

MATTHEW E. GORDLEY

The Colossian Hymn in Context

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*
228

Mohr Siebeck

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen
zum Neuen Testament · 2. Reihe

Herausgeber / Editor

Jörg Frey (München)

Mitherausgeber / Associate Editors

Friedrich Avemarie (Marburg)

Judith Gundry-Volf (New Haven, CT)

Hans-Josef Klauck (Chicago, IL)

228



Matthew E. Gordley

The Colossian Hymn in Context

An Exegesis in Light of Jewish
and Greco-Roman Hymnic
and Epistolary Conventions

Mohr Siebeck

MATTHEW E. GORDLEY, born 1972; 2000 M. Div., Alliance Theological Seminary; 2006 PhD in Theology, University of Notre Dame; Currently assistant professor of religious studies and department chair in the School of Undergraduate Studies at Regent University (Virginia).

e-ISBN PDF 978-3-16-151571-2

ISBN 978-3-16-149255-6

ISSN 0340-9570 (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

© 2007 by Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, Germany.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, in any form (beyond that permitted by copyright law) without the publisher's written permission. This applies particularly to reproductions, translations, microfilms and storage and processing in electronic systems.

The book was printed by Laupp & Göbel in Nehren on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

Preface

This volume is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation which was defended at the University of Notre Dame in March 2006. The idea for this project originated in Professor David Aune's doctoral seminar *Paul and Rhetoric* in Fall 2003 in the form of a paper exploring the rhetoric of the Colossian hymn. From there versions of the paper were presented at the Midwest Society of Biblical Literature in February 2004 and at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in November 2004. I am grateful for comments and suggestions received from colleagues at these presentations on aspects of the rhetoric of the hymn. This rhetorical line of approach was expanded and developed into a dissertation proposal under the direction of David Aune.

I am particularly grateful to my professors, James VanderKam, Gregory Sterling, and Jerome Neyrey, for all of their work on my behalf as teachers, mentors, and dissertation committee members. Each of these individuals has left an imprint on this volume, for which I am most grateful. I am also indebted to my dissertation director, David Aune, for his careful evaluation of my work and his encouragement throughout the process of research and writing. I wish especially to thank David for his many sacrifices of time and energy to read and review my research as it unfolded. In spite of his own voluminous work-load and many deadlines, he has the ability to give his complete attention to the needs of his students seemingly whenever it is needed. This is an ability I hope to emulate and for which I am most appreciative. I am also grateful to the department of theology at the University of Notre Dame for granting me the opportunity to study and work in the midst of such a distinguished community of scholars – both faculty and fellow students. In particular I would like to express my appreciation to Jack Conroy, Kindy DeLong, Dan Machiela, and Ardea Russo, my colleagues in the area of Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, for their encouragement, their friendship, and their ongoing willingness to discuss my research on Colossians and ancient hymnody.

In addition, I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Jörg Frey of Mohr Siebeck for selecting my study for inclusion in this series. I am particularly grateful for the recommendation of Professor Hans-Josef Klauck who read through my dissertation in its entirety and offered many

excellent suggestions in terms of content and style. In addition, the entire production team at Mohr Siebeck was extremely professional and very helpful at every stage of the publication process, for which I am most thankful.

I completed the dissertation and revised the manuscript for publication while teaching in the School of Undergraduate Studies at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va. I am grateful for the support of my deans, Dr. Beth Doriani and Mr. Gary Oster, as well as my colleagues at Regent University throughout the process of bringing this volume to print.

Among those who deserve my warmest thanks are my parents, Paul and Ellen Gordley and John and Dolores Henseler, who supported me and my family in many tangible and intangible ways throughout my doctoral studies. Thank you for your unwavering support in this endeavor and always. My sons, Jack, Aidan, and Noah, were also a continual source of encouragement, joy, and good perspective in this process. Thank you.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my wife, Janine, whose many sacrifices and whose devotion to me and to our family have made the completion of this project possible and even enjoyable. “Thank you” does not cover it. It is to you that this volume is dedicated.

January 2007

Matthew E. Gordley

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. The Colossian Hymn and the Study of Ancient Hymnody.....	1
A. Introduction.....	1
B. Thesis.....	2
C. <i>Status Quaestiones</i>	3
1. Structure and Form.....	5
2. Cultural Background.....	16
3. The Origins of the Content of Col 1:15–20.....	18
4. Col 1:15–20 within the Context of the Epistle.....	23
D. Methodology.....	26
E. Terminology.....	30
F. Summary.....	40
Chapter 2. Hymns and Their Development in Second Temple Judaism.....	41
A. Introduction.....	41
B. Hymns in the Canonical Book of Psalms.....	42
1. Form Criticism and the Gattung Hymn.....	42
2. Hebrew Poetry and Its Features.....	52
3. Discussion of Specific Psalms as Background for Col 1:15–20.....	56
4. Psalm 33: A Hymn Emphasizing God’s Role in Creation and Redemption.....	57
C. Wisdom’s Hymn of Self-Praise in Proverbs 8.....	67
D. Hymns in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.....	73
1. Introduction.....	73
2. The Use of the Form and Themes of Hymns of Praise in Non- Canonical Texts.....	76
3. Praise of God’s Agents as Seen in Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Other Texts.....	80
E. Hymns and Religious Poetry at Qumran.....	85
1. Introduction to Qumran Materials.....	85
2. Discussion of Selected Texts.....	91
F. Praise of God in <i>1 Enoch</i>	100

