6

Barbaric Scythians

INTRODUCTION

Colossians 3:11 has often been marshalled in support of the view that ethnic distinctions, prejudices, and stereotypes had for all intents and purposes become irrelevant in the context of early Christianity. Other passages frequently cited in this connection include 1 Cor 12:13 ("For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free") and, especially, Gal 3:28 ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus"). Colossians 3:11 has much in common with these earlier Pauline pronouncements, which may have been known to the author of Colossians.[1] His version of the formula, however, further accentuates the ethnic aspect by including "barbarian" and "Scythian": there "is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, *barbarian, Scythian*, enslaved, free; but Christ is all and in all!" The upshot, according to many interpreters, is the abolishment or

[1] This was obviously the case if Colossians was authored (with Timothy) by Paul himself, but it is also a good possibility if it was written by an early imitator, as is slightly more likely in my judgment. On the question of the familiarity of the author of Colossians with previous Pauline texts, see Nicole Frank, *Der Kolosserbrief im Kontext des paulinischen Erbes*, WUNT 2/271 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Outi Leppä, *The Making of Colossians: A Study on the Formation and Purpose of a Deutero-Pauline Letter* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Paul Foster, *Colossians*, BNTC (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 81–85. Since both 1 Cor 12:13 and Gal 3:28 appear in the context of baptism, the author may have known this expression independently as a baptismal formula as well. On the question of whether Col 3:5–11 also evokes baptismal imagery, which is often asserted but remains uncertain, see Foster, *Colossians*, 333–34.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

transcendence of ethnic, racial, and other distinctions,[2] leaving no room for ethnic prejudice of any kind.[3] To evaluate such readings of Col 3:11, Section 6.1 will explore what kind of beliefs and expectations (i.e., stereotypes) about the barbarian and the Scythian may have been conjured up by this text in its first-century Greco-Roman context.[4]

[2] E.g., Andrew T. Lincoln, "Colossians," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 644: "This formulation stresses inclusiveness and does away with all distinctions based on ethnic, religious, cultural, or social criteria within the new humanity"; Joachim Gnilka, *Der Kolosserbrief*, HThKNT (Basel: Herder, 1980), 189, speaks of "die Aufhebung völkischer, rassischer, religiöser, kultureller Barrieren im Christus-Leib." Many recent commentators prefer the language of "transcendence" and "irrelevance" over "abolishment." E.g., Robert Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 256; Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 79; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC 11 (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1996), 223. Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Covenant Commentary (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 103, develops the underlying logic: "It is not that these distinctions cease to exist in some way, but they are now transcended by virtue of the believer's participation in the Messiah ... the emphasis ... is not the obliteration of different human identities, but the *inclusion* of multiple identities under a single meta-identity" (emphasis original). This line of argument emphasizes unity over sameness and allows for differences to remain intact. David Horrell notes a similar shift from abolishment of ethnic distinctions to their transcendence in commentaries on Gal 3:28 (David G. Horrell, "Paul, Inclusion and Whiteness: Particularizing Interpretation," *JSNT* 40 [2017]: 125, 128–29). This may well reflect a broader societal move away from insisting that there are no fundamental differences among human beings (and that, when it comes to race, feigning colorblindness is an appropriate response) toward increased acknowledgment and celebration of difference.

[3] David E. Garland, *Colossian and Philemon*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 209: "The gospel breaks down man-made walls. It does not classify people by race, tribe, nationality, or class; nor does it calculate their worth from the various permutations of these divisions ... each group deserves equal respect." H. D. McDonald, *Commentary on Colossians & Philemon* (Waco: Word Books, 1980), 110–11: "Christ ... has forever rendered void racial prejudices ... racial distinctions of white and black, nationalist and immigrant, are no more ... [he was] the first to take away the reproach of *Scythian* by receiving them on the same terms with the rest as sons of God." (italics original). Patrick Rogers, *Colossians*, New Testament Message 15 (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1980), 59: "The whole range of old prejudices ... must give way." William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapid: Baker Books, 1964), 151: "All racial bigotry, chauvinism, and snobbery is condemned here. Here the truth that before God 'all men are equal' receives its best – because infallibly inspired – expression." J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 189: "Paul is challenging the prevailing, commonly held, racially prejudiced view of the Greco-Roman world, and telling the Christians that such divisive barriers should not (or do not) exist in the new people of God."

[4] If the letter is pseudonymous, we may not be able to determine the chronological, cultural, and geographical context of the author with much certainty or specificity, but it is reasonable to assume that the letter was composed in or around the second half of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Interpreters have traditionally identified the Scythian as the "the lowest type of barbarian,"[5] but several more recent interpretations assign the Scythian, and sometimes the barbarian as well, a neutral or even positive valence. This interpretive shift matches a pattern that we have already observed a number of times and will encounter again in the remainder of this study: interpretations that by contemporary standards are offensive are replaced with more palatable alternatives. As David Garland notes in his cautious endorsement of one of these more recent interpretations, "if this is correct, Paul does not perpetuate the racist cliché that Scythians were monstrous and untamed brutes."[6]

In this chapter, I argue that these alternative interpretations do not stand up to scrutiny and that the view that the text assumes a stereotypical conception of the Scythian as especially barbaric remains the most compelling interpretive option. I advance this argument on the basis of an analysis of classical and Hellenistic stereotypes about barbarians (Section 6.1) and Scythians (Section 6.2). I subsequently propose, on the basis of a close analysis of the literary context of Col 3:11, a fresh explanation of *why* the Scythian is mentioned in Col 3:11 (Section 6.3). I will argue that the text conveys that everyone, without exception, can attain to the high ethical standard that the author outlines in this part of the letter. The barbarian and Scythian are rhetorically useful in this connection, because they were routinely depicted as especially liable to immoral behavior. By including them at this juncture, the author makes a forceful point about the transformative power of the gospel: Even the barbarian and Scythian can, through Christ, attain to the moral vision promulgated by the author. Rather than questioning the view that Scythians and barbarians were immoral, the author reinscribes this stereotypical conception, yet argues that this collective character trait can be overcome in the process of "putting on the new self" and "being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (Col 3:10). The final section of the

first century in a Greco-Roman setting (see, e.g., Lukas Bormann, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Kolosser*, THKNT [Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2012], 51; Foster, *Colossians*, 80; Taschl-Erber, "Zwischen Römer- und Epheserbrief: Zur Kontextualisierung des Kolosserbriefs," 134).

[5] J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Revised Text with Introductions, Notes, and Dissertations* (London: MacMillan, 1879), 218.

[6] Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, 209 with reference to Douglas Campbell's proposal, discussed below. Garland's comment is exceptional in the sense that interpreters do not usually express any qualms about the author's possible promulgation of a "racist cliché" or a negative ethnic stereotype. For further discussion of this phenomenon, see below, pp. 219–20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

chapter (Section 6.4) turns to nineteenth-century interpretations and applications of Col 3:11 and demonstrates that the stereotyped character of the immoral Scythian served as a lens through which readers perceived purportedly backward peoples of their own day and age. The Pauline text served as exemplification and hence legitimization for conceiving of ethnic groups in terms of superiority and inferiority and was used to buttress colonialist notions about the need to morally improve ethnic groups that were considered inferior.

6.1 BARBARIAN

Before turning to the Scythian, I will briefly consider the term "barbarian" with which it is juxtaposed in Col 3:11. In contrast to the Scythian, the barbarian is not without literary precedent in the Pauline corpus. Paul's usage in the undisputed epistles fits the common usage of *barbaros* in Greek literature, where it refers to non-Greeks, sometimes in a neutral sense, but routinely with pejorative connotations.[7] In the latter case, the term suggests "cultural or intellectual inferiority, lack of refinement, various insensibilities, brutality, chicanery, and a tendency to embrace despotism rather than the rule of law."[8]

In 1 Cor 14:11, Paul's usage is perhaps neutral. In the context of discussing "speaking in tongues" (γλώσσαις λαλῶν, 14:6–8), Paul writes, "If then I do not know the meaning of a sound, I will be a foreigner (βάρβαρος) to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner (βάρβαρος) to me." The word barbarian was originally used of people who did not speak (proper) Greek and were therefore difficult to understand.[9] Paul may well

[7] As Volker Losemann, "Barbarians," *Brill's New Pauly Online* (Brill), accessed February 11, 2025, doi:10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e212470, notes, "General judgements of a positive nature, particularly related to a simple natural life, are much rarer."

[8] Erich S. Gruen, "Greeks and Non-Greeks," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. Glenn R. Bugh, Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 295. See also Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Christopher Tuplin, "Greek Racism? Observations on the Character and Limits of Greek Ethnic Prejudice," in *Ancient Greeks West and East*, ed. Gocha R. Tsetskhladze (Leiden: Brill), 295–314; Eran Almagor, "Who Is a Barbarian? The Barbarians in the Ethnological and Cultural Taxonomies of Strabo," in *Strabo's Cultural Geography: The Making of a Kolossourgia*, ed. Daniela Dueck, Hugh Lindsay, and Sarah Pothecary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 42–55.

[9] That at least is what Strabo suggests (*Geogr.* 14.2.28 [C662]), although it should be noted that he presents it as more of an hypothesis than an established fact. On the possibility that *barbaros* is derived from the Babylonian word *barbaru* ("foreign"), see Gruen, "Greeks

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

use the word in a similar sense here, where the issue is precisely the unintelligibility of sounds. Paul himself will be like a barbarian if he engages in glossolalia or speaks in a non-Greek language (depending on the translation of γλῶσσα as tongue or language) and others consequently fail to understand what is being said. Although it is evident that Paul wants his audience to avoid being *barbaroi*, it is not certain that the word conveys any pejorative connotations beyond the unintelligibility of the barbarians.[10]

A different situation arguably obtains the only other time that Paul uses *barbaros,* in Rom 1:13–14:

> I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. *I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.*

Whether the label "barbarian" has a pejorative connotation in this passage hinges on whether "wise and foolish" stands in apposition to "Greek

and Non-Greeks," 297; Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2013), 1:201.

[10] Ekaputra Tupamahu, "Language Politics and the Constitution of Racialized Subjects in the Corinthian Church," *JSNT* 41 (2018): 223–45 (largely reproduced in Tupamahu, *Contesting Languages*, 146–57) argues that the issue is not glossolalia but the speaking of languages other than Greek. He regards Paul's use of *barbaros* as a way of "othering" those who speak such languages: "By employing a racialized rhetoric, Paul's discourse is very consistent with the larger Hellenistic attitude and discrimination against the others (i.e., the barbarians) … Paul is adopting their ethnic hostility discourse against the others" (240). Tupamahu argues "that the term βάρβαρος is never neutral or detached, because it is thoroughly embedded in the sociopolitical struggle between the Greeks and their imaginative others, i.e., the barbarians" (Tupamahu, *Contesting Languages*, 146–57). Scholars like Joseph Fitzmyer and Gordon Fee, who claim a neutral usage for 1 Cor 14:11, are said to attempt "to save Paul from being a 'racist' so to speak" (238). While I agree that this is an interpretive reflex to which we must be attentive, in this case there is reasonably solid ancient evidence for a neutral usage of the term. Gruen, *Ethnicity in the Ancient World*, 11–41, goes so far as to claim that in the great majority of cases βάρβαρος means nothing more than non-Greek. Even if Gruen is overstating the case (see my review essay "David G. Horrell, Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities – Erich S. Gruen, Ethnicity in the Ancient World: Did It Matter?," *EC* 13 [2022]: 133–39) his work effectively demonstrates that the term need not be derogatory in and of itself. I subscribe however to Tupamahu's Butlerian observation that "the efficacy of a word employed in a speech does not necessarily depend on the intention of the speaker, but also on the context, history, and power networks from which that word is taken" (*Contesting Languages*, 156). Whatever his intent, Paul's barbaros-language in this passage may well have been construed by some in the Corinthian community as derogatory.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and barbarian," to the effect that Paul deems the Greeks wise and the barbarians foolish. "Barbarians" and "foolishness" were regularly associated in literature from this period,[11] and it is reasonable to suspect that a first-century audience would have construed Paul's phrasing in this manner.[12] In his classic commentary on Romans, Charles Cranfield argues that this cannot have been Paul's intention: "if σοφός and ἀνόητος are intended at all seriously, they can hardly be used as synonyms for 'Greek' and 'barbarian'. The Greeks themselves knew that there were wise barbarians and foolish Greeks. How much more would Paul realize it!"[13] Cranfield tellingly takes for granted that Paul must have been at least as fair-minded as the most enlightened among the Greeks. On this basis, Cranfield offers the following alternative interpretation:

