



## Colossians between Texts and Contexts: *status quaestionis* of the Recent Research\*

Juan Manuel Granados Rojas, S. J.<sup>a</sup>

Pontificio Instituto Bíblico - Roma

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0477-9264>

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper summarizes the current research on the letter to Colossians. It proposes the *status quaestionis* of the most significant interpretations concerning the identity of the addressees, archaeological research, epistolary introduction, Christology and theology of the letter. Comparative studies of the cities in the Lycus Valley suggest that the recipients of the letter were people scattered throughout the region, but unlike Laodicea and Hierapolis, only the humblest city in the valley was mentioned in the initial greetings. Numismatics and epigraphy highlight Colossae's secondary role. However, since the tell of ancient Colossae had not yet been excavated, scholars await further archeological evidence. Regarding the epistolary introduction, current studies focus on the understanding of hope and the use of memory. The various attempts made to identify the opponents and the error of Colossians illustrate the methodological difficulties in studying the letter. For a suitable historical reconstruction of Paul's opponents, they may need a more balanced approach, distinguishing thoroughly both the historical situation and rhetorical situation. The exegetical-theological studies on the Christological Hymn of the last twenty years are fewer in number than those of a socio-historical nature. However, among the former, those that focus on the rhetoric and argumentation theory offer a holistic perspective more suited to understanding the letter. Rhetorical studies on the Christological Hymn of Col 1:15-20 have made it possible to overcome the one-sided perspective based on the correction of a possible heresy contained in the letter. Recent rhetorical and theological studies have also contributed greatly to identifying the features of the Christological *μυστήριον*. The study of the Christology of universal lordship has helped researchers to clarify the distinctive aspects of the letter's soteriology and eschatology. If diachronic exegesis has multiplied the hypotheses about the composition of the letter, the synchronic approach has offered a better articulated perspective on the mystery of Christ.

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<sup>a</sup> Corresponding author. E-mail: [jmgranados@biblico.it](mailto:jmgranados@biblico.it)

KEY WORDS: Colossians; recipients; epigraphy; numismatics; epistolary; opponents; heresy; Christological Hymn; *μυστήριον*.

*La Carta a los Colosenses entre textos y contextos:  
status quaestionis de los estudios recientes*

RESUMEN: Este artículo resume la investigación actual sobre la carta a los Colosenses. Propone el *status quaestionis* de las interpretaciones más significativas sobre la identidad de los destinatarios, la investigación arqueológica, la introducción epistolar, la cristología y la teología de la carta. Los estudios comparativos de las ciudades del valle del Lico sugieren que los destinatarios de la carta estaban dispersos por toda la región, pero, a diferencia de Laodicea y Hierápolis, sólo la ciudad más humilde del valle fue mencionada en los saludos iniciales. La numismática y la epigrafía destacan el papel secundario de Colosas. Sin embargo, dado que el *tell* de la antigua Colosas no ha sido aún excavado, los estudiosos esperan más pruebas arqueológicas. En cuanto a la introducción epistolar, los estudios actuales se centran en la comprensión de la esperanza y el uso de la memoria. Los intentos por identificar a los adversarios y el error de Colosenses ilustran las dificultades metodológicas para estudiar la carta. Para una adecuada reconstrucción histórica de los adversarios de Pablo, tal vez sea necesario un enfoque más equilibrado, que distinga tanto la situación histórica como la retórica. Los estudios exegético-teológicos del Himno Cristológico de los últimos veinte años son menos numerosos que los de carácter socio-histórico. Sin embargo, entre los primeros, los que se centran en la retórica y la teoría de la argumentación ofrecen una perspectiva holística más adecuada para comprender la carta. Los estudios retóricos sobre el himno cristológico de Col 1,15-20 han permitido superar la perspectiva unilateral basada en la corrección de una posible herejía contenida en la carta. Los recientes estudios retóricos y teológicos han contribuido además a identificar los rasgos del *μυστήριον* cristológico. El estudio de la cristología del señorío universal ha ayudado a los investigadores a aclarar los aspectos distintivos de la soteriología y la escatología de la carta.

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PALABRAS CLAVE: Colosenses; destinatarios; epigrafía; numismática; epistolario; adversarios; herejía; Himno Cristológico; *μυστήριον*.

What are the recent approaches to academic research on the Letter to the Colossians? At first glance, several socio-historical studies shed light on the possible contexts of the letter or its recipients. A more careful analysis reveals other theological studies that focus on the message of the letter and its relevance within the Pauline epistolary as a whole. The latter are essential not only to understand the letter's Christology, ethics and ecclesiology, but also to grasp the possible evolution of Pauline thought.

Recent studies of Colossians re-examine a number of issues discussed through diachronic exegesis. These include controversies concerning the recipients of the letter, the location of Colossae, the original context of the hymn of 1:15–20, the vocabulary related to the so-called “heresy” (cf. φιλοσοφία, ἐμβατεύω, θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων), and the *Hausetafel* of 3:18–4:1. Current studies are distinguished from previous ones by a more holistic and interdisciplinary style. This paper presents the *status quaestionis* of the most significant interpretations concerning the identity of the addressees, archaeological research, epistolary introduction, apostolic authority, the identity of the opponents, Christology and the theology of the letter.

## The Colossians' Identity

Who were the recipients of the letter? Who were the apostle's opponents (traceable from the vocabulary of Col 2)? What is the recent research on these two questions? The absence of *in situ* information and the vocabulary of Col 2 have given rise to a variety of hypotheses regarding the suspicion of heresy. On the other hand, the theological approach has helped to carefully examine many of these interpretations and to clarify them in the light of the Deutero-Pauline literature. If the socio-historical approach investigates, for example, the type of Jews and Judaism present in the Lycus valley during the first century BCE, the theological approach delves into the image—and the consequent Christology—that may have configured the saints and believers to whom the letter was addressed.

Are the Colossians the fictitious recipients of the letter? Within his extensive study of Christianity in the Lycus Valley, Huttner evaluates this assumption.<sup>1</sup> Some authors have used the destruction of the city to demonstrate the pseudepigraphy of the letter: thus, Paul would have been addressing an already disappeared community that could neither affirm nor deny the authenticity of the communication. Schenk,

<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Huttner, *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley*, trans. David Green, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* 85 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 115–16.

for example, followed by Pokorný and Frank,<sup>2</sup> advocates not only the pseudonymity of the letter but also the fictitious nature of the addressees (“ihrer Adresse fiktiv ist”).<sup>3</sup> More recently Vegge, in discussing the genre and function of the letter, seems to follow Lindemann’s view, i.e., that the general function of the letter would be exhortative even though its recipients are fictitious.<sup>4</sup> Huttner discards this hypothesis affirming the authenticity of the letter. He inquires how the Pauline circle in that area (for example, the descendants of Epaphras) would have reacted a generation after the apostle’s death if a letter attributed to Paul had appeared containing references to the tasks and roles assigned to his friends and relatives in the community. The possible solutions would have been twofold: to declare the document a forgery or to consider it a further reflection on the history of the community. This would have led to the recognition of its authorship.<sup>5</sup>

The recipients’ identity in the letter is still a matter of debate among scholars: did they belong to a local community (that of the city of Colossae) or were they members of a Pauline “circle” located in the Lycus valley? The hermeneutical approaches are mainly two. First, socio-historical exegesis, which wonders about the possible presence of a Pauline school—both in the above-mentioned valley and in Asia Minor—that could shed light on the identity of the author and of the recipients. Second, theological exegesis, which tried to give the reasons for the lack of the term *ἐκκλησία* in the initial greetings. In the first group there are several scholars. Röhser, for example, is interested in the historical consequences of research, he focuses on the epistolary elements of Colossians, particularly the conclusion (4:7–17).<sup>6</sup> The latter (*Schluss*) constitutes a key

<sup>2</sup> Petr Pokorný, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 17. Nicole Frank, *Der Kolosserbrief im Kontext des paulinischen Erbes: eine intertextuelle Studie zur Auslegung und Fortschreibung der Paulustradition*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/271 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 413.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Schenk, “Der Kolosserbrief in der neuen Forschung (1945–1985),” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, T 2: Principat 25/4. Teilband Religion (Vorkonstantinisches Christentum: Leben und Umwelt Jesu; Neues Testament; Kanonische Schriften und Apokryphen [Forts.])*, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 3334.

