

Reconciliation and Forgiveness in the Letter to the Colossians

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I

INTRODUCTION

The Christian community at Colossae was personally unknown to Paul (2:1) at the time of his writing to it.¹ It is clear that he had learned of the success of Christian preaching only at second-hand (1:4, 9). Presumably this initial evangelism was undertaken by Epaphras who sends greetings (in a later part of the epistle) to the Colossian believers as "one of yourselves" (4:12) and he was evidently commissioned by Paul to be his spokesman and ambassador to the town of Colossae (1:7). It is Epaphras who has come from the congregation to visit Paul in his confinement and has brought news of the establishing of the church in that part of the Lycus valley (1:8).

Paul rejoices, in this letter, over the ready welcome which these people had given to the message of his colleague who had carried "the word of truth" (1:5). Part of their response was that they had "received Christ Jesus the Lord" (2:6) and had "come to fulness of life in him" (2:10). More specifically, they had understood the meaning of the grace of God (1:6, 7) as Epaphras' preaching announced to them the availability of God's offer to include them along with other Gentile peoples within the scope of his mercy (1:27). The consequence of this understanding of the "mystery" (1:26, 27) was that by their faith-response to the overture of God's truth in the gospel they had entered a new humanity in which all religious disadvantages and racial distinctions were done away (3: 10, 11). They had entered into the heritage of God's ancient and covenant people as his elect ones (3:12; cf. 1:26; 2:13) and they had come to share in the inheritance of the family of God, a company embracing men and angels (1:12 and possibly 1:26).

They had been rescued from the dark domain of evil powers and brought over to the kingdom of Christ (1:13). Included in that transference these men and women had known the freedom of deliverance

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from evil and evil forces as their sins were forgiven (1:14; 3:13) and they were reconciled to God (1:22). God had graciously accepted them as pardoned sinners (2:13) and had himself removed every impediment to their restoration to his favour (2:14). In particular, the demonic powers of angels and spiritual beings which held their lives captive in a web of superstitious dread were compelled to relinquish their grip, since God in Christ who was their liberator had already broken the power of these malign spiritual forces on the cross of Christ where he won a resounding victory over them at a time when it seemed he was their helpless prey (2:14, 15).

¹ The following essay makes certain assumptions regarding the authorship and provenance of the epistle. Some justification for these assumptions, with a bibliography of the current debate, will be found in the present writer's *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Exeter, 1972; Grand Rapids, 1973).

In that death of Jesus Christ, these Colossian believers had died to "the elemental spirits of the universe" (2:20); and in his resurrection triumph over them they too had a share (3:1), with its promise of liberty from all the enslavement and inhibitions they had previously known as pagan Gentiles in a society where demons and taboos kept people in a twilight of fear and uncertainty. Formerly they had lived in their society as "men of the world" (2:20) doomed under God's righteous sentence (3:6, 7) and held prisoner to evil passions and practices which had their origin in a mind at enmity with God (1:21). Now, they had experienced not only a forgiveness which cut off the entail of the past and gave them a fresh start, but a moral transformation which is likened to the imparting of a new nature (3:9, 10). This is both God's gift and an expression of his character demonstrated in Christ (3:10, 11).

The dramatic "moment" when this life-changing transference from the realm of evil to God's kingdom in the company of Christ's people took place is located in an act of renunciation, described as "putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ" (2:11; cf. 3:9). In the next breath, Paul proceeds to talk about baptism with its symbolic actions of burial and being raised out of the water (2:12). Then, as though to show that these actions have their counterpart in religious experience, he applies these baptismal motifs to the acts of God who both passes sentence of death on transgressors and vivifies them in a spiritual renewal so that they are lifted out of the realm of death into new life (2:13). The offending sentence of condemnation is obliterated, and the baptized Christian is brought by this faith-response-in-baptism to a new relationship with God and a new standing before him. The newly baptized neophyte has come to fulness of life in Christ (2:10) and has been enrolled in the congregation of God's people as a member of the "saints" (1:2) and given a part in one body," the church (3:15; cf. 1:18; 1:24), the new "Adam" (3:10).

From this cursory survey of the epistle to the Colossians the main lines of Paul's description of how new life came to the readers are fairly well drawn. We do not anticipate that there would be much quarrel among modern interpreters that Paul's writing adds up to this. It is different, however, when we ask about the situation at Colossae which

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occasioned the form and style as well as the specific content of the apostle's teaching. Our purpose is to examine two extended passages (1:12-23; 2:13-15) with a view to setting them against the background of their historical context (as far as we may determine it today) and in the light of the recent discussion of the redactional use Paul makes of traditional elements which putatively underlie the epistle.

II

1:1a-23: Christian Experience and the Hymn to Christ

"He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness" (v. 13) is a translation which, while it accurately conveys the thought of the writer, fails to bring out the syntactical connexion with the foregoing part of Paul's statement. Paul's sentence is participial (ὄς), referring back to the Father who has enabled his people to escape from their former sad condition as Gentiles and to take their appointed place among the saints who dwell in light (v. 12). "Appointed place" is a phrase which combines in translation two separate items: μερίς is a share or a part, and

κληρος a lot. These terms are often juxtaposed in the Old Testament, e.g. Deuteronomy 10:9, LXX: "Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers" (διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ ἔστιν τοῖς Λευίταις μερίς καὶ κληρος ἐν τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς αὐτῶν). The terms have an original reference to the apportionment of the land of Canaan (Deut. 32:9; Jos. 19:9),² but the thought is really a single one and relates to the tribes' occupancy of their promised inheritance. A spiritualized meaning of "appointed lot" is already found in the Old Testament (e.g. Ps. 15:5, LXX: "The Lord is the portion of my inheritance": κύριος ἡ μερίς της κληρονομίας μου); and this process of spiritualizing paves the way for the extended usages of the metaphor in the Qumran literature (e.g. 1 QS xi. 7 f.)³ and in Paul. The Qumran text is interesting because it throws some light on the Pauline allusion to "saints who dwell in light." The section from the Community Rule runs:

God has given them to His chosen ones
as an everlasting possession,
and has caused them to inherit
the lot of the Holy Ones.
He has joined their assembly
to the Sons of Heaven
to be a Council of the Community (Vermes' translation)⁴

As E. Lohse points out, in this citation the phrases, "Holy Ones" and the Sons of Heaven" are in parallelism; and this fact settles the issue of the

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meaning of the former term. The "holy ones" are the angels. If this is the correct background of the Pauline passage, the meaning of verse 12 will be: God the Father has authorized you as his "holy ones" (1:2) to share in a heavenly life in company with the angels who dwell in light. And this translation has bearing on the verse immediately following, because strictly this too continues the same thought. The same God who is praised for his election of his people and his appointment of believers to their eternal destiny also delivered them from their fate in bondage to satanic powers and placed them in the domain of his beloved Son (v. 13). The church's confidence in being already part of the heavenly realm is renewed in a later part of the letter (3:1-4), and the church's possession of a title to the world of angels (implied also in the contrast of 1:26 f.) prepares the ground for Paul's later and more explicit polemic against the false teaching at Colossae which venerated the angels as mediators (2:18).

