

TOWARDS A RE-READING OF COLOSSIANS  
FROM AN AFRICAN AMERICAN  
POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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## ABSTRACT

Essential information is often lost when in reading a piece of work the identity of an audience or the recipients is overlooked. The first hearers of the letter to the Colossians were a diverse group of people in a colonized country under the imperial rule of Rome in the first century. The writer of the letter addressed possible concerns presented to him from the evangelist, Epaphras, a native of Colossae. In identifying the audience whether they are first recipients or future readers, ideologies and theologies are discovered which add to the existing criticism genres. The process of identifying the audience allows one to reread the work through the lens of various peoples. This process also allows one to make comparisons between the various audiences.

A comparison is made in this thesis between the 1<sup>st</sup> century readers and the enslaved Africans who lived on the continent of North America who were later exposed to concepts that stemmed from the letter. In viewing the identities of both groups the most damaging find was the derogatory labels placed on them. This thesis, an African American postcolonial re-reading of the letter to the Colossians, looks beyond the labels to ascertain the meaning of the Colossians letter, giving voices to each group.

## DEDICATION

Nothing can compare to the overwhelming gratitude I have for my family for their never-ending support of me through this arduous task. Words cannot express my love and thanks to my children: Jaime and Hezekiah Massey, Paul and Demetria Tinsley II and Patience Tinsley; my mother, Nancy Coakley Barfield, my sister, Nikki McCoy and to my entire family near and far.

In memoriam:

Paul Michael Tinsley I

1953 - 2000

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## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

Each generation leaves a footprint of their lives on earth. That footprint which is their identity is a measure of every aspect of their lives except their thoughts. It can be argued that their footprint is the result of their thought processes whether constructive or destructive. Yet, the actual thoughts are immeasurable. People can however leave footprints of their lives through actions that cannot be measured scientifically. The people of Colossae left footprints even though their lives were erased through the devastation of an earthquake. Although they can no longer speak, these footprints or voices are recorded in the letter to the Colossians. Their voices seemed to have been silenced by history but can be heard through the pages of that letter. Similarly the identities of the enslaved Africans are the result of footprints left by generations of Africans whose lives were interrupted by the devastation of slavery. This thesis explores the religious history of each group to determine their understanding of the gospel.

### **The Goals of the Study**

The aim of this thesis is to study the presentation of the gospel message to the first-century community of Colossae, their reception of it and compare it to the presentation and reception of the same to the enslaved Africans in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The purpose of this study is to look at parallels in the way the message was presented to and interpreted by the groups. It is the goal of this paper to show that they were presented with the gospel, but when they attempted to incorporate it into their belief systems they were told their beliefs were not sufficient. It is the general consensus that the “error” or “crisis” began with

teachings from within the community that did not line up with the doctrines being set forth by first-century leaders such as Paul and those that followed his teachings (see Chapter Ten subsection 10.2 for notes on “Colossians Error”). It is the opinion of this thesis that the issues that are addressed mainly in the second chapter of the letter do not point to errors in understanding the teachings of the gospel but reflect attempts by the people of the community to understand and therefore assimilate their beliefs to this new teaching. The Africans experienced similar difficulties in their attempt to understand the gospel message presented to them initially by the Portuguese missionaries, slave traders and later those who enslaved them.

### **The Methodology**

From the field of hermeneutics this thesis takes the form used by postcolonial scholars R. S. Sugirtharajah whose related works include *Voices from the Margin; Interpreting the Bible in the Third World, Vernacular Hermeneutics; Bible and Postcolonialism* and work co-edited with Fernando S. Segovia, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings, The Bible and Postcolonialism*.

Segovia is a cultural critic (for which he is noted for in this thesis) whose interests include postcolonial studies, Diaspora studies and minority studies. His understanding of various methods of biblical interpretation is remarkable and he seems to favor cultural studies which are shown in his contribution as co-editor of *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*. This particular work reflects on the historical and theoretical structure of minority criticism from African Americans, Asian Americans and Latino/a scholars in the United States.

Sugirtharajah is very open about his views of mainstream biblical scholarship over which he favors Third World biblical scholarship. His works demonstrate how the bible gets used by both the colonized and colonizer. He also supported minority criticism in his first edition of *Voices from the Margin* by urging Latin Americans, Africans and Asians to dialogue among each other as “partners in a common cause”.<sup>1</sup> Sugirtharajah’s main interest in biblical interpretation is from an Indian perspective; however he offers important discussions within the African context.

The lens for interpreting the letter to the Colossians is formed by examining the identities of its initial recipients. The research completed during the process of writing this thesis reflects an African American viewpoint of the letter to the Colossians which in view of the limited amount of such research makes it to date among the first. The letter will be read in opposition to those who feel there were false teachings at Colossae. Further examination of the motives of the author will be made in order to ascertain possible shortcomings on the letter writer’s part.

In forming this thesis the debate is moved from pointing to the error on the part of the community in Colossae to possible misunderstandings on the part of either Epaphras or the letter’s disputed author. A study is presented of the similarities between the people of the Lycus Valley, Jew and Gentile alike, as they are presented with the gospel. The ancestors of these first-century Jews were transplanted to this region. However they grew substantially in less than 200 years.<sup>2</sup> By 62 BCE the amount of the temple tax confiscated by the Roman governor (twenty pounds of gold) reveals

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, Rev. and expanded 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006) 443.

<sup>2</sup> Colossae – In 213 BCE Antiochus III installed 2,000 Jewish families from Mesopotamia (Josephus, Ant 12.148-53)

that there were at least 11,000 adult male Jews living in that region.<sup>3</sup> A study of the beliefs of the groups inhabiting this valley can reveal the reasons for concern by the writer of this letter. Conflicts between the groups and their beliefs could explain the “crisis” referred to in the second chapter. Questions that arise in reading the letter are: Who were the dominant groups? What teachings by Epaphras may have created the misunderstanding? Did Epaphras react as a native of Colossae, fearing a schism was about to erupt? Paul as writer presents the problem of his reputation in the first century compared to how he is viewed by many in the present. Paul’s views and the views of his contemporaries differed substantially (see Chapter Three “Jews”). The opposing views coupled with present day commentary can spark a controversy all its own; an important part of understanding the “blame game” being played in commentary after commentary.

The enslaved Africans were also transplanted; however, their circumstance differed from that of the Colossians in that with the latter there was a mutual cohabitation between the pagan population and the Jews brought there by Antiochus III. How did this difference affect their reception and interpretation of the gospel as opposed to that of the enslaved Africans? Being an already established community (since 213 BCE), the Colossians seemed to have had established beliefs before the evangelization facilitated by Epaphras. This was also the case with the enslaved Africans before being brought to the New World. It is interesting to note, however that both groups were criticized for bringing to the table, so to speak, beliefs that facilitated their understanding of the gospel as presented to them. What are explored in this thesis are the intricacies of assimilation of beliefs by both groups to

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 8th ed. (London and New York,: Macmillan and co., 1886) 20.

understand why the label “error” occurred. Although the intentions of the slave traders may seem obvious; the missionaries who thought they were bringing this new information to the Africans were in error.

Furthermore, this thesis views literature concerning the alleged crisis in the letter detrimental to the proliferation of the gospel to all people. The epistle writer’s attempt to correct or warn the community without fully investigating the situation could have been detrimental to some who believed, and were considered different because of the way they interpreted what was being taught. They could also have been ostracized because they refused to let go of customs and beliefs that did not line up with or were unfamiliar to the writer. We cannot forget Epaphras’ role. Perhaps in his zeal to emulate the major thinkers of the day, he tried to erase former beliefs in hopes of winning approval. Much of this is speculative, but worth investigating since the debate seems to lean heavily in favor of error and simply to close the book on this topic without fleshing it out further does not seem fair.

Relevant literature in the re-reading of Colossians includes commentary on and from the Pauline corpus, linguistic study of the language of the letter to the Colossians pertaining to the error and well as African American linguistics. Further included is literature concerning the history and evangelization of the Lycos Valley cities; Hierapolis, Laodicea and Colossae, as well as parts of Africa evangelized in the mid second millennium.

### **Outline of Study**

This thesis discusses the following similarities between the initial recipients of the letter to the Colossians and the enslaved Africans in North America. First, each was

presented with the gospel and their interpretation was viewed as problematic to those presenting it. Second, they were also subjects of empires into which they were forced to be assimilated. Third, diversities existed within their culture and religions which had developed over generations. These similarities contribute to the re-reading of the Colossians letter from an African American postcolonial perspective.

If written by Paul or someone close to him it is dated in the spring of CE 57 or as some scholars think in 62 soon after the Epistle to Ephesians. If not part of the Pauline Corpus, then it might be dated during the late first century as late as the 80's.<sup>4</sup> The term "the writer" or "the author" is used as the authorship of this letter is debated. Where Paul is being discussed specifically he will be referenced.

The letter written to the Colossians was reactionary in that the writer expresses a third hand opinion of the situation in that first-century community. The writer was responding to a second hand report from presumably, Epaphras, who could only assess the beliefs of the people he had evangelized. Therefore it is likely through a first-hand report from the people of Colossae (which to date does not exist) that a better understanding of the letter's purpose can be ascertained. The textual scholar may argue that the way the letters were written also impact the message of the gospel we have today.<sup>5</sup> It is however, with confidence this thesis proceeds making use of the text presently available.

This thesis investigates the identity of the first-century audience of the letter to seek its meaning and purpose. In addition comparisons between the identities of the first

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<sup>4</sup> Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? : The Making of the Christian Myth*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, Ca.: HarperSan Francisco, 1995) 184.

<sup>5</sup> Parker discusses the role of the amanuensis and different copies produced for specific purposes. D. C. Parker, *An Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 247-48.



century audience and the enslaved African in North America produce similarities that further enhance the meaning of the letter. The identity of the audiences mentioned above serves as a footprint generations later and is essential in the re-reading of the letter from an African American postcolonial perspective.

However it is with the history of the presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ that their voices can be heard. Each group has a legacy that gives them a voice which allows them to speak through the ages. This thesis in exploring the identities of both the people of first-century Colossae and the enslaved African gives voice to their views and the meaning of the letter written to the Colossians.

The author of Colossians introduced new ideas and terminologies into a culture which historically had various beliefs and traditions. The following questions form the basis of the re-reading process in Part Four of this thesis:

- Should the teachings found in Colossians be presented to persons in an African American culture what would be the implications?
- Would the reaction by the people of the African American community differ from that of the Colossian community?
- Can these reactions be used to draw conclusions which can impact the meaning of the text?
- Can language be used to alter the identity and faith formation of an existing culture or to eliminate particular ideologies or beliefs?

The main hermeneutical issues from the standpoint of the readers are:

- The language of the text
- The pre-gospel beliefs of the recipients and
- The motives of the presenters.

It is particularly interesting that we know of no existing letters or correspondence of any kind that was presented to the writer of Colossians. The canon of New Testament epistles contains responses to situations and concerns either witnessed by Paul and other writers or by persons, in some way closely associated with them. The authenticity of the scriptures is not being questioned, but it presents speculation as to whether Paul or the writers were responding to accurate situations or to concerns of individuals. This letter in particular speaks of the writer's distance from the situation and relies totally on the report of Epaphras (Col 1.6; 2.1). He never alludes to having visited Colossae, although Paul, having stayed in Ephesus could have. However he writes of preaching the gospel as they are being instructed but makes no connection between the two. He states that Epaphras is the evangelist and one reference does connect to the other. The gospel that he preaches is no different from what Epaphras has presented to them.<sup>6</sup> He also makes it clear also that he had never been to this particular congregation. "Moreover, if he had actually visited Colossae, it must appear strange that he should not once allude to any incident occurring during his sojourn there, for this epistle would then be the single exception to his ordinary practice."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Col 1.5-8, 21-23, 25, 28, 29. 2.5, 6

<sup>7</sup> Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* 28.

Christianity was in the early stages of development in the first century; therefore doctrines and beliefs were still being formed (see subsection 10.3). The label “heresy”, assigned to the suspected teachings mentioned in the letter is questionable simply because neither “heresy” nor “Christianity” was clearly defined in that period.<sup>8</sup> The term heresy αἵρεσις<sup>9</sup> took on a less controversial meaning during that time. It was not until later that it took on a more pejorative meaning. It is difficult to understand what the writer was addressing or trying to correct since the ideals and doctrines of Christianity were not fully formed. This idea perhaps gives license to the many opinions and commentaries on the teachings alluded to in the epistle and the subject of “heresy”. Among the existing beliefs were mysticisms that were long practiced for centuries. Was the writer trying to bring their beliefs in line with what he felt was the beginning of a new sect of Judaism? Or was he trying to sever old ties with Judaism even to the point of disregarding the holidays and feasts as merely shadows of what was to come (2.16-17)?

Error on the part of the residents of Colossae is debatable. The letter is a third hand report of the development of this religious sect. The writer in admitting to never personally having visited the area must rely on second hand reports. However, Epaphras and others could only report their findings as they saw them. What of the people on whom they were reporting? What did they have to say? The belief held by the writer was that the community at Colossae was in danger of succumbing to philosophies and teachings that compromised the truth as he saw it. The beginning

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<sup>8</sup> Wilson also notes that “the lines of division between ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ were by no means so clear-cut in the early period as they were later to become”, referencing Dunn’s work: *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 1996. R. McL Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* (London ; New York: T & T Clark International, 2005) 63.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning to choose or those follow their own tenets. Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) s.v.

of the letter expresses satisfaction in the way the believers understood salvation and their commitment to Jesus Christ (1.1 – 2.3). From 2.4 – 23 the writer gives various warnings to the Colossian community with the intent of saving them from falling under the influence of false teachings. The point as to whether there was false teaching or teachers is and can be further debated. A comparison can also be made between letters to other communities where churches were being established that differentiate the alleged problems.

The thesis is presented in four parts. Part One examines the identities of the people of the first-century community of Colossae where the gospel was being introduced. Part Two examines the identities of the people of Africa beginning in the first century to approximately the fifteenth century referencing the reception history of Christianity there. Part Three investigates the identity of people involved in the Atlantic slave trade and the role the bible played in shaping their reception and use of Christianity from the seventeenth century to the present. Part Four uses the information gathered from the preceding parts to initiate a re-reading of Colossians from the viewpoint of the “other”; in this case an African American postcolonial view of scripture. The discussion begins with the first -century community in Colossae, their identity and reception of the gospel.

## **PART ONE**

### **THE PEOPLE OF COLOSSAE**

#### **Introduction**

Part One is a study of the people of first-century Colossae, who they were and their reception of early Christian beliefs as presented by Paul, other teachers and believers of that time. Four areas will be discussed in the identification process:

- The Colossians as contemporaries of the people of Laodicea and Hierapolis
- The historical data concerning the generations of believers in the mystery and mythological cults
- The Jewish population and their relationship to Paul, the disputed writer of the epistle to the Colossians, with a unique look at a contemporary Jewish view of Paul and his Christianizing theology
- The people of Colossae as subjects of Greco-Roman governments and rulers.

Each of the above play an essential role in the reception history in the early stages of Christianity as it was presented to the Colossians. Although discussions of their beliefs plays into the identity of the Colossians and helps in understanding them as a people, the emphasis is on who they were, not so much on what they believed.

The letter was written to a newly-founded community of believers. What did this letter mean to the Colossian community? The letter addresses issues that the Colossians perhaps did not see as problems until they were pointed out to them. Initially it appeared they did not quite see the benefit of trusting in God through Jesus Christ.

They were perhaps afraid or unable to let go of their past (See subsection 13.1). The

letter however seems to indicate in the first chapter that they had overcome their trepidation and had come to a belief in Christ (1.4). The writer was trying to get them to not only let go, but “to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2.2-3).

The town of Colossae obtained some of its fame from the letter written by Paul or someone who was familiar with or close to Paul.<sup>10</sup> We can assume from the letter that Colossae existed and the fact that other sources mention the towns which surrounded it that can be identified today (4.13).<sup>11</sup> Colossae, assumed to have been destroyed by an earthquake has yet to be excavated. The writer alludes to a letter which is lost (4.16). However, it is from the extant letter to the Colossians that we have obtained the teachings attributed to Paul which address the situation of the believers. The letter expresses concern that the hearers remain strong in the gospel they were being taught concerning the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1.11-14).

The religion of the region, according to Morna Hooker, was syncretistic, suggesting that there were those who worshipped many deities and that the climate for cults was favorable. Hooker notes, “Its population was mixed: native Phrygians had been joined by Greek and Syrian settlers.”<sup>12</sup> By the time of the letter the economy and subsequent popularity of the town had declined and neighboring Laodicea and Hierapolis were the more visited locations. The population of Colossae was a

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<sup>10</sup>David M. Hay, *Colossians, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 20.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.philipharland.com/associations/Lycus.html>, September 16, 2009

<sup>12</sup> Morna Hooker, 'Colossians' James D. G. Dunn and J. W. Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003) 1404.

mixture of Phrygians, Greeks and Syrians. The milieu of the first-century CE presented a challenge to both the Colossians and the writer of this letter. There existed over a course of about three hundred years a conglomerate of ethnicities and wide-ranging beliefs. Epaphras' (1.7; 4.12) efforts to introduce them to the gospel were met with beliefs that were handed down for centuries. Bauer presents two views about Epaphras' capabilities.

Possibly Epaphras is not entirely blameless for the fact that in the community he established in Colossae, peculiar syncretistic ideas were introduced such as worship of the cosmic elements – or perhaps it would be more accurate to suggest that such ideas already were present from the very beginning in Colossae but that Epaphras did not take the trouble to eliminate them.<sup>13</sup>

The last argument sounds feasible because it is difficult to judge the effort Epaphras exhibited in clarifying the teachings set before them. The writer was alerted concerning the problem and they were discussed in the letter. Whether Epaphras was the one who brought it to the writer's attention or not, he did not object to the writer's interference. He is mentioned in the letter as being present at the penning of the letter (4.9).

The intended hearers were a newly established community of believers who were becoming quite familiar with the teachings of Jesus and what it meant to be disciples (1.21; 2.13). The names of some of the persons mentioned in the letter have some semblance to pagan deities *Tychicus* (from *Tuche* = Fate). *Epaphras* (short form of *Epaphroditus*, related to *Aphrodite*), and *Nympha* (probably shortened from *Nymph*

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Bauer, Robert A. Kraft, and Gerhard Krodel, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, 1st paperback ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, 1996) 235.

*Dora*, “gift of the nymphs”). Others familiar to the readers were Jews. However, Hays observes, “...yet there is no sign of a struggle between Jews and Christians or between Paulinists and Judaizers.”<sup>14</sup> A discussion will follow that will expand this subject and problems created after the letter was written. The implied readers know about the teachings of Paul and are not inclined to question his authority. Although the writer explains his authority in 1.24-25, he seems to not have to defend it.<sup>15</sup>

Looking at this mixture of peoples living in the city of Colossae helps to identify the foundational beliefs that confronted the writer. The history of these peoples was older than the beliefs he was introducing. Therefore not only does this bring in the question of orthodoxy (right thinking), but also it is easier to perceive the confusion of beliefs and the attempt to incorporate what is familiar rather than readily grasping what is relatively unfamiliar. It can be surmised that the recipients were trying to make sense of what they were experiencing in studying and living out the teachings of Christ.

The similarities between the African community of the fifteenth century CE and the first-century community of Colossae are striking. Each community had its own set or sets of beliefs and was impacted by new beliefs. The process of incorporating the unfamiliar with the familiar between Jews and Gentiles has been viewed as syncretic by Clinton Arnold in this situation (See Subsection 10.2). Syncretism resulted perhaps unintentionally to facilitate the adaptation of the new ideas. Their adaptations were not acceptable to those presenting the gospel and they were seemingly chastised because of them (Colossians 2.20).

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<sup>14</sup> Hay, 26.

<sup>15</sup> This speaks to the view that in the letter's tone there seems to be no urgency to suggest 'heresy' in the teachings the Colossae church is being exposed to. Bauer also suggests this speaking about the receptivity of those in Laodicea and Hierapolis proclaiming the gospel abroad and even elaborating on it. Bauer, 235.



The transference of Jews to Colossae by the Oriental king Antiochus the Great brings to mind three suppositions. First, Colossae, an Asian city, was once ruled and governed by Asia. Secondly, some of these Jews converted to Christianity, or whatever form of the gospel they were presented with (Acts 2.10). Thirdly, what must be considered are the beliefs of the Phrygians and their effect on the generations of Jews living in that community. Hamilton and Falconer state, “With their unsurprising ethnocentrism, ancient Mediterranean’s divided the peoples of the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Greek writers in general spoke of ‘Greeks and Barbarians’”.<sup>16</sup> The writer uses terminology that tends to simplify the classes of people in Colossae; neither: “Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor un-circumcision, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free” (3.11). For the most part we have come to accept these distinctions and to see the audience’s world as two dimensional. By doing this it colors our thinking, tending to group people together accepting the division not realizing that their ethnicities were diverse. This is a form of stereotyping that was generally accepted by the culture at large.<sup>17</sup> The goal was to keep the family or group together socially and in this case the early Christian community was trying to find cohesion. The letter to the Colossians exemplifies this attempt but damages the view of the people ethnically. Although the practice of grouping peoples as “us” and “them” was a common practice at the time of the writing and probably did not confuse the first readers of the text, later readers and commentators generally seem to accept the seeming simplicity of the division without considering that there was a more diverse ethnic division.

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<sup>16</sup> Strabo, Hans Claude Hamilton, and W. Falconer, *The Geography of Strabo* (London and New York,: G. Bell & sons, 1903) 1.4.9.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul : An Archaeology of Ancient Personality*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) 184.

By way of comparison, the Africans and the Colossians were not able to voice their concerns, yet they were able to send a message through the ages. The message, though not documented, is that they tried to make the gospel their own. They tried to understand what was being introduced. They were not heard, yet much is being said about them. The existence of God was undisputed and the way to him was through his son, Jesus. Yet the path was still unclear. Did the writer, Epaphras or those sent to teach them stand in the way? Why was God still so inaccessible or was He? Where was the freedom?

## PART ONE - CHAPTER ONE

### CONTEMPORARIES OF LAODICEA AND HIERAPOLIS

We begin this study of the identification of the people of Colossae by examining the region in which it was situated and the two towns closest to them, Laodicea and Hierapolis. The letter was written “to the saints in Colossae” (1.2) who inhabited the fertile Lycus Valley. Colossae was one of the smaller cities in the valley in the Roman province of Asia. This given easy access most importantly due to the river Meander, encouraged settlement. The three cities, Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, developed in proximity to each other. Dunn notes that “Laodicea and Hierapolis on either side of the Lycus a few miles from the junction with the Meander, six miles apart and within sight of each other across the intervening plain, and Colossae about ten miles upstream on the southern bank of the Lycus”.<sup>18</sup> Therefore a vantage point could be established somewhere in the Lycus Valley where one could look out and be surrounded by all three cities. Lightfoot suggests:

The three cities lie so near to each other, that it would be quite possible to visit them all in the course of a single day. Thus situated, they would necessarily hold constant intercourse with each other. We are not surprised to find them so closely connected in the earliest stages of Christianity... same evangelist.<sup>19</sup>

Colossae had been a popular, large and wealthy city four or five centuries before the time of the New Testament. Its wealth was due to its position on the main road from

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<sup>18</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing ; Paternoster Press, 1996) 20.

<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* 2.

Ephesus and Sardis to the Euphrates and to its wool industry.<sup>20</sup> Under Roman rule, Laodicea, founded later than Colossae, flourished. However as Colossae decreased in significance, Laodicea grew as the administrative and financial center of the region. It seems Laodicea benefitted greatly as part of the Roman Empire. Laodicea, also noted for its woolen textile industry and medicines and Hierapolis, with its hot mineral spring attracting many visitors, steadily cast a shadow on Colossae in importance. The acceptance of the gospel seemed more successful in Colossae however. The letter was addressed to them and the contents mentions sending it to Laodicea, but no mention of Hierapolis. At the time this letter was written perhaps the people of Colossae yearned for better days or days gone by. The exhortation in the letter was uplifting and perhaps what was needed at the time of Roman imperial rule (See Chapter Four).

Surprisingly, the site of Colossae has never been excavated, unlike Laodicea and Hierapolis;<sup>21</sup> this hampers our ability to gain a clearer perspective on what took place. It can therefore be deduced that the cities were in such close proximity that they must have had several features in common (not just textiles), and it can be deduced from reading Colossians 4.14-16 that there must have been daily movement among them. This knowledge and other information is common knowledge in the major commentaries about the history of Colossae. In this portion the writer of the letter suggests they greet believers who are in Laodicea and read this letter to them.

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<sup>20</sup> Chicago. University. University extension division. Home-study dept. [from old catalog] and Harold Stukeley, *Greek 102 (Xenophon : Anabasis)* ([Chicago]: the University of Chicago, 1936) 1.2.6.

<sup>21</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Archaeology of New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor, Baker Studies in Biblical Archaeology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980) Chapters 10-12.

## 1.1 Mixed Cultures

The introduction of this thesis gives evidence that Colossians had a history of being a city of mixed cultures and peoples. The diversity of the beliefs in that city and surrounding cities perhaps fueled the many discussions in numerous commentaries concerning the identity of the “false teachers”. Had the culture of Colossians not been diverse there would be less discussions of who they were and more on what they believed. During the second millennium BCE, Syria was occupied successively by Canaanites, Phoenicians, Hebrews, and Aramaeans as part of the general disruptions associated with the Sea Peoples. Eventually the Persians took control of Syria as part of their general rule of Southwest Asia; this control transferred to the Greeks after the conquests of Alexander the Great and thence to the Romans and the Byzantines.<sup>22</sup> Syria is significant in the history of Christianity; Paul was “converted” on the road to Damascus and the first organized Christian Church was established at Antioch in ancient Syria, from which he left on many of his missionary journeys.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps this connection at the time of his “conversion” fueled his interest in the community there.

Given the access to the Lycus Valley from major roads, many ethnic groups could have entered the region. Of significance as a feature of the Lycus valley cities, including presumably Colossae was the presence of a substantial Jewish minority. According to Philo, Jews were very numerous in every city in Asia Minor.<sup>24</sup> Moreover Josephus states that, in the late third century BCE Antiochus the Great had settled two thousand Jewish families in Lydia and Phrygia to help stabilize the region and in

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<sup>22</sup> David Noel Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed., 6 vols. (New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992) s.v. "Syria".

<sup>23</sup> Acts 15:23, 41; 18:18; 20:3; 21:3; 13:1-3

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Williamson and Philo, *Jews in the Hellenistic World : Philo, Cambridge Commentaries on Writings of the Jewish and Christian World, 200 Bc to Ad 200* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 25.

the middle of the second century a sequence of letters sent by the Roman Senate to Asia Minor in support of Jews living there indicates a sizeable Jewish population.<sup>25</sup> Evidence given by Flaccus' attempt in 62 BCE to confiscate gold collected by Jews in Asia Minor and Cicero's defense in 59 BCE yielded a little more than twenty pounds of gold seized in Laodicea.<sup>26</sup> Laodicea was obviously the central point for storing the collection; presumably for the Lycus Valley at least, so that would include the Jewish population of Colossae and Hierapolis. The city of Apamea, further up-country, was another collection point, where nearly one hundred pounds of gold was seized. Cicero mentions only two other collection points further north in Asia Minor, but presumably there were collection points in the coastal cities such as Ephesus and Smyrna and other larger centers of Jewish population like Sardis. Assuredly Laodicea must have functioned as a collection point for such cities as these. It is also possible that the city may have covered other smaller settlements in the central Meander valley. According to Trebilco it is possible that more than one year's collection was involved.<sup>27</sup>

According to Josephus a considerable number of Jews settled in the Lycus Valley in 200 BCE and it could be assumed that some of their descendents still lived there at the time of this letter.<sup>28</sup> Although we have evidence of Jewish communities in the regions surrounding Colossae, it has not been definitely acknowledged there were Jewish residents in the town itself. However coins of the city indicate that during the

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<sup>25</sup> Flavius Josephus and William Whiston, *The Complete Works of the Learned and Authentic Jewish Historian, Flavius Josephus : Comprising the Antiquities of the Jews, a History of the Jewish Wars, Three Dissertations Concerning Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, &C., &C., and the Life of Josephus* (London,: J.G. Murdoch) Antiquities 12.147-53; 85-267; 16.160-78.

<sup>26</sup> Marcus Tullius Cicero, *In Difesa Di Lucio Flacco = Pro L. Flacco*, 1. ed. (Venezia: Marsilio, 2000) Pro Flacco 28.68, in GLAJ §68.

<sup>27</sup> Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 14.

<sup>28</sup> Ant. 12.147-53.

Roman period Isis and Sarapis were worshipped there, as well as Helios, Demeter, Selene, Artemis the huntress and Artemis the Ephesian as well as the native Phrygian god Men.<sup>29</sup>

When taking into consideration the inclusion of Jewish families we may have to allow a total Jewish population of Colossae during this period comprising as many as two or three thousand. Depending on how large Colossae still was by this time that would make the Colossian Jews a substantial and possibly influential ethnic minority, as they certainly were later in other cities of the region. This information will take on greater importance in the discussion of the Jewish component in Chapter Three.

This information although not helpful in ascertaining viable information about the city of Colossae, helps to envision the reality of it. However, the peculiar fact that the site of Colossae has never been excavated means that we are unable to make informed guesses on this subject. Dunn also points out that what cannot be deduced are, “other questions such as the size and likely population of the city at the time and whether there are any indications of a building that may have served as a synagogue at the time”.<sup>30</sup> However, speculations can be and have been made by many commentators using the information found in the letter to the Colossians. Hence, it is with this impetus that the discussions in this thesis are set forth; to join in the discussion and to further the commentary on the people and the occasion of the letter.

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<sup>29</sup> Viktor Schultze, *Altchristliche Städte Und Landschaften* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1913) 447.

<sup>30</sup> Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* 23.

## 1.2 The Devastation

Frequent earthquakes, which have covered up much of the history of this region, make it difficult to know the true culture and beliefs of the people of this region.

Lightfoot notes, "Not once or twice only in the history of Laodicea do we read of such visitations lying waste the city itself or some flourishing town in the neighborhood."<sup>31</sup>

Strabo, in contrast to what was stated earlier, describes Colossae as a "small town".<sup>32</sup> Ptolemy does not mention it, though he enumerates other cities.<sup>33</sup> Lightfoot also states, "Without doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul was addressed."<sup>34</sup> The above claims of Strabo and Lightfoot raise an important question: So, why did the writer write to them? It is evident despite the above claims there existed a community of believers that captured the attention of writer. The letter was first to be read to the Colossians and then circulated (4.16).

The fact that the Lycus valley was ravaged by an earthquake in 60-61<sup>35</sup> might yield vital clues on all these matters, including the date of the letter, were we in a position to evaluate its effects. Unfortunately with no reference to the amount of damage suffered by Colossae this is not feasible. However Tacitus has given clues to the damage to Laodicea.<sup>36</sup> "The volcanic springs and underground rivers alerted Strabo to the unstable character of the Lycus valley. If any country is subject to

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<sup>31</sup> " Hierapolis and Colossae in 63 or 64 CE according to Eusebius' Chronicles were also devastated." Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* 3.

<sup>32</sup> Strabo and Walter Leaf, *Strabo on the Troad; Book Xiii, Cap. I* (Cambridge [Eng.]: The University press, 1923) 576.

<sup>33</sup> Ptolemy et al., "Geography of Claudius Ptolemy," (New York: New York Public Library., 1932), V.2.

<sup>34</sup> Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* 16.

<sup>35</sup> A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection : Studies in Pauline Theology against Its Graeco-Roman Background, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (P. Siebeck), 1987) 70, notes a seismologist's judgment that the earthquake took place in 60; Tacitus's report indicates 60 to 61; according to Lightfoot 38-40, the American version of Eusebius, *Chronicle*, dates the earthquake subsequent to the burning of.

<sup>36</sup> Cornelius Tacitus, Alfred John Church, and William Jackson Brodribb, *The Annals ; and the Histories*, New ed. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005) *Annales* 14.27.1.



earthquakes, Laodicea is.”<sup>37</sup> Both Laodicea and Hierapolis were rebuilt, but Colossae never recovered; note the silence of Pliny.<sup>38</sup> Its long slide into oblivion terminated in the ninth century CE when the site was definitely abandoned.<sup>39</sup>

### 1.3 The Church at Colossae

We have no way of knowing how large the church in Colossae was by the time the letter was written. However, if “the saints and faithful brothers” (1.2) are not to be simply identified with the letter addressed to Philemon (Philemon 2) and/or with the church in the house of Nympha, it is possible that there existed more than one house church in Colossae (4.15). Also, the reference to churches in Laodicea, support this possibility (4.15). The lack of reference to Hierapolis presumably implies that Epaphras was not as successful in spreading the gospel there (4.13-15). Perhaps believers who lived in Hierapolis may simply have made the double journey to Laodicea to attend gatherings there. Dunn suggests, “In that case we have to envisage the Christians in the Lycus valley meeting in or at least four small (house) churches.”<sup>40</sup>

The majority of the inhabitants of Colossae were Gentiles and Bauer believes the cities around and in Phrygia were populated by gentile Christians and states that the evidence of this is the letter itself. He surmises, “But everything we know of other communities founded by Paul permits us to conclude that the congregations of Asia (1Cor. 16.19) also were composed mainly of Gentile Christians.”<sup>41</sup> This point is debatable, but helps in determining who the Colossians were ethnically. However, it

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<sup>37</sup> Geog. 12.8.16.

<sup>38</sup> Nat. Hist. 5.105.

<sup>39</sup> John Barton and John Muddiman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 1191.

<sup>40</sup> Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* 21.

<sup>41</sup> Bauer, Kraft, and Krodel, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* 89.

can be deduced from the above statement that there existed among the population of Colossae and Laodicea Gentiles who were a part of the newly founded community of believers.

## PART ONE - CHAPTER TWO

### GENERATIONS OF BELIEVERS IN THE MYSTERIES AND MYTHOLOGICAL CULTS

This section will focus on the beliefs held for generations by the Colossians at the time of their exposure to the gospel by Epaphras. The idea of Christianity as an established religion at the time of the letter is an anachronism, not only in the Lycus Valley, but also in the first century CE.<sup>42</sup> The first reason is because the prevailing mystery and myth religions that evolved through the previous centuries were at home there. Schweizer remarks that, "...at the time of the Epistle to the Colossians an Apollo-Archegetes cult may have replaced that of the mother goddess".<sup>43</sup> Dynasties of deities were being worshipped as generations of Colossians were taught to believe in them. Houses, marketplaces, hills and mountains were filled with images of gods and goddesses to whom they and their ancestors gave homage (see subsections 2.1 and 4.1). The second reason is that the doctrines of Christianity were not yet fully established (see subsection 10.3). The third reason is that the transplanted Jews practiced a religion that not only preceded Christianity, but taught about God and that the way to him was the Torah. Into this arena, the writer of Colossians answers the call of Epaphras to build up the newly founded community. The terms "Christian", first used in Antioch to denote "followers of Christ" according to Acts 11.26, and "Christianity", first recorded by Ignatius of Antioch in 100 CE, though familiar today, were respectively novel and non-existing according to our dating of the Colossian letter. Furthermore, as an established religion it went through many phases until the ascension of Constantine in 313 CE and the Council of

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<sup>42</sup> References to the beginnings of Christianity will be discussed in subsection 10.3 of this thesis.

<sup>43</sup> Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians : A Commentary* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Pub. House, 1982) 14.

Nicaea in 325 CE. Also at the time of its writing this phase of Christianity could be viewed as a sect of Judaism and from this perspective the beliefs of the people of Colossae is reflected. Neusner writes:

The earliest Christians, Jesus and his family and Paul, all saw themselves as 'Israel' and called on Scripture to provide the framework of interpretation of the life and teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All of these groups fall into the category of 'Judaisms', though each differs in fundamental ways from the others.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore not only should the teachings of Paul be considered but also those of others. Although this paper cannot encompass the immensity of the canon and apocryphal writing related to this era, there is much which needs to be considered outside of Paul's writings to accurately understand what transpired.

Greco-Roman domination was a particularly important aspect in the lives of the Colossians and it was not something they could pick up and put down at will. To suggest that they totally do away with their beliefs and traditions was asking a lot. It would take some time to, not only understand this new belief, but to test the gospel's merit. Similarities existed between the religions that needed to be worked out. The writer's use of terms that sounded familiar to those exposed to or those who practiced the mystery religions could have played a part in the confusion. Phrases such as "being buried with" and "you were raised with" (2.12) were arguably concepts from the mysteries.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps what happened in Colossae was not unlike what transpired with the Africans who believed what they were taught about

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<sup>44</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began : A Survey of Belief and Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 9.

<sup>45</sup> Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies*, Rev. ed., *Sources for Biblical Study* ([Cambridge, Mass.] Missoula, Mont.: Society of Biblical Literature ; distributed by Scholars Press, 1975) 89.

Christianity and when faced with difficult situations reverted back to traditional religious practices. Many speculations can be raised here as to the situation and how the Colossians can be identified.

## **2.1 Gods, Goddesses, Geniis, Lares... Oh My**

Colossians displays the writers concerns for the new believers who lived in the Lycus Valley. The complexity of the religious atmosphere into which the gospel came gave rise to various problems. According to Bradford:

Some of the people gave their allegiance to family gods or ancestral spirits who were identified as Lares or geni. Others worshiped the patron deity of the municipal cult. Wherever one chose to go in Asia Minor he was sure to be confronted with the gods and goddesses. Though they were adored and worshiped under different names they shared an identical role in the faith of the people. Upon the entrance of the Greek influence most of these gods and goddesses became identified with the greater Greek deities.<sup>46</sup>

The Greeks worshipped the bright gods of the day and the dark gods of the underworld. It was in this milieu that the gospel was preached. For centuries this type of worship and the beliefs that accompanied it was ingrained in the lives of the people of Colossae. Neill reveals that, "at least seven hundred years before the time of Paul, Greek-speaking colonists had begun to come into Western Asia Minor from the mainland of Greece".<sup>47</sup> In time every aspect of the Colossian's life was Greek; later Rome would come to dominate the lives of the people of Asia Minor.

Phrygia, in antiquity, a kingdom in the west central part of the Anatolian highlands and part of modern Turkey from ca. 1200 BCE to 700 BCE, had a rich mythological

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<sup>46</sup> L. B. Radford, *The Epistle to the Colossians and the Epistle to Philemon* (London,: Methuen & co., 1931) 63.

<sup>47</sup> Stephen Neill, *Paul to the Colossians* (New York,: Association Press, 1964) 9.

heritage as the homeland of the Great Mother Cybele<sup>48</sup>. This goddess was commonly perceived of as a nature goddess and the recurrent theme of nature and motherly care go hand in hand. As the prominent feature of many early Indo-European societies, the mother archetype manifests itself in a host of deities and symbolism.<sup>49</sup> The religion of the Phrygians was an ecstatic nature worship in which the Great Mother of the gods Rhea or Cybele and a male deity Sabazius, a nomadic horseman and sky father god of the Phrygians and Thracians, played a prominent part. With the establishment of the Galatians in eastern Phrygia the fertility cult of Cybele, the mother goddess, spread widely among town dwellers, while the country folk tended to worship Men, the moon god, ruler of Paradise and the Underworld.<sup>50</sup> Anatolian, a pre-Hellenic religion, was a religion of Asia Minor often referred to as the Phrygian Religion. However the worship of the Great Mother was much older than the Phrygian conquest. It has also been known by several other names; the most common probably being the Cybele-Attis Cult. Then there was the Phrygian Mysteries and the religion of the Great Mother, Cybele. All of the above worshipped the same Anatolian god. Neill notes, “The famous ‘Artemis of the Ephesians’ was not really the Greek goddess of that name; she was the age-old mother-goddess of the eastern regions, the goddess of fertility.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it appears that the “pagan” roots of the people of Colossae run deep.

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<sup>48</sup> The churches of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were located in the Lycus valley in the SW part of Asian Phrygia: *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1992, s.v. “Phrygia”.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Russell Coulter and Patricia Turner, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000).S.V. Cybele

<sup>50</sup> Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary* s.v.

<sup>51</sup> Neill, *Paul to the Colossians* 10.

## 2.2 Cults

The nature of mythology meant that many myths and ideologies were produced, not only in the first Century, CE, but in the centuries before. In addition to the more traditional myth cults, Paul is blamed for instituting a version called the Christ-myth. Francis and Meeks argue, “the Christ-myth – constructed by Paul shows Christ’s incarnation after the manner of a descent-to-Hades myth. According to Colossians, Christ descended unrecognized through the spheres of the archons, in order then, ascending in glory, to triumph over the deluded archons.”<sup>52</sup> Cross referencing Philippians 2:5 (debatable) and 2:11 shows that the mythical outline is clear. The proponents of the Christ Myth Theory<sup>53</sup> having proposed one form or another of the theory have documented similarities between the stories of Christ and those of Krishna, Adonis, Osiris, Mithraism, and a pre-Christian cult of Jesus within Judaism. As a debate these arguments are only mentioned to substantiate the era in which the letter to the Colossians was written. This paper does not support the teachings of these and other parallels, but uses them to shed light on the context of this letter and the identification of the Colossians.<sup>54</sup>

Burkert presents parallels in the gospels of Christ with the life-death-rebirth gods found in the widespread mystery religions common in the Hellenistic culture and amongst which Christianity is assumed to have been born. Closely related to this are mythological themes of sacrificial kingship and “Theophagy”, the eating of the body of a fertility god. Although the Christ-myth Theory is a discussion started in the

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<sup>52</sup> Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 94.

<sup>53</sup> The antecedents of the theory can be traced to the French Enlightenment thinkers Constantin-François Volney and Charles François Dupuis in the 1790s. The first academic advocate was the 19th century historian and theologian Bruno Bauer.

<sup>54</sup> For a more complete discussion of diversities of beliefs and religions in the Lycus Valley and surrounding areas see Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations : Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

eighteenth century, it has its foundational precedence in the culture of people similar to the Lycus Valley. Burkert writes about a Neolithic fertility rite which surrounds a god who needs to die and rise again so that the community can be fed, which bears close similarity to the Christian Eucharist.<sup>55</sup>

M. Dibelius states that, “the letter of Paul did not address directly those who had introduced this cultus into Colossae. Rather, he turned to the Christians who had given an audience to those people”.<sup>56</sup> He suggests that the Christians at Colossae were at fault for joining the “Christ-cult” and “element worship”. Dibelius also deduces from 2.20 that the connection between the two was already in place and the members of the Christian community had joined the mystery religion, but remained Christians. They were not excluded from the congregation nor did they willingly withdraw. It is possible they felt comfortable with the situation. Francis and Meeks add, “This combination of cults, particularly in the mysteries, is nothing unheard of”.<sup>57</sup> This line of thinking suggests that Christianity was well established, but in actuality it was in its initial stage. Not only was it not fully established, but as mentioned earlier it was also not yet known by that name. Having the two cults fostered a kind of “double insurance” made easier by conceivably the want of a kingly god yielding one cult. For example the different beliefs concerning salvation in the two cults helped to create a utopia if both ways could be obtained. Francis and Meeks state, “Christianity grants security in the future judgment; the cult of the elements, protection from ‘blind

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<sup>55</sup> See Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).for further discussions.

<sup>56</sup> Martin Dibelius, 'The Initiation of Apuleius and related initiatory rites', Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 90.

<sup>57</sup> Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 90.



fortune' as Apuleius calls it."<sup>58</sup> The writer of the letter to the Colossians however, opposes this blend and emphasizes both the pre-eminence and the superiority of the gospel. Superiority is evident because the letter teaches that Christ gives protection not only from the coming wrath (cf. I Thess. 1.10) but also from the rulers of this cosmos (Col. 2.15). All mysteries are made known in Christ, which rules out every other mystery (Col. 1.26; 2.3).

### **2.3 Dissimilate or Assimilate**

To many of the new believers, the value they found in Christ was also that which they had in Isis (see 5.2.1.2). Francis and Meeks describe it as "liberation from the cosmic tyrants of existence".<sup>59</sup> Therefore does it not seem far-fetched as newly converted believers to search for other similarities, thus, giving rise to the syncretic practice of assimilating beliefs from the old into the new? As discussed in subsection 2.1 belief in the Mysteries and Myths existed before the introduction of the newly forming Christian beliefs. Therefore it would make sense that the new was being influenced by the old and bringing them together was an issue. There were two ways this issue could have been addressed: one was to try and understand both and bring them together somehow, the other was to replace one belief with the beliefs and practices of the other. (The question would then be would this still be considered Christianity?) The latter is what was fostered by the writer to the detriment of the movement, because not only were the so-called pagans (Gentile believers) devalued because of their beliefs, Jews as well as Jewish Christians were alienated. This discussion will continue in Chapter Three.

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<sup>58</sup> Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 90.

<sup>59</sup> Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 101.

Dibelius suggests:

Evidently the propaganda for the element-worship had first appeared in the place after the Christian congregation was already in existence. The element-worshippers apparently had nothing whatever to do with the Christ cult; the syncretic cult of the elements alongside Christ was not their doing. Rather the *mélange* first arose when members of the Christian group entered the cultic fellowship of the element without renouncing their Christianity.<sup>60</sup>

However, here again, Dibelius seems to dismiss the religious history of the people of Colossae, placing Christianity historically older than their “pagan” beliefs. The writer of the epistle praises these new believers for being reconciled after being “alienated and enemies” (1.21). The answer to the question, “which came first”, is obvious. The Isis mystery and Anatolian mythology were in existence centuries before the coming of Christianity. Perhaps Dibelius is suggesting that this element worship was new to the Lycus valley. Finding this argument difficult the following questions are raised. What was the belief of these believers before being evangelized by Epaphras? Were they not considered pagans?<sup>61</sup>

Insisting that all conform to the new doctrines of the faith which was soon to be known as Christianity presented a problem to the diverse peoples of the Lycus Valley. Not only were there many beliefs that were handed down through generations, but issues of culture were present. For example slavery and education presented barriers that did not allow all to be exposed to the same things. Under Roman imperial policy:

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<sup>60</sup> Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 83.

<sup>61</sup> For article on paganism see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paganism>, September 16, 2009.

The only true educational system was provided by the people in the various towns who realized the need of the boys and girls. They gave instructions in writing, music, gymnastics, archery, and the throwing of the spear. However, the custom was to limit this to the free children, thus making no provision for the children of slaves. This elementary instruction was provided by some wealthy citizen and it was the object of public care.<sup>62</sup>

The people of the cities in the Lycus valley came together during sporting events. However the writer of the letter attacked this society on all levels, from teaching that Christ supersedes every other god to breaking down the cultural boundaries of race. Cultural issues will be discussed in more detail in Part Four.

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<sup>62</sup> Theodor Mommsen, William P. Dickson, and F. Haverfield, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire, from Caesar to Diocletian*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Ares Publishers, 1974) 362.

## **PART ONE - CHAPTER THREE**

### **JEWS**

It has already been established in Subsection 1.2 that a substantial number of Jews were residents of the Lycus Valley and some of them were probably a part of the community of new believers. Not knowing exactly what Epaphras reported to the writer, the letter is the main indicator of the concern for specific teachings and the need to warn or inform against possible misunderstandings. This section serves to identify the audience of the letter and not to affirm any side. In the twentieth century, terms such as “opponents”, “errors”, “false teachers” and “heresy” have become common when discussing this letter. However, use of such terms in this thesis is not an attempt to place blame but for identification purposes only. The letter to the Colossians addresses teachings in the following areas that help to identify a Jewish audience:

- The Law
- Circumcision and Traditions
- Jesus Christ.

The majority of the references in this chapter of the thesis are made to Paul and Pauline teachings and responses by Jewish scholars over the past fifty years. These scholars are referenced to examine their considerations in an attempt to reflect the views of the audience of the letter. It must be noted that the teachings in this letter are attributed to Paul as the debated author. The intentions of the historical Jesus Christ, his teachings and sayings are not addressed as they fall beyond the scope of

this thesis. The letter reflects the writer's interpretation of the gospel and addresses specific issues of the community in Colossae.

### **3.1 The Law**

In Colossians 1.12-14 the following is found. "The Father... has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light through the Son." The writer's inclusion of the Gentiles into the nation of Israel compromised the promise made to the Jews through Abraham by God. How can Gentiles expect to receive the promise made to the Jews? The letter taught that through Jesus Christ salvation came to all people and presents a gospel that is inclusive to an exclusive people. Neusner not arguing that Judaism is necessarily ethnic states, "The nations came to Christ through a Christianity that was universal. Israel remained aloof, because its Judaism was (merely) ethnic."<sup>63</sup> However, he makes the point that this large group of people did not embrace the teachings of the gospel due to their beliefs about who they were. The Sinai Covenant in Exodus 19 -24 addresses a specific group of people "chosen" by God. The Law presented to Moses by God at Mount Sinai was specific to Israel as they were led out of captivity, embarking upon a new life as the people of God. This history defines Israel, and because of this, it may have been hard for them to accept teachings concerning the inclusion of Gentiles.

In Colossians (1.22-23, 27-28; 2.4-10) references to legal righteousness or Judaic legalism, submission to valid regulations, human tradition and philosophy suggests that the audience had a Jewish component. There were those who are familiar with Judaic teachings and were perhaps questioning the teaching about the indwelling

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<sup>63</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Children of the Flesh, Children of the Promise : A Rabbi Talks with Paul* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1995) 3.

Christ which is received through faith. The “doctrines” to which the “false teachers” hoped to subject the Colossians were not only revealed (2.14) but also angelic (2.20) and human (2.22). Much has been said about to whom this section of the letter was referring. However for the purpose of this section, the concentration is on the Jewish component. The above verses point to teachings concerning belief in the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ.

Sanders makes the following points concerning the law.<sup>64</sup> The first, that Jesus Christ and Paul were opponents of Jewish legalism is a widely accepted sentiment. The reasons vary. One is that comparing legalism and grace can cause conflict between the two. Another is that Judaism and Pharisaism have been dominated by legalism. Finally, the heart of Judaism has often been depicted in the past as legalistic as opposed to the centrality of grace within Christianity. Sanders however adds that Paul did not feel that Judaism was legalistic but that it was based on the election and this was what he was opposed to. Both legalism and election are addressed in the letter to the Colossians identifying once again a Jewish component in the community. Paul’s views on the law could have caused some consternation to those who may have been privy to his contrasting views in both Romans and Galatians. This of course depends on the dating of the letter, oral tradition and questions of authorship.

In Colossians 1.23 the writer not only places the legal sense of righteousness aside, by saying that the law is no longer enough and that the Jews need to be reconciled, but also he places himself in the stead of a priest. Paul and his followers dismissed

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<sup>64</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 275-76.

rabbinic views about the oneness of a diverse mankind under one God.<sup>65</sup> According to Rosenberg, Paul treated the Jews as outcasts because they did not share his views. He is blamed for perpetuating the idea that Jews are not equals in the sight of God. This statement comes at the close of a discussion concerning the role of a Rabbi. Rosenberg compares the roles of priests within the Roman Catholic Church, and ministers in the Protestant faith to that of the Rabbi in the synagogue. It is his contention that it is not biblical to have leaders set apart but that leaders should exist within the community. Rosenberg imparts:

Like his first precursors, the contemporary rabbi is not a priest, because he performs no ritual for his group – only with it. But neither is the rabbi a minister, because he never acts as God’s authorized agent in offering access to personal salvation. This is why I have referred to him as a layman – he is a ‘teaching elder’.<sup>66</sup>

Rosenberg points to Paul as the author which has been established as debatable. Therefore, his comments reflect his views concerning the formation of early church doctrines.

Colossians 2.2 alludes to love as the fulfillment of the Law (cf. Romans 13.10) which suggests that love is what is needed to replace the Law; “all things are made understandable by their being knit together in love”. According to Bokser man is incapable of defining to what extent he needs to express love in order to fulfill the Law. He contends that, “Christianity itself refused to depend on the spontaneity of love to direct man how to serve God. It prescribed rites and sacraments that it

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<sup>65</sup> Stuart E. Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1986) 62-63.

<sup>66</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 62.

deems man's duty to follow".<sup>67</sup> He also points out that society has to impose laws to assure everyone gets treated fairly and that no one person takes unfair advantage of another. Bokser asserts, "Love is not the fulfillment of law, because it is both more and less than Law. Law is the fulfillment of love, a particular fulfillment for a particular time."<sup>68</sup> He states that this fulfillment is in the Jewish Law. Society cannot depend on love to fulfill the Law. The Law cannot be static and the Torah is an example of how the Law went through changes so that it could remain cogent for those changed times.

Colossians 2.17 treats the old cultic Law as but a shadow of coming things; "but the substance belongs to Christ ... In him all the fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell bodily" (1.19; 2.9). The temple comes under attack as the divine presence which was known to dwell there now lives in a person rather than in such a place as a temple. Continuing this thought, "and through him to reconcile to himself all things...making peace by the blood of his cross" (1.20) only serves to place a wider divide between the Jews and the Gentiles. Christ as the ideal temple (in whom believers are bound together) is implied in 2.7 and they are 'built up in him'. He is the community's center of unity: "And the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body "(3.5). Returning to 1.20 and the suggestion of blood sacrifice appears references also in 1.14 ('in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins') (cf. the reading, "through his blood" in 1.14; Eph 1.7; Hebr. 9.22) and 1.22 ("present you without blemish"). All of which were temple practices performed under the supervision of priests whose authority is systematically being undermined.

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<sup>67</sup> Ben Zion Bokser, *Judaism and the Christian Predicament*, [1st ed. (New York,: Knopf, 1967) 309.

<sup>68</sup> Bokser, *Judaism and the Christian Predicament* 310.



Sandmel compares Paul to Philo<sup>69</sup> as they relate to the Laws of Moses. He notes, “For Philo the Laws were eternally valid; for Paul they had been valid for the period from Moses to Paul himself, and now they were abolished.”<sup>70</sup> The things that Paul taught concerning the Law, was in direct opposition to what Philo taught. He suggests, “Philo would never have assented to a view that nullified the Mosaic laws; nor would Philo have agreed that man was unable to observe the Laws, and therefore unable to affect his own salvation.”<sup>71</sup> To claim this is to say that humanity is weak and according to Sandmel, Philo would never agree to that. He would say that humanity is capable of affecting his own salvation. “In Philo, Judaism is a religion of salvation by which man saves himself, while, in Paul, Christianity is a religion of salvation in which man is saved by divine grace.”<sup>72</sup>

Paul is accused of basing his philosophy of the end of the Law on the belief that the Messiah had come. According to Bokser, the rabbis believed that with the coming Messiah, man would reach a level of perfection whereby the necessity of Law would be diminished. This level of perfection would make it possible for God to establish his kingdom on earth, and a new world order would exist based on justice, freedom, and peace. Sanders asserts, “For Judaism, the kingdom was always the kingdom of Israel. Jesus, by emphasizing ‘of God’, made a fundamental change, one which broke with Jewish nationalism.”<sup>73</sup> To the Jews there was a shift from exclusivity to the universal. Paul takes it further by teaching that the kingdom had now been

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<sup>69</sup> Jewish thinker and exegete of a prosperous priestly family of Alexandria. His most influential achievement was his development of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture which enabled him to discover much of Greek philosophy in the OT, and to combine the respect of his religion for the Pentateuchal law with his personal aspirations, towards a more spiritual interpretation of it. Cross, F. L. and Livingstone, E. A. ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1279.

<sup>70</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 335.

<sup>71</sup> Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* 335.

<sup>72</sup> Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings* 335.

<sup>73</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 26.

removed from an earthly one to one located in the heavens with the resurrection and subsequent return of Christ.<sup>74</sup> Bokser explains that Jesus Christ as central to the coming kingdom is a belief Jews cannot embrace for the Jews still look to the future for the consummation of the coming Messiah, not to the past.<sup>75</sup> It is interesting however that Col 1.13 presents the idea that 'the kingdom of his beloved Son' had already taken place. Furthermore, Col 3.1 teaches that the believers "have been raised", which is then reinforced by the teaching of the indwelling Christ (3.11). The writer of Colossians presents thought-provoking concepts to a Jewish audience whose beliefs of the kingdom were static and long standing. A dichotomy is certainly evident and eminent not only between Jews and Gentiles, but also among Jewish and Gentile Christians.

For the Jew, the Law is the way to God and the way man became holy. Bokser explains: "It was the means of hallowing man's life and that of society."<sup>76</sup> However he believed for the Christian, the Law was obsolete and a hindrance. Sandmel shares this opinion and further adds, "Paul held that the laws not only did not bring their observer to righteousness but were, indeed, an obstacle to it, and therefore were null and void, and that the proper way to righteousness was through 'faith'".<sup>77</sup> He further uses this argument to say that Paul believed that the New Testament is right and the Hebrew Bible is wrong; therefore the Jews are the "wrong people" and the Christians are the "right people." Paul is noted as the "most zealous adversary of the law" by Bokser. According to Romans 7:5-8, the Law was superfluous, ineffectual and a stumbling block. Bokser admits that in some respects Paul's

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<sup>74</sup> See also I Thessalonians 4.15-17. Other dimensions of 'kingdom' are expressed in I Cor. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Bokser, *Judaism and the Christian Predicament* 311.

<sup>76</sup> Bokser, 306.

<sup>77</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *We Jews and you Christians* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1967), 19.

psychology is sound. He explains that there are those who find pleasure in breaking the Law just because it is possible to do so. There are some who find it difficult to abstain from breaking the Law when so much temptation is present. Bokser points out that it is good when we can count on something outside of ourselves to help us deal with the perils of living outside of the Law. But he quotes Amos 6:1, "Woe to those who are at ease in Zion" to press home that many people are using this as an excuse to live lives oblivious of the consequences of the law. He therefore argues that the Law should not be totally done away with. He offers this suggestion: "Law cannot exhaust the moral claims on a man; and the Law itself may need periodic adjustments to reckon with new visions and new possibilities. But the total renunciation of law leads to anarchy and moral suicide."<sup>78</sup>

If it can be interpreted that the enforcers of the law were angels Colossians 2.18 suggests that there were Jews in the city of Colossae. According to 1 Cor. 2.6,8, the evil of this "age" stems from bondage to death, sin, the flesh, circumcision, the Law and hostile cosmic powers who crucified the Lord of glory. Painting a comparison, Colossians teaches: 'Let no one disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels' (2.18). Theodore of Mopsuestia understood this verse to suggest "that the Law had been given through the ministry of angels and that they watch over the observance of the Law"<sup>79</sup>. Some Jews feared them because the resentful angels do not tolerate any hatred of the Law when it is not observed. Thus Theodore explained, that it was taught that God was so exalted that men can only come into contact with Him through angels. G. Macgregor interpreted the heart of the

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<sup>78</sup> Bokser, 308-309.

