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RECENT RESEARCH ON COL 1:15-20 (1980-1990)

LARRY R. HELYER

Research on Col 1:15-20 during the decade of the 80s suggests that the consensus of the 60s and 70s regarding the genre, composition and religious background of the passage is collapsing. In particular, the view that the passage is a pre-Pauline hymn redacted by Paul or a Paulinist no longer prevails. In its place, recent scholarship posits a Pauline composition which could best be described as a poem. There is also a decided shift away from a gnosticising Hellenistic Judaism as the conceptual reservoir of the passage. Among evangelical scholars, a new consensus regarding the passage appears to be emerging.

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SCHOLARLY study of Col 1:15-20 continues to be a lightning rod in New Testament research. The cosmic christology and the complex questions concerning genre, structure, religious background and function all contribute to the fascination of the passage.

The purview of this article is a survey of selected studies on Col 1:15-20 published during the decade of the 80s. The purpose is to discern what trends may be evident, to determine whether a consensus is emerging with respect to some of the exegetical conundrums and to identify any false trails from previous research.

TWO CHALLENGES TO THE CONSENSUS

We begin with two studies published in 1979 because they raised serious questions about the direction of scholarship vis-à-vis Col 1:15-20 and challenged the consensus of the 60s and 70s. These studies were, in retrospect, bellwethers for research in the 80s.

In an article entitled "The Source of the Christology in Colossians," J. C. O'Neill denied a long-standing assumption in Colossian studies.¹ He cast doubt upon the theory that the author of Colossians

¹NTS 26 (1979) 87-100.

was citing a pre-existent hymn.² This denied a well-nigh "assured result of critical study."³

We note first his arguments against the hymnic character of the passage. He observed that the technical terms in the passage are not uniformly employed—they have different meanings in the same composition. This seems highly unlikely for a hymn.⁴ Secondly, the passage fails to exhibit regular parallelism—there are too many inconsistencies.⁵ Thirdly, recourse to editorial insertions to salvage the presumed original structure lacks conviction. In such a procedure we are simply multiplying "hypotheses in order to save the original theory, and are in danger of pretending that the additional theories actually render the first hypothesis more likely rather than less likely."⁶

O'Neill did not, however, argue that the passage emanated from the hand of a single author. On the contrary, it betrayed a communal origin. Because words and expressions are resumed without subordination or connection, and because scarcely an expression in the passage bears the meaning it would have in ordinary speech, O'Neill concluded that we are dealing with "the language of public declaration."⁷ Thus we have a passage which is confessional drawing upon the traditions of the community to which the author of Colossians belonged.⁸ O'Neill was amenable to the notion of interpolations, but assigned them not to the author of the letter but to an unknown reactor "after the epistle left the author's hand."⁹ O'Neill located the provenance of the tradition in Jewish circles which engaged in cosmological meditation. Consequently, the author of the letter, having his roots in that tradition, had taken it over but christianized it "believing that all had been fulfilled and completed in Jesus Christ."¹⁰

Whereas Frédéric Manns accepted the common view that the passage was a hymn, he drew attention to the unresolved question of how the hymn had been composed.¹¹ He noted features which betrayed the

²Ibid., 87.

³E.g., Ernst Käsemann's appraisal: "The hymnic character of Col 1:15-20 has long been recognized and generally acknowledged." "A Primitive Christian Baptismal," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964) 149. Cf. also E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 41. R. P. Martin lists scholars who advanced the same thesis in "An Early Christian Hymn (Col. 1:15-20)," *EQ* 36 (1964) 200 n. 6.

⁴His example is ἀρχή (v. 18) and ἀρχαὶ (v. 16). O'Neill, "Source" 87.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 88-89.

⁷Ibid., 89, 94.

⁸Ibid., 94.

⁹Ibid., 95.

¹⁰Ibid., 99.

¹¹Frédéric Manns, "Col. 1, 15-20: Midrash Chrétien de Gen. 1, 1," *RevScRel* 53 (1979) 100-10.