> By Ἕλληνες are meant all those Gentiles who are possessed of Graeco-Roman culture, and by βάρβαροι all the rest of the Gentiles ... σοφοῖς τε καὶ ἀνοήτοις represents a different grouping of the Gentiles, which divides them into those who are intelligent and educated, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those

[11] Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. rom.* 5.4.3) mentions ἀνοήτων δὲ καὶ βαρβάρων "stupid people and barbarians" and contrasts them with φρονίμων μὲν ἀνθρώπων "wise persons," who in the context are Romans, specifically Roman senators. In Plutarch, *Alex. fort.* 1.7 (Mor 329e), Xerxes is addressed as βάρβαρε Ξέρξη καὶ ἀνόητε ("barbarian and foolish Xerxes"). In *Ep.* 61, Philostratus writes: "Who polled you, my pretty one? How senseless and barbarous (ἀνόητος καὶ βάρβαρος) the person who spared not the gifts of Aphroditê!" Other relevant passages include Ovid, *Amores* 1.7.19: *Quis mihi non "demens!" quis non mihi "barbare!" dixit?* ("Who did not say to me: 'Fool!' who did not say: 'Barbarian!'"); Plautus, *Bacch.* 123: *is stultior es barbaro poticio* ("you're more stupid than a barbarian child"); Galen, *Plac. Hipp. Plat.* 3.3.18 (De Lacy): "barbarians and uneducated (ἀπαίδευτοι) people"; Diodorus Siculus, *Libr. Hist.* 1.2.5–6: "History also contributes to the power of speech, and a nobler thing than that may not easily be found. For it is this that makes the Greeks superior to the barbarians, and the educated to the uneducated" (τούτῳ γὰρ οἱ μὲν Ἕλληνες τῶν βαρβάρων, οἱ δὲ πεπαιδευμένοι τῶν ἀπαιδεύτων προέχουσι). This final passage also attests to the common understanding of the Greeks as "educated," "intelligent," or "wise." Paul associates the Greeks with wisdom not only here (Rom 1:14) but also in 1 Cor 1:22.

[12] Similarly, e.g., James R. Harrison, "Paul's 'Indebtedness' to the Barbarian (Rom 1:14) in Latin West Perspective," *NovT* 55 (2013): 337–38: "The equivalence of verse 14a with verse 14b is likely, given the widespread stereotyping of ethnic groups in antiquity. Paul would have been well aware of the dishonouring of the barbarian as 'foolish,' 'stupid' or 'innately idiots' in popular culture"; Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 139; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Romans: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2024), 44.

[13] C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, ICC (London; New York: T&T Clark, 1975), 84. Similarly, Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 65: "This second division is not identical with the first. There could be foolish Greeks and there could be wise barbarians!"

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who lack intelligence and education. Here both pairs of terms appear to be used in a thoroughly objective, factual manner, without overtones of irony, complacency, prejudice or contemptuousness.[14]

The final sentence reveals what is at stake and identifies the sort of understanding of Paul that Cranfield is eager to avoid. Yet the proposed solution is not persuasive, for rather than two different ways of dividing Gentile humanity, they are in effect quite similar. According to Cranfield, Greeks are "possessed of Graeco-Roman culture" whereas "the wise" are "intelligent and educated." It is difficult to see how these two are very different, since being "cultured" and being "educated" amount to much the same thing in Paul's Greco-Roman context. What is presented as two different ways of segmenting Gentile humanity are in reality nearly equivalent categorizations.[15]

Robert Jewett has proposed another reading of Rom 1:14 that would absolve Paul of any charge of ethnic stereotyping. In Jewett's view, this text in fact constitutes a reversal of "the profoundest stereotypes of the ancient world."[16] Jewett recognizes that Paul's two pairs (Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish) are related: "Barbarians are viewed as innately idiots, while Greeks are innately wise."[17] But for Jewett it is highly significant that Paul expresses an equal sense of obligation to both (ὀφειλέτης εἰμί, 1:14). According to Jewett, "it was a complete reversal of the system of honor and shame to feel indebtedness to barbarians and the uneducated."[18] Be this as it may, even on Jewett's reading, Paul does not

[14] Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:84.

[15] Cf. Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 131, who notes that "since the Greco-Roman educational system concentrated on linguistic and rhetorical competence in Greek and Latin, this antithesis [σοφοῖς τε καὶ ἀνοήτοις] roughly corresponds to 'Greeks and barbarians.'" Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 251–52, by contrast, claims that "the first pair sums up the Gentiles, the second is a description of all humanity ... Paul moves from a restricted group to a larger one." It seems odd that Paul would change the group that he is speaking about without offering any indication of doing so.

[16] Jewett, *Romans*, 133. [17] Jewett, *Romans*, 132.

[18] Jewett, *Romans*, 132. Harrison, "Paul's 'Indebtedness' to the Barbarian," develops Jewett's suggestion in more detail. Neither scholar takes account of the proposal by Runar Thorsteinsson, "Paul's Missionary Duty towards Gentiles in Rome: A Note on the Punctuation and Syntax of Romans – 1.13–15," *NTS* 48 (2002): 531–47; Runar Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*, Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003), 43–44, that the dative phrase Ἕλλησίν τε καὶ βαρβάροις, σοφοῖς τε καὶ ἀνοήτοις stands in apposition to τοῖς λοιποῖς ἔθνεσιν and forms the end of the sentence, rather than the beginning of a new one. If Thornsteinsson is right,

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

argue that the barbarians are just as wise and are therefore deserving of just as much "obligation" as Greeks but rather that *despite* their foolishness, he feels as much obligation to them as to the Greeks.

Paul confirms here, then, rather than disputes, the stereotype of barbarian foolishness. In what follows, however, he questions the view that the Greeks are in a better position. Over the course of the first chapter of Romans, he argues for the priority of the Jew over the Greek (1:16) and he claims that *all* Gentiles (i.e., Greeks just as much as barbarians) have sunk to extreme levels of depravity (1:18–32).[19] The barbarians may have been barbaric, but *all* Gentiles were immoral from Paul's perspective. Those among them claiming wisdom (like the Greeks, cf. 1:14) turned out to be foolish (1:22). The Greeks are no better, therefore, than the foolish barbarians.

In sum, then, "barbarian" appears to be used in Pauline literature in two different senses: neutral (referring to linguistic unintelligibility) and pejorative (the barbarians as the foolish counterparts to the wise Greeks). I will return to the question of which of these senses applies in Col 3:11 following the analysis of "Scythian."

6.2 SCYTHIAN

In determining the meaning of "Scythian" in Col 3:11, much recent scholarship takes as its point of departure that "barbarian" and "Scythian" function as a contrasting pair, in conformity with the other pairs listed in this verse (Greek/Jew, circumcised/uncircumcised, enslaved/free). Prominent suggestions include that "barbarian, Scythian" expresses a contrast between enslaved and free, between Scythians and non-Scythians, between inhabitants of the north and the south, and between noble nomads and brutish barbarians. In what follows, I will briefly review these various options and argue that they are not ultimately compelling. The traditional view, which construes "Scythian" as a reference to an ethnic group renowned for cruelty and immorality remains the most persuasive option.

Paul is not expressing any indebtedness or obligation to the barbarians, since ὀφειλέτης εἰμί goes with what follows ("I am obligated, then, to announce the gospel"), rather than what precedes.

[19] For further analysis of this passage, see pp. 47–53.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Slave and Free

Douglas Campbell has suggested that "barbarian and Scythian" expresses essentially the same contrast as "slave and free."[20] The Scythian is synonymous with "slave," while the barbarian is synonymous with "free." For the latter equation, Campbell provides no support (deeming it "not . . . implausible" but not arguing the case), for the former (Scythian = slave), the evidence he cites falls short to establish the point. Slaves of Scythian descent doubtlessly existed around the time Colossians was composed, but there is no compelling evidence that the word "Scythian" was used as a shorthand for "slave."[21]

Scythians and non-Scythians

Another way to construe the pair as opposites, proposed by Troy Martin, is to read it from a Scythian perspective: one is either a Scythian or a non-Scythian, that is, a barbarian.[22] This reading, while ingenious, also faces a number of difficulties. Martin argues that the opponents referred to in this letter were Cynics, who associated themselves with Scythians, and that the author of the letter contests their view that there is a fundamental distinction between Scythians (i.e., Cynics) and the rest of humanity, by including the pair "barbarian (i.e., non-Scythians/non-Cynics) and Scythians" in his list of oppositions that are overcome in Christ.[23] This reading only

[20] Douglas A. Campbell, "Unravelling Colossians 3.11b," *NTS* 42 (1996): 120–32.

[21] For these and other cogent criticisms of Campbell's proposal, see Troy W. Martin, "Scythian Perspective or Elusive Chiasm: A Reply to Douglas A. Campbell," *NovT* 41 (1999): 256–64; Alexander Weiß, "Einführung: Die Skythen als paradigmatische Nomaden," in *Skythen in der lateinischen Literatur*, ed. Andreas Gerstacker et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 26; Lukas Bormann, "Weltbild und gruppenspezifische Raumkonfiguration des Kolosserbriefs," in *Kolosser-Studien*, Biblisch Theologische Studien 103 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 95. The opposite of Campbell's position (i.e., barbarian = slave, Scythian = free) is attested in older literature. E.g., Jacobus Gerardus Staringh, *Bybels zakelyk-woordenboek: Letter S, zevende deel, tweede stuk* (Amsterdam: J. de Groot, 1778), 335: "*De Barbaren*, als Volken, die Slaafsch van aart waren, en ook veel al in slaverny leefden; de Scythen, in tegendeel, als een Volk van een vryen aart" (English translation: "The Barbarians, peoples who were slavish in nature and often lived in slavery; the Scythians, by contrast, as a people with a free nature").

[22] "The Scythian Perspective in Col 3:11," *NovT* 37 (1995): 249–61. Reprinted in Troy W. Martin, *Theology and Practice in Early Christianity*, WUNT 442 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 113–23. Citations follow the page numbers of the reprinted edition.

[23] Martin, "Scythian Perspective or Elusive Chiasm," 121: "The Colossian author proclaims that Christ has so completely obliterated the arbitrary categories dividing

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

makes sense if the rival teachers are identified as Cynics, which is an argument that Martin has advanced in a monograph-length study that has not commanded much assent.[24] Yet even if this identification is accepted, a serious difficulty facing Martin's proposal is that Cynic texts do not *oppose* barbarians and Scythians (as in Colossians) but identify or associate them with each other: the Scythians are presented as celebrating and defending their "barbarian" identity and wisdom.[25]

North and South

Another alternative reading, which has commanded significant support, is David Goldenberg's argument that "barbarian, Scythian" refers to the contrast between the far north and the far south: "Barbarian" refers to the inhabitants of the far south, while the Scythian represents the far north, a possibility previously raised by others, including Bengel (1742) and Hermann (1930).[26] In the Greco-Roman ethnographic imagination, "Scythians" frequently functioned as a catchall term for peoples living at the very northern edge of the known world.[27] Their counterparts in the far south, however, were usually identified as Ethiopians, not as "barbarians."[28] The key question, then, is whether the term "barbarian" could be

humanity that he has abolished even the divisive Cynic categories of those who live according to nature as the Scythians and those who do not."

[24] Troy W. Martin, *By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique*, JSNTSup 118 (London: T&T Clark, 1996). For Martin's own reflections on its reception, see his *Theology and Practice in Early Christianity*, 224–51.

