

PRESENTLY ENTERING THE KINGDOM OF CHRIST: THE BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF COL 1:12-14

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In Col 1:12-14 Paul charges the Colossians to give "thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (NASB).¹ We will here center our discussion on the linguistic and conceptual background of this controversial passage and then go on to examine one of its possible purposes within Colossians.

The helpfulness of our approach can be measured by its methodological implications as well as by its exegetical value. Col 1:12-14 is often a testing ground for theories about earlier Christian or even pre-Christian—namely, Qumran-Essene—sources and Pauline redaction. The presupposition that lies behind such methods usually is that a close verbal parallel to another literary source is of sufficient weight to indicate the borrowing and modifying of that source. Thus a verbal parallel is tantamount to a conceptual parallel, which in turn leads to theories about the genealogy of a concept. Within this study we will examine the drawbacks of this method and of its results for Col 1:12-14.

I. THE LINGUISTIC/CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF COL 1:12-14

For some time it has been suggested that Paul did not compose Col 1:12-14 but that he borrowed from an earlier tradition, perhaps from an introit to the Christological hymn in 1:15-20. Ernst Käsemann contended that earlier Christian redactors had joined two traditions: a primitive Church confession in 1:12-14, and a gnostic hymn in 1:15-20.² The thesis that has kindled the most enthusiasm, however, is that Paul or a deutero-Pauline author discovered a Qumran-Essenic tradition and adapted it as a summation of Christian conversion.

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¹Paul implies that believers have already entered into Christ's kingdom in advance of the end. It is logical to assume with most commentators that he is here speaking of spiritually entering his kingdom in this age; cf. G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 552. Note also the attempts to reduce the eschatology of Colossians to a Hellenistic-spatial understanding of reality; cf. H. Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1969) 314-315; J. Gnllka, *Der Kolosserbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1980) 49.

²Cf. E. Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964) 152-153; P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco: Word, 1982) 25.

1. *The theory of correspondence with the language of Qumran Essenism.* A leading proponent of the Qumran source theory is Reinhard Deichgräber, who focuses on the vocabulary of Col 1:12-14 and makes these oft-repeated claims: (1) that while Paul composed Colossians, Col 1:12-14 does not resemble his writing style; (2) that the only tenable parallels to 1:12-14 are from QL; and (3) that Paul or his sources must have appropriated the tradition from Qumran theology.³

2. *Weaknesses of the non-Pauline-language view of Col 1:12-14.* Granting the Pauline authorship of Colossians, the other suppositions articulated by Deichgräber are fatally flawed. In the first place, the claim that 1:12-14 is constructed of non-Pauline language can be embraced only with serious qualifications. His methods for discriminating non-Pauline vocabulary from Pauline are highly suspect. Deichgräber argues, for example, that whereas Col 1:12 has Christians calling God "the Father" absolutely, Paul never did that. How does he account for those passages in which Paul does call God "the Father" absolutely (Gal 4:6; Rom 6:4; 8:15)? By labeling them too as pre-Pauline traditions. George Cannon uses similar arguments by maintaining that Paul would never have regarded God's redemption as a past event. But his evidence for Paul's usual idiom is weak: He cites 1 Thess 1:10; Rom 7:24; 11:26 as proof, but Rom 11:26 is a quotation of the LXX while the other two passages are ambiguous in their time reference. Like Deichgräber, Cannon insists that the phrase *hoi hagioi* ("the holy ones") must be non-Pauline since it must here denote "holy angels" rather than human "saints."⁴ We will argue to the contrary that Paul is indeed speaking about human saints in this passage. But even so, in view of 1 Thess 3:13 one cannot easily rule out Paul's use of the phrase to denote "holy angels."

Many of these claims about the language of Col 1:12-14 have been uncritically affirmed by a succession of authors (Kuhn, Deichgräber, Cannon). The lingering impression that this text cannot have been composed by the author of Colossians probably owes less to strong evidence than to the reiteration of weak evidence.

3. *Some weaknesses of the Qumran-tradition view.* But let us look at some of the specific evidences that these verses might have been drawn from QL. The *Manual of Discipline* contains a remarkable parallel: "God has given [righteousness, wisdom, and glory] to His chosen ones as an everlasting possession, and has caused them to inherit the lot of the Holy Ones. He has joined their assembly to the Sons of Heaven" (1QS 11:7-8, Vermes' transla-

³So R. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit: Untersuchungen zu Form, Sprache und Stil der frühchristlichen Hymnen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967) 79-82. Cf. also H.-W. Kuhn, *Enderwartung und gegenwärtiges Heil: Untersuchungen zu den Gemeindliedern von Qumran* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966); P. Benoit, "Qumran and the New Testament," in *Paul and Qumran: Studies in New Testament Exegesis* (ed. J. Murphy-O'Connor; London: Chapman, 1968) 1-30.

