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Elchasai and the Heresy of the Epistle to the Colossians

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(translated with machine tools by Neil Godfrey 2024)

Abstract: *So far, the exegetes' attempts at identifying the heretics in the Epistle to the Colossians have failed because they started from the unprovable assumption that the letter had originated in the second half of the 1st century. A better approach would take as its starting-point the parallels found in 2nd century history of religion, and proceed from there in order to finally come to a dating of that letter. A great many parallels between the Colossian heresy and the Jewish-Christian sect of Elchasai that came up in 2nd century clearly show that those groups are identical. Not only is the synthesis of circumcision and the cult of the στοιχεῖα, of which there isn't any analogy elsewhere in the history of religion, a feature of both heresies; one can moreover demonstrate it to be probable that Col. 2:18 presupposes knowledge of the Book of Elchasai.*

1. The Identity of the False Teachers

It wasn't long ago that the question of identifying the opponents in the Epistle to the Colossians was dominated by the alternatives "heterodox Jewish-mysterious-gnostic" or "heterodox Jewish-mysterious"¹. Times have changed. Even if the "gnostic solution" may still have one or another supporter, many exegetes, for good reasons, tend to prefer the second alternative and emphasize the Jewish component of the heresy².

¹ Hans-Martin Schenke/Karl Fischer, Introduction to the Writings of Paul and the Writings of Paulinism (2 volumes, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978) 1.171 - Schenke counts Bornkamm, Conzelmann, Lohse, Kümmel, Marxsen among the proponents of the first alternative – Percy, Hegermann, Lähnemann, however, among the proponents of the second view.

2 "Reconstructions that obliterate the Jewish element in the mixture seem to be the most precarious," John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (NTG; Sheffield: Academic, 1997) 54. See also James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 29: "In recent years the pendulum has begun to swing back toward recognition of more distinctively Jewish features in the Colossian threat..." Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Commentaries on the New Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 109: "The weakness of the theory that the opponents held some sort of gnosticizing syncretistic view has been amply shown by Dunn. In particular, there is certainly no evidence that Paul is polemicizing against dualism of some sort, which is characteristic of Gnosticism. It is far more plausible that he is dealing with some sort of ascetic Jewish piety."

2

Unfortunately, not much more can be said about the Colossian heresy beyond this still very general and vague labeling. It is difficult to combine the various, divergent findings into a "comprehensive view," let alone find clues to identify the heresy with a concrete form within the history of early Christian sects. Wright states in his commentary on Colossians: "No syncretistic religion has yet been discovered which had exactly this blend of things pagan and Jewish; nor is this a mere accident of our limited historical knowledge, since it is in fact difficult to conceive of even the possibility of such a blend"³. For A. Lindemann as well, the "syncretistic fusion of inherently incompatible religious or 'philosophical' tendencies" is "without direct parallel"⁴, meaning it has no relation to the other heterodox currents surrounding it in early Christianity⁵.

Such a result of historical-critical work seems strange, especially since we are quite well informed about early Christian heresies from the heresy reports of Hippolytus, Irenaeus, or Epiphanius. Could it really be entirely impossible to place the Colossian heresy within the spectrum of early Christian heterodox movements presented to us by the Church Fathers?

Anyone who is not satisfied with negative results must ask why the previously applied method has regularly led to these negative results. This may partly be because the profile of the false teaching has still not been accurately determined. Mainly, however, something else seems to be decisive: the widespread but never thoroughly justified view of many exegetes that the Colossian heresy must be a phenomenon of the 1st century AD. It is assumed that the author of the letter, if not Paul himself, was one of his students, who wrote it only a few years or decades after the master's death, in any case still towards the end of the first century⁶. Based on this assumption, scholars search for religious-historical parallels and contemporary sources within the presumed time frame of the text's creation—and find none or encounter later sources that only provide general hints but do not allow for concrete identifications. It is clear that this cannot be the approach of an unbiased historical investigation. Since there are no truly unequivocal points for the chronological classification of the Epistle to the Colossians, it would be more appropriate to widen the time frame and, conversely, proceed to date the letter based on religious-historical parallels and sources. This would indeed mean letting go of the unexamined axiom of the letter's origin in the first century—something few exegetes have been willing to do so far.

3 N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 24.

4 A. Lindemann, *Der Kolosserbrief*, 1983 (ZBK.NT 10, Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zurich, 1983), 84.

5 The list could be extended further, just to quote Angela Standhartinger, *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte und Intention des Kolosserbriefs* (NT.S 94, Leiden: Brill, 1999) 284: "The many identifications in the history of religion ... make it clear, in my opinion, that the allusions of Col. cannot be integrated into a coherent picture of a specific theological or philosophical direction."

6 James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, considers the Epistle to the Colossians (e.g. on the basis of personal references) to be the earliest Deutero-Pauline work and speaks of the "'brigde' character", 39. "In a post Pauline trajectory, Colossians would have to be placed very close to the beginning", 19.

3

In the following study, I would like to show that this approach, moving from the identification of religious-historical parallels to dating, can help break out of the current stagnation and shed clearer light on the question of the identity of the Colossian heresy. The religious-historical comparative material from the first half of the 2nd century that we have should also be taken seriously as a chronological indicator.

The crucial name of the person who left his mark on the Colossian heresy has already been mentioned: it is the Judeo-Christian heretic Elchasai. Bornkamm already introduced this name into the discussion in his equally rich and enlightening essay "The Heresy of the Epistle to the Colossians"⁷. However, at that time, it was done playfully. Bornkamm ultimately held the view that the numerous "correspondences between the Ebionite and Elchasaite teachings and the Colossian heresy were not sufficient to equate the latter with the former." His reasoning: "Every single feature, if we had more precise knowledge of the history of early Christian and late Jewish sects, could surely be substantiated to an even greater extent from a wealth of other systems"⁸.

7 G. Bornkamm.: *The Heresy of the Epistle to the Colossians* (Paulusstudien, Contributions to Protestant Theology Vol. 16, Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 21958) 139-156.

8 G. Bornkamm.: *The Heresy of the Epistle to the Colossians*, 150.

4

But it seems highly questionable to conduct scholarly exegesis, so to speak, in the subjunctive. Naturally, it would be desirable if we had evidence about the early Christian sect history of the 1st century beyond the material from the 2nd century. As long as we do not have this evidence, we are compelled to make do with the comparative material we have and to make the identifications that the available material obliges us to make. If this material comes from the 2nd century, we should consequently also place the Epistle to the Colossians chronologically where it belongs along with the opponents it combats: in the 2nd century⁹.

Bornkamm did not draw these conclusions and probably could not do so because they did not align with his ideas about the existence of a "Pauline school"¹⁰ immediately following the apostle. Nevertheless, his well-founded information about the numerous parallels between the

Colossian heresy and the Elchasaite teachings remains of lasting value, even where he mistakenly considered the latter to be "gnostic." Some of these parallels will be included in the following study, while others will be contributed from my own observations and may help to gain a clearer understanding of the identity of the Colossian heresy.

9 In his essay: The conflict between gnostic and ecclesiastical theology reflected in the Colossians Epistle (ZThK 61, 1964), H.M. Schenke also observed a connection between the false teachers of the Colossians Epistle and Elchasai: "... in concrete terms, one could well imagine the στοιχεῖα cult in accordance with the instructions of the Book of Elchasai on observing the 'evil stars of godlessness.'" In this context, Schenke quotes the instructions from the Book of Elchasai to beware of the "stars of godlessness." Unfortunately, this trail pointing to Elchasai and his followers is not followed any further by Schenke later on. Evidently, traditional prejudices about the age and origin of the heresy fought against by the author of Colossians get in the way. In any case, a few sentences later, Schenke draws the conclusion: "The heretics of Col are, after all, real Gnostics, early exponents of the one Gnostic movement, as we assumed and claimed above," 398. Probably because the Elchasaites can neither be considered early (= "around 70 AD") nor really Gnostic, Schenke has refrained from further drawing out the connecting lines between Elchasai and the heresy of the Colossians.

