

Colossians

Post by “Don” of October 10, 2023 at 7:19 PM

Just skimmed Dewitt's chapter on Colossians and looked through Paul's letter itself.

This one could be interesting.

Consider this a teaser.

Post by “Don” of October 11, 2023 at 9:04 AM

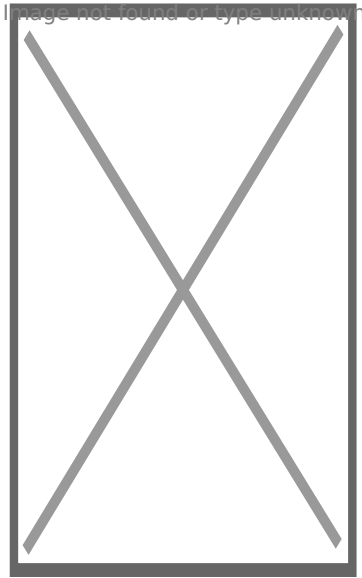
I'm also going to begin this thread by posting some additional resources and very brief remarks.

One observation that took me by surprise was that the ONLY place in the Bible where the word "philosophy" φιλοσοφία occurs is Colossians 2:8 where the author is talking about a "philosophy" luring away the Christians in Colossal:

Quote from Colossians 2:8

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Troy Martin identified that "philosophy" with Cynicism:



[By philosophy and empty deceit : Colossians as response to a cynic critique : Martin, Troy W : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

223 pages ; 23 cm

archive.org

I've seen a source saying that the "philosophy" was Gnosticism, but more research and available Gnostic texts has made this position much less likely.

[This Christian professor states that it can't be determined which Greco-Roman philosophy is being referred to in Colossians 2:8:](#)

Quote

Paul does not give us enough information to identify precisely what sect or "philosophy" he is describing. There are some clues, however, that suggest that it was perhaps a syncretistic hybrid of Jewish mystical practices and popular pagan folk-belief: he mentions the observance of special days, including the Sabbath (v. 16); visionary experience and the worship of angels (v.18); submission to the "elemental spirits of the world" (v. 20); and abstinence (vv. 21, 23). Paul clearly is attacking a peculiar form of religious speculation, but it is impossible to identify it with any of the major schools of philosophy known to us from the Greco-Roman world. In fact, it is important to keep in mind that the Greek word philosophia (and its Latin cognate) had a variety of meanings in this period, and, depending on the context, might be translated "religion," "speculation," or "investigation." (excerpt)

[Meyer's NT Commentary notes a couple candidates for the philosophy of 2:8:](#)

Quote

we are under no necessity to infer from the word φιλοσοφία a reference to Greek wisdom, as Grotius did, suggesting the Pythagorean (Clemens Alexandrinus thought of the Epicureans, and Tertullian of such philosophers as Paul had to do with at Athens).

One last general comment: The authorship of Colossians is debated by scholars with opinions about evenly split on whether it was Paul or someone else claiming to be Paul who wrote it. The scholarly phrase is "Deutero-Pauline letters" for Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians. 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews are not accepted as authentically written by Paul by any mainstream academic scholars today (and have not been for quite some time).

The 7 undisputed letters are:

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Philippians

1 Thessalonians

Philemon

I will add that the fact that the "philosophy" isn't named opens up interpretation to anyone with an agenda or preconception of what they want to see or find. Dewitt is no different in that. It's just a question of whether there's any there there.

Post by “Don” of October 11, 2023 at 3:44 PM

I will admit that I got a little excited when I read Colossians 2:8 in the New Revised Standard Version (Updated) (emphasis added) and checked the Greek:

2:8 Watch out that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental principles[b] of the world, and not according to Christ.

I mentioned the word philosophy above.

I thought the use of "empty" κενός might be the author's dig at Epicurus's use of that term.

Traditions of men τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων sounded like anything that could be applied to pagan traditions, ie not of God.

And we're back to the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου we saw in that other verse, but this time in a different context.

What could it do mean?!

Join us next post to delve into more *Epicurean Mysteries!* (Insert appropriate theme music here 😊)

Post by “Don” of October 11, 2023 at 10:11 PM

So, as stated in post 3, I got excited about some words and phrases that *could* be interpreted as Epicurean. In fact, [Clement of Alexandria](#) (c.150 - c.215) thought the author of *Colossians* was referring to Epicureans (but also brings in Stoics) in verse 2:8:

[Quote from Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis](#)

(50)(6)He does not mean all philosophy, but the Epicurean variety (which Paul mentions in the Acts of the Apostles [Acts 17.18], criticizing it for rejecting Providence and making a god of pleasure) and any other form which honors the elements without a scientific knowledge of their creative cause, and without any notion of the creator.

