

COLOSSIANS

C H R I S T O P H E R R. S E I T Z



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For Elizabeth

Ἐνδύσασθε τὴν ἀγάπην, ὃ ἔστιν σύνδεσμος τῆς τελειότητος
Revêtez-vous de l'amour, qui est le lien de la perfection

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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia*, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapse, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this*

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions

8. *Sermon 212.2.*

of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use

of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

When the Bible speaks of a time of peace and comity, of fair and equal receipt of God's blessings, it uses this language: "In that day everyone will sit, each under their own vine and fig tree, and none shall make them afraid" (Mic. 4:4). The bulk of the writing of this commentary was done literally under vine and fig tree in a rented cottage in the village of Les Baux, in the Provence region of France, renown for olive oil, figs, and wine. I was fortunate to have a summer research break from teaching at Wycliffe College, enabling me to write and walk and think and pray in relatively undisturbed fashion. This commentary is dedicated to my wife, Elizabeth, in thanksgiving for her companionship and love. We will long have pleasant memories of our little orangerie cottage in the olive grove "La Serre."

I also want to thank those parishioners at the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas, Texas, who read Paul's letter to the Colossians with me during lunchtimes in 2011. I was invited to give the Gross Lectures at Valparaiso University in 2010, and this gave me the opportunity to think in depth about Paul's use of the scriptures, especially for those newcomers in Christ for whom they were new wineskins exploding with fresh meaning. Thank you, George Heider and Gilbert Meilander and your fine colleagues at Valparaiso. David Trobisch read initial drafts of portions of the commentary and offered wise counsel and support. I mention with gratitude Don Collett and Mark Gignilliat, who received email attachments from France and commented in helpful ways on what I was trying to do. Jonathan Reck offered good editing and bibliographic assistance at key points. Errors in judgment and expression are of course my own, under my own professional vine and fig tree.

I want to acknowledge the hard work of Brazos editors Rusty Reno and Ephraim Radner, in working through the first written drafts. Thanks to Dave Nelson and Lisa Ann Cockrel for their editorial help in the latter stages as well. Rusty probably had no business inviting an Old Testament scholar to pretend he was a theologian writing a commentary, consistent with that discipline in its modern guise, on a

Author's Preface

letter in the New Testament. All the same, I like to imagine my grasp of the Old Testament and its rhythms as placing me closely alongside Paul himself, in ways that the New Testament guild or theologians properly speaking come at it less directly. In any event, the idea of throwing off the usual patterns of commentary design is one I resonate with. I hope this volume is a fruitful contribution to the series and a commentary that opens up some fresh angles of vision for those who read it and use it. Writing it did that for me.

Feast of the Epiphany, 2014

ABBREVIATIONS

Biblical Translations

BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NA ²⁷	<i>Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , edited by B. Aland et al., 27th edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993)
NET	The NET Bible (New English Translation)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TNIV	Today's New International Version

Biblical Books

Acts	Acts	Eccl.	Ecclesiastes	Hag.	Haggai
Amos	Amos	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
1 Chr.	1 Chronicles	Esth.	Esther	Hos.	Hosea
2 Chr.	2 Chronicles	Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Col.	Colossians	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Jas.	James
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	Ezra	Ezra	Jer.	Jeremiah
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Gal.	Galatians	Job	Job
Dan.	Daniel	Gen.	Genesis	Joel	Joel
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Hab.	Habakkuk	John	John

Abbreviations

1 John	1 John	Mark	Mark	Rev.	Revelation
2 John	2 John	Matt.	Matthew	Rom.	Romans
3 John	3 John	Mic.	Micah	Ruth	Ruth
Jonah	Jonah	Nah.	Nahum	1 Sam.	1 Samuel
Josh.	Joshua	Neh.	Nehemiah	2 Sam.	2 Samuel
Jude	Jude	Num.	Numbers	Song	Song of Songs
Judg.	Judges	Obad.	Obadiah	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
1 Kgs.	1 Kings	1 Pet.	1 Peter	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
2 Kgs.	2 Kings	2 Pet.	2 Peter	1 Tim.	1 Timothy
Lam.	Lamentations	Phil.	Philippians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Lev.	Leviticus	Phlm.	Philemon	Titus	Titus
Luke	Luke	Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi	Ps.	Psalms	Zeph.	Zephaniah

INTRODUCTORY MATTERS

What Is an Introduction to a Single Letter of Paul?

The modern commentary belongs to a genre in which certain conventional matters can be expected to be treated. This includes what appears in the introductory section preceding the commentary proper. The present commentary operates with three general presuppositions that impact those expectations.

The first is that the Bible exists in relationship to a community (the people of Israel, the church through time). This means that it maintains its own literary integrity but that this integrity is received into the life of the church in time in the form of preaching, catechesis, exposition, paraphrase, and commentary. The “history of interpretation” represented by this reception is not confined to either a premodern context or a modern one said to be an improvement on or replacement for it (or a postmodern one renegotiating them both). Practically speaking, this means that, while a certain kind of (especially historical) commentary tradition may be more familiar to us (positively or negatively), the Bible’s reception history is not to be confined to the last two hundred years but must be evenly evaluated, in terms of what it as a phenomenon communicates, across a longer period of time. This is a function of the Bible’s living character. It means that certain questions raised to a particular acuteness in one age, due to cultural realities under God’s providence, do not match the questions and answers given at an earlier age, even as the same witness is sounding forth. The positive side of this is that the questions of one age, including our own, sometimes need to be changed, once they have had their day and the limits of their probing and concerns have been exhausted or borne their wonted fruit. What can be discovered, furthermore, is that by examining an earlier period in the lived life of the Bible’s reception, the proper proportion of what we seek to know can be corrected or reappraised. The amnesia of the present age can be overcome or ameliorated, and a wider set of concerns reidentified as worthy of our attention.

The second and related presupposition is that what we mean today by the word “historical” is not self-evident but requires probing. Given the character of the material we are seeking to interpret—sacred literature of a certain character—historical questions are immediately and ineluctably hermeneutical questions. What is meant by “the original” (whether an authorial intention, or first audience, or an early “setting in life”) has a historical dimension to be sure, but equally may this be said of developmental/medial and final periods of a text’s life: in the form of a single letter (in the case of Paul), a letter in association with other letters, or of the Pauline letters in the New Testament canon or indeed of that canon in relation to the scriptures of Israel or Old Testament with a two-testament Christian scripture.¹

The final presupposition flows from this as well. Paul’s letters come to us in a given canonical form. That form foregrounds certain things and lets other things fall out of specific focus or priority. It is possible to regard the canonical presentation as empty of significance, as necessitating a certain kind of recasting, or as a cataract on the “real truth of the matter.” But this commentary will take the view that the canonical presentation has its own kind of significance that requires attention and care to evaluate properly. The canonical presentation guards against imbalances emerging at periods in the history of interpretation, when certain questions have been hyperextended or no longer gain interest or lose their capacity for resolution or assent. The canonical presentation offers a commentary on how history and God’s abiding voice are inextricably related. It seeks to maintain a balance in what is worthy of comment and what is less decisive.

With these three presuppositions in place, inevitably what we might mean by an “introduction” to Colossians is also affected. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible offers no strong replacement model here, in the form of a single new template. What the present commentary on Colossians seeks to do is rehearse some of the classically modern themes one expects to appear in a commentary introduction, now with an eye toward recasting them in the light of the presuppositions we are seeking to honor and uphold in the commentary as such. This commentary assumes that the usual genre of “introduction” is fairly well known or, more surely, that it is readily available for consultation. Sometimes the introductory sections of an individual letter of Paul can be almost as long as the commentary proper. Under discussion are things like (1) Asia Minor at the time of Paul, (2) authorship (did Paul write this letter?), (3) the character and structure of the letter, (4) the date and place of writing, (5) distinctive theological emphases and themes, (6) the relationship with other letters of Paul, and the list goes on.

It is my judgment that the reader of the present commentary will find answers to these questions either in the present introduction or in the commentary itself. What I wish to do here is survey the modern questions from the standpoint of

1. Consult my *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) for a fuller account and examples.

the contribution that I believe is best secured when the presuppositions of our approach are observed. I begin by asking what it means for an individual commentator to select one letter of Paul for commentary, given that the letters of Paul come to us in a fairly stable and standardized collection order. What has this meant in the modern period and how might one undertake a single commentary project mindful of the letter-collection dimension as a factor in the history of interpretation and as part of how the church received, heard, and proclaimed “the canonical Paul”? I then turn to a series of topics typically treated as introductory but handled here in the light of canonical factors as well as the earlier history of interpretation: (1) the question of the *setting* as the material itself presents this (Colossians and the other prison letters); (2) the *occasion* for Paul’s writing as such and in the wider canonical presentation; (3) Paul’s *use of scripture* (to be called in time the Old Testament) and the implications for his own epistle writing as itself a kind of emerging *graphē*; and (4) letter composition and the question of *Paul as author*. The final introductory section explains the appeal to the term “canonical” for the approach adopted and also the format, translation, bibliographical, and structural matters.

Colossians in the Pauline Letter Collection: The Proper Implications to be Drawn Regarding a Commentary on a Single Letter

In the history of interpretation, anomalous would be, not an Old Testament interpreter commenting on a New Testament book, but any interpreters confining themselves to commentary within a single Testament, much less leaving theological construction to others coming after. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible seeks to listen to—if not also restore—an older set of assumptions and learn from the church’s long history of hearing God’s voice in a two-testament Christian scripture.

What *would* be anomalous would be choosing to write on a single letter of Paul, to the exclusion of the others (including the writings of the New Testament in their entirety). There are exceptions, of course, but they are notable for being such.² The effect of this can be stated negatively and positively.

Positively, greater focus has been given to the individuality of the letter and concern with matters such as (1) authorship, (2) setting, (3) date, (4) distinctive features, (5) relation to other letters, and so forth. The negative effects flow

2. Martin Bucer produced a special commentary on Ephesians, as did John Davenant on Colossians (*An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians* [Cambridge, 1627; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005]). Part of the reason for this belongs to Reformation controversies and the desire to focus attention on their possible resolution through specific, detailed exegetical treatments. In the modern period, Colossians (because short) can be grouped with Philemon (so Dunn 1996 and Moo 2008) or with the “prison correspondence” (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon). I will discuss the implications of these subgroupings below.

from this as well—including a focus on such matters arguably in disproportion to their significance for interpretation. So by contrast, a quick look at the attention given to these matters in the history of interpretation shows that they are generally worthy of discussion (though, e.g., the commentary of Thomas Aquinas says virtually nothing on these topics), though chiefly to establish a basic working conception. The main task is interpretation of the message of the letter and its application, with allowance for whether the locus of commentating is desk (Theodoret, Erasmus), pulpit (Chrysostom, Calvin), lectern (Luther), monastic homily (Jerome), and so forth. The wide agreement on Pauline authorship and the assumption of the equally wide setting (Roman imprisonment)³ mean not a lot of attention is given to the history-of-religion or where an individual letter is to be situated in context, on a timeline purporting to show the historical sequence of letters, now standardized in New Testament introductions. I will have more to say about that below when it comes to the “Colossian heresy” and how the older history of interpretation proportionalized attention to this within the cumulative task of interpretation.

Two matters conspire at this point. Because interpreters typically handle the entire corpus of Paul’s letters (including Hebrews and the Pastorals) as the task to be undertaken and because they simply assume that Paul authored them, their instincts are deeply integrative.⁴ That is, they tend toward seeing synthesis, and they major in theological cross-reference. And this is true not just of Paul’s letters as interpreting each other, but also as they are interpreted together with the Old Testament writings and the rest of the New Testament. Thomas Aquinas is typical on this score, especially in his creative ranging across the Testaments in order to draw out theological significance (2006). One may note as well that his is not a study of how Paul uses the Old Testament, but is a study of how God uses the inspired scriptures as a whole, as a pluriform set of witnesses, to inform and enhance and interpret one another. Much of the modern preoccupation with particularity—whatever its strengths—has meant a forfeit or even disqualification of reading the letters in the light of one another.⁵ Indeed, the very idea of Colossians being non-Pauline turns on the assumption that something is so distinctive in the letter it must be accounted for by saying it is discontinuous in sufficiently serious ways. Ours is not here a question of historicity (did Paul in fact author Colossians, or Ephesians?) but is rather an observation about the naturalness of a more integrative reading when these questions have not been

3. The Marcionite Prologue of Colossians and the somewhat ambiguous view of Erasmus, in favor of an Ephesian imprisonment, notwithstanding.

4. Hebrews is its own problem; and there are some exceptions regarding other letters of course. See Trobisch 1994: 45–46. The special case of Hebrews is discussed in Seitz, *Character of Christian Scripture*, 115–35.

5. Of course the letters are compared and contrasted. But this work is undertaken so as to put them in proper historical sequence and pursue questions of authorship and development of thought (history-of-religion).

foregrounded, due to the existence of a literary collection that orients them toward one another as a totality. To produce a single commentary on the letter to the Colossians, then, could raise in its wake all the sorts of issues this commentary will seek to move beyond in a constructive way. So mention of the assignment and its possible limitations or expectations needs to be registered up front. This is a commentary on a single letter attributed to Paul (Colossians), but it will seek to read the letter without the modern assumptions attending single-letter commentary, where a certain species of particularity and independence is prized as the goal of interpretation.

The same comment could be made about the assignment of individual books of the Old Testament (the Minor Prophets come to mind) to individual writers of commentary and the implications—maybe even unintended—of that. Commentary by Theodoret of Cyr or John Calvin handles the Minor Prophets as a whole in the same way the letters of Paul are handled: as individual writings subsisting in an ordered canonical collection. Exceptions to this practice would have seemed odd. I leave to the side the idea that it is better or more natural to distribute the books among separate commentators who will write on only one book for a series that will then include them all as authors of individual, specialized treatments. This is the modern practice, and it has been carried over into a new theological commentary series that nevertheless intends to seek newer and older horizons at the same time. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to read and integrate an older history of interpretation in the work to follow without acknowledging the wide gulf separating its assumptions about the Pauline letter collection and those of modernity, where individual treatments of individual letters by individual commentators have become the norm.⁶

Where we do find comprehensive treatments of the Old and New Testament writings, undertaken by an individual author, these have migrated in the modern period from the genre of “commentary” into what is called “introduction.” This genre is suited to a particular curriculum need and setting, such as arose after the Reformation, especially in the German university context and its eventual derivatives. The genre is also invested in the set of questions regarding author, setting, sequence, distinctive features, and so forth mentioned above, for the purpose of achieving a larger, developmental picture. Introduction is also a discussion of the state of the academic discourse as “introductions” have pursued this: who has argued for what view and how they have come to the conclusions they have, with an evaluation and fresh (it is hoped) proposal. Raymond Brown’s careful contribution is a good example. In the case of Colossians he will canvas the views on a topic like “Pauline authorship” and give the pros and cons and indicate where the scholarly consensus is.⁷ In cases like Colossians where the views are divided,

6. Compare the popular treatments of William Barclay (“The Daily Bible Study Series”) and N. T. Wright (“The New Testament for Everyone”).

7. R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997). He writes: “At the present moment about 60 percent of critical scholarship holds that Paul did not write the letter”

he will give his own view, but then be sure to say how the discipline is, at the moment of his writing, leaning.

My point here is not to dispute Brown's conclusions, but rather to note the changed climate of evaluation. If 99 percent of the church's earlier position on author and setting was uncontroversially "Paul in Roman imprisonment," this will play no role in his discussion of the aggregated consensus. Again, the question is not whether an earlier consensus lines up with what now goes with discussion of these matters, as essential to historical inquiry popularized since the nineteenth century; it most certainly does not. At issue, rather, is what the earlier position meant when it asserted such things and then went about the business of writing commentary. It is a relatively easy thing to omit notice of the earlier consensus on the grounds that it was not asking the same sorts of historical questions and so is irrelevant to the modern discipline of New Testament studies and its conclusions. But it is a different thing to fail to ask why the earlier commentators *moved briskly by such questions* in favor of what they regarded as a more obvious fact: Paul as the author of a collection of letters *whose interpretation required coordination and theological integration*. For it is not true that they were poor readers of the original or translated languages or could not see divergence or development of thought by comparing one letter with another. Rather, they accounted for this in other ways. In this they were constrained by the assumption that the canonical portrayal was itself a given and so was deeply ingredient in the task of interpretation itself. Thirteen letters are attributed to Paul.⁸ They are not in obvious chronological order, so other indexes must be in play. Rather than seek for this kind of historical contextualizing (rearranging the letters according to a proper order), they allowed the canonical form to order the way they approached the interpretation of single letters and the whole.

