Jewish mystical experience in the early Christian era as background to understanding Colossians

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ABSTRACT
The threat against which Colossians warns the local church consisted in the reaction of a Jewish group of ascetic-mystics who claimed to have experienced heavenly journeys and the angelic liturgy as it is known from a number of apocalypses. This group reacted to the missionary approach of the congregation, resulting in a disposition of uncertainty in certain members of the congregation occasioned by contact with the opposing group’s teachings. A brief introduction details the problem areas, followed by an overview of some suggested solutions to the problem of the opponents. The term ‘early Jewish mysticism’ is explained with reference to apocalyptic material, after which the problem of the opponents is viewed in the context of the letter. This is followed by an attempt to read various contexts in Colossians in view of pertinent tangent points between the letter and the Similitudes of Enoch, such as the christology, the soteriology and the cosmology of Colossians. The question arises as to whether the Similitudes could have been the ‘book’ of the opponents.

1 INTRODUCTION
The problem of the background to Colossians touches virtually all aspects of the letter’s interpretation and will in many cases decide the choices made with regard to details of exegesis. It has a bearing on one’s view of what can be called the formal aspects of the letter. It determines one’s understanding of the place and meaning of the so-called hymn in chapter 1. Indeed, it determines one’s view on the matter of opponents and their ‘teaching’, as well as the question of the letter’s argument and its specific communication or pragmatics. Many answers have been given to these questions. However, arguments and motivations have been countered by other arguments and motivations. In the end one has to decide which theory best answers the many problems arising from the text.

Foremost amongst the problem areas is certainly that of the opponents. Although almost everyone speaks of Colossians as polemical in some way or another, it should surely be seen that this letter nowhere attacks the community to whom it was directed. It nowhere berates them for having left the way of the Gospel, as Paul for instance does in the case of the Galatians. So,
is the author indeed writing against teachings or practices within the community? Or should we take the author's formulation seriously, and then understand that the letter was meant as a warning to the Christian congregation not to be misled by some outside body, a person or group, who opposed in some way or another, the beliefs of the Christian community at Colossae? A next set of questions then has to do with what the exact point of difference could have been between the author's understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the offending teachings. Where does he understand the danger confronting the congregation to lie? And how does he counter that? The answer to this last question in turn opens a number of others relating to exegetical details in various parts of the letter and to which we shall return later.

It is the contention of this paper that the letter can best be understood against the background of early Jewish mystical practices and experiences and that this perspective should in turn be understood in the light of certain apocalyptic traditions of the period. The paper endeavours to show, not only that those who endangered the congregation were early Jewish mystics of the apocalyptic mode with interests in heavenly journeys and the observance of heavenly practices, but also that the letter, in dealing with the problems brought about by the opponents, on the one hand utilises apocalyptic material to offset their claims and on the other boosts the congregation's understanding of Christ and his meaning. Before going into this, a brief summary of the state of research will be in order, followed by an attempt to clarify the sense in which the idea of mysticism is applied in this paper.

2 SOME SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF THE OPPONENTS

In view of the fact that the state of research into the opponents in Colossians has been dealt with by many (see Francis & Meeks 1975; Schweizer 1976:173-180; Yates 1986; 1993:xi-xvii; Schenk 1987; Sappington 1991:15-22; Dunn 1995:153-154; Dunn 1996:27-33) and has previously received my attention (Roberts 1988:813-818; 1991a:295-303), I will treat it only very briefly in this overview.

What could broadly be termed the traditional understanding (see Bruce 1957:165-169; Ridderbos 1960:104-107) would speak of false teaching of a syncretistic nature within the congregation, perpetrated by a group of Jewish Christians. This point of view is based on the many references in the letter to the characteristics of the opposing group which is typically Jewish in nature, but also some references which are then interpreted as pointing in the direction of Hellenistic or pagan influence.

A second set of interpreters related the leading ideas attributed to the opponents to some form of gnosticism or other (Bornkamm 1975). In the
previous century Lightfoot (1975) argued that the opponents were to be 
found in an Essene group, whose teachings he understood to be of a gnostic 
nature. After the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls the idea of an Essenian 
background was revived in a different form, looking for clues in the Qumran 
community and their documents (Kehl 1969; see also Dunn 1996:30). Others 
turned to what they considered to be a form of gnosticised Judaism or 
gnostics influenced by Judaism, again pleading the platform of syncretism 
which prevailed in Asia Minor (see also Yamauchi 1964).

A third attempt to solve the problem was found in terms of the mystery 
religions. On the basis of the occurrence of the word ἐμβατεύω in Colossians 
2:18, Dibelius (1975) argued that it should be understood in the way it was 
used at the temple of Apollo in Klaros. Representatives of a number of cities 
consulted the oracle at Klaros and then went on to partake in the mystery of 
the temple, the occasion being remembered in inscriptions at the site. In 
these the word ἐμβατεύω was used to describe their entrance into the inner 
room and their experience of the mystery, that is, their initiation (μόνηως). 
Dibelius understood the Colossian mystery to be practised by a group outside 
the Christian community with some members of the church being initiated. 
With some variation Dibelius was followed by a number of influential 
scholars (see Hoppe 1994:133–134; 143–145; cf Lohse 1977:186–191; Harris 

Taking seriously the reference to the opponents in Colossians 2:8 as 
attempting to gain control and lead astray through philosophy, attempts have 
been made to find the specific philosophy which was represented by the 
opposing group. Thus Schweizer (1988) found the answer in Pythagorian 
looked to the common philosophy of Posidonios of Apameia.

Although the above viewpoints and interpretations can all summon sup­
port and muster arguments in their favour, a new approach to the problem 
has slowly been making progress during the last three to four decades 
amongst scholars of widely different traditions (see amongst others Bowker

1 Most recently Arnold (1996:5) contended 'that the beliefs and practices of the 
opponents at Colossae best cohere around the category of what might loosely be called 
folk religion'. His overall view is neatly summarised in the following (:226): "the 
philosophy"...demonstrates a remarkable syncretism' of Jewish features 'such as Sab­ 
bath observances' and others that are 'distinctively pagan (mystery initiation)', and 
still 'others that are best explained as folk belief/magic (invoking angels), and many 
that could be explained from the perspective of a number of traditions'. His 
understanding of the opponents combines the mystery religion explanation with magi­ 
cal practices, local cult religion and Jewish religion in an overarching syncretistic per­ 
spective (passim).
According to this approach the problem which faced the Christian congregation at Colossae was quite clearly of Jewish origin. Of importance to those causing the problem seems to have been strict compliance with certain Jewish ascetic practices, Jewish feasts, the Sabbath, and circumcision. It is argued that one also need look no further than a Jewish setting for those traits accorded to the group which seem to point in the direction of esotericism and intermediate heavenly powers, usually associated with gnosticism. Specifically, scholars supporting this position direct attention to incipient forms of early Jewish mysticism as complying with the picture arising from Colossians with regard to those who formed a threat to the congregation. Although some would still see the threat as arising within the midst of the Christian community (see discussion under 4.4, below), others are of the opinion that the text can best be explained by postulating some external Jewish group who had no direct relationship with the Christian church (on this last aspect see Schenk 1987:3349–3350). As can be seen from the Introduction above, it is along these lines that this paper endeavours to understand the threat to the Christian community at Colossae and to explain the peculiarities of the letter to the Colossians.

