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**PROBLEMATIZING THE “PROTESTANT
HISTORIOGRAPHIC MYTH”
APPLIED TO BOUNDARY DEMARCATIONS
AND THE MAKING OF PAULINISM IN
COLOSSIANS**

Abstract

In spite of a lively debate during the last century, there is still no scholarly consensus about the identity of the opponents in Colossians. The aim of this essay is not to put forward yet another attempt to solve this complex historical problem, but rather to examine how boundaries are drawn between the author and the opponents in Colossians and how similar boundaries are maintained, developed or even created in scholarly historiography.

In what Jonathan Z. Smith refers to as the “Protestant Historiographic Myth”, nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars of biblical studies often understood early Christian developments in terms of an original purity that was lost at a later stage. According to this historiographic construction, the essence of Christianity was distorted through interaction with the cultural and religious environment of the Roman Empire and through the incorporation of pagan elements.

Throughout this essay, I argue that this essentialist conception of early Christianity has shaped the construction of the opponents of Colossians in scholarly literature. In studies of Colossians, many modern scholars have, problematically, recreated the dichotomy between an original apostolic Christianity and later Hellenized deviations. This legacy of the “Protestant Historiographic myth” is mainly expressed in two ways, either as an opposition between the author’s pure apostolic Christianity and the opponents, who are understood as a syncretistic group, composed of a mixture of various Hellenistic elements, or as a dichotomy between Christianity, as represented by the author, and “religion”, as represented by the opponents.

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1. Background

1.1 Introduction

In the beginning¹ was the Word² and It was taken quite literally. Jesus really was conceived by a virgin, really did walk on water and the opponents of Paul (who was the author of all the thirteen epistles) really were evil apostates who had crawled from a true and authentic Christianity (which, by the way, had nothing to do with degenerated Judaism) into the syncretistic hellhole of heresy. Then came the 1800s and things began to change. Liberal theologians such as Schleiermacher, who wanted to reconcile the life of Jesus with a more scientific worldview, removed the miracles from the gospels and made him a worker of ethics instead of wonders. The academic study of Christianity was, however, still in its infancy and much of the progress made was theologically motivated – how was one to understand Jesus Christ as the son of God in the age of reason.

By the end of the 19th century, the authenticity of the Pauline epistles was also challenged; the Pastorals were orphaned, Colossians, Ephesians and 2 Thessalonians were questioned. By the turn of the century only seven of the letters were generally accepted as authentic. The opponents, whether they were attacked by Paul or by one of the pseudo-Pauls, were still viewed as syncretistic deviators from the pure beginnings of the Jesus movement.

With the advent of the twentieth century, the age of progress and certainty, the general ambition was, through careful use of trusted scientific methods, to unravel the objective reality of the historical settings of the gospels. Research was (ostensibly) no longer theologically, but was rather scientifically motivated. In spite of this, the Word was still taken quite literally when it came to the opponents of the N T authors, opponents whose teachings were frequently referred to as heresy or

¹ That is, the beginning of biblical studies.

² That is, the written word.

deviations. They were constantly defined as something wholly other than “authentic” Christianity, as well as defined against this authentic understanding of Christianity.

In our time, the confidence of the twentieth century is in many ways questioned and the age of reason and progress is judged retrospectively as a time of hubris. Postmodern theoreticians like Keith Jenkins have pointed out that historical reality is not something that can be unearthed - neither through archeological excavations nor through specific methodologically sound readings of a text.³ Rather, these theoreticians view archeological findings and texts as traces from the past. By interpreting these traces, we create history, which is something wholly different than the past (in itself always out of reach) and always to a certain extent constructed by scholarly trends, ideology and subjectivity. This tendency to problematize scholarly bias and question positivist pretensions of objectivity also spread to biblical studies. Jonathan Z. Smith’s *Drudgery Divine* and the anthology *Redescribing Christian Origins* edited by Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller offer but a few examples of scholars who call for a more theoretically aware historiography in biblical exegesis.

Still, confessional readings of the Word haunt the scholarly world. Due to the polemical tone of many New Testament writings, Colossians included, where the author aims to establish ideological boundaries vis-à-vis religious opponents, these passages can be particularly vulnerable to essentialist interpretations of history. In my opinion, the main problem is that many scholars still allow the author to dictate historical reality and view the refutation of the opponents as an objective account, rather than a subjective rhetorical construction. As a result the opponents are often defined over against the purported “orthodoxy” of the author, as a deviation from or an inferior interpretation of Christianity. Such a derivative characterization of the opponents is expressed mainly in two ways:

1. By coining categories constructed to define the opponents against a perceived orthodox purity: for example some scholars refer to the opponents in Colossians as “syncretistic ascetics influenced by philosophy, myths and the mysteries” or “Jewish Christians appealing to Moses and natural philosophy”.⁴

³ Jenkins 1991, p 6-15.

⁴ See the examples in Gunther 1973, pp 3-4.

2. As syncretism, defined against a perceived orthodox purity. This group, in contrast to the precedent, acknowledges the limitations of the available categories and argues that these categories do not fill any analytical function as designators for the identity of the opponents. Therefore, they label the opponents “syncretistic”, in contrast to the (pure?) Christianity of the canonical texts.

This essay focuses primarily on the opponents in the letter to the Colossians. Or rather, it questions how boundaries are drawn between the author and the opponents in Colossians and examines how similar boundaries are maintained, developed or even created in scholarly historiography. I therefore examine both the question of how followers of Paul, such as the author of Colossians, contribute in creating an orthodox school of Paulinism and the problem of how scholarly historiography has understood the opponents.

1.2 Research Questions

This essay aims to answer the following questions:

1. What historical context does Colossians address?
2. What can we know with confidence about the opponents in Colossians?
3. How does the author draw boundaries between addressees and opponents in Colossians?
4. How are boundaries created in scholarly historiography?

1.3 Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

1.3.1 Point of Departure

My point of departure is an anti-essentialist approach to religious categories. Rather than view definitions of these categories as universal, I perceive them as discourses whose meanings are subject to constant change. Thus, a religious category such as Christianity, Gnosticism or Judaism, must in some way always be seen as a simplification – a caricature of historical events and strands of thought that can never

wholly correspond to the reality it intends to describe, affected by scholarly trends, ideological positions and confessional interests. That scholars also come from a wholly different cultural milieu than the subjects they investigate presents perhaps the greatest challenge to modern research.

As Talal Asad points out, a definition of a religious category establishes boundaries in relation to other religious categories by highlighting certain characteristics at the expense of others.⁵ The choice of which characteristics are highlighted depends on how the boundaries are drawn and is also connected with the selection of other traditions against which the religious category is set up.

During the last three decades, critical studies of scholarly bias in the academic study of religion have become more common. A good example of this positive trend in some scholarship is Smith's *Drudgery Divine*, where he argues that the Protestant notion of an original purity of earliest Christianity, distorted by the intellectualism and Hellenism of the early church fathers, has had profoundly negative influences on much biblical scholarship.⁶ Such a notion of an original purity, only accessible through reading of scripture (*sola scripture*), implies that Christianity has been seen as something totally unique, a phenomenon *sui generis*, not comparable or reducible to anything else. Smith argues that on a historical level, this is "an assertion of the radical incomparability of the Christian 'proclamation' with respect to the 'environment'".⁷ In other words, "pure" Christianity is placed *outside* of history and it is through subsequent interactions with the cultural and historical environment that the decline starts. According to what Smith calls "the Protestant Historiographic myth", Christianity is perceived as unique in contrast to other religions, just as apostolic or Pauline Christianity is unique with respect to other (later) Christianities.⁸

Naturally, this assumption of uniqueness has consequences for the manner in which studies of comparative religion/theology have been carried out.⁹ Karen King argues in her book *What is Gnosticism?* that categories like Gnosticism were "created" by the early church fathers to discursively define their religious opponents

⁵ Asad 1993 *passim*. See particularly p 28-29.

⁶ See Smith 1990, pp 1-35.

⁷ Smith 1990, p 39.

⁸ Smith 1990, p 43.

⁹ For a great study of how the "world religions" were created, defined and valued in the 18th and 19th century after their perceived distance to the Christian traditions, see Masuzawa's *The invention of the world religions* from 2005. For an overview, see Masuzawa's introduction p 1-33.

as “the Other”, in contrast to orthodox Christianity. While these statements about the church father’s view of Gnosticism are not particularly controversial, King goes further to argue that this heritage lives on even in modern critical scholarship, for example in the scholarly tendencies to approach Gnosticism as the negative counterpart of Christianity. That heritage results in seeing Gnosticism as a distortion of earliest Christianity’s supposed purity and neglects the fact that many of the traditions labeled as Gnosticism understood themselves as Christian.¹⁰

Smith also recognizes that this “Protestant historiographic myth” is present in more recent scholarship, but disguised as if evaluating traditions in terms of authenticity was a question on chronology.¹¹ In other words, the earliest traditions win the de facto prize for being the most authentic. This evaluation of religious traditions combined with the notion of Christianity as something unique and not comparable in any way to any other religious tradition creates problem for an anti-essentialist point of view.

In what follows, I discuss the quest for pure origin and the concept of uniqueness, pointing out how these notions are problematic and how an anti-essentialist approach offers a way forward, beyond the “Protestant Historiographic myth”. I also discuss the implications that this carries for historical and comparative studies and I account for some methodological issues.

1.3.2 On Origins

In contrast to “the Protestant historiographic myth” – and really any myth of origins - an anti-essential approach abandons the quest for pure origins. Categories are discursive constructions. The actual historical events to which they intend to correspond are diverse and complex. In his article, “Nietzsche, genealogy, history,” Michel Foucault differentiates between what he calls the genealogical method and the historian’s quest for origins.¹² Foucault argues that the latter, which is occupied with tracing a certain phenomenon back in time and arranging history rationally according to continuity, is based on the metaphysical notion that historical

¹⁰ King 2003 passim. See particularly King’s analysis of the scholarship of Adolf von Harnack, which serves as a good example of her main hypothesis, pp 55-70.

¹¹ Smith 1990, p 43.

¹² Foucault (1984) passim.

developments follow a certain logical pattern of progress.¹³ Foucault rejects this notion. Historical developments are rather, according to him, irrational and discontinuous – regulated above all by power interests. This assumption can be questioned – even if power interests play a major role, they can hardly be the only determinant that influences historical development. I concur, however, with Foucault’s critique of the notion of origins and I agree that the historian’s task should not be to find the origin or essence of a phenomenon but rather to map out how phenomena changes over time.¹⁴ This focus on tracing changes rather than pure origins has implications for the questions scholars ought to engage, as well as for the manner in which one understands historical developments and categories.

Therefore it is not relevant to establish the authenticity of certain traditions, on the basis of their alleged “purity”, deeming one second century group of Christ believers less authentic than another. In the last twenty years, several scholars have sharply criticized the tendency to gather diverse religious phenomena under the label of Gnosticism, creating the ostensible impression of a unity, a construction of a collective “Other”.¹⁵ I would like to argue that the depiction of a first century orthodox unity deserves to be treated with suspicion.

In this essay, when I make use of categories like Platonism and Stoicism it is not to suggest that, in the Hellenistic period, there existed only one authentic Platonic understanding of a certain concept. On the contrary, a diversity of understandings would be a more plausible working hypothesis. My use of such categories is pragmatic. I use a category like Platonism to refer to the philosophical schools that understood themselves as the heirs of Plato, but I do so with the critical awareness that the categorical divisions that we construct create rather than describe history.