It is difficult today to speak of "the canonical Paul" without hearing that as a way to smuggle in answers to questions about authenticity, in turn foreclosing on matters of differentiation and particularity in the name of harmony and apologetics. But that thirteen letters circulate under a Pauline egis of some kind does not tell us exactly why that is so, in precise historical and sociological terms. Speculations there are and they rush in to close the gap. Theories of pseudepigraphy are to hand, available by careful comparison to other literature of the time. Other factors are claimed to be relevant (the process of dictation, the role of the secretary in editing, collaboration with colleagues, development of thought, adaptation for the audience anticipated by Paul or others, Paul's own editing, and so forth). But the letters do not foreground these explanations and instead claim the authority of Paul without telling us just how that is so. The letter collection is "the church's guide for reading Paul" as one interpreter puts it (Childs 2008). This rubric covers

(610); and "I am treating it in the deuteroPauline section of this *Introduction* because that is how most critical scholars now treat it" (617).

8. With Hebrews the count is fourteen, but its status has always been viewed as requiring special evaluation.

over a host of questions made central by historical-critical method, not so as to sidestep them, but to indicate that speculation undertaken according to a certain kind of historical method can go only so far. At some point the canonical portrayal sits there before us and requests that we take it seriously as a factor in interpretation, however we might explain that in more precise historical terms (having to do with origins and development and stabilization). It is at this point that the difference between the earlier history of interpretation and the present age is so stark. What was previously taken as a given and, as such, offering hermeneutical guidance in a low-flying sense, has in the modern period become a matter of high seriousness. The canonical portrayal is held to be empty of significance, and so significance of a very different kind is to be sought. What in turn drives the business of modern interpretation is its pursuit of questions that are difficult to answer in the nature of the case because the canonical portrayal is frankly of a different order of presentation.

A certain species of modern historical analysis can, however, also identify limiting factors to historical questions too narrowly framed. Three examples are illustrative. On the issue of authorship, one modern author, having canvassed the matter in the thorough way now expected in modern commentary, concludes in this way:

At all events, whatever the precise circumstances of its composition, Colossians strongly suggests that the distinctions between a Paul who himself changed in style and developed in theology, a Paul who allowed someone else to interpret his thought and concerns, and a Pauline disciple writing shortly after Paul's death but seeking to be faithful to what he perceived would be the master's thought and concerns envisaged in the letter become of *uncertain and diminishing significance*. (Dunn 1996: 39, emphasis added)

This judgment is made on historical grounds, not on theological or canonical ones. Yet here is where the overlap is unavoidable. So while Dunn believes Timothy to be the author of the letter, under loose supervision by Paul, the theory will not dislodge his use of the name "Paul" when he speaks of the true author of the letter and also when reflexively he attributes the message he comments on to the apostle.

On the problem of individual uniqueness in modern historical questing, in the context of the individual letters of Paul, another historically alert commentator points to certain basic limitations in this line of inquiry:

It turns out, for example, that the differences are not large between Paul himself writing this letter, Paul writing with the aid of secretary, Paul authorizing an associate to write it, and the letter being composed by a knowledgeable imitator or pupil of Paul. Perhaps with our intense concern to demarcate "Paul" from "non-Paul" we are working with an artificial or anachronistic notion of individual uniqueness: was Paul completely different from his contemporaries and associates, or did he

typically work with others, influencing them and being influenced by them? Have we created a Paul of utter uniqueness in line with the peculiarly modern cult of the individual? (Barclay 2004: 35)

The history of interpretation is a helpful reminder that the canonical presentation need not be handled in a manner in which certain questions of individuality and uniqueness overshadow the basic contours provided by a collection of writings attributed to a single individual. Barclay writes as a historian careful to observe when a species of historical questing may run up against problems of its own making given the literature and its presentation in the form we receive it.

The third example also does not invoke the term “canonical” and the approach related to it, when it comes to precision in identifying the problems Paul is addressing in the letter, as they relate to the church at Colossae. But the same limitations noted by a canonical reading for a species of modern historical analysis are assessed hermeneutically by the author in a way that is congenial with such an approach, also in the context of a modern commentary concerned with historical context. The following quotation prefaces the discussion of the false teaching at Colossae as scholars seek to clarify this:

What exactly the false teachers were saying can be determined only by analyzing the nature of Paul’s response to them against the background of what we know generally about the first-century world of Colossae. But this process is a very inexact and uncertain one. Paul naturally presupposes that the Colossians know what the false teachers were saying, and so he only alludes to their teaching in making his points. And these allusions involve some of the most debated exegetical points in the letter. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to know when Paul is describing what the false teachers were saying and when he is characterizing their teaching in his own terms.⁹ And, finally, we do not know nearly as much as we would like about the Colossians’ own “world.” What we do know about it suggests that it was very complex, with many religious, philosophical, and cultural movements jostling for attention. (Moo 2008: 49)

And so Moo continues:

All of this makes it extraordinarily difficult to pin down the exact teaching Paul opposes in Colossians and explains why scholars come to so many different conclusions about it. Indeed, we are not convinced that the letter provides enough information for us to be even reasonably sure about the identification of the false teaching.” As Lincoln puts it, “Although the prescription for cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present-day reader of Colossians, the ailment defies a really detailed

9. The same problems dog interpretation of the critique of idolatry and idol construction in Isa. 40–55. In the sociology of knowledge this is the tension between emic and etic description. Are the descriptions the prophet gives accurate ones, or are they broad-brush, intended by contrast to bring out the character of the God of Israel?

diagnosis on his part.”¹⁰ Such an uncertain conclusion is disappointing in some respects but is, in another respect, hermeneutically fruitful. For it means that we can apply Paul’s teaching in the letter to a wide variety of historical and contemporary movements that share the general contours of the false teaching. Our inability to pin down the false teaching does not mean that we cannot describe some of its basic tenets. (Moo 2008: 49)

This comment tracks well not only with the implications of canonical interpretation in respect of historical contextualizing, but also suggests that the final form of the letter, as it now exists (where the solution precedes the problem: cure before diagnosis) properly belongs to the interpretative intention of the letter—whatever we might say about success in bringing precision to the false teaching Paul is addressing (from afar and secondhand).

Here one can spot something of a similar caution operating, for different reasons, in the earlier history of interpretation. After all, the letter is meant to address us, one commentator will conclude, as he faces into the complexity of reconstructing the heresy in its original situation (is it Jewish, philosophical, a hybrid, etc.).¹¹ Calvin handles the matter in his own way, prefacing his brief discussion (he thinks of a form of Platonized Judaism) with a familiar line, in which he has in view the principle of parsimony and clarity he seeks to honor: “As, however, it is not my intention to refute the opinions of others, I shall simply state what appears to me to be the truth, and what may be inferred by sound reasoning” (1996: 133). In consequence his “front matter” is vastly overshadowed by the exegesis and interpretation of the letter itself. The same is true of interpreters as different as Chrysostom, Ambrosiaster, Theodoret, Augustine, Pelagius, Thomas Aquinas, Erasmus, and others. Typically a very short preface or “argument” (drawn in some cases from the superscriptions and subscriptions of the textual tradition) is provided before the more extensive and more significant commentary, paraphrase, homily, or *emmarratio* is set forth. Almost reflexively coordinated with the parsimony of what is given by the canonical portrayal, as measured against historical-critical interests and emphases, interpreters are content with Paul as author and Roman imprisonment as setting, and a basic statement of the problem he appears to be addressing, before moving to the task at hand: interpretation of one of Paul’s letters in the context of them all, of the New Testament more generally, and of the Old Testament as Christian scripture.

10. Lincoln 2000:561. We will see below the candid acknowledgment of Wayne Meeks about how earlier questions he had posed about the specific details of the controversy simply proved incapable of final resolution.

11. That the letter can be read profitably by another church is taken by Ambrosiaster as hermeneutically significant. Commenting on 4:16 he writes: “Since the apostle’s instructions were universally applicable and his letters written for the benefit of everyone, he directed that this letter should also be read to the Laodiceans so that they might learn from it what they should be doing. He also wanted the Colossians to read their letter, for the same reason” (quoted in Bray 2009: 100).

“Remember My Fetters”: Imprisonment in Canon, History, and Theology

Paul’s imprisonment is mentioned specifically in several letters (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 6:20; Phil. 1:13–14; 4:22; Col. 4:3, 10, 18; Phlm. 9; cf. 1 Cor. 15:32; 2 Cor. 1:5–10; 11:23). Colossians is but one of these. The modern commentary in endeavoring to provide the historical setting of the letters will invariably give account of which prison Paul was writing from, discussing the various options, and concluding in favor of one of these. Acts tells us Paul was in prison (very briefly) in Philippi, for two years in Caesarea (after his transfer from Jerusalem by Roman authorities), and of course under house arrest in Rome. In addition, Paul speaks of the experience of imprisonment in 2 Corinthians, and some believe this argues for an Ephesus period of confinement. So the serious candidates have been the last three of these locations, with consideration given to how long it might take to travel from one place to another, the alleged date of the letters in relation to one another, Paul’s announced intentions, the overlap of persons named and how to account for them and their movements, and so forth. Some hold that Philippians and Colossians were written from an otherwise unknown incarceration in Ephesus; others that they come from Rome; Caesarea is also a proposed candidate.¹² Philemon and Ephesians are subject to similar analysis. These four letters all mention Paul’s imprisonment as a fact unto itself and as the subject of the apostle’s own reflections and exhortations.

The general opinion of the earlier tradition tends toward a uniform Roman setting for Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, letters that are also in canonical order and grouping (at the end of the collection, the short letter to Philemon is also considered Paul’s composition from Roman prison; the overlap of named associates with Colossians is obvious). Yet Colossians was held by Erasmus as having been written in Ephesus, and the tradition is reflected in earlier textual subscriptions (e.g., in the 1388 Wycliffe Bible).¹³ An Ephesian imprisonment for

12. Representing the Caesarean imprisonment for the composition of Colossians are B. Reicke, W. G. Kümmel, E. Lohmeyer, and J. A. T. Robinson; for the Ephesian imprisonment are the Marcionite Prologue, R. P. Martin, and D. L. Duncan; for the Roman imprisonment are F. F. Bruce, C. F. D. Moule, and D. J. Moo. Dunn 1996: 39–41 inclines toward Rome but accepts Ephesus as a possibility. Lohse 1971: 167 denies Pauline authorship and so favors a late date, which makes the prison idea less historical and more thematic: “In post-Pauline times this situation was generalized, and the Apostle was represented as constantly suffering.” Wright 1986: 39 argues for the Ephesian imprisonment for both Colossians and Philemon and the earlier date this requires (52–55), in favor of Paul as author. Barth and Blanke 1994: 126–34 favor the traditional view.

13. “Colossians are also Laodiceans. These are of Asia, and they had been deceived by false apostles. The apostle himself came not to them, but he brings them again to correction by epistle, for they had heard the word of Archippus that had underfonged the ministry into them. Therefore the apostle, now bound, wrote to them from Ephesus by Tychicus the deacon and Onesimus the acolyte” (*The Wycliffe New Testament* [1388], ed. W. R. Cooper [London: British Library, 2002], 337). Erasmus reproduces this view but then goes on to adjust it: “In our arguments [here he means the Latin arguments found in the Vulgate], Onesimus is added to Tychicus as a colleague [as in the Wycliffe New Testament], just as

the authoring of the letter to the Colossians is another scholarly view, as we have seen, though the reason for the Latin subscription reference to Ephesus is odd and in any event is not explained.¹⁴

As is well known, the letters of Paul come to us in the manuscript tradition as a collection of letters.¹⁵ The remarkable standardization of the order (Hebrews alone migrates, and the explanations for that are not hard to come by) is noted in recent studies.¹⁶ Trobisch controversially argues that Paul was himself responsible for the editing of the first books (Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians). He and others notice the obvious fact that the letters are in descending order by length (not breaking up paired letters), and Trobisch speaks of the codex as partly responsible for this (gauging the length of the material to be copied and coordinating the quire of the codex being no simple thing, it is wiser to get the longer works in first so that they not be broken up).

There is one curious exception to this descending order, however. The letter to the Ephesians is longer than its predecessor (Galatians) by over nine hundred characters, yet the copyists never confuse the order of Colossians and its predecessor (Philippians), though it is only about one hundred characters shorter. This suggests to Trobisch a conclusion congenial with his larger theory: that Ephesians and the letters to follow (which are in descending order) are a secondary extension after Paul's death to enlarge his original collection, which had concluded with Galatians. It also raises for him the possibility of aspects of a view (now widely rejected) held by Goodspeed-Knox (see Trobisch 1994: 101n22), that Ephesians was a cover letter composed as a distillate of circulating Pauline letters, intended for multiple audiences. Always hard to explain was why the letter is never first in any list (the lists are remarkable for their uniformity).¹⁷ Though Trobisch speaks of this only in a footnote, the point he allows is that, on his theory, Ephesians would indeed be the first letter of a (nine-letter) extension of the original Pauline letter collection (Romans, 1–2 Corinthians, Galatians), now ending with the Pastorals (and Hebrews).

Paul attests in chapter four; while the Greek subscriptions affirm that it was sent from the city of Rome, certainly it was from Rome that he sent back Onesimus who he had begotten for Christ when he was in chains in that place" (*Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. R. D. Sider [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009], 43.396). My conjecture is that Erasmus in fact leans toward the Roman setting after all, prefaced by the remark regarding the Latin textual tradition.

14. For other superscriptions and a brief discussion of the peculiarity of the one for 1 Corinthians, see Trobisch 1994: 44–45.

15. The New Testament writings circulate in the manuscript tradition in four groupings: Gospels, Pauline letters (with Hebrews), Acts and General Epistles, and Revelation. This is the order of the Wycliffe Bible of 1388 (which includes as well the letter to the Laodiceans).

16. See Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Childs 2008: 5.

17. See Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1–3*, Anchor Bible 34 (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 40; and John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 13, for example.

Another possibility is that Ephesians finds its place after Galatians because this allows the theme of imprisonment, missing from Galatians, to be associated with the letters next to follow, where it is prominent. The letters of Paul have indeed been arranged according to descending order. Ephesians has been shifted one place so that it can be read together with Philippians and Colossians. Philemon is simply too short to defy the order principle and has its own logic of location following the letters to Timothy and Titus. First and Second Thessalonians follow naturally after Colossians according to this principle, and then the Pastorals in descending order of length.

If the canonical order is significant for this reason, it may mean that the exact determination of the place of imprisonment (is it Rome, or Ephesus, or Caesarea?) as the original location of the letter's dictation is less decisive. That is, what is crucial is the theological significance of Paul's imprisonment and less our ability to determine the original location, a determination that must rely on a correct account of the proper historical order of the letters' composition, and thus a dismissal of significance in the canonical presentation as such. The canonical presentation may well favor the Roman imprisonment over a more oblique Ephesian or Caesarean one, considered strictly historically. My own view is that the traditional position of Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians as written by Paul in Rome is the one suggested by the presentation of the letters themselves, given what they choose to share with us.

Returning then to the earlier history of interpretation, note the way Chrysostom discusses the imprisonment setting and its significance, as he moves from letter to letter. Concerning Ephesians: "He wrote the Epistle from Rome, and, as he informs us, in bonds" (2004: 49). Regarding Philippians: "But when he wrote to them, it happened that he was in bonds. Therefore he says, 'So that my bonds became manifest in Christ in the whole pretorium,' calling the palace of Nero the pretorium" (2004: 181).¹⁸ A sort of crescendo is then reached when Chrysostom comes to Colossians and summarizes:

Holy indeed are all the Epistles of Paul: but some advantage have those that he sent after he was in bonds: those, for instance, to the Ephesians and Philemon: that to Timothy, that to the Philippians, and the one before us: for this also was sent when he was a prisoner, since he writes in it thus: "for which I am also in bonds: that I may make it manifest as I ought to speak." (Col. iv.3, 4.) . . . And it is evident from hence: that in the Epistle to Philemon he says "Being such an one as Paul the aged" (ver. 9), and makes request for Onesimus; but in this he sends Onesimus himself, as he says, "With Onesimus the faithful and beloved brother"

18. That modern scholars today speak of the pretorium as more of a group than a place ("the pretorium guard") does not answer the question of location. Gordon Fee strongly defends the pretorium guard as "the emperor's own elite troops stationed in Rome" rejecting alternatives in Ephesus or Caesarea; *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 35.

(Col. iv.9). . . . Wherefore also he boldly says in this Epistle, “from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which was preached in all creation under heaven” (Col. i.23). For it had now been preached a long time. I think then that the Epistle to Timothy was written after this; and when he was now come to the very end of his life. (Chrysostom 2004: 257)

He then continues, answering the question he had posed:

But why do I say that these Epistles have some advantage over the rest in this respect, because he writes while in bonds? As if a champion were to write in the midst of carnage and victory; so also in truth did he. For himself too was aware that this was a great thing, for writing to Philemon he saith, “Whom I have begotten in my bonds” (ver. 10). And this he said, that we be not dispirited when in adversity, but even rejoice. At this place was Philemon with these (Colossians). (Chrysostom 2004: 257)

Chrysostom, observing the canonical presentation and the suggestions it makes for interpretation, notes several important things. First is the theme of imprisonment associating Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, augmented by Philemon. Second is the way the presentation unfolds into theological interpretation. The bondage gives evidence of the lavish grace of God, enabling Paul to “raise trophies” and, by so doing, to encourage and exhort others. And lastly, he sees the aged Paul in his bonds and in his seniority nevertheless raising up the next generation, by the ministry of his letter writing and by his final personal actions, with Timothy and with Onesimus.