10 G. Bornkamm, Paulus (Stuttgart, Berlin, Cologne: 7th ed. 1993) 102.

5

Before we get to that, we must first more precisely define the profile of the Colossian heresy.

2. The Profile of the Colossian Heresy

The Colossian heresy is depicted roughly as follows based on the scattered information provided by the author of the Epistle to the Colossians.

1. The service to the στοιχεῖα by the false teachers is mentioned twice in the Epistle to the Colossians. Colossians 2:8 warns the readers against the teaching of the opponents:

Βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν·

Colossians 2:20 presents a similar argumentative structure to Galatians 4:9. While the Epistle to the Galatians argues that it is (at least theoretically) impossible to return to the service of the elements after receiving the knowledge of God, for the author of Colossians, it is unthinkable that the Christian, who has died to the elements of the world (through baptism), would impose regulations on themselves again:

Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε;

Colossians 2:8 shows more clearly than the corresponding parallels in the Epistle to the Galatians that the term τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου could not have been introduced by the author

himself but must have already played an important role in the "philosophy" of his opponents. If this were not the case, his argument would hardly have been understood by his readers.

6

Luz, who in his commentary on Colossians wants to understand the "elements of the world" as an interpretation of the author, sees in τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου a "phrase that should be put in quotation marks, referring to Galatians 4. What Jesus said to the Pharisaic ritualists and what Paul said to the Judaizing opponents in Galatia also applies to those whom the Colossians are dealing with"¹¹. However, even as an allusion to Galatians 4, the sentence would hardly be clearer, especially since it is not proven that the readers (or the author) knew the Epistle to the Galatians at all.

Indeed, the majority of New Testament exegetes today admit that στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου is a term used by the opponents. Even Vielhauer, who, with reference to the Epistle to the Galatians, strongly maintained that we are dealing with an interpretation of the opponents, cannot help but acknowledge, in light of the clear evidence in the Epistle to the Colossians, that this is "a fundamental concept of the opponents"¹².

Apart from the στοιχεῖα or angel worship, which we want to note in our list of profile characteristics under 1, the profile of the opponents fought by the author of Colossians includes other peculiarities, some of which coincide with those of the heresies fought in the Epistle to the Galatians, and some of which differ:

2. The false teachers apparently demand and practice the rite of circumcision and observe certain holy times like the new moon and the Sabbath (2:16). That the opponents of Colossians demanded circumcision can only be inferred indirectly from Colossians 2:11. Following the warning about the philosophy of the false teachers based on human tradition and στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου, Christ is presented antithetically as the fullness of deity, and it says:

Ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ ...

11 Luz, U., The Letter to the Colossians, in: Becker, J./Luz, U., The Letters to the Galatians, Ephesians and Colossians (NTD 8/1, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 220 - Hans-Martin Schenke/Karl Fischer, Introduction, 160.

12 Philipp Vielhauer, History of Early Christian Literature, (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1975) 193.

7

According to some exegetes, however, Colossians 2:11 should not be taken to imply a circumcision practice by the opponents¹³. Schmithals also considers such a conclusion to be "very bold"¹⁴. Luz believes that only polemical sections should be used to reconstruct the Colossian philosophy. Since the interpretations of the foundational beliefs in Colossians 2:9-15 have a "thetic character," it is not legitimate to draw any conclusions about the nature of the false teaching from them. However, this view is not tenable. The passage can certainly be

understood polemically. It is clear that in Colossians 2:11f, circumcision and baptism are delineated from each other. Unlike the traditional Jewish (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων) practice of circumcision, this is the true, the actual circumcision not done by human hands, through which the body of flesh is put off, buried, and the believer is raised by the power of God. What reason would the author of Colossians have had to make such a contrast and emphasize the opposition between baptism and circumcision if he had not been directly prompted by his opponents, with whom he had previously been contending? In other words, it is evident that the opponents practiced and demanded circumcision as a prerequisite for fulfilling the law, however interpreted, including Sabbath observance, observance of (Jewish) festivals (2:16), dietary regulations (2:16, 21), fasting (2:20), etc. It would be very strange if the latter were demanded without prior circumcision.

3. The fact that the opponents demanded the observance of the Sabbath, certain festivals, dietary regulations, and fasting along with circumcision is shown in Colossians 2:16 and 2:21-3:1. The false teachers refer to ancient traditions in all this (2:8, 22). But in the eyes of the author of Colossians, these commandments have only an appearance of wisdom. The self-satisfied piety, humility, and asceticism are worthless and only satisfy the flesh, that is, vanity.

Vielhauer speaks at this point of "ascetic observance," which makes the "dualistic character of the opponent's philosophy clear." This is supposed to be particularly shown in 2:23, which Vielhauer translates as "mortification of the body." Colossians 2:11 is also said to speak of the "putting off of the body of flesh," which Vielhauer interprets as "being freed from the bondage to ungodly matter and thus the purification of the self and its ascent into the Pleroma"¹⁵.

13 E. Käsemann: "It cannot be proven that circumcision was required", article: Colossians, in RGG3 vol. 3, p. 1728.

14 Walter Schmithals, *New Testament and Gnosis* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984) 70.

15 Philipp Vielhauer, *History of early Christian literature*, 194.

8

Such an interpretation, however, hopelessly overburdens the text. There are no indications that the opposing false teachers, in line with a gnostic dualistic worldview, saw matter as a god-opposing power. All the listed features of the false teaching can be explained by Jewish roots: the festivals "festival, new moon, Sabbaths" (2:16) are, as Luz points out, referencing Hosea 2:13, Ezekiel 45:17, and 1QM 2:4, a "biblical-Jewish triad." The dietary laws also have little to do with dualism but can be understood as Jewish dietary regulations and purity laws. The "putting off of the body of flesh" is not spoken of by the opponents but is an interpretation of baptism made by the author of the letter. And the "harsh treatment" (ἀφειδία) of the body (2:23) does not necessarily point to gnostic asceticism but forms a parallel to the "humility" mentioned shortly before and is thus apparently nothing other than a description of fasting¹⁶.

4. The author of Colossians refers to the opposing false teaching as "philosophy" in 2:8. It is widely accepted¹⁸ that we should not think of the scientific explanation of the world based on rational critical thinking of Greek philosophical schools, but rather of "various secret astronomical and natural-scientific wisdom"¹⁷. However, it is also disputed here whether the term comes from the opponents themselves or was introduced by the author of Colossians. While a majority of exegetes assume that the author picked up a term used by the opponents, others believe he used it disparagingly to judge the "human teaching." As σοφία, the teaching could, in any case, have been referred to by the opponents themselves. The formulation in 2:23 (ἄτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας) suggests that the author is responding to the opponents' claim that their teaching is wisdom.

16 Luz, U., *The Letter to the Colossians*, 217; cf. the Jewish and Jewish-Christian material presented by Gunther St. Paul's opponents on the subject of "ascetism", 95-133.

17 Wilhelm Lueken, *The Letter to the Colossians (The Writings of the New Testament, 4 vols., Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1907) 2.349.*

18 Philipp Vielhauer, *History of Early Christian Literature*, 193.

9

5. An opposing individual might play an important role (2:8, 18).

6. The opponent claims a pneumatic authority and appeals to visions (2:18):

μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύτω θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκὴ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ, ...

Points 5-6 will be further explained in section 4 along with the discussion of Elchasaite parallels for better understanding.

3. Elchasai and the Elchasaites

The oldest testimony about Elchasai¹⁹ is owed to Hippolytus²⁰. In his heresiological compendium *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, which was probably written at the beginning of the 3rd century, the contemporary and opponent of the Roman Pope Callistus (218-227) reports about an Alcibiades. He supposedly came to Rome during the time of Callistus (around 220) to drum up propaganda for his new gospel. This gospel was none other than that of Elchasai, who, according to Hippolytus, appeared in the third year of Trajan, i.e., in the year 100, and in the year 116, ἀπὸ Σηρῶν τῆς Παρθίας²¹, supposedly wrote a book of prophecies for his followers, the Sobiai (i.e., the Bathers, Baptists = Sampsaeans), in the original Aramaic language. The book, as Epiphanius later adds, was also read by Jewish Christians such as the Ossaeans, Ebionites, and Nazoreans²², and according to Origen, it supposedly fell from heaven²³. Its content, according to Hippolytus, was inspired by an angel, ὑπὸ ἀγγέλου, of enormous size,

who was accompanied by a female being of matching dimensions; the male being was called the Son of God, and the female being was called the Holy Spirit²⁴. As the parallel in Epiphanius "irrefutably attests"²⁵, this vision apparently belonged to the sect founder himself.