influence of Jewish exegetical techniques, such as the repetition of units organized into groups of threes and sevens; plays on the different meanings a word can bear, as in the gradation ἐν αὐτῷ, δι' αὐτοῦ, εἰς αὐτὸν representing three possible translations of the Hebrew particle (ב); and, more importantly, the exposition of the possible meanings of ראשית (beginning). This latter observation assumes that the author of our passage drew upon Gen 1:1: "In the beginning (בראשית) God created the heavens and the earth," and identified the ראשית as Jesus Christ by means of Prov 8:22: "The Lord brought me forth as the first (ראשית) of his works." Manns marshalled evidence for this hypothesis by citing various passages in the Targums and Palestinian Midrashim in which the Wisdom of Prov 8:22 was equated with the ראשית of Gen 1:1. Thus the Christian author of our passage, using Jewish midrashic techniques, transfers to Jesus what had in Jewish tradition been ascribed to God's wisdom. In so doing, the author developed four different senses in which Jesus is the ראשית: he is the first appearance (πρὸ πάντων), the head (κεφαλῇ), the beginning (ἀρχή), and the first fruits (πρωτότοκος).¹² In all of this Manns acknowledged his indebtedness to the work of C. F. Burney who had suggested a similar explanation for the composition of the passage back in 1925.¹³

Manns did break new ground in more narrowly specifying the *Sitz im Leben* of the hymn in the Jewish Passover liturgy. He drew attention to four motifs which the hymn shares with Pascal terminology: (1) the antecedent context of the hymn stressing the theme of redemption in language reminiscent of the Exodus (1:13); (2) the notion of an eschatological new creation (Cf. *1 Enoch* 91:14–15; *Jub.* 1:29; *Pesiq. R.* 34:2); (3) the theme of blood connected to reconciliation and peace; and finally, (4) the mention of the firstborn from the dead. According to Manns, these motifs all underlay the Pascal "poem of the four nights" and were taken up and christianized by the author of Col 1:15–20 by connecting them to the blood of Jesus' cross and his resurrection.¹⁴ For Manns, in contrast to O'Neill, we are dealing with a single author whose pre-Christian religious background was more nearly that of Palestinian Judaism.

O'Neill and Manns, respectively, challenged the scholarly consensus at the end of the 70s that we have (1) a hymnic composition and (2) that the religious background of the passage derives from Hellenistic Judaism, with possible gnosticizing tendencies, redacted by Paul or a Paulinist. These two lonely voices in 1979 would be joined by a chorus at the end of the 80s.

¹²*Ibid.*, 101–5.

¹³*Ibid.*, 101. Burney's article was "Christ as the *APXH* of Creation: Pr 8, 22, Col 1, 15.18, Rev 3, 14," *JTS* 27 (1925–26) 160–77. Burney's view was endorsed by W. D. Davies in his *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K. 1948) 150–52.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 105–7.

BEASLEY-MURRAY AND KYRIOS CHRISTOLOGY

In a 1980 article Paul Beasley-Murray followed in the train of those who held that Col 1:15–20 is an early Christian hymn cited and adapted by Paul in light of the Colossian errorists.¹⁵ He also concurred with Eduard Schweizer and R. P. Martin that we have a three-strophe hymn, the middle strophe being of special importance. This intermediate strophe bound together the two realms of creation and redemption and thus served as the focus of the entire composition.¹⁶ Only three Pauline interpolations were acknowledged: the expansion of the “all things” in vv. 16a–c and 20c; the affirmation in 18c of Christ’s supremacy in everything; and the grounding of reconciliation in the cross in v. 20b.¹⁷

For the most part Beasley-Murray located the conceptual reservoir of the hymn in a Christian interpretation of several Old Testament passages. Although he acknowledged that v. 15 may allude to wisdom christology, Beasley-Murray thought that Gen 1:26 provided a better fit in that the ideas of “image” and “domination” were precisely the focus of the hymnic assertion.¹⁸

The “firstborn” predication of v. 15 likewise derived from the OT notion of pre-eminence as seen in Exod 4:22 and Ps 89:27; however, Beasley-Murray included temporal priority since the latter clearly is involved in the parallel expression “firstborn from among the dead” in v. 18.¹⁹ Another key Old Testament text was Ps 67(68):16 (LXX): εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς κατοικεῖν ἐν αὐτῷ (i.e., Mt. Zion). The notion of God dwelling in his temple provided the background of the debated term πλήρωμα in v. 19 rather than any connection to Gnosticism or Stoic philosophy.²⁰ Beasley-Murray stoutly resisted the notion that the pre-Pauline hymn was couched in terms of a world body concept of which Christ was the head.²¹ Indeed, in only one place did he admit that the hymn borrowed from popular philosophy and that was in the phrase “all things hold together in him” (v. 17b). Even here, however, he asserted that the meaning is more the active idea of “putting back together” and thus the Jewish-Christian notion of reconciliation which leads into the third strophe.

In short, Beasley-Murray attributed the genesis of the hymn to a fundamental *Kyrios* christology—the Lordship of Jesus Christ was the central affirmation. This Lordship was affirmed in Adamic categories

¹⁵“An Early Christian Hymn Celebrating the Lordship of Christ,” *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday* (eds. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 169–83, esp. 169.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 169–70.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, 177.