[25] E.g., Ps-Anacharsis, *Ep.* 1, *Ep.* 2. Cf. Douglas A. Campbell, "The Scythian Perspective in Col. 3:11: A Response to Troy Martin," *NovT* 39 (1997): 83: "We never see Scythian Cynics opposed to barbarians in the few pieces of literature written from that perspective and now extant." Martin responds to this criticism in *Theology and Practice in Early Christianity*, 127: "Contrary to Campbell's contention, Ps.-Anacharsis' first letter contrasts Scythians with others of foreign speech and specifically identifies these others not only as Athenians but also as Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Persians (*Epistle* 1)." While this observation effectively demonstrates that the Scythians could be distinguished from a range of different ethnic groups, the Scythians are not opposed to the category "barbarians."

[26] David M. Goldenberg, "Scythian-Barbarian: The Permutations of a Classical Topos in Jewish and Christian Texts of Late Antiquity," *JJS* 49 (1998): 87–102; Johann Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Tübingen: J. G. P. Schrammi, 1742), 2:317; Theodor Hermann, "Barbar und Skythe. Ein Erklärungsversuch zu Kol 3, 11," *Theologische Blätter* 9 (1930): 106–7.

[27] Pliny, *Nat.* 4.81; Strabo, *Geogr.* 1.2.27; Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.2.56.

[28] See Frank M. Snowden, *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), 171–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

used to refer to the inhabitants of the extreme south. Goldenberg has identified a number of fairly late rabbinic texts (c. fifth–fourteenth century CE) in which inhabitants of northern regions are mentioned alongside and perhaps in contrast with barbarians. He cites only a single instance, however, and an uncertain one at that, that specifically features "Scythians" alongside "barbarians."[29]

Even if more substantial evidence were to be identified in this body of literature, this does not necessarily count for much given the chronological, cultural, and geographical gap that separates these texts from Colossians.[30] More immediately relevant is whether in contemporary Greco-Roman literature, "barbarian" could refer to the inhabitants of the far south. The primary evidence that this was the case comes from the anonymous *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (first century CE) and Ptolemy's *Geographia* (second century CE).[31] In these sources, Barbaria is identified as a region in the far south, on the coast of East Africa. Ptolemy refers to Barbaria in *Geogr.* 1.17.6 (ταῦτα δὲ πάντα Βαρβαρίαν ἰδίως καλούντων) and to "the Barbarian bay" in 4.7.4 (τῷ Βαρβαρικῷ πελάγει). He does not, however, identify the inhabitants of this region as "barbarians" (*barbaroi*). The *Periplus*, by contrast, does identify the inhabitants of this region as such but only after having introduced the region as ἡ Βαρβαρικὴ χώρα (*Periplus* 2). This contextual clue makes it possible for the reader to accurately interpret "Barbarian" as a gentilic in what follows but complicates any suggestion that the audience of Colossians would understand "barbarian" as a reference to this people on the coast of the Red Sea in the absence of such a contextual indicator. Further complicating the argument is that these "barbarians" are not, in the context of the *Periplus*, located at the furthest remove from the center; other regions and peoples are located further to the south.[32] Likewise relevant is that several other places and regions were identified as

[29] Only *MidPs* 109:3 *possibly* refers to the Scythians, depending on whether the hypothesis is accepted that *Shtutia*, found in some but not all manuscripts, is a corruption of Scythia (see Goldenberg, "Scythian-Barbarian," 89 n. 9, 95).

[30] Similarly Alexander Weiß, "Einführung," 26: "Dieser Gedankengang mag vor einem jüdischen Hintergrund, den Goldenberg ausbreitet, durchaus eine gewisse Plausibilität haben. Für einen griechischen Leser von Kol 3,11 jedoch – und die christlichen Gemeinden in West-Kleinasien bestanden nach allem, was wir wissen, mehrheitlich aus sogenannten Heidenchristen und nicht aus Judenchristen – ist dies jedoch kaum nachvollziehbar."

[31] For several other, later sources, see Goldenberg, "Scythian-Barbarian," 91.

[32] See Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text With Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 45–47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"barbaria" or as "the region of the barbarians."[33] And as previously noted, the word was more generally used, including within the corpus Paulinum, to refer to non-Greeks *in general*. All this renders it unlikely that readers of Colossians would have construed "barbarian" as a reference to an obscure people on the coast of East Africa. If the author of Colossians had sought to oppose the most extreme northern and southern regions, it is difficult to explain why he did not employ the more common and therefore more readily intelligible "Scythian-*Ethiopian*" binary.

Goldenberg reads "barbarian, Scythian" in Col 3:11 not only as a geographic antithesis but assigns it a racial component as well: "It would appear than Paul was using the place-name Barbaria in opposition to the place-name Scythia, and his antithesis, then, was racial-geographic (black/white)."[34] Lukas Bormann follows Goldenberg but rejects the racial interpretation as "unnecessary" arguing instead that Col 3:11 constitutes "an internationalization and universalization."[35] The reference to the extreme north and extreme south indicates, in line with other NT

[33] As Goldenberg himself notes in another article: "The Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman sources know of various Barbarias located in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Elam/Media, Syria, Lebanon, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Mauretania, and East Africa. The Rabbinic sources know of a Barbaria in the north (in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, or Syria); they know of a Barbarian Promontory either in Lusitania or in Mauretania; they certainly know the well-documented Barbaria in East Africa; and they know of a Barbaria in western North Africa although it was probably not Barbary" ("Geographia Rabbinica: The Toponym Barbaria," *JJS* 50 [1999]: 70–71).

[34] Goldenberg, "Geographia Rabbinica," 96.

[35] "Weltbild", 96, 100. See also Lukas Bormann, "'Nicht mehr Barbar, Skythe, Sklave, Freigeborener' (Kol 3,11): Personenrechtlicher Status, Geschlecht und Ethnizität in Colossae," *ASE* 36 (2019): 393–412; Lukas Bormann, "Barbaren und Skythen Im Lykostal? Epigraphischer Kommentar zu Kol 3:11," in *Epigraphical Evidence Illustrating Paul's Letter to the Colossians*, ed. Joseph Verheyden, Markus Öhler, and Thomas Corsten, WUNT 411 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 161–98; Lukas Bormann, "Griechen und Juden? Skythen und Barbaren: Ethnizität, kulturelle Dominanz und Marginalität im Neuen Testament," in *Alternative Voices: A Plurality Approach for Religious Studies (Essays in Honor of Ulrich Berner)*, ed. Afe Adogame et al., Critical Studies in Religion/Religionswissenschaft 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 116–33. In his 2018 publication, he appears to nuance the view advanced in his 2009 essay, when he writes "Die Gegenüberstellung Barbar und Skythe kann also auch eine geographische Bedeutung annehmen. Diese lässt sich aber nicht völlig von kulturellen Zuweisungen trennen" (186). Bormann concludes in that later contribution, "Kol 3:11 ist demnach angesichts des epigraphischen Befunds als eine Aussage zur Integration von gesellschaftlich randständigen Einzelpersonen aufzufassen. Deren Inklusion durch die für die Abfassung des Kolosserbriefs verantwortliche Paulusgruppe stellt eine paradigmatische Aufhebung von kulturellen Grenzen zu Ethnien jenseits von Juden und Griechen dar, die von Paulus selbst noch nicht konsequent überschritten wurden" (197–98).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

passages like Rom 15:24, 28 and Mark 13:10, that the gospel is to be proclaimed to the very ends of the known world: "In Col 3:11, the horizon of the proclamation of the Gospel is geographically extended to the boundaries of the known world."[36] This reading avoids the difficulty that "barbarian" does not usually refer to people with black skin color but remains vulnerable to the other objections discussed above that render it unlikely that "barbarian" would be understood by a first-century Greco-Roman audience as referring to the inhabitants of the far south.

Barbarians and Nomads

Alexander Weiß has advanced yet another interpretation of "barbarian, Scythian." He points out that the Scythians were a nomadic people and were sometimes regarded as just and noble. He accordingly proposes that Col 3:11 contrasts the noble, nomadic Scythians with (other) barbarians.[37] A major difficulty for this hypothesis is that, as Weiß himself notes, a distinction between "nomads" and "barbarians" is attested primarily in considerably earlier sources and cannot be readily identified in sources contemporaneous with Colossians.[38]

[36] Bormann, "Weltbild," 102. German original: "In Kol 3,11 wird der Horizont der Evangeliumsverkündigung geographisch bis an die Grenzen der bekannten Welt ausgeweitet."

[37] The identification of Scythians as a nomadic people also plays a role in an interpretation proposed by Richard Strelan, "The Languages of the Lycus Valley," in *Colossae in Space and Time: Linking to an Ancient City*, ed. Alan H. Cadwallader and Michael Trainor, NTOA 94 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 98–99: "Since it is used in a letter to Colossians, might 'Scythians' in fact refer to Phrygians in this context? Like Scythians, Phrygians were 'originally' nomadic and from the north-west, coming from the Lycus Valley from elsewhere but having political and cultural control in the Lycus for a period. A Scythian would then belong to the 'in' group; being labeled 'barbarian' would put one among the 'outsiders.' Were there Christians in Colossae and in the Lycus generally who claimed to be 'Scythian,' meaning they were descendants of the tribes who were the ruling class in the Lycus in the seventh and sixth centuries before the Common Era?" This is all highly speculative and there is nothing in the literary context (on which, see below, pp. 158–68) that points in this direction.

[38] Strabo is a crucially important source, because he attests, according to Weiß, to the continued currency of a distinction between nomad and barbarian: "In diesem Zusammenhang fällt bei Strabo dann auch ein Satz, der neuerlich ein Hinweis zu sein scheint auf ein Fortleben der Differenzierung zwischen Barbaren und Nomaden. Viel von dieser Schlechtigkeit, schreibt Strabo, 'ist … nicht nur zu den übrigen Barbaren, sondern auch zu den Nomaden gedrungen.'" (Weiß, "Einführung," 23). However, if "barbarians" and "nomads" were clearly distinguished, "übrigen" (ἄλλους, Strabo *Geogr.* 7.3.7 [C301]) would be superfluous.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Traditional Interpretation

The traditional interpretation holds that "Scythian" refers to an ethnic group especially renowned for its cruelty and barbarism. This interpretation is at least as old as Ambrosiaster's fourth century *Commentary on Colossians*:

> Paul distinguishes the barbarian from the Scythian, just as he distinguished the slave from the free man, not in Christ, in whom all are one, but in the savageness of their morals and the heinousness of their people (*in morum feritate et in gentis immanitate*). He wanted it to be understood that the Scythians were worse than barbarians before their conversion . . . the [Scythian] men became rabid in the way that dogs are, heinous, beastly and wild more than the barbarians were (*inmanes, silvestres, inculti plus quam barbari*), so changed that they were plunged into eating human flesh.[39]

This line of interpretation is reflected in many older publications. The matter is not, however, quite so straightforward as most studies that opt for this reading suggest. Alexander Weiß has drawn attention not only to the nomadic character of the Scythians but also to their depiction as a particularly noble people in some sources. The possiblity that the Scythian of Col 3:11 should be understood as a reference to the "noble savage" has been entertained by a number of other scholars as well.[40]

This split in scholarly opinion reflects the fact that the depiction of the Scythians in ancient Greek and Latin sources is mixed, featuring both highly appreciative and deeply derogatory assessments of the Scythians. Pompeius Trogus, for instance, praised them for their "ignorance of vice"

[39] Translation: Gerald L. Bray, *Ambrosiaster: Commentaries on Galatians–Philemon*, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Latin text: H. J. Vogels, *Ambrosiastri qui dicitur Commentarius in epistulas Paulinas (ad Galatas, ad Efesios, ad Filippenses, ad Colosenses, ad Thesalonicenses, ad Timotheum, ad Titum, ad Filemonem)*, CSEL 81/3 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969). For further discussion of this passage, see Matthijs den Dulk, "The Salvation of the Scythians: Early Christian Ethnography and the Reception History of Colossians 3:11," in *Aspects of Soteriology in John and Paul*, ed. Jan van der Watt, Joseph Verheyden, and Jörg Frey, WUNT 529 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2025), 258–61.

