

be used for a long time and, because it is complete, balanced, and judicious, it will be beneficial to those of diverse theological views.

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OTIS COUTSOUMPOS

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

*The Colossian Syncretism* can perhaps best be situated against the backdrop of the ongoing controversy surrounding Colossians—not merely in relation to such general introductory issues as authorship, authenticity, original addressees, or audience, but more in terms of the specific factors and forces that lie behind the syncretistic “philosophy” (2:8-19) against which the author of Colossians (for Arnold it is Paul) is inveighing. The work under review should also be placed alongside Arnold’s earlier Aberdeen dissertation, *Ephesians: Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians in Light of Its Historical Setting*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge University Press, 1989). We find “intertextual echoes” of the latter volume in the former precisely because “the seeds of the present study [*The Colossian Syncretism*] were planted and took root” during Arnold’s earlier investigation of Ephesians (v).

In an Introduction, a General Conclusion, and three Parts (comprised of nine chapters), Arnold provides us with a highly informative piece of scholarship. The work is well organized, moving us from general background information that is grounded in the magico-cum-religio-cultural traditions of a relatively obscure city like Colossae and its environs, traditions that tended to foster angelolatrous belief and behavior, to a more focused study of Colossians itself—in particular, two passages: (1) the Christological poem/hymn of 1:15-20 with its timely stress on the supremacy of an all-sufficient Christ, and (2) the pericope which deals specifically with the false or syncretistic philosophy itself (2:8-19).

Arnold’s basic thesis is that, contrary to the Gnostic and other hypotheses that have been tried, “the beliefs and practices of the opponents at Colossae best cohere around the category of what might loosely be called folk religion” (5) with its stress on trinkets, amulets, a mumbo-jumbo-like use of language, and other apotropaic magic-related practices and paraphernalia. To buttress a well-argued thesis, he quarries from relatively little known angel inscriptions, magical texts and archeological data relevant to Asia Minor as a whole. His primary sources cover the papyri, amulets, and lead curse tablets and include both the non-Jewish and the Jewish. Examples include: inscriptions from Claros and Notion; the cults of Apollo, Men, Theos Hypsistos, Cybele, Attis and Isis; the Book of Tobit, the Testament of Solomon, the Sephar Ha-Razim and the Hekhalot literature. Interestingly (but not as surprising for the reviewer as, seemingly, it appears for Arnold), what emerges from a scanning of these and other relevant sources is that basically, “Jewish magic appears quite similar to pagan [I prefer to say: non-Jewish] magic” (59). And under the rubric of the “pagan” are to be found some Egyptian magical belief and behavior-systems with distinct tinge of the Jewish—systems in

which both Moses (believed by some to be the magician *par eminence*) and Michael, the angel, feature rather prominently in their supposed power to protect fearful folk from the darker side of fate.

When it comes to the Colossian philosophy itself, Arnold shows correctly that that philosophy was itself a syncretistic amalgam of Jewish, local, and Christian elements; and that Paul's high Christology is part and parcel of his concerted attempt to come to the rescue of those Colossian Christians who had fallen prey to a faith-eroding folk philosophy that stressed, among other things, the right performance of certain dietary and days-observing rites.

Not only is Arnold's book a pleasure to read in terms of the tone of the text, the scope of the study or the coherence of his case, but his book is also typographically pleasing to the eye as well. Mine caught only three little slips: on two occasions, the dittographical duplication of the definite article (235 and 237, the first paragraph in each case) and, philosophy, in lieu of, philosophy (243, line one of Conclusion).

Writing in an African context where "syncretism" is discussed as an ever-present phenomenon (not just among the Mayans of Mexico whom Arnold mentions *en passant* [234f]), this reviewer would be remiss if nothing were said, in closing, about the whole issue of "syncretism" itself. Query: is syncretism, i.e., the meeting and merging of elements of both old and new religious worldviews, totally avoidable—whether in Africa, Asia, the world of the West or within the New Testament itself? With recent studies stressing the Jewishness of both Jesus the Christ, and Paul, the Christian, perhaps the old hermeneutical and homiletical tendency to define and defend *metanoia* as the total abnegation of the old and the whole-hearted embracing of the new should be abandoned.

Conversion, in any meaningful sense, perhaps should be likened more to the incomplete metamorphosis of the *Periplaneta americana*, the cockroach, than to the complete metamorphosis of the butterfly. In my view, the Colossians were not unique in their attempt to incorporate the old into the new (or is it the other way round?). To varying degrees, Christians in East, West, North, and South, have done, and continue to do so. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the mixing of superstitious and Christian elements should be limited to the level of the common folk as Arnold's study suggests. Elites are not entirely immune to this tendency, in my opinion. The Colossians themselves however, veered off course when their meeting and merging of old and new eventuated in the undermining of the supremacy of the all-sufficient Christ. And it is that type of syncretism from a Christian perspective that is to be considered intolerable—then and now.

Again, Arnold's book makes a good read and is highly recommended.

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Botterweck, Johannes, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Vol. 8. Translated by Douglas W. Stott. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. 584 pp. \$45.00.

Volume 8 of the *TDOT*, from *lakad* to *mōr*, comes as a welcome addition to