

HEAVENLY MINDEDNESS AND EARTHLY GOOD:
CONTEMPLATING MATTERS ABOVE IN COLOSSIANS 3.1-2

Craig Keener

Palmer Theological Seminary, Wynnewood, PA, USA

Colossians 3.1-2 exhorts believers to fix their attention on Christ enthroned in heaven. A first-century Mediterranean audience would readily hear this invitation in light of various ideas and images current in their milieu. The milieu of the Colossian audience itself may have included both Greek philosophy (φιλοσοφία, Col. 2.8) and traditional Jewish practices (Col. 2.16). Just as Colossians urges a heavenly object of thinking (τὰ ἄνω φρονεῖτε, 3.2), Greek and Roman philosophy emphasized right thinking, often further insisting that such right thinking elevated the soul to the heavens to experience the pure vision of a transcendent deity. Some Jewish circles also attempted to secure visions (Col. 2.18) of God's heavenly throne. While the writer of Colossians employs analogous images and language to communicate his point, his interest is not so much the more general object of philosophic abstractions and mystic contemplations. He focuses instead more concretely on the exalted Christ.

This article traces in turn ancient philosophy's contemplation of heavenly matters; evocations of such language in other early Jewish and Christian sources; the significance of our author's christocentric focus in his adaptation of the language in 3.1; the behavioral implications the author draws from this christocentric focus; the intelligibility of those implications in light of ancient philosophy; and how the immediate context shapes eschatological implications in the author's evocation of heaven.¹ My focus and primary contribution will be elaborating how ancient hearers would have received the passage, especially in view of ancient philosophy.

1. I speak of 'the author' not to stake a position regarding the authorship of Colossians but to avoid entering a lengthy discussion not strictly relevant to the purpose of this article.

Contemplating Heavenly Matters (Colossians 3.1-2)

Colossians emphasizes seeking ‘matters above’ (τὰ ἄνω), where Christ is enthroned beside God, and focusing one’s interest on ‘matters above’ in contrast to ‘earthly matters’. This language appears to recall familiar philosophic idiom for contemplating divine, heavenly reality, except that it has a specifically christocentric focus.²

As commentators on Colossians have sometimes noted, philosophy emphasized right thinking, through which the soul sought to arise to the heavens.³ Such an emphasis arose naturally in its context: the entire range of Greco-Roman philosophy emphasized sound thinking,⁴ and most thinkers also viewed the heavens as pure, perfect, and unchanging, hence eternal. Naturally these ideas were often combined to speak of contemplating heavenly realities. In an influential dialogue, Plato emphasized that souls by nature desired the highest location,⁵ and those who consistently chose philosophy would ascend to a heavenly place.⁶ Meditating on the heavens and stars was a noble philosophic pursuit,⁷ and a pure mind could be described as guarded in a ‘celestial citadel’.⁸ The rational mind enabled one to ascend;⁹ stirred by

2. The use of ‘things above’ (employing language appearing nowhere else in Colossians and rarely in the Pauline corpus) instead of ‘heavenly things’ might be to avoid confusion with other heavenly entities (Col. 1.16, 20), but in view of 1.5 may be simply stylistic variation, as perhaps in Phil. 3.14, 20.

3. So Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary* (trans. Andrew Chester; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), p. 175.

4. E.g. Seneca, *Nat.* 3, pref. 11-15; see fuller discussion in Craig S. Keener, “‘Fleshly’ versus Spirit Perspectives in Romans 8:5-8”, in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Paul: Jew, Greek and Roman* (Pauline Studies, 5; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2008), pp. 211-29 (212-13). True beliefs could form a new identity in line with virtue (Stanley K. Stowers, ‘Does Pauline Christianity Resemble a Hellenistic Philosophy?’, in Troels Engberg-Pedersen [ed.], *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], pp. 81-102 [92]).

5. Plato, *Phaedr.* 248AB. Bodies were fashioned from earthly substance, with heavenly souls merely imprisoned in them (Plato, *Phaedr.* 250C; Plutarch, *Exil.* 17, *Mor.* 607D).

6. Plato, *Phaedr.* 248E-249A.

7. Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 12.59 (also affirming mathematics, which likewise involves what is harmonious). Pythagoras allegedly attained full knowledge of the heavens (Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 5.27).

8. Valerius Maximus 4.1. ext. 2 (*in arce caelesti*, LCL 1.354-55).

reasoning, some said, the mind would fly upward, light in weight.¹⁰ An essay in the form of a revelatory dream repeatedly emphasized looking to the imperishable things in the heavenly spheres, not to the corruptible earth below.¹¹

While many sources reflecting these ideas are Platonic, the ideas are by no means limited to Platonists.¹² Thus Seneca, an eclectic first-century Stoic, believed that the soul proved its divinity and celestial origins by enjoying what was divine, such as the stars and orbits of celestial bodies.¹³ Good Stoics believed that the ideal wise person would adopt a perspective from heaven, evaluating the rest of existence without personal bias.¹⁴ Such a heavenly perspective had practical consequences. Thus, for example, heavenly reality set the model for the soul formed from it: the mind should remain tranquil, like the highest

