INTRODUCTION

Is the monster in the story real?

Often an unexpected parent is confronted (and embarrassed) by this or a similar question. Yes, the monster is real in the story, but No, the monster isn’t real in the ‘real’ world. ‘Killing’ the monster by denying its reality in the story, means ruining a good story. Not denying its reality often means creating fear.

Unprompted the youngster has stumbled onto one of life’s great questions: ‘What is real?’ This basic hermeneutical question will be a lifelong partner, influencing world-view and regulating conduct in every conceivable way. If one day the youngster should perhaps decide to become a theologian, this question will cause him/her even more difficulty than having to deal with monsters.¹

¹ The relevance and problematic character of this pre-question is recognised in most of the hermeneutical writings since Schleiermacher (cf Bultmann 1964:342-351; Robinson 1964: 1-77 and Palmer 1969; Gadamer 1975; Stanton 1979:60-71; Carson 1984:11-29; Ferguson 1986:6-39).
The intent of this paper is not *per se* to try to solve the 'reality-question'. Its aim is to investigate the relevance of this question to the interpretation of the letter to the Colossians. Arguments will be put forward claiming the author used a specific and (in his time) well-known strategy in dealing with 'reality-questions'. The writer of Colossians' modification of this strategy to his missionary aim holds great promise for supplying the present day theologian with a workable method of using Scripture in a multi-contextual society.

2 A FIRST-CENTURY METHOD OF DEALING WITH 'REALITY'

Addressing Glaucon on education, Plato (*Res Pub* VII.514a-517b) illustrates the contrast between the reality of the world of sense perception and the reality of the world of thought by using the image of a cave with a long entrance, open to the light in its entire width. There are people in this cave who are sitting with their backs to the entrance of the cave and who have their legs and necks bound from childhood so that they are only able to look forward. They see only the shadows and reflections of all kinds of implements and shapes on the walls of the cave and hear only echoes of voices (514b-515a).

Plato likens these people to the people in the real world, and our real world becomes the symbol of Plato's ideal world (515c). From this allegory Plato deduces the following:

* Every prisoner in the cave would deem reality to be nothing else than the shadow of the objects (515c).
* If one of these prisoners was freed and turned around to see the light, it would cause him pain (515c).
* The freed prisoner would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the reality now pointed out to him (515d).
* He would be inclined to turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern (515e).
* To make this person understand reality there would be need of forceful habituation (516a).
* Only after habituation, being finally able to look upon the source of light itself, he would count himself happy (516c).
* Going back into the cave he would provoke laughter with his stories about the 'real' world above, and if possible, would be killed (517a).

Plato (518b-518c) applies this image to the education teachers of philosophy have to give their students. He points out that education is not merely a matter of putting true knowledge into a soul, but turning the whole organ of knowledge. It must be turned around from the world until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence.
By using the above imagery Plato creates a powerful metaphor which significantly influenced first-century thought and continues to influence western thought to this day.

Although the metaphor's continued use could be ascribed to an ongoing interest in the Platonic philosophy from which it was born, its popularity was more probably assured by its usefulness as a tool in handling questions arising from the relation between perceptions and reality.

3 'CAVE METAPHOR' IN THE FIRST CENTURY

To review the use of cave-metaphor in the known writings of the first century would occupy volumes. In order to focus on its influence on Colossians, only the use of σκιά, σώμα, the combination of these two and synonymous terms are discussed.

3.1 σκιά

While literal use of the word σκιά does occur, its most common use was in the transferred sense (Schulz 1971:394). In the LXX it is used in connection with distress, deadly peril and the world of the dead. The lostness of the heathen is seen as life 'in the land of death-shadow' which calls for the advent of the Messiah as 'a great light' (Is 9:1). When Jesus visits Galilee, Matthew views this prophecy to be fulfilled for the people who dwell ἐν χώρᾳ καὶ σκιᾷ θανάτου (Mt 4:16).

Because originally there was no Greek 'sun-cult', the figurative contrast between light and dark is judged to be an Eastern influence which found acceptance through the dualistic thought of Plato (Klein 1962:8-9). In the thought patterns that followed in the wake of this dualism, the contrast between light and dark was often related to the divine and the human, superior and inferior knowledge, and virtue and vice (Philo Ebr 154-158,209).

