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**The Liberating Soteriology of Colossians 2**

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**Abstract**

The people of first-century Colossians and the enslaved Africans of North America had three things in common. They lived in colonized countries, were subjects of imperial powers and within their society slavery existed. The presentation of the gospel of salvation is impacted not only by these situations but by the identities of the recipients of the letter as a whole. This article’s examination of who and what the recipients were determines how they received the message of salvation. Therefore discussions are presented to show how Jews and Gentiles in the first century as the initial audience

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.Birmingham.ac.uk](http://www.Birmingham.ac.uk).

received the message and how the enslaved African particularly in eighteenth-century North America in a similar society received the gospel.

This article does not argue for authorship of the letter to the Colossians. Therefore, the use of the term “writer” is used to describe the author. Paul is referenced only in cases of direct reference to him and his teachings.

### **Who They Were**

The second chapter of the letter to the Colossians represents the struggle of the initial recipients to understand the message of salvation. In order to understand the message being preached one must identify the recipients; their beliefs and their history. The entire letter is a response to issues raised perhaps by persons within the community concerning the gospel being taught by Epaphras. It is my opinion that the identities of the initial audience impact their reception of the gospel; specifically the message contained in Chapter Two of the letter as it was directed to Jews and Gentiles who were citizens and subjects of Greco-Rome.<sup>2</sup>

This article goes further and represents the reception of the gospel in two societies; the people of first-century Colossae and the enslaved Africans in North America. From an African American postcolonial perspective a study of the letter to the Colossians reveals that the various beliefs of the people of first century Colossae that existed for generations were a result of their diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. Taken from a larger work this article points to the reception of the gospel by its initial readers and compares it to the reception of the teachings of the letter by the enslaved African in North America in the eighteenth century. These two perceptions reveal the backgrounds of colonized people who were presented with a gospel of liberation. What is also revealed is that both societies tried to make sense of what was taught in light of their identity and former beliefs.

In the twentieth century the beliefs of the people of first-century Colossae and the surrounding communities have come under attack

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<sup>2</sup> Histories of the people of Colossae can be found in various commentaries. See for example James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing ; Paternoster Press, 1996).

and are largely labeled heresy. This labeling does not accurately define their beliefs. However, the text of the letter portrays the people of Colossae with a measure of faith in Christ (2:5) seeking a deeper understanding of some aspects of the gospel pertaining to their former beliefs (2:9-23).

Referencing the identities of the people of Colossae, the lack of the evidence of letters or correspondence to Paul from the churches to which he wrote comes to bear here. Specifically Barclay asks, “How literally should we take the reference to ‘philosophy’ in 2:8? Is this a term used by the “heretics” or by the author of Colossians?”<sup>3</sup> Barclay discussed the use of terms which could be labeled abusive or vindictive which reveal nothing of the character of a person or group of people. Can the people of Colossae be identified by the attacks or accusations of error alleged by the writer or the commentators? Where did these terms originate and why did he (or they) find it necessary to address these issues using them? Are these words merely repeated by the writer that Epaphras used in describing the problem at Colossae? Or, are these words used by the so-called “heretics”? As evidenced by the many commentaries using the terms as clues to the target(s) of Colossians, much has been derived without consensus. Barclay also points out, “Scholars who survey this mass of hypothetical reconstructions are apt to be dismayed by the failure of the guild to reach unanimity on even the rudiments of a solution.”<sup>4</sup> In attempting to identify the hearers of the letter the accusative language proves to be problematic. However, if one could look beyond the attack to the letter in its entirety, the process of identifying the people of Colossae and how they received the message of the gospel may be obtained. Their former beliefs can be assessed and the way in which they processed their new belief can be revealed.

The attack by commentators hides the message of the letter. Barclay states, “We are trying to trace a target that we can see only through the haze of a polemical tirade, leaving traces that are brief, often ambiguous and sometimes wholly obscure.”<sup>5</sup> The re-reading of the Colossians letter without the labeling have revealed more about

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<sup>3</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon, New Testament Guides* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

the identity of the recipients and what they believed. Identification of the initial audience of the letter is important to understanding the message of salvation being preached.

The issue of asceticism is raised in discussing this chapter, although deliberation will be brief in order to understand the type of environment that existed. Do the instructions in this chapter reveal the author's intentions to create a new subjectivity? Are the recipients merely being told to change their allegiance from former gods to that of Jesus Christ? Wimbush's definition suggests, "Asceticism may be defined as performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe."<sup>6</sup> R. Valantasis points out that the writer of Colossians speaks against a specific type of ascetic performance, "one that involves physical indicators of world rejection and visible signs of identity."<sup>7</sup> Yet the writer appears to be replacing one form of asceticism with another by instructing them to reject their former worldly views and admonishing them to accept another form; directing them to accept and live according to the gospel. MacDonald suggests, "The author wages a battle on two fronts, rejecting one type of asceticism while fervently propounding another, intentionally directing the audience 'toward an alternative mode of existence within a dominant social environment'.<sup>8</sup> Some hearing this letter, attuned to the ascetic forms in former beliefs, may have questioned the motives and the intent of this teaching. Thus valid questions concerning rituals leading to "labeling" were being addressed in the bulk of this chapter.

