Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:

Buy me a coffee   https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology

PATREON   https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb

PayPal   https://paypal.me/robbradshaw

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn?
The Arguments from Style

John F. Balchin

[p.65]

The starting point for much discussion relating to Colossians 1:15-20, and in particular, the suggestion that it represents an early Christian hymn or confession, is the assumption made by many since the nineteenth century that the style of this section is unusual. The argument runs along two lines. On the one hand, it is maintained that liturgical material possesses its own distinctive style which, presumably, can be recognized as such. On the other hand, it has been argued that the style of these verses is significantly different from regular Pauline epistolary prose and therefore evidence that Paul did not compose them himself, but rather quoted them from some other source. It is time to re-examine the criteria employed in this process to see if such a conclusion is, in fact, justified.

Style in General

An author's particular style has to do with the way in which he chooses to put together his material, and therefore relates to syntax as much as to vocabulary. Some aspects of a man's style will be the unconscious reflection of his general cultural background. Others may be deliberately chosen for effect.

The argument that the style of a particular passage is different from that generally used by an author, and therefore comes from another hand, rests on the assumption that his personal choice of words and syntax could not alter appreciably from one work to another, or from one part of a work to another. The approach to Pauline writings has usually been to establish 'normative Pauline style' from his 'accepted letters', and then to compare this with the style of other works credited to him to determine whether or not he could have written them.

This basic assumption has been frequently challenged. It has been maintained, for example, that outward circumstances or differences in mood would affect a man's style.[1] The simple physical conditions under which a man like Paul wrote could well have a bearing on the way in which he wrote.[2] If the busyness of an apostolic ministry makes it remarkable to us that he found time to write at all, the prolonged, enforced inactivity of imprisonment afforded opportunity for extended and profound meditation. Colossians 1:15-20 reflects the latter situation.[3] Even writing to a

[p.66]

church he did not know personally may have had some influence on the tone of his letter.[4]

---

[1] A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (ET New York 1927) 236-238 W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *Romans* (Edinburgh 1908) lix argued that Paul's highly strung temperament would affect his mood and be expressed in his writings.

[2] *cf.* F. W. Beare, *St. Paul and his Letters* (London 1962) 17: it is not 'the leisure of the scholar nor the quiet of the academy, but the turmoil of a life of action and continual danger that provides the proper setting' to Paul's letters

[3] R. P. Martin, *EQ* 36 (1964) 199 [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/early-christian-hymn_martin.pdf]; C. Masson, *Comm.* 106.

[4] M. Dibelius and W. G. Kümmel, *St Paul* (ET London 1953) 99.

Some have argued for what they consider to be more objective criteria for determining style. For example, Morton and McLeman based their studies of Pauline style on sentence length and the common use of 'filler' words which, they claimed, reflect unconscious literary habits which persist throughout his productions.[5] Their theory, however, has faced sharp criticism both at the statistical level at which it was pitched[6] and also because of the results it produced.[7] If such persistent characteristics of style do exist, we have to admit that, in the present state of research, these have not as yet been conclusively demonstrated.[8]

Any discussion of Pauline style is further complicated by the debated issue of the contribution of various amanuenses. In ancient practice, the author's contribution might be no more than a personal subscription appended to a scribally composed document,[9] or at the other extreme, the entire contents of the work, dictated verbatim.[10] From the evidence of the Pauline material itself—especially the 'breaks' which conceivably indicate different 'sittings'—it appears that he had reasonable control over the contents, even though his secretaries might be responsible for putting his words in readable order, that is, for some of the syntax.[11] This, together with the co-authorship which Paul frequently claimed, opens up the possibility of stylistic variations which would make any argument from style extremely difficult.[12]

But in Colossians 1:15-20 we are not simply dealing with stylistic peculiarities but with 'an unusual vocabulary and elevated style which betrays a rhythmic lilt when read aloud'.[13] This may be the case, but it would be wrong to assume that Paul could not write in exalted terms when he wanted to.[14] In fact, a man reared against the background of Old Testament poetic form would most naturally write about issues central to his life and faith in similar terms.[15]

---

[5] *Paul, the Man and the Myth* (London 1966).

[6] *cf.* C. Dinwoodie, *SJT* 20 (1967) 116-118.

[7] For example, it demonstrates that I and II Peter are linguistically indistinguishable. J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude* (London 1969) 235 comments that 'most readers of Greek would agree that this conclusion illustrates the limitations of the method'.

[8] A more promising approach may be by way of generative-transformational linguistics which concentrates on the 'deep' or 'kernel' structures of language rather than on surface phenomena (*i.e.* as in statistical analysis), but the application of this theory to biblical texts has not been thoroughly explored as yet. If anything, however, it demonstrates the possibility of variations in what has traditionally been termed 'style'. *cf.* E. A. Nida, *JBL* 91 (1972) 79-80 There is 'no one-to-one correlation between the semantic level and the actual syntactic structures of the discourse. This means that the same underlying structure may give rise to more than one form of expression and that seemingly identical forms of expression may go back to quite different underlying structures.' However, this theory is not without its critics.

[9] G. J. Bahr, *CBQ* 28 (1966) 465-477; *JBL* 87 (1968) 27-41, argues from analogy with legal documents which were frequently written in this way.

[10] so J. N. Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek?* (Leiden 1968) 12 We have evidence that methods of shorthand were available for verbatim reporting in Paul's day: *cf.* G. J. Bahr, *CBQ* 28 (1966) 472-474.

[11] O. Roller, *Das Formular der paulinischen Briefe* (Stuttgart 1933) 148, who maintained that Paul's style was mixed and runs into that of his amanuensis; *cf.* C. F. D. Moule *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge 1963) 201. N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh 1976) 4, 82, argues that in the light of the frequent inelegancies, especially zeugma, Paul had no regular amanuensis.

[12] A. Wikenhauser, *New Testament Introduction* (ET Dublin 1958) 348, comments that if a secretary took part in the composition of a letter, 'the vocabulary and style are not decisive criteria for settling its authenticity'.

[13] R. P. Martin, *Comm.* 45.

[14] 1 Cor. 13:1-13; 1 Thess. 5:14-22; Gal. 5:16-26; 1 Cor. 1:18-31; Rom. 1:1-7; 8:31-39; 11:33-36; 16:25-27; 2 Cor. 4:7-10; 6:3-10; 11:33-36; *cf.* A. Feuillet, *Le Christ sagesse de Dieu d'après les epîtres pauliniennes* (Paris 1966) 262; B. Rigaux, *Saint Paul et ses Lettres* (Paris 1961) 184.

[15] F. C. Grant, *Introduction to New Testament Thought* (New York 1950) 232; R. P. Martin, *Vox Evangelica* 2 (1963) 21 while arguing for a hymn in Colossians 1:15-20 admits that 'religious speech tends to be in poetic form; and meditation upon the person and place of Jesus Christ in the Church's life and in the experience of the

The fact that scholars are divided over the actual length of the proposed liturgical material in Colossians 1 illustrates the point. As we shall see, some would like to begin with verse 12 or verse 13 because verses 12-14 are undoubtedly exalted in style and describe the central themes of redemptive history. But the argument cuts both ways. If these verses are simply a Pauline introduction to a hymn or confession which he is about to quote, they demonstrate that he was quite capable of writing in exalted style as occasion demanded. For similar reasons the verses that follow, 1:15-20, may be hymn-like without necessarily being an actual hymn. Other writers of antiquity developed an unstudied rhythmic style which did not indicate that their writings were less spontaneous.[16] How much more would this be true of the preacherwriter who knew that his work would be read aloud in times of worship?[17] It could even be argued that they were consequently designed to be 'liturgical' in this respect.

But the assertion that Colossians 1:15-20 is some sort of liturgical piece

[p.67]

quoted by Paul is based on what is claimed to be more specific stylistic evidence than this, which we must now proceed to examine.

1 *Parallelism*

It is now well established that Hebrew poetry was cast in the form of parallel statements, and we have abundant evidence for this *parallelismus membrorum* in the Old Testament.[18] Although differing somewhat as to their extent, scholars have noted that in Colossians 1:15-20 there are several instances of parallel statements or words which might be evidence for this kind of poetic form.[19] These may be summarised as follows:[20]

> ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν (15) ... ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή (18)
> πρωτότοκος πάσης κρίσεως (15) ... πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν (18)
> ἐν αὐτῷ ... τὰ πάντα (16) ... ἐν αὐτῷ ... πᾶν (19)
> ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς ... ἐπι τῆς γῆς (16) ... ἐπι τῆς γῆς ... ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς (20)
> τὰ πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν (16) ... καὶ δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ... τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτοῦ (20)
> καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων (17) cf. ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων (18)

(Some would parallel καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων (17) with καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ (18).)

Hence it is argued that both verbal parallels (using the same nouns, verbs and prepositions) and conceptual parallels (setting one statement over against another) may be established. For

---

believer is not expressed in a cold, calculating way, but becomes rhapsodic and ornate'. [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol02/worship_martin.pdf]

[16] J. Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (Edinburgh 1918) 55.

[17] *loc. cit.*

[18] *cf.* S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Leiden 1955) 2,159-175; J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London 1976) 65-71.

[19] A. M. Hunter *Paul and his Predecessors* (London 19612) 124f., who maintains that this passage 'betrays the hand of an exacting composer whose hymnodical style—if we may judge from the parallelisms and early position of the verb-was Semitic rather than Greek'.

[20] Hunter, *Paul* 124ff.; P. Ellingworth, *ET* 73 (1962) 252-253; J. M. Robinson, *JBL* 76 (1957) 275; P. Benoit in *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults* (Leiden 1975) (ed. J. Neusner) 226ff.; J-N Aletti *Colossiens 1, 15-20* (Rome 1981) 26-42.

many this has been conclusive evidence in itself that Paul could not have put together so complicated an arrangement as he dictated his letter, but that he was drawing on the work of someone who had spent time and ingenuity in composing the piece.