<sup>79</sup> Theodorus and Henry Barclay Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni : In Epistolas B. Pauli Commentarii : The Latin Version with the Greek Fragments*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1880) 294.

Colossian heresy in “giving to the elements as mediators between God and man, the place which can belong only to Christ”<sup>80</sup>. One needs to consider, that, given the chronology of these two sects, it seemed that Christ was replacing the elements as mediator. The false teachers were accused of adhering to certain religious customs out of reverence for angels. This is referred to by Aristides in his *Apology* as he criticized the Jews: “In the methods of their actions their service is to angels and not to God, in that they observe Sabbaths and new moons and the Passover and the great fast and the feast and circumcision and cleanness of meats: which things not even thus have they perfectly observed”.<sup>81</sup>

The presence of Jews in Colossae is further evidenced as the writer criticizes similar observance of Jewish Laws under the guise of following the “elements of the world” and demonstrating “humiliation and worship of angels”. A word of wisdom in promoting devotion to angels is manifested by subjection to ascetic taboos decreed by the “elements of the world” (2.20-21) and interpreted “according to human precepts and doctrines” (2.22). Gunther stipulates that Paul was indicating that “a fundamentally Jewish view of angels and the Law has been assimilated to current pagan cosmology, at least as far as terminology is concerned.”<sup>82</sup> Fear becomes a factor when these spiritual powers teach laws and are considered conveyors of revelations. Add to that self-abasement and the angels are elevated above the elements. Colossians 2.16, 18 indicates that disobedience of such laws led to human judgment as a counterpart of the divine. Colossians 2.14-15 confirms this fearful

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<sup>80</sup> G. MacGregor "Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought" "New Testament Studies," *New testament studies*. (1954): 22.

<sup>81</sup> Aristides, J. Rendel Harris, and J. Armitage Robinson, *The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians, from a Syriac Ms. Preserved on Mount Sinai*, 2d ed. (Cambridge [Eng.]: The University press, 1893) 48.

<sup>82</sup> John J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (Leiden,: Brill, 1973) 174-75.

attitude: God through Christ has “cancelled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands...nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him”.

Maurice Jones makes an interesting analogy: “The whole world, the Jewish with its law and its angels, and the Gentile with its astral religions, is a world in bondage, and can only attain to freedom and life through the victory accomplished in the death of Christ on the Cross...”<sup>83</sup> As the power of sin is said to be the Law ( 1 Cor 15.56), Christ’s breaking of this power meant the overthrow of the cosmic spirits although all “rule”, “authority” and “power” will not be abolished until the “end” (according to 1 Cor. 15.24-26). Hence believers must no longer humble themselves before angelic powers and the laws by which they judge.<sup>84</sup> The above analogy relating sin to the Law and Christ’s role in breaking this power overrides the place of the priests in the atoning process for sin. By so doing the role of the angels as guardians of the Law also come under attack. When it came to laws of diet and holy days differing views were held, (2.16) and chastisements and accusations were brought by the angels holding the book in which are recorded sins.<sup>85</sup> According to the writer of Colossians, Christ superseded these cosmic powers and they have lost their authority to condemn those who break the Law, because Christ has “rubbed off” their “handwritten accusations” through his being nailed to the cross (2.14). Perhaps as W. L. Knox proclaims, “the opponents sought to impose on them higher standards of

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<sup>83</sup> Maurice Jones, "St. Paul and Angels" "The Brantford Expositor," *The Brantford expositor* (1918): viii-15, 415.

<sup>84</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 173-76.

<sup>85</sup> G. MacGregor "Principalities and Powers:The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought" "New Testament Studies," 22.

special feasts, enjoined as a means of propitiating the angels”.<sup>86</sup> In addition “humility” (2.18, 23) attached, deduced from the writer’s use of the term in 3.12, and from the fact that “pleasure in humility”, is a Hebraism, according to Arndt.<sup>87</sup>

In a non-ascetic sense if the readers have died with Christ from the “elements of the world”, they should no longer be focused on ascetic laws like those implied in 2.20-21, “do not taste, do not handle”. A true mark of asceticism is the idea of severity to the body (2.23). Pious Jews were perhaps accused of aiming for a higher form of purity. To further the idea of a higher form of purity, “do not touch... do not handle... severity to the body... satisfaction of the flesh” (2.21, 23) collectively implies asceticism in sex.<sup>88</sup> Hence freedom from the body through abstinence of certain foods and bodily gratifications fostered communication with the spiritual world. The writer is either warning them against this type of ascetic practice mentioned or that the believers should not take things too far.

Colossians 2.18 also contains a warning against those who worship angels and who humble themselves by fasting in order to see visions, thereby puffing themselves up “without reason by his sensuous mind”. As W. L. Knox observed, “angelic appearances to them in a vision would mark the stages of their progress to higher things”<sup>89</sup>. These heavenly visions considered special revealed laws that elevated the individual, giving them reason to boast and heaping judgment on those who did not believe in or accept them. Assured claims of “knowledge” that were being made may

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<sup>86</sup> Wilfred Lawrence Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1939) 170.

<sup>87</sup> William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 356.

<sup>88</sup> Ernst Percy, *Die Probleme Der Kolosser- Und Epheserbriefe, Skrifter Utgivna Av Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapssamfundet I Lund ; 39* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1946) 92.

<sup>89</sup> Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* 170.

be construed from “puffed up” (2.18; cf. 1 Cor. 8.1; 13.2; 2 Cor. 12.7: “exalted above measure”) and from the writer’s charge of “empty deceit” (2.8). In referencing the Shepherd of Hermas it is suggested that similar methods may have been used by the readers of the letter.<sup>90</sup> In the text, Hermas states that desiring too many revelatory visions would harm his flesh implying that fasting occasioned revelations. He is told that “all inquiries require humility; fast, therefore, and you will receive what you ask of the Lord.”<sup>91</sup> According to the writer this line of thinking diminishes the work of Christ (2.17, 20) and replaces emphasis on faith in Christ, in 2.2-28 (“in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”) with beguiling speech. He contrasts the philosophy and empty deceit (apart from Christ, e.g. of men following traditions) and the “elements of the world”. According to Gunther, “The controversial text suggests that the writer was claiming for Christ knowledge of the mystery of God; this was what the opponents were claiming for their angelic revelations which, though obscure, they claimed to interpret wisely.”<sup>92</sup>

The angelology of the Hebrew Bible texts in Daniel offers some parallels which help to clarify the Jewish belief in angelic powers. Van hov illustrates:

Yahweh, the Prince of the host who receives the daily burnt offering (8.1), is the Prince of princes (8.25). Among the chief of these are the princes in charge of the Persians, Greeks and Jews (i.e. Michael) (10.13, 20; 12.1; cf. Deut. 32.8-9<sup>93</sup>; Jub. 15.31). The host of heaven, or the host of stars (8.10), consists of the celestial bodies, i.e. sun, moon and stars (cf Gen. 2.1; Deut. 4.19; 17.3; Neh. 9.6; Pss. 148.3). But in

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<sup>90</sup> Hermas and Robert Van de Weyer, *Revelations to the Shepherd of Hermas : A Book of Spiritual Visions*, 1st U.S. ed. (Liguori, Mo.: Triumph Books, 1997) Vis. iii, 10.

<sup>91</sup> Hermas and Van de Weyer, *Revelations to the Shepherd of Hermas : A Book of Spiritual Visions* iii, 6.10; cf 2.3; Col. 2.18, 23

<sup>92</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 272.

<sup>93</sup> Albert Vanhoye, *Situation Du Christ, Hébreux 1-2* (Paris,: Éditions du Cerf, 1969) 131.

other contexts the 'heavenly host' signified angels (1 Kings 22.19; 2 Chron. 18.18; Luke. 2.13; cf. Job 38.7; Rev. 19.14), or both angels and heavenly bodies (Ps. 148.2; Acts 7.42).<sup>94</sup>

The above becomes a strong argument for the writer's inclusion of Jewish angels and Hellenistic astral deities among "elements of the world", i.e. cosmic angels. Bandstra suggests, "The Apostle worshipped God for His mercy as revealed in Christ, while the Judaizers revered God for His justice as mediated through angels."<sup>95</sup> Both the Jews and the writer of the letter however, acknowledge God as supreme above all principalities and powers. Where they part ways is God atoning for sin through Christ's death on the cross.

Colossians 3.11 teaches (cf. Galatians 3.28) that there is no distinction between Jews and Greeks in Christ. Neusner argues that this places Christ and the Torah as opponents because the Jews are who they are because of the Torah.<sup>96</sup> To include the Gentiles in the promise through Jesus Christ, exclusive of the Torah, seems to violate the teachings of the Torah, which contains God's instructions to Israel (Exodus 13.9), the promise made to Abraham's seed (Genesis 26.4-5). The Torah defines Israel as the people of God; therefore Judaism cannot accept Christ in place of the Torah as the letter seems to indicate. Neusner suggests, "Paul's comparison of individual Jews and Greeks contrasts with the formulations of Israel characteristics of the sages of Judaism. They know only Israel, the supernatural entity, the holy people; individuals simply exemplify and embody Israel."<sup>97</sup> The letter presents a new belief and Israel cannot accept it because it seems to reject them. Paul's theology

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<sup>94</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 178.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew John Bandstra, ... *The Law and the Elements of the World : An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1964) 152-53.

<sup>96</sup> Neusner, *Children of the Flesh, Children of the Promise : A Rabbi Talks with Paul* 21.

<sup>97</sup> Neusner, *Children of the Flesh, Children of the Promise : A Rabbi Talks with Paul* 21.



reflected in the letter was so different from the monotheistic views of Judaism that it seems to indicate that Paul intentionally set out to start a religion outside of Judaism.

### **3.2 Circumcision and Traditions**

In Colossians 1.24-25, the writer perpetuates the ministry of preaching fully the word of God in the church in the role of steward in the house of God (1.24-25). He reminds his readers that they “were called in the one body” by “the word of Christ” (3.15-16), urging them to “put off” or “put to death” the old nature and its corrupt practices and to “put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge... Here there cannot be Jew and Greek, circumcised and uncircumcised... but Christ is all, and in all’ (3.5-14). The use of the phrases “old nature” and “new nature” resonates with leaving behind the Jewish practices that were being replaced with the new teachings of reconciliation (see also Subsection 4.2). The letter explains that the true circumcision boast rather in Christ and serve God spiritually. This suggests that Jews were deceived by believing that through circumcision they served God and in which boasted their legal righteousness.

Oposing lines have been drawn between Christians and Jews because of statements such as this in Colossians 2.6. Rosenberg contends that Paul taught that Israel, God’s elect, was being pushed aside for the New Israel, the “Israel of God”. “He [Paul] broke the ties that bound the early Judeo-Christians to their ancestral heritage by announcing in effect: ‘The Old Israel is dead! Long live the Christians, the New Israel!’”<sup>98</sup> He also asserts that Paul was strategic in targeting weaker communities in his spread of the gospel. “It was no coincidence that Paul’s missionary journeys never led him either to Egypt or Babylonia, Jewish communities

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<sup>98</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 77.

whose spirit of national sentiment was exceedingly strong.”<sup>99</sup> Perhaps the writer of the letter felt that the diversity of the beliefs of the people of Colossae was fertile ground for the acceptance of the gospel. Paul’s impetus in spreading the gospel in this sense can be portrayed as shrewd and calculating.

In Colossians 1.21 and 2.11-13 the Jewish tradition of circumcision is intimated and the audience is reassured that baptism replaces circumcision, thereby nullifying the act and making baptism into the faith more complete and sanctifying. J. D.

Levenson<sup>100</sup> accuses Paul of using Genesis 15.6 to mean that circumcision was unnecessary because to God Abraham was righteous even before he was circumcised. He was righteous purely on the basis of his faith. That is to say that faith could substitute for the commandments of the Torah. This is expressed in Paul’s own words at the end of his ministry, “It was not through the Law that the promise was made to Abraham and his descendants that he would inherit the world, but through the righteousness that comes from faith” (Romans 4:13). To counter this, Levenson points out that, according to the Mishnah completed in 200 BCE, Abraham practiced the Torah before it was given to the people. This view stands in opposition to Paul’s view concerning the faith of Abraham over the Torah. He goes on to say that, “in the rabbinic interpretation, the Pauline opposition between an Abrahamic and a Mosaic dispensation dissolves.”<sup>101</sup> Levenson also points out that Paul did not dialogue (seek the truth), but argued and went to great lengths to get his point across by using polemics. Bokser quotes I Corinthians 9.19-24 to illustrate the tactics Paul used in order to revolutionize his movement as he admitted his methods

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<sup>99</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 78.

<sup>100</sup> Jon D Levenson. “How not to conduct Jewish-Christian dialogue,” *Commentary*. New York: Dec 2001. Vol. 112, Iss. 5; pg. 31.

<sup>101</sup> Levenson, 36.

are not altogether honorable and that he would in fact go to great lengths to bring about the conversion of those to whom he was speaking.

It appears from the above statements that Paul's tactics moved the pre-Christian teachings from a sect of Judaism to a religion no longer associated with Judaism. The early Christians are accused of needing to supply evidence that they too have a revelation from God, for the Hebrew Bible holds the covenant made by God with Israel. The Old Covenant is supplanted by the New Covenant with Jesus Christ as the focal point of the new revelation. The writer could be accused of forcing the Jews into making a choice between accepting what was being taught and thereby becoming a part of the new community or rejecting it and remaining outside of the faith. Rosenberg interprets Paul's strategy thus: initially proselytizing was among fellow Jews, "but later, following Paul's insistence, among the pagan Gentiles of the area."<sup>102</sup> Seemingly stigmatized for their noncompliance the Jews were left out, and their rituals replaced.

Using Col. 2.11-12, 20-21; 3.1-3 circumcision and the regulations for the body as imposed by the "elements of the world" were being replaced by baptism. Gunther states, "The use of the term, '*baptismos*' (2.12), rather than the customary '*baptisma*' suggests ritual washing of eating utensils (Mark 7.14). This usage further suggests further that Christian baptism is not only the new circumcision but the new counterpart of the ceremonial washing of cups, pots and vessels."<sup>103</sup> Here again Gunther suggests that the Jewish laws and traditions were being replaced by Christianity. With apparent simplicity, these age old Judaic traditions were explained

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<sup>102</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem*, 73.

<sup>103</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 134.

away and considered ineffective in the face of these “new teachings”. The letter to the Colossians had rendered Judaic practices outdated; updated through Christian teachings. The practices were not nullified, but simply adjusted so that Gentiles could be included. Perhaps these assertions were hard for the Jews in that community to accept. However it must be noted here, that there is a distinction between “hand-washing” and “ceremonial washing”. The reference in this thesis is to the latter. Sanders remarks, concerning hand-washing that, “it is not a biblical purity law, but a practice which, in Jesus’ day, was probably developing among certain groups.”<sup>104</sup>

The reference to a festival, new moon and Sabbath (2.16-17) implies annual, monthly and weekly observances (cf. 2 Chron. 2.4; 31.3; Ezek. 45.17; Hosea 2.11). If this were the case, the annual feasts would include the Feasts of Passover, Weeks and Booths. The addressees were being decisively judged in terms of their keeping these days holy. No longer considered purely Judaic, the context even suggests that special times were endorsed by heavenly powers (2.18, 15-20). If this interpretation is valid, while these days were held in high esteem throughout the history of the Jews, they are now being subordinated.

Jewish scholars argue that Christianity is based on borrowings from pagan cults.<sup>105</sup> Rosenberg contends that, “Paul’s borrowing from pagan cults resulted in the writing of the New Testament which differs fundamentally in major respects from all Jewish

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<sup>104</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 186.

<sup>105</sup> Bokser quotes Alfred Loisy and Charles Guignebert concerning the practice of the Lord’s Supper, He deems the sacramental interpretation of the bread and wine as a contribution of Paul who acted under the influence of the pagan mysteries.,” Alfred Loisy, “The Christian Mystery,” *Hibbert Journal*, X (1911-12); 54-7. “Writing as a historian, Professor Guignebert declares these rites as clearly a later development, representing the influence of paganism on the growing Church.,” Charles Guignebert: *Christianity, Past and Present* (New York: The Macmillan Company; 1927), pp. 105 ff.

literature.”<sup>106</sup> However, the letter does not however deny the existence of cosmic powers which tends to support these arguments. The writer does not take a strong enough stand in denouncing cosmic powers. Placing Jesus above these entities (1.15-18) only diminishes their power. When the correlation is viewed between the celebration of the birth of Christ and the birthday celebration of the pagan redeemer of mankind, Mithras (which also marks the winter solstice), one can wonder about the reasoning of those who came up with these ideas. Davies point is valid here, “what the layman does not know, and the scholar does, is that there were many Pagan deities for whom similar claims were made and in whose names were preached quite similar doctrines. Mithras was a Redeemer of mankind; so were Tammuz, Adonis, and Osiris.”<sup>107</sup> It is also A. P. Davies’ view that Jesus as Redeemer was not the view of Judaism or that of the early Christians rather, “it was when Christianity spread out into the pagan world that the idea of Jesus as a Savior God emerged.”<sup>108</sup>

Rosenberg further argues that it was Paul who cultivated pagan ideas and “whose missionary zeal latched onto ideas anchored in the Greek and pagan mystery cults.”<sup>109</sup> He points out that the first followers of Jesus Christ were not yet full-blown Christians, but simply a Jewish sect who differed only from traditional Judaism in believing that Jesus had not died and was returning as he promised during their lifetime. They still believed that he would come back and free them from Roman

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<sup>106</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 43.

<sup>107</sup> A. Powell Davies, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls* ([New York]: New American Library, 1956) 89-92.

<sup>108</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 44.

<sup>109</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 45.

rule. Rosenberg, citing the classicist M. Grant, insists that Paul de-nationalized Judaism by spreading his gospel to “all the world”.<sup>110</sup>

### 3.3 Jesus Christ

The author of Colossians attempts to make a connection to the Jews with his reference to the blood of Christ as the atoning factor. This reference to the sacrifice in his blood and the Lord’s Supper is made in other early Christian literature.<sup>111</sup> Hebrews 9.22 echoes Exodus 24.8 with reference to the blood sacrifice as the atonement of sin. The argument that Jesus Christ, being a Jew, could not have possibly instituted the practice of the Lord’s Supper is based on the Torah (Leviticus 17.10-12) which specifically forbids the drinking of blood. Consequently even the suggestion of drinking it (even symbolically) is taboo. It may be therefore argued that to suggest that he would require that his disciples remember him in this way is incomprehensible since they were all Jews. This also suggests that it is unlikely that God would require them to accept a messiah of this caliber. Thus the writer of Colossians could, in the eyes of many Jews can be accused of building a doctrinal practice on what is perhaps a misinterpretation of the actions of Christ at the Last Supper or of deliberately using this event to further this cause. Although interesting, the investigation of these ideas would take this thesis in another direction.

The teaching in the letter concerning the “mystery” caused concern within the Jewish community and their beliefs about the presence of God. Bornkamm argues that, “to make the reality of God present: this is the essential mystery of Jesus.”<sup>112</sup> In

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<sup>110</sup> Michael Grant, *From Alexander to Cleopatra : The Hellenistic World* (New York: Scribner, 1982) 79. “the Jews of Asia Minor [who were acculturated to Greek ideas] mostly rejected Paul because they regarded his doctrine of the divinity of Jesus Christ as a blasphemous betrayal of their tradition of monotheism”

<sup>111</sup> Rom. 3.25, Rom. 5.8-9, I Cor. 5.7, Eph. 1.7; 2.13, Col. 1.14, 20.

<sup>112</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 62.

discussing this statement Sanders contends that in reference to the contemporaries of Christ God was not present. Sanders further argues:

That contrast is still based on no study of Judaism to see whether or not God was perceived to be present; one is rather reading here a theological assessment of the significance of Jesus for Christians. ...Jesus is a living reality in contrast to the Jewish teachers immersed in dead erudition, for whom God was not present.<sup>113</sup>

This would challenge the heritage of the Jews as God's chosen people, which carry the implication of a long standing relationship.

The above, perhaps, brought to mind one of the occasions where Jesus Christ was said to forgive the sins of the paralytic (Mark 2.5; cf. Luke 7.47). Sanders in his discussion of the topic of Christ putting himself in the place of God by forgiving sins points out that speaking for God was not uncommon. He states, "No prophet – by definition a spokesman for God – was, as far as our knowledge goes, accused of blasphemy."<sup>114</sup> Although Sanders does not have a problem with Jesus putting himself in the place of God by forgiving sins, he does not address seriously the implication of Christ being God as the letter suggests. Bornkamm argues, "The oft-repeated claim that Jesus "put himself in the place of God" is overdone."<sup>115</sup> Sanders doubts the "uniqueness" of Christ which suggests that the first-century Colossians may not have taken his claims seriously as well. The writer of the letter addresses the topic of the mystery of God in Christ which implies there may have been some questions or a need for further clarification and teaching.

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<sup>113</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 30.

<sup>114</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 273.

<sup>115</sup> Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* 240.

The writer's wish that the Colossians and Laodiceans "have all riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2.2-3), also implies that Christ has revealed mysterious treasures. This the Jews could not have understood because they claimed to know mysteries apart from Christ. Consequently the writer's task was "to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden from ages and from generations", i.e. the mystery of "Christ in you, the hope of glory". The writer declares that it is Christ which he proclaims, "warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man, mature in Christ" (1.25-28). In direct opposition to what the Jews taught it was the Law and not Christ that held all the answers. The letter's emphasis was on preaching the gospel and 'Christ in us'. Thus, freeing the audience from the Law (2.14, 17, 20-21) and the 'principalities', "powers" and "elements" (rudiments) (2.15, 20) by the death of Christ through which comes reconciliation and peace (1.20, 23) and redemption and forgiveness of sins (1.14; 2.13-14; 3.13).<sup>116</sup>

This teaching was problematic to the Jewish population for what the writer teaches about Jesus' death and resurrection is something with which Jewish literature cannot identify. There is nothing in early Jewish literature that deals with the death of God (1.20, 22) and not much has changed in contemporary literature. Maccoby suggests, "Such a concept, associated everywhere in the ancient world with the renewal of nature in the spring, was banished forever from Judaism by its theology of a God superior to nature."<sup>117</sup> Rosenberg accuses Christian scholars of being afraid to

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<sup>116</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 215.

<sup>117</sup> Hyman Maccoby, "Christianity's Break with Judaism," *Commentary*, August, 1984, 39.



broach this subject, making them not true scholars. He contends that in order to be willing to change the course of history one should be willing to commit to “objective research.”<sup>118</sup> Rosenberg adds:

The New Testament writes one Jewish scholar, tells us about the death of a god who was resurrected on the third day. Unless the death of a divine figure marks the end of an outworn religious cult, like the death of Pan, it can be given meaning only in terms of a scheme of salvation: and this is how the New Testament interprets it.<sup>119</sup>

To the Jews the very concept of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ brings to mind human sacrifice, which is totally unacceptable. That God would demand it so that he might resurrect him goes too far. Therefore it would appear that Christianity turned to the pagan world while Judaism remained faithful to its teaching.

Sandmel suggests that the writers view concerning the Messiah in the Christ Hymn, as a pre-existent and a heavenly being was “derived from the messianic speculations of the age.”<sup>120</sup> By the tone of the letter the Jewish component, however, were not totally convinced. Sandmel relates that Jewish views and thoughts concerning the Messiah were not altogether cogent during the time that Paul began his ministry. He notes that, “the recorded utterances of individuals should be regarded as reflections of something kindred to poetic license.”<sup>121</sup> He also states, that the evidence is “poorly rendered defensible by his crucifixion and by the collapse of any political aspect of his movement, and by the sad actuality that

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<sup>118</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 39.

<sup>119</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem : A Jewish View* 43.

<sup>120</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *Judaism and Christians Beginnings*, 207.

<sup>121</sup> Sandmel, 207.

Palestine was still not liberated from Roman domination.”<sup>122</sup> Therefore it can be inferred that Paul derived his views from this setting and that they were not credible. Paul’s views were consistent with what Apocalyptic and Rabbinic literature taught except in the area of Jesus’ career as it related to sin and atonement. This is where the problem lies. On the subject of the Law which deals with sin and atonement the writer makes a detour.

In the first century early Christian and Jewish views concerning the Messiah began to differ.<sup>123</sup> To the Pharisees the Messiah was merely a human being; an agent of God. Although he may have had special powers, he could never do anything to atone for the sin of man. Janowski and Stuhlmacher present a summary of the Jewish view of the Messiah. He was viewed as a comforter for his suffering people, but not as a “suffering savior”. He was to defeat the enemies of Israel and set them up as rulers, restore their land, and bring them back to God in a spirit of tranquility and restoration.<sup>124</sup> Rosenberg sums it all up by stating, “Then, at the climax of human history, the Messiah together with his people was to serve as the instrument by which the sovereignty of God was established on earth.”<sup>125</sup> Paul seemed to abandon his Judaic teaching to embrace a messiah that was strange to Judaism.

The deifying of Jesus caused a break in the relationship between the Jews and the Jewish Christians as the latter began to adopt this doctrine along with the

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<sup>122</sup> Samuel Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament* (Woodstock, Vt.: SkyLight Paths Pub., 2004) 33.

<sup>123</sup> Neusner, *Judaism When Christianity Began : A Survey of Belief and Practice* 172-74.

<sup>124</sup> Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, *The Suffering Servant : Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004) 89-90.

<sup>125</sup> Rosenberg, *The Christian Problem*, 37.

immaculate conception of Jesus.<sup>126</sup> Within the community two major divisions in the followers of Jesus were the Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The main cause of dissension was that the Jewish Christians adhered to the belief that Jesus was the Son of David and the Gentile Christians understood him as the Son of God. Sanders states that the designation Son of God was not problematic to the Jews for “all Israelites can be said to be ‘sons of God’”.<sup>127</sup> However the problem according to Sanders was the claim that Jesus was divine which in Jewish law amounts to blasphemy<sup>128</sup>. The letter to the Colossians was perhaps designed to mitigate this tension by calling all believers, be they Jews or Gentiles, to unity in the faith.

The following quote reflects the affinity of pagans to Christianity as opposed to Judaism with its strict rules and observances because it allowed them to make little change in their lives.

The Christians sent out zealous messengers, and, following the example of Paul, sought to make converts by eloquence and so-called miraculous cures. They imposed no heavy duties on the newly-made converts, and even permitted them to retain their former habits of life, and, in part, their old views, without separating themselves from their family circle, their relations, or from intercourse with those dear to them.<sup>129</sup>

A reading of Colossians from a Christian standpoint may indicate the opposite with the debate using terms such as “false teachers”, etc. However, from a Jewish

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<sup>126</sup> Heinrich Graetz, Bella Löwy, and Philipp Bloch, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia,: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1891) 370-71.

<sup>127</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* 298.

<sup>128</sup> For further discussion on the topic see index 'Blasphemy, charged against Jesus'. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*.

<sup>129</sup> Graetz, Löwy, and Bloch, *History of the Jews* 383.

standpoint, their teachings were being devalued and replaced by a much less complex ideology, “Christ is all and in all” (1.19, 2.9, 3.11).

Gunther suggests that the differences in Christology between the Judaizers and the mainstream of the church were that the work and spiritual nature of Christ was described in angelic terms by the Judaizers while those in the early Pauline church tended to assimilate Christ and the Spirit, at least more than had the later church.<sup>130</sup> Epiphanius remarks that since the descent of the Spirit at the time of Christ’s baptism was accepted even by the Judaizing Ebonites, there was no need to question its general acceptance in Asia Minor as well.<sup>131</sup> Gunther concurs with that assessment.<sup>132</sup> If interpreted messianically, its Hebraic foundation (Isa. 11.1-5; 42.1-4; 61.1), states that ‘he shall receive the spirit of wisdom, knowledge and might which shall enable him to judge the world’. These powers, and other like them, would not nullify his angelic nature. “Son of God” is an angelic title.<sup>133</sup> Certainly those Jews who witnessed the account of his baptismal could agree. The letter proclaimed that the ‘spirit’ was the Holy Spirit, while the Jews still believed it was angel and spirits. Bornkamm suggests that 2.9 is controversially directed against the teaching that “in the ‘elements’ the ‘spirit of Godhead’ dwells”.<sup>134</sup> P. Testa argues that Paul’s opponents ‘minimized the concept of the spirit’ of divinity which indwelt Christ bodily into fantasy on the [sacred] letters of the alphabet, “elements”, and on “sacred

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<sup>130</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 259.

<sup>131</sup> Epiphanius, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin., and Karl Holl, *Epiphanius, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller Der Ersten Drei Jahrhunderte*, (Leipzig,: J. C. Hinrichs, 1915) Haer., 30, 13.2 & 7-8.

<sup>132</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 259.

<sup>133</sup> Gen. 6.2, 4; Job 38.7; Pss. 29.1; 82.6; 89.6.

<sup>134</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Das Ende Des Gesetzes; Paulusstudien*, [5. Aufl.] ed., *Beiträge Zur Evangelischen Theologie* (München,: C. Kaiser, 1966) 140, 46.

numbers.”<sup>135</sup> The Ascension of Isaiah (3.15; 7.23; 9.36, 39-40; 10.4; 11.4, 33) frequently mentioned “the angel of the Holy Spirit”.<sup>136</sup> Hebrew Bible texts refer to the spirit as the “angel of the Lord”. Here it can be construed as a “splitting of hairs” for there is no distinction made between the “spirit of the Lord” and the “angel of the Lord” in pre-Christian literature.

This section presents overwhelming evidence that the audience of the letter to the Colossians contained Jewish believers. The writer’s warnings address some of the beliefs held by them as they pertained to his interpretation of the teachings of Jesus. In the years following the writing of this letter and the rest of the New Testament, much has been written that often gets embellished to the point that the simple message is obscured. New Testament writers were writing letters and through analysis commentators have produced thousands of books and tons of literature explaining what they said or meant to portray. Even in this paper, it can be concluded that Jews were in the congregation simply from the evidence that is written in the Colossian letter. However, not taking anything away from the writer of the letter, but with the massive amounts of literature that has been generated over the years it seems to be forgotten that a letter was all it was when penned in the first century.

Perhaps the Jews in Colossae sensed that Judaism was at risk of being replaced by this new religious sect. The early Christians were a persistent group and the growth factor was steadily increased even in the face of persecutions. Johnson states, “The term (supersessionism) is traditionally used for the conviction that the church has

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<sup>135</sup> Matthew Black and William Foxwell Albright, *The Scrolls and Christianity: Historical and Theological Significance, Theological Collections*, (London,: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1969) i, 140; cf.46.

<sup>136</sup> Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background. A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* 260.

replaced Israel as God's chosen people. Israel has lost its place and Christianity now occupies it. Supersessionism is shorthand for the dominant Christian theological position regarding the Jews."<sup>137</sup> However, in this article, he admits that supersessionism did not occur during the time of the initial writing of the New Testament but in the latter part of the second century.

Historically, the response of the Jewish community historically to the teachings in the letter to the Colossians serves to prove the existence of Jews in the city. It is the position of this thesis to present the arguments to this end only. Much debate has developed over the years concerning this particular letter in relation to the identity of the false teachers. However, the aim of this thesis has been to determine who the hearers were. Thus far we know that the Jewish views were represented alongside the generations of mysteries and mythological beliefs.

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<sup>137</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson. "Christians and Jews: Starting Over, Cilliers Breytenbach, *Versöhnung : Eine Studie Zur Paulinischen Soteriologie, Wissenschaftliche Monographien Zum Alten Und Neuen Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989) pg. 15. Jan 31, 2003. Vol. 130, Iss. 2;

## PART ONE – CHAPTER FOUR

### SUBJECTS OF GRECO-ROMAN EMPIRE

This final section discusses the identity of the citizens of Colossians as subjects of Greco-Roman imperial rule. Their identity is suggested by the imperial language used by the writer as he addresses the concerns of the audience in reference to the Christian doctrines. Although the writer is not viewed as deliberately targeting certain groups of people through the use of rhetoric exclusive to those of the Roman Empire, by virtue of the language, however, it can be assumed the readers were either Greco-Roman subjects or citizens of Rome. The people of the Lycus Valley were subjects of Rome and would, therefore understand the language used as a matter of course. However, the discussion of imperial terms does not definitively describe the political situation of Colossae.

H. O. Maier relates, in an article entitled “A Sly Civility<sup>138</sup>: Colossians and Empire”,<sup>139</sup> Colossian vocabulary, motifs and theological themes to the cultural situation of the cult of the emperor. In summary Maier identifies imperial language in the following texts of the letter:

- Colossians 1.15-23, according to Maier reflects an imperial backdrop and utilizes civic vocabulary typical of Greek and Roman treatments of concord.
- Geopolitical notions of a worldwide Roman Empire are reflected in the writer’s representation of Jesus’ death as a Roman triumph (2.15).

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<sup>138</sup> This is a phrase Maier borrows from Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge Classics (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004) 93 -102.

<sup>139</sup> H. O. Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," *Journal for the study of the New Testament*. 27, no. 3 (2005).

- The inclusion of humankind, i.e. Barbarians and Scythians in a “trans-ethnic unity” (3.11).
- The Household Code in 3.18-4.1 is an imperial imprint and compares with the “numismatic representations of Nero and his consort enjoying a divinely appointed familial concord” .<sup>140</sup>
- The letter uses imperial themes and ideals in portraying the place of Jesus in the lives of the new believers.

Maier claims to offer “a reading of Colossians against the backdrop of the Roman Empire and in particular in the light of the political culture surrounding, embracing and championing the cult of the divine emperor”.<sup>141</sup> There are those who do not agree with the orientation and consider this controversial. Nevertheless, his observations concerning the language, however, remain and are useful for identifying the people of Colossae. Comparing early Christian religious devotion to Jesus Christ to the category of emperor worship is considered unacceptable to L. W. Hurtado. He considers emperor worship repulsive to early Christian worship and discounts it as a source for early Christian reflection.<sup>142</sup> Maier criticizes Hurtado by saying he puts forth a weak argument by dismissing the relevance of the Christ devotion in the Christian movement.<sup>143</sup> Hurtado seems to miss the connection between the imperial cultural system and the devotion of the Christian movement. According to Maier early Christian devotion to Christ is not defined by the imperial cult. Perhaps those who opposed the study set forth by Maier are afraid that

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<sup>140</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 323.

<sup>141</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 325.

<sup>142</sup> Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ : Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2003) 92-99.

<sup>143</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ : Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* 93.



Christianity could not stand up under such scrutiny. Hurtado in agreement with Maier states that, “reference to the imperial cultural system in which Christianity took root and grew helps to recognize the appropriation of imperial themes and ideas to Christians to make sense of their religious devotion and to communicate their own ideals.”<sup>144</sup> However he notes that the imperial cultural system did exist. Hence it is used for identification purposes in this thesis.

Collins uses the phrase “cultural situation” to describe “the imperial context as an important source in shaping and giving expression to early Christian experience and theology”.<sup>145</sup> To dismiss the cultural expressions and beliefs of the day would do an injustice to the people being exposed to this new religion. This is not to say that it was acceptable to incorporate pagan beliefs and practices, but to totally dismiss the beliefs and culture of these people without regard to how they were trying to understand the gospel does them an injustice. There needed to be some adjustments made and a process of understanding how this was done in light of new ideas. The people of Colossae were seeking help in solving the problems that related to their situation. In many cases their thoughts went toward a greater power than themselves. Before the gospel was made known to them their former beliefs and practices were their way of life (see Chapter Two).

Collins explains that, “once the letter is read in the context of the cultural situation of the imperial cult and the political ideals associated with it, a dimension of the letter

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<sup>144</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ : Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* 93.

<sup>145</sup> A. Y. Collins “The Worship of Jesus and the Imperial Cult”. Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis, *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism : Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism*, (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 1999).

passed over by more traditional exegetical accounts gain a striking relief”.<sup>146</sup> By comparison, B. R. Braxton points out that where ethnic language is unambiguous, the complexities and ambiguities of early Christian communities are understood.<sup>147</sup> The writer’s use of imperial language was not forced or contrived. He was writing in the genre of his time and the nature of his audience; to people who understood the language. Braxton makes a distinction between culture and ethnicity that is applicable to this study. “...ethnicity presupposes the presence of culture between ethnic groups...it is possible for groups to share the same culture yet understand themselves to belong to totally different ethnic groups”.<sup>148</sup> The culture of the Colossians in and around them was Greco-Roman, but their ethnicity varied. Yet, being a part of that culture they were able to relate to what the writer was explaining, although they belonged to different ethnic groups.

Maier asserts, “Colossians’ representation of a gospel embracing “the whole world” (1.6; cf 1.23) and its imagery of a Roman Triumph (2.15) represent the most recognizable parallel with imperial ideas.”<sup>149</sup> Other examples that parallel Roman political ideology are the words; “affirmation of a universal reconciliation on earth and in heaven” and its celebration of Christ’s “making peace with its former enemies” (1.20). Being under Greco-Roman rule, the audience would be familiar with reconciliation terms such as “making peace”. Colossians 3.1, 10, 15 also gives examples of imperial politics stressing Christ’s enthronement making possible moral and natural renewal and “let the peace of Christ rule in believers’ hearts”. Still Maier

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<sup>146</sup> Newman, Davila, and Lewis, *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism : Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* 241-42.

<sup>147</sup> B. R. Braxton 'Role of Ethnicity in I Corinthians 7:17-24'. Randall C. Bailey, *Yet with a Steady Beat : Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

<sup>148</sup> Bailey, *Yet with a Steady Beat : Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation* 23.

<sup>149</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 326.

makes other references with imperial associations in 3.11; 1.15,20, 23, 28 in which he indicates that, “a cosmic and global renewal and peace brought about by the universal reign of Christ penetrating and overcoming every ethnic and social boundary, and representing a cosmic harmony especially in “the kingdom of God’s beloved son” (1.13), has similarly imperial associations.”<sup>150</sup> Whether or not the hearers believed what was being said, they would recognize the language.

#### **4.1 Imperial Themes and Images**

Imperial sounding themes would have been evident to a first-century audience. Zanker points out that there were images they viewed daily. He notes, “Images of Caesar were found in the market, the city square, the public baths, and the theater, at the gymnasium and in the temples. Images of the empire were also found on every imaginable object for private use.”<sup>151</sup> Images of the divine emperor were everywhere, but especially in the sacred precincts dedicated to the emperor and his family. This seemingly “omnipresent” display celebrated the Roman order, a divinely ordained order brought together by a divinely appointed emperor by military might into a world-wide peace. This order was meant to bring together hostile and ethnically isolated peoples through pacification. The process was meant to create ethical, natural and spiritual renewal. The language of the text was used to draw the audience to the message of the gospel. This language was not foreign to them and the familiarity of imperial terms and ideas helped to foster a greater understanding of the message. In describing the language of empire Walsh observes, “And in the face of the ubiquitous imagery of the empire, Paul proclaims Jesus as the true image of

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<sup>150</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 326.

<sup>151</sup> For other examples see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus, Jerome Lectures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988) 228-29, 26-67, 70-71.

God (Col. 1.15) and calls the Colossian Christians to bear the image of Jesus in shaping an alternative to the empire.”<sup>152</sup> It is interesting that Walsh uses the term image here because it is through the image of the empire, using imperial themes, the writer of Colossians speaks.

Attention to imperial themes and imagery suggest that the people of Colossae, although ethnically diverse, were culturally linked through prevailing Roman and Hellenistic views. The themes cannot give a complete account of the letter to Colossians, nor do they displace other exegetical treatments. However expansion of the views held were enhanced by the imperial cultural situation. The use of imperial language in no way detracts from the message of the letter. This view complements other prevailing ideas and commentaries in helping to discover how these treatments were probably personalized and revised as a means of creating a religious and social identity that was unique to Colossae. Acting as a vehicle, the imperial language enabled the writer to get the message of the gospel to the diverse people of Colossae.

Upon hearing “the Son through whom and for whom all things were created” (1.16e), and whose powers (1.20; 2.15) – especially those cosmic powers, some felt obliged to offer religious observance (2.16-18). The audience was directed to take another look at their ritualistic practices whether imperial or mythical and perhaps they saw the redundancy. They had to wonder about the duplication and long for a simpler way. The pressure to live up to and never attain respect in governance that reminded them they were simply subjects could be alleviated by belief in Jesus

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<sup>152</sup> Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed : Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 63.

Christ (3.15).<sup>153</sup> The majority of the people of Colossae and in other towns of the Mediterranean did not have any rights in modern times, but they did know what their duties were. The letter does not teach them that their duties changed, as the household codes exhibit (Col. 3, 4), but a new dimension was added. They belonged to a greater society. Presented with the gospel by Epaphras, they accepted what he taught them about Christ (1.6). Christ accepted them and to this they should remain faithful.

The writer's teachings about Jesus Christ's place in their lives appeared to be replacing that of the vice-regent of gods, Nero, the reigning incarnate divine being. Maier stipulates, "He is the one who held all things together in the body of his Empire of which he is head, and which he maintains in health and security".<sup>154</sup> The writer however, points out that it is the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, the one who nourishes the church and in whom the fullness of God dwells bodily, who exercises a universal reign. This nourishment was made known distinctively in the "joints and bands" of his body (2.19). Christ thus replaces the rulers of this world and is universally capable of doing what the empire had only attempted to do.

## **4.2 Imperial Reconciliation Language**

The language of reconciliation points to Roman rule and how in conquering lands and its people the idea was to bring peace. Maier states, "Especially helpful in recognizing the imperial valences of these texts is attention to Neronian imperial iconography deployed to celebrate a global imperial rule by a divine emperor

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<sup>153</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 327.

<sup>154</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 328.

appointed to pacify the world and bring all into an overarching political union.”<sup>155</sup> The message in Colossians differs from imperial propaganda, e.g. a divine emperor appointed to pacify the world and bring all into an overarching political union, in its paradoxical assertion that the origin of all the imperial-sounding ideals are to be found in the cross.

Breytenbach concurs:

... diplomatic usage by recognizing that Paul’s representations of himself and his colleagues in 2 Cor. 5.17-20 as exercising ‘the ministry of reconciliation’, proclaiming ‘the message or gospel of reconciliation’ and acting as ‘ambassadors for Christ’ exactly echo imperial political language describing politically appointed legates designated with the task of initiating or concluding civic reconciliation between hostile parties.<sup>156</sup>

Breytenbach however mirrors E. Schweizer in contrasting the human and cosmic contexts of Col 1.20 (cf. 2 Cor. 5.19). They insist on comparing this type of reconciliation to ancient pre-Socratic, Aristotelian, Stoic and especially [neo-] Pythagorean physical theories of opposing natural elements.<sup>157</sup> Maier fails to see the difference between reconciliation in the human and the cosmic domains or diplomatic celebrations from ancient religion. Schweizer does and fails to emphasize the essential facts that point to Roman imperial order and neglects important confirmation celebrating the Roman imperial order as a public agreement imaging ‘heavenly peace’ found in the Colossians letter. This insight or lack thereof on Schweizer’s part shows the universal cosmic and human reconciliation motifs in 1.15-16 and 1.20- 23 connecting the preceding verses as unified civic applications

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<sup>155</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 328.

<sup>156</sup> Breytenbach, *Versöhnung : Eine Studie Zur Paulinischen Soteriologie* 65-68.

<sup>157</sup> Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians : A Commentary* 164-78.

which resound throughout the rest of the letter. The audience was directed to identify Christ as truly divine and capable of bringing about the reconciliation spoken of by the rulers of the day.

Civil concord is an idea with which the audience was familiar and the writer's use of reconciliation terminology could strike a welcome chord with them. Maier argues, "It is significant that these verses (1.20-23) deploy language not only belonging to the diplomatic representations of reconciliation, but also at home in the closely associated semantic domain of civil concord."<sup>158</sup> In the *Onomasticon* of Pollux (second century CE) is listed the civic terms used to describe enemies or hostility which is precisely the vocabulary we discover in 1.20-23.<sup>159</sup> Christ has come to "bring peace" to those once "estranged" and "hostile in mind".

Using another term especially related to diplomatic ideals of reconciliation, the writer of Colossians describes his audience as being "knit together in love" (2.2), and using the reference of the church as a body in 2.19 he unites this image with the similarly politically charged reference to the church as body – the image presented in 1.18. Maier references Breytenbach and Schweizer in their works supporting the use of such terms in diplomatic contexts as well as D. B. Martin.<sup>160</sup> This language would not have been foreign to the people of Colossae living under Roman rule.

Considered civic also are the technical terms in 1.21-23 associated with blame or blamelessness, a term of course used in the diplomatic semantic domain of reconciliation. Again the readers would not have difficulty understanding "once

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<sup>158</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 332.

<sup>159</sup> Julius Pollux, Joh H. Lederlin, and Pre-1801 Imprint Collection (Library of Congress), *Iouliou Polydeukous Onomastikon. En Bibliois Dekas. Julii Polucis Onomasticum* (Amstelædami, 1706).

<sup>160</sup> Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 3-37.

hostile in mind” as a wordplay on “blame” or “blameless”. They were encouraged to continue “stable and steadfast and not shifting” from the message preached to them. Maier explains, “This is architectural language especially common in civic representations of political concord.”<sup>161</sup>

1. 23 speaks of having a foundation (being grounded) and being settled as opposed to being moved away specifically from the hope in which one has come to rest. These concepts are considered by Mitchell metaphors for “political stability and concord”.<sup>162</sup> Furthermore in 1.20-23 there is a continual application of diplomatic and civic language. The progression is shown from this highly charged imperial language of reconciliation to the writer as he brings the gospel to them, declaring himself a minister of the gospel (1.23b-c). In this place, the letter directs one to the arena of the “diplomatic ambassador” (cf. 2Cor. 5.18-20). Noted in Sub-section 3.1 the Jewish population may have had cause to take issue with this idea, but the concept would have been understood by all and can be viewed an identifying marker into the identity of the audience. Although Breytenbach, Schweizer and Martin took note of and objected to the reference to imperial language in relation to the gospel the language remains.

Maier discusses Col. 1.20 as crucial in bringing together the communal civic-sounding ideals of 21-23 with the cosmic affirmations of 15-19. The verse of the “hymn” (15-20), which in Maier’s eyes celebrates this cosmic reconciliation, presupposes the pacification of previous “hostile powers” in 1.16 and “elemental

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<sup>161</sup> Maier refers to Margaret Mary Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation : An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*, 1st American ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) 99-111., for a more thorough treatment of civic concord.

<sup>162</sup> Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation : An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* 107. cf p.108, note 263 for comparison to 1 Cor. 15.58.



spirits of the universe in 2.8,20. Christ's death, presented as a Roman triumph (2.15) is then the means of reconciliation and pacification because he is portrayed in verse 16 as the one who by his works is the creator and reconciler of the universe. Again we see earthly civic mirroring heavenly concord and peace over which Jesus is heralded as Lord.

### 4.3 Global Rome – the Pax Romana

A closer look should be taken into the degree to which the writer brings together the following language with ideals and images that would have been familiar to the people in the political culture of imperial Rome, to celebrate the peace Christ has made by his death. Arnold states, "As has been widely noted, the references in Colossians to "thrones", "dominions", "principalities", and "powers" (1.16, 2.15), as well as "rudiments of the world" (2.8, 20) represent language characteristic of Jewish cosmic speculation."<sup>163</sup> The term "peace" does not only belong to the diplomatic representation of reconciliation; but it rehearses in Roman political discourse the global pax or military "pacification" fostered by imperial rule. Dio<sup>164</sup> presents Julius Caesar as the "Peacemaker". Cary and Foster note, "Indeed, so widely spread was its use that, by the time of Commodus, the "Peacemaker of the World" had become one of the emperor's official titles."<sup>165</sup> Philo, does the same for Caesar Augustus (of

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<sup>163</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism : The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament. 2. Reihe*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1995) 158-94, Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon : A Commentary on the Greek Text* 92-93.

<sup>164</sup> Cassius Dio was a historian who published a 1,400 year history of Rome (approximately 1200 BCE - 229 CE). He was a Roman citizen of Greek descent who wrote in his native language. His work survives in fragments. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>165</sup> Cocceianus Cassius Dio, Earnest Cary, and Herbert Baldwin Foster, *Dio's Roman History* (London; New York: W. Heinemann; The Macmillan co., 1914) 72.15.5.

the Julio-Claudian dynasty)<sup>166</sup> indicating that he restored civic harmony by pacifying “unsociable, hostile, and brutal” nations. Halicarnassus in an earlier inscription (c. 9 BCE) praises Augustus for improving the lot of humankind by bringing peace to the world: “Land and sea are at peace, the cities are flourishing in good order, concord, and prosperity...”<sup>167</sup> An inscription from Priene, the ancient Greek city located near the Maeander<sup>168</sup>, which is roughly contemporary with Halicarnassus, celebrates the inauguration of the imperial cult of Roman Asia and similarly heralds the emperor as one “who has made war to cease and ordered the world with peace”.<sup>169</sup> The epistle of Colossians writer’s references to peace with Christ could hardly go unnoticed by the audience who would have been very familiar with their rulers acting in this identifiable role. As subjects of Roman rule, Christ as peacemaker against the backdrop of imperial powers, needed clarification. It was necessary to warn them to not be “spoiled” or “fooled” by philosophy and vain deceit and rudiments of the world that had no dealing with Christ (2.8). Furthermore, the writer cautions the audience that since they are dead with Christ to the rudiments of the world, do not subjugate themselves to ordinances (2.20). He was directing them to seek freedom from imperial rule.

In Colossians 1.15-23 the imperial terminology parallels Rome’s emperors not only as gods, but those who bring peace and reconciliation through military success. This type of success was coupled with ending the civil war, pacifying enemies and ending piracy. The cosmic and civic themes of reconciliation in 1.15-23, bring to mind

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<sup>166</sup> The forty year blended dynasty of the Julian and Claudian families (from the second half of 1 BCE to 68 CE). See further: Philip Matyszak, *The Sons of Caesar: Imperial Rome’s First Dynasty* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2006).

<sup>167</sup> Victor Ehrenberg et al., *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus & Tiberius*, 2nd [enlarged] ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 83-84, no. 98a, 11. 9-10.

<sup>168</sup> Nancy Thomson De Grummond, *An Encyclopedia of the History of Classical Archaeology*, 2 vols. (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1996) 935.

<sup>169</sup> Ehrenberg et al., *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus & Tiberius* 81-84, no. 98 11. 36-7.

imperial *pax* reflecting a cosmic concord, a *pax deum* (the favor of the gods), guaranteeing Augustus's and his successors' achievements, preserved for human benefit by their piety, and made manifest in the security and tranquility of the Roman order.<sup>170</sup> Peace here is not only a civic phenomenon, it is cosmic. In the Priene inscription, Augustus's birth is celebrated as "good tidings" (1.41) from which comes "the beginning of all things" (1.6). Furthermore, he is heralded as giving to "the whole world a different appearance" (11. 8-9), a new beginning in the natural order of things. Extravagant praise by court poets celebrate Augustus as ushering in the Golden Age and Nero for bringing in the second Golden Age. Maier suggests, "These are references to the blessing of cosmic powers preserving imperial concord manifested in natural abundance and earthy fertility."<sup>171</sup>

Comparatively in 1.15-23 the Colossian global language contains a recognizably imperial imprint. The author emphasizes that Christ is "before all" (1.17), or that "he is the beginning", so that "in him all will have preeminence" (1.18), apart from the warning to resist worship of cosmic powers; "angels" (2.18). In 2.18 the audience was also warned against being "puffed up" which is synonymous with "boasting" (cf. 2 Cor. 9, 10). The two terms are often used synonymously in ancient Greek texts.<sup>172</sup> Roman rulers were often depicted as emperors sitting on thrones in heaven with depictions of subjects or conquered people (nations) below them who had been pacified by Roman victory; thus, giving the appearance or "illusion" of divinity. Zanker portrays Augustus in the guise of Jupiter, enthroned beside Roma, surrounded by

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<sup>170</sup> For piety, religion and the preservation of the *pax romana*, see Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture : An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996) 288-331.

<sup>171</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 334.

<sup>172</sup> Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation : An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* 95.see note 180 for references to Greek texts.

divine personifications of the earth.<sup>173</sup> The writer was not only creating a picture of the preeminence of Christ, but making a substitution for Roman politics.

Divine harmony was illustrated in a large sculpture displaying the divine appointment of the Julio-Claudian dynasty located only 100 km from Colossae at the temple complex of Sebasteion at Aphrodisias. Smith suggests that the sculpture was erected to depict the “pacifying” of the peoples of the earth and bringing them into a “civil union”.

Completed at precisely the time Colossians was composed, the sculptural programme included representations of emperors and their family members depicted in the company of Olympian deities and personified nature and cosmic powers, towering over some 50 statues representing people pacified, restored and/or absorbed into the Roman order.<sup>174</sup>

Coins also reflected the same idea. The emperor Nero, in various collections of coins is depicted with Jupiter seated on a throne and/or with head “radiate”<sup>175</sup>, or illustrations associating him with protection by the mythical god Jove<sup>176</sup>. Maier states, “ These symbols, representing a renaissance of Jovian imagery in imperial media, urged imperial subjects to believe that Nero’s reign was ordained by Jupiter and represented the earthly copy of a cosmic model, if not the enfleshed embodiment of the divine.”<sup>177</sup> Perhaps used to create a greater understanding of him, the writer’s reference in Col. 1.15 to Jesus Christ as the “image of the invisible God” is a carbon

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<sup>173</sup> Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* 230-38. For other examples see Maier, note 32, page 336

<sup>174</sup> R. R. R. Smith, *The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias*, *Journal of Roman Studies*. [Offprint (S.I.: s.n., 1987) 77, p. 88 – 138.

<sup>175</sup> J. Rufus Fears, *Princeps a Diis Electus : The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome* (Rome: American Academy, 1977) 235-37.

<sup>176</sup> Fears, *Princeps a Diis Electus : The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome* 235-37.

<sup>177</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 337.

copy of the Jovian protection afforded Nero. P. Bastien comments that this depiction was an opportunity for Nero to declare his “extraterrestrial nature”. He argues, “Nero is portrayed with a radiate crown – an honour usually reserved to designate posthumous deification. “<sup>178</sup> Nero was preceded by Gaius who introduced the iconographical innovation of representing himself on coins as radiate.<sup>179</sup>

In a quote by Roman poet Calpurnius Siculus, Caesar is heralded as Jupiter in disguise, with powers beyond his mortal body. He is praised as the “very god” and exhorted to rule the world and its people for ever. Heaven’s love is no match for him and again he is crowned the originator of peace.<sup>180</sup> The comparison facilitates the audience of Colossae’s identification of a greater power in Christ when compared to the emperors (1.16). Or perhaps confusion or fear takes place and in an attempt to clarify things, the audience incorporates the message into the existing structure of their world; thereby placing Christ within this structure.

The audience could not have helped but recognize in the Colossian Christology (Col. 1.15-23) the imperial and diplomatic language heralding the cosmic and earthly concord of Roman rule. They could not have helped but be familiar with imperial nuances in the celebration of an incarnate Son in whom God was pleased to dwell (1.19; 2.9) to usher in a universal reconciliation. Maier observes, “Like Nero, whom imperial poets acclaimed as an embodied deity, and Seneca celebrated as the head of the body, the Roman Empire, on whom all rests and depends for its health and vigour, the incarnate Son, the enthroned Jesus, heads the cosmos growth and

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<sup>178</sup> Pierre Bastien, *Le Buste Monétaire Des Empereurs Romains, Numismatique Romaine* (Wetteren, Belgique: Editions numismatiques romaines, 1992).

<sup>179</sup> For a historical discussion Bastien, *Le Buste Monétaire Des Empereurs Romains* 105-07.

<sup>180</sup> Ecologue. 4.142-46.

renewal (2.9-10, 19; 1.6)”<sup>181</sup> It is interesting to note however that peace and concord was not the state of the cities and nations globally. The peace and concord was said to exist only within the empire of Rome. Aelius Aristides<sup>182</sup> writes, “Although your empire is so large and great, it is much greater in its good order than in its circumference.”<sup>183</sup> He then goes on to give examples of civil chaos replaced by imperial rule and civic concord adorning the empire as a garden. Plutarch<sup>184</sup> describes Fortune permitting Rome to be confirmed as the city anticipating an empire-wide concord to come.<sup>185</sup> P. Mitchell gives examples of the enduring tradition of political applications of permanent, firmly built up structures, with representations of Roman political peace and reconciliation.<sup>186</sup> Nevertheless the writer praises the Colossians for their “good order”, and their being “rooted”, “built up”, and “firmly established” in Christ (2.5). These are all civic terms used in commonplace political treatments of “concord” to celebrate the benefits and character of Roman rule. The writer of Colossians almost seems to mock the empire by attributing to Christ the power to do what it could not without military measures; either nationally or globally. Here was a chance for the people of Colossae to supersede their rulers.

The use of diplomatic language is clear in Colossians. Christ is depicted as the Son of the only God, who brought about the creation of the world and sustains it. In

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<sup>181</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 338.

<sup>182</sup> Aristides was a second-century sophist and man of letters. He was a student of Alexander of Cotiaeum and studied in Athens and Pergamum. His most noted polemical works include 'On Rhetoric' and 'In Defence of the Four'. See further: Hornblower and Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* s.v.

<sup>183</sup> Orations 26.29,99,101,103-104, Aelius Aristides and Charles Allison Behr, *The Complete Works*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1981) 79, 95-96.