[40] E.g., Julius Jüthner, *Hellenen und Barbaren aus der Geschichte des Nationalbewusstseins*, Das Erbe der Alten: Schriften über Wesen und Wirkung der Antike Neue Folge (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1923), 143 n. 238: "Der Schriftsteller (will) den Skythen als etwas Edleres über die Barbaren herausheben . . . was im Hinblick auf die weitverbreitete Idealisierung der Nordvölker . . . nichts Befremdendes hätte."

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(*vitiorum ignoratio*),[41] while Josephus described them as "delighting in murdering people and little better than wild beasts" (φόνοις χαίροντες ἀνθρώπων καὶ βραχὺ τῶν θηρίων διαφέροντες, *C. Apion.* 2.269). Depending on the depiction familiar to readers of Col 3:11, the import of the reference to the Scythian may have been construed very differently. In what follows, I will argue that it is most likely, for reasons historical, literary, and contextual, that "Scythian" functioned in Col 3:11 as shorthand for immoral barbarian rather than noble savage.

Historical Development

Pompeius Trogus is somewhat of an outlier in that his appreciative assessment of the Scythians is fairly late (first century BCE).[42] It is otherwise mostly older sources that speak in praise of the Scythians. Herodotus' long excursus on the Scythians (*Hist.* 4.1–142) is notably even-handed. In letters ascribed to the sixth-century BCE philosopher Anacharsis, but more likely penned in the third century BCE, the Scythians are idealized as wise barbarians.[43] Anacharsis was half-Scythian, half-Greek, and often included among the Seven Sages (Ephorus *apud* Strabo 7.3.9 [C303]; Diogenes Laertius 1.13; Plutarch, *Sept. sap. conv.*). He was not, however, necessarily representative of the Scythians in general, despite Strabo's claim that he was among those who "showed a certain ethnic character of contentedness, simplicity, and justice" (ἐθνικόν τινα χαρακτῆρα ἐπέφαινον εὐκολίας καὶ λιτότητος καὶ δικαιοσύνης, 7.3.8 [C301] – see further on Strabo, below). Anacharsis was famously killed by other Scythians since "owing to his enthusiasm for everything Greek, he was supposed to be subverting the national institutions."[44] By his own account as reported by Diogenes Laertius, Anacharsis was not typical of Scythian culture: "When some Athenian reproached him with being a Scythian, he replied, 'while my country is a disgrace to me, you are a disgrace to your country'" (ὀνειδιζόμενος ὑπὸ Ἀττικοῦ ὅτι Σκύθης ἐστίν, ἔφη, "ἀλλ' ἐμοῦ μὲν ὄνειδος ἡ πατρίς, σὺ δὲ τῆς

[41] *Apud* Justin, *Epitome* 2.2.15. Latin text: Otto Seel, *Pompeius Trogus Fragmenta* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1956).

[42] Horace, *Odes* 3.24.9–10 (first century BCE) favorably contrasts the simple, nomadic life of the Scythians with the destructive effects of wealth, but nothing is said about the collective character of the Scythians.

[43] Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977); *Ep.* 1 ll. 20–21; *Ep.* 4 ll. 15–17; *Ep.* 9. ll. 28 (p. 48)–l. 2 (p. 50).

[44] Diogenes Laertius 1.102; cf. Herodotus 4.76–77, Josephus, *C. Apion.* 2.269.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

πατρίδος).[45] "Scythian" evidently has a depreciatory connotation here. In the fourth century BCE, Ephorus offered a glowing account of the Scythians, albeit with the intent to correct what he considered an undue emphasis on their savagery (see discussion below in the excursus on Strabo). One source he may have had in mind was his contemporary Antiphanes, who referred to the Scythians as "the foulest race" (γένος μιαρώτατον, fr. 157).

Sources closer in time to Colossians also frequently speak about the Scythians in derogatory terms. Polemo of Laodicea warns his readers that "you will find that the people of Scythia are a treacherous and immoral people."[46] Several contemporary sources compare the Scythians to wild animals (θηρία). As noted above, Josephus considered them "little better than beasts" (βραχὺ τῶν θηρίων διαφέροντες); in Diodorus Siculus, Scythia is equated with a beastly way of life (τῆς Σκυθίας καὶ θηριώδους διαγωγῆς, 9.26.5); Pliny wrote that in the territory of the Scythian Anthropophagi, there are "multitudes of wild beasts ... ready to fall upon human beings *just as savage as themselves*" (*Nat.* 6.20.1). Ambrosiaster's depiction of the Scythians as "rabid in the way that dogs are, heinous, beastly and wild" evidently drew on well-established literary precedent.

When contemporary texts report appreciatively about some aspect of Scythian culture, it is often formulated, much like in Ephorus, in direct opposition to the common wisdom that the Scythians were an especially immoral and barbaric people. Valerius Maximus 5.4e.5 (first century CE) describes an act of Scythian piety, but the anecdote simultaneously confirms the general reputation of the Scythians for savagery: "By this pious answer, that fierce and barbarous nation (*inmanis et barbara gens*) redeemed themselves from the charge of savagery (*feritas*)." Similarly, Lucian's *Toxaris* offers an appreciative depiction of the Scythians as a people who deeply value friendship, but this is formulated against the backdrop and in correction of the common Greek view that they were wild savages. As the dialogue's Greek interlocutor Mnesippus puts it in *Toxaris* 8: "I should not have expected friendship to be so highly cherished among the Scythians, for as they are inhospitable and uncivilised

[45] Diogenes Laertius 1.104–5.

[46] *Leiden Polemon* 31. Translation: Hoyland, "A New Edition and Translation of the Leiden Polemon," 423.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I thought that they always were well acquainted with hatred, anger, and bad humour but did not enter into friendship even with their closest kin, judging by all that we hear about them, and especially the report that they eat their dead fathers."

Admiring comments about the Scythians also appear in the context of narratives of decline, in which the Scythians of yore are cast as noble savages, in contradistinction to their descendants. An early example is found in Clearchus of Soli (fourth–third century BCE): "The Scythians were the first people to rely exclusively on laws that applied to everyone. But then they became, by contrast, the most miserable people in the world due to their outrageous behavior" (μόνον δὲ νόμοις κοινοῖς πρῶτον ἔθνος ἐχρήσατο τὸ Σκυθῶν· εἶτα πάλιν ἐγένοντο πάντων ἀθλιώτατοι βροτῶν διὰ τὴν ὕβριν).[47]

Strabo, who comments on the Scythians extensively in a complicated argument that requires some unpacking, also posits that their moral character had degenerated over time.

Excursus: Strabo on the Scythians

Strabo's most extensive comments about the collective character of the Scythians appear in the context of a scholarly dispute about the geographical knowledge of Homer and other ancient authors. Strabo's opponents Eratosthenes and Apollodorus claimed that Homer had been unaware of the Scythians:

> They say because of ignorance he [Homer] does not mention the Scythians or their cruelty toward strangers (they sacrifice them and eat their flesh, using their skulls for drinking cups), and because of whom the Pontus was called the Axenos, yet he invents certain "noble Mare Milkers, Milk Drinkers, and the Abians, the most just people" – who are nowhere on earth. (7.3.7 [C300])

Strabo commences his apologetic efforts on behalf of Homer and other ancient authors by arguing that the name "Axenos" (inhospitable) betrays that they were acquainted with the Scythians: "How, then, could they call the sea 'Axenos' if they did not know about the savageness or about the people who were most savage? And these, of course, are the Scythians" (εἰ μὴ ᾔδεισαν τὴν ἀγριότητα, μηδ' αὐτοὺς τοὺς μάλιστα τοιούτους; οὗτοι δ' εἰσὶ δήπου οἱ Σκύθαι, 7.3.7 [C300]). Strabo subscribes here to the view that the Scythians were "most savage." Strabo continues his argument that Homer was by no means ignorant of the Scythians by arguing that he had the Scythians in mind when he spoke of "mare milkers" and "milk drinkers." This interpretation faces an obvious problem, however, because Homer describes these people as "the most just," which seems inappropriate given the Scythians' reputation for savagery. Strabo's preemptive response to this objection is two-pronged: (1) he limits the "justness" of the Scythians to their dealings

[47] *Lives*, fr. 46, *apud* Athenaeus, Deipn. 12.524c.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

among themselves (rather than with strangers, whom he admits they treat cruelly) and specifically to the honesty and straightforwardness with which they treat each other due to their common possession of all things; (2) he argues that the Scythians have changed over time: They were "just" (in this circumscribed sense) in previous times, but that description was no longer apt in his own day. Strabo posits that the Scythians had become corrupted due to the influence of Hellenic culture (7.3.7 [C301]) but that those "who lived before our times, and particularly those who lived near the time of Homer, were such people as Homer says, and were assumed to be such by the Hellenes" (7.3.8 [C301]). In support, he discusses several episodes and figures from the sixth to third century BCE to paint an attractive picture of Scythian culture (7.3.8 [C301–2]). The final component of Strabo's attempt to rescue Homer from his critics relies on the work of the fourth-century BCE historian Ephorus of Cyme, who argued that the reputation of the Scythians for savagery was the result of other authors' sensationalism and overgeneralizations about the Scythians (7.3.9 [C302]). Ephorus did not deny that some Scythians were cruel (χαλεπός) and engaged in savageness (ὠμότης) but argued that this did not apply to all of them and did not tell the full story. Ephorus accordingly focused on their more laudable qualities. Strabo concludes the discussion by stating that "there was a common report (believed both in antiquity and later) that certain of the nomads – those settled the farthest away from other men – were the Milk Drinkers and the Abians, the most just, and not Homer's fantasy" (7.3.9 [C303]). Taking this broader literary context into account allows us to see that the appreciative comments made about the Scythians in this section are not disinterested ethnography but part of an apologetic effort in support of Homer and other ancient authors. Strabo's lengthy argument suggests that he expected his first-century readership to balk at the notion that the Scythians were to be identified with Homer's "most just people." Importantly for present purposes, Strabo indicates that this description was no longer accurate in his own day. He distinguishes between contemporary Scythians and those who lived closer to Homer's time, explaining their moral degeneration as the result of the corrupting influence of Hellenic culture. Elsewhere, when Strabo mentions the Scythians, he primarily associates them with cruelty and savagery, not with the justness that Homer allegedly imputed to them (cf. 3.4.17, 5.3.12, 11.9.2-3, 11.11.3).

Ambrosiaster too, in his comments on Col 3:11, resolved the mixed reputation of the Scythians by means of a narrative of decline: "Although there are Greek books which testify to [the Scythians'] righteousness . . . since everything degenerates, later on they became more blameworthy than they had been praiseworthy before." Perhaps the degeneration model is how we should contextualize Pompeius Trogus' unusually glowing account of the Scythians as well, since it is embedded in a narration of the early history of the Scythians, prior to Darius' invasion in 513 BCE (Justin, *Epitome* 2.5.9–13).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Literary Form

Another reason to posit that the "Scythian" of Col 3:11 would have invited associations of cruelty and immorality is that nuanced comments about the Scythians appear mostly in contexts where the authors enter into some detail about the history and character of the Scythians (Herodotus, Pompeius Trogus *apud* Justin, Ephorus *apud* Strabo). By contrast, when "Scythian" identity is briefly alluded to in a context where ethnography is not the main concern (as in Col 3:11), it often has a pejorative connotation (as already noted with regard to Strabo).