But we need to ask if this is necessarily a foregone conclusion. Certainly the parallels might lead us to believe that there was a Semitic mind behind the writing of this passage, but the complicated balance that we are asked to accept as poetic form is different from any Hebrew *parallelismus membrorum* that we might name. It is considerably more involved than the most developed forms of poetry elsewhere in both biblical and extrabiblical writings,[21] where the pattern was generally confined to parallel statements or antitheses, or variations on that basic formula.

Moreover, when we examine the parallels proposed, we discover that they are 'more visual than substantive'.[22] The parallels are not exact. Verbally, we have to cope with excess terms which have prompted a good deal of editorial suggestion concerning which words disturb the perfect balance of the statement and which consequently should be excised.

For example, ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου does *not* balance ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή. Paul seems to be using the term πρωτότοκος in a

[p.68]

somewhat different sense in verse 18 from verse 15. Followed by the genitive phrase πάσης κτίσεως, it relates Christ to the created order while differentiating him from it. But followed by ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν it relates Christ to the dead while involving him in the resurrection from the dead. The force of ἐν αὐτῷ is entirely different with ἐκτίσθη from the affirmation ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν... κατοικῆσαι, and similarly εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται carries a different prepositional significance from ἀποκαταλλάξαι... ἐις αὐτόν. The statement καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων may—or may not—be the conceptual equivalent of ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων, but the form is entirely dissimilar.

As we shall see, we have a good number of excess terms which disturb the balance and which have been variously excised by different scholars. But the process seems to be somewhat *a priori*, beginning with the assumption that the original must have exhibited perfect correspondences.

A better explanation of the phenomenon might be that we have here an author steeped in the poetic background of the Old Testament, where not only hymns but also prophetic productions were cast in parallel form. Paul, as a Jew and an apostle, stood in this tradition. It should not be surprising that he expressed himself in those forms which he had been reared to associate with the divine message.[23] Jesus himself taught in this way, and at times his use of

---

[21] For example, the Psalms of Solomon, the Odes of Solomon and the *Hodayoth* of Qumran all exhibit the same basic features of the Old Testament poetic forms. Although the Qumran material does involve particular poetic devices, the extent and types of parallelism are quite comparable to those of the Old Testament Psalter and the prophetic writings. cf A. Dupont-Sommer, *The Essene Writings from Qumran* (ET Oxford 1961) 199; M. Mansoor, *The Thanksgiving Hymns* (Leiden 1961) 23; B. P. Kittel, *The Hymns of Qumran* (Chico 1981) 158.

[22] N. Kehl, *Der Christushymnus im Kolosserbrief* (Stuttgart 1967) 40f.: 'despite the recurrence of formulas or catchwords, when some of the parallels are heard, it becomes evident that there is no genuine correspondence between them'.

[23] Turner, *Grammar* 4, 96-97, argues that there is considerable evidence of parallelism throughout Paul's writings.

balanced statement went well beyond single line parallelism.[24] However, there has been no suggestion that because of this what he said must be regarded as hymnic or confessional. His employment of parallel statements is simply evidence that Jews brought up against an Old Testament background tended to think and teach in parallel forms, especially when they intended their words to be memorable, or when they were expressing religious truths.

2 *Introductory Formulae*

There are certainly quotations in the New Testament from works other than Old Testament books.[25] However, unless—as some have suggested—there is a citation formula hidden away in the verses which immediately precede Colossians 1:15-20,[26] we have no overt indication that the author might be quoting from another source at this point. More commonly, the twofold use of the relative, ὅς ἐστιν... (vv. 15, 18) has been seen by some as being an indication of the presence of hymnic or confessional material.[27] The grounds for this assertion are usually taken to be what appears to be some sort of quotation in 1 Timothy 3:16:

> ὅς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί... etc.

From the use of the relative pronoun in this passage, exegetes have tended to work back to other statements with a similar form, especially if they are christological formulations.[28] This leads to the general assertion that 'credal forms often favour such relative clauses'.[29] What is more, the

[p.69]

double ὅς in our passage does not seem to be 'obviously natural' to some.[30]

Over against these assertions, it may be said that the use of the relative pronoun in this way is perfectly regular Greek which can be paralleled many times in the New Testament in places where it could not have any liturgical connotations whatsoever. In the passage under review it is grammatically correct. There is no syntactical break between verses 14 and 15 because of its introduction.

Paul uses the relative pronoun as regularly and as often in his writings as any other New Testament author. What is more, he uses the nominative with the verb εἰμί in an epexegetic sense more than most.[31] The use of the relative pronoun in 1:15, 18 would be in no way abnormal for him. Certainly the double relative separated by three or four lines is unusual, 'yet nobody can deny that it makes perfectly correct and logical sequence'.[32] If, as many maintain, these relatives mark the beginning of strophes, why is this peculiar to this passage? We do not find this phenomenon in any other passage which has been isolated as liturgical.

---

[24] *e.g.* Lk. 17:26-30; 11:31-32; cf. T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge 1931) 50-56.

[25] *e.g.* Jude 14f.; Eph. 5:14.

[26] *e.g.* E. Lohmeyer, E. Norden, E. Käsemann, G. Schille, K. G. Eckhart, J. Schattenmann, R. Deichgraber.

[27] So Martin, *EQ* 36 (1964) 197: 'a tell-tale mark of liturgica'.

[28] Hence E. Lohse, *Comm.* 41 can cite Col. 1:15, 18; Phil. 2:6; 1 Pet. 2:22; Heb. 1:3.

[29] Hunter, *Paul* 126; cf. E. Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (ET London 1964) 153.

[30] Hunter, *Paul* 126.

[31] W. F. Moulton and A. S. Geden, *A Concordance of the Greek Testament* (Edinburgh 1963) 706; *e.g.* Rom. 1:25; 4:16; 5:14; 1 Cor. 4:17 etc. Paul uses this construction elsewhere when describing Christ: *e.g.* Rom. 8:34; 1 Cor. 3:11; 2 Cor. 4:4 (where we have almost the same expression as Col. 1:15); Gal. 3:16. The relative is also a regular feature of his style elsewhere in the letter to the Colossians: *e.g.* 1:7; 1:13; 1:27; 2:9; 2:22.

[32] C. F. D. Moule, *Comm.* 62.

Elsewhere the protagonists of this theory appear to be quite happy with one relative pronoun, or none at all.

Another difficulty involved in the argument from the relative pronoun is that, in normal grammatical usage, the relative refers back to some antecedent subject. Several have recognized this fact, and have suggested that there must have been some sort of introductory line like 'Blessed be the Son of God...'[33] However, if this was the case, it would wreck the balance of a strophic arrangement based on parallel relative pronouns. Others have argued that there must have been an opening verse in which Christ was named and praised, but which did not fit into this place in the letter.[34] This could be so, but if the relative pronoun is some sort of clue as to the presence of hymnic material, it seems strange that every hymn in the New Testament introduced in this way should begin with what is at least the second verse!

While dealing with the issue of introductory formulae, we must examine the views of those who believe that the verses immediately preceding Colossians 1:15-20 form some kind of liturgical introduction to the hymn. For example, E. Lohmeyer began his reconstruction at verse 13,[35] while E. Norden started with verse 12.[36] Both felt that the style of these verses warranted their inclusion. More recently, E. Käsemann has argued that verses 13-14 betray a liturgical style which also gives us some indication of its original *Sitz im Leben* which he identifies as a baptismal liturgy.[37] He believes that these verses were already associated with the hymn before the writer incorporated it in the letter.[38] He says that verse 12 is 'clearly stylised in liturgical fashion', and 'equally clearly' cannot be a special Pauline composition.[39] G. Bornkamm had maintained that εὐχαριστοῦντες was being used in a technical sense which should lead us to expect a 'Thanksgiving Prayer' in what follows.[40] Käsemann adopts Bornkamm's view,[41] and tells us that if we put quotation marks after

[p.70]

εὐχαριστοῦντες, we have a pre-Christian hymn, worked over by Christian hands, and provided with a liturgical introduction.

N. A. Dahl has also followed Bornkamm,[42] comparing the style of these verses with that of early Christian eucharistic graces which combine the themes of creation and redemption.[43] Hence the whole passage is governed by εὐχαριστοῦντες in verse 12.

---

[33] so Lohse, *Comm.* 41; *cf.* G. Harder, *Paulus and das Gebet* (Güttersloh 1936) 46ff. 34.

[34] Masson, *Comm.* 105; cf. N. Hugede, *Comm.* 49.

[35] *Comm.* 41.

[36] *Agnostos Theos* (Leipzig 1929) 250ff.

[37] *Essays* 158-167.

[38] *cf.* B. Vawter, *CBQ* 33 (1971) 74-75 who believes that vv.12-14 and vv.15-20 form a redactional unity derived from a sacramental liturgy, presumably baptismal. G. Schille, *Frühchristliche Hymnen* (Berlin 1965) 81 f., also maintains that we should begin our investigation at v.12, and assumes a lost Aufgesang prior to this. R. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus and Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (Göttingen 1971) 144 argues that v.12 has a distinctive liturgical style and says that the change from the second person is significant and that the language of v.13 is unPauline. *cf.* Kehl, *Christushymnus* 28ff.

[39] Käsemann, *Essays* 153.

[40] *Studien zu Antike and Urchristentum* 2, 196.

[41] *Essays* 154.

[42] *Studia Theologica* 1, 69-95.

[43] as in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*, c. AD 215.