<sup>4</sup> Lindemann suggests that the recipients are fictitious, although the letter was originally addressed to the community of Laodicea. Andreas Lindemann, *Der Kolosserbrief*, ed. Hans Heinrich Schmid and Siegfried Schulz, Zürcher Bibelkommentare NT 10 (Zürich: Theologischer, 1983), 12. See also Tor Vegge, “Polemik in the Epistle to the Colossians,” in *Polemik in der frühchristlichen Literatur: Texte und Kontexte*, ed. Oda Wischmeyer and Lorenzo Scornaieni, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 170 (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 266, n. 56.

<sup>5</sup> “In any case, a dispute over the authenticity of Colossians would have prevented its inclusion in the New Testament canon,” Huttner, *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> Günter Röhser, “Der Schluss als Schlüssel. Zun den Epistolaria des Kolosserbriefes,” in *Kolosser-Studien*, ed. Peter Müller, Biblisch-theologische Studien 103 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 150.

(*Schlüssel*) to solving the “mystery” of the letter since it introduces Paul’s collaborators as a “Missionsteam.”<sup>7</sup> This “team” would confirm the presence of a Pauline school as well as a common editor for Colossians and Ephesians. In the second group, there are fewer scholars. From a theological perspective, Standhartinger, for example, explains the absence of the term *ἐκκλησία* in the initial greetings of the letter as an indication of a broader content,<sup>8</sup> i.e., not restricted to a local community.<sup>9</sup> If one looks at the context, one may notice that between wealthy Laodicea (4:16) and affluent Hierapolis (4:13), the letter receives the name of the humblest city in the valley: Colossae was probably part of a church composed by people scattered throughout the Lycus valley. In this regard, Standhartinger says that the point of view has changed: from prosperous cities we move to a small, unimportant town, known only for its sheep and colorful wool, yet remembered thanks to a letter praising the spiritual life of the members of its community.<sup>10</sup> Paul’s greeting in Col 1:2 (“to the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae”) would then put forward the following message: God has chosen the weak and not the powerful of the world as the most suitable recipients to receive the message of Christ crucified.

## Recent Archeological Research

Over the past two decades, investigation about the letter’s recipients has relied heavily on socio-historical studies. They focused on evidence confirming or denying the presence of Jews and local cults in the Lycus valley; cults related to angels, mysteries, or immersions. Such studies often draw on archaeology—in particular, numismatics and epigraphy—looking for clues that attempt to roughly clarify the vocabulary of Colossians 2. However, their application range is still limited. Until 2019, the tell of ancient Colossae had not yet been excavated, and the situation nowadays seems

<sup>7</sup> Röhser takes the expression from Marco Frenschkowski, “Pseudepigraphie und Paulusschule. Gedanken zur Verfasserschaft der Deuteropaulinen, insbesondere der Pastoralbriefe,” in *Das Ende des Paulus: Historische, theologische und literaturgeschichtliche Aspekte*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 106 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 239–72. In turn, Frenschkowski uses it to clarify the “vague” notion of school: “Die hier vertretene [...] These heißt nun: Das, was man gerne vage die Schule des Paulus nennt, ist nichts anderes als das ehemalige Missionsteam des Apostels” (259).

<sup>8</sup> Angela Standhartinger, “A City with a Message: Colossae and Colossians,” in *The First Urban Churches: Vol. 5: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea*, ed. James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, SBL Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 16 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2019), 239–56.

<sup>9</sup> The only geographic reference of the “church” in Colossians corresponds to that which gathers in the house of Nymph (4:15) (cf. Rev. 3:14–21).

<sup>10</sup> Standhartinger, “A City with a Message,” 251–52.

unchanged.<sup>11</sup> Trainor describes the biconical tell (*hüyük*) of the ancient city in these terms: it was about 30 meters high, with an area of about 90 thousand m<sup>2</sup> (22 acres). The basin of the theater was able to accommodate about five thousand spectators. Trainor also mentions the importance of underground and lateral water channels. Although archaeological findings are scant, epigraphic and numismatic studies confirm some of the historical information already present in the ancient literature.

Trainor offers a brief socio-historical reconstruction of the ancient city.<sup>12</sup> Pottery found at the site points to settlements ranging from the Chalcolithic period to the Byzantine and Islamic periods (3500 BC - AD 1100).<sup>13</sup> The most important period of the city seems to be the Persian one (547-330 BC). Herodotus (484-425 BC) mentions it in the story of the expedition of Xerxes (486-465 BC) and calls it “a great city in Phrygia” (*Histories* 7.30.1). Xenophon (430-354 BC) confirms the information (*Anabasis* 1.2.6). Trainor specifies that at that time the city was renowned for its dyed wool (or the process of dyeing wool) called *colossinus*, from which the city takes its name.<sup>14</sup> Following a powerful earthquake in AD 60 it was soon rebuilt (attested by Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.2716 and Pliny, *Natural History*, 5.145).<sup>15</sup> Colossae is also mentioned in the Second Council of Nicaea (AD 787). Among the largest remains of the Byzantine period, only those of the church of St. Michael are preserved. Finally, Byzantine sources suggest that the city lost its importance because of the Arab invasions, until it became uninhabited. Its population migrated to the adjacent city of Chonai, today Honaz.

<sup>11</sup> Trainor and Cadwallader mention Celal Şimşek from Pamukkale University as the professor in charge of the archeological investigation. He counts on the support of Denizli’s civic and industrial sector, but has focused all research on ancient Laodicea (“the new Ephesus”). Michael Trainor, “Colossae--Colossal in Name Only?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 45, no. 2 (2019): 44–50.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Trainor, “Colossae--Colossal in Name Only?” 44–50.

<sup>13</sup> See a full pottery report in Bahadır Duman and Erim Konakçı, “The Silent Witness of the Mound of Colossae: Pottery Remains,” in *Colossae in Space and Time: Linking to an Ancient City*, ed. Alan Cadwallader and Michael Trainor, *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus* 94 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 247–81.

<sup>14</sup> He also stresses the commercial importance of the city in Michael Trainor, “Romes Market Economy in the Lycus Valley: Soundings from Laodicea and Colossae,” in *The First Urban Churches: Vol. 5: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea*, ed. James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, SBL. Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 16 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2019), 293–24.

<sup>15</sup> During the Roman period Colossae was part of Phrygia (province of Asia).

Huttner suggests some points of contact between the numismatic studies and the interpretation of the letter.<sup>16</sup> He analyzes five coins minted by Syllius [Suillius] Antiochos (with the title of grammateus in Hierapolis) for the purpose of honoring Emperor Claudius and his sons Britannicus and Nero. According to Huttner, it is possible to trace in them more than one reference to the letter to the Colossians. First, the crest of the city would recall the agonistic motif, as do the crowns depicted on a pair of coins. Such a motif would be traceable in Col 1:29–2:1; 4:12; and in 2:18, by means of the term *καταβραβεύω*, it would indicate a warning against angel worship. Second, the information drawn from the coins would contrast with the message of the letter. In some coins two young men appear alongside their father Claudius and the god Apollo as deified members of the imperial family (contrasting the divinity of Jesus Christ?). Huttner confirms his interpretation by citing an ironic pamphlet of Seneca in which the young successor of the deceased emperor is said to become an Apollo, like a morning star.<sup>17</sup> So, coins celebrating the sons of the deified emperor would explain the context of the statement in Col 1:15 (*εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου*).<sup>18</sup> According to Huttner, numismatics confirms the divergence between Christological monotheism and imperial deification.