The figurative use of the light/dark-contrast blossomed in the thought of Philo. The power and knowledge of God is represented as light which humans have to behold to be themselves illuminated (Vit Mos II.271). Though God is light, creation and the rule of creation are his 'shadows' (Abr 120). A prophet (who has contact with God Himself) is depicted as someone carrying 'light with-

2 Although the origin of Plato's cave could have been Vari in Attica (Wright 1906) or Orphic (Burnet 1945), the origin most probably is to be found in the cosmology of Empedocles (Fragment 120).

3 A frequently quoted passage of Aristotle (Cicero De Nat Deor II.95) is derived from it. It is the source of Bacon's (1972:74-81) Idols of the den in which the inductive method is defended. Important scholars in hermeneutics such as Heidegger, Husserl and Fink devoted much attention to it (McGaughey 1976:331-348). It has influenced modern mathematics (Krzysztof 1988:111-146), journalism (Newman 1991), (O'Neill 1933) and Marxism (Clayton 1988:209-216).
out shadow' (*Spec Lec* IV.192). A person should endeavour to be so illuminated by the spiritual light of God that no ‘shadow’ remains (*Abr* 119). The word σκιά thus takes on the negative connotation of *earthly ties* in the sense of Plato’s *bodily prison*.

The early Christian tradition adopted some of this light terminology (Klein 1962:52). Baptism especially was seen as ‘illumination’ (*γοτισμός*) by Justin (*Apol* I.61.12). It would thus not be surprising to find baptismal liturgy and light terminology (and its conceptual background) closely related in a passage.4

3.2 σώμα

In the time of early Christianity the word σώμα had a very extended definition. While in the writings of Aristotle it was mainly used for the human body (Schweizer 1964:1030), it had a more cosmic meaning in the works of Plato. Following Democritos (*Fragment 34*), Plato supported the idea of people as microcosms of the world as macrocosmos (*Tim* 47c-48b). This concept allowed the use of κόσμος and σώμα as interchangables (Pseudo-Aristotle *De Mun* 391b-392a; 397b) and allowed the Stoa to pose that god and cosmos were alike body (Diog Laert *Lives* VII,148). Consequently in the late Stoa the interesting theory of the cosmos as the σώμα of the divine was developed (Schweizer 1964:1035ff.)5

3.3 σκιά and σώμα

The pair σκιά/σώμα derives from the ‘thought-form’ scheme of Hellenistic philosophy (Schulz 1971:398). Lohmeyer (1964:122ff) defines the general meaning as appearance and reality. The appearance is connected with reality but it is not the content thereof.

The theological significance of the σκιά/σώμα-contrast is best illustrated by Philo. In his well-known *original/copy* speculation he combines Platonic-Alexandrian thought with the Old Testament legacy.

To Philo the same relationship exists between shadow and body, letter and oracle, name and object and λόγος and θεός (*Conf Ling* 190; *Post Cain* 112; *Div Her* 72). In each case the higher values revealed are what really and truly exist. Philo says: ‘Monstrous it is that shadows should be preferred to substance or copy to originals’ (*Mig Abr*, 12).

It is also used in this sense by Josephus (*Bell Jud* II.25).

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4 That Colossians (especially *Col* 1:15-20) has much of a baptismal liturgy was originally argued by Käsemann (1965) and later also Pokorny (1987:61).

5 The use of this concept in *Col* 2:19 therefore should not be considered as a total ‘hapax-legomenon’ The writer adapts a known idea to designate the church as ‘alternative cosmos’ in Jesus Christ.
3.4 Synonymous terminology
'Original-copy speculation' in the time of early Christianity is not always cast in pure 'light terminology'. Other distinctions used are σκιά/ἀρχητυπός (Philo Plant 27; Leg All III, 96), σκιά/τυπός (Heb. 8:5), σκιά/πρᾶγμα (Heb. 10:1; Philo Flacc 165), σκιά/εἰκών (Plato Res Pub VII, 514a-518b), μίμημα/ἀρχητυπός (Philo Mig Abr 12), μίμημα/παράδειγμα (Philo Somn I,206; Ebr 133).

3.5 Conclusion
It would appear that the use of the σκιά/σώμα-contrast in Col 2:17 is not naive. In a purposeful, figurative way the writer employs a cliché, to state the relationship between Gospel and heresy in terms of reality and perceptions. The correct contextual understanding of this utterance in Col 2:17 is therefore of hermeneutic importance.