The canonical form brokers basic historical information but at the service of theological significance, as Chrysostom offers his homily: now in the place of the apostle, following carefully his legacy of personal and literary witness. It is time to consider what I call the occasion of the letter’s construction, within the ministry of the apostle, taking my cue from the canonical presentation and the apprehension of it by a commentator like Chrysostom.

Why Did Paul Compose a Letter to the Colossians?

An answer frequently given is that Epaphras asked him to do so.

This is of course far too simple an answer but certainly aspects of it are correct. The “beloved fellow servant” is mentioned very early in the letter (1:7), and the same man “who is one of yourselves” sends greetings through Paul at the close (4:12). Colossae is an insignificant city in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor, compared with Ephesus (the third largest city in the Roman Empire) and even the more excellent Laodicea just eight miles away. Paul had never visited the city (2:1) though he was present in Ephesus some eighty miles away for a period of

three years, preaching and teaching.¹⁹ Epaphras brought the gospel to the church (1:7), and in the context of the letter he is the one who informed Paul about their faith, which he calls “your love in the Spirit” (1:8).

As I have already mentioned, Paul’s exhortations in 2:8–23 imply that he has learned from Epaphras of issues in the Colossian (and Laodicean; see 4:16) context that give him concern. But the letter does not begin with this set of issues and instead moves from thanksgiving (1:3–8) to assurances of intercession (1:9–14) to a description of the supremacy of Christ (1:15–23) and indeed to rejoicing over their “firmness of faith” (1:24–2:7)—before he sets forth his address to these concerns.

In that sense, the letter to the Colossians is not unlike other letters of Paul, written to correct and shepherd a flock, yet one he does not have firsthand knowledge of and has never visited. Unlike Romans, it is not an extended treatise or epideixis, and it does speak to specific issues of local concern. The letter to the Romans, like Colossians, also addresses an audience Paul knows about only secondhand, but one that he will in fact eventually visit (Acts 28:16–30).²⁰ Such a reality appears now more wistful in the case of Colossians, probably due to the uncertain fate of Paul in Rome (Phlm. 22).

The Occasion of Paul’s Writing

It is here that the second major consideration for the occasion of Paul’s writing must be mentioned. To recap, Colossians is written to a church Paul has never visited. It discusses a set of problems Paul has heard about secondhand. It does not begin with this concern but instead on a more personal note. It is a letter that can be read by another one close by with profit. It has been argued that the letter to the Ephesians—which is so close in language and content as to be regarded by many as developed on the basis of Colossians—was likewise addressed not to one specific congregation only, but to the churches throughout the region.²¹

19. Theodoret (2001: 84) believes Paul had actually visited Colossae, though his view is unusual and is not shared by his Antiochene colleague Chrysostom.

20. Most believe Romans was written from Corinth. That Acts ends with Paul in Rome and is then followed by Romans closes the gap in some sense (at least in the orders where Acts precedes the Pauline Epistles) by reversing the chronological order. The preaching Paul is shown to undertake in Rome at the end of Acts finds an exemplar in Romans. The concerns Paul articulated at the close of the letter also proved to be true (15:22–33). See L. E. Keck’s comments in *Romans*, Abingdon Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 21. For the majority of the orders, Acts introduces the General Epistles. There is evidence of Acts positioned after the Gospels and before the Pauline corpus in the Marcionite fragment, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen. See the brief discussion in Childs 2008: 225–26.

21. This is a view widely held, and not just for those who find persuasive the Goodspeed-Knox idea of Ephesians as a distillate of other Pauline letters written to introduce them. Theodore of Mopsuestia held the view that it was actually written by Paul *before* he visited there, a curiosity demanded by what he saw as its lack of concrete details regarding the Ephesian church (where Paul was active for three years). See the discussion in Theodoret 2001: 31–32. He rejects this view in a lengthy introduction.

The occasion for writing, in the light of these several factors, cannot be the specifics of a problem Paul is concerned about and solely that. In this letter Paul is speaking about himself and about the way he is coming to understand his apostolic office, in the light of changed and probably unforeseen circumstances, over against the ministry he is depicted as undertaking in Acts. Note the following distinctives:

1. Paul is “we”—joined chiefly by Timothy but also by Epaphras and all those named in 4:7–17. His ministry is a joint one. It is one that began with the work of others and grows independently of him (1:1–8).
2. Paul’s ministry is prayer and intercession, and he calls attention to this because he wants the church at Colossae—which he never visited and did not plant—to understand the significance of this form of his apostleship alongside the vocation he can be seen, for example, to exercise in Acts. It is a ministry of exertion and labor with its own character (Col. 1:9–14; 2:1–7).
3. Paul’s ministry is one of mature theological clarification before it is one of problem address. The similarity with (the more extended) Ephesian discourse is obvious, especially in Col. 1:15–20. Before we hear of angels and elemental spirits and the challenges they represent and that Paul addresses, we hear of Christ and his all-embracing reign.
4. Paul is writing a letter whose occasion is borne of his own self-reflection and a new understanding of his apostleship in Christ, the result of prayer and companionship in prison, in the later years of his life. The main opening units of the letter make clear that this occasion is every bit as important as the specifics of the church situation in Colossae, as this has been related to Paul by Epaphras. The gospel is spreading in ways Paul could never have anticipated, independently of him. He is in bonds. The gospel is unhindered. Indeed it spreads because of this.²²

Given this reality being borne in on him, Paul has occasion to consider the way God has been at work in him quite apart from his own early intentions and plans, as God vouchsafed them to him—both as reported in Acts and in the specifics of letters considered to be earlier, where Paul addresses congregations he has himself planted or visited. He speaks of a mystery whose final purpose is now becoming clear, and by that he means the way God was intending always,

22. Chrysostom, Melancthon, and Calvin all note the rhetorical effect of beginning the letter in this way and so put this down as flattering the audience before Paul brings up the serious matters he deals with in Col. 2. But is this the real point of the opening units of the letter? Erasmus likewise offers a paraphrase of the letter in which matters to be dealt with in Col. 2 are explicitly referred to here and there in the movement of 1:1–2:8, thus anticipating and giving prominence to the occasional specifics Paul will address in 2:9–23. This is not to take seriously the content and intention of the material as it takes its place in the canonical shape of the letter.

by the cross of Christ, to address those outside the covenants, placing them in the end on a footing with its own logic alongside that of the covenant people of address and promise (1:26–27; cf. Rom. 11:25–36; Eph. 3:1–13). But he does not speak of this as an independent revelation or theological datum, worthy as it is on those terms of expression and proclamation. He speaks of this, rather, in direct connection to his own “divine office” (Col. 1:25) “given to me for you.” This divine office is tied up with the mystery of dual citizenship, in God’s hidden and revealed plans, but it also has to do *with a fresh revelation of the character of his own vocation, now being borne in him in Christ*. This explains why, before he says a thing about the specifics of the Colossian situation, he speaks of thanksgiving (1:3–8), petition and intercession (1:9–14), the protological Christ (a truth likewise only now being made clear, though there at the beginning; 1:15–20), and a transfer from estrangement (1:21–23) to an “inheritance of the saints in the light” (1:12). Paul is here speaking of a ministry given to him, part of a much larger plan entailing “every creature under heaven” (1:23).

It is at this point that Paul—in an audacious manner—puts his finger on an understanding of his vocation that has been borne in him and that explains why his apostleship of prayer, mutual thanksgiving, new revelation, and sacramental disclosure takes the form it does, as its own kind of mystery revealed. I have noted the theme of imprisonment associating the letters placed side by side (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians) and Paul’s commendation of his circumstances as worthy of remembrance and reflection. I believe this is also a strong reason for Paul’s writing to the Colossians and helps explain why the letter unfolds as it does. Paul is giving explanation for an apostleship that exists now differently from how he had exercised that previously, as church planter and shepherd. Paul wants the Colossians to know that this vocation is continuous with his previous role, though he is now bound up and geographically limited in prison. Unlike Philippians, where Paul is also in prison and writing from a distance, Paul had no personal contact with the church in Colossae. For different reasons, the “letter to the churches who are also faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1) is written without comment on the specifics Paul might be concerned to address in that church and instead takes the form of a long theological treatise.²³ It too mentions Paul’s imprisonment in connection with the mystery of God’s intention vis-à-vis the Gentiles (3:1–13), and this is one of the passages notable for its close relationship to Colossians.

So in my view Colossians brings to a crescendo—alongside the features noted by Chrysostom—Paul’s mature theological reflections on his vocation as an apostle, given the context of imprisonment and affliction. He writes in Col. 1:24: “Now I rejoice in the sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking: in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”

23. Was the letter always meant to address multiple churches? See the discussion of Nils A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002).

The interpretation of the verse—given its prominence in the history of interpretation and the possibility of misinterpretation—will be the topic of the commentary at its proper place. For now, let it simply be said that Paul has come to understand there to be an ongoing work in respect of proclaiming the gospel—to Jew and Gentile, in the light of the mystery hidden and revealed—that is Christ's extended and intentional work, accomplished on the cross and now working its way through to completion “to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister” (1:23). In Paul's personal apostleship, there is a sharing of Christ's afflictions, as the body is related to the head. Nothing is lacking in Christ's earthly afflictions—the passage does not refer of course to Christ's work of reconciliation on the cross—save the shared work of proclaiming his finished work, which entails a kindred affliction, ongoing, for the risen and exalted Lord and for his body the church.²⁴

This is a message Paul wants to share with the Colossians because it explains that his absence and his imprisonment are precisely in accordance with God's plans for his apostleship in relation to them and, rather than hindering the spread of the gospel, insure its fulfillment. One can see the relation between the work of the cross—the radical emptying that brings about the once-for-all fulfillment—and Paul's own prison dying (and experience of affliction; 2 Cor. 11:13–33), and between them both and the manifold Old Testament types (Jonah, Ezekiel, the Suffering Servant, Jeremiah, the Davidic voice of the Psalms, Moses). Paul does not begin with an effort to exhort them in respect of challenges specific to their Colossian experience of false teachers, because he wants them first to understand the character of the apostleship he has come to see is deeply intrinsic to it and to the gospel he wishes to proclaim. He is not rhetorically easing them into a position where they can hear a stern word of correction and warning, but is proclaiming a gospel in which his identity and vocation are now explicable in the light of Christ's own ongoing work as risen Lord of the church.

Colossians, Ephesians, and the Beginnings of a Collection Concept

Since at least the 1872 monograph of H. J. Holtzman, who sought to clarify the relationship of Colossians and Ephesians, great effort has been expended more precisely to define the patterns of dependence that might explain the overlaps between the two letters (as well as Philemon's relationship to Colossians), if not also account for the changed style and syntax of them both.²⁵ That the evidence

24. For a thorough discussion of the history of interpretation, see John Reumann, “Colossians 1:24 (‘What Is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ’): History of Exegesis and Ecumenical Advance,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 17 (1990): 454–61.

25. “The author of Ephesians not only first imitated an original Colossians, but subsequently interpolated Colossians with material from Ephesians” (Childs 1984: 317). Compare the modern treatment of Muddiman, who holds that Ephesians is a later edition of a genuine letter, intended to remain faithful to Paul but also edited to direct his teaching toward later circumstances (*Epistle to the*

has been used to argue for discontinuity and continuity both, and the lack of anything like a firm consensus regarding authorship forthcoming after generations of labor, means that the canonical portrayal simply does not yield the kind of data necessary for scholarly resolution at this level.

Brevard Childs makes an important observation about the canonical shape of the letter to the Ephesians with implications for Colossians as well. He notes the textual evidence that allows for the view (held in antiquity as well as more recently) that the letter once addressed more than one church (Eph. 1:1), and was only secondarily related (in some way) to a specifically Ephesian congregation (i.e., some believe this interpolation refers to where the letter landed and was treasured, in one case, and not to whom it was specifically addressed by the author). He sees the force for an argument for post-Pauline composition, but concludes the canon does not allow us to decide for this categorically. Elements of continuity exist alongside alleged discontinuity:

What distinguishes the Ephesian letter from the great majority of Pauline letters is that the canonical intention to shape the original letter in such a way as to render it accessible to later generations of believers did not take place on the redactional level. The textual expansion in 1.1 [“to the saints who are *at Ephesus and faithful*”] only confirms this basic point. Rather, it is reflected in the primary level of the composition, which is to say, that it derives from the author’s own intention. The concern to address a new generation of Christians, unknown to Paul, is a small step removed from a growing consciousness of the role of the canon which performed a similar function. The point to be made is that the grounds for the subsequent canonical process extend back into the actual compositional level of the New Testament literature itself. (Childs 1984: 326)

A similar point was made about the note with which Colossians concludes, which speaks of a transfer of letters. Long ago Ambrosiaster commented on 4:16: “Since the apostle’s instructions were universally applicable and written for the benefit of everyone, he directed that this letter should also be read to the Laodiceans so that they might learn from it what they should be doing. He also wanted the Colossians to read their letter, for the same reason” (quoted in Bray 2009: 100).

The commendation of Paul’s apostolic office and the clarification of it to the Colossians can find association with what we read in the other “captivity letters” even as it makes its own very particular contribution. What Childs says about Ephesians, and what he and others indicate about the character of Colossians, is true about them both in conjunction. That is, the “compositional level” of the New Testament literature, to which Childs refers above in respect of a single letter, is a shared feature in the case of a different letter (Colossians), and the Pastoral

Ephesians, 20–24). He believes the parallels with Colossians are too varying to think primarily of a letter composed on the basis of it.

Epistles will represent a yet further example of such broadening. Is it possible to decide at what moment we are speaking of “the compositional level” and what he calls a “consciousness of canon,” on the one hand, and when we are speaking of something like the effect of association when more than one letter is under consideration on the other hand?

The point I wish to make is that comparative studies of language, syntax, and themes take us only so far and may not be able to resolve the matter (of relationship and dependence) given what the canon shares with us when it comes to the literary form of individual letters. What seems clear is that both Colossians and Ephesians—for similar and for different reasons—represent efforts to speak more broadly than an account of them focused only on “the Colossian heresy” or the “Ephesian situation” would allow. Something else is going on. That both letters participate in this move toward shared meaning—the churches in Asia Minor, in the case of Ephesians, or the way Paul’s apostolic office is larger than an individual church context, or concerns Paul may have about concrete challenges to be faced in a congregation, as with Colossians—may well suggest that canonical shaping is extending beyond individual letters and has to do with the phenomenon of an emerging collection as such.²⁶ So in addition to compositional level and canon we might need an intermediate conception as well. It is not that far a cry from “have this letter read at that church” to “please read Colossians and Ephesians and other letters in the light of one another,” for that is a kindred idea, congenial with what we might mean by an author’s intention historically determined.

The point for present purposes is that when it comes to the distinctive theme of Paul’s afflictions, as Colossians sets this out, it is hard to isolate interpretation of this from what is said elsewhere about Paul’s experience of imprisonment and the character of his apostolic office. This is not a matter of determining dependence or noting thematic similarities between books, but flows from the notion of wider intention in the scope of a single writing, especially when one can see this happening in more than one letter at the same time. To simply discuss the phenomenon in terms of “Paul” or “non-Paul” shifts the question to matters of historicity, which on the one hand cannot be resolved and which furthermore may not deal with the hermeneutical challenge of the canonical reality before us.

The historical Paul and the canonical Paul simply cannot be easily extricated, and this may go back into the compositional and associative levels of his letters both. Paul has become aware that his letter writing is a form of apostolic ministry with its own integrity and afterlife, especially in the form of letters in emerging collective association. This is evidenced in the compositional level of more than

26. E. J. Goodspeed (*The Meaning of Ephesians* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933]) thinks in terms of letters that were scattered and needed to be gathered up (and of the concern for a Paul fading from view). But the idea of sharing (so Colossians) and of a general epistle like Ephesians intended for more than one church points instead to a concern for preservation possibly at work in the very act of conceiving and composing a letter.

one letter, and in my view is manifested in Colossians by virtue of its final literary form, where concern for the specific challenges in a congregation is registered through the lens of reflections on the apostolic office in the broadest sense. Philemon speaks of Paul as both aged and a prisoner. What flows from that reality is precisely the sort of reflection on his apostolic office we see in Colossians.

Paul's Letters and the Scriptures of Israel

There is much interest at present by New Testament specialists in understanding Paul's use of the Old Testament. Paul's use of the Old Testament differs from book to book, and studies of Paul as Old Testament interpreter may choose to focus on a single letter or, in the case of wider studies, will operate under the strictures that one must determine which of the Pauline letters are authentic and then limit the investigation to those letters.

Colossians offers a special challenge because the Old Testament does not appear in the letter in the familiar form of a formula citation ("as Isaiah said" or "so it is written"). What we have are allusions or echoes.²⁷ Why does this happen? Is it to do with the audience addressed? Is it a sign of the non-Pauline character of the letter? In this section I address the questions in the light of my concern to understand the implications of the letter collection form.