Cadwallader responds to Huttner's research by means of a comparative approach, clarifying the purpose of certain numismatic evidences.<sup>19</sup> This approach is useful to determine the main characteristics of an isolated site. To individuate these features, one must consider the Roman imperial interest in promoting competition among the Greek cities of Asia Minor. The comparative approach makes it possible to inquire both compression and idiosyncrasy.<sup>20</sup> The compression of an overall interpretation relates to the individual features of a site located in the region, and its idiosyncrasy

<sup>16</sup> Ulrich Huttner, "Colossians, Hierapolitan Coins—and the Young Bearers of Hope," in *The First Urban Churches: Vol. 5: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea*, ed. James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, SBL. Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 16 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2019), 73–79.

<sup>17</sup> Seneca, *Apol.* 4.21–32 [Eden]. Cited by Huttner, "Colossians, Hierapolitan Coins—and the Young Bearers of Hope," 75–76.

<sup>18</sup> Huttner follows Maier in stating that Paul uses imperial images to communicate his teaching, reconfiguring its contents. See Harry O. Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 156–62.

<sup>19</sup> Allan H. Cadwallader, "On the Question of Comparative Method in Historical Research: Colossae and Chonai in Larger Frame." In *The First Urban Churches: Vol. 5: Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea*, ed. James R. Harrison and L. L. Welborn, SBL. Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 16 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2019), 105–51.

<sup>20</sup> Cadwallader follows here Michael E. Smith and Peter Peregrine, "Approaches to Comparative Analysis in Archeology," in *The Comparative Archaeology of Complex Societies*, ed. Michael E. Smith (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4–20.

relates to the external influence over it. Cadwallader proposes the comparative study of some coins ranging from the Attalid period to the Roman period. The following are three of the examples he analyzes.<sup>21</sup>

The first coin dates back to the second century BC. It depicts Zeus and his thunder. The inscription on the coin ΚΟΛΟΣ ΣΗΝΩΝ does not suggest a relevant explanation. However, comparative analysis reveals that many Seleucid cities minted similar coins. Thus, the question that arises is whether the cult of Zeus was characteristic of Colossae or shared by the entire region. The study of the second coin suggests that at some point Colossae adhered to Apollo (to whom was attributed the paternity of Seleucus I) to support the Seleucid dynasty. The reverse of this coin depicts a four-stringed lyre, an uncommon symbol of Seleucid Apollo. Because of this, it appears to be from the Ionian or to the Lycian mint.<sup>22</sup> Cadwallader reports the details of the radiant crown present in other coins of the region and asks whether it should be associated with Helios or Apollo (or other eastern deity). He interprets the possible association as follows: as Laodicea and Hierapolis gained more importance in the eyes of the Seleucids, Colossae was obliged to show its pride as an ancient city; therefore, it reproduced the characteristic features of other cities in the region—in this case Apollo—with its own attributes and depiction style.

The third coin is considered by Cadwallader as a model of negotiation between the cities of the region.<sup>23</sup> Although the coin was minted at the beginning of Hadrian's reign (AD 117/118) under the patronage of the widow Claudia Eugenetoriana, the text on this Roman civic coin is Greek. Its symbolism is particularly dense from a political point of view. The figures of the women represented there, which recall Athena and Demeter, could deliberately imitate the widows Marciana and Plotina (respectively sister and wife of Trajan), supporters of Hadrian. In this case, the comparative approach demonstrates that archaeological findings, particularly through the analysis of iconography, make it easier to identify deities (regional cults) and to have clues about

<sup>21</sup> See detailed numismatic studies in Adriana Travaglini and Valeria G. Camilleri, *Hierapolis di Frigia, le Monete: Campagne di Scavo 1957-2004* (Istanbul: Ege, 2010), 9–12, 23. Cadwallader also notes that the inscription in honor of Emperor Hadrian (*IGRR* 4.869) corresponds to the coins minted in honor of Olympian Hadrian by Apollonios and Hyeronymos (in the second coin Colossae's flag seems to appear). See Hans von Aulock, *Münzen Und Städte Phrygiens* (Tübingen: E. Wasmuth, 1980), 2.547; *RPC* 3.2309. See also *RPC* 2.2310a online.

<sup>22</sup> Cadwallader refers to the study by Nicholas L. Wright, "Seleucid Royal Cult, Indigenous Religious Traditions, and Radiate Crowns: The Numismatic Evidence," *Mediterranean Archaeology* 18 (2005): 67–82.

<sup>23</sup> The facts that took place in the Colossae's mint prior to Hadrian (i.e., during the Attalid-Roman period) are still matter of scholarly debate. It is unclear, but it is possible that Rome imposed a ban on minting coins during or after the Mithridates revolt.



the “negotiation” or political and cultural affairs carried out in the area. Cadwallader points out that such numismatic evidence, while helping to grasp the cultural and political setting of the region, does not allow for the identification of characteristic elements of Colossae when compared to those of Laodicea and Hierapolis.<sup>24</sup>

On the whole, the results of the recent socio-historical studies attempting to identify the recipients of the letter are approximate and subject to confirmation. Numismatics and epigraphy highlight Colossae’s secondary role. These studies show that the city had great relevance dating back to the Persian rule, a decisive decline during the Hellenistic period and first century (after the earthquakes) and, finally, a certain recovery occurred with the restoration (or opening) of the mint of the city (during the inspection of the eastern provinces carried out by Hadrian). The most recent hypotheses have tried to refute the supposed presence of Jews in the city. However, this objection does not prove *a fortiori* the opposite identity of the addressees, namely Gentiles.<sup>25</sup>

## The Epistolary Introduction of Col 1:3–14: Between Hope and Memory

Initial research on Col 1:3–14 focused on the *εὐχαριστῶ* period (vv. 3–8), because of its similarity to the *εὐχαριστῶ* period in Philemon (vv. 4–7).<sup>26</sup> Other studies devoted

<sup>24</sup> Cadwallader, “On the Question of Comparative Method in Historical Research,” 117. Alternatively, Cadwallader seeks to identify the distinctive elements of Colossae by analyzing the inscriptions and iconography of the miracle of Michael of Chonai. The key to understanding this story would be found in the period after Julian (apostate). In the above story, Michael would take the side of Hierapolis against Laodicea. In light of this interpretation, the story of Michael of Chonai could not be considered as a “text” resisting the authority imposed by Laodicea, but as part of a negotiation between the two cities (immediately after or following Julian II).

<sup>25</sup> For further bibliography see Alan H. Cadwallader, “The Historical Sweep of the Life of Kolossai,” in *Epigraphical Evidence Illustrating Paul’s Letter to the Colossians*, ed. Joseph Verheyden, Markus Öhler, and Thomas Corsten, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 411 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 25–67. Alan H. Cadwallader, *Fragments of Colossae: Sifting through the Traces* (Hindmarsh: ATF Press, 2015). Michael Trainor, “Colossae: The State of Forthcoming Excavations,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 1, no. 1 (2011): 133–35.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the comparison between the Thanksgiving of Colossians and Philemon proposed by Terence Y. Mullins, “The Thanksgivings of Philemon and Colossians,” *New Testament Studies* 30, no. 2 (1984): 288–93. He discusses the dependence of Colossians’ Thanksgiving on Philemon’s; *stricto sensu* Colossians did not expand the Philemon Thanksgiving. On the other hand, Mullins believes that the Thanksgiving in Colossians mirrors the Pauline pattern of epistolary thanksgiving; it introduces the main themes that are developed throughout the letter. Rockwell explains the latter observation: the triad faith, charity, and hope of the thanksgiving is developed by means of several imperatives throughout the letter. See Stephen Rockwell, “Faith, Hope and Love in the Colossian Epistle,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 72, no. 1 (2013): 36–52.

to the intercessory prayer report (Col 1:9–14). In contrast, recent studies focus on the understanding of hope and the use of memory in the epistolary introduction.