3 APPLICATION OF THE TERM ‘EARLY JEWISH MYSTICISM’

Mysticism as a religious phenomenon is variously understood and defined. Also there appear to be various forms of mysticism prevailing amongst different religious groups. In view of this it is important to set out what is meant by mysticism as used in this paper. In this connection the literature is conspicuous in its uninhibited use of the term ‘mysticism’ to signify the phenomena under discussion although these do not necessarily comply with some widely held views on mysticism and the mystical experience. When Pelikan (1970:1129) defines mysticism as ‘the immediate experience of oneness with Ultimate Reality’, it is at once clear to students of early Jewish mysticism that the phenomena of this movement lay on a different level. Pelikan, realising this, nonetheless (:1130) speaks of ‘(t)he visions of the biblical prophets and the apocalyptic imagery of post biblical Judaism’, as leading ‘to the Hekhalot, which described the heavenly mansions and thus laid the foundations for Jewish mysticism’, which deals with the regaining of ‘adherence to God’. This clearly implies a broader definition of mysticism. In this broader sense Ringgren (1992:945) seems to apply the idea to biblical material in cases where the ‘accompanying phenomena’ of mystical experiences, such as ‘visions, auditions, trances, and states of ecstasy’, can be discerned.
In this connection some remarks made by Scholem (1995:4–5) are particularly helpful. After referring to Jones who uses the word mysticism ‘to express the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation with God, on direct and intimate conciousness of the Divine Presence’, Scholem (5) reminds us that this kind of fundamental experience is generally known as *unio mystica*. He points out, however, that this term has no particular significance for understanding mysticism, since many mystics did not understand ‘the essence of their ecstatic experience, the tremendous uprush and soaring of the soul to its highest plane, as a union with God’. He then goes on to say:

To take an instance, the earliest Jewish mystics who formed an organized fraternity in Talmudic times and later, describe their experience in terms derived from the diction characteristic of their age. They speak of the ascent of the soul to the Celestial Throne where it obtains an ecstatic view of the majesty of God and the secrets of His Realm. A great distance separates these old Jewish Gnostics from the Hasidic Mystics one of whom said: “There are those who serve God with their human intellect, and others whose gaze is fixed on Nothing...He who is granted this supreme experience loses the reality of his intellect, but when he returns from such contemplation to the intellect, he finds it full of divine and inflowing splendor." And yet it is the same experience which both are trying to express in different ways. (Scholem 1995:5)

In line with this, O’Brien (1993:623) consents to the definition of Tannehill (1967:3–4 n 7) that mysticism is ‘the doctrine that the individual can come into immediate contact with God through subjective experiences which differ essentially from the experiences of ordinary life’ (4). Bearing in mind this definition and what has been referred to above as ‘accompanying phenomena’, as well the insight of Scholem regarding the same fundamental experience which was expressed in different ways by different groups in different ages (see also the discussion by Kourie 1992:96–99), it indeed seems justified to speak of early Jewish mysticism, not only with regard to the merkavah mystics of the Talmudic period, but also with regard to the apocalyptists of the period before and contemporary with the New Testament.2

The apocalyptic writings, both from the period before and after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, arose in times of tribulation and uncertainty (cf Lemmer 1996:368) as literature of protest and consolation (Van Uchelen 1983:27). Basic to the apocalyptic mind was the differentiation between ‘this world’ of

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2 This accords well with the view of Gruenwald 1995:7: ‘For the sake of a very general orientation...we would here suggest viewing mysticism as the diversified forms of direct realizations of divine presences, whether on earth or in heavenly domains.'
woes and calamity and the ‘other world’ of God and his angels, that is, the
distinction between the world below and the world above, the present world
and the world to come. Esoteric in nature, the writings of the apocalyptists
reflect the experiences of a seer who, in an ecstatic state of trance, either
meets with representatives of the other world (Daniel, 4 Esra, 2 Baruch) or
visits the other world (1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, Apocalypse of Abraham, Revelation).
In both cases the ecstatic experience takes the form of a vision in
which the seer is brought into unmediated contact with the other world or
its representatives, or ultimate reality. The related experience could reflect a
heavenly message on conduct, that is, on living in accordance with the special
demands of heaven for the initiated group according to the unwritten law as
revealed in the vision (4 Esra, 2 Baruch). Or it could reflect ‘revelation’ on
creation, its plan, its mechanics, its order, as well as ‘revelation’ on the
throne chariot, and throne room of God, with its accompanying phenomena
such as fire and ice and thunder and crystal, angels and garments (1 Enoch).

It is in this second set of apocalyptic experiences involving the seer’s
translation into heaven, that we are particularly interested because it deals
with a seer undertaking or experiencing a heavenly journey and entering the
abode where the throne of God can be seen. ‘Entering’ the throne room is
the keyword in this connection because it can assist our understanding of the
enigmatic phrase in Colossians 2:18 about the opponent who appealed to
what he saw when he entered’. To this we will have to return shortly.
Meanwhile, let us remind ourselves of the fact that heavenly journeys of the
soul were in Hellenistic society by no means as strange a phenomenon as
they seem to modern man (cf Segal 1980:1358–1368). Bousset (1901:5; see
also Sappington 1991:74) found that two ideas on the heavenly journey of the
soul existed in that society: the one eschatological, the soul making its jour­
nedy after death; the second a mystical-ecstatic belief according to which a
journey to heaven was possible for the pious in this life as an ecstatic ascent
to the godhead. This finding is important since it establishes the apocalyptic
experiences within the wider Hellenistic cultural pattern as a well-known

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3 Hanson (1980:1408–1409) clearly demonstrates that there is no point in trying to
distinguish between dreams and visions so that he prefers to speak of ‘dream-visions’.
The reported dream-visions ‘were nearly always considered meaningful or significant’
in that they were understood to have a supernatural origin and to be revelatory in
nature (:1396). See also his note on apocalyptic dream-visions (:1396 n 5).
4 Segal could speak of ‘a mythical structure of katabasis and anabasis, which was
shared by most cultures’ in Hellenistic society (1980:1387). He could go as far as to
say: ‘it is possible to see the heavenly journey of the soul, its consequent promise of
immortality and the corollary (sic!) necessity of periodic ecstatic journeys to heaven as
the dominant mythical constellation of late classical antiquity’ (:1388).
religion and the claim to such an experience not uncommon. The specific feature of the apocalyptic heavenly journey can be found in its goal: entering heaven or the heavens in order to see the throne chariot and throne room of God, there to experience the service to God by the angels around his throne (and partake in this service); and to receive knowledge, revelation, about the creation of God.