But it is important to understand that the influence of the Old Testament ranges more widely than a study of citations may typically appreciate. I leave aside for a moment the more specific question of where such studies are headed theologically and hermeneutically. Does one seek to understand Paul's use of the Old Testament because in some sense it is materially normative for Christian use of the Old Testament in the church today, that is, the historical precision in understanding this phenomenon is at the service of hermeneutical imitation? The church should imitate Paul's exegetical freedom with respect to the Old Testament, and that freedom extends to appropriation of the New Testament as well.²⁸ Or, alternatively, the church imitates the exegesis of Paul and is in some sense hedged about by the proper appreciation of how he goes about his work in this regard.²⁹ This is only one way to think about the role of the Old Testament as Christian scripture when it comes to the letters of Paul in the New Testament canon. Before moving to a discussion along these lines (i.e., the material appearance of the Old Testament in Colossians and what to make of that), I will start with reflection at a different level. This is because the influence of the Old Testament is not to be restricted to this material use only or what we might understand to be Paul's

27. Beetham uses the term (indebted to Richard Hays's earlier study) in the title of his 2008 monograph.

28. Andrew Lincoln, "Hebrews and Biblical Theology," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. C. Bartholomew (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 313–38.

29. This is closer to the position of Richard Hays in *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

human intentions as exegete and thinker, as exposed by a study of his citations or allusions. If the history of interpretation of the Pauline corpus shows us anything, it is that a modern inquiry into the techniques by which Paul handles the scriptures of Israel would represent a limitation in respect of what is judged to be significant about the horizon these scriptures continue to have in the Christian church, now in possession of a two-testament canon.

The Thirteen-Letter Collection and the Book of the Twelve

Leaving aside the Pastoral Epistles—letters written not to churches but to individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon)—the small letter to the Colossians is third from the end in the sequence of the letter collection, followed by 1–2 Thessalonians.³⁰ That is, Colossians is the third smallest “church letter.” It is but four chapters, or about the length of the compact Old Testament books of Ruth or Jonah.

In the Old Testament a long narrative (historical) section sits astride the prophetic genre books (the three major and twelve minor prophets), called by scholars the Deuteronomistic History whose concluding books are 1–2 Kings. The point of contact between this historical chronicle and the prophetic books is most obvious in the superscriptions of the prophetic books: six of the Minor Prophets are correlated with the reigns of specific kings, accounts of which are supplied by the Deuteronomistic Historian: “The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel” is how the superscription of the first of the twelve Minor Prophets reads; and similar chronological notices, typically less full, now stand at the head of the books of Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, and the postexilic prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Other than that, the individual (Minor) prophets play no actual role in the literary unfolding of the history itself. Only Jonah is mentioned (briefly, at 2 Kgs. 14:25). The (Major) prophet Isaiah is mentioned in 2 Kgs. 18–20 (the text itself is very close to Isa. 36–39), and Jeremiah is argued to have been edited by the same hands that gave final form to the History itself.

In the New Testament, the narrative (historical) chronicle of Acts likewise provides a loose interpretative framework for the thirteen letters of Paul. The points of contact are greater yet also different in kind. In Acts the letter writing of Paul is never mentioned. Several communities for which we now have Pauline letters are, however, mentioned and Paul’s missionary contact with them described. In consequence, it is usually thought helpful to have some sense of Paul’s missionary journeys in mind when reading the letters of Paul. The Philippian, Thessalonian, Corinthian, and Ephesian correspondence can be associated with what we know about Paul’s actual activity in Acts (in that order in Acts 16:11–20:38), and indeed

30. The letter to Philemon is written as well to Apphia and Archippus and “the church in your house” (Phlm. 1–2).

most modern accounts of Paul's letters (and theology) assume we must get the letters in the correct historical sequence if we are properly to interpret and understand them; here Acts is brought into service.³¹ The same has been held with regard to the twelve Minor Prophets.

Romans, the longest of Paul's letters and so in first place, picks up where Acts leaves off (with Paul in the Rome he had said he hoped to visit at the end of the letter to the Romans, written on his second missionary journey, according to most correlations, from Corinth; see Acts 18 and the mention of the Jews from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla). The author of Acts, Luke, is also likely the "Luke the physician" who has joined Paul in prison, according to Col. 4:14 (cf. Phlm. 24).³² The final chapters of Acts end with the first-person-plural "we" (from 16:10 to the end), and that seems a natural way to think as well about Paul and Luke in fellowship at the close of Colossians, if not also at the beginning (Col. 1:3–14).³³ Aristarchus, one of Paul's Jewish brothers also in prison with him (4:10), is mentioned briefly in Acts 19:29 and 27:2, in the nearer sea approach of Paul and Luke to Rome (from Malta). And of course Timothy is Paul's close companion in Acts (16:1). He is certainly to be thought of as integral to Paul's "we" address at the opening of Colossians ("we always thank God"; Col. 1:3). The letter to the Colossians is sent from Paul and Timothy (cf. 1–2 Thessalonians to follow; 2 Corinthians and Philippians earlier).

Similar to the relationship between the twelve Minor Prophets and the history recorded in Kings, the book of Acts and the Pauline letter collection have not come to us in a form originating in, or headed toward, a concern for tidy correlations at every point.³⁴ The respective books have their own integrity and their

31. As we have seen, the letters to the Ephesians and to the Philippians are written from a later context of prison, most likely in Rome. The letter to the Ephesians is probably intended to be read in a number of different churches, and it lacks any mention of specifics in the Ephesian church, such as we have in detail in Acts—unusual given the length of time Paul spent there. To account for this oddity, Theodore held the position that it was written before Paul arrived. This was clearly an effort to account for the absence of details, which in the modern period is handled differently by recourse to critical theory (Ephesians is a later, non-Pauline letter).

32. Oddly enough, Calvin contests this (1996: 230), believing that the appellation "the Physician" intends to distinguish him from "the Evangelist." He also holds the curious view that Onesimus (4:9) is not the slave of Philemon (1996: 227). This is the incipient "historical-critical" Calvin, in my view.

33. This may also be one reason why what is likely the earliest order (Acts introducing the General Epistles) can also be joined in time by the one familiar in modern English printed Bibles (Acts before Romans and the letters of Paul). See the discussion of Childs 2008: 225–26; compare Trobisch 1994: 9–10.

34. "The canonical collectors sought to preserve both the Pauline letters and the book of Acts. By so doing they established a context for the reading of Acts which was different from that of the original author of Acts who composed his book without recourse to the Pauline letters. Secondly, the literary effect of this new context is clear, regardless of whether or not the church fathers gave explicit formulation of its role. Because Acts offers a narrative of Paul's ministry with fixed chronological and geographical sequence, it provided the framework into which Paul's letters which lacked a sequence were fitted. This traditional use of Acts as the interpretive guide to the Pauline letters has been assumed by the church because of the canonical collection and not challenged until the rise of the critical method discovered tension between the materials" (Childs 1984: 239).

own literary history. Paul never visited Colossae, and so nothing can be gleaned in any specific way about it from Acts. Colossians makes clear that what Paul knows about the church there he knows from Epaphras (1:7; 4:12) and perhaps from Archippus (4:17). Philemon also belongs to the church at Colossae, and Archippus is mentioned again in that letter as a member of the church “in your house” (Phlm. 2). Onesimus is “one of yourselves” Col. 4:9 tells us, and together with the letter carrier Tychicus, Paul says at the close of the letter, “they will tell you everything that has taken place here.”

The thirteen-letter collection of Paul and the prophetic collection of the Twelve can be fruitfully compared. There is no evidence that the former was given a template in the latter in any specific sense. Rather, kindred concerns for guarding the specificity of the occasion of prophetic and apostolic activity, but also shaping a written testimony for future generations, are what overlay the development of both collections.

In both instances, a concern for chronology and orderly historical sequence is not the main issue at work in the collections.³⁵ The books and the letters can of course be placed in this kind of order, with the aid of history and of Acts and based upon internal arguments. This tracks well with the prophetic and apostolic material having emerged from specific historical occasions.³⁶ But the canonical form has not sought to make this the main feature for their interpretation. In the case of the Twelve, undated witnesses (from arguably later historical contexts) have been placed next to the dated ones (these are in a general historical sequence, leaving aside the arguments for the earlier date of Amos as against Hosea). The effect is not to generate concern for locating these undated witnesses in the same periods of their dated neighbors, though this has often been the assumed reason for their location (Jerome held this view; others demurred). Rather, their placement is thematic, and the occasion for this is theological, concerned to release a former prophetic word into a new future of address.

That the thirteen-letter collection moves from longer to shorter witnesses points to a different logic of arrangement. That does not prevent features emerging that indicate intentional shaping. The prologue to Romans, it is argued, functions to introduce not just that individual witness, but serves as an appropriate summarizing

35. Chrysostom comments on order in the Pauline letters and in the Twelve, in the introduction (“The Argument”) to his *Homilies on Paul’s Epistle to Romans* (thanks to Robert Kashow for this citation): “And that to the Galatians seems to me to be before that to the Romans. But if they have a different order in the Bibles, that is nothing wonderful, since the Twelve Prophets, though not exceeding one another in order of time, but standing at great intervals from one another, are in the arrangement of the Bible placed in succession. Thus Haggai and Zachariah and the Messenger prophesied after Ezekiel and Daniel, and long after Jonah and Zephaniah and all the rest. Yet they are nevertheless joined with all those from whom they stand so far off in time.” Chrysostom’s comment about the Minor Prophets is not entirely clear, but he seems to be noting that Ezekiel should appear in sequence before the final three Minor Prophets, but finds his place elsewhere. Other than that, he believes the Twelve are in historical succession, though separated by “great intervals.”

36. Standard introductions usually place the letters and the prophets in historical order and understand this to be necessary for proper interpretation. See my discussion in *Prophecy and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

entry for the collection proper.³⁷ I also note above the mislocation of Ephesians and seek explanation for this in the concern to place the prison letters next to one another, with the associating refrain “remember my bonds” in Col. 4:8 (so also Chrysostom 2004: 49, 181, 257). It is difficult not to see in the conclusion of the collection a significant transition, from Paul to the next generation that will carry on after him (Timothy and Titus). The Paul of Philemon is both prisoner for Christ and the aged apostle who has given birth to Onesimus in baptism.

As with the Twelve, the historical specificity of the Pauline letters is never subsumed into an abstract theological system, but retains all its rooted significance, as the real Paul confronts real problems and real hopes in real communities. The ordering from longer to shorter is clearly a mechanical feature that has emerged from the context of a secondary organization, with its own constraints. But this has not prevented the collection serving as “the church’s guide for reading Paul”—a guide whose achievement is to relate to future generations the concrete witness of the historical Paul, but that has seen in the man and his letters a consciousness deeply rooted in the historical specifics themselves, that Paul’s achievement is God’s achievement in him. This means that history serves the purpose of transparency to God’s use of Paul and cannot be isolated as theologically or objectively significant in its own register. To declare some letters (1) much later and (2) at distinct odds with the pure teaching of Paul is to undo the historical specificity of the letter collection as its own achievement, in the name of another species of history (i.e., the non-Pauline letters are capitulations to this or that later social force).

As with the book of the Twelve, the later witnesses are theologically integral to the earlier proclamations, because the one God is inspiring the former and latter things under his own providential ordering of time. In the Pauline letter collection, the temporal span is of course far more compressed, and the letters are all associated with a single inspired witness. But the effect is the same. The present letter collection guards the historical specificity (as Acts in the New Testament and 1–2 Kings in the Old Testament speak of that), but also allows for development and movement. These are the consequence of changed circumstances in the churches addressed, as well as the march of time as Paul himself experiences this, as the one untimely called and untimely superintended both. He will come to understand that his final vocation, prisoner in chains, slave for Christ, is to give thanks for the spread of the gospel apart from his own efforts and to place into the hands of the next generation a testimony that God bequeathed to him through the scriptures and bequeathed in him, in the legacy of his letters. Second Peter concludes on precisely this note, as the logic of Paul the letter writer is grasped in all its significance: “And count the forbearance of the Lord as salvation. So also our brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given to him, speaking of

37. See Childs 2008: 66; and Robert Wall, “Romans 1:1–15: An Introduction to the Pauline Corpus of the New Testament,” in *The New Testament as Canon*, ed. Robert Wall and E. E. Lemcio, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* 76 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 142–60.

this as he does *in all his letters*. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other scriptures*” (2 Pet. 3:15–16, emphasis added).

In the Pauline letter collection, it is one and the same Paul who speaks to specific communities a specific gospel word of address and who releases his letters to new purpose under God’s providential care. One cannot pull these two Pauls apart without destroying the historical integrity of the letters themselves as they maintain this balance, going back to Paul himself. Peter speaks of “all his letters” and relates them reflexively to the inherited scriptural testimony, the Old Testament. In time it will be not just the “twisting” to different purpose but also the selection and truncation of the letters that causes misunderstanding and destruction (as Peter puts it); so, e.g., Marcion’s “Paul.” Reading Paul by focusing on individual letters to the isolation of others is precisely what the canonical form seeks to guard against. This can be done in the name of historical precision, or by application of a theory of what must be non-Pauline, or because of theological preference, even under the congenial rubric of “canon within a canon.” The canonical form, by contrast, seeks to attach Paul’s authorizing significance evenly across the thirteen books and resists various theories of developmentalism, pristine origins, or special theological privilege.

Influence of the Scriptures of Israel and the New Testament as Canon

This brings us to a second matter of equal importance, when one thinks of the role of the Old Testament and Paul’s letter legacy. I have mentioned already the interest by New Testament specialists in Paul’s use of the Old Testament. In Colossians, we have an additional challenge because the book does not show a Paul using scripture by means of formal citation. Instead, the Old Testament makes its force felt through allusions. Two recent studies seek to give precision to this, with the number and character of allusions set forth and evaluated.³⁸ So, for example, Paul speaks of the gospel “bearing fruit and growing” (1:6), and this is taken to be an echo of Gen. 1:28. The unhindered spread of the gospel is happening under the authority of the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), the new Adam. Beetham finds ten such echoes in the letter to the Colossians, from across the Old Testament; his doctoral supervisor, Greg Beale, detected and argued for seventeen; and Barth and Blanke, Hubner, Fee, and others have their own enumerations (see Beetham 2008: 6–7 for full discussion on these scholars).

In addition to such listings and their evaluation is a related set of questions. Why does Paul adopt this manner of citation when elsewhere he is more explicit? Does this lean in the direction of arguing against genuine Pauline authorship? Beetham, for his part, sees in the avoidance of formula citation an indication that Paul wants Christ to be taken by the Colossians as the true Torah; Torah itself, he

38. Beetham 2008; and G. K. Beale, “Colossians,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 841–70.

wants the Colossians to conclude, is a “faithful, if incomplete, source of revelation and wisdom” (2008: 262).

Further questions arise. Scholarly studies can detect these echoes, but how many would have been picked up by Paul’s actual audience in Colossae?³⁹ This question touches on a larger area of debate, namely, audience competence and its significance for understanding an authorial intention and purpose. Must Paul cite scripture (or allude to it) only in accordance with what he knows or presumes about the competence of his audience? Does Paul write letters like Romans, Ephesians, or Colossians—more literary than private letters—with only a single audience in view, or rather is his assumption of a wider currency and application? In my view this question is tied up with the actual phenomenon of scripture citation and allusion, both. I will deal with the question of the appearance and significance of individual allusions in the commentary proper. At issue here is the more general question of the status of the Old Testament as scripture.

Beetham thinks that the avoidance of formula citation by Paul indicates significance in a transfer of authority from Torah to Christ, which Paul has come to see. At the same time, on the question of audience competence, he otherwise draws the conclusion that Paul commends scripture at the close of the letter (3:16) precisely because he assumes that, whatever audience he addresses, he expects that they will study the scriptures in the course of their becoming mature in Christ. The allusions he registers in the letter, their own sustained encounter with scripture will in time reveal. In the context of regular worship and the hearing of scripture, the church at Colossae would become competent inhabitants of the symbolic universe of scripture, as Beetham puts it. He concludes his speculations in this way: “It is also possible that Paul wrote with especially the functionally literate in view, some of whom would certainly have held leadership roles in the churches, and expected of them to teach and explain his message to the rest of the congregation, including its Old Testament foundations” (2008: 257).

The question I pose is whether this evaluation is far too restricted by a view of strict “authorial conscious intention” at a number of levels. Paul alludes to scripture. This is an intentional matter: on its own face and because, so it is argued, of a wish to avoid formula citation. Paul then also commends scripture and assumes the congregation and/or its leadership will so learn, teach, and instruct that allusions will be grasped for their significance. This particular view also makes Paul the center of attention vis-à-vis the scriptures, whose importance lies in the area of foundations for understanding his thought and purpose, communicated through his letter. The scriptures’ eventual significance turns on their resourcefulness for filling out Paul’s original communicative intention in an individual letter to a church who reads it.

