

Sectarian Parallels: Qumran and Colosse

Edwin Yamauchi

[Edwin Yamauchi, Graduate Fellow and Candidate for Ph.D. degree,
Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts.]

[p.141]

The three sites—Qumran in Palestine, Colosse in Asia Minor, and Chenoboskion (Nag-Hammadi) in Egypt—have produced literature which may be taken to illustrate the evolution of gnosticism. The Sectarians from Qumran¹, on the one hand, have been described by some scholars as representatives of a gnosticizing Judaism.² The codices recovered from Chenoboskion, on the other hand, are shedding much light upon the nature of the gnostic heresies that flourished in the second century.³

Since the heresy which Paul confronted at Colosse may be characterized as a Judaistic gnosticism, we may hope to gain a better understanding of the affinities of the Colossian heresy by comparing any parallels to its features from these new sources.⁴ The comparison is complicated by several factors. (1) The Colossian heresy itself is hybrid in nature. (2) Our understanding of the heresy is derived in part from explicit negative statements about it and in part from implicit suggestions as to its nature which we may form from Paul's positive emphases.

In our present study we shall be concerned primarily with the materials from Qumran. We shall do well not only to

[p.142]

compare parallels, but also to note where parallels are lacking to determine if we can assume any Sectarian influence.⁵ We shall examine the evidence for comparisons in the areas of practices, attitudes, and doctrines.

¹ The author would like to acknowledge his indebtedness to Professor Shermayahu Talmon of the Hebrew University for his stimulating instruction in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

² E.g. Ralph Marcus, "Pharisees, Essenes, and Gnostics," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 73:161, 1954. Jülicher in 1742 called the Colossian heresy a "gnosticizing Judaism."

³ The Gnostic material, which was discovered about the same time as the Dead Sea Scrolls, has not received the same publicity as the Scrolls. I have used the translations of Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*; Bertil Gärtner, *The Theology of the Gospel According to Thomas*; and Kendrick Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth*.

⁴ Bo Reicke examines the contention that there are "Traces of Gnosticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *New Testament Studies*, 1:137-41, 1954-55. He concludes by saying that although we cannot call the sect Gnostic, we might describe it as pre-Gnostic.

⁵ S. Lyonnet, "L'étude du milieu littéraire et l'exégèse du N.T.," *Biblica*, 37:27-38, 1956; Roland E. Murphy, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and New Testament Comparisons," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 18:263-72, 1956; S. Zedda, "Il carattere Gnostico e Giudaico dell' errore colossese nella luce dei manoscritti del Mar Morto," *Rivista Biblica*, 5:31-56, 1957. The weakness of these and other studies on the subject, to my mind, has been the fact that similarities are discussed without an adequate discussion of the dissimilarities between Qumran and the Colossian heresy.

PRACTICES

The evidence for parallels with Qumran is clearest in the Judaistic practices of the heresy. It is true that many of these could be illustrated by reference to normative Judaism. However, certain aspects seem especially congenial to the environment of Qumran. Paul in Colossians 2:16 warns: "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of any holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days."

First of all, the Sectarrians were vitally concerned with calendaric questions, since they followed a calendar which was different from the other Jews—one which was similar to that of the Book of Jubilees. Indeed, this difference may have been one of the factors in their original secession from Judaism at large.⁶

We know further that the Essenes⁷ were even stricter than the Pharisees in their observation of the Sabbath.⁸ Josephus tells us that they "are stricter than all Jews in abstaining from work on the seventh day; for not only do they prepare their food on the day before, to avoid kindling a fire on that one, but they do not venture to remove any vessel or even to go to stool."⁹

The Essenes were also exceedingly scrupulous about their

[p.143]

eating habits.¹⁰ They preferred to die rather than to violate their consciences on this regard. Josephus tells us: "Those who are convicted of serious crimes they expel from the order; and the ejected individual often comes to a most miserable end. For, being bound by their oaths and usages, he is not at liberty to partake of other men's food, and so falls to eating grass and wastes away and dies of starvation."¹¹

One aspect of Essene practice which seems conspicuous by its absence in the Colossian heresy, if we are to assume Essene influence, is their emphasis on lustrations.¹² Nor do we

⁶ S. Talmon, "The Calendar Reckoning of the Sect from the Judaeian Desert," *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 4:162–99, 1958.

⁷ Though some scholars still maintain reservations about identifying the Sectarrians from Qumran with the Essenes, for this study we are assuming their virtual identity. On the subject, see Frank M. Cross, Jr., *The Ancient Library of Qumran*, 70-71.