Paul's emphasis on the present reality of the Christians' share in the heavenly world leads him to expound a doctrine of deliverance and reconciliation. At verse 13 the Old Testament-Qumranic background is again much in evidence. "Deliverance" (ῥύεσθαι) is exactly the connotation of the language used of Israel's salvation from the hands of the Egyptians (Ex. 6:6; 14:30; Jud. 6:9, 13) as a prelude to their possession of the land as their inheritance. The Qumran hymns extol God as the deliverer of the faithful from their enemies (I QH ii. 35; iii. 19). The enemy in verse 13 is "the power of darkness", which is a Hebraic expression to be understood as "the domain of evil powers" ; it is parallel with the Qumran teaching on the

² Further examples of the way in which the two terms are combined are given by W. Foerster, *TDNT* III, pp. 759-61.

³ For this material see E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, 19-71), pp. 35 f.

⁴ G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 93.

"dominion of Belial" (I QS i. 18, 23 f.; ii. 19; 1 QM xiv. 9; xvii 5 f.) which is described as the dominion of his wickedness which inflicts persecution on the children of righteousness (I QS iii. 22 f.). This time of suffering for the saints is called the "dominion of falsehood" (I QS iv. 19) where the Angel of Darkness is in command. But at length deliverance will come for "the sons of light", God's holy ones (I QS i. 9; ii. 16; xi. 7 f.).

The contrast between darkness and light is intended, in Paul's writing (cf. Acts 26:18), to point to the issues of bondage to satanic or demonic powers and the freedom which Christians have known within the rule of Christ, God's Son. The two verbs which dramatically describe the release and the new allegiance and freedom are: *ῥύεσθαι* (to set free) and *μεθιστῆναι* (to transfer). Israel had been delivered from her Egyptian slavery and transplanted in the land of Canaan. There may be another historical allusion in Paul's mind as he writes to the churches of the Lycus valley (2:1; 4:16). Antiochus III in the early part of the second century BC had brought several thousand Jews from Mesopotamia and Babylon and settled them in Lydia and Phrygia (Josephus, *Ant.* xii. 149). But the metaphor of servitude and release, followed by a newly found liberty,

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is common enough. The Qumran community rejoiced in its deliverance from its enemies and its place in the company of the children of light.

There is one final part of the Christian's experience to which Paul calls attention. As a climax in verse 14 he announces, though again in a relative clause, that in Christ "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins". Membership of the elect community which is nothing else than passing under the present lordship of Jesus Christ is made possible by the redeeming power of God. Once more there are anticipations of this thought in the Old Testament and Qumran traditions in spite of the lack of attestation of the noun *ἀπολύτρωσις* (redemption) in biblical Greek.⁵ It is true that in the Colossians text the cost or the price of the redemption is not alluded to, but the connexion of thought with the foregoing probably requires us to supply the meaning of the payment of a ransom in order that the captives held by the power of evil might be set free (v. 13).⁶

Paul's use of the word redemption usually contains an eschatological dimension, but this is not present here. Rather, the promise is that redemption is a present experience within the church's fellowship and under the regime of Christ. Its content is crisply defined as consisting in the forgiveness of sins. A reason may be sought for this change of emphasis; and it is this enquiry which will guide us to the heart of the issue in the exegesis of 1:13-23.

⁵ Cf. L. L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London, 1955). p. 37; F. Büchsel, *TDNT* IV, p. 352, who refers to the sole LXX example of the word in Dan. 4:34 (*καὶ ἐπὶ συντελείᾳ τῶν ἔτων ὁ χρόνος μου τῆς ἀπολύτρωσεως ἦλθε*) and concludes that, since this text refers to Nebuchadnezzar's restoration from this madness, "this verse shows that there does not have to be a ransom". But Morris adds a corrective to this conclusion (*op. cit.*, pp. 11, 25, 39) in the light of the context of Daniel's exhortation to the king to "redeem all his iniquities with almsgiving" (4:27).

⁶ So J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (London, 1897), *ad loc.* Cf. L. L. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

Recent study of the passage 1:15-20 has reached a fairly settled consensus, especially regarding the literary genre and form of the verses.⁷ E. Käsemann speaks for most modern interpreters: "The hymnic character of Col. 1: 15-20 has long been recognized and generally acknowledged."⁸ Less agreement is forthcoming on the matters of the background and meaning of the hymn; and even more problematical is the issue of Paul's redaction of an independently existing hymn written as an aretology in praise of the cosmic Lord.⁹ There are two concerns which have dominated

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current study, viz. an endeavour to set the text into a versified pattern which is as nearly symmetrical as possible, and an interest in isolating a pre-Pauline (i.e. precanonical) hymn which Paul has taken over and adapted to his use in the letter to the Colossians.¹⁰ Significantly these two, concerns bear upon each other and inter-penetrate. Because they are so intimately related, any solution to the problems of the passage which can offer help in both areas simultaneously is more likely to be correct than any proposal which deals with only one matter of the tandem partnership. Our purpose is to attack the problem on this double front. First, we shall see if it is possible to detect a pre-Pauline hymn of recognizably symmetrical form; and then, we try to suggest why the apostle may have been driven to break the symmetry by his additional material which formerly had to be removed from the present text in order to secure a neat scheme of versification.

The structure of the pre-Pauline traditional composition¹¹

⁷ I may refer to an article, "An Early Christian Hymn (Col. 1:15-20)", *EQ* 36, 4 (1964), pp. 195-205 [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/early-christian-hymn_martin.pdf] for some discussion and bibliography. For a useful summary of the more recent debate, see J. G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption* (Leiden, 1971) pp. 94-114.

⁸ E. Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy", *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London, 1964), p. 149.

⁹ Or, in a more complex formulation, the issue is what is the paraenetic purpose of the post-Pauline author of the epistle in the use he makes of a gnostic hymn which later became transformed into a baptismal homology? This is the question which Käsemann poses regarding the genesis and application of the Christ-hymn. I have considered this theory briefly in *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christians Liberty*, pp. 40 ff. and for further criticism based on Käsemann's acceptance of some concepts which are patently non-gnostic in the original form of the hymn, see E. Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 45, 60, n. 205. In particular, E. Schweizer is quoted (*TDNT* VII, 1075, n. 474): "Reconciliation of the material world with heaven is the precise opp[osite] of the Gnostic hope."

¹⁰ For the latest discussion of the issues involved in the principle of pre-Pauline tradition and a Pauline redaction, see B. Vawter, "The Colossians Hymn and the Principle of Redaction", *CBQ* 33 (1971), pp. 62-81. His analysis of the formal structure of the hymn and its pre-Pauline theology is, however, obfuscated by his insistence (following Käsemann, *loc. cit.*, p. 153) that the writer of the epistle already found 1:13, 14 connected with the hymn and that therefore the redaction of the hymn had already taken place before the author of Colossians took it over. This assumption which destroys all semblance of symmetrical form in the Urtext makes it possible for Vawter to regard the redactional changes as "slight" and not substantive (*loc. cit.*, p. 76).