9. Porphyry, *Marc.* 26.415-16. Some described God as pure mind (Pliny, *Nat.* 2.5.14).

10. Heraclitus, *All.* 63.4. Wisdom would soar (Heraclitus, *All.* 63.5).

11. Cicero, *Rep.* 6.17.17; 19.20.

12. This observation is important because Stoicism was far more influential than Platonism in the first century, though Platonism became increasingly dominant subsequently, and the thought of the Jewish philosopher Philo demonstrates that Middle Platonism was influential in educated Hellenistic Jewish circles at least in Alexandria (for discussions of Platonic influence on Philo, see e.g. David T. Runia, 'Was Philo a Middle Platonist? A Difficult Question Revisited', *Studia Philonica* 5 [1993], pp. 112-40; Gregory E. Sterling, 'Platonizing Moses: Philo and Middle Platonism', *Studia Philonica* 5 [1993], pp. 96-111; John Dillon, 'Reclaiming the Heritage of Moses: Philo's Confrontation with Greek Philosophy', *Studia Philonica* 7 [1995], pp. 108-23), despite some Stoic and even Aristotelian elements.

13. Seneca, *Nat.* 1. pref. 12.

14. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), p. 59 (citing Marcus Aurelius, 7.48, 9.30, 12.24.3), p. 63 (citing Cicero, *Fin.* 3.25). Some allowed for enlightened emotions provided they were 'monitored' from above (Troels Engberg-Pedersen, 'Marcus Aurelius on Emotions', in Juha Sihvola and Troels Engberg-Pedersen [eds.], *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy* [Texts and Studies in the History of Philosophy, 46; Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Press, 1998], pp. 305-37 [334-35]). Even if in *Paul and Stoics*, p. 65, Engberg-Pedersen goes too far in regarding the Stoic emphasis on proper understanding of one's identity as 'the framework for Paul's thought' about identity in Christ, it reflects elements in the larger milieu relevant for how Paul and Paulinists would be heard.

heavens.¹⁵ Moreover, the heaven-informed soul despised terrestrial limitations such as human boundaries.¹⁶

Heavenly-mindedness in Early Jewish and Christian Sources

Such perspectives were not limited to Gentiles; some Jews in a Hellenistic context adapted this language. The Middle Platonic Jewish philosopher Philo opined that humans were not only terrestrial entities, but also celestial ones, near the stars.¹⁷ He believed that inspiration would cause the soul to contemplate God,¹⁸ carrying the soul into the upper atmosphere.¹⁹ This observation was not merely theoretical for Philo; he believed that he had experienced this exaltation himself. Meditating on philosophy and other divine matters, freed from earthly and bodily thoughts, Philo felt that he was raised in soul to heavenly regions (with the sun, moon and other celestial bodies).²⁰ Moving in the same realm of thought, yet at a more popular level, the Wisdom of Solomon notes that the perishable, earthly body weighs down the soul.²¹ The second-century *Testament of Job* emphasizes being occupied with heavenly rather than earthly matters, for earthly things change and are unstable, whereas heaven stays unperturbed.²²

15. Seneca, *Dial.* 5.6.1. For the harmony of heavenly spheres, see e.g. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 37.5; Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 15.65-66; Menander Rhetor 2.17, 442.30-32; Lucian, *Salt.* 7. For imitating the heavens' harmony, see e.g. Dio Chrysostom, *Conc. Apam.* 35; such imitation enabled one to return there (Cicero, *Rep.* 6.18.18-19). Though Aristotle knew the Pythagorean view (*Cael.* 2.9, 290b.12-29), he opposed it (2.9, 290b.30–291a.26).

16. Seneca, *Nat.* 1. pref. 13. Contemplating the larger cosmos allowed one to transcend mortal limitations (Seneca, *Nat.* 1. pref. 17; cf. 3. pref. 10).

17. Philo, *Op. Mund.* 147; cf. *Op. Mund.* 82. Later rabbis also opined that humans were a mixture of heavenly and earthly components (*Sifre Deut.* 306.28.2; *Gen. R.* 12.8).

18. Philo, *Op. Mund.* 71; cf. *Leg. All.* 3.82.

19. Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.2.

20. Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.1. At the time of writing, however, he complained that terrestrial matters like politics distracted him (*Spec. Leg.* 3.3).

21. Wis. 9.14-15.

22. *T. Job* 36.3/4-5/7. As in the case of Philo's inspiration, charismatic inspiration moved the hearts of Job's daughters to heavenly rather than earthly or worldly matters (*T. Job* 48–50, esp. 48.2; 49.1; 50.1; note also that 48.2 employs the same verb as Col. 3.2).