One type of evidence that suggests that the mere mention of or allusion to the Scythians would have elicited associations with barbaric and shocking behavior is verbs like Σκυθίζω ("to behave like a Scythian"), which could refer to immoderate drinking – based on the Scythian practice of drinking unmixed wine[48] – or to the act of scalping or shaving defeated enemies. For the former (heavy drinking), the compound verb ἐπι-σκυθίζω was available as well; ἀπο-σκυθίζω could be used for scalping/shaving.[49]

Proverbial expressions related to the Scythians further strengthen the impression that common associations with the word "Scythian" were not especially positive. Clearchus of Soli associates "Scythian speech" with their supposed arrogance and harshness:

> The Scythians dominated everyone so high-handedly that whatever their slaves did was accompanied by tears, making the meaning of the saying "from the Scythians" apparent to everyone thereafter (πάντων δὲ οὕτως ὑπερηφάνως προέστησαν ὥστε οὐδένων ἄδακρυς ἡ τῆς δουλείας ὑπουργία γιγνομένη διήγγειλεν εἰς τοὺς ἐπιγινομένους τὴν ἀπὸ Σκυθῶν ῥῆσιν οἵα τις ἦν, *Lives* [fr. 46] *apud* Athenaeus, Deipn. 12.524e).

This statement must be understood in light of what is reported about "Scythian speech" by Herodotus, who records this reply by the Scythian king Idanthyrsus to the Persian ruler Darius I:

> As for you, instead of gifts of earth and water I shall send such as ought to come to you; and for your boast that you are my master, I say 'Weep!'" Such is the proverbial "Scythian speech" (σοὶ δὲ ἀντὶ μὲν δώρων γῆς τε καὶ ὕδατος δῶρα πέμψω τοιαῦτα οἷα σοὶ πρέπει ἐλθεῖν, ἀντὶ δὲ τοῦ ὅτι δεσπότης ἔφησας εἶναι ἐμός, κλαίειν λέγω." τοῦτο ἐστὶ ἡ ἀπὸ Σκυθέων ῥῆσις, *Hist.* 4.127.4).

[48] Cf. Athenaeus, Deipn. 10.427a, where this is referred to as "Scythian drinking" (Σκυθικὴν . . . πόσιν).

[49] LSJ, s.v. ἀποσκυθίζω.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To tell someone to "go weep" (or to actually make them weep, as in the case of the enslaved people discussed by Clearchus) was evidently considered typical of the Scythians' mode of communication. The Suda nicely captures the import of the expression: "The proverb is applied to those who sharply tell someone to go hang" (Ἡ ἀπὸ Σκυθῶν ῥῆσις: τέτακται ἡ παροιμία ἐπὶ τῶν ἀποτόμως οἰμώζειν τινὰ λεγόντων).[50] While harsh, such speech also evinces *parrhesia* and as such could be praiseworthy, as is evident from Diogenes Laertius, who credits the origins of the proverb to Anacharsis: "So outspoken was he that he furnished occasion for a proverb, 'To talk like a Scythian'" (παρέσχε δὲ καὶ ἀφορμὴν παροιμίας διὰ τὸ παρρησιαστὴς εἶναι, τὴν ἀπὸ Σκυθῶν ῥῆσιν, 1.101).

A more uniformly derogatory conception of the Scythians is suggested by the proverbial expression "a Scythian toying with a donkey" (or, in some versions, "horse"), which the Suda explains as referring "to those ostensibly nauseated but in fact avid. For someone who had seen a dead donkey said to a Scythian who was present 'some meal, Scythian!' He was disgusted, but subsequently prepared it for eating" (Ἀκκιζόμενος Σκύθης τὸν ὄνον. ἐπὶ τῶν βδελυττομένων λόγῳ, ἔργῳ δὲ ἐφιεμένων. ἰδὼν γάρ τις νεκρὸν ὄνον ἔφη πρὸς Σκύθην παρόντα, δεῖπνόν τι, ὦ Σκύθα. ὁ δὲ ἐμυσάξατο μὲν, ὕστερον δὲ ἐπονεῖτο).[51] The proverb reflects the Scythians' reputation as people who engaged in actions considered loathsome and abominable (cf. βδελυττομένων, μυσάξατο). A final proverbial expression associated with the Scythians was "Scythian wilderness" (Σκυθῶν ἐρημία), which referred "to desolate and wild places" (ἐπὶ τῶν ἐρήμων καὶ ἐξηγριωμένων τόπων, *CPG* 2:208, cf. 3:643 for a slightly different explanation), a description that suggests an etymological and contextual connection with the reputation of the Scythians as the most "wild" or "savage" (ἀγριότης) people (Strabo 7.3.7, discussed above). Cumulatively, these examples suggest that a quick reference to a Scythian, such as we have in Col 3:11, would have conjured up associations of savageness and barbarism for many readers, not of anything praiseworthy or virtuous.

Social and Intellectual Context

Another consideration in this connection is related to the social and intellectual context of Colossians and its readers. Josephus was not the

[50] Suda, η.11. Translation: William Hutton, "Eta, 11," *Suda On Line*, accessed February 11, 2025, www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/sol/sol-entries/eta/11.

[51] Suda, α.878. Translation adapted from Jennifer Benedict, "Alpha, 878," *Suda On Line*, accessed February 11, 2025, www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/sol/sol-entries/alpha/787; cf. δ.357, ο.695; *CPG* 1:144, 1:452–53.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

only Hellenistic Jewish author to make disparaging comments about the Scythians. The conception of the Scythians as savage and barbaric is also expressed or presupposed in 2 Macc 4:47, 3 Macc 7:5, 4 Macc 10:7, and Philo, *Legat.* 10. These texts are arguably closer to the social and intellectual milieu of Colossians than any of the literature that suggest a more appreciative understanding of the Scythians. That subsequent Christian literature also almost uniformly depicts the Scythians in dark hues further cements the impression that in the social and intellectual context inhabited by Colossians' author and readers, the word *Skythes* would much more readily have invited pejorative than appreciative connotations.[52]

Summation

While it remains possible that a reader had, for instance, Pompeius Trogus' claims about the Scythians' "ignorance of vice" (*vitiorum ignoratio*) ringing in their ears as they encountered Col 3:11 and hence construed the reference to the "Scythian" differently, there are good historical, literary, and contextual grounds to posit that "Scythian" would most likely and most frequently have conjured up derogatory associations of savagery, cruelty, and immorality. In light of these considerations and the various weaknesses that alternative interpretations face, the traditional view that the Scythian in Col 3:11 refers to someone who is especially barbaric remains a compelling interpretive option. "Barbarian" must in that case be understood as carrying the pejorative connotation attested in contemporary literature as well as in the Pauline corpus (Rom 1:14), with the "Scythian" functioning as a superlative instance of barbarism. The primary weakness of this line of interpretation is that "Scythian" on this reading functions as an intensification of "barbarian" rather than as its opposite. If the formulation of Col 3:11 was entirely of the author's making, it would indeed be remarkable that these two terms do not fit the pattern, but since he is inserting "barbarian, Scythian" into an already established formula it is perhaps not all that noteworthy that they do not neatly conform to the existing pattern. Moreover, some of the more compelling proposals surveyed above also fail to neatly fit these two terms into the existing pattern, because the other pairs in Col 3:11 are not only mutually exclusive but also all-encompassing: everyone is either a Jew or a Greek (i.e., non-Jew), either circumcised or uncircumcised, and

[52] See den Dulk, "Salvation of the Scythians."

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

either an enslaved or a free person.[53] The proposals by Goldenberg, Bormann, and Weiß, however, do not construe "barbarian, Scythian" as such: Not everyone is either from the far north or from the far south (most people are from somewhere in-between) and not everyone is either a barbarian or a nomad (the Greeks being the obvious exception). Likewise relevant to note in this connection is that structurally the sentence does not consist of four equal parts either, since *kai* separates the first and second as well as third and fourth items on the list, but is absent from the remainder of the verse. As Peter Müller rightly notes, "Neither the structure of the sentence nor its contents are constructed as a fully consistent opposition. Therefore, caution is advised with interpretations that divide all the terms into opposing pairs."[54] The fact that the traditional interpretation does not construe barbarian and Scythian as opposites is, then, not as fatal an objection as is sometimes suggested.

6.3 LITERARY CONTEXT

I propose that any lingering uncertainty about the significance of "Scythian" in Col 3:11 may be resolved by taking the literary context into account. This context has been largely missing from the analysis thus far, which reflects the fact that it has received short shrift in much recent scholarly discussion.[55] *Why* "barbarian, Scythian" is introduced *at this point in Colossians* is rarely asked. Regardless of whether interpreters argue that "Scythian" refers to a particularly low kind of barbarian, to people in the far north, to nomads, and so on, and irrespective of whether they interpret the reference in terms of the inclusivity of the Christian community, the geographical spread of the gospel, or a polemic against opponents, the question of how such a reference functions in the

[53] Cf. Galen, *Inst.* 1,9–11 who distinguishes between free and enslaved persons and regards freedpersons as a subcategory of the former, rather than as a separate, third category.

[54] Peter Müller, *Kolosserbrief*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 303. German original: "Weder die Struktur des Satzes noch die Inhalte sind völlig stringent als Opposition aufgebaut. Deshalb ist Vorsicht geboten bei Deutungen, die alle Begriffe in Gegensatzpaare aufteilen."

[55] Noting the similarities between Col 3:11 and Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 12:13 (quoted at the outset of this chapter), many interpreters appear to transpose the meaning of those texts to Col 3:11, yet with more emphasis on ethnic tensions, given the inclusion of barbarian and Scythian. However, the literary contexts of these three passages are rather different, as Troy Martin rightly observes (*Theology and Practice in Early Christianity*, 122): "Pauline antitheses are used in 1 Cor 12:13 and Gal 3:28 to emphasize the unity that Christ effects for the church. In Colossians, however, the emphasis is upon the repudiation of the evils associated with the old humanity and the realization of the practices of the new humanity."

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

immediate literary context has often remained unexamined.[56] This critique also applies to interpretations that do not stake out a clear position on the function of "barbarian, Scythian" and emphasize, more generally, that Col 3:11 refers to the abolishment or transcendence of social and ethnic distinctions, without clarifying the function of such a claim at this point in the letter.

Col 3:11 is situated in the second part of the epistle, which is marked by a predominantly parenetical focus (3:1–4:6).[57] Early on in chapter 3, the believers are called to

> Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. (Col 3:5–8)

The author is writing to a Gentile audience (cf. Col 2:13) and exhorts them to "put to death" what was characteristic of their prior way of life. We have seen in Chapter 3 that contemporary Jewish literature regularly characterized non-Jews as particularly prone to sexual malfeasance (cf. the first four terms in 3:5) as well as to greed, the final vice mentioned here, which is tellingly equated with "idolatry," the Gentile sin par excellence. Colossians 3:5, then, features an ethnically inflected list of

[56] Some have tried to explain the presence of the Scythian in relation to the historical setting of Colossians, but this is entirely speculative. E.g., Andreas Lindemann, *Der Kolosserbrief*, Zürcher Bibelkommentare 10 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1983), 59, raises the possibility that "barbarian, Scythian" was added because of problems with foreigners in the community. Yet there is nothing in the literary context that points in this direction. Cf. Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Astrid B. Beck, AB 34B (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 415: "A series of commentators has tried to explain the further peculiarities of this verse by means of the special situations in the Colossian community. But even here, we do not get beyond suppositions . . . there are no indications of a specific function of Scythians in the society there."

[57] For analysis of the letter's structure, see Franz Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene der Schöpfung: Untersuchungen zur Formalstruktur und Theologie des Kolosserbriefes* (Wien: Herder, 1974); Johannes Lähnemann, *Der Kolosserbrief: Komposition, Situation, und Argumentation* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1971), 53–57. Some interpreters take 3:5 as the starting point of the parenetical section and include 3:1–4 with the polemic against the opponents in 2:6–23 (e.g., Bormann, *Kolosserbrief*, 147–48, 151, 156). Others locate the starting point of the parenetical part of the letter already in 2:6 or even earlier (Wolfgang Schenk, "Christus, das Geheimnis der Welt, als dogmatisches und ethisches Grundprinzip des Kolosserbriefes," *EvTh* 43 [1983]: 151).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

vices.[58] This is surely relevant for the interpretation of Col 3:11, which follows shortly after and includes references to a variety of ethnic groups: Greeks, Jews, barbarians, and Scythians. The fact that the author starts with "Greek" in Col 3:11, which has sometimes puzzled interpreters since elsewhere in the New Testament the order is always reversed (Jew and Greek), can be explained as a function of the fact that the preceding part of this literary unit has been concerned with characteristically "Greek" sins.