Christianity in its infancy had many parallels to the existing mystery cults; e.g. teachings concerning salvation, resurrection, eternal life, initiation and ritual sacraments. Throughout the first four centuries there often existed direct competition in evangelization between various cults and sects.<sup>9</sup> Christianity, possibly an early form

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<sup>6</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, *Asceticism* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1995), 544-52.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 63, no. 4 (1995), 800.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald "Asceticism in Colossians and Ephesians" in Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 270.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 81-152.

of Judaism, by definition could have been considered a cult.<sup>10</sup> It is evident in this chapter that although conflicting views existed within the community, former beliefs did not initially create problems. The audience, although embracing the new teachings were keen to distinguish the validity of their former beliefs in the light of what was being taught. Klauck states, “In my opinion, the Christian doctrine of the sacraments, in the form in which we know it, would not have arisen without this interaction; and Christology too understood how to ‘take up’ the mythical inheritance, purifying it and elevating it.”<sup>11</sup>

The Jews<sup>12</sup> were known for “debating” the scripture. This is not meant pejoratively but alludes to a form of discussing the written text. It was a healthy way of getting at the truth (Job 13:3, 15:3; Prov. 25:9; Isa. 43:26). Looking from a twentieth-century perspective at the practice, commentators seemed to miss the validity of it in labeling the audience rather than considering the “problem” as a debate of some sort. The Jewish form of discussing scripture/oral tradition was a debate which, in the case of the Talmud, resulted in the writings of the Mishnah.<sup>13</sup> The dates of the institution of the transcribing Jewish oral tradition coincide with that of the beginning of Christianity. The completed process of forming ideas and doctrines could not have happened overnight as this letter shows. Important discussions occurred which shaped doctrines of not only Christianity, but perhaps those of the Gnostics and other beliefs that were believed to have grown out of this period.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., “Encyclopaedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite,” (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2005), s.v.

<sup>11</sup> Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, 152.

<sup>12</sup> According to Josephus a considerable number of Jews settled in the Lycus Valley in 200 BCE and it could be assumed that some of their descendants still lived there at the time of this letter. Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Complete Works of the Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian, Flavius Josephus: Comprising the Antiquities of the Jews, a History of the Jewish Wars, Three Dissertations Concerning Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, &C., &C., and the Life of Josephus* (London: J.G. Murdoch), 147-53, 85-267, 16. 160-78.

<sup>13</sup> The Mishnah reflects debates between 70-200 CE by the group of rabbinic sages known as the Tannaim. For detailed history see Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Views held and discussed in detail in the following works. Günther Bornkamm, *Das Ende Des Gesetzes; Paulusstudien*, [5. Aufl.] ed., *Beiträge Zur Evangelischen Theologie* (München: C. Kaiser, 1966), Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 8th ed. (London and New York: Macmillan and co., 1886), R. McL Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (London ; New York: T & T Clark International, 2005).

The writer of this letter was concerned because of the diversity of beliefs that existed in the community. The gospel being preached to former mystic and mystery adherents and Jews presented many questions as this chapter suggests. In agreement with M. Hooker's view of the situation, additionally, the information the writer received, which perhaps sparked this letter, came from discussions within the community.<sup>15</sup> The similarities between the various cults and this new teaching needed to be talked out. Ancient philosophy dates from 600 BCE to 500 CE<sup>16</sup> and the practice of philosophy, probably not unfamiliar to the population at Colossae during Greco-Roman rule, was another common form of discussion.

Relevant themes of philosophy cited in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*<sup>17</sup> are: the understanding of the basic causes and attributes of the universe; discussions of it in an economical and uniform way; the theoretical problem of integrating the diversity and variation of the natural universe, with the prospect of obtaining rigid and clear knowledge about it; questions about numbers, elements, universals, and gods; the study of patterns of "reasoning and argument"; the nature of the good life and the importance of understanding and "knowledge in order to pursue it"; the clarification of the concept of justice, and its relation to various political systems. The use of persuasion and imperial language points to the knowledge of the above practices by the writer of the letter and the assumption by him that the audience would understand the message presented in this manner. The audience, as a colonized people, was exposed to Greco-Roman civic and cultural attributes.

Chapter Two suggests the writer was faced with issues brought to his attention perhaps by Epaphras. These issues were the result of the discussions held upon hearing the gospel preached to them in attempts to gain a better understanding of what they were hearing. Perhaps Epaphras had reached the limit of his ability to answer the questions that were being raised and from his report to the writer, clarification

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<sup>15</sup> Specifically my opinion comes from her view that there existed no heresy but the letter served as a "pastoral concern...rather than because of some dangerous error there". Morna Dorothy Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 122-26.

