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Nijay Gupta

George Fox University, [ngupta@georgefox.edu](mailto:ngupta@georgefox.edu)

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# What is in a Name? The Hermeneutics of Authorship Analysis Concerning Colossians

**Nijay Gupta**

Seattle Pacific University, USA

## Abstract

Pauline scholars, especially in the last century, have been almost evenly divided on whether they consider Colossians to be genuinely written by Paul or by someone else in his name. Through an exploration of the commentaries of eight key scholars on Colossians, this study examines the hermeneutics of authorship analysis in order to determine the key factors involved and how they are weighed. For the study of the authorship of Colossians to move forward in a productive way, a number of yet-understudied issues must be addressed and closely researched. In the meantime, tentativeness in conclusions is the most reliable stance.

## Keywords

Apostle Paul, authorship, Colossians, letters, pseudonymity

While I was in graduate school, especially early in my degree when I had little knowledge of the field of Pauline studies, I came across what I considered to be a very curious book: *Letters That Paul Did Not Write* by Raymond F. Collins (1988). You normally read a book about the substance and theology of something someone *did* write, so what could this be about? The subtitle was instructive: *The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Pauline Pseudepigrapha*. Fast forward more than two decades and we have the recent contribution by Bart Ehrman called *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (2011). Of course, in the last two decades, indeed in the

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## Corresponding author:

Nijay Gupta, Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies, Seattle Pacific University, 3307 Third Ave W, Seattle, WA 98119, USA.

Email: [guptan@spu.edu](mailto:guptan@spu.edu)

last few generations, many books, articles, and essays have been written on the subject of how many letters in the New Testament have apostolic names internally attributed, and yet, for a host of reasons, there is reason to doubt that the apostles actually *wrote* these documents. In that sense, they are ‘pseudepigraphal’, books falsely attributed to an authoritative religious figure, while actually written by someone else. And scholars are divided on the implications of this phenomenon in the Bible, if indeed it is considered to be an accurate label.

On the one side, we may take the example of I. Howard Marshall on the Pastoral Epistles. Marshall finds the label ‘pseudepigraphy’ to be inappropriate in this matter, because it carries such a negative connotation. Instead, Marshall refers to the Pastorals as ‘allonymous’, or an example of ‘allepigraphy’, as ‘somebody close to a dead person continued to write as (they thought that) he would have done’ (Marshall 1999: 79). In Marshall’s estimation, the author would have had no intent to manipulate or distort Paul’s teachings, but to galvanize it in a new situation or era: ‘The letters are ostensibly concerned above all else to conserve and consolidate, to preserve the Pauline gospel and teaching as the right response to heretical teaching’ (1999: 81).

On the other side of the spectrum of this issue, in terms of responses to a situation where a NT letter is deemed to be written by someone other than the named writer, we have Neil Elliott who considers texts like the Pastoral Epistles to have been pseudonymously written, but accepted into the canon because the early church believed them to be genuine. He goes on to pit them against the theology and ethics of, for example, Romans and thus represent a ‘canonical betrayal’ of the real message of the apostle Paul where false writers sought ‘to capitalize on the apostle’s authority to advance their own policies and prejudices’ (1995: 21). Elliott considers them actual forgeries and finds the ethics of this practice problematic. He reasons, ‘we must be prepared to judge that the author of 1 Timothy, for example, was as much a betrayer of Paul as his “disciple”, a saboteur of one form of Pauline community as much as a member of a Pauline “school”’ (1995: 29). As you can see, on the matter of pseudonymity, the theological and ethical stakes are high. When we ask the titular question with a view towards Colossians, ‘What is in a Name?’, there is much indeed. Markus Barth portrays well the seriousness of the matter.

Ever since, on literary and historical grounds, the secondary and spurious origin of Colossians was ‘discovered’ or ‘demonstrated’, cumulative experience has shown that the verdict ‘inauthentic’ leads to a depreciation and devaluation of some elements, at times even of the essential substance and character of this letter... The work of a disciple of Paul could not command the same respect as the work of the master (Barth and Blanke 1994: 114).

The purpose of this article is to focus attention on scholarly analyses of Colossians and its authorship. However, we will not attempt to get to the bottom of the issue

and discover the ‘truth’ once and for all. Many books and articles have attempted to do this and the debate continues. Rather, we will take an interest in the following questions:

1. On the basis of what reasons have scholars judged Colossians to be pseudonymous or authentic?
2. How are such discrete types of evidence weighted and why?
3. How has the landscape of rationales changed over time?
4. On which particular factors does the current state of the issue hinge?

This article presents an exercise in disciplinary hermeneutical analysis—how do Pauline scholars come to the conclusions that they do about determining the ‘right’ answers regarding the authorship of Colossians? Part of what this article divulges is how some tectonic shifts have taken place on this matter. While the debate continues over whether Colossians is genuine or not, some of the factors have changed in weight.

The outline of the article will proceed in this way. First, we will observe the research and reasoning of eight scholars (Ferdinand Christian Baur, Eduard Lohse, Eduard Schweizer, Peter T. O’Brien, James D.G. Dunn, Markus Barth, Andrew Lincoln, and Margaret MacDonald). Then we will analyze the various logical strategies employed. Finally, we will examine factors that shape the current debate.