²¹*Ibid.*, 180–82.

of image and dominion and augmented by the motif of the indwelling and redeeming God. Though perhaps influenced by earlier Jewish speculation about Wisdom and Adam, the driving force behind the hymn lay in the distinctly Christian confession: Jesus is Lord.²²

DUNN AND POLLARD: REDEFINING COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY

James D. G. Dunn's *Christology in the Making* appeared in 1980.²³ This substantial investigation into the origins of the doctrine of incarnation devoted some seven pages to an examination of our passage. He accepted the verdict that this was a pre-Pauline hymn redacted "without too much modification."²⁴ He opted for a basic two-strophe arrangement in which protology and eschatology were the principal topics respectively.²⁵ As to background, Dunn cast doubt upon Adam christology in the first strophe because the notion of creation in, by and for Christ had no counterpart. He concluded that the description of Christ in the first clause was "very much that of Wisdom."²⁶ Thus the circles from which such a hymn arose would most likely be Hellenistic Jewish Christian.

The most significant and provocative aspect of Dunn's study was his hermeneutical approach to the affirmations about Christ in the passage. He maintained that the attributions should be understood as ways of expressing the early Christian belief that God's creative activity and redemptive activity were connected. Thus according to Dunn the early Christians were not really saying that Christ was the actual agent of creation or that he actually was a pre-existent being, but that they now recognize in Christ the embodiment and definition of God's power which was once active in creation as it is now active in redemption.²⁷ This is disappointing coming from one whose roots are in evangelicalism. Such an approach seems to be a form of de-mythologizing and violates Dunn's own excellent guidelines for doing biblical theology as he outlined them in the first chapter of his book.²⁸

T. E. Pollard offered a "reconsideration" of Col 1:12-20 in a 1981 study.²⁹ By-passing the questions of genre and structure (he refers to the passage as a hymn), he devoted his attention to the same question as Manns, namely, how the passage was composed. For Pollard the so-called cosmology was really subordinated by the context to the chief

²²Ibid., 179.

²³James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

²⁴Ibid., 188.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., 194.

²⁸Ibid., 9-10

²⁹"Colossians 1.12-20: A Reconsideration," *NTS* 27 (1981) 572-75.

concern which was the fact of redemption. This soteriological focus, which characterizes Paul's christological statements elsewhere (Cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:6-11), determined the meaning of the hymn, whatever its original meaning may have been.³⁰

As to the genesis of the original hymn, Pollard seemed sympathetic to C. F. Burney's thesis that we have a rabbinic-style exegesis of *בראשית*, even though he was aware that many scholars dismissed it. He observed, however, that virtually all scholars agree that below the surface of the passage lies the figure of Wisdom.³¹ This led Pollard to the observation that Paul clearly identified Christ as Wisdom in 1 Cor 1:24. Might it not be, he concluded, that Paul was giving an exegesis of 1 Cor 1:24 and 8:6 in Col 1:15ff.? Be that as it may, Pollard continued, what is demonstrable is an interweaving of several themes which is typical of both Rabbinic and Philonic exegesis. This configuration of ideas—Wisdom, Torah, Adam, and Israel—all linked together and christianized provides the best explanation for how the passage originated. Thus Christ superseded and realized fully all that these notions had originally meant in Jewish faith and thought.³² Pollard's view of the genesis of the hymn is thus close to Mann's, though not as restrictive in the scope of the Jewish background.

We would add that Pollard's interpretation of the language of pre-existence is also close to that of Dunn. In this regard Pollard cited with approval Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's contention that the meaning of such language is that Christ "represents the divine intent which came to historical expression in the creation of Adam."³³ Apparently Pollard understands the language of pre-existence in functional rather than ontological terms.

STUDIES FAVORING PAULINE AUTHORSHIP OF THE ENTIRE PASSAGE

A major commentary on Colossians written by an evangelical scholar, Peter T. O'Brien, appeared in 1982.³⁴ While acknowledging that Col 1:15-20 was a pre-Pauline hymn, O'Brien also broadened the category to include confessional, liturgical, polemical or doxological material. He preferred to label the passage as "a traditional hymnic piece."³⁵ With regard to structure, he noted that no consensus had yet emerged on the number and content of the stanzas.³⁶

³⁰Ibid., 573.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 575.

³³Ibid., 574. citing *Becoming Human Together* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1977) 48.

³⁴*Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982).

