ST. PAUL IN ROME.
3. THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS[1]

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I

COLOSSAE was a city of Phrygia, situated on the south bank of the river Lycus (modern Çürüksuçay), a tributary of the Maeander (modern Menderes). It lay on the main road from Ephesus to the Euphrates, and accordingly finds mention in the itineraries of the armies of Xerxes and Cyrus the Younger, which marched along this road. Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C., speaks of it as "a great city of Phrygia"[2]; Xenophon, at the beginning of the following century, describes it as "a populous city, wealthy and large".[3] But later in the pre-Christian era it diminished in importance with the growth of neighbouring Laodicea and Hierapolis, and at the beginning of the Christian era Strabo calls it a small town.[4] The site is now deserted, but the town of Honas (formerly a Byzantine fortress and seat of an archbishopric) lies three miles to the south-east. In New Testament times its population comprised indigenous Phrygians and Greek settlers, together with a number of Jewish colonists who settled in Phrygia from the time of Antiochus III (early second century B.C.) onwards.

The western region of Phrygia in which Colossae and the other cities of the Lycus valley lay formed part of the kingdom of Pergamum, which was bequeathed to the Roman senate and people in 133 B.C. by Attalus III, the last ruler of that kingdom, and reconstituted by them as the province of Asia.

Christianity was introduced to the Lycus valley during the years of Paul's Ephesian ministry (*c.* A.D. 52-55). So vigorously was evangelization prosecuted during those years that, according

[1] A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 10th of November 1965.

[2] *Hist.*, vii. 30.

[3] *Anabasis*, i. 2. 6.

[4] *Geog.*, xii. 8. 13 (πόλισμα).

to Luke, not only the people of Ephesus but "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts xix. 10). While this work was directed by Paul, he was assisted by a number of colleagues, and through their activity churches were planted in some areas of the province which Paul was unable to visit personally. Among these were the churches of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, which appear to have been planted by Paul's colleague Epaphras; this may be inferred from Paul's references to him in Col. i. 7 f.; iv. 12 f.

Within five years from Paul's departure from Ephesus, he found himself under house-arrest in Rome.[1] Here, for a period of two years, he was able to receive visitors in his lodgings without difficulty.[2] One of these visitors was Epaphras, the evangelist of the Lycus valley. He brought Paul news of the progress of the churches in that region. Much of his news was encouraging, but there was one disquieting feature: at Colossae in particular there was a strong tendency among the Christians to embrace a form of teaching which (although they themselves had no suspicion of this) threatened to subvert the gospel of grace which they had recently believed and to replace their Christian liberty with spiritual bondage. To safeguard them against this threat Paul sent them the Epistle to the Colossians.

II

The statements in the foregoing paragraph are based on several assumptions—two in particular: (i) that the letter to the Colossians has Paul for its author; (ii) that it was written during his imprisonment in Rome.

(i) On the point of authorship, Paul and Timothy are named together in the opening salutation as senders of the letter. It has been shown that most of the epistles in which Timothy's name is conjoined in this way with Paul's present some common literary features which mark them off from other letters in the *corpus Paulinum*; a natural explanation of this would be that in these letters Timothy served the apostle as his amanuensis.[3]

[1] See BULLETIN, xlvi (1963-4), 342; xlviii (1965-6), 88 f. [2] Acts xxviii. 30 f.

[3] W. C. Wake, "The Authenticity of the Pauline Epistles: A Contribution from Statistical Analysis", *Hibbert Journal*, xlvii (1948-9), 50 ff., especially

But it has been urged against the Pauline authorship of this epistle that such a gnostic heresy as it presupposes could not have emerged before the second century A.D. There would be substance in this argument if the " Colossian heresy " exhibited the traits of fully developed Valentinianism or one of the other gnostic systems described by Irenaeus and Hippolytus or reflected in the Nag Hammadi papyri. But, as compared with such second-century systems, the " Colossian heresy " must be recognized as an *incipient* form of gnosticism. Evidence has indeed been forthcoming in increasing measure of the currency of incipient forms of gnosticism in the first century, especially in areas where Judaism found itself involved in dominant trends of Hellenistic and Oriental thought.