## **Eight Commentators on the Authorship of Colossians**

There are scores of books written on the issue of the authorship of Pauline letters, and there are dozens upon dozens of commentaries on Colossians, most of which discuss this matter in earnest. To offer a manageable discussion of authorship in Colossians, we will focus our attention on eight important commentators. An attempt was made, in the selection of these, to show a balance of scholars throughout the last several decades, on both sides of the pseudonymous/genuine debate, and from more than one region/country. In this section, we will take a short amount of space to sketch the individual perspectives of these writers in particular on the matter of authorship and Colossians. For further study, scholars in favor of Pauline authorship include Kümmel 1975: 30-40; Martin 1981: 30-40; Cannon 1983: 220-91; Bruce 1984: 28-32. For those who see it as pseudonymous, see Gnlika 1980: 11-17; Pokorný 1987: 1-2; Wilson 2005: 9-19.

### ***F.C. Baur***

The great Tübingen New Testament scholar of the nineteenth century, Ferdinand Christian Baur, did not write a commentary on Colossians in particular, but gave

an influential discussion on the matter in his *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ* (1875: 2.1-44). Baur tethered the fate of Ephesians and Colossians together due to their similarities. Thus, if one of them was deemed inauthentic, so was the other, because of their close (historical) relationship. What struck Baur in Colossians was the difference he saw theologically in comparison to the genuine letters. Two matters, in particular, were dealt with as of interest. First, Colossians demonstrated a cosmological obsession, an interest in ‘the transcendent regions of the spirit-world’ (1875: 2.6). Secondly, the Christology appeared quite grandiose, supporting ‘absolute pre-existence’ (1875: 2.7).

While these matters were cause for notice according to Baur, he was more convinced of Colossians’ pseudonymous authorship based on his reading of how well the description of the false teachers fit the profile of Gnosticism. Somewhat ironically, Baur wrote this about mirror-reading the Colossian heresy and opponents: ‘how hard it is to construct the peculiar character of the sectaries in question from the various single traits, mostly the merest hints, which are given us of them’ (1875: 2.26-27). In his own analysis, though, he felt quite confident that Colossians contained evidence of concern with Gnosticism. Baur identified, in Colossians, attention to Gnostic cosmology, Gnostic terms (such as *plērōma* [fullness], *sōma* [body], *sophia* [wisdom]), similarities with Irenaeus’ polemic against Gnostics, references to ‘Gnostic ideas and expressions’ (e.g., Col. 1.6, 9, 26; 2.22; 3.10, 16), and Valentinian dualism. As far as Baur was concerned, Paul could not have written Colossians because ‘there is no proof of the existence of Gnostic ideas at so early a period’ (1875: 2.21).

Baur observed a number of anomalies in Colossians, yellow flags like unusual emphases and stylistic differences with the genuine letters. However, the main issue for Baur was that Colossians apparently came from a later era of Christianity theologically (in terms of theological developments in ecclesiology and Christology) and especially with regard to a historical setting where the opposition had a strong Gnostic ring.

### Eduard Lohse

Moving forward almost a century later, we have the influential *Hermeneia* commentary by Eduard Lohse (1971). Lohse, also concluding that Colossians is not authentic, addressed several issues of concern in this letter. In terms of looking at vocabulary and style matters, Lohse’s discussion is very careful and detailed. He observes the absence of key terms such as *hamartia* (sin), *dikaïosynē* (righteousness), *nomos* (law), and *sōteria* (salvation) as well as 34 *hapax legomena* (see 1971: 86-89). When it comes to the rhetorical style of Colossians, Lohse notes that it resembles more a ‘liturgical-hymnic’ style, rather than the more Stoic-diatribal or Jewish-scribal manner that we see in the ‘major Pauline letter’

(1971: 88-89). Nevertheless, Lohse treated the final arbiter in this case to be the issue of the theological developments of Colossians.

Pauline theology has undergone a profound change in Col, which is evident in every section of the letter and has produced new formulations in Christology, ecclesiology, the concept of the apostle, eschatology, and the understanding of baptism (1971: 180-81).

Lohse concludes that the letter was written by someone skilled in 'Pauline thought' who wanted to address issues in his own community in Asia Minor, probably around 80 CE.

### *Eduard Schweizer*

Another Eduard from the middle and late twentieth century, this time a Swiss professor of New Testament, wrote a commentary on Colossians that has been equally influential, especially when it comes to matters pertaining to authorship (1982). Schweizer offers a rather balanced and trenchant examination of the complexities of the text of Colossians and the problem of authorship. In terms of word usage, he finds no reason for *hapax legomona* to rule out Pauline authorship. Indeed, he argues that such unusual language may be accounted for by the 'Hymn' (1.15-20) and 'the philosophy that is being opposed' (1982: 16). More disconcerting for Schweizer is the stylistic anomalies: lack of hypotaxis, extensive appearance of pleonasms, genitive strings, etc. While such elements do occur on occasion in the *Hauptbriefe*, it is pervasive in Colossians. Even more problematic is the logic and rhetorical flow of Colossians: 'The train of thought is associative, scarcely ordered, and in any case not in such a way that the reader is needed as a partner in dialogue on a conceptual journey' (1982: 18). Schweizer concludes that this reveals

an author who, although following Paul completely in vocabulary and theological concepts, differs from him altogether in his mode of argument. The letter can neither have been written nor dictated by Paul (1982: 18-19).

Again, Schweizer finds this particular kind of logical problem in Colossians more decisive than a number of other issues, such as the 'realized eschatology' (which could be explained as a response to the specific circumstances) or the absence of Spirit language (which he views as more pervasive when Paul is dealing with 'effervescent enthusiasm' [1982: 17-18]).