G. Hymns in the Writings of Philo and Josephus.....	105
H. Conclusions and Implications for Col 1:15–20.....	109
Chapter 3. Praise of the Divine in the Greco-Roman World in Theory and in Practice	111
A. Introduction.....	111
B. Praise of Gods in the Rhetorical Handbooks and <i>Progymnasmata</i>	112
C. Ancient Hymns and Their Characteristics.....	124
D. The Homeric Hymns	134
E. Pindar’s Odes.....	136
F. Testimonies to Asclepius	141
G. The Prose Hymns of Aristides	142
H. Isis Aretalogies.....	147
I. Hymns and Philosophical Speculation on Creation	155
J. The Orphic Hymns	164
K. Summary and Conclusions	168
Chapter 4. The Form and Content of Colossians 1:15–20 in Historical/Cultural Context.....	170
A. Introduction.....	170
B. Formal Analysis of Hymns: Methodology and Problems	170
C. Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15–20.....	176
D. Metrical Analysis	181
E. Reconstruction of the Original	190
F. Poetry or Prose	196
G. Jewish Background.....	198
H. Greco-Roman Background.....	201
I. Content Analysis.....	203
1. The Strophe: Christ’s Identity as Agent of God in Creation	206
1.1. Image of the Invisible God.....	210
1.2. Firstborn over All Creation	216
1.3. And He Is the Head of the Body, the Church	219
2. The Anti-Strophe: Christ’s Identity as Agent of God in Redemption	221
2.1. The Beginning, Firstborn from the Dead.....	222
2.2. In Him All the Fullness Was Pleased to Dwell.....	224
2.3. To Reconcile All Things to Him, Making Peace through the Blood of His Cross.....	225
3. The Epode: Recapping the Main Idea of the Hymn	227
J. Conclusions	229

Chapter 5. The Colossian Hymn in the Context of the Epistle to the Colossians	231
A. Introduction.....	231
B. Epistolary and Rhetorical Analysis and Outline.....	232
C. Colossians: A Philosophical Paraenetic Letter.....	242
D. Rhetorical Function of the Colossian Hymn in Epistolary Context	255
E. Conclusions	269
 Bibliography.....	 271
 Index of Ancient Sources.....	 281
 Index of Modern Authors.....	 290
 Index of Subjects.....	 293

Chapter 1

The Colossian Hymn and the Study of Ancient Hymnody

A. Introduction

This monograph is largely a study in context. It is a study that takes seriously the need to grapple with the background and environment of an ancient text in order to be able to understand its significance. Accordingly, one of the major aims of this study is to paint a vivid picture of the cultural and religious context in which the Colossian hymn (Col 1:15–20) was written. Another major goal of this study is to examine and appreciate the literary and epistolary setting in which the Colossian hymn is located. It is the contention here that the interpretation and evaluation of an ancient text such as Col 1:15–20 will be rendered more plausible when it takes into account and reflects seriously on the contexts noted above. This study thus endeavors to read the Colossian hymn in light of its Greco-Roman and Jewish context, as well as in consideration of its location in the epistle to the Colossians.¹

This chapter will begin with a clear statement of the thesis that will be articulated and argued in the chapters that follow. A survey of scholarship on the Colossian hymn will follow, focusing on the issues of form, content, background, and its function in its epistolary context. This chapter then turns to an articulation of the basic methodology of this project. Finally, this chapter will address the issue of terminology and, as a way of clarifying the claims that are being made here, provide a definition of “hymn” that is a result of this study.

¹ Beyond these cultural and literary contexts, there are other important contexts that would be worth considering, including its place as part of the other related writings of the New Testament, its place in early Christian literature as a whole, and its place in comparison with other New Testament hymns. However, the exploration of these other contexts is best done after the exploration of the cultural and literary contexts offered here.

B. Thesis

This study will argue that Col 1:15–20 is a citation of a pre-existing prose-hymn which represents a fusion of Jewish and Greco-Roman conventions for praising an exalted figure. While Christ is not explicitly praised as God, the qualities and actions ascribed to him as agent of God resonate with some of the qualities and actions ascribed to the divine in the Jewish and Greco-Roman hymns of the ancient world, thus moving this passage beyond the realm of praise of honored humans and justifying the appellation *hymn*. A review of hymns in the literature of Second Temple Judaism will demonstrate that the Colossian hymn owes a number of features to Jewish modes of praise, including the clear movement from the work of God in creation to the work of God in redemption, key terminology in the hymn which derives from Hellenistic expressions of Judaism, as well as the prominent use of parallelism. A review of hymns in the broader Greco-Roman world will demonstrate that the Colossian hymn is equally indebted to conventions used for praising the divine in the Greco-Roman tradition, including the arrangement and order of the topics of praise, the style of the passage including rhythmic prose, and the introduction of philosophical concepts into the hymn. In light of the hymnic traditions of antiquity, the analysis of the form and content of the Colossian hymn will show that the passage fits well into a Greco-Roman context, and is best understood as a quasi-philosophical prose-hymn cited in the context of a popular philosophical/paraenetic letter.

The final chapter of this study demonstrates that in its epistolary context the Colossian hymn serves a number of significant rhetorical functions. These include: 1) development of the character of the writer, 2) establishment of a prior tradition that could be drawn on for didactic purposes, 3) affirmation of values already embraced by the Colossians, and 4) the laying of a foundation for acting on those values.

First, by citing such a hymn the author suggests his competence and facility with the matters with which the hymn (and the letter) dealt, namely, cosmology, redemption, and the correct philosophical understanding of Christ as agent of God in creation and redemption. It is clear that a conflict over interpreting the Christian message was occurring at Colossae. It is also clear that the author of the letter did not know the Colossian Christians personally. Accordingly, the author needed to exert considerable energy establishing his character – which is something he did with great skill in the part of the letter that serves as the functional equivalent of an exordium. The citation of the hymn may be viewed as a part of that very necessary development of the author's persona.