51(1) The Stoics, too, of whom he also speaks say wrongly that God is corporeal and moves through matter of the most disreputable kind. (2) "Human tradition" is his term for this intellectual nonsense. ...

That's the opinion of Clement of Alexandria [writing in around 200 CE](#). I will admit I got excited about the "Epicurean" possibilities from the text of Colossians and that Clement had the opinion the author was referring to Epicureans.

Then I looked closer at the list of characteristics of these philosophers the letter's author was warning about in 2:16 and 18:

- Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and/or drink
- or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths.
- 18 Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement
- and worship of angels,

- initiatory visions,[i] puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking,[j]
- 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with a growth that is from God.

Maybe I could rationalize the "matters of food and/or drink" or "observing festivals" (The 20th, anyone?)... but then the letter's author goes into new moons or Sabaths. In fact, "matters of food and drink" sound like this "philosophy" being discussed has some dietary rules or forbidden foods that the Christians are eating. It's hard to say without any context. I'm sure the Colossians knew what he was referring to!

The "insisting on self-abasement"? KJV translates that as "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility" with the Greek being θέλων ταπεινοφροσύνη. Some dictionaries translate that as "lowliness/humility of mind." That doesn't sound like Epicureans, but the voluntary humility? Could that be the voluntary "confession" characteristic of parrhesia (frank criticism)? That seems to be a stretch. The word ταπεινοφροσύνη shows up 7 times in the New Testament and can refer to serving the Lord "with all humility of mind" (Acts 20:19). It's also used in Ephesians 4:2 ("with all lowliness and meekness"); Philippians 2:3 ("Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind"); Colossians again in 3:12; 1 Peter 3:8 and 5:5.

The other characteristics that are brought up seem even less Epicurean: Worship of angels? Initiatory visions?? The latter sounds like a mystery cult.

In the end, there are just TOO many loose ends. If *some* of these lines were the only thing in the text, it would be easier to make a solid case that the author was talking about Epicureans. As it is, however, it's a roller coaster - yes, no, could be, no way - leading ultimately to frustration in trying to solve a puzzle with 1/2 the pieces missing forever. I don't think we can accept that the "philosophers" being referred to are Epicureans. Too many things don't add up in the final analysis.

Post by "Titus" of October 12, 2023 at 5:19 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

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Maybe he is referring to different groups at the same time. As you did say, we would need more information about the background of the recipients.

For the next week I will be occupied by work, but I am looking forward to participate more afterwards.

Post by “Don” of October 13, 2023 at 6:15 AM

[Quote from Titus](#)

Maybe he is referring to different groups at the same time. As you did say, we would need more information about the background of the recipients.

I think that is a good possibility. The Greek διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης uses singular terms (literally, "through the philosophy and empty deceitfulness") but that construction can be used generically to refer to a class of things, so "through philosophy, in general." 2:16 Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω is also singular, "Therefore, let no one judge..." But there's really no way around doing that.

So, yes, there could have been more than one philosophy at play in this letter.

Post by “Pacatus” of October 13, 2023 at 7:29 PM

[Don](#): "One observation that took me by surprise was that the ONLY place in the Bible where the word "philosophy" φιλοσοφία occurs is Colossians 2:8 where the author is talking about a "philosophy" luring away the Christians in Colossal:

Quote from Colossians 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."

Lest anyone think this old stuff is not resurrected in modern times: I was warned 30 years ago by a conservative (but not evangelical) Christian pastor that my soul was in mortal danger due to (1) my interest in "philosophy" [his actual word], which he thought was (2) doubtlessly influencing my decision to get a divorce [my wife's longstanding abusive behavior was, apparently, not a consideration]. He clearly thought that philosophy was at the root of the evil (in his mind) I was about to commit. {Just to be clear, this guy - whom I knew fairly well - was

no feminist (as I consider myself to be) concerned with empowering women; no, he was a “man is the head of the woman” guy – though of a kinder, gentler disposition than some of that ilk.}

Post by “Pacatus” of October 13, 2023 at 8:00 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

So, yes, there could have been more than one philosophy at play in this letter.

My recollection is that the Greek definite article was also used for emphasis, and not just distinction – as in τὸν Θεόν in John 1:1.

In the Colossians case, it could mean all philosophy in general -- as opposed to proper faith.

Post by “Don” of October 13, 2023 at 10:03 PM

Agreed, [Pacatus](#). The definite article was used much more often than it is in, say, English. And a generic wider use in Colossians 2:8 is a definite possibility.