⁴G. E. Cannon, *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon: Mercer University, 1983) 16-19.

tion). *Thanksgiving Hymns* reads: "I thank Thee, O Lord, for Thou hast redeemed my soul from the Pit, and from the Hell of Abaddon Thou hast raised me up to everlasting height. . . . Thou hast cleansed a perverse spirit of great sin that it may stand with the host of the Holy Ones, and that it may enter into community with the congregation of the Sons of Heaven" (1QH 3:19-22).

The resemblances of Col 1:12-14 to QL include a light/darkness dualism, the *qēdōšim* (holy ones), redemption, and the motif of the lot and inheritance. The parallels, however, are for the most part verbal and coincidental. The concepts represented by QL clearly are only remotely akin to those found in Colossians 1. One of the benefits attending the use of semantics in Biblical studies has been the axiom that verbal parallels are not a reliable index to conceptual parallels or direct conceptual development. Three examples should mark out the conceptual chasm that lies between Col 1:12-14 and QL. (1) In QL the phrase "holy ones" seems generally to denote "holy angels."⁵ But elsewhere in Colossians the phrase is used to refer exclusively to Christian "saints,"⁶ and interpreting it as "saints" in 1:12 makes perfect sense (cf. *RSV*; *NEB*; *TEV*; *NASB*; *NIV*). (2) Käsemann argues that according to Colossians 1 Christians have been united with the angelic congregation in a transcendent kingdom of Christ.⁷ But that interpretation goes against the general tenor of the letter, especially Paul's theme that the angels are vastly inferior to Christ.⁸ If Paul were doing battle with a form of Essene Christianity by turning their own traditions against them, then it is difficult to imagine what he was trying to accomplish. 1:12-14 reinforces what Christian Essenes might be expected to teach, that in Christ they had been united with the angelic host. (3) Paul's conception of light and darkness in Col 1:12 is not at all like Qumran Essenism. There the traditional Jewish picture of the light of salvation versus the darkness of bondage evolved into the dualistic belief in two spirits, light and darkness, which were created by God in the beginning and are most importantly the types of two ways of life (1QS 3:18) rather than the eschatological fulfillment in the present age.⁹ For Paul, living in "light" does not denote a perpetual cosmological sphere but rather a quality of spiritual existence that is now possible—not because the end is imminent, but because the Church is already within the messianic kingdom.¹⁰

⁵Cf. Kuhn, *Enderwartung* 72-74; but see also pp. 90-93, where he shows that the "holy ones" may mean both saints and angels.

⁶Cf. the use of *hagioi* in Col 1:2, 4, 22, 26; 3:12.

⁷Cf. Käsemann, "Baptismal Liturgy" 160-162.

⁸Cf. E. Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary* (London: SPCK, 1982) 51-53.

⁹Cf. J. J. Collins, "Patterns of Eschatology at Qumran," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (ed. B. Halpern and J. D. Levenson; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1984) 363-364.

¹⁰Cf. Rom 13:11-14; 1 Thess 5:5-11; Eph 5:8-14.

Those who deny the Christian origin of 1:12-14 have an additional problem in justifying the parallels to these verses within other early Christian literature. In Acts 26:17-18, as in Colossians, Paul touches on the Gentile mission, turning from darkness to light, the *exousia* ("dominion") of Satan, the remission of sins, and the *klēros* ("lot") "among the saints" (*en tois hagiasmenois*). Kuhn and Deichgräber respond that the Acts tradition must also have been borrowed from Qumran liturgy—namely, 1QH 11:10-14.¹¹ But there are other Christian parallels (Eph 1:6-7; 1 Pet 2:9-10; Rev 1:5-6; 1 Clem. 59; Barn. 14.5-9) that are verbally similar to some Qumran texts but that, like Col 1:12-14; Acts 26:17-18, express distinctively Christian themes. Acts 26:17-18; Col 1:12-14; Eph 1:6-7 reflect Paul's own concern about these themes. Their mutual corroboration should overcome most critical doubts as to whether these works accurately reflect the Paul of history.