A second but no less important function for the hymn is didactic. That is, the hymn provided a basis in a prior tradition for the letter-writer's preferred understanding of Christ in relation to God, the cosmos, and the Colossian Christians. The philosophical terminology and manner of speech, as well as the hymn's placement in the letter, suggest that one of the main goals of the writer in citing the hymn is to instruct. This is rendered even more likely by an awareness of an "opposing view" that was vying for allegiance at Colossae. The author's editorial additions to the hymn demonstrate a very specific area where additional instruction was needed.

Third, when viewed through the lens of epideictic rhetoric, it appears that the hymn served with the rest of the introductory material to increase adherence to values and beliefs already embraced by the Colossians. The introductory section of the letter emphasizes this very fact: they had already received the good news of the gospel, and it was taking root among them. The author sought to encourage their commitment to the message they had already embraced by demonstrating that Christ was the unique locus of God's work in creation and reconciliation of all things.

Expanding on the previous insight, a fourth aspect of the function of the hymn in the context of the strong paraenetic dimension to the whole letter, is the role the hymn plays in urging the Colossian Christians toward action – action in light of the beliefs they embrace. By presenting a picture of the world in which the Colossians lived, and the realities of the cosmos in which Christ upholds all things, the author shows a world in which it makes a great deal of sense to live according to the very practical instructions provided in the remainder of the letter.

C. Status Quaestiones

It is readily accepted by most scholars that Col 1:15–20 is a passage that uses elevated language in an epistolary context to describe the nature and work of Jesus Christ. What is open to question is the character of that "elevated language" and the significance of this passage for the epistle as a whole. Depending to a large extent on the particular texts scholars have chosen for comparison with Col 1:15–20, they have variously categorized this passage as a Christ-hymn, an encomium, a Christ-psalm, a Christological confession, a Christological midrash, a poetic passage, a redacted hymn to Sophia, epideictic rhetoric, or elevated prose. Currently no clear consensus exists with regard to understanding the form of this

passage or any of the other New Testament passages referred to by a number of scholars as Christ-hymns.²

There are four central issues that play into the interpretation of Col 1:15–20. These relate to: 1) the structure/form of the passage, 2) the cultural background of the passage, 3) the background of the *content* of this passage, and 4) the relationship of Col 1:15–20 to its epistolary context. These will be treated in turn in the review of scholarship that follows. The question of the authorship of Colossians, while important in its own right, will not be argued here.³ The analysis of Colossians presented in this study makes sense, however, on the assumption that the letter is an authentic letter of Paul sent to a real Colossian community. If the letter were not written or at least authorized by Paul, then the reconstruction of the occasion for the writing of the epistle becomes extremely complicated, and arguments about the rhetorical purposes of its contents become highly speculative. This recognition in itself is not an argument for or against Pauline authorship, but is noted here as one of the constraints of the present study. The arguments for and against the authenticity of the letter have been covered in detail elsewhere, with the apparent result being that no consensus exists.⁴ Dunn has suggested that,

² Not surprisingly, even among scholars who agree that there is early hymnic material embedded in the New Testament writings there is a great deal of disagreement as to which particular passages contain such material. Reinhard Deichgräber suggests Phil 2:6–11, Col 1:15–20, 1 Tim 3:16, Heb 1:3, and 1 Pet 2:21ff fall in this category but rejects Eph 2:14–16; see Reinhard Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (SUNT 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 118–143, 165–167. Jack T. Sanders adds Eph 2:14–16, 1 Pet 3:18–22, and also treats the prologue of the Gospel of John; see Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background* (SNTSMS 15; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). It may be argued that other passages could be included in this list as well. There is also disagreement in reconstructing supposed “original” forms of these hymns and in interpreting them within their New Testament contexts.

³ The main points of contention center on the letter’s vocabulary and style on the one hand, and its theology on the other hand. On vocabulary and style critical scholars all refer to the quantitative findings of Walter Bujard, *Stilanalytische Untersuchungen zum Kolosserbrief als Beitrag zur Methodik von Sprachvergleichen* (SUNT 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973). A list and analysis of the unique vocabulary of Colossians is found in Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 85–89. The areas where the theology of Colossians appears to move beyond that of the undisputed Pauline letters include Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. Theories of authorship must provide a satisfactory explanation for the apparent development of Paul’s theology in these areas.

⁴ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor claims that “the scholarly community is split down the middle” on this issue. He argues, however, that the letter is authentic. See his discussion

whether the epistle is written by Paul or not, Colossians may be viewed as a kind of “bridge” letter.⁵ If written by Paul Colossians provides a glimpse of the end of the Pauline era and a look at the way Paul’s theology has developed and adapted to challenges faced near the end of his life. If written by someone other than Paul (a disciple of Paul, perhaps) it provides a perspective on how Paul’s theology and epistolary style is furthered by his followers early in the post-Pauline era. In keeping with the epistle’s claim, for the purposes of this study I will refer to the author of Colossians as Paul, recognizing that I have not demonstrated the likelihood of that particular position.⁶

1. Structure and Form

Scholars are divided over the issue of the structure and form of Col 1:15–20. One consideration that influences structural and formal analyses is the initial question of whether the material comes from the author of the epistle or if it comes from a source that precedes the writing of the epistle. In other words, was it created by the author of the epistle in the course of writing the letter as a kind of christological digression or is it a citation or adaptation of a pre-existing tradition that may have been a hymn? Scholars who view the material as coming from the author himself tend to be skeptical of the reliability of form-critical analyses of supposed “hymnic” passages in the New Testament. N. T. Wright, for example, has argued that, while there is much in Col 1:15–20 that may be called

and his arguments in favor of the authenticity of the letter in Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 237–248.

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 19.