Some similar language and images also appear in the thought of the undisputed Pauline letters, where the ‘inner person’ was being renewed despite the body’s decay.²³ This unencumbered inner person was being prepared for what was unseen and eternal, which was from the heavens (2 Cor. 4.16–5.2).²⁴ In contrast to pure Platonists, Paul anticipated a heavenly *body*, though with apocalyptic Judaism could associate this heavenly body with celestial bodies (1 Cor. 15.40–41).²⁵ Paul also spoke of a heavenly Jerusalem (one ‘above’), of which the earthly version was presumably at best a shadow (Gal. 4.25–26). This idea, too, was already at home in Jewish circles.²⁶

By itself, vertical dualism in the Pauline corpus need not imply a wholesale embrace of conventional philosophic perspectives. Apocalyptic Judaism had a more specifically developed vertical dualism than Greek philosophy did,²⁷ although the dualism of Jewish sources in

23. On the language of the ‘inner person’, see diverse approaches in David E. Aune, ‘Anthropological Duality in the Eschatology of 2 Cor 4:16–5:10’, in Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide*, pp. 215–40 (220–22); Christoph Marksches, ‘Die platonische Metapher vom “inneren Menschen”: Eine Brücke zwischen antiker Philosophie und altchristlicher Theologie’, *ZKG* 105 (1994), pp. 1–17; Hans Dieter Betz, ‘The Concept of the “Inner Human Being” (ὁ ἔσω ἄνθρωπος) in the Anthropology of Paul’, *NTS* 46 (2000), pp. 315–41.

24. The heavenly body is viewed as a present possession (2 Cor. 5.1) probably not in terms of present experience (5.2–4; cf. similar vocabulary in 1 Cor. 15.49–54) but in terms of the down payment of the Spirit (2 Cor. 5.5) and the beginning of the new creation (5.17); see e.g. Craig S. Keener, *1–2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 179–80.

25. Resurrection bodies are compared with stars in Dan. 12.2–3; *1 En.* 43.3; 104.2; *2 Bar.* 51.10. In more hellenized Judaism, cf. astral immortality for martyrs in *4 Macc.* 17.5.

26. E.g. *4 Ezra* 10.25–28; *b. Hag.* 12b; 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* (SNTSMS, 43; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 18–24, 29. In Diaspora Judaism, cf. Philo, *Somn.* 2.250; Heb. 12.22.

27. Cf. comments in, e.g., Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC, 44; Waco, TX: Word, 1982), p. 161; French L. Arrington, *Paul's Aeon Theology in 1 Corinthians* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1978), p. 69; James H. Charlesworth, ‘A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in IQS III,13–IV,26 and the “Dualism” Contained in the Fourth Gospel’, *NTS* 15 (1969), pp. 389–418 (409); Matthew Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1961), p. 171; perhaps *T. Job* 33.3.

Greek did not always carry the connotations that it did among philosophers.²⁸ In Colossians 3, as in Jewish apocalyptic, the vertical dualism is also eschatological, so that the ‘shadow’ is contrasted with the coming world (Col. 2.17) and believers’ identity is fully revealed at Christ’s coming (3.4).²⁹ Moreover, as is usually observed,³⁰ the image of Jesus at the Father’s right hand in 3.1 is specifically Jewish; it recalls Ps. 110.1, consistently applied to Jesus’ exaltation as Lord in early Christianity.³¹ The writer’s thought structure is intelligible in terms of a broader milieu, but his image is distinctly christocentric, both reflecting biblical images long applied christologically and implying a future eschatology. Nevertheless, as some examples above (such as Philo and other Diaspora Jewish sources) show, we need not force a choice between Jewish and hellenistic elements (again note Col. 2.8, 16).³²

‘Where Christ is Enthroned’ (*Colossians* 3.1)

Contemplating ‘matters above’ was not a purely impersonal exercise, particularly for the writer of Colossians. For most ancient thinkers, the

28. E.g. Judah (with its kingship) had ‘earthly matters’ and Levi (with its priesthood) ‘heavenly matters’ in *T. Jud.* 21.3. In the context of *T. Sol.* 6.10, ‘heavenly matters’ turns out to be essentially folk magic.

29. For heaven as both present and eschatological in Jewish apocalyptic, see esp. Lincoln, *Paradise*.

30. E.g. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris; ed. Helmut Koester; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 133. The image need not be so limited (Suetonius, *Nero* 13.2), but its pervasiveness in early Christianity supports this allusion.

31. Mk 12.36; Acts 2.33-34; Heb. 1.3, 13 (cf. 8.1; 10.12; 12.2); *1 Clem.* 36.5; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2.1; *Barn.* 12.10. Some later rabbis assigned this location to teachers of Scripture and rabbinic tradition (*Pes. K.* 27.2, on Ps. 16.11).

32. Nearly all scholars now recognize the value of Greco-Roman sources for understanding a wide range of Jewish sources, even from Jewish Palestine, in this era; see e.g. Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission, Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E.–IV Century C.E.* (Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 18; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2nd edn; 1962); Boaz Cohen, *Jewish and Roman Law: A Comparative Study* (2 vols.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1966); Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period* (trans. John Bowden; 2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

heavens were not barren; the celestial deities lived there.³³ Heaven also hosted the stars; many Gentiles viewed the stars as divine,³⁴ and Jews normally viewed them as angels.³⁵ In Platonic thought, pure deities could reside only in the heavens.³⁶ The plurality of such divine beings in typical pagan thought would be problematic for our author. Following Plato, many regarded the realm between earth and heaven as the realm of intermediate *daimones*, but heaven as the place of the supreme God.³⁷ For Colossians, the heavenly focus must be on Christ alone; Col. 1.15-17; 2.10, 15, 18, warn against overestimating the status of the intermediate powers (as angels would be understood to be) vis-à-vis Christ.