Smith asks whether any historical event (or religious tradition) can be unique, since that term designates something wholly different than everything perceived prior to that particular event. From a historian’s point of view, “unique” would then signify “mentally incomprehensible”, something that in itself is incomprehensible.¹⁶ Rather than trying to point out “uniqueness” or “sameness”, Smith calls for a “discourse of difference”:

¹³ Foucault 1984, pp 88-89.

¹⁴ Foucault 1984, pp 83-84.

¹⁵ See King 2003 passim, but particularly p 154-169, and Williams 1996 passim, but particularly p 46-50.

¹⁶ Smith 1990, p 42.

What is required is the development of a discourse of “difference,” a complex term which invites negotiation, classification and comparison, and, at the same time, avoids too easy a discourse of the “same”. It is, after all, the attempt to block the latter that gives the Christian apologetic language of the “unique” its urgency.¹⁷

In this essay on the opponents in Colossians I have attempted to emulate Smith’s view and refrain from stressing either the “sameness” or “uniqueness” of the pseudo-epigraphical author’s expressions.

1.3.3 On Syncretism

If one finds Smith’s conceptualization persuasive, the dysphemistic implications of “syncretism” lose their meaning, since syncretism imply that certain phenomena are less authentic and consists of a mixture of influences - in contrast to other phenomena that are more pure. While this may be true when it comes to chemistry, it is much harder to apply the same principle to *social* phenomena, including religious groups. Yet the term syncretism occurs frequently in articles, monographs and biblical commentaries dealing with the opponents of Colossians.

In *What is Gnosticism?* King develops an “anti-syncretistic discourse”. An anti-syncretistic discourse functions to establish boundaries between what is syncretistic or a corruption of some original purity, on the one hand, and what is genuine and pure, on the other hand.¹⁸ When King criticizes the positing of an anti-syncretistic discourse, she is mainly referring to how the church fathers in their polemical works established boundaries between “pure” Christianity and various “heresies”.

In analyzing Colossians, I show that similar anti-syncretistic discourse, with the function of separating the normative and pure from the corrupt. When New Testament exegetes, such as Lars Hartman and Arthur Patzia, stress the anxiety of the believers that made them deviate from the pure teachings and turn to syncretism, an anti-syncretistic discourse similar to the ones of the church fathers is naively perpetuated. In “Humble and Confident: On the so-called philosophy in Colossians”, Hartman writes:

The syncretism which was a typical feature of the age meant a confusing ethnic and cultural pluralism in which many religions, philosophies and cults offered their solutions, also such as involved magic, mantics and astrology. Many individuals seem to have felt

¹⁷ Smith 1990, *ibid.*

¹⁸ King 2003, p 33-34.

insecure and sought for meaning, structure, stability, perhaps for atonement with Tyche, or for support by powers stronger than destiny.¹⁹

Since the passages that provides us with information of the opponents are polemical, rebuking followers who are threatened to be deceived by teachings that are “according to the elemental spirits of the universe” (Col 2:8), it seems that they are particularly vulnerable to essentialist interpretations of history. While New Testament scholars are well aware that the polemical passages provide a subjective account of the author’s position and do not always serve as a reliable source in the description of the “other”, many scholars still dichotomize the apostolic Christianity and the “heresy” of the opponents. One of the more extreme examples can be found in Jerome Murphy-O’Connor’s article on Colossians in *Oxford Bible Commentary*. Murphy-O’Connors creates the following picture of the opponents in Colossians:

Here he has to deal with a fashionable religious fad without intellectual depth, whose proponents floated in a fantasy world. His concern is to restore a sense of reality, to set the feet of the misguided on solid ground. They grasped at shadows. He had to show them that Christ was substance (2:17).²⁰

Murphy-O’Connor’s comments on the opponents in Colossians reflect a bygone era, when scholars employing an essentialist historiography did not even bother to conceal their contempt for Paul’s opponents or even of (possibly fictitious) opponents, as presented by the pseudo-Pauline authors.²¹ This is however not the case. Murphy-O’Connor’s article is a part of a Bible commentary from the beginning of the twenty-first century, published by Oxford University Press, one of the most prestigious university presses of the world. Since Murphy-O’Connor’s approach is emblematic of a problematic trend among exegetes, this paper’s critical study of the making of boundaries between Paulinism and heresy in Colossians and of essentialist construals of boundary demarcations in scholarly literature is needed.

1.4 Previous Research

Already in 1973, John J. Gunther accounts for at least 44 different scholarly opinions on the identity of the opponents in Colossians.²² Now, forty years after Gunther’s

¹⁹ Hartman 1995, p 36.

²⁰ Murhpy-O’Connors 2001, p 1192.

²¹ See Smith 1990, pp 43-46.

²² Gunther 1973, pp 3-4.

study, the number of diverse positions has certainly not grown fewer. Despite a lively debate, the scholarly world is even further from a consensus on the question of the identity of the opponents. In this section, I provide a brief survey of some of the more influential scholarly position. These positions will be discussed more extensively later.²³

In his book *The Colossian controversy: Wisdom in dispute at Colossae*, Richard E. DeMaris provides an excellent survey of the main scholarly positions on the opponents of Colossians, dividing characterizations of the opponents into five schools of interpretation: 1. Jewish Gnosticism; 2. Gnostic Judaism; 3. Ascetic, Apocalyptic, Mystical Judaism; 4. Hellenistic syncretism; 5. Hellenistic philosophy.²⁴ A working, and unexamined, hypothesis in much scholarship is that Colossians addresses *just one set* of opponents – a point that the letter neither confirms nor denies.

The first distinction between Jewish Gnosticism and Gnostic Judaism is mainly motivated by whether a scholar emphasizes the Jewish or Gnostic elements of the group. Since this distinction is not of crucial importance in this study, I treat these schools as one single tradition of interpretation, where the Jewish and/or Gnostic elements of the opponents are emphasized. In this group, Eduard Lohse is one of the most influential proponents of this view. Lohse places particular emphasis on the occurrence of terms such as powers (ἐξουσίαι), principalities (ἀρχαί) and fullness (πλήρωμα), as well as on the problematic influences of philosophy, asceticism and worship of angels.²⁵ These pre-Gnostic adherents, Lohse argues, were living in fear of intermediary entities and tried to appease them through veneration, ascetic practices and food regulations.²⁶

In regard to a third characterization of the opponents, John J. Gunther advocate for the Ascetic, Apocalyptic and Mystical Judaism school of interpretation, arguing

²³ Due to space limitations, I have only provided a brief survey of the most influential scholarly positions and save the discussion for section 2 and 3 of this essay.

²⁴ DeMaris 1994, pp 38-39. For the whole survey, see pp 18-40.

²⁵ Lohse 1971, pp 3, 57, 96-99, 116-121, 128-131

²⁶ For an additional proponent of this view, see Macdonald 1980 pp 12-14 who suggests a protognostic “heresy”.

that the opponents in Colossians should be understood as Essenes, or as apocalyptic and legalistic Jews with a developed angelology and an ethical dualism.²⁷

A fourth option, that of Hellenistic syncretism, is rather broad, encompassing a range of scholarly positions. The common denominator for scholars such as Hartman, Patzia and Clinton Arnold is an emphasis on a mixture of multiple influences from astrology, mystery cults, angel veneration, and Hellenistic folk beliefs.²⁸ In his book, *The Colossian Syncretism*, Arnold explains that “syncretism” covers a wide range of traditions and is not meant to be derogatory in any way:

The use of the term syncretism here and in the title of the book is not intended to prejudge the teachings of the opponents as bad, heretical or unorthodox (thus, the previous references to “the Colossian heresy” or “die kolossische Irrlehre”). The designation is descriptive insofar as the competing teaching represents a blending of a variety of religious traditions.²⁹

Finally, as a fifth option, Eduard Schweizer is one of the most influential scholars who interprets the opponents as belonging to a Hellenistic school of philosophy, who argues that the term στοιχεῖα that occurs in Col 2:8 and 2:20 should be interpreted as a technical term referring to the four elements, which are common in philosophical speculations.³⁰ Schweizer goes on to argue that there are many common denominators between the description of opponents in Colossians and the Neo-Pythagorean school and, for this reason, that the opponents are most likely to be Neo-Pythagoreans.³¹ DeMaris offers an alternate version of the Hellenistic philosophy school, maintaining that the opponents should be understood as a middle Platonic school of thought.³²

In addition to the five main scholarly positions that DeMaris outlines, a few less common, but nonetheless significant, positions ought also to be mentioned. In her 1973 article, Morna Hooker challenges the assumption that Colossians mirrors a historical reality in which a particular group is rejected. She concludes that the epistle is concerned not with a specific group, but rather with the general “threat” of

27 See Gunther 1973, pp 314-317. Another advocate of this school is Bruce, who suggests Merkabah mysticism as the religious identity of the opponents, Bruce 1984, pp 22-24.

28 See Hartman 1985, pp 121-125 and Hartman 1995, particularly p 36. Patzia 1990, p 4; Bart & Blanke 1994, pp 38-39; Arnold 1996 passim.

29 Arnold 1996, p 1.

30 Schweizer 1988, pp 455-456.

31 Schweizer 1988, pp 464-466.

³² See DeMaris 1994, “The historical and social settings of the Colossian philosophy”, pp 98-133. For other advocates of this school, see Martin 1996 esp. 205-206, who suggests that the opponents were Cynic philosophers.

Hellenism and that the author tries to persuade newly converted Christians to not turn back to their former religious convictions.³³

During the last ten years, a few scholars have begun to question the tendency to either trace the opponents to a certain category of tradition, e.g. middle platonic philosophy or Gnosticism, or to label the opponents as “syncretistic”. One example of this is Robert Wilson’s commentary in the International Critical Commentary series.

We have to think not of abstract 'heresies' but of people in different areas who combined ideas from their own earlier background with their new Christian faith, and sometimes reached conclusions which to others appeared to be detrimental to that faith, and which in a later age were to be denounced as heretical.³⁴

Wilson provides a balanced discussion of Colossians and refrains from the dichotomizing discourse of apostolic Christianity and heresy. Rather than viewing the school of the author as the one true apostolic Paulinism, Wilson acknowledges a multitude of competing Pauline worldviews of which the author’s position is but one of many.

2. Boundary Demarcations in Colossians

2.2.1 Historical Context of Colossians

It is almost impossible to write about Colossians without first taking a position on the question of authorship. Since the issue is of crucial importance for the question of date and historical context of the epistle, I will address this point first.

As most scholars have acknowledged, the language of Colossians differs significantly from the undisputed Pauline epistles including Galatians and 1 and 2 Corinthians.³⁵ The famous Pauline sarcasms and the passionate outbursts that otherwise tend to characterize the writings of Paul are absent in Colossians. Moreover, the epistle also differs in its almost excessive use of the Greek preposition

³³ Hooker 1973, pp 121-136. See particularly p 129.

³⁴ Robert Wilson 2005, pp 22-23. A similar position can also be found in Dunn 1996, who argues that labels like “false teachings” and “heresy” causes scholars to ignore the many common denominators between the opponents and the author. Dunn 1996, p 35.

³⁵ See for example Hartman 1985, p 198-199.

έν, its tendency to use synonyms and its fondness of genitive constructions.³⁶ Colossians also contains 48 words that are not used in the other Pauline letters.³⁷ 34 of these do not occur in any other book of the New Testament. Many of Paul's favorite terms, both nouns and verbs with over 30 occurrences in the genuine letters, are missing in Colossians.³⁸ Among these terms are: righteousness, law, to reckon, to write, to boast, brothers, children and beloved ones. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that there are also several words with more than 50 occurrences in the Pauline letters also present in Colossians.³⁹ However, a later pseudonymous imitator could seek to emulate Pauline style if he had access to one or more Pauline letters.

