

SCEVA, SOLOMON, AND SHAMANISM: THE JEWISH ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM AT COLOSSAE

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The time is favorable for a reinvestigation of the background of the problem at Colossae. A cascade of important historical studies and a few new primary source documents have appeared over the last two decades that have relevance to this question. All of this contributes in substantive ways to our understanding of the background of Colossians, but these documents and studies also represent significant new strides for appreciating the contours of Second Temple Judaism, especially Jewish mysticism and Jewish magic.

This essay also affords me with an opportunity to defend some of the things I said in my 1995 monograph, *The Colossian Syncretism*, with which not everyone has agreed.¹ Some have suggested that I overstressed the Greek and Roman background of the problem and have not paid sufficient attention to the essential Jewishness of the rival teaching.² In this paper, I want to affirm that I do, in fact, see a substantial Jewish contribution to the problem at Colossae without surrendering the fact that I still think the teaching of the faction there was indeed syncretistic. What I hope to reveal in this paper is a dimension of Judaism that has largely been unexplored and unrecognized by biblical scholars, especially in terms of its contribution to this question.

The issue of the precise nature of the competing teaching at Colossae is an intriguing puzzle. What specifically was happening at Colossae continues to be an unresolved matter of debate. For many years, Gnosticism was viewed as the root of the problem, but more recent scholarship has rightly called into question whether Gnosticism even yet existed as a coherent religious system by the middle of the first century.³

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¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism. The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (WUNT 2/77; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995; repr. Baker, 1996).

² For example, James D. G. Dunn stresses the strictly Jewish nature of the problem describing the competing teaching as the “self-confident apology” of Jews from one or more of the Jewish synagogues at Colossae; see James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 34. He concludes, “the hypothesis of a syncretistic religious philosophy with only some Jewish elements is both unnecessary and highly implausible” (p. 33).

³ See Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism. A Survey of the Proposed Evidences* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983). Martin Hengel, “Die Ursprünge der Gnosis and das

It does not help to speak of the problem as “incipient Gnosticism” or “proto-Gnosticism,” since many Graeco-Roman religious traditions could be given this designation since Gnosticism itself was a grand syncretism.

In the last generation, a number of scholars have suggested that the rival teaching at Colossae stems from local Judaism—either Jewish Christians within the church or influence from a local synagogue. I, too, think that this is a fruitful direction to look because the rival teachers emphasize the importance of Jewish observances such as Sabbaths and new moon celebrations (Col 2:16) and because Paul speaks of these observances as a “shadow” of what is to come (Col 2:17). The complicating difficulty we face is that there are a variety of other practices that the faction is insisting on that look very different from the Pharisaic Judaism we know about in first-century Israel. Among these strange practices is what Paul terms “the worship of angels” along with other forms of ascetic behaviors, fasting, observance of taboos, and visionary experiences. So, one can quite reasonably ask, what kind of Judaism is this? And how could this have influenced Christians in Colossae?

Many scholars have now suggested it was a form of Jewish mysticism—the kind that developed into the later Merkabah mysticism.⁴ They contend that the odd practices that Paul takes exception to at Colossae possibly originated with a Jewish Christian who was advocating a ritual ascent to heaven experience for the members of the community. By undergoing proper preparation through fasting and ritual purification, one could engage in a vision of the heavenly throne and participate with the angels in worshipping God and thus “worship of angels” would actually mean “worshipping with the angels.”

I am convinced that there are numerous problems with this reconstruction, not least of which is a very doubtful interpretation of the phrase “worship of angels”—an expression appearing in Col 2:18 that forms part of Paul’s polemic against the practices of the competing teaching at Colossae. Traditionally, this phrase has been interpreted to regard the angels as the object of the worship, which I think is the correct way to take it. Of course, another difficulty with this view is that we have absolutely no positive evidence of the presence of this kind of mysticism within the Judaism of Asia Minor.

Urchristentum,” in J. Ådna, S. J. Hafemann, and O. Hofius, *Evangelium—Schriftauslegung—Kirche. Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher zum 65. Geburtstag* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997) 222, has argued that the radically negative interpretation of the origin of the world in which the God of Israel is defamed as a cruel and foolish demiurge had its beginning among Hellenistic Jews whose national eschatological hope was shattered after the Jewish war. In my view, this appears to be the best explanation for the catalyst that prompted the rise of Gnostic systems of redemption.

⁴ Most recently, see Ian K. Smith, *Heavenly Perspective. A Study of the Apostle Paul’s Response to a Jewish Mystical Movement at Colossae* (LNTS 346; London: T & T Clark, 2006).

But on the other side of the ledger, it should also be mentioned that we have no unequivocal evidence of Jews anywhere engaging in a cultic veneration of angels, where angels are the object of worship. In other words, we find no groups of Jews worshipping angels in the same way that they worship Yahweh. While angels are prominent in Second Temple Jewish texts, Jews always stop short of offering praise to them or praying to them.⁵ So, if angels are the object of veneration, how should we understand this? Is this a new and aberrant Christian practice that was unique to Colossae?

What do we do, then, with this important clue for interpreting the nature of the Colossian problem? I do not think we should abandon Judaism as a possible source for the rival teaching. We have just been looking at the wrong form of Judaism.

I. SCEVA

There is a form of Judaism that has received little attention for its potential contribution to our question. It is represented, in part, by an enigmatic figure who we know was active in first-century western Asia Minor. This is a Jewish man named Sceva. He was serving in Ephesus about the time that the church at Colossae was being planted by Epaphras. We meet Sceva in Acts 19 where he and his seven sons are singled out by Luke as part of a larger group of Jews who functioned as itinerant exorcists (Acts 19:13).⁶ This familiar story is told to us by Luke as a way of describing how God sovereignly worked to convict a number of Ephesian Christians to give up their magical practices. Apparently, the tendency to syncretize their faith with some of their traditional beliefs and practices overwhelmed quite a number of believers in spite of Paul's teaching and the inner working of the Holy Spirit.

