104</sup> The resurrection of Jesus is frequently cited as a manifestation of the power of God (Rom 1:4; 6:4; 1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 13:4; Phil 3:10; Eph 1:19). In Col 1:15-20 this power may be seen as operating on a cosmic scale to restore the universe from the dislocation of the fall, to overcome death, pacify the hostile powers and usher in the age of the new creation. As those baptized exercise faith in God whose power was manifest in this historical event, this same power becomes operative in raising them from their state of spiritual death.<sup>105</sup> Thus, Christians in their resurrection with Christ become partakers of the same power, made operative in the faith expressed in the baptismal rite, by which God ushered in the new age when he raised Christ from the dead (cf. Eph 1:19,20).

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<sup>102</sup>This runs contrary to the popular understanding which separates saving faith and baptism so that the latter is but a public declaration of a union with Christ which has already taken place (thus e.g. C. A. A. Scott, *Christianity According to St. Paul*, 118).

<sup>103</sup>Certain older commentators including Luther, Melancthon, Bengel and De Wette (see further J. Eadie, *Colossians* (Richard Griffin & Co., 1856; reprint ed., USA: Klock & Klock, 1980) 155 understood τῆς ἐνεργείας as a subjective genitive: "through faith produced in you by the working of God" (Weymouth). The genitive following πίστις, however, commonly specifies the object of faith unless the reference is to the one who believes, thus Lightfoot, 185; Abbott, 252; Williams, 94; Harris, *Colossians*, 105.

<sup>104</sup>Over against this straightforward affirmation stands the claim of Bultmann that the resurrection was not an objective, historical event or miracle, but an "event" nevertheless which gave rise to faith and is to be the object of faith; see "New Testament and Mythology," 36-40.

<sup>105</sup>Peake, 526; Gnilka, 134.

#### IV. Summary

1. Col 2:11,12 belongs to the soteriological application of the message of cosmic reconciliation and new creation through the death and resurrection of Christ developed in 1:15-20.

2. The writer identifies this eschatological work of reconciliation with the spiritual circumcision of OT-Jewish expectation. This "circumcision made without hands" was foreseen as a divine transformation of the heart in order to love and serve God. In vv 11,12a it is explained in terms of the believer's union with Christ in his death and burial.

3. The words "in the stripping off of the body of flesh," which describe this spiritual circumcision, portray in the realistic language of the death Christ died (cf. 1:22; 2:15), the spiritual death of the convert. This spiritual death consists in the forgiveness of sins and the laying aside of the old Adamic existence including deliverance from the present age of fallenness, sin and death. Christ experienced this same essential deliverance or "circumcision" in his representative death so that those who are united with him in his death may be said to be circumcised in his circumcision (2:11c).

4. The statement that the believers participate *with* Christ in his death and resurrection is to be understood on the basis of the principle of solidarity and representation and finds its closest parallel in the statement of Rom 5:12 that all participated in the sin of Adam and therefore share his condemnation. Christ died and rose as the founder and representative of the new humanity. As soon as believers are united to him, his history becomes theirs and God associates them with Christ in his saving acts by including them in his verdict of acquittal pronounced on Christ and consequently delivering them and restoring them to life.



5. The wording of vv 11,12 suggests that the baptismal rite was understood as a symbolic re-enactment and participation in the events of salvation history. The removal of one's garment symbolized death as the stripping off of the body of flesh. Disappearance below the surface of the water pictured burial and emergence again resurrection. Through these actions the baptized publicly expressed their faith in God, and this faith in turn became the means by which God brought about in their experience the transformation symbolized in the rite.

6. Resurrection with Christ may be seen as the positive aspect of salvation. As dying with Christ means the end of the old fallen existence, so resurrection with him means the start of a new existence, endowed with the life of the age to come and incorporated into the redeemed race of the new Adam (cf. 1:18).

7. The declaration of v 12 that Christians have risen with Christ does not differ fundamentally from the teaching of Romans 6 on this subject. Both passages view sharing in the resurrection life of Christ as a present reality, yet neither present this as the ultimate attainment of salvation but the basis for pressing on to a life of holiness.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**PASSAGE WITH CHRIST FROM DEATH TO LIFE**  
**COLOSSIANS 2:13-15**

The description of salvation as being made alive with Christ is the focal point of Col 2:13-15. These verses constitute the third and final part of an argument begun in v 9. To review, we saw in chapter two of this study that 2:9-15 is in many respects the central theological statement in the epistle. It follows the writer's opening warning against the Colossian errorists (v 8) and explains why the readers should not be led astray by the false teachers. In the first part of his argument he presents his case in sweeping terms. It is because of the surpassing superiority of Christ ("in him dwells all the fullness of deity bodily," v 9) and the superiority of the salvation which he has already bestowed on the Colossian believers ("and in him you have been made full," v 10a). The second (vv 11,12) and third (vv 13-15) parts elaborate on the nature of this salvation. In vv 11,12 the Colossians are said to have undergone a moral and spiritual transformation by sharing in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. This event is further explained in 3:9,10 in terms of new creation. The explanation of salvation in 2:13-15 carries forward from vv 11,12 the concepts of circumcision and resurrection with Christ. Significantly, however, the focus of the imagery shifts from salvation as dying and rising with Christ to salvation as the passage with him from death to resurrection life. The text falls broadly into two parts. In v 13a-c is the principal declaration that salvation means being made alive with

Christ. The remainder explains this passage from death to life in terms of Christ's own death, by which he secured the forgiveness of sins (vv 13d-14), and his victory over the hostile spirit powers (v 15).

### I. Salvation as Being Made Alive with Christ (v 13a-c)

The central feature of this passage is the sharp contrast drawn between the Colossians' pre-Christian state of being dead (ὕμᾱς νεκροὺς ὄντας) and God's saving activity by which they now share the resurrection life of Christ (συνζωοποίησεν ὑμᾱς σὺν αὐτῷ). The three part structure of the passage reflects this contrast.

- a. καὶ ὑμᾱς νεκροὺς ὄντας
- b. ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ
- c. συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾱς σὺν αὐτῷ

Part a, describing the pre-conversion state, stands over against the saving act described in part c. Part b serves as an explanation of part a. From a grammatical point of view, part a is subordinate to part c, since the thought of the former is expressed with a participle (ὄντας) and that of the latter by the governing finite verb (συνεζωοποίησεν). The emphasis thus rests on the saving act of part c.<sup>1</sup>

The same kind of sharp contrast between the Colossians' unredeemed past and their present state of salvation appears in 1:21,22. Formerly (ΠΟΤΕ) they were alienated from God, but now (ΝΥΝ) they have been reconciled. In addition to this fundamental contrast, 1:21,22 displays remarkable parallels in language and structure to 2:13: (1) both begin with the same words καὶ

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<sup>1</sup>O'Brien, *Colossians* 121. For a more complete grammatical analysis, see Harris, *Colossians*, 105,106.

ὑμῶς . . . ὄντας; (2) in each the pre-conversion state is described with the use of an adverbial participle; (3) this state is then explained in terms of a sinful disposition and sinful actions; (4) the explanation of the sinful acts in each case takes the form of a dative phrase governed by the preposition ἐν; and (5) in both texts the saving act is expressed by a finite verb, which governs the participle describing the unredeemed state. These parallels suggest quite strongly that these two texts mean very nearly the same thing. Thus, being dead in sin is but another way of speaking of alienation from God.<sup>2</sup> And being made alive means being restored to a right relationship with God.

The line of thought connecting Col 2:13 with 2:11,12 is disputed. Common to each is the idea of union with Christ in his resurrection and the characterization of the old existence as one of spiritual and moral uncircumcision. A significant discontinuity, however, is seen in the change in application of the image of spiritual death from that of dying with Christ in baptism in v 11 to death as the pre-baptismal state in v 13. A fundamental issue in this dispute is the meaning of the phrase καὶ ὑμῶς, introducing v 13. For one group of interpreters this phrase is a special address to the Colossians as "you Gentiles" which introduces a contrast between them and the group just described in vv 11,12. Hence, while all Christians (Jew and Gentile alike) have died and risen with Christ, only Gentiles were previously dead spiritually.<sup>3</sup> It is true that the Colossians were in all likelihood Gentiles,

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<sup>2</sup>In light of these parallels Lona concludes, "Das Leben in der Fremde, fern von Gott (1. 21) ist sachlich nichts anderes als ein Tot-Sein als Folge der Übertretungen" (*Eschatologie*, 97). Even apart from this evidence the most common explanation of the meaning of spiritual death in 2:13 is that of alienation from God, e.g. O'Brien, 122; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 195; Martin, *Colossians*, 83; Lohmeyer, 113. Others prefer to characterize this state of spiritual death as being under the dominion of death (Lohse, 107) and sin (Zeilinger, 168), as powers of the present age.

<sup>3</sup>Thus Scott, *Colossians*, 45-46; Lohmeyer, 114; W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge: CUP, 1939) 169, n. 2; Martin, *Colossians*, 83; Houlden, 191;

since in v 13b they are described as uncircumcised in their flesh. Moreover, there was among Jews of this period the belief that the uncircumcised were spiritually dead.<sup>4</sup> But this interpretation is unsatisfactory for several reasons. To begin with, the second person "you" has been used all along in this passage, and thus could hardly introduce a contrast in v 13.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the Colossians' uncircumcision could hardly set them off from those described in vv 11,12, since the unredeemed state in v 11 is also that of uncircumcision. Third, in two very similar Pauline passages, Rom 7:9-13 and Eph 2:1,5, Jews and Gentiles alike are viewed as dead prior to conversion.<sup>6</sup> And finally, since καὶ ὑμᾶς is sandwiched between the references to Christ's death (ἐκ νεκρῶν) and the death of Christians (νεκροὺς ὄντας), it is more natural to take it as introducing a contrast or comparison between Christ and Christians.

Alternatively, E. Best argues that the connection between v 12 and v 13 "is not made logically, but through the catchword νεκρός." In other words the final word of v 12, νεκρῶν, referring to the death of Christ, is taken up in v 13 to describe the pre-conversion state, νεκροὺς ὄντας, but with no intended connection in meaning.<sup>7</sup> Best is surely correct to see a connection

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Wright, *Colossians* 109; and TEV. Some interpreters on the other hand take the introductory "and you" as simply stressing that "you" the Gentile readers as well as the Jews have received this redemption, e.g. Meyers, *Colossians* 370 and apparently H. Halter, *Taufe und Ethos* (Freiburg: Herder, 1977) 199; cf. Lightfoot, 185.

<sup>4</sup>The earliest evidence of this is seen in *Joseph and Asenath* 8:10, 11; 15:5, 12; 27:10; *m. 'Ed.* 5.2; *m. Pesah.* 8.8 (cf. Eph 4:18). See further D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956) 110-112.

<sup>5</sup>Peake, 526; cf. Williams, *Colossians* 94.

<sup>6</sup>Outside the NT, the notion of universal spiritual death because of sin is seen in 4 Ezra 7:48 where the pious Jewish author laments, "for an evil heart has grown up in us, which has alienated us from God, and brought us into corruption and the ways of death, and has shown us the paths of perdition and removed us far from life - and that not just a few of us, but almost all who have been created."

<sup>7</sup>E. Best, "Dead in Trespasses and Sins (Eph. 2.1)," *JNT* 13 (1981) 10. Cf. Lahnemann, 124; Lohmeyer, 113.

between these two "deaths," but to say they have no more in common than the bare term itself does not do justice to the text. On the face of it the final clause of v 12, τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν, gives every appearance of being a logical transition statement to v 13. The mention of God having raised Christ from the dead becomes the occasion for describing the readers' prior state of spiritual death from which God made them alive with Christ. The connecting καὶ ὑμᾶς would appear to indicate that what is intended here is a comparison between Christ and the Colossians: "as Christ was dead and God raised him to new life, *so also you* were dead spiritually and God made you alive with him."<sup>8</sup> This use of καὶ ὑμᾶς to introduce a theological application follows the pattern of usage seen in 1:21,22 where the message of the preceding verse regarding cosmic reconciliation (ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα) is applied to the readers (καὶ ὑμᾶς . . . ἀποκατήλλαξεν).<sup>9</sup> The usage in 2:13 also fits the pattern observed repeatedly in Colossians in which the writer makes a brief comparison between Christ/the Lord and the reader that is introduced by καὶ ὑμᾶς and uses a catchword common to each: (1) "when Christ appears . . . *you also* will appear with him (3:4); (2) "as the Lord has forgiven you, so *you also* must forgive" (3:13); (3) "Masters . . . *you also* have a Master in heaven (4:1).<sup>10</sup> But the claim that 2:13 makes a meaningful, theologically based comparison between Christ and the readers is generally rejected on the

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<sup>8</sup>Thus Peake, 526; Williams, 94; *pace*, Schweizer, *Colossians* 146 who calls the phrase superfluous.

<sup>9</sup>Thus e.g. Lohse, 62. Based on the pattern of 1:21, Bruce, (106) and Halter (199) also recognize the applicational function of "and you," but not in the sense we have interpreted it.

<sup>10</sup>In the light of the other parallels in wording and subject matter with Romans 6 it is noteworthy that the phrase οὕτως καὶ ὑμεῖς is also used in v 11 to apply Christ's resurrection from the dead (ἐκ νεκρῶν) - and hence his resulting freedom from the powers of death and sin - to the Christian: "so *also you* must consider yourselves dead (νεκρούς) to sin."

grounds that there is no theological basis for such a comparison. Christ's state of physical death and the Christian's pre-baptismal state of spiritual death have nothing in common.<sup>11</sup> The objection, however, is not serious since the second member of the comparison (resurrection with Christ) is certainly theologically based, and the *witness* of this making alive implies a common experience of death. We will take up the point of the comparison of the two kinds of death presently, but for now our purpose is limited to showing that 2:13 is connected to 2:12 by a logical line of thought in which the resurrection of Christ from the dead is applied to Christians. This interpretation is made more intelligible and more credible if 2:13 is recognized as an elaboration (with v 12) on the statement in 1:18 that Christ is "the firstborn from the dead."<sup>12</sup> In this way it may be seen that 2:13 serves the purpose of explaining how Christ as the *first* to rise from the dead is followed in this passage from death to life by Christians in baptism-conversion. Thus while 2:12d serves as the immediate point of departure for the application of Christ's death and resurrection to the believer in 2:13, the rationale for the argument and the ultimate starting point is found in 1:18.

The origin and nature of the Colossians' state of death is explained by the extended prepositional phrase of v 13b, ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ. The term παράπτωμα (trespass) refers to the violation of God's command.<sup>13</sup> The plural indicates that the Colossians' lifestyle prior to conversion was characterized by disobedience and rebellion against God. This description stands in continuity with the parallel text 1:21 where evil deeds (ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς) are said to have characterized their

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<sup>11</sup>Thus Best, "Dead in Trespasses," 14, in reference to the parallel text Eph 2:1; cf. Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 50 (cf. 194) who states the objection but refutes it.

<sup>12</sup>See our discussion of v 12 in chapter five.

<sup>13</sup>Lohse, 107; Michaelis "παράπτωμα," *JNT* 6 (1968) 172.

former life of alienation and fallenness.<sup>14</sup> These trespasses are described in the vice lists of 3:5,8 and are designated in v 9 as the deeds of the "old person."<sup>15</sup> Interpreters usually recognize in the phrase "the uncircumcision of your flesh" a reference to the Colossians' bodily condition as Gentiles which the writer employs as a symbol for their state of spiritual alienation from God.<sup>16</sup> But as a metaphor this description is applicable to Jews as well since it is used in the OT of Israelites who were rebellious against God (e.g. Lev 26:41), and the Jews looked to a coming day when God would restore the nation to himself by circumcising their hearts (Deut 30:16; *Jub.* 1:23).<sup>17</sup> Thus in Col 2:11, as we noted above, the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles is characterized as "a circumcision made without hands." The Colossians were circumcised in baptism by "the stripping off of the body of flesh," a statement which is interpreted in 3:9 as the stripping off of the old person, i.e. the old Adamic existence. Hence the unredeemed state of uncircumcision was one of fallenness and rebellion against God. Their trespasses were the concrete manifestation of this condition. The preposition ἐν<sup>18</sup> governing the two datives παραπτώμασιν and ἀκροβυστία is to be understood in a causal sense.<sup>19</sup> This is supported by the participial clause at the end of v 13

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<sup>14</sup>Cf. Lohse, 63, 64.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Lahnemann, 124; Gnifka, 136.

<sup>16</sup>E.g. C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 97 and O'Brien, 122, 123.

<sup>17</sup>See further chapter five, 123-124 .

<sup>18</sup>The manuscript tradition is divided over whether or not ἐν is original. In its favour are ̅46, ̅2, A, C, D, F, G, 17 and 1739. Those texts which omit the preposition include ̅9, B, L, ̅ and 33. The evidence for the ἐν reading is both early and widespread, and is the choice of the editors of the 26th edition of the *Nestle-Aland Greek Text*, though they put it in brackets. The textual uncertainty is of no consequence for our reading of the dative as causal. The presence of the preposition does, however, open up the possibility that the phrase may be understood instead as describing accompanying circumstances (see Turner, *Syntax* 241).

<sup>19</sup>Thus the majority of interpreters, including Lightfoot, 186; Lohmeyer, 113; Lohse, 107; Ernst, 204; Zeilinger, 168; Schweizer, 147; Lons, 97; O'Brien, 122; and the RV, JB, TEV, NEB.



indicating that being made alive with Christ follows from the forgiveness of the readers' trespasses (παρὰπτώματα). The Colossians' former life was one of spiritual death and alienation from God because it was a life of sin.

Behind this may be seen the Pauline idea that death is the power of the present age which entered the world with the sin of Adam and which, because of sin, has ruled his descendants ever since (Rom 5:12, 14, 17, 21; cf. Gen 2:16, 17). The rule of death is manifest ultimately in physical death (Rom 6:9, 23; 8:10; 1 Cor 15:54-56), but the fact that Paul in Rom 7:5, 9-13 can speak of sin causing a state of spiritual death in the living shows that he makes no hard and fast distinction between physical and spiritual death.<sup>20</sup> This lays the groundwork for understanding the argument of Col 2:12d-13c regarding the application of Christ's deliverance from death to Christians. Christians can share in his victory because Christ shared their death. He came in the likeness of the sinful and uncircumcised flesh of Adam (1:22; 2:11; Rom 8:3) and made himself accountable for their transgressions in the criminal execution he endured on the cross (Col 2:14; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Phil 2:8; Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3). As such he submitted himself fully to the rule of death (Rom 6:9) - a death which was spiritual as well as physical. In this way Christ identified himself with the human predicament of death, so that those who are united with him in faith-baptism might share in his victory over death.<sup>21</sup>

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Those who read the phrase as describing attendant circumstances include C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 97; Best, "Dead in Trespasses," 12; and Wedderburn, *Baptism*, 74. The following translations also read "in trespasses etc.": the AV, Moffatt, RSV and NIV.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 93; Dunn, *Romans*, 1, 365.

<sup>21</sup>The notion that Christ in his physical death shared the common human subjection to death, and that his victory over death became the basis for deliverance from death with him in baptism is given elaborate development in the *Odes of Solomon*. In Ode 42 Christ is represented as saying, "Sheol saw me and was shattered and Death ejected me and many with me" (v 11). Death released Christ because he "had become vinegar and bitterness to it" (v 12). Then others among the dead cry out to him, "Son of God . . . bring us out from chains of darkness . . . May we also be saved with you, because you

This conclusion offers some insight into the relationship of the image of spiritual death used in Col 2:11, 12, 20 and 3:3 as dying with Christ in baptism to the usage in 2:13 of death as the pre-baptismal, unredeemed condition. The juxtaposition of such different uses of the same image could be seen as paradoxical if not contradictory- for how does one die who is already dead?<sup>22</sup> C. Burger has addressed this issue by arguing that in the earliest stage of the text there was no switch in the image of death from 2:11,12 to 13. According to Burger's reconstruction, τοῖς παραπτύμασιν and the reference to the forgiveness of sins are later additions which gave the text its present meaning. The original, however, spoke of being "dead to uncircumcision," νεκροὺς ὄντας τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ, as a parallel to burial with Christ in the previous verse. In this way, Burger alleges, the writer was following the Pauline pattern of describing Christians as being "dead to sin" (νεκροὺς μὲν τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, Rom 6:11) or "to the law" (νόμῳ, Gal 2:19).<sup>23</sup> Aside from the patently speculative nature of this interpretation we would list the following criticisms. (1) Wedderburn comments that for the sense Burger requires one would have expected an aorist participle.<sup>24</sup> (2) While Paul does indeed employ the dative to speak of having died to sin, the law and the world (Gal 6:14), the notion of having died to *uncircumcision* is

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are our Saviour" (vv 15-18). Thus Christ says, "I made a congregation of living among his [i.e. Death's] dead" (v 14). The same basic picture appears in Ode 17. Again Christ speaks of his own deliverance from the prison of death, and how he thereby freed his people: "And I shattered the bars of iron, for my own iron(s) had grown hot and melted before me" (v 10). Having thus been freed he says, "I went toward all my [fellow] bondsmen in order to loose them . . . And I gave . . . my resurrection through my love" (vv 12-13). To reiterate, these statements reflect a baptismal setting. Those who are made alive with Christ are those who before conversion were spiritually dead. Christ joins them in their subjection to the power of death so that having gained his own release he might also free them. On the relation of the *Odes of Solomon* to baptism see M. Pierce, "Themes in the 'Odes of Solomon' and Other Early Christian Writings and Their Baptismal Character," *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 98 (1984) 35-59.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Lahnemann, 123.

<sup>23</sup>Burger, *Schöpfung und Versöhnung*, 98-100.

<sup>24</sup>*Baptism and Resurrection*, 74, n. 13.

without parallel.<sup>25</sup> (3) On the other hand, there is a precedent for the kind of dual usage of the image of spiritual death seen in our passage: in Rom 7:4-13 Paul switches back and forth freely from the concept of having died (with Christ) to the law (vv 4,6), to the pre-Christian state as one of spiritual death because of the law and sin (vv 5, 9-11,13). A less speculative approach to the different usage of spiritual death in Col 2:13 takes as its starting point the recognition that the notion of present existence as a state of death was a commonplace figure in the NT era.<sup>26</sup> According to this interpretation the writer in 2:13 has simply pressed into service a traditional image. This image is independent in origin from that used in vv 11,12 and is thus to be interpreted independently.<sup>27</sup> But if our interpretation of 2:13 is correct it may be seen that the two ways in which the image of spiritual death is used in these verses find a common basis in the seemingly paradoxical nature of the death of Christ as both the saving event, and as that state to which his identification with sinful humanity brought him and from which resurrection was deliverance. Thus in his explanation of the fullness of the salvation Christians now possess in Christ the writer can switch in seemingly paradoxical fashion from describing union with Christ in the saving events of

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<sup>25</sup>Gnilka, 137, n. 91.

<sup>26</sup>Philo employs this metaphor of (1) the person lacking in virtue (e.g. *Leg. All.* 3.52; *Det.* 70; *Quod Deus* 89; *Cong.* 57; *Fug.* 55; 113; *Som.* 1.131; *QG* 1.16, 51); (2) those who flee from God (*Fug.* 78) or do not acknowledge him as the cause of all things (*Leg. All.* 3.35); and (3) the soul while it is entombed in the body (*Leg. All.* 1.108). For usage in Greek philosophy see R. Bultmann, "θάνατος," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 12 and L. Coenen, "νεκρός," *NIDNTT* 1 (1975) 443. Already in the OT the state of sickness, sin, alienation, captivity or subjection by an enemy is seen as existence in the grave (Sheol) or the realm of the dead (e.g. Ps 13:1-3; 22:15; 30:13; 31:12; 88:3-6; 143:3; Hos 13:14 and Jonah 2:6). This usage stands in continuity with that of IQH 3:19 and 11:10-14. In the NT the metaphor is applied to the prodigal son (Luke 15:24, 32), and in 1 Tim 5:6 and Rev 3:1 to those in the church whose lives are characterized by sin (see also Matt 8:22 and Luke 9:60). In some Jewish circles Gentiles were regarded as dead (see above note 4). For other references in Rabbinic literature see Strack-Billerbeck 1.489 and 3.652.

<sup>27</sup>Schweizer, 146-147; Gnilka, 136.

his death and resurrection to union with Christ in his deliverance from the power of death.<sup>28</sup> The juxtaposition of these two ideas, moreover, is not entirely foreign to Romans 6. On the one hand, Christ's death is seen as the saving event in which Christians have shared, while on the other hand his resurrection from the dead (ἐκ νεκρῶν) means "death no longer rules him" (v 9) and Christians accordingly are said to be alive from the dead (ἐκ νεκρῶν ζῶντας, v 13).

We have thus far been dealing with the application of Christ's death to the convert's pre-baptismal experience of spiritual death. We turn now to a brief examination of part c of v 13 in which the writer applies Christ's resurrection from the dead to Christians: συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ. The pronoun ὑμᾶς is picked up from the opening address of the verse and repeated for the sake of clarity.<sup>29</sup> The subject of the verb is not Christ but God, as seen from the parallel with v 12d: God raised Christ (θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτόν ) and "he made you alive with him."<sup>30</sup> The switch from the verb ἐγείρω to (συ)ζωοποιέω does not indicate any essential change in meaning. When used of the eschatological resurrection of the dead the two terms were virtually synonymous and often appear in such parallel fashion (e.g. John 5:21; 1 Cor 15:15-22, Rom 8:11, cf. *Bib. Ant.* 3:10 and *J. Judah* 25:4).<sup>31</sup> The συν- prefix on the verb ζωοποιέω followed by the phrase σὺν

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Lahnemann, 123.

<sup>29</sup>Thus A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadmann, 1934) 1205; Turner (*Syntax* 38.39) reckons this redundancy is the result of Semitic influence. Classical Greek usually avoids this type of repetition, and this probably accounts for its omission in some manuscripts (cf. O'Brien, 123), e.g.  $\aleph^2$ , D, F, G,  $\Psi$ ,  $\Phi$ . The reading ὑμᾶς appears in  $\Phi$ <sup>46</sup>, B, 33, 88 and 181. Lohmeyer (101) accepts this as original, but its appearance here is probably due to an attempt to bring the person into conformity with the first person pronoun in vv 13d, 14 (thus Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 623).

<sup>30</sup>See further Abbott, 253, 254.

<sup>31</sup>R. Bultmann, "ζωοποιέω," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 874, 875; O'Brien, 123.

αὐτῷ indicates that God has caused Christians to share in what he did for Christ when he raised him from the dead.<sup>32</sup> The meaning of his resurrection in relation to 2:13 is rooted in the statement in 1:18 that Christ is "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." Christ suffered death because of his identification with sinful fallen Adamic humanity. His resurrection was a deliverance from the power of death and the inauguration of the eschatological new creation, in which he became the new Adam of the new reconciled human race. The message of 2:13 is that Christians have been caught up in this event. By virtue of their union with Christ in conversion-baptism they too have been delivered from the power of death and entered the life of the age to come. They have been transferred out of the sphere of the old Adamic existence and into the sphere of the new creation and the new Adam (cf. 3:9,10). This event means there is moral transformation (2:11,12), forgiveness (2:14) and reconciliation (1:21,22). That which God intended for the human race from the beginning and which was lost in the fall is restored in Christ (cf. 1:15,20).<sup>33</sup> There is, however, a "not yet" dimension to this life. Though they belong to the new creation, they still live in the midst of the old. The fullness of the resurrection existence is still awaited. Their life is hidden with Christ, but when Christ is manifest at the parousia they will be manifest with him in glory (3:3,4).

## II. New Life Through Forgiveness of Sins (vv 13d-14)

The central idea in Col 2:13-15 is that Christians have been made alive with Christ (v 13c). The remainder of this passage constitutes an explanation, directly or indirectly of this statement. In vv 13d-14 the writer

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<sup>32</sup>See further our earlier treatment of the meaning of *with Christ* in chapter five, 137-143.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Zeilinger, 168; Halter, 198; O'Brien, 123.

explains their passage from death to life on the basis of forgiveness. This section unfolds in two principal parts: (1) a summary statement in v 13d setting out the essential fact of forgiveness as the basis of new life, and (2) an explanation in v 14 of this forgiveness in terms of blotting out their record of sin (v 14a) through the death of Christ (v 14b).<sup>34</sup>

#### A. Forgiveness as the Basis of Life (v 13d)

The main clause of v 13, συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ is sandwiched between two subordinate participial clauses. The first, καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν κτλ., sets out the Colossians' situation prior to faith as being dead *because of trespasses*; the second, χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα ("having forgiven us all our trespasses"), is its counterpart in that it states the cause or means of being made alive with Christ as the forgiveness of those trespasses.<sup>35</sup> Thus as sin brings death so the forgiveness of sin brings life from the dead. This declaration of forgiveness belongs to the epistle's theology of salvation as new creation, the structure of which is set out programmatically in 1:15-20.<sup>36</sup> God's original intention for humanity was life in harmony and fellowship with himself. But the introduction of sin into the creation brought death and alienation. The message of 1:20 is that God's purpose in sending Christ was to

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<sup>34</sup>Because of its distinctive vocabulary and style, as well as the switch to the first person in v 13d, many scholars believe an early hymn or confessional statement underlies the present text of vv 13d-15. This has led to numerous attempts to reconstruct the alleged original wording. Yet the lack of any consensus among these scholars and the fact that these verses form an integral part of the context has led other scholars to believe that no such original piece exists, though the text may indeed contain echoes of traditional phraseology. This would seem to be the more reasonable conclusion. For a recent discussion of views and issues see Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae*, 205-207 and Pokorný, *Colossians*, 135-137.

<sup>35</sup>A. Oepke, "βάπτω, βαπτίζω," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 542, n. 59.

<sup>36</sup>See chapter four, especially 86-88.

reconcile the rebellious cosmos "making peace through the blood of his cross," thereby restoring the lost harmony of the original creation. The following two verses apply this act of new creation to the Colossian readers: they too were in a state of alienation from God (v 21) but he has reconciled them through the death of Christ that they might stand before him holy and blameless and free from accusation (v 22). As we have seen, in 2:13a-c the writer picks up on this theme of alienation and reconciliation from 1:21-22 and explains it in terms of having been spiritually dead but now made alive with Christ. Beginning with 2:13d he develops his explanation of the basis of this reconciliation/resurrection with Christ in the forgiveness of that sin which brought about the alienation and death.

#### **B. The Blotting Out of the *Cheirographon* (v 14a)**

The following participial clause ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν reinforces and expands on the concept of forgiveness. The verb ἐξαλείφω is frequently used of the removal of writing from a document (e.g. LXX Num 5:23; Rev 3:5), and this is the meaning here. A common image in the OT and later Judaism is that of God keeping a written record of human deeds, both good and evil, so that forgiveness means the blotting out (ἐξαλείφω / חָטַט) of the sins recorded. Thus the psalmist prays, "blot out my transgressions," (MT, 51:3; cf. v 11), and God proclaims in Isa 43:25, "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake."<sup>37</sup> Especially noteworthy are the parallels to Col 2:14 seen in the following three lines from the ancient Jewish prayer *Abinu Malkenu*:

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<sup>37</sup>See further Ps 109:14; Jer 18:23; Neh 3:37; Dan 7:10; *Jub.* 28:6; *1 Enoch* 81:2; *2 Enoch* 53:2, 3; 1QS 11:3; Acts 3:19; *m. Abot* 2.1. The notion that a record of good works is kept is explicit in Neh 13:14, Mal 3:16 and *Jub.* 30:17.