Colossians does not only differ from the genuine Pauline epistles in terms of language, but also in theology. The cosmic dimensions of the Christology are different and the Christology is also higher than in the genuine letters. The term ἐκκλησία designates a universal institution, rather than local house congregations, as in the genuine Pauline letters, and the metaphorical interpretation in which Christ is the head and ἐκκλησία the body is a new development.⁴⁰

The theology of baptism is also different. Just as in the genuine letters, the author speaks of the followers of Jesus as having died and been buried with Christ, but he also adds that they have been raised from the dead with Christ (Col 2:12-13; 2:20; 3:1; 3:3-4). Unlike the genuine epistles, there are no references to the imminent coming of Christ. Rather, it is emphasized, for example, in Col 3:3-4 – that the believers already have the lives that in the Pauline epistles are reserved for the time after the return of Christ.

Some scholars, in an effort to maintain the authenticity of Colossians, explain these incoherencies by either attributing the epistle to a disciple who wrote it with Paul's approval or by attributing it to Paul himself, suggesting that he dictated the

³⁶ As Walter Wilson 1997, p 18, notes, these differences appear throughout the whole epistle and are not concentrated in any particular section.

³⁷ Barth & Blanke 1994, p 57.

³⁸ Barth & Blanke 1994, p 59.

³⁹ Ibid. A few examples are: Brother, love, truth, apostle, glory, power, peace.

⁴⁰ Wilson 1997, p 19.

letter using a scribe.⁴¹ Others, however, argue that the epistle should be understood as a pseudoepigraphon and, on this basis, propose a much later date.⁴²

Among those who prefer an early date of the epistle, it is common to argue that Colossae was destroyed in an earthquake in 60/61 and conclude that the epistle must have been written beforehand.⁴³ I do not consider this to be a sufficient reason for an early date of the epistle. First, because we, as Dunn accounts, neither literary sources nor archeological data reveal information of the damage suffered to Colossae.⁴⁴ Second, because the conclusion that Colossians was written prior to the earthquake rests on the assumption that no author, writing pseudo-epigraphically or not, would chose to address “a heap of ruins”.⁴⁵ I would like to challenge this assumption. As will be discussed more extensively below, the author of the epistle does not indicate that he had visited Colossae. In contrast to genuine Pauline letters, such as 1 Thessalonians or 1 Corinthians, that actually deal with specific problems, the exhortations in Colossians are of a more universal character and are not restricted to particular time or place. Neither does the author refer by name to any of his opponents. Even the descriptions of the opponents in Col 2:8, 16-23 are vague (which could also explain why the scholarly opinions on their identity ranges from Cynic philosophers to Merkabah oriented Jews who follow the Torah to the teeth).

Collectively, these observations favor the inference that the author did not have any immediate interest in the city of Colossae as such, but rather used it as a platform addressing a threat of false teachings. If the epistle had been concerned with problems and exhortations specific to a local Colossian church in the 50s, it could be reasonable to assume, as Hartman does, that the author would not address

⁴¹ Bruce 1984, p 32. argues that the epistle was written during Paul’s lifetime by a disciple. This position is also shared by Hartman 1985, p 200. James D. G. Dunn leaves the question open, suggesting that Colossians was either written by a disciple with Paul’s approval or by a Paul who himself changed in language and theology. Dunn 1996, pp 35-39. For scholars advocating a Pauline authorship, see Lohse 1971 p 4; Macdonald 1980, p 11. Barth & Blanke 1994, p 125; Murphy-O’Connors 2001, p 1191.

⁴² See Wilson 2005, p 35 and Charles Talbert 2007, pp 10-12. Talbert suggests that theologians from the inner Pauline circle have written the letter and dates it to somewhere between the late 50s and the end of the first century.

⁴³ Hartman 1985, p 200. Barth & Blanke 1994, p 134. See also James A. Kelhoffer’s discussion of the earthquake in Laodicea and its implications for the question of date of Revelations and Colossians, in Kelhoffer 2012, pp 554-557.

⁴⁴ Dunn 1996, p 23. Angela Standhartinger also questions the assumption that the city of Colossae was abandoned, due to the lack of evidence. Standhartinger 2004, p 586.

⁴⁵ Hartman’s formulation. Hartman 1985, p 200.

a heap of ruins.⁴⁶ I do not, however, consider this to be a convincing objection to a later dating of Colossians. Standhartinger, for example, argues that Colossae was chosen due to the symbolic value of the town.⁴⁷ By addressing a heap of ruins, the pseudonymous author faced no threat of rebuttal from a living Christian community in Colossae. Therefore, a specific and fictitious setting could offer an earlier, apostolic platform to address problems in the author's own time.⁴⁸

To summarize, the eschatology of an already realized resurrection, the cosmic Christology and the total absence of any references to the imminent coming of Christ suggest a later date for Colossians after Paul had died. For these reasons, I side with scholars such as Walter Wilson and Robert Wilson, who argue that Colossians should be dated in the 70s or 80s of the first century and moreover should be viewed as a Pauline pseudoepigraphon.⁴⁹

2.2 Paulinism in Context

2.2.1 Ancient Philosophical Schools

Among the philosophical schools in antiquity, it was a well established custom to continue the work of the founder of a certain school through pseudoepigraphical writings. We have works preserved from Pseudo-Plutarch(s), Pseudo-Aristotle(s) Pseudo-Apollodoros and Pseudo-Heraclitus. Moreover, the Pseudo-Homeric works – the Homeric hymns – practically compromise a whole genre of mythic narratives. To emulate the identity of a founder or a prominent person of a particular

⁴⁶ Hartman 1985, p 200.

⁴⁷ Standhartinger 2004t5, p 585. "The selection of a small town somewhere in the hinterland of Asia Minor manifestly demonstrates the spread of the gospel throughout the world, even to the furthest corner of the Roman Empire."

⁴⁸ Dunn 1997, p 19, writes that Colossians serves as a "bridge" between the undisputed Pauline letters and the epistles that are generally considered deutero-Pauline. The character of the letter is more "general". Instead of addressing the problems of a certain local congregation, the emphasis is on the universal *ἐκκλησία*. In a similar manner, it is stressed that the gospel has been proclaimed throughout the whole world in Col 1:5-6, 23. Both Laodicea and Hierapolis, two other cities in the Lycus valley, are mentioned in Colossians (2:1, 4:13-16) as centers for missionary activities. In Col 4:16, the author directs the addressees to exchange letters with the residents of Laodicea. As Standhartinger 2004 points out, none of the genuine Pauline letters were intended to be spread and distributed to other churches. The message in Colossians is thus not limited to certain situation or place, but rather of universal relevance. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the main interest of the author lies not in the city of Colossae, but in the more general situation of the development of the Pauline school in the Roman Empire.

⁴⁹ See the discussion above.

philosophical school was an effective way to exert moral influence over people who in some way were affiliated with this certain tradition.

These “schools” were not institutions in the modern sense of the word, since there was no central organization or institutionalized system of education.⁵⁰ Rather, people were loosely affiliated to a αἵρεσις, which can be roughly translated as “school” or “system of philosophical principles.”⁵¹ Who belonged and did not belong to a certain αἵρεσις could be somewhat arbitrary. It was not necessary to be teaching philosophy professionally in order to be affiliated to a αἵρεσις. Often it was sufficient to profess ideas that were considered Platonic or Stoic,⁵² as David Runia summarizes:

One could identify a group of people sharing common views and say of them: “they belong to a particular haireisis”, but one would not say: “they are that particular haireisis”. One might compare “movements” or “directions of thought” in modern philosophy or theology, such as phenomenologists, positivists, Neo-Kantians, Barthians etc.⁵³

In antiquity, the boundaries between one αἵρεσις and another were not obvious. Neither was self designation a criterion for “membership”. As mentioned above, one could be understood as a “Pythagorean”, even if one did not consider oneself as such. Alternately, some adherents could be passionately devoted to a αἵρεσις, expressing a loyalty to its tenets and to particularly important teachers.

The αἵρεσις were usually centered on the founder or on a particularly influential person of the “school”. Each αἵρεσις had certain δόγματα, doctrines, which were generally attributed to the founder.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, these doctrines were constantly modified and developed through the sometimes quite creative interpretations of authoritative philosophical writings. After their deaths the founders and particularly influential individuals were often “deified” and venerated in an almost godlike fashion.

2.2.2 The Pauline Legacy as a Philosophical School

Even in the genuine Pauline letters, there are many common denominators between the presentation of the school of Paul and a philosophical αἵρεσις. Scholars have long acknowledged how the Pauline corpus closely follows Greco-Roman

⁵⁰ Runia 1995, pp 6-7.

⁵¹ Liddel & Scott 1924. αἵρεσις 2.

⁵² Runia 1995, p 7.

⁵³ Runia 1999, p 120.

⁵⁴ Runia 1999, pp 121-122.

conventions for letter writing. An ancient letter containing a moral exhortation, where the addressees are urged to adopt a certain way of life, would immediately be recognized as a conventional form of philosophical discourse.⁵⁵ While Paul's exhortations in Phil 3:17-4:1, 1 Cor 11:1 and Gal 4:12 that the addressees should imitate him may appear to the modern reader as a simple act of bragging, this manner of speaking was immediately recognized as a marker, indicating the relevance, actuality and authority of the message. A philosopher's life was during antiquity understood as closely related to, if not inseparable from, his teachings. In this manner, the philosopher functioned as the role model whose life and teachings were to be emulated.

As Walter Wilson points out, in Colossians, the vocabulary, in which different kinds of "wisdom" occur, would be at home in a philosophical context.⁵⁶ Occurring terms like σοφία (1:9, 28, 2:3, 23, 3:16, 4:5) ἐπίγνωσις (1:9, 10, 2:2, 3:10) γνῶσις (2:3) σύνεσις (1:9, 2.2) φρονεῖν (3:2) and δίανοια (1:21) are used to designate the importance of the right understanding and insight of the message mediated by the author. The persona of Paul is presented as a wise teacher, a role model, and the addressees are constantly exhorted to emulate this wisdom themselves.

Angela Standhartinger argues that Colossians is to be understood as a "heavenly letter". In the philosophical schools, there was a widespread conception that extraordinary men, often founders of a certain school, wrote a letter before their death in order to summarize their teachings.⁵⁷ Similarly, these extraordinary men could also send letters from the underworld and articulate their ideas through an earthly mediator who wrote down the message. Standhartinger argues that Colossians purports to have been written by Paul in prison, just prior to his execution, with the intention to be understood as his last will and testament – a summary of his most important tenets.⁵⁸ In Col 2:5, the spiritual presence of Paul is contrasted to his physical absence, in order to emphasize how the legacy of his teachings lives on through the conduct of his followers.

Likely, the author was addressing an audience who were already familiar with the significance and achievements of Paul. I concur with Standhartinger who

⁵⁵ See Wilson 1997, pp 47-50.

⁵⁶ Wilson 1997, p 66.

⁵⁷ Standhartinger 2004, p 583.

⁵⁸ Standhartinger 2004, p 584

suggests that the letter is written primarily as a reaction to the increasing uncertainty among the followers evoked by Paul's death.⁵⁹ The coming of Christ, described as imminent in passages such as Rom 13:11 and 1 Thess 4:13-18, did not occur under Paul's life time, as expected. Through the emphasis on the already realized resurrection, for example, in Col 3:3, the author modifies the apocalyptic expectations of Paul in order to adapt them to a post-Pauline setting. The author also stresses the spiritual presence of Paul (Col 2:5), calls for endurance through the use of growth metaphors and exhorts the addressees to stay rooted in Jesus Christ (2:6-7).