Some other arguments that have been brought against the Pauline authorship of Colossians boil down to the feeling that the author of Galatians, Corinthians and Romans could not have adapted himself as the writer of Colossians does to the situation with which this epistle deals. But this is seriously to underrate Paul's intelligence and versatility. The man whose settled policy it was to be " all things to all men " for the gospel's sake (1 Cor. ix. 22 f.) was perfectly capable of confronting what he regarded as the false *gnosis* and worldly *askesis* taught at Colossae with the true *gnosis* and spiritual *askesis* of Christ. For all his opposition to the " Colossian heresy ", he readily takes up its characteristic terminology with a view to showing that the truth which it attempts to convey and only succeeds in distorting is perfectly embodied in Christ, the manifested " mystery of God " (Col. ii. 2).

It was pointed out some years ago by Professor Henry Chadwick[1] that Paul in this epistle is doing two things at once: he is acting as the apologist for Christianity to the intellectual world of paganism at the same time as he is defending gospel truth within the church. His employment for apologetic purposes of the technical terms of the " Colossian heresy " in what

p. 54. An exception to this rule is 2 Corinthinians; see BULLETIN, xlvi (1963-4), 330, n. 3.

[1] " All Things to All Men ", *New Testament Studies*, i (1954-5), 261 ff., especially pp. 270 ff.

has been called a " disinfected " sense[1] goes some way to account for the differences in vocabulary which have been discerned between this epistle and Ephesians on the one hand and the Galatian, Corinthian and Roman epistles on the other.

Some scholars—notably H. J. Holtzmann,[2] Charles Masson[3] and (most recently) P. N. Harrison[4]—recognizing indubitably Pauline elements in Colossians, have tried to explain the presence of elements felt to be un-Pauline by supposing that Paul wrote a shorter Epistle to the Colossians. This shorter epistle, the hypothesis proceeds, was drawn upon by the Paulinist who wrote Ephesians; and the same Paulinist subsequently inserted substantial interpolations into the genuine Colossians in his own " inimitable style ",[5] thus producing our present enlarged Colossians. Holtzmann attempted in this way to account for the curious phenomenon that, in passages common to Colossians and Ephesians, sometimes the one epistle and sometimes the other seems to be earlier. But A. S. Peake's criticism of Holtzmann's argument—" the complexity of the hypothesis tells fatally against it "[6]—is equally valid against its more recent formulations.

P. N. Harrison incorporates with his formulation of this hypothesis the view which he takes over from E. J. Goodspeed that Ephesians was written by Onesimus; Onesimus, he concludes, was also the interpolator of Colossians.[7] Two of the most substantial interpolations which Harrison discerns are the passages in Colossians i. 9b-25 and ii. 8-23, largely because of the high proportion of *hapax legomena* which they contain. But the argument from *hapax legomena* is precarious when applied to these two passages, since in the former liberal use is made of liturgical formulae, while the latter is above all others the passage in which the vocabulary of the " Colossian heresy " seems to be taken over and used in a " disinfected " sense.

[1] Chadwick, loc. cit. p. 272.

[2] *Kritik der Epheser- und Kolosserbriefe* (Leipzig, 1872).

[3] *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Colossiens* (Neuchatel and Paris, 1950), pp. 83 ff.

[4] *Paulines and Pastorals* (London, 1964), pp. 65 ff.

[5] P. N. Harrison, op. cit. p. 75. According to Harrison, the original letter consisted of Col. i. 1-6a, i. 6c-9a, i. 26-ii. 2a, ii. 5, 6, iii. 2-13, iii. 17-iv. 18.

[6] *Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London, 1909), p. 52.

[7] Op. cit. pp. 70, 77.

(ii) As for the question whether Paul's imprisonment at the time of writing Colossians (Col. iv. 3, 18) was his Roman imprisonment or an earlier one, I have elsewhere[1] referred to two criteria which, in default of more explicit evidence, may help to determine the relative dating of the Pauline epistles. These criteria have to do with the development of Paul's thought in certain fields. Here it is all too easy to argue in circles, determining the development of his thought from the order of his epistles, and then determining the order of his epistles from the development of his thought. But if we can establish some definite progression of thought on the basis of those epistles which can be dated on independent evidence, we may be able sometimes to suggest where, along the line of progression thus established, the other epistles should most probably be placed. Even so, we must beware of imagining that we can assume anything in the nature of linear progression when we are dealing with a mind like Paul's.

The two criteria mentioned are Paul's progression of thought in relation to (*a*) the eschatological hope and (*b*) the church as the body of Christ.