Our Father, Our King! forgive and pardon all our iniquities.  
 Our Father, Our King! blot out (מחל) our transgressions, and make  
 them pass away before thine eyes.  
 Our Father, Our King! erase in thine abundant mercies all the  
 records of our guilt.<sup>38</sup>

On occasion this record of sin is said explicitly to be "against" the sinner (cf. "against us" in Col 2:14), as in *1 Enoch* 96:7. "Woe unto you who carry out oppression . . . There shall be a record of evil *against you* (cf. 97:7). Similarly in 81:4 Enoch declares, "Blessed is the man who dies righteous and upright, *against whom* no record of oppression has been written." In the apocalyptic literature this heavenly book of deeds is brought into connection with the final judgment of the dead.<sup>39</sup> Each person will be judged on the basis of the written record, as in the judgment scene of Rev 20:12: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened . . . And the dead were judged by what was written in the books." As a result of the judgment the wicked are condemned to eternal perdition, while the righteous are "made alive" - i.e. they will be transformed and glorified, and received into paradise where they will live forever.<sup>40</sup> We shall argue that this is the conceptual background against which the reader is to understand the statements in Col 2:13,14 that Christians are made alive with Christ through the blotting out of "the *cheirographon* against us."

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<sup>38</sup> *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book*, trans. S. Singer, 25th ed. (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1957) 56.

<sup>39</sup> *1 Enoch* 90:20; 98:7, 8; 104:7; *Jub.* 4:23; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 24:1; *T. Abr.* [Rec. A.] 12:8-18; *Apoc. Zeph.* 3:6-9, 7:1-11; *2 Enoch* 44:5; 52:15. See further Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae*, 100, 108 and Strack-Billerbeck, 2.1070-1073.

<sup>40</sup> This of course is a major theme in the apocalyptic literature, e.g. Dan 12:2, 3; *T. Levi* 18:10-14; IQS 4:6-8; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 51:3-12; 4 Ezra 7:36, 95-8, 113-114; Rev 21; cf. also Matt 25:34. See further E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)* New English Edition rev. and ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black, P. Vermes, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973-87) 2.54-55, and Sappington, 108-110.



For the great majority of interpreters, however, the essential image behind the use of *χειρόγραφον* in v 14 is simply that of the debtor and creditor, since the term was commonly used of a certificate of indebtedness, a bond or promissory note (e.g. Tobit 5:3; 9:5; cf. Philem 19).<sup>41</sup> There is, however, some disagreement as to whether it refers in Col 2:14 to the record of the debt of sin as such,<sup>42</sup> or to humanity's obligation to keep the law (τοῖς δόγμασιν),<sup>43</sup> or to the law itself, "as the explicit statement of what all men owe to God."<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, a small but growing number of scholars believe the image is that of the heavenly record of sin to be presented before God at the judgment.<sup>45</sup> The chief evidence for the meaning of *χειρόγραφον* in this sense is the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* (100 B. C. E. - 70 C. E.). The Greek original is lost, but the term appears transliterated in the surviving Coptic version.<sup>46</sup> Usually overlooked in this discussion is the

<sup>41</sup>E. Lohse, "χειρόγραφον," *TDNT* 9 (1974) 435; Moulton and Milligan, 687.

<sup>42</sup>Thus the TEV, "he cancelled the unfavourable record of our debts." See further Lohse, 108.

<sup>43</sup>Thus the NEB, "he has cancelled the bond which pledged us to the decrees of the law." See also Robinson, *Body*, 43, n. 1; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 97-98; Bruce, 109, n. 91; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 195; cf. Turner, *Syntax*, 219.

<sup>44</sup>Scott, *Colossians*, 47. Thus the NIV, "having cancelled the written code." See also Meyer, 374; Abbott, 225; Peake, 527; Williams, 97, 98; Prat, *Theology of St. Paul*, 2.228-229; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 212; and Wright, 112. Two views generally rejected today are 1) the reference is to a contract made between Adam and the devil (thus Lohmeyer, 116), and 2) W. Carr's idiosyncratic view that it should be understood on the basis of certain confessional stellae discovered in Asia Minor (*Angels and Principalities*, 52-58). For a critique of Carr's hypothesis see Sappington 214, n. 2 and Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 55, 56. For a recent survey of views see also R. Yates, "Colossians 2.14: Metaphor of Forgiveness," *Biblica* 71 (1990) 249-256.

<sup>45</sup>Thus A. J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World* (Kampen: Kok, 1964) 159, 160; H. Weiss, "The Law and the Epistle to the Colossians," *CBO* 34 (1972) 301, 302; Lincoln, *Paradise*, 113, 114; Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 56; Martin, *Colossians*, 84, 85; idem, "Reconciliation and Forgiveness in the Letter to the Colossians," in *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. R. Banks (Exeter: Paternoster, 1974) 120, 121; Sappington, 214-217.

<sup>46</sup>For the Coptic text with a German translation indicating the numerous Greek loanwords see G. Steindorff, *Die Apokalypse des Elias, ein unbekannte Apokalypse und Bruchstücke der Sophonias-Apokalypse* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1899) especially 149-155. For an English translation with introduction see O. S. Wintermute, "Apocalypse of Zephaniah," *OT Pseudepigrapha* 1.497-515.

usage in the *Apocalypse of Paul* 17 which in its present form dates from about 400 C. E. Again, the original Greek is lost but the loanword *chirographum* is used in the Latin translation for the heavenly record of sin.<sup>47</sup> Noteworthy also is the reference to the heavenly record of sin in *2 (Slavonic) Enoch* 53:3 as "handwriting," which suggests the word  $\chi\epsilon\iota\rho\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\omicron\nu$  in the lost Greek text of which this is a translation. Finally, and of special significance is *m. Abot* 4.17 where the record of each person's sins is likened to the account-book of a shopkeeper in which "the hand writes" recording each transaction, and this record becomes the basis of judgment after death.<sup>48</sup> The special value of this passage is that it provides a very plausible explanation for how a term belonging to the realm of commerce,  $\chi\epsilon\iota\rho\gamma\rho\alpha\phi\omicron\nu$ , could make its way into a juridical context. In other words, it is not necessary to believe that in ordinary usage this word meant "charge-list" or "indictment." Rather it represents a special development within Jewish circles of an image from the world of commerce carried over and redeployed in a juridical context.<sup>49</sup>

The evidence that the *chirographon* of Col 2:15 refers to a heavenly record of sin, however, goes beyond that of a single term. The seventh chapter of the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* contains a number of significant points of contact with our Colossian passage. A proper assessment of these parallels and of their significance for the interpretation of Col 2:13-15 requires a brief examination of this apocalyptic text.

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<sup>47</sup>See Lohse, *TDNT* 9 (1974) 435, n. 2. For an English translation see Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* 2.770.

<sup>48</sup>See Lohse, *Colossians* 108.

<sup>49</sup>Another example of this same essential phenomenon, it seems, would be the use of balances or scales in the Jewish post-mortem judgment scene (e.g. *Apoc. Zeph.* 8:5 and *T. Abr.* 12:13 [A]).

As is typical of the Jewish apocalypses, the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* is fashioned around a visionary journey to heaven. In order to reach the realm of the righteous the seer must travel the route of a departed soul.<sup>50</sup> Hence, he finds himself in Hades where he is put in the dock "in the presence of the Lord" (6:17) to be judged for the deeds he has done on the earth. An accusing angel unrolls a manuscript (*cheirographon*) containing a record of the seer's sins (7:1-3). The seer then falls on his face and prays "before the Lord Almighty, 'may your mercy reach me and may you wipe out my manuscript'" (7:8). In response an angelic attendant announces to him, "Triumph, prevail, for you have prevailed and triumphed over the accuser, and you have come up from Hades and the abyss" (v 9). The seer then passes into the heavenly realm where he puts on an angelic garment and joins the angels in their worship of God (8:1-5). The following points of contact with Col 2:13-15 and context are to be noted.

1. The *cheirographon*, as in Col 2:14, is of central importance appearing no less than seven times (vv 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10). The term also appears with this sense three times in chapter three (vv 6, 8, 9).<sup>51</sup>

2. In both texts forgiveness is said to come by the wiping out of the *cheirographon*

3. In both texts the wiping out of the *cheirographon* leads to the language of *triumph*<sup>52</sup>

4. In the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* the object of triumph is the accusing angel; in Col 2:15 it is the principalities and powers. In our investigation of Col 1:16,20 in chapter four we argued that the principalities and powers of 2:15 are to be understood as hostile spirits. As such they fit

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<sup>50</sup>Wintermute, *OT Pseudepigrapha*, 1502.

<sup>51</sup>See Steindorff, 150, 152-153.

<sup>52</sup>Sappington, 217.

the role of malevolent accusers who hold the condemning indictment against humanity and thus exercise dominion over them.<sup>53</sup>

5. Of special significance is the *result* of the seer's acquittal at the judgment. He passes over from Hades and the abyss (the realm of the dead) to heaven (i.e. the realm of eternal life). Correspondingly, "the blotting out of the *cheirographon* against us" in Col 2:14 is the basis for the convert's passage from death to life (v 13). Compare also 1:12-14 where Christians, on the basis of forgiveness, are said to have been transferred from the dominion of hostile spirit powers to the (heavenly) dominion of Christ.<sup>54</sup>

6. According to Col 1:22 Christians have been reconciled to God through the death of Christ so that they might be presented before him "free from accusation" (NIV; παραστήσαι ὑμᾶς . . . ἀνεγκλήτους). The image here is that of the divine tribunal: no accusation (ἔγκλημα) can now be levelled against believers when they stand before God at the judgment (cf. 1 Cor 1:8).<sup>55</sup> We have already seen that Col 2:13 is closely parallel to 1:21,22 in language and thought, with the Christians' past alienation corresponding to their prior state of death, and reconciliation corresponding to their being made alive with Christ. It is thus entirely in keeping with this pattern that the image of acquittal before the divine tribunal introduced in 1:22 in explanation of reconciliation should be picked up in 2:14 and used to explain being made alive with Christ.

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<sup>53</sup>Thus Sappington, 208-213 and Bandstra, *Law and the Elements of the World*, 164-166.

<sup>54</sup>Sappington, 217. For his arguments on the meaning of 1:12-14 and the connection of this text with 2:14-15 see 192-193, 198-203; 211-213.

<sup>55</sup>W. Grundmann, "ἀνεγκλήτος," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 356-357; Lohse, 65; Peake, 512, 513; Williams, 60; O'Brien, 68; Martin, *Colossians* 67, 68. Commenting on Col 1:22 Scott (*Colossians* 28) writes, "No accusing angel will dare to bring anything against them, since Christ has won for them a complete deliverance."

7. The picture in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* of a visionary journey to heaven where the seer joins the angelic worship dovetails with our earlier conclusions regarding the teachings of the Colossian errorists who advocated mystical experiences of entering heaven in order to participate in the angelic liturgy (2:18). Since the seer's entry into heaven in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah* is granted only after acquittal at the post-mortem judgment in Hades, it seems altogether likely that the visionary journeys of the errorists also included arraignment before this tribunal, with guilt or innocence being based on compliance with their rules and regulations. If this is the case, the writer's use of this imagery and his affirmation of the believer's present acquittal and triumph over the accusers takes on added significance as a polemical response.

We conclude that the use of the term *cheirographon* in Col 2:14 must be understood against the background of an apocalyptic judgment scene like that of the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*. It is a sustained image which draws in both the concepts of being made alive in v 13 and triumph over the principalities and powers in v 15. The import of this text, then, is that Christians are as those who have stood accused and guilty before the divine tribunal. But the record of their transgressions has been blotted out. They have been made to triumph over the hostile accusing powers and have passed from death and the dominion of darkness (cf. 1:13) to the heavenly life of the age to come. Implicit here is a polemic against the teachings of the errorists. By their legalistic and ascetic strivings they hoped to achieve a sufficient degree of purity so that in their mystical journeys they might get past the accusing angel of Hades and thereby enter heaven. Within this context the writer may be heard to say, there is no need to so strive since

the passage into life and heavenly existence is already freely granted through faith in Christ.

This leads now to the question of the meaning of the dative τοῖς δόγμασιν following χειρόγραφον in 2:14. Given our interpretation of the *cheirographon*, these *dogmata* are best understood as the legal grounds of the indictment "against us."<sup>56</sup> The misdeeds recorded on the *cheirographon* are violations of these ordinances or commands. The dative is thus causal: "the indictment which because of the ordinances was against us."<sup>57</sup> The precise nature of these ordinances is disputed. Most scholars, regardless of their interpretation of the *cheirographon*, identify the *dogmata* as the law of Moses.<sup>58</sup> This is a commonsense view since Paul makes it quite clear that it is the law which defines sin as such ("where there is no law there is no transgression," Rom 4:15b), and the law brings condemnation and death on those who violate it (cf. Rom 3:19-20; 4:15a; 5:20; 7:5, 9-11; Gal 3:10). Moreover, in Hellenistic Judaism the term δόγμα was used as a designation for the law (e.g. 3 Macc 1:3; 4 Macc 10:2; Josephus, *Apion* 1,42), and indeed it appears with this meaning in Eph 2:15, a text which is generally thought to be dependent on Col 2:14. On the other hand, a proper assessment of the meaning of the *dogmata* in Col 2:14 must take into account the role they played in the teaching of the errorists. As we saw earlier, the writer apparently chose to explain salvation in terms of acquittal at the post-mortem judgment because it was useful as a counter-argument to the

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<sup>56</sup>Thus Lohse, 109, 110; Schweizer, 150; Martin, *Colossians*, 84; Bandstra, *Law and the Elements* 161; R. Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror* (London: SPCK, 1954) 102; J. Schneider, "σταυρός," *TDNT* 7 (1971) 577; Sappington, 219.

<sup>57</sup>Thus E. F. Scott, 46; O'Brien, 102, 125; Lohse, 92, 109; Percy, *Probleme der Kolosser*, 88, 89, n. 43; Bandstra, *Law and the Elements* 158; cf. Turner, *Syntax*, 242.

<sup>58</sup>Thus, e.g. G. Kittel, "δόγμα, δογματίζω," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 231; Abbott, 254; E. F. Scott, 46; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 97-98; Kasemann, "Baptismal Liturgy," 163; Bandstra, 161; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 195.

errorists' insistence that such a judgment must be undergone and passed by all who would make a successful heavenly journey. Apparently also the errorists referred to their peculiar regulations as δόγματα since in v 20 the writer refers to them as such, only using the verbal form δογματίζω: "If you died with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world *why... do you submit to its rules*: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!'" These regulations were to one extent or another based on the Jewish law and obviously incorporated traditional aspects of the law, as may be seen from v 16. To the false teachers, no doubt, their *dogmata* were the commandments of God, and it was on the basis of their successful adherence to these commandments that they hoped to triumph over the accuser in their mystical journeys and thereby enter heaven. It would seem, then, that with the expression τοῖς δόγμασιν in v 14 the writer has made use of the errorists' own terminology.<sup>59</sup> He does this in order to assure his readers that they can now stand before God free from those accusations and transgressions which the errorists claim would bar them from his presence. In doing this the writer is not necessarily endorsing the errorists' claim that their regulations are divine commandments. In fact, in v 22 he characterizes them as being in accordance with "human precepts and doctrines" (cf. v 8). Rather, he is able to use the term δόγμα because it is sufficiently vague or non-specific to be able to designate legal demands of any kind whether of divine or human origin.

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<sup>59</sup>Cf. Weiss, "The Law in Colossians," 304, 310, 311; Lincoln, *Paradise*, 114; Pokorný, 139; Sappington, 219.

### C. Forgiveness Through the Death of Christ (v 14b)

The second half of v 14 begins with an independent clause declaring that God has removed the accusing *cheirographon* "from the middle" (καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου). This statement carries forward the image of the law court. "The middle" refers to the centre of proceedings in a trial and is thus the place where an accusing witness or prosecutor would stand.<sup>60</sup> This usage is seen in Mark 14:60 and Acts 4:7. While the expression does not appear in the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*, it is found in the post-mortem judgment scene of the *Apocalypse of Paul* 17. In this passage, which obviously belongs to the same tradition, God, "the righteous judge," commands the angel holding the record of sin (*cheirographum*), "Come . . . stand *in the middle*!"<sup>61</sup> Thus in Col 2:14 the removal of the accusing record of sin from "the middle" must be indicative of the end of the trial and the acquittal of the accused. The imagery is drawn out to emphasize the forgiveness which the Colossian Christians now possess.

In the final clause of v 14 the *cheirographon* is said to have been nailed to the cross (προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ). With this statement the imagery has obviously shifted from trial to execution. Clearly the death of Christ on the cross is in view, and it is through his death that forgiveness by the blotting out of the *cheirographon* has been secured (cf. 1:22). But with the shift in imagery, what is portrayed as being nailed to the cross? Since according to the gospel record Christ's body was nailed to the cross, some scholars believe there is a tacit identification here of the *cheirographon* with Christ himself.<sup>62</sup> Support for this interpretation is seen in the gnostic

<sup>60</sup>Weiss, "The Law in Colossians," 311,312; Lincoln, *Paradise*, 121; Gnifka, 140.

<sup>61</sup>The same usage appears again in the first sentence of chapter 18, see Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* 2.770.

<sup>62</sup>Thus O. Blanchette, "Does the *Cheirographon* of Col 2:14 Represent Christ Himself?" *CBO* (1961) 306-312; Bandstra, 158-163; Weiss, 301,302 and Martin, *Colossians* 85,86.



reading of Col 2:14 found in the *Gospel of Truth* 20:23-27 which speaks of Christ being clothed with a heavenly book and nailed to the cross.<sup>63</sup> But the picture of Christ, or the body he wore, as a written record of sin is very severe, and it must be seriously doubted if the original readers could have made sense of such a notion.<sup>64</sup> More likely and more popular is the view that the reference here is to the inscription on the cross of Christ (cf. Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38 and John 19:19,20).<sup>65</sup> This reflects the ancient custom of displaying a placard at public executions, written on the authority of the court, and stating the charge against the condemned.<sup>66</sup> The charge on the inscription which Pilate had nailed to the cross read, "The King of the Jews." But for the writer to the Colossians the real charge for which Christ died was the comprehensive sin of his people as recorded on "the indictment which was against us." The identification of the *cheirographon* with the inscription on the cross provides a powerful illustration of the primitive Christian confession, "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3).

Although dying with Christ is not mentioned in v 14, Moule and Wright are surely correct in concluding that the explanation of his death in this verse has a direct bearing on this issue.<sup>67</sup> As we have seen, the present section serves as an explanation of the statement in v 13c that Christians have been made alive with Christ. Implicit in this verse is the idea that Christ and Christians shared a common subjection to the power of death,

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<sup>63</sup>On the meaning of this passage within the context of this gnostic work see R. Yates, "Colossians and Gnosis," *JNT* 27 (1986) 61,62.

<sup>64</sup>Thus Carr, *Angels and Principalities* 54; O'Brien, 125; Sappington, 216.

<sup>65</sup>Thus Dibelius-Greeven, 31; E. F. Scott, 47; Lohse, 111, n. 125; Ernst, 205; Lahnemann, 128; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 195; Wright, *Colossians*, 113 and Pokorný, 139, 140.

<sup>66</sup>On the background, see E. Bammel, "The *titulus*," in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: CUP, 1984) 353,354.

<sup>67</sup>C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians* 98,99; idem, "Judgment Theme in the Sacraments," 465; Wright, *Colossians* 113.

with Christ identifying himself with fallen humanity's state of death because of sin (v 13a,b). But the notion or at least the language of Christians being identified with Christ in his death is absent from v 13. Nevertheless, baptism in vv 11,12 is said to mean union with Christ in his death, and v 14 contains the only explanation of the meaning of this death in the context. Thus, it is reasonable to believe the two should be understood together: the Colossians are saved because they have been united with Christ in his death for sin. Two additional arguments favour this connection with dying with Christ in v 14. The first is based on v 20: "If you died with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world, why as though you still belonged to it do you submit to its rules (δογματίζεσθε)?" With this statement the writer is apparently making an application based on his explanation of the death of Christ in v 14, since the *stoicheia* are in all likelihood to be understood in terms of the post-mortem judgment scene, either as the δόγματα under which Christians had stood condemned, or as the hostile accusing spirits who exercised authority over them because of the *cheirographon*. In other words, even though the language of dying with Christ is absent from v 14, when the writer takes up the point of v 14 and applies it in v 20, he does so in terms of dying with Christ.<sup>68</sup> The second line of evidence concerns the participle ἀπεκδυσάμενος, the first word of v 15. To anticipate our arguments in the next section, this word is to be understood as a metaphorical description of Jesus' death on the cross and refers back to the description of dying with Christ in v 11 as the stripping off (ἀπέκδυσις) of the body of flesh. Hence, by implication, the Colossians' death with Christ (ἀπέκδυσις) in v 11 is to be understood on the basis of his death (ἀπεκδυσάμενος) for them in vv 14,15.

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<sup>68</sup>Cf. Ernst, 212; Halter, *Taufe und Ethos*, 201.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then we see in Col 2:14 and context a juridical interpretation of dying with Christ. This is not to say, at least as far as this passage is concerned, that the juridical motif ("Christ died for us" or "for our sins") fully interprets the participationist motif ("we died with Christ"), so that "with Christ" is simply another way of speaking of "Christ for us." Rather, what we see in vv 13-15 is a broadly participatory account of salvation: Christ identifies himself with humanity's fallen condition even to the point of death so that his deliverance from death might become the pattern and lot of all who are subsequently united with him.<sup>69</sup> Yet the linchpin of this participationist schema is the notion that Christ, in his identification with humanity's condition, makes himself responsible for the indictment against them and dies their death. This death then becomes the basis for their passage with him from death and the power of the accusing spirits to the life of the age to come, from the sphere of the old Adamic existence to that of the new Adam and the new creation. Thus it may be said that the perspective of dying and rising with Christ revealed in vv 13-15 is both juridical and participationist: the participationist schema forms the broader conceptual framework within which the juridical plays the critical role.

### **III. Victory Through Christ's Death and Resurrection (v 15)**

This difficult verse continues the explanation of the central statement in v 13c that God has made believers alive with Christ. The focus is on the results of Christ's victorious death, particularly with regard to the principalities and powers. The verse is structured around three verbs in a

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<sup>69</sup>On the participatory theory of the death of Christ see our discussion earlier in chapter one, 7-8.

manner similar to v 13 - a finite verb ἐδειγμάτισεν sandwiched between two circumstantial participles ἀπεκδυσάμενος and θριαμβεύσας. The meaning of the final two clauses of which ἐδειγμάτισεν and θριαμβεύσας serve as verbs is disputed but may be understood straightforwardly following our interpretation of v 14 on the basis of the apocalyptic judgment scene. Much more difficult is the interpretation of ἀπεκδυσάμενος in v 15a. The issues in question here are the subject and object of the verb, the force of the middle voice and the sense of the metaphor. At stake is the relation of the verb to the death of Christ, the defeat of the powers and the Christian's participation in these events. Because the final two clauses can help shed light on the meaning of ἀπεκδυσάμενος we will investigate these first.

#### **A. The Powers Led in Triumph (v 15b-c)**

Presented in these two clauses is the image of a triumph which is centred around the principalities and powers (τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας). Since these entities are central to the understanding of this image, the proper starting place for our investigation of this passage is a discussion of their identity. The reader first encounters the principalities and powers in 1:16 where they are listed among those things "in heaven and on earth" which were created in the beginning through Christ and for Christ. This statement along with 2:10, where Christ is said to be the head of all rule and authority (ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας), is seen by some interpreters as proof that the principalities and powers of v 15 are in fact benign and not hostile spirits.<sup>70</sup> But as we saw in our treatment of the Colossian hymn in chapter

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<sup>70</sup>See especially Carr, *Angels and Principalities* 63 and R. Yates, "Colossians 2:15: Christ Triumphant," *NTS* 37 (1991) 585; also Abbott, 260,261 and Williams, 100.

four, 1:20 tells a different story. The fact that "the things on earth and in heaven" must be reconciled or pacified through the cross of Christ indicates that not only humans but angelic powers were involved in the cosmic rebellion. Thus in the new creation the powers which rebelled are once more brought under the headship of Christ. It is this theme from 1:16, 20 which is picked up and delineated in 2:10, 15: through the cross the powers have been conquered (v 15), and Christ has thus re-established his headship over them (v 10).

The more immediate context for understanding the nature of the principalities and powers and their defeat through the death of Christ is found in v 14, as seen particularly against the background of the apocalyptic judgment scene. As we observed earlier, in his adaptation of the judgment scene the writer casts the principalities and powers in the role of the accusing angel of Hades. The Hebrew term *śatan* שָׂטָן, means "adversary," often in the specific sense of accuser at law, as in Ps 109:6 where it is used of a human prosecutor in a trial. (Compare the noun שְׂטָוֹן, "accusation" in Ezra 4:6, and the verb שָׂטָן, "to accuse," e.g. Ps 109:4, 20, 29.) The angel Satan appears as a judicial prosecutor in the court of heaven in Job 1-2. In Zech 3:1-2 is an actual trial scene where he accuses Joshua, the high priest, who stands as the representative of the nation of Israel.<sup>71</sup> In Rev 12:10 Satan is described as "the accuser of our brethren . . . who accuses them day and night before our God." In the *Book of Jubilees* the accuser is called Bellar (1:20) and Mastema (17:16; 48:15, 18). Finally, in *1 Enoch* 40:7 there is reference to a number of "satans" or demons who come "before the Lord of the Spirits in order to accuse those who dwell upon the earth."<sup>72</sup> We

<sup>71</sup>See further W. Forester, and G. von Rad, "διαβάλλω, διάβολος," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 73-75 and Caird, *Principalities and Powers* 31-34.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. *T. Abr.* [Rec. A] 12:12, 17, 18; 13:9, 10. See further Sappington, 95-100.

conclude that the principalities and powers of Col 2:15 are to be identified as Satan and his servants and specifically in their role as accusers before the divine tribunal. They have exercised power over humanity through the charges recorded on the *cheirographon*. But the blotting out of this record of sin through the death of Christ has brought about their defeat.<sup>73</sup> Christians have thereby been delivered from this dominion of darkness (1:13) and made to pass from death to life (2:13). This sets the stage for our interpretation of the image of triumph in v 15b-c.

The image is conveyed by the two verbs ἐδειγματίσεν and θριαμβεύσας, with the powers as the object of both. The verb δειγματίζω means essentially "to exhibit," "to make public" and typically with the pejorative connotation of "to expose" (e.g. *Asc: Isa* 3:13 and *Acts of Peter* 32).<sup>74</sup> In its only other appearance in the NT this verb is used of Joseph in Matt 1:19 who did not wish to expose Mary to public shame.<sup>75</sup> The sense in which the powers are exhibited is conveyed by the participle θριαμβεύσας. It is generally agreed that this verb does not refer to the actual winning of a military victory, but to the celebration of a victory in a triumphal procession, hence "to lead in triumph."<sup>76</sup> The triumph was a well known Roman institution in which the conquering military hero rode in a chariot as part of

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<sup>73</sup>Thus Percy, 98; Leivestadt, 102-103; Caird, *Principalities and Powers*, 43; E. Larsson, *Christus als Vorbild* (Uppsala: Gleerup, 1962), 90; Bruce, 110; O'Brien, 127 and Sappington, 212, 221.

<sup>74</sup>H. Schlier, "δειγματίζω," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 31.

<sup>75</sup>Thus the great majority of interpreters accept the pejorative sense e.g. BAGD, 172; Lohse, 112; Schweizer, 151; O'Brien, 128; Pokorný, 141; against R. B. Egan, "Lexical Evidence on Two Pauline Passages," *NovT* 19 (1977) 53.

<sup>76</sup>Thus G. Dellling, "θριαμβεύω," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 159-160; Lohse, 112; Gnllka, 142-143; Schweizer, 151-152. An eccentric view is that of Egan, "Lexical Evidence," 34-62, who argues that the verb in 2:15 means "to make known," but this view has not proved convincing. See e.g. O'Brien, 128.

a tumultuous procession leading his captive enemies.<sup>77</sup> The image in Col 2:15, then, is that of a victory parade in which the principalities and powers are led as captive enemies and thereby publicly exposed to shame.<sup>78</sup>

Two questions remain to be answered about this image: (1) Who is the one who leads in triumph - God or Christ? and (2) How do the death and resurrection of Christ relate to the image? It is generally recognized that Christ by his death on the cross (σταυρός, v 14) is the one who wins the victory over the principalities and powers.<sup>79</sup> However, the subject of the verb συνεζωοποίησεν in v 13 is God, and there is no formal indication of a change in subject through the end of v 15. The majority of scholars, therefore, take God as the subject in v 15 and see in the final ἐν αὐτῷ a reference to Christ as his agent in victory: God "triumphs" through Christ.<sup>80</sup> Thus the text would follow the pattern of 1:20 which speaks of God reconciling and pacifying the fallen cosmos (including the powers) through "the blood of his cross." There are, however, two serious difficulties with taking God as the subject of the verbs in the image of triumph in 2:15. First, in a Roman triumph it was the military hero himself who rode in the chariot leading the captive enemies in the procession. Recognizing this, Schweizer believes the picture is that of Christ leading the conquered powers, with God in the role of the Roman emperor who "makes prisoners of war march behind the one whose triumph it was."<sup>81</sup> But the verb θριαμβεύω does not mean "cause to triumph" but "lead in triumph." Hence, the one who

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<sup>77</sup>For background material see especially L. Williams, "Led in Triumph. Paul's Use of Thriambeuo." *Interpretation* 22 (1968) 318-322.

<sup>78</sup>Cf. P. Marshall, "A Metaphor of Social Shame: ΘΡΙΑΜΒΕΥΕΙΝ in 2 Cor 2:14," *NovT* 25 (1983) 302-317.

<sup>79</sup>Cf. 1 Cor 15:24 where in the end Christ will deliver "the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power."

<sup>80</sup>Thus e.g. Lohse, 112; O'Brien, 128, 129; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 196.

<sup>81</sup>*Colossians* 151; similarly Pokorný, 140.

triumphs, the θριαμβευτής, is the military victor who leads the captives in the victory parade, and it is Christ to whom this role properly belongs in v 15. Second, many scholars - even among those who take God as the subject of the verbs - recognize in this image of a Roman triumph a reference to Christ's exaltation to heaven following his resurrection.<sup>82</sup> The mention of a victory celebration immediately following the reference to Christ's death naturally calls to mind his resurrection. Moreover, a reference to the resurrection is to be expected in this passage since it belongs to the explanation of the statement in v 13c that God has made Christians alive with Christ. And of particular significance is Eph 4:8 where Christ's exaltation is portrayed with imagery very similar to that of Col 2:15: "when he ascended on high he led a host of captives." Thus Schweizer believes v 15 is intended as a picture of Christ's triumphal procession to heaven following his victorious death and resurrection.<sup>83</sup> We would agree with this assessment, but if the image is of Christ's exaltation, the subject of the action must be Christ and not God. It would seem, then, that the sense of this passage requires that Christ be understood as the subject of the two verbs ἐδειγμάτισεν and θριαμβεύσας. Formal notice of a change in subject is indeed lacking, but the logic of the argument suggests that with the mention of the cross of Christ at the end of v 14, by which the victory over the powers was achieved (and thus ἐν αὐτῷ at the end of v 15 refers to the cross) Christ himself becomes the proper subject of the verbs.<sup>84</sup> This switch in subject,

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<sup>82</sup>Thus Schweizer, 151,152; Gnilka, 142-143; Pokorný, 140; cf. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 162.