<sup>184</sup> Plutarch was a second-century philosopher and biographer. 'The Fortune of Rome' is included in his group of rhetorical works. He is most famous for 'Parallel Lives' in which he attempts to show individual virtue or vice in the careers of men of stature. Hornblower and Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* s.v.

<sup>185</sup> "On the Fortunes of the Romans" 9.321D, Plutarch, *Plutarch's Complete Works* (New York,: T. Y. Crowell & co., 1909).

<sup>186</sup> Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation : An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* 105-07.

comparison in the imperial program there are many gods and the emperor is a god or a son of god. The language echoes in celebrations and affirmation of imperial rule. It is important to note the placement of this language in a politically oriented cosmology. Placed in Colossians this imperial language takes on definite socio-political meaning. According to Maier:

The Colossians Christological monotheism and the universal imperial-sounding claims associated with it are always affirmed with reference to the church understood as both the local assembly of the gathered house church (4.15,16) and a more cosmic reality it makes manifest (1.18, 24; 2.19).<sup>187</sup>

For example Christ who is head of the body, the church, is equivalent to the emperor who is head of the body of his Empire, with the exception that Christ does not rule by military force over subdued enemies. Rather he rules through his reconciling death. Furthermore, because of this, his enemies become his friends. The giving of himself marks his reign, not by domination (1.20, 22). The audience was urged to live according to its counter-imperial logic (3.13-15). Maier suggests, "Indeed, in its affirmation of Jesus as the one in whom, through whom and for whom all things are made (1.16) and continue to hold together (v.17), by logical implication even Caesar, together with the cosmic powers he serves, is ultimately subject (Col 2.10). We have here the making of a Quiet Revolution."<sup>188</sup>

This notion is not far-fetched when one's attention is drawn to those who were malcontents or those whose lot in life has been of a servant, woman, or slave. Perhaps these were the people who were drawn to Paul's gospel and to whom the

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<sup>187</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 340.

<sup>188</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 340.

writer caters his message. However, not all would have been from these classes as there are records of some well-to-do persons who were believers whose homes were used as house churches. The writer's use of imperial terminology and context would incite these people to not only give their lives but fight for it as well. Another group of people would be those who were seeking a position of authority and who would welcome his message without thought of reconciliation or concord. These people may have felt trapped in their particular offices and saw a way of better utilizing their abilities. There are more than a few speculations to be made here that would be useful to this argument. This letter is written during the time of Roman imperial politics and divine claims of Caesar and his rule. A. Deissmann, although not elaborated on in this thesis, is noted for contributing the best known paradigm in the early twentieth century describing the discussion of the conflict between Paul's preaching of the gospel and Caesar.<sup>189</sup>

The imperial language continues, particularly in its affirmations of the global rule of Christ who is "all and in all" (3.11). Not only can the imperial descriptions be noted in reference to Jesus Christ's death as a triumph over the Romans and how that relates to cosmic powers, (2.15 and 1.16 respectively) W. Meeks states these acts are the result of the scriptures declaring Christ at his baptism as the son of God. Meeks indicates this "utopian" declaration helped believers gain a sense of belonging in the global world.<sup>190</sup> Maier remarks that Meeks historical religious insights "gain contextual relief once related to a more imperial reading of Col 3.11; that places its

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<sup>189</sup> Adolf Deissmann and Lionel Richard Mortimer Strachan, *Light from the Ancient East; the New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World* (London,: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910).

<sup>190</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, 'In One Body: The Unity of Humankind in Colossians and Ephesians' in Nils Alstrup Dahl, Jacob Jervell, and Wayne A. Meeks, *God's Christ and His People : Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Oslo: Universitetsforl., 1977) 209-21 (09).



utopian declaration in the social setting of imperial ideals.”<sup>191</sup> Outside of this context the comparison points to religious traditions and patterns set forth concerning the renewal of life in Jesus Christ through baptism. It also points to unity as new creatures in comparison to former classifications (3.11).

Unity in Christ transcended ethnic boundaries. The terms used in 3.11 were to combat the image of dominion over subjected peoples by way of military power as a way to bring peace and inclusion to the world. Maier, quoting Mühl, contends, “Ethnic diversity in unity created by means of Roman military pacification of enemies – “cosmopolitanism with power” – was the imperial vision Rome held up to its subjects to convince them of Rome’s entitlement to govern the world.”<sup>192</sup> Rome’s entitlement was being challenged by the teaching that Jesus brought peace to the world through his death and resurrection. Instead of being subjects divided by race and ethnicity, the audience was now full-fledged citizens. This claim again fuels the “Quiet Revolution” mentioned previously. Maier states:

The universal claims of a gospel bringing into one unity ethnically diverse, often mobile peoples of varying socio-economic status, was at home in an Empire that equated its realm with the world, integrated its subject peoples militarily and diplomatically into a political union, and created new possibilities for social and economic mobility.<sup>193</sup>

The imperial language transcended the rules of society and the diversity of the audience.

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<sup>191</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 341.

<sup>192</sup> Max Mühl, *Die Antike Menschheitsidee in Ihrer Geschichtlichen Entwicklung* (Leipzig,: Dietrich, 1928) 82.

<sup>193</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 342.

Utopian association resonate in 3.11 when the author declares “here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all”. Coupled with “Roman triumph” 2.15 and the claims of a triumphal Christ proclaimed through “all the world” (1.6, 23) a new moral order is envisioned (3.5 – 4.6). Christ’s triumph overshadows military pacification under the appointed right of Rome to rule.

Maier pointing out a metaphor states, “The ritual of Roman triumph included a ceremonial taking off and putting on of clothing to celebrate victorious rule.”<sup>194</sup> The image introduced at 2.15 of “taking off” refers to Christ’s death. W. Carr draws attention to the imagery created as a depiction of him triumphantly disrobing in preparation for the “victory parade to follow in which he publicly displays the principalities and authorities in the triumphal procession of his resurrection”.<sup>195</sup> The imperial metaphors continue with the language of triumph. The audience is encouraged to “seek the things above where Christ is enthroned”. In 3.15 the call to let “the peace of Christ rule” expressed in 3.10 with its obvious connection to the Hebrew Bible is surrounded by imperial metaphors. The imperial tone is more strongly felt in 3.11, in which “Christ is all, and in all”. Maier claims, “The triumph acclaimed at 2.15 now takes on a recognizably Roman imperial reach and universality. With even barbarians and Scythians caught up in the moral renewal of “the kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son” (1.13), the gospel has indeed reached “the world” – the furthest limits of the imperial imagination.”<sup>196</sup> Can Roman rule claim to

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<sup>194</sup> Maier, “A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire,” 344.

<sup>195</sup> Wesley Carr, *Angels and Principalities: The Background, Meaning, and Development of the Pauline Phrase Hai Archai Kai Hai Exousiai* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 61, H. S. Versnel, *Triumphus; an Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of the Roman Triumph* (Leiden,: Brill, 1970) 56-93.

<sup>196</sup> Maier, “A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire,” 345.

have reached this goal at this point in history? Agreeably Aelius Aristides, noted earlier would say, “No”.

#### 4.4 Imperial Imprint in the Household Code

Maier’s treatment of the images of imperialism in the Household Code of 3.18 – 4.1 is significant to identification of the letter’s audience. He observes, “It has long been recognized that the Haustafeln here and elsewhere in early Christian literature are to be interpreted as a topos (place, position) at home in Hellenistic political literature.”<sup>197</sup> Within the Colossian Haustafel, the characteristics of a well run house include husbands loving their wives (3.19), and slaves obeying their Master (3.18, 20, 22, 23, 24; 4.1). This is complemented by the divine authority of the rule and peace of Christ exhibited in 3.15. Furthermore, a well synchronized house outlines the obligations of slaves and masters (3.22-25). This order similarly mirrors the imperial political handling of the perfect household. Cary and Foster referencing the historian state, “Dio Chrysostom,<sup>198</sup> for example, reflects this Roman context when he likens civic “concord” to a well-governed household in which husband and wife are like-minded and slaves obey their masters.”<sup>199</sup> Balch suggests that Colossians’ idiosyncratic lengthening of slave instructions perhaps originated from the needs of a community constituted mostly by converted slaves, anxious to defend against pagan suspicions.<sup>200</sup>

As hearers of the letter the Colossians would have been able to recognize that like Caesar, Christ was to bring about peace and reconciliation that superseded race,

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<sup>197</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 345.

<sup>198</sup> Cassius Dio, Cary, and Foster, *Dio's Roman History* Or. 38.14.

<sup>199</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 346.

<sup>200</sup> David L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive : The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981) 96-97, Margaret Y. MacDonald and Daniel J. Harrington, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000) 160-69.

ethnicity, religion and social boundaries. The reemphasis on the household duties served to paint a portrait of concord and global peace. Christ as the head of the local house churches brought a domestic political ideal that was supposed to be in the world around them. The idea, however, was that the reconciliation, spoken of earlier in the letter, was brought about through the death of Christ and not through Roman ideas of military pacification. The Household Code, that recommended that those occupying traditional positions of power (husbands and slave owners) love (3.19 justice and 4.1 equity), disrupts Greco-Roman traditional absolute rule and exploitation over their subjects. Maier adds that, "a domestic peace in the house church marked by love, justice and equity insists that the Colossian church realize a civic identity that runs counter to the exploitative rule by domination of its imperial overlords."<sup>201</sup> The writer does not change the rules of the house; slaves are still subject to their masters. However, the masters are to act justly because they too have a master, in heaven. This goes counter to the role of imperial leaders of the day who answer to no one.

## **Conclusion**

Colossae's history, although difficult to unravel due to the lack of evidence, is perceived through the lens of the rich history of the peoples of Asia Minor and into the Mediterranean era. There too is a long history of beliefs shared and embellished with each generation and emerging imperial power. Into this culture comes a belief that shatters all that they believed and offers what was viewed as improbable, even impossible, and yet long sought after: peace and life throughout eternity. Historically each group sought after what the empire promised, yet it did not and could not

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<sup>201</sup> Maier, "A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire," 347.

deliver. They placed their faith in various gods, traditions and empires and lived their lives accordingly. They were people like many others and the message of the gospel reached them where they lived. Their responses identified them in the letter as being worthy of the writer's time to address and this is the most important identifying marker.

The contribution of Jewish scholars in response to Paul's Christianizing theology adds a dimension to their identity not readily seen by many Christian scholars. The belief of present day Jews is a testament to their tenacity in the face of Christianity's weak beginning yet strong presence in the world today. Their response as presented here reveals not only the identity of the people of Colossae, but the strong-hold of traditions and laws within their faith that has kept them. Their views for the most part mirror the concerns reflected in the letter to the Colossians.

Maier's treatment of the text's imperial connotations was pivotal in determining the identity of the people of Colossae as not strictly two dimensional. The community at Colossae, both Gentiles and Jews were subjects of Rome. They were encouraged to "put on love" (3.14) and to put off the notion of peace through violent means (2.15) in the face of the leaders of the empire of Rome and to seek universal peace (3.15). They were intertwined, as subjects of Rome, but isolated ethnically as Jews and Gentiles. The writer's attempt to bring them together under the umbrella of the "mystery" of the gospel of Jesus Christ presented many problems; thus, giving rise to the letter to the Colossians.

The next section identifies the people of Africa and their exposure to the gospel beginning in the first century. This section is important in identifying the similarities between them and Colossians whose existence can only be documented in the first

century. The presentation of the gospel to and the reception of it by both groups help to identify them. Their identities shape the meaning of the text and contribute to the re-reading of the letter from an African American postcolonial perspective.

## **PART TWO**

### **THE PEOPLE OF AFRICA**

#### **Introduction**

Part Two explores the reception history of Christianity in Africa and serves as a footprint in understanding the re-reading of Colossians from an African American postcolonial perspective. It examines the reception of Christianity by the Africans in both the first and fifteenth centuries. These two periods are better documented than that of the interim years and present interesting information concerning the identity of those exposed to the teachings of each era. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the focus will not be on the fifteenth-century re-introduction but on the traditional religions of Africa as a possible link to first-century African Christianity. Traditional religions provide the socio-religious context of the Africans who were enslaved and sent to the New World. As with the Colossians, the identity of the Africans is crucial to their response and understanding of the gospel. Part Two serves as a bridge to the understanding of the enslaved Africans in North America which will lead to their reception of the gospel (Part Three) and then the re-reading (Part Four). Although Christianity presented some problems with its presentation by the Portuguese and with the newly enslaved Africans in North America, it took a firm hold among the enslaved Africans in North America in the eighteenth century. The latter will be discussed further in Part Three.

The arrival of the missionaries in West Africa beginning in the fifteenth century was met with long practiced traditional religions. Although Christianity was not new to the continent, the first-century beliefs that spread through parts of Africa were not

evident to the missionaries. There was a desire to convert the so called “heathen” and their strange beliefs to those of Christianity. Perhaps, as Cox suggests, “For some missionaries, Africa had no religion at all. Their conclusion was that Africans were polytheists and idol worshippers and all the missionaries needed to do were to debunk the African primal religion and spirituality and sweep away that religious structure.”<sup>202</sup> In contradiction: Chapter Six explores African religions, traditional and Christian, and their importance in the re-reading Colossians from an African American postcolonial perspective.

At this point in the thesis it is important to note that, as in first-century Colossae, Christianity was just forming in first-century Africa. Comparatively the Africans and Colossians were diverse peoples with long standing traditions and religions. Each, at the points in their history discussed in this thesis, lived under the shadow of empire and were subjugated and labeled. Part One has shown that the people of Colossae were exposed to the gospel initially by Epaphras and then by the writer of the letter. With the destruction of that city the subsequent history of their reception of the gospel is stunted. Thus far their identity has been discussed in Part One and their initial response will be ascertained through the examination of the letter in Part Four. Concerning the presentation of the gospel, the people of Africa had much in common with the people of Colossae. They both were believers in what appeared to be other forms of religions and when presented with the gospel they initially accepted the basic teachings. The major difference is that the beliefs of the Colossians can only be viewed from their existence in the first century, but the Africans have a longer history. Discussions follow that concern what history tells of Christianity’s initial

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<sup>202</sup> James L. Cox and Gerrie ter Haar, *Uniquely African? : African Christian Identity from Cultural and Historical Perspectives, Religion in Contemporary Africa Series* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2003) 93.



contact with the Africans in the first century and its possible connection to the fifteenth century. The importance of this connection, discussed in Chapter Six, helps in identifying them and the beliefs that disseminated through subsequent generations (Part Three).

Chapter Five focuses on the introduction of Christianity to first-century Africa with special attention paid to Egypt and Ethiopia. Other regions of northern Africa<sup>203</sup> are also being addressed showing the spread and growth of Christianity westward. Ethiopia is included in this region from a geographic standpoint being situated in the northern portion of the continent. Chapter Six discusses the similarities between traditional religion of Africa and Christianity suggesting a possible link that could have facilitated the evangelization of Africa. Was there a remnant of beliefs that survived the invasion of North Africa? Could these beliefs have crossed the continent to western Africa and resulted in a traditional religion being formed? The similarities are essential as they point to the possibility that African traditional religion and Christianity may have common origins.

Although mostly documented in the fifteenth century, Africa's reception of the gospel was based on their beliefs before the coming of the Portuguese. T. Oden states that Western historical skepticism only allows the initial arrival of Christianity to be pushed back as early as the fifth century. However, as early as 180 CE with the Martyrs of Scilli there is evidence of first-century existence in Carthage. Oden further remarks, "For it is implausible that the Madaura and Scilli martyrs would be ready to

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<sup>203</sup> North Africa or Northern Africa is the northern most region of the continent of Africa linked by the Sahara to Sub-Saharan Africa. According to United Nations geo-political definition the regions include Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Mauritania and Western Sahara. "United Nations Statistics Division – Standard Country and Area Codes Classification" n.p. [cited 6 December 2009]. Online: <http://millenniumindicators.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49regin.htm>.

die for the faith if they had just appeared in North Africa immediately before 180 C.E.”<sup>204</sup>

With strong beginnings in Africa, the teachings and practices of first-century Christianity were carried out with tenacity by Africans from Egypt and Cyrene (located in present day Libya). Relying on the scriptures being historically accurate, the impact of carrying the cross of Jesus upon Simon of Cyrene is suggested in the conversion of his two sons, Rufus and Alexander (Mark 15:21). Apollos was also said to be impacted by the gospel message and encouraged by the teaching of Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:24-26). Jewish Christians from Cyrene were said to have preached the gospel in Antioch with great power (Acts 11:20). Before the death of Christ, Africa’s exposure was evidenced in the story of the flight to Egypt by Jesus’ parents to escape his murder.<sup>205</sup> Moreover, there is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch recorded in Acts 8:27-38. Christian Africa’s interpretation of these accounts places her at the beginnings of the world’s largest religion.<sup>206</sup> Christian Ethiopia also embraces its rich pre-Christian history (see Chapter Five).

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<sup>204</sup> Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2007) 23.

<sup>205</sup> The account of King Herod slaughtering babies is debatable as there is no supporting historical account recorded.

<sup>206</sup> Christianity is ranked as the largest religion in the world today with approximately 2 billion adherents. <http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christiantoday.htm> March 26, 2010.

## PART TWO – CHAPTER FIVE

### FIRST CENTURY AFRICA

#### 5.1 Ethiopia

The roots of Ethiopian pre-Christianity, according to Baur's research, are found in their tradition that "holds Ethiopian kingship and priesthood to be the legitimate continuation of the Solomonic dynasty and the Aaronic priesthood."<sup>207</sup> Budge recounts that I Kings 10:1-13 tell us that the queen of Sheba visited Solomon. In Ethiopian tradition she is referred to as "the queen of the south" Makeda of Aksum (ancient Ethiopia). The tradition continues with her giving birth to Solomon's son, Menelik I.<sup>208</sup> History recorded in the Kebra Nagast is considered factual in the perception of Ethiopians and important to their link to the "God of Israel".<sup>209</sup> Ullendorff points out that, "the Kebra Nagast is not merely a literary work, but – as the Old Testament to the Hebrews and the Qu'ran to the Arabs – it is the repository of Ethiopian national and religious feelings."<sup>210</sup> The conversion of Makeda is the link between Jewish immigrants and the Hebrew Bible customs that Ethiopian Christians observe. Although some strife existed between the two groups, today the Falasha<sup>211</sup> are recognized by the Jewish chief Rabbis as the lost tribe of Dan.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> John Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa : An African History, 62-1992* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines, 1994) 34.

<sup>208</sup> E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Queen of Sheba and Her Only Son Menyelek (I) : Being The "Book of the Glory of Kings" (Kebra Nagast), The Kegan Paul Library of Arcana* (London ; New York: Kegan Paul, 2001).

<sup>209</sup> The Kebra Nagast records the conversion of Makeda to Judaism following her encounter with Solomon.

<sup>210</sup> Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Roma,: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1971).

<sup>211</sup> *Falasha (or Beta Israel), a Jewish Hamitic people of Ethiopia who claim descent from Menelik I, the son of the queen of Sheba and King Solomon; have no knowledge of Talmud but use a Bible and a prayer book written in Ge'ez, the ancient Ethiopian language. They follow Jewish traditions including circumcision, observing the Sabbath, attending synagogue, and following certain dietary and purity laws.*

*Recognized in 1975 by the Chief Rabbinate as Jews and allowed to settle in Israel. In 1984-85 thousands of Falashas resettled to Israel from refugee camps in Sudan as part of the Israeli government's "Operation Moses" and the U.S. government's "Operation Sheba." Origins and History of the Tribe of Falasha, <http://www.falasha-recordings.co.uk/teachings/ras.html> January 25,2010.*

<sup>212</sup> Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa : An African History, 62-1992* 35.

The kingdom of Aksum was both rich in culture and religious tradition. Baur reveals, “Its major beliefs were based on a divine triad: the god moon, the goddess sun, and the morning star.”<sup>213</sup> They were recognized together in every temple as a Trinity. The king was regarded as the supreme religious authority, a son of a god and he functioned as a high priest. This concept is reflected in their recognition of the Holy Trinity and the priestly kingship in Christian beliefs.

Ethiopian Christianity’s interpretations of the following three events are the hallmark of their belief in the gospels:

- The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch
- The priesthood of Frumentius
- The Nine Saints monastic life

### **5.1.1 The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch**

First, due to lack of physical evidence the Ethiopian Eunuch’s actions, following his conversion cannot decisively place Christianity in Ethiopia in the first century.

However, Baur believes that Origen’s statement “nobody claims that the Gospel has already been preached to the whole of Ethiopia, especially beyond the River [Nile]” indicates there must have been Christians there at an early date.<sup>214</sup> Nevertheless, the well-established trade route between Ethiopia, India and the Mediterranean via the Red Sea is believed to be the background to the official conversion of Ethiopia.

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<sup>213</sup> Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa : An African History, 62-1992* 35.

<sup>214</sup> Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa : An African History, 62-1992* 31.

### 5.1.2 The priesthood of Frumentius

Second, Frumentius<sup>215</sup> is noted for bringing the priesthood to Ethiopia by traveling this route in order to be ordained bishop of Ethiopia by Athanasius, the Patriarch of Alexandria. Trade routes were essential to not only trade, but also to the dissemination of the gospel from Syria to Ethiopia.<sup>216</sup> (See also Subsection 5.3) Ethiopia's importance as an indigenous Christian nation is based on the narrative of Athanasius' refusal to allow Frumentius to be replaced with an Arian Byzantine bishop by Constantius, emperor of Constantinople.<sup>217</sup> The importance of Ethiopia retaining its Christian roots was essential to the Coptic Church of Ethiopia remaining African rather than Grecian. The Coptic Orthodox church had connections to the Syrian churches, Nubia, Ethiopia and probably the southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula as well as India, following the trade routes.<sup>218</sup>

The establishment of Christianity in Asia and Eastern Africa followed the trade routes traveled by merchants and missionaries alike as they took with them their faith and spread it from person to person. Because of this there was a high degree of tolerance with cultural and theological diversity as well as an interconnectedness of historical experience and influences along the trade routes and in the intellectual centers.<sup>219</sup> This widespread diffusion of ideas led to the cultivation of a climate for Christian thought. The chance to follow one's religious practices and the occasion to declare one's faith to one's neighbor became central values.

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<sup>215</sup>Frumentius, his brother Aedesius were shipwrecked in Ethiopia on their journey to India, along with their teacher, a Syrian philosopher. They were brought to the court of Aksum, where they were educated. Allowed to leave, Aedesius went home and Frumentius to Alexandria. Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* 25.

<sup>216</sup>Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa : An African History*, 62-1992 35.

<sup>217</sup>Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris, *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol. 2, Constantine to C. 600, The Cambridge History of Christianity* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 141.

<sup>218</sup>Casiday and Norris, *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol. 2, Constantine to C. 600* 140.

<sup>219</sup>Casiday and Norris, *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol. 2, Constantine to C. 600* 144.

### 5.1.3 The Nine Saints monastic life

Third is the event that is credited for evangelizing the whole country. Monks arrived in various groups around the year 500. The most famous were the Nine Saints, to who are attributed the true monastic origins. These monks were known to be leaders of the communities which included priests and nuns. The monastery church of Debre Damo founded by Michael Aregawi still exists. Also attributed to the Nine Saints is the educational and literary work of the Church, including the translation of most books of the Bible.<sup>220</sup>

There is also significant accord connecting Ethiopian and Syriac Christianity. Syrian churches rejoice in that their language is the closest to the Aramaic said to be spoken by Jesus. Aksum was converted by Syrian Christians, and later strengthened its faith by remaining there as missionaries. A similar spirit existed among the churches of Egypt, Nubia (an independent kingdom located to the south of Egypt in ancient times), and Ethiopia with close associations with the rest of Eastern Christendom.

The beginning of Syrian Christianity is marked by a legend which told of how King Abgar of Edessa wrote to Jesus Christ, requesting to be healed of his leprosy. Isichei records the following statement. "I have a very little city, but comely, which is sufficient for us both."<sup>221</sup> The spiritual unity of Ethiopian, Nubian, Egyptian and Jacobite Syrian Christians was cemented by their adoption of a Monophysite Christology (one divine nature of Christ) which stood in opposition to previous

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<sup>220</sup> For further discussions of monastic communities in Ethiopia see: Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time : A History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Shama Books, 2004).

<sup>221</sup> Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa : From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids; London: Eerdmans; SPCK, 1995) 18.

Chalcedon (two natures; human and divine) beliefs.<sup>222</sup> After the Ethiopian church rejected the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, many persecuted refugee monks traveled from Mesopotamia and Palestine to Ethiopia where they supported missionary efforts among the Ethiopians.

Lardner and Kippis record the tradition of St. Matthew traveling to Ethiopia and finding on the eastern shore many Ethiopian Christians.<sup>223</sup> However, St. Matthew is said to have neither ordained anyone nor establish the Church there. Perhaps this lends credence to Origen's statement made earlier that supports the theory that the gospel had already reached Ethiopia with the return of the Ethiopian Eunuch. The apostle is said to have been martyred in Ethiopia after having spent the remainder of his life preaching the gospel there.<sup>224</sup> It was not until the fourth century that Athanasius, the twentieth patriarch, was said to have ordained Frumentius as administrator and Bishop over the Ethiopians. The root of their faith in Christ was traced to the first Pentecost, where it is recorded that Ethiopians were present during that time in Jerusalem. Altschul states, "In this period, Christianity spread quickly as far as Nubia and Sudan."<sup>225</sup>

The Church in Ethiopia survived Islamic invasions and retained its position of being the main religious force in the country. However, in Egypt, as in other parts of northern Africa, it was nearly wiped out. Mbiti relates that, "what remains of this Coptic Church has a long tradition going back to the apostolic times and strongly

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<sup>222</sup> Defined in conflict in Catholic University of America., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit; Washington, D.C.: Thomson/Gale; Catholic University of America, 2003). s,v, 'Council at Chalcedon'. The Chalcedonian Council issued 27 disciplinary canons and one concerning special treatment for Constantinople.

<sup>223</sup> Nathaniel Lardner, *The Works of Nathaniel Lardner* (London,: 1815) 296. Some however place his preaching in Parthia and Persia.

<sup>224</sup> *The Lives of the Holy Evangelists, and Apostles, with Their Martyrdoms*, (Barnard, Vt.: Published by Joseph Dix., 1813).

<sup>225</sup> Paisius Altschul, *An Unbroken Circle : Linking Ancient African Christianity to the African-American Experience* (St. Louis, Mo.: Brotherhood of St. Moses the Black, 1997) 9.

believes that it was St. Mark who founded it”.<sup>226</sup> Conscious missionary expansion was lacking in the ancient Church in these two countries. However, there is evidence presented in this thesis that Christianity extended further than the present-day Ethiopia and Egypt. Mbiti explains Portuguese missionary action, but leaves out any notable expansion of first-century Christianity beyond Ethiopia and Egypt. He suggests that perhaps the work of the Roman Catholic Church in the fifteenth century did not penetrate into the interior because it was aimed at European traders.<sup>227</sup>

Africa’s connection to the Mediterranean world is exemplified by the account given of Philip and the Ethiopian on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza. Described as, “a minister of Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians” (Acts 8:27), the account of his conversion figures in the planting of Christianity in Northern Africa. Falk states, “The story of the Ethiopian leads us to believe that he was a literate proselyte who went to Jerusalem to worship at the temple.”<sup>228</sup> He was said to be reading in the Septuagint which lends the idea that Hebrew Bible teachings had reached the southern kingdom by way of the Jews who had come to live along the Nile. We have no reliable evidence to substantiate the validity of this idea but: Was he a messenger of the Good News to his people? Several centuries later, Jewish communities existed in this region and also farther south, but no records concerning a Christian community have been discovered. However, the idea of this possibility spurs many Africans to place their belief in Jesus Christ. The very idea that an African had been converted so early in the first century, soon after the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy

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<sup>226</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (London, Ibadan [etc.]: Heinemann, 1969) 230, 31.

<sup>227</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*.

<sup>228</sup> Peter Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1979) 28.



Spirit and before the writings by the Apostles gives credence to the pride of ownership of such a message.

## 5.2 Egypt

Before the first millennium the tradition of Christianity is alluded to in the belief that the pre-ordained Messiah had come to Africa. The following statements by Ativa and Taylor respectively reveal the pride of Christian Egypt.

The story of the Flight into Egypt has never ceased to glow in the Coptic<sup>229</sup> imagination. In the words of the Coptic liturgy, 'Be glad and rejoice, O' Egypt, and her sons and all her daughters, for there hath come to Thee the Lord of Man.'<sup>230</sup> Modern African Christians cherish the same tradition: 'When Jesus was persecuted by the European Herod, God sent him into Africa by this we know that Africans have naturally a true spirit of Christianity'.<sup>231</sup>

There is a tendency to forget that Egypt, dating back to 3150 BCE, has been a part of Africa as an ancient civilization located in eastern North Africa.<sup>232</sup> It is easier to separate Egypt from a continent about which negative reports were made by the explorers and missionaries who came to conquer or convert the heathen. Egypt was the bridge that linked Africa to the Mediterranean world. This bridge brought trade, such as ivory, ebony and ideas to the rest of the world. Egyptian history consists of thirty-one dynasties; conquest by Rome in the first century before the coming of

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<sup>229</sup> The word Coptic can refer to a people, a language, or a Church. Both 'Copt' and 'Egypt' come from a Greek word, Aigyptos, which in turn, comes from the ancient Egyptian name for Memphis, 'the house of Ptah'. Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa : From Antiquity to the Present* 26.

<sup>230</sup> Aziz Suryal Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, [1st American ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 22.

<sup>231</sup> The Children of the Sacred Heart in Northern Rhodesia, in 1958, quoted in J. Taylor and D. Lehman, *Christians of the Copperbelt* (SCM, London, 1961) p. 167. John V. Taylor and Dorothea Lehmann, *Christians of the Copperbelt : The Growth of the Church in Northern Rhodesia* (London: SCM, 1961) 167.

<sup>232</sup> Digital Egypt for Universities. Chronology. University College, London. Cited December 2, 2009. Online: <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/chronology/index.html>.

Christ and later by Alexander the Great in the fourth century. However, its reception of Christ in the first century began a religious revolution that has left a lasting impact.

Egyptian culture proved to be good soil for the planting of Christianity in the first-century. Three keys to Egypt's reception of Christianity are discussed:

- Bridges
- Jewish Diaspora
- Tradition of Mark

### **5.2.1 Bridges**

The first key to this reception are the bridges that prepared Africa to receive the gospel of Jesus. Egypt's conversion to Christianity shows a consideration, whether intentional or not, for their former beliefs which facilitated the entrance of the gospel into their culture.

A paradigm is presented here to show the inclusion of religious and cultural practices in presenting the gospel to indigenous people. Against the practices recorded of the fifteenth century this paradigm proves more successful in evangelizing the indigenous. Shaw imparts, "Although Egyptian culture offered many barriers to the gospel; three features in particular seem to have acted as bridges."<sup>233</sup> He explains that these three bridges ingrained in the fabric of Egyptian culture, were critical to Egypt's reception.

- Death
- The Afterlife

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<sup>233</sup> Mark Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa : A Short History of African Christianity, A Bgc Monograph* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wheaton, IL: Baker Books; Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, 1996) 23.

- Peace

### **5.2.1.1 Death**

The first bridge was death. Christianity, with its assurance of eternal life and its death conquering lord who promised a prepared dwelling place in eternity for his followers, found an amenable audience among people who for numerous millennia viewed the next life described by Shaw as “the proper contemplation for those found in the present one”.<sup>234</sup> It is no surprise that monasticism, with its denial of this world for greater rewards in the next, caught on so completely in the “land of the Nile”.

### **5.2.1.2 The Afterlife**

The second bridge was the afterlife. Fundamental to the obsession with death was a religious mythology that promoted longings for immortality (afterlife). The Egyptian deities included many gods, (e.g. Isis, Osiris, and Horus) who dominated their myths. Beyond the crude parallels with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and this family of three are the more pointed analogies between Christ and Osiris. The concept of a divine king who rises from the dead and is made lord of the world to come was readily understood by those still in touch with Egyptian traditional religion. Shaw states, “What made Christianity so attractive was the fact that the resurrected and ascended Lord was not a mythical symbol but a historical person.”<sup>235</sup> With all the power placed in their Egyptian deities and kings there lacked a connection to a real person after death that had more power than the person who died. They made grand preparations for the king, generally as soon as he came into power, in order for him to go to a place in hope of a better life. Christianity offered the missing link, Jesus

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<sup>234</sup>Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa : A Short History of African Christianity* 23-4.

<sup>235</sup>Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa : A Short History of African Christianity* 24-5.

Christ, which taught that he was the son of the living God who would provide passage not only to the afterlife but “life everlasting”.

Significant preparation for the coming of the gospel to Egypt was the tradition of divine kingship.<sup>236</sup> From the rainmakers (who controlled the rains and floods) grew the idea of a semi-divine chief/king who stood halfway between God and man. Clark provides the following example: “The pharaoh was considered the incarnation of Horus, thus the son in the flesh of Isis, Osiris. Some ancient texts even equate the pharaoh with the supreme god Ra.”<sup>237</sup> In order to raise the status of the king, this equality became necessary, with no tangible evidence of a supreme god. The king was divinely seen as not only the link to the other world but to a supreme god. Death was not an ending but a beginning, a link to a higher status than what could be achieved in life. Mokhtar adds:

The treatment of this divine king became highly ritualized. His names and titles were regarded as sacred. Great pomp accompanied his appearances. The women surrounding the pharaoh were given special status, with the wife receiving the title ‘wife of Amon,’ another name for the supreme god.<sup>238</sup>

All of life pointed to death and the rewards it would bring. However, the king and those closely associated had to represent what they believed would exist in or after death. The role of a divine king paved the way for the introduction of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>236</sup> Inner Africa may have provided the roots for the idea. Roland Oliver expresses this concept as Egypt's legacy to the rest of the continent - Roland Anthony Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa*, 6th ed. (London: Penguin, 1988) 54.

<sup>237</sup> Desmond J. Clark et al., *The Cambridge History of Africa*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) vol. 1, 659.

<sup>238</sup> G. Mokhtar and Unesco. International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa., *Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, Abridged Edition ed., *General History of Africa (Abridged Ed.)* (London; Paris; Berkeley: James Currey; Unesco; University of California Press, 1990) 84.

### 5.2.1.3 Peace

The third bridge was peace. Speculations of peace and prosperity surrounded the death of a king, but only for the hereafter. There were hopes of immortality and the body was embalmed to preserve it long enough to reach that state. The king held a status in life that was equal to a god, so who had a better chance than the king? Although this idea of immortality was reserved only for the nobility, over time, even a common citizen could acquire this hope. Christianity's teaching on eternal life and a God who promised peace and prosperity, (the very things they sought after), found a receptive audience on all levels of Egyptian society. Before this the divine king was judged by a standard of justice called *ma'at*, which carried the implications of cosmic order, peace, and prosperity comparable to the Hebrew concept of *shalom*. Once the pharaoh died the tomb became a sacred place and the deceased pharaoh's divine status increased. Nubia provided the link through which the idea of divine kingship would spread throughout the continent thus reshaping much of African politics and religion.<sup>239</sup> Shaw adds, "It also played a role in providing the categories in which to understand the person and work of Christ as a divine king who promised a kingdom of *shalom* that would never end."<sup>240</sup> Not only was this state attainable by even the common citizen of the empire, it did not have the restrictions of death and the ever present tomb. The assurance of eternity replaced the uncertainty and the arduous work of embalming and laboring that was to assure life after death.

The demanding task of preparing a king to travel to eternity really progressed after the death of the king. Although preparations were made upon the pharaoh's

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<sup>239</sup> "Nubia is the biblical Kush ("the South", hence the Swahili 'Kushini') which the Septuagint rendered as "Ethiopia" ("Land of the Sunburnt Faces"). Baur, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa : An African History, 62-1992* 31.

<sup>240</sup> Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa : A Short History of African Christianity* 25-26.

inauguration with the building of the temple and gathering gifts and furnishings for the temple, it was after death that the task of preparing the body began. The proper removal of vital organs and retention of the heart was essential. Each step had to be done according to ritual or the body of the dead was in jeopardy of not reaching its soul or spirit. Christianity offered a less complicated way of achieving immortality and a promised place to reside that even the poorest person could look forward to achieving. One could enjoy life and not be consumed with the preparation for death and the afterlife.

### **5.2.2 Jewish Diaspora**

The second key to Egypt's receptivity was that from Egypt's Jewish Diaspora rose a community of Jews. Having had no access to the Hebrew original scriptures, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) was available from 280 BCE. This allowed the Jews in the Diaspora to communicate with the Greek speaking population which surrounded them. It is believed that this was the scripture being read by the Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip met going to Jerusalem from Gaza. Isichei also suggests Greek-speaking Jews of Egypt and Cyrene were present at Pentecost.<sup>241</sup>

### **5.2.3 Tradition of Mark**

The third key is the Coptic Church belief and tradition of Mark being the first apostle to Egypt and that he was martyred in Alexandria.<sup>242</sup> Although not strictly documented, we have Clements early reference and also that of Eusebius on which

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<sup>241</sup> Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa : From Antiquity to the Present* 16.

<sup>242</sup> The identity of Mark as the evangelist or John Mark in Acts is debated in Lardner and Kippis. Also debated is the time he spent in Egypt if at all. 325-327.

to rely.<sup>243</sup> However the spirit of this tradition continues to be an essential part of African Christianity. In combination with the earlier story of Jesus' escape to Egypt, it is not hard to imagine the pride of Africa in its earliest encounters with Christianity. Later, scripture presents an account of Jewish Christians from Cyrene preaching to Gentiles in Antioch: "the Lord's power was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11.20-21). The teachers at Antioch were said to include Lucius from Cyrene and "Simeon called the black".<sup>244</sup> Shaw reveals that, "the Coptic church regards Mark's founding of the church as beyond dispute. Visitors to Egypt can see the site of St. Mark's tomb in Boukolou".<sup>245</sup> This tenacity in the face of opposition and lack of conclusive historical evidence links the present to the past. The Coptic Church still stands by the traditions and beliefs of the first-century church. Despite the subsequent contradictions to Clement and Eusebius, the entrance of first Islam and later corruption in the faith, Egypt stands firm in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by the first-century believers, such as Mark, Clement and Eusebius. The legacy of the first-century church creates a back drop to Christianity in Egypt today. Oden states, "The hundreds of millions of Christians dwelling in Africa provide more than enough testimony that they feel quite at home. Christianity is not alien to Africa or to African traditional religion."<sup>246</sup> The latter will be dealt with more fully in Chapter Six.

Egypt's continued place in Christian history is further advanced by the belief that the Nicene Creed, adopted by the Coptic Church was said to be penned primarily by St.

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<sup>243</sup> Eusebius and Christian Frederic Crusé, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus, Bishop of Cesarea, in Palestine : In Ten Books* (Philadelphia: R. Davis, 1833) 11, 16.

<sup>244</sup> Mark 15.21; Acts 2, 5-12; 11, 20, 13:1; 18-24

<sup>245</sup> Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa : A Short History of African Christianity* 26. Boukolou is the site of one of the earliest known churches in Egypt.

<sup>246</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 32.

Athanasius, an African from Egypt.<sup>247</sup> Athanasius, along with Patriarch Alexander and Longinus, the bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia,<sup>248</sup> were said to have worded this document; also referred to as the Athanasian Creed. Subsequent councils were also attended by Africans from Alexandria. The Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 CE had as its president Pope Kyrillos the First, the twenty-fourth Patriarch of the Church of Alexandria, known as the “Pillar of Faith”. He is believed to have worded the introduction to the Creed which is still recited by the Coptic Church as a prefix to the Nicene Creed substantiating Africa’s influence in the early ecumenical world.

Some historians believe that Christianity was introduced to Nubia in the sixth century by missionaries from Byzantium.<sup>249</sup> Arberry records the only extant Donatist document from the period identifies the Vandal King with the Beast of Revelations (Rev. 4,6,17 and 20) and then of Berber nomads, Lawata, “ignorant of the Christian God”.<sup>250</sup>

However, the following statements refute the above claims. While Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria consecrated one Marcus as bishop of Philae before his death in 373, showing that Christianity had penetrated the region by the fourth century, John of Ephesus<sup>251</sup> records that a Monophysite priest named Julian<sup>252</sup> converted the king

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<sup>247</sup> Altschul, *An Unbroken Circle : Linking Ancient African Christianity to the African-American Experience* 13.

<sup>248</sup> The name of an extensive inland district of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Encyclopaedia Britannica inc., *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 32 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1997).

<sup>249</sup> Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa : From Antiquity to the Present* 31.

<sup>250</sup> A. J. Arberry, *Religion in the Middle East : Three Religions in Concord and Conflict*, 2 vols. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969). On this obscure last phase, cf. W. H. C. Frend, ‘Christianity in the Middle East: Survey down to CE 1800’, in A. J. Arberry, ed., *Religion in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1969) pp. 280-283, and Brett, ‘The Arab Conquest’, pp. 509-11.

<sup>251</sup> Born in Amida, a city in the north of Mesopotamia, probably about 516 CE; was a monophysite historian, also known as John of Asia. He was a missionary to Nubia which included Makuria which was a southern kingdom. Laurence Kirwan et al., *Studies on the History of Late Antique and Christian Nubia* (Aldershot, Hampshire, Great Britain ; Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate/Variorum, 2002) XVI 289-90.



and his nobles of Nobatia around 545. John of Ephesus also writes that the kingdom of Alodia was converted around 569. However, John of Bisclorum<sup>253</sup> records that the kingdom of Makuria<sup>254</sup> was converted to Roman Catholicism<sup>255</sup> the same year, suggesting that John of Ephesus might have been mistaken. Further doubt was cast on John's testimony by an entry in the chronicle of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Alexandria Eutychius, which stated that in 719, the church of Nubia transferred its allegiance from the Greek Orthodox to the Coptic Church.

The above summary exemplifying the controversy in Christian Nubian history is noted to further express the existence of Christianity in Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese. Also addressed is the rivalry among Christian leaders to implement and subsequently further doctrines held by the above leaders and nobles to the detriment of the accuracy of Christian history in Africa and possible hindrance to the dissemination of the gospel. This too would speak to the ability of the Islam faith to infiltrate and overtake many of the people of this region in their beliefs.<sup>256</sup>

The catechetical school of Alexandria, founded in Africa, is recorded as the first Christian university (180 CE).<sup>257</sup> It offered theological instruction and prepared

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<sup>252</sup> Egyptian priest; a monophysite and a follower of the Empress Theodora, also held in favor by Theodore, the old Bishop of Philae. Kirwan et al., *Studies on the History of Late Antique and Christian Nubia* XVIII 127.

<sup>253</sup> Cited as "Biclarum" a Melkite chronicler, was a contemporary of John of Ephesus, whose writings held oppositional views not only within the faith but dates of conversions as noted above. Kirwan et al., *Studies on the History of Late Antique and Christian Nubia* XIX 50.

<sup>254</sup> Makuria (Makurra), one of three kingdoms of Nubia lay south of Nobatia. The Makurites were converted by an Orthodox mission from Constantinople around 569 CE and established direct links with the imperial city. Lloyd A. Thompson and John Ferguson, *Africa in Classical Antiquity; Nine Studies* ([Ibadan, Nigeria]: Ibadan University Press, 1969) 53-54.

<sup>255</sup> The phrase used here perhaps refers to the disputed influence by the Byzantine (Roman) culture on Melkite (Catholic) Nubia mentioned in this source. Kirwan et al., *Studies on the History of Late Antique and Christian Nubia* XVI 294.

<sup>256</sup> For a more comprehensive discourse of the history of Christianity in Ancient Nubia see: Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture, Blacks in the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Thompson and Ferguson, *Africa in Classical Antiquity; Nine Studies*.

<sup>257</sup> G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *Chronology of African History* ([London, New York]: Oxford University Press, 1973) 21.

scholars to introduce the Christian message to others. As a missionary endeavor this was mostly directed toward those in school and less to convert the population of the interior. Thus we have some indications of why Christianity did not reach West Africa until centuries later and also a possible reason for its failure to flourish when faced with the attacks of the Vandals<sup>258</sup> and encounters with those of the Muslim faith. In the second half of the first century Christianity gained its first supporters among the God-fearing<sup>259</sup> people of Alexandria. Christianity's spread in Egypt, encountered people of cultural differences; among them were the Greek speaking population of the Delta who were acquainted with the Septuagint. They in turn were influenced by Greek philosophy and Platonic ideals.

The first half of the first millennium is considered the period of Africa's greatest energy where African intellect was considered to be extremely influential. It was sought after and copied widely by Christians of the northern and eastern Mediterranean shores. Names common to Christian history and literature were persons who were products of the African intellectualism of the day. Oden remarks that, "Origen, an African, was actively sought out by the teachers of Caesarea Palestina. Lactantius was invited by Emperor Diocletian (245-313) to be a teacher of literature in his Asian palace in Bithynia. Augustine was invited to teach in Milan".<sup>260</sup> Others mentioned by Oden in the intellectual movement from Africa to Europe are Plotinus, Valentinus, Tertullian, Marius Victorinus and Pachomius. Oriental religions

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<sup>258</sup> The invasion of Northern Africa by an East Germanic tribe called Vandals preceded the sacking of Rome by nearly 25 years; 429 and 455 respectively. A. H. Merrills, *Vandals, Romans and Berbers : New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>259</sup> Defined: members of the gentile-community who affiliate themselves to some degree with Jewish worship, who are interested in Jewish-morality and monotheism yet are not in obedience to some aspects of the Jewish Law (often circumcision) as a "proselyte" Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2000).

<sup>260</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 28.

began to take a back seat to the early Gnostics presentation of the Christian faith to the more highly educated of Alexandria. Christianity was then presented as a superior philosophy giving a more coherent explanation to the workings and understanding of the universe. Falk states, “This teaching was widespread in Alexandria during the first part of the second century. Basilide, Valentin, and Carpocrate were prominent leaders of the movement.”<sup>261</sup>

Origen, an early Christian scholar and theologian was one of the most distinguished fathers of the Christian Church. Oden reveals, “Basil and the Gregories introduced Origen’s basic teaching and forms of exegesis of Scripture to both Europe and Asia in their early collection called the *Philocalia* (c. 360).”<sup>262</sup> He is known to have laid the groundwork for the rules and methods for interpreting Scripture and was considered Africa’s greatest scientific investigator of sacred texts. By the fourth and fifth century African exegetes like Didymus the Blind, Tyconius and Augustine of Hippo followed suit. Oden adds, “Among the most decisive things Augustine personally learned in Italy, according to his own *Confessions* (8.6.14), was the impact made upon him by hearing from Pontitianus of the holy life of Antony of the African desert, written by the African patriarch Athanasius.”<sup>263</sup> African influence in the first millennium cannot be denied. Texts considered products of Greek and Rome such as early Greek and Latin Bibles before Jerome (the Septuagint and the Old Latin Bible versions) were both products of Africa. In the twenty-eight volumes of the *Ancient Christian*

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<sup>261</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 29.

<sup>262</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 45.

<sup>263</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 63.

*Commentary on Scripture*<sup>264</sup> there is a proliferation of texts from Africa or writings influenced by Africans among large amounts of patristic comments on the Scriptures.

The monastic life of the African church was a vehicle in the spreading of Christianity from eastern to western Africa. Oden states, "The suffering of the African martyrs-Mark in Alexandria and Cyprian in the Maghreb-became the pattern for early monasticism in Africa long before it did elsewhere."<sup>265</sup> The Egyptian desert became the environment in which monasticism germinated, and soon thereafter Numidia, Libya (Tripolitania), Byzacena (present day Tunisia) and all the way to Mauretania in the northwest of Africa. Monasticism prospered less well on the coast of Africa but found its greatest successes on the inland deserts, rugged mountains, the salt flats of Nitris, and further south in the Theban desert wastes where the atmosphere for solitude and contemplation could be found. Within this type of environment, it took hold in two major African centers; Scetis (south of Alexandria) and Numidia.

Although the persecutions in Egypt caused the Christians to flee to the interior of the country, spreading the gospel message in the Coptic language and planting churches wherever they went, theological controversies weakened and slowed the process of the Christian ministry in Egypt. Despite the efforts of monasteries which began as a layman's movement and, which significantly added in the establishment of this indigenous Christianity in Egypt, the church missed the mark somehow. Falk offers one explanation: "But the Egyptian patriarch could have rendered a greater

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<sup>264</sup> Thomas C. Oden, "Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Volume I. Cd-Rom," (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

<sup>265</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 54.

service to the church if there had been a more sincere search for the truth, plus the humility to accept it".<sup>266</sup>

Using the term "Hellenistic chauvinists", Oden suggests that such persons need to be reminded that Philo, Ammonias Saccas and Plotinus, the central players in Neo-Platonism, were all Africans. Although, born in Africa, philosophers like Marius Victorinus would come to reside in Rome; others like Bishop Synesius would remain in Cyrenaica (present day Libya). Discussions of the connections and distinctions between logos philosophy and the Christian teaching of God were first introduced by Christian teachers including Clement of Alexandria. Oden states, "Modern intellectual historians have become too accustomed to the east premise that whatever Africa learned, it learned from Europe."<sup>267</sup>

The first Christian church was established in Jerusalem, which is part of Asia, and was from where the scripture records that Philip left to go to Gaza and meeting an Ethiopian which whom he shared the gospel. After being baptized the Ethiopian took his new faith home, which was into Africa along the Nile River.<sup>268</sup> Although evidence of evangelization of Ethiopia is sketchy, spreading the gospel (the good news) was expected of those who had converted to Christianity (Acts 1.8). Years later, churches began to spread out across both Africa and Europe as Christianity's path crossed from northern Africa where they grew strong. Oden makes reference to the growth of African Christianity speaking to the tenacity of those entrusted to the gospel:

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<sup>266</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 57-58.

<sup>267</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 55-56.

<sup>268</sup> John Foster, *Church History*, 2 vols., *Tef Study Guide* (London: S.P.C.K. in association with the United Society for Christian Literature for the Theological Education Fund, 1972) 105.vol 1,

Early African Christianity did not prevail in all of the reaches of the continent, but it did eventually influence the whole known continent. It did not survive the first millennium in many parts of North Africa, but in those few centuries its impact was felt on the whole of world Christianity.<sup>269</sup>

Out of Africa comes Christianity in its purest form (first-century teachings), yet Africa has been robbed of not only its heritage but the dignity of being the birthplace of early Christian doctrine and dissemination of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The following quote captures the essence of the stance taken for the inclusion of this information.

Major participants in Euro-American theology seem to have thus missed entirely the literary richness of the distinctive African Christian imprint on proto-Europe and the formation of the Christian mind. These mistakes have been passed on through the graduate studies programs that have formed scholars of all continents subliminally. The liberal bias wrongly assumed that Africa was inexperienced in understanding cultural conflict resolution and only needed larger doses of European enlightenment to solve its maladies. It is more accurately described as a specific prejudice of Hegelian idealism to assume that everything of intellectual importance that happened near the Mediterranean is really at heart European and therefore hardly could be imagined to have had an African origin. African origins are prima facie ruled out. Here is where Alexandria gets its unjustified reputation as being simply a non-African extension of the European intellect.<sup>270</sup>

The following accounts are interpreted pointing to Africa's beliefs in its participation in the history of Christianity. The Acts of the Apostles also presents an account in

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<sup>269</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 83.

<sup>270</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 57-58. Here Oden is referring to Georg Wilhelm Fredrick Hegel - German Philosopher.

which shortly after Jesus Christ ascended into heaven the Holy Spirit appeared to Christians in Jerusalem and the church began spreading to Africa and Europe (2:41-47). Philip evangelized the Ethiopian at Gaza and several years later churches were started in Egypt and then in the rest of northern Africa. It was twenty years after Paul began his missionary journeys in Asia that he finally reached Europe during his third missionary journey 54 CE.<sup>271</sup> Before Paul began his first missionary journey in 47 CE, not only had Philip come in contact with the Ethiopian, but Acts 10 records that Peter had already preached to Cornelius' family in Caesarea (39 CE) and Mark (although disputed) had taken the gospel to Egypt (42 CE). Christianity had reached northern Africa and was growing rapidly and although it did not prevail throughout the entire continent, its influence did. Not surviving the first millennium in many parts of northern Africa, did not impede the impact of African Christianity on Christians worldwide.

Oden discusses seven ways Africa shaped the Christian mind with the considerable transfer of scholarly strength and creativity from Africa to Europe. They are: academia, exegesis, dogmatism, ecumenism, monastic communities, philosophy and dialectics. He mentions the library of Alexandria, which was unsurpassed for five centuries, serving as the model for European university libraries. However, for purposes of this thesis, the monastic communities are key to the dissemination of the gospel from the heart of the Nile to western Africa. This occurred from two major African centers; Scetis<sup>272</sup> and Numidia (southern Egypt), sprang monasteries that

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<sup>271</sup> William J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* ([n.p.]).

<sup>272</sup> Famous Egyptian monastery of the fourth century (<http://www.hermitary.com/articles/moses.html>) January 24, 2010.

spread throughout northern Africa to Mauretania on the northwest coast during the fourth century.

### **5.3 The Dissemination of Christianity in Northern Africa**

This section examines the dissemination of Christianity across northern Africa and possible connections with the reintroduction to West Africans beginning in the fifteenth century. The role of the Christian church and trade routes are the main vehicles discussed in this process. Monasteries as a means of spreading Christianity were previously discussed in 5.2 of this thesis.

The records of the development of the church in this area have not been preserved. However, according to Synesius' (Greek bishop of Ptolemais in Libya) letters, there were half a dozen bishoprics in the area in 410.<sup>273</sup> Christianity did not only rest in the eastern corner of Africa but spread throughout the Maghrib (North Africa). Africa, in the first century experienced much in the way of the dissemination of the gospel. Its connection with the Jewish pogrom of CE 58 and the Jewish rising of 73 to the institution of the Catholic Church left in its wake the beginnings of Gnosticism and Monophysitism. The passion for truth was exhibited in the Christian martyrs of Africa as well as the Greek and Roman worlds of the first century. Isichei suggests, "The known Christian history of the Maghrib begins dramatically in 180 CE, with the martyrdom of five women and seven men from the little village of Scilli, near Carthage."<sup>274</sup> Isichei recounting the story, says that in the bag of one of the martyred were the "books and letters of Paul, a just man". A Roman proconsul, described as a religious man who presided at their trial, tried to dissuade them and suggested they take thirty days to think things over, but the Scilli martyrs refused saying: "Today we

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<sup>273</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 26.

<sup>274</sup> Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa : From Antiquity to the Present* 34.



are martyrs in heaven, Thanks be to God”.<sup>275</sup> Dominated by a passion for martyrdom these words resound through African Christian history.

With limited knowledge of the beginning of the Christian church in Africa and its early growth until the end of the second century, the earliest dependable records reveal however a well-established church. Britten recounts, “The late Dr. Byang Kato of Nigeria has correctly pointed out that during the first 200 years of the Christian church, the strongest churches were in North Africa and western Asia.”<sup>276</sup> An organized religion with established doctrines and beliefs in place is thus indicated. The leaders called upon the emperors to think about the soundness of their faith and provide open-mindedness for it. Falk states, “Justin Martyr, the philosopher from Asia Minor, spent some time in North Africa. Dressed in his philosopher’s cloak, he argued for the reasonableness of the Christian faith according to philosophic thought. From North Africa, he went to Rome where he died a martyr’s death in 166.”<sup>277</sup> Furthermore Walker remarks that, “Tertullian (born c. 155), an apologist of the Christian faith, presented his apology to the emperor, hoping to promote a greater understanding of the Christian faith.”<sup>278</sup> Many would scoff at first-century African philosophy, making one believe that the abundance of extant documents belonged solely to Greek and Roman philosophers. Eusebius writes concerning the validity of Mark- being the first to evangelize Africa and it is debated perhaps because it is Africa. However there is no question of “his” validity.

The following point made by P. Schaff is largely accepted and rarely debated: “As commerce with Rome was quite well established and there was a flow of emigrants

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<sup>275</sup> Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa : From Antiquity to the Present* 34.

<sup>276</sup> Bruce Britten, *We Don't Want Your White Religion* (Manzini, Swaziland: B. Britten, 1984) 11.

<sup>277</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 27.

<sup>278</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986) 67.

between Rome and Carthage, Christianity came to North Africa from Rome.”<sup>279</sup> Yet, that the Ethiopian eunuch could possibly evangelize his own people is overlooked.<sup>280</sup> This is part of the degradation of the indigenous people. Falk in his discussion of traditional view concerning the dissemination of the gospel in Ethiopia uncovers the following statements.

The names of early Christians indicate that they probably were servants who had been taught by their masters. The martyrdom of twelve Christians in A.D. 180 reveals that they were of the Romanized population of Numidia. This indicates the spread of the Christian faith among the people of North Africa toward the end of the second century.<sup>281</sup>

What of Africa’s traditional religion? The encounter of Portuguese in the fifteenth century with Africa indicated a disbelief in its viability as a civilized culture. Africa is depicted as hedonistic and without religion. Africa’s traditional and Christian religious histories were either not known, ignored or not evident. Suggestions follow which may shed some light.

The gradual process of the extinction of Christianity in the Maghrib is one of the great mysteries of African history. Although the evidence is fragmented, it is clear that the Arab invaders encountered a Christian culture largely confined to the towns and weakened both by sectarian divisions and by the invasions of first, Arian Vandals (the Vandals were Gothic in language and Arian in religion) and persecuted Catholics and Donatists impartially.<sup>282</sup> Falk suggests that the church was

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<sup>279</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., 8 vols. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) 2:27.

<sup>280</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 96-97.

<sup>281</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 27-28.