Following Bornkamm's research regarding the meaning of the triad "faith, charity, and hope" in Col 1:4–5,<sup>27</sup> Standhartinger advances a political interpretation, from a rather socio- historical viewpoint.<sup>28</sup> Her study begins with two questions: what can we know about the history of the community and its recipients on the basis of the double proem (vv. 3–8; 9–14)? What is the content of the hope enunciated in Col 1:5? The first question comes up again in broader terms: what is the communicative situation highlighted in the epistolary introduction, that is, what is the need that can be glimpsed in the addressees? Standhartinger answers by stating that the recipients need knowledge and wisdom, therefore a life in divine perspective. The latter, according to the epistolary communication, must culminate in a heavenly service of thanksgiving. The second question takes up one of Bornkamm's conclusions, namely, that the hope in Col 1:5 indicates a content (*spes quae speratur*).

Standhartinger considers the phrase διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα in Col 1:5 as a key to understanding hope. The ἐλπίς of Col 1:5 could be interpreted in light of Col 3:1–4 as a treasure, a precious content kept in heaven; an interpretation that may be supported by Second Temple literature.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the author points out that in none of the proposed texts does hope appear linked to the verb ἀπόκειμαι. On the other hand, the study of the "hope of glory" (ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης) of Col 1:27, within the pattern of revelation of vv. 26–27, shows that hope concerns the present time (rather than future).<sup>30</sup> Unlike some authors, who detect in the present eschatology of Colossians signs of the insecurity caused by erroneous philosophy or doctrine,<sup>31</sup> Standhartinger identifies

<sup>27</sup> Günther Bornkamm, "Die Hoffnung im Kolosserbrief. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage der Echtheit des Briefes," in *Geschichte und Glaube: Zweiter Teil*, ed. Günther Bornkamm, Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 53 (München: Kaiser, 1971), 206–13.

<sup>28</sup> Angela Standhartinger, "... wegen der Hoffnung, die für euch im Himmel bereitliegt" (Kol 1,5). Zum Prooemium im Kolosserbrief und seinem politischen Hintergrund," in *Kolosser-Studien*, ed. Peter Müller, Biblisch-theologische Studien 103 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 1–22.

<sup>29</sup> Some texts from the Jewish apocalyptic, sapiential tradition, and from NT would suggest this. See 2Mac 12:44; HenEt 11:1; 25:7; Philo, *Praem* 104; 4Esd 7:14; 4Esd 7:77; BarSir 4:3; 14:12; 24:1; Mt 6:20 (Lk 12:33). Cf. Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser, der Brief an Philemon*, Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar zum Neuen Testament 12 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1993), 52. Cf. Standhartinger, "... wegen der Hoffnung", 10–11.

<sup>30</sup> See also Todd D. Still, "Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?" *New Testament Studies* 50, no. 1 (January 2004): 125–38. Thomas Witulski, "Gegenwart und Zukunft in den eschatologischen Konzeptionen des Kolosser- und des Epheserbriefes," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 96, no. 3–4 (2005): 211–42.

<sup>31</sup> Wolter, *Der Brief an die Kolosser*, 53.

in these verses the communicative situation of the letter. She focuses particularly on the latter in light of the representation of hope in contemporary political discourse, drawing on Maier's studies of imperial vocabulary in the letter.<sup>32</sup>

Maier notes some hints of political discourse in the mention of reconciliation and pacification in the Christological hymn (*ἀποκαλλάσσω* and *εἰρηνοποιέω* in Col 1:20). Indeed, the Roman peace celebrated with Augustus was understood as a *pax deum* with cosmic and universal dimensions.<sup>33</sup> For example, the cosmic peace and universal rule of the emperors are represented in the Gemma Augustea and the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias. To the epigraphic evidence Standhartinger adds that of numismatics. After the death of Caligula, Claudius, at the time of his rise to power, was the first to mint coins with the representation of a new hope, that his reign restored. Vespasian introduced a similar type of coinage after his rise to power in AD 70-71. Standhartinger concludes by stating that during the imperial period hope becomes one of the main prerogatives of the ruler (to which all other benefits are tied). In the period in which the letter to the Colossians originates, it possesses a political dimension. Therefore, the communicative situation described in the letter suggests that its recipients were waiting for peace, security, moral order, stabilized provinces and reconciliation of the barbarians. Although Colossians does not openly advance any criticism, in the context of the imperial propaganda “ist die Rede von [...] Hoffnung im Kolosserbrief eine Konkurrenzbotschaft”.<sup>34</sup>

Standhartinger's research ranges from theological questions to socio-historical issues, attempting to answer the former by means of the latter. To the question of the meaning and content of hope, which in the letter is linked to a particular eschatology, she replies in socio-historical terms by appealing to the imperial ideology of peace.<sup>35</sup> However, from a rather theological perspective, it should be pointed out that the hope

<sup>32</sup> Harry O. 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, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/193 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 385–406. See also Harry O. Maier, “A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 3 (2005): 323–49.

<sup>33</sup> “The Christ who is head of the body, the church, parallels the emperor who is head of the body of his Empire, with the difference that Christ's is not a rule centered in military dominion over pacified enemies. His rule is rather manifested in a reconciling death making friends out of enemies.” Maier, “A Sly Civility,” 340.

<sup>34</sup> Standhartinger, “... wegen der Hoffnung”, 21.

<sup>35</sup> This study does not depart significantly from some other studies on the Epistle to the Ephesians. See, for example, Eberhard Faust, *Pax Christi et Pax Caesaris: Religionsgeschichtliche, traditionsgeschichtliche und sozialgeschichtliche Studien zum Epheserbrief*, *Novum Testamentum et orbis antiquus* 24 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1993).

placed in heaven may be interpreted as the hope in glory, “which is Christ in you” (Col 1,27). This formulation provokes a significant change in Pauline eschatology. It requires a change of understanding on the part of the ideal reader: what is lacking to the believers is not waiting in time but in space (in heaven).

Some studies of Col 1:3–14 from the last decade have dealt with the rhetoric of the letter, particularly of the epistolary introduction. Dettwiler, for example, argues that this is an anamnestic rhetoric.<sup>36</sup> He seeks to show how the argumentation of the letter offers a “travail de mémoire,” that is, a work of persuasion designed to confront the community with its “savoir religieux” (or its own tradition).<sup>37</sup>

According to Dettwiler, Col 1:3–23 has the function of establishing a close connection with the recipients of the letter. This section hints at themes that will be discussed later; it also introduces the type of relationship between the apostle and the congregation. In the thanksgiving of vv. 3–8 the author reminds the community of its initial understanding of the gospel, so as to create a corporate identity with a universal horizon. In the intercessory prayer report of vv. 9–14, the community is reminded (*déjà vécu*) of its soteriological experience, that of liberation from the condition of darkness and transfer to that of light, that is, the kingdom of the beloved son. This existential transformation is grounded on Christ (vv. 15–20). Through this procedure, the author reminds the recipients of what they already knew (or should have known) but are about to forget.<sup>38</sup> It is a re-reading of the past that aims at the consent of the recipients, making them, in a certain sense, “instance de validation.”

Dettwiler states that the author of the letter reinterprets the Christological hymn in two moments. First, Col 1:21–23 develops the anthropological dimension of cosmic Christology through the semantic field of reconciliation. Colossians preserves the anthropological orientation characteristic of the Pauline understanding of reconciliation, without losing its universal dimension. Col 1:22b indicates, as a consequence, the ethical purpose of this reconciliation. Second, Col 2:9–15, reaffirms the religious identity of the community on the common basis of Christology. In Christ, the community already participates in salvation and is invited to renew its

<sup>36</sup> Andreas Dettwiler, “La lettre aux Colossiens: une théologie de la mémoire,” *New Testament Studies* 59, no. 1 (2013): 111–12. He understands the term “rhetoric” in a broad sense, not limited to techniques of induction and deduction.