19 In the ancient and patristic sources, different spellings are encountered: "Elchasai(os)", "Elxai(os)", "Elkesai(os)", "Alchasaios" or "Elkesaiten" or "Helkesaiten". Here and in the following, I adopt the spelling suggested for practical reasons by Gerard P. Luttikhuisen: *The Revelation of Elchasai. Investigations into the Evidence for a Mesopotamian Jewish Apocalypse of the Second Century and its Reception by Judeo-Christian Propagandists* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985) 1: "Elchasai" and "Elkesaiten". See also Reinhold Merkelbach, *Die Täufer, bei denen Mani aufwuchs, Philologica, Ausgewählte Kleine Schriften* (Stuttgart und Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1997) 401ff.

Luttikhuisen's monograph is still fundamental. – From the older literature on Elchasai, reference should be made above all to Wilhelm Brandt, *El-chasai* (or *Elxai*), a founder of religion and his work, contributions to the Jewish, Christian and general history of religion in late Hellenistic times, (Leipzig 1912, Ndr. Amsterdam: Philo Press 1971); H. Waitz, *The Book of Elchasai, the holy book of the Jewish-Christian sect of the Sobaii*, in: *Harnack-Ehrung* (Leipzig: 1921) 87-104 – Schoeps, H.-J.: *Theology and History of Jewish Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1949) 325-334.

In A.F.J. In Klijn, *Elchasai and Mani*, *VigChr* 28 (1974) 277, as in Merkelbach, Elchasai is considered primarily from the perspective of his relationship to Mani.

20 Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 9.4, 13ff, 17; 10.29. Quoted from the edition by Miroslav Marcovich (PTS 25, Berlin: 1986) - cf. Epiphanius *Adversus haereses* (Panarion), *Elchasaiten*: 1.217.17-1.224.6 (1.19); Sampsæer: 2.314.23-2.317.2 (4.33) ; quoted from the edition by Karl Holl (GCS, Leipzig: 1:1915; 2:1922; 3:1933) – All fragments from the Book of Elchasai were collected by Gerard P. Luttikhuisen, *The Revelation of Elchasai. An older collection by A. Hilgenfeld*, in: *Hermae Pastor Graece* (editio secunda Lipsiae 1881).

21 Hipp Ref 9.13.1.5.

22 Epiph Haer 1.222.27 - 1.223.1 καὶ κέχρηται αὐτῷ τέσσαρες αἰρέσεις (1.19.5.4) 23 Eus Hist Eccl 6.38.

24 Hippolytus Ref 9.13.2.

25 Wilhelm Brandt, *Elchasai*, 9.

10

According to Hippolytus, the book of Elchasai contains a gospel proclaimed by Alcibiades as well²⁶, with which the sect founder wanted to confuse foolish Christians. The "gospel" of Elchasai, directed at already baptized Christians, primarily consists of the proclamation of a new forgiveness of sins for those who repent and wish to receive a second baptism. A baptismal formula later cited by Hippolytus confirms that the forgiveness of sins through this baptism primarily pertains to sexual sins of all kinds, such as sodomy, homosexuality, incest, adultery, and fornication. For the rigorist Hippolytus, who had previously ranted about his arch-enemy, Pope Callistus, the rebaptism proclaimed by Alcibiades following Elchasai is the real stumbling block. He sees in it the same lax morality that he had previously condemned in Callistus and the Callistians.

26 Hipp Ref 9.13.4: εὐηγγελίσθαι.

The baptismal formula cited by Hippolytus from the book of Elchasai has an interesting continuation. After invoking "the great and highest God and in the name of His Son, the great King," the baptized person is to

be cleansed and washed, and he shall call upon the seven witnesses recorded in this book as testimony: the heaven and the water and the holy spirits and the prayer angels and the oil and the salt and the earth (τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ καὶ τὰ πνεύματα τὰ ἅγια καὶ τοὺς ἀγγέλους τῆς προσευχῆς καὶ τὸ ἔλαιον καὶ τὸ ἄλας καὶ τὴν γῆν).²⁷

Noteworthy in this passage quoted from the book of Elchasai is the invocation of the seven oath witnesses: heaven, water, the holy spirits, the prayer angels, oil, salt, and earth. The passage in Hippolytus has two correspondences in Epiphanius, who also knows that among the Elchasaites there existed a group of seven witnesses invoked during washings. In both cases, it is clear that the witnesses invoked during the baptism could only be regarded as στοιχεῖα or elementa according to ancient understanding.

Indeed, they are referred to as such by Hippolytus in another part of his work! According to Hippolytus, the Elchasaites practiced their invocations and washings under the invocation of the στοιχεῖα: χρῶνται δὲ καὶ ἐπαιδαῖς καὶ δαιμόνων ἐπικλήσεσι καὶ βαπτίσμασιν ἐπὶ τῆ τῶν στοιχείων ὁμολογία²⁸.

Hippolytus uses the term in the same original sense as many other ancient authors when they refer to the fundamental substances from which their world believed the cosmos was composed, e.g., the four elements (fire, water, air, earth).

These elements, which were revered by the Elchasaites and invoked as witnesses during baptism, oaths, or invocations, are both cosmic and sacred in character, as noted by Brandt in his still informative book on the "religious founder and his work." Those with a cosmic character include water, earth, heaven, ether, wind, i.e., the ancient five elements that Elchasai could have learned from ancient philosophy. He replaced the fire of the Pythagoreans and Aristotelians with heaven because he apparently had a conflict with the fiery element. This rejection of fire, corresponding with the Ebionite hostility to burnt offerings²⁹, has rightly been seen as a reaction by Elchasai to the ancient fire cult, which was practiced in various forms in ancient Asia Minor, such as in the Parsisism influenced by India³⁰.

²⁷ Hipp Ref 9.15.2.

²⁸ Hipp Ref 10.29.3.1f .

²⁹ Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Theology and History of Jewish Christianity*, 328.

³⁰ Wilhelm Bousset, *Main Problems of Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1907, Ndr. 1973) 136.

The close affinity to water is not surprising for a representative of a typical baptist sect. According to the possibly somewhat exaggerated remark by Epiphanius, water was revered and even regarded as God in most Judeo-Christian baptist sects, such as the Cerinthians, Merinthians, Ebionites, Sampsaeanes, and Elchasaites. Specifically, regarding the Sampsaeanes, among whom a descendant of Elchasai named Marthana lived at the time of Epiphanius (alongside the already deceased Marthus), it is said: "They honor water above all and regard it as God, for they claim it is the source of life"³¹. The water as the original element of creation is also mentioned in the Judeo-Christian pseudoclementine literature³².

According to Brandt, the στοιχεῖα with a sacred character include bread and salt, i.e., those two elements that also played an important role in the communal meals of the Ebionites and beyond, even among the Therapeutae and Essenes³³. Their use in the oath formula is explained by Brandt as possibly attributing a harmful effect to bread and salt, in line with the invoked cosmic elements. He further references the Contestatio Iacobi, which, along with the preceding Epistula Petri, forms the prologue to the Clementine Homilies. In the originally Judeo-Christian and later Catholic reworked Epistula Petri, Peter requests James not to entrust his attached sermons to any unworthy or foreign person. After James gathers the elders, he responds in his Contestatio that Peter's request will be honored. Only after a six-year probation period should the "pious candidate for the teaching office, who as a circumcised believer (!) is faithful," standing by a river or a spring, take the following oath:

31 Epiph Haer 2,315.24 4.33.1.7); cf. also Anacephalaeosis 1.236.12-1.236.22 (2.30): The Ebionites are very similar to the Cerinthians and Merinthians, with whom the heresy of the Sampseers and Elchasaites partly agrees. ... They abstain from eating meat, and consider water to be God ... Finally, in summer and winter, in order to sanctify themselves, they perform ritual washings, as the Samaritans do.