⁶ For a defense of the letter’s authenticity, in addition to Murphy-O’Connor, see Peter Thomas O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), xli–xlix. In addition, Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke cite no less than forty-one “modern scholars” who “tentatively or with firm conviction” could affirm the authenticity of Colossians; see Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (trans. Astrid B. Beck; AB; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 119–122. Ralph Martin has also argued for the authenticity of Colossians in a number of publications, but spells out the reasoning most extensively in Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 32–40. More recently Thomas Sappington, while not committing to one position, has suggested some considerations in favor of a view that sees Paul’s hand involved in the composition; see Thomas J. Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae* (JSNTSS 53; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 22–24. For a review of the evidence on both sides of the issue see Jean-Noël Aletti, *Saint Paul Épître aux Colossiens* (Paris: Éditions J. Gabalda, 1993), 27–30. For arguments in favor of Timothy as the author, see Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 15–24. For the suggestion that the author is a theologian in the Pauline school, see, for example, Lohse, *Colossians*, 177–183.

“poetic,” there is no reason to suppose that Paul himself is not the author of every word of this poetic passage.⁷ Wright argues that even if Paul were quoting a source, the task of reconstructing the source would be impossible. In particular, he notes that if one is prepared to admit that Paul *added* material (a view held by most scholars who see Col 1:15–20 as a pre-existing tradition of some kind), then one must be just as willing to consider that he *removed* material from the original as well. Further, Wright explains, perhaps the author only quoted part of his source. In other words, Wright is contending that the reconstruction of original sources is historically problematic based on the hypothetical nature of the enterprise.⁸ For Wright then, the task of reconstruction is “virtually impossible” amounting to “unprovable speculation.”⁹

From this theoretical foundation Wright analyzes the passage as Paul’s own poetic creation, which is not a pre-existing hymn of any kind. By analyzing the passage “as is” he argues that it is really an example of a chiasm in the form ABBA. Preferring to see the parallel *καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν* phrases in 17 and 18 as forming the center of the chiasm (rather than as interpolations or a middle strophe), he understands the chiasmatic structure of the passage in the following way:

- A vv. 15–16
- B v. 17
- B v. 18ab
- A vv. 18c–20.

The A sections begin with the *ὅς ἐστιν* phrases, while the B sections begin with the *καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν* phrases. This structure has the advantage of being relatively simple, requiring no emendation of the text, and making good sense of the text as a whole. However, Wright’s arrangement does not take into account a number of other important features of the text – features which are not speculation but are clearly present in the passage without emendation or the use of extreme textual rearrangement.

Gordon Fee has offered a similar critique of formal analyses of Phil. 2:4–11 and argues that, due to the lack of certainty achievable by form-criticism of such passages, it is more reasonable to view this particular

⁷ N. T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15–20,” *NTS* 36 (1990): 444–468.

⁸ His more general treatment of the historical difficulties attending the use of proposed reconstructed sources in gospel research may be found in chapter fourteen (pp. 418–443) with a general summary of historical method on pages 98–109 of idem, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). Additional argumentation followed on pages 35–44 of N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1st North American ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

⁹ Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15–20,” 445.

passage as a composition of Paul in the course of writing the letter.¹⁰ His criticisms may be extended and generalized to include other passages, including Col 1:15–20.

On the other side of the debate are those who believe that Col 1:15–20 contains traditional material of a hymnic nature and that this material may be reasonably reconstructed. The reasons for asserting the traditional nature of the material in Colossians (as well as in the other New Testament “hymns”) are treated thoroughly by a number of scholars. The first to recognize the hymnic nature of Col 1:15–20 was Eduard Norden.¹¹ In his treatment of the passage he identified the parallels between vv. 15–18a and vv. 18b–20 and used these as a basis for arranging the passage into strophes. Unlike most later scholars, Norden suggested that the hymn began before v. 15 with the phrase εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ πατρὶ in v. 12. The whole passage is thus arranged as a doxology to the father and son.¹² With specific reference to vv. 15–20, however, he suggests an arrangement in two strophes without positing redactional insertions or explanatory glosses within the text as it exists in Colossians. In addition to his analysis of the structure and form of the passage, Norden offered insight into the background of the contents of the passage when he noted the appropriation of a Stoic formula in Col 1:16–17.¹³

Reinhard Deichgräber has provided analyses not only of Christ-hymns but also hymns to God, doxologies, and other forms of praise in the New Testament.¹⁴ In his analysis of Col 1:15–20 he begins by identifying the limits of the hymn and shows that it would not have included vv. 12–14, a position generally accepted today.¹⁵ From there he moves on to identify an original text as distinct from Paul’s redactional insertions. Deichgräber is aware of the difficulties of the approach he has chosen. He explains, “Certainty in this matter can scarcely be achieved; our knowledge of the stylistic sensibilities that early Christian literature certainly had is too low than to make it possible to form rather certain opinions.”¹⁶ Nevertheless,

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, “Philippians 2:5–11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose,” *BBR* 2 (1992): 29–46.

¹¹ Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1956). His analysis is found on pages 250–254 with the formal arrangement into strophes on 252.

¹² *Ibid.*, 253.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 241. For a recent evaluation of Norden’s contribution to the study of New Testament hymns, see Edgar Krentz, “Epideiktik and Hymnody: The New Testament and Its World,” *BR* 40 (1995): 50–97.

¹⁴ Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 144–146.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 147. Translations of German and French works are mine unless otherwise noted.

he finds the process of analysis to be worthwhile and illuminating, provided scholars do not take their conclusions too far beyond the evidence. For example, Deichgräber is not willing to posit a definitive *Sitz im Leben* for the passage, because such statements are several steps removed from observable facts found in the text itself. Deichgräber does, however, offer a strophic arrangement of the passage in two strophes, and discusses Pauline additions to the original.¹⁷ Deichgräber's work advanced the work of Norden in its application of a consistent method of study to the variety of liturgically styled passages in the New Testament. With regard to the Colossian hymn, it serves as an example of the application of form-critical methodology to this particular passage.