¹¹ This section is based on E. Schweizer's work: "Die Kirche als Leib Christi in den paulinischen Antilegomena", *ThLZ* 86 (1961), cols. 241-56 = *Neotestamentica* (Zürich/Stuttgart, 1963), pp. 293-316. Cf. his essay, "The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ," *Neotestamentica*, pp. 317-29; and most recently "Kolosser 1, 15-20", *Beiträge zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments. Neutestamentliche Aufsätze* (1955-1970). (Zurich, 1970), pp. 113-45. There is a handy summary of Schweizer's contributions in H. J. Gabathuler, *Jesus Christus. Haupt der Kirche-Haupt der Welt* (Zürich, 1965), pp. 110-18.

Strophe I

Verses 15, 16

| | |
|--|--|
| ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως; ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα, ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτίσται | He is the image of the invisible God the firstborn of all creation; For in him all things were created in heaven and on earth. All things were created through him and for him. |
|--|--|

This stanza consists of three lines which hail the cosmic Christ as Lord of creation. He is the one who is uniquely related to God as his manifest

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presence (εἰκὼν); he holds the primary over all the orders of creation. He stands over against God's handiwork as the agent through whom all the forces of the universe came into being; indeed, he is creation's sovereign Lord (πρωτότοκος). He also is the rightful "soul" or sphere in which the world exists and he is the one who guides its destiny. Creation is both "in him" and "for him", so that he becomes the key to explain all that is. The stanza declares that "it is all there with Christ in view".¹²

Strophe II

Verses 17, 18a

| | |
|--|---|
| [καὶ] αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν; [καὶ] αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος. | He is before all things, And in him all things hold together; He is the head of the body. |
|--|---|

The first line partly recapitulates the previous stanza with its emphasis on his pre-existent activity. Then, the hymn's thought proceeds with the assertion that the same cosmic Lord is the unifying principle which establishes the units of the cosmos and holds the particles of matter together. This is the sense of the verb συνέστηκεν.¹³ As the centre around which all things revolve and which gives coherence to the whole creation, he is the head or ruler of the cosmic body.

Strophe III

Verses 18b-20

| | |
|--|--|
| ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι | He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell; ¹⁴ |
|--|--|

¹² A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting Paul's Gospel* (London, 1954), p. 60.

¹³ See the references to Plato, Philo and Sirach supplied by Lohse, *ad loc.* He concludes in regard to Philo: "The divine Logos, indeed God himself, is the unifying bond which includes all things and holds them together."

¹⁴ The subject of the verb εὐδόκησεν is disputed. To the discussion of C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 70 f. may now be added G. Munderlein, "Die Erwählung durch das Pleroma. Bemerkungen zu Kol. I. 9," *NTS* 8 (1962), pp. 264-76 and following him J. G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption*, pp. 99 f., 108 for whom the implicit subject is the Spirit. See the full survey in N.

Ralph P. Martin, "Reconciliation and Forgiveness in the Letter to the Colossians," Robert Banks, ed., *Reconciliation and Hope. New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday*. Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1974. pp. 104-124.

καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι
τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν.

And through him to reconcile to
himself all things.

The final section celebrates the triumph of the cosmic Lord who embodies the divine "fulness" (πλήρωμα). God's plan is executed through him who as the risen one marks a new beginning of world history. He also effects God's design to bring the universe into harmony with the divine purpose (reconciliation).

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Paul's redaction

It will be clear that certain parts of the received text in our Bibles have been omitted from the above reconstruction of the verses. By these omissions it is possible to secure a hymn of noticeable symmetry, with each stanza consisting of three lines and with a discernible rhythmical pattern which is partly accounted for by the use of special rhetorical devices.¹⁵ If this is soundly based, it should be possible to inspect the lines and phrases which were left out and to see whether Paul had a special reason for wishing to insert them into a putatively original hymn. In this view, Paul has supplemented the hymn which was in circulation prior to his writing to the Colossians. He has taken over this already existing *Vorlage* and edited it by the addition of extra lines.

These extra phrases are put in as Paul wished to stress points which this extant piece of Christian liturgy, conceivably used at baptism to celebrate Christ as cosmic Lord world ruler

Kehl, *Der Christushymnus im Kolosserbrief* (Stuttgart, 1967), pp. 110-25. The translation given above follows E. Schweizer, *Neotestamentica*, p. 294, n. 3.

¹⁵ Correspondences in the lines of the strophes are most obviously seen by comparing strophes I and III:

| | |
|---|--|
| Who is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; | Who is the beginning, the first born from the dead; |
| For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth. | For in him all the fulness willed to dwell; |
| All things through him and to him were created. | And through him to reconcile all things to him. |

These correspondences in the lines are not accidental, but are designed to bring out the main emphases in the two orders of creation and redemption. The use of the relative pronouns (ὅς), the repetition of πρωτότοκος (verses 15b and 18b) and ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ (in verses 16a and 19) and the frequent mention of "all" (i.e. Norden's *Allmachtsformel: Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Berlin, 1913), pp. 240 f.) are all features which betray a carefully composed Urtext. See J. M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20," *JBL* 76 (1957), p. 286.

The most revealing example of a rhetorical form is the presence of chiasmus in verses 16c and 20:

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| a τὰ πάντα | b καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ |
| b δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ | a τὰ πάντα |

For an attempt to carry through a systematic chiastic analysis, see E. Bammel, "Versuch zu Col. 1:15-20," *ZNTW* 52 (1961), pp. 88-95; and for a detailed comment on this attempt, see H. J. Gabathuler, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-21.

On a tripartite division of the text into three stanzas, with strophes I and III covering the aspects of creation and redemption, it is a problem to know how to treat strophe II (verses 17, 18a), as Gabathuler notes (*op. cit.*, p. 128). One proposal would be to take this Mittelstrophe as proclaiming Christ's work of preservation (based on the line τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν) with line 1 recapitulating the first strophe and line 3 looking forward to his reconciling work as head of the cosmic body. It is thus a Scharnierstrophe uniting what has gone before and what is to follow in the acclamation of the cosmic Christ.

and giver of new life to the world, did not do.¹⁶ Or else he wished to correct some misplaced emphases in the original version of the hymn.¹⁷ This emendation was made, not by striking

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out the offending parts but by juxtaposing some corrective lines or sentences, whose presence is known most obviously by the way in which they break the poetic structure of the piece as a whole.