The former of these criteria does not take us very far with Colossians. In this epistle there is none of the apocalyptic picture-language which we find in the Thessalonian epistles[2] and in some degree in 1 Corinthians xv. 51 ff., but the certainty of the parousia as the hope of the people of Christ is as clear as ever: "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col. iii. 4). This is very much in line with Romans viii. 18-25, where the revealing of the sons of God in glory is the consummation for which the universe waits with longing expectancy; and the portrayal of Christ in Colossians i. 20 as the one through whom God plans to reconcile the universe to himself is in line both with that passage in Romans and with Philippians ii. 10 f., where the divine purpose is said to be that every knee should bow in Jesus' name and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

[1] *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley (London, 1962), pp. 928 ff.

[2] E.g. 1 Thess. iv. 16 f.; 2 Thess. i. 7, ii. 3-12.

Much more decisive for the dating of Colossians is the other criterion—Paul's conception of the Church as the body of Christ. A comparison of the setting forth of this conception in Colossians with its setting forth in 1 Corinthians and Romans suggests that Colossians marks a more advanced stage in Paul's thinking on the subject than do 1 Corinthians and Romans. More will be said about this later in the paper; suffice it to note here that, whereas in 1 Corinthians and Romans the common life of Christians is compared to the interdependence of the various members of a body, the head (or a particular part of the head) being one member among others,[1] in Colossians (and Ephesians) Christ is viewed as the head of the body. This more advanced stage in Paul's thinking may reflect his reaction to the Colossian heresy; at any rate, it is difficult to date it during his Ephesian ministry, about the same time as 1 Corinthians and earlier than Romans. It follows that an Ephesian imprisonment is out of the question as the setting of Colossians; and if an Ephesian imprisonment is out, we have to think of either Caesarea or Rome. As between these two alternatives, Rome is the more probable on all counts.[2]

This argument would, of course, be rebutted if the theory of two stages in the composition of Colossians were accepted; P. N. Harrison, for example, assigns all the occurrences of "head" and "body" in the epistle to the interpolator, and is thus able to date the genuine nucleus in Paul's Ephesian ministry, "during a brief period of house arrest by friendly Asiarchs (Acts xix. 31), to keep Paul out of the reach of fanatical Jews, and avert a riot".[3] But the bibliographical improbability of this theory is such that it could be favourably considered only if powerful evidence were forthcoming in its support—and for such evidence we seek in vain.[4]

[1] Cf. 1 Cor. xii. 16-21.

[2] Rome was a more natural place than Caesarea for Paul to receive visitors from all parts and have news of his converts in the Aegean world. If Ephesus is excluded as the place of origin for Colossians, it is excluded for Philemon by the same token (see BULLETIN, xlviii (1965-6), 85 ff.); in that case Rome must be adjudged much more probable than Caesarea as the place where Onesimus met Paul.

[3] *Paulines and Pastorals*, p. 75.

[4] It is not easy to decide why the genuine "nucleus" of Colossians should have been written at all.

III

We have no formal exposition of the Colossian heresy; its character must be inferred from the counter-argument of our epistle.

Basically the heresy was Jewish. This is evident from the part played in it by legal ordinances, circumcision, food regulations, the sabbath, new moon and other prescriptions of the Jewish calendar. But it was not the more straightforward Judaism[1] against which the churches of Galatia had to be put on their guard. That Judaism was probably introduced into the Galatian churches by emissaries from Judaea; the Colossian heresy was more probably a Phrygian development in which a local variety of Judaism had been fused with a philosophy of non-Jewish origin—an early and simple form of gnosticism.

The synagogues of Phrygia appear to have been peculiarly exposed to the influence of Hellenistic speculation and consequent tendencies to religious syncretism.[2] When the gospel was introduced to the region, a Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism would find little difficulty in expanding and modifying itself sufficiently to fit the general framework of the Christian story, and the result would be something not unlike the Colossian heresy as we can reconstruct it from Paul's reply to it.

In this heresy a special place was apparently given to angels, as agents both in creation and in the giving of the law.

As for the angelic agency in creation, one form of this belief appears in Philo, as Professor Chadwick has reminded us in his Manson Memorial Lecture for 1965.[3] Another form seems to be attested by Justin Martyr, who refers to certain Jewish teachers who held that the words " let us make man " (Gen. i. 26)

[1] " More straightforward " than the Judaism of the Colossian heresy, but not absolutely straightforward Judaism, if the references to the στοιχεῖα in Gal. iv. 3, 9, are any guide. Cf. J. H. Ropes, *The Singular Problem of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929).