That the letter also addresses issues, such as diversity, internal differences and power struggles, indicates that there were other competing schools, perhaps with a similar understanding of themselves as the heirs of Paul. In what follows, I discuss how the author attempts to draw boundaries between his Pauline schools and the Pauline schools of the opponents through exhortations and polemic. My intention is to raise the questions of how a specific "Pauline" identity was created through the exclusion of others, how the opponents were portrayed in Colossians and how they are portrayed in modern scholarly historiography. Finally, I will raise the question of how much it is possible to know about the opponents through the scarce information provided in Colossians and question the assumption that the polemical passages in Colossians necessarily have to refer to a particular religious group.

2.3 Boundary Demarcations in Colossians

2.3.1 Paraenetic Teaching and Anti-Models

In the previous section, it was argued that the rhetoric and paraenesis of Colossians in many ways resemble the ethical teachings of the many ancient philosophical schools. The same can be said about Colossians' polemical rhetoric.

The purpose of this rhetoric of persuasion and exhortation was to define the boundaries of orthodoxy and heresy. Therefore, the author of Colossians was more interested in defining the boundaries of his own school, than in providing an accurate description the opponents. I concur with Walter Wilson and argue that these rhetorical accounts of wrongdoers and heretics are designed to provide an anti-

⁵⁹ Standhartinger 2004, p 585.

model - that is, to depict something or someone that the addressees should *avoid*.⁶⁰ The opponents function thus as a rhetorical device of contrast, in order to make the author's school appear more attractive.

Both James D. G. Dunn and Walter Wilson observe that the polemical passages in Colossians are mild in comparison to their equivalents in the genuine Pauline letters, e.g. Gal 1:6-9; 5:12; 2 Cor 11:12-15; Phil 3:2.⁶¹ Dunn argues that the author most likely did not consider the opponents to be an immediate threat and argues that they were not, as other scholars have suggested, the most pressing reason why the epistle was written at all.⁶² Both Dunn and Walter Wilson argue that the main focus and reason for writing is the author's own paraenetic teaching. In particular, Wilson stresses that the author only is interested in the opponents insofar that they can be used as a negative type to strengthen the authority of the author's own school.

As mentioned above, the author keeps the exhortations on a general level and refrains from providing more specific information or advice. This can also be said about the refutations in 2:8 and 2:16-23 which provide little specific information and displays no personal acquaintance at all. Walter Wilson suggests that the reason why the author provides so scarce information about the opponents could be that he does not want to betray the post-Pauline origin of the letter.⁶³ Here I find Wilson's argumentation persuasive. Wilson goes on, however, to argue that, as in other NT letters, more specific information was not necessary, since the opponents were familiar to the intended audience. In other words, there was indeed, according to Wilson, particular group of opponents that were known by both the author and the addressees. This group was not considered as an immediate threat to the community, but rather perceived and used as a negative model.

2.3.2 Existentialist and Gnostic Construals of the Opponents

In this subsection, I challenge Walter's construction of the opponents in Colossians. Even if I share Walter Wilson's view that the critique in 2:8 and 2:16-23 is directed to

⁶⁰ See Wilson 1997, pp 152-158 for a survey of the function of polemic in philosophical schools.

⁶¹ Dunn 1997, p 35.

⁶² Ibid. Dunn argues that rather than an immediate threat, the polemic in 2:16-23 is directed against "a synagogue apologetic promoting itself as a credible philosophy more than capable of dealing with whatever heavenly power might be thought to control or threaten human existence."

⁶³ Wilson 1997, p 171.

the addressees with the primary purpose to direct and educate them,⁶⁴ I am critical towards Wilson's reconstruction of the identity of the opponents. Wilson sketches the opponents as an anxious group, living in a constant fear of hostile powers and principalities demanding veneration and worship.⁶⁵ This understanding of the opponents seems to be at least partly based on Wilson's chapter on "Colossians and its Hellenistic Context," where he writes extensively about the "Weltangst" characterizing the Roman Empire, whose "social and religious developments contributed to feelings of dislocation and loneliness among Hellenistic people".⁶⁶ Wilson further maintains that, "as a result, in their current situation people felt themselves to be aliens and exiles, groping for personal wholeness and spiritual identity, while at the same time harboring resentment both against the human world and against human nature itself."⁶⁷

Such a dated and dubious view, which Wilson seems to embrace, of antiquity as a period of anxiety, alienation and profound human loneliness, thrived in the first half of the twentieth century, when existentialism was particularly fashionable.⁶⁸ In an excellent survey and critical study of this view of cosmic pessimism, Nicola Denzey argues persuasively that the sources supporting it are few and that this view is the result of a deficient methodology, where scholars such as Franz Cumont and E. R. Dodds interpreted antique texts in the light of a modern (existentialistic) worldview and used texts from the 4th century C.E to provide a religious and social setting for the first century C.E.⁶⁹ One of the sources that Denzey discusses is Colossians, whose elements, powers and principalities, when interpreted in light of much later texts and the presupposition that humanity felt particularly alienated during late antiquity, have been understood as personifications of oppressing and enslaving astrological entities.⁷⁰ Denzey argues, on the contrary, that the notion of an irrational humanity, helplessly caught in the clutches of fate until they are saved through the faith in Christ, was a part of an early Christian ideological discourse with the purpose to contrast the irrationality of the non-Christian life to the perfected life of the believer.

⁶⁴ Wilson 1997, p 152, 172.

⁶⁵ Wilson 1997, pp 172-178.

⁶⁶ Wilson 1997, p 3.

⁶⁷ Wilson 1997, p 4.

⁶⁸ For an example of this existentialistic perspective, see Hans Jonas' essay "Gnosticism, Nihilism and Existentialism" in Jonas 1963, pp 320-340.

⁶⁹ Denzey 2004 passim.

⁷⁰ Denzey 2004, p 292.

There is no compelling evidence that supports the view of the first century as a more “irrational” and anxious age than any other particular time. Further, there are no sources going back to the first century that indicate such notion of one’s own group as enslaved to and oppressed by fate or astrological entities. Rather, those enslaved are always the opponents, as Denzey points out:

Consistently in our primary sources, whether Christian, Jewish or Pagan, we find a shared conviction: while heimarmene⁷¹ certainly exists, it only enslaves the “other”, not the members of the group with whom the author himself identifies.⁷²

The fatal flaw with Wilson’s account for the Hellenistic context of Colossians is that it is almost entirely built on *secondary literature*, many of whose authors are part of the existentialist-theological perspective that Denzey criticizes.⁷³ Wilson quotes only two primary sources, sources that, in my opinion, provide no support for his application to Colossians the theory that antiquity was an age of existential anxiety. The sources quoted – Seneca’s *De Tranquillitate Animi* 2.10 and Marcus Aurelius’ *Ad Se Ipsum* 2.17 - rather function to dichotomize the transience of a “worldly” life and the wisdom of the life of the philosopher.⁷⁴ Rather than advocating an alienated attitude towards the world à la the philosophy of Albert Camus⁷⁵, the passages quoted indicate Marcus Aurelius’ and Seneca’s a notion of the philosopher as the enlightened one, in contrast to the uneducated peasants.

Likewise, the explanation that the opponents were Gnostics tends to emphasize the use of terms such as powers and principalities, since they also commonly occur in Gnostic terminology. Lohse, who was the perhaps most prominent advocator of

⁷¹ Fate.

⁷² Denzey 2004, p 295.

⁷³ Among the authors who Wilson builds his arguments on and who Denzey is particularly critical towards are Hans Dieter Betz and E. R. Dodds.

⁷⁴ See Wilson 1997, pp 4-5.

⁷⁵ Ironically, Camus was surprisingly careful in applying his own existentialist philosophy to the settings of late antiquity. In his thesis from the mid 30s *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, publically available first 2007, Camus describes the Gnostic currents of thoughts as “an attempt to reconcile knowledge and salvation” and the Gnostics as obsessed with the problem of evil.” Camus (2007) p 67-69. In this aspect, Camus is closer to modern scholars that stress the importance of the theodicy dilemma for the Gnostic strands of thought, than to earlier existentialist scholars like Dodds. It is rather in Camus description of the absurd and alienated situation of the modern man, most explicitly described in *The Myth of Sisyphos* 1942, pp 1-63, that we can find the modern existentialist philosophy that inspired scholars like Dodds and Cumont, who in their turn have influenced modern scholars like Walter Wilson.

the Gnostic school of interpretation, argues that the opponents were pre-Gnostics living in fear of intermediary entities, entities whom they were trying to appease.⁷⁶

This explanation is problematic for several reasons. First, Colossians never explicitly states that the opponents understand or believe themselves to be under the rule of powers and principalities. Col 1:13-14 and 2:15 emphasize how Christ triumphed over the powers. The passages are not polemical and they do not suggest any connection between the powers and the opponents.

Second, the description of the Gnostics as under the enslavement of archonic powers does not correspond to the primary sources we have from the groups commonly referred to as Gnostics. In texts such as the *Hypostasis of the Archons* or the *Apocryphon of John*, those who have reached the right understanding (that is, the adherents) have been liberated from the oppressive powers.⁷⁷ In a fashion similar to the boundary demarcations in Colossians, the authors of the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Apocryphon of John* explicitly states that it is, instead, those who are ignorant (that is, non-adherents) who are subject to the rule of the powers. The notion of being enslaved under cosmic powers therefore does not reflect a Gnostic self understanding. Rather, in Gnostic literature this points out the situation of the non-believers. This also makes the fact that Lohse draws his conclusions without consulting any Gnostic primary sources particularly problematic.⁷⁸ In support of his pre-Gnostic hypothesis, Lohse has only used later patristic sources, since, in his day, the Nag Hammadi literature had been discovered only recently and was not as widely accessible to scholars as it is now. The current scholarship disputes the notion of a pre-Christian Gnosticism that could aid in the interpretation of the New Testament.

2.3.3 Adapting to the Greco-Roman Conventions

In the household codes of Colossians, the addressees are exhorted to live according to the regular conventions in Greco-Roman society.⁷⁹ The main concern of the author is that the recipient live well ordered lives, adapting to Greco-Roman norms of hierarchical relations and respecting the institution of family. As has been argued

⁷⁶ Lohse 1971, p 3, 101, 115-116. For a discussion of the opponents as Gnostics, see pp 128-131.

⁷⁷ See for example the *Hypostasis of the Archons* 96:19-27 and the *Apocryphon of John* BG 64:4-15.

⁷⁸ Of the Nag Hammadi writings, Lohse does use *Gospel of Thomas* and *Corpus Hermeticum*, but no serious modern scholar would label them Gnostic. Lohse does not, however, use *The Apocryphon of John*, *Hypostasis of the Archons* or *On the Origin of the World* which would have been more relevant Gnostic sources. See the bibliography for extracanonical material, Lohse 1971, pp 223-225.

⁷⁹ Wilson 1997, p 46.

above, the author is portraying Christianity as a universal faith, with the church as a universal institution and with an agenda of universal salvation. The addressees are exhorted, not only to “stay rooted” themselves, but also to proclaim their faith to others. In Col 1:25 the author writes how he (Paul) had been given the commission “to make the word of God fully known.” In 1:28, the addressees are urged to continue this work: “It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

One can easily see how the author presents himself as continuing the missionary work of Paul with the same pragmatic stance as displayed, for example, in passages like 1 Cor 10:32-33:

Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many so that they may be saved.