We do not know where Sceva was from or where he lived at the time he was in Ephesus. He could have been resident in Ephesus or he may have come from another Jewish community in Asia Minor. Luke is clear, however, that "he went from place to place" (περιερχόμενος) offering his services as one who had special knowledge and access to spiritual power for bringing healing and release from demonic spirits. A modern anthropologist would refer to Sceva as a shaman figure for the Jewish community, that is, he functions as a medicine man, a village healer, a sage with esoteric knowledge, or a holy man.

Luke refers to Sceva as a "chief priest" (ἀρχιερεύς). Some commentators have thought that this was downright false advertising

⁵ See the similar conclusions of Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology* (WUNT 2/70; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995) 200–3.

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SacPag 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 340, rightly notes, "By his language, Luke suggests that there were a number of such exorcists besides these, who 'wandered' (*perierchomenoi*) through the cities of Asia."

designed to enhance his reputation and thus gain more business.⁷ Hans Josef Klauck even refers to it as a “stage name” to make people think he was authorized to utter the divine name and had access to sacred skills.⁸ But Luke shows no sign of questioning this designation; he narrates it as though it were true. Perhaps the best explanation is that Sceva was from the high-priestly clan, a distant descendent of Zadok. As Joachim Jeremias notes, even though members of the Zadokite clan did not hold the priestly office during the time of Jesus and Paul, they “stood in the popular view high above the influential but illegitimate high-priestly families.”⁹ Functionally, Jews in this Diaspora community may have looked to him as one who could serve as a spiritual intermediary for them.¹⁰

The episode involved more people than Sceva. Apparently, he had seven sons who joined him in this ministry. Presumably they were adult sons since this is the kind of ministry that would not be undertaken by children. Whether they independently operated as itinerant exorcists in various places is not known but is quite possible. In this situation, it appears that they joined together as a team of eight people to help a severely demonized man. As we already know, the situation turned ugly with the demonized man exhibiting superhuman strength and physically overpowering all eight of the men there to deliver him from these forces.

Luke says that the reason they were unsuccessful in the exorcism is that the team used the name of Jesus (whom Paul proclaims) in their ritual adjuration. The demonized man successfully challenged their authority to use this name and they were unable to restrain him.

One of the questions that is not often asked about this Jewish exorcist and his team is How did they do it? How did a first-century Jew living in the Greek world (over 700 miles from the land of Israel) perform exorcisms? What names of authority did they typically use in their ritual invocations for exorcism?

Based upon the evidence we have from folk Jewish practices during the Roman period, this is an easy question to answer. The names they called upon were Michael, Gabriel, Ouriel, Raphael, and dozens of others. They called on the names of angels. The invocation of angels was a common way to conduct exorcisms in the Second Temple period and beyond.

⁷ See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 411.

⁸ Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000) 100.

⁹ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 193.

¹⁰ See Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts* (ZEC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming) *loc. cit.* Paul R. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (WUNT 166; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 148, notes, “The term ἀρχιερεύς is sometimes used of those who were never ruling high priests but rather were members of the Jewish priestly aristocracy.”

II. SOLOMON

Within Judaism, there was a long-standing tradition, purportedly coming down from Solomon, about how to perform exorcisms and deal with the influence of demonic powers.

1. *The Testament of Solomon*. This is well illustrated in a Jewish magical handbook called the *Testament of Solomon*.¹¹ This document is a compilation of adjurations and magical wisdom that, in its final form, postdates the NT, but likely contains many traditions that were current during the time of Jesus and Paul. Like dealing with the Rabbinic literature, one needs to be very cautious in using this document, for it is often extremely difficult to discern which traditions are early and which are late.

There is one portion of this text, however, that may date as early as the first-century BC. That is the 18th chapter. In his 2005 monograph *Rewriting the Testament of Solomon*, Todd Klutz argued that the *Testament* reached its full form sometime between the last quarter of the second century and the middle of the third.¹² Nevertheless, he contends, along with Wilhelm Gundel and others, that the eighteenth chapter should perhaps be dated as early as the first or second century BC.¹³ Part of the basis for this was the discovery of a fifth-century papyrus fragment of this chapter as well as the astrological “decan” tradition. Because this is one portion of the text that can be dated as existing before the NT era with reasonable certainty, I will only use this portion of the text for my purposes here.

A modern psychologist reading the text of *Testament of Solomon* 18 would regard it as an ancient version of the DSM-IV (the diagnostic manual for various diseases). The difference is that every ailment it lists

¹¹ Still the only critical edition of the Greek text is (although badly in need of updating) that of Chester C. McCown, *The Testament of Solomon* (UNT 9; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1922).

¹² Todd E. Klutz, *Rewriting the Testament of Solomon. Tradition, Conflict and Identity in a Late Antique Pseudepigraphon* (LSTS 53; London: T & T Clark, 2005) 35. Sarah L. Schwarz, “Reconsidering the *Testament of Solomon*,” *JSP* 16 (2007) 203–37, argues that the final form of the testament came together later than Klutz posits. Nevertheless, she recognizes that “the individual spells were ancient elements, gathered over time into a spellbook collection” (p. 208).

¹³ Klutz, *Rewriting* 35. See also Wilhelm Gundel, *Dekane und Dekansternebilder. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Sternbilder der Kulturvölker* (2d ed.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969) 45, 92. Part of the evidence for this is the discovery of a fifth- or sixth-century papyrus containing a portion of *Testament of Solomon* 18; see Karl Preisendanz, “Ein Wiener Papyrusfragment zum Testamentum Salomonis,” *EOS* 48 (1956) 161–67; and Robert Daniel, “The Testament of Solomon XVIII 27–28, 33–40,” in *Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer (P. Rainer Cent.). Festschrift zum 100-jährigen Bestehen der Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen National-Bibliothek* (Vienna: Verlag Brüder Hollinek, 1983), Textband, pp. 294–303. Schwarz, “Reconsidering” 219, notes, “Such decan lists [as contained in *TSol* 18] are known from earlier Egyptian sources, and, based simply on its form and content, this version could easily once have been an independent document. It is quite plausible that this chapter was one of the oldest portions of the story, and that it circulated independently of the rest until it was agglomerated with other Solomonic incantation materials at some later point.”

traces the etiology of the problem to a demonic spirit and then prescribes how the spirit can be expelled.