<sup>37</sup> Dettwiler, “La lettre aux Colossiens,” 110.

<sup>38</sup> Dettwiler, “La lettre aux Colossiens,” 115.

experience of God and Christ. Equipped with such an experience, the community can live without anguish.<sup>39</sup>

Dettwiler's analysis of the epistolary introduction (Col 1:3–23) deals with the “travail” of memory accomplished for the benefit of the recipients. Its purpose is to show the system of religious convictions shared by them and the author, so as to consolidate and strengthen the religious identity of the community. This purpose is balanced by two dynamic factors: the spiritual life of the community, understood as a continuous evolving process, and Christ, who remains “incomplete” until the apostle has reached the world with his preaching. Dettwiler, however, does not relate the “travail” of memory with the semantics of knowing the mystery of Christ, nor does he explain how the community of recipients evolves, nor how the fulfillment of the gospel of Christ takes place in the world.<sup>40</sup> His understanding of the rhetoric of the letter excludes—perhaps unintentionally—the gnoseological character of the Pauline reasoning.

### Pauline Authority in Col 1:24–2:5: A *Selbstvorstellung* of the Apostle?

Dettwiler claims that the protagonist of the “travail” of memory in Colossians is Paul. The section in Col 1:24–2:5 constitutes his self-presentation: he makes the status of his authority and his missionary task explicit. However, it should be noted that the interpretation of the epistolary function of this section is currently under discussion. According to Dettwiler, through his letter Paul becomes present in the Pauline communities (as *Paulus redivivus*). Paul's authority retained in the memory of the recipients guarantees their interpretation of the past and sheds light on the present of the community. Actually, Dettwiler's interpretation of this unit as a self-presentation or self-recommendation of the apostle echoes Wolter's commentary on the letter, who in turn bases his thesis on Schnider and Stenger's studies to the epistolary introduction to the Pauline letters.

Aletti discusses Wolter's interpretation and shows that the presence of a *Selbstvorstellung* in Col 1:24–2:5 responds to formal criteria (without regard to content) and to rigid patterns of ancient epistolography.<sup>41</sup> The formal distinction between

<sup>39</sup> Reinterpreting the Christ event prepares the reader to deconstruct the contrary position (Col 2.8, 16–23). See Dettwiler, “La lettre aux Colossiens,” 118–19.

<sup>40</sup> Although he claims to have explained not only “what” but also “how.” Dettwiler, “La lettre aux Colossiens,” 124.

<sup>41</sup> Jean Noël Aletti, *Lettera ai Colossesi: introduzione, versione, commento*, 2nd ed., Scritti delle Origini Cristiane 12 (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2011), 32–38.

the body of the letter and the self-presentation of the apostle recalls Schnider and Stenger's study. They state that the undisputed Pauline letters include a *Danksagung* and a *Selbstempfehlung* situated between the *Präskript* and the *Briefcorpus*. While the *Danksagung* introduces the faith of the addressees, the *Selbstempfehlung* illustrates Paul's apostolic work and current situation. Reviewing the works of these authors, Aletti notes, however, that "numerosi passi etichettati come *briefliche Selbstempfehlung* non lo sono,"<sup>42</sup> moreover, "la loro individuazione dei passi di autopresentazione paolina non è esatta."<sup>43</sup> Beyond the methodological difficulties encountered in determining a *Selbstempfehlung* within the Pauline letters, Wolter's use of Schnider and Stenger's analysis neglects that Col 1:24–2:5 proposes a specific reasoning in the epistolary corpus. See, for instance, the introduction of the *μυστήριον* as the content of the apostle's universal proclamation, and the knowledge of the *μυστήριον* itself as an essential part of the proclamation. It seems, then, that the section stresses Paul's apostolic activity rather than the apostle himself (or his authority).

The interpretation of this section as an expansion of the gospel announced by Paul clarifies the content, manner, and agents of the proclamation of the word of truth.<sup>44</sup> Dettwiler insists that the agent (or protagonist) must be understood as a *Paulus redivivus* of unchallengeable authority. However, mentioning Pauline fatigue (1:29) and struggles (2:1) does not seem to emphasize the auto-biographical dimension of the apostle but the power of Christ acting in him. Fatigue and struggle are emblematic of the *διάκονος* serving the universal proclamation of the *μυστήριον*. For Dettwiler, the quid of the "travail" of memory is the construction of community identity. To this end, the self-recommendation in Col 1:24–2:5 legitimizes the writing. However, if we take into account the rhetorical function of this section, we find that its core is the manifestation and knowledge of the mystery of Christ. For Dettwiler, the "travail" of memory in Col 1:24–2:5 emphasizes the universal scope of Christ's project. It should be pointed out, however, that this mode does not take into account the fact that the fulfillment of the word of truth, i.e., reaching every man (*πάντα ἄνθρωπον*), consists in an ethical fulfillment, that is, in becoming *τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ*. Epistolary and rhetorical studies of Col 1:24–2:5 still give rise to discussion among scholars today; the studies on this section could be further improved by analyzing, in a complementary way, both its epistolary function and its line of reasoning.

<sup>42</sup> See Aletti's critical review of Schnider - Stenger's study in *Lettera ai Colossesi*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Aletti, *Lettera ai Colossesi*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Aletti further demonstrates that the gospel Paul serves (introduced in Col 1:23b) is explained and expanded in Col 1:24–2:5 as the *μυστήριον* for which Paul toils and struggles. Aletti, *Lettera ai Colossesi*, 38–39.

## The Christological Hymn (Col 1:15-20): Between Contextual and Textual Approaches

The Christological hymn in Col 1:15–20 continues to be the most studied text of the letter. Numerous monographs and articles published in the last two decades bear witness to this. Examining all of these studies exceeds the limits of this paper, however, a repeated pattern of interpretation can be seen in them, often of a contextual nature. In addition, many of them, either using socio-historical or exegetical-theological approaches, inquire about the relationship between creation and redemption, i.e., between the first and second parts of the hymn. The assumptions of the analyses determine in this case their greater or lesser novelty, as well as their accuracy.

Medley suggests a subversive reading of the hymn.<sup>45</sup> He compares Col 1:15-20 to popular protest songs, focusing particularly on Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." His interpretation builds on Gordley's earlier research,<sup>46</sup> especially his rediscovery of resistance poetry in the Jewish tradition. Medley is not the first to emphasize the subversive features of the hymn; he cites, for example, Walsh and Keesmaat's study,<sup>47</sup> as well as Maier's (mentioned above). According to the latter, Colossians polemicizes against the pretensions of Roman imperial ideology to the point of challenging them, exalting Christ as cosmic creator and redeemer.<sup>48</sup>

Trainor proposes an ecological reading of the hymn.<sup>49</sup> He divides Col 1:15–20 into two stanzas and identifies a concentric structure of the type A-A1, B-B1, and C-C1, whose textual and thematic center is v. 18a. In the conclusion, he highlights five aspects proposing a Christian reflection on biodiversity. First, the hymn invites the believer to consider the connections between the human experience of the world and the relationship with God. Second, it leads the believer to deepen the divine capacity (almost sacramental) to communicate with the world. Third, the hymn urges communion with God and, consequently, recognition of the global fracture and

<sup>45</sup> Mark S. Medley, "Subversive Song: Imagining Colossians 1:15-20 as a Social Protest Hymn in the Context of Roman Empire," *Review and Expositor* 116, no. 4 (2019): 421–35.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew, E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context: An Exegesis in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Hymnic and Epistolary Conventions*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/228 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Brian J. Walsh and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2004).