4 POSSIBLE INFLUENCE ON THE LETTER TO THE COLossians
Given the wide use and acceptance of the cave-metaphor in literature known to first and second-century readers, its familiarity to and use by the writer and first readers of the letter to the Colossians are a reasonable assumption.

This assumption is supported by a correlation between the vocabulary, concepts and strategy of Plato's cave-allegory and the letter to the Colossians.

4.1 Vocabulary
A careful reading of the letter to the Colossians reveals the presence of a few words that have strong semantic links to the cave-metaphor.

4.1.1 ἀρχῆ
A popular first-century world-view would entail a definite cyclic notion about the origin and destination of the cosmos. Anaximander (Fragment 1-3) coined this origin/destination as ἀρχη. Everything proceeds from ἀρχη and everything leads back to it.

The word ἀρχη was originally used for the basic material from which everything evolved.6 The definition broadened to point of departure (physical and temporal) and centre of the world (Viljoen 1986:91). Later an obvious connection was established with the ἀρχη-discussion when it became commonplace to say of god that he comprised ἀρχη and τέλος (Plato Leg IV. 715e; Philo Plant 93; Josephus Ant VIII,280).

Though Plato's cave-allegory is focused on education, the basic concept of learning through remembering ('anamnesis') and 'contemplating the essence'.

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6 In this sense it was later gradually replaced by στοιχεῖον (Delling 1978:480).
brings the ontological question of ἀρχή en τέλος into play. This is especially clear when he speaks about the idea of good as the cause of all things (Res Pub VII.517c).

In the letter to the Colossians ἀρχαί is mainly used for rulers who the errorists reckoned to have influence on life and the cosmos (1:16; 2:10,15). Noteworthy though, Christ is portrayed in no unclear terms as the One who really is the ‘First’ (ἀρχή) (1:18). In the Colossian hymn (1:15-20) He is called ἀρχή in parallelism with the statement that He is the One who existed ‘before everything’ (πρὸ πάντων), through whom all things were created (ἐκ τισταμαι) and in whom all things consist (συνεστηκεν) (1:17).

The letter to Colossians postulates a confrontation between the ἀρχαί of the errorists and Christ as the real ἀρχή. In this confrontation Christ is the victor. It is He who strips the ἀρχαί of their powers and in typically first-century fashion, triumphantly displays them in a public parade as His slaves (2:15).

4.1.2 δόγμα/δογματίζομαι

In the philosophies of the first-century the word δόγμα attained a broader meaning than just opinion (Plato Soph 265c). It was not only used to describe a certain philosophical set of convictions (Plato Res Pub VII.538c), but also for the ethical implications of these convictions. These ethical implications were put forward as a set of rules or decrees which a person had to obey to attain ‘a good life’ (Plato Res Pub III.414b).

Although the word δόγμα is not used in the cave-allegory, the idea of a fixed set of convictions that arise from contemplating the essence is very much apparent (Res Pub VII. 517a, 518a-b, 520c-d).

Philo thinks of the Torah in the same way (Leg All 1.54). He argues that the Torah contains the sacred principles of divine philosophy and advertises it as a system that is not only comparable to but even better than the δόγματα of the philosophers.

Josephus (Ant 15.136) and Diadorus Siculus (The Library of History 1.86.2) hold the same point of view.

In the letter to the Colossians the perception that δόγματα as a system is the way to ‘the good life’ or ‘the divine’ is defeated. By nailing them to the cross, the δόγματα are blotted out by Christ (2:14). The δόγματα as a system are replaced by the personal relationship of Χριστός ἐν ὑμῖν (1:27). Having this personal re-

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7 According to Schweizer (1970:251, n 45) this corresponds very closely to the doctrine of a dominating world principle (συμπάθεια) which gives each individual in the cosmos the place which is meaningful for the whole.

8 The different philosophical traditions of the first century agree about the ‘good life’ as philosophical goal. They also agree that attaining the ‘good life’ is basically a question of ethics (Meeks 1986:60,61).
relationships, Christians are warned not to let themselves be ὑπομαντίζεσθε again (2:20).

4.1.3 εἰκών

For the present day Western-orientated mind the use of the word εἰκών in Colossians 1:15 immediately poses a problem. How can there be an image of something which is invisible and how can there be appearance without reality. To modern logic this seems to be a contradiction. Kleinknecht (1978:389) however explains the peculiarity of the Colossians 1:15 εἰκών-expression. The word εἰκών is not to be understood as a magnitude which is alien to the reality. It is also not limited to a functional representation present only to human sense, but should be thought of as an emanation or revelation of being. It implies the illumination of an inner core.