There is of course another way of speaking about this, which is centered less on “Paul the author” and more on “Paul the authored.” On this account, Paul is

39. Christopher D. Stanley, *Arguing with Scripture: The Rhetoric of Quotations in the Letters of Paul* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), esp. chap. 3.

less self-conscious of the allusions he is making. The scriptures are projecting their horizon as a consequence of his deep educational internalization of them, now being heard in the apostolic cause of speaking forth Christ and explicating his eternal significance as they bore and bear witness to this mystery. The dots cannot be neatly connected. The portions of scripture alluded to cannot be mapped on a tidy exegetical grid, but indicate an allusive penetration of his thought and argument. Scripture is grasping Paul in this, and not the other way around. The use of allusion (and not formula citation) is not a signal of lesser importance or a transfer of authority from written Torah to christological wisdom, for its own sake or measured against a different practice to be noted elsewhere (the formula citations in Romans), now leaving the Old Testament to serve as foundations of something else. No, the scriptures are declaring their own christological purpose, and they are doing so in a way that Paul may only partly comprehend but not fully track or encompass. That we can see them now through careful study, moreover, is a sign of our own present knowledge of these scriptural texts, much as Beetham reasonably speculated that churches in time would enter the symbolical universe of the Old Testament because Paul himself so expected.

In this sense, then, we are not so much imitating the exegetical practices of Paul as we are allowing the scriptures to speak their word over and alongside his own efforts. Paul does commend the scriptures to his audience, and Peter will be bold to commend Paul's letters alongside them (2 Pet. 3:15–16). The way, then, that the scriptures will function is not as foundations but as declarative of mysteries they genuinely guard in their own literal sense, which are coming to light in ways Paul cannot himself fully grasp, but only be grasped by. The scriptures of Israel, the Christian Old Testament, will be heard in the church as reading Paul and clarifying his apostolic word. It is not difficult to assume that Paul expected that this would be so, as the “oracles of God entrusted to the Jews” (Rom. 3:2) would become entrusted to a wider circle: following the dominical example of Easter day, now being opened more widely to a particular Christian hearing and instructing, for which Paul serves as a central apostolic example. (For a creative presentation of how Paul the Jewish Christian and the now largely Gentile church orient themselves around both scripture and the gospel, see the appendix.)

The Mechanics of Letter Composition and the Question of Pauline Authorship

The Witness of the Old Testament and Authorial Inspiration

The prophets of Israel were public speakers, and so the path that leads from this inspired activity to the legacy of written texts, now bearing their names, is in large measure hidden from view. In the texts they have left us we get glimpses only, a signal certainly that the important thing is the word vouchsafed and preserved and not the means by which that has happened. Jeremiah had a secretary. Isaiah

had disciples. Elijah and other prophets had schools within which they worked and saw to the transitions called forth by God, from one generation to the next. Ezekiel “swallowed a scroll”—a metaphor perhaps for more direct involvement by the prophet in the compositional achievement of prophetic witness. Some argue that works like Isa. 40–55 were composed more on the order of extended discourse than brief prophetic utterance, but whether that amounts to a literary shift is the stuff of speculation only. The later prophetic books (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) do appear more literary in character, perhaps the function of a new understanding of the prophetic office. And one very important aspect of this—probably not sufficiently noted—is the emergence of a prior literary record. Postexilic prophecy becomes prophecy in relationship to a written record. A classical period has emerged. Prophecy does not die out as a live phenomenon but is internally transformed, coexisting with an “agony of influence” from prophecy as it went forth in the past and continues to sound forth in the context of ongoing, yet now very different, prophetic address. As Zechariah the latter prophet puts it, “Your fathers, where are they, and the prophets, do they live forever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers?” (1:5–6). And again, “Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets?” (7:7), followed by a precise summation of that former speech, now addressing a new generation (7:8–14). The book of Zechariah can be read as a reestablishment of prophecy given the realities of postexilic life (kingship, prophecy, priesthood all sundered or brought under severe judgment in the destruction of Jerusalem and exile), by means of dream visions and by the ability to reconnect with what prophecy had been, as this exists via the medium of a growing scriptural witness (“words and statutes” being collections in association with the prophets and Moses).

Where does Paul the apostle fit within such a conception? Like Amos, he is a voice wrested by God to a particular vocation, untimely born. Like Ezekiel, he has “swallowed a scroll,” by means of an education whose purpose was the internalization of God’s prior speech as found in the Law and the Prophets. Like Zechariah, he faces into that same scriptural legacy as an undoubted authority from the past, but with a word still to speak enlivened by God’s vocation given him as inspired apostle. He is one of the Twelve, Judas’s true replacement, as Barth (*Church Dogmatics* 2/2: 478–506) provocatively states: an inspired voice among a choir of apostolic voices, typologically figured in the Twelve Prophets, and now fulfilled in the presentation of Acts, the Pauline letter collection, and the General Epistles of the New Testament.

Like the prophets, Paul’s vocation was not the literary production of books. He dictated his letters to secretaries, and their names and personal attestation have been preserved (e.g., Rom. 16:22). How did he go about the business of internal organization of his thoughts and anticipated speech and address? How did he call up the scriptural references? What is the relationship between the final form of a letter as we now have it, where he has signed off in his own large-lettered hand (1 Cor. 16:21; Gal. 6:11; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17), and previous stages of

dictation and editing and reconception? We can trace out answers to these questions by comparison with letters from antiquity and what we can know about that process, including even speculation about letter collections and how they became such. But in many ways, not unlike with the prophetic books, we will not know all we might like to know because the predominating concern was with the message itself and not descriptions of the process; these come to us as intriguing incidentals. We must also be prepared to accept that there might be something *sui generis* about the forms of composition held to be at the base of New Testament proclamation. Paul's letter collection is entitled to be both like and unlike what we might find in the letters of Seneca. And this is not least because of the influence and overshadowing prophetic authority of the scriptures of Israel, under whose shadow these letters find form. The New Testament is "accorded testimony," and in that sense it finds a modest exemplar in the prophetic writings themselves. The book of the prophet Isaiah is a testimony of "former and latter things." The latter things are what they are in relationship to a prior divine word, and that must be grasped before what is truly new can make its force felt. The postexilic prophets also find their logic and their warrant in relationship to "former prophecy."

Paul as Author of Letters

As we have seen, much hard labor has gone into the business of determining which letters were authored by Paul and which ones were not. This project has been tied up with the individualization of the letters. Even the tendency to comment on only a single letter is a relatively recent development, as the tradition typically interpreted the letters as a group. Initially this may have had less to do with an intuition about a single selected letter being more decisive than the others, though certainly the idea of a "canon within a canon" bespeaks an instinct toward prioritization on some principle other than the canonical presentation. Bucer was well known as an Ephesian commentator and was invited by Thomas Cranmer to lecture at Cambridge and prepare material for what he planned would be a collaborative project, unifying the Reformation churches around a fresh Latin translation together with commentary. Other single-commentary compositions arguably took place because of certain central theological themes the author felt needed to be pressed inside a newly conflicted ecclesial situation.

In the modern period, the individualization came as part of the industry of historical-critical evaluation. The books needed to be placed in their "proper" sequence. Critical was a determination of setting, provenance, and distinctive theological contribution. Part and parcel of this method of proceeding was a determination of authenticity based upon an account of the development of Paul's thought and the place where it appeared certain letters had moved into discontinuous territory. This could be accounted for by theories of pseudigraphy, which might well dismiss the idea of fraud or radical disjuncture, as these sometimes accompanied the judgment of *antilegomena*. Partly to their credit, such

conclusions at least reminded us that authorship as meant in the antique world and in our own are very different conceptions.

As we have seen, the quest for the human author in the case of Old Testament prophetic books (and elsewhere) was always held in sharp contrast with modern conceptions due to the oral and public character of prophetic speech. The path to written legacy was not obvious or straightforward. How was Moses thought to be the “author” of the Pentateuch and what was meant by that traditional conception? How is Isaiah the “author” of the sixty-six-chapter work now associated with him? How does the book of the Twelve go back to individuals but also represent an authorship greater than the sum of its parts?

In addition, in the later period, as a classical conception of prophecy emerged in connection with an emerging canonical witness, to be a prophetic author was also to relate to and in some sense defer to a prophetic legacy with which any new prophecy was to be in accordance. Newer forms of inspired writing also emerge at this period, some of them from circles associated with the wisdom tradition. Wisdom becomes what one author called “a hermeneutical construct,” that is, by means of specific editorial handling of the tradition, the wise are those who understand how an ancient word overtakes and addresses a new generation and, more importantly, how this happens when the authoritative tradition has aggregated.⁴⁰ Now the questions for the wise to answer and learn from have to do with seeing proper associations across a developing written witness. How does the Psalter relate to the life of David recorded in the history? How does the first book of the Twelve serve as a lens on the collection as a whole? Does the book to follow (Joel) press for an individualized reading, or is its sense to be grasped in connection with how it appropriates and relates to the first witness (Hosea)? How did a word from Isaiah continue to accomplish God’s purpose: an authorization that led to extended prophetic address after his lifetime, but consistent with and drawn from the original inspiration given to him? His word is what it is to his own generation, but it contains the seeds of God’s accomplishing address for a later day.

Much about the process of extended inspiration is hidden from view and can be reconstructed (modestly and tentatively) only on the basis of close reading and on the assumption that “the prophet Isaiah wrote the book of Isaiah” does not adequately capture what the sixty-six-chapter book means when it declares itself the vision the prophet saw (1:1). The term “pseudepigraphy” does not sufficiently clarify what is going on and what is at stake, precisely when it comes to the inspiration and the manner of authoring we call “divine.”

When it comes to the letters of Paul we are on seemingly firmer and also different ground. The movement from author to written letter is more temporally compressed, more capable of explication, and more direct. But other factors intrude that have their Old Testament analogies. Paul is not an isolated figure but exists in

40. Gerald T. Sheppard, *Wisdom as a Hermeneutical Construct: A Study in the Sapientializing of the Old Testament* (BZAW 151; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980).

relationship to a wider apostolic movement. Paul is a writer of letters to specific congregations, but he is also one who stands under scriptural authority, in Christ, and who seeks to hear that former word delivering up a sense consistent with its own deliverance in time, while yielding also an extended sense due to the conviction that Christ or the Spirit was inspiring the first witness toward a final end. The many and varied ways the scriptures make their force felt across the letters mean that this authoritative horizon would lose its character if made the focus of a study of only a single letter or a focus on an individual witness apart from the wider collection.

Here it is that a declaration of some letters as non-Pauline must run up against what is arguably too thin an account of authorship to begin with (Barclay 2004: 35). The letter collection proceeds on the basis that Paul stands behind the total inspired witness, and to do this it merely declares him its originating force without distinguishing different forms of that. His name appears at the top of every letter, if not also at the close. Why is it that distinctives appear in the letters (in language, syntax, content) that seem to be good evidence of some other intruding force? Answers are given on the basis of development of thought, changed circumstances, collaboration, and other factors. Undeniable is Paul's being, especially later in his apostolic life, a man among other men (and women), in a way different from what we see of his companionship in Acts. If the epilogues of the letters are not taken to be efforts to give historical color to a later secondary composition, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon show a Paul in a setting where his thinking must invariably be affected by the presence of others and also his own reflections on the history of his apostolic life up to that point in time. Could it be otherwise?

Of course, we cannot know why Paul's thought and forms of expression appear to change, and we can note this only within the compass of the canonical presentation that allows his name to stand over the whole. Has Timothy begun to work more closely alongside? Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians all mention him en route to the letters to Timothy proper, which follow. Colossians reflexively uses the "we" form in thanksgiving at its opening (compare the first-person singular in Phil. 1:3 and the plural "we" in Colossians and 1 Thess. 1:2 and 2 Thess. 1:3). Colossians closes with a veritable "seminar room" setting, with such luminaries as Mark, Luke, Jesus called Justus, Epaphras, and Aristarchus (latterly travel companion with Paul and Luke, as Acts reports it)—all companions of the apostle. Just as statements written by more than one person look different than ones with a single author, even though one person must do the final authoring, can we be sure that an account of Paul as author is sufficiently tuned to the realities of the day, and how apostolic witness in accordance with the scriptures takes its form, such that we can refer to it now as part of the inspired work of Paul in a final letter collection? Here the challenge is not to make Paul measure up to what we mean by "author," but instead to concede that we must go to school again when it comes to understanding inspiration in the context of a scriptural horizon (Old Testament) and an apostolic testimony (New Testament), which in the nature of the case seeks a common point of origin in the one Holy Spirit of inspired address.

Paul stands alone as canonical author of the thirteen letters, and how that is so is less prominent in the presentation than that is so. To introduce an alternative understanding in the name of modern conceptions is to fail to accept the limitations of modern inquiry into what is a scriptural convention.

In the appendix, I seek to bring together the conclusions of this opening section in the form of a first-person account. This resembles in some ways the “paraphrase” genre in Erasmus’s work. His is a representation of Paul’s letter with expanded first-person supplementation, and the rhetorical effect is notable upon even a brief reading. But I did not generate it for this purpose. I was struck at how certain economical accounts of introduction to the letter to the Colossians often served the purpose better of allowing the historical Paul to step forward, with all the allowances that must be made for how secure a portrayal it was. Paul is clearly a personality in his letters and in Acts, and the autobiographical exists alongside the substantive theological. This opening section has hopefully shown why this is unavoidably so, when it comes to apostolic witness from the maturing, imprisoned Paul. This is part and parcel of the letter collection’s canonical unfolding.

I do not, however, intend the paraphrase to present itself as history after the modern example. It is more in the form of a “historylike” account, to borrow a phrase from Hans Frei.⁴¹ As such it is a heurism, intended as a lens or overture, by which one may enter the commentary proper. For this reason I introduce the notion of Paul as an actual letter *writer*, when strictly speaking it is doubtful that such a vocation was ever his in the manner I tease out. This is to give indication that I mean the portrayal of Paul to be a heurism, and not some sort of competition or displacing exercise with respect to the letter collection itself, and Colossians as one integral part of it. I intend this only as a way to give proportion to the reality of Paul as a person, as the letter collection allows us a glimpse. I hope it summarizes the findings of this more formal introduction in a readable, congenial way. That will better serve the purpose of introducing the commentary proper, where he appears in all his specificity and all his vocational humility. It is placed in the appendix so that those who wish to move directly to the presentation of Colossians in the form of commentary may do so.

A Final Word about the General Approach to Reading Colossians

At points along the way in composing this commentary I have been tempted to refer to the approach adopted in respect of Colossians “canonical.” The term “canonical”—whatever its technical, semantic, or practical limitations—is likely now fated to a context of misapprehension or caricature. A “canonical reading” is either a genre mistake or a piety masking illegitimate (“unhistorical” in our present parlance) interpretation. A canonical reading is a holistic reading that eschews

41. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

matters of historical background, favoring the final form and leaning toward, even if unintentionally, a hermeneutics of reader-response and kindred objections.

But of course a canonical reading as adopted specifically by Childs is a resolutely unpostmodern reading, and when it comes to the letters of Paul, the business of properly associating a single letter with the achievement of the letter collection forbids anything like holistic reading (Childs 1984 and 2008). Minimally, a canonical reading should mean something basically proper like paying attention to the text's final form in its totality and also not preempting the historical character of the text's coming-to-be. The balance will prove to be the real issue.

Or—another complaint often lodged—a canonical reading is some degenerative form of theological reading. In Barclay's 2004 survey of the modern interpretation of Colossians—and with attention to the postmodern challenge—almost reflexively he lumps what he calls a theological reading (whatever that might mean) with a literary (“unhistorical”) reading. But he must quickly concede, and does, that no theological reading is exempted from having to attend closely to what is said and the historical implications of that (see the discussion on authorship in the introduction). Such readings could take the form of situating Paul within his own corpus or seeking to understand what his audience might hear in the theological realm of Paul's address. Either reading is at once theological and historical.

It seems to me that what captures the concern of a canonical reading, if the term may be indulged for a moment, has to do with the proper proportion between what is said as an act of intentional communication and the circumstances said to be generating it. Both are historical data. The one exists in time and calls up terms and contexts relevant to historical precision-making. The latter is a speculation based upon what the text says. A canonical approach seeks to assure that these rhyme and that the speculations about the circumstances generating the material are in proper proportion to what the text actually highlights and prioritizes in its final total form, or in “the way the words go.” So, to say that Epaphras has had a falling out with the Colossian community would require much more in the explicit unfolding of what Paul says than appears in the final text, and as I show below, other explanations better conform to the actual words. Or, to say Timothy cowrote Colossians is fine as speculation, but it cannot be called historical as over against something canonical. Rather, it is a speculation based upon various bits of evidence, none of them in the form of the letter saying “Timothy cowrote the letter.” This would be the proper canonical representation of such an idea. If that were the case, we would conclude that the canonical text gave proportion to this historical claim. In my view this is simply not so. The point here is that a canonical reading tries to pay attention to what is not said by a text and to conclude this lack of plain deliverance is significant. Proper proportion must be weighted to what is said. There is nothing especially theological or holistic or unhistorical in such an approach. The text is honored for what it chooses to communicate in the form it chooses to say that, and historical judgments are kept in proportion to this reality.