Thus we are left in Colossians 1 with a demonstrably Pauline use of Christian ideas that is conceptually unlike its verbal parallels in QL and conceptually similar to other Christian texts that deal with redemption as it applies to salvation for Jews and Gentiles. A methodology that consists of tracing conceptual evolution backward through a ladder of verbal coincidences alone and then offering explanations for conceptual differences (Kuhn, Deichgräber, Cannon) will of necessity be weaker than one that proceeds up the ladder of verbal/conceptual development.

4. *Correspondences with the OT motif of the new exodus.* What is most telling against the theory of Qumran tradition is this: The words of the early Christians and the words of the Qumran sectarians clearly are derived from older traditions, particularly from the OT motif of the exodus and, in the case of Qumran, from other apocalyptic traditions as well. While this is not the first time someone has pointed to the influence of the OT on this text, others tend to think that the piece was a tradition about conversion that Paul took over.¹² There is also evidence that points to the author of Colossians as the composer of Col 1:12-14.

Almost all of the words (or at least synonyms of the words) of Col 1:12-14 are found in the LXX to describe the motif of the exodus. The language of the exodus is found in the historical account itself and also in the prophetic promises of a new exodus from Babylon and an eschatological new exodus and new covenant under the Messiah. Jesus connected his death with the hoped-for new covenant, and the early Christians saw his death and resurrection as the beginning of a spiritual new exodus.¹³

¹¹Kuhn, *Enderwartung* 162-163; Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus* 83-84. According to Kuhn: "At least for the Ephesians reference and probably also for Acts 26:18 a tradition-critical connection with the Qumran texts is to be assumed" (p. 163).

¹²Cf. Schweizer, *Colossians* 51-52.

¹³Cf. esp. 1 Pet 2:9-10; Rev 5:9-11. See H. Sahlin, "The New Exodus of Salvation according to St. Paul," in *The Root of the Vine: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Westminster: Dacre, 1953) 89-90; D. Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber, 1963); R. E. Nixon, *The Exodus in the New Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1963).

There are many parallels to Col 1:12-14 in the LXX,¹⁴ but there are also a few sections of the OT that contain most of the ideas or words present in Colossians 1. One example is found in Isa 63:15-19 (MT; LXX is quite different). Israel is estranged from Abraham, and this prayer contains a petition for a new exodus, an emphasis on God's position in heaven, and references to Israel as God's lot and to God's rule over them. Considering his other interpretations of that section of Isaiah, we may assume that Paul may even have had Isaiah 63 in mind when he wrote Colossians 1.¹⁵

In Colossians 1 Paul presents his own version of the new exodus and draws from several layers of tradition: from the Exodus account, from the OT predictions of the new exodus, from Paul's own commission (cf. Acts 26:17-18), and from the Church's language of redemption.

Since the Qumran sectarians on the one hand and Paul and the early Christians on the other have differing interpretations of similar words and motifs, and since these words and motifs are from their common Scriptures, then it is best to assume that Paul is not modifying QL. Rather, the Essene sectarians are reworking certain OT and apocalyptic expectations in terms of their belief that they are the eschatological remnant of Israel, while Paul and other early Christians are re-examining the OT predictions in terms of their fulfillment in Christ. Our methodology must take into account that both are in all likelihood focusing the OT revelation through different lenses and are therefore ending up with very different conceptual spectrums.

II. THE PURPOSE OF COL 1:12-14 WITHIN THE EPISTLE

The question now remains: Why does Paul speak of a new exodus in Colossians 1? The answer to this question lies in the nature of the false teaching against which he was arguing—the so-called Colossian error.¹⁶