<sup>83</sup>*Colossians*, 152; cf. Pokorný, 140.

<sup>84</sup>A switch in subject by at least v 15 is recognized in the following versions: the RV (apparently), TCNT, Weymouth, Moffatt, Phillips, NEB and TEV. Commentators who detect a shift in subject by v 15 include Lightfoot, 189; H. C. G. Moule, 107; Williams, 99; C. F. D. Moule, 100,101; G. H. P. Thompson, *The Letters of Paul to the Ephesians, to the*



however, does register grammatically as a switch to the middle voice with the participle ἀπεκδυσάμενος. This grammatical point is disputed, but we will argue in the next section that this is the more likely reading. We conclude that Christ's victory on the cross over the infernal powers is followed by the image of him leading them as captives in his triumphal exaltation to heaven. And if v 15 concerns Christ's resurrection and exaltation, then the connection with v 13c ("he made us alive with him") falls into place: in baptism Christians are made to share in his victorious passage from death to life and heavenly existence.

The writer's adaptation of the post-mortem judgment scene provides a framework for understanding the nature of Christ's victory and the believer's participation in it. As we saw earlier, the language of victory or triumph belongs to the pivotal event in the judgment scene of the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*. The answer to the seer's prayer for the blotting out of his *cheirographon* is reflected in the angelic proclamation to him: "Triumph, prevail because you have prevailed and have triumphed over the accuser" (7:9). As a result of his victory, the seer is allowed to "come up from Hades and the abyss" and enter the realm of the righteous in heaven. The key point to observe is that it is the one who is accused who is said to triumph over the accuser and thereby rise from Hades to heaven. The writer to the Colossians, however, has reinterpreted the scene in terms of the death and resurrection of Christ. As the corporate representative of his people Christ made the *cheirographon* his own and died to blot it out. In this way Christ is drawn into the events of the judgment drama. He has, as it were, stood in the place of the accused in Hades, the realm of the dead.<sup>85</sup>

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*Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967) 146; Martin, 87.88; Ernst, 205 and Bruce, 107.

<sup>85</sup>Martin, "Reconciliation and Forgiveness," 122.

Through the blotting out of the *cheirographon* he has triumphed over the accuser and passed from the realm of the dead to the realm of the righteous in heaven. In order to portray this victorious passage from Hades to heaven (i.e. his resurrection and exaltation) the writer skillfully shifts to the image of a triumphal procession. By reinterpreting the judgment scene in this way the writer presents Christ as the prototype of salvation. His experience of salvation - the erasure of the record of sin, victory over the accuser and passage from death to life - then becomes that of all those who are united with him in faith-baptism as God makes them co-recipients of the verdict he pronounced on their representative and of the power with which he raised Christ from the dead. Hence, it may be seen that in vv 14,15 the writer picks up and elucidates the two main points of v 13a-c. Christ identified himself with his people in their subjection to the dominion of death because of sin (v 13a,b). From this state of death God made Christ alive - he is "the firstborn from the dead" - and God has made Christians alive with him (v 13c).

### **B. The Metaphor of Stripping (v 15a)**

We are now in a position to consider the interpretation of the difficult and disputed participle ἀπεκδυσάμενος at the beginning of v 15. The rare double compound ἀπεκδύω refers to the removal or stripping off of clothing.<sup>86</sup> In the NT it appears only here and in 3:9 where the Christian is said to have stripped off the old person, i.e. the old Adamic existence, in baptism. This statement picks up on 2:11b where the corresponding noun ἀπέκδυσις is used of the Christians' "stripping off of the body of flesh" in baptism, a reference to their participation in Christ's death as the stripping off of his body of flesh (cf. 1:22). The debate over the meaning of this

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<sup>86</sup>BAGD, 83; see also our treatment of this term in chapter five, 126.

participle in v 15 centres around the force of the middle voice. Interpreters fall into two camps on this issue. The majority understand it in an active sense, so that the image is either one of "disarming" the principalities and powers,<sup>87</sup> or divesting them of their dignity and authority,<sup>88</sup> or both as part of their public disgrace in a Roman triumphal procession.<sup>89</sup> Grammatical justification for this reading is seen in the fact that in the Hellenistic period the middle voice was sometimes used with an active sense,<sup>90</sup> although Robertson contends the force of the middle is retained here in the sense of personal interest - i.e. "he stripped off for himself."<sup>91</sup> Those who take this view typically understand God as the subject of the verb, though some think it is Christ.<sup>92</sup>

The alternative to an active meaning of ἀπεκδυσάμενος is the reflexive sense of "stripping off from himself." The case for this interpretation is quite strong. This form of the verb appears in 3:9 with this meaning, and there are no instances of this verb used elsewhere in Greek literature where the middle voice is used in an active sense. The same may also be said of the related verbs ἀποδύω and ἐκδύω.<sup>93</sup> Moule holds that it is questionable whether this verb could be used in the active sense of divesting or disarming the powers.<sup>94</sup> N. Turner, moreover, notes that the

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<sup>87</sup>Thus e.g. E. F. Scott, 48; Dibelius-Greeven, 32; BAGD, 83; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 195,196; Schweizer, 151; Gnifka, 142 and the RSV, NIV, REB.

<sup>88</sup>Thus Lohmeyer, 119; Lohse, 112; Zeilinger, 172; O'Brien, 127,128.

<sup>89</sup>Thus Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 58.

<sup>90</sup>Grammars which cite ἀπεκδυσάμενος in Col 2:15 as an example of this phenomenon include BDF sec. 316.1; Zerwick, sec. 235; Turner, *Syntax*, 55. However, in his later *Grammatical Insights*, 133-134, Turner argues for a reflexive meaning.

<sup>91</sup>*Grammar*, 85; so also Moulton and Howard, *Accidence and Word-Formation*, 310; Bruce, 107; Harris, 110.

<sup>92</sup>Thus H. C. G. Moule, *Colossians*, 108; the Moffatt translation; Bruce, 107; Caird, *Principalities and Powers*, 43, although he revised his view in *Letters from Prison*, 195,196 where he argues that God is the subject.

<sup>93</sup>Williams, *Colossians*, 99,100; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 101.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*

Greek fathers understood the verb in the reflexive sense, and being native speakers of the language their judgment is deserving of some respect.<sup>95</sup> We therefore conclude that the participle ἀπεκδυσάμενος in v 15 is best understood in the reflexive sense. As such Christ must be the subject, as it is virtually impossible to conceive of a meaning whereby God strips himself in his conquest of the principalities and powers.<sup>96</sup>

Of what then does Christ strip himself? One possibility is that it was his body of flesh stripped off in death, as the NEB margin reads, "he stripped himself of his physical body, and thereby boldly made a spectacle of the cosmic powers . . . ." On this reading ἀπεκδυσάμενος is intransitive with the following accusative τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας being the subject of ἐδειγμάτισεν alone. This was the view of the Latin Fathers,<sup>97</sup> and it has found a series of supporters in modern times.<sup>98</sup> As we have seen, the death of Christ in vv 14,15 is the basis of salvation: through his death the *cheirographon* is blotted out and the principalities and powers are overcome. On this intransitive reading the reference to the death of Christ

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<sup>95</sup> *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament*, 133.

<sup>96</sup> Thus Sappington, 211. However, a handful of nineteenth century interpreters supported this grammatical reading but with the powers seen as benign. Their explanation is that God is presented as having been cloaked by the angelic mediators of the law (cf. Gal 3:19; Heb 1:1-2; 2:2). But in the Christ-event God stripped them off so that in Christ his unveiled glory is revealed. Thus H. Alford and G. G. Findlay cited with approval by J. A. Beet, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1890), 189-190, 192. Percy (*Probleme*, 96) concludes that this interpretation "ist ganz absurd."

<sup>97</sup> See Lightfoot, 190 for quotations from Novatian, Hilary, Ambrose and Augustine. Abbott, 258, however, notes that these men appear to have had before them a Latin text of Col 2:15 following the reading of G (012), τὴν σάρκα καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας. The same interpretation appears in the Syriac Peshitta ("by the putting off of his body") and the Gothic. It also appears in a docetic work quoted by Hippolytus (d. 236) and in the *Gospel of Truth* 20:30-32. On the relation of this text to Col 2:14-15 see Yates, "Colossians and Gnosis," 61-62.

<sup>98</sup> A. Barry, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in *Ellicott's New Testament Commentary* ed. C. J. Ellicott, vol. 9 (London: Cassell, Peter, Galpin & Co., 1879) 41; Knox, *Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*, 169, n. 4; Robinson, *Body*, 41; Bandstra, *Law and Elements*, 158; Burger, 105; Carr, *Angels and Principalities*, 59; Yates, "Colossians 2:15," 585-591.

implicit in the image of nailing the *cheirographon* to the cross becomes explicit, and thereby serves to clarify and emphasize this central feature. However, in the absence of a word for "body" following "stripping himself" the metaphor is problematic. Lightfoot writes, "the serious objection to this rendering is, that it introduces an isolated metaphor which is not explained or suggested by anything in the context."<sup>99</sup> But this objection overlooks the use of this very metaphor in v 11. In our examination of this verse in the previous chapter we argued at length that the phrase τῆ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός ("the stripping off of the body of flesh") employs the realistic language of physical death to describe the Christian's spiritual death with Christ. In other words the phrase describes what happened physically to Christ - just as burial and resurrection in v 12 - and Christians in baptism are said to be united with him in this death. Hence, in v 11 we have not only the metaphor of death as the stripping off of the body, but the reference is specifically to the death of Christ and the convert's participation in that death. In addition it should be recalled from our discussion in chapter five that the image of the body as a garment which is put off in death and put on in resurrection was well established in the Jewish literature of the NT era.<sup>100</sup> The connection with v 15 is straightforward. As we have seen, vv 13d-15 serve as an explanation of the Colossians' baptismal participation in Christ's passage from death to life. These verses portray him as the representative of the sinful and guilty race of Adam, making himself responsible for their transgressions and dying their death. But his death wiped clean the indictment against them. He thereby triumphed over the hostile accusing powers who held the indictment, gaining release from their dominion and

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<sup>99</sup> *Colossians* 190; see also Abbott, 258.

<sup>100</sup> See chapter five, 127.

passage from death to life. Baptism in v 11 is thus the stripping off (ἀπέκδυσις) of the body of flesh because in it Christians are united with Christ in his death as the stripping off (ἀπεκδυσάμενος) of his body on the cross. By sharing his death in this way there is the blotting out of the *cheirographon* against them, deliverance from the dominion of darkness and passage with Christ from death to life. The inclusion of a word for body after ἀπεκδυσάμενος in v 15 would have made this interpretation certain, but given the fact that the writer sets out the image in full in v 11 in reference to dying with Christ, and that only four verses later he is explaining salvation through the death of Christ, it is altogether plausible for him to have used this same image in abbreviated form, thinking the inclusion of a word for body to be unnecessary to the sense. Finally, this interpretation is reinforced if we are correct in believing with Meeks and others that this metaphor of stripping in v 11 is directly related to the Colossians' experience of baptism in which disrobing prior to immersion symbolized death.<sup>101</sup> If such symbolism was indeed an established part of the baptismal ritual, and thus of the original baptismal instruction, then it is all the more easy to account for a seemingly obscure reference to Christ's death as his "stripping" in a passage which purports to recall to the minds of its readers the instruction they received at the time of their conversion (cf. 2:6-8).

The alternative to understanding ἀπεκδυσάμενος in terms of Christ's death as the stripping off of his body is to see the principalities and powers as the object of this stripping. Thus the NEB reads, "on that cross he discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment." From the

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<sup>101</sup>Thus Meeks, *First Urban Christians* 155 and Yates, "Colossians 2:15," 586; see further our discussion in chapter five, 127-128.

standpoint of word order this is the more natural reading, and it would match the pattern of the use of ἀπεκδυόμενος in 3:9 where the accusative τὸν παλιὸν ἄνθρωπον following the participle is clearly its object. This was the interpretation of the Greek fathers,<sup>102</sup> and it has found more favour among modern interpreters than the intransitive reading.<sup>103</sup> The notion of Christ stripping from himself the principalities and powers is typically explained as follows. In order to identify himself with Adam's fallen race and thereby to be its representative and redeemer, Christ "put on" the likeness of Adam's sinful flesh (Rom 8:3). In this fleshly bodily existence he was subject to the condemnation of the law and to the powers of sin, death and the hostile spirits. Hence, when in death he stripped off the body of flesh, the expression of his representative involvement in fallen humanity, he was at the same time "stripping off" the dominion of the powers. Thus in baptism when Christians are united with Christ in the stripping off of the body of flesh they too strip off the principalities and powers since they participate in his death and victory. Criticism of this interpretation tends to focus on the imagery. Carr objects, "there is something . . . slightly bizarre in the notion that Christ went through the world clothed in hostile powers."<sup>104</sup> This criticism is unfair for two reasons. First, it is the nature of figurative language that most metaphors can be made to appear ridiculous if pressed,

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<sup>102</sup>For references see Lightfoot, 190.

<sup>103</sup>Among modern commentators who support this view are Lightfoot, 190,191; Williams, 99,100; C. F. D. Moule, 101; Thompson, 146; Martin, 87 and Ernst, 205. Other scholarly works include C. A. A. Scott, *St. Paul* 35; Käsemann, *Leib*, 139-144; "Baptismal Liturgy," 162; G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers: the Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought," *NTS* 1 (1954-55) 23; Leivestad, *Christ the Conqueror*, 103; L. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 229; Turner, *Grammatical Insights* 131-134; G. Schille, *Frühchristliche Hymnen* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1965) 35; A. T. Hanson, "The Conquest of the Powers," in *Studies in Paul's Technique and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1974) 9. Modern versions which follow this reading include the RV, TCNT, Weymouth, NEB and TEV.

<sup>104</sup>*Angels and Principalities*, 60.

particularly if pressed at a point other than the point of comparison intended by the author. Secondly, as the image is typically understood, it is the *dominion* of the rulers which is cast off and not the rulers as such. The figure thus involves a metonymy in which cause (i.e. the powers) substitutes for effect (i.e. their dominion). Others object to the clash of this image with that of the triumphal procession in the remainder of v 15. Most notably, Caird claims that the notion of "Christ celebrating a triumph over a cast off suit of clothes" is "an intolerable mixture of metaphors."<sup>105</sup> We would note, however, that advocates of the view in question generally do not see in v 15 a mixed metaphor, but rather the juxtaposition of two separate metaphors. On the other hand, Paul - whom Caird takes to be the author of Colossians - is perfectly capable of producing some odd mixed metaphors as seen for example in 2 Cor 5:1,2 where he calls the resurrection body a house which he longs to put on (as a garment). Also noteworthy is the juxtaposition, if not the mixture, in Col 2:11 of the images of salvation as spiritual circumcision and as spiritual death (i.e. the stripping off the body).

What then does Col 2:15 portray as being stripped off in the death of Christ - his body or the principalities and powers? The difference between the two views is not very great. The essential question is one of imagery. Has the writer simply taken up the metaphor used earlier in the context and employed it in abbreviated form, or has he fashioned a new metaphor out of the old which pictures Christ casting off the powers (or their dominion) by casting off his body? On balance, we prefer the former view. In spite of the difficult word order, this reading has the advantage of the more direct and simple connection with v 11, where Christ's death is portrayed as the

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<sup>105</sup> *Letters from Prison*, 196, followed by Yates, "Colossians 2:15," 585; similarly H. C. G. Moule, 107 and E. F. Scott, 48.



stripping off of the body of flesh, and thus with 3:9, where this event is interpreted as the stripping off of the old person. But in either case we would argue that ἀπεκδυσόμενος in v 15a harks back to the description of dying with Christ in v 11 as an ἀπέκδυσις and is thus indicative of the Christian's deliverance from death by sharing in Christ's own death and victory.

#### **IV. Summary**

1. Verse 13 commences a renewed and more detailed explanation of salvation as new life through union with Christ, but this time with an alteration in the imagery of death from that of salvation as dying with Christ to spiritual death as the pre-conversion state of Jew and Gentile. This state is caused by sin and consists of alienation from God.

2. Christ's identification with fallen humanity brought him to experience its state of death because of sin, so that in his resurrection he might become the means and pattern of the spiritual resurrection of those who are united with him. The writer can apply Christ's deliverance from physical death to the Colossians' deliverance from spiritual death in vv 12,13 because he considered each a genuine manifestation of the rule of death which entered the world with the sin of Adam.

3. To explain this deliverance from death the writer makes use in v 14 of the Jewish tradition of the heavenly record which is kept of each person's sin to be used against them by an accusing spirit in Hades at the post-mortem judgment. Christ himself has stood in their place at the judgment, making himself responsible for the charge list against them and dying their death. Thus he blotted out the record of sin, triumphed over the accusing spirits and opened the way to heavenly life. No doubt the writer formulated

his description of salvation in this way in response to the claim by the errorists that only those worthy enough to pass this tribunal in Hades could merit entry into heaven.

4. Christ's death, by which he blotted out the Colossians' record of sin and gained victory over the accusing spirits, is characterized in v 15a as the stripping off of his body (ἀπέκδυσάμενος). This elucidates the earlier description of salvation in v 11 as the stripping off (ἀπέκδυσις) of the body of flesh. This ἀπέκδυσις is a participation in Christ's stripping (i.e. his death) and means Christians have become sharers in the forgiveness he won on the cross and his victory over the hostile spirits.

5. Building on the idea of victory over the accuser and passage into heavenly life, the writer in v 15 depicts Christ's resurrection and exaltation to heaven in terms of a Roman triumphal procession where Christ is in the role of the victorious general leading his vanquished captives, the spirit powers, in his ascent on high. The implication is that Christians have been made to share in this triumphant passage into heavenly life.

6. The perspective on dying and rising with Christ revealed in vv 13-15 may be said to be both juridical and participationist. The broader framework is participationist in that Christ identifies himself with humanity's fallen condition so that all who are united to him might share in his deliverance and new life. But the critical element in this schema is the juridical notion of Christ making himself responsible for humanity's sin and dying their death so that dying with him involves acquittal before God.

**CHAPTER SEVEN**  
**DEATH WITH CHRIST TO THE STOICHEIA OF THE WORLD**  
**COLOSSIANS 2:20**

In the two preceding chapters we have dealt with the writer's exposition in 2:11-15 of the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ and the Christian's union with him in these events. The message of these verses is that believers have become the objects of God's end-time reconciling work in Christ (cf. v 10a, "In him you have been made full."). In the following section 2:16-3:4 the writer *applies* these truths to his readers in the light of the threat posed by the false teachers. The focus of the present chapter is the application of the believer's union with Christ in his death seen in 2:20: "If you died with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?"<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of this statement hinges on the meaning of the much disputed phrase "the stoicheia of the world" (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). Thus before proceeding with a direct investigation of this text, we will first (1) give an overview of the various interpretations of the stoicheia, (2) survey the lexical evidence regarding στοιχεῖον outside the Pauline corpus, and (3) examine the usage of this term in Gal 4:3, 9, and (4) in Col 2:8.

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<sup>1</sup>Translation adapted from the NIV.

## I. Survey of Interpretations

Like many issues in the Pauline writings the meaning of "the stoicheia of the world" has been the source of disagreement for centuries. During the past century the debate has intensified considerably and generated an unusually large number of studies.<sup>2</sup> In his survey of the history of the debate A. J. Bandstra helpfully identifies three basic categories of interpretation: (1) The "cosmological" interpretation, (2) the "principial" interpretation, and (3) the "personalized-cosmological" interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Each of these has had its era of dominance, and we will consider them in that chronological sequence.

The "cosmological" interpretation was the majority view in the Patristic period and claimed among its adherents Hilary of Poitiers, Chrysostom, Eusebius, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Augustine.<sup>4</sup> This view, however, has proved the least popular among the three in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,<sup>5</sup> though recent decades have seen something of a revival in interest. Noteworthy advocates in the present generation include: N. Kehl, F. Zeilinger, E. Schweizer, and H. E. Lona.<sup>6</sup> The common motif among those who fall within this category is the understanding that the stoicheia refer to the physical constituents or elements of the material world or "cosmos," following the usage of the term in 2 Pet 3:10,12 which describes

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<sup>2</sup>For a relatively full bibliography up to the date of publication see G. Delling, "στοιχείον," *TDNT* 7 (1971) 671.

<sup>3</sup>*The Law and the Elements of the World*, 15-16.

<sup>4</sup>See Bandstra, *Law and Elements* 8-11.

<sup>5</sup>For advocates of this view in the nineteenth and earlier part of the twentieth century, see Bandstra, 17-18 and 23-25.

<sup>6</sup>Kehl, *Christushymnus im Kolosserbrief*, 138-161; Zeilinger, *Erstgeborene der Schöpfung*, 120-126; Schweizer, "Christianity of the Circumcised and Judaism of the Uncircumcised," 249-257; idem, *Colossians*, 128-134; 165-166; idem, "Slaves of the Elements and Worshipers of Angels: Gal 4:3, 9 and Col 2:8, 18, 20," *JBL* 107 (1988) 455-468; Lona, *Eschatologie im Kolosser- und Epheserbrief*, 214-226.

the end-time conflagration in which "the *elements* will be dissolved with fire." For the church fathers these stoicheia were typically the sun, moon and the stars which the heathen worshipped as gods. Modern interpreters in this category are divided as to whether the stoicheia refer to the "fleshly," material aspects of the religious life of Jews and Gentiles or simply to the "created things" of this world, or (in the case of Schweizer) to the elements which contaminate the soul and threaten to prevent its ascent upon death to the upper sphere.

The "principal" interpretation was held by a number of the church fathers including Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Jerome.<sup>7</sup> It came into dominance in the Reformation period and maintained this position until late in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it has continued to attract a significant following up to the present.<sup>9</sup> The essential feature of this interpretation is that the stoicheia are understood as "principles," "rudiments," or "elementary teachings," following the use of the term in Heb

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<sup>7</sup>See Bandstra, 5-7.

<sup>8</sup>Nineteenth century interpreters who supported the "principal" interpretation include: Meyer, 356; Lightfoot, 180; Beet, 178-179; H. C. G. Moule, 114; Sabatier, *The Apostle Paul*, 151; B. Weiss, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, 1.356; Stevens, *The Pauline Theology*, 169; and the RV. See further Bandstra, 13-19.

<sup>9</sup>Thus among English versions: the TCNT, Weymouth, Phillips, JB, NASB, NIV, and NJB. Other scholarly works include: H. St. John Thackeray, *The Relation of St. Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1900) 162-170; Williams, *Colossians*, 87, 118-119; Prat, *Theology of Saint Paul*, 2.104-107, 417-423; Strack-Billerbeck, 3. 570; E. D. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921) 510-518; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 91-92; J. Blinzler, "Lexikalisches zu dem Terminus τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου bei Paulus." in *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus Internationalis Catholicus* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), vol 2, 429-443; Dellling, *TDNT*, 7.684-686; Bandstra, e.g. 68-72; H. N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, trans. H. Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 153-154; *Paul*, 148-149; Francis, "Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18," 131; Carr, *Angels and Principalities*, 72-76; Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 66-77; Yates, "Colossians and Gnosis," 59; L. Belleville, "'Under Law': Structural Analysis and the Pauline Concept of Law in Galatians 3.21-4.11," *JNT* 26 (1986) 64-69; Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae*, 164-170; R. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 1990) 165; D. R. Bundrick, "Τὰ Στοιχεῖα τοῦ Κόσμου (Gal 4:3)," *JETS* 34(1991) 353-364, especially 362. For additional studies see Bandstra, 20-23.

5:12: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first *principles* of God's word." The great majority of interpreters who fall within this category identify the *stoicheia* with those rudimentary principles of religious practice and belief common to Jewish and pagan religion alike, though some would limit the reference to Jewish religion alone. These "elements" of religion are suited only to the childhood of the human race and have been superceded by the coming of Christ. To have died to the *stoicheia* of the world is to be understood along the lines of having died to the law (Rom 7:4; Gal 2:19): Christians have been freed from all those worldly rudimentary religious demands and entered the newness of life in Christ.

While not altogether unknown in the Patristic period, the "personalized-cosmological" interpretation is essentially a modern development. It gained currency in Germany in the late nineteenth century<sup>10</sup> and has in the twentieth century won the support of the great majority of scholars.<sup>11</sup> The distinguishing feature of this interpretation is

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<sup>10</sup>See Bandstra, 18-19. Writing just before the turn of the century Thackeray comments that this view has been "adapted almost unanimously by recent German theologians" though "the majority of English commentators" hold the principal view (*The Relation of Saint Paul to Contemporary Jewish Thought*, 163-164).

<sup>11</sup>Twentieth century English versions which follow this view include the Moffat, RSV, TEV, NEB, REB, and NRSV. Commentaries on Colossians include those of Peake, 522-523; Lohmeyer, 103-105; Scott, 43; Dibelius-Greeven, 27-29; Lohse, 96-97; Martin, 79, 95-96; Caird, 190-191; Gnilka, 123-127; O'Brien, 129-132; Bruce, 126; Wright 102; Pokorný, 115, 152; Harris, 193-194, 128. Other noteworthy studies written with special reference to Colossians include: Percy, *Probleme*, 158-169; Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," 123-131 and Cannon, *Traditional Materials in Colossians*, 220-223. Commentaries on Galatians which support this view include A. Oepke, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater* (Leipzig: Scholl, 1937) 72-73; J. Bligh, *Galatians: A Discussion of St Paul's Epistle* (London: St. Paul, 1969) 330-331, 337, 338; H. D. Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 204-205; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1982) 193-194, 203. Other significant studies having special reference to Galatians are B. Reicke, "The Law and This World According to Paul," *JBL* 70 (1951) 259-276; H. Hubner, *Law and Paul's Thought*, trans. J. C. G. Greig (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984) 33-35; G. Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979) 66-67; B. H. Brinsmead, *Galatians - Dialogical Response to Opponents* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982) 120-127; E. P. Sanders,

that the stoicheia are understood to be personal spiritual beings which were believed to be active in and through the physical elements and heavenly bodies. Where scholars differ here concerns the nature and character of these beings with opinions extending from the angelic mediators of the law to angels or spirits which rule the elements or stars to gods and demons. In the context of Colossians, however, it is generally agreed that the stoicheia are to be identified with the principalities and powers of 1:16; 2:10,15. Hence, to have died to the stoicheia means the same thing as having been delivered from the dominion of darkness in 1:13, i.e. from the control of hostile spirit powers (cf. 2:15).

## II. The Lexical Evidence

The fact that such widely divergent meanings have been assigned to the  $\sigma\tau\omicron\iota\chi\epsilon\iota\alpha$  in Galatians and Colossians bears witness to the great variety of ways in which this term was employed in ancient times. Our procedure in this section will be to survey the principal usages in and around the period of the NT with a view to determining the basic characteristics of the word.<sup>12</sup> These usages may be classified broadly into five categories.

1. *The letters of the alphabet* Though not attested in the NT itself this meaning is common in the period, occurring, for example, fourteen times in Philo (e.g. *Op.* 126; *Quis Her.* 210,282). Accordingly, the phrase  $\kappa\alpha\tau\grave{\alpha}$   $\sigma\tau\omicron\iota\chi\epsilon\iota\omicron\nu$  meant "alphabetically" or simply "in order."

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*Paul, The Law, and the Jewish People* (London: SCM, 1983) 69-70, 88, n. 21; H. Raisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 22, 131.

<sup>12</sup>Among the many thorough and helpful studies of this term which are available, see especially Dellling, *TDNT* 7.670-684; Blinzler, "Lexikalisches," 430-441; Burton, *Galatians*, 510-518; Bandstra, 510-518; J. D. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. rev. by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940) 1647.

2. *Elementary or fundamental principles of a science, skill, system of beliefs, etc* This meaning was common before, during and after the NT. It was, for example, a standard practice to employ the word στοιχεῖα in the title of learned works on various subjects. Euclid wrote on the "elements" (i.e. the fundamentals) of geometry, Aristoxenes on the elements of music and Galen on the elements of medicine.<sup>13</sup> Hence, the stoicheia as fundamentals can be used in connection with the early stages of understanding as in Heb 5:12 where the readers are reproached for their lack of progress and need again to be taught "the first principles of God's word."<sup>14</sup>

3. *The basic constituent elements of which the physical world is composed, typically identified as earth, air, fire and water.* This was by far the most common usage of the term in the NT era (e.g. Wis 7:17; 19:18; 4 Macc 12:13; 2 Pet 3:10,12; Josephus, *Ant* 3, 183; Herm. *Vis* 3,13,2). It is particularly prominent in Philo who uses it upwards of fifty-four times in this sense out of a total of eighty-five occurrences.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the term was often combined with the genitive κόσμου in the partitive sense (e.g. Philo *Quis Her.* 109,140; *Sib. Or.* 2.206; 3.79; 8.337),<sup>16</sup> and in fact the precise expression found in Gal 4:3 and Col 2:8,20, τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, appears in Philo *Aet.* 109. On three other occasions Philo uses the virtually synonymous phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ παντός ( *Mos* 1.96; *Spec. Leg* 2.

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<sup>13</sup>In this regard we may compare Plutarch's reference to "the prime elements of virtue" (*De Liberis Educ.*, 16, cited in Wink, 68, n. 70.).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Philo, *Quis Her.* 209, where he contrasts that which is "elementary" with that which is completed.

<sup>15</sup>Thus Wink, 69. By Blinzler's count (440) it is sixty-four out of eighty-two.

<sup>16</sup>For additional texts see Blinzler, 441, notes 3, 4, 5, 6, and D. Rusam, "Neue Belege zu den στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμος (Gal 4,3.9; Kol 2,8.20)," *ZNW* 83 (1992) 119-125. Blinzler counts an additional twenty-three instances in Philo where στοιχεῖα and κόσμος are juxtaposed in such a way that it is clear the reference is to the physical elements of which the world is composed. He lists several examples of this phenomenon in n. 7 on the same page.



255; *Flacc* 125). On the face of it, then, the Pauline expression belongs to an established linguistic practice,<sup>17</sup> and thus Blinzler's conclusion that Paul took this established usage with its physical meaning as his starting point, but used it in a transferred sense, deserves serious consideration.<sup>18</sup>

4. *Astronomical usages, viz. sun, moon, planets, stars, constellations and signs of the Zodiac.* As we noted earlier, the patristic writers frequently identified the  $\sigma\tau\omicron\iota\chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$  of Galatians and Colossians with the heavenly bodies which the pagans worshipped as gods. However, this usage of the term does not come into prominence until the mid-second century (e.g. Justin, *Apol* II, 5.2; *Dial* 23.3), and is not attested with any degree of certainty before 100 C. E.<sup>19</sup>

5. *Spirits: gods, angels, demons, etc* The great difficulty with this meaning for *stoicheia* is that it appears not to have developed until a time much later than the writing of Colossians. The earliest undisputed document in which it is found is the *Testament of Solomon* (8:2; 15:5; 18:1,2), which is generally dated to the late third century C.E.<sup>20</sup> Another document frequently cited is the version of the *Alexander Romance* known as Pseudo-Callisthenes (1:1,12) which in its present form dates to about 300 C.E.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Contra* Ridderbos, *Galatians* 153.