³⁵Ibid., 32, 33.

³⁶Ibid., 35.

On the question of background, he reviewed and refuted the pre-Christian Gnostic thesis of Käsemann.³⁷ He also surveyed the approach of C. F. Burney and concluded that “although Burney’s detailed argument may be open to question, his drawing attention to Old Testament parallels which clearly lie close at hand—rather than some uncertain parallels which have been claimed in Gnosticism, Stoicism and elsewhere—is commendable.”³⁸ O’Brien acknowledged the probable influence of wisdom speculation in Hellenistic Judaism upon the formulation of the passage. He rejected, however, Eduard Schweizer’s version of this approach whereby the author of Colossians felt compelled to redact the orientation of the hymn so that it reflected a theology of the cross.³⁹

O’Brien’s own view took seriously Pauline authorship and accepted either that Paul drew upon a composition of his own or that the passage was a *de novo* work in exalted hymnic style.⁴⁰ He also inclined to Seyoon Kim’s thesis that Paul’s wisdom christology was rooted more in the Damascus Road experience than in the Hellenistic Jewish wisdom theology of a Philo or of the Wisdom of Solomon.⁴¹

In contrast to Dunn’s work, O’Brien argued for Christ’s actual pre-existence. In O’Brien’s words: “As the first title of majesty, ‘image’ emphasizes Christ’s relation to God. The term points to his revealing of the Father on the one hand and his pre-existence on the other—it is both functional and ontological.”⁴²

Janusz Frankowski (1983) queried the various criteria which scholars advanced for the identification of preexisting hymns in the NT.⁴³ He expressed a preference for regarding certain hymnic texts as compositions of the author of the works in which they appear.⁴⁴ Frankowski also insisted that one must closely analyze the individual parts of the hymnic text in order to detect possible dependency upon other compositions with regard to form and content.⁴⁵ He observed that when this is done for Col 1:14–20 and Heb 1:2b–4, we discover that “each author approaches the theme and formulates its expression in his own manner.”⁴⁶ This led him to conclude that “in many other cases where there is talk of [a] hymn being quoted, we are in reality dealing with texts drawing upon existing themes but written in the form in which we find

³⁷Ibid., 37.

³⁸Ibid., 39.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 41, 42.

⁴¹Ibid., 42.

⁴²Ibid., 44.

⁴³“Early Christian Hymns Recorded in the New Testament: A Reconsideration of the Question in the light of Heb 1, 3,” *BZ* 27 (1983) 183–94.

⁴⁴Ibid., 184.

⁴⁵Ibid., 185.

⁴⁶Ibid., 188.

them in the New Testament by the authors of those respective works."⁴⁷ The process which Frankowski envisioned was one in which familiar and traditional themes were borrowed and reworked by the pneumatic author in a poetic manner. He concluded his article with a rather pointed critique of the hitherto prevailing consensus:

... we are under the impression that in many cases where exegetes today claim to have discovered in the NT writing early Christian hymns being quoted and try to restore them to their original form—by eliminating some elements and adding others—they are doing once again precisely what were doing the NT writers [sic]: they are simply composing their own hymns.⁴⁸

The present writer entered the debate with an article in *JETS* in 1983.⁴⁹ Whereas the thesis that the passage was a hymn was provisionally accepted, attention was also called to the disarray concerning arrangement, number of strophes and possible interpolations. With some caution the article opted for a three-strophe arrangement.⁵⁰ My main objective was to argue for the Pauline authorship of the entire passage. Responding to arguments of unusual vocabulary, lack of personal allusions in the passage, alleged differences in christology from Pauline theologumena, supposed liturgical settings and the unlikelihood that prison circumstances permitted the production of such an exacting and artfully constructed piece, I attempted to demonstrate the inadequacy of the above criteria to overturn what is still the decisive observation on the whole question. The theology of the passage "is so compatible with and adducible from uncontestably Pauline thought that the best hypothesis is also the simplest: Paul is the author."⁵¹

As to the religious background, Wisdom and Adam speculation account for some of the verbal parallels. As a comprehensive explanation for the hymn as we have it, however, one must resort to *Kyrios* christology whereby Christ assumes the predicates and prerogatives of Yahweh in the Old Testament. Parallels from the hymnic literature of Psalms strengthened this assertion. In sum, cosmic christology was implicit from the beginning of the primitive church by virtue of the

⁴⁷Ibid., 191.

⁴⁸Ibid., 194.

⁴⁹Larry R. Helyer, "Colossians 1:15–20: Pre-Pauline or Pauline?" *JETS* 26 (1983) 167–79.