In this text, Solomon interrogates 36 demons requiring them to divulge the nature of their assignments and how they can be defeated. These particular demons are astral spirits and correspond to every 10 degrees of the heavenly sphere. They describe themselves to Solomon as *stoicheia*—the same term that Paul uses in Col 2:8, 20 that is often translated as “elementary spirits.” They also call themselves *kosmokratores*, “world rulers,” another designation for spiritual powers that Paul uses in Eph 6:12. I am convinced that it is precisely from this kind of Jewish folk belief that Paul derives these terms.¹⁴ It is highly doubtful that Paul coined these words for spirits himself. He more likely chose terms that would have been widely known among Jews to refer to demonic powers.

One by one these evil spirits, or *stoicheia*, appear before Solomon and are forced to surrender the information that he seeks. When Solomon summons the first spirit, he says to him, “Who are you?” (18:4). The spirit replies, “I am the first decan of the zodiac and I am called Ruax. I cause heads of men to suffer pain and I cause their temples to throb. Should I hear only, ‘Michael, imprison Ruax,’ I retreat immediately.”

And so it goes on, one after the other, with each spirit revealing its name, a particular evil it accomplishes, and how it can be thwarted. Many of the spirits cause physical ills (such as damage to the eyes or ears, tumors, problems with the internal organs, fevers, convulsions, hysteria, and paralysis). Others incite relational problems in the home and the community (such as conflicts between husbands and wives, jealousies, strife, dissension, and perversions).

In sum, the 18th chapter of the *Testament of Solomon* is essentially a Jewish shaman’s diagnostic manual. By looking at the presenting symptom, the holy man can identify the name of the demon causing the problem and then perform the appropriate spiritual intervention to alleviate the demonic attack and thus bring healing to the person.

What is of special interest to us here is that the demon is driven out by invoking an angel to perform the deliverance. But it cannot be just any angel. The Jewish healer needs to know the precise angel who has power to defeat the particular afflicting spirit. It does no good, for instance, to

¹⁴ Guy Williams, *The Spirit World in the Letters of Paul the Apostle* (FRLANT 231; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009) 164–65, suggests that the later editor/compiler of *Testament of Solomon* may have been familiar with these terms from the NT and imported them into the document. That is possible, but this position presumes that Paul would have coined these terms, which is highly doubtful. As Dennis C. Duling, “The Testament of Solomon: Retrospect and Prospect,” *JSP* 2 (1988) 201, rightly notes, “It is perhaps in this area of demonology (and angelology) that the Testament offers information which could be exploited for New Testament interpretation As commentators on the Pauline letters [sic] have observed, the selections on the *stoicheia* in TSol 8 and 18 may provide background for attempting to understand the Galatian and Colossian heresies.”

call on Gabriel if the person has a tumor. The angel who is effective for this is one named Sabael (18:10).

I would suggest that it was precisely this kind of Jewish folk tradition that was behind the methodology Sceva and his sons employed in their itinerant ministry of exorcism within the Jewish communities of Asia Minor and, as I hope to further demonstrate, this tradition was at the heart of the problem at Colossae.

This magical tradition purportedly stemming from Solomon became well known—even among the Gentiles—in the Mediterranean world as very effective in dealing with harmful spirits. In a recent monograph published by Cambridge University Press titled *Ancient Jewish Magic*, Gideon Bohak argued that these magical traditions were generally passed on orally throughout the Second Temple period and only came to be written down in the third century and beyond.¹⁵

2. *Josephus*. We do have additional first-century evidence of this Solomonic magical tradition for dealing with spirits. It is mentioned briefly in the first-century BC *Wisdom of Solomon*. There the author claims that God gave Solomon “unerring knowledge of what exists” (Wisd 7:17). This knowledge extended to the spiritual domain and included wisdom about “the powers of spirits” (πνευμάτων βίαις; Wisd 7:20); the constellations of the stars (ἄστρον θέσεις; Wisd 7:19); and the powerful workings of the *stoicheia* (ἐνέργειαν στοιχείων; Wisd 7:17).

The theme of Solomon’s esoteric knowledge and abilities is also developed by Josephus in the eighth book of the *Antiquities*. Josephus describes how Solomon’s extensive wisdom included insight on how to get rid of evil spirits. He says, “God enabled him to learn that skill which expels demons... he left behind him the manner of using exorcisms, by which they drive away demons, so that they never return” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.45). In Josephus’s view, this powerful, secret wisdom was then passed down for generations. He describes a dramatic situation in which a Jewish man named Eleazar cast an evil spirit out of a man in front of a distinguished Roman audience that included the emperor Vespasian and his sons, Titus and Domitian (who also would, in turn, serve as Roman emperors). Also present for the event were a number of Roman officers and soldiers (Josephus, *Ant.* 8.46–49). As Bohak notes, Josephus presents Eleazar as “an experienced, and we might even say professional,

¹⁵ Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic. A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 138. He notes, “It thus seems quite clear that most of Second Temple Jewish magic was transmitted orally, and even when it was transmitted in writing, as in the case of some exorcistic hymns, its ‘performance’ normally included an oral recitation but no writing.” Pablo A. Torijano, *Solomon the Esoteric King. From King to Magus, Development of a Tradition* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 73; Leiden: Brill, 2002) 86, notes, “It is most probable that the traditions that contained information about Solomon and the demons were quite common as early as the second century BCE.”

exorcist, who had the special implements and texts needed for this kind of ritual.”¹⁶ This Eleazar has much in common with the Sceva of Acts 19.

3. *Qumran magical handbooks*. The *Testament of Solomon* is one of the earliest Jewish magical handbooks extant until recent years when it was discovered that there were magical handbooks among the documents found at Qumran.

