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## Gnosticism – The Colossian Heresy

### Introduction <sup>1</sup>

[Please read the Epistle to the Colossians before continuing with this study.]

The doctrine of the Person of Christ is stated in Colossians with greater precision and fullness than in any other epistle of Paul.

The Colossian heresy, in its attack upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, made it imperative that it be met with such precise and complete doctrinal teaching as would successfully cope with the false teachings of these systems. A full understanding of the implications of the truth in Colossians stems from an acquaintance with this heresy.

The Colossian heresy is composed of two elements, either as taught separately by different people, or fused into one idea structure containing elements of legalistic Judaism and ascetic oriental Gnosticism.

Paul's mention of Sabbaths, new moons, distinctions between meats and drinks, circumcision – all point to the element of Judaism in the heresy. His references to self-imposed humility, service and worship of angels, hard treatment of the body, and a superior wisdom, indicate that he is dealing with a Gnostic element.

Paul does not define these heresies. We are inferring the questions by examination of the answers that he provides. Neither is there any evidence that he is addressing two different groups; but it is generally agreed that many Christians at Colosse were being taught false doctrine that was based on these two major heresies.

### Gnosticism

A Gnostic is a person who considers himself as having “knowledge” beyond that which the ordinary person has. He thinks of himself as a member of an intellectual elite, one of the few who

set themselves above all others as possessing a superior knowledge.

The ancient oriental philosophy, or religion, of Gnosticism was concerned mainly with two questions.

First, how can the work of creation be explained?

Second, How are we to account for the existence of evil in the universe.

So, the problem posed was, “How can one reconcile the creation of the world and the existence of evil with the conception of God as a being who is absolutely holy?”

The Gnostic argued as follows

If God had created the universe out of nothing, and evolved it directly from Himself, that holy God could not have brought an evil universe into existence. Otherwise, one is driven to the inescapable conclusion that God created evil, which is impossible because He is holy.

But, the fact of an evil universe remained. So the Gnostic explains this with the theory that God must have limited Himself in some way in the act of creation.

There must have been some evolution, some emanation from God, a germination. This first “germination” evolved a second, which introduced a third, and so on. The more numerous the various stages of these creative emanations from God, the more feeble became their deity, until the divine element became so diffused that contact with matter was possible.

Now – matter was conceived to be that in which evil resided. The Gnostic postulated the theory of some antagonistic principle, independent of God, by which His creative energy was thwarted and limited. Thus, evil is seen to be resident in the material universe.

So their reasoning is, the gap between a holy Creator, God, and matter is bridged by these emanations. In this way the Gnostic brushes aside the intermediate agency of creation, namely the Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:3) and the fact that God put a curse on the perfect creation because of sin (Rom. 8:20).

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<sup>1</sup> This article is taken largely from Bishop J. B. Lightfoot, *Epistle to the Colossians*.

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From these philosophical speculations, two opposing codes of ethics emerged, a rigid asceticism and an unrestrained license. The problem confronting the religious Gnostic was – since matter is evil, how can one avoid its terrible influence and keep his higher nature pure?

According to one group, the solution was to hold to a rigid asceticism. All contact with matter should be reduced to an absolute minimum. The material part of man should be reduced by subduing and mortifying. One should live on a spare diet and refrain from marriage. Eating animals was forbidden. The anointing of the body with olive oil was prohibited.

Other Gnostics, however, felt that even such strict denial of the body would produce slight and inadequate results. They argued that matter is everywhere and that, no matter how careful you are, you can avoid contact with it.

Therefore, one should cultivate an indifference to the world of matter and sensation. One should follow his own impulses without giving matter any thought one way or the other. Further, this group argues, the ascetic elevates matter to a higher place that it deserves, by placing such great importance on abstinence. Thus he fails to assert his independence to it. The true rule of life is to treat matter as foreign and alien to one, and as something towards which one has no duties or obligations, and which one can use or leave unused as one likes. This philosophy, of course, led to unbridled license.

Gnosticism had no connection with Christianity directly. The professing Christian church was, however, influenced by Jewish Essenes, who were mystics, members of a secret brotherhood, and characterized by the same sort of severe asceticism that Gnostics practiced, in their rigorous observance of Mosaic ritual. They would not light a fire, move a vessel, or perform other ordinary functions; some even stayed in bed as much as possible.

Essenes held the name of Moses in reverence, and blasphemy was punishable by death. Marriage was an abomination; the adopted children. Those who accepted marriage as necessary regarded it, nevertheless, as evil. They lived for prayer and religious exercises.

Believing that matter is evil, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, but believed in the continuance of the soul after life. They rejected blood sacrifices of the Jews (in spite of Moses) and sent offerings of vegetables to the temple. They place angels in the category of things to be worshipped, and prided themselves on their secret documents and teachings.

These, then, are the anti-Christian doctrines and practices that were creeping into the church at Colosse. Paul's letter was written to combat these things.

1. Intellectual exclusivism VS the universality of Gospel teaching
2. Hidden mysteries and secret ritual VS the knowledge of God in Christ
3. Some men perfect through knowledge VS every man perfect in Christ.
4. Divine emanations and angels who were mediators in creation VS Jesus Christ as Creator
5. A distributed divine essence (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) VS the divine essence is totally in Christ Jesus.

## The Essenes <sup>2</sup>

The Essenes were a Jewish religious community which was first mentioned in history in the writings of Josephus (*Antiquities*, XIII, 5, 9), who mentions them as flourishing in the time of Jonathan Maccabaeus, in about 150 B.C., where he speaks of Judas, an Essene.