<sup>18</sup> Thus Blinzler, 442; similarly Delling, *TDNT* 7.684-685; P. Vielhauer, "Gesetzesdienst und Stoicheidienst im Galaterbrief," in *Rechtfertigung. Festschrift für Ernst Käsemann zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. J. Friedrich, W. Pöhlmann and P. Stuhlmacher (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1976) 553, cf. 550.

<sup>19</sup> For a judicious examination of this issue see Blinzler, 432-434 and Delling, *TDNT* 7.679-682. A case in point is 2 Pet 3:10, 12. Many believe the reference here is to the heavenly bodies, including Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1647; Moulton-Milligan, 591 and, among recent commentators, R. J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 315-316. In favour of the reference being to the physical elements (i.e. category two) are BAGD, 769; Blinzler and Delling.

<sup>20</sup> On the question of date see the recent discussion of D. C. Duling, "Testament of Solomon," in *OT Pseudepigrapha*, 1.940-943.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Bruce, *Galatians* 193-194. For additional texts, some allegedly earlier, see Blinzler, 437-438 and Macgregor, "Principalities and Powers," 21-22.

This usage became prominent in the late Byzantine period and continues up to the present in modern Greek. In the absence of clear lexical evidence of a personal meaning for *stoicheia* in the NT era outside of the Pauline corpus, supporters of the personal-cosmological view point to the fact that the elements and heavenly bodies had been venerated as deities since ancient times (cf. Wis 13:2; Philo, *Cont* 3) and that Jewish sources indicate a belief that angels were active in and through the forces of nature (e.g. *Jub.* 2:2; *1 Enoch* 82:7-8; *2 Enoch* 4, 2; cf. Rev 7:1; 14:18).<sup>22</sup> Thus, it is argued that the designation of these spirits as *στοιχεῖα* could have been a well established usage in the time of Paul, and it is only due to the fragmentary nature of the extant evidence that the earliest examples are preserved in Galatians and Colossians.<sup>23</sup> This scenario is indeed theoretically possible, yet it must be recognized that, although incomplete, the written remains of ancient Greek are far more abundant than any other ancient language (approximately ten times that of ancient Latin) and with the NT period being especially well represented.<sup>24</sup> The theory then that cosmic or elemental spirits was a well established meaning for *στοιχεῖα* in the NT era, only all record of it outside of Paul has been lost through the vicissitudes of history, is a very unlikely one, and the burden of proof for it must rest with its advocates. The more likely explanation is that this meaning "spirits" for *στοιχεῖα* developed considerably after the time of Paul, and it is therefore anachronistic to

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<sup>22</sup>E.g. O'Brien, 132.

<sup>23</sup>E.g. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980) 239; Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 22, n. 41 and Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, 135.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. S. E. Porter, "Keeping Up with Recent Studies 17: Greek Language and Linguistics," *ExpTim* 103 (1992) 207. By way of contrast the quantity of extra-biblical Hebrew writings preserved from the OT period is notoriously meagre, thus making it more likely and indeed probable that words and meanings attested only in much later documents could have been in use in the earlier period.

interpret the Pauline usages in this sense.<sup>25</sup> The acid test, of course, must be a careful examination of these passages, and we will seek to show in the following sections that they are more sensibly understood on the basis of usages attested in the first century.

What then are the basic characteristics of this term? If we follow a strict methodology by considering only those usages which are attested in the NT era, it is apparent that the essential element common to all is that of an irreducible component. Already in the fourth century B.C.E. Aristotle had seen that the term in its essence denoted "that which is the primary component immanent in the thing which is indivisible into kinds different from itself."<sup>26</sup> The term thus refers to that which is one, small, universal and capable of many applications. Hence, in the field of music, it was used of the notes common to all compositions. In grammar it was used of the letters of which all words are composed but also of the basic sounds or phonemes which are the irreducible components of the spoken word. In geometry it was used both of the basic theorems and the universal elements such as the point, line, and circle from which the more complex shapes are formed. And in physics it was used of those basic components into which all matter is ultimately divisible. Philo also appears to recognize in this term the basic notion of an irreducible component when he explains that the material world (including people) has been created out of the four elements and can be resolved back into these just as all words are composed of the grammatical

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<sup>25</sup>In a section entitled, "The Corresponding Danger of Anachronism," Cotterel and Turner (*Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*) define anachronism as "the explanation of biblical meanings in terms of senses which only develop *later*" (133). However, out of deference to the current majority view they concede the Pauline use of *stoicheia* as an exception to the rule (135). On the error of semantic anachronism see further D. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 32-34.

<sup>26</sup>Bandstra, 32, commenting on Aristotle's discussion in Book iv of his *Metaphysics* (1014a 26-1014b 15); so also Wink, 68.

elements (i.e. letters) and can be resolved back into the same (*Quis Her.* 281-283). What we observe then with the term  $\sigma\tau\omicron\lambda\chi\acute{\epsilon}\iota\omicron\nu$  is a multiplicity of senses but each sharing a common element and the context determining in each instance the specific meaning required. Linguists call this phenomenon *polysemy*, and it is a common and fundamental feature of all languages.<sup>27</sup> The English word "element" is an excellent illustration of polysemy in that its range of usage is very close to that of  $\sigma\tau\omicron\lambda\chi\acute{\epsilon}\iota\omicron\nu$ . Thus we may refer to the element of surprise, the chemical element carbon, the wind and rain as the elements of nature, bread and wine as the elements of the Lord's Supper or a book entitled *The Elements of Preaching*. The idea common to each usage is that of a component part, but it is the specific context which gives content to the meaning.

To summarize, the evidence available from the period of the NT indicates a wide range of uses for  $\sigma\tau\omicron\lambda\chi\acute{\epsilon}\iota\omicron\nu$  with the meaning "heavenly bodies" appearing late in the period and "spirits" not appearing until after the close of the period. The range of usage seen in the first century shows the term is polysemous in nature with each meaning sharing the common notion of an irreducible component, and the context in each case supplying the specific meaning. It is this understanding which provides the lexical key for unlocking the meaning of the Pauline usage of  $\sigma\tau\omicron\lambda\chi\acute{\epsilon}\iota\alpha$  in Gal 4:3,9 and Col 2:8,20.

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<sup>27</sup>On this subject, see Cotterel and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, 135-139; S. Ullmann, *Semantics: An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962) 159-167.

### III. The Stoicheia in Galatians 4:3,9

The meaning of **στοιχεῖα** and the role played by "the stoicheia of the world" in the argument of Galatians is of fundamental importance for understanding the Colossian usage and therefore merits special attention. The Epistle to the Galatians was written in order to counter the claim of certain Jewish Christians that for Gentiles to become Christians they must first become in effect proselytes to Judaism by submitting to circumcision and observing the other requirements of the law of Moses.<sup>28</sup> In the face of such a claim Paul builds an argument from the history of salvation to show that salvation is by faith and not by the works of the law (3:1-18). This line of argument leads naturally to the question of the function of the law within the history of salvation (3:19a), and it is in Paul's answer to this question in 3:19b-4:11 that he finds occasion to employ the notion of "the stoicheia of the world" (4:3,9).

To the question in v 19, "Why then the Law?" Paul states, "It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made." He clarifies this rather cryptic statement somewhat in v 22: "But the Scripture has imprisoned (**συγκλείω**) the whole world (**τὰ πάντα**) under sin in order that the promise of salvation through faith in Christ might be given to those who believe."<sup>29</sup> The law, in other words, had a legitimate function within the divine economy - namely, to demonstrate and deepen humanity's bondage to sin (cf. Rom 5:12,13,20;7:7-13).<sup>30</sup> But, with the Christian's liberation from this bondage through faith in

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<sup>28</sup>For a recent and thorough evaluation of the demands of these Galatian "agitators" see J. M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988) 36-74.

<sup>29</sup>Translation ours.

<sup>30</sup>On the relation of the law to sin, see especially S. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 179-189.

Christ, the law's function is at an end. It is this essential point which Paul next seeks to drive home in two successive and largely parallel sections of seven verses each, 3:23-29 and 4:1-7.<sup>31</sup> In the first he likens the bondage under the law (ὑπὸ νόμον) to the experience of a child under the care of a παιδαγωγός, a custodian or attendant who was typically a domestic slave.<sup>32</sup> The law as παιδαγωγός served its temporary purpose of leading "us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (v 24). But with this mission accomplished "we no longer are under an attendant" (ὑπὸ παιδαγωγόν, v 25). Rather, all are now sons of God, seed of Abraham and heirs according to promise (vv 26-29).

In 4:1-7 Paul elucidates further the temporary purpose of the law by picking up on the ideas of inheritance and sonship mentioned in 3:26-29 and developing them with the use of an analogy from Roman legal practice (vv 1-2). The practice concerns a father who appoints by testament guardians for his underaged child who is entitled to inherit his property after his death. Although the child is the heir and potentially the owner, he is under the control of guardians and, in this sense, is no different ~~from~~ a slave until "the time set by the father" when he will be free of the guardians and take full control of his inheritance.<sup>33</sup> The application unfolds in vv 3-5. The child represents "we," the stoicheia of the world fill the role of the guardians and managers, and the child's father represents God. It is disputed whether the first person "we" should be taken as a reference to former Jews only<sup>34</sup> or

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<sup>31</sup>Cf. Bandstra, 59.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Betz, *Galatians* 177; Belleville, "Pauline Concept of Law in Galatians 3:21-4:11," 59-60.

<sup>33</sup>See further Betz, 202-204 and Belleville, " 61-63.

<sup>34</sup>Thus, e.g. Bandstra, 59; Bligh, *Galatians* 330; Belleville, 68.

to Christians in general, both Jewish and Gentile.<sup>35</sup> Probably Paul frames his argument here with the Jewish experience of the law in mind, but intends it to be applicable in principle to Gentiles, since in v 6 he switches to the second person "you," and in vv 8-11 he apparently applies the essence of vv 1-5 to his readers' former experience of polytheism.<sup>36</sup> The story of the child's passage from the virtual slavery of his minority to the freedom of the status of maturity illustrates (a) the former state of Christians enslaved under the stoicheia of the world (v 3), (b) their emancipation through Christ "in the fullness of time" (cf. v 2: "the time set by the father") when God sent forth his Son (vv 4,5a), and (c) their entry thereby into their present status of freedom as mature sons of God (vv 5b-7).

But what does Paul mean by "the stoicheia of the world" in v 3? The argument, as we have seen, centres on the purpose of the law in the divine economy. Paul has just described the law as that which imprisoned (3:22-23), guarded (v 23) and acted as a custodian (vv 24-25). In the present paragraph he says, "we" were formerly enslaved under the stoicheia (ὑπὸ τὰ στοιχεῖα, 4:3) but were redeemed from servitude under the law (ὑπὸ νόμον, v 5). Clearly, there is a tacit equation of slavery under the stoicheia and slavery under the law. But what is the relationship of the law to the stoicheia of the world? B. Reicke and others claim Paul is alluding back to 3:19 where he mentions that the law was given through angels.<sup>37</sup> According to this view the law originated not with God but with the angels.<sup>38</sup> Hence, to

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<sup>35</sup>Thus most, e.g. Lightfoot, *Galatians* 166-167; Burton, *Galatians* 215; Reicke, 259-260; Betz, 204.

<sup>36</sup>Thus Bruce, *Galatians* 143; Longenecker, *Galatians* 164.

<sup>37</sup>Reicke, 261-263; Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul* 70-71; Percy, *Probleme*, 164-165; Caird, *Principalities and Powers* 47; Bligh, *Galatians* 331.

<sup>38</sup>Caird, however, believes the law to be of divine origin (*Principalities and Powers* 45), but can also affirm that pagan religion ultimately rests on divine institution (49).

be under the law means to be subject to angels or spirit powers which are designated "the stoicheia of the world." Some advocates of this view have claimed support for it in the fact that the guardians and managers of the analogy are personal.<sup>39</sup> But this interpretation does not stand up to scrutiny. First, as we have seen, the lexical evidence is against it. Secondly, there is no more necessity for taking the stoicheia as personal because they are likened to guardians than there is for taking the law as personal in 3:24 because it is likened to a παιδαγωγός (cf. Rom 7:1-4),<sup>40</sup> and it should be recognized that these two analogies serve to make the same point. Third, there is nothing in 4:1-7 to indicate that Paul intended to make any connection here with the angels of 3:19.<sup>41</sup> Fourth, it was a common Jewish understanding that the giving of the law at Sinai involved angelic mediation (e.g. Acts 7:38, 53; Heb 2:2; *Jub.* 1:29), yet it originated with God. Had Paul meant something so radically different, he surely would have said so, but the evidence indicates he believed the law to be of divine origin (cf. 3:10, 22; 5:14; Rom 3:2, 7:12).<sup>42</sup> Finally, the whole point of Paul's argument in 3:19-4:8 is to explain the place of the law in the plan of God (cf. the role of the father in the analogy of 4:1-7). Had Paul actually believed the law was the invention of angels, the argument would have been unnecessary.<sup>43</sup> Rather than a reference to angels, the contextual evidence all points to the

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<sup>39</sup>Thus e.g. Percy, *Probleme*, 165-166; Reicke, 261; O'Brien, 131.

<sup>40</sup>Raisanen, 131, n 22; Thackeray, 167.

<sup>41</sup>Thus Raisanen; cf. Leivestadt, 105; Bruce, *Galatians*, 203.

<sup>42</sup>Thus Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 67-68; Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*, 176-179; cf. Raisanen, 128-132.

<sup>43</sup>Thus Raisanen, 132. Hübner, on the other hand, argues that God turned the evil intention of the angels to his own purpose. By giving the law, the angels intended to bring humanity to perdition, but God stepped in after the event and provided salvation for those whom the law condemned (*Law in Paul's Thought*, 28-31). In response to this unusual interpretation, see Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 67-68.



conclusion that Paul employs the expression τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in 4:3 as a designation for the law itself.<sup>44</sup> But, in order to understand precisely why and in what sense he does so, we must examine his usage in v 9.

In vv 8-11 Paul brings to a climax his argument begun in 3:19 by applying what he has said regarding servitude under the law to the Galatian Christians' former servitude as pagans. Formerly (τότε) they served as slaves to those which by nature are not gods (v 8), but now (νῦν) they enjoy the knowledge of God (v 9a). "How then," Paul challenges them (v 9b), "can you turn back again to those weak and impotent stoicheia to which you wish to be slaves all over again?"<sup>45</sup> The reference here to life under the law as servitude to the stoicheia is in line with the usage of vv 3-5. But in what sense is a turning to the law a *return* to the kind of servitude they knew as polytheists? Obviously Paul can equate Jewish and pagan religion in this way because both consist in the service of the stoicheia of the world. For the purpose of identifying the stoicheia here we may isolate the following four propositions: (1) polytheism is a state of slavery to unreal gods (v 8); (2) polytheism is slavery to the stoicheia (v 9b); (3) Judaism (viz. slavery to the law) is slavery to the stoicheia (v 9); (4) slavery to the stoicheia involves various calendrical observances (v 10). On the basis of the first two propositions most twentieth century interpreters have concluded that the stoicheia are the unreal gods of paganism which Paul would classify as demonic spirits (cf. 1 Cor 10:20). The great difficulty with this reading is how to reconcile it with the third proposition - that Judaism is slavery under the stoicheia. This has led to a variety of explanations. Perhaps the most common and certainly the most logically consistent is the view that what

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<sup>44</sup>Thus, e.g., Wink, 72; Bruce, *Galatians*, 193-194, 203.

<sup>45</sup>Translation ours.

Judaism holds in common with polytheism is the servitude of unreal gods viz. angels of the law or demons.<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, however, Paul's argument from 3:19 onward is to show God's purpose for the law within the history of salvation. But on this reading the argument becomes in effect that the Jews from Moses onward were serving not God but "gods," even hostile spirits, which is manifestly at odds with the point of 3:19-4:7. A more nuanced approach is that of G. Howard who claims that Paul's intention here is not so much to brand Judaism as the worship of unreal gods, but that turning to Judaism would have the effect of reducing Yahweh, the universal God, to the status of a local deity, no different in principle from the nondivine gods of their polytheistic past.<sup>47</sup> But however true this might be, Paul's argument in 3:19-4:7 is not directed at a misunderstanding of the nature of God nor a misunderstanding of the nature of God arising from a misunderstanding of the nature of the law, but simply a misunderstanding of God's purpose for the law. A third view is that of Sanders and Räisänen who argue that when Paul says Jews are subject to the *stoicheia* he only means their experience of bondage under the law is *parallel* to the pagans' experience of bondage to their deities.<sup>48</sup> But this interpretation does not do justice to the text; Paul plainly classifies Judaism as enslavement under the *stoicheia* (4:3), and so if the *stoicheia* are to be identified as the unreal gods of paganism the conclusion follows unavoidably that Judaism is the service of these spirit beings. We conclude that the common view which identifies the *stoicheia* of 4:9 with the unreal gods of polytheism in v 8 leads to a *cul-de-sac*, and a different approach is required.

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<sup>46</sup>Thus essentially Oepke, *Galater*, 78; Reicke, 274; Bligh, 338, 365-366; Hubner, 34; Brinsmead, 121; Betz, 216; Caird, *Principalities and Powers*, 49.

<sup>47</sup>*Crisis in Galatia*, 78.

<sup>48</sup>Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, 69, 89, n. 21; Räisänen, 22-23.

It must be seen that the point of comparison and common ground between Judaism and polytheism takes place not on the level of *deities* or to use the illustration of 4:1,2, on the level of the father, but on the level of the guardians and managers. This would seem to be implicit in the disclaimer of v 8 that the pagan deities are not real gods. What is comparable is the Jewish system of law, consisting of various rites and rituals, rules and regulations which kept Israel in a state of servitude, and the servitude which the former polytheistic Galatian Christians experienced with the rites and rituals, rules and regulations involved in the service of those unreal gods (cf v 10). In a word, *stoicheia* refers to *religion*: Paul uses the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as a generic, comprehensive designation for religion before and outside of Christ.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the "spirits" view, this interpretation is entirely consistent with Paul's argument regarding the nature and purpose of the law in 3:19-4:7. But how in the light of the lexical range of usage observed earlier does he arrive at this meaning for the word στοιχεῖα?

It is an impressive fact that not only is the notion of physical elements by far the most commonly encountered meaning of στοιχεῖα in ancient literature, but it appears on numerous occasions coupled with the defining genitive κόσμου, and always with the meaning of the basic materials of which the universe is composed.<sup>50</sup> This quite naturally has led many scholars to take this meaning as their starting point for explaining Paul's usage in Gal 4:3,9. But what do earth, air, fire and water have to do with pre-Christian religion, which is Paul's meaning here? For one group of interpreters the connection is seen in the fact that both Jewish and pagan religion are largely taken up with material, created things of this world such

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<sup>49</sup>Thus Delling, *JNT* 7.685; Bandstra, 63.

<sup>50</sup>See above 205.

as offerings, festivals, washings, food, circumcision, etc.<sup>51</sup> Another group takes the physical meaning of stoicheia as the basis of a metaphor: as the existence of the material world rests on the stoicheia, so human existence before Christ rested on pre-Christian religion.<sup>52</sup> Some within this category go on to identify these enslaving elements which are constitutive of humanity's pre-Christian existence as law, sin, flesh and death.<sup>53</sup> But at the end of the day, this attempt to derive the notion of pre-Christian religion from the physical elements seems artificial and contrived. The polysemous nature of the term, we would suggest, provides a more trustworthy guide to the apostle's meaning.

As we saw earlier, the term στοιχεῖα displays a wide range of usage which includes along with the physical elements, letters, musical notes, geometric elements and fundamental teachings - and it is the context in each case that determines the specific meaning required. Considering then the context of his argument, Paul can refer to the law as the stoicheia of the world in 4:3 and upbraid former pagans wishing to take up the keeping of the law for *returning* to the service of the stoicheia in v 9, because he looks upon both Jewish and pagan religion as made up of the same basic elements: rituals and rites (e.g. circumcision), rules and regulations (e.g. food laws, cf. 2:12), celebrations and observances (4:10).<sup>54</sup> In other words, the kinds of things which kept Jews in a state of servitude - and thus in their own negative way were meant to lead them to Christ - were common to all religions. Hence, for the Galatian Christians to turn to the law would be to enter upon a life of slavery which in principle is no different from the one

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<sup>51</sup>Cf. Dellling. *TDNT* 7.684, n. 97.

<sup>52</sup>Thus Dellling. *TDNT* 7.685.

<sup>53</sup>Thus Blinzler, 442-443; Vielhauer, "Gesetzesdienst und Stoicheiendienst," 553.

<sup>54</sup>Thus Wink, 79.

from which they were freed when they became Christians. Paul's use of *stoicheia* then fits the pattern of usage observed earlier: as all discourse is composed of words (and words of letters), as all people are composed of physical elements, all music of notes and geometric shapes of lines, points, circles, etc. - so all religions before and outside of Christ can be reduced ultimately to the same basic practices and principles.

On this reading the Mosaic law is not one of the *stoicheia*, i.e. a *stoicheion*, as is so often assumed.<sup>55</sup> Rather the expression, "the *stoicheia* of the world," may be applied to the law or to any or all religions outside of Christ because the law is made up of and ultimately reducible to the same kind of individual *stoicheia* or elements which make up those other religions. In this way the phrase can be seen to function as a class designation for religion outside of Christ. This usage finds an analogy in the English expression "bricks and mortar" which functions as a class designation for buildings. Here the class is designated by the fundamental components (or representative components) of which each member of the class is built. Obviously then, bricks are not a member of the class but a defining element common to all members of the class. It is in this sense that the law may be said to be a member of the class designated "the *stoicheia* of the world," though the law is no more to be identified as a single *stoicheion* than a brick is a building. Rather an example of a *stoicheion* would be circumcision in that it is a religious rite comparable on the generic level with religious rites found in paganism.<sup>56</sup> To summarize, it suited Paul's purpose in his explanation of the Jewish and Gentile Christians' common experience of

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<sup>55</sup>Thus e.g., Bandstra, 60-62, 67; Blinzler, 442, 443; Bruce, *Galatians*, 193; H. H. Esser, "στοιχεία," *NIDNTT* 2 (1976) 453; W. Gutbrod, "νόμος," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 1075; Zellinger, 123.

<sup>56</sup>Cf. Dellling, 686.

servitude to designate their very different previous religions by an inclusive expression which considers them from the perspective of their common elemental building blocks. The final question to be addressed is what Paul meant in this expression τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου by the term κόσμος.

Judging from the argument of 3:19-4:11, one may assume that the stoicheia are "of the world" in the sense that they hold all humanity outside of Christ - i.e. the world - in subjection (cf. 3:22, τὰ πάντα). Two other passages in Paul's argument, however, shed additional light on this concept and lead to a somewhat modified conclusion. In 4:21-5:1 Paul carries forward his argument concerning slavery under the law and the Galatian believers' new found freedom in Christ, concluding in 5:1 with a repetition of his charge in 4:10 not to return again to a yoke of slavery (5:1). In support of this argument he employs an allegorical contrast between Hagar and Sarah. The former represents the present (νῦν) Jerusalem and is in slavery with her children (v 25) while the latter represents the heavenly (ἄνω) Jerusalem - she is free and the mother of believers (v 26). This contrast between the Jerusalem above and the present Jerusalem implies the latter is "earthly," of this *world*. The notion of a heavenly Jerusalem finds its roots in the eschatological promise of Isa 65:17-19 regarding a new heaven and a new earth (new creation) with a new Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> According to *2 Apoc. Bar.* 4:3-6 the new Jerusalem was prepared at the same time as paradise; it was taken away when Adam sinned and is presently hidden in heaven with paradise, to be revealed again in the time of the eschatological salvation (32:3-6; Rev 3:12; 21:1-2; 4 Ezra 7:26; 10:54). Thus Paul's reference to the new Jerusalem in Gal 4:26 must be understood in terms of the salvation of

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<sup>57</sup>On this subject and what follows, see especially Lincoln, *Paradise*, 18-22.

the age to come, the new creation whose benefits Christians even now have entered upon. The present Jerusalem, the Jerusalem of this world, by implication is associated with the old order, the state of fallenness, "the present evil age" of 1:4. The second passage of interest is 6:14,15 and contains the only other uses of the term κόσμος in Galatians. As a part of his concluding statements, Paul recapitulates some of his leading themes: he has died to the *world* and the *world* to him (v 15) - hence, what matters is no longer circumcision or uncircumcision but a new creation (καὴν κτίσις, v 16).<sup>58</sup> Here, the world, to which circumcision and the law belong, is contrasted with the new creation. By implication, then, the world is identified with the old fallen order, the present evil age (cf. 1:4). From these texts we may conclude that Paul's characterization of the stoicheia as "of the world" is not simply a reference to their universal dominion over the human race outside of Christ. But more specifically the stoicheia are worldly because they are part and parcel of the fallen world system, the present evil age, which stands over against the age to come and the new creation which have been inaugurated by Christ.

Finally, it should be noticed that in the Galatian epistle dying with Christ and the stoicheia of the world belong to the same circle of ideas.<sup>59</sup> In 2:19 Paul declares, "through the law I died to the law." Then in the succeeding argument he explains that the Jews' slavery to the law is no different in principle from the Gentiles' slavery under the rules and regulations of polytheistic religion. Hence, both may be classed together as existence under the stoicheia of the world. Jewish and Gentile Christians

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<sup>58</sup>On the relation of these verses to the overall structure of the epistle and the central thesis see Betz, *Galatians* 19, 122, 318-319; Hoover, *The Concept of New Creation in the Letters of Paul*, 102-106.

<sup>59</sup>Delling, *TDNT* 7.686.

alike have been rescued from their former state of servitude through Christ who subjected himself to the same bondage (γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον, 4:4), and on the cross became "a curse for us" (3:13). All Christians are therefore no longer slaves of the stoicheia of the world but free sons of God (4:7) and children of the heavenly Jerusalem (4:26; cf. v 31; 5:1). On this basis it can be said that had Paul chosen to express himself in terms of having died to the stoicheia of the world instead of the more specific notion of dying to the law, the meaning would have been essentially the same. Also, given this interpretation of the stoicheia of the world, the statement regarding dying to the world in 6:14 is very close conceptually to Col 2:20. As we noted above, this verse belongs to the closing summary of the epistle. In these closing remarks, Paul pulls together various threads of his argument emphasizing that the law (viz. circumcision) belongs to the world, but through the cross of Christ, "the world was crucified to me and I to the world." Paul thereby asserts that he no longer belongs to the world - and thus such stoicheia of the world as circumcision no longer matter. He belongs instead to the new creation of the world to come (v 15). Another perfectly intelligible way of making the same point would have been to say he has died with Christ to the stoicheia of the world, and since he therefore no longer belongs to the world, but to the new creation, such things of this world as circumcision no longer matter.

To summarize, "the stoicheia of the world" is an expression Paul uses in Galatians to designate not elemental or cosmic spirits, but elemental rules and regulations common to all religions including Judaism, and under which all outside of Christ are enslaved. Through faith in Christ the Galatian Christians have been delivered from this former yoke of slavery: they have passed from this present fallen world in which the stoicheia of the world are



operative and now belong to a new world, the eschatological new creation. And while Paul does not employ the language of dying with Christ to the stoicheia in this epistle, his statements regarding dying to the law and to the world come very near to it in meaning.

#### **IV. The Stoicheia of the World in Colossians**

We come at last to our investigation of the meaning of the stoicheia of the world in Colossians and specifically to the question of what it means in 2:20 to have died to the stoicheia of the world. Our preceding conclusions provide the essential basis for our study here. Like the Galatian usages, the two appearances of the term  $\sigma\tau\omicron\iota\chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$  in Colossians belong to the same extended argument - with the first (2:8) being introductory to the second (v 20). Our procedure will be to determine the meaning of the expression "the stoicheia of the world" in each text relying on both its place within the development of the argument and the immediate contextual indicators. We will seek to show that in both texts the phrase is best understood in the same sense as we found in Galatians, namely, religious practices basic and common to Judaism and paganism alike. This meaning will then provide us with the basis for our interpretation of dying with Christ to the stoicheia of the world.

##### **A. According to the Stoicheia and Not According to Christ, 2:8.**

As we pointed out in chapter two, Col 2:6-8 occupies a strategic position in the epistle in that it functions as a summarizing conclusion to the body-opening (1:24-2:5) and a summarizing introduction to the body-middle

(2:6-4:1).<sup>60</sup> The central statement of this "hinge" section is v 6, and its interpretation is fundamental for the understanding of v 8. In essence, v 6 ("As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him") is an exhortation to the Colossian Christians to continue to believe and live in accordance with the teachings they received at the time of their conversion and baptism. This verse may in fact be seen as the theme statement of the entire epistle. After a series of participial clauses in v 7 reinforcing this statement, the writer reformulates it in v 8 in terms of its negative complement: they must not be "taken captive" (συλαγωγῶν) through a false teaching. The nature of this false teaching through which someone might take them captive is delineated in a series of four prepositional phrases. The first, διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης, may be rendered "through his philosophy which is in fact empty deceit."<sup>61</sup> The second and third prepositional phrases, κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου - "according to human tradition, according to the stoicheia of the world" - are formally parallel and further characterize the philosophy as to its nature and origin. The fourth and final phrase, οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν, identifies the problem with the philosophy on the most fundamental level: it is "not according to Christ."

It has often been argued that the direct contrast between the stoicheia of the world and Christ at the end of v 8 indicates the stoicheia are conceived as personal powers (i.e. since Christ is a person, the stoicheia with which he is contrasted must also be personal).<sup>62</sup> This argument fails for two reasons.

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<sup>60</sup>See above, 53.

<sup>61</sup>Thus, Lightfoot, 178; Abbott, 247.

<sup>62</sup>E.g. Dibelius-Greeven, 27: "Diese Gegenüberstellung führt mit Notwendigkeit auf eine persönliche Fassung von τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου." See also Peake, 522; E. F. Scott, 43; Lohse, 99; Caird, *Letters*, 190; cf. O'Brien, 110.

First, the contrast is not simply between Christ and the stoicheia, but extends to the entire series of characterizations of the false teaching following *συλαγωγῶν*.<sup>63</sup> Hence, the contrast with Christ is no more indicative of a personal interpretation for the stoicheia than it is for "philosophy" or "the tradition of men." Secondly, it must be considered whether the very opposite of this personal argument is not the case, namely that the non-personal nature of "philosophy" and "tradition" points to a non-personal interpretation of Χριστόν in this context. By this we mean the word "Christ" here should be understood as shorthand for "the tradition about Christ" i.e. the gospel,<sup>64</sup> so that what is set in contrast to the stoicheia is not a person but a body of teaching. The strongest evidence for this reading appears in v 6 with the admonition "as therefore you received (παρελάβετε) Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him." The verb παραλαμβάνω is frequently employed in the NT in the sense of receiving an oral teaching,<sup>65</sup> and it is generally recognized that this is the meaning here, so that the words "Christ Jesus the Lord" actually function as an abbreviation for "the tradition about Christ Jesus the Lord" - i.e. the gospel (cf. 1:5b-7).<sup>66</sup> This elliptical mode of expression should not be surprising since Paul frequently speaks of preaching *Christ* when in fact what he means is the *gospel of Christ* (e.g. 1 Cor 15:12; cf. Rom 1:9; 10:7; 1 Cor 1:23; 2 Cor 1:19; Gal 1:16; Phil 1:15; Col

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<sup>63</sup>Thus Lightfoot, 181; Sappington, 168.