This aspect of apocalyptic, with its biblical roots in prophecy and wisdom, is the feature that links it in literary terms to the later, developed, form of early Jewish *merkavah* mysticism of which Scholem says:

> No doubts are possible on this point: the earliest Jewish mysticism is throne-mysticism. Its essence is not absorbed contemplation of God's true nature, but perception of His appearance on the throne, as described by Ezekiel, and cognition of the mysteries of the celestial throne-world. (Scholem 1995:43-44)

At this point it is important to bear in mind the apparent differences between the apocalyptic *merkavah* experiences and those of the *merkavah* mystics of a later age. Van Uchelen (1983:27-30) has pointed out the aspects which were held in common by both the apocalyptists and the later *merkavah* mystics. Both groups fed on esoteric traditions. Both groups had ecstatic religious experiences resulting in heavenly journeys—although with the apocalyptists this did not occur in every case. However, with the mystics proper the heavenly journey and seeing the throne and the Holy One, and experiencing the glory of the divine Presence, had become the sole purpose towards which they strove. They were truly travellers to the throne and became known as *yoredey merkavah*. In the case of the apocalyptists the heavenly journey was of a more incidental nature. Being deeply troubled by the times in which they lived, being without hope for a meaningful earthly existence in future, and unable to grasp where history was taking them, they strove to receive direct revelations from God explaining the mysteries of God's dealings with humanity and of his creation, and so gain stability and hope for a non-earthly, eschatological future. Such revelations could come in the form of either dream-visions or heavenly journeys which result in visions in heaven. The basic element in both these groups of writings is the appearance of God or his angel to a human being.

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Antedating the apocalyptic material, biblical visions were described in 1 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 6:1ff; Ezekiel 1, 3:22-24, 8:1ff, 10:1ff. To this the biblical apocalypse Daniel can be added where the vision appears in chapter 7:9-10. Although these appearances do not all contain exactly the same features, Gruenwald (1980:31) could list the following six characteristic features as pertaining to the visions as a group:

1. God appears sitting on a throne
2. His appearance is that of a man
3. God is sitting in a palace
4. Fire plays an important role in the vision
5. Ministering angels accompany God
6. The angels are singing songs.

The importance of this analysis becomes clear when he continues:

All these elements became major components in the mystical visions found in apocalyptic and later on in the Merkavah visions of the Hekhalot literature.... If one can speak of a Jewish mystical tradition that had more or less unified qualities, then, it seems, the above enumerated features are the more characteristic ones in that tradition. (Gruenwald 1980:31)

Remembering that the traditions pertaining to the heavenly journey in particular concern us here, an example may be called for. The earliest example of a heavenly journey that has been transmitted to us is described in 1 Enoch 14 where Enoch is said to have been taken up into heaven (see also 1En 39:3–8; 45:2; 71:1; 93:8–12; ApAb 13:5; 15:4–5; 16:1–4; 19:9). The Greek text (Black 1970:28) says that in his vision the clouds called to him and the mists invited him, the courses of the stars and the lightnings hastened him along and excited him, the winds gave him wings and lifted him up and brought him into heaven. Then he says: ‘And I went in...’ (εἰσῆλθεν). He sees two houses, fire and flames everywhere, but also a heaven of water. The second house was built of fire and inside there was a throne on which the Great Glory was seated wearing a shining white gown. Even the angels could not come to see his face, but he speaks to Enoch and calls him to come near to him...

In this description of ascension into heaven, we get no inkling of any preparatory practices accompanying the vision. However, the righteousness of the seer is stressed, seemingly a necessary qualification for the mystical experience (cf Sappington 1991:63–65). In other visions of this nature one can detect various ways in which the seer prepared himself for receiving visions, whether of the heavenly journey type or not. Abraham has to fast for forty days, prepare a sacrifice and learn to cant a song (ApAb 9–14). Esra has to fast for several periods of seven days, eat only flowers, and drink from a

As we now turn our attention to the opponents in Colossians, this brief and perhaps inadequate overview on the mystical qualities of early Jewish apocalyptic, should provide a guideline by which to determine the nature of the threat posed to the Christian community at Colossae.

4 THE ASCETIC-MYSTICAL THREAT TO THE COLOSSIANS

Since I have previously written on this theme (Roberts 1988; 1991a—see also Carr 1973; Francis & Meeks 1975:1–12, 209–218, and passim; Bandstra 1974:329–339; Evans 1982; Rowland 1982; 1983:75; Bruce 1984:17–26), I would like to only briefly set out my position here and then pay attention to the extremely valuable work done by Sappington (1991).

One can start to assess the threat to the congregation by trying to determine the letter's context. The question is: why was the letter written? The answer is to be found in the particular exigency of the Christian community to whom the letter was directed and which prompted its writing. Since he nowhere attacks the Colossians for confessing a false teaching or practising it, but merely warns them to beware of being led astray by such teaching, it should be clear that it is not the existence of an opposing group as such that was, in the view of the author, the problem confronting the congregation. Their problem lay deeper. It has to be found in a disposition of uncertainty in certain members of the congregation occasioned by contact with the teachings of the opposing group. The question then becomes: who were they and what did they teach? The text leads us to a fourfold characterisation of the opponents: they were Jews; they were ascetics; they were early Jewish mystics of the apocalyptic strain; they were a non-Christian group. Let us briefly look into each of these characterisations.

4.1 The opponents were Jews

Although some would deny this on the basis of their belief that the opponents were to be found within the congregation, the author's references to circumcision (2:11–13) can be understood adequately only if the opponents were Jews. Before their conversion the readers were uncircumcised, that is to

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6 See the interesting discussion by Bousset 1901:30–33 on Arđa-Virāf going into trance for seven days after drinking some substance from a cup.
say, were of heathen extraction (2:13), but now, having become Christians, they are indeed circumcised, albeit in the spiritual sense of having laid down their old sinful way of life (2:11). The author is here rejecting the reproach which the opponents directed against the congregation that they have no claim to salvation without becoming Jews through circumcision. Instead, he says, by faith they have been circumcised with the spiritual circumcision of Christ: there is no further need to lay off a part of their body as an outward sign of belonging to God's people. Their baptism is adequate proof of that. The argument in this section only makes sense if the opponents were Jews.

This fact is corroborated by the reference in 2:8 to the false teaching of the opponents being κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, the traditions, laws and teachings (2:22) to which the Jews so proudly appealed (2:20), but in the end were of little value, being κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κοσμοῦ (2:8, 20). It smacks of legalism and formalism. In addition to this the text mentions their emphasis on festivals such as the Jewish New Moon festival and the Sabbath (2:16—cf. Giem 1981).