One such document is 11Q11, also known as 11QApocryphal Psalms (or 11QPsAp^a),¹⁷ which dates to the middle of the first century AD. It is a 5-column text, inscribed on vellum, and written in Hebrew. The overall function of this fragmentary text is apotropaic, that is, to drive away evil spirits, indicated in part by the words “exorcising” and “the demon” in the first column. In the beginning of column one, Solomon is mentioned followed by the statement, “he will invoke,” before it breaks away. The text goes on to speak of spirits and demons. In column two, the text begins with the same question of interrogation of the demons—“who are you?”—that we find in the *Testament of Solomon*, especially chapter 18, where this question is posed to each of the 36 demons of the zodiac that Solomon questions.¹⁸ Column three speaks of a powerful angel who fights against an evil spirit and then once again uses the same interrogation formula (“who are you?”) that reminds us of the *Testament of Solomon*. Column four refers to “those possessed” and then mentions that the angel Raphael will heal them. The text ends with a recitation of Psalm 91—a biblical text often cited in connection with exorcism and protection from demons. Pablo Torijano rightly points to a fourfold structure that this text has in common with the *Testament of Solomon*: (1) an identifying formula (“who are you?”); (2) a description of the demon; (3) the threat of binding at the hands of YHWH; and (4) the rhetorical invocation of an angel.¹⁹ These commonalities suggest that the date of this Solomonic exorcism tradition is certainly earlier than the mid-first century AD when this text was copied. It also corroborates our observation that the Jewish exorcism formula encapsulated in *Testament of Solomon* 18 predates the NT.

Another fascinating document of a similar nature is 4Q560, also called 4QExorcism, an Aramaic fragment dated to 50 BC. Joseph Naveh claims that it has all the signs of being a “magical manual” and that it “bears clear evidence for the existence of such books at least as early as

¹⁶ Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic* 103.

¹⁷ See Florentino García Martínez, Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, A. S. van der Woude, and Edward D. Herbert, *Qumran Cave 11: Part 2: 11Q2–18 and 11Q20–31* (DJD 23; Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) 181–205. See the translation in Florentino García Martínez, ed., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated. The Qumran Texts in English* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 376–78.

¹⁸ Torijano, *Solomon* 51–52, contends that this interrogation technique and the name of Solomon were linked in a popular exorcistic tradition that was probably widespread in Judaism from the first century BC.

¹⁹ Torijano, *Solomon* 52.

the Hasmonaean period.”²⁰ Michael Swartz agrees with Naveh’s assessment and concludes that it confirms the existence of magical manuals in antiquity.²¹ The text speaks of certain kinds of evil spirits that produce a variety of illnesses and maladies. The names of these spirits correspond to certain demons invoked in the Babylonian incantation bowls many years later.

Finally, I might also mention 4Q510 and 511, also known as 4QSongs of the Sage. Although not a recipe book of invocations as we have in the *Testament of Solomon*, 11Q11, or 4Q560, they do represent hymns that were probably recited to ward off the influence of demons. In the spirit of Psalm 91, this song emphasizes trust in God as the principal means of protection. The text begins, “And I, the Sage, declare the grandeur of his radiance in order to frighten and terr[ify] all the spirits of the ravaging angels and the bastard spirits, demons, Liliths, owls, and [jackals...] and those who strike unexpectedly...” (1:4–6). The identity of the sage is never explicitly revealed, but Solomon is the likely candidate. And although angels are not invoked by name as in the *Testament of Solomon*, angels figure prominently in this text.

4. *Amulet tradition.* The invocation of angels in Jewish rituals of power to expel demons and ward off attack is a staple part of this folk tradition within Judaism. Bohak notes, “The appeal to angels, which is echoed in *Tobith* and is apparent in the exorcistic texts, seems to have grown hand in hand with the Jewish demonology and angelology of the last few centuries BCE, but it will remain a permanent fixture of Jewish magic for many centuries to come.”²²

The Jewish magical amulets dating from the Roman period and late antiquity continue this tradition. These were generally worn around the neck or somewhere on the body and ritually empowered to fend off evil spirits. A characteristic feature of the amulets is the tendency to invoke angels to fight against the demonic powers.

One example of this is a small limonite stone amulet that on one side depicts Solomon as a mystagogue, haloed, and holding a scroll.²³ A snake is depicted beside him, perhaps a symbol of the demonic over which Solomon has power. The inscription reads *boēthi*, “help.” On the reverse side is the inscription “Ouriel, Sabao, help!” a clear invocation of

²⁰ Joseph Naveh, “Fragments of an Aramaic Magic Book from Qumran,” *IEJ* 48 (1998) 261.

²¹ Michael D. Swartz, “The Dead Sea Scrolls and Later Jewish Magic and Mysticism,” *DSD* 8 (2001) 191.

²² Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic* 141.

²³ See the discussion of this amulet in Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period. II: The Archaeological Evidence from the Diaspora* (New York: Pantheon, 1953) 2.232. See also Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1950) 310 (§339).

two angels widely known in Judaism. The Semitic characters at the top probably represent magical words of some kind.

Another amulet discovered in Asia Minor (north of Pergamum) bears the inscription²⁴ “Michael, Gabriel, Ouriel, Raphael, protect the one who wears this. Holy, holy, holy. ΠΙΠΠΙ²⁵ RPSS. Angel Araaph, Flee, O hated one: Solomon pursues you.” In the center of the amulet is the figure of a horseman (probably best interpreted as Solomon) led by an angel and is depicted spearing a woman and a snake. A similar amulet was found in Smyrna that has many of the same features: the mention of Solomon, an angel, Araaph, and the trishagion, “holy, holy, holy.”²⁶

Finally, I would mention an amulet that is housed in the Kelsey Museum at the University of Michigan.²⁷ The amulet depicts an anguipede (a man’s body with a rooster’s head and snakes as legs). Both of these figures are common in apotropaic magic. But it is the inscription on the upper right side of the amulet that I would like to focus on: the inscription “Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, Ouriel.” Once again, we have the invocation of angels for protection from evil spirits.