<sup>64</sup>Thus essentially Bruce, *Colossians* 98. This phenomenon is a figure of speech which is probably best classified as a type of ellipsis called *brachylogy*; see Robertson, *Grammar*, 1203-1204; BDF, sec. 483.

<sup>65</sup>E.g. 1 Cor 11:23; 15:1, 3; Gal 1:9, 12; Phil 4:9; 1 Thess 2:13, 4:1; 2 Thess 4:6.

<sup>66</sup>Thus e.g. Lohse, 93; Schweizer, *Colossians* 123; Gnllka, 116; Bruce, *Colossians* 105; O'Brien, 105; Pokorný, 110-111.

1:28).<sup>67</sup> We conclude that the phrase *κατὰ Χριστόν* at the end of v 8 simply picks up and carries forward the elliptical usage of v 6. It is thus intended as a reference to the message about Christ which the Colossian believers received at the time of their conversion and baptism and to which they are exhorted to cling in the face of the competing claims of the false teachers. The phrase *κατὰ Χριστόν* therefore provides no basis for a personal interpretation of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.<sup>68</sup>

So far we have seen that the phrase "the stoicheia of the world" belongs to a series of four prepositional phrases descriptive of the Colossian error. With each of the other three the object of the preposition is a term or phrase which refers either in general or specifically to a body of teaching ("philosophy," "tradition of men," "[the tradition about] Christ"). It therefore stands to reason that "the stoicheia of the world" should be understood as conforming to this pattern. To put this point into perspective, if the word *στοιχεῖα* had appeared in any of the many Pauline lists of spirit powers (e.g. Col 1:16) this would be considered compelling evidence in favour of the personal-cosmological interpretation. The fact that it does not is itself telling

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<sup>67</sup>Cf. G. Friedrich, "εὐαγγέλιον," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 730-731. This phenomenon may also be observed earlier in Colossians where the phrase *Χριστός ἐν ὑμῖν* in 1:27 probably has reference to the proclamation of the gospel among the Gentiles (thus Lohse 76; M. N. A. Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* [Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1990] 182). Similarly in 2:2 *Χριστοῦ*, standing in apposition as it does to "the mystery of God," is probably synonymous with the gospel message and equivalent to "the mystery of Christ" in 4:3, which the author requests prayer for opportunity to proclaim (Bockmuehl, 188).

<sup>68</sup>It could perhaps be argued that the same kind of abbreviation has taken place with "the stoicheia of the world" so that by analogy with the previous phrase the actual meaning is "according to the tradition about the stoicheia of the world" - presumably how to avoid the railing accusations of the principalities and powers at the post-mortem judgment by keeping all the necessary rules and regulations. But this seems unlikely as there is no precedent for it, whereas the brachylogy "Christ" for "the gospel of Christ" is not only a well established figure, but it appears earlier in the context (v 6, cf. 1:27, 28; 2:2).

against this interpretation.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, the appearance of the phrase τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in a series of phrases which refer to teachings should by the same token be taken as compelling evidence for the principal interpretation. We conclude that like "philosophy," "the tradition of men," and "[the tradition about] Christ" - "the stoicheia of the world" in Col 2:8 has reference to teachings. But does the evidence of Colossians permit us to go so far as to conclude that this phrase designates the same thing here as we found in Galatians - namely, those elemental beliefs and practices of which all religions outside of Christ are ultimately composed?

Absolute certainty is lacking, but there is much to suggest that this is what the writer had in mind. To begin with we may note that the term φιλοσοφία was frequently used by Hellenistic Jewish writers to refer to the Jewish religion.<sup>70</sup> As such it can function as a synonym for "religion," though its range of usage is of course much wider extending to virtually any set of beliefs and practices.<sup>71</sup> The phrase ἡ παράδοσις τῶν ἀνθρώπων is also interesting in this regard. While it is sufficiently vague to refer to any human tradition, these exact words are used pejoratively in Mark 7:8 of the oral scribal commentary added to the law, i.e. Halakhah (cf. "the tradition of the elders" in v 5). The phrase in context is obviously adapted from a quotation in the previous verse of Isa 29:13 - "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (cf. Matt 15:6-9; Titus 1:14). The language of Isa 29:13 is similarly employed in Col 2:22 to describe the errorists' rules and regulations, κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων, and this statement has every appearance of being an expansion

<sup>69</sup>So Schweizer, "Christianity of the Circumcised," 253.

<sup>70</sup>E.g. 4 Macc 5:11, 22; Philo, *Op.* 8; *Mos* 2, 216; *Mut.* 223; *Cont.* 26, 28; *Leg.* 156, 245; Josephus, *Apion* 1.54; *War* 2.119; *Ant.* 18.9, 11, 23.

<sup>71</sup>See further O. Michel, "φιλοσοφία," *TDNT* 9 (1974) 172-188.

on the earlier *κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων* of v 8.<sup>72</sup> Hence, while "the tradition of men" could refer in general to any merely human tradition, the wording is highly suggestive of a peculiarly Jewish type of legalistic tradition,<sup>73</sup> and this is corroborated by our earlier conclusion that the Colossian error was a form of Jewish mysticism.<sup>74</sup> Thus, both "philosophy" and "the tradition of men" are designations which could be used of any set of religious teachings including Judaism, and this fits the pattern we found with Paul's use of "the stoicheia of the world" in Galatians. Furthermore, the two expressions "human tradition" and "the stoicheia of the world" may be seen as referring virtually to the same things - ie. rules and regulations - only considering them from different angles. On this reading all four prepositional phrases characterize the Colossian mysticism in parallel fashion resulting in a quite consistent and intelligible reading of v 8b: though this religious philosophy claims to offer a richer spiritual experience and higher form of revelation, it is in reality empty deceit, following merely human legalistic tradition, those worldly practices which are basic and common to all religions<sup>75</sup> and contrary to the unique revelation of the gospel of Christ. With this conclusion the critical ingredient is in hand for determining what the writer had in mind when he admonished the Colossian believers in v 20 not to submit to the rules and regulations of the errorists on the basis of their death with Christ in baptism to the stoicheia of the world.

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<sup>72</sup>Thus O'Brien, 151; Lohse, 124; cf. Schweizer, *Colossians* 136-137.

<sup>73</sup>Thus Houlden, 190; Wright, *Colossians* 101.

<sup>74</sup>See chapter three.

<sup>75</sup>Cf. Sappington, 169.

## **B. Freed from the Stoicheia by Dying with Christ, 2:20**

We begin our investigation of 2:20 by locating it within the structure and argument as it proceeds from v 8. As we have seen, vv 6-8 serve as an introduction to the body-middle of the epistle (2:6-4:1). The essence of vv 6-8 is that the Colossian Christians should live by the message of Christ they received in the beginning and not that of the false teachers. The ὅτι of v 9 introduces a concise, positive exposition of the Christological and soteriological dimensions of this message. This exposition extends to v 15, and we have previously identified it as the central theological argument of the body-middle.<sup>76</sup> The οὖν of v 16 introduces a section extending to 3:4 in which the writer employs the truths of 2:9-15 to admonish his readers not to be taken in by the false teachers. Hence, it may be seen that the warning of v 8 serves as the introduction and theme statement of 2:16-3:4. This explains the link between the use of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in v 8 and v 20 (compare "the tradition of men" in v 8 and the similar phrase in v 22). In v 20 the writer picks up and develops a concept which he has introduced in his theme statement of v 8. Our next task is to show where v 20 fits within this polemic of 2:16-3:4.

In chapter three of this study we examined vv 16-19 at some length in order to determine the nature of the false teaching, as this is the key text in the epistle on this subject. The Colossian error, we concluded, was a form of Jewish mysticism which had as its central focus the attainment of a mystical journey to heaven in order to enjoy there, if fleetingly, the blessings of salvation. Prerequisite to achieving any such journey was the observance of numerous rules and regulations, some of an ascetic nature.

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<sup>76</sup>See chapter two, 53-54.

Moreover, as we saw in our study of v 14,<sup>77</sup> these would-be visitors to the heavenly realm faced in a preliminary stage of the journey the prospect of having to stand trial for their earthly deeds, particularly in regard to their compliance with the rules and regulations promoted by the errorists. Only after successfully passing this judgment and thus triumphing over the accusing angel, would the mystic be allowed to enter heaven. The writer's polemic in 2:16-3:4 against this mystical teaching unfolds in four parts. The first, vv 16-17, begins with the exhortation to allow no one to sit in judgment on them regarding their compliance with various rules and regulations relating to food or drink or festivals. The basis of this exhortation is the declaration in v 14 that through the death of Christ the indictment listing all their violations of such *dogmata* has been wiped clean. They can now stand before the divine tribunal holy, blameless and free from accusation (1:22). Thus, if God does not condemn them, they should suffer no human to do so. In v 17 the writer follows this up by explaining that practices such as these once served a legitimate function in the divine economy by foreshadowing the coming eschatological order, but Christ, the reality of that new order, has already come, thereby rendering these observances obsolete. The second section, vv 18-19, also begins with an exhortation to let no one condemn them (καταβραβέυετω) - again picking up on the theme of the Christian's acquittal at the judgment set forth in v 14 (cf. 1:21). These critics are characterized as delighting in humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη) - a reference to ascetic practices, especially fasting<sup>78</sup> - and the angelic worship of God which they have seen when entering

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<sup>77</sup>See especially 178-180.

<sup>78</sup>For this interpretation see chapter three, 65-67.



heaven.<sup>79</sup> In vv 18c-19 the writer dismisses these visionary experiences as merely the product of the human mind, and argues that advance towards spiritual maturity is not to be gained by individualistic mystical exploits but by taking up one's proper place in the corporate body of Christ. Like the two previous sections, the argument of the third section, vv 20-23, takes as its point of departure the declaration of v 14 regarding the Christian's acquittal before the divine tribunal of any and all transgressions of the *dogmata*: "If you died with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its *dogmata* (δογματίζεσθε)?" Such rules and regulations (a stereotyped sampling of which appears in v 21) are merely human in nature and origin (v 22), and though they may have the appearance of wisdom, in reality they lead only to the gratification of the flesh (v 23).<sup>80</sup> In the fourth and final part of this polemic, 3:1-4, the writer carries forward and develops the notion of v 20 that believers no longer belong to the world since they have died with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world. As those who have died and risen with Christ, they must set their minds on heavenly things. They must not follow the example of the errorists whose minds are set on worldly/earthly matters (cf. the *stoicheia* of the world, v 20), those rules and regulations which are merely human (v 22) and fleshly (v 23). Like Christ they now belong to the world above, and when Christ is revealed at his coming they also will be revealed with him in glory (3:4). It may thus be seen that 2:16-3:4 is a unified argument based on the exposition of the blessings of salvation set forth in 2:9-15 and aimed at persuading the Colossians not to be led astray by the errorists' programme of

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 67-73.

<sup>80</sup>For this reading of v 23 see B. Hollenbach, "Col. II.23: Which Things Lead to the Fulfillment of the Flesh," *NTS* 25 (1978-79) 254-261; followed by O'Brien, 151-152.

keeping various rules and regulations in order to attain a mystical experience of heaven (cf. 2:8). Hence, 2:20 belongs to this central theme in that the notion of dying with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world (cf. vv 11, 12, 14) is used as the basis for an exhortation not to submit to the rules and regulations of the errorists. The stage is now set for an explanation in detail of the meaning of v 20.

To understand the writer's argument in v 20 for not submitting to these regulations, one must answer three questions: (1) What is meant by "if you died with Christ?" (2) What are the *stoicheia* of the world? (3) How has dying with Christ altered the Colossian Christians' relationship to these *stoicheia*?

1. Most commentators assume the first class condition εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ refers directly back to vv 11,12 since this is the only place in the preceding discussion that dying with Christ is explicit.<sup>81</sup> In chapter six, however, we concluded that v 20a is actually an application based on the exposition in v 14 of the Christian's forgiveness through the death of Christ, even though explicit participatory language does not appear in this verse.<sup>82</sup> To review: we argued that vv 14-15 are to be understood against the background of the post-mortem judgment like that encountered in Hades by the seer on his journey to heaven in chapter seven of the *Apocalypse of Zephaniah*. Standing before the divine tribunal the seer is confronted by a hostile accusing angel holding an indictment (*cheirographon*) listing his transgressions. But following his plea for mercy that the indictment might be blotted out, the seer is said to triumph over the accuser. He is then

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<sup>81</sup>E.g. Lohse, 122; O'Brien, 148; Pokorný, 152.

<sup>82</sup>See chapter six, 183.

allowed to proceed on to the heavenly paradise.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly Christians are as those who have stood before the divine tribunal accused by hostile spirits (viz. the principalities and powers of v 15) of transgressions of decrees (τοῖς δόγμασιν) recorded on an indictment (χειρόγραφον). But God has forgiven them all these transgressions (v 13d) by blotting out the *cheirographon* with the result that they have passed from a state of spiritual death to the life of the age to come (v 13a-c). This act of forgiveness was secured by Christ who in representative fashion identified himself with the plight of his people, making the indictment against them his own and dying their death (v 14b). His death was a victory over the hostile accusing powers, and v 15 portrays him as leading them as conquered captors in a triumphal procession to heaven. Since vv 14-15 serve as an explanation of the statement in v 13 regarding believers' passage from death to life with Christ, it follows that the account of Christ's death and victory here are to be understood as the prototype of their own: by union with Christ in baptism they have been made to share spiritually in his death and victory, and his entry thereby into heavenly life. In this way the concept of dying with Christ may be seen to underlie the statement in v 14 regarding Christians' freedom from the condemnation of the *dogmata* and it is this which the writer takes up as his point of departure in v 20 to persuade his readers that they should not submit again to such *dogmata*.<sup>84</sup>

2. If, as we have concluded, v 20 involves a direct application of vv 14-15 to the writer's argument against following the rules and regulations of the errorists, then it is possible to identify the stoicheia of the world either

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 176.

<sup>84</sup>Thus essentially Ernst, 212; similarly, Halter, 201; Lona, 215.

as the accusing principalities and powers<sup>85</sup> who exercised authority because of the violations of the *dogmata* recorded on the *cheirographon*, or as the *dogmata* themselves by which the readers had stood condemned. We have seen, however, that the lexical evidence in the NT era is inconsistent with a personal interpretation. In our study of the only other uses of the term in the Pauline corpus outside of Colossians, Gal 4:3,9, we concluded that the reference is to the elemental rites, rules and regulations which form the common building blocks of Judaism and paganism alike and under which all humanity outside of Christ is enslaved. As we have argued above, this essential meaning is entirely consistent with the usage in Col 2:8, and this verse serves as the theme statement of 2:16-3:4. This same impression is given by the usage in 2:20 and its immediate context. This may be seen first of all in the writer's sample list of rules and regulations in v 21: "touch not, taste not, handle not." By leaving off the direct object of each taboo it may be seen that he presents them as generic, as though to say that such purity regulations are universal in nature, the kind common to all religions.<sup>86</sup> Secondly, the implication of v 20 is that by submitting to the Jewish legal demands of the errorists, these former pagans would be subjecting themselves again to that from which they were liberated by Christ.<sup>87</sup> This matches the essential situation found in Galatians and leads, as there, to the conclusion that subjection to the *stoicheia* is a state common to Judaism and paganism alike. Finally, direct parallels may be seen between the argument

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<sup>85</sup>Thus the great majority of twentieth century commentators; see n. 11 above.

<sup>86</sup>That such rules are a fitting characterization of Jewish laws can be seen from the explanation in *Ep. Arist.*, 142: "So, to prevent our being perverted by contact with others or by mixing with bad influences, he hedged us in on all sides with strict observances connected with meat and drink and touch and hearing and sight, after the manner of the Law." trans. from R. J. H. Shott, "Letter of Aristeas," *OT Pseudepigrapha* 2.22.

<sup>87</sup>Zeilinger, 126; Wink, 76; cf. Lohse, 123.

regarding dying with Christ in Gal 2:19 and Col 2:20. In the former, Paul argues that since he has died with Christ to the law he is no longer subject to its demands (cf. Rom 7:4,6), while in the latter dying with Christ to the *stoicheia* of the world results in freedom from the legal demands enjoined by the errorists. All of this points to the conclusion that the *stoicheia* of the world in Col 2:20 means the same thing as in Gal 4:3,9. The reference is to those elemental rules and regulations, including the law, of which all religions "of this world" are ultimately composed and which enslave all humanity outside of Christ. Hence, the *stoicheia* of v 20 are to be identified with the *dogmata* of v 14 by which the Colossians had stood condemned.

3. The final and critical question to be answered then is how dying with Christ has decisively altered the Colossians' relationship to these *stoicheia*, or *dogmata*, so that the writer may admonish them on this basis no longer to submit to such legal demands. The syntactical device commonly employed by Paul to indicate the change in relationship brought about by union with Christ in his death is the simple dative: Christians have died to sin (τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, Rom 6:2, 10, 11), to the law (τῷ νόμῳ, Rom 7:4; Gal 2:19) and to the world (κόσμῳ, Gal 6:14).<sup>88</sup> By using ἀπό plus the genitive in our text, the writer departs formally from this Pauline pattern, though on the theological level the meaning is quite consistent. The use of ἀπό here is probably best understood as brachylogy for "and were freed from" - hence, the TEV: "you have died with Christ and are set free from the . . ." (similarly, Weymouth, NEB, REB).<sup>89</sup> Judging from Pauline practice elsewhere the most likely candidate for this missing verb is καταργέω. In Rom 7:2 Paul

<sup>88</sup>The usage is the dative of reference. For a judicious analysis of the issues see C. F. D. Moule, "Death 'to sin,' 'to law,' and 'to the world': A Note on Certain Datives," in *Essays in New Testament Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982) 149-157.

<sup>89</sup>Harris, *Colossians* 127; cf. BAGD, 86.

illustrates the Christian's freedom from the law by the well-known legal principle that a marriage is dissolved by the death of a partner: "but should the husband die (ἀποθάνῃ), she is freed from the law (κατήργηται ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου) as far as her husband is concerned." Paul makes the same point in v 3 with the words ἐλευθέρα ἐστὶν ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου. He summarizes in v 6: "But now we have been freed from the law (κατηργήθημεν ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου), since we have died to that by which we were bound." Delling identifies the essential meaning of καταργέω in this context as "to take from the sphere of operation" (cf. Gal 5:4).<sup>90</sup> This captures the sense required in Col 2:20: by virtue of their union with Christ in his death Christians have been removed from the sphere of operation, or jurisdiction, of the stoicheia of the world.

This sphere of operation from which they have been removed is reflected in the rhetorical question of v 20b, τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε; an underlying assumption of this question would seem to be the commonplace notion that upon death one departs this world.<sup>91</sup> The world to which the Colossian believers now belong is indicated in 3:3: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." In this context Christ is said to be in the world above (ἄνω, v 1), "seated at the right hand of God." Hence, by union with him in his death and resurrection, Christians no longer live in the world below but participate in the heavenly life of the world above.<sup>92</sup> This transference may also be understood in temporal categories, for as the world above is to be identified with the new creation and the age to come,<sup>93</sup> so the world below is co-extensive with the present evil age, the

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<sup>90</sup>G. Delling, "καταργέω, κτλ.," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 454.

<sup>91</sup>Cf. Jn 13:1; 1 Tim 6:7; *1 Clem.* 5:7. See further H. Sasse, "κόσμος," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 889.

<sup>92</sup>Lincoln, *Paradise*, 124; cf. Schweizer, *Colossians* 165.

<sup>93</sup>On this subject see Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 315-317; Strack-Billerbeck, 4.819-820.

realm of fallenness and sin (cf. Gal 6:14-15).<sup>94</sup> This present fallen world then is the sphere of operation of the stoicheia.

The picture which emerges of dying with Christ to the stoicheia of the world is as follows. The stoicheia are religious legal demands, including the law, which are operative in this present fallen world, and all who belong to this world are subject to them. The violation of these demands had brought the Colossians under a sentence of death, a penalty which Christ took upon himself as their representative. Hence, it may be seen that the stoicheia were instrumental in the death of Christ and thereby the death of Christians with him.<sup>95</sup> As a result of this death, Christians have been taken from the sphere of operation of the stoicheia - this present fallen world - and now belong to the new order of the world above. And since they no longer belong to this world, they can no longer be subject to its rules and regulations - no more than a person can be subject to the laws of a state of which he or she is no longer a citizen or a resident.. This, then, is the theological basis of the writer's admonition in v 20b. Having been delivered in this way from their former state of bondage and condemnation, it would be folly for the readers to return to it by submitting to the legal demands of the errorists.

## V. Summary

1. While the great majority of twentieth century interpreters hold that the statement in Col 2:20 regarding the Colossians' death with Christ to "the stoicheia of the world" refers to their liberation from the dominion of

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<sup>94</sup>Zeilinger, 123-126; cf. Wright, *Colossians* 123; Pokorný, 152; Peake, 334; Sasse, *TDNT* 3.885,893.

<sup>95</sup>Cf. Gal 2:19: "through the law I died to the law."

hostile spirit powers (cf. 1:13-2:15), this view must first of all be rejected on the grounds that there is no record of the term  $\sigma\tau\omicron\lambda\chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha$  having been used to refer to personal spiritual beings until late in the third century C. E.

2. The various usages of  $\sigma\tau\omicron\lambda\chi\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$  attested in the first century C. E. (letters of the alphabet, elementary principles, physical elements) reveal a term polysemous in nature with the notion common to each meaning being that of an irreducible component.

3. In Gal 4:3,9 Paul employs the phrase "the stoicheia of the world" to refer to elemental rules and regulations, rites and rituals which make up all religions "of this world," including Judaism, and under which all outside of Christ are enslaved.

4. The same phrase is used in Col 2:8,20 to characterize the various rules, regulations and ascetic demands of the errorists. The "world" in this phrase refers to the present evil age, the realm of fallenness and sin which is the sphere of operation of the stoicheia.

5. To have died with Christ to "the stoicheia of the world" means to live no longer within their jurisdiction and therefore to be freed from any obligation to submit to such legal demands.



**CHAPTER EIGHT**  
**LIFE WITH CHRIST: PRESENT AND FUTURE**  
**COLOSSIANS 3:1-4**

Colossians 3:1-4 constitutes the fourth and final section of the polemical application of the central theological message of 2:9-15. This polemic, as we have seen, begins with 2:16 and is aimed at persuading the Colossian Christians not to be led astray by the false teachers' insistence on the keeping of various rites, regulations and ascetic practices in order to gain mystical experiences of heaven. In 2:20-23 the writer exhorts them to be done with these worldly fleshly religious practices because, having died with Christ, they no longer belong to the world and therefore cannot be subject to such "elements" of the world. Next, in 3:1-4 he takes up the counterpoint: their union with Christ in his death and resurrection means they now belong to the world above, and their life is hid with Christ in God. Hence, they must set their minds on things above - awaiting the day of Christ's appearance from heaven, when they will be revealed with him in glory.

Structurally this passage falls into three parts: (1) v 1a, (2) vv 1b-2 and (3) vv 3-4.<sup>1</sup> The middle section centres on the twin imperatives of v 1b and v 2b: the Colossians must orient their thinking and living around the

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 201; also Zeilinger, 61-62, followed by O'Brien, 158.

things above and not the things on earth. The theological basis for these imperatives appears in v 1a and vv 3-4. Essentially it is their union with Christ in his death and resurrection: v 1a mentions only their co-resurrection, while vv 3-4 is a more developed explanation mentioning also their co-death, the present hiddenness of their resurrection life with Christ and its consummation when they will be revealed with him at his coming.

### I. If Risen with Christ (v 1a)

The first class conditional clause of v 1a is parallel to the opening clause of the previous section, 2:20-23, and forms its positive counterpart.

2:20a εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ

3:1a εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ

Having admonished the Colossians on the basis of their baptismal union with Christ in his death, the writer now undertakes to exhort them on the basis of their resurrection with Christ.

There is some disagreement among scholars over the significance of the οὖν and hence, the precise logical connection between 3:1 and the preceding. As we saw earlier,<sup>2</sup> the section 2:16-3:4 constitutes a unified argument in which the writer employs various concepts drawn from his central theological statement of 2:9-15 to persuade his readers not to be deceived by the false teachers' programme of rules and regulations. In 2:16-19 the point he builds on is their acquittal before God at the last judgment based on v 14 (cf. 1:22). To this in 2:20 he adds explicitly their union with Christ in his representative death. Next in 3:1 the writer brings to bear in his polemic the positive counterpart of his point in 2:20, the Colossians' union

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<sup>2</sup>See above, 228-231.

with Christ in his resurrection. Since this concept was previously developed in 2:12, most commentators simply maintain that the οὖν is resumptive of this text.<sup>3</sup> But while it is true that the notion of resurrection with Christ receives no mention in the preceding section, we would argue that 2:20 and 3:1 belong to a single argument regarding the effect of union with Christ and that the conjunction οὖν in 3:1a is best understood as resumptive of this argument as it proceeds from 2:20.<sup>4</sup> In its discussion of the resumptive use of this conjunction the standard grammar by Blass, Debrunner and Funk states, "After parenthetical remarks οὖν indicates a return to the main theme."<sup>5</sup> This aptly describes the case in 2:20-3:1. The essential argument of 2:20 is that through their union with Christ in his death Christians have been transferred out of the present world; hence, they are no longer subject to the *stoicheia* or *dogmata* of the world. The following three verses (2:21-23) may be described as parenthetical comments on the nature of these *dogmata*. That the writer at least resumes in 3:1a the pattern of language of 2:20 is evident: εἰ ἀπεθάνετε . . . εἰ οὖν συνηγέρθητε. Moreover, it may be seen that he resumes the theme or argument of 2:20 in 3:1a (1) if this theme is understood broadly as, *union with Christ results in a change of dominions or worlds*, and (2) if dying and rising with Christ are understood as but two aspects - the negative and the positive - of the same reality, baptismal union with Christ<sup>6</sup> (as indeed set forth in 2:11-15). Thus, in 3:1a the writer has not taken up a new argument based on a theme drawn independently from 2:12,13. Rather in 2:20 and 3:1 he employs the concepts

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<sup>3</sup>Thus E. F. Scott, 62; Schweizer, *Colossians* 171, 172; Harris, 137; Gnilka, 171; Pokorný, 159.

<sup>4</sup>Thus Lightfoot, 208, 209; Williams, 121; O'Brien, 159.

<sup>5</sup>Sec. 451.1.

<sup>6</sup>Lightfoot, 209.

previously developed in 2:11-15 to frame what is essentially a single unified argument: union with Christ means a change of worlds. In 2:20 he develops the negative aspect of the argument: union with Christ in his death means departure from this world - therefore do not submit to the rules and regulations of this world. In 3:1a he takes up the positive: union with Christ in his resurrection means entry into heavenly existence - therefore seek the things above. To summarize, then, it seems best to regard the οὐν of 3:1a as resumptive of the argument of 2:20 - an argument which applies the concept of dying and rising with Christ developed previously in 2:11-15.

The words, "if you are raised with Christ," εἰ οὐν συνηγέρθητε, draw on the initial discussion of the Colossians' resurrection with Christ in 2:12 where the same verb συνηγέρθητε appears. As we have seen, the starting point for understanding resurrection with Christ is the nature of Christ's own resurrection. This is set forth in 1:18: as the firstborn from the dead Christ is the first to pass from the old era of fallenness and death to the sphere of new creation and the life of the age to come. As such he has become the founder of the new human race as a second Adam, and his passage from fallenness and death to life is of prototypical significance for this new race. To be united with Christ in his death and resurrection through faith-baptism (2:11-12) means to participate on a spiritual level in his passage from the old order to the new; it means deliverance from the fallen Adamic existence of this sin determined world and entry into the life of the new creation inaugurated by Christ's resurrection (cf. 3:9,10).

## II. Seek the Things Above (vv 1b-2)

On the basis of their resurrection with Christ the writer now exhorts the Colossians to "seek the things above", τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε. Thus, as in 2:20

their death with Christ means they no longer belong to the world (κόσμος), and therefore they must stop living as though they did, so now in 3:1 their resurrection with him leads to the conclusion that they belong to a new world - the realm "above," ἄνω - and they must therefore live in accordance with this new reality. Before we can address directly the question of the actual behaviour enjoined in v 1b, we must sort through the logic and assumptions involved in this argument.

### **A. The Assumptions of the Argument**

The basic line of thought, when fully fleshed out and supplemented by the clarifications in v 2 appears to run as follows: (a) Christ has experienced the eschatological resurrection from the dead (v 1a); (b) he has ascended to the realm above where he has been exalted to the place of supremacy at the right hand of God (v 1c,d); (c) because the Colossians have been united with him in faith-baptism they now share both his resurrection life and his existence in the realm above; (d) therefore, they should seek and set their minds on the things above and not the things upon the earth (vv 1b-2). Two issues, however, remain to be clarified. First - in what sense, and to what extent have the Colossians participated in Christ's resurrection? And second - in what sense do they no longer "live" in the world (2:20) or "upon the earth" (3:2) but in the realm above? In answer, the essential facts of Christ's resurrection and exaltation could suggest first that for those united with him in these events the goal of eschatological perfection has already been reached - and hence, there remains nothing more to be done<sup>7</sup> - and secondly

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<sup>7</sup>Thus Beker: "When participation in Christ is viewed as a completed state, Christian ethical life is distorted, because it leads to premature spiritual perfection" (*Paul the Apostle*, 163).

that they exist spatially with Christ in the realm above. The actual imperatives of vv 1b-2, however, do not bear this out. The spatial contrast τὰ ἄνω - τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς <sup>γῆς</sup> has the earth as the point of reference with "heaven" above. Hence, the imperatives assume existence "upon the earth."<sup>8</sup> It is Christ who is in heaven and, as it is made clearer in vv 3,4, the readers share his resurrection life yet without being "there". Moreover, the fact that they must seek and set their minds on the things above indicates the goal of salvation is not yet attained; this will only come with the parousia when faith becomes sight, and they are revealed with Christ in glory (v 4). This conjunction of indicative and imperative in vv 1-2 thus displays a tension between the already and the not yet of salvation and its outworking in Christian conduct.<sup>9</sup> This pattern is, of course, a fundamental feature of Pauline ethics.<sup>10</sup> A clear case in point, and one which displays close parallels with Col 3:1-2, is found in Romans 6. Here Paul reminds Christians that they have died to sin (v 2) and thereby exhorts them to count themselves dead to sin (v 11) and not to allow it to reign in their mortal bodies (v 12). To summarize: the imperatives of vv 1b,2 to seek and set the mind on the things above assume (1) that the Colossians are located on the earth, and (2) that the goal of salvation is not yet reached in spite of the "already" dimension of the indicative upon which the admonition is based.

