

Christ, Salvation and Eschatology from Colossians: Developing a response
to the Melanesian concept of *Gutpela Sindaun*

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A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
University of Otago
Dunedin, New Zealand

21st June 2019

Abstract

This thesis explores the Melanesian concept of '*gutpela sindaun*' (the good life), and its influence on Melanesians in their response to the Christian teaching of salvation. *Gutpela sindaun* is a life of spiritual and material wholeness, which is regarded as immediately available. My argument in this thesis is that the Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking is influencing many Melanesian Christians to embrace the versions of gospel that promise spiritual and material prosperity. The literature review shows the influence of *gutpela sindaun* thinking on many Melanesians' expression of dissatisfaction with their salvation experience in Christ and a search for versions of gospel that promise a prosperous life without suffering. To respond to *gutpela sindaun* thinking, I chose Paul's Letter to the Colossians where he responded to an alternative teaching that was propagating another form of salvation experience. To establish a link between Colossians and Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking, I constructed a 'cultural affinity' methodology as well as exegetical, theological, hermeneutical and critical contextualisation principles. I also brought to this discussion my own cultural knowledge.

In Chapter 2, I explore the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. It is ingrained in the Melanesian primal worldview, culture and religion and was an impetus for Melanesians' response to the coming of Europeans and Christianity. I also discuss the subsequent emergence of Melanesian indigenous movements popularised as cargo cults, of independent churches and new sects and splinter groups in the established churches in recent decades. I argue that *gutpela sindaun* thinking is a key motive for embracing the new sects offering spiritual and material prosperity teaching today.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I explore the Colossian teaching. In Chapter 3, I discuss the Colossian philosophy and Paul's response from Colossians 2:8-23. I argue that Paul's thinking about both christology and soteriology undergird his polemic against the Colossian philosophy. A wrong view of Christ held by those promoting the Colossian philosophy has direct implications for their experience of salvation. In Chapter 4, I discuss the Colossian poem found in Col 1:15-20. I argue that the poem emphasises the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption and is the basis for assuring the believers about the sufficiency of Christ for their salvation. In the Letter, Paul draws on the poem in what he says about both theology and practice. In Chapter 5, I discuss some terms used in Colossians. These terms have to do with themes similar to the teaching of the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the way the teaching and themes of Colossians relate to, and offer a response to, the challenges *gutpela sindaun* teaching brings to Melanesian believers. Firstly, the motifs of the poem can be seen as presenting Christ to Melanesians as their ultimate hero. As such his divine identity, and roles as creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the whole cosmos, show how fully, richly and openly he satisfies the understandings that drive the Melanesian search for *gutpela sindaun*, fulfilling that search at a new level. Secondly, through his death and resurrection, Christ reconciled all things to God, including both human beings and the whole creation. The emphases of the Letter's reconciliation soteriology on life and relationship with God through Christ are explored as they relate to key Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* themes. Thirdly, major features of the inaugurated eschatology of Colossians are shown to relate to the present-oriented aspects of *gutpela sindaun* with the 'now-but-not-yet' aspects of the Colossian eschatology offering a constructive antidote to the teachings of the new movements in Melanesia today.

In the Conclusion, the themes and concepts used by Paul in his response to the Colossian philosophy that promised to take the salvation experience to another level are applied to the Melanesian situation. These themes and concepts address similar themes and concepts of *gutpela sindaun* thinking, showcasing that Christ has fulfilled the Melanesians' hope of *gutpela sindaun* centred on their culture heroes.

Abbreviations

- ABR – Australian Biblical Review
 BDAG – W. Bauer and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000). 3rd Edition.
 CBQ – Catholic Bible Quarterly
 ExpT – The Expository Times
 GTJ – Grace Theological Journal
 IBMR – International Bulletin of Missionary Research
 IRM – International Review of Mission
 JBL – Journal of Biblical Literature
 JETS – Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
 JMS – The Journal of Multicultural Society
 JPH – The Journal of Pacific History
 JSNT – Journal for the Study of New Testament
 JTI – Journal of Theological Interpretation
 JTS – Journal of Theological Studies
 MAIR – Missiology: An International Review
 MJT – Melanesian Journal of Theology
 NASB – New American Standard Bible
 NIV – New International Version
 NKJV – New King James Version
 NRSV – New Revised Standard Version
 NTS – New Testament Studies
 SBT – Studies in Biblical Theology
 SJT – Scottish Journal of Theology
 St VTQ – St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly
 TRINJ – Trinity Journal
 TEV – Today’s English Version
 WTJ – The Westminster Theological Journal

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Acknowledgements

The opportunity to do doctoral studies came as a result of God's call on my life and my family. God who called us in the beginning is faithful to his calling and I want to acknowledge His faithfulness and grace throughout the whole duration of my PhD studies. The journey has not been easy for my family and me. There have been many challenges along the way but God who called us is faithful to see us through every circumstance. To God be all glory, honour and praise forever and ever.

The opportunity to do PhD studies in NZ came through a scholarship from Otago University. I could not have secured the scholarship if it wasn't for the support and recommendations from the leadership of Christian Leaders' Training College (CLTC) in Papua New Guinea and many others who were part of the whole process. My heartfelt thanks to you all.

The Otago University scholarship made it possible for my family and me to move to NZ to take up my PhD studies. I acknowledge CLTC for meeting all the cost of our travel documents and airfares to NZ. In NZ, the stipend we received from the University scholarship was not sufficient to meet the total living cost and other associated costs which saw CLTC NZ to support us until Langham Partnership gave me a scholarship. Langham Partnership through LeaDev-Langham NZ come on board as co-sponsors and through its sponsorship that I have been able to complete my doctoral studies. While my family and I were still looking for additional support, we were graciously assisted by Russell Education Trust. Thank you all for your support.

In NZ, my family and I found new friends and Christian family who became a pillar of support and encouragement. We are grateful to God for so much love and support from many Christians in Dunedin. Before we arrived, they contributed everything needed to furnish our house. For this we are grateful. The Cornerstone International Bible Church took us in and made us feel welcome and supported us right to the end of my studies. A special thanks to Peter and Jessica Crothall who became my prayer partners and supported my family and me in various ways.

To CLTC staff, students and workers from Banz, Lae and Port Moresby campuses and to all our extended family, and church in PNG who kept us in their thoughts and prayers, I acknowledge your partnership. For this journey, though it may seem like my journey, is in fact our journey.

Regarding my thesis, my greatest gratitude goes to my two supervisors, Professor Paul Trebilco and Dr. John Hitchen who walked with me throughout my research journey. I couldn't have asked for anyone better than to have you both as my supervisors. I owe it all to you both for challenging and encouraging me to keep going. Both combined their intellectual and contextual abilities to challenge and inspire me in the writing of this thesis. I am grateful to Lydia Johnson for proofreading the thesis.

Last but not the least to my family. To my wife Ruby, and my two children Immanuel and Irene who have been part of this journey with me. They made a lot of sacrifices behind the scene to allow me to stay focus on my studies. You have been a daily source of inspiration and motivation in this journey that we embarked on as a family.

George Mombi
June 2019

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Melanesia is one of the south-western sub-regions of the South Pacific, along with its Pacific regional neighbours, Micronesia in the north and Polynesia in the east.¹ Melanesia is comprised of Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and the Papua Province (formerly Irian Jaya) of Indonesia.² Portuguese explorers led by Ferdinand Magellan³ were the first Europeans to venture into this part of the Pacific Ocean and sight various islands in what came to be called Melanesia, but it was Spanish ships that first came ashore on these islands inhabited by dark-skinned people, in 1513.⁴ In 1528, Saavedra anchored in Manus, or the Admiralty Isles.⁵ In 1567, Alvaro de Mendanade Neira led an expedition to locate the Isles of Solomon.⁶ It was from this point that opportunities for the colonial enterprise began.⁷ Later, in 1832, the French navigator Jules-Sebastien-Cesar Dumont d'Urville named this island region "Melanesia" (meaning "black islands" in Greek), referring to the skin colour of the inhabitants of this region of the South Pacific.⁸

For these South Pacific islanders, religion was already a way of life, and the same was true for the Micronesians and Polynesians well before European contact. Religion gave hope to Melanesians about life both in the here-and-now and in the future, before the arrival of the colonial powers and the introduction of Christianity into the region.

¹ See Figure 1, p. 5.

² I have included Indonesian Papua because the original inhabitants are Melanesians and there were occurrences of cargo cult movements amongst them.

³ See Robert Langdon, "Ferdinand Magellan," in *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Brij V. Lal and Kate Fortune (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 151.

⁴ Robert Langdon, "Spain and Portugal in the Pacific," in *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Brij V. Lal and Kate Fortune (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 150.

⁵ Garry W. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 141.

⁶ Langdon, "Spain and Portugal in the Pacific," 150. Trompf, however, states that it was in 1595 that a Mendana-led expedition reached the Isles of Solomon. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 141. But according to Langdon, this was Mendana's second expedition, which led to his death. Langdon, "Spain and Portugal in the Pacific," 151.

⁷ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 141.

⁸ Darrell Whiteman, "Melanesia, Its People and Cultures," *Point 5* (1984): 86. Another description of Melanesians is the "dark skinned, frizzy-haired people, who live on Pacific Islands to the north and northeast of Australia. Together with the Papuans, they form the Oceanic Negroid division of humankind. The Melanesians live in part of coastal New Guinea, especially in the Southeast, and in most of the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides [Vanuatu], New Caledonia, and Fiji." *The World Book Encyclopaedia* (Chicago; Field Enterprise Educational Corporation, 1976), 656. We do not limit the term to only coastal PNG, but use the term generally to include all of PNG. See also Manfred Ernst, "Globalization Process in the Pacific Islands," in *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Manfred Ernst (Suva, Fiji: Pacific Theological College, 2006), 58-9; also "Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* online, February 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography>.

The Christian missions began to make their presence felt as early as 1546,⁹ but active mission activities were delayed for at least three hundred years.¹⁰ It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that missionary endeavours experienced growth and expansion in the Melanesian region.¹¹ The Christian mission to bring the Pacific Islands under the banner of Christ started in Polynesia¹² and Micronesia, and moved westward towards Melanesia. The London Missionary Society (LMS) trained Tahitian and Tongan teachers to open the mission frontier in Fiji in the 1830s. Then, under the vision and leadership of John Williams, Cook Islands and Samoan teachers set foot on Erromanga and Tanna (Vanuatu) in 1839-40. In 1840, Samoan teachers were dropped off on the Isle of Pines (New Caledonia). In 1848, two German missionaries arrived on the western end of the island of New Guinea, known as Irian Jaya (West Papua). The last frontier was New Guinea (PNG).¹³

Although Catholic missionaries brought Christian teaching to Woodlark Island (PNG) in 1847, Christianity did not find a foothold there until twenty-three years later. Some Polynesian (Loyalty Islands and Cook Islands) teachers set foot on the Papuan coast between 1870 and 1872,¹⁴ followed by the European missionaries – Samuel Macfarlane (1871), A. W. Murray (1871), William George Lawes (1873) and James Chalmers (1877).¹⁵ This was approximately ten years before the British and German administrative presence began on the mainland and outer islands of New Guinea. The civil government and the missions worked side by side to civilise and evangelise the Melanesians. However, it was the Christian missions that exercised stronger control over the islands.¹⁶ Their influence can be seen in the rise of the so-called cargo cults or millennial movements which

⁹ Francis Xavier, a Jesuit priest, arrived in the Moluccas in 1546. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 141.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹¹ For the history of Christian missions in the South Pacific, see the trilogy by John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania* (Geneva and Suva: WCC and USP, 1982); *Footsteps in the Sea: Christianity in Oceania to World War II* (Geneva and Suva: WCC and USP, 1992); and *Where Nets Were Cast: Christianity in Oceania Since World War II* (Geneva and Suva: WCC and USP, 1997). See also Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 141.

¹² Catholic and Protestant missions were established in Polynesia during the first half of the nineteenth century. See Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 142.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 142-3.

¹⁴ See John Hitchen, "Training Tamate: Formation of the Nineteenth Century Missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers" (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 1984), 32-3.

¹⁵ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 206-7.

¹⁶ Trompf highlights the fact that there were problems which the missionaries encountered, but at the same time the missionaries were able to influence the indigenes through their abilities to mediate peace between various warring groups and through the giving of gifts. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 146. Trompf noted Ruatoka, a Rarotongan missionary, who went with Motuan converts in 1878 and stopped the armed men from killing the miners. *Ibid.*

interpreted Christian teachings¹⁷ in a way that validated the ideology of Melanesian eschatology. The first written report of cargo cult movements in 1855 comes from West Papua.¹⁸

The London Missionary Society, Wesleyan Missionary Society, Roman Catholic Orders (who made an earlier unsuccessful attempt to set up missions in 1848),¹⁹ the German Lutheran Mission, and the Anglican Church had all begun mission work in PNG between 1872 and 1891. With the Protestant groups agreeing to work in different geographical locations, by the beginning of World War II these missions, together with the more recently arrived Seventh Day Adventist Mission and the Unevangelized Fields Mission,²⁰ had virtually penetrated the whole coastal areas of PNG.²¹

After the Second World War, many more Evangelical and Pentecostal missions made their way to PNG and spread the gospel to newly opened frontiers, such as the Highlands. Up to the present time, Christianity is the dominant religion in PNG and Melanesia. Christianity has virtually taken over and replaced every aspect of Melanesian religion. Regardless of Christianity's dominance and influence, the belief in ancestors, spirits and magic (sorcery and witchcraft), for the purpose of ensuring a prosperous life, still influences the lives of many Melanesians.

This religious ambience has made the region in recent times, particularly since the 1980s, conducive for the emergence of new religious sects and splinter groups in PNG and other parts of Melanesia, promising a superior form of Christianity to the believers.²² The

¹⁷ Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 106.

¹⁸ See John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults* (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 14-5.

¹⁹ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 181-2. Compare with Philip Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea," in *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Ernst, 99.

²⁰ The Unevangelized Fields Mission later changed its name to the Asia Pacific Christian Mission (APCM).

²¹ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 206-52.

²² Covenant Ministries, which is also known as Life in the Spirit Ministry, is a case in point. Its founder, David Dian Warep, who is linked to Prophet Jonathan David from Malaysia, "preach[ed] that if you give yourself completely to God then God will give to you abundantly in return. If you give everything to God, then God will meet all your spiritual and physical needs." Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea," 120. From personal knowledge, there are new sects such as Reform Ministries and Covenant Ministries International (succeeded from Christian Revival Church) which have entered the religious scene in PNG. Many of the founders and leaders of these sects and splinter groups have been indoctrinated and influenced by teachings and practices promising a superior Christian life of tranquillity. They originate especially from North America, Australia, New Zealand and Asia, and resonate, at least superficially, with traditional Melanesian beliefs. The New Zealand influence, for instance, is seen through some Papua New Guineans like Mosa Putumla, who studied at the International School of Ministry run by New Life Ministries in Christchurch, NZ, who returned after studies and started Rhema Family Church in 1996. See Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea," 127. A similar case is seen in the Solomon Islands. Alfred Alufurai, a son of the first local Anglican bishop, after graduating from Pacific Theological College in Suva, Fiji, returned and introduced charismatic activities which were opposed by the Archbishop. However, with the support of the

claim made is that if one keeps these new teachings and practices faithfully, one will reach a supra-spiritual life and will experience spiritual and material breakthroughs which will amount to *gutpela sindaun*, which, in neo-Melanesian or Tok Pisin²³ means ‘the good life.’

Gutpela sindaun implies a life of perfection and wholeness in every aspect, both spiritually and physically. It is a vision of life where pain, loss, and all kinds of suffering are absent. I will reserve my discussion of *gutpela sindaun* for Chapter 2. The point here is that many Christians from Protestant and historic Pentecostal denominations²⁴ are attracted to these new teachings and they are either leaving their denominations to join the new sects, forming their own groups, or are pressuring their clergy to adopt these sects’ teachings and practices.

The emergence of these new sects and splinter groups, whose teachings somewhat parallel the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, is not a new trend. Melanesian religious history reveals that the formation of indigenous Melanesian movements popularised as cargo²⁵ cults was a result of Melanesians’ encounters with Western civilization and Christianity. The welcoming and embrace of Western culture and Christianity, and the subsequent formation of the so-called cargo cult movements, was with a view to realising and experiencing *gutpela sindaun*. The recent religious developments are a repetition of history, a continuing search for *gutpela sindaun*. This time, the history-in-the-making relies on teachings and practices based on selected scriptures regarding wealth and health that are at home with the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. This teaching can be called the *prosperity gospel teaching*.²⁶ Prosperity gospel teachings reject suffering as part of the Christian life, and thus suit the Melanesian view of *gutpela sindaun*.²⁷

Melanesian Christians, coming from the background of ancestor worship and the invocation of spirit powers with the aim of achieving *gutpela sindaun* in one’s present life,

International Convention of Faith Churches in Australia he started the Rhema Family Church. These churches are linked to some of the independent pastors (televangelists) in the United States such as Kenneth Copeland Ministries. Manfred Ernst, “Solomon Islands,” in *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Ernst, 191.

²³ Tok Pisin is the main *lingua franca* spoken in PNG and is often referred to as “Neo-Melanesian.” Tom Dutton, “Tok Pisin,” in *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Brij V. Lal and Kate Fortune (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i, 2000), 72-3. Tok Pisin is similar to Bislama, the *lingua franca* of Vanuatu (Dutton, “Bislama,” in *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia*, 73-4), and Tok Pijin, the *lingua franca* of the Solomon Islands (Dutton, “Solomon Islands Pijin,” in *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia*, 76).

²⁴ By historic Pentecostal denominations, I am referring to the Assemblies of God, Four Square, Apostolic and Christian Revival Crusade denominations.

²⁵ Cargo means manufactured goods or, more generally, material possessions.

²⁶ See J. Norberto Saracco, “Prosperity Theology,” in *Dictionary of Mission Theology*, ed. John Corrie (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 322; and George Mombi, “Impact of Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God Churches in Papua New Guinea,” *MJT* 25, no. 1 (2009): 32-58.

²⁷ See Chapter 2 below.

have found prosperity gospel teaching appealing. At the same time, the prosperity gospel challenges the Christian gospel of salvation from sin, and suffering as part of Christian life. This challenge is seen in the testimonies of those leaving the historic Protestant and Pentecostal denominations to join the new sects and ministries, who say that they used to live in sin but not anymore.²⁸ This scenario sets the backdrop to this study and leads to my thesis statement.

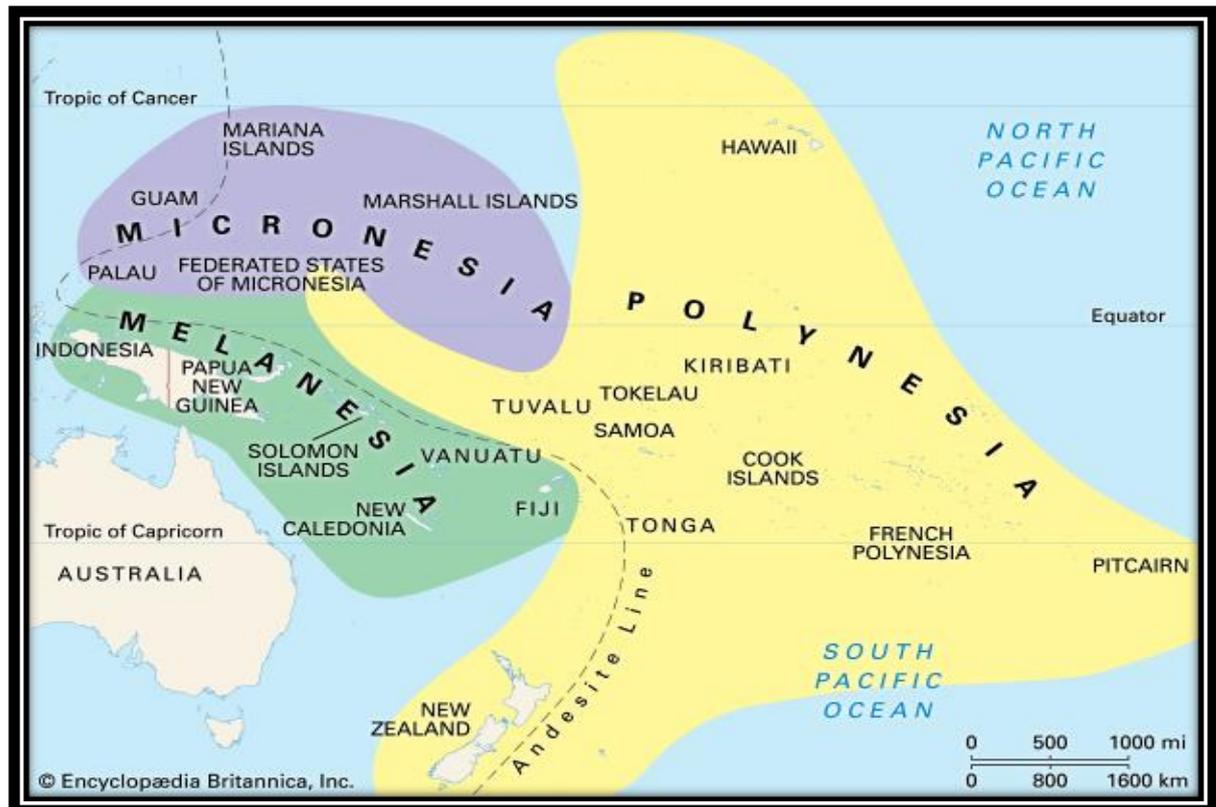


Figure 1: Map of Oceania showing the three sub-regions: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia (downloaded from Google Maps: www.google.maps. Maps of the South Pacific)

1.2 Thesis Statement

This research explores the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* (the good life), and how it influences the Melanesian understanding of Christian salvation. *Gutpela sindaun* is the

²⁸ See Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea," 120-1. Serving as a faculty member at Christian Leaders' Training College of PNG from 2011 to May 2015, I have heard numerous accounts of students having to deal with Christians from historic Protestant and Pentecostal denominations leaving to join the new sects and ministries, who testify that they had never truly known God or experienced the power of the Holy Spirit until they joined the new sect or ministry. One of the common phrases used by one of the groups located within the vicinity of the College is *Spirit i tok* (the Spirit says). What this phrase means is that they will not do anything unless they hear the Spirit telling them to do so. Even the church services are unplanned or unstructured because they do not want to grieve God's Spirit by doing anything that is contrary to the Spirit's lead. When they meet for services, no one takes the lead and no one preaches unless the Spirit says so.

object of the aspirations of many cultural groups in Melanesia. The aspiration for *gutpela sindaun* is deeply rooted in the Melanesian myths and worldview and permeates Melanesian culture and religion. This worldview understands life in its inception as perfect in every aspect. Life at creation was one unified whole, both physically and spiritually. This ideal life was lost due to ancestral failures; however, it is expected to be restored at the return of the ancestors. Many Melanesian cultures and religions were centred in this belief in a lost golden age and its future restoration.

It is essential for this study to understand more fully the tenets and key concepts of *gutpela sindaun* that influence Melanesian beliefs and lifestyles today and so, *gutpela sindaun* will be discussed at length in Chapter 2. We are also concerned to grasp how these *gutpela sindaun* concepts might have influenced Melanesians' response to the arrival of Europeans and the Christian Gospel. We are particularly concerned to understand more fully the contribution of *gutpela sindaun* to alternative religious beliefs which Melanesians embrace instead of, or after accepting for a time, the Christian Gospel brought by the missionaries and upheld in the established churches. Our special interest is in the new wave of professedly Christian alternative movements which, by their emphasis on the immediate satisfaction of material desires, appear to have much in common with *gutpela sindaun* beliefs and expectations (not unlike the earlier adjustment movements commonly called cargo cults).

Our primary concern, on the basis of this enriched understanding of the cultural yearnings embedded in *gutpela sindaun* thinking, is to develop a biblically grounded response to the challenge of *gutpela sindaun* concepts that are drawing established Christians towards these new alternative teachings. I have chosen, therefore, to explore whether the message of the New Testament (NT) Letter to Colossians offers insights and principles that can assist us in responding to the resurgent interest in *gutpela sindaun*. I have selected Colossians as a key biblical source since that Letter was written to address new teachings, with some apparent similarities to key aspects of *gutpela sindaun*, in a comparable situation where Christian believers were being enticed to turn away from the apostolic gospel they had embraced to follow apparently more attractive alternative religious beliefs.

1.3 Research Questions

In order to develop a contextual theological response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, this research will explore the nature and influence of *gutpela sindaun* and then

focus on the study of christology, salvation and eschatology in Colossians, in search for answers to these questions:

1. What is *gutpela sindaun*?
2. How does *gutpela sindaun* thinking influence the Melanesian understanding of the Christian gospel?
3. What responses does the teaching of the Colossian Letter give to *gutpela sindaun* thinking about the gospel?

1.4 Literature Review

Much has been written about the religious scene in Melanesia and the wider Pacific, but my focus is on Melanesia, and PNG as the test case. One of the topics that has been discussed in theological forums, not to mention anthropology and other disciplines, is Melanesian religion and the Melanesian concept of salvation or *gutpela sindaun*. From the wealth of material available, I have chosen six publications for review that discuss the Melanesian view of salvation. In each case I will summarise the views of the selected authors' relating to our teaching questions. Five of the selections are from the discipline of theology, and one is from anthropology. I will begin my literature review with the theological studies and end with the anthropological study. Two of the theological studies are from expatriate missionaries who have served in PNG, and three are from two indigenes. One indigene published two related articles which I will review together. The anthropological selection is from an expatriate anthropologist who studied the Urapmin people of PNG.

1.4.1 John G. Strelan – *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults*²⁹

John Strelan's views are of significance for our thesis and can be summarised as follows: In anthropological and sociological literature, many of the indigenous movements in PNG are described as "nativistic, prophetic, adjustment, millenarian and messianic,"³⁰ but they are popularly known as cargo cults. The term cargo or *kago* in neo-Melanesian or Tok Pisin refers to everything that is materially necessary for a good life.³¹ According to Strelan, in

²⁹ John G. Strelan, *Search for Salvation: Studies in the History and Theology of Cargo Cults* (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹ These include things such as "food, clothing, and other goods, economic development, money, technological advancement, release from oppression, knowledge, peace, social justice, status [and so on]." *Ibid.*, 11.

theological terms *kago* is a synonym for what world religions refer to as salvation.³² Cargo cults are “the external, ritualistic expression of genuinely indigenous religious beliefs and hopes which existed long before the arrival of the Gospel.”³³ Historically, the government and the church have used the term ‘cargo cult’ pejoratively to speak of any and every movement that did not meet their “criteria for the ‘right’ way of achieving the good life.”³⁴

Studies have shown that not every movement had cargo as its goal.³⁵ Cargo cults are about the “Melanesian concepts of power, status, wealth, and the good life. [There is an] expectation of a radical change in the social, economic, and even the cosmic order. There will be new life, a new life-style, a new world which will be patterned after the way things were thought to have been before, in the beginning.”³⁶

According to Strelan, cargo cults and cargo beliefs are an integral part of the Melanesian religious system, and cargo cult ideologies are derived from its myths. To explain present conditions and to express hope for a better future, cargo cults make use of these myths from the past in order “to make sense of the present realities and to give hope for the future.”³⁷ This tendency to return to origins is seen in messianic and millenarian movements across the world, including Melanesian cargo cults, and thus these movements are known as ‘religions of return’ which “have as their goal ‘salvation.’”³⁸ As religions of return, these movements “embrace such things as deliverance from the present trouble and oppression, peace, wholeness, healing, health and well-being.”³⁹ In Melanesia, cargo cults are a “Melanesian version of the search for salvation.”⁴⁰

Strelan asserts that cargo cults are people’s quest for identity and are essentially anthropocentric and sociocentric. As sociocentric, cargo cults are not primarily about individuals but are concerned with group salvation.⁴¹ Individuals participate as members of a collective group. The search for salvation is societal, a communal salvation that embraces all creation. The understanding is that creation will be transformed, and the living will be united with their ancestors.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 10.

³⁵ For instance, the Paliu Movement, which was about political, social and religious reforms. Ibid., 35.

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ Ibid., 62.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 63.

⁴¹ Ibid., 83.

This communal view of salvation fits well with the cargo cults' organisation under the leadership of a 'big-man' or prophet who was assumed to possess "secret knowledge necessary for making salvation a reality."⁴² At the same time, "the gaining of salvation [in the cargo cults] depends upon the society's ability to create conditions which will induce the ancestors to play their decisive part in bringing about a restoration and renewal of all things."⁴³ Proper relationships with each other and with the ancestors, the spirits and the material world are prerequisites. These relationships are controlled by the concept of *lo* (law, custom), which regulates every aspect of life. If *lo* is fulfilled, there is a chance for salvation to be realised.⁴⁴

As anthropocentric movements, cargo cults accord the ancestors (regarded as men)⁴⁵ a central place in rituals and worship. It was through their ancestors that Melanesians lost their identity. The identity Melanesians lost is one of power, status, wealth and a good life of peace and harmony. The ancestors are believed to be alive on the other side of life and are considered part of the living community. They "hold the key to the good life"⁴⁶ because they have gained access to the secret to a good life. They share with the living the blessings and benefits of the good life that they have attained.⁴⁷ The ancestors are the only ones who can "resolve the identity crisis in which Melanesian man finds himself."⁴⁸ Melanesians believe that their ancestors "will inaugurate the golden age, the age of salvation."⁴⁹

The salvation envisioned here is not after-death or after-life oriented. It occurs in the here and now; it is a pragmatic, concrete, this-worldly salvation which involves every known social structure of the society. It entails freedom from every impediment of life, the regaining of human dignity, the re-ordering of relationships, and balance in social structures.⁵⁰ It is a cosmic re-ordering of all life,⁵¹ creating life that is fruitful, peaceful and harmonious.⁵²

⁴² Ibid., 67.

⁴³ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 81.

⁵¹ The cosmic reordering of life refers to the local cosmos or one's immediate known world.

⁵² Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 83-4.

Strelan's discussion defines cargo cult movements in a number of ways. First, as noted above, Melanesian cargo cults are salvation movements that seek physical and material wholeness and the reordering of social structures and the cosmos. Cargo cult movements are not seeking salvation from sin and death, as understood in mainstream Christianity. This raises questions such as: What is the Melanesian concept of sin? How do the cargo cult movements understand the Christian teaching of salvation from sin and death, and the relationship with God through Christ? What does the New Testament and Colossians in particular, teach about physical and material salvation and the reordering of the cosmos? These are important questions which will be considered in this thesis.

Second, Strelan asserts that in Melanesian religions it is our human ancestors who are responsible for the restoration of salvation.⁵³ Elsewhere he states that the ancestors will be led by a messianic figure or a folk hero.⁵⁴ Is it going to be a human ancestor or folk hero who is responsible for restoring *gutpela sindaun*? There are some cultural groups in PNG (like the author's) who traditionally believed in a folk hero or primordial being who was responsible for creating the world and bringing about salvation or *gutpela sindaun*. This being was expected to return at some point and restore *gutpela sindaun*.

There are other beings, whom I will refer to as "superhuman beings," with innate abilities, who died yet remain with the people as ever-active spirit powers. These superhuman beings are invoked for *gutpela sindaun* in the present. I will refer to the folk heroes and superhuman beings as "culture heroes" given their association with each cultural group. I will further distinguish them as "departed culture heroes" and "dead culture heroes." The term "ancestor" is reserved for human ancestors (the distant and recent dead). The dead culture heroes and ancestors played a preparatory role for the departed culture hero to return and restore *gutpela sindaun* to its golden past. I will discuss this further in Chapter 2.

Strelan also points out that salvation or *gutpela sindaun* is something to be experienced here and now and not in the afterlife. There is considerable writing about this because it is not only about pragmatic salvation in the present, it is also about time. How do Melanesians understand time? If the Melanesian concept of time is not correctly understood, there will be a fair degree of misunderstanding of the Melanesian conception of pragmatic salvation in the present, as well as that which is anticipated to be realised at

⁵³ Ibid., 67, 74-5.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 11.

the return of the primordial being. In Chapter 2 I will explain the Melanesian understanding of time in relationship to *gutpela sindaun*.

1.4.2 Joshua K. Daimoi – “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage from an Indigenous Evangelical Perspective”

Again we summarise Daimoi’s views as follows: Daimoi, in one section of his PhD thesis, discusses the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. Prior to this discussion, under the section “Basis of Melanesian Religion,” he states that Melanesians traditionally believed that their world “was created and bequeathed to them by their creator spirits or ancestors.”⁵⁵ Therefore, their world bears the imprint of spirit powers that control the fertility of the environment. This belief makes Melanesians see their world as religious and spiritual. They believe that the total cosmic order to which they relate makes their communal “religious experience a holistic encounter with the totality of life.”⁵⁶

Melanesians’ holistic view of life is depicted as both theistic and bio-cosmic and both are “concerned with the search for pragmatic meaning or abundance of life.”⁵⁷ In their religious experience, Melanesians ask pragmatic questions. That is why the traditional Melanesian thinking about *gutpela sindaun* is “earth-bound, or human centred. The people look to this world to provide them with abundant life or fullness of life, or *gutpela sindaun*.”⁵⁸

In discussing *gutpela sindaun*, Daimoi writes that “salvation is concerned with good, harmonious, or peaceful relationships between the people in the community, the ancestors, and the environment to which the people belong.”⁵⁹ As noted above, Melanesians understand *gutpela sindaun* or salvation in relation to their ancestors. They view their ancestors as providers or channels of *gutpela sindaun*. Melanesian communities have “looked to the ancestors for this *gutpela sindaun* because salvation is related to the concepts of time, space, history, and *lo* [law/customs] which are directly related to the ancestors.”⁶⁰

The opposite of *gutpela sindaun* is *i stap long hevi* (having problems). In the minds of Melanesians, calamities are associated with the activities of the spirits. When misfortune occurs to individuals or to the community, the first question people ask is, ‘Who did it?’

⁵⁵ Joshua Kurung Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage from an Indigenous Evangelical Perspective” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sydney, 2004), 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

This is because Melanesians associate sicknesses and misfortunes “with the activities of the spirits, ancestral and other spirits.”⁶¹

Traditionally, in order to free the person or the community from sickness or calamity, a priest performs certain rituals, like the Sentanian priest⁶² who burns coconut husks for a sick person and asks the ancestral spirit to protect the sick person from other spirit powers and “to ensure that the sick person will receive *gutpela sindaun*.”⁶³ The Wape people of the Torricelli mountains of West Sepik Province (PNG) have a ritual of shooting the fish mask with arrows in order to bid farewell to the spirits and ask for healing of sicknesses which they know the spirits have caused.⁶⁴

Daimoi’s discussion of *gutpela sindaun* highlights, firstly, the fact that ancestors are the key to *gutpela sindaun*, as Strelan also rightly concluded. Melanesians believe in ancestral spirits as creator spirits who created their world for the sake of *gutpela sindaun*, which is “earth-bound.” This implies that Melanesians’ holistic religiosity entails asking pragmatic questions. This holistic view of life is at the heart of the Melanesian worldviews, in which the spiritual and the physical are one unit.⁶⁵

Secondly, the relationship between the living and ancestors is the key to *gutpela sindaun*, and any misfortunes are associated with the activities of the spirits. Relationships with the ancestors or the whole cosmic world are vital for *gutpela sindaun*. This relational core of the Melanesian worldviews raises the question of community: How do Melanesians define community? How is *gutpela sindaun* experienced – individually and communally?

Although Daimoi emphasises the role of ancestors in *gutpela sindaun*, his understanding of ancestors differs from that of Strelan. Daimoi uses the term “ancestor” inclusively, to refer both to creator spirits and human ancestors, and he makes a distinction between the roles of creator spirits and human ancestors.⁶⁶ With regard to creator spirits, Daimoi states that they created and bequeathed the world of each Melanesian cultural group, and thus have a special place in the hopes and aspirations of each cultural group.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Ibid., 182.

⁶² The Sentani people group is located along Lake Sentani in the West Papuan Province of Indonesia from which Daimoi hails.

⁶³ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 182.

⁶⁴ Rephrased from Daimoi, whose source of information is Donald E. McGregor, “The Fish and the Cross,” *Point 1* (1982): 61; see also Donald E. McGregor, *The Fish and the Cross* (Hamilton, NZ: Impression, 1975), 54-5.

⁶⁵ See Chapter 2.

⁶⁶ See Daimoi’s inclusive use of the term ancestor in Chapter 3 of his thesis, “Melanesian Ancestral Heritage and Christianity” in “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 61-99.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 27-8.

In my discussion, I will re-classify the creator spirits or folk heroes as culture heroes and reserve the term ‘ancestor’ for dead human ancestors (remote and recent), as stated in my analysis of Strelan’s use of ancestor above.⁶⁸ In Chapter 2 I will explicate the roles and behaviours of both the culture heroes and the ancestors.

1.4.3 Douglas Hanson – “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans”

Douglas Hanson discusses *gutpela sindaun* in one section of his doctoral dissertation. We summarise Hanson’s view in this section. He goes so far as to state that “[t]he purpose of life for most Papua New Guineans is *gutpela sindaun*.”⁶⁹ He describes *gutpela sindaun* as connoting peace, a state wherein people will live free from fear of enemies, have a limitless food supply, and “live in ‘social harmony.’ The concept of *gutpela sindaun* is built on the underlying factors of *lo*, power, and retributive logic.”⁷⁰ These factors are intertwined and interdependent.

The first factor is *lo*. The concept of *lo*, which literally means law, custom or rule, “is integral to the pursuit of *gutpela sindaun*.”⁷¹ *Lo* as a concept governs all aspect of life. Adherence to the *lo* was reciprocated with blessings. *Lo* is “a very intricate system of reciprocity, which directs the life of all members of a society.”⁷² The success or failure of a community is often attributed to adherence or non-adherence to the *lo* as determined by the ancestors. Adherence to the *lo* results in the ancestors blessing the community with *gutpela sindaun*. The *lo* originated with the ancestors and they continue to monitor its observance by the living.

There is a spiritual significance to every aspect of earthly life for Papua New Guineans, and the *lo* regulates every aspect of life to ensure a harmonious existence. For example, the planting of a garden has spiritual significance, and therefore rituals prescribed by the *lo* are requirements that must be performed during planting, so that the garden may

⁶⁸ See Chapter 1.4.1 above.

⁶⁹ Doug Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans” (D.Miss diss., Western Seminary, 2012), 55.

⁷⁰ The concept of “retributive logic” was coined by Garry W. Trompf, which Hanson has used in *Ibid.*, 55-6. The concept of retributive logic arises, as Trompf states, from “some of the more remarkable features of Melanesian life: the taking of ‘indiscriminate’ revenge (or payback killing), prestigious acts of generosity without guarantee of comparable returns; and the intricate modes of explaining significant events in human affairs, such as prosperity and disaster, well-being and sickness, life and death... By the ‘logic of retribution’, or ‘retributive logic’... we simply mean the way people think or reason about rewards and punishments.” Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 51.

⁷¹ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 56.

⁷² Gernot Fugmann, “Salvation in Melanesian Religions,” *Point* 6 (1984): 284; cited in Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 56-7.

produce as expected. The “*lo* safeguards the strength, the fertility, the prosperity, and the continuity of the group.”⁷³ Adherence to the *lo* leads to the security of individuals and the community. Security is sought through obedience to the traditions, as *lo* defines one’s actions towards one’s fellow human beings and the spirits.

Pawa (power) as the second underlying factor of *gutpela sindaun* is one of the goals of Melanesian religion. To obtain power means abundant life. “The search for power is often pragmatic,”⁷⁴ to counter adversity and to bring about prosperity – be it in health, wealth, success or fertility. To counter any misfortune, it does not matter where the person looks for *pawa*. *Pawa* refers to “metaphysical qualities ascribed to spirit beings, creative and regulative deities.”⁷⁵ Human beings can participate in this power if they know the *stori*⁷⁶ (rituals) of their respective deities. “Thus, the search for power is a desire to control the visible and non-visible world.”⁷⁷

Those who can tap into the right power source “have an advantage in their pursuit of *gutpela sindaun* over those who cannot.”⁷⁸ A related factor in the search for power is the concept of *mana*. “*Mana* is kind of a life force which manifests itself as power and strength,”⁷⁹ and its presence is justified by the results it brings. For example, if a man buries an unusual stone which has *mana* in his garden, it will make the garden produce abundantly.

Retributive logic is the third underlying aspect of *gutpela sindaun*. There are three constituents of retributive logic.⁸⁰ The first is revenge and negative payback, which is manifested both in tribal warfare and personal vindication. Payback, or *pebek* in neo-Melanesian, carries a negative connotation, as in *pebek* killing. One method of *pebek* killing is through sorcery. Here the “spirit-world is invoked to play a role in the revenge... In the end, the goal of revenge and negative payback is community continuity and oneness, facilitating *gutpela sindaun*.”⁸¹

The second constituent element of retributive logic is found in reciprocity, which means peaceful payments made in a give-and-take socio-economic context. Reciprocity in this sense is a positive term which promotes the idea of tribal peace internally, externally,

⁷³ Ibid., 57.

⁷⁴ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 58.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ The term *stori* in Neo-Melanesian literally means story but also applies to procedures, ritual actions or words used or performed to bring about cultural expectations.

⁷⁷ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 58.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ The three aspects of retributive logic are from Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 51-77.

⁸¹ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 60-1.

and with the spirit-world. Reciprocity through gift-giving or trade creates demands benefitting others, which creates a sense of indebtedness. Central to intra-clan reciprocity is the importance of balance in relationships.⁸² The concept of reciprocity is important “in establishing and maintaining relationships in society.... [The reciprocity of gifts] builds trust and gains insurance for future needs – facilitating *gutpela sindaun*.”⁸³

The third aspect of retributive logic is the ability to explain significant events, which involves the intellectual process of reasoning based on the notion of reward and punishment. A problem that threatens the survival of the people needs an explanation and a solution. The question often asked is “who” has caused a problem. This problem is expressed as trouble or *trabel* in neo-Melanesian.⁸⁴ One of the common sources of trouble is inappropriate behaviour resulting in the displeasure of the spirits. Good behaviour and a proper relationship with the spirit world is rewarded with *gutpela sindaun*.⁸⁵

To conclude, Hanson’s discussion of *gutpela sindaun* emphasises Melanesians’ search for pragmatic answers to life’s problems. Melanesians’ concern for their present wellbeing involves *lo*, *pawa* and retributive logic, which are reflected in Melanesian cultural practices. Hanson’s discussion shows that Melanesian culture is built on the core concept of *gutpela sindaun*. It is earth-bound and this-worldly, as Daimoi and Strelan both assert.⁸⁶ Yet the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, even though earth-bound and pragmatic, is also future-oriented. Hanson has shown how Melanesians seek to realise and experience *gutpela sindaun* in the present, but has not considered its future outlook, which Daimoi includes. The ancestors whom Hanson identified as the custodians of *lo* are also the key to the future restoration of *gutpela sindaun*. As we shall see later in Chapter 2, it is this element of the future realisation of *gutpela sindaun* which gave rise to Melanesian indigenous movements popularised as cargo cults.⁸⁷

⁸² Dan Seeland, “Obligation in the Melanesian Clan Context and its Effect Upon the Understanding of the Gospel of Grace,” *MJT* 20, no. 2 (2004): 93; cited in Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 61.

⁸³ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 61.

⁸⁴ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 68.

⁸⁵ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 62.

⁸⁶ See Chapter 1.4.1 and 1.4.2 above.

⁸⁷ See Chapter 1.4.1 above.

1.4.4 Maxon Mani – “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea: The Yangoruan Context;” and “Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering in the Midst of Prosperity Theology within Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches in Papua New Guinea, Particularly Yangoru”

Mani’s two works which we summarise here are related. The second thesis⁸⁸ builds on his first thesis.⁸⁹ In the first thesis, he asserts that the Yangoruan people are still searching for salvation.⁹⁰ They are not satisfied with their blessings in Christ, and are still “looking for this-world, pragmatic blessings.”⁹¹ This is because life is both spiritual and physical, corporate and personal.⁹² This holistic life was fashioned and given to their progenitors by Saii Urin,⁹³ and it must be protected until he returns. The salvation people are seeking is not compartmentalised, as in spirit vs. body, or individual vs. society. It is a holistic life (spirit and body, personal and societal).

This corporate view of salvation unites the people. As Mani contends, the *wantok* (‘one talk’) system, which highlights the common language and the centrality of shared relationships,⁹⁴ expresses the communal understanding of salvation. It is a system designed to support one another and one’s surroundings. “The Yangoruan search for salvation involves the whole universe of his or her surroundings... [It is] about the protection, restoration, preservation, and survival of Yangoruan society and environment – and not for just an individual, but also the community.”⁹⁵

As such, “the Yangoruan search is pragmatic and worldly.”⁹⁶ This-worldly salvation does not imply that there is no futuristic aspect. It is simply that the Yangoruan

⁸⁸ Maxon Mani, “Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering in the Midst of Prosperity Theology within Pentecostal and Evangelical Churches in Papua New Guinea, Particularly Yangoru,” *MJT* 29, no. 2 (2013): 5-78.

⁸⁹ Maxon Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea: the Yangoruan Context,” *MJT* 26, no. 2 (2010): 69-87.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Saii Urin is a mythical being who created and fashioned life for the Yangoruan people. According to this myth, life “was prosperous and lively until Saii Urin was killed by a wicked tribe from within Yangoru. Saii Urin is a mythical figure, whom Yangoruans believed was Ye-Saii (creator-god), living in a bodily form among them. Thus, the Yangoruan philosophy of life and prosperity hinges around this mythical prophecy of the return of Saii Urin and their ancestors.” Mani, “Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering,” 11; “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea: the Yangoruan Context,” 70.

⁹⁴ *Wantok* in Neo-Melanesian or Pidgin literally means one language. The term *wantok* is a fluid term that takes on new meanings in new social and cultural settings. It could mean tribesman/woman, neighbour, friend, compatriot, fellow country-man/woman. For more details and etymology of the term *wantok*, see Maxon Mani, “A Theological and Missiological Response to the *Wantok* System in Melanesia,” in *Living in the Family of Jesus: Critical Contextualization in Melanesia and Beyond*, ed. William K Longgar and Tim Meadowcroft (Auckland: Archer, 2016), 57-78.

⁹⁵ Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea,” 72.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

concept of eschatology “is not forward-looking, but backward-looking.”⁹⁷ The future lies in the hands of the ancestors who will bring it to pass. But the “sustenance of life here and now is the focus of the Yangoruan search for the good life,”⁹⁸ “which involves the individual and society, body and spirit, present and future.”⁹⁹ This means wrestling with issues such as “poverty, disease, neo-colonialism, good education, oppression, ethnic tensions, sexism, and a race-superiority syndrome”¹⁰⁰ that impair the fullness of life.

In his Masters thesis, Mani addresses the prosperity gospel that is taking root in Melanesia. He seeks to formulate an appropriate theological relationship between the prosperity gospel and suffering. The ability of the prosperity gospel teaching to take root in Melanesia is because of Melanesian beliefs in the loss of a prosperous life. When prosperity teaching “crosses cultural boundaries, it takes on and accommodates the recipient cultural stimulus about life here and now, in a pragmatic way.”¹⁰¹ Mani assesses the arguments for and against prosperity gospel teaching and concludes that, “from a biblical perspective, prosperity and suffering belong together.”¹⁰² But if prosperity teaching dismisses suffering, it is anthropocentric and “reflects Yangoruan pragmatism.”¹⁰³

Using the Yangoru people as a case study of how the prosperity gospel has impacted them, Mani states that life for the Yangoru is “one holistic entirety ... whether it be socio-political, socio-economic, or socio-religious, their interrelatedness gathers together what Yangoruans call life and prosperity.”¹⁰⁴ This life depends on good relationships with the total environment, which for Yangoruans means fullness of life.¹⁰⁵ Prosperity is the ruler that one uses to measure one’s religiousness.

On a practical level, Yangoruans see good health and wealth as proof of healthy relationships with the community, environment, ancestors and the divine. “Misfortune is a sign of defective relationships and needs an immediate examination and restoration. Suffering, therefore, is a result of defective relationships.”¹⁰⁶ Viewing life from the perspective of the Saii Urin myth, Yangoruans believe that the mythical or distant past “has a profound impact on the religious, economic, and political welfare of the people today.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 85.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Mani, “Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering,” 5.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 14.

Therefore, the sustenance of life, here and now, is the cream of the Yangoruan search for the good life.”¹⁰⁷

The arrival of the first European missionaries was seen as the fulfilment of the Yangoruan people’s hopes in Saii Urin. The missionaries were welcomed to Yangoru as their expected ancestors whom Saii Urin had sent “to revive the long-lost Yangoruan life.”¹⁰⁸ Yangoruans thus called them Wale Saii (spirit-gods), only to change their minds later and call them Wale Kamba (dead spirits) because they did not fulfil the expectations of the people.¹⁰⁹ The anticipated arrival of Saii Urin receded, leading to the formation of cargo cult movements such as the Peli Movement, which is a result of a collision between cultures and religions.¹¹⁰

These movements united the people under “common beliefs to press for a collective destiny.”¹¹¹ The people’s longing for the better life was sought through socio-political, socio-economic and socio-religious systems. The political parties and their leaders carried on the same message preached by the cultist leaders.¹¹² Some of the cargo cult groups went into business ventures.¹¹³ Others became the first indigenous churches in Melanesia. Mani asserts that “[t]he cultic ideology, in the development of indigenous churches, is a drive to restore hope in Melanesian religion.”¹¹⁴

Mani’s discussion of salvation shows that the Melanesian mythical beliefs about the golden blissful life are still the basis for understanding new phenomena and have been the impetus for the formation of cargo cults, business ventures and independent churches. This is still the lens through which biblical teaching is viewed. In so doing, many Christians expect that their salvation experience will be somewhat similar to their cultural view of salvation or *gutpela sindaun*. This shows that the primal worldview has played into the Christian view of salvation, so that many Melanesians anticipate that their Christian salvation will have pragmatic implications.

Mani also makes the case that the prosperity gospel has reinforced the idea that misfortune is a sign of defective relationships,¹¹⁵ but he does not elaborate on this claim. He does not consider the Melanesian concept of sin, which I will take up in this study to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 19.

¹¹² Ibid., 21.

¹¹³ Ibid., 22.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 23-4.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

show how Melanesians defined sin prior to the introduction of the gospel of Christ. The issue, as I see it, is that the diverse Melanesian cultures are the filter through which Christian teaching is appropriated. Any teaching that does not complement Melanesian cultural aspirations is deemed incomplete, and this includes the teaching of salvation from sin through Christ.

1.4.5 Unia Kaise Api – “Towards a Biblical Theology of Gutpela Sindaun in the Kamea Context”

The author whose view we summarise next is a Papua New Guinean lecturer at Pacific Adventist University. His Fuller Seminary (Pasadena, California) doctoral thesis was based on the Kamea People of Gulf Province in Papua New Guinea. He lectures in Cultural Anthropology and Theology of Mission at PAU.

In his doctoral dissertation, Unia Api correlates the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* with the biblical concept of shalom.¹¹⁶ Api used the Kamea (PNG) people’s schema of *gutpela sindaun* as a case study to show a correlation with the biblical notion of shalom. Api’s basic assumption is that the Kamea understanding of *gutpela sindaun* reflects a common Melanesian cultural mentality.¹¹⁷ For Kamea, *yapmea awamangardi*¹¹⁸ or *gutpela sindaun*¹¹⁹ connotes peace, where people are able to sit and relax because they feel safe from enemies, have a limitless food supply, and “live in social harmony.”¹²⁰ Api argues that the Kamea understanding of *gutpela sindaun* is similar to that of shalom (peace or collective wellbeing) in the Old Testament.¹²¹

According to Api, to understand the Melanesian schema of *gutpela sindaun* is to enter into their socio-religious domain. For Melanesians, *gutpela sindaun* is an experiential concept, framed within a socio-religious context.¹²² Life is cosmic, renewable, and sacred.¹²³ Human beings, along with their material and immaterial worlds, are at the centre of this life. After death, life continues like a snake shedding its old skin. Sacred power protects this life, and the power phenomenon is deeply ingrained in Melanesian

¹¹⁶ Unia Kaise Api, “Towards a Biblical Theology of Gutpela Sindaun in the Kamea Context” (D.Miss diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2018).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 14, 27.

¹¹⁸ This is the Kamea dialect.

¹¹⁹ Api, “Towards a Biblical Theology of Gutpela Sindaun in the Kamea Context,” 11-12.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹²¹ Ibid., 15.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 38.

consciousness in all matters of life and death.¹²⁴ Anthropologists describe this life-force as *mana*, which human beings seek to manipulate for their benefit. Through cordial relationships with human beings and the spirits, life is maintained. The *lo* (customs/traditions) govern these relationships and every aspect of life.¹²⁵ Life is celebrated through rituals and ceremonies and thus is sacred.¹²⁶

Melanesians' conception of *gutpela sindaun* is also associated with their thought patterns. First, Melanesians think synthetically rather than analytically. Life is not compartmentalised into spiritual versus physical, but is an integrated whole. Thus, in every experience, spiritual answers are sought.¹²⁷ Second, Melanesians think communally rather than individually. Everyone lives and shares as a community. The communal good takes precedence over individual goals.¹²⁸ Third, Melanesians are "harmony-conscious," so that they only share their secrets with those with whom they have built trusted relationships.¹²⁹ Fourth, Melanesians operate from the known to the unknown. New phenomena are understood and explained in terms of the old.¹³⁰

In their search for *gutpela sindaun*, Melanesians embraced Christianity.¹³¹ Christianity offered alternative answers to the fundamental questions about life and was seen as "*narapela rot*, 'another way' to experience *gutpela sindaun*."¹³² At the same time, Christianity arrived along with modernisation. The newly introduced economic, political and educational values of modernisation were also seen as a means to access *gutpela sindaun*.¹³³

Embracing Christianity and modernisation has had several implications. One was that the cargo cult movements, which represented the Melanesian search for renewal of their social and moral order, would see the indigenous people retaking leadership and removing the colonial rulers. In addition, the gospel presentation of a coming Messiah to realise a new creation reinforced the people's beliefs in their local heroes, who, it was believed, would "appear and inaugurate a blissful paradise on earth."¹³⁴ Another

¹²⁴ Ibid., 38-9.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 40-1.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 41.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 42.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 43.

¹³² Ibid., 44.

¹³³ Ibid., 44-6.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 47.

implication has been the appeal of prosperity gospel for Melanesians who are searching for *gutpela sindaun*.¹³⁵

In discussing biblical shalom, Api states that the term *shalom* has multiple meanings, and all aspects are strongly positive. Shalom basically means peace; however, it can also mean a state of wholeness, unity, fulfilment, harmony, tranquillity, security, wellbeing, success and prosperity.¹³⁶ God is the source of shalom and shalom “portrays the transcendent and immanent attributes of God’s relationship with His people [the Israelites].”¹³⁷ Shalom is strongly communal and it is conditional, which means it is subject to the people’s obedience to God’s commands.¹³⁸ Its soteriological meaning is associated with the notion of an ideal state which will be achieved in the future (eschatology).¹³⁹

Therefore, biblical shalom is based on God’s intention, as expressed in the covenant between God and the People of Israel (Ezek 34:25; 37:26). God determines the terms and conditions of the divine-human covenant. Obedience to God’s commands means life, while disobedience means punishment (Lev 26; Deut 11). In the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), God wants to dwell among God’s people, forgive their sins, cultivate the spirit of forgiveness amongst the people, have His law written in their hearts, and lead them to the Promised Land – the New Heaven and the New Earth (Rev 21:1-4).¹⁴⁰

Api contends that in Israel’s ‘lived experience,’ shalom also meant material prosperity, as demonstrated by King Solomon’s forty-year reign (1 Kgs. 5:11-14).¹⁴¹ It could also involve ‘physical safety,’ as seen in the plagues episode in Egypt, where God’s people experienced peace, while the Egyptians suffered (Exod. 7:14-11:10). Shalom could also mean ‘absence of fighting’ as the result of an alliance (1 Kgs. 5:12). The health and wellbeing of Joseph in captivity was a sign of shalom (Gen. 43:27). It could also be applied to the entire city or nation (Ps. 122:6-9).¹⁴² In a spiritual sense, shalom means peace and spiritual wellbeing between God and human beings, as peace offerings imply (Lev. 3:1-2; 17:11). Finally, the concept of shalom is celebrated in weekly and yearly Sabbaths.¹⁴³

Looking at the New Testament, Api understands Jesus as the prince of shalom. In his incarnation, he became Immanuel (God with us – Matt 1:23). The fact that Jesus was

¹³⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 56-7.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 57-8.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 61.

¹⁴² Ibid., 62.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 62-3.

incarnated as part of the human race means to Melanesians that he is a *wantok*, a friend or neighbour. He came to give abundant life or *gutpela sindaun* (John 10:10). The promised land of shalom is the New Heaven and New Earth, the ultimate reality.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, shalom is not exclusively a spiritual or merely a future experience. It is physical and present.¹⁴⁵

The Kamea schema of *gutpela sindaun* is based on an origin myth. The Kamea ancestor originated from the *haogka* tree.¹⁴⁶ Using this *haogka* tree analogy, Api structures the Kamea schema of *yapmea awamangardi* (*gutpela sindaun*), with land as the source from which life begins.¹⁴⁷ From the land springs *gutpela sindaun*. *Gutpela sindaun* is rooted in community, relationship and reciprocity.¹⁴⁸ It is experienced communally.¹⁴⁹ Relationship with others and with the *masalai* (nature spirits) “is pivotal to cultivate *gutpela sindaun*.”¹⁵⁰ Reciprocity is “fundamental to experiencing *gutpela sindaun*.”¹⁵¹ It is through sharing and caring that people experience *gutpela sindaun*.¹⁵²

The means through which the Kamea schema of *gutpela sindaun* is demonstrated are continuation, protection, maintenance and celebration. First, the continuation of *gutpela sindaun* is demonstrated in the following ways: (a) Through initiation the sacred knowledge of “‘powers and blessings’ [is passed on] ... so that one continues to enjoy *gutpela sindaun*.”¹⁵³ (b) *Lo* – the living wisdom of the ancestors – contains perpetual principles of life that are for pragmatic living.¹⁵⁴ (c) Role modelling is essential in fostering the continuation of *gutpela sindaun*. An exemplary life is vital for the younger generation to follow in order to experience *gutpela sindaun*.¹⁵⁵

Second, the protection of *gutpela sindaun* is shown through: (a) the ancestral *lo* or cultural laws, God’s law, and government laws; by following these tripartite laws, one experiences *gutpela sindaun*.¹⁵⁶ (b) the use of shields, meaning various protective means such as material objects (necklaces), plant species (cordyline plant), riddles and coded

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 63-4.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 68-9.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴⁷ The Kamea believed that there are three layers of land – (1) *kwananima* – people (dead relatives) living beneath the ground; (2) *awanamia* – people (people, *masalai* and environment) living on the ground [middle ground]; (3) *ainganamia* – people (no idea who they are) living above the ground. Ibid., 87-8. Christianity has answered this mystery. Good people live on *ainganamia* with Jesus as their ruler.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 89.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵² Ibid., 93.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 94.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 97-8.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 99.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 100-1.

languages to repel supernatural powers.¹⁵⁷ (c) the protection of guardians – ancestors as guardians use *glasman* (mediums) to communicate with the living through dreams to guard against enemies and other evil forces that threaten *gutpela sindaun*. *Glasman* are seen as the guardians of the village.¹⁵⁸

Third, *gutpela sindaun* is maintained through: (a) hospitality which unites, establishes and maintains relationships, where the parties involved experience *wanbel*, meaning ‘good terms’; hospitality also extends to the spirit beings, as it is important to maintain *gutpela sindaun*¹⁵⁹ with them;¹⁶⁰ (b) marriage, in which the woman especially plays an important role in establishing and maintaining *gutpela sindaun*; marriage is seen as a bridge to establish or maintain *gutpela sindaun* between enemies; (c) gifts – reciprocating gifts enhances *gutpela sindaun*,¹⁶¹ and gift-giving to humans and spirits features in all events and ceremonies; (d) nurturing – in the Christian context, nurturing helps many Christians to maintain their allegiance to God.¹⁶² And finally, *gutpela sindaun* is celebrated through *singsing*, meaning celebrative festivals¹⁶³ which involve dancing and singing,¹⁶⁴ and feasting. “The essence of every feast is to have a merry heart.”¹⁶⁵

The biblical shalom tree,¹⁶⁶ that is God’s intention for humanity depicted by the two trees of life (Gen 2:16-17; Rev 22:2), and the *haogka* code tree are compared to identify similarities and differences. This resulted in the creation of a hybrid tree which Api calls the Kamea *Kristen* (Christian) tree. The goal of blending the biblical schema of shalom and the Kamea schema of *gutpela sindaun* is to reach a “cognitive effect,”¹⁶⁷ i.e., erasing, modifying and adding new implications to the existing assumptions.¹⁶⁸ The underlying aim behind constructing the Kamea *Kristen* tree is for people to understand biblical shalom and to articulate it in culturally relevant ways.¹⁶⁹ In other words, the Kamea *Kristen* tree reflects

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 102.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 102-3.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 105.

¹⁶⁰ First crops are allowed to ripen and decay in acknowledgement of the ancestral and nature spirits who give abundant harvest.

¹⁶¹ Api, “Towards a Biblical Theology of Gutpela Sindaun in the Kamea Context,” 108.

¹⁶² Ibid., 109.

¹⁶³ Initiation, marriage, breaking the mourning period, and so on are celebrated through *singsing*. Ibid., 110-11. Also, long life is celebrated. This shows the absence of sickness and other factors that affect “one’s physical and emotional health.” (112) The blessing of long life is closely associated with the wisdom of the elders. (113).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 110.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 112.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 51-70.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 119.

a biblical understanding of shalom where people live in harmony and peace as *wantoks* in Christ. By living together as a community of Christ and obeying God's law and *lo* (ancestral law), they will experience a *gutpela sindaun* which is identical to biblical shalom.¹⁷⁰

Api's assertion that *gutpela sindaun* is a worldview shared by many cultural groups in Melanesia, including the Kamea, is helpful. However, his discussion of the Kamea schema of *gutpela sindaun* in his sixth chapter is not entirely traditional. The Kamea schema of *gutpela sindaun* has, to some degree, already been influenced by Christian teachings, which makes it a hybrid *gutpela sindaun*.

Furthermore, there is relatively little discussion of the significance of the death of Christ for humanity's sin and how the Old Testament biblical concept of shalom should be seen through the eyes of the cross. Api seems to emphasise the incarnation (birth) of Christ and eschatology, with relatively little emphasis on the crucifixion and the redemptive aspects of the gospel. This demonstrates that he is giving Law/*lo* a continued pivotal role for *gutpela sindaun* with God, others and the cosmos.

Api's emphasis on Law/*lo* needs to be considered in the light of the relational aspects of being saved by the grace of God and united with Christ by faith through the Holy Spirit. His discussion of *gutpela sindaun* and his emphasis on the role of Law/*lo* reflects his Seventh Day Adventist location. Its eschatological focus on the judgment of God suggests that there is a need for an Evangelical-Pentecostal consideration of *gutpela sindaun* in the light of New Testament emphases such as that found in Colossians. There is a gap in his discussion that this thesis will attempt to fill. As a Pentecostal-Evangelical, my discussion of *gutpela sindaun* will centre on the gospel of Christ.

1.4.6 Joel Robbins – *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*

Joel Robbins did his anthropological fieldwork in the early 1990s among the Urapmin People of Sandaun Province in the PNG highlands area bordering the Western Province and the Indonesian Province of West Papua. My review gives a twofold summary of aspects of Robbins' work relating to my thesis topic.¹⁷¹ First, he discusses sin and argues that Christianity has, on the one hand, redefined the Melanesian cultural understanding of wilfulness and desire, and, on the other hand, has construed obeying the law in such a way

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 136-47.

¹⁷¹ Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in Papua New Guinea Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

as to make the Urapmin sinners. Second, he analyses the concept of knowledge, fullness and hiddenness, based on the Urapmin culture, as a fundamental concept in many PNG cultures for depicting *gutpela sindaun*.

In his book and article,¹⁷² Robbins argues that Christianity has transformed the Urapmin people's notion of desire, meaning moral inclination, turning them into sinners. Christianity has demonised all wilfulness, i.e. the willingness to impose one's will in different circumstances, which traditionally depended on certain practices regarded as lawful, meaning practices sanctioned by the ancestral *lo*. These practices supported the tribal social structures in traditional Urapmin belief. Robbins sees the role which desire has played in individual motivations to support the Urapmin social structure as the same driving force behind Urapmin Christian belief and practice.¹⁷³ However, he contends that Christianity has altered the indigenous understanding of desire without changing the social structures that depend on the traditional model for their continuation,¹⁷⁴ thus creating a tension.¹⁷⁵

Initiations, secret mythologies and taboos dominated the daily life of the Min people¹⁷⁶ prior to Christianisation. In the mid-1960s, this scenario changed when Urapmin pastors, trained under the Australian Baptist Mission in Telefomin, brought the gospel to the Urapmin people. Despite several decades of Christianisation, their religious system remained robust and continued to define the parameters of their lives.¹⁷⁷

However, a 1977 revival in the region saw the conversion of all Urapmin, resulting in the abandonment of their traditional religion.¹⁷⁸ This revival brought with it a localised form of Western Christianity. The Urapmin came to see themselves as sinners and came to construe their lives in terms of a recognisably Christian culture.¹⁷⁹ They reconstructed their world and motivations in Christian terms,¹⁸⁰ but Robbins argues that they were impaired by their sinfulness. Urapmin Christianity took on a distinctive charismatic cast, and in the

¹⁷² In my review of Robbins, I will also integrate materials from his article, "Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Desire Among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea," *Ethnology* 37, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 299-316, which was published earlier; this article constitutes the main thrust of his book. In his book he expands the thoughts he introduced in the article.

¹⁷³ Robbins, "Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Desire," 299.

¹⁷⁴ Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment*, xxvi.

¹⁷⁵ Robbins, "Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Desire," 300.

¹⁷⁶ The Min people are the groups of people who are linguistically and culturally part of the Mountain Ok, located in the far Western highlands of PNG, territorially part of the Sandaun or West Sepik Province. The Urapmin are a part of the people group often referred to as the Min people.

¹⁷⁷ Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment*, 1.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

early 1990s an interest in the imminent return of Christ and Christian ethical living dominated Urapmin Christianity.¹⁸¹

Pre-Christian Urapmin life was based on imposing one's will through aggressive means and sensitively controlling one's desires in the interest of communal harmony. These two actions were intertwined and both were necessary for a cohesive social life.¹⁸² The people's behaviours were evaluated based on the ethical codes that required control of desire. The first code regulated reciprocity and mutual support for each other. The second code focused on the taboos that dictated food consumption, land use and so on. The third code comprised the social prohibitions or laws forbidding inappropriate behaviours that threatened social harmony.

These three codes interpolated and immersed the will under many rules, greatly restricting the element of choice in daily life.¹⁸³ Some wilful activities, such as fighting and adultery, conflicted with these codes and often threatened the social structure. These contradictory values of controlling desire and expressing wilfulness, however, were recognised as necessary for creating and maintaining social life that depended on pre-determined kinship relationships established through wilful (i.e., purposely crafted) actions.

Given this background, the Urapmin interpretation of Christianity has produced new models of desire and broader relations between wilfulness and lawfulness. To control the problems which desire creates, the Urapmin developed new sets of rituals, thus tearing apart the dialectical or logically balanced relationship between wilfulness and lawfulness, causing an imbalance between wilfulness and lawfulness that had formerly shaped their social existence. The effect of the Christian understanding of desire on the Urapmin has been to vilify all wilful behaviours.

Christianity has accomplished this in two ways. First, Christianity has condemned all personal wilfulness, including many acts of will concerning religious behaviour and obeying traditional taboos that were important in indigenous law. Second, Christianity condemned all desires except the desire for salvation, and celebrated good thinking and

¹⁸¹ As Robbins states, "Urapmin interest in engaging Christianity was very much tied up with changes in the regional ritual system in which they participated." (88). The Urapmin saw their significance and influence in the regional (Min) religious ritual system, which involved secret knowledge, diminishing. This was due to the modern developments introduced by the colonial government and the Christian mission, which favoured others in the region, leaving the Urapmin at the periphery. They no longer saw themselves as a key player in the regional success.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 194-6; Robbins, "Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Desire," 303.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 305.

good behaviour exclusively. Its goal has been to follow God's will without imposing one's own will.¹⁸⁴

This Christianised view of desire has made the Urapmin see themselves as sinners. Hence, leaders within and outside the church urged the people to take control of their moral failings by following the government's laws and the Bible, combining this with self-control. Sermons from Bible passages always conclude with a plea for the people to control their desires and to obey the law. This strong moralising tone has become the marked feature of everyday and religious discourse in Urapmin. These discourses, though they are now Christianised, were also important themes in the traditional life of the Urapmin.

Culturally, the Min operated under the epistemology of secrecy, following their ways of handling sacred knowledge which were passed on through successive stages of initiation. But there was a wariness about the knowledge being passed on at initiation. The known narratives contained internal secrets, but knowing a narrative did not mean that its secrets were known "in [their] entirety."¹⁸⁵ Misleading information was given to the uninitiated boys and women, thus producing uncertainties about the valuing of knowledge. Secrecy regarding important knowledge implied that there was uncertainty regarding "'the full story' about a given matter."¹⁸⁶ The valued knowledge was protected until death.¹⁸⁷

The role of the senses is significant in this epistemology of knowledge. The senses in Urapmin epistemology revealed "the opposition between things that are 'hidden' (*bantap*) and those that are in the 'clear' (*kem*)."¹⁸⁸ The hidden things were highly valued, like the religious secrets of the men's cult, as part of a larger class of hidden things in Urapmin life. Hidden things were regarded as the most important knowledge.¹⁸⁹

This custom rendered the Urapmin social world as one of hiddenness, with hiddenness being a general condition of shrouding important knowledge in secrecy.¹⁹⁰ "The Urapmin preoccupation with hiddenness grounds their evaluation of the senses of sight and hearing."¹⁹¹ To the Urapmin, sight is a primary sense for producing and obtaining

¹⁸⁴ Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment*, 225.

¹⁸⁵ See Joel Robbins, "Secrecy and the Sense of an Ending: Narrative, Time, and Everyday Millenarianism in Papua New Guinea and in Christian Fundamentalism," *Society for the Comparative Study of Society and History* 43, no. 3 (2001): 535.

¹⁸⁶ Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment*, 137.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 137-8.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

knowledge.¹⁹² Seeing is a superior sense associated with gaining knowledge compared to hearing. The Urapmin distrust hearing as a way of gaining dependable knowledge because of the negative evaluation of speech, since speech cannot be trusted to reveal things that can be known.¹⁹³ In other words, people look for deeds, not spoken words, in order to be reliably informed.¹⁹⁴ This behavioural outlook dominates the Urapmin approach to the world.¹⁹⁵ Visible demonstrations of knowledge are highly valued and trusted.¹⁹⁶

The epistemology of seeing as a quality of knowledge led all Urapmin to accept God and Jesus in the 1977 revival. The Urapmin saw the bodies of their friends flailing about when they were possessed by the Holy Spirit, and heard of Jesus appearing in visions and dreams. These events confirmed to them that God and Jesus exist. However, the revival did not quickly remove the scepticism that characterised the epistemology of secrecy. Older men remained sceptical until they saw that those who disregarded their ancestral food taboos suffered no calamities, and that the gardens that were tended with prayer, compared to those treated with rituals and magic, were productive and flourished. Seeing these prevailing signs, the older men who were vested in the traditional cult and its epistemology of secrecy converted to Christianity.¹⁹⁷ The Urapmin have always emphasised visual knowledge as central to religion, and this shaped their conversion to Christianity. The knowledge they gained changed their lives in many ways.¹⁹⁸

Robbins' discussion of sin is provocative, as he asserts that Christianity has made the Urapmin sinners. Prior to Christian influence, the Urapmin used their will aggressively and sensitively to construct sociality, but Christianity declared that all wilfulness was sinful, including the taboos that previously upheld important aspects of Urapmin society. We need to ask whether this is the case, or whether the problem is simply that there was no

¹⁹² Ibid., 139, 141.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 142.

¹⁹⁴ This epistemology of hidden things is illustrated by the Urapmin secret mythology which convinced them of the hidden, and only the special powers of vision could open the different worlds to those who possessed them. The secret myth is based on the creative ancestress Afek, who told human beings and dogs to cover their eyes while she hid all the game animals from the people and the dogs. But the dogs had bad fingers, so they could not cover their eyes properly, which allowed them to see the game animals. That is why the people find it difficult to locate the game animals, whereas dogs can do so. The emphasis of this myth is that eyes open up a world. This story highlights the epistemological weight placed on vision/sight, since knowledge is derived from seeing as opposed to hearing. Ibid., 140. Hence the Urapmin conceptualise the process of gaining useful knowledge in terms of seeing or being shown, and not of hearing things. The seeing notion alludes to what the initiates were shown in various initiation stages, and thus the importance of knowledge is equated with sight. (141)

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 142.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 144.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 144-5.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 145.

word for sin in the Urapmin dialect prior to the introduction of Christianity, as is the case in many tribal languages in PNG. I would suggest that, although there is no word for sin in many dialects, the notion of sin has not been absent. I will show in my discussion of sin in Chapter 2 that, for Melanesians generally, sin is deed-based and has been defined relationally. *Lo* set the parameters regarding how to use one's will for individual and communal harmony.

I concur with Robbins that the epistemology of knowledge, fullness and hiddenness is expressed in myths. Myths, as I will show later,¹⁹⁹ are sacred to many Melanesian cultures and have been the basis of Melanesian religions, as in the case of the Urapmin. The knowledge of sacred and profane rules for daily living and relationships was partly derived from myths. Therefore, any new body of knowledge has been filtered through existing mythical knowledge, and new parallel knowledge was embraced as a key to the fulfilment of cultural aspirations. As I will show, the Melanesians' receptivity to Christian teaching was largely due to the analogies between Christian themes, concepts and teachings and Melanesian mythical themes and concepts.

The epistemology of the secrecy of sacred knowledge was common practice amongst almost every Melanesian culture. The secrecy of sacred knowledge about the mysteries of culture heroes and ancestors was kept hidden for the sake of ensuring the prosperity of the people. Sacred knowledge was for pragmatic purposes, yet it was also believed that sacred knowledge had a metaphysical dimension. Being in possession of such knowledge gave the person leverage to harness the power of the spirit beings through magic.²⁰⁰ Sacred ancestral knowledge, combined with magic, enhanced soil fertility, ensured successful harvests, controlled the weather, and so on. Moral requirements and taboos were observed in order to make magic effective.

Fullness of knowledge leads to *gutpela sindaun*. What Melanesians refer to as fullness of knowledge is the sight knowledge of the ancestors and the practicality of the sacred knowledge. The knowledge that shows itself in a concrete fashion was traditionally considered full and true knowledge. Any knowledge that did not have practical and visible substance was not sought after or prized, compared to knowledge that was validated by clear and visible evidence. This discussion of Robbins' work has laid a foundation for our later discussion of hiddenness in relation to *gutpela sindaun*.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ See Chapter 2.

²⁰⁰ See Chapter 2.

²⁰¹ See Chapter 2.

1.5 Need for this Study

The need for this study arises from the following points. Firstly, the traditional Melanesian worldviews and beliefs about *gutpela sindaun* still influence the values, emotions and behaviours²⁰² of many Melanesian Christians in their daily lives, be it public or private, formal or informal, secular or religious. The influence of *gutpela sindaun* thinking could be the impetus undergirding many Melanesian Christians' receptivity to teachings promising wealth and health. Such teachings suit the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, and this prompts a study of this nature to delineate what Christian salvation is.²⁰³

Secondly, no one has directly addressed the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* in relation to Paul's Letter to Colossians.²⁰⁴ Unlike other studies that have haphazardly referenced scriptural texts from the Pauline corpus and the rest of the Bible to address the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, this study will develop a contextual theological response to *gutpela sindaun* based on insights from Colossians. Because the Colossian Letter has been chosen to develop a contextual biblical theological response to *gutpela sindaun*, I will provide a brief overview of Colossians below.

1.6 The Colossian Letter

1.6.1 Authorship and Date

The Letter identifies Paul and Timothy (1:1, 23; 4:18) as its authors. The Letter uses the first-person plural (1:3, 28; 4:3b) and first person singular (1:23-25, 29-2:5; 4:3c) interchangeably, with the Apostle Paul signing off, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hands. Remember my chains" (4:18). The interchange between first person plural and first-person singular implies that the Letter was co-authored. Paul may not be the only author of the Letter, but constant references to his suffering and imprisonment for the sake of the gospel depict him as the principal author.²⁰⁵

Christians, beginning with the Church Fathers, have generally accepted that the Apostle Paul is the author of Colossians. However, in recent times, some New Testament

²⁰² See Gibbs, "Papua New Guinea," 91.

²⁰³ Gibbs remarks that there is a need to clearly define the term 'Christian' because there are almost 200 Christian churches and organisations in PNG, and "many have very different beliefs and practices." Ibid., 91. His comment raises the need for a sound contextual theological articulation of the orthodox Christian doctrines (God [Father, Son and Spirit], salvation, eschatology, and so on) by Melanesians for the church in Melanesia and the world.

²⁰⁴ Regarding the reasons for studying Colossians to develop a response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, see Chapter 1.2 above.

²⁰⁵ See Paul Foster, *Colossians* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 61; Scot McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2018), 5.

scholars²⁰⁶ have disputed Paul's authorship of Colossians. What are their grounds of disputation? Rather than going into detail about the arguments *for* and *against* Paul's authorship,²⁰⁷ I will only outline the main points of the debate. This is because the authorship issue does not alter or undermine the teaching of Colossians²⁰⁸ which this thesis will study to develop a theological contextual response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*.

1.6.1.1 Arguments Against Paul's Authorship

The argument against Paul's authorship stems from the style, grammar and theology of Colossians. The scholars who argue against Paul's authorship state that the style, grammar and theology of Colossians suggest another author, such as Timothy.²⁰⁹ They conclude that the style of the Letter does not match Paul's undisputed letters. Their point of disputation is, as Sumney states, that "Paul seldom multiplies adjectives and other modifiers the way Colossians characteristically does."²¹⁰ Unlike Romans and Galatians, which use a question and answer style of dialogue, Colossians states themes briefly or poetically and later develops them, as in 1:15-20 and 2:6ff.²¹¹

Grammatically, these scholars argue, the Letter contains thirty-four words which are *hapax legomena* in the New Testament.²¹² Twenty-eight words occur in Colossians which are found elsewhere in the New Testament but not in the undisputed Pauline epistles.²¹³ Fifteen words found in Colossians and Ephesians are found elsewhere in the

²⁰⁶ The authenticity of the Apostle Paul's authorship of Colossians was first raised by E. T. Mayerhoff, *Der Brief an die Colosser, mit vornehmlicher Berücksichtigung der drei Pastoralbriefe kritisch geprüft* (Berlin: Hermann Schultze, 1838), cited in Vincent A. Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith: An Authorial, Structural, and Theological Investigation of the Cosmic Christology in Col 1:15-20* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2006), 13; see also Robert McL. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 9. The four points of Mayerhoff's argument against Paul's authorship, according to Pizzuto, are: (1) lexical and stylistic differences; (2) vocabulary – words that appear in Colossians but not elsewhere in Paul, or appear with a different meaning; (3) The Letter was written to combat Colossian heresy, and; (4) the dependence of Colossians on Ephesians. Mayerhoff, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 14-35.

²⁰⁷ Argument *for* and *against* Paul's authorship, see Janice Capel Anderson, *Colossians: An Introduction and Study Guide: Authorship, Rhetoric, and Code* (London; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: T & T Clark, 2019), 10-15.

²⁰⁸ See Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 8.

²⁰⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1996), 35-6.

²¹⁰ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 2.

²¹¹ N.T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. Leon Morris (Leicester, England: Inter Varsity Press, 1986, Reprint 1989), 32.

²¹² Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, trans. by William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 85; Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 418-19.

²¹³ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 85-6; see also Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 2, footnote 2.

New Testament but not in the undisputed Pauline letters. There are also ten words that Colossians has in common with Ephesians only.²¹⁴ Moreover, the poem (1:15-20), some scholars have argued, is non-Pauline on the basis of the terms used in it.²¹⁵ Stylistically, the flow of thought and the rhetorical technique of the Letter are markedly different from Paul's undisputed letters.²¹⁶

Beyond these stylistic arguments, there are theological differences when compared to the undisputed letters.²¹⁷ The Letter does not mention significant theological terms such as faith, righteousness and justification by faith, which are prominent themes in Romans and Galatians.²¹⁸ There is a near absence of references to the Holy Spirit, which is one of the major themes of First and Second Corinthians, Romans and Galatians.²¹⁹ The theme of eschatology is the greatest point of departure from the undisputed letters. Colossians emphasises that believers already possess eschatological blessings. Their hope already exists in heaven (1:5), they are already filled (2:9), and they are already raised with Christ (2:12-13).²²⁰

From these internal differences, many interpreters have suggested that the Epistle is from the sub-apostolic era. It is argued that its author probably used Philippians and Philemon as models to pen Colossians, so as to recommend Epaphras in accordance with apostolic tradition.²²¹ This means that the Letter is pseudonymous.²²² Some even go further to argue that since gnosticism²²³ was the issue being addressed, it is un-Pauline. Gnosticism

²¹⁴ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 86.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 41-6; Ernst Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," *SBT* 41, 4th ed. (London: SCM, 1971). There are thirty-four *hapax legomena* words in Colossians and three appear in the poem: ὄρατός (visible – v. 16), πρωτεύειν (to be preeminent – v. 18), and εἰρηνοποιεῖν (to make peace – v. 20); and twenty-eight words that appear in the New Testament but not in Paul, two of which appear in the poem: θρόνος (throne – v. 16), and συνηστηκέναι (to hold together – v. 17). There are ten words that Colossians has in common with Ephesians and one appears in the poem: αποκαταλλασσειν (to reconcile – v. 20); and fifteen words that are used in Colossians, Ephesians and other NT texts but not in the Pauline epistles, two of which appear in the poem: κυριότης (dominion – v. 16) and κατοικεῖν (to dwell – v. 19). See Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 17.

²¹⁶ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 35; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 2.

²¹⁷ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 36.

²¹⁸ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 2-3. Wright argues against the notion that justification was Paul's prominent theme. He states that "[t]he real centre of Paul's thought, as of his life, is not justification but that which underlies it and gives it its polemical cutting edge, namely, the crucified and risen Jesus, seen as the revelation in action of the one creator God." Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 36.

²¹⁹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 3.

²²⁰ Ibid., 5.

²²¹ P. T. O'Brien, "Colossians, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 214.

²²² See Walter T. Wilson, *The Hope of Glory: Education and Exploration in the Epistle of Colossians* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 20-2.

²²³ Gnosticism is a term classifying a variety of religious movements that stress salvation by knowledge, especially of one's origins. It teaches cosmological dualism, which means the spirit is good, but body or

came to be the main battle of the second century A.D. and some argue that the author of Colossians depended on Ephesians as its model.²²⁴

Adding to these arguments is the overlap between Colossians and Ephesians, and Colossians and Philemon. Colossians and Ephesians overlap in their use of similar phrases, content and structure. Thus, it is contended that Colossians was used as a template for writing Ephesians.²²⁵ Colossians and Philemon overlap in bearing the names of the same authors (Col 1:1; Phlm 1) and greeters (Col 4:10-14; Phlm 23-24). Therefore, it is explained that this is a result of deliberate contrivance – the Colossians’ author copying from Philemon or their sharing a close historical connection.²²⁶

1.6.1.2 Arguments for Paul’s Authorship

Historically, the early church and the Church Fathers never questioned Paul’s authorship of Colossians. Marcion (around A.D. 150) took Paul as the genuine author of Colossians,²²⁷ as did Irenaeus (A.D. 190), who first deemed the epistle to be undeniably Paul’s own Letter.²²⁸ There are no question marks on the authorship of Colossians as shown by the Chester Beatty Codex P⁴⁶, which includes Colossians as one of the letters that Paul wrote. When it was circulated, it used no other person’s name.²²⁹

The objections to Paul’s authorship have been adequately answered by various scholars.²³⁰ The style, grammar and theology may appear to be un-Pauline but we should not underestimate Paul’s adaptability in using a variety of styles and expressions in

matter is evil. For further details on Gnostic sources, doctrines, ethics, communities and scholarship, see E. M. Yamauchi, “Gnosticism,” in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Daniel G. Reid, (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 406-10; see also Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meyer Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology*, 412-13.

²²⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*. Word Biblical Commentary. Vol 44, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glen W. Baker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), xli. We note that the usefulness of O’Brien’s commentaries has been questioned on the grounds of suspected plagiarism and some of his works have been withdrawn from circulation. We have continued to use his material but do so having alerted the reader to this cautionary note.

²²⁵ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 36.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

²²⁷ S. L. Johnson Jr., “Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118, no. 471 (July-Sept 1961): 241.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 241-2.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 242.

²³⁰ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 1-9; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, reprint (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984; Reprint 1993), 28-33; O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, xli-xlix; see also George E. Cannon, who approached this problem of Paul’s authorship through his study of the use of traditional material in the Letter, in *The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University, 1983), 1-9.

different situations.²³¹ He was adaptable to his audience, both Jews and Gentiles, in his manner of expression and writing, so as to win as many as he could to Christ.

Indeed, Paul's undisputed letters show that every issue faced by the churches in the Empire was unique and required redress using styles and expressions that suited the circumstance. This does not mean that there are no points of similarity between Colossians and Paul's undisputed letters in terms of style, grammar and theology.²³² There are some similarities, but the similar styles, concepts and terms used lay the foundation for introducing new theological insights. In every circumstance, Paul had to refine his theological thoughts and expressions.

For instance, the markedly developed christology of Colossians²³³ shows a development in Paul's theology as a result of the Colossian situation. His use of certain words that are unique to the Letter depicts the uniqueness of the circumstance being addressed, and these terms are to be interpreted theologically and contextually.²³⁴ Therefore, the differences in style, grammar and theology observed in Colossians might be best understood in relation to its distinct context, rather than proposing non-Pauline authorship.

To use the logic of 'known to unknown' to ascribe the authorship of Colossians to another hand could be exaggerated.²³⁵ Yes, there are points of tension between Colossians and Paul's undisputed letters²³⁶ like Romans and Galatians. But when we consider the authorship of Romans, a case can be made that Paul used others in the writing process (see Rom 16:22). On this issue, Scot McKnight contends that both the style evident in the letters that are undisputedly Pauline, and in those that are not, are from the same hand. It was not Paul alone who wrote these letters. McKnight asserts that Paul was not skilled at writing (Gal 6:11), and that therefore he

*used co-workers and probably professional secretaries who were more skilled at writing and at articulation (in Greek) and who also contributed theologically to the letters [not by way of dictation], ... what we have in each of the letters attributed to Paul and his co-workers and a secretary or two, and some discussions and some drafts and contributions by one or more others in varying degrees.*²³⁷

²³¹ See Clinton Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief in Colossae* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 6-7.

²³² See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 84-5.

²³³ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 36; McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, 15-16.

²³⁴ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 1-2.

²³⁵ See McKnight, *The Letter to Colossians*, 6-12.

²³⁶ Undisputed letters are letters that are considered as pure Paul or from Paul's own hand. These letters are: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.

²³⁷ McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians*, 8-9. (Italics in original).

I agree with McKnight's argument that Paul's co-workers likely contributed to the writing of the Letters. However, the theology is undoubtedly and distinctively Paul's. Unlike his co-workers, Paul was a trained scholar (a Pharisee, Phil 3:5; cf., Acts 22:3). His encounter with Christ changed his theological orientation and his reading of Scripture. His co-workers were his students, and therefore any theological contribution from them would be within the framework of Paul's theology. Moreover, we know nothing about the capabilities of his co-workers.²³⁸ If they had capabilities to theologize and to compose letters to churches, Paul may have allowed them to do so, but their theological articulations were well within the framework of Paul's theology, and Paul surely would have checked what they wrote before he signed off on the Letters (Rom 1:1; 16:22; Col 1:1; 4:18).

I acknowledge that the theological themes of Colossians may not relate well with some major themes of Paul's undisputed letters. However, there are certain developments in Colossians that link with major theological themes in other Pauline epistles. Wright states that its christological theme (Col 1:15-20) matches Philippians (2:6-11) and the two letters to Corinthians (1 Cor 6:8; 2 Cor 4:8; 8:9). The focus on seeing Christians as God's new covenant people links to Romans (2:17-29), Philippians (3:2-11), 2 Corinthians (3) and Galatians. Further, the ecclesiological theme in Colossians should not be seen as a complete departure from the Pauline theology of the church as a body (1 Cor 12; Rom 12). In the undisputed letters, the body metaphor was used to refer to a local church, but in Colossians it is used for the universal church of which Christ is the head. The body metaphor shows a development from its previous usage. The theme of suffering (Col 1:24) links to 2 Corinthians (1:3-11; 4:7-18) and Romans (8:17-25).²³⁹ These unilinear developments suggest that Colossians was from the same pen as the undisputed and prison letters.

In the light of this debate, the authorship question in one sense does not matter for the purpose of my thesis because we are asking what the received or canonical text of Colossians can say to Melanesians who follow *gutpela sindaun* thinking. In another sense, the authorship question does matter if we are to correctly interpret what the text means. In my view, the author is an apostle to whom God's mystery was revealed. He was commissioned to proclaim it to the Gentiles (1:25-26). He is from a Jewish background and he is familiar with Greco-Roman culture. That is why the author was able to combine the

²³⁸ See Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 31.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

two worldviews together as shown by the style, grammar and theology of the Letter. So, some attention to the question of authorship can lead to better understanding of the message of the Letter.

Whatever presuppositions or conclusions we have about the Letter's authorship, the Letter's theology and teachings fit into the overall schema of Pauline theology. For the sake of this thesis, after admitting the uncertainty, I will simply refer to the author as Paul or Apostle Paul or the author. I will use these nouns interchangeably to show the question is still being debated and not to cause any distraction. The Colossians Letter shows that it was written during the author's imprisonment (Col 4:3) which leads to the questions: where was the author imprisoned and when was the Letter written?

1.6.2 Place and Date of Writing

Colossians, along with Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon, is traditionally accepted as a prison epistle.²⁴⁰ Philemon is unanimously accepted as one of Paul's undisputed epistles, written from prison. It mentions some of Paul's colleagues who send greetings to Philemon (Phlm 23-24). The same greeters also appear in Col 4:10-14. This parallel evidence and further textual evidence of Paul's imprisonment in Colossians suggest that it was written from a prison (4:3, 10, 18),²⁴¹ but which one? Three locations have been suggested for the Colossian Letter's composition – Ephesus, Caesarea and Rome.²⁴² Identifying the location of Paul's imprisonment is important when it comes to dating the Letter's composition.

The first suggestion is Ephesus.²⁴³ The argument for Ephesus stems from a statement found in the second century Marcionite prologue to Colossians.²⁴⁴ Geographically, Ephesus was much closer to Colossae than Caesarea and Rome. Hypothetically, Paul's associates' frequent travel to and from Colossae (Col 1:7-8; 4:7-17; Phlm 8-12) suggests a closer proximity to Paul's imprisonment.²⁴⁵ Thus Ephesus may have

²⁴⁰ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 34.

²⁴¹ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 39.

²⁴² Foster, *Colossians*, 62-6; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 34. Paul was also imprisoned at Philippi, but it was only for one night (see Acts 16:16-40).

²⁴³ Wright has argued for Ephesus as the place of writing of the Colossian Letter. See Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35-9.

²⁴⁴ It is also inferred from 2 Cor 1:8 and 1 Cor 15:32. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35. See also Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier and Liturgical Press, 2000), 10.

²⁴⁵ For the argument against the notion that closer proximity of Ephesus to Colossae made travel easier for Paul's associates, see H. C. G. Moule, *Colossians Studies: Lessons in Faith and Holiness from St Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (New York: Armstrong, 1898; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1902), cited in Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 21-2.

been the place where the Letter to the Colossians was written, around A.D. 52-54 or 56-57.²⁴⁶ However, there is no direct evidence of Paul's imprisonment at Ephesus, where he stayed for over two years. He left Ephesus due to civil disturbances (see Acts 19). Writing to the Colossians from an Ephesian prison is only a hypothesis.²⁴⁷ The geographical proximity of the two locations is an attractive argument, but is not convincing because of the hypothetical nature of Paul's imprisonment there.

The second suggestion is Caesarea (A.D. 58-59).²⁴⁸ Paul was imprisoned for almost two years in Caesarea, with some degree of freedom (see Acts 23:33-35; 24:27).²⁴⁹ The reasons for supporting this proposal are based on inferences. In both letters, several of Paul's associates are mentioned (Col 1:7; 4:7-14; Phlm 23-24), which suggests they were present with Paul at Caesarea, because Felix gave Paul some degree of freedom (Acts 24:23). However, several chapters earlier, Acts 20:4 identifies the disciples who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and his subsequent arrest. The only names of Paul's associates in Acts 20:4 that overlap with Colossians and Philemon are Timothy, Aristarchus and Tychicus. Hence, this is not a strong argument for the Caesarean composition of Colossians. Despite the textual evidence of Paul's prolonged imprisonment at Caesarea, this proposal has gained less support.²⁵⁰

The third suggestion is Rome (Acts 28:16ff). There is no difficulty with a Roman origin of the Letter. In Acts 28 Paul was under house arrest in Rome (v.16) and had some degree of freedom, welcoming those who visited him and proclaiming Christ there (vv. 30-31). This means that the greeters mentioned in Col 4:10-14 had direct access to Paul, and Rome is a good possible location for Onesimus' conversion (Phlm 10-11). The content and personal references to colleagues in Colossians suit a Roman imprisonment.

The other supporting evidence for a Roman origin of Colossians is the existence of certain manuscripts. Foster states that "[a] variety of colophons, which are found in manuscripts as early as the fourth or fifth centuries, state that the Letter was 'to the

²⁴⁶ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 10; Foster, *Colossians*, 62-3.

²⁴⁷ Foster, *Colossians*, 62. On the Ephesus imprisonment hypothesis, see George Simpson Duncan, *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry: A Reconstruction, With Special Reference to the Ephesian Origin of the Imprisonment Epistles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1929). Duncan developed his argument for an Ephesus imprisonment based on the work done by others, such as H. Lisco, who developed the thesis that Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and 2 Timothy were written during an Ephesus imprisonment. Duncan, *St. Paul's Ephesian Ministry*, 59.

²⁴⁸ Foster, *Colossians*, 62.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

Colossians written from Rome.”²⁵¹ Then there is the fourth-century Codex Vaticanus, B 02 and Codex Alexandrinus, which contain “the subscription ‘to the Colossians from Rome’ (f.110r).”²⁵² Furthermore, MacDonald observes that the “transformed nature of the theology of Colossians points to a time of composition very near the end of Paul’s career.”²⁵³ If this is true, and since, according to tradition, Paul was martyred in Rome, this would suggest that the Colossian Letter was written during a Roman imprisonment, around A.D. 60-61.²⁵⁴

1.6.3 Audience

The Letter was addressed to the church at Colossae. However, Sumney notes that the direct audience in Colossae is difficult to identify if Paul is not the author of Colossians. Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake sometime between A.D 60 and 62. This means that the Letter was sent to the churches in the region²⁵⁵ or a broader audience.²⁵⁶ This could be the case, because the Letter addressed to the church at Colossae was also meant for the churches at Laodicea²⁵⁷ and Hierapolis (4:13, 16).²⁵⁸

However, if, as I have argued, the Letter was written by Paul, it was directed to the church at Colossae. The instruction to circulate the Letter suggests that the issue which the Colossian Letter addressed was a regional concern. The same could be said of the Letter written to the church at Laodicea, which we do not have (4:16).²⁵⁹ Both Letters were

²⁵¹ Ibid., 65.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 10.

²⁵⁴ Foster, *Colossians*, 66.

²⁵⁵ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 10-11.

²⁵⁶ Wilson, *The Hope of Glory*, 16.

²⁵⁷ There is an Apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans but we are not certain that this is the letter that Col 4:16 is referring to. The letter the Apostle Paul had sent to Laodicea, referred to in Colossians 4:16, has not been found so its contents are unknown. See further comments in footnote 259.

²⁵⁸ Dunn states that Epaphras was responsible for evangelising and establishing churches in these three cities. But lack of further details on Hierapolis suggests a failed mission, meaning there were no house churches there compared to Colossae, which had house churches in the house of Philemon (Phlm 2) and Nympha (4:15). Any believers at Hierapolis probably journeyed to Laodicea for meetings. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 22-3.

²⁵⁹ A later apocryphal *Letter to the Laodiceans* which appears to draw heavily on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians is available in English translation in Wilhelm Schneemelcher, “The Epistle to the Laodiceans,” in *NT Apoc* (1992) 2. 42-46; cf., Paul A. Holloway, “The Apocryphal Epistle to the Laodiceans and the Partitioning of Philippians,” *Harvard Theological Review* 91. no 3 (1998): 321-25.

addressing specific issues that were confronting the churches in the region.²⁶⁰ This could be one reason the Letter depicts the church as a universal church.²⁶¹

The Colossian Letter was written to believers who were mainly Gentiles. There are many allusions to a pagan past, which suggest that the recipients of the Letter were Gentile converts.²⁶² There are four reasons, according to Moule, to support this conclusion.²⁶³ First, the idea that they are ‘outsiders brought inside’ found in Col 1:12, 21, and 27²⁶⁴ refers to Gentiles. Second, there is a scarcity of Old Testament allusions. Third, there are distinctively Gentile vices mentioned in 3:5-7. Fourth, there is a “lack of references to the matter of the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles in the congregation; though note 3:11 and 4:11.”²⁶⁵ There is also the use of the phrase “uncircumcision of your flesh,” which refers to a Gentile audience.²⁶⁶ There are allusions to Jewish rituals and ceremonies (2:11, 16), which advocates of Colossian philosophy used to challenge the non-Jewish believers to accept in order to reach spiritual fullness. Internal evidence suggests that the recipients of the Letter did not succumb to the opposing teaching (see 2:9-23).

1.6.4 Circumstance and Identity of the Opponents

I will reserve my discussion of the circumstances pertaining to the writing of the Colossian Letter for Chapter 3.²⁶⁷ Here I only wish to mention briefly the debate surrounding the identity of the opponents.²⁶⁸ It is problematic to identify the opposing teacher(s) or the nature of their teaching. There are various suggestions, starting from the notion that there were no opponents.²⁶⁹ I am of the view that there were opponents at Colossae which prompted an apostolic response. In the Letter, the author referred to the opponents using

²⁶⁰ Pizzuto, who agrees with Morna Hooker that there was no identifiable movement confronting the Colossians church, only a multitude of syncretistic movements, states that there is “no compelling reason to limit this threat of syncretism to Colossians church. In fact, the Christian communities of Colossae’s more renowned sister cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis were likely to have been even more heavily influenced by syncretistic threats than the smaller Colossae.” *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 23, footnote 27.