Schweizer does not immediately argue for a pseudonymous writer many decades later trying to utilize the name and legacy of Paul, as some scholars have done. He finds some reason to believe this document was written quite close to

the time of Paul—e.g., there is apparently no hierarchy of church leadership that would be found in a more formal era of Christianity, and the author takes a more ‘charismatic’ approach to combating the aberrant philosophy (e.g., with the ‘word of Christ’ and spiritual songs) rather than relying on some kind of executive ecclesial authority (1982: 16). Ultimately, Schweizer sees the work of an admirer of Paul behind the letter—someone who places Paul in an iconic role as the apostolic sufferer and revealer of mysteries (1982: 17).

In a discussion regarding pseudepigraphy in the ancient world, Schweizer accepts that this type of authorial approach was not uncommon and that it is conceivable that Colossians could fit this category. He is hesitant, though, because Colossians was probably written so near to the death of Paul.

I confess that as far as I am concerned a clever forgery of this kind remains inconceivable, especially in a letter that is so very close to Paul, and would therefore presumably be the first to be seized on as inauthentic (1982: 21).

In light of Schweizer’s impression that Colossians was not written by Paul, but does not seem to be a later forgery, he proposes a *via media*—Timothy wrote on Paul’s behalf while the apostle was in prison (see Phil. 2.20). Could it be, then, that Paul placed his ‘stamp of approval’ by dictating or writing the closing greetings? For Schweizer, many enigmas and perplexities in Colossians would be dealt with. For example, the style and logic of the letter is Timothy’s, probably based on Pauline teaching and thinking. The hagiographic depiction of Paul would also be explained. Even the use of hymnic and traditional elements (such as the *Haustafel*) may have come from a desire on Timothy’s part to set forth reliable as well as relevant teaching.

### *P.T. O’Brien*

In 1982 (the same year that Schweizer’s English translation of his commentary came out), Peter T. O’Brien published his Colossians volume in the Word Biblical Commentary series which presently stands as one of the most extensive defenses of Pauline authorship. Rather than sitting neutrally on authorship matters and *then* deciding in favor of Pauline authorship, he essentially takes this as the stated position (supported by Patristic witness) and weighs the significance of challenges against it.

In terms of word use and the absence and presence of certain concepts, like Schweizer, O’Brien attributes such variance and peculiarities to context (e.g., ‘interaction with the false teaching’ [1982: xlii]). One thing that O’Brien is insistent upon is that scholars tend to sideline the vast amount of overlap and similarity with the accepted Pauline letters and focus too narrowly on differences. For O’Brien, there is a certain naïveté in the hasty dismissal of genuine authorship

which presupposes ‘an almost infallible understanding of what Paul could or could not have done’ (1982: xliii).

Much like Lohse, O’Brien finds most critical in this matter the *theology* of Colossians and whether or not it could be connected to the historical Paul (1982: xlv). In terms of the possibility that Colossians’ Christology is unique, as Lohse suggests, O’Brien entertains the likelihood that Paul may have been working out his own Christology ‘in relation to and as a correction of the false teaching in Colossae’ (1982: xlv; O’Brien would say much the same for the matter of the Christ-head ecclesiology of Colossians; 1982: xlv). In that sense, it is ‘new’ and ‘different’, but neither incompatible nor substantively contradictory.

One plank in O’Brien’s argument is that hypotheses regarding the later context of a pseudonymous writer do not seem to fit any better the actual content of Colossians than a theory that works with Paul as the author. All scholars in this conversation are doing educated guesswork—the challenge is to limit the margin of error as best as possible.

### *Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke*

In 1994, the Anchor Bible series published a Colossians commentary authored by Markus Barth along with his pupil Helmut Blanke. In many ways, Barth and Blanke’s perspective on the authorship of Colossians echoes O’Brien’s, and not only in conclusion. Barth and Blanke point to the many similarities that Colossians bears with the *Hauptbriefe*. In terms of variance in thought and theology, Barth and Blanke conclude: ‘Great is...the probability that Paul and his thinking were developing and growing over the years of his ministry’ (1994: 121).

One important contribution they make is regarding the double-edged nature of pointing out the ‘otherness’ (so to speak) of Colossians and then attributing it to a later pseudonymous writer. Barth and Blanke wonder if such a crafty writer would have been so sloppy as to deviate so far from what he must have known about Paul’s own style and diction. In a sense, even the variance in thought and style offer some opportunity to rule out a ‘*famulus*’ (1994: 121).

Two conclusions that Barth and Blanke make are instructive in terms of the method of determining authorship. In the first place, they uphold the principle of *in dubio pro reo*—‘in doubt, side with the accused’; another way of saying ‘innocent until proven guilty’ (1994: 125). Secondly, following closely from this, they reason that modern scholars are not in a secure enough position to rule out Pauline authorship on the basis of the information at hand whether language, historical matters, or theological orientation (1994: 125). In the end, then, Barth and Blanke hold Paul to be the author (or primary source of information). When we see diversity among his letters in thought and argumentation we observe the ‘mind of the apostle, who faced to the best of his gifts and capabilities the problems of the people whom he had to address’ (1994: 125).

### James D.G. Dunn

Only a couple of years later, another major work on Colossians was written, this time by British scholar James D.G. Dunn. While Dunn freely admitted that he has no intention of bringing new research to the matter, he discusses it with such clarity and depth that it is worth examining (1996: 35).

Dunn considers four issues to be problematic for viewing Paul as the author: manner/mode of expression, flow of thought, rhetorical technique, and theological perspective. Primarily for these reasons, Dunn carefully concludes that ‘the letter comes from a hand other than Paul’s’ (1996: 35). He sets aside the idea that Paul may simply have used a different amanuensis for this letter as compared to Galatians or 1 Corinthians. Dunn refers to Colossians as having ‘fingerprint’ differences—marks and patterns of thinking and personality at the core of the person distinctly different from Paul (1996: 36).