⁵⁰Ibid., 168–70.

⁵¹Ibid., 172. This position was also argued by Pierre Benoit "L'Hymne Christologique de Col 1.15–20," *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 226. Frankowski's article was unavailable to me at the time though his approach was similar to mine.

resurrection.⁵² Paul Beasley-Murray, it will be remembered, had also argued for the importance of *Kyrios* christology.

A REDACTION CRITICAL TOUR DE FORCE

1983 also witnessed a major study of our passage which headed in an entirely different direction. Cesare Marcheselli Casale, by means of structural and redactional analysis, laid out an elaborate four-stage development of Col 1:15–20.⁵³ The earliest stage he attributed to an early Christian, pre-Pauline community which produced a two-strophe hymn in the abc:a'b'c' pattern.

- a v.15a He is the image of God,
- b v.15b The firstborn of the entire creation,
- c v.16a for in him all things were created.

- a' v.18b He is the Beginning,
- b' v.18c the firstborn of the dead,
- c' v.19 for God desired to dwell in him with his entire fullness.

His arguments in support of the above scheme were threefold: unusual vocabulary, compact literary unity, and a metrical structure with assonance designed as a mnemonic aid. The origin of this hymn was in the liturgy of the Colossian community which celebrated the cosmic primacy of Jesus.⁵⁴

The second stage of development was an equally compact and concise textual unit which, on the basis of context, was identified as Hellenistic-Jewish. It consisted of the following:

- v.16b All things that are in heaven and all things that are in earth
- c the visible and the invisible
- d thrones and dominions
- e Powers and authorities
- v.20b not only all things on earth but also all things in heaven
- v.15a of the invisible

Casale linked this material to Hellenistic views such as Philo which betray a Platonic influence. The redactor of the hymn incorporated this Hellenistic-Jewish tradition into the hymn.⁵⁵

⁵²*Ibid.*, 172–77.

⁵³"Der Christologische Hymnus: Kol 1, 15–20 im Dienste Der Versöhnung und Des Friedens," *Teresianum* 40 (1989) 3–21. Italian original *RivB* 31 (1983).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 5, 6.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 7, 8.

The third stage comprised the following:

- 16f All things that are in heaven, and all things that are upon earth
- 17a And he is before all creation
 - b and in him all things have existence
- 18a And he is the head of the body.
 - d in order to have the preeminence in all things.
- 20a God was pleased through him to reconcile to himself all things
- 20b.1 through him who has established peace
 - b.2 through him

This stage, which stood as an independent unit joined by parataxis and which harmonized the earlier stages Casale traced to Pauline teaching.⁵⁶

The fourth and final stage comprised the following parts of verses:

- 18a the church
- 18c from the dead
- 20b.1 through the blood of the cross

Here we have from the hand of Paul himself some modifications which brought the content in line with the Pauline kerygma. Thus we have, according to Casale, an important indication how the early church of Colossae—perhaps with the consent of Paul—had taken over and reformulated elements of the Christian culture of that time. Casale's approach might be considered a highly nuanced variation of O'Neill's thesis. According to Casale, the end result is a "considerable redactional achievement."⁵⁷

F. F. BRUCE: CAUTIOUS AND CONSERVATIVE

In 1984 F. F. Bruce contributed two works on Colossians, an updated volume on Colossians in *The New International Commentary* series and an article in *Bibliotheca Sacra*. We will use the latter as the basis for our discussion.⁵⁸ Bruce was cautious about the genre question. He acknowledged that the passage might be a hymn.⁵⁹ With regard to authorship, he thought that more probably the hymn was composed in the circle of the Pauline churches. In any case, the content was agreeable to Paul.⁶⁰ On the question of structure he favored two-strophes with a transitional link (vv. 17–18a) in agreement with

⁵⁶Ibid., 8.

⁵⁷Ibid., 9.

⁵⁸F. F. Bruce, "The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15–20," *Bib Sac* 141 (1984) 99–111.

⁵⁹Ibid., 99, 100, 105.

⁶⁰Ibid., 100, 105.

Benoit.⁶¹ As to the background, Bruce singled out the influence of Old Testament Wisdom teaching, the impact of Paul's conversion experience, the OT teaching in Ps 89:27 whereby the son of David is equated with "firstborn of the kings," and Genesis one.⁶² While he acknowledged affinities to Stoic terminology, Stoicism was not the real tap root of the hymn. Bruce also strongly resisted the notion that the original hymn spoke of the cosmic body glossed by Paul as the Church.⁶³ In his words, "there is no good reason to suppose that the hymn at any stage bore a different meaning from what it bears in the context of the Letter to the Colossians."⁶⁴ Bruce's views are at considerable distance from those of Casale and are very close to those of Peter O'Brien; indeed, the latter was a student of Bruce's at Manchester.