The author continues his moral exhortations with the metaphor of stripping off the "old self" and putting on a "new self":

> [9] Seeing that you have *stripped off* (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι) the old self with its practices [10] and have *clothed yourselves* (ἐνδυσάμενοι) with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator, [11] where there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved, free; but Christ is all and in all! [12] As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, *clothe yourselves* (ἐνδύσασθε) with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. [13] Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. [14] Above all, *clothe yourselves*[59] with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Throughout this section, the emphasis is on vices and virtues; the change in clothing refers to a moral transformation. The believers are to give up the old sinful practices detailed in 3:5–9a and adopt the high ethical standard that the author lays out in 3:12–14 and much of the remainder of the letter. Embedded as it is in this section, it stands to reason that Col 3:11 pertains to *moral* transformation as well. In light of other Pauline texts like Rom 12:2 and 2 Cor 4:16, the process of renewal (ἀνακαίνωσις) may be understood to comprise a range of anthropological, epistemological, and eschatological aspects, but in the present context it is applied to the moral realm.[60]

[58] As Müller, *Kolosserbrief*, 294 notes in commenting on this verse, "Unzucht und Habgier sind … als heidnische Verhaltensweisen gekennzeichnet." Similarly, Gnilka, *Kolosserbrief,* 181; Foster, *Colossians*, 322–23; Ingrid Maisch, *Der Brief an die Gemeinde in Kolossä*, Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 12 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), 221–23.

[59] The verb ἐνδύω is not repeated, but "love" (τὴν ἀγάπην, vs. 14) is one of the objects of "clothe yourselves" (ἐνδύσασθε) in v. 12.

[60] It is worth noting in this connection that the transformative process involves *epignosis* (εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν κατ' εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν) and that this term was associated at the outset of the letter with moral conduct: "We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will (ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ) in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God (τῇ ἐπιγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ)" (Col 1:9–10).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This observation may help us decide between the interpretive options surveyed above. Which of these can best explain why the author felt compelled to include "barbarian, Scythian" in this particular context? Interpretations that connect "barbarian, Scythian" with the polemic against opponents do not fit the literary context very well, because this issue was addressed earlier on (Col 2:8–23) and there is nothing in the text that suggests that these unnamed rivals were accused of disputing the need to abandon vices like fornication and anger or of adopting virtues like compassion and patience.[61] Interpretations that understand the inclusion of "barbarian, Scythian" in geographical terms, as a way of indicating that the gospel is (to be) proclaimed to the "ends of the earth" face the same objection inasmuch as they do not explain how this connects with the section's moral focus.[62] Interpretations that argue that "barbarian,

[61] This criticism applies to Troy Martin's proposal, as well as to the more recent article by Deok Hee Jung, "Barbarian and Scythian in Col 3,11," *Biblica* 99 (2018): 414–30, which argues that Col 3:11 is aimed against the opponents' assertion of superiority: "Accordingly, the formula in 3,11 makes the point that there should be no distinction between those who arrogantly constitute themselves as judges over other persons, and those who are held captive by these judgments" (427). Other interpreters have likewise read Col 3:11 as aimed, at least in part, at the position of the rival teachers. See, e.g., MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 146–47, for the suggestion that the absence of the male-female pair has to do with the alleged asceticism of the rival teachers, and Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 225, for the argument that "circumcision-uncircumcision" indicates that circumcision was a key point of discussion between the author and his opponents (likewise Gnilka, *Der Kolosserbrief*, 191).

[62] Harry Maier, "Barbarians, Scythians, and Imperial Iconography in the Epistle to the Colossians," in *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images*, ed. Annette Weissenrieder, Friederike Wendt, and Petra von Gemünden, WUNT 193 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 385–406, is one of the few to recognize the significance of the emphasis on moral exhortation in the immediate literary context of Col 3:11. Maier argues that the passage "offers an imperial-looking global universality" and compares it with the inclusion of images and statues of defeated *ethnē* in Roman imperial monuments. Maier admits, however, that "the author in the literary context of the passage has his eye more on exhortation than iconography, as he contrasts the new nature of 3:10 with the vice list of vs. 5–9, a link the Scythian reference exploits, since Scythians were associated with immoderation. However, even here the imperial focus comes into play, since the Empire conceived itself as a civilizing influence bringing its superior moral order to subject peoples" (395). Maier does not further develop this brief aside. His interpretation of Col 3:11 (as positioned over against Roman claims about a universal "territorial reach") faces the difficulty that this text is not simply a list of subjugated peoples but covers "religious" and socioeconomic differences as well. Maier resolves this difficulty by reading slave/free in a geographic sense as reflecting "Roman imperial territorial associations in which there is a distinction between enslaved barbarians subject to Roman domination and free Scythians outside Roman control" (389). He cites Campbell's work in support, but Campbell in fact argued the opposite (Scythian

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Scythian" indicate that people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds are to be included and treated equally are vulnerable on this point as well. As Jerry Sumney notes, "ethnic and social distinctions have not been an issue to this point" in the letter.[63] It is true that the author does not conceive of moral transformation in purely individual terms but exhorts his audience to forgive *each other* and to bear *with one another* (3:13). The emphasis, however, is on cultivating virtues, not on resolving tensions between different groups within the community. The immediate goal and outcome of the process of renewal is the rejection of vices (3:5–9) and the adoption of virtues (3:12); the latter subsequently enable the community to live together harmoniously (3:13–17).

There is, of course, an obvious connection between the emphasis on *moral* exhortation and the ethnic stereotype of Scythians (and to a lesser extent, barbarians) as *immoral*. This congruence between the ancient stereotype and the literary context suggests that the traditional understanding of Scythian as especially immoral and barbaric is indeed in view in this section. This interpretation was already deemed most likely on the basis of how these terms are used in contemporary literature. The connection with the broader theme of the section further strengthens the case.

An important question remains however to be answered: What point is made by the inclusion of a reference to these allegedly immoral people in the letter's moral exhortations? One possibility is that the readers are called upon to treat even such notoriously savage people as the Scythians according to the high ethical standard that the author advocates. They too must be treated with "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (3:12). Another possibility is that the author seeks to convey that all people regardless of status or background are called upon and capable of realizing the ethical ideal that the author advocates. The inclusion of the barbarian and Scythian, on this reading, serves to make a forceful claim about the transformative power of the gospel: Everyone,

= slave, barbarian = free). Maier cites no evidence that "barbarian" was likely to be understood as referring to enslaved inhabitants of the Roman Empire. There were plenty of free "barbarians" within the Roman Empire, and plenty of "barbarians" outside of it, both free and enslaved. Maier's insight that universalist claims such as we find in Col 3:11 are reminiscent of Roman imperial ideology is valuable, but I think we can be more precise both with regard to the kind of claim that is made (it is not exclusively about territory or ethnicity) and about the aim of this universalist claim (which, I suggest, centers on moral improvement).

[63] Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary,* NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2013), 204.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

including the barbarian and even the Scythian, can realize this ethical ideal.

I propose that the latter option is, on balance, the most persuasive. It seems more likely that the groups that are mentioned in 3:11 *participate* in the process of moral transformation than that they are to be treated equitably by those who have undergone this transformation. Colossians 3:10 describes the process of renewal and 3:11b describes its outcome: "Christ is all and in all." This suggests that the groups referenced in 3:11a are participating in the process of moral renewal and become conformed to the "image of the Creator" to such an extent that ultimately Christ becomes fully manifest in them. At that point, ethnic background and status have become irrelevant because all are enabled to live lives that are fully infused with Christ and therefore marked by moral excellence. All of them, who are now no longer defined by their prior identities but are collectively addressed as ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ἅγιοι καὶ ἠγαπημένοι are enabled and therefore called upon to "clothe themselves" with the virtues mentioned in 3:12 ("compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience"), along with, above all, "love" (3:14).

That everyone is equally capable of virtue might seem so self-evident that it can hardly be what Col 3:11 sought to convey. Yet in Colossians' ancient context, this claim would by no means have been obvious or uncontested. The Greek, the first item on the list, was from a Jewish vantage point frequently regarded as particularly prone to various vices.[64] As previously noted, the section starts off with a reference to typically "Greek" sins (Col 3:5), which were said to be characteristic of the prior way of life of the letter's non-Jewish audience: "These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life" (3:7). Moreover, earlier in the letter, the author had described this audience as "once estranged and hostile in mind, *doing evil deeds*" (ποτε ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἐχθροὺς τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς, Col 1:21).[65] It is plausible therefore to apply the lack of distinction in Col 3:11 between Greek and Jew to the moral plane. Although Gentiles were inclined to these various sins, Col 3:11 asserts that through Christ they are just as capable of moral transformation as are those of Jewish descent.

[64] See Chapter 3.

[65] For the view that Gentiles are primarily in view in this passage, see, e.g., Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser: Der Brief an Philemon*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament 12 (Gütersloh, Würzburg: Gerd Mohn; Echter Verlag, 1993), 92; Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 219; Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 106.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The same logic can be applied to the circumcised/uncircumcised contrast; those who are uncircumcised, like the audience of this letter (Col 2:13), are equally capable of living up to Colossians' ethical instructions as those who were circumcised. Read along these lines, the author expresses a thought quite similar to 1 Cor 7:19, "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything" (cf. Rom 2:25–29). Whether circumcised or not, Christ-followers are called upon and enabled to obey God's instructions. Uncircumcision need no longer be associated with "trespasses," as used to be the case: "You were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh" (ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας [ἐν] τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, Col 2:13). This passage and Col 1:21, along with Col 3:5–7, both quoted in the preceding paragraph, indicate that earlier in the letter the distinction between Greek and Jew and circumcised and uncircumcised had been conceptualized in moral terms. These passages earlier in the letter prime the reader to apply the lack of distinctions announced in Col 3:11 to the moral plane: Non-Jews and those who are uncircumcised are just as capable of virtue as circumcised Jews; they are no longer trapped in lives marked by "evil deeds" (1:21) and "trespasses" (2:13).

The final pair, enslaved and free, likewise fits this reading and arguably offers the most compelling argument in support of this reading. Whether slaves had an equal capacity for virtue had been subject to debate ever since Aristotle suggested the contrary.[66] Enslaved people were widely regarded as prone to immorality, including by early Jewish and early Christian authors.[67] As John Chrysostom put it, "everywhere it is admitted that the race of slaves is somewhat reckless, not open to impression, intractable, not terribly apt to receive instruction in virtue . . . it's difficult for any slave to be good" (*Hom. Tit.* 4.3).[68] The author of Colossians, on

[66] See P. A. Brunt, "Aristotle and Slavery," in *Studies in Greek History and Thought* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 343–88; Malcolm Heath, "Aristotle on Natural Slavery," *Phronesis* 53 (2008): 243–70; Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine*, The W. B. Stanford Memorial Lectures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 107–27; Marguerite Deslauriers, "Aristotle on the Virtues of Slaves and Women," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2003): 213–31.

[67] Cf. Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery*, 74 n. 10: "Christian writers (and Philo) . . . can sometimes sound rather like Aristotle." Pertinent primary texts are collected in Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery*, 157–219.