Of all the hypothetical additions supplied by Paul's hand our attention is concentrated on two specimens.¹⁸ At verse 18a he has added (in a way whose grammatical form clearly betrays the fact that it is an after-thought) the words: "the church" to the affirmation, "He is the head of the body." This suggestion is no speculation, since we have in 1:24 an illustration of the way Paul would normally write the phrase, "his body, that is, the church" and it is quite different in 1:18. Obviously, at verse 18a, the words τῆς ἐκκλησίας are an explanatory addendum.¹⁹ But the addition has drastically and dramatically altered the meaning of the entire sentence and all that follows. In its pristine form, the line declared that Christ was the head of the body of the universe. By this additional gloss Paul has effected a transformation of meaning, and turned a cosmological statement into an ecclesiological/eschatological one. This turns the course of the subsequent stanza from being a continuation of Christ's authority in the universe into a new channel; and it boldly appropriates the statements about Christ the cosmocrat so that now, in Paul's revision, they do service in the interests of Christ's authority in the church. A piece of cosmic aretology in celebration of Christ the world ruler has been adapted by Paul and transformed into a *carmen Christi* extolling him as redeemer of his people and God's reconciling agent.

The second example makes the point even sharper. At verse 20 Christ's achievement is described as one in which God was pleased to reconcile (ἀποκαταλλάττει) all things to himself. At the end of the stanza at a point far removed from its antecedent (τὰ πάντα) comes an explanatory phrase, "whether on earth or in heaven." This unusual placing of the gloss is one more sign that it is Paul's thought. He has appended it in order to amplify the scope of "the All" which is the object of God's redeeming enterprise. Paul's annotation makes it plain that no part of the cosmos stands outside the compass of the divine reconciling work.

¹⁶ As in the case of the *carmen Christi* in Phil. 2:6-11 where most modern commentators trace the hand of Paul in the insertion of the phrase θανφτου δὲ σταυροῦ in verse 8.

¹⁷ As in the case of the pre-Pauline Romans 3:24, 25 which *ex-hypothesi* represents a Jewish Christian formulation, modified by Paul's addition of verse 26 in order to bring it into line with this theological position. See E. Käsemann, "Zum Verständnis vom Römer 3:24-26", *ZNTW* 43-44 (1950-51). pp. 150-54. For discussions of this theory, see A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors*² (London, 1961), pp. 120-22, and J. Reumann, "The Gospel of the Righteousness of God," *Interp* 20 (1966), pp. 432-52.

¹⁸ These two parts of the text which appear as Paul's addenda to the *Vorlage* are most commonly accepted as such even by those scholars who are sceptical of the other Pauline additions (suggested by J. M. Robinson and E. Schweizer, among others). See E. Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy", pp. 151 f.; Lohse, *Colossians*, p. 45 and Vawter, *loc. cit.*, p. 75. The exception is that these scholars are anxious to retain the verb εἰρηνοποιήσας in verse 20c as part of the *Urtext*, as well as to treat the phrase εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς in the same way.

¹⁹ To be sure, this submission ought not to be taken as axiomatic since it creates a problem seen by Kehl, *op. cit.*, p. 41, viz. how can a universe which already is united to Christ as its head (κεφαλή) stand in need of a "reconciliation"? The answer must lie in the sense to be given to the verb ἀποκαταλλάττει in the *Urhymnus*, which Paul has adapted to his own purpose by the significant addition of εἰρηνοποιήσας. See later p. 113.

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But the more significant addition is found in the interpretative clause rendered, "making peace by the blood of his cross" (v. 20c). The effect of this addendum is once again to transform radically the meaning of the reconciliation. In the original statement of the hymn the cosmic theology proclaimed a universal harmony because of the creator's work in Christ the Lord. That harmony which re-united the fractured and fragmented elements of the world was seen as the restitution of Christ as the head of a cosmic body, according to an attested understanding in hellenistic thought which announced that the body of the universe was ruled by Zeus or Logos.²⁰ The Christian version of this concept of a world-body under the control of a dominant head is seen in verse 18a. As Paul felt impelled to modify this emphasis and to re-cast the statement as an assertion of Christ's lordship in the church, so he could not leave the hellenistic idea untouched. He must ensure a fuller understanding of reconciliation as a soteriological reality by relating it closely to the death of Christ on the cross. Only in this way can he insist that redemption comes, not in knowing the cosmic secrets of the universe or by indulging in speculation, but by the forgiveness of sins (1:14). And that forgiveness, made possible by the costly death of Jesus as an historical event, is mediated to men and women who are consciously committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ not as a statement about his control of the cosmos but as a personal confession of their being in his kingdom and under his rule (1:13). This was the point and purpose of Paul's citation of the hymn at verse 15, introduced as it was by a description of the way in which his readers became members of Christ's body, the church. At the close of the hymn, Paul adds a final interpretative comment to make certain that its revised meaning will not be lost.

Reconciliation for him is not to be thought of as a cosmic miracle which merely changed the state of the universe outside of man. By the insertion of a reference (εἰρηνοποιήσας) which is unique in his writing and which is marked by a certain syntactical awkwardness in the verse, Paul has ensured that the moral transformation of the "reconciliation of all things" shall not be overlooked. Implicit in his addition of the line, "making peace by the blood of his cross" are the several ways in which Paul achieves this objective.

First, he has shown that reconciliation is primarily concerned with the restoration of relationships. Accepting the premise that the earlier hymn was an existing part of the tradition and that the pre-Pauline tradition really represents a type of thinking which was current coin at Colossae, as seems likely, it declares that Christ is the restorer of the universe to its true harmony. Paul, however, goes on to insist that

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speculative interest is not enough to match a moral problem. This is why he can move directly from the quotation of the hymn (which contains not a single personal reference) to an application of what the hymn (in its revised form) teaches. The link between 1:15-20 and 1:21-23 is close-knit, with the personal pronoun at verse 21, "And you" and the verb at verse 22, "he has now reconciled by his death" standing in an unusual and emphatic position. Quite

²⁰ See E. Schweizer, *TDNT* VII, p. 1037 for quotation from an Orphic fragment to this effect, and his discussion in *Lordship and Discipleship* (London, 1960), Appendix B. The "Body of Christ", pp. 119 ff.

evidently this is Paul's set purpose.²¹ Having shown how the scope of Christ's work reaches every part of creation, he can apply this teaching to his readers. But this modification of the hymn has made it clear that the reconciliation really matters because it touches human lives and produces the effect of a changed human character. Hence the purpose of reconciliation is spelled out: "in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him" (v. 22b), a purpose which says nothing about mastering the hidden secrets of the universe or indulging in gnostic speculation about the *pleroma*. To be sure, Paul will later in this epistle offer a rationale of the way in which the evil powers were overcome and forced to surrender their claim on Christ and his people (2:14, 15). But at this point Paul's teaching remains within the orbit of the personal effect of reconciliation by which its moral power is known, in the restoration to the favour of God of men and women who formerly were estranged and hostile in mind and open transgressors (v. 21). And the sum of that experience is: the Lord has forgiven you (3:13; cf. 1:14) by his incarnation ("his body of flesh") and sacrificial death on the cross ("the blood of the cross" ... "by his death").