A similar attitude can be identified in Col 4:5-6 where the author exhorts the addressees to always appear as a good example towards outsiders:

Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

The author differs, however, in several aspects from the genuine Pauline letters. One of these divergences is the view on marriage and celibacy. In 1 Cor 7:25-39, Paul displays a pragmatic attitude towards marriage, arguing that, whereas it is better to refrain from marriage since the end times are approaching, marriage is preferable to a life in sin. Due to the imminent coming of Christ, Paul urges the addressees to remain in their previous conditions – that the married stay married and the unmarried remain celibate.

Since Colossians displays an already realized resurrection, this attitude towards marriage prior the return of Christ is no longer an issue. The Pauline position that celibacy is preferable, since it makes it possible for the adherent to dedicate undivided attention to God (1 Cor 7:32-34), is not only absent in Colossians but is possibly also rejected in the attack against body-regulating practices in Col 2:18, 21-23.

From Col 2:6 onward there is an increasing use of imperatives, marking the transition to a hortative section. Interestingly, what the author repudiates in the hortatory passages of 2:6-23 is primarily the notion of any need for social

transformation on earth. Any form of marginalization, extremism or sectarianism is strongly rejected. These observations correlate with the argument I will offer that the author, in an almost apologetic fashion, wants to present his Paulinism to a Gentile Christian audience as a rational and universal movement that does not stand out as extreme, but stays well within the limits of the Greco-Roman conventions.

2.3.3.1 Christianity and Philosophy in Col 1:15; 2:8

Col 2:8 has traditionally been and is still by many modern scholars understood as displaying a polemic stance towards philosophy as a whole.⁸⁰ I reject this view and side with Walter Wilson's critique of this rigid division between philosophy and Christianity.⁸¹ The use of φιλοσοφία in Col 2:8 should not be understood as pejorative, as if the author rejects the "philosophy" of his opponents and defines it against the "Christianity" of the addressees. Rather, the author rejects the philosophy "according to the elements of the world" and contrasts it to the philosophy "according to Christ." As has been argued above, the author's vocabulary, with the reoccurring emphasis on wisdom and insight as well as his self-presentation, would have been much at home in a philosophical context. Col 2:17, where food regulations and observances of festivals are likened to a shadow, contrasted to Christ, who is the body, displays the use of a clearly Platonic concept.⁸²

An even more evident example of allusions to Platonic concepts is the hymn in Col 1:15-20. Dunn points out that ἀόρατος, "invisible", in Col 1:15, is used only five times in the New Testament and that in four of these occurrences the adjective is used to modify God.⁸³ Dunn remarks that the term occurs frequently in Philo. It is also a technical term in Platonic philosophy, used to contrast the ontologically higher constituents of existence (e.g. the soul, the higher spiritual beings and the higher spiritual sphere) to the lower visible constituents.⁸⁴ Col 1:16 draws a similar contrast between what is visible (τὰ ὄρατά) and invisible (τὰ ἀόρατα).

⁸⁰ Lohse 1971, pp 94-96; Martin 1972, p 74; Bruce 1984, p 98; Hartman 1985, pp 93-94; Talbot 2007, p 211.

⁸¹ Wilson 1997, p 8. See also Hans Hübner 1997, pp 75-76, who puts emphasis on the term "empty deceit", that immediately follows "philosophy" in Col 2:8 and argues that it is used by the author to clarify that it is a particular, errant form of philosophy he rejects rather than philosophy as a whole. A similar position can also be found in McDonald 1980, p 76.

⁸² Plato, *The Republic* VIII

⁸³ Dunn 1997, p 87. Except for these occurrences, it is not used anywhere else in biblical Greek, including LXX.

⁸⁴ See for example *Timaeus* 36E.

To refer to Jesus as “the image” of the invisible God is also to use a characteristically platonic terminology. Εἰκών, image, is a technical term in Platonic philosophy that designates a “copy” of something else, sharing some quality but distinctively inferior. In *Timaeus* 92C, Plato calls the world “a perceptible God made in the image (εἰκών) of the intelligible”. Another example of this meaning of the term is a passage in the *Timaeus* where time is described as an εἰκών, made after the model of eternity, but distinctively different in that it is “movable” while eternity is “immovable”.⁸⁵

This distinction between immovable and movable often corresponds to the distinction between invisible and visible. Immovable designates what is spiritual and superior and movable is used to designate what is inferior. In his excellent study of the concept of immovability, Michael Allen Williams shows that the language of standing often occurs in Platonically influenced texts.⁸⁶ Standing is used to designate the state of immovability, a condition of enlightenment that is usually reserved for the sage who is unmoved by passions. Therefore I argue that συνέστηκεν occurring in Col 1:17 also should be understood as Platonic term, used to designate the state of immovability shared by everyone who is “in” (ἐν) God.

A much similar terminology also occurs in the slightly later (between 110-150 C.E.⁸⁷) highly Platonically-influenced *The Apocryphon of John*. Here, Providence is described as the power “before all” (NH III 7:6), as “the image of the invisible (ἀόρατος) One” (NH III 7:18). Also, the creations of the invisible One are described as “standing together” (αζε ερατ̄c mn̄) (NH III 8:9-10, 16-17).

As has been discussed above, in the theoretical and methodological sections, the boundaries between Platonism and Judaism were not always clear-cut. Philo was in many ways a living proof of this. That the terminology is originally platonic is not evidence in and of itself that the hymn is based on a Platonic, rather than a Jewish, understanding of God. Nor do I intend to argue that the Platonic element is of greater importance than the Jewish. I will, however, argue that the author consciously used a terminology that would be familiar to an educated audience from a Greco-Roman

⁸⁵ *Timaeus* 37D.

⁸⁶ Williams 1985, pp 39-57.

⁸⁷ A minority of scholars, such as Davies 2006, p XXV, argue that the *Apocryphon of John* could be as early as the mid 80s. A majority of leading scholars, such as Turner 2001, p 141, and Pearson 2007, p 29, prefer a date somewhere between 110 and 150.

background. Several observations speak in favor of this inference: the complete lack of any quotations from the Hebrew Bible, the stress on the revelation of Christ as a “mystery”, the emphasis of Christ as “wisdom” and the recurring allusions to Hellenistic philosophical terms indicates that the author intended to present his teachings in Hellenistic terms to a Hellenistic audience.

Interestingly, many scholars have taken the completely opposite position – that the hymn in Col 1:15-20 is used to refute the opponents and is, thus, used for a polemical rather than an apologetic purpose. For example, Lohse, argues that the author emphasizes the fullness and lordship of Christ over the powers, in order to proscribe worship of angelic powers and the observance of intermediary entities.⁸⁸ Since nothing in the hymn suggests this possibility, and since there is no clear connection between the powers and principalities and the opponents, Lohse’s explanation is implausible.⁸⁹

In Col 2:8, when the author exhorts the addressees to be careful, so that they are not “taken captives through philosophy”, he is contrasting the philosophy κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, according to human tradition, and κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, according to the elements of the world, and against the philosophy that is κατὰ χριστόν, according to Christ.

That a particular philosophy is described as “worldly” or irrational in polemical passages in contrast to the own school which’s founding figure is understood as divinely inspired is in no sense unique for rhetoric of Colossians. On the contrary, it was a common practice to attack rivaling schools in order to point out logical incoherencies or simply to ridicule and denigrate revered founder figures.⁹⁰ One example of a similar polemic, is the writings of the Apollo priest and Middle Platonic philosopher Plutarch, who lived roughly contemporary to the author of Colossians. Plutarch criticized Jews and polemized intensely against Stoics, as well as Epicurus, whom some regarded as divine.⁹¹ The Epicurean school did not, however, abstain from name calling. According to Plutarch, one of their followers had called Socrates a charlatan, implying that he said one thing and did another. Additionally, both the

⁸⁸ Lohse 1971, p 3.

⁸⁹ See “The Existentialist and Gnostic school of interpretation” above for a more extensive discussion of the position of Lohse and other advocates of the Gnostic hypothesis.

⁹⁰ For a discussion of this polemical tendencies of philosophical schools, see Baltussen 2007 and Johnson 1989.

⁹¹ For more examples of these polemical traditions, see Johnson 1989, pp 430-434.

Epicurean and Middle Platonic schools accused each other of associating with prostitutes.⁹²

In a similar fashion, the author of Colossians presents his Christianity as a school of philosophy – a superior, divinely inspired one – and contrasts it to the other, in his opinion, inferior schools that draw on earthly traditions.

There are almost as many theories regarding the meaning of the phrase κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, “according to the elements of the world”, (Col 2:8) as of the identity of the opponents. The Bauer-Danker *Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* provides the following possibilities:⁹³

1. Basic components, elements
 - A. The substances underlying the natural world, the basic elements from which everything is made and of which it is composed.
 - B. Heavenly bodies.
 - C. Fundamental principles, things that constitute the foundations of learning.
2. Elemental spirits, Transcendental powers that are in control over events in this world.

Eduard Schweizer, argues that τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου must refer to the four elements that constitute the world. Schweizer draws primarily on philological evidence and presents a multitude of contemporary texts in support of his view. Schweizer argues that “philosophy according to the elements of the world” refers to a specific strand of thought, namely the Neo-Pythagorean belief that, by performing ascetic practices the adherent can pass through the four worldly elements and thereby be saved.⁹⁴ I find plausible Schweizer’s philological conclusions that στοιχεῖα should be understood as the elements and that it, in a figurative sense is used to designate “the world.”⁹⁵ I am skeptical, however, in regard to his suggestion that the opponents should be understood as Neo-Pythagoreans.

Not all scholars understand τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου as the four elements. According to Martinus De Boer, there is no philological evidence earlier than the 2nd

⁹² *Moralia* 1086E and 1129B.

⁹³ Bauer 2000, p 946.

⁹⁴ Schweizer 1988, pp 466-467.

⁹⁵ Schweizer 1988, pp 467-468.

century for στοιχεῖα as elemental spirits or heavenly bodies.⁹⁶ In spite of this, quite a few scholars persist in suggesting that the term is used to denote personal beings; perhaps most influential advocator of this interpretation is Bo Reicke.⁹⁷ A modern proponent of a similar understanding is Nicola Denzey. Denzey argues that Paul, the deutero-Pauline school and the opponents shared a common cosmology wherein celestial beings exerted influence over the world.⁹⁸ According to Denzey, the main difference between the Pauline school, including the author of Colossians and the opponents lies thus not in different cosmological conceptions, but in how they understand salvation. Recognizing the basis of a common cosmology, Denzey suggests that both the author of Colossians and the opponents would say that their adversaries (that is, each other!) are under the rule of the personified στοιχεῖα.

It is not of immediate relevance for this study whether στοιχεῖα should be understood as the impersonal world itself, as Schweizer, among others, suggests, or as celestial beings administrating the world, as for example Denzey argues. What is important is the sense in which the term is employed in that particular passage. Whether κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου should be understood as “philosophy according to the world as it is and the elements that constitute the world” or as “philosophy according to the celestial beings that administer the world and have influence over its inhabitants”, the term is used to express a contrast to the philosophy of the author’s school, which the author construes as based on its founder, Jesus Christ. I believe that it is this contrast that should be emphasized. Since the term is also coupled with κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, according to human traditions, I argue that the rhetorical effect that the author wants to achieve is the denigration of other philosophical schools that are “worldly” or simply inferior to the school of the author.