[2] The statement sometimes quoted in this connection from *TB Shabbath* 147 b, to the effect that the wines and baths of Phrygia had separated the ten tribes from their fellow-Israelites, is of doubtful relevance; the location of *Prugitha* is uncertain, but it may have been a place in Palestine.

[3] See p. 303, *infra*.

and " as one of us " (Gen. iii. 22) imply " that God spoke to angels, or that the human frame was the workmanship of angels " —whereas Justin held that the plural pronoun " us " denoted the Father and the Son.[1] We may compare the statement in the *Treatise on the Three Natures*, discovered among the Nag Hammadi texts: " Some [Jewish sects] say that God is the creator of that which exists; others say that he created through his angels."[2]

The angelic agency in the giving of the law is mentioned by three distinct New Testament writers (cf. Acts vii. 53; Gal. iii. 19; Heb. ii. 2); it is attested in contemporary Jewish literature, as well as earlier in the Book of Jubilees and later in rabbinical commentaries.[3] In the Colossian heresy the keeping of the law was regarded as a tribute of obedience due to those angels, and the breaking of the law incurred their displeasure and brought the law-breaker into debt and bondage to them. Hence they must be placated not only by the legal observances of traditional Judaism but in addition by a rigorous asceticism.

The angels through whom the law was given are described as " elemental beings " (στοιχεῖα), a term already used in the same sense in Galatians iv. 3, 9. But they are not only elemental beings but dominant ones as well—principalities and powers, lords of the planetary spheres, sharers in the divine plenitude (πλήρωμα) and intermediaries between heaven and earth. Since they controlled the lines of communication between God and man, all revelation from God to man and all worship from man to God could reach its goal only by their mediation and with their permission. Christ himself, it was evidently held, had to submit to their authority on his way from heaven to earth, if not indeed also on his way back from earth to heaven.

[1] Justin, *Dial.*, 62.

[2] See G. Quispel's account in *The Jung Codex*, ed. F. L. Cross (London, 1955), p. 62. He ascribes the treatise to Heracleon. Cf. also *Bereshith Rabba* on Gen. i. 26: " When Moses came to the words, ' Let us make man ', he said, ' Lord of the world! What an opportunity is thus given to the heretics to open their mouths! ' He answered: ' Write! Who wishes to go astray can go astray.' "

[3] Cf. Jub., i. 29; *Test. Dan.*, vi. 2; Philo, *Somn.*, i. 141 ff.; Josephus, *Ant.*, xv. 136; *Sifre* Num., 102 (on Num. xii. 5); *Mekhilta* on Exod. xx. 18; *Pesiqta rabbati*, 21.

All this was presented as a form of advanced teaching for a spiritual élite. The Christians of Colossae were urged to go in for this progressive wisdom and knowledge (γνῶσις), to explore the deeper mysteries by a series of successive initiations until they attained perfection (τελείωσις). Christian baptism was but a preliminary initiation; those who wished to proceed farther along the path of truth must put off all material elements by pursuing an ascetic regimen until at last they became citizens of the spiritual world, the realm of light.

Bishop Lightfoot, in his commentary on Colossians and Philemon (1875), traced this species of Judaizing *gnosis* back to the Essenes,[1] to whom he devoted three dissertations at the end of the commentary,[2] thus reverting to a subject which he had already broached ten years earlier in his dissertation on "St. Paul and the Three" in his commentary on Galatians.[3]

Quite apart from the relevance of his dissertations on the Essenes to the theme of Colossians, Lightfoot shows his characteristic sobriety and accuracy of scholarship in his description of the Essenes and their doctrines—as may be seen on the one hand by the contrast between his account and that of C. D. Ginsburg's essay on *The Essenes, their History and Doctrines*, published in 1864,[4] and now on the other hand in the light of the vastly increased knowledge of the Essenes or a related group available to us from the Qumran texts. In the light of these texts, too, Lightfoot's further thesis of a strong Essene element in Ebionitism is reinforced.[5]

In relating the Colossian heresy to the Essenes Lightfoot argues (i) that Essene Judaism was "gnostic", characterized by

[1] J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London, 1875), pp. 73 ff.

[2] "The Name Essene" (pp. 349 ff.); "Origin and Affinities of the Essenes" (pp. 355 ff.); "Essenism and Christianity" (pp. 397 ff.).