4.2 The opponents were ascetics

The conclusion that the threat against the congregation was of an ascetic nature can, of course, not only be based on the three negative demands in 2:23: do not handle, do not taste, do not touch—although they do contribute to the overall impression since they represent the rules regulating the prohibitions governing an ascetic lifestyle. They point to a strict way of living. More important though is the general reference ἐν...ἀφετέρως σώματος, denoting strict discipline of the body, accomplished among others by fasting and related acts of self-denial (ἐν...ταπεινοφορεῖς—2:23). From within their sequestered situation they judge and disqualify others who do not follow their strict rules about eating and drinking (2:16–18). In all this they deem themselves to be above the rest, but are in fact indulging in self-imposed religion that only has an appearance of wisdom, but is in fact without real value (2:18).

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For the view that ἐν...ταπεινοφορεῖς, like θρησκεύς, is governed by the genitive, see the discussion by Rowland (1983:74–77). For the renderings 'false humility' and 'in abject worship of angels', see Louw & Nida (1988:748).
4.3 The opponents were mystics

Coupled to what we know about them as ascetic Jews, 2:18 now leads us to think of the opponents as mystics. As in 2:8 the author here may be using the singular to focus attention on the leader of the group. In trying to disqualify the Christian believers, this leading figure, on the basis of his alleged superior knowledge and insight (εἰκῇ φυσιόμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοὸς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ—cf also 2:2–4), boasts about the things he saw on entering heaven (ὁ ἑρακεῖ ἐμβοηθεῖν)—a condition qualified by his zealous practice (θέλων: here the expression of that in which he has pleasure—see e.g. Bratcher & Nida 1977:67) of such bodily deprivations as fasting (ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνη—cf 2:23) in order to attain the vision of the angels serving God in heaven (θρησκείας τῶν ἀγγέλων). As set out above it is possible to make good sense of the notoriously difficult phraseology in 2:18, but only when understood against the backdrop of apocalyptic ascetic mysticism. We shall shortly have occasion to test the particular relationship between, what I would like to call, the traditions behind the Similitudes of Enoch and Colossians. However, whereas the Similitudes show no particular interest in the preparational stage of the heavenly journey, one cannot but wonder whether the Colossian reference to that person who took pleasure in strict discipline leading to entrance into heaven and its sights, especially observation of the angelic liturgy, may not be an early testimony to the tendency towards the efficacious following of a rigorous ascetic regime in order to attain a heavenly journey and the sighting of the merkavah (cf the quote below from Sappington).

4.4 The opponents were a non-Christian group

Before passing on to some observations on possible links between the Similitudes of Enoch and other apocalypses with the text of Colossians, a few remarks on the contribution by Sappington (1991) are in order. It is fair to say that the very thorough and detailed examination of the relevant facts and material by Sappington, although much more refined, corroborates my own previous findings regarding the background against which Colossians should be understood. His analysis indicates that the Colossian error is strikingly similar to the ascetic-mystical piety of Jewish Apocalypticism. The errorists sought out heavenly ascents by means of various ascetic practices involving abstinence from eating and drink—
ing, as well as careful observance of the Jewish festivals. These experiences of heavenly ascent climaxed in a vision of the throne and in worship offered by the angelic hosts surrounding it. It seems that these visions also pointed to the importance of observing the Jewish festivals, probably as evidence of submission to the law of God. These visionary experiences provided the basis for the errorists' judgments.... (Sappington 1991:170).

In conclusion he can summarise as follows:

My investigation of the ascetic-mystical piety of Jewish apocalypticism has yielded results that are significant for understanding both the problem at Colossae and Paul's response. The direct descriptions in the polemic of 2.16-23 suggest that the error corresponds to the practices associated with the reception of revelation in the Jewish apocalypses, as well as to the media of revelation, the content of revelation, and the functions of revelation described in these writings. Indeed, there appears to be a correspondence between the two religious systems, not only in certain particulars, but in their beliefs and practices as a whole. (:224)

The direct descriptions of the practices of the Colossian errorists and the supporting expositional passages in the Colossian letter are mutually reinforcing: both point to Jewish apocalypticism as the religious movement most relevant for the study of Colossians. (:225)

With these results of Sappington I find myself in complete agreement. I would, however, wish to differ from him on the question as to whether the opponents were to be found within the congregation, the church at large, or some unrelated group. Sappington, in agreement with most it seems, is of the opinion that they were a group within the church at Colossae, or, at least, a Christian group that had some contact with that community.

These visionary experiences provided the basis for the errorists' judgments by which they attempted to move the Colossian Christians to obedience and true Christian piety, as they understood it. (:170)

So we may describe the Colossian error as a type of Jewish/Gentile Christianity that was strongly oriented toward the ascetic-mystical piety of Jewish apocalypticism. Still, there is much that we do not know about the situation at Colossae. Were the errorists themselves Jews or Jewish Christians? Or were they, like the majority of the Christians at Colossae, Gentiles who had been proselytized by Jews or Jewish Christians? What was their point of contact with the church at Colossae? Were other congregations in danger from their influence, as may be suggested by Col. 4.16? These and other questions must remain unanswered, simply because of the paucity and nature of the evidence. (:225)

To my mind, good reasons are to be found for placing the opponents outside the congregation and outside the church as such.10 Firstly, one should

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10 See also the appraisal by Yates (1992:95-97; Dunn 1996:25-26).
take seriously the fact that the letter nowhere polemises against the address­ees. What it does, and what indeed is the single reason for writing it, is to warn the addressees lest someone captures them with seemingly wise argu­ments that lead them astray (2:8), criticises them on matters pertaining to ascetism and Jewish requirements of the law (2:16–17), and tries to disqualify them from God’s salvation and their future portion in the kingdom of God through lack of knowledge and experience regarding entrance into heaven by means of a heavenly journey of the soul (2:18). This understanding of the situation is strengthened by the two appeals made to the addressees in 2:20–3:4. They have died with Christ and have been made alive with him. So, how could they even begin to allow themselves to be dictated to by others on how they should live their lives? Rather their vision should be on their portion in heaven (ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ—cf also 1:13) and the coming glory when they will appear with him on his advent. This clearly shows that the opponents did not die and rise with Christ, had no personal relationship with him, and did not hold onto him (see below under 5.2.2).

Secondly, one should bear in mind the special emphasis on mission in this letter, because it contains a clue to solving the context of the letter. In dealing with the idea of revealed mystery in the letter, Sappington (1991:183–190), with reference to Paul’s preaching, paid some attention to the missionary perspective, emphasising the universal outlook of Colossians without linking it to the letter’s context, except to say that the universal scope of its message, ‘viz. to reach πάντα ἀνθρωπον with the proclamation of Christ’ is in view of the thrice repeated πάντα ἀνθρωπον in 1:28–29, ‘an attempt to counter the pride and exclusivism of the errorists (d. 2.18–19, 23)’.11 There is, however, much more to the missionary perspective of Colossians than is here acknowled­ged.

