

Clinton E. Arnold. *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996. xii + 378 pp. \$19.99.

Clint Arnold's work on the Colossian philosophy represents a bold and fresh attempt to reconstruct the problem facing the Colossian Christians. Many recent scholars have identified the deviant teaching as a form of Jewish mysticism. Arnold calls this view into question by suggesting that local folk belief--which was informed by magic, initiation rites from mystery religions, and certain Jewish practices--serves as a better explanation for the particular features of the Colossian philosophy. In his reconstruction the philosophy is fundamentally syncretistic, though Jewish elements are present.

Arnold's work is fascinating, and he does an excellent job defending his thesis. Whatever one thinks of his thesis as a whole, one will learn much about magic in the ancient world and the veneration of angels by both Jews and pagans. The thesis is divided into three sections. First, evidence relating to veneration of angels is treated. Second, the specific features of the Colossian philosophy are reconstructed. Third, the teaching of Colossians is examined in light of the conclusions proposed regarding the adversaries. In this review I will concentrate on Arnold's conclusions regarding the opponents and his methodology in depicting them since it is here that his work makes a distinct contribution. My goal is to assess whether Arnold's methodology in reconstructing the Colossian philosophy is sound and to test out his conclusions with some interpretive discussion.

The first methodological question that arises relates to dating. Are the extra-biblical sources cited to cast light upon the Colossian philosophy contemporaneous with the writing of Colossians? If the parallels adduced come from a period before or after the writing of Colossians, they may not reflect the situation when Colossians was written.

New Testament scholars are keenly aware of the dangers here, since some scholars of previous generations read the full blown Gnosticism of the second and third centuries A.D. into the New Testament documents. The issue of dating is crucial for Arnold since most of the magical papyri stem from the third and fourth centuries A.D. He argues that the magical papyri are distinct from Gnosticism, for in the case of magic we are not dealing with a full fledged movement, and the basic structure of the magical formulas did not change over time. I believe Arnold is probably right on this score. He provides some evidence for continuity in magical formulas over time, and it seems sensible to say that magical invocations and curses were relatively stable. Thus it seems legitimate to mine the magical papyri to illuminate the New Testament world. Yet we must be also cautious. Even though magical formulae were stable over time, it would be illegitimate to conclude from this that all the terms used in the papyri had the same definition when the NT was written. The basic formulae may be the same, but it does not follow from this that all the terms used had the same meaning over the centuries. I am more skeptical when Arnold summons evidence from mystery cults or even Mithraism to buttress his thesis. In such cases the late date of the sources makes any reputed parallels suspect.

Second, Arnold attempts to elucidate the Colossian philosophy by using local evidence from Asia Minor. Inscriptions, magical amulets, and other literary sources from Asia Minor are utilized to cast light on Colossians. Again I am in agreement with Arnold. Local evidence should certainly be considered in any reconstruction of Pauline opponents. Nonetheless, it may be the case that the problem in the letter is not confirmed by any local evidence since our sources are fragmentary, and thus we may be restricted to Colossians itself in delineating the Colossian philosophy.

Third, Arnold argues that one must discern the catchwords of the philosophy from the sections of the letter that are explicitly polemical, so that Col. 2:4-8 and 2:16-23 are primary in delineating the philosophy rather than Col. 1:15-20 and 2:9-15. On this basis he suggests that $\square \bullet \approx \diamond \square \blacklozenge \circ \textcircled{\text{E}}$ is not a central term for the adversaries. I believe Arnold's methodological principle has merit, although it cannot be applied absolutely and he himself is not completely consistent in adhering to this principle. In detecting the Colossian philosophy explicit statements in the letter are fundamental. And yet Jerry Sumney in his work on detecting opponents (*Identifying Paul's Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians*, 1990) in Paul rightly notes that we may glean some information about Paul's adversaries from allusions and affirmations in the letters as well, so that we are not restricted to sections of letters that are explicitly polemical. We must beware, of course, of mirror reading, and yet other portions of the letter besides those that are explicitly polemical may yield some information about the opponents.