J. M. Robinson perceived a somewhat different thanksgiving-formula in these verses—that of late Judaism which was formed from Old Testament precedents.[44] As Paul was a Jew and well-read in Old Testament matters, it would not be surprising if we found him forming his thanksgivings in a Jewish or Old Testament manner. The difficulty with Robinson's view in the context of Colossians 1:15-20 is that by verse 15 the subject has changed from God to Christ. There may be a hint of such a pattern lying behind verses 12-14, but the following verses go well beyond a thanksgiving-formula.[45]

It is perfectly true that Paul employs some powerful terminology in verses 12-14, but there is no real evidence that they, or the verses that follow, are necessarily liturgical. Not only do they make good grammatical and logical sense in the general progression of the passage, they are couched in language that we may well expect from a man like Paul. Whoever wrote them was someone who knew the blessings of both covenants. The terminology at many points reflects Israel's foundational experience of deliverance from Egypt, but it is transmuted to the plane of Christian redemption. C. F. D. Moule points us to a striking parallel to verses 13-14 in Acts 26:18, where Paul is represented as recounting his commission from the risen Christ.[46] If we are prepared to take Paul's words in that passage seriously (and Luke had no doubt heard them on more than one occasion as the apostle seemed fond of retelling the circumstances of his conversion), it may be that these ideas had been with him since that first encounter.

Bornkamm's argument, that we have to deal with a thanksgiving-prayer here because of the presence of εὐχαριστοῦντες is somewhat anachronistic as we have no evidence that it was used as a technical expression in this way as early as this.[47] It could be argued that there is a self-contained movement of thanksgiving running right through the first chapter and beyond.[48] Lohse concludes that, in his opinion, although verses 12-14 are made up from traditional phrases, they do not form any continuous liturgical context.[49]

3 *Unusual Vocabulary*
It has often been argued that one of the indications that Colossians 1:15-20 is a non-Pauline composition is the presence of an usually large number of words not used by Paul elsewhere.[50]

---

[44] 'Die *Hodajot*-Formel in Gebet and Hymnus des Frühchristentums' in *Apophoreta* (Berlin 1964) 194-235; *cf.* Schille *Hymnen* 15-20, 79-85; Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus* 78-82, 144-150; J. T. Sanders, *New Testament Christological Hymns* (Cambridge 1971) 12-13.

[45] Aletti, *Colossiens 1, 15-20* 5 K. G. Eckhart, *Exegetische Beobachtungen zu Kol.* 1:9-20 (Berlin 1960) 16-18 began his investigation at v.9 which he regarded as a parenetic introduction to baptism, followed by the baptizands' praise (vv. 13-14) and the baptismal hymn (vv. 15-20), a suggestion which is more ingenious than convincing in the light of the extended introductions in other Pauline letters. J. Schattenmann, *Studien zum neutestamentlichen Prosahymnus* (Munich 1965), 16-18 went as far as arguing for two hymns, a Logos-hymn (vv. 12, 15, 18a) and a Christ-hymn (vv. 13-14, 18b-20).

[46] *Comm.* 56.

[47] *cf.* Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus* 144.

[48] So J. G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption* (Leiden 1971) 101, who compares the note of thanksgiving struck in 1:3, 12; 2:7 and concludes that there is 'a long circular movement of thought which begins with thanksgiving and the Colossians where they are, and returns after prayer, confession of faith and the apostle's own experience to the same point of thanksgiving'.

[49] *Comm.* 40.

[50] The situation is complicated by the widely held view that Ephesians, where some of the terms occur, is non-Pauline, and further complicated by those who argue that Colossians itself is non-Pauline. If the latter is the case we would have no grounds for separating the passage from the rest of the letter on the basis of vocabulary.

[p.71]

In our passage the terms in question are ὁρατὰ (v.16), θρόνοι (v.16), κυριότητες (v.16), πρωτεύων (v.18), κατοικῆσαι (v.19), ἀποκαταλλάξαι (v.20) and εἰρηνοποιήσας (v.20). In addition to these it has been maintained that συνέστηκεν (v.17) is not used in the sense of 'cohere' elsewhere in Paul, and that he does not use the term ἀρχή (v.18) elsewhere of Christ.[51]

As C. F. D. Moule has pointed out, however, the presence of unusual words or terms which are *hapax legomena* does not necessarily indicate the work of another hand.[52] We need to ask if there were any better or more natural terms which Paul could have used to express these ideas, or if there are any words here which it would be impossible for Paul to have used. We must therefore examine the terms in question in more detail.

ὁρατὰ is not only a term which is a Pauline *hapax legomenon*, it occurs only here in the New Testament. However it is found in the Septuagint[53] and would therefore have been available to Paul, while in this context it is the natural positive of ἀόρατα, a term which Paul uses elsewhere[54] in the same sense of 'invisible'.[55]

Θρόνοι certainly does not occur elsewhere in Paul's writings, but it was a common word at the time, widely used in both the Septuagint and elsewhere in the New Testament. There is no reason whatsoever why Paul could not have used it had it suited his purpose.

κυριότητες occurs in Paul's work only here and in Ephesians 1:21. It is also rare elsewhere in the New Testament,[56] although it does appear in the Septuagint. In a summary list like this one, Paul is no doubt attempting to cover every eventuality, and uses unusual words alongside those like θρόνοι, ἀρχαὶ and ἐξουσίαι which were better known.[57]

πρωτεύων is another term which is not found elsewhere in Paul or in the New Testament, although it does occur in the Septuagint.[58] It could be argued that it is the best possible word for Paul to use at this point, summing up Christ's pre-eminence over all things, a thought which he expresses elsewhere in different words but with the same force. Unless we assume that he was devoid of stylistic creativity—which is hardly a conclusion we would readily draw from his writings—we must allow him to express his thought in different ways as occasion demanded.

κατοικῆσαι is only found elsewhere in Paul in Colossians 2:9 and Ephesians 3:17 where it could derive from this present reference. However, it was a common word in New Testament

---

[51] So Lohse, *Comm.* 42, who would also add the phrase εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ (v.15) which he feels is being used in a different sense from 2 Cor. 4:4. He concludes: 'These observations exclude the possibility that the author of the letter could have composed these verses himself by using traditional phrases.' *cf.* Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus* 153 Masson, *Comm.* 106, argues that the very form of some of these terms is due to the demands of the poetic structure.

[52] *Comm.* 61-62.

[53] 2 Kings 23:21; 1 Chron. 11:23; Job 34: 26; 37:21.

[54] Rom 1:20.

[55] The thought is almost paralleled in 2 Cor. 4:18 where Paul also uses the simple negative of the previous form.

[56] only 2 Pet. 2:10; Jude 8.

[57] *cf.* Col. 2:10, 15 where on each occasion he abbreviates the list to a sampling of two terms.

[58] Est. 5:11; 2 Macc. 6:18; 13:15.

times and is found regularly in the Septuagint. There is nothing improbable about Paul's use of it at this point.

ἀποκαταλλάξαι is first attested in this passage,[59] and thereafter only in Christian writers no doubt influenced by this passage. But Paul does use the uncompounded form elsewhere,[60] while appearing to have a predilection for compound verbs.[61] It is not impossible that he may have even coined it himself.[62] In this particular context, he seems intent on making sure that his readers grasped the completeness of both Christ and what he

[p.72]

had done. It is the sort of situation where we can imagine him adding a preposition to make his point.

εἰρηνοποιήσας, although both a Pauline and New Testament *hapax legomnon*,[63] is once again, a Septuagintal term.[64] It is also a thoroughly Jewish concept well known in rabbinic circles, the kind of circles in which Paul, on his own admission, had been trained. In Christian terms it represents the same underlying message which Paul taught elsewhere.[65]

It is true that the use here of συνέστηκεν is unparalleled in Paul's other writings,[66] but we do have it used with the sense of 'cohere' elsewhere in the context of the created universe.[67] So it would appear that, when describing the establishment of the natural order, it was a perfectly suitable term to use. The fact that Paul deals with this particular subject nowhere else in his writings would be enough to account for it here.

Again, as far as we know from our sources, Paul did not use the title ἀρχή for Christ, although its occurrence in this sense in Revelation 3:14 indicates that it was employed as a christological description in New Testament times. However, in the same context of resurrection he does use a very similar term. Christ is described as ἀπαρχὴ τῶν κεκοιμηνένων (1 Cor. 15:20) with the same sense of initiatory instance and priority as the epexegetic πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν here. We therefore cannot exclude it as a Pauline possibility.

A further indication of the weakness of the argument from peculiar vocabulary is the fact that, in rearranging the material in this passage into strophic form, a number of commentators regard several of these terms as editorial additions, and often Pauline additions at that.[68] Some are prepared to excise as many as five out of the seven *hapax legomena* terms, which means

---

[59] though cf. Eph. 2:16 and later in this chapter at verse 22.

[60] 1 Cor. 7:11; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19, 20; Rom. 5:10.

[61] For statistics, see R. Morganthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (Zürich 1972) 160-162.

[62] F. Büschel, *TDNT* 1, 258.

[63] though see the noun, Matt. 5:9.

[64] Prov. 10:10.

[65] See Rom. 5:1 where both peace and reconciliation are mentioned in the same passage; cf. v.11.

[66] elsewhere in the sense of 'to present, recommend, introduce' *e.g.* Rom. 16:1; 2 Cor. 5:12; 6:4 etc. or 'to demonstrate, bring out' Rom. 3:5; Gal. 2:18.

[67] 2 Pet. 3:5.

[68] *e.g.* ὁρατά, θρόνοι: omitted by J. M. Robinson, Eckhart, Schweizer, Hegermann, Schenke, Gabathuler, Deichgräber πρωτεύων: omitted by Harder, Schweizer, Bammel, Gabathuler, Lahnemann, Pöhlmann εἰρηνοποιήσας: omitted by Harder, J. M. Robinson, Schweizer, Conzelmann, Gabathuler, Pöhlmann.

that, for them, the argument for liturgical material from vocabulary must not be indispensable, and they must establish their thesis on other grounds.