The second way in which the meaning of the term reconciliation in verse 20 is more sharply defined by Paul's theology of the cross is more obviously polemical and designed to answer the needs of the Colossian church. Part of the "Colossian heresy" (as Lightfoot called it) was evidently a promise that salvation could be enjoyed "instantly" with an immediate offer of immortality and with very little said by way of the ethical demands of the new life. Against that distortion Paul is quick to insist that his (and the apostolic) understanding of the gospel is different on the important ground that it does not pass lightly over the moral

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demands whether of God's nature or of man's response to his offer. A gnosticizing version of redemption and reconciliation apparently was content simply to assert that God works by non-moral fiat and automatic process. A christianized account of the divine activity (if we may see the evidence for such in the earlier draft of verse 20) stated simply that Christ fills the universe as its head and so leaves no room for competing agencies in the celestial hierarchy to make their bid for man's allegiance. In that sense the spiritual super-beings (later called "the elemental spirits of the universe," (2:8, 20)) are "reconciled" by having their power to oppose Christ and set up a rival claim nullified. By their enforced submission to the lordly Christ who alone expresses the divine fulness (1:19; 2:9) and who by divine appointment is the head of all these angelic hosts (2:10) they are brought to an acknowledgement of his authority and of their rightful place under him. This is described as God's design for the cosmos in which there should be no discord, since it is the divine good pleasure that all things shall be brought under the undisputed headship of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:10 states this design in clear fashion).

²¹ Not the least obvious sign of Paul's deliberate intention is his use of the verb ἀποκαταλλάσσειν in 1:22 (the textual question does not materially affect the issue), which is picked up from the Vorlage of the hymn at 1:20. The evidence shows that this form of the verb is uniquely Christian (see Arndt) and that it occurs in the New Testament only in these two Colossians texts and Ephesians 2:16. The supposition of F. Büchsel (*TDNT* I, p. 258) that it is Paul's own coinage will need modification if the reference in verse 20 derives from a pre-Pauline source. Moreover, in our statement, there are several meanings to be attached to the verb, notably in Colossians where at verse 20 in the hymn the reconciliation describes the unifying of the cosmos under its true head (cf. J. Michl, "Die 'Versöhnung' (Kol. 1, 20)", *ThQ* 128 (1948), pp. 442-62), whereas in Paul's hands the verb takes on a soteriological meaning, which embraces both the "overcoming of the cosmic hostility through the lordship of Christ" (explained in 2:15) and the restoration of sinful men to God's favour and family (1:22). This is the sense given to 1:20 by Dibelius-Greeven, *An die Kolosser* (Tübingen, 1953), p. 19 quoted in the above line.

This is the meaning of cosmic reconciliation in the *Grundschrift*. But for Paul this statement of Christ's relation to the powers was not adequate. For him—and we shall inspect his thought more fully when we come to 2:13-15—these cosmic forces are not simply neutral agencies which need to find their true place in the hierarchy over which Christ presides. Their bid for man's allegiance shows that they are rebel forces and it is needful that their hostility should be drawn out and neutralized.²² So Paul expounds the need for their rebellion to be put down and for peace to be restored in a universe which is at odds with its creator. Moreover the creator—God in a moral world cannot deal with rebel spirits with a wave of the hand. In some way they have to be exposed, with their evil intentions brought out into the open and their claim to human obedience answered. Only then will there be true reconciliation as these usurping powers are called to a trial of strength and shown to be weak and impotent (see Gal. 4:8, 9) in the face of God's wisdom displayed in Christ's cross. That engagement, for Paul, took place at the cross where the issue of God versus the powers

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was joined; and peace is now proclaimed throughout the whole universe because of what Christ did both in his submission to the evil spirits and in his triumph over them. But the emphasis which Paul makes at 1:20c is clear: reconciliation is not secured easily nor is it accomplished as a physical miracle which changes the state of the cosmos outside of man. It "does not work like, to use a Gnostic image, a magnet put up in heaven and drawing those who are brought into its magnetic field irresistibly after it. The effect of Christ's death is the effect of a deed of love bringing its fruit in a human life which is touched by it".²³

III

2:13-15: New Life in Christ and the Hymn of the Saviour

These verses form a compact section in which Paul is applying the acts of God to his readers' situation. One dominant act was his appointment of his Son as "head of all rule and authority" (2:10), i.e., the elemental spirits of the universe. This headship of Christ confirms the original sense of 1:18a. Attempts have been made to see in this short paragraph (in particular in verses 14, 15) a snatch of hymnody which celebrates the redeeming and victorious power of God in Christ.²⁴ Clearly there is a break in thought at verse 13. From the initial statement of verse 10

²² It is feasible that, since evil spirits are not mentioned in the text of Colossians, those whose theology is represented in the tradition of the hymn may have seen the cosmic powers in a neutral light and in a non-dualistic way. Then, it would be Paul who has given a moral character to the powers since, in the Colossian false teaching and practice, they were becoming a rival to Christ (2:8, 18) and so setting up a dualistic tension which Paul could not tolerate for the reason given in Romans 8:38 f.

The antagonistic motif behind Paul's use of the verb ἀποκαταλλάττει and his imagery of 2:15 may well be accounted for on this assumption. Because of the situation at Colossae, "The Powers are no longer instruments, linkages between God's love, as revealed in Christ, and the visible world of creation. In fact, they have become gods (Galatians 4:8), behaving as though they were the ultimate ground of being, and demanding from men an appropriate worship. This is the demonic reversal which has taken place on the invisible side of creation. No longer do the Powers bind man and God together; they separate them" (H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scotsdale, Pa., 1962), p.23).

²³ E. Schweizer, *The Church as the Body of Christ* (Richmond, Va., 1964), p. 70.

²⁴ The most ambitious attempt at tracing a hymnic form in ch. 2 is that of G. Schille, *Frühchristliche Hymnen* (Berlin, 1965), pp. 31-37. He thinks that verses 9, 10b, 11b and 13b-15 were all part of a traditional hymn on which the author of Colossians has commented. But it is unnatural to bring verses 9 and 10 into a hymnic

that Christ is Lord of all the powers, the apostle's discussion moves on to consider various ways in which the readers came to an experience of "fulness of life" (verse 10). Three aspects of their experience are mentioned as figures under which the Christian initiation is described: circumcision, baptism, and new life in a resurrection. The section which follows verse 13b: "God has made you alive in union with him (Christ)" is evidently intended to be a paean of praise to the Redeemer who achieved the believers' new life. If there is the insertion of a hymnic fragment at this point, it is an open question whether the subject of the verbs is continued from verse 13b, i.e., God the Father, or whether the "hymn of the Redeemer" beginning at verse 13c or verse 14 more naturally extols Christ the Lord. We shall see grounds on the exegetical level for preferring the latter suggestion.