I am unpersuaded, therefore, by the claim that $\square \bullet \approx \diamond \square \blacklozenge \circ \textcircled{\text{E}}$ does not relate to the Colossian philosophy, for responses to opponents may exist in parts of the letter that contain positive affirmations. Arnold is skeptical since $\square \bullet \approx \diamond \square \blacklozenge \circ \textcircled{\text{E}}$ first appears in the Colossian hymn and later appears in Col. 2:9-10, a text that reaffirms and applies the hymnic statement to the church (p. 263). But the first statement on angelic powers appears in the Colossian hymn as well (Col. 1:16) and Arnold himself makes use of Col. 2:10 and 2:15 to trumpet the importance of angels, though these texts are outside the polemical sections. Waving aside $\square \bullet \approx \diamond \square \blacklozenge \circ \textcircled{\text{E}}$ so quickly is suspect since Col. 2:9-10 is embedded in the middle of Paul's polemical argument—even if these verses are not specifically polemical. Indeed a $\textcircled{\text{E}}$ links vv. 8-9 together, and so it seems

questionable to sever vv 8-9 so sharply from one another. Moreover, in v. 10 Paul says that believers are $\square\mu\ \square\bullet\ \approx\ \square\ \diamond\ \circ\ \mu\ \diamond\ \blacksquare\ \square\ \times$, and the fullness of believers is connected to Christ's headship over every rule and authority. Since virtually all agree that in v. 10 $\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi\eta\varsigma$ and $\mu\ \boxtimes\ \square\ \diamond\ \times\ \diamond\ \textcircled{\times}$ refer to angels, and angels are a central part of the philosophy, some basis exists to think that $\square\bullet\ \approx\ \diamond\ \square\ \diamond\ \circ\ \textcircled{\times}$ may be part of the Colossian philosophy. If $\square\bullet\ \approx\ \diamond\ \square\ \diamond\ \circ\ \textcircled{\times}$ relates to the philosophy, we need not (indeed must not) read second century Gnosticism into the term. I conclude that sections of the letter that are not explicitly polemical may provide some information about the Colossian philosophy.

Arnold has demonstrated that magic and veneration of angels were at least somewhat common in Asia Minor when Colossians was written. He has compiled an impressive amount of primary source evidence to support his thesis. It is certainly possible that magic combined with a veneration of angels was the genius of the Colossian philosophy. But I must admit that I have some reservations because of another methodological principle, the principle which is the most important in my opinion: *the evidence from the letter itself must be fundamental in reconstructing the Colossian philosophy*. It is not enough to show that many people engaged in magic when Colossians was written. It is not even sufficient to show that magic was common in Asia Minor. What must be demonstrated is that magic was the particular problem in Colossae. What I mean by this is that the text of Colossians itself must show that magic was a formative element in the Colossian philosophy. The same methodological principle can be formulated in another way: How can we assess whether genuine parallels between magic and Colossians have been established?

I do not mean in the least to detract from the impressiveness of Arnold's work and the possibility that he is correct, but currently I am still in the category of the unpersuaded. Evidence from the letter itself must be primary in identifying the opponents. And the crucial verses to my way of thinking are Col. 2:16-17, for these verses specifically delineate what the opponents taught. "Therefore no one must judge you in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or sabbaths—which are shadows of what is to come; but the body belongs to the Christ." From these verses we learn that the variant teaching prohibited certain foods and drinks and advocated the observance of various days. Prohibitions regarding food and drink were common in the ancient world, and thus are not of much help initially in identifying the philosophy. The prohibitions regarding food and drink must have been of prime importance because they surface again in Col. 2:20-23. Indeed, this is the element of the philosophy that receives the most attention from Paul when he explicitly counters the adversaries.

Is there any way in the context to decipher the background to the prohibitions against food and drinks? I think we receive immense help from what immediately follows the reference to food and drink in v. 16, namely, the reference to festivals, new moons, and sabbaths. Sabbaths almost certainly points to the OT sabbath. Festivals and new moons also refer to Jewish observances, for sabbaths, new moons, and feasts often appear together, designating Jewish festivals (1 Chron. 23:31; 2 Chron. 2:4; 31:3; Neh. 10:33; Isa. 1:13-14; Ezek. 45:17; Hos. 2:11; 1 Macc. 10:34). If the calendar matters have a Jewish provenance, it is most likely that food and drink have the same background. Some might object that a Jewish background is unlikely since drinks are not prohibited in

the OT. But there are plenty of examples in Jewish literature of abstention from wine deriving from the fear that it had been offered as a libation to the gods (Dan 1:3-17; 10:3; Add. Esth. 14:17; *Joseph and Asenath* 8:5; Mishnah *'Abodah Zerah* 2:3; 5:2). Romans 14 also functions as an important parallel text, for there abstention from both food and wine can be traced back to Jewish purity issues.