2.3.3.2 Col 2:11-13 and 3:11: Circumcision as an identity marker

In Col 2:11-13, the author contrasts bodily circumcision with circumcision in Christ, a circumcision not made by human hands, that is, rather, a spiritual one performed through the act of baptism. The issue of circumcision and how it should be understood in Colossians has been subject to considerable debate. Some of the

⁹⁶ De Boer 2007, p 206.

⁹⁷ See Reicke 1943, pp 49-70.

⁹⁸ Denzey 2013, pp 66-67, 72-73.

scholars who argue for a Jewish identity of the opponents have understood circumcision as one of the elements that the author rejects.⁹⁹ Others, mostly scholars who accentuate the Hellenistic character of the opponents, hold that the author never explicitly rejects circumcision but, rather, rejects the analogy of baptism and circumcision to stress the superiority of baptism as the “spiritual” and not physical circumcision.

I find most persuasive, the obligation to circumcise, like all of the other features that the author rejects as marginal and extreme, demarcates what is outside the boundaries of (the author’s conception of) the legitimate Pauline school. Surely, the author is not rejecting circumcision per se. In his paraphrase of Gal 3:28, the author adds in Col 3:11 the opposites of circumcised and uncircumcised:

In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is in us all.

There are many indications that the author is addressing mainly gentile Christians and is rejecting the circumcision of Gentiles. In Col 4:10-11, three individuals are mentioned as the only co-workers “of the circumcision”. If the intended readers were Jewish Christians, the author may have made a point of their background. The same goes for Col 1:21-23 where the author describes the conversion of the addressees, who are portrayed as “once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.” The verb ἀπολλοτριόω, “estranged,” occurs, within the Pauline corpus, only here and in Eph 2:3 and 4:18. Dunn argues that the term should be understood in the same sense as in Ephesians, where it refers to gentiles who are estranged in the sense that they did not believe in the Jewish-Christian God.¹⁰⁰ I find Dunn’s interpretation to be the most plausible reading of Col 1:21-23, which most likely intends to describe Gentile conversions to Christianity.

That the author refrains from quoting the Hebrew Bible in his argumentation when dealing with the subject of circumcision is particularly striking. In the genuine Pauline letters, salvation through Christ is always understood as the culmination of the Jewish faith. The main issues debated in Romans and Galatians centers on how and on which premises gentiles should be a part of this salvific plan. In Romans, Paul likens Israel to an olive tree into which branches of wild olive shoots – the gentile

⁹⁹ Lohse 1971, pp 101-102.

¹⁰⁰ Dunn 1997, pp 105-106.

believers – have been grafted. Paul’s argumentation in particularly Galatians and Romans is based on interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, which he also quotes frequently to prove his points. The author of Colossians does not do this. That the author never uses the Hebrew Bible in his argumentations indicates at least one of two possibilities: 1. that the author himself is a gentile who has converted to Christianity; 2. that the intended audience is from a gentile background and that argumentations based on the Hebrew Bible would not fill any function.

Dunn points out that circumcision was regarded by both Jews and Gentiles as a distinctively Jewish practice, which served as a badge of identity with the function to separate Judaism from the non-Judaism.¹⁰¹ The author, who as discussed above pursues a non-particularistic agenda, wants to avoid particularism and marginalization. Therefore, he also struggles to erase the association between circumcision and Christianity. The contrast between spiritual (literarily not made by hand) and bodily circumcision aims to stress the superiority of the baptism, which is portrayed as a universal identity marker. At the same time the author tries, in the vein of Paul, to reconcile the Jewish identity with the Gentile in Col 3:11 and struggles therefore to avoid any exclusion of circumcised Christians with a Jewish identity.

2.3.3.3 Col 2:16-19: Festivals and Worship of Angels.

Col 2:16-23, on festivals, worship of angels and ascetic practices, is extremely polemical. Col 2:6–15 consist of directions to believers, centering primarily on behavior that is *desirable* and within the limits of his Pauline school. By contrast, Col 2:16-23 offers *negative* examples of practices that are perceived and portrayed as outside the limits of the group of the author.

In Col 2:16, the author addresses food regulations and the observance of particular festivals.

Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food or drink or of observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths.

The main debate among scholars has centered on whether the food regulations and the observance of festivals refer to Jewish or to Hellenistic practices. Dunn, who argues for the former possibility, notes the vagueness of the two first terms ἑορτή,

¹⁰¹ Dunn 1997, p 154.

festivals, and νεομηνία, new moon. Both terms are imprecise and can be used to designate a variety of practices. The use of the term Sabbath, however, is unambiguous and can only refer to the Jewish practice. Dunn argues that since the term Sabbath occurs, also the other terms can plausibly be understood as Jewish practices.¹⁰² Further, Dunn goes on to argue that the three terms commonly occurred together as a conventional way to speak of the Jewish annual festivals.¹⁰³

Arnold on the other hand, states about Col 2:16, together with the later passages, that “the sum of this terminology seems to go beyond the cultic and ritual practices typical of Judaism.”¹⁰⁴ Thus, Arnold argues that the opponents observed both pagan festivals and the Jewish Sabbath.¹⁰⁵

I would like to suggest a third possibility. Instead of stressing, as Arnold does, that Col 2:16 necessarily must refer to one particular group that observed both Sabbaths and pagan festivals, the vagueness of the phrasings allows for the possibility that the passage is meant to refer to sectarian observance of festivals in general and that the critique is directed towards different groups. Interestingly, it is not the practices per se that the author turns against (although he does not encourage them, either) but, rather, the tendency of the practitioners to judge others who fail to observe these practices.

In regard to the identity of the criticized religious practices, a frequently debated passage is 2:18.

Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by human way of thinking.

In particular the phrase θρησκεία ἀγγέλων, “worship of angels” has spawned a diversity of interpretations. One of the main discussions has centered on the issue of translation – whether the phrase should be translated as an objective genitive (that is, the adherents’ worship of angels) or a subjective genitive (that is the angels’ worship of God). The objective genitive was, for a long time, the most acknowledged and most widely adopted alternative.¹⁰⁶ Dunn, who argues for a Jewish identity of the opponents, finds this construal particularly problematic. According to Dunn, worship

¹⁰² Dunn 1997, p 175.

¹⁰³ These terms occur together, e.g., in 1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:3, 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Isa. 1:13-14.

¹⁰⁴ Arnold 1996, p 210.

¹⁰⁵ Arnold 1996, p 215-216.

¹⁰⁶ Dunn 1997, p 180.

of angelic beings in a Jewish context was rare if occurring at all.¹⁰⁷ Dunn chooses to translate the phrase as a subjective genitive and suggests that it denotes worship to God, offered by angels, since this practice is quite well attested among apocalyptic and mystical circles of first century Judaism.¹⁰⁸

Arnold rejects the subjective genitive solution, since he argues that it, in Col 2.18, is grammatically dubious.¹⁰⁹ Further, Arnold argues that multitudes of sources show that worship of angels was widespread in pagan, as well as in Jewish and even Christian, groups.¹¹⁰ DeMaris is less skeptical towards the understanding of the phrase as a subjective genitive, but argues that although *θρεσκεία* as a subjective genitive by no means is impossible, the attestations of the word followed by an objective genitive is much more common than the subjective genitive, which, by comparison, is rare.¹¹¹ Further, DeMaris argues that it was common to equate *ἄγγελλοι* to other celestial entities like *ἥρωας*, “heroes”, or *δαίμονες*, intermediary celestial beings.¹¹² An example a Jewish of philosopher almost contemporary with the author of Colossians who used the term in its wider sense is Philo.¹¹³ DeMaris thus suggests that the phrasing in Col 2:18 is a reference to a common feature of Greco-Roman religiosity.

Since it is by no means my intention to unravel the identity of the opponents in Colossians – but rather to investigate and question whether the scholarly constructions of the opponents are legitimate – I will not take on position on whether *θρεσκεία ἄγγέλλων* refers to the worship, of or through, angels. Neither will I conclude whether this angelic veneration takes place in a Jewish or a Hellenistic context. Due to the vagueness of the description, which, as previous research has proved, invites a whole range of interpretations, I do not think that a definitive answer is possible. What is important for the present essay is that it is not the phenomenon of cultic angelic practices per se that the author turns against (even though he certainly disapproved of them as well since he deems them “puffed up without cause

¹⁰⁷ Dunn 1997, pp 179-180.

¹⁰⁸ Dunn 1997, pp 180-181.

¹⁰⁹ Arnold 1996, p 9.

¹¹⁰ See Arnold 1996, pp 38-60 for his argumentation and sources. I posit myself skeptical towards Arnold’s lack of source criticism, however. Among the texts on which draws his conclusions, magical papyri that are either difficult to date or much later than Colossians, are used.

¹¹¹ DeMaris 1994, p 60.

¹¹² DeMaris 1994, pp 61-62.

¹¹³ See for example *On the Giants* 4:16.

by human ways of thinking” in Col 2:18). What the author rejects is the perceived superiority of ascetic and visionary practices of the opponents, since it challenges the authority of the author’s own school, which does not involve any of these elements.

2.3.3.4 Col 2:21-3:4. Bodily regulations and Social Marginalization

Col 2:21-23 depicts the opponents’ position as “worldly”, naturally, in contrast to the author’s teaching. As has been shown above, this rhetoric of “worldly” and divinely ordained follows the conventions of ancient philosophical polemic.

“Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch”? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

Particularly interesting is the contention that all these practices “refer to things that perish with use.” Apart from the rhetorical contrast between human and divine traditions that we have encountered earlier in the epistle (Col 2:8), the author also emphasizes what he considers to be the transient nature of these severe bodily practices.

Unfortunately, the author does not provide a more specific description of the nature of these practices and it is not clear whether they could be understood as ascetic or not. Although we have Greek and early Jewish sources that promote an ascetic life, there are few, if any, sources available that testifies for the existence of a first century Christian asceticism. The earliest sources that actually describe Christian ascetic practices date from the beginning of the second century and are, in other words, slightly later than Colossians.¹¹⁴ Due to the lack of sources I will refrain from the term “asceticism” and instead refer to the practices of the opponents as bodily regulations, since the term is more neutral.

After the polemical passage in 2:21-23, the author goes on to exhort his audience in Col 3:1-4:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

¹¹⁴ For a more extensive discussion of second century Christian asceticism and available sources, see Kelhoffer 2006, pp 439-444.

As many commentators point out, spatial dimensions are of great importance in Colossians.¹¹⁵ What was in the Pauline letters understood as before and after the coming of Christ is in Colossians referred to as earthly and heavenly. It is thus not through the resurrection of Christ alone that the adherents are saved, but, rather, from a transformation through being raised with Christ in baptism. In Col 2:12, the author explicitly states that the addressees have been buried with Christ through the act of baptism and that is through baptism (βαπτισμῶ ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε) that they have been raised through faith. In Col 3:1-4, the author returns to this theme of death and resurrection, a theme that functions as a contrast to the position of the opponents, as described in Col 2:21-23. The opponents also seem to stress an element of transformation. Unlike the school of the author, this transformation has already started on earth and requires bodily practices and observance of particular regulations.

Once again, I believe that the rejection of these bodily regulations can be explained by the author's missionary intentions. While Paul addressed minor household congregations where charismatic leadership and gifts were of great importance, the author of Colossians wishes to address the whole Hellenistic world. In doing so, he intentionally avoids any element that could be understood as particularistic and sectarian, or in any way in opposition to the conventions of the Greco-Roman world. Rather than placing emphasis on elements resembling asceticism, this heir of Paul has adopted the pragmatic and universalistic side of his master, displayed in for example 1 Cor 10:32-33:

Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many so that they may be saved.