The lines of the fragment may be set down, noting the same poetic features as we observed in the case of 1:15-20. Moreover, at one place, it is possible to detect a Pauline insertion which interrupts the flow of

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the text. This comes at verse 14 where the phrase τοῖς δόγμασιν (RSV "with its legal demands") is an awkward pendant and occurs disconnectedly in the middle of the sentence.²⁵ In addition, the following phrase ὃ ἦν ὑπεναρτίον ἡμῶν complicates the meaning and has been regarded as tautologous in view of the preceding καθ' ἡμῶν which is descriptive of τὸ χειρόγραφον. It is then a plausible suggestion that these two phrases are insertions by Paul himself, added to clarify the special sense in which he wishes τὸ χειρόγραφον to be understood. There is also the problem of knowing exactly the point at which the hypothetical hymn begins. We are inclined to treat the participial clause, "who forgave us all our trespasses"²⁶ in verse 12 as Paul's climactic and triumphant declaration at the close of his recital of the benefits conferred by the gospel message since he identifies himself ("us all") with his erstwhile Gentile readers ("you... were dead in the uncircumcision of your flesh").²⁷ This would also be in keeping with his consistent stress on forgiveness in the epistle (1:14; 3:13) and would give some justification for the quoted passage which follows directly. That hymnic period tells the story of the Saviour whose dramatic actions have dealt with the accusing powers. He emerged victorious after his engagement with them and as a direct consequence he is the mediator of pardon to his people.

The structure of the pre-Pauline traditional composition

Strophe I

scheme, as critics of Schille have noted, e.g. R. Deichgraber, *Gotteshymnus and Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (Göttingen, 1967). pp. 167 f. and E. Lohse, *Colossians*, p. 99, n. 43. Much more probable is the view that sees the hymnic material beginning at verse 13c; or, as we prefer, to ensure a three-line metrical symmetry, at verse 14.

²⁵ So Lohse, *op. cit.*, ad 2:14.

²⁶ The verb "to forgive" (χαρίζεσθαι) is attested in Paul at 2 Cor. 2:7, 10; 12:13 in very personal passages, though the full expression "to forgive trespasses" is not found elsewhere in his undisputed writings.

²⁷ The explanation which R. A. Wilson gives " 'We' and 'You' in the Epistle to the Ephesians", *Studia Evangelica* 11 TU 87 (Berlin, 1964), pp. 676-80, "The paragraph passes from the second to the first person when Paul wishes to emphasize that what he is describing to his hearers has been the experience of all Christians" (p. 677), holds good for this section of Colossians.

Ralph P. Martin, "Reconciliation and Forgiveness in the Letter to the Colossians," Robert Banks, ed., *Reconciliation and Hope. New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday*. Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1974. pp. 104-124.

Verse 14

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν | Who cancelled the bond of debt |
| χειρὸν γραφόν, | which stood against us, |
| καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου, | And he removed it, |
| προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ. | Nailing it to the cross. |

These lines explore the rationale of Christ's forgiveness. He is the one who confers the blessing of pardon, as explicitly mentioned in 3:13, "As the Lord (Christ) forgave you..."²⁸ The problem posed by the "certificate of indebtedness" (τὸ χειρόγραφον) which was inimical to men's hopes of restoration to God is met by what Christ did. He wiped the record clear

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(ἐξαλείφειν)²⁹ of the list of men's transgressions and then he took that discharged document and affixed it to his cross.

Strophe II

Verse 15

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς | Who divested himself of |
| καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας, | the principalities and powers, |
| ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ | He made a public display of them, |
| θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ. | Triumphing over them in it (the cross). |

Even more dramatically the work of the Redeemer is described in vivid language. On the assumption that the translation given above is defensible,³⁰ the first line declares how the

²⁸ At 3:13 P.46 A B D G and the Latin Bible read "the Lord"; but this meaning is clarified as referring to Christ in a weighty body of textual evidence.

²⁹ The verb ἐξαλείφειν means to smear out, obliterate (Moule) as writing on wax or papyrus was rubbed out. But it is fanciful to see here an allusion to the washing of baptism, as H. G. Marsh (*The Origin and Significance of the New Testament Baptism* (Manchester, 1940, p. 134) does.

³⁰ The chief difficulty centres on the meaning to be given to the participle ἀπεκδυσάμενος. The RSV assumes that God is the subject of the sentence, going back to verse 136, and its translation, he disarmed the principalities and powers" gives to the middle verb an active and transitive sense to denote the personal interest of the one who acts. See Arndt, s.v. and A. Oepke, *TDNT* II, p. 319. But this translation is open to question on the score that the evil powers are more likely to be stripped of their rule and so exposed to ridicule rather than to be disarmed of their weapons (so Lohse). H. Schlier, *TDNT* II, p. 31, n. 2 follows Lohmeyer in treating the verb as a "divestment of dignity rather than despoiling of weapons". If the verb is given its true meaning of "to strip off"—and this is preferable in the light of Lohmeyer's insistence that the imagery is not drawn from the battlefield but from a royal court in which public officials are degraded by being stripped of their honour—it is still an open question whether the full force of the middle voice should be given. The choice is between taking the verb to mean, he stripped the evil powers of their dignity and authority (so Lohse), or by giving the full meaning to the deponent, he divested himself of the principalities and powers of evil. The latter is the sense taken by the Greek fathers and preferred by Lightfoot: "The powers of evil, which had clung like a Nessus robe about His humanity, were torn off and cast aside for ever." This interpretation makes ἀπεκδυσάμενος govern τὰς ἀρχὰς κτλ and yields the translation found in the RV. There is a third view, adopted by the Latin fathers and in recent times by J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London, 1952), p. 41, which would make Christ's action relate to a divesting of his flesh. Yet again it is possible to combine these early Greek and Latin interpretations in the manner taken by C. A. A. Scott, *Christianity According to St. Paul* (Cambridge, 1927), pp. 34 ff. This is the line we have followed in the text. It unites the view that Christ (who is the subject of the participle) stripped off from himself the evil forces which attacked him and that he stripped off his flesh, since it was his flesh (i.e., his frail humanity) which the evil powers assaulted. Flesh in this context means "the medium through which He had become involved in the human experience of the hostility of the evil Potentates and Powers, the spirit-forces which had usurped

crucified Christ dealt effectively with the enemies which conspired to cause his death. These demonic agencies (as in 1 Cor. 2:6-8) tried to cling to him (or his flesh) but he stripped them from his person and discarded their pretended authority over him, as a person divests himself of clothing. In so doing he disgraced them by showing them up in their real character, as usurpers and rebels against God.

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They, presumed to attack him as weak and helpless (apparently regarding him as a mortal man, identified with the human race over which they claimed their rights). But he repelled that assault by turning them into captives and conquered rebels whose bluff had been called. He led them in a public procession, just as the victorious Roman general paraded his captives of war in chains through the streets of the city at the conclusion of a foreign campaign.³¹ So these demonic powers are Christ's "prize of war," held up to public spectacle as he mounted the cross. From that cross he reigns and receives the homage of his foes, who are now "reconciled" and subjugated.