The Essenes are not mentioned directly in the Bible. However, it is thought that Matt. 19:11,12

## <sup>2</sup> Bibliography of the section on the Essenes.

Josephus, *Antiquities*, xviii,1,5; Wars, II,8,2

Schuerer, *Jewish People*, Vol. II

Edersheim, *Life and Times of the Jesus the Messiah*,

Brownlee, W.H., "A Comparison of the Covenants of the Dead Sea Scrolls with Pre-Christian Jewish Sects", in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Vol. XIII, Sept. 1950, pp. 50-72.

Unger, Merrill F., *Unger's Bible Handbook*

and Col. 2:8 and 18 include indirect references to Essenes. In any case, the Essenes disappeared from history after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

The Essenes were an extremely ascetic group of men in Palestine and Syria, and they are thought to have formed the first cells of organized monasticism in the Mediterranean world, setting the pattern for the various holy orders which proliferated during and after the time of Christ. It is still not clear whether the Essenes proceeded from some sect of Judaism or whether elements of Greek and other foreign philosophies had an influence in their origin. Their main colonies were near the northern end of the Dead Sea and around the town of Engedi. The study of the Dead Sea Scrolls has produced a considerable body of knowledge of the early Christian sects; and the Essenes may have been the group which produced the scrolls. The bibliography of this article provides references for further study.

### **Essene Organization**

The community of the Essenes was organized as a single body, with a president at the head. The members had to obey the president unconditionally. A man who wanted to join the order was given three articles: a pickax, an apron, and a white garment. After a year's probation, during which he was observed continuously, he was admitted to the second stage of his probation period. Another two years passed, after which the successful candidate was admitted as a full member and allowed to participate in the common meals. He was required to take a terrible oath, in which he swore to be absolutely open to the brethren and to keep secret the doctrines of the order, under pain of excommunication.

Children were instructed in the principles of Essenism; and Josephus says that the Essenes were divided into four classes. The children formed the first class, the first and second stages of novices were the next classes, and the fourth class were the full members.

### **Essene Discipline**

Discipline was carried out by trial, and guilt was never decided unless at least one hundred members voted for it. After that, the decision was

unalterable. The usual punishment was excommunication, often amounting to a slow death, since an Essene could not take food prepared by strangers, for fear of pollution.

The strongest tie between members was the absolute community of goods. Those who came into the order had to give all they had to stewards who were appointed to take care of their common affairs. There was one purse for all, and all members had expenses, clothing, and food in common. Those who were needy, such as the aged and infirm, were cared for at the common expense; and special officers were assigned in each town to take care of traveling brethren.

### **Essene Ethics and Customs**

The daily labor of the members was strictly regulated. After group prayer, the members were dismissed to work by their president. They reassembled later for purifying washings and the common meal. They went to work again for the afternoon and gathered again for the evening meal. The chief employment was agriculture, and there were crafts of every kind. Trading, however, was forbidden; it was thought to lead to covetousness. It was also forbidden to make weapons or any utensils or tools that might injure men.

According to Josephus and other historians, the Essenes' life was simple and unpretentious. They did not marry, but other people sent their children to them for training and admission to the order. They only ate enough to stay healthy; and they were content to eat the same food day after day. They felt that great expense was harmful to mind and body; and they did not throw any clothes or shoes away until they were completely worn out. They only acquired for themselves the minimum required to maintain life.

The following special customs were observed by the Essenes:

- They had no slaves; all were free, mutually working for each other.
- Swearing oaths was forbidden as worse than perjury; "for that which does not deserve belief without an appeal to God is already condemned."

- The forbade anointing the body with oil or perfumes, because they thought that having a rough exterior was praiseworthy.
- It was compulsory to bathe in cold water before meals, after the functions of nature, and after coming into contact with lower Essene classes or strangers.
- They wore white clothing all the time.
- They required great modesty. In performing natural functions they dug a foot-deep hole with their pickax, which they always carried, covered themselves with a mantle (so as not to offend God), and covered the hole when they were finished. While bathing, they tied the ever-present apron around their loins.
- They sent gifts of incense to the temple, but they did not offer animal sacrifices because they thought their own sacrifices were more valuable.
- Their common meals had many characteristics of sacrificial feasts. The food was prepared by priests with the observance of certain rites of purification; and an Essene could not eat any food but this.

### Essene Theology

The Essene theology was basically Jewish, with an absolute belief in God. Next to God, the name of Moses the lawgiver was an object of great reverence, and whoever blasphemed either God or Moses was sentenced to death. In their worship, the Scriptures were read and explained. The Sabbath was so strictly observed they did not even move vessels or perform the functions of nature. Their priesthood closely paralleled the Aaronic priesthood.

They had a strong belief in angels and revered them highly. Novices had to swear to preserve the names of the angels.

Concerning their doctrines of the soul and of immortality, Josephus writes: "They taught that bodies are perishable, but souls immortal, and that the souls dwelt originally in the eternal ether, but being debased by sensual pleasures united themselves with bodies as if with prisons. But when they are freed from the fetters of sense, they will joyfully soar on high as if delivered from long

bondage. To the good souls is appointed a life beyond the ocean, where they are troubled by neither rain nor snow nor heat, but where the gentle zephyr is ever blowing...But to the bad souls is appointed a dark, cold region full of unceasing torment."

The Essenes had peculiar conduct with respect to the sun. They turned to the sun while prayer, in contrast to the Jewish custom of turning toward the temple.

Essenism seems to have been Pharisaism in the highest degree. It was, however, influenced by foreign systems of theology and philosophy, including possibly Buddhism, Parseeism, Syrian heathenism, and Pythagoreanism.