²⁶¹ The Letters to Colossae and Laodicea were probably written around the same time as other prison letters.

²⁶² See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 2.

²⁶³ C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 29; see also Wilson, *The Hope of Glory*, 23-4.

²⁶⁴ On this point; see also Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 7-8.

²⁶⁵ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, xxviii.

²⁶⁶ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 7-8.

²⁶⁷ See Chapter 3.2.

²⁶⁸ See further in Chapter 3.1.

²⁶⁹ Morna Hooker, “Were There False Teachers in Colossae?” in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: Studies in Honour of Charles Francis Digby Moule*, ed. B. Lindars and S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 315-31. See also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, xxxi.

pronouns (μηδεῖς – 2:4, 18, μη τις – 2:9, 16). The author’s generalisation of the opponents has led to various proposal as I will briefly outline below.

Scholars who argue that there were opponents disagree on the identity of the opponents and the nature of their teaching. Some scholars have suggested a form of a pagan cult,²⁷⁰ others a form of sectarian Judaism,²⁷¹ and still others have proposed that the opponents represented an earlier form of gnosticism. Francis suggests a Jewish Christian Mystical Asceticism,²⁷² and others a type of teaching that blended all of these and thus constituted syncretism.²⁷³ The ‘identity of opponents’ debate has not reached a consensus. This research will use the term ‘Colossian philosophy’ (see 2:8) as a designation for the alternative teaching.

1.7 Methodological Approach

My research approaches for this thesis are exegetical, theological, hermeneutical and contextual. I also bring to this study knowledge of my own Mundogumur (Biwat) culture²⁷⁴ and the Abelam culture of Maprik, where I was privileged to spend four years in ministry. My first approach is exegetical to which I turn.

²⁷⁰ Martin Dibelius represents those who have proposed a pagan cult. See his “The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Scholars*, rev. ed., ed. Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks (Sources for Biblical Study 4; Missoula, Montana: Society of Biblical Literature and Scholars Press, 1975), 61-122.

²⁷¹ J. B. Lightfoot represents those who argue that it was Essene Judaism of a Gnostic type. See “The Colossian Heresy,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Scholars*, ed. Francis and Meeks, 13-60.

²⁷² Fred O. Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Scholars*, ed. Francis and Meeks, 163-96; “The Background of Embateuein (Col 2:18) in Legal Papyri and Oracle Inscriptions,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Scholars*, ed. Francis and Meeks, 197-209.

²⁷³ Günther Bornkamm proposed a syncretism of Judaism and Pagan elements. See his “The Heresy of Colossians,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Scholars*, ed. Francis and Meeks, 123-46. Stanislas Lyonnet proposed a Judaic syncretism, in “Paul’s Adversaries in Colossae,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Scholars*, ed. Francis and Meeks, 147-63. More recently, Clinton Arnold has argued for syncretism, in *The Colossian Syncretism*.

²⁷⁴ Mundogumur is a tribal group made up of six villages – Akurang, Andefukua, Biwant, Branda, Dawaneng and Kinakatem. My Wanegesa clan is found mainly in Biwat village. But the name Biwat is now being used by many groups living along the Yuat River and the hinterland as a wider term for the whole area. The people from Mundogumur tribe itself when they travel outside of their villages to other parts of the Sepik Region or the country would refer to themselves as the Biwats. On this basis, I will use Biwat as a synonym for Mundogumur. But I will distinguish this usage by using Biwat village to refer to the village to which I belong.

1.7.1 Exegetical

Michael Gorman defines exegesis “as the careful historical, literary, and theological analysis of a text.”²⁷⁵ Some scholars refer to exegesis as “scholarly reading” or “close reading” of the text.²⁷⁶ Hence, exegesis is an investigation of the text which considers carefully “the many dimensions, or textures, of a particular text.”²⁷⁷ It is a process that involves answering provocative questions that the text raises.²⁷⁸ Through exegesis, we seek to understand what the text is saying, i.e. to grasp the meaning of the text. It focuses on “the *then* of the text rather than the *now* of contextualized meaning.”²⁷⁹ In exegesis, we pay attention to factors such as genre, and literary and social contexts to derive the meaning of the text before it can be contextually applied to our context.²⁸⁰

The exegetical task involves a grammatical-historical method. “The grammatical-historical method considers the grammatical context, i.e. language, grammar, semantic, syntax and the text. The biblical text was originally written in Hebrew and Greek. The terms and concepts used in the text embody meaning. To get to the meaning of the text, an understanding of the biblical languages (Hebrew and Greek) is vital. The study of the language, grammar and syntax clarifies the meaning of the text and sheds light on the religious, political, social and economic situation behind the text.”²⁸¹ Failure to pay attention to linguistic expressions can impair our understanding of the terms and expressions found in the text and lessen our understanding of cultural factors associated with the text. Hence, the historical critical method concerns the history, society, politics, geography and culture of the author and the audience.”²⁸²

In this thesis, I recognize that meaning comes from the *author*, the *text* and from the *reader*.²⁸³ When I refer to the author, I am referring to what the author intended to

²⁷⁵ Michael J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 10; Revised and expanded edition.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 23.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-5.

²⁸¹ See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), 7-8; Moisés Silva, “Let’s be Logical: Using and Abusing Language” in *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 47-64.

²⁸² For more details, see Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint Books, 1994), 112-13.

²⁸³ See Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 57-78, on the historical developments and reactions about the authors, texts and readers. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a*

communicate through shared language. What the author meant to say is embedded in the text. Through study of the text and its background and cultural setting, the reader can grasp the meaning of the text, so that it becomes the basis for readers understanding and responding by applying it and giving it further meaning for Christ-honouring living in their own cultures such as those in Melanesia.

In the thesis I will look at the background the Colossian readers brought to the text to help them understand the message of the letter. I will also show how Melanesians bring their cultural understanding about *gutpela sindaun* when they try to understand the Gospel. So in this way I will show the response the reader gives is important for meaning. But I want that meaning to be based on hearing what the author was saying, and hence from the meaning that comes through a careful study of the text itself. I am not endorsing a radical “reader-response” theory.²⁸⁴ But I am recognising that all three, author, text and reader, are important for meaning.

Therefore, the goal of the grammatical-historical exegetical method is to establish the meaning of the text,²⁸⁵ and how it may have been understood by the original readers, as the basis for deciding how that meaning can be contextually applied to a new or different context like Melanesia. In this thesis, the use of the exegetical method will draw out the meaning of the text, how the audience may have responded to it and what theological statements can be made in relation to the contemporary situation of Melanesians.

1.7.2 Hermeneutics

The term hermeneutics is understood as another term for “interpretation.”²⁸⁶ Anthony Thiselton explains recent developments in hermeneutics in this way:

Traditionally hermeneutics entails the formulation of rules for the understanding of an ancient text, especially in linguistic and historical terms ... In other words, traditional hermeneutics began with recognition that a text was conditioned by a given historical context. [But the recent use of the term] begins with the recognition that historical conditioning is two-sided: *the modern interpreter, no less than the text, stands in a given historical context and tradition.*²⁸⁷

Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 15-35.

²⁸⁴ Robin Parry, “Reader-Response Criticism,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (London; Grand Rapids Michigan: SPCK and Baker Academic, 2005), 658-61.

²⁸⁵ Tremper Longman III, “Historical-grammatical Exegesis,” *GTJ* 11, no. 2 (1990): 140-41.

²⁸⁶ See Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein*, 10.

²⁸⁷ Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein*, 10-11. (Italic original).

Therefore, hermeneutics according to Thiselton is “how we read, understand and handle texts especially those written in another time or in a context of life different from our own. Biblical hermeneutics investigates more specially how we read, understand, apply and respond to biblical texts.”²⁸⁸ The meaning of the text is conditioned by various historical, sociological and linguistical factors of the writer and the targeted audience. Thus, hermeneutics, according to Brown, “refer[s] to the discipline that analyses interpretation, specifically, how texts communicate, how meaning is derived from the texts and/or their authors, and what it is that people do when they interpret a text.”²⁸⁹ The goal of biblical hermeneutics as Thiselton states, “is to bring about an active and meaningful engagement between the interpreter and text, in such a way that the interpreter’s own horizon is re-shaped and enlarged.”²⁹⁰ The Bible as Thiselton goes on to states, “can and does speak today, in such a way as to correct, reshape, and enlarge the interpreter’s own horizons.”²⁹¹ In hermeneutics we seek to ascertain the meaning of the text or as Brown terms it, the text’s “communicative intention”²⁹² but we also want to hear God through the text, which leads to another aspect of the hermeneutical approach I use this research.

1.7.2.1. *Theological Interpretation*

In this thesis we are using theological interpretation; the question of whether theological interpretation is a method or not is debated.²⁹³ Tim Meadowcroft states that practitioners and theorists of theological interpretation steer clear of making claims that it is a method. “[I]t is conceived of as a mindset or perspective or an approach to Scripture.”²⁹⁴ To claim theological interpretation is a method has the possibility of creating “an unresolvable tension between the aim of interpreting Scripture in its own theological and literary terms, and the possibility that any methodology of interpretation is capable of creating an interpretive straitjacket, which then inhibits the possibility of the reader hearing

²⁸⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2009), 1.

²⁸⁹ Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 20. Wendell V. Harris also states that “[h]ermeneutics ... assumes that texts result from an author’s intention to communicate, and that the intended communication is almost always largely interpretable with reasonable accuracy.” Harris, *Literary Meaning: Reclaiming the Study of Literature* (London: MacMillan, 1996), 90.

²⁹⁰ Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein*, xix.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 22.

²⁹³ See Murray Rae, “Theological Interpretation and the Problem of Method” in *Ears that Hear: Explorations in the Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Joel B. Green and Tim Meadowcroft (University of Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 11-12.

²⁹⁴ Tim Meadowcroft, “Introduction” in *Ears that Hear: Explorations in the Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Joel B. Green and Tim Meadowcroft (University of Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), 2.

the voice of God in Scripture.”²⁹⁵ In the light of the above cautionary statement, instead of defining theological interpretation as a method, I will refer to it as an approach or a perspective in this thesis.

In theological interpretation, according to Kevin Vanhoozer, we read Scripture for the purpose of “coming to hear God’s word and to know God better.”²⁹⁶ In his critique of Vanhoozer, Meadowcroft states, “to call that enterprise ‘theological interpretation’ hardly advances the matter.”²⁹⁷ There is a difference in hearing God and encountering God in the reading of the Scripture.²⁹⁸ Murray Rae stresses that listening is a “particular kind of attention to the text.”²⁹⁹ But to be a good hearer or listener one has to be a follower of Christ. One has to be in the company of Jesus.³⁰⁰ In our case, one has to have faith in Christ. Faith is the substance that enables us to accept, read and listen to the Scripture as God’s authoritative word for faith and life.³⁰¹ Without faith we can read the Scripture but never perceive what it is saying, nor will we hear God. Therefore, the goal of theological interpretation, as Gorman puts it, is “to allow the text to read, question, and form us.”³⁰² Rae takes this thought further to state, “[t]heological interpretation is better conceived as a form of attentiveness in which we relinquish hermeneutical control and subject ourselves to the transforming power of the word.”³⁰³ This has to be done with much prayer and brokenness or humility.³⁰⁴

Theological interpretation of the Scripture as I have outlined above involves faith in God or Christ as the vital element in attentive reading of the Scripture and encountering God through the Scripture, thus allowing the Scripture to form our lives. We come to know God through the Scripture as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. A christological focus is vital in theological interpretation. Both Old Testament and New Testament bear witness to the life and the work of Christ. As Meadowcroft states, “[t]herefore all of Scripture is read in light of what is made know (*sic*) to us of God in Christ, including and perhaps especially his incarnation, suffering and resurrection ..., this also has an epistemological

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 2.

²⁹⁶ Kevin Vanhoozer, “Introduction,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 22.

²⁹⁷ Meadowcroft, “Introduction,” 3.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ Rae, “Theological Interpretation and the Problem of Method,” 13.

³⁰⁰ See Ibid., 16-17.

³⁰¹ See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 13.

³⁰² Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, 23.

³⁰³ Rae, “Theological Interpretation and the Problem of Method,” 17.

³⁰⁴ See Richard B. Hays, “Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith,” *JTI* 1 (2007), 15.

effect on how one reads.”³⁰⁵ The Scriptures bear witness to Christ, the fullness of God, who has revealed God to us.

As well as christology we also need a trinitarian approach in the reading of Scripture. Scripture is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit and in theological interpretation we need the Holy Spirit to illumine our minds to hear God’s voice and to apply the truth of the Scripture to our lives. The Holy Spirit, as Meadowcroft states, “is present in the Scriptures themselves and in each part of the process between their writing and their taking up residence as the voice of God in the heart and mind of the believing reader.”³⁰⁶ The Holy Spirit speaks through the Scriptures to enable the readers/hearers to hear God’s voice through their own cultural backgrounds. That the Holy Spirit respects the local cultural background is seen both in the way the author uses appropriate culturally relevant concepts and terms, and in the way the Spirit expects and welcomes the audience response to what God is saying through the Scripture in their own terms. Thus, using theological interpretation, we will seek to be attentive to the way the hearers may respond to the message.

As Melanesians, we can come to the Scripture with our cultural backgrounds based on our primal beliefs about utopian life and its expected realisation. Our beliefs in the culture heroes, ancestors and various spirit powers which communicate and interact with humans have always been part of Melanesian ways of life and thinking. Our myths, and the “*Lo*” (law) and “*Kastom*” (customs) and beliefs we received from our ancestors taught us to expect the spirit powers to communicate meaningfully with us. So, when we come to the Christian Scriptures, we accept that they reveal the Triune God who speaks to us. God speaks through historical actions and the Scriptures, more specially through Christ who is the *eikon* of God, and through the living relationship we have with the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, theological interpretation should take place in relation to the Christian community or the church. Christian theological interpretation is “interpretation in, with and for the church so that the church may in fact be the kind of church in the world that is appropriate to the Christian gospel.”³⁰⁷ As Scripture enters new cultural contexts and boundaries, it raises issues that others have not yet recognised. This thought is seen in Walls’ remarks: “the Scriptures are read with different eyes by people in different times and places; and in practice, each age and community makes its own selection of the

³⁰⁵ Meadowcroft, “Introduction,” 5.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁰⁷ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, 23.

Scriptures, giving prominence to those which seem to speak most clearly to the community's time and place and leaving aside others which do not appear to yield up their gold so readily."³⁰⁸ Walls goes on to state:

Each phase of Christian history has seen a transformation of Christianity as it has penetrated another culture. There is no such thing as "Christian culture" or "Christian civilization." ... The reason for this lies in the infinite translatability of the Christian faith ... And this [translation] principle brings Christ to the heart of each culture where he finds acceptance; to the burning questions within that culture, to the points of reference within it by which people know themselves. That is why each phase of Christian history has produced new themes: themes which the points of reference of that culture have made inescapable for those who share that framework.³⁰⁹

This happens when the theological interpretation of Scripture is done by the *local* church to bring it into conversation with their primal beliefs and cultural practices, allowing the Scripture to speak into their worldviews, beliefs and challenges, and form their lives and practice. In this regard, theological interpretation should be done in relation to the Scripture-reader's cultural context(s), so that the essence of the text is retained for the purpose of making doctrinal claims or statements³¹⁰ and for contextual theology.

1.7.2.2 *Critical Contextualization*

The principle of contextualization,³¹¹ according to Brown, is the "task of bringing a biblical author's meaning to bear in other times and cultures," or the process of "hearing Scripture's meaning in a new context."³¹² Contextualization is not just "an add-on at the end of the exegetical process."³¹³ It is an integral part of a careful study of the biblical text in its context, so that it is heard rightly in our context, directing our thinking and our lives.³¹⁴ Brown further reminds us that Scripture was already contextualized at the time it was written. What we are doing is recontextualizing the meaning of the biblical text in relation

³⁰⁸ Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996), 11-12. Or again: "...we all approach the Scriptures wearing cultural blinkers, with assumptions determined by our own time and place... Perhaps it is not only that different ages and nations see different things in Scripture – it is that they *need* to see different things," 12.

³⁰⁹ Andrew F. Walls, "Culture and Coherence in Christian History," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1996), 22-23.

³¹⁰ See Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 24.

³¹¹ The term *contextualization* was introduced into theological and missiological discourse in 1972. See Krikor Halebian, "The Problem of Contextualization," *Missiology* 11, no. 1 (January 1983): 95. It was first introduced by Shoki Coe into the theological and missiological discourse (see footnote 319 below).

³¹² Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 25.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 233.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

to our context. We do our best to identify the normative meaning of the text in order to recontextualize it in our time and culture.³¹⁵

In recontextualization we move back and forth between the world of Scripture and our world. Through recontextualization, we enter the textual world with our context in mind. We are invited to hear Scripture as both familiar and also foreign to us.³¹⁶ In other words, in recontextualization, we unwrap the normative meaning from the cultural wrappings of the original recipients and re-wrap it using the appropriate wrappings of our own time and cultures (context).³¹⁷

The art of contextualizing the gospel is ancient, going back to biblical times. As the gospel message moved beyond Jerusalem and encountered Greco-Roman culture, it took on the cultural forms and identities of the recipient cultures.³¹⁸ This art of communicating the gospel has been previously defined by terms like accommodation, and indigenization, and so on, until in 1972, Shoki Coi [C. H. Hwang], Director of the Theological Education Fund of the WCC introduced the term ‘contextualization’ into the theological discussion for the English speaking world.³¹⁹ Missionaries and theologians devised contextual models for cross-cultural communication of the gospel.

One of the contextual theologians Stephen Bevans, in his book *Models of Contextual Theology*, listed six models for doing contextual theology.³²⁰ Dean Gilliland and A. Scott Moreau have identified seven contextual models.³²¹ The contextual model that best suits my research is the ‘critical contextualization’ model developed by Paul Hiebert.³²²

³¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 241-3.

³¹⁷ The majority world is not only faced with the issue of decontextualizing the normative meaning from the time and culture of the original recipients of the texts, they are also faced with the issue of decontextualizing it from its Western clothing. Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *IBMR* 11, no. 3 (July 1987): 108.

³¹⁸ See Darrell L. Whiteman, “Effective Communication of the Gospel Amid Cultural Diversity,” *Missiology* 12, no. 3 (July 1984): 275-85.

³¹⁹ Shoki Coe [C.H. Hwang], “In Search of Renewal in Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 9, no. 4 (1973a): 233-43; “A Preliminary Word from the TEF Directors,” *Theological Education* 9, no. 4 (1973b): 231-32; cf., Scott Moreau, “Evangelical Models of Contextualisation,” in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew Cook, et al. (Pasadena, California: William Carey, 2010), 167.

³²⁰ Anthropological, Translational, Praxis, Adaptational, Synthetic and Semiotic Models. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

³²¹ Dean S. Gilliland, “Appendix,” *The Word Among Us*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1989), 313-17. See also Moreau, “Evangelical Models of Contextualization,” 169-71.

³²² Paul G. Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” *Missiology* 12, no. 3 (July 1984): 287-96; and Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization” (July 1987): 104-12.

Hiebert developed the critical model of contextualization in response to questions raised by believers from non-Western contexts such as India.³²³ Should non-Western believers reject their culture altogether? Should believers be allowed to retain their old culture and traditions? In response to such questions, Hiebert developed a contextual model which he called ‘critical contextualisation.’ In the critical contextualization model, “the old is neither rejected, nor accepted uncritically. It is explicitly examined with regard to its meanings and functions in the society, and then evaluated in the light of biblical norms.”³²⁴ In other words, as Gilliland states, it “confronts the double-edged risk of too much permissiveness in the role of culture on the one hand, and the outright rejection or denial of traditional beliefs and practices on the other.”³²⁵

In the critical model of contextualization, the culture and Scripture are both taken seriously, and the church community is engaged in the hermeneutical task.³²⁶ In this approach, both culture and related biblical themes are exegeted simultaneously, with the objective of discovering a new response “which is culturally authentic and biblically appropriate.”³²⁷ Culture is made to pass through biblical filters, and cultural forms that satisfy the process of filtration are modified within a Christian framework. The steps of critical contextualization will guide the movement from apostolic message to applying the biblical teachings for a Melanesian response to *gutpela sindaun thinking*.

The goal of this model is to “arrive at contextualized practices which have the consensus of the redeemed community.”³²⁸ The gospel is therefore clothed in the attire of the redeemed community, so that it is no longer seen as foreign or labelled as the white man’s gospel. Critical contextualization or ‘good contextualization,’ as Darrell Whiteman has argued, should, first, hold *emic* and *etic* perspectives in tension (a deep insider’s understanding with an outsider’s critique); and, second, cause offence only for the right reasons (exposing sinful and oppressive patterns in the culture).³²⁹

If a critical contextualization of the gospel is not applied, then we risk uncritical contextualization. In this regard, Whiteman writes that “we run a much greater risk of establishing weak churches, whose members will turn to non-Christian syncretistic explanations, follow non-biblical lifestyles, and engage in magical rituals. This is because

³²³ Majority world refers to the non-Western world.

³²⁴ Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” 294.

³²⁵ Gilliland, “Appendix,” 317.

³²⁶ Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” 109-10.

³²⁷ Gilliland, “Appendix,” 317.

³²⁸ Ibid. See also Moreau, “Evangelical Models of Contextualization,” 170.

³²⁹ Darrell Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *IBMR* (Jan 1997): 2-3.

a non-contextualized Christianity seldom engages people at the level of their deepest needs and aspirations.”³³⁰ Whiteman’s warning regarding uncritical contextualization of the gospel stems from his ministry experience in PNG.

Hiebert lists several implications of adopting an approach of an uncritical contextualization of the gospel, from which I want to emphasise a few notable implications that relate to the Melanesian context.³³¹ The first implication is an ethnocentric reading of Scripture. One cannot help but see ethnocentric presentations of the gospel as a tool of colonialism.³³² Melanesians were taught to read, think and articulate the gospel like Westerners. Some Western missionaries, shocked by some features of Melanesians cultures such as cannibalism, polygamy and payback, taught that Melanesian cultures were to be rejected as pagan, satanic or demonic.³³³ One Melanesian academic laments that the lack of an in-depth knowledge of Christianity, “couple[d] with contempt of the traditional cultures, has led to uncritical acceptance of Christianity in Western garb.”³³⁴ The general perception regarding the gospel is that it is foreign, a white man’s story.³³⁵

Second, the ethnocentric presentation of the gospel has meant that the old beliefs and cultures went underground. This has created a “coexistence of public Christianity and private paganism,”³³⁶ leading to syncretism and a suppression of old forms, which then continue underground. Since the indigenization of the churches in Melanesia, meaning that they became self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating, many cultural practices and beliefs that existed secretly have been resurfacing, such as beliefs in sorcery and magical powers, which are a major social and religious concern in PNG. Fear of malevolent powers is overshadowing people’s faith in Christ, which means that a critical contextualization of the gospel is vital for the church in Melanesia.³³⁷

³³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³³¹ Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” 108-9.

³³² See Polonhou S. Pokawin, “Interaction between Indigenous and Christian Traditions,” in *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from Southwest Pacific*, ed. Garry W. Trompf (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), 24; Hiebert, “Critical Contextualisation,” 105-6.

³³³ See Marilyn Rowsome, “Melanesian Religion,” *MJT* 17, no. 2 (2001): 44-5; see also Pokawin, “Interaction between Indigenous and Christian Traditions,” 25.

³³⁴ Pokawin, “Interaction between Indigenous and Christian Traditions,” 26.

³³⁵ Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” 104; See also Pokawin, “Interaction between Indigenous and Christian Traditions,” 23-31; Bernard Narokobi, “Christianity and Melanesian Cosmos: The Broken Pearl and a New-born Shell,” in *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from Southwest Pacific*, ed. Trompf, 32-7 and Rose Kunoth-Monks, “Church and Culture: An Aboriginal Perspective,” in *The Gospel is Not Western: Black Theologies from Southwest Pacific*, ed. Trompf, 38-41.

³³⁶ Hiebert, “Critical Contextualization,” 106.

³³⁷ The critical model is criticised for being too narrow and not responding to wider social and political issues. While it is concerned with issues of a specific culture or society, it is sometimes not balanced with insights from historical theology and theology developed from outside. Gilliland, “Appendix,” 317.

1.7.2.3 *Missional Interpretation*

My primary methodological approaches in this research are theological and hermeneutical interpretation and contextualization of the biblical teaching to the Melanesian context. Secondary to it, is a missiological hermeneutic. Missiological or missional hermeneutics as Gorman states, is about the *missio Dei* – the mission of God. Missional hermeneutics acknowledges that the Bible is God’s word which reveals God’s purpose for the world. God’s mission is not just about saving lost souls for heaven “but to restore and save the created order: individuals, communities, nations, the environment, the world, [and] the cosmos.”³³⁸ We will give attention to the way biblical authors like Paul understood and used his knowledge of Greek and Roman cultural background to relate his message to the new situation arising in Colossae. We use that feature of Paul’s approach to apply the message of the Colossians Letter to Melanesian contexts in a missiological way. I am not setting out to impose a missiological interpretation on the message of the Colossian Letter. Rather, as I worked on the author, text and reader aspects of the meaning of the letter, I discovered themes and terms within the message that have missiological implications. The claims the Letter makes for Christ’s uniqueness and fullness in terms of christology, salvation, and eschatology, have implications for the missional contact of Christians with the existing beliefs of contemporary cultural groups. Therefore, in my work there is an element of missiology when I discuss the themes and terms of the Colossians Letter that are somewhat similar to those of *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

1.7.2.4 *Culture and Exegesis: Cultural Affinity*

In each aspect of our discussion of hermeneutics I have emphasised the importance of the cultural factors in interpreting the Scriptures. The theological basis for culturally sensitive exegesis is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He lived in a particular region, time and culture and revealed God to us. Therefore, the word of God needs to be appropriated in every case. The multiplicity of theological and christological conceptions in the New Testament bear witness to inculturation and contextualisation of 1st century Christianity³³⁹ as we shall see in our study of Colossians. Hence, cultural exegesis as Elizabeth Sung states is an “integrative attempt to articulate the vision and instruction that the world projected by the canonical text provides for the world of lived existence – is another level at which the

³³⁸ Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, 155

³³⁹ Werner Kahl, “Intercultural Hermeneutics, Contextual Exegesis: A Model for 21st Century Exegesis,” *IRM*, 89. no. 354 (2000): 424.

sociocultural factors contribute considerably to interpretative judgement.”³⁴⁰ As Bruce Malina also suggests the meaning of the text is “derived from the general social systems of the speakers of a language.”³⁴¹ An adequate understanding of the Bible requires an understanding of the “social system embodied in the words that make up our sacred scriptures.”³⁴²

To generate an understanding of the biblical world and culture in our time and place,³⁴³ models are developed based on certain presuppositions regarding the nature of the group or social systems.³⁴⁴ In this study, I will use a model known as *cultural affinity* to generate a dialogue between the world of Colossae and the Melanesian world.³⁴⁵

My presupposition undergirding cultural affinity is that many cultural (ethnic) groups, like those in Melanesia, share similar aspirations, assumptions, values, thought-patterns and ways of social interaction, in such a way that “members of those groups ... resonate with and feel a sense of shared perspective with each other.”³⁴⁶ N.T. Wright also states, “[e]very human community shares and cherishes certain assumptions, traditions, expectations, anxieties, and so forth, which encourages its members to construe reality in particular ways, and create contexts within which certain kinds of statements are perceived as making sense.”³⁴⁷ Cultural affinity, according to John Hitchen, is not claiming identity but sharing “basic concepts and values that allow members of some present-day cultures [like those in Melanesia] to feel culturally at home with the concerns, styles of approaches to issues, and social relations operating in the biblical text.”³⁴⁸ Although Melanesian cultural groups have historical and geographical differences from the biblical culture under investigation, some of their core values can have an affinity with the cultural backgrounds of the biblical writings.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁰ Elizabeth Sung, “Culture and Hermeneutics,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 152.

³⁴¹ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 1.

³⁴² Malina, *The New Testament World*, 2.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19. In cultural anthropology, three models – structural functionalism, social functionalism, and the symbolic model – were developed in an attempt to generate an understanding of God’s word in our time and age. See Malina, *The New Testament World*, 20-23.

³⁴⁵ The principle of Cultural Affinity is proposed by John M. Hitchen, in “Clarifying the Contribution of Culture to our Methodology for Contextual Theology: Three Guiding Principles,” in *Theological Formation for Christian Missions: A Festschrift for Dr Ian Walter Payne*, ed. Roji Thomas and Aruthukul Varughese John (Bangalore, India: SAIACS Press, 2019), 91-120.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁴⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 36.

³⁴⁸ Hitchen, “Clarifying the Contribution of Culture to our Methodology,” 100.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

There are strands in the cultural affinity approach that can contribute to developing a local theology.³⁵⁰ The first strand, as Malina states, is that “*all cultures share the same basic human nature and human capacities.*”³⁵¹ In terms of human nature, the people of the Mediterranean world described in the New Testament are, in some respects, like us and everyone else in the world. Their cultural stories, cues and scripts are somewhat similar to ours.³⁵² This is because human nature is, to some extent, unchanged across time and cultures, which is fundamental in assisting us to learn from history and “to accept that the Christian Scriptures have abiding relevance and authority today.”³⁵³

The second strand argues that there is an “affinity between two cultures which they both share at a worldview level,”³⁵⁴ in terms of certain shared aspects of social structures and patterns. For instance, Melanesians share parallels with Mediterranean culture (past and present) regarding kinship institutions. Just as “the family is truly everything”³⁵⁵ in Melanesian cultures, so, according to Malina, “*family membership is the basic organising principle of Mediterranean life.*”³⁵⁶ Family in both cultures is not restricted to the nuclear family (father, mother and children), but incorporates the entire kin group or *haus lain* (in Tok Pisin/neo-Melanesian). Kinship as an institution is organised on the principle of belongingness. Success depends on having and making right interpersonal connections within this kinship structure, where one’s identity is derived from the group or extended family, based on adherence to traditional rules that organise and maintain families. These traditional rules are rooted in the values of honour and shame.³⁵⁷

Honour³⁵⁸ and shame were also pivotal values in the first century Mediterranean world. Honour “is basically a claim to worth that is socially acknowledged. It surfaces especially where the three defining features of authority, gender status, and respect come together.”³⁵⁹ The authority feature concerns behavioural control, the gender status feature is about the “oughts” of gender roles, and respect is about attitudes and behaviours towards

³⁵⁰ These three strands I am using here have been developed by Hitchen, *Ibid.*, 100-07.

³⁵¹ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 6. (Italics in original.)

³⁵² In terms of personhood and uniqueness, they are as unfathomable as we are, and they are unlike us in terms of cultural interpretation of human nature. Malina, *The New Testament World*, 9.

³⁵³ Hitchen, “Clarifying the Contribution of Culture to our Methodology,” 102.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 29.

³⁵⁶ Hitchen, “Clarifying the Contribution of Culture to our Methodology,” 102. (Italics in original.)

³⁵⁷ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 29.

³⁵⁸ Malina used American spelling to spell ‘honor’, but I am using the British spelling throughout. If the term honour occurs in the citation in American spelling, it will remain unchanged.

³⁵⁹ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 29.

those who control one's existence, often referred to as religion or piety.³⁶⁰ Honour is proper attitudes and behaviours where these three features intersect.³⁶¹ It can be ascribed, for instance, through birth into a family with recognised status, or acquired by excelling over others through social interaction, known as challenge and response.³⁶² Challenge and response is a kind of game where people wrestle each other through socially defined rules to gain honour over others. The loser in the challenge is shamed and the victor increases in status. Honour ascribed or acquired is often symbolised by blood³⁶³ and by name.³⁶⁴

The third worldview strand in Malina's framework is the personality of the individual and the group.³⁶⁵ In individualistic cultures, an individual's sense of value, ambitions, and interests are important elements of understanding and explaining human behaviour – ours and others.³⁶⁶ Malina asserts that a careful reading of the New Testament shows an absence of individualism. Instead, we find a social worldview of collectivism in the first-century Mediterranean world. Individuals defined themselves in terms of “the group(s) in which they experience themselves as inextricably embedded.”³⁶⁷ The quest for honour in a collectivist culture is linked to one's group(s).³⁶⁸

The importance of the affinity principle in developing a local theology is, as Hitchen states, the fact that

this Affinity principle gives good grounds for the local theologian to look for and expect points at which our common human nature, the features of the local worldview (like the centrality of the extended family, the priority of seeking honour and status, a communal understanding of human functioning, and the concept of limited good), and insights from reflection on local myths, will bring to light insights that will make the living message of the Gospel come freshly alive and, with perhaps previously unnoticed emphasis, speak directly to aspirations and values already cherished in the local culture. Always with the proviso that those insights pass the test of honouring Christ Jesus and more fully proclaiming the Gospel of Christ Jesus within the local culture.³⁶⁹

Garry Trompf suggests a further “history of religions” reason which supports our use of this cultural affinity principle. Trompf explains the common experience of cultures in different parts of the world when their previously unchallenged myths-based understanding of primordial time is confronted by a linear-history-based understanding of

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 29-30.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 30.

³⁶² Ibid., 32-3.

³⁶³ Ibid., 36-7.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 37-8.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 58-80.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 61.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 62.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

³⁶⁹ Hitchen, “Clarifying the Contribution of Culture to our Methodology,” 118-9.

the long distant past.³⁷⁰ Trompf explains that in such historical encounters the myths-based cultures have often resorted to re-framing their myths to account for the new approach to knowledge and to incorporate for them, the new awareness of other historic personages (like the OT biblical characters) into their traditions. Trompf makes a strong case to suggest that the rise of gnostic thinking in the 1st Christian century was part of the Greco-Roman world's grappling with this change from their myth-based views of primeval time as it encountered in a fresh way the linear-history-based understanding of antiquity inherent in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and Gospel. The pseudepigraphal attributing of gnostic ideas to Moses, Solomon, Jeremiah, etc., are examples of such re-writing of their myths to include the biblical characters in their own stories.

Moreover, Trompf claims that this encounter with the need to re-orient traditional understandings of time is an important aspect of any adequate explanation of the rise of “cargo-cults” in Melanesia in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this way, he also draws parallels between the 1st Christian century Greco-Roman context of the NT Letters with the Melanesian cultures' encounter with the Christian Gospel. This suggests for us, an affinity in the way both cultures were relating their new understandings to the myths of their ancient past. This is relevant to the way ancestors play such an important part in *gutpela sindaun* thinking, and gives another strand of justification for the cultural affinity principle we use as an aspect of our methodology.

1.7.3 Personal Knowledge

As an indigene, I bring to this study my personal Melanesian perspective. My perspective is supported by my personal knowledge of the Mundogumur (Biwat) people's group culture,³⁷¹ to which my Wanengesa clan belongs. This people group is situated along the Yuat River in the area now widely referred to as Biwat in Angoram District, in East Sepik Province (PNG). I also bring to this study the knowledge that I acquired during my four years of cross-cultural ministry among the Abelam or Manje people of Maprik, and from the Buki or Arapesh people of East Sepik, with whom I joined relations through my marriage. I am indebted to the Abelam and Buki people for teaching me a lot about their

³⁷⁰ Garry W. Trompf, “Macrohistory and Acculturation: Between Myth and History in Modern Melanesian Adjustments and Ancient Gnosticism,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31.4 (1989): 621-648).

³⁷¹ For the linguists use of Mundogumur and Biwat, see my explanation in footnote 274 above.

cultures and beliefs about magic, sorcery and witchcraft, which still dominate the hinterlands of the East Sepik Province.

My experience in cross-cultural ministry revealed that there is considerable cultural distinctiveness amongst the different tribes in Melanesia. One should never assume that Melanesian cultures are all the same. One needs to look no further to notice this cultural distinctiveness than the fact that more than eight hundred languages are spoken in PNG. In Garry Trompf's words, I am, "dealing with the most complex ethnologic scene on earth, and ... generalisations are perilous."³⁷² My personal knowledge and insights utilised in this study come primarily from my own people group, the Abelam and the Arapesh. My Melanesian readers may not fully agree with me on some of my ideas because of the reality of our Melanesian cultural diversity and distinctiveness. I take this reaction as normal and positive, because it can stimulate more discussion and further contributions from other indigenous Melanesians on this subject matter.

1.8 Thesis Synopsis

Chapter 1 is a general overview of the thesis. In this chapter, I began by describing the audience, the research problem, the thesis statement, and related thesis questions. I then provided a relevant cultural literature review, followed by a statement of my reasons for undertaking this study. My primary argument is that a more adequate theological response to *gutpela sindaun* is needed, and that the Book of Colossians is a helpful aid in responding to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. I provided a general background to the Colossian Letter, before discussing the thesis methodology. This study is approached exegetically, theologically, hermeneutically and contextually, also incorporating my personal background knowledge of my culture. Chapter 1 concludes with this thesis synopsis, outlining the contents of each chapter, and ending with comment on my contribution to knowledge.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, which is an object of aspiration for many cultural groups in Melanesia. As noted previously, *gutpela sindaun* means a good or prosperous life, both spiritually and physically. My discussion will include the background of this concept, including how the coming of Europeans and the preaching of the gospel were generally appropriated, and the subsequent emergence of Melanesian indigenous movements popularised as cargo cults, independent churches and

³⁷² Garry W. Trompf, Personal communication October 2019.

new religious movements. The Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* is at the heart of many Melanesian cultures and religions, and it can be seen to be the impetus for embracing new sects and movements that are emphasising social and material salvation.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the polemic of the Colossian Letter. This chapter discusses, in particular, Col 2:8-23 to see what was at stake that the author of Colossians set out to combat. The exegetical discussion will help us to understand the authorial message and its implication for recipients. The exegetical discussion follows the schema of three warnings (2:8, 16, 18) and a rhetorical question (2:20). This chapter highlights the theological response of the Apostle Paul to the Colossian philosophy as a model for responding to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*.

Chapter 4 examines the Colossian Letter's emphasis on the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption, through exegesis of the christological poem (Col 1:15-20). The chapter explores the background, divine identity and various roles which the poem attributes to Christ as the image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation, being before all things (the beginning), sustainer, head, firstborn from the dead, fullness of God, God's agent in the reconciliation of the cosmos, and his pre-eminence in creation and redemption. The significance of the poem is its intent to assure the believers that their salvation was secured, Christ is superior to every principality and power, and to exhort them to remain firm in their faith in Christ as Lord, providing a potential model for Melanesian believers facing comparable challenges from new calls for *gutpela sindaun*.

To deepen such biblical insights, Chapter 5 analyses the terms *fullness*, *riches*, *mystery*, *hiddenness* and *knowledge* as they are developed in Colossians. These terms have to do with themes similar to the teachings embedded in the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. In Colossians, these terms explicate the implications of the person and work of Christ for believers. Christ is the fullness of God (1:19; 2:9), through whom God's secret plan is revealed – salvation of both Jews and Gentiles (1:27). In Christ is hidden the fullness of knowledge and wisdom (2:2-3). From the riches of his fullness, believers are given fullness of salvation (2:10), sufficient for them to withstand the alternative teachings being promoted to the Colossian Christians. The new life in Christ is hidden but it will be revealed at the Parousia of Christ (3:3-4). This response in Colossians should challenge Christians in Melanesia against seeking a suffering-free 'wealth and health' type of life.

Chapter 6 discusses the ways in which the teaching and themes of the Colossian Letter relate to and offer a response to the challenges which *gutpela sindaun* teaching brings to Melanesian believers. First, the motifs of the poem can be seen as presenting Christ to

Melanesians as their ultimate culture hero. As such, his divine identity and roles as creator, sustainer and redeemer of the whole cosmos show how fully he satisfies the desires and hopes that drive the Melanesian search for *gutpela sindaun*, fulfilling that search at a new level. Second, through his death and resurrection, Christ reconciled all things to God, including both human beings and the whole creation. The emphases of the Letter's reconciliation soteriology on life and relationship with God through Christ are explored as they relate to key Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* themes. Third, major features of the inaugurated eschatology of Colossians are shown to relate to the future-oriented aspects of *gutpela sindaun*, with the 'now-but-not-yet' aspects of the Colossian eschatology offering a constructive antidote to the teachings of the new movements in Melanesia today.

Chapter 7 is the Conclusion and summarises the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, the Colossian philosophy and Paul's response, to show how the Colossian Letter's use of fullness, riches, mystery, hidden and knowledge, and the threefold response of christology, reconciliation soteriology, and eschatology, relate to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. This thesis concludes by asserting that contextual theology should take Melanesian culture and religion seriously in articulating biblical teachings in order for Melanesians to clearly grasp the fundamental Christian teachings for them to grow in cognitive and experiential knowledge.

1.9 Contribution

My contribution in this study is the development of a theological response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, enriched by insights from the Colossian Letter, which no one has done previously. My hermeneutical method of cultural affinity, based on the assumption that the original recipient culture and the Melanesian cultures share some similarities, implies that the message of Colossians is significant for the Melanesian context, regardless of differences in time and cultures. Melanesians can still read, hear and know God in full measure through the words of the Colossian Letter.

Chapter 2: The Melanesian Concept of *Gutpela Sindaun*

Gutpela sindaun (good life) is the object of the aspirations of many cultural groups in Melanesia, and lies at the heart of many of the new religious movements which have characterised the Melanesian religious scene since the advent of the colonial powers. Some of these new religious movements are searching for *gutpela sindaun* and others are promising *gutpela sindaun* – complete freedom, peace, health, wealth and spiritual prosperity.

Gutpela sindaun, as many cultural groups in Melanesia acknowledge, was lost *taim nambawan tumbuna i mekim asua* (when the first ancestors caused the trouble/problem/wrong). Its loss is solely the responsibility of the *nambawan tumbuna* (first ancestors).¹ How do Melanesians know this? There is no simple answer. This is because the main source of knowledge of the lost *gutpela sindaun* is the myths which vary from tribe to tribe.² However, despite mythological variations, many Melanesian myths reveal that the human ancestor(s) committed the *asua* (trouble/problem/wrong) against the folk hero. This led to the termination of *gutpela sindaun*.

I will apply our chosen hermeneutical methods³ to analyse and interpret the written sources and my personal knowledge of *gutpela sindaun* from an emic perspective.⁴ My discussion of the concept of *gutpela sindaun* begins with a definition, followed by its background. The third section looks at Melanesian cultures, which are built on the concept of *gutpela sindaun*. In this section I will explore relevant aspects of Melanesian cultures to show that the concept of *gutpela sindaun* is ingrained in the Melanesian cultural worldviews. In the fourth section I will discuss Melanesian religions, which are also centred in the concept of *gutpela sindaun*. The fifth section examines the arrival of the Europeans and how Melanesians interpreted this phenomenon. In the sixth section I discuss the arrival of Christianity, and how the Melanesian people understood biblical teachings such as salvation through Christ. The seventh section highlights the formation of the Melanesian indigenous movements popularised as ‘cargo cults.’ The final section describes the contemporary Melanesian religious scene and summarises the findings of the chapter as a whole.

¹ The blame for the loss of *gutpela sindaun*, or what Trompf refers to as death, is solely the responsibility of the first human beings. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 71.

² See Chapter 2.2.1.

³ See Chapter 1.7.3.

⁴ See Chapter 1.7.5.

2.1 Definition of *Gutpela Sindaun*

The purpose of life for Melanesians is to find and enjoy *gutpela sindaun*.⁵ Melanesians past and present have a deep desire for *gutpela sindaun*. Their socio-political and socio-religious practices were fashioned to enhance *gutpela sindaun*. What is it? The term *gutpela* in Tok Pisin or neo-Melanesian means “good, attractive, fine.”⁶ *Gutpela* also has a wider range of meanings, including well, decent, perfect and pleasant. The term *sindaun* literally means “to sit, sit down, to live, stay,”⁷ but it also connotes “a way of life.” Hence, *gutpela sindaun* means a perfect way of life. In PNG *Tok Pisin* there are other comparable terms such as *gutpela laip* (good life) *laip is pulap tru* (fullness of life), *nogat hevi na bagarap* (no problems and calamities), “*i stap gut* – keeping a good life, *i stap stret* – having an orderly life, and *i stap klin* – being clean physically and ritually”⁸ are used to describe this primal concept of life but in this thesis I will use the term *gutpela sindaun*.

According to Gernot Fugmann, *gutpela sindaun* means an “absence of such negative forces in life as sickness, death, defeat, infertility, contempt or poverty.”⁹ Daimoi defines *gutpela sindaun* as being “concerned with good, harmonious, or peaceful relationships between the people in the community, the ancestors, and the environment to which the people belong.”¹⁰ For Strelan, salvation is an English equivalent of *gutpela sindaun*, meaning “freedom from wants and sickness, relief from the pressures of work and time, a state of wholeness and health, a regaining of one’s prestige and self-respect, an ordering of relationships so that proper balances obtain in the social structures.”¹¹ According to Mani, salvation or *gutpela sindaun* means ‘life’ in a holistic sense – life well lived in its physical and spiritual, individual and corporate dimensions.¹²

Analytically, Fugmann’s definition is framed as an antithesis of negative experiences, while Daimoi bases his definition on relationships. Strelan and Mani integrate these two aspects in their definitions. From these definitions, we may conclude that *gutpela sindaun* is about wholeness of life – including health, wealth, peace, and harmony in and

⁵ See Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 55.

⁶ Friedrich Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary* (Madang, PNG: Kristen Press, 1969), 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁸ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 179.

⁹ Fugmann, “Salvation in Melanesian Religions,” 282.

¹⁰ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 181.

¹¹ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 81.

¹² Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea: The Yangoruan Context,” 70.

with the cosmos.¹³ It implies bodily and spiritual wholeness.¹⁴ Ennio Mantovani sees “the completeness of life” as the key to understanding the Melanesian search for a holistic life: “The key values seem to be what in Pidgin is called ‘*gutpela sindaun*’ ... and which I, for the lack of a better term, call ‘life’ ..., which means good relationships, prestige, security, health, wealth, meaning, success in everything. This ‘life’ is holistic and includes every aspect of human existence. It is cosmic as it affects the whole cosmos.”¹⁵

Gutpela sindaun in Melanesian thinking is not simply a theoretical or abstract notion of salvation but, rather, a pragmatic, concrete, this-worldly salvation that will involve the restoration of the known cosmos to its original state. As this-worldly, Daimoi notes that the Melanesian “people look to this world to provide them with abundant or fullness of life, or *gutpela sindaun*.”¹⁶

An analysis of these definitions and descriptions of *gutpela sindaun* reveals that they are all attempts to define life. *Gutpela sindaun* is about life understood as corporeal earthly immortality.¹⁷ By corporeal material immortality, I mean a perfect immortal life lived bodily on earth, in contrast to the present earthly mortal life. It is life that is spiritually and physically complete. It is life that is perfectly balanced,¹⁸ which one missiologist has described as theistic (God-centred) and bio-cosmic (life-centred).¹⁹ This life is thoroughly and perfectly fashioned, with no demarcations. The spiritual and the physical are one integral whole.

Immortality in the Melanesian mind means life without ageing. It is expressed as a youthful life, in which human beings live on. This notion of immortality is depicted in myths such as the Grujime myth of the Mundogumur people.²⁰ Other myths use the analogy

¹³ See Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 55; Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1999), 82.

¹⁴ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 181.

¹⁵ Ennio Mantovani, “Ancestors in Melanesia: Toward a Melanesian and Christian Understanding,” *Catalyst* 20, no. 1 (1990): 26.

¹⁶ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 30.

¹⁷ The notion of corporeal earthly immortality is depicted in some of the myths found among certain Melanesian cultural groups, such as the Daribi. Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 35. For the Manamakari or Mansren myth of the Iran Jaya people, see Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 136-41.

¹⁸ See Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea,” 70, 72.

¹⁹ Ennio Mantovani, “Introduction to Melanesian Religions,” *Point* 6 (1984): 31.

²⁰ According to the Grujime myth of the Mundogumur people, a woman named Grujime and her two daughters went to pound sago. While they were pounding the sago, *sanguma* (occultists) came and killed Grujime. Before Grujime and her daughters were attacked, she managed to hide her two daughters. One climbed a tree and the other one hid under the sago palm leaves. When the *sanguma* killed her and left, she came back to life from her blood. She then patched up her body using some of the sago starch. Then she called out to her daughters to come out from their hiding places. But the one who hid up in the tree took her mother to be a dead being, came down from the tree, and ran all the way home and told their father what had happened and how their mother came back to life. Quickly her father rounded up the men from the

of a snake being reborn (changing its skin).²¹ In other words, corporeal earthly immortality is understood as the removal of old skin and putting on new skin like a snake. It is believed that human beings originally possessed the gift of immortality and they could shed their bodies and be reborn as youths.²² This life was terminated due to ancestral *pasin nogut*, and human beings were subjected to *sindaun nogut* (bad/spoiled/imperfect life). The continuation of the imperfect/unbalanced life anticipates a future perfection of life by the one who fashioned it.²³ This desired *gutpela sindaun* is at the heart of Melanesian cultures,²⁴ religions²⁵ and so-called cargo cult movements.²⁶ It is the Melanesian myths and worldviews that have idealised *gutpela sindaun*, and it is to these that I now turn.

2.2 The Basis of *Gutpela Sindaun*

There are two interrelated background constituent elements of *gutpela sindaun*. These are *tumbuna stori* (ancestral myths) and Melanesian worldviews. I will begin this discussion with *tumbuna stori*, which explain what life was like in the beginning, its termination, the present state of life, and its future restoration.

2.2.1 *Tumbuna Stori: The Sacred Portrait of Gutpela Sindaun*

2.2.1.1 Definition

The milieu of *gutpela sindaun* is *tumbuna stori*. The term *tumbuna* in neo-Melanesian means “grandfather, predecessors [and] ancestors.”²⁷ It can also be applied to the continuing line of descendants from grandparents down to their grandchildren and their posterity. The term *stori* means “story, [narrative], parable; to tell a story.”²⁸ Hence,

village and waited. As soon as Grujime and her other daughter arrived home carrying a bag of sago, her husband with the mob (other men) started chasing her away from the village. She fled to another village and tried to settle in that village. But she could not settle because she could hear the sounds of their *garamuts* (slit-gong), indicating that the men were still coming after her. She kept moving until she went away to a faraway place. The place where Grujime was killed and came back to life is still there today on the fringes of Fudukuang village, located in the hinterlands of Biwat Village (Yuat River), which is my home village. The Mundogumur people believed that if Grujime was allowed to stay, human beings would not grow old and die. Their bodies will change and they will take on new youthful bodies and live on.

²¹ See Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 35-6; also Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 38-9.

²² Norman C. Habel, “Introduction,” in *Powers, Plumes and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Bedford Park, South Australia: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, reprinted 1983), 7; see also Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul 1926), 43.

²³ See Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea,” 70-1.

²⁴ See Chapter 2.3.

²⁵ See Chapter 2.4.

²⁶ See Chapter 2.7.

²⁷ Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary*, 208.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

tumbuna stori implies an ancestral story or history passed down from generation to generation. In oral societies like those of Melanesia, *tumbuna stori* is an oral account of how the world and life came to be, how it is now, and how it will be.²⁹

Myths are the basis of socio-religious, socio-economic and socio-political practices in Melanesia. The people believe that myths are real stories of real events that occurred in the past, which in some cases are sustained with visible evidence. As Mircea Eliade states, in primal and archaic societies, myth “happens to be the very foundation of social life and culture... [It] express[es] the *absolute truth*, because it narrates a *sacred history*... Being *real* and *sacred*, the myth becomes exemplary, and consequently *repeatable*, for it serves as a model, and by the same token as a justification, for all human actions.”³⁰

Eliade’s statement on how the primal and archaic societies understand myth is true for Melanesian societies. Many Melanesian cultural groups believe that their myths are, as Garry Trompf defines them, “narratives which sacralised the accepted cosmos, showing in memorable form and suggestive phrase how various parts of the world came into being or, better still as a generalisation, how various parts of the world came to be as it now is.”³¹ Such myths are, for many cultural groups, living realities.³² Malinowski claims that myth

expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man [sic]. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.³³

Through such myths, people attempt to explain how life was wholesome, physically and spiritually, in the beginning.

Myths have informed Melanesians about life in the past (beginnings), in the present, and in the future. In the beginning life was perfect, until their ancestor(s) committed the *asua* (fault) which led to the termination of the gift of immortality. The *asua* committed

²⁹ Wendy Flannery, “Appreciating Melanesian Myths,” in *Powers, Plumes and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, ed. Habel, 161; also Glynn Cochrane, *Big Men and Cargo Cults* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 17.

³⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. by Philip Mairet (London: Harvill, 1960), 23.

³¹ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 18. Wendy Flannery made a similar observation on Melanesian myths, in which she states, “They [myths] convey the most fundamental understanding of the society’s identity and an understanding also of how human beings are related to one another, to the world in which they live, and to the supernatural beings and forces considered essential to life and well-being.” Flannery, “Appreciating Melanesian Myths,” 161. Kees Bolle states that myth is “an expression of the sacred in words; it reports realities and events from the origin of the world that remain valid for the basis and purpose of all there is.” Kees W. Bolle, “Myth: An Overview,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, Vol. 10, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 6359.

³² Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 23.

wrongs varying from impatience to murder,³⁴ sexual intercourse, and so on.³⁵ Consequently, *gutpela sindaun* was lost and Melanesians were subjected to an unwholesome life of mortality. However, many Melanesians myths indicate that this unbalanced mortal life will be reversed at the return of the ancestors. Ancestors such as Saii-Urin or Manamakari³⁶ are the key or channel to the realisation of *gutpela sindaun*.³⁷ They fashioned life in the beginning to perfection, physically, spiritually and cosmically. Almost every myth exhibits central beliefs, ideals and values about *gutpela sindaun* that guide Melanesian communal societies in their relationships with one another, the cosmic beings and the natural world,³⁸ to which I now turn.

2.2.1.2 Themes in Tumbuna Stori Depict the Central Belief in Gutpela Sindaun

Many Melanesian *tumbuna stori* emphasise themes that are central to *gutpela sindaun* belief. Studies have shown that myths embody specific themes that influence many Melanesian cultural groups to desire *gutpela sindaun* and anticipate its realisation. Researchers have attempted to categorise Melanesian myths according to themes. According to Strelan, there are five central themes in the myths.³⁹

The first theme is the division of humankind. The second is the separation of the two brothers. Third is the lost paradise. Fourth is the end-times or the eschaton. And the fifth theme is the advent of the ancestor hero or redeemer. Norman Habel also categorised Melanesian myths and legends into five general thematic categories, which are creation, death, first human, culture and cargo myths.⁴⁰ Re-reading these mythical themes as someone already familiar with Christian teaching, I see an overlap between the two lists of themes, which I will amalgamate into one. I want to show that some of these mythical themes parallel key biblical themes, and provide a bridge between the Christian gospel and Melanesians. Melanesian religious history shows that the primal thinking about *gutpela sindaun* is stirred and re-read in the light of new phenomena, such as the Christian faith.⁴¹

In analysing the themes listed by Strelan and Habel through a Christian lens, I identify at least four general themes which are interrelated and which, together, paint a

³⁴ For the Yangoru people in East Sepik, it is the murder of the god-man, Saii Urin. See Mani, "Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering," 12.

³⁵ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 71.

³⁶ For the return of Saii-Urin, see Mani, "Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering," 71; and for Manamakari, see Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 140.

³⁷ Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 182.

³⁸ See Flannery, "Appreciating Melanesian Myths," 162.

³⁹ See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 60-1.

⁴⁰ Habel, "Introduction," 7-8.

⁴¹ See Chapter 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7.

picture of *gutpela sindaun* belief. The first theme is the creation of the cosmos and everything therein. Myths of creation are found amongst many Melanesian tribes. As Wendy Flannery rightly states,

Not many Melanesian societies have myths specifically about the origin of the world. Most, however, have stories about the origin of their 'world,' of their people, and of important characteristics of their natural environment and the socio-cultural aspects of their way of life, including animals, plants, geographical features, food habits, artifacts (*sic*), marriage customs, religious rituals and relationships with other groups.⁴²

As one example of the diverse myths regarding creation we can look at the Ngaing people of Madang in Papua New Guinea. They are one of the group of cultures whose mythical beliefs shows that creation came into being stage by stage. In the first stage, the high god or supreme being Parambik initiated the creation of cosmos (land, rivers, wild animals, birds, plants, totems and (war) gods).⁴³ The creation myths reveal that many cultural groups across Melanesia acknowledge the existence of a high god or supreme being. Daimoi has adequately explained Melanesians' core belief in a high god.⁴⁴ From the coast to the highlands of PNG, people have generally believed in the existence of a high god or supreme being whom they have acknowledged was the initiator of the creation, but many cultural groups rarely worshipped or invoked him in their search to have their needs met.

In the second stage of creation, the Ngaing suggest that the semi-gods, superhumans and totemic beings⁴⁵ created parts of the natural world and human cultures and made the world habitable.⁴⁶ According to the Manup-Kilibob myth of the Madang peoples, Manup is credited with love magic, sorcery and warfare. His younger brother Kilibob is credited

⁴² Flannery, "Appreciating Melanesian Myths," 163.

⁴³ See Peter Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo: A Study of the Cargo Movement in the Southern Madang District of New Guinea* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964), 16.

⁴⁴ Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 62-6.

⁴⁵ For Melanesians' beliefs in totems, see Appendix 1. Also see Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 31-7.

⁴⁶ The second stage of creation has different versions. According to another version, the "people appeared when totemic birds, animals, and plants gave birth to or turned into the human ancestresses of matrilineal clans. Another [says that] ... at the same time as the appearance of human beings, deities created important parts of culture." Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 16. For example, the war deity created weapons (bows and arrows), another created slit-gongs, and so on. (Ibid.) Most Melanesian myths (such as the Manup-Kilibob of Madang and the Tolai myth of the two brothers, To Kabinana and To Purgo) account for the second stage of creation, according to Flannery, "Appreciating Melanesian Myths," 163-4. Flannery also notes that, in the second stage of creation, human beings and their cultures were created. Cultural myths and legends narrate the origin of cultures, whether in the form of customs, rituals, artefacts, social order or magic. The To Kabinana and To Purgo myths of the Tolai (PNG) narrate that the two brothers gave to the Tolai people their customs, rituals, etc. They created certain features of the world but not the whole cosmos. (Ibid.) This is also noted in the Manup-Kilibob myth. These beings are the culture heroes who made the world habitable for human beings. (164).

with creating human beings, pigs, dogs, food plants, and artefacts.⁴⁷ Kilibob also created new islands and reefs, and the peoples that inhabit the Rai Coast of Madang (PNG). He gave them “the power of speech [languages], plants, bows and arrows, stone axes, rain and ritual formulas.”⁴⁸ Many cultures associate such superhuman beings with their cultural group, and I refer to them as culture heroes.⁴⁹ In Habel’s view, the origin of the first human beings and culture are separate themes.⁵⁰ But based on my discussion of culture heroes, I maintain that these themes come under the broader theme of creation. The creation theme implies that the world and everything has a beginning.

The second theme is the lost paradise or loss of *gutpela sindaun*. There was once an idyllic life which “was spoilt by foolishness, disobedience, or ingratitude ... of an individual or a group,”⁵¹ as the Mansren (Manamakari) myth of West Papua (Indonesia) describes.⁵² The separation⁵³ and death myths are understood in this thesis not as separate themes, as Strelan and Habel have argued, but as supplementary themes of the lost paradise. They portray the termination of *gutpela sindaun* by the superhuman being or sky god as a result of *pasin nogut*.⁵⁴

A third theme is the end-time or eschaton. In many myths the belief is that there will be a cosmic upheaval prior to the return of the redeemer and the restoration of a golden age. There will be events like an eclipse of the sun or a violent earthquake before the final coming of the culture hero.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ Manup and Kilibob began doing these separate creative acts after they had a dispute and went their separate ways.

⁴⁸ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 17.

⁴⁹ From this point on, I will use ‘culture hero’ as a designation for the being often referred to as the primordial being, superhuman being, *dema*, or folk hero. I will reserve the term ‘ancestor’ for dead human ancestors, past and present.

⁵⁰ Habel, “Introduction,” 7-8.

⁵¹ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 60-1.

⁵² For a detailed account of the Mansren myth, see Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 133-57.

⁵³ See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 60-1, on the separation of the two brothers, Manup and Kilibob, due to hostility toward each other; and Kenelm O. L. Burridge on the separation of the two brothers’ families, in *Tangu Traditions: A Study of Way of the Life, Mythology and Developing Experience of a New Guinea People* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 400-02. For an ethnographic study of the Tangu people, see Kenelm O. L. Burridge, “Tangu, Northern Madang District,” in *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia: Some Religions of Australian New Guinea and the New Hebrides*, ed. Peter Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt (Melbourne: Oxford University Press; 1965), 224-49.

⁵⁴ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 71. The Sau myth of the Daribi people of Chimbu (Simbu) in PNG also highlights the theme of death. (Ibid., 35).

⁵⁵ See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 17; also Friedrich Steinbauer, *Melanesian Cargo Cults: New Salvation Movements in the South Pacific*, trans. by Max Wholwill (Brisbane: University of Queensland, 1979), 34-5. Peter Worsley also made reference to a movement in the Markham Valley, Morobe (PNG) in which a native saw visions of the end of the world wherein the ancestors would cause earthquakes and floods, in *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 111; c.f. Patrick Gesch, “The Cultivation of Surprise and Excess: The Encounter of Cultures in the Sepik of Papua New Guinea,” in *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements: Transoceanic*

A fourth theme is the advent of the culture hero with the dead ancestors, and the restoration of *gutpela sindaun*. The departed culture heroes, like Manamakari or Saii Urin, took away the gift of corporeal earthly immortality or eternal youthfulness. Upon their return, immortality and prosperity will be restored;⁵⁶ this is an ideal life in which all relationships will be restored. Melanesians' ancestors will be reunited with their living relatives, and peace and harmony will return to the cosmic world. It will be the beginning of the golden age.⁵⁷

In his analysis of the cargo cults, Habel asserts that "cargo" is another theme of Melanesian myths.⁵⁸ I argue, however, that the notion of "cargo" is a later development.⁵⁹ It is a more modern expression of the Melanesian beliefs in a corporeal earthly immortality which the culture heroes will realise. The arrival of Europeans with their cargo (material goods) was used to depict⁶⁰ and explicate this anticipated corporeal earthly immortality.⁶¹ As Glynn Cochrane states,

Myth provided the sole means for innovation: new events could be explained or new courses of action justified. However, these explanations or justifications had to be contained within the existing cosmological framework. New concepts were not created in a vacuum. New ideas and theories had to be linked to old ideas and theories. Innovation was limited by myths which were in existence at the time. In the event of doubt or confusion over any new events, an explanation could be sought in mythology.⁶²

Therefore, the basis of the cargo myth is the notion of the lost paradise and the desire for its restoration, so that the living and the dead will be reunited and live forever. I will reserve my discussion of the so-called cargo cults for a later section.⁶³ The myths of a lost blissful

Comparisons of New Religious Movements, ed. G. W. Trompf (Berlin; New York: Moulton de Gruyter, 1990), 218-9.

⁵⁶ See Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 194. Steinbauer, *Melanesian Cargo Cults*, 41, also states that "Kilibob was superior to his brother, and that he created cargo and gave it to the Europeans. According to the traditions the Whites and Blacks were allowed to choose what they wished. Kilibob made firearms and iron ships and placed them beside the traditional weapons and canoes. The Blacks chose the latter because they were familiar with them. Their choice forced them to stagnate. The Whites, however, chose the advanced, technical implements and so became superior to the Blacks. Only when Kilibob returns and shows the Blacks the way to technological mastery over the world will equality between the two be established."

⁵⁷ See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 60-1.

⁵⁸ Habel, "Introduction," 8; see also Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 59.

⁵⁹ See Moses Bakura, "Towards a Melanesian Perspective on Conversion: The Interrelationship Between Communal and Individual Decision-making and its Implications for a Melanesian Communal Way of Life," *MJT* 25, no. 1 (2009): 21.

⁶⁰ See Chapter 2.5.

⁶¹ See Flannery, "Appreciating Melanesian Myths," 170.

⁶² Cochrane, *Big Men and Cargo Cults*, 17.

⁶³ See Chapter 2.7.

life are common in Melanesian societies, and this is reflected in the larger Melanesian worldviews,⁶⁴ to which I now turn.

2.2.2 Melanesian Worldviews

2.2.2.1 Definition

Worldview, according to Ken McElhanon, is “how the peoples of different cultures conceive of the world, how they categorize the things in the world and structure their knowledge, and how they interpret life experience so as to live fulfilling lives.”⁶⁵ Worldview conceptualises reality and “lies at the heart of culture, touching, interacting with and strongly influencing every other aspect of culture.”⁶⁶ Like myths, a people’s worldview is used to explain how life and everything in it have come to be, providing a framework within which to evaluate other cultures, ensure a psychological foundation in times of crisis, integrate what is understood as reality, and adapt to change.⁶⁷

A cultural worldview provides a framework for interpreting the world, and religion reflects a people’s view of transcendent reality.⁶⁸ In framing any culture, worldview and religion are the controlling factors.⁶⁹ Most worldviews project the existence of supernatural beings and therefore are thought to be religious.⁷⁰ This is reflected in the Melanesian worldviews, which are ancestor- or spirit-dominated worldviews.⁷¹ According to Turner, tribal people have an encapsulated cosmology. In tribal cultures and religions, their view of the whole universe “embraces the divine, the human and the natural in one interlocked, working system, usually with a hierarchical arrangement.”⁷² This interweaving of

⁶⁴ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 39-40.

⁶⁵ Ken A. McElhanon, “Worldview,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 1032-3, cited in Hanson, “Contextualized Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 36.

⁶⁶ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 53.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54-7.

⁶⁸ Terry C. Muck, “Religion,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 818-91, cited in Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 36.

⁶⁹ Harvie M. Conn, “Culture,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 252-4, cited in Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 36.

⁷⁰ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 148, cited in Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 36.

⁷¹ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 132.

⁷² Harold W. Turner, *The Roots of Science: An Investigative Journey Through the World’s Religions* (Auckland: DeepSight Trust, 1998), 22.

worldview and religion links nature, human beings and supernatural beings. At the heart of the Melanesian worldviews is the concern for *gutpela sindaun*.⁷³

2.2.2.2 *The World is One Unit*

The Melanesian understandings of the cosmos are not strongly demarcated as in the West.⁷⁴ The spiritual and material worlds belong together as two sides of the same coin. They are, as Turner describes them, unitive worldviews.⁷⁵ The world is an inclusive system that embraces the whole of reality, including transcendent powers such as gods and culture heroes, as part of the cosmos which they created and bequeathed for human habitation.⁷⁶ In this sense, the cosmos, as Lawrence describes it, is a “finite and almost exclusively physical realm”⁷⁷ in which human beings are the locus of two systems of relationships. The social structures emerge from people’s relationship with each other, while relationships with the supernatural beings and totems create the religious consciousness.⁷⁸ These two relational systems are interwoven, so much so that in Melanesia the religious consciousness influences social values and relationships. Everything in the earthly life has spiritual and religious dimensions.⁷⁹ These worldviews, therefore, shape the Melanesian belief systems (religions) and cultures, which we will discuss below.

2.2.2.3 *The Melanesian Worldviews Depict Cosmic Gutpela Sindaun*

The interconnectedness of the material and immaterial realms depicts a cosmic-centric *gutpela sindaun*. *Gutpela sindaun* is envisioned as both this-worldly and cosmic, meaning it involves human beings, the material world and the unseen world, especially the culture heroes and ancestors, who, according to various myths and legends, bestowed upon each people group various gifts to live a prosperous life.⁸⁰ This prosperous, perfect and blissful life was not pursued independently of the cosmic beings or the community. *Gutpela sindaun* embraced the living dead, the living living⁸¹ and the whole cosmos.⁸²

⁷³ See Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 37.

⁷⁴ P. Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt, “Introduction,” in *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*: ed. Lawrence and Meggitt, 7, 9.

⁷⁵ Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 19-20.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁷ Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 9, 11.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁹ See Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 57.

⁸⁰ See Trompf, *Melanesian Religions*, 17.

⁸¹ The phrase ‘living dead’ means those who have died but are spiritually alive; the ‘living living’ means those who have not tasted death.

⁸² See Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea,” 69-73.

In short, the religious beliefs and practices (rituals), and the cultures as a whole, were fashioned to sustain the vertical and horizontal relationships which collectively comprise *gutpela sindaun*. The Melanesian myths and worldviews have a direct bearing on Melanesian cultures as a whole. Melanesian cultures are the practical application of shared beliefs about *gutpela sindaun*. They are about establishing, nurturing, sustaining and enhancing *gutpela sindaun*. This leads to a more in-depth discussion of Melanesian cultures.

2.3 The Core of Melanesian Cultures is *Gutpela Sindaun*

The core value that governs Melanesian cultures is *gutpela sindaun*, as aptly demonstrated in Api's study of the Kamea.⁸³ Culture is broadly defined as a multi-layered model of reality which determines patterns of behaviour.⁸⁴ In Melanesia, despite the cultural variations, there are certain common cultural values and practices shared across different layers of experience and symbols such as *gutpela sindaun*. James Plueddemann identifies three different levels of culture.⁸⁵ At the core of "culture is *worldview* – beliefs about the deepest meaning of life and assumptions about the nature of reality."⁸⁶ On the surface are external practices such as clothing, food, weddings, music, and so on.⁸⁷ In between are cultural values or belief systems.⁸⁸ These are "cultural ideals that link abstract philosophy to concrete practices."⁸⁹ The string that links these three layers in Melanesian cultures is *gutpela sindaun*. What follows is a discussion of core cultural practices that reflect Melanesian values and beliefs about *gutpela sindaun*. Out of many cultural practices, I will discuss the Melanesian concepts of *lo*, the *wantok* system, *pebek* (reciprocity), bigmanship, and time, and show how these concepts are crafted to enhance *gutpela sindaun*.

⁸³ See Chapter 1.4.5.

⁸⁴ Conn, "Culture," 252-4.

⁸⁵ Some academics identify two layers of culture: 'deep culture' and 'surface culture'. See Harold Turner, *Frames of Mind: A Public Philosophy for Religion & Culture* (Auckland: DeepSight, 2001), 74-86.

⁸⁶ James Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2009), 69. On 'worldview,' see Chapter 2.2.2 above.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 70-1.

⁸⁸ Hanson, "Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans," 35.

⁸⁹ Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures*, 71.

2.3.1 *Lo* (Law or Custom)

Lo is an integral part of Melanesian cultures that is intended to bring about *gutpela sindaun*.⁹⁰ *Lo* in neo-Melanesian means “law, custom, rule.”⁹¹ Another equivalent term for *lo* is *kastom* (custom).⁹² Theodor Ahrens defines *lo* as the “moral actions and social behaviour, accepted and expected by the group, kept secret from other groups, endorsed by the forefathers, and approved by the ancestral spirits.”⁹³ According to Daimoi, *lo* is “an ethical and religious code of behaviour for the community, based on the teachings and laws established by the ancestors.”⁹⁴ Hanson argues that “the tribal wisdom, expectations, and customary norms inherited from the ancestors form the heart of *lo*.”⁹⁵

These definitions reveal that *lo* governs every aspect of life. The *lo* spells out the rules for leadership, wealth possession and (reciprocal) distribution, relationships, sexual conduct, rituals and ceremonies, spirit invocation, gardening, and so on. The *lo* creates a sense of responsibility and accountability between the living dead and the living living,⁹⁶ and indeed the whole cosmos. By keeping the *lo* people will experience *gutpela sindaun*.⁹⁷

The *lo* originated with the culture heroes, totemic ancestors⁹⁸ and human ancestors, and was passed down from generation to generation.⁹⁹ The ancestors, as Daimoi asserts, are key to *gutpela sindaun*,¹⁰⁰ because the *lo* originated from them, and it is obeying the *lo* that leads to *gutpela sindaun*. The *lo* is the bedrock for Melanesian communities and the integrating principle between the living dead, the living living, and the natural or material world.¹⁰¹

The ancestors or *tumbuna* are the guardians of the *lo*, making sure that the ‘living living’ follow it in order to experience *gutpela sindaun*.¹⁰² If one part of the *lo* is broken, the offender is required to make amends to avoid being cursed or punished by the ancestors. Traditionally, each clan or tribe had its own set of *lo* governing the moral behaviours of people with other people, supernatural beings and the natural world. The ancestral *lo*

⁹⁰ See Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 56.

⁹¹ Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary*, 104.

⁹² In this thesis, these two terms (*lo* and *kastom*) are used interchangeably.

⁹³ Theodor Ahrens, “Christian Syncretism,” *Catalyst* 4, no. 1 (1974): 13.

⁹⁴ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 22.

⁹⁵ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 56-7.

⁹⁶ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 36.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹⁸ I will not discuss the totemic *tumbuna* (ancestor) and its significance for those who held this belief. See Appendix 1.

⁹⁹ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 22.

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter 1.4.2.

¹⁰¹ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 225.

¹⁰² Ahrens, “Christian Syncretism,” 13.

strengthened the sacredness of the cosmos where there was ongoing interaction between the empirical and the non-empirical worlds.¹⁰³

Melanesians were obligated to follow the *lo* to appease the ancestors and the spirits in order to bring about success and prosperity. Careful observation of the *lo* would enhance material prosperity and prosperous living. For the Abelam people of Maprik, faithful adherence to every *lo* and ritual of yam cultivation, which stemmed from Wapiken, caused a successful and abundant harvest of yams.¹⁰⁴ It was believed that a single failure would jeopardise every effort. The *lo* was endorsed by the ancestors so that their descendants could have a life of success and prosperity, and to pave the way for the realisation of the utopian age where the living dead and the living living would be reunited. The *lo* therefore had an “eschatological implication,”¹⁰⁵ and it was the prerogative of the culture heroes to realise the fullness of *gutpela sindaun*.¹⁰⁶

The *lo* also created a sense of group solidarity. In Melanesia, group solidarity is vital for survival. Group solidarity guarantees the continuation of life, peace and security, and brings a sense of wholeness to the tribe, clans and families. The *lo* united the people as one family and, if kept thoroughly, would make the people prosper together as a community. Any failure to keep the *lo* significantly affected and threatened the survival of the community. Individual desire and will, as Robbins highlights, were directed toward strengthening the social structure and the wellbeing of the community, in keeping with the *lo*.¹⁰⁷

The *lo* was understood relationally. Being in a healthy relationship with the invisible (ancestors and spirits) and the visible (fellow human beings) realms was paramount for prosperous living. Individual commitment to the tribe, clan and family strengthened group solidarity. The community decided what was best for each individual and the whole community. Therefore, group solidarity was about community salvation. Melanesians live in closely-knit communities, held together by the shared beliefs and aspirations of their communal group. Hence their language of communication was “we” or *yumi* in neo-Melanesian. “I” language was barely spoken, as it was seen as detrimental to communal salvation or *gutpela sindaun*.

¹⁰³ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 37-8.

¹⁰⁴ George Mombi, “Jesus as our Wapiken: Seeking a Model of Holiness amongst the Abelam People,” in *Living in the Family of Jesus: Critical Contextualization in Melanesia and Beyond*, ed. William Kenny Longgar and Tim Meadowcroft (Auckland: Archer, 2016), 83.

¹⁰⁵ Ahrens, “Christian Syncretism,” 13.

¹⁰⁶ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 38.

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter 1.4.6.

2.3.2 *Wantok System*

Another cultural practice that is based on the principle of *gutpela sindaun* is the *wantok* ('one talk') system. The *wantok* system promotes the wellbeing of individuals, families, clans and tribes,¹⁰⁸ in a way similar to modern welfare systems. The term *wantok* in Tok Pisin literally means one (*wan*) language (*tok*).¹⁰⁹ In wider usage, *wantok* means "same nationality, compatriot, same language group; friend, neighbour."¹¹⁰ *Wantok* is a relational term. The *wantok* system is the practice of looking out for those with whom one identifies in kinship terms.¹¹¹

Relationships are key to sustaining *gutpela sindaun* in a world filled with competition and adversity. Establishing and maintaining cordial relationships with others is pivotal to experiencing *gutpela sindaun*. The *wantok* system is thus key to sustaining a relational network that seeks to integrate and unite individuals, families, language groups, people from the same region, and who share common goals.¹¹² The concept of *wantok* is similar to the concept of *kerekere* in Fiji and *fa'asamoa* in Samoa.¹¹³

The *wantok* system, though not perfect,¹¹⁴ helps to (re)connect people with others so that they feel they belong to an extended family identity. In the *wantok* system people do not see themselves as individuals but as part of a group, as was the case in the ancient Mediterranean world.¹¹⁵ This identity is ensured by geographical and association connections. People are more comfortable associating with those with whom they share

¹⁰⁸ The *wantok* system has both positive and negative dimensions, but I am limiting my discussion of *wantok* to its positive aspects.

¹⁰⁹ See Kasek M. Kautil, "Wantok-System on Karkar Island," *Catalyst* 16, no. 1 (1986): 28; and Paliaina Aiyery Tanda, "An Analytical Evaluation of the Effects of the Wantok System in the South Sea Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea," *MJT* 27, no. 1 (2011): 7-9.

¹¹⁰ Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary*, 214.

¹¹¹ See Hermann Janssen, "Wantoks Everywhere," *Catalyst* 7, no. 4 (1977): 288-89; Kautil, "Wantok-System on Karkar Island," 28-9; Ako Arua and Daniel John Eka, "Wantok System," *MJT* 18, no. 1 (2002): 7-8; Tanda, "An Analytical Evaluation," 7-9; and Mani, "A Theological and Missiological Response to the Wantok System in Melanesia," 57-78.

¹¹² Paolo Renzio writes that *wantok* expresses "the set of relationships (or a set of obligations) between individuals characterized by some or all of the following: (a) common language (*wantok* = one talk), (b) common kinship group, (c) common geographical area of origin, (d) common social associations or religious groups, and (e) common belief in the principle of mutual reciprocity." Paolo D. Renzio, "Bigmen and *Wantoks*: Social Capital and Group Behaviour in Papua New Guinea," in *Group Behaviour and Development* (Helsinki: The United Nations University, 1999), 19, cited in Leua Nanau, "The *Wantok System* as a Socio-economic and Political Network in Melanesia," *OMNES: The Journal of Multicultural Society* 2, no. 1 (2011): 32.

¹¹³ Nanau, "The *Wantok System* as a Socio-economic and Political Network in Melanesia," 32.

¹¹⁴ See Mani, "A Theological and Missiological Response to the Wantok System in Melanesia," 57;

Hanson, "Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans," 33.

¹¹⁵ See Malina, *The New Testament World*, 60-7.

some type of connections. The *wantok* system is a practice based on values such as identity, belongingness and reciprocity. Reciprocity will be elaborated on in section 2.3.3 below.

What then is the underlying value of the *wantok* system? Is it about maintaining cordial relationships, unity,¹¹⁶ cooperation and caring?¹¹⁷ Cordial relationships and unity for what? Relationship, unity, cooperation and caring are surface values that emanate from a much deeper value, which is life¹¹⁸ or *gutpela sindaun*. The *wantok* system, as Mani describes it, is a protective shell that shields life from being extinguished or destroyed.¹¹⁹ This life is nurtured and sustained through relationships. The *wantok* system is a group-oriented system that is built on the principle of sustaining life through moral, social, mental, emotional, spiritual and material support. In this system, one is obligated to be a brother-sister keeper, to be responsible for each other's wellbeing – safety, material and social health, and so on. *Wantokism* is about communal or corporate salvation or *gutpela sindaun*. It is about succeeding together as a group.

2.3.3 *Pebek/Givim na Kisim (Reciprocity)*

Pebek or reciprocity is an integral aspect of *gutpela sindaun*. In discussing the *wantok* system, some see reciprocity as a principle of *wantok*.¹²⁰ Though this may be the case, reciprocity is a practice on its own, where give and take may occur outside of the bonds of *wantokism*. Reciprocity is a cultural practice that has its own value, like *wantokism* and other cultural practices.

Reciprocity (*bekim bek* or *givim na kisim* in Tok Pisin) means the giving and receiving of goods and services. Reciprocity is not just about the giving and receiving of goods, as some see it.¹²¹ It is also about services rendered to others, such as helping someone in clearing his or her portion of land for gardening or building a house, as the result of which someone returns the favour in a like manner. Melanesians' social life is about give and take, in the form of goods and services.

Reciprocity is about building relationships, as many researchers have highlighted in their discussion of the *wantok* system.¹²² Reciprocity brings together the dead, the spirits

¹¹⁶ See Nanau, "The *Wantok System* as a Socio-economic and Political Network in Melanesia," 32.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ See Mani, "A Theological and Missiological Response to the *Wantok System* in Melanesia," 59-60.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 60.

¹²⁰ See Nanau, "The *Wantok System* as a Socio-economic and Political Network in Melanesia," 32, 37.

¹²¹ See Hanson, "Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans," 61.

¹²² See Darrell Whiteman, "Melanesian Religions: An Overview," *Point* 6 (1984): 109; Seeland, "Obligation in the Melanesian Clan Context and its Effect Upon the Understanding of the Gospel of

and human beings in an interdependent relationship.¹²³ Reciprocity is inevitably seen as obligatory. For instance, if you are given a plate of food, you cannot return an empty plate to its owner. You are conscious that the plate must be returned with food on it or another form of gift. In so doing, trust and insurance are gained for meeting further or future needs of both parties.¹²⁴

This applies to everyone with whom one lives in a reciprocal relationship, including the gods, culture heroes, spirits and the dead. While the deceased ancestors or relatives were alive, they were cared for with a view that they would return the favours to their living relatives or family members when they die. Jenny Hughes, writing about Chimbu ancestors, states that “[a]t the heart of all Chimbu interactions with spirits is a desire for reciprocity.”¹²⁵ Gods and spirits were traditionally venerated through gifts and offerings, anticipating that they would reciprocate by rewarding the people with what they desired. I remember my father telling me about our family god, Dakuat. Before going hunting, the hunter would rise early in the morning and offer some food to Dakuat and entreat him to make the hunting trip successful. As soon as the hunter stepped into the bushes behind the family residence or hamlet, the catch was already there.

Reciprocity occurs outside of the *wantok* system context. This is highlighted in Trompf’s and Hanson’s discussions of reciprocity as a token of peace against the backdrop of tribal conflict.¹²⁶ Trompf went so far as to state that the real reason behind the victorious tribe in a tribal conflict seeking to make peace with the losing tribe is to make the “enemy feel all the more intimidated.”¹²⁷ In this case, the gifts given in the name of “peace” could not be an expression of reciprocity. They are an act of domination that the dominated will seek to repay when the time is right.

Trompf and Hanson discuss reciprocity from a Highlanders’ (PNG) perspective. But while their observations may be the case in the Highlands, in the lowlands or among the coastal people reciprocity is experienced in a slightly different way. Any act of giving

Grace,” 93; Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 52; Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 61.

¹²³ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 52.

¹²⁴ See Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 61.

¹²⁵ Jenny Hughes, “Ancestors, Tricksters and Demons: An Examination of Chimbu Interaction with the Invisible World,” *Oceania* 59, no. 1 (September 1988): 61, cited in Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 41.

¹²⁶ See Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 62-3; Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 61.

¹²⁷ See Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 62; and Garry W. Trompf, *Payback: The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 98.

and receiving between warring tribes among the lowland tribes is understood as an act of reconciliation (*wanbel*)¹²⁸ and peace (*bel isi*). It signifies an end to hostility and the commencement of peace and harmony between the parties concerned. Reciprocal gifts re-establish relationships between the rival parties. Gifts initiate the emotional and psychological healing process for the parties involved.

Mutual reciprocity empowers the parties involved to develop their mental, physical, social and material abilities. Reciprocity puts gifts in the hands of others, arousing in them a desire to return the favour. In other words, mutual reciprocity is sharing with the other party the best goods and services (gifts) so that the recipient is obligated to return the favour. This notion is well expressed in some of the great feasts and ceremonies in Melanesia.

For example, in the Highlands of PNG, the great pig killing feast known as *Kongar* among the Waghi,¹²⁹ *Bugla* in Chimbu¹³⁰ and *Moka* in Hagen¹³¹ and Enga¹³² is a type of reciprocal feast that arouses one's trading partner to return the favour. In this feast, hundreds of pigs are killed and given to another tribe, especially one with whom the host tribe has a mutual trading relationship. In so doing, the host tribe puts its guests under a debt which the guest is to return in the near future, in a similar fashion or more so.

Similarly, in the hinterlands of the Sepik region is the Yam feast of the Abelam people. The best yams are put on display and the one who has the biggest long yam is the man-of-the-moment. Towards the end of the feast, the best yam tubers on display are distributed to every guest and visitor to take home and plant. The man-of-the-moment will step forward and give his yam to his *koas*, a rival trading partner from another clan or village, challenging him to work and produce the same type of yam (size and length) or more in the coming season.¹³³ In this way the best yam tubers are distributed freely to everybody and to every community, challenging the menfolk to work instead of being lazy.

In summary, reciprocity in Melanesian communities is about relationship, peace and empowerment. The underpinning reason behind the different facets and practices of

¹²⁸ See further discussion of reconciliation in Chapter 6.3.2.

¹²⁹ See Marie Reay, *The Kuma: Freedom and Conformity in the New Guinea Highlands* (Carlton, AU: Melbourne University Press, 1958).

¹³⁰ See Paula Brown, *Highland Peoples of New Guinea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 63.

¹³¹ See Andrew Strathern, *The Rope of Moka: Big-men and Ceremonial Exchange in Mount Hagen New Guinea* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

¹³² See M. J. Meggitt, "'Pigs are our Hearts:' The Te Exchange Cycle Among the Mae Enga of New Guinea," *Oceania* 44, no. 3 (March 1974): 165-203.

¹³³ See Mombi, "Jesus as our Wapiken," 95.

reciprocity is life or *gutpela sindaun*. Reciprocity is about sustaining, protecting, preserving and caring for life. The concept of reciprocity directs individual interest and goals to the common good of every member of the community.¹³⁴ Looking out for the good of every member of the community through the giving and receiving of goods and services leads to *gutpela sindaun*. Another side of reciprocity is the seeking of bigmanship status, to which we now turn.

2.3.4 *Bikman* (Bigmanship)

In Melanesia, the *bikman* is a facilitator of *gutpela sindaun*. *Bikman* (in Tok Pisin) or bigmanship refers to the status of leadership, inherited or acquired,¹³⁵ in a society,¹³⁶ where one exerts influence over the people through one's ability to secure and guarantee *gutpela sindaun* for the people. In Melanesia, bigmanship status occurs either by inheritance or achievement, and the focus of my discussion is the latter. In some Melanesian societies, bigmanship is achieved through bravery in tribal warfare, the possessing of powerful magic, oratory skills, artistic skills, wealth, and so on. According to Ann Chowning, successes in economic endeavour, warfare and possession of special knowledge are the three criteria for achieving leadership status in Melanesia.¹³⁷

There are other traits or qualifications which have also been essential for bigmanship, but these vary greatly from society to society.¹³⁸ Among the Siane people of Eastern Highlands (PNG), the big-men were traditionally those "who achieved respect by their abilities in council, their activity, and their oratorical and financial skills."¹³⁹ In Enga (PNG), the prestige-seekers, especially men, displayed their grown pigs and those they borrowed to contest for bigmanship.¹⁴⁰ Among the Abelam people, it is one's ability to grow huge long yams.

¹³⁴ See Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 37-8.

¹³⁵ Narokobi captured these types of leadership in Melanesia in his statement, "Some leaders are made by situations and circumstances. Some are born into environments which give them leadership." Bernard Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia* (Suva and Port Moresby: USP and UPNG, 1983), 1.

¹³⁶ See Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 188.

¹³⁷ See Ann Chowning, "Leadership in Melanesia," *The Journal of Pacific History* 14, no. 2 (1979): 66-84. Although Chowning has asserted that these are the three main criteria for achieving leadership, she also discusses other important criteria, such as artistic ability and *mana*.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹³⁹ R. F. Salisbury, "The Siane of the Eastern Highlands," in *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*: ed. Lawrence and Meggitt, 53.

¹⁴⁰ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 64.

In view of the above discussion on reciprocity,¹⁴¹ I want to focus on bigmanship achieved through wealth accumulation and distribution, which also carries with it the notion of reciprocity. One of the ways to achieve big-man status was through accumulation of wealth and its distribution. One's ability to do this successfully revealed one's qualities and charisma. In Melanesia, as Narokobi notes, a leader by definition is a distributor of wealth, because "the societal wealth was always held in trust for the family, the clan and the village."¹⁴² The big-man had a social responsibility to his community "to make sacrifices for the community and its survival. They also find that they are rewarded for their contributions; the accumulation of personal wealth is not condemned provided the rich man is generous with his possessions, and by generosity such a man can enhance his prestige enormously."¹⁴³

The traditional role of the *bikman*, in a nutshell, was to facilitate *gutpela sindaun* for the people whom he represented, even though he may have his own ego. A *bikman* was socially obligated to use his wealth and position of influence to ensure *gutpela sindaun* for his community. The big-man would use his wealth to settle disputes, pay compensation, host a feast, help in mortuary costs, and so on. Hoarding of wealth was detrimental to one's big-man status.¹⁴⁴ As Narokobi writes,

Big men remained big men through real mastery and skilful distribution of wealth. Festive distribution was not charity, big men (leaders) distribute in order to gain in status and reputation first as big men and secondly as good leaders who care for others. Politics and business were inevitable parts of an integral life. A successful village politician is also a successful trader, a successful feast maker. He might also be a successful sorcerer, a high priest, a polygamist.¹⁴⁵

The big-man does these things for personal ego, on the one hand, but also to bring *gutpela sindaun* to the community. By personal ego, I mean that he must maintain his status as a leader so that the community would look to him as their guardian and saviour. At the same time, his actions and gestures for the community must contribute to peace, harmony and unity. Peace, harmony and unity are characteristics of *gutpela sindaun*. The *bikman*, as a leader of the people, was culturally bound to ensure the wellbeing of the people and to make sure that the *lo* was kept, which would lead to *gutpela sindaun*.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 2.3.3.

¹⁴² Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia*, 9.

¹⁴³ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 65.

¹⁴⁴ Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia*, 10.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴⁶ The close link between bigman leadership and status or honour-seeking which we have noted in this section, suggests further attention needs to be given to the interrelationship between the focus of this thesis

2.3.5 Time Encapsulates *Gutpela Sindaun*

The Melanesian desire for *gutpela sindaun* is understood in relation to *taim bilong tumbuna* (time of the ancestors) or *taim bipo* (the past, or time past; literally time in front), because Melanesians look back to their ancestors for the meaning of time. When measuring time, two types of time references are used.

First, people may use important events or experiences in their lifetime to measure time, which Leonardo Mercado has referred to as “living memory time.”¹⁴⁷ Living memory time could also refer to events that occurred in one’s parents and grandparents’ lives and were passed on through collective memory. There are things that happened in my grandfather’s life and my father’s life which my father told me and which have become part of my living memory.

Second is the *taim bilong tumbuna*¹⁴⁸ or time of the ancestors (ancestral time). According to Mercado, “[t]he latter stores the people’s values and the mores of the people, and is also the locus of myths, and of the superhuman. Time, for the Melanesian, is not an absolute, because his community takes the centre space. What has meaning to him and to his community has relevance in time... Time is then relational, in so far as it has meaning to the Melanesian.”¹⁴⁹

Time is a relational concept. It links the present with the past or the past with the present, looking forward to the future. Time links the gods, culture heroes and ancestors with living human beings and the natural world.¹⁵⁰ The Melanesian concept of time is strongly influenced by the mythical past and is referred to as *taim bilong tumbuna* (time of the ancestors), *taim bipo* (time in front, meaning the past as seen above), and *taim bihain* (time at the back, meaning the future; it is ‘at our back’ in the sense that we have not yet seen it). These expressions of time imply that Melanesians’ time concept is mythical, measured by what is important to the people. It is backward-looking – to the culture heroes and ancestors.¹⁵¹ What lies ahead is in the wisdom and security net of the ancestors.

on *gutpela sindaun* and studies on the place of status and honour (*biknem na namba*) in Melanesian cultures. Such investigation is beyond the scope of this thesis, but is noted for possible further research.

¹⁴⁷ Leonardo Mercado, “Melanesian Philosophy,” *Catalyst* 18, no. 2 (1978): 117, cited in Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 87.

¹⁴⁸ *Taim bilong tumbuna*, according to Daimoi, “is often talked about as the time of prosperity, one with abundant supply of food and game in the bush. This was the time when hunters did not have to go too far into the bush to kill animals, when the rivers and the waters teemed with fish and other water creatures. The search for a meaningful life or ‘a way of salvation’ is a longing to return to, or for the return of, this time of abundance.” Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 88.

¹⁴⁹ Mercado, “Melanesian Philosophy,” 117.

¹⁵⁰ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 87.

¹⁵¹ See Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 23, 25.

Taim bilong tumbuna is the mythical past or the life of prosperity and youthfulness, meaning an absence of aging and death. In this mythical Garden of Eden, the game animals were plentiful, waters teemed with fish, and fruit trees did not fail to produce.¹⁵² Life was at ease and peaceful, until the ancestor(s) committed *pasin nogut*, resulting in the termination of the prosperous and youthful life¹⁵³ and the expected realisation of *gutpela sindaun* at the return of the culture hero.¹⁵⁴

Although *taim bilong tumbuna* is not in one's living memory, it is the very basis of Melanesian worldviews,¹⁵⁵ many of which show that the mythical past merges into the present, wherein one desires to experience that blissful life in one's lifetime in the here and now. This past is in the psychology or the imagination of the people. Therefore, today is part of yesterday and tomorrow, as Narokobi states:

Tomorrow is deeply rooted in yesterday and today is half yesterday, and half tomorrow. The events of the past, however they began, have a profound impact on human development in the future. That we live each day at a time is true, even though we plan in decades as if we could live a life span within a day. The prejudices, the fears, the frustrations, the hopes, the aspirations, the dreams and the visions of our ancestors have a profound impact on us.¹⁵⁶

These Melanesian views of now-time or here and now, as Strelan defines them, are thus informed by the past. Some anthropologists refer to this as "everyday millenarianism,"¹⁵⁷ which means that time is both linear and cyclical at the same time.¹⁵⁸ In many Melanesian religions, there is a deeply held belief in the return of the culture hero at some point in the future.¹⁵⁹ Melanesians live this belief in their everyday life. In the so-called cargo cult movements, despite their everyday routine of rituals and taboos that were meant to bring in the new or restored world order, the millenarian outlook continued "during the periods between highly organised cargo cult activities."¹⁶⁰ This means that there was a futuristic view of time which each generation perceived could be fulfilled during their lifetime, and that is precisely what the so-called cargo cult movements had in view.¹⁶¹

The backward-looking time concept is also linked in many Melanesian cultures to the return of the mythical or culture hero to restore the *gutpela sindaun* that was terminated.

¹⁵² See Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 88.

¹⁵³ See Chapter 2.2.1.

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 2.4.5.

¹⁵⁵ See Chapter 2.2.2.

¹⁵⁶ Narokobi, *Life and Leadership in Melanesia*, 20.

¹⁵⁷ See Robbins, "Secrecy and the Sense of an Ending," 525-51.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 528.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ See Chapter 2.7.

The unfolding events in people's lived experience, such as the arrival of Europeans¹⁶² and Christian missionaries,¹⁶³ made it seem obvious to Melanesians that their mythical history was beginning to be fulfilled in their very time and age. Drawing on their mythical past, Melanesians interpreted these new occurrences in ways that renewed their hopes for the restoration of *gutpela sindaun*. The Melanesian hope of the restored *gutpela sindaun* kept the "Melanesian 'way of salvation' [and eschatology] within the reach of the people."¹⁶⁴ In Daimoi's words, "[t]he search for a meaningful life or 'a way of salvation' is a longing to return to, or for the return of, this time of abundance. Thus, future events are explained in the light of the past."¹⁶⁵

Trompf, drawing on Eliade, adds another dimension to the Melanesians' understanding of time. New understandings arose when our Melanesian 'mythical' views of time began to interact with new 'historic' views of past time when Westerners and the Christian Gospel came to Melanesia, and 'cargo' ideas developed. Trompf critiques Mircea Eliade's claim that "all cargo cults 'share the same central myth' of cosmic regeneration, and that although this myth gets 'revalorized' in millenarian terms, it derives from indigenous New Year festivals which celebrate the renewal of the known order, including the special return of the dead into the presence of the living."¹⁶⁶ Trompf points out that such New Year renewal celebrations do not occur in many, if any, Melanesian societies which experienced cargo cult activity, neither is the idea of the return of the dead held by all.

But Trompf continues, "[d]espite weaknesses in his thesis ... Eliade has still managed to put his finger on that crucial issue: time. He has an uncanny sensitiveness towards the assuring, enduring rhythmic order of archaic humanity's universe. And ... no one will deny that Melanesian life is rhythmic: one can feel its pulse in the beat of a *kundu* (drum), the swaying of a mask or the chant of a dancing warrior."¹⁶⁷ Moreover,

Melanesian adjustment to mission evangelization, then, and to the new arrangements ordained by the administration and by business, has everything to do with modifying conceptions of time, myth and the cosmic rhythm. The cargo cult is one form of that adjustment ... Almost always, however, spiritual and social 'negotiations' with the bearers

¹⁶² See Chapter 2.5.

¹⁶³ See Chapter 2.6.

¹⁶⁴ Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 87.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁶⁶ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 198-99, citing Mircea Eliade, *The Two and the One*, trans. by J. M. Cohen (London: Harvill Press, 1965), 137.

¹⁶⁷ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 200.

of the new order meant that the old rhythmic cycles have given way to a more linear approach to time.¹⁶⁸

In another article, Trompf has explored what happens when people who have thought about the distant past only in terms of mythic time encounter the arrival of a dominant people with a well-developed understanding of historical time, reaching back several millennia.¹⁶⁹ He points out that almost inevitably the disruptions of the period of encounter, and the apparently fabulous technological and material differences between the two cultures, stimulate the need for the more traditional, myth-based cultures to develop new explanatory ‘macrohistories’ to account for the unexpected, confusing new culture, and its different linear view of time. Such new ‘macrohistories’ commonly draw on aspects of traditional myths as well as key characters of the newly introduced historic time – especially biblical characters - to produce new explanations to account for the disruptive change around them. This is what is happening, Trompf suggests, in the cargo cult narratives.¹⁷⁰ Certainly, studying Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* beliefs highlights the tensions between traditional-mythic and biblical-linear/historic approaches to time and the transition from one to the other.

2.4 Melanesian Religions

The nature of reality as it is perceived by Melanesians is encapsulated in Melanesian religions and it permeates Melanesian life and cultures. It is impossible to consider Melanesian religions without reference to the Melanesian quest for *gutpela sindaun* or “search for salvation.”¹⁷¹ Deeply ingrained in Melanesian religions is the quest for *gutpela sindaun*, as I will show in the sections below.

2.4.1 Defining Melanesian Religions

It is difficult to define Melanesian religions because religion is a way of life. The Melanesian epistemology of life is based on religious knowledge, which means that Melanesians see and interpret life through religious lenses. Religious beliefs provide the

¹⁶⁸ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 200-1.