In this sense Plato talks about the sun as εἰκών of the idea of good (Res Pub VI.509a). This thought is one of the backbones of the cave-allegory. Light (of a fire and of the sun) plays an important role in both the creation of the shadows and the 'contemplating of the essence' (Res Pub VII., 514b, 516b).

The writer of the letter to the Colossians describes Christ as the εἰκών of the invisible God (1:15). This is an almost direct parallel to Plato’s description of the cosmos as a living creature and εἰκών of the invisible god (Tim 92c). Philo, in Platonic fashion, also expresses the thought that first of all an image proceeded from God, which in turn served as a model for man (Leg All 3.96).9

The above parallel again presents the theory that the writer of the letter to the Colossians depicts Christ (and more precisely the body of Christ) as an alternative cosmos.

4.1.4 μυστήριον

An antithesis between the known and the unknown is implied in the word μυστήριον (‘mystery’) (1:27). Though its origin is undoubtedly cultic, philosophers soon annexed the term for ontological use. The goal of a vision of the divine is the analogy between the cultic and ontological use of the term. In this respect Bornkamm (1978:810) notes that the interest in the use of the word μυστήριον has shifted from the earthly contingency of the divine, to the divine trancendence of the cosmos.

Plato sometimes uses the word with a methodological focus. He uses μυστήριον to describe the way to the divine and the gradual ascent of knowledge to the full vision of true being10. Thus μυστήριον means the way a heavenly reality

9 Philo's Platonic-inspired use of εἰκών is often closely related to vocabulary such as μία, ἀρχηγοῦς and σοφία (a very prominent word in Colossians) (Leg All 1.43; Rer Div Her 230).
10 Phaedr 249a-250, Symp 210a-212c; Theat 156a. Also in Philo Cher 49; Leg All III.100
breaks into the sphere of an earthly reality. Μυστήριον reveals the distinction between real truth and symbolic appearance.

Μυστήριον is also a predominant concept in Colossians (Bauer 1958:530). The writer uses the word in the same way as Plato to describe an ontological antithesis; the antithesis between something then hidden, and now revealed (1:26-27). At the same time μυστήριον is also used with a methodological focus: it depicts a system in which a heavenly reality (Christ) breaks into an earthly reality and enriches the lives of those who 'receive' (παρελάβετε) Him (2:6) with true 'knowledge and wisdom' (σαφίς καὶ γνώσεως) (2:3). The μυστήριον of the letter to the Colossians is: 'Christ is in you' (Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμίν) (1:27).

4.1.5 στοιχεία
Much has been written about the use of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in the letter to the Colossians. Interpretations have varied from basic principles to elements of the world to supernatural powers. The expression has obvious connections to the φιλοσοφία (2:8) against which the apologetical content of the letter is directed.

The word στοιχεία also plays an important role in the educational theory of Plato. He often employs 'letters' or 'elements' (στοιχεῖα) to illustrate the acquisition of knowledge (Theat 206a), the relation of elements to compounds (Phil, 18c), the principles of classification (Crat 393d) and the theory of ideas (Pol 278a). The importance of the στοιχεία is that they represent copies of the original ideas. Plato says for example that we cannot be true musicians till we recognise both the forms and all the copies of, or approximations to them in art or nature (Res Pub III 402a-402c).

The thought that the elements only find their true meaning in the highest idea is in tune with the basic lesson of the cave-allegory. The shadows point to a reality, and find their true meaning only in the reality. The use of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Colossians to describe the φιλοσοφία (2:8) of the errorists, suggests the same strategy. These στοιχεία are the 'shadows' (σκιά). The 'reality' (σῶμα) is Christ (2:17).

4.1.6 πλήρωμα
Although the word πλήρωμα is not a hapaxlegomenon in the New Testament, its semantical content is determined by Hellenistic rather than Biblical vocabulary (Gnilka 1980:73). Its meaning as that which fills is easily combined with the

and Dio Chrysostemos Or XII.33.