A Jewish background is also confirmed by v. 17, which says that these practices are "shadows (σκιά) of what is to come." I think it is highly doubtful that Paul would say this about pagan practices, or practices that were deeply syncretistic, and though Arnold concedes a Jewish element in the philosophy, the pagan element predominates. Arnold's interpretation of σκιά is not completely clear (p. 221). At first glance he appears to side with Gnilya in suggesting that "shadows" refers to that which is "unstable, shifting, weak, and empty." No positive content can be assigned, then, to festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. If this view is correct, it hardly seems likely that Paul refers to OT institutions. But on the same page Arnold also relates the shadows to salvation history. If the shadows are understood in a salvation historical framework and anticipate and point forward to Christ, it is difficult to see how the practices listed could be fundamentally syncretistic. For my own part I think Paul is speaking salvation historically because he says "a shadow of things to come." If he thought these practices were inherently defective, he might merely call them a shadow. But he does not simply say they are a shadow, but "a shadow of things to come." The words "of things to come"

(◆◆♠■ ○ℳ●●□❖■◆◆■Ⓣ) suggest that these institutions anticipated and foreshadowed a future reality. Food and drink regulations, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths are no longer needed because Christ has now come and fulfilled what these

pointed to. The eschatological cast of the language suggests that Paul uses the word shadow in the same way as the author of Hebrews. "The law is a shadow of good things to come" (Heb 10:1). Now if this is correct, then it is less likely that Paul criticizes syncretistic practices relating to new moons or Sabbath or foods.

It is, of course, possible that the Colossian philosophy combined Jewish and pagan elements, so that magic and mystery initiation were still features of the variant teaching. But it is one thing to say that magic was in the air in Colossae, a thesis I do not doubt, but it is quite another to say that the Colossian philosophy was informed by magic and initiation rites from mystery religions. The credibility of such a thesis must be demonstrated from Colossians itself. There were, after all, many religious movements in the Greco-Roman world, and all kinds of religious viewpoints may have influenced the early Christian communities. But we must establish from the letters themselves the presence of specific religious cults.

When I read Colossians, however, doubts about Arnold's thesis arise. If magic is the problem in Colossae, why is any reference to charms, spells, or magicians lacking? Certainly angels are venerated in some way in Colossians, but the text never clearly connects angelic veneration with magic. If Arnold were correct, I would think that Paul might use the φύλασσω word group to designate Christ's protection from angelic powers or magical curses. It is precisely here that the word "fullness" reenters the picture, for Paul does not emphasize protection from demonic powers as much as he emphasizes that fullness is in Christ. If Arnold were correct, I would think that Paul might refer to magicians, conjurers, mathematicians, astrologers, or sorcerers. It seems curious that there is no reference to amulets or that the word φαρμακεία is not used.

One of Arnold's strongest arguments relates to the worship of angels. He makes a very good case for this being an objective genitive. Even if we grant him his thesis, I do not see how it follows from this that magic was involved. He relates worship of angels to conjuration or invocation and connects it with the magical arts, but any connection with conjuration or invocation is unstated in Colossians. I see no specific evidence in the letter, even if some were actually worshiping angels, that such worship was connected with magic. We must admit that we are frustrated by the paucity of evidence here; the mirror we hold up has an obscure and dim picture. Perhaps what we see here is the veneration of angels from a form of Judaism, though it is certainly possible that some syncretism existed in the Colossian philosophy.