There is a sense in which one could say that practically the whole letter is encapsulated between two references to the universalistic scope of the Gospel and the attending worldwide proclamation of its message (see Roberts 1997b:15–21; 86–88). In the very first pericope after the letter opening—the thanksgiving in 1:3–8—the author refers to the missionary message that reached them in Colossae through Epaphras and started to bear fruit as it does worldwide (1:6). They had reacted with faith and love (1:4, 8). There is

11 On the position that the opponents were at least also to be found within the Christian congregation, the element of divisiveness on the basis of their boast about heavenly experiences becomes important to Sappington (1991:161–164). Emphasis on the exclusivistic character of the opponents is also the position of Rowland (1983:78): ‘Additional practices and revelations obviously had the effect of separating between the brethren (2:18...). For Paul such a division was totally unacceptable...’.
an implication here that the congregation is part and parcel of the church's worldwide evangelistic preaching. Bearing fruit and growing implies at least that the spread of the Gospel is attained through the efforts of the loving communities that it reached.

Once again, in the last pericope but one (4:2-6), just before the ending of the letter, the author returns to the theme of the church's mission. First he asks for the community's prayers in his captive situation, so that he might accomplish his own mission (4:2-4). Then he exhorts them to do the same towards those outside the church, responsibly accounting themselves as to their faith before each and every person. Wisely they should make the best use of their time, dealing with others in such a way that the Gospel message reaches home through communication that bears the mark of God's graceful intervention (4:5-6). In the end, notwithstanding their negative experiences with those who rejected their message, they simply have to continue preaching God's message to those outside, including the opponents.

These encapsulating references to the universal acclaim of the Gospel and the outreach of the Christian community to unbelievers outside the church, have particular significance in this letter.\(^{12}\) Why would the author emphasise this aspect in such a conspicuous way, were it not that the problem of the Colossians was set off in the first place by their missionary contact with the opponents? May one not, at this point, venture a probable scenario of what had transpired at Colossae and had led to the problem to which the letter responded? Should we not endeavour to find Sappington's 'point of contact' between the opponents and the Christian community in the missionary outreach of the Christians into their environment?

Should this be the case, we might see them trying to convince a Jewish group to whom the ascetic mysticism of Jewish apocalyptic was not only of particular importance but amongst whom were actual practitioners/experiencers of the mystic code, leading figures or a leading figure, who claimed to have made the heavenly journey and seen the angels in liturgic worship before the throne of God. The confrontation between Christians and the mystic travellers led to violent reaction. With utmost contempt (2:18) the idea of a crucified Messiah was rejected. Strict compliance with the Jewish law and traditions,\(^{13}\) and belonging to the people of Israel,

\(^{12}\) See below section 5.1.2.

\(^{13}\) That a mystical interest did go hand in hand with a strict adherence to the law, is proved by 4 Ezra, amongst others. Collins (1992:286) discusses Qumran under the heading of 'Early Jewish apocalypticism'. The sectarians' world view was clearly apocalyptic in nature and apocalyptic literature was prevalent amongst them. They were, however, 'rigidly hierarchical, legalistic, and preoccupied with questions of purity', traits which stemmed from their priestly traditions. Now, in the same way that a legalistic group could show vital interest in apocalypses of the heavenly journey
coupled with the ‘new’ knowledge obtained by means of heavenly journeys—this alone could in the view of the opponents, lead to salvation. The haughtiness of the reply, and the assurance of personal experience of the heavenly journey and the angelic liturgy, led to uncertainty and confusion amongst some Christians. In order to instill in these wavering Christians a new sense of confidence in the Gospel message and to warn them not to be tempted into mystical practices, the letter to the Colossians was written. Rather than be intimidated and brought to confusion by their opponents in the missionary confrontation, they should, with the confidence of faith, continue their mission to preach the message even amongst those who targeted them with contempt. Another way of putting it, would be to stress the Christological focus of soteriology: In Christ they have all that is needed for salvation: hold onto him, the Head of the body, for in him God has indeed accomplished salvation in the fullest sense of the word.14

5 UNDERSTANDING COLOSSIANS AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF APOCALYPTIC MYSTICISM

Accepting a situation as set out above obviously has implications for the interpretation of many details in the letter. Thus Sappington (1991:208-223) interprets 2:13-15 in terms of the apocalyptic eschatological judgment scene, and ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὁ ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν tentatively as “wiping out the record of the deeds that was against us type, one could surmise that a group which were primarily interested in heavenly journeys, could just as well indulge in legalistic rituals and practices. This could especially be the case since a righteous life according to the torah seems to have been a prerequisite for making such a journey. See also the discussion by Barrera (1995:68-76, and especially :75-76); De Conick (1996:33-34). On the issue of heavenly journeys at Qumran it was suggested that the Sabbath Songs functioned as instruments of mystical ascent. This has been shown to be incorrect by Newsom (1990:113-118). However, merkavah descriptions form an important motif in these songs. Newsom (1990:112) contends ‘that one should understand the whole of the twelfth Sabbath song as a description of the complex of events that constitute heavenly Sabbath worship. In this regard the manifestation of the merkavah and the praise that greets it should be seen as part of that heavenly liturgy’. See also the discussion by Scott (1997:103-104).

14 I have argued the thrust of the letter to the Colossians elsewhere (Roberts 1991a), taking into account its structure and argument in view of the constructed situation or context. In terms of communication, the letter’s thrust is simply the warning about being led astray from Christ, to whom the readers should remain steadfastly bound. This can be stated in terms of the Christological focus on soteriology as formulated above, with outrunners regarding ecclesiology, cosmology and ethics. In his 1992 article Yates has pointed to the importance of most of these aspects in the letter, including eschatology as well (cf Yates 1992).
(together) with the decrees”, viz. the decrees of judgment set out on the basis of the content of the heavenly book(s), but in any case understood against the background of Jewish apocalyptic (2:19).

That which follows here cannot, of course be explicated in detail as was done by Sappington with regard to 2:13-15. Our attempt to point out some tangent points between Colossians and the apocalypses will be just that—the pointing out of expressions in Colossians which seem to have counterparts in the apocalyptic writings that could help us to better understand some of the difficult exegetical cruces when viewed against the general backdrop of apocalyptic. We will view the evidence from the perspective of Colossians under the headings of Christology, soteriology and cosmology.

5.1 Christological pronouncements in view of the apocalyptic writings

5.1.1 The fullness of God and all wisdom is in Christ

To the author of Colossians, clarifying the status of Christ was of the greatest importance (Roberts 1997a:489-495). It is in itself probable that this was the case on account of the high pretence of the leader of the opponents and the need to counter his claims. The highest status that Colossians allocates to the Christ is that of the indwelling of God in him. In confessing God’s saving of his end-time people of believers in Christ (1:13-14), the author absorbs the hymnic material of 1:15-20 into his confession as motivation for the unique saving value of the relationship with Christ. Christ is the image of God who himself cannot be seen (1:15a). What this means is that he is mediator in God’s work of creation (1:15b-17), and mediator in God’s work of salvation (1:18). This is now in turn motivated by stating that it is the case because God willed it so—it is simply his good-pleasure that all the fullness abides in Christ (1:19). We are left with no doubt about the meaning of this when 2:9 states that all the fullness of the Godhead abides in him in a bodily way. Thus in the appearance of the Christ as a human being, the invisible God himself could be seen in action.