HYMN HYPOTHESIS UNDER ASSAULT

In 1985 two more evangelical scholars made significant contributions to the scholarly study of Col 1:15–20, one in Great Britain and the other in the United States. John F. Balchin, writing in *Vox Evangelica*, attacked head-on the consensus that the passage is a hymn.⁶⁵ His conclusion was forthrightly stated:

We have no actual parallel anywhere in ancient literature, Christian, Jewish or pagan, which justifies our using the description of 'hymn' for the passage as it stands, or for any of its scholarly redactions. We are actually ignorant of the ground-rules of early Christian liturgy. We cannot even demonstrate that there was any fixity of form as early as this letter.⁶⁶

Balchin's article is a meticulous critique of the various arguments used to support the hymn hypothesis.

1. The stylistic argument that an author does not appreciably alter his/her style from one work to another lacks conviction and evidence.⁶⁷
2. The parallelism of the passage demonstrates not a perfectly balanced hymnic structure but a Semitic mind influenced by the parallelism of the OT. Thus, the excessive terms in the present passage which destroy a precise parallelism require interpolation and excision theories in order to salvage the hypothesis.⁶⁸

⁶¹Ibid., 100, n. 2.

⁶²Ibid., 100, 101.

⁶³Ibid., 103.

⁶⁴Ibid., 108.

⁶⁵John F. Balchin, "Colossians 1:15–20: An Early Christian Hymn? The Arguments from Style," *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985) 65–94.

⁶⁶Ibid., 87.

⁶⁷Ibid., 66.

⁶⁸Ibid., 68.

3. The so-called introductory formulae are not clear indicators of quoted material, but quite consistent with Pauline usage elsewhere in which there is no question of any liturgical connotation.⁶⁹
4. The argument from unusual or rare vocabulary falls considerably short of demonstration. All the words in our passage except ἀποκαταλλάξαι are found in the NT, LXX or were widely used in the NT era. The latter term may well be a Pauline coinage.⁷⁰ Furthermore, as Balchin notes:

The real weakness of arguments based on words which are *hapax legomena* is the fact that our New Testament is only a partial collection of the occasional writings of its authors. In spite of the extent of Paul's work, we have no exhaustive, definitive Pauline vocabulary.⁷¹

5. Balchin examined the assumptions underlying other criteria for detection of hymns such as: contextual dislocation, christological content, syllable counts, strophic arrangement and chiasmic structure. In each case he concluded that the evidence appealed to may more easily fit alternative explanations.⁷² Indeed, he showed that the hymn hypothesis can only sustain itself when one invokes interpolations by the writer of the letter. But if this is so, why would Paul bother to cite something which required him to make such radical alterations? According to Balchin, "this is a question which has either not been asked, or has never been satisfactorily answered by those who argue for an edited hymn."⁷³ In this we hear the echoes of O'Neill's earlier work. Finally, with regard to chiasmic arrangement, Balchin acknowledged that Paul, doubtless owing to his Old Testament background, did employ chiasm in some of his writings. He was skeptical, however, that Col 1:15–20 was so constructed.⁷⁴

It is precisely the issue of chiasm which Balchin's counterpart, Steven Baugh took up in his study which appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal*.⁷⁵ Baugh's argument may be set out as follows:

1. The existing text does not possess the characteristics of modern hymns. Baugh prefers the designation "poem."⁷⁶

⁶⁹Ibid., 69, 70.

⁷⁰Ibid., 71.

⁷¹Ibid., 72, 73.

⁷²Ibid., 74–86.

⁷³Ibid., 81.

⁷⁴Ibid., 86.

⁷⁵Steven M. Baugh, "The Poetic Form of Col 1:15–20," *WTJ* 47 (1985) 227–44.

⁷⁶Ibid., 217.