An additional matter regarding the thought structure of 3:1-4 which requires elucidation is the nature of the eschatological model presupposed here in which temporal and spatial concepts are merged. In v 1 we see an

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<sup>8</sup>Lona, 176; Gnilka, 172; Lohmeyer, 132; O. Merk, *Handeln aus Glauben* (Marburg: Elwert, 1968) 203.

<sup>9</sup>Ernst, 221; Gnilka, 172.

<sup>10</sup>On this subject see e.g. G. Bornkamm, *Paul*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971) 196-205 and Ridderbos, *Paul*, 253-258.

imperative phrased in spatial terms, τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, based on an indicative phrased in temporal terms, i.e. the present possession of the eschatological resurrection life.<sup>11</sup> Again in v 3 the particle γάρ indicates a causal relationship between the spatially related imperative of v 2 and the spatially and temporally related indicatives of vv 3-4: "set your minds on things that are above . . . *for* you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ appears . . . you also will appear with him in glory." We will treat the argument of vv 3-4 in detail below, but it is useful at this stage of our discussion to observe that the interplay of spatial and temporal concepts in v 1 is mirrored by a similar interplay in the argument as it runs from v 2 to v 4. It should be seen in fact that vv 3-4 serve to elucidate the argument of v 1 and carry it a step further by relating Christians' present possession of eschatological life to a future consummation in glory at Christ's coming. Our question for now is, What is this eschatological model (with which the readers are apparently at home and thus the writer need not explain) in which such spatial and temporal concepts can be so merged?<sup>12</sup>

One view, as represented most notably by E. Grässer, is that this interplay of spatial and temporal concepts represents a synthesis of two perspectives - Hellenistic mysticism and early Christian apocalyptic.<sup>13</sup> According to this interpretation the temporal aspect is supplied by the apocalyptic perspective and appears only in v 4 with the reference to the end-time appearance of Christ in glory. But for Grässer the dominant conception is that of Hellenistic mysticism: the idea of dying and rising with

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. Lincoln, *Paradise*, 123.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. J. R. Levison, "2 Apoc. Bar. 48:42-52:7 and the Apocalyptic Dimension of Colossians 3:1-6," *JBL* 108 (1989) 95.

<sup>13</sup>"Kol 3,1-4 als Beispiel einer Interpretation secundum homines recipientes," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 64 (1967) 155, 159-160. See also Dibelius-Greeven *Kolossar*, 40 and Sellin, "Die Auferstehung ist schon geschehen."

Christ (vv 1-3) is derived from the Hellenistic mysteries in which the one baptized is transferred out of this lower world of shadows, transitoriness and unreality and into the upper world of eternal timeless being.<sup>14</sup> This attempt, however, to explain vv 1-4 in terms of a synthesis of two such different world views is both artificial and unnecessary.<sup>15</sup> Once its essential outlines are recognized, the Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic perspective provides a straightforward framework for the interpretation of this text. Within this perspective there is a correspondence between the temporal concepts of the two ages, the present age and the age to come, and the spatial concept of lower and upper worlds. The present age is identified with "this world," or the earth, the sphere of sin and fallenness, while the age to come is seen as existing now in heaven where the blessings of salvation including paradise are kept and hidden until the consummation of the present age when they will be revealed to the righteous.<sup>16</sup> This apocalyptic perspective is clearly in evidence in Col 1:5 where reference is made to "the hope laid up for you in heaven." This hope laid up in heaven is the same reality as the "hope of glory" (1:27) proclaimed in the gospel and corresponds to that which according to 3:3-4 is now hidden with Christ in the realm above and will be revealed in glory at the parousia. Thus, the blessings of salvation laid up in heaven (a spatial concept) are identified with the salvation to be revealed in glory at the final dénouement (a temporal concept). Moreover, just as the assurance of eschatological blessings laid up in heaven can in Jewish literature become the basis for

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<sup>14</sup>Grasser, "Kol 3,1-4 als Beispiel," 155.

<sup>15</sup>For a critique of the essential features of Grasser's interpretation of Col 3:1-4 see Lincoln, *Paradise*, 131-132.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *2 Apoc. Bar.* 48:49; 51:8-10; 52:7; 84:6; 4 Ezra 7:14, 121; 8:51-54; 2 Macc 12:45; 1 Pet 1:4. See further Zeilinger, 149; Lincoln, *Paradise*, 124, 126; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 202; O'Brien, 161; Levison, "Apocalyptic Dimension of Colossians 3:1-6," 96-97.



exhortations to confidence and righteous living in the present (*2 Apoc. Bar.* 52:7; *1 Enoch* 104:6),<sup>17</sup> so in Col 1:4,5 and in 3:3,4 we see this hope serving as a motivation to a life of Christian virtue in the present. But while these features are readily placed within the standard Jewish apocalyptic framework, the element of realized or inaugurated eschatology in the Colossian epistle introduces a new wrinkle. Whereas the Jewish apocalypses looked forward to God's coming acts of deliverance which would mark the arrival of the new age, for the author of Colossians the resurrection of Christ and his enthronement as the Messianic king at God's right hand (3:1; cf. Ps 110:1) mean the new age has already dawned. Consequently, those who through faith-baptism have been united with Christ in his resurrection (2:12) and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (1:13) no longer belong to the present age but to the age to come. As such, because of this eschatological model in which the age to come corresponds to the world above, the new temporal standing of believers can be stated in spatial terms: they no longer "live in the world" (2:20) but belong to the world above (3:1,3).<sup>18</sup> Yet, as we have seen in the tension of the already and the not yet of this epistle's eschatology, their actual spatial existence is assumed to be on the earth while they still live in faith and hope of a salvation which will not reach its goal until the return of Christ in glory. This, then, constitutes the essential logic and eschatological framework within which the twin imperatives of 3:1b-2 are given: τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε . . . τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε. We are now in a position to address the question of the precise conduct and attitudes which the writer enjoins by these commands.

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<sup>17</sup>See further Levison, "Apocalyptic Dimension," 97.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 202.

## B. The Conduct and Attitude Enjoined

To determine what behaviour the writer had in mind when he exhorts his readers to seek and concentrate on the things above, it is necessary first to recognize that this exhortation appears within a polemic aimed at countering a false teaching which was very much concerned with "the things above." As we have seen, the Colossian errorists held to a form of Jewish mysticism which advocated various legalistic observances and ascetic practices for the purpose of gaining mystical visions of heaven where the aspiring mystic could experience the blessings of salvation preserved there for the righteous.<sup>19</sup> "The things above" which they sought would have included the knowledge of heavenly secrets, paradise, the angelic host whose worship of God they sought to join (θηρσκειῶ τῶν ἄγγέλων, 2:18)<sup>20</sup> and, most importantly, the throne of God itself.<sup>21</sup> It is, therefore, probable that the words τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε . . . τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, μη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς were originally used by the errorists themselves in reference to their quest for heavenly visions.<sup>22</sup> That such language was used of heavenly visions may be seen in various documents from the NT era or shortly thereafter. When Job's daughter in *T. Job* 48:2 entered upon a vision of the heavenly world by donning a magical sash, she is described as being "no longer minded toward earthly things," τὰ τῆς γῆς φρονεῖν (similarly 49:1 and 50:2; cf. 47:2).<sup>23</sup> In the words of a Rabbinic counterblast against those who advocated the

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<sup>19</sup>See chapter three, especially 71-73.

<sup>20</sup>For this interpretation of 2:18 see chapter three, 67-68.

<sup>21</sup>See further Levison, "Apocalyptic Dimension," 99-100.

<sup>22</sup>Lincoln, *Paradise*, 126.

<sup>23</sup>Regarding the freedom of *T. Job* from Christian influence see J. J. Collins, "Structure and Meaning in the Testament of Job," in *Society of Biblical Literature: 1974 Seminar Papers*, ed. G. MacRae (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974) vol 1, 47-49; see also Schürer, *History of the Jewish People* (rev. ed.) 3.553-554.

seeking of heavenly visions, "whoever gives his mind" to "what is above," it is "better for him if he had not come into the world" (*m. Hag.* 2.1). Similarly in Sir 3:21 the readers are admonished not to seek (μὴ ζήτει) what is too difficult or beyond their power - presumably a reference to the esoteric knowledge on offer from heavenly visions.<sup>24</sup> Our point of departure, then, for determining what the writer to the Colossians meant by his exhortation to "seek the things above" is the recognition that within the context of the errorists' own teaching, such language referred to the seeking of heavenly visionary experiences through legalistic and ascetic observances.

But the use of the errorists' language obviously cannot mean that the writer approved of their quest for heavenly visions. His statements leading up to 3:1-2 make it quite clear that he strongly disapproved. Their experience of heavenly visions is in reality but the product of their own human minds (2:18). By their insistence on individual, elitist spiritual exploits they cut themselves off from the true means of spiritual growth which is found in organic relationships within the church under the direction of Christ (2:19). The rules, rites, regulations and ascetic exercises by which they would gain heavenly entry are but the elements common to all religions outside of Christ; they are of this world, the present evil age (2:20), and in accordance with human commandments and teachings (2:22). Although these things have the appearance of true wisdom and piety, in reality they only serve to fulfill the desires of the flesh (2:23). Hence, their heavenly-minded spirituality is in fact a fleshly, human, this-worldly striving, a type of behaviour which the writer classifies in 3:2 as setting the mind on the things that are on the earth (τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). But why should the writer

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<sup>24</sup>C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, (London: SPCK, 1982) 75.

employ the language of the false teachers when his intent is obviously so much at odds with theirs? And - more to the point - what *does* he mean when he exhorts his readers to "seek the things above"?

In answer to this first question H. Chadwick observed, "What we have here is one more instance of the typically Pauline method of outclassing his opponents on their own ground."<sup>25</sup> The tactic involves making use of the opponents' language but in a corrected, redefined sense so as to employ it in the polemic against them. Thus, the quest for things above - when properly understood - is an entirely fitting and proper enterprise for the Christian. With careful attention to the argument of 3:1-4 and with some assistance from the wider context we can identify at least four ways in which the writer corrects, redefines and redirects this command to seek the things above.

1. The starting point of this seeking is different. Whereas the errorists assume as their starting point existence in this world, the present evil age, and through their legalistic works tried to qualify for heavenly entry, Christians begin their quest for the things above on the understanding that they already belong to the world above, because they have risen with Christ.<sup>26</sup> Already they can stand before the divine tribunal holy, blameless and without accusation (1:23; 2:14). With Christ they have passed from death to life and from the sphere of fallenness and sin to the new creation and the redeemed race of the new Adam. Hence, they do not strive to merit and achieve an experience which is fundamentally at odds with their present state of existence, but they seek to progress in a sphere to which they already belong.

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<sup>25</sup>"All Things to All Men" *NTS* 1 (1954/55) 272 quoted also in Lincoln, *Paradise*, 127.

<sup>26</sup>Lincoln, *Paradise*, 127.

2. The outcome of the seeking is different. The goal of the errorists' quest was a heavenly vision, i.e. a present mystical experience of the glories which are preserved in heaven for the righteous. This experience was fleeting and attained only by an elite. For Christians the full experience of the eschatological blessings now in heaven must await Christ's return (3:4). But deferred as it may be, this programme of heavenly experience is far superior to that offered by the mystics: (a) all believers, and not simply an elite, will attain it;<sup>27</sup> (b) it will be a permanent and abiding state and not just a fleeting vision; (c) it will not be something altogether new and qualitatively different from their present existence, but the consummation of the new life begun in conversion-baptism; and (d) they will not simply observe the heavenly glories, but they "will be manifest in glory" (3:4) - i.e. they will themselves be transformed to a state of glory.<sup>28</sup>

3. The focus of the seeking is different. "The things above" which the Colossian mystics sought were the knowledge of heavenly secrets, paradise, the angelic host and the throne of God. On the other hand, the writer's definition of the realm above as the place "where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God," indicates that their heavenly-mindedness is to be centred on Christ.<sup>29</sup> (a) As the risen and exalted Lord, he is their head (1:18) and heavenly king (1:13; 3:1) whose rule they are to follow in their daily lives (2:18; 3:15; 4:1). (b) By virtue of their resurrection with him, they have entered upon the life of the realm above, he is the repository of their heavenly life (3:3) and the pattern of what they will become at the consummation (v 4). (c) The knowledge of divine secrets is to be found in

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<sup>27</sup>Lincoln, *Paradise*, 124; Levison, 102.

<sup>28</sup>On this subject see our treatment of v 4 below; see also Levison, 102.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Lincoln, *Paradise*, 124, 125.

Christ, since in him "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden" (2:2,3), and the full revelation of this knowledge, we may infer, will accompany his public manifestation in glory (3:4; cf. *1 Enoch* 51:3; *T. Levi* 18:5).<sup>30</sup>

4. The means of the seeking is different. As we have seen, the errorists through their own legalistic striving sought to enter a sphere which was fundamentally at odds with their present state of being. Christians, on the other hand, take as their starting point participation in the life of the realm above, because they have died (2:20; 3:3) and risen with Christ (3:1a). Therefore they seek not to become what they are not, but to progress in a sphere to which they already belong. For them the imperative takes the form, "Become what you are." This general command to seek and concentrate on the things above and not the things on earth becomes specific in the paraenesis of 3:5-17.<sup>31</sup> That this is the writer's intent is seen in the fact that he takes up again the words ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς in v 5 (cf. v 2) along with a command to put to death their earthly members (cf. v 3, "for you died").<sup>32</sup> They must put to death and "put off" those vices which characterize this present world and fallen sinful humanity (vv 5-9) and "put on" those virtues which are characteristic of the new humanity (vv 12-14). The basis of these exhortations is spelled out in vv 9-11: in baptism Christians have already taken the decisive step - they have put off the old humanity and put on the new, i.e. they have died and risen with Christ. Moreover, they are presently being renewed to the pristine image of God lost in the fall, a state now

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<sup>30</sup>See further Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity*, 188-189.

<sup>31</sup>Schweizer, *Colossians*, 178; Lincoln, *Paradise*, 127; Lona, 176.

<sup>32</sup>Lona, 176.

possessed by the risen Christ in its fullness (cf. 1:15,18).<sup>33</sup> Thus, it may be said that seeking the things above and turning from the things on earth means for Christians the actualization in daily life of their death and resurrection with Christ, as they advance towards the goal of perfection at Christ's coming.<sup>34</sup>

### **III. Life Hidden Now - Revealed at the Parousia (vv 3,4)**

We have seen that the indicative of v 1a regarding the presence of salvation provides the grounds for the imperatives of vv 1b-2: because the Colossians have risen with Christ (and therefore no longer belong to this world but to the one above) they must seek the things above and not those of the earth. In vv 3,4 the writer returns to the indicative, explaining further why they must seek the things above.<sup>35</sup> This explanation falls into three parts: (1) they died with Christ, v 3a; (2) their present life is hidden with Christ in God, v 3b; (3) they will be revealed with Christ in glory at his coming, v 4. These final two points may be seen as the writer's own commentary on the meaning of resurrection with Christ (v 1a) in regard to Christians' present and future relationship to the resurrection state of existence.

#### **A. Present Life: Hidden with Christ (v 3)**

The first clause of v 3, ἀπεθάνετε γάρ, takes up the thought of dying with Christ previously mentioned in 2:20, which in turn goes back to the

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<sup>33</sup>See further our investigation of 3:9-11 below in chapter nine.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Grundmann, *TDNT* 7.793, n. 125.

<sup>35</sup>The explanatory nature of these verses is indicated by γάρ (thus e.g. Harris, 138), against the NEB which takes it as resumptive ("I repeat, you died"), and Zeilinger, 147, who understands it in the sense "in effect."

initial description of the Colossians' death with Christ seen in 2:11. The terse ἀπεθάνετε is obviously an abbreviation for the fuller thought expressed in 2:20, ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ. The essential point in view in 3:3a is also that of 2:20: those who have died with Christ no longer belong to this world. The writer reiterates this point here in v 3 in order to underscore the preceding admonition: the Colossians must not set their minds on the things of the earth (τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς). They have stripped off the old fallen humanity (2:11; 3:9) and died to those earthly rules and regulations which the errorists enjoin (2:20) and therefore must orient themselves to the new reality which is theirs in Christ. In addition to supplying the grounds for the negative admonition of v 2, this reassertion of their baptismal death with Christ also becomes the basis for the imperative of v 5 to "put to death" (νεκρώσατε) their members which are upon the earth (τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς).

In v 3b the writer explains that, having died, the Colossians' present life now lies hidden with Christ in God, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ. This brief statement has given rise to a variety of interpretations. We begin with the meaning of the *hiddenness* of this life. Some scholars have claimed that since the writer speaks of hiddenness with Christ immediately after referring to dying with Christ, the image he has in mind must be that of *burial* with Christ (cf. 2:12): the one who is buried is hidden in the earth out of sight to the world.<sup>36</sup> This view, however, does not fit the argument of the text. It must be seen that v 3b is a development of the admonition of v 1 that since the Colossians were raised with Christ they should seek the things above. Death enters the picture in v 3 in order to support the negative side of the admonition which is to avoid setting their

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<sup>36</sup>Lightfoot, 209; Martin, *Colossians*, 102; Grässer, 160.



minds on the things of the earth (v 2). Burial has no place in the argument, since this would imply a continuing state of death. Rather, the life of v 3b is that life which has followed on from their resurrection with Christ: they died and were buried with Christ; they were raised with him and the life they have now as a result of that event lies hidden (κέκρυπται, perfect passive) with Christ.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, this resurrection life is not called hidden because it belongs to the inner person as opposed to the outer and visible person (cf. 2 Cor 4:16,18).<sup>38</sup> It is hidden because it is "located" with Christ who is, according to v 1, enthroned in heaven at God's right hand. Believers are to seek the things above because they have been united with the one who is enthroned above. As we mentioned earlier, this concept of hiddenness finds its basis in the world view of Jewish and early Christian apocalyptic according to which the blessings of salvation are now preserved and hidden in heaven and will be revealed (cf. v 4) at the consummation.

How then are we to conceive of this resurrection life which is now hidden with Christ in heaven? In a recent article J. R. Levison has put forward the novel interpretation that this hidden life is synonymous with "the things above" of vv 1, 2, which is what the errorists sought to encounter in their heavenly visions - namely paradise and the angelic host.<sup>39</sup> In other words, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν in v 3 signifies the existence or world that is preserved in heaven and which believers will inherit at the time of Christ's coming (v 4) when they themselves are transformed to a state of glory like his. In this sense, it is the "life" of the resurrection now in heaven and to be entered

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<sup>37</sup>Thus most interpreters e.g. Abbott, 279; Williams, 123; Lohse, 133; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 176; Gniska, 174.

<sup>38</sup>Thus Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 203; for older commentators who support this view see those listed by Eadie, *Colossians*, 216-217.

<sup>39</sup>"Apocalyptic Dimension," 100,101.

upon in the future. Levison's interpretation fails to do justice to the meaning of ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν in v 3 in two important respects. First of all, his attempt to identify the hidden life of v 3 with paradise and the angelic host misses the mark. The *life* in question here is in the first instance the very life of Christ in the sense that it is the spiritual animating principle of the resurrected man Jesus Christ which he received by an act of new creation when God raised him from the dead (Col 1:18; 2:12). As the Adam of the new human race and its corporate head, Christ is the bearer and fountain of the new eschatological life (cf. Acts 3:15; 1 Cor 15:45).<sup>40</sup> This is the writer's point when in v 4 he identifies Christ as the believers' life ὁ Χριστὸς . . . ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν. Therefore, the resurrection life which is hidden in heaven is not paradise but Christ himself, the firstborn from the dead and the source and bearer of the believer's life.

The second difficulty with Levison's interpretation concerns the sense in which this resurrection life is presently possessed by believers. According to Levison it is now theirs only in the sense that it is laid up for them in heaven. Their actual entry into or participation in this life must await the revelation of Christ in glory (v 4). Of course, Levison's identification of the believer's hidden life with paradise and the angelic host more or less requires this futurist interpretation. Others, however, who identify ζωὴ in v 3, as we do, as resurrection life (or eternal or eschatological life) have also concluded it is future to the believer's experience - since it is now laid up in heaven with Christ. This essential view is as old as the Greek Fathers<sup>41</sup> and has been taken up in modern times most notably by E. Grässer. For Grässer

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<sup>40</sup>Gnilka, 175.

<sup>41</sup>According to Eadie ( *Colossians*, 216) who also cites Barnes and Meyer among nineteenth century interpreters who held this view.

the Christian's resurrection with Christ in conversion-baptism mentioned in v 1 is but the date at which this eschatological life is deposited in heaven with Christ who will serve as trustee until the day of redemption (v 4) when it will be transferred to those for whom it was held in trust.<sup>42</sup> In this way Grässer denies that the eschatological life is in any way a present reality for the believer; the tension of the *already* and the *not yet* is cut in favour of the not yet. The clear message of 2:13, however, is that God has made Christians alive with Christ: *συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ*. Their union with Christ in his resurrection - i.e. his own passage from death to life (cf. 1:18) - means that they now share his resurrection life. Hence, the statement in 3:3 concerning the present hiddenness of the Colossians' life with Christ in God must be understood to mean that their spiritual life, as they experience it on earth, is but an extension of Christ's own resurrection life which he possesses in its fullness in heaven in the presence of God.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, this present participation in his heavenly life may be seen as a token or a pledge (cf. 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:14) of the resurrection existence which will become theirs in its fullness when they are revealed with Christ in glory at his coming.<sup>44</sup>

### **B. Revealed with Christ at his Appearing (v 4)**

With v 4 our passage reaches its high point by bringing to completion several key issues raised in the preceding sections. In regard to v 3 it develops the concept of *κρύπται* in that it points forward to a time when the Christian's life of *hiddenness* will be *revealed* in glory. In regard to vv

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<sup>42</sup>"Kol 3,1-4," 161-162.

<sup>43</sup>Bruce, *Colossians*, 135.

<sup>44</sup>Ernst, 221; cf. Bruce, *Colossians*, 137.

1b-2 it provides additional motivation for seeking that which is above, since the world above to which Christians now belong will one day be revealed on earth. And finally in regard to v 1a, this verse shows that those who have been raised with Christ in baptism have not arrived at a state of spiritual perfection but rather at a preliminary form of the resurrection existence which looks forward to a final and definitive stage to be unveiled at the end of the age.

The time and circumstances of this eschatological event are indicated by the words ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῆ. The construction ὅταν plus the aorist subjunctive is commonly used to specify a future action which will take place before the action of the main verb.<sup>45</sup> The event to which the Colossians must look, which will precede and announce the manifestation of their resurrection life in glory, is the revelation of Christ from heaven. The absence of a connecting particle such as δέ, gives an added sense of solemnity and drama to this statement.<sup>46</sup>

The passive of the verb φανερόω, used both here and in the main clause, means "to be revealed" or "to appear." It is a synonym of ἀποκαλύπτω in the Pauline writings (cf. Rom 1:17 with 3:21, and Eph 3:5 with Col 1:26) and is the opposite of "to be hidden," "to be invisible" (cf. 1 Cor 4:5).<sup>47</sup> This term is employed frequently in the NT of Christ's appearance in the world, both in his first advent (1 Tim 3:16; Heb 9:26; 1 Pet 1:20; 1 Jn 1:2) and, as here in Col 3:4a, in his second (1 Pet 5:4; 1 Jn 2:28; 3:2). The notion that the end of the age would be marked by the appearance of the Messiah from heaven was well fixed in apocalyptic tradition (e.g. *I Enoch* 69:27-29;

<sup>45</sup>Turner, *Syntax*, 112; Harris, 139.

<sup>46</sup>Williams, 124; Abbott, 279; Harris, 141. On the subject of asyndeton see BDF sec. 462.

<sup>47</sup>R. Bultmann and D. Lührmann, "φαίνω, κτλ.," *TDNT* 9 (1974) 3.4.

4 Ezra 7:28; 2 Apoc. Bar. 39:7; cf. Dan 7:13). Frequent reference also is made by Paul and other NT writers to this end-time appearance of Christ from heaven (e.g. Matt 24:30; Acts 1:11; Phil 3:20; 1 Thess 4:15-17). Thus the statement in Col 3:4, "When Christ appears . . . in glory" is to be identified with this broad Jewish and early Christian expectation.<sup>48</sup> In addition, this statement must be viewed with special reference to Christ's previous state of hiddenness in heaven mentioned in v 3 (cf. v 1b, "seated at the right hand of God"). The Christ whom the Colossians have known in hiddenness as the object of their hope, the centre of their seeking and the author and bearer of their life, is the Christ who will be revealed publicly in glory.

This spectacular event will also mean the end of the hiddenness of the Colossians' lives and their own revelation with Christ in glory, ΤΟΤΕ ΚΑΙ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ. It is noteworthy that this statement follows the same essential formula which we observed earlier in 2:12,13 regarding the correspondence between Christ's state of physical death and the Colossians' prior state of spiritual death. In each case, a verb descriptive of Christ's state (ἐκ νεκρῶν, φανερωθῆν) is linked by the words "you also" (καὶ ὑμᾶς/ καὶ ὑμεῖς) to a different form of the same verb in the next clause of which Christians are the subject (νεκροὺς ὄντας, φανερωθήσεσθε).<sup>49</sup> The point in each instance is to indicate an essential unity or sameness in the experience of Christ and Christians. At issue in 2:12,13 is the fact that Christ and believers have had a common experience of death, though one involved physical death while the other was only spiritual in nature. The question, then, to be answered in regard to the co-

<sup>48</sup>That the reference here is to the parousia is widely assumed, e.g. Lohse, 134; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 176; Grässer, 163; Gnifka, 175; O'Brien, 167; Pokorný, 161.

<sup>49</sup>See above chapter six, 163.

revelation of Christians with Christ at his appearing described in 3:4 is not simply the nature of this event, but more specifically, in what sense can we speak of the revealing of Christ from heaven and the revealing of Christians with him as a common, shared experience?

We may begin by imagining the case if the experience of Christians were to be *exactly* the same as Christ's. For this to happen it would be necessary for Christians to be previously with Christ in heaven, in a personal and bodily sense, to descend and then to be revealed with him in glory on the earth. It should be pointed out that v 4 could readily be understood in this sense were it isolated from its context. Other related texts using similar language do in fact display just such a pattern. In Luke's account of the transfiguration, which may be viewed as an anticipation of the parousia, Elijah and Moses are described as "appearing in glory" (ὁφθέντες ἐν δόξῃ; 9:31) and speaking with the transfigured Christ. Here it seems obvious that prior to their appearance in glory with Christ these men were in heaven. A closer parallel is seen in 4 Ezra in 7:28 where we read regarding the end-time coming of the Messiah: "For my son the Messiah will be revealed *with those who are with him*." In this context "those who are with him" refers to certain choice individuals such as Enoch, Elijah (cf. 6:26) and Ezra (according to 14:9) who were taken up without seeing death to live with the Messiah in heaven until the end of the age when they would descend and be revealed with him at his coming (see also 13:52 and 14:9).<sup>50</sup> The parallel between the descriptions of the parousia in Col 3:4 and 4 Ezra 7:28 is in fact quite striking, and we must consider at this point how it is to be accounted for. Is it merely accidental? Or has the writer deliberately made use of the

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<sup>50</sup>J. M. Meyers, *I and II Esdras: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974) 233, 322.

tradition underlying 4 Ezra 7:28 and with which he knew his readers to be familiar? And if so, to what end? In favour of this second alternative is the fact that he has done something quite similar in vv 1b-2 where in furtherance of his polemic he adopts the errorists' own exhortation, "seek the things above, etc;" but in a completely reinterpreted sense. Moreover, it is not difficult to see how such an allusion in v 4 could contribute to the writer's argument. His purpose, we may surmise, would have been to imply that the status of Christians is comparable to that of those privileged saints of old who were taken up to heaven without seeing death to live with the Messiah until the dénouement when they would be revealed with him in glory. To the errorists who aspired to heavenly ascent these OT saints would have represented the ultimate achievement. If then, by implication the writer was placing believers on a par with them, he would be adding another plank to his argument that already Christians enjoy the blessings for which the errorists would have them strive, and indeed far more.

We have seen that v 4 is worded in such a way as to indicate an essential unity of experience between Christ and believer at the parousia. The wording follows the pattern of 2:12,13 which describes the common state of death experienced by Christ and Christians. This mention in v 4 of the co-revelation of Christians with Christ is also comparable to earlier statements regarding their co-death, co-burial and co-resurrection with Christ. In addition, the fact that an apocalyptic tradition existed regarding the co-revelation of certain men with the Messiah at his coming suggests that the writer may have deliberately echoed this tradition with polemical intent. Yet, while the writer uses essentially the same words to describe the revelation of Christ and the revelation of Christians at the parousia - and by this he indicates an essential unity of experience - it is clear that this

experience cannot be exactly the same, since for Christ it will involve a *simple* disclosure of the state in which he already exists in heaven. For Christians, however, the matter is not so simple. As we have seen, vv 1b-2 locate believers on the earth prior to the parousia. By virtue of their union with Christ in his resurrection, they do indeed share in the life of the age to come, which is a heavenly life, but it is only theirs in a preliminary, incomplete form since they must for the present live by faith, seeking to progress in their new existence (cf. 1:28; 3:5-12) as they await the promised glory (ἡ ἐλπὶς τῆς δόξης, 1:27 cf. 1:5).

The key to understanding the sense in which the final dénouement will bring, in the case of believers, an unveiling of what was previously hidden is found with the identification in v 4 of Christ as their life, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν.<sup>51</sup> This identification must be understood on the same principle that allows the writer to speak of Christians as having died and risen with Christ. It is the principle of corporate representation and solidarity, which we have developed elsewhere. The description of Christ in 1:18 as the beginning, the firstborn from the dead means that in the history of salvation Christ was the first to pass from the old era of fallenness, sin and death to the sphere of the new creation and the life of the age to come, and as such he has become the founder of the new human race as a second Adam, its corporate head and

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<sup>51</sup>Some manuscripts read ἡ ζωὴ ἡμῶν (B, D<sup>c</sup>, H, Ξ), and this is preferred by the majority of modern commentators (Lightfoot, 210; Abbott, 279-280; Lohmeyer, 131; Schweizer, 177; Lohse, 134; O'Brien, 157; also the RSV, NEB and REB). In its favour it is argued that this is the more difficult reading since the scribal tendency would be to substitute ὑμῶν to agree with the preceding and following second person pronouns (cf. Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 624). On the other hand, the second person reading is better attested (ϕ<sup>46</sup>; K, C, D\*, 33, 81, 88, 1739), and the switch to the first person could be explained on the basis of "the universalizing instinct of a scribe who did not want it to appear that Christ was 'the life' solely of the Colossian Christians" (Harris, 140). Those who accept this reading include the TEV, NRSV, JB, NIV; Dibelius-Greeven, 40; Harris, 140; Pokorný, 162; UBS 3rd ed. and Nestle-Aland 26th ed.



representative. This new human race is made up of all who through faith-baptism have been incorporated into the founding event of the new creation, Christ's resurrection from the dead, and thus they share his resurrection life. What is hidden in heaven (3:3) then is Christ: he is the one human in whom the process of salvation has run its full course. But because he stands at the head of the race as its founder and corporate representative, and because of the church's union and solidarity with him, he embodies and represents their resurrection life. It is on this basis and in this sense that the manifestation of Christians with Christ in glory at his coming will be an unveiling of a previously existing reality: since their baptism-conversion, what was true of Christ in his glorious resurrection existence had been true of them by virtue of their relationship of solidarity with Christ their representative head.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, since Christians are not viewed in vv 1-3 as having been personally and spatially in heaven prior to the parousia, but on earth and in a state of incompleteness as far as the resurrection existence is concerned, the event of v 4 in which they will be made manifest with Christ in glory must, in another sense, mean that they will become what they were not previously. What then is the nature of this event which is at the same time a transformation to something new and the unveiling of a previously hidden state? The most simple and reasonable answer is that at the time of his coming Christians will be made like Christ in his full bodily resurrection existence: what had previously been true of Christ - and of Christians by virtue of their union with him - will become true in the full reality of each

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<sup>52</sup>Grasser, on the other hand, understands the notion of the hiddenness of the life of Christians in heaven and their unveiling at the parousia on the basis of Hellenistic mythology: the "life" of believers, hidden in heaven, is their true life and essential existence, while on earth there lives only each person's "double" which is but a shadow of the true self. The end-time fulfillment foreseen in v 4b will be the reunification of the soul with its heavenly counterpart (162, 166; cf. Lohmeyer, 134).

individual's personal bodily existence.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the manifestation of believers with Christ described in v 4 will not be a *simple* disclosure but a dynamic one in which the resurrection existence possessed by Christians in preliminary form and hiddenness will be brought to its final and definitive stage and displayed openly. This perspective on the resurrection of the body as a dynamic disclosure is not unique to Colossians but appears also in Romans where Paul refers to the anxiously awaited "redemption of our bodies" (8:23) as "the revelation of the sons of God" (v 19).