<sup>48</sup> See also Arthur M. Wright Jr., "Disarming the Rulers and Authorities: Reading Colossians in Its Roman Imperial Context," *Review and Expositor* 116, no. 4 (2019): 446–57.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Trainor, "The Cosmic Christology of Colossians 1:15-20 in the Light of Contemporary Ecological Issues," *Australian Biblical Review* 53 (2005): 54–69.

disharmony. The fourth aspect concerns the church, an extension of Jesus' presence in the universe, called to be a concrete demonstration of reconciliation and peace. Fifth, the hymn reminds believers that creation is a blessing and that "the cosmos has the potential to reflect and reveal God's biodiversity."<sup>50</sup>

Dettwiler suggests a cross-cultural reading of the hymn.<sup>51</sup> Pointing out several implicit connections, he highlights how different cultural universes are intertwined in Col 1:15–20. The figure of wisdom emerges as a characteristic element praised in the hymn; in fact, it constitutes the core of both, the Christological reflection in the first stanza and the anthropological reflection in the second stanza. The perception of a cohesive world around Christ contrasts with the Greek-Hellenistic notion of an "unstable world." In addition, the poetic language, proper to the wisdom tradition, articulates Christology and anthropology together. The OT wisdom tradition is proposed as a (Christological) answer to Greek-Hellenistic cosmology. Thus, Col 1:15–20 denotes a cross-cultural theology that offers a response of faith to the anguish characteristic of the Hellenistic world.<sup>52</sup>

Various socio-historical interpretations of the Christological hymn avoid the difficult issue of the relationship between creation and redemption. In the above-mentioned study, Dettwiler points to the question in these terms: "Certes, le langage de la réconciliation présuppose l'expérience d'un état d'adversité préalable qui affecte le monde et l'être humain. Mais notre texte ne l'explícite nullement."<sup>53</sup> The cause of this state of "adversity" has been subject of hypotheses that are not only unfounded (in the text) but also unusual (in context). Cox, for example, asserts that between the two stanzas we must assume a fall, some kind of "rebellion by supernatural forces or human beings."<sup>54</sup> Ibrahim's monograph addresses the same issue. Following Lohse and Testa, he considers that "l'autore dell'inno annuncia la riconciliazione universale

<sup>50</sup> Trainor, "The Cosmic Christology of Colossians 1:15-20," 69. Trainor's interpretation oscillates between theological, pastoral, and spiritual applications; *sensu stricto* it does not explain the ecology present in the hymn (e.g., divine biodiversity), but uses its hypothetical consequences.

<sup>51</sup> Andreas Dettwiler, "Le christ comme pensée de la création. Un exercice en théologie interculturelle (Col 1,15–20)," *Foi et Vie* 54, no. 3 (2015): 37–52.

<sup>52</sup> Dettwiler, "Le christ comme pensée de la création," 50.

<sup>53</sup> Dettwiler, "Le christ comme pensée de la création," 51.

<sup>54</sup> "The second strophe tells us – as simply – that in order to become preeminent in the cosmos, the Son had to mediate reconciliation through his death (at least implied) and his resurrection. We might understand that between the two some type of fall is implied, involving rebellion by supernatural forces or human beings (or both)." Ronald Cox, *By the Same Word: Creation and Salvation in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 145 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 192.



nel v. 20 senza aver parlato prima di ciò che l'ha causata. La riconciliazione presuppone, infatti, che ci sia stato un turbamento nel cosmo, anzi, una rottura.<sup>55</sup> Ibrahim attempts to demonstrate (unconvincingly) the breakdown associated with the creation by means of other biblical references (Rom 8:20; Gen 3:17; 6:20; Hos 4:3ff.). It must be noted, however, that the text itself does not mention the cause of such a rupture. In fact, numerous scholars do not provide a satisfactory explanation concerning the relationship between the firstborn's (πρωτότοκος) mediation in creation and its mediation in reconciliation.

Aletti's monograph had already explained the relationship between creation and reconciliation.<sup>56</sup> The double mention of the firstborn (πρωτότοκος) noted in Col 1:15 and 1:18b enunciates the primacy of Christ-ἀρχή: in Col 1:15 it is a primacy of rank (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως), in Col 1:18b is a temporal primacy (πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν).<sup>57</sup> The other expressions in the hymn appear as designations having the function of developing the content of the firstborn's primacy. The most recent studies have evinced the internal structure of the designations: their articulation is achieved through the prepositional inflection of the pronoun αὐτός, i.e., the rhetorical figure of the *polyptoton*.<sup>58</sup> This modulation confirms not only the uniqueness of the mediator (πρωτότοκος) but also the type of mediation: it is a mediation that is active as much in creation as in reconciliation. If the action of the πρωτότοκος is such, then the relationship between creation and reconciliation must be understood not in a consecutive sense (as though the creation had been disrupted, so it must be reconciled), but in a parallel sense (this is also described in Eph 2:15–16).

<sup>55</sup> Najib Ibrahim, *Gesù Cristo, Signore dell'universo: la dimensione cristologica della Lettera ai Colossesi*, Analecta. Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 69 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2007), 134. "Although there has been no previous mention of it, it is presupposed here that unity and harmony of the cosmos have suffered a considerable disturbance, even a rupture." Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, ed. Helmut Köster, Hermenia 14 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 59. See also Emanuele Testa, *Gesù pacificatore universale. Inno liturgico della Chiesa Madre (Col. 1, 15-20 + Ef 2, 14-16)*, Quaderni de "La Terra Santa" (Gerusalemme: Franciscan Printing Press, 1969), 15.

<sup>56</sup> For the *status quaestionis* of the structure and reconstructions of Col 1:15-20 see Jean-Noël Aletti, *Colossiens 1, 15–20: genre et exégèse du texte: fonction de la thématique sapientelle*, Analecta Biblica 91 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 20-26.

<sup>57</sup> For Ibrahim it includes the prōton and the eschaton. Ibrahim, *Gesù Cristo, Signore dell'universo*, 130.

<sup>58</sup> See Juan Manuel Granados Rojas, "Reconciliation in Col 1:20: A Case of Polyptoton," in *Non mi vergogno del Vangelo, potenza di Dio: studi in onore di Jean-Noël Aletti SJ, nel suo 70° compleanno*, ed. Francesco Bianchini and Stefano Romanello, Analecta biblica 200 (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2012), 153–70. See by the same author, *La teologia della riconciliazione nell'epistolario paolino*, Subsidia Biblica 46 (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2015), 101–7.

Like the above-cite authors, Copenhaver shows the importance of the rhetorical function of the Christological Hymn for understanding Colossians.<sup>59</sup> He studies the echoes of Col 1:15–20 throughout the letter. The echoes he identifies should be clearly distinguished from those proposed by Beetham. For Beetham, the hymn echoes Prov 8:22–31.<sup>60</sup> For Copenhaver, on the other hand, the hymn presents a series of elements in germinal stage, which are developed into clusters. He identifies three: the application of the hymn in Col 1:21–24, the polemic in Col 2:9–10, 14, 19, and the moral exhortation in Col 3:2, 5, 10. Copenhaver clarifies that some parts of the hymn, such as the preeminence of the son, have no development in the rest of the letter. Some of the elements of the middle and third stanza reveal that the author considers Christ's actions as *Welterlöser* rather than as *Weltschöpfer*.<sup>61</sup> Finally, Copenhaver notes that the author uses the hymn as foundational proof in the broadest sense of rhetoric. The Christological Hymn introduces the grounds of persuasion and dissuasion that are unfolded in the rest of the letter.