Others, however, sought the one, transcendent deity in the heavens. Platonic mysticism (including in Philo) sought contemplative or mystical vision of God,³⁸ but this aspiration was by no means limited to

33. E.g. Ovid, *Metam.* 1.168-76; Valerius Maximus 7.1.1; Seneca, *Nat.* 1. pref. 2; *Dial.* 12.8.5; Valerius Flaccus 1.498; Dio Chrysostom, *Dei cogn.* 34; cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 39.4. In various Jewish sources, God was in the highest heaven (e.g. *2 En.* 20.1-3; *3 En.* 1.2); for Jewish association of God with heaven, see also, e.g., Dan. 4.26; 1 Esd. 4.58; Tob. 10.13; Jdt. 6.19; 1 Macc. 3.18, 50, 60; 4.24; *3 Macc.* 7.6; *1 En.* 83.9; 91.7; 1QM 12.5.

34. E.g. Cicero, *Nat. d.* 2.15.39-40; *Rep.* 6.15.15; Seneca, *Ben.* 4.23.4; Iamblichus, *Myst.* 1.17, 19; condemnation of this view in *1 En.* 80.7-8; *Pes. R.* 15.1.

35. *1 En.* 80.6-8; *2 En.* 4.1; 29.3; Pseudo-Phocylides, 71, 75; Philo, *Plant.* 12, 14; *Sifre Deut.* 47.2.3-5; possibly *2 Bar.* 51.10.

36. Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 78, *Mor.* 382F.

37. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 8.8; see also M.B. Trapp, *Maximus of Tyre: The Philosophical Orations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 76 n. 36. This image may be relevant for the lesser hosts in Col. 1.16, although the categories come closer to Jewish apocalyptic (Dan. 10.13, 21; *1 En.* 40.9; 61.10; 69.3; 72.1; 75.1; 82.10-12; *3 Bar.* 12.3; cf. Sir. 17.17; *Jub.* 15.31-32; 35.17; *Mekilta Shirata* 2.112-18; *Sifre Deut.* 315.2.1).

38. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 11.11; cf. Marie E. Isaacs, *The Concept of Spirit: A Study of Pneuma in Hellenistic Judaism and its Bearing on the New Testament* (Heythrop Monographs, 1; London: Heythrop College, 1976), p. 50; John M. Dillon, 'The Transcendence of God in Philo: Some Possible Sources', *Centre for Hermeneutical Studies Protocol* 16 (1975), pp. 1-8; Donald A. Hagner, 'The Vision of God in Philo and John: A Comparative Study', *JETS* 14 (1971), pp. 81-93 (89-90). On the impossibility of full vision of God in this life, see Philo, *Praem. Poen.* 39. Only the pure soul could envision God (Philo, *Conf. Ling.* 92); for biblical examples, see Philo, *Mut. Nom.* 3-6; *Quaest. in Gen.* 4.138; *Conf. Ling.* 92, 146; *Somn.* 1.171; *Abr.* 57. On mysticism in Philo, see e.g. *The Ancestral Philosophy: Hellenistic Philosophy in Second Temple Judaism: Essays of David Winston* (ed.

Gentiles or even Philo. A primary goal of Jewish mysticism was vision of God's throne.³⁹ The means of attaining this vision may have varied, but the objective remained fairly consistent.⁴⁰ The date of some of these mystical sources is disputed,⁴¹ but God's exalted throne was also a key element in Jewish apocalypses from both centuries before our document and long afterward.⁴² Some of Paul's own visions (2 Cor. 12.1-4, 7) apparently included Jesus (12.1, 8-9).⁴³ For some early Christians beyond the immediate Pauline circle, Jesus was the only genuine mediator between heaven and earth (Jn 3.13; cf. 1.51; Matt. 11.25-27/Lk. 10.21-22).

Gregory E. Sterling; *BJS*, 331; *Studia Philonica Monographs*, 4; Providence: Brown University, 2001), pp. 31-32, 169-70; perhaps excessively, Erwin R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1962), pp. 134-60.

39. See e.g. Daphna V. Arbel, "Understanding of the Heart": Spiritual Transformation and Divine Revelations in the Hekhalot and Merkavah Literature', *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 6 (1999), pp. 320-44.

40. Angelic help appears in *1 En.* 71.5; 87.3; *2 En.* 7.1; *2 Bar.* 6.3-4; note the Spirit in Ezek. 43.5; Rev. 4.2. For an arduous journey, see e.g. *1 En.* 14.9-13; later rabbis nevertheless regarded this adventure as dangerous (e.g. *b. Hag.* 13a, *Bar.*; 14b, *Bar.*; Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [New York: Schocken Books, 3rd edn, 1971], pp. 42-44; cf. Andrea Lieber, 'Angels that Kill: Mediation and the Threat of Bodily Destruction in *Hekhalot* Narratives', *Studies in Spirituality* 14 [2004], pp. 17-35).