32 PsClem Recg 6.8; PsClem Hom 11.24 .

33 Wilhelm Brandt, Elchasai, 19; cf. Philo VitCont 37.73.81

13

I call upon as witnesses Heaven, Earth, Water, by which all things are encompassed, and also the all-pervading Air, without which I cannot breathe (Μάρτυρας ἔχοιμι οὐρανόν γῆν ὕδωρ ἐν οἷς τὰ πάντα περιέχεται πρὸς τοῦτοις δ' ἅπασιν καὶ τὸν διὰ πάντων διήκοντα ἄρα οὐ ἄνευ οὐκ ἀναπνέω), that I will always be obedient to the one who gives me the books of the sermons and that I will not in any way hand over the books he gives me to anyone, nor will I copy them, nor will I pass on a copy, nor will I let them come into the hands of a copyist...³⁴

After considering all the ways to prevent the loss of the valuable writings, the candidate for the teaching office finally once again calls upon the previously mentioned four elements of Heaven, Earth, Water, and Air.³⁵

The section from the prologue of the Pseudoclementines is not only a remarkable piece of evidence for the prevailing fear in certain early Christian circles that their canon of sacred writings might fall into the wrong, i.e., opposing hands; it also shows that elements of Elchasaite

beliefs apparently infiltrated the pseudoclementine writings. However, in the oath of the Contestatio, only the classical four cosmic elements are mentioned, with fire again being replaced by heaven. Salt and bread are mentioned separately, apparently pointing to a communion that follows the oath.

34 PsCl EpPtr 2.2.

35 PsCl EpPtr 2.4.

14

An infiltration of Elchasaite elements into the theological worldview of other Judeo-Christian groups is also explicitly attested by Epiphanius, who speaks of a "connection" between the Ebionites and the teachings of Elchasai³⁶. According to Schoeps, the invocation of the witnesses in the Contestatio was already "Christianized" to some extent, while such an invocation in Elchasai's practice was "more than custom and ceremonial, but rather true θρησκεία," meaning true worship. Even monotheism was in a "dangerously softened state" with Elchasai. The "central deification of natural elements" in Elchasai's teachings was considered by the former Erlangen historian of religions to be part of the pagan component of the Elchasaite "religious mixture"³⁷.

In addition to the στοιχεῖα worship and the second baptism for the forgiveness of sins, the Elchasaites also demanded something further and decisive: circumcision and the associated adherence to the law, which was required by all Judeo-Christian groups.

That this was a core element of Elchasaite teaching is hinted at by Hippolytus, who quotes the Elchasaite Alcibiades:

He [Alcibiades] dangles the observance of the law as bait and asserts that new Christians must be circumcised and live according to the law (φάσκων δεῖν περιτέμνεσθαι καὶ κατὰ τὸν νόμον ζῆν τοὺς πεπιστευκότας)³⁸.

36 Epiph Haer 1.222.25-26 (19.5.4) Elchasaites and Ebionites influence each other, Epiph Haer 1.336.1-3 (30.3.2) and 1.356.16ff (30.17.5); Osseans associate with Sampsees and Elchasaites, Epiph Haer 1.226.16ff (20.3); 1.219.5f (19.2); the book of Elchasai is read by Ebionites, Sampsees and Osseans, Epiph Haer 1.222.27ff (19.5.5). - See John J. Gunther St. Paul's opponents and their background : a study of apocalyptic and Je-wish sectarian teachings (NT.S 35, Leiden: Brill 1973) 20.

37 Hans Joachim Schoeps, Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums, 330; Schoeps also notes that the στοιχεῖα-worship of the Elchasaites was "already" (!) combated by Paul in Kolossae, 329. - PsCl PsClem Hom 10.25, however, there is a warning against considering the elements to be God: αὐτίκα γοῦν τὰ πρῶτα τέσσαρα στοιχεῖα θεὸς εἶναι οὐ δύναται τὰ ὑπὸ ἄλλου γενέσθαι.

38 Hipp Ref 9.14.

15

A look at Epiphanius further makes it unmistakably clear that the circumcision demanded by Alcibiades as a sine qua non condition for adherence to the law goes back to Elchasai, who apparently already found it among the Ossaeans. The followers of the Ossaeans, to whom Elchasai initially belonged, "led," it is said, "a Jewish life according to the observance of the Sabbath rest, circumcision, and adherence to the law"³⁹. Besides the Sabbath, circumcision, and the law, other Jewish traits of the sect include the Qibla towards Jerusalem, i.e., the command to face Jerusalem during prayer. The typical Christian prayer direction towards the east (towards the rising sun) was rejected by Elchasai.

It was already mentioned above that rebaptism was at the center of the gospel proclaimed by Elchasai. Washings also played a significant role in the sacramental practice of his sect.

What Elchasai teaches about Christ is very peculiar and deviates from both Pauline and Catholic doctrine. From the vision quoted above, which apparently formed the beginning of the book of Elchasai, it was already clear that Christ (alongside his female counterpart, the "sister," the Holy Spirit) was considered an angel by the sect founder. This "degradation" of Christ to an angelic being is, however, also a characteristic feature in the Christology of Judeo-Christian sects of the 2nd century⁴⁰. What is unusual, however, is the Elchasaite doctrine of ensomatization, which Hippolytus attributes to Alcibiades but seems to trace back to Elchasai, as the subsequent section from *Refutatio 10.29* shows. This indicates the direction from which the sect founder may have derived his inspiration for his strange Christology: the doctrine of soul transmigration from Pythagoreanism, which likely also gave rise to the στοιχεῖα worship. In any case, Elchasaism proves to be a thoroughly syncretistic religious mixture, composed of Jewish, Judeo-Christian, and Orphic-Pythagorean (possibly also Parthian⁴¹) elements.

Especially the Christological concepts of the Elchasaites, together with the στοιχεῖα worship, have led many scholars since F.C. Baur to label them as "Gnostics" or "Judeo-Christian Gnostics." Even Schoeps, who vigorously opposes this entrenched but in truth misleading and incorrect terminology with regard to the Ebionites, calls the Elchasaites a "highly Gnostic sect"⁴², without further explaining how the features he qualifies as "Gnostic," such as στοιχεῖα worship and ensomatization Christology, deserve this designation⁴³. He would have done better to speak of syncretism rather than Gnosis, for the sect is syncretistic in any case, as their borrowings from Orphic-Pythagoreanism while simultaneously adhering to Jewish and Judeo-Christian elements prove. That they are also Gnostic is not equally evident. Some of the arguments Schoeps uses for his thesis that the Ebionites were "never Gnostics, but on the contrary, their staunchest opponents"⁴⁴, can also be applied to the Elchasaites. For instance, the Jewish belief in creation was self-evident to them, and Gnostic dualism was entirely foreign. Their belief in angelic powers was shared not only with Gnostics but also with Jews and other Judeo-Christians. Their explicit recognition of marriage distinguished them clearly from the Marcionites and most Gnostics. The legal orientation of Elchasaism was contrary to Gnostic antinomianism (or the occasionally present libertinism). Finally, the Elchasaites not only rejected but vehemently opposed Paul along with the other Judeo-Christian sects⁴⁵, whereas Paul was held in high esteem as the authoritative apostle by Gnostics and Marcionites.

39 Epiph Haer 1.222.14ff (19.5.1).

40 John J. Gunther, St. Paul's opponents, 236ff.

41 The question of the extent to which Elchasaitism also incorporated Parsist elements cannot be further pursued here.

42 Hans Joachim Schoeps, Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums, 325.

43 Criticism of this in Luttikhuisen, Revelation, 18, note 52. Luttikhuisen also complains about the lack of justification.