<sup>16</sup> Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

was necessary. The letter, as with other letters of the Pauline genre, was an attempt to encourage the community to stay together and seek the truth; to not be afraid to engage each other and those around them. Stambaugh adds, “The oneness of God demanded that the body of the church also be one, that there be no internal boundaries between members (Col 2).”<sup>18</sup>

The enslaved Africans were faced with not only the oppression of the dominant society but with the pressure of behaving in such a way to avoid punishment. They had to walk a fine line in their speech and mannerisms so as not to offend those who were in authority over them.<sup>19</sup> Lane states that a slave had to be careful in speech and mannerism to not arouse anger among those who opposed and subjugated them. However, Lane’s statement is a debunking of the idea that the enslaved adopted the slave or colonial mentality. Being subjects in a colonial society and more specifically a slave society, there was the possibility of adopting the mindset of defeat. The slaves were in danger of succumbing to either accepting their status as property or trying to adopt the ways of the colonizer or enslaver. The letter to the Colossians speaks to their retaining their dignity in the face of degradation, oppression and death. With boldness they were to walk according to the will of God as Christians and to allow neither anyone nor their circumstances to deter them.

The slaves’ agenda was two-fold. One: they sought salvation in an eschatological sense and two: they pursued salvation from their present state of slavery; both of which they sought in Christ. For some, perhaps, the latter weighed more importantly, but their faith for both was to be in Christ. The letter reaffirmed their desires as they perceived both their destiny and the demise of the enslaver’s dominion over them.

The discussion of the liberating Soteriology of Colossians 2 describes the letter as a response to the reception of the gospel presented to the people of first-century Colossae, bringing to bear

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<sup>18</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), 57.

<sup>19</sup> Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N. C., Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption, by Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery, and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin*, 4th ed. (Boston: Printed for the publisher, Hewes and Watson’s print., 1848), 31.



their various ethnicities and former beliefs. As a postcolonial work this section of the letter presented to the enslaved African in the eighteenth century produces speculations of their response in view of their history and beliefs.

### **Colossians 2.1-3 “Gaining Knowledge through Christ – Resisting the Obvious”**

The tenor of the letter begins to change in this chapter from that of the previous chapter. We get a hint of that change in 1:10 in the phrase “walk worthy”. The term conflict *ἀγών* concern<sup>20</sup> is derived from “an athletic contest”.<sup>21</sup> The writer is pulling for them as an athlete would for a team member. The Apostle Paul’s writings often used the analogy of an athlete to make his point (Heb 21:1; Phil 1:3). This is a new community of believers who have made great strides within the context of their diverse cultures. The author wants to let them know that he is taking pride in their accomplishment. They are being encouraged to stay in the race and to engage each other in conversation. He mentions Laodicea because they have not seen him either. With the distance between the two cities and the fact that he tells them to exchange letters, dialogue probably ensued.

To encourage *παρακαλέω* (2:2) means “To call to one’s side, to comfort”. The writer is telling them to stand up. The notion is that they are capable of understanding what they have been taught. They were to study and discuss it. As an act of encouragement the writer again acts as a bridge; in this case as an authority on the subject of the teachings of Jesus Christ and his relationship with God.

Perhaps the writer, aware of the diverse ethnicity and beliefs, continues the call to unity but that does not seem to be the concern here. They seem to have overcome their different backgrounds and are gaining an understanding of the gospel to the point that he trusts them with knowing the true relationship of God in Christ on which the gospel of salvation hinges.

The enslaved African faced many difficulties: e.g. prohibitions on learning to read and not being able to comprehend their status. It is important to remember that the slaves did not accept their status as

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<sup>20</sup> Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



some would think and the history of rebellions confirms it. Rebellions as a way of resisting came in many forms. They resisted through their determination to learn the word of God. Although many of the earlier generations had little desire to adopt the religion of their enslaver, some sought out answers in the Bible. They found consolation in the various texts that spoke of the oppressed and how God sent deliverers to relieve and avenge them. The Acts of the Apostles portrays Paul as one of the persons who understood oppression. It recounts that he and his companions had been beaten and imprisoned for his resistance; refusing to back down in their beliefs and for continuing to spread the gospel even in prison (Acts 16:37).

The writer's words in this section describe his anguish at not being able to be with the Colossians and Laodiceans, but he wanted them to be comforted. He encouraged them that if they stayed together and remained faithful they would understand who Christ was. In the previous chapter he described Christ as all in all and as the image of God. Here he is telling them to remain faithful and it would become even clearer. If it was knowledge they sought, Christ was the way to "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3).

Some would say that the enslaved desired knowledge into the ways of the enslaver so that they might live like them or gain revenge. To some extent this was true, but upon release from slavery they did not seek retribution but only the ability to care for themselves and live peacefully in society.<sup>22</sup> The slaves rebelled against the inability, caused by their enslaver's long hours and physical torture, to grow crops for their families and to worship as they desired. The knowledge they sought was not only to survive this present situation, but to live long enough to be free of it.