⁸ Judah Rosenthal in "The Sabbath Laws of the Qumranites or the Damascus Covenanters," *Biblical Research*, 6:10–17, 1961, points out that in the case of the Sabbath journey the Sectarrians along with the Pharisees adopted a more liberal interpretation of Exod 16:29 than did the Samaritans or the Jews from Elephantine.

⁹ *The Jewish War*, II, viii, 9.

¹⁰ 10. Saul Lieberman in "Light on the Cave Scrolls from Rabbinic Sources," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 20:395–404, 1951, calls attention to a reference in the Tosefta (third century A.D.) to a heterodox sect which was probably the Essenes. Whereas the orthodox rabbis ruled that tiny creatures generated in wine and vinegar were edible, this sect, which also pronounced a blessing on the sun, took pains to strain out these larvae.

¹¹ *The Jewish War*, II, viii, 8.

¹² David Flusser, "The Dead Sea Sect and pre-Pauline Christianity," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 4:265, 1958, holds that Sectarrian concept of immersion was closer to the Christian concept than to that of normative Judaism in that it was likewise associated with the forgiveness of sins. The Sectarrians did not believe that the water itself had an inherent power to cleanse. In the Manual of Discipline 3:4–5, we read of the hypocrite, "He shall not be absolved by atonement nor purified by lustral waters, nor sanctified by seas and rivers, nor cleansed by all the waters of washing."

find any suggestion of celibacy,¹³ since it is not likely that the word *haptesthai* (AV, "touch," RV, "handle") in Colossians 2:21 refers to sexual contact here, as it does in 1 Corinthians 7:1. Attitudes

When we examine the attitudes reflected in the Colossian heresy we find that, in spite of the presence of legislations, there is an absence of an emphasis on legalism as such. That is, Paul seems to be attacking a heresy in which legal observances were not the acme, as was the case in the Galatian heresy, but rather more of an adjunct.

The ascetic practices, in particular, may have been intended as preparatory means for the incubation of dreams and visions as in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition. Scholem tells us that the Jewish Merkabah mystic (second century A.D.) "must fast a number of days and lay his head between his knees and whisper many hymns and songs whose texts

[p.144]

were known from tradition. Then he perceives the interior and the chambers...."¹⁴

The mysticism of the Colossian heresy and the mysticism of Qumran as reflected in the fragments from the Testament of Levi found there both included visions of angels.¹⁵ However, Jewish mysticism as represented also by Philo and by Merkabah mysticism, in contradistinction to later Gnostic and Neoplatonic mysticism in which the soul sought reabsorption with the divine, always maintained the distinction between Creator and creature. "The mystic who in his ecstasy has passed through all the gates, braved all the dangers, now stands before the throne; he sees and hears—but that is all."¹⁶

From Colossians 1:28: "Whom we preach, warning every man in all wisdom," a statement which is clearly directed against the exclusiveness of the heretics, we may gather that the exclusiveness of the Colossian heresy was an "intellectual" one. The Essenes, on the other hand, excluded from the eschatological banquet all the maimed and distorted.¹⁷ Rabin's statement that "clearly the sect only accepted members of a certain intellectual standard" is quite questionable.¹⁸ Probably far more important than how bright one was, was how closely one followed the "party line." The exclusive policy of Qumran was built upon dogmatic and disciplinary lines that did not tolerate any deviations. By contrast the intellectual exclusiveness of the Gnostics fostered innovations. Irenaeus reports of the Gnostics: "Every day each one of them, in so far as he is able, produces some novelty."¹⁹

¹³ The Essene rejection of marriage was based more on the pragmatic needs of a contemplative life as in the case of Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher, than it was on a philosophic opposition to sex such as in the case of Saturninus (A.D. 117-38), the Gnostic, who taught that Christ had come from heaven to "destroy the works of the female" (cf. 1 Tim 4:3).

¹⁴ Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 49.

¹⁵ J. T. Milik, "Le Testament de Lévi en araméen," *Revue Biblique*, 62:400, 1955.

¹⁶ Scholem, *op. cit.*, 56.

¹⁷ Since this exclusion of the maimed, etc., is on account of the angels, H. J. Cadbury, "Qumran Parallel to Paul," *Harvard Theological Review*, 51:1-2, 1958, compares this with 1 Cor 11:10.

¹⁸ Chaim Rabin, *Qumran Studies*, 4. Elsewhere Rabin himself says, "However, it is doubtful whether *sékhel* here means in fact general intelligence."