The practice of ritual invocation of angels drawing on traditions associated with Solomon definitely found its way into churches beyond Colossae in Asia Minor. Archaeologists recently discovered a phylactery lamella near a tomb in the city of Xanthos (about 110 miles due south of Colossae in the territory of Lycia). This amulet belonged to an otherwise unknown Christian named Epiphanius and reveals not only a dependence on the Solomon tradition, but the prevalent impulse to syncretize by invoking a pagan deity alongside Christ (the Lord) and Jewish angels. It reads: “Lord, help the bearer [of this tablet] Epiphanius, whom Anastasia bore. I adjure you Solomon, the great Angel Michael, Gabriel, Ouriel, Raphael. I adjure you Abrasax. I adjure you in Hebrew: thaobarao Sabaoth, Epiphanius...Iaw...Iao...noeitho....”²⁸

This amulet reveals why Canons 35 of the synod held in Laodicea in AD 350 found it necessary to prohibit the invocation of angels and referred to the practice as a secret idolatry.²⁹

²⁴ A. Sorlin Dorigny, “Phylactère Alexandrin,” *Revue des Études Grecques* 4 (1891) 287–96; Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 2.229–30 (Fig. 1052).

²⁵ These four Greek letters represent a crude way of writing the Tetragrammaton in Greek script. Torijano, *Solomon* 136, takes it as constituting “further evidence of the age of the charm and of its probable Jewish origin.”

²⁶ Dorigny, “Phylactère Alexandrin” 294–95.

²⁷ Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* 281 (§172).

²⁸ D. Jordan and R. Kotansky, “Two Phylacteries from Xanthos,” *Revue archéologique* 1 (1996) 167–74. See the discussion in Rangar Cline, *Ancient Angels. Conceptualizing Angeloi in the Roman Empire* (RGRW 172; Leiden: Brill, 2011) 146–51.

²⁹ For the text and translation, see C. J. Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church, Volume II: A.D. 326–429* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1896) 317–18. Hefele contended that “it hardly needs to be observed that this canon does not exclude a regulated worship of angels, such as is usual in the Church, although on the Protestant side it has often been so interpreted.” Cline, *Ancient Angels* 146–65, concurs (although he seems unaware of Hefele’s statement)

In addition to the Jewish amulets I have cited are numerous published amulets invoking angels that cannot be identified as specifically Jewish, pagan, or Christian because of their syncretistic character.³⁰ It is precisely here in the practices of ritual power in the ancient world where syncretism reaches its high points.

All of these amulets are notoriously difficult to date. They could date from anywhere in the Roman period or even into late antiquity. They are, however, consistent with what we know of the Solomon magical tradition. They represent a calling on the names of angels for deliverance from demonic powers. This is a form of Judaism that is not well known and has been neglected in previous decades of academic study. Nevertheless, it is a very important window for understanding how many Jews in Israel and throughout the Roman world dealt with the reality of demonic influence and intrusion in their lives.

5. *The Sepher Ha-Razim*. This tradition involving knowledge of angelic names, the adjuration of angels, and various magical techniques allegedly stemming from Solomon can be traced in a trajectory that can be seen in a variety of Jewish documents that extend to the middle ages and beyond. It can be seen especially in the *Sepher Ha-Razim* and in the Hekhalot literature.

The *Sepher Ha-Razim*, that is, the “Book of Mysteries,” is a manual of Jewish magic consisting of roughly 800 lines that may date to the late third or early fourth century AD.³¹ Michael Morgan, the translator of the text for the SBL Texts and Translations series notes, “it is crucial to recognize what fascinates us most about this text, the magic, is part of a folk tradition which dates from an earlier time.”³² The volume begins by attributing the source of its esoteric content to Solomon: “the Books of the Mysteries were disclosed to him [Solomon] and he became very learned in books of understanding, and (so) ruled over everything he desired, over all the spirits and demons that wander in the world, and from the wisdom of this book he imprisoned and released, and sent out

and attempts to make the case that part of the purpose of these decrees of the synod was to create an acceptable space for angel invocations within the church. Part of the positive evidence he cites for this kind of acceptable angel invocations does not work, however. The examples he gives from John Chrysostom represent prayers to God for the ministry of angels and not a direct invocation of the angels themselves; see Cline, *Ancient Angels* 156–57.

³⁰ One important publication of amulets depicts sixteen that include the name of angels. See Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* 280 (§168), 281 (§§171–72), 283 (§179), 288 (§208), 291 (§227), 300 (§280), 302 (§298), 304 (§§309, 310, 311), 305 (§313), 310 (§§338, 339, 342), 314 (§361). Numerous additional amulets invoking angels have been published in a wide array of journals. A complete corpus of amulets has yet to be published.

³¹ Michael Morgan has provided an English translation of the text in his *Sepher Ha-Razim: The Book of Mysteries* (SBLTT 25, Pseudepigrapha Series 11; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983). Regarding the date of the document he notes, “the consensus of those scholars who have worked with the text is to support Margalioth’s dating of SHR to the early fourth or late third century CE” (p. 8).

³² Morgan, *Sepher Ha-Razim* 9.

and brought in, and built and prospered” (lines 26–28). Among the various spells in the document are some for warding off demons, and central to dealing with these demons is calling on angels. The names of nearly 700 angels are mentioned in this book. For instance, in one portion of the document, sixteen different angels are named and described. The reader is told that “in a place where their name is invoked an evil spirit cannot appear” (2.123; p. 54). The reader is then told how to make a gold lamella with the names of these angels inscribed upon it “if you wish to drive off an evil spirit so it will not come to a woman when she is in childbirth and so it will not kill her child” (2.124–25; p. 54).

In his important monograph *The Commerce of the Sacred*, J. N. Lightstone argued that the *Sepher Ha-Razim* is an important piece of evidence demonstrating the presence of certain Jewish holy men functioning as shamans in the Diaspora.³³ The visionary ascent to heaven, according to him, “grounds the authority of the theurgist and provides the measure of the extent of that authority.”³⁴ This shaman figure therefore wields spiritual insight, power, and authority that he can use to help others within the community deal with the influence of these hostile forces. His comments also show that there can be a strong connection between Jewish mysticism and Jewish magic.