On the other hand, Dunn is not convinced that the text stands at a far distance from Paul either. The level of detail used with respect to the Colossian church (esp. in 4.7-17) would be counterproductive if it were all verisimilitudes produced by an imitator (1996: 37). Dunn puts it this way: ‘Why would a pseudopigrapher, consciously free to create his own history and aware that Colossae was not strictly speaking one of Paul’s churches, choose as the recipient of his putative letter, of all places, Colossae?’ (1996: 37; note: Colossae was devastated by an earthquake around 60 CE after which it could not fully recover).

Dunn, again acknowledging that he is happy to rely on an already articulated position, finds Schweizer’s theory the most persuasive: Timothy wrote the letter and what we see in Colossians is Paul’s theology refracted through his friend’s own mind and pen. Dunn also contemplates the possibility that Paul had already died when Timothy wrote Colossians; in either case, it serves as a bridge between the Pauline era and the post-Pauline era (1996: 35-39).

### Andrew T. Lincoln

Though the commentary on Colossians by Andrew T. Lincoln in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* set (vol. XI, 2000) has not attracted the attention of very many scholars and researchers, it is worthwhile to include his work in this study because of his pervasively influential work on Ephesians (1990), a text that Lincoln considers to be pseudonymously written. As for Colossians, he also believes that it not written by the apostle Paul, but only comes to this view based on a ‘cumulative argument’ (2000: 580).

Issues such as unusual vocabulary and missing ‘Pauline’ words are mentioned by Lincoln, but given little weight. The so-called ‘realized eschatology’ of Colossians is also minimally impactful, as Lincoln determines this a contextualized emphasis (2000: 578-79).

There are, though, some question marks for Lincoln regarding the scarcity of references to the Spirit and an imminent Parousia, as well as the development of body/head imagery and the unusual and frequent use of the word ‘mystery’. Again, while any one of these matters in isolation would not draw too much attention, ‘the question remains whether...Paul would have changed his perspective on so many significant matters’ (2000: 579).

Three matters are more decisive for Lincoln. Firstly, we have the matter of language. Working from the research of Bujard (1973) and Kiley (1986), Lincoln notes that, grammatically speaking, ‘Colossians lacks the adversative, causal, consecutive, recitative, copulative, and disjunctive conjunctions that are characteristic of Paul’s style’ (2000: 578). As for syntax, he points out in Colossians ‘long sentences with relative clauses, nouns linked in genitive constructions, and the piling up of synonyms’ (2000: 578). Again, for Lincoln, the *manner* of communication is noticeably different. And an argument that Paul used a different amanuensis is not convincing as our information on how Paul used a secretary or co-author is still a bit of a mystery (2000: 587).

Secondly, Lincoln is persuaded that the author used the word ‘faith’ (*pistis*; 1.23; 2.5, 7) as if it were a technical term: *the faith*. Additionally, the appearance of a household code guides Lincoln to believe that this fits better into a later time period (2000: 579). Finally, when it comes to the writing of pseudonymous works, Lincoln directs attention to the commonality of this kind of literary-authorial approach in the Greco-Roman world which offered ‘the occasion for passing on philosophical teaching and portraying a particular philosophy as a model’ (2000: 582).

### *Margaret MacDonald*

Our final Colossians commentator under consideration is Margaret MacDonald, who wrote in 2008 for the Sacra Pagina series. MacDonald begins her discussion by urging caution against glossing over the ways in which Colossians coheres with the undisputed letters (like O’Brien). Colossians bears that stamp of Paul’s letters where he (the author) takes an interest in supporting the life of the community and responding to false teaching that has had a deleterious effect on them (2008: 7). Also, MacDonald agrees with Dunn (and others) that the final section of Colossians (4.7-18) offers such vivid detail of a particular group of people that seems out of place in a letter by a later disciple of Paul’s writing in his name (2008: 7).

Like Lincoln, though, MacDonald is struck by a variety of challenges with claiming Colossians as a work of the apostle Paul himself. She naturally addresses the Christology and eschatology as developed (2008: 7). Also, she notes the language elements (long sentences, synonym strings, etc.), as well as the obvious absence of standard Pauline phrases like ‘my brothers and sisters’ (2008: 8).

However, perhaps most problematic are the features of Colossians that could better be placed historically in a later period and can be accounted for as purely rhetorical elements in the letter. Drawing from sociological theories associated with Max Weber and Bruce Malina, MacDonald finds that models exist for understanding how the death of a charismatic leader (such as Paul) could create problems that needed to be addressed through stabilizing frames of reference (2008: 2-3). Colossians could be understood from this perspective rhetorically, as '1:6-8 and 4:7-18 reflect an effort to reinforce the authority of Paul's co-workers (especially Epaphras and Tychicus) and to emphasize their connection with the apostle' (2008: 7-8).

MacDonald also finds it implausible that the household code (3.18–4.1) represents Paul's own perspective and framework. Rather, she finds it consistent with 'Pauline Christianity' in the latter first century and the beginning of the second. The apostle himself preferred celibacy and saw the present state of the world as 'passing away'. Colossians 'recommends a way of life that allows believers to be physically integrated within the urban centers of the Greco-Roman world, but the symbolism of Colossians, replete with images of a cosmic Christ and a heavenly reign of believers, reminds the recipients that they ultimately belong to another world' (2008: 8).

In the end, then, MacDonald prefers to see Colossians as 'deutero-Pauline', but does not see this as a dispensable forgery. A younger co-worker of Paul's or a later Paulinist may have written Colossians in tribute to Paul, not with an attempt to deceive, but 'to enhance Paul's position and reputation' (2008: 9).