44 Hans Joachim Schoeps, Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums, 305f.

45 Eus Hist Eccl 6.38.1.11 τὸν ἀπόστολον τέλειον ἀθετεῖ.

16

According to the unanimous view of ancient witnesses, mathematical, astrological (again showing Pythagorean influence!), and magical practices played an important role for the Elchasaites, including magic words, incantations, and spells for the possessed and the sick⁴⁶.

46 Hipp Ref 10.29 ... They are proud of their astrology, their mathematics and their magical arts. They call themselves seers of the future.

17

The parallels that can be repeatedly discovered in the worldview of the Pseudoclementines and Elchasaite beliefs indicate that the Elchasaites apparently had a significant influence on the Judeo-Christianity of their time. This is also confirmed by Epiphanius, who mentions that Elchasai allied himself with other Judeo-Christian sects, such as the Ebionites, Ossaeans, etc., which were "bewitched" by his influence⁴⁷. Even though Schoeps tries to downplay the "connection" between the Ebionites and the teachings of Elchasai asserted by Epiphanius and only acknowledges it for the late "period of disintegration," the lasting impact of Elchasaite beliefs on the entire Judeo-Christianity of the 2nd century is unmistakable⁴⁸.

Little is known about the fate of Elchasaite beliefs. The connection with Manichaeism, suggested by the Fihrist of al-Nadim from the 10th century but often disputed in the past, was recently confirmed by a manuscript discovery, the so-called "Cologne Codex." This manuscript is a biography of Mani, from which it emerges that the founder of the great ancient world religion spent his youth with his father in the baptist sect of the Mughtasilah. Elchasai is named here, as in the Fihrist, as the founder (ἀρχηγός) of this sect⁴⁹. However, the nature and extent of Mani's influence by Elchasai are still disputed.

47 Eriph Haer 1.223.1 (1.5.4) ἐπειδὴ **θέλγονται** τῇ αὐτοῦ πλάνῃ

48 Hans Joachim Schoeps, Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums, 17: "Unfortunately, in all these chapters [of the Panarion] – but especially in the Ebiobaeian chapter – the characteristics of two very different religions – Ebionitism and Elkesaitism – have been mixed up, so that a totally false overall picture of Ebionitism emerges and one must first isolate the rather rich Ebionite components of this mixture." However, the program of "de-mixing" favored by Schoeps is under strong suspicion of bias. Schoeps, whose heart beats clearly for Ebionism, evidently wants to exclude from Ebionism the "gnostic" elements of

Elchasaitism that he finds unpleasant, in order to retain the ideal of a Judeo-Christian religion that has remained largely free of syncretic elements.

49 Klijn, A. F. J., *Elchasai and Mani*, 277.

18

Influences of the Elchasaites on Islam can also be demonstrated. The Sabians mentioned in the Quran⁵⁰ are presumably the Sampsaeans, who, as we know from Epiphanius, were verifiably influenced by Elchasai⁵¹.

The question of whether Elchasai was a historical figure has also been raised⁵². Skepticism might be prompted by the name itself, whose explanation is given by Epiphanius. He claims that the Elchasaites called their master "hidden power" because ηλ means power and ξαι means hidden, which would correspond to the Semitic writing חיל כסי: "hidden power." Just as the name of the Ebionites ("the Poor") was later derived by Church Fathers, always on the lookout for spiritual forebears, from a supposed heretical father named "Ebion" (Tertullian, Epiphanius), the Elchasaites, as worshippers of the "hidden power"—perhaps once a divine designation—might eventually have attributed a founder-prophet named "Elchasai." Nevertheless, given the large number of ancient witnesses, there is legitimate reason to believe that a prophetic founder figure with this name did indeed exist. It is most likely that he either adopted this name himself or received it from his followers. Brandt writes: "Just as, according to the canonical Acts of the Apostles (8:10), the followers of Simon Magus said he was 'the great power of God,' so the Elchasaites might have given their master the name 'the hidden power'... "⁵³. The existence of two descendants mentioned by Epiphanius also supports the idea that the sect founder Elchasai was a historical figure.

This provides a brief overview of the Elchasaite doctrine, which has already been sharpened at some points for the now-following investigation of the question of the opponents in the Epistle to the Colossians.

50 See Koran, Sura 2,62; 5,69; 22,17.

51 Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Theology and History of Jewish Christianity*, 334ff.

52 See also R. Merkelbach, *The Baptists with whom Mani grew up*, 403, note 8.

53 Brandt, *Elchasai*, 8.

19

3. Elchasai and the Colossian Heresy

1. If we understand the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Colossians 2:8 as an opponent's term, in the same sense as Galatians 4, the sentence presents no great difficulty. The author of Colossians takes up the opponents' claim of having developed a universal Christian teaching based on tradition and στοιχεῖα belief, representing the highest wisdom ("philosophy").

But with this accusation, the author could only have had the Elchasaite doctrine in mind. As we have seen, Elchasai's teaching attributed extraordinary significance to the cult of the elements, so much so that they could be invoked as oath witnesses during washings and immersion baths. Such cultic veneration of the elements, as attested, likely represented only the tip of the iceberg. Behind it must have stood a comprehensive cosmology with an extensive στοιχεῖα doctrine, which we can no longer reconstruct given the few fragments of the book of Elchasai we possess. We only know that astrology, mathematics, incantations, medicine, divination, etc., combined in Elchasai's teachings into a peculiar Christian universal science and religion, in which the followers recognized the highest "wisdom" (σοφία) (Hipp. Ref. 2.17) and which for this reason also deserved the name of a philosophy (in the ancient sense)⁵⁴.

However, Elchasai's teaching was not just a "philosophy" based on a cosmology "according to the elements of the world"; as a Judeo-Christian religious philosophy, it naturally also relied on the principle of tradition; as a "tradition of men," it was an interpretation of the law, which circumcision obligated. That Elchasai appeared as a scripture interpreter is hardly doubtful (cf. Epiph. Haer. 1.218.19ff = 19.1.8-9), even if he interpreted it in his own way and, with his interpretation, surely far exceeded the boundaries of orthodoxy in the eyes of a devout Jew. In doing so, he was no different from the representatives of other Jewish groups of his time. Of them, Hippolytus says in Ref. 9.28.3.1ff:

54 Heinrich Ewald, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (7 vols., Göttingen: 21859) 7.158, characterizes the teaching of Elchasai very aptly: "He [Elchasai] established a doctrine about all things in the world [emphasis mine]..." Even Augustine, in his *Enchiridion* (c.9), counts the **study of the elements** among the characteristics of philosophy.

20

Because of their special views, they bear special names. They adhere to the ancient tradition (τὴν ἀρχαίαν παράδοσιν διακρατοῦντες) and constantly debate what is clean and unclean according to the law...

An interesting, previously entirely overlooked hint of the existence of such a cosmological system within early Judeo-Christianity can be found in the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions, which have often been said to contain Elchasaite tendencies⁵⁵. In it, Peter unfolds the following doctrine:

"When God created the world, as the Lord of the universe, he appointed princes (principes = ἄρχοντες) over the various creatures, even over the trees, mountains, springs, rivers, and all things that he made, as we have told you ... Therefore, he set an angel as the prince over the angels, a spirit over the spirits, a star over the stars, a demon over the demons, a bird over the birds, a wild animal over the wild animals, a snake over the snakes, a fish over the fishes, a man over the humans, who is Jesus Christ⁵⁶."

It is clear that in this writing, influenced by the syncretistic, Elchasaite Judeo-Christianity of the 2nd century, we encounter precisely those ideas against which the author of Colossians contended. Against the image of a cosmos divided into different realms of dominion, where all

individual beings are under the rule of a divine archon, he directed his Pleroma-Christology. His Christ is—unlike the Christ of the syncretistic Judeo-Christians—not an individual being coexisting with and alongside other beings; rather, these beings have their existence only in and through him, as the whole fullness of deity dwells in him (Col 2:9).