In order to do so, the author found it necessary to abandon some of the practices that were perceived as sectarian in the Greco-Roman world. The notion of a transformation on earth, carried out through particular regulations and bodily practices, was thus rejected. Rather, the emphasis was placed on the wisdom and the virtues of the teachings. As has been discussed above, the presentation of the author was consciously designed to resemble a philosophical school, with a

¹¹⁵ See for example Standhartinger 2004, pp 588-589.

Hellenistic vocabulary and through the use of philosophical terminology, familiar to an educated Greco-Roman audience.

3. Concluding Discussion

3.1 Summary

I have now offered a survey of the polemical and hortative passages in Colossians. I have discussed the implications of the exhortations and argued that the author's purpose is to present his teachings to a gentile audience as a philosophical school. In order to do so, he has, as was customary during antiquity, emulated the identity of the founder of this particular school, which is Paul. Since the Pauline school of the author has universal ambitions, the purpose of the exhortations is to establish boundaries towards particularistic behavior, as well as to counteract other schools' claims of superiority.

It is now time to return to one of the initial questions of this essay. What can we with confidence know about the opponents from the polemical passages in Colossians? To sum it up, the author rejects:

- **Philosophy according to human traditions and the elements of the world. Col 2:8, 2:20. As discussed above, this should not be understood as an attack on philosophy per se. The author rather contrasts the (true) wisdom and philosophy of Jesus Christ to the (transient) philosophy of the world.**
- **Observance of food regulations and holy days. Or more precise: the tendency of the practitioners to judge those who fail to observe these practices. Col 2:16.**
- **Worship of angels and visionary oriented mysticism. Col 2:18.**
- **Body-regulating practices; self-imposed piety. Col 2:18, 21-23.**

As has been discussed in the previous passage, the descriptions of the opponents are so vague that we have one scholarly opinion for almost every religious

movement contemporary with Colossians.¹¹⁶ Whether Neo-Pythagoreans, Essenes, Middle-Platonists, Proto-Gnostics, Hellenistic mystery cults or Christians is the favored possibility, it is possible to find observance of food regulations, body-regulating practices and belief in angelic beings in any one of these religious movements.

3.2 Syncretism as a Designation

Since these features that the author rejects were commonly occurring among all sorts of religious groups contemporary to Colossians, it is understandable that some scholars have described the opponents as “syncretistic”. The common denominator for scholars who belong to the syncretistic school of interpretation, like Hartman, Patzia and Arnold, is that they all acknowledge the limitations of the religious categories of late antiquity and argue that none of them are sufficient to describe the identity of the opponents. I share this position. It could, however, be questioned whether the term syncretism is much more usable. As has been discussed in the theoretical and methodological considerations, the term syncretism implies that some phenomena are mixed. If the term should be of any analytical value it is necessary that this designation can be contrasted to other phenomena that are not mixed. Mircea Eliade defines religion as “something wholly other” than the profane.¹¹⁷ From this point of view, it is of course possible to argue that there is an “unmixed” element in religious thought. But as Cameron and Miller (and many other modern critical scholars) have argued, this one and similar essentialist conceptions of religion rests on a metaphysical ground and cannot be used as an argument in a academic context.¹¹⁸ Rather, it is necessary to acknowledge the social dimension of religious groups. From this point of view, that it is primarily the social elements that constitutes a religious group, it is difficult to argue that one particular group or strand of thought is “pure” while another is “syncretistic.”

Another scholar who is particularly critical towards the designation “syncretistic” is Royalty. Royalty argues against scholars like Arnold who use the term to identify

¹¹⁶ See section 1.4, Previous Research.

¹¹⁷ Eliade 1959, p 10.

¹¹⁸ Cameron & Miller 2004, pp 498-499.

the opponents, and raises the question whether the designation can add anything of analytical value to the discussion.

Casting Jewish, Gnostic, or pagan groups as the enemy within a canonized text without first considering Christian groups reads the polemical interactions of the earliest Christian communities within the narrow ideological confines of the canon. This move presupposes that Colossians expresses a “pure” form of proto-ortodox Christianity and the opponents were heterodox, if not heretical. If not Jewish or Gnostic “heretics” or “errorists”, the author’s opponents could also be “syncretistic”, again with the implication that the author, usually Paul himself, expresses a “pure” Christianity. For instance Clinton Arnold, a recent proponent of a fully developed theory of “syncretistic” origins for the opponents, notes that the designation (e.g. syncretistic) “is descriptive insofar as the competing teaching represents a blending of variety of religious traditions”. But this is a description of *all* of the Christianities of the NT, including that of the author of Colossians.¹¹⁹

Royalty concludes:

Since ‘syncretistic’ is equally descriptive for all the Christianities that developed in Asia Minor during the first two centuries of the Common Era, the term does not bring precision to delineating the opposing groups referred to by the apostle.¹²⁰

I share this position, since the term syncretism only serves to separate the orthodox from the heretical, the pure from the contaminated, and can therefore not contribute to a better understanding of actual religious groups and historical events.

3.3 Were There False Teachers at Colossae?

In 1973, Morna Hooker suggested in her article “Were there false teachers at Colossae?” that the polemical passage were not directed towards a particular group, but rather addressed the issue of pagan teachings in general.¹²¹ According to Hooker, the author is concerned that some of the pagan converts might return to their former religious convictions and therefore tries to persuade them to “stay rooted” in Christ (Col 2:7).

DeMaris, who points out that a vast majority of scholars are convinced that the polemical passages in Colossians refer to a specific group of opponents, refers to Hooker’s position as an “insignificant minority.”¹²² While Hooker might be a minority, her position is by no means “insignificant”. Among the majority who advocates that the polemical passages reflect the practices of an actual group, few of them actually

¹¹⁹ Royalty 2002, pp 333-334.

¹²⁰ Royalty 2002, p 334.

¹²¹ Hooker 1990, p 129.

¹²² DeMaris 1994, p 39.

bothers to argue why this is the case; they rather draw on the traditional assumption that Colossians, just like the other Pauline letters, must be addressing a local problem, specific for a certain town. Since Hooker may be the first scholar to question this assumption, the case is rather the opposite – her contribution is of high significance. In the vein of Hooker’s article, I will therefore posit the question: Were there really false teachers at Colossae?

Interestingly, there are no references to any named competitors in Colossians, as in for example 1 Corinthians or Galatians. In contrast to the genuine Pauline letters, the author consistently makes use of indefinite pronouns in the hortative passages in Colossians. In 2:4 the negative indefinite pronoun μηδεις is used for the anonymous opponents: “I am saying this so that no one may deceive you through plausible arguments.” In 2:8, the prohibitive imperative, βλέπετε μή, is paired with the indefinite pronoun, τις, to warn the addressees: “See that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit”. A similar pairing of a prohibitive imperative and τις occurs again in 2:16 when the author goes back to criticize the opponents: “Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or baths.” In 2:18 an imperative is paired with the negative indefinite pronoun μηδεις: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worshipping of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking.”

Dunn argues that the recurring use of indefinite pronouns to designate the opponents was used to refer to an opponent that the audience already was familiar with (“you know who”, as Dunn puts it).¹²³ This argumentation, however, is based on the assumption that the author – whether Paul or “Paul” – wrote to the particular town of Colossae and had personal experience of the problem he addressed. As has been argued above, this assumption can easily be questioned. The universal relevance of the message and the universal ambitions of the author, and the scarce information provided about the town itself rather points to the contrary. As Standhartinger puts it: “In my view, Colossians contains no local information beyond that known to any citizen of the Greco-Roman world.”¹²⁴ From this point of view, the “you-know-who”-argument is invalid. If the letter was intended to be spread and circulated throughout an unspecified part of the Hellenistic world, as Standhartinger suggests, it is more

¹²³ Dunn 1997, p 171.

¹²⁴ Standhartinger 2004, p 586.

reasonable to assume that the description of the opponents did not reflect the practices of a particular group, but rather describes more general religious practices of groups found throughout the whole Roman Empire.

My point is not to suggest that there did not exist religious groups contemporary to the author that would fit the description of the opponents of Colossians. As has been argued, there were plenty of religious groups that observed particular holidays, venerated angelic beings and demanded ascetic practices. The polemical passages in Colossians are a reaction towards these tendencies.

As also has been argued above, the common denominators for the rejected features are that they all in some way indicate a particularistic and marginal behavior that stands in opposition to the norms and conventions of the Greco-Roman world. The author turns against food regulations, body regulations and the perceived superiority of groups involved in veneration of angels and visionary oriented mysticism. He particularly rejects groups that require their adherents to subject themselves to regulating practices in order to be saved. The “transformative” elements in the school of the author are the act of baptism and the change of thought that follows, through which the adherents are saved. The Paulinism of the author does not require any physical practices and rejects the notion of any transformative practices that occurs on earth.

It is almost impossible to conclude whether these groups were Jewish, Greco-Roman or Christian, due to the scarce information provided in the letter. As the scholarly positions have shown, it is possible to interpret the identity of the opponents in a variety of ways.

It is clear from verses such as Col 2:11-13 and 3:11 that the author followed Paul in his rejection of the need for gentiles to follow the Judaic law. The references to food regulations in 2:16 and 2:21 could, in a similar manner, refer to Judaism, but could also be used to designate religious movement that place emphasis on food and body regulating practices. It is reasonable to assume that the author of Colossians, who pursues a universalistic agenda and favors passages like 1 Corinthians 10:31-32, wanted to exclude interpreters who stressed body-regulating practices and the need for a transformative element from their claims to the authentic understanding of Paul.

3.4 The Construction of Boundaries in Scholarly Historiography

One of the research questions that I initially asked was how boundaries are created in scholarly historiography. The phrasing of this question and the use of the term “created” instead of for example “been understood” or “been interpreted” is a conscious choice. Keith Jenkins makes a distinction between the past and history. While the past refers to what has already happened, history designates our understanding of the past. While the past in itself is inaccessible, history is the attempt to reconstruct the past through the scarce traces available. This reconstruction can never completely correspond to actual events. When we read for example James Dunn’s *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* or Richard E. DeMaris *The Colossian Controversy*, we do not study the past, we study history, or rather, we study Dunn’s or DeMaris’ constructions of the past.

Tomoko Masuzawa shows in her book *The Invention of the World Religions* that the notion of world religions is relatively young and was developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It began to occur commonly in historiographic works first in the beginning of the twentieth century.¹²⁵ Moreover, Masuzawa argues that many aspects of the eighteenth, nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century academic study of religion were theologically motivated. The religions of the world were defined over against Christianity, often understood as inferior, primitive and “older.”¹²⁶ The divisions of diverse religious groups and practices were also motivated by theological interests, arranged in a hierarchical order and put into the simplistic categories of Christianity (that is, orthodoxy), Judaism and Mohammedanism (inferior, yet acceptable) or Paganism (that is, furthest from the true faith and pretty much everything that does not fall into any of the former categories).¹²⁷

Likewise, Smith shows in *Drudgery Divine* how nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars of biblical studies engaged in similar boundary demarcations.¹²⁸ In Protestant historiographic works, the earliest Jesus movement is portrayed as unique

¹²⁵ Masuzawa 2005, pp 37-53.

¹²⁶ Masuzawa 2005, p 79-82.

¹²⁷ Masuzawa 2005, pp 50-51.

¹²⁸ This is a summary of the more extensive discussion of Smith’s position provided in section 1.3, Theoretical and Methodological Considerations.

and almost revealed – the “Essence of Christianity”, as Adolf von Harnack phrased it. According to this historiographic construction, the essence of Christianity was distorted through interaction with the cultural and religious environment of the Roman Empire and through the incorporation of pagan elements.