### **Colossians 2:4-8 "No Man's Philosophy"**

The use of the phrase *μη τις* (anyone or any man<sup>23</sup>) in both 2:4 and 2:8 denotes the writer cautioning the Colossians to be careful how they are interpreting what they are hearing either from Epaphras, others in the community or the writer himself. He is not accusing

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<sup>22</sup> See discussions of African Americans during American Reconstruction Period (1863-1877) in Eric Foner, *The Tocsin of Freedom : The Black Leadership of Radical Reconstruction* ([Gettysburg, Pa.]: Gettysburg College, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon* .

anyone in particular. His caution is general, hence the word “any.” Neither gender nor specific persons is implied. In the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint the word “any” is often followed by a qualifier to determine of whom or what it refers.<sup>24</sup> In the Colossian text “any man” is inferred by those that translated it. Apart from not being gender specific, the reference could have been to words or ideals that formed within the community that may have caused concern.

Addressing the diversity of the community, there were many pre-existing ideas about the meaning of what was said concerning “mystery,” “treasures” “wisdom” and “knowledge.” These words in themselves are enticing when applied to gaining a better life. The Colossians were a mixture of people under Roman rule, living under colonial conditions, whose lives were ruled by imperial standards which was supposed to benefit all. They, however, were not often the recipients of the promises made by the empire and were often the means whereby the dominant society benefited; i.e., through taxation and subordination necessary for control by the empire.

Before and after enslavement, the African community experienced similar conditions. However, in the case of the Colossians, race was not so much a factor. The communities were diverse, with those owning property and those who were the property of others; those who were citizens as opposed to those who were subjects. The writer is telling this group that no one was to deter them from gaining the liberty to “walk in Christ” (2:6). At this point in the letter Christ was said to have freed them from their way of thinking. The wisdom that they once owned was now to be replaced with that of Christ. Their eyes were to be opened to the mystery, “God in Christ.” This text, when applied to the conditions of the African before slavery, meant they would have the power that the missionaries had as they came over to their land; the power to cross oceans and bring elaborate gifts; ultimately the same power that robbed them of their resources.<sup>25</sup> Both communities were told they were free, but they

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<sup>24</sup> *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*, [New and rev. ed. (Chicago: Menorah Press, 1973). Genesis. 24.16 ‘any man’, Genesis 17.12 ‘any stranger’, Leviticus. 22.4 ‘any thing’, Charles Thomson, *The Septuagint Bible, the Oldest Text of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. (Indian Hills, Colo.): Falcon’s Wing Press, 1960).

<sup>25</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Rev. pbk. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981).

were not (ref Col. 3:22-4.1). The text suggests that the slaves were not free to do as they pleased and the masters were not obligated to let them go.

The art of persuasion *πιθανολογία* (2:4) was practiced by famous teachers such as Aristotle, Epicures and Diogenes. Is this not what the writer is doing? He would not have been able to stand with former teachers nor his contemporaries had he not done so. The word comes from the root *πείθω* meaning calculated to persuade and *πιθανολογία* which means to bring reasons for persuading or making probable, to use probable arguments.<sup>26</sup> Although often described in connection with Colossians as a negative act, this was the accepted means of discussion in the time of this writing. Paul himself was using the art as he wrote letters to the churches. Galatians proves to be a much sterner letter in which the practice of persuasion is more readily seen. The writer, therefore, has justification in being concerned. This becomes a lost art when only one party is allowed to voice their beliefs to the detriment of the message being brought. He seems to fear that, in his absence, there is no one else who could act as his substitute in presenting this side of the dialogue (2:1). It can also be inferred that there seems to be a fear on the part of Epaphras to allow the new believers to voice their concerns. Was there a letter sent from the church or did Epaphras verbally voice his or their concerns or questions? The negative labeling of those in the community by commentators is unjust, yet unavoidable due to the circumstance of no other surviving information. However, this fact leaves open the door for many opinions as in this work.

The writer seems to think that the terms and expressions in 2:6-8 are effective in cautioning the audience to remember the teaching they have already received. The “teaching” referred to in verse six, is presumably what they received from Epaphras. The term abounding (in verse seven) *περισσεύω* means to excel more or increase in excellence; used of a flower going from a bud to full bloom.<sup>27</sup> Similar expressions as those used in 2:8, “traditions of men” and “basic

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<sup>26</sup> Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Rev. and augm. throughout / ed. (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996) s.v.

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit., Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

principles of the world,” are also used by Paul in other letters (e.g., Galatians 1:14).

L. Lewis comments on the language used in this chapter. He suggests, “What is remarkable in this section is Paul’s uncompromisingly hostile language launched at the false teachers. They are frauds and thieves, (2:4, 8) who peddle a counterfeit product. The reality they proclaim, compared to the reality of Christ, is illusory (2:17) and ephemeral.”<sup>28</sup> Although the writer’s view of their “hostility”, or referring to them as “frauds and thieves”, does not conform to the tone of the letter (again we must compare the mood of this letter to Galatians and 1 Corinthians), he is nevertheless, uncompromising. The presentation of Christ is phenomenal in that his devotion to him is quite clear. The letter captures Paul’s zeal for Christ and the gospel of salvation which is only matched by that of his former days in persecuting believers.