41. For arguments for early merkavah traditions, see e.g. David J. Halperin, 'Merkabah Midrash in the Septuagint', *JBL* 101 (1982), pp. 351-63; Devorah Dimant and John Strugnell, 'The Merkabah Vision in *Second Ezekiel* (4Q385 4)', *RevQ* 14 (1990), pp. 331-48; James R. Davila, '4QMess ar (4Q534) and Merkavah Mysticism', *Dead Sea Discoveries* 5 (1998), pp. 367-81. The earliest traditions clearly grew over time, however; see Jacob Neusner, 'The Development of the *Merkavah* Tradition', *JSJ* 2 (1971), pp. 149-60.

42. E.g. *1 En.* 14.18-20; 18.8; 47.3; 71.7; 90.20; *2 En.* 1a.4; 20.3; 21.1; 22.2; *3 En.* 1; *4 Ezra* 8.21; cf. *LAE* 25.3-4; 28.4.

43. Some also view Paul in terms of the apocalyptic experiences that later contributed to merkavah mysticism; see e.g. Alan F. Segal, 'Paul's Jewish Pre-suppositions', in James D.G. Dunn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 159-72 (170); J.W. Bowker, "'Merkabah' Visions and the Visions of Paul', *JSS* 16 (1971), pp. 157-73; Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1981), pp. 252-53. Others demur (e.g. Peter Schäfer, 'NT and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkavah Mysticism', *JJS* 35 [1984], pp. 19-35).

The christocentric emphasis in Colossians 3 is unmistakable against this backdrop. Some philosophers sought to attain divine vision (and consequent transformation) through contemplating the purely transcendent, abstract deity of Platonism. Some Jewish mystics sought to attain divine vision of the throne chariot. In Colossians, however, the object of heavenly contemplation is no transcendent abstraction or even Israel's God in exalted splendor, but Christ. Philo may have limited experience of God to the mediation of the Logos;⁴⁴ God draws the ideal person from 'earthly matters' to himself through the Logos.⁴⁵ This perspective might be relevant to the centrality of Christ (in a role like divine Wisdom or the Logos) in Col. 1.15-20 and 2.8-9 and reiterated in our passage.⁴⁶

Granted, the writer speaks of τὰ ἄνω ('matters above,' plural) versus 'earthly' matters in 3.2, but the only content of these heavenly matters specified is the exalted Christ. Indeed, the postpositive conjunction γάρ ('for') in 3.3 explicitly predicates one's contemplation of 'matters above' on union with Christ in God. This focus fits the christocentric emphasis of Colossians as a whole. Heaven hosted many angelic ranks, but they were both created (1.16) and tamed (1.20) through Christ. Moreover, the emphasis fits the preceding context. Like the 'earthly things' of Platonism, Jewish new moons and sabbaths (2.16) were merely 'shadows' (2.17), though in this case not merely of heavenly things but, consistent with eastern Judaism, of eschatological things ('coming things', 2.17). I will not digress here to enter the debate about the precise contours of the asceticism discussed in 2.18-23, but in any case, believers had died with Christ to such earthly matters (2.20-22). It was not abuse or neglect of the body (2.23) that caused them to transcend earthly matters, but union with a new 'body'

44. See David Winston, 'Philo's Mysticism', *Studia Philonica* 8 (1996), pp. 74-82; cf. discussion in Hagner, 'Vision', 84; Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 4th rev. edn, 1968), I, pp. 282-89.

45. Philo, *Sacr.* 8.

46. Scholars have long identified logos or wisdom Christology in Col. 1.15-20; see e.g. Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 47-48; Schweizer, *Colossians*, p. 69; Kim, *Origin*, p. 268; Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1970; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 145; earlier, J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1879), p. 144.

in Christ (2.17; cf. 1.18, 22, 24; 3.15), hence death to the old one, presumably in Adam, in 3.5 (cf. also 2.11).

Moral Implications of Heavenly Contemplation

But if Christ is the focus, why does the author speak of τὰ ἄνω ('things above') in the plural in 3.2? He might use the plural τὰ ἄνω ('things above', i.e., 'heavenly matters' or even 'heavens') here simply to underline his evocation of contemporary language, but a singular could have communicated this sensitivity as well (cf. e.g., the singular of οὐρανός in 1.23; especially 4.1).⁴⁷ It is likely that he is preparing to complement or further explicate the mention of Christ (in 3.1) in what follows. Literary connections in fact do suggest that the following context explains what is involved in these τὰ ἄνω. As the invited focus of contemplation in 3.2, these 'things above' contrast with the 'earthly matters' that the same line summons hearers to avoid. The passage further defines these 'earthly matters' in terms of all the immoral behaviors to which one died with Christ (3.5-9, esp. 3.5), characterizing the old life (3.9).