When it comes, then, to reflection on the character of Colossians within a letter collection, great care must be taken to understand where and how significance in this broader realm lies. Barclay again is helpful here. He speaks of the unavoidable reality that everyone must create a portrait of Paul by the very act of seeking to retrieve one from the material sitting before us in thirteen letters. Surely this is right. Is there something called a canonical portrait of Paul given by his letters?⁴² Yes, in the sense that taking the letters as a whole and asking what sort of Paul is being communicated by them in their totality is possible. What is difficult to know is how this kind of endeavor is historical on the terms of the present meaning of the word. One can read the Pastorals and by various means of historical comparison argue they are not by Paul but represent some effort to speak in his name at a later date and under circumstances not his own. What one in turn does with such a conclusion is another matter, but it does mean that the Paul created in this portrait has no coloring from these three letters. A similar thing can be said of a method that would exclude Colossians or Ephesians as non-Pauline.

Childs in his work on the Pauline letters seeks to work around certain constraints implicit in this sort of approach. So, he can conclude that arguments for the non-Pauline, or later, character of certain letters make a sort of sense, while remaining agnostic about claims as to their actual character and intention (he does not find the comparisons with ancient pseudepigraphical writings compelling, for example). But his concern, after noting this, is to ask what kind of Paul the letter collection, in the form we have it, has sought to give us. In this manner has he just avoided the historical question by a clever sleight of hand? Does the word “historical” refer to the subsequent decisions as to how to present Paul and so these are not seeking to lodge a claim for ostensive reference at the same level of canonical significance? How was it possible for later hands to extend Paul’s portrayal in letters that so clearly depict him as their author, without making an inappropriate transfer historically? If they did this, should we? These are the questions that might be posed if one seeks to understand how a canonical approach is a historical approach but with a wider lens on history and reception history.⁴³

In this context I am going to content myself with not writing on the Pastorals, as in my view they represent the most serious challenge as to how we face this kind of question. I believe Childs is on the right track by seeking signs of organic

42. For simplicity’s sake, we can leave the presentation of Hebrews (which does not foreground a Pauline character as author) and Acts (which does give us a clear “Paul” portrait) to the side. They do illustrate, however, the challenge. See Seitz, *Character of Christian Scripture*.

43. A similar set of considerations emerges in the discussion of the modern scholarly conception “Luke-Acts,” which conception does not appear as hermeneutically or materially significant in the earliest commentary references. Is the conceptuality of “Luke-Acts” historical, and the one that has Acts introduce the General Epistles nonhistorical? Or is one forced to posit a moment in time that is historical in which the former conceptuality is in place, even as we have no record of it in the earliest history of reception? What kind of history is it that only with difficulty links up with the earliest reception history? See A. F. Gregory and C. K. Rowe, eds., *Rethinking the Unity and Reception of Luke and Acts* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 74–81; and Childs 2008: 219–36.

extension, and not ones glued on after the fact and made to say something either un-Pauline or something of an altogether different purpose at a period when he was gone from the scene and his concerns were no longer logically extendable to subsequent churchly adjudication.⁴⁴ The single statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream as seen by Daniel (Dan. 2:31–35) had ten toes (2:41–43), did it not? The two main sections of Daniel do not represent subsequent layers of *vaticinia ex eventu*, but organic extensions based upon the conviction that the original visions had more to say than was constrained within the “historical” context of Dan. 1–6.⁴⁵ So too, one might think of the relationship of the Pastorals vis-à-vis the so-called *homologomena*. But again, I am not forming a strong opinion about how one should assess the Pastorals in the context of the letter collection. I agree with Childs that something like a broader approach to the question of historicity must be entertained when it comes to the interpretation of Paul in the canonical-historical portrayal. And if that is so in the case of the Pastorals it is even more so in the case of Colossians and Ephesians, both of which have been held by reputable scholars as Pauline on the grounds one typically, in the modern period, engages the question.

In this commentary I will defend the view that a strong argument for non-Pauline authorship or for pseudepigraphical composition cannot be sustained. I believe that far easier explanations lie close to hand. I hold that the distinctive circumstances of Paul's authorial location explain how and why his diction and his perspective look like they do. He is observing, through the testimony of Epaphras, the vibrant growth and spreading of the gospel independently of his own efforts or expectation. The Colossian church is non-Jewish in character and therefore will need to hear the patterns and themes and truths of the scriptures Paul treasures in a distinctive idiom tailored to their reception among them. Because the growth of the church is happening in dramatic ways and because the Gentile composition of this congregation is forefront in his mind, themes like the mystery hidden and revealed, via the extensional senses of the one scriptural witness, are prominent.

I will explain at appropriate points why a certain kind of inquiry into allusions and echoes of scriptures in Colossians will misfire if the question is whether those addressed are in a position to pick up on them, or why Paul “avoids” direct quotations in the form we find them elsewhere.⁴⁶ I believe a better answer is available for how and why Paul proceeds as he does.

A brief word, then, about the way the commentary will be undertaken.

Translation. The English translation is in bold so the reader can know where we are in the text of Colossians. The translation is my own. The only thing I try to do consistently is maintain the same word order as the Greek, when that does

44. This becomes relevant in the commentary, for example, on the “household code” in 3:18–4:1.

45. See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 614–18.

46. See Beetham's discussion about a subsequent “biblical literacy” Paul in time would expect of a Gentile congregation (2008: 255–57). I do not agree with the conception of Paul “avoiding” direct citation and of explaining this as having to do with “Christ replacing Torah” (2008: 262).

not create an idiosyncratic rendering in translation. I also try to comment on no more than one verse at a time. At points in the commentary I will speak more in the way of summary introduction to verses where such a treatment is called for.

Units/text division. I believe the letter as a whole gives indication that Paul was thinking in terms of a sustained discourse. Like any composer, he moves from topic to topic, and one can sense beginnings and endings and transitions of various description. But on the whole I am convinced there is a coherence to the units when taken in relationship to one another. I will introduce subdivisions in the chapters and give explanation for the logic of these. But it will also be true that strong divisions, going back to form-critically determined discrete units, are not often in evidence. This should be obvious as one reads along, and it does not require further elaboration here. I mention it only as a matter of format in the context of this Series.

Selection of commentaries. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible is intended to avoid digging a fresh scholarly ditch (*ein wissenschaftliche Grabe*). That said, I have read widely in modern and ancient commentary and know what kinds of issues predominate in both. What has been given most attention has often happened appropriately. That said, it will always be the case that certain kinds of issues (e.g., the diachronic or genetic coming-to-be of the text in its final form is a good example in the modern period: how the “hymn to Christ” looked in its “pristine form” and how it has been augmented; how the “household codes” of antiquity have been adapted in Hellenistic Judaism) are given a length of treatment in the commentaries that does not necessitate another rehearsal here. One can easily consult the literature to see how the discussion has gone. The present commentary will give indication that these are areas for further consideration by those so inclined, and it will offer its own view. But it will not unroll the nineteenth/twentieth-century discussion in detail and show that it knows it well. I am a biblical scholar trained in historical-critical method, and I know this kind of analysis better than I know certain phases of the history of interpretation. But I endeavor to give proper proportion to the scholarly discussion in its more recent phases so as to allow a theological reading to emerge from the canonical text before us.

Paul as the subject of verbs. I believe it is appropriate to refer to “Paul” as the creative mind at work in the letter to the Colossians. I will therefore allow him to be the subject of the verbs in my commentary on his letter. But equally, I believe there are no genuinely suitable alternatives for this. For those who believe Paul had considerable help from Timothy, or that the latter was the real composer/dictator of the letter, the avoidance of “Paul” *simpliciter* as author is not easily accomplished, practically speaking, when it comes to line-by-line commentary.⁴⁷

47. Dunn is a good example here. He believes Timothy is in some measure the author of the letter and that this is the implication of 1:1. Yet he also describes the practical limitations of setting this forth: “We may, for example, envisage Paul outlining his main concerns to a secretary (Timothy) who was familiar with the broad pattern of Paul’s letter writing and being content to leave it to the secretary to formulate the letter with a fair degree of license, perhaps under the conditions of his imprisonment at that point able

For those who prefer to think of a pseudepigrapher or a “project of the Pauline circle,” a generic “the author” is the expediency required; or, one can speak of the purpose of the letter in general terms and avoid reference to its author entirely (so, e.g., Kiley 1986 and Lincoln 2000: 553–669). The text is the subject of the verb.

In some ways Lincoln also puts his finger on the issue, though perhaps inadvertently, when he concludes his introduction to the letter with these sentences:

Although the following commentary is written from the perspective that the letter is to be dated sometime after Paul’s death and that the interpretation of 1:24–2:5 and 4:7–16 is to be linked to the device of pseudonymity, this is a matter still under dispute. For those who disagree with such a stance on authorship, all that is necessary in most of what follows, is, of course, to make the mental substitution of “Paul” or “Timothy” or both for “the writer.” (Lincoln 2000: 583)

A theological commentary on the canonical scriptures would need to be able to defend a view of biblical texts whereby it falls to readers to make mental substitutions of various kinds so as to have the letter to the Colossians conform to their own wishes in respect of authorship. I believe here one sees the deeply practical reality that inhabits the claims of the biblical text and of commentary on the same. A text has an author of some description. If on every occasion one must make mental substitutions of some kind in order to clarify the author and subject of verbs in the letter to the Colossians, it is nevertheless the case that the matter is not open ended. A choice must be made in some way (Paul, Paul/Timothy, post-Pauline project, the writer). I believe it is true to the account the letter to the Colossians makes of itself that we make the author neither anonymous (“the writer”) nor a cipher for a theory nor even Timothy acting with Paul’s imprimatur (however we imagine that). In the case of Colossians, I also believe there are far fewer problems with simply using the word “Paul” than the alternatives. The reader of our day and age, and one who consults this commentary, will know that these matters have been debated in the modern period. That is simply presupposed as a “reader reality” and a threshold fact. But the practical reality remains that a name must be given for the subject of verbs in this letter. “Paul” is beset with fewer problems at this basic level. Moreover, to do this leaves open the connection of Colossians to other letters in the thirteen-letter collection. And it attaches the present commentary to the long history of interpretation where

only to add the briefest of personal conclusions (see on 4:18). If so, we should perhaps more accurately describe the theology of Colossians as the theology of Timothy, or, more accurately still, the theology of Paul as interpreted by Timothy. On the other hand, if Timothy did indeed write for Paul at Paul’s behest, but also with Paul’s approval of what was in the event written (prior to adding 4:18), then we have to call the letter ‘Pauline’ in the full sense of the word, and the distinction between ‘Pauline’ and ‘post-Pauline’ as applied to Colossians becomes relatively unimportant” (1996: 38). That is a lot of words to conclude that the use of Paul without scare quotes is an appropriate way to speak of the letter’s author. Eduard Schweizer holds a similar view and faces a similar challenge; “Kolosserbrief—weder paulinisch noch nachpaulinisch?” in *Neues Testament und Christologie im Werden* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 150–63.

economy on matters of authorship meant that attention was given over to other more important matters of interpretation and application.

Paul and scripture. My commentary gives special attention to Paul's scriptures and the role they play in his letter to the Colossians. The commentary will speak for itself on this matter. Only one thing to note here. When Paul speaks of these scriptures he has not of course attended a modern introductory course where three Isaiahs, the separate authorship of Gen. 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–3:24, or even the significance of the exile are major topics on the syllabus. This means that at times we must retrain ourselves, who have attended these courses, to try to consider how the scriptures of Israel are making their force felt at the time Paul is communicating them. Also, and fundamentally, it will be emphasized below that Paul's relation to these scriptures is of a specific sort having to do with his own DNA as a particular Jew, now seeing these scriptures from the standpoint of one cross. Those he is speaking to do not share his scriptural DNA, but this means only that his achievement will consist of making their literal and extensional senses heard from the standpoint of a single cross and Lord, who is opening up these senses as a genuine bequest from their single, literal, stable presentation.

Excurses. Interwoven in the commentary proper the reader will find a series of Excurses. These are intended to amplify on some aspect of exegesis that ranges more broadly than the specific text under discussion. They also allow for a more sustained look at some contested area of interpretation. Finally, they permit a perspectival concern to come better into focus, or so it is hoped. As such they can be skipped for one turning to the commentary for help in one narrower part of the letter to the Colossians only. I have tried to write the commentary as a single sustained argument, in which certain key themes receive sustained attention and guide the interpretation of individual sections. That is consistent with my view of Paul's own intention in this short letter.

A final personal note, upon having completed the commentary writing on Colossians. My hope has been that because the "oracles of God entrusted to the Jews" are central to my own training and my own understanding of the character of Christian scripture, I might be in a position to stand closer to Paul—even in my own Gentile DNA—than many commentators working at present in a field of biblical studies where two divisions of labor have opened up, spawning in turn innumerable subspecies of study. I am not a New Testament scholar at work in an academic shop set up in the modern academy. I am also not an Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholar who believes that a "historical sense" can set aside canonical and theological considerations. These aspects are so deeply ingrained in what the scriptures are and how they make their sense as to be inextricable, and indeed the center of what makes them what they are as such under God. This will likely inform the commentary to follow in particular and significant ways—not least because I believe they also give an accurate (historical, canonical, theological) account of how Paul is working in the letter to the Colossians.

FORMAL INTRODUCTION AND SALUTATIONS

(1:1–2)

1:1 Paul, apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Brother Timothy—By the convention of his day, so begins the letter dictated by Paul. The letter concludes by convention as well, with Paul signing off on what he has constructed: “I Paul write this greeting with my own hand” (4:18; cf. 1 Cor. 16:21). The conclusion to 2 Thessalonians adds to this same phrase, “This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write”; and the conclusion of Galatians explains that the script of Paul is different from that of a trained secretary: “See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand.” The letter to the Romans kindly lets us see the secretary himself, who in the case of Romans offers his own greetings: “I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord.” Occasionally, Paul will use the opportunity to add some additional notes of his own, matters that come to him after the dictation itself (1 Cor. 16:22–24).¹ In Colossians this is the ever so brief: “Remember my fetters” and “Grace be with you” (4:18).²

Ancient authorship is characterized in ways that compare with modern notions but also depart from them, when it comes to inspired biblical writings. Two factors at least bear underscoring. Examples from the prophetic books of the scriptures Paul inherits and internalizes are helpful for comparison with his own compositions. Prophets were speakers, not writers. How their speech made it into written form is nowhere the subject of detailed or explicit treatment, and what we have

1. Trobisch (1994: 98) playfully signs off with his own cursive script and with further notes to the reader in his own hand.

2. See Eadie 1856: 302–3, where the publisher opts for a different font to capture the signing-off aspect.

are only incidental glimpses, provided in the context of other matters. Prophets had disciples who “bound up the testimony.” Baruch was Jeremiah’s “secretary.” Ezekiel swallowed a scroll, and so perhaps initiated a longer style of discourse that may have involved his own compositional role. Isaiah 40–55 reads like an extended dramatic accomplishment, though how exactly it came to form we do not know.

To be inspired by God is to be given a word intelligible and divinely spoken to a generation confronted by God’s agent in time. It is also to be given a word for the ages, one that accomplishes what God intends beyond the comprehension of the human agent himself. So the psalmist speaks of David but also of David’s greater Son, at one and the same time. We may call this either prophecy or figural presentation, and the degree of comprehension of the “latter thing” to which it corresponds will vary, often in ways our own efforts to understand the human agent’s intentions cannot penetrate.³ That is what makes it a divine word. Isaiah speaks a word that is concrete and specific and as such closes ears—and also one that will sound again beyond his own time and place (Isa. 43:8).

Paul stands in this tradition. In addition, he has this same scriptural word and inheritance shedding a particular kind of light on his place in God’s time, as a minister of the gospel that is now being proclaimed to every creature under heaven (Col. 1:23). One sees Paul in Colossians in a specific kind of apostleship. Like Isaiah, he speaks to a people he knows, whose temporal frame of reference he shares, even as he has accepted the call to preach the gospel to a people not his own. The ironic legacy of Ezekiel has come about after all: “Not to a people of harsh speech do I send you . . . they would listen” (Ezek. 3:6).

But this congregation Paul has never visited. He did not preach to them. He does not intend to visit them in the future, so far as the letter itself speaks of it (cf. Phlm. 22). The word of the gospel has borne fruit of its own, and its capability to do that is itself a matter of rejoicing for Paul in his own communication to this church (Col. 1:3–6). It is as though the word that addressed him has now asserted its own independence, in the same way Isaiah’s received and transmitted word has gone on to speak again of its own accord, as former and latter horizons of God’s intention come into coordination. Though Paul will not refer to it in these terms, this is also the reason what he now says he can ask to be heard beyond the limitations of the Colossian congregation as such, in Laodicea (4:16). Paul is striving for them (2:1–2) in the selfsame context of his striving and praying for the congregation I have come to associate this letter with, the epistle “to the Colossians.”⁴ God’s inspired word to prophet and apostle is directed to one specific place and time but precisely in such a way that it can sound forth more broadly and reach out to enclose us as well, who overhear and hear.