In considering what kind of vocabulary Paul would have had at his disposal, the fact that he habitually quoted from the Septuagint indicates the importance of that translation for him.[69] As we have seen, the presence of six out of the seven *hapax legomena* terms in this passage in the Septuagint means that they at least were readily available to him, even though we may have little or no indication as to his other reading.

A more natural explanation of these unusual terms would be that the false teaching which had beset the Colossian church included aspects which Paul is deliberately countering with positive statements. The very fact that he expounds some of these issues in the letter points in this direction. From Paul's use of *hapax legomena* elsewhere, we know that he was perfectly capable of employing obscure or rare words when it suited his purpose.[70]

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,

[p.73]

we have no exhaustive, definitive Pauline vocabulary. We are simply not in a position to know what terms he might have used if the occasion had demanded it. As we have seen, none of the terms in question is beyond his capacity. We must leave him with the option of deliberately choosing his words to secure the particular end he had in view. We find him doing this elsewhere.[71]

It is pertinent to recognize the insights of modern linguistic studies at this point. The structural approach to language affects our handling of individual words in two ways. On the one hand, it has been established that it is illegitimate to study a particular term in isolation, or indeed, for its own sake. Every individual word derives significance from its immediate context, and from its relationship with other words in that context.[72] We must not make the false

---

[69] Turner, *Grammar* 89, points out that Paul appears to be indebted to the Septuagint for his constructions as well as for his vocabulary. This is what we would expect of a diaspora Jew who heard the Old Testament regularly read in this version, in the same way that the liturgical language of many English-speaking Christians has been influenced by the use of the Authorised Version.

[70] Paul used a considerable number of *hapax legomena* terms in his writings. In Romans there are 269 in 433 vv.; in 1 Corinthians 226 in 437 vv.; in Galatians 83 in 149 vv.; in Philippians 67 in 104 vv.; even when not dealing with theological issues as in Philemon he can use 10 in 25 vv. They are not evenly spread throughout his writings, but depend largely on the subject matter with which he is dealing. *cf.* Morganthaler, *Statistik.*

[71] The classic passage is Col. 2:6-23 where we find 19 in 17 vv. Some have assumed that this is evidence for non-Pauline authorship, but the passage is clearly dealing with specific topics which demanded this concentrated spread of unusual terms.

[72] J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford 1961) 263, who argues for the connection between language and biblical theology 'at the level of the larger linguistic complexes such as the sentences'. The newness of the ideas is not a matter of words or of word concepts, but new combinations of words, *cf.* 269 where he maintains that a sentence, unlike a word, is likely to be unique, and that the distinctiveness of biblical thinking must be settled at this level. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London 1980) 49-53 extends the idea of context beyond the immediate verbal connections to the situation involved, the traditions of writer and reader, and the cultural and conceptual background of the passage. 'The principle of contextual determination... delivers us from the worst excesses of the word-concept fallacy.' (51).

assumption that the word rather than the sentence or speech-act constitutes the basic unit of meaning to be investigated.[73]

Even more important for lexical studies is the fact that words are now regarded as arbitrary signs which represent underlying concepts, which in turn may be represented in other ways What should concern us is 'the analysis of related meaning of different words, not the different meanings of single words'.[74] We need to speak in terms of semantic fields which cover a range of diverse terminology which represents overlapping conceptual significance.[75]

In the immediate context, it is not really legitimate to say that because words are present here which are unusual or *hapax legomena* in Paul's writings, the passage cannot be Pauline. We need to be asking whether or not the concepts expressed by these terms are incompatible with what Paul has to say elsewhere.

4 *Contextual Dislocation*

Part of the argument for the passage in question being some kind of liturgical formula is the assertion that it breaks up the context of the letter.[76] It has also been pointed out that there is a change of subject in this chapter,[77] thanksgiving to God moving into a description of Christ. There is also a change of person. Verses 9-12 refer to the second person plural; verses 13-14 to the first person plural; verses 21ff. to the second person plural again. In the intervening section there are no personal references whatsoever, simply a series of predicates relating to Christ. This could be evidence that verses 15-20 are a self-contained unit, or according to some, that the liturgical section begins with verse 13.[78]

C. Masson went much further than this. He compared the passage with that other one which is said to have strong liturgical connections, Philippians 2:6-11, which he maintained, fitted into its context naturally after the preceding exhortation (Phil. 2:1-5). Colossians 1:15-20 on the other hand, was a laborious insertion which could be detached cleanly from its context.[79] He argued that the whole flow of the chapter, beginning

[p.74]

with Paul's prayer (vv.9-12) and moving on into the transitional verses which follow (vv.13-14), has been reworked and developed in order to make a place for the quotation.[80] It was then attached to the rest of the letter with the following verses (vv.21-23).[81]

Once again, however, we must ask if the evidence is quite as clear as has been proposed, and if this section is so obviously out of place here. If one of the proposed criteria for detecting

---

[73] A. C. Thiselton, *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter 1977) (ed. I. H. Marshall) 76.

[74] E. A. Nida, *JBL* 91 (1972) 85.

[75] Thiselton, *NTI* 90-93.

[76] A. M. Hunter, *Paul* 124f.

[77] *cf.* Masson, *Comm*. 104.

[78] Käsemann, Essays 152, can speak of the striking change of person in v.13.

[79] *Comm*. 106.

[80] Masson was indebted to H. J. Holtzmann for his interpolation approach to Colossians, but others who do not hold this position are equally convinced that there is a break in the flow of thought here: *e.g.*, T. K. Abbott, *Comm*. 224, 1:21 ff. 'obviously begins a new paragraph, resuming the thought from which the apostle had digressed in 15'; *cf.* C. R. Bowen, *JBL* 43 (1924) 201.

[81] Masson argued for a theory of later interpolation on the grounds that it would have been impossible for Paul to construct such an elegant piece of redaction in prison.

hymnic or confessional statements is the absence of personal references, verses 12-14 can hardly be included in the section under consideration. If it is argued that there has been a significant change of person in verse 12 or 13, we are faced with a problem of textual uncertainty at that point. It is difficult to see if the original alternated between the second and first person plural in verse 12, or indeed elsewhere in the letter.[82] As C. F. D. Moule states, 'Throughout the letter there is constant doubt about the correct reading as between the first and second person.'[83]

We have evidence elsewhere for Paul's use and development of the current epistolary pattern when he includes greetings, thanksgiving, and on occasion, prayer.[84] On more than one occasion he moves from his petition for his friends into some theological issue which arises out of it.[85] Certainly in Colossians the development becomes elaborate, but it is the same in principle as the others.

Masson's contrast between this passage and Philippians 2:5-11 does not really stand up to examination. If anything, the reverse is true in that the Philippian passage runs well beyond its starting point. It marries in well initially with Paul's appeal for humility, but by the later verses we have left Christ's humiliation far behind and we are witnesses of his universal lordship. The truth that God exalts those who humble themselves to his will is not applied. Paul simply reverts to a lesson of obedient discipleship (Phil. 2:12-13).[86]

Short of suggesting, as Masson does, that the whole context has been fabricated, the sequence of thought flows right through the preceding verses into those that follow in the Colossian passage. We are to give thanks to the Father who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints of light (v.12). The following verse tells us how he did it, and through whom it was accomplished, 'his beloved Son' (v.13). Verses 15-20 are a description of this Son and his mediatorial work, and that is immediately followed by a personal application in the same terms (vv.21-23).[87]

One of the great weaknesses of an interpolation theory such as Masson's is that he provides no good reason why anyone should go to such lengths to insert a hymn to Christ at this point, and then to further pepper the letter with odd insertions. The modifications that he demands are really too complicated to be plausible.

Anyone who has studied Paul is quite familiar with the way in which his arguments can be diverted and flow into another subject, and the way in

---

[82] *e.g.* 1:7; 2:13; 3:4; 4:8.

[83] *Comm.* 27-28.

[84] 1 Thess. 1:2-3; 2 Thess. 1:3-4; Rom. 1:8-17; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; Phil. 1:3-11.

[85] *e.g.* Rom. 1:16-17; 1 Cor. 1:9; 1 Thess. 1:4-5; 2 Thess. 1:5ff.

[86] R. P. Martin, *An Early Christian Confession* (London 1960) 11 [now on-line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/confession_martin.pdf].

[87] M. Hooker, *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (Cambridge 1973) (eds. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley) 322, maintains that if Paul placed vv. 15-20 here, it was because it was relevant to his argument. Themes in the hymn underline points made in 1:13-14 and are taken up in vv.21-23. Cf. Gibbs, *Creation* 100, who says that there is a smooth grammatical transition between vv. 14-15, and that there is no dichotomy between the hymn and the christology of the prayer and the Colossians' experience. R. P. Martin, *Reconciliation and Hope* (Exeter 1974) (ed. R. Banks) 114 says that 'the link between 1:15-20 and 1:21-23 is close knit with the personal pronouns standing in unusual and emphatic position'. He admits that the hymn appears at an appropriate place in the letter, and notes the use of the same verb ἀποκαταλλάξαι (v.20) and ἀποκατήλλαξεν (v.22) [on-line at: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rh/colossians_martin.pdf].