In light of the growth of literature on the subject of Christ-hymns and the use of traditional materials within the epistles of the New Testament, a number of scholars turned toward discussion of systematic methodologies for uncovering and evaluating such texts. A concise summary of criteria that can be used for deciding about the nature of such material is provided by Ethelbert Stauffer.¹⁸ His list of twelve common features of "confessional formulae" applies to a broad range of passages including hymns to Christ. Stauffer proposes a process of development in the Christological formulae of the early Christians, beginning with pre-Pauline confessional material, which centered originally on the passion of Christ but developed to include a focus on the incarnation of Christ. In the Pauline confessional material he notes the development of incarnational formulae to include three different kinds: 1) antinomies of the incarnation (formulae which describe the mystery of Christ's person in pairs of contradictory terms), 2) paradoxes of the incarnation, and 3) summaries of the incarnation.¹⁹ Col 1:15–20 is included in the third category. What is significant for the purposes of this chapter are the criteria which enable Stauffer to show that Col 1:15–20 is of a different quality and character than the text in which it is embedded. Some of the criteria he discusses will be utilized in the analysis of the Colossian hymn in chapter four.

With regard to the possibility of identifying hymnic or traditional material in the New Testament, Stauffer's work has been summarized and supplemented more recently by W. H. Gloer.²⁰ Critical commentaries that treat the hymn also include discussion of relevant features that point to a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 146–150. His arrangement is reproduced in full later in this section.

¹⁸ Ethelbert Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (trans. John Marsh; London: SCM Press, 1955), 338–339.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁰ W. Hulitt Gloer, "Homologies and Hymns in the New Testament: Form, Content and Criteria for Identification," *PRS* 11 (1984): 115–132.

prior existence for the passage.²¹ In general, once the likelihood that a passage had an independent existence is demonstrated, scholars then move on to reconstruct the original by arranging it into lines and strophes.

As noted above, the first to attempt a strophic arrangement of the Colossian material was Eduard Norden.²² Following Norden there have been many scholars who have offered differing arrangements of the material, often involving various proposed redactions by the author of the epistle to the Colossians presumably made when he incorporated the hymn into its current context. Most scholars favor a version of a two-strophe arrangement based on the obvious parallels in vv. 15–17 and 18b–20, although arrangements in three, four, and five strophes have also been proposed. Aletti, who accepts none of the strophic arrangements as definitive, provides a review of seven different arrangements that have been proposed: two in two strophes, two in three strophes, two in four strophes, and one in five strophes.²³ Although such a review appears to indicate an incredibly wide range of possibilities in the number of strophes, it is fair to say that most scholars favor an arrangement in two strophes, with a three strophe arrangement being the second most widely accepted.²⁴ However, this observation should not be taken to mean that most scholars favor the same two-strophe arrangement. Among those who favor a two strophe arrangement there is, in fact, a good deal of disagreement. There are many more than two ways of arranging Col 1:15–20 in two strophes as the following review will show.

A good representative of a basic two-strophe arrangement is Deichgräber's proposal, which has already been mentioned above. The arrangement will be provided here with asterisks added where Deichgräber has removed material that was not part of the original hymn. His arrangement is as follows:

Strophe I

- 15 ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
 πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
 16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
 ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,*
 17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων
 καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.
 18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος.*

²¹ Lohse, *Colossians*, 41–43.

²² Norden, *Agnostos Theos*. His analysis is found on pages 250–254 with the formal arrangement into strophes on 252.

²³ Aletti, *Saint Paul Épître aux Colossiens*, 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Strophe II

ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή,
 πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,
 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
 20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,
 εἰρηνοποιήσας * δι' αὐτοῦ
 εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

The balanced arrangement presented here results from Deichgräber's removal of three sections as redactional. First he removes the second half of v. 16 (τὰ ὄρατα καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτόν ἔκτισται). Second, he removes the explanatory τῆς ἐκκλησίας of v. 18a. Third, the phrase διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ in the middle of v. 20 is also seen as an explanatory gloss, and thus removed.²⁵ Not all scholars have gone as far as Deichgräber in positing three redactional insertions. For example, Klaus Wengst holds to a two strophe arrangement that maintains the originality of two of Deichgräber's proposed redactional additions, with the one exception being the gloss τῆς ἐκκλησίας in v. 18a.²⁶

Alternatively, Robinson goes further than most in placing great confidence in the ability of modern scholars to reconstruct an original hymn. He has provided a two strophe arrangement which brings in phrases from elsewhere in Colossians (specifically Col 2:9) to create an original hymn that, in Colossians, has been commented upon by the author of Colossians as well as quoted other places in the letter.²⁷ His arrangement is as follows:

Strophe I

15 ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
 πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
 16a ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
 16b [καὶ] τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτόν (ἔκτισται)
 17 καὶ αὐτὸς ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.

Strophe II

18b ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 2:9 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ [κατοικεῖ] πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα [τῆς θεότητος (σωματικῶς)],
 20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ [ἀποκαταλλάξαι]* τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν
 *[Robinson has ἀποκατήλλαξε]

²⁵ Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus*, 150.

²⁶ Klaus Wengst, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums* (SNT 7; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1972), 174–175.

²⁷ James M. Robinson, “A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15–20,” *JBL* 76 (1957): 270–287.

- 18a και αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος,
 18c ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτός πρωτεύων.²⁸

Robinson's proposal has not been well-received since he has not only removed a good deal of Col 1:15–20 but has also taken the extremely hypothetical additional step of supposing that the author has dislocated some phrases from the original hymn.