¹⁴The LXX parallels that have a bearing on the exodus motif include *tō patri* ("to the Father"; Deut 14:1; Hos 1:10; 11:1; Isa 64:8); *eis tēn merida tou klērou* ("a share in the lot"; Deut 10:9; 12:12; here *klēros* renders *nahālā* ["inheritance"] rather than the Qumran term *gōrāl* ["casting a lot for an inheritance"]); *tōn hagiōn* ("of the saints"; Wis 5:5); *en tō phōti/ek tēs exousias tou skotous* ("in the light/from the dominion of darkness"; Exod 10:21-23; Isa 9:2; 40:5; 60:1-3, 19-20); *hos errysato hēmas* ("who has redeemed us"; *ryomai* ["redeem"]) is very important in the LXX account of the exodus and usually translates the Hebrew *nāšal* [Exod 12:27; 14:30]; in the latter half of Isaiah the Greek verb usually translates Hebrew *gā'al* in respect to the new exodus [Isa 48:20-21; 49:25-26]; *methistēmi* ("transfer") with its present meaning is not used in the LXX with respect to the exodus; see, however, its use as a technical term for mass deportation in Josephus' account of the Assyrian exile of Israel: *tous oikētoras aichmalōtisas metestēsen eis tēn autou basileian* ("[the king of Assyria] made the inhabitants prisoners and transplanted them into his own kingdom" [Whiston]); *eis tēn basileian tou huiou tēs agapēs autou* ("into the kingdom of the Son of his love"; Ps 2:6-7; Isa 55:3); *apolytrōsin tēn apherin tōn hamartiōn* ("redemption, the forgiveness of sins"; the noun *apolytrōsis* appears only in Daniel LXX). The idea of redemption from Egypt/Babylon is ubiquitous, but it is always expressed in other synonyms or cognates.

¹⁵Deut 32:5-14 also contains many of the elements found in Colossians 1.

¹⁶Cf. O'Brien, *Colossians* xxx-xxxviii, for a helpful listing of the major theories about the Colossian error.

1. *What is the Colossian error?* Lightfoot thought that the heresy was a form of Essene Judaism, and the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls has resulted in a revival of this theory.¹⁷ The major obstacle that this solution faces is the absence of known Essenic practices, such as ritual purification and communal exaltation, from Paul's polemic.

The other standard explanation, advanced by F. C. Baur and many others, is that the heresy was some kind of gnosticism. This label has difficulties for many reasons: our inability firmly to date gnosticism that early, our inability to define what first-century gnosticism might look like, the absence of known gnostic ideas from Paul's polemic, and the clear Judaizing tendency of the error.¹⁸

Since neither traditional solution is compelling, some scholars have supposed that the error was a syncretistic philosophy.¹⁹ But it would be more logical to find one system of thought that is known to have existed during that time period, which we are capable of defining and analyzing through its own literature and which explains all or most of the error's discernible phenomena without distorting the evidence. The solution that best fits these criteria today is the proposal that the Colossian error was a Christian version of Jewish visionary mysticism—a philosophy that within Judaism developed as *merkābā* mysticism.²⁰ This mystical philosophy taught that through self-denial the pious Jew could experience a miraculous journey to see heaven and to learn divine mysteries.²¹ Such Jewish mysticism is known to have existed

¹⁷Cf. Gnlika, *Kolossierbrief* 49; *Der Epheserbrief* (Freiburg: Herder, 1971) 126; W. D. Davies, "Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Flesh and Spirit," in *The Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; London: SCM, 1958); Benoit, "Qumran."

¹⁸Cf. G. Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," in *Conflict at Colossae* (ed. F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks; Missoula: Scholars, 1973) 130; H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1957) 2; Conzelmann, *Outline* 315. See contra M. Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974) 12-18; E. Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbrief* (Lund: Gleerup, 1946) 176-178; R. M. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968) 55-57. The tendency of G. Scholem and others to label *merkābā* mysticism as "Jewish gnosticism" seems to me to confuse the issue for the primary purpose of highlighting the esoteric nature of both Jewish mysticism and gnosticism.

¹⁹So H. E. Lona, *Die Eschatologie im Kolosser- und Epheserbrief* (Würzburg: Echter, 1984) 235-238; E. Lohse, "Christusherrschaft und Kirche im Kolosserbrief," *NTS* 11 (1964-65) 203; J. Lähnemann, *Der Kolosser: Komposition, Situation und Argumentation* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971) 174-175.

²⁰Cf. F. O. Francis, "Humility and Angel Worship in Col 2:18"; "The Background of EMBATEUEIN (Col 2:18) in Legal Papyri and Oracle Inscriptions," in *Conflict* (ed. Francis and Meeks) 163-195; C. A. Evans, "The Colossian Mystics," *Bib* 63 (1982) 188-205; A. J. Bandstra, "Did the Colossian Errorists Need a Mediator?," in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 329-343; C. Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions and the Exaltation of Christ in the Letter to the Colossians," *JSNT* 19 (1983) 73-74. For the Jewish background see especially G. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (3d rev. ed.; New York: Schocken, 1954); *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1965).