<sup>282</sup> Discussed summarily: Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 42-58.

strengthened through dynamic leaders, such as Tertullian and Cyprian, but weakened through doctrinal controversies, Montanism, Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism and through its encounter with external peoples.<sup>283</sup> He states:

It was a dynamic form of Christianity, producing great scholars and theologians like Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria and Augustine. African Christianity made a great contribution to Christendom through scholarship, participation in Church councils, defense of the Faith, movements like monasticism, theology, translation and preservation of the Scriptures, martyrdom, the famous Catechetical School of Alexandria, liturgy and even heresies and controversies.<sup>284</sup>

From 64 to 311 CE the church in North Africa endured persecutions and with it Christians multiplied. Fleeing persecution, churches were planted and monasteries sprang up, supporting a theory that indigenous Christianity in Egypt can be attributed to monks. However theological controversies and doctrines slowed the dissemination of Christianity in Egypt. Had the leaders been more concerned with truth the Egyptian church would have prospered in reaching local people despite Muslim teachings. Falk contends that in order for a religion to be successful it must become indigenous.<sup>285</sup> He suggests that Christianity failed in this area because it was too Romanized. Another suggestion is that, "The Bible was translated into Latin but was not made available either in the Punic or in the Berber language."<sup>286</sup> These were the languages of the people. The use of the Latin language prevented Christianity from taking strong roots in North Africa in the services and in the preparation of Christian

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<sup>283</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 38-53.

<sup>284</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* 230.

<sup>285</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 58.

<sup>286</sup> Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa*.

literature. When suppression and invasion came, the church lost contact with the indigenous people.

Falk adds that language, as well as cultural differences between the people of the Delta and those of the interior, slowed down the natural dissemination of the gospel among the people of Middle and Upper Egypt, where “the Coptic language, the dominion of the priests of the popular Egyptian religion, and the old Egyptian religion stood in the way”<sup>287</sup>.

The above analysis helps to explain the apparent absence of an organized religion reaching into the fifteenth century. However, Christianity seemed to have spread into the upper regions of Egypt as early as the late second century. Neander, Schneider and Torrey support the theory of the spread of the gospel through persecution.

“Persecution once again was the agent in the wake of the Christians in Thebias under the Emperor Septimius Severus, following the edit of A.D. 202 forbidding conversions to Christianity and Judaism.”<sup>288</sup> Persecution largely confined to Egypt and North Africa led to further expansion of the church, sending Christians fleeing southwards to the cataract regions and to the west into Libya. They continued proclaiming the gospel to indigenous people which caused the church to become rooted in the indigenous populations; the Coptic language, not a hindrance it seems here, was in use and the church took on a national character.

Therefore, there is a possibility that Christianity may have spread across Africa via trade and trade routes. Their development across the continent may have linked Christianity in east Africa to West Africa as far back as the first century. The Iron Age

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<sup>287</sup>Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa* 29.

<sup>288</sup> August Neander, K. F. Th Schneider, and Mary Cutler Torrey, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, 13th American ed., 5 vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1871) 1:83.

evidences West Africa's trade route extending to the Mediterranean and received added incentive with the growth of the port city of Carthage. Carthage (founded c. 800 BCE), became one station for West African gold, ivory, and slaves. Also along these routes West Africa received salt, cloth, beads, and metal goods. Shillington identifies this trade route as the source for West African iron smelting.<sup>289</sup> Trade routes, as logistical networks with identifiable patterns and stoppages, not only served to transport goods from place to place, but new ideas and teachings along the way. The trade route became established over time and if well travelled, lasted for millennia. With the passage of time diversities of culture and often religious beliefs were casually, yet purposely, transported from country to country, coast to coast, and even across continents.

Trade continued into Roman times as travel became more intricate and the routes became more established. Because of distance being a factor, it would seem atypical to conduct business through direct personal contacts. Yet there are typical references to direct travel from the Mediterranean to West Africa. However, most trade was conducted through middlemen who inhabited the area aware of passages through the drying lands.<sup>290</sup> Opportunities for social contact and free exchanges of ideas were prevalent along these routes.

Trans-Saharan trade, encompassing lands from the Mediterranean to West Africa, had existed from pre-historic times but was at its peak from the eighth to the sixteenth centuries. Hallett reveals, "By the end of the first millennium A.D. regular

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<sup>289</sup> Kevin Shillington, *History of Africa*, Rev. 2nd ed. (Oxford; New York: Macmillan Education; Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 46.

<sup>290</sup> Charles Daniels, *The Garamantes of Southern Libya* (Cambridge, England ; New York, N.Y.: Oleander Press, 1970) 22.

trade routes had been established across the Sahara.”<sup>291</sup> Hundreds of Maghribi or Levantine merchants had visited and even settled in the commercial centers of the Sudan. Is it so hard to imagine that these same roads that brought Muslim scholars from Cordoba and Baghdad had not previously brought Christian scholars acquiring first-hand descriptions of the lands beyond the desert? Maghribi merchants were most familiar with those parts of the Sudan that provided the southern termini of the trans-Saharan routes, and it is of these areas, such as Ghana and Kanem, that the most detailed descriptions have been preserved. Both regions shared the commercial advantage of occupying the end of the main trans-Saharan routes.

Muslims and Christians in the Maghrib had in common an equal fervor for truth, and a similar combativeness. However, Muslims succeeded where Christians failed in spreading their faith far to the south, across the Saharan trade routes, and into the western Sudan. In search of truth, Brown states, “In the Roman ruins of Hippo, Arab visitors looked for the cathedral of ‘Augodjin, a great doctor of the Christian religion’.”<sup>292</sup> Coming upon public baths in this region they mistakenly took them for the Roman cathedral of “Augodjin, ‘Iglisia Rumi’.”<sup>293</sup> Owing to the grandeur of paganism compared to the poverty of Christianity the quest points to awareness by Muslims that Christianity preceded Islam.

Hallett, in discussing the development of territories and states in West Africa observes, “The early traditions of West African peoples are full of stories of migration, but these stories must usually be taken as referring only to a small section

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<sup>291</sup> Robin Hallett, *Africa to 1875; a Modern History* (Ann Arbor,: University of Michigan Press, 1970) 141-42.

<sup>292</sup> Quoted in Peter Robert Lamont Brown, *Augustine of Hippo : A Biography*, New ed. (London: Faber, 2000) 190. They mistook the ruined baths for the remains of a church.

<sup>293</sup> Erwan Marec and Algeria. Service des antiquités., *Hippone, Antique Hippo Regius* ([Alger: Imprimerie Officielle, 1950) 89.

of the community.”<sup>294</sup> West Africa’s linguistic map has a staggering number of diverse languages which proposes a state of cultural stability maintained over a very long period. No doubt some ideas ultimately derived from Kush or ancient Egypt reached West Africa, but they must have suffered considerable modification in the process of transmission, and they could have represented only one element in the complex pattern of the cultures that developed in the region. Hallett states:

Early Muslim writings confirm that the people of West Africa operated a sophisticated network of trade, usually under the authority of a monarch who levied taxes and provided bureaucratic and military support to his kingdom. Sophisticated mechanisms for the economic and political development of the involved African areas were in place before Islam further strengthened trade, towns and government in western Africa.<sup>295</sup>

Islam replaced the managers of the trade route, but can it be said they controlled the travelers and the ideas, political and/or religious thoughts of those traveling? It is therefore not unreasonable to speculate that Christians from Ethiopia, North Africa and Arabia shared the gospel message with the trading partners from the ancient kingdoms of west and southeast Africa?

The knowledge of the biblical God came before the European missionaries landed in the land of Phut. In the biblical Table of Nations (Genesis 10:6 cf. I Chronicles 1:8), Phut is named as the third son of Ham, who is one of the sons of Noah. Josephus describes Phut, as “the founder of Libya to the south, and called the inhabitants

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<sup>294</sup> Hallett, *Africa to 1875; a Modern History* 145-46.

<sup>295</sup> "History of Western Africa" Encyclopaedia Britannica inc., "Encyclopaedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite," (Chicago, IL: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 2005).

Phutites, from himself".<sup>296</sup> This biblical Libya is not exactly the same as modern day Libya.<sup>297</sup> In biblical text, Kush (Cush) along with Phut and Libya were said to be helpers of Egypt. Burton connects Christianity from east to west through Muslim missionaries. Direct access to the bible was not necessary since many would have been familiar with major biblical stories and characters through the work of Muslim missionaries. Names like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus would have been familiar to them as they may have come in contact with Christians along the routes. Burton presents the following argument.

Just by exposure to the Qur'an, they would have heard stories of the virgin birth and Jesus' miraculous healing ministry. They would have heard Jesus referred to as the Messiah and been familiar with his role on the day of judgment. The sons of Put may not have been exposed to the interpretation of biblical faith that predominated the cathedrals of Europe, but they had already been provided with practical glimpse of God's Word. The foundation for the gospel had already been laid. One can't help but wonder how different things would have been in the territory of the Bantu if the European missionaries had entered the continent with pure motives.<sup>298</sup>

By the third century, Christianity had spread west to Mauretania. Oden states, "From the start of the third century Tertullian was aware that Christians were being persecuted in Mauretania."<sup>299</sup> He continues by recounting that the bishops of Mauretania took an active part in wide-ranging African councils in Carthage. One bishop in particular is clearly called a Mauretanian (Quintas). Furthermore, by the

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<sup>296</sup> Flavius Josephus, William Whiston, and Susan B. Anthony Collection (Library of Congress), *The Works of Flavius Josephus: Comprising the Antiquities of the Jews; a History of the Jewish Wars; and Life of Flavius Josephus, Written by Himself* (Philadelphia,: J. B. Smith & co., 1854) Book 1:6/2.

<sup>297</sup> Herodotus used the name Libya to refer to Africa. Herodotus, Robert B. Strassler, and Andrea L. Purvis, *The Landmark Herodotus : The Histories* (London: Quercus, 2008).

<sup>298</sup> Keith Augustus Burton, *The Blessing of Africa : The Bible and African Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007) 204-05.

<sup>299</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 90.



third century Caesarea Mauretania (Cherchel) had a Christian community whose cemetery goes back to the persecution of Septimius Severus. Additionally, Tipasa, on the coast of western Algeria, has necropolis evidences and third-century votive inscriptions showing a Christian presence before Constantine.<sup>300</sup>

Christianity was well established in north Sudan, but how far south was it established in the first millennium? The number of Coptic and Ethiopian Christians who continue to recall and practice the tradition of early Christianity greatly outnumber those in the Maghrib, due to the fury of the Arab conquest. The dissemination of Christianity appears to end in the upper westerly portion of Africa. The next section discusses the possibility that Christianity and the traditional religions of the African people have common ground. This discussion provides information essential to the re-reading of Colossians from an African American postcolonial perspective. Also the similarities between Christianity and African Traditional Religion are discussed to investigate a possible link to first-century Christian teachings and its dissemination from the eastern to western African (see subsection 5.2 – 5.3).

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<sup>300</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 88.

## PART TWO – CHAPTER SIX

### AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION (ATR)

Describing ATR, in the sense of its/their origins, tends to be difficult in that they cannot be traced to any one particular group of people. Africa is not a continent with people sharing common traditions and so the religions of Africa, although they come under the umbrella of traditional religions, are varied in many respects. However, ATR does have universal points which are discussed in subsection 6.3. Hallett suggests, “Yet, every religion, not only the so-called historical religions, has a history behind it insofar as it must have been shaped by the thoughts and actions of individual men and women.”<sup>301</sup>

Oden writes that Africa’s traditional religions are said to pre-date Christianity by thousands of years. “There is an enduring pre-Christian traditional African religious past in the north of Africa during the entire first Christian millennium: Pharaonic, proto-Nubian, Libyan, Capsian and Ghanian, reaching far back into African prehistory.”<sup>302</sup> They remained indigenously African even under a military force that compels them to adapt to multiple colonial coercions. Early Christianity met not only with Greco-Roman religions but had to deal with traditional African cultures in the remote villages of the Maghreb (also Maghrib) and Nile.

J. S. Mbiti credits Christianity with transforming traditional African religion. With their combined strength they were able to stand up to what could have been seen as idolatrous Roman imperial civic religion. He further points out that in a study of comparative metaphors it is clear “how the motifs of ancient Pharaonic religion (such

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<sup>301</sup> Hallett, *Africa to 1875; a Modern History* 70.

<sup>302</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 66.

as spiritual ascent and eternal life) were echoed and included in the works of Origen, Athanasius and Pachomius.”<sup>303</sup> Therefore although the traditional religions of Africa pre-date the introduction of Christianity, much of what we know of the first century is related to the effects of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

## 6.1 Triple Heritage

Africa’s religious history is complex and there are many questions with few answers. According to Mazrui, “Africa is a continent with a triple heritage.”<sup>304</sup> Western, indigenous, and Semitic cultures have each found a home for thousands of years in Africa. This triple heritage is uniquely manifest in the area of religion. Three religions in particular: Islam, Christianity, and African traditional religion are all deeply rooted in Africa’s past and co-existed in various regions at some point in the history of Africa. So too were the mystery, mythological and Jewish religions in Colossae. The mutual exclusiveness of Islam, Christianity, and ATR has been overstated ignoring their mutual influences. Shaw states, “The reality is that both ATR and Islam cultivated a widespread longing for the kingdom of God and for a sacred king that eventually led millions of Africans to seek their fulfillment in the redemptive reign of Christ.”<sup>305</sup> This view must be substantiated in the context of those who have experienced and practiced said religions. However in the context of this thesis ATR is a possible link to first-century Christianity and its reception in the fifteenth by West Africans who are the ancestors of the enslaved Africans in the New World. It serves as a key to their understanding of the gospel as presented both in Africa and in North America during the time of the slave trade and subsequent slavery.

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<sup>303</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* 229.

<sup>304</sup> Ali Al Amin Mazrui, *The Africans : A Triple Heritage*, 1st American ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986).

<sup>305</sup> Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa : A Short History of African Christianity* 76.

## 6.2 Mid Second Millennium

Christianity in the middle of the second millennium was somewhat of a mixed bag in Africa. The Portuguese presented the gospel reflecting their culture which may have proven problematic. Britten explains that it can be likened to a loaf of bread.<sup>306</sup> The bread is Christianity in its fundamental form, but the wrapper that holds it can differ according to who is presenting it. In this case Europe brought the bread/gospel wrapped in European culture and doctrines. The Europeans were unwilling to unwrap Christianity so that the Africans could experience it in its elemental form.

As ancestors to the enslaved Africans in the New World the discussion of the identity and religious beliefs of the West Africans in the fifteenth century provides information that formulates the re-reading of Colossians from an African American postcolonial perspective. The practice of Christianity in Africa before the arrival of the Portuguese can be documented only to the eleventh century.<sup>307</sup> However, much of the practices of traditional religion of West Africa resemble Christianity. In exploring ATR a link is made between Christianity in first-century Africa and the beliefs of the Africans when they encountered the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. Traditional religion was a way of life for those Africans which beliefs they carried with them to the New World.

The Spanish and Portuguese arrived on the west coast of Africa armed with weapons and the assumption that Africa was devoid of religion of any kind. They were either uninformed or refused to believe that the people of Africa could possibly possess a true knowledge of God. Mbiti points out however that, "Christianity in Africa is so old that it can rightly be described as an indigenous, traditional and

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<sup>306</sup> Britten, *We Don't Want Your White Religion*.

<sup>307</sup> Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind : The African Seedbed of Western Christianity* 197.

African religion.”<sup>308</sup> It bears repeating that Christianity was well established in Northern Africa, which included Egypt, part of the Sudan and Ethiopia long before the start of Islam in the seventh century.

Mbiti reports that in the fifteenth century the process of evangelization in Africa began with the trivialization of the African belief in the Supreme Being; treating African cosmology as fantasy. He further states that because the Africans claim to a belief in one Supreme Being did not conform to the outward manifestations of the religions known to the Europeans it was considered erroneous and had to be corrected.<sup>309</sup> The missionaries could not cope with the thought of divinities and ancestral spirits taking prominence in Christianity as it had in African religion.<sup>310</sup> This was not the consensus of everyone during that period. J. L. Cox for example names Bishop John Colenso<sup>311</sup> as a controversial person who was bold enough to speak out for the validity of the African referencing of God and to accept the African names for God not forcing European names or traditional names from the bible<sup>312</sup>. Africa’s religious history is too vast to be incorporated in this single work but it bears mentioning the shortcomings of the presentation of the gospel in the fifteenth century as a precursor to its failures among the enslaved African in the New World. Not

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<sup>308</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* 229.

<sup>309</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* 10. See also , Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris,: Présence africaine, 1969) 75-108.

<sup>310</sup> Divinities are defined as ministers of God and distinguished from the Supreme Being (God) and lesser spirits. For a fuller discussion on divinities see Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, Rev. ed. (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2005) 124-46, and E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London,: S.C.M. Press, 1973) 173.

<sup>311</sup> 1814-1883; Anglican Bishop of Natal, F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) s.v.

<sup>312</sup> Cox and Haar, *Uniquely African? : African Christian Identity from Cultural and Historical Perspectives* 93.

making Christianity indigenous, exploitation and marginalization were key factors in the failure of the gospel to truly reach the people exposed to it in West Africa.<sup>313</sup>

Perhaps it can be determined that missionaries, like the writer of the letter to the Colossians were truly remiss in their attempts to evangelize. Perhaps it was felt that the message they brought should not be blemished by allowing the indigenous to interpret scripture in the light of their experiences and customs. The fear was perhaps the Africans would pervert the message and so former beliefs and customs were rejected and condemned as heresy. The first part of the following quote is a misnomer concerning the "introduction" of Christianity in Africa in the fifteenth century; however the second supports the missionaries' view of ATR. Gairdner and Mott state, "When Christianity was first introduced to Africa, African religion was rejected 'as perfect specimens of absolute error, masterpieces of hell's invention', which Christianity was simply called upon to oppose, uproot and destroy"<sup>314</sup>.

Because no middle ground could be reached between the missionary message and the African world view "a form of religious schizophrenia" was created as neither party could see giving in to the other. Thus Ntoedibe concludes, "This influenced most colonial writers to state that there were no figures in African cultures playing a similar role to that played by the Jesus of Christianity."<sup>315</sup> However, the following example from African traditional religion shows some similarities.

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<sup>313</sup> For further discussions see: Burton, *The Blessing of Africa : The Bible and African Christianity*, Cox and Haar, *Uniquely African? : African Christian Identity from Cultural and Historical Perspectives*, Falk, *The Growth of the Church in Africa*, Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa : From Antiquity to the Present*, A. F. C. Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans 1485-1897, Ibadan History Series* (Harlow: Longmans, 1969).

<sup>314</sup> William Henry Temple Gairdner and John R. Mott, *Echoes from Edinburgh, 1910* (New York, Chicago [etc.]: F. H. Revell company, 1910) 137.

<sup>315</sup> Gomang Seratwa Ntoedibe, "Ngaka and Jesus as Liberators:A Comparative Reading", Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube Shomanah, *The Bible in Africa : Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2000) 498. Ntoedibe cites Mbiti's "Some African Concepts of Christology." In Ed. G.F. Vicedon, "Christ and the Young Churches. London: SPCK, 1972, 51-60.

Ntloedibe compares Jesus and Ngaka as liberators, saviors and sacred agents.<sup>316</sup>

Ntloedibe remarks:

The role of Jesus in the Jewish society is similar to the role of Ngaka in the Batswana society. Yet, when colonial Christianity was introduced to Batswana, the role of the Ngaka in his/her society was condemned. The same Jesus who built his reputation of healings in the Jewish culture was made to be indifferent to Batswana culture by the missionary enterprise.<sup>317</sup>

Instead of dismissing the belief in the Ngaka, the missionaries could have been more successful by exploring the beliefs of the Batswana (Botswana) society. A comparison could also be made to the writer to the Colossians as he elevates Jesus over their gods and the Torah. Perhaps, in the case of Batswana, the Ngaka would have proven to be Jesus. The Batswana were forced to differentiate between the two, instead of embracing them as one. Instead Jesus was reduced to being referred as an agent who serves God's creation and Ngaka takes preeminence as liberator, savior and sacred agent. West and Dube state, "In spite of the attempt to denigrate the role of the Ngaka, his/her role remains indispensable."<sup>318</sup> Similarly the community in Colossae seemed unwilling to let go of former beliefs which perhaps occasioned the letter.

### **6.3 Christianity and ATR**

ATR has hundreds of variations, yet, within its specificities, there are enough universal points to use African Traditional Religion as an umbrella term referring to

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<sup>316</sup> For more comparisons of Jesus and Ngaka see pages 504-509 in West and Dube Shomanah, *The Bible in Africa : Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends*.

<sup>317</sup> Gomang Seratwa Ntloedibe West and Dube Shomanah, *The Bible in Africa : Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* 509-10.

<sup>318</sup> West and Dube Shomanah, *The Bible in Africa : Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* 510.

the traditional religions of the people of sub-Saharan Africa. Corduan, making the comparison between the two states:

The elements that these cultures hold loosely in common include (1) the recognition and worship of the high god, (2) the importance attached to relationships with the ancestors; (3) the importance attached to age grades and rites of passage and (4) a philosophy of life that focuses on this-worldly concerns and present spiritual agencies.<sup>319</sup>

Specifically, West African traditional religion sets the stage for the relationship that existed between the Africans who were shipped to the New World. The beliefs held by the Africans prior to being sent to the New World followed them and impacted their reception of Christianity as enslaved (see Subsection 10.6). In describing basic elements of West African traditional religion E. B. Idowu, basing his study on the concept of Africa as a whole, proposed a five-fold classification. "These are belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in the ancestors, belief in spirits, belief in the practice of magic and medicine."<sup>320</sup> African tribes acknowledge the supreme God in one way or another. This one attribute, albeit there are many, stands out because it is reflected in Christianity as a foundation of belief. In ATR, however, either this god is recognized fully or with little reflection. Corduan suggests:

The God of ATR fits the picture of the God of original monotheism. God is thought to be (1) associated with the sky, (2) all-powerful, (3) all-knowing, (4) eternal, (5) spirit (not having a physical body), (6) a person, (7) good, though he can be capricious (unpredictable), (8) creator of the world, (9) provider.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths : A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) 142.

<sup>320</sup> S. A. Abioye, *Basic Text on West African Traditional Religion for Higher Education*, [1st ed. ([Akunlemu, Oyo state, Nigeria: Immaculate-City Publishers, 2001) 25.

<sup>321</sup> Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths : A Christian Introduction to World Religions* 144.



This God is not a totally different being from the God of the Christians, although the name(s) attributed may be. The West African religions had numerous subordinate gods but “God” in these contexts is the “supreme God”. God is Olorun, meaning “owner of the sky”; the source of all power.

In West African traditional religion many different gods are recognized that are inferior to the original supreme God. Among the Yoruba, Olorun has been practically displaced by Orisa-nla (carried out the actual work of creation). The Yoruba, in fact, have hundreds of such lower deities called the “orisa” (estimates vary from 400 to 1,700). It is difficult to know the exact number of gods, because many of them may be known by several different names. According to Lawson the term “god” has referred to the orisa (a common scholarly practice).<sup>322</sup> If the use of this terminology is correct, Yoruba religion is polytheistic; other scholars, however, dispute the appropriateness of this label.<sup>323</sup> According to Mbiti they would rather refer to the orisa as divinities, thereby indicating that they are something less than gods. This understanding maintains the idea that ATR is uniformly monotheistic.

## **Conclusion**

Part Two has shown that Africa as an integral part of the dissemination of the gospel to the world has been largely ignored. The identities of the people of first-century Africa have proven that Christianity had reached Africa earlier than in Europe and produced biblical scholars who made major contributions to the literature of early Christianity. In comparing the first-century inhabitants of both Colossae and Africa

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<sup>322</sup> E. Thomas Lawson, *Religions of Africa : Traditions in Transformation*, 1st ed., *Religious Traditions of the World*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

<sup>323</sup> Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* 75-77.

their reception of the teachings of the gospel was met with acceptance of its basic tenets.

Referring to the African religious system as “devil worship”, Europeans wanted them to cease this form of worship and adopt theirs. What the Europeans saw as polygamy was considered sinful and often a pretentious conversion resulted. Bond, Johnson and Walker state, “The missionaries did get some villages to cease the overt practice of their traditional religion with the promise to teach them Christianity, which the Africans imagined to be a stronger religion because it had given the Europeans the power to conquer them.”<sup>324</sup> This did not last very long because this belief did not meet the total needs of the African. When the villages came upon hard times, the Christian practices taught by the missionaries were insufficient. They returned to their old practices when they realized what they were being taught did not keep misfortune from entering into their lives, often brought on by the exploitation at the hands of those bringing this seemingly new religion.

So delusional were European missionaries that they did not recognize one of the oldest Christian churches in the world; the Ethiopian Church. Missionaries still arrived in Ethiopia with their own religious doctrines and strategies, believing they were fostering the work of Christianity. Bond, Johnson and Walker also point out, “Their spiritual mission is to convert Ethiopians Christians to Christianity! African Christianity, like Ethiopian Christianity is Christianity. Both emerged out of an expanding “world system” at different periods of historical time.”<sup>325</sup> The supposition of bringing Christianity as a new faith to Africa was constantly repeated without

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<sup>324</sup> George C. Bond, Walton R. Johnson, and Sheila S. Walker, *African Christianity : Patterns of Religious Continuity* (New York: Academic Press, 1979) 11.

<sup>325</sup> Bond, Johnson, and Walker, *African Christianity : Patterns of Religious Continuity* xiv.

regard for the beliefs already in place. Careful consideration would not only reveal Christianity in its purest forms, but the knowledge of Christianity's origins on that continent reflected in ATR.

Altschul, in the following quote, references either the place of Africans among the martyrs of early Christianity or uses a kind of euphemism in pointing out the immense sacrifice made by early Christians for the spreading of the gospel. "Having produced tens of thousands of martyrs in the first three centuries after Christ, the African Church led the way in preserving the vitality of the faith passed on from the martyrs when Christianity was legally tolerated after 313 A.C."<sup>326</sup> African deserts, at that time, became invigorating sources of life. They were inhabited by holy monks and virgins as the cities were becoming polluted by political and economic immoralities. Some Christians were falling prey to and perpetuating these practices as others went to the deserts of Egypt and Ethiopia to repent and be purified.

The tenacity of the Africans to identify with Christianity although in opposition to it in some cases, speaks to their acuity in discerning truth in the way it was being presented. Comparatively, the West Africans and the Colossians accepted the basic tenets of the gospel, but questioned the application of it as it related to their former beliefs. In so doing, both groups were negatively labeled and treated as inferior intellectually and spiritually. In re-reading Colossians, without the obstacle of these labels, the views of both the Colossians and the enslaved Africans (in particular) are made clearer. The information discussed in this section is further utilized in understanding the enslaved Africans' reception of Christianity in Part Three.

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<sup>326</sup> Altschul, *An Unbroken Circle : Linking Ancient African Christianity to the African-American Experience* xiii.

## **PART THREE**

### **IDENTITY THROUGH THE ENSLAVED AFRICANS IN NORTH AMERICA**

#### **Introduction**

Part Two introduced the background of Christianity in Africa as a footprint for the reception of Christianity among the enslaved Africans in the New World. As shown with the first-century Colossians and the Africans in the fifteenth century the enslaved Africans in the New World, when presented with the gospel were not allowed to make Christianity or their Christian beliefs indigenous. Part Three will show that the outcome proved beneficial to them despite the oppression and controlling efforts of the enslavers to subdue them. It also serves as the basis for the re-reading of Colossians from an African American postcolonial perspective.

A double standard existed where Christianity was practiced by the dominant culture (enslavers) who enjoyed liberty as they interpreted the scriptures, but for the subdominant culture (enslaved) it meant servitude and conformity. Becoming Christians did not improve their way of life as the Bible taught (John 10.10; 2 Corinthians 5.17). The dominant culture neither accepted the language of the oppressed, nor did they allow them to master their language. With the presentation of the gospel rules for the form of worship followed. Worship was to conform to European interpretations of acceptance and the enslaved were to only worship in methods taught by the dominant culture. These were standards which prevented the practice of Christianity from being indigenous to the enslaved (See subsection 10.6).

Christianity, although intended to minimize, maximized the humanity of the enslaved African and takes a central role in the creation of African America. To clarify: the

dominant society in this discussion is the enslavers of Africans who were sent to the New World and the subordinates are the enslaved Africans. The discussion will focus on the way Biblical language in particular has been used by the dominant society and the subordinates during the time of the Atlantic Slave Trade and into the present. Why language? Language was a vehicle used by both the enslaved and the enslavers to not only accomplish the means for survival as they saw it, but it identified them. As the dominant culture sought to silence the voice<sup>327</sup> of the subordinate culture it was met with refusal and their voices united to give utterance to who they were and what they had to say about themselves. I. Berlin expresses that, “although denied the right to marry, they made families; denied the right to an independent religious life, they established churches; denied the right to hold property, they owned many things. Defined as property and condemned as little more than beasts, they refused to surrender their humanity.”<sup>328</sup>

The discussion will show how language has given voice to and has come to shape the “identity” of African America today. Erin Aubry describes the African American experience as “otherness”.<sup>329</sup> Powell states, “... and Language – especially language. It didn’t merely survive in the barren cold of otherness; it thrived in it.”<sup>330</sup> In this depiction of the “other” the African American evolved. The evolution however, did not erase the distinguishing characteristics of race and culture. Wimbush remarks that, “African Americans, perhaps more than any other racial/ethnic group

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<sup>327</sup> Used here to describe the collective desire to be heard and understood. Henry Louis Gates, 'Writing Race', Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995) 218. "...an authentic black voice - a voice of deliverance from the deafening discursive silence..."

<sup>328</sup> Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003) 4.

<sup>329</sup> Erin Aubry, 'The Soul of Black Talk' in Kevin Powell, *Step into a World : A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* (New York: Wiley, 2000).

<sup>330</sup> Powell, *Step into a World : A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* 152.

in the United States, by historical tradition and present realities, represent radical otherness – of origins, appearance, speech, orientation to world, and (for most, even today) physical location”.<sup>331</sup> As with other races, African Americans are distinguishable by their physical features. However, that is not what makes them different. Among the defining factors of this race are the language and its development within their culture.

Three discussions will be presented examining the role of language in the identification process of the enslaved African in the New World:

- The use of language by the enslavers
- Second the use of language by the enslaved
- Third language as instrumental in sustaining the culture of African Americans

What has thus far been discussed serves as a precursor to the fourth part of this thesis which will be a re-reading of the epistle to the Colossians from an African American postcolonial lens. Therefore specific comments will be kept to a minimum and will only reflect what is pertinent thus far to the discussion.

Differing language between groups of people is a barrier to understanding one another. When that barrier is overcome, there is then communication, next if continued, comes dialogue, and finally understanding.<sup>332</sup> The early enslavers seemed to understand this concept to the degree that separation of the slaves from their relatives and/or neighbors prevented understanding which could possibly lead

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<sup>331</sup> Wimbush, "Reading..." Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Teaching the Bible : The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998) 108.

<sup>332</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'The Language of African Literature', Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 288-89.

to rebellion. With the mastery of a language came power. Smitherman states, “However, because of the Black Liberation Movement I learned that language is a people’s identity, culture, and history, that language is power.”<sup>333</sup>

On one hand, with a common language, the power to unite and rebel was evident; on the other hand, without a common language, the power to control and enslave developed. The comparison can be made to the “Babel” experience in the Bible (Genesis 11:1-9). There is also evidence in the power of language to manipulate events. In the language or rhetoric of disease, labeling persons sick or a potential danger to society places a stigma on those persons. For example, Leviticus 13.44-46 instructs that when a leper came in close proximity of persons not infected, he or she was instructed to yell, “unclean” to indicate the potential to harm. In Leviticus 15.19 women were instructed to stay away from others during their period of menstruation. The flow of blood was believed to represent uncleanness.

Using language to strip the enslaved of power and control are ways the enslaver benefited from the institution of slavery. Rendering the enslaved powerless to communicate with others placed them in subjection to the enslaver. The enslaved was thus labeled illiterate because they were unable to be understood by or to understand the enslaver. One has to wonder why such lengths were taken. The effect on the economy through loss of this institution, although not justified, is evident, but why the extremity?

The enslaved Africans were shipped to a country unfamiliar to them. They were prohibited from acquiescing to all semblances of their religious practices and form of

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<sup>333</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006) 145.

dress. Their names were also changed. They were neither to mention their former gods nor recognize them. After being exploited in their homeland, the Africans were sent to the New World to be further exasperated and denigrated, but before they left, some had to be catechized and or baptized as Christians.<sup>334</sup> Upon arrival in the New World after being “chattelized” in a manner worse than the animals on ships, they were sold to the highest bidder and in most cases immediately separated from their families.<sup>335</sup> This separation was also often done before leaving their homeland. With the same Bible presented to them in Africa and the promise of salvation, in the New World they were told that slavery was their plight in life.

The voices of the enslaved Africans were being silenced and the manipulation of language played a vital role in the process. To expedite matters, because the demand was great, at one point the catechists were Africans who were taught the doctrines of the faith by the Church eliminating the need of the enslavers to learn their language.<sup>336</sup> However, upon arrival in the New World, language presented another problem. The slave traders and future slave owners were unable to communicate with each other or the slaves. A language had to be created so that the slave traders, the slaves and the new owners could understand each other. A pidgin language was created just for that purpose, however after that the owners could use whatever method they needed to get the point across, mostly it was corporal or other physical means of communication. There was no time or need to learn the languages of the enslaved who were brought over to work. There was little chance of going back as it was too expensive, and they were going to work for free. They were

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<sup>334</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade : The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997) 9.

<sup>335</sup> Joseph R. Washington, Jr. "Folk Religion and Negro Congregations: The Fifth Religion", Gayraud S. Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies : An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989) 51.

<sup>336</sup> Thomas, *The Slave Trade : The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* 396.



kept in the bowels of the ship sometimes for the entire journey and they had no means or direction to return home. With the language seemingly confused and their former lives eradicated, this new strange world was home.

The significance of the languages of the enslaved was lost on the enslaver. To the enslaver the enslaved Africans were of a subordinate culture and were to be used to the advantage of the enslaver. The enslaved as indigenous in Africa were now in the Diaspora in America. The problems with communication between the enslaved and enslavers were only relevant in the process of enslaving and controlling the enslaved. Not only were Africa languages not considered important, not meriting examination, but the enslaved were ridiculed for trying to adjust to their new language.

When the African came to the United States and encountered in English certain sounds not present in his native language, he did what any other person to whom English was a foreign language would have done under similar circumstances – he substituted sounds from his own language which appeared to him to resemble most closely those English sounds which were unfamiliar to him.<sup>337</sup>

Forced to adopt a version of English not acceptable to the enslavers, a common language evolved because the practice of mixing Africans from different ethnic-linguistic groups was developed in order to frustrate communication and rebellion. Smitherman reveals, “However, enslaved Africans stepped up to the challenge and made English work for them by creating a new language using the English language vocabulary.”<sup>338</sup> This strategy was crucial to the liberation of the slaves as it was also

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<sup>337</sup> Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* 10.

<sup>338</sup> Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, Rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000) 25-26.

used to build hope through the use of scriptures. The language of the Bible united the enslaved as passages were often extracted in attempts to learn to read, not having the opportunity to formally learn. Groups such as the abolitionists and Quakers were instrumental in teaching and supplying literature in order to give slaves the opportunity to learn to read.<sup>339</sup>

Between 1620 and 1700 little direct or indirect evidence of the speech of slaves survives in manuscripts.<sup>340</sup> Some of the manuscripts that do exist are in the form of scant letters and journals. The study is documented through comparison and reconstruction. Despite the lack of documentation of the language of the enslaved during their time of enslavement and that of indigenous peoples in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Federal Writers' Project includes more than two thousand interviews with former slaves in seventeen states collected between 1936 and 1938. These were accounts of life in antebellum South told from the perspective of African American former slaves.<sup>341</sup> What concerns this thesis is the language that was discovered in this collection. Dillard reveals, in reference to the evidence of the language of the enslaved:

There is, in short, evidence that by the end of the eighteenth century slaves from Massachusetts to South Carolina used varieties of English ranging from West African Pidgin to (nearly) Standard English. To discover the evidence, one must examine some relatively obscure

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<sup>339</sup> Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Beautiful Soul of John Woolman, Apostle of Abolition*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008) 196-97.

<sup>340</sup> J. L. Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York,: Vintage Books, 1973) 77-78.

<sup>341</sup> Norman R. Yetman, *Life under The "Peculiar Institution"; Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection [Library of Congress* (New York,: Holt, 1970) 1.

documents. But the documentation is available to anyone who will look for it.<sup>342</sup>

There is a lack of an empirical record of African American language in its incubation period (1619 to the Revolutionary War era). "Speaking Negro" is documented by a few whites as some kind of linguistic phenomenon, but there is no written record of the language used by African Americans of the time of their enslavement. In the late eighteenth century however, there are demonstrations of slave speech in literature and few written examples of speech from enslaved Africans in other parts of the New World. However scant there is linguistic evidence of language patterns still in use by African American speakers of Ebonics.<sup>343</sup>

So important was language to the enslaver that measures were taken to discourage a common language among the enslaved. The following chapter identifies the enslaver through the language.

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<sup>342</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* 93.

<sup>343</sup> "Ebonics is a set of communication patterns and practices resulting from African's appropriation and transformation of a foreign tongue during the African Holocaust." Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* (New York: Routledge, 2000) 19.

## PART THREE - CHAPTER SEVEN

### IDENTITY THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF THE ENSLAVER

Literature on the culture of New World slave populations, particularly from the seventeenth century, is extremely limited.<sup>344</sup> Rickford notes, there is less direct documentation on American slaves than on any other American group.<sup>345</sup> Why should this be? This scourge on the conscience of the nation known as a super-power would serve no purpose other than to diminish it; and diminish it, it does. How does one deal with the history of enslaving people, but to try and erase it? Perhaps the strategy was to not document it so that no paper trail could be found.

#### 7.1 Silencing the Voices of the Enslaved

The enslavers so despised the language of the enslaved that they took measures to silence their voices. The measures noted below are not documentation but helps to portray measures taken by European conquerors of Australia. "That the conquerors in fact continue to fear the "story" of the indigene and seek to silence it is graphically and horrifically illustrated by their favoured torture of cutting out the tongues of the Indians and then, subsequent to this act, forcing them to 'speak'".<sup>346</sup> However, figuratively, the enslaved were castigated with the separation from their homeland and each other. Then they were despised for attempting to speak the language of their oppressors.

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<sup>344</sup> The only contemporary records for this period cited in Walter M. Brasch (1981:30) are the court transcripts of the Salem witch trials of 1692, recorded by Magistrate John Hawthorne, and not published until 1866.

<sup>345</sup> John R. Rickford, *African American Vernacular English : Features, Evolution, Educational Implications* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999) 203. See also Robert Ascher, "Tin-can Archaeology." *Society for Historical Archaeology*, "Historical Archaeology," ([Bethlehem, Pa., etc.]: Society for Historical Archaeology.), 8: 7-16.

<sup>346</sup> Gareth Griffiths, 'The Myth of Authenticity', Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 166-67.

## 7.2 The Arrival of Slave and Free

The Africans first arrived in Jamestown in 1619, and continued arriving in a constant stream until at least 1808, when the slave trade officially ended. African “immigrants” spoke languages other than English; so did the ancestors of many other Americans.

Rickford states, “Their languages were from the Niger-Congo language family, especially the West Atlantic, Mande, and Kwa sub-groups spoken from Senegal and Gambia to the Cameroons, and the Banto sub-group spoken farther south.”<sup>347</sup>

Holloway gives a definitive breakdown of the groups of Africans transported to the New World.<sup>348</sup> Upon arrival the enslaved learned the dominant language, English.

Holloway notes, “But how quickly and completely they did so and with how much influence from the African languages are matters of dispute among linguists.”<sup>349</sup>

At this juncture it is necessary to emphasize that slavery was not new to some of the West African peoples. Arab slave traders introduced the practice into Europe among the Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>350</sup> Geography plays a major part in the linguistic emphasis of this thesis. The introduction of European languages further hampered the abilities of the enslaved to communicate not only with each other, for their languages were diverse but with those who had power over them. Upon arrival to the new world many Africans were introduced to indentured servitude. This was a seven-year term of service practiced within the British colonies, after which the servant was to be freed and awarded land to make his own living. C. S. Keener asserts that this was based on an Hebrew Biblical practice meant to wean the Israelites, newly freed from slavery themselves, away from practicing slavery at all (Lev 25.39-43; Deut

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<sup>347</sup> Rickford, *African American Vernacular English : Features, Evolution, Educational Implications* 324.

<sup>348</sup> Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* 1-17.

<sup>349</sup> Rickford, *African American Vernacular English : Features, Evolution, Educational Implications* 324.

<sup>350</sup> John G. Jackson, *Introduction to African Civilizations* (New York,: University Books, 1970) 305.

15.12-18).<sup>351</sup> Usry and Keener also add, “Poor British people voluntarily entered into indentured servitude, hoping to find more economic prosperity in the New World at the end of their service; African slaves were procured from the Spanish and Portuguese and brought into indentured servitude as well.”<sup>352</sup>

It cannot be determined how early Africans arrived in the Americas. L. Bennett remarks, “Africans arrived in the New World before the Mayflower (1619) and perhaps even before Christopher Columbus (1492.)”<sup>353</sup> However, according to Bennett the first Africans in English America thus were not indentured servants or slaves, but arrived on these same socioeconomic terms on which many English and Irish settlers came.<sup>354</sup> (From 1619) Additionally, “Over the next four decades, Black Americans bought land, voted, testified in court and mingled with whites on a basis of equality. They owned other Negro servants. And at least one Negro imported and paid for a white servant whom he held in servitude.”<sup>355</sup>

C. E. Lincoln states that this institution did not last long as economics became the impetus for longer periods of servitude.

With Africa as an inexhaustible source of supply for free Black labor, Portugal contracted with Spain to provide the Spaniards with slaves for markets Spain had developed in the New World...the monopoly was soon fractured by Spanish, English, Dutch, Danish, and American

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<sup>351</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives : Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992) 188-91.

<sup>352</sup> Glenn Usry and Craig S. Keener, *Black Man's Religion : Can Christianity Be Afrocentric?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 47.

<sup>353</sup> Lerone Bennett, *Before the Mayflower : A History of Black America*, 8th ed. (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 2007), Ivan Van Sertima, *African Presence in Early America* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1987) 25-38.

<sup>354</sup> Bennett, *Before the Mayflower : A History of Black America* 36, Leonard L. Haynes, *The Negro Community within American Protestantism, 1619-1844* (Boston: Christopher Pub. House, 1953) 27-31.

<sup>355</sup> Bennett, *Before the Mayflower : A History of Black America* 36.

competition...as a result there were 500,000 slaves in the American colonies by the time of the Revolution.<sup>356</sup>

Legally servants were supposed to serve their tenure with the idea that they would become a part of the society they once served and therefore become equal to those whom they once served. However, the supply was becoming exhausted and fewer people from across the Atlantic and in the Americas were opting for indentured servitude. Lincoln states,

The colonists quickly learned, however, that it was more economically advantageous to exploit African servants than European ones. The basis was economic; racism – dehumanizing African peoples based on their skin color – was simply an ideology created to justify economic exploitation and relieve ‘tender’ European consciences.<sup>357</sup>

### **7.3 Name Changing: Linguistic Colonialism**

Name changing became a way of disengaging the enslaved from their past, as silencing the sounds of the voices disengaged them from their homeland. Since the late 1960's African Americans have been seeking to lose their given names. Perhaps it represents a desire to lose slave names, a symbol of suppression of African culture and identity in the United States. The changing of names was a practice among early Christians who received new names upon conversion. Ceylonese Buddhists denounce family ties and receive a new name. Muslim converts change their names. The new names of the enslaved Africans were those given to them by their enslavers. In so doing, the language of the enslaved was also changed. Their original names had meaning that linked them to their past and family. Before this

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<sup>356</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, 'The Development of Black Religion in America', Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* 8-9.

<sup>357</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984) 35.

name changing practice became standard (and even after it was not permitted) newborn children were given “Day Names” a West African influence, which carried special significance.<sup>358</sup>

- Sunday - Quashee, Quasheba
- Monday - Cudjo, Juba
- Tuesday - Cubbenah, Beneba
- Wednesday - Quaco, Cuba
- Thursday - Quao, Abba
- Friday - Cuffe, Phebe, Phibbi
- Saturday - Quame, Mimba

Under the influence of certain whites, pejoratives were produced which belittled this practice:

- Quasheba came to represent “the colored mistress of a white man” or “prostitute”
- Quao represented “ugly stupid man”
- Cuffie became “contemptuous name for a negro”
- Sambo became (name given to second son in a family, and/or anyone called Muhammdu “name of a spirit” “to disgrace”, “to be shameful”, generic term for Negroes

The denial of the enslaved to retain their given names was part of the practice called linguistic colonialism. The practice of name changing of Africans by Europeans took place as early as the sixteenth century. Mbemba Nzinga’s, name, then king of Congo, was forever changed to Alfonso. Two other examples of linguistic colonialism

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<sup>358</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* 124.



can be found in South Africa and the United States of America during the time of the colonizing of each. South Africans were allowed to retain their languages; however the languages were relegated to “dialects” by the British. A system of rewards was established for Africans who spoke English. Languages then became a source of the divide and rule strategy. Blacks who spoke different languages had to live in separate quarters. The division caused conflict and competition within the black race as better jobs were given to those who spoke Afrikaans (one of the 11 official languages of South Africa) and for those who spoke English. It was also spoken in Namibia, it is descended from the seventeenth-century Dutch spoken by settlers.

#### **7.4 Learning the Language of the Enslaver**

In the New World African Languages and early forms of Ebonics (see Subsection 8.3 for discussion of term) were devalued by the whites. Enslaved Africans were characterized by their competence in speaking white English which consisted of three categories: “bad English”, “tolerable English”, and “good English”. The following questions point to the complexity of language created by subordinating language for the purpose of oppression. Is Ebonics broken English? Which is a foreigner’s accented English? Or is it Pidgin English developed after slaves learned “proper” English (disputed standing theory). Or is it simplified English taught to Africans and Indians by Whites? In dispute of this theory, Dillard points out that most whites did not know the rules enough to either speak or understand the Pidgin which was spoken in Massachusetts for the 65 to 70 years before examples were recorded.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* 80.

Advertisements for captured runaway Slaves, which indicate the desire to denigrate the enslaved, but shows the lack of understanding by whites of the English spoken by the enslaved included:

- “Speaks very good English”
- “Speaks pretty good English”
- “Speaks proper English”
- “Speaks English though somewhat Negroish”
- “He speaks remarkably good English for a Negro”
- “Speaks rather more proper than Negroes in general”<sup>360</sup>

Slaves born in America commanded a higher price than the native Africans because the former spoke better English than the latter. Thus, we can surmise there was a varied use of the language by enslaved Africans that escaped the comprehension of the slavers and slave owners.

Europeans involved in the slave trade saw no need to learn the language of the people they conquered because to them their language was superior as were they.

V. Wimbush imparts that, “they conquered native peoples and declared that European customs, languages, and traditions were the law. The Europeans’ embrace of the Bible helped to lend this process legitimacy”.<sup>361</sup> It facilitated a smoother transition into the lifestyle the Europeans desired. They were the conquerors out to build a new nation and the Bible (as they saw it) supported them in this process (See Subsection 7.7). Some learned to use language/rhetoric to advance and maintain the institution of slavery in America (See Subsection 7.6).

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<sup>360</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* 84.

<sup>361</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush, “The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretative History”, Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 84.

## 7.5 The Language of Disease

The “language of disease” was an important factor in the attempt to maintain the enslaving of Africans in America. Being black was considered a disease to the end that being chattered and separated from society as a whole was in the best interest of the wider world. Evans states, “One writer notes that ‘there is a long history of perceiving this [black] skin color as the result of some pathology’.”<sup>362</sup> He notes that although this was not the reason for the initiation of the slave trade, it was used as a justification for slavery. This prognosis was not an overt assertion, but it served to pacify the minds of some and spur others to vigorously promote the maintenance of the institution of slavery in America. Leprosy was the disease that was said to have caused the darkening of the skin.<sup>363</sup>

Benjamin Rush, a founder of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, a member of the Continental Congress, a signer of the Declaration of Independence is said to be a major contributor to the theory of the “rhetoric of disease”.<sup>364</sup> He had credibility as he was a medical doctor and was later considered to be the Father of American Psychiatry.<sup>365</sup> Using the language of disease, Rush advocated quarantining the slaves to a leper colony so as not to infect the rest of society with this disease. He cites that, “a white woman in North Carolina not only acquired a dark color, but several of the features of the Negro, by marrying and living with a black husband”.<sup>366</sup> He fails to show findings of the white men, who cohabitated

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<sup>362</sup> James H. Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 55.

<sup>363</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology : Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 101.

<sup>364</sup> Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* 55.

<sup>365</sup> Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages : Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 16-17.

<sup>366</sup> Takaki, *Iron Cages : Race and Culture in 19th-Century America* 31.

with black women, to ascertain their state. Evans indicates that there is no mention of a physical change in these men.<sup>367</sup> Rush, in the opinion of this thesis, was covertly re-institutionalizing the enslaved under the guise of abolition. This in measure would permanently insure their “chattel” state and present opportunities for genocide. Incidents like The Tuskegee Experiment,<sup>368</sup> had he succeeded, would have taken place in a more secluded place and perhaps not been discovered at all. The language of disease was a convenient way to insure that the institution remained intact. Ultimately Rush wanted to use this rhetoric to cure black people of their blackness. He went so far as to suggest the ancient practice of bleeding, or purging, as a cure for this malady.<sup>369</sup> This finding makes a case for genocide.

## 7.6 Rhetoric

The idea that slaves were not supposed to possess the presence of mind to live free lives was also relegated to rhetoric. The desire to be free, which resulted in the act of running away, was denigrated to a disease called “Drapetomania”<sup>370</sup>. The symptom of this disease was running away and only consigned to black slaves. The cure was to keep slaves enslaved and the study only applied to black slaves. The study was published in 1851 in a paper in the *New Orleans Surgical Journal*, by S.

Cartwright.<sup>371</sup> Evans notes that many people of the medical profession believed that the problem of the black race hampered the process of the nation.<sup>372</sup> The use of the

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<sup>367</sup> Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* 56.

<sup>368</sup> Beginning in the 1930's, more than four hundred black men were either purposely infected with syphilis or simply diagnosed and left untreated. The disease was allowed to progress in these men even though effective treatments were readily available. The sole purpose of this experiment was to chart the disease until the subjects died.

<sup>369</sup> Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* 56.

<sup>370</sup> Gilman, *Difference and Pathology : Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* 138.

<sup>371</sup> See entry for Samuel Aldophus Cartwright in Glenn R. Conrad, Louisiana Historical Association., and University of Southwestern Louisiana. Center for Louisiana Studies., *A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography*, 2 vols. (New Orleans, La.: Louisiana Historical Association, 1988).

<sup>372</sup> Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* 57.

“language of medicine” hid the actions of the enslaver and those who advocated their actions as justified under the guise of the good of mankind. Did anyone not think to look at the other side of the coin? Perhaps the problem could have been solved by less dramatic means and without extensive study into bogus diseases, maladies and the senseless waste of human lives. It must not be forgotten that America was built on the backs of these slaves. The attempt to use whites from England proved to produce too few participants and the use of Native Americans was hampered by disease spread among them after the arrival of Europeans. The enslaved Africans proved to be the strongest, hardest working and most convenient source of labor thanks to the combined actions of the slave traders, European and African.

## **7.7 Censored Christianity**

The institutionalizing of slavery was aided by the innovative and dehumanizing practices of the enslavers. Once name changing and separatism was in place, further steps were taken to ensure the maintenance of the practice of slavery.

Stampp suggests:

Slaveholders felt that religion reduced social problems on their plantations. But as one historian notes, ‘The master class understood of course, that only a carefully censored version of Christianity could have this desired effect. Inappropriate biblical passages had to be deleted; sermons that might be proper for freeman were not necessarily proper for slaves’.<sup>373</sup>

It is utterly amazing the lengths taken in maintain the institution of slavery. The process was a continuum of events that with time evolved as situations were

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<sup>373</sup> Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution : Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 159-60.

presented. Lincoln states, "The Christianizing of slavery meant, first of all, the sanctification of the practice of slave-holding as having biblical precedent and spiritual merit."<sup>374</sup>

The voice of the enslaved was silenced because the act of slavery appeared to be sanctioned by God. Their lives were said to be improved because they no longer lived as savages. Scriptures relating to the curse of the sons of Ham were evoked (Genesis 9.21-27 and Joshua 9.21-17) as the destiny of the enslaved. Segovia and Tolbert state, "During the slave trade, theories of saving the souls of the African people through enslavement were also propounded and supported on the basis of the biblical text."<sup>375</sup>

In the arena of theology the use by Christian writers of the language of contrasts persists in the commentaries of scripture. This language appears to emanate from the written text, yet no scripture can be found to suggest this. Evans points out that, much of this discourse was set by commentaries of St. Ambrose of Milan and St. Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs.<sup>376</sup> He also suggests that from the language of the text the Shulamite woman was black and the suggestion is that this was the reason for her fall from grace. Evans remarks, "Blackness is associated with sin, and sin is associated with disease."<sup>377</sup> Where did this originate? Does the Bible offer any rebuttal or can scripture be the cause?

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<sup>374</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, 'Development of Black Religion', Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies : An Interdisciplinary Anthology* 12.

<sup>375</sup> Segovia and Tolbert, *Teaching the Bible : The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* 227. See Katie G. Cannon, "Slave Ideology and Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation for Liberation in Semeia* 47; ed Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 9-23.

<sup>376</sup> Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* 57.

<sup>377</sup> Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* 57.

The use of scripture to elevate one race over another with the right to oppress or use as experiments is flawed. Leviticus 25.39-43; Deuteronomy 15.12-18 explains the process of ending slavery to the Israelites (who were once slaves themselves); the practice of slavery was not to be continued indefinitely. In addition the Bible does not discuss diseases to minimize the humanity of people nor does it concentrate on why one person was diseased and another was not. Although some did try and introduce this concept (John 9.12), Jesus is portrayed throughout his healing ministry as one who did not concentrate on the cause of a disease, but upon the healing of it to the betterment of all involved (John 10.10). The language of the Bible speaks to God's power to heal and to deliver from infirmities. Evans suggests that, "the Bible provides resources for the deconstruction of the rhetoric of disease that has often attended the experience of people of African descent".<sup>378</sup>

The church was complicit in the enslavers' desire to maintain the institution by using the Bible. Preachers were also involved in this misuse of the language of the scripture. A. J. Raboteau states, "As religion gained a wider hearing in the southern colonies, some preachers who supported the slaveholders' cause found a way to leave out parts of the Bible that sounded like they made the slaves equal; different catechisms were provided for slave and free."<sup>379</sup> Many of the Africans who were brought over had been exposed to the Bible before they arrived. Some were catechized before they were brought onto the ships to the New World. One thing that can be ascertained is that not many of them understood that the Bible they were

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<sup>378</sup> Evans, *We Shall All Be Changed : Social Problems and Theological Renewal* 61.

<sup>379</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion : The "Invisible Institution" In the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 152-80.

presented with, welcoming them into the faith, was to be used later to separate them from that which they knew as freedom.

## 7.8 Planned Illiteracy

To further silence the voice of the enslaved the teaching of reading and writing was prohibited among them by their slaveholders. They were often threatened and punished for attempting to acquire literacy.<sup>380</sup> However, slaves hungry for literacy found ways with or without help from others.<sup>381</sup> How better to control their thoughts and language development? There were some exceptions mostly in the north and among Anglican clergymen and Quakers, who actually encouraged and taught slaves. Along with the prohibition of literacy, and the use of a common language among the slaves by inter-mixing the tribes making it difficult for slaves to even communicate with each other. Drums, a sophisticated form of communication among the Africans, were even prohibited on the plantations.<sup>382</sup> Felder points out, “However, blacks found ways of communicating, and they became ingenious in their use of symbols. The symbolic thus became a part of their history that is valued even to this day. Where there is a lack of reading and writing, other symbols take on great meaning.”<sup>383</sup> The actions by the slaveholders and the reaction by the enslaved became providential in forming a cultural language primarily exclusive not only to the

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<sup>380</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught : African American Education in Slavery and Freedom, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) 18, 219. For discussions of antiliteracy statutes see pages 7 and 216.

<sup>381</sup> Williams outlines various ways slaves found to obtain help from free blacks and white mistresses despite the close scrutiny placed on them by their owners. Williams, *Self-Taught : African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* 18-22.

<sup>382</sup> H. Samy Alim, *Roc the Mic Right : The Language of Hip Hop Culture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006) 135, Amanda Villepastour, *Ancient Text Messages of the Yoruba Bata Drum : Cracking the Code* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>383</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 26.



enslaved community but to the African American community of today (See Chapter Nine).

Frazier and Lincoln note that in the course of time, whites used the Christian religion to bring slaves increasingly under the influence of slavery as African religious practices were lost or forgotten. They state, "This deculturation was effected by efforts on the part of whites to prevent any resurgence of African religion."<sup>384</sup>

However they add that the African based "shout songs" and "holy dances" of black Sea Islanders of South Carolina and Georgia were being addressed to the white man's God and were mostly influenced by Christian philosophy. Nevertheless, they conclude, "The black man therefore adapted Christianity to his experience in the New World. The spirituals and the "invisible church" were the results."<sup>385</sup> Roberts and Goatley suggest that the traditional religion of the enslaved is the impetus for the spirituals and the preaching of the enslaved preachers.<sup>386</sup> Roberts and Goatley seem to contradict Frazier concerning the elimination of African traditional religious beliefs. However there appears to be a syncretism that developed to meet the spiritual needs of the enslaved. Their beliefs, although seemingly suppressed by their captivity, were ethnically redirected.

The use of the term ethnic is not peculiar to African America or any third world group. Within each culture there can be various ethnicities. Giles and Johnson state, "Language is vital to any group's identity and is particularly salient for ethnic

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<sup>384</sup> Edward Franklin Frazier and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America, Sourcebooks in Negro History* (New York,: Schocken Books, 1974) 9-11.

<sup>385</sup> Frazier, "The Negro Church in America", Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America* 12-19.