¹⁹ Cited by Robert M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, 11.

The proselyting zeal of the heretics (Col 2:4) was a phenomenon that would be strange to the Essenes. On the contrary, the Sectarians were admonished to keep separate from nonbelievers and to conceal their doctrines from them. "And let him not rebuke the man of the Pit nor dispute with them; let him conceal the maxims of the Law from the midst

[p.145]

of the men of perversity.... This is the time to prepare the way to go into the desert...that they may be separated from all who have not departed from all perversity."²⁰

CONCEPTS

It is affirmed that the Sectarian emphasis upon knowledge, which is moreover secret knowledge or mystery, links Qumran with the Colossian heresy and with later Gnosticism.²¹ Davies, however, points out that the three questions which preoccupied the Gnostic—"Whence evil and by what means? Whence man and how? Whence God?"—are not relevant to the understanding of a da'at "knowledge" in the Dead Sea Scrolls.²² Philo in his description of the Essenes in *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit*, 80 tells us: "The logical part of philosophy as not necessary for the acquirement of virtue they leave to word-hunters, and the physical part as surpassing human nature to star-gazers, except in so far as it reasons about the existence of God and the origin of the universe. But on ethics they expand much thought under the guidance of their ancestral laws, which the human mind could not have conceived without divine inspiration."²³

We may say that the da'at of Qumran in contrast with the gnosis of Gnosticism was primarily practical rather than theosophical, ethical rather than soteriological. Likewise in the writings of Qumran the word *raz*, i.e. *secret* or *mystery*, was eschatological, whereas the mysteries in Gnostic circles were cosmological. The use of the concept of mysteries at Qumran and at Colosse had precedents enough in prior Jewish thought.²⁴

[p.146]

Knowledge for the Sectarians and for the Gnostics had altogether different orientations. For the former knowledge meant primarily the study²⁵ of the Old Testament and other Jewish

²⁰ *Manual of Discipline*, 9:16f.

²¹ Zedda, *op. cit.*, 33f.; Jean Danielou, *The Dead Sea Scroll and Primitive Christianity*, 100; Kurt Schubert, *The Dead Sea Community*, 67-70.

²² W. D. Davies, "'Knowledge' in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Matthew 11:25-30," *Harvard Theological Review*, 46:131, 1953.

²³ Philo, *Quod Omnis Probus Liber Sit*, 80.

²⁴ Reicke, *op. cit.*, 138; Raymond E. Brown, "The Semitic Background of the New Testament *Mysterion*," *Biblica*, 39:426-48, 1958; 40:70-87, 1959. Brown concludes, "We believe it no exaggeration to say that, considering the variety and currency of the concept of divine mysteries in Jewish thought, Paul and the New Testament writers could have written everything they did about *mysterion* if there had never been pagan mystery religions."

In the case of Colossians, however, Paul uses terms such as *embateuein* [Col 2:18] that was used on three of the seven inscriptions dealing with the mysteries of Apollo celebrated at Claros about 20 miles north of Ephesus. See S. Lyonnet, "L'epitre aux Colossiens (Col 2:18) et les mysteres d'Apollon Clarien," *Biblica*, 43:417-35, 1962.

²⁵ Nahum Glatzer in his article on Hillel in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. by Krister Stendahl, 236, remarks, "In the sectarian writings, however, we find (besides interest in the pragmatic side of scriptural

traditions. For the Gnostics, who on the whole maintain a negative attitude toward the Old Testament, knowledge was the saving illumination meditated by the risen Lord. We may see this sharp difference by comparing two passages that deal with the identical theme—God's deliverance of a people groping in darkness by making Himself known.

DAMASCUS DOCUMENT

But when "He remembered the covenant of the forefathers," "He caused a remnant to remain of Israel and gave them not up to be consumed."...And they considered their trespass and they knew that they were guilty men; but they "were like the blind and like them that grope their way" for twenty years. And God "considered their works," for "with a perfect heart" did they seek Him; and He raised for them "a teacher of righteousness" to lead them in "the way of His heart" and to make known to the last generation, the congregation of the faithless.²⁶

GOSPEL OF THOMAS

For indeed the Totality (of creatures) have been searching after that (or Him) from which they emerged—and (all along) the Totality were within Him, the unthinkable Incomprehensible One, who is choicer than any thought!—whilst this not-knowing-the-Father became an anguish and a terror; and the anguish condensed like a fog so that none could see.... The Forgetting did not arise under the hand of the Father, though it did arise because of Him, but what arises in Him is Gnosis, which made its appearance in order that Forgetting might be destroyed and the Father be known.²⁷

By his particular emphasis on knowledge in Colossians, Paul seems to be seeking to offset a knowledge that would derive its source outside of Christ. It does not seem that this gnosis centers about the interpretation of the Old Testament, as in the case of the Sectarians, nor does it seem to have the central, saving significance, as among the later Gnostics. What may have been involved at Colosse was the attempt "to increase" and "to perfect" one's spiritual life through a knowledge mediated in visions by angels (cf. Col 1:9–10, 28).