The following word analyses from 2:8 suggest alternatives to the way the community was told to view what was being taught as opposed to labeling them as false teachings.

βλέπετε means to be perceptive, discerning, look into, discern by use, know by experience.<sup>29</sup> They were to study the matter to see whether the philosophy lined up with what they were taught and had already accomplished (military reference to being taken away as booty perhaps into slavery). The Africans had already been carried away, made spoil of, physically taken from their homeland to the New World as slaves. Then they were “spoiled” (2:8) through the teachings that maintained their servitude. The indication here for the Colossians is that they could be pulled away from what they already knew. If they were once pagans, what they already knew was not a threat. Therefore their former beliefs were not an issue. What the writer is cautioning them about is discernment in what they have come to believe.

So φιλοσοφία<sup>30</sup> refers to the love of wisdom. And 2:8 references three areas he warns them about in opposition to the philosophy of Christ (vain deceit, traditions of men and rudiments of the world). A

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<sup>28</sup> Lloyd A. Lewis, ‘Colossians’, Brian K. Blount et al., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 385.

<sup>29</sup> Op. cit., Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

line is drawn between the two philosophies; philosophy itself is not under attack, just what is not according to Christ. So it is false or just different?

So κενῆς<sup>31</sup> ἀπάτη<sup>32</sup> means to cheat, deceive, or beguile. Philippians recounts that to Paul except for Christ and “Him” crucified everything else were dung (3:8). Therefore, the writer like Paul is not allowing for any outside thought to be brought in. This seems to contradict his saying “beware” in 2:8. Stated earlier, to beware; βλέπετε is to have knowledge of something and make a choice. Blind faith is not suggested as the letter encourages them to beware (look into).

The above suggests that discussions should ensue within the audience although the writer seems to be directing them through persuasion to adopt his point of view. He seems to be going out on a limb, so to speak, by encouraging debate. He does not waver, however, on the teachings concerning Christ.

On both sides the enslaved and the enslaver learned how to use words to manipulate the other. Slaves learned how to speak and act so as to appease the sensibilities of the enslaver. The enslaver learned how to denigrate the slave to shame him into working and by telling him that his work was for the betterment of all. This philosophy was according to a tradition (servitude) that had evolved with the growing economy. The enslaver was using the enslaved to do work that he could not do alone, but he did not want to share the profits. The fundamentals of the New World economy was the driving force behind the maintenance of slavery. Increased production required increased labor and increased labor only served to increase production. The letter warned the enslaved to not allow the dominant society to use them because it was not according to Christ. The enslaved heard this and continued to resist their status covertly, either through quiet rebellions, escapes, etc., or when necessary overtly, through open rebellions and in the biracial churches they were later allowed to join.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

### Colossians 2:9-10 “From Isolation to the Divine”

In 2:9 the writer uses the word θεότης to indicate the deity of God as opposed to θειότης which relates to divinity. Whether intentional or not it is significant when expressing the superiority of God in Christ in reference to all other expressions of godlikeness. Richard Trench gives a fuller discourse on the use of the two Greek words.

St. Paul is declaring that in the Son there dwells all the fullness of the absolute Godhead; they were no mere rays of divine glory which gilded Him, lighting up his person for a season and with a splendour not his own; but He was, and is, absolute and perfect God; and the Apostle uses θεότης to express this essential and personal Godhead of the Son; ... In all of these it expresses, in agreement with the view here asserted, Godhead in the absolute sense, or at all events in as absolute a sense as the heathen could conceive it. Θειότης is a very much commoner word; and its employment everywhere bears out the distinction here drawn. There is ever a manifestation of the divine, of some divine attributes, in that to which θειότης is attributed, but never absolute essential Deity.<sup>33</sup>

Again, the diversity of the first-century community comes in to play as the writer is dispelling all indications that there is anyone or anything greater than Jesus. He does not single out one group over the other, but issues a blanket statement in 2:9 concerning the deity of Jesus in God. To emphasize this, he adds the word “bodily” σωματικῶς meaning “of the exalted spiritual body, visible only to the inhabitants of heaven.”<sup>34</sup> The distinction between θειότης and θεότης is noted by the community in this Greco-Roman governance. The emperors, see Subsection 4.3, were often aspiring to be known as living gods and, often upon their death, this was sometimes bestowed upon them.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, to make the distinction clear, the writer chooses the higher of the two which is rarely used to refer to the status of an emperor.<sup>36</sup>

The writer here again elevates the believers letting them know that they are complete in Christ who, in him, dwells all the “fullness

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench et al., *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989) (1990).

<sup>34</sup> Op. cit., Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

<sup>35</sup> Trench et al., *Synonyms of the New Testament* 10. Cites works of Lucian and Plutarch where they reference the use of Θεότης to raise the rank of emperors to that of a god.