6. *The Hekhalot writings*. A final group of texts that reflect this tradition are the Hekhalot writings.³⁵ These are a collection Jewish esoteric and revelatory texts produced in late antiquity or the early Middle Ages. They detail the ascent to heaven experiences of a number of Jewish rabbis wherein they describe what they have seen, heard, and learned in the heavenly palaces (the Hekhalot) in their visionary experience. At the beginning of the 20th century, Solomon Schechter of Cambridge University discovered about two dozen Hekhalot fragments among the thousands of other Jewish writings in the Cairo Geniza. Gideon Bohak has noted that, “it is quite possible that the lore contained within them was passed orally for many generations before being first committed to writing.”³⁶

These texts have often been described as reflecting Jewish mysticism. In a recent monograph titled *Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, Peter Schäfer raises serious questions about this categorization since they do not reflect a mystical union (*unio mystica*) with the deity that is central to the common

³³ Jack N. Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred. Mediation of the Divine among Jews in the Graeco-Roman Diaspora* (2d ed.; New York: Columbia University Press) 16–22.

³⁴ Lightstone, *Commerce* 31.

³⁵ These Hebrew and Aramaic texts have been compiled and edited by Peter Schäfer (with the assistance of Margarete Schlüter and Hans Georg von Mutius) in a large folio volume titled, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (TSAJ 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981). A German translation is available in the four-volume set edited by Peter Schäfer, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987–1995).

³⁶ Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic* 330.

understanding of mysticism.³⁷ Rather, he speaks of them as representing a “liturgical communion” of the suppliant with the angels in heaven.

Although the Hekhalot writings are often mined for their contribution to an understanding of Merkabah mysticism, what has been missed is their contribution to understanding Jewish magic. The texts are filled with esoteric knowledge about the names of the angels, magical formulas and charms, and techniques for adjuring the angels. These adjurations were the subject of a study by Rebecca Lesses in a Harvard Theological Studies monograph. She noted that “one best understands the adjurations of the Hekhalot literature within the overarching category of ritual practices involving the use of divine or angelic names in order to gain power of various kinds.”³⁸ She argued that these texts functioned as “instructions for performances” rather than merely literary accounts.³⁹ As such, they enable the holy man to serve the Jewish community to fulfill a variety of human needs.

III. SHAMANISM

In a very important monograph dealing with the function of the Hekhalot literature within the Jewish communities, James Davila contends that “a central element of the Hekhalot texts themselves is the quest for ritual power.”⁴⁰ He has argued convincingly that the religious functionaries described in the Hekhalot literature correspond to the anthropological model of shamanism.⁴¹

A shaman figure serves his community through his knowledge of spiritual power. Persons afflicted or harassed by evil spirits go to the shaman for help and deliverance because they have wisdom about such things and know the rituals of power that will be effective.⁴² Visionary experience is often foundational to becoming a shaman since it is through a personal vision that the shaman gains his power.⁴³ In addition, ascetic

³⁷ Peter Schäfer, *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) 354–55.

³⁸ Rebecca M. Lesses, *Ritual Practices to Gain Power. Angels, Incantations, and Revelation in Early Jewish Mysticism* (Harvard Theological Studies; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998) 367.

³⁹ Lesses, *Ritual Practices* 378.

⁴⁰ James R. Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot. The People Behind the Hekhalot Literature* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 70; Leiden: Brill, 2001) 42.

⁴¹ Davila, *Descenders* 49, 306. On the topic of shamanism, see now Thomas A. DuBois, *An Introduction to Shamanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴² DuBois, *Shamanism* 82, notes, “Human beings find themselves in a mysterious web of seen and unseen forces. Frail and limited figures in themselves, they are set in largely unconscious relation to a vast array of powerful sentient beings who hold the keys to success or failure in their lives. Amid this complex and threatening world, the shaman emerges as a crucial mediating figure.”

⁴³ See Davila, *Descenders* 47.

practices such as fasting, dietary restrictions, abstinence from sex, and other taboos are essential for a shaman to have a visionary experience.⁴⁴

Davila rightly explains that the control of spirits is a central feature of shamanism in all cultures. It also plays a significant role in the Hekhalot writings. In these documents, the spirits controlled by the shaman are angels.⁴⁵ Through rituals of power, the Jewish shaman adjures the angels and controls them for various practical purposes in the community, for example, to grant revelations, to serve as guides in otherworldly journeys, to grant wishes, to provide protection from demonic spirits, and to bring healing.⁴⁶ As Davila notes, one of the Hekhalot documents, the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, “provides seals, invocations, and rituals for protection from hostile angels and harmful demons” (§560–66) as well as incantations to protect against harmful demons.⁴⁷

The Hekhalot is a great distance chronologically from the Judaism of the Hasmonean or Roman Imperial period, but it is not a great distance in terms of the phenomenology of practice. There is a fairly clear trajectory of traditions relating to exorcism and protection from evil spirits that stretches from the first century BC (or even earlier) and through the Middle Ages.

A common and consistent part of this tradition (often identified as having its source in Solomon) is the invocation of angels for protection against evil spirits. Additional features of this include visionary experiences and ascetic practices such as fasting and the observance of various kinds of taboos. It is this tradition of ritual practices to gain power that best explains the itinerant exorcism ministry of the Jewish priestly family of Sceva in western Asia Minor. It is also my contention that this evidence best explains the problem confronting the church at Colossae.

IV. THE PROBLEMATIC TEACHING AT COLOSSAE

In essence, I think it was a figure like Sceva (or Josephus's Eleazar) who stood behind the problem at Colossae that so troubled the apostle Paul and prompted him to write a letter to the church there.