This unique counter to the opponents’ high esteem of their leader gains perspective once we bring into the discussion the other references to the fullness of the Christ. In chapter two the author speaks about his struggle for those Christian communities who were not founded by him, in order to let them gain richly in insight and knowledge into God’s mystery, who is Christ himself (2:1-2). Then he says: ‘In him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden’ (2:3). The implication seems to be that the community’s

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15 Levison (1989) has shown that the language of Colossians 3:1-6 is steeped in apocalyptic lore. In addition to his findings one should pay attention to the phrase in 3:3 claiming that the life of the believers is hidden with Christ in God. In addition to
growth in knowledge is coupled to their knowing the mystery of God, that is Christ, who has at his disposal all the treasures of knowledge from which to enlighten them.

Now this motif is one which is quite abundant in the Similitudes of Enoch and is also found elsewhere. In 1 Enoch 46:3 it is said of the Son of Man that he will open all the hidden storerooms. In 48:7 and 51:3 we find that the Chosen One revealed the wisdom of God to the righteous and holy ones. This correlates closely with the diction of 1QpHab 7:1-13 which states that the wisdom of the prophetic words was revealed to the Teacher of righteousness, who, of course, then revealed this to his followers in the pesher on Habakkuk (Gruenwald 1980:21, and see Martínez 1995:91-96). In 2 Baruch law and wisdom is closely correlated (38:3-4). So 2 Baruch 54:13 speaks of God who has prepared under his throne the treasures of wisdom, and in 44:13-15 says of the inheritors of the end-time that they, who have not withdrawn from God's mercy and have preserved the truth of the law, have prepared for themselves treasures of wisdom. We return to the Similitudes with the references in 1 Enoch 49:3 which says that the spirit of wisdom abides in the Chosen One, and 51:3: from his mouth all the secrets of wisdom shall flow. We hear about him in 49:4 that 'he is the Elect One before the Lord of the Spirits according to his good pleasure'. Lastly, in 71:3-4 Enoch recounts that Michael revealed to him the secrets pertaining to mercy and righteousness, as well as the secrets of the cosmos—the implication being that he will in turn proclaim this to those who shall be saved.

the fullness of truth being hidden in Christ, and the fullness of the Godhead residing in him, this statement speaks of the church as hidden with Christ in God until the end-time when all will be revealed. Whereas truth is otherwise seen as the hidden treasure, the people of God is here, as it were, God's hidden treasure, his possession—in the same way that Ephesians 1:11 speaks of his people as his inheritance, that is, his lot, his possession (see Roberts 1991b:41-42).

The text used for reference is the translation by Isaac (1983)—see also that by Knibb (1978 & 1985).

The translation by Klijn (1983) was used for referencing.

De Villiers (1983) has aptly shown that the Similitudes of Enoch basically deals with two matters: revelations regarding salvation and judgement on the one hand, and revelations of special cosmological knowledge on the other. On the first theme his conclusion is that salvation or judgement is related to the acceptance or not of the secret knowledge of Enoch. How this is supposed to function, he does not discuss except to say that the torah does not play such a prominent role as in the case of the Pharisees and rabbis (62). Salvation seems to hinge on belonging to the esoteric group, whilst those on the outside can expect God's judgement. The meaning of the second set of revelations, 'scientific' knowledge on cosmological matters, seems to lie in integrating Hellenistic views with the belief in the God of Israel, thereby allowing his community to function meaningfully in their new circumstances. In times of social change and uncertainty, it is meant to provide the community with encouragement by showing that God is in control and that He is managing the cosmos as a well-ordered
When we take into account our findings above on the nature of the opposing group being esoteric Jewish mystics and read this together with the references on the treasures of wisdom, it seems most probable that the author of Colossians was countering apocalyptic traditions of the kind especially frequent in the Similitudes of Enoch\(^\text{19}\). To the insecure Christians who became impressed with all the pronouncements about apocalyptic revelations and the fountain of knowledge and wisdom to which its proponents lay claim, the author of Colossians endeavoured to bring assurance by emphasising that their own confession of faith implied that all those claims by the opponents were in fact true of Christ, their Saviour. Every conceivable need for wisdom and knowledge is contained in him. To know him, God's revealed mystery, is to know all that is necessary for salvation. In doing this the author was actually countering the opposing group by applying the language of their apocalyptic traditions to the Gospel message. Whatever that group could claim in terms of hidden wisdom and knowledge, our author would claim is true of Christ and the salvation God brought about for them through their relation to him. But then he went one step further. Not only is all required knowledge, the fullness of knowledge and wisdom, available in Christ, but far more than this: the fullness of God himself dwells in Christ because of his good pleasure—they need nothing more in the service of God than to hold onto him who is the head above all.

5.1.2 Christ as God’s revealed mystery is the hope of glory for the gentiles

We have had occasion above to call attention to Christ as the revealed mystery of God, but should now return to this theme as it has bearing on another aspect of his singular status. Not only is all wisdom and knowledge provided in the relationship with Christ who is the fountain of all wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3), but as 1:25-27 clearly states, the preaching of this message brings about the revelation of the formerly hidden mystery, videlicet that God’s salvation in the Christ was meant, not only for Israel, but for gentiles as well. This motif was sometimes hinted at by the prophets in the Old Testament (cf Zch 8:20-23), sometimes more clearly expounded (Jr 12:14-17; 18:5-10), but then always in terms of the gentiles turning toward Israel, receiving the blessing of Yahweh by assimilation into Israel (cf again Jr 12:14-17). According to the author of Colossians the end-time of salvation through God’s Messiah has finally arrived, including the salvation of the gentiles. However, now that the hidden mystery has finally been revealed, it transpires that God’s will was actually for the gentiles to be part of his end-time people because of their relationship with Christ on the basis of believing the message of salvation through the cross, and not because of becoming circumcised Jews. The true people of God consist of those who put their faith in Christ. This fact the author stresses by calling Christ the gentiles’ hope of glory, that is, their participation in the future glory of the end-time (cf Col 1:27; 3:4, and 1En 50:1; 62:14-16) is not bound up with their inclusion in the Jewish nation. Also it is not bound up with their participation in heavenly journeys and the ‘revelation’ of all kinds of esoteric knowledge as boasted about by their opponents. It is accomplished by means of their steadfast relationship with Christ, the head above all. In this sense then Christ, and no other ‘wisdom’ brings the only hope for salvation. Personified, the author thus epithetises the Christ as the gentiles’ hope for full participation in the future salvation of God’s people.