11 It is used in this sense by De Wette (1847:43-44), Ridderbos (1960:172-176) and Bandstra (1964:173).

12 It is used in this sense by Blinzler (1963) and De Witt (1954:58-72).

13 It is used in this sense by Van Wageninge (1917:1-6) and Bruce (1957:165ff;231ff).
more cosmological content of eternity and totality. From the first century onwards the word πλήρωμα was increasingly used in a theological sense. Philo says it is God that fills (πλήρωμα) everything in everybody (Vit Mos II.238; De Somn l.62). Gnilka (1980:73) reports its use for the uppermost spiritual world in the nearness of God which is inhabited by the bearers of saving light.

The word is used in the same cosmological and theological sense in the letter to the Colossians, most probably for apologetical reasons. Christ is firstly depicted as the One in whom the fullness of God dwells (πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικήται) (1:19). Secondly Christians are assured that because they are ‘in Him’ (ἐν αὐτῷ), they also ‘partake in the fullness of God’ (καὶ ἐστε ἐν αὐτῷ. πεπληρωμένοι) (2:10). They therefore do not have to live according to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (see 4.1.5 above) (2:19) to attain πλήρωμα.

4.2 Concepts

The use of certain concepts in Colossians suggest relation to the cave-allegory.

4.2.1 The above/below scheme

The cave in Plato's allegory is subterranean (514a). The shadows are created by a fire burning higher up (514b). The habituation of the released cave-prisoner is pictured as a gradual lifting of the eyes, contemplating things higher and higher, until he is able to see the sun and its true nature (516a-516b). The allegory obviously makes use of the dualistic above/below scheme.

That more than physical location is implied in this dualism is confirmed by Plato when he describes the whole process to Glaucon and tells him that ‘the ascent and contemplation of the things above is the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region’ (ὑπὲρ τῆς ἀναβασιν καὶ τῆς θέας τῶν τῶν εἰς τὸν νοητὸν τόπον τῆς ψυχῆς ἀνοδον) (517b). Food and similar pleasures are judged to turn the vision of the soul downward (519b).

The writer of the letter to the Colossians also makes use of the above/below scheme. He firmly encourages the Colossians to ‘seek’ (ζητεῖτε) and ‘set their affections’ (φρονεῖτε) on the things ‘above’ (ἄνω) (3:1,2). The reason for this is that the location of Christ is ‘above’ (ἄνω) (3:1) and He is the ‘reality’ (σῶμα) (2:17). The maintenance of earthly and man-made rules about touch, taste and handling things are ‘according to the rules of this world’ (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) (2:8) and ‘shadows’ (σκιά) (2:17), while the life of the believer is ‘with Christ hidden in God’ (ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κεκρυμνεῖ σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ) (3:3).

Again, more is meant than pure physical location. To bring home the consequences of Christ's death, resurrection and ascention for the situation here and
now, the writer uses the above/below scheme as a strategy for realised\textsuperscript{15} eschatology\textsuperscript{16}.

4.2.2 The focus on education
Addressing Glaucon on education, Plato uses the cave-allegory to explain some of his educational principles. His main argument is that a wise person should catch sight of the fact that the idea of good is the cause of all the things in the visible world (517c). True education for Plato is the turning around of the whole organ of knowledge, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence (517c). This ‘contemplation of the essence’ enables a person to habituate others and to discern easily between ‘shadows’ (σκιά) and ‘reality’ (σῶμα).

Education also plays a very important role in the letter to the Colossians. The writer ‘continuously prayed’ (ὁ πανομένα ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι) that the Colossians might ‘be filled with knowledge in all wisdom and spiritual understanding’ (ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ συνείδει πνευματικῇ) (1:9). This knowledge and wisdom are depicted as the ‘mystery of God’ (μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ (2:2) which has now been revealed as ‘Christ is in you’ (Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν) (1:27). ‘In Christ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden’ (ἐν τοῖς εἰσιν πάντες οἱ θησαυροί τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφοι) (2:3).

As in Plato’s cave, education in the letter to the Colossians entails contemplating another reality ‘above’ (3:1). By contemplating Christ, and letting ‘the word of Christ live richly in them’ (ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐνοικίζω ἐν ὑμῖν πλούσιώς) (3:16), they will be bound to the σῶμα (Christ) and not to the σκιά (maintenance of earthly and man-made rules).