2. Paul spontaneously composed the passage. 1 Cor 13 and Rom 11:33–36, unquestionably Pauline, likewise display exalted poetry involving chiasms.⁷⁷
3. The structure of the poem consists of an intricate chiasm in which a *xyz/x'z'y'* inner structure is encased within an over-arching *ABC-B'A'* pattern. Such a variation of the second member of the inner set has Old Testament exemplars.⁷⁸
4. The focus of the poem is the C element in v. 17b: "And all things continue to exist in him." In this he agreed with and acknowledged the work of Paul Beasley-Murray.⁷⁹
5. He concluded that "it is fitting that a poem inspired by the torrent of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus should follow the poetic wadi carved out by the Old Covenant revelation."⁸⁰

A NEW SYNTHESIS

1986 saw the publication of Nicholas Wright's commentary on Colossians and Philemon. In 1990 he followed this up with a more specialized study of Col 1:15–20. We will consider these together.⁸¹

On the genre question, Wright followed the tack of O'Neill, Frankowski, Balchin and Baugh in denying that we have a hymn *per se*. He preferred the designation "poem."⁸² He argued that the theology of the poem as a whole accords best with Pauline authorship.⁸³ As to structure, Wright followed closely Baugh's chiastic arrangement and did not delete any words or phrases as Pauline interpolations or additions.⁸⁴

Wright critiqued the Gnostic redeemer-myth and the Jewish Wisdom hypothesis as inadequate to account for the poem *as a whole*.⁸⁵ He saw the matrix of the hymn as mainline Jewish monotheism. The pattern observable in the hymn crops up in many Psalms (as I had pointed out earlier) and in the structure of the Pentateuch as well as Isaiah 40–55, namely, creation-redemption.⁸⁶ Thus the wisdom-traditions, according to Wright, even in their apocalyptic developments, function within the broader context of Jewish monotheism.⁸⁷

⁷⁷Ibid., 228, n. 6

⁷⁸Ibid., 231–39.

⁷⁹Ibid., 237.

⁸⁰Ibid., 244.

⁸¹N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) and "Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15–20," *NTS* 36 (1990) 444–68.

⁸²*Colossians*, 64; "Poetry," 444.

⁸³"Poetry," 464.

⁸⁴Ibid., 445–48.

⁸⁵Ibid., 451, 452.

⁸⁶Ibid., 452.

⁸⁷Ibid., 454–55.

Interestingly, Wright, as had Manns and Pollard, refurbished C. F. Burney's thesis in explaining how the poem was composed. Wright showed that Burney overlooked the importance of ἀρχή (18c) and failed to appreciate the significance of εἰκὼν despite its appearance in Gen 1:26; Wis 7:26 and Col 1:15a. Taking these two terms into account we have the following possible meanings of תְּשׁוּבָה which provided the skeleton for the entire poem:

- A He is the image-the firstborn
- B He is supreme
- B He is the Head
- A He is the beginning

Thus we have a chiastic structure (as argued by Baugh) in which the four meanings correspond to the four parts of the poem.⁸⁸ Wright further argued that the weight of the above sequence fell on the last term ἀρχή which drew attention to the climatic part of the poem, namely, the creation of a new people of God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. In short, Wright claimed that "Burney's basic insight was indeed sound. . . ."⁸⁹

In contrast to Dunn and Pollard, who fell short of ascribing an ontological pre-existence to Christ, Wright countered with a carefully nuanced position. He agreed with Dunn and Pollard that the εἰκὼν title in v. 15a referred to the risen and exalted man Jesus, but that in no way ruled out his being God's agent in creation *before* he assumed his human nature.⁹⁰

THE NEW HISTORY OF RELIGIONS APPROACH TO COL 1:15–20

Our last researcher is Jarl Fossum (1989).⁹¹ Fossum apparently accepted the designation of "hymn" for our passage.⁹² He was not really concerned with the authorship question and contended that the issue was not relevant to his paper.⁹³ Fossum accepted a two-stanza structure although he voiced some concern for the rather subjective nature of all such attempts to arrange the passage into strophes.⁹⁴

Fossum's article focused on the history-of-religions background. He acknowledged that Käsemann's Gnostic Urmensch-Erlöser had

⁸⁸Ibid., 456–57.

⁸⁹Ibid., 458.

⁹⁰Ibid., 461.

⁹¹Jarl Fossum, "Colossians 1.15–18a in the Light of Jewish Mysticism and Gnosticism," *NTS* 35 (1989) 183–201.

⁹²Ibid., 183–85.

⁹³Ibid., 185.

⁹⁴Ibid.

fallen on hard times.⁹⁵ Furthermore, an Adam christology failed to provide a complete explanation because “Adam is said to have been made *in* or *after* God’s image; he is not that image.”⁹⁶ He likewise found Sophia-Christology as in Wis 7:26 wanting because it too did not precisely equate Sophia with the image of God—in the latter instance Sophia was said to be an image of God’s (perfect) goodness, which, according to Fossum, “is not the same thing.”⁹⁷ Appeal to Philo’s Sophia-Logos descriptions were also inadequate because “Philo’s intermediary is recognized to be a highly complex figure, and so we would have to ask whether Philo actually testifies to the same tradition as that found in the Gnostic texts.”⁹⁸ On this basis Fossum proposed to reinvestigate the Gnostic traditions to see if we might find a more adequate explanation for this terminology.