The emphasis in Col 3:4 clearly lies with the *continuity* between the present state of Christians and what they will be at the parousia. Yet, that which will be new at the parousia, expressed in the phrase ἐν δόξῃ, must not be overlooked. It is with this expression that the writer comes closest to traditional Jewish and early Christian descriptions of the end-time transformation to the resurrection state of existence. Perhaps the most consistent element in the accounts of the resurrected saints in apocalyptic literature is their *glory* or shining brilliance. This first appears in Dan 12:3, where the resurrected righteous are described as those who "will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven . . . like the stars forever and ever." According to *2 Apoc. Bar.* 51:10,11, "the righteous will be changed . . . from light to the splendour of glory." In 4 Ezra 7:97 it is said their faces will "shine like the sun," and according to *2 Enoch* 66:7 [J] they will "shine seven times brighter than the sun" (cf. Matt 13:43). Other texts refer to the transformed body as a "garment of glory" (*1 Enoch* 62:15; cf. 1QS 4:8; *2 Enoch* 22:8-10). Turning to the NT, Paul declares in 1 Cor 15:42,

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<sup>53</sup>Thus e.g. E. F. Scott, 64; Martin, *Colossians*, 102; Lincoln, *Paradise*, 129; O'Brien, 167; Levison, 101-102; apparently also Lona, 183. Against G. Bornkamm, "Die Hoffnung im Kolosserbrief," in *Geschichte und Glaube* (München: Kaiser, 1971) 211; cf. also Grasser, 162, 166.

43 that the body will be raised in glory (έν δόξη), power (δυναμίει) and incorruptibility (άφθαρσία).<sup>54</sup> The description is similar in Phil 3:21. At his coming Christ will transform the lowly bodies of believers so that they will be like his glorious body σύμμορφον τῷ σώματι τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ. Hence, Christ's glorious resurrection body with which he is now clothed in heaven (cf. v 20) will be the model according to which the believer's body will be transformed. In the light of these parallels it seems most reasonable to conclude that in Col 3:4 the characterization of the believer's appearance with Christ as one of glory (έν δόξη) also has reference to the resurrection body.<sup>55</sup> By analogy the statement in 1 Tim 3:16 ὅς ἐφανερώθη έν σαρκί, does not mean that Christ existed in a fleshly state before his appearance in the world. The bodily form έν σαρκί was a new element. In the same way the believer's bodily state έν δόξη will be a new element at the parousia. Therefore, while future bodily transformation is not explicit in Col 3:4, as it is in Phil 3:21 and 1 Cor 15:42, it is reasonable to believe that this is the event foreseen in Col 3:4 with the words φανερωθήσεσθε έν δόξη.

We conclude that resurrection with Christ in baptism does not exclude a future redemption of the body. The Colossian epistle holds resurrection with Christ in the familiar Pauline "already - not yet" tension. In baptism believers participate in the resurrection of Christ in that they enter into the new eschatological humanity which was inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Christ, its founder and head. By union with him they share his resurrection life which is also the life of the age to come, though it is now with Christ hidden in heaven. At his coming that hidden resurrection life

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<sup>54</sup>Cf. Lona, 183.

<sup>55</sup>See above note 53.

will become manifest as they are transformed into the same glorious bodily state of existence presently possessed by the risen Christ.

#### **IV. SUMMARY**

1. The worldview of Jewish apocalyptic literature provides the key to understanding the interplay of spatial and temporal concepts found in vv 1,2 with the imperative to seek and concentrate on the things above based on the indicative of a past resurrection with Christ. This perspective identifies the present age of fallenness and sin with the world below, while the age to come remains in heaven awaiting the dénouement of history. The eschatological event of the resurrection of believers with Christ means they already belong spiritually to the age to come now in heaven, while they remain spatially on the earth awaiting the fullness of the resurrection existence at the parousia (v 4).

2. With his exhortation to seek and concentrate on the things above the writer makes use of the language of the errorists themselves but does so in a corrected and redefined sense. It means the actualization in daily life of their death and resurrection with Christ (vv 5-17) - looking to him as they await the consummation of this life at the parousia.

3. The added explanation of why Christians must seek the things above - i.e. because their life is hidden with Christ in heaven (v 3) - reveals the nature of the believer's present relationship to the resurrection state of existence. Christ himself, as the first to rise and head of the new humanity, is the fountain and bearer of this new eschatological life, and the Christian's experience of this life on earth is but an extension of Christ's own resurrection life which he possesses in its fullness in heaven.

4. When Christ is revealed from heaven at his coming this period of heavenward seeking will be at an end. The resurrection life which Christians had known only in preliminary form and hiddenness will become theirs in its fullness as they are transformed to be like Christ in his present glorious bodily state of existence.

**CHAPTER NINE**  
**PARAENESIS BASED ON**  
**DEATH AND RESURRECTION WITH CHRIST**  
**COLOSSIANS 3:5-11**

The commandment of 3:1b,2a to seek and concentrate on the things above, which was the central focus of vv 1-4, becomes specific in the paraenesis of the next three paragraphs (3:5-4:1). While this section makes no formal mention of dying and rising with Christ, it must be understood that just as the imperative to seek the things above is based on the indicative of the Colossians' death and resurrection with Christ, so it is with the delineation of this imperative in the specific injunctions of 3:5-4:1. The commandments of this section, then, encompass the living out in daily experience of the reality of union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Rather than make a detailed examination of the entire section - which would take us at times quite far from our subject of dying and rising with Christ - we will focus on the admonitions of vv 5-9a since this material is most closely tied to our subject, and upon vv 9b-11 because this section contains in the language of putting off the old person and putting on the new a return to the subject of dying and rising with Christ.

## I. Abandon the Sins of the Past (vv 5-9a)

### A. Put to Death Your Earthly Members (v 5a)

The opening injunction summarizes the writer's perspective on the Colossians' former way of life, νεκρώσατε οὖν τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς - "put to death therefore what is earthly in you" (RSV). The wording here recalls vv 2b,3a: "Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth [τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς]. For you have died [ἀπεθάνετε] . . . ." In this context, "the earth" refers to the realm of fallenness, sin and death, the present evil age. By virtue of their union with Christ in his death Christians no longer belong to this sphere, and hence the command not to fix their minds on "the things" of this sphere. Verse 5 then takes up again this negative admonition and gives it a more specific content: having thus died and been transferred out of the sphere of the earthly (τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς), Christians must put to death "what is earthly" (τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) in themselves. The attempt to interpret this injunction, however, runs into the immediate problem of how these two "deaths" relate to each other, for if one is already *dead* what logically speaking can there remain to put to death? Translators on occasion have sought to soften the tension between these two "deaths" by offering alternative readings for νεκρώσατε such as "treat as dead"<sup>1</sup> or "consider yourselves dead"<sup>2</sup> or "let your old self remain dead."<sup>3</sup> Such translations, however, fail to do justice to this text since νεκρώω carries the causative sense, "to make dead," "put to death," "kill."<sup>4</sup> Rather, this tension between the baptismal death of believers and their need yet to put

<sup>1</sup>Bruce, *Colossians* 139.

<sup>2</sup>J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*, similarly the NASB.

<sup>3</sup>Martin, *Colossians* 102.

<sup>4</sup>Thus, R. Bultmann, "νεκρώω, κτλ.," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 894; Liddell-Scott-Jones, 1166.

to death must be understood on the basis of the tension between the already of the salvation believers have entered upon in baptism, when they were united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and the not yet of the consummation when they will be revealed with him in glory (v 4).

Though we have used the somewhat paraphrastic rendering of the RSV for the words τὰ μέλη τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, the translation, "your members which are upon the earth," is more reflective of the actual Greek wording.<sup>5</sup> The term μέλη, translated "members" here typically refers to the parts or members of the human body (e.g. limbs, tongue, head, etc.).<sup>6</sup> Hence, the command, "put to death, therefore, your members which are upon the earth"<sup>7</sup> sounds like a demand for asceticism. In order to appreciate the irony of such a statement it must be remembered that it appears within the context of a polemic against a false teaching which advocated ascetic practices (cf. "severe treatment of the body," 2:23) as a means of achieving heavenly visions. It would appear then that this is yet another instance of the writer's strategy of outclassing his opponents on their own ground by using their own words but in a redefined sense to prescribe the true path to spiritual progress.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>See Harris, 145, 146.

<sup>6</sup>See J. Horst, "μέλος," *TDNT* 4 (1967) 555-568.

<sup>7</sup>N. Turner (*Insights* 105) wishes to read τὰ μέλη as a nominative used as a vocative with the sense, "put to death, you members [of the body of Christ] the things which are on the earth, immorality, etc." This interpretation is possible grammatically but could only be convincing had the writer included some additional phrase to indicate that what is intended is the members of the church (see especially Harris, 145). As the text stands τὰ μέλη must be understood as the accusative object of the νεκρώσατε, as we have it above.

<sup>8</sup>Lincoln, *Paradise*, 130; Houlden, 202; cf. Chadwick, "All Things to All Men," 272. Another clear instance of this stratagem is seen with the command to "seek the things above, etc." in 3:1b, 2a. See our earlier discussion in chapter eight, 248-249.



His redefinition of putting to death the earthly members is seen in the list of five vices following γῆς ; all are in the accusative case and stand in apposition to τὰ μέλη.<sup>9</sup> There is some question, however, as to the sense intended: What is the connection between the vices and the earthly members? and more to the point - Are these members to be understood in a literal or a figurative sense?

O'Brien is representative of those who claim that the literal, physical bodily members are designated.<sup>10</sup> According to this view the juxtaposition of bodily members with the sins of v 5b is to be understood on the basis of the close association in Jewish thought between sin and the members by which sin is accomplished (cf. 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 49:3; Rom 6:19; 8:13). What the writer commands, then, is not asceticism but the putting to death of the sinful *use* of the body. On this reading the injunction of v 5 is seen as the same kind of appeal to the will found in Rom 6:13 where Paul exhorts believers on the basis of their having died with Christ not to yield their "members to sin as instruments of wickedness."<sup>11</sup> Levison takes this interpretation a step further by arguing that this process of "putting to death the earthly members" must be understood in terms of the eschatological transformation of the body - from earthly bodies which have been instruments of sin to bodies of glory purified of sin.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation is

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<sup>9</sup>O'Brien, 174; Harris, 146.

<sup>10</sup>*Colossians* 177, 178.

<sup>11</sup>This view in its chief features is also supported by Martin, *Colossians* 103; Williams, 125; Merk, *Handeln aus Glauben*, 204; Harris, 146; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians* 115; cf. Horst, *TDNT* 4. 565.

<sup>12</sup>"Apocalyptic Dimension of Colossians 3:1-6," 107. In this regard Levison quotes Baruch's inquiry in 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 49:2,3 regarding the bodily nature of the resurrection: "In what shape will the living live in your day? Or how will be their splendor which will remain after that? Will they, perhaps, take again this present form, and will they put on chained members which are an evil and by which evils are accomplished? Or will you perhaps change these things which have been in the world, as also the world itself?"

attractive both in the light of the allusion to the resurrection body in the preceding verse (φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ) and the concept seen in v 10 of a progressive eschatological transformation at least on the moral level (τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν). But in the final analysis the conclusion that τὰ μέλη in v 5 refers to physical bodily members cannot be sustained. If it is the *members* which are to be put to death, as the text states, and these members are identified with the list of five vices, then the usage is surely figurative.<sup>13</sup>

The writer redefines the errorists' call to asceticism by redefining bodily members as vices.<sup>14</sup> For the errorists asceticism was a means of purifying oneself of sin in order to qualify for entrance to heaven. But, on the writer's view, though this had the appearance of virtue, in reality these practices led only to a different form of vice ("to the fulfillment of the flesh," 2:23) and worldly-mindedness (3:1,2). True heavenly existence is not attained by mortifying one's body, but by sharing in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. The result is not yet perfection, for there remains within believers a remnant of their earthly sinful past. It is these "earthly members," the vices of their past, which must be ruthlessly put to death, so

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<sup>13</sup>Thus Lohse, 137; Tannehill, 50,51; Ernst, 223; Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 205; Wright, *Colossians*, 134; BAGD, 501.

<sup>14</sup>There is no parallel to this unusual image in the NT, and some scholars following R. Reitzenstein trace this usage to Iranian dualism in which a person's members are his good or bad deeds enumerated in schemas of fives. Out of these are fashioned his heavenly self, and this in turn determines his earthly fate. See *Hellenistic Mystery Religions*, trans. J. E. Stealy (Pittsburg: Pickwick, 1978) 338-351, also Dibelius-Greeven, 41; Lohse, 137; and Gnifka, 179-180. The unlikelihood of any such connection, however, is seen first of all from the fact that the documents used by Reitzenstein are centuries later than Colossians, and secondly, such ideas are quite foreign to the thought of Col 3:1-5. On the other hand, Philo approaches the imagery of v 5 when he says in *Fug.* 110,112 that the mind of the wise man is clothed with virtues as the body is the clothing of the soul. And regarding the pattern of *lives* seen in the vice list of Col 3:5, 8 and the virtue list of v 12, it is worthy of observation that in his discussion of proselyte conversion in *Virt.* 180, Philo lists five vices with their corresponding virtues, though like Paul, he can use other numbers in such lists (cf. 182).

that the reality of their true existence might be more and more appropriated and actualized.

### B. The Sinful Lifestyle of the Past (vv 5b-7)

The catalogue of vices focuses on sexual sins and covetousness. Πορνεία, "immorality," denotes every kind of illegitimate sexual intercourse.<sup>15</sup> An entire chapter of the Mosaic legislation (Lev 18) is devoted to the enumeration of these prohibited practices. As in the OT era (cf. Lev 18:24) so in the era of the NT, pagan society was very tolerant of sexual immorality,<sup>16</sup> and hence, new converts from paganism required special exhortation and warning in this area.<sup>17</sup> Sexual sin, Paul writes, is especially pernicious because the immoral person uniquely sins against his or her own body; thus he warns, "Flee immorality," (1 Cor 6:18).<sup>18</sup> The term ἀκαθαρσία, "impurity," frequently appears with πορνεία (e.g. Gal 5:19; 2 Cor 12:21; Eph 5:3) in the sense of sexually immoral conduct. Thus, it is not used here to refer to an additional kind of conduct but to underscore the admonition against πορνεία.<sup>19</sup> In a similar way πάθος in this context refers to *passion* of a sexual nature and is perhaps best rendered "lust" as in the NEB, NIV and REB. The fourth vice to be put to death, ἐπιθυμία κακή, "evil desire," probably has a wider reference than illegitimate sexual desire

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<sup>15</sup>BAGD, 693.

<sup>16</sup>See F. Hauck and S. Schulz, "πορνεία, κτλ.," *TDNT* 6 (1968) 582-584.

<sup>17</sup>This special emphasis may be seen in the fact that πορνεία stands at the head of the vice list not only in Col 3:5 but also in 1 Cor 5:10,11; 6:9; Gal 5:19 and Eph 5:3, cf. also 1 Thess 4:3. In this regard it may be noted that in *T. Reub* the first of the seven evil spirits established against the human race is πορνεία (3:3; cf. 2:1; 5:3).

<sup>18</sup>Cf. *T. Reub.* 5:5. According to *T. Sim.* 5:3 πορνεία "is the mother of all wicked deeds; it separates from God and leads to Beliar."

<sup>19</sup>Lohse, 138; O'Brien, 182.

in the light of the following vice "greed."<sup>20</sup> This admonition calls to mind the tenth commandment, οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις (LXX Exod 20:17, "you shall not covet"). This sin is fundamental in nature since it concerns not primarily concrete actions but the thoughts and feelings from which actions arise (cf. Rom 7:7,8).<sup>21</sup> The death of such activities of the mind comes by fixing the mind on the things above (vv 1b, 2a). The final vice to be killed, πλεονεξία, is set off from the other four by καὶ τήν and followed by a relative clause ἥτις ἐστὶν εἰδωλολατρία. Πλεονεξία is "a desire to have more" (πλέον ἔχειν) and therefore may be rendered "covetousness," "greediness," "avarice."<sup>22</sup> Since πλεονεξία is a synonym of ἐπιθυμία it would appear that the words καὶ τήν serve to identify this fifth vice as a special or concrete application of the fourth: even that covetousness "which is nothing less than idolatry" (REB).<sup>23</sup>

By setting forth his redefined "asceticism" in v 5 - i.e. the putting to death of the sins of the past - the writer reaffirms key aspects of OT-Jewish morality. Sexual immorality, covetousness and idolatry are all prohibited by the Mosaic code. This leads to the question of the relationship of the moral injunctions of Colossians, which are based on dying and rising with Christ, to the moral demands of the Mosaic Law. In chapter seven we examined the claim in 2:20 that Christians have died with Christ to the stoicheia of the world. This means they have been freed from all those rites, rules and regulations - including those of the Mosaic code - which make up religions

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<sup>20</sup> *Psco*, Harris, 146.

<sup>21</sup> According to *Apoc. Mos* 19:3 it was covetousness which led to the original act of disobedience in the garden of Eden, "For covetousness is the origin of every sin."

<sup>22</sup> BAGD, 667; Harris, 146.

<sup>23</sup> On this reading the καὶ is ascensive. For this use of the article see Zerwick, par. 176. Cf. also Harris, 147. For the identification of covetousness with idolatry in contemporary Jewish thought see *T. Jud.* 19:1 and Philo *Spec. Leg.* 1.24-26.

outside of Christ. But if this is the case, the question must be asked how it is the writer can apparently reintroduce elements of the Mosaic Law in 3:5? Is he being inconsistent? Or does this mean that his actual intent in 2:20 is to say Christians have been freed from the *ceremonial* elements of the law, i.e. those with which the false teachers were primarily concerned (cf. 2:21, "do not handle, do not taste, do not touch") - while the moral elements remain binding? If we understand correctly the writer's line of argument in 2:20, the sphere of the law's jurisdiction is the *world* or the present evil age; by virtue of their death with Christ Christians have been transferred out of this realm and thus cannot by the nature of the case be subject any longer to the law's requirements. Hence, it must be the law *in its entirety*, and indeed "all earthly" religious rules from which believers have been released. Turning now to the moral injunctions of 3:5, we see that just as deliverance from the world through dying with Christ in 2:20 provided the basis for the freedom of believers from obligation to the law, so in 3:5 this same death and transference out of this world becomes the basis for their obligation to keep these moral injunctions. Therefore in 3:5 the writer is neither being inconsistent nor is he merely issuing an abridged edition of the Mosaic code. Union with Christ in his death and resurrection has resulted in a totally new basis for ethical behaviour. It is the eschatological life of the new creation and the heavenly realm being appropriated and expressed in the midst of a not yet fully redeemed existence on earth.<sup>24</sup> The fact that there is some overlap in the moral precepts of the Mosaic code and the code of the new creation should be no more surprising than the fact that there is overlap

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<sup>24</sup>Halter, *Taufe und Ethos* 214.

between the laws of different countries on matters such as murder and theft.<sup>25</sup>

The admonition to kill earthly vices is underscored in v 6 by a reference to future judgment: because of these things the eschatological wrath of God is coming upon those who practice them.<sup>26</sup> Such notices of God's displeasure and coming judgment commonly accompany NT catalogues of vices (cf. Rom 1:18,32; 1 Cor 6:9,10; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5,6; Rev 21:8). In the context of Col 3:6, this notice of God's coming wrath serves not only to remind the readers of what would have happened to them had they not embraced the message of Christ (cf. 1:4-8; 2:6,7),<sup>27</sup> but also emphasizes the urgency and necessity of putting to death what remains of their old Gentile way of life.

Formerly, when they lived among these unbelieving Gentiles, their lives too were characterized by these evil vices (ἐν οἷς καὶ ὑμεῖς περιπατήσατέ ποτε ὅτε ἐζήτε ἐν τούτοις). In v 7 the writer once again reminds the Colossians of their sinful past in order to bring the present more sharply into focus. The first time he does this is in connection with the declaration in 1:20 regarding the reconciliation of the fallen creation through the death of Christ: they too (καὶ ὑμᾶς, v 21) had been formerly (ποτε) alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds but now (νυνὶ δέ, v 22) they have been reconciled to God. The second mention appears in 2:13 where he reminds them that in their pagan past they were dead - a death as

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<sup>25</sup>Cf. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*, 199-201.

<sup>26</sup>The words ἐν τοῖς υἱοῖς τῆς ἀπειθείας - though present in the great majority of manuscripts - are absent from  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$  and B, and many exegetes believe they are a gloss from Ephesians 5:6. However, the words καὶ ὑμεῖς in v 7 virtually assume a previous mention of sinful Gentiles, and this would seem to certify the genuineness of the phrase in question. See further Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 625.

<sup>27</sup>O'Brien, 184.

real as Christ's state of physical death before God raised him - though theirs was a spiritual state of death due to their sins and their morally corrupt hearts, but God has since forgiven their sins and made them alive with Christ. In each of these cases the writer identifies his readers' condition with a condition stated in the preceding verse and then enlarges on the nature of this state of theirs in order, first, to remind them of whence they came and, second, to introduce an explanation of their present state of salvation which contrasts sharply with that previous state.<sup>28</sup> We see the same essential pattern in 3:7,8 except in the description of the present state an imperative appears in place of the indicative: the Colossians' previous state (ΠΟΤΕ) was the same as those unbelieving Gentiles (καὶ ὑμεῖς) and their lives were characterized by the vices of v 5, but now (νυνὶ δέ, v 8) they must lay aside (ἀπόθεσθε) all such vices. Thus, the reference to the past serves to introduce and provide a point of departure for admonition in the present. We may further observe that this "once-now" schema serves to join together the two vice lists of this passage, vv 5,8, and with them the two notions of "putting to death" and "putting off." In v 7 ΤΟΥΤΟΙΣ refers to the five vices of v 5, while that which the Colossians must now put off, indicated by the words τὰ πάντα in v 8, includes the sins of v 5 but also looks ahead to the sins listed in v 8.<sup>29</sup> The upshot of this is that both lists describe the same old way of life and the two imperatives νεκρώσατε and ἀπόθεσθε, operating as they do in tandem, may be seen not so much as separate actions but as two metaphors which have for the writer the same significance.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Cf. P. Tachau, *"Einst" und "Jetzt" im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972) 86, 87.

<sup>29</sup>O'Brien, 186.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Tannehill, 52.

### C. Put Off the Deeds of the Old Person (vv 8-9a)

The injunction of v 8 to lay aside vices functions in connection with the two participial clauses of vv 9b,10a regarding the stripping off of the old person with his deeds and the putting on of the new person. Therefore to get a proper assessment of the imperative we must anticipate two conclusions from our study of vv 9b,10a in the following section. First, we understand the two participles ἀπεκδυσάμενοι and ἐνδυσάμενοι to be causal, referring to the salvation event of baptism, and giving the *basis* for the imperative to put off: "since you stripped off the old person with his deeds and put on the new . . . ." Secondly, we will argue that the stripping off of the old person and the putting on of the new is but another way of speaking about having died (cf. Rom 6:6, "our old person was crucified with him") and risen with Christ. Hence, just as the imperative to put to death the vices of the old earthly life in v 5 is based on the indicative of having died with Christ in v 3, so again in v 8 we see an imperative based on the indicative of past union with Christ in his death: the Colossians must put off the vices of the old existence because in baptism-conversion they put off (by dying with Christ) the old person with his deeds and put on the new.<sup>31</sup> This means we have the same kind of tension here as in v 5 between the already put off old person and his deeds and the need ever and again to put off these deeds in daily living. And again this tension finds its explanation in the nature of salvation in the present time period between Christ's resurrection and his return: believers have already been transferred out of the "world" and into the new creation by "putting off" the old fallen Adamic existence

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<sup>31</sup>The image of behaviour or character as a garment has a long history; see e.g. Ps 30:12; 35:26; 109:29; Isa 11:5; 61:10; *Ep. Arist.* 122; *T. Levi* 18:4; *Philo Conf.* 31. In the NT this image is used on numerous occasions in moral exhortations: Rom 13:12,14; Eph 4:22, 25; Heb 12:1; Jas 1:21; 1 Pet 2:1.



and putting on the renewed existence of Christ the new Adam: the final consummation, however, is yet future and until then the ethical task remains of putting to death and putting off the vices which remain of that old fallen existence.

The vices to be put off in v 8 are those which are destructive of human relationships, principally anger and the speech which accompanies it. The terms ὀργή and θυμός, "wrath" and "anger," go together and may simply be synonyms as are πορνεία and ἀκαθαρσία in v 5. However, the Stoics distinguished them with the former denoting a more subtle feeling of hostility and the other an outburst of passion.<sup>32</sup> Κακία is a general term signifying "wickedness" with the probable sense in this context of "malice," that is the deliberate intent to do harm<sup>33</sup> which arises out of anger and is expressed in the following two sins of speech. Though the term βλασφημία most often in biblical Greek refers to "evil speech against God," the meaning in this context no doubt concerns other humans; it is the intentional telling of falsehood about another - hence, "slander," "defamation."<sup>34</sup> The fifth vice αἰσχρολογία could denote "obscene speech" (cf. αἰσχρός = "shameful," "base"<sup>35</sup>), but its juxtaposition with βλασφημία points towards the meaning "abusive speech" which is a form of βλασφημία.<sup>36</sup> All such evil speech - slander and injurious abuse - must be "put off" by being stopped before it comes out of the mouth. A third and final sin of speech is taken up in v 9a with the admonition μὴ ψεύδεσθε εἰς ἀλλήλους. The switch from the aorist

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<sup>32</sup>See Lightfoot, 214; also R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 131.

<sup>33</sup>Lightfoot, 214; BAGD, 397; O'Brien, 187.

<sup>34</sup>BAGD, 143; Lohse, 140; O'Brien, 187, 188.

<sup>35</sup>BAGD, 25.

<sup>36</sup>Abbott, 283; BAGD, 25.

to the present imperative is perhaps significant and would appear to place emphasis on the idea implicit in the garment image: as they had habitually lived (cf. the imperfect ἐζήτε, v 7) in and worn as garments the sins of their past, so also lying to their neighbour was with them a way of life, but now they must, with these other sins, put an end to it.<sup>37</sup>

To summarize, we see in vv 5-9a the ethical norm of the new life in Christ. These injunctions to put to death and put off the sins of the past existence in paganism - though they reproduce certain elements of the Mosaic code - belong to a wholly new framework, and are set forth on the basis of a totally new act of salvation. In 3:1-4 this salvation is described in terms of the Colossians' death and resurrection with Christ and their transference thereby from the realm of the earth and the present age to the realm above and the age to come. The Colossians then are not to obey these injunctions because Moses commanded them; neither is the motivation to gain salvation nor, in the first instance, to avoid the coming wrath of God (cf. v 6). The reason they must follow these admonitions is that they have already shared in the death and resurrection of Christ and have entered with him upon the blessings of the future age.<sup>38</sup> Hence, they must live out the reality of this new existence in their daily lives. In the second clause of v 9 the writer returns to this theme of why the Colossians should follow this new ethical norm. The underlying thought remains the same, though it is viewed from a different angle - the angle of the old and new ἄνθρωπος, existence as defined by Adam and Christ.

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<sup>37</sup>Bruce, *Colossians* 146; O'Brien, 188; cf. NEB, "Stop Lying to One Another." On this use of the present prohibition see J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of the New Testament*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (1908): *Prolegomena*, 3rd ed. by J. H. Moulton, 122-126.

<sup>38</sup>Halter, 214.

## II. On Becoming a New Person (vv 9b-11)

### A. The Return to the Indicative

The reason the Colossians must now put off the sins of their pagan past is set forth in the two participial clauses of vv 9b,10a ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον σὺν ταῖς πράξεσιν αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον . . . . While we take the view, as stated earlier, that the two participles here are causal, specifying the basis for the preceding imperative, it must be noted that many scholars understand them in an imperatival sense, continuing the injunction begun with μὴ ψεύδεσθε upon which they are grammatically dependent.<sup>39</sup> There are two principal reasons for rejecting this imperatival reading. The first is grammatical. It has become widely recognized in the twentieth century that the NT contains numerous examples of participles used as imperatives.<sup>40</sup> The debate on this subject has focused on whether this phenomenon is to be accounted for as a genuine Hellenistic development<sup>41</sup> or on the basis of Semitic influence.<sup>42</sup> However, in none of these studies in this debate of which we are aware have the aorist participles of Col 3:9,10 been suggested as a possible instance of this usage. In fact, all of the cases cited are *present* participles with the single exception

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<sup>39</sup>Thus Lightfoot, 214,215; Williams, 129; A. Oepke, "ἀπεκδύω," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 319; Lohmeyer, 135,139; Dibelius-Greeven, 42; Lohse, 141; A. Lindemann, *Der Kolosserbrief* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1983) 55; R. Yates "The Christian Way of Life: the Paraenetic Material of Colossians 3:1-4:6," *EvQ* 63 (1991) 247. Among English versions of the NT which follow this reading see the *TCNT*.

<sup>40</sup>See e.g. Moulton, *Prolegomena* 180-183; Robertson, *Grammar*, 113; BDF, sec. 468.

<sup>41</sup>Thus Moulton, *Prolegomena* 180-183; H. G. Meecham, "The Use of the Participle for the Imperative in the New Testament," *ExpTim* 58 (1946-47) 207, 208; A. P. Salom, "The Imperatival Use of the Participle in the New Testament," *Australian Biblical Review* 11 (1963) 41-49.