As was the case with the hymn in 1:15-20 there are areas of interpretation, where the hypothesis of tradition-and-redaction helps in elucidating the meaning of a passage. In 2:13-15 we are assuming with several modern interpreters that Paul has used a piece of traditional material, possibly set in hymnic form, and has inserted it as part of his continuing polemic against the Colossian false teachers. It is not difficult to imagine how impressive this citation would be if it represented a species of agreed teaching in the churches, to which Paul could appeal as part of the tradition which the Colossian Christians had received (2:6). He would then be able to use this fragment as an effective way of checking the gnosticizing proposal that the angelic powers were to be venerated as powerful intermediaries in the Colossians' quest for religious certainty.

Paul's redaction

The apostle, as on the occasion of his use of 1:15 ff., has taken over an already extant piece of liturgy and edited it for his own purpose. The presence of symmetrical forms is seen in the way in which two stanzas of three lines each can be detected, with correspondences of participial style and the main verbs carefully arranged. Moreover, it cannot be accidental that, as 1:15 and 1:18b begin their respective strophes in a similar way and 1:16 and 1:20 conclude their stanzas on the same note (with a recurrence of τὰ πάντα), so in this hymn of the Redeemer the last line of strophe I and the last line of strophe II match each other, with a participial clause and a reference to the cross. Also the first lines of both stanzas are participial, and the second line in each stanza contains the prominent main verb. We have now to enquire into the purpose of Paul's redactional activity. This is seen in his additions at verse 14 where the original hymn stated that Christ "cancelled the certificate of indebtedness which stood against us".

authority over men" (Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 35). As Moule, *Colossians*, p. 102 points out, the transition between these two views is one that Paul may well have made in spite of the absence of any precise term for "flesh". Paul's description of Christ's reconciliation in 1:22 ("in his body of flesh by his death"), however, makes clear his close association of Christ's death and the medium of his bodily flesh". For the phrase "body of flesh" see p. 123, n. 1.

³¹ G. Delling, *TDNT* III, p. 160.

We have already seen the difficulty which the received text presents with its overloading of the sentence by the inclusion of "because of regulations" (τοῖς δόγμασιν) and its repetition of the otiose phrase "which was against us" (ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῶν). By recourse to the theory of an *Urtext*

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which did not have these phrases we are able to see why Paul needed to add in these glosses. By the addition of τοῖς δόγμασιν he wished to stress how it was that the χειρόγραφον was the ground of the accusation levelled by the demonic powers. Also we propose that the second phrase marks the beginning of a new sentence which Paul includes to re-iterate how the work of Christ consisted in taking away "that which was inimical to us" (ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῶν). These two matters require some comment: and we shall take them in reverse order.

On the second point, Lohmeyer's suggestion is deserving of attention.³² He proposes to place a period after τοῖς δόγμασιν and to treat the phrase ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῶν as the object of the verb ἤρκεν. The text now reads: "That which was hostile to us, even that (referring back to the *cheirographon*) he has removed". This re-punctuation certainly makes for a simpler and smoother flow of the sentence, and the unusual position of the phrase coming before the verb can be explained by the expedient that it is a Pauline addendum, added to make clear the evil character of the document which Christ has not only wiped clear but also removed (from the divine presence?).

The meaning of τὸ χειρόγραφον is well-attested in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman world. It represents a statement of obligation written by a debtor with a promise to pay what is due. The qualifying τοῖς δόγμασιν apparently suggests the reason why this document contains a record of human failure before God, though perhaps unconsciously many interpreters seem to be influenced by an identical phrase in Ephesians 2:15 where a reference to the standard of the divine law is clear. Under this influence, τὸ χειρόγραφον is taken to be a bond of debt which records its damaging indictment of mankind "because of regulations", i.e., by the strict requirements of God's law man is convicted of his failure to attain the standards set by that law and branded as a transgressor. In that way the law has become an instrument of judgement which the obedient Christ took responsibility for in our name and so "paid the debt" on behalf of sinners. He did this by his close identification with human need, even to the point of his vicarious death on the cross.

There is, however, a difficulty with this view, viz. that it is awkward to equate a certificate of indebtedness signed by men with a divine exhibition of condemnation in the bond which was nailed to the cross. Some recent interpreters have, therefore, suggested that the χειρόγραφον refers not to a document of human guilt in respect of the Mosaic law but to an

³² E. Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an die Kolosser und an Philemon* (Göttingen, 1953) ad loc. He renders the text:

Was uns feind war,
Ja, das hat er weggeräumt,
das an das Kreuz genagelt;

But Lohmeyer's exegesis which makes the χειρόγραφον refer to a document on which is inscribed a man's pact with the devil is an eccentricity.

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indictment presented at the heavenly court.³³ The original text referred simply to a cheirographon hostile to man; Paul's addition of the explanatory gloss, "consisting of ordinances. That which was against us" amplifies the nature of the charge which the angelic indictment brought against mankind.

The reason for believing that this is Paul's designation of the bond as the work of evil spirits is primarily to be sought in 2:20. There he makes it plain that the false ideas and prescriptions which formed the basis of the errorists appeal and which entailed a worship of the angels (2:18) consisted in the regulations or ordinances imposed on the Colossians. To the simple believer, caught by this spell, the ascetic requirements of 2;23: "don't handle, don't taste; don't touch" may have seemed harmless enough and even laudable as inculcating a self-discipline. For Paul this line of reasoning is demonic and is to be utterly refused. His challenging rebuke τί... δογματίζεσθε; admits of no compromise. The reason for his stringent rejection is given in the preceding verses. This asceticism substitutes for a way of life κατὰ χριστόν a rival system of religion and ethics which is not only κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων (2:8) and κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων (2:22), but κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου (2:8). For Paul this is deadly heresy, and the recourse to δόγματα is the surest sign that the evil spiritual forces are threatening to engulf the church and rob it of its freedom in the gospel. Paul must therefore proclaim that the indictment which the evil powers bring against the Colossians as they consent to submit to a way of life which is a deliberate return to astral tyranny has already been answered in the heavenly court by the Christians' advocate who has both wiped the account clear and removed it as a liability facing man.

The way that Christ did this is the theme of the second stanza of 2:15. But it is impossible to see the full relevance of Paul's use of the rare participle ἀπεκδυσόμενος in this verse in isolation from what he has said in 2:11 and what will follow as part of his paraenetic counsel in 3:9. The middle term is still *cheirographon*, which in this context takes on a special meaning as a virtual equivalent of Christ's human body which, in Pauline thought, is closely linked with his death on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Rom. 8:3). This is the argument proposed by O. A. Blanchette³⁴ in order to link cheirographon with Christ's body bearing our sins. Additional support for this view comes from the *Gospel of Truth*³⁵

³³ A. J. Bandstra, *The Law and the Elements of the World. An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (Kampen, n.d. around 1964), pp. 158 ff. cites the evidence from L. Koep, *Das himmlische Buch in Antike und Christentum: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zur altchristlichen Bildersprache* (Bonn, 1952).