The exegetical-theological studies on the Christological Hymn of the last twenty years are fewer in number than those of a socio-historical nature. However, it should be noted that, among the former, those that focus on rhetoric and argumentation theory offer a holistic perspective more suited to understanding the letter. Said otherwise, rhetorical studies on the Christological Hymn of Col 1:15-20 have made it possible to overcome the one-sided perspective based on the correction of a possible heresy contained in the letter.<sup>62</sup>

## Opponents and Heresy

Attempts to identify the so-called Colossian heresy and its source are innumerable. Some authors speak of error, others of heresy, others prefer to speak of philosophy. With regard to its source, the alternatives range between paganism, Judaism and a

<sup>59</sup> Adam Copenhaver, “Echoes of a Hymn in a Letter of Paul: The Rhetorical Function of the Christ-Hymn in the Letter to the Colossians,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 4, no. 2 (2014): 235–55.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher A. Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, Biblical Interpretation Series 96 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 113–41. The textual connection Beetham discovers here is ἀρχή. His argument invoking the Second Temple Jewish tradition reflects a rather inter-textual approach.

<sup>61</sup> Copenhaver, “Echoes of a Hymn in a Letter of Paul,” 253.

<sup>62</sup> See also Juraj Feník and Róbert Lapko, “Christ as Ruler in Col 1,15-20?” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 95, no. 1 (March 2019): 39–62. Michel Gourgues, “‘Tout a été créé par lui et pour lui’ (Col 1,16): sens et portée d’une proclamation christologique,” *Revue Biblique* 118, no. 3 (2011): 422–42.

combination of these two, i.e., a syncretism.<sup>63</sup> Variations appear within these options. Those who attribute a pagan source to the heresy, identify it with a Greco-Hellenistic philosophy, or a mystery religion, or a pre-Christian Gnosticism. Conversely, those who advocate a Jewish source suggest a mystical, or apocalyptic asceticism, or a Jewish Gnosticism. Finally, those who recognize in it a syncretic movement suggest a Jewish-Christian Gnosticism or a Pythagorean paganism.<sup>64</sup> Other scholars point out that we should not speak of heresy but, rather, of a warning against the synagogal tendencies of the young church, with the aim of reaffirming the primacy of Christ.<sup>65</sup> O'Brien, in turn, argues that it would be more appropriate to speak of philosophy rather than heresy.<sup>66</sup> The differences between these interpretations illustrate well the methodological issues raised especially by the socio-historical approaches used to determine both the characteristics and the source of the error. The most discussed issue is the vocabulary of Col 2:8–23 and its relationship to any hypothesis of interpretation.

In his recent monograph, by applying a rhetorical analysis to Colossians, Copenhaver studies two debated issues: the identity of the opponents and the best suited methodological approach to determine the rhetorical and historical situation of the letter. He bypasses the controversies raised by the history of interpretation and seeks to understand the text of the entire letter in light of its relationship to the history of the Lycus valley. As a result of such a “holistic” approach, Copenhaver doubles the number of the opponents in the letter, while he specifies that they clearly did not belong to a distinct group. The warnings found in Col 2:8–23 include two religious motifs: Judaism and pagan mysteries, both opposed to Christ’s preeminence. The interwoven arguments in this text do not describe a local heresy or heretical movement present in

<sup>63</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Religion at Colossae*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/77* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995). See also Frederick Fyvie Bruce, “Colossian Problems, Pt 1: Jews and Christians in the Lycus Valley,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141, no. 561 (1984): 3–15. James D. G. Dunn, “The Colossian Philosophy: A Confident Jewish Apologia,” *Biblica* 76, no. 2 (1995): 153–81.

<sup>64</sup> For a complete list of authors see Aletti, *Lettera ai Colossesi*, 12–18.

<sup>65</sup> Angela Standhartinger, “Colossians and the Pauline School,” *New Testament Studies* 50, no. 4 (2004): 585.

<sup>66</sup> The expression “philosophy and empty deceit” in Col 2:8 deals with a human tradition in opposition to the apostolic tradition. Paul responds to this human teaching by means of a realized eschatology. Christians have already been raised with Christ (Col 2:9). They have also received the divine fullness; Christ has done all that is necessary for their salvation. Cf. Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, *Word Biblical Commentary* 44 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), xxxviii–xxxix.

the church of Colossae or in the Lycus valley, but correspond to two historical trends contrary to the fullness of Christ.<sup>67</sup>

How can these two historical trends be identified in Col 2:8–23? In v. 8 the indefinite pronoun (τις) alludes to some opponents who could represent any type of religion or philosophy. The prepositional phrases (κατά) in the same verse refer to two distinct groups that respectively reflect the type of philosophy the author had in mind. “The παράδοσις refers to Judaism, while στοιχεῖα points to spiritual beings venerated by pagan religions.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, v. 8 constitutes a *partitio* that is expanded in vv. 14–15. In v. 14 the expression τὸ χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν would allude to Jewish codes and dogmas belonging to the first historical thread, while in v. 15 the expression τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας would point to spiritual authorities associated with the second historical thread. The next verses (16–19) further amplifies these two trends. Whereas in v. 16 the warning against Jewish practices takes place in two stages, in vv. 18–19 the argument moves from undefined humility (ταπεινοφροσύνη) and general angel worship (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων) to a concrete socio-historical reference, namely the oracle of Apollo in Claros. At the end of the chapter, in vv. 20–23, the author of the letter “summarizes the preceding warnings and provides final evaluations of the two historical threads [he] had in view.”<sup>69</sup>

Copenhaver’s analysis of Col 2:8–23 includes several assumptions that may raise questions among scholars. His interpretation of the philosophy mentioned in v. 8 is rather vague. According to him, there would not have been a particular school of philosophy, but any kind of religion or philosophy. As for the worship of angels (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων), he interprets the genitive of v. 18 as subjective (the worship or veneration that angels give to God), thus taking up Francis’ interpretation.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the latter, who associates veneration with Jewish practices, Copenhaver associates it with pagan cults. He partially follows the study of the aforementioned Arnold, who concludes that in many cultic practices of Asia Minor, angels were commonly

<sup>67</sup> “To speak of the ‘Colossian Heresy’ is both misguided and misleading, for Paul does not write the letter as a response to a particular opponent.” Adam Copenhaver, *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul’s Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians*, Library of New Testament Studies 585 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 235.

<sup>68</sup> Copenhaver, *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul’s Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians*, 202–3.

<sup>69</sup> Copenhaver, *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul’s Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians*, 227. Paul compares the two trends to Christ, satirizes them, and makes a negative judgment on ascetic practices.

<sup>70</sup> Fred O. Francis, “Re-Examination of the Colossian Controversy,” Unpublished Thesis: Yale University, 1965.

considered as intermediaries between the deity and men. Copenhaver argues that the clue to explain the worship of angels is to be found in the next phrase of v. 18: “dwelling on visions” (NRSV) (ἃ ἐόρακεν ἐμβατεύων = literally “immersing himself” in what he saw).

Copenhaver understands the term “to step in” or “to enter into” (ἐμβατεύω) in Col 2:18 with a technical meaning related to the rites of initiation to the mysteries.<sup>71</sup> This interpretation assumes that the term had a significant role in the mystery cults. In this regard, Copenhaver believes that ἐμβατεύω was a characteristic expression of the Oracle at temple of Apollo in Claros, and although the term “may not have been employed in every description of mystery initiation, it still stands as a commonly used term within the cultic proceedings of the oracle of Apollo at Claros.”<sup>72</sup> The understanding of this initiation/immersion (ἐμβατεύω) not only reveals the historical context of the Pauline warning of Col 2:18 but also confirms the interpretation of self-abasement (ταπεινοφροσύνη) and worship of angels (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων) in the same verse. Subordinating his interpretation of self-abasement and angel worship to his questionable reading of ἐμβατεύω, Copenhaver uses the same kind of “circular process” that he criticized at the beginning of his monograph and sought to avoid in his research. Although he does not twist the whole textual evidence to fit with this understanding of ἐμβατεύω, he does evaluate most of the imperatives and warnings of Col 2:8–23 as references to the cult of Apollo present in the Lycus Valley.