¹⁶⁹ Garry W. Trompf, ‘Macrohistory and Acculturation: Between Myth and History in Modern Melanesian Adjustments and Ancient Gnosticism,’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31.4 (1989): 621-48.

¹⁷⁰ Trompf, “Macrohistories and Acculturation,” 625-34.

¹⁷¹ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 62.

logic for reasoning and explaining occurrences in life.¹⁷² Everything from birth through life and death is spiritual.

This means that Melanesians are born and raised with religious awareness and expectations so as to promote the religious order of life¹⁷³ through trade, politics, farming, hunting, warfare, marriage, mortuary customs, feasts and celebrations, magic, healing, sorcery, witchcraft, and so on. Almost every part of life and activity is “filled with spirit consciousness,”¹⁷⁴ which makes the notion of the ‘secular’ unknown.¹⁷⁵ Lawrence sums up this religious worldview in this way:

Religion is important in all Papua New Guinea societies. Allowing for regional variations, virtually all serious events are seen as in some way connected with it. Nevertheless, it is difficult to define. The people themselves have no general term for it, and it cannot be regarded, as it is in the Western world, as a separate cultural entity, something pertaining to a special supernatural or transcendental realm within the cosmos. Its explanatory mythology or scripture is not different or set apart from other forms of knowledge, nor is its ritual reserved for and performed on specified occasions. It is not something removed from the ordinary world of secular human affairs: it is best examined as one aspect of the total cosmic order that the people believe to exist.¹⁷⁶

In other words, religion is not separate from ordinary activities or the so-called secular arena. Melanesian societies function on the basis of religious knowledge. As Michele Stephen and Gilbert Herdt write, religion “is among the most durable and powerful of forces in human society. It provides not only for ultimate beliefs about the nature of human existence and for social practices that assist in its own production and legitimation as an institution, but also for the vitality of a culture.”¹⁷⁷

The durability of religion in primal societies like Melanesia can be attributed to the myths¹⁷⁸ and the underlying worldview.¹⁷⁹ John Parratt, who has studied Papuan religions,

¹⁷² See Peter Lawrence, “Religion and Magic,” in *Encyclopaedia of Papua and New Guinea*, ed. Peter Allen Ryan (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1972), who states that virtually all serious events in Papua New Guinea society are seen as in some way connected to their religion. (1001).

¹⁷³ See Bernard Narokobi, “What is Religious Experience for a Melanesian?” *Point 3* (1977): 8.

¹⁷⁴ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 28.

¹⁷⁵ As Parratt stated in his study of Papua religions, “there is no division in the Papuan world-view between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’ ... [the] Western dichotomy is wholly foreign to the Melanesians, for whom all of life is subject to the supernatural. The empirical and the non-empirical, do not occupy separate spheres; they are part of the same continuum. The ‘secular’ – gardening, hunting, building, attracting lovers and so on – is also ‘sacred,’ in that without the prescribed rituals and formulae these things cannot be attempted. All of life was sacred, because life was influenced by and was subject to superhuman powers. It is perhaps for this reason that Melanesian religion is basically so materialistic – even in its concept of the afterlife.” John Parratt, *Papuan Belief and Ritual* (New York: Vantage, 1976), 4.

¹⁷⁶ Lawrence, “Religion and Magic,” 1001.

¹⁷⁷ Michele Stephen and Gilbert Herdt, “Introduction,” in *The Religious Imagination in New Guinea*, ed. Gilbert Herdt and Michele Stephen (New Brunswick; New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 1.

¹⁷⁸ See Chapter 2.2.1.

¹⁷⁹ See Chapter 2.2.2.

found that “[r]eligion was a way of life by which the superhuman powers were invoked, placated, or manipulated for material ends.”¹⁸⁰ For this reason, religion in Melanesia is the centre of life and action.¹⁸¹ Being aware of this, Trompf warned of being oblivious to tendencies to try to distinguish, for instance, war, economics and significant events from religion, using one’s analytical skills.¹⁸² Melanesian rationality is dictated by belief in the high gods, culture heroes, ancestors and spirit powers, and these beliefs subsequently influence the interpretation and celebration of significant events.

Melanesian religions are also tribal. This is because the rituals and religious practices are centred in the culture hero and the experiences of the tribal people with supernatural beings. Each tribe, or in some cases language group, has its unique beliefs about gods and culture heroes, and these were traditionally expressed through various religious rituals and ceremonies. As Malinowski observed, cultural performances such as “religious ritual, moral influence and sociological principle”¹⁸³ were connected to the tribe’s underlying myths.

It is therefore difficult to pinpoint one Melanesian belief system, because the “Melanesian religious tapestry is so variegated.”¹⁸⁴ Melanesian religions were a way of conceptualising people’s lived experiences with a transcendent reality that directly influenced their worldview. As seen above, the Melanesian worldviews¹⁸⁵ are about *gutpela sindaun*, so we can say that Melanesian religious experience, being influenced by foundational myths, is also about *gutpela sindaun* that can only be realised by the culture hero. It will be helpful, therefore, to discuss specific aspects of Melanesian religions that are centred in the concept of *gutpela sindaun*.

2.4.2 Human Beings are Not Alone

The empirical realm is a habitation for human beings, but they are not alone. Melanesians believe that the physical world is also an abode of supernatural beings (gods, culture heroes, totems, ancestors [the dead], nature and personal spirits). Generally, these beings were “said to live on the earth, often near human settlements.”¹⁸⁶ Belief in the near-presence of spiritual beings on the human plane instilled a sense of sacredness and fear of the unseen

¹⁸⁰ Parratt, *Papuan Belief and Ritual*, 4.

¹⁸¹ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 27.

¹⁸² See Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 19.

¹⁸³ Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, 16.

¹⁸⁴ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 12.

¹⁸⁵ See Chapter 2.2.2.

¹⁸⁶ Lawrence and Meggitt, “Introduction,” 9.

(malevolent) forces who seemed to roam around in and control the empirical realm, yet were open to human manipulation.

This spirit-consciousness cautioned the people not to explore or exploit the natural world.¹⁸⁷ The habitation of totemic creatures was considered sacred, and the sites where the *masalai* (nature spirits) dwelt were taboo, which meant that the people dared not wander into their territory for fear of being harmed. To harvest the material resources at such sites, rituals were performed to appease the spirits before commencing such activities.¹⁸⁸

The non-empirical realm is the realm of the high god, culture heroes, nature or territorial spirits, the dead, and the personal spirits. There is a misconception that the belief in a high or supreme being found among the Melanesians was a later development.¹⁸⁹ General knowledge about the existence of the high god or supreme being pre-dated Christianity. In Melanesia, many tribal groups acknowledged the existence of the high or sky gods or supreme beings.¹⁹⁰ Lawrence E. Sullivan defines the supreme beings as divinities with unique qualities that feature in many cultures' religious systems.¹⁹¹ From their myths, many cultural groups in Melanesia grasped either one or two of the divine qualities of these beings¹⁹² and for at least a few groups like the Hulis of Southern Highlands (PNG) were able to call on him. But one thing that was common to many cultural groups in Melanesia is that they acknowledged the supreme beings as creator and initiator

¹⁸⁷ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 18.

¹⁸⁸ Lawrence observed that the Ngaing people of the Rai Coast in Madang paid special honour to the spirits of the Male Cult during the Harvest festival, especially when it came to exchange. The spirit of Yabuling and the guardian spirits of the poles were invoked to participate in the ceremony. *Road Belong Cargo*, 18.

¹⁸⁹ Herbert Spencer, an early sociologist, made this assertion of the people of New Guinea, in *The Principles of Sociology, Vol. 1, Part 1: The Data of Sociology* (London: Forgotten Books, 1874), cited in Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 9.

¹⁹⁰ See Daimoi who have also argued for the pre-existence of the "high gods" in Melanesia ("An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 62-6).

¹⁹¹ Lawrence E. Sullivan, "Supreme Beings," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. Vol 13, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 8867.

¹⁹² He is Yabwahine, the great Sky Dweller who created the vegetation and animals and made sure that life was not wasted (Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 9. See also Parratt, *Papuan Beliefs and Rituals*, 5-6). He is Yakili, the half-human and half-vegetation, the creator of human beings and the vegetation and disappeared into the sky and never to be seen again (Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 39). He is Datagaliwabe the creator, all-knowing, all-seeing and all-powerful being who punished wrong doers and rewarded those who did what was right. He could not be manipulated (See Parratt, *Papuan Belief and Ritual*, 6. See also Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 56-7). He is Vui, a living being, more intelligible than man and he knew everything, supernaturally powerful, invisible and had no soul because it itself is the soul (Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 13). Among the other tribes of Vanuatu, the high god was known as Supe, Eтарo, Ictar, and Tar. See also Roy B. Yosef, "Pre-Gospel Belief in Vanuatu," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 14:2 (1998), 70. He is Aitawe, the one without whom their universe could not be sustained (Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 10). The existence of the natural environment and natural phenomena are attributed to him. He is known as Duduma, the creator of everything by the Mundogumur people of Sepik (PNG).

of the cosmos. Later theorists refer to this belief as “primal monotheism.”¹⁹³ In comparison, the supreme beings were more powerful than the culture heroes.¹⁹⁴ But many cultural groups rarely called on a supreme being compared to their culture heroes (see 2.4.5.1 below) because they thought the supreme being was passive and remote.

Because of the unitive view of existence, the non-empirical world was seen as an integral part of the physical realm. Therefore, spiritual beings were believed to inhabit the sky, the earth (mountains, rocks, jungles, rivers, lakes, ocean) and the realm below the earth.¹⁹⁵ These beings not only cohabited the human plane, they also controlled various parts of the human plane, from the sky above to the earth, water and sea. They controlled the weather, food chain, wealth and health of human beings.

The unitive worldview meant that Melanesians had a sacralised view of the world where supernatural beings and human beings mingled on the human plane. Melanesians believed their world was alive with spirit beings. In religious studies, such a belief has sometimes been defined as animism.¹⁹⁶ For any occurrence in the natural world, spiritual answers were sought. Religion was a way of life for Melanesians and, as seen above, to define religion in this sense is problematic.¹⁹⁷ The culture heroes, ancestors, nature and personal spirits were central to the desired *gutpela sindaun*. Whatever task the Melanesians undertook was sacred, and it was done with the help and assistance of supernatural beings. Consequently, human beings were able to forge relationships with various spirit beings and manipulate them through magic to use their powers to assist them in their livelihoods or for the desired *gutpela sindaun*.

2.4.3 Conceptual Expression of *Gutpela Sindaun* Belief in Melanesian Religions

Almost every pre-Christian Melanesian religion was pragmatic, seeking to realise *gutpela sindaun* here and now, and, in many cases, looking forward to its future realisation when the culture hero returns. Melanesian religions operated with an epistemology of secrecy, as Urapmin exemplified.¹⁹⁸ Every cult was bound to keep its secrets about life and prosperity from others (outsiders, the uninitiated, women and children). Cultic secrets were hidden

¹⁹³ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 9.

¹⁹⁴ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 62-3.

¹⁹⁵ See Lawrence and Meggitt, “Introduction,” 7, 9; Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 12; Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment*, 180.

¹⁹⁶ See Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 23. Turner gives good reasons for preferring the term ‘primal religious belief.’

¹⁹⁷ See Chapter 2.4.

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter 1.4.6.

and masked using stories, riddles, *tok bokis* (parables, in neo-Melanesian), *singsing* (traditional dance and singing), and drama or role plays. Sometimes in the public arena or *bikmak* (in neo-Melanesian), parabolic languages were used to cover up the secrets of the cult from others. Therefore, in order to grasp the people's beliefs and aspirations about *gutpela sindaun*, understanding the language they used is important.

In the four years of my ministry amongst the Abelam people, I used to hear some of the prominent church clergy say, “*yu no inap planim na kamautim longpela yam sapos yu no lukim tambaran*” (“you cannot plant and harvest long yams [*dioscorea alata*] if you have not seen the spirit/ancestor/ancestral mask”).¹⁹⁹ Repetition of this statement at different occasions got my attention and aroused my curiosity to investigate what it meant. I discovered that this statement stems from the Abelam Yam religion.²⁰⁰ It was a parabolic expression of the secrecy surrounding the invocation of Wapiken and other ancestral figures (carved images and masks), representing the spirit powers involved in yam cultivation. Through initiation, the initiates saw the ancestral figures and learned the secrets of invoking Wapiken, the yam god, and the ancestral spirits, thus qualifying the initiates to cultivate yams known as *waapi/wa:bi/wabi* (probably after Wapiken) among different ethnic groups making up the Abelam people group – Mamu Kundi, Kamu Kundi and Samu Kundi.²⁰¹

The epistemology of secrecy surrounding sacred knowledge protected and veiled the cultic secrets from others, as seen in the case of Urapmin.²⁰² Such knowledge was only revealed or given to initiates under oaths of silence. Silence was a protective tool to guard the sacred knowledge, which if revealed would lead to severe consequences, such as shaming and excommunication of the initiate from the cultic community. Revealing sacred knowledge is like selling your birthright to someone who could use it to gain an upper hand over you, socially, politically, economically and religiously. Therefore, secrecy and silence were necessary to protect the sacred knowledge that brought success and material prosperity to the group. The indigenous thinking about secrecy of the ancestral knowledge is probably comparable to the ancient Greco-Roman gnosis prior to the 2nd Christian century gnosticism as we shall see in chapter 3.

¹⁹⁹ Mombi, “Jesus as our Wapiken,” 79.

²⁰⁰ Yam religion originated with Samu Kundi, one of the ethnic groups within the Abelam people group. *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² See Chapter 1.4.6.

Melanesian religions were based on sacred ancestral knowledge. This is a mystical and unmediated knowledge²⁰³ that was associated with the *tambaran* (spirit) cult.²⁰⁴ Amongst the Abelam people, the images of the *tambaran* were kept in *hausman* (men's house) or *kurambu* (sacred house in Abelam),²⁰⁵ popularly known as *haus tambaran* (spirit house).²⁰⁶ In the *kurambu*, and other sacred shrines (buildings) and sites, the initiates saw the ancestral figures, in the form of carvings and masks, and received instructions about the religious rituals and knowledge of the cult.

Magic, such as the yam magic, was taught to the initiates and frequently repeated at every stage of the planting and growth of the yam; this magic was untranslatable. These ritually repeated sayings were true magic which made the yams grow big and long.²⁰⁷ The sacred knowledge and magic were believed to hold metaphysical powers, meaning that they were linked to the various spirit powers who had the power to bless and to curse. Improper use of the sacred knowledge resulted in a curse, but its proper use brought prosperity and *gutpela sindaun*.

The epistemology of secrecy of sacred knowledge was associated with the sense of seeing – *lukim tambaran* literally means “see the ancestor.” Like the Urapmin, the epistemology of true knowledge in the Yam cult was a visual knowledge.²⁰⁸ The yam magic, understood as true magic, was magic that brought about the desired outcome. In other words, only knowledge that demonstrated itself pragmatically was true knowledge. Such knowledge was described as full or complete knowledge. Fullness of knowledge was knowledge that was justified by its outcome. It was not enough to undergo initiation, see the *tambaran*, and claim to ‘know it all.’ The know-how must be translated into visible, tangible and concrete evidence or proof to justify its truth. In short, true religious knowledge was expected to meet the practical and physical needs of the people. Evidence proved the power of the sacred knowledge, which proved the power and the presence of the god(s) with the people.

²⁰³ Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 25.

²⁰⁴ Phyllis M. Kaberry, “The Abelam Tribe, Sepik District, New Guinea: A Preliminary Report,” *Oceania* 11, no. 3 (1941): 356-8.

²⁰⁵ *Kurambu* in the Abelam dialect means the house of the spirits. *Kurambu* did not just house the wooden masks, it was the house of the spirits and thus a sacred house.

²⁰⁶ The *kurambu* is a massive structure that goes up to 20-30 metres high.

²⁰⁷ Kaberry, “The Abelam Tribe, Sepik District, New Guinea,” 355.

²⁰⁸ See Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment*, 140-1.

2.4.4 Rituals that Sacralise and make Life Wholesome

Religion as a way of life for Melanesians implied that all life is sacred. Human life from birth to death, and almost every activity to sustain life in a wholesome manner, involved sacred rituals.²⁰⁹ Rituals were customary, prescribed practices and observances that had religious, social, political and economic significance. They ranged from simple to complex. Most of the rituals involved the invocation of gods, culture heroes, ancestors, the dead, nature and personal spirits. Rituals²¹⁰ made life sacred, purposeful and wholesome. They linked a person to his or her ancestral history and brought one into a mystical union with the ancestors or spirit powers. Rituals joined the ‘living living’ with the community of the ancestors and the spirit powers.

There is no uniformity in the use of rituals for invoking the gods, culture heroes, ancestors, *masalai* (nature/territorial spirits), the dead and *kawal* (personal spirits). Various groups from the Highlands, like the Huli and Kuma, used rituals to placate and to bargain with the deities. Others, like the Ngaing and their beach neighbours of Astrolabe Bay, Seaboard in PNG, and the people from South Pentecost in Vanuatu and other Melanesian islands, “invoked creative or private spirit-beings in expectation of automatic and immediate success.”²¹¹ Among the Mundogumur people, almost every family had its own shrines dedicated to private gods. These gods were invoked from day to day to help with daily needs, and immediate success was never in doubt.²¹² However, groups like the Siane in Eastern Highlands Province, or in Manus and Lesu (Kavieng) in PNG, and the To’ambaita in Solomon Islands, had only “weakly developed beliefs in creative or regulative spirit-beings and so perform comparatively little or no ritual to them.”²¹³

²⁰⁹ See Habel, “Introduction,” 11-15.

²¹⁰ According to Lawrence and Meggitt, “Ritual, which often has to be supported by the observance of taboos, may take any of the following forms. For spirit-beings, it may be seen as a substitute for face-to-face relationships and may emphasize or combine any of three approaches: propitiation by prayers or offerings; bargaining with offerings; or what is often called coercion – usually the attempt to create by invocation or spell reciprocal relationships, which are modelled on those in human society and in which spirit-beings should automatically confer material benefits on men.” “Introduction,” 8.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹² My father, Paul Mombi, recounted to me that our household god was *Dakuat*. *Dakuat* was invoked to assist in daily needs, especially in hunting. However, the Catholic missionaries came and took it away, along with other household gods (images) of other families. Worsley’s reference to Moagendo village (in the Angoram District of PNG), where their sacred objects were taken away by the missionaries, is a hint regarding the missionaries’ activities in the Sepik (Angoram) district to remove and probably destroy the sacred objects. This confirms what my father told me of the Catholic missionaries’ activity in Biwat or Yuat, which was/is also under the Angoram District Administration. Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 110.

²¹³ Lawrence and Meggitt, “Introduction,” 14.

There are some tribal groups in Melanesia which had very little ritual to do with the culture heroes. Some of the culture heroes were seen as tribal deities, such as Wapiken and Vlisuak. Such beings were invoked for the communal good. For instance, if the security and safety of the Mundogumur people was threatened, the leaders on behalf of the community would invoke Vlisuak for his protection and to empower the men to successfully counter the threat. Some of the magic formulae were believed to originate with the culture heroes, as with the yam magic of the Abelam people. Before yam magic could be applied, men performed specific rituals and observed food and sexual taboos. In Yam religion, these rituals and observances had a purifying function. After purifying themselves from every contamination, magic was performed in every stage of yam cultivation. In order for one to learn the art of rituals and magic, one must be initiated, to which we now turn.

2.4.4.1 *Initiation*

In Melanesia, initiation was a prerequisite for acquiring the secrets of sacred knowledge and power that would enhance one's ability to succeed materially, which would lead to *gutpela sindaun*. Arnold Van Gennep has called initiation a "rite of passage."²¹⁴ This refers to rituals marking entrance into various stages of life, from childhood (birth to before puberty), to youth (puberty to before marriage), to adulthood (from marriage to death).²¹⁵

The first two stages (childhood and youth) are developmental and formative. The third is a developed and experienced stage. Of these three stages, we will focus on the transitional rite of passage, i.e. the second stage (youth). To make that transition, from being boys and girls to men and women, many cultures mark this transition with an initiation ceremony. This initiation has been of vital importance for young boys and girls, for a number of reasons. First, the initiation rite linked the initiate with his or her ancestors. The initiate was incorporated into a long line of ancestors. As Sir Michael Somare, the founding Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, said of his own initiation experience:

For me the installation [initiation] ceremony meant that I had again struck roots at home. Rather than remaining a floating city dweller I had been reintegrated with my clan, my family and my village. The wisdom of Sana, my grandfather, had been passed on to me together with his strength and his fighting spirit. Most important to me is the fact that Sana was a great peacemaker – the man who sat down to eat with his enemies before agreeing to

²¹⁴ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), 10. Van Gennep subdivided rites of passage "into rites of separation [funeral ceremonies as an example], transition rites [pregnancy, betrothal and initiation are some examples], and rites of incorporation [marriage, for example]." (11).

²¹⁵ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 22.

fight them. He could not have passed on better wisdom to guide me in my job as Chief Minister of Papua New Guinea.²¹⁶

Daimoi, who is also a paramount chief of the Sentani people of West Papua (Indonesia), has said this of initiation: “The initiation rites amount to the re-enactment of the people’s relationship with the primordial life which forms the foundation of their world and existence; these rites of passage are an emotional and a spiritual experience, uniting the community of the living and the living-dead into one.”²¹⁷

Initiation rites, in sum, have been seen as a form of death, where one passed “from one order into another ... through temporary contact with that spiritual realm in which ancestors move and have their being.”²¹⁸ Through initiation, the initiate came face to face with the ancestors in the forms of totems, skulls, bones, carved images and masks that were kept hidden from the public in the *kurambu* or *hausman*.²¹⁹ These beings held the power of life and death. They controlled the ecosystem, human productivity, soil fertility, garden productivity and, in general, the social health of the community, which included both the ancestors and the initiates. The thought of initiation caused considerable anxiety on the part of novices, parents and guardians. During the initiation, the novice endured many ordeals and, in some places, the colourful and joyful celebrations that followed.²²⁰

The second dimension of an initiation rite has been the incorporation of the initiate into the community of the ‘living living’.²²¹ Their status changed before the community so that they were no longer boys and girls, but men and women. As such, they were now responsible citizens of their communities.²²² The welfare of the people of their community was now in their hands. They were charged to live as responsible adults on whom the community could count for its success. To aid them in their communal responsibilities, the initiates, during their initiation, were taught religious and magical knowledge, arts and skills for warfare, and how to be socially and economically successful.

²¹⁶ Michael Somare, *Sana: An Autobiography of Michael Somare* (Port Moresby: Niugini Press, 1975), 37-8. In East Sepik, the Murik Lakes people practice chieftain leadership. Sir Michael Somare is from a chiefly family and he was initiated as the paramount chief of the Murik people.

²¹⁷ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 30.

²¹⁸ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 36. Trompf noted that the initiation ceremony of the Wam people of the Torricell Mountains of Sepik vividly enacted the ritual death. “When the initiates enter the cult house or *haus tambaran* (italics mine), the first in line falls to the ground as dead, and the others behind crawl in over him.” (36).

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid., 23.

²²¹ ‘Living living’ means those who are physically alive.

²²² Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 31.

In their religious training, the initiates were taught “magical words to communicate with the appropriate spirit beings on behalf of the individuals, or for the well-being of the living community.”²²³ In their social training, they were schooled in marriage, traditional dance, songs, and different drumming tunes and rhythms. The social training was more ethical and ethnically based, in that it prescribed the expected behaviour and conduct within one’s ethnic group. In their economic training, initiates were trained in various arts and skills, such as making houses, gardening, hunting, and so on.²²⁴ Even the social and economic training was not detached from magic and charms. Magic and charms were integrated into every form of training.²²⁵ The initiates of the Yam cult of Abelam and their neighbours, the Buki (Ilahita Araphesh), were taught magic, charms and rituals for treating the yam tubers and making the soil fertile so that the yams would grow long and huge, which had social, economic and political importance.²²⁶ Magical words, spells and rituals were used to manipulate the spirit powers to which I now turn.

2.4.4.2 Magic

Manipulating spirit powers through magic was an integral aspect of Melanesian religions pertaining to *gutpela sindaun*. There is much linguistic debate in cross-cultural studies regarding how to define magic, so that when Trompf notes that there is no agreement about how to define magic, he adds, “let alone what it is.”²²⁷ Van Rheenen, referring to the African scene, defines magic as “the use of rituals and paraphernalia to manipulate spiritual powers ... to project human control over spiritual forces.”²²⁸ Schwartz, discussing magical thinking in Melanesia, defines magic as “the use of hidden forces to make things happen that do not ordinarily happen in nature.”²²⁹ From these two definitions, we may say that magic is the use of charms or spells and paraphernalia that are believed to have a supernatural power to influence (manipulate) and control supernatural beings to use their powers to bring about a desired outcome. My discussion of magic takes us back to pre-European Melanesia.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ See Lawrence, “Religion and Magic,” 1010. Through initiation, the boys who are soon to pass out as men acquired the true (magical) knowledge.

²²⁶ Mombi, “Jesus as our Wapiken,” 83, 91-3.

²²⁷ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 79.

²²⁸ Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1991), 218.

²²⁹ Nick Schwartz, *Thinking Critically About Sorcery and Witchcraft: A Handbook for Christians in Papua New Guinea*, Occasional Paper 14 (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2011), 11.

Belief in magic was widespread in pre-contact Melanesia. People believed that with magic one could do extraordinary things by changing the natural outcome of events. Some Melanesians claimed to have magical powers. This type of magic is called occult power (*sanguma* in Tok Pisin). These individuals could command and control spirit powers to act according to their wishes. Others had in their possession magical spells and chants to do magic. Still others possessed and used objects or material elements that were deemed to contain supernatural powers to do magic.²³⁰

Generally, there are two types of magic in Melanesia. The first type is malevolent magic (for harming others), which some refer to as ‘black magic.’²³¹ Malevolent magic is destructive and deadly in character. The people feared (and continue to fear) malevolent magic such as *posin* (sorcery/witchcraft)²³² and *sanguma* (occult power).²³³ In some Melanesian cultures, the people were so preoccupied with sorcery that they were highly suspicious of one another.²³⁴ Others, like the Buki (Ilahita Arapesh), were very careful with food scraps, which if found might be used in malevolent magic.

The second category of magic in Melanesian societies is benevolent magic (believed to bring about good fortune), which is sometimes referred to as ‘white magic.’ Benevolent magic is “protective and productive in character.”²³⁵ It was used for healing the sick, for productivity in gardening, hunting and fishing, to find love, to control the weather, and so on. The yam magic of the Abelam of Maprik (PNG) is an example of benevolent magic that was used to make yams grow long and huge.

Magic to Melanesians was not wishful thinking or clever tricks, as some might say. Magic was real.²³⁶ With magical charms, spells and objects, spirit powers were summoned to meet the physical needs of the people and alter the outcome of natural events. In Melanesia, magic worked in two ways. First, some magic was performed using charms,

²³⁰ Schwartz, *Thinking Critically About Sorcery and Witchcraft*, 5.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²³² See Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 89-95.

²³³ Many seminars and studies have been conducted on black magic, and it is still a big problem in Papua New Guinea and other Melanesian countries. Some recent studies on black magic are by Neville Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World in the Highlands of PNG: Developing a Contextual Theology in Melanesia*, Point 29 (Goroka, PNG: Melanesian Institute, 2005); and Schwartz, *Thinking Critically about Sorcery and Witchcraft*.

²³⁴ See Michele Stephen, “Sorcery, Magic and the Mekeo Worldview,” in *Powers, Plumes, and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, ed. Habel, 149-50.

²³⁵ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, “The Morphology and Function of Magic: A Comparative Study of Trobriand and Zande Ritual and Spells,” in *Magic, Witchcraft and Curing*, ed. John Middleton (Austin, Texas; London: University of Texas Press, 1967), 4. See also Schwartz, *Thinking Critically About Sorcery and Witchcraft*, 12.

²³⁶ Schwartz, *Thinking Critically About Sorcery and Witchcraft*, 12.

spells and objects. Other magic arose from a person being possessed by a supernatural source.²³⁷ In these two ways, people were able to perform magic to achieve extraordinary results.

Many traditions about magic show that magic originated with the ancestors, or from the mythological ancestors.²³⁸ In his study of the Yangoru people's magical beliefs and practices, Patrick Gesch found that "[t]he ancestors are invoked as the very epitome of power and ability to get things done."²³⁹ One example is the yam magic used in the planting and harvesting of yams among the Abelam people. The yam magic has its origins in Wapiken, the being attributed with creating the yam.²⁴⁰ Such magic, as van Rheenen states, is a productive magic to increase soil fertility so as to produce an abundant harvest.²⁴¹ In yam magic, the men involved in the cultivation of yams also practised asceticism. They abstained from food (meat), drinks, sexual relations and other taboos to make the magic work.

Magic was also not separated from impersonal forces. Impersonal forces were believed to be involved in making the magic effective. The performance of magical rituals or the reciting of magical charms was not to appease the spirit beings but to summon them to immediately carry out the desire of the magician or the people.²⁴² Benevolent magic was used as a means to bring about *gutpela sindaun* – health and wealth.

Malevolent magic was further used as a control mechanism in Melanesian societies,²⁴³ so that communal *gutpela sindaun* was not disrupted by any unruly behaviour. But no malevolent magic was used against an unruly member of the community without communal (leadership) consensus²⁴⁴ or the (senior) chief's approval.²⁴⁵ Malevolent magic

²³⁷ Ibid., 5.

²³⁸ Evans-Pritchard, "The Morphology and Function of Magic," 10.

²³⁹ Patrick F. Gesch, "Interpreting Magic: Magic as a Process of Social Discernment," in *Powers, Plumes, and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Region*, ed. Habel, 141.

²⁴⁰ Lawrence referred to it as empirical knowledge. He states that the "[s]eaboard peoples, however, do not regard their empirical knowledge as the result of mere human intellectual experiment and discovery. They tend to believe that it exists because it was revealed to men by deities and culture heroes. At the time of the creation, deities and culture heroes actually lived with men or appeared to them in dreams, visions or other extraordinary experiences. They showed men the items of culture they had invented and the practical skills necessary for their production or performance: how to plant crops, raise pigs, makes (*sic*) canoes, split-gongs, bullroarers, and bows and arrows and perform dances." Lawrence, "Religion and Magic," 1010.

²⁴¹ Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, 219.

²⁴² Lawrence, "Religion and Magic," 1001.

²⁴³ George Mombi, "The Death of Christ and its meaning for Melanesians from Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *MJT* 29, no. 2 (2013): 88.

²⁴⁴ See Gesch, "Interpreting Magic: Magic as a Process of Social Discernment," 146-7.

²⁴⁵ Stephen, "Sorcery, Magic and the Mekeo Worldview," 150.

served the good of families, clans and tribes to enforce control within and without, meaning that others dare not harm any member of one's family, clan or tribe.

Sometimes sicknesses suspected of being caused by sorcery were occasions for reconciliation between the sick and those whom the sick person had wronged.²⁴⁶ Gesch defined this as social discernment – the ability to deal with things that are happening to the people.²⁴⁷ In this way, peace and reconciliation was sought, restitution made, and broken relationships were restored within the community. In sum, magic in Melanesia, whether benevolent or malevolent, was used to serve the good of the people. Despite the effect it might have on tribal enemies, or within the clan or extended family, magic was used in healing the sick, gardening, hunting, fishing, enforcing discipline, repelling spells and curses, and so on. Magic was used and justified as beneficial for personal wellbeing as well for the communal good.

2.4.5 Superhuman Beings as Key to Gutpela Sindaun

Relationships with superhuman beings (culture heroes, ancestors [dead – past and present], nature and personal spirits) were seen as key to the realisation of *gutpela sindaun*. Melanesians believed that superhuman beings were the source of material prosperity leading to *gutpela sindaun*.²⁴⁸ They believed that human beings could enter into a relationship with supernatural beings and share in their power.²⁴⁹ Through magic and rituals, Melanesians sought to share in the power of the supernatural beings and manipulate them to use their powers.²⁵⁰

Melanesians believed that these beings cohabited the human plane and were an integral part of the human community.²⁵¹ They controlled and influenced life and knew the way to achieve *gutpela sindaun*. For this reason, the relationship with supernatural beings was vital for unlocking the knowledge that would enable the culture hero to return and realise *gutpela sindaun*. Through religious rituals, taboos and festivals, these beings were invoked in order to bring about *gutpela sindaun*. Below I will discuss the invocation of the

²⁴⁶ See Gesch, "Interpreting Magic: Magic as a Process of Social Discernment," 143-4.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 137-8.

²⁴⁸ As Trompf states, "Historians of religion will immediately recognise that such beliefs in the supra-human bases of material prosperity have been of fundamental importance at the dawn of so-called civilisation..." Garry Trompf, "God as the Source of Wealth," *MJT* 3, no. 1 (1987): 76.

²⁴⁹ Harold Turner, "The Primal Religions of the World and their Study," in *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. Victor C. Hayes (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 31.

²⁵⁰ See Chapter 2.4.4.2.

²⁵¹ See Chapter 2.2.2.

culture heroes, ancestors (dead), nature and personal spirits, for the purpose of attaining *gutpela sindaun*.

2.4.5.1 Culture Heroes (Folk Heroes, Superhumans)

Culture heroes were credited with creating certain parts of the natural world, bestowing on each tribal group their unique gifts and abilities, and making the world habitable for people.²⁵² These beings, which some refer to as folk heroes, superhumans or supernatural beings, I am defining as culture heroes.²⁵³ These beings either died or went away in the past, and some were expected to return and restore *gutpela sindaun*. As Trompf states,

According to various Melanesian traditions, beings (of human form and qualities but with supra-human powers and abilities) were abroad in the land during the primordial time, bestowing on a given group's ancestors 'the skills of warfare, food production and other technologies', and even establishing certain features of the environment. These figures then went away, or died, although there can be consensus that they may return or be re-contacted.²⁵⁴

The culture heroes then became objects of worship and invocation for many cultural groups in Melanesia. This is why the tribal religions, or, to use Turner's term, 'primal religions,'²⁵⁵ have been described as anthropocentric, socio-centric and pragmatic. Their religious rituals were performed to maintain and promote "human welfare, especially in its material aspects."²⁵⁶

In Chapter 1, I noted that there are two types of culture heroes. One type refers to those who have departed and are expected to return, such as Saii Urin, Manamakari, Manup and Kilibob.²⁵⁷ The second type of culture hero is those who died or were killed, like Wapiken and Vlisuak, and are with the people.²⁵⁸ Both types, the departed and the dead culture heroes, have a distinctive role in the desired *gutpela sindaun*. Time, as we have seen, encapsulates *gutpela sindaun*,²⁵⁹ so that the present and future are influenced by the mythical past. *Gutpela sindaun*, both in the here and now and in its future restoration, is ascribed to the culture heroes (departed and dead).

²⁵² See Chapter 2.2.1.2.

²⁵³ Contrast Lawrence, "Magic and Religion," 1002.

²⁵⁴ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 17.

²⁵⁵ See Turner, "The Primal Religions of the World and their Study," 27-9.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 33; see also Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 67; and Chapter 1.4.1.

²⁵⁷ Lawrence noted that his Yabob informants (a people group in Madang, PNG) told him that their forebears told them that the first European ship to arrive belongs to Kilibob. *Road Belong Cargo*, 65.

²⁵⁸ Wapiken is a yam god of the Abelam people and Vlisuak is a war god of the Mundogumur people. The latter is my people group.

²⁵⁹ See Chapter 2.3.5.

The question we need to ask is, can the Melanesian concept of time be of any value in distinguishing the culture heroes? I will use the Melanesian concept of time to distinguish the role of the dead culture heroes and the departed culture heroes in releasing *gutpela sindaun*, whether in the present or in the near future. Here I will rely on my knowledge of the Abelam people, the Boiken people, and the Mundogumur people, who are located in the East Sepik Province (PNG).²⁶⁰ In this discussion, I will show the distinction between the departed and the dead culture heroes.

The immanent presence of dead culture heroes is key to attaining material salvation in the present. The people believed that the culture heroes who had died lived on in a spiritual form near or amongst human societies (habitations) and were contactable to intervene in human affairs.²⁶¹ When they died, their innate powers were released and were readily available for the people to access in order to bring about their desired *gutpela sindaun*. The culture heroes or *dema*, as Flannery calls them,

may be humans or of some other species important to the group, or a combination of these, who possess supernatural powers. Often, it is their death or departure that gives rise to natural or cultural features, practice, institution, or even a human group. The cause of death or departure is usually attributed to some fault or stupid act committed either by them or by someone else. In cases where the *dema* are killed, sometimes at their own request, their creative, spiritual power is released. This power then becomes available to the killers and to all their descendants.²⁶²

An example is Wapiken, the yam god of the Abelam people.²⁶³ When he died, his power was released and became available to the people so that they could produce huge long yams.²⁶⁴ To produce these yams, the men performed various religious rituals that conformed to Wapiken's ideals, which they had learned during initiation.²⁶⁵ Through these rituals, they invoked Wapiken to release his power so as to enhance their abilities to cultivate and harvest huge long yams.²⁶⁶ Through these religious rituals, the initiated men imposed their will upon Wapiken to help attain the desired outcome, with subsequent economic and social benefits for the yam producers and the community.

²⁶⁰ The Arapesh people group (ESP) shares, to some degree, similar beliefs with the Abelam people. However, I will restrict my discussion of the culture hero in relation to the desired *gutpela sindaun* (here and now and its future realization) to the Abelam, Boiken and Mundogumur.

²⁶¹ Lawrence and Meggitt, "Introduction," 8.

²⁶² Flannery, "Appreciating Melanesian Myths," 164.

²⁶³ See Mombi, "Jesus as our Wapiken," 79-100.

²⁶⁴ For the Wapiken myth see Mombi, "Jesus as our Wapiken," 81-2.

²⁶⁵ See Chapter 2.4.4.1.

²⁶⁶ Despite Christian influence, many menfolk involved in yam cultivation still adhere to rituals of planting and harvesting yams. During the planting and harvesting, the men abstain from sexual intercourse and observe specific food taboos.

Vlisuak is another example of a culture hero, whom the Mundogumur people deified as a war god. He was killed on his own terms and his power was released for the people to access for the desired *gutpela sindaun*. His bones were kept and those who possessed his bones offered food sacrifices to him daily to pacify him. He was invoked to protect and give victory in warfare.²⁶⁷

According to Trompf, “[f]ecundity, prosperity and welfare were ... the vital concern”²⁶⁸ behind the invocation of these beings. The dead culture heroes’ released power sustained and granted human productivity, gardening productivity, success in hunting and fishing expeditions, safety (security), and preservation of the cosmos.²⁶⁹ They were seen as the life-force who brought immediate success and material, social and economic prosperity to the people here and now, until such time as the departed culture heroes return and restore *gutpela sindaun* for both human beings and the natural world. The departed culture heroes were the key to the realisation of *gutpela sindaun*.

For many Melanesian cultures, the attainment of corporeal earthly immortality for human beings and the natural world was found in culture heroes like Manup and Kilibob, Manamakeri or Mansren²⁷⁰ and Saii Urin, who departed and are expected to return.²⁷¹ Not all PNG cultures make this distinction between the roles of the departed and dead ancestors, but all agree the ancestor spirits are responsible for both the present and future *gutpela sindaun*. The culture heroes possessed the ability to realise *gutpela sindaun* for both human beings and the cosmos.²⁷² They were responsible for terminating the gift of bodily earthly immortality and cursing the natural world as a result of *pasin nogut* (bad behaviour/action).

It will be the departed culture heroes who will restore the gift of immortality to human beings and revoke the curse imposed by such culture heroes, so that the natural world can be released from its bondage to mortality. These departed culture heroes are the key to what I will call the Melanesian eschatology. As noted earlier, it is because of this

²⁶⁷ See Garry W. Trompf, “Indigenous Religious Systems,” in *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Brij V. Lal and Kate Fortune (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000), 176; Trompf, in *Melanesian Religion*, 13, spelt Vlisuak as Vlisso. The correct spelling is the former, which he got right in his article, “Indigenous Religious Systems.”

²⁶⁸ Trompf, “Indigenous Religious Systems,” 176.

²⁶⁹ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 8-9.

²⁷⁰ See the Mansren myth in Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 136-41.

²⁷¹ Mani, “Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering,” 11-12.

²⁷² Daimoi, in “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 4, writes that “[s]uccess in all areas of life, the economic and political areas, the fertility of crops and animals, manufacture and use of artifacts and the well-being of the community are controlled by the ancestral spirits. Appropriate rituals and sacrifices were offered to the ancestral spirits to obtain their good will and blessings for the community. The belief in the ancestral spirits made the people rely ‘on spirit powers or non-human agents to bring material blessing and avert pain, loss or harm.’”

return outlook that Melanesian primal religions have been defined as religions of return.²⁷³ It was from the return myths that many indigenous movements popularised as cargo cults drew their ideology.²⁷⁴ For example, movements like Letub and Tagarab, observed in Madang Province (PNG), drew their ideology from the Manup-Kilibob myth.²⁷⁵ Movements in West Papua (Jayapura, Indonesia) were inspired by the Manamakeri myth,²⁷⁶ and in the Sepik the Saii Urin myth gave rise to the Peli Association.²⁷⁷

In contrast, the Wapiken and Vlisuak myths, for instance, did not lead to the formation of so-called cargo cult movements. Nevertheless, both departed and dead culture heroes are central to Melanesians' desired *gutpela sindaun*. The latter are to bring success and prosperity to the people here and now, while the former hold the key to the gift of immortality and cosmic restoration to its original state. At the same time, Melanesians believed that other supernatural beings existed who were also the power-brokers for the desired *gutpela sindaun*, and these are explored below.

2.4.5.2 *Masalai (Territorial/Nature Spirits)*

*Masalai*²⁷⁸ (neo-Melanesian) or nature spirits²⁷⁹ refer generally to spirits which Melanesians believed inhabit certain parts of the human plane, such as the space between the earth and the clouds, forests, rocks, mountains, caves, lakes, rivers, the ocean, and so on. Some cultural groups divided this legion of *masalai* into two or more categories, such as the Mundogumur and Iatmul people of East Sepik.²⁸⁰ These *masalai* were believed to control natural resources such as food stocks (pigs, fish) and the weather, and they held the power of life and death. They were known to be in charge of specific zones of the tribal domain. No *masalai* had complete control over the entire tribal territory. The jungle

²⁷³ See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 62.

²⁷⁴ Lawrence and Meggitt, "Introduction," 21, note that "traditional religious concepts lay at the root of cargo cult ideologies." Burrige argues that "there is little doubt that his [Mambu's] relevance at the time to the peoples concerned drew sustenance from the myth about the two brothers [Manup-Kilibob]." Kenelm O. L. Burrige, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 67.

²⁷⁵ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 26-7. See Chapters 3 to 8 of Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 63-221, on cargo beliefs in Madang that stemmed from the Manup-Kilibob myth. See also Burrige, *New Heaven, New Earth*, 64-72.

²⁷⁶ See the development of the so-called cargo cult movement based on the Mansren myth in Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 141-56.

²⁷⁷ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 47-9.

²⁷⁸ *Masalai* could be singular or plural in Tok Pisin. In my usage it means both.

²⁷⁹ Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary*, 114.

²⁸⁰ Timothy Misha, "Case Study: The Impact of the Middle Sepik River People's Cultural Practices and Spirit-Worship on their Christian Worship," *MJT* 24, no. 1 (2008): 52. Among the Mundogumur people, the river, lake or sea dwelling spirit is called *saki* (*sakilu* – plural). The jungle dwelling spirit is called *magime* (*magimilu* – plural).

dwelling *masalai* (*magime* in the Mundogumur dialect) had no territorial authority and control over the river, lake or sea dwelling *masalai* (*saki* in the Mundogumur dialect), and these beings could reveal themselves in various forms.²⁸¹

People forged relationships with these beings so that they could have access to material resources under their territory to sustain their livelihoods. One living example of the *masalai*-human relationship is the *masalai*'s disclosure of their names to human beings through dreams, which were a key medium of communication between the spirits and human beings. Many of the tribal names that most Melanesians use up to the present time are the names of *masalai*.²⁸² When people invoked the *masalai* to meet their needs, they specifically called on them by name.

The people believed that the *masalai* could be manipulated to grant people's wishes. Generally, rituals and magic (see 2.4.4 above) were the two ways of manipulating these spirits. Through rituals, the *masalai* were invoked to assist in hunting and fishing expeditions so that they would grant a successful outcome.²⁸³ However, invocation of the *masalai* did not always mean that they were under obligation to grant every request. They reserved the right to grant or refuse. On the other hand, magic placed the *masalai* under obligation to carry out whatever requests were made to them. Relationships with *masalai* were vital in the granting of access to material resources like game animals and fish stock under their domains.

²⁸¹ Ibid. I have had several encounters with *magime*. Two separate encounters were during stormy nights (heavy rain, lightning flashing across the sky, with thunder striking almost every minute). One of these experiences was when I was awakened by a thunder strike. I was fast asleep in my mosquito net on a spring metal bed at one corner of our house, near the door. (In those days most of our houses were just open houses without rooms). Next to my net was my stepsister's and her husband's net. Beside their net was a kerosene lamp, lowered but bright enough to see any movements in the house. Before I was awakened, my stepsister was already awake because of the thunderstorm. From her net she could see a shadow moving from one corner of the house to another. Just before I woke up and saw this particular being with my two naked eyes, she was thinking of lifting her net to see what was moving about. When I was awakened by a thunder strike, I opened my eyes and saw a human-like figure just next to my bed, close to my feet. I saw the upper part of his body, from the waist up. It gave me such a fright that I started screaming, and this being then pushed the door open and jumped out into the rain and disappeared. Everyone woke from their sleep and I told them what I had seen. Then my stepsister said that she had seen the shadow and was just about to lift the net to see what was moving back and forth when I screamed. As soon as this being disappeared, the lightning and thunder subsided, and the rain stopped.

²⁸² For instance, my son's middle name is Saun. Saun is a name of the *masalai* or *magime*, the tree dwelling spirit who is believed to control a certain area of our tribal land.

²⁸³ Whatever territory the people intended to visit on an expedition, the *masalai* of that territory was specifically invoked.

2.4.5.3 *The Dead*

The dead refers to the spirits of the deceased. In Melanesia, they have been referred to as the living dead (recent and remote).²⁸⁴ Melanesians believed that life did not end at death. The deceased lived on in the other side of life.²⁸⁵ In the afterlife, the soul (*singe sivuak* in the Mundogumur dialect) of the deceased was potent,²⁸⁶ and the spirit of the dead person could be re-contacted to come to the aid of his or her living families and relatives.

As potent beings, distance was not an issue for them, nor their ability to see and hear the living living.²⁸⁷ As Hanson observed, “[e]ven though far away, the dead can see and hear the activities of the living since the dead now have new, more powerful, eyes and ears.”²⁸⁸ These beliefs affirmed that the living dead were interested in the affairs of the ‘living living’ and they brought success.²⁸⁹ Because of this belief, children and grandchildren cared for their parents, grandparents and loved ones who, in the afterlife, would come to their aid. When they died, the living living invoked them to assist in their daily needs, such as protection from danger and sickness, healing, food, and even to reveal the cause of their death (in the case of a recent death). The dead, therefore, were considered more compassionate and responsive to the needs of the living living. They were like the guardians who made sure that the living living could experience *gutpela sindaun*.

²⁸⁴ Neville Bartle, *Death, Witchcraft, and the Spirit World in the Highlands of PNG*, 42.

²⁸⁵ Various names are used in PNG for *singe sivuak* (dead soul – Mundogumur). The Huli people (PNG) called the immaterial part that lives on the *dinini* (soul – Huli). *Dinini* in the Huli language of the Southern Highlands of PNG refers to the “immaterial essence of human personality which survives bodily death and persists indefinitely thereafter as [a] ghost. In the latter form, *dinini* affects the behaviour of living people and to some extent the actions of dema (gods).” R. M. Glasse, “The Huli of the Southern Highlands,” in *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*: ed. Lawrence and Meggitt, 27. The *dinini* or *singe sivuak* lives on as a human soul or spirit without reincarnating into something else. At death, the *dinini* or *singe sivuak* did not depart immediately to its destination, as many cultural groups in Melanesia believe. It was around, in the vicinity of his or her family for a period of time before it left the community of the living to join the community of the dead. Kevin Hovey, a long-time missionary in the Sepik, described this belief in this way: “During this period, it is not uncommon for the spirit of the dead person to be heard, especially in or near the grave yard. These spirits have often been seen by villagers although they disappear on being apprehended. During this period these spirits are feared by everyone, although they are thought to only be malevolent to those who have harmed them in life. At the conclusion of the mourning period (1 month to 1 year after death) a feast is held after which it is assumed that the spirit will leave the village for the place of the dead.” Kevin Hovey, *Before All Else Fails, Read the Instructions: A Manual for Cross-Cultural Christians* (Brisbane: Harvest, 1986), 124.

²⁸⁶ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 43-4.

²⁸⁷ The place where the dead live permanently varied from beneath the earth to among the living living, to a not too distant place, to a faraway place. See Glasse, “The Huli of the Southern Highlands,” 30-1; Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 43; Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 48.

²⁸⁸ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 48.

²⁸⁹ Trompf, “Indigenous Religious Systems,” 176.

2.4.5.4 *Kawal (Personal Spirits)*

Kawal in neo-Melanesian literally means ginger, but in Mundogumur culture *kawal* is associated with the personal spirit being. I am using *kawal* with the latter connotation. The *kawal* became manifest in the form of its owner. However, the *kawal* did not possess the owner. It was a free being but under the command of its owner. There are two types of *kawal*. One was associated with malevolent personal beings and the other with benevolent beings. Generally, the *kawal*, whether malevolent or benevolent, was at the disposal of their owners. *Kawal* were used for personal protection, healing and for harming others. *Kawal* was used in magic (see 2.4.4.2 above), and was more about individual salvation or *gutpela sindaun*.

Melanesian belief in the invocation of spirit powers for *gutpela sindaun* reflects the Melanesian worldviews and myths of return, discussed earlier.²⁹⁰ The dead, the *masalai* and the *kawal* were potent beings whom people believed had a role in bringing about the desired *gutpela sindaun* here and now. But the realisation of the *gutpela sindaun* to its original state awaits the return of the culture heroes. Invocation of these beings was subject to circumstances. Belief in these spirit powers for the purpose of gaining *gutpela sindaun* suggests that human beings are impotent and need a potent being to realise the desired *gutpela sindaun*. Therefore, cordial relationships with the potent beings were necessary. Any wrongdoing jeopardised *gutpela sindaun* and delayed the return of the culture hero.

2.4.6 Melanesian Concept of Sin

Melanesian myths depict a reality in which *gutpela sindaun* was lost due to ancestral *pasin nogut* (bad behaviour/action).²⁹¹ *Pasin nogut* is used as a term for sin. It is problematic to find an equivalent term for sin in many Melanesian dialects.²⁹² Many languages, such as Tabo of Western Province (PNG), use the word *kuba* for sin, which means “the bad way we live;”²⁹³ and among the Gogodala of Western Province, *sosawe* means “bad.” In the Angal Heneng language of the Nipa in the Southern Highlands, the word for sin is *koraob bismisao*, meaning “doing bad things;”²⁹⁴ and *ko bero* among the Huli of Hela Province means “doing bad” or “bad things.”²⁹⁵ The difficulty is also evident in the *Buk Baibel* (Tok

²⁹⁰ See Chapter 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

²⁹¹ See Chapter 2.2.1.

²⁹² In PNG alone, there are more than eight hundred different dialects.

²⁹³ Tim Schlatter, “The Biblical Concept of Sin, Relative to Animistic Worldview (Part 1 of 2),” *MJT* 18, no. 1 (2002): 36.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39, footnote 3.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39, footnote 4.

Pisin Bible) translation of sin as *pasin nogut*,²⁹⁶ or, in revisions since 1989, the English word “sin” is used untranslated.

From these definitions, we can see that sin is not defined, explained or understood cognitively but concretely, i.e., in terms of deeds and their consequences. *Pasin nogut* refers to deeds. *Pasin nogut* affects one’s relationships with others, bringing shame, dishonour, pain, suffering and material loss. *Pasin nogut* is any deed that is contrary to the *lo*.²⁹⁷ *Lo* defines one’s conduct and behaviour toward others and the natural world.

In Melanesia, sin or *pasin nogut* is understood relationally.²⁹⁸ It is defined by one’s actions that affect relationships and place fellow kinsmen and kinswomen under its shadow.²⁹⁹ Defining sin relationally reflects the Melanesian communal worldviews. Individuals are part of a larger group and the strength of individual existence is group coherence. The group or community of which an individual is part is comprised of the living dead and the living living. Sin affects relationships with the living dead, the living living and the natural world. Thus, the natural world is referred to in kinship terms, and if one’s relationship with the natural world is flawed, this results in the failure of garden productivity or hunting ventures and so on. Any prolonged suffering, illness or material loss is likewise seen as a result of sin against fellow human beings, the dead, or the nature spirits. Suffering and material loss were traditionally seen as the result of sin against others.

Hence, to deal with sins of great magnitude, such as sexual immorality or the breaking of taboos, one’s kin group is involved. It is the kin group that takes responsibility to help make amends for the sin. In person-to-person sin, the one caught in sin is concealed to protect him or her from the shame stigma. Instead of the person involved taking centre stage to deal with the issue personally, one of his or her kinsmen/women serve as a proxy to protect him or her from being shamed.

With sin comes shame and disgrace, the result of breaking the *lo*. Culturally, every Melanesian strives to live free of shame and disgrace. Being shamed and disgraced is regarded as the worst experience in a face-to-face or collectivist society like those in Melanesia. This has affinities with the ancient Mediterranean world, where shame and

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 36.

²⁹⁷ See Chapter 2.3.1.

²⁹⁸ From this point onwards, I will use the noun ‘sin’ instead.

²⁹⁹ Crockett, in her study of Makru-Mansuka beliefs and rituals about conception and birth, finds that “[p]ersonal wrong-doing is recognised as having powerful social effects which include not only the individuals, but the good of the whole clan.” Patricia J. Crockett, “Conception and Birth: Beliefs and Rituals of the Makru-Mansuka,” in *Powers, Plumes and Piglets: Phenomena of Melanesian Religion*, ed. Habel, 67.

honour permeated almost every aspect of public life, as Scott D. Charlesworth has elaborated: “The first-century people engaged in a constant round of social evaluation of their own conduct and that of others. If anyone stepped out of the bounds of what was considered acceptable, or moral behaviour, gossip and shaming were the informal and formal means respectively of bringing them into line, of maintaining social control.”³⁰⁰

These control mechanisms that typified the ancient Mediterranean world are also evident in Melanesian societies. Honour or *biknem* (big-name or honour/status) is extremely important for Melanesians, motivating men in particular to strive to achieve such status through the use of their wealth and skills.³⁰¹ Honour is like a social game between men of equal rank, in which they attempt to outplay each other. The practice of polygamy was partly about *biknem*. The more wives one had, the more wealth one could produce to afford and maintain the *biknem* status.

The antithesis of honour is shame and disgrace. Often shame and disgrace lead to the isolation of the individuals and families involved from the rest of the community. Among the Mundogumur people, to be accused of practising sorcery or witchcraft is as good as death. The accused must relocate to another location away from the rest of the community. The general populace will naturally cut off relational ties with the accused, mainly because of fear, until the accused proves his or her innocence or repents. In sum, sin is relationally based, severs relationships, and deprives one of participation in the hoped for communal *gutpela sindaun*.

The consequence of sin is *nogut sindaun/sindaun nogut* (bad life, the opposite of *gutpela sindaun* or good life).³⁰² Sin deprives one of *gutpela sindaun*. This notion can be traced to one’s understanding of the ancestors. It was the ancestors who committed the wrong which originally deprived us of *gutpela sindaun*. Most Melanesians, when they evaluate their present life in a negative sense, rationalise that it is the result of *pasin nogut ol tumbuna i mekim na yumi stap olsem* (the wrong action the ancestors committed that made our life as it is now). We can see this rationale in the answer which the Tabo people gave to Tim Schlatter’s question, “What did Jesus come to save us from?” “You know – our *kuba*, the bad way we live. We don’t live in nice houses like yours; our clothing is

³⁰⁰ Scott D. Charlesworth, “Missiologial Implications of Counter-cultural Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: Reflections on Six and Half Years in Papua New Guinea,” in *Living in the Family of Jesus: Critical Contextualization in Melanesia and Beyond*, ed. William K. Longgar and Tim Meadowcroft (Auckland: Archer, 2016), 198.

³⁰¹ See Chapter 2.3.4.

³⁰² Another phrase for ‘bad life’ in neo-Melanesian is ‘*sindaun bagarap*.’

ragged and dirty; it's hard to find school fees for our kids; we don't have a medical aid post in our village; our wives get tired of making sago, and we get tired of eating it. It would be much nicer to just open tins of food like you foreigners."³⁰³

The present life of hard work, difficulties in storing food, sickness, no good clothes, and so on, is seen as the result of ancestral sin. Life would be better if the ancestors did not commit wrongs so that our life today would not be a struggle for survival. In short, Melanesians see that sin affects relationships with the living living, the living dead, and the natural environment. Sin affects the community and disrupts *gutpela sindaun*.

The Melanesian traditional understanding of sin differs from biblical teachings about sin, as seen above in the Tabo people's reply to Schlatter's question. Melanesians understand sin in terms of breaking the *lo* and as actions that harm relationships, leading to social and material loss. Wrong thoughts toward others and profane language used during quarrels do not have great weight on the scale of sin. Any wrongful act committed that no one saw is not sin. Wrongful acts become sin when they become public knowledge.

In contrast, Christian teaching reveals that the root of *pasin nogut* is a broken relationship with God (see Gen 3:8-23; Col 1:14, 20-22; 2:14). It is not about breaking the *lo* that governs relationships with other people, the ancestors and the natural world. This was a new concept that confronted Melanesians with the arrival of Christianity. Furthermore, Scripture also teaches that sin is sin whether it is public knowledge or a secret; there is nothing hidden from God's sight. God sees and knows everything because God is present everywhere and punishes every wrong.³⁰⁴

The people of Huli in the Southern Highlands referred to their supreme being as Datagaliwabe, who was all-seeing, punishing those who broke family laws.³⁰⁵ However, such knowledge did not include the fact that the root cause of sin is a broken relationship with God. It is in this context that Robbins may have been correct to assert that Christianity

³⁰³ Schlatter, "The Biblical Concept of Sin, Relative to Animistic Worldview (Part 1 of 2)," 36. Schlatter's later investigation of the meaning of *kuba* led him to conclude that *kuba* is first used in a non-moral sense – it is "focused on the community suffering a lack of material goods, being physically destitute." (37) The bad way we live is because our ancestors failed. Schlatter was critical of the moral application of *kuba*. Using his biblical knowledge, he was critical of the actions of the people not to speak against the tribal elders and customs, which contradicted the biblical teaching on good and bad. What he did not understand was that in communal societies like Melanesia, individual good is not pursued at the expense of the communal good. This does not mean that individual good is ignored. The question Melanesians ask is, 'Will my action make the community progress or regress?' If the community progresses, we progress, but if it regresses, we all regress. This is because *gutpela sindaun* is governed by the principle of reciprocity.

³⁰⁴ See further discussion of sin and its effects on divine-human relationship in Chapter 3.7.

³⁰⁵ See Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 56.

made the Urapmin or Melanesians sinners.³⁰⁶ Robbins argued that Christian teaching has redefined the Melanesian definition of wilfulness and desire as evil, thereby making Melanesian sinners. I disagree with Robbins on this point. What Christian teaching has done is to make us become more aware of sin as an inward fallen nature and shows that God holds everyone accountable in everything, including one's thoughts, desires, and the use of one's will. Every thought, desire and wilful action that is contrary to God's holy nature and character is sin.

Melanesian religions, particularly those that included the expectation of the return of ancestors, expected that return of the departed culture heroes to realise *gutpela sindaun*. In their daily living, Melanesians invoked the dead culture heroes, the dead (humans), *masalai* and *kawal* to temporarily meet their *gutpela sindaun* expectations here and now. The secret ancestral knowledge and magic were vital in the invocation of the spirits to bring about the desired *gutpela sindaun*. The sacred knowledge, magic and other skills necessary for *gutpela sindaun* were passed on through initiation to the next generation of men and women. In their efforts to relate to the various spirit beings, so as to bring about *gutpela sindaun*, Melanesians did not lose hope in the return of the departed culture hero to restore the gift of corporeal earthly immortality. This belief or hope in the return of the culture hero became a crucial bridgehead for the Melanesians to accept Europeans and the Christian gospel.

2.5 Gutpela Sindaun Belief and Coming of Europeans

The myths of return and restoration of the lost golden age gave hope to Melanesians to remain vigilant and resilient through time and history. They believed that when their culture heroes finally return, everything will change. Life for Melanesians will be like the golden past. The millennium which Melanesians expected would be a perfect, blissful and trouble-free earthly order of corporeal earthly immortality. In many Melanesian cultures the arrival of Europeans on the shores of Melanesia was interpreted as the returning of the culture heroes and the commencement of *gutpela sindaun*, as foretold by their myths.³⁰⁷

Melanesians therefore generally welcomed the Europeans who appeared on their shores and in their communities. In some communities, they were emotionally welcomed

³⁰⁶ See Chapter 1.4.6.

³⁰⁷ Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 22. Based on the Manub-Kilibob myth, the Yabob people of Madang believed that the direction which Kilibob and his friends sailed was "south-east toward the Dampier Straits. When the first Europeans came from the south through the Dampier Straits, the Yabob people believed Kilibob was returning with his friends." Steinbauer, *Melanesian Cargo Cults*, 41.

as their long dead ancestors.³⁰⁸ For instance, villagers from one village in the Gulf region of PNG received a missionary from the London Missionary Society with great excitement as one of their returning ancestors.³⁰⁹ Why such excitement and emotion on the part of Melanesians? Their hope for the restoration of *gutpela sindaun*, for which they had been eagerly waiting, was beginning to be realised. Their culture heroes had come to commence the long-promised *gutpela sindaun*.

The sophisticated culture and life of the Europeans convinced Melanesians that these white men were their ancestors. Some perceived that these were their ancestors sent by their culture hero.³¹⁰ Many Melanesians believed that their culture heroes were behind all the material goods of the Europeans, as it was anticipated that the ancestors would be the bearers of superior goods.³¹¹ Their culture heroes would bring with them material goods of extremely high quality which would be a trademark of *gutpela sindaun*. These goods would be unlimited so that nobody would lack anything. Everyone would be equal and would enjoy life in all its fullness. This spectacular foreign intrusion into Melanesia was understood against the backdrop of beliefs in the return of the departed culture heroes and the realisation of *gutpela sindaun*.

Some Melanesians saw the Europeans as their dead ancestors. According to their return myths, Melanesians expected their culture heroes to return, but not their dead ancestors.³¹² Why, then, was there such a shift in position to seeing the Europeans as dead ancestors and not as the culture heroes? Trompf, noting this change of position, concludes that Melanesians saw the Europeans as a sign of the return of the dead ancestors because they believed in the end of the created order.³¹³ Trompf further asserts that “‘the whiteman phenomenon’ *produced* and *diffused* such beliefs.”³¹⁴

Worsley, however, asserts that “[t]his belief that White men are the returned ancestors was possibly indigenous. It was to receive a new twist in the emerging belief that all natives would be White in the afterlife.”³¹⁵ This scenario can be described as the grafting of orange and mandarin shoots onto the same lemon stem. The stem here is the longing for *gutpela sindaun*, and the orange and mandarin shoots represent the new phenomenon and

³⁰⁸ Mani, “Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering,” 16.

³⁰⁹ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 90.

³¹⁰ See Chapter 1.4.4.

³¹¹ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 46.

³¹² See Chapter 2.4.5.1 above.

³¹³ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 47.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*

³¹⁵ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 90. See also Steinbauer, *Melanesian Cargo Cults*, 40.

experiences grafted into it. Even though there was a twist in the doctrine, the core remains solid. This raises two questions. What is the point of this twist? What factors contributed to this twist?

The point of this twist, as I see it, is to keep the hope of *gutpela sindaun* alive. It was this hope that kept Melanesians resilient from generation to generation, through difficult and trying times. It was their culture, their philosophy and their worldview that needed protecting and rejuvenating in the face of intruders and new phenomena. On this note, what are the possible explanations for the modification of return myths – cultural heroes to dead ancestors, and black-skin to white-skin?

Firstly, there is the shift from cultural heroes to dead ancestors. Hypothetically, this reinforced the belief in the ability of the dead to retain power. As we have seen, Melanesians believed that, at death, the dead were potent, contactable and manifestable. They were not restricted by distance and time.³¹⁶ The dead were capable of doing anything, such as taking on the form of another person or being reborn, as noted in Papua and Bena Bena in the Eastern Highlands of PNG.³¹⁷ Therefore, belief in the potency of the dead, even their ability to manifest themselves in a variety of visible ways, may have influenced Melanesians to reason that the Europeans were their dead ancestors returning. Nonetheless, the people's belief in the 'millennium' remained unchanged.

Secondly, there is the shift from black-skin to white-skin in the afterlife. First, in Melanesian minds, there was a belief that as soon as the culture hero returns, the anticipated *gutpela sindaun* will commence immediately. However, although this did not occur as anticipated, the Europeans were still regarded as the dead ancestors whose lives were better off than those who were dark-skinned. The thought was that the Europeans were once coloured-skin like us, but had come back to us as white-skin, and we can see that life is better off for them than us. Therefore, the Melanesians presumably reasoned that the way to experience the kind of life their white-skin ancestors had, and were not willing to share, was to die and come back as a white-skin.

Moreover, for some there was the suspicion that white-skins were intercepting and withholding the cargo that was destined for the black-skins.³¹⁸ This notion became prominent later in the so-called cargo cult movements.³¹⁹ The white-skins' unwillingness

³¹⁶ See Chapter 2.4.5.3.

³¹⁷ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 46.

³¹⁸ See Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 107.

³¹⁹ See, for example, the Komba Cult moment, which believed that the stockpile of war materials in Finschhafen, Morobe (PNG) was intended for the coloured-skin. Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 37.

to share their manufactured goods with Melanesians demonstrated that the true source of the superior goods was their culture heroes. However, the trouble caused by the human ancestors led to the cursing of Melanesians with black skin. The only way to share in the superior life of the white-skins was for the culture heroes to return and lift the curse, which would result in a change in skin colour. Melanesians would then share in the superior life of the white-skins. The essence of the belief that the black-skins will take on white skin could be the desire to participate and share in the European way of life.

Thirdly, some, like the Yangoruans, saw the Europeans as the representatives of the soon-to-return culture hero.³²⁰ They were sent ahead to introduce the anticipated *gutpela sindaun*. However, the anticipated *gutpela sindaun* was not forthcoming, and the Europeans were then accused of blocking the arrival of the culture hero, accompanied by the ancestors and the material goods. As a result, cases of insubordination to the European Administration broke out in some parts of Melanesia, such as Madang (PNG).

The European phenomenon was understood against the backdrop of the belief in the return of the culture heroes. However, the expected introduction of the *gutpela sindaun* did not commence, which resulted in the revision of the myths as living stories to explain the new occurrence.³²¹ Meanwhile, the *gutpela sindaun* thinking that the culture heroes will return to realise *gutpela sindaun* remained firm, despite the disappointment which the Melanesians felt. One of the most obvious indications of this disappointment was the creation of the so-called cargo cult movements.³²² The creation of cargo cult movements was not exclusively in response to the Europeans' presence; it was also a response to the Christian gospel that the missionaries brought, to which I now turn.

2.6 *Gutpela Sindaun* Belief and Coming of Christianity

Melanesians, along with Micronesians and Polynesians, responded in large numbers to the gospel.³²³ The receptiveness of the South Pacific Islanders to the gospel came as a result of, firstly, the power encounter. The people came to believe that the God of the newcomers was more powerful than their tribal gods. Secondly, the predictions and prophecies from the prophets and charismatic leaders of the local religions, who predicted the arrival of

³²⁰ See Chapter 1.4.4.

³²¹ Trompf reminds us that such re-working of myths has often occurred when mythic-time oriented cultures come into contact with historic-time oriented cultures during the period of initial interaction. See Chapter 2.3.5 above.

³²² See Chapter 2.7.

³²³ See my discussion of Christian mission history in Chapter 1.1.

ships and a new religion, prepared the way for Melanesians to receive and interpret the gospel.³²⁴

The arrival of missionaries and their new religion was thus not a coincidence, from the point of view of the traditional religionists. As many of the Melanesian primal religions were religions of return,³²⁵ which expected the culture heroes to return, this had a bearing on the people's response to the gospel. Thematically and conceptually, Melanesian religious beliefs had similarities to themes and teachings in the Bible.³²⁶ Melanesian religions, as we have seen, were linked to myths which depicted life as perfect in the beginning, with this ideal life having been terminated due to ancestral *pasin nogut*, leading to a vision of its anticipated restoration. This primal soteriological narrative resonated with the biblical soteriological narrative (creation, fall, redemption and new creation). These points of connection enabled many Melanesians to grasp the Christian teaching.³²⁷ Melanesians could see their culture hero and the fulfilment of their desired *gutpela sindaun* in the gospel of Christ, with emphases similar to what the Colossian poem portrays, as we shall see.³²⁸ As Trompf states,

Any ... objective observer should perhaps only go so far as to note how fertile the ground has been for a transition to Christianity over the last hundred years, although believers will want to speak freely of God's hand behind the quite extraordinary transformation in modern Melanesia. Remaining within the constraints of history and other related academic disciplines, at least one can affirm how much in Melanesian tradition chimed in with, or seemed to foreshadow, the teachings and practices of the new religious order.³²⁹

Overall, however, there were mixed responses to the Christian gospel in Melanesia. Harold Turner identified four levels of responses as a result of the interaction between primal religions and Christianity.³³⁰ The first level of response is the borrowing of elements from the new religion so as to remodel the existing primal religions, which Turner defined as *neo-primal*. The second response is a rejection of the traditional religion and the new invading religion, in favour of a new composite drawn from the two rejected traditions. This Turner designated as *synthetist*. The third response is a privileging of the Hebrew scriptures or Old Testament, which Turner called *Hebraist*. The fourth response is to move beyond the Hebraist approach and embrace some form of christology, producing

³²⁴ John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 5.

³²⁵ See Chapter 2.4.

³²⁶ See Chapter 2.2.1.2.

³²⁷ See Chapter 5.6.

³²⁸ See Chapter 4.

³²⁹ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 29.

³³⁰ Harold Turner, "New Religious Movements in Primal Societies," in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. John R. Hinnells (London: Penguin, 1997), 583.

Independent Christian churches. To this list, I would add Christian experience in mission organisations, which led to Christian churches turning to secular economic and political development as points five and six. For point five, some Christian missions presented the gospel in a too-foreign way.³³¹ The Western worldview was emphasised as superior to the Melanesian worldview. Therefore, there was little to no contextualisation of the gospel. For point six, some Christian missions ventured into economic activities and acquired land for coconut and rubber plantations for world markets. Land along the coastal fringes of mainland and Islands of New Guinea was acquired dubiously without proper survey and registration.³³² Thus, the indigenous people saw such mission activity as tools of the colonial governments.

There were certainly those who genuinely accepted the gospel of salvation from sin, and found a personal faith relationship with God in Christ, which led to the establishment of churches throughout the Pacific Islands under the denominational banners of the missionaries' sending denominations back in Europe, such as Anglican, Methodist, Wesleyan, Presbyterian and so on.³³³ The Tongans, Cook Islanders and Tahitian converts, and the Fijians³³⁴ who were trained as teachers of the gospel, proved very effective in spreading the gospel across the South Pacific, including in PNG.³³⁵

The Protestant missions entered PNG on two fronts. The London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries (MacFarlane and Murray) and Island teachers entered the Papuan coast in 1871-2.³³⁶ They were later joined by Lawes (1873) and Chalmers (1877).³³⁷ The Wesleyan Missionary Society (WMS) came through New Britain in 1875. George

³³¹ Garry W. Trompf, "Cargo Cults," *The Pacific Islands: An Encyclopaedia*, eds. Brij V. Val and Kate Fortune, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2000), 253.

³³² There is no information on how the Lutheran Mission acquired the land to establish the mission station in Bongu (Madang). See for instance Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 40.

³³³ For the historical accounts of various denominations in the Pacific Islands, see Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea: Christianity in Oceania to World War II*. One incredible impact of the gospel on the Islanders was the revivals that took place after the conversion of prominent leaders like the high chiefs of Tonga in 1834 and Fiji in 1845. Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 110. The churches grew numerically and some converts, like Joeli Pulu (pronounced Bulu in Fijian), following the Tongan Wesleyan revival, went as a missionary teacher to Fiji. In Fiji, near the end of his faithful, fruitful ministry, Bulu gave a stirring address to Fijian missionaries who were chosen to go with George Brown to commence the Methodist mission in New Britain and New Ireland (PNG). (105).

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 221.

³³⁵ See Raeburn Lange, *Island Ministers: Indigenous Leadership in Nineteenth Century Pacific Islands Christianity* (Christchurch and Canberra: Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies, University of Canterbury and Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australia National University, 2005); Hitchen, "'Training Tamate': The Formation of the Nineteenth Century Missionary Worldview: The Case of James Chalmers of New Guinea."

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 206-7.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

Brown landed on the Duke of York Island with some Polynesian teachers. Later he recruited additional teachers from the Bible School in Fiji to reach the New Irelanders (PNG).³³⁸

While the LMS and WMS were working in those parts of PNG, a lone Lutheran missionary, Johann Flierl, from the German Neuendettelsau Mission, landed at Finschhafen (Morobe, PNG) in 1886.³³⁹ He was later joined by other Lutheran missionaries. When the indigenes responded to the gospel, congregations were formed under the Lutheran denominational banner. The growth and expansion of Lutheranism throughout Morobe, Madang and into the Highlands of PNG was the work of indigenous evangelists who took the gospel of Christ to their fellow Melanesians.³⁴⁰

There were others like the Unevangelised Fields Mission, later known as the Asia Pacific Christian Mission, who began work in 1930 and whose mission field was the people of the Gulf and Western provinces (PNG).³⁴¹ After World War II, other Evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic missionaries set foot in PNG and helped spread the gospel of Christ throughout the country.³⁴² Many people came to believe in the gospel of Christ for the forgiveness of sin and new life in Christ.

Hence, today PNG is called a Christian country, with well over ninety-five percent of its population professing to be Christians. However, the question Mani asked about the Yangoruans people, after they had received the gospel of Christ, requires our attention: “Why are Yangoruans still searching for salvation, when it has been over 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world?”³⁴³ One may re-phrase this to ask, “why are many Christians in PNG not satisfied with their soteriological experience in Christ?”

Further complicating this story, the coming of European missionaries with the gospel was seen as a fulfilment of the prophecies and beliefs of the people. Thus, the gospel was re-interpreted in the light of existing predictions and religious beliefs, which were described as the “precursors of the later charismatic figures who precipitated so-called

³³⁸ Ibid., 221.

³³⁹ Garrett, *Footsteps in the Sea*, 1.

³⁴⁰ See Christian Keysser, *A People Reborn*, trans. by Alfred Allin and John Kuder (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1980; Herwig Wagner and Hermann Reiner (eds.), *The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea: The First Hundred Years, 1886-1986* (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1986).

³⁴¹ See John and Moyra Prince, *No Fading Vision: The First Fifty Years of APCM* (Melbourne: Asia Pacific Mission, 1991).

³⁴² For accounts of this later wave of missionary work in PNG, which some refer to as second wave, see John Garrett, *Where Nets Were Casts: Christianity in Oceania Since World War II*.

³⁴³ Mani, “Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea,” 71.

cargo cults.”³⁴⁴ Some in Polynesia responded to the gospel in such a way that they believed that the Christian God, who gave material wealth to the missionaries, would do the same for them.³⁴⁵

The Melanesian response to the Christian gospel differed in some respects. Melanesians conceived that it was their ancestors who supposedly gave the Europeans their technology and wealth, and not Jehovah God. This led to the desire for European-style wealth, as manifested in the European missionaries. In this vein, Dorothy Tweddell concludes that Melanesians accepted Christianity and revised their native cosmology to create cargo cult movements.³⁴⁶

As I have noted, the Christian teachings of the Creator God and creation, fall, salvation and the eschaton were somewhat similar to the themes of the Melanesian myths.³⁴⁷ The Genesis narrative of God the Creator who created everything from nothing, however, was different from the Melanesian mythical narratives. It is possible to see the missionaries’ message as the missing piece of their myths. The difference was probably because Melanesian myths do not envision creation emerging from nothing, or ‘the void,’ as Flannery has pointed out; however, the myths’ accounts of creation at its inception existing in complete perfection and harmony are somewhat similar to the Genesis account.³⁴⁸

The point is that the similarities between the Genesis account and Melanesian creation myths convinced the Melanesians to set aside and replace their mythical gods with the God of the Bible as the God of their ancestors. Some groups who believed in the existence of a supreme being obviously connected the God of the Bible with the supreme being they had known all along. The Roro of the Papuan Coast declared that they already knew God, whom they had called Riripi.³⁴⁹ Thus, believing and worshipping this new God would lead to *gutpela sindaun*.

³⁴⁴ Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars*, 5.

³⁴⁵ Ibid. If they accepted Christianity, the Christian God would give them material wealth as well.

³⁴⁶ Dorothy Tweddell, “Cargo Cults: A Search for Meaning,” Term Paper for Michigan State University Doctoral Course, 1978: *Anthropology* 870 (1977): 4-10.

³⁴⁷ See Chapter 2.2.1.

³⁴⁸ Melanesian myths portray that the universe was created gradually and by various demi-gods, unlike the Genesis narrative which points to the one God and six days of creation. However, both versions affirm that everything has a beginning. The perfect life was disrupted through the disobedience of the first human beings (Adam and Eve) or the *nambawan tumbuna*. Adam and Eve were banished from the perfect life, which parallels the myths’ account of *gutpela sindaun* that was terminated through ancestral failure. The imperfect life that their descendants were subjected to is a consequence of the fall or ancestral failure. It is not the kind of life that was meant to be in the first place.

³⁴⁹ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 147.

Indeed, many Melanesians replaced their tribal deities with the God of the Bible. But this does not mean that the primal worldview changed dramatically. Many of the old religious forms were simply Christianised. Christianity was seen as a new channel or *narapela rot*³⁵⁰ to *gutpela sindaun* because the Christian teachings were somewhat similar to the Melanesian myths of creation and the notion of the return of the culture hero and the commencement of *gutpela sindaun*.

The preaching and teaching on salvation through Jesus Christ, that is the virgin birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ into heaven, his imminent return, and the new heaven and new earth paralleled in certain respects the concept of *gutpela sindaun* portrayed by the myths.³⁵¹ In Christian teaching, Melanesians found their mythological eschaton.³⁵² The Roro perceived Jesus as Oarove, who was miraculously born a long time ago in a bundle of wood carried by a very respectable woman.³⁵³ The teaching on the death and resurrection of Jesus was likewise not totally foreign in Melanesian societies. Some of their myths, such as the Grujime myth of the Mundogumur people, narrated the concepts of death and resurrection.

Worsley asserts that the outbreak of beliefs in the return of the dead and the millennium was due to white missionary preaching on the resurrection. He concludes that the idea of return and the millennium was a later addition to the traditional notions.³⁵⁴ However, the Manup and Kilibob myths of Madang prove otherwise. In Madang, the teaching of Jesus' return was attractive because it tied in with the expected return of their culture heroes – Manup and Kilibob.³⁵⁵ On this basis, the Christian teachings of return and the millennium were not exclusively a later addition, as Worsley claims, but were used to validate and re-work the existing notions, with the hope of ushering in *gutpela sindaun*. The Christian teaching about the sacrificial work of Christ and his return seemed to be a promising pathway to *gutpela sindaun*.

The *gutpela sindaun* which Melanesians were expecting was not identical to what the missionaries taught from the Bible. Melanesians expected a visible, concrete, experiential this-worldly salvation here and now, as Strelan rightly claims.³⁵⁶ For Melanesians, religious knowledge and their relationship with transcendent beings involved

³⁵⁰ See Chapter 1.4.5.

³⁵¹ See Chapter 1.4.5.

³⁵² Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 193.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁵⁴ See Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 128, 93.

³⁵⁵ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 147.

³⁵⁶ See Chapter 1.4.1.

material salvation in the present, brought by the one who terminated the gift of immortality but will return and restore it.³⁵⁷

When the promised *gutpela sindaun* was not forthcoming, the European missionaries were accused of hiding the secret *kru* (knowledge). Local people came to believe that the Europeans who were the bearers of the Christian teachings did not teach the full truth about *gutpela sindaun*. They taught the general and *hap kru* (partial knowledge) of *gutpela sindaun*, but they withheld the secrets or real *kru* that was necessary for *gutpela sindaun*. Melanesians, as pragmatic people, expected *gutpela sindaun* to be a concrete, material experience when they accepted the Christian teaching of salvation. Unfortunately, for some, their expectations turned to disillusionment and the accusation that the secret to *gutpela sindaun* was being withheld by the missionaries. Thus, as Worsley notes,

The Europeans [including White Skin missionaries] were accused of hiding part of the Christian doctrine and rituals: they concealed the fact that it was the ancestors of the natives who made the goods the Europeans received. Proof was available in the inability of Europeans to repair mechanical contrivances when they broke down; they had to be sent away for the ancestral spirits to repair.³⁵⁸

The missionaries' inability to do mechanical repairs led to the conclusion that the true culture heroes of the Melanesian people were yet to come. They were the sources behind all the goods the Europeans were receiving. In the minds of many Melanesians, since the missionaries were withholding the secret *kru*, this hidden knowledge needed to be found and this would lead to *gutpela sindaun*. The primal beliefs (or worldview) about discovering secret *kru* to *gutpela sindaun* was a key factor undergirding modern economic, social, political and religious developments and for evaluating new innovations and scientific methods. Patrick Gesch in his study of the Mt. Rurun (sometimes spelt Hurun or Turu) or Peli Movement has shown that the Melanesian primal worldview about the secret *kru* to *gutpela sindaun* was the deciding factor behind the programmes the Movement undertook. He argues "that appearances of shifts towards modernity were more apparent than real, and were actually no progression at all. The modern Western forms were not what they seemed to be, because underlying and explaining them was the traditional religious worldview."³⁵⁹ He listed sixteen programmes the Rurun Movement undertook from the removal of the survey markers to the new religious movement now known as Nui Apostolic

³⁵⁷ See Chapter 2.4.5.1.

³⁵⁸ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 128.

³⁵⁹ Patrick Gesch, "The Cultivation of Surprise and Excess: The Encounter of Cultures in the Sepik of Papua New Guinea," 215.

Sios to discover the secret something that was under the control of some persons and was withheld from the people.³⁶⁰ The removal of the survey markers was associated with the millennial thinking where the ancestral spirits will restore good times.³⁶¹ Portions of scriptures from the Niupela Testamen (*Tok Pisin* translation of the New Testament) were read and cited to fit “into the context of traditional religious viewpoint, search for the hitherto withheld secret that would yield a radical change”³⁶²

The accusation brought against some missionaries for hiding the *kru* corresponds to the Melanesian epistemology of the secrecy of sacred knowledge in Melanesian religions, as Robbins demonstrated in his study of the Urapmin.³⁶³ Deep sacred ancestral knowledge was withheld by the few from the many. Sacred ancestral knowledge, which was pragmatic and concrete, and regarded as the true knowledge, was kept secret. Thus, in their religious experience, Melanesians asked pragmatic questions and sought pragmatic answers.³⁶⁴ They continued to look for pragmatic answers when they accepted Christianity.

Hence, belief in the epistemology of the secrecy of sacred knowledge may have played a part in the accusations that were made against the missionaries for hiding the secret knowledge about the ancestors who had made all the things that they possessed. In addition, sacred knowledge that was considered true and complete needed to pass the test of seeing. The missionaries’ inability to showcase the power of the gospel that they preached, not just in healing and casting out demons but also in the miraculous repair of machinery or causing cars bogged down in the mud to come out with ease, aroused suspicions that the missionaries were not preaching the whole gospel or the truth. They were withholding some secret knowledge, especially secrets about the material goods they possessed. For some, then, Europeans and Christian missions were seen as a hindrance to the arrival of their culture heroes and the restoration of *gutpela sindaun*. Some Melanesians felt that they were denied the *kru* to *gutpela sindaun*, and this led to the formation of the cargo cult movements.

Thus, there was a wide range of responses to the Christian gospel. Some Melanesians fully trusted in the gospel of Christ for salvation. They saw in the gospel the true way of salvation prefigured by the Melanesian ancestral (mythical) beliefs about the culture heroes and the anticipated *gutpela sindaun*. They understood what the gospel

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 220-1.

³⁶² Ibid., 232.

³⁶³ See Chapter 1.4.6 and Chapter 2.4.3.

³⁶⁴ These were related to healing the sick, making a heavy workload lighter, finding love, and so on. See Gesch, “Magic as a Process of Social Discernment,” 139-41.

means, i.e., salvation from sin and relationship with God through Christ. They experienced the transforming power of the gospel in their lives and turned from ancestral worship to God and Christ. Subsequently, they became the nucleus of the Bible-believing, Christocentric churches in Melanesia.

As already mentioned, some Christian missions became involved in business ventures.³⁶⁵ They were involved in land acquisition for business activities (coconut and rubber plantations to supply European markets). In so doing, they gave away the Christian gospel of salvation. For Melanesians, their land and resources were created and bequeathed to them by the high god, culture heroes and totems. Their view of *gutpela sindaun* involved their entire cosmos.³⁶⁶ To take the land away from them caused an imbalance in their view of *gutpela sindaun*. This scenario led to a violent confrontation with the Europeans (both the government and the missions) in some places.³⁶⁷ Christian missions in general were not only accused of hiding the *kru* but of being a tool of colonialism.³⁶⁸

Other Melanesians who responded to the Christian gospel, however, reinterpreted the gospel to give new meaning to their existing beliefs in the culture heroes and thus to revitalise *gutpela sindaun* thinking. They accused the missionaries, who at that point in time did not understand the Melanesian cultural thinking about *gutpela sindaun*, of hiding the *kru*, which led to the formation of the so-called cargo cult movements.

2.7 *Gutpela Sindaun* and Melanesian Indigenous Movements

The indigenous religious movements that characterised the Melanesian region have been given numerous names – nativistic, acculturative, (re)vitalistic, adjustment, nationalistic, millennialistic, messianic, salvation, and so on.³⁶⁹ These plentiful names imply diverse features present in these movements, making the task of defining them difficult. But these movements are more popularly known as cargo cults.

The cargo cult movements were non-existent until the arrival of Europeans and Christianity.³⁷⁰ The cargo notion first emerged in the Pacific in Fiji, and spread throughout

³⁶⁵ See Lawrence, *Road belong Cargo*, 47.

³⁶⁶ See Chapter 2.2.1.

³⁶⁷ See Charles de Burlo, "Land Alienation, Land Tenure, and Tourism in Vanuatu, a Melanesian Island Nation," *GeoJournal* 19, no. 3 (1989): 317-21.

³⁶⁸ See William K. Longgar, "Towards a Theology of Land for the New Guinea Islands" (D.Miss diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2006), 13-14.

³⁶⁹ See Garry W. Trompf, "Introduction," in *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements*, ed. G. W. Trompf (Berlin; New York: Mouton De Gruyter, 1990), 2-3; Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 53.

³⁷⁰ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 47.

Melanesia, according to Worsley.³⁷¹ What is a cargo cult (*kago kalt*)? The term ‘cult,’ denoting religious worship, became stuck with the term ‘cargo,’ thus defining every indigenous movement in Melanesia as a cargo cult.³⁷² The term cargo (*kago*) connotes “cargo, supplies, household-wares, belongings, expected goods from the world of ancestors,”³⁷³ or everything necessary for a good life.³⁷⁴ Consequently, the term ‘cargo cult,’ according to Strelan, was applied to any movement in which the adherents did not meet the Western criteria for acquiring material goods to have a good life.³⁷⁵

However, not every movement featured cargoism, and therefore to designate them collectively as cargo cults is unfortunate.³⁷⁶ There is little evidence of cargoism in some indigenous movements. Studies on *kago kalts* reveal that these movements had diverse aims and prove difficult to interpret. *Kago kalts* are societal, communal, collective responses to the new order of life embodied by the introduction of new kinds of goods.³⁷⁷

How, then, should we define these movements? Recalling my discussions above, I have argued that religion was a way of life for Melanesians,³⁷⁸ and that in Christian teaching Melanesians rediscovered their mythological eschaton.³⁷⁹ Hence, these movements are religious movements which could be referred to as new religious movements,³⁸⁰ millennial movements,³⁸¹ or salvation movements.³⁸² I accept these designations as appropriate in terms of their wider application. Seeing these religious movements as expressions of Melanesians’ own ingenuity, I will refer to them as Melanesian indigenous movements whose grand objective was to realise *gutpela sindaun*.

The Melanesian indigenous movements were a creation of tribal contact with Western civilization and Christianity.³⁸³ They included elements such as magical thinking, eschatological hopes, concepts of time,³⁸⁴ desire for material possessions, and climatic

³⁷¹ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 104.

³⁷² Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 190.

³⁷³ Steinbauer, *Neo-Melanesian Dictionary*, 72.

³⁷⁴ See Chapter 1.4.1.

³⁷⁵ See Chapter 1.4.1.

³⁷⁶ See Chapter 1.4.1.

³⁷⁷ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 189.

³⁷⁸ See Chapter 2.4.1.

³⁷⁹ See Chapter 2.6.

³⁸⁰ See Turner, “New Religious Movements in Primal Societies,” 581-93.

³⁸¹ Garry W. Trompf, “The Cargo and the Millennium on both sides of the Pacific,” in *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements*, ed. Trompf, 35-94.

³⁸² Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 62-3.

³⁸³ Philip Gibbs, “Oceanic Religions: New Religious Movements,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 10, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 2005), 6795.

³⁸⁴ See Chapter 2.3.5; also Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge Classics, 2014), 310-12. In his discussion of Kula trade, Malinowski explained the concept of time amongst

conditions and psychic structures within Melanesian cultures that contributed to the emergence and spread of indigenous movements. These were legitimate movements expressing Melanesians' hopes and desires for *gutpela sindaun*. Their goal was to reach a totality of life – both spiritually and physically.³⁸⁵

The Melanesian indigenous movements were marked by great variety, which makes them problematic for interpreters to define. To some interpreters, these movements were socio-political,³⁸⁶ to others they were Christian-ethical,³⁸⁷ for still others they were cultural-historical,³⁸⁸ national-economic,³⁸⁹ or eclectic. Despite the great variety observed in these movements, they were rooted in the Melanesian philosophy of communal salvation.

the people of Trobriand Islands. The time of the ancestors is referred to as mythical history and time in one's life he referred to as historical accounts.

³⁸⁵ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 58.

³⁸⁶ The proponents of a socio-political interpretation saw cargo movement occurrences as due to the lack of "sufficient cultural insurance to withstand the shock of sudden contact with another culture." Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 54. The society found itself in a state of frustration and stress when it came into contact with Western culture. Thus, the cargo movements were interpreted as a defence mechanism to ensure that the traditional culture was not rendered poor or 'rubbish' in comparison to the alien one, and to make provision to obtain the desirable elements in the new culture. Also, they were a religious reflection of sharp cultural antagonism between Western and Melanesian civilizations. The arrival of Western goods and technology constituted the moment of impact between two types of civilization which had inevitably taken different courses. The people of Melanesia reacted to this encounter between indigenous and Western lifestyles by resorting to mythical interpretations. Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 55.

³⁸⁷ Missionary interpreters argued that cargo movements were an "outward expression of a burning inner desire for a full, complete life." Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 56. There was a longing for a golden age – for salvation and peace, for a long and happy life, now and in the hereafter. The chief question that was asked is, how would this longing for a complete life be met? The answer that one received was to somehow manipulate the spirit powers of this world to reveal the way to 'all spiritual and material blessings.' This answer needs to be examined in the light of Melanesian cosmology, where the spirit world was filled with powers of salvation and destruction. These powers could be manipulated or controlled by prophets, witchdoctors, shaman and messiahs and the secret way to all the blessings that Europeans possessed would be unlocked. Since Melanesians were not so sure whether their mythological heroes and ancestors were capable of bringing about the longed-for golden age, they turned to the God of the Christians which promised that the return of Christ would usher in the golden age. Therefore, cargo movements were seen as a "mixture of traditional and Christian beliefs in the coming age of wholeness, health, healing, and material and spiritual blessings." (Ibid.)

³⁸⁸ Ethnologists and anthropologists claim that it was the internal social structure which was in conflict as it began to go through the process of cultural and social change. To deal with this crisis, Melanesians turned to their mythological heritage with the intention of controlling the future. To understand these movements, the key is the traditional beliefs, rituals and mythologies. Sometimes there were renewal festivals to mark the renewal of the cosmos and the return of the dead. Melanesians thought that in Christianity they had discovered their old prophetic and eschatological myths, which the missionaries did not seriously consider, because if they did this would "reveal the key which will open the door to the new age." Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 57.

³⁸⁹ Again, this interpretation was championed by sociologists and ethnologists after World War II. Cargo movements were interpreted as reaction movements against the oppression of the foreign powers. Most Melanesian societies do not have centralised political institutions and legal machineries to unite in political matters. With low-level political organisation, there was the certainty of a "predisposition toward ... Melanesian millenarian movements" such as cargo movements. Another contributing factor was the lack of technological and scientific knowledge. People's ignorance of scientific findings left the field opened to supernaturalistic and animistic interpretations and explanations. Melanesian movements were seen by other interpreters to be in harmony with Marxist theory. Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 57.

Therefore, as Trompf maintains, “[t]he concept Cargo ... implies a totality of material, organisational and spiritual welfare, collectively desired as a replacement for current inadequacy, and projected into the imminent future as a coming salvation.”³⁹⁰ The common characteristic of these movements was an expected drastic alteration in the social, economic and cosmic order. The new world would be patterned after the way the world was in the beginning.

2.7.1 *Gutpela Sindaun*: An Impulse of Melanesian Indigenous Movements

It has been said that “all Melanesian societies are vitally concerned with a search for salvation”³⁹¹ or *gutpela sindaun*. *Gutpela sindaun* “is sought in the ‘religions of return’ [which] embrace such things as deliverance from present troubles and oppression, peace, wholeness, healing, health and well-being.”³⁹² Many of the Melanesian indigenous movements drew their ideologies from the return myths. They reached back into their mythical history to validate the millenarian expectations of their movement. It was the reformulation of the myths of return that gave rise to these movements. Myths of return justified the change and were powerful incentives for the emergence of the new movements, supplying the blueprint or model for change.³⁹³ This means that the Melanesian philosophy of *gutpela sindaun* was at the heart of Melanesian indigenous movements.

In analysing the Melanesian indigenous movements, Brian Schwarz identified four general themes or constituent elements that reveal the prime objective of these movements:³⁹⁴

- i. The vision of an earthly salvation – salvation as something to be experienced here and now in a concrete, material way, embracing the whole community and the whole creation;

³⁹⁰ Trompf, “Introduction,” 10-11.

³⁹¹ Fugmann, “Salvation in Melanesian Religions,” 279.

³⁹² Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 62.

³⁹³ Douglas Hayward, “Melanesian Millenarian Movements: An Overview,” *Point 2* (1983): 16. For further reading see Jan A. Godschalk, “How are Myth and Movement Related?” *Point 2* (1983): 62-77.

³⁹⁴ Brian Schwarz, “Cargo Movements: An Introduction to Melanesian Religions,” *Point 6* (1984): 243. Strelan, in *Search for Salvation*, 60-1, lists five tenets. Schwarz’ number one tenet is Strelan’s one and two combined. His first tenet is the division of humankind and the second is a failure of the ancestor(s). I would argue that separation is the result of failure or wrong decisions made by the ancestor(s) and this does not really require separation, because the emphasis is not so much on the division of humankind but on the failure.

- ii. The belief that Melanesians have lost their true identity and with it the fullness of life, through the foolish actions of the ancestor(s);
- iii. The expectation of the return of the ancestor(s) to restore their lost identity and bring back the Golden Age;
- iv. The belief that knowledge of the correct rituals and correct performance will open the way for the advent of the day of salvation.

These four aspects of *gutpela sindaun* are presented visually in Figure 1:

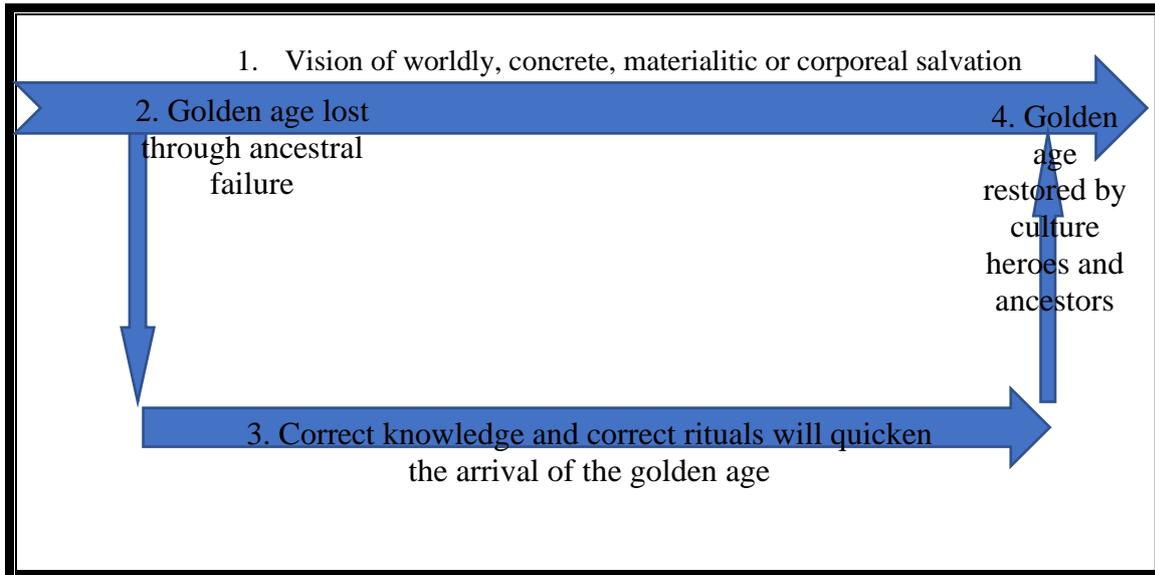


Figure 1. Melanesian Indigenous Movements' view of *Gutpela Sindaun*

The diagram depicts the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* as a this-worldly, blissful, perfect, corporeal (bodily and spiritual) life, as the top horizontal arrow shows. Life originally was perfect for human beings and creation, until human beings' progenitor(s) (Melanesians' ancestors) committed the *asua* (the reason for fault or blame).³⁹⁵ The vertical arrow pointing downwards shows the termination of *gutpela sindaun* among human beings due to ancestral failure. Human beings lost their corporeal earthly immortality and the peaceful world turned to chaos, pain, suffering and death. The blissful golden life was lost.