³⁴ O. A. Blanchette, "Does the Cheirographon of Col. 2,14 represent Christ Himself?" *CBQ* 23 (1961), pp. 306-12.

³⁵ The passage in the *Gospel of Truth* is 20:22-28. The translation in *Evangelium Veritatis*, ed. M. Malinine, H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel (Zürich, 1956) reads:

This is why, Jesus appeared (and) took that Book
(cf. 20: lines 3 ff.) He was nailed
to a (cross of) wood (and) He attached the
deed of disposition
of the Father to the Cross
Oh! great, sublime Teaching.

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where the text speaks of Jesus taking or wearing a book as his own and as being nailed to the cross where he affixed the ordinance of the Father to that cross. The choice of sense: bearing or wearing the book is evidently settled by a subsequent text (20:34) which remarks: "Having divested himself of these perishable rags (his flesh), he clothed himself with incorruptibility, which it is impossible for anyone to take away from him."

The association of "wearing" and "divesting" recalls the previous verse 11 where the key phrase is "putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ". This is a disputed verse, but the likelihood is that we should understand ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ χριστοῦ to mean the circumcision which Christ himself underwent when he stripped off from himself the clinging attack in his flesh of the spiritual powers which assaulted him. Verse 15 relates to the same event and shows how on the cross the engagement with the evil powers led to his victory over them. By taking χειρόγραφον as a personalized allusion to the charge-list of guilt which Christ assumed in his body we are now in a position to understand why these evil powers attacked him. They accused him as though he were a sinner—or, as the gnostic would put it, because he was fleshly and obviously out of harmony with the divine because he was suffering³⁶—and indicted him. But he repelled this charge first by receiving the full force of their malevolence and "wearing" the charge as he took responsibility

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for it and, then, by rejecting it as he discarded his "body of flesh",³⁷ now a dead thing and so fit to be abandoned on the cross (1:22; cf. Rom. 6:6, 7). However, this was not the end, since he was raised in a spiritual body and vindicated by God, thus reversing the sentence which these evil forces levelled at him. He stripped off their hold and overcame them. Even more, he turned the tables on them and led his erstwhile overlords in captive as his prize of war at the very place—ἐν αὐτῷ—(the cross) where they imagined that their victory was won.

The points of similarity and distinction between this section of a gnostic document and Col. 2:14 were first pointed out by W. C. van Unnik "The 'Gospel of Truth' and the New Testament", *The Jung Codex*. Three studies by H.-Ch. Puech, G. Quispel and W. C. van Unnik, ed. F. L. Cross (London, 1955), pp. 108 ff. and have been noted by later writers. Cf. the discussion of Sasagu Arai, *Die Christologie des Evangelium Veritatis* (Leiden, 1964), pp. 100-105.

The key text comes in line 24 which most translators render: "He took that Book". However, the *Note critique* in *Evangelium Veritatis*, p. 53, draws attention to the suggested ambiguity of the underlying Greek ἀναλαμβάνειν which the Coptic translator read as "to take up" "to take upon oneself" (cf. W. W. Isenberg's renderings: "He took that book as his own" in *Gnosticism: An Anthology*, ed. R. M. Grant, London, 1961). The Greek may also mean "to clothe"—a translation already preferred by H. M. Schenke, *Die Herkunft des sogenannten Evangelium Veritatis* (Göttingen, 1959), p. 37: "Er bekleidete sich mit jenenl Buche", and now argued for by Bandstra, *op. cit.*, p. 161, n. 173 and Cullen I. K. Story, *The Nature of Truth in "The Gospel of Truth" and in the Writings of Justin Martyr* (Leiden, 1970), p. 129.

³⁶ Paul's answer to this charge may be inferred from his use of the adverb σωματικῶς in 2:9 on which W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge, 1939), p. 168, n. 3 comments: "It seems to be a summary reply to the argument that Jesus could not have been divine, for He had a real body and was really crucified, which is impossible for a divine being."

³⁷ For the phrase "body of his flesh", see 1 QpHab ix. 2 and the other Jewish allusions suggesting a man's frail physical nature, cited by K. G. Kuhn, "New Light on Temptation, Sin, and Flesh in the New Testament", *The Scrolls and New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl (London, 1958), p. 107.

This is a highly dramatic and picturesque account of the historical events of Good Friday, with which we may find it hard to relate. Paul's first readers must have understood it all, and we are encouraged to believe this by the way in which he proceeds to apply the teaching to their new life. All that Christ did both in submission to death and overcoming his foes has personal and experiential relevance in the light of 3:9, 10: "seeing that you have put off (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι) the old nature... and have put on the new nature." The Christians' "putting off" (ἀπέκδυσις) exactly matches Christ's "putting off",³⁸ and points back to 2:11. When the Lord consented to yield to the regime of the astral powers and then to triumph over them, Christians too were involved in that representative act and by their faith union with him (expressed in baptism) they were united with him in his death and victory. The result is clear: You died with Christ out from under the elemental spirits of the universe (2:20).³⁹ They are now an enemy which brings its accusations and indictment against you in vain, for they have done their worst to Christ and been foiled in the attempt to succeed in their clinging attack. He has neutralized their malevolence and holds them as his spoils of war.

Paul finally drives home the point: Therefore do not allow any false teacher encroaching on the life of your congregation to carry you away as a prize of war (2:8).⁴⁰ You are assured by Christ's victory that he has "reconciled" (i.e., drawn the hostility of) these malign spirits; and the sure token of that victory is proved by the new life which the Colossians already have as men and women risen with Christ and as part of the heavenly world (1:12-14; 3:1-4). Specifically their sins are forgiven and no accusing angel can bring charges against them. The cosmic reconciliation is certified by the knowledge and assurance of divine forgiveness.

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To have (this) forgiveness of sins... means to be free from the powers and principalities, who on the cross of Christ were subjected to ridicule and shame (2:15). Whoever is baptized into Christ is placed under the dominion of the beloved Son of God, who as Lord holds in his hands the authority over the whole world as well as the salvation of those who belong to him—freed for the new life of obedience that confesses his rule.⁴¹

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Prepared for the Web in November 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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³⁸ Lightfoot comments (p. 189): "The ἀπέκδυσις accomplished in us when we are baptized into His death is a counterpart to the ἀπέκδυσις which He accomplished by His death."

³⁹ J. A. T. Robinson's forceful attempt to render Paul's Greek at 2:20: *The Body*, p. 43.

⁴⁰ I suggest that there is a parallel intended by Paul's use of the rare verb συλαγωμεῖν (to carry off as a captive of war) in 2:8 and his use of the verb θριαμβεύειν (to lead in a triumphal procession someone as a captive) at 2:15.

⁴¹ Lohse, *op. cit.*, p. iii.