The Similitudes twice speaks of the concealing of him who was to enlighten God’s people. The reference in 1 Enoch 62:6-7 is quite clear: the one who rules over everything is the Son of Man. He was concealed and preserved by the Lord of Spirits, but on the day of judgment the Lord revealed him to the holy and elect ones. In 48:4-6 we read that the Chosen One was concealed in the presence of the Lord from creation and for eternity, but that Chosen One has now revealed God’s wisdom to his righteous and holy ones. Therefore he will become to those, the despondent who are sick at heart, the hope for the future.
The motifs of previous concealment and later revelation of God's special instrument, as well as the accompaniment of hope for God's people, run parallel in Colossians and the Similitudes. There is, however, one big difference. Whereas the Similitudes uses the idea of previous concealment to explain why 'Enoch's' revelations have only lately been revealed, and simply mentions that the Son of Man is the light of the gentiles, Colossians utilises the idea in the sense of the Old Testament promises regarding the future salvation of the gentiles. Only, the time of fulfilment has now arrived and gentiles have through faith become part of God's people. Once more we can surmise that the opponents' boasting about their revelations led the author of Colossians to ensure his readers of salvation in Christ, whose advent meant the fulfillment of the ancient promises. His readers can rest assured that they really do form part of God's plan and need no more than their relationship with Christ to experience fully the salvation wrought by God in Christ. In this connection the expression in Colossians 2:2: ἵνα παρακληθῶσιν αἱ καρδίαι αὐτῶν, most probably refers to the Enochite expression about hope for those who were sick at heart (48:4). The author's struggle for the Christian communities had as purpose their encouragement, and the upliftment of their hearts in a situation of uncertainty, assuring them of the true insight into, and knowledge of, God's revelation in Christ (cf Ps 34:18).

5.1.3 Christ, the kingly Ruler of God's empire

In Colossians 1:13-14 the author confesses the believers' translation into the kingdom of his beloved Son, then stresses the fact that the believers have in him both redemption and forgiveness of sins. The ideas of 'kingdom' and of 'the beloved Son' are well known themes in the New Testament; the formulation of Colossians, however, is unique.

In the apocalyptic traditions figuring behind the opponents, ideas like these probably played an important role as well. In the Similitudes we find evidence of this in throne-room scenes on the day of judgment. The Son of Man will conquer and in judgment remove the oppressing rulers from their throne (1En 46:2-7). As the Lord's Chosen One he will rule on God's throne with wisdom (51:2). Sitting in glory upon the throne of God he will wisely judge and condemn both the evil angels (Azaz'el and those belonging to him), and the wicked rulers who oppress God's people (55:4; 62:3-12; cf 45:3). On the day of judgment their deeds shall be judged by weighing them in the balance (61:8).

The importance of these references for the confession of Colossians should be clear. 'Son of Man' and 'the Chosen One' in the Similitudes have here become 'the beloved Son of God'. The kingdom of God is referred to as the kingdom of God's Son: Christ is the conquering Ruler. But here, as in the
Similitudes, the King sits in judgment; the throne has become the judgment seat, and the King the Judge. The assurance of our author to his readers, and especially the wavering element, as contained in the confessional statement, is one of acquittal: through their relationship with Christ, the King (ἐν Ὀ), they have been redeemed and their sins have been forgiven. Acquittal on the basis of redemption and forgiveness is the foundation of their salvation by God from the power of darkness, and not the weighing of their deeds in the balance of justice. Through their relationship with Christ the acquittal has already been granted. The implication of this is that the demands of their opponents to acquire justification by the painstaking way of the law and attaining a good result at the balancing of good and bad deeds, is both outdated and an unnecessary folly (cf 2:23).

5.2 Soteriology of Colossians and apocalyptic

The soteriological pronouncements that interest us can be viewed both from the perspective of God’s act of salvation and the experience of the believers.

5.2.1 The salvatory act of God

We have already seen that God is professed as the initiator of salvation in 1:13, whilst in 1:12 the community was called upon to thank him for qualifying them to receive their inheritance. We have also seen that the status of his Son as image of God was described as the result of his good pleasure (1:19). In 1:20 God’s good pleasure is also linked, in a ground—result scheme, to his purpose of atonement/salvation through the cross of Christ. In 1:27 it is God’s will that the richness of the mystery be made known to the gentiles, thus providing the basis for their salvation.

Now, as the Similitudes ascribed God’s good pleasure as the ground of the Son of Man being his Chosen One (1En 49:4), we hear in 48:7 that it was the good pleasure of the Lord of Spirits that his righteous and holy ones should have life and be saved, albeit that this is linked to their righteous way of life, and their hatred of this world and its sinful ways. It is exactly at this point that the author of Colossians parts ways with the traditions of the opponents. Salvation is grounded in God’s will, yes! But the actualisation of his will is not attained by means of a life according to the law; it was accomplished through the cross of Christ (1:20), the acceptance of the Gospel message (1:27, cf 1:5–8), and a trustful relationship with Christ (1:21–23, cf 1:4).

The saving act of God can thus be seen as the fulfilment of his good pleasure. It can also be seen in his election of the faithful, although the believers are once only, in Colossians 3:12, called ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ. In the Similitudes the righteous ones are often referred to as the elect or chosen ones.
(eg 1En 38:1-7; 48:1; 51:3, and in many other places, cf also ApAb 14:1-2; 20:6). For the author of Colossians election belongs to the Christians who died with Christ and were resurrected with him (2:20; 3:1). In this connection another pronouncement in the Similitudes assumes importance. In 1 Enoch 63:8 the wicked rulers realise that they have no hope of being saved because the Lord's judgment shows no respect of persons, that is, his judgment is not influenced by the earthly importance of a person. Colossians 3:25 may reflect this in urging Christians to serve the Lord Christ faithfully, otherwise bad will come from bad because 'there is no partiality' (NRSV). So in judging what is bad, God is impartial, but on the other hand he chooses whom he saves on the basis of dying and rising with the Christ. What is significant in all this is the attempt by the author of Colossians to reassure his readers once more that not those opponents with their apocalyptic claims are the ones chosen by God for salvation, but those whose trust is in his Christ.

Lastly, God's saving act can be seen in his creation of a new covenant with his end-time people. 1 Enoch 60:6 refers to the coming day of judgement as a covenant day for the elect, but a day of inquisition for the sinners, whilst 2 Baruch 66:5 unites the fulfilment of the law and circumcision, the sign of the covenant. The author of Colossians, in 2:11-13, takes great pains to assure his readers that they are indeed the ones blessed with God's end-time covenant, because they were circumcised with the spiritual circumcision of Christ as they died and rose with him in the act of baptism.

5.2.2 The experience of the believers

The believers' experience of salvation is specifically in the foreground in Colossians 1:12-14. We find here a number of motifs grouped together in a confessional statement (1:13-14) which functions as the basis for the letter's main point of communication, videlicet the warning not to be misled. We have already had occasion to discuss the motifs of redemption and forgiveness. Apart from these our text (1:12-14) contains the following: God saved them; He enabled them to receive their share in the inheritance of his people; He brought them from darkness to light; He transferred them from the rule of this world to the rule of his Son, to which we have also already paid attention. These motifs are equally well established themes in the Similitudes especially. The occurrences are so frequent that space will not allow their full discussion.