Given their specific contrast to 'earthly' behaviors, the 'matters above' would then involve whatever characterized the new life in Christ (cf. 3.3-4). These characteristics are not simply universal parenesis but are repeatedly connected with Christ. Because the new person is made new in accordance with the Creator's image (3.10), embracing all humanity (3.11), the passage evokes a new Adam (cf. Gen. 1.26-27; Rom. 5.12-21), hence a new humanity in the heavenly Adam (cf. 1 Cor. 15.47-49).⁴⁸ This new life reflects God's image in Christ (Col. 3.10-11). Verse 11's climax could hardly be more emphatic: πάντα καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν Χριστός (Christ is all and among all), that is, Christ is the basis for the new humanity and is working in all the diversity of traditional human categories (cf. 1.27).

47. Cf. also 1 Cor. 8.5; 15.47; Phil. 3.20. The singular and plural appear to function interchangeably in undisputed Pauline letters, most clearly in 2 Cor. 5.1-2 and 1 Thess. 1.10; 4.16, although Paul knows multiple heavens (12.2).

48. For the Adamic allusion in Colossians, see e.g. Lohse, *Colossians*, pp. 142-43; George Johnston, *Ephesians, Philipians, Colossians and Philemon* (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1967), p. 65; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 107.

In ‘putting on’ this new life (3.10), then, one puts on characteristics of Christ, such as kindness and forgiveness (3.13-14). The latter characteristic explicitly follows the Lord’s example (καθὼς καὶ ὁ κύριος, 3.13). It is Christ’s peace that unifies believers (3.15), surmounting ethnic and social boundaries (3.11); indeed, they are ultimately one body (3.15), that is, in Christ (1.18; 2.11, 19). The writer thus connects this parenetic material closely with his christocentric emphasis.

The depiction of new life in Christ continues further in the following lines about worship and conventional household codes. Whereas the parallel text about worship in Ephesians emphasizes the Spirit (Eph. 5.18-20), Colossians maintains the contextual emphasis on the effects of union with Christ: Christ’s message dwelling in the believer produces worship (Col. 3.16-17).⁴⁹ All one’s acts should be done in the name of Jesus (3.17), and for the Lord (3.23-24), including one’s behavior in accordance with household codes (3.18, 20, 22, 23, 24; 4.1). In view of our discussion of 3.1-2, it is perhaps most relevant to note that Christian slaveholders must answer to a lord ‘in heaven’ (4.1). In the context, then, Colossians speaks of no abstract contemplation detached from present earthly existence. Rather, the focus on heaven is a focus on Christ, not only as he is enthroned above, but as that reality of his lordship impinges on the living of daily life. Even prayer involves present issues, even if they have eternal consequences (1.3, 9; 4.2-4, 12). For the author, believers should (to adapt a modern idiom) be so heavenly minded that they do more earthly good.

Moral demands may also be implicit in the presentation of Jesus’ exalted status in 3.1, which indicates his authority. The allusion to Ps. 110.1, noted above as widely applied in early Christianity, implicitly identifies Jesus as ‘lord’. Jesus appears as ‘lord’ as many as eight times in 3.13–4.1, most relevantly (as we have noted) as ‘lord in heaven’ in 4.1. In any case, for Colossians, union with the heavenly, exalted Christ

49. If ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ here means not ‘the message about Christ’ (cf. 1.5; 4.3; Rom. 10.17; 16.25; Eph. 3.4) but perhaps something like ‘the speaking of Christ’ (cf. 3.17; 4.6; Rom. 9.6; 1 Thess. 2.13; perhaps Col. 1.25; cf. Christ praying in Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], p. 107), the author could connect believers’ worship to Christ’s activity even more clearly, but the former interpretation might be likelier.

redefines believers' eschatological identity and should thus impinge on their present behavior.

The Intelligibility of the Moral Connection for Ancient Hearers

A Middle Platonist would detect a ready connection between the ascent in 3.1-2 and the warning against earthly, bodily passions in 3.5. For Middle Platonists, the intellect would experience God, rising ever upward, as it relinquished bodily sense-knowledge and earthly matters.⁵⁰ A strong intellect could encounter the divine in the heavens;⁵¹ philosophic rhetoric could direct the mind away from indulging vices to contemplating matters above.⁵² For later Platonists, pleasure dragged the soul back down toward the body.⁵³ Those who wished to ascend to God needed to abstain from pleasures;⁵⁴ virtue would draw the soul upward toward what it was like.⁵⁵ Nor was this concern limited to later Platonists. The first-century Jewish thinker Philo emphasized not only the soul's heavenward proclivity (as noted above), but also the danger of distraction from that proclivity. Thus he believed that the primeval serpent symbolized pleasure because of its downward orientation.⁵⁶ Others also agreed that thinking like deity required virtue, renouncing desire for anything evil or shameful.⁵⁷

The Stoic Seneca concurred that the soul would ascend by contemplating the heavens only to the extent that it was freed from the

50. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 11.10. For Maximus, however, contemplating stars and planets, like *daimones*, was simply contemplating divine works (11.12).

51. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 2.2 (conceding that most people, however, needed images to help them).

52. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 25.6.

53. Porphyry, *Marc.* 6.108. Passions affixed the soul to the body (Plato, *Phaed.* 83d; Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 32.228).

54. Porphyry, *Marc.* 6.105-108; 7.131-34.

55. Porphyry, *Marc.* 16.267-68. Because the divinely inspired intellect was 'like' God, it would be drawn to God (19.314-16); contemplation of God purified the mind (11.204). Earlier writers also agreed that reason shared the divine nature (*Rhet. Alex.* preface 1420b.20-21; Aelius Aristides, *Defense of Oratory* 409-10, §139D).

56. Philo, *Op. Mund.* 157.

57. Dio Chrysostom, *4 Regn.* 42-43.

body.⁵⁸ The flesh weights a person down, but the soul by nature is light, eager to ascend to the highest heavens on which it meditates.⁵⁹ In freeing the soul from passions, virtue released it to contemplate heavenly things;⁶⁰ by moving among the stars, the mind should spurn evil and worldly wealth.⁶¹

Popular detractors of philosophy did not always appreciate implied connections between heavenly contemplation and earthly behavior; for some critics, in fact, philosophers could become so heavenly-minded that they were no earthly good. Some considered discussion of the state more profitable for terrestrial audiences.⁶² Writers could depict typical farmers as rejecting the impractical pursuits of philosophers who ‘meddle with things above the earth’.⁶³ Another work complains that one could not speak wisdom concerning heavenly matters unless one understood earthly matters.⁶⁴ Others merely warned that those who cannot understand earthly matters dare not pretend to understand heavenly ones.⁶⁵

Many observers ridiculed the celestial preoccupation of astronomers and philosophers through a familiar anecdote. A servant girl reportedly ridiculed Thales for falling into a well while preoccupied by the stars, complaining that he sought to know heavenly matters while ignoring what lay beneath him.⁶⁶ Others applied this story line more widely.⁶⁷ In

58. Seneca, *Nat.* 1. pref. 11. For the ‘earthly’ body and its influence, see Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.9.

59. Seneca, *Dial.* 12.11.6. In much of ancient physics, air and especially fire were the lightest and highest of substances (Pliny, *Nat.* 2.4.1), but heavy elements could hold lighter elements down (Pliny, *Nat.* 2.4.11). Some, however, viewed the heavens as consisting of an element different from earthly ones, and more divine (Aristotle, *Cael.* 1.2, 268b11-269a32).

60. Seneca, *Nat.* 1. pref. 6. Seneca may connect envisioning the universe mentally with overpowering vices in *Nat.* 3. pref. 10 (where he mentions them together).

61. Seneca, *Nat.* 1. pref. 7.

62. Dio Chrysostom, *Alex.* 25; contrast Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.3.

63. Alciphron, *Farmers* 11 (Sitalces to Oenopion, his son), 3.14 (LCL p. 103).

64. Philostratus, *Hrk.* 33.6-7.

65. *Wis.* 9.16; cf. *Jn* 3.12.

66. Plato, *Theaet.* 174A. Plato’s Socrates thus commented that philosophers must be ready for ridicule for not sharing others’ focus (*Theaet.* 174A-175B).

67. E.g. Aesop, *Fable* 40, cited in Lawrence M. Wills, ‘The Aesop Tradition’, in Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, Jr, and John Dominic Crossan (eds.), *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton Readings in Religions; Princeton: Princeton

one later story Alexander of Macedon allowed a stargazing astrologer to fall into a pit, which mortally wounded him; rather than extending sympathy, Alexander mercilessly reproached the hapless astrologer for studying heavenly matters while ignoring earthly ones.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the writer of Colossians, like many philosophers, could not be justly charged with such neglect. As we have noted, the author not only uses familiar language for contemplating ‘matters above’, but also applies this idea to concrete behavioral issues (3.5–4.1).

Heavenly Afterlife and Colossians 3

Although Col. 3.1-2 is not itself explicitly eschatological, it quickly gives way to an eschatological expectation (3.4); as in many Jewish sources, vertical dualism is connected with eschatological dualism. Colossians speaks elsewhere of a hope reserved for believers in heaven (1.5; cf. 1 Pet. 1.3-4), appealing to an image familiar by the writer’s day, including in the circles to which the writer objects (cf. Col. 2.8, 16). In Colossians, however, the basis for the hope is already effective among believers (1.23, 27). Believers’ lives are already hidden with Christ (3.3), who is their life (3.4), with consequent promise for the future (3.5; cf. the present possession of the Spirit as a guarantee of the future in, e.g., Rom. 8.23; 2 Cor. 5.4-5; Eph. 1.13-14).