[3] *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London, 1865), pp. 292 ff.

[4] Reprinted with his treatise *The Kabbalah* in one volume (London, 1955).

[5] Cf. O. Cullmann, "Die neuentdeckten Qumran-Texte und das Judenchristentum der Pseudoclementinen", in *Neutestamentliche Studien für R. Bultmann* (Berlin, 1954), pp. 35 ff.; "The Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the Beginnings of Christianity", in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl (London, 1958), pp. 18 ff.; H. J. Schoeps, *Urgemeinde, Judenchristentum, Gnosis* (Tübingen, 1956), pp. 69 ff.

the intellectual exclusiveness and speculative tenets of gnosticism; (ii) that this type of Jewish thought and practice had established itself in that area of Asia Minor in the Apostolic Age; (iii) that the Colossian heresy was a brand of gnostic Judaism, because (*a*) it was clearly Jewish in its basis and (*b*) it was marked by several distinctive features of gnosticism: an intellectual élite (which insisted on σοφία, γνῶσις, σύνεσις, etc.), cosmogonic speculation (with emphasis on angelic mediation, the πλήρωμα, etc.), asceticism and calendrical regulations.[1]

More recently many of these features reappear in a catalogue of specific points of contact between the Qumran texts and the Colossian heresy.[2] Professor W. D. Davies, for example, enumerates among these points of contact features of phraseology,[3] calendrical niceties, sabbath regulations, food distinctions, asceticism, and emphasis on wisdom and knowledge,[4] involving a special understanding of the world, of angelology, of the "spirit of truth" and the "spirit of error", and so forth.

Even so, we cannot without more ado identify the Colossian heresy as a variety of Essenism or of the Qumran doctrine. For one thing, we miss in the Epistle to the Colossians any reference to an insistence on ceremonial washings, which appear to have played an important part among the Essenes in general and at Qumran in particular. When baptism is mentioned in Colossians, it is mentioned not as the true counterpart to heretical ablutions but in connection with the "circumcision made without hands"

[1] *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 73 ff.

[2] Cf. W. D. Davies, "Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Flesh and Spirit", in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl, pp. 157 ff., especially pp. 166 ff.

[3] E.g. "his body of flesh", attested in Col. i. 22 (τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, cf. Col. ii. 11) and in 1QpHab. ix. 2 (*bigewiyyath besaro*).

[4] With Col. ii. 18 (ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων) Professor Davies compares the description in 1QM x. 10 ff. of

> "the people of the saints of the covenant
> instructed in the laws and learned in wisdom,
> who have heard the voice of Majesty
> and have seen the angels of holiness,
> whose ears have been unstopped,
> and who have heard profound things."

(Col. ii. 11 f.)—perhaps by way of showing that the literal rite c circumcision has been superseded by the work of Chris Instead, therefore, of talking of specifically Essene influence i the Colossian heresy, it might be better to use the wider ter recently popularized by Principal Matthew Black and talk of th influence of "nonconformist Judaism" or "Jewish non conformity".[1]

Behind Colossians, and some other areas of New Testamen literature, several scholars have discerned a gnostic myth o Iranian origin which they believe to have been current in th Near East around the time when Christianity first appeared. The reflection of this myth in a New Testament document i usually sufficient to stamp it as post-apostolic—sufficien especially, if the document in question belongs to the *corpu Paulinum*, to stamp it as non-Pauline or at least deutero-Pauline One distinctive feature of this myth is the association or identifi cation of Primal Man with the Redeemer-Revealer who come from the realm of light to liberate exiles from that realm who hav been imprisoned in material bodies in the lower world of darkness by imparting to them the knowledge of the truth. Much of th material on the basis of which this myth has been reconstructed— especially Mandaean and Manichaean literature—is later than the apostolic age, and is at least as likely to have been influenced by the New Testament as to have exercised an influence upon it. It is possible to defend the thesis that Primal Man and the Redeemer-Revealer are nowhere brought together in gnosticism except under the influence of the gospel, and one might even hazard the guess that one of the earliest attempts to re-state the gospel in terms of such a gnostic myth can be detected in the Colossian heresy. But the substantiation of this guess (if it is capable of being substantiated) is a task that must be undertaken on another occasion.

[1] M. Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (London, 1961), p. 166.