<sup>386</sup> J. Deotis Roberts and David Emmanuel Goatley, *Black Religion, Black Theology : The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts, African American Religious Thought and Life* (Harrisburg [Pa.]: Trinity Press International, 2003) 118.

groups.”<sup>387</sup> What makes each group unique can range from race to customs within that group and language, not excluded, is essential in the identification process. Hecht, Collier and Ribeau state, “The process of identification is one of adopting the code, learning to “do the conversation,” and associating within the community literally and/or symbolically. Identity means orienting self toward a particular ethno cultural framework.”<sup>388</sup> The enslaved Africans, although forced into their communities, were successful at creating a new identity by learning to communicate through the language of the enslaved.

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<sup>387</sup> H. Giles & P. Johnson, "The Role of Language in Ethnic Group Relations" In John C. Turner and Howard Giles, *Intergroup Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 199-242.

<sup>388</sup> Michael L. Hecht, Mary Jane Collier, and Sidney A. Ribeau, *African American Communication : Ethnic Identity and Cultural Interpretation, Language and Language Behaviors* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1993) 34.

## PART THREE – CHAPTER EIGHT

### IDENTITY THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF THE ENSLAVED

Out of the oppression and degradation felt by the enslaved emerged a voice that identified them as a people that were unified by language and culture. The process of learning to navigate through the new language and new environment is not easily traceable nor was it fully documented. The following discussion traces the linguistics of the language (as well as its evolution) which has come to be known as African American English. Through the process of the development of the language, the re-reading of Colossians is formed and the enslaved African's voice is heard.

#### 8.1 Style-shifting

With the separation of slaves from their families and friends, the necessity to communicate with those among whom they were then united was created. A further issue was being able to communicate on a level that only those within your group could understand. Some may ask, why this was necessary? With dignity and family all gone, what else was left? The following passage is quoted in its entirety because of its salient expression validating the truth of the existence of the emasculation of the slaves and their resiliency in coping with their situation. The enslaved resisted slavery and their resistance was evident in the language that developed from the slave culture. Smitherman adds:

The roots of African American speech lie in the counter language, the resistance discourse that was created as a communication system unintelligible to speakers of the dominant master class. Enslaved Africans and their descendents assigned alternate and sometimes oppositional semantics to English words, like *Miss Ann and Mr. Charlie*,

coded derisive terms for White woman and White man. This language practice also produced negative terms for Africans and later, African Americans, who acted as spies and agents for Whites – terms such as *Uncle Tom/Tom*, *Aunt Jane*, and the expression, ‘run and tell that’, referring to traitors within the community who would run and tell ‘Ole Massa’ about schemes and plans for escape from enslavement.<sup>389</sup>

The voice of the enslaved became exclusive out of necessity. B. B. Kachru states that, “the English language is a tool of power”.<sup>390</sup> His article refers to English as elitist and domineering in that it is used as communication across continents. The enslaved were able to use the power of their new language to their advantage by creating a secret language. Their voice, or meaning, could only be understood by an informed ear, namely their peers.

This exclusive technique of communication that existed among the enslaved is called “style-shifting”. Style-shifting is an in and out of, in-group way of speaking. One reason for the shift was for the communication with different types of people. Today, for example a person would speak a certain way to their minister and another way in the Nation of Islam mosque. While speaking to white teachers, grandmother, girlfriend, father, a brother on the block or a job outside of community (to different customers) natural adjustments are made to facilitate adequate communication. Another term is “Playing the Game” which indicates access to white ways of speaking and a strategy used by enslaved African called “Puttin’ On Ole Massa”.<sup>391</sup>

Style-shifting stems from enslaved Africans who were adept at using language to either put on a façade of servitude, a form of self-defense or to express true feelings

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<sup>389</sup> Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* 4-5.

<sup>390</sup> ‘The Alchemy of English’, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 272.

<sup>391</sup> Gilbert Osofsky et al., *Puttin’ on Ole Massa; the Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*, [1st ed. (New York,: Harper & Row, 1969) 9-48.For full treatment.

in front of whites that only a fellow slave would understand. H. Bibb states, "The only weapon of self defense I could use successfully was that of deception."<sup>392</sup> Hence, it is through the narratives of slaves we see the usefulness of this technique, which is evident even today in the speech practices of African Americans.<sup>393</sup>

"Slave Narratives" exhibit this type of shift in language that give a sense of the struggle impressed by slavery and how the enslaved managed to cope with it. L. Lane's statement indicates the shift was necessary for his survival and it was a choice he made to maintain the station in life he had worked so hard to achieve.

Ever after I entertained the first idea of being free, I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people. The two points necessary in such a case I had kept constantly in mind. First I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery. Second, I never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all colored people at the south, free and slaves, find it peculiarly necessary for their own comfort and safety to observe.<sup>394</sup>

That Mr. Lane felt it necessary to avoid offending the sensibilities of the whites in his day is a testament not to the power of the white people, but his desire to survive. In spite of the circumstances which placed him in degradation and the position of opposition, he like many others, knew what it meant to be free. Although freedom

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<sup>392</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb : An American Slave* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2005) 17.

<sup>393</sup> In the section entitled "Duality of Survival" Hopkins explains "a conscious false display of the slave self" as a mechanism of survival. Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet : Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993) 43-45.

<sup>394</sup> Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N. C., Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption, by Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery, and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin*, 4th ed. (Boston: Printed for the publisher, Hewes and Watson's print., 1848) 31.

was not afforded in the physical sense, through the use of language the enslaved found freedom.

## 8.2 A Common Language: Pidgin to Creole

The semantics of the language of the enslaved was evolutionary. Coming to a country where language was one barrier among many, the necessity to overcome this obstacle produced a new communication form; the combining of what was known to the unknown. Despite deliberate attempts to prevent communication and rebellion on the plantations (putting a variety of West Africans together), a common language evolved because the enslaved Africans shared two linguistic denominators: 1) the English vocabulary; and 2) the structure and meaning systems of the African languages. This created the *lingua franca*, Africanized English, of the enslavement communities, as well as the language used, often on their terms, to communicate with the Europeans in the British colony in America. The result was called Pidgin Language.

Following is summary of Murphy's research of the development of Pidgin.<sup>395</sup> Murphy states that Pidgin refers to a language which has no native speakers. It exists only as *Lingua Franca*. It is to language what a "KOINE" is to dialects. It dispenses with the unusual features which speakers from a great variety of languages would find strange or difficult to learn. When the pidgin becomes the only language of the speech community, it then becomes Creole. He reveals that there were four varieties of Pidgin English spoken in the US: African, American Indian, Hawaiian and Chinese. There were idiomatic expressions which varied from the original languages.

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<sup>395</sup> John Joseph Murphy, *The Book of Pidgin English, Being (1) a Grammar and Notes (2) an Outline of Pidgin English (3) a Pidgin English-English Dictionary (4) an English-Pidgin English Dictionary*, Rev. [i.e. 3rd] ed. (Brisbane, : Smith & Paterson, 1966) s.v.

Even today dialects of Pidgin are evident. The circulation of Pidgin English (seventeenth century) developed out of the Mediterranean and West African *lingua franca* but it was spoken in West Africa during the sixteenth century.<sup>396</sup> Later, it spread east to China and the Pacific and west to the Americas. Effects of Pidgin can be seen among the following peoples: Chinese, Australian, Melanesian, African, French, Portuguese, and Indian. Pidgin left traces in the West Coast of Africa, West Indian Islands, coastal South America, Vietnam, Portugal, India, Malacca, China, and the Philippines.<sup>397</sup> It was transmitted by African escapees to Florida Seminoles and by polyglots to the West Indies. Some slaves acted as interpreters for the whites.<sup>398</sup>

The surviving texts of the speech of slaves corroborate the hypothesis that Pidgin English was the language of the masses of slaves in, what is now, the continental United States. Early evidence suggests that Pidgin English was widespread both in northern and southern states. Late in the eighteenth century, there is evidence that, by the end of the eighteenth century, slaves from Massachusetts to South Carolina used varieties of English ranging from West African Pidgin to (nearly) Standard English.<sup>399</sup>

Existing Creole, that resulted from Pidgin when it became the only language of the speech community, are Gullah or “Geechee” of the South Carolina-Georgia Sea Islands; French Creole of Louisiana and Southeastern Texas; Haitian French Creole;

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<sup>396</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* 178.

<sup>397</sup> Murphy, *The Book of Pidgin English, Being (1) a Grammar and Notes (2) an Outline of Pidgin English (3) a Pidgin English-English Dictionary (4) an English-Pidgin English Dictionary* s.v.

<sup>398</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* 140-41.

<sup>399</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* 93.

Caribbean Creole; Plantation Creole. Three Varieties of English existed in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries:

- West African Pidgin English. The example which follows comes from Daniel Defoe<sup>400</sup>, “Yes, yes...me know, me know but we want speak, me tell something. O! me no let him makee de great master angry”.
- Plantation Creole: “On Sunday, we-uns do us washing”,<sup>401</sup>
- Standard English

Smitherman states, “The African-based tradition of Ebonics, asserted that “Negro English” was a kind of Africanized English developed during the slave trade.”<sup>402</sup> An earlier view is that this Africanized English began as Pidgin English, which later evolved into Plantation Creole, which was de-Creolized over time.

Pidgin and Creole refer to language mixtures developed in situations where speakers of different languages had extended contact with one another that required them to communicate. Pidgin is the language spoken where other languages existed and it was used for the purpose of communication outside of a given circle. Creole is an outgrowth of Pidgin when their children grew up using it as their first and only language. It becomes more developed grammatically and has a more extensive vocabulary since Creole is used widely and frequently. The vocabulary from a given European language (English, Dutch, French, etc.) is combined with the grammatical and pronunciation patterns of African languages. Smitherman points out, “While the words may have been derived from the European language, the way the Africans

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<sup>400</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The History and Remarkable Life of the Truly Honourable Colonel Jacque, Commonly Called Colonel Jack* (New York, : AMS Press, 1974) 152.

<sup>401</sup> Benjamin Albert Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down : A Folk History of Slavery* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989) 57.

<sup>402</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 32.



used the words was distinctly African.”<sup>403</sup> What developed were systems of syntax and communicative styles that were not found in the European languages. Note however, that the English spoken today by those of the United States of America is not what is accepted by the British or people of some African nations as “Standard English”.

### 8.3 Ebonics

C. G. Woodson and W.E.B. DuBois were pioneers in thinking that the linguistic version (a prerequisite of Ebonics) reflects African-language origins. Both argued that African American cultural distinctiveness resulted from retentions and adaptations of African culture to new circumstances and conditions. They argued that a culture cannot be wiped out by a journey across the Atlantic, or harsh living conditions. Because culture is ways of thinking, behavioral habits, patterns of conduct and language, they disavowed the “*tabula rasa*” theory as a logical impossibility for any human group, even one under the siege of enslavement and post Emancipation poverty and degradation.<sup>404</sup> The enslaved resisted through the development of “Black Talk” which enabled them to grasp the meaning of the gospel. A brief history follows showing the development of African American English also referred to as “Black Talk”.<sup>405</sup> In 1554 five enslaved Africans are taken to England to learn English as interpreters in the slave trade. By 1619, in Jamestown, enslaved Africans speak their own languages as well as Pidgin (or Creole), which enables them to talk with the white settlers, as well as among themselves in instances where they don’t speak the same language. The Pidgin/Creole formation may have been

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<sup>403</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 33.

<sup>404</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 32-33.

<sup>405</sup> Dillard, *Black English; Its History and Usage in the United States* Chapter 3.

introduced by enslaved Africans from the Caribbean (where slaves would be taken for “seasoning” and “breaking” and/or it may have been formed on the West Coast of Africa, and during the long periods of time when captured Africans were held in the slave “castles” awaiting transport to the “New World”).

In 1661 “Slaves Codes” were instituted which gave slaves limited freedom to move about. Slaves were slaves for life. It was illegal to teach slaves to read or write, and the breeding of slaves was carried out to produce stronger workers. Children born in this period would be exposed to less of the African language and more of the Africanized language (Pidgin/Creole English) for communication and solidarity among the enslaved. Class distinctions formed where the “house” slave was more exposed to the language of the “massa” than the “field” slave.

From 1808 – 1945 de-Creolization (linguistic de-Africanization of Black speech) slowly began with the house slaves and free blacks and later with the Anti-Slavery Movement. Post-war dreams of equality by blacks were dashed which resulted in a period of the denial of Africa and with that came the continuance of de-Africanization of the language.

From 1950 – 1966 the Black Freedom Struggle and Civil Rights Movement signaled a new pride in being black which replaced black inferiority. The Black Power arm of the Freedom Struggle turned things around and brought back a drive for Re-Creolization, with a move to recapture the African nuances of language and culture.

From 1990 the Hip hop culture and the works of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Terri McMillan continue the process of Re-creolization.<sup>406</sup>

English which grew out of the Germanic tribes who settled in England in the fifth century did not reach West Africa until the sixteenth century (noted above). The multiplicity of West African languages, however, encouraged the adoption of English – as well as Portuguese and French – as means of communication along the West African coast, but, at the same time, it led to the modification of the European languages to fit their (enslaved) new linguistic and cultural environment.<sup>407</sup> African-Indian cooperation and resistance to the English suggests a common language spoken that facilitated this attempt.<sup>408</sup>

Language was not the only thing the enslaved was denied. Along with their dignity went their hope and religious freedom. Felder notes, “Although they initially could not participate in their adopted languages, Africans in the Americas did not enter the New World with a religious and cultural *tabula rasa*.”<sup>409</sup> They remembered their past, including their rich oral tradition of the griots’ stories of life, death, and rebirth. Their memories included a religion that was the foundation of life and gave meaning to it through the power of their language; the spoken word. The oral tradition was not primitive trivia to be erased or ignored, but vital for the African perspective. Felder adds, “It often assumed formal expression in rhythmic music, colorful imagery, and poetic force that enriched the more visual Western culture shaped by the printed

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<sup>406</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 38.

<sup>407</sup> Thomas Kochman, *Rappin' and Stylin' out; Communication in Urban Black America* (Urbana,: University of Illinois Press, 1972) 170-71.

<sup>408</sup> For a full treatment of this subject see Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: International Publishers, 1983), Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, *The New World Negro; Selected Papers in Afroamerican Studies* (Bloomington,: Indiana University Press, 1966).

<sup>409</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family, Bishop Henry Mcneal Turner Studies in North American Black Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1989) 82.

word.”<sup>410</sup> First generation slaves were exposed to the language and religion of their masters, but later generations combined African oral tradition with that of Western writing.

#### **8.4 Bible Language**

The enslaved Africans were separated from their families, and also the attempt was made to separate them from their language and religion. In the African American community, the influence of family provides the language, the imagery, and the cadences in which the people, inside and outside the church give voice to their experience. The Bible as a “language” became the vehicle by which they could navigate between this strange new world and the slave existence. The Bible as “The Living Word”, spoke about white slavers among whom the enslaved found themselves. In it, they found ways to understand their situation; as slaves, as freed persons, as disenfranchised persons and as a people. Christian and biblical, *double entendre* was used in spirituals to protect the enslaved Africans from whites and to bind them together.<sup>411</sup>

The Bible as a historical book, was a language world full of stories; a world into which they could retreat; a world in which to find identity; a world from which to draw strength and a world they could to manipulate for self-affirmation. Felder states, “One useful way of beginning to clarify the issues involved in thinking about the function of the Bible among African Americans is to think of the Bible as a language, even language-world.”<sup>412</sup> Being uprooted and denied communication with fellow tribesmen was harsh enough. The use of the Bible by the enslavers caused many of the

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<sup>410</sup> Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* 82.

<sup>411</sup> John Lovell, *Black Song : The Forge and the Flame : The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual Was Hammered Out*, 1st U.S. pbk. ed. (New York: Paragon House, 1986) 190-92.

<sup>412</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 82.

enslaved to reject the Bible; lending a feeling of hopelessness. However, a great many of the enslaved adapted to their situation and found new languages for survival in the Bible. As a powerful language Europeans embraced the language of the Bible to legitimize their conquering of native peoples and declaring European customs, languages, and traditions as law. Enslaved Africans noticed the powerful influence of the Bible and in learning the language used their understanding of this language to survive.

The language of the Bible spoke of freedom through acceptance and affirmation. They sought freedom through faith and found freedom of interpretation in songs, prayers, sermons, testimonies and addresses. The language of faith was seen through identification with the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible, who sought deliverance from enslavement. This identification was also with the long-suffering but ultimately victorious Jesus. They sought resurrection from their social death to a new life.

The Bible allowed the enslaved to learn the language of interpretation. This reasoning was the bane of slaveholders as they realized that literacy, especially Biblical in nature, was enlightening to the slave and detrimental to the industry. Frederick Douglass aptly affirms this thinking, quoting Master Hugh upon the discovery of his wife's instruction of young Douglass, "If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave."<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History* (New York,: Collier Books, 1962) 79.

J. Hammon's first poem "An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ, with Penitential Cries,"<sup>414</sup> is a prayer of personal salvation (freedom), as well as being one for all Africans in the Diaspora<sup>415</sup>. The poem is cloaked in special Biblical language and meaning for enslaved Africans. There is imagery of black and white that depict one over the other. However, America's biblical culture was accepted by the Africans, but not in the way that white Americans accepted it or in the way the whites preferred that others accept it. The Bible, first rejected as the "white folk's" book, was accepted but not interpreted in the way white Christians interpreted it (discussed further in Part Four). Among many, in the academy and seminary, the voice and language of black people is reluctantly heard and then it is only tolerated.

Felder, reflecting upon the use of Bible language by the enslaved, remarks that, "the Africans could not and did not fail to notice the powerful influence of the Bible upon the Europeans' self-image, culture, and orientation".<sup>416</sup> Initially doubt and suspicion was their reaction to the written word for their tradition was oral. How can something written down be sacred compared to the honor bestowed on those who carefully carried out their office as "storytellers"; "groits".

In African culture, the person in the community who serves as the repository of community customs, history, and traditions is the griot. He is pivotal for remembrance of past events and the re-creations of the community traditions and so provides occasion for tribal reflection, appreciation, and celebration. When Africans were brought to

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<sup>414</sup> Sondra A. O'Neale, *Jupiter Hammon and the Biblical Beginnings of African-American Literature, Atla Monograph Series* (Metuchen, N.J. [Philadelphia]: Scarecrow Press; American Theological Library Association, 1993).

<sup>415</sup> Avtah Bran 'Thinking Through the Concept of Diaspora' referring to Africans, "Or it might have resulted from the capture or removal of a group through slavery or systems of indentured labor." Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 443.

<sup>416</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 65.

Jamestown in 1619 as slaves, they brought this oral style of historical-cultural transmission with them.<sup>417</sup>

In addition, Turner states, “the fact that those who had enslaved them and were conquering the New World were ‘Bible Christians’ was not at all lost on the Africans: It did not take them long to associate the ‘Book Religion’ with power”.<sup>418</sup> As the Europeans used the Bible to assert their superiority over the enslaved, the Africans began to see ways of using scripture to help them adapt to their new situation. The stories and teachings of the Bible were a source of hope and a tool for survival.

Felder suggests:

They were attracted primarily to the narratives of the Hebrew bible dealing with the adventures of the Hebrews in bondage and escaping from bondage, to the oracles of the eighth-century prophets and their denunciations of social injustice and visions of social justice, and to the New Testament texts concerning the compassion, passion, and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>419</sup>

These enslaved Africans interpreted the language of the scriptures in light of their experiences. Although they identified with the champions of the Hebrew Bible and saw themselves as liberated and victorious in Jesus, it wasn't until the eighteenth century that Africans began to convert to Christianity in large numbers through evangelical preaching (see Subsection 10.6). In this era as before, their spirituals and sermons reflected the language of scripture that spoke of Jesus being raised from the dead to new life. Therefore, songs and testimonies evolved with exaltations of being “raised” from their “social death” to equality and freedom.

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<sup>417</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 26.

<sup>418</sup> Harold W. Turner, *Religious Innovation in Africa : Collected Essays on New Religious Movements* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979) 271-88.

<sup>419</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 86.

## 8.5 Negro Spirituals

What are presently known as Negro Spirituals are the result of the reflections on the language of the scriptures that touched the condition of the enslaved. Felder states, “The spirituals reflect the process of the transformation of the Book Religion of the dominant people into the religion reflective of the socio-political and economic status of African slaves.”<sup>420</sup> The language of the Bible was transformed into soul wrenching ballads of freedom from the oppressor and a faith in God’s power to free them, not only in the next life, but in this present life also. This same Bible, which was used by the dominant culture to oppress them, became the very vehicle to freedom in the minds of the enslaved Africans. Felder adds, “The interpretation was not controlled by the literal words of the text, but by social experience. The texts were heard more than read; they were engaged as stories that seized and freed the imagination.”<sup>421</sup> The enslaved allowed the language of the text to enter their situation and, upon entering, freed them to express their desires. As the promises of the passages became their own, the lives of the biblical characters began to take shape as reflections of their lives. The words were a commentary on their situation in life and their lives began to take on new meaning. The language of the Bible, spoken or read, spoke to their situation and freed them. Felder reveals, “That the songs and sermons reflect a type of indirect or veiled commentary on the social situation that the African slaves faced has been noted by most interpreters.”<sup>422</sup> The language of the text was also oppositional when it came to sections that spoke about slavery. Sections of the epistles (e.g. Ephesians 6.5 and the Colossians 3.22) were hammered into them by preachers: “Slaves, be obedient to them that are your

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<sup>420</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 87.

<sup>421</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 88.

<sup>422</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 88.



master...., as unto Christ.” Afterwards, they would go on to demonstrate that it was the will of God that they were slaves and that they were to be happy and good. And if so, God would be pleased with them and blessed them. Not being allowed to learn to read, the enslaved were initially excluded from all written word. The Bible was no exception, therefore oral translations ensued and parts of scripture found distasteful were initially avoided even when the slaves began reading them for themselves. However this was not the case with the slave preacher (See Subsection 10.6).

The following question posed by Wimbush and Rodman is paramount to understanding the enslaved’s ability to rise above their situation.

How could the formation of African America, as an example of a social-cultural formation in the West, be understood without heightened attention to the Bible, specifically, the manner in which the Bible was used as language world within which those violently cut off from their home could speak again?<sup>423</sup>

This use of the Bible as language is in opposition to the intended use by white slave owners, particularly Protestant owners in their use of it to justify slavery and the maintenance of the institution. Once the enslaved African began to use the language of the Bible to free himself from the shackles of illiteracy, the process of liberation began. The Bible as the enslaved saw it demanded equal justice. The dominance by whites, European and American was challenged by the interpretation of the text through the lens of the enslaved mind. Wimbush and Rodman also state:

The Bible quickly came to be embraced as a powerfully arresting and expansive language world – full of poignant, memorable stories;

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<sup>423</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush and Rosamond C. Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York: Continuum, 2000) 15.

brehtaking vision ... of the pathetic travails and great triumphs of a rootless people, and of a savior figure who is mistreated and abused but who ultimately overcomes.<sup>424</sup>

After hearing the Bible preached by white preachers and slave preachers alike, the passages of the Bible became ingrained in the minds of the enslaved. These passages and stories were transformed into a “language world” through prayers, songs, exhortation and sermons.<sup>425</sup> This action transcended the use of the Bible by white Protestants in that no longer was the power of the enslaver sought, but a new world was envisioned and oppression lost its power to trample them under.

The efforts by missionaries, abolitionists and religious leaders did not go unnoticed by the enslaved. Their desire to be free spawned creative developments in their acceptance of the religions being presented to them. They saw themselves in the stories being told, not only of exodus from bondage but beyond freedom to a place in the world into which they were brought. Wimbush and Rodman describe this action as manipulation of the religions and states that, “the major turning points in the history of their engagement of religion in North America, especially but not limited to Protestantism, reflect religion’s significant and complex role in the development of African America”.<sup>426</sup> The enslaved were able to see beyond the Exodus story in the Bible to the gospels and see Jesus as triumphant; therefore they too could overcome.

The resultant coded language of the spirituals served to liberate them from the master’s constant interruption into their world. This language world was exclusively

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<sup>424</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 146.

<sup>425</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 147.

<sup>426</sup> Wimbush, "Reading Texts as Reading Ourselves" Segovia and Tolbert, *Teaching the Bible : The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* 97.

understood and was the enslaved's way of passive resistance. B. Holdredge in her article "Beyond the Guild" uses the example of how differently white nationalist and the enslaved African interpreted the Exodus experience.<sup>427</sup> Where the enslaved saw this experience central to their liberation from the American institution of slavery, whites read the account in reference to their liberation from Great Britain.

Furthermore the songs created by the enslaved from their understanding of the Bible reminded them that the Promised Land was also to be reached after death, at the end of this journey of life. Wimbush states, "They frequently invoked the Exodus event in their spirituals and prayers, as a paradigm not only for sociopolitical freedom from the fetters of slavery, but also for spiritual freedom from the bonds of sin and final deliverance in the Promised Land after death."<sup>428</sup>

The Negro Spiritual is one of the earliest and most idiosyncratic forms of rhetoric originating in the African American Church. Frazier and Lincoln point out that "the Bible provided the Negro with the rich imagery which has characterized the sermons of Negro preachers and the sacred folk songs of the Negro".<sup>429</sup> The rhetoric/language stems from the experience of the enslaved African reaching deeper than any whip can cut and any master can beat out of him. The language that was produced could be understood by others who were torn away from their homes and forced to endure hardships no one should have had to be subject. The experience was so gut retching it produced sounds that sometimes could not be uttered. So the enslaved moaned out songs and sermons that reached the ears of others who through the years carried this language in their souls.

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<sup>427</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 147.

<sup>428</sup> Wimbush, "African Americans and the Bible", Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 147.

<sup>429</sup> Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America* 12.

Meeks notices a parallel in the spiritual odes or psalmic hymns of the primitive Church.<sup>430</sup> By comparison it shows that, “Paul’s churches developed spiritual odes that were regularly sung in early Christian meetings, and that such songs were crafted as a means of coping with affliction”.<sup>431</sup> In Colossians 5.18-20, Paul exhorts the believers to be filled with the spirit and to encourage one another by singing spiritual songs and making melody in their hearts; also an expression of thanksgiving to God. The language of the spirituals most often reflected the sorrow and pain of enslaved Africans. DuBois remarks, “They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering, and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.”<sup>432</sup> A comparison is evident between the two eras and peoples as the sufferings of the first-century Christians, because of their faith and Paul’s endured hardships, proved to show evidence of similar if not equal cruelties. The first-century martyrs died as a result of their belief and unwavering faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>433</sup> The scriptures, mentioned below, recount how Paul was beaten and imprisoned due to his unwavering belief. Acts 16.37 presents Paul specifically being beaten and imprisoned. Further in Ephesians 3.1, Philemon 1.1 and 9 reports him referring to himself as a “prisoner of Christ”.

## **8.6 Slave Preacher**

The Bible language that entered the lives of the enslaved gave a voice to the enslaved preacher to speak to their condition. The sermons of the enslaved African

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<sup>430</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 144, 74.

<sup>431</sup> Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* 85.

<sup>432</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969) 267.

<sup>433</sup> John Foxe, *The Book of Martyrs. Condensed from the Larger Editions* (London; New York,: F. Warne; Scribner, Welford, 1869) 14-18.

preachers and those that followed are examples of the style and language of the enslaved. James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* is one of the best known written accounts of the oral tradition of the preaching language of the enslaved.<sup>434</sup>

The preacher used and interpreted the Bible to tell the story of the enslaved from their perspective. The language that developed among the enslaved served to bring cohesion and relief from the situation in which they found themselves. Johnson does not often use the dialect of the slave preachers, but he does use biblical subject matter and language in an attempt to make authentic the tone of the work reflecting that of the slave preacher.<sup>435</sup> He uses dialect sparsely, mostly in reference to the spirituals. Often the stories the preachers expounded upon were used to buffer them against the harsh reality of life and to transport the people if only for a little while to a more tolerable place. These sermons gave them hope.

Although illiterate, the memorization and the internalizing of the text read to the black preacher brought about a linguistic education. R. E. Fleming remarks,

They [the old-time black preachers] were all saturated with the sublime phraseology of the Hebrew prophets and steeped in the idioms of King James English, so when they preached and warmed to their work they spoke another language, a language far removed from traditional Negro dialect.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>434</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones; Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (New York: The Viking Press, 1927) 8.

<sup>435</sup> Manfred Siebald "James Weldon Johnson's Biblical Tuning of 'God's Trombones', " in Winfried Herget and Alfred Hornung, *Religion in African-American Culture* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006) 78-79.

<sup>436</sup> Robert E. Fleming, *James Weldon Johnson, Twayne's United States Authors Series* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987) 59.

The English, written and heard from the Bible, became a familiar and welcoming sound in this context.<sup>437</sup> To emulate the language of those who enslaved, while pushing back at their teachings, elevated not only the preacher but the text. His preaching transformed the congregation from their dire existence with the language they too had internalized.

The Bible stories entered the lives of the enslaved. Felder suggests, “Basic to the treatment of Scripture was the fact that those who heard the sermons lived in a society that rejected, debased, and discriminated against them.”<sup>438</sup> Amazingly, the preacher was able to take the language of the biblical text and link it to the predicament of the enslaved. D. T. Shannon uses Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s “An Ante-bellum Sermon” to illustrate the use of the Hebrew Exodus experience on which to base the message of the preacher. Felder states that, “therefore it is clear that he expects liberation in his own lifetime”.<sup>439</sup> The language of the text fits quite easily the situation of the enslaved and the preacher was able to bring the message of hope and restoration. The people understood their predicament and had no doubt that liberation was evident because the same God that brought about the exodus of the Jews would do the same for them.

The enslaved held the unique belief that slavery could only be effective if it totally affected their lives. The totality of their situation was minimized with the belief that, in spite of their physical slavery, they were free mentally. Felder adds, “The biblical faith led the slaves to affirm that God had already made them free in spite of the

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<sup>437</sup> Robert Aitken and Marian S. Carson Collection (Library of Congress), *The Holy Bible; Containing the Old and New Testaments*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Printed and sold by R. Aitken, at Pope’s Head, three doors above the Coffee-house, in Market street, 1782).

<sup>438</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 120.

<sup>439</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 118.

chains of slavery.”<sup>440</sup> The language of the scripture was not only transformed to fit their situation but it transformed their minds to allow them to rise above their situation. Contextually, the text of the Bible spoke of the past, but, through the language of the text, the preacher was able to bring life to the text by applying it to the present. Moses was sent to free the Jews from Pharaoh’s enslavement and God was going to send “another” Moses to set them free. The preacher did not try and delude the people into thinking that Moses would rise up and free them. The language was clear in that the hope was a present one and their time would come just as surely as that of the enslaved Jews of the Hebrew Bible.

But de Moses is a-comin’,  
An’ he’s a comin’, suah and fas’  
We kin hyeah his feet a-trompin’,  
We kin hyeah his trumpit blas’.<sup>441</sup>

Hermeneutically the African American slave preacher provided a way to empower and instill hope and solace to the enslaved as they daily faced their plight. The preacher’s use of the language of scripture and his delivery were vehicles to raise the consciousness of the enslaved to live their lives in survival mode. This technique is not unique to the slave preacher. Each preacher must be able to apply the text to the lives of those within in his care. It was this same approach that was taken by white preachers to maintain the status of enslavement. The question here, however, is to what degree is one allowed to interpret the text and to what end? For what purpose was the text written and how it is interpreted should not be at opposite ends

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<sup>440</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 119.

<sup>441</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead and company, 1896) Lines 73-76.

of a spectrum. The context can only be stretched so far before it becomes counterfeit.

The language of the Bible became vibrant. Wimbush and Rodman state:

Having heard the Word proclaimed by white preachers as well as slave preachers, they inscribed the biblical passages in their memories and incorporated the images, stories, prophecies, and sayings of the Bible in their prayers, songs, sermons, and exhortations transforming the fixed text of Holy Writ into a fluid, vibrant 'language world'.<sup>442</sup>

This world, seen as empowerment by some because of the white enslavers' use of the Bible to capture and enslave, meant more than that. The language of the Bible transcended the abyss of slavery into a world that condemned the actions of their enslavers despite their attempts to justify it. Although thought to have animalistic or infantile minds, the enslaved understood that something was amiss and, although they were seemingly powerless to escape it, the language of freedom and sympathy for the oppressed emanated from the Bible. The fact that most could not read the words for themselves neither hampered their understanding of the language of the texts nor denied them from questioning it. By comparison the letter presented to the Colossians indicated a desire for a better understanding of the gospel being presented.

In reference to style-shifting (see subsection 8.1), the African American preacher used the rhetorical device of "double entendre" to protect the slaves against possible danger from the enslaver who may have been listening. The listeners went away with the understanding that this message was for their present situation with hopes

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<sup>442</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 147.



of change in the future. Sometimes that future was alluded to as near or in the afterlife. A subtle style of interpretation of the Bible in its fullest sense was employed.

The physical nature of the Bible as a powerful book soon gave way to the spiritual.

Wimbush and Rodman state:

The world of the Bible – with its stories of enslaved people who are liberated, oppressed individuals who are delivered, poor and marginalized groups who are uplifted, and a persecuted savior who is ultimately triumphant – resonated with the world of enslaved and oppressed African Americans.<sup>443</sup>

It was the language of the Bible that captivated the enslaved not the book itself. The book at first confused them as a written text because their tradition was oral. When the language of the text was laid bare, the world of the enslaved took on relevance and then their imaginations were exposed. The language became natural to them because of their oral tradition. Hearing the texts read and preached served to incite them to internalize what they were hearing and make it their own through spirituals and preaching. Wimbush and Rodman discussing the content of the Bible affirm that it was “not simply its status as a sacred object – that captivated the imagination of the slaves, catalyzing their devotion, nurturing their hopes, inspiring their visions, and fueling their rhetoric”.<sup>444</sup> In conjunction with the sermons, the spirituals further gave the enslaved confidence to express their feelings and desires.

Their story was told through these mediums and they were protected by the anonymity given to them by the stories in the Bible. What was heard by the enslaver was different from what the enslaved were saying. Wimbush and Rodman agree

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<sup>443</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 147.

<sup>444</sup> Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 147.

that, “moreover, their ‘readings’ of the Bible – especially as embodied in the coded language of the spirituals – served as an instrument of resistance through which they countered and critiqued the hegemonic readings of white slaveholding Christian culture”.<sup>445</sup>

The black preacher’s history reaches back to Colonial days, before the Revolutionary War. Then, slavery had yet to take on the economic importance that diminished people to nothing but property. It was through the African American enslaved preacher that the people of Africa, with such diverse languages and customs found unity and solidarity for the first time in their new situation as slaves. Often portrayed as a “semi-comic figure”, his importance cannot be diminished. Johnson adds that, “he was the first shepherd of this bewildered flock. His power for good or ill was very great. It was the old-time preacher who for generations was the mainspring of hope and inspiration for the Negro in America”.<sup>446</sup>

The capacity of the slave preacher to retain the scriptures was vital to the dissemination of the gospel among the enslaved. Johnson points out, “The earliest of these preachers must have virtually committed many parts of the Bible to memory through hearing the scriptures read or preached from in the white churches which the slaves attended.”<sup>447</sup> Over the years, being among the first of the slaves to learn to read, the preachers readings were confined to the Bible, and exclusively to the Hebrew Bible where lay the more dramatic passages.<sup>448</sup> A text, merely a starting point rarely had any relation to the growth or outcome of the sermon. The preacher

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<sup>445</sup> Vincent Wimbush, "African Americans and the Bible" in Wimbush and Rodman, *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* 147.

<sup>446</sup> Johnson, *God's Trombones; Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* 2-3.

<sup>447</sup> Johnson, *God's Trombones; Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* 4-5.

<sup>448</sup> Janet Duitsman Cornelius, "*When I Can Read My Title Clear*" : *Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 3.

was not afraid to approach or expound on any text within the contents of the Bible. Johnson adds, "The old-time Negro preacher of parts was above all an orator and in good measure an actor. He knew the secret of oratory, that at bottom it is a progression of rhythmic words more than it is anything else."<sup>449</sup> The dialectic language of the preacher uniquely contributed to uplifting of the listeners. The language of the text was transformed into the nuances and dialect of the hearers so as to facilitate their understanding on all levels. Johnson rightly bemoaned the elimination of dialect in African American poetry in his day.<sup>450</sup> Perhaps the writers deliberately wrote this way to erase the stigma and memory of a time that stained the history of African America. However it is also possible that the writers were attempting to reach a wider audience.

## **8.7 Language of Freedom**

The enslaver's attempt to create happy slaves by preaching Christianity slanted toward their obedience to their masters backfired. Initially freedom was not relegated to the physical but to the mind. This process could not remain in stasis long. The desire to be free physically spoke to the language of their present condition. The African had known freedom and no amount of indoctrination could repress that memory. The language of the Bible, as seen by the enslavers, was meant to pacify the enslaved and take his mind off returning to Africa. However, it can be argued that the Bible opened up a new world for the enslaved. Lischer states:

The cruelties of slavery made it imperative that African Americans not step back but step into the Book and its storied world of God's personal relations with those in trouble. Bereft of a remembered history of their

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<sup>449</sup> Johnson, *God's Trombones; Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* 4-5.

<sup>450</sup> Johnson, *God's Trombones; Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* 8.

own in a culture that valued historical consciousness, the enslaved Africans listened to the Bible and adopted a new history.<sup>451</sup>

The desire was to be free in America and to that end they sang and the preacher preached. In the process of concentrating on and expressing freedom the enslaved seemed to surpass their enslavers in their understanding of the scripture. Roberts and Goatley explain, "But the African has an oriental mind, and even without learning, he appeared to understand the message of the Bible better than his white teachers. The tragic aftermath is that whites believed their own false version of the Bible."<sup>452</sup> Roberts makes a very good point here as some atrocious acts were done under the guise of religion, namely Christianity. The advocates of the Nazi regime adopted the church as the banner under which they carried out their aggression against the Jews and some parts of the church stood by idly. White supremacist groups believe they are justified in their attempts to purify their race in the name of Christianity. DuBois suggests, "Racism in the sense of preferring one's people to other peoples is as old as recorded history, but racism in the sense of dehumanizing others on the basis of their skin color is a modern phenomenon."<sup>453</sup> This thesis does not allow full disclosure on this discussion, but points out the historical abuses of Christianity.

The language of freedom expressed in the Bible helped the enslaved Africans to see that the slaves obeying masters was a message relegated in time when compared to what it said of Jesus. They were able to perceive, in spite of the restrictions and the constant indoctrination by enslavers, that the Jesus story pertained to them as well

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<sup>451</sup> Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King : Martin Luther King, Jr. And the Word That Moved America* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 200.

<sup>452</sup> Roberts and Goatley, *Black Religion, Black Theology : The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts* 120.

<sup>453</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, Mahmood Mamdani, and Gerald Horne, *The World and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 224, 26-27.

and he would also lift their burdens. Thus, they discovered a secret that their master did not want them to know.<sup>454</sup> The secret is very aptly put into the words of Usry and Keener: “It is to the credit of our forebears that they could discern real Christianity from the perverted form of it their masters sought to enforce on them”.<sup>455</sup>

The Bible, in spite of its limited exposure to the enslaved by Whites had come to inhabit a central place in religions of the Black Diaspora. Felder states:

Whether in slave religion or independent Black Churches of the Americas and the Caribbean, biblical stories, themes, personalities, and images have inspired, captivated, given meaning, and served as a basis of hope for a liberated and enhanced material life. They have enriched the prospects for a glorious afterlife, as well.<sup>456</sup>

L. Thomas perceived that blacks identified with daring heroes of the faith through the language of the Bible.<sup>457</sup> And, whether spoken or later read they realized that the God who empowered those heroes would likewise empower them.

Perhaps, the language of the enslaved preacher touched and reached the ears of those who were resistant to it. Some enslaved preachers were given the liberty by the enslaver to preach in an arena where many came because it was an outlet from the daily woes of slavery. Not all received the preaching as was intended, but many heard it. The language of freedom and deliverance had drawing power.

Being denied the opportunity to be fully human, which included the opportunity to learn to read and write, the “letters” of biblical text were not essential to the

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<sup>454</sup> Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992) 79.

<sup>455</sup> Usry and Keener, *Black Man's Religion : Can Christianity Be Afrocentric?* 104.

<sup>456</sup> Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* 5-6.

<sup>457</sup> Latta R. Thomas, *Biblical Faith and the Black American* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1976) 15.

enslaved's ability to understand its true meaning. Wimbush states, "What became important was the *telling* and *retelling*, the hearing and re-hearing of biblical stories – stories of perseverance, of strength in weakness and under oppressive burdens, of hope in hopeless situations."<sup>458</sup> So they gathered in the fields to listen and absorb the language.

Being delegated to the fields to work under conditions not meant for humans strengthened the resolve of the enslaved to survive against impossible odds.

Although much was lost in the process of transportation and enculturation to and in the New World core values remained. Berlin states:

Family, language, and spirituality infused the patches of tobacco and the fields of rice and indigo, just as exploitation and compensation informed the spiritual language of brush-arbor sermons and the vernacular of field chants. Over time, slaves transformed their experience – drawn from, among other things, work habits, musical style, and religious beliefs – into a culture that joined them together as a class and distinguished them from their owners.<sup>459</sup>

The enslaved did not adopt the ways of the enslavers and persistent resistance was the result. Unity is expressed as the result of the experience of the enslaved, yet also by their experience a survivor's mentality resulted. What was meant to subdue and oppress the enslaved produced a race and class of people who by their very nature are unique. An example can be taken from the Civil Rights movement in twentieth-century America where against impossible odds the oppressed rose up in unity without adopting the ways of those who oppressed them and won for all people their

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<sup>458</sup> Vincent Wimbush, "Biblical-Historical Study as Liberation: Toward an Afro-Christian Hermeneutic,," *The Journal of religious thought* 42, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1984-1985): 10.

<sup>459</sup> Berlin, *Generations* Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 5.

constitutional rights. This thesis however is unable to encompass this discussion in its entirety.<sup>460</sup>

The irony of the biblical stories touching the lives of the enslaved lies in Felder's statement: "Many of the biblical stories reflect the existential reality of the 'Black story' in an environment typically hostile to the interests of Blacks attaining their full sense of human potential".<sup>461</sup> Although the enslaved African identified with the stories in the Bible, the Bible itself held special meaning. Its use by whites to denigrate revealed aspects of the "master" race and helped them to sympathize with it, bringing life to the pages and the language therein. The language of the Bible spoke to them of revelation and justice which in turn turned their attention toward their plight. It was through this experience that the Bible was seen literally as the revealed Word of God. Experiencing the language of the Bible within in the context of slavery touched not only the individual but the race as a whole. Thomas explains the impact of the Bible on African America by stating: "Even beyond the confines of African-American religion, Black people are fundamentally people of the Book".<sup>462</sup> Its effect is felt even in its cultural and ethnical diversities.

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<sup>460</sup> See legislation on Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1964 and 1968.

<sup>461</sup> Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* 6.

<sup>462</sup> Thomas, *Biblical Faith and the Black American* 18.

## PART THREE – CHAPTER NINE

### IDENTITY THROUGH THE LANGUAGE OF AFRICAN AMERICA

In the process of insuring slavery as an institution, a language was created that not only allowed the enslaved to survive but the survival of the language itself helped to sustain the culture and beliefs of African Americans; thereby solidifying its identity. The communication between the enslaved, in exclusivity, gave voice to their feelings and helped to create their culture. N. W. Thiong'o reveals that, "in doing similar kinds of things and actions over and over again under similar circumstances, similar even in their mutability, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences and knowledge emerge".<sup>463</sup> He also points out that it is through these experiences which are passed on to the next generation that culture is established and reestablished through time.<sup>464</sup> In time, these experiences create a way of life that distinguishes one culture from another. Values are formed and the identity of the people is solidified. Furthermore, he states, "All this is carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history"<sup>465</sup> The importance of language cannot be overly stressed. The communication brought by a common language brings identity to the African American. They were to tell their story during slavery and that voice has shaped their identity.

The importance of language as an identifying marker during slavery continues to be essential with African Americans today. This section discusses how the language survives and in so doing the voice of African America survives. It is important that

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<sup>463</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 289.

<sup>464</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 289.

<sup>465</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 289.



this link exists for the re-reading of Colossians from an African American perspective, because it links the past with the present. The text was not only relevant to the enslaved but to present day African Americans. Though Africa is not considered a homeland as such to most African Americans, what survived were the languages which were created and recreated through the experience of slavery and later freedom. The language is the one common denominator among a race of people who have been deliberately dispersed across America. H.S. Alim adequately expresses it thus: “The reason why Black students continue to speak their language is because, really, if you think about it, it’s the only ONE THING that they own in this world. It’s the one thing that NOOOOOBODY can take away from them. NO-body”.<sup>466</sup> Enslavement has successfully separated African Americans from the customs of their forbears, but the language survives. Smitherman states:

African American language crosses boundaries of gender, age, religion, social class, and region because it derives from the same source: the Black Experience and the Oral Tradition embedded in that Experience. Of course it’s true today in the twenty-first century that there is greater diversity within the African American community than ever before in the history of U.S. slave descendents.<sup>467</sup>

The language of African Americans has been under attack since the period of enslavement. The mere fact that the debate still exists about the viability of the language is a testament to its survival and that of the people. Those outside the culture do not understand how it is communicated. Those inside, although diversities exist, can. Smitherman points out, “African American diversity notwithstanding, there

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<sup>466</sup> H. Samy Alim and American Dialect Society, *You Know My Steez : An Ethnographic and Sociolinguistic Study of Styleshifting in a Black American Speech Community*, Publication of the American Dialect Society ([Durham, N.C.]: Duke University Press for the American Dialect Society, 2004) 246.

<sup>467</sup> Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* 18.

is an underlying commonality among all those with the blood of a slave running in they veins (as Hip Hop artist Nas would say). Culture, history, experience, not just skin color and race, continue to define African America.”<sup>468</sup>

### 9.1 Shadows of a Lost Heritage

African Americans are the only racial/ethnic group in the US in which the first generation did not speak its native tongue. (Pidgin and Creole English were spoken in the enslavement community.) It is important to note that knowing the history of words used by African Americans contributes to the viability of the language. The following are scant examples of African words used by Americans of all races. Although many words are now extinct in our culture, a few words did survive: “tote” to carry from Kikongo, *tota*; “jazz” from Mandinka, *jasi*; “banana”, from Wolof, *banana*; “cola” as in “Coca-Cola”, from Temne, *kola*; “juke”, as in “jukebox”, from Wolof, *dzug* (to misbehave), and Bambara, *dzugu* (wicked); “gumbo”, from Tshiluba, *kingombo*, and Umbundu, *ochingombo*; “banjo”, from Kimbundu, *mbanza*; and “Voodoo”, from Fon, *vodoun*, and Ewe, *vodu*.<sup>469</sup> Under the heading of “farming practices,” “farm machinery” and “kitchen utensils” are terms listed in the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*<sup>470</sup> project with origins in African Languages. These, however are not among the majority of terms that still survive in the language. Some expressions survived linguistically: e. g. “bad” meaning good. In Mandinka is the phrase, *a ka nyi ko-jugu*, which means, literally, “it is good badly”, that is, it is very good, or it is so good that it’s bad! Another is the “okay” from West

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<sup>468</sup> Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans* 19.

<sup>469</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 19.

<sup>470</sup> *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*, s.v.

African “*kay*” meaning “yes”, “of course”, or “all right”. In Wolof, “*waw kay*”, in Fula “*eeyi kay*”; in Mandinka, “*o-ke*”.

Some African influences on the black vernacular are looked down upon but are actually carry-overs which have persisted throughout the years. As discussed earlier for example: the spoken “*dat*” for “that” – most West African languages do not have a “*th*” sound. Another is “He tall” – the verb “to be” is not obligatory in West African languages. Another example, “Playin the Dozens”, is derived from ritual insult verbal practices in West African cultures.<sup>471</sup> The following is a humorous song, sung by slaves about the devil during the Civil War recorded by William Wells Brown. Brown was the first African-American to publish a novel, a play, a travel book, a military study of his people, and a study of black sociology. Throughout his life he was committed to the abolition of slavery. He made eloquent speeches putting forward ideas for reform. Later in life he took up the cause of the temperance movement. It shows the use of “*de*” for “the” and “*dat*” for “that” to represent the absence of “*th*” in the language of enslaved Africans as it is directly influenced by the West African language. Quoted by Brown and Smith:

If *de* Debble do not ketch  
Jeff Davis, *dat* infernal retch,  
An roast and frigazee *dat* rebble,  
Wat is *de* use of any Debble?<sup>472</sup>

It was widely believed by historians, linguists, and other scholars, that enslavement had wiped out all traces of African languages and cultures during the first fifty years

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<sup>471</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 21.

<sup>472</sup> William Wells Brown and John David Smith, *The Negro in the American Rebellion: His Heroism and His Fidelity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003) 113.

of slavery. Secondly it was believed that Black English is a poor replication of European American language. However Smitherman remarks, "Today scholars generally agree that the African heritage was not totally wiped out, and that both African American language and African American culture have roots in African patterns."<sup>473</sup> There may have been some implementation and variation of and with Eurocentric patterns, but the African patterns of language have not been erased.

## 9.2 Survival of African Languages

In a debate between M. J. Herskovits and E. F. Frazier concerning the survival of linguistic Africanisms in North America Frazier says that the institution of slavery completely destroyed any surviving African culture and that African American culture developed without any African antecedents.<sup>474</sup> Holloway and Vass in discussing findings by Herskovits reveal him saying that African cultural influences survived in America and were retained by the process of acculturation and adaptation. The thread that bridges these cultures is the African American language. Herskovits, in his initial studies, was not able to gather enough statistics to support this theory, but others followed and they were able to some degree by linking Bantu and other African languages to many facets of American culture.<sup>475</sup> In proving the linguistic survival of Africanisms in North American of Bantu origin, two cultural baselines were used: West African baseline (for assessing New World Africanisms among whites) and a Central African baseline (for assessing Africanisms among African Americans).<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 19.

<sup>474</sup> Frazier and Lincoln, *The Negro Church in America* 9-11.

<sup>475</sup> Joseph E. Holloway and Winifred Kellersberger Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) xx.

<sup>476</sup> Holloway and Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* xvi.

The survival of African language is documented in Wolof folk tales that came over to North America from Africa, which included “Brer” tales and “Nanny” tales originating with the Fulani and Mandinka peoples. The Wolofs, being the dominant African culture on both sides of the Atlantic, in the upper Guinea coast and the coast of South Carolina, were the first Africans to have elements of their language and culture retained within the developing American culture. Mande and Wolof were the two most widespread languages of the Senegambia. Bilingualism was important for the trade and commerce in the region.<sup>477</sup>

The Hare (Rabbit) story is also found in parts of Nigeria, Angola, and East Africa. Tortoise stories are also found among the Yoruba, Igbo, and Edo-Bini peoples of Nigeria. From West Africa Sudanic zone come the Hare and the Hyena. These stories were part of the oral tradition of the Africans who were brought to the new world as slaves. These stories were even spread among the Creek Indians known as “Trickster and Hare” tales. Most of the folk tales told by Uncle Remus are Hausa in origin and were transported to North America by the Mandinkas (Mandingos).<sup>478</sup> Gullah, mentioned earlier as a dialect spoken by some in South Carolina and Georgia, is derived from Angola.<sup>479</sup> From Mande, American English borrowed numerous words now a part of everyday English. But it was from Bantu<sup>480</sup> that the greatest influence on Black American culture came.<sup>481</sup> Holloway states:

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<sup>477</sup> Holloway and Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* xxiii.

<sup>478</sup> Holloway and Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* xxiii.

<sup>479</sup> Holloway and Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* xxiv.

<sup>480</sup> Bantu is a large category of African languages. It also is used as a general label for over 400 ethnic groups in Sub-Saharan Africa, from Cameroon across Central Africa and Eastern Africa to Southern Africa. These peoples share a common language family sub-group, the Bantu languages, and broad ancestral culture, but Bantu languages as a whole are as diverse as Indo-European languages.

<sup>481</sup> Holloway and Vass, *The African Heritage of American English* xxiv.

Once the Bantu reached America they were able to retain much of their cultural identity. Enforced isolation of these Africans by plantation owners allowed them to retain their religion, philosophy, culture, folklore, folkways, folk beliefs, folk tales, storytelling, naming practice, home economics, arts, kinship, and music. These Africanisms were shared and adopted by the various African ethnic groups of the field slave community, and they gradually developed into African-American cooking (soul food), music (jazz, blues, spirituals, gospels), language, religion, philosophy, customs, and arts.<sup>482</sup>

The theme of isolation will be discussed in Part Four of this thesis and will reflect the above in the lives of the enslaved as a means of survival. Conversely, the discussion will entail how it was used by the enslavers to help maintain servitude for the advancement of the economy. Most importantly, this section reinforces the viability of language as a tool in the identification of a group of people.

### **9.3 Theft of a Language**

Although the enslaved were not colonized as such on American soil, the effect of colonization has had lasting. One effect is the stealing of African American terms. It is a kind of reverse colonization that steals the culture of the African American. When terms are used or adopted by the white American mainstream, it is dropped by blacks and new ones are created. Hecht, Collier and Ribeau state, "Such double-meaning expressions are used only until those outside the culture discover the true meaning then new alternate-meaning words and phrases are created."<sup>483</sup> This is what is known as "crossover" or "theft". A cultural example is the Harlem Renaissance as not all blacks are flattered by this theft. Langston Hughes argues, that many people of Harlem had never heard of the "Renaissance ... and if they had,

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<sup>482</sup> Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* 17.

<sup>483</sup> Hecht, Collier, and Ribeau, *African American Communication : Ethnic Identity and Cultural Interpretation* 86.

it never raised their wages any". He called it the "out-migration" of Black Culture; "They done taken my blues and gone".<sup>484</sup> As with the enslaved, the attempt is made to silence the voice of the African American. During the Harlem Renaissance, whites profited from black peoples' work done in the arts.

There is presently a multibillion-dollar industry based on African American language and culture, where, at the same time those who produce this language and culture are still underprivileged. So why is it considered that black people have a no culture? Wiley concludes, "Because most of it is loaned to white people. With no interest."<sup>485</sup> There is money being made by using Black Language: McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Gatorade.<sup>486</sup> The following are examples of cross-over adopted into the English language by whites from blacks: "Chill out", "Jack", "Upside the head", "White on rice", "Hit on", "Don't even go there" and "Twenty-four seven".<sup>487</sup> These terms are presently outdated indicating the turnaround time to be less than ten years. This speaks to the continued struggle between the races to maintain or gain dominance of a commodity important to each. On one hand money is to be made on the other a culture struggles to survive.

T. Kochman asks the question "Why can the language crossover but the people can't?"<sup>488</sup> Norman Mailer attributes it to "stubborn rebelliousness against societal constraints, and Blacks' fierce determination to live life on their terms".<sup>489</sup> It appears that "white privilege", picked up whenever needed by some whites and those who

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<sup>484</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 28-29.

<sup>485</sup> Ralph Wiley, *Why Black People Tend to Shout: Cold Facts and Wry Views from a Black Man's World* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Pub. Group, 1991).

<sup>486</sup> Erin Aubry, 'The Soul of Black Talk' Powell, *Step into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* 154.

<sup>487</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 29.

<sup>488</sup> Kochman, *Rappin' and Stylin' out; Communication in Urban Black America*.

<sup>489</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 31.

can pass as white gives them *carte blanche* to pursue life on their terms. Societal constraints are exactly those issues that the enslaved encountered upon their arrival and they still exist even today. Words, such as, “determination”, “live” and the phrase “on their terms” appear to be an affront, according to Mailer, when applied to African Americans. In January 1865, General William Tecumseh Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton met in Savannah to question a group of African American former slaves and also those who had not known slavery concerning their definition of slavery and freedom. Garrison Frazier, a 67-year-old Baptist minister served as spokesman for the group, and offers an effective rebuke to Mailer’s idea of what it meant to African Americans to “live life on their own terms” and he offered a clearer understanding of the aspirations of black people. Frazier stated:

Slavery is receiving by the *irresistible* power the work of another man, and not by his *consent*. While freedom is taking us from the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruits of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.<sup>490</sup>

Clearly Mailer could not speak for African Americans and misses the mark opining a one-sided viewpoint about a black mindset.

#### **9.4 African American Language**

The language and phrases used by African Americans are often misunderstood and most often misappropriated when used by those outside of the race. Many times whites get the language wrong in an attempt to be with it. A very positive article about Henry Louis Gates is overshadowed by the use of a phrase, “Head Negro in Charge”; denoting in history the practice of whites placing key black figures over

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<sup>490</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 2.



blacks to keep them in line.<sup>491</sup> This actually signifies that he is not really in charge at all. There is a difference when blacks use this term to describe themselves and when a white person uses it. The underlying implications can be felt by both and for very different reasons. The message is felt more on the negative side than on the positive. Smitherman points out: whites “don’t pay no dues” but reap the benefits of the social, psychological and economic advantage of a “language and culture born out of enslavement, neo-enslavement, Jim Crow, U.S. apartheid, and twentieth century hard times”.<sup>492</sup>

The nuances and temperament of African American culture is often lost on whites. N. George while discussing the “topic of rap and white folks” says, “They [whites] don’t feel the music like a black kid from Harlem might. No, they feel it like white people have always felt black pop. It speaks to them in some deep, joyous sense as a sweet memory of childhood fun.”<sup>493</sup> This same idea is expressed in terminology when used in the context of African American culture. The term “nigger” as pejorative has gotten a lot of attention in the last five years. Viewed from different perspectives different feelings derive. D. Alexander explains the use of the word describing it essentially as evolutionary stemming from slavery. It is a voice of a people who have been made to make “something out of nothing” in their lives.<sup>494</sup>

The resilience of African America stems from a long history of “making due” with what they had. Slaves were made to create meals out of the garbage that their white

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<sup>491</sup> Cheryl Bentzen, “Head Negro in Charge.” Boston Magazine, April 1998.

<sup>492</sup> Smitherman, “Black Talk” Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 32.