One common denominator for the historiography of nineteenth and early twentieth century biblical studies and comparative religious studies is the tendency to use a discourse of religion to separate the orthodox from the heretical, the “revealed” from the historical. According to the Protestant historiography of early twentieth century biblical studies, Christianity is not originally a religion – it is something wholly different, a phenomenon *sui generis*. It was only in a later stage that Christianity started to resemble a religion, when, through contact with its cultural and religious environment, it adopted pagan rites and practices.¹²⁹ As H. S. Versnell accounts, it was not unusual to contrast the “magic” of Pagan and Catholic rituals, with the scripture based faith of pure (Protestant) Christianity.¹³⁰ Similarly, the nineteenth century theologians of comparative religious studies depicted Christianity as a “new” faith, in contrast to the non-Christian “older” religions, stressing either the notion of Hegelian progress from deficient to perfect, or depict Christianity as something wholly unique that could be placed outside of historical events.¹³¹

According to Smith and Masuzawa, the legacy of this scholarly historiography still lives on, even in modern, recently published scholarly works.¹³² As mentioned in the theoretical section, Smith argues, however, that modern essentialist interpretation of early Christianity is now disguised as if valuating traditions in terms of authenticity was a question on chronology.¹³³ According to this understanding of history, the earliest tradition provides an example of a more “pure” Christianity, while the later developments display the incorporation of foreign Pagan elements.

A particularly well disguised version of this essentialist historiography is found in the syncretistic school of interpretation, criticized in section 3.2. As discussed above, the term syncretism implies that some phenomena are mixed, while other phenomena are “pure”. It is problematic to use syncretism as a categorization of the

¹²⁹ Smith 1990, pp 43-45.

¹³⁰ Versnell 1991, pp 178-180.

¹³¹ Masuzawa 2005, pp 79-80.

¹³² Masuzawa 2005, pp 6-7

¹³³ Smith 1990, p 43.

opponents' identity, understood as mixture of heretical Pagan elements, and then oppose it to Christianity (which is implicitly understood as non-syncretistic, that is, "pure").

Not all proponents of the syncretistic school of interpretation oppose Christianity and Pagan syncretistic identity, however. Hartman argues that the opponents had a Christian self-understanding and were members of the church in Colossae.¹³⁴ The difference between the opponents and the author's group was then, according to Hartman, that the opponents were syncretistic (in contrast to the group of the author, who he implicitly states as non-syncretistic).¹³⁵ The syncretism of opponents were characterized by, among other things, astrology and veneration of intermediary beings, elements which all contained influences from other traditions. This depiction of the historical events surrounding Colossians resembles to a high degree Smith's Protestant Historiographic myth, where the apostolic Christianity of the author is contrasted to the non-apostolic Christianity, corrupted through the incorporation of Pagan traditions.

In the scholarly accounts of the opponents, the proponents of the syncretistic school of interpretation often dissect the elements that constitute the "heresy" of the opponents, for example the cosmological details, and trace them back to other religious traditions.¹³⁶ The constituents of the author's pure Christianity are rarely analyzed in terms of their genealogy. Rather they are considered as elemental components of Christianity. This is particularly interesting, since several modern critical scholars, including Nicola Denzey, stress that the author of Colossians and the opponents shared a common cosmology.

A majority of scholars on Colossians have interpreted the opponents as one specific group. As discussed extensively throughout this essay, the scholarly positions on the identity of the opponents range from legalistic Jews to libertarian Gnostics. There are two common denominators for this large group of scholars: first, a tendency to interpret the opponents as one particular group, in contrast to several different groups of opponents; and, second, a tendency to understand the opponents' group as something wholly other than the Christianity of the author. This second point requires some clarification. Clearly, there are differences between the author of

¹³⁴ Hartman 1985, p 94.

¹³⁵ Hartman 1985, pp 117-125.

¹³⁶ See for example Hartman 1985, pp 117-125.

Colossians and the group (or groups) that advocated the practices which the author rejects – otherwise there would not have been any need to reject them. Rather one needs to ask how these differences should be understood and how wide the theological and cosmological gulf between the author’s school and the opponents’ actually was.

Whether the opponents are interpreted as Proto-Gnostics, Essenes, Middle Platonists, Neo-Pythagoreans or Cynic philosophers, they are understood and defined against the Christianity of the author and as something wholly different. While many scholars of this group tend to emphasize the dichotomy between Christianity and for example proto-Gnostics (or whatever group the opponents are identified as), these proponents rarely problematize the issue of diverse and competing groups of Christianity. The scholarly boundaries are drawn between an apostolic Christianity and “religion” (as the “Other”), represented by the reconstructed identity of the opponents.¹³⁷

This claim also requires some clarification. I do not argue that all scholars who interpret the identity of the opponents as non-Christian are victims of a simplistic and essentialist view of history. James Dunn, who understands the opponents as a Jewish group in Colossae whose practices stand in opposition to the group of the author, is a great scholar whose works are anything but simplistic. In his commentary on Colossians, he depicts the cultural and religious environment as diverse and complex. Similarly, DeMaris, who advocates that the opponents should be understood as Middle Platonists, shows that he is well aware of early Christian diversity and does not present a dichotomy between Christ believers (as if it was a homogenous concept) and Pagan religion.

DeMaris, however, creates another dichotomy, namely a dichotomy between the original, apostolic Christianity and later deviations and misinterpretations (in this case, the author of Colossians). With a rhetoric resembling Smith’s Protestant Historiographic myth but with an added new liberal touch to it, DeMaris argues that the author of Colossians has distorted the original message of Christianity and needs correction [*sic*]:

¹³⁷ For examples of this boundary demarcation, see Lohse 1971, pp 2-3; Martin 1973, pp 6-12; Bruce 1980, pp 26-28; McDonald 1980, pp 12-14; Barth & Blanke 1994, 23-39, who even refer to the opponents as the “Colossian Religion” in contrast to the Christianity of the author; Murphy-O’Connors 2001, p 1192.

Anyone who claims to speak for Paul, as the author of Colossians did, bears a heavy responsibility, especially if the pursuit of victory in a dispute, or perhaps control of a community, results in a distortion of Paul's thought, which seems to be the case in Colossians. In opposing Christ to the elements of the world (2:8) and devaluing the latter entirely (2:20), the letter writer did not do full justice to Paul's theology. Paul was well aware of worldly powers inimical to God's rule, but he expected reconciliation to entail more than conquest; he awaited the ultimate transformation and redemption of *all* creation (Rom. 8:18-25). The letter writer's caricature of Paul has not always served later generations of Christians well; it deserves correction.¹³⁸

As has been discussed throughout the essay, there are also scholars who reject these discourses of dichotomy. Angela Standhartinger, Robert Wilson and Robert Royalty are all examples of scholars on Colossians who question the hierarchic taxonomy of essential apostolic Christianity and lesser, "hellenized," Christian traditions. As mentioned above, in section 3.2, Syncretism as a Designator, Royalty fiercely attacks the proponents of the syncretistic school of interpretation and argues that the designator syncretism is used only to separate the orthodox from the heretical. Standhartinger and Robert Wilson criticize the scholarly tendencies to neglect a Christian diversity and present the school of the author as *the one* apostolic Pauline school, rather than as one of many. I concur with all of these positions.

I also concur, with scholars such as Walter Wilson, that the author uses the opponents, in order to strengthen the authority of his own interpretation of Paul, and that he is mainly interested in the opponents insofar that they provide a negative type to which he can contrast his teachings. I also argue that, in the polemical sections of Colossians, the author aims to define boundaries in reaction particularistic and extreme behavior that stands in opposition to Greco-Roman conventions.

There is nothing to indicate that these sectarian practices, which the author rebukes, refer to one particular group, rather than a diversity of groups whose practices fall outside of the author's boundary demarcations. As Standhartinger points out, the post-Pauline context of Colossians mirrors a time of uncertainty and a diversity of Pauline schools. It is reasonable to assume that the author, as one of many competing Pauline interpreters, wishes to draw boundaries in relationship to other, in his opinion, less accurate understandings of Paul's teachings, and to deprecate these interpretations. I do not, however, exclude the possibility that the polemic sections also refer to other religious groups, which are used as negative types for contrast, in order to strengthen the authority of the author's tenets.

¹³⁸ DeMaris 1994, pp 147-148.

Summarily, it is beyond dispute that boundary demarcations are present in Colossians, but it is unclear how they should be understood and towards whom they are directed. Modern scholars have interpreted the identity of the opponents as one particular group, either composed of a mixture of syncretistic elements (as contrasted to the “purity” of the author’s school) or as a specific religious group, often presented as an opposition of Christianity, as represented by the author, and “religion,” as represented by the opponents. The dichotomizing and simplistic taxonomy of *one* apostolic Christianity and several other Hellenized deviations of Christianity is a modern scholarly construction, a “Protestant Historiographic Myth” as Smith phrases it, and it needs to be challenged.

4. Summary and Conclusions

The research questions addressed in this essay are:

1. What historical context does Colossians address?
2. What can we know with confidence about the opponents in Colossians?
3. How does the author draw boundaries between addressees and opponents in Colossians?
4. How are boundaries created in scholarly historiography?

I have reached the following conclusions:

1. Colossians was written in the early post-Pauline period by a representative of *one* of the Pauline schools. The author uses the fictitious setting of Colossae to offer an earlier, apostolic platform to address problems in his own time. These problems regard issues such as how the school of Paul should be understood and which practices its followers should practice.
2. The descriptions of the practices that the author rejects are utterly vague and cannot, as is displayed by the diversity of scholarly opinions on the matter, be traced with any confidence to one particular group. There is nothing that indicates that the practices, which the author

rebukes, refer to one particular group, rather than a diversity of groups whose practices fall outside of the author's boundary demarcations. Neither can we know much about the beliefs, tenets or practices of this/these group/groups. The information provided in Colossians only accounts for practices rejected by the author. Since the author aims to establish boundaries between the author's school and other competing views, he does not account for the (possibly many) beliefs and practices that his group shared with the opponents.

3. The author is mainly interested in the opponents insofar as they can be used as a negative type to strengthen the authority of the author's own school. The author primarily criticizes particularistic and sectarian behavior that stands in opposition to the Greco-Roman conventions, and wants to avoid any association between his group and sectarian practices.

It is beyond doubt that the author of Colossians establishes boundaries towards other schools or groups, in order to strengthen the authority of his own teachings. It is however, as has been argued above, unclear towards whom these boundary demarcations are directed. I argue, therefore, that the scholarly assumption that the polemical passages in Colossians reflect the practices of *one* particular group needs to be challenged.

4. In what Jonathan Z. Smith refers to as the "Protestant Historiographic Myth", nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars of biblical studies often understood early Christian developments in terms of an original purity that was lost at a later stage. According to this historiographic construction, the essence of Christianity was distorted through interaction with the cultural and religious environment of the Roman Empire and through the incorporation of pagan elements.

Throughout this essay, I have argued that this essentialist conception of early Christianity has shaped the construction of the opponents of Colossians in scholarly literature. In studies of

Colossians, many modern scholars have, problematically, recreated the dichotomy between an original apostolic Christianity and later Hellenized deviations. This legacy of the “Protestant Historiographic myth” is mainly expressed in two ways:

1. As an opposition between the author’s pure apostolic Christianity, and the opponents, who are understood as a syncretistic group, composed of a mixture of various Hellenistic elements.
2. As a dichotomy between Christianity, as represented by the author, and “religion”, as represented by the opponents.

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