3. See the extended discussion of *theoria* by Bradley Nassif, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1996), 343–77.

4. For an amplification of the view that the “Letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16) is most likely a reference to the Letter now referred to in the canonical collection as “Ephesians,” see also the appendix. This view has been widely held in modern and earlier times.

The second feature of divine inspiration is more difficult to grasp given the high priority we place, in the modern West, on the individual. Here it is that liberal and conservative provocations often meet themselves in paradoxical ways. The former seeks out the original and the discrete, on the grounds that temporal proximity must be wrested from the canonical form. There is a “real Paul” somewhere behind the text, and we must get at him by means of excavation. He is discrete and his ideas must be sufficiently unchanging for the logic of his extraction to operate. But above all, he is an individual, a specific genius of inspired thought, if we search to uncover and set forth the precise limits of that, behind the canonical form.

The conservative version of this quest has the very same view of the propriety of the individual, but argues in the same context of questing that the canonical form points in very precise terms toward the “real Paul” of temporal specificity. On occasion one can see the efforts made to alter the terms of the discussion. After all, Paul had a secretary,⁵ and who knows what effect this may have on how we understand what we are looking for in our search for Paul the individual (in terms of style, diction, sentence structure, content, theological nuance). Or, Paul is affected in what he says in Colossians as an individual composition by his association with others (Timothy or the many named individuals of the final chapter). Or, Paul is imprisoned and so has adopted a new style given the specifics of that setting. All of these efforts to adjust what we are looking for acknowledge that what any inspired author says or intends must be coordinated with the range of influences operative given the wider social location. An overly individual portrait of Paul may believe it has isolated the true genius of his inspiration, by liberal or conservative methods of extraction, and in so doing has protected his apostleship. But what does the actual canonical form seek to convey?

The letter collection does not transmit introductory or concluding rubrics in anything like a stereotyped form. Again, the comparison with the superscriptions of prophetic books is revealing, for they do not follow any fixed pattern across the fifteen witnesses we have. The first letter of the collection, Romans, appears to have a superscription that with its fuller form could function to introduce the collection as a whole (Rom. 1:1–6). What about the reference to colleagues in the letters? There is no clear pattern here: Sosthenes appears in 1 Corinthians; Timothy in 2 Corinthians in the precise same wording as in Colossians; Galatians and Ephesians mention no colleagues; Philippians mentions Timothy but now in a different manner: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ”; following Colossians, Timothy appears in 1–2 Thessalonians, now joined by Silvanus.

It is difficult on the basis of this to see any explicit claim for Timothy as an actor in the compositional process of Colossians (compare, e.g., Dunn 1996: 35–39). If the canonical form is claiming anything, it may be the simple fact of Paul as joined by fellow Christians in the context of what he has to say. Paul is a Christian among Christians. In his vocation as inspired apostle, latterly called, he

5. Schweizer, “Kolossierbrief—weder paulinisch noch nachpaulinisch?”

is always a Christian among Christians. He speaks out of that context. “We thank God” (1:3). “We have heard” (1:4). Epaphras “our beloved brother” (1:7). “He has made known to us” (1:8). “We have not ceased to pray for you all” (1:9). “He has delivered us” (1:13). Colossians could lay claim to being a letter that foregrounds the associative character of Paul’s Christian walk more than any other. Hence the emphasis on the church as within God’s eternal purpose (1:18). Hence the emphasis on suffering, in Christ, on behalf of others (1:24). Hence the close association of Colossian Christians and those in neighboring Laodicea and Hieropolis (2:1; 4:13–15). That the gospel has been preached and is growing independently of his individual efforts fits perfectly alongside this associative emphasis. Epaphras, Tychicus, Onesimus—each in his own way, but also corporately—are “letters from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God . . . on tablets of human hearts,” as Paul will state it in another place (2 Cor. 3:3). Epaphras is “our beloved fellow servant” who brought the gospel to the Lycus Valley churches and who “is one of you,” but who now remains with Paul as a fellow prisoner. Tychicus will bear the letter, but he will also bear the news of Paul and his fellow Christians, in all its rich forms.⁶ Onesimus will bear the message of incorporation into Christ’s body and with that a new form of servant living.

Paul writes to the congregations in this setting, then, and with him is Brother Timothy. What do they hear when they hear Paul speak through this inspired medium, when they hear the letter read aloud and mention of Timothy is made? They hear that Paul is a Christian among Christian brothers. As the letter is read, further along Timothy is joined by Epaphras, the Laodiceans, then a final roll call of circumcised and uncircumcised brothers (and sisters), and Archippus in their own midst, who is charged to complete his ministry (4:7–17). These are all “authors” of the gospel of Jesus Christ as it is communicated by the apostle Paul. And if they were fortunate enough in time to have the entire letter collection, as shortly churches indeed will, they might also draw the conclusion that mention of Timothy points not to Christian association only but temporal extension more critically, as Paul’s associates become the bearers of his gospel proclamation to a next generation. The brother will become the son, the next generation (1 Tim. 1:2), in the same way Isaiah’s children will bear witness to him and to God’s word in its accomplishing march through time (Isa. 8) or Baruch will give testimony of God’s word by Jeremiah. Timothy is himself surrounded by faithful preceding generations (2 Tim. 1:5). And the final letter of the collection (Philemon) will reprise the names given in Colossians, reminding of God’s faithfulness in surrounding Paul with witnesses and fellow Christians right to the end. The wistful hope that he might be with them for a visit lingers in the air, in the way Jeremiah saw into a future that would be beyond his own days. That the letters are not in chronological order, but by descending length, means only that such a manner of deliverance

6. Probably a third of the letter communicates matters of concern the letter itself does not expressly convey in its own letter of address.

was not deemed significant enough to preserve. As it stands, the letter collection allows certain conclusions to be drawn in a most general way. Colossians stands out as making the Christian fellowship Paul enjoys, including his imprisonment and afflictions for Christ, a critical aspect of the letter's communication.⁷

One further aspect of the letter's communicative purpose I have not mentioned. The imprisonment motif—if I might speak of it that way to avoid an immediate quest for “which prison and when?”—is obvious in Philippians, Colossians, Timothy, and Philemon. If we ask what the canonical form is seeking to communicate, it certainly is not the provision of details suitable for precise adjudication—is it Caesarea, Ephesus, or Rome? The traditional view (Rome) flows from reliance on the canonical form as a primary witness. If precision at the level we might now wish is not the intention of the form, then what purpose is being served? Surely it is to emphasize the afflictions Paul undergoes for the sake of the gospel, on behalf of the church, and its relation to Christ's work once-for-all on the cross and continuing in his body. I mentioned the wistful reference—because we come to know it did not transpire—of a guest room being kept at the ready for Paul (Phlm. 22). In my view the understanding of authorship the letter endeavors to convey is one that depicts Paul with the shadow over his own physically active,

7. Wayne Meeks refers to how the Colossians are to come to know what Paul means to communicate, in ways beyond the regulatory or instructional aspects of the apostle's proclamation. Yet he falls prey to a residual kind of historicizing, even as he seeks to move beyond it and its limitations for setting forth the real point of Colossians (which he concedes could not be grasped by focusing on false teaching). He still asserts that the letter is not Paul's but is the creative work of an emissary using Paul's name. In her response to Meeks, Eleonore Stump focuses on this limitation, exposing how difficult it would be to hold up Paul as a model along the lines of Christian fellowship and obedient emulation, if, as Meeks holds, the letter was transmitted by witnesses who knew Paul had not actually written it and yet were passing it off as authentic, with Paul himself as its author. Meeks sits easy to the received view of Colossians as non-Pauline (as the modern historical argument tracks), but adverts sufficiently to it that Stump could charge that this was a deceptive practice undercutting Meeks's larger argument. The point here is not to determine who is right or wrong about Pauline authorship in the narrow context of the Meeks-Stump exchange, but rather to argue the way the discussion proceeds is simply too narrow and does not track well with the claims the letter itself makes. Barclay (2004: 33), Barth and Blanke (1994), and Ben Witherington (*The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007], 100–103), among modern authors, have their own forms of this concern. Moreover, the appeal to pseudigraphy does not actually match very well what we know about the genre of that category as compared with Colossians. The long epilogue (4:7–18) would have to be judged a ploy, carefully drawn up on the basis of the list of names in Philemon available to a later author. If the city of Colossae, moreover, was destroyed by earthquake around AD 62, the reason for writing to a nonchurch at a later period would be to have a different audience reach certain obviously false conclusions about its authenticity. It is better on the whole to ask what the implications of the letter itself are for authorization and inspiration, given the form of the letter and the position it will in time be given in a letter collection. To separate history from reception history is to misunderstand what history is in its antique form. In my view authorship began to carry a kind of extra freight in the modern period without proper proportion to the literature being evaluated. Colossians is a first-person-plural letter, with all that means. Paul is himself being written by the gospel he proclaims. The Meeks and Stump essays are in Eleonore Stump and Thomas P. Flint, eds., *Hermes and Athena: Biblical Exegesis and Philosophical Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 37–58 and 59–70.

missionary ministry drawing longer. He speaks to a church he has not started and will not visit. His apostleship is being transformed into one of prayer, striving, affliction, and pending death (“remember my fetters”). And alongside this comes the awareness that the gospel will bear fruit not just where he did not directly set down his plow, in Colossae or Hieropolis or Laodicea, *but where he never will*. That will be for Timothy, and all his name represents to undertake as Paul mentions him in the opening verse of this letter and of others. Paul as a Christian among Christians will pass that ministry to others. As the letter ends we hear: “Say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received from the Lord.’” Followed by: “Remember my fetters.” And the very brief final four words: **Grace be with you.**

1:2 to the Colossians, saints and faithful brothers in Christ: grace to you and peace from God our Father—The emphasis noted above, on the first-person-plural orientation of the letter, is clearly maintained here. Timothy “the brother” (1:1) who joins Paul as he writes has his counterparts in “the brothers” in Colossae, who have faith in Christ. The God who willed Paul’s vocation (1:1) is the “our Father” from whom flow all grace and peace. Note the strong emphasis in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and Philippians on the first-person singularity of Paul. The contrast with Colossians (and Ephesians) is clear. Further, Paul the called and Timothy the brother may not be all that is meant by the “we” of the opening section to follow, as Paul may be speaking on behalf of his community more generally.⁸ Lightfoot notes: “In the letters to the Philippians and to Philemon, the presence of Timothy is forgotten at once (see Phil. 1:1). In this letter, the plural is maintained throughout the thanksgiving (verses 3, 4, 7, 8, 9)” (1997: 62).

I agree that nothing too much should be read into the opening reference to “will of God” as if a countervailing view is being put to the side. The mood of the opening verses is one of thanksgiving. Calvin and Melancthon speak of a kind of flattery intended to give Paul a good purchase on his audience, but that is nowhere clearly signaled in the letter of the text.⁹ Paul is reflexively thankful. Equally, the “saints and faithful brothers” should not be taken as implying a differentiation later to unfold in the rhetoric of the letter (“you who are set apart and who have faith in Christ, and not the others”).¹⁰ The letter does not give us enough evidence for this kind of further stipulation. All that is being asserted is that Paul and his community are joined with the brothers in Colossae in the one grace and peace that flows from “our Father.” To make the concern of Paul chiefly with a specific religious challenge is to miss the significance of the form of the letter. Those issues (religious conflict or false teaching) are not foregrounded

8. Moo 2008: 75–76 discusses the issue with customary thoroughness: “we” could be authorial; “we” could be Paul and Timothy only. If authorial, why not everywhere then in Paul’s letters? The position taken here is that “we” means Paul, Timothy, and those associates with him whose greetings he later sends, especially Epaphras, “one of yourselves” (4:12).

9. P. Melancthon, *Paul’s Letter to the Colossians*, trans D. C. Parker (Sheffield: Almond, 1989).

10. Lightfoot 1997: 62: “In this way he obliquely hints at the defection.”

as the reason for Paul's writing, but emerge later in the context of positive commendations.¹¹ What the letter says about Epaphras is that the Colossians learned from him, heard and understood the grace of God in truth (1:7). What did he make known? That they were under threat by false teaching? Not according to these opening words. "He made known to us your love in the Spirit" (1:8) is the way the next section concludes.

It is important to allow the letter to guide our interpretation according to the way it has been constructed to unfold and be heard. If a "mirror-reading" approach is difficult in Romans or Galatians, it is extremely strained in Colossians or Ephesians. We know only what Paul chooses to tell us in the form he does. What we learn in the next section is that Paul and his community have learned about developments in Colossae through a visitor to them, Epaphras. What he indicates as of first importance in that regard has an integrity of its own and is not the occasion for teasing out a religious context of false teaching of a specific kind and making that the main agenda of Paul in writing. When Lincoln perceptively writes: "Although the prescription for cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present-day reader of Colossians, the ailment defies a really detailed diagnosis on his part" (2000: 561), he has still in my view not got the matter quite right. The "ailment" as well as "the prescription for cure" are both secondary to the letter's primary intention, which is grasped by hewing as closely as possible to what is written and viewing that in comparison with other kindred Pauline witnesses. The alternative is to judge the opening reflexive thanksgiving as a form of rhetorical strategy before Paul "gets down to work" or as incidental to an otherwise consistent interest in writing letters to address specific problems. This in turn forces all the letters of Paul into a single anticipated mode that a survey of them all does not justify. Romans and Ephesians come especially to mind here, both being letters than most likely seek a wider reading that one community or its special issues would exhaust.

Excursus: "By the Will of God"

Several distinctive theological issues are raised by Paul's language for God, here at the outset of the letter to the Colossians and throughout this and the other epistolary witnesses. But these (literally) theological issues cannot be treated as simple conceptual

11. Moo speculates: "Epaphras's reason for making this trip to visit Paul was almost certainly that he wanted to enlist the apostle's help in dealing with a dangerous yet slippery variation on the Christian gospel that had arisen in the community" (2008: 27). The problem is that the letter never says this and Paul does not so speak of his relationship to Epaphras in this way. Moo continues: "Epaphras, we may assume, has journeyed all the way to Rome just to present his mentor, the apostle Paul, with the problem and to enlist his help in responding to it" (2008: 47). Again, the letter nowhere says this. Nothing prevents the view that Epaphras sought Paul out for the same reason Onesiphorus did according to 2 Tim. 1:16: "he was not ashamed of my chains," or he sought me out for basic fellowship in Christ. That need not have any other purpose.

loci to be described and fleshed out as if they were universals in some generalized sense. What Paul says of God he says from within the conceptual DNA provided by his immersion in “the oracles of God entrusted to the Jews” (Rom. 3:2). To be who he is, claimed by God for a particular willed mission, is to be seized by the God who has made himself known from within a particular revelatory compass. But at the same time that specific compass is being broken open for a new readership, brought near by the work of Christ in one cross (Eph. 2:11–14). To be included in that new and final act of God is to be issued a particular kind of library card, one that Paul has had, has used, has worn through use, but that is also for him proving to be more than he had imagined in terms of its scope and range. Paul does not start with a general word for God and then sees how this maps out in his scriptures, more present or true here, less so there, available for dogmatic description in terms of attributes, characteristics, and such like. God is the willed “I am who I am” who in covenantal relationship has made himself known in a specific, personal, desisting, forbearing, and judging way with a chosen people (Exod. 34:6–7). He has allowed himself to be referred to by means of a generic word (“God”), one that can resonate beyond the covenantal relationship and that indeed can have its own very different semantic range in that generic potential (“God” or “gods” in Hebrew *’elohim*). But the personal name (YHWH) bespeaks a specific personal covenantal relationship with the judging and forbearing “I am with you.”

Of course “the name above every name” has been given to the One who obediently submitted himself to our mortal frame and who died that all sins might be forgiven and new life granted for all, Jew and Gentile. In consequence of that, every knee will bow, and the name above every name will now be parsed Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as Jew and Gentile are brought near by the one cross (Phil. 2:9–11, based on Isa. 45:23).¹² But Paul is aware of all the transfer means. How can this transfer and the new life it bespeaks be made known abroad to those who exist outside the covenants, those who were promised to be included and who, when they would in time read the old scriptures, would discover that it was addressing them in its own distinctive way? As Luther puts it, it is as though being invited to the reading of a will of someone you never knew and learning that, astonishingly, you had a portion of the inheritance after all, by virtue of an act of beneficence by the owner’s son.¹³

In order to speak of the issue of theological language properly, we need to think a bit further about Paul’s audience. Every missionary has a particular account that guides his or her life journey, and it is not an account that exists in generic terms, but revealed and highly personal ones, themselves going back to the call of Abraham and

12. David S. Yeago, “The New Testament and Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994): 152–64; and Bauckham 1999: 52–53.