<sup>36</sup> Trench et al., *Synonyms of the New Testament* “Θειότης, Θεότης”

of the Godhead bodily”. He reminds the audience of what they were taught about reconciliation to God through Christ (1:21-22).

Complete πληρόω used here differs from perfect τέλειος (1:28) in that the latter goes beyond completeness<sup>37</sup>. Their perfection was not an act of “self”; it was contingent on their belief in Christ. A boundary is set to insure that they understood Christ’s position as the head and their position in him. Unity again is stressed as Jesus is raised above principalities and powers.

With the limitation of language and literature it is unclear how the enslaved African would interpret the idea that in Christ was the fullness of the Godhead. How far removed were they from the teachings of the traditional religion of their homeland? African traditional religion reflects an understanding of the ordering of the gods and the place of the Supreme God.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps from other teachings in the Bible they would have been exposed to the trinity. They would come to know that God is the head, the highest part of the triad. The letter is pointing them to God, placing the weight of the motives of their actions on their belief in God. Christ dwells in the Godhead as the image of God and it is through him that they are identified as complete.

Completeness (2:10) brings the enslaved from their status of isolation to an intimate relationship with Christ. As heirs with him they are also above their situation for he is the head of all principality and power. The enslaved did not allow the power exerted over them by the dominant culture to force them into succumbing to colonial or slave mentality. They are complete, not less than others. The letter spoke to them about looking to heavenly things and not to things on the earth (1:5). At this point in the letter they are to look above their present status because they occupy a place with Christ who is above all.

Christianity was used by both the enslaved and enslaver. At various times the enslaver either allowed slaves to be Christianized or sought to prevent it as it served his needs. The letter tells both parties that order and the steadfastness of their faith in Christ is above all. It

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<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

<sup>38</sup> E. Thomas Lawson, *Religions of Africa: Traditions in Transformation*, 1st ed., *Religious Traditions of the World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).



reminds them of their “faith walk” as that which is pleasing to Christ. They are not to allow the twisting of words or doctrines for personal gain to deter them.

### **Colossians 2:11-15 “Rituals and Rites”**

Although there is no mention of law in itself, it is implied in circumcision. In the era of this letter did other cults/religions require circumcision? The writer uses this practice to differentiate non-believing Jews from Gentiles and believing Jews and Gentiles. The unity the writer so carefully tries to instill is complicated by the Jewish population and their history during the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>39</sup> In referring to angels, they are reminded of the writings which reflected the contest of angel princes in the court of heaven. To this part of the community the very realization of this event enters the discussion. The translation of the text concerning angel worship is controversial. However, the writer refers to the practice with the intent of elevating Christ above all powers, authorities, sovereignties, thrones and lordships. Caird states:

They were created by God (Col. 1:16), and they were disarmed and defeated by Christ on the cross (Col. 2:15). Although all the words are in the form of abstract nouns, connoting structures of power, they do not in these contexts denote abstractions, but personal beings, who symbolize, personify, embody or wield power.<sup>40</sup>

The writer does not dismiss them as mythical beings, but disarms them however real, as entities over which Christ has dominion.

Evidence pointing to the opinion that there were no false teachers within the community is that although references were made to Jewish cultic regulations and calendrical observances, there is no mention of the law as such, as would be expected if the teaching were under attack by the Jewish community.<sup>41</sup> Lincoln also makes reference to the idea that circumcision, mentioned in 2.11, operates

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<sup>39</sup> Epiphanes ruled Hellenistic Syria 175-164 BCE. His attempts to suppress Judaism brought on the Wars of the Maccabees. John R. Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees, The Cambridge Bible Commentary: New English Bible* (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1973), 19-44.

<sup>40</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 238.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln “Colossians” Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter’s Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 568.

for the most part as a metaphor for dealing with the physical body as a whole. The question may have been raised as to the necessity of actual physical circumcision among gentiles.

The writer's language is strong as he describes the power of God in what is often referred to as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ in 2:15. Caird refers to this section as a linguistic description of the death of Christ in mythological terms.<sup>42</sup> This would be familiar to those with mystic and mythological backgrounds which would include acts of baptism and quickening. However, Christ disarmed/spoiled/ put off/ stripped off, in the sense of separating one's self from something to have nothing to do with it again, (for one's own advantage<sup>43</sup>). So 2:15 completes the dissertation which follows the writer's caution in 2:8. The audience is guided through this section to show that they share in the triumph with Christ over all "them" the powers of the "cosmos". "Them" could also refer to people in authority or spiritual entities<sup>44</sup>

Rituals among the enslaved referenced in 2:14 were a part of life; they changed only with time and with the application and society of which they were a part. Some of the enslaved may have been familiar with circumcision as it was practiced in some countries in Africa.<sup>45</sup> Baptism as well as circumcision took on new meaning as it did with the first-century church. However, in the case of some of the enslaved baptism was just a ritual that was performed before they were put in the holds of the slave ships. The letter instructed them on the meaning of baptism as a rite of passage from death to life; from their old life to new life. They were often told that they were sinners without a way of redemption. The letter exposes that theory as false with their belief in Christ and the outward show of their faith in baptism. The "ordinances" that denigrated them to unsalvageable sinners and even less than human had been canceled with Christ's death on the cross. The powers and principalities were exposed because Christ had won the battle over them.