²¹An example is found in *Mart. Isa.* 9:42. The martyred Isaiah ascends to the seventh heaven and joins with the angels in worshiping God: "And then all the righteous approached and worshiped, and the angels approached and worshiped, and all the angels sang praises."

in Paul's day, and it provides solutions for the error's emphasis on "things seen," on asceticism, on individualism, on the denigration of Christ as the all-sufficient mediator to the Father, and on "angels' worship." The Qumran sect basically approved of apocalyptic Judaism. They then modified and spiritualized the apocalyptic experience into the exaltation of the community in angelic liturgy. But the conventional mystics stressed the individual's experience.²² The Colossian errorists could have very well been Christians who relied on Christ less as they became enamored with personally entering into heaven, seeing angels and receiving esoteric wisdom.

2. *Col 1:12-14 and ecclesiology.* Some scholars have proposed that in Col 1:12-14 there is a closer identification of the kingdom of Christ with the Church.²³ Käsemann believes that in Col 1:12-14 there are hints of baptismal imagery, the deliverance through the Red Sea being a type of baptism as in 1 Cor 10:2, the "beloved Son" title being reminiscent of Jesus' baptism.²⁴ He then links 1:12-14 with 2:12-13 and implies that the eschatological tradition of "entering the kingdom" is drawing closer to presently "entering the Church." Of course Col 1:12-14 is appropriate for a baptismal setting. But here and in Col 1:15-20 Paul speaks not so much of men and women being converted and baptized into the body as he does of Christ becoming the head of the Church in his death and resurrection. We might say that he speaks in Col 1:13-20 of historical redemption and in Colossians 2, Acts 26, and perhaps Col 1:12 of individual redemption.

There is good reason to suppose that when Paul relates the new exodus of redemption he is speaking of the corporate exodus of the Church from darkness into light. In fact the NT concept of redemption is almost always corporate rather than individual. This historical movement then provides the basis for later individual conversions. Those who come to Christ do not go through the exodus one by one (as Käsemann implies). Rather, they join the invisible body that has already been rescued from darkness. The corporate aspect is especially clear when one considers Paul's use of *methistēmi* ("transfer"), which Lightfoot asserts is virtually a technical term for "the wholesale deportation of peoples."²⁵

There is a conceptual analogy for our "exodus" interpretation in Jewish proselyte baptism. The *tēbilā* baptism came to be regarded by the rabbis as the symbol of entering the Sinai covenant. After a convert was baptized he

²²For the spiritualizing of traditional apocalyptic expectations in Qumran theology cf. Kuhn, *Enderwartung* 72.

²³Cf. L. Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1959) 384-385; D. M. Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1961) 204; see contra R. Schnackenburg, *God's Rule and Kingdom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963) 301; A. Wikenhauser, *Der Kirche als der mystische Leib Christi nach dem Apostel Paulus* (Münster: Aschendorffschen, 1937) 41-47.

²⁴Käsemann, "Baptismal Liturgy" 160-161.

²⁵J. B. Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint 1879) 141.

was allowed to partake of the Passover and on the basis of covenantal solidarity to say, "The Lord redeemed me out of Egypt."²⁶

Thus the kingdom saying in Col 1:13 is not a statement about individuals entering the Church/kingdom but about the Church corporately having entered into the kingdom in the cross, resurrection and enthronement of Christ.

3. *The Church's salvation history as an anti-mystical polemic.* Our interpretation of Col 1:12-14 as a Pauline affirmation of corporate historical redemption corresponds nicely with the theory that the Colossian error was a Christianized visionary mysticism. Paul is able to show that in Christ we all have access to the Father through reconciliation by Christ's death on the cross (1:21-22). Gentiles have an equal footing in this new exodus since Christ dwells in them (1:27). No one can claim a better route to the Father than that which the whole Church has possessed since God's redemptive act in Christ. All other claims about visions or angels become vain boasting (2:18) and indicate that that individual has lost contact with the head (2:19). In 3:1-4 Paul shows that true heavenliness is not found in visionary experiences. Rather, it is found in Christ the head, who is "seated at the right hand of God" (Col 3:1).

Paul's polemic does not correspond well with the corporate heavenliness of Qumran and still less with the supposed cosmic knowledge of the later gnostics. We must guard against a too-hasty assumption that 1:12-14 could not have been Pauline and must have been Essenic. These verses are best seen as a Pauline-Christian argument against the kind of radical individualism and elitism that visionary mysticism naturally engendered.

²⁶Cf. Str-B, 1. 103-105; Sahlin, "New Exodus" 89-90; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1962) 27 n. 1.