Interestingly, in Colossians, the στοιχεῖα are indiscriminately placed alongside personally conceived angelic beings; στοιχεῖα, powers, authorities, and angels are ranked on the same level. This is naturally due to the fact that for the author of Colossians, the στοιχεῖα also have a personal aspect. This is shown in 2:9f, where the philosophy of the false teachers, based on belief in elements and human tradition, is antithetical contrasted with Christ as the fullness of deity and the head of powers and authorities. According to Lohse, the juxtaposition with Christ indirectly indicates that the στοιχεῖα are "personal and cosmic powers." The further context shows, according to Lohse, "that the world elements are precisely those demonic figures that want to exercise their oppressive rule over humanity (2:10, 15)"⁵⁷. Worship of personally conceived angelic beings is then explicitly mentioned in Col 2:18:

55 However, Waitz, *The Book of Elchasai*, takes a different view, emphasizing the contrasts; cf. Luttikhuisen, *Revelation*, 16ff.

56 PsCI Recg 1.45.

57 Eduard Lohse *Die Briefe an die Kolosser und an Philemon* (KEK 9,2, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 21977) 150.

21

ἡδεῖς ὑᾶς καταβραβεύετω θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἐόρακεν ἔβατεύων, εἰκῆ φυσιοῦενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ ...

As a parallel for this juxtaposition of seemingly purely elemental and personal powers, one might point to the Elchasaite invocation of the elements as oath witnesses. One of the cited invocations was addressed to "Heaven and Water, the holy Spirits and the prayer Angels, and the Oil and the Salt and the Earth." Here, too, the elemental powers (Heaven, Water, Oil, Salt, and Earth) are indiscriminately placed alongside the personal spiritual powers (holy Spirits, prayer Angels). This is only possible because the concept of στοιχεῖα encompassed both a material and an ideal aspect. The veneration was not for the matter itself, but for the divine-spiritual essence inherent in it, the respective numen or elemental spirit or angel that animated it. While the author of Galatians has more of the material aspect in mind (water, earth, etc.) and can speak of the πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα, the author of Colossians apparently views the στοιχεῖα more from the ideal aspect as spirit and angel beings. All of this, as mentioned, is not contradictory but completely in harmony with the Elchasaite texts, where this connection is already established, as in the oath formula cited above. Therefore, it is incorrect for Luz to defend his thesis by claiming that the opponents had nothing to do with the world elements and then continuing: "Rather, they worshipped angels; but at that time the world elements were not considered angels"⁵⁸.

58 U. Luz, *Der Brief an die Kolosser*, 218.

It is indeed true that the angel worship hinted at in Colossians is not of genuinely Jewish origin. Kümmel considers the "religious-cultic angel doctrine" advocated by the false teachers to be Hellenistic⁵⁹. Similarly, Wikenhauser states: "The angel cult, which is foreign to Judaism, probably points beyond Judaism"⁶⁰. While angel worship was mostly rejected by official Judaism⁶¹, it enjoyed great popularity in Jewish syncretistic circles, particularly where they were exposed to Parthian influence, as angel worship seems to have its roots in Zoroastrianism. It is certainly no coincidence that, according to Hippolytus, Elchasai is said to have received his book in Persia (Hipp. Ref. 9.13).

2. The matter of circumcision among the Elchasaites was already discussed on page 14. It was also noted that this naturally obligated one to the law. However, the nature of the Elchasaite observance of the law was quite particular, as hinted at by Hippolytus in Ref. 9.4, where he speaks of the "apparent law observance of Elchasai"⁶². In fact, Elchasai took certain liberties in interpreting the law, leading Epiphanius to claim: "Originally he [Elchasai] was a Jew with Jewish faith, but later he did not live according to the law." Instead, as Epiphanius continues, he introduced the worship of elements with salt, water, earth, bread, heaven, ether, and wind as oath witnesses, thereby significantly distancing himself from his Jewish roots. Other peculiarities of the sect were also incompatible with genuinely Jewish thinking: for example, the condemnation of sacrifices and their replacement by water baptism, the criticism of the Mosaic law (and possibly the prophets), and the acceptance of false pericopes⁶³. The specific targets of Elchasai's criticism of the law cannot be determined from the few surviving testimonies. It is only clear that Elchasai's circumcision obligated one to a law that had apparently little to do with Jewish law, which could lead to the impression reported by Epiphanius that Elchasai himself did not observe the law⁶⁴.

59 Werner Georg Kümmel, Introduction to the New Testament (Heidelberg: 171973) 297. Admittedly, he speaks immediately afterwards of "Jewish speculation about angels."

60A. Wikenhauser / J. Schmid, Introduction to the New Testament (Freiburg - Basel - Vienna: Herder 61973) 467.

61 H.O. Francis, Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18, StTh 16 (1962) 109-134: "Worship of angels within Judaism is not conceivable," quoted in Lohse, The Letters to the Colossians 175, note 2; cf. Wilhelm Lueken, The Letter to the Colossians 352.

62 Τίς ἡ καινὴ ἐπιθεῖα τοῦ ξένου δαίμονος Ἡλχασαί, καὶ ὅτι <ἐστὶ> σκέπη τῶν ἰδίων σφαλῶν τὸ δοκεῖν προσέχειν <τῷ> νόμῳ.

63 Eus Hist Eccl 6.38 The sect rejects certain parts of every scripture, but uses words from the entire Old Testament and all the Gospels.

64 Epiph Haer 1.218.8-9 (19.1.5): ἀπὸ Ἰουδαίων ὅρ ὡς ἐνός κατὰ Ἰουδαίων φρονῶν, κατὰ νόον δὲ ἡ πολιτεὺς ἐνός.

3. Parallels to Elchasaism have often been observed in the past. Lohse notes that the demand for the observance of festivals and the Sabbath is not justified by the Torah but cosmologically, because humans are "subject to the world elements through birth and fate." In this context, he refers to "the teaching of Elchasai, who instructed his followers to observe the Sabbath because it is one of the days that should be meticulously observed with anxious fear due to the course of the stars"⁶⁵, with reference to Hipp. Ref. 9.16.2.

Additionally, the high regard for specific dietary laws, purity regulations, and fasting among the Elchasaites can be explained partly by the Jewish origins of the sect and partly by its syncretistic character. For example, the vegetarianism practiced by the Elchasaites, as well as some other Judeo-Christians, is syncretistic. It is clearly attested by Epiphanius that the Elchasaites (like the Ebionites⁶⁶) were vegetarians⁶⁷. The related Sampsaeans also abstained from meat according to Epiphanius⁶⁸. The Judeo-Christian followers of Dositheus practiced an early form of veganism by rejecting eggs and milk, i.e., liquids of animal origin.

Judeo-Christian vegetarianism and the observance of purity regulations are also widely attested in the Pseudoclementines influenced by Elchasaism. The Peter of the Pseudoclementines seems to live only on bread, olives, and vegetables. Furthermore, he strictly observes the prescribed purity laws, washing his hands after touching strangers, before eating, after eating, and before praying⁶⁹. For him, abstinence and fasting are the most effective means against demons⁷⁰.

65 171, note 3; cf. G. Bornkamm, *The Heresy of Colossians*, 150. 66 Epiph Haer 1.352.4ff (30.15.3).

67 Epiph Haer 1.220.3 (19.3.6)

68 Epiph Haer 1.315.14 (33.1.4)

69 PsCI Hom 8:15; 12:6; on the vegetarianism of Jewish Christians, see Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Theology and History of Jewish Christianity*, 203.

70 PsCI Hom 9:10.

24

The extent to which contact taboos, which were common among the Ebionites⁷¹, also played a role among the Elchasaites cannot be said with certainty, but it is highly probable due to the close connection with their Ebionite relatives. In the Cologne Mani Codex, edited by Hinrichs and Koenen, it is mentioned that it was customary among the Elchasaites to ritually wash fruits and vegetables⁷².

Colossians 2:21ff is closely related in content to Philippians (3:16) and Romans (16:17), where the author, in even stronger polemical terms, opposes the Judeo-Christian idolization of the "belly," i.e., dietary laws.