The problem facing the Colossian church, however, was substantially different than what Paul had to confront at Galatia. In Colossians, there is no mention of “works of the law,” “boasting,” “justification,” or the “righteousness of God.” Whereas “law” (*nomos*) is mentioned 32 times in Galatians, it is not mentioned even once in Colossians. Paul does mention “circumcision” in Colossians, but only positively, that is, a spiritual circumcision that serves as a metaphor for the

⁴⁴ Ibid. 306.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 211.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 212.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 210.

implications of Jesus' death for our battle with the flesh and not as a literal rite that some Christians were practicing in ostensible obedience to the law. So, the issues at Colossae were very different than the Judaizing problem at Galatia. The issues Paul deals with in Colossians have little to do with matters relating to Jewish identity.

The unique practices of the rival teaching at Colossae include the worship of angels, visionary experience, and asceticism. The worship of angels has been one of the most debated phrases in the letter. Are the angels the object of the worship or should they be understood as the subjects of the worship? To get to the latter view, some scholars have assumed an ascent to heaven experience where the visionary participates with the angels in worshipping God who sits on his heavenly throne. But as I argued in my 1995 monograph, it is highly unlikely that this is what Paul is referring to here. Paul uses the rare word *thrēskeia* for "worship" in Col 2:18 and not the more common *proskuneō* or *latreuō*. In my own linguistic research of the occurrences of *thrēskeia* in Greek literature, whenever the noun is followed by a divine being in the genitive case, that being is always the object of veneration.⁴⁸ Furthermore, it is important to ask why Paul may have chosen a word that he uses nowhere else to convey the notion of "worship." It is significant that the Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon include the glosses "cult" and "ritual" in their entry on *thrēskeia*.⁴⁹ For the verb, they suggest, "perform religious observances." The word is used, for instance, in the famous Delphi inscription in connection with the rituals that are performed in consulting the oracle-god Apollo.⁵⁰ In another instance, it was used in connection with the ritual services provided by priests of Isis in local shrines in the Fayyum of Egypt.⁵¹ It may be that Paul has chosen this term because of its overtones of ritual performances in contrast to the terms *latreia/latreuō* or *prokuneō/proskunesis*. The "worship" that the faction is commending at Colossae is not worship in the sense that we may normally think of it. Rather, it is the performance of rituals in relationship to angels with angels as their focus and object. This fits very well with the invocation and adjuration of angels with the attendant rituals that we have just explored.

That visionary experience was part of the teaching of the opponents at Colossae has been widely accepted. This is seen clearly in the text with Paul's use of the perfect tense of the verb *horaō*, "what he has seen," in Col 2:18. It is the precise nature of the visionary experience that is in dispute. Does it refer to a Jewish ascent to heaven experience that we know about through the various apocalypses like *1 Enoch*? This is a

⁴⁸ Arnold, *Colossian Syncretism* 90–95.

⁴⁹ LSJ, s.v.

⁵⁰ SIG³ §801d, line 4 (p. 494): τὴν θρησκείαν τοῦ Ἀπόλλωνος τοῦ Πυθίου.

⁵¹ BGU XIII.2215, iii, 1–4. See the discussion in David Frankfurter, *Religion in Roman Egypt. Assimilation and Resistance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 100.

distinct possibility. But if it is, what is the purpose of the visionary experience and what social function does it have within the community. I find it less likely that it refers to an individual mysticism whereby a member of the community endeavors to have a mystical union with God. Nor do I find the communal/liturgical mysticism of the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice at Qumran a compelling explanation of what was happening at Colossae. Furthermore, as I have already noted, there is no positive evidence of Jewish mysticism existing in Asia Minor in the Roman era. Rather, in light of the Jewish texts we have just examined and the kind of folk beliefs that were demonstrably present in this area in the first century AD, I would contend that they were seeking visionary experiences with the angels who could convey esoteric knowledge. This knowledge was then used for the benefit of the community in much the same way as a holy man or shaman serves as a healer or exorcist.

There is also widespread agreement among interpreters that the competing teaching at Colossae also involved ascetic practices such as fasting and abstinence from an assortment of things. This is not at all surprising in a context where visionary experience was present. These practices were widely perceived as an important preparation for a vision.

In summary, whoever the principal advocate of this teaching was at Colossae, he was deeply influenced by Judaism. I would contend that this person (or group of people) looked an awful lot like Sceva and his sons (or even Josephus's Eleazar). This was a form of Judaism that we have learned much more about in recent years through the discovery of amulets and a variety of texts that functioned like handbooks for such folk. These people were interested in rituals of power, incantations, and angelic adjurations. They served the Jewish community by their availability to bring healing to people who were afflicted by the demonic. Now someone in the Christian community is taking on the same kind of role and has positioned himself as something of a shaman for the community.

This explanation of the problem at Colossae fits well with the theological emphases of the letter. Although the term "demon" never appears in the letter, numerous other expressions for these beings do appear, such as principalities, powers, authorities, thrones, dominions, and *stoicheia* (which I am convinced is a part of this reservoir of terminology for evil spirits). Christ's defeat of these powers is celebrated here in more dramatic terms than anywhere else in his letters. In Col 2:15, Paul declares that God has "disarmed the rulers and authorities," that he has "put them to open shame," and that he has led them in a triumphal procession as his vanquished foes. This has all happened through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of the Colossian believers' participation in Christ's death, Paul can assure them that they have "died to the elemental spirits of the world" (2:20).

In the poetic praise of Christ at the outset of the letter, Jesus is proclaimed as the Creator of all things on earth and in heaven (Col 1:15–

17). But it is the “all things in heaven,” “the invisible,” that receives the elaboration: “whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (Col 1:16). Jesus is temporally prior to these beings and he is preeminent over them. In Col 2:10, Paul pointedly states that Jesus “is the head over every power and authority” (NIV).

Why was this theme of Christ’s supremacy over the powers and his defeat of them at the cross a necessary emphasis in this letter? Precisely because they needed to hear it. Because issues related to the spirit realm were part of daily life, they were tempted to rely on shamanistic-magical traditions for dealing with spirits. Paul thus affirms the reality of their fundamental concerns, but objects to the approach offered by leaders of the faction.