Fossum then conducted an interesting foray through various Jewish and Gnostic sources. A presupposition which guided this search was that “Gnosticism was not only roughly contemporary with infant Christianity; it also had arisen out of the same matrix. It thus stands to reason that the New Testament is found to contain terms and motifs which have equivalents in Gnostic texts.”⁹⁹ Irenaeus’ account of Satornil of the school of Simon Magus provided a starting-point. Here we have the body of man made by the angels as the “shining image” or “likeness” of God. This was compared to the Nag Hammadi tractate *Orig. World* where a similar teaching occurs.¹⁰⁰ This in turn was compared to Jewish Kabbalistic texts. Fossum drew this all together in the following synthesis:

Kabbalism can be viewed as a revival of mythology on Jewish soil. In this respect, however, Kabbalism was preceded by Gnosticism by centuries, for in Gnosticism, too, the mythology which was suppressed by Pharisaic Rabbinism crops up again. The same mythology would seem to have played a role in the formation of certain New Testament terms and themes, and it may be right to relate the conception of Christ as the ‘image of the invisible God’ to the Gnostic (and Jewish mystical) hypostatization of the divine image in Gen 1:26.¹⁰¹

To the above, a wide range of sources—some early, some late—were canvassed. These include snippets from *Exagoge* (Ezekiel the Tragedian), Aristobulus (fragment preserved by Eusebius), *The Prayer of Joseph*

⁹⁵Ibid., 183.

⁹⁶Ibid., 185.

⁹⁷Ibid., 187.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid., 184.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 186.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 186, 187.

(preserved by Origen), the *Visions of Ezekiel*, *Ma'aseh Merkabah*, *Teach. Silv.*, *Eugnostos*, *Gos. Eg.*, *Poimandres*, *Abot R. Nat.*, *Shi'ur Qomah*, *2 Enoch* and the *Book of Elchasai* all of which are drawn upon to illustrate some facet of the hymn in Col 1:15–18a.¹⁰² Fossum concluded that “the hymn actually seems to bear witness to an Anthropos-Christology rather than a Sophia-Christology.”¹⁰³

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We now summarize our survey. Clearly the consensus of the 60s and 70s came under heavy assault during the 80s and crumbled. In its place, among mainline scholars, exists a rather wide spectrum of opinion and hypothesis. Increasingly, scholars of all stripes are casting doubt on the designation of “hymn” for our passage. The confidence with which many reconstructed and rearranged the putative hymn has been replaced by many with caution or skepticism, although a few push the methodological limitations of redaction criticism to a point calling into question the credibility of the entire enterprise (e.g. Casale).

Among evangelicals, however, something more like a consensus seems to be emerging. On the question of genre, though some still accept the category of hymn, the trend appears to be toward a more broad classification like “poem.” Furthermore, a consensus appears to support the notion of Pauline authorship for the entire passage. This does not appear to proceed from an *a priori* assumption that such a position is required by a high view of Scripture, but rather, it simply accords best with the evidence. Support also seems to be growing for the recognition of a deliberate chiasmic structure.

There also seems to be increasing agreement that Paul’s cosmic christology is rooted in the OT teaching of a creator-redeemer God and Paul’s personal encounter with Jesus the Lord on the Damascus Road. These fundamental data, however, may well have been facilitated in expression by Adam and Wisdom theology mediated through first century Judaism. In any case, we have the theology of Paul before us in this incomparable passage.

Finally, there also appears to be increasing support among evangelical (and even some mainline) scholars for the older view of C. F. Burney that the passage represents a midrashic interpretation of Gen 1:1 by means of Prov 8:22. In my opinion N. T. Wright’s reformulation and restatement of Burney’s thesis is quite convincing. I would now identify my own view with that position.

¹⁰²Ibid., 190–201.

¹⁰³Ibid., 201.

In retrospect, Eduard Norden's form critical analysis in 1913 and Ernst Lohmeyer's further elaboration in 1930 leading to the conclusion that we have an early Christian hymn in Col 1:15–20 has been a red herring which has drawn attention away from the main task at hand. Enormous time and energy have been expended in the vain attempt to recover, rearrange and explain the original hymn and its background. All the while, attention should have been placed on the content of this passage as the profound culmination of the Apostle Paul's theology—cosmic christology.