4. As we noted above (1), the Elchasaite doctrine corresponded in every respect to what was expected of a philosophy in antiquity. With its various branches, including astrology,

mathematics, incantations, medicine, and divination, it provided its followers with a key to a universal interpretation of the world. It does not explicitly appear from the little we have from him that Elchasai himself referred to his doctrine as philosophy. However, Hippolytus seems to have known about it, as he mocks this claim at several points in his account of Elchasai. For example, in 9.16.1, he ironically exclaims: ὦ σοφίας ἀμίμητου καὶ ἐπαιδῶν δυνάμεως πεπληρωμένων· - "Oh, the inimitable wisdom and the powerful incantations!" Also, in 9.17, Hippolytus once again ridicules the wisdom of Elchasai, which supposedly surpassed all the wisdom of the Egyptian sages and even that of Pythagoras. The subsequent sentence reveals that Elchasai was ranked by his followers among other great philosophers such as Pythagoras, Thales, Solon, Plato, and other Greek sages. There is no doubt: Elchasai was regarded by them as a philosopher, and his doctrine as philosophy! His doctrine is what the author of Colossians denounces as empty deceit when referring to the philosophy of his opponent.

71 Cf. e.g. PsCI Hom 7.4: ἔστιν δὲ τὰ ἀρέσκοντα τῷ θεῷ τὸ αὐτῷ προσεύχεσθαι αὐτὸν ὄν αἰτεῖν ὡς πάντα νόμῳ κριτικῶ διδόντα τραπέζης δαι ὄνων ἀπέχεσθαι νεκρᾶς ἢ γεύεσθαι σαρκός ἢ ψαύειν αἴματος
Josephus Bell 2.119 of the Essenes who washed their hands after touching strangers.

72 A. Hinrichs and L. Koenen, A Greek Mani Codex, ZPE, 5 (Bonn:1970) 144-45; see Gunther St. Paul's opponents, 140.

25

5. In the Epistle to the Galatians, there are some passages that many exegetes believe suggest that an individual may have played a special role in the agitation. Galatians 5:10 and Galatians 5:7 speak of a "troubler" (ταράσσω) and a τις, whose identity remains unknown. Similarly, in Colossians, there are several τις passages. Colossians 2:8 warns against a τις who seeks to captivate the congregations with "philosophy" and empty deceit (ὁ συλαγωγῶν). Colossians 2:16 also contains a warning against a τις who enforces regulations regarding food, drink, festivals, and Sabbaths. Colossians 2:18 warns the Colossians not to let anyone (μηδεὶς) deprive them of their reward. Who is this individual?

Colossians 2:8 suggests that this is a person who will appear in the future, as the author says: "See to it that no one takes you captive" (Βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται Ind. Fut.). Colossians 2:16 is similarly structured with its sequence of τις and ὑμᾶς. However, instead of a verb in the future indicative, it uses an imperative present κρινέτω.

Colossians 2:8 gives the impression that the author of Colossians wanted to put a future prophecy in the mouth of his apostle and warn the congregation about the appearance of a still-coming false teacher. It is quite possible that the author, aware of the temporal distance he assumed between himself and the apostle, played with the idea of portraying his apostle as a prophet of future events, without carrying this through consistently⁷³.

In any case, the τις that the author of Colossians warns his congregation about can only be one person, as the previous explanations have shown: the sect founder and Christian false teacher Elchasai. The warnings of the apostle refer to him—and to his book!

6. This perspective should also be considered when addressing the much-discussed exegetical problem of Colossians 2:18:

μηδείς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύτω θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ = "No one should deprive you of your prize, who delights in humility and the worship of angels, puffed up without reason by his fleshly mind, based on what he has seen during his 'entry' or 'ascent' (into the heavenly realm)."

73 See also Angela Standhartinger, *Studies on the Origin and Intention of the Epistle to the Colossians*, 284.

26

The obscure and linguistically challenging passage has given rise to various speculations about the nature of the "entry" mentioned here, which is apparently associated with a visionary experience. Wikenhauser states: "The passage 2:18... must be understood to mean that the followers of the sect boasted of ecstatic experiences and that an initiation rite was used when they were admitted into their community"⁷⁴.

The above translation, written following A. Fridrichsen⁷⁵ and Blaß-Debrunner § 154, is one of several possible translation variants. Further variants discussed include the following (a–d):

(a) Lohse connects ἃ ἑώρακεν to the preceding ταπεινοφροσύνῃ and θρησκείᾳ (cf. 3:6), "regardless of the different grammatical gender of the referents"⁷⁶: "No one should condemn you who delights in humility and the worship of angels, as he has seen them at the initiation..." The τῶν ἀγγέλων could then be interpreted either as Genitivus objectivus or Genitivus subjectivus. In the latter case, favored by Francis and Zahn⁷⁷, the angels would not be the object but the subjects of worship. The vision could then refer to a heavenly worship service of the angels, which the visionary had observed. In the former case, assumed by Lohse and the majority of exegetes, it generally refers to the performance of an initiation rite, to which the term "entering" (ἐμβατεύων), frequently used as a technical term in this context, would point. In this scenario, the initiate would have experienced and performed the worship of angels "also in sensory experience" during the initiation, as Lohse suggests: "as he has seen them at the initiation." However, Lohse does not provide an answer to how what the initiate saw in a preliminary visionary experience during the initiation would have been realized in the later worship service.

74 A. Wikenhauser / J. Schmid, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 467.

75 A. Fridrichsen, *ΘΕΛΩΝ Col 2,18*, *ZNW* 21 (1922), 135-137.

76 E. Lohse, *The Letters to the Colossians*, 177 note 3.

77 F.O. Francis, *Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18*, *StTh* 16 (1962), 126-130; – cf. E. Lohse *The Letters to the Colossians*, 175 note 2.

27

(b) Also discussed was the translation proposed by Dibelius: "entering what he has seen." In this case, ἃ ἑώρακεν would have to be seen as the object of ἐμβατεύων. After the initiate has observed sacred symbols, i.e., had a preparatory "vision," he is then supposed to have entered what he had previously seen upon entering the sanctuary. However, this translation, which tries to do greater justice to ἐμβατεύων as a technical term in the language of mysteries, was later abandoned by Dibelius himself for various reasons⁷⁸.

(c) According to Schenke⁷⁹ and other proponents of the Gnostic thesis, it is not necessary to see ἐμβατεύων as a special expression of the language of mysteries. Instead, ἐμβατεύων refers to the "entering" during the postmortem ascent of the soul. The meaning of the sentence here is: The (Gnostic) visionary enters what he previously saw in the vision. However, Colossians 2:18 refers to the living, not the dead.

(d) Following Preisker, Luz and others hold the view that ἐμβατεύων means "to investigate" (cf. 2 Maccabees 2:31). It suggests that the opponents in Colossae had visions (perhaps of angels?) and attempted to laboriously penetrate their meaning. Preisker: "If one follows the way of the Colossian false teachers, he must continually wait for such moments of visionary sight, only to then laboriously investigate what he has seen in such ecstasy"⁸⁰. This is a (religious)psychologically very unlikely interpretation.

(e) A linguistically correct and content-wise plausible translation is the one first proposed by Fridrichsen, which connects ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων with the following εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ:⁸¹ "vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind on what he has seen during his initiation (or the visionary entry into the upper world)."

78 M. Dibelius, *Message and History*, Collected Essays II, ed. by G. Bornkamm (Tübingen: 1956) 62f. - See E. Lohse *The Letters to the Colossians*, 177, note 4.

79 H.M. Schenke, *The Conflict between Gnostic and Church Christology in the Mirror of the Letter to the Colossians*, 391-403.

80 ThW II, 532.

81 A. Fridrichsen, *ΘΕΛΩΝ*, 135-137 - See E. Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians*, (EKK12, Zurich and Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1976, 21989) 124; Blass- Debrunner §154 and the parallels listed there, Rom 6.10, Gal 2.2

With this translation, we are now able to combine some of the observations made so far and draw the crucial conclusion for understanding Colossians 2:18:

If we specifically relate ἐμβατεύων in this context to the ascent of the visionary into the upper world; if we further note that the author repeatedly formulates his warning against false teaching in the singular, as a warning against a τῖς or μηδεὶς; and if we finally recall that the book of Elchasai began with the description of a vision and that the depiction of visions likely constituted a significant portion of the book, the particular focus of the author's polemic becomes

immediately clear: The charge of arrogance is not directed at the opposing Christians as a whole, but rather it specifically targets the author of that writing which, due to its author's claim to pneumatic authority, was held in high esteem by many Christians and received widespread admiration: the author of the book of Elchasai!

