New Test. Stud. 50, pp. 125–138. Printed in the United Kingdom © 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI:10.1017/S0028688504000086

Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized is It?*

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The majority of Pauline scholars depict the eschatological orientation of Colossians as 'realized'. Furthermore, a number of interpreters juxtapose the eschatological 'already' which arguably earmarks the epistle with the eschatological 'not yet' which ostensibly permeates Paul. This article questions the common contention that Colossians, in contradistinction to Paul, is virtually void of futurist eschatology. It is argued herein that even though the 'already' may feature in the letter, the 'not yet' is more pervasive than is frequently supposed. Correlatively, this study suggests that there is less variance between the eschatological perspectives of Colossians and Paul than is typically recognized.

I. Introduction

Whereas Pauline scholars usually describe the apostle's eschatology as futurist,[1] interpreters of Colossians typically characterize that letter's eschatological outlook as realized.[2] A number of exegetes would in fact contend that Colossians emphasizes the eschatological 'already' to the extent that it all but eclipses the 'not yet' and in so doing eradicates the 'end-time' tension that is part

* This piece was prepared for and presented to the Paul Seminar of the British New Testament Conference 2002 in Cambridge, England. I am grateful to Dr R. B. Matlock of Sheffield University for the invitation to participate in the Seminar and to the members of the Seminar for their interaction with this essay.

1 For the purposes of this paper, the following definition of eschatology will suffice: the study or doctrine of the destiny of humanity and history including, though not necessarily restricted to, teaching regarding the parousia, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, heaven, and hell. See further T. D. Still, 'Eschatology in the Thessalonian Letters', *RevExp* 96 (1999) 195–210, esp. 196.

2 So, e.g., R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 612; C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1957), 110–11; P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982) xlvi–xlvii; J. T. Sanders, *Ethics in the New Testament: Change and Development* (London: SCM, 1986) 69–70; and W. Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 245.

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and parcel of Paul's thought.[3] Indeed, the eschatological texture of the epistle (in confluence with a number of other factors) has led many readers to doubt its authenticity.[4]

In this piece I am not seeking to counter the axiom that in his 'undisputed' letters (except, of course, Philemon) Paul stresses the 'not yet' elements of eschatology as much as if not more than he does the 'already' aspects.[5] Nor am I necessarily attempting to deny that 'realized eschatology' features in Colossians.[6] Rather, my intent in this paper is to inquire whether or to what extent the eschatology articulated in Colossians is (in)compatible with the eschatological thought of the Paul we know through those letters that are 'assuredly' his. The point of entry for this study is to identify and comment briefly upon those texts in Colossians that are eschatological in content (section II). A comparison between the eschatology one discovers in Colossians and that which one encounters in the universally recognized Pauline letters will follow (section III). By way of conclusion, I will offer a response to the question posed in the sub-title of this article. Moreover, I will ask what factor(s) might have shaped the eschatological orientation of Colossians and will consider what light, if any, this study sheds on the (in)authenticity of the letter (section IV).

3 E.g. E. Lohse (*Theological Ethics of the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991] 148) remarks, 'The eschatological expectation that is at the heart of the Pauline train of thought has receded, only vague echoes of which are now heard from time to time (Col. 3:3).' Cf. *idem*, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 180.

4 E.g. R. Yates (*The Epistle to the Colossians* [Epworth Commentaries; London: Epworth, 1993] xxiii–xxiv) writes: 'The fading hope of an imminent parousia, the shift in terminology [with special reference to "hope" and "faith"], and the hint that resurrection is already realized in baptism are important reasons why Colossians cannot be Pauline.' See also L. R. Donelson, *Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 8–9; and D. M. Hay, *Colossians* (Abingdon NT Commentaries; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000) 21–2.

5 Cf. B. Witherington ('Transcending Imminence: The Gordian Knot of Pauline Eschatology', *Eschatology in Bible & Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of a New Millennium* [ed. K. E. Bower and M. W. Elliott; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997] 171–86 [on 186]), who contends that Paul 