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<sup>42</sup> Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* 211.

<sup>43</sup> Op. cit., Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 232-35.

That the teachings in this section of the letter also applied to the enslaver, was not lost on the enslaved. Many of them realized that their masters could also receive salvation and some rejoiced and joined them in worship upon learning of their conversion. The idea of communal worship and belief brought the enslaver into their isolation and took the enslaved outside of their world even just for a little while.

The writer in 2:14 references avoiding things for one's own advantage. For the Africans and enslaved Africans their advantage was only considered when it served the purpose of the enslaver. This verse adequately described their condition. They were victims of such treatment and were looking to Christ to remove their yoke of bondage. Their hope was to be separated from the life that defined them and to be free; living in triumph over their present condition.

#### **Colossians 2:16-23 “Initiations, Intrusions, Perversions”**

In 2:23, humility *ταπεινοφροσύνη* is the technical term for “fasting” (in *Hermas* V. III. 10. 6, s.v. 3.7).<sup>46</sup> The writer is aware that within the community are those who fast and he encourages them to investigate their reasons. Matthew records Christ's teaching that fasting was for specific purposes and not to be done for vain glory (17.21; see also Mark 9:29). The Hebrew Bible also gives references to fasting and some in the audience would be familiar with the practice, even if they were not partakers. The writer was telling them to make decisions about what was important. Did they want to lose their reward over these things, which according to him and in the face of who Christ is has little value? It must be stressed here again that these were issues which needed clarification. The labeling of them overshadows the uniqueness of this community; for they appeared to be as curious as they were diverse. The main issue the writer wanted to address was their knowledge of Christ. Examination of this section points to their diverse former beliefs and their willingness to examine their traditions in light of their new beliefs.

Caird's comment is out of context as we continue observing the tone of the letter and also in light of at least interpretations of the

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<sup>46</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 104.

phrase. “‘Angel-worship’ was Paul’s pejorative and emotive term for a practice he wished to ridicule, and that the ‘heretics’ themselves would have resented and repudiated it.”<sup>47</sup> The translation debate over whether it was worship “of” angels or worship “with” angels has not found consensus. He also suggests that this was pre-Gnostic. To say that this was the beginning of a movement (Gnostics) is questionable. The writer may have been addressing a practice that existed among the people in general or just a small group.

The term “intruding” carries three possible meanings: 1) borrowed from the mystery religions and referring to entering the sanctuary after initiation; 2) O.T. metaphor from the occupation of the promised land...the person treats his visions as his most prized territory, his Mecca; 3) investigating.<sup>48</sup> All are viable considering the diversity of the population in Colossae. Here again, as much discussion exists on this topic, it is mentioned briefly in this thesis to point to questions that may have been raised concerning the usage of the term in this context. In the absence of existing correspondence between the writer and Epaphras, it is not known who initially used the term. If Epaphras used the term, the audience could have initiated the discussion to clarify its meaning. If the writer used the term, their question could have varied concerning proper entry into the faith; whether by baptism, circumcision or other rituals that existed in the community. The writer again makes it clear however that faith in Jesus Christ is the unifying entity; anything or anyone else is temporal (2:20-22).

The writer makes a listing of the common teachings mentioned in the beginning of the discussion in this chapter. As many parallels existed, it was necessary to address each one, circumcision, baptism, ordinances, principalities and powers. Each had its place in the existing and developing beliefs and religions of this time. Numerous commentaries expound on the meanings of each in reference to this letter and other letters written by New Testament writers. Concurring comments made in this chapter will correlate with the views held by

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<sup>47</sup> Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon : An Introduction and Commentary*, 105: Citing II Macc. 51. 30, Philo, de Plant, 80.

Morna Hooker. The writer is issuing general warnings about what could occur within the community concerning teachings in the gospel.

The tone of the letter indicates that it is written to an informed audience. This statement does not imply that the enslaved Africans were comparatively uninformed. The instructions build upon each other, beginning with comments about what they already know and then encouraging them to make informed choices about what they are hearing and discussing around them. They are not to shy away from the philosophy, but weigh it and see if it makes sense. He makes a final push in this section by encouraging them to think about what they have learned and if they have decided to become believers, why are they still dwelling on things that are no longer relevant (2:20-23)?

The second chapter of Colossians represents the crux of the argument over the interpretation of “error”, “heresy” and “false teachers” by many commentators. No consensus to date has been reached definitively as to whom they were referring, but it is generally agreed that the community of believers, as with Christianity, was in its infancy. There were issues that needed to be addressed and the writer points out those areas. As with other letters, there is no correspondence to the writer that survived, so speculation as to what was actually reported remains moot.