The Colossians have indeed ‘died with Christ from the elements of the world’ (ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου) (2:20) and ‘have been made alive together with Him’ (συνεζωοποίησαν) (2:13) for a new life that is ‘hidden’ (κρυπταῖ) in God (3:3). This new life is described as ‘having been renewed in full knowledge according to the image of the One creating him’ (τὸν ἀνακαινοῦμενον εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν καὶ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτῶν) (3:10).

4.2.3 The light/dark scheme
The light/dark scheme is closely related to the above/below scheme. Both the cave-allegory and the letter to the Colossians are examples of the typical figura-

\textsuperscript{15} The Christians of Colossians are described as people who ‘died with Christ’ (ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ) (2:20) and who were ‘resurrected with Christ’ (συνεζωοποίησαν) (2:13) for a new life that is ‘hidden’ (κρυπταῖ) in God (3:3). In Ephesians this strategy is taken a step further when it is said that Christians with Christ also ‘have a place in heaven’ (συνεκάθισεν ἐν τοῖς ἐπιφανείοις) (2:6).

\textsuperscript{16} Wessels (1987:183-202) convincingly refutes the theory by Bultmann and Bornkamm that Colossians and Ephesians lack eschatology.
tive use of the light/dark scheme to depict good and bad.\textsuperscript{17}

In the allegory of the cave Plato describes the educational change of contemplating the essence as ‘a conversion and turning about of the soul from a day whose light is darkness to the veritable day’ (ἀλλὰ ψυχῆς περουγωγὴ ἐκ νυκτερινῆς τινὸς ἡμέρας ἐις ἀληθινὴν) (521c) and ‘a conversion from darkness to light by turning the whole body (μὴ δυνατὸν ἦν ἄλλως ἢ ξῖν ὥλος σώματι στρεφεῖν πρὸς τὸ φανὸν ἐκ τοῦ σκοτῶδους’) (518c).

In the letter to the Colossians light and darkness are described as two realms. Christians are described as ‘having been delivered from the power of darkness’ (ὅς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους) (1:13) and as ‘partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light’ (ικανώσαντι ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν μερίδα τοῦ κλήρου τῶν ἀγίων ἐν τῷ φωτὶ) (1:12).

4.2.4 The social responsibility and suffering of the teacher

Plato's cave-allegory advocates more than a mere utopia. After ‘contemplating the essence’ a strong social responsibility rests on the philosopher.

> It is the duty of us the founders then to compel the best natures to attain the knowledge which we pronounced the greatest...and when they have reached the heights and taken an adequate view, we must not allow...that they should linger there and refuse to go down again among those bondmen and share their labours and honours.\textsuperscript{18}

Philosophers are also enticed to take up leadership in public office because having seen the essence of reality, they are the best equipped for the job:

> So our city will be governed by us...as most cities are inhabited and ruled darkly as in a dream by men who fight each other for shadows.\textsuperscript{19}

The whole process of contemplating the essence and teaching the bondsmen results in a lot of suffering. The habituation from darkness to light, and then again from light to darkness causes pain and disturbance (518a). The bondsmen are also slow and unwilling students who do not want to give up their shadow-reality and who will laugh at, and even try to kill the people who advocate another reality

\textsuperscript{17} Also used by Philo in his essay on drunkenness (\textit{Ebr} 209).

\textsuperscript{18} Plato (519d): Ἡμέτερον δὴ ἐργον, ἦν δὴ ἐγὼ, τῶν οἰκίστων τάς τε βελτίστας φύσεις ἀναγκάσατο ἀφίκεσθαι πρὸς τὸ μάθημα ὁ ἐν τῷ πρόσθες ἐκφάγειν εἴη μέγιστον, ἰδεῖν τε τὸ ἀγάθον καὶ ἀναβῆναι ἐκεῖνην τὴν ἀνάβασιν, καὶ ἐπειδὰν ἀναβαντες ἰκανοὶ ἰδοὺς, μὴ ἐπιτρέπειν αὐτοῖς ὁ νῦν ἐκπρέπεται. Τὸ ποίον δὴ, Τὸ αὐτὸ ᾗν δ’ ἐγὼ, καταμηνεύει καὶ μὴ ἐβέγειν πάλιν καταβάινειν παρ’ ἐκείνους τοὺς δεσμοῦς μηδὲ μετέχειν τῶν παρ’ ἐκείνους πόνων τε καὶ τιμών.