<sup>493</sup> Nelson George, *Hip Hop America* (New York: Penguin, 2005) 75.

<sup>494</sup> Donnell Alexander, “Are Black People Cooler than White People?”, Powell, *Step into a World : A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* 15.

master threw away; surviving on virtually the cast offs of their masters.<sup>495</sup> Alexander explains:

The tryin-to-make-a-dollar-outa-fifteen-cent outlook that explains the crossover: Cool, the basic reason blacks remain in the American culture mix is an industry of style that everyone in the world can use. It's making something out of nothing. It's the nigga<sup>496</sup> metaphor. And nigga metaphor is the genius of America.<sup>497</sup>

An adequate example follows: partying all night whilst knowing that the next day the gas is going to be cut off because the bill has not been paid – and it's zero degrees outside! Smitherman suggests, "The absorption of African American Language into European American culture masks its true origin and reason for being cause the "nigga metaphor" is born from a culture of struggle."<sup>498</sup> An example follows where attributing the opposite meaning to a Euro-standard, "Fat" spelled "Phat" refers to a person or thing that is excellent and desirable. Thus reflecting the traditional African value that human body weight is a good thing, and implicitly rejecting the Euro-American mainstream in which skinny, not fat, is valued, and everybody is always on a diet. Smitherman making a generational connection also states, "Black senior citizens convey the same value with the expression 'Don't nobody want no bone.'<sup>499</sup> The above examples facilitate the enslaver's inability to understand the perception of the enslaved as they interpreted the scripture on their own terms. So they rejected it.

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<sup>495</sup> Donnell Alexander "Are Black people Cooler than White People?", Powell, *Step into a World : A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* 16.

<sup>496</sup> Nigger - The term is often derogatory when used by persons other than Blacks. Alexander explains that the term was invented in America to denigrate slaves but has evolved as a status symbol for survival in America (15-16, see reference Powell).

<sup>497</sup> Donnell Alexander, "Are Black People Cooler than White People?" in Powell, *Step into a World : A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature*.

<sup>498</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 31.

<sup>499</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 31.

“Rap” and “Hip Hop” have been said to bridge the gap between black and white cultures (rap group “Public Enemy’s” Chuck D., the “Commissioner of Rap” in Time magazine 1999). However the cultural gap still remains as two separate societies still exist, one black and the other white. Racial injustice and economic inequality continues. Within the black society there is also a division; the middle-class group of “haves” and the “have-nots”. The “haves” are the older forty-five plus and the younger and celebrants of the new Hip Hop Language and Culture are the “have-nots”. Language is a factor into this contradiction with the haves and have-nots “dissing”<sup>500</sup> each other’s language. The haves are bilingual, speaking Black Language (U.S. Ebonics) and Standard English (the language of commerce, business and mainstream politics or the Language of the Wider Communication (LWC or Standard American English)).<sup>501</sup> The have-nots are monolingual, only speaking Black Language and minimally LWC or not at all; sometimes “dissing” LWC altogether. The same holds true for the haves, they may “dis” Black Language. The division, however, is about acceptance of the language and not its viability.

Ebonics (African American “Vernacular” English) also refers to French-African and Dutch-African. However the exact origin of the terms and phrases in African American Language cannot be determined as with the term Ebonics. United States Ebonics is rooted in the Black American Oral Tradition, reflecting the combination of African languages (Niger-Congo) and Euro American English. It is the result of enslavement, which survived domination. Ebonics is not “broken” English, nor “sloppy” speech or slang. It is set of communication patterns and practices resulting

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<sup>500</sup> To discount or show disrespect for a person; to put someone or something down. (Smitherman, Black Talk, 108)

<sup>501</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 20.

from Africans' appropriation and transformation of a foreign tongue during the enslavement of African people in the United States and throughout the Diaspora, known to black writers, Rappers, activists, and others as the African Holocaust<sup>502</sup>.

The parallel is seen as the lives of those in the communities of Africa were disrupted by the European slave trade. Millions died as a result of deplorable conditions in the Middle Passage and the constant torture of the slaves. Smitherman states, "A number of contemporary Black historians and other scholars have argued that the consequences of the African Holocaust and its impact on present-day Black communities have yet to be fully assessed".<sup>503</sup>

The dialects and languages of the African American community are represented by the following:

- United States Ebonics derived from the Niger-Congo (African) languages and/or derived from Creole languages of the Caribbean, and/or derived from the linguistic related to but not directly the same as either English or West African languages.
- Standard American English (U.S. Language of Wider Communication (LWC))
- Nonstandard American English
- Language patterns and communication styles that are non-African in origin and are used by the working class which incorporates double negatives and mis-pronunciations (ask and axe)
- Arabic, Spanish, Swahili, Creole, etc.<sup>504</sup>

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<sup>502</sup> "A term used by Black writers, Rappers, activists, and others to refer to the enslavement of African people in the US and throughout the Diaspora", Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 19.

<sup>503</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* Note 1, 400.

<sup>504</sup> Smitherman, *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture, and Education in African America* 20.

All of which was shaped by the desire to communicate under duress as enslaved Africans in America.

In the controversy about the existence and role of Africanisms in the “Black Experience” two schools of thought exist. In the Anglican tradition “Negro” or “Black” English is really “White English” and traceable to British dialects spoken in remote areas. Enslaved Africans picked up their English from white immigrants, from places like East Anglia (whites of the British Isles), who had settled in the South during the Colonial era in U.S. history. Thus, saying that black speech is simply outdated or archaic white speech. In this tradition, it is believed that these outdated and old-fashioned forms of English have persisted in the African American community because of racial, and consequently, linguistic isolation. Furthermore, it is believed that, because blacks have not participated in the mainstream of white society, they have not evolved. This line of reasoning replaces or piggybacks on, the theory concerning genetic and biological and sociological differences. Also in the Anglican tradition, is the theory that everything African was lost during the hardship of the Middle Passage and the aftermath of slavery. A blank slate was left (*tabula rasa*), which was filled with European American culture. Cultural differences are also attributed to the degradation of poverty and hard times, rather than to African linguistic and cultural influence.

The other school of thought lies in the definition of Ebonics: linguistic and paralinguistic features, which on a concentric continuum, represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. It includes the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social dialects of black people, especially those who have been forced to adapt

to colonial circumstances. “Ebonics” derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound).

At the level where African Americans were prevented from maintaining the large number of African cultural institutions and traditional customs (which survived in the Caribbean and in South America) is racial barriers which prevent the poor from assimilation into white American society. They also served as cultural and linguistic barriers, enabling many African characteristics – including linguistic features – to be preserved behind an apparently American exterior. Africanisms survived and were not recreated as is assumed. Smitherman states:

Other creations emerged from the life and experience of a segregated culture and include language concerning a life of oppression, expressions indicative of a strong Christian orientation, and phrases that are coded to mean something other than what they would mean to a non-Black listener.<sup>505</sup>

Here we see that “style-shifting”, discussed in Subsection 8.1, has also survived into the present century. African Americans are very protective of the language and forms of expression inherited from their ancestors. Perhaps this form of self preservation speaks to the continuing desire for freedom; an inheritance that cannot be denied, as is exhibited in Part Four.

## **9.5 The Black Church**

J.D. Roberts, in discussing the survival of Africanisms in the black church community expresses the following: “It follows that there were no significant religious

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<sup>505</sup> See “code-switching” in Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin : The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

survivals”.<sup>506</sup> In dispute of this statement, the voice of African America was heard loudest during the American Civil Rights Movement of the 50’s into the early 70’s coming through the African American church. Mailer expressed earlier (9.3) the African Americans desire to live life on their own terms. During the time of the Civil Rights movement African Americans were speaking out and rebelling against living their lives on terms set for them by the dominant society. The act of rebellion was not new as there were many rebellions in the past by the enslaved. These rebellions symbolized the desire to live as human beings and the voice of the enslaved was crying out to be heard. Hopkins states, “The myth of the happy slave evaporates when one discovers that there were so many slave insurrections in Virginia in the nineteenth century that they were not all recorded for fear that the magnitude of the Black quest for freedom might overwhelm the slave-owners.”<sup>507</sup> The enslaved were punished like little children for desiring to have the basic right that was afforded to many other people of their time, freedom. Why were the enslaved Africans not only denied the basic right of freedom, but also denied the right to want it? This thesis has shown that one of the primary measures taken to quell the desire to be free was the presentation of Christianity.

The abuse of Christianity in the past by whites has been discussed in this thesis and the effect on the black church has fostered a renewed desire to reclaim and rename the past and present respectively. Smitherman reveals, “Yes, enslaved Africans adopted ole massa’s religion, but they Africanized this religion into spirit-gittin, tongue-speakin, vision-receivin, amen-sayin, singsong preachin, holy-dancin

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<sup>506</sup> Roberts and Goatley, *Black Religion, Black Theology : The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts* 118.

<sup>507</sup> Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet : Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* 38-41, Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies : An Interdisciplinary Anthology* 27.

worship.”<sup>508</sup> The above statement, although seemingly simplistic and archaic represents the voice of the African American church. Very often in the experience of the African American Christian, attending church is what sustains them and allows them to give voice to their daily lives. Many African Americans are comfortable with attending multicultural church services, but uncomfortable when it comes to worship. Wilmore states, “Regardless of the congregational expression in which he may be involved side by side with his white neighbor, the Negro knows the dimension of separation from the white that leads him to seek fulfillment in fellowships primarily concerned with the folk religion: freedom and equality.”<sup>509</sup> Often times they are self conscious about their desire to express their praise to God in a manner that would single them out from the crowd. It is in their “blood” to rejoice openly and sometimes in ways peculiar to the experience mentioned above by Smitherman. Wilmore adds, “Black religion is unique to the Negro folk, born as it was of slavery, and it ties them each to the other in times of stress by a racial bond that cuts across all other variables.”<sup>510</sup> There are times when African Americans are reminded of their past, albeit through negative contact with other societies or in times of close contact with other African Americans. During these times the voice of the enslaved speaks reminding them of who they are. A mixture of rage and pride develops and often it is through their faith that an outlet comes. Wilmore concurs, “The voices of Black faith

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<sup>508</sup> Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* 20-21.

<sup>509</sup> Joseph R. Washington, Jr. "Folk Religion and Negro Congregations: The Fifth Religion", Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies : An Interdisciplinary Anthology* 51.

<sup>510</sup> Joseph R. Washington, Jr. "Folk Religion and Negro Congregations: The Fifth Religion", Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies : An Interdisciplinary Anthology* 51.



granted Blacks a spiritual emancipation from their oppression, which is still a primary element in the anatomy of contemporary African American Christianity.”<sup>511</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Through the languages of Pidgin, Creole, spirituals, sermons, style-shifting, etc the voice of African America is heard. Their story is told through the struggles with learning English and making it their own. The history of the songs, sermons, poems still coming to light pull out of obscurity the rich yet debased lives of a people struggling to survive and make sense of their history. This thesis is not just about the survival of words or even language, but the voice that is created from the origin of the African American language; a product of two cultures, Africa and America. Yet the voice is that of African America and that voice is that of survival. Enslaved Africans were forced to survive from the time they left the shores of West Africa. Some did not make it across the Atlantic, but those that did carry their blood in their veins. Therefore, they too survived as African Americans. In spite of the hardships and the attempts by enslavers to erase the memory of those who perished, they live on.

The common language of African Americans is constantly changing but the voice of survival remains. With this change comes new dynamics that merely reiterate the consciousness of African Americans concerning their identity. Language has power to shape identity, culture and to remind of the past. The changes in the language, as with the culture, will not necessary come from the past but from the future. D. S. Hope states, “Shifts in identity are more likely to come about through new age

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<sup>511</sup> Marable Manning, "Religion and Black Protest Thought in African American History", Wilmore, *African American Religious Studies : An Interdisciplinary Anthology* 325.

cohorts than in changes in existing cohorts. As a result, the history of African American rhetoric has been characterized by a continuing search for identity.”<sup>512</sup>

Powell, in the chapter of the book *Step Into a World* entitled “The Word Movement”, discusses the current movement of the voice of African America.<sup>513</sup> The Word Movement is not new for it began with the voice of the enslaved African spanning from Phyllis Wheatley to today’s voices of those like Toni Morrison and young writers like Kevin Powell. The movement encompasses the voices of writers, poets, rappers, preachers and teachers. The new “cohorts” are young African Americans voicing their concerns about poverty, injustice, and AIDS that beat their communities down. The former writers have passed on the legacy of language and the voice of the marginalized continues to be heard. Powell adds, “The goal was not just to write, but to aggressively inform the public of our efforts.”<sup>514</sup> His anthology informs and reminds one of the worlds African America has inherited.

Christianity stands at the center of the survival of African America. Used to subdue and pacify the enslaved, the Bible spoke of freedom. The enslaved were not satisfied with the teachings by the white preachers and even before they were allowed to read the words for themselves the message of the Bible was revealed. The stories became their stories and the enslaved preacher spoke of survival. Wimbush describes the Bible as:

An ideological and rhetorical weapon on an ideological and rhetorical playing field. Different regions of the country, different religious and cultural groups, and different racial and ethnic groups and classes

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<sup>512</sup> D.S. Hope, "Redefinition of self: A Comparison of the Rhetoric of the Women's Liberation and Black Liberation Movements" Eastern Communication Association. and Speech Association of the Eastern States., "Today's Speech," ([Amherst, Mass., etc.,: Eastern Communication Association), 23, 17-25.

<sup>513</sup> Powell, *Step into a World : A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* 1-14.

<sup>514</sup> Powell, *Step into a World : A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature* 6.

turned to the Bible both to articulate and to justify their views on the great controversial topic of the times – slavery.<sup>515</sup>

Christianity, used by some to silence the voice of the enslaved, literally gave them their voice and identity which carried over into the American Civil Rights Movement a collective voice that was heard and still reverberates around the world. Part Four utilizes the identity and culture of African America and data collected to discuss the presentation to and reception of the gospel to both the Colossians in the first century and the enslaved Africans of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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<sup>515</sup> Wimbush, "Reading..." Segovia and Tolbert, *Teaching the Bible : The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* 99.

## **PART FOUR**

### **TOWARDS A RE-READING OF COLOSSIANS**

#### **Introduction**

The identities of the Colossians and Africans mentioned in this thesis produced a footprint for understanding the reception of the gospel portrayed in the letter to the Colossians from an African American perspective. Africa's extensive history of exposure to the teachings of the gospel is reflected in the re-reading of Colossians. With strong beginnings in Africa, the teachings and practices of first-century Christianity were observed with tenacity by Africans. If not largely ignored, the similarities between the traditional religions of Africa and Christianity would have served as a bridge for the missionaries of the fifteenth century (See Subsection 5.2). Subsequently Africans carried with them to the New World the teachings of both their traditional religions and Christianity. As with the Colossians, their interpretation of the teachings did not meet the standards of those presenting the gospel.

The re-reading is seen through the lens of the people of Colossae and that of the enslaved Africans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from an African American postcolonial perspective. These two groups were chosen because in paralleling the presentation and reception of the gospel to Colossae and to the enslaved African during the respective periods mentioned, similarities existed:

- Both groups lived in countries that had been colonized.
- They were mostly powerless to change their status without negative repercussions.
- Diversities of beliefs and customs existed within their communities.
- The dominant culture controlled them to the betterment of the empire and the detriment of its subjects.

This thesis does not attempt to equate one society with the other. They differed in that, unlike the enslaved African, the people of Colossae had more mobility. They travelled freely to other cities, e.g. Laodicea and Hierapolis. They were hampered neither by race nor by ethnic differences, however they were classified by status (slave and free). The letter does suggest that the people were under the subjection of worldly powers (Colossians 2.8, 15). The lives of each group differed geographically and in the era in which they lived. However, a greater similarity (and the focus of this thesis) was that both groups were new believers. The difference was that the gospel had only just begun to be spread in the first century and Christianity was in its early stages. Nevertheless as new believers, both groups had been exposed to religions and practices for generations that “seemed” to oppose the teachings of the gospel. The impact of Christianity through the centuries on the generations of Africans, both in Africa and the New World is pivotal in understanding the postcolonial view.

In understanding postcolonial (as with post-feminine or postmodern), the “post” does not mean sequentially “after” or “anti” as the prefix might indicate. Bhabha explains it in oppositional terms. The discourse does not represent what happens beyond or outside a given era or genre. Nor is it merely relevant to that which happens during a set period. The prefix “post” rather concerns what Bhabha interprets as: that which represents what is produced by the very existence of the era or genre; be it art, music, literature, etc. He states, “It is in this sense that the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing.”<sup>516</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 5.

The re-reading begins with a brief mention of authorship of the Colossians letter. Next in Chapter Ten a summary of the commentaries on Colossians is presented. Finally, the actual re-reading will follow in Chapters Twelve through Fifteen.

Authorship is addressed to further identify the hearers. Paul's writings show a different approach when writing to the different communities. The writer of this letter, if not Paul, shows techniques that parallel him. The letter differs from that to the Galatians and the Corinthians. Barclay, referencing the letter to the Colossians suggests, "Whereas there is more or less settled consensus about the target of Paul's attack on Galatians or the viewpoints Paul combats in 1 Corinthians, here there is not only no consensus but, it seems, an ever-increasing in the range of reconstructions on offer."<sup>517</sup> The diversity of the population in Colossae and the rest of the cities in the Lycos valley perhaps contributed to the problem of identifying the target of the "so called" attack. The various commentators attempting to lay blame as to who the "false teachers" were help identify the hearers. However, it is not the aim of this thesis to point to the hearers or community members as "false teachers" but to identify them, promoting the idea that various beliefs were represented which constituted the purpose of the letter.

Within the purview of this letter, written to a first-century community of new believers, five areas are briefly presented in reference to the development of this perspective:

- Labeling
- Major Commentators on the "Colossian Error"

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<sup>517</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon, New Testament Guides* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 40.

- Christianity
- Rhetoric
- African American Hermeneutics
- A Hermeneutic of a Slave Society (Isolation Theme)

## PART FOUR - CHAPTER TEN

### LITERARY REVIEW OF COMMENTARY ON COLOSSIANS

#### 10.1 Labeling

Can one speak for the people of Colossae, the hearers/readers of the letter written by Paul or someone of the Pauline Corpus? The answer has to be no, because only they can speak and that is now an impossibility considering the letter was written nearly 2000 years ago. Does anyone have the right to speak for them? No, unless they had asked someone and that cannot be determined (unless there is tangible evidence that has survived the devastation of that city). Should someone speak for them? Now this is the question that needs clarifying. What would be accomplished by giving a voice to the people of first-century Colossae? Perhaps it is just the curiosity of one person who is puzzled by the “hype” of twentieth and twenty-first-century scholars labeling some of the early believers of that community as “heretics”, “false teachers” and “opponents”. From a postcolonial standpoint interest is generated in hearing the voice of the “other” unraveling the European and Euro-American criticism of the text which presents an imperialistic view of society gone wrong. This thesis identifies with the “other” on the subject of the voice of the Colossians and takes issue with speaking *about* and *to* the “other”.

Spivak’s statement concerning the voices of the indigenous rings true for both the believers in Colossae and the enslaved Africans. She remarks, “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a



circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.”<sup>518</sup> However, by comparing the circumstances of each group as it relates to the reception of Christianity in this thesis a collective voice resounds giving notice to those who will hear. The labels placed on the people of Colossae and those of the enslaved Africans have placed limitations on the interpretation of the text.

Viewing the text of Colossians from the lens of the subdominant culture offers interpretation from the perspective of the “other”; a valuable interpretation in furthering the debate in biblical hermeneutics in the critical study of the Bible. Foucault suggests, “To make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value.”<sup>519</sup> In changing the level of the conversation in Colossians from concentrating on the error to examining the people to whom the letter was addressed argues against labeling them. Re-reading the text from the view of “other” allows one to see historic value in people who otherwise have no voice.

Spivak responds to Foucault’s statement by saying that; “it is the slippage from rendering visible the mechanism to rendering vocal the individual both avoiding ‘any kind of analysis of [the subject] whether psychological, psychoanalytical or linguistic’, that is consistently troublesome”.<sup>520</sup> The people of Colossae were labeled and as a consequence their views were not valued. It should be noted that the writer of the letter is not complicit to the degree of the commentators in their labeling of its

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<sup>518</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 308.

<sup>519</sup> Michel Foucault and Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge : Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980) 49-50.

<sup>520</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Nelson and Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* 285.

readers as “heretics” and “false teachers”. However, he suggests they were not “worthy” (1.10) as believers unless they rose to the level of knowledge to which he encouraged them (1.9 “the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding”). The listeners were praised for their belief in Christ as having “faith” and “love” (1.4-8); yet the goal was to have a deeper knowledge. They were not to be heard from (made visible) unless they conformed to the edict of the gospel concerning the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They were to be presentable only through their acknowledging (1.21-22, that they were once “alienated” and must be made presentable “holy, blameless and above reproach”).

The people of Colossae had been believers in religions of some kind before the teachings of the gospel were introduced. The religion that was later to be known as Christianity was new; therefore commentators who place belief in Christ as being older than that of the beliefs of the Colossians are not looking at the chronology of religion in the Lycus Valley. Christianity was not yet fully established. Therefore why is it being presented in such an authoritative fashion? MacDonald points out, “The Church was in the intermediate stages of the institutionalization of the Pauline communities.”<sup>521</sup> The language of the letter needs to be looked at more closely to determine the tenor of the writer’s concern. This thesis suggests that the writer and later commentators are in error in claiming to know the people of Colossae to the point of labeling those of the community who appear to be trying to make sense of this new belief.

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<sup>521</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches : A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 2-4.

Often, neither the beliefs nor the traditions of the indigenous are investigated beyond observing what appears on the surface. Zerbe remarks:

With a few sharp strokes the author asserts the supremacy and absolutism of Christ over all other religious and political claimants (1.13-20; 2.8-3.4). These texts have been a powerful tool in the history of the colonial missionary enterprise, a weapon used to reject indigenous rituals, practices and beliefs of colonized and converted peoples.<sup>522</sup>

Upon viewing certain behavior that appears strange or foreign, opinions are formed and actions are taken to correct the beliefs on the assumption that what is viewed is in error. Zerbe and Orevillo-Montenegro assert in the following quote that the beliefs of the other are not properly investigated, thus that voice is often misrepresented.

Almost invariably, Western scholarly commentators either proudly proclaim and sanctify Paul's resistance to 'error' and 'heresy' or refuse to engage the critical religious and cultural issues by resting content to reconstruct descriptively the alternative perspective which Paul opposes. Proposed labels for the 'other' tendency include Jewish-Christian Gnosticism, a Christianized mystery cult, Jewish ascent mysticism, Hellenistic philosophy (various forms) and syncretistic folk religion.<sup>523</sup>

*Africa Answers Back*<sup>524</sup> portrays the traditional beliefs of remote African villagers in early twentieth-century Uganda. As a case review for this thesis this biographical story told in a fictional fashion, reveals a well structured society and reaction to missionary attempts to correct what they interpreted as erroneous beliefs. The

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<sup>522</sup> Zerbe and Orevillo-Montenegro Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings, The Bible and Postcolonialism* (London ; New York: T & T Clark, 2007) 295.

<sup>523</sup> Zerbe and Orevillo-Montenegro Segovia and Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* 296.

<sup>524</sup> Akiki K. Nyabongo, *Africa Answers Back* (London,: Routledge, 1936).

author reveals the problems encountered by both missionaries and indigenous people in understanding the beliefs of one another. Nyabongo records an instance where missionaries sought to correct the practice of polygamy within the tribal system by citing the teachings of Paul, but failed to dissuade the chief in adequately answering the question of Solomon's many wives and concubines. Another area questioned by the people was Jesus' lineage in light of Mary's Immaculate Conception and her betrothal and marriage to Joseph. In addition from the missionary's teaching there was the confusion about Jesus' step-father and from their calculation the result was that Jesus seemed to have had three fathers. This undermined the missionary's attempt to teach monogamy since the Ugandans thought Mary had three husbands.

The book illustrated the problems of presenting the gospel to a society whose beliefs were not only different but grounded in traditions that extended to past generations. Their beliefs did not hamper them in offering informed questions and in some cases accepting the doctrines presented to them. The Chief in the story inquired about having his son baptized, but a missionary refused because the chief practiced polygamy. Although the intention of the missionary was for a far-reaching evangelism throughout the entire village, his refusal sent a different message to the people. Instead of drawing them into the faith, they were turned away.

Aichele asks provoking questions that add to the discussion of labeling in the context of biblical hermeneutics.

To what extent have the echoes of other voices in these letters been drowned out simply by being labeled the opponents, the biblical scholar's equivalent of the term other? To what extent does the term

opponent connote the normativity of Paul's own discourse? And to what extent does such Pauline commentary become an extension of Paul's own discourse, a testament to its cooptive power, and a repetition of its gesture of exclusion?<sup>525</sup>

He offers a Foucauldian reading which he feels would attempt an alternative interpretation of the various voices within the Pauline corpus, by saying that the labeling is not necessarily negative; just an example of unconventional interpretations of truth in terms. Walsh disagrees with this concept. He calls it, "a facile strategy" with an "appearance of wisdom", that drowns out the voice of the marginalized.<sup>526</sup> He adds, "What such 'reading against the grain' of the text actually accomplishes is a new kind of violence with a new opponent who is deemed to have deviated from another assumed normative stance."<sup>527</sup> While seeing Walsh's point, the idea of "other" applied to Paul would only work if poststructuralist critics applied the same rhetorical techniques to him as he did his opponents. This tactic, being reactionary, would only serve to dismiss Paul and his theology which is not the intention of this thesis. Although the discussions surrounding Paul's voice tends to be an obstacle, they are necessary for identifying the voices of the people of Colossae.

The free use of the term "pagan" in many of the commentaries on Colossians points to the Europeans' view of the Africans when first encountered. They were said to be without a religion or what they believed was "false" therefore the need to evangelize them was evident. Their beliefs were dismissed as pagan and if there were any

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<sup>525</sup> George Aichele and Bible and Culture Collective., *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995) 143.

<sup>526</sup> George Aichele and Bible and Culture Collective Aichele and Bible and Culture Collective., *The Postmodern Bible* 275.

<sup>527</sup> Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed : Subverting the Empire* 104-05.

examination of them they proved to be substandard. The writer of Colossians letter was kind; however, there is the element of sub-standardizing the former beliefs of the community.

To dismiss the discourse of the letter to the Colossians would only serve to further silence their voices. The obstacle in this process is the labeling by contemporary critics of the people of the newly formed community of believers as heretics and opponents and presupposing knowledge of their beliefs by labeling them erroneous. The danger in perpetuating this practice is born out historically in presuppositions concerning the beliefs of people in various “other world” countries. The following is quoted in entirety to reflect accusations supporting the derogatory view of many European critics of the “other”:

Hypocrisy is of recent date; that neither Cortez discovering Mexico from the top of the great teocalli, nor Pizzaro before Cuzco (much less Marco Polo before Cambaluc), claims that he is the harbinger of a superior order; that they kill; that they plunder; that they have helmets, lances, cupidities; that the slaving apologists came later; that the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations Christianity = civilization, paganism = savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians. The refusal of the Caribs (Caribals / cannibals) to convert to Christianity justified European genocide in the Caribbean. Native ‘other’ and ‘cannibal’ became linked concepts in a European psyche already politically and religiously alert for signs of this ultimate sacrilege / sacrament. Myths of

African savagery and 'heathen rites' justified a racism rendered necessary by the economic promise of the slave trade.<sup>528</sup>

## 10.2 Major Commentators on the “Colossian Error”

This section presents background literature on the labeling of “false teachers”. The views are used in this thesis to identify the Colossian believers. Although not meant to dismiss the views held by the commentators presented, this thesis stands in opposition to the labeling itself and the foundations on which the commentators base it. However, this thesis finds value in the labels to aid in identifying the people of Colossae and to give them a voice in the understanding their view of the presentation of the gospel. The authors are not listed in any particular order.

### 10.2.1 J.B. Lightfoot<sup>529</sup>

Lightfoot identifies the false teacher as Jewish with the references to circumcision, Sabbaths, new moons and the rules about food and drink. He saw a close relationship to Judaism in wisdom, knowledge and mystery; fascination with angels and other intermediary powers; and interest in asceticism and humiliation of the body. He also made a parallel between Judaism and the Essenes. The Essenes were interested in angels, ascetic practices and knowledge that he felt influenced the newly formed Christian church in Colossae. He considered the Essenes to be a form of pre-Christian Judaic Gnosticism although not claiming that the “heresy” originated in the doctrines of the Essenes.

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<sup>528</sup> Diana Brydon, Helen Tiffin, 'West Indian Literature and the Australian Comparison' *Postcolonial Criticism* B. J. Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton, and Willy Maley, *Postcolonial Criticism, Longman Critical Readers* (London ; New York: Longman, 1997) 201.

<sup>529</sup> (reprinted in) Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 13-59, Primary source Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*.

### 10.2.2 Günther Bornkamm<sup>530</sup>

Bornkamm concentrated on the reference to “elements/elemental spirits of the universe” (2.8, 20) which connects with “powers” in 2.10 and 2.15, angels 2.18 and “fullness” 2.9. He made a connection between Mithras and Jews to Christ through the references to angel worship, observance of festivals and seasons and the insistence on certain ascetic practices. His Gnostic connection stems from the Mithras celebration of a mystery of rebirth which he parallels with the ascetic of “voluntary humiliation” (2.8, 23). He considered the “heresy” to be a Jewish Gnosticism stemming from the aforementioned feasts and festivals as ascetic practices which he later indicated as the precursor to Hypsistarians a successor in Asian Christianity. This he identified as the Jewish-Christian Gnosticism combated in Colossians.<sup>531</sup>

### 10.2.3 Martin Dibelius<sup>532</sup>

Dibelius argued that Christians had adapted a pagan mystery cult dedicated to “the elements” of the “cosmos”. With Christianity in its early stages one would argue that they were mixing more familiar pagan beliefs with their new beliefs in the gospel. Barclay here however sounds closer to chronologically putting the beliefs in order, whereby Christianity is not mentioned as an established religion, but beginning to form. He states that, “...we have a fine example of the syncretization of Christianity in which early mystical forms of gnosis (not yet developed Gnosticism) proved attractive to Christians as a kind of secondary religious insurance”.<sup>533</sup> However, there

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<sup>530</sup> 'The Heresy of Colossians', translated in Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 123-45.

<sup>531</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 42.

<sup>532</sup> Martin Dibelius, *An Die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon* (Tübingen,: J.C.B. Mohr (p. Siebeck), 1927). Translated in Francis and Meeks 'Conflict at Colossae' 61-121.

<sup>533</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 44.



is still a sense that Christianity dominates with the use of the “secondary”. The mystery cults predated Christianity. Dibelius was particularly interested in the phrase ἃ μή ἐώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, roughly translated “which he has seen entering” or “dwelling on visions”. He connects this entry rite to mystery initiations in antiquity. Dibelius’ views indicate a struggle between early Christian beliefs and existing pagan beliefs. His arguments comes closer to the view held by this thesis in that although he refers to “error” on the part of the Colossians, he does recognize that there existed beliefs rooted in generations of pagan worship.

#### 10.2.4 Fred O. Francis<sup>534</sup>

The readers of the letter can be identified as a mixture of pagan mystery believers and Jews. Francis took the interpretation of *ταπεινοφροσύνη* in 2.18 to be important (as did Dibelius). However, Francis equated self-mortification to a fasting regimen and the visions which could result. He found this to be common in both the Hellenistic world and Jewish post-biblical literature. In this period Jewish asceticism and mystical ascent were the result of fasting which resulted in visions and a sense of entering into the heavens (cf. 2 Corinthians 12.1-6). Francis pioneered the thought that the phrase *θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* translated by nearly all scholars to mean “worship of angels”, to be better translated as “worship practiced by angels”; thus, directing the error as a fascination with or human participation in the activity of angels worshipping God. This type of activity is discussed in Jewish apocalyptic literature. Francis aligns with Dibelius and the discussion of mysticism and “Gnosticism” places the target of the letter with Judaic ideology.

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<sup>534</sup> Francis and Meeks, *Conflict at Colossae : A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity, Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies* 163-95.

### 10.2.5 Eduard Schweizer<sup>535</sup>

The audience can be looked at as traditional Jews with a Greco-Roman background according to Schweizer's views of the heresy in Colossae. Hellenistic Philosophy is identified with the repeated phrase "the elements of the world" (2.8, 20). Schweizer took this phrase to refer neither to spirits nor astral powers but to the (four) physical elements of the world, which were regarded by some Greek philosophers as being in constant strife and as holding humanity captive in the physical world.<sup>536</sup> "Self mortification" to Schweizer meant fasting and sexual abstinence which expressed a traditional Jewish characteristic when rules about food, drink and festivals were enforced. He also paralleled the Jewish implications with a neo-Pythagorean text from the first century (Diogenes Laertius, Lives 8.25-33) giving the philosophy a "Judaized Pythagoreanism".

### 10.2.6 Clinton Arnold<sup>537</sup>

Jewish and Gentile syncretism is identified within this newly forming Christian community. Traditional local religions were practiced with reference to invocation to angels and magic to ward off evil powers. He contends that the phrase θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων has nothing to do with Jewish mysticism. He identifies the hearers as the local peoples of Phrygian (mystery 2.18) and Jewish (2.16) descent.

### 10.2.7 Richard DeMaris<sup>538</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians : A Commentary*.

<sup>536</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 46.

<sup>537</sup> Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism : The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*.

<sup>538</sup> Richard E. DeMaris, *The Colossian Controversy : Wisdom in Dispute at Colossae, Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

DeMaris identifies the people of Colossae as Jewish and Greek. He identifies elements of Middle-Platonic demonology and a Jewish-Christian emphasis on humility, food and celebrations. DeMaris points out that the Jews were no longer concerned with the religious aspects of these traditions. The worship of angels meant that the angels themselves were worshipped. Contrary to Francis, however, “angels” were another name for pagan heroes or lesser divinities, identifying a more mythic audience. He translates the term ἐμβατεύων, to mean “investigating” which points to the philosophical tone of “heresy”. He feels this “attracted Christians precisely by its combination of Jewish tradition and Greek philosophy”.<sup>539</sup>

#### **10.2.8 Troy Martin<sup>540</sup>**

Cynic philosophers were thought to be among the Colossian congregation using 2.16-18 and 20-23 as evidence. The Cynics were said to criticize the community for their eating and drinking and observance of feasts, new moons and Sabbaths. Cynics were noted for their prohibitions of consumer goods and an understanding of humility as bodily discipline, not social respect.<sup>541</sup> Martin argues that the phrase θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων does not mean worship of angels or worship with them, but “the religion communicated by human messengers”. The Cynics criticized the preaching of the gospel by the Colossian Christians.<sup>542</sup>

#### **10.2.9 R. McL. Wilson<sup>543</sup>**

Wilson views the controversy as pre-gnostic in nature stating: “The only proper course is to read the letter as it stands, without importing ideas from a later age, but

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<sup>539</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 46.

<sup>540</sup> Troy W. Martin, *By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament. Supplement Series*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>541</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 47.

<sup>542</sup> Barclay Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 47.

<sup>543</sup> Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* 61.

at the same time recognizing throughout the possibility that there may be elements which suggest a development in the direction of the later Gnosticism".<sup>544</sup> He identifies a Jewish component in relation to the "Gnostic" elements making note of the debate concerning the authenticity and dating of the letter. Wilson affirms, as does this thesis, that; "We are not yet in a position to affirm with confidence that we have finally identified the nature and origins of the Colossian "heresy"". <sup>545</sup> He identifies the community largely as Gentile Christians and, on a smaller scale, some Jews.<sup>546</sup>

### **10.2.10 Morna D. Hooker**

Morna Hooker's view of the comments to the Colossians community is as general warnings to a community which consisted of diverse peoples of faiths ranging from Judaism to the mystery cults. She suggests, "Even if the letter is written out of a general pastoral concern for the Christians in Colossae, rather than because of some dangerous error there, we may expect Paul's words to reflect knowledge of the state of the Church."<sup>547</sup> Hooker's stance on the controversy is that due to the unusual calm of the writer in confronting the situation as reported to him in Colossae the idea of false teaching is questionable. She suggests that, if there were indications of false teachings it was not serious enough to warrant attacks as other commentators suggest. The letter indicates at the onset that there were no questions about the uniqueness of Christ that would suggest, for example, the beginning of Gnostic belief. The writer does not specifically point that out. There was no clear correction directed to outsiders bringing into the community false teachings. Hooker mentions

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<sup>544</sup> Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* 45 - 63.

<sup>545</sup> Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* 61.

<sup>546</sup> Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* 8.

<sup>547</sup> Morna Dorothy Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 126.

the letter to the Galatians, where faith in Christ was being compromised, as a reference to the different tone of the letter. She adds, “There is therefore no real basis for assuming that the Christology of chapter 1 is developed in opposition to false beliefs in the Colossian Church which could in any sense be described as ‘heretical’ or ‘dangerous’.”<sup>548</sup>

This thesis is in agreement with Hooker’s assessment of the situation. Colossians does not contain the angry outbursts and concerns found in Galatians, Philippians (3.2) or the Corinthian letters. Hooker states, “Indeed, a closer examination of Paul’s language in Colossians suggests a situation very different from the troubled state of some of his churches.”<sup>549</sup> Chapter One is very encouraging and exhibits confidence in their adapting to the teachings of the gospel. Chapter Two shows the writer rejoicing over their good order and faith as he urges them to live their lives as those who are “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith” (2.7).

In 2.2 the writer explains that he is reminding the Colossians of certain facts in order that no one should delude them. The warning is a general one, and it should not be assumed that the writer believes that the people of Colossae are in imminent danger from particular “false teachers”. In employing the term *δογματίζεσθε* (in verse 20) the writer is perhaps asking them rhetorically in order to invoke thought “why subject yourselves” or “why submit” to regulations as opposed to implying that they have already done so. Hooker remarks that, “in view of the lack of any other indication that

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<sup>548</sup> Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* 122.

<sup>549</sup> Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* 124.

the Colossians have submitted to such regulations, it seems more likely that Paul is issuing a warning than an accusation".<sup>550</sup>

Pagan beliefs were alive as was the heritage of Judaism. The newly baptized community of believers were called to be "holy and blameless and irreproachable" (1.22) within this atmosphere. Imagine the pressure of those who had removed themselves from their former pagan beliefs to achieve purity by keeping the regulations of Judaism. It was perhaps not so difficult for the Jewish population. Hooker points out, "The convert who accepted as much from Judaism would naturally tend to accept these also. There is no need to postulate the arrival in Colossae of "false teachers" or "Judaizers" to explain Paul's warnings."<sup>551</sup> The tension created within the community in deconstructing former beliefs and instituting the teachings of the gospel was what concerned the writer. Therefore clarification was needed which over time could create a more stable community. With persons living in the community who were outside the faith tensions would naturally occur and Hooker's following statement could hold true.

Paul's teaching in Colossians, then, seems to us to be quite as appropriate to a situation in which young Christians are under pressure to conform to the beliefs and practices of their pagan and Jewish neighbors, as to a situation in which their faith is endangered by the deliberate attacks of false teachers.<sup>552</sup>

### 10.3 Christianity

Reading the letter from the perspective that it was addressing people who were still practicing "pagan" religions and viewing Christianity in its infancy turns the tables to

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<sup>550</sup> Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* 123.

<sup>551</sup> Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* 124.

<sup>552</sup> Hooker, *From Adam to Christ: Essays on Paul* 134.

show that Christianity was not necessarily being challenged but the former beliefs and culture of the Colossians. What did the Colossians need to change about their faith and what could be incorporated? Surely there were practices that seem to contradict the teachings of Paul and others. The labeling of the teachings and the stigma of the word “opponents” is reminiscent of the missionary efforts to convert West Africans as early as the fifteenth century to Christianity. Since the indigenous beliefs were foreign to that with which the missionaries’ were familiar the indigenous people were labeled as “savages” and “heathens” and their beliefs were condemned. The use of the term “wayward community” by Zerbe and Montenegro following, suggests a pulling away from established beliefs of a group or culture. “The letter to the Colossians is, in brief, an assertion of Paul’s apostolic authority over a (potentially) wayward community not established by Paul himself”.<sup>553</sup> This community was a newly formed community of believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ being led by Epaphras in the absence of the writer; thus the label “wayward” does not fit into this cultural context. The following statement by Zerbe rings truer in reference to the chronological place of Christianity as a more established movement elsewhere.

Appealing to Paul’s special role in the divine management of redemption (1.24-2.5), the letter attempts to maintain or restore a normative understanding of faith and practice within the community in the face of rival perspectives and teachers and seeks, accordingly, to promote social cohesion both within the community and between the community and adherents of the Pauline movement in other locations (e.g., 4.7-17).<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> Gordon Zerbe and Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, 'The Letter to the Colossians', Segovia and Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* 294.

<sup>554</sup> Zerbe and Orevillo-Montenegro Segovia and Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* 294.

Yet, Christianity as an established religion was in its early stages.<sup>555</sup> The writers of this comment go on to make reference to “alternative religious perspectives and practices, introduced by rival teachers” (2.4, 8, 16, and 18). Alternatively it suggests movement from Christianity to another religion, where as Epaphras was actually attempting to accomplish the opposite.

#### 10.4 Rhetoric

Amidst strong criticism it is thought that traditional religions were woven into the fabric of Christian teachings among indigenous people. What some critics failed to acknowledge was that all people bring their existing beliefs to bear when faced with new beliefs. This does not necessarily negatively affect the doctrines of the faith unless these doctrines negate foundational beliefs. For example, Paul used his background, his rhetoric and opinions in presenting the gospel. Zerbe remarks:

Writings by or about Paul indicate that he is quite ready to use syncretism and self-conscious cultural accommodation in his proclamation of the gospel (e.g., Acts 14, 17; 1 Cor. 11). Yet, Paul also appears to be uncompromising in rejecting particular Hellenistic religious notions, such as those regarding the afterlife (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15) or when he considers the ‘truth of the gospel’ to be potentially compromised (e.g., Galatians 1-2).<sup>556</sup>

In the letter to the Colossians, though not as harsh as in these mentioned here, the writer takes great pains to instruct the community concerning pitfalls that might occur

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<sup>555</sup>64 CE - persecutions by Nero blaming Christians for Great Fire of Rome

150 CE – Theologies and apologetics began to be formed

313 CE – persecutions ended; Constantine and Licinius issues ‘edict of tolerance’ (previously issued in 311 by Galerius of Serdica) in the Edict of Milan. Margaret Mary Mitchell, Frances M. Young, and K. Scott Bowie, *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol. 1, Origins to Constantine* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Casiday and Norris, *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Vol. 2, Constantine to C. 600*.

<sup>556</sup> Zerbe and Orevillo-Montenegro Segovia and Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* 296.



and encourages them to remain faithful. He appears to be intolerant of views that may oppose those being taught and leaves little room for discourse.

Paul successfully used rhetoric to capture the attention of his readers and to persuade them to hear the gospel in language that was often familiar to them. A. T. Lincoln points out:

Since the letter was a substitute for speech and since Paul's letters were meant to be read aloud to their recipients, it is also appropriate to view their contents in the light of the conventions of ancient rhetoric. Although the categories from the ancient rhetorical handbooks should not be applied rigidly or mechanically, they may be employed, where they fit, to illuminate the letter writer's persuasive strategy.<sup>557</sup>

The language of the letter indicates that the writer is attempting to guide the hearers from one degree of learning to another. He wants to increase their understanding incrementally, by building on what is already known by them, and then systematically encouraging them, pushing them further through the learning process. A. J. Malherbe suggests, "As a paraenetic<sup>558</sup> letter, Colossians shares numerous features with other letters of moral guidance produced in the Greco-Roman philosophical schools."<sup>559</sup> In these schools teachers would also use a combination of three major functions entitled "affirmation", "correction of rival views", and "exhortation" attempting to form or re-form the lives of the students to reflect the teachings.

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<sup>557</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln "The Letter to the Colossians" Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) Volume 11, 557.

<sup>558</sup> To exhort someone by urging them to pursue something or avoid something - See A.J. Malherbe, "Ancient Epistolary Theorists" (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 37, 69.

<sup>559</sup> Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes* 560 See also W.T. Wilson, 'The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Colossians (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997) esp. 10-131, 219-29

Another striking similarity is that their letters were sometimes written in the name of a past philosopher. The letter to the Colossians, as a disputed letter, would fit into this category with an added similarity that it was often addressed to past persons with a contemporary audience in view. The writer of this letter, if not Paul himself, was an adept student of Paul and was knowledgeable in the teaching styles of that day.

## 10.5 African American Hermeneutics

Every interpreter is biased in some way for they will bring to the reading their own experiences and presuppositions; therefore there exist various types of biblical hermeneutics. How the message is perceived depends on the biases of that person. In this thesis African American hermeneutics is applied, which indicates that it comes from that perspective; a person who is of that ethnicity, and a product of that culture. A person of that culture will interpret Scriptures in ways that are unique to them and often different from white interpreters. This concept is often referred to by black scholars as the “politics of interpretation”.<sup>560</sup> A universal hermeneutic is therefore a misleading concept because there is no absolute interpretation to which all should ascribe. G. Mulrain states:

The popular procedure in Black hermeneutics is to adopt the approach that there is no textual authority. No text ought to stand unchallenged. A purely Western scientific approach will claim absoluteness in the text, namely that it is fixed, that it emerged in a given historical period, therefore contains an absolute meaning.<sup>561</sup>

Although there must be interaction between the text and context, that context does not fix the message in time. Mulrain further adds, “This means that the text must

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<sup>560</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 6.

<sup>561</sup> George Mulrain, Hermeneutics within a Caribbean Context in R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Vernacular Hermeneutics, Bible and Postcolonialism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 120-21.

always be relevant to today's realities and not just those of yesteryear."<sup>562</sup> Surely this is not to say that the text is no longer relevant to the time in which it was written. In re-reading Colossians, looking at the context of the letter and viewing it from the standpoint of the audience, a larger picture of that society is seen.

Apart from the commentaries labeling the people of the community as heretics and false teachers, one can not only identify the people but also gain a different view of their situation. Mulrain advises, "In Black culture when one speaks of the reader's context, it must be realized that it is the "reader writ large" being referred to. One should read the text from the point of view of the community."<sup>563</sup> Often when this is done particularly from the lens of a certain culture identifying markers from that culture come to bear in that context. For example, a person reading the letter to the Colossians from an Asian lens will view it differently from that of a Latino. Their histories and present day cultural experiences come to bear.

Viewing a text from an African American perspective fits into the description of vernacular hermeneutics.<sup>564</sup> S. Hawley states, "Creatively intermixing and synthesizing biblical faith with indigenous religion, vernacular hermeneutics has not only transformed the biblical faith. It has also enabled indigenous cultures to survive for instance, Mayan identity in Guatemala"<sup>565</sup>. Sugirtharajah continues by saying in

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<sup>562</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Vernacular Hermeneutics* 122.

<sup>563</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Vernacular Hermeneutics* 122.

<sup>564</sup> "Vernacular hermeneutics privileges indigenous culture as an authentic site for doing theology, and focuses on native characteristics and ideas (paraphrased to state meaning)... Vernacular reading is often undertaken by the indigenes themselves. Vernacular hermeneutics is about being nearer home and getting closer to the roots... In his paper, Gerald West defines vernacular hermeneutics as the reading strategy, using their own resources, of ordinary indigenous readers of the Bible, mainly the marginalized, who bring their own critical consciousness to the text. For him, vernacular is not an interesting reading but an interested reading which always sides with the marginalized." Sugirtharajah, *Vernacular Hermeneutics*, 12-14.

<sup>565</sup> Susan Hawley 'Does God Speak Miskiro? The Bible and Ethnic Identity among the Misteitu of Nicaragua', Mark G. Brett, *Ethnicity and the Bible, Biblical Interpretation Series, V. 19* (Leiden ; New York: E.J. Brill, 1996) 315-42.

opposition to hermeneutical practices that emphasizes textual and visual modes as a way to interpret a text, “vernacular hermeneutics provides a corrective with its emphasis on the non-visual senses, and reverses the bias towards rationalistic understanding and opens up the richness of non-rationalist modes of interpretation”.<sup>566</sup> By doing this the interpretation is not relevant to a particular people to the exclusion of all others. This is not to say that one method is better than another. The emphasis is on the interpreter and what is produced from that process. Did not the writer of Colossians in response to the situation brought to him by Epaphras respond according to his views of the situation? It has also been shown in this thesis that the writer used the language of the culture and rhetorical practices of the era. It is therefore important at this juncture to unpack the culture of the enslaved as it relates to their own interpretation of their condition, which will be further discussed in the re-reading.

### **10.6 A Hermeneutic of Slave Society (Isolation theme)**

The letter to the Colossians, in the context of slavery in America encountered social and cultural similarities yet their world exhibited marked differences. Although resistance to the dominant society was suggested by the Colossians in this thesis, it was more evident among the enslaved Africans. Most enslaved Africans in the New World lived on plantations in isolation from other plantations and apart from rights and liberties experienced by the dominant society. They were treated like animals and were the property of their enslaver. Although treated as such, they did not accept this defamation. There were insurrections and rebellions that often resulted in bloodshed and death on both sides. Berlin notes:

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<sup>566</sup> Sugirtharajah, *Vernacular Hermeneutics* 106-07.

The transplanted Africans who might be subjected to such abuse made no pretense of trying to adapt to the planters' ways. Slave unrest grew with every new wave of harsh discipline and terror. The first decades of the eighteenth century were alive with rumors of insurrection and outbursts of violence, as slaves lashed back at the lords of the plantation.<sup>567</sup>

There were also rebellions that were not so violently carried out. They cried out, but their voices were often met with silence as no one seemed to care. Some who did hear their voices and had the power to help chose to only respond in deference to their own advantage. Laws were created that gave the slaveholders total and absolute power over their slaves.<sup>568</sup> Some enslavers hired overseers who watched for signs of rebellion in order to keep the enslaved subjugated. Sometimes the overseers were slaves who had won the favor and trust of their master.

The letter to the Colossians re-read from an African American postcolonial perspective will be viewed from the lens of an isolated people. In their isolation the enslaved Africans, whose voices the enslaver tried to silence, directed their hopes for deliverance and understanding towards God. They looked to God, who was omnipresent in place and time, to hear their voices and deliver them from their oppressor as he did the Israelites. He spoke to them through scant passages they were able to access, in spite of the restrictions placed by their enslavers. It is unknown what other passages they were able to access, except for what was preached to them concerning slavery.

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<sup>567</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 74.

<sup>568</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 193.

Many slaveholders were unaware that the scriptures preached to the enslaved (intended to maintain their captivity) were actually planting seeds for their liberation. Often the freedom they experienced was psychological, but it also fed their desires to be free to live their lives on their own terms. What was desired by the enslaved was the freedom to provide decent homes and crops for themselves and their families. They desired to worship in ways in which they felt familiar and in places called “hush harbors” also called “brush harbors”.<sup>569</sup> They often achieved satisfaction in reaching freedom in worship and communion with each other. In the hush harbors discussions and plans for escape and rebellions were made. It was here explains Hill that religious institutions created social spaces for making their voices heard and worship was unhindered by the restraints of the dominant society.<sup>570</sup>

Christianity in the lives of the enslaved was met with complexities. Those who presented the teachings of the gospel to them had agendas that ranged from genuine evangelization to maintaining slavery for profit, right through to those who were genuinely interested in freeing the slaves. The enslaved received the teachings for many reasons as well. Christianity was presented to some with the promise of a better life. To others it was presented as a means to freedom from one form of slavery to another or one location of slavery to another. Christianity represented power and both sides often used it for personal gain. The earlier generations of African slaves resisted Christianity and sought to maintain their former beliefs.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> See Chapter One: "Religious Meetings in de Bushes" for fuller explanation in Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet : Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*.

<sup>570</sup> Herbert Hill and James E. Jones, *Race in America : The Struggle for Equality* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993) 27.

<sup>571</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 56.

Two of the components of ATR that impacted the reception of Christianity and changed it for the enslaved were the belief in morality and the attributes of the Supreme Being. Paris states that, "All value in general and moral value in particular is thought to be grounded in and derived from the supreme deity".<sup>572</sup> He indicates that in Christianity a source for moral teaching is the Bible and in traditional African religion is through oral tradition facilitated by the elders. Morality then is a part of the fabric of ATR and the authority/elder that encourages morality is revered. Paris contends that because of this reverence for authority Africans are passive in the presence of legitimate authority and they are not critical of their teachings. There is trust in the leadership because of belief that they represent morality of the Supreme Being. However, he states, in the face of illegitimate authorities these same people will rebel.

It was through remembering the teachings of traditional religion of Africa applied to the erroneous teachings of the Bible that Christianity was changed for the enslaved African. The harmony that traditional religion produced was disrupted by the violence and ill-treatment of the enslaved in North America. The introduction in Part Three pointed out the double standard that existed in the practice of Christianity during slavery in North America. The enslavers represented illegitimate authority in that they violated the moral values of the Africans, by implementing a system of oppression and domination, i.e. slavery, based on what was portrayed as Christian teachings (see Subsection 13.4). Although speculations are various as to the reasons, one thing can be certain, having faith in the religion that not only enslaved them, but was used to maintain that status, could not have been appealing. Some

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<sup>572</sup> Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples : The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 41.

had little need for it. Others tried to adapt using their traditional worldview to survive.<sup>573</sup>

The enslaved Africans recognized similar traits in the God of Christianity and the God of ATR. From an African viewpoint God is creator and protector. He served their communal needs and preserved their well-being.<sup>574</sup> It is through this belief that the enslaved could not believe that Christianity upheld the indignity they endured as slaves in North America. The enslaved, despite planned illiteracy (see Subsection 7.8), comprehended “this authentic gospel as centering on the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples under God”.<sup>575</sup>

The gospel portrayed God as the liberator of the oppressed and opposed to those who sought to maintain oppression. The enslaved recognized these similarities in the God of their traditional religion. Paris states: “Their belief that God wills that the good of all people should be realized in community is both commensurate with the expansive of the African traditional understanding of God.”<sup>576</sup> All slaveholders were not Christians, but some however saw the advantage of using religion and would seek out religious leaders to preach to the slaves in order to convince them that being a slave was what they were born to be.

The following views, from Ira Berlin and others, interpret feelings toward Christianity among the enslaved during the period of its growth.<sup>577</sup> Much of what Berlin shares are reflected in the re-reading of Colossians in this thesis. Initially enslavers took little

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<sup>573</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples : The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* 43.

<sup>574</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples : The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* 40.

<sup>575</sup> For a fuller explanation of this understanding, see Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

<sup>576</sup> Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples : The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* 41.

<sup>577</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves*. See also works cited by John C. Van Horne and Randy J. Sparks



notice of the religious beliefs of the enslaved. From 1590 to the mid 1700's a sort of "tug of war" existed between the enslaved Africans and Christianity. The first generation of blacks to reach the New World were known as Creoles<sup>578</sup> who considered themselves by right to be a part of the Christian churches, but later generations kept their distance finding opposition to be great. As time passed conversion to Christianity was used to lure slaves from state to state with the promise of freedom; however rarely was this realized. The religious practices of the enslaved were considered, at times, by the established clergy to be idolatrous and devil worship.<sup>579</sup> They were also accused of clinging to old superstitions and practicing false religions. Attempts to make Christianity their own were met with hostility by both the enslavers and the religious leaders.

Many who accepted Christianity prior to their arrival in the New World dismissed it and reverted to old religious beliefs. The Anglican clergy condemned the polygamous practices of the male population of slaves. Attempts by the enslaved to adopt and adapt Christianity to their former beliefs were also met with disdain by their masters as well as the clergy. The promise of equality in the sight of God was not appealing to the enslavers, so often evangelization was discouraged. At times urban slaves showed more of an interest in Christianity than those in slave quarters. Newl- arriving slaves retained much of their former beliefs, which reminded and

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<sup>578</sup> Referred to by Berlin as Atlantic creoles, these people was either a mixture of African, European, and American descent or held knowledge of the three continents that facilitated their use as a commodity to New World. Their familiarity with commerce and languages, trade and culture made them essential to merchants along routes between Africa, Europe and the Americas. See Berlin, *Generations of Captivity*, "Charter Generations". 26-29.

<sup>579</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 56.

fascinated the slaves they encountered in the New World. This facilitated the distance between old beliefs and Christianity.<sup>580</sup>

From 1780, with the importation of slaves diminishing coupled with the “evangelical awakening” led by Baptists and Methodists, more slaves turned to Christianity. With anti-slavery sentiments and slaves and free persons worshipping together a feeling of power among the enslaved emerged. During this period, African Americans, slave and free, filled churches and camp meetings and some often preached openly to black and mixed congregations. According to Berlin this was the foundation of the Christianization of black life.<sup>581</sup> Divisions between urban slaves and plantation slaves still existed in some areas and planters capitalized on this by driving a wedge between the two groups. However, for those who accepted the teachings of Christianity a new sense of control over their lives took place. There was a sense that their destiny was redefined from that of hopeless isolation to inclusion into a wider world of freedom. Many of the plantation slaves resisted meeting in the urban churches and preferred to worship in hush harbors armed with both the knowledge of the freedom that Christianity taught and the freedom to worship on their own terms.

The early nineteenth century marked the forced migration of slaves into the American West, known as the Second Middle Passage.<sup>582</sup> This migration was involuntary and the anguish it created resembled that of the Atlantic Middle Passage experienced by those being transported from Africa. Families were destroyed and then reconstructed; relationships between the members were redefined as further

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<sup>580</sup> James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty : Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 16-17, 78-79.

<sup>581</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 118. For an estimate of African American membership in Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches in 1810 see Heyrman, *South Cross*, 5, 23, 26, 218-220, 262-263.