## **Analysis of Colossian Authorship Determination**

When the dust of our discussion has settled, the eight commentators mentioned above represent basically an evenly-divided perspective on the authorship of Colossians. Baur, Lohse, Lincoln, and MacDonald find that Paul did *not* write Colossians; O'Brien and Barth/Blanke reason that he did; Schweizer and Dunn take a middling approach, finding it not *written* by Paul, but certainly not distant from him either, probably written by someone like Timothy just before or just after Paul's demise and perhaps with his own permission. The descriptions above are instructive for analyzing *how* these scholars came to their various views. It would appear that five major factors are regularly engaged: language, logic, theology, historical plausibility, and pseudonymous-authorship currency/acceptability (see also Barclay 1997: 18-36).

### *Language*

The matter of the language of Colossians, which includes the style and syntax of verbal expression, has long been one of the most obvious features of this letter

that has raised questions about its relationship to the undisputed letters. Lohse carefully examines this matter, offering the fullest discussion and analysis within a commentary, and each commentator addresses this matter in turn. For all of the scholars who conclude that Colossians is pseudonymous, this is one factor that moves their views in such a direction. However, this matter could hypothetically be separated from matters of theology and historical plausibility, insofar as language difference only means that the one who strung words together in written communication in Colossians was not the same person who did so, for example, in the case of Galatians or 1 Corinthians. In that sense, language problems only remove ‘the author’ (the actual physical writer) of Colossians from Paul the communicator. Conceivably, someone could have received a message to deliver on behalf of Paul which was then put into formal sentences and paragraphs. Dunn and Schweizer come close to this position, but, with Lincoln, find that not only are words and sentences different, but also the process of thought—or *logic*.

### *Logic*

This level of analysis deals with the thought patterns or process of argumentation found in Colossians. It focuses on the rhetorical-discursive features of the letter that map out the way the author deals with the exigency at hand. Again, this is where Schweizer and Dunn are in agreement that the essential ‘Paulness’ (in cognitive terms) is missing. The writer simply does not reason like Paul, though many features of Paul’s letter are present. However, Barth and Blanke argue the opposite, that, in fact, we *can* see the same process of thought where Colossians moves from ‘formulated intention’ to ‘careful indoctrination’ to ‘summarizing conclusion’ (1994: 120). They recognized a general pattern of orientation-of-thought that they find to be congruent with the undisputed letters.

### *Theology*

One of the two most decisive issues for scholars is the ‘theology’ of Colossians (the other issue being, below, historical implausibility). Matters such as Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology in Colossians have proven particularly troublesome for most of the above scholars, especially Baur, Lohse, and Lincoln. This matter is closely tied with the ‘era’ in which the letter was written, because the issue is not so much that the theology of Colossians differs from Paul’s (though on some matters scholars find it to do so), but that it appears to develop out of, and also *away from*, Paul’s own metaphors, structures, conceptions, and expressions. For some, this is the theology that comes only from the passing of time and new Jesus-community experiences and ideas. For O’Brien and Barth, though, while ‘development’ may be the best word for this, it could be Paul’s *own* processing and contextualizing.

### Historical Plausibility

Alongside ‘theology’, many commentators mentioned above see historical issues as *the* primary challenge to connecting Colossians to the apostle Paul. This is seen on two levels. On one level, we have the mismatch between Colossians and the historical Paul. On another level, we have arguments that Colossians fits so well into another context and time that genuine authorship is highly unlikely.

In terms of the former, MacDonald, for example, sees the household code as implausible as a pattern of relationships in light of the imminent-eschatological tone of Paul’s undisputed letters. Lincoln, again, saw language like ‘the faith’ as historically too developed. As for the latter, Baur saw Colossians fitting quite perfectly into later Gnostic controversy.

Such matters stand out in this discussion and provide a more solid ground for concern because they have the potential to be more empirical, working from historical grounding rather than more subjective study of theological outlook.

### Pseudonymous-Authorship Currency/Acceptability

In more recent years, the discussion of the suitability (or lack thereof) of pseudonymity (or allonymity) has grown immensely (see Aland 1961; Donelson 1986; Dunn 1987; Meade 1987; Bauckham 1988; Ellis 1993; Wilder 2004), and this conversation is deeply relevant to the analysis of authorship in Colossians. As some scholars have found Colossians to be pseudonymous and from a later era, this challenges details within Colossians—ones that the pseudepigrapher would have fabricated, apparently for the sake of authentication. *How legitimate is this practice of fabricating a historical context? Are there models and examples of this? Does it work differently for different genre-types (e.g., apocalypse versus letter)? Does it work differently for religious literature? Does it work differently for the early Christian communities in particular and the nature of apostolic leadership, authority, and religious-prophetic testimony?*

The consensus of most scholars that take Colossians to be pseudonymous is that the practice of writing in the name of another, especially in honor of the person and to set forth his teaching for a new context or generation, was not frowned upon (though see Wilder 2004, who, upon examining Greco-Roman pseudonymous letters, found very few that were not written to deceive in his estimation; pp. 56-58). The nub of the issue, for many, is whether or not such writings had the intention of deceit and to what degree people were able to *recognize* such writings as pseudonymous (and acceptably so). When it comes to the way that the New Testament documents under most suspicion work (such as the Pastoral Epistles) this is a real dilemma. In the case of the Pastoral Epistles, if a pseudepigrapher, after the death of Paul, wished to write in his name, but did not have the intent to deceive, C.F.D. Moule wonders:

How [do you] explain the circumstantial references in the Pastorals to the apostle's movements and plans?... [W]hat would a posthumous pseudepigraph want with the cloak left at Troas, or (still odder!) with an expectation of speedy release?... It seems gratuitously ironic—not to say callous—for an imitator of a deceased master to say, in his name, that he is hoping soon to come and visit the recipient (1982: 116).