\textsuperscript{19} Plato (520c-d) καὶ ὥσπερ ὡς ἔκανεν ἔκανεν...αἱ πολλαὶ ὑπὸ σκιαμαχούντων τοις πρὸς ἄλληλους καὶ στασιαζόντων περὶ τοῦ ἄρχειν ὀδοιποντα.
The writer of the letter to the Colossians also endures suffering. He describes himself as being ‘in bonds’ (δεδεμοσιον) (4:3), the reason being: ‘the mystery of Christ’ (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ) about which he must teach ‘every man in all wisdom’ (διὰ συγκομιδῆς πάντα άνθρωπον ἐν πᾶσιν σοφίᾳ) (1:28). He talks about his ‘great conflict’ (ηλικὸν άγώνα) for the Colossians and Laodiceans, that they may become ‘full-grown in Christ Jesus’ (τὰ παραστήσωμεν πάντα άνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ) (1:28). Also in 1:24-26 he makes mention of his suffering and again couples it with the once hidden but now revealed mystery of God; Χριστὸς ἐν ύπνῳ.

As recipients of this mystery of Christ, the Colossians are encouraged to become teachers amongst themselves (3:16) and among the outsiders (4:5-6).

5 THE STRATEGY OF THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS

When compared with other New Testament writings, the writer of the letter to the Colossians employs an unusual strategy. Although he criticises the errorists, he does not criticise the reality they believe in. This strategy has puzzled scholars such as Gnilka (1980:152). To some of them it is totally ‘unpauline’ not to criticise a heresy severely, and even more so, (by calling it ‘shadow’) to attribute a seemingly positive role of ‘precursor of Christ’ to the earthly and man-made rules of the errorists (2:17).

This puzzle however is based on the perception that the word σκέπασμα is used in a positive or neutral sense. From a present day Western perspective this perception makes perfect sense, but from the perspective of early Christianity its untenability is clear: σκέπασμα almost invariably has a negative connotation. It is used to illustrate the temporality of life (1 Chr 29:15), the deceit of things that seem real (Philo Flacc 165). It is used to describe weakness, instability and incompleteness (Gnilka 1980:147), the vanity, emptiness and worthlessness of human affairs (Schulz 1971:394-395), and even for uninvited guests (Plut Quaest Cour VII.707a). Although the word is seldom used in the Dead Sea scrolls or rabbinistic literature, when used it also has a negative meaning (Strack & Billerbeck 1924:268-269).

The writer is not denying the reality perceived from the heretics point of view. He takes their perceptions seriously. He is answering questions that are important from their view of reality. At the same time, however, he is focusing

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20 What Plato describes here is even today still very typical of people who experience a ‘paradigm-shift’. Shorey (1956) thinks this passage specifically refers to the suffering and death of Socrates.

21 Questions concerning the ‘first principles’ (στοιχεία) (2:9,20) the ‘thrones, lordships, rulers and authorities’ (βρόντα, κυριότηται, ὀρχαὶ and ἐξουσίαι) (1:16), and the partaking in the ‘fullness of God’ (πλήρωσις) (2:9).
the attention of his readers on another reality. He discloses the reality of Christ within their reality. By doing this, the writer is making use of Plato's strategy of turning heads rather than just pouring knowledge into the soul.

This strategy aims at a discovery by the errorists that some of their realities are mere shadows. He does this by eschatologically (τὸν μελλόντων) and Christologically (τὸ δὲ σώμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ) relativising their reality (2:17).

6 HERMENEUTICS TODAY

A more diverse perception of reality than in present-day South Africa is hardly imaginable. It seems useless to try and change perceptions by criticising them. Criticism usually brings up defense mechanisms and entices self justification. Denying the existence of 'monsters' to people who are really 'living' in a certain story, means actually denying these people's existence.

The strategy employed by the writer of Colossians promises a more productive approach to multi-contextual reality. It could be used to address fears that arise from a political, social or theological paradigm shift.

According to this approach the task of Christian hermeneutics entails denying nothing. It is to accept the fact of perceived reality from a certain perspective. This means taking questions, fears ('monsters') and hopes seriously. But the task also is asserting only one reality: Christ on the cross.

From the reality of Christ, 'monsters' are not denied, they are conquered. They are eventually exposed for what they really are: 'shadows'.

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22 This is notably close to the Apostle Paul's self proclaimed strategy in his missionary work, namely 'to know nothing among you, except Jesus Christ and Him having been crucified' (1 Cor.2:2).

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