The bottom horizontal arrow indicates the current mortal life of pain and suffering. Melanesian culture³⁹⁶ and religion³⁹⁷ are attempts to regain the lost *gutpela sindaun* here and now. Seeking after magical powers and hidden knowledge or *kru*, and the performance of religious rituals and taboo observances, are with a view to quickening the arrival of the

³⁹⁵ See Chapter 2.2.1.

³⁹⁶ See Chapter 2.3.

³⁹⁷ See Chapter 2.4.

departed culture heroes and ancestors. The arrow pointing upward indicates the return of the departed culture heroes and ancestors and the restoration of *gutpela sindaun* (corporeal earthly immortality). Life will be restored to what it was in the beginning, as indicated by the horizontal arrow. *Gutpela sindaun* will continue for eternity.

These ideological notions of the Melanesian indigenous movements parallel the themes of the Melanesian myths (see 2.2.1 above). This means that the Melanesian indigenous movements were newer expressions of the Melanesian desire for *gutpela sindaun* that permeates Melanesian religions. The myths of return provided the ideological basis for the Melanesian indigenous movements. In this vein, Strelan argues that “no interpretation of cargo cults is valid which does not take into account the basic role which myths play in the movements.”³⁹⁸

2.7.2 Metamorphosis of Melanesian Indigenous Movements into Independent Churches

In our discussion of Melanesian indigenous movements above, we mentioned that these movements were multi-layered but have one prime objective, and that is *gutpela sindaun*. Different movements championed or emphasised a specific aspect, whether it was cargo, commerce (as in cooperative societies), politics or religion. With “the passage of colonial and neo-colonial history,”³⁹⁹ some movements formed business ventures, others pushed for political freedom,⁴⁰⁰ and still others metamorphosed into independent churches.

During the 1970s, many of the well-known indigenous movements were actually tending towards becoming independent churches, and various churches emerged without any cargoist basis.⁴⁰¹ Some of these indigenous movements were “set up as alternatives to the mission denominations and were highly syncretistic or split-dimensional (Bibles for whites and traditional past for the indigenous).”⁴⁰² These independent churches could be called, in Harold Turner’s term, synthetist, whose intention was not to identify with the traditional primal faith or with the new Christian form, but to create a new synthesis by drawing from both of these sources, but mainly from the tribal tradition.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁸ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 59.

³⁹⁹ Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 253.

⁴⁰⁰ I will not discuss the possible influence of *gutpela sindaun* thinking on business ventures and self-government, and the subsequent independence of most Melanesian countries. These discussions are discrete subjects of investigation on their own and beyond the focus of this research.

⁴⁰¹ See Trompf, “Independent Churches,” in *Melanesian Religion*, 212-40.

⁴⁰² Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 254.

⁴⁰³ See Turner, “New Religious Movements in Primal Societies,” 583; and “New Religious Movements in Primal Societies,” *Point 2* (1983): 1-6.

The emergence of independent churches was in certain respects a protest against Europeans for presenting the gospel in ways that were too foreign.⁴⁰⁴ Paliau Maloat, the founder of the Paliau movement (see below), which evolved and became an independent church, was attacked by the government and the established church.⁴⁰⁵ Misunderstanding and persecution of the movements also pushed some movements to metamorphose into independent churches. Some of these movements tending towards independent churches incorporated Christian millennial concepts,⁴⁰⁶ expecting the return of the departed culture heroes and the realisation of *gutpela sindaun*.

As Trompf notes, the “independent churches of Melanesia make up a more complicated scene.”⁴⁰⁷ From twenty more or less classified cases by 1990, the spread of Charismatic or Pentecostal style of worship has generated many splinter congregations.⁴⁰⁸ In PNG, a number of Melanesian indigenous movements metamorphosed into independent churches. The Peli association, originating with Mattias Yaliwan in 1969, assisted by Daniel Hawina, originally had cargo expectations which failed. Hawina “skilfully used the presence of in-and-out Canadian Apostolic church missionaries to start a new church”⁴⁰⁹ called Niu Apostolik Church. Using Peli’s constitution and ideology, Hawina was able to lure many Catholics in the hinterland of the East Sepik into the Niu Apostolik Church.⁴¹⁰ The consolidation of independent churches seemed to provide a more “reliable source of total and spiritual directness,”⁴¹¹ making promises to the adherents, in the face of modernity, to raise their expectations of material prosperity or quick development.

While some Melanesian indigenous movements also shifted toward church status, others have a different history altogether, like the Baluan Native Christian United Church founded by Paliau Maloat in 1946. Its teachings were based on his indigenous theology of *nupela pasin* (new fashion), which contained the prospect of divine retribution against the Australians if they did not treat his people properly.⁴¹² With only a brief period of success

⁴⁰⁴ Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 253.

⁴⁰⁵ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 35.

⁴⁰⁶ Ernst, “Globalization Processes in the Pacific Islands,” 66.

⁴⁰⁷ Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 255.

⁴⁰⁸ See Manfred Ernst, “Roots, Trends and Developments of New Forms and Expressions of Christianity,” in *Globalization and the Re-Shaping of Christianity in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Ernst, 9-13.

⁴⁰⁹ Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 255.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 229-30.

⁴¹¹ Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 255.

⁴¹² Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 222-24.

in cargoistic hope, the church settled as an alternative church “with claims of third-level government,”⁴¹³ meaning local level government.

The Paliau movement is an interesting case with different facets – politics, cultural reform, socio-economic interests, and a religious identity (as an independent church).⁴¹⁴ In 1980, the Baluan Native church released its own Bible, with brief notes “in myth-historical terms, explaining the cosmic significance of Paliau’s work.”⁴¹⁵ Further, as Trompf notes, the Paliau Church tailored Christianity “to suit indigenous needs.”⁴¹⁶ The ideology of the Baluan Native Christian Church “was based on the utopian aspects of Christianity.”⁴¹⁷ Other examples of such multi-faceted independent movements are Maasina Rule in Malaita and Guadalcanal, the ni-Vanuatu Nagriamel movement for land distribution, led by half-Tongan Jimmy Stephens, and the John Frum movement on Tanna (south Vanuatu).⁴¹⁸

2.8 *Gutpela Sindaun* and the Post-Independence Religious Scene

2.8.1 The Melanesian Religious Scene towards the End of the Twentieth Century

Towards the end of the last century, PNG’s religious scene was unprecedented in its diverse religious history, and this continued into the twenty-first century. In the 1990s, many Pentecostal churches experienced a period of revival under the ministry of various preachers and evangelists, such as Rev. Joseph Walters. During this period, international evangelists like Benny Hinn and Reinhard Bonnke visited PNG, and the churches generally saw the power of God at work in healing, slaying (meaning falling) in the Spirit, and glossolalia (speaking in tongues).

While the church was experiencing this fresh move of God’s Spirit, the government, on the other hand, was facing economic woes.⁴¹⁹ This turn of events set the stage for the introduction of prosperity teaching, or the prosperity gospel. Many Christians embraced the prosperity teaching of wealth and health as a means to prosperous living, individually and corporately as a nation. The equation which the prosperity teaching offered to Christians

⁴¹³ Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 255.

⁴¹⁴ The Paliau movement was mostly secular but later included religious ideas, which led to the formation of Baluan Native Church. See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 35.

⁴¹⁵ Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 224.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁷ Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, 197.

⁴¹⁸ Trompf, “Cargo Cults,” 255.

⁴¹⁹ See Mombi, “Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God Churches of Papua New Guinea,” 32-3.

was that fullness of spiritual salvation equals material prosperity. The more you give to God in tithes and offerings, the more you will receive from God in material benefits.

Because of this view of salvation, churches and Christians became easy prey to false money schemes.⁴²⁰ Besides the false money schemes, independent ministries like Operation Joshua and Israel Ministry also propagated a theology of material prosperity. The former, modelled after the Book of Joshua, envisioned that the way forward for communities, churches, and the nation was through confession and repentance of sin, reconciliation and redemption, meaning taking back the cultural elements which the devil had stolen and using them to glorify God.⁴²¹ The latter, in contrast, advocated an alliance with Israel which would lead to material prosperity.⁴²² This tendency is seen in a controversial “new covenant” signed by the then Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare during the South Pacific Prayer Assembly held in Port Moresby in 2007. He was badly advised by a few Pentecostal pastors and one so-called prophet to sign the new covenant between the God of Israel and PNG.⁴²³ In doing so, he believed God would bless and make PNG a prosperous nation. The government under Prime Minister Peter O’Neil officially gazetted August 26th as a National Day of Repentance.⁴²⁴

Space does not allow a discussion of Covenant Ministries, also known as Life in the Spirit Ministry,⁴²⁵ and the PNG Revival Church,⁴²⁶ which has been briefly documented. There are others as well, such as Reform Ministries, Covenant Ministries International, Nui Laif Blong Olgeta,⁴²⁷ and many more that are yet to be documented. These Christian ministries or sects draw members from the historic Protestant and Pentecostal denominations because of their emphasis on healing, miracles, material prosperity as a reward for faithful tithing and being faithful to the cultic ordinances, and complete obedience to the leader(s).

⁴²⁰ See Abel Haon, “The Church Impacting Melanesia: A Case for People-centred and Participatory Ministry,” *MJT* 24, no. 1 (2008): 21, footnote 57.

⁴²¹ Under the operation of the Joshua Ministry, some of the cultural relics and artefacts were burned in some places.

⁴²² For more details on the Joshua Operation, Israel Ministry and False Money Schemes, see Mombi, “Impact of the Prosperity Gospel on the Assemblies of God in Papua New Guinea,” 44-8. See also Gibbs, “Papua New Guinea,” 123. Members of one tribe in PNG (which prefers to be anonymous), which is predominantly Protestant, went so far as to declare themselves to be a lost tribe of Israel.

⁴²³ See Eckart Garbe, “Ecumenism in Papua New Guinea: Overwhelmed by Challenges,” in *Navigating Troubled Waters: The Ecumenical Movement in the Pacific Islands Since the 1980s*, eds. Manfred Ernst and Lydia Johnson (Suva: Pacific Theological College, 2017), 216-7.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁴²⁵ Gibbs, “Papua New Guinea,” 120-1.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 126-7.

⁴²⁷ See Sebby Wasmande, “A Critique of the Niu Laif Bilong Olgeta Movement,” *MJT* 15, no. 2 (1999): 5-39.

The teachings of these movements and independent churches about wealth and health, or bodily prosperity, are very much at home with the Melanesian philosophy of *gutpela sindaun*. The desired *gutpela sindaun* is a prosperous life without suffering, or life free from every impediment, which is available here and now through the dead culture heroes, *masalai* (nature spirits), *daiman* (the dead) and the *kawal* (personal spirits) as seen above.⁴²⁸

The key to ‘here and now’ *gutpela sindaun* is relationship, and ritual invocation of these beings which would be reciprocated⁴²⁹ with material blessings. This reciprocal relationship was guided by the *lo* (customs/traditions)⁴³⁰ and the fulfilment of rituals and ceremonies pertaining to the spirit powers. Keeping the *lo* and its requirements created a closer and warmer relationship with these beings, who in turn would use their powers to grant a pragmatic *gutpela sindaun*. Considering the teachings of the new sects and independent churches, with their teachings on wealth, health and prosperity through one’s relationship with Christ and God, we can see that they are influenced by and paralleled the Melanesian philosophy of *gutpela sindaun*.

2.8.2 Melanesian Religious Scene in the Twenty-first Century

In the twenty-first century, many Christians in Melanesia are still searching for a type of salvation that is akin to *gutpela sindaun*. In other words, some Melanesians are searching for salvation that is of a mythical or primal type,⁴³¹ a type that is pragmatic, communal and materialistic. Does the Bible have anything to say about pragmatic salvation? In search of this type of salvation, some Christian churches have embraced the prosperity gospel that teaches a salvation which parallels *gutpela sindaun*.

This prosperity teaching offers a salvation that is this-worldly, materialistic, and free of suffering. The prosperity teaching of wealth and health as evidence of a superior spirituality has captured the hearts and minds of many Melanesian Christians. Thus, many Christians and churches have welcomed prosperity teaching with open arms. In critiquing this phenomenon, Mani comments:

What has gone wrong with the Yangoruans? Christianity was introduced to the Yangoruan people almost a century ago, yet they are not satisfied with the eternal blessings which are theirs in Christ. Moreover, why are they still looking for this-worldly, pragmatic blessings

⁴²⁸ See Chapter 2.4.5.

⁴²⁹ See Chapter 2.3.2.

⁴³⁰ See Chapter 2.3.1.

⁴³¹ Compare Jean Guiart, “Oceanic Religions: Missionary Movements,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 10, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Thompson Gale, 2005), 6790.

everywhere they turn? Are they reverting back to cargoism? Why are Yangoruans still searching for salvation, when it has been over 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world? And even worse, Papua New Guinea is a Christian, and modern, country, and the Yangoruans have been evangelised since 1912.⁴³²

The discontentment with christological salvation, meaning being saved from sin, delivered from Satan, death, and from God's coming judgment, and having eternal life with God in heaven through Christ, demonstrates that the Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking is resilient and is still influencing many Christians in the region.

2.9 Summary

In summary, the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* is about a life of corporeal earthly immortality. Re-reading the Melanesian myths with an awareness of the Christian teaching, there are four themes that describe *gutpela sindaun*. These themes are: creation, lost paradise, cosmic upheaval, and restoration of the golden age. *Gutpela sindaun* is cosmic-centric, as the Melanesian unitive worldview of the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical domains portrays.

The core value governing Melanesian cultures is *gutpela sindaun*. The *lo* is about ensuing a pathway toward *gutpela sindaun*. By keeping the *lo*, one will enjoy *gutpela sindaun*. The value undergirding every cultural practice, from the *wantok* system to *pebek* (reciprocity) and the bigman system, is *gutpela sindaun*. The *wantok* system is about communal *gutpela sindaun*. Reciprocity guarantees *gutpela sindaun*. The bigman ensures that the people experience *gutpela sindaun*. *Gutpela sindaun* is time-oriented (in the here and now) and linked to the mythical past, which is anthropologically defined as 'everyday millenarianism.'

Melanesian religions are deeply rooted in *gutpela sindaun* thinking. Melanesians believe that their world was created and bequeathed to them by the creator god, culture heroes and totemic ancestors, and that it is full of spirit powers. A cordial relationship with these spirit powers is vital for the desired *gutpela sindaun*. Sin or *pasin nogut* is a breaking of the ancestral *lo* and relationships between humans, spirits and the natural world, leading to social and material loss. The culture heroes, the dead, *masalai* and *kawal* have a role to play in the present desire for *gutpela sindaun*. The key to the gift of *gutpela sindaun* is the departed culture heroes who are expected to return and restore *gutpela sindaun*.

⁴³² Mani, "Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea," 70-1.

Melanesian religions are also religions of secrecy. The sacred knowledge was veiled from outsiders through concepts, parables, stories, and so on. True knowledge is a visible pragmatic knowledge that provides answers to pragmatic questions. That is why Melanesians ask for practical answers in their religious experience.

Indigenous Melanesian religions considered all of life sacred. Rituals sacralised life and joined the living living with the living dead. Initiation rituals joined the living with the ancestors. The initiates received instructions about various arts and skills so that they could use the knowledge and skills to ensure *gutpela sindaun* for their community. The initiates were also taught magic (malevolent and benevolent) to manipulate the spirit powers to carry out the wishes and the desires of the people.

Melanesian cultures and religions seek to make up for the loss of *gutpela sindaun* and, at the same time, anticipate the return of the culture heroes to realise *gutpela sindaun*. Belief in the return of the culture heroes set the platform for the reception of the Europeans and Christian teaching. Their foreign culture and sophisticated technology seemed to indicate that *gutpela sindaun* had commenced.

Christian teaching has had a considerable impact on Melanesians. The biblical teachings about creation, fall, judgment, salvation and the promised return of Christ somewhat parallel the mythical themes that described *gutpela sindaun*. Melanesians quickly responded to the gospel. Some understood the biblical teaching of salvation and made a transition from traditional *gutpela sindaun* thinking to Christo-centric soteriological teaching, which became the nucleus of the church in Melanesia.

Some Melanesians, however, expected something more than a salvation experience centred in Christ. Curiosity over the missionaries' inability to do certain practical tasks led to suspicions that the missionaries were withholding the real *kru* (knowledge) that would lead to *gutpela sindaun*. This was partly to do with the epistemology of secrecy, where sacred *kru* was always kept secret. Those who accused the missionaries of hiding the *kru* revised their myths to explain the European phenomenon.

Those who were dissatisfied with the missionaries' message formed their own groups, defined as Melanesian indigenous movements and popularised as cargo cults. These movements were multi-faceted, but their ultimate goal was the realisation of *gutpela sindaun*. Some of these movements metamorphosed into independent churches. In such churches, Christian teaching is tailored to suit the indigenous thinking about the eschaton.

After independence, many of the indigenous movements were replaced by a new wave of sects and splinter groups. These groups offer a gospel of wealth and health. If one

keeps the prosperity tenets faithfully, the belief is that one will experience spiritual and material breakthroughs which will amount to *gutpela sindaun* in the here and now. Those who do not have such experiences are deemed to have a deficient faith and are challenged to do more to perfect their faith. The prosperity teaching is somewhat similar to the traditional Melanesian belief in *gutpela sindaun* and thus is attracting many Christians from the historic Protestant and Pentecostal denominations, who feel that the gospel teaching received from the historical denominations is insufficient.

We need to ask, should Christians expect a perfect life in every aspect here and now as a result of their faith in Christ? Melanesians with religious knowledge have always asked pragmatic questions; is this way of thinking behind the discontentment and the search for a gospel that offers newer and super-spiritual experiences that amount to *gutpela sindaun*? How does the Bible respond to this way of thinking? To find answers to these questions, I will turn to Paul's Letter to the Colossians. In the next chapter, I will discuss the alternative philosophy at Colossae and Paul's response, which will provide the tools to respond to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* in Chapter 6.

Chapter 3: Colossian Philosophy and Paul's Response

The Letter to the church at Colossae addresses an alternative teaching that contradicted the Pauline gospel which the Colossians had heard and believed. The Colossian Christians were disturbed by an alternative teaching, which prompted an apostolic response. Paul designates this teaching **φιλοσοφία** (Col 2:8), which modern scholars have coined the “Colossian heresy” or “Colossian philosophy.” The term **φιλοσοφία** is derived from the term **φίλος**, meaning love,¹ and **σοφία**, meaning wisdom.² Hence, **φιλοσοφία** means ‘the love of wisdom.’ **Φιλοσοφία** is a noble term, but occurring with **κενῆς ἀπάτης** (empty deceit – Col 2:8) is used pejoratively, showcasing that for Paul the alternative teaching is far from noble.³

In this study, the title ‘Colossian philosophy’ is used instead of ‘Colossian heresy’ as the designation for the alternative teaching. Choosing to use philosophy instead of heresy means retaining the Letter’s designation as a refutation of the opponents’ teaching. In addition to the designation ‘Colossian philosophy,’ I will also use ‘alternative/opposing teaching,’ ‘cult’ and ‘so-called philosophy’ as synonyms.

Why discuss the Colossian philosophy? The danger facing Christians everywhere, including Melanesia, of being taken captive by false teachings is as real today as it was in first-century Colossae. False teachings come in various forms that many Christians find hard to detect, and some become easy prey to such teachings. One area in which these teachings prey on unsuspecting Christians is in relation to their salvation experience in and through Christ. The claim made by these teachings is that they offer a superior and complete (perfect) soteriological knowledge and experience, one far better than what they have previously experienced in Christ. In this way they undermine the sufficiency of Christ for salvation, which is the issue at stake at Colossae and even in Melanesia today.

In this chapter, I will discuss the Colossian philosophy by studying Col 2:8-23, which biblical scholars generally agree is the main polemical passage against the alternative teaching. Study of this passage will help us to identify the nature of the alternative teaching

¹ Walter Bauer and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1058-9, 3rd edition. [Hereafter cited as BDAG].

² BDAG, 934.

³ *Ibid.*, 1059; John Paul Heil, *Colossians: Encouragement to Walk in All Wisdom as Holy Ones in Christ* (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 106.

and Paul's reply, and thereby to gain the tools to respond to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* later in Chapter 6.

I will approach the study of Col 2:8-23 by applying the exegetical method and the theological and cultural hermeneutical approaches to determine the meaning of the passage for the original recipients.⁴ The exegetical method involves a grammatical-historical approach. In applying the exegetical method and hermeneutical approaches, we recognise that the meaning of the text comes from the author, the written text and the cultural setting of the original recipients. These methodological approaches will help answer questions such as: Who are the opponents? What is the nature of the Colossian philosophy? What is the issue at stake? What is Paul's reply to the alternative teaching?

In this chapter, the first point of discussion is to ascertain the purpose of the Letter, which includes its structure and the context of Col 2:8-23. The second point of discussion is my analysis of the Col 2:8-23 text itself, which is divided into two parts. Part 1 is Col 2:8-15. After analysing Col 2:8-15, I will provide a summary. Part 2 is Col 2:16-23, which will also include an analysis and summary. The third point will delineate the meaning of Col 2:8-23. The fourth section discusses the identity of the opponents. The fifth section focuses on the nature of the Colossian philosophy. The sixth point of discussion is the theological issues undergirding Paul's polemic. I will conclude with a summary.

3.1 Purpose of the Colossian Letter

Scholars acknowledge that it is not easy to reconstruct the situation at Colossae. Most scholars have focused on Col 2:8-23 in this effort, which is the main passage in the Letter where Paul openly referred to the Colossian philosophy and sought to characterise the nature of the philosophy. From Paul's polemic, it appears that the Colossian philosophy emphasised adherence to certain rules and regulations, observance of certain religious feasts and holy days – festivals, new moons and sabbaths (v. 16), worship of angels, humility, visions (v. 18), claiming commitment to Christ (v. 19), abstinence regulations (the three 'do not's') (v. 21), and promoting self-imposed worship and harsh treatment of the body (v. 23).

Paul's use of circumcision and baptism metaphors to depict believers' union with Christ has also led some biblical scholars to suggest that their use by Paul implies some

⁴ See Chapter 1.7.1.

sort of actual circumcision or initiation rites.⁵ There is also another suggestion that the opponents were suggesting that baptism rites should be replaced with circumcision.⁶ Whether this was the case or not, the nature of the philosophy reveals that the use of these metaphors was an amalgamation of elements from both Jewish and Greco-Roman religions.

The opponents were presumably “promising new and greater depths of spiritual experience and insight, [and] greater ‘wisdom’.”⁷ Lohse, however, argues that the opposing teaching called φιλοσοφία was offering “protection from cosmic powers and principalities.”⁸ In other words, there are various suggestions about what the opponents were offering. I will come to my own conclusion after my discussion of Col 2:8-23. At this point, the question which needs to be asked is, what is Paul’s purpose in writing the Colossian Letter? Is it just to refute the opposing teaching? He certainly does this, but the Letter’s overall purpose is a concern for doctrine and practice; it is about how the believers in Colossae should live out Christian doctrine in their everyday lives.

While the Letter presents a developed christological teaching, a key focus is on theology and practice (2:6-7). Given the prevailing circumstances at Colossae, orthodoxy and practice were Paul’s overriding concern in penning the Letter. He did not want the Colossians to succumb to the Colossian philosophy. He was concerned, as Thompson comments, for the Colossians to have a “full understanding, both cognitive and experiential, of Christ and his work on their behalf, for, equip[ped] with such discernment, believers ought to be able to withstand whatever teaching rears its head.”⁹

Paul therefore urged the Colossians, “since you have received Jesus Christ as Lord, walk in him” (2:6-7). This passage highlights Paul’s objective: Colossians, having known Christ (cognitive knowledge), should also walk in him (experiential/practical knowledge). Commenting on this passage, H. Wayne House writes that “Paul’s concern was not that they simply possess the right Christology and theology in general, but that they also live in accord with it (v. 7).”¹⁰ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., writing with reference to Col 1:9, argues that

⁵ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101-2; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul’s Thought with Special Reference to his Eschatology* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 113.

⁶ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 107.

⁷ Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005), 7.

⁸ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 3.

⁹ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 53-4.

¹⁰ H. Wayne House, “The Christian Life according to Colossians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151, no. 604 (October-December 1994): 441.

“[t]he knowledge should issue in a walk that pleases God. Here again is that necessary union of theology and ethics.”¹¹

Of prime importance was the need for the Colossians to believe in Christ (1:4, 23), who is the true substance (2:17) and fullness of God (1:19; 2:10). Faith in God or Christ should be lived out practically, overflowing with thanksgiving to God (3:5-4:1). The Colossians’ knowledge of the person and the work of Christ should be the filter through which they viewed any philosophical teaching. Any teaching that stands over against the teaching of Christ which the apostles delivered should be rejected (2:8 – “rather than Christ”).

Paul’s objective (theology and practice) can be traced in the way the Letter is structured. Scholars generally agree that the Letter is structured in two parts. The first part (1:13-3:4), described as polemical,¹² is more theological or doctrinal in nature. Here Paul articulates the doctrine of Christ, demonstrating that it is the principle doctrine under attack at Colossae.¹³ In this section, Paul spells out how the apostles understood and interpreted the Christ-event (incarnation, death, resurrection, heavenly existence, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the promised return). This Christ-event is referred to as the gospel of Christ.

The second part of the Letter (3:5-4:6) is characterised as didactic – the application of the theology or doctrine in Christian living. To say the least, statements like “put to death the sinful nature” (3:5), clothe yourself with Christ (3:10), forgive each other (3:13), wives be subject to your husbands, husbands love your wives, fathers are not to make their children angry and children obey your parents (3:18-20) are ethical statements. Christians are to apply the doctrine of Christ (biblical teaching) in their lives, relationships, and in every other aspect of life. The passage earmarked for discussion is located in the first (doctrinal) section. Here I want to provide a basic overview of the first section (1:3-3:4), which will set the stage for my discussion of Col 2:8-23.

The Letter begins with a prayer of thanksgiving (1:3-12). This prayer is like the epistle’s table of contents, listing a series of themes or subjects that are later developed in the Letter.¹⁴ Mainly in Col 1:13-23, 26-28 and 2:6-15, Paul articulates his or the apostolic

¹¹ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Spiritual Knowledge and Walking Worthily of the Lord,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118, no. 472 (October 1961): 341-2.

¹² This will be the case because almost all the explicit allusion and affirmation statements are found in Col 1:3-3:4. See Jerry Sumney, “Those Who ‘Pass Judgment’: The Identity of the Opponents in Colossians,” *Biblica* 74, no. 3 (1993): 366-88.

¹³ See F. F. Bruce, “Colossian Problems Part 2: The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15-20,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (April-June 1984): 99.

¹⁴ See Terence Y. Mullins, “The Thanksgiving of Philemon and Colossians,” *NTS* 30, no. 2 (April 1984): 290.

interpretation of the Christ-event. Christ is pre-eminent in both creation and redemption. Concerning Col 1:13-23, O'Neill argues on grammatical grounds that it is a christological statement, but goes all the way back to Col 1:9 rather than focusing on vv. 15-20, as many scholars do.¹⁵

However, I see the sectional development of the person and work of Christ, introduced in the thanksgiving prayer (1:4-6), being developed in Col 1:13-23. On grammatical grounds, Col 1:3-12 is an *inclusio*. It begins with thanksgiving (v. 3) and ends with thanksgiving (v. 12). Also, the use of the pronoun “you” (plural), referring to the recipients, beginning in verse 3 through to verse 12 and verse 13, switches to “us” (inclusive of the apostolic band and Colossians), implying a shift from thanksgiving to articulating the meaning of the Christ-event for every believer. Col 1:13-23, 26-28 and 2:6-15 depict the person and work of Christ in creation and redemption and how this is understood by the believers. In this section, we have one of the most profound christological passages in the New Testament (1:15-20).¹⁶ Christ is given a cosmic position, pre-eminent in both creation and redemption.

Sandwiched in between the christological articulation is a sub-section (1:24-2:5) outlining the ministry of Paul. Paul's ministry is defined in light of the Christ-event, portraying him as a servant of the (universal) church, according to God's commission, who has been called to publicly proclaim God's mystery, namely Christ, through whom the Gentiles are given an opportunity to become God's people.¹⁷ Here Paul interprets his suffering for the church in the light of the Christ-event and the commission God gave him to preach Christ. He was obligated to preach Christ and to be responsible for the wellbeing of the church (2:1). He was responsible for clearly articulating the Christ-event so that the believers understood and lived by it and not being deceived by anyone (2:2-4).¹⁸

The passage earmarked for discussion (Col 2:8-23) is structured around three warnings (vv. 8, 16, 18) and a rhetorical question (v. 20).¹⁹ My discussion of Col 2:8-23 is

¹⁵ J. C. O'Neill, “The Source of the Christology in Colossians,” *NTS* 26, no. 1 (October 1979): 87-100.

¹⁶ Col 1:15-20 is discussed in Chapter 4.

¹⁷ Compare Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 125.

¹⁸ This sub-section (1:24-2:5) could be further sub-divided into two parts: (1) An overview of Paul's suffering for the church and God's commission to preach God's mystery, the goal of his ministry to the Gentiles being to present them mature in Christ (1:24-29). (2) Paul's instructions to the church concerning God's mystery (2:1-5). Here Paul issues a warning to the Colossians regarding the opposing teaching (see 2:4), which he later identified as philosophy (2:8). In Col 2:8-23, the Apostle refuted the claims and the teachings of the opponents using the christological foundation established in Col 1:13-23.

¹⁹ The structure followed in the exegesis of Colossians is adapted from Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 206-24.

structured around the three warnings and the rhetorical question. But I will draw attention to the passage summary in two segments. The first segment is Col 2:8-15, and the second is Col 2:16-23.

3.2 Analysing Col 2:8-23

3.2.1 First Warning: ‘Do not be taken captive’ (Col 2:8-15)

3.2.1.1 *Insufficiency of the Colossians Philosophy* – v. 8

Verse 8 is a warning to the believers concerning the alternative teaching – βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης (See to it that no-one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit – v. 8a; *translation mine*).²⁰ The imperative βλέπετε means ‘look out, beware or be on guard,’²¹ and followed by μή (not) is a clear note of warning to ὑμᾶς, i.e. the readers, to be on the alert that μή τις (no-one), that is the opponents who are referred to earlier (see 2:4) lead them astray.²² The participle συλαγωγῶν used here is rarely used in the New Testament. It is a much stronger word than ἄγω, and is understood as a “connative present, with the meaning of ‘who tries to ... who wants to.’”²³ It can be used to speak of “carrying off as booty or captive”²⁴ in the context of war. The warning issued suggests that the alternative teaching is indeed dangerous, but it does not mean that the addressees have already been taken captive. This alternative teaching is defined as τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης.

Φιλοσοφία is a broad term²⁵ with a “range of meanings describing various groups, tendencies and viewpoints within the Greek and Jewish worlds.”²⁶ Whether the designation

²⁰ Throughout this chapter and chapters 4 and 5, the translation of each verse from Greek text to English is mine.

²¹ BDAG, 179.

²² Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 94; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 146.

²³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 146. See also Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 97.

²⁴ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 146-7. See also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 109. On the other hand, Wright suggests that the term συλαγωγῶν is a “contemptuous pun with the word synagogue,” and thus translates it as follows: “see to it that no-one snatches you as prey (NRSV) from the flock of Christ, to lock you up instead within Judaism.” Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 100. Wright’s interpretation is influenced by what comes later in the polemic, i.e. the mention of circumcision, food rituals, new moons and sabbath, which are elements of Jewish religion – however, not exclusively, in his interpretation.

²⁵ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 94.

²⁶ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 109. See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 147, for Aristean and Maccabean definitions. Paul is not implying that every philosophical thought is empty and deceitful. It is because the teaching at Colossae is undermining the sufficiency of Christ that it is described as hollow and deceptive. The Jewish apologists made free use of the term φιλοσοφία to refer to and to recommend their religious system as a philosophy, like Josephus, who recommended the three Jewish sects (Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes) to his readers as philosophies: “The Jews, from the most ancient times,

φιλοσοφία is a self-designation of the opponents that Paul was using is uncertain. The noun φιλοσοφία means love of wisdom. Here it is used with κενῆς ἀπάτης (empty deceit), which implies that φιλοσοφία was probably being used pejoratively to depict the alternative teaching as erroneous.²⁷ The καί is exegetical, so κενῆς ἀπάτης describes φιλοσοφία.²⁸ The adverb κενῆς means “without effect or to no purpose, *in an empty manner, idly, in vain.*”²⁹ The noun ἀπάτης means “*deception, deceitfulness.*”³⁰ These two terms form a double negation of the philosophy as contentless, baseless, truthless, powerless, “seductive and misleading.”³¹ It is a clever deceit based on deceptive human behaviour and built on futile and seductive empty words (2:4; Eph 5:6). It is therefore a false philosophy or wisdom (see 2:23).

The philosophy was κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν (according to the tradition of people, according to the principles of the universe and not according to Christ – v. 8b). Παράδοσιν³² τῶν ἀνθρώπων may refer to the teachings and commands that were passed on from a cult, a teacher or a philosopher to his students.³³ The occurrence of παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων

had three philosophies pertaining to their traditions, that of the Essenes, that of the Sadducees, and, thirdly, that of the group called Pharisees.” Josephus, *Ant* 18:11, Ἰουδαίοις φιλοσοφίαι τρεῖς ἦσαν ἐκ τοῦ πάντων ἀρχαίου τῶν πατρίων, ἧ τε τῶν Ἑσσηνῶν καὶ ἡ τῶν Σαδδουκαίων, τρίτην δὲ ἐφιλοσόφουν οἱ Φαρισαῖοι λεγόμενοι – “The Jews, from the most ancient times, had three philosophies pertaining to their traditions, that of the Essenes, that of the Sadducees, and, thirdly, that of the group called the Pharisees.” Philo too had no problem in “presenting biblical teaching and Jewish piety as a kind of philosophy.” Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 147. From a religious standpoint, various religious groups used the term to convince the masses that their teachings were a true philosophy of life. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95. Even the magicians called themselves sages and ‘philosophers’ to capture people’s allegiance by unleashing hidden powers through magical spells. Lohse cites Storbæus’ statement that a prophet endowed with the special power of knowledge worked “in order that philosophy and magic might nourish the soul” (ἵνα φιλοσοφία μὲν καὶ μαγεία ψυχὴν τρέφῃ). Storbæus, *fragm.* 23.68. Initiations that unlocked the doors to the hidden sources of being were likewise considered gateways to philosophy, so that “one might say that philosophy is the rite of genuine initiation and the handing on of those mysteries which are genuine mysteries” (τὴν φιλοσοφίαν μύησιν φαίη τις ἅν ἀληθεοῦς τελετῆς καὶ ὄντων ὡς ἀληθῶς μυστηρίων παράδοσιν. Theo of Smyrna, *Expositio Rerum Mathematicarum*, ed. Edvard Hiller, 1878, 14, cited in Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 95; see also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 109.

²⁷ BDAG, 1059. See also J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: MacMillan, 1900, Reprinted Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 177; Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 98; and Foster, *Colossians*, 251.

²⁸ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 130.

²⁹ BDAG, 540.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

³¹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 147-8; See also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 110.

³² In the Greco-Roman world, the term παράδοσις was widely used, which indicates that it was an important concept. See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 148.

³³ Plato, *Theaet* 36.198b.

recalls the polemic of Isa 29:13³⁴ but it is difficult to ascertain the nuance behind the phrase. Those who think otherwise suggest that it is a form of Jewish tradition being presented as a philosophy.³⁵ But the phrase *παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων* is most likely setting up a contrast with the apostolic teaching which the Colossians had received (see Col 2:6-7; 1:7),³⁶ thus denying the divine origin of the opposing teaching. It is purely of human origin, based on rules and regulations of human beings, lacking the divine revelational character, in contrast to the apostolic gospel (see 1:25-26; Gal 1:15-17).

Another basis of the philosophy is *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*. The root meaning of *στοιχεῖα* is ‘primary parts, a series or row.’³⁷ Applying it to the military context, it means “members of a row or series.”³⁸ But *στοιχεῖα* in the plural means the elements or components of something such as heavenly constellations (heavenly bodies).³⁹ It also

³⁴ The prophet Isaiah warned against changing the true transformational living religion into a set of ideas and rules promulgated on a purely human level. See Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101.

³⁵ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 148; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101.

³⁶ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 131.

³⁷ BDAG, 946; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 129.

³⁸ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 129.

³⁹ The first view is called the cosmological view, from the term *κόσμος*. Here *κόσμος* is understood as “world,” i.e. material, visible elements of the world. The philosophers used the term *στοιχεῖα* to speak of four elements – earth, water, air and fire – from which everything was created. BDAG, 946. See also Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101-2; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 150. Plato, for instance, spoke of the primary elements out of which human beings and everything else were formed – “primary elements ... [from which] we and everything else are composed.” *Theaet* 201e: “In my dream, I seemed to hear some people saying that the primary elements, as it were, of which we and everything else are composed, have no account and into which all will finally be dissolved.” *Diogenes Laertius* 7: 136-7 says, “Thereupon he [God] created first of all the four elements, fire, water, air, earth... An element is defined as that from which particular things first come to be at their birth and into which they are finally resolved.” In the Hellenistic philosophical schools, and later in Hellenistic Judaism, *κόσμος* was used to refer to the four elements from which God made the world. Philo, *De Cherubim* 127: τὰ τέσσαρα στοιχεῖα (the four elements); Wis 7:17; 19:18. *Στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* was used to compare the “observance of the Jewish Law and the practices of pagan religions.” O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 131. Schweizer argues in support of this interpretation that all the parallels of *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* outside of the New Testament denote earth, water, air and fire. See E. Schweizer, “Christianity of the Circumcised and Judaism of the Uncircumcised: The Background of Matthew and Colossians,” in *Jews, Greeks and Christians Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honor of William David Davies*, ed. R. Hamerton-Kelly and R. Scroggs (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 249-55. Any connection of elements to the stars, deities, spirits or demons could not be found before the second century A.D. Thus, Philo demonstrated that his readers were expected to understand the term ‘element’ in a physical sense, without any spiritual overtones, in *Heres* 140; *De Abrahamo*. 162. But if the same phrase *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* is used in Galatians to refer to the spirit powers of the universe, then chronologically (i.e. the date of penning Galatians by Paul), as Arnold argues, the phrase was already being used to refer to spirit powers of the universe in the 1st century AD. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 183-4. In the context of Galatians, *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* is used to refer to the religious experience of the Gentile believers prior to them receiving the gospel of Christ, as an experience which was comparable to the Jews’ experience of the Law. See Daniel G. Reid, “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 230. Evidence from Second Temple Judaism also points to the speculation about the universe and how the heavenly bodies were related to angels (*1 Enoch* 43:1-2; 60:11-12; 80:6; *Jub* 2:2). Stephen in his speech also accused the Jews of worshipping the heavenly host (Acts 2:42-43).

means foundational principles of learning such as ‘ABCs.’⁴⁰ In a technical sense, it refers to the “transcendent powers that are in control over events in this world.”⁴¹ These three nuances⁴² are possible, but in my view religious teaching and elemental powers of the universe are preferable nuances.⁴³ The first and third nuances could be merged as one because of the pre-existing belief that the material world was under the control of the cosmic powers.⁴⁴ From the two nuances, the latter is preferred here, as I will show.

⁴⁰ The second nuance of *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου* is the things that “constitute the foundation of learning.” BDAG, 946. This is like learning the ABCs as the first lesson before words and sentences are constructed. See Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 98, footnote 40. Elsewhere in scripture, *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου* implies the basic principles of religious teachings (see Heb 6:4-6). In Colossians, these were regulations and practices that the people followed prior to the proclamation of the gospel (vv. 16, 20-23). See J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (1880, republished; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 178. Hence, *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου* referred to the basic teachings of the opponents bound up with this world. O’Brien renders *στοιχῆα* as the “element of knowledge” for the “age of minority.” O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 130. It was a deficient knowledge before the gospel, the “inherent component” bound up with the notion of “power” or “force;” thus the term *κόσμος* denotes the “whole sphere of human activity which stands over against Christ and his salvation.” (Ibid.) As such, it is ineffective in overcoming sin and bringing salvation. These basic components that held Jews and Gentiles in bondage are law and the flesh, and one could only be set free from them through Christ. (Ibid.)

⁴¹ BDAG, 946. The third interpretation of *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου* is the elemental spirits of the world, which were considered to be personal and active in both physical and heavenly elements. These spiritual beings were also believed to control the destiny of human beings. Consequently, these elemental spirits were worshipped. Offerings and sacrifices were made to them. The people were required to submit to their rules and regulations (2:16, 20-23). See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 133. If the ideas in the Testament of Solomon were circulated by the 1st Christian century (see Reid, “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World,” 321-2), then it gives evidence that soon after Colossians was written, *στοιχῆα* was being used to refer to the spiritual forces behind the stars and powers of the universe. Its author says Solomon used ‘elements’ in his depiction of demons – “seven intertwined comely demons, the seven elements, world-rulers of darkness” (Test. of Sol 8:1-2). In some places in the Greco-Roman world, the four elements (earth, air, water and fire) were mythologized or personified as spirits and given names of deities – Demeter, Poseidon, Hera and Hephaestus respectively. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 98, footnote 40. See also Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 150.

⁴² See Reid, “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World,” 229-33.

⁴³ In using *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου* here and in Galatians, Paul could not have had a scientific reading in mind. The interpretation his readers would have had is the elementary teachings and/or the elemental spirits and local deities. Elementary teachings of a religion are seen as the meaning behind the use of similar phrases in Gal 4:3, 9. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 99. In Galatians, *στοιχῆα* is understood as a reference to Jewish tradition or, more specifically, the works of the Law (*νόμος*) administered through the angels (Gal 3:19) for the Jews. See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 150. But for the Gentiles, it is beings that were by nature not gods (Gal 4:8). See Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 99.

⁴⁴ See Clinton Arnold, “Returning to the Domain of the Powers: Stoicheia as Evil Spirits in Galatians 4:3, 9,” *Novum Testamentum* 38, no. 1 (1996): 55-76. Further support for understanding *στοιχῆα* as elemental spirit powers comes from study of the way gnostic concepts were being developed in the second half of the 1st Christian century in the Greco-Roman world. PHEME PERKINS writes in her *Gnosticism and the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1993). “Systematic formalization of gnostic theology does not appear to have existed in the first century.” (91). But she continues later: “Even without an underlying gnosticizing mythology, anxiety over the vulnerability of the community to external powers and passions probably extended beyond the sphere of concrete ethical behaviour to the threat of invasion by other powers and forces in the universe. Such anxieties were characteristic of the religious sentiments in the first century” (14; citing E.R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: Norton, 1965:1-36)). Perkins shows convincingly that the themes and concepts on which later gnostic teachings

In Colossians, as many scholars have argued, *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* means elemental spirits of the universe and local deities, which were believed to preside over nations and peoples.⁴⁵ These powers seek to tyrannize the lives of the people and to “hold sway mysteriously and peremptorily in the phenomena of nature and the destinies of the human world, threatening and bestowing life.”⁴⁶ In the polemic, Paul goes on to mention some of the spirit beings that are an integral part of *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* (see 2:10, 15, 20; 1:13).⁴⁷ A strong case for rendering *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* as ‘elemental powers of the universe’ is the poem’s (Col 1:15-20) emphasis on the pre-eminence of Christ over against every principality and power (1:16; 2:10).

The charge which Paul made against the Colossian philosophy is that it is *οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν* (not according to Christ – 2:8c). It is not in line with the teaching that the Colossians received from Epaphras (1:7) or from the apostles (2:6-7). The teaching that the Colossians received is Christ as Lord, God’s agent of creation and redemption (see 1:15-22).

3.2.1.2 *Christ is All-Sufficient* – v. 9

The reason the Colossians should reject the opposing teaching is given in verse 9 – *ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς* (for in him dwells all the fullness of the deity bodily – v. 9). The conjunction *ὅτι* (for/because) introduces the reason why the Colossians are being warned not to listen to the opposing teaching (see vv. 4, 8). Following the conjunction, the prepositional-dative construction *ἐν αὐτῷ* (in him) is in the emphatic position and refers to Christ (v. 8d).

were built, were already circulating widely in the Mediterranean area in NT times. So the scholarly argument that there is no clear evidence that *στοιχεῖα* is used to refer to spirit powers until the 3rd or 4th century (which Reid refers to in his *Dictionary* article cited in a previous footnote), is not valid, when such ideas were commonplace, and Paul uses *στοιχεῖα* in this way here, in Galatians, 4, and Ephesians 6.

⁴⁵ Bornkamm, “The Heresy of Colossians,” 123-5; Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 158-94; Foster, *Colossians*, 352-4. Sumney asserts that many first-century writers used the term *στοιχεῖα* to refer to the spirit powers that ruled the cosmos. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 131. Reid also states that, although the *Testament of Solomon* is dated to the 3rd century AD, and “possibly containing material dating to the first century, testifies to a belief in star spirits called *stoicheia*... Thus, it is not difficult to imagine a belief system, particularly at Colossae, in which Jewish and Hellenistic ideas would have been intermingled and celestial powers associated with angels, who were revered as controlling the fate of humans. These cosmic powers, which Paul may have called *στοιχεῖα του kosmou*, needed placating if humans were ever to escape their bondage to fate.” Reid, “Elements/Elemental Spirits of the World,” 231-2.

⁴⁶ Bornkamm, “The Heresy of Colossians,” 125.

⁴⁷ See Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101-2; Bornkamm, “The Heresy of Colossians,” 124. For a detailed discussion of *στοιχεῖα* as spirit powers of the universe, see Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 158-93.

The whole passage (vv. 9-15) is woven around the *εν αὐτῷ* phrase. “In him” is one of the popular phrases used repeatedly in Colossians and other Pauline epistles. But the use of the “in him” construction in this part of the text (vv. 9-15) seems to suggest that Paul is making Christ the central focus of his argument against the Colossian philosophy, and why he thought the Colossians should hold firmly to Christ. The use of the ‘in him’ phrase in verses 9 and 10 speaks of how all of God’s essence became visible in Christ, and subsequently the Colossians received fullness in Christ. The use of “in Christ” in the remaining verses (11-15), along with metaphors, stresses the notions of incorporation and participation. The use of *ἐν αὐτῷ/ἐν ᾧ* construction in verses 10-15, makes Christ central in the whole argument.

The phrase *κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα* used in relation to Christ occurred earlier in the poem (1:19),⁴⁸ and Col 2:9 is an expansion and application of Col 1:19, making it a high christological statement against the opposing teaching. The verb *κατοικεῖ* (*κατοικέω* – in present tense) denotes the continuing bodily existence of Christ. In Christ all the fullness (*τῆς θεότητος*) dwells (*σωματικῶς*). *Πλήρωμα* as the subject⁴⁹ with the verb *κατοικεῖ* stresses that the totality of *θεότητος* dwells in Christ, underscoring that the *πλήρωμα* is found only in Christ.⁵⁰

The genitive *τῆς θεότητος* is the content of the subject – all the fullness of the deity. The term *θεότητος* is an abstract noun for *θεός*, meaning “the state of being god, divine character/nature, deity, divinity.”⁵¹ Here *θεότητος* denotes the “state of being divine” and the subject *πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα* stresses emphatically that the whole of God’s undivided divine essence dwells in Christ.⁵² This means that Christ by nature is God; he

⁴⁸ See the detailed discussion of *κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα* in Chapters 4 and 5.

⁴⁹ On the question of whether *πλήρωμα* is the subject of Col 1:19, and other exegetical objections, see O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 15-17. *Πλήρωμα* Fullness and its related terms, like full (2:2) or fully (4:12), are important theological concepts used in this letter. See Chapter 4.3.3 and 5.2 for further discussion of *πλήρωμα*. *Πλήρωμα* occurs 17 times in the New Testament, 6 times each in Paul and deuterio-Pauline letters. The meaning of *πλήρωμα* is derived from the root word ‘full’ and signifies fullness or fulfilment. Its usage, for instance, in Rom 11: 25 is in the context of the salvation of Israel after the full number of Gentiles has come in. And in Rom 13:4, love is the fulfilment of the law. The use of fullness in Gal 4:4 is in reference to time, implying the in-breaking of the age of salvation with the birth of Christ (see Eph 1:10). *Πλήρωμα* is a central Christological term in Colossians and Ephesians. See H. Hübner, “*Πλήρωμα*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 110-11.

⁵⁰ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 111.

⁵¹ BDAG, 452.

⁵² O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 111.

existed with the Father as *πρωτότοκος* and is God's agent of creation and redemption (see 1:15-20). He is the divine embodiment.

The adverb *σωματικῶς* means “*bodily*, [or] *corporeally*”⁵³ and denotes the totality of God's essence as embodied in the person of Christ, “[underscoring] the accessibility of the divine epiphany.”⁵⁴ In other words, *σωματικῶς* indicates the manner which *κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος*. It reinforces the physical reality and the encounterability of the divine indwelling.⁵⁵ The invisible God became visible in the realm of the visible in Christ, who is the representation and the manifestation of God (1:15a).

The *κατοικεῖ ... σωματικῶς* construction has led to an interpretation that Christ lives through his body the church, which I think is not the case because Christ is not depicted as *κεφαλῆ* of *σώματος*, as in 1:18.⁵⁶ The prepositional phrase *ἐν αὐτῷ* emphasises that it is in Christ that all the fullness of God dwells bodily. Hence, I conclude that *σωματικῶς* is used to express the divine embodiment in Christ in redemption (see 1:19) and in his resurrected-glorified existence.⁵⁷ In Christ all the divine fullness lives bodily, meaning corporally. As Sumney states, the “resurrected Christ continues to live an embodied existence”⁵⁸ at God's right hand in heaven (see 3:1; 1 Cor 15:20-48).⁵⁹ Therefore,

⁵³ BDAG, 984.

⁵⁴ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152.

⁵⁵ As Dunn states, the “human *σῶμα* enables a person to be in relationship with other persons, so the somatic character of this indwelling God meant that he could be encountered directly in and through this particular human being, Christ,” who is the image of the invisible God (1:15). Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152.

⁵⁶ See Lohse, who interprets *σωματικῶς* as a reference to the church, in *Colossians and Philemon*, 101. See also Suzanne Watts Henderson, “God's Fullness in Bodily Form: Christ and Church in Colossians,” *ExpT* 118 (2007): 169-173; and Heil, *Colossians: Encouragement to Walk in All Wisdom*, 108-9. Against the interpretation of *σωματικῶς* as a reference to the church, Foster claims that “[i]t designates the embodiment of the fullness of deity in Christ, and identifies that divine presence with the corporeal form of Christ. Thus, the text affirms the mystery of the divine fullness dwelling in Christ, and this act of revelation in bodily form requires no additional or supplementary act of disclosure. The text, therefore, assumes the enfleshment of the fullness of deity in Christ.” Foster, *Colossians*, 259. This divine enfleshment does not necessarily mean incarnation. See Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon: An Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2013), 89. Sumney argues that it affirms “the bodily nature of Christ's resurrection existence; it agrees with 1 Cor 15:20-48, where Paul argues that the resurrected Christ continues to live an embodied existence.” Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133; and MacDonald claims that “the deity is described as dwelling bodily (*somatikōs*) in Christ. This may well reflect a response to proponents of the false teaching who require various physical measures in the form of rituals and ascetic acts for full access to the ‘fullness.’” MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 98.

⁵⁷ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 152; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 113.

⁵⁸ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133. Smith also states that “the present tense of *κατοικεῖ* shows that the whole fullness of God continues to reside in the resurrected and exalted Christ, with the adverb *σωματικῶς* describing the manner of the residing.” Ian Smith, *Heavenly Perspective: A Study of the Apostle Paul's Response to a Jewish Mystical Movement at Colossae* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 91.

⁵⁹ See S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: VI. Beware of Philosophy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119, no. 476 (October-December 1962): 310.

the expression *κατοικεῖ ... σωματικῶς* has salvific-historical connotations, i.e. past (incarnation – 1:19), present (resurrected-glorified in heaven – 2:9) and future (glorious revealing – 3:4).

3.2.1.3 *Believers are Sufficient in Christ – vv. 10-15*

From Christ's fullness, the Colossians are given fullness – *καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι, ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας* (and in him you are given fullness, who is the head of every ruler and authority – v. 10). Again, this verse begins with *καὶ...ἐν αὐτῷ*. The conjunction *καί* indicates that this is the second reason why the Colossians should hold unswervingly to Christ. In Christ, *ἐστὲ...πεπληρωμένοι*, i.e., the Colossians have come to fullness. The periphrastic perfect *πεπληρωμένοι* connotes a continuous state of filling because of a prior action, as the passive voice indicates that they had been filled by God (see 1:9). It is through their union with Christ through faith (see 1:4) that the Colossians possess fullness.⁶⁰ From the christological fullness the believers received fullness.⁶¹

There is no noun accompanying 'fullness' to define what it is. Some scholars have suggested that Paul employed a slogan which the false teachers were using when teaching fullness to their followers.⁶² Others have suggested that the divine fullness or fullness of deity (see v. 9) is the content of fullness.⁶³ Perhaps the prayer of thanksgiving (Col 1:9-12) can contribute to our understanding of the content. The fullness which the Colossians received in Christ is godly knowledge, spiritual wisdom and understanding, inner strength, and being made fit to share in the inheritance of the saints (see 1:9-14), which they received as the blessing of reconciliation (see 1:21-23). The immediate context (vv. 11-15) supports this notion of fullness, as it goes on to explain what God has done for them through Christ.

The second part of verse 10, *ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας*, recalls Col 1:16. Christ through whom the Colossians have received fullness is also *ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας*. The *κεφαλὴ-σωματικῶς* metaphors occurred

⁶⁰ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 134; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 113.

⁶¹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 134.

⁶² Lohse writes that "[i]t also affirms an emphatic contrast to the teaching of the 'philosophy': not by grovelling before 'the elements of the universe,' but in Christ alone [they] have been 'filled' (*πεπληρωμένοι*)." Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101. But Sumney contends that the employing of *πεπληρωμένοι* does not necessarily mean that the opponents were using it: "Its use here responds to their contention that believers need to supplement what they now possess in Christ." Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 134.

⁶³ See Ben C. Blackwell, "You are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3," *JTI* 8, no. 1 (2014): 103-23.

earlier, implying Christ's authority over the church. He is in charge. Then in 2:19 it is from him as κεφαλή that the body, i.e. the church, gets its nourishment and growth.⁶⁴ The use of ἡ κεφαλή here and in Col 1:18 means "a being of high status."⁶⁵ The noun ἀρχῆς means ruler or authority,⁶⁶ and ἐξουσίας means human authorities or transcendent rulers.⁶⁷ Here, ἀρχῆς and ἐξουσίας are references to spiritual powers, since both nouns occur later in Col 2:15. 'Christ is their head' means that all the spirit beings are subservient to him.⁶⁸ Christ rules over them by virtue of "creation and conquest."⁶⁹

The fullness which the readers received in Christ implied a change of status. The Apostle draws the readers' attention to how this change has occurred as a result of their incorporation into Christ in vv. 11-15. He uses six metaphors to delineate this change of status. In these verses, there is a variation of the personal pronoun ἐν ᾧ from 'in him' to 'in whom.' This does not alter the flow of thought – the believers' incorporation into Christ.⁷⁰

Addressing the Colossians, we hear that ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (in whom you were also circumcised with [the] circumcision made without hands, in the stripping [of] the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ – v. 11). The personal pronoun ἐν ᾧ (in whom) links verse 11 with the preceding two verses (vv. 9, 10). In this verse, the first metaphor used to stress the notion of incorporation is περιτέμνω (circumcision).

The term περιτέμνω means "'circumcision' of the foreskin"⁷¹ or penial incision. Jews practised circumcision in keeping with God's covenant with Abraham (see Gen 17:9-14). In the Jewish context, περιτέμνω involved inclusion into the divine-human covenant. But the use of circumcision here is unusual compared to its usage elsewhere by Paul, and

⁶⁴ The head here is not portrayed as a member of the body or a member amongst other members, which would imply equality (see 1 Cor 12:12ff).

⁶⁵ BDAG, 542.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 353.

⁶⁸ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 98; Foster, *Colossians*, 261; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 114.

⁶⁹ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 90. See also Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 102.

⁷⁰ In verses 11-15, Paul explains how the Colossians have come to the state of fullness, i.e. how they have come to share with Christ and in his inheritance. Around the 'in Christ' phrase, Paul made a powerful exposition of the cross. See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 151. It was through the cross that the Colossians received circumcision (i.e. putting off the body of flesh), death and resurrection, forgiveness, cancellation of the written bond, and the stripping of the power of rulers and authorities.

⁷¹ BDAG, 807.

in relation to Jewish usage.⁷² Its use in the New Testament in general refers to the rite of circumcision⁷³ and/or a state of one already circumcised, characterising the Jews⁷⁴ and the proselytes.

At times in Scripture, circumcision is also used figuratively (see Rom 2:28), as it is in this case.⁷⁵ Its figurative usage suggests spiritual *περιετιμήθητε*,⁷⁶ as the grammatical evidence supports.⁷⁷ The adjective *ἀχειροποίητος* indicates non-physical circumcision. The use of *ἀχειροποίητος* here is different from its use in the Septuagint and other parts of the New Testament.⁷⁸ In these sources, the adjective *χειροποίητος* referred to anything that was of human action or characterised idolatry.⁷⁹ Therefore, the use of *ἀχειροποίητω* denotes an inward spiritual transformation of the heart.⁸⁰ In this sense, *ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός* is used figuratively for the stripping of the sinful nature by Christ.⁸¹ The circumcision metaphor described the process by which Christ in his crucifixion removed the sinful nature of the believing men and women.

The Colossians, being incorporated into Christ, had their sinful natures stripped or severed by the cross. The use of the stripping language elsewhere in the Letter does not imply physical stripping. It implies spiritual stripping, as *ἀπεκδύσει* and its variant form (*ἀπεκδυσάμενος* in Col 2:15 and 3:9-10) go on to demonstrate. It is through the death of Christ as *σώματι τῆς σαρκός* (see Col 1:22) that the sinful nature was stripped away. The stripping of the sinful nature is a divine act through divine agency.⁸²

⁷² The noun *περιτομή* occurs 36 times in the New Testament, especially in Romans and Galatians, where Paul was responding to a Judaistic gospel, i.e. Moses plus Christ. Faith in Christ alone was not enough. One also needed the works of the Law, such as food restrictions, the Sabbath and circumcision. O. Betz, “*Περιτεμνω*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 79.

⁷³ See John 7:22, 23; Acts 7:8; Rom 2:25a, 27; 4:11; Phil 3:5; Col 2:11; Eph 2:11.

⁷⁴ See Rom 2:25b, 26, 28; 4:10; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6, 11; 6:15.

⁷⁵ Betz, “*Περιτεμνω*,” 79.

⁷⁶ See Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 104.

⁷⁷ BDAG, 807; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 115; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 135-40; Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 103-4; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 153-58.

⁷⁸ Lev 26:1; Isa 2:18; 16:12; 11:9; Lev 26:30; Mark 14:58; Acts 7:48; 17; 24; Eph 2:11; Heb 9:11, 12 are some of the passages in the Greek Septuagint and New Testament that use the clause ‘hands of men’ or ‘made by human hands.’ See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 115.

⁷⁹ See Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 156; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 115.

⁸⁰ See Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; Ezek 36:26-27.

⁸¹ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 181. From Paul’s teaching, *σάρξ* (flesh) means the old nature or earthly nature (Col 3:5, 9). The “body of flesh” is equivalent to “the body of this death” (*τοῦ σώματος τοῦ θανάτου τούτου* – Rom 7:24), or “the body of sin” (*τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας* – Rom 6:6), and here *σώματος τῆς σαρκός* refers to the body of sin or sinful nature.

⁸² See Foster, *Colossians*, 264-5.

The spiritual circumcision which the Colossians received is ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (by the circumcision of Christ). The occurrence of περιτέμνω does not carry the same nuance as when it was used earlier in this verse. Grammatically, the circumcision is not referring to penial circumcision of Christ himself (see Luke 2:22-24). Here the circumcision metaphor is used in the context of the cross (v. 15). It refers to the death of Christ on the cross. The Colossians had their sinful natures stripped away through the death of Christ.⁸³ This rendering is compatible with the earlier phrase ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός. The significance of περιτέμνω is inclusion into God's covenant community through Christ, God's divine agent.

The occurrence of the baptism metaphor in verse 12 reinforces the incorporation and participation themes – συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ, ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν (having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with [him] through faith in the work of God [who] raised him from the dead – v. 12). The passive verb συνταφέντες, meaning buried (together) with,⁸⁴ only occurs here and in Rom 6:4. Συνταφέντες is used figuratively to portray the burial of believers with Christ in baptism, a conclusion of the event of death. The dative βάπτισμῷ is defined as burial and resurrection of the believers.⁸⁵ When a believer undertakes baptism, this displays one's willingness to identify with the event of Jesus' death and a total surrender to God,⁸⁶ like Christ himself, and to share in the victory of Christ over sin and death (1:19).⁸⁷

Not only have the Colossians died with Christ in baptism, they also ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε, i.e. they are also raised with Christ. There is a scholarly debate regarding whether to take ἐν ᾧ as 'in which' or 'in him/whom.' Beasley-Murray argues for 'in which' as a reference to baptism. He sees συνηγέρθητε (you were raised with him) as a parallel

⁸³ See Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*, 96.

⁸⁴ BDAG, 971.

⁸⁵ Baptism here touches on two of its three elements found in Rom 6:4. The two elements are burial and resurrection, but not death. This is because the element of dying with Christ was captured in the circumcision metaphor, but this does not make the two metaphors (circumcision and baptism) equivalent. The motif behind circumcision is incorporation, while the meaning underlying baptism is participation in death, burial and resurrection (v. 12) with Christ to new life. Of the three baptismal constituents, the emphasis is on death and resurrection. These statements commenced with an emphatic ἐν ᾧ καί, which employed finite verbs (περιετμήθητε, συνηγέρθητε). The same statements are later taken up in verse 13, but there they are used differently. See O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 119.

⁸⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 159.

⁸⁷ See Teresa Okure, "In Him All Things Hold Together": A Missiological Reading of Colossians 1:15-20," *IRM* 91, no. 360 (January 2002): 69.

of *συνταφέντες* (you were buried with him), and the two are joined together by *αὐτῷ*. Reading *ἐν ᾧ* as ‘in him’ separates the two baptismal elements, implying that the believers are buried with Christ in baptism but are raised with him in some other way.⁸⁸ Despite this argument, my position is to take the clause *ἐν ᾧ* as ‘in whom,’ which points to Christ. Attention was drawn earlier to the fact that this text (vv. 9-15) was woven around the ‘in Christ’ phrase, which makes Christ the focus of the text. The text introduces and stresses the theme of incorporation and participation. Phrases like ‘in Christ,’ ‘in whom’ and ‘with him’ are used throughout this text, which reinforces the fact that the Colossians were given fullness of life in Christ. To be consistent with the text, *ἐν ᾧ* is rendered ‘in whom,’ as seen earlier in verse 11. The phrase ‘in him’ may be unusual “when joined to a verb prefixed by *συν-* (*συνηγέρθητε*, ‘you were raised with’).”⁸⁹ But the reference is specifically to Christ rather than to a personal pronoun (him/it). Their resurrection is described by the aorist *συνηγέρθητε*. This means that resurrection had already occurred for those who believed in Christ but is currently hidden in Christ, with God awaiting its final realisation at the Parousia (see 3:3-4). In the meantime, the believers are living and participating in the life of the risen Christ (3:1-2). They have put on the new self that is being renewed in the image of the creator, who is Christ (see 3:9). It is a long drawn-out process which requires firmness of faith and hope as held out in the gospel (see 1:23).

The basis on which the Colossians are raised with Christ is *διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτοὺς ἐκ νεκρῶν*. The term *πίστις* (faith) means “to consider something to be true and therefore worthy of one’s trust, believe,”⁹⁰ or “to entrust oneself to an entity in complete confidence, believe (in), trust.”⁹¹ The Colossians heard and believed in the gospel of Christ (1:4-6) that God through the cross of Christ has offered redemption to the Gentiles. Therefore, God, who is the implied agent, raised the Colossians to life with Christ (see v. 13).

In verse 13, the Apostle Paul makes a sharp contrast with the Colossians’ pre-Christian life. *καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας [ἐν] τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ, χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα* (and you being dead [in] your transgressions and in uncircumcision of

⁸⁸ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1973), 153-4.

⁸⁹ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 119

⁹⁰ BDAG, 815.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

your flesh, he made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all [our] trespasses – v. 13). Terms and metaphors akin to those in verses 11 and 12 are again mentioned in verse 13 – νεκρός (dead), ἀκροβυστία (uncircumcision), σάρξ (flesh) and συζωοποιέω (made you alive). These terms are used to describe the former life of being spiritually dead and morally separated from God (1:21a) and held captive in the domain of darkness (1:13).⁹²

This spiritual alienation was brought about by the παράπτωμα. The term παράπτωμα translated as trespasses (NRSV) means a “violation of moral standards, offence, wrongdoing, sin.”⁹³ One’s transgressive behaviour is a testament of a hostile mind towards God (1:21b, c). Hence, παράπτωμα emphasises “the deliberate act of disobedience with its fateful consequences.”⁹⁴ In the Septuagint, παράπτωμα expresses a conscious, deliberate sin against God, such as rebellion,⁹⁵ unfaithfulness⁹⁶ and injustice (Ezek 3:20; 18:26). The same Greek word, παράπτωμα, is used in Rom 5:15-18 to refer to Adam’s sin of rebellion against God in the Garden of Eden (see Gen 3), which made sin become part of human experience.⁹⁷ Here, the term παράπτωμα is used to refer to a mental rebellion leading to evil deeds (1:21). The mind ruled by the flesh, or a carnal mind, produces all kinds of sin (see 3:5-9) and subjects human beings to God’s judgment.

In Christ, God has χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα παραπτώματα. Forgiveness of sin is one of the promises of the new covenant (see Jer 31:34). This promise was fulfilled through the death of Christ. Through the cross of Christ, God forgave every sin. The recipients, including the author (as the pronoun “us” implies), were redeemed, i.e. had their sins forgiven (1:14, 21) when they heard the gospel and trusted in it. Hence, the cross of Christ is central to the forgiveness of sin. Without the cross, there is no forgiveness of sin and no reconciliation with God (1:20).

The Colossians’ former state of life is further described as τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν. The term ἀκροβυστίας is used figuratively here and could mean a non-Jew or a condition of disobedience and rebellion towards God. Probably both notions are in view. They were Gentiles but there is also a reference to their pre-gospel condition. Prior

⁹² Bruce, *The Epistles to Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 108; Foster, *Colossians*, 268; MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 101; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 122.

⁹³ BDAG, 770.

⁹⁴ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 122.

⁹⁵ See Job 36:9; Ezek 14:11; 18:22.

⁹⁶ See Ezek 14:13; 15:8; 18:24; 20:27.

⁹⁷ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 122.

to the preaching of the gospel, the Colossians were uncircumcised, meaning alienated or excluded from God and his saving grace (1:21; see Eph 2:11-12). The turning point was that “God made you alive in Christ” through the circumcision of Christ (v. 11), meaning the death of Christ. The Colossians were given new life in Christ as an integral part of the new creation.

God as an implied agent ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ (having obliterated the record of debt against us with its requirements which were hostile to us, and he took it away having nailed it to the cross – v. 14.). The term ἐξαλείφω means “to remove so as to leave no trace, *remove, destroy, obliterate*.”⁹⁸ God obliterated the record of debt along with its legal demands. The term χειρόγραφον means “a handwritten document, specifically a certificate of indebtedness, *account, record of debts*.”⁹⁹

This was a well-attested concept in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world, having to do with record-keeping. In the Greco-Roman world, keeping a record of debts was part of a legal practice. In Judaism it was held that God kept a χειρόγραφον of every person’s sins, and judgment was based on those records (see Tob 5:3; 9:5).¹⁰⁰ Lohse writes “the relationship between man and God was often described as that between a debtor and his creditor.”¹⁰¹ This notion may be seen in Moses’ prayer to God to blot out his name from his record book if he was not going to blot out the people’s sin from His book (Exod 32:32-33).¹⁰² In the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, God through the angel demanded from the people what they owed him and his judgment was based on the records kept in a ledger.¹⁰³ This imagery of record-keeping was behind the use of ἐξαλείφω. God through the cross of Christ obliterated the χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν.

⁹⁸ BDAG, 344.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 1083.

¹⁰⁰ See Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 164; Foster, *Colossians*, 273.

¹⁰¹ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 108.

¹⁰² See also Ps 69:28 and Testament of Abraham 11:10-11, where the notion of account-/record-keeping occurs.

¹⁰³ Apoc. Zeph 3: ²Again he brought another roll, written by hand: he began to unfold it. I read in it. I found it was written in my own language... ^{5-6a}I knew their language that they spoke with me (This, my sons, is the trial that has to be – that the good and evil deeds of every man are weighed in a balance). See exegetical comments in Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 108; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 124.

The nuance of the phrase *χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν* depends on the interpretation of the term *χειρόγραφον*.¹⁰⁴ One possible interpretation of *χειρόγραφον* is that it refers to the Mosaic Law (see Eph 2:15).¹⁰⁵ *Χειρόγραφον* is a written agreement or a bond to keep the Law and/or a certificate of debt for failure to keep it. Failure to keep the Law proves that one is guilty. It is this bond that was abolished through Christ.¹⁰⁶ However, the Mosaic Law which the Israelites pledged to keep had nothing to do with the Gentile audience at Colossae. Generally, the Mosaic Law shut Gentiles out of associating with Jews.¹⁰⁷ Thus, this interpretation is true for some but not for others.

A second possible interpretation is to read *χειρόγραφον* as a book of indictment presented at the heavenly court, rather than as a reference to the Mosaic Law (see 1 Enoch 81:1-2). *Χειρόγραφον* is then identified with Christ and seen as Christ taking upon himself our body of flesh in order to blot out our sins on the cross. Christ, as the heavenly writing which contained God's secret, was sent into the world and was nailed on the cross.¹⁰⁸ The problem with this interpretation is that *χειρόγραφον* is not identified with Christ. Furthermore, in this interpretation *χειρόγραφον* is first referred to as the heavenly book and later as the body of flesh.¹⁰⁹ For these reasons, this interpretation is not preferred.

The third interpretation of *χειρόγραφον* is a signed acknowledgement of a bond of debt by the debtor.¹¹⁰ The Jews through the Mosaic covenant agreed to obey the Law

¹⁰⁴ Roy Yates lists six different nuances of *χειρόγραφον*. (1) The Law of Moses – very early on, Eph 2:15 was used to interpret *χειρόγραφον* in Col 1:14 as the Law of Moses. (2) A Pact with Satan is another interpretation. This bond is a result of man's contract with the devil. *Χειρόγραφον* is a covenant between Adam and Satan. (3) An IOU from Mankind to God. This is an image taken from ancient legal and commercial practice and *χειρόγραφον* is interpreted here as a certificate of debt. *Χειρόγραφον*, therefore, means the removal of sin. Later it was understood as a bond of obligation which Gentiles signed by their conscience and Jews by the contract of bond to observe the Mosaic law. (4) The Heavenly Book – a book kept by God in heaven of everyone's sins. (5) Penitential Stelae is a personal autograph acknowledging indebtedness that leads to condemnation if the terms are not fulfilled. (6) Theophany Visions – here *χειρόγραφον* is a "note of passage, enabling the mystic to pass unhindered through various stages of his ascent to the angel presence of God." Roy Yates, "Colossians 2, 14: Metaphor of Forgiveness," *Biblica* 71, no. 2 (1990): 249-56.

¹⁰⁵ Olivia A. Blanchette, "Does the *Cheirographon* of Col 2:14 Represent Christ Himself?" *CBQ* 23 (1961): 307; see also Yates, "Colossians 2, 14: Metaphor of Forgiveness," 249-50; and "Colossians and Gnosis," *JSNT* 27 (1986): 59-63, which is a summary of Gnostic interpretations of *χειρόγραφον*. Some modern scholars who interpret *χειρόγραφον* as Law of Moses are influenced by the interpretation of Eph 2:15. See Yates, "Colossians 2, 14: Metaphor of Forgiveness," 250.

¹⁰⁶ Bruce, *The Epistles to Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 109, footnote 91.

¹⁰⁷ Except one who became a proselyte.

¹⁰⁸ For a detailed discussion, see Blanchette, "Does the *Cheirographon* of Col 2:14 Represent Christ Himself?" 306-12.

¹⁰⁹ See Yates, "Colossians 2, 14: Metaphor of Forgiveness," 253-4.

¹¹⁰ See Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 111-3; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 125.

(see Exod 24:3-8; Deut 27:14-26; 30:15-20), and the Gentiles agreed to keep the moral law through their conscience (see Rom 2:14, 15). However, both races failed and subsequently came under God's judgment (see 3:6). In Colossians, the Gentile world became hostile towards God in their minds (διάνομα), i.e., a conscious antagonism towards God (1:21). Hence, χειρόγραφον is a signed acknowledgement of debt before God, which for the Jews was to obey the covenant, and for Gentiles to obey the moral law through their conscience. Χειρόγραφον is therefore a record of condemnation that was upon all people because of sin.¹¹¹ It is this third interpretation of the meaning of χειρόγραφον which is preferred, for its broad application to those under the Law and those who are not under the Law.¹¹²

God obliterated the χειρόγραφον with its legal requirements that stood opposed to the Colossians, when he nailed them on the cross. The noun δόγμα means “a formal statement concerning rules or regulations that are to be observed;”¹¹³ or it could mean “something that is taught as an established tenet or statement or belief, doctrine, dogma,”¹¹⁴ which is mandatory to follow. Since δόγμασιν is in the dative case, it is probably (a) “causal – because of regulations, so indicating why the bond or certificate of indebtedness has a case against us...; (b) one of obligation – i.e. the bond places us under an obligation to keep the regulation.”¹¹⁵ Both nuances are preferred. Both Jews and Gentiles signed a bond to keep the regulations.

However, both Jews and Gentiles were unable to keep the agreement, which turned out to be a certificate of indebtedness that stood opposed to them. Through the death of Christ, the χειρόγραφον, along with the legal demands or charges that stood in opposition to humankind, was obliterated. God obliterated both by προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ. It is difficult to relate these pictures – written bond and charges – which God nailed to the cross with Jesus' actual crucifixion drama. However, this is how God dealt with sin.¹¹⁶ It

¹¹¹ See Yates, “Colossians 2, 14: Metaphor of Forgiveness,” 251-3; Blanchette, “Does the *Cheirographon* of Col 2:14 Represent Christ Himself?,” 311; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 144-6; Foster, *Colossians*, 273.

¹¹² See Yates, “Colossians 2, 14: Metaphor of Forgiveness,” 252.

¹¹³ BGAD, 254.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 125.

¹¹⁶ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 113; Bruce, *The Epistles to Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 110.

is a vivid way of saying that when Christ was nailed on the cross and died, the debt and dogma which convicted humankind of sin were obliterated completely.¹¹⁷

In addition, in erasing the debt and charges God also ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, θριαμβεύσας αὐτούς ἐν αὐτῷ (having disarmed the rulers and authorities, he exposed them in public, having triumphed over them through him – v. 15). The metaphor used here is that of a military victory parade, portraying what happened, to whom it happened, and how it happened. God is the subject ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας through the death of Christ. There are three important phrases in this verse – ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας, ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, and θριαμβεύσας αὐτούς ἐν αὐτῷ. The same verb, ἀπεκδύομαι, occurs earlier in verse 11 and later in Col. 3:9, and both usages mean to “take off, strip off.”¹¹⁸ Commenting on this, Wright states that the verb ἀπεκδύομαι “refers to stripping something off from oneself.”¹¹⁹

The verb ἀπεκδυσάμενοι is in the middle voice; it implies “putting off as of clothes” (3:9), or to “undress oneself.”¹²⁰ Thus, ἀπεκδύομαι is rendered as follows: (1) Christ on the cross divested himself of the hostile principalities and powers clinging to him like an alien garment.¹²¹ However, to see Christ’s body as an entry point of the evil powers which he divested on the cross is more gnostic, as Wright notes.¹²² (2) Ἀπεκδύομαι means

¹¹⁷ See Foster, *Colossians*, 272; Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 210; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 126.

¹¹⁸ BDAG, 100. Lightfoot states that the “occurrence of ἀπεκδύεσθαι here and in iii.9, and of ἀπέκδυσις above in ver. 11, is remarkable; and the choice of an unusual, if not wholly new, word must have been prompted by the desire to emphasize the *completeness* of the action.” Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 187.

¹¹⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115. Yates, in his study of Col 2:15, states that it is one of the most difficult verses to translate and interpret because of the lexical, syntactical and historical problems that surround it. The interpretation of every term or concept is disputed. Roy Yates, “Col 2:15: Christ Triumphant,” *New Testament Studies*, 37 (1991): 573. See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 187-9 for the grammatical, syntactical and exegetical issues surrounding Col 2:15. Drawing on Lightfoot’s work, Yates has identified five issues that make translation and interpretation of the verse difficult: (1) the voice of the participle ἀπεκδύσασθαι; (2) the subject of the action; (3) the identity of the principalities and powers; (4) the nature of triumph and public display; and (5) the meaning of ἐν αὐτῷ. Yates, “Col 2:15 Christ Triumphant,” 573-4. He deals critically with these issues individually. A thorough understanding of the issues identified will help to ease translation and interpretive difficulties. However, it is beyond the objective of this research to give full attention to each issue individually.

¹²⁰ Dunn comments that the verb ἀπεκδύω is a cognate of the noun ἀπέκδυσις which appears in 2:11 and 3:9; an intensive form of ἐκδύω means “strip, take,” and in the middle voice ἐκδύομαι means to “undress oneself.” Dunn, *The Epistles to Colossians and to Philemon*, 167. O’Brien adds that Greek has a tendency to substitute middle voice for active in certain verbs like ἀπεκδύομαι. The best way to settle exegetical difficulties is to regard it as middle voice with an active sense. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 127.

¹²¹ This is the position of the Latin Fathers. See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 188.

¹²² Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115.

the flesh (v.11) through which evil powers exercised tyranny over human beings but were divested on the cross. These powers were utterly divested of their dignity and might.¹²³

I concur with the latter rendering. The rulers and authorities were stripped of their authority over the people that they once held in custody as custodians or possessors of the certificate of debt.¹²⁴ Through the death of Christ, God destroyed their legal ground (the written bond and charges, which arose from sin), thus rendering them weak and beggarly (see Gal 4:9).¹²⁵ Therefore, these spirit powers (2:8) should not be reckoned as of any value or significance, any more than a bunch of discarded old rags.

Having stripped them of their power and authority, God made a public spectacle of them (ἐδειγματίσεν ἐν παρρησία). The verb δειγματίζω occurs once elsewhere in the New Testament (Matt 1:19), meaning “to expose, make an example of, [or to] disgrace.”¹²⁶ This means that the powers and authorities were exposed to public disgrace and humiliation, revealing their true character.¹²⁷ They no longer have any authority over believers. In cancelling the certificate of debt and its regulations, God through the cross of Christ stripped the hostile powers of their authority. Therefore, the divestment of the principalities and powers demonstrates the sufficiency of Christ. He is supreme over every ruler and authority by virtue of creation and redemption (see Col 1:16, 20; 2:10).

The image behind the verb θριαμβεύω (see 2 Cor 2:14) is that of a joyous military victory procession through the streets. The spoils of war are put on display in the public procession.¹²⁸ More decisively, the object of θριαμβεύω would naturally refer to “those over whom the triumph was celebrated.”¹²⁹ The flow of the discussion suggests four nuances of θριαμβεύω, as noted by Dunn:

- (1) ... deliverance from the authority of darkness (1:13...), (2) the implication of a state of cosmic warfare, which the cross brought to reconciliation (1:20), (3) the implication that the στοιχέια are a force opposed to Christ (2:8), from which believers need to escape

¹²³ The Greek Fathers held the second position. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 188. See also Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 127.

¹²⁴ See Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 110; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 127.

¹²⁵ Wright, however, suggests that the principalities and powers are hypothetically the gods of the pagan nations, and the Law for the Jews, which is mediated through the angels; they are also the major governments and highest religions of the world at that time, who conspired to crucify Christ. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115-16.

¹²⁶ BDAG, 214.

¹²⁷ See Foster, *Colossians*, 277; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 128.

¹²⁸ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 99; see also Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 168; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 128.

¹²⁹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 169.

(2:10), and (4) the sustained impression in the immediate context of a fatally disadvantaged, condemned status from which the cross has provided deliverance (2:11-15).¹³⁰

It thus -shows that through the cross of Christ, God stripped every cosmic power of its authority to hold the believers captive (1:13), or even to harm them (3:3). Christ, as the conquering general, has rescued the Colossians from captivity to these evil forces (see 1:13) and made these forces toothless.

3.2.1.4 Summary of Col 2: 8-15

In summary, the Apostle Paul warned the Colossians not to let the opposing teaching, designated a philosophy, take them off into captivity as war booty. This teaching was based merely on παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων and στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου. It did not have a divine origin because it was not based on Christ. The gospel teaching of Christ that the Colossians received from the apostles (1:4-7; 2:6-7) was from God. Christ, in whom they have come to place their trust, is the divine fullness at incarnation and he lives bodily in heaven as the glorified lord and redeemer.

From the divine fullness of Christ, the Colossians have come to the fullness of salvation. When they heard and believed the gospel of Christ, crucified for sin and risen from the dead, they were incorporated into the divine union through the divine transformation of their hearts. Through baptism they have died with Christ to sin and have risen with Christ to new life, and they are sharing in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ. Through the cross of Christ, God forgave their sin and obliterated every debt and regulation that stood between them and God. God has not only forgiven their sins through the cross of Christ but has also defeated every hostile power that kept them in bondage to fear (see also 1:13). Christ rules over every cosmic power by virtue of creation and redemption (2:10b; see also 1:16). The Colossians' new life and experience in Christ supersedes what the Colossian philosophy was offering, as we shall see in the second half of the polemic (Col 2:16-23).

3.2.2 Second Warning: Against Practices of the Colossian Philosophy (2:16-17)

After affirming the identity and the work of Christ and what it means for the believers, the Apostle Paul turns his attention to the philosophy which he had introduced in his first warning in Col 2:8. In the second and third warnings and the rhetorical question, Paul identifies and critiques the practical requirements, dogmas and spirituality of the Colossian

¹³⁰ Ibid., 168-9.

philosophy (2:16-23). The second warning (2:16-17) is against succumbing to judgments based on dietary practices and religious celebrations (v. 16). The structure of Col 2:16-17 is threefold – the warning, specific issues, and then the evaluation.

The Colossians are first warned as follows: **Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω ἐν βρώσει καὶ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νεομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων** (therefore, let no one judge you in regards to food and in regards to drink or in regard to festivals, new moons or Sabbaths - v. 16). The conjunction **οὖν** links the second warning to the benefits of the cross of Christ (vv. 11-15).¹³¹ The Colossian Christians should not let anyone judge them – **Μὴ... τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω**. The verb **κρίνω** means to “pass an unfavourable judgment upon, [to] criticize, [to] find fault with, [or to] condemn,”¹³² and is linked to **καταβραβεύω** (disqualify – v. 18).

The problem with this judgment is that it is the type of judgment that people customarily pass on the lives and actions of others to try to influence them,¹³³ or to “take one to task”¹³⁴ over something that is not beneficial to one’s life. In this case, the Colossians should not let the opponents (see 2:4, 8) take them to task over **βρώσει καὶ ἐν ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νεομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων**. The list of items mentioned reflects the Mosaic tradition¹³⁵ which the opponents seem to be using to take the Christians to task, seeking to disqualify their salvation in Christ, as the conjunction **οὖν** implies.

First, the opponents took the Christians to task over **βρώσις** and **πόσις**, i.e., eating and drinking. They probably were accusing the Christians of failing to keep the kosher (Jewish) food laws.¹³⁶ Yet Jewish food laws did not extend to **πόσις**. The inclusion of **πόσις** suggests “more stringent laws of an ascetic nature.”¹³⁷ Foster comments that while the food laws appear to reflect Jewish practices, “they are not exclusive to Judaism. Asceticism was also a feature in certain pagan religions.”¹³⁸

In addition to judging the Christians with regard to food and drink, the opponents also took the Colossian Christians to task over **ἑορτή** (festivals/feasts), **ἢ νεομηνίας** (new

¹³¹ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 110.

¹³² BDAG, 567.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 191. See also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 138.

¹³⁵ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 171-3; Christian Stettler, “The Opponents at Colossae,” in *Paul and His Opponents*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 169-200; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 119.

¹³⁶ Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 216-7.

¹³⁷ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 114.

¹³⁸ Foster, *Colossians*, 279; see Prophyry, *Abst.* 1.56-57.

moons) and ἡ σαββάτων (sabbaths). Other cultures observed festivals and new moon appearances to order their calendars, but not Sabbath, which suggests that the elements in question were not necessarily Jewish.¹³⁹ Commenting on festivals and new moons in the Greco-Roman world, Foster states that there was an overlap and variety in the calendar between the civic and religious societies related to the festivals.

This linkage between civic and religious obligations ... were regulated by series of annual festivals as designated by regional calendars, pervaded life in the Mediterranean world... The reference to the term new moon is general and somewhat imprecise in nature. Again, the term is found across all strands for the first-century society. In pagan contexts, the term can occur with an overtly religious sense... Within the Jewish tradition the new moon is connected with a reference to the Sabbath and is considered a propitious day to consult a prophet (2 Kgs 4:23) ... connected with 'offering for Sabbaths, for new moons and for festivals' (2 Chron 31:3).¹⁴⁰

This means that the food regulations and religious celebrations reflected Judaism with some strands of Greco-Roman religious beliefs most clearly relating to food and drink, which the opponents had integrated and made an issue of by calling into question the validity of Christian salvation. The Christians' non-compliance regarding dietary regulations and observance of religious festivals and sacred days seems to have resulted in their being criticised for not taking these matters seriously, which the opponents saw as necessary for salvation or for raising their salvation experience to higher level. Paul responds that the work of Christ alone and having a relationship with God is sufficient for salvation.¹⁴¹ These elements were not exclusively Jewish such as food and drink and therefore the opponents are unlikely to be a Jewish faction.¹⁴²

In v. 17, the Apostle Paul critiques the rituals and ceremonies for which the opponents were taking the Christians to task: ἃ ἐστὶν σκιὰ τῶν μελλόντων, τὸ δὲ σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ (which are a shadow of the things to come, however the body [is] of Christ – v. 17). The two key concepts in this statement are σκιὰ τῶν μελλόντων and σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ. These concepts contrast with each other. The term σκιά means “a mere

¹³⁹ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 114-15. Martin, however, argues that festivals, new moons and sabbaths are exclusively the schema of Jewish time-keeping. Troy Martin, “Pagan and Judeo-Christian Time-Keeping Schemes in Gal 4:10 and Col 2:16,” *NTS* 42 (1996): 105-19.

¹⁴⁰ Foster, *Colossians*, 280-1.

¹⁴¹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 150.

¹⁴² See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 217. Dunn, on the other hand, thinks that it was a Jewish faction that was creating trouble for the Christians at Colossae. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 174.

representative of something real, [or] *shadow*,”¹⁴³ and *σῶμα* means “substantive reality, *the thing itself*, [or] *the reality*.”¹⁴⁴

The shadow and reality theme also occurs in Heb 10:1. The thought world of ‘shadow and reality’ was probably Platonic.¹⁴⁵ Plato held that there was a “heavenly original and an earthly copy, the former being the true reality and latter only a shadow... In Christian circles, this Platonic structure of thought was adjusted by eschatology.”¹⁴⁶ However, Paul may have also drawn from his rabbinic tradition, where many Jews saw “their religious festivals and sacred seasons as adumbrations of the messianic age.”¹⁴⁷

The use of the shadow and reality contrast reflects Paul’s critique of the opponents who combined Jewish and non-Jewish religious elements and professed Christ-allegiance (2:19) to claim that they had the real spiritual experience as a result of the severe treatment of the body (asceticism, see below). Paul rejects this probable claim of the opponents by applying the shadow and reality contrast to point to the true substance which the Christians already had in Christ, to which the Mosaic ordinances had pointed.¹⁴⁸ The shadow equals the appearance, the body equals the real essence.¹⁴⁹ If they were really connected to Christ, they would not insist on observing religious practices.

Grammatically, (ὃ ἐστὶν σκιά), food and drink, special festivals and sabbath (v. 16) would be seen as *σκιά* of the *σῶμα* to come (τῶν μελλόντων), which is Christ who has already come. The reality of life and relationship with God has come in Christ, and the Colossians already possessed the eschatological blessings. They were raised from death, their sins were forgiven, and they were sharing in the resurrected, glorified life of Christ. They were brought into relationship with God and freed from the tyranny of the dark forces (2:11-14). The fullness of life mimicked by the shadowy elements has been inaugurated in Christ – the true reality or substance, meaning the sum total of the eschatological blessings that various traditions and ceremonies blurrily portrayed. The Colossians are to look forward to the future unfolding of God’s plan for the entire world (3:1-4, 25).¹⁵⁰

¹⁴³ BDAG, 929.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 984.

¹⁴⁵ Plato, *Republic* 7.514a-7.517a – the cave allegory.

¹⁴⁶ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 216; see also O’Brien’s comments on Plato in *Colossians, Philemon*, 139. But Wilson has also pointed out that the language of *σκιά* and *soma* is Hellenistic. He cites Philo for his fair use of the terms. See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 219, footnote 12.

¹⁴⁷ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 116.

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*, 118; see also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 140.

¹⁴⁹ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 116.

¹⁵⁰ For details, see Sumney, “Eschatology in Colossians,” in *Colossians: A Commentary*, 17-18.

3.2.3 Third Warning: Against the Umpires (2:18-19)

The third warning in verse 18 is similar in structure to the second warning (warning, issue and critique). It is issued using a sporting metaphor: μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύτω θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ (let no one disqualify you, delighting in humility and [the] worship of angels, which he has seen [by] entering, being vainly puffed up by the mind of the flesh – v. 18).

This verse is one of the most difficult verses in Colossians to interpret.¹⁵¹ Almost every term in the verse is contested, beginning with the main verb καταβραβεύω, which is rarely found in Greek literature.¹⁵² The verb καταβραβεύω means to “decide against (as an umpire) and so rob of a prize, [or] condemn.”¹⁵³ It is a much stronger word than κρίνω (v. 16) and so demonstrates that the opponents were like umpires, bent on disqualifying the Colossians of their prize, which is the fullness of life in Christ. The opponents were judging the Colossians who did not follow their practices, and deemed them unworthy of the prize. Paul describes the practices of the opponents as θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων.

In this verse, the meaning of the phrase θέλων ἐν is vigorously disputed as we shall see. The verb θέλω means (1) “to have a desire for something, (2) to have something in mind for oneself, of purpose, resolve, (3) to take pleasure in, (4) to have an opinion.”¹⁵⁴ There are at least five different ways in which scholars have interpreted θέλων ἐν; my view is that θέλων ἐν is used to modify ταπεινοφροσύνῃ, as I will show.

First, one can take θέλω in an adverbial sense, modifying καταβραβεύω to read “let no one disqualify you intentionally as (s)he pleases/in regard to.”¹⁵⁵ This meaning does not suggest any reason why Paul uses the phrase. The opponents were not disqualifying the

¹⁵¹ This verse alone has resulted in independent studies by scholars such as: Roy Yates, “‘The Worship of Angels’ (Col 2:18),” *ExpT* 97, no. 1 (October 1985): 12-15; Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 163-96; and “The Background of Embateuein (Col 2:18) in Legal Papyri and Oracle Inscriptions,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Scholar*, ed. Francis and Meeks, 197-207.

¹⁵² Francis writes that “Greek commentators took καταβραβεύτω as a synonym of παραβραβεύειν, meaning to award a prize unfairly.” Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 163-4. Many modern scholars take καταβραβεύτω as an equivalent of κατακρίειν, and some still retain the primary sense of the verb βραβεύειν, meaning ‘to act’ as an umpire or one who gives a prize. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 141.

¹⁵³ BDAG, 515.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 447-8.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*, 120; see also Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 164.

Colossian Christians, they felt compelled to do it because of their stringent food regulations and religious days and festivals (v. 16).¹⁵⁶

The second approach is to take θέλω in an adverbial/adjectival sense linking either with ἐμβατεύω or ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνη, which would read (respectively): “let no one disqualify you by a voluntary entering or voluntary humility.”¹⁵⁷ If these phrases are to be taken together, Paul would have inserted ἐν before θέλω.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, we can rule out this line of thought.

The third interpretation is to supply the infinitive ποιεῖν as a participle attendant of θέλω, rendering θέλω as “wishing to do it.”¹⁵⁹ However, the infinite ποιεῖν is not in the text. Therefore, this rendering is not preferred.

The fourth rendering is to take θέλω in a modal sense, meaning “order, require or insisting on.”¹⁶⁰ But θέλω does not have these renderings in BDAG as given above. Therefore, this proposal is not preferred.

A fifth interpretation is to take θέλων ἐν to mean ‘to delight in.’¹⁶¹ This meaning is preferred because θέλων ἐν is used in the LXX in this way.¹⁶² This meaning also fits in this context. This means that the opponents were delighted in their high spirituality and saw those who had no similar experiences as outside their group. I prefer this rendering because it either modifies ταπεινοφροσύνη or ἐμβατεύω. But according to the sentence structure, it is closer to ταπεινοφροσύνη, which means it is used in a modal sense, modifying ταπεινοφροσύνη.¹⁶³ Θέλων ἐν heightens the level of Paul’s polemic against the opponents who were delighting in ταπεινοφροσύνη.¹⁶⁴

Controversies also surround the interpretation of ταπεινοφροσύνη. The noun ταπεινοφροσύνη means “*humility [or] modesty*,”¹⁶⁵ but in a technical sense it can mean fasting, as the LXX usage shows by the way it uses the related words ταπεινώ and ταπείνωσις.¹⁶⁶ Whatever nuance is intended for ταπεινοφροσύνη here, it is subject to

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. See also Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 164.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. See also Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 164.

¹⁶² 1 Sam 15:26; 1 Kgs 10:9; 2 Chron 9:8; Ps 21:9; 39:7; 111:1; 146:10; Hos 6:6.

¹⁶³ See Foster, *Colossians*, 287.

¹⁶⁴ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 154.

¹⁶⁵ BDAG, 989.

¹⁶⁶ Lev 16:29, 31; 23:27, 29, 32; Isa 58:3, 5; Ps 34:13f; Judith 4:9. See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 111.

the interpretation of *θηρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων*.¹⁶⁷ There are three different interpretations of *θηρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* on grammatical grounds.

The first interpretation take *θηρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* as an objective genitive, which mean angels as the objects of worship. A number of second-century sources accused Jews of worshipping angels.¹⁶⁸ The second interpretation also take *θηρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* as an objective genitive but it means “invocation of angels for protection and other benefits”¹⁶⁹ by humans. Jewish apocalyptic literature depict good angels as coming to the aid of people in need. Angels also assisted in the interpretation of visions and mysteries.¹⁷⁰ In this reading, *ταπεινοφροσύνη* means fasting. However, in Judaism the worship of angels was condemned as idolatry.¹⁷¹ Here Paul was not condemning¹⁷² or criticising the worship of angels, but the bragging (*φυσιώω*) and judgmental attitude of the opponents. Furthermore, the use of second-century evidence of full-blown angelic worship may reveal tendencies toward angelic worship at Colossae, but it does not necessarily mean that this was the exact case at Colossae at the time of Paul’s Letter.

The third reading is to take *θηρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* as a subjective genitive, meaning the “worship that angels do.”¹⁷³ Francis has argued that the phrase *θηρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* means the worship which angels performed.¹⁷⁴ The initiates of the opposing teaching participated in the heavenly worship of God done by the angels. On this view, the Colossian philosophy focused on this worship that the angels performed, on initiates’ participation in the angelic worship of God in the heavenly realm, and on such believers receiving of visions of divine mysteries.¹⁷⁵ On this view, *ταπεινοφροσύνη* is understood as fasting. In order to participate in angelic worship and receive heavenly visions, one had

¹⁶⁷ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 218.

¹⁶⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 6.5; Celsus, cited by Origen, *Cels.* 26. These sources reveal that the Jews were accused of worshipping angels and practicing sorcery (magic). Arnold has presented a counter-argument that Jews, along with Gentiles, worshipped angels. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 32-88.

¹⁶⁹ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 218-19; Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 90-101.

¹⁷⁰ Dan 8:16; 10:12, 13, 20; Joseph and Aseneth 14-15.

¹⁷¹ Deut 4:19; 17:3; Jer 8:2; 19:13; Zeph 1:5.

¹⁷² See Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*, 125.

¹⁷³ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 218.

¹⁷⁴ See *Ascension of Isaiah* 7:13-9:33.

¹⁷⁵ Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 176-81; see also O’Brien’s summary of Francis, in *Colossians, Philemon*, 143. However, Arnold disagrees with Francis on the basis that the survey of the term *θηρησκεία* fails to account for its use in relation to “divine being or a typical object of *θηρησκεία* (e.g. an ‘idol’), related to worship in the genitive case that should be taken as a subjective genitive.” Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 90-1. This observation upholds the statement in BAGD, 363, that “the Being who is worshipped is given in the objective gen.”

to abstain (fast) from certain foods and drinks.¹⁷⁶ This is probably what Paul had in mind in his use of *θηρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων* because it is the worship that angels conducted in heaven which the visionaries saw. In the Jewish apocalyptic literature, fasting prepared people for heavenly visions and angelic encounters (see Dan 10:3-7). On this basis, this meaning is preferred.

Even though the third reading is preferred, there are some scholars from this group who take *ταπεινοφροσύνη* as angelic humility seen in visions.¹⁷⁷ How do we resolve the dilemma of angelic humility versus what humans do? In the Hellenistic world, the practice of fasting was widespread as a prerequisite for receiving visions.¹⁷⁸ The fasting of the opponents involved food and drink which seems to be a rigorous type of fasting associated with asceticism, as seen earlier (see 2:16).¹⁷⁹ Jewish mystical literature asserts that ascetic practices led to the receiving of visions of heavenly wisdom or activities.¹⁸⁰ It seems then that the opponents made asceticism a mandatory tenet for their adherents, in order that they could have heavenly visions.¹⁸¹ However, according to Paul, the humility shown by the Colossian philosophy is a misdirected humility (see v. 23). The opponents were boasting about what they saw in their visions, which revealed that their humility was not real (it was puffed up with human ways of thinking – v. 18). For Paul it was false humility.

The third phrase is perplexing: *ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων*, which means ‘the things seen’¹⁸² and could either be an object of *ἐμβατεύω* or a modifying clause of *ταπεινοφροσύνη*.¹⁸³ The verb *ἐμβατεύω* means “to investigate it closely, *enter into... go into detail*.”¹⁸⁴ There are three main interpretations based on this connotation.