In 1 Enoch 39:8 Enoch knows that his portion is already allotted and waiting for him under the wings of the Lord of Spirits. A glorious portion awaits the righteous and elect ones (1En 58:1-2, cf 48:7; 62:8,14; 71:16; 4 Esra 7:9-13; ApAb 13:8; 29:21; cf also Russell 1971:328). The Lord shall save the righteous ones at the end of time (1En 48:7; 50:1-4; 51:2; 62:13-14; 4 Esra
6:25–26). Then the light of the Lord of Spirits will shine upon them (1En 38:3–4, cf 48:4; 58:6; see also 5:7). They will be in the light, but the sinners will be in darkness (1En 41:8; 5:7; cf 108:11–12).

With traditions such as these (cf also 1QM 13:7–10, in Martínez 1994:107) operating within the group of opponents, it is clear that the author of Colossians was once again utilising the language of the opponents, their claim to salvation on the basis of their esoteric knowledge and their righteousness of the law, to express to the Christians who were impressed by this, his faith that God had in Christ already given all of this to them who have put their trust in his Christ. They have already been transferred from the rule of darkness to the rule of his Son.

With reference to the relationship with Christ which our author understands to be the way of salvation, a last remark. In Colossians 2:19 the author negatively qualifies the leader of the opponents as not holding onto the head (οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλήν). Positively this identifies the Colossian Christians as those who do hold fast to Christ, the head of his church, the body. This expression is often used as argument that the opponents were somehow or other part of the Christian community whose actions, however, have the effect that they have now abandoned Christ and no longer hold onto him. A number of references in the Similitudes put a different perspective on the expression. In 1 Enoch 40:6 a voice blesses the Chosen One and the chosen ones 'who are clinging onto the Lord of the Spirits'. In 46:7–8 we again come across 'the faithful ones who cling to the Lord of the Spirits', but now they are juxtaposed against the wicked rulers who 'do not extol the name of the Lord of the Spirits' (46:6). The implication is clear: the wicked rulers who have never served the Lord of Spirits are those who do not cling to or hold onto him. In contrast with the congregation of the holy ones, they appear as those who deny the name of the Lord (45:1, 46:7, cf 4 Esra 7:37; 8:56). What the author of Colossians is doing here is to turn the table on the opponents by using their own traditions against them—they are the ones who do not cling onto the Christ of God and will therefore fall under his judgment.
5.3 Cosmology of Colossians and apocalyptic

Heavenly journeys to and visions of the mysteries of God’s creation are of great importance in the apocalypses and may have to do with the provision of a sense of stability in the unstable and uncertain world in which they were written. They wanted to assure their readers that God is in control of his creation, in what happens to it and in it (cf 1En 60; 61:1–6,13; 72–82; ApAb 10). This is the case especially in the need to see order in the universe which could bring trust in God in a disorderly world (1En 1–5, see especially 2:2; 5:2).

In view of our findings above, it is justified to surmise that this aspect of apocalyptic as part of the opponents’ mystical tradition led the author of Colossians to see the value of including the hymnic material of 1:15–20 as motivation in his credal statement (1:13–20). Since the Similitudes in 1 Enoch 52:4 states that all the secret things seen by Enoch ‘happens on the authority of his Messiah so that he may give orders...’, we may find in this the motivation for speaking of the Christ as mediator in creation (Col 1:15–17). Of particular importance in this connection is the reference in Colossians 1:17 to the fact that ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν οὐχ ὑποκυνότηται, which I have previously shown to have been used in the meaning ‘hold together’ (see Roberts 1997a:480–482; Louw & Nida 1988:614; Bratcher & Nida 1977:25: ‘There is order and harmony in all creation; it is a universe, not a chaos, and Christ is the unifying force’). Our author agrees that creation is a cosmos ruled by the Messiah. But this Messiah, the Christ, is the Son of God who died on the cross and rose from death to be first in rank above all (cf Gruenwald 1980:10–11; Sappington 1991:116 n 3).

The final motif to which I would like to draw attention is that of the thrones, dominions, rulers and powers mentioned in Colossians 1:16—see also 2:10, 15. Opinion is divided on whether the text deals here with supernatural forces or political entities. I have previously argued that Colossians 1:16 should probably be understood in a general sense, that is, including powers of whatever nature (Roberts 1997b:37–38). The same may be true of 2:10. However, Sappington (1991:208–213) strongly argues for 2:15 to be

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understood in terms of supernatural beings, and he is probably right in this. The question is whether this necessarily implies, as he argues, that the other two instances should be determined by the meaning in 2:15. If traditions such as those in the Similitudes indeed formed the background to which Colossians was reacting, it may be of help in solving this problem. The fact of the matter is that the Similitudes most often refer to political entities as the powerful ones who oppressed the elect ones and who will have to face the Son of Man in judgment (cf 1En 62:1–12; 46:7–8; 48:8; 53:2–5; 54:6; 65:10). In another context, however, the Similitudes can also refer in these terms to Azaz’el and his company, although even here it is with a view to calling the earthly powers to account (55:4). This would seem to strengthen the case that the references in Colossians need not in every case be to the same entity. What is in any case clear is that the author of Colossians is in general agreement with the views of the Similitudes on the judgment of God on whatever powers may influence the life of his people. Where he may have held a sharply divergent view from that of the opponents of the Colossians is in his interpretation that the Christ of the Christian church, the professed Son of God, was indeed the one who fulfilled the role of the Enochian Son of Man: He is indeed the head above all.

6 CONCLUSION

The evidence adduced from Colossians shows that it is not only possible to read the letter against the background of early Jewish mysticism as an element of apocalyptic, but that a reading along these lines makes perfectly good sense, helps to solve some difficult problems in the letter, and that such a reading should indeed be deemed probable as a solution to the vexing dilemmas concerning this letter. We found the opponents against which the congregation at Colossae were warned to be a group of non-Christian Jewish mystics whose strict adherence to the law attained the proportions of an ascetic way of life and that their asceticism probably was a contributing factor towards the experience of heavenly journeys.

Once these facts were accepted the question arose as to whether the apocalyptic writings could not perhaps provide us with evidence of the specific traditions which inspired the group of opponents, and against the backdrop of which the letter to the Colossians was written and its warning to the congregation was formulated. By comparing the letter’s diction and its important motifs with apocalypses of the time, a remarkable tangency could be observed between Colossians and the Similitudes of Enoch in particular. This tangent relationship was explored with regard to Colossians’ pronouncements on the levels of Christology, soteriology and cosmology.
It was found that the author of Colossians regularly utilised apocalyptic motifs to either enhance the congregation’s understanding of their own beliefs or to counter claims of their opponents with regard to the superiority of their mystical religion. We also found that the original confrontation between the Christian group and the non-Christian Jewish group of ascetic mystics most probably arose in the course of the congregation’s missionary preaching to these Jews about Jesus as the Christ of God.

Lastly, would it be improper to suggest that the evidence alluded to above, points in the direction of a close relationship between the opponents of the Colossians and the Similitudes of Enoch? Could it have been that the Similitudes were indeed the ‘book’ of those opponents and that this explains the tangent relationship between the letter to the Colossians and the Similitudes of Enoch?

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