Common to both the Sectarians and to the Gnostics was the attempt to preserve their knowledge as an esoteric secret. According to Josephus the Essene swore "carefully to preserve the books of the sect and the name of the angels."²⁸

[p.147]

In Logion 14 of the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is said to have uttered three words to Thomas. When his companions asked him what they were, Thomas replied: "If I tell you one of the words which he said to me, you will take up stones and cast them at me, and fire will come out of the stones and burn you." In contrast to the esoteric knowledge of the Sectarians and of the Gnostics, the mystery of which Paul spoke was an unveiled revelation, and was therefore not secret knowledge for an exclusive spiritual aristocracy, but was good news for all the world (Col 1:5–6, 23, 26–28).

A striking feature of Qumran and of Colosse is a pronounced emphasis upon angels. In the Manual of Discipline angels have a ubiquitous influence for good and for evil. In the

exegesis) an emphasis on study for its own sake, on nonpractical, pure study, on study that approaches the character of worship."

²⁶ Chaim Rabin, *The Zadokite Document*, 2, 4.

²⁷ Grobel, *op. cit.*, 3.

²⁸ *The Jewish War*, II, viii, 7.

eschatological crisis angels will have a role superior to any messianic figure.²⁹ Since parts of the Hebrew original of Jubilees and of the Aramaic of Enoch have been found at Qumran, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Sectarians shared the angelology of these two books. In Jubilees there is a large order of angels who presided over natural phenomena. These may correspond to the "elemental spirits" of Galatians 4:3, 9 and Colossians 2:8, 20 (cf. also Rev 7:1; 14:18; 16:5).³⁰

The doctrine that God created through angels seems to have been inculcated by the heresy at Colosse. We do have evidence that some Jews ascribed the work of creation to angels.³¹ In a statement dealing with Jewish heresies of the second century A.D. in the recently discovered Jung Codex from Chenoboskion we read: "Some say that He is the creator of what exists; others say that He created through His

[p.148]

angels."³² In the Midrash of Genesis Rabba, we read the following comment: "When Moses wrote the Torah, he described the work of each several day. But when he reached the verse (Gen 1:26) 'Then spake God, Let *us* make men,' he said, 'Lord of the World! What an opportunity Thou givest the heretics to open their mouths!' He answered, 'Write! Who wishes to go astray can go astray.'"³³

Later Gnostics maintained the teaching that the world was created by angels with the intent of absolving God from blame for the creation of the material and therefore evil world. Cerinthus, who flourished in Asia Minor at the close of the first century, taught that, "the world was not made by the primary God, but by a certain Power far separated from him, and at a distance from that Principality who is supreme over the universe, and ignorant of him who is above all."³⁴

The teaching which Paul seems to be counteracting at Colosse seems to have been one which held that Christ was not wholly responsible for creation, not one in which Christ was the demiurge of an evil creation.

The evident attempt of the heretics to minimize "the fullness"³⁵ of the deity of Christ would be consonant with what we might expect of the followers of the Essene tradition. Their own

²⁹ Yigael Yadin, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 4:36-56, and H. Kosmala, *Hebräer, Essena-Kristem*, have set forth the thesis that Hebrews was written to persuade Essenes or Essene converts to Christianity of the superiority of Christ over angels. For a critique of this view, see F. F. Bruce, "'To the Hebrews' or 'To the Essenes'?" *New Testament Studies*, 9:217-32, 1963.

³⁰ The *stoicheia* were also associated by the pagans and by the Jews (see Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 98-99) with the stars and the planets, which they thought controlled their destinies. As G. H. C. MacGregor, "Principalities and Powers: the Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought," *New Testament Studies*, 1:21, 1954-55, points out: "That Paul himself was in bondage to such superstition is not for one moment suggested. But that such was the background of the religious experience of most of his pagan converts can hardly be denied." See also Wilfred L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*, 106f.

³¹ Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ch. 62.

