

THE COLOSSIAN HERESY

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I. A combination of doctrines in one group, rather than two or three doctrines held by different groups in the Colossian church

- A. The epistle itself contains no hint that the author writes to more than one group.
- B. Historical criticism depreciates needless multiplication of persons or events. The simpler explanation more likely holds true (law of parsimony).
- C. The apostle moves back and forth from the elements of one teaching to the elements of the other, which he would presumably not do if writing to separate groups. Note especially the connecting particles between verses that appear to refer to separate heresies.
- D. The tendencies of contemporary Jewish religious thought made possible such a combination as appears in Colossae.
- E. Later, developed Gnosticism exhibits the same kind of combination found in Colossae, which shows that the combination was historically possible. Kabbalism illustrates (from a later time) the actual combining of Judaism and Gnosticism.

II. Elements of the heresy

A. Gnosticism

- 1. Intellectual exclusivism notable in its hidden wisdom, exclusive mysteries, and privileged class
 - a. The contention for the gospel's universality in contrast to intellectual exclusivism; see 1:27, 28; 2:2, 3; 4:3
 - b. Frequent use of *wisdom* (σοφία, *sophia*); *intelligence* (σύνεσις *synesis*); *knowledge* (γνώσις, *gnōsis*); [perfect] *knowledge* (ἐπίγνωσις, *epignōsis*) with reference to the gospel; *angels* (ἄγγελοι, *angeloi*); *mystery* (μυστήριον, *mystērion*); *ruler* (ἄρχων, *archōn*)
- 2. Speculative tenets of Gnostic cosmogony and theology
 - a. Against the doctrine of successive created mediation from good spirit to evil matter, Paul sets forth the doctrine of one eternal Son whose mediatorial function he exercised in both material and spiritual creation (see 1:16-20; 2:8, 9).
 - b. The apostle adopts Gnostic terminology with a higher content: *pleroma* (πλήρωμα, *plērōma*: 1:19; 2:9; angels = voluntary humility?)
- 3. Gnostic asceticism
 - a. Drinks (2:16)
 - b. Touch not, taste not, handle not.

c. Denounces ascetic practices on their moral (not Mosaic-legal) aspects as drawing too much attention to the affections of a higher sphere and dying to the world (2:8, 20-22; 3:1-5)

B. Jewish

a. Handwriting of ordinances (2:14)

b. Ritual

(1) Circumcision

(2) Sabbath

(3) New moons

(4) Feast days

(5) Meats

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