(1) On account of *ἐμβατεύω*, the meaning is to approach something in order to investigate it. In this context, it is to investigate what is seen in visions in order to gain deeper insight of the divine mystery.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁶ See Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 218.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas J. Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae* (Sheffield: JOST, 1991), 159.

¹⁷⁸ Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 167-71; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 142.

¹⁷⁹ Smith claims that “*ταπεινοφροσύνη* refers to asceticism that includes fasting,” in *Heavenly Perspective*, 122.

¹⁸⁰ See Apo. of Esdras 1:1-7; 4 Ezra 5:14-20.

¹⁸¹ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 142.

¹⁸² Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 108.

¹⁸³ Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 164-5.

¹⁸⁴ BDAG, 321.

¹⁸⁵ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 113. In this case, Paul would be seen here combating the quest for knowledge through angelic worship. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 144.

(2) Ἐμβατεύω is a technical term in mystery religions that describes the initiates entering the sanctuary to consult the oracle after the completion of the rite.¹⁸⁶ In other words, the “time of entering is the climax of the initiation while the inner sanctuary or ... oracle grotto is the place one entered,”¹⁸⁷ where the person for whom initiation rites were performed experienced the vision of cosmic secrets.¹⁸⁸

(3) The term Ἐμβατεύω is used broadly in the LXX and the papyri to denote entering into possession of or taking possession of something, particularly the possession of property (Josh 19:49, 51).¹⁸⁹ For the Israelites, it was not just taking possession of the land to worship God, but their portion in the Lord (Josh 22:24-26).¹⁹⁰

In this regard, entering the heavenly realm could be explained in terms of the soul’s journey to the heavenly realm. Therefore, the connotation of entering in Col 2:18 is probably a mystical-ascetic perception, which has to do with the “encountering of the divine in real religious experience”¹⁹¹ in the heavenly sanctuary, where angels conduct the worship of God. Thus, the issue at Colossae does not concern the use of mystery language; rather, it is the claim of superior spirituality validated by mystical-ascetic piety.¹⁹²

The last part of verse 18 reveals the criticism of the Colossian philosophy – εἰκῆ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ. The passive verb φυσιοῦμενος, from φυσιώω, means “to cause to have an exaggerated self-conception, *puff up*, [or] *make proud*.”¹⁹³ Being puffed up was a characteristic danger of the church at Corinth.¹⁹⁴ Pride takes on various forms.¹⁹⁵ Here it is the character of those who had an exalted view of themselves due to their heavenly experiences.¹⁹⁶ They were puffed up because of τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ. They were driven by the mind of flesh, which means “the attitude and outlook featuring the old nature, dominated by the flesh.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁸⁶ See Dibelius, “The Isis Initiation in Apuleius,” 86-8; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 144.

¹⁸⁷ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 144.

¹⁸⁸ See Dibelius, “The Isis Initiation in Apuleius,” 88.

¹⁸⁹ Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 171.

¹⁹⁰ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 145; see also Francis, “The Background of Embateuein (Col 2:18) in Legal Papyri and Oracle Inscriptions,” 198-9.

¹⁹¹ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 145.

¹⁹² Francis, “Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18,” 171-6; see also O’Brien’s summary of Francis in *Colossians, Philemon*, 144-5.

¹⁹³ BDAG, 1069.

¹⁹⁴ 1 Cor 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4; 2 Cor 12:20.

¹⁹⁵ 1 Cor 4:6; 5:2; 8:1.

¹⁹⁶ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 146.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

Earlier in the Letter, the Colossians' former state of life is described as having a mind of hostility toward God (1:21). Here in 2:18, Paul points to a mindset that is unbroken and bent on doing what seems normal in one's view, because it is directed by the *σάρξ*. *Νοῦς* (mind) is an intellectual faculty in the human body that enables human beings to process information and initiate plan¹⁹⁸ to do good or evil or to respond to God. As long as the *νοῦς* is controlled by the *σάρξ*, meaning the sinful nature (see v. 11 above), it will turn human beings away from God. This is a mind puffed up with claims of divine encounters and mysterious knowledge of heavenly things.

The second evaluation of the opponents is *καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα διὰ τῶν ἄφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων ἐπιχορηγούμενον καὶ συμβιβαστόμενον αὕξει τὴν αὕξησιν τοῦ θεοῦ* (and not holding fast to the head, from whom all the body by the joints and ligaments being nourished and being held together, grows with the growth of God – v. 19). In 1:18, the body and head metaphors are used for the church and Christ respectively. Here these two metaphors are used again in critiquing the opponents' position. The opponents are puffed up with unspiritual minds and idle notions; they are *οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν*. They have lost connection with the *κεφαλὴ*, namely Christ (1:18a; 2:10b).

What this means is that the opponents have failed “to maintain contact with him who is head of his body, the church, have no true part in that body, since it is from Christ *τὴν κεφαλὴν* that all the members of the body acquire their capacity to function aright in harmony with one another.”¹⁹⁹ The opponents have no connection to the head because they seek after angelic worship, visions and heavenly mysteries, and they fail to come to a correct understanding of who Christ is. They fail to grasp that Christ is the divine fullness (1:19; 2:9) and the head of the church (1:18a). Instead of seeking the wisdom and knowledge of God revealed in Christ, and growing in the knowledge of Christ, the opponents seek a different path. This is a path of asceticism, visions of heavenly ascent, and angelic worship. By taking this path, Paul says, they have lost connection with Christ and his body, the church. The opponents' claims of heavenly experience have created a sense of self-sufficiency and superiority over against those who have had no such experiences.

¹⁹⁸ BDAG, 680.

¹⁹⁹ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossian, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 123.

However, true spiritual growth does not come by means of compliance with religious rituals and mystical practices, visions of heavenly ascent and angelic worship, but through a connection to the head – κεφαλὴν, ἐξ οὗ πᾶν τὸ σῶμα. Christ is the Lord who has given them fullness (2:10) and incorporated them into his own body. By maintaining contact with the head who is the channel, as denoted by the conjunction διὰ, through whom the whole body, i.e. the church, receives nourishment to live, function and grow together as the body of Christ, believers come to know that “Christ is all and in all” (3:10), as indicated by the sinews and ligament metaphor.²⁰⁰

3.2.4 Rhetorical Question and Conclusion (2:20-23)

The concluding sub-unit (2:20-23) begins with a rhetorical question. It then presents the issue and closes with the author’s evaluation. In this sub-unit, Paul picks up on the commands and regulations introduced in Col 2:16.

The question Εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε; (if you died with Christ to the principles of this world, why, as if [you were still] living in [the] world, do you submit to [its] rules? – v. 20) is an appeal to the Colossians after refuting the practical elements and spiritual perceptions of the opponents. Through conversion and baptism, the Colossians have ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου. The verb ἀποθνήσκω in dative identifies the Colossians with Christ’s death (see v. 12; 3:3) – a “mystical death with Christ.”²⁰¹ In dying with Christ, the Colossians have severed relationships with στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, which is comparable to the separation of a person from sin (Rom 6:2) or law (Rom 7:4).

The Colossians have died to στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου. The phrase στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου was used earlier, referring to the elemental powers of the universe (see 2:8). When the Colossians died with Christ, the bond binding them to the cosmic powers of the universe was severed.²⁰² The believers are no longer obligated to submit to their rule, as their identity is now in Christ. However, some are troubled by the opponents’ rhetoric concerning the validity of στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου, as the clause τί ὡς ζῶντες ἐν κόσμῳ δογματίζεσθε denotes. It seems that some of the believers are attracted to the opposing teaching.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 158; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 147.

²⁰¹ BDAG, 111.

²⁰² O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 148-9.

²⁰³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 188.

Firstly, the point of attraction was probably the mystical and visionary experiences that were part of the philosophy (v. 18). Yet, despite the philosophy's rhetoric, the believers had not committed apostasy (see 2:8). Secondly, the recipients probably contemplated complying with the rules and regulations of the *στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου* because of fear of the malevolent powers, as implied in verse 15. Thirdly, the title *στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου* reveals the character of these beings as powers behind the natural elements, and therefore submitting to their rules was deemed necessary for Christians (see Col 1:15-20).

However, Paul reminds the Colossians that since they have died with Christ, they have no need to submit to the *δογματίζεσθε* of *στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου*. The passive verb *δογματίζεσθε* means “to put under obligation by rules or ordinances”²⁰⁴ or “decree by ordinance ... decree.”²⁰⁵ A related word form was used earlier in verse 14, where it has a different nuance.²⁰⁶ But here it is a probable reference to rules concerning eating and drinking, festivals, new moons and sabbaths (v. 16). All these rules and regulations are of the sphere of the flesh or the pre-converted life.²⁰⁷ To submit to these ordinances means returning to the life of slavery, to the basic principalities of the cosmos that have already been made redundant (see 2:8; see also Gal 4:3, 8, 9).

Μὴ ἄψη μηδὲ γεύση μηδὲ θίγης (You should not handle. You should not taste. You should not touch – v. 21) are regulations reflecting the ritual practices of more than one ancient religion or philosophy.²⁰⁸ These regulations (v. 21) are all negative. These types of rules are not peculiarly Jewish.²⁰⁹ As Talbert notes, “Cynics practiced an extreme asceticism that not only forbade eating and drinking but also touching or handling commodities that were not produced naturally,”²¹⁰ like wine. The Pythagoreans were also given to asceticism.²¹¹

For such groups, these regulations were for pedagogical development; they were ABCs for beginners, but are unnecessary for the mature. They defined the rituals and ceremonies for accessing and maintaining harmony with the spirits.²¹² However, Paul says that this is not the case for those who are in Christ. For Christians, life is not regulated by

²⁰⁴ BDAG, 254.

²⁰⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 190.

²⁰⁶ See Chapter 3.2.1.

²⁰⁷ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 126.

²⁰⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 190.

²⁰⁹ Compare Stettler, “The Opponents at Colossae,” 169-200; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 190-2.

²¹⁰ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 221.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 190.

rules and regulations but by the appropriation of Christ in his person and his work to sustain Christian growth. In Iverach's words, "[t]he Christian must live over again the experience of the Christ; he must die with Him, rise with Him, live with Him in an endless, ever-growing life."²¹³

The meaning of the participles ἅπτω (handle) and θίγγάνω (touch) is almost identical. It is difficult to distinguish between the two, but the latter seems to be a much stronger word than the former,²¹⁴ and it generally refers to touch or contact.²¹⁵ Both terms signify defilement through physical contact. Religious purity involved not handling, tasting or touching. Hence, any contact with taboo objects was believed to defile and make a person impure. The purity regulations referred to here likely included those relating to food, as noted earlier on the matter of eating and drinking (v. 16). The purity regulations may also have included other areas, such as sex, contact with a woman having her menstrual period, and touching a corpse.²¹⁶ Purity regulations may have included anything that it was believed would make the initiates impure.

The second indictment against the false teachings is ἅ ἔστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρήσει, κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων (which are all [destined] to decay with use, [because they are] according to commands and teachings of people – v. 22). Here several criticisms are made against the opponents. The first criticism is ἅ ἔστιν πάντα εἰς φθορὰν τῇ ἀποχρήσει. Everything that is represented by the taboos was destined to perish, especially food and drink, as the phrase ἅ signifies that the Colossian philosophy was concerned about these matters (2:16, 21). The expression ἔστιν ... εἰς φθορὰν denotes 'appointed for' or "destined for corruption"²¹⁷ and decomposition, as the term φθορὰν implies.²¹⁸ The phrase τῇ ἀποχρήσει means "in the consuming."²¹⁹ Therefore, the first criticism against the opponents' purity regulations is that external purity rules have no effect on one's spiritual condition. They belong to the world. In this criticism, the notion of purity rules as a spiritual enhancer is regarded as without eternal value.

²¹³ J. Iverach, "The Epistle to the Colossians and its Christology," *ExpT* 25 (1913): 208.

²¹⁴ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 20.

²¹⁵ BDAG, 126.

²¹⁶ Lightfoot states that ἅψη is a reference to the husband and wife relation (1 Cor 7:1) or to forbidding marriage (1 Tim 4:3). Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 201-2. See also MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 121.

²¹⁷ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 202.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

The second criticism is κατὰ τὰ ἐντάλματα καὶ διδασκαλίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων. Two important terms used here are ἔνταλμα and διδασκαλία. The term ἔνταλμα means “that which is commanded as officially binding, *commandment*,”²²⁰ and διδασκαλίας means “that which is taught, *teaching*, [or] *instruction*.”²²¹ In their order of occurrence, ἔνταλμα described the source of authority and διδασκαλία described the medium.²²² The commandments and teachings of the opponents are of human origins and are not of God. The words of Isaiah 29:13 may lie behind this indictment, as seen above (see 2:8); there it is said that their worship of God is vain, based on conventional rules learned by rote.²²³ It is interesting that Colossians 2:8 mentions human traditions, and the second expression here concretises the opposing teaching as mere man-made commands and teachings.

The opposing teaching is again criticised as ἄτινά ἐστιν λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας ἐν ἐθελοθρησκίᾳ καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνῃ [καὶ] ἀφειδίᾳ σώματος, οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τινι πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός (which indeed have an appearance of wisdom in their self-imposed worship, false humility and harsh treatment of [the] body, [but] of no value in restraining [the] indulgence of the flesh – v. 23). The structure and meaning of this verse (23) is unclear regarding whether it is using a slogan of the opponents or the author’s own critique.²²⁴ The force of ἄτινά points back to the regulations of verse 21.²²⁵

The next phrase, λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα, means “having a reputation [appearance] (of something),”²²⁶ which, in this case, is σοφίας (wisdom). Therefore, the whole phrase, ἄτινά λόγον μὲν ἔχοντα σοφίας, denotes regulations (v. 21), but it may also include the commandments and teachings (v. 22)²²⁷ that have a reputation of wisdom but lack the real substance, which is Christ (v.17). The opponents present this faulty wisdom as

²²⁰ BDAG, 339.

²²¹ Ibid., 240.

²²² Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 202.

²²³ See Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 127; see also Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 202; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 193-4.

²²⁴ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 194; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 151.

²²⁵ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 194; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 152.

²²⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 194; Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 203.

²²⁷ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115.

philosophy (2:8). This wisdom is itself a facade, while Christ is the true wisdom of God (2:3; 1:9, 28; 3:16).²²⁸

The false teachers have gained their so-called wisdom ἐν ἑθελοθησικία καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη [καὶ] ἀφειδία σώματος (through worship or rigorous devotion, false humility and severe treatment of the body). The phrase ἐν ἑθελοθησικία καὶ ταπεινοφροσύνη recalls Col 2:18, ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνη καὶ θρησκειᾷ τῶν ἀγγέλων. These two parallel phrases emphasise worship. The term ἑθελοθησικία means “self-made religion, do-it-yourself religion, [or] idiosyncratic religion.”²²⁹ In Col 2:18, in literal sense worship is rendered to the angelic beings whilst in 2:23, worship is self-will or self-imposed. It is a man-made worship. This self-made religion or worship involves a severe treatment of the body. The rigorous body treatment implies asceticism as seen earlier in our discussion of the term ταπεινοφροσύνη (v. 18). Again in verse 23, the same term ταπεινοφροσύνη is used which has to do with fasting and other bodily rigours. Here probably the self-imposed worship and rigorous bodily treatment were intended to produce humility.²³⁰ But Paul opposed this worship as man-made because it led to bragging of one’s spiritual experience and to pass judgement on those who had no such experiences as yours.

Ascetic practitioners followed humility techniques and regarded these techniques as effective in accessing mystical powers and encountering and participating in the spiritual realm, seeking heavenly mysteries and knowledge or wisdom.²³¹ The opponents probably saw their rigorous asceticism and ritual purity (abstinence) as preparatory for divine fullness and visions, but this is nothing more than a mere λόγον ... σοφίας (appearance of wisdom).²³² Paul asserts that the practices of the opponents, though they may have a reputation of wisdom in the sphere of rigorous devotion, humility and severe treatment of the body, are οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τινι, having no value in restraining sensual indulgence or a sinful nature.²³³

²²⁸ According to Foster, “[w]isdom is also a fundamental quality that should characterise the recipients of the letter. Therefore, the word of Christ is to dwell in believers ‘with all wisdom’ (Col 3:16), and the Colossians are to behave ‘with wisdom’ to those outside the community (Col. 4:5). Thus, wisdom is a positive quality that the author seeks to promote among believers, and which they should strive to nurture within themselves. Even here in Col. 3:23 wisdom is not a negative idea. Rather, the problem arises from attributing wisdom to activities that cannot result in acquiring that quality.” Foster, *Colossians*, 302-3. See also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 152.

²²⁹ BDAG, 276.

²³⁰ See Foster, *Colossians*, 304-5.

²³¹ See Foster, *Colossians*, 304; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 153.

²³² O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 153-4.

²³³ Foster argues that the clause implies “the self-made human regulations to be without ‘honour’ or ‘value,’” in *Colossians*, 305; see also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 153-4.

The last phrase, *πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός*, is explained in three different ways, and of these three, the third explanation is preferred. The first interpretation is from the early church fathers. Many of them regarded this phrase as a further description of ascetic practice by equating *σάρξ* with *σῶμα*. Thus, *πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός* is taken positively as a legitimate satisfying of bodily or physical needs,²³⁴ as the term *πλησμονή* means a “process of securing complete satisfaction, *satiety*, especially with food and drink, but also with other types of enjoyment, *satisfaction, gratification*.”²³⁵ However, this explanation encounters several problems. First, the term *πλησμονή* is used in a negative sense to refer to excessive indulgence, and therefore it cannot be referring to the legitimate satisfaction of physical needs.²³⁶ Second, any “links with the phrase [*ἀφειδία σώματος*] are awkward.”²³⁷ Third, for Paul the legalistic lifestyle leads only to satisfying the flesh.²³⁸

The second interpretation is in conjunction with the preceding clause – *οὐκ ἐν τιμῇ τι* (without any value whatsoever). Thus, *πρὸς πλησμονὴν τῆς σαρκός* is rendered as “yet not really of any value to remedy indulgence of the flesh.”²³⁹ In this sense, *πρὸς* is rendered as “‘against;’ but the idea of hostility or opposition is not in the preposition itself.”²⁴⁰ This interpretation runs into a problem with the position of *οὐκ*, which is irregular. To render *πρὸς* as ‘against’ also obscures the meaning of *τιμῇ*.²⁴¹

The third interpretation is the preferred rendering of the phrase as ‘the legalistic lifestyle only leads to satisfying of the flesh.’ The term *πλησμονή* only appears here in

²³⁴ Ps. of Sol 5:17; Josephus, *Ant.* 11:34; Justin, *Dial.* 126:6; see also Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 205; T. K. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 276; Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 230; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 154.

²³⁵ BDAG, 830.

²³⁶ See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 205.

²³⁷ C. F. D Moule, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 116-17.

²³⁸ Foster states that “the term ‘flesh’ can be used either in a negative sense in the letter (Col 2:11, 13, 18), or in a neutral sense describing the matter that constitutes humans (Col 1:22, 24; 2:1, 5; 3:22). If the term is being used in a neutral sense here, then the sense might be that contrary to the ascetic practices and severe treatment imposed by restrictive practise the Colossians should not engage in this abuse of their bodies. However, if the term ‘flesh’ retains its negative connotation, then one is forced to supply some kind of negative force to the clause, and understand what is being said to be that even if one adopts the regulations imposed by those who practise such severe treatment of the body, those practices are ‘of no value in guarding against the gratification of the flesh.’” Foster, *Colossians*, 306; see also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 154. The term ‘flesh’ is used in a negative sense.

²³⁹ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 204-6.

²⁴⁰ Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 276; see also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 154.

²⁴¹ See Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 277; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 154.

the New Testament and twenty-eight times in the Septuagint. It is used “in a good sense to denote ‘satisfaction’ especially with food and drink [for nourishment] and other types of enjoyments.”²⁴² However, “the term also occurred in a bad sense to denote ‘excess’ or ‘satiety’ which led to sin and apostasy from the Lord.”²⁴³

In the context of the whole polemic, we have seen expressions like *σώματος τῆς σαρκός* (body of flesh – v. 11), *τῆ ἀκροβυστία τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν* (the uncircumcision of your flesh – v. 13) and *νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ* (his fleshly mind – v. 18). All of these expressions are to do with fallen nature, or the sinful human nature that cannot be remedied by external means such as human commandments and regulations (vv. 21-22). Nor can the sinful nature be dealt with by the observance of food regulations, various religious festivals and sabbaths (vs. 16). Instead, these elements breathe life and energy into the flesh.

3.2.4.1 *Summary of Col 2:16-23*

In the schema of warnings and rhetoric, the Apostle Paul warns and exhorts the Colossians not to let the opponents influence them to participate in their ascetic (dietary) practices and calendric observances. Nor should they submit to the regulations pertaining to the elemental powers of the universe. They have died with Christ, through baptism (2:12), to the elemental powers of the universe, and their allegiance is to Christ. The opponents’ ascetic practices, including fasting, humility, abstinence and severe treatment of the body, were probably to prepare for a divine encounter which was an out-of-body experience. The out-of-body experience featured in visions, participating in angelic liturgies, and thereby receiving knowledge of hidden mysteries.

Paul critiques the dietary practices and calendric observances as shadows, mere reflections of the reality to come. The reality has come in Christ, a reality which the Colossians have already experienced (2:10-15). This reality is embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom all the fullness of God dwells bodily (2:9). The Colossians do not need an out-of-body experience to encounter God. They have encountered God in Christ and have been incorporated into divine union through Christ. Since they belong to Christ, they are not to submit to the commands of the elemental powers of the universe. They are to live for Christ whom they have received as Lord (2:6-7) and who is the wisdom of God. In Christ they have died to their sinful natures, which ascetic practices, with all their ‘do’s and don’ts,’ cannot subdue.

²⁴² O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 155.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

3.3 The Overall Flow of Thought (Col 2:8-23)

The Apostle Paul designates the opposing teaching a philosophy (alluded to in Col 2:4), meaning love of wisdom. **Φιλοσοφία**, was a familiar term as it was used by various schools, sects and teachings.²⁴⁴ Both Jews and Greco-Roman people used it, but neither Jewish apocalyptic groups nor Christian groups used the term “philosophy” as a self-referent.²⁴⁵ Whether the opposing teaching used the term philosophy as a self-referent is unsure. Paul warns the Colossian Christians not to heed this teaching because it will **συλαγωγῶν**, carry them off into captivity like war booty. They will be separated from Christ who is their head (2:19) and will be alienated from God (1:21). They will be enslaved to the **στοιχεῖα** all over again (2:20; 1:13), and to the sensual desires of the flesh (3:5-9). The Colossians, as Arnold puts it, will be “in danger of being re-enslaved to a teaching instigated by the **στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου**.”²⁴⁶ The two negations (**κενός ἀπάτη**) depict that this teaching is an empty deceit without real substance.

It is based on **παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων** and **στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου**, and some scholars see these two phrases as synonyms.²⁴⁷ Human traditions, as one of the bases of the philosophy, refer to teachings and commands that are of human origin, and/or teachings that are emptied of spiritual significance, which makes them mere human constructions probably invoking Isa 29:13. I suggest that this association was probably behind Paul’s criticism of the dietary regulations and calendric elements of the philosophy as mere shadow (2:16, 20-23).²⁴⁸ In Jewish antiquity, these traditions were seen as foreshadowing the blessings of the messianic age.²⁴⁹ The anticipated messianic blessings have now been

²⁴⁴ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 147.

²⁴⁵ Stettler, “The Opponents at Colossae,” 177.

²⁴⁶ Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 186.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 374-5; Stettler, “The Opponents at Colossae,” 177-8.

²⁴⁸ As Lohse writes, “These sacred times are referred to as ‘festival, new moon and sabbath’ (**ἑορτή, νεομηνία, σάββατα**); the author enumerates the three terms which often occur in the OT in this combination and describes special days dedicated to God. In the context of Col, however, the command to keep festivals, new moons, and sabbath is not based on Torah, according to which Israel received the sabbath as a sign of her election from among the nations. Rather, the sacred days must be kept for the sake of ‘elements of the universe,’ who direct the course of the stars and thus also prescribe minutely the order of the calendar.” Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 115.

²⁴⁹ Isa 9:6; Philo, *Legum allegoriae* 3.100-103; *De Abrahamo* 119-120; *De decal* 82; *De plantation* 27, **οὐ σκιάς ἀλλὰ τὰς ἀρχετύπους** (not shadows but actual archetype); *de post. Caini* 112, **Σελλὰ τοῖνυν ἐρμηνεύεται σκιά, τῶν περὶ σῶμα καὶ ἐκτὸς ἀγαθῶν, ἃ τῷ ἄντι σκιάς οὐδὲν διαφέρει, σύμβολον** (‘Sella’ means ‘a shadow,’ and is a figure of bodily and external goods, which in reality differ not a whit from shadow); see Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 116, footnote 18.

inaugurated through Jesus Christ.²⁵⁰ The opponents' claim to spiritual knowledge and wisdom based on amalgamated religious traditions that were already made redundant amounted to hallow and empty claims. In contrast, the gospel which the apostles preached and which the Colossians received has real substance. It is based on Christ who is the divine fullness (1:19; 2:9).

Furthermore, the philosophy is based on the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*,²⁵¹ which is likely a general designation for every spirit power.²⁵² These are spirit powers that were believed to control the elements of the universe and hold sway over the Colossians. In the Hellenistic religions these powers were believed to control the natural elements and the life cycle.²⁵³ The Gentile world believed that these beings controlled the time and seasons for social, religious, political and economic activities.²⁵⁴ This could be a reason behind the observance of religious festivals and new moon celebrations. However, Paul states that every elemental power is created by Christ (1:16), and pacified through his death (1:20) and he rules over them as their head (2:10a). These powers once held the Colossians captive until the gospel was preached to them. Through faith in the gospel of Christ, God has rescued the Colossians from the dominion of darkness and delivered them into the kingdom of his beloved son, Jesus Christ (Col 1:13). God through the cross of Christ stripped the hostile powers of their authority and made them redundant and useless (2:15). Their true character, as revealed to the realm above and to those who believe in Christ, is that there is nothing good in them. Therefore, the two sources of the opposing teachings are interrelated. As Arnold comments, the traditions of humans are the intermediate source, while *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* are the ultimate source.²⁵⁵ In describing the Colossian philosophy as based on the traditions of man and the elemental powers of the universe rather than on Christ, Paul is implicitly denying the divine origin of the opposing teaching.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁰ In Wright's view, "[t]hey were the 'shadows' that the approaching new age casts before it. Now that the reality is come, there is no point in clinging to the shadows. And the reality belongs to Christ." Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 120.

²⁵¹ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 114-16; Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 158-93; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 99; Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," 123-4.

²⁵² See Chapter 3.3.

²⁵³ Test. of Sol 8:2-3a, ("We are heavenly bodied, rulers of this dark world"); Jubilees 2:2; 1 Enoch 43:1-44:1; 80:6-7; 86:1ff; 2 Enoch 4:1ff; 4 Ezra 6:3. These Jewish apocalyptic literature probably paved the way for the Greek world to associate elements with the spirit powers. See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 114.

²⁵⁴ See Foster, *Colossians*, 280-1.

²⁵⁵ Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 188.

²⁵⁶ Sumney feels otherwise. He argues, in "Those Who Pass Judgment," 374, that to see both terms as combating the superhuman source of teaching is mirror reading.

After dismissing the philosophy as not of divine origin, in verse 9 Christ's identity is revealed.²⁵⁷ In Christ all the fullness of divinity lives bodily (v. 9), recalling Col 1:19. Some scholars assert that the term 'fullness' is a slogan of the opponents, which is disputed.²⁵⁸ That the concept of fullness was used by the opponents is not improbable. Paul likely uses the fullness concept to counter any ideas that the divine fullness was distributed to the various emanations. He shows that Christ is the divine embodiment of God. God's divine glory, power and presence are made manifest in Christ,²⁵⁹ who is the locus and fullness of God's wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3). In addition, the divine fullness embodied in Christ is an indictment against the Colossian philosophy for its out-of-body spiritual encounters and claims of receiving heavenly mysteries. Christ who is the divine fullness in his incarnation and redemption (1:21-22; 2:11-15) lives an embodied existence in heaven at God's right hand (3:1-2). Heaven is God's dwelling place, and since it is there where Christ is seated, he is divine just as God the Father is. His divine identity sets him over against the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*, the beings behind the philosophy. On account of Christ's divine fullness, the Colossians have come to fullness.

From his divine fullness, the Colossians have received fullness, meaning a continuing state of filling due to prior action. As Dunn comments, the Colossians "in Christ have been granted a completeness and fulfilment which they could not find or achieve anywhere else."²⁶⁰ Since the Colossians have received the traditions and teachings of Christ as Lord and believed in him, they have fullness of salvation. Christ in whom the Colossians have received fullness of salvation is also the supreme ruler over every rule and authority. To say that Christ is the head of every rule and authority is to assure the believers that the elemental powers (2:8) do not control the affairs of the world. Christ rules over the entire cosmos, including the spirit powers, by virtue of creation and redemption.

In vv. 11-14, Paul uses a series of metaphors to portray the change which the Colossians have undergone in Christ.²⁶¹ They have been incorporated into Christ and they share in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ and in his victory over hostile cosmic powers. The first metaphor that demonstrates this change of status is circumcision (v. 11). Some scholars suggest that the Colossian philosophy practised some sort of initiation or

²⁵⁷ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 105. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the divine identity of Christ in detail.

²⁵⁸ See Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," 124; Sumney, "Those Who Pass Judgment," 382.

²⁵⁹ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 120.

²⁶⁰ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 152.

²⁶¹ See Foster, *Colossians*, 271; compare Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 56.

was recommending that the rite of circumcision should replace baptism. We cannot be sure if this was the case. If a circumcision rite was performed by the opponents, according to Roy Yates, it was “not as [a] necessary fulfilment of the Jewish law (as in Galatians), but as a way of symbolising the release from the flesh that was necessary to experience the visionary ascent of the mystic.”²⁶² Paul’s use of circumcision is to press upon the Colossians that they have received a true circumcision, the removal of the body of flesh or sinful nature.²⁶³ The circumcision that they have received is inward, the transformation of the heart through a divine agent, namely Christ. They have been included in God’s family and share in the inheritance of the saints (1:12).

The change which the Colossians have undergone is also portrayed using the baptism metaphor (v. 12). Here baptism points to death and resurrection, marking the termination of one life and the beginning of another. The baptism metaphor thus conveys that the Colossians have died to their sinful flesh with Christ and have been resurrected with Christ to new life. Their lives are bound up with Christ. Their relationship to their sinful past and even to the various cosmic powers has been severed (see v. 20). They have a new relationship and a new life with Christ in God.

The new mode of existence thus means separation from the world. In this sense, circumcision and baptism are used by Paul over against the ascetic measures of the opponents (2:16-23).²⁶⁴ Paul’s plea to the Colossian Christians is to remember that they have died with Christ to the elemental powers of the universe (2:20, 12). To submit to the rules and regulations of the opposing teaching would mean going back to the lower realm of life, under the rule of the elemental powers of the universe who are also under Christ’s rule.

In 2:13, Paul again uses the (un)circumcision metaphor to depict their former state of life. Prior to receiving fullness in Christ, the Colossians were dead in sin (see Col 3:5-8) and were spiritually and morally separated from God (see 1:21). But in Christ, God forgave their sins and raised them to new life with Christ. Forgiveness of sin is a promise of the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). The certificate of debt and all its regulations (v. 14), which stood in between God and the Colossians, was obliterated through the cross of Christ. There is no more debt to be used against the Colossians before God, like the accusing angel (Satan) in Zechariah’s vision (Zech 3:1). Not even the hostile cosmic powers that once

²⁶² Roy Yates, “Colossians 2.15: Christ Triumphant,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 587.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 105.

enslaved them to fear and the dark domain can stand in the way, because God has triumphed over them through the cross of Christ (v. 15). Using a military metaphor, the Apostle Paul explains that every hostile power has been defeated and the victory of Christ is celebrated. The Colossians are no longer to live in fear of any hostile powers and submit to them as if they controlled their fate and that of the natural world.

In the second part of the polemic (2:16-23), Paul rebukes the opponents for their claims about certain practices which they insist the Colossians should follow in order to have a higher spiritual experience.²⁶⁵ Paul warns the Colossians not to let the opponents take them to task over their practices. The first set of practices Paul mentions are food and drink (v. 16). The issue underpinning food and drink is asceticism or ascetic rite of some sort. The ascetic rite involved fasting, humility (v. 18), abstinence from drink and probably other aspects of life that were considered impure (v. 21), and harsh treatment of the body (v. 23).²⁶⁶

The opponents claim that asceticism prepares the devotee to ἐμβατεύω – enter into an ecstatic experience of heavenly realm, see visions of heavenly liturgy,²⁶⁷ and receive knowledge of heavenly mysteries (2:18). As Bruce states, the Colossian philosophy was “involved [in] ascetic discipline which combined food restrictions and calendar regulations with a form of angel worship.”²⁶⁸ The opponents probably defined their dietary and abstinence practices as ταπεινοφροσύνη (fasting – v. 18). Fasting as seen in Jewish apocalyptic writing,²⁶⁹ was “often preparatory for visionary experience and reception of divine revelation ... [and] entrance into the heavenly realm... Sometimes the preparation is specially for entrance into the heavenly realm.”²⁷⁰ To the opponents, this was probably the higher plane of spirituality.²⁷¹ The opponents who profess allegiance to Christ (2:19) claim that, through asceticism, Christians will have a fuller spiritual experience. They are likely insisting that the Christians should add asceticism to baptism in order to have the fullness of spiritual experience, featuring heavenly ascent, seeing visions, and receiving heavenly mysteries that are not revealed in Christ (cf. 1:26-27; 2:2-3). Christians who have

²⁶⁵ See Chapter 3.2.2 and 3.2.3.

²⁶⁶ See Chapter 3.2.4.

²⁶⁷ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 111.

²⁶⁸ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 113.

²⁶⁹ Dan 9:3, 21ff; 10:3ff; 4 Ezra 5:20; 6:31, 35; 9:23-25; 12:51-13:1; 2 Bar 5:7-7:1; 9:2-10:3; 12:5-20:6; 21:1-30-5; 43:3; 47:2ff.

²⁷⁰ Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 111.

²⁷¹ See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 62.

been keeping to their conversion and baptism experience and did not practice asceticism were probably considered by the opponents to have not yet received fullness (cf. 2:10).

The opponents also observe religious feasts, celebrations and holy days (sabbaths). These elements point to the calendric celebrations which the opponents insist the Colossians should observe. The Sabbath, though it was a Jewish day of worshipping God, was probably an identity marker of the opponents. They may have used the Sabbath as a tool of judgment and separation from other Christians. Nevertheless, these calendric elements were presumably public events which, from the opponents' viewpoint, were for public piety. They perhaps believed there was no better way to show one's piety than by a faithful observance of religious calendric events and fulfilling religious obligations to elemental powers of the universe. This aspect of the Colossian philosophy shows that the opponents were also focused on mysteries, which is alluded to by the term *ἐμβατεύω* (2:18). It was likely through visions (2:18) that the opponents claimed to receive heavenly mysteries and knowledge.

Paul, in response, counters that all these practices (dietary and calendric) which the opponents are insisting on are nothing but a shadow. These religious practices are only a resemblance of the reality found and received in Christ.²⁷² The reality has come in Christ (v. 17), in whom all of God's wisdom and knowledge is located (2:2-3). The Colossians already have this reality, namely Christ, in whom they have been given fullness of salvation, and they already have access to God's presence. They are already participating in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ and the eschatological blessings with Christ,²⁷³ while acknowledging that this reality is still to be wholly realised at the revelation of Christ (3:1-4).

In response to the superior spiritual claims of the Colossian philosophy, Paul states that it is mere boasting, without real substance. Their boasting stems from an unspiritual mind, meaning a worldly mind controlled by sinful inclinations. As such, it is not centred on Christ. Christ is the real substance, meaning fullness of relationship with God are given and received in Christ, and believers are fully sustained through their union with Christ, who is the head of the body, the church (1:18a).

For Paul, mystical and visionary experiences are not the reality to boast about. If that were the case, the apostles would have boasted about their own visionary experiences

²⁷² See Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*, 118.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

(see 2 Cor 12:1-7). Instead of boasting about heavenly visions as the higher spiritual experience, Paul reminds the Colossians that Christ is the head of the body, the church, who unites and sustains it, and God causes it to grow (2:19) in spiritual knowledge, wisdom and understanding (1:9). In other words, Christ is the real substance to boast about (see also 1 Cor 1:31, quoting Jer 9:24). Those who are joined to Christ remain in this divine union and receive spiritual nourishment from God the Father through his beloved Son, Jesus Christ who is the domain of divine wisdom and knowledge (2:3). True spirituality does not come through compliance with religious rituals and mystical practices, but through union with Christ and being part of his body, the church.

Another issue which Paul addresses concerns the commands and regulations pertaining to the elemental powers of the universe. Paul argues that in Christ the Colossians have died to the elemental powers of the universe through baptism (see 2:12). When they died, their relationship with these spirit powers was severed. Therefore, every regulation associated with these powers is non-binding and of no value. They are the man-made precepts and teachings which were dismissed earlier as empty deceit (see 2:8). The Christians are not obliged to adhere to these rules and regulations, which are not for the mature. The mature are those who have been transferred from the shadow to the reality, namely Christ (see 2:17), from darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved Son (1:13). Those who insist on keeping the regulations live under the rule of the στοιχεῖα (see 2:20, 1:13), which are the defeated beings (see 2:15).

Paul throughout his argument against the opposing teaching did not identify his opponents. Who are they? In the next section I will seek to answer this question.

3.4 Identity of the Opponents

The identity of the opponents is only detected by piecing together and interpreting the counter argument in Colossians 2:8-23.²⁷⁴ This passage outlines the polemic against “a set of practices and rules that [are] deemed inappropriate and wrong-headed.”²⁷⁵ Studies of Col 2:8-23 have produced over forty different hypotheses concerning the identity of the

²⁷⁴ For some interpreters it is Col 2:4-3:4, while for others, like Bruce, it is Col 2:8-3:4. See Bruce, “Analysis (Outline) of Colossians,” in *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 35.

²⁷⁵ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 7.

Colossian philosophy, with no consensus is in view in biblical scholarship.²⁷⁶ I will not dwell on the endless debate about the identity of the opponents.²⁷⁷

Answers to the question ‘who were the opponents at Colossae?’ range from Jews, Christians (Jewish or Gentile), syncretistic Christians, and non-Christians. In the three warnings, the opponents are only referred to using indefinite pronouns: μήτις (no one – v. 8, see also 2:4 – ἵνα μηδεὶς) and μὴ οὖν/μηδεὶς (anyone – 2:16, 18). The view that they are non-Christians is unlikely on the basis of Col 2:19, where it is stated that the opponents are out of touch with Christ the head, which presupposes that the opponents had claimed allegiance to Christ. Christian Stettler argues that both the dietary and calendric traditions point in the direction of Judaism.²⁷⁸ In this view, “those who ‘condemn’ the Colossian Christians must then be the local Torah-observant Jews”²⁷⁹ or “some kind of Jewish mystic is in view.”²⁸⁰ In the same vein, Jerry Sumney suggests an association of the opponents with apocalyptic Judaism.²⁸¹ Both Stettler and Sumney see the regulations and special holy days and celebrations as strictly Jewish practices that feature in the Colossian philosophy.²⁸²

There is also a suggestion that the opponents were both Jewish and Gentile Christians who retained some of their old beliefs and practices along with faith in Christ.²⁸³ The Apostle Paul’s critique of the mystical practices of the opponents in Col 2:19 seems to suggest that the opponents may have responded to the gospel of Christ – καὶ οὐ πρατῶν τῆν κεφαλὴν (and not holding fast to the head – 2:19). Given that the opponents were able to synthesise the traditions of the Jewish cult, non-Jewish cults (e.g., regarding drinks) and apostolic teaching (the gospel), the opponents are thought to be Christian syncretists (non-Jews and probably some who were once proselytes).²⁸⁴

²⁷⁶ See David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 692; Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 1-2; MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 10-13; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, xxx-xxxviii; Wilson, *Colossians, Philemon*, 35-58; and H. Wayne House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians Part 1 (of 4 parts): Heresies in the Colossian Church,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (January-March 1992): 145-59.

²⁷⁷ Here I will not engage deeply in the ongoing debate on the identity of the Colossian philosophy. But see the sources given in footnote 270 for the summaries of the most prominent interpretations of the Colossian philosophy.

²⁷⁸ Stettler, “The Opponents at Colossae,” 179-82. See also Jerry Sumney, “Those Who ‘Pass Judgment,’” 387-8; see also Dunn, who states that the Jewish features are seen in the Colossian threat, in *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 29-35, 172-3.

²⁷⁹ Stettler, “The Opponents at Colossae,” 182, 190, 196, 200.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁸¹ Sumney, “Those Who ‘Pass Judgment,’” 388.

²⁸² See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 62; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 23-30.

²⁸³ Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 310-11.

²⁸⁴ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 185.

In my view, the Christian syncretists could not have been Jewish Christians. First, the Colossian church was comprised mainly of non-Jews as noted earlier that in Paul's use of ἀκροβυστία (Col 2:13), even though there was a strong Jewish presence in the region due to Antiochus III's edict.²⁸⁵ There is no archaeological evidence so far to prove the presence of a Jewish community at Colossae.²⁸⁶ It therefore seems unlikely that the opponents were Jewish Christians or Jews. Second, there is hardly any quotation of Old Testament scriptures in the Letter, and the vices mentioned in 3:5-7 are distinctively Gentile. Third, the beliefs and practices which the opponents were advocating were not exclusively Jewish. It is unlikely that Jewish Christians would endorse and teach any of the beliefs and practices from non-Jewish cults. These were probably Gentile Christians who kept some of the beliefs and practices of their former religious cults. Fourth, compared to Galatians, there is a calmer tone in the argument, for example in Col 2:5, where Paul expresses confidence in the Colossians' faith.²⁸⁷ Given that the opponents were Christian syncretists, meaning confessing the name of Christ and at the same time retaining some beliefs and practices of their former life, this made the situation more delicate,²⁸⁸ which necessitated a swift and condemnatory response from Paul.

3.5 The Nature of the Colossian Philosophy

After analysing what Paul said in Col 2:8-23, I will now endeavour to portray the nature of the Colossian philosophy. It is not easy to construct the exact nature of the Colossian philosophy. Trying to piece together what it is from the Letter is difficult. What we hear from Colossians is like listening to one side of the debate, without having to listen to the other side. We are left with one-sided information in any effort to depict the nature of the Colossian philosophy.

Paul's argument against the Colossian philosophy reveals that the opponents were seeking higher spiritual experiences, particularly in visions of angelic worship, divine knowledge and wisdom to complement or to perfect salvation experienced through the gospel of Christ. The opponents were pursuing divine knowledge and wisdom and claimed

²⁸⁵ See Paul Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, reprint (Cambridge, England; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 1: Jews and Christians in the Lycus Valley," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (January 1984): 3-15.

²⁸⁶ See Foster, *Colossians*, 282.

²⁸⁷ MacDonald, *Colossians and Philemon*, 12.

²⁸⁸ See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 55-6.

to be the custodians and teachers of divine wisdom (2:23; compare 1:9) as the term **φιλοσοφία** and the phrase **οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν** imply.²⁸⁹

The opponents' pursuit of higher spiritual experience, divine wisdom and knowledge to perfect their salvation was through multiple ways. First, through asceticism. At the heart of the opposing teaching was the practice of asceticism connected to claims of visions and angelic worship,²⁹⁰ the receiving of knowledge about the heavenly mysteries, and angelic mediation. The ascetic practice prepared the devotee for an out-of-body experience or encounter with the spiritual realm and to gain knowledge of the divine mysteries.

Second, the opponents' pursuit of divine knowledge and wisdom was through **στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου**. As we have seen from Paul's polemic the opposing teaching was centred on the elemental powers of the universe (2:8, 20), **θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων** and visions (2:18). The philosophy was engaged in the invocation of the elemental powers of the universe. As noted earlier, in the Hellenistic religions these powers were believed to control the natural elements and the life cycle.²⁹¹ This could be a reason behind the observance of religious festivals and new moon celebrations. Worship conducted by the angels was what the opponents saw in their visions.²⁹² Those visionary experiences may have led to a claim of acquiring and possessing spiritual knowledge and wisdom.²⁹³ In this sense, the observances of the new moon, festivals or feasts and sabbaths were seen as compulsory practices to honour and seek blessings and favours from the elemental powers of the universe and the angelic beings.²⁹⁴ The Gentile world believed that these beings controlled the times and seasons for social, religious, political and economic activities.²⁹⁵ The opponents claimed that the way of fullness cannot be in Christ alone (see vv. 9-10).²⁹⁶

From the above discussion of the nature of the Colossian philosophy, Paul's argument against it can be seen as: First, by stating that the philosophy was not based on Christ, Paul dismissed its divine claims. Christ alone is the divine revelation and knowledge of God. To sustain his argument, Paul identified Christ with the divine identity – Christ is the fullness of God in bodily form (2:9), recalling Col 1:19. In declaring that in Christ all

²⁸⁹ See Sumney, "Those Who Pass Judgement," 373-4.

²⁹⁰ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 111.

²⁹¹ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 114.

²⁹² See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 112.

²⁹³ Sumney, "Those Who 'Pass Judgment,'" 381; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 150.

²⁹⁴ See Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," 124.

²⁹⁵ See Foster, *Colossians*, 280-1.

²⁹⁶ See Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," 124.

the fullness of deity lives bodily, Paul dismissed the opponents' claims of an out-of-body experience to gain divine knowledge and understanding. Earlier on Paul stated that Christ is the image of God (1:15a) who is the revelation and manifestation of God in the world of humanity. He is the source of divine knowledge and wisdom (2:3) and the Colossians have been filled with spiritual understanding and the knowledge of God (1:9), revealed through the preaching of the gospel of Christ. Through faith in the gospel of Christ, the Colossians were given fullness of salvation. Salvation comes from hearing and comprehending the divine knowledge embodied and revealed in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christ is the reality through whom the Colossians were given fullness of the eschatological blessings whilst the opposing teachings were only a shadow. The fullness of divine knowledge and wisdom is centred on Christ.

Further, Paul's argument against the opponents' claim of wisdom is that it was from the *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*. As I have noted, the designation *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου*,²⁹⁷ is probably a general designation for every spirit power.²⁹⁸ Earlier on Paul listed these spiritual beings – thrones, dominions, rulers and powers – as creatures of Christ (1:16). Christ created them and later on in the hymn, Christ reconciled or pacified them through his death on the cross (1:20). In the polemic, Paul declared that Christ is the head of every ruler and authority (2:10b) and through the cross of Christ, God stripped them of power and authority. Using the imagery of a Roman victory parade of its conquered enemies, Paul points out that these principalities were defeated and disgraced through the cross of Christ. Their true character is revealed that they are impotent and have nothing good in them. This betrays a negative evaluation of the elemental powers of the universe that were central to the Colossian philosophy and rejected its claims of wisdom and knowledge as insignificant and dangerous. Karris also states that

The philosophers had a high regard for the knowledge to be derived from the study of the elemental principles of the universe whereas the author of Colossians degrades such knowledge, preferring exclusively the wisdom of Jesus Christ. The author of Colossians viewed the principalities and powers as bringers of evil, who had to be despoiled and humbled by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. It would seem that the philosophers had a higher regard for these powerful creatures.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 114-16; Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 158-93; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 99; Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," 123-4.

²⁹⁸ See Chapter 3.3.

²⁹⁹ Robert J. Karris, *A Symphony of New Testament Hymns* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 75.

3.6 Understanding the Polemic as Defending Christology

After analysing the polemic using the schema of warnings and rhetoric, we must now ask ‘what undergirds Paul’s polemic?’ Scholars interpreting the distinguishing marks (slogans, inferences and practices) of the polemic have made various suggestions regarding what Paul’s polemic is about. Some have suggested that Paul is opposing the worship of *στοιχεῖα* and angels.³⁰⁰ Others, like Morna Hooker³⁰¹ and Jerry Sumney, maintain that Paul is defending Christian salvation.³⁰² Still others think the Letter is opposing the wrong view of Christ as one of the angels, i.e., defending the doctrine of Christ.³⁰³

From the above discussion,³⁰⁴ it seems that the issue undergirding the polemic is the wrong view of Christ with regard to the *στοιχεῖα* and angels. Who is Christ amongst the *στοιχεῖα* and angels? What implications do *στοιχεῖα* and angelic worship have for faith in Christ alone for salvation? I agree with Sumney and Hooker that salvation is most likely the central issue; however, salvation stems from christology. A wrong view of Christ has a direct consequence on our understanding of salvation. Christ is the cornerstone of salvation; remove the cornerstone and salvation will collapse.

A related metaphor is the killing of a tree by putting dry sticks around the stem and burning it or digging it up by its roots. I see Christ as the trunk of the tree called salvation. A distorted view of Christ means a distorted view of salvation, with salvation then becoming works-based and not by grace (cf. 1:6) nor achieved through Christ (cf. 1:20, 2:14-15). Christology and salvation are a two-sided coin. In this section I will delineate why I think christology is the primary issue at stake, and later I will discuss salvation.

The issue addressed here (2:8-23), and even back in Col 1 (apparent in 1:15-20, as we shall see in Chapter 4) is christology. I argue that this is the case for the following reasons. Firstly, there are terminological and conceptual connections with the poem and Col 2:8-23. (1) The terminological connections are: in him/Christ dwelt/dwells all the fullness of God (1:19; 2:9), death (1:18; 2:12-13), head and body (1:18a, 2:19), rulers and

³⁰⁰ See Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 1996; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 1982; xxxii.

³⁰¹ Hooker concludes that fullness of salvation is the issue that is being addressed. I agree with her, but not with her position that there were no opponents at Colossae. Her denial of the opponents is based on the hypothesis that the young converts were under pressure to conform to the superstitious beliefs and practices of the Jews and the non-Jewish neighbours for a complete salvation. Hooker, “Were there False Teachers at Colossae?” 315-31.

³⁰² Jerry L. Sumney, “Paul and His Opponents: The Search,” in *Paul Unbound*, ed. Mark D. Given (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2010), 66.

³⁰³ Curtis Vaughn, “Colossians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), 11:168; see also Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*, 115.

³⁰⁴ See Chapter 3.3.

authority (1:16, 2:10b, 15).³⁰⁵ (2) The conceptual connections are: divine embodiment (1:19; 2:9), and death and resurrection (inauguration of the new age [1:18b; 2:20], believers' co-resurrection with Christ [1:18b; 2:12-13, 20], vanquishing of hostile powers [1:20; 2:15], and salvation motif [1:18b, 20; 2:12-14, 20]).³⁰⁶

Col 2:8-23 is an application of christological knowledge established in Col 1:15-20 to refute a defective view of Christ. In Col 2:8-23, it is apparent that there was a concern among the Colossians about the person of Christ and the cosmic beings and angels they had known all along. Is Christ all-sufficient for salvation? Or do we need to include Christ in the array of other cosmic beings and angels in order to experience fullness of salvation?

Secondly, I am arguing that the issue is about Christ and *στοιχεῖα* and angels on the basis of my discussion of Col 2:8-23. As we have seen, there are various references to *στοιχεῖα* and angels in the text (see 2:8, 10, 15, 16 [implied], 18, 20; see also 1:13, 16), which show that these beings were probably thought of as powers to confide in, in addition to Christ, for hidden spirit knowledge, wisdom, and for apotropaic reasons. In this sense, the traditions – teachings (8, 20-23) and practices (16, 18) – of the Colossian philosophy are for honouring the cosmic beings who were believed to control the elements of the world. The crucial question is, what is the status or rank of Christ compared to *στοιχεῖα* (elemental powers) and angels? The question of the status of Christ is, I believe, a key reason behind the polemic.

Thirdly, the fact that the Colossians had not yet committed apostasy when they were confronted by the opposing teaching implies that their faith in Christ was firm but was being tested by the opposing teaching (see 2:20). This we see in Paul's tone of speech when he praised the Colossians for their firmness of faith (2:4). On these bases, I am proposing that the issue is Christ versus the *στοιχεῖα* and angels. Paul went on to articulate who Christ is in his polemic against the Colossian philosophy. I want to discuss three themes deduced from Paul's polemic.

3.6.1 Christ is Divine Being

In the schema of the first warning (Col 2:8-15), the divine identity of Christ is revealed.³⁰⁷ The Apostle Paul states, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος

³⁰⁵ See Luke R. Hoselton, "New Creation in Colossians: A Comparative, Exegetical, and Theological Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Otago, 2016), 114.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 115.

³⁰⁷ I will discuss the divine identity of Christ further in Chapter 4.

σωματικῶς (v. 9), recalling Col 1:19. Christ is the divine embodiment of God's being. In him God's redemptive purpose is revealed to the world, the divine in-breaking into the world of human beings to reconcile them and the world to God. Christ is the very essence of God's mystery revealed to the world (1:26-27), in whom is hidden all the fullness of God's knowledge and wisdom (2:2-3). God's secrets or divine oracles are centred in the person of Jesus Christ and are revealed through him. Those who believe in his gospel have God's mystery or secret revealed to them. The mystery is 'Christ in you the hope of glory' (1:26-27).

Therefore, Christ's divine identity reveals his nature and also that the Colossian philosophy was mistaken. The opponents probably acknowledged Christ as one of the spirits or angelic beings. But Paul proclaims that Christ is not one of the spirits or angelic beings. Christ shares in the divine identity while the στοιχεῖα and the angels are only supernatural beings. This means that Christ is the creator while the στοιχεῖα and angles are creatures, which is clearly stated in Col 1:15-16. His divine identity elevates him above every other spirit being.

The first implication of Christ's divine identity, against the Colossian philosophy's demotional view of Christ, is that Christ is a divine being and the head of στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and ἄγγελοι. The στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου are not integral constituents of the fullness of Christ, meaning they do not constitute the divine nature of Christ. As Bornkamm argues, divine fullness in Christ is not given through a relationship with the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου and ἄγγελοι, as the opponents might have thought.³⁰⁸

In declaring that in Christ all the fullness of God lives σωματικῶς, Paul points to the embodied existence of Christ in heaven. His bodily existence gives new meaning and outlook to the physical body. In the thinking of the day, the physical body was regarded as corrupted by sin and as a jail of the soul (dualism).³⁰⁹ As Thompson explains, whereas the "ancient Greek and early Christian dualism contrasts the physical and the spiritual realms, Paul does not do so, at least in those stark terms."³¹⁰ Paul's statement that Christ lives bodily in heaven clearly shows that he is not making a stark contrast between heaven and earth, spiritual and physical, divine and mortal. He brings the two together, overlapping each

³⁰⁸ See Bornkamm, "The Heresy of Colossians," 125.

³⁰⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246, *Timaeus* 90; cf. *Phaedo* 81. Duality means the separate existence of the spiritual and the physical. See Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 20.

³¹⁰ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 248.

other. As such, a bodily existence of the divine being and a bodily encounter with the divine being are both possible.

The opponents probably maintained a stark contrast between heaven and earth, spiritual and physical, so much so that the physical was seen as evil and corrupted. It had nothing good in it. For the opponents, presumably, the way to have a divine encounter was through an out-of-body experience.³¹¹ But the divine embodiment in Christ showed otherwise. The divine had come and dwelt among human beings, such that the divine now can be encountered not through out-of-body experiences, but through the living person of Christ who lived in his body and now lives through his body, the church (1:18a).

Moreover, the bodily existence of the divine shows that there is no problem with the physical body. The physical body is not evil in itself; rather, it is the body of flesh, sinful nature (2:11) or earthly nature (3:5, 8), that is the culprit, when it uses the body to do evil. Christ, by taking on the body, became one with fallen humanity, and through his physical death on the cross he overcame the sinful human nature.³¹² Through his death, described as circumcision, he took away the sinful nature and gave a new nature to everyone who turns to him in faith, a new nature recreated in his image (Col 3:10). Those who come to Christ have a new nature, even though their bodies are subject to death. The resurrected-bodily existence of Christ in heaven gives a new future to the body, which is currently perishable but which will be made imperishable at the end of the age. Therefore, to deny the body its benefits is an abuse of one's body.

3.6.2 Christ is Not a Spirit Being

For Paul, Christ is not like one of the spirit beings or angels espoused in the Colossian philosophy. In the world where *στοιχῆα* and angels were worshipped, Christ was preached, and some turned to Christ in faith (see 1:3-7). As seen above, the Greeks deified the four elements (air, water, fire and earth) as gods and worshipped them.³¹³ Given their pre-gospel experiences with the *στοιχῆα* and angels, the Colossian Christians supposedly, as Thompson puts it, “found it difficult to grasp that the promise of the gospel lay precisely in the sufficiency of Christ and what he had done on their behalf and that

³¹¹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133.

³¹² See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 121.

³¹³ See Chapter 3.3.1.

while growth in knowledge and wisdom was desirable and possible, such growth did not entail probing further the hidden ‘mysteries’ of God.”³¹⁴

If this was the scenario, as Thompson asserts, then the environment was conducive for the opponents to push for their case that Christ could be no different from the angels. The opponents may have reasoned that the angels are messengers of God, and that if Christ is God’s agent of creation and redemption (Col 1:15-20), then he is a messenger just like the angels. Such reasoning may have made the opponents insist on *στοιχεῖα* and angelic worship.

The opponents, in other words, may have accepted Christ but honoured him just like the angels and *στοιχεῖα*. That would mean that Christ is one among many cosmic beings or is one of the agents of God and not all-sufficient for salvation, as the apostles proclaimed. As Wayne House comments, “this angelology diminishes the role of Christ, reducing Him to less than divine and making Him simply another go-between in man’s quest for ‘true light.’”³¹⁵ This rendering, as some scholars understand it, is a demotion of Christ to an inferior status.³¹⁶

Paul’s response to the opponents is to claim that Christ *ἐστὶν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας*. The term *κεφαλὴ* (v. 10) is an important term which denotes that Christ is of the highest status, and all other cosmic beings that *ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας* represent are his subordinates. The *στοιχεῖα* that the opponents invoke during their sacred festivals and holy days are under his rule. This includes the angels that the ascetic visionaries saw in their visions of angelic worship. Even Christ’s death on the cross was God’s means of stripping the hostile angelic beings of their power and their ability to keep human beings under their bondage, and this shows that Christ is greater than the *στοιχεῖα* and the angels. Paul used the head metaphor to show Christ’s superiority over every cosmic being, which means that Christ is not equal to them, nor does he have the same nature as the angels and the elemental powers of the universe.

3.6.3 Christ is Central to Salvation

Christ is central to the soteriological fullness of the Colossians. Through faith in Christ (1:4-6), the Colossians have been given fullness (2:9). The soteriological fullness which

³¹⁴ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 8.

³¹⁵ See House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians Part 1 (of 4 parts): Heresies in the Colossian Church,” 58.

³¹⁶ See Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1991), 113.

the Colossians received flows out of the christological fullness. Their incorporation into God's family (2:11) and sharing in the inheritance of saints is through Christ (1:12). It is through the death of Christ on the cross that the fullness of God's blessings has come to the Colossians. They are raised to life and their sins forgiven on the basis of the death of Christ. Through his death, the *χειρόγραφον* that stood in between God and human beings was obliterated. Christians thus have direct access to God and are saved from God's coming judgment (3:6). By dying with Christ, the Colossians also died to the elemental powers of the universe (2:20). Their relationship with the cosmic powers of the universe has been severed, and their rising with Christ from death has ushered in a new life, a new beginning, and a new relationship with Christ.

God triumphed over the powers of darkness through the cross of Christ (2:15). The triumph of Christ on the cross asserts his supremacy over every power. The powers of darkness that once held the Colossians captive to fear and controlled their fate have had their own fate decided. They have been stripped of their power and authority, which means they have no authority over those who are in Christ. Nor can they touch or threaten the believers' soteriological fullness in Christ, because their lives are hidden with Christ in God (3:3) beyond the realm and reach of the dark forces. If Christ is God's agent for the defeat of the evil cosmic powers, then he has authority over these powers, as 2:10b earlier stated. As one with authority over the cosmic powers, he cannot be one among others or inferior to others. To the conquering army general the captives bow in shame and defeat, as a sign that they are his subjects. In a similar way, the cosmic powers stripped by his death on the cross are his subjects.

3.7 Understanding the Polemic as Defending Christian Salvation

Having presented the case underlying the polemic as christological, here I want to look at the polemic from a soteriological standpoint. The other side of Paul's polemic against the opponents was their teaching on salvation. For the opponents, the salvation inaugurated in Christ is not all there is. The way to reach a higher spiritual plane, see visions of angelic worship, and gain spiritual knowledge and wisdom is through asceticism. Anyone who does not comply with their regulations is accused of sinning and having no visionary experience and no relationship with God.³¹⁷ In response to this opposing teaching, Paul's argument is that the believers have been given fullness in Christ (2:10).

³¹⁷ Sumney, "Paul and His Opponents: The Search," 66.

3.7.1 Sins Forgiven (2:11-14)

In Colossians, the noun ἄμαρτία (sin) is used only once (1:14), but forgiveness of sin is an important theme in the Letter.³¹⁸ Ἄμαρτία means “a departure from either human or divine standards of uprightness.”³¹⁹ In scripture it is the departure from God’s standards. Despite there being only one occurrence of the word ἄμαρτία in Colossians, the concept of sin is expressed using various metaphors. Sin is described as the power of darkness (1:13), estrangement and hostility, doing evil deeds (1:21), body of flesh (2:12), trespasses, un-circumcision of your flesh (2:13), record of debts (2:14), old self (3:9), and wrong (3:25).

These terms and metaphors portray sin as a power that alienates human beings from God, and as constituting the human nature. Sin corrupts human beings morally, mentally and emotionally so that they sin against God (see 1:21-22; 2:14). Sin makes us unable to meet God’s moral requirements. Colossians gives specific examples of moral sins, such as fornication, impurity, passion, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry (3:5); and emotional or behavioural sins such as anger, malice, slander, abusive language and lying (3:8-9).

Sin separates human beings from God. The status of human beings before God is that of sinner (2:13). As Marshall presents this understanding, sin has alienated human beings from God and made them God’s enemies (1:21). Human beings became part of the dark domain from which they were unable to rescue themselves (1:13). Therefore, the coming of Christ is seen as a rescue mission in which human beings are redeemed, which involves forgiveness of their sins (1:14; 2:13).³²⁰ The concept of redemption has sacrificial overtones, as found elsewhere in Paul (see Rom 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30) and deutero-Paul (Eph 1:7, 14; 4:30).³²¹ The sacrifice is Jesus Christ. It is through the blood (1:20) or the death of Christ on the cross (1:21) that God has redeemed or forgiven sin (1:14).

The emphasis on the forgiveness of sin in Colossians is likely because the opposing teaching “asserts that believers without visionary experiences still bear the guilt of their sins.”³²² While this may be the case, we must be careful in asserting that Paul was compelled by the opponents’ view to emphasise forgiveness of sin. In Colossians Paul

³¹⁸ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

³¹⁹ BDAG, 50.

³²⁰ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 376; see also Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 124; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

³²¹ See Petrus J. Grabe, “Salvation in Colossians and Ephesians,” in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspective on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 288.

³²² Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

shows his independent understanding of sin and its effects. He emphasises that the whole world is corrupted by sin and needs forgiveness and reconciliation (1:20-22).

Christ, as the cosmic creator and sustainer, died on the cross to reconcile the entire cosmos to God and to save human beings from their sins and from God's coming wrath (3:6). In emphasising forgiveness of sin, Colossians maintains consistency with the theme of forgiveness of sin in other Pauline and deuterio-Pauline letters.³²³ Without the forgiveness of sin and obliteration of debts, no one can become a child of God (1:2) and share in the inheritance of the saints (1:12). This shows that Paul is not just being influenced by the opponents in his emphasis on the forgiveness of sin.

Sin is not merely breaking social relationships, *lo* and rituals, as it is understood in many Melanesian cultures.³²⁴ It is not understood here, as in some cultures, in a non-moral sense, meaning lacking in material goods or physical shortcomings,³²⁵ nor is it about the loss of honour and status (*nem na namba* in neo-Melanesian) between different people in the community, or between different communities. Sin is an inward problem rooted in the minds of every human being.

Although the term *παράπτωμα* means trespasses, it includes all broken relationships and rebellion against God. It is what alienates human beings and creation from God. As Colossians shows, sin is breaking relationship with God, and therefore the reconciling work of Christ is firstly about restoration of relationship with God and creation (1:20). Rituals and human traditions cannot deal with the root problem of sin, if this was what the Colossian philosophy assumed. Regulations like fasting, other forms of asceticism, or outward actions (like compensation payments) are insufficient to deal with the roots of sin. The root problem is one's nature, and thus the Apostle Paul emphasises that only through the death of Christ on the cross can the root problem of sin be dealt with (see 2:11-14; 1:21-22).

3.7.2 Relationship with God (2:13-14)

Forgiveness of sin and cancellation of debts secures believers' relationship with God (2:9-15).³²⁶ Colossians shows that sin disrupted peaceful and harmonious relationships between God, human beings, and the creation or cosmos (all things – 1:20). The relationship

³²³ See Rom 3:21-26; 4:7-8; 5:18-21; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 2:15-17; Eph 2:1-5; 4:32. Most of the undisputed Pauline letters use the term justification instead of forgiveness.

³²⁴ See Chapter 2.4.6.

³²⁵ See Schlatter, "The Biblical Concept of Sin, Relative to Animistic Worldview (Part 1 of 2)," 37.

³²⁶ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

between God and human beings caused by sin is described as estrangement and hostility (1:21).

The consequences of this estranged and hostile relationship between God and human beings caused by sin are: servitude to the powers of darkness (1:13), life without hope (see 1:5, 27), being held captive by the bond of debt (2:14), being subject to God's wrath (3:6) and death (Col 1:18b; 2:13). All of this results in a relationship between God and human beings of estrangement and hostility (1:21). On the part of the non-human creatures, sin causes distortion and disorder. But through the cross of Christ, sins are forgiven, death is defeated, human beings are given new life in Christ, and their relationship with God changes from being God's enemies to God's children (Col 1:2), from being unholy and guilty to being made holy and blameless without spot (1:22). Christ, in his resurrected and exalted position at God's right hand, is able to offer to every believer the forgiveness of sin "and the proper relationship with God."³²⁷ In both the theological and teaching sections of the Letter, life and relationship with God are stressed.

In the teaching section (3:3-4:6), the household code (3:18-4:2) spells out how one's relationship to Christ should influence one's relationship with others. Believers are to live as people who belong to Christ, so that their lives will bear witness to Christ (4:5-6). In the theological section, the concepts of rescue, redemption, forgiveness of sin, reconciliation, peace, cancelling of debt, and stripping of rulers and authorities all have one goal, and that is God's relationship with human beings and creation.

As we will see in the next chapter, even the use of the firstborn metaphor in both strophes of the poem identifies Christ's relationship to creation as its creator and redeemer. Christ's participation in the unique role of God as sovereign creator, redeemer and ruler of the cosmos shows that Christ shares in the divine identity.³²⁸ The firstborn metaphor as a kinship term reveals Christ's relationship with God as a divine being and mediator through whom human beings can become God's children. In short, the concepts and metaphors used in the Letter indicate that salvation is about life and relationship with God in Christ. Although sin alienated human beings from God, the death of Christ reconciled and restored the broken relationship between God and human beings.

³²⁷ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

³²⁸ See Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 40-2.

3.7.3 Participating in the Resurrected-Glorified Life of Christ (2:13)

Christ, from his own fullness (1:19; 2:9), has given fullness to believers, meaning that they are incorporated into Christ and participate in the fullness that is in Christ. Commenting on Col 1:19 and 2:9, Thompson writes that these two passages reveal “a union of Christ with God distinguished from any other union or relationship with God.”³²⁹ The significance of the Christ-God union being manifested in believers’ union with Christ is that the power of God is working in them, rather than the “*fullness or indwelling of deity*.”³³⁰ While Thompson stresses the power of God working in believers through their union with Christ, Sumney focuses on the blessings of God that flow from believers’ participation in Christ.

All relationships with God, all forgiveness, all security from hostile spiritual forces, and all spiritual blessings come to believers through their participation in the life of Christ, which God grants them in baptism. Participation in Christ, and nothing else, grants access to all of God’s blessings. Colossians identifies being ‘in Christ’ as the sphere of salvation.... Therefore, Colossians has a participationist soteriology.³³¹

It is through the power of the cross and by the grace of God that believers have received all of God’s blessings. One of these blessings is the resurrected-glorified life of Christ. Through the power of God, believers are able to participate in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ. They have been raised to new life, as symbolised in their baptism (2:12).³³² Formerly they were dead in sin, but now God has made them alive with Christ as a result of the forgiveness of sins (2:13-14). They have been raised with Christ and are sharing in the heavenly life with Christ (3:1-3).

Thus, as Foster states, the Colossian believers are “already participating in the new mode of existence that life in Christ brings. The author does not describe such blessings as part of a hoped-for future, but as the reality for those who already belong to Christ.”³³³ The reality of sharing and living in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ is experienced here and now. The new life in Christ is not something to be expected in the future or after death. It is available now and will be consummated at the Parousia of Christ, when the resurrected-glorified life with Christ will be made a visible reality (3:3-4).

The notion of participating in the resurrected-heavenly life of Christ also connotes sharing in the inheritance of God’s people in the kingdom of light (1:12) or the kingdom of God’s beloved son (1:13). What is the inheritance of God’s people? It is all of God’s

³²⁹ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 119.

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 14.

³³² Foster, *Colossians*, 45.

³³³ Ibid.

blessings – life and relationship with God, forgiveness of sin, and protection from the hostile powers. Believers are not only protected from the evil powers, they are also participating in the authority and rule of Christ over the cosmic powers by dying and rising with him (2:12, 20).

Another blessing that I would add to Sumney's list is the Holy Spirit. Although the Holy Spirit is not prominent in Colossians (see 1:8),³³⁴ it is one of the promised blessings of the eschatological age (Joel 2:28-32). The love which the believers have for one another is made possible by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (1:8). Love is a virtue that holds every virtue in perfect unity. Thus the Colossians, by believing in the gospel of Christ, experience God's love poured into their hearts and express this love for each other (Col 1:4; 3:14), and this is one of the eschatological blessings of believers' new life in Christ. The phrase 'Christ in you' implies divine immanence, which could be rendered as 'the Spirit in us.'³³⁵ Commenting on 'Christ in you' (1:27), Dunn notes that,

[s]trictly speaking, the divine presence indwelling individual humanity should be expressed in terms of the Spirit of God; hence the more typical Pauline balance between 'us in Christ' (see on 1:2) and 'Spirit in us' (e.g., Rom 8:9, 11, 15-16, 23, 26). But given the overlap between Wisdom and Spirit as ways of speaking of divine immanence, a degree of interchange between 'in Christ' and 'Spirit in' formulations is no problem.³³⁶

The believers' participation in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ also means life beyond death. At Christ's return, the reality of the resurrected-glorified life of believers which is currently hidden will become a visible reality. In addition to life beyond the grave, there is life here and now. Life here and now is not to be lived under the shadow of the fear of death and the powers of darkness. Fear is the opposite of faith, and it is one of the tools of death and its partners (the powers of darkness) used to hold sway over people's lives. Christ, through his death and resurrection, has defeated death and the powers of darkness.

³³⁴ Foster gives two reasons why the Holy Spirit is not given prominence in Colossians. First, there are the circumstances facing the Colossian believers: "Perhaps the false teaching, with its emphasis on worship of the angels and ecstatic visions (Col 2:18), caused the author not to mention experiential aspects of life in the Spirit. This may have been to avoid a debate with those teaching a different philosophy, who may have claimed that their religion offered greater spiritual experiences." Foster, *Colossians*, 37. Second, the neglect of the role of the Holy Spirit is a possible reflection of a different author, "who has such a strong emphasis on union with Christ and participation in the divine life through Christ alone, that there is little room in his theological understanding for the Holy Spirit, which 'some have described as the "binitarian" pattern of Christian worship; that is why it is "difficult to integrate the Holy Spirit in the schema." Ibid., 38.

³³⁵ Col 1:8 refers to the Colossians' "love in the Spirit" and this phrase has been subject to debate. The preferred meaning is "the corporate love the Spirit produces in believers." Foster, *Colossians*, 151. This denotes the presence of the Holy Spirit in and among the believers. Hence, 'Christ in you' could also mean 'Spirit in you.'

³³⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 122-3.

Those who have died with Christ (2:12, 20) and been raised with Christ have nothing to fear.

3.7.4 Delivered from the Dark Powers (2:15)

The fullness of salvation entails deliverance from the dominion of darkness (1:13).³³⁷ Through the cross of Christ, the evil powers of darkness have been divested of their powers (2:15), and the people who were held under their rule have been rescued and transferred into the kingdom of Christ (1:13). According to Sumney,

Christ has freed believers from the powers of these beings, declaring that Christ has defeated them and so reclaimed believers for God (2:14-15, 20). Christ has not only rescued believers but also transferred them into his own realm. Therefore, they no longer serve those hostile powers but are citizens of a different kingdom (1:12-14), in which they are heirs with God, properly qualified to receive all God's blessings.³³⁸

As Sumney points out, the believers no longer belong to the domain of darkness. They belong to the kingdom of Christ, and God has qualified them to share in the heavenly inheritance or blessings (1:12). The powers of darkness have no blessings to offer to the believers (c.f. Gal 4:9). Therefore, they are not to fear these beings, as they have already been defeated (2:15). Nor should believers seek to obey them all over again by submitting to their rules and regulations (2:20-23), as if the destiny of God's people is in their hands. Nor should believers let anyone judge or condemn them for refusing to participate in religious (cultural) practices pertaining to elemental powers of the universe.³³⁹

The death and resurrection of Christ displays that Christ is pre-eminent in all things. Christ rules over the entire cosmos (visible and invisible). The fallen world or the domain of darkness which he effectively reconciled to God is under his rule. The powers that rule over the domain of darkness, meaning the human plane wherein Christ divested them of their authority, no longer has any authority over the lives of believers, either here and now or into eternity. Believers' lives are hidden with Christ in God (3:3), which means that they are protected from the harmful forces that are still at work because of people's allegiance to them through sin, even after the cross. Believers have nothing to fear because Christ has freed them from fear and bondage to the forces of darkness, and he will protect them. Not only will he protect the believers, they are already part of the eschatological kingdom.

³³⁷ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 14.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ See Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*, 377.

Therefore, “believers can serve God wholeheartedly, knowing that these beings cannot disrupt their relationship with God.”³⁴⁰

3.8 Summary

In my discussion of the polemic in Col 2:8-23, I have highlighted the nature of the Colossian philosophy and drawn attention to the theological issues behind the polemic. The Colossian philosophy was an amalgam of Jewish and non-Jewish religious traditions and practices. It was a philosophy that practised ascetic humility in order to have visions, see angelic worship in heaven, and receive knowledge of hidden mysteries. These visionary experiences and the associated knowledge were probably defined as wisdom. Anyone who did not follow their prescribed regulations may have been accused of sinning, which undermined the soteriological experience in Christ. The opposing teaching also saw the body of flesh or sinful nature as an obstacle to reaching a higher spiritual plane. Therefore, asceticism and harsh treatment of the body were practised so as to subdue the body of flesh.

The nature of the Colossian philosophy unearths the insight that the primary issues that were at stake in Paul’s response to the opponents were christology intertwined with soteriology. First, the opponents devalued Christ to the status of *στοιχεῖα* and angels. This could be seen in their insistence on keeping food regulations and calendric elements pertaining to the worship of *στοιχεῖα* and angels. In response, the Apostle Paul revealed the identity of Christ as the fullness of God and a divine being. As a divine being, he is different from the *στοιχεῖα* and the angels. He is their creator and he rules over them as their head. Christ lives bodily in heaven. His embodied existence implies that the physical body is not evil in itself. Rather, it is the sinful nature that is the problem. Therefore, Christ in his physical body took upon himself as a human the problem of sinful nature and nailed it on the cross. In so doing, the Colossians were recreated in his image.

From Christ’s divine fullness, the Colossian Christians had come to fullness of salvation. In Christ they had experienced the transformation of their hearts and now shared in the promised eschatological blessings – the forgiveness of sin, relationship with God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, participation in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ which is hidden with Christ in God (3:3), and deliverance from the powers of darkness. In his polemic, in many ways, the Apostle Paul drew his christological statement from the hymn (Col 1:15-20) and applied it against the opposing teaching, which was found wanting.

³⁴⁰ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 14.

Accordingly, in Chapter 4, I will discuss Col 1:15-20, which is a high christological poem tracing the development of Colossian Christology.

Chapter 4: The Pre-eminence of Christ in Creation and Redemption

In Chapter 3 I discussed Col 2:8-23 and showed how the doctrine of Christ is intertwined with the doctrine of salvation,¹ and it is apparent that the Apostle Paul, in rebuking the opponents drew concepts and themes from Col 1:15-20.² It is to this passage that I now turn.

Col 1:15-20 is one of the high christological passages in the New Testament. It has inspired not a few scholarly studies.³ This raises the question, why study Col 1:15-20 again? Scholars have entered into dialogue on this passage based on hypotheses and presuppositions they wished to prove through substantiated logical arguments. For instance, there is a hypothesis that the Colossian hymn (1:15-20) is a preformed piece used by the Colossian author, interpolating the preformed hymn to suit his needs.

Indeed, numerous studies of Col 1:15-20 not only reflect its significance but also scholars' own assumptions. Hence, no study is strictly objective. However, the benefit we gain from these studies is the development of a body of knowledge on this passage. I am examining Col 1:15-20 to see whether the Christ of the hymn can be understood in fresh ways through a Melanesian Christian lens, in order to find answers to their desired *gutpela sindaun*.⁴

The approach I am using in this discussion is the same as that in Chapter 3. In this chapter I am applying the exegetical method and the hermeneutical approaches to derive the meaning of the passage for the original recipients. This entails a grammatical-historical approach.⁵ Using these methodological approaches, I will seek to answers these questions:

¹ See Chapter 3.4 and 3.5.

² See Chapter 3.

³ See, for example, Adam Copenhaver, "Echoes of a Hymn in a Letter of Paul: The Rhetorical Function of the Christ-Hymn in the Letter to the Colossians," *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 235-55; Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context: An Exegesis in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Hymnic and Epistolary Conventions* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*; Karris, *A Symphony of New Testament Hymns*, 63-91; Larry R. Helyer, "Recent Research on Col 1:15-20 (1980-1990)," *GTJ* 12, no. 1 (1992): 51-67; N. T. Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20," *NTS* 36 (1990): 444-68; Eduard Schweizer, "Colossians 1: 15-20," *Review and Expositor* 87 (1990): 97-104; Jarl Fossum, "Colossians 1:15-18a in the Light of Jewish Mysticism and Gnosticism," *NTS* 35, no. 2 (April 1989): 183-201; John F. Balchin, "Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn? An Argument from Style," *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985): 65-94; F. F. Bruce, "Colossians Problems Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (April-June 1984): 90-111; Steven M. Baugh, "The Poetic Form of Col 1:15-20," *WJT* 47 (1985): 227-44; Larry R. Helyer, "Colossians 1:15-20: Pre-Pauline or Pauline?," *JETS* 26, no. 2 (June 1983): 167-79; Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," 149-68; and C. F. Burney, "Christ the APXH of Creation," *JTS* 27 (1926): 160-77.

⁴ See my discussion of *gutpela sindaun* in Chapter 2.

⁵ See Chapter 1.7.1.

What is the basis of the christological hymn? How is Christ presented? The answers to these questions will be used to respond to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* in Chapter 6.

This chapter commences with a background discussion of the hymn or “poem” as is my designation. I will state why I will refer to it as “poem” rather than hymn below. This discussion is concerned with identifying the author’s source and context, and investigating how the author understood the Christ-event, i.e., the person and the work of Christ. The poem contains terms and phrases that will help us to correctly understand the concepts used in the poem. The background discussion is followed by an exploration of common questions asked about the poem. I then move to an exegesis of Col 1:15-20 and its meaning and significance in the overall schema of the Letter. I will summarise the chapter by highlighting key concepts that will be applied in Chapter 6, in response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*.

4.1 Background of the Poem

There are several propositions regarding the background of the christological poem (1:15-20), of which I will discuss two.⁶

4.1.1 Pre-Gnostic Text

Ernst Käsemann argues that the background of the poem is from pre-Christian Gnostic texts.⁷ He understands the passage as a preformed hymn which the author has redacted, and that it had its genesis as a gnostic text. The concepts and titles, like ‘first-born,’ are to some extent gnostic terms, “in which the Redeemer, acting as the pathfinder and leader of those

⁶ For further discussion of these two main proposed backgrounds of the poem, see Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 451-6.

⁷ Käsemann, “A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy,” 149-68. Bornkamm’s assertion about the Aeon-primeval man from Jewish gnostic documents seems to support Käsemann. Bornkamm states, “[h]ere we encounter not only the requirement of circumcision and the worship of the elements, but also teaching, according to Hippolytus *Ref.* 9:13 (Epiphanius, *Haer.* 30.17; 19.4; 53.1), from the Son of God, who appeared to him as an angel in gigantic form, i.e., as the world-spanning Aeon. The Aeon-primeval-man speculation is also evidently the origin of the Ebionite christology of the Pseudo-Clementines, according to which Jesus appears, after his incarnation in the seven righteous, the ‘seven pillars’ of the Old Testament, as the eighth and thus as revealer and redeemer. The schema of the Aeon-mythology, originally intended cosmogonically, here is made the basis of a speculation about salvation history, while cosmology recedes altogether ... If one sees how in Christian gnosticism the redeemer figure is understood as ὁ ἐν παντι ὦν καὶ διερχόμενος διὰ πάντων [‘he who is in all and passes through all’] (Acts of Thomas 10), and how his role is taken over by the apostles, and how, on the other hand, biblical events and figures are frequently interpreted mythologically, then the transposition of the myth onto the whole history of salvation is no longer astonishing.” Bornkamm, “The Heresy of Colossians,” 132.

who are his, makes a breach in death's domain."⁸ Käsemann asserts that it is without question that the concepts go back to the LXX and revive liturgical and cultic formulations, as might be expected in a passage in which the Christians celebrate eschatological salvation. However, for Käsemann, apart from the Christian interpolation, the hymn shows the "supra-historical and metaphysical drama of the gnostic Redeemer."⁹

The rounded-off shape of the passage and the distribution of the lines to form the stanzas appear to reveal the hymnic reconstruction of a pre-Christian hymn. In this light, the religious background of the hymn could be the gnostic myth of the Archetypal Man, who is also the redeemer, presented in the form and language of Hellenistic Judaism, where Sophia and Logos are combined. This can be seen in a "parallel passage in Philo, *De confus. ling.* 146: καὶ γὰρ ἀρχὴ καὶ ὄνομα θεοῦ καὶ λόγος καὶ ὁ κατ' εἰκόνα ἄνθρωπος καὶ ὁ ὄρων, Ἰσραήλ, προσαγορεύεται."¹⁰ ("for he is called, "the Beginning," and the Name of God, and His Word, and the Man after His image, and "he that sees," that is Israel).

Wisdom, as described in the Near Eastern traditions,¹¹ is a mediator in creation. Hence, "the doctrine of wisdom coincides with the Archetypal Man ... when the predicate πρωτότοκος (firstborn) is used both of Sophia and Adam and again when both are described as the image of God."¹² The Archetypal Man who is the Redeemer cannot be understood from within Palestinian Judaism alone, since Judaism held that human beings have always borne the image of God and therefore cannot be the Redeemer.¹³ The attribution of the image of God to the Archetypal Man was taken over from elsewhere and read back into the text.¹⁴

Käsemann's proposition of a non-Christian Gnostic background is unconvincing to many scholars, for several reasons.¹⁵ First, his treatment of strophes on stylistic grounds is doubtful, even if the clauses τῆς ἐκκλησίας (the church – v.18) and διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ (through the blood of his cross – v. 20) were later additions as proposed. Second, his argument is based on second-century Gnostic documents. Gnosticism is not found in the first century. Third, there are several terms in the poem –

⁸ Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," 154.

⁹ Ibid., 155.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ πάρεδρος τῶν σῶν θρονῶν. Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 156.

¹³ According to Bauckham, "Second Temple Judaism was characterized by a 'strict' monotheism that made it impossible to attribute real divinity to any figure other than the one God." Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, 2.

¹⁴ Käsemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," 156.

¹⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 37-8.

the reference to divine creation (vv. 15-16) and the verb εὐδουκέω (pleased – v. 19) which have an Old Testament ring to them and therefore cannot be from a Gnostic redeemer myth. Fourth, the phrase πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν (firstborn from the dead – v. 18) is undoubtedly a Christian characteristic. Fifth, there are no original non-Christian creator-redeemer myths to substantiate this hypothesis. Consequently, scholars have given up trying to find any redemption myth unaffected by the Christian story of Jesus to affirm Käsemann’s hypothesis, and thus any significance of redeemer myths is denied. Hence, we turn to the second hypothesis – that the background of the poem is Second Temple Judaism.

4.1.2 Second Temple Judaism

Some scholars have proposed that the New Testament writers drew their insights and interpretation of the Christ event from Second Temple Judaism.¹⁶ It was during the Second Temple period, before the destruction of the Temple, that some of the most outstanding Hellenistic Jewish writers, like Aristobulus, Philo and Josephus, lived.¹⁷ Thus, both Rabbinic and Hellenistic Judaism can be drawn on to understand the christology of the Colossian poem.

Second Temple Judaism was strictly monotheistic, and it “was the context of Christian origins – and New Testament Christology.”¹⁸ It was in this context of strict monotheism, where the *Shema* (Deut 6:4-5) was the daily prayer of every Jew, that Jesus was raised.¹⁹ Praying the *Shema* twice daily (morning and evening) demonstrated the devotedness of the Jews to Yahweh, as stipulated in the Decalogue (Exod 20:2-5; Deut 5:6-9). It was in this matrix of Judaism that Christianity emerged.

However, Wright cautions that the poem (Col 1:15-20) should be read in the context of the entire Jewish worldview, characterised by monotheism, which he calls the “creational and covenantal monotheism as opposed to the pantheistic variety known in

¹⁶ See Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*; A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (London: Duckworth, 1982), Chapter 7; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1965); Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 444-68; J. C. O’Neill, “The Source of the Christology in Colossians,” *NTS* 26, no. 1 (October 1979): 87-100; Balchin, “Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn?,” 65-93.

¹⁷ Louis H. Feldman, “Palestinian and Diaspora Judaism in the First Century,” in *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), 1. For Aristobulus, see C. John Collins, “Colossians 1:17 ‘Hold Together’: A Co-opted Term,” *Biblica* 95, no. 1 (2014): 67.

¹⁸ Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, 1.

¹⁹ Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, 154.

Stoicism and elsewhere.”²⁰ There is one God, the creator of the world, who is in a covenantal relationship with Israel. Wright argues that although the poem was “written in Greek and with some possible verbal echoes of ideas current in other worldviews, its overall emphasis belongs within the broad and rich tradition of Jewish psalmody.”²¹

It is within this wider context of Second Temple Judaism that Burney sees the term “beginning” in Col 1:16-18 as an elaborate exposition of the Hebrew word *bereshith*, the first word of Genesis, thus “interpreting *reshith* as referring to Christ.”²² Burney gives three explanations for *be* and four for *reshith*. He writes “Prov. viii 22ff, where Wisdom (i.e. Christ) is called *reshith*, gives the key to Gen. 1:1. *Bereshith* God created the heavens and the earth. Christ fulfils every meaning which may be extracted from *reshith* — ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων.”²³

Bereshith – in *reshith* — ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτισθη τὰ πάντα
Bereshith – by *reshith* — πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἔκτισται
Bereshith – into *reshith* — πάντα εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται
Reshith – Beginning — αὐτός ἐστι πρὸ πάντων
Reshith – Sum-total — τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκε
Reshith – Head — αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος
Reshith – First-fruits — ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν

Although we may disagree with Burney, it seems plausible that the Old Testament creation statements are behind the poem if it is seen from within the wider Jewish monotheistic tradition. In the Wisdom traditions, Wisdom was the agent of creation (Prov 8:22-31; 7:22). Although Burney’s proposition is open to question, it clearly draws attention to Old Testament parallels that lie in close proximity to the poetic phrases in Col 1:15-18. In addition, I am proposing that the Gen 3:14-19 account of the Fall and a promised redemption can be discerned in Col 1:20. Reconciliation of all things is clearly a reversal of the turmoil that entered the perfectly ordered world as a result of Adam’s sin, which subsequently led to God cursing the earth.

Therefore, the high christology of the New Testament, as Bauckham claims, can be seen against the background of Jewish monotheism. Jesus was “directly identified with the one God of Israel, including Jesus in the unique identity of this one God.”²⁴ Identity is

²⁰ Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 453. In Wright’s analysis of the poem he maintains that the poem stems from a Jewish monotheistic worldview. (451-65).

²¹ Ibid., 453.

²² Burney, “Christ the APXH of Creation,” 160. Burney himself sees it as drawing on the Hellenistic Jewish tradition.

²³ Ibid., 175-6.

²⁴ Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, 4.

concerned with who God is.²⁵ In the Old Testament and other Jewish sources, God is the creator and ruler of all things and is supreme in all things. In this context, Col 1:15-20 can credibly be viewed as a part of wider New Testament christology that is indebted to Jewish theology, which gave the Wisdom of God a central place. The hermeneutical key to understanding statements about Christ in the New Testament is then Jewish monotheism, as Bauckham suggests. Jewish monotheism enables us to understand the divine identity of Christ.²⁶

From the above discussion, the great christology of the poem should not be seen simply against the background of Second Temple Judaism but, rather, the whole of the Jewish monotheistic worldview, as Wright argues. The poem draws from the Jewish monotheistic worldview, from its Wisdom-logos traditions, with an element of the Greek worldview. Jews believed in one God who is the creator and ruler of the world, whose Messiah will come and redeem them.²⁷ Words such as εἰκὼν and πρωτότοκος are correctly understood when we turn to the Old Testament to see how they were used there. The poem is informed by the redemption theme reflected in verses 12-14, which echoes Jewish redemptive concepts.²⁸ This leads to some frequently asked questions concerning the poem, which probe some of the ground already covered in this section.

4.2 Questions Concerning the Poem

There are three most common questions asked concerning Col 1:15-20 as Talbert outlines.²⁹ Is there a preformed tradition behind these verses? Did the author of Colossians edit a preformed unit in any way? What is its structure?³⁰ Before we answer these questions, the hymn is highly christological which implies that it is from the Christian community or from the pen of the Colossians' author.

²⁵ Ibid., 8.

²⁶ Ibid., 26.

²⁷ See Deutero-Isaiah 40-55; Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism & Christology in the New Testament*, 10.

²⁸ Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20," 453.

²⁹ See Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 182-4. Richard N. Longenecker, *New Wine into Fresh Wineskin: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 8-11; Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 97-111; see also Balchin, "Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn?," 67-80; O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 32-3; Schweizer, "Colossians 1: 15-20," 97; Larry Helyer, who surveyed selected studies on Colossians 1:15-20, and whose summaries of these studies bring to the fore the answers to these three questions by the authors of these studies. Helyer, "Recent Research on Col 1:15-20 (1980-1990)," 51-67.

³⁰ There is also a question of what literary style Col 1:15-20 exhibits which I will not discuss because it is not a major issue. In short, the question of literary style has led to a number of designations such as hymn, creed, public confession, liturgy, kerygma, tradition, or a poem. In this thesis I will refer to it as a poem or hymn.

4.2.1 Preformed or Not?

The arguments for Col 1:15-20 as a preformed hymn³¹ are: (1) *parallelismus membrorum* (parallel structure) – the passage consists of two strophes, made conceptually parallel through the use of ὅς ἐστιν (1:15, 18b); (2) *hapax legomena* – there are a number of terms in the passage³² that are unique and which the presumed author, Paul, has not used in his undisputed letters; (3) the preference for participles over finite verbs suggests “original oral provenance;”³³ (4) introductory formulae – hymnic texts are commonly introduced by the relative pronoun ὅς in second- or third-person singular. It is like other traditional units noted elsewhere (Rom 4:25; Phil 2:6; 1 Tim 3:16b).; (5) contextual dislocation – liturgical formulae break up the context of the letter by a change of subject; (6) passage continuation – the passage is relevant outside of its immediate context. If the hymn (vv.15-20) is taken out, 1:14 naturally links to 1:21.³⁴ (7) christological statements – it is a scholarly assumption that “early Christian hymns and confessions would naturally have been christological.”³⁵ The statements in the poem affirm the person and the mission of Christ. The poem, exhibits, as Wright calls it, “christological monotheism”³⁶ and therefore its

³¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *New Wine into Fresh Wineskin: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), 8-11; Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 97-111; see also Balchin, “Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn?,” 67-80; O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 32-3; Schweizer, “Colossians 1: 15-20,” 97. For a detailed argument, see Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 41-6. Compare O’Neill, “The Source of the Christology in Colossians,” 87-100, who argues against the hymnic character of the hymn. Dunn accepts the verdict that the hymn is pre-Pauline. However, his seven-page hermeneutical approach to the passage is provocative. He denies the pre-existence of Christ in creation and the fullness of God in Christ in redemption to assert that the writer of the hymn was expressing the early Christian belief about God’s creative and redemptive activity rather than the actual creative agent. He states, “[t]he two strophes become quite consistent as soon as we realise that *throughout the hymn we are not talking about God’s creative power per se, nor of Christ per se, but of Christ whom, Christians came to recognize as the embodiment and definition of that power (= wisdom, fullness)* [italics in original]... Once again then we have found that what at first reads as a straightforward assertion of Christ’s pre-existent activity in creation becomes on closer analysis an assertion which is rather more profound – not of Christ as pre-existent hypostasis or divine being (Wisdom) beside God, *but of Christ as embodying and expressing (and defining) that power of God which is the manifestation of God in and to his creation*” [italics in original]. James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1989), 193-4. See also Bruce, “Colossians Problems Part 2: The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15-20,” 99-111, who wrote earlier than Dunn, and who has, I believe, a proper hermeneutical approach to the hymn.

³² The exceptional terms found in the poem that are not used elsewhere in the Pauline Epistles are: ὄρατὰ (v. 16), θρόνοι (v. 16), κυριότητες (v. 16), ἀρχή (v. 17), πρωτεύων (v. 18), κατιοκῆσαι (v. 19), ἀποκαταλλάξαι (v. 20) and εἰρηνοποιήσας (v. 20). Balchin, “Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn? An Argument from Style,” 71-2; see also Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 182.

³³ Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 106.

³⁴ See Käsemann, “A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy,” 151-2, 159-64. But see also A. J. M. Wedderburn, “The Theology of Colossians,” in *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, ed. Andrew T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49-53, and Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 444-7. Both were responding to Käsemann and other scholars who were of the view that the poetic unit is a preformed hymn.

³⁵ Balchin, “Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn?,” 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

origin is from the Christian community. For these reasons it is suggested the hymn was preformed and inserted into the Letter.

Although O'Neill states that the passage betrays a public declaration,³⁷ he casts doubt that the author was citing a pre-existing hymn, and even disputes the hymnic character of the passage (Col 1:15-20).³⁸ His reasons for disputing it are as follows: First, the passage does not use terms like ἀρχή and ἀρχαί uniformly. These words have different meanings in the same composition. Second, the passage fails to meet the parallelism test. The first set of words in v. 15, ὅς ἐστιν...πρωτότοκος...ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ...εἶτε...εἶτε, is not complemented by the second set in vv. 18b-20. Third, the parallelism is wrecked by 1:17-18a.

Some scholars also argue that the Apostle Paul could have been waxing lyrical, as seen elsewhere (Rom 8:31-39; Eph 1:3-14).³⁹ He drew his ideas and concepts from Second Temple Judaism, the Jewish Wisdom-logos tradition, and possibly from Greek thought⁴⁰ to compose the poem about Christ in the light of what was happening at Colossae.⁴¹ Vincent Pizzuto writes that “the author of Colossians, himself, wrote the poem precisely to serve as a unifying creedal statement over and against the heretical views that were threatening to seep into the faith, life and practices of his young Christian audience.”⁴²

In addition, there is no evidence to prove that this was a preformed poem. Arguing for the existence of the preformed poem based on the material before us (in Colossians) is not impossible, but it is hard to prove.⁴³ Paul was well versed in his Jewish traditions,⁴⁴ and drew from these traditions and the materials available to him from Second Temple Judaism or from the wider Jewish monotheistic worldview, as well as from his understanding of Greek culture and the Gentile audience to whom he was writing. He was able to use the terms and concepts familiar to him and his audience to compose the poem.

Furthermore, the poem was not a preformed piece because any omission of parts of the poem would have caused problems for the readers who were accustomed to it.⁴⁵ It would

³⁷ O'Neill, “The Source of the Christology in Colossians,” 88.

³⁸ Ibid., 89, 91, 94.

³⁹ See O'Neill, “The Source of the Christology in Colossians,” 87-100; Balchin, “Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn?” 65-93.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 4.1.2 above.

⁴¹ See J. C. O'Neill, “The Source of the Christology in Colossians,” 87-100.

⁴² Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 42.

⁴³ See Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 445.

⁴⁴ The Apostle Paul was instructed by one of the best rabbis of his day (Acts 5:34), and he was well versed in his Jewish traditions (Phil 3:4-6; Gal 1:13-14; cf. Acts 22:3; 26:4-5).

⁴⁵ Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 445.

cause discord among those who were already familiar with the poem and undermine its function as an authoritative piece in the later development of the argument against the Colossian philosophy and the ethical teaching.⁴⁶

In addition, there is disagreement regarding whether Col 1:13-14 exhibits a poetic structure. It is also suggested that the ‘beloved son’ of Col 1:13 is taken from the first line of the actual poem (1:15). This too, however, is “unprovable speculation.”⁴⁷ Therefore, as Wright states, the attempt to reconstruct the original poem should be abandoned.⁴⁸ Moreover, the suggestion of editorial additions should not be accepted unless the redundant “through it” is proven as not original.⁴⁹ As Wright concludes, “[a]gain, hypothetical additions to an original poem are one thing, problematic in themselves but not totally impossible.”⁵⁰

In light of Wright’s cautionary remarks, and the ongoing debate whether the poem was a preformed piece or was an original composition, in either case, the Colossian author made it his own, and used it in the Letter to the Colossians. The poem exhibits Christological monotheism as Wright has stated and it is central to the Letter’s development where its themes are further developed in the polemical and ethical sections of the Letter.

4.2.2 Hymnic Structure

The third question relates to the structure of the text (vv. 15-20). There is no agreement on the structural composition of the poem.⁵¹ Many structures have been proposed, and Talbert highlights four.⁵² First, some exegetes have argued that there are two strophes, creating a bipartite structure (15-18a and 18b-20).⁵³ Within the bipartite camp, some see Col 1:17-18a as a transition segment, moving from the first strophe (1:15-16) to the second strophe (1:18b-20),⁵⁴ or a chiasmic pattern in the two strophes.⁵⁵ Second, other interpreters propose

⁴⁶ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 183; Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 445.