Such an explanation would also resolve the difficulty that previous interpretations have faced. These interpretations required assuming that the author of Colossians was opposing an entire collective of Christians who boasted of their visionary experiences. While it is possible that such a phenomenon existed and that visionary experiences occurred as a collective phenomenon among entire groups⁸², it is more likely that the focus here is on a single prominent individual, the author of a book, to whom the charge of arrogance is directed. The singular formulation at this point supports this interpretation. From the little that remains of the book of Elchasai, the profile and high self-confidence of the charismatic visionary and pneumatic become clear. This individual, likely respected and acknowledged in Pauline communities for his special charismatic gifts and teachings, drew the ire of the author of Colossians. The author aims his polemic against the groundlessly puffed-up visionary who boasts of his visions (and even claims to know the measurements of Christ and the Holy Spirit).

82 So have most exegetes. Gunther St. Paul's opponents, 272, recalls that the mystics were prepared to receive visions by fasting and quotes for comparison Herm vis 3 10:6 "Every prayer requires a humble mind; fast therefore and you will receive what you desire from the Lord". Gunther: "Similar methods may have been used by the false teachers in Colossae".

29

5. Conclusions

The striking parallels between the Colossian heresy and Elchasaite teachings have shown that we are apparently dealing with the same group. Apart from other similarities, both heresies are primarily characterized by the unique synthesis of circumcision and στοιχεῖα worship, for which there is no other historical analogy. Additionally, Colossians 2:18 clearly presupposes knowledge of the book of Elchasai.

There can be no doubt that Elchasai and his sect belong to the sectarian history of the 2nd century, given the precise chronological data provided by Hippolytus⁸³. If the Epistle to the Colossians takes a stand against the Judeo-Christian syncretism of Elchasai, it is clear that it must also be dated to the first half of the 2nd century, presumably a few decades after the appearance of the book of Elchasai, i.e., around 130⁸⁴-160⁸⁵. Not only the linguistic-stylistic and theological evidence but also the religious-historical findings argue against the thesis, still held by some exegetes today, that the Epistle to the Colossians is an authentic letter of the Apostle Paul from the mid-1st century⁸⁶.

83 Schoeps

84 If the book first appeared around 116/17, ca. 130 is appropriate as a terminus post quem - taking into account the slow spread of literary works in antiquity.

85 Theoretically, an even later terminus ante quem would be conceivable, since the first witnesses to the existence of the Epistle to the Colossians (Canon Muratori, Irenaeus) only appear towards the end of the 2nd century.

86 The consequences that arise from the new dating of Col. for the chronological and theological classification of the Epistle to the Ephesians, whose author evidently used Col. as a model, cannot be discussed in detail here. In no case can the conventional dating of Eph. at the beginning of the 2nd century be taken as an axiom. This is not the case because the dating of the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp, in which some exegetes believe they can prove the influence of Eph, is by no means certain. The age and authenticity of the letters of Ignatius have been questioned for good reasons in recent research, for example by Hübner, Lechner and recently also Schmithals (in a posthumous article in the ZAC), or have been dated later by other exegetes who maintain that they are authentic, so that the naive recourse to Ignatius and Polycarp as supposedly reliable indicators for determining the age of some New Testament writings is no longer possible.

30

Another cherished notion might be shaken. What about the origin of the letter from a "Pauline School"?⁸⁷ It is clear that at the time the Epistle to the Colossians was written, there could be no personal teacher-student relationship between the unknown author and Paul, as the concept of the Pauline School in the narrow sense, developed in analogy to ancient philosophical schools, presupposes⁸⁸. Apart from that, it is worth questioning whether it is historically meaningful to insist on a phenomenon whose existence is owed solely to the combinatorial imagination of some exegetes and which— as Ludwig himself honestly admits— "cannot be demonstrated due to the lack of historical material"⁸⁹. This is not to say that there were no followers of Paul in the 2nd century. However, the students who can actually be historically proven are not those whom modern exegetes likely think of when they speak of a "Pauline School." The most faithful disciples of the Apostle and guardians of his legacy in the 2nd century were none other than Marcion and his followers.

Historically speaking, the Epistle to the Colossians would already be situated within the characteristic tension of the 2nd-century Christianity between Marcionitism on one side and (syncretistic) Judeo-Christianity on the other, as we know it primarily from the so-called pseudoclementine literature. It is quite possible that the Epistle to the Colossians emerged precisely in these Marcionite circles, presumably as a reaction to the confrontation with Elchasai and the appearance of his book, and was presented according to the custom of the time as a "Pauline legacy."

87 See, for example, Angela Standhartinger, *Colossians and the Pauline School*, NTS 50 (2004), 571-593 - *Studies on the origins and intention of the Colossian Epistle* (NT.S 94, Leiden, Boston, Cologne, 1999).

88 See the Lohse student Helga Ludwig, *The author of the Colossian Epistle - a student of Paul* (Diss. Theol., Göttingen, 1974); who assumes that the Pauline School was founded during the apostle's lifetime (193-223).

89 Helga Ludwig, *The author of the Colossian Epistle - a student of Paul*, 231.

31

Of course, the conclusion may seem too bold to some who have readily followed the argumentation thus far. I mention it only because the thesis of a Marcionite origin of the pseudepigraphic writing could explain something that has remained unaddressed: the undeniable and long-recognized "Gnostic" coloring of the letter. It is indeed indisputable that many terms in Colossians have a Gnostic ring to them⁹⁰. Exegetes like Schenke and Schmithals are also correct in noting that the author thinks along Gnostic lines in some theological aspects⁹¹.

This could, among other things, be evidenced by Colossians 2:14. The idea of erasing a χειρόγραφον through the cross is also found in two Nag Hammadi texts. In the Interpretation of Knowledge (14.1ff), the Son of God, sent to his "little brothers," is said to remove the χειρόγραφον after proclaiming the Father's edict⁹². The Gospel of Truth may also be familiar with such a motif⁹³.

When one understands how much Gnosticism and Marcionitism—despite their differences—resemble each other in language and theology, it becomes clear that what some exegetes considered "typically Gnostic" in the Epistle to the Colossians could indeed also be Marcionite. This would fit well with the previously suggested origin of the letter from the context of Marcionitism⁹⁴.

90 H.M. Schenke, *The conflict between Gnostic and ecclesiastical theology in the mirror of the Colossian letter*; *ibid.* Introduction, 159.

91 H.M. Schenke, Introduction, 163 - W. Schmithals, *New Testament and Gnosis*, 78f.

92 ... when the great son was sent to his little brothers, he spread (30) the edict of the father and proclaimed it, contradicting the universe. And he removed the certificate of guilt, that of condemnation. And this [is] the edict that existed: "Those who made themselves (35) slaves were condemned in Adam. They were brought out of death, they received forgiveness for their sins, and they were redeemed ...

93 EvVer 20: That is why Jesus appeared; he put on that book; (25) he was nailed to a piece of wood; he nailed the Father's decree to the cross. Oh, what a great and sublime teaching! The passage is, however, obscure. There is no mention of the destruction of the χειρόγραφον, but rather of a public presentation of the father's edict according to Inter 14.30ff.

94 The anti-Gnostic (in truth anti-Marcionite) passages in the Christ Hymn could also be explained in this way, namely as later orthodox corrections or interpolations (Col 16.18 were notoriously missing in the Marcionite Apostolikon – cf. Tert Marc 5.19).

32

But all this can and should only be hinted at here. It is quite possible that other exegetes may draw different conclusions regarding the theological origin of the letter from its redating. My primary concern at the conclusion is to establish that the author of the Epistle to the Colossians is almost certainly targeting one opponent: the Judeo-Christian syncretist Elchasai and his book, which was circulating in Christian communities at the time the letter was written.