

What Was the “Colossian Heresy”?

More than forty proposals have been offered regarding the nature of the philosophy that the Letter to the Colossians seeks to oppose. Here are some sample suggestions:

- a Jewish Christian movement that insisted that gentile Christians must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, similar to the “Judaizers” opposed by Paul in Galatians (cf. Gal. 3:19; 4:3–9)
- an esoteric and rigorous form of Judaism, comparable to that practiced by the Essenes at Qumran
- a mystical form of Judaism, like the Merkabah tradition, so named because asceticism and strict adherence to the law allowed devotees to travel in the spirit to the heavenly throne room in a celestial chariot called a *merkabah*
- a syncretistic religious amalgam of beliefs, combining elements from Jewish tradition with elements of astral religion
- some variety of a Greco-Roman “mystery religion,” which emphasized the hidden nature of spiritual truth revealed only to the spiritually elite
- incipient gnosticism, a precursor of what would develop into prominent antimaterialist religious systems in the second century CE
- Pythagorean philosophy, based on the teaching of Pythagoras (sixth century BCE), who thought that the sun, moon, and stars were spirits that control human destiny and that the human soul must be purified through ascetic practices