Paul sums up the problem with the false teachers in Col 2:19 by saying that they “are not holding fast to the Head.” This indictment follows immediately on the heels of his criticism of their “worship of angels” in the previous verse. Apparently, their focus was more upon angels than upon Christ. This would fit well with the kind of influence a Sceva-like figure could have upon the community. For a wide array of problems, this sort of person would commend knowing the right angels and invoking them with the proper rituals as a way of accessing spiritual power and gaining authority over the demonic realm. He would also insist that they observe the proper taboos, follow the right calendar observances, and engage in the right kind of ascetic preparations. Paul, however, sees this as compromising the role that Christ should play in this community and diminishing his power, accessibility, and sufficiency for the Colossians.

Jesus is indeed Lord, and the Colossians do not need to listen to a shaman figure, even if he is in the church. Because they are “in Christ,” the Colossians have ample resources for dealing with spiritual attack and for protection from the influence of principalities, powers, and authorities. Paul emphasizes this through giving his readers a brilliant picture of the cosmic supremacy of Christ and by stressing their participation with Christ in his present authority over that realm. This is best expressed in Col 2:9–10: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” In saying this, Paul effectively eliminates their need to call on angels or engage in rituals of power. They are in direct contact with the risen Christ who directly mediates his power to them.

In a twinge of irony, Paul in fact intimates that those who are advocating the teaching regarding angels have themselves been influenced by evil spiritual forces in Col 2:8 when he says that their teaching is “according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, I would affirm that there is a substantial Jewish background to the problem facing the Colossian church. The question really is: What kind of Judaism forms the best backdrop? It is here that I would contend for what we might call “folk Judaism” or the kind of Judaism reflected in texts of ritual power.

We have learned far more about this kind of Judaism of the common people in the last few decades. It is an aspect of Judaism that is concerned with certain issues of daily life, such as what to do when a family member has a severe fever or how does one get rid of a tormenting demonic presence.

What I have not dealt with in the confines of this paper are the elements of the competing teaching of Colossae that could reflect Hellenistic influence (such as the meaning of the term *embateuō* in 2:18 that most likely has some connection with ritual initiation in a mystery rite).⁵² What is important to note, however, is that it is precisely in this context of the quest for ritual power that syncretism commonly occurs.⁵³ This is why there are Jewish magical amulets that call on Michael, Gabriel, Ouriel, and Raphael on one side and invoke a pagan deity on the other. It is why the sun-god Helios is invoked in the *Sepher Ha-Razim*. What counts is what works and what are the powerful names and effective rituals. Once again, Sceva’s adding of the name of “Jesus” to his adjurations for exorcism is not surprising.

This essay has plowed extensively in the field of backgrounds. There are some scholars who downplay the role and importance of such study, suggesting that we simply need to stay focused on the teaching of the text and not get sidetracked by such things.

I am in partial agreement with that sentiment. The text of Scripture should be front and center. I would even observe that it really does not matter if one sees the problem at Colossae as Gnosticism, Jewish Mysticism, or local shamanistic practices; the theology of the letter will remain the same. In other words, the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ over all of creation remains the same, however the background problem is described. The new identity of believers as co-resurrected with Christ and as members of his kingdom is positively affirmed regardless of how the setting is reconstructed.

⁵² See *Colossian Syncretism*, chapter 5, 104–57.

⁵³ Philip S. Alexander, “Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and Magic (c. CE 70 — c. CE 270),” in W. Horbury, W. D. Davies, and J. Sturdy, *The Cambridge History of Judaism*. Volume Three: *The Early Roman Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 1070, aptly notes, “Magic is highly syncretistic: magicians were prepared to use names and formulae, whatever their source—Jewish, Christian, Egyptian or Persian. Eclecticism was pursued as a matter of deliberate policy.”

So what is at stake? I think an enormous implication of this kind of study is thinking through how to *apply* the teaching of this text.

If the problematic teaching at Colossae reflects some form of emphasis on the means for obtaining ritual power for handling spiritual attack, this has great implications for Christian discipleship in a variety of cultural contexts, especially in non-Western contexts. Here are just a few potential applications:

(1) For Christians who are facing demonic attack, Paul would say, you can now be assured that Christ alone is your answer.

(2) For Christians tempted to wear magical amulets for protection against spirits, there is no reason to do this; Christ is a powerful and sufficient refuge.

(3) For Christians who think that getting in touch with angels (or any other spiritual power) may be a channel for healing or an effective key for thwarting demonic presences, you are missing and diminishing the present work of Jesus Christ as Lord and as Head of the Church.

(4) For Christians who are convinced that rituals of power are essential for exorcism, healing, or protection, you need to explore the full dimensions of what it means to be in union with the Lord Jesus Christ. Following a system of taboos, abusing your bodies with ascetic practices, chanting the right names, using traditional incantations—none of these are necessary or even useful. You have a direct and immediate connection now with the Lord of the universe who will gladly fight for you as Divine Warrior.

(5) For Christians fearful that Christ may not be sufficiently powerful to guard them against demonic assault, you need simply to reflect more deeply about who Jesus is as the creator of heaven and earth and as preeminent over all of creation.

(6) For Christians who seek protection from a curse or the evil eye, you can be assured that Christ is sufficiently powerful to break these evil influences.

Seeing Colossians in this light helps to understand its relevance to new believers in India, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere in the non-Western world.⁵⁴ This message is vital and essential for believers to grasp early on in the discipleship process. By understanding this message, the impulse to syncretism can be broken.

Of course, the same message is very relevant to us in the West. The problems we face may not be as overtly spiritual (although I do think the West has embraced a hunger for spiritual experience that is inclining

⁵⁴ See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament. Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005) 231–32, who notes, “It is hard to miss the similarities between the context Paul addressed in Colossae and that of many non-Western worldviews and cultures, where established religions, popular folk beliefs and Christianity routinely share the same quarters.”

people to explore phenomena like angels, visions, dreams, paranormal phenomena, and even shamanism).

Yet, the message of Colossians speaks to anything that might supplant the role of the Lord Jesus Christ in our lives. Paul's word to all of us would be: "hold on tight to Christ, who is the Head, from whom the whole body grows" (Col 2:19).