Another approach for a two-strophe arrangement is that found in Murphy-O'Connor's work on Paul.²⁹ He begins with the obvious correlations between two strophes, and then removes all the remaining parts that disturb the exact correspondence. He writes,

Such perfection of balance betrays a deliberate creative effort. No artist who had invested so much would destroy the elegance of his work. The elements in the existent text which disturb the balance must have been added by a later hand, more concerned with content than with form.³⁰

In this view, then, the original hymn is quite short and to the point. Murphy-O'Connor's arrangement is as follows, in English as he provides it:

Strophe I

- v. 15a Who is (the) image of the invisible God
- v. 15b First-born of all creation
- v. 16a For in him were created all things
- v. 16f All things through him and to him were created.

Strophe II

- v. 18b Who is (the) beginning
- v. 18c First-born from the dead
- v. 19 For in him all the Fullness was pleased to dwell
- v. 20a And through him to reconcile all things to him.³¹

As in the other arrangements, Paul's additions to the original shed light on his own Christology as well as on the situation that he is confronting in Colossae. The major weakness of this arrangement is that it is not clear from comparison with other ancient texts that such a high degree of verbal and syntactical correspondence would be necessary from a first to a second strophe in a composition of this nature. In other words, some of the deleted phrases may have belonged to an original hymn that was not composed according to as strict a pattern as Murphy-O'Connor suspects.

Burger presents a similarly "sparse" reconstruction of the original.³² Like Murphy-O'Connor, he holds that only the most obvious parallel parts

²⁸ Ibid., 286.

²⁹ Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 240–246.

³⁰ Ibid., 240–241.

³¹ Ibid., 240.

of the strophes are original. However, his arrangement goes further than Murphy-O'Connor in adapting the text. His arrangement is as follows:

Strophe I

- 15a ὅς ἐστιν εἰκῶν
 15b πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
 16a ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
 16c τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα.

Strophe II

- 18b ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή,
 18c πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατώκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα
 20c εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

Unlike Murphy-O'Connor, Burger alters the word order and tense of a key phrase in the third line of the second strophe to make it align more closely with the first: it now reads “For in him all the fullness dwelt.” In addition, he removes the concept of reconciliation from the second strophe, thus making the second strophe more similar to the first in content as well as form. A problem here is that Burger views as original some of what other scholars claim to be later additions, while at the same time excising parts of the hymn that other scholars accept as original.

In contrast to all of the aforementioned two-strophe arrangements which depend heavily on the ability to remove suspected redactional comments and glosses, is the recent arrangement of Stettler. In Stettler’s view the whole passage is original and there is no need to posit any redactions.³³ In this regard, he follows the example of Wright noted above. Yet Stettler goes beyond Wright and proposes an arrangement in two strophes, with a hypothetical, reconstructed opening line (Εὐλογητός Ἰησοῦς Χριστός). He divides the strophes at vv. 15–17 and 18–20 as follows:³⁴

Strophe I

- <Εὐλογητός Ἰησοῦς Χριστός,>
 15a ὅς ἐστιν εἰκῶν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
 15b πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
 16a ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
 16b ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
 16c τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
 16d εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες

³² Christoph Burger, *Schöpfung und Versöhnung: Studien zum liturgischen Gut im Kolosser- und Epheserbrief* (WMANT 46; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975), 38.

³³ Christian Stettler, *Der Kolosserhymnus: Untersuchungen zu Form, traditions-geschichtlichem Hintergrund und Aussage von Kol 1, 15–20* (WUNT 2/131; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 86–94.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

- 16e εἶτε ἀρχαὶ εἶτε ἐξουσίαι
 16f Τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτισται,
 17a καὶ αὐτὸς ἐστὶν πρὸ πάντων
 17b καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.

Strophe II

- 18a καὶ αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος, τῆς ἐκκλησίας·
 18b ὃς ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 18c ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,
 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
 20a καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,
 20b εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ,
 20c δι' αὐτοῦ εἶτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
 20d εἶτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

Stettler's view that the hymn began prior to the phrase ὃς ἐστὶν in v. 15 is foundational to his arrangement. By drawing on the importance of parallelism in the hymn and in the Jewish psalm style, he claims that since the first strophe did not begin with the relative clause, the second strophe cannot have begun with the relative clause either.³⁵ Accordingly, one must look for the beginning of the strophe prior to the relative clause. He thus finds the beginning of the second strophe in v. 18a (καὶ αὐτὸς ἐστὶν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος, τῆς ἐκκλησίας). Admittedly, this solves the problem of the change of scope from cosmic to ecclesial headship in the first strophe that has caused scholars to posit the phrase τῆς ἐκκλησίας as a redactional insertion. In Stettler's arrangement the first strophe remains cosmic in scope, while the second strophe deals with the new creation and redemption.

Ralph Martin has followed the lead of Schweizer and argued for an arrangement in three strophes with a few editorial comments inserted. The first strophe is comprised of vv. 15–16 which “hail the cosmic Christ as Lord of creation,” although the phrases in v. 16 describing “all things” are Pauline additions to the original hymn.³⁶ The second strophe, vv. 17–18a, continues the idea of Christ's pre-existent cosmic activity but then “goes on to assert that Christ acts as a unifying principle which holds the universe together.”³⁷ Here Pauline adaptation is seen in the addition of τῆς ἐκκλησίας. The third strophe, vv. 18b–20, “celebrates the triumph of this cosmic Lord who embodies the divine fullness” and brings the universe into harmony.³⁸ In the third strophe Paul's additions are seen in the

³⁵ Ibid., 88.

³⁶ Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 55.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

phrases that introduce the idea of the cross. Martin's arrangement, retrofitted onto the Greek, is as follows:³⁹

Strophe I

- 15 ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
 πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
 16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
 ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
 τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτισται.