Philosophers and those influenced by them usually viewed the heavens as pure, perfect, and unchanging, hence eternal.⁶⁹ This conception shaped many views of immortality. Even if scholars a century ago overemphasized astral immortality,⁷⁰ the soul’s celestial

University Press, 2006), pp. 222-37 (226), mocking an astronomer. Cf. Philostratus, *Hrk.* 1.2; 33.6-8, and comment in Jennifer K. Berenson Maclean and Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, ‘Introduction’, in their *Flavius Philostratus: Heroikos* (SBL Writings from the Greco-Roman World, 1; Atlanta: SBL, 2001), pp. xxxvii-xcii (lxxxii-lxxxiii).

68. Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alex.* 1.14.

69. In Platonic and Pythagorean sources, see e.g. Philo, *Quaest. in Exod.* 2.73; Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 21.7-8; Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.1-2 (noting their ordering by the universal Soul); Pythagoras in Diogenes Laertius, 8.1.27. In Cicero, *Rep.* 6.17.17, everything above the moon was eternal. Cf. also, e.g., the contrast between what is earthly/mortal and heavenly/divine in Plutarch, *Quaest. rom.* 78, *Mor.* 282F.

70. E.g. Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), pp. 91-109.

destination appears in various ancient sources.⁷¹ In some Greek and Roman sources, the soul was of heavenly origin and cultivated its heavenly character by meditating on the divine, on what was heavenly.⁷² This prepared the soul for its heavenward ascent after death.⁷³ Souls imprisoned in present bodies could look heavenward in anticipation of their release.⁷⁴ The soul ascended to the heavens to which it was akin, leaving behind the body.⁷⁵ The souls of the deceased ascended and could look down from heaven.⁷⁶ Whereas pure souls ascended, however, souls too attached to their bodies might be thought to hover in the atmosphere and ascend higher only over long periods of time.⁷⁷

Colossians does not address what is 'eternal' in the heavens in an abstract sense, however, but in 3.1 emphasizes Jesus' resurrection, with its eschatological implications for believers in 3.3-4 (cf. 2.17). The allusion to Ps. 110.1 (noted above) also surely presupposes Jesus' resurrection, given the connection in early Christian tradition (Rom. 8.34; Eph. 1.20; Acts 2.33-34; 1 Pet. 3.21-22). Just as Hellenistic Jews like Philo could adapt Gentile philosophy in light of Jewish tradition, so can our author, though our author is far less assimilated than Philo (and may provide a *contrast* with philosophy, in view of 2.8). Just as

71. On astral immortality, see e.g. Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 117. For deceased heroes becoming stars, see e.g. Virgil, *Aen.* 7.210-11; Valerius Maximus 4.6. ext. 3; Lucan, *C.W.* 9.1-9; Ovid, *Metam.* 15.749, 843-51 (Ovid hopes this for himself in 15.875-76).

72. E.g. Porphyry (a much later Platonist), *Marc.* 6.103-108; 7.131-34; 10.180-83; 16.267-68; 26.415-16. In Valerius Flaccus 3.378-82, people were originally fire, stars in heaven (also Cicero, *Rep.* 6.15.15); they became mortals, but they eventually return to heaven.

73. For the soul's postmortem ascent, see e.g. Cicero, *Rep.* 6.16.16; 6.24.26; Philo, *Quaest. in Gen.* 3.45; Heraclitus, *Ep.* 5; Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 9.6; 11.11; 41.5; Menander Rhetor 2.9, 414.21-23; also Aune, 'Duality', p. 228; for particular philosophers' expected ascents, see Cercidas, frg. 1; Eunapius, *Vit.* 469; Herodian 1.5.6. Some portrayed this ascent as divinization (Menander Rhetor 2.9, 414.25-27), which goes beyond the closest early Christian parallels to the idea (2 Cor. 3.18; 2 Pet. 1.4).

74. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 7.5.

75. Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.19.43-44.

76. Seneca, *Dial.* 11.9.3.

77. Cicero, *Rep.* 6.26.29; *Tusc.* 1.31.75; cf. other unhappy approaches in Valerius Flaccus 3.383-96; Pythagoras in Diogenes Laertius 8.1.31. Valerius Maximus 9.3. ext. 1, opines that Alexander's evil deeds nearly prevented his ascension.

the content of heaven is no divine abstraction, but Christ, so the immortality that awaits believers there is not a product of the soul's preexistent nature (as in Platonism) but the promise inherent in believers' presently shared life with Christ.

Conclusion

Philosophers, mystics and apocalyptic visionaries sought to visualize heaven, often to envision deity; philosophers emphasized specifically heavenly thinking. For philosophers, the pure and heavenly deity was abstract and transcendent; for Colossians, the heavenly focus is Christ, fitting the christocentric emphasis of this letter. For Colossians, contemplating Christ also leads naturally to Christlike character, in contrast to the pursuit of earthly passions. Although the writer's articulation of the connection is distinctive, his connection of heavenly contemplation with appropriate behavior would have been fully intelligible to his contemporaries, including many philosophers. The writer also connects consideration of Christ's current heavenly status with believers' future hope. Colossians 3.1-2, then, is a pivotal text both for understanding the sorts of conceptions in the larger milieu that the letter as a whole addresses and for understanding the connection between the letter's earlier theological arguments and the following parenetic material.