<sup>582</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 161-62.

separation of husband, wives, children and close relatives occurred. Additionally division was created as people who experienced generational slavery from the sixteenth century experienced a schism in opposition to those whose ancestors never experienced slavery. Christianity was now more readily embraced in opposition to the rejection by earlier generations.<sup>583</sup>

During the middle of the nineteenth century many planters converted to Christianity but the enslaved remained suspicious, due to the sermons to which they were subjected that reinforced their condition. Their belief was not in just freedom in captivity but from it as well. Many of the enslaved worshipped both in the hush harbors and in the churches of their masters. They enjoyed the freedom of worshipping on their own terms and also the feeling that they were truly equal in Christ. However biracial worship often reinforced the master's authority and the slaves' subordination. Thus, the enslaved often questioned this forcing the dominant society to come to terms with the teachings of the Bible.<sup>584</sup>

African Americans who were only allowed to rise to the rank of deacons in biracial churches promoted themselves by preaching to their people and interpreting the Bible in their own way; also resolving disputes within the slave community.<sup>585</sup>

Standards were set as they placed themselves in authority beyond the walls of the church. Like the family this new aspect of community provided a place where slaves lived out their shared ambitions and pooled their resources, infusing them with spiritual meaning which challenged the authority of their owners. Although still slaves, within this community a platform was created that advocated for their rights;

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<sup>583</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 15-16.

<sup>584</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 207-08.

<sup>585</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 208.

a place to voice their concerns and seek solutions to their problems. It was in this atmosphere that slaves in the interior of the South worshipped in their own way and waited for opportunities to make their lives better.<sup>586</sup>

According to Berlin, it was with the ratification of the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution (in 1865) that more ex-slaves professed Christianity. The amendment proclaimed that, “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”. Section Two states that “Congress shall have the power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation”<sup>587</sup>. Perhaps their dream of freedom was beginning to be realized as the dominant society was forced to recognize their right to freedom.

It is from this background the re-reading of Colossians commences. The African American postcolonial perspective is based on the history of Christianity as it was presented to the Africans beginning in the first century and through to the period of slavery in America. This history is the presupposition brought to bear when re-reading this text from an African American perspective. It shapes how one views the Colossian community and the enslaved African community and their reception of the gospel presented to them in their respective eras.

Part Four is the re-reading of Colossians which includes views of both the Colossian community’s response and that of the enslaved Africans. The views presented, based on the findings in the previous sections of this thesis, serve to further the debate concerning the identity and the reception of the gospel by both groups. The

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<sup>586</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 209.

<sup>587</sup> United States Constitution

hope is to encourage other cultures to re-read literature in light of their perspective histories. Recognizing the scope of the diversity of the lives within the society of both communities as too vast for the confines of this thesis, the comments resulting from the re-reading will focus on the teachings of the letter to the Colossians to believers and potential believers or to those who perhaps were curious.

## PART FOUR - CHAPTER ELEVEN

### COLOSSIANS ONE

#### Introduction

In this chapter the writer is calling for solidarity and attempts to instill, within this first-century community a hope, for a better future. He also illustrates unity in Christ in opposition to Greco-Roman rule. The writer encourages the audience that he is united with them by telling them of his “bonds” and that he “struggles” for them. Since Rome promises peace and unity, but fails to deliver; peace and unity are aspects missing in their situation. Peace is only maintained by military might and most of the members are mere subjects whose status is unequal to the dominant society. Deliverance had not been realized and they have grown accustomed to their way of life. Hope is stirred within them and, with it, the promise of a “savior”, realized in Christ.

The audience is told to believe “walk in” what they have already been taught and to seek further knowledge. W. R. Roberts points out, “In an analysis of Colossians as a persuasive speech, 1:3-23 constitutes the exordium. The exordium functioned as the introduction, indicating the aim of the speech and attempting to secure the hearer’s goodwill.”<sup>588</sup> The writer stated that he desired to be with them, but was unfortunately unable to accommodate them. Opening the letter with an exordium fulfills both the purpose of introducing the subject of the letter and drawing the audience into a personal relationship through the gospel message. The mention of Epaphras, who is one of them, also serves to bring about closeness; bridging the gap between them.

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<sup>588</sup> Aristotle and W. Rhys Roberts, *Rhetoric*, Dover thrift eds. ed. (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2004) 3.13-14.

A. T. Lincoln suggests, "Since in Colossians the author claims to have no personal acquaintance with the people being addressed, it is necessary for him to establish an initial positive relationship with them if they are to be receptive to his message."<sup>589</sup>

In the introduction, the Colossians are noted for their faith and are encouraged by referring to the prayers that are being made in their behalf. According to Lincoln, of the three main rhetoric genres deliberative and epideictic are used to persuade and dissuade the people of Colossae as they work to build their community. Deliberative rhetoric seeks to persuade the listeners to work toward future goals and the epideictic seeks to encourage them using praise; to hold on to what they have learned in the present. Lincoln dismisses the third genre, forensic, because he feels the writer is not trying to persuade the Colossians to make a judgment about events in the past. On this point, although debatable in view of the labels placed by aforementioned commentators, he is accurate when viewing the author's intent as being that of erasing the former beliefs of the Colossians. However, when one considers the mentioning in the letter of Christ being above all, the audience is forced to review their former lives against what they had come to believe. Their faith is commended as the writer seems to notice the struggle they were experiencing in this area; emphasized as he references his own and his desires to have contact with them in spite of his inability to personally deliver this message.

Lincoln is adept in noticing the writer's joy in the faith of the audience along with mentioning prayer for them as a means of producing a "positive emotional effect that

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<sup>589</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln "The Letter to the Colossians" Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes* 557.

will make them responsive to his exhortations”.<sup>590</sup> He also sees the use of the Christ hymn (verses 15-20) early in the letter to evoke common feelings of praise and worship that also sets the stage for the message to follow. The writer is identifying with the readers’ plight as subjects of the Greco-Roman Empire and the struggles they are experiencing in sorting out the teachings presented to them of the gospel. Perhaps he realizes their position as being subordinate to the dominant culture and uses that to persuade them to believe the gospel.

The daily lives of the believers included the knowledge of deities as well as the knowing of the aspirations of emperors concerning deification see Subsection 4.3). Yet, deities are not dismissed by the writer. He places Christ above all powers. Referring to the phrase “elemental spirits of the universe” used by most interpreters Lincoln states, “This also fits well the context of thought in the letter, for elsewhere the writer emphasized Christ’s supremacy and victory over just such spiritual agencies”.<sup>591</sup> He also references the “elements” used in Galatians 4:3.9 where Paul is admonishing the Gentile Christians to avoid falling under the power of the law. “To turn to the law would be equivalent to returning to their previous enslavement to the stoicheia, who are linked with their pagan deities, designated by Paul as “beings that by nature are not gods” (Gal 4:8)”.<sup>592</sup> A clear line in dismissing pagan beliefs in deities and the Roman emperor beliefs in attaining that status should have been drawn. However, the writer chooses to avoid that area.

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<sup>590</sup> Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes.*

<sup>591</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, "The Letter to the Colossians" Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes* 566.

<sup>592</sup> Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes* 566.



The language of the letter serves to warn the audience concerning influences that may deter them from gaining the knowledge necessary for understanding Christ's position in the cosmos. Their identity is tied into Christ as above all and in all which separates them from the world. MacDonald remarks:

Language of belonging works together with language of separation in the process of creating self-definition. In Colossians and Ephesians the language of separation primarily takes the form of remembrance of 'conversion' – transference from the evil world outside into the 'body' where salvation is found (e.g., Col. 1:13-14, 21-23; Eph. 4:17-24).<sup>593</sup>

The audience is warned to be aware of worldly outside influences, to remain true to their new beliefs and to not slip back into their old ways. MacDonald mentions that there are no explicit descriptions of the outside world.<sup>594</sup> The comments are general yet they are encouraged to remain together and to strive for unity. Therefore they are to be steadfast in what they have learned in order to make progress in their development into a stronger community of believers.

### **11.1 Colossians 1.1-2 "Unity in Diversity: Leveling the Ground"**

The letter begins with the customary salutation and prayer as in the undisputed Pauline epistles. It immediately lets the audience know that they are accepted and that their progress in the faith is noted. Their advancement is acknowledged and a prayer that they will continue to grow is offered. The author wants them to understand that he knows of their achievements and that he cares about them. He affirms Epaphras as their minister and that what they have heard from him is in accordance with the gospel. How does this affect them? What is the desired

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<sup>593</sup> MacDonald Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York: Routledge, 1999) 271-72.

<sup>594</sup> Vaage and Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament*.

reaction? The writer's use of inclusive language attempts to bring unity to a diverse people perhaps feeling for the first time that they can all agree and aspire to work together. They have a chance at fellowship with one another, with people outside of their city and with a power that is higher than anyone or anything they have ever known.

They are called saints and faithful brethren united in Christ. Perhaps to be called a "saint" is to be elevated. The writer is leveling the ground. They are not only equal to each other but to Christ as brothers and sisters. Although the Gospels were not yet written, if some the teachings of Christ were made known at this point they would be familiar with saying attributed to Jesus Christ, "no longer servants, but friends" (John 15.15).<sup>595</sup> The writer addresses readers of his letters as brothers to denote commonality and unity in Christ. Unity is brought to another level with the last line in verse 2. He brings a message of grace and peace from God and Christ who is exalted above all and in all.

For the enslaved African the name Jesus Christ was either new or an unpleasant reminder of their past. To those who had heard the name of Jesus, perhaps pain resurfaced of their journey to either this new land or from one plantation to another. The name of Jesus had perhaps been used in the baptisms prior to their transport as new arrivals or later in sermons that were preached to remind them of their status as slaves. They too are confronted with a level to which perhaps they dared not to aspire but had hopes of attaining thereby identifying with the Colossian community.

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<sup>595</sup> See Subsection 11.5 note 601 for discussion of Paul and John.

## **11.2 Colossians 1.3-6 “Unity in Visibility and Acceptance”**

This prayer is an affirmation as the writer lets them know that he is thankful because of what he has heard about them. In so doing he is letting them know that they are not invisible. Often, as this thesis has shown, in a colonial setting, the indigenous are not viewed as important and their daily lives are insignificant to the dominant society (see Chapter Seven). He is letting them know that he has heard about their progress and he thanks God for them.

Unity is expressed in that the hope/promise of eternal life they were attaining to is also that which “all the world” expects, and which is a realized hope (brings fruit). The “truth” of the gospel is emphasized and the grace of God in “truth”. The writer wants them to know that they were not being fed lies. Epaphras had confirmed the “hope” and the writer was also affirming them.

Focusing on isolation, a term mentioned several times in this thesis, the enslaved African heard this letter say to them that someone outside of their situation had heard their voices. Whether or not at this point they had become Christians; to know that someone was praying for them perhaps awakened in them the desire to be free. Someone either identified with their plight or understood it. As with the Colossians, the enslaved Africans needed to know that others shared their faith either in the God of Christianity or the god of their ancestors. The letter made the distinction that God, the Father, was aware of their existence (1.2).

The truth is put on display here. What had the enslaved heard about faith in Jesus Christ? They were told that the Bible confirmed that they were to be slaves and that as slaves they were to obey their masters. They were to accept their place in life with

no reservation. Moreover they were to live in isolation because they had no place in the dominant society. Their place was on the plantation or workplace creating wealth for the society that enslaved them. The enslaved were necessary to the economic stability of the dominant society and they were also to accept this without reservation. The enslaved, however resisted the notion of working for others and not personally being able to benefit from their labor. Long hours and strenuous work left no time to plant and work for themselves.<sup>596</sup>

They were taught that their reward was laid up for them in heaven (1.5). Although this was true, it was not enough. The gospel being taught to them could not be the only truth. They saw the fruit of their labor and it was abundant; yet the abundance of fruit rarely reached their tables nor were they allowed to wear the clothing produced from the crops they worked. As the first fruit of their labor was not extended to them, Colossians promised that the truth of the gospel brings fruit. Addressing the duality of the truth, reference is made to Matthew 7.17-18 which teaches a good tree bears good fruit and adversely bad bears bad, the truth of the gospel cannot be carried by persons who were not truthful. The tree that bears bad fruit is the one who would pervert the gospel. The truth of the gospel is that all will have an inheritance.

The message, at this point, that the Colossians received found a place of acceptance in the community of the enslaved believers. They were encouraged to overcome their circumstances and exhibit faith and love within their community. In reading this text what could the enslaved find encouraging? The hope of an inheritance was promised to them that believed in the gospel of truth. The example

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<sup>596</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 177.

of the Colossians community gave them hope that they too would find acceptance among other believers.

### **11.3 Colossians 1.7-9 “Preaching in Isolation”**

Epaphras, who probably carried the report to the writer, is being praised for his success in bringing the people of this new community of believers to the level of “saints and faithful brethren in Christ”. At this point Epaphras seems satisfied with their progress in showing their “love in the Spirit”. The Spirit is now brought into the picture clearly indicating that they are familiar with the term; nevertheless, it is the only time he mentions Him. Great praise is heaped upon them for their progress. However, there’s more to learn or perhaps this is where Epaphras’ teachings ended or where some questions arose that needed clarification.

Was there an Epaphras among the enslaved that imparted to them the gospel? The slave preacher comes to mind and he would be their faithful minister of Christ. Slave preachers were often allowed to move between plantations and perhaps he would relay messages concerning the progress in the faith from place to place. In addition the selling and renting of slaves to other plantations may have also helped to connect believers. Often the enslaver would allow slaves to congregate together for services and the message would be brought, although sometimes monitored. In the hush harbors perhaps the message of truth was preached beyond the ears of the enslaver where freedom of interpretation was prevalent.

The language of the text made them aware of their isolation however adding a new dimension: “praying for you”; “heard of your faith”; “in all the world”. The letter suggests that others have heard the truth and they were now a part of a wider

movement. They were isolated but not alone and their hope for a better future was expressed as they congregated either in their homes or special places such as hush harbors. These desires have found their way into the contemporary literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. L. L. Lewis states:

African American believers have preserved in hymns and sermons and in their poetry this same eschatological concern and tension. In hope they anticipate the future. At the same time they see in the Good News proclaimed and enacted signs of hope visible as God's new arrangement confronts injustice and evil.<sup>597</sup>

ἐπίγνωσις (1.9) is translated “complete and precise understanding”.<sup>598</sup> They were called to seek after God to know him and his will for them. Through the act of insurrection and resistance the enslaved questioned their existence. They did not accept their status and sought to free themselves from the oppression of slavery. Although tragically the rebellion may have resulted in bloodshed and loss of life, freedom to live life on their own terms was the goal. They believed that outside of their isolated environment they could live life as they saw fit. Even though they knew that the struggle often did not end once they had escaped, they were willing to risk it, because anything was better than living in isolation.

As in times past, some of the enslaved used religion as the door to freedom. With hopes dashed, many turned away and others would have nothing to do with Christianity. As the truth of the gospel was not told; perversions existed on both

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<sup>597</sup> Lloyd A. Lewis, 'Colossians', Brian K. Blount et al., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 382.

<sup>598</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

sides, being used for personal gain. The enslaved sought a way to liberty and the enslavers sought a way to maintain slavery through the word of God.

#### **11.4 Colossians 1.10-12 “The Empire and Worth”**

The language of worth, perhaps spoke to the subordinate in negative terms as, according to Rome, some of the people of Colossae were not worthy citizens. The designation “some” is used because of the diversity of the people. As subjects of the empire, worth belonged to the rulers and they were to be held in high esteem. The writer is introducing a novel concept because their worth now was contingent upon their being filled with wisdom and understanding (1.9). Again, we find that speaking of worth in this context created problems among the believers who were slaves and slave owners alike. How were they to interpret “worthy”? The standard of slavery addressed in Colossians Chapter Four serves to clarify this. Although they stood on equal footing as believers, in the community they did not.

The Colossians were being told to walk in a manner that was pleasing to God, and although further explanation is given in Chapter Three of the letter, how does one living in a subjugated society understand that? There is a great build up from the beginning of the letter until you get to 3.22 where they are reminded just who they are; subjects of Rome, living within the household codes and the limits of Roman domination. By comparison walking in a manner that was pleasing to God may have also been difficult for those in authority. One must not only consider those who were subordinate but those who had higher status and who were asked to look at their neighbors in a different light (4.9). They were to put their past behind them and follow

the teachings of the gospel to love one another and treat each other with kindness and fairness.

However, the shadow of the empire looms. It is one thing no longer to view the emperor as a god, but quite another to look at a neighbor, who might have been a slave, as an equal. The emperor was not personally a part of their daily life (although his statue may have been visible), but they interacted with their neighbors daily.<sup>599</sup>

DeSilva states:

By focusing on God's approval, the Christians' desire will be to live up to (walk in a way worthy of) "the gospel" or "the Lord" rather than living up to the standards of the culture they left behind. (See Eph. 4.1, Phil. 1.27, 2Thess. 1.11-12) The opinion of those who award honor and censure by standards alien to the Christian culture is bracketed as being of no real concern.<sup>600</sup>

This could not be so easily done, as the empire's presence was felt and they knew the threat of military intervention at the first sign of insurrection. The letter however does not encourage overt opposition, but encourages patience, because what they looked forward to was an inheritance. An inheritance, however, was preserved in this society for the elite. Ordinary citizens and slaves would only receive an inheritance in unusual circumstances; for it was possible some may have looked to their children being free, or if the owner had no heir, they might receive one.<sup>601</sup> However, all believers were affirmed as inheritors. Again it can be mentioned that this teaching

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<sup>599</sup> DeSilva discusses the effect of the Greco-Roman empire on the New Testament church of the 1st century in David Arthur DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity : Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000) 19.

<sup>600</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity : Unlocking New Testament Culture* 57-58.

<sup>601</sup> Thomas E. J. Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Croom Helm, 1981). See Chapter Three "Manumission" for explanations of possible reasons for slaves to be set free.



was perhaps beyond the scope of Epaphras' instruction and the people of Colossae wanted to hear more.

Those who were taught the doctrines of the Mystery Religions perhaps sought instant gratification, and therefore, learning to wait was new to them. The Jewish population had a long history of waiting, for the Messiah was a promise they wished to witness. He was to bring about a new era in the lives of the promised people of God. Caird imparts:

When the Israelites looked forward to a new age, they envisaged it as a new Exodus (Isa. 11:12-16; 43:16-20). Thus a whole language was ready-made for the early Christians, as they strove to expound the significance of the life and death of Christ, and Exodus imagery abounds in almost every book of the New Testament. When the New Testament writers speak of 'redemption' (e.g. Luke 1:68; 2:38.....), they are using a metaphor drawn from slavery, but they are using it at one remove; for them the surface significance of the term is that it belongs to Exodus language.<sup>602</sup>

The Israelites, as a transplanted population, are reminded of their history as captives once again; e.g. Babylonian (see II Chron. 36). They are subjects in a kingdom that does not recognize their God. This letter speaks to what they know about the coming Messiah and now what they hoped to be a part of. They wanted to be delivered and redeemed to their rightful place as heirs in the kingdom of God. Perhaps it is at this point they begin to question former rituals and their significance in light of the gospel. Should they continue with circumcision, celebration of holy days, etc? The question about being called "elect" will be addressed in Subsection 13.2.

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<sup>602</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980) 156.

The message in this section is that, although isolated, the enslaved were to prove themselves worthy of the Lord in gaining the true knowledge of God, thereby pleasing him in all that they did. This placed added pressure on the enslaved because their lives were consumed with pleasing others with little or no self-gratification. The scripture here tells them to please God as well. What were they to get from it? They were promised an inheritance along with other believers. Was this enough? Faced with constant constraints, was a promise of a future prize enough? To those who had reason to hope this may have been appealing, however, to the enslaved that daily fought to survive, this was perhaps not enough.

Did the letter to the Colossians fail to meet the needs of the enslaved African? Some had heard the biblical account concerning Moses and how God had delivered the Israelite slaves from bondage. Christ is described as one who overcame adversity and death to be delivered to his father, God; the supreme one. This parallel was not lost on the slaves; there had to be more. The message seemed to be for those who looked for their inheritance to come in the future. How did living their lives according to the teaching in Colossians improve their present circumstances?

### **11.5 Colossians 1.13-20 “Empire, Jesus and Isolation”**

Now begins the teaching concerning the identity of Jesus Christ. The commentaries on these verses have filled many books and will not be dealt with here in depth.

Depending on the date of this letter, in the city of Colossae this was a hard lesson for first-century Jews and anyone coming into the faith that may have heard of or witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Those who came into the faith were looking to Christ as the son of God and the writer is teaching that he is God. Also John’s

gospel records Jesus saying; “When you have seen me, you have seen the Father” (John 14.9).<sup>603</sup> Viewing this point technically Caird states, “Metonymy is calling a thing by the name of something typically associated with it: e.g. the Bench, the stage, the turf, the bottle, may stand for magistrates, the theatrical profession, horse-racing and alcoholic liquor.”<sup>604</sup> The use of the term “image” denotes likeness. Using the concept of metonymy, the writer is teaching that everything God is, so is Christ. He goes further, however, in saying that Jesus Christ is God, the creator. Whether this teaching is accepted, it is clear that they are being taught that Christ is above the empires and empirical rulers. He is above the gods of the pagan believers of the day. He was and is in company with “the invisible God”. The Jews, who sometimes lived in a form of isolation because of their faith, existed however in and around the community of the believers and would have questioned Epaphras and the writer. Perhaps this teaching created an issue about Jesus Christ’s role as Messiah (see Chapter Three of this thesis).

The exaltation of Christ against the isolated conditions of the enslaved is poignant as darkness adequately defined their isolated social condition. A law was enacted which further stripped some of their humanity for they were already removed from their culture. Berlin reveals, “An 1822 Mississippi law barring black people from meeting without white supervision spoke directly to the planters’ fear.”<sup>605</sup> Their lives were being monitored and fear of cruel punishment and sometimes death for suspicious behavior often resulted. They were reminded that their lives were expendable and

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<sup>603</sup> If John and Paul were contemporaries as Galatians 2.9 suggests this interpretation of the oneness of God and Jesus may have been familiar to first-century believers. As to whether John's teachings had reached Colossae that remains to be proven. Although authorship and place of writing is disputed, commentators have suggested that John may have resided in Ephesus which was nearby.

<sup>604</sup> Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* 136.

<sup>605</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 203-05.

that they existed solely for the benefit of the dominant society. Slaves were constantly arriving, either legally or illegally, from across the ocean and through the constant buying and selling of slaves between slave owners to meet the demands of production. Dark was the existence of the enslaved African for they were made to work long hours during the day and they did not own the night because it encompassed them as they lay exhausted in their dimly lit and meager dwellings.

The contrast to the existence of the enslaved is made with Christ, who is their deliverer and redeemer. The language of this section spoke to their desire for freedom. Christ had suffered so that they would be free, yet his suffering was for all who had sinned. He died not only for them but for their oppressor. It is not known whether this concept was realized, however, upon hearing this message.

Nevertheless, the thought must have crossed their minds. The oppressor had entered their isolated world as those who also needed forgiveness of sins. Jesus Christ, however, is able to pull the enslaved out of isolation and elevate them as partakers of his Kingdom. Christ is being equated (image εἰκῶν) with God and identified as the “firstborn of every creature” and “firstborn from the dead” (1.15). His position is further elevated to encompass all things and having preeminence over all things.

Referencing the “blood” of the cross (1.20) touches both the enslaved Africans and the community of Colossians crossing boundaries of race, culture and beliefs. The enslaved can identify with Christ’s suffering and it was through his suffering, his “blood” that peace and reconciliation were accomplished. His suffering brings them out of isolation because they can empathize with him. O’Donovan states:

In most African cultures, initiation rituals are the critical rites of passage by which a child becomes an adult. Closely related to the issue of adult clan acceptance is the issue of being united to the whole clan, both living and dead. The shedding of blood at the circumcision ceremony or in other initiation rituals is often intended to unite the boy or girl by covenant to the ancestors of the clan.<sup>606</sup>

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is referenced as an act of reconciliation between God and mankind. All are reconciled, brought together as one by the atoning death of Christ. His death is viewed as a sacrifice so all mankind is united with God bringing to mind the covenant made between God and Israel in the Hebrew Bible.

The idea of unity permeates, both the Judaic and African beliefs in the shedding of blood, atoning for sin and the initiation rituals, respectively. The practical applications and distinctions are clear between the shedding of blood for circumcision in the uniting with family members and that with Christ's sacrificial death. However, the concept of unity and reconciliation is seen in both, not minimizing Christ in any way.

To the enslaved African the blood of those who died before during and after the Middle Passage is a unifying element; it is a reminder of the horrors of slavery. Furthermore, the blood that was shed in their bondage in the New World from the plantations and later the streets of the south during the Civil Rights movement unifies them, not because they died senselessly, but because they were willing to die to be free. From the pulpits of churches all around the country Christians were encouraged to look to Christ as an example of one who was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of others. Not only that, but that he made the ultimate sacrifice. His legacy was

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<sup>606</sup> Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000) 232-35.

the basis for the sermons preached by the slave preachers and later Civil Rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Here again, the unifying power of Christ is at work. The people whose ancestors died and those who were willing to lay down their lives were being reconciled by their belief that God made all men equal.

The shedding of black blood by whites could also be cause for violence and anger. C. H. Felder quotes W.E.B. DuBois' postscript from *The Gift of Black Folk*<sup>607</sup> as a possible call to such violence that has been carried out by activist for the rights of blacks and other sub-dominant peoples in the United States. However, he declares that to "listen only to the winds, bones, and blood invoked by DuBois, Blacks would only be listening with one ear. There is another blood for believers to hear with the other ear –the blood that symbolizes hope, new citizenship, and membership in the Household".<sup>608</sup> 1. 20 is a call to the oppressed members of the both communities to realize that they were part of a new community where they could feel at home. The pressures of the empire would not ultimately defeat them and they were to live in unity because of the shed blood of Christ.

### **11.6 Colossians 1.21-23a "Breaking the Isolation"**

The writer changes the focus from all (universal) and particularizes the people of Colossae by reminding them of who they were before they came to faith in Christ. These are harsh words used to contrast the old and the new as the teaching of newness continues in 2.12-15. The language of reconciliation is continued as the

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<sup>607</sup> "Listen to the Winds, O God the Reader, that wail across the whip-cords stretched taut on broken human hearts; listen to the Bones, the bare bleached bones of the slaves, that line the lanes of Seven Seas and beat eternal tom-toms in the forests of the laboring deep; listen to the Blood, the cold thick blood that spills its filth across the fields and flowers of the Free; listen to the Souls that wing and thrill and weep and scream and sob and sing above it all. What shall things mean, O God the Reader? You know. You know." W. E. B. Du Bois and Edward F. McSweeney, *The Gift of Black Folk : The Negroes in the Making of America* (Garden City Park, NY: Square One Pub., 2009) 341.

<sup>608</sup> Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* 164.

reason for it is explained. The idea of being reconciled is not new to the community. As stated in Part One of this thesis, this is the language of the empire and the Jews awaited reconciliation in the coming Messiah. To both, perhaps the concept was futuristic; certainly to the Jews, yet as subjects of the Roman Empire reconciliation was a promise that was realized only in the eyes of the empire. 1.21-22 informs the readers that they were once alienated, enemies and wicked, but now they are holy, blameless and above reproach because of the death of Jesus Christ. One act, albeit magnanimous, changes them as rituals that were taught are no longer needed. Their lives were now changed by the sacrificial death of Christ. The writer speaks to every group who has become a part of the community; Jews and Gentiles as new believers. In Christ they are reconciled by his death on the cross.

The following excerpt by L. Lewis combines baptism and temple service into a single act which result in sacrifice. These two acts which were separate parts of both the mystery religions and Judaism are seemingly simplified when entered into in the teachings of the gospel. Yet, the result is a life totally made over and dedicated to Christ.

If the language of the Colossians hymn focuses on creation, then the implications of the hymn focus on worship, particularly in baptism and temple service. Initiation into the church is more than a contract of membership. Baptism functions as a dynamic border, and once it is crossed, an individual is changed. Combining his belief in the power of baptism with language drawn from the temple cult of Judaism, Paul envisions baptism as an occasion when the believer offers his or her life as an act of sacrifice: a life made into the perfect sacrificial victim

(holy, pure, spotless, v.22), so that an individual might live the life of faith.<sup>609</sup>

The new believers, some of whom were familiar with at least one of the acts of baptism or temple service in their former lives were made to view these in a new light. According to Lewis' interpretation, they were not simply being initiated into a cult or organization; they were sacrificing themselves and, as a result, living changed lives. 1. 23 is a warning that their new lives will only be validated if they remain faithful. The question that could have arisen may have concerned the difference in the former baptism rituals and the new. In all cases, the act of baptism exemplified a joining of sorts into a community; however, the difference was in the results.

The enslaved Africans were told that they were wicked and were treated as enemies by their enslavers.<sup>610</sup> Their behavior was monitored and if it was not to the satisfaction of their master, attempts to adjust it were enforced by cruel means. The letter to Colossians identified them as "alienated and enemies" and this could not have sat well with them. Although they are then told that they have been reconciled (placing one's self in the mindset of these enslaved Africans) it may have been difficult to hear these terms for they were used to identify them. Furthermore if their former condition was of alienation and enemies and Christianity was to make them free, why were they still enslaved?

Although the message is of a spiritual nature and the writer is exalting Jesus Christ above all things, the same gospel they were hearing was intended for the dominant

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<sup>609</sup> Lloyd Lewis, "Colossians", Blount et al., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* 383.

<sup>610</sup> See in this thesis Chapter Thirteen Cartledge's statements concerning slaves as dangerous and enemies.



society. It was to be understood that “all are in need of salvation”. What is hard to understand is how the enslaved were to respond to this message? Did this message that was preached to them really apply to the dominant society? Yet, respond they did; for the enslaved realized what their enslaver did not. They looked at their lives and compared it to that of the enslaver. Although they looked to achieve just a measure of what the dominant society possessed they understood that it was only temporal in comparison to what lay ahead in eternity. They did not wish for the destruction of the enslaver, but for deliverance from their oppression. During the Reconstruction period of American history, once slavery was abolished, many freed slaves held responsible offices in government.<sup>611</sup> Their aim was to allow all people to live equally under the law. This absence of malice towards those who oppressed former slaves is also evident in the spirituals and sermons preached as recorded for example by James Weldon Johnson<sup>612</sup> and by Jupiter Hammon.<sup>613</sup>

### **11.7 Colossians 1.23b-29 “It’s All About Christ – the Christ Hymn”**

The writer interjects himself into the discourse in 1.27 then continues the teaching started in 1.12. Unity is further emphasized by identifying with the suffering of Christ and placing himself as a “bridge” between the audience and Christ. As a minister he is charged with carrying out the gospel of Christ in his “absence”.<sup>614</sup> Another interpretation would suggest that the writer is claiming superiority in Christ. However, the tenor of the letter does not lend itself to the idea that he is anything other than a

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<sup>611</sup> Eric Foner, *The Tocsin of Freedom : The Black Leadership of Radical Reconstruction* ([Gettysburg, Pa.]: Gettysburg College, 1992).

<sup>612</sup> Johnson, *God's Trombones; Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*.

<sup>613</sup> Jupiter Hammon and Stanley Austin Ransom, *America's First Negro Poet : The Complete Works of Jupiter Hammon of Long Island, Empire State Historical Publications Series* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Associated Faculty Press : Kennikat Press, 1983).

<sup>614</sup> "One who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master, a servant, attendant, minister." Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

minister (1.23, 25). In so doing, with the new teachings that are meant to break down barriers, he discourages power struggles that may arise. It is important within the community that they be Christ-centered. The writer directs the teachings of the letter back to Christ as the connection from 1.12 is made 1.27.

Christ is the catalyst, the one who is the mechanism whereby unity is made possible. The letter, thus far, suggests diversity in culture and beliefs that once existed. 1.27 mentions Gentiles and the mystery now being revealed to them. Reconciliation language implies both Jewish and Greco-Roman elements. The writer is encouraging them to seek not only unity but completeness by faith in Christ.

The mystery is defined clearly as Christ; “the hope of glory” (1.27) in the lives of the believers. To those who were labeled “pagans”, their former beliefs could have led them to believe in the “mystery” as a secret or secret rites or initiations into a cult. Although baptism could be viewed as an initiation, it was made public and available to all. Jews, presented with the idea of being baptized, may have protested since baptism was only for those joining Judaism from outside of the faith. However, perhaps many were willing to put these beliefs aside due to their new found faith in Jesus Christ. The writer applauds them for their faith, but questions still may have arisen concerning other rituals with which they were familiar (the discussion will continue in Colossians 2).

The enslaved were encouraged to continue in the faith in union with all other believers. Perhaps the use of the phrase “every creature under heaven” (1.23) appealed to them on two levels. They were included because “every creature” meant even those who were made to feel less than human. The other level is that the same

gospel was preached to those who used religion to oppress them. The conditional if/then phrase is used to relay the message that if the truth of the gospel is accepted then the “mystery”, Christ in the believer is made manifest. If the message of Colossians was not lost on the enslaved then they are aware that the enslaver did not have Christ in them and their actions proved it. Christ’s suffering and the writer’s identification with them in his suffering would not produce more suffering. Again, the enslaver is brought into the isolated world of the enslaved with the warning to “every man” (1.28). Connecting verses 1.23 and 1.28 indicates that no one is left out of the purpose of bringing all to Christ.

## PART FOUR – CHAPTER TWELVE - COLOSSIANS TWO

### Introduction

Barclay asks, “How literally should we take the reference to ‘philosophy’ in 2.8? Is this a term used by the “heretics” or by the author of Colossians?”<sup>615</sup> The issue addressed earlier in this thesis concerning the lack of the evidence of letters or correspondence to Paul from the churches to which he wrote comes to bear here. Barclay discussed the use of terms which could be labeled abusive or vindictive which reveal nothing of the character of a person or group of people. Can the people of Colossae be identified by the attacks or accusations of error alleged by the writer or the commentators? Where did these terms originate and why did he (or they) find it necessary to address these issues using them? Are these words merely repeated by the writer that Epaphras used in describing the problem at Colossae? Or, are these words used by the so-called “heretics”? As evidenced by the many commentaries using the terms as clues to the target(s) of Colossians, much has been derived without consensus. Barclay points out, “Scholars who survey this mass of hypothetical reconstructions are apt to be dismayed by the failure of the guild to reach unanimity on even the rudiments of a solution.”<sup>616</sup> In attempting to identify the hearers of the letter the accusative language proves to be problematic. However, if one could look beyond the attack to the letter in its entirety, the process of identifying the people of Colossae and how they received the message of the gospel may be obtained. Their former beliefs can be assessed and the way in which they processed their new belief can be revealed. The attack by commentators hides the message of the letter. Barclay states, “We are trying to trace a target that we can see only

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<sup>615</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 50.

<sup>616</sup> Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 48.

through the haze of a polemical tirade, leaving traces that are brief, often ambiguous and sometimes wholly obscure.”<sup>617</sup> The re-reading of the Colossians letter without the labeling have revealed more about the identity of the recipients and what they believed.

The issue of asceticism is raised in discussing this chapter. Do the instructions in this chapter reveal the author’s intentions to create a new subjectivity? Wimbush’s definition suggests, “Asceticism may be defined as performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.”<sup>618</sup> R. Valantasis points out that the writer of Colossians speaks against a specific type of ascetic performance, “one that involves physical indicators of world rejection and visible signs of identity.”<sup>619</sup> Yet the writer appears to be replacing one form of asceticism with another by instructing them to reject their former worldly views and admonishing them to accept another form; directing them to live according to the gospel. MacDonald suggests, “The author wages a battle on two fronts, rejecting one type of asceticism while fervently propounding another, intentionally directing the audience ‘toward an alternative mode of existence within a dominant social environment’.”<sup>620</sup> Some hearing this letter, attuned to the ascetic forms in former beliefs, may have questioned the motives and the intent of this teaching. Thus valid questions concerning rituals leading to “labeling” were being addressed in the bulk of this chapter.

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<sup>617</sup> Barclay Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* 52-53.

<sup>618</sup> Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, *Asceticism* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1995) 544-52.

<sup>619</sup> Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 63, no. 4 (1995): 800.

<sup>620</sup> Margaret Y. MacDonald "Asceticism in Colossians and Ephesians" in Vaage and Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament* 270.

Christianity in its infancy had many parallels to the existing mystery cults; e.g. teachings concerning salvation, resurrection, eternal life, initiation and ritual sacraments. Throughout the first four centuries there often existed direct competition in evangelization between various cults and sects.<sup>621</sup> Christianity, possibly an early form of Judaism, by definition could have been considered a cult<sup>622</sup> (See Subsection 2.2 for discussion of the “Christ myth”). It is evident in this chapter that although conflicting views existed within the community, former beliefs did not initially create problems. The audience, although embracing the new teachings were keen to distinguish the validity of their former beliefs in the light of what was being taught. Klauck states, "In my opinion, the Christian doctrine of the sacraments, in the form in which we know it, would not have arisen without this interaction; and Christology too understood how to 'take up' the mythical inheritance, purifying it and elevating it."<sup>623</sup>

The Jews were known for “debating” the scripture. This is not meant pejoratively but alludes to a form of discussing the written text. It was a healthy way of getting at the truth (Job 13.3, 15.3; Prov. 25.9; Isa. 43.26) Looking from a twentieth-century perspective at the practice, commentators seemed to miss the validity of it in labeling the audience rather than considering the “problem” as a debate of some sort. The Jewish form of discussing scripture/oral tradition was a debate which, in the case of the Talmud, resulted in the writings of the Mishnah.<sup>624</sup> The dates of the institution of the transcribing Jewish oral tradition coincide with that of the beginning of Christianity. The completed process of forming ideas and doctrines could not have

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<sup>621</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity : A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions*, Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 81-152.

<sup>622</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica inc., "Encyclopaedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite," s.v.

<sup>623</sup> Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity : A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* 152.

<sup>624</sup> The Mishnah reflects debates between 70-200 CE by the group of rabbinic sages known as the Tannaim. For detailed history see Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah : A New Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

happened overnight as this letter shows. Important discussions occurred which shaped doctrines of not only Christianity, but perhaps those of the Gnostics and other beliefs that were believed to have grown out of this period (see Subsection 2.2 R. McL. Wilson, G. Bornkamm and J.B. Lightfoot).

The writer of this letter was concerned because of the diversity of beliefs that existed in the community. The gospel being preached to former mystic and mystery adherents and Jews presented many questions as this chapter suggests. In agreement with M. Hooker's view of the situation, additionally, the information the writer received, which perhaps sparked this letter, came from discussions within the community. The similarities between the various cults and this new teaching needed to be talked out. Ancient philosophy dates from 600 BCE to 500 CE<sup>625</sup> and the practice of philosophy, probably not unfamiliar to the population at Colossae during Greco-Roman rule, was another common form of discussion.

The themes of philosophy cited in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*<sup>626</sup> relevant to this thesis are: the understanding of the basic causes and attributes of the universe; discussions of it in an economical and uniform way; the theoretical problem of integrating the diversity and variation of the natural universe, with the prospect of obtaining rigid and clear knowledge about it; questions about numbers, elements, universals, and gods; the study of patterns of "reasoning and argument"; the nature of the good life and the importance of understanding and "knowledge in order to pursue it"; the clarification of the concept of justice, and its relation to various political systems. The use of persuasion and imperial language points to the

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<sup>625</sup> Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) s.v.

<sup>626</sup> Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* s.v.

knowledge of the above practices by the writer of the letter and the assumption by him that the audience would understand the message presented in this manner. The audience, as a colonized people, was exposed to Greco-Roman civic and cultural attributes. Colossians Three shows that the writer is not willing to oppose societal/familial mandates and treads lightly in making any substantial changes (See Subsections 13.4 and 14.1).

Chapter Two the writer was faced with issues brought to his attention perhaps by Epaphras. These issues were the result of the discussions held upon hearing the gospel preached to them in attempts to gain a better understanding of what they were hearing. Also stated earlier, perhaps Epaphras had reached the limit of his ability to answer the questions that were being raised and from his report to the writer, clarification was necessary. The letter, as with other letters of the Pauline genre, was an attempt to encourage the community to stay together and seek the truth; to not be afraid to engage each other and those around them. Stambaugh adds, "The oneness of God demanded that the body of the church also be one, that there be no internal boundaries between members (Col 2)."<sup>627</sup>

The enslaved Africans were faced with not only the oppression of the dominant society but with the pressure of behaving in such a way to avoid punishment. They had to walk a fine line in their speech and mannerisms so as not to offend those who were in authority over them (See Subsection 8.1, quote by L. Lane). However, Lane's statement is a debunking of the idea that the enslaved adopted the slave or colonial mentality. Being subjects in a colonial society and more specifically a slave society, there was the possibility of adopting the mindset of defeat. The slaves were

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<sup>627</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986) 57.



in danger of succumbing to either accepting their status as property or trying to adopt the ways of the colonizer or enslaver. The letter to the Colossians speaks to their retaining their dignity in the face of degradation, oppression and death. With boldness the readers were to walk according to the will of God as Christians and to allow neither anyone nor their circumstances to deter them.

The slaves' agenda was two-fold. One: they sought salvation eschatologically and two: they pursued salvation from their present state of slavery; both of which they sought in Christ. For some, perhaps, the latter weighed more importantly, but their faith for both was to be in Christ. The letter reaffirmed their desires as they perceived both their destiny and the demise of the enslaver's dominion over them.

The theme of isolation discussed in Subsection 10.6 still holds true for this chapter. Although, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries many of the slaves had freedom of movement within the confines of their society which often included attending churches with whites and free blacks. Nevertheless, they also worshipped in their own churches or sought out hush harbors where they felt free to worship and converse about their faith on their own terms. In spite of their location the isolation is seen in their status as slaves.

### **12.1 Colossians 2.1-3 “Gaining Knowledge through Christ – Resisting the Obvious”**

The tenor of the letter begins to change in this chapter. We get a hint of that change in 1.10 in the phrase “walk worthy”. The term conflict ἀγών concern<sup>628</sup> is derived from

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<sup>628</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

“an athletic contest”.<sup>629</sup> The writer is pulling for them as an athlete would for a team member. The Apostle Paul’s writings often used the analogy of an athlete to make his point (Heb 21.1; Phil 1.3). This is a new community of believers who have made great strides within the context of their diverse cultures. The author wants to let them know that he is taking pride in their accomplishment. They are being encouraged to stay in the race and to engage each other in conversation. He mentions Laodicea because they have not seen him either. With the distance between the two cities and the fact that he tells them to exchange letters, dialogue probably ensued.

To encourage παρακαλέω (2.2) means “To call to one’s side, to comfort”. The writer is telling them to stand up. The notion is that they are capable of understanding what they have been taught. They were to study and discuss it. As an act of encouragement the writer again acts as a bridge; in this case as an authority on the subject of the teachings of Jesus Christ and his relationship with God.

Perhaps the writer, aware of the diverse ethnicity and beliefs, continues the call to unity but that does not seem to be the concern here. They seem to have overcome their different backgrounds and are gaining an understanding of the gospel to the point that he trusts them with knowing the true relationship of God in Christ on which the gospel of salvation hinges.

The enslaved faced many difficulties: e.g. prohibitions on learning to read and not being able to comprehend their status. It is important to remember that the slaves did not accept their status as some would think and the history of rebellions confirms it. Rebellions as a way of resisting came in many forms. They resisted through their

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<sup>629</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

determination to learn the word of God. Although many of the earlier generations had little desire to adopt the religion of their enslaver, some sought out answers in the Bible. They found consolation in the various texts that spoke of the oppressed and how God sent deliverers to relieve and avenge them. The Acts of the Apostles portrays Paul as one of the persons who understood oppression. It recounts that he and his companions had been beaten and imprisoned for his resistance; refusing to back down in their beliefs and for continuing to spread the gospel even in prison (Acts 16:37).

The writer's words in this section describe his anguish at not being able to be with the Colossians and Laodiceans, but he wanted them to be comforted. He encouraged them that if they stayed together and remained faithful they would understand who Christ was. In the previous chapter he described Christ as all in all and as the image of God. Here he is telling them to remain faithful and it would become even clearer. If it was knowledge they sought, Christ was the way to "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2.3).

Some would say that the enslaved desired knowledge into the ways of the enslaver so that they might live like them or gain revenge. To some extent this was true, but upon release from slavery they did not seek retribution but only the ability to care for themselves and live peacefully in society.<sup>630</sup> The slaves rebelled against the inability, caused by their enslaver's long hours and physical torture, to grow crops for their families and to worship as they desired. The knowledge they sought was not only to survive this present situation, but to live long enough to be free of it.

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<sup>630</sup> See discussions of African Americans during American Reconstruction Period (1863-1877) in Foner, *The Tocsin of Freedom : The Black Leadership of Radical Reconstruction*.

## 12.2 Colossians 2.4-8 “No Man’s Philosophy”

The use of the phrase μη τις (anyone or any man<sup>631</sup>) in both 2.4 and 2.8 denotes the writer cautioning the Colossians to be careful how they are interpreting what they are hearing either from Epaphras, others in the community or the writer himself. He is not accusing anyone in particular. His caution is general, hence the word “any”.

Neither gender nor specific persons is implied. In the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint the word “any” is often followed by a qualifier to determine of whom or what it refers.<sup>632</sup> In the Colossian text “any man” is inferred by those that translated it. Apart from not being gender specific, the reference could have been to words or ideals that formed within the community that may have caused concern.

Addressing the diversity of the community, there were many pre-existing ideas about the meaning of what was said concerning “mystery”, “treasures” “wisdom” and “knowledge”. These words in themselves are enticing when applied to gaining a better life. The Colossians were a mixture of people under Roman rule, living under colonial conditions, whose lives were ruled by imperial standards which was supposed to benefit all. They, however, were not often the recipients of the promises made by the empire and were often the means whereby the dominant society benefited; i.e. through taxation and subordination necessary for control by the empire.

Before and after enslavement, the African community experienced similar conditions. However, in the case of the Colossians, race was not so much a factor. The communities were diverse, with those owning property and those who were the

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<sup>631</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>632</sup> *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text*, [New and rev. ed. (Chicago,: Menorah Press, 1973).Genesis. 24.16 ‘any man’, Genesis 17.12 ‘any stranger’, Leviticus. 22.4 ‘any thing’, Charles Thomson, *The Septuagint Bible, the Oldest Text of the Old Testament*, 2d ed. ([Indian Hills, Colo.]: Falcon’s Wing Press, 1960).

property of others; those who were citizens as opposed to those who were subjects. The writer is telling this group that no one was to deter them from gaining the liberty to “walk in Christ” (2.6). At this point in the letter Christ was said to have freed them from their way of thinking. The wisdom that they once owned was now to be replaced with that of Christ. Their eyes were to be opened to the mystery, “God in Christ”. This text, when applied to the conditions of the African before slavery, meant they would have the power that the missionaries had as they came over to their land; the power to cross oceans and bring elaborate gifts; ultimately the same power that robbed them of their resources.<sup>633</sup> Both communities were told they were free, but they were not (ref Col. 3.22- 4.1). The text suggests that the slaves were not free to do as they pleased and the masters were not obligated to let them go.

The art of persuasion *πιθανολογία* (2.4) was practiced by famous teachers such as Aristotle, Epicures and Diogenes. Is this not what the writer is doing? He would not have been able to stand with former teachers nor his contemporaries had he not done so. The word comes from the root *πείθω* meaning calculated to persuade and *πιθανολογία* which means to bring reasons for persuading or making probable, to use probable arguments.<sup>634</sup> Although often described in connection with Colossians as a negative act, this was the accepted means of discussion in the time of this writing. Paul himself was using the art as he wrote letters to the churches. Galatians proves to be a much sterner letter in which the practice of persuasion is more readily seen. The writer, therefore, has justification in being concerned. This becomes a lost art when only one party is allowed to voice their beliefs to the detriment of the

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<sup>633</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Rev. pbk. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1981).

<sup>634</sup> Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Rev. and augm. throughout / ed. (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1996) s.v.

message being brought. He seems to fear that, in his absence, there is no one else who could act as his substitute in presenting this side of the dialogue. (2.1). It can also be inferred that there seems to be a fear on the part of Epaphras to allow the new believers to voice their concerns. Was there a letter sent from the church or did Epaphras verbally voice his or their concerns or questions? The negative labeling of those in the community by commentators is unjust, yet unavoidable due to the circumstance of no other surviving information. However, this fact leaves open the door for many opinions as in this thesis.

The writer seems to think that the terms and expressions in 2.6-8 are effective in cautioning the audience to remember the teaching they have already received. The “teaching” referred to in verse six, is presumably what they received from Epaphras. The term abounding (in verse seven) περισσεύω means to excel more or increase in excellence; used of a flower going from a bud to full bloom.<sup>635</sup> Similar expressions as those used in 2.8, “traditions of men” and “basic principles of the world”, are also used by Paul in other letters (e.g Galatians 1.14).

L. Lewis comments on the language used in this chapter. He suggests, “What is remarkable in this section is Paul’s uncompromisingly hostile language launched at the false teachers. They are frauds and thieves, (2:4, 8) who peddle a counterfeit product. The reality they proclaim, compared to the reality of Christ, is illusory (2:17) and ephemeral.”<sup>636</sup> Although the writer’s view of their “hostility”, or referring to them as “frauds and thieves”, does not conform to the tone of the letter (again we must compare the mood of this letter to Galatians and 1 Corinthians), he is nevertheless,

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<sup>635</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>636</sup> Lloyd A. Lewis, 'Colossians', Blount et al., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* 385.

uncompromising. The presentation of Christ is phenomenal in that his devotion to him is quite clear. The letter captures Paul's zeal for Christ and the gospel of salvation which is only matched by that of his former days in persecuting believers.

The following word analyses from 2.8 suggest alternatives to the way the community was told to view what was being taught as opposed to labeling them as false teachings.

βλέπετε means to be perceptive, discerning, look into, discern by use, know by experience.<sup>637</sup> They were to study the matter to see whether the philosophy lined up with what they were taught and had already accomplished (military reference to being taken away as booty perhaps into slavery). The Africans had already been carried away, made spoil of, physically taken from their homeland to the New World as slaves. Then they were "spoiled" (2.8) through the teachings that maintained their servitude. The indication here for the Colossians is that they could be pulled away from what they already knew. If they were once pagans, what they already knew was not a threat. Therefore their former beliefs were not an issue. What the writer is cautioning them about is discernment in what they have come to believe.

φιλοσοφία<sup>638</sup> refers to the love of wisdom. 2.8 references three areas he warns them about in opposition to the philosophy of Christ (vain deceit, traditions of men and rudiments of the world). A line is drawn between the two philosophies; philosophy itself is not under attack, just what is not according to Christ. So it is false or just different?

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<sup>637</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>638</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

κενησ<sup>639</sup> άπάτη<sup>640</sup> means to cheat, deceive, or beguile. Philippians recounts that to Paul except for Christ and “Him” crucified everything else were dung (3.8).

Therefore, the writer like Paul is not allowing for any outside thought to be brought in. This seems to contradict his saying “beware” in 2.8. Stated earlier, to beware; βλέπετε is to have knowledge of something and make a choice. Blind faith is not suggested as the letter encourages them to beware (look into).

The above suggests that discussions should ensue within the audience although the writer seems to be directing them through persuasion to adopt his point of view. He seems to be going out on a limb, so to speak, by encouraging debate. He does not waver, however, on the teachings concerning Christ.

On both sides the enslaved and the enslaver learned how to use words to manipulate the other. Slaves learned how to speak and act so as to appease the sensibilities of the enslaver. The enslaver learned how to denigrate the slave to shame him into working and by telling him that his work was for the betterment of all. This philosophy was according to a tradition (servitude) that had evolved with the growing economy. The enslaver was using the enslaved to do work that he could not do alone, but he did not want to share the profits. The fundamentals of the New World economy was the driving force behind the maintenance of slavery. Increased production required increased labor and increased labor only served to increase production. The letter warned the enslaved to not allow the dominant society to use them because it was not according to Christ. The enslaved heard this and continued to resist their status covertly, either through quiet rebellions, escapes, etc., or when

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<sup>639</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>640</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.



necessary overtly, through open rebellions and in the biracial churches they were later allowed to join.

### **12.3 Colossians 2.9-10 “From Isolation to the Divine”**

In 2.9 the writer uses the word θεότης to indicate the deity of God as opposed to θειότης which relates to divinity. Whether intentional or not it is significant when expressing the superiority of God in Christ in reference to all other expressions of godlikeness. Richard Trench gives a fuller discourse on the use of the two Greek words.

St. Paul is declaring that in the Son there dwells all the fullness of the absolute Godhead; they were no mere rays of divine glory which gilded Him, lighting up his person for a season and with a splendour not his own; but He was, and is, absolute and perfect God; and the Apostle uses θεότης to express this essential and personal Godhead of the Son; ... In all of these it expresses, in agreement with the view here asserted, Godhead in the absolute sense, or at all events in as absolute a sense as the heathen could conceive it. Θειότης is a very much commoner word; and its employment everywhere bears out the distinction here drawn. There is ever a manifestation of the divine, of some divine attributes, in that to which θειότης is attributed, but never absolute essential Deity.<sup>641</sup>

Again, the diversity of the first-century community comes in to play as the writer is dispelling all indications that there is anyone or anything greater than Jesus. He does not single out one group over the other, but issues a blanket statement in 2.9 concerning the deity of Jesus in God. To emphasize this, he adds the word “bodily” σωματικῶς meaning “of the exalted spiritual body, visible only to the inhabitants of

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<sup>641</sup> Richard Chenevix Trench et al., *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989) (1990). s.v.

heaven”<sup>642</sup>. The distinction between *θειότης* and *θεότης* is noted by the community in this Greco-Roman governance. The emperors, see Subsection 4.3, were often aspiring to be known as living gods and, often upon their death, this was sometimes bestowed upon them.<sup>643</sup> Therefore, to make the distinction clear, the writer chooses the higher of the two which is rarely used to refer to the status of an emperor.<sup>644</sup>

The writer here again elevates the believers letting them know that they are complete in Christ who, in him, dwells all the “fullness of the Godhead bodily”. He reminds the audience of what they were taught about reconciliation to God through Christ (1.21-22).

Complete *πληρώω* used here differs from perfect *τέλειος* (1.28) in that the latter goes beyond completeness<sup>645</sup>. Their perfection was not an act of “self”; it was contingent on their belief in Christ. A boundary is set to insure that they understood Christ’s position as the head and their position in him. Unity again is stressed as Jesus is raised above principalities and powers.

With the limitation of language and literature it is unclear how the enslaved African would interpret the idea that in Christ was the fullness of the Godhead. How far removed were they from the teachings of the traditional religion of their homeland? Chapter Six of this thesis reflects an understanding of the ordering of the gods and the place of the Supreme God. Perhaps from other teachings in the Bible they would have been exposed to the trinity. They would come to know that God is the head, the

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<sup>642</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>643</sup> Trench et al., *Synonyms of the New Testament* 10. Cites works of Lucian and Plutarch where they reference the use of *θεότης* to raise the rank of emperors to that of a god.

<sup>644</sup> Trench et al., *Synonyms of the New Testament* “*θειότης, θεότης*”

<sup>645</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

highest part of the triad. The letter is pointing them to God, placing the weight of the motives of their actions on their belief in God. Christ dwells in the Godhead as the image of God and it is through him that they are identified as complete.

Completeness (2.10) brings the enslaved from their status of isolation to an intimate relationship with Christ. As heirs with him they are also above their situation for he is the head of all principality and power. The enslaved did not allow the power exerted over them by the dominant culture to force them into succumbing to the aforementioned colonial or slave mentality (Part Four Introduction). They are complete, not less than others. The letter spoke to them about looking to heavenly things and not to things on the earth (1.5). At this point in the letter they are to look above their present status because they occupy a place with Christ who is above all.

Christianity was used by both the enslaved and enslaver. At various times the enslaver either allowed slaves to be Christianized or sought to prevent it as it served his needs. The letter tells both parties that order and the steadfastness of their faith in Christ is above all. It reminds them of their “faith walk” as that which is pleasing to Christ. They are not to allow the twisting of words or doctrines for personal gain to deter them.

#### **12.4 Colossians 2.11-15 “Rituals and Rites”**

Although there is no mention of law in itself, it is implied in circumcision. In the era of this letter did other cults/religions require circumcision? The writer uses this practice to differentiate non-believing Jews from Gentiles and believing Jews and Gentiles. The unity the writer so carefully tries to instill is complicated by the Jewish population

and their history during the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes.<sup>646</sup> In referring to angels, they are reminded of the writings which reflected the contest of angel princes in the court of heaven. To this part of the community the very realization of this event enters the discussion. The translation of the text concerning angel worship is controversial. However, the writer refers to the practice with the intent of elevating Christ above all powers, authorities, sovereignties, thrones and lordships. Caird states:

They were created by God (Col. 1:16), and they were disarmed and defeated by Christ on the cross (Col. 2:15). Although all the words are in the form of abstract nouns, connoting structures of power, they do not in these contexts denote abstractions, but personal beings, who symbolize, personify, embody or wield power.<sup>647</sup>

The writer does not dismiss them as mythical beings, but disarms them however real, as entities over which Christ has dominion.

Evidence pointing to the opinion that there were no false teachers within the community is that although references were made to Jewish cultic regulations and calendrical observances, there is no mention of the law as such, as would be expected if the teaching were under attack by the Jewish community.<sup>648</sup> Lincoln also makes reference to the idea that circumcision, mentioned in 2.11, operates for the most part as a metaphor for dealing with the physical body as a whole. The question

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<sup>646</sup> Epiphanes ruled Hellenistic Syria 175-164 BCE. His attempts to suppress Judaism brought on the Wars of the Maccabees. John R. Bartlett, *The First and Second Books of the Maccabees, The Cambridge Bible Commentary: New English Bible* (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1973) 19-44.

<sup>647</sup> Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* 238.

<sup>648</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln "Colossians" Abingdon Press., *The New Interpreter's Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes* 568.

may have been raised as to the necessity of actual physical circumcision among gentiles.