[p.75]

which he can move, sometimes abruptly, from one topic to another. But that does not seem to be the pattern here. The whole section forms a unity, and we can see why he has included the description of Christ and his work, and how it has bearing on the lives of those who read it. What is more, it is also his habit on occasion to move from the personal to the general theological argument, and then back to the personal once more.[88] We must add to this the fact that Paul expounds some of the truths in this section later on in the letter, (e.g. 2:8ff.) which makes an interpolation theory based on the idea of contextual dislocation even more unlikely

5 *Christological Statements*

It is an assumption among many scholars that, because the subject of early Christian hymns and confessions would naturally have been christological, descriptions of Christ in the New Testament may be an indication that we are dealing with liturgical material. R. H. Fuller could confidently write, 'Formulae are concerned with basic christological assertions.'[89] Martin argues that a number of New Testament christological affirmations—all the main ones, in fact—are christological hymns. Certain themes such as Christ's pre-existence, his pre-temporal activity, the Servant concept, and his role as cosmological Lord run through them. Redemption is set in a cosmic context in early Christian praise.[90] Or we might quote C. Masson, who argued that our present passage was distinguished not only by its form, but also by its content which was '*rigoureusement christologique*'.[91]

There is nothing very profound in saying that Christian hymns could be expected to be christological. The first Christians praised and confessed Christ spontaneously,[92] and it would only be a matter of time before they set out to put something of that praise into forms which could be shared and repeated.

It is another matter, however, to argue in reverse, and to say that, because of this, christological statements in the New Testament most likely owe their origin to Christian hymns. This would be tantamount to saying that the New Testament writers were incapable of making statements about Christ as occasion demanded without quoting liturgical material. We have plenty of Old Testament precedent for straightforward descriptions of God as *well* as ascriptions of praise which were originally designed to be sung. In the same way, we must give the New Testament authors the liberty to describe Christ in whatever terms they wished, even the exalted language of Colossians 1:15-20. In the light of their experience as Christians, it would be scarcely possible to describe Christ in anything but exalted language.

It may be true that this passage goes further in its christological description than any other statement in the Pauline corpus,[93] (although it would be wrong to say that its thought is unparalleled in Paul) and that it provides—along with Hebrews 1:1-4 and the prologue to John's Gospel—a

[p.76]

---

[88] see Rom. 5:11-6:1; *cf*. O. Piper, *Interpretation* 3 (1949) 287.

[89] *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (Lutterworth 1965) 21; *cf*. E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (ET London 1955) 378.

[90] *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge 1967) 20.

[91] *Comm*. 104; cf. Deichgräber , *Gotteshymnus* 152.

[92] *e.g.* 1 Cor. 12:1-3 where the very spontaneity was something of a problem.

[93] Hunter, *Paul* 124ff., uses this fact as evidence that Paul is using liturgical material here.

christology with cosmic dimensions. But it is not necessary, on these grounds, to isolate it, or the other two, as christological hymns. John 1:1-18 may be unique as an introduction to a gospel, but it has been demonstrated that in many respects it is thematically akin to what follows.[94] The opening verses of the letter to the Hebrews are an integral part of the argument, and in some ways compare closely with the context of Colossians 1:15-20. Both appear to be establishing, for different reasons, the supremacy and complete adequacy of Christ. We are tempted to ask how an author could deal with an error involving the person of Christ without making statements about him.

We may also test the thesis by examining those passages in the New Testament which are often used as starting points for liturgical research. Whereas 1 Timothy 3:16 is most certainly christological in content, we could not say the same about 2 Timothy 2:11-13, which is a parenetic exhortation, or about Ephesians 5:14, which seems to be a call to repentance and salvation. We may conclude that, if christological statements are likely to be hymnic, hymns are not necessarily christological.

Some would describe the passage in question more in terms of a credal statement or confession than a hymn,[95] but if this is the case, it differs in several respects from the confessional material which can be isolated elsewhere in the New Testament and subsequently. We can only conjecture that, early on in the history of the churches, Christians formulated the essential elements of their beliefs in credal statements. It can be argued fairly cogently that the initial confession of faith demanded at baptism was the simple but far-reaching acknowledgment, 'Jesus is Lord'.[96] One can appreciate how simple statements of belief like this developed into more elaborate confessions as Christians faced error, a process which continued through the early centuries of the Christian church.[97] It is in this context that Colossians 1:15-20 could be regarded as a christological confession shaped by the demands of a Hellenistic world-view.

But, as far as we can see, the first creeds were simple confessional statements which could be put to catechetical use among new converts.[98] The Colossians statement introduces us to some of the highest christology in the New Testament. It is certainly well beyond the scope of the basic kerygma. Again, as far as we can see, the *name* or the *titles* of Christ formed an important centre-point in early Christian confessions.[99] Jesus was described as 'Christ' or 'Lord' or 'Son', and to own him in these terms was the heart of the converts' response to the gospel. Apart from an introduction to the Son in verse 13, there are none of the well-known

---

[94] J. A. T. Robinson, *NTS* 9 (1962-63) 122; *cf.* R. E. Brown's discussion of the issues in *The Gospel according to John* (London 1966), 18-21.

[95] For a discussion of confessional material in the New Testament see V. H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden 1963); O. Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (ET London 1949).

[96] Rom. 10:9 *cf.* 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:10-11; Col. 2:6.
J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London 1972) 23, goes as far as saying: 'It cannot be too often repeated that, in the proper sense of the terms, no creed, confession or formula of faith can be discovered in the New Testament, with the possible exception of such curt slogans as *Kurios Iesous*.'

[97] Cullmann, *Confessions* 30ff.: but *cf.* Kelly, *Creeds* 25ff., who maintains that it is false to argue that more involved statements of faith are necessarily later productions.

[98] Stauffer, *Theology* 339: 'for the most part credal formulae refer to the elementary truths and events of salvation-history as norms'. Kelly, *Creeds* 30-51, argues that creeds were not originally baptismal statements, but part of the prior catechetical teaching: 'Confessions as such were originally in response to questions addressed to the candidate in baptism.'

[99] Kelly, *Creeds* 18, reviewing simple confessional statements, says: 'The plan of these christological kerygmas is simple: they are built up by attaching to the name of Jesus selected incidents in the redemption story.'

titles of Christ in this passage at all. To propose that we are lacking the first stanza or an opening introductory statement about the Son is to argue from silence.

Another aspect of early credal confessions is the way in which they refer to the events in Jesus' career about which the gospel message hinges. For example, when Paul cites what appears to be a summary of the basic ker-

[p.77]

ygma to the Corinthian church,[100] it is narrative in form.[101] But Colossians 1:15-20 is not cast in narrative form. Although it begins with Christ's agency in creation and providence (vv. 15-17), it moves immediately to his priority in the church (v. 18a) and follows this by a reference to the resurrection (v. 18b). It then proceeds to speak about his incarnation (v.19), followed by his death and its significance (v.20). It is the somewhat illogical order which has prompted a number of editorial attempts to rationalize its form, as we shall see. Whereas there is a movement from creation to redemption, from the cosmos to the church, it is different from anything else we know as a creed.

A further difference is the fact that the death and resurrection of Christ often form the central issues of regular credal form, as we would expect. Although we find both in these verses, the reference to the resurrection is somewhat sophisticated (v.18), and the reference to Christ's death is excised by some as a Pauline gloss on the original text. Unless we argue that Paul has shifted from these central emphases—and that does not seem to be the case from the rest of the letter—we must conclude that this passage is significantly different in form from later confessional statements as we have them. This raises the question as to whether it is a confession at all.

There is no reason why the apostle could not have employed an already existing confessional form in his letters, but as we have seen, the substance of this statement about Christ represents a considerable advance on basic credal forms. At this level, was it likely that Paul would have been secondary and derivative in his thinking? We know that there were other thinkers in the church at that period who came to remarkably similar conclusions to these, but the differences in their terminology reveal that they were essentially independent in their work. If others were able to describe Christ in cosmic terms, so was Paul. We know something of his theological versatility from his other writings—enough to convince us that, when a situation arose which required fresh thought on a subject, he was quite capable of pushing out the boundaries of theological formulation. There is no reason why he was not doing exactly this when he wrote the passage in question.

6 *Strophic arrangement*
Hymns normally broke down into strophes or verses in ancient times as they do today. If we are dealing with hymnic material in Colossians 1:15-20, it follows that we should be able to detect some sort of division into stanzas or lines. It is at this point that we encounter the greatest division among scholars. We may summarize their conclusions.

---

[100] 1 Cor. 15:1 ff.

[101] If 1 Tim. 3:16, Phil. 2:6-11 do represent underlying traditions, we see the same tendency there.

Those who break the passages into strophes do so in the following manner (lines and phrases in brackets are omitted by the author cited; *cf.* the table of editorial omissions):[102]

[p.78]

1. *Two Strophes:*
Aletti: 15-18a/18b-20
Bammel: Chiastic structure
    a=15a; b=15b; b=16a-e; a=16f-18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)
    a*=18bα; b*=18bβ; b =19; a*=20
Burger: Original hymn
    15a, 15b, 16a, 16c/18bα, 18bβ, 19 (verb: κατῴκησεν), 20c
    1st interpolation: 16b, 16f, 18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/18c, 20a
    2nd interpolation: της ἐκκλησίας /20b
Conzelmann: 15-18a (της ἐκκλησίας)/18b-20ac
Deichgräber: 15, 16ab, 17, 18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/18bc, 19, 20a, 20b (διὰ... σταυροῦ αὐτου),
    20c
Dibelius: 15-17/18b-20a+ 18a, 18c
Eckhart: 15a, 15b, 16a, 16f, 17a, 17b, 18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/18ba, 18bβ, 18c, 19, 20a, 20b
    (διὰ... σταυροῦ αὐτου)
Ellingworth: 15ab, 16a-f, 17ab, 18b, 19, 20a-c
Ernst: 15, 16ab, 16f, 18a (τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/18b, 19, 20a, 20b (18c,
    διὰ... τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτου, 20c)
Hegermann: 15a, 15b, 16a, 17b, 18a/18b, 18c, 19, 20a (εἰρηνοποιήσας δι᾽ αὐτοῦ)
Käsemann (Jervell): 15-18a/18b-20 (της ἐκκλησίας δια... σταυροῦ αὐτου)
Lähnemann: Sub-division in 1st strophe: 15-16f/17-18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/18b-20
Lohmeyer: 13-16e/16f-20
Norden (O'Brien): Sub-division in the first strophe: 15-16e/16f-18a/18b-20
Robinson: 15a, 15b, 16ab, 16f, 17a, 17b/18bα, 18bβ, 19, 20a, 18a, 18c
Schenke: 15ab, 16ab, 16f, 17ab, 18a/18b, 18c, 19, 20 (ἰρηνοποιήσας... αυτοῦ)

2. *Three strophes:*
Gabathuler (Lamarche, Wengst):
    15a, 15b, 16a, 16b (16cde)/16f, 17a, 17b, 18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/ 18ba, 18bβ, 19, 20a
    (18c, 20bc)
Maurer: 15, 16/17, 18a/18b, 19, 20
Schille: 15, 16abcde/16f, 17, 18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/l8b, 19, 20
Schweizer: 15ab, 16ab, 16f/17a, 17b, 18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/18b, 19, 20a (Benoit, Fuller,
    Kehl, Hamerton-Kelly, Lohse, Martin, Rey, Sanders and Schnackenburg also regard 17-
    18a as the middle verse)

Testa: Col. 1:15-20 and Eph. 2:14-16
     A = Col. 1:15-17
     B = Col. 1:18-20

[p.79]

---

[102] *cf.* H. J. Gabathuler, *Jesus Christus, Haupt der Kirche― Haupt der Welt* (Zürich 1965); P. Benoit, *Christianity* 226-263; E. Schweizer, *Theologische Berichte* 5 (1976) 163-191; Aletti, *Colossiens* 1, 15-20 21-24.

A* = Eph. 2:14
B* = Eph. 2:15-16

3. *Four strophes:*
Pöhlmann: 15a, 15b, 16a/16b, 16c, 16d, 16e/16f, 17a, 17b, 18a (τῆς ἐκκλησίας)/18b, 19, 20a
Zeilinger: 15aα, 15aβ, 15b, 16a, 16b, 16c, 16f/17a, 17b, 18aα, 18aβ/18ba, 18b(3, 18c, 19, 20aα, 20aβ/20b (διὰ... σταυροῦ αὐτου) 20cα, 20cβ

4. *Five strophes:*
Masson (Hugedé): 15a, 15b, 16a, 16b/16c, 16d, 16e, 16f/17a, 17b, 18b, 18c(18a)/19a, 19b, 20aα, 20aβ/20ba, 20bα, 20cα, 20cβ.

Material which various scholars have felt it was necessary to edit out in order to produce such strophic arrangements may be summarised as follows:[103]

	15a	15b	16a	16b	16c	16d	16e	16f	17a	17b	18a	18b	18c	19	20a	20b	20c
Bammel[1]											(x)		x				x
Beasley-Murray				x	x	x	x						x			x	x
Bornkamm									x	x	x					(x)	
Burger				x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	
Conzelmann											(x)					x	
Deichgräber					x	x	x	x			(x)					(x)	
Eckhart				x	x	x	x				(x)					(x)	
Ernst					x	x	x				(x)		x			(x)	x
Harder					x	x		x	x		x		x			x	x
Hegermann				x	x	x	x	x	x		(x)					(x)	x
Kasemann[2]											(x)					(x)	
Masson[3]											x						
Pöhlmann											(x)		x			x	X
Robinson					x	x	x				(x)		x			x	x
Schattenmann[4]											(x)						
Schenke					x	x	x				(x)					(x)	x
Schweizer[5]					x	x	x				(x)		x			x	x

x signifies an omission, 18a (x) the omission of τῆς ἐκκλησίας only, 20b (x) the omission of διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ only.

1. So Lahnemann
2. So Lohse, Vawter, Jervell
3. So Ellingworth, Hugede
4. So Schille
5. So Gabathuler, Martin, Fuller

[p.80]

it would be impossible to enter into detailed discussion of all these permutations. However, we may consider the underlying principles which have prompted the various arrangements, asking if they are valid or necessary.

7 *The Considerations of Parallelism*

---

[103] *cf.* Benoit, *Christianity* 238.

We have already noted the parallel statements and terms in the passage. It was the presence of these which first suggested some sort of two-fold structure in these verses, the first stanza beginning ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν..., and the second beginning ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή.

Some such division was suggested by the scholars who worked on this text at the very beginning,[104] and it is still widely held—with variations—today.[105]

It has also been argued that the parallelism is not just linguistic. The first strophe isolated in this way has to do with creation and with Christ's primacy in the cosmos—the second deals with redemption and Christ's right to supremacy in the light of what he has done.[106] However, it is in this two-fold theological division that we face our first problem. The redemption theme in the text as we now have it begins too early to sustain this theological parallel. In verse 18a, and before the second relative pronoun, we read about the church: καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας. To retain this, as some have done, would be to destroy the conceptual balance of the two strophes. The most popular solution has been to excise the words τῆς ἐκκλησίας[107] as being an editorial gloss from the hand of Paul,[108] or whoever they consider that the author of the letter was.

When this is done, however, it alters the entire significance of the line. Instead of describing Christ's relationship with his people on the analogy of head and body, it pictures his body as the cosmos, an image understood by many to have been derived from a non-biblical Hellenistic or even Gnostic background.[109] Hence it has been concluded that the original intention of the hymn was very different from the use to which Paul put it.

This has led to the examination of other lines and phrases which might be regarded as redactions of the original hymn, and the approach has been so widely adopted and variously applied that only verses 15-16a, 18b and 19-20a seem to be above suspicion. Sometimes the motive is stylistic, especially when the author sets out to find a perfect syllabic balance between the lines. on other occasions the reason is frankly theological, and depends largely on the presuppositions of the particular scholar. For example verse 16b-e (ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς... εἴτε ἐξουσίαι), along with 20c (εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ κτλ) have been suspect, according to some, because they appear to be Pauline additions geared to the needs of the Colossians' situation.[110]

---

[104] *e.g.* Norden, *Agnostos Theos* 252; J. Weiss, *Christ: The Beginnings of Dogma* (ET London 1911) 85.

[105] *e.g.* Käsemann, *Essays* 151, can speak about two parallel and antithetic stanzas', while Ellingworth, *ET* 73 (1962) 252, could strongly criticize Masson's five-fold reconstruction on the ground that it overlooked the two-fold parallelism of the passage. The widespread employment of the term 'strophe' in respect of this passage should not be taken to indicate that it should be understood in terms of Greek metrical forms. No scholar appears to have seriously proposed that we might be dealing with such. Turner, *Grammar* 96, points out that, apart from quotations (*i.e.* 1 Cor. 15:33; Tit. 1:12), the only example of Greek metrical pattern in the New Testament seems to be 1 Cor. 10:12 (an anapaest) which is probably quite accidental.

[106] *cf.* Hunter, *Paul* 124f.

[107] Some, like Masson, *Comm.* 105, delete the whole line. He feels that the words represent an unexpected contraction in a strophe dealing with the dimensions of the universe.

[108] or some later interpolator.

[109] *e.g.* E. Schweizer, *NTS* 8 (1961-62) 1-11, argues that a Christian group had reinterpreted Paul's original phrase, 'the body of Christ', in familiar Hellenistic terms. Christ was regarded as the world-soul permeating and ruling the whole cosmos, and therefore the head of the universe. Käsemann, *Essays* 151, believes that the author was taking up and adapting a pre-Christian gnostic hymn which was originally concerned with cosmology. Hence the 'body' referred to the cosmos.

[110] *e.g.* H. Hegermann, *Die Vorstellung vom Schöpfungsmittler* (Berlin 1961) 91-92 J. M. Robinson, *JBL* 76 (1957) 276, describes these terms as 'loosely appended appositions'.

Eckhart argues that they interrupt the flow which rises to a climax in verse 17.[111] Pöhlmann, on the other hand, omits 20c on the ground that it is a reprise by the author of Colossians, but retains verse 16b-e.[112] But others have argued for the retention of verse 16b on the very

[p.81]

ground that it is parallel to verse 20c![113] Deichgräber, for his part, omits verse 16c-f (τὰ ὁρατὰ κτλ) because he feels that the words represent Hellenistic categories in contrast to verse 16b, which, he says, is Semitic.[114]

Verses 16f-17 (τὰ πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ... συνέστηκεν) are rarely questioned, because they develop the thought of verses 15-16a, and appear to be necessary for the parallel structure. But Hegermann deletes verses 16f-17a on the ground that they are a Pauline repetition of what is already stated,[115] while Harder dispenses with verse 17 for no apparent reason at all.[116]

Verse 18c (ἵνα γένηται... πρωτεύων) is another frequent casualty. Some omit it on literary grounds in that it breaks the movement between verse 18b (ἵος ἐστιν ἀρχή κτλ) and verse 19 (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν κτλ).[117] Bammel argues that there is a finality about the statement which is out of place in the development of the hymn.[118]

A good number edit out verse 20b, or at least the phrase διά τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ.[119] Käsemann, who understands the whole section in terms of Gnostic motifs, feels that it should end with a reference to Gnostic peace. The stress falls on the resurrection, and mention of the death of Christ produces what he calls 'an anachronistic effect'.[120]

In ways like these, for a variety of reasons, anything from two words to half the entire section may be excluded. There is no textual evidence for any of these omissions.[121] They are based on assumptions about what Paul could or could not have written, and there is wide-ranging opinion even on that score. It raises the whole question, however, why Paul should have gone to such lengths to edit his material as heavily as he did; unless, that is, we fall back on some theory of later interpolation into the apostle's work. Surely the point of such a citation would be that his readers were familiar with it. He would have been reminding them—for his own polemical purposes, no doubt—of truths which they already knew and even sang about. Hence he would feel free to take up a well-known piece and include it in his argument.

---

[111] *Theologia Viatorum* 7 (1959-60) 105.

[112] *ZNW* 64 (1973) 56.

[113] Robinson, *JBL* 76 (1957) 276, 282f.; E. Schweizer, *ThLZ* 86 (1961) 247; Gabathuler, *Jesus Christus* 130.

[114] *Gotteshymnus* 146.

[115] *Vorstellung* 92.

[116] *Paulus* 46ff.

[117] Schweizer, *ThLZ* 86 (1961) 243, 245; Gabathuler, *Jesus Christus* 94, 128.

[118] *ZNW* 62 (1961) 94 J. Lähnemann, *Der Kolosserbrief* (Gütersloh 1971) 36, argues for the deletion of the whole line because he does not believe that a iva clause can be part of a hymn. With regard to Phil. 2:10 where one occurs in a passage widely held to be hymnic, he maintains that in that instance it is permissible because it refers to the acts of Christ, whereas in Col. 1:15-20 we are dealing with the being of Christ.

[119] Among those who delete the whole line are Harder, *Paulus* 48; Robinson, *JBL* 76 (1957) 284.

[120] *Essays* 152 Feuillet, *Le Christ sagesse* 256, feels that the phrase is one of the 'bumps' in the general pattern of the hymn.

[121] Textual variants in these verses are minor on the whole.

But if this is the case, why did Paul add to it in such a way that he altered the essential meaning of the original? If it suited his purpose, why was this necessary?[122] If, as some argue, Paul was citing one of his own earlier compositions, the same objection applies. Why did he need to change it so radically? This is a question which has either not been asked, or has never been satisfactorily answered by those who argue for an edited hymn.

J. M. Robinson dealt with the problem of imbalance between the strophes in a much more radical way.[123] He felt that originally they must have been perfectly matched, and concluded that the original units have been partly conflated and then supplemented with lists of the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου worshipped at Colossae, and with a specific allusion to the cross, plus minor stylistic alterations. This, he argues, was to be expected in the free citation customary in those days. Consequently, he sets about rearranging the material to bring about formal correspondence between

[p.82]

the various statements in the hymn. In order to do this he is prepared to go outside the limits of the passage, gleaning additional data, for example, from chapter 2, verse 9. In this way he repairs what he calls 'the disorder in the whole passage', which 'can hardly be attributed to the careful hand' responsible for the original.

We may note from this illustration the lengths to which a scholar will go in order to prove his point. Few have followed Robinson, partly on the ground that the alterations he proposes meddle too much with the text as we have it, and partly because his arguments for an exactly parallel structure are not convincing.

A more readily accepted solution has been the suggestion that we are not only dealing with two strophes, but that between them there is an intermediate verse, a 'hinge-strophe', which accounts for the difficulty at the beginning of verse 18. Scholars differ, however, when it comes to actually delineating the material which they feel ought to be included in it. While some argue for 16f-18a (τὰ πάντα δι᾽ αὐτου... τῆς ἐκκλησίας), the majority opt for 17-18a (καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ... τῆς ἐκκλησίας).[124]

In this way some are prepared to retain τῆς ἐκκλησίας (verse 18a),[125] but others maintain what they consider to be the editorial insights which arose out of the attempts to break the passage into parallel strophes. E. Schweizer is an example of the latter.[126] He omits verse 16c-e, τῆς ἐκκλησίας, verse 18c and verse 20b-c, and is left with three statements about creation, preservation and redemption.

This a bold approach, but we need to ask if the arguments are valid. Why should there be a short three-line verse between two others which are apparently related in a parallel manner? If

---

[122] *cf*. Feuillet, *op. cit*. 267 Similarly O'Brien, *Comm*. 35, asks why, if the author corrected the hymn, did he allow certain elements which were different from his own theology to remain.

[123] *JBL* 76 (1957) 286; Lohse, *Comm*. 44.

[124] This is not entirely an innovation. E. Lohmeyer, *Comm*. 41-42, began his reconstruction at v.13 and suggested a pattern of 13.14/15.16a-e/16f-17b/18.19.20. This gave him two five-line verses separated by a three-line verse, although his reasons for the division were different from those advanced for an intermediate verse today.

[125] *e.g.* Benoit, *Christianity* 229; W. McCown, *EQ* 51 (1979) 156-166 Benoit's theory is somewhat complicated by his idea that the author borrowed only the first stanza. The second consists of his own thoughts, drawn from Ephesians and put together in a parallelism which was not as skilled as that of the verse he had quoted (250ff.).

[126] *The Church as the Body of Christ* (ET Richmond 1964) 68-78.

parallelism is so important in our understanding of the passage—and we must remember that it was the starting point for strophic reconstruction—what is parallel to the hingeverse (17ab, 18a)? It stands by itself.[127]

The problem underlying a good deal of the editorial re-arrangement is the difficulty which arises from the position of τῆς ἐκκλησίας (v. 18a) in a line which ought, by its position, to be dealing with creation and not with redemption. But what is an embarrassment and unexpected, if we are looking for a passage which is completely balanced in its statements, is quite explicable from a psychological point of view. There is no reason why Paul should not have intended to balance his statements, using similar words and phrases; and as we have seen, being a Jew, it is probable that this was how he thought. However, under pressure—particularly the sort of pressure which dictation imposes upon a writer—it is possible for the human mind to run ahead of itself and produce just the sort of irregularity which we find in the passage as it stands.

We have at least one other example of this sort of thing in Paul's writings. Concluding his great exhortation to the Roman Christians (Rom. 8:38) he tells them that nothing will separate them from God's love, οὔτε θάνατος οὔτε ζωὴ οὔτε ἄγγελοι οὔτε ἀρχαι ἐνεστῶτα οὔτε

[p.83]

μέλλοντα οὔτε δυνάμεις.... Now it appears that δυνάμεις is out of logical order. It ought to have been placed after ἀρχαὶ, which is exactly where the Byzantine text puts it. But this is no doubt an attempt, on the part of some copyist, to tidy up the text in exactly the same way that modern scholars have dealt with the difficult τῆς ἐκκλησίας in the passage under review. If we would be prepared to accept this explanation of Colossians 1:18a, it would relieve us of a great deal of imaginative, though not very convincing, rearrangement and editorial work in this passage.

8 *Syllabic Investigation*

A problem related to the various attempts to reconstruct the original hymn is the fact that, even with severe pruning and rearrangement, the lines which are left are often of unequal length. A number have assumed, not unreasonably, that in singable hymns, the lines should correspond in the number of beats or syllables they contain. This, therefore, has become the criterion for assessing the material, with the aim of producing a syllabic balance between the lines.

C. Masson is a good representative of this approach,[128] and he produced a five strophe arrangement. In order to arrive at this solution, he had to omit verse 18a altogether as an addition to the original. In fact he tells us that the redactor did not value poetic form.[129] He argues that the number of syllables involved explain the compounded ἀποκαταλλάξαι. It was necessary to make up the required amount. The method also explains the elliptical πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα which requires τῆς θεότητος to complete it. Had these two words been added, however, it would have increased the number of syllables in that line to 14, something which

---

[127] McCown, *EQ* 51 (1979) 161, suggests that the intermediate verse should be regarded as a refrain written in the same way that modern hymnbooks would print a refrain once, to be repeated after each verse. But is it not going a little too far to credit the writers in New Testament times with the methods of modern publishers?

[128] *Comm.* 195; followed by N. Hugedo, *Comm.* 48-9.

[129] *Comm.* 107.

is without parallel in the hymn. One is tempted to ask how Paul knew that he had to add τῆς θεότητος in 2:9 if he was citing a hymn in 1:15-20, but Masson does not answer that question.

It is Masson who also argues that there are several cases of alliteration, which for him was a sign of hymnic material.[130] He also tells us that there are signs of anaphora and epiphora, the author studiously employing words with the opening and ending in the same vowel in order to impart rough rhyme and assonance.

Although he strongly pleads his cause, he seems to overlook the actual fact that the lines which he produces do *not* contain the same number of syllables. In spite of his efforts, his strophes are badly balanced, and in spite of the fact that he claims to argue from parallelism, he appears to have overlooked the basic two-fold movement of the passage. The original correspondence between the opening lines of verses 15 and 18b has been swallowed up in the rearrangement, while his arguments from alliteration are not convincing enough for many others to follow his lead.[131]

N. Kehl has attempted a similar syllabic analysis, beginning his investigation with verse 12.[132] He observed that the actual parallel statements in the section were both few and simple. Consequently he removed verses

[p.84]

16b-18a, 20b-c as being additional material geared to the Colossian situation. Comparing what remained, he argued for a syllabic balance between the first and the second strophe:

		syllables
ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν	ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή	5 – 5
τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου	πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν	8 – 8
πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν	9 – 9
ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα	πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι	11 – 9
τὰ πάντα δι᾽ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται	καὶ δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν	13 – 16
		46 – 47 - 93

Counting the number of syllables in verses 12-14, Kehl discovered that there were 88, a figure he then proceeded to produce by some editing of the parallels above. Hence we have two strophes of 88 syllables apiece. His theory is somewhat further complicated by his suggestion that the additional lines were also written in rhythmic prose, so that one can find a rough correspondence in the number of syllables in each line.

---

[130] ibid. 106.
[131] Pöhlmann's reconstruction, also based on the number of syllables in each line, restores something of the parallelism in a four-stanza arrangement, *Comm.* 56. But even after editing out τῆς ἐκκλησίας and vv. 18c, 20bc, he can still only produce verses of unequal length (the first only has three lines) while the relative pronouns of vv. 15, 18b occur in the first and the fourth.
[132] *Christushymnus* 32-34.

Quite apart from the fact that he has opposed lines which are not parallel statements, he seems to make light of the resulting differential between their syllabic value. Even with his editing of the material, only six of the ten lines actually correspond numerically. What is more, 88 is a very round figure for 93, and although, as we have seen, verses 12-14 have a stately ring about them, they appear to be of a rather different character to the proposed parallel statements of verses 15-20. As with other attempts to analyse the passages in terms of syllabic balance, Kehl's attempt has all the signs of manipulation governed by the *a priori* assumption that such a balance exists.[133]

9 *Chiastic Arrangement*

More than one scholar has felt that the key to understanding the passage is the device of chiasmus, the *a.b.b.a* pattern which has been shown to be a characteristic of Old Testament parallelism.[134] E. Bammel discovered a somewhat complicated double chiastic arrangement in Colossians 1:15-20.[135] The major structure he suggests is:

[p.85]

a verse 15a (ὅς ἐστιν... ἀοράτου)	a* verse 18b (ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή)
b verse 15b (πρωτότοκος κτλ)	b* verse 18b (πρωτότοκος κτλ)
b verse 16a (ὅτι ἐν... τὰ πάντα)	b* verse 19 (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κτλ)
a verse 17ab-18a (omitting	a* verse 20ab (καὶ δι᾽ αὐτοῦ...
τῆς ἐκκλησίας	δι᾽ αὐτοῦ

In order to produce this, Bammel has to delete verse 18c (ἵνα γένηται κτλ) and verse 20c (εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ κτλ). His substructure is based on verse 16b-e:

α ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς	
β καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς	
β τά ὁρατο	β´ εἴτε θρόνοι
α καὶ τὰ ἀόρατο	α´ εἴτε κυριότητες
	α´ εἴτε ἀρχαὶ
	β´ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι

Once again we find that we need to edit our text in order to sustain the argument, which even then is not completely convincing, especially in the context of Paul's writings. For chiasmus, common in the Old Testament and a characteristic of Latin literature, is rare both in Greek and in the New Testament apart from Paul.[136] The apostle, possibly because of his Old Testament background, uses the device on a number of occasions, sometimes rhetorically and

---

[133] Schattenmann's analysis, already mentioned (*Prosahymnus* 16-18), which divides vv. 13-20 into a Logos hymn and a Christ hymn, is also based on syllabic balance. Vv. 12, 15-18a and 13-14, 18b-20 each have, in his opinion, 151 syllables. Lohse, *Comm.* 44 rightly calls his approach 'an arbitrary procedure'; *cf.* G. Schille *ThLZ* 92 (1967) 36.

[134] N. W. Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament* (Carolina 1942); *AJSL* 46 (1929) 104-126; *AJSL* 49 (1932) 281-312.

[135] *ZNW* 52 (1961) 88-95.

[136] F. Blass, A. Debrunner, R. W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* 252-3; Turner, *Grammar* 1, 345-347; 4, 97, points out that this is all the more remarkable in that the Septuagint frequently ignores the chiasmus of the Hebrew text. There have been various attempts to find a chiastic pattern in the structure of Luke's writings: *e.g.* M. Goulder, *Studia Evangelica* 2 (Berlin 1964) (ed. F. L. Cross) 195-202; C. H. Talbert, Literary Patterns, *Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (Missoula, Montana 1974) 51-57; *cf.* K. E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids 1976) who also finds chiasmus in Jesus' teaching.

sometimes as part of his argument.[137] It might even be said to be an unconscious feature of his style. In a passage as profound as the one in question, he would have every temptation to write in this way, just as it would have been natural for him to employ parallelism.[138]

Similar observations may be made about Giavini's chiastic theory which embraces verses 12-20.[139] He maintained that the focal centre of the passage was verse 16b-e which enumerated the subjects over which Christ exercised his pre-eminence. Hence:

> C   (12-13) 14 Christ the redeemer
> B   15, 18a The prerogatives of Christ
>   A   16a Christ the creator
>   X   16b-e
>   A* 16f-17b Christ the creator
> B*   18bc The prerogatives of Christ
> C*   19-20b Christ the redeemer
>   X*   20c Reprise of the focal centre

Once again, considerable editorial work is necessary in order to produce the desired result, and the final arrangement overlooks the parallelism which was our starting point. There seems to be no good reason for

[p.86]

making verse 16b-e the focal centre. If anything, the list is an expansion of τὰ πάντα (v. 16a), while the central theme of the whole section is surely the priority of Christ, rather than his subjects.

As we have noted, Gibbs has pointed out that there is what he calls 'a long circular movement of thought' which begins early in the chapter with the note of thanksgiving, and which runs right through into the early verses of the next chapter.[140] It may well be that this was Paul's method, and that he might have employed chiasmus along the way, but the theory that our verses contain a chiastic hymn is both speculative and difficult to sustain.

10 *Free Rhythm*

The real difficulties in reconstructing anything like a regular form, whatever criteria are used, have led some to fall back on the assertion that it is hardly probable that a primitive hymn would have consisted of regularly constructed strophes at all. Hence Lohse can maintain that 'an exactly parallel structure for the strophes can only be achieved through deletions and transpositions', because we are dealing with a composition 'in the free rhythm of hymnic prose'.[141] This could be so, but hymns have to be sung or chanted, and consequently their form must lend itself to this end. However, the most likely arrangement, that of two verses derived from the parallelism in the passage, would have been the most cumbersome from this

---

[137] *e.g.* Rom. 14:7ff.; 1 Cor. 4:10; 7:1-7; 8:5; 9:19-22 M. Black, *BJRL* 45 (1962) 314f., argues for a chiastic structure in Philippians; J. Bligh, *Galatians* (London 1969) 37-42, proposed that the whole letter was written in the form of chiasmus.

[138] Vawter, *CBQ* 33 (1971) 69: 'a chiastic structure presumed but hardly demonstrated'. R. P. Martin, *EQ* 36 (1964) 197, argues for a chiastic balance between 16f. and 20: a τὰ πάντα b καὶ δι αὐτοῦ b δι αὐτοῦ καὶ a τὰ πάντα; but he seems to overlook the fact that this is a different word order from that of the passage.

[139] *RB* 15 (1967) 317-320; *cf.* Aletti, *Colossiens 1, 15-20* 42.

[140] *Creation and Redemption* 101.

[141] *Comm.* 44.

point of view. As we have already noted, this can be seen when the proposed hymn is compared with the relatively simple hymn form of, for example, the Psalms of Solomon, the *Hodayoth* of Qumran or the Odes of Solomon. As far as the passage is concerned, simpler forms of strophic arrangement can only be achieved by an extensive editing which is far from convincing.

It could be argued that we should expect strophic irregularities in hymns of this period, because they were the product of spontaneous Spirit-led worship.[142] If this was the case, we need to ask if they would be likely to be written down, and if so, if they would be likely to be known far beyond the bounds of the local assembly. We have seen that one of the reasons for such a quotation would be that both Paul and the Colossians knew the piece, which means that if it was a hymn, it must have been a popular one—because Paul is writing from a distance to a church which he had never visited.

It may be true that 'the bounds of the category [hymn] cannot always be strictly maintained, for the style of a sermon, of a prayer and of a hymn may touch one another closely'.[143] However, if it can be shown that the passage does not fall into a hymnic pattern without considerable effort on the part of the editors, and if it is not a written prayer, we may reasonably conclude that it is neither, but rather part of Paul's written sermon to a church he could not visit for more personal preaching and teaching.

The fact is, that when all the editorial work has been done, and when all

[p.87]

the residual material has been rearranged, the 'hymn' which remains follows no known metre.[144] 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.[145] 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. It is no argument to work from the way in which liturgy subsequently developed and then to read back the results into a period about which we know relatively nothing in this respect. It is probably no accident that interest in liturgical remains embedded in the New Testament runs parallel to a renewed interest in liturgy generally. It is not disputed that this is a legitimate area of scholarly interest and debate, but with regard to the practices and products of New Testament times the whole approach is hypothetical and based on little hard evidence. As J. C. O'Neill has pointed out, hypotheses are multiplied in order to save the original theory, but in this way scholars are in danger of 'pretending that additional theories make the

---

[142] M. Dibelius, *A Fresh Approach to the Literature of the New Testament* (ET Hertford 1936) 146; cf. 1 Cor. 14:26.

[143] Dibelius, *op. cit.* 253; cf. Feuillet, *Le Christ sagesse* 256, who concludes that it is a hymn, but not in the sense of a true hymn written to be sung.

[144] *cf.* Dibelius, *op. cit.* 251.

[145] As far as Old Testament precedents are concerned, there is nothing to parallel any suggested arrangement of this passage. It is difficult to establish discernible metre in OT poetry, and strophic arrangement is not common; *cf.* W. S. Smith *Musical Aspects of the New Testament* (Amsterdam 1970) 18; C. Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (ET London 1966). There are no actual pagan parallels: *cf.* Delling, *Worship in the New Testament* (London 1962) 83f. Appeal to the hymns of the Therapeutae referred to by Philo, *De Vit. Cont.* 25, 29, 80, apart from revealing that they sang hymns in 'reverent' metres, gives us no real clue as to the actual metres they employed.

first hypothesis more likely rather than less likely'.[146] This may be harsh judgement, but it must be admitted that the progress of research in the area of strophic arrangement in this passage hardly inspires confidence.

[p.93]

Commentaries on Colossians specifically cited (*Comm*.):

[p.94]

Abbott (Edinburgh, 1899); Hugede (Geneva, 1968); Lohmeyer (Gottingen, 1930); Lohse (ET Philadelphia, 1967); Martin (Exeter, 1972); Masson (Neuchatel/Paris, 1950); Moule (Cambridge, 1957); O'Brien (Waco, Texas, 1982).

Abbreviations:

AJSL   *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature*
CBQ   *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ET   *Expository Times*
EQ   *Evangelical Quarterly*
JBL   *Journal of Biblical Literature*
NTS   *New Testament Studies*
SJT   *Scottish Journal of Theology*
TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
ThLZ   *Theologische Literaturzeitung*
ZNW   *Zeitschrift fur die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*

---

[146] *NTS* 26 (1980) 87f.