[68] Translation: Pauline Allen, *John Chrysostom, Homilies on Titus and Philemon*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: SBL, 2024), 83. Chrysostom argues that this is not an inherent deficit of enslaved people but is due to the fact that they have not had the

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

my reading, argues that in Christ there is no distinction between enslaved people and enslavers in terms of their capacity for virtue. In doing so, he was making much the same point as the Stoics, who argued, against the Aristotelian view, that slaves were just as capable of virtue as everyone else.[69] As Seneca succinctly put it, "it is possible for a slave to be just" (*potest servus iustus esse*, *Ben.* 3.18.4). He argued that "although in other matters there are great distinctions of rank and birth, virtue is accessible to all; she deems no one unworthy" (*virtus in medio posita est; neminem dedignatur, Polyb.* 17.2).[70] According to Seneca, "virtue closes the door to no one; it is open to all, admits all, invites all, freeborn and freed people and enslaved people and kings and exiles" (*et ingenuos et libertinos et servos et reges et exules*, *Ben.* 3.18.2).[71] This statement is close to Col 3:11 in thought as well as in form (note the references to various categories on opposing ends of the social spectrum). In short, the passage in Colossians, on the reading proposed here, can be situated within a broader discussion about the extent to which virtue was universally attainable.

What makes this interpretation of "enslaved, free" in Col 3:11 especially compelling is that if we construe the passage along these lines, a classic problem in the interpretation of Colossians subsides. Very shortly after the proclamation that "there is no longer . . . enslaved and free" (Col 3:11), the letter offers elaborate instructions to enslaved people and enslavers that indicate that this social hierarchy remains intact (Col 3:22–4:1). Scholars have offered various theories to resolve this

benefit of instruction from suitable teachers and companions. Chrysostom submits that it is testimony to the power of the Christian message (ἡ τοῦ κηρύγματος δύναμις) that it can make enslaved people better behaved and more reasonable (κοσμιώτερον καὶ ἐπιεικέστερον).

[69] For comparison of the Stoics with Aristotle, see Brunt, "Aristotle and Slavery," 371–74, 381–84; Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery*, 105–6.

[70] Cf. the similar statement in Valerius Maximus, who writes, immediately after citing the example of a virtuous barbarian slave, "Virtue is not, therefore, fastidious about who approaches her: when strong characters are aroused she allows them to come right up to her, and she provides generous or stingy portions to each person without any discrimination according to status; rather she is available to all equally on the basis of how much desire you bring rather than how much social standing" (3.3.ext.7; Translation: Rebecca Langlands, *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome* [Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 214). Valerius Maximus is affirming the accessibility of virtue to all in a context where this was not the consensus view, as is evident also from statements within his own work, e.g.: "It remains for us to relate the loyalty of slaves to their masters, which is so much the more praiseworthy *because it was least expected from them*" (6.8.1).

[71] For evidence suggesting that other Stoics likewise claimed a universal human potential for virtue, see Stobaeus, *Flor.* 2.65.8; Diogenes Laertius 7.91; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.11.2–3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contradiction. F. F. Bruce explained the inconsistency by restricting the implications of Col 3:11 to the context of "the Christian fellowship": "Outside the Christian fellowship those barriers stood as high as ever .... But within the community of the new creation – 'in Christ' – these barriers were irrelevant; indeed, they had no existence."[72] However, in Col 3:22–4:1, the author addresses both slaves and masters as fellow Christ-believers, so the claim that Col 3:11 advocates the abolishment of social distinctions within the Christian community is hardly compelling.[73] More plausible is the line of interpretation advanced by, among others, Paul Foster, who argues that the discrepancy may reflect "a pragmatic realization that while the gospel dismantles such social distinctions, nonetheless within the first-century setting Christians were powerless to introduce such radical social changes."[74] In support of this line of argument, scholars have pointed to elements in Col 3:22–4:1 that may indicate that the author sought to improve the position of enslaved people, suggesting that the author would ideally see the institution of slavery abolished. Such elements include their identification as "heirs" (3:24) in a social context in which it was highly unusual for enslaved people to be heirs, as well as the injunction to enslavers to give to their slaves "what is just and equitable" (τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὴν ἰσότητα, 4:1).[75] Yet even on a maximalist construal of potentially anti-slavery elements in Col 3:22–4:1, the slave-master relationship remains intact, even though Col 3:11 supposedly proclaimed it null and void.

[72] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 149. Similarly, Gnilka, *Kolosserbrief*, 190; Maisch, *Kolossä*, 231.

[73] There can be no doubt that both parties are understood to be fellow believers. The enslaved persons are reminded that "you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward" (Col. 3:24), while the enslavers are told "you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1). Moreover, the household context cannot be meaningfully distinguished from the context of the "Christian fellowship," since their meetings took place in houses, presumably especially the larger-sized houses of members who could afford to own enslaved people.

[74] Foster, *Colossians,* 343. Similarly, Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 253: "A pragmatic quietism was the most effective means of gaining room enough to develop the quality of personal relationships which would establish and build up the microcosms (churches) of transformed communities." Sumney, *Colossians*, 247: There was "no room for public enactment of the leveling of status affirmed earlier in the letter (3:11)."

[75] But see J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 105–9, on what such "just and equitable" treatment may have looked like in antiquity, which is quite different from what we would consider humane treatment.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

If, however, Col 3:11 is interpreted as implying that everyone can attain to virtue, the tension between Col 3:11 and 3:22–4:1 dissipates. To claim that enslaved people are equally capable of virtue does not necessarily imply that the legal institution of slavery is to be abolished. The author's position would then again align with that of Seneca and other Stoics, who likewise did not contest slavery as a legal institution. The Stoics focused on combatting moral slavery, that is, the enslavement of people to desires and passions, but legal slavery "affected the body, and as such was judged to be an external condition, and of no significance."[76] I suggest that the author of Colossians shares this attitude, in broad outline. His concern is with the moral state of the believers, both slaveholders and enslaved people, not with upending societal distinctions.

The author of Colossians and Seneca are also on the same page in instructing slaveholders to treat their slaves fairly. In Col 4:1, they are exhorted, "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven." Seneca would have agreed with the sentiment, even as he offers a different set of reasons for treating enslaved people fairly and engages the topic at much greater length (covering essentially all of *Ep.* 47).[77] In neither case, however, does this concern with the well-being of slaves translate into a fundamental critique of slavery as a legal institution. The understanding that a slave was capable of virtue was not regarded as incompatible with the status of being enslaved. It simply meant that they were equally capable of living a life marked by moral excellence. For the author of Colossians, this meant that slaves, in addition to following the general moral exhortations found throughout the letter,[78] would work hard and "obey [their] masters in everything" (3:22–24).[79]

Although the author of Colossians does not question the hierarchical relationship between slaves and masters, he does assert in his instruction to the former that there is no partiality with God. The equality that this implies is once again centered on the *moral* plane: "For the wrongdoer

[76] Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery*, 105. On this distinction, see also P. A. Brunt, *Studies in Stoicism*, ed. Miriam Griffin, Alison Samuels, and Michael Crawford (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 395.

[77] For ancient arguments in favor of fair treatment of slaves, see Maisch, *Kolossä,* 254.

[78] This was not always within the slave's power. MacDonald (*Colossians and Ephesians*, 165) rightly notes that it would have been impossible for enslaved people to adhere to the instructions about avoiding "fornication" and "impurity" in Col 3:5 if their enslavers were otherwise inclined.

[79] On different moral codes for slaves and slaveholders, see Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity*, 133–39.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality" (ὁ γὰρ ἀδικῶν κομίσεται ὃ ἠδίκησεν, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν προσωπολημψία, Col 3:25, cf. Eph. 6:8–9). The absence of partiality does not mean that everyone has or ought to have the same social status but rather that everyone is equally responsible for their actions, which presupposes that they are all equally capable of virtue. This passage therefore fits well with the reading of Col 3:11 proposed here: If enslaved people and their owners are equally capable of virtue, they are also equally accountable for their vices.

In short, interpreting Col 3:11 as a statement about the possibility of moral transformation for all makes very good sense for all of the various categories that are listed. By including the barbarian and Scythian in this list, the author is once again echoing contemporary conversations and sounds a very similar note to Cicero (another author whose ethical thought has substantial commonalities with Stoicism): "In fact there is no human being of any race who, having obtained a guide, cannot attain to virtue" (*nec est quisquam gentis ullius, qui ducem nactus ad virtutem pervenire non possit*, *De leg.* 1.30). The author of Colossians would have agreed, and the point that virtue could be attained by human beings regardless of ethnic background could hardly be made more forcefully than by insisting that this included barbarians and even Scythians.

A final observation that may lend support to this reading is that early Christian authors continued to regard the Scythians as paragons of immorality, which in turn allowed them to claim any moral improvement on the Scythians' part as testimony to the transformative power of the gospel.[80] Eusebius, for instance, wrote, "the customs of all nations are now set aright, even those customs which before were savage and barbarous; so that Persians who have become His disciples no longer marry their mothers, *nor Scythians feed on human flesh*, because of Christ's word which has come even unto them" (*Praep. Ev.* 1.4). In the *Theopania*, he credits Christ with "purifying the Scythians, the Persians, and other barbarians, and converting (them) from every savage, and lawless sort of life" (5.17). I suggest that this line of argument is similar to the logic underlying Col 3:11: The Scythians are by nature extremely barbaric, yet through the transformative power of Christ can be morally improved.[81]

[80] See den Dulk, "Salvation of the Scythians."

[81] Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 144, mentions the possibility that the passage is about a universally binding morality only to reject it

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

6.4 RECEPTION HISTORY

Eusebius' line of argument finds notable parallels in nineteenth-century studies of Col 3:11. The view that the "Scythian" in Col 3:11 referred to the "the lowest type of barbarian"[82] was widely accepted in the nineteenth century and suggested to several interpreters that such universally depraved ethnic groups were a social reality. This served to validate similar conceptions about contemporary ethnic groups.

John Eadie, for instance, a prolific Scottish biblical scholar,[83] wrote in his Colossians commentary, "The Scythian is one at the lowest point of barbarism, as we might say – a negro, or even a Hottentot – a savage, or even a Bushman."[84] According to Cornelius H. Patton, the secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions,[85] the Scythian was "the barbarian of barbarians, who stands for the lowest type of man then known to exist, our modern Hottentot or Digger Indian."[86] Opting for a different set of comparanda, Alexander William, the Church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh,[87] explained that the Scythians were "those of the lowest caste, who were regarded in the ancient world as Papuans or Andaman Islanders may be among ourselves."[88] Whereas the Scythian was perhaps little more than a literary

without argument: "The author is not talking about the natural equality of all men nor about a morality that is binding on all men." Peter T. O'Brien's comment "The apostle is not speaking about some natural equality of all persons nor about a morality that is binding on all" (*Colossians and Philemon*, WBC 44 [Grand Rapid: Zondervan, 1982], 193) is simply repeating Lohse (note that this commentary has been taken out of circulation due to plagiarism allegations).

[82] Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 218.

[83] Joanna Hawke, "Eadie, John (1813/14–1876)," in *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[84] John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884), 231.

[85] For more on Patton, see his obituary in the *New York Times*: "Rev. Dr. C. H. Patton, Minister, Author," August 18, 1939.

[86] Cornelius H. Patton, "Universal Brotherhood through Christ," *Fifty-Third Annual Report of the American Missionary Association*, October 1899, 101.

[87] Kenneth Milne, "Alexander, William (1824–1911), Archbishop of Armagh," in *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Samuel Austin Allibone, "Alexander, Right Rev. William," *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors: Living and Deceased, from the Earliest Accounts to the Latter Half of the Nineteenth Century, Supplement* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1891), 24.

[88] Alexander William, "Colossians," in *The Holy Bible, According to the Authorized Version (A.D. 1611): With an Explanatory and Critical Commentary and a Revision of the Translation, by Bishops and Other Clergy of the Anglican Church*, ed. Frederic

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

topos for the audience of Colossians (they may have had very limited exposure to actual Scythians), these nineteenth-century interpreters identified the Scythians with real world ethnic groups, familiar to them and their readers.[89]

Connections between Colossians' "barbarian" and "Scythian," on the one hand, and modern "savages," on the other hand, also underly various nineteenth-century discussions of the transformative effects of Christian missions. Christianity, as an anonymous author of the influential *Quarterly Review* opined, had proved "capable of lifting up even the most debased tribes to participate in the fellowship of regenerated humanity." It had the "power to awaken and develop the man, where little more than the brute had for ages manifested itself." Clearly, then, "Into St. Paul's words, 'Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman,' modern missions have put a fulness of meaning beyond anything that the apostle could have anticipated."[90]

Charles Cook (London: J. Murray, 1881), 676. The comparison may have been suggested by the shared reputation of the ancient Scythians and the Papuans and Andaman Islanders for cannibalism.