<sup>42</sup>Thus D. Daube, "Participle and Imperative in 1 Peter," appended note in E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1947) 467-488; E. Lohse, "Paranese und Kerygma im I Petrusbrief," *ZNW* 45 (1954) 75-76; Zerwick, par.130; Davies, *Paul*, 130,131; Moule, *Idiom Book*, 179,180; cf. Turner, *Grammatical Insights*, 168.

of ἀρξάμενοι in Luke 24:47 which Moulton includes "with great hesitation"<sup>43</sup> and H. G. Meecham and A. P. Salom dismiss as too suspect because of its probable dependence on the preceding verb.<sup>44</sup> The fact, then, that the participles of Col 3:9,10 are aorist would seem to rule out the imperatival reading. The aorist, rather, should be seen as indicating action antecedent to that of the governing present prohibition μὴ ψεύδεσθε, with the sense best understood as causal: "stop lying . . . since you stripped off the old person etc."

The second reason for believing that the two participial clauses give the basis for the previous injunctions concerns the writer's practice of grounding his imperatives on related indicatives regarding the salvation event and doing so in an alternating pattern. In 3:1 the indicative of resurrection with Christ becomes the basis of the imperative to seek the things above. The prohibition of the next verse regarding earthly-mindedness is then based on the fact of the Colossians' death with Christ (v 3), and this in turn becomes the basis for the imperative of v 5 to put to death the earthly members. Given this pattern, the reader is led to expect an indicative in conjunction with the imperatives of vv 8,9a. The following participial clauses display the hallmarks of such an indicative in that (a) they employ the same clothing imagery as found in the imperative of v 8 (cf. the concurrence of imagery in vv 3,5), and (b) the notion of stripping off (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι) the old person recalls the earlier descriptions of the salvation event in 2:15 concerning Christ's death as the stripping off of his body (ἀπεκδυσάμενος)<sup>45</sup> and in 2:11 concerning the death of believers with

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<sup>43</sup> *Prolegomena* 182

<sup>44</sup> Meecham, "Participle," 207; Salom, "Imperative," 46.

<sup>45</sup> See above chapter six, 191-198.

Christ as the stripping off (ἀπεκδύσις) of the body of flesh.<sup>46</sup> To conclude, both grammatical and contextual considerations lead away from the imperatival interpretation of ἀπεκδυσόμενοι and ἐνδυσόμενοι and favour instead the more commonly held view that these are causal adverbial participles which explain why the Colossians must abandon the sinful ways of their past.<sup>47</sup>

### B. The Clothing Image

The critical element in the understanding of the salvation event as it is described here is its portrayal under the image of a change of clothing: in baptism-conversion Christians *stripped off* the old person and *put on* the new. Interpreters generally recognize a connection between this text and Paul's statement in Gal 3:27 that all who "were baptized into Christ have *put on* Christ" (cf. Rom 13:14). This common clothing motif in its association with baptism has led many to conclude that it reflects the early Christian baptismal practice of disrobing before entering the water and putting on a new garment afterwards.<sup>48</sup> The *essential* meaning of the image in our text cannot be in doubt: it bespeaks a radical break with one's sinful past in baptism-conversion and entry upon a new and morally upright existence. However, because clothing is universal, and it was used in many ways in the ancient world in symbol and metaphor, there have been numerous theories

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<sup>46</sup>See above chapter five, especially 134,144.

<sup>47</sup>Thus Peake, 539; Abbott, 283; Houlden, 200; Ernst, 226; Gnilka, 186; O'Brien, 189; Harris, 150,151; Jervell, *Imago*, 236; Merk, *Handeln*, 205; Zeilinger, 151, n.5; Tannehill, 52, n.14; RV Weymouth, Moffatt, RSV, GNB, NEB, NIV, REB, NRSB.

<sup>48</sup>Thus Flemington, *Baptism* 57; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 148; Martin, *Colossians* 106; C. F. D. Moule, "The New Life' in Colossians 3:1-17," *Review and Expositor* 70 (1973) 489; Scroggs and Groff, "Baptism in Mark: Dying and Rising with Christ," 539. Corroborating evidence for this practice as early as the first century, however, is lacking (see above page 127 note 30).

as to the historical background of this image and its precise reference and meaning. One theory traces the usage to the robe of initiation in the mystery religions which symbolized the reception of divine powers (cf. Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.23,24).<sup>49</sup> Some believe the gift of the Spirit is in view here and trace this concept of enclothing to the OT image of being clothed with the Spirit (e.g. Judg 6:34; cf. Luke 24:49).<sup>50</sup> Others account for the metaphor on the basis of the common practice of symbolizing a change of status or dominion by a change of clothing (cf. Zech 3:3-5).<sup>51</sup> P. W. van der Horst finds the background in a saying recorded in *Diogenes Laertius* 9.66 regarding putting off "the man" which meant to free oneself from a previous worldview and to live consistently with a new one.<sup>52</sup> Frequently overlooked in attempts to understand this imagery is the fact that the writer uses the same language of "putting off" in connection with baptism in 2:11-15. The interconnection of these usages is seen first of all in the fact that the verb ἀπεκδύω in 2:15 and 3:9 and its cognate noun ἀπεκδύσις in 2:11 are the only occurrences of this rare double compound in the NT - and indeed in ancient literature independent of Colossians.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, as we have noted repeatedly, the section 2:9-15 is an exposition of salvation which is foundational for the application oriented discussions of 2:16-4:1.<sup>54</sup> It is therefore reasonable to believe that the image of putting off in 3:9 along with the complementary image of putting on in v 10 builds on the earlier

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<sup>49</sup>Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery Religions* e.g. 339.

<sup>50</sup>Dunn, *Baptism*, 110; Ridderbos, *Galatians*, 148, n.9.

<sup>51</sup>Scott, 68; Flemington, *Baptism*, 58; Lohse, 141.

<sup>52</sup>"Observations on a Pauline Expression," *NTS* 19 (1972-73) 181-187; followed by Pokorný, 167, n. 49.

<sup>53</sup>See above chapter five, 126.

<sup>54</sup>See chapter two, 54-55.

usages of 2:11,15. Hence, it is to these earlier usages that we should look to discover the key to the interpretation of 3:9b-10a.

In our investigation of 2:15 we concluded that the participle ἀπεκδυσάμενος is best understood as a description of Christ's death in which he "stripped himself of his physical body" (NEB margin).<sup>55</sup> The image of the body as a garment which is put off in death or put on in resurrection is common in Jewish and Christian writings of the NT era (e.g. 2 Cor 5:3,4; 1 Cor 15:53,54).<sup>56</sup> The same image appears four verses earlier in v 11 with the phrase "the stripping off [ἀπεκδύσει] of the body of flesh." These words describe in language appropriate to the physical death of Christ (cf. 1:22; 2:15), the spiritual death of the believer with Christ.<sup>57</sup> This same pattern of thought is observed in Paul's declaration in Gal 2:19, "I have been crucified with Christ:" he describes his spiritual death with Christ employing the language of Christ's physical death. Moreover, it is entirely likely that this picture of death as the stripping off of the body reflects a dramatized theology of baptism in which the act of disrobing prior to entering the water symbolized death - just as immersion itself symbolized burial with Christ (cf. 2:12).<sup>58</sup> We would argue then that the image of putting off in 3:9 should be understood along the lines of these earlier uses of the same language in 2:11-15: to have put off the old person means the old person has died. Additional evidence for this interpretation is found in the related baptismal statement of Rom 6:6 where the old person is described as having been

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<sup>55</sup>See chapter six, 191-198.

<sup>56</sup>See above 127, n. 28.

<sup>57</sup>For our arguments in support of this interpretation see above, 128-134

<sup>58</sup>See above 127-128, following Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 155; see further Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*, 370.

*crucified* with Christ.<sup>59</sup> By extending the metaphor we may reasonably assume that the corresponding metaphor of putting on in 3:10a refers to resurrection.<sup>60</sup> If then, the twin images of putting off and putting on bespeak death and resurrection, it follows that the putting off of the old person and the putting on of the new should be seen as an *interpretative* description of dying and rising with Christ.<sup>61</sup>

### C. The Old and the New Person

The next issue to be settled is that of the identity of the old and the new person (ἄνθρωπος). We begin with the observation that the description of the new ἄνθρωπος as "being renewed . . . after the image of his creator" displays an unmistakable allusion to Gen 1:26,27 where the first parents of the human race (LXX, ἄνθρωπος) are said to have been created in the image and likeness of God. This echo from the biblical account of the original creation indicates that our text is to be understood within the broader religious framework of the OT-Jewish concept of new creation. As we saw in chapter four, the Colossian hymn (1:15-20) is built around this notion.<sup>62</sup> The essential idea here is that the salvation of the end-time will bring a reversal of the fall and the restoration of what God intended for humanity and for the world from the beginning. Within this framework the terms "old" and "new" designate not simply the pre- and post-conversion state of existence, rather

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<sup>59</sup>See e.g. Zeilinger, 152.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. 4 Ezra 2:45 where the resurrected on Mount Zion are described as those who have put off mortal clothing and put on immortal.

<sup>61</sup>Those who view dying and rising with Christ and putting off the old person and putting on the new as descriptive of the same reality (but do not necessarily accept our interpretation of the clothing image itself) include Tannehill, 52,54; Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 149; Dunn, *Baptism*, 158; Zeilinger, 152; Halter, 216; Kim, *Origin of Paul's Gospel*, 326.

<sup>62</sup>See especially 86-88.



"old" has reference to that which belongs to the old fallen creation, the present evil age, the realm of sin, death and "the world" (cf. 2:20;3:2). Similarly "new" refers to that which is eschatologically new - the new creation and the age to come which dawned with the resurrection of Christ. Furthermore, ἄνθρωπος in this context recalls Adam, and the old and new ἄνθρωπος are to be understood on the basis of the Adam-Christ typology developed in 1:15-20 (cf. Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:21,22,45-49).<sup>63</sup> The precise sense in which these expressions are related to Adam and Christ, however, is disputed. Since in Gal 3:27 and Rom 13:14 Christ is the object of the act of "putting on" (ἐνδύω), it could be argued that the new ἄνθρωπος which is put on in Col 3:10 is likewise to be identified as Christ.<sup>64</sup> This interpretation, however, runs aground on the description in v 10b of the new ἄνθρωπος as "being renewed (τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον) in knowledge after the image of its creator," since it cannot be said that Christ is being renewed or requires renewal.<sup>65</sup> Rather, this progressive renewal must mean the reference is to those who are the recipients of God's reconciling work in Christ, though opinions vary as to whether the expressions "old" and "new" ἄνθρωπος in this context designate the individual as such,<sup>66</sup> or corporate humanity in

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<sup>63</sup>See especially 86-88 and 104-109.

<sup>64</sup>Jervell, *Imago*, 246-248, for example, supports this view identifying the "new person" with Christ as Spirit indwelling the believer; cf. Ignatius *Eph.* 20.1.

<sup>65</sup>Merk, *Handeln*, 206; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 197; Halter, 216; Harris, 152.

<sup>66</sup>This is the view of the majority of interpreters e.g. Lightfoot, 215; Abbott, 136,284; Peake, 539; Williams, 129,130; E. F. Scott, 68,69; Ernst, 226; Schweizer, *Colossians* 197; Lohse, 142; Bruce, *Colossians* 147, n.83; Merk, *Handeln*, 208; Zeilinger, 174; Halter, 215,216; Best, *One Body*, 68; R. Schnackenburg, "The 'New Man' According to Paul" in *Present and Future: Modern Aspects of New Testament Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966) 81-100, especially 85,93). The following versions employ the expressions "the old self" and "the new:" Weymouth, GNB, JB, NIV, NRSV; Those which prefer "the old" and the "the new nature" include the Moffat, RSV, NEB, REB.

Adam versus in Christ,<sup>67</sup> or whether there is in fact a two fold reference - individual and corporate.<sup>68</sup>

For a more specific determination of the identity of the old and new person we return to our earlier conclusion that the putting off of the old person and the putting on of the new is an interpretative reference to the description of dying and rising with Christ in 2:11 as the putting off of the body of flesh, and by extension the putting on of the new person is interpretative of resurrection with Christ. There is obviously a close connection here between the old person and the body of flesh since both are put off, though this does not necessarily mean they are equivalent expressions.<sup>69</sup> As we have previously argued, the body of flesh in 2:11 refers to the physical body, and the stripping off of the body of flesh describes the physical death of Christ in which Christians have been made to participate on a spiritual level. In the same way, v 12 speaks of Christ's burial and resurrection in which Christians also have shared spiritually in baptism. Thus we may say that what Christ experienced comprehensively - i.e. physically and spiritually - in his death and resurrection, Christians have experienced on a spiritual level in baptism, and this spiritual reality is characterized in 3:9,10 as putting off the old person and putting on the new. A proper understanding of the old and new person then must proceed from an understanding of Christ's death and resurrection: what it meant for him,

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<sup>67</sup>Thus Shedd, *Man in Community*, 155,156; Martin, *Colossians* 107; C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians*, 119,120; Wright, *Colossians*, 138; S. Hanson, *The Unity of the Church in the New Testament* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1946) 145; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 224,225; Dahl, "Christ, Creation and Church," 436. Those who understand this corporate reference in relation to the Gnostic Redeemer myth include Bousset, *Kyrios* 158,179; Kasemann, *Leib*, 147,148 and Tannehill, 24,25,27,50,51.

<sup>68</sup>Thus C. K. Barrett, *From First Adam to Last, A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1962) 99; O'Brien, 189,191; Harris, 151; Gniska, 189.

<sup>69</sup>As assumed, for example, by Kasemann in *Leib*, 140; cf. Tannehill, 24.

and how participation in these events brings salvation to Christians. To review, in his earthly life Christ identified himself with the fallen race of Adam, whereby he was clothed with the likeness of the flesh of sin (cf. Rom 8:3) and experienced the dominion of the present evil age and its powers. On the cross he made the indictment against sinful humanity his own and died their death. This death, which the writer to the Colossians characterizes as the stripping off of the body of flesh, meant Christ's own deliverance from the fallen Adamic existence he had assumed. Thus it may be said that in his death *Christ stripped off the old person* which he was, because death for him meant the laying aside, the termination, of his identity as a representative of Adam's race. Similarly his resurrection meant *the putting on of the new person*, since, when he put on the glorified body of the new creation, restored to the image and glory Adam knew before the fall, he assumed a new identity as the firstborn from the dead, the Adam of the end-time, the first ancestor and founder of the new redeemed human race. In these events Christ acted as the corporate representative of his people so that his deliverance from the old Adamic existence and his transference to the new order via death and resurrection might be the prototype of those who would follow. Hence, for the Christian to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection means to participate in this same "change of identity" from old person to new person. In this regard the old person is the individual in his or her pre-conversion state, as a member of the fallen race of Adam and belonging to the old era of sin and death; the new person is the Christian incorporated into the redeemed race of Christ, the new Adam and belonging to the new age of righteousness and life. To put off the one and to put on the other means the convert, as the old person, dies and, as the new

person, rises, so that he or she is no longer identified with the old order but with the new.

Hence, the return to the indicative of vv 9b-10a is a return to the subject of dying and rising with Christ. In other words, just as dying with Christ (and by extension rising) in v 3 constituted the basis for the imperative of v 5 to put to death the earthly vices, so now the parallel imperatives of vv 8,9a to put off the sins of the past, have their basis in the same salvation event - the believer's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. There is, however, a distinct difference in perspective between these two formulations of the indicative. In vv 1-4 the principal notion is that of transference. Through death and resurrection with Christ Christians have been transferred "spatially" - from the earthly realm to the heavenly - and temporally - from the present evil age to the age to come. The imperative of v 5 builds on the spatial element: they must put to death what remains in them of the earthly realm. By contrast the principal notion in the formulation of the indicative in 9b-10a is that of new being. Each believer has ceased to be the old sinful person in Adam he or she used to be and become through the ontological process of a spiritual death and resurrection a new person. The lifestyle of the old person was sin, but since the old person has died that lifestyle must also necessarily die - anything else would be a contradiction and indeed a repudiation of one's whole being.<sup>70</sup> In this way the writer argues from every angle that the salvation event proclaimed in the gospel must lead away from sin to a life of Christian virtue. This is the essential theme of the epistle.

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<sup>70</sup>Cf. Halter, 216.

#### D. Renewal after the Image of God (v 10b)

The person who came into being or was "put on" in baptism-conversion is now "being renewed (τὸν ἀνακαλούμενον) unto knowledge according to the image of his creator." We saw earlier that while resurrection with Christ involves a moral transformation (cf. 2:11) it does not result in moral perfection. This is implicit in the imperatives which follow from the indicatives of death and resurrection with Christ.<sup>71</sup> It is now made explicit in this description of the new person as being in a state of progressive development (ἀνακαλούμενος). The passive participle indicates this renewal as the work of God or the Spirit.<sup>72</sup> This progressive renewal takes place in and through the moral efforts of believers as they lay hold of the truth of their death and resurrection with Christ and respond in faith by actively putting to death and putting off the sins of their past and putting on Christlike virtues.

The direction and goal of this renewal is said to be *knowledge* (εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν).<sup>73</sup> The phrase reflects in capsule form the theme developed earlier in the epistle regarding progress in the Christian life gauged in terms of the knowledge of God's work of salvation through Christ and of his moral will. This theme first appears in 1:9,10 where the writer informs the Colossians of his long-standing prayer that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's moral will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that they might lead a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him - with this in turn leading to a deeper knowledge of God. In 1:28, while explaining his commission to proclaim the gospel of Christ, the writer states that his

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<sup>71</sup>See, 242-243.

<sup>72</sup>Harris, 152.

<sup>73</sup>Abbott, 284; Williams, 131; Halter, 217; Weymouth, JB, NASB.

mission in life is to bring every person to maturity (τέλειον) in Christ by teaching and admonishing them about Christ - i.e. about the message of God's saving work through Christ. He makes this same point more specifically several verses later in the purpose statement of the epistle (2:2,3): his goal is that his readers might come "to have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge (εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν) of God's mystery of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Hence, the knowledge which is the engine and goal of the Christian life is that of God's moral will and his saving acts in Christ. These two kinds of knowledge are united in the indicative and imperative of the context of 3:10: it is on the basis of a true understanding of the reality of their union with Christ in his saving death and resurrection that the Colossians know God's moral will, which is to abandon the sins of the fallen Adamic existence and put on the virtues of a Christlike life.

The renewal of the new person is further characterized by the words κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν, "according to the image of his creator." As we noted above in our identification of the new person, this allusion to Gen 1:26,27 reflects the OT-Jewish concept of new creation that the end-time will be like the beginning. More specifically, this statement reflects the Jewish hope that the image and glory of God lost by Adam in the fall would be restored to the righteous in the end-time.<sup>74</sup> Thus, on the face of it, v 10b contains an implicit comparison between the first ἄνθρωπος, Adam, and the new ἄνθρωπος, the believer: as God created Adam in his own image - the pristine quality of which was lost to the race in the fall - so now he is progressively renewing believers as members of the new human race to that

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<sup>74</sup>See 1QS 4:23; CD 3:20; 1QH 17:15; cf. *2 Apoc. Bar.* 51:10-12; 54:15,21; 2 Cor 3:18.

same original image. This assessment, however, is an over-simplification in that it ignores the Adamic Christology of the epistle seen specifically in 1:15-20. Christ himself in his resurrection humanity is the image of God (1:15), and as such he is the pattern and prototype of God's work of re-creating humanity. As we have seen, Christ's death and resurrection were archetypal events in which he stripped off the old fallen humanity which he had assumed and put on the new humanity, the humanity restored to the pristine image and glory which Adam possessed before the fall and which represents God's original intent for the human race. By baptism into Christ Christians also are made to share in these archetypal events: they lay aside the old fallen self and put on this new humanity which partakes of the restored image. Baptismal resurrection with Christ, however, is only the first stage of restoring this image, since according to 3:10b this is an ongoing task (cf. Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18). And since this process is moral in nature (εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν), renewal according to the image of God means becoming more like Christ in moral understanding and action. The purpose of 3:12-4:1 is to spell out the nature of this Christlike manner of life which constitutes the moral image of God. This ongoing task of renewal begun with their spiritual resurrection will find its completion at the parousia when believers will share fully in the image and glory of God because they will be made fully like Christ in his bodily resurrection state of existence (cf. 3:4; Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:49).

#### **E. The Unity of the New Human Race (v 11)**

The re-creation and renewal of the new person concerns not just the individual but aims at the unity of the entire church: "where (ὅπου) there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian,

Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all." There is some question as to whether the particle ὅπου, "where" refers back to the new person,<sup>75</sup> to the process of renewal<sup>76</sup> or to the image of God.<sup>77</sup> The connection, however, is loose, and one need not choose one to the exclusion of the other. It is the general concept of the new person, as set out in the entire preceding statement, which is in view.<sup>78</sup> The essential meaning must be that because of the resurrection of believers with Christ and their transference into the new age and the new human race, the old distinctions - racial, religious, cultural and social - which separate people and constituted their primary identity no longer count for anything. Consequently, the following admonitions are focused on the Christian as a member of this new humanity and on his or her responsibility to put on those virtues which break down previous barriers and promote harmony within the church - compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience (v 12), forgiveness (v 13), love (v 14), mutual submission to the rule of Christ (v 15), and in general seeking the edification of the church to the glory of God (vv 16-17).

Christ himself is the church's principle of unity, as the climactic words of v 11 announce, ἀλλὰ τὰ πάντα, καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός, "Christ is all and in all things."<sup>79</sup> As the Lord of the church and the head of the body, he displaces all previous distinctions and loyalties and inserts himself instead.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Thus, Peake, 539; Williams, 132; E. F. Scott, 69; Dibelius-Greeven, 42; O'Brien, 192.

<sup>76</sup>Thus NASB, NRSV.

<sup>77</sup>Thus, JB, NJB, cf. Williams, 132.

<sup>78</sup>Cf. BAGD, 576: "under the presupposition given by the idea of the 'new man'."

<sup>79</sup>The phrase ἐν πᾶσιν is probably neuter (thus Lightfoot, 219; Peake, 540; Williams, 133). The masculine reading "Christ is in all believers" (e.g. O'Brien, 193) is a Pauline thought, but not one which appears in Colossians. For the usage of ἐν ὑμῖν, "among you" in 1:27 see Lohse, 76.

<sup>80</sup>Lightfoot, 219.



For those who have risen with Christ, he is all that matters in every relationship of life.

### **III. Summary**

1. The moral injunctions of 3:5-9a find their basis in the believer's death and resurrection with Christ and entail the actualization in everyday life of this transference and transformation accomplished once for all in baptism-conversion.

2. The commandment to put to death earthly members (v 5a) plays on the errorists' call to ascetic practices in order to attain heavenly experience. The members to be put to death are not bodily parts but the sins which belong to the earthly, fallen realm. Because Christians have already left this realm behind and entered upon heavenly existence with Christ they must kill what remains in them of this earthly realm.

3. While it is the fallen, sinful way of life as a whole which must be killed and put off, special attention is given to immorality and covetousness in v 5 and to anger and sins of speech in vv 8,9a. The former is emphasized because these sins were so prevalent and of such a fundamental nature, the latter because they are so destructive of human relationships.

4. The command regarding the putting off of vices along with the prohibition against lying in vv 8,9a is based on the Colossians' union with Christ in his death and resurrection described interpretatively as having stripped off the old person (cf. 2:11,15) and put on the new. The old person is the individual in Adam who died with Christ; the new person is the individual risen with Christ, and incorporated into the redeemed humanity of this new Adam.

5. The work of new creation begun in baptism-conversion continues as God progressively remoulds each Christian to the image of Christ by causing them to grow in knowledge of his moral will and of his saving work through Christ. In this way God aims at the unity of the church by breaking down racial, social and religious barriers which divide people.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CONCLUSION

Our investigation is now complete, and it remains only to relate our principal findings to the questions with which we began this study. In our introductory chapter we identified what we considered to be the five major issues which have occupied twentieth century interpreters of the Pauline concept of dying and rising with Christ. These concern (1) the pre-Christian religious ideas which inform this concept; (2) the Christological and soteriological framework within which it is to be understood; (3) the nature of the link between Christ's historical death and resurrection and what happens to the believer in conversion-baptism such that it is said to occur *with Christ*; (4) the nature of this baptismal experience of salvation which is called a death and a resurrection; and (5) the relationship of the concept of dying and rising with Christ as it is presented in Colossians to that of the undisputed Pauline epistles, especially Romans. Our task in chapter one was to survey the answers which scholars have given to these questions over the past century. Our procedure in closing will be to summarize the answers to these questions which have emerged from our study of the Colossian epistle.

## **1. Religious Background**

Our analysis reveals that the concept of dying and rising with Christ in Colossians and its associated framework of ideas belong within the broader world of thought characteristic of the Jewish apocalyptic literature of that era, and which in turn is rooted in the Old Testament itself. The following are the leading ideas of this thought world which in one way or another contributed to the formulation of dying and rising with Christ found in the Colossian epistle.

a. This worldview divides history into two eras, the present evil age and the age to come, which is the era of salvation and now exists in the heavenly realm.

b. The perspective of Colossians on salvation belongs to the broad OT, Jewish and early Christian view that existence in this present age of sin represents a departure or fall away from an original state of bliss (cf. Gen 1,2), and that in the end-time God will perform a new act of creation in which he restores those conditions he intended from the beginning.

c. The figure of Adam plays a prominent role in this expectation. God's intent for eschatological humanity was represented by the glorious existence which Adam knew in paradise in the beginning. According to one strand of tradition the Messiah of the end-time would be a new Adam restoring peace and harmony to the world and presiding over a restored paradise (Isa 11:1-9; *J. Lev* 18).

d. The concept of salvation as the end-time restoration of a lost protological state provides the framework for understanding the significance of death and resurrection in Colossians. Death was not a part of God's original creation, but entered the world as the result of the sin of Adam and has ruled his descendants ever since. Resurrection must then be seen as the

eschatological defeat and abolition of death in which God raises the righteous and restores them to that state of glorious immortal existence which Adam knew before the fall.

e. The concept of individuals being made partakers of an event in the distant past (i.e. baptismal dying and rising *with Christ*) is broadly rooted in the OT-Jewish notion of the solidarity of the group with a founding figure or figures, and the ability of this founder to act as the representative of the group. The Pauline idea of Christ's representative relationship towards Christians finds its closest antecedent in the relationship of Adam to his descendants described in Rom 5:12-19: because Adam in his transgression acted as the head and representative of the race, all are counted as having participated in this act, and God therefore includes them in his verdict of condemnation and death on Adam (cf. 4 Ezra 7:118; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 23:4).

f. Finally, Colossians makes use of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition of the post-mortem judgment scene (cf. *The Apocalypse of Zephaniah* 7) in which a departed soul or a visionary mystic seeking heavenly entry is arraigned in Hades before the divine tribunal and is confronted there by an accusing spirit holding a written record (*cheirographon*) of this person's earthly sins. Acquittal is signaled by the blotting out of this condemning document, followed by the proclamation that the defendant has triumphed over the accuser, whereupon he or she ascends to the heavenly realm and joins with the angels in their worship of God.

## **2. The Christological and Soteriological Framework**

The concept of dying and rising with Christ in Colossians takes for its point of departure the conviction that Christ is the new Adam, and as such he is God's end-time agent of reconciliation and new creation (1:15-20).

Christ's saving work of restoring humanity can be understood in terms of this Adam-like role: as Adam in his sin brought fallenness and death to himself and his posterity, so Christ in his dying and rising travels the same path, but in the opposite direction, to bring to a new redeemed humanity a reversal of this fallen state and with it reconciliation and life . He took up this task where Adam left off by identifying himself with Adam's fallen race. Because sin was the cause of humanity's ongoing subjection to death, Christ made himself responsible for "the charge-list (*cheirographon*) against us" (2:14), thus subjecting himself to the hostile accusing spirits who exercised authority over humanity because of it. By taking upon himself the divine sentence of death, he caused the condemning document to be blotted out, resulting in a verdict of acquittal and victory over the hostile spirits. In his victorious passage from death to heavenly life he inaugurated the new age and became the founder and head of the new redeemed human race (1:18). Because Christ subjected himself to humanity's fallen condition, his death and resurrection must be seen in the first instance as his own experience of deliverance from the fallen state. But because he acted in a representative capacity this experience of deliverance became the means and prototype of the salvation of those who would be joined to him in the future.

### 3. The Meaning of "with Christ"

This representative role in which Christ acted as the founder and head of the new humanity provides the basis for understanding the meaning of *with Christ*. The paradigm for this relationship of solidarity and representation is, as we stated earlier, Adam's relationship to the race descended from him. As Adam acted as the representative of his race so that all may be said to have participated in his sin and therefore share his

punishment, so Christ in his death and deliverance acted on behalf of his people so that they may be said to have participated in these past events. Believers were not somehow "in Christ" when he died and rose again, rather at the time of conversion-baptism they are united to Christ, incorporated into his body, with the result that his history becomes theirs. In this they are, as it were, "caught up" into these past events so that God includes them in his saving acts towards Christ their representative.

#### **4. The Death and Resurrection of Christians**

By including them in his saving work towards Christ, God reproduces in believers on a spiritual level the same deliverance which Christ experienced in his death and resurrection. He pronounces on them the same verdict of condemnation and acquittal he pronounced on Christ, resulting in victory over the hostile spirits. God furthermore exercises anew the same power towards them as when he raised Christ from the dead. Christians are thus made to share spiritually in Christ's deliverance through death from the old fallen existence in this present world, and his entry through resurrection into the heavenly existence of the new creation. It may be seen that this is essentially a participationist interpretation of dying and rising with Christ, though it has at its core the juridical notion that Christ died for the sins of his people, and they gain forgiveness and life by identifying themselves with this death for sin.

Finally, while the epistle to the Colossians proclaims that Christians have attained a spiritual resurrection in conversion-baptism, this does not mean they have reached the ultimate goal of the eschatological salvation. They possess this resurrection life only in preliminary form and in hiddenness (3:3); they must yet strive in their daily lives to actualize this

salvation by putting to death what remains within them of the old existence and by cultivating Christlike qualities, as God progressively renews them according to his image (3:5-11). It is only at the dénouement, when Christ is revealed from heaven, that the final goal will be attained as they are made like Christ in the fullness of his glorious bodily resurrection existence (3:4).

## 5. The Relation of Colossians to the Pauline Homolog<sup>u</sup>mena

Our major concern in this area has been to take issue with the prevailing opinion that the notion of a present resurrection with Christ in conversion-baptism seen in Colossians differs sharply from the outlook of the undisputed Pauline epistles, particularly Romans. We have attempted to show - in keeping with the nineteenth century consensus - that in Romans 6 Christians are indeed presented as having been raised with Christ in baptism. Hence, it is a mistake to see in the teaching of the Colossian epistle either an over-realized eschatology which Paul corrects in Romans, or a later development on the Romans view, or evidence that Paul could not have written Colossians. In addition, our investigation also led us into an extended analysis of the use of the term στοιχεῖα in Galatians, by which we concluded that the concepts and argumentation used in this connection are very similar to those used in connection with the statement of Col 2:20 that Christians "have died with Christ to the stoicheia of the world." Beyond these two exegetical forays into Romans and Galatians, we have not ventured to go. However, it is here in the area of the relationship of the teaching of Colossians on dying and rising with Christ to that of the other Pauline epistles (and not just the homolog<sup>u</sup>mena) that important questions remain regarding differences and similarities, and the issue of theological development. But to do a proper job of answering these questions would



**require extensive exegetical study of all the relevant texts, and this would take us far beyond the scope of the present work.**

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