The writer's language is strong as he describes the power of God in what is often referred to as the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ in 2.15. Caird refers to this section as a linguistic description of the death of Christ in mythological terms.<sup>649</sup> This would be familiar to those with mystic and mythological backgrounds. Dibelius describes the acts of baptism and quickening (Part One). However, Christ disarmed/spoiled/ put off/ stripped off, in the sense of separating one's self from something to have nothing to do with it again, (for one's own advantage<sup>650</sup>). 2.15 completes the dissertation which follows the writer's caution in 2.8. The audience is guided through this section to show that they share in the triumph with Christ over all "them" the powers of the "cosmos". "Them" could also refer to people in authority or spiritual entities<sup>651</sup>

Rituals among the enslaved referenced in 2.14 were a part of life; they changed only with time and with the application and society of which they were a part. Some of the enslaved may have been familiar with circumcision as it was practiced in some countries in Africa.<sup>652</sup> Baptism as well as circumcision took on new meaning as it did with the first-century church. However, in the case of some of the enslaved baptism was just a ritual that was performed before they were put in the holds of the slave ships. The letter instructed them on the meaning of baptism as a rite of passage from death to life; from their old life to new life. They were often told that they were sinners

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<sup>649</sup> Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* 211.

<sup>650</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>651</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>652</sup> O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa* 232-35.

without a way of redemption. The letter exposes that theory as false with their belief in Christ and the outward show of their faith in baptism. The “ordinances” that denigrated them to unsalvageable sinners and even less than human had been canceled with Christ’s death on the cross. The powers and principalities were exposed because Christ had won the battle over them.

That the teachings in this section of the letter also applied to the enslaver was not lost on the enslaved. Many of them realized that their masters could also receive salvation and some rejoiced and joined them in worship upon learning of their conversion. The idea of communal worship and belief brought the enslaver into their isolation and took the enslaved outside of their world even just for a little while.

The writer in 2.14 references avoiding things for one’s own advantage. For the Africans and enslaved Africans their advantage was only considered when it served the purpose of the enslaver. This verse adequately described their condition. They were victims of such treatment and were looking to Christ to remove their yoke of bondage. Their hope was to be separated from the life that defined them and to be free; living in triumph over their present condition.

### **12.5 Colossians 2.16-23 “Initiations, Intrusions, Perversions”**

In 2.23, humility ταπεινοφροσύνη is the technical term for “fasting” in Hermas V. III. 10. 6, S. v. 3. 7.<sup>653</sup> The writer is aware that within the community are those who fast and he encourages them to investigate their reasons. Matthew records Christ’s teaching that fasting was for specific purposes and not to be done for vain glory (17.21; see also Mark 9.29). The Hebrew Bible also gives references to fasting and

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<sup>653</sup> C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon : An Introduction and Commentary, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957) 104.

some in the audience would be familiar with the practice, even if they were not partakers. The writer was telling them to make decisions about what was important. Did they want to lose their reward over these things, which according to him and in the face of who Christ is has little value? It must be stressed here again that these were issues which needed clarification. The labeling of them overshadows the uniqueness of this community; for they appeared to be as curious as they were diverse. The main issue the writer wanted to address was their knowledge of Christ. Examination of this section points to their diverse former beliefs and their willingness to examine their traditions in light of their new beliefs.

Caird's comment is out of context as we continue observing the tone of the letter and also in light of at least interpretations of the phrase. "Angel-worship' was Paul's pejorative and emotive term for a practice he wished to ridicule, and that the 'heretics' themselves would have resented and repudiated it."<sup>654</sup> The translation debate over whether it was worship "of" angels or worship "with" angels has not found consensus. He also suggests that this was pre-Gnostic. To say that this was the beginning of a movement (Gnostics) is questionable. The writer may have been addressing a practice that existed among the people in general or just a small group.

The term "intruding" carries three possible meanings: 1) borrowed from the mystery religions and referring to entering the sanctuary after initiation; 2) O.T. metaphor from the occupation of the promised land...the person treats his visions as his most prized territory, his Mecca; 3) investigating.<sup>655</sup> All are viable considering the diversity of the population in Colossae. Here again, as much discussion exists on this topic, it

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<sup>654</sup> Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* 26.

<sup>655</sup> Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon : An Introduction and Commentary* 105., Citing II Macc. 51. 30, Philo, de Plant. 80.

is mentioned briefly in this thesis to point to questions that may have been raised concerning the usage of the term in this context. In the absence of existing correspondence between the writer and Epaphras, it is not known who initially used the term. If Epaphras used the term, the audience could have initiated the discussion to clarify its meaning. If the writer used the term, their question could have varied concerning proper entry into the faith; whether by baptism, circumcision or other rituals that existed in the community. The writer again makes it clear however that faith in Jesus Christ is the unifying entity; anything or anyone else is temporal (2.20-22).

The writer makes a listing of the common teachings mentioned in the beginning of the discussion in this chapter. As many parallels existed, it was necessary to address each one, circumcision, baptism, ordinances, principalities and powers. Each had its place in the existing and developing beliefs and religions of this time. Numerous commentaries expound on the meanings of each in reference to this letter and other letters written by New Testament writers. In this thesis is a synopsis of the views of major thinkers in reference to much of whom and what the writer was addressing. Concurring comments made in this chapter will correlate with the views held by Morna Hooker. The writer is issuing general warnings about what could occur within the community concerning teachings in the gospel.

The tone of the letter indicates that it is written to an informed audience. This statement does not imply that the enslaved Africans were comparatively uninformed. The instructions build upon each other, beginning with comments about what they already know and then encouraging them to make informed choices about what they are hearing and discussing around them. They are not to shy away from the



philosophy, but weigh it and see if it makes sense. He makes a final push in this section by encouraging them to think about what they have learned and if they have decided to become believers, why are they still dwelling on things that are no longer relevant (2.20-23)?

The second chapter of Colossians represents the crux of the argument over the interpretation of “error”, “heresy” and “false teachers” by many commentators. No consensus to date has been reached definitively as to whom they were referring, but it is generally agreed that the community of believers, as with Christianity, was in its infancy. There were issues that needed to be addressed and the writer points out those areas. As with other letters, there is no correspondence to the writer that survived, so speculation as to what was actually reported remains moot.

Many of the enslaved were accused of perverting Christianity because they included traditions and practices from their homeland. Some of these traditions were not personally initiated but passed down through generations and perhaps brought by the new arrivals from Africa. This section as well as the previous one would cause one to pause and think about how they incorporated them. Their practices were sometimes viewed as idolatrous by those who were not familiar with them (See subsection 10.6).

Traditionally Africans believe in numerous spirits, good and evil. (See subsection 6.3 for documentation.) Divinities are intermediaries between God and man. In what they believe to be a demon haunted universe, belief in witches and wizards are common. Wind and rain, thunder and lightning are forces that have spiritual forces controlling them. Trees, mountains, rivers, etc. are inhabited by spirits which can either bless or

harm man. Fear of these forces and spirits govern the daily lives of the African and the person who can tap into these entities is also feared. Abogunrin reveals, "Traditionally, nobody would act without consulting a particular or family divinity. The gods and spirits control access to the divine Presence."<sup>656</sup>

Christianity in the atmosphere of slavery was in a fragile state, as many were frustrated with the teachings from both sides. On one side slave holders were wary of those preaching the gospel because often what ensued were discussions of freeing the slaves or at least giving them liberties that would, as they saw it, cut into their productivity. Some slave holders became Christians but used the scriptures to reinforce their stance on slavery. On the other side the enslaved were often dismayed to find that Christianity in this state was, not the answer to what they needed and, therefore, many either reverted to traditional rituals or incorporated them into Christianity.

Abogunrin writes that, today many of the churches in Africa enslaved their followers by not giving them the freedom they were promised.<sup>657</sup> Traditional practices that still exist in Africa were often a part of the enslaved participation in Christian practices. He states, "The belief in angelic intermediaries is generally common. Prayers are offered through angels to God, especially Michael the Arch-angel. The jingling of the bells three times before prayer is to invite God, Jesus and the angels to join in worship."<sup>658</sup> Many other rituals are performed that center around worshipping God,

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<sup>656</sup> Samuel O. Abogunrin, "The Total Adequacy of Christ in the African Context", Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso., "Ogbomoso Journal of Theology," (Ogbomoso, Nigeria: Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986), 10.

<sup>657</sup> Samuel O. Abogunrin "The Total Adequacy of Christ in the African Context" Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso., "Ogbomoso Journal of Theology," 15.

<sup>658</sup> Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso., "Ogbomoso Journal of Theology," 12.

however the rituals can often take precedence. People then become focused on formulas and procedures minimizing the attention on God.

In referencing the African Christian churches today, Abogunrin remarks that, “they feel that the mission churches have not preached the gospel undiluted with Westernisms and that the missionaries are not Bible-believing Christians. Today, while the missionary churches are gradually becoming stagnant in growth, these churches are growing in an amazing way.”<sup>659</sup> The mention of missionary activity does not reflect more recent progress, a topic this thesis cannot address totally. These churches are where rituals have become dominant and Christ is minimized. He blames the lack of teaching of the word of God for the problem in most of these churches. He blames this also on the use of Western terminologies and ideals that fail to see the total picture of African life. Yet it is through these churches that Christianity is making its strongest impact in Africa.

Subsection 6.2 of this thesis states three reasons why Christianity failed in Africa when the Portuguese entered in the fifteenth century. The enslaved Africans were faced with the same problems in the New World. The gospel was perverted due to problems on both sides, but the main reason stated by Abogunrin was the lack of the teaching of the word of God. Too many agendas prevailed and the gospel was often not heard. However, as in Africa, amazingly Christianity in the New World had a strong impact on the lives of the people.

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<sup>659</sup> Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso., "Ogbomoso Journal of Theology," 15.

Much of this can be attributed to the perseverance of the enslaved Africans to seek out the truth of the gospel. The sound of drums and exuberant shouts and songs coming from the hush harbors were disturbing and often a cause for fear on the part of the whites who chose to ignore the viability of African culture. In the process of making their beliefs in Christ their own, the enslaved African was warned in this letter to not allow their witness to be held suspect. They are constantly reminded to center their beliefs and actions on Christ; to remember that he is the head and that he is above all. Just as the Colossians were warned, in the context of their society, that Christ is above all they once believed in, so were the enslaved Africans.

## PART FOUR - CHAPTER THIRTEEN - COLOSSIANS THREE

### Introduction

Colossians Three is a call to action. The readers are reminded of their new life in Christ and it is at this point the lenses of the two groups converge. The writer gives two lists to show the contrast between their old and new lives which represent their conduct on earth. This is a timeless message that encourages believers to adopt a lifestyle that transcends not only their old lives but what they must endure in their present situations. The chapter begins however with another elevation. Although they are to live pleasing lives on earth, they are to seek a “heavenly” existence. They are to live life on earth with a heavenly mindset. 3.1-4 elevate them mentally, looking forward to eternal life with Christ. The rest of the chapter is meant to elevate them physically. With these instructions they are to live new lives in contrast to and apart from the old.

### 13.1 Colossians 3.1-4 “One ‘if’ Many ‘thens’”

The writer continues to address the audience as an informed community. Here his tone is not derogatory. He uses an if/then clause to stimulate their thinking and to persuade them to make the choice between their old “life” and their new (life is singular because of the emphasis on unity). However, notice that there is simply one “if” but many “thens”. The word *συνεγείρω* in verse one, meaning “to be raised with or together”<sup>660</sup> promotes the theme of unity. “If” together they are raised with Christ as a community of believers “then” they should seek and do. The writer is aware that temptations will come and that they will be faced with making decisions about their

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<sup>660</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

new belief. The process is complicated by the single “if”. Although meant to simplify matters the hearers of the letter are forced to make this decision on the pains of what is required of them in the succeeding verses.

The first “then” (a collective command) is an instruction to seek or set their “understanding”  $\varphi\rho\nu\acute{\omicron}\nu\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  on things above. The writer has accessed and addressed the divisions in the previous chapter and feels now the believers, as community, are ready to “walk worthy of the Lord”. The division he addresses now is the separation of their old lives from their new. This is no longer a community divided, but unified and the instructions given in this chapter are aimed at solidifying that union.

Christ’s position is further explained as physically “sitting at the right hand of God”. Their position is spiritual with Christ, as their lives are hidden with him in God. The promise that they will be with him physically in eternity is given, contingent upon the “if” in 3.1. Such elevation supersedes not only their former lives as non-believers, but their present lives as believers. The writer raises the bar from Christ being “all in all” to their being totally in him.

There is a suggestion of an ultimatum here and this may cause a problem for the subjects of Rome. Can there be dual allegiance? In theory, what the writer is suggesting sounds exceptional, but is Rome tolerant enough when faced with the competition of all that Christ offers? However, what the writer suggests is passively subversive in that they are not to rise up against the empire, but to be a community of believers within the existing structure. If that is so, why is it recorded that Paul was in prison? Does, he not ask that they no longer give allegiance to, nor worship other

gods? What about the claims of the emperor to be divine? Does not that imply some form of “worship”?

The Jews of the new community are faced with similar problems; further complicated by their former beliefs. Was it so easy to accept that Jesus Christ, the crucified, was the Messiah? How were they to now separate their doctrines along the lines of salvation? Was the Torah no longer the way to salvation? These are questions that presumably were being asked.

What appeared to be simplistic with the one “if” is complicated not only by the catalogue of guidelines in this chapter, but by the diversity of the community. Although they placed their faith in Christ, their various ethnicities still existed. The letter does not address the issues of customs and traditions effectively. The issues mentioned in Colossians Two, are too general to identify the various beliefs that existed. The solutions suggested in both Colossians Two and Three only served to unify them in the faith. The many denominations that later developed within Christianity are partly an indication of cultural and traditional diversities.

In this chapter, the people of Colossae have reached the pinnacle of their position in Christ. The writer is adept in elevating the Colossians to a place they were privileged to occupy. To reiterate: they were accepted in the faith of Christ who is above all and in all. They were made aware of the “mystery” who is Christ in God. They were being treated as citizens rather than subjects and made to feel that the unattainable promise of peace by the empire was nothing in comparison to the peace in knowing Christ. Colossians 3.5 gave the guidelines to maintaining peace within the community.

What began as inclusive teaching turns exclusive. The writer praises them for their faith and includes them within “the faith” by stressing unity. He also places himself among them first by writing to them and then acting as a bridge between them, Epaphras and God. This chapter stresses the exclusivity of being a new creature. They are no longer to act like the world around them, but be examples to those who were without (1.10; 4.5).

Some enslavers, needing a way to subdue the enslaved, used Christianity to separate themselves from those they captured for the profit of slavery. In order to manage this enterprise and quench resistance, the enslavers adopted the attitude that the slave was dangerous and must be dealt with as the enemy. Cartledge makes a comparison between managing the risk of native and black resistance to that of first-century Jews and other nationalists conquered by the Empire. “All slaves are enemies” is a Roman proverb *Quot servi, tot hostes*.<sup>661</sup> This idiom served as a valuable lesson quickly learned by colonial slaveholders. Like the Romans, they were not always successful in their endeavors to maintain the illusion of peace. This attitude was prevalent throughout the history of the colonizing of the Americas. J. M. Terrell suggests, “British militia leavened the American populace, regulating the social and civic affairs of whites, displacing and annihilating native peoples and intimidating free blacks and slaves in an effort to preclude insurrection on the part of activist black denizens and their abolitionist friends.”<sup>662</sup>

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<sup>661</sup> Cited in Paul Cartledge, “Rebels and Sambos in Classical Greece,” in Paul Cartledge, F. D. Harvey, and G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *Crux: Essays in Greek History Presented to G.E.M. De Ste. Croix on His 75th Birthday* (London: Duckworth, in association with Imprint Academic, 1985) 16-46 quotation at p. 21.

<sup>662</sup> JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience, The Bishop Henry Mcneal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998) 37.



The enslaved are again reminded that their focus should be ἄνω (above) and the clarification is made with the next phrase not on γῆ (earth). Most often they understood this to mean that they were to look for life to be better after death. Their expectancy of change was not to be in their present condition, and although this was meant to be consolation, it was something to aspire to in the future. As indicated in this thesis, the actions of the enslaved proved that they wanted life to be better in the present. The image of the docile, happy slave is a false one, portrayed in pictures were meant to depict the desire of the enslaver. Slaves were adept at “puttin’ on ole massa” to appease their masters and often what was seen in these pictures were just a depiction of a performance by the enslaved (See Subsection 8.1).

To focus on things above and not things on the earth meant also that they were to look beyond their present condition. They were to set their standards higher than what was expected of them. Often the enslaved rebelled out of frustration and lamented their present conditions causing them to pity themselves. The text encouraged them to look beyond or above what they could see and view themselves; not as property, but as people. Their present condition should not define them; thus they were not to adopt a slave mentality by succumbing to the image of one without hope. Nor were they to adopt the colonial mentality by aspiring to be like their enslaver. They were to look to Christ where their lives were hidden.

Living life in the isolation of servitude could create the desire to be hidden from the degradations of that sort of life. To be seen as the lowest form of humanity is such a negative image to have to endure day in and day out. That image was perpetuated in everyone and every situation encountered. The letter threw light on that image as it

encouraged them that they were no longer to be seen as such. Because of Christ, all that they were before was “dead”; they were now hidden in him. Christ had come to break the barriers of their isolation as he took up residence in their lives. The evidence of life in him is expressed in the latter part of the if/then clause in the next section.

### **13.2 Colossians 3.5-13 “Catalogue in Overload”**

The catalogue of iniquities, beginning in Colossians 3.5, is a restatement of Wisdom 14.22-31, with which the Jewish community would be familiar. The writer takes it to another level by removing the sin from tangible to moral intent. The genre represented in Colossians also appears later in, *Didache 5; Shepherd of Hermas* and *Mandate 8*.<sup>663</sup> It can be argued that its inclusion represents the Jewish background of the writer and has no bearing on the audience. That would be feasible if the writer had not included 3.11. The intent was to identify the diversity of the audience and to unify them; uniting them with Christ as “all, and in all”.

Paul identified with liberty from bonds and the writer of the letter seems familiar with his experience (3.11). He considered his new life in Christ to be removed from his old life in Judaism. His experience on the road to Damascus is explained as transformative and he was not only delivered from sin but from the bondage of the law (Rom. 8.3; Gal. 3.13). In Rom 8.15; Col 2.15 and Eph 6.10-16, the writer(s) speaks of being set free from the power of unseen forces of evil or demonic elements of life. With Christ there is new life and that meant he was a new man. “He hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the Kingdom of His dear Son” (1.13). The writer is echoing Paul’s jubilation over being

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<sup>663</sup> Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Classical Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism : Comparing Theologies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004) 148.

set free. He wants the believers in Colossae to experience the same and warns them of pitfalls that might occur.

The writer wanted the Jews of this congregation to see that the Messiah they were looking for had already come. In the process of realizing the Messiah, they were also to be re-created. These two concepts were not unfamiliar to his contemporaries.

Davies states, "We have seen that he used the terminology of the two ages, a concept that was perfectly familiar to the Rabbinic Judaism of his day."<sup>664</sup>

Four groups of opposites are named who are made in the image of Christ (3.11).

These groups are included as part of the makeup of those who can attain new life in Christ. However, this grouping is not complete unless Christ is all in all. The question is therefore raised as to what is meant by "all in all." Davies replies, "It is not merely men, Greek and Jew, Scythian and barbarian, who are made at one with themselves and with God but also all things that God may be all in all."<sup>665</sup> Schweitzer interprets "all" to refer to the Elect.<sup>666</sup> He is distinguishing those who are "selected" by God to be saved. C.H. Dodd disagrees saying that Paul meant exactly what he said.<sup>667</sup> The goal of the letter is to unify all believers in the faith. Schweitzer's response is indicative of the labeling placed on the Colossians by other commentators. Can an individual decide who the "Elect" are? This is a question that cannot be addressed in its fullness, but only considered so as to bring attention to labels that can cause things to be interpreted or perhaps misinterpreted. Davies disputes the theory of the

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<sup>664</sup> see Davies for more discussion of Christ as messiah and Christian dispensation as a new creation W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism : Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1980) 37.

<sup>665</sup> Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism : Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* 58.

<sup>666</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, Johns Hopkins paperback ed., *The Albert Schweitzer Library* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 185.

<sup>667</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Mind of Paul: Change and Development*. Reprinted from John Rylands Library. and Henry Guppy, "Bulletin of the John Rylands Library," (Manchester,; Manchester University Press [etc.]), Vol. 18, No. 1, Etc. 40.

elect purported by Schweitzer indicating the universal and national (in this case) call of God to all people.<sup>668</sup> The letter indicates that the Colossian believers were “once alienated and enemies in your mind... now...reconciled” (1.21). Others can also be brought into the faith that was once as they were (1.23). Inclusive in “all in all” is anyone or anything that has put on and has been raised with Christ (1.17; 3.1). Schweitzer explains his position by stating, “The adjective ‘elect’ is found in Paul only in Rom. 8:39; 16:13, specifically in relation to the person who believes in Christ, while the noun “election” features significantly in the discussion of Israel’s destiny (Rom. 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28)”<sup>669</sup>

The Jews of the community are given a challenge. Meeks states, “All these terms are drawn from biblical language referring to Israel; Paul himself still uses several of them of the Jewish people in Romans 9 -11.”<sup>670</sup> How are they to understand the “elect” of God? Were they able to make the above distinction between elect and election? The terms “saints” or “holy ones” (used earlier in Col 1.2,4) are reflected with the use of “elect” and “loved”. They were striking and a bit ambiguous when applied to this diverse community of believers.

The writer explains that to walk worthy indicates that others will notice and perhaps be saved (1.10) and walk in him (2.6). περιπατέω<sup>671</sup> (“walk” meaning to make one’s way, progress), to make due use of opportunities. In Hebrew *hă lak*<sup>672</sup> (meaning to regulate one’s life, to pass one’s life, to conduct one’s self), represents an outward

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<sup>668</sup> Col 1.20, 3.11; 2 Cor. 5.19; Rom. 8.19-23, 11.32.

<sup>669</sup> Schweitzer, *The Letter to the Colossians : A Commentary* 205.

<sup>670</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* 84.

<sup>671</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

<sup>672</sup> Francis Brown et al., *The Brown, Driver, Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon : With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001). s.v.

show of your life and beliefs. Others will see how a person conducts one's self and it becomes a witness, showing the beliefs held by that person. In the case of the Colossians the writer was telling them God's call was to all people and that their witness was crucial to those outside the faith in seeing Christ in them. This was the cause of his concern (2.1). The instructions in Chapter Three were given so that they could live harmoniously. As others came into the community and eventually into the faith they would not be turned away by disharmony and strife.

The letter to the Colossians is remembered because of the language; such as "cosmic powers" and "vain philosophy". The language that developed later identifies the hearers; heretics, false teachers are examples. Felder states:

The new universalism and unity to be found in the Christian church express themselves further in the new sequence of thoughts found in Colossians 3.11-12 ('Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all') cross reference Galatians 3.28 and I Corinthians 12.13.<sup>673</sup>

He is speaking of the term "chosen" in opposition to being ethnic or cultic. Looked at from this point of view, in opposition to what was stated concerning the "elect" earlier, it is corporate including all people, and is making a case for Christianity being inclusive and not exclusive.

If the previous section presented tremendous challenges to the enslaved, this section of the chapter compounds them. Dire living conditions can produce unpleasant attitudes to say the least and the enslaved could have been justified in

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<sup>673</sup> Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 139.

exhibiting the worst of human characteristics apart from the labels placed on them by the dominant society. The list given in 3.5-9 is an example of the labeling they had to endure. They were often labeled liars, sensual, angry, filthy, idolaters, blasphemous to justify their servitude. It would seem justifiable for the enslaved to exhibit these traits under the circumstances. However, the letter dispels this myth. Firstly it lets them know that they were now in Christ; “un-blamable and un-reprovable” in his sight, therefore these labels no longer applied to them (2.22). The old man was dead and the new man seeks after knowledge in Christ. Secondly, these were attributes, within themselves, they could control. Although they could not control the way in which they are treated, they were in charge of their behavior. The letter informs them that this type of negative behavior will be rewarded with wrath from God who sees all things. Neither their treatment nor their behavior has gone unnoticed. Thirdly, these are traits that all people exhibit apart from Christ. 2.1 clarifies those who are in Christ and those who are not. Christ-likeness is portrayed by those who are willing to erase these traits. Although it is difficult to perceive the desires of people, it is easier to see their actions.

Herein lay another difficulty. Although the enslaved could see the behavior exhibited by their enslavers and could perhaps pass judgment on them; the letter does not focus on others, but cautions them to take an inward look and strive to correct these faults. It suggests that it is within their power to do so in spite of their circumstances, for who but themselves are affected? Neither being treated humanely without retribution nor living as free persons could come about effectively with the use of any of these. In the best of circumstances these instructions are difficult; imagine living as a slave? They were being reminded that if they portray these attributes, they are

no better than those who abuse them and that they should not judge. 3.7 echoes the teaching in Romans 3.23. 5.12 reminded them of the commonality of man and sin. It also reminded them that a person is enslaved by sin (John 8.34).

The traits in 3.5-10 were often pointed out by the enslavers aiming to control the enslaved. The enslaver's desire to maintain his economic existence, which was contingent upon the actions of the enslaved, produced daily tensions. The scriptures were a means of showing the expected shortfalls of the enslaved and how control within the enclave of servitude needed to be acquired which justified the harsh measures used. The enslaved, on the other hand, resisted being controlled and desired freedom if only in their isolated lives. Being denied "inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (a phrase in the United States Declaration of Independence) was disheartening.

### **13.3 Colossians 3.14-17 "Barriers of Unity – Race and Class"**

The writer brings this section to a close with words that appeal to the intellect. They were advised that love is the standard whereby intelligence is measured. Perfection τελειότης from τέλειος "to bring to completeness, or perfect", suggests a culmination of all that had been taught. However, although, in the life of the believer it can be attained, it must be held together by love. The theme of unity was further encouraged in 3.15-16 as the writer admonished them to live at peace with each other; not allowing divisions to exist. The last three verses in this section describe the atmosphere in which believers are to come together; encouraging and lifting each other up.

Up to this point, the theme of unity is intact. 3.11 breaks down the barrier of race and class and in the following verses, in keeping with the theme of unity, the writer continues to give instructions on how to maintain it within their community. They were admonished at the close of the section to keep Christ at the center of everything they do and say. In addition, they were to give thanks to God. What follows is meant to be a continuation of the “if /then” process. The flow is interrupted with specific individuals being named; nowhere else are instructions given to specific persons. In the following verses, discussed in the next section, the unity theme is compromised.

The instructions in this chapter would have produced a desirable atmosphere had the enslaver attempted to rightly enforce them within the slave society, without the cruel measures used. Additionally, most enslavers, by their actions, did not adhere to the instructions themselves. In whom were the enslaved to look for these attributes? Their examples were limited by their isolation; therefore they had to look among and within themselves. This is the message in Colossians; they were to set their sights on Christ, who is above all and in all. It was within their power to affect a change in their lives and they were to teach each other (3.16).

In this chapter the enslaved, by the instructions given, could have created a new community within the isolated walls of their physical, emotional and mental conditions. The two lists provide the guidelines for each member of the community to live at peace with one another and with their enslaver. Ideally, getting rid of the bad and instilling the new qualities would not only better their isolated condition, but would send a message to the dominant culture. Christ promises that if they adjust



their sights, he would not only protect them (3. 3) and be their avenger (3. 6), but that he would reward them in eternity (3. 4).

The enslaved, however, did not rest with the promise of eternity as they wrestled with living with the indignity and indecency of the present. They desired to experience peace, yet it eluded them as their daily lives were disrupted by the evils of slavery. The atrocities made it difficult to cope and as they were often made to think that the only escape and reward was in death itself, many took their chances by either risking escape or rebellion.<sup>674</sup> Surely the message of the letter did not include the continued mistreatment and degradation with which they were faced? Although faced with similar conditions, could the audience in first-century Colossae have endured under these circumstances? This thesis does not serve to equate the two, but the letter speaks to both under their separate conditions.

Paul (the disputed author) could identify here with those who are enslaved. Slavery causes blindness wherein a person cannot see beyond their circumstances or their existence. Paul's experience is mirrored by the experience of the enslaved Africans in that they were blinded to the truth of the gospel and made to see only partially what was needed to keep them in bondage. As with the enslaved Africans, Paul understood he was delivered from the darkness by the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ; whereby both/all were to be freed. Hence, freedom was sought by the enslaved Africans because in spite of all that occurred around them, this was what they believed.

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<sup>674</sup> <http://www.johnhorse.com/highlights/essays/buried.htm> September 10, 2009 Author also discusses the covering up and omission in the recording of rebellions in the history of American slavery.

Referencing again the instructions given in Chapter Three concerning living in harmony with each other; within the community of the enslaved African, this type of bonding was limited due to the divisions within and without (see page 291). The white preachers could not preach the full gospel because their agenda to keep slavery alive did not allow harmony to exist, apart from maintaining servitude. Therefore the enslaved were admonished to stay in their place and masters to remember that God was watching them (3.22 and 4.1 respectively).

The ambiguity and pressure in 3.16 is capitalized on with the expectations placed upon the enslaved African to be “happy” and “carefree”, singing and dancing at the whim of their superiors. The letter is redirecting their singing in support of those in the community of believers. J. White and T. Parham call on examples of religion and art to support this category. They note the transcendent theme of gospel songs that teach the message that sorrows will pass and a spiritual hope and joy will triumph.<sup>675</sup>

In a harmonious society the writer’s if/then list could be portrayed more easily. This is not to say that that arena naturally produces what is suggested in 3.11-17. The evidence is in 3.11 which points out that it is in Christ that the list of favorable attributes is attained. The enslaved are made aware that it is in Christ that the listing of persons and ethnicities cohere. The erasure of divisions is only possible if they be “raised” in Christ and put on newness. This, however, cannot be achieved within the complexities of the two worlds that existed, apart from all coming to Christ. The enslaved could only do their part by striving to adhere to the standards set in the second list.

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<sup>675</sup> Joseph L. White and Thomas A. Parham, *The Psychology of Blacks : An African-American Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990).

The identification assigned to believers in 3.12; “elect of God, holy and beloved” carry with it a weight meant to liberate them. However, in the face of adversity the enslaved were asked to do the impossible. Slavery in the New World is a blight on the American conscience. The enslaved in America, whether they were African, Indian or early indentured servants were treated with the lowest regard. Greed and hatred was at their height and being instructed by this letter to exhibit the characteristics listed was a hardship considering first the motives of most slave owners and then the conditions endured by the enslaved.

#### **13.4 Colossians 3.18-25 “It All Comes Undone”**

The letter to the Colossians changes dramatically in this chapter when the household codes are mentioned. The male dominated household is enforced, albeit the roles of husband and wife are changed slightly to include admonitions of fairness on the part of the husband and father. The master, in 4.1, is given a warning that he is being watched and the slave is also informed of this. Was this a message to the slave that was supposed to soften the blow of his position? Did this change his status in any way? How frustrating this must have been after all the glowing words that preceded this part of the letter.

The household codes (or the *Haustafeln*) are the subject of many books and needs no explanation in this thesis. The discussion in this thesis is to bring attention to the identity of the people of Colossae and the teachings of the writer in light of his attempt to unify them as new believers in the gospel. It is the opinion of this thesis that, at this juncture, the writer diverts from this purpose to pacify those in the community who are not ready or unable to leave their old lives behind. In no other setting is the status of the members of the community more evident than in the

household; the position of the father to his family; the mother to the family and the slave. Had the writer excluded 3.11, perhaps this section would not be problematic. The believers of the Colossae community were made to think that they could exist beyond the bounds of the empire and then those of their status; but then they are reminded of their status.

The inclusion of this section in the letter is a clear indication that the writer either could not or would not address changing the structure of the family in Greco-Rome.

MacDonald remarks:

Household codes offer indisputable evidence of the merging of traditional Greco-Roman ethics with early church exhortation. Moreover, there is significant evidence contemporary with Colossians and Ephesians to support the theory that New Testament household codes served an apologetic function.<sup>676</sup>

She also mentions that traditional household ethics may have served the same purpose in Jewish households in the ancient world. In addition she references the household code of 1 Peter; stating that its purpose was a desire to appease strained relations with the outside world (1 Pet. 2:18-3:7; cf. 2:15; 3:15-16). Stambaugh offers this explanation.

Within the group, at least in the early decades, there was a conscious rejection of the status-conscious norms of society, a rejection summarized in the admonition that within the community of the baptized there was 'neither Jew nor Greek ... slave nor free .... Other passages of the New Testament, on the other hand, especially the admonitions to orderly family life known as '*Haustafeln*' (Col. 3.18 to 4.4... ) seem to show an attempt in the next generation of Christian

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<sup>676</sup> MacDonald, Vaage and Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament* 271.

leaders to impose a more patriarchal order, patterned more closely on the traditional Greco-Roman (and Jewish) family.<sup>677</sup>

Despite all the writer has set in motion to this point, he fails to live up to the standards he set for his hearers. They are not one in Christ for there is still a separation between “bond” and “free”. Wilson intimates that the reference to slavery in this text should not be compared to the slave trade in America, yet he discusses the comparison in the degrees of slavery in each era. Yet, stating further that one cannot assume that “conditions were the same everywhere in the ancient world”.<sup>678</sup> However, the view taken in this thesis references the writer’s statement in 3.11.

The writer fails to address classes in this society. He tells them Christ is all and in all, but how does that translate in the work place? Realizing that this is just one letter riddled with admonitions about conduct, the writer seems far removed in this area. Perhaps he is not able to address this issue because he has little experience in running a household. Paul is recorded as not married and celibate and would be remiss in addressing an issue of which he has no personal knowledge (1 Corinthians 7.7). Perhaps he had no intention of instructing in this area, but the question came up. Furthermore questions may have also arisen concerning Nympha, who was a woman whose home was mentioned in 4.15. Perhaps someone questioned her status in this male dominated society.

Much can be deduced from this section. Judge declares:

Male dominance is the theme as the dynamic of power and the concern is for his relationship to the weaker and inferior groups. The

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<sup>677</sup> Stambaugh Stambaugh and Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* 55.

<sup>678</sup> Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon* 282.

male, in the Greco-Roman household was the head and exercised full authority over the wife, children and slaves. What is heard in the Haustafeln are the voice of the propertied class.<sup>679</sup>

The letter is not sufficient in this area in bringing about unity in the community. C. J. Martin states:

The ethical teachings of the Christianized household codes thereby conveyed a new motive for action in accord with the prescribed behavior. One was to act 'as is fitting in the Lord' (Col 3.18' Eph 6.1), 'fearing the Lord' (Col 3.22), 'as to the Lord' (Eph 5.22). In sum, the hierarchical structural pattern of a male superior and wife-child-slave inferiors remains intact.<sup>680</sup>

The division is evident and the call for unity is compromised. The letter, addressed in this manner, suggests confusion on the part of the audience as to the extent of the call to unity.

The address to the wives pertaining to submissiveness perhaps was to clarify whether there was now a differentiation suggested in reference to 3.11. Martin offers still another problem with interpretation in light of the same. She remarks, "Equally problematic in the interpretation of the regulation regarding wives is the meaning of "to be subject" ὑποτάσσω (see Col 3.18; I Peter 3.1). Is "submission" synonymous with obedience? Is it voluntary? Reciprocal?"<sup>681</sup> Furthermore, is this outdated along with the slave code? See C. Martin's chapter in *Stony the Road We Trod* for fuller

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<sup>679</sup> E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century: Some Prolegomena to the Study of New Testament Ideas of Social Obligation*, [1st ed. (London: Tyndale Press, 1960) 60, 71.

<sup>680</sup> Clarice J. Martin, 'The Haustafeln' in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 210.

<sup>681</sup> Clarice J. Martin, 'The Haustafeln' in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 220.

treatment of Household Code.<sup>682</sup> Also see Chapter 11 of same for Philemon-Paul-Onesimus discussion (Col 4.7-18)<sup>683</sup>

The writer's inclusion of the *Haustafeln* causes one to wonder about his tenacity in the face of the empire. He was powerful in his message of the gospel and proclaiming the lordship of Christ and his place as the son of God; yet, here he weakens. The stance in 3.11, concerning the unity of all people in the faith is suddenly halted in 3.22, where servants and masters are excluded from that unity. If all have become new creatures, why have the status of the free and the slave not been re-created? Controversy exists over the question of whether servants/slaves of the first century had accepted their station in life and a change in status although possible was mostly horizontal.<sup>684</sup> Whatever their occupation, they were still servants and were made to think that this was all they could expect. By comparison, one difference between the slaves of the first century and the enslaved Africans in the New World was skin color. Another distinction was that, initially, most of the Africans were not born into slavery. It was a condition forced on them. Nevertheless, their plight was similar and this marks a major commonality; they were the property of other human beings.

The household codes discussed in this thesis were for the most part a tool used in Greco-Roman societies that was perpetuated to maintain the economic and military strength of the empire under the guise of creating and maintaining a peaceful

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<sup>682</sup> Clarice J. Martin, 'The Haustafeln' in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 206-31.

<sup>683</sup> Lloyd A. Lewis 'An African American Appraisal of the Philemon - Paul - Onesimus Triangle' in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 232-46.

<sup>684</sup> For further discussions of slavery in the first century see Cartledge, Harvey, and De Ste. Croix, *Crux : Essays in Greek History Presented to G.E.M. De Ste. Croix on His 75th Birthday*.

society.<sup>685</sup> The empire profited economically and militarily on the backs of the slaves, yet peace was not to be found. Fiorenza further suggests, “As a patriarchal society the Greco-Roman world was one in which a few men exercised power over other men, women, children, slaves, and colonized people.”<sup>686</sup>

In 3.19 the father’s responsibility is to no person (as opposed to that of the wife and children). He is to look to God for approval. The only place we see the man’s responsibility to God is if he owns slaves (4.1). Perhaps the writer’s instructions carry a subversive message that the male’s behavior toward his family is to be fitting /pleasing to God. 4.25 could be an open admonition to all in the household. Hay’s table illustrates the different responsibilities of each member of the household.<sup>687</sup> The table shows the greater responsibility to be on the slave, followed by the wife and child. The male (father, husband) and master, although their responsibility is expressed in their accountability to God, ambiguity exists because they are only to be aware of God’s presence. Hay suggests, “Probably the brevity of teaching for masters reflects the fact that there were far more slaves than masters in early Christian congregations.”<sup>688</sup> Thus, in 3.25 the emphasis is placed on the slave. However, the instruction in Eph. 6.9 contradicts 3.25, where more pressure was being placed on the master. Ephesians 6.8 gives the warning to both the master and the slave.

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<sup>685</sup> Philip H. Towner, “Romans 13:1-7 and Paul’s Missiological Perspective: A Call to Political Quietism or Transformation” in Gordon D. Fee, Sven Soderlund, and N. T. Wright, *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999) 156-57.

<sup>686</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 29.

<sup>687</sup> Hay, *Colossians* 139.

<sup>688</sup> Hay, *Colossians* 147.



Colossians 3.22 - 25 has the greatest amount of household instructions. The servant's position appears complicated. It is not enough to give a simple if/then instruction as with the others. Perhaps it could be construed that there was a problem that the writer wanted to address specifically. Earlier, he states that there is no difference between slave and free, but now he reinforces the status of each to remain as it always was. He explicates this by saying that, if the slave behaves as instructed then his/her reward is eschatological. He then adds a clause in 3.25 admonishing the slave to remain a slave. This verse could strike discord in the hearts of the enslaved and was used very adeptly by the enslavers to discourage revolt and maintain slavery as an institution. These passages, as well as others, were preached from white pulpits and variations from black pulpits during slavery in the New World with the same results in the new community; slavery was right because it was part of the gospel message. The manipulation of the scriptures in the Bible was evident. The Colossians, as well as the enslaved African, could expect no more. The responses of the Colossians were not recorded but the enslaved African did, however, perceive that the Bible was being manipulated and, in time, the preaching from the black pulpits no longer echoed the message from the white pulpits (See Subsection 8.6).

## PART FOUR – CHAPTER FOURTEEN - COLOSSIANS FOUR

### Introduction

Following the teachings concerning the household the writer conveys his situation and his instructions given to those around him. The conclusion of the letter names persons with whom the readers may or may not be familiar. His concern for the wellbeing of those around him and the recipients of the letter is expressed through admonitions of prayer for the continuation of the teachings of the gospel. The ending is similar to other letters written to churches in the first century. The emphasis in this thesis is on the names and their importance in identifying the recipients. The impact on both the first-century believers and the enslaved Africans is discussed.

### 14.1 Colossians 4.1 “Remains of the Empire”

The instruction given to the masters in 4.1 is ambiguous and open to interpretation. How does one measure this? In the cases of both the Colossians and the enslaved African, their status determined what was just and fair. That determination lay totally in the hands of their owners. The writer finally mentions the master’s responsibility to God but this puts distance between them and their slaves, allowing room for error. Martin states, “In Ephesians and Colossians the exhortations in the *Haustafeln* are set forth in three pairs and outline reciprocal relationships between husbands and wives, fathers and children, and masters and slaves.”<sup>689</sup> This remark is not true as there is a double standard concerning master and slave. According to Zerbe:

...its words of caution uttered at the expense of the powerless (in this text: slaves, women and children). This text is one of the chief planks

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<sup>689</sup> Clarice J. Martin, 'The *Haustafeln*' in Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 208.

used to support androcentric, patriarchal and classist perspectives. Indeed, this text gives the prevailing status quo a religious legitimization - the conduct of all three lower positions (but only one of the superior positions) is motivated by religious means (confirming the social legitimating function of religion).<sup>690</sup>

If this section was taken seriously at all it was with the hopes that God would intervene on their behalf. The enslaved had experienced separation from the earliest days of their participation in the institution. But does one get used to the trauma of families being divided? The family life of the enslaved was fragile as the threat of separation was eminent. Parents were in perpetual fear of separation from their teenage children, for it was inevitable. Young slaves were bought and sold for profit. Marriage in the slave society was not viewed as valid and separation could occur at some point to facilitate the profiteer in the slave trade.<sup>691</sup> This section must have cut deep, yet one cannot help but feel that those parents must have cherished the time they spent with their children. Thus, it is sensed that in reading this part of the scripture, the enslaved relished the time they spent together and held dear the ideal of their familial duties. (See subsection 10.6 for documentation.)

Painful as it must have been to read verses referencing the household, wives were told to stand beside their husbands, even when the wives saw their husband's manhood challenged by the degradation of being overworked and disrespected. The admonishment to do this as "unto the Lord" must have given them some courage. Husbands were to love their wives without bitterness, although faced with the reality that often they were the objects of sexual abuse by their masters and those in

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<sup>690</sup> Zerbe and Orvevillo-Montenegro Segovia and Sugirtharajah, *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* 297.

<sup>691</sup> Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* 214.

authority over them. The wives, having to endure the abuse, faced the impossible task of facing her family with this knowledge and that it would happen repeatedly at a whim. Children faced with all that they experienced were to obey their parents. What a horrible environment to be forced to live in. Fathers, πατήρ, “generator or male ancestor”<sup>692</sup>, the description of God; denoting authority, were reduced by their circumstances and often were debased while their families were forced to watch in order to teach everybody the lessons of servitude.

Three observations can be made concerning the inclusion of the household codes in this letter. Firstly, what cannot be overlooked here, as with the interpretation in light of the people of Colossae, is that to be a slave was to have your life depredated. A slave’s life was not his or her own. Their daily existence was at the discretion of others. In each case the slaves were forced to accept their condition and, although their desires were for better lives, they did not expect it.

Secondly, this passage speaks volumes concerning the heart of the situation. Family order, in both situations, was governed by the dominate society. The writer of the letter makes strong statements about the nullification of division in 3.11, but the statement is contradicted when faced with the household codes in the time it was written. The letter speaks of equality, but it must not affect the structure of the household. For the enslaved Africans, as well as for the Colossians, the entire message is turned around by the instructions concerning the household.

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<sup>692</sup> Danker, Bauer, and Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* s.v.

Thirdly, the writer offers little consolation in the hope of obtaining equality. The message he sends is that slavery is approved by God. Godly instructions are given throughout the letter for living faithfully as believers. The instructions in the household codes are also given in like manner. The phrase “as pleasing to God” is central in the message. The enslavers used this type of reasoning to reinforce the enslavement of Africans within their communities citing *Haustafeln* scriptures. The end was to oppress and maintain society to benefit those in dominance.

#### **14.2 Colossians 4.2-6 “So, What does Freedom Mean?”**

Taking on an air of “business as usual”, the writer references having an opportunity to further spread the gospel, indicating that is the reason he is in prison. The people of Colossae are made aware that they are part of a movement that had the potential for danger. Yet, they were not alone. The same message they are receiving is intended for the world. MacDonald remarks that, “Paul certainly believes that the community’s interaction with outsiders can lead to the expansion of the church”.<sup>693</sup> Apart from the household codes, the writer seems bold in his attempts. He gives added instructions to members with reference to their responsibility to God, which is perhaps all he felt was needed to align the code with his message of unity. The community had been the subjects of Greco Roman rule and were, in addition, now part of the kingdom of Christ. Perhaps he is taking measured steps here; trying to not move too fast. However, this is not consistent with his prior statement in 3.11. τοὺς ἔξω, “without” in 4.5, shows that a definite line is drawn between church members and nonbelievers’; those who are being saved and those who are not.<sup>694</sup>

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<sup>693</sup> MacDonald Vaage and Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament* 272.

<sup>694</sup> Vaage and Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament* 272.

Although a line was drawn, Paul is telling the members to try and draw the outsiders in by their behavior.

Here, the church at Colossae is being instructed to take every advantage of the opportunity for dialogue, but to take care not to harm delicate relations with outsiders. (cf., 1Peter 3.15-16). The community is instructed to always be ready to make a defense (apologia) to anyone who challenges them concerning their faith, although their dealings with nonbelievers still should be characterized by gentleness and reverence.<sup>695</sup>

The witness, in the form of the life of the believer, is essential for showing unbelievers the love of God for all mankind. Hope is rekindled as the letter encourages the believer to pray. The request is two-fold; they are to pray for one another as a community and for others outside that community. The writer shows the constraints he has endured and wishes to be able to preach the gospel freely.

Freedom as with salvation carries a dual meaning for the enslaved. They wanted to be free physically and mentally. The writer teaches in this section that, although he is physically bound, mentally he is free. The constraints of prison did not prevent him from exhibiting the characteristics of the life of the believer. Abogunrin states:

The majority of African Christians' understanding of salvation covers the whole sphere of life. Salvation must be related to man's body, health, victory over demonic powers and continued protection from these powers, provision of daily needs, the security of the society in which he lives, and man's total well-being.<sup>696</sup>

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<sup>695</sup> Vaage and Wimbush, *Asceticism and the New Testament* 273.

<sup>696</sup> Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary Ogbomoso., "Ogbomoso Journal of Theology," 14.

The enslaved were again encouraged to seek ways of overcoming their adversity through the attributes taught them in this letter. The message was that their actions could win over others. Many slaveholders became believers and the results often were the catalyst for change within the structure of slavery. In some cases, the believers afforded slaves liberties which they would not have received otherwise (see 8.6, Slave Preacher). However, some slaveholders, in spite of their belief, used Christianity to further control slaves and this could have been an indication of whether or not their faith was real. It is also fair to say that some slaves used Christianity to gain control of their lives and the same can be said of them. This passage serves as warning to those whose walk may be questioned and whether they can offer a valid answer.

### **14.3 Colossians 4.7-18 “Legacy in a Name”**

Epaphras is praised for his work among the believers in the three cities of the Lycos Valley. His aspirations for them are that they come to the full knowledge of God’s will. As part of a team, he stays with the writer, as Tychicus and Onesimus are sent to deliver the letter(s) to the cities in the Lycos Valley. The community in Colossae is being given adequate attention in order that they may grow. The indication from the letter and the people being sent to minister to them as well as those who are already there offering them their homes for meeting, is that this community is of worth. It is a viable community where its people are sought after for their potential as strong believers in the gospel.

Names in this section represent people who were important to the ministry. The writer praises each and gives instructions to the hearers. Although, not relevant in the contemporary sense, the names reflect the society from which this letter was

generated. As indicated in Chapter Two of this thesis some of the names may have been changed from the ancestral ones to reflect the change in their beliefs as some of the believers' previous names could have been of pagan origin.

The writer names those who have served with him. They have been a comfort to him (4.10-12). He commends some as being the only ones of the circumcision. Hay states that in making this statement the writer implies that some of the Jewish Christians did not support him in the ministry.<sup>697</sup> Thus bringing to mind the Acts account (15.37-39) of a possible dispute between Paul, Barnabas and Mark. Whether or not he specifically names them, their legacy is now known. Onesimus, whose name means "useful"<sup>698</sup> is legendary. He is the slave who, after a dispute with his master, was employed to accompany Tychicus with this letter to the church at Colossae. Onesimus, although a slave, was trusted to carry the letter along with Tychicus, and is called "the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you" (9). In this act, orchestrated by the writer, the two walk along side each other in the delivery of the gospel message. However R.J. Weems is concerned that not enough was said about Onesimus and even in the letter to Philemon more focus was placed on Philemon, his owner, to receive him with love.<sup>699</sup> Onesimus was a slave and that status did not change upon his return to Colossae. There are many discussions concerning Paul's intentions concerning Onesimus and the unique situation of slavery in ancient Rome. In all that is said about the differences between slavery in the ancient world and those in the later centuries of this millennium, the following is

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<sup>697</sup> Hay, *Colossians* 159.

<sup>698</sup> Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature : A Translation and Adaptation of the Fourth Revised and Augmented Edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch Zu Den Schriften Des Neuen Testaments Und Der Übrigen Urchristlichen Literatur* s.v.

<sup>699</sup> Renita J. Weems, "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible". Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* 73.



portrayed in the scriptures; Onesimus was a runaway slave who was returned to his believing master<sup>700</sup> by the leader of the then developing Christian church. This, above all, is the message seen in this thesis as most troubling.

The community in Colossae perhaps is aware of the situation with Onesimus and Philemon. Perhaps the private letter to Philemon was read to them.<sup>701</sup>

Comparatively, the enslaved African may have also known about the letter to Philemon which would acquaint them with the identity of Onesimus. This thesis, however, is limited to Colossians in viewing the letter from an African American postcolonial perspective. Therefore, the discussion focuses on the text and in particular the verses discussed earlier in this section concerning slaves (3.11, 22).

Along with many attributes of Christianity this type of relationship between the writer and Onesimus was missing in the isolated existence of the enslaved. If Onesimus was known to them, perhaps they, unlike Onesimus, were not worthy to carry the gospel. Their preachers were assigned to them as was the message. They owned virtually nothing and names held special significance to the enslaved for their names spoke of slavery. Often, the names given were not flattering and reflected the hatred that the slave owners' had for their heritage. In many cases, the enslaved were not given the opportunity to even name their children. A name is something of which a person should be proud, but since that was not the intention of the enslaver the names took on a pejorative nature (See Subsection 7.3).

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<sup>700</sup> The letter addressed to Philemon describes him as a "dearly beloved and fellow laborer" (1.1). The rest of the letter lends support to these attributes in the eyes of the writer.

<sup>701</sup> A documented interpretation of the reading of the letter from Onesimus' perspective is given by: Walsh and Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed : Subverting the Empire* 202-12.

Each person's name in the letter marked them as a part of the era in which they lived. They belonged to that society and their names linked them to families. The defaming names of the enslaved Africans marked them as well and often family lines were lost due to the changing of their names. Scant records were kept (if at all) of the births and deaths of the enslaved. In reading this letter they were reminded of their real names and, although they often secretly retained them, they were not recorded in history. The "role call" in the closing of the letter identifies each person and marks a place for them in history. For example: Luke was a physician; Justus was a Jew; Nympha was a church leader in whose home they met. Onesimus and Epaphras were Colossians and, from reading Philemon, we know that the former was a slave. They will be remembered individually. The same cannot be said of the enslaved African.

### **Conclusion**

The letter to the Colossians revealed the identity of the people of Colossae and spoke to the enslaved Africans revealing to them their identity in Christ. Without tangible evidence of their existence due to the devastation of the town of Colossae this letter serves as their voice. Without labeling them, it was found that they were a diverse people with different ethnicities attempting to understand the doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ being introduced to them by leaders of their community and, later, through this letter. They presented areas of concern and the letter addressed them albeit from a third party perspective. In the process of their inquiries they were led to believe that their status had changed with the knowledge of Christ, however only spiritually. They are reminded that their status in the society in which they lived had not altered.

The enslaved Africans realized they were no longer isolated and their belief in Christ defined them and not their status. However, they too were reminded that their status in the society in which they lived had not changed. Unlike the people of Colossae, the voice of the enslaved African was heard through songs, preaching and the history of the African American. This letter spoke to them about who they were as Christians and motivated them to seek freedom from slavery of the mind and body.

## **General Conclusions**

The letter is possibly a third party account of a representation of the beliefs of the people of Colossae. Concerns were addressed to Epaphras, who relayed them to the writer, who then responded. It is difficult to ascertain the validity of the concerns of the audience, except in trying to identify the people themselves. This thesis, in its determining the reaction of the first-century audience to the gospel of Jesus Christ presented by the writer of the letter, can only speak to the diversity of the community and by use of commentaries ascertain that they were a new community of believers presented with doctrines that were not yet fully formed. The labels placed on them by modern commentaries were an injustice in that subsequently their voices were not heard.

The enslaved Africans were dealt a similar injustice by not being allowed to explore the gospel and determine what was necessary for their understanding. They were constantly fed doctrines that were aimed at oppressing them and maintaining their servitude. Colossians was used as an example because of the texts that not only related to servitude but because of the labels placed on the audience, as a result of their attempts to understand the teachings as they related to their situation. As with the first-century audience, the Africans of the fifteenth century and the enslaved Africans in North America were labeled as heretics and culpable in perverting the message by incorporating former beliefs into the doctrines of the gospel.

Consideration needed to be given to their status in the society in which they lived; the laws that governed them and their relationship to each other. Further studies of the identity of both societies would yield even more insight into the viewpoints of the

people being presented the gospel. They can neither be spoken about nor understood adequately without ascertaining their identity.

Re-reading the letter to the Colossians from an African American postcolonial stance has determined that the writer was not guilty of labeling the people of the community at Colossae harshly. His instructions were directed at an informed people who showed signs of sharp abilities in understanding what was being taught. The letter is an attempt to answer questions being raised from the teaching given by Epaphras. As stated earlier, Epaphras seemed to have reached his potential and sought out the writer's help. This act was magnanimous in that he put the needs of the community above his own.

This thesis points to the labeling of the people in this community by modern commentators. The error was not with the people of this first-century community, nor with the writer of the letter, but with the commentators. The popularity of using the terms heresy and orthodoxy began in early Christianity between groups of people with differing and unfamiliar beliefs.<sup>702</sup> Issues of unity/diversity; heresy/orthodoxy are topics that can be discussed further perhaps in a subsequent work. However, Bauer points out that, "What constitutes 'truth' in one generation can be out of date in the next through progress, but also through retrogression into an earlier position."<sup>703</sup> Perhaps in the spirit of this statement and in the context of this re-reading it is time to move from labeling to ascertaining the history of the audience. Examining the text with the identities of the audience in mind, the intention of the writer becomes clearer and allows both voices to be heard.

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<sup>702</sup> For comprehensive discussions see Bauer, Kraft, and Krodel, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*.

<sup>703</sup> Bauer, Kraft, and Krodel, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* xxii.

At the time of the reception of this letter, the people of this community, in postcolonial terms, were the “other” in that they were citizens of a country that had been colonized and they were now subjects. They were subject to the laws of Rome and were required to pay homage, financially and civically, to the empire. In addition, there were beliefs that stemmed centuries before the coming of the gospel as well as those they were forced to adhere to within the empire. It is understandable that confusion, and perhaps doubt had set in with the teachings of the gospel.

In examining the footprints of the believers of the groups referred to in this thesis what can be found? One thing stands out, Christianity and its mark upon these groups of people. In examining their collective identities, it is determined that both groups had two main things in common. Firstly, colonization left its impact on their lives and thought processes. Secondly, they were labeled because of their efforts to understand and adapt to the teachings of the gospel. The labels that were placed on them effectively silenced these voices, however, with their removal, they are once more heard. From this examination, their voices are heard as it relates to their reception of the gospel in their given eras.

The following questions were asked in the introduction of this thesis (see page 7):

- Should the teachings found in Colossians be presented to persons in an African American culture, what would be the implications?

The implications of the teachings found in Colossians when presented in an African American cultural setting varied according to the agenda of those presenting them. However, this does not make the question less meaningful. Summarily the teachings in Colossians were used as a vehicle by both the enslaver and the enslaved. Some

slaveholders used the text to oppress and profit from slavery. Some slaves used the text to gain freedom from oppression and exploitation due to slavery.

- Would the reaction by the people of the African American community differ from that of the Colossian community?

The reactions of the people of both communities were similar in that they tried to make the religion their own and in so doing they were found wanting and labeled.

- Can these reactions be used to draw conclusions which can impact the meaning and/or interpretation of the text?

Investigating the intent of the letter helps in the comprehension of the text. However, each reader's interpretation may vary. Their reactions to the text indicated their abilities to reason and to question the teachings in light of their histories and background. These abilities contradicted the labels placed on them.

- Can language be used to alter the identity and faith formation of an existing culture or to eliminate particular ideologies or beliefs?

The investigation of the use of language produced both positive and negative effects. Language was used in attempts to persuade, deny and eliminate certain aspects in the lives of the groups discussed. Whether temporary or permanent, the affects of the use of language in this process cannot be readily measured, but showed the degree to which it was used to obtain desired effects.

The re-reading of the letter from an African American postcolonial perspective gave a voice to the people of Colossae that was silenced not only by the devastation of that city but by the labels placed on them by modern commentators. Why should their voices be heard and should anyone speak for them? The letter was a response to their reaction to the gospel. Their identities, which impacted their response,

produced the letter. The letter is a footprint of the lives of the people of Colossae in their journey in understanding the early teachings of the gospel. Their concerns, like those of the enslaved Africans, are part of the history of Christianity. Therefore, their voices should be heard and only an informed ear can hear and speak for them.



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