[89] One important way in which such familiarity was established was through "human zoos," exhibitions of living colonial subjects. The display of Sarah Baartman (the "Venus Hottentot") in London and elsewhere is perhaps the most famous example of a phenomenon that enjoyed considerable popularity throughout the Victorian age. As James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 16, notes, "It was through popular performances like this that understandings of … racial character were shaped." The "hottentot" is mentioned by Eadie and Patton discussed at the beginning of this section. Cf. James Scott, who in his influential commentary on the entire Bible, originally published from 1788–92 and often reprinted during the nineteenth century, equated "the barbarous Scythians" with "the wild Indians, nay, the stupid Hottentots." *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: With Original Notes, Practical Observation, and Copious Marginal References*, vol. 5 (London: Baldwin, 1827), 710 (commentary on Acts 17:17). Similarly, Hugh Stowell, "The Wonders of the Bible," in *The Evangelical Church: A Series of Discourses by Ministers of Different Denominations, Illustrating the Spiritual Unity of the Church of Christ*, ed. Henry Tullidge (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1879), 332, in the context of commenting on Col 3:11 speaks of "the wild Caffre … the degraded Hottentot … the effeminate Hindoo." See also the next note.

[90] Anonymous, "Modern Christian Missions," *The Quarterly Review* 163 (1886): 146. Similarly, The Methodist pastor C. J. Kennedy wrote in 1846: "The South Sea Islanders, including tribes the most licentious and the most ferocious, have been subjected to the gospel of Christ. Tahiti, and New Zealand … have all exhibited irrefragable proof that savage natures are not inaccessible to the ennobling and transforming influences of Christianity. The degraded Hottentot – the warlike Caffre – the wandering Boshman – have all received and obeyed with joy the gospel of peace." C. J. Kennedy, *Nature and Revelation Harmonious: A Defence of Scriptural Truths Assailed in Mr. G. Combe's*

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The parallels with Eusebius' logic are unmistakable. This is arguably even more true of the commentary on Col 3:11 offered by the Anglican bishop of Calcutta, Daniel Wilson, which reads almost like an updated version of the statements by Eusebius quoted above: "In our missions these transformations are to be seen, as the Gospel spreads; the prostate, passive Hindoo, the fierce Mohamedan, the stupid Hottentot, and wild demon-worshipper, are mollified and humanised by the grace of Christ."[91] Wilson's comment that these people were "humanised" by the grace of Christ, implies that they were not fully human prior to this point and suggests a strong ethnic hierarchy. Other authors likewise gave expression to such a hierarchy. James Spence, an English Congregational minister who served as the editor of the *Evangelical Magazine*,[92] commented on Col 3:11, "This truth has received abundant illustration in the history of the Church and in the progress of the gospel. The sensual Hindoo, the literary Chinaman, the *stolid* Hottentot, and the *energetic* European are alike by sin removed from the life of God."[93] The contrast between the Hottentot and European in particular mapped nicely onto the contrast drawn in Col 3:11, according to Spence, between "the culture of civilization of established government and the indolence and anarchy of wild and uncivilized tribes."[94] Spence stressed that "all require to be

Work on "The Constitution of Man, Considered in Relation to External Objects" (Edinburgh: William Oliphant and Sons, 1846), 91–92.

[91] Daniel Wilson, *Expository Lectures on St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, 3rd ed. (London: Daniel Wilson, 1853), 394 (emphasis added). On Wilson, see Andrew Poter, "Wilson, Daniel (1778–1858)," in *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[92] On the history and significance of the *Evangelical Magazine*, see Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, eds., "Evangelical Magazine (1793–1904)," *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Academia Press, 2009), 208. On James Spence's life and work, see "Obituary: The Rev. James Spence, D.D.," in *The Scottish Congregational Magazine: January to December 1876*, vol. 25 (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot, 1876), 125–27.

[93] James Spence, *Sunday Mornings with My Flock, on St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians: A Series of Discourses, Forming an Exposition on That Epistle* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1875), 300 (emphases added).

[94] Spence, *Sunday Mornings with My Flock*, 301. Cf. William Bates, "The Four Last Things: Namely: Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, Practically Considered and Applied: In Several Discourses," in *Select Practical Theology of the Seventeenth Century: Comprising the Best Practical Works of the Great English Divines, and Other Congenial Authors of That Age*, ed. James Marsh (New York: Burlington, 1830), 411, who similarly explains the ancient difference between "the ignorant Barbarians" and "the learned Grecians" in terms of the distinction between "the Negroes in Africa" and "the people of Europe" (original publication date, 1691). On Bates, see Stephen Wright, "Bates, William (1625–1699)," in *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

spiritually renewed"[95] and that "outward distinctions ... do not hinder, and they do not directly help, the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new."[96] But he was quick to point out that this applied only to "the renovation of the soul" and that otherwise, "worldly distinctions ... have influence in ordinary life."[97] Such distinctions remained in force, and included, according to Archbishop William, the intellectual capabilities of ethnic groups: "The Apostle is speaking not directly of man's common capacity of *intellectual culture,* but of his common capacity of *spiritual renovation.*"[98]

Far from ruling out notions of ethnic superiority and inferiority, then, Col 3:11 exemplified and legitimized them. Colossians 3:11 was read by these biblical interpreters as support for essentialist and hierarchical modes of thinking about ethnic difference and for identifying the Gospel (and hence missionizing) as the preeminent way to improve the moral character of allegedly inferior "races." Colossians 3:11 suggested that the colonial ideal of "lifting up even the most debased tribes" enjoyed scriptural support.[99] Similar to Eusebius and other ancient interpreters, this nineteenth-century use of the text encompassed both a more and a less egalitarian impulse: These interpreters argued that "in Christ" all people(s) are on the same plane, while implying or even stating outright that in any other context they are not. Indeed, what makes the lack of distinctions "in Christ" so impressive is that these ethnic groups are "by nature" so very different. Pauline literature once more functioned as a lens through which certain ethnic "others" were viewed: they were assigned to the same category as the Scythians, which meant that like the Scythians, they were immoral and primitive, yet still could and therefore ought to be morally reformed by means of the Gospel.

In Section 6.3, I argued that reading Col 3:11 in terms of the need for and capacity of all human beings for moral transformation is a compelling exegetical option. This interpretation is not to the best of my knowledge advocated among recent interpreters, but some of the nineteenth-century literature discussed here moved in that direction.

John Eadie, the previously quoted Scottish biblical scholar, expressly states:

[95] Spence, *Colossians*, 300.
[96] Spence, *Colossians*, 302.
[97] Spence, *Colossians*, 300.
[98] William, "Colossians," 676 (emphases original).
[99] Anonymous, "Modern Christian Missions," 146. As Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals*, 19, notes, in the Victorian age "to tame the barbarian ... emerges as the ultimate justification for white intrusions into non-white, supposedly savage or barbarian territory."

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> The meaning of the apostle is not that a man loses nationality on becoming a Christian; or that social rank is obliterated by admission into the church .... The chain of the slave was not broken by his religion, any more than the circumcision of the Jew was erased. But the meaning of the apostle is ... that *such distinctions do not prevent the on-putting of the new man*. In other words, such differences of nation, religion, culture, and social position, do not interfere with the adaptation, the offer, or the reception and the results of the gospel.[100]

Anyone, Eadie maintained, can accept the gospel "and having embraced it he will feel its renewing power."[101] For James Spence too, "it is not implied that a man loses his nationality, or that his social rank is obliterated ... but that these distinctions have neither place nor power in this spiritual renovation of manhood."[102] And Bishop Wilson claimed in his Colossians commentary that "the apostle's meaning is that the most remote and unpolished nations, however wild and uncivilised, were all 'one in Christ Jesus.' Let only the new man appear in them, and their original ferociousness or indolence would yield to the power of grace."[103] Colossians 3:11, on their reading, was about the possibility of spiritual and moral transformation for all, not about the removal of distinctions in the real world.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this chapter, I noted that many recent interpreters take Col 3:11 as implying the rejection of ethnic prejudices and stereotyping. This stands in stark contrast to the nineteenth-century interpretations discussed in Section 6.4. For these earlier readers, the text functioned not as a deterrent but as support for thinking of contemporary ethnic groups like the "Hottentots" and "Bushmen" as morally depraved and inferior.

Two major exegetical differences between these studies and more recent scholarship can be observed. The first is that a range of recent interpreters have rejected the notion that the Scythian in Col 3:11 refers to a particularly immoral ethnic group. Rather than an intensification of "barbarian" (used here in a pejorative sense, in keeping with Pauline precedent in Romans), they argue that the Scythian of Col 3:11 has a neutral or even positive valence. According to these scholarly proposals, "Scythian" refers to someone who is enslaved, to a proponent of

[100] Eadie, *Colossians*, 232.
[101] Eadie, *Colossians*, 232.
[102] Spence, *Colossians*, 303.
[103] Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon*, 394.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Cynicism, to a nomad, or to someone from the far north. I have argued that none of these alternative interpretations stand up to scrutiny and that references to the Scythians in literature roughly contemporaneous with Colossians strongly suggest that the traditional view, that is, that the Scythian refers to an especially barbaric ethnic group remains the most compelling exegetical option.

The other point at which nineteenth-century and more recent interpretations diverge is that many recent interpreters apply the lack of distinctions proclaimed in this passage to the social realm: There should be no difference in status or treatment of Greeks and Jews, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free persons. By contrast, some of the nineteenth-century interpretations surveyed above restrict this lack of distinction to the spiritual plane: There are no distinctions when it comes to the need for "spiritual renovation," but this does not have any implications for the social status of the various groups referenced in this text.

My own interpretation is closer to the latter: I have argued that Col 3:11 is about the possibility of *moral* transformation. On this reading, the point of the inclusion of the Scythian in Col 3:11 is that everyone, *even the Scythian*, can be morally regenerated through the transformative power of Christ. The other side of this is that those who were often considered morally upright by virtue of their birth stood in equal need of moral transformation; the Jew had no benefit over the Greek in this regard, circumcision did not render this process superfluous, and masters were no better off than the people they enslaved. The passage, then, promotes radical equality when it comes to people's moral standing, yet not with respect to their societal position.

This reading can account for the addition of barbarian and Scythian to the established formula used in Col 3:11, since both were associated with immorality. By including references to these two groups, the author made a powerful point about the transformative potential of the Christian message: Even these notoriously immoral people could attain to the ethical ideal promulgated in Colossians. This reading works well within the literary context, specifically with (1) the emphasis on moral improvement in the section within which Col 3:11 is embedded; (2) the comments about enslaved people later on in the same chapter, which clearly indicate that on the social level the distinctions between the groups mentioned in Col 3:11 remained intact; and (3) the preceding passages in Colossians in which the difference between Jews and Gentiles/circumcised and uncircumcised people were cast in moral terms, which prepares the reader to

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press

apply the lack of distinctions announced in Col 3:11 to the moral plane as well.

For the question of what the term Scythian signifies, it is not decisive whether this reading is accepted or preference is given to the view that Col 3:11 refers to the various groups that have equal standing in the context of the Christian assemblies and are therefore to be treated equitably (interpretive possibility number one, mentioned on p. 162). On that reading as well, the barbarian and Scythian are introduced because of their stereotypical associations with immorality, and the text intimates that despite their questionable reputation they must be treated like all others. Regardless of which of these two interpretive options is ultimately adopted, then, the author makes his case not by disputing the Scythians' reputation for immorality but by assuming and affirming it. He is drawing on an ethnic stereotype about the Scythians as cruel and barbaric in order to make his point.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009718127.006 Published online by Cambridge University Press