[2] Cf. in particular R. Reitzenstein, *Das Iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (Bonn, 1921); for the application to the New Testament, especially Colossians and Ephesians, cf. H. Schlier, *Christus und die Kirche im Epheserbrief* (Tübingen, 1930); E. Käsemann, *Leib und Leib Christi* (Tübingen, 1933); R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, E.T. i (London, 1952), 164 ff., ii (1955), 133 ff., 149 ff.

IV

The whole elaborate structure of the Colossian heresy is condemned by Paul as so much specious make-believe. Far from representing a more advanced grade of religious truth than that proclaimed in the apostolic preaching, it was at every point inconsistent with that preaching. A system in which the planetary powers played so prominent a part must needs enthrone fate in place of God. If we may judge by the analogy of parallel systems, Christ was probably held to have relinquished successive portions of his authority to the planetary powers as he passed through their spheres on his way to earth, and if (as the Colossian heresy seems to have taught) it was these powers that made him suffer on the cross, that would be regarded as conclusive proof of their superiority to him.

Paul's reply to this "human tradition" (Col. ii. 8) is to set over against it the tradition of Christ—not merely the tradition which stems from the teaching of Christ but the tradition which finds its embodiment in him.[1] Christ, he says, is the image of God, the one who incorporates the plenitude of the divine essence, so that the elemental spirits have no share in it at all. And those who are members of Christ realize their plenitude in him; they need not seek, for they cannot find, perfection anywhere else. It is in Christ that the totality of wisdom and knowledge is concentrated and made available to his people—not to an élite only, but to all. And he is the sole mediator between God and mankind.

Far from the angels playing a part in creation, Christ is the one through whom all things were created, including the principalities and powers who figured so prominently in the Colossian heresy. Why should people who were united by faith with the creator of these powers think it necessary to pay them tribute? Again, far from these powers demonstrating their superiority to Christ, his death and resurrection reveal him as their conqueror. When on the cross they flung themselves upon him with hostile intent, he not only repelled their attack but turned the cross into the

[1] Cf. O. Cullmann, "The Tradition", in *The Early Church* (London, 1956), pp. 55 ff.

triumphal chariot before which he drove them as his vanquished foes.[1] Why then should those who through faith-union with him shared his death and resurrection go on serving those elemental spirits whom Christ had conquered? The Colossian heresy, with all its taboos, was no syllabus of advanced wisdom; it bore all the marks of immaturity. Why should those who had come of age in Christ go back to the apron-strings of infancy? Why should those whom Christ had set free submit to this yoke of bondage?

In his reply to the Colossian heresy, Paul develops the doctrine of the cosmic Christ more fully than in his other epistles. Adumbrations of it certainly appear in some of his other epistles. To Paul there was "one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. viii. 6); this Christ was "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. i. 24), and God through the Spirit had revealed to his people that hidden wisdom, "decreed before the ages for our glorification" (1 Cor. ii. 7), through ignorance of which the cosmic powers[2] had crucified the Lord of glory and thus accomplished their own overthrow (1 Cor. ii. 6-10). And the liberation from such hostile forces procured by Christ in his death was not to be restricted to his people alone, but would in due course reach out to the whole cosmos (Rom. viii. 19-22). But what is suggested in passing in 1 Corinthians and Romans is expounded more fully and systematically in Colossians. (This, it may be added, is a further indication that Colossians is later than these two epistles.)

The language in which Paul portrays Christ as the one in whom and for whom the universe was created, and in whom all things hold together, is generally recognized nowadays to be based on an early Christian hymn or confession in which Christ is celebrated as the Divine Wisdom. Into the form-analysis of Colossians i. 15-20 I will not enter here; I should mention, however, that my colleague Dr. Ralph P. Martin, who has made a special study of early Christian *carmina*, has undertaken a detailed examination of this passage.[3]

[1] Col. ii. 15.

[2] The ἄρχοντες τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, probably identical with the κοσμοκράτορες of Eph. vi. 12. For Paul's understanding of them see p. 285.

[3] A portion of this as yet unpublished work, "An Early Christian Hymn (Col. 1: 15-20)", appeared in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, xxxvi (1964), 195 ff.

A Wisdom Christology can be traced in various strands of first-century Christianity, the most notable evidence of it in the New Testament being Colossians i. 15-17, John i. 1-3 and Hebrews i. 1-3, three mutually independent passages. The root of this Christology, on which Paul and the Fourth Evangelist and the writer to the Hebrews alike drew, must be primitive indeed; and in view of the presence of what form critics call "Wisdom sayings" among the *verba Christi* in the Synoptic Gospels, it is not too hazardous to suggest that Christ's occasional speaking in the rôle of Divine Wisdom is a major root of the Wisdom Christology of the Apostolic Age.