The various attempts made to identify the opponents and the error of Colossians illustrate the methodological difficulties in studying the letter (which also concern the rest of the Pauline letters).<sup>73</sup> Determining the historical situation from the rhetorical situation and, conversely, grasping the content of the argument from the analysis of the socio-historical context may create more controversies. Scholars cannot take

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Martin Dibelius, “Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites,” in *Conflict at Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies*, edited by Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks, Sources for Biblical Study 4 (Cambridge: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 61–121.

<sup>72</sup> Copenhaver, *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul's Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians*, 219.

<sup>73</sup> For further bibliography about the opponents in Colossae see Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Paul and His Opponents*, Pauline Studies 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Peter Müller, “Gegner im Kolosserbrief: Methodische Überlegungen zu einem schwierigen Kapitel,” in *Beiträge zur urchristlichen Theologiegeschichte*, ed. Wolfgang Kraus, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche 163 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 365–94. Jerry L. Sumney, “Those Who ‘Pass Judgment’: The Identity of the Opponents in Colossians,” *Biblica* 74, no. 3 (1993): 366–88.

for granted that the rhetorical situation may give access to the historical situation.<sup>74</sup> For a suitable historical reconstruction of Paul's opponents, they may need a more balanced approach.

## Christology, Theology of the Cross, and Theology of Fullness

What is the literary background of the Christological hymn? Some authors have inquired whether it grew out of the OT wisdom tradition or elsewhere. Second Temple Judaism interpreted God's saving action in several ways: a new exodus, a new creation, a universal wisdom (an exceptional divine knowledge). The way in which the author of Colossians characterizes Christ is to be understood in continuity with these OT categories. Thus, the figure of Christ is rooted in the Jewish salvific tradition but has a universal scope. What, then, is the novelty of the Christology introduced in Col 1:15–20? Diachronic exegetical studies have long held that the Christological hymn was the result of an editorial process that predates the composition of the letter. On the other hand, synchronic studies have more carefully shown that the Christology and soteriology found in the hymn agree with the theology of the rest of the letter. The novelty of this Christology lies in its cosmic scope. The Christ event is not opposed to, but corresponds to the theology of divine fullness (*πλήρωμα*). In addition to this, Christ, who is the word of the truth, the gospel (Col 1:5), is organically bound to the life of the church. Various scholars have focused their research on describing the cosmic scope of Christ's action in the first part of the hymn;<sup>75</sup> few, however, have noted the internal correspondence between the creative action and the reconciling action in the second part of the hymn. Christ, the word of truth, the revealed mystery, the head of the body of the church and the pivot of the Letter to the Colossians, is the novelty by which the community of believers is reconciled.

<sup>74</sup> "This careful distinction suggests that elements of the historical situation remain within the rhetorical situation. However, the historical data are partial in accordance with the rhetor's interests and constraints and are presented in accordance with the rhetor's judgment of their deficiency. Nevertheless, the rhetorical situation gives access to the historical situation. Thus, the two are 'intertwined,' with the rhetorical creating a bridge to understanding the historical situation". Copenhaver, *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul's Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians*, 89.

<sup>75</sup> Some scholars resolve the dilemma between high and low Christology in terms of dynamic Christology. In the Letter to the Colossians the Christological motivation becomes more important than the ecclesiological one. The key to this interpretation is to be found in the parenthesis of the letter and its internal articulation with its Christology.

Recently, Dettwiler has investigated the scope of Christ's universal lordship in Colossians.<sup>76</sup> He specifically inquires whether "universal lordship Christology" is not a triumphalist surrealist perspective that minimizes the experience of evil. Such a perspective would be contrary to the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and evil as it is described in the Synoptics.<sup>77</sup> He proposes two preliminary observations regarding the letter and Christology. First, the reflection on the figure of Christ in the letter to the Colossians is framed in the type of communication characteristic of the apostolic letter (different from Ephesians, which is considered an example of a theological treatise). Second, Colossians reflects a specific problem, a historical context that challenges any kind of exhaustive analysis of the text. Consequently, it would be wrong to interpret the Christological mediation present in Colossians as a complete and systematic discourse. First, because the precise reconstruction of the enigmatic philosophy of Colossians is still an open question. Second, because the letter itself indicates that its content has a broader context of reception.<sup>78</sup>

Dettwiler adds three further clarifications. First, the hymn is not a treatise on cosmology; in fact, the cosmological representations are subordinated to Christology and soteriology. Moreover, it does not appear that the hymn minimizes evil, since it presupposes a rupture that affects the world and humanity. Second, the hymn does not include a polemical dimension but introduces a life project. Third, the hymn speaks of the cross ("the blood of his cross," Col 1:20).<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the Christology of Colossians creates a link between the Risen Christ, the Pantocrator and the death of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>80</sup> Even so, it must be stressed that the Christology of the hymn is built not only on the Pauline model of the theology of the cross, but also on the model of "universal lordship." This Christology certainly does not describe Jesus as a divinity separated from human history.

<sup>76</sup> Andreas Dettwiler, "Christologie et existence apostolique dans Colossiens et Éphésiens," in *Paul et son Seigneur: trajectoires christologiques des épîtres pauliniennes: XXV<sup>e</sup> congrès de l'Association catholique française pour l'étude de la Bible (Angers, 2016)*, ed. Christophe Raimbault, *Lectio Divina 271* (Paris: Cerf, 2018), 229–55.

<sup>77</sup> See Andreas Dettwiler, "Colossians," in *The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries, Volume Two: From Thomas to Tertullian: Christian Literary Receptions of Jesus in the Second and Third Centuries CE*, ed. Jens Schröter and Christine Jacobi (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 1–9.

<sup>78</sup> Dettwiler, "Christologie et existence apostolique dans Colossiens et Éphésiens," 234.

<sup>79</sup> See Andreas Dettwiler, "Das Verständnis des Kreuzes Jesu im Kolosserbrief," in *Kreuzestheologie im Neuen Testament*, ed. Andreas Dettwiler and Jean Zumstein, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 151* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 81–105.

<sup>80</sup> Dettwiler sees the Christology of the hymn as a counterbalance to the anguish of the Hellenistic world. Dettwiler, "Christologie et existence apostolique dans Colossiens et Éphésiens," 239.

## Conclusive Remarks

Recent socio-historical research on the Letter to the Colossians has produced abundant literature. However, numismatic and epigraphic studies have had limited success in identifying the recipients of the letter. Mostly, they attempt to refute the apparently undisputed Jewish identity of the Lycus Valley communities. Scholars in these disciplines have high expectations of the excavations of the Colossae's tell, as any discoveries could confirm their hypotheses. So far, they have profited greatly from "silences" about the archaeological findings and from the ambiguous vocabulary in Col 2:8–23. Despite this, by not distinguishing between occasion and theme of the letter many of these studies continue to create misunderstandings.<sup>81</sup>

On the other hand, rhetorical and theological studies on Colossians have contributed greatly to identifying the features of the Christological *μυστήριον*. Knowing this *μυστήριον* is essential for understanding the content of the Pauline teaching and the ethical exhortations. The study of the Christology of universal lordship, or pan-Christology, has helped researchers to clarify the distinctive aspects of the letter's soteriology and eschatology, comparing them with those of the undisputed letters. The shift of soteriology toward Christology and of temporal eschatology toward spatial eschatology illustrates a development of the Colossians author's reflection, as well as of his comprehension of the word of truth. If diachronic exegesis has multiplied the hypotheses about the composition of the letter, the synchronic approach has succeeded in offering a better articulated perspective on the mystery of God, of Christ, in whom all believers find "hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:2-3).

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<sup>81</sup> For example, inquiries regarding the worship of angels (*θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων*) do not take into account that angels are not considered a mediation in Col 2:18, nor are they associated to the heavenly powers. See also Aletti, *Lettera ai Colossesi*, 239.



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