David deSilva, similarly inclined to Moule, takes seriously the vividness of historical and contextual detail in the text when concluding on matters pertaining to authorship, not unlike Dunn mentioned above. For example, the fact that Ephesians has much less personal detail makes it more of a proper candidate for being 'the benign work of a modest disciple' (2004: 687). In any case, this matter is quite decisive for how 'open' an interpreter is to attributing authorship to another person other than the named sender.

## The Changing Shape of the Discussion

Six factors appear to be currently guiding the future of the study of the authorship of certain letters of Paul (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles, in particular): genre and literary style, the meaning of 'authorship', the nature of theological development and variance, canonicity and the acceptance of pseudepigraphical texts, patristic testimony, and the interpreter's hermeneutical perspective.

### *Genre and Literary Style*

While vocabulary (like *hapax*) will probably not trouble interpreters too much in the near future, there is still the thorny issue of 'style'—the syntax of Colossians is one particular matter in this category. More study needs to be done in terms of the style variance of an author: how much is 'normal' (in the ancient world in particular) and for what reasons might an author use a different style? For example, Ben Witherington compares Asiatic style of rhetoric communication (which he finds pervasive in Colossians) with Atticizing style. He quotes G.A. Kennedy who explains that Asiatic style was 'a highly artificial, self-conscious search for striking expression in diction, sentence structure and rhythm' (Kennedy 1984: 32; Witherington 2007: 4). In terms of finding Asiatic style in the undisputed letters, Witherington wonders whether it appears in Philemon, 'a miniature rhetorical masterpiece in an Asiatic vein' with much *pathos*, ornamentation, and repetition (2007: 6). Not enough time has passed since the writing of Witherington's commentary and discussion to see how this may influence style discussions in Paul.

### *The Meaning of 'Authorship'*

It is typical for commentaries (whether on Colossians or other Pauline letters) to have a section on 'authorship' and make a decision regarding whether or not Paul wrote this letter. This is a sensible enough maneuver, since we have Paul representing himself as one who 'writes' letters (1 Cor. 5.9). However, over the years, the discussion has become quite complex, especially if we take the word 'author' to mean 'The person who originates or gives existence to anything' (OED). In that respect, we could differentiate between originator-as-author and writer-as-author. To give a sense for the complexity involved here, we might use the example of what 'authorship' means according to the writings of Cicero. Charles Talbert, studying Cicero's *Letters to Atticus*, notes at least five ways Cicero refers to authorship (2007: 8).

1. Authorship as writing in one's own hand (2.23.1)
2. Authorship as writing by dictation (4.16.1)
3. Authorship as collaboration in writing (11.5)
4. Authorship as authorizing someone else to write (3.1.5)
5. Authorship 'as if' by the putative author (6.6).

Talbert exposes the challenges of determining, not only whether Paul is author, but, if he is, in what sense and with what level of active participation. This means that our discussions of authorship need to be more robust, not only judging a text like Colossians to be removed from Paul and 'written' by someone else, but more precisely considering any association with Paul at all. This includes, as Talbert notes, co-authorship as well as the use of secretaries. On both of these matters, E. Randolph Richards has done much study. As for the idea of co-authorship (in the case of Colossians with Timothy; see Col. 1.1), Richards studied over six hundred private letters from Oxyrhynchus, Tebtunis, and Zenon, only finding six that appear to be co-written; yet, Richards found none of these to resemble the type of letter Paul wrote (2004: 34). Richards is convinced, though, that more attention must be given to some of Paul's letters being written by a community of leaders, and not simply one individual (see also Murphy-O'Connor 1995: 19). He urges: 'Our modern understanding of *author* must expand beyond just "Paul alone"' (2004: 20).

Another subject that Richards has invested much research in is that of the letter-secretary. While these figures are still not fully understood by NT scholars at present, Richards argues that there is enough evidence from the ancient world to deduce that they worked along a spectrum of roles from *transcriber* to *contributor* to *composer* (see also Richards 1991: 23-53). The matter is even more complex than simply determining which role he played based on style, vocabulary, or outlook: 'Some blending of these roles should be allowed. Since the

distinctions between these roles are artificial, the uses were frequently separated more by gray areas than by hard and fast lines. The role played by the secretary depended on how much control the author exercised at that particular moment in that particular letter, even shifting roles within the same letter' (2004: 80; see also Richards 1991).

A final complicating question to consider is this: even if a document is judged to have been finalized and directed to a church community long after the apostle's death, to what degree may it have included word-for-word teaching of Paul or 'fragments' of genuine writing? In terms of pursuing the idea that a pseudepigraphical text contains genuine Pauline 'fragments', John Muddiman finds such an approach to Ephesians, for example, to settle several issues at once. He urges that, if this theory is adopted, 'We no longer have to provide explanations of how a later pseudepigrapher can be so convincingly Pauline in one place and so indifferent to Paul's idiom and thought in another' (2001: 23).

To summarize, when we refer to the 'authorship' of a Pauline letter, we must not only show caution in the decision in general (whether 'by Paul' or not), but also in articulating exactly how the term 'author' is being used in the discussion and taking account of various levels of input and sources that contribute to the generation and completion of a writing.