Strophe II

- 17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων
 καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.
 18a καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος.

Strophe III

- 18b ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή,
 πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
 20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,
 εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

In this arrangement, four elements of vv. 15–20 are viewed as Pauline commentary: the phrases in v. 16 (τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι); the words τῆς ἐκκλησίας in v. 18a; the phrase in 18b (ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων); and the phrase about making peace in v. 20 (εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ). On this reconstruction, Paul's redactional comments on the original hymn demonstrate that he has "placed the 'theology of the cross' at the crucial point of the hymn, and transformed a hymn in praise of the cosmic Lord of creation into a song of redemption which centres in Christ's atonement as Saviour of the Church."⁴⁰

Pöhlmann is one of few scholars who identify a four-strophe arrangement of the hymn. Wright's chiasmic structure noted above is considered by Aletti to be a four-strophe arrangement.⁴¹ However, Wright does not consider that he is dealing with strophes as much as pointing out the arrangement of corresponding ideas in different parts of a poem.⁴²

³⁹ Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991), 105–106.

⁴⁰ Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 57. See the summary and discussion on pp. 196–197 of Ralph P. Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn (Col 1:15–20)," *EQ* 36 (1964): 195–205.

⁴¹ Aletti, *Saint Paul Épître aux Colossiens*, 90.

⁴² Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15–20," 448–451.

Pöhlmann's is a true four-strophe arrangement of the hymn and is laid out by him as follows:⁴³

Strophe I

- 15a ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
 15b πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
 16a ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα

Strophe II

- 16b ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
 16c τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
 16d εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες
 εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι

Strophe III

- 16e τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτισται,
 17a καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων
 17b καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.
 18a καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος

Strophe IV

- 18b ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή,
 18c πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 19ab ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
 20a καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν.

Pöhlmann thus considers τῆς ἐκκλησίας in v. 18a, the phrase ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτός πρωτεύων in v. 18d, and the second half of v. 20 (εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι' αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς) to be redactional insertions.⁴⁴

An arrangement in five strophes is provided by Charles Masson.⁴⁵ In creating this arrangement Masson has identified the first half of v. 18 as a redactional insertion. Thus, it is not only the phrase τῆς ἐκκλησίας that is added, as many commentators have suggested, but the whole line (καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος, τῆς ἐκκλησίας). Masson's arrangement is as follows:

Strophe I

- 15 ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
 πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
 16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
 ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,

⁴³ Wolfgang Pöhlmann, "Die hymnischen All-Prädikationen in Kol 1:15–20," *ZNW* 64 (1973): 53–74, here p. 56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

⁴⁵ Charles Masson, *L'épître de Saint Paul aux Colossiens* (CNT 10; Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1950), 105.

Strophe II

τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
 εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες,
 εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι,
 τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται,

Strophe III

17 καὶ αὐτὸς ἐστὶν πρὸ πάντων,
 καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,
 18b ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 ἵνα γένηται ἐν πάσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,

Strophe IV

19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν
 πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
 20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι
 τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,

Strophe V

εἰρηνοποίησας
 διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ,
 [δι' αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
 εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

Masson's five-strophe arrangement has not been widely accepted. One major difficulty is that it ignores some of the obvious parallelism that provides the initial clue that this is a hymnic citation. For example, the lines beginning with ὅς ἐστὶν in vv. 15 and 18b, are generally thought to be related through parallelism, and thus the beginnings of two strophes. Yet in Masson's arrangement the ὅς ἐστὶν in 18b is found in the middle of the third strophe.⁴⁶

Clearly, even among scholars who accept the application of form-critical methods to passages such as Col 1:15–20 there is no widespread agreement on how the passage should be arranged or analyzed.

2. Cultural Background

Moving on to the question of the cultural background of Col. 1:15–20, the options are quite varied, although recent scholarship has seen a general movement toward some aspect of Hellenistic Jewish wisdom speculation such as is evidenced in Philo and a number of other Jewish texts of the Second Temple Period.⁴⁷ Another alternative is the view of Christian

⁴⁶ For further critique see Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus*, 151–152.

⁴⁷ For example, David M. Hay writes, "The similarities [between Philo and his predecessors] are strong enough for us to conclude that the hymn was created by someone thoroughly familiar with Hellenistic-Jewish traditions," David M. Hay, *Colossians* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 54. This is quite different than scholars of an earlier generation who sought the origin and background of the passage in

Stettler⁴⁸ who, following a path suggested by Hartmut Gese and N.T. Wright, argues that the entire passage is composed along the lines of a mixture of Old Testament psalm forms. He attempts to demonstrate that each element of the Colossians passage can be found in some form in the Old Testament and wisdom traditions. Nevertheless, in spite of his thorough treatment of this material, he fails to give adequate reasons for neglecting the Greco-Roman influences that almost certainly must have been present in a Greek letter, addressed to Greek-speaking residents of a Greek city in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor.⁴⁹

Another author who deserves mention in this discussion is Ralph Brucker.⁵⁰ Although his recent monograph is primarily concerned with Phil 2:6–11, his work has clear implications for Col 1:15–20, as he notes.⁵¹ Unlike Stettler, he engages in a full-fledged analysis of Greco-Roman rhetoric and how it does or does not relate to the passage under discussion. He explores what the rhetorical handbooks say on the subject of praise and blame, and seeks to integrate it into an analysis of Phil 2:6–11. In the end Brucker concludes it is desirable to do away with the term “Christ-hymn” altogether. Instead, he argues that Phil 2:6–11 is a deliberative passage which utilizes elements of epideictic in the course of the argument.⁵² So for Brucker this is more correctly an instance of “Christuslob” – praise of Christ – which happens to occur in a deliberative context. Brucker is clearly on the right track in considering the evidence of Greco-Roman writers and theoreticians of rhetoric. In his final chapter he argues that each New Testament passage containing elevated language about Christ must be studied with an ear for its rhetoric.⁵³ In each instance the “praise

a Gnostic Redeemer myth; see, for example, Sanders, *New Testament Christological Hymns*. Advances in scholarly reconstructions of Gnostic thought have served to remove this particular theory from discussion.