⁴⁷ Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 445.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Compare Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 183.

⁵⁰ Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 445.

⁵¹ See James M. Robinson, “A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20,” *JBL* 76, no. 4 (December 1957): 270-87, who analysed the work of some scholars’ structural proposals regarding the poem. Robinson himself settled for a two-unit structure, arguing for the Pauline authorship of the hymn, which he thinks was reconstructed.

⁵² Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 183-4.

⁵³ See Schweitzer, “Colossians 1: 15-20,” 99-104; Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 446-8; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 42.

⁵⁴ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 73. Trainor has two stanzas (1:15-17 and 1:18b-20), with the central statement of the whole hymn found in 18a. Trainor, “The Cosmic Christology of Colossians,” 61-4.

⁵⁵ See O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 33-4 on various two-strophe structural proposals regarding the poem.

that there are three strophes (15-16, 17-18a and 18b-20).⁵⁶ Third, still others say there are four strophes (15-16a, 16b-e, 16f-18a and 18b-20).⁵⁷ Fourth, there are even those who have proposed five strophes (15-16b, 16c-f, 17a-18c, 19a-20a and 20b-c).⁵⁸

From these many proposals, the most popular one suggested is two strophes, and it is favoured here. The difficulty facing this view is with verses 17-18a. The possible solution to this difficulty, according to Schweizer, as O'Neill notes, is "vv. 17, 18a contain three short statements, each beginning [with] καί, which correspond to the threefold structure of vv. 15, 16 on the one hand and vv. 18b-20 on the other hand: each of the sets refers to (a) the dignity of Christ; (b) the creative work of Christ; and (c) the reconciling work of Christ."⁵⁹

In other words, verses 17-18a are a transitional statement. But the problem with this suggestion, as O'Neill highlights, is in verse 16, where "[t]he words τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται belong much more naturally with vv. 17, 18a than with vv. 15, 16, simply because the verb is a perfect tense: the perfect matches the perfect *συνέστηκεν* (and the two present tenses, *ἔστιν*) in vv. 17, 18a."⁶⁰ He further argues that the four "paratactic statements form a natural unit, with a style of their own: lines 1 and 3 have a common subject, a perfect verb, and one or two prepositional phrases, and lines 2 and 4 both begin καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν."⁶¹ O'Neill's argument seems to support a three-strophe structure. However, he treats verses 15-20 as part of the Apostle's prayer of thanks, which he refers to as liturgy (vv. 9-23), and thus he divides the liturgy into two main units (vv. 9-20 and vv. 21-23).⁶² Therefore, his structural argument, though intriguing, is not applicable to the study of Col 1:15-20 as a stand-alone passage.

While O'Neill proposes that verses 17-18a are a separate unit, against the two-strophe position, the preferred structure for our investigation is two strophes, as Wright

⁵⁶ R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (Greenwood, South Carolina: Attic Press, 1974), 55.

⁵⁷ Wolfgang Pohlmann, "Die hymnischen All-Prädikationen in Kol 1:15-20," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 64 (1973): 56; cited in Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 184.

⁵⁸ See Charles Masson, *L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Colossiens: Commentaire du Nouveau Testament* 10 (Neuchâtel: Delachaux, 1950), 195; cited in Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 184.

⁵⁹ Eduard Schweizer, "Die Kirche als Leib Christi in den paulinischen Antilegomena," *Th.L.Z* 86 (1961): 241-56; reprinted in *Neotestamentica* (1963): 293-316; O'Neill, "The Source of the Christology in Colossians," 88.

⁶⁰ O'Neill, "The Source of the Christology in Colossians," 88.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* O'Neill was of the opinion that Col 1:15-20 is part of a whole liturgical passage (1:9-23) and thus divides this passage into two parts, on grammatical grounds: 1:9-18 and 19-23. (89-96).

⁶² *Ibid.*, 89.

proposes.⁶³ The questions raised concerning the middle stanza (vv. 17-18a) can be resolved by adopting the two-strophe structure with a chiasmic pattern. Wright suggests that the problematic lines (vv. 17-18a) be “taken as a pair of couplets, forming the centre point of a chiasmus.”⁶⁴ This leaves us with the two parallel strophes (vv. 15-16 and 18b-20), each beginning with relative pronouns. Wright, in using the pronouns to delineate the structure of the poem, evokes a uniformly coherent division, as shown below.⁶⁵

ὅς ἐστιν (15a)
 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ (16a)
 δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτόν (16f)
 καὶ αὐτός, (17a)
 καὶ αὐτός (18a)
 ὅς ἐστιν (18c)
 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ (19)
 δι’ αὐτοῦ...εἰς αὐτόν (20a)⁶⁶

Further support for parallelism in the structure is drawn from the repeated use of *πρωτότοκος* (15c and 18d), “and by the parallels between 16 and 20:

τὰ πάντα
 ἐν τοῖς οὐρανόις καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (16a-b)
 τὰ πάντα...
 εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανόις (20a, c).⁶⁷

Wright then uses the ABBA pattern to divide the poem as follows: A – 15-16; B – 17; B₁ – 18ab; A₁ – 18c-20. The problematic middle pair (B and B₁) form the centre point of the chiasm. This preserves the parallelism between A and A₁⁶⁸ as shown below.

A – Col 1:15-16
 B – Col 1:17
 B₁ – Col 1:18a-b
 A₁ – Col 1:18b-20

Based on the above analysis, this thesis adopts Wright’s two-strophe structure in our study of Col 1:15-20.

⁶³ Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 445; see Bruce, “Colossians Problems Part 2: The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15-20,” 100.

⁶⁴ Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 447.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁶⁶ Adapted from *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

4.3 Analysing Col 1:15-20

The poem (1:15-20) is part of the first major section of the Letter (1:3-23),⁶⁹ which I have described as theological or doctrinal.⁷⁰ It consists of sections of Thanksgiving (1:3-12) and the Person and Work of Christ (1:13-23).⁷¹ The latter subsection begins with believers' transference from the dark domain into the kingdom of God's beloved Son, through whom the Colossian Christians have been redeemed, i.e. the forgiveness of sin (13-14). What follows is the poem of praise to Christ as the cosmic creator and redeemer of all things. The poem consists of two strophes which parallel each other, with a transition statement linking them (1:17-18a). The first strophe portrays Christ as pre-eminent in creation. The second strophe exalts him as pre-eminent in redemption. Our discussion of the poem follows this basic structure.

4.3.1 First Strophe (vv. 15-16) – Christ is Pre-eminent in Creation

The relative pronoun ὃς refers to Christ (see vv. 13-14). Christ ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου προτότουκος πάσης κτίσεως (is [the] image of the invisible God [the] firstborn of all creation – v. 15).⁷² Similar language is used in 2 Cor 4:4, where Christ is εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ, except that it does not have the term ἀοράτου. The term εἰκὼν has a range of meanings⁷³ but the nuance intended is “that which has the same form as something,”⁷⁴ the “representation, reflection and likeness.”⁷⁵ The depiction of Christ as “the image of the invisible God” does not mean a resemblance; rather, it is an image of an archetype which “in this case is God.”⁷⁶ Εἰκὼν reflects “certain qualities of the object being imaged.”⁷⁷ As Witherington notes, Christ is “seen as one who in the fullest sense bears the divine image

⁶⁹ Scholars like Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, vii-viii; Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, vii, and Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 35-6, have divided the letter into five main units. There are minor differences concerning where one unit ends and another begins. I have adopted Sumney's and Talbert's divisional units, as follows: (i) Thanksgiving, Intercession and Christology – 1:3-23; (ii) Paul's Ministry – 1:24-2:5; (iii) False Teachings and its antidote – 2:6-23; (iv) Cruciform Lifestyle – 3:1-4:6; and (v) Final Greetings and Instructions – 4:7-18.

⁷⁰ See Chapter 3.2.

⁷¹ Talbert has three subsections – Thanksgiving (1:3-8), Intercession (9-14), Praise and Application of Person and the Work of Christ (vv. 15-23). Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 182. I differ from Talbert because 1:3-12 is an *inclusio*. It begins and ends with giving thanks to God the Father (3, 13) and also uses the pronoun “you” (v. 3, 12) and switches to “us” in verse 13.

⁷² The translation of the Greek text (Col 1:15-20) to English is mine.

⁷³ See BDAG, 281.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁷⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 87; see also Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 143.

⁷⁶ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: III. Christ Pre-Eminent,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119, no. 473 (January-March 1962): 13.

⁷⁷ Foster, *Colossians*, 177.

and character on earth,”⁷⁸ “the ‘projection’ of God on the canvas of our humanity and the embodiment of the divine in the world of men and women.”⁷⁹

The “image of God” language immediately recalls Gen 1:26. Could Gen 1:26 be the background of εἰκών? Some biblical scholars see in εἰκών this background.⁸⁰ Strelan argues that to confess Christ as the image of God implies that Christ is the true man whom God created Adam to be. He is the head of the new humanity.⁸¹ Commenting on εἰκών, Wright asserts that Christ is a perfect human being, though not yet a human, and that Jesus was God’s agent in the creation of the world.⁸²

While these renderings are possible, grammatically the verb ἔσται (present tense) makes Christ the exclusive, eternal, visible representation of God the Father in the present.⁸³ Christ is the very being of the invisible God.⁸⁴ He is the uncreated image of God, while human beings are created. This means that the background of εἰκών goes beyond Gen 1:26 to the Wisdom tradition. In Wilson’s view, Christ is “the embodiment of the figure of Wisdom.”⁸⁵ Both Prov 8:22-29 and Wisdom 7:25 use εἰκών of Wisdom.⁸⁶

In Hellenistic Judaism, the divine Wisdom was thought of as an image of God, as was Logos in Philo.⁸⁷ Subsequently, these ideas were taken up by Christian writers to identify Christ with God.⁸⁸ Wisdom was with the LORD in the beginning of creation (Prov 8:22), and Wisdom is personified as the εἰκών of God’s goodness, that is, the one who

⁷⁸ Ben Witherington III, *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament: Individual Witnesses*, Vol. 1 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 20.

⁷⁹ Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon*, 108. Plato referred to the cosmos as the image of God (*Timaeus* 92c).

⁸⁰ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 58.

⁸¹ See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 72.

⁸² Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 461.

⁸³ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 39; Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 459.

⁸⁴ Both Jewish and Christian theologians have wrestled with the question of the image of God or *imago Dei*. For Christian theologians, especially in the early patristic period, a distinction was drawn between the image of God and the likeness of God. First, Tertullian suggested that the image of God was retained after the Fall, but it would be restored to the likeness of God by the renewing work of the Spirit. Origen, on the other hand, referred to *imago Dei* as humanity after the Fall, and the likeness of God as the human nature which would be perfected at the final consummation. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 348-9. A second suggestion from the same period was to envision the *imago Dei* as the human faculty of reasoning that distinguished human beings from the animal kingdom. (349) The third interpretation is moral uprightness. According to McGrath, “humanity as created in the image of God is widely regarded as establishing the original uprightness and dignity of human nature.” (349).

⁸⁵ Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 129.

⁸⁶ As Wright has cautioned, the poem (1:15-20) should be read from the entire Jewish worldview rather than just one particular branch. See Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 452-58; see also O’Neill, “The Source of the Christology in Colossians,” 87-100.

⁸⁷ Philo, *De confusione* 97, 147; *De fuga* 101; *De somniis* 1.239; 2.45.

⁸⁸ See Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20,” 462-3; Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 130-1.

reveals God's goodness (Wisd 7:25).⁸⁹ Wisdom as the εἰκὼν pre-existed with God and is the divine revelation of God's goodness. Against this background, Christ is identified as the εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου. The phrase Christ "is the image of the invisible God" assumes pre-existence and a manifestation of God's glory, as the term πρωτότοκος (see below) also indicates.

Christ is the image of τοῦ ἀοράτου God. The term ἀοράτος could be seen as a contrast to εἰκὼν, which implies something visible.⁹⁰ According to Sumney, ἀοράτος refers to the "transcendence and otherness of God."⁹¹ But God's transcendence and otherness is made immanent and visible through Christ, who is the εἰκὼν of God's glory.⁹² Dunn understands both Wisdom and Logos as God's way of "reaching out to and interacting with his world and his people, in other words, speaking of God's immanence while safeguarding his transcendence."⁹³

In short, through Christ the transcendent God revealed his presence and activity in the world.⁹⁴ This understanding is derived from τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, which implies the "manifestation of the hidden."⁹⁵ This manifestation of God in Christ is always, in every way, the manifestation of God, as the present tense ἐστίν connotes.⁹⁶ Christ as the image of the invisible God emphasises the importance of revelation. He is the one who has revealed God to/in the world so that human beings can enter into a relationship with God.⁹⁷

Christ is not only an εἰκὼν of the invisible God, he is also the πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως. The term πρωτότοκος occurs twice in the poem, and it can have two different connotations – priority and sovereignty.⁹⁸ Πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως does not mean that Christ was the first of God's creation or a created being.⁹⁹ The term πρωτότοκος is seen against wisdom tradition. In Prov 8:22, Wisdom is alluded to as firstborn who existed with God before the creation came into existence. Paul therefore applies this notion to

⁸⁹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 88-9; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 43.

⁹⁰ Foster suggests the use of ἀοράτου, "draws upon the theological outlook of the Jewish and ancient Israelite religion, and may stand behind the commandments against the futility of attempting to make objects in the likeness of God (Exod 20:4)." Foster, *Colossians*, 178.

⁹¹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 64.

⁹² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 88; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 43.

⁹³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 88.

⁹⁴ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 64.

⁹⁵ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 143.

⁹⁶ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: III. Christ Pre-Eminent," 13.

⁹⁷ See John Behr, "Colossians 1:13-20: A Chiastic Reading," *St VTQ* (1996): 252-3.

⁹⁸ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: III. Christ Pre-Eminent," 14.

⁹⁹ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon: Exegetical Guide to Greek New Testament*, 39-40.

Christ as the firstborn implying that Christ existed with God the Father and was there when all of the creation came to be (Prov 8:23-31). Hence, Christ as the firstborn implies that he is the pre-existent one. Also the term *πρωτότοκος* implies a special relationship between the Father and Son.¹⁰⁰ That relationship is portrayed as Christ being God's agent in creation and redemption (see 1:19). Through Christ, God created everything both visible and invisible (1:16). Being God's agent does not mean Christ is lower than God the Father. He is equal with God the Father. Christ shares in the same divine nature with God the Father as an *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ*. He is the one through whom the Father's plan and purpose for the creation is executed.

Therefore, the term *πρωτότοκος* speaks of priority¹⁰¹ in time and rank.¹⁰² In time, Christ pre-existed creation and in rank, he has priority over creation. He is superior to all of creation. This line of thought is supported by the genitive phrase *πάσης κτίσεως*, which appears more as a comparative than a partitive.¹⁰³ In a syntactic sense, it does appear to be partitive. Christ would then be one among other creatures. However, the poetic material proves otherwise, since Christ is compared with all created things implying that he is supreme. Hence, the phrase *πᾶς κτίσις* places Christ in the highest position, above every created being.¹⁰⁴ He is one and equal with God the Father with whom he shares in the same divine nature, power and glory.

His pre-existence is given more explicit proof in verse 16 – *ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα* (for in him were created all things – v. 16a). The verb *κτίζω* aorist passive indicates that God is the creator, and it is taken up again in the latter part of the verse, reiterating that *τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται* – 16d, see below). The aorist tense (*ἐκτίσθη*), in the first instance, draws attention to the historical act of creation (Gen 1-2), but its second usage in the perfect tense (*ἔκτισται*) implies the continual existence of the creation.¹⁰⁵ This means that everything has come into existence in and

¹⁰⁰ See Foster, *Colossians*, 180.

¹⁰¹ Probably derived from *πρῶτος*, which means first in time or first in rank. Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: III. Christ Pre-Eminent," 14).

¹⁰² Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 71; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 65; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 44.

¹⁰³ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 65.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁰⁵ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 49. Behr asserts that two important dimensions underline the change of tense (*ἐκτίσθη...ἔκτισται*). "These two dimensions are generally interpreted as 'creation' and 'redemption' respectively." John Behr, "Colossians 1:13-20: A Chiastic Reading," *St VTQ* 40 no. 4 (1996): 254.

through Christ. The prepositional phrase ἐν αὐτῷ (in him) demonstrates that Christ is the sphere within which the work of creation commenced.¹⁰⁶

Some scholars argue that the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ is used here in an instrumental sense.¹⁰⁷ The supporting reasons given for this position are these: firstly, from the religious background, from the Jewish speculations about Wisdom, where ἐν αὐτῷ referred to location;¹⁰⁸ secondly, the parallel clause αὐτὸν ἔκτισται at the end of the verse and the phrase δι' αὐτῷ support this interpretation; and thirdly, from the parallel statement in 1 Cor 8:6 (δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα).¹⁰⁹ Clearly Christ's mediatory role in creation includes instrumentality, but the preposition ἐν suggests something more than just instrumentality. Bruce suggest the preposition ἐν (αὐτῷ) seems to point to Gen 1:1, thus depicting Christ is the sphere within which the work of creation took place.¹¹⁰ The creation took place in Christ and not without or outside Christ. Hence the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ means that the creation came into being by his actions and exists within him as the sphere.¹¹¹

As the firstborn, Christ created everything – τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα (all the things in the heavens and on the earth, the visible and the invisible – v. 16b). This phrase τὰ πάντα, in Hellenistic Jewish thinking, means totality or a single whole.¹¹² That is, the entire cosmos was created by him, as stated: ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα. The οὐρανοῖς (plural) seems to suggest that the cosmos was viewed as having a series of layers. Each layer was governed by various spirit powers. In using 'heavens' in the poem, the author probably envisioned all the beings in these realms.¹¹³ The γῆ is given as the opposite of οὐρανός and also means the material world.

Both the heavens and the earth denote that the powers/beings inhabiting the realm above and the realm below were created by Christ.¹¹⁴ These beings/powers were again

¹⁰⁶ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 45; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 71.

¹⁰⁷ See Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 188; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 50-1, footnote 129.

¹⁰⁸ Philo, *De opificio* 20; οὐδ' ὁ ἐκ τῶνιδεῶν κόσμος ἄλλον ἂν ἔχει τόπον ἢ τὸν θεὸν λόγον – the universe that consisted of ideas would have no other location than the divine reason. This understanding is contextually inappropriate because τὰ πάντα cannot be interpreted as world of ideas. See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 138.

¹⁰⁹ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 45.

¹¹⁰ See Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 61-2.

¹¹¹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 66.

¹¹² Ps. 104:24 (LXX 103:24); Wis 8:5; Philo *Quod deterius* 54; *Heres* 199; *De fuga* 109; Pseudo-Aristotle *De mundo* 6; Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4:23; Philo, *De cherubim* 125-126. See also Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 71.

¹¹³ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 66.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

captured by the second of pair of opposites – τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα. The use of ἀόρατος here probably had something to do with the Colossian philosophy that was based on the elemental powers of the universe (2:8, 20), with its emphasis on the visionary experiences of the angelic beings (cf. 2:18).¹¹⁵ These visible and invisible powers/beings were identified as εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι (whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – v. 16c).¹¹⁶ These titles represented real beings that the recipients were aware of and which they previously believed occupied various layers of the cosmos and controlled the elements of the cosmic world, which the author suspected that the Colossians envisaged as “having an independence from the sphere of Christ’s power.”¹¹⁷

The titles of these beings alone suggest that these were powerful beings.¹¹⁸ Thrones were probably superior to powers and rulers to the authorities. In Greek thinking, thrones and rulers denoted positions held. Powers and authorities indicated the presence of those over whom the authority was exercised.¹¹⁹ The titles likely represented the highest order of these beings,¹²⁰ but these terms were used in a variety of ways in the New Testament,¹²¹ which cautions against any fixed hierarchical structure.¹²² In both Testaments, thrones were located in heaven,¹²³ dominions were referred to as heavenly powers,¹²⁴ and the same was true of rulers and authorities.¹²⁵ In this sense, all four seem to refer to spiritual beings,¹²⁶ which were later referred to as στοιχεῖα, from which the opposing teaching had its origins (2:8, 20; see also Gal 4:9).¹²⁷

¹¹⁵ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 63, Chapter 3.

¹¹⁶ For the meaning of each of these titles, see Foster, *Colossians*, 186-9.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹¹⁸ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 66.

¹¹⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 72.

¹²⁰ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 46-7.

¹²¹ See 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col 2:10, 15.

¹²² Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 63-4; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 72-3. However, Wright states that Paul was not so much concerned with “listing them in a particular order or with distinguishing carefully between them as with asserting Christ’s supremacy over them.” (73).

¹²³ Dan 7:9; Rev 4; Wis 7:8; Test. of Levi 3:8; 2 Enoch 20:1; Apocalypse of Elijah 1:10-11.

¹²⁴ Eph 1:20-21; 1 Enoch 61:10; 2 Enoch 20:1.

¹²⁵ Col 2:10, 15; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12.

¹²⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 92. See also O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 46-7.

¹²⁷ While these titles clearly referred to spiritual beings, they can also represent visible political and social structures, offices and realities. Wright also comments that “[t]his is quite legitimate, for Paul spiritual and earthly rulers were not sharply distinguished.” Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 72. This understanding is derived from the opposing pairs – things in heaven and on earth, and visible and invisible. The list of titles is probably listed in the same sense as opposing pairs – thrones and dominions, and rulers and authorities. See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 67.

The final clause, τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται (all things through him and for him have been created – v. 16d), means that no power structure, whether visible or invisible, is independent of Christ. Every power structure is established by him and for him, who is their head (2:10). These powers are subservient to him and received their authority to rule from him (see Rom 13:1). The three-prepositional phrase, ἐν αὐτῷ, δι' αὐτοῦ and εἰς αὐτόν, denotes Christ's relationship to creation, both visible and invisible. From the highest to the lowest of beings, they were created in him, the sphere within which creation commenced, by him (denoting the agency of creation) and for him (denoting the goal of creation).¹²⁸ Everything owes its existence to Christ, who is their goal of existence. Therefore, everything is subjected to him as the goal of creation. Christ is supreme over all creation.¹²⁹

In summary, the main emphasis of the first stanza is the pre-eminence of Christ in creation. Drawing on the Jewish Wisdom tradition, Christ is identified as “the image of the invisible God” and the “firstborn of all creation.” The three prepositional phrases, “in him,” “through him” and “for him” affirm the motif of Christ's pre-eminence in all things, both visible and invisible, and over every spirit being. Christ is the sphere, agent and goal of creation. The middle stanza (vv. 17-18a), to be discussed next, is a transition from Christ's creative-sustenance role to his redemptive role.

4.3.2 Transition Stanza (vv. 17-18a) – Christ is the Sustainer of Creation

Col 1:17-18a summarises the first strophe (vv. 15-16) and introduces the second strophe. It commences with the phrase καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων (and he is before all things – v. 17a). This phrase stresses the notion of Christ's pre-existence, as seen in the earlier phrase, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως.¹³⁰ It is alluding to Gen 1:1 – “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Before anything existed, God was. As seen from Burney's exposition of the Hebrew word *bereshith* (Gen. 1:1), *reshith* can be seen to refer to Christ. He interprets αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων as ‘beginning’ or *reshith*. *Reshith* is

¹²⁸ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 46-7.

¹²⁹ Foster, *Colossians*, 184.

¹³⁰ See Bruce, “Colossians Problems Part 2: The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15-20,” 104; Wayne H. House, “Doctrinal Issues in Colossians Part 2 (of 4 parts): The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (April-June 1992): 183. Harris highlights four different ways of translating αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων; “(1) He himself exists before all things... (2) He himself exists in supremacy over all things... (3) He himself is before all things... (4) He himself is supreme over all things.” Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 42.

Christ.¹³¹ Christ (αὐτός) was before all things, meaning that he pre-existed creation, as πρωτότοκος implied earlier (v. 15). In declaring that Christ pre-existed creation, he is included in the identity of the creator God of Genesis.¹³² As the pre-existent one, Christ is superior over the cosmos, which reinforces the notion of primacy in time (πρὸ πάντα) and rank, as seen earlier.¹³³

Furthermore, καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν¹³⁴ (and all things in him hold together – v. 17b) stresses that Christ is also the sustainer of the cosmos. The clause ἐν αὐτῷ used here asserts that everything is held together in Christ. He is the locus that keeps everything in motion (see Wis 1:7; Sir 43:26), and the bond that holds everything together (see Heb 1:3).¹³⁵ Everything revolves around him. Even during the period of cosmic disorder before he mediated reconciliation and peace (1:20), he sustained the universe, as the verb συνίστημι denotes.¹³⁶ The trend of thought moves from creation to its preservation,¹³⁷ and to the continuation of the creation.¹³⁸ Without him, the universe will disintegrate. He is the sustainer of the cosmos and the unifying principle of life.¹³⁹

He is not only the sustainer of the cosmos: καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας (and he is the head of the body, [of] the church – v. 18a).¹⁴⁰ This phrase makes a good transition from Christ's lordship over creation to his lordship over the church.¹⁴¹ The verb ἐστιν in the present tense is used a second time (first in verse 17) in the transition stanza, stressing his ongoing lordship over the church and its sustenance.

¹³¹ See Chapter 4.1.2.

¹³² Burney, "Christ as the APXH of Creation," 160-77.

¹³³ See Bruce, "Colossians Problems Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," 104.

¹³⁴ The background of the phrase αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας is probably from Hellenistic Judaism. See C. John Collins, "Colossians 1:17 'Hold Together': A Co-opted Term," *Biblica* 95, no. 1 (2014): 64-87.

¹³⁵ See Foster, *Colossians*, 191; House, "Doctrinal Issues in Colossians Part 2: The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians," 184.

¹³⁶ The verb συνέστηκεν may have a Hellenistic ring. See Collins, "Colossians 1,17 'Hold Together.' A Co-opted Term," 64-87.

¹³⁷ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: III. Christ Pre-Eminent," 16.

¹³⁸ See Foster, *Colossians*, 191.

¹³⁹ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 154; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 47.

¹⁴⁰ This phrase has been a point of debate among scholars regarding whether or not it was an editorial addition to a preformed poem.

¹⁴¹ David M. Hay, *Colossians* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000), 60.

The term κεφαλή is used widely in Scripture.¹⁴² Its meaning ranges from being a part of the body that contains the brain to being a person with high status.¹⁴³ Most of Paul's uses of κεφαλή are metaphorical, and its interpretation is determined by the context in which it is used.¹⁴⁴ The use of κεφαλή in 1 Cor 11:4-10 denotes authority.¹⁴⁵ In the headship structure, God is at the top as the one with the highest rank. In 1 Cor 12:21, κεφαλή is part of the body, illustrating the unity and diversity of spiritual gifts. Every gift is equal and important for the edification of the church. In Rom 12:20, paying back evil with good is like piling burning coal on the enemy's κεφαλή, meaning causing one's enemy to burn with conviction. In the context of the first stanza of the poem, which depicts Christ's pre-existence and pre-eminence, and the beginning of creation, κεφαλή suggests origin and pre-eminence.¹⁴⁶ Christ is the κεφαλή τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας, where κεφαλή (1:18; 2:10, 19; Eph 4:15), highlights origination, supremacy and control.¹⁴⁷

Christ is the head – τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας. In the Pauline corpus, σῶμα is used ninety-nine times. Σῶμα has a variety of nuances and here it means a unified group of people (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:13, 27; Eph 4:4),¹⁴⁸ τῆς ἐκκλησίας.¹⁴⁹ The church is a group of people called out by God through the gospel of Christ from different languages, tribes and nations, who are united under the headship of Christ. The church needs guidance and direction from Christ to function properly (2:19).

Paul's use of the body metaphor is probably not from Second Temple Judaism. It could have been "from the common Hellenistic image of a political population as a body."¹⁵⁰ The κεφαλή... σώματος also implies the inseparableness of Christ and τῆς ἐκκλησίας. The church has an indissoluble relationship with Christ, like the Father-Son inseparable love for his people (Rom 8:35-39). The church cannot be separated from Christ,

¹⁴² Κεφαλή is used approximately seventy-five times in the New Testament. Of these, it occurs eighteen times in the Pauline corpus. I. Howard Marshall, ed., *Moulton and Geden Concordance to the Greek New Testament*, 6th ed. (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 582-3.

¹⁴³ BDAG, 541-2.

¹⁴⁴ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 145.

¹⁴⁵ See Thisselton's discussion of the semantic nuances of κεφαλή, which he divides into three categories; (1) authority, supremacy, leadership; (2) source, origin, temporal priority, and (3) pre-eminence, foremost, topmost serving. Anthony C. Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 812-22.

¹⁴⁶ Foster, *Colossians*, 192-3.

¹⁴⁷ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: III. Christ Pre-Eminent," 17.

¹⁴⁸ BDAG, 983-4.

¹⁴⁹ Some scholars see τῆς ἐκκλησίας as a later addition to the preformed poem. However, I am not in favour of this view, as I have outlined above (see Chapter 4.2 above).

¹⁵⁰ Collins, "Colossians 1:17: 'Hold Together.' A Co-opted Term," 64-5. See the rest of his argument that the composer of the poem co-opted the term.

nor can it have life outside of Christ (2:19). As the head, he is the sustainer of the church, as he is of the created world. The church originated in Christ and exists through and for him. Because Christ is the cosmic Lord, the church here means the universal church.¹⁵¹ The church is a microcosm, where the macrocosmic rule of Christ is recognised as well as exemplified.

In summary, the transition stanza encapsulates the pre-eminence of Christ (vv. 15-16) by referring to him as αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντα. He pre-existed all things and he sustains all things. As pre-eminent Lord of creation, he is also the head of the church. He is the beginning of the church and controls the church. This introduces the second strophe, which emphasises the pre-eminence of Christ in redemption.

4.3.3 Second Strophe (vv. 18b-20) – Christ is Pre-eminent in Redemption

The second strophe parallels the first by the repetition of ὅς ἐστιν...πρωτότοκος, with an emphasis on Christ as the cosmic redeemer. Depicting Christ as the cosmic redeemer implies that there was cosmic chaos and thus a need for the cosmos to be re-ordered and restored to its original goal, namely Christ (see v. 16). The passages before (1:13-14) and after (1:21-22) the poem give some hints of this chaotic world. There was a cosmic conflict, in which human beings were held captives and were living in hostility toward God. Through Christ, human beings are delivered, redeemed and reconciled to God, along with the entire cosmos (1:20). Creation has been brought back to Christ its head.

The second stanza begins with verse 18b – ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν ἵνα γένηται ἐν πάσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων (who is the beginning, firstborn out from the dead, so that in all things he might have pre-eminence). Ὅς refers back to αὐτός (18a), which means that Christ is the beginning of the church.¹⁵² But ἀρχή is an indefinite predicate noun used with no reference to a particular situation.¹⁵³ This means that ἀρχή could have a similar connotation as πρωτότοκος, which we have seen earlier (v. 15). Ἀρχή, just like the term πρωτότοκος, has its background in the Wisdom tradition. Ἀρχή probably recalls *bereshith*, the first word of Genesis, as Burney contends.¹⁵⁴ In asserting that Christ is the ἀρχή, the author likely had in mind the new creation motif. Thus, the

¹⁵¹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 71; Foster, *Colossians*, 193.

¹⁵² See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 44.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Burney, "Christ as the APXH of Creation," 175-6.

church which is comprised of the people redeemed by Christ is a testament to the new creation begun in Christ. The next phrase makes the new creation motif more obvious.¹⁵⁵

Christ is the *πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν*. This phrase emphasises that Christ is the first to rise from the dead, thus making resurrection possible.¹⁵⁶ Being the first to rise from the dead vindicates Christ as God’s Son (see Rom 1:4; 1:3, 13) and also demonstrates that he is pre-eminent in the new creation. He has, as Foster puts it, “priority in recreation.”¹⁵⁷ His resurrection set the stage for the resurrection of others, which parallels Paul’s apocalyptic idea of first fruits in 1 Cor 15:20-27.¹⁵⁸ The phrase “firstborn from the dead” parallels “firstborn of all things,” which shifts the focus of Christ’s pre-eminence from (old) creation to new creation.¹⁵⁹ As the “firstborn from the dead,” Christ has inaugurated a new epoch (new creation).

The prime reason for Christ as the firstborn from the dead is given in the next statement – *ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων*. The poem earlier asserted his pre-eminence in creation, and now it establishes his pre-eminence over all things by virtue of his resurrection from the dead. His resurrection shows that he is pre-eminent in and the head of the new creation. There is no force, whether in the world above or below the world, that can rival his supremacy.

The remaining two verses (19 and 20) explain why Christ is pre-eminent in new creation. The first reason is *ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι* (for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell – v. 19). There are several interpretive issues concerning this verse. First, what is the meaning of *πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα*? Second, what is the subject of the aorist *εὐδόκησεν*?

The first question concerns the meaning of the phrase *πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα*. The noun *πλήρωμα* means “that which is brought to fullness or completion ... *sum total* [or] *fullness*.”¹⁶⁰ The term *πᾶν* (all) adds emphasis to *τὸ πλήρωμα*, thus connoting sum total or the totality of fullness, superabundance or completeness.¹⁶¹ The occurrence of *πλήρωμα*

¹⁵⁵ Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 151.

¹⁵⁶ The dead here could be a reference to believers (see Rom 8:29) or humanity in general. See Foster, *Colossians*, 194.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Hay, *Colossians*, 61.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ BDAG, 829.

¹⁶¹ See Petr Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. by Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991), 85. *Πλήρωμα* is either read non-technically or technically. In the non-technical sense, *πλήρωμα* simply means to fill or to make something complete. In the second century, *πλήρωμα* was used technically by the (Gnostic) Valentinians to refer “to the totality of emanations that

here without a qualifying phrase suggests its theological significance.¹⁶² Noting the occurrence of the aorist εὐδόκησεν alongside πλήρωμα has elicited various suggested meanings, from incarnation, baptism and Spirit filling,¹⁶³ resurrection,¹⁶⁴ redemptive power¹⁶⁵ or to the whole salvific work of Christ,¹⁶⁶ the whole salvific act of Christ and to God's pre-ordained decision before creation for Christ to be the agent of his "presence, creation and salvation."¹⁶⁷ In the context of the second strophe of the hymn, I conclude that it refers to the whole salvific act, which includes incarnation and baptism. The hymn praises Christ as the head of the church, the beginning and the firstborn from the dead, through whom God reconciled everything to himself (1:15-20). Thus Christ, in his redemptive mission, was the fullness of God. The aorist infinitive κατοικῆσαι also indicates what has happened.

Sumney renders πλήρωμα as "all the nature and character of God."¹⁶⁸ While this may not be incorrect, the parallel statement in Col 2:9 provides a qualifying object, θεότητος. The genitive θεότητος¹⁶⁹ sheds light on the interpretation of πλήρωμα. In Christ all the fullness of the deity dwelt (see Eph 3:19), evoking the Septuagint reading of Ps 67:17 (Ps 68:16) – "the mountain that God chose to dwell in it" – indicating that the "completeness of God's self-revelation was focused on Christ, that the wholeness of God's interaction with the universe is summed up in Christ."¹⁷⁰ This elevates Christ to the highest position in the cosmos, above every ruler and authority.¹⁷¹

The second question concerns the subject of the aorist εὐδόκησεν. The aorist εὐδόκησεν, from εὐδοκέω, means "to consider something as good and therefore worthy of choice, consent, determine, [or] resolve."¹⁷² Or it may mean "to take pleasure or find satisfaction in something, be well pleased, [or] take delight."¹⁷³ In short, it means resolve

came forth from God. The eons emanating from God filled the space in the uppermost spiritual realm – the place closest to God." Macdonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 63; see also C. F. D. Moule, "'Fullness' and 'Fill' in the New Testament," *SJT* 4, no. 1 (1951): 79-80. This evidence is often used to read the use of πλήρωμα in Colossians, but it is to be rejected. See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74.

¹⁶² Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 327.

¹⁶³ Hay, *Colossians*, 62; Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 85-6.

¹⁶⁴ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 63.

¹⁶⁵ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "From Enmity to Amity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April 1962): 141-2.

¹⁶⁶ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 63.

¹⁶⁷ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74-5.

¹⁶⁸ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74.

¹⁶⁹ For an explanation of the term θεότητος, see the discussion of Col 2:9 below.

¹⁷⁰ Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 101.

¹⁷¹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74.

¹⁷² BDAG, 404. Passages that have this connotation in Paul are 1 Cor 1:21; Gal 1:15; 1 Thess 2:8; 3:1; 2 Cor 5:8; Rom 15:26, 27.

¹⁷³ BDAG, 404. Texts that have this meaning are 1 Cor 10:5; Rom 9:1, 16.

or good pleasure, and these two nuances are retained here.¹⁷⁴ In the Old Testament, εὐδοκέω denotes God's good pleasure,¹⁷⁵ especially God's divine election, expressed in connection with His choosing and His dwelling place.¹⁷⁶ In the New Testament, the participle form of εὐδοκέω is used in a variety of ways, from God's good pleasure¹⁷⁷ to human resolve.¹⁷⁸ Its usage in Colossians 1:19 refers to God's resolve and good pleasure to have all the fullness of deity dwell in Christ, as I will show.¹⁷⁹

Therefore, the answer to the question about the subject of εὐδόκησεν is not Christ. Grammatically, ἐν αὐτῷ (see also v. 16) is locative, referring to Christ. If Christ is to be the subject, then the dative pronoun αὐτῷ should be a reflexive.¹⁸⁰ Thus, Christ cannot be the subject of εὐδοκέω. This means that the subject is either God or πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα.

There is no mention of God, which some suggest is resolved by the grammatical subject πλήρωμα, which is a "circumlocution"¹⁸¹ for God. Inserting God as the subject is supported by the use of εὐδόκησεν (εὐδοκία/εὐδοκέω) elsewhere in the New Testament (see Phil 2:13), denoting God's good pleasure¹⁸² or resolve.¹⁸³ This rendering is further supported by the masculine participle εἰρηνοποιέω (v. 20). Commentators who take God as the subject of εὐδόκησεν argue that the omission of God is possible because "εὐδοκία, εὐδοκεῖν ... are used absolutely of God's good purpose"¹⁸⁴ (see Phil 2:13). In this reading, πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα is an accusative and infinitive construction of the indirect discourse.¹⁸⁵ Further support for this position stems from the masculine participle, εἰρηνοποιέω (v. 20),

¹⁷⁴ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74.

¹⁷⁵ Ps 44:3; 147:11; 149:4.

¹⁷⁶ Ps 68:16; 132:13-14. Sumney comments that we need to retain the two nuances, in *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74.

¹⁷⁷ Luke 12:32; I Cor 1:21; Gal 1:15; Phil 2:13; Col 1:19. To this list we could add God's pleasure in his Son at his baptism (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:23) and at the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt 17:5).

¹⁷⁸ 1 Thess 2:8; 3:1; 2 Thess 1:11; 2 Cor 5:8; Rom 15:26, 27; 10:1; Phil 1:15.

¹⁷⁹ The expression εὐδόκησεν κατοικῆσαι, according to Pokorny, "was linked to the Christian tradition with the confession of Jesus as Son ... and points to his one-time and unique mission from God (Mark 1:11, par.; 2 Pet. 1:17)." Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 84. He was introduced as God's beloved son (John 1:13) which, in that tradition, was a "free rendering of Is. 42:1." (84-5). Christ is described in this manner.

¹⁸⁰ David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon: The Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed.

Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012), 101.

¹⁸¹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 75. On grammatical grounds, God is the indirect subject, but not on exegetical and theological grounds. See Bruce, *The Epistles to Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 72.

¹⁸² O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 51.

¹⁸³ BDAG, 404.

¹⁸⁴ Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 218. Lightfoot represents the commentators who argue that God is the implied subject of εὐδοκέω. See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to Colossians and to the Philemon*, 156.

¹⁸⁵ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 151.

which is a masculine personal subject.¹⁸⁶ God is the implied subject of reconciliation, and hence the same applies to εὐδόκησεν.¹⁸⁷ The verb εὐδοκέω often takes a personal subject, and in the Septuagint God is often the subject.¹⁸⁸

However, the use of the verb εὐδοκεῖν by Paul is more frequently used with human beings rather than God.¹⁸⁹ In Paul, the verb is not used in an absolute sense to render God as an implied subject (see 1 Cor 1:21; Gal 1:15).¹⁹⁰ In the immediate context, to supply God as the subject of the verb interrupts the flow and the focus on the person and the work of Christ in creation and redemption (1:15-20).¹⁹¹ Further, there is a close parallel text (2:9) which indicates what the subject of 1:19 should be.¹⁹²

On the basis that εὐδοκεῖν is not used in an absolute sense of God, and due to the occurrence of πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα in the parallel statement (2:9), it seems clear that πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα was intended to be the subject of εὐδοκία. Εὐδοκία usually has a personal subject,¹⁹³ but πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα is impersonal.¹⁹⁴ This dilemma can be resolved by the parallel statement (2:9), so that πλήρωμα can be rendered as a personal subject of εὐδοκία. There is no need to supply God (ὁ θεός) as the subject in Col 1:19 because Col 1:19 parallels Col 2:9.¹⁹⁵ Thus the personal subject of εὐδοκία is ‘all the fullness of deity or Godhead.’ In rendering πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα as the personal subject of εὐδοκία, the expressions εὐδοκησεν and αποκαταλλαξαι ... εἰς αὐτον are both conceived as having

¹⁸⁶ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101-2.

¹⁸⁷ If God is taken as the subject of εὐδοκέω, then verse 19 is rendered as – “For God was pleased to have all his fullness to dwell in him.” Translations like NIV, NASB, NKJV and TEV prefer this reading.

¹⁸⁸ Ps 40:13 (LXX 39:14); 51:16 (50:18); 85:1 (84:2); Jer 2:19; 14:10, 12 Judith 15:10; 2 Macc 14:35; Sir 34:19; 45:19. See Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 101.

¹⁸⁹ According to Abbott, about seven use of εὐδοκεῖν is used in relations to human beings and three use of its use is relations to God. Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 218.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 63. See also Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 218. Although support for God as the subject is found in 2 Macc. 14:35, Abbott argues that “the subject of the infinitive after εὐδοκεῖν is different from the subject of the finite verb (σύ, Κύριε, εὐδόκησας ναὸν τῆς σῆς κατα σκηνώσεως ἐν ἡμῖν γενέσθαι), yet in every instance in the N.T, (six) in which εὐδοκεῖν is followed by an infinitive, the subject of both is the same. The assumed change of subject to the two infinitives, κατοικ. and ἀποκατ. is also harsh.” (219).

¹⁹² See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 151; Campbell, *Colossians and Philemon*, 16.

¹⁹³ Εὐδοκία usually has a personal subject, and thus it is awkward to take the neuter πλήρωμα as the subject. See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 151.

¹⁹⁴ If πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα is rendered as the impersonal subject, then it would indicate “that the completeness of God’s self-revelation was focused in Christ.” Dunn, *The Epistles to Colossians and Philemon*, 101.

¹⁹⁵ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 45.

a personal subject.¹⁹⁶ The masculine εἰς αὐτόν and εἰρηνοποιήσας “may be explained as a construction according to sense.”¹⁹⁷ In Christ, the totality of divinity dwelt in the work of redemption, just as in creation.

On the other hand, πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα could stand as a subject. This rendering is supported by Col 2:9, where πλήρωμα is without doubt the subject.¹⁹⁸ In my view, πλήρωμα is the subject. In Christ, all the fullness of God dwells. This affirms that the totality of the divine essence and power reside in Christ. The use of πλήρωμα here and later in Col 2:9 was probably to undercut any perception that the πλήρωμα was “dispersed through the cosmos in a series of emanations.”¹⁹⁹

God through his incarnated son executed his plan of redemption and reconciliation of the cosmos. Here κατοικέω is emphasising the historical event wherein God in Christ was pleased to become a human being and died to save humanity from sin and death (1:21-22) and to reconcile all things to God, as verse 20 demonstrates. The verb εὐδόκησεν accentuates God’s pleasure in dwelling visibly in and through the person of Christ, and in revealing his glory, power and plan for human beings and the cosmos. Christ is not a mere symbol of the divinity, but shares in the divine identity. The second strophe declares that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Christ, and is a reference to his incarnation and the whole salvific work of Christ.²⁰⁰

The second reason why Christ is pre-eminent in new creation is καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ [δι’ αὐτοῦ] ἢτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἢτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς (and through him to reconcile all things to himself, having made peace through the blood of the cross, [through him], whether the things on earth or things in the heavens – v. 20). The second strophe climaxes in redemption accomplished in Christ, as the two verbs ἀποκαταλλάσσω and εἰρηνοποιέω assert. The act of reconciliation is described by a rare compound verb, ἀποκαταλλάσσω. This verb here (also in v. 22) is an “intensive

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 70.

¹⁹⁸ See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 51-2; Bruce, *The Epistles to Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 72-3; Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.2.

¹⁹⁹ Foster, *Colossians*, 159.

²⁰⁰ Dunn argues that both εὐδόκησεν and πλήρωμα refer to Christ’s ministry, climaxing in his death and resurrection. “The thought is not yet of incarnation, but it is more than of inspiration; rather, it is of an inspiration (in Greek, ‘God-possessed’ – ἔνθεος, ἐνθουσιασμός) so complete (‘all the fullness’) as to be merging into the idea of incarnation.” Dunn, *The Epistles to Colossians and to Philemon*, 102, cf. 99.

word meaning *to reconcile completely (apo)*,²⁰¹ which presumes a state of estrangement or hostility that the two strophes have not mentioned. This ongoing hostility was resolved through the cross of Christ.²⁰²

The reconciliation spoken of here is not a mutual reconciliation following a mutual concession after or during the hostility. It is the sole initiative of God, who decisively restores the wayward creation because of sin (see 1:14, 21-22; 2:11-14).²⁰³ The reconciliation of all things is decisively God's doing, and thus is to be seen as objective rather than subjective.²⁰⁴ Because of its objective nature, reconciliation can be applied to human beings subjectively to mean forgiveness of sin, and to the rebellious cosmic power as pacification. As Garry Schultz maintains, "[r]econciliation in a salvific sense refers to God's work in which [h]e acts out of [h]is love to bring about harmonious relations between [h]imself and others."²⁰⁵ God's reconciliation of all things to himself through Christ is a past event with continuing effect.

The unusual feature of this verse is the reconciling of τὰ πάντα. In 2 Cor 5:19, reconciliation of the cosmos clearly refers to the world of humans, but what is the meaning here? To answer this question, we must first understand what the clause ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν means. Then, what is the meaning of the next clause, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ?

There are several answers to the first question. Some scholars (Martin, Sumney, Bruce) contend that ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα means human beings. They argue that the verb 'reconcile' is properly applied to persons as objects of reconciliation.²⁰⁶ Others, however, do not think that ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα refers to "an objective physical-metaphysical reconciliation"²⁰⁷ of all things, and suggest that Col 1:20 is to be seen as a reversal of Rom 1:23, where the breaching of God's glory is healed or restored.

Still other scholars (e.g., Pokorny) see reconciliation as subjection, to do with the pacification of the cosmic powers. Since these forces were evil, they needed to be brought under Christ as their head. They were pacified through the cross (2:14-15) and the cosmic

²⁰¹ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: IV. From Enmity to Amity," 143.

²⁰² Dunn, *The Epistles to Colossians and to Philemon*, 102-03; cf. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 53.

²⁰³ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: IV. From Enmity to Amity," 143.

²⁰⁴ See Gary L. Shultz Jr., "The Reconciliation of All Things in Christ," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167 (October-December 2010): 442-59.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 442.

²⁰⁶ See Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, 109; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 75-6; F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (October-December 1984): 291-2.

²⁰⁷ See O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 54.

peace was restored.²⁰⁸ There are other scholars (Lohse, Thurston, Hay) who argue that τὰ πάντα refers to the universe (cosmos), which had a considerable disturbance. Through Christ, the cosmos was reconciled and brought back to its original creative purpose and order, under Christ as its head, but complete cosmic peace will occur at the end times.²⁰⁹ Thus, the phrase διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ stresses that the cosmic peace was established through the death of Christ on the cross. The principalities and powers were stripped of their powers, and reconciliation of everything commenced. The message of reconciliation pertains to the entire cosmos (τὰ πάντα), including human beings (vv. 21-22).²¹⁰

But how do we explain δι’ αὐτοῦ in this verse? There are two options: First, “through him” is an emphatic repetition of Christ (see 1:16d, 17a, 18a, 18c); and second, it is resumptive, i.e. it is taking up again the earlier occurrence of “through him” all things were reconciled (v. 20).²¹¹ I suggest that “through him” is emphatic (the first option), because the overall emphasis of the poem is on Christ’s pre-eminence. The purpose of the poem is to explain why Christ is pre-eminent. The second strophe of the poem states that Christ is pre-eminent because he is the cosmic redeemer. Therefore, “through him” is emphasising that through the blood of Christ cosmic reconciliation and peace have been established.²¹²

In this light, the phrase ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα ought to be understood as the reconciliation of the entire universe, since τὰ πάντα was used earlier (vv. 16, 17) to refer to the cosmos. As Schultz states, “believers, unbelievers, and the creation are all reconciled

²⁰⁸ Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 86-9. Thompson sees it is the reconciliation of human beings and the pacification of the hostile powers. Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 33-5.

²⁰⁹ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 59; Bonnie Thurston, *Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 30-1; Hay, *Colossians*, 63.

²¹⁰ Another rendering that is not convincing is that of some interpreters who see the emphasis of the verse as located elsewhere. Instead of seeing τὰ πάντα and the possible categories that it includes as its central focus, this view directs attention to the one who effected reconciliation. Here the central question asked is, “who is the mediator of this reconciliation?” The answer is “Christ alone.” He is the nucleus of the first and second strophe. The “all” formula decisively points to Christ as the mediator and Lord of creation. Therefore, the clause εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, which is seen as in apposition of τὰ πάντα, supports this view. Since the phrase εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς is generalised, the author applied the poem to human beings as the recipients of this reconciliation (vv. 21-23), while omitting the cosmic Fall to stay in focus with the author’s intention of maintaining Christ as the focus of the poem. There is no question that the poem stresses Christ’s pre-eminence in creation and new creation, but the passage mentions the object or benefactor of reconciliation as “all things” in general. Therefore, to ask who or what was reconciled is a legitimate question, even though it may not be the primary question. See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 55.

²¹¹ Harris argues for the first rendering; see *Colossians and Philemon*, 47. Foster is in favour of the second rendering; see *Colossians*, 200.

²¹² Heil, *Colossians: Encouragement to Walk in All Wisdom*, 74; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 78.

in different ways. There is no need to restrict the scope of reconciliation to avoid universalism.”²¹³ Furthermore, because the poem emphasises Christ’s pre-eminence in creation and redemption, reconciliation embraces the whole cosmos.

This cosmic reconciliation is likely a reversal of Gen 3. The Fall of human beings brought chaos, disharmony and disorder to God’s purpose and order in creation. In Christ, God restored order and peace in the cosmos. The application of reconciliation to human beings (1:21-22) does not mean that τὰ πάντα suggests human beings are the object of reconciliation while the cosmos is not. The application of reconciliation to human beings means that human beings are responsible for what happened in the cosmos (Gen 3). Reconciliation of human beings means the reconciliation of everything on earth and in the heavens. When human beings are restored to their original purpose and order, the rest of the creation also finds its purpose and place under the headship of Christ.²¹⁴ The phrase διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ, which is original to the poem, further expands the concept of reconciliation. The cosmic peace has returned.²¹⁵ Through this one act of reconciliation, the hostile spiritual powers were emptied of their vitality and authority over human beings (2:13-15). These powers were stripped, pacified and subjected to Christ, the only true head (2:10).

If humanity is the object of reconciliation, does this mean that everyone will be saved? Is Col 1:20 advocating universal salvation? In christological terms, the wider teaching of Colossians does not advocate that everyone will be saved whether they believe the gospel or not. As Schultz writes, “[t]he Bible clearly rules out universalism, but it also teaches that all things created by God are reconciled to God through Christ’s death. Therefore, the Bible teaches universal reconciliation, but not universal salvation.”²¹⁶ In Colossians, in order to be reconciled and have peace with God (1:21-23), one has to trust in Christ (1:5) or to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (1:21-22; 1:5; 2:6). Through Christ, one enters into a new relationship with God – no longer an enemy of God.

²¹³ Schultz, “The Reconciliation of All Things in Christ,” 444.

²¹⁴ According to Wright, “Humanity plays the key role in the ordering of God’s world, human reconciliation will lead to the restoration of creation, just as human sin led to creation’s fall (compare Rom 8:19ff). At present..., the world as a whole remains unaware of the reconciliation achieved on the cross, of the fact that God will eventually remake the world and its power structures so that they reflect his glory instead of human arrogance. This is why he [Paul] speaks both of reconciliation of the ‘powers’ and also of God’s victory in Christ over them as hostile forces (2:15). God plans for an eventual complete harmony, new heaven and new earth.” Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 76-7.

²¹⁵ See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 55-6.

²¹⁶ Schultz, “The Reconciliation of All Things in Christ,” 444.

In summary, the second strophe depicts Christ as God's agent of redemption (reconciliation) and the ἀρχή, the genesis of the re-creation, and thus he is supreme. He is also supreme over the dead, as πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν implies. His resurrection from the dead affirms his dominance or pre-eminence over death, signifying the inauguration of the new creation. Life has conquered death. His resurrection from the dead prepares the way for the resurrection of believers. As the ἀρχή and the πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, Christ is pre-eminent in all things. All things have been reconciled to God through him who is the fullness of God in incarnation and redemption. Through his death on the cross, the creation in turmoil is brought back to the headship of Christ. Forgiveness of sin and pacification of the insubordinate forces are effected in and through Christ.

4.4 The Flow of Thought (Col 1:15-20)

The poem is about the person and the work of Christ. To understand God's plan and activity in the world is to know who Christ is in relation to God the Father.²¹⁷ Thus, the poem delineates the identity of Christ in relation to God. The Apostle Paul drew on the characteristics of Jewish monotheism to include Christ in the unique divine sovereignty over creation and redemption.²¹⁸

The first strophe of the poem emphasises the role of Christ in creation as the Wisdom of God,²¹⁹ which some scholars refer to as wisdom christology. The terms "image" and "firstborn" (1:15), as seen above, stem from the Wisdom tradition and show that Christ shares in the divine identity with God the Father, that he pre-existed creation, and that through him the very being and nature of God is made manifest. That Christ is the image of the invisible God means he is the exact representation and manifestation of God. He is not a resemblance but the very essence of the unseen God. As the image of the invisible God, Christ has revealed God. God's divine nature, glory and power were revealed in Christ.²²⁰ It is no longer only from creation that God's divine attributes are seen (Rom 1:19-20). They are seen in the face of Jesus Christ, the son and image of God.

Furthermore, Christ pre-existed creation as πρωτότοκος, which connotes that he created everything. The three prepositional phrases ἐν αὐτῷ, δι' αὐτοῦ and εἰς αὐτὸν

²¹⁷ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 28.

²¹⁸ See Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*, 26.

²¹⁹ Bruce, "The Colossian Problem Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," 100; see also Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: III. Christ Pre-Eminent," 13.

²²⁰ See Bruce, "The Colossian Problem Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," 101.

underscore Christ's pre-eminence in creation. *Ἐν αὐτῷ* implies that Christ is the sphere of creation. This means that Christ is the beginning of creation, which identifies him with the "beginning" of Gen 1:1, the sphere within which creation came into existence.²²¹ Creation is *δι' αὐτοῦ*, meaning that Christ is the agent or the one responsible for creating all things. Creation is *εἰς αὐτὸν*, implying Christ is the very reason and goal of creation. He created every spirit being that exists in the world, above or below. These beings are not independent beings. They are an integral part of Christ's creation and are subjected to him as their head (2:10). Therefore, Christ is pre-eminent in creation. He is not only the creator, he is also the sustainer. He sustains the entire cosmos.²²² He holds everything together, just as the body is held together by joints and ligaments (2:19).

The transitional stanza re-affirms Christ's pre-existence (before all things) and his cosmic sovereignty. As Bruce comments, "[t]he phrase 'before all things' sums up the essence of His designation as 'Firstborn before all creation' and excludes any possibility of interpreting that designation to mean that He Himself is part of the created order."²²³ It is as the pre-existent one that Christ holds creation together. Even the church which is his body is held together by him (see Col 2:19). The church is inseparably linked to Christ, as the head-body metaphor indicates. Christ's rule over the universe is made known through the church, his body.

The second strophe of the poem celebrates the role of Christ in the new creation. He is the firstborn (or first to rise) from the dead, which denotes the beginning of the new creation. Death no longer has power over those who are in Christ. His resurrection from the dead implies that believers (and human beings in general) will also rise from the dead. In fact, Colossians goes on to teach that the believers were already raised from the dead with Christ and were reigning with Christ in heaven, awaiting the final unveiling of Christ in glory, and that they too will be revealed with him (Col 3:1-4). His resurrection from the dead reinforces the fact that he is pre-eminent in all things (1:18c).

In him all the fullness of the Godhead "was pleased to dwell" (1:19). The dwelling refers to incarnation and the whole salvific event. Christ in his divine fullness effected cosmic reconciliation (1:20). He reconciled all things to God and made peace with his blood, meaning his death on the cross. This is an objective reconciliation, meaning that God reconciled all things to himself through Christ. It is an act of God. In Bruce's view, "it is

²²¹ Ibid., 102.

²²² See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 31.

²²³ See Bruce, "The Colossian Problem Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," 104.

God's eternal purpose (as stated in Eph 1:10) that all things should be summed up in Him."²²⁴

God's work of reconciliation through Christ "is objective as well as subjective."²²⁵ Reconciliation of all things does not mean universal salvation – that every human being will be saved because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. The context of Colossians (see 1:4-14, 22-23) and other Pauline Letters (Rom 10:9; 2 Cor 5:19) shows that those who have faith in Christ are reconciled to God.²²⁶ The notion of cosmic reconciliation and reconciliation of human beings (1:21-23), those who have faith in Christ, recalls Gen 3. The unmentioned cosmic chaos as implied by the cosmic reconciliation is probably a reference to the Fall of Adam that brought God's judgment on the earth. Here we see Christ through whom God has reconciled all things to himself. Hence, the reconciling of human beings also means the reconciliation of the whole cosmos. This notion is seen elsewhere in the Pauline epistles – that creation is waiting for the redemption of human beings, which would lead to its freedom (Rom 8:18-23).

Reconciliation is a past event or a finished work with a continuing effect on humanity, the world, and the unseen powers. The poem shows that reconciliation is a finished work in which the cross of Christ is a necessary feature of reconciliation. In this vein, Johnson concludes that "[r]econciliation, then, is a finished work of God by which man is brought from an attitude and position of enmity with God to an attitude and position of amity and peace with God, by means of the removal of the enmity through the cross."²²⁷ On the other hand, reconciliation is a finished work with a continuing effect. As Bruce comments, "[t]he reconciliation of the κόσμος is a continuing process, not yet an accomplished fact... While the reconciliation of believers is a completed work, the reconciliation of the world is not."²²⁸

What about the powers of darkness (Col 1:13)? Reconciliation for the powers of darkness means pacification.²²⁹ Through the cross of Christ, the evil powers were stripped of their rule and authority (2:15) and were forced to submit to or accept Christ's rule (2:10).²³⁰ Reconciliation has commenced and will climax at the revealing (Second Coming)

²²⁴ Ibid., 109.

²²⁵ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: IV. From Enmity to Amity," 144.

²²⁶ Shultz, "The Reconciliation of All Things in Christ," 443.

²²⁷ Johnson, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: IV. From Enmity to Amity," 144.

²²⁸ Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler," 292.

²²⁹ Wedderburn, "The Theology of Colossians," 46-7.

²³⁰ See Bruce, "The Colossian Problem Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," 109; and "Colossian Problems Part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler," 293.

of Christ (3:4). At the Parousia, what the reconciling work of Christ means for the believers, unbelievers, hostile forces and the rest of creation will be made plain.²³¹ Christ, in whom all the divine fullness dwells, is the only mediator between God, human beings and the cosmos. Christ is the only agent of reconciliation.²³²

In summary, the two strophes emphasise that Christ is pre-eminent in creation and in redemption. He is the divine agent. He existed with God, shares in divine nature, and reveals God's divine qualities, power and glory to the world. He is identified with the divine identity of God as the creator, sustainer and redeemer of all things. He is the sovereign ruler of the universe.

4.5 The Significance of the Christological Poem for Colossians

Christology is central in the theological structure of Colossians as a letter. The christology of the poem sets the foundation for the Letter to address the wrong teaching and ideas in the Lycus Valley (Colossae and Laodicea – see 2:1; 4:16). Christology was also the basis for exhorting Christians to live under the Lordship of Christ (2:6-7). Hence, the poem emphasises the role of Christ in creation and redemption and his pre-eminence in creation and redemption. Why is it important to emphasise the person and work of Christ?

First, to combat the Colossian philosophy (see Col 2:8-23). In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I argued that the opposing teaching did not acknowledge the uniqueness of Christ as shown by their worship of angels (2:18). What this suggests is that Christ was probably seen as one of the messengers of God, like an angel, and was treated like an angel or one of the other elemental powers of the universe (2:8). From their experience with angelic beings and *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου* the opponents likely questioned the sufficiency of Christ, whom the Colossians had come to trust.²³³

The poem undertakes to emphasise the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and thus depicts the uniqueness and sufficiency of Christ. Stressing the uniqueness of Christ was important so that the Christians could have a better understanding of his uniqueness (2:2),

²³¹ Shultz argues that, for the believers, it is life and relationship with God for all eternity, while the unbelievers who have not experienced the salvific reconciliation with God will suffer in hell, unable to sin against God and acknowledge Christ as Lord (Phil. 2:10). Satan and his host of powers will suffer in the lake of fire (hell) and will no longer threaten the people. The material world will be renewed and cleansed from sin. Schultz, "The Reconciliation of All Things in Christ," 453-8.

²³² See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 77.

²³³ Bob DeWaay, "The Colossian Heresy Part 1: Understanding the Issues," *Critical Issues Commentary: A Biblically Based Commentary on Issues that Impact You* 69 (March/April 2002): 1.

in contrast to those beings whom they once knew. Is Christ sufficient for salvation? Who is Christ? How is he different from the angels or elemental powers?

The poem delineates that “he is the image of the invisible God,” thus identifying Christ with God as the exact representation and manifestation of God. Christ is the manifestation of God’s glory, power and greatness. Christ as God’s image reveals a unique relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ. Their relationship is one of equality between the Father and Son (see 1:13 – the Father’s kingdom is equally his beloved Son’s). Everything the Father does is for his Son, and everything the Son does is for his Father and the Father’s relationship with creation.²³⁴ Their relationship is a “matrix and model of their shared work of creation.”²³⁵ Therefore, the creation of the cosmos is both the work of God the Father and his Son. The fact that the poem gives Christ such a prominent role in creation, as Genesis does to God the Father, designates Christ as the one who also has the divine title, the creator and redeemer of the cosmos.

Christ is the “firstborn in all things,” which indicates his primacy or pre-existence. He existed before all things, and that includes the angels and the elemental powers. This means that Christ is a divine being because he shares in the divine nature, glory and power. The angels and στοιχῆα are supernatural beings. They do not share in the divine nature. Christ alone is the divine fullness of God, which the poem and elsewhere in the Letter declares (1:19; 2:9). If the opponents ever conceived that the divine fullness was distributed among a hierarchy of beings, in this one statement (1:19) the poem dismisses such a rendering by pointing to Christ as the fullness of God who lives bodily in him (2:9).²³⁶ He shares in the divine identity and he is to be worshipped in a similar fashion as God the Father.

As the divine being, Christ is God’s agent in creation – “in him,” “through him” and “for him” all things were created, and everything holds together in him (1:16-17). He created all things, whether material or immaterial, in the heavens or the earth. The concepts “heavens and earth,” “visible and invisible” underscore that the totality of creation is under the creative power of Christ.²³⁷ He created every spirit being, they are his subordinates, and

²³⁴ This trend is noted in the polemical section, where God at times is the subject, acting for his Son and for the creation (see Col 1:13, 21-22; 2:11-15), and vice versa. Christ is the subject, God’s agent and mediator between God and creation (see Col 1:15-20).

²³⁵ David Tripp, “ΚΑΤΟΙΚΗΜΣΑΙ, ΚΑΤΟΙΚΕΙ (Colossians 1:19, 2:9): Christology, or Soteriology Also?,” *ExpT* (2004): 78.

²³⁶ See Bruce, “The Colossian Problem Part 2: The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15-20,” 108.

²³⁷ See Trainor, “The Cosmic Christology of Colossians,” 65.

he has authority over them (Col 2:10). As a supreme creator, Christ is in control of the cosmos.

In emphasising the uniqueness of Christ, Paul wants the Colossian Christians to have a deeper understanding and knowledge of Christ, on the one hand,²³⁸ and, on the other hand, to rebuke the opponents for their misconceptions of Christ. Christ is not one among the array of angelic beings or the elemental powers of the universe. As seen in Chapter 3, the correct cognitive knowledge of Christ is vital to enable the believers to respond to any teaching that does not make Christ its only foundation. The correct knowledge of Christ should result in the correct walk with Christ as Lord, which pleases God (Col 2:6-7; 3:16-17; 1:9-11).²³⁹

Second, Christ's pre-eminence in redemption and new creation is emphasised by the second strophe of the poem. In emphasising the role of Christ in reconciliation, the poem maintains that Christ is the only mediator between God and creation. After mediating reconciliation and peace, Christ is exalted at God's right hand in heaven (3:1). Therefore, his exalted position, as Sumney states, "assures the readers that their identification with Christ provides them with forgiveness and proper relationship with God."²⁴⁰

Sumney further asserts that the attention given to christology in Colossians is not an indication that the believers had a defective view of Christ, "but that they have not recognized the implications of their Christology and of their identification with the exalted and cosmic Christ."²⁴¹ In Christ they have been given fullness of relationship with God, made holy and blameless before God (1:22) by the forgiveness of their sins, raised to life with Christ (2:11-14), reigning with him in heaven (3:1-3), are qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints (1:12), and are destined to appear with Christ in glory (3:4). In other words, for the Colossians to be "in Christ" who is the sphere of salvation means "access to all God's blessings."²⁴²

Furthermore, because of the significance of Christ's pre-eminence in redemption, the powers of darkness have been defeated (1:13). The hostile powers that once held the Colossians captive were defeated by the cross of Christ, and the believers were released from these hostile powers and delivered into Christ's kingdom (1:13).²⁴³ The hostile powers

²³⁸ See Foster, *Colossians*, 28.

²³⁹ See also S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Spiritual Knowledge and Walking Worthily of the Lord," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118, no. 472 (October 1961): 341-4.

²⁴⁰ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

were stripped of their power and authority and made redundant (2:15). These hostile powers, as portrayed in Colossians, were real powers over whom Christ triumphed through the cross. Therefore, the Colossians were not to succumb to fear of these hostile beings under whom they had once lived.

Nor should the Colossians fear the *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου* and submit to their rules and regulations, because they have died with Christ and been set free from fear and bondage to these powers. The Colossian Christians were also raised and were reigning with Christ in heaven (3:1). If the believers had any questions concerning the spirit powers or *στοιχῆα τοῦ κόσμου*, the answer is that they are creatures (see 1:16) and subordinates of Christ (2:10) who have been defeated (2:15; 1:13). Christ is their head, meaning their origin, and he has complete authority over them. The Colossians were not to submit to any powers, no matter how powerful they may appear to be.²⁴⁴

Third, the result of the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption should be a changed way of life. Those who have acknowledged his pre-eminence are to walk with him, rooted and built up in their faith, and are to grow in the knowledge of Christ (2:6-7). Being incorporated into Christ means putting on Christ and putting to death the sinful nature and its cravings.²⁴⁵ To put on Christ means putting on a new mode of existence received through dying and rising with Christ (2:12-13, 20). This new mode of existence should be reflective of Christ in whose image they were recreated (3:10).

The pre-eminence of Christ also means the redefining of societal relationships and responsibilities for those who were in Christ.²⁴⁶ The lordship of Christ should permeate believers' lives, their relationships and responsibilities.²⁴⁷ The knowledge of Christ's pre-eminence in reconciliation should be the bedrock of peace in the heart of every Christian (3:15) in every circumstance. Moreover, for fruitful and effective Christian living, Christians should let the word of Christ dwell in their hearts, overflowing with thanksgiving and worship to God in Christ (3:16-17). In addition, the lordship of Christ means a life of bended knees, which leads to more open doors to proclaim Christ, being alert and wise toward those outside the faith, making use of every opportunity to testify of one's hope in Christ (Col 4:3-6). As Foster concludes,

²⁴⁴ See Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler," 291.

²⁴⁵ See Foster, *Colossians*, 28.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ In the household code (3:18-4:2), concerning the believing husbands, parents and masters, their actions were no longer to be based on being the power-brokers but were to be guided and carried out for the sake of Christ who was their Lord. See Foster, *Colossians*, 28.

[i]n this way the whole argument of Colossians is dependent on a correct understanding of the identity of Christ. The motivation for a change in individual moral practices and the way in which one behaves in societal relationships stem from this new life in Christ. In Colossians, Christ alone is the basis for a transformed mode of life, he is the ground or the basis to which the Colossian believers are now to hold fast, and he is their hope for the glorious future with God. In effect Christ is presented as the centre and the totality for ethics, experience of religious life, and eschatological hope – he ‘is all and in all (Col 3:11).²⁴⁸

4.6 Summary

The christology of the poem is central to the Colossian Letter. The poem emphasises the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption. Christ shares in the divine identity and is God’s agent of creation and redemption. Drawing on the Jewish Wisdom tradition, Paul identifies Christ with the divine identity of God.

Following Wright’s structural division of the poem,²⁴⁹ the first strophe of the poem presents Christ as the cosmic creator (Col 1:15-16), an identity reserved for God. The concepts εἰκών (image) and πρωτότοκος (firstborn) in the first strophe and, in the middle stanza, πρὸ πάντα (before all things) and συνέστημι (sustainer) portray Christ as being divine and pre-eminent in creation.

In the second strophe (Col 1:18b-20), Christ is also pre-eminent in redemption or the new creation. His pre-eminence is depicted in terms of his being κεφαλή (head) of the church in the middle stanza (18a) and, in the second strophe, as the ἀρχή (beginning), πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν ἵνα γένηται (firstborn from the dead), εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι, (all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell), and the mediator of the cosmic reconciliation between God and creation.

Understanding who Christ is and his role in creation and redemption has significant implications for believers, individually and collectively. As we have seen, the christological teaching was applied to rebuke the Colossian philosophy,²⁵⁰ and to exhort Christians to live their lives under the lordship of Christ. The cognitive knowledge of who Christ is, should be applied in practical living so that God is glorified.

This chapter has laid the foundation for Chapter 5, where I will discuss the concepts of fullness, riches, mystery, hiddenness and knowledge, terms that recur in the Colossian Letter. My discussion of these terms is because similar terms or ideas are used in explicating *gutpela sindaun*, as seen in Chapters 1 and 2.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 29.

²⁴⁹ See Chapter 4.2.

²⁵⁰ See Chapter 3.

Chapter 5: The Colossians' use of Fullness, Riches, Mystery, Hiddenness and Knowledge

Terms used in Scripture embody meaning. As Malina notes, such terms are derived from the social context of the speaker of the language,¹ in this case the author of Colossians. I want to add that these terms are also derived from the religious context, as Robbins demonstrates in his discussion of the Urapmin people of Telefomin (PNG),² and even in my experience among the Abelam people of Maprik (PNG).³ In Chapters 3 and 4, we saw that the concepts Paul used and the practices he referred to embody meaning. Even the practices of the opponents he mentioned embody meaning as seen in Chapter 3.

This chapter's focus is on the terms πλήρωμα, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω and γνώσις⁴ used in Colossians, with the intent of ascertaining their meanings and significance in the text. The reason for studying these terms is that such terms, or similar ones, also feature in Melanesian religion to depict the desired *gutpela sindaun*, as seen in Chapters 1 and 2. In Colossians these terms and their variant forms occur in both the polemical or theological and teaching sections of the Letter. Some of them are used in close proximity to each other or are almost synonyms, while others are not.

The approach I am adopting in this discussion is the same as that used in Chapters 3 and 4. I am applying the exegetical method and cultural hermeneutical approach to derive the meaning of the text for the original recipients.⁵ In this chapter, I will discuss the terms πλήρωμα, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω and γνώσις that Colossians have used in order to develop a contextual theological response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* thinking. This means the cultural exegetical approach is required. In the cultural hermeneutic, I introduced the cultural affinity approach. By cultural affinity, I mean as human beings, there are somethings we share in common regardless where and when we live. Therefore, the use of cultural affinity approach will enable to critically contextualise the meaning of term used in the text using the Melanesian cultural media. Using these

¹ See Chapter 1.7.3.

² See Chapter 1.4.6.

³ See Chapter 2.4.3.

⁴ In Colossians, the noun πλήρωμα occurs twice (Col 1:19; 2:9), and its verbal and participle forms occur seven times (Col 1:9, 24, 25; 2:2, 10; 4:12, 17); πλοῦτος and its verbal and participle forms occur three times (1:27; 2:2; 3:16); μυστήριον occurs four times (1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3); ἀποκρύπτω and its verbal and participle forms occur three times (1:26, 2:3; 3:3); and γνώσις and its verbal and participle forms occur five times (1:9, 10, 2:2, 3; 3:10).

⁵ See Chapter 1.7.

methods, I will seek to answer these questions: What is the meaning of each term? How is it intended to be understood? What is its significance? Answers to these questions will give us the tools to reply to the Melanesian search for *gutpela sindaun*. This leads to a related question: How do we determine which text to discuss given the recurrent use of these terms and their variant forms throughout the Letter?

5.1 The Selection of Passages

The selection of the texts is based on the occurrence of the terms *πλήρωμα*, *πλοῦτος*, *μυστήριον*, *ἀποκρύπτω* and *γνώσις*. I will limit the text selection to the section referred to as polemical or theological (1:13-3:4). In this section, these terms either occur alone or in a cluster.⁶ I will only discuss the texts in which these terms are used in conjunction with or in relation to *ἐν Χριστῷ* (in Christ). However, I may occasionally engage with texts that are not used in conjunction with “in Christ” and those occurring in both the didactic section (3:5-4:6) and the conclusion (4:7-10). This is to establish a proper understanding of how the term is used in the text being discussed. In applying this principle, I am able to identify Col 1:19, 26-27; 2:2-3 and 3:3-4 as texts that use the terms under investigation in relation to *ἐν Χριστῷ*.

The first relevant text is Col 1:19, where the term *πλήρωμα* occurs. The noun *πλήρωμα* occurs here and later in Col 2:9-10, which will be the second text in my investigation. These texts show similarities, as in both texts the phrase *πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα* occurs. In the second passage (2:9-10), there is also a periphrastic perfect *πεπληρωμένοι* used, which will be discussed as well. The third text for discussion is Col 1:26-27, and the fourth text is Col 2:2-3. Both Col 1:26-27 and 2:2-3 are somewhat similar, in that both texts are centred on the mystery concept. The fifth passage is Col 3:3-4. The term *ἀποκρύπτω* occurs in Col 3:3; however, I am including verse 4 because it gives the context of *ἀποκρύπτω*.

5.2 Πλήρωμα (Col 1:19)

5.2.1 Analysing Col 1:19

Col 1:19 is located in the second strophe of what is commonly known as the christological poem/hymn, which emphasises Christ’s pre-eminence in redemption. The context and

⁶ The participle forms of *πλήρωμα* in Col 1: 24, 25 (in the theological section) will not be discussed, as these participles are used to delineate Paul’s ministry as an apostle of Christ to the Gentiles.

questions regarding the hymn have already been discussed in Chapter 4, along with the text. The reason for returning to Col 1:19 is the occurrence of the term *πλήρωμα*. There are some exegetical issues concerning the verse which were not fully explored in Chapter 4.⁷ This discussion is aimed at delineating the meaning of *πλήρωμα* and its use in its immediate context.

Col 1:19 reads as follows: *οτι εν αυτω ευδοκησεν παν το πληρωμα κατοικησαι* (for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell). This statement begins with the preposition *οτι* (see also 1:16), which introduces the first reason for Christ's pre-eminence in all things, as noted in Col 1:15-18, 20. The prepositional phrase *εν αυτω* is used in a locative sense to refer to Christ.⁸ However, the verse raises three exegetical problems. First, what does the neuter nominative/accusative phrase *παν το πληρωμα* mean? Second, what is the subject of the aorist *ευδοκησεν*? Third, what does the aorist *κατοικησαι* connote? We have already dealt with the first two questions in Chapter 4. Here, I will only consider the third question. After answering this question, I explicate the significance of the term *πλήρωμα*.

The third question concerns the term *κατοικησαι*. This term is first used as an aorist infinitive *κατοικησαι* (1:19 – past tense), and later as a verb *κατοικει* (2:9 – present tense). The first nuance of *κατοικειω* is “to live in a locality for any length of time,”⁹ and it applies to the divine and other transcendent beings possessing human beings.¹⁰ The second nuance of *κατοικειω* is “to make something a habitation or dwelling by being there.”¹¹ It is the second meaning that is implied in Col 1:19. The aorist infinitive *κατοικησαι* emphasises a permanent residence rather than a temporary one.¹² This means that Christ is not possessed by the divine being. He is and always has been the divine being in creation and redemption.

The point of *κατοικησαι* is that Christ became like a creature himself without ceasing to be who he is. He took on human form, as *κατοικησαι* is often taken as an

⁷ For other exegetical issues that are not discussed here, see Chapter 4.3.3.

⁸ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 62; Constantine R. Campbell, *Colossians and Philemon: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2013), 16.

⁹ BDAG, 534.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 220.

ingressive aorist, meaning “entrance upon a state.”¹³ Here κατοικῆσαι suggests that the state in which the divine πλήρωμα decisively took residence is the realm of the physical and finite creatures. The infinitive κατοικῆσαι indicates an unspecified time of residence, meaning that Christ has always been the fullness of God; but because it also suggests a state, κατοικῆσαι probably refers to the incarnation.¹⁴ Christ, the divine embodiment, displayed all the attributes and activities of God to the world.¹⁵ These three notions – fullness, pleased and dwell – come together in Col 1:19 in the person of Christ and connect with the image and the firstborn notions of Col 1:15.¹⁶ He is the revelation and manifestation of God. The occurrence of κατοικῆσαι in the second strophe of the hymn implies that Christ in his redemptive work never ceased to be divine.

5.2.2 The Flow of Thought (Col 1:19)

I have noted in Chapter 4, Col 1:19 has identified Christ with God, as is the case in Col 1:15 where the εἰκὼν and πρωτότοκος metaphors are used. In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, implying that Christ was God’s divine agent in reconciliation of the entire cosmos. God’s pleasure to have all his fullness dwell in Christ is by no means intimating that Christ is not divine. It is not suggesting that at some point in his mission the divine fullness came to dwell in him. This would contradict his divine pre-existence delineated earlier in Col 1:15-16.

Rather, Col 1:19 points to Christ as the divine being and agent in whom the superabundance of divine attributes and activities was displayed in the redemption of the creation.¹⁷ Through his divine fullness, God reconciled all things to himself. As Hay comments, “God in all God’s fullness was pleased to be in and to act through the Son” (cf. 2 Cor 5:19).¹⁸ Wright points out that “God dwelt fully in Christ in order to reconcile all things to himself ... through him...”¹⁹ In other words, Christ is God-incarnate. As God-incarnate, Christ was able to reconcile the estranged and alienated world to God. Apart

¹³ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 43.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 52-3.

¹⁶ If it is transitory, then Paul would have used the term παροικία, which means to live in a locality without citizenship. BDAG, 779. See also Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 157.

¹⁷ Dunn states that “[t]he object here is simply to claim that divine fullness is evident in Christ’s ministry on earth, above all in his death and resurrection, and that that is another way of explaining his pre-eminence in all things (1:18).” Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 102.

¹⁸ Hay, *Colossians*, 62.

¹⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 76.

from Christ, there is no other redeemer to reconcile creation to God. This sets Christ apart from all the cosmic beings which are his creatures (see 1:16).

5.2.3 The Significance of Πλήρωμα in Col 1:19

Πλήρωμα is a key word used to delineate the cosmological reconciliation mission of Christ.²⁰ The cosmic meaning of fullness can be traced back to Old Testament references to the earth and all its fullness.²¹ The Prophet Jeremiah spoke of God filling the heavens and the earth.²² In the Wisdom tradition, the idea of fullness was used of God or to describe God's Spirit filling the world (Wis 1:6-7).

Philo also wrote that God fills all things.²³ The same rationality permeated Stoic thinking.²⁴ In Classical Greek, πλήρωμα was used to describe a ship and its crew or cargo.²⁵ In its semi-technical sense πλήρωμα “applied primary to the perfection of God, the fullness of His Being, the aggregate of the Divine attributes, virtues, [and] energies.”²⁶ This shows that the term πλήρωμα had a widespread appeal in the Greco-Roman world of the 1st and 2nd Christian centuries.²⁷ Hence, the term πλήρωμα occurs in the New Testament where Paul used in his writings.²⁸ Although he used the term elsewhere in his writings, it is in Colossians that Paul used πλήρωμα in relation to the person of Christ, making it theologically significant.²⁹ He used πλήρωμα to identify Christ with God. This indicates that Paul's use of πλήρωμα differs from Stoics, implying that his thinking was influenced neither by the Stoics, nor by the Classical Greeks.

This also means Paul was not influenced in his use of πλήρωμα by fully developed Gnosticism, which was a second-century phenomenon.³⁰ This does not mean that the ideas taken up in the early Valentinian Gnosticism in the second century were not in circulation

²⁰ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 99.

²¹ Ps 24:1; Jer 8:16; Ezek 19:7; 30:12.

²² Jer 23:24; see also Ps 139:7-9.

²³ Philo, *Legum Allegoriae* 3:4; *De confusione* 136; *De Vita Mosis* 2.238.

²⁴ Seneca, *De beneficiis* 4.8.2 – nothing is void of him (God); he himself fills his work. See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 152.

²⁶ W. Lock, “Pleroma” in *The Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol 4, no. 1 (London: C. Scribner's Sons, 1902), 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁸ Rom 11:12, 25; 13:10; 15:29; 1 Cor 10:26, a direct quote from Ps 24:1; Gal 4:4 – the fullness of time.

²⁹ Arnold notes that the noun πλήρωμα never appears in the LXX, in *The Colossian Syncretism*, 262-3.

³⁰ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 100; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74. Πλήρωμα became a technical term in Valentinian Gnosticism, “where it refers to the sphere from where emanation of aeons come forth.” Foster, *Colossians*, 194.

when Colossians was written.³¹ Although the term appears to have been significant in the thinking of his opponent at Colossae, Paul was not depended on them for his use of *πλήρωμα*.³² He was drawing the concept of fullness from the LXX and Jewish Wisdom tradition³³ to depict Christ's pre-eminence in cosmic redemption as the divine agent. As Arnold states, *πλήρωμα* was a helpful term for "communicating the sovereignty of Christ."³⁴

Paul used the term *πλήρωμα* to attribute to Christ the divine identity and the one who possesses all the divine fullness in his reconciliation mission. The use of *πλήρωμα* in Col 1:19 "proclaims that all that God is dwells in Christ, so no one could be higher"³⁵ than him. *Πλήρωμα* expresses "the sole sufficiency of Christ and adequacy of Christ derived from the LXX"³⁶ for redemption. In declaring that Christ possessed all the divine fullness, Paul nullified any *πλήρωμα* myth(s) or teaching of the opponents.³⁷ Paul's opponents at Colossae likely restricted *πλήρωμα* to the upper realm of spirit powers, which are designated thrones, powers, rulers and authorities (*hapax legomena* – 1:16), who were seen as intermediaries to the gods.³⁸

The use of the *πλήρωμα* of God distinguishes Christ as the sole agent of reconciliation, and all spirit beings as creatures who were reconciled, meaning pacified through Christ (2:15). *Πλήρωμα* in its semi-technical sense was applied to the perfection and the fullness of God. It is transferred to Christ who is the permanent embodiment of God in his incarnation and the whole cosmic redemptive ministry (Col 1:19), and is still in his resurrected-glorified body (Col:29).³⁹ Hence, *πλήρωμα* delineates Christ as divine, as the cosmic mediator between human beings and God, and as the completeness of God's divine revelation. Christ as the cosmic redeemer underscores that there is no other redeemer besides him.

³¹ See Foster, *Colossians*, 195; Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 75.

³² See Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 263.

³³ In 1 Cor 10:26, Paul quotes Ps 24:1, which shows that his idea of *πλήρωμα* stems from LXX.

³⁴ Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 263.

³⁵ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 74

³⁶ Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 264.

³⁷ See Chapter 3.5.

³⁸ See Thurston, *All the Fullness of God*, 27.

³⁹ Lock, "Pleroma," 1.

5.3 Πλήρωμα and Πεπληρωμένοι (Col 2:9-10)

5.3.1 Analysing Col 2:9-10

Col 2:9-10 is part of Paul's polemic against the Colossian philosophy, discussed in Chapter 3.⁴⁰ In our discussion of Col 1:19 above,⁴¹ Col 2:9 was used as a parallel text of Col 1:19 to explain πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα. I touched on the genitive τῆς θεότητος, but here I will cover some ground that was not covered above.⁴² In addition to the term θεότητος, I will also examine the verb κατοικεῖ, the adverb σωματικῶς, and the periphrastic perfect πεπληρωμένοι.

Col 2:9 reads as follows: ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς (for in him dwells all the fullness of the deity bodily). The conjunction ὅτι indicates that what follows is the reason why the Christians should not pay attention to the Colossian philosophy (2:8). The prepositional-dative construction ἐν αὐτῷ is in the emphatic position, emphasising that it is Christ⁴³ in whom κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς, as it did earlier in Col 1:19. The phrase πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα means all the fullness or superabundance of fullness, as seen above (5.2.1). Some scholars have suggested that πλήρωμα was probably used by the Colossian Philosophy, since the πλήρωμα concept was in the thought world of the Greco-Romans.⁴⁴ The inclusion of θεότητος describes the totality of deity.

⁴⁰ For a detailed discussion of the context of Col 2:8-3:4, see Chapter 3.1. See also Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 126-8.

⁴¹ See Chapter 5.2.1.

⁴² In Chapter 3 and Chapter 5.2.

⁴³ See Chapter 3.2.1.

⁴⁴ See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 156-7; Moule, "‘Fulness’ and ‘Fill’ in the New Testament," 79-80. In religious circles, the Jewish schools used πλήρωμα in connection "with the eternal Ideal of Godhead." Moule, *Colossian Studies: Lessons in Faith and Holiness from St Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 87, footnote 1. In Chapter 3, we saw that the Colossian philosophy assimilated its teachings and practices from both Jewish and Greco-Roman religions. It then claimed to offer a higher spiritual experience to those who adhered to its practices and regulations, a form of spiritual fullness. In other words, the Colossian philosophical notion of fullness differed from Paul's, which we can deduce from Paul's use of πλήρωμα. But the πλήρωμα concept is original to the author, who used it to render the Colossian philosophy void of divine origin by emphasising that Christ is the true πλήρωμα through whom the Colossians received πεπληρωμένοι. Paul's view of the divine πλήρωμα stems from Jewish traditions. There is thus no Gnostic meaning in the use of πλήρωμα, here or elsewhere in Scripture. See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 152-4.

Θεότητος only occurs here in Scripture,⁴⁵ and it applies to beings recognised as gods.⁴⁶ The noun θεότης describes the character and quality of the divine being,⁴⁷ and here it is used in relation to Christ, thus depicting Christ as divine. In using the term Θεότητος, Paul acknowledges Christ as divine and not just as a divine manifestation.⁴⁸ Christ, as Wright comments, “is uniquely God’s presence and his very self.”⁴⁹ Θεότητος is also the most exalted language to speak of the divine fullness that dwells in Christ.⁵⁰ The use of Θεότητος indicates that Christ is the very fullness of the one true God⁵¹ and the highest deity.⁵²

In Christ is all the fullness of Θεότητος κατοικέω. The verb κατοικέει means to dwell or to inhabit.⁵³ Christ, as ἐν αὐτῷ demonstrates, is the fixed place or locus of divine habitation.⁵⁴ The use of κατοικεῖ in the present tense attests to the superabundance of God inhabiting Christ at present. The totality of divinity dwelt and dwells in Christ.⁵⁵

The verb κατοικέει indicates a continual dwelling of Christ σωματικῶς, thus making the interpretation of σωματικῶς difficult. The adverb σωματικῶς means “bodily [or] corporeally of Christ.”⁵⁶ There are nine different interpretations of σωματικῶς, according to Foster.⁵⁷ Some of these interpretations are an elaboration or offshoot of a primary notion. I suggest that the reason there are nine interpretations is because σωματικῶς is studied on its own, which I will avoid. Instead of explaining σωματικῶς independently, I explain it in conjunction with the verb κατοικέω. Using this approach, the nine proposed interpretations are reduced to five: (1) the incarnated, crucified, resurrected

⁴⁵ Lightfoot draws attention to the distinction between the terms Θεότητος and θειότης in Plutarch (*Mor.* 857; 415). The latter means divine quality or attributes which a lesser being possesses. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 179. For a later scholarly discussion on Θεότητος and θειότης, see Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 103; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 132-33; Foster, *Colossians*, 257.

⁴⁶ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133.

⁴⁷ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 100; Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 55; Foster, *Colossians*, 256-7.

⁴⁸ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133.

⁴⁹ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 103.

⁵⁰ Compare Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 132. Foster argues that “[t]he claim the author makes is elevated, and focuses on the unique position of Christ, without loading the term ‘deity’ with a precise and technical sense.” Foster, *Colossians*, 257.

⁵¹ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 55.

⁵² Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 121.

⁵³ BDAG, 539.

⁵⁴ Or “fixed abode” in Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 179; see also Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 1.

⁵⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 151.

⁵⁶ BDAG, 984.

⁵⁷ See summary of the nine proposals in Foster, *Colossians*, 258.

and glorified Christ;⁵⁸ (2) actuality or solid reality and not just appearing to be;⁵⁹ (3) an organised body, i.e. the totality of the Godhead was undisturbedly amassed or localised into one person, namely Christ;⁶⁰ (4) the church, which is referred to as his body (1:18);⁶¹ and (5) in essence.⁶²

From these five interpretations, the first interpretation is preferred here, without ruling out the second and fifth interpretations. The third and fourth interpretations are not preferred. The arguments against the third interpretation are: (1) Paul would be seen here borrowing the concept from the opponents, which is not the case because Col 2:9 is an expansion of 1:19.⁶³ (2) We cannot be sure that this reading was actually developed and taught around the time of writing, since it draws heavily on the much later Gnostic group of the Valentinians.⁶⁴ (3) This interpretation would force us to see the “body” as the universe and the “fullness of deity” as denoting Christ’s lordship over the cosmos, whereas we have seen in Col 1:19 that the fullness of deity is more than lordship over the cosmos.

The argument against the fourth interpretation is that it weighs heavily on the meaning of *κατοικεῖ-σωματικῶς* without considering the prepositional pronoun *ἐν αὐτῷ*, which is in an emphatic position, emphasising Christ in whom all the fullness of deity lives. In this statement, Christ is not the designated head. If this is the case, *σωματικῶς* would be rendered as the church (compare Col 1:18). Dunn argues that to take the word *σωματικῶς* as a reference for the church “diminishes the richness of the play on the term.”⁶⁵

I maintain, as some scholars have claimed, that *κατοικεῖ-σωματικῶς* means the incarnate, resurrected and exalted Christ in whom the totality of deity lives.⁶⁶ Given that the verb *κατοικεῖ* is in the present tense, the emphasis here is on the present existence of Christ. The verb-adverb combination (*κατοικεῖ-σωματικῶς*) describes the present

⁵⁸ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 103; Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 198-99; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133; See also Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 88.

⁵⁹ Wright, *Colossians*, 103; See also Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 89.

⁶⁰ See Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 249; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 89; See also Campbell, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35.

⁶¹ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 100-1. See also Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 133; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 89.

⁶² For the summary of these five options, see O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 112-3.

⁶³ See Chapters 5.2.1 and 3.2.1.

⁶⁴ Moule, “‘Fulness’ and ‘Fill’ in the New Testament,” 79-80.

⁶⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152.

⁶⁶ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 199; Foster, *Colossians*, 258, proposal 8.

resurrected-glorified state and reality of Christ's existence (see 3:1).⁶⁷ As we have seen, the occurrence of *κατοικέω* (past tense) earlier (Col 1:19) denotes the whole incarnation-redemption event, which is past,⁶⁸ but *κατοικεῖ* (present tense) suggests the resurrected-glorified existence of Christ. He lives bodily in heaven.⁶⁹ Both verbs (*κατοικῆσαι-κατοικεῖ*) highlight the fact that Christ has always been the divine being in the past, and that he continues to be in the present. Christ in creation, incarnation, redemption and glorification is God in all his fullness.⁷⁰

The argument progresses from christological fullness to soteriological fullness in verse 10 – *καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι, ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας* (and in him you are given fullness, who is the head of all ruler and authority). The conjunction *καί* makes the transition from Christ to the believers at Colossae and makes it clear that, from his fullness, fullness flows into them – *ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι*. The verb *ἐστέ* (you are) is in the present tense, and *πεπληρωμένοι* means to make full, fill a person with power, qualities, and so on.⁷¹ The verb *ἐστέ* and the perfect participle *πεπληρωμένοι* together make “a perfect periphrastic construction.”⁷² The verb *ἐστέ* points to the continuing state or sphere of existence, but the perfect participle *πεπληρωμένοι* points to past action.⁷³ This means that it is through their union with Christ that they were given fullness and are filled, and that their present existence is in Christ. The fullness the believers received is incorporation into Christ and living in union with Christ.

There is no qualifying object defining the nature of the believers' filling. This has led to a number of suggestions. The first suggestion is that the believers are filled with the same fullness of deity that filled Christ (v. 9).⁷⁴ However, on grammatical and theological

⁶⁷ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 198.

⁶⁸ See Chapter 5.2.

⁶⁹ See Chapter 3.2.1.

⁷⁰ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 199.

⁷¹ BDAG, 828.

⁷² Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 162.

⁷³ Based on these verbal forms, there are various renderings. God is the implied agent, as suggested by the passive voice, and thus the clause is translated as stative: “you are complete in him.” Or, as an active verb, the phrase is translated as “you share in this fullness in him.” These readings have the potential of distracting from Paul's focus on Christ as the subject. See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 180.

⁷⁴ Blackwell, “You are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3,” 103. The notion of believers filled with the deity is later designated *theosis* or deification. The doctrine of deification is extrapolated from the adoption metaphor that believers are children of God, and thus are gods by grace and not by nature. As gods, they participate in the divine immortality. Gradually, the two central concepts (adoption and participation) of deification were refined: “*methexis* and *homoiosis* – participation in and likeness to God in a Trinitarian context.” (104).

grounds this interpretation is rejected.⁷⁵ Grammatically, αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι describes “persons *fill[ed]* with powers, qualities, etc.”⁷⁶ But here it has a different meaning. It does not mean being filled “‘with him’ but *in him* or *through him*.”⁷⁷ Therefore, our text reads that it is “in him” and not “with him” that the believers are filled. “Filled in him” connotes believers’ incorporation and participation in the divine fullness of Christ. Being incorporated into and participating in divine fullness both entail sharing in the divine nature and divine qualities of Christ.

The second suggestion is that the believers were given full salvation. Their salvation experience was full and complete in Christ, which can be summarised as “fullness of life, unrestricted access to the divine power which will shape them ... into the divine image (3:10).”⁷⁸ The third suggestion focuses on the noetic enlightenment or transformation.⁷⁹ This interpretation is derived from the knowledge motif in the Letter, which “emphasises the fullness of knowledge and wisdom granted by God, following the pattern of connections between fullness and knowledge in other parts of the letter (1:9, 2:2; 4:12).”⁸⁰ The fourth suggestion is “functional mission,”⁸¹ which refers to the believers’ authority over the spirit powers and their mission to the world. Their authority over the powers and their worldly mission are based on the fullness they received in Christ. This fullness is related to the divine fullness of Christ, which is linked to his headship over the church (1:18) and over every ruler and authority.⁸²

The four proposals are possible, except that many scholars reject the first interpretation.⁸³ The second suggestion has been critiqued as too broad⁸⁴ because it does not bring into the discussion the continuity of salvation. The third and fourth proposals are

⁷⁵ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 113.

⁷⁶ BDAG, 828.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 153; cf. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 134; Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 123; Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 103.

⁷⁹ See Blackwell, “You are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3,” 111-2.

⁸⁰ Blackwell, “You are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3,” 111-2; Rom. 15:13; Phil 1:1; 4:19; Eph 3:19.

⁸¹ Blackwell, “You are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3,” 111.

⁸² Hay, *Colossians*, 89-90; see also Susanne Watts Henderson, “God’s Fullness in Bodily Form: Christ and Church in Colossians,” *ExpT* 118, no. 4 (2007): 172.

⁸³ Dunn sees καὶ ἔστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι as “language [which] is... rhetorical and hyperbolic.” Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 152. Pokorny concludes that “πληροῦν is a play on words with πλήρωμα (2:9),” and that the Christians’ lives do not mean “one with the fullness.” Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 123. On the other hand, there are scholars who support this reading. See Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Blackwell, “You are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3,” 103-23.

⁸⁴ See Blackwell, “You are Filled in Him: Theosis and Colossians 2-3,” 112.

critiqued as too narrow.⁸⁵ The salvific work of Christ is more than being given the fullness of knowledge. It is also about abiding in Christ and growing into Christ-likeness. Furthermore, it is more than being given authority over spirit powers and the believers' mission to the world. It is also about overcoming sin and suffering and living lives worthy of the Lord (1:10-12). If these suggestions have flaws, then what is the most likely nature of the believers' filling? I argue that it is the second interpretation.

In support of the second interpretation, I turn to the immediate literary context (2:11-15). The literary context delineates what Christ achieved for the Colossians. They were given fullness of new life (2:11-15) when they heard and believed the gospel. The Colossians were incorporated into Christ through the circumcision done by Christ, and they participate in the resurrected life of Christ symbolised by the baptismal rite. Every sin is forgiven, new life received, debts obliterated, and spirit powers vanquished (2:15; 1:13). This description depicts their new state of life.

This new life was expressed earlier as reconciliation and peace with God (1:21-22). The Colossians were reconciled to God through Christ and they now have peace with him. Reconciliation and peace describe a mending of broken relationships caused by an offence that led to a hostile relationship between the parties concerned, in this case God and the Colossian believers. They are no longer God's enemies who were blemished before him. They are holy, spotless and stand un-condemned before God (1:22). Reconciliation is what God has done for them and it is their new status before God.