13. “For the New Testament is nothing more than a revelation of the Old. Just as one receives a sealed letter which is not to be opened until after the writer’s death. So the Old Testament is the will and testament of Christ, which he has opened after his death and read and everywhere proclaimed through the gospel” (Luther’s Sermon on John 1:1–14, “Third Christmas Day [or the Principal Christmas Service],” in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. and trans. J. N. Lenker et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1/1–2: 174.

the work of one cross. How to make that account comprehensible without sacrificing the particular and personal, the willed act of God in Christ: this is the challenge of all Christian witness. Paul cannot jump out of his scriptural skin, but those same scriptures announce to him they are competent to be heard in Christ by others. Only by understanding this exchange and transfer, this negotiation of one specific frame of reference into another, can we really speak of theology in its precise meaning. God is a personal and willing God, with a name, a history of relationship, and knowing him and his name is to be transferred to a new realm of existence: the bringing near of Gentiles. This is true in specific form as one reads the life of God with a people in “the oracles of God entrusted to the Jews” even as an outsider to that story. But having been brought near by Christ, the first story of transfer—the call of Israel—is redolent of a second story—the adoption of outsiders—and now encloses under older names (“holy ones”) former and latter citizens both (“saints”). That language flexibility—specific and extensional—lies at the heart of the gospel’s proclamation as fully and eternally “in accordance with the scriptures.”

What follows is a single example, on Paul and the scriptures, dealing with the material that follows in the first chapter of this letter. To understand what the theological language of Paul means, and how it means what it means, requires some sense of how the scriptures’ older and specific horizon is extending itself. It does this, moreover, without in any way diminishing the particularized speech and action of God in the old covenants, and indeed shows them to be casting a shadow that is before and after Christ, for Israel the church, called as was and is Israel.

Paul participates in his own particular account of God’s willed work, as imparted to him via “the oracles of God entrusted to the Jews.” Yet he is using that particular account with those who do not know its details, and so in Colossians he has an extensional version of it he has crafted to his purpose. That is, it is not a matter of avoiding specific textual quotations due to being in a different (chiefly Gentile) frame of reference—hence no formula citations, specified allusions, and so forth in the letter to the Colossians.¹⁴ Rather, we may assume Paul has learned very well how to negotiate the transfer from his own “elected” place as an Israelite into the world he has been called to convert to Christ. Indeed, he speaks clearly of being situated in the midst of these delineated groupings in his final greetings (those of the circumcision and those not of the circumcision). Paul has now had a long career of preaching and teaching, and this has involved proving Christ from the single holy scriptures before his own people, addressing proselytes, and speaking to Gentiles (e.g., Acts 17), each context of which

14. Beetham’s 2008 monograph examines the evidence for allusions in Colossians. Why does Paul not provide explicit references as elsewhere? The audience is assumed to be primarily non-Jewish, on the one hand, and Paul wants to insist that the place given to Torah in creation is now held by Christ, on the other. Not citing the scriptures in direct ways helps serve this purpose. The view held here is that Paul is simply an effective missionary who thinks himself into another frame of reference in a way that, over time, he has become adept at. He is not avoiding reference to the scriptures, and it is not a matter of his being unconscious of what he is alluding to. Rather, the story of Israel is so his own that he draws on it consistently with its own extensional potential.

has its own instructional integrity and challenge, each provided with some measure of symmetry and overlap by virtue of there being one cross.

In Col. 1 Paul uses the language of bearing fruit and multiplying, and it has been argued convincingly that here we touch upon the conceptuality of Gen. 1. Others argue against this, as is the usual way in such matters.¹⁵ Some look for explicit recycling of precise phrases and collocations as the Septuagint brokers these so as to make the case more effectively; or to the contrary. In my view the matter requires a looser and not a more restrictive panel against which to pose the question.¹⁶ The language of bearing fruit and multiplying of course does not exist on its own in the Old Testament, but plays out against the effects of sin and disobedience recorded in Gen. 1–11, whose resolution is provided in the promises to Abraham. By means of him, all the nations of the world will be blessed, by this willed calling of him by God in a particular time and space. In part the promise to Abraham is fulfilled, according to Exod. 1. Israel is fruitful and multiplies—to such an extent a hostile “nation” (“Pharaoh who knows not Joseph”) plots execution where there had once indeed been blessing in Egypt, for Israel and the nations.

God rescues his people. He gives the law. He provides a deliverer in Moses and in Joshua. He transfers his saints to a promised land, in spite of a generation’s rebellion and death in the wilderness. Moses suffers that God’s people may be freed and remain his people. He is afflicted on their behalf, asking that his own name be written out of the book of life, and he dies in the wilderness, seeing the promised land—the inheritance promised to Abraham and the ancestors—only from afar. When the promise is again threatened in the period of the prophets, it is renewed and extended afresh, with exile in figural place of wilderness.

This is the basic creedal life of Israel, and it even finds rehearsal in something like that form at various points in the Old Testament, as noted by Gerhard von Rad, and made to serve a prominent reconstruction associated with his name (e.g., Deut. 26:5–11).¹⁷

When then we hear the language “bearing fruit and growing” the force of its expression as such, and the context from which it emerges, is strengthened when alongside it we hear of the deuteronomic concern for increase of knowledge across the generations (Deut. 6:20–25), of leading a worthy life in the promised land, of giving proper thanks to the Father, of sharing in an inheritance, and of a transfer from a realm of wilderness darkness to a new kingdom. The sacrificed Moses and the deliverer Joshua have become the beloved Son, and the kingdom is one where sin is finally and everlastingly dealt

15. J. Ernst, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an Philemon, an die Kolosser, an die Epheser*, Regensburger Neues Testament (Regensburg: Pustet, 1974), 158; and Moo 2008: 88n31.

16. Moo in particular is anxious to find precise wording being repeated from the Septuagint, and without this he does not like associations being made. One can see how profligate associative readings could become, but in this instance his method is overweaned insofar as it attends to words in isolation (2008: 103; especially his n94, where he looks for more references to the words for “rescue” and “redeem” in Exodus and finds the verbs insufficiently attested). Moreover, one need not be forced to choose between wilderness and exile, as in the scriptures they are already types. Isaiah’s promised land is a redeemed Zion.

17. Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 1–78.

with and put away. The deliverer who makes the promises of Genesis happen is a new Adam, in the eternal image of God, and the being fruitful and multiplying are being accomplished obediently by him. Those who now comprise the saints are those insinuated into a new covenant by divine action, those joining the saints of old, and giving the term a new extensional meaning. The promises to Abraham, which originated in an act of election of a particular people, are made to serve a wider, national purpose. For this, Paul uses the language of “the whole world,” which is neither rhetorical exaggeration nor what such a world might look like to him given his Michelin map with its antique limits. It is the language of divinely willed promise. What the scriptures of Israel said to him in their specific detailed promise, he has creatively addressed the Colossians with. Those of the Old Covenant, should they be among the churches in the Lycus Valley, could nod their heads and see the allusions, while those outside the covenants of God, now being called saints with them, can hear the language in its own logical, now exalted register. And in time, as they become mature in Christ, the scriptures of Israel will be opened up to this purposeful apprehension as Paul brokers it on their behalf, and a new extensional significance will also be grasped. So Paul is concerned before he says farewell to exhort the Christians in Colossae to let the word of Christ dwell richly with them: “Teach and admonish each other in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

Saints and faithful brothers—Paul makes clear that what he has to say, and who he is concerned for more generally, is directed to the churches of Colossae, Laodicea, and Hieropolis. The letter opens with a focus on the Colossian church with the language “saints and faithful brethren in Christ [*hagios kai pistois adelphois en kristō*] at Colossae.” Later (1:12), in speaking of Christ’s work of qualification, of rescue, and of transfer, he also speaks of “sharing in the inheritance of the saints in light [*tō hagiōn en tō phōtī*].”¹⁸ The phrase is subtle enough to have occasioned discussion, and other renderings of the syntax are proposed. On my view the reference to light is given to contrast with “the dominion of darkness” as this appears in the next verse, where the transference idea is completed.

It is unlikely that with the opening language Paul is speaking of two distinct groups, saints and faithful brothers. However “and” is to be construed, the sense is not “saints” over here and “faithful brothers in Christ” over there, but rather, along the lines of “friends, Romans, countrymen” or “saints, faithful brothers in Christ.” When the term “saints” appears in connection with the language of sharing an inheritance “of the saints in light,” and a transfer is being accomplished, many have taken the word “inheritance” as triggered by the larger figural background of the Old Testament story. If that is so, and it fits the larger picture described above, the image is not far from the one I have been referring to, whose home is in Eph. 2:11–13: “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh

18. Compare Eph. 1:18: “the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints [*tis ho ploutos tēs doxēs tēs kléronomias autou en tois hagiois*].”

... were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.”

Paul continues by describing how the union has been accomplished, not by two different (one for willful disobedience and one for estrangement and darkness) but by a single cross. In Ephesians this argument has its own integrity and does not rely in the same way on an unfolding “history of redemption background” (from creation to Abraham to exodus to promised land) such as we sense operating in Colossians in Paul’s creative extension for “the saints and faithful brothers in Christ” in 1:3–14. I find it unlikely that Paul addresses two distinctive groups with this opening language (those who are saints and those who are faithful brothers brought near), as this is simply too explicit a delineation to ask the language to bear. We would need a clearer syntactical marker and follow-up in the flow of the address itself.

It is worth noting the textual variant at 1:12 is relevant to this discussion of transfer from a dominion of darkness and being “qualified to share in an inheritance of the saints in light.” If the variant “he has qualified *you*” (which has wide support) were adopted, it would perhaps emphasize that Paul is distinguishing between his own state of affairs—as is made clear in Ephesians—and that of Gentiles. Obviously when Paul makes this a point of emphasis in Ephesians he is not imagining two different works of Christ, one for himself and God’s people and one for Gentiles, but is rather underscoring what the one cross has done for a particular fulfillment of God’s purposes, stretching back to Genesis foundations. One reason for maintaining the reading “he has qualified *us*” is that the first-person plural is a feature of these opening verses in their entirety, as I have emphasized, and because the next sentences read, without textual variation: “He has delivered *us* from the dominion of darkness and transferred *us* to the kingdom of his Son, in whom *we* have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Here the genius of Paul’s logic is made clear. The one story of redemption inherited from the scriptures Paul first-person pluralizes. The inheritance of the saints is figurally given in the entrance to the promised land, beyond the desert of disobedience. The sojourners in the midst accompanied Israel, and faithful Gentiles would play their critical roles (Caleb, Rahab, Ruth), if however always in the supporting parts. When God spoke of a new and renewed Zion (Isa. 54), after the punishment of a different wilderness in exile—a place of chaos and darkness with its own character—those bringing gifts from afar were representatives of the nations. Not the plunder of Egypt this time, but freewill offerings, even from those, so to speak, of “Caesar’s own household”—Persian kings drawing from the treasuries of Ecbatana (Ezra 9).

The “holy ones” of God certainly are those called by God in every generation who bear faithful witness to him, but the term arises from its particular place in the story of God with his people as vouchsafed to Paul. It is simply that now the term’s extensional meaning is paramount in Paul’s mind. Included in the transfer

from the kingdom of darkness, included in the qualification for an inheritance of the saints in light, because of the one cross, Paul will highlight no distinction. The word “saints” ranges alongside “saints and faithful brothers” to mean those brought near from the nations, but also, because Paul sees the one story to have its one fulfillment, a common first-person plurality requiring no further conjugating. The scriptures have made their one story a story of one cross’s accomplishment for “all the saints.”

Somewhat in the spirit of how Ephesians handles this, and for its own rhetorical reasons in Colossians, it is important to note that Paul can emphasize a distinction corresponding to the fate of the Gentiles. So in 1:21–23 the individual first-person Paul can speak to the “you all” he is addressing as “estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds”—a reference that applies to the Gentile condition fairly specifically. But this follows the logic of the movement of Colossians in its full form. Here, at this juncture, Paul is moving toward a specific account of his suffering “for your sake,” and this necessitates a shift in horizon, whereby his individual *hyper hymōn* role, alongside the once-for-all redemptive work of Christ, is to the fore (1:24–29). Paul’s ministry of affliction on “your behalf” ranges alongside his role as teacher (“to make the word of God fully known”) and complements that. Here again we find reference to “the saints” (1:26). The saints are the privileged recipients of an unveiled mystery, having to do with God’s revelation to the Gentiles, that is, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul uses the scriptures’ extensional sense to relay this mystery, which was imbedded in the literal sense of God’s prior word, but could be grasped only by the generation whose eyes were unveiled to see it, given the finished work of Christ. The saints are the first-person plurality God has made possible by this selfsame work.

Grace and peace to you from God the Father—For Paul, the “name above every name” (YHWH) has found proper reference through a gloss in Greek translation, *kyrios* (“the LORD”). How and why this practice emerged within the bosom of Israel we do not know and are unlikely ever properly to know in detail.¹⁹ Perhaps concern with honoring the third commandment came into specific view as Israel found itself “among the nations.” Perhaps the practice arose as sacred texts emerged, not from an oral speech origin of proclamation to Israel, but as written compositions that in turn enabled such conventions to be used, identified, and respected (e.g., YHWH *’adonai* in Isaiah and Ezekiel) in the way a written text allows, thereby providing cues for public reading.

The emphasis on “the name” is so frequent in the Old Testament as to threaten to become a cliché or to lose its significance for outsiders. Indeed, it is hard to imagine what use of the proper name of God within the covenantal life actually bespoke. Exodus 3 and kindred texts give us glimpses: to know God is to know his name, and to know his name is to experience his judging and forbearing life

19. Do we see the beginnings of this in later prophetic texts where *’adonai* appears next to the tetragrammaton? Does a diaspora context require special concern for the name (Exod. 20:7)?

with his elected people. The name YHWH is not a hypostasis as in time wisdom might qualify to be called, or the word of God, or the Spirit of God. YHWH (“the LORD”) is the Triune God in the form of an acoustic icon.²⁰ But what that might mean is now overshadowed by the properly triune name as spoken in faith in the church. “Baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Israel’s Psalms say, “In Judah God is known” and “he has not made his name known to any other nation. Alleluia.” So when Christians recite the psalms and say, “Blessed be the name of the LORD / the maker of heaven and earth,” that LORD/YHWH finds particular reference in the now Christian gloss, “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.”²¹

Paul addresses the saints and faithful brethren, a first-person plurality that includes himself and also the particularities of his theological DNA. Paul is not himself “estranged and darkened of mind” but rather possesses the mystery-bearing “oracles of God entrusted to the Jews.” These oracles declare “in Judah God is known” even as God is always hiding himself by his own gracious act as ingredient in “I am who I am” and “the LORD compassionate and merciful” (Exod. 34), and even as he is always more fully to be known. How does Paul communicate to those being brought near and those for whom his ministry—the divine office—is to make God fully known (Col. 1:25)? Can he simply speak the name of Christ and point to the cross? Yes and no, because both require their deep accordance with what has been revealed to be made known, as what it means to comprehend Christ and his cross.

So Paul opens his address to the Colossians with the horizon potentially most inclusive horizon. Paul is “an apostle of Jesus Christ,” and he is this “by the will of God.” The God of Israel is a jealous God, which means above all that he is a God with a will. By that will he created the heavens and the earth, called Abraham, delivered Israel, gave a revelation of his will, gave an inheritance. And called Paul into that will and work by the address of his Son. So Paul’s first theological word to the saints and faithful brethren is “Grace and peace to you from God the Father.” “Grace” is the equivalent of “greetings” as any Colossian would hear that, and “peace” is the “shalom” of Paul’s more familiar “hello.” These are now joined into one as they come from one Father. He is “our Father,” and so the address continues the first-person plurality as it explains that God is “Father” because he has a Son, Jesus Christ, and he is “our Father” because “the Lord Jesus Christ” is “our Lord.” Paul is not doing complex mathematics here, but he is also not making any errors as he moves through the declension of “the LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut. 6:4 and Mark 12:29) to “the will of God” to “God our Father” to “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The one LORD (YHWH, *kyrios*) who is God

20. The phrase appears in William Propp, *Exodus*, Anchor Bible 2 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1999), 272.

21. Most recently, Christopher Seitz, “The Trinity in the Old Testament,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. G. Emory and M. Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28–40.

alone, includes within his own eternal life (this to be more fully explored below; 1:15–20) the Son Jesus Christ, who is “our Lord” (*kyrios*). The saints and faithful brethren are who they are because they have been included in this history of redemption, and Paul departs not one iota from the theological DNA that is his particular willed destiny as he understands a first-person plurality now brought within its saving address. “Grace and peace to you from God the Father: God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is the trinitarian confession enabled by the Spirit, in its particular biblical idiom, embracing Jew and Gentile in the fulfillment of God’s will and purpose as set forth in the mystery of his revelation.²²

22. For further reading, Yeago, “New Testament and Nicene Dogma”; Christopher Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville: John Knox, 2001), 131–44, 177–90; and Bauckham 1999.