One Old Testament passage in particular has influenced those New Testament contexts in which Christ, as the Wisdom of God, is said to have created all things, and that is Proverbs viii. 22 ff., where Wisdom personified speaks in the first person as the beginning of God's way, his darling first-born child and his assessor when he created the world. The wording of this passage underlies the description of Christ in Colossians i. 15 as "the first-born of all creation" and in Colossians i. 18 as "the beginning" (ἀρχή). Rabbinical exegesis adduced the word "beginning" in Proverbs viii. 22—"the beginning (Heb. *rēshīth*) of his way"—to explain the "beginning" (Heb. *rēshīth*) of Genesis i. 1; that is to say, the "beginning" in which God created heaven and earth was Wisdom. This sufficiently explains the curious use of the preposition ἐν in Colossians i. 16a ("in him were all things created") where we might have expected the διά of agency; the "in" is the "in" of Genesis i. 1: if "in the beginning God created heaven and earth", Christ, as the Wisdom of God, is the beginning "in" whom all things were created.[1]

But the hymn of Colossians i. 15-20 celebrates Christ not only as head of the old creation but as head of the new creation; this is the subject of the second strophe, beginning in verse 18.

Cf. J. M. Robinson's suggestion that Col. ii. 9-15 might be regarded as "a baptismal homily on the anti-gnostic kerygmatic hymn in Col. 1: 15-20" (*Interpretation*, x (1956), 349). The incorporation of such liturgical elements should be given due weight when the authorship of such a document as Colossians is being considered in the light of statistical analysis, but this is not always done.

[1] Cf. C. F. Burney, "Christ as the ἀρχή of Creation", *JTS.*, xxvii (1925-6), 160 ff.

In the new creation, too, Christ is the " beginning ", not this time as the " first-born of all creation " but as " first-born from the dead "—i.e. by resurrection.[1] If in relation to the old creation he is " head " of every principality and power (Col. ii. 10) in the sense of being their ruler, in relation to the new creation he is " head " of his body the church, not simply in the sense of ruler but in the sense that he is so vitally united with his people that the life which they now live is derived from the life which he lives as first-born from the dead. The cosmos is not called his body, and to envisage an earlier form of the hymn in which the cosmos, and not the church, was so called is an unwarranted exercise of the imagination.[2]

Whatever form the hymn originally had, the description of Christ as " the head of the body, the church " (Col. i. 18) is most probably Pauline. All our evidence points to Paul as the originator of this way of expressing the church's vital unity with the church's Lord, " the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God " (Col. ii. 19). This, as we have seen, marks an advance on the use of this terminology in 1 Corinthians and Romans, where the church is " the body of Christ " (1 Cor. xii. 27) or " one body in Christ " (Rom. xii. 5), but Christ is not spoken of as the church's head.

A great variety of theories have been advanced regarding the source of the conception of the church as the body of Christ. Jewish,[3] Gnostic[4] and Stoic[5] antecedents have been suggested. But most probably we have to do with a survival of the Hebrew concept of corporate personality.[6] Christ and his people are so conjoined that on occasion Christ and his people together can

[1] Cf. Rev. i. 5.

[2] Cf. W. L. Knox's argument that under the influence of Hellenism Paul moved from apocalyptic to cosmogony, from Christ as omega to Christ as alpha (*St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 90 ff.).

[3] Cf. W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London, 1948), pp. 53 ff.

[4] Cf. H. Schlier, *Christus und die Kirche im Epheserbrief* (Tübingen, 1930); E. Käsemann, *Leib und Leib Christi* (Tübingen, 1933).

[5] Cf. W. L. Knox, op. cit. pp. 160 ff.

[6] Cf. A. Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, E.T. (London, 1931), *passim*; E. Best, *One Body in Christ* (London, 1955), pp. 93 ff., 203 ff.

be called " Christ ".[1] This is not the only phase of Paul's thought where oscillation between individual and corporate personality can be traced; but this phase was probably impressed indelibly on his mind when on the Damascus road he heard the challenge of the voice from heaven: " Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? " (Acts ix. 4). Not that Paul immediately interpreted these words in terms of head and body, as Augustine later did;[2] but the truth which they expressed is the truth which Paul expresses in Colossians (and Ephesians) when he speaks of the church as the body of Christ, drawing life and all other resources from him who is her head.