The next clause of verse 10, ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας reiterates the supremacy of Christ over creation (see 1:16). That he is ἡ κεφαλὴ (head) recalls 1:18, but πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας (every ruler and authority) refers to 1:16. In Col 2:19, the head-ligament metaphor delineates holding firmly or keeping a close hold onto someone. The Colossian Christians need to hold firmly onto Christ, from whom comes all the spiritual nourishment (2:19) and the fullness of salvation. But the head metaphor in 2:10 signifies the supreme authority and power which Christ exerts over every spiritual being (cosmic power and angel). He rules over them as their creator and redeemer (1:20). Again, his supremacy over every being is consolidated through the cross (2:15). This means believers can only receive fullness of salvation in Christ.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

5.3.2 The Flow of Thought (Col 2:9-10)

The reason the Colossians should not listen to the opposing teaching is because in Christ the superabundance of the deity lives bodily in his resurrected-glorified state. Both Col 1:19 and 2:9 emphasise the permanence of divine existence in and through the person of Jesus Christ – in creation, incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and glorification.

The Colossians have come to fullness through the resurrected-glorified Christ, the divine-human. In receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Colossians received the fullness of life which they could not gain elsewhere. They were transformed, sins forgiven,⁸⁶ raised from death, given new life with Christ, delivered from the powers of darkness, and delivered into Christ's kingdom (1:13; 2:15). Fullness of salvation has been presented earlier as reconciliation and peace with God (1:20-21), resulting in the restoration of relationship or fellowship with God.

5.3.3 The Significance of πλήρωμα and πεπληρωμένοι in Col 2:9-10

The meaning of fullness was discussed earlier in relation to the Old Testament and Jewish Wisdom literature.⁸⁷ Paul drew on the concept of fullness from Second Temple Judaism to interpret and apply it to the Christ-event.⁸⁸ Tracing the meaning of πλήρωμα and its variant form (πεπληρωμένοι) used here, we will first explicate the meaning of πλήρωμα. The use of πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα here with κατοικεῖ ... τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς expands our knowledge of the divine fullness in Christ.⁸⁹ Here πλήρωμα expresses the understanding that the totality of divine fullness lives in Christ in his resurrected-glorified existence, as it was in his whole salvific mission (see 1:19). The superabundance of deity is located in Christ, who is now exalted on high at God's right hand in heaven (3:1-2). Christ's cosmic pre-eminence is re-asserted here, as stated earlier (Col 1:15-20), adding that the divine fullness lives bodily, i.e., the continuing embodied existence of Christ in heaven.

The significance of Christ's resurrected bodily existence in this context is that it counters the opponents' ascetic-visionary tendencies. The opponents placed a high value on visions and thus asceticism was necessary, in the form of out-of-body experiences of

⁸⁶ Sumney sees forgiveness of sin as a central theme of Colossians. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

⁸⁷ See Chapter 5.2.3.

⁸⁸ See Chapter 4.1.2. According to Sumney, the author uses poetic language and "borrows from known metaphors and traditions ... employs an elevated style ... draws on and alludes to themes and language from the poetic material in 1:15-20 and other church tradition to address the problem at hand." Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 132.

⁸⁹ In my discussion in Chapter 3.2.1, I asserted that Col 2:9 is an expansion of Col 1:19.

the spiritual realm and this asceticism was rejected as unnecessary.⁹⁰ In declaring that in Christ the divine fullness lives bodily, Paul dismisses the cosmic speculations of the Colossian philosophy⁹¹ about the roles these beings play in sustaining the wellbeing of human beings, and about human beings being required to venerate them (Col 2:16, 20). Such cosmic powers could not supplement or add to the fullness of deity in Christ. The Colossian Christians are linked to Christ who is the head of every cosmic power (2:10b).

Second, the periphrastic construction of *ἔστε πεπληρωμένοι* connotes the believers' past filling in Christ, as they heard and believed in the gospel of Christ (Col 2:6-7) and have been sustained since then.⁹² The believers' current state of existence is in Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God. Christ with whom they exist is also the head, meaning the ruler over every ruler and authority, or *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* (2:8, 20).⁹³ Given the status of these beings, there is nothing to gain from them. Therefore, the Colossians do not need additional practices pertaining to *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* for blessings or spiritual experiences. They are complete in Christ, with whom they now exist by rising with him from the dead (2:12, 20). Through their union with Christ, the believers qualify to share in the inheritance of the saints and have direct access to God's power and to all the eschatological blessings inaugurated through Christ.

5.4 Μυστήριον, Ἀποκρύπτω and Πλοῦτος (Col 1:26-27)

5.4.1 Analysing Col 1:26-27

Col 1:26-27 is part of the polemical or theological section of the Letter⁹⁴ describing Paul's ministry for the church (1:24-2:5). Although his unique role as an apostle is highlighted, he is not the centre of the message. Christ is the centre of the gospel message. Paul is the servant of the gospel and his ministry is described in light of the Christ-event, using eschatological concepts.⁹⁵ In Col 1:26-27, God's eschatological plan for the Gentiles is disclosed. The terms *μυστήριον*, *ἀποκρύπτω* and *πλοῦτος* occur in this text.

Col 1:26 reads: *τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν, νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ* (the mystery that had been hidden

⁹⁰ See Chapter 3.5.

⁹¹ Foster, *Colossians*, 255.

⁹² See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 153; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 134.

⁹³ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 134-5.

⁹⁴ See Chapter 3.1.

⁹⁵ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 104.

throughout the ages and throughout the generations, but which has now been revealed to his saints). The term **μυστήριον** stands in apposition to the word of God (1:25). **Μυστήριον** is used four times in Colossians,⁹⁶ meaning secret, secret rite or teaching.

Μυστήριον can also be a *terminus technicus* for the mystery religions of the Greeks and Romans, who usually concealed their secrets in “many strange customs and ceremonies ... [and had] a reluctance in antiquity to divulge them.”⁹⁷ The term mystery also refers “to the transcendent activity of God and its impact on God’s people.”⁹⁸ In Colossians, **μυστήριον** refers to God’s transcendent secret or activity and its impact on the people and the cosmos.⁹⁹ The revealing of the eschatological secrets is the prerogative of God alone.¹⁰⁰ In the Old Testament, God reveals his divinely ordained events through the seers and prophets.¹⁰¹ In the New Testament it is through the apostles and prophets (see Eph 3:5). One of the divine activities that was withheld from the seers and prophets in the Old Testament, but is now revealed through the apostles and prophets, is making both Jews and Gentiles one people.¹⁰²

The occurrence of **ἀποκρύπτω** (hidden) with **τὸ μυστήριον** here has nothing to do with future events lying hidden in God’s plan, as in Col 3:3-4.¹⁰³ It is to do with God’s decisive action in Christ, which is already being revealed through the preaching of the gospel (see 1:6). This mystery was previously hidden or concealed – **ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν**. Exegetes have proposed that **ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν** means people, or the principalities and powers from which the mystery was hidden, because of the preposition **ἀπό**.¹⁰⁴ Although this is a possibility, it is difficult to ascertain whether this understanding was part of Paul’s thinking. The use of **ἀπό** here seems to suggest a temporal concealment.¹⁰⁵ God concealed the eschatological secret

⁹⁶ Col 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3. The term **μυστήριον** occurs six times in Ephesians (1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19), once in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, and in Paul’s undisputed letters five times as singular (Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:1, 7; 15:57) and three times in plural form (1 Cor 4:1; 13:2; 14:2).

⁹⁷ BDAG, 661.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 662.

⁹⁹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 104.

¹⁰⁰ See Galen W. Wiley, “A Study of ‘Mystery’ in the New Testament,” *GTJ* 6 (1985): 351; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 84.

¹⁰¹ See 1 Kgs 22:19-22; Job 15:8; Isa 6:1-13; Jer 23:18, 22; Amos 3:7; Zech 3:1.

¹⁰² See E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians*, 3rd print (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1965), 218.

¹⁰³ See Chapter 5.6.

¹⁰⁴ MacDonald, *Colossians and Philemon*, 81; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 104; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 119. Foster, *Colossians*, 223-4.

¹⁰⁵ MacDonald, *Colossians and Philemon*, 81; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 104; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 119.

temporarily for an extended period, as αἰώνων καὶ...γενεῶν implies.¹⁰⁶ But it could also mean the past generations who lived before the cross-event.¹⁰⁷

The temporary concealment of the mystery is again stressed by the clause νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, where the past and present are clearly differentiated. The clause νῦν δὲ shows a dramatic turn of events. The mystery that was concealed is now revealed τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, to his saints, meaning believers who were described earlier as faithful or believing brothers and sisters in Christ (1:2), and later as God's chosen people (cf. 3:12). These are the people who heard the gospel proclaimed and responded to it by faith (1:4, 7, 23). But to those who heard and did not accept it, God's mystery remains a mystery.

In verse 27 the mystery is disclosed – οἷς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης (to whom God willed to make known what [is] the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory). It is revealed οἷς (to them), the ἔθνεσιν (Gentiles), defined as saints (v. 26),¹⁰⁸ in this case the Colossian believers.¹⁰⁹ The inclusion of Gentiles into God's family fulfils the Old Testament prophetic oracles which looked forward to the saving of Gentiles along with Jews (e.g. Isa 49:6), but the manner in which this would happen was hidden. It is in/through Christ that believing Gentiles are brought into God's family.

The verb θέλω (desired) connotes God's free will. It is God's desire to γνωρίσαι the mystery. The verb γνωρίζω echoes the verb φανερώω (revealed – v. 26). The repetition of a very similar concept points to the immense greatness and significance of the mystery, i.e., God's utmost desire for the salvation of Jews and non-Jews. It is God's desire to make believing Jews and Gentiles become His people.

There are two features of this mystery, as indicated by the phrase τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης. The pronoun τί (what?) serves as a comparative, which is the subject of the ἐστὶν (is). The noun πλοῦτος and the similar term θησαυροὶ (Col 2:3) are prominent concepts in Scripture. Πλοῦτος means "abundance of many earthly goods, wealth [or a]

¹⁰⁶ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 119.

¹⁰⁷ See Heil, *Colossians: Encouragement to Walk in All Wisdom as Holy Ones in Christ*, 87.

¹⁰⁸ See Foster, *Colossians*, 225; Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 130.

¹⁰⁹ The instruction to circulate this Letter to other churches to read, and letters addressed to other churches in the region to be circulated and read as well (see Col 4:16), suggest that the saints are those taken from among the Gentiles. Although the Letter is addressed to the Colossians, the interpretation of saints is inclusive of all who have responded to the preaching of the gospel of Christ.

plentiful supply of something”¹¹⁰ (see 1 Tim 6:17). **Πλοῦτος** also means being plentifully supplied or abounding with something.¹¹¹ Here **πλοῦτος** is associated with God’s mystery revealed. God’s abounding mystery is the inclusion of Gentiles into the eschatological community in Christ. The noun **πλοῦτος** is a predicate nominative and **τί τὸ πλοῦτος** could be translated literally as “how great is the wealth or riches.”

The noun **πλοῦτος** points to the conferral of God’s richest blessing through Christ to those who come to faith in Christ. The genitive noun **δόξης** was used earlier in reference to God’s majestic enabling power experienced in all kinds of trials (1:11), and is used here as an adjective describing the magnificence and awesomeness of the mystery. The mystery is so profound and glorious because it involves the divine will to give hope to everyone. The whole phrase could be translated as “how great is the wealth or riches of the glory.” It discloses the greatness and splendour of **τὸ μυστήριον**. It is so marvellous, so great, that God desired to make it known to the saints.¹¹²

The term **μυστήριον** was probably not unfamiliar to the Colossians, because in the Greco-Roman world **μυστήριον** was used in mystery religions, as part of their teachings and rituals.¹¹³ Paul would have been aware of this usage, but he was probably not influenced by it. Paul understood his ministry as making known the mystery of God from an eschatological perspective, like the Old Testament prophets and apocalyptic seers.¹¹⁴ Therefore, there is a compelling case to make that the meaning behind the use of the term **μυστήριον** (mystery) stemmed from the apocalyptic tradition. The term ‘mystery’ is frequent in Daniel,¹¹⁵ where it denotes an eschatological mystery.¹¹⁶

In the New Testament, the concept of mystery is used in a variety of ways. In Paul’s writings, mystery describes the following: a partial hardening of the Jews to make way for the Gentiles to be saved (Rom 11:25); the proclamation of Jesus Christ to all nations that they might believe and obey him (Rom 16:25-26); the wrapping up of God’s purpose

¹¹⁰ BDAG, 831.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² See S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. “Studies in the Epistles to the Colossians: V. The Minister of the Mystery,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119, no. 475 (July-September 1962): 232.

¹¹³ Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 174. Wiley asserts that mystery religions had their roots in the Babylonian story of Ishtar and Tammuz. These mystery religions spread throughout the Roman Empire and played a role in the Greek world from the seventh century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. Wiley, “A Study of ‘Mystery’ in the New Testament,” 350.

¹¹⁴ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 176.

¹¹⁵ Dan 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47. Jewish intertestamental apocalyptic writings made extensive use of the concept of mystery (1 Enoch 41:1, 3; 2 Bar 48:2-3; 80:7; 81:4; 4 Ezra 12:36-37; Sir 39:2-7).

¹¹⁶ See Wiley, “A Study of ‘Mystery’ in the New Testament,” 350-2.

inaugurated through Christ and the subjecting of everything under his leadership (Eph 1:9-10); and Gentiles and Jews being made heirs and one body, sharing in the promise of Christ (Eph 3:6).

In Colossians, the mystery $\delta\ \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\iota\nu\ \chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\iota}\nu$, $\acute{\eta}\ \acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\acute{\iota}\varsigma\ \tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma\ \delta\acute{o}\xi\eta\varsigma$ (which is Christ in you, the hope of glory). The verb $\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\iota\nu$ points to Christ, making him the centre of the mystery (see 2:3; 4:3). Thus the clause $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\acute{o}\varsigma\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \acute{\upsilon}\mu\acute{\iota}\nu$ means either Christ in you or Christ among you. The context and the grammar support either rendering. The immediate context supports Christ among you, which parallels the phrase ‘among the Gentiles.’ Christ in you suggests the divine immanence of the mystery in and among them.¹¹⁷

The next clause of the mystery is $\acute{\eta}\ \acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\acute{\iota}\varsigma\ \tau\acute{\eta}\varsigma\ \delta\acute{o}\xi\eta\varsigma$ (the hope of glory). The hope ($\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\pi\acute{\iota}\varsigma$) concept was introduced earlier as ‘stored up in heaven’ (1:5) and ‘held out in the gospel’ (1:23). In these two occurrences, the phrase is laden with eschatological overtones. Hope is a sure confidence in the realisation of the eschatological events, such as the glorious appearing of and with Christ in glory and being saved from God’s coming wrath (3:6). The immanent presence of Christ in and amongst the believers is an assurance and a guarantee of glory. Hope, together with glory, point to the future. What is kept in heaven will be revealed. When Christ appears in glory, the believers will appear with him in glory (Col 3:4; cf. 1 Pet 1:13).

5.4.2 The Flow of Thought (Col 1:26-27)

$\mu\upsilon\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\rho\iota\omicron\nu$ refers to God’s transcendent activity. This mystery was temporarily hidden but is now revealed through the preaching of the gospel (see Col 4:3). It is revealed to the saints. Saints are those who have heard the gospel of Christ and believed. The revelation of the mystery is according to God’s will. It is abounding and magnificent as it is God’s mystery that was kept hidden until its time had fully come. The $\mu\upsilon\sigma\tau\acute{\eta}\rho\iota\omicron\nu$ is ‘Christ in you the hope of glory.’ He is the apex of God’s revelation that through faith in him both Jews and Gentiles are made one people. To both, Christ is their hope of glory.¹¹⁸

The hopes of the believing community are bound up with the indwelling Christ, which affords them a stable basis for their confidence in sharing in the fullness of glory that will be fully displayed on the day Christ is revealed in glory (Col 3:4; Rom 8:19). ‘Christ

¹¹⁷ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 122-3.

¹¹⁸ The mystery revealed is that both Jews and Gentiles are saved on the basis of faith in Christ (see Eph 3:6; 12-22).

in you' recalls the presence of the ark of the covenant in the midst of the Old Testament community, whose hopes and confidence were bound up with the ark (1 Sam 4:3-6a). The eschatological community's hopes and stability are not in the ark but in Christ who indwells them, individually and corporately, and he is their assurance of the glorious unveiling with him. The Christian community is defined by his presence, which joins them to him and to one another (see 2:19).

5.4.3 The Significance of μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω and πλοῦτος in Col 1:26-27

The term μυστήριον was not uncommon in the Colossian context, but Paul's understanding of the term drew on the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, where it refers not so much to God's undisclosed secret, in contrast to the Greco-Roman mystery religions.¹¹⁹ It refers to God's divine secret revealed through God's divine agency (see Dan 2:18-19, 27-30). In Colossians, Paul is presented as the recipient of God's divine mystery who was commissioned to preach it (1:25; see also Gal 1:15-16; Eph 3:3-5).¹²⁰ The divine mystery is used in apposition to the word of God, signifying that the mystery is in God's word and is revealed through the proclamation of God's word,¹²¹ and that it is bearing fruit everywhere (Col 1:6).

This mystery was ἀποκρύπτω, that is, not previously revealed. It was concealed in God's counsel until it reached its time of revelation or fullness of time (see Gal 4:4). This mystery is gloriously rich (πλοῦτος), pointing to the abundance or greatness of God's mystery, which is the inclusion of non-Jews and Jews into God's eschatological community in Christ. Almost every use of πλοῦτος in Paul's letters describes the bountifulness of the divine characteristics.¹²² Here πλοῦτος is used to describe the mystery that is revealed.

¹¹⁹ 1 Enoch 103:2; 106:19; 2 Enoch 24:3; 4 Ezra 10:38; 14:5. Brown claims that mystery was a widespread concept "at the time of Christianity's beginnings." Raymond E. Brown, "The Semitic Background of the New Testament *Mysterion* (I)," *Biblica* 39, no. 4 (1958): 426. In Arnold's view, Paul's use of mystery should be interpreted on the basis of mystery as used in the book of Daniel to "describe the hiddenness or secrecy of the redemptive plan of God." Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 271.

¹²⁰ The Greek word οἰκονομία (Col 1:25) was used by Paul with the meaning of stewardship, to describe God's disclosure of the divine secret to him and the mandate for him to proclaim it. However, the term stewardship does not capture exactly the nuance of οἰκονομία. An English term that better captures οἰκονομία is economics, although it can be misleading to use the technical term 'economics.' Nonetheless, in later patristic theology, economy was used to denote "God's external actions directed towards creation, in distinction from discussion of the internal or ontological relationships within the Trinity." Foster, *Colossians*, 221.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹²² Riches – Rom 2:4; 9:23; 11:33; Eph 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8; Col 2:2; Rich – 2 Cor 6:10; 8:9; 1 Tim 6:17.

The beauty of this mystery is the indwelling and immanent presence of Christ in and among the saints, which is a guarantee of their future hope of glory (3:3-4).

The passage's emphasis on mystery requires further attention. The term mystery appears four times (twice here and later in Col 2:3, 4:3), which underscores its rhetorical significance. The rhetoric behind the use of mystery here is that the divine eschatological mystery has been revealed. The revelation of the eschatological mystery is God's doing, as *θέλω* demonstrates. God has revealed the eschatological mystery through the preaching of the gospel to all who believed (referred to as saints).¹²³ The assertion that all the saints have had the mystery revealed to them undercuts any claim of the divine mystery being revealed only to a special group of people or to spiritual elites.¹²⁴ The opponents, who probably made exclusive claims to receiving mystery and knowledge through visions (2:18), are shown to be deceivers (2:4), whose teaching is an empty deceit based on the elemental powers of the universe (2:8).

God's eschatological mystery is not hidden and believers do not need an ascetic rite to discover it. One does not need to combine the gospel with other mystery elements to know or understand God's mystery, which the Colossian philosophy wrongly assumed.¹²⁵ Rather, it is revealed in the gospel of Christ. The Colossian Christians have been given that mystery, which is Christ in them, the hope of glory. By living and walking according to the gospel of Christ (2:6-7), they will grow in greater appreciation of the mystery that God has revealed to them in Christ (3:15-17). They should not be fooled by the claims of the opponents about hidden mysteries which were received through visions and out-of-body experiences.

The mystery which the Colossians received is 'Christ in you the hope of glory' (1:27). The phrase *Χριστός ἐν σὺ* signifies a mystical union between Christ and the Colossians. Throughout the Letter, the phrase *ἐν Χριστῷ* is used extensively to depict the soteriological experience of the believers and their present participatory state of existence. Here, however, the phrase is reversed (from *ἐν Χριστῷ* to *Χριστός ἐν σὺ*), which, according to Arnold, "conveys the concept of present union with Christ through faith."¹²⁶ Dunn adds that "'Christ in you' is a shift in focus from the goal (reconciliation of Jew and

¹²³ The mystery of Christ remains a mystery to those who do not have faith. Wiley asserts that every believer receives the mystery because they have received the Holy Spirit. See Wiley, "A Study of 'Mystery' in the New Testament," 354.

¹²⁴ Wiley observed that "knowledge of the mystery is not the exclusive property of the clergy." *Ibid.*, 353.

¹²⁵ See Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 271.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

Gentile) to the means (Christ).”¹²⁷ Dunn further asserts that the reverse formula is appropriate in the light of Col 1:15-20; the divine Wisdom “identified with Christ can be seen as an immanent power within the personality.”¹²⁸

“Christ in you”¹²⁹ expresses an interchange between the resurrected believers’ new life, which is hidden with Christ in God in heaven, and the resurrected-glorified Christ, who is in heaven but has also made his residence in and among the believers. The believers do not need visions of heaven or a heavenly liturgy because the one who is pre-eminent in all things is living in them (Col 1:18). His immanent presence unites everyone into one, which makes social and class divides non-essential, because he is all and is in all (3:11). Everyone has the same identity, i.e., the image of Christ (3:10).

Another distinct aspect of the mystery revealed is “the hope of glory.” Hope is mentioned earlier (1:5, 23) and it points to the future. This means that the mystery revealed is progressive¹³⁰ to the final goal of glorious union with Christ, which will no longer be a union of faith but of sight (3:3-4). The resurrected hidden life of the believers will be revealed in conjunction with the glorious revelation of the resurrected-glorified Christ. Paul himself looks forward to the future appearing of Christ in glory, so that he might present every believer he has laboured for complete in Christ (1:28).¹³¹ Their future glory is bound up with the future glorious revealing of Christ; the believers should continue in the gospel of Christ (2:6-7); and they should not let the Colossian philosophy disqualify them from the glorious prize (2:18).

5.5 Πλήροφωρία, Πλοῦτος, Μυστήριον, Ἀποκρύπτω and Γνώσις (Col 2:2-3)

5.5.1 Analysing Col 2:2-3

Col 2:2-3 is also in the polemical or theological section of the Letter. This text is part of the sub-section describing Paul’s ministry leading up to his polemic against the Colossian philosophy.¹³² Col 2:2-3 states the purpose of Paul’s struggle for the Colossians and

¹²⁷ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 122.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ ‘Christ in you’ can appropriately be seen as the Spirit in you (see Rom 8:8-10, the interchange of Spirit and Christ in you). Ibid., 122-3; Foster, *Colossians*, 227; Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 272-3.

¹³⁰ Foster states that “the letter envisages a transformative process whereby believers have already begun to experience the presence of Christ in them and their lives begin to be conformed to the model of Christ-centred values. It is ‘the hope of glory’ which will see that process come to fulfillment.” Foster, *Colossians*, 228. Dunn also argues that “‘Christ in you’ is ‘the hope’ of that ‘glory’ because retransformation into the divine image and glory is a lifelong process already underway in the person of faith.” Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 123.

¹³¹ See Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 273.

¹³² See Chapter 3.

Laodiceans, those who have met him and those who have not. In this text, the terms *πλήροφορίας, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω* and *γνώσις* occur.

In Col 2:2, Paul introduces his reason for struggling for the churches in Lycus Valley – *ἵνα παρακληθῶσιν αἱ καρδίαι αὐτῶν συμβιβασθέντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ καὶ εἰς πᾶν πλοῦτος τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως, εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, Χριστοῦ* (that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love and to all [the] riches of the full assurance of understanding, to [the] knowledge of mystery God, [which is] Christ).

The preposition *ἵνα* introduces the purpose that *παρακληθῶσιν αἱ καρδίαι αὐτῶν*. The *παρακαλέω* word-group had various meanings in the Greek world. Its basic meaning “is to call to one’s side, to summon, to address or to speak.”¹³³ In its usage in the New Testament,¹³⁴ it means (1) to admonish or to exhort;¹³⁵ (2) to beg, entreat or beseech;¹³⁶ (3) to encourage, and strengthen by consolation, to comfort; (4) to encourage, comfort, strengthen;¹³⁷ and (5) to treat someone in a congenial manner.¹³⁸

From these nuances, *παρακαλέω* in Col 2:2 means to comfort or to encourage.¹³⁹ This is the most probable meaning given Paul’s testimony (v. 1) to strengthen and encourage the believers in the Lycus Valley in their struggles.¹⁴⁰ The believers were probably perplexed by the Colossian philosophy (cf., 2:4-23), and by possible rejection or persecution from their families, masters, social or religious affiliations,¹⁴¹ and thus they needed encouragement from a friend like Paul. They needed encouragement in their *καρδίαι* (see 4:8).

Καρδία refers to the centre and source of inner life, with its intellect, will and emotions or affections.¹⁴² In the ancient Mediterranean world, *καρδία* referred to the “whole of the human capacity for thought, judgment, and emotion.”¹⁴³ In Jewish thinking, *καρδία* is “the seat of emotions of spiritual feelings.”¹⁴⁴ In Dunn’s view, Paul “hope[d]

¹³³ BDAG, 764-5.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Rom 12:8; 2 Cor 5:20; 10:1; 1 Thess 2:11-12; 1 Tim 2:1; 2 Tim 4:2.

¹³⁶ Phlm 9-10; 1 Cor 16:12; 2 Cor 9:5; 12: 8, 18.

¹³⁷ 2 Cor 2:6-7; 1:4, 6; 7:7, 13; 1 Thess 4:18; Eph 6:22; Col 2:2; 4:8; 2 Thess 2:17.

¹³⁸ 1 Cor 4:13; 1 Thess 2:12; 1 Tim 5:1.

¹³⁹ See Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 106; MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 85.

¹⁴⁰ See Foster, *Colossians*, 234.

¹⁴¹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 114.

¹⁴² BDAG, 508-9.

¹⁴³ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 85.

¹⁴⁴ Foster, *Colossians*, 234.

that spiritual effects would reach to the depth of their experience, where not only emotions were rooted, but also thought and decision.”¹⁴⁵ The recipients should be emotionally and intellectually strengthened in the face of the persuasive rhetoric of the Colossian philosophy (2:4).

The participle clause *συμβιβασθέντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ* has been rendered as “being instructed in love” from its Septuagint occurrences.¹⁴⁶ The verb *συμβιβάζω* could mean to unite, conclude, demonstrate or instruct.¹⁴⁷ The use of *συμβιβάζω* later in 2:19 means unite, and its usage here probably means the same. But the context is about Paul giving instruction to the Colossians. Here the two nuances – instruct and unite – are retained.

Unity is a product of love, and Col 3:16 singles out love as a cord which binds everything together in harmony.¹⁴⁸ Love is the core of any mutual relationship which binds people together. In this bond of oneness, people find support and encouragement.¹⁴⁹ This gives us a glimpse of the communal nature of the Christian community to whom the Letter was addressed. By staying united as God’s redeemed people, they will be able to gain encouragement and strength from each other to withstand every form of teaching that contradicts the gospel which they had received. In this light, the participle clause is modifying the act of comforting and strengthening the Colossians.¹⁵⁰

The phrase *καὶ εἰς πᾶν πλοῦτος τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως* points further to the author’s style of writing. Here the author is reflecting on “the superlative value and quality of the understanding they now possess.”¹⁵¹ The phrase *πᾶν πλοῦτος* recalls Col 1:27, which means all the wealth or the fullness of blessings or benefits.¹⁵² In Pauline writing, *πληροφορία* only occurs twice (1 Thess 1:5; Col 2:2), and it means

¹⁴⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 130.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Ex 4:12, 15; 18:16; Lev 10:11; Deut 4:9; Judg 13:8; and Isa 40:13, which Paul cited in 1 Cor 2:16, meaning instruct. The same can be observed in Acts 9:22 and 19:33. Foster points out that the participle *συμβιβασθέντες* leads to an anacoluthon. It does not follow on from what precedes it. It does not agree with *καρδία*, which is a feminine participle, if hearts are meant to be the subject. If “their” is the antecedent subject, then it should be in the genitive case.” Foster, *Colossians*, 235. *Συμβιβασθέντες* is a masculine plural participle, and therefore it is neither of the two, leaving us with no solution. However, the overall meaning is clear, that is, the “temporal sequence and relationship between hearts that might be encouraged, and the knitting together of the believers in love.” (234-5).

¹⁴⁷ BDAG, 956.

¹⁴⁸ See Foster, *Colossians*, 235; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 93.

¹⁴⁹ The recipients of the letter gain instruction or knowledge by being united. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 115.

¹⁵⁰ See Foster, *Colossians*, 235.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 73.

complete certainty or full assurance.¹⁵³ Πλοῦτος expresses quantitative characteristics and πληροφορία expresses qualitative characteristics¹⁵⁴ of συνέσις. The genitive συνέσεως is the same word used earlier in Col 1:9 – an understanding that comes from the Spirit. The two genitives, τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως, follow πᾶν πλοῦτος, highlighting quality and quantity respectively.

The two genitives could be explained as follows: The first interpretation is to take τῆς πληροφορίας (full assurance) as a genitive of source and τῆς συνέσεως (understanding) as an objective genitive. In this view, πᾶν πλοῦτος denotes “the riches that come from the full assurance of understanding.”¹⁵⁵ Second, if τῆς πληροφορία is reckoned as genitive of content and τῆς συνέσις as genitive of source, then it means “the wealth consisting of full assurance that springs from understanding.”¹⁵⁶ The preposition εἰς (in/for) highlights Paul’s purpose in labouring for the church in the Lycus Valley, as a way of bringing assurance. The two genitives probably mean the latter – all the wealth of full assurance of understanding that was granted by the Spirit when they heard and believed the gospel.¹⁵⁷

Syntactically, the phrase εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, Χριστοῦ parallels the previous phrase εἰς πᾶν πλοῦτος τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως. Both start with the preposition εἰς. The above phrase, however, builds on the foundation of understanding that comes from the knowledge of God. The connection between knowledge and understanding has already been made in Paul’s prayer for the Colossians, in which he prayed for his readers’ growth in the understanding and knowledge of God (1:9-10; 4:12).

The stress on ἐπίγνωσις continues into the teaching or ethical section, where it is said that one’s new self is renewed in the knowledge of its creator (3:10). The term ἐπίγνωσις means “acquainted with,”¹⁵⁸ which is translated ‘knowledge’ in 2:3. Ἐπίγνωσιν has several connotations: (1) “knowledge as an attribute of God;”¹⁵⁹ (2) “specifically of Christian knowledge ... supernatural mystical knowledge;”¹⁶⁰ (3) “of the

¹⁵³ BDAG, 827.

¹⁵⁴ See Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians*, 239.

¹⁵⁵ Moule, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 86.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. See also Foster, *Colossians*, 236.

¹⁵⁷ See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 131; Foster, *Colossians*, 236.

¹⁵⁸ BDAG, 162.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 162-63.

heretical Gnosis.”¹⁶¹ This ἐπίγνωσις is linked with μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, Χριστοῦ and thus refers to specific knowledge of Christ.

We have already discussed μυστήριον (1:26-27).¹⁶² Here it refers to the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ. Christ being presented as a mystery probably had a cultic overtone for the recipients, as participants in Greco-Roman cults went through initiation rites of participation.¹⁶³ To refer to Christ as God’s mystery is to say that the recipients were already participating in God’s divine mystery through their union with Christ.¹⁶⁴ By knowing Christ as God’s mystery, the Colossians may grow in their knowledge of Christ cognitively and relationally. Acknowledging Christ as God’s mystery is a way of rejecting the mystical teachings and practices of the Colossian philosophy that sought mysteries through asceticism, angelic worship and visions.

Christ is the locus – ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφοι (in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge – v. 3). The prepositional phrase ἐν ᾧ refers to Christ (v. 2). This verse further describes the significance of Christ. Its syntactic construction points back to the christological poem (1:15-20). The prepositional phrase ἐν ᾧ links especially with ἐν αὐτῷ of Col 1:17. The hymn acknowledges that “in him all things hold together,” and here it is affirmed that in Christ “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.” His unique status is stated as in whom πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφοι. Θησαυρός means either repository or wealth.¹⁶⁵

Foster states that θησαυρός speaks “of items of great value or worth.”¹⁶⁶ In the Septuagint, ‘treasure’ denotes material wealth (Josh 6:19, 24; Prov 10:2) and spiritual goods (Isa 33:6; Prov 8:18-21). In Jewish apocalyptic writings, the image of hidden treasure was used “to challenge men and women to pursue right knowledge (1 Enoch 46:3).”¹⁶⁷ Paul was likely using this image to encourage his readers to look to Christ for πᾶς (all) spiritual σοφία καὶ γνώσις which rules out every other source of these things. The occurrence of θησαυρός and ἀπόκρυφος here is not implying that the treasures are concealed (1:26)

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶² See Chapter 5.4.

¹⁶³ Foster, *Colossians*, 236.

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 5.4.3.

¹⁶⁵ BDAG, 456.

¹⁶⁶ Foster, *Colossians*, 237.

¹⁶⁷ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 95. 1 Enoch 46: 3: “This is the Son of Man to whom belongs righteousness, And righteousness dwells with him; And all the treasures of that which is hidden he reveals Because the Lord of spirits has chosen him.”

but denoting that which is deposited or stored up.¹⁶⁸ All the treasures of σοφία καὶ γνώσις are stored or deposited in Christ. There is no other beside Christ, in whom the full riches of knowledge and wisdom of God could be found.

The two genitives (τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως) are genitive of contents, describing πάντες οἱ θησαυροί. By stating that all the treasures of σοφία καὶ γνώσις are in Christ, the implication is that in Christ are found all the spiritual wealth of insights, understanding, knowledge and wisdom needed to live discerningly, to grow in the knowledge of God's will, and to walk in a way that is worthy of the Lord (1:9-11; 2:6-7).

In the Old Testament, God is the source of wisdom and knowledge. From his lips come wisdom and knowledge (Prov 2:8-9). Therefore, Paul's use of wisdom and knowledge here was probably influenced by the wisdom tradition from canonical and extracanonical texts (Sir 1:24-25; Wis 6:22; 7:13; Bar 3:15).¹⁶⁹ The occurrence of the pair in Rom 11:33 refers to God's wisdom and knowledge in the future salvation of the Jews. The pair σοφία καὶ γνώσις appeared together earlier (1:9), in Paul's prayer to God to fill the believers with spiritual wisdom and knowledge (see Eph 1:17). Here wisdom and knowledge are stored up in Christ, who is God in all his fullness (1:19; 2:9), and from him come the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

5.5.2 The Flow of Thought (Col 2:2-3)

As Col 2:2-3 shows, Paul's purpose in writing the Letter is that the Colossians will be encouraged and strengthened in their hearts, and that their emotions and decisions will be rooted in their experience of Christ and in their being united and instructed in love. As Dunn writes, "[o]nly a love which penetrates to the heart and wells up from the heart can sustain the sort of unity that Paul sought"¹⁷⁰ (see 1:4). As believers, individually and collectively, they possess all the wealth of full assurance of spiritual understanding and knowledge that was granted to them through faith in the gospel of Christ (1:5). This knowledge is not just an intellectual knowledge but relational knowledge.¹⁷¹ The knowledge that they received is God's mystery, namely Christ (see 1:26-27), who is the repository of all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. It is only in Christ that all the fullness of spiritual wisdom and knowledge are found.

¹⁶⁸ BDAG, 456; cf. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 95.

¹⁶⁹ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, 139.

¹⁷⁰ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 130.

¹⁷¹ Foster, *Colossians*, 237.

5.5.3 The Significance of πλήροφωρία, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω and ἐπίγνωσις in Col 2:2-3

The terms πλοῦτος (see 1:27) and θησαυρός are not depicting material wealth. These two terms describe the value (quality and quantity) of understanding and knowledge. Commenting on θησαυρός, Foster writes that “the term does not denote physical items that are luxurious or of great expense, but it is an image of the ‘treasure’ of divinely given understanding and insight.”¹⁷² The same could be said of πλοῦτος. Both understanding and knowledge are linked to God’s mystery, namely Christ, recalling Col 1:26-27, which implies the pricelessness of the mystery that the Colossians were given.

The term πλήροφωρία, from the root word πλήρης, occurring with πλοῦτος, describes συνέσις. It basically emphasises that the fullness of the riches of spiritual understanding and knowledge are found in God’s mystery, namely Christ, emphatically denying any spiritual understanding and knowledge outside of Christ. The whole purpose of Paul’s use of the terms fullness, riches and treasure is to encourage the Colossians to look to Christ alone for true spiritual understanding and knowledge. Correct knowledge about Christ is vital to keep the believers from being deceived by fine-sounding arguments. As Geisler points out, “[t]ruth and persuasion do not always correlate. Error can persuade, and truth can be compelling at times. It all depends on whether one has the *full* truth and a *complete* commitment to it.”¹⁷³ In Foster’s summation, Christ is “the only place where such priceless wisdom and knowledge is to be found.”¹⁷⁴

The term μυστήριον recalls Col 1:26-27,¹⁷⁵ where mystery was associated with God’s word. Here in Col 2:2-3 mystery is used in apposition to Christ. This shows the author’s rhetorical way of introducing Christ. There has been a carefully thought-out approach leading up to this point, where Paul declares Christ to be the mystery revealed. The use of μυστήριον is a “reminder to the Colossians of what they have received and known in Christ.”¹⁷⁶ Here mystery is understood with reference to Christ’s divine being, while in Col 1:26-27 it is used soteriologically. Christ is the domain where the fullness of wisdom and knowledge is found.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Geisler, “Colossians,” 676.

¹⁷⁴ Foster, *Colossians*, 237.

¹⁷⁵ Refer to the significance of μυστήριον in Chapter 5.4.3.

¹⁷⁶ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 48.

The term ἀποκρύπτω occurs three times in the Letter (1:26; 2:3; 3:3). Its earlier use was in conjunction with the mystery hidden for a long period of time but now revealed to the saints, while its later use is in relation to believers' resurrected life.¹⁷⁷ Its use here in Col 2:2-3 is in relation to treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The threefold use of ἀποκρύπτω evokes the apocalyptic and Wisdom tradition.¹⁷⁸ In view of the earlier use of mystery, the term ἀποκρύπτω, as Dunn states, “evokes the apocalyptic idea of heavenly treasures, hidden from human eye but revealed to the visionary or heavenly traveller”¹⁷⁹ (see 1 Enoch 18:1; 43:6; Isa 45:3). It is in Christ that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God are found (1:9-10). He is the wisdom and the knowledge of God that the Colossians have come to know, while those who have not been united with Christ through faith have no access to the wisdom and the knowledge of God. God's mystery is hidden to them.¹⁸⁰

The term γνῶσις, appearing here and elsewhere in a compound form ἐπιγνῶσις (1:9, 10, 2:2; 3:10), “describes an intellectual aspect of faith. Christ-centred knowledge is seen as a goal of Colossians.”¹⁸¹ Paul's prayer to God for the Colossians is that God will fill them with spiritual understanding and knowledge of His will (1:9-10). His purpose in encouraging the Colossians is that they would see in Christ all the wealth of understanding and knowledge (2:2). In Christ is hidden all wisdom and knowledge.

Wisdom, in Foster's understanding, is “a cognitive quality that provides insight into the divine will, and possession of such wisdom should produce instructional insights and ethical behaviour towards those both inside and outside the community.”¹⁸² The result of their knowledge of Christ is the renewal of their image to conform to the likeness of Christ (3:10). In sum, spiritual knowledge and wisdom “originate in the divine sphere being concealed in Christ from those who have not received the insight and faith the Colossians now possess.”¹⁸³

¹⁷⁷ See Chapter 5.6.3.

¹⁷⁸ Pro 2:3-6; Sir 1:24-25; Wis 6:22; 7:13-14; Bar 3:5.

¹⁷⁹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 132.

¹⁸⁰ See Foster, *Colossians*, 238.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

5.6 Κέκρυπται (Col 3:3-4)

5.6.1 Analysing Col 3:3-4

There is some disagreement amongst scholars about how to understand where Col 3:1-4 fits in the structure of the Letter. Some consider it as part of the polemic against the Colossian Philosophy,¹⁸⁴ while others suggest it belongs to the didactic section.¹⁸⁵ This thesis designates Col 3:1-4 as part of the polemic or theological section, functioning as a transition statement from the polemic to the didactic part of the Letter (3:1-4:6). The theology is applied to practical living.¹⁸⁶

Col 3:1-4 makes the transition from theology to practice by recalling some of the theological (polemical) statements: you died and were raised with Christ (3:1, 3; 2:20, 11-12), and will have future glory (3:4; 1:27). Col 3:1-4 drives home to the recipients of the Letter that they have a new identity. They are no longer what they used to be. As such, they are required to live differently, as we see in the rest of the parenetic section, which is a series of instructions about the vices (3:5-17), household codes (3:18-4:1), and duties toward outsiders (4:2-6).¹⁸⁷ They should live differently in view of their identity in Christ. They are to fix their minds on the heavenly things where Christ is seated. In verse 3, the term κέκρυπται is used.

Colossians 3:3 reads: ἀπεθάνετε γὰρ καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ ἐν τῷ θεῷ (For you have died and your life have been hidden with Christ in God). The preposition γὰρ indicates that this verse is giving the reason why the believers should have their minds fixed on things in heaven and not on earthly things (2:2). The reason is ἀπεθάνετε (you died). The aorist verb ἀπεθάνετε is a metaphor for spiritual death. Ἀποθνήσκω is the same verb used in Col 2:20; it denotes the past act and its usage here reinforces a twofold injunction.

First, it serves as a corollary of “you have been raised.” The believers are raised with Christ, who is seated at God’s right hand, and they are to fix their minds on the things above (3:1-2). Second, at baptism, which is a confirmation rite of conversion, the believers died with Christ (2:20).¹⁸⁸ This implies that the believers died to the world and its

¹⁸⁴ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*; Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*.

¹⁸⁵ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*; Foster, *Colossians*.

¹⁸⁶ See Hay, *Colossians*, 114.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 121.

regulations. They no longer belong to the world to think about earthly things and to obey its commands and regulations (see Col 2:20-22).

This is a radical change of identity. It points to the fact that when the Colossians believed in Christ and were baptised, their past lives were buried in the waters of baptism and are to be remembered no more.¹⁸⁹ Their former life of servitude to principalities and powers (2:20; 1:13), beliefs, rules and rituals of their former religions (inferred in 2:16), and their earthly or sinful natures (1:21; 3:5) were put to death. In dying with Christ, they were freed from the influences and obligations of their former way of life.

When they died, they did not remain in death. The next phrase states what happened – καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ, which implies resurrection (see 3:1). What does κέκρυπται σὺν τῷ Χριστῷ imply? The term κέκρυπται means to hide something in a safe and secure place.¹⁹⁰ Κέκρυπται is a past event with continuing effects,¹⁹¹ and it also suggests a future completion.¹⁹² The verb ‘hidden’ connotes that this world knows nothing about the reality and fullness of the resurrected life of those who died with Christ in baptism,¹⁹³ and even the believers themselves do not know it in full.¹⁹⁴ What the resurrected life will be like is hidden until its disclosure at the glorious revelation of Christ, as verse 4 delineates.

As they are hidden with Christ, the believers are intimately connected to the resurrected, heavenly life of Christ and are in the company of the living Christ in the heavenly realm.¹⁹⁵ They are bound to Christ in his eschatological return. Together they (the believers and Christ) are ἐν τῷ θεῷ. The phrase ἐν τῷ θεῷ is rarely used in Colossians compared to ἐν Χριστῷ. It is used in a locative sense, regarding where their lives are hidden. As Christ himself has his being in God as creator and redeemer (see Col 1:15-20), those who are raised with him from death are in God as well.¹⁹⁶ The believers are brought into the sphere of God’s divine power and protection so that nothing can wrest them away from God.

¹⁸⁹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 180; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 206.

¹⁹⁰ BDAG, 571.

¹⁹¹ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 180

¹⁹² BDAG, 571; See Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 206.

¹⁹³ See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 207; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 180.

¹⁹⁴ Hay, *Colossians*, 117.

¹⁹⁵ See Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 121-2.

¹⁹⁶ See Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, 135.

Col 3:4 reads: ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῆ, ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν, τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ (when Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will appear with him in glory). The verb φανερόω was used earlier in 1:26 to refer to the revealing of God’s mystery that was hidden from the ages and generations. Its usage here, ὅταν ὁ Χριστὸς φανερωθῆ, means the visible revealing or appearing of Christ in the future – the Parousia of Christ.¹⁹⁷

This suggests that not only is the believer’s life hidden, the resurrected Christ who is also the believers’ life, as the phrase ἡ ζωὴ ὑμῶν shows, is hidden from sight. Christ is seated in heaven (3:1). If the believer’s life is hidden with him, “then the believer’s life is already in heaven”¹⁹⁸ (see also Eph 2:6). The believers’ lives are bound up with Christ as their “source, centre and goal.”¹⁹⁹ In this sense, the Parousia of Christ has a direct bearing on the believer’s life – τότε καὶ ὑμεῖς (then you too) will ὑμεῖς σὺν αὐτῷ φανερωθήσεσθε ἐν δόξῃ. The same verb φανερόω (future passive) is also used for the believers appearing with Christ. Those who are in Christ will visibly appear with Christ at his own visible appearing – ἐν δόξῃ.

What does ἐν δόξῃ mean? If ἐν is taken as circumstantial, it would mean attended by glory or the blazing of glory. If it is taken as instrumental, it would mean clothed in glory, but if ἐν is taken as locative, it means glorified or in glorified bodies.²⁰⁰ In whose glory will the believers appear – God’s, Christ’s, or theirs? I concur with Harris, who concludes that the context supports Christ’s glory, since he lives in heaven in a resurrected-glorified body (see 2:9; 3:1). If Christ’s appearing is in heavenly glory, where he is now seated, this also means that he will visibly appear as the resurrected-glorified Lord. Since the believers’ lives are hidden in him, it must also mean that the believers’ visible appearing with Christ will be in glorified bodies.

5.6.2 The Flow of Thought (Col 3:3-4)

What the text is saying is that the believers are already raised from death. Their lives are currently hidden with Christ in God but will be revealed with Christ at the Parousia. This is because their lives are so bound up with Christ that his life is called the believers’ life.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 204.

¹⁹⁸ Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 128.

¹⁹⁹ Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 123.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 129.

Whatever happens to Christ will also happen to them. The baptism rite illustrates this binding of believers with Christ (2:12). At baptism, the believers died with Christ and were resurrected to life with Christ. Their lives are hidden with Christ who is seated in heaven, which means that the believers are seated with Christ in heaven (Eph 2:6). It also connotes that they are already living in the resurrection. When Christ, who is their life, appears in glory, they too will appear with him in glory, but at present the new life in Christ is hidden, both to the believers and to the non-believers. What this new life is like is unknown, but it is described as glorious (see 1 Cor 15:43; Phil 3:21).

5.6.3 The Significance of ἀποκρύπτω in Col 3:3-4

From the above analysis, it is clear that the meaning of ἀποκρύπτω in Col 3:3-4 is similar to its earlier usage (1:26; 2:3). Both in Col 1:26 and 3:3-4 it follows a hidden-revealed pattern. In its previous usage, the mystery that was kept hidden or concealed is now revealed to the believers. In its use here, the believer's resurrected life is hidden, and it will only be revealed at the revelation of Jesus Christ. There are at least two motifs that I want to draw attention to from the above analysis of the verb ἀποκρύπτω in Col 3:3-4.

First, the believers are already raised from death. As we have seen, "you have died" is a corollary of "you were raised' with Christ." Those who believe and are baptised are already raised with Christ now, and share in the resurrected-heavenly life with Christ in heaven.²⁰² Their lives are connected to the resurrected-glorified Christ who is in heaven, which means the final realisation of their new life is currently hidden. This is implied by the use of φανερώω in verse 4. The believer's new life in Christ is hidden with Christ in God.

The reality and fullness of sharing in the resurrected-heavenly life with Christ is presently hidden from the world, and even from those who already participate in it. It is a spiritual reality. It is already but not yet. The hiddenness of the resurrected life with Christ points to the future eschatological revealing of what the resurrected life will be.²⁰³ As the mystery that was kept hidden was revealed, so too the resurrected life of believers in Christ will be revealed in glory. The hidden resurrected life in Christ will become a visible reality. Its revelation will be glorious, matching the gloriousness of Christ and his appearing, because believers' lives are bound with Christ's life (3:4; see also 1 Cor 15:42-49). The

²⁰² Ibid., 128. In Thompson's words, "[b]elievers are raised to new life in this world, not in the next." Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 125.

²⁰³ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 180-1; Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 128.

glorious appearing of Christ will be visible, as it will be for all who are in Christ.²⁰⁴ The hiddenness of the resurrected life awaiting the revelation of Christ resonates with Col 1:26-27 (see also 1:5), where Christ is the believers' hope of glory. When he appears, they too will appear with him.

The second motif deduced from ἀποκρύπτω is protection. The fact that the believers are hidden with Christ in God means that their lives are safe in the sphere of God. They are beyond the reach of any harmful or destructive forces, which Colossians refers to as thrones, dominions, rulers and powers (1:16, 1:13; 2:15), or the general designation, elemental powers (2:8, 20; 1:13). This aspect of protection indicates the ongoing reality and experience of the victory that Christ won over the cosmic powers (2:15). He rules over every rule and authority (2:10).

In this present life, believers are not immune to struggles and sufferings,²⁰⁵ but the imperative to remain firm against all adversities is firm because believers are already sharing in the resurrected-heavenly life with Christ, hidden with Christ, and are destined to reign with him when he appears. Their struggles and sufferings are like the birth pains of the life that they already possess, which is a reality only through the eyes of faith.²⁰⁶ These struggles and pains show that they do not belong to this world. They belong to the kingdom of Christ (1:13).

This means that the world has no say regarding their lives and destiny, as it once did. Their destiny and identity have changed through dying and rising with Christ. There is no power on earth, not even death, that can snatch away those who are already raised and hidden with Christ in God. The hostile rulers and authorities are defeated (2:15). However, even after the cross these beings still have some degree of power to hold people back from knowing God's mystery, namely Christ (see 1:13), and from its proclamation (4:3). They even seek to exert fear over the believers. But the cross of Christ has sealed the fate of every power of darkness, which the final revelation of Christ in glory will bring to a close.

The knowledge of being hidden with Christ in God leads believers to think about what is above or in heaven, where Christ is seated. Thinking about heavenly things is not suggesting a life of solitude. Being heavenly minded indicates a change of status, as the death metaphor implies. Death ushers in a new mode of existence and a new code of conduct. One's conduct should reflect the lordship of Christ, putting to death the sinful

²⁰⁴ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 129.

²⁰⁵ See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 126.

²⁰⁶ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 181.

flesh and putting on Christ as one's new clothing, in whose image one is being recreated (3:5-10).²⁰⁷ One should see oneself as dead to this world, alive and sharing in the resurrected-heavenly life with Christ and awaiting being revealed with Christ in glory.

The hope of the glorious revealing with Christ should influence one's attitudes and conduct, and it should not be exchanged or sacrificed for the temporary. One should not live the way one once lived, or succumb to the pressures and temptations of this world. Instead of thinking and behaving like those who are of this world, the believer should think and act differently. His or her social status and boundaries are redefined. Christ becomes the centre of one's life, and therefore one's conduct should reflect Christ who is Lord. Christ should be the lord of every relationship and his lordship redefines our attitudes toward work and the resources he puts in our care.

5.7 Summary

In summary, we have seen that the noun *πλήρωμα* occurs twice in both parallel texts (1:19; 2:9). As a noun, *πλήρωμα* depicts the completeness of divine embodiment in Christ (1:19; 2:9). Christ's divinity is seen in his cosmic salvific mission and in glorification. He exists corporeally in heaven. The participle *πεπληρωμένοι* describes the believers' state of being filled (2:10). The believers are given fullness of salvation in Christ, which will be consummated at the return of Christ. Those who are joined to Christ are filled and sustained through and through. They lack nothing in Christ. In Col 2:2, *πληροφορίας* is used along with riches to quantify and qualify the knowledge and understanding that comes from knowing Christ.

The term *πλοῦτος* occurs twice (1:27; 2:2), along with its related term *θησαυρός*, which does not entail material wealth but, rather, great worth or value. The first use of *πλοῦτος* describes the abounding worth of the glorious mystery revealed – Christ in you the hope of glory (1:27). Its second use highlights the value of understanding and knowledge that come from faith in Christ. All the riches and treasures of spiritual wisdom and knowledge are located in Christ (2:2-3).

Ἀποκρύπτω and *μυστήριον* occur in close proximity to each other. *Ἀποκρύπτω* occurs three times (1:26; 2:3; 3:3). Its first usage, in Col 1:26, describes concealment of the

²⁰⁷ In Lincoln's view, "[t]he heavenly life, which flows from its source in the exalted Christ (3:3), works itself out and takes form within the structures of human existence, not only in the community of the church and its worship (3:16) but in every aspect of life (3:17), in the husband-wife, parent-child and master-slave relationships (3:18-4:1)." Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 130.

divine mystery for a long period of time and from past generations. The second usage of hiddenness in Col 2:3 points to Christ as the one in whom all the fullness of wisdom and knowledge is located. The third use of hiddenness refers to concealment of the believers' resurrected life with Christ in God, awaiting its full disclosure at the revelation of Christ (3:3). **Μυστήριον** refers to the transcendent activities of God, which were not previously understood but are now revealed to the saints through the apostles and the prophets. The mystery is Christ in you the hope of glory (1:26-27). **Μυστήριον** is also used in apposition to Christ (Col 2:2), emphasising that Christ is God's **μυστήριον**, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3). This mystery was revealed to Paul, who was tasked to make it known (see 4:3).

Γνώσις describes the intellectual aspect of Christ-centred faith. Divine knowledge and wisdom originate in the divine sphere and are concealed, meaning bestowed in Christ. Believers are to seek divine wisdom and knowledge in Christ. **Γνώσις** emphasises Christ-centred knowledge (2:3) that has the power to renew and conform the believers into Christ-likeness (3:10).

The concepts of **πλήρωμα**, **πλοῦτος**, **μυστήριον**, **ἀποκρύπτω** and **γνώσις** emphasise the divine nature of Christ and his centrality for salvation. Through Christ the eschatological blessings have been inaugurated and are progressing toward the final revelation of Christ in glory (3:4). With these insights in mind, I now turn to Chapter 6, which will integrate the resources gathered in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 in order to respond to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 6: A Response from Colossians to the Melanesian Concept of *Gutpela Sindaun*

In this chapter I will develop a contextual theological response from Colossians to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, as delineated in Chapter 2.¹ In Chapter 3 I discussed the Colossian philosophy and Paul's response in Col 2:8-23. The motivation for examining the Colossians philosophy and Paul's response to it has been to develop a model for responding to *gutpela sindaun*.

Paul's response to the Colossian philosophy reveals that the issue underlying the polemic is christology intertwined with soteriology. We saw in his polemic that Paul utilised the concepts and motifs from the Colossian poem to challenge the Colossian philosophy. This linked to our Chapter 4 discussion of the christological poem (1:15-20), which is about the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption. The poem uses Second Temple traditions to interpret the Christ-event so as to identify Christ with God.²

In analysing the poem, several important theological concepts and metaphors emerged, such as image, firstborn, beginning, head, fullness and reconciliation, which were used to explicate the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption. The analysis of these christological concepts and metaphors led to Chapter 5, where I discussed the concepts of fullness, riches, mystery, hiddenness and knowledge. These concepts emphasised the centrality of Christ for salvation and future glory.

The reason for elaborating these concepts is that similar concepts or ideas are used in delineating the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. These concepts were unpacked in order to ascertain how we might engage intelligibly with Melanesian cultural thinking about *gutpela sindaun*.³ Thus, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 have supplied the necessary resources to develop a response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* discussed in Chapter 2.

The approaches I will use to develop a Colossians-centred response to *gutpela sindaun* are theological, hermeneutical and contextual. By theological, I mean that we allow Scripture to question and form our theological articulation and practice.⁴ The hermeneutical approach seeks to apply the significance of the exegetical results to today's readers. Within

¹ See Chapter 2.1 for the definition of *gutpela sindaun* and Chapter 2.7.1 for the Melanesian view of corporeal earthly immortality, which was the impetus for Melanesian indigenous movements, independent churches, cooperative societies and political independence.

² See Chapter 4.1.2.

³ See Chapters 1.4.6 and 2.4.6.

⁴ See Chapter 1.7.2.

the scope of the hermeneutical approach, I utilise the cultural affinity method to apply the exegetical results to Melanesia. This is so that the theological teachings and exegetical insights speak to the Melanesian context, as they did to the original recipients of the Letter. Otherwise, Christian (biblical) teaching will not take root in a given cultural context. To contextualise the theological insights within the Melanesian context, I will also apply the critical contextualisation method,⁵ which takes seriously both Scripture and the recipient culture.

A Colossians response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* is presented in this chapter in three parts. In Part 1, I will discuss how the christology of Colossians relates to *gutpela sindaun*. How does Colossians present Christ to Melanesians? In Part 2, I will discuss Colossians' reconciliation soteriology and how it relates to *gutpela sindaun*. What is a Colossian reconciliation soteriology response to Melanesians' desired *gutpela sindaun*? In Part 3, I will discuss Paul's eschatology in Colossians and its relationship to *gutpela sindaun*. Why should Melanesians remain faithful to the gospel of Christ? In each part, definitions of any important term or concept not defined earlier will be woven into the discussion.

Before delineating a response from Colossians to *gutpela sindaun*, there is one preliminary issue which must be addressed. How does the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* relate to the biblical concept of salvation? In Scripture, the term salvation is used in two ways. Its first usage is in a physical sense: being saved (1) from mortal danger and death; (2) from slavery like the Israelites in Egypt;⁶ (3) from sickness and diseases; (4) being in good health; or (5) being prosperous.⁷ In this understanding, as Cilliers Breytenbach writes, "soteriology essentially means deliverance from a perilous situation which would, if it were not for the salvation, end in death."⁸

The second use of salvation is in a spiritual sense, referring to God's transcendent activity to save humanity from eternal death.⁹ Salvation in the New Testament is understood primarily as God's gracious activity through Christ as presented in the gospel

⁵ See Chapter 1.7.4.

⁶ BDAG, 985-6.

⁷ See *σώζω*, Ibid., 982.

⁸ Cilliers Breytenbach, "The 'For Us' Phrase in Pauline Soteriology: Considering their Background and Use," in *Salvation in the New Testament. Perspectives on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 163. See also Leon Morris, "Salvation II: Paul," in *The IVP Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1003.

⁹ BDAG, 986.

of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ It is essentially about salvation from sin and relationship with God. Salvation in New Testament teaching is centred on the cross of Christ.

What, then, is the common ground for both the New Testament teaching of salvation and *gutpela sindaun*? The connection between *gutpela sindaun* and the New Testament teaching on salvation is the desire for life. Almost every religion has some concept of salvation that expresses a longing for a better life.¹¹ Both the Colossians teaching on salvation and the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* are concerned with saving life from perilous situations and circumstances. Both show that the answer to life's dilemmas lies with the one who fashioned life.

For Melanesians, as we have seen, life is both physical and spiritual. They believe that their culture heroes fashioned life and are coming back to restore it to its former idyllic state. The New Testament emphasis on spiritual salvation from sin and its consequences is problematic for Christian Melanesians. They have difficulty coming to fully trust Christ for salvation, rather than their culture heroes and other spirit beings, because of their *gutpela sindaun* thinking in which the physical and the spiritual are integrated. How does the Colossian Letter respond to such a holistic vision of salvation? In order for the Colossian teaching to speak meaningfully to Melanesians and to establish a contextual theological response to *gutpela sindaun*, we will first need to build a bridge, to which I now turn.

6.1 Bridging from Colossians to Melanesians

What do Melanesians think when they read or hear the christological poem (1:15-20)? How do they interpret the poem? Hanson, in his discussion of scriptural metaphors for Christ that could be used as bridges to contextualise Christ for Papua New Guineans, identifies the "firstborn" and "head" metaphors from Colossians as useful (Col 1:15-20; 2:10).¹² In Hanson's discussion of these metaphors, he stresses the functional aspects of the two metaphors and how they could be appropriately applied in contextualising Christ for Papua New Guineans.

¹⁰ Col 1:5-6; Rom 1:16; Tit. 2:11-12; 2 Cor 5:18-6:2.

¹¹ See R. S. Barbour, "Salvation and Cosmology: The Setting of the Epistle to the Colossians," *SJT* 20, no. 3 (September 1967): 257.

¹² Hanson discusses the two metaphors to determine how the truth behind these metaphors could transform Papua New Guineans' worldview. Concerning the "firstborn" metaphor, he states that Christ as the firstborn means that he is (1) supreme over death or the afterlife; (2) the source of creation, with implications for human wellbeing; and (3) our sustenance, referring to Christ being the creator and sustainer of all things. Hanson, "Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans," 132-6. The "head" metaphor, on the other hand, means (1) supremacy over the cosmic powers, (2) source of the fullness of life; and (3) sustenance, implying ontological unity between Christ and the church which he sustains. (146-8).

Daimoi's discussion of Christ as the firstborn again highlights this function.¹³ His discussion of the relevance of the firstborn stems from the Sentanian culture,¹⁴ which is generally applicable to many Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian cultures. He contextualises Christ as the ancestor of the Christian faith, similar to the importance of ancestors for Melanesians. These two metaphors (firstborn and head) are susceptible to misunderstanding, but Hanson and Daimoi are able to address these concerns.¹⁵

To build a contextual bridge, instead of using the metaphors in the poem itself I will use the two motifs from the poem. As I see it, the creator and redeemer motifs from the poem, although they are taken from the Jewish monotheistic tradition, are not foreign to many cultural groups in Melanesia. These two motifs are relevant to the task of forming a bridge from the Colossians teaching to a contextual theological response to Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking. In the schema of creator-redeemer motifs, the concepts of fullness, riches, mystery, hidden and knowledge from Colossians are brought into conversation with Melanesian religion's use of similar concepts to delineate *gutpela sindaun*. But before demonstrating how Christ as creator and redeemer addresses the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, it will be helpful to revisit how the Colossian Gentile Christians might have heard or read the poem.

As demonstrated earlier,¹⁶ we do not need to take a firm position as to whether the poem was a preformed unit, or whether it was a pre-Christian poem from a Gnostic text which combined Wisdom-Logos speculations that were edited, as Käsemann proposed.¹⁷ Assuming Paul's involvement as author of the Letter, the poem uses materials from a Jewish monotheistic background, and therefore it was expected to be read against the backdrop of a Jewish monotheistic worldview.¹⁸ But for the Gentile audience at Colossae who were hearing the poem for the first time, which tradition would have come into play or provided the backdrop for their understanding of its meaning? Would it be the Jewish tradition or their own? I argue that it was the audience's Gentile tradition that became a bridge to understanding a message stemming from a different cultural worldview.¹⁹

¹³ Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 168-72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103-29.

¹⁵ See Hanson, "Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans," Chapter 6.

¹⁶ See Chapter 4.2.

¹⁷ See Chapter 4.1.1.

¹⁸ Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15-20," 453.

¹⁹ Dunne, commenting on the view that the Wisdom Tradition was behind the poem, suggests that, although Wisdom motifs are utilised, the author's understanding of Christ is broader than Wisdom. See John A. Dunne, "The Regal Status of Christ in the Colossian 'Christ-Hymn': A Re-evaluation of the Influence of Wisdom Traditions," *TRINJ* 32:1 (Spring 2011): 4-7.

Even though Käsemann's hypothesis about the original background of the poem has been rejected, his assertions regarding *primeval man* and *redeemer* should at least be heard, for these motifs are a vital link between the Jewish monotheistic worldview and the non-Jewish pantheistic worldview. Although the poem's background is from the Jewish monotheistic worldview, it contains concepts and motifs such as creator and redeemer that have antecedents in non-Jewish worldviews and traditions.²⁰ These antecedents link the Colossian Gentiles' worldview with the Jewish worldview and belief in one God, the creator and redeemer of all things.

In other words, the creator and redeemer motifs about Christ bridge the gap between the Jewish monotheistic worldview and the Gentile pantheistic worldview. The world which had been living without the perfect knowledge of the one true God is able to find it in Christ who is the knowledge, revelation and manifestation of God. The world living in hostility toward God has been reconciled to God through Christ. The world enslaved to the elemental powers of the universe is able to find freedom and be brought back under its head, namely Christ, and given a hope of future glory.

The issue is that the Gentile audience at Colossae to whom the Letter was addressed may not have grasped the content and meaning of the poem purely from a Jewish monotheistic background. There was a need for a bridge between their mythical traditions and worldview and the knowledge and worldview of Paul, which would enable them to make sense of what Paul said. The Gentile audience at Colossae would have heard the gospel of Christ and listened to or read the poem not so much from a Jewish monotheistic background but from theirs as well.

Roy Jeal rightly notes that the "[e]arly Christians found that they needed multiple ways to address their faith understandings and their new Christian social environment. They did what groups and communities of all kinds and in all places do: they shaped and reshaped language in ways that, for themselves at least, effectively expressed their beliefs and their worldview."²¹ Although Paul drew on the Jewish monotheistic and Wisdom traditions, he

²⁰ See Foster, *Colossians*, 175.

²¹ Roy R. Jeal, "Starting Before the Beginning: Precreation Discourse in Colossians," *Religion & Theology* 18 (2011): 288.

anticipated a blending of ideas²² “to comprehend a new or different idea in a new conceptual space.”²³

In so doing, the Gentile Christians were able to understand the Christ-event and how to interpret it in light of their own worldview. In reading the poem, the Gentile audience at Colossae would have blended their mythical motifs in their various myths to acknowledge the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption over every mythical saviour and elemental power of the universe,²⁴ which was the new truth that Paul expected them to know. Many cultures around the world, like those of Melanesia, blend their pre-existing ideas in order to comprehend new ideas, and in that sense we share with the Colossians at the worldview level. Every human being, regardless of when and where we live, shares in the same basic human nature and human capacities, despite our cultural differences.²⁵

For many Melanesians, *tumbuna stori* or myths of return have played and still play a vital role in interpreting new phenomena.²⁶ To analyse new occurrences, concepts and knowledge, many Melanesians return to these mythical beliefs and traditions to comprehend and respond to the new concepts, as was the case with the arrival of white foreigners in PNG.²⁷ This process intensified with the introduction of the gospel of Christ by the missionaries, which led to the conversion of the Melanesians from primal religious thinking to Christianity²⁸ and the subsequent formation of the Melanesian indigenous movements²⁹ and independent churches.³⁰

Through their mythical lenses, many Melanesians hearing the christological poem would say that the poem is rather similar to their *tumbuna stori*. They would see their culture hero as the creator and would-be deliverer,³¹ the two constituent parts of many

²² This is called conceptual blending, which functions rhetorically to blend new categories and concepts “as a counterfactual mental space that draws salient elements from other mental spaces.” Todd V. Oakley, “Conceptual Blending, Narrative Discourse, and Rhetoric,” *Cognitive Linguistics* 9, no. 4 (1998): 325; see also Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

²³ Jeal, “Starting Before the Beginning,” 289.

²⁴ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 16.

²⁵ See Chapter 1.7.3.

²⁶ See Chapter 2.2.1.

²⁷ See Chapter 2.5.

²⁸ See Chapter 2.6.

²⁹ See Chapter 2.7.(1).

³⁰ See Chapter 2.7.2.

³¹ See Chapter 2.4.2 (ii). As explicated in Chapter 2, a culture hero to the Melanesians is a mythological or legendary figure of supernatural descent endowed with extraordinary power, strength and ability, who was responsible for creating some aspects of creation, bestowing on human beings gifts and abilities for life here on earth, and making the earth habitable. The culture heroes either died or departed due to human

Melanesian return myths. At this point we need to ask, is the being depicted by the poem the one to whom these myths allude? Are Melanesian culture heroes shadows of the reality to come, like the Mosaic law and requirements for the Jews (see 2:16-17)? Should they forgo their beliefs in the culture heroes because they can see their true hero in the Christ of the Colossian poem?³² I contend that the culture heroes were prefigurings of Christ the creator and redeemer whom the Colossian poem portrays.

Against the backdrop of their mythical beliefs and expectations, Melanesians hearing the poem could see their culture hero in Christ, whom the Colossian Letter reveals as the creator and redeemer of *all things*. In Melanesia, some cultural groups have without hesitation identified Christ with their culture heroes. For instance, cultural groups like the Yangoru of East Sepik Province (PNG) refer to Christ as Saii Urin, the mythical ancestor who gave life and will return to liberate the Yangoru people from their current state of life.³³ Mani has composed a poem about Christ as the Saii Urin of the Yangoru people.³⁴ The Mundogumur people are also not reluctant to call Christ Forpa Makan, meaning firstborn. Many Melanesians reading or hearing the poem could relate to the Christ of the poem as the hero to whom their *tumbuna stori* alludes. But how does Colossians present Christ as the hero who is both like and yet unlike the Melanesian culture heroes?

6.2 The Colossian Christology and its Relationship to *Gutpela Sindaun*

The creator and redeemer motifs in Colossians 1:15-20 identify Christ as the divine agent in creation and redemption. These two motifs show an affinity between the Christ of Colossians and *gutpela sindaun* thinking, suggesting that Christ was the hero to whom Melanesian myths allude. In this sectional discussion, I will refer to Christ as the hero. First, I will consider Christ as the hero who is the fulfilment of the Melanesian beliefs in culture heroes as the creators and fashioners of *gutpela sindaun*. Second, I will present Christ as the redeemer who fulfils the hope of *gutpela sindaun*. Third, I will identify Christ as the hero who sustains life in the present, since Melanesians attribute the sustenance function to the dead culture heroes, the dead, and various spirit powers. These three aspects of Christ

progenitors' failure, subsequently terminating *gutpela sindaun*, but are expected to return and restore *gutpela sindaun*.

³² See Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," as an example.

³³ Mani, "Quest for Salvation in Papua New Guinea," 70-1, 78-85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80-2.

and his work give good grounds for seeing Christ as the Melanesian Hero whom Strelan and Daimoi have also presented as the Melanesian Ancestor.³⁵

6.2.1 Christ as the Hero: Creator of All Things

The poem depicts Christ as the creator of *all things* (1:15-16),³⁶ in contrast to Melanesian culture heroes who were believed to be creators of certain aspects of the natural/tribal world of their cultural groups.³⁷ There are eight forms of $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ occurring in the poem that emphasise the totality of creation and divinity.³⁸ Seven occurrences stress the totality of creation, and one occurrence emphasises the totality of God dwelling in Christ (1:19).³⁹ The term $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$ confirms that ‘all things’ or the entire creation, whether invisible or visible, are the work of Christ’s craftsmanship and are affected by his reconciliation.⁴⁰ The phrase ‘all things’ in Jewish thought can be used to refer to God as the creator of the universe (2 Macc 1:24-25), and its use here emphasises that Christ is the sole agent of creation.⁴¹ This identifies Christ with God the creator and depicts Christ as the divine being.⁴²

The Colossian philosophy was mistaken in its view of Christ and presumably understood him as one of the divine messengers, as seen earlier.⁴³ In Chapter 3 we saw that Paul depicts Christ as the divine being and God’s agent of creation, and in this sense he is different from the angels or from the Melanesian culture heroes, in that the culture heroes are his creatures too. Everything, both visible and invisible, has its beginning in Christ. This places Christ outside of the realm of the creatures, because he pre-existed creation.

This means that creation cannot influence or manipulate Christ, unlike the Melanesian culture heroes whom the people were able to influence through rituals such as magic, in order to use their powers to fulfil the people’s desires.⁴⁴ These beings’ displays of power made Melanesians power-oriented, so that, in almost everything, supernatural interventions and assistance was sought. While the Colossian philosophy sought after visions and elevated spiritual experiences, Melanesians sought assistance from the dead

³⁵ See Chapter 1.4.1 and 1.4.2.

³⁶ See Chapter 4.3.1.

³⁷ See Chapter 2.2.1 (ii) and 2.4.5 (i).

³⁸ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\eta\varsigma$ (1:15), $\tau\acute{\alpha} \pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$ (twice in 1:16, once in 1:17 and 1:20), $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\omega\nu$ (1:17), $\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\iota\nu$ (1:18), $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$ (1:19).

³⁹ Thurston discusses the eight occurrences of *pas* in the hymn in *All the Fullness of God*, 24-8.

⁴⁰ Thompson notes that “Paul repeatedly used the Greek term $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$ (*panta*, ‘all things’) to describe the comprehensive scope of God’s work in Christ,” in *Colossians and Philemon*, 114.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 114-5.

⁴² See Chapter 3.6.1.

⁴³ See Chapter 3.6.2.

⁴⁴ See Chapter 2.4.4.

culture heroes and other spirits to meet their physical, social and material wellbeing, which collectively constitute *gutpela sindaun*. These beings were subject to human manipulation, which contrasts them with Christ who cannot be manipulated because he created and sustains creation (1:17).

The poem draws from Jewish Wisdom/Logos traditions to identify Christ as the Wisdom figure who was there in the beginning of creation and was the agent of creation. As we have noted, Burney argues that Col 1:16-18 is actually an interpretation of *bereshith* (beginning) in Genesis 1:1, which identifies Christ as the beginning.⁴⁵ Burney's view is not shared by many scholars, but the shared point is that Christ is the beginning of all things. This means that creation was perfect in the beginning. All things or the entire cosmos began in Christ, as the phrase "in him" underscores. The other two prepositional phrases, "through him" and "for him," also depict Christ as the sphere, sole agent and reason for creation.⁴⁶ He is all in all and "the integrating centre of reality."⁴⁷ He is the key, the source and the origin of all life. The cosmos exists for him, for his glory and honour. This makes it clear that no Melanesian culture hero can measure up to Christ's ability as the sphere, agent and goal of creation.

The culture heroes, whom Melanesians believed created and made the world habitable for human beings and are the keys to *gutpela sindaun*, are analogies for Christ, the true hero now revealed by the Colossian Letter. The culture heroes, in the language of Colossians, could be described as $\sigma\kappa\iota\acute{\alpha}$ of the true agent of creation and the true key to *gutpela sindaun*, like the Mosaic tradition was to the Colossian philosophy in its quest for higher spiritual experience.⁴⁸

Melanesians can thus look to Christ as the true hero, because he alone fashioned life in the beginning and is thus the key to *gutpela sindaun*. The creator motif of the first strophe of the Colossians poem ascribes to Christ the exclusive role in creation. He is God's agent of creation and all things were created by him. He is pre-eminent in all things. In the first strophe there are two metaphors that portray Christ's pre-eminence in creation, and these are vital in establishing Christ as the hero, over against the Melanesian culture heroes. These two metaphors are "image" and "firstborn," and they further demonstrate that Christ is indeed the agent through whom the entire creation came into existence.

⁴⁵ See Chapter 4.1.2.

⁴⁶ See Chapter 4.3.1.

⁴⁷ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 31.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 3.2.2, 3.3 and 3.5.

6.2.1.1 *Christ is the Image of the Invisible God*

Christ is the image of the invisible God (1:15a), and image in this case, as we have seen, refers to the divine identity. The image metaphor is not new to Melanesians, but its rendering in Colossians is different from the Melanesian understanding. In Melanesia the carved ancestral images or images of culture heroes represent the creative and life-giving powers. By life-giving I mean sustaining cosmic biological life and giving *gutpela sindaun* to their cultural groups. Traditionally, these carved images were kept in sacred houses, away from the public eye. Only initiates saw them during their initiations.⁴⁹

But Christ is not a replica or representative of God, like the images of culture heroes. Rather, he is the exact manifestation of God in the world of humanity,⁵⁰ so that everyone can come to know God revealed in Christ. Christ shares in the reality of the invisible God.⁵¹ All the fullness of God dwelt in Christ (1:19) and made his dwelling among human beings before his resurrection-glorification (2:9), as we shall see below.⁵² Christ is who God is, as the use of Wisdom tradition shows.⁵³ He is the superior and final theophany of God. He existed with God and is God's sole agent of creation. He has revealed God to the world, showing that God is not remote and uncaring, in contrast to the culture heroes whom Melanesians believed were closer and more responsive to people's needs, while the high god was not.⁵⁴ Thus it was the culture heroes who took the centre stage in creation and in the memory and history of the Melanesian people, making the supreme being obscure.

This way of thinking among Melanesians can be described as a state of enslavement in the dark domain (1:13), sin (1:14), disharmony in the cosmos (1:20), and alienation from God (1:21). Even though Paul shows elsewhere that creation bears witness to the divine attributes (see Rom 1:20), many Melanesians could not see God as active and caring. There were varying perceptions of God across Melanesia, but none of these revealed the fullness of God.

Only Christ as God's image and agent of creation has revealed who God is. He has taken the revelation-knowledge of God to a whole new level from what Melanesians ever had. Christ has shown that God has always been with creation. In creation people could grasp a general knowledge of God; however, creation itself was in such disarray that human

⁴⁹ See Chapter 2.4.4.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 4.3.1; 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3.

⁵¹ Thurston, *All the Fullness of God*, 23-4.

⁵² See Chapter 6.2.2.

⁵³ See Chapter 4.3.1.

⁵⁴ See Chapter 2.2.1 (ii). I am aware that a few people groups, like the Hulis, considered the Supreme Being as active, and it was mostly portrayed as a judge.

beings made creatures their objects of worship rather than the creator, as the Colossian philosophy demonstrated in its worship of the elemental powers of the universe, and Melanesians in their invocation of culture heroes and various spirit beings.

Christ, who is the image of God, fully revealed God in the world of humanity. All the divine attributes, glory and power which were once partially seen in creation are embodied in Christ. In Christ the power and glory of God are displayed in fullness.⁵⁵ Christ as God's agent in creation has sustained creation since its inception, as seen earlier.⁵⁶ He is the supernatural glue that holds everything together, as we will see below in our discussion of Christ as the sustainer of all things.⁵⁷

As the image of God, Christ has brought the so-called remote or higher realm and the lower realm together.⁵⁸ Through Christ, human beings can enter into relationship with him. God, who is transcendent above creation is made immanent in Christ. He has made known who God is as the very image of God himself. The world which lived with a finite and faint knowledge of God can come to comprehend the full knowledge of God in Christ. Instead of encountering God through the created world, God is encountered through the very being who created all things. He "is the one through whom the transcendent, unseen God is made immanent and active in the world,"⁵⁹ and we gain knowledge of the invisible God through Christ.

Christ who is the image of God is the domain of divine knowledge and wisdom.⁶⁰ In Melanesian religions, sacred knowledge or *kru*, and right ritual pertaining to the culture heroes and other spirit powers, were seen as the key to *gutpela sindaun*. The epistemology of secrecy meant that the sacred knowledge or *kru*, and the rituals for applying that *kru*, were kept hidden from outsiders using stories, parabolic language, and so on. The sacred knowledge of culture heroes which brought about *gutpela sindaun* was only passed on to initiates, as noted earlier.⁶¹

By contrast, in Christ God's hidden secret or mystery is revealed to the believers (1:26-27). Potentially, all people can become believers and have this knowledge. All the treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge are located in Christ (2:3) and we gain

⁵⁵ See Derek J. Tidball, *In Christ, In Colossae: Sociological Perspective on Colossians* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2011), 83.

⁵⁶ See Chapter 4.3.2.

⁵⁷ See Chapter 6.2.3 below.

⁵⁸ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 120.

⁵⁹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 64.

⁶⁰ See Chapter 5.5.

⁶¹ See Chapters 1.4.6 and 2.4.3.

knowledge of God in Christ. As Sumney states, the “[b]elievers also gain all knowledge of God in Christ because that knowledge resides fully in Christ (2:3).”⁶² God’s knowledge is not embodied in mysterious objects or stories that Melanesians used to conceal the key secrets. He is the domain of divine wisdom and knowledge of God’s grace (1:6) and will (1:12).

It is through the will of God that we come to the knowledge of His mystery, namely Christ (2:3). He is the centre of God’s divine economy for salvation and relationship with God. God’s glorious abounding secret plan, centred in Christ revealed, is to make both Jews and Gentiles become God’s people (1:26-27).⁶³ God through grace has revealed his divine secret to the apostles and prophets to be proclaimed to the nations of the earth (1:6, 25).⁶⁴ This mystery is revealed through the preaching of the word of God and the gospel of Christ. Those who have responded to the gospel through faith have done so by the grace of God. They have God’s secret revealed to them, which is “Christ in you the hope of glory” (1:27).

The mystery revealed in Christ is not a secret reserved for a few⁶⁵ or certain initiates, as in Melanesian religions and probably also the Colossian philosophy. It is not given only to the so-called spiritual elites so that they may make exclusive claims to possessing the divine secret. The mystery is not a hidden spiritual secret that requires additional pious rituals to comprehend it. Every Christian possesses this secret of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27) through faith. The secret is given to every believer, so that by reflecting on it they may grow in the knowledge and wisdom of God which imparts spiritual growth.⁶⁶

In Melanesian terms, there is no magical formula or secret *kru* in God’s mystery revealed. In magic-oriented societies like Melanesia, which have sought after magical knowledge for material prosperity, it can be very tempting to see the gospel of Christ as a new magical formula. The presence of Christ in and amongst the believing community can be misunderstood, given the belief in the dead culture hero whose power was available to the people to access in their quest for social and material success.⁶⁷ Christological knowledge is not a magical formula for social and material success. Christological knowledge is a relational knowledge that draws us into relationship with Christ and gives us the ability to overcome sin and the powers of darkness.

⁶² Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 17.

⁶³ See Johnson, Jr., “Studies in the Epistles to the Colossians: V. The Minister of the Mystery,” 232.

⁶⁴ In the past, it was to the prophets and seers that God revealed his secrets or divine oracles. See Wiley, “A Study of ‘Mystery’ in the New Testament,” 351.

⁶⁵ Brown, “The Semitic Background of the New Testament Mysterion,” 438.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 438.

⁶⁷ See Chapter 2.4.2 (iii).

The knowledge of God's mystery is both cognitive and experiential. It provides insight into God's will for creation (2:11-12). It has the power to re-create both creation and believers in the likeness of Christ, who is the creator of all things (3:10). The Colossian poem spells out who Christ is and who we are in Christ. Knowing who Christ is gives us the wisdom to live according to his will, bearing good fruit in everything we say and do for God's glory (1:12; 3:17). These good deeds are the evidence of God's divine knowledge and wisdom working in and through our lives.

The Melanesian epistemology of secrecy about sacred knowledge was associated with the sense of seeing. Knowledge that was pragmatic and experiential was considered true knowledge.⁶⁸ Seeing and experience determine the value of knowledge. Experiential knowledge outweighs cognitive knowledge and was therefore seen as the *kru* to *gutpela sindaun*. The divine knowledge revealed in Christ is both cognitive and experiential. The knowledge of Christ is to be pragmatically applied in our lives through faith. As we do this, we experience the saving power of God's knowledge revealed in Christ (1:5-6, 9-10). Without faith, the knowledge of God will have no effect on our lives. As Colossians shows, God's divine mystery revealed will remain a mystery to those who do not have faith. It is through faith in Christ that God can be known, because he is the revelation of who God is, the embodiment of God's divine wisdom (2:3).⁶⁹

Knowledge of Christ's pre-eminence in creation and redemption is the basis of advancing our knowledge of the world around us. Christ rules over creation as its creator, he redeemed it and sustains it. Through his redeeming work, every hostile power has been pacified. The rule of Christ over these powers has been enforced through the cross. For Melanesians, fear of unseen powers, which they believe co-habit the human plane, restricts their knowledge of the world around them, such that they keep to the ancestral knowledge passed down as *lo*.

But the knowledge of Christ as the creator, sustainer and redeemer is a new knowledge that surpasses ancestral knowledge. It provides a whole new understanding of creation, how it came to be, what went wrong, how the wrong has been corrected, and the future of creation. Knowledge of Christ also reveals that he is in control of the entire universe. He knows everything about creation and his presence is everywhere. Because he is in total control and the source of creation, he is the basis for Christian growth in the

⁶⁸ See Chapters 1.4.6 and 2.4.3.

⁶⁹ See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 29.

knowledge and wisdom of God and the knowledge of the world of which Melanesians are a part.

6.2.1.2 *Christ is the Firstborn of All Creation*

The “firstborn” metaphor in the first strophe of the poem further ascribes to Christ the pre-eminent role in creation. Christ as the firstborn does not mean the first creature through whom God created other things.⁷⁰ The term “firstborn,” as we have seen, speaks of primacy and priority.⁷¹ That Christ as the “firstborn of all creation” (1:15b) means that he holds primacy over all things.⁷² There is nothing above him except God the Father, with whom the Son shares the same divine essence, as God’s image. Christ as the firstborn pre-existed creation as God’s wisdom and agent in creation.⁷³

As the firstborn, Christ exercises sovereignty over creation. This means that he alone rules the creation. No power that exists is his co-ruler. The entire cosmos (both spiritual and physical) is the sphere of Christ’s rule. The human plane, which many tribal groups in Melanesia believed was cohabited and governed by the *masalai* or nature spirits, is under the rule of Christ.⁷⁴ These powers, which, whether by design or through human sinfulness and rebellion, came to exert influence on the human plane, are under Christ’s rule (2:10b). He rules over every spirit power as their head. The titles ‘head’ and ‘firstborn’ have different nuances. But in Melanesia the firstborn is also the head of the household.⁷⁵ The wellbeing and cohesiveness of the household is a crucial responsibility of the firstborn. The firstborn not only rules over the household but leads it. The basic thought behind the firstborn metaphor is “sovereignty over other household members.”⁷⁶

Christ’s relationship to creation is presented as a household relationship, in which he governs as the firstborn. The creation is under his oversight, as underscored by the

⁷⁰ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 125.

⁷¹ See Chapter 4.3.1.

⁷² The term firstborn is susceptible to misunderstanding. Bratcher and Nida note that “[t]here are some problems involved in rendering literally the first-born Son, since any term such as ‘birth’ or ‘to be born’ would suggest Christ’s birth on earth at Bethlehem. A literal translation might also give the impression of some kind of miraculous birth by which God the Father actually gave birth to his Son named Christ. Another complication involved in the use of a word such as ‘born’ might suggest some kind of sexual relations between God the Father and ‘mother earth.’” Robert Bratcher and Eugene Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (New York; United Bible Societies, 1977), 23, cited in Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 133-4.

⁷³ See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 44.

⁷⁴ See Chapter 2.4.2 and 2.4.5.2.

⁷⁵ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 127-8.

⁷⁶ Thurston, *All the Fullness of God*, 24.

occurrence of “in him all things hold together” (1:17).⁷⁷ In other words, he is the natural ruler and head of God’s household, the cosmos.⁷⁸ Bruce, in reference to Christ as the firstborn, comments that Christ “exercises the privilege of primogeniture as Lord of creation, the divinely appointed ‘heir of all things.’”⁷⁹ Drawing on the image of Christ being in the primogeniture position in God’s household, Hanson makes the case that

[t]he combined imagery of Christ as the primogeniture head of the household of creation suggests the following. First, God conceives the whole universe as a familial household. Second, Christ has the position of the firstborn son or eldest brother (Rom 8:29) over the whole universe. As such, He has the responsibility to manage the creation household to ensure its well-being, to conserve and allocate the inheritance of the household for the good of its members. He is the one to whom every household member is accountable and to whom they turn for advice, support, guidance in all major decisions and responsibilities of household membership.⁸⁰

Hanson further concludes that Christ as the firstborn “is the One who is ultimately responsible for the success of the creation household. He is the life-source of creation, tending and developing the household towards its completion.”⁸¹ In Melanesian terms, Christ as the firstborn is the *papa*, which literally means father but also connotes ownership. Therefore, Christ is the *papa* of the entire cosmos. The cosmos is his household that he manages as its head. Christ as the rightful *papa* is further shown by the use of the three prepositional phrases: ἐν αὐτῷ (“by him” – 1:16), δι’ αὐτοῦ (“through him”), and εἰς αὐτὸν (“for him”), which imply that Christ is the locus or sphere, agent and goal of creation. Christ’s ownership and authority over the cosmos as firstborn is not by virtue of his birth but his pre-existence, and his being the image of the invisible God (1:15a).

Christ, as the firstborn of all things, has the exclusive authority over creation. In the Melanesian context, the firstborn is also regarded as a *bigman*. As seen earlier, the *bigman* status, which comes either by heredity or achievement, is in solidarity with his family and the community. In either case, the *bigman* is responsible to ensure peace and *gutpela sindaun* for his people. He uses his wealth to ensure communal salvation. Christ as the firstborn ensures universal harmony and reconciliation in creation. Daimoi’s comments on the firstborn highlight the fact that the

Melanesian ancestral *Lo* ensures that the first-born does not selfishly retain everything to himself and neglect his brothers and sisters who are dependent on him. What he inherits

⁷⁷ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Paul’s Letter to the Colossians* (Birmingham, Alabama: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005), 51. First published as *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Colossians* (London and Glasgow: Richard Griffin & Co., 1855).

⁷⁸ See Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 73.

⁷⁹ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 59.

⁸⁰ Hanson, “Contextual Christology for Papua New Guineans,” 126.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

must be held in trust in conjunction with the rest of the family, because the rest of his family are his inheritance also. Accordingly, his brothers and sisters, but especially his brothers, with their families, are dependent on him as their first-born to share the family inheritance with them.⁸²

The entire cosmos depends on Christ for its sustenance and cohesiveness. Christ as the firstborn died to reconcile all things to God the Father and to restore creation to its creative purpose in him. As the firstborn, he met the need for creation to come back to God the Father and be given a new beginning.

Christ's divine identity as firstborn reveals his unique relationship with God the Father. He is God's Son (1:3). The Father-Son metaphor expresses a distinctive relationship within the divine Godhead, a divine relationship that is not to be taken as superior and subordinate.⁸³ According to Foster, the Father-Son relationship expresses a "filial relationship [which] places Christ in a unique position as one who makes the father known."⁸⁴ This filial relationship between the God the Father and Christ the Son is a mutual relationship. The Father-Son distinction, according to Thompson, is a way "by which each receives his distinctive identity."⁸⁵ The notion of a mutual relationship between God and Christ is seen in the fact that God's kingdom is equally his beloved Son's (1:13). As a Son, Christ was obedient to his Father's will to reconcile all things to him. In so doing, God honoured his Son by having him sit at his right hand (3:1), which underlies his superiority over every ruler and authority, whether in the highest realm or in the lowest realm.⁸⁶

In this discussion we have seen that Christ is *the* hero because he created all things. He is pre-eminent in all things as the image of the invisible God and firstborn of creation. Below we will continue to demonstrate that Christ is *the* hero because he redeemed all things.

6.2.2 Christ as the Hero: Redeemer of All Things

The second motif that stems from the Colossian poem is redemption. Redemption or deliverance is a constituent belief of the return myths.⁸⁷ Belief in the return of the departed culture heroes prepared Melanesians to receive the Europeans as their returning ancestors.⁸⁸

⁸² Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 169.

⁸³ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 32; see also Foster, *Colossians*, 133-4.

⁸⁴ Foster, *Colossians*, 27.

⁸⁵ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 119.

⁸⁶ See Tidball, *In Christ, In Colossians*, 89.

⁸⁷ See Chapter 2.2.1 (ii) and 2.4.5 (i).

⁸⁸ See Chapter 2.5.

The receptivity of Melanesians to the gospel of Christ is partly due to their belief in the return of the culture heroes.⁸⁹

The writer of Colossians unreservedly declares that Christ is the redeemer of all things. Christ through his blood (death) on the cross has reconciled all things to God (1:20).⁹⁰ Reconciliation comes at the cost of God's own son's sacrificial death on the cross. Reconciliation soteriology is not a mutual act, as Melanesians understand it.⁹¹ It demonstrates God's love and grace to undeserving creatures for the forgiveness of sin and the hope of new life and relationship with him.

Christ who is God's own beloved Son became the peace offering between God and human beings. He is God's *tarop tim*, which in the Sawi language means peace child.⁹² Christ as the *tarop tim* has come and inaugurated *gutpela sindaun* which is a restored life and relationship with God. This *gutpela sindaun* is received through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. The salvation teaching of the cross of Christ is central to Christian mission throughout the world (Col 1:6). It was the impetus for Christian missionary activities in the South Pacific, commencing in Polynesia, and moving from there to Micronesia and to Melanesia.⁹³

In Melanesia, PNG was the last frontier to be reached with the good news that *gutpela sindaun* had been inaugurated through Christ. The church in every continent, every region of the South Pacific, every Melanesian country, and every part of PNG is a testament to the scope of the reconciliation work of Christ. The redeeming work of Christ is universal. The church catholic as a redeemed community bears witness to the fact that true *gutpela sindaun* or salvation has been inaugurated through Christ. He is the redeemer and the hope of every believer (Col 1:5, 27), and for Melanesians he is the redeemer whom their culture heroes foreshadowed.

Christ as God's peace child is both human and divine (1:19; 2:9). Christ as God incarnate died on the cross (1:20; 22) and God raised him from death (2:11-13; see Ps 16:10; Rom 1:3-4). As fully human and divine, Christ is the qualified *tarop tim* to mediate peace and reconciliation between God and human beings (1:22). By his death he offered forgiveness and reunited human beings with God. He is the fulfilment of the Sawi

⁸⁹ See Chapter 2.6.

⁹⁰ See Chapter 4.3.3, where I discussed the meaning of reconciliation and its implication cosmologically.

⁹¹ See Chapter 2.3.4, where I touched on reconciliation as a mutual act where the parties involved pay the price for reconciliation.

⁹² Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, 15th Print (Norwood, Massachusetts: Regal Press, 1983), 201.

⁹³ See Chapter 1.1.

(Melanesian) expectation of a qualified mediator between God and human beings.⁹⁴ He has brought heaven and earth together. The Sawi believed that as long as the *tarop tim* is alive, there will be no animosity between rival parties.⁹⁵ Christ our *tarop tim* is alive, and he lives bodily in heaven (2:9; 3:1).⁹⁶ The believers' lives are bound to his life and his life is the believers' life. Since Christ is alive at God's right hand in heaven, the believers have peace with God. In Christ, God has thrown his hands wide open to everyone and everything that his son brought into existence, to be reconciled to him through faith in Christ.

Any insistence on looking to the culture heroes or ancestors for *gutpela sindaun* will only lead to frustration.⁹⁷ Christ as *the* hero has opened the way to the fullness of salvation through his death and resurrection, which is his first coming. The fullness of salvation has been inaugurated and will be consummated at his glorious revelation (3:4), meaning his Second Coming. At his Second Coming, the believers will be revealed in glory with Christ.⁹⁸

The resurrection of Christ from the dead marks the end of the reign of death, sin and every power of darkness. These powers no longer have any authority over those who are in Christ. The cosmos affected by the Fall has been reconciled to God, meaning that everything is restored to its place in creation order and relationship with Christ as the head. Human beings at the centre of God's redemptive plan, who were once estranged and alienated from God, are given the opportunity to receive fullness of life and relationship with God the Father and Christ the Son here and now. The creation is re-ordered and restored according to Christ's plan of creation from the beginning, in which Christ is the very essence of creation. Creation, along with human beings, finds its purpose and meaning in Christ. The life which the believers received is a new life, identical to the resurrected-glorified life of Christ which is hidden with Christ in God (see 6.3 below). It is, in other words, a new nature, a new image which has been created and renewed through the knowledge of the creator, who is Christ (3:10).

6.2.2.1 *Beginning of the New Creation*

Through Christ the eschatological age commenced, as the term ἀρχή (beginning) implies. Christ is the beginning of re-creation or new creation. Christ through his death and

⁹⁴ According to the Sawi people, for two warring parties to have peace and reconciliation, both parties must exchange *tarop tim*. See Richardson, *Peace Child*, 201-3.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ See Chapters 3.2.1 and 5.3.

⁹⁷ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 75.

⁹⁸ See Chapter 6.3 below.

resurrection has inaugurated the new creation. He is the head of the new creation and the hope of the nations. Having reconciled and made peace between God and creation, he is now seated at God's right hand in heaven (3:1). He is seated at God's right hand, which means that there will be no hostility between God and creation, in personal terms, for those who have responded to Christ. The believers are saved from God's coming judgment (3:6, 25). Christ the redeemer has inaugurated salvation or *gutpela sindaun*, unlike the Melanesian culture heroes who are yet to come.

6.2.2.2 *Firstborn from the Dead*

Christ as the cosmic redeemer rose bodily from death and lives corporally in heaven. His bodily resurrection as the firstborn or first-fruit (1 Cor 15:20-23) marks the path for the believers' resurrection, which is already guaranteed but which will be fully realised at his glorious unveiling.⁹⁹ The guaranteed bodily resurrection of the believers is affirmed by the bodily existence of Christ as the resurrected-glorified Lord (2:9), at the Father's right hand in heaven (3:1). At his Second Coming, Christ will return in glory, accompanied by the believers (3:4).

The bodily resurrection of believers at the Second Coming will not be isolated from the rest of creation. It is also intertwined with cosmic transformation. Cosmic transformation is already set in motion through God's action in Christ to reconcile all things to himself (1:20), which will be consummated at the revelation of Christ and the believers (3:4). The Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* or corporeal earthly immortality, inaugurated by the culture hero, is not at all a fantasy. However, it is not the Melanesian culture heroes who will realise *gutpela sindaun*, but Christ *the* hero who has already inaugurated salvation and will bring it to completion at his return.

Melanesian believers must come to understand that their hope of *gutpela sindaun*, the corporeal immortality which they expected to be realised instantaneously, is inaugurated in different phases by Christ. The first phase is the life and relationship with God, co-resurrected with Christ. This phase is centred around the cross of Christ. The second phase is the revealing of Christ in glory, wherein the believers' present resurrected life, hidden with Christ in God, will become visible (3:3). It is then that believers will experience corporeal immortality, as we shall see below.¹⁰⁰ Christ as the cosmic redeemer, as Daimoi reminds us, "supersedes and fulfils all that the human ancestors stood for and

⁹⁹ See Tidball, *In Christ, In Colossians*, 87-8.

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter 6.4.3 below.

did, including the Melanesian ancestors [culture heroes]. On the basis of what Jesus achieved and offers, Melanesians are challenged to relate to him as their Ancestor and trust in him as their Mediator before God.”¹⁰¹

6.2.2.3 *Fullness of God*

Colossians depicts Christ as the πλήρωμα of God. Christ as the fullness of God is the mediator between God and creation (1:19-20). In this statement, Paul declares that the one who reconciled all things to God is divine. Christ whom the Colossians have come to trust is not a mere divine inspiration but truly the divine being in whom the entirety of the divinity dwells in bodily form (2:9). The bodily existence of the divine fullness in Christ points to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ into heaven two thousand years ago.