³² Cited by Giles Quispel, "The Jung Codex and its Significance," in *The Jung Codex*, ed. by Frank M. Cross, Jr., 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ch. 26.

³⁵ P. Benoit, "Corps, tete et plerome dans les Epitres de la captivite," *Revue Biblique*, 63:5-44, 1956, rejects a Gnostic origin for *pleroma*, and suggests a Stoic origin. A. Feuillel, "L'Eglise plerome du Christ d'apres Ephes.

leader, the "Teacher of Righteousness," pious man that he was, nonetheless acknowledged his own sinfulness. Notwithstanding Dupont-Sommer's misleading translation from the Habakkuk Commentary 2:15—"Thus the Teacher of Righteousness, shining with a divine light himself punished the city"—it is certain that the "Teacher of Righteousness" was not divine, was not crucified, and was not resurrected.³⁶

The Ebionites, judaizing Christians who rejected the deity of Christ, are considered to be the spiritual heirs of the

[p.149]

Essene tradition.³⁷ It is of interest to note that according to the Muslim historian, Shahrastani, the famous heretic Arius (fl. 320) who taught that Christ was a creature, took his teaching from the Magharia, the "People of the Cave," who lived four hundred years before Arius, and who are probably the Essenes.³⁸

The Gnostics, on the other hand, did not deny that Christ was divine. They even maintained that there was a spark of the divine in every man. What they did deny was that Jesus Christ was wholly divine. They further discounted the role of the earthly Jesus. Thus all the sayings that Jesus uttered on earth were but mere parables. True knowledge could be given only by the risen Christ in the period after the resurrection, which lasted according to the various accounts from eighteen months to twelve years. For example, in the Apocryphon of James, discovered at Chenoboskion, we read that the risen Lord walked with Peter and James for 550 days, imparting to them secret knowledge.

In Colossians 1:12 Paul is "giving thanks to the Father, who made you worthy for the lot of the inheritance of the saints in light." A striking parallel occurs in the following: "To those whom God chose He has given them as an eternal possession; and He has given to them an inheritance in the lot of the holy ones."³⁹ Like Colossians 1:13 which speaks of our deliverance from the dominion of darkness and our transference into the kingdom of Christ, the Sectarians made a sharp division between the children of light and the children of darkness. The Gnostics, on the other hand, maintained a threefold division of human beings: the sarkikoi, the psuchikoi, and the pneumatikoi. The first class included those without the church, the second the ordinary church members, and the third the Gnostics. Irenaeus reports that they said: "For animal (psuchikoi) men are instructed in animal things; such men, namely, as are established by their works, and by a mere faith, while they have not perfect knowledge. We of the church, they say are these persons. Wherefore also they

[p.150]

1:23," *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, 88:449-72, 593-610, rejects both Gnostic and Stoic origins for the concept, and suggests that it is to be derived from the Jewish sapiential literature.

³⁶ Jean Carmignac, *Christ and the Teacher of Righteousness*, 130.

³⁷ In his article on the Ebionites and the Sectarians, in *The Scrolls and the N.T.*, Fitzmyer is careful to point out the differences as well as the similarities between the two. See p. 230.

³⁸ A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Jewish Sect of Qumran and the Essenes*, 162-63.

³⁹ *Manual of Discipline*, 11:8.

maintain that good works are necessary to us, for that otherwise it is impossible to be saved. But as to themselves, they hold that they shall be entirely and undoubtedly saved, not by means of conduct, but because they are spiritual (pneumatikoi) by nature."⁴⁰

This latter outlook seems to be closer to what the heretics at Colosse may have held.

As for the subject of redemption, the concepts of grace and mercy in the devotional literature of Qumran almost seem to approximate the Pauline teaching of grace. The "Teacher of Righteousness" in the Thanksgiving Hymns 4:30–33, 35–37 declares: "And I, I know that righteousness is not of man, nor of the sons of men perfection of way; to the Most High God belong all the works of righteousness, whereas the way of man is not firm unless it be by the Spirit which God has created for him to make perfect a way for the sons of men, that all His works may know the might of His power and the greatness of His mercy to all the sons of His loving-kindness. And I said, It is because of my sins that I am abandoned far from Thy Covenant. But when I remembered the might of Thy hand together with the greatness of Thy mercy I rose up and stood, and my spirit stood upright in the face of the blows. For [I] leaned on Thy favours and on the greatness of Thy mercy. For Thou pardonest iniquity and clean[sest m]an of sin by Thy righteousness."⁴¹