The advance from the language of simile in 1 Corinthians and Romans to what has been called the ontological and realistic language[3] of Colossians and Ephesians may have been stimulated by Paul's consideration of the issues involved in the Colossian heresy. Far from being subject to the principalities and powers, he argued, Christ was their ruler, their head, by the twofold claim of creation and conquest. But as he was head of the old creation, so by his resurrection from the dead he was head of the new creation too; and as Paul had already repeatedly spoken of the church as the body of Christ, Christ's headship over the church could readily be conceived as an organic relationship, in which Christ exercised the control over his people that the head of a body exercises over its various parts. In this way not only is the living fellowship between the members of the church brought out (as in the earlier epistles referred to) but so is the dependence of all the members on Christ for life and power, and his supremacy is vindicated against a system of thought which threatened to cast him down from his excellency. In consequence " body " is used in Colossians and Ephesians in correlation with " head " rather than (as in the earlier epistles) with " spirit "; but this is no valid argument against identity of authorship.

[1] Cf. 1 Cor. xii. 12.

[2] " Membris adhuc in terra positis caput in caelo clamabat " (*Sermons* 279, 1).

[3] Cf. E. L. Mascall, *Christ, the Christian and the Church* (London, 1946), p. 112; " it is not a mere metaphor, but the literal truth, that the Church is the Body of Christ " (op. cit., p. 161). I do not stay to inquire what is meant by " literal truth " in this last sentence.

V

" Christ crucified, . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God " (1 Cor. i. 23 f.), the message preached to the Corinthians, is the message which Paul proclaims as the answer to the Colossian heresy. How foolish it was to pay tribute to the angelic powers through whom the law was given, as though they controlled the way from God to man and back from man to God! That way was now controlled by Christ, who had subjugated these powers and reduced them to the status of " weak and beggarly elemental spirits " (Gal. iv. 9).

The lords of the planetary spheres may play but little part in the world-outlook of man today—although the number of readers of the popular press who accept the invitation to " plan with the planets " suggests that they perhaps play a larger part than we think. Yet man today is unprecedentedly aware of powerful and malignant forces in the universe which he does not hesitate to call " demonic ". He feels that they are operating against his welfare but that he is quite unable to master them, whether by individual strength or by united action. They may be Frankenstein monsters of his own creation; they may be subliminal horrors over which he has no conscious control. He knows himself to be involved in situations from which his moral sense recoils—but what can he do about them? If he and his fellows are puppets in the hand of a blind and unfriendly fate, what difference does it make whether they resist and be crushed immediately, or acquiesce and be crushed a little later?[1]

To this mood of frustration and despair Paul's answer would be his answer to the Colossian heresy. To be united to Christ, he would say, is to be liberated from the thraldom of demonic forces, to enjoy perfect freedom instead of being the playthings of fate.

Indeed, archaic as some of Paul's terminology is, his essential message is easily translated into the language of today. Whatever

[1] Cf. A. D. Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ* (London, 1951), p. 28; J. S. Stewart, " On a Neglected Emphasis in New Testament Theology ", *SJTh.*, iv (1951), 292 ff.; G. H. C. Macgregor, " Principalities and Powers ", *NTS.*, i (1954-5), 17 ff.

others might think, in his mind the principalities and powers were no longer the archons who governed the planetary spheres; he has " demythologized " them to stand for all the forces in the universe opposed to Christ and his people. Professor Bultmann points out that " in our day and generation, although we no longer think mythologically, we often speak of demonic powers which rule history, corrupting political and social life. Such language ", he continues, " is metaphorical, a figure of speech, but in it is expressed the knowledge, the insight, that the evil for which every man is responsible individually has nevertheless become a power which mysteriously enslaves every member of the human race."[1] I suggest that this knowledge, this insight, was present to Paul's mind and expressed by him in terms of the principalities and powers which, he affirmed, were unable to separate believers " from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord " (Rom. viii. 39).

[1] *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, E.T. (London, 1960), p. 21. Cf. the striking treatment of " Beliar " in H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic* (London, 1963), pp. 177 f. On the subject in general see also G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers* (Oxford, 1956); H. Schlier, *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament*, E.T. (Freiburg and London, 1961); E. G. Rupp, *Principalities and Powers* (London, 1964).