Arnold also argues that the term στοιχεῖα refers to angelic powers in Colossians, protesting that we should not cavalierly dismiss a reference to angels in the term στοιχεῖα. I think it is just possible that in Paul's day the term στοιχεῖα began to be used of angels. Adjudicating this issue is not easy and incautious judgments must be eschewed. And yet I am still unconvinced that the στοιχεῖα actually refer to angels in Colossians. We receive some illumination from dating here, for, despite the impressive evidence supplied by Arnold, no specific example of στοιχεῖα meaning angels contemporaneous with or prior to Colossians has been established. And even if an example or two were found, we could at least say that extant evidence reveals that the term στοιχεῖα rarely meant angels when Colossians was written. It is much more likely, therefore, that the term reflects a much more common meaning in Greek literature at Paul's time. The στοιχεῖα refer to the four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. I think such a meaning fits well in both Galatians and Colossians, for Paul always speaks of "the

elements *of the world*" (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). Paul dismisses the Colossian philosophy as teaching which comes from this world. If Arnold is incorrect regarding the στοιχεῖα, then one of the major planks for his view is uprooted.

Another key feature for Arnold's reconstruction is his understanding of ἐμβατεύω, for he sees a parallel here to initiation into the mysteries at Claros. Arnold demonstrates to my satisfaction that mystery initiation *may* lie behind the term ἐμβατεύω in Colossians, but I am doubtful that this is the most probable reading of the evidence. Once again it should be noted that the inscriptions at Claros are post-New Testament in date (2nd century A.D.). Furthermore, Arnold himself understands the words ἐμβατεύω as the object of ἐμβατεύω but in the mysteries the verb lacks the object. Lexically we know that the term may also be used to describe entering that does not involve initiation into the mysteries. Again, it seems striking that any specific language from the mysteries is lacking in the context in Colossians. The presence of ἐμβατεύω alone is not enough to persuade me that mystery initiation was involved. Given the clear Jewish features present elsewhere in the letter, other explanations of the term seem more likely. More evidence in Colossians is needed to show that it hails from the technical language of the mysteries. I thought Arnold's discussion of μυστηρίον was particularly interesting in this regard. He states that it is surprising that Paul uses the term when it was probably used by the opponents. But Arnold cannot point to a single instance in Colossians where μυστηρίον was a term from the Colossian philosophy (Col. 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3). The claim that ἐμβατεύω is a technical term from the mysteries would be more credible if a term such as μυστηρίον were associated with it.

Wisdom and knowledge are prominent themes in Colossians, and Arnold connects wisdom to magic. He detects such a connection in the Wisdom of Solomon (7:17-20), Psuedo-Philo (60:3), Josephus (Ant. 8.2.5), and the *Testament of Solomon* (*T. Sol.* 3:5; 22:1; see pp. 202-203 in Arnold). In these texts wisdom is applied against demons, or relates to incantations, exorcisms, or cures. I remain unconvinced, however, that a genuine parallel to Colossians exists. No specific link between wisdom and demons, incantations, exorcisms, or magic is evident. The very terms that would establish a connection between magic and wisdom are missing in Colossians. Instead wisdom seems to focus on living a godly life (Col. 1:9-11, 28; 3:16; 4:5). The only place wisdom appears in a polemical context is Col. 2:23, and in context the polemic seems to be against asceticism and food laws. No clear association between wisdom and magic can be demonstrated. Probably the most promising link is in the word $\mu\epsilon\rho\mu\bullet\sigma\sigma\sigma\omega\&\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}$, but even here the context suggests asceticism related to food laws, not demons and magic.

Arnold quite often reads too much into parallels. For example, he documents that words like philosophy, tradition, and honor relate to magic somewhere in the literature, and then concludes that such is possible in Colossians as well. I found such arguments to be consistently unpersuasive. What we need to see is *evidence from Colossians* that these terms are related to magic. Granted they may be related to magic elsewhere, but are they in Colossians? Is it not it instructive that the word $\text{H}\text{H}\bullet\sigma\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}$ is used, but not $\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}$? When Paul uses $\sigma\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}$ in Colossians, we do not find $\sigma\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}$ $\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}\text{H}$ as in the papyri or the mystery religions. I think it is quite a stretch to see a link between honor and the mystery cults in Col. 2:23.

Let me conclude by saying that I think that Arnold's book is a significant contribution to research. His primary work in inscriptions, amulets, and other literary sources helps us understand the world view of those living in Asia Minor in the first century. Nor do I doubt that some Christians dabbled in magic during the New Testament era. Nonetheless, despite the impressive argument made, probably the best one now for a syncretistic view of the Colossian philosophy, I still think a form of Judaism is the primary element in the Colossian philosophy.

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