However, it is necessary to contrast this with the Sectarians' explanation of Habakkuk 2:4—Paul's key text for the doctrine of justification by faith. In their commentary on Habakkuk we read that this verse means: "On account of their labor and of their faith in him who expounded the Law aright, God will deliver them from the house of judgment." As Daniélou notes: "Faith in the Teacher of Righteousness, on the contrary, is faith in him who teaches how to fulfill the Law. It would almost seem as if this were a Pauline polemic against the (Sectarian) *Midrash*."⁴²

Thus for the Sectarian as well as for the orthodox Jew salvation was gained through "faith," which meant, however,

[p.151]

"faithfulness" and "fidelity" to the laws which God had given.⁴³

On the other hand, full salvation for the Gnostic meant illumination. According to the Apocryphon of John (from the first half of the second century A.D.) recovered from Chenoboskion, the Father produced Sophia. Sophia without permission of the Father produced the degenerate Jaldabaoth—the creator of the world according to the Old Testament. Jaldabaoth in turn created man and placed in him a particle of light, but clothed it in hylē or matter to keep that spark from being liberated. The Savior seeks to enlighten man of the spark of light in him and to liberate it from the world. The body itself will not be resurrected, but will be left to waste away in corruption.

⁴⁰ *Against Heresies*, ch. 6.

⁴¹ *Thanksgiving Hymns*, 4:30–33, 35–37.

⁴² Daniélou, *op. cit.*, 101.

⁴³ The Jewish scholar, H. J. Schoeps, in his classic work on *Paul* cites with approval A. Meyer's description: "The idea of faith stemmed from the idea of fidelity, of loyal adherence to God and His law. As the law insists on works, so faith becomes a zealous obedience in the matter of fulfilling the law, and its individual prescriptions. It is joy in the law and faithfulness to the law even in the most minute points" (p. 202).

Logion 84 of the Gospel of Thomas reads: "Jesus says: 'He who has known the world has fallen into the body, and he who has fallen into the body, the world is not worthy of him.'"

But even after the Gnostic leaves the physical body and the "robbers" or material powers, he is now "naked" and must still tread the dangerous path to the heavenly world. Only those who possess knowledge of gnosis are able to reach the goal.⁴⁴

Here again the soteriology of the Colossian heresy would seem to have a greater affinity for the viewpoint of the Gnostics than of the Essenes.

[p.152]

CONCLUSION

In spite of the number of striking parallels to features of the Sect from Qumran, we find that we are unable to equate the Colossian heresy with the Essene heterodoxy. We have found that there are features which are quite dissimilar and other features that have greater affinities with the Gnostics of Chenoboskion. We are left then with a heresy with elements that resemble Jewish heterodoxy, on the one hand, and with elements that anticipate the later development of Gnosticism, on the other hand. In short, we have exactly what we might expect of a transition from the one to the other, if Gnosticism did evolve along these lines.

It may be that the heresy was a homegrown product of the Lycus River Valley. We do know that the heresy maintained its transitional character without developing the exaggerated excesses of later Gnosticism, for the Council which met at Laodicea (a dozen miles from Colosse) in the middle of the fourth century still found it necessary to admonish: "It is not right for Christians to abandon the Church of God and go away and invoke angels and hold conventicles; for these things are forbidden. If therefore anyone is found devoting himself to this secret idolatry, let him be anathema, because he abandoned our Lord Jesus Christ and went after idolatry."⁴⁵

© 1964 Dallas Theological Seminary. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in April 2008 by Robert I/ Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁴⁴ Gärtner, *op. cit.*, 185. One of the primary preoccupations of the second-and third-century Gnostics and hermetics was: "the ascent of the soul from the earth, through the spheres of the hostile planet-angels and rulers of the cosmos, and its return to its divine home in the 'fullness' of God's light, a return which, to the gnostic's mind, signified Redemption" (Scholem, *op. cit.*, 49).

Knox, *op. cit.*, 101, tells us that "...The Christian Gnostics later were uncertain whether it was baptism that delivered man from fate and the power of the stars, or whether Gnosis was needed as well." Even today the Mandaean of Iraq and Iran—the only extant Gnostic sect—believe "that stars and planets contain animating principles, spirits subservient and obedient to Melka d Nhura (the King of Light), and that the lives of men are governed by their influences" (E. S. Drower, *The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran*, xviii).

⁴⁵ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, 68. Lightfoot in the nineteenth century anticipated modern scholarship by suggesting that the Colossian heresy was Essene in origin.