Many of the enslaved were accused of perverting Christianity because they included traditions and practices from their homeland. Some of these traditions were not personally initiated but passed down through generations and perhaps brought by the new arrivals from Africa. Their practices were sometimes viewed as idolatrous by those who were not familiar with them.<sup>49</sup>

Traditionally Africans believe in numerous spirits, good and evil.<sup>50</sup> Divinities are intermediaries between God and man. In what they believe to be a demon haunted universe, belief in witches and wizards are common. Wind and rain, thunder and lightning are forces that have spiritual forces controlling them. Trees, mountains, rivers, etc. are inhabited by spirits which can either bless or harm man. Fear

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<sup>49</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 56.

<sup>50</sup> Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Rev. ed. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2005), 124-46. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London.: S.C.M. Press, 1973), 173.

of these forces and spirits govern the daily lives of the African and the person who can tap into these entities is also feared. Abogunrin reveals, “Traditionally, nobody would act without consulting a particular or family divinity. The gods and spirits control access to the divine Presence.”<sup>51</sup>

Christianity in the atmosphere of slavery was in a fragile state, as many were frustrated with the teachings from both sides. On one side slave holders were wary of those preaching the gospel because often what ensued were discussions of freeing the slaves or at least giving them liberties that would, as they saw it, cut into their productivity. Some slave holders became Christians but used the scriptures to reinforce their stance on slavery. On the other side the enslaved were often dismayed to find that Christianity in this state was, not the answer to what they needed and, therefore, many either reverted to traditional rituals or incorporated them into Christianity.

Abogunrin writes that, today many of the churches in Africa enslaved their followers by not giving them the freedom they were promised.<sup>52</sup> Traditional practices that still exist in Africa were often a part of the enslaved participation in Christian practices. He states, “The belief in angelic intermediaries is generally common. Prayers are offered through angels to God, especially Michael the Arch-angel. The jingling of the bells three times before prayer is to invite God, Jesus and the angels to join in worship.”<sup>53</sup> Many other rituals are performed that center around worshipping God, however the rituals can often take precedence. People then become focused on formulas and procedures minimizing the attention on God.

In referencing the African Christian churches today, Abogunrin remarks that, “they feel that the mission churches have not preached the gospel undiluted with Western-isms and that the missionaries are not Bible-believing Christians. Today, while the missionary churches are gradually becoming stagnant in growth, these churches are growing in an amazing way.”<sup>54</sup> The mention of missionary activity

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<sup>51</sup> Samuel O. Abogunrin, “The Total Adequacy of Christ in the African Context,” Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso,” *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, (Ogbomoso, Nigeria: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986), 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

does not reflect more recent progress, a topic this thesis cannot address totally. These churches are where rituals have become dominant and Christ is minimized. He blames the lack of teaching of the word of God for the problem in most of these churches. He blames this also on the use of Western terminologies and ideals that fail to see the total picture of African life. Yet it is through these churches that Christianity is making its strongest impact in Africa.

Much of the success of Christianity among the enslaved in North America can be attributed to the perseverance of the enslaved Africans to seek out the truth of the gospel. The sound of drums and exuberant shouts and songs coming from the hush harbors were disturbing and often a cause for fear on the part of the whites who chose to ignore the viability of African culture. In the process of making their beliefs in Christ their own, the enslaved African was warned in this letter to not allow their witness to be held suspect. They are constantly reminded to center their beliefs and actions on Christ; to remember that he is the head and that he is above all. Just as the Colossians were warned, in the context of their society, that Christ is above all they once believed in, so were the enslaved Africans.

### **Conclusion**

The letter to the Colossians revealed the identity of the people of Colossae and spoke to the enslaved Africans revealing to them their identity in Christ. Without tangible evidence of their existence due to the devastation of the town of Colossae this letter serves as their voice. Without labeling them, it was found that they were a diverse people with different ethnicities attempting to understand the doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ being introduced to them by leaders of their community and, later, through this letter. They presented areas of concern and the letter addressed them albeit from a third party perspective. In the process of their inquiries they were led to believe that their status had changed with the knowledge of Christ, however only spiritually. They are reminded that their status in the society in which they lived had not altered.

The enslaved Africans realized they were no longer isolated and their belief in Christ defined them and not their status. However, they too were reminded that their status in the society in which they lived had not changed. Unlike the people of Colossae, the voice of the enslaved African was heard through songs, preaching and the history



of the African American. The message of salvation spoke to them about who they were as Christians and motivated them to seek freedom from slavery of the mind and body.

The message of salvation freed the members of both societies from the oppression they endured in a colonized country, an imperialist government and for some as slaves. Although their situations did not change, looking to Christ as savior brought them out of their isolation into a larger world where freedom could be experienced. Hope of a better existence could be realized. Although difficulties were presented in their attempts to understand and assimilate their beliefs into the gospel, the message of salvation was clear. Christ, the savior was ‘all and in all.’

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