### *Development and Variety*

Insofar as one of the thorniest issues in author-determination is the ostensible development and variance in terms of the theology of Colossians, the future study of this document will need to consider how we understand the theological fixity of Paul's thinking and the possibility and limits of adaptation and growth. On the question of 'Did Paul's Theology Develop?', E.P. Sanders makes this helpful reflection.

Of course Paul's thought developed. How could it not? He was an intelligent and reactive human, who worked in an unprecedented environment. The latter days had arrived, and it was time for Jews to persuade Gentiles to turn to the God of Israel in order to share in the blessings of the messianic age. During his travels on behalf of this new vocation, Paul met and conversed with a variety of other humans, and he faced a series of new challenges. Only a dullard would repeat time after time what he had previously thought or refuse to think back through some of his opinions as issues and objections arose during his ministry. Adaptation must have been his watchword... As problems shifted, and as his understanding of them advanced, he made adjustments (2008: 334-35).

Certainly most scholars accept that a human Paul was naturally thinking, re-thinking, and changing. The crux of the matter regards developments that would be historically too fast, too sharply re-directed, or straightforwardly impossible.

### *Acceptance of Pseudepigraphical Texts*

Few commentators suggest, if they take Colossians to be pseudonymous, that the author had intent to deceive the readers by leveraging the name and authority of a respected apostle (see Donelson 1986: 18-22; cf. Kiley 1986: 21). For many, it was simply a standard, accepted practice. Outi Leppä's position is, perhaps, common: 'Since there is no evidence that Paul's letters were sold and nothing in Col seems to be construed as slander towards Paul, it is most likely that a disciple of Paul, who has an important message for others, writes in the name of his (her) respected teacher. He wants to write in a new situation in a way he thinks Paul would have done if still alive' (2003: 12).

While many scholars work from the general 'acceptability' of pseudonymity in the Greco-Roman world (including among Jewish communities), the fact that these are religious, canonical documents makes the ethical issue all the more pressing. Somewhat tentatively, after surveying the matter of why writers may author a document as if written by another, Bruce Metzger concludes that, if it was a standard way to communicate in that time, there is nothing unethical about such a practice as it pertains to the New Testament documents. He writes, 'Whatever idiom or mode of expression [any given writer] would use in ordinary speech must surely be allowed him when moved by the Holy Spirit' (1972: 22). D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo resist Metzger's sentiment only by urging that, while pseudepigraphical writings were rather common in early Jewish literature, this happened to be the case more for apocalypses than for letters. Also, they reason that Jewish communities may have viewed it differently than the wider community of Greco-Romans. They remark that since there is no clear precedent 'among the canonical writings of the Old Testament', there is no clear pattern to follow (1999: 341-42).

What we see here is that the matter of the *ethics* of pseudonymity is quite important, and not just for conservatives. There is a general impression, though not universal, that when dealing with letters that are so interested in virtue and truth (under religious authority), the idea that an author could write so piously, and at the same time fabricate details so convincingly, seems both improbable and ironically irreverent. Clearly NT scholars need to come to some sort of common ground regarding the acceptability of the practice of pseudonymity.

### *Patristic Testimony*

Ignored in most discussions is the early church testimony, which is exclusively supportive of Pauline authorship. Again, the possibility that Colossians was not written by Paul was not raised until relatively recently in the last two thousand years. The underlying presumption by scholars in favor of viewing Colossians as pseudonymous, perhaps, is that these early theologians were incapable

of analyzing texts on such a level. However, Metzger argues that ‘scholars in antiquity were able to detect forgeries, using in general the same kinds of tests as are employed by modern critics’ (1972: 13). He gives the example, from the third century CE, of Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, who argued that the book of Revelation was not written by the fourth evangelist in view of differences of style and vocabulary!

In a time now when a renewed interest in reception history is growing, more attention will naturally turn, and should turn, to those who first received and ‘canonized’ these letters. They are not necessarily the objective arbiters for the scholarly guild’s decision, but giving them *a* voice in the conversation seems prudent. G.K. Chesterton underscores the fundamental importance of taking counsel from past voices (through ‘tradition’), supporting a ‘democracy of the dead as well as the living’ (see O’Rourke 1989: 310).

### *Interpreter’s Perspective and the Limits of Historical Inquiry*

One factor that is very important to this entire matter of authorship and interpretation is the interpreter’s own perspective—the predispositions and natural inclinations of the modern reader of Colossians. Regardless of ‘proof’ and the strength of a particular argument, it is generally recognized by scholars that complete objectivity is impossible (see Gempf 1992: 8-10). Two examples, in this regard, will suffice. First of all, we might consider the reflections of seasoned NT scholar Dale Allison Jr. on the Quest for the Historical Jesus. Looking broadly at the several ‘quests’, and especially in view of Schweitzer’s criticism of scholars re-making Jesus into their own images, he doubts whether newer ‘quests’ have learned from this. He writes:

Who doubts that authors [today] who themselves have a high Christology tend to write books in which the historical Jesus himself has a high Christology? Or that those who are uncomfortable with Nicea and Chalcedon more often than not unearth a Jesus who humbled rather than exalted himself? The correlations between personal belief and historical discovery must be endless... It is easy to be suspicious here. You can do anything with statistics, and you can do anything with Jesus, or at least a lot of different things (2009: 16).

Much of the same can be said in our case: *You can do anything with the author of Colossians*. A second example is also instructive. In an essay discussing the division in Johannine scholarship over whether we can speak of a single ‘Johannine community’ that the Fourth Gospel was directed towards, Adele Reinhartz points out that the stalemate in the guild on this matter is, in the end, inevitable and finding ‘the truth’ (so to speak) should no longer be the premium.