Christ, who is the divine fullness is in a unique relationship with God the Father. He shares in the same divine essence with the Father. From his divine fullness believers are given fullness (2:10). As the moon receives its light from the sun, Christians are given fullness in Christ. The fullness which believers receive in Christ is the right to become the children of God, as “our Father” (1:2) implies. In Christ the believers are incorporated into God’s family and share in all of God’s blessings.¹⁰² Because believers are given fullness in Christ, their lives are bound up with the life of Christ. In Christ, the believers are complete.

Christ who lives corporeally in heaven indwells every believer (1:27). He fills, sustains and empowers every believer to live lives worthy of his calling (1:10-11; 3:17). There is nothing the believers can do to add to the fullness that they have in Christ. In *gutpela sindaun* thinking, the people must do something to initiate and experience *gutpela sindaun*. The performing of rituals and ceremonies pertaining to the dead culture heroes, ancestors and various spirit beings was with the view that it would be reciprocated with material and social blessings which amount to *gutpela sindaun*. But the fullness of salvation in Christ is not the result of what we have done. Our fullness of salvation comes from our union with Christ through faith.

In sum, the redemption motif depicts Christ as the redeemer of all things. Both human beings and the whole creation have been reconciled to God through the death of Christ. The creation is set for its final transformation at the glorious revelation of Christ in glory.

¹⁰¹ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 192.

¹⁰² See Chapter 6.3.2 below.

6.2.3 Christ as the Hero: Sustainer of All Things

Christ as the creator and redeemer of all things holds everything together (1:17). Creation was not created and then left to the culture heroes and totems¹⁰³ to make it habitable and to sustain it, as Melanesians have believed.¹⁰⁴ As shown above, Christ created everything perfect and complete,¹⁰⁵ he then redeemed all things through his own death,¹⁰⁶ and he sustains all things. He is in complete control. He causes everything to cohere, exist and hold together.¹⁰⁷ The phrase ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν assigns to Christ the central governing role in the cosmos.

Therefore, there is nothing that exists outside of Christ's jurisdiction. Creation was made for him and its destiny lies with and in him. Creation was not left to its own devices after it was created, as deists believe.¹⁰⁸ Nor is the destiny or fate of the natural world in the hands of the elemental powers of the universe, as the Colossian philosophy and the Greco-Roman worldview thought. It is not left to the culture heroes and *masalai* to govern, as Melanesians have thought, and some still think.

Indeed, even after receiving the gospel of Christ, some Melanesians still believe that the *masalai* and occult powers control the destiny of human beings and their world. Yet Colossians shows that every spirit being is a creature (1:16), and their purpose and destiny is in Christ who is their head (2:10b).¹⁰⁹ Every rebellious power, described as powers of darkness (1:13), has been stripped of its power and authority by God through the cross of Christ (Col 2:15), and they have been showcased as defeated creatures. The cross reaffirms Christ as the integrating power of the universe.

Christ as the sustainer is also responsible for nourishing and supplying every necessity to support life. He is the channel of all spiritual nourishment for soteriological and ecclesiological growth (2:19). He holds the church together like ligaments that holds the body together. He unites the church and causes the church to grow to maturity. But if he is able to sustain the spiritual growth of every believer as members of his body, is he able to provide for their material or physical needs too?

¹⁰³ Totemic ancestors, see Appendix 1; Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 31-2; Lawrence, "Magic and Religion," 1002.

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter 2.2.1.

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter 6.2.1.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ BDAG, 973. Thurston writes that Christ is like a super-glue that holds everything together, in *All the Fullness of God*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ See Thurston, *All the Fullness of God*, 25.

¹⁰⁹ See Tidball, *In Christ, In Colossae*, 83.

This is a fundamental question in the hearts and minds of every Melanesian, and probably for the Colossian believers too. The responsiveness of many Melanesian Christians to the versions of the prosperity gospel is because it addresses the question of physical needs.¹¹⁰ The receptivity to the prosperity gospel teachings is partly propelled by the Melanesian primal beliefs in the dead culture heroes, who were present among the people, the dead, *masalai* and *kawal* to sustain them in the present *gutpela sindaun* until the departed culture heroes return and restore the gift of corporeal immortality.¹¹¹ Melanesians looked to spirit beings to support them in terms of their daily necessities. Colossians presents Christ as the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all things and God's channel of spiritual nourishment. This means he is also the provider for all the necessities for life. But how?

Colossians does not teach that every day Christ will send manna from heaven, as God did for the children of Israel to sustain them in their forty years of wandering in the wilderness (Exod 16). The miracle that God has worked through the cross of Christ is to raise us spiritually from death and give us new life and relationship with him. Believers are recreated in Christ-likeness. Their mode of existence has changed. Instead of living under the bondage of sin and the hostile powers of the universe, they have been set free to live under the lordship of Christ.

This means that the believers' view of difficult and trying circumstances also changes, because they believe in the one who is in control of everything. When they are hard pressed, they are patient and endure every circumstance joyfully (1:12) because of their knowledge of Christ, who also suffered and in whom is their hope of glory (1:5, 27).¹¹² While they are living under the lordship of Christ, believers must also earn their living, as stated in Col 3:23: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord and not for men" (NIV). Col 4:1 adds, "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (NIV).

Here we see that recreated human beings are to continue to work to sustain their livelihoods, but with a different attitude and perspective. Their work is not just to be seen as working for physical survival, but as an act of worship of Christ, who is their Lord. In whatever work they do, whether in formal paid jobs, informal work, or in the self-employed

¹¹⁰ See Chapters 1.1, 2.7 and 2.8.

¹¹¹ See Chapter 2.4.5, where I discuss these beings to whom Melanesians look to for the present *gutpela sindaun*.

¹¹² I will discuss suffering below.

sectors, they are to earn their living rightly and fairly. Christ defines every believer's life and he is to be Lord in everything we do, whether work or worship (3:17).¹¹³

The above discussion of the pre-eminence of Christ in creation, redemption and sustenance shows that Christ is the hero through whom *gutpela sindaun* has been inaugurated. He is the creator-deliverer prefigured by the Melanesian culture heroes. In the next section, I will discuss the relationship of reconciliation soteriology to *gutpela sindaun*.

6.3 The Colossian Reconciliation Soteriology and its Relationship to *Gutpela Sindaun*

The Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* is a life of corporeal immortality that will be realised instantaneously for human beings and the natural world at the arrival of the culture hero. Wrongs will be put right and *gutpela sindaun* will commence.¹¹⁴ Colossians, in contrast, shows that salvation has already begun. As Strelan rightly notes, "the Melanesian hope of salvation here and now is, at least in part, a theologically-realistic expectation."¹¹⁵

There are also hints of corporeal immortality in Colossians, noted in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, which will be discussed further in section 6.4 below. The key point made in Colossians, as we have seen,¹¹⁶ is that salvation has been inaugurated through the cross of Christ. Sins are forgiven, creation is reconciled to God,¹¹⁷ believers are co-resurrected from death through their union with Christ, have access to all God's blessings, and hostile powers are defeated.¹¹⁸ Central to reconciliation soteriology is forgiveness of sin, which I will discuss in relationship to *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

6.3.1 Forgiveness of Sin and Relationship with God are Central for *Gutpela Sindaun*

Forgiveness of sin (Col 1:14, 21-22; 2:13-14)¹¹⁹ and relationship with God (Col 1:20) are central to the cross of Christ. Sin as we have seen means missing God's mark or standard. Sin as a written injunction or *χειρόγραφον* that prevented the divine-human relationship was obliterated through the cross of Christ (2:14). Through the cross of Christ the grace of

¹¹³ I will discuss eschatology further below.

¹¹⁴ See Chapter 2.1 and 2.2.1.

¹¹⁵ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 82.

¹¹⁶ In Chapters 3 and 4.

¹¹⁷ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 13.

¹¹⁸ See Gräbe, "Salvation in Colossians and Ephesians," 292.

¹¹⁹ See Chapter 3.7.1; Robert L. Cavin, *New Existence and Righteous Living: Colossians and 1 Peter in Conversation with 4QInstruction and the Hodayot* (Germany: De Gruyter, 2013); 127.

God overcame sin to establish a divine-human relationship or salvation. But the way sin is understood today sometimes varies from the scriptural definition. Among many Melanesian tribal groups and languages, there is no exact word for sin, as seen in Chapter 2. Sin is understood relationally and is basically defined as the breaking of relationships, ancestral *lo* and rituals, resulting in *sindaun nogut*, which in neo-Melanesian means bad life.¹²⁰ It is understood in terms of cause and effect. Sin or *pasin nogut* is explained using external physical circumstance such as social ill health and material deprivation. External circumstances are used to define sin, thus shifting the definition of sin to external matters. Sin is not seen as an internal or moral problem. And morality is defined by the ancestral *lo* which differs from tribe to tribe.¹²¹ Any deeds that conflicted with the established *lo* and norms were deemed as *pasin nogut*.

In Colossians, sin is portrayed as an internal moral problem, especially in relation to God (3:5-9), as seen earlier.¹²² Colossians identifies ἐχθρός διάνοια (hostility of mind – 1:21) and σάρξ (flesh – 2:11, 13, 18, 23) as seats of sin. It is the negative influence of flesh on the mind that produces evil inclination toward God and alienates us from God. Sin brought death, meaning separation from life and relationship with God, who is morally righteous and perfect in every way. Sin made us enemies of God (1:21) and kept us enslaved to the dark hostile powers (1:13).¹²³ God through the cross of Christ took away sin and defeated the hostile powers (1:13; 2:15) so that human beings may have a new life and relationship with him. Those who believed in the gospel of Christ have their sins forgiven, are rescued from the hostile powers and delivered into Christ's kingdom, saved from God's coming judgement (see 3:6, 25), and given a whole new start, a new beginning, to live not for sin but for Christ, in whose image they are recreated. Through their union with Christ, believers are qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints (1:13). The inheritance the believers share is all the spiritual blessings released through the death and resurrection of

¹²⁰ See Chapter 2.4.6. *Sindaun nogut* or, as Daimoi refers to it, *i stap long hevi* (living with problems), is the opposite of *gutpela sindaun*. Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 182.

¹²¹ What is morally accepted in one tribe might not be in another tribe.

¹²² See Chapter 3.7.1.

¹²³ Cavin states that "Flesh ... may refer to the negative power or 'realm' contrary to God's will, closely associated with the 'earthly' realm. Working in coordination with the 'authority of darkness' and the 'powers,' the σάρξ leads humankind to commit transgressions against God (cf. 3:7). To exist in the σάρξ is to exist in a permanent state of spiritual 'death' (νεκρός, 2:13), i.e., unholy, full of blame (1:22) and deserving of God's wrath (3:6)." Cavin, *New Existence and Righteous Living*, 128-9.

Christ (see also Eph 1:3-14). God's forgiveness of sin is so that human beings can have new life and relationship with him.¹²⁴

The new life God has given us is a new resurrected-glorified life in Christ. This life is referred to elsewhere in Scripture as eternal life (see Rom 6:23; 1 Tim 1:16) or immortality as Melanesians understand. Eternal life or immortality has been inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Christ. It is through faith in Christ that God has given us new life "together with Christ" (2:13). The rite of baptism symbolises our death to sin and our resurrection to new life with Christ (2:12). Death has no power over our new life in Christ. The believers' new life is bound up with the life of Christ which implies that Christ is our life. Because Christ is our life, believers have taken off the sinful nature through which death reigned and have put on Christ as Lord and master who overcame death on our behalf. Christ is our new self (3:9) and we are to walk in the newness of life (3:12-17).

The forgiveness of sin underpins the change of status before God which changes our mode of existence. The status of being a sinner and an object of God's wrath changes to a status of being holy and without fault (1:22) and saved from God's coming judgment on the ungodly (3:6, 25). Our status of being sinners has changed to ἄγιοι (saints – 1:26). Our change of status means that there is no bond of debt (2:14) or, for Melanesians, a conscientious agreement to keep the ancestral *lo* that can stand in between the forgiven and the forgiver. The conscience or *liklik tingting* is set free from fear of being cursed if the ancestral *lo* is not kept.¹²⁵ All the debts of sin are obliterated, and all rules and regulations or *lo* pertaining to the spirits of the universe are severed.

Having given us new life in Christ, God has brought us into a new relationship with himself. The new life is nurtured through our relationship with God in Christ. Through our relationship with Christ, we grow in our understanding and experience of reconciliation soteriology. In Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking, relationships are fundamental to experiencing *gutpela sindaun*. Cordial relationships with the supernatural beings, other human beings and the natural world enhance *gutpela sindaun*. This triangular-shaped relationship has traditionally been the basis for experiencing *gutpela sindaun*. But the cross of Christ is the basis of the divine-human relationship. The fullness of salvation comes from our relationship with God through Christ (2:10). Christ is the source or fountain of *gutpela*

¹²⁴ See Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 77.

¹²⁵ See Chapter 2.3.1.

sindaun. For believers, the cross-shaped relationship is the basis for experiencing new life and relationship with God. Sin or *pasin nogut* negatively affects the divine-human relationship, but God through the cross of Christ destroyed the wall of hostility and reconciled sinful human beings to himself (1:21-22). Christ as our *tarop tim* and divine-human brought us into relationship with the transcendent and holy God. The relationship we have with God is a type that is related to Christ's own relationship with God the Father (1:3). That is why the believers can join with Christ and call God "our Father" (1:2).

The new life and relationship with God is by grace through faith in Christ, not by the law. In *gutpela sindaun* thinking, adherence to the ancestral *lo* (laws, customs) and rituals was vital to sustain and strengthen cordial relationships. One's relations with other members of the community¹²⁶ were defined by the *lo*. But those who have come to the knowledge of the truth do so by God's grace (1:5-6). The saving knowledge of the gospel truth is followed by the knowledge of God's will (1:9-10).¹²⁷ It is by his grace that believers have come to know his will. God's will includes that the believers will know his mystery revealed, that is Christ in them who is their hope of glory (1:26-27) and they live their lives under the lordship of Christ (2:6-7). Their relationship with God through faith in Christ is nurtured through the word of Christ (3:17), i.e., the instruction about Christ that brings us into faith-union with Christ (1:5-6) and makes us grow in Christ-likeness (3:10).

Believers are to grow in their relationship with God the Father and with Christ who is their Lord (2:6-7). Growth in relationship with God comes from our understanding and knowledge of who Christ is. Christ is the fullness of God (1:19) and the domain of all spiritual knowledge and the wisdom of God (2:3). He is the creator, sustainer and the redeemer of all things as seen above.¹²⁸ He is the head of every spirit being (2:10b) and through the cross of Christ, God stripped every hostile power of their authority and triumphed over them (2:15). In him, the believers are given fullness of salvation (2:10a). Knowledge of who Christ and what he has done is fundamental to our life and relationship with him. Our knowledge of who Christ is should be applied in our lives. As believers, we are to live our lives according to what the Scriptures including Colossians teach us of Christ. This means that the believers' relationship with Christ is not to be passive. To grow

¹²⁶ Melanesians define community as a composition of the living dead, the living living and the natural world.

¹²⁷ See Wedderburn, "The Theology of Colossians," 53.

¹²⁸ See Chapter 6.2.

in their relationship with God through Christ, believers are to follow God's will in their lives by living according to the teachings of Christ.

In *gutpela sindaun* thinking, the practice of reciprocity was an important way to establish, strengthen and nurture relationships.¹²⁹ Reciprocal giving as a mutual obligation insured and kept relationships active and functional. Through reciprocity *gutpela sindaun* was experienced. However, our relationship with God is not established on the basis of mutual reciprocal obligation. God gave his Son as an atoning sacrifice to make a way for human beings to have a relationship with him. In mutual reciprocal relationships, one returns the favour offered by the other. But human beings have nothing that can match what God has done through his Son on the cross. We fall short, unable to return his favour because our relationship with God is by grace (1:6). It is by God's grace through faith in Christ that human beings are given new life and enter into relationship with God. This relationship begins at conversion, when one gives his or her life to Christ, which means dying and rising with Christ, as the waters of baptism symbolise (2:12). As believers die to sinful desires and put on Christ daily, their relationship with Christ grows. This growth can be understood as the renewal of the Christ-like image (3:10) and putting on godly virtues that characterise one's new mode of existence.

But some believers do not fully understand that the forgiveness of sin is about inward change, from the life of enmity to a life of amity with God. It is a moral change from living in sin and rebellion towards God to holiness and blamelessness and being recreated in the image of Christ. We do not deserve to be forgiven of our sins and brought into a living relationship with God. God by his own grace has done it. Our relationship with God starts when we respond to God from our hearts¹³⁰ when we hear and believe the gospel of Christ preached (1:6). Transformation of our hearts is the work of the divine agent (see 2:11). Our relationship and devotion to God does not mean that it will be reciprocated with material blessings as Melanesians understood from their relationships with culture heroes, ancestors and various spirit beings.

For the Colossians believers, their soteriological experience did not have a miraculous effect on their physical circumstances. The believing servants continued to serve as servants and were urged to serve with a new sense of purpose, i.e., serving the Lord Jesus Christ (3:22). Paul's physical circumstances became more difficult. He suffered

¹²⁹ See Chapter 2.3.3.

¹³⁰ Heart mean the seat of emotions, feelings, intellect, will and desires.

greatly for the gospel of Christ and for the church (1:24). He was a prisoner of God's mystery (4:3) when the Letter was written. Our soteriological experience is by the grace of God and his grace is able to carry us through whatever circumstance we encounter in life. Hence, God's grace is the inward enabling power for life and relationship with God, other believers and those outside of the community of faith.

In this new existence, believers' allegiance to the ancestral spirits and every other spirit shifts to loyalty and obedience to God and Christ. The believers are no longer subservient to the ancestral spirits, *masalai* and *kawal*. Those who are in Christ no longer live to please the dead culture heroes, the ancestors, *malasai* and *kawal*. Forgiveness of sin has restored the redeemed to their proper place in creation and in their relationship with God who is their Father. For believers, physical circumstance does not define their status before God, or whether they are forgiven or not. Forgiveness of sin is given through faith in the work of Christ on the cross, who is now seated in heaven (3:1).

This reconciliation soteriology means that the physical, social and material ills that believers experience are not because they are still in sin. Nor is good physical, social and material health proof that one's sins are forgiven and one's relationship with God is intimate. Not even special kinds of religious or miraculous experiences are proof of sinless perfection and super spirituality. We recall that the Colossian philosophy seems to have claimed they reached a higher spiritual plane based on visionary experiences.

In *gutpela sindaun* thinking, physical, material and social health are seen as evidence of cordial relationships with the spirits, fellow human beings and the natural world. This is an "encapsulated view of the [world] of nature."¹³¹ An encapsulated view takes events in the earthly realm or microcosm as reflections of the spiritual principles of the macrocosm. Applying this understanding to reconciliation soteriological experience through Christ can be problematic for one's faith-union with Christ. It can make one think that when one does not experience physical, material and social health, his or her salvation experience is imperfect. One then asks: Am I truly saved? Has God forgiven my sins? Doubts about the reality of one's salvation experience in Christ and the sufficiency of Christ for salvation begin to settle in, like the Colossian philosophy that tried to influence the Colossian believers to doubt the sufficiency of Christ for salvation.¹³²

¹³¹ Turner, *The Roots of Science*, 58

¹³² See Chapter 3.6.1.

Bodily concerns or needs are a testing point for many believers in Melanesia. In their search for answers to bodily needs, many believers set aside the essence of the gospel which is forgiveness of sin and relationship with God, about which they first heard and came to faith. They embrace other gospels that claim to give answers to their bodily needs, and even at times revert to magical thinking to address their physical and material health. They fall back on the belief that it is through magical words and formulae that the spirits are manipulated to change the circumstances of life, as seen earlier.¹³³ Thus there is still an expectation that believing in the gospel should make miracles happen in believers' lives. This is a notion promoted in other versions of the gospel that require extra religious rituals and rules to perfect one's faith, which it is said will lead to miracles, signs and wonders that produce physical, material and social health.¹³⁴

This betrays an anthropocentric gospel and an anthropocentric salvation, in which one must create favourable spiritual conditions that will induce God to respond to one's needs.¹³⁵ But Colossians shows that the cross of Christ has changed our spiritual condition, which we cannot control ourselves. Through the cross, Christ has overcome every adversary that robbed us of life and relationship with God, and offers us a stable foundation to live in the world that is still marred by sin and death. He indwells every believer, not only as their hope of future glory (1:27) but as their pioneer and friend in suffering, so that believers can take courage and be assured that their forgiveness of sin is absolute because Christ suffered and died on the cross.

The reality of the reconciliation soteriological experience does not eradicate pain, suffering and material ills, but it does change our perspective on life so that we look heavenward to Christ and to conduct our lives differently from the world. The new life in Christ is characterised by the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness and love (3:12-14). These are relational virtues that define one's relationship with Christ, God and others. They are to be practically applied in one's relationship with both the faithful and those outside the faith. The fullness of new life is a life that is ethically reflective of the new life in Christ, indwelt by his word (3:16), continually singing praises to God and overflowing with thanksgiving to God in Christ

¹³³ See Chapter 2.4.4.

¹³⁴ See Chapter 2.8, where I discussed the religious trend in PNG influenced by prosperity gospel teaching.

¹³⁵ See Chapter 1.4.1.

(3:16-17). The world which he has reconciled is moving toward its transformation, as we shall see below.¹³⁶

6.3.2 Reconciliation, Incorporation and Adoption

God has reconciled all things to himself through the death and resurrection of Christ (1:20). In Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking, when the departed culture heroes return the wrongs will be put right and *gutpela sindaun* will commence for both human beings and the created world. Colossians shows that salvation has already commenced through the cross of Christ and will be consummated at the return of Christ. The wrongs which Melanesian progenitors and their progenies committed, whom the culture heroes prefigured, which led to the termination of relationship with God, have been dealt with on the cross of Christ, and *gutpela sindaun* has been inaugurated. God whom the Melanesians have transgressed against has forgiven every wrong.

In Colossians, various metaphors are used to delineate salvation, but the one I want to focus on is reconciliation, to show how it relates to *gutpela sindaun* thinking. Reconciliation is about re-establishing or restoring relationships, as we have shown.¹³⁷ Colossians presents Christ as God's agent of reconciliation. Reconciliation does not come through our relationship with the spirit world,¹³⁸ fellow human beings or nature, as Melanesians perceived.¹³⁹ Relationship with God puts human beings where they belong in the creation order, under Christ as their head, and shows how human beings can relate to the rest of creation.

Reconciliation is *wanbel*, which literally means 'one stomach.' One stomach means one heart, and heart has the same understanding as in both the Jewish and Mediterranean worlds.¹⁴⁰ It is the centre of emotions, senses, desires, will and reasoning. We saw the meaning of reconciliation in Melanesia in our discussion of *pebek* or reciprocity, which in some cases was a domination of the weaker party by the stronger party, while in others it was a mutual relationship.¹⁴¹ Whether reciprocal giving in the context of reconciliation was with a view of domination or not, the whole reason was to establish peace¹⁴² so that *gutpela sindaun* could be restored. The reconciliation soteriology of Colossians shows that God is

¹³⁶ See Chapter 6.4.4.

¹³⁷ See Chapter 6.3.1.

¹³⁸ For culture heroes, *masalai*, dead and *kawal*, see Chapter 2.4.2.

¹³⁹ See Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 181.

¹⁴⁰ See Chapter 5.5.

¹⁴¹ See Chapter 2.3.4.

¹⁴² See Chapter 1.4.3 (retributive logic).

the one who reconciled all things to himself through Christ. Therefore, his reconciliation is an objective reality that can be applied subjectively to human beings, the spirit world, and the natural world.¹⁴³

Reading God's cosmic reconciliation through Christ through the lens of *pebek* as domination, the Colossian reconciliation almost seems to be a dominance reconciliation. But it is not a dominance reconciliation which God imposed on creation whether it wanted it or not. If it were a dominance reconciliation, then it would be seen as advocating a universal salvation. Colossian reconciliation soteriology is self-sacrificial, restorative and objective. God out of his love and grace let his son be the sacrifice to reconcile all things to himself. The sacrifice of Christ has brought restoration of all creation under the headship of Christ.

In personal terms, human beings are reconciled to God through faith. Colossians reconciliation is a restorative reconciliation and it is not only about restoring relationship between God and creation, it is also about giving new life to creation. Restorative reconciliation does not mean suppression but acceptance, even though there is still a degree of ongoing hostility. In restorative reconciliation, God is committed to reconcile all things to himself, including human beings, knowing that not every creature will accept it.

Reconciliation in Colossians is a restorative reconciliation because it is, firstly, solely God's doing through Christ (Col 1:20-22). Secondly, it is a restorative reconciliation because it reaffirms Christ's pre-eminence or predominance over all things – ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων (Col 1:18c). Christ as God's agent of reconciliation gave himself to reconcile all things to God. He is exclusively God's *tarop tim* or peace child, who executed God's restorative reconciliation of all things. God's restorative reconciliation means that we can do nothing to be reconciled to God, for God has done it through Christ. *Gutpela sindaun* has been inaugurated through the cross of Christ, which is the decisive point in creation history to enter into relationship with God and find identity and purpose in Christ.

God's reconciliation soteriology differs from people-to-people reconciliation, which does not merge or integrate the two people into one. They continue to live as separate entities. The Colossians reconciliation soteriology is different. It is about more than just restoring relationship with God and being left in a state of peace and harmony with God. Colossians reconciliation soteriology shows that those who are reconciled to God through

¹⁴³ See Chapter 4.4 and 4.5.

Christ are incorporated into the divine family. This notion underlies God's mystery revealed.¹⁴⁴ God wants to take for himself a people from among the Jews and Gentiles (1:26-27).

This mystery is made known through the preaching of the gospel, as we saw in Chapter 5. In Christ, God is recreating a people for himself with Christ as their head. It is God's desire to make one people from both Jews and Gentiles, such that they will call themselves *wantoks* in Christ.¹⁴⁵ As we saw in Chapter 2, *wantok* is a relational term which connotes family. Those who are brought into God's divine family are *wantoks* because they share in the image of Christ (3:10) and in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ (2:12, 20; 3:1-4). Together they share in the inheritance of the saints (1:12). The basis for their inclusion into the divine family is their faith in Christ. As Daimoi states, "[f]aith in Christ brings people into a spiritual father-child relationship with God."¹⁴⁶ Reconciliation soteriology shows that God is carving out a people for himself from the old humankind, that they may be qualified to share in the heavenly inheritance.

Incorporation into God's family can also be understood as an adoption. The term adoption is not used in Colossians; however, the phrases "our Father" (1:2) and sharing "in the inheritance of saints in the light" (1:12) reflect the adoption notion. In the light of Colossian teaching, Christ is the only "beloved Son" of God (1:13, see also 1:3), and he is the legitimate heir to all that belongs to his Father. Christ is also God's firstborn and agent, and by virtue of his relationship as a son and his role in creation and redemption of all things, he is the only rightful ruler and heir of everything that belongs to God, including the entire cosmos that God brought into existence through him.

Believers, through their union with Christ, are adopted into the divine family, which qualifies them to share in the inheritance of the saints. Adoption legitimises one's status as a full member of the family, thus qualifying one to share in the family inheritance. Some scholars frame the inheritance that the believers share as God's divine power.¹⁴⁷ Wedderburn, commenting on the supremacy of Christ over everything, as the poem delineates, argues that "those who are Christ's already share with him both in the fullness of the divine power that fills him and, by implication, in his superiority over all ... [this]

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter 5.4.

¹⁴⁵ See Chapter 2.3.3.

¹⁴⁶ Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 183-4.

¹⁴⁷ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 119.

may have arisen as a response to the suggestion that heavenly powers barred one's way to the heavenly world."¹⁴⁸

However, Sumney concludes that the inheritance is all of God's blessings that the believers share. He writes "[a]ll relationships with God, all forgiveness, all security from hostile spiritual forces, and all spiritual blessings come to believers through their participation in the life of Christ, which God grants them in baptism."¹⁴⁹ I concur with Sumney that the inheritance is every eschatological blessing. This is because Christ is God's mystery revealed to the world that was kept hidden to past generations. Through Christ, God's plan of redemption is accomplished. In Christ, God's eschatological plan is put into effect to make Jews and Gentiles become one people. Hence, the blessings listed in Colossians are not an exhaustive list. To this list we could add sharing in the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:27, 8), and the victory of Christ over death (1:18b). Sharing in all God's blessings demonstrates our relationship with God here and now and into eternity. We are already his children and co-heirs with Christ, as Paul wrote elsewhere.¹⁵⁰ Divine reconciliation, incorporation and adoption are important relational concepts that depict the inauguration of reconciliation soteriology through Christ.

6.3.3 Hostile Powers Vanquished

The reconciliation soteriology wrought through Christ is not only from sin but also from the hostile powers or the powers of darkness (1:13, 2:15).¹⁵¹ The cross of Christ is depicted as a military invasion of hostile powers. Colossians vividly depicts the existence of cosmic powers (1:16). It goes on to show the defeat of the hostile powers, which means that the hostile powers previously had some degree of influence over the world and over human beings.

As seen earlier, the Colossian philosophy's insistence on the worshipping and invocation of the *στοιχῆια τοῦ κόσμου* was probably for their role in blessing and sustaining life. The opponents thought that Christ was not all-sufficient for the believers' salvation. The Gentile Christians at Colossae knew what it meant to be under these powers, designated as *στοιχῆια τοῦ κόσμου*, which were believed to control the elements of the natural world and even the fate of human beings.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Wedderburn, "The Theology of Colossians," 48.

¹⁴⁹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 14.

¹⁵⁰ Rom 8:17; Gal 3:29; 4:7; Tit 3:7; Eph 3:6.

¹⁵¹ See Chapters 3.7.4 and 4.5; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 14.

¹⁵² See Chapter 3.3 and 3.5; Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, 8-10.

In *gutpela sindaun* thinking, the dead culture heroes and various spirit beings are the power brokers of *gutpela sindaun* in the present. These powers were invoked and manipulated, using rituals and magic, for blessings and curses, and a curse was seen as a blessing in disguise if one's enemy suffered its effects. The cross of Christ, however, renders these powers as of no use. They have nothing good to offer to believers. The believers have received fullness of blessings in Christ, who is the head of every spirit being (2:10), and so they are not to look to these beings to give them *gutpela sindaun*. Nor should the believers fear these beings, because Christ has already defeated them.

The reconciliation soteriology reveals the true nature and status of the hostile powers, or of every spirit power in the universe. Firstly, every spirit being is a creature. Christ who is the firstborn of creation (Col 1:15-18a) is the creator of every spirit being. All the spirit beings are supernatural beings of the non-empirical realm which Christ created (1:16). As creatures they are not all-powerful.¹⁵³ They are under Christ and he rules them as their head. He is superior to every supernatural being (Col 2:10). Secondly, the hostile powers of the universe have been pacified. Christ has defeated every hostile power, depicted as "power of darkness" (1:13) and "rulers and authorities" (2:15), on the cross.

The cross of Christ exposed who these beings really are. They are hostile, rebellious and evil beings who sought to keep human beings under bondage (1:13). God through the cross of Christ stripped these beings publicly. Public stripping suggests humiliation. The public humiliation of the hostile forces recalls the public humiliation of Christ on the cross. Through the cross of Christ, God publicly (most probably before the heavenly host) humiliated every ruler and authority, every hostile power.

Humanly speaking, to be exposed for who you really are or what your real qualifications are, over against what you claim to be, in a shame and honour society like those in the Mediterranean world and Melanesia, is shameful and disgraceful.¹⁵⁴ In the Mediterranean world, the dishonoured person had his or her wealth forfeited, any titles retracted, and the person was made insignificant in society.¹⁵⁵ In Melanesia, relationships were severed with the disgraced person, implying that he or she was as good as dead. Severed relationships meant loss of trust and *gutpela sindaun*.

Paul who was from an honour and shame culture, almost certainly saw shame as involved in stripping of the hostile forces. The point of Paul's statement is that the hostile

¹⁵³ See 6.1.3 above.

¹⁵⁴ See my discussion on shame and honour in the Mediterranean world and Melanesia in Chapter 3.4.3 (i).

¹⁵⁵ See Charlesworth, "The Missiological Implications of a Counter-cultural Jesus," 197-9.

powers or the elemental powers of the universe are insignificant. Christ has conquered them and has imposed his rule upon them. Those who are in Christ have been set free from the grip of the hostile powers and delivered into his kingdom (1:13). In Sumney's words,

Christ has freed believers from the powers of these beings, declaring that Christ has defeated them and so reclaimed believers for God (2:14-15, 20). Christ has not only rescued believers but also transferred them into his own realm. Therefore, they no longer serve those hostile powers but are citizens of a different kingdom (1:12-14), in which they are heirs with God, properly qualified to receive all God's blessings.¹⁵⁶

The believers are members of a kingdom that is more powerful than the one they were once part of. As members of Christ's kingdom, believers' lives are safe with Christ in God. As far as the believers' salvation is concerned, it is secured. No power of darkness can take their salvation away. Therefore, the believers are not to fear these beings and occult powers, for they have been defeated. Nor are they to obey them by submitting to their rules and regulations (2:20-23), as if the destiny of God's people is in these beings' hands. In addition, believers should not let anyone judge or condemn them for refusing to participate in religious (cultural) practices pertaining to *ol kainkain spirit bilong graun* or elemental powers of the universe.¹⁵⁷

After the cross of Christ, the forces of darkness are still free agents. They can still keep human beings in their grip. Their ability to keep human beings in the domain of darkness comes from sin. In addition, they may take Christians captive through teachings that are not centred on Christ (Col 2:8). In Melanesia, prosperity gospel teaching can be challenging to one's faith in Christ, because it is close to *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

Likewise, in Colossians, Christians are warned to be on guard against fine-sounding arguments (2:4), and to be prayerful and alert at all times (4:3). To avoid being deceived and taken into slavery to the elemental powers of the universe, Christians are exhorted to hold firmly to Jesus and the teachings of Christ that they received from the apostles (1:25; 2:6-7). Christians need to study the Scriptures themselves instead of just accepting what the missionaries and the present-day preachers and teachers are telling them because their teachings are wrapped in their own cultural perceptions. We need to confirm what we hear with the whole canon of Scriptures. Careful study of Scriptures helps us to understand the meaning and message of the Scripture and to appropriately or contextually apply it into our lives. In this way, the gospel of Christ becomes part of our lives, so much so that we are able to teach and admonish each other with spiritual wisdom and knowledge, expressing

¹⁵⁶ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 14.

¹⁵⁷ See Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*, 377.

heartfelt gratitude to God for his salvation, by “singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God” (Col 3:17) through our cultural forms and media. Hence, to grow in our relationship with God through Christ and to guard against deceptive teachings that seeks to mislead and enslave us again to Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking, it is the whole teaching of Scriptures that we need and not just some selected texts.

The death and resurrection of Christ demonstrate that Christ is pre-eminent in all things. Christ rules over the entire cosmos, visible and invisible. The fallen world or the domain of darkness which he effectively reconciled to God is under his rule. Death itself is defeated and the powers of the domain of darkness have been divested of their authority. They do not have any authority over the lives of the believers now and into eternity. Believers’ lives are hidden with Christ in God (3:3),¹⁵⁸ meaning they are protected from the harmful forces that are still seen at work because of people’s allegiance to them through sin, even after the cross. Believers have nothing to fear because Christ has freed them from fear and bondage to the forces of darkness and he will protect them. Not only will he protect the believers, they are already part of the eschatological kingdom. Therefore, the “believers can serve God wholeheartedly, knowing that these beings cannot disrupt their relationship with God.”¹⁵⁹ The ultimate victory, power and authority belong to Christ.

6.3.4 All Things Reconciled

One of the core aspects of *gutpela sindaun* thinking is the restoration of the cosmos. According to many Melanesian *tumbuna stori*, the cosmos ceased to be what it was in the beginning as a result of *pasin nogut*.¹⁶⁰ *Gutpela sindaun* is incomplete without the restoration of the cosmos. The known cosmos supports human life and is expected to be restored by the culture heroes to what it was like in its pristine beginning.

However, Colossians shows that Christ as the cosmic creator and redeemer, or the hero, has inaugurated cosmic reconciliation. Through his death, God has reconciled all things to himself (1:20).¹⁶¹ This theme of cosmic reconciliation is not only found in Colossians. Elsewhere Paul stated his vision for the future reconciliation of the cosmos (Rom 8:18-24; 11:25-26; 1 Cor 15:20-28).¹⁶² But in Colossians, the reconciliation of all things is said to have commenced. Christ is the sphere in which all things or the entire

¹⁵⁸ See Chapter 5.6.

¹⁵⁹ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 14.

¹⁶⁰ See Chapter 2.2.1.

¹⁶¹ See Chapter 4.3.3.

¹⁶² Gräbe, “Salvation in Colossians and Ephesians,” 289.

universe came into existence, and the cosmos is reconciled, meaning reordered to its original goal and purpose in and through him (1:20).

The reconciliation of all things may suggest that there was a time when life was completely whole and perfect, before its disruption. In the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, this time of perfection is referred to as *taim blong tumbuna* (time of the ancestors).¹⁶³ The Melanesian time concept recalls life in the beginning as perfectly whole, before its disruption due to the human progenitors' *pasin nogut* (bad actions/deeds), and points to its future restoration. In Colossians, the time of *gutpela sindaun* has come in Christ. Christ as the redeemer of all things has inaugurated *gutpela sindaun*, as we shall see below.¹⁶⁴ The cross of Christ is the defining point in the history of humanity. In Christ, God's eschatological secret is revealed to the world. This means that every creature and life form (high or low), visible and invisible, has one goal, namely Christ. Everything exists for the glory of Christ.

Some scholars, in particular Wedderburn, agree that the poem is universal in scope, but argue that the focus of reconciliation is human beings rather than the whole cosmos.¹⁶⁵ This is probably because reconciliation is understood subjectively. As I have shown, God's reconciliation is objective, initiated wholly by God, and it is applied subjectively in relation to the non-personal creation, the hostile cosmic powers, and human beings. Its subjective application in relation to human beings (see 1:21-22) does not change the fact that God's plan of reconciliation includes the entire cosmos, as τὰ πάντα denotes.¹⁶⁶

Thompson confirms that the predicaments of human beings and the cosmos are intertwined, and both are in need of reconciliation: "Sin ruptured not only divine-human relationship but also the relationships of humans to each other and to their world, and all those relationships must be repaired."¹⁶⁷ Reconciliation of all things implies that the relationships between God, human beings and the entire cosmos had been distorted and

¹⁶³ See Chapter 2.3.6.

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 6.3 below.

¹⁶⁵ Wedderburn, "The Theology of Colossians," 40. In support of human beings as objects of reconciliation, Marshall comments, "we have by now the traditional picture of human beings as sinners (Col 2:13), alienated from God and at enmity toward him (Col 1:21); they belong to a world that is characterized by darkness (Col 1:13) from which they cannot deliver themselves. The coming of Christ is seen as a rescue operation, through which people are redeemed from their dire situation. Redemption is elucidated as 'forgiveness of sins.'" (Col 1:14; 2:13). Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*, 376. See also Gräbe, "Salvation in Colossians and Ephesians," 289-90.

¹⁶⁶ Gräbe, "Salvation in Colossians and Ephesians," 292-3.

¹⁶⁷ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 121.

thus needed repairing. Both human beings and the cosmos were disoriented from their goal and purpose.

There is indeed a close link between human beings and the cosmos, and the reconciliation of human beings is also the reconciliation of the entire cosmos. Since the cosmos shared in the punishment and suffering of humans' sin, so it will share in the redemption of human beings. As Dennis Hamm puts it, "[a]s the whole created world shares in the estrangement and disorder caused by human sin, so it will share in Christ's redemption and [be] restored to its full beauty, harmony and magnificence (see Rom 8:20-21)."¹⁶⁸ Thompson adds that "[t]hrough the cross God does not simply deal with the situation of the individual, but undertakes to bring wholeness to the whole world."¹⁶⁹ Cosmic reconciliation, in short, suggests the interrelationship of creation with humans and their relationship to Christ as the head. Christ's reconciling work with human beings restores them to their place of responsibility in the cosmos, and redeemed humanity (the church) is to exemplify the redeeming work of Christ amongst the human community and the whole creation.

Cosmic reconciliation also means that God loves and cares for the entire creation (see Ps 145:8-9; Wisd 11:23-26; Sir 18:13).¹⁷⁰ God has a plan for the whole universe, a plan which is hidden but will be revealed at the Parousia of Christ (see 3:4). Therefore, the reconciling work of Christ is not only to reconcile human beings to God, but the entire cosmos. In Strelan's words, it "will involve all known structures of society."¹⁷¹

God's plan of salvation is macrocosmic. It is through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:18b) that the cosmos is given hope of new life. This is an aspect of salvation that is "not-yet," as we will see below. What happened to Christ's resurrected body will happen to those who are in Christ and the entire world, which is our third point in response to *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

¹⁶⁸ Dennis Hamm, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 179.

¹⁶⁹ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 121.

¹⁷⁰ Gräbe, "Salvation in Colossians and Ephesians," 292.

¹⁷¹ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 81.

6.4 The Colossians' Inaugurated Eschatology and its Relationship to *Gutpela Sindaun*

6.4.1 Eschatology: Realised, Future or Inaugurated

Eschatology in Christian teaching means the final events, or the last things, relating to the end of this present life or the end of the world.¹⁷² New Testament authors like Paul had quite a lot to say about this important topic.¹⁷³ This is because the Christ-event is the beginning of an end and can be seen as an apocalyptic event, meaning the revelation of God's imminent plan to defeat evil and suffering in the world and establish his reign over creation, as Col 1:13 and 2:15 imply. Features of Colossians such as mystery revealed (1:26-27), cosmic reconciliation (1:20), cosmic duality (heavens and the earth – 1:16) and the revealing of Christ in glory (3:4) are some of the apocalyptic features.¹⁷⁴

In Christ, God's final eschatological events have been revealed. The cosmos which Christ created for his own purpose (1:16), and redeemed through his death, is moving toward an eschatological goal in Christ. In Colossians, Paul speaks of eschatology but not with such urgency as in other Pauline epistles (see 1 Cor 16:22; 1 Thess 4:13-5:11).¹⁷⁵ Nonetheless, within Pauline eschatological thought, the Letter to the Colossians outlines what happens to Christians through their union with Christ. What type of eschatology does Colossians depict?

The grammatical features of the Letter are largely in the past tense, speaking of things that have already occurred – Ὡς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον (just as therefore you have *received* Christ Jesus the Lord - 2:6a), συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ, ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως (having been *buried* with him in baptism, in which you were also *raised* [with him] through faith – 2:12; see also 3:1, 3). These grammatical features (verbs in past tense) portray an “inaugurated eschatology” with a “realised” aspect.¹⁷⁶ ‘Realised eschatology’ implies that all the blessings are already complete and there is nothing more to be expected in the future.

¹⁷² McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 444; see especially his definitions of Future, Inaugurated and Realised Eschatology (452).

¹⁷³ For instance, see Rom 8:18-23; 1 Cor 15:20-58; 2 Cor 4:11; Phil 3:20-21; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess 2:8; 1 Tim 6:14; 2:10; 4:1, 8; Tit 2:13.

¹⁷⁴ See Luke R. Hoselton's discussion of 'Apocalyptic in Colossians,' in "New Creation in Colossians: A Comparative, Exegetical, and Theological Analysis," 123-49.

¹⁷⁵ Lohse contends that the eschatology in Colossians has receded into the background, in *Colossians and Philemon*, 180.

¹⁷⁶ See Todd D. Still, "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?," *New Testament Studies* 50, no. 1 (Jan 2004): 127-8.

Although believers are already raised, resurrection in Paul's thinking in Colossians has two poles. First, believers through their union with Christ have been raised from death, but the ultimate consummation is still to come.¹⁷⁷ This means that there is an element of "future eschatology,"¹⁷⁸ expressed as "your hope is laid up in heaven" (1:5), "Christ in you the hope of glory" (1:27), "fix your mind on things above where Christ is seated" (3:1), and "your lives are hidden with Christ in God" (3:3). 'Future eschatology' means that the end times blessings await the final revelation of Christ.

At the same time, the forgiveness of sin and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit show that the eschatological blessings have commenced in and through the cross of Christ. Forgiveness of sin and receiving of the Holy Spirit are not blessings that are yet to be realised. But this does not mean that the realised blessings are complete. Although forgiveness of sin has been realised, the state of sinless perfection awaits the future revelation of Christ, where sin will no longer be part of life after the revelation of Christ.

These two renderings, "realised" and "future" eschatology, lead to the third rendering, which some refer to as "already-but-not-yet"¹⁷⁹ or inaugurated eschatology. Inaugurated eschatology refers to the present inauguration of the eschatological blessings and the consummation of these blessings at the return of Christ.¹⁸⁰ The final discourse of world history has commenced through the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ into heaven, but it remains to be completed at his glorious return (Col 3:4).¹⁸¹

This trajectory of now and not-yet is also seen in Paul's theology from the undisputed letters (Rom 8:18-23; 1 Cor 15:50-58). In Colossians, the believers are co-resurrected with Christ (2:13; 3:1) but their resurrected lives are hidden (3:3), which shows an eschatological tension of already-but-not-yet. The use of spatial terminologies – heavens and earth, invisible and visible (1:16), death and resurrection (2:12, 20; 3:1), set your mind on things above – establish the link between already and not yet. Inaugurated eschatology is a balanced designation of the Colossian eschatological teaching.

The realised eschatological orientation of Colossians also must be balanced with the 'not-yet' dimension. The Letter maintains the resurrection of believers with Christ at conversion (2:12; 3:1; cf. 2 Cor 4:14), but it is "not yet." The use of spatial and temporal

¹⁷⁷ See Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 122-3.

¹⁷⁸ See Still, "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?" 128-9.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 130-35.

¹⁸⁰ See McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 445.

¹⁸¹ See C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944), for the distinction between future and realized eschatology.

images to delineate eschatological realities or blessings in Colossians (see 3:1-4) is unusual, according to Sumney.¹⁸² The use of spatial images in Colossians does not mute the not-yet aspect of the eschatology.¹⁸³ Immediately after declaring that the believers were already raised with Christ (3:1) and their lives were hidden with Christ in God (3:3), Paul goes on to state that the new resurrected heavenly life with Christ still awaits the future eschatological manifestation of Christ (3:4).¹⁸⁴ This future eschatological act is the revelation of Christ in glory, through which God will reveal his will for the world (3:1-4, 6, 25).¹⁸⁵ Having established this understanding of the Colossians eschatology, how does it relate to *gutpela sindaun* that entails the restoration of the cosmos?

6.4.2 Inaugurated Eschatology and *Gutpela Sindaun*

Melanesian eschatology is eventually backward-looking. It looks back to the *taim bilong tumbuna* (time of the ancestors) as an era of prosperity and perfection (*gutpela sindaun*),¹⁸⁶ which will be restored at the return of the culture heroes and the ancestors.¹⁸⁷ The living dead will either accompany the culture heroes or will immediately follow their return and be reunited with the ‘living living,’ and the natural world (known cosmos) will be restored to what it was like in the original golden age. Human beings will enjoy fullness of bodily life that will not end. It will be the beginning of the eschatological age.¹⁸⁸

Colossians maintains that the eschatological age and its blessings have already commenced through the death and resurrection of Christ.¹⁸⁹ Christ’s resurrection as the *πρωτότοκος* from the dead (Col 1:18b) marks the end of the old age, the defeat of death, sin and the powers of darkness (2:15), and the inauguration of the eschatological age and its blessings. Life has triumphed over sin and death, signifying an end of one era and the beginning of another under the rule of Christ. Christ is the beginning of creation, as *ἀρχή* demonstrates, is *κεφαλή* (1:18) of a new era or ‘new creation.’¹⁹⁰

¹⁸² Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 182.

¹⁸³ See Foster, *Colossians*, 45; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 182.

¹⁸⁴ See Foster, *Colossians*, 46; Chapter 5.6.

¹⁸⁵ See Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 17.

¹⁸⁶ See Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 87-8.

¹⁸⁷ See Figure 1, points 2 and 4, on golden life lost and golden life restored, in Chapter 2.7.1; Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 74.

¹⁸⁸ See Chapter 2.2.1.2 and 2.7.1.

¹⁸⁹ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 82.

¹⁹⁰ See Chapter 4.3.3. Hoselton states that “the use of *ἀρχή*, as is widely acknowledged, echoes the creation account of Genesis 1:1, indicating the term takes on an eschatological meaning in Col 1:18b which depicts the ‘beginning’ of the new creation.” Hoselton, “New Creation in Colossians,” 135.

Although the term ‘new creation’ is not used in Colossians, it is inferred by the redemption motif (Col 1:18b-20) and the notion of recreating the image (3:10). My use of ‘new era’ refers either to the beginning of redemptive history (time) or to the new creation order. The new era is further highlighted by contrasting the past life with the new life which believers possess (2:13). Paul says that you were reconciled (past tense) through the brutal death of Christ on the cross (1:21), you were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, and God made you alive with Christ (2:13).

This alludes to a change in time period and the beginning of a new life in Christ. The eschatological era has been inaugurated through the cross of Christ and will reach its climax at the revelation of Christ in glory (3:4). The Colossian eschatology is thus progressive. It is a forward-looking or upward-looking eschatology, moving toward the final unveiling of Christ in glory. It is not looking back to the Adamic glory in the Garden of Eden, but to the glory of the resurrected-glorified Christ in whom the believers’ hope and resurrected lives reside.

The Melanesian backward-looking eschatological expectations of *gutpela sindaun* are somewhat static and do not offer a deeper and richer hope for the future. The future is predicted or projected on the basis of *taim blong tumbuna*. The hope is that people will experience material prosperity and regain their identity.¹⁹¹ This means that the *gutpela sindaun* to be experienced will be a replica of life that was lost in the past. The arrival of Europeans and even the preaching of the gospel of Christ were seen against the backdrop of this backward-looking eschatology.¹⁹²

The Melanesian backward-looking eschatological expectation could thus be problematic when it comes to understanding the inaugurated eschatological teaching from Colossians, and this has in fact been borne out by Melanesian religious history, with the formation of Melanesian indigenous movements and independent churches.¹⁹³ The introduction of the prosperity gospel teaching of wealth and health in recent times¹⁹⁴ further complicates and confuses many believers. It is difficult for them to be upward-looking to where Christ is seated (3:1-2) and to accept adversities as part of their Christian journey

¹⁹¹ See Chapter 1.4.1.

¹⁹² See Chapter 2.5 and 2.6.

¹⁹³ See Chapter 2.7. Published sources by Melanesians that address the issue of prosperity teaching include: Rodney Gilikambe, “Biblical Prosperity: Abelam Christians in East Sepik Province,” *MJT* 26, no. 1 (2010): 37-86; Mani, “Towards a Theological Perspective on the Mystery of Suffering,” 5-78; Mombi, “Impact of the Prosperity Gospel in the Assemblies of God Churches in Papua New Guinea,” 32-58.

¹⁹⁴ See Chapter 2.8.

with Christ, who is their hope of glory (1:27). Even the evangelical millennial teachings¹⁹⁵ which various Christian denominations embrace and teach often create fear rather than motivating the believers to be firm in their hope of glory with Christ in the face of adversities.

The implication of backward-looking eschatology relating to inaugurated eschatology is the expectation that life in Christ will be perfectly whole in every aspect in the here and now. Some Melanesian Christians believe that the fullness of *gutpela sindaun* should be experienced now so that one's transition from the present life to the next, when Christ returns, will not require any 'getting-used-to.' Christians who have such views see Christ as a means to an end and believe that Christ is obligated to grant everything they ask for in order to experience the desired *gutpela sindaun* in the present. These Christians expect Christ to free them from every pain and suffering, so they might enjoy the fullness of *gutpela sindaun* now.

Suffering, as Strelan notes, "is one element which is unpalatable, unpopular, and unpleasant to many: [Yet] Paul insists that participation in salvation in the end-time involves a sharing in Christ's suffering."¹⁹⁶ Paul himself rejoiced in his suffering for the church and for the gospel of Christ (1:24). Christ suffered vicariously before his glory in heaven. This means for Christ's followers there is no glory without suffering. Christian suffering is part and parcel of being "in Christ" and is a mark of the inaugurated eschatology that Christians undergo as they wait patiently for the glorious return of Christ.

The tendency to expect Christ to fulfil our desires demotes Christ from his cosmic supremacy as *the* cosmic hero¹⁹⁷ to being just *a* culture hero whom one can manipulate to fulfil one's desired *gutpela sindaun* in the present.¹⁹⁸ But because Christ who has inaugurated salvation is pre-eminent in all things, he cannot be manipulated to do our will. God's eschatological plan revealed in Christ runs contrary to any backward-looking eschatology. The inaugurated eschatology of Colossians is heavenward focused, not earth-bound (Col 3:1-4).

This is not to suggest that the created world has no place in God's eschatological future. It is our thinking and perspective that should change from earth-bound to heavenward – to Christ who is the believers' hope of glory (1:27, 5). The eschatology

¹⁹⁵ These are Premillennialism, Postmillennialism and Amillennialism.

¹⁹⁶ Strelan, *Search for Salvation*, 82.

¹⁹⁷ See Chapter 6.2.1, 6.2.2 and 6.2.3.

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter 2.4.5.1.

inaugurated at the cross in the earthly realm has moved from earth to heaven. The cross-event is past, but it is still a reminder of the suffering that Christ endured to inaugurate *gutpela sindaun*. He has gone ahead as our pathfinder, urging us to look to him who is our only hope for the glorious future. Inaugurated eschatology does not take away suffering but redefines it in view of the glorious unveiling of Christ. Christ in whom the believers' hope is stored makes him central to the believer's life, not only for the future but in the present. He is both the goal and quality of life for the believers.

Although the believers are already sharing in the resurrected-glorified life with Christ and are reigning with him in heaven, they are still living bodily on the earth. However, the notion of their resurrection and renewal changes their earthly mode of existence. The present existence of believers is a life of faith anticipating their future revealing with Christ in glory. The believers' lives should be oriented to the future as they live in the present.¹⁹⁹ Their present bodily existence is still in the sphere of sin, the power of darkness and hostile forces, pain and suffering, and death. The very powers that Christ defeated on the cross and saved the believers from seem to continue unabated in power and authority. Forces of darkness like *sanguma* (witchcraft) and *posin* (sorcery) still cause many nightmares and instil fear in the lives of many Melanesians, including Christians. The elemental powers that were stripped of their power and authority are still at work today. As Sumney acknowledges,

[t]he epistle proclaims Christ as the victor over all powers, but that victory is not yet evident in the structure and conduct of the world. The author recognizes the tensions between his proclamations about Christ and believers' place in him, on the one hand, and the actual lived experience of believers who must still contend with a hostile world on the other. The world's refusal to recognize the lordship of Christ demands a future eschatological act, a time when Christ's lordship will be evident and believers' true identity, now hidden, will be manifested (3:4).²⁰⁰

The sin that Christ died to save us from, in order to present us holy and blameless to God, continues to trouble and tempt Christians. However, believers are exhorted to live out the resurrected-heavenly life on earth in view of their appearing with Christ in glory (3:1-4). This should be the motivation to die to sin and live for Christ. Believers are to live with heaven-mindedness and put to death every vile expression of the sinful nature (3:5), rid themselves of their old way of life (3:7-9), and put on Christ as Lord of their lives, in whose image they are being created and renewed with ever-increasing knowledge of Christ (3:10). As God's chosen people, set apart for him, believers are to put on the virtues that

¹⁹⁹ See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 125-6.

²⁰⁰ Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 18.

characterise God's children (3:12-17). Between the inauguration of the new creation and its consummation, believers will still face physical death, because the physical resurrection or transformation is yet to occur.

6.4.3 Resurrected with Christ: Bodily Resurrection is Guaranteed

Gutpela sindaun defined as corporeal earthly immortality²⁰¹ holds that both spiritual and physical life will be made whole when the culture hero returns. There will be no delay in the union of the two aspects of life. This is, in part, a theological reality which will occur at the end of time and not in the present. But Colossians indicates that immortality has been inaugurated in a different fashion.

The resurrected life of believers with Christ could also be referred to as immortality or eternal life, which comes before physical resurrection, where the body will receive its immortality. What we see from Colossians is that immortality or eternal life with God/Christ in heaven commenced through the death and resurrection of Christ. Those who are incorporated into his death and resurrection through faith are raised from death and given new life, which is eternal life at that point. At conversion the old life is terminated and the new life begins.

Still asserts that the author of Colossians spoke of the believers' resurrection as a past event.

[The] author obviously did not mean that his audience had already been raised physically from the dead, nor did he envision some kind of spiritual resurrection that rendered redundant the appearing of Christ and the future glorification of Christ (see 3:4). Rather, it does in fact appear that Colossians employs resurrection language to speak of a believer's conversion to, union with, and transformation through Christ. Christians have not yet been raised with Christ to glory (3:1, 4). Furthermore, the resurrection life that they experience in the present is predicated upon their 'faith in the working of God who raised [Christ] from the dead' (2:12b).²⁰²

I agree with Still that physical resurrection is not yet, but I disagree with him not seeing conversion as spiritual resurrection. In Colossians, Paul speaks of baptism (2:12), which defines what conversion is. It means dying and rising with Christ to new life, which is a spiritual resurrection. Out goes the old life (3:5, 8) and in comes the new life (3:10, 12, 14). This new life is renewed in the knowledge of its creator (3:10)²⁰³ and is hidden with Christ in heaven and yet to be revealed.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ See Chapter 2.1.

²⁰² Still, "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?" 132-3.

²⁰³ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 108; Still, "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?" 128.

²⁰⁴ Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*, 378. See Foster, *Colossians*, 45-6; Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, 17. Still states that "the talk of believers being raised with Christ does

The bodily resurrected-glorified existence of Christ differs from the present experience of believers. The believers' resurrection (2:12-13) and heavenly dwelling with Christ is spiritual, which differs from Christ's because he lives an embodied existence in heaven with a transformed body (2:9). Believers are raised spiritually, which does not yet involve bodily resurrection. There is a tension between believers' resurrected existence in heaven with Christ and their bodily existence on earth. In a temporal sense, the body is separated from the spiritual, pointing to the future element of the resurrection that will make believers' resurrection complete. Their bodily life on earth is not abandoned to hostile forces which would seek to tear it down. Instead, their mortal bodies have become the dwelling place for the resurrected-glorified Christ, reflecting the immanent presence of Christ, as seen earlier.²⁰⁵ Heaven and earth are brought together in the person of Jesus Christ and made manifest through the believers who are his image.

Believers will also experience bodily resurrection. This is because the resurrected-glorified life of Christ was not without a body. Christ as the firstborn from the dead (1:18b) rose bodily (2:9), and lives corporeally in heaven at God's right hand (3:1).²⁰⁶ On the other hand, the believers, who are resurrected spiritually with Christ from death, have not yet been raised bodily. Their spiritual resurrected life, which is "hidden with Christ in God," does not have a bodily form or existence like Christ.

The present separation of the spiritually resurrected life from the current earthly body points to the future union of the two. Believers through their union with Christ do not experience both resurrections simultaneously, as Melanesian eschatology expects. Spiritual resurrection precedes physical resurrection. The bodies of every believer will experience resurrection or transformation and be united with the present resurrected life or the new life which is currently hidden in Christ when Christ is revealed in glory (see also 1 Thess 4:16-17). On the day when Christ is revealed, the believer's resurrected life will be revealed, because it was already resurrected,²⁰⁷ and be united with their resurrected bodies.

Therefore, Christ's bodily resurrection from death (1:18b) and his embodied existence reveal that this is the pattern which believers' resurrection will follow (cf. 1 Cor 15:20). Because Christ was resurrected bodily from death, the believers who participate in

not occur elsewhere in the seven-letter Pauline corpus," in "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?," 132; see also Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 180, footnote 8.

²⁰⁵ See Chapter 5.4.

²⁰⁶ See Chapters 3.2.1 and 5.3.3.

²⁰⁷ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 180.

the renewed creation will also experience a bodily resurrection.²⁰⁸ Thus the resurrection of believers will be completed when the spiritual and the bodily aspects of life are merged into one. This will occur when Christ is revealed in glory. Life for believers from then on will be an embodied existence with Christ forever.

The cosmic-visible return of Christ in a sense affirms the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, which is corporeal earthly immortality. *Gutpela sindaun* is concerned for a wholeness of life that is balanced and perfect in every aspect – both physical and spiritual. This is a life in which every impediment will be absent. Life will be completely perfect in every respect when the culture hero returns.

But we have seen from Colossians that the *gutpela sindaun* has already been inaugurated in Christ. The Melanesian views of *gutpela sindaun* which looks for a perfect world of life without pain and suffering, a life that is full in every aspect when the culture hero returns, point to the Second Coming of Christ. The fullness of life inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Christ will find its consummation at the Parousia. The corporeal resurrected life of every believer will commence for all eternity.

6.4.4 Cosmic Renewal or Transformation

In *gutpela sindaun* thinking, when the departed culture hero returns and restores the gift of immortality, he will also restore the natural world to what it was in the beginning. Colossians shows that God has reconciled all things to himself through Christ (1:20). The renewal of the cosmos has been set in motion. In this statement, Paul envisions God's plan of reconciliation as macrocosmic and microcosmic.²⁰⁹ Reconciliation, as I have shown, is objective but can be subjectively applied to forgiveness of sin or pacification of hostile forces or renewal of the cosmos.²¹⁰

Christ's reconciling work is macrocosmic in the sense that all creation will be transformed along with believers' bodily resurrection or transformation. From the Melanesian perspective of *gutpela sindaun*, the 'reconciliation of all things' would mean restoration of the cosmos to what it was in the beginning, because the cosmos will complement and sustain the restored life of human beings. The restored human life and the cosmic life are perfectly balanced. Human life is intertwined with the world in which it belongs. Whatever happens to the created world will have an effect on human beings and

²⁰⁸ Still, "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?" 133.

²⁰⁹ See Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 113.

²¹⁰ See Chapter 4.3.3.

vice versa. Therefore, the restoration of human beings entails the restoration of the cosmos, which will be their home forever. The reconciliation of the cosmos commenced through Christ and will climax at the revealing of Christ in glory.

The cosmos, through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:20), is given the hope of transformation. The cosmos that is affected by the Fall (sin), and subjected to death and decay (suffering), as Paul states in Romans (see 8:19-22), will be set free and transformed to complement the corporeal immortal life of Christ and the believers. The creation waits in agony for the children of God to be revealed, as Paul writes in Romans.

In Colossians, the believers know God as their Father and regard each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and are also set apart people or saints (1:27), God's beloved, chosen people (3:12). To them God has revealed his mystery (hidden secret) – Christ in you the hope of glory. The one in whom the Gentiles found their hope of glory is also the one to whom the cosmos looks for its future transformation. The transformed cosmos will be flawless and perfectly whole to bear and sustain the corporeal immortal life of human beings, who are in Christ and for Christ. There will be no more sin, pain, suffering and death.

The reconciliation of all things has begun primarily for Christ himself, because he is the goal of creation. As Johnson notes, “[w]hat God has done for the body of Jesus in microcosm, God will do for the cosmos in macrocosm.”²¹¹ In this vein, Thompson argues that “[t]he renewal of the world is the resurrection on a cosmic canvas. This is so not because Christ is part of the world, but because the world is the creation of Christ and holds together in him. Its destiny is bound up with his.”²¹² The cosmic reconciliation through the cross marks the beginning of the new creation. The creation will not be restored to what it was in the beginning, as understood by many Melanesians based on their myths. It will not be a patching up of old broken pottery. It is a new creation, in which the cosmos will be recreated and fitting for the glorious unveiling of Christ, accompanied by the believers.²¹³

6.5 Summary

Although Paul interpreted the Christ-event against the background of Second Temple Judaism, his message was not purely understood by the Gentile Colossian believers from

²¹¹ Andy Johnson, “Imagining the New Creation: On the Hermeneutical Priority of Jesus’ Resurrection in Transformed Flesh” (unpublished paper, n.d., n.p.), cited in Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 113.

²¹² Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 113.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

his background. There was a probable interplay of Paul's message with the recipients' cultural cues as they sought to grasp the meaning of the message. This process is known as contextualisation, and the cultural background can confirm and clarify the intended message of the text, or at times it can confuse and lead to misunderstanding regarding the intention of the text. In an attempt to provide a contextual response from the Colossian Letter's teachings to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*, I have established a bridge using the creator and redeemer motifs of the Colossian poem, which have cultural antecedents in creator-deliverer myths of many cultures around the world, including the cultures of Melanesia.

This response to *gutpela sindaun* thinking developed from the Colossian Letter's teaching has been threefold. The first part of the reply was christological, and focused on how Christ relates to *gutpela sindaun* thinking. In response to the Melanesian belief about the culture heroes as the creators and would-be deliverers, I have established from Colossians that Christ is *the* hero whom the Melanesian culture heroes prefigured. He supersedes every culture hero because he is the creator of all things, redeemer of all things, and sustainer of all things (Col 1:15-20).

Christ the creator of all things is the image of God and the firstborn of all creation. He revealed God to the world of humanity, and he is the divine agent of creation. As the redeemer of all things, Christ is the beginning of the new creation and the fullness of God in the redemption of the cosmos. He has inaugurated true *gutpela sindaun* or full salvation. As the sustainer, he is the glue that holds the entire cosmos together. Christ is pre-eminent in all things and therefore he supersedes the Melanesian culture heroes and thus shows to Melanesians that he is the creator and redeemer whom their culture heroes have prefigured.

The second part consisted of a Colossian reconciliation soteriology response to *gutpela sindaun* thinking. This indicated that salvation or *gutpela sindaun* has been inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Christ. It is first and foremost about life and relationship with God. God through the death of Christ has reconciled all things to himself. God's reconciliation is an objective reconciliation that can be applied subjectively to different parts of creation. The non-personal creation is restored to its original creative purpose in Christ.

In this reconciliation, human beings have been forgiven of their sins and those who trust in Christ have been brought into a living relationship with God. They are incorporated into the divine family with Christ as their head. The believers' incorporation also means adoption into the divine family, which qualifies them to share in all the spiritual blessings

that have been released through the cross of Christ. Through the cross of Christ, God also disarmed every hostile power and stripped them of their powers. They are creatures and have nothing good in them. Believers are not to fear them even though their activities may seem to proceed unabated.

The third part of the Colossian teaching's reply to *gutpela sindaun* is eschatological, and focuses on the death, bodily resurrection and existence of Christ in heaven, which guarantees the bodily resurrection of believers at the glorious revelation of Christ. Colossians depicts an inaugurated eschatology. Although believers are already raised and reigning with Christ in heaven, their bodily resurrection awaits the future revealing of Christ in glory. It will be then and there that the corporeal immortality for which Melanesians have hoped will be fulfilled. The entire cosmos will be transformed to match the glory of Christ and the believers. In the meantime believers will share in Christ's suffering.

Colossians' threefold reply to *gutpela sindaun* is that Christ who is God's agent of creation and redemption has inaugurated *gutpela sindaun* or salvation. This includes a spiritual, inward transformation of the heart and relationship with God. Through Christ all the eschatological blessings have been inaugurated and will be consummated at his Second Coming, where the believers who have already been raised with him will be revealed with Christ in God. On the basis that Christ is the creator, sustainer and redeemer and the inaugurator of the eschatological age, we present Christ as *the Melanesian Hero*. This summary sets the stage for the final chapter of the thesis, which is its Conclusion.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

In this thesis we have explored the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* (the good life), and its influence on Melanesians in their understanding of the Christian teaching of salvation, developing a contextual theological response to *gutpela sindaun* from the Colossian Letter. We have established that *gutpela sindaun* is a cultural object of aspiration which has influenced Melanesians in their response to the coming of Europeans and Christianity. It has also influenced the subsequent formation of Melanesian indigenous movements and some of these movements metamorphosed into independent churches, and of new sects and splinter groups in the established churches in recent decades; and could be a key motive for embracing various versions of prosperity gospel teachings. We have discussed key themes and concepts of *gutpela sindaun* to broaden our understanding of the *gutpela sindaun* way of thinking and its influence on Melanesians. Finally, we examined selected texts from Colossians for theological insights that are helpful in responding to *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

7.2 Assessing the Thesis Questions

We set out to answer three questions¹ in this thesis, in order to assess our discussion of *gutpela sindaun* thinking and a Colossians response. These questions were:

1. What is *gutpela sindaun*?
2. How does *gutpela sindaun* thinking influence the Melanesian understanding of the Christian Gospel?
3. What responses does the teaching of the Colossian Letter give to *gutpela sindaun* thinking about the Gospel?

Questions 1 and 2 led us to discuss *gutpela sindaun* and its influence on the Melanesian understanding of the Christian gospel. The third question provided the framework for our discussion of the Colossian Letter's teachings. We studied selected texts from Colossians to deduce their meanings in the overall scheme of the Letter, and how it was understood by the original recipients, before these teachings were brought to bear on our response to

¹ See Chapter 1.3.

Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking. We turn first to an assessment of our discussion of *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

7.2.1 Reflective Summary of *Gutpela Sindaun* and its Influence on Melanesians

I approach this research as an emic researcher and this is evident in my discussion of the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* in chapter 2. I did not simply depend on what others have written on this topic. I was able to bring my own insights from my Mundogumur culture and the Abelam culture, which I was part of for about four of years my ministry.² I also spent time with the Buki or Arapesh Ilahita people through my marriage. These four years of service were formative years where I was able learn and grapple with the Melanesian concept of good life or *gutpela sindaun*. Throughout chapter 2, I was able to draw the important lessons that I learned from these humble and hardworking people about their view of life and their belief in Wapiken, the yam god. I was also able to make reference to the Boiken or the Yangoru people group because they too share similar beliefs and views of life with the Abelam people.

Using this approach, in this thesis we defined *gutpela sindaun* as corporeal earthly immortality. Corporeal earthly immortality means a perfect bodily life that is wholesome physically and spiritually, where death and every calamity associated with life on earth are absent. It is a life without end or aging. We have seen that *gutpela sindaun* thinking is a cultural aspiration, as Melanesian myths or *tumbuna stori* reveal. We considered key studies on Melanesian myths and identified four themes that are central to *gutpela sindaun* thinking: (1) the creator(s) and creation; (2) the loss of the perfect life; (3) the end time cosmic upheaval; and (4) the advent of the culture heroes and the restoration of immortality. These themes show that *gutpela sindaun* is cosmic-centric, as the Melanesian unitive worldviews portray.

Our discussion of significant Melanesian cultural practices demonstrated that *gutpela sindaun* is the principal value underpinning Melanesian cultures. We have seen in our discussion of the ancestral *lo* (law/custom), *wantok* system, and the *bigman* (leadership) system that the core value underpinning these cultural practices is *gutpela sindaun*. These three cultural practices depict a communal salvation, internalised as *gutpela sindaun*. This communal *gutpela sindaun* is time-oriented and linked to the mythical past, which is

² See Chapter 1.7.3.

anthropologically defined as ‘everyday millenarianism.’³ This understanding of time includes a belief in the return of the culture heroes to restore the gift of immortality for human beings and the restoration of the entire cosmos, which is anticipated in the here and now.

We have also seen that *gutpela sindaun* is considered the highest value in Melanesian religions. Melanesians believed that the creator god, culture heroes and totemic ancestors made their world and therefore it was sacred. Keeping warm relationships with the spirit powers, ancestors, the dead, *masalai* and *kawal* was considered vital for the desired *gutpela sindaun*, both in the present and for its future restoration. Sin or *pasin nogut* is the breaking of the ancestral *lo* in relationships with humans, spirits and the natural world, leading to social and material loss. Sin in the traditional Melanesian understanding was defined non-morally to mean physical, social and material deprivation. Keeping the *lo* and using sacred knowledge and rituals pertaining to the culture heroes and various spirit beings led to *gutpela sindaun*.

Melanesian religions are religions of secrecy. Thus, sacred knowledge was veiled from outsiders through concepts, parables, stories, and so on, that kept such knowledge hidden. The sense of seeing confirms sacred knowledge. Melanesians considered true knowledge as concrete and pragmatic. The religious worldview made life and the world sacred. Melanesian cultures and religions motivated Melanesians to desire and strive for *gutpela sindaun*. The belief in the restoration of the gift of immortality provided the platform for explaining the coming of the Europeans and Christianity.

Christian teaching has made a considerable impact on Melanesians, because the biblical themes of creation, fall, judgment, salvation and the promised return of Christ somewhat parallel the mythical themes that were central to *gutpela sindaun* thinking. Some Melanesians understood the biblical teaching of salvation from sin and found a relationship with God through faith in Christ, leading to the birth of the church in PNG.

Others who responded to the gospel, however, expected more than just salvation from sin and a relationship with God through faith in Christ. Curiosity about the missionaries’ inability to do certain tasks led to suspicions that the missionaries were withholding the real *kru* (secret knowledge) about *gutpela sindaun*. This was partly to do with the epistemology of secrecy, where the sacred *kru* was always kept secret, and this worldview led to the formation of Melanesian indigenous movements popularised as cargo

³ See Chapter 2.3.5.

cults. These movements were multi-faceted, but their ultimate goal was communal *gutpela sindaun*. Some of these movements metamorphosed into independent churches. In such churches, Christian teaching was tailored to suit indigenous thinking about the eschaton.

After PNG's independence, many of the indigenous movements were replaced by a new wave of sects and splinter groups. These groups offered a gospel of healing, exorcism, miracles, signs and wonders, and glossolalia. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, new versions of the 'wealth and health' gospel gained momentum in PNG. Its adherents believe that if one keeps the prosperity tenets faithfully, one will experience a spiritual and material breakthrough which will amount to *gutpela sindaun* here and now. Those who do not have such an experience are deemed to have a deficient faith and are challenged to do more to perfect their faith. This prosperity teaching is somewhat similar to the traditional Melanesian belief in *gutpela sindaun* and is thus attracting many Christians, who are leaving the historic Protestant and Pentecostal denominations because they feel that the gospel teaching received from the historic denominations is insufficient.

In Chapter 2, we established that the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* is woven into every aspect of Melanesian cultures and religions. *Gutpela sindaun* thinking influenced Melanesians in their response to new occurrences, as they sought to interpret and explicate new phenomena. It also influenced Melanesians in their response to the Christian gospel, and this has continued up to the present time.

7.2.2 Reflective Summary of the Colossian Teachings

In chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 we used the exegetical, theological and hermeneutical approaches to analyse the passages from the Colossians Letter to develop a contextual theological response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*.⁴ Using these approaches, we were able to establish the meaning of the Colossian text and how the Colossian Gentile believers understood what the author said through the shared language of the written text. The author of Colossians used terms that were not foreign to the Colossian believers. Therefore, the Colossian believers were able to relate to these terms, by interpreting them through their cultural lenses.

By using these methodologies and approaches, we were able to analysis Col 2:8-23, 1:15-20 and the terms πλήρωμα, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω and γνῶσις, and come to understand what these texts and terms mean, as summarised below.

⁴ See Chapter 1.7.1 and 1.7.2.

The third thesis question led us to explore selected texts from Paul's Letter to the Colossians and to interpret the meaning of these texts in the overall scheme of Colossians' teaching, before relating these passages to *gutpela sindaun* thinking. First, we discussed the Colossian philosophy and Paul's response to it (Col 2:8-23), in Chapter 3. Our discussion of Col 2:8-23 revealed that the issue undergirding Paul's polemic is christology intertwined with soteriology. Paul's opponents at Colossae doubted the sufficiency of Christ for salvation, and insisted on adding further traditions and practices pertaining to the elemental powers of the universe. The opposing teaching practised asceticism to reach a high spiritual plane, featuring visions of angelic worship and receiving knowledge of hidden mysteries. These visionary experiences and the associated knowledge were added to belief in Christ.

In his response to the Colossian philosophy, Paul asserted that Christ is all-sufficient for salvation because he is the fullness of God – in him the whole fullness of deity lives bodily (2:9). 'Fullness of deity' ascribes to Christ divine status. From Christ's divine fullness, the Colossian believers were given fullness of salvation. They had experienced the transformation of their lives and shared in the promised eschatological blessings – the forgiveness of sin, relationship with God, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, participating in the resurrected-glorified life of Christ which is hidden with Christ in God (3:3), and being delivered from the powers of darkness. As the divine being, Christ is different from the *στοιχεῖα* and the angels. He is their creator and he rules over every ruler and authority as their head (2:10b). Therefore, the Colossian Christians did not need additional traditions and rituals to perfect or prove their soteriological fullness in Christ.

Second, in Chapter 4 we discussed Col 1:15-20, which is referred to as the Colossian poem. The poem is central in the Letter's development, but the author's objective is theology and practice. The author wanted his audience to have a clear knowledge of who Christ is and to apply that knowledge in their lives. Hence, the poem emphasised the pre-eminence of Christ in creation and redemption. Christ "is the image of the invisible God" (1:15a), implying that he shares in the divine identity and is God's agent of creation and redemption. Interpreting the Christ-event drawing on the Jewish Wisdom tradition, Paul identified Christ with the divine identity of God. Christ as the 'creator of all things' shares the divine identity reserved for God (Col 1:15-16).

The metaphors *εἰκὼν* and *πρωτότοκος* in the first strophe of the poem, and *πρὸ πάντα* and *συνέστημι* in the middle stanza, portray Christ as divine and pre-eminent in

creation. In the second strophe (Col 1:18b-20), Christ is pre-eminent in redemption or the new creation. His pre-eminence is depicted as κεφαλή (head) of the church in the middle stanza (18a), and in the second strophe as the ἀρχή (beginning) of recreation, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν ἵνα γένηται (firstborn from the dead), πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα (all the fullness of God), and the mediator of cosmic reconciliation between God and creation. These divine titles show that Christ is all-sufficient for believers' salvation. Believers do not need στοιχεῖα and additional practices and ceremonies because they already have the fullness of salvation in Christ.

Third, in Chapter 5 of the thesis we discussed the terms πλήρωμα, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω and γνῶσις, because similar concepts are used in describing *gutpela sindaun* belief. The concepts of πλήρωμα, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, ἀποκρύπτω and γνῶσις in Colossians emphasise the divine nature of Christ and his centrality for salvation and glorification.

Christ is the divine πλήρωμα (fullness) (2:9; 1:19), and from his divine fullness the believers were given fullness of salvation or the eschatological blessings of transformed lives, being raised with Christ to new life, sins being forgiven, freedom from the hostile powers (2:10-15), and sharing in the inheritance of the saints (1:13) – which will be fully consummated at the revelation of Christ in glory (3:4). The believers lack no spiritual blessings through their faith union with Christ. In their union with Christ, God has revealed to them his divine μυστήριον (mystery) that was withheld or kept ἀποκρύπτω (hidden) from past generations (1:26).

The mystery revealed is so glorious, abounding, or πλοῦτος (rich) that God desired to make it known. The mystery is “Christ in you the hope of glory” (1:27). The immanent presence of Christ in and amongst the believers is a clear assurance of their future glory with Christ. Christ, who is seated in heaven but is present among the believers, assures us that our life with him is secured and that we are destined for a glorious future with him. The believers' hope of glory is kept or held in heaven (1:5), which is in Christ whose life is the very life of the believers.

The believers' resurrected life is bound up with the resurrected-glorified life of Christ and is ἀποκρύπτω (hidden – 3:3), but will be revealed with Christ at his glorious revelation at the end of the age (3:4). Christ who is the mystery of God is the domain of all the treasures of divine wisdom and γνῶσις (knowledge – 2:3). Γνῶσις describes the intellectual aspect of Christ-centred faith. Divine knowledge and wisdom originate in the

divine sphere and are centred on Christ. Believers are to seek divine wisdom and knowledge in Christ. This Christ-centred knowledge (2:3) is God's saving knowledge that re-creates those who believe in Christ in Christ-likeness (3:10).

Reflecting on the Colossians' discussions in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the central insight from these discussions relate to the person and the work of Christ and the believers' soteriological status in Christ. Christ is the fullness of God through whom the Colossian believers received fullness of salvation. As we saw in Chapter 4, christology is central to the Letter's development. Christ is the creator, sustainer and redeemer of *all things*. While the Letter presents a developed christology, the overall objective of the author is to stamp upon the audience the correct understanding and knowledge of Christ, so that they may be firm and stable in their faith in Christ (2:5) and live cruciform lives (2:6-7).

In other words, the correct knowledge and understanding of Christ should affect the believers' mode of existence such that it is reflective of a Christ-like life. Christ-centred knowledge is faith-based and relational. Correct understanding and knowledge of Christ should enable believers to grow in their relationship with Christ as they apply the knowledge of Christ in every aspect of life. The correct understanding and knowledge of Christ should equip believers to assess and resist any teaching that does not acknowledge the sufficiency of Christ for salvation and his pre-eminence in all things.

7.2.3 Reflective Summary of the Response from Colossians to *Gutpela Sindaun*

In Chapter 6, we delineated the reply from Colossians to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* in three parts. The first part showed that Christ is the agent of true *gutpela sindaun*. The creator-redeemer motifs of the Colossians poem provided a bridge through which we can link Christ to the Melanesian culture heroes, whom Melanesians believed were creative beings who will realise *gutpela sindaun*. Colossians shows that Christ has fulfilled this role of the culture heroes. He is the creator, sustainer and redeemer of *all things* (Col 1:15-20), in contrast to the culture heroes whom Melanesians believed were creators of certain significant cultural objects.

Christ, the creator of *all things*, is the image of God and firstborn of all creation. He revealed God to the world of humanity, and he is the divine agent of creation. As the redeemer of *all things*, Christ is the beginning of the new creation and the fullness of God who redeems the cosmos. He has inaugurated *gutpela sindaun* or salvation. As a sustainer, he is the glue that holds the entire cosmos together. Christ as pre-eminent in *all things* supersedes the Melanesian culture heroes as the cosmic hero. In response to the Melanesian

belief about culture heroes as creators and would-be deliverers, we have established from the teachings of Colossians that Christ is *the* hero whom the Melanesian culture heroes have prefigured, and thus Christ has inaugurated *gutpela sindaun*, and will also fulfil and complete it without needing other creatures to supplement his work.

The second part of the Colossians' reconciliation soteriological response from Colossians to *gutpela sindaun* thinking is that salvation or *gutpela sindaun* has been inaugurated through the death and resurrection of Christ. This *gutpela sindaun* is first and foremost about life and relationship with God. God through the death of Christ has reconciled *all things* to himself. God's reconciliation is objective and can be applied subjectively to different aspects of creation. The non-personal creation is reconciled to God and brought back under the headship of Christ. Human beings have their sins forgiven, and those who trust in Christ are brought into a living relationship with God. They are incorporated into the divine family with Christ as their head.

The believers' incorporation could be interpreted as adoption. Through their incorporation through Christ into the divine family, believers are qualified to share in all the spiritual blessings that have been released through the cross of Christ. Through the cross of Christ, God has also disarmed every hostile power and made them redundant. They are creatures and have nothing good in them. Believers are not to fear them even though their power may seem to go on unabated.

The third part of Colossians' eschatological reply to *gutpela sindaun* is the death and bodily resurrection and existence of Christ in heaven, which guarantees the bodily resurrection of believers at the glorious revelation of Christ. Although believers are spiritually raised and reigning with Christ in heaven, their bodily resurrection awaits the future revealing of Christ in glory. The reconciliation of the non-personal creation also awaits the revelation of Christ, which will usher in their complete liberation. It will be then and there that the corporeal immortality which Melanesians have hoped for will be realised. The entire cosmos will be transformed to match the glory of Christ and the believers. The Colossians' eschatology is an inaugurated eschatology which will be consummated at Christ's return.

The threefold christological, soteriological, and eschatological response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* demonstrates that Christ as *the* hero has inaugurated a *gutpela sindaun* that is balanced, objective and theocentric, rather than what Melanesians have expected from their culture heroes, thus challenging the anthropocentric nature of *gutpela sindaun* thinking. The *gutpela sindaun* which Christ inaugurated does not deny

suffering but sees suffering as part of our soteriological experience and growth in our relationship with Christ. Christ as the hero has fulfilled the Melanesians' hope of *gutpela sindaun* or, in biblical terms, salvation.

Salvation in Colossians is first and foremost about forgiveness of sin that brought death, meaning separation from life and relationship with God. Through Christ's sacrificial death and forgiveness of sin, our rebellion toward God is atoned for, and life and relationship with God is inaugurated. One receives new life and relationship with God through faith in Christ. The salvation Christ inaugurated is an inward moral change toward God, who has revealed in Christ his plan of redemption and the reconciliation of fallen humanity and the entire cosmos to himself.

Salvation inaugurated through the cross of Christ does not take away pain, suffering and death. It does, however, give hope for a glorious life beyond what is experienced in the present fallen world, which also awaits its own complete liberation. The Melanesians' hope for a wholesome spiritual and physical life without pain and suffering here and now is challenged by the Colossian reconciliation soteriology, in which there is no glory without pain and suffering. This means that the pain and suffering experienced in the present life help us to grow in our relationship with God and to demonstrate a Christ-like character that will bring forth godly virtues reflective of our union with Christ in God. Our life and union with Christ is not a licence to gain material wealth. Material wealth does not qualify or quantify our union with Christ. Material wealth comes from prudence and wise management of the material world that has been reconciled to God through Christ and is under Christ.

Fear and beliefs in various spirit beings incapacitate our human abilities to utilise the material world to sustain our physical needs. As Colossians has shown, knowledge of Christ as creator, redeemer and sustainer of all things should bring freedom from ancestral norms and knowledge (gained through observance of the *lo*) that have subjected Melanesians to fear of the various spirit powers which they believed control the material world. This frees us to acquire knowledge and understanding of the material world and to utilise it to sustain life now, until the revealing of Christ in glory.

7.3 Theological Articulation in Context

The developed christological response to the Colossian philosophy and the threefold response to *gutpela sindaun* thinking from Colossians highlight the need for a thorough understanding and knowledge of the person and the work of Christ for Melanesians, as they

grapple with the cultural cues of *gutpela sindaun* thinking and what their salvation experience in Christ means. This task of delineating and explicating the person and the work of Christ is not straightforward, as it has different nuances from one cultural group to another. This challenge is also seen in the approach of the Apostle Paul, who had to be careful in his presentation of Christ to the Gentile world.

As we have seen in the Letter to the Colossians, although Paul interpreted and explained the Christ-event against the backdrop of Second Temple Judaism, he presented Christ not as a Jewish Messiah but as God's agent of salvation for the whole world. This he was able to do because of his personal experience of Christ, and his cross-cultural ministry experience may also have contributed to the way he communicated Christ to Gentiles in Colossae. Indeed, he stated elsewhere that he became all things to all people to win as many as he could to Christ (1 Cor 9:22). The way he communicated the gospel of Christ suggests that he was aware of the context he was addressing, such that his style, grammar and theology were contextually relevant. The audience was able to understand his message because his grammar, theological notions and motifs also had antecedents in their own cultures.

As Paul affirmed in Colossians, the Christ-event or the gospel is God's mystery revealed, and this had to be communicated in such a way that the recipients would understand it. Although Paul and his apostolic band interpreted the Christ-event from the Jewish Wisdom-Logos tradition, their cross-cultural audience had to reinterpret this message with the aid of their cultural cues. This meant that the gospel of Christ in the Gentile world, in places like Colossae, could not be interpreted and understood purely through a Jewish lens. There was an interplay between Paul's cultural background and his readers' cultural cues. In this thesis I have shown that Melanesian cultural cues, especially their belief in a creator-deliverer, have linked the gospel to the Melanesian worldviews. In this way, the Melanesian people came to grasp the gospel message and turned to Christ.

But the interplay between the world in which the text was produced and the audience's cultural cues has not always been optimal in the transmission of biblical teachings. Cultural cues have also led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the gospel of Christ, as seen in the rise of Melanesian indigenous movements popularised as cargo cults, some of which evolved into independent churches. The emergence of new religious movements and recently introduced versions of prosperity gospel teachings have also found Melanesians receptive to their teachings, because their tenets and ideologies are compatible with aspects of *gutpela sindaun* thinking. This scenario raises the need for an

in-depth study of Melanesian cultures and religions in order to articulate the gospel of Christ intelligibly and contextually, so that believers can have a clear knowledge and understanding of fundamental biblical doctrines such as christology, salvation and eschatology, which will enable them to be firm in their faith in Christ.

How, then, do we effectively communicate biblical teachings such as the person and the work of Christ and his return to Melanesians? I have tried to show that careful study and understanding of the recipients' culture is important in relation to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*. Having made this suggestion, I acknowledge that cultures are fluid, and that modernisation and globalisation have led to the export and import of other cultural worldviews. The world we now live in is culturally pluralist, meaning that there is an integration of different cultures, thus making the task of cultural studies challenging. Despite this cultural pluralism, however, many Melanesian cultural practices have not been lost. Some cultural practices have taken on new forms, like the *wantok* system and *pebek*, but the core beliefs and values have not changed. For instance, some Christians' loyalty to their tribe still takes precedence over loyalty to Christ and the family of faith.

In order to develop Melanesian theology, there is thus a need to study Melanesian cultures and religions to identify links that can provide a bridge between biblical truth or doctrine and Melanesians' experience. Efforts have been made in this direction, as my literature review has shown,⁵ and this thesis is one such contribution. It has wrestled with Melanesian *gutpela sindaun* thinking in an effort to provide a contextual theological response from Paul's Letter to the Colossians.

Knowing how close and how far the cultural cues are from the biblical truth and teachings is vital for doing theology in context. Theological colleges and other educational institutions in Melanesia that offer biblical studies and training need to take stock of whether or how courses on Melanesian cultures and religions form part of their curriculum. The Christian Leaders' Training College of Papua New Guinea, with which I am involved, has a course on Melanesian religion as part of its curriculum. Students are taught to contextualise biblical teachings in their present-day context. However, less attention is paid to Melanesian religious studies, which means that our contextual efforts are focused on engaging with the surface culture, leaving the deep cultural values and belief system untouched.

⁵ See Chapter 1.4.

Contextual theological articulation is necessary for Melanesians to grasp scriptural teachings and to apply them in their lives. The Colossians Letter, as we have seen, emphasises the importance of clearly grasping the knowledge of God in Christ so that believers may not fall prey to false teachings and versions of the gospel that are unsound. Contextual theological articulation deepens our understanding and knowledge of biblical teachings when this is done properly. It deepens our faith and relationship with God in Christ when the knowledge of Christ is expressed through our own socio-religious lens.

It is God's desire to make known his mystery to every believer, and to see their lives bear fruit in a way that will bring glory and honour to his name. In order for this to happen, the gospel of Christ should be communicated using forms and concepts that are meaningful to the audience. Our conduct as Christians will reflect the depth of our knowledge and understanding of who Christ is and what he has done for us. Theology and conduct are complementary. If our understanding and knowledge of God and Christ are somehow defective and unsound, we will end up being insecure and unstable in our faith and become easy prey to shifting doctrinal winds and versions of the gospel that are unsound and continue to endorse inappropriate aspects of cultural assumptions about *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

7.4 Areas of Further Study

In this thesis, we developed a contextual theological response to *gutpela sindaun* thinking based on the first part of the Colossian Letter, which is referred to as the theological or polemical section (Col 1:13-3:4). We have not considered the ethical section (Col 3:5-4:6) of the Letter, even though there were references made to this section of the Letter. *Gutpela sindaun* thinking has a pragmatic outlook, and therefore there is a need for further work on an ethical response to *gutpela sindaun* thinking. The second part of the Letter of Colossians needs examination in order to give a practical reply to *gutpela sindaun* thinking.

Another area of further research is the de-sacralising of the Melanesian worldviews in view of the Colossian teaching that Christ is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of all things. Melanesians believed that their world was created and bequeathed to them by their culture heroes and totemic ancestors, which is contrary to the teaching of Colossians. This belief has left an ongoing fear of displeasing the ancestors or *masalai* by utilising the natural world for human development purposes. Further study is needed to show how traditional fears can be replaced by a more balanced, de-sacralised understanding of the created world as a trust from God to be responsibly managed and cared for, for the ongoing good of our

people and the future generations through appropriate business, technological and commercial development. The implications of such a de-sacralised view of creation need more theological discussion.

We have touched on the question of the probable links between these so-called cargo cults and new religious movements. These links need to be further explored keeping in mind how they are influencing *gutpela sindaun* thinking and their links to the teachings of the New Testament Scriptures.

This study has also shown the need for further research on links between the *gutpela sindaun* concept and its relationship with the quest for power, status and honour in Melanesian societies.⁶

7.5 Summary

In summary, the Colossians response to the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun* has revealed that Christ as the cosmic hero has inaugurated a *gutpela sindaun* that is balanced and christocentric, in contrast to what Melanesians have internalised from their myths, from the new religious movements, or from new versions of health and wealth gospels abounding in Melanesia today. The *gutpela sindaun* which Christ has inaugurated is life and relationship with God the Father through Christ in the present, along with a future hope of glory with Christ when Christ is revealed from heaven in glory. As Colossians beautifully states,

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving (2:6-7) ... So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (3:1-4 – NRSV).

⁶ See Chapter 2.3.4.

Appendix 1: Totemic Ancestor

In this thesis I mentioned totemic ancestor and, in the footnotes, I made reference to the Appendix. I did not discuss the significance of totemic ancestor to some cultural groups in Melanesia who identify themselves as descendants of one common ancestor based on their totemic ancestral beliefs. The significance of totemic ancestor is family. Regardless of language and tribal differences, the totemic ancestral belief joins family and clans from different language and tribal groups into one family. As Daimoi states, “[totemic] ancestor-hood ... is a widespread understanding and crucial for mediating the sense of groups held together by spiritual realities, not just ‘thought truths.’ Totems are believed ‘to contain the spirit of the common ancestor.’”¹

In the myth discourse, the totemic beings are acknowledged as the spiritual ancestors or *tumbuna* of humankind. Totems as Trompf states are,

specific species of objects in the cosmos on which clans (or other specific groups defined by blood ties or activity) placed sacred meaning or tabus to identify themselves, [and] are usually a visible part of the ‘known order.’ In either case, however, mythic wanderers and totems appear as primary components of an ordained pattern of things which normally carries the quality of having always been there since humans began. It is usually up to humans to discover or have disclosed to them what is already there.²

Totems are credited for giving birth to (creating) human beings or in a few cases turning into human ancestors.³ After creating human beings and bestowing on them various gifts and skills, they have reincarnated into some visible species or objects of nature such as sharks, birds and animals.⁴

Beliefs in totems and use of totemic objects are generally noted among many *nambis* (seaboard/coastal) and lowland cultures compared to people in the Highlands of PNG as Lawrence and Meggitt asserted.⁵ Also totemism is probably more widespread in PNG than the rest of the Pacific as H. Neumann asserted.⁶ Perhaps this is because PNG has more cultural (language) groups compared to other Pacific Island countries.⁷ The more

¹ Daimoi, “An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage,” 31.

² Trompf, *Melanesian Religion*, 17.

³ Lawrence, *Road Belong Cargo*, 16.

⁴ However, according to Lawrence and Meggitt, totems belong to the autonomous spirit-beings. These autonomous spirit beings are; first the deities and culture heroes who are creative and regulative and second, those who have no creative or regulative function such as “tricksters, demons and pucks who wantonly cause annoyance or harm.” “Introduction,” 8.

⁵ Lawrence and Meggitt, “Introduction,” 11.

⁶ H. Neumann, “Die Religionen der Südsee” in *Die Religionen der Südsee und Australiens*. H. Neumann, E.A. Worms and H. Petri. London, Stuttgart; Kohlhammer Verlag, 1968; 78; cited in Parratt, *Papuan Belief and Ritual*, 12.

⁷ In PNG, there are more than eight hundred plus languages groups.

the culture groups, the more totemism PNG had. The imprints and presence of the spiritual *tumbuna* are everywhere in the natural environment and amongst the people. Totems in many *nambis* and lowland cultures represent the presence of the spirit *tumbuna*. The totemic *tumbuna* is represented by animate and inanimate objects such as beasts, reptiles, birds, under-water or sea creatures and various plant species.⁸ These beings have affinal links to kinship groups or a clan as represented by an animal species or other objects. The objects that represent totemic *tumbuna* varied from clan to clan.⁹ Whatever object was a totem to one clan was not to another. An object that was a totem to a clan is *tambu* or taboo. It was taboo to kill or eat one's totem.¹⁰

Totems were very sacred and respected symbols to each clan. Like the human progenitors, they were seen as the guardians of the clans that use the same totemic symbol to define their ancestry. There were no shrines dedicated to the totemic *tumbuna*, but they were treated with the utmost respect. They were very rarely invoked to come to the aid of their descendants, maybe because they were not considered as powerful as other beings.¹¹

The totemic *tumbuna* is non-biological, meaning it is a spiritual ancestor who links one clan to another that uses the same totemic object as its identity, even if they are linguistically and culturally different.¹² This means the spiritual ancestry supersedes natural, physical and cultural boundaries. The spirit of the totemic *tumbuna* redefines natural relations. It joined different families that were biologically unrelated. It highlighted the fact that the spiritual has power over the natural. Thus, the totem *tumbuna* created a bond of oneness, a sense of filial love, care and respect for each other.

Furthermore, the concept of totemism connotes sacredness and respect for the cosmos and human families. Firstly, the totem forbids the abuse of the material world, and preserves and sustains biocosmic life. This is seen in the sacredness of the totem as it is believed to be the re-incarnated ancestor. For instance, if one's totem is a *paklak*¹³ (turtle), then it is *tambu* to kill and eat it. This allows the *paklaks* to multiply. Even the place where the totemic animal lives was left untouched. Secondly, totemism defined the social systems, whether one belonged to a patrilineal or matrilineal group. For some families, the totems

⁸ See Parratt, *Papua Belief and Ritual*, 12-4.

⁹ Clan implies the descendants of one ancestor. A number of clans make up a tribe which is linguistically and culturally one.

¹⁰ Parratt asserts that the "most important feature of this totem system was the *tabu* on eating and harming certain totems, and ... on sexual intercourse between a couple of the same totem." Parratt, *Papua Belief and Ritual*, 13.

¹¹ van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, 250.

¹² See Daimoi, "An Exploratory Missiological Study of Melanesian Ancestral Heritage," 31-2.

¹³ In Mundogumur dialect.

were the emblems of their moieties.¹⁴ Totems defined the familial relations and social lineage. It is in these social structures that wealth creation and transaction occurred. Totemic *tumbuna* united every member together to share as one family. It minimised rivalry and tribal warfare between clans and tribes. In other words, totemic *tumbuna* signified a communal salvation. No one could succeed without the community. Success and prosperity were communally based. In addition, the families from the same totem were forbidden to marry within their own totem. Nor should a man approach a woman from his totem for sexual favours.¹⁵ In doing so, it would displease the totemic *tumbuna* and the most likely consequence is children born from such relationship would be born with physical deformity.

¹⁴ Lawrence and Meggitt, "Introduction," 11-12.

¹⁵ See Parratt, *Papua Belief and Ritual*, 12-3.

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