⁴⁸ Stettler, *Kolosserrhymnus*.

⁴⁹ Stettler’s reasoning for excluding the Greco-Roman material is not persuasive. The essence of his argument is that since he has shown that Col 1:15–20 can be viewed in light of a mixed form of Old Testament psalm forms, one need not look beyond this material for any other influences (see page 84 in particular). However, such a line of reasoning fails to take into account the complex cultural milieu within which the epistle to the Colossians must have been written.

⁵⁰ Ralph Brucker, *‘Christushymnen’ oder ‘epideiktische Passagen’? : Studien zum Stilwechsel im Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* (FRLANT 176; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 353.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 350.

⁵³ He rightly claims that the motives for praise and blame in the wider literary context are quite varied depending on the text; as a consequence the art of each passage must be explored individually in reference to its specific function in its context (*Ibid.*, 353). The

of Christ” may have its own unique function, but it is probably never a quotation of a hymn to Christ. The details of his case must be weighed against the other proposals, specifically with regard to Col 1:15–20. It appears that the main factor Brucker overlooks is the multitude of indicators within the passage and its context that suggest that traditional material is indeed being utilized by the author.

Such recent suggestions as those made by Stettler (that “Christ-hymns” are simply psalm forms derived from the Hebrew Bible) and Brucker (that Greek deliberative rhetoric with epideictic elements provides the key to analysis) must be placed within a more comprehensive context – which is part of the aim of this study. What is required is a thorough reevaluation of several aspects of the problem. First the interface of rhetoric and ancient praise of gods must be attended to. While Brucker goes to some good sources and offers a good start, his analysis does not go as far as it might in order to address the observations that suggest that there are traditional materials being utilized by Paul and the other NT authors. Second, a more comprehensive understanding of Jewish psalms, prayers and liturgical texts and their relationship with praise as it is manifested in Greco-Roman society as a whole must be developed. This would bring the observations of Stettler (as representative of one particular camp) into conversation with the work of Brucker (as representative of another camp). In conversation with the form critics of the twentieth century, some new paths can be charted with regard to the study of “traditional materials” reflecting praise of Christ in the New Testament.

3. *The Origins of the Content of Col 1:15–20*

Closely related to the cultural background is the issue of the origin of the content of this passage. The traditions found embedded in this passage, though resonating with other similar passages in the New Testament, appear to be unique in some of their implications about a proper understanding of the nature of Christ. Nearly every phrase in the hymn can be traced and shown to be connected on some level to an earlier tradition. As is the case with the cultural background issue, the origins of statements of this nature about a particular person are highly debated.

E. Käsemann suggested that the contents of the original hymn were essentially Gnostic, and that the passage was in fact a hymn to a Gnostic redeemer figure.⁵⁴ In its present context, according to Käsemann, it has

present dissertation is an attempt to explore this in reference to the Colossian hymn in its epistolary context.

⁵⁴ E. Käsemann, “A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (trans. Montague; American ed.; Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1964),

been adapted by Christians with the addition of the phrases τῆς ἐκκλησίας in v. 18a and διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ in v. 20. Aside from these, he claims that the remainder of the passage is pre-Christian. Käsemann's view, in this instance, has not been accepted in subsequent scholarship for a variety of compelling reasons. The greatest weakness of his proposal is his dependence upon second century sources to establish the existence of Gnostic patterns of belief in the first century; it is not clear that such a pattern of beliefs existed at the time this hymn was composed.⁵⁵ A second major weakness, one identified by both Schweizer and Lohse, is the presence of the phrase πρῶτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, which is integral to the hymn and most certainly Christian in its nature and origin.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, there does appear to be some relationship between the nature of some of the contents of this passage, and the nature of later Gnostic texts. The tendency today appears to be to regard the language of Colossians as being a response to a form of belief among the Colossian opponents that was perhaps "proto-Gnostic" in nature.⁵⁷ Martin summarizes his view of the background as "a gnosticizing trend within Hellenistic Judaism mediated through the Phrygian synagogues and picking up ideas which are found in the Wisdom literature."⁵⁸ This perspective takes into account the syncretistic nature of first-century Asia Minor, without projecting later systems of belief into an earlier period.

Given that a Gnostic background is unlikely, there are several other major views on this subject. C. F. Burney, followed by W. D. Davies, suggested that there are strong analogies between what is occurring in Col 1:15–20 and the kinds of interpretations given to the figure of wisdom in the early rabbinic traditions.⁵⁹ Both the Colossian passage and the early rabbinic sources draw on Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 in order to discuss the role of an intermediate figure in creation (whether it is Christ or wisdom). According to this interpretation, this tradition of exegesis is being utilized

149–68. Along those lines see also the work of Sanders, *New Testament Christological Hymns*.

⁵⁵ For the development of this claim, see Carsten Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (FRLANT 60; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), 57–68, esp. 63–65.

⁵⁶ For more details and responses to Käsemann see, for example, O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 38.

⁵⁷ Margaret Y. MacDonald and Daniel J. Harrington, *Colossians and Ephesians* (SP 17; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 63.

⁵⁸ Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 65.

⁵⁹ C.F. Burney, "Christ as the APXH of Creation," *JTS* 27 (1926): 160–77; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (4th American ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). For critical commentary on these views, see O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 38–39.