My reading of Bauckham's work, in the context of historical-critical scholarship on the Gospels, leads me to suggest that the measure of a 'good' or persuasive hypothesis is not whether it is 'true' (how would we even know?) but the degree to which it fires the imagination, and prompts new approaches and ideas that in turn lead us to perceive layers in the Gospel texts that were not evident to us before. It is for this reason that I would not ask, or expect, Richard Bauckham to relinquish a hypothesis that is fruitful for his own thinking, just as I do not expect to relinquish my own thoughts and theories on the matter of Gospel audiences (2010: 152).

While some matters pertaining to Gospel audiences are obviously not relevant to our discussion, the overall phenomenon in NT studies is strikingly pervasive: scholars on some matters can only agree to a point and then disagreement persists, largely based on what each scholar finds fruitful, reasonable, and coherent. On the matter of the authorship of Colossians, do we conclude, with Reinhartz, that an attempt to finally get at 'the truth' is futile? I suspect Reinhartz does not come to this conclusion out of a postmodern dissatisfaction with absolutism or because there is no 'truth'. Rather, I presume she, perhaps like Allison above, finds that our tools and methods for accessing the past are limited and so is our ability to agree on the meaning and value of what we do see as relevant 'evidence'. This is a challenge that scholarship will need to face as we continue to interpret canonical texts using a variety of tools, historical and otherwise, with a view towards the ancient context of the writing.

As an exercise in demonstrating the subjective ways in which we approach authorship issues in the Pauline corpus, Harold Hoehner raised the question: 'Did Paul write Galatians?' (2006: 150-69). He found that one could doubt that Paul genuinely wrote Galatians based on many of the same reasons Ephesians or the Pastoral Epistles are doubted. For example, he found the 'impersonal nature' of Galatians potentially problematic. In terms of language and statistics, Galatians yields 30 *hapax* and a number of uncommon vocabulary words such as *portheō* ('I destroy'; 1.13, 23) (2006: 150-56). Hoehner also discusses historical and theological peculiarities of the kind that normally make scholars doubt the authenticity of the disputed letters (2006: 163-68). The whole scope and depth of research Hoehner offers against viewing Galatians as authentic is impressive. Is he really trying to argue that Paul did not write Galatians? Not really. He wants to expose the biased attitude of the guild at large. He concludes:

Personally, I think we are using a double standard. We apply these rules to the disputed books of Paul but not to the *Hauptbriefe*... The critics do not allow the flexibility that is allowed within the *Hauptbriefe* (p. 169).

Again, the interpreter's perspective, including presuppositions as well as an interpretive community's influence, has serious bearing on how authorship issues are decided. Taking into consideration the comments by Allison, Reinhartz,

and Hoehner, how can it be possible to have a broader *historical* discussion, when, though we may agree on some tools and criteria, we find it difficult to agree on theories and arguments that are most ‘convincing’? Is it inevitable, as in the case with the ‘Gospel communities’ question, that we will simply settle into two or three camps of ‘viable’ positions and work independently (as it seems that we are currently doing)? As the NT guild, especially in the United States, continues to fragment and specialize more and more, as perhaps demonstrated in the increasing number of SBL program units at the annual conference, this will become a more pressing matter.

## Conclusion

The point of this article has not been to settle the matter of the authorship of Colossians once and for all, but to explore the hermeneutics of authorship determination, focusing on commentaries especially from the last forty years or so. Five categories (language, logic, theology, historical plausibility, and pseudonymous-authorship reception) hold central significance in this discussion, though some have become less determinative over time, others more so. We have also discussed six factors (genre and literary style, the meaning of ‘authorship’, the nature of theological development and variance, canonicity and the acceptance of pseudepigraphical texts, patristic testimony, and the interpreter’s hermeneutical perspective) that will shape the conversation on authorship issues (for Colossians as well as other NT epistles) in the future.

The obvious complexity of the discussion raises the broader question of the limits of historical inquiry. Can we really *know* Paul did not write (or co-write or authorize in his life-time, etc.) Colossians? What level of confidence can we expect from theories that doubt the internal attribution of authorship? In that sense, even if there is good reason to doubt the genuine Pauline authorship of Colossians, it could probably never be referred to as pseudonymous—at least, not without new tangible proof (based, for example, on new archaeological or historical discoveries). At best, it can be placed in the category of ‘dubious’ or ‘disputed’—the latter being the chosen category for Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, and the Pastoral Epistles for a program unit for SBL’s annual meetings.

When authorship *theories* of pseudonymity are read back into a letter like Colossians, it is easy to see what you want to see—e.g., how certain ‘historicizing features’ work to the advantage of the pseudepigrapher. However, we all know that ‘what really happened’ can surprise us after all, thus the old adage, ‘the truth is often stranger than fiction’. That is, it is very difficult to ‘fill in the blanks’ of what happened in the past in the absence of very clear and reliable historical markers. A point in case, in 1915 Charlie Chaplin entered his own ‘look-alike’ contest and did not win. He did not even get a place in the top three

(though a young Bob Hope did). In that case, the judges did not accurately have a good sense of what Chaplin *really* looked like, or Chaplin did not happen to look like the ‘self’ the public is used to seeing when he was judged. This should caution the interpreter in the matter of being ‘fully convinced’ a New Testament text is pseudonymous.

In the end, it is highly unlikely scholarship on Colossians will reach anything like a consensus, but perhaps our tools for historical research will become sharper and more fit for the task. Soon, it will become irresponsible to refer to ‘authorship’ as if it were an obvious category of production and participation in a communicative act that can be determined rather simply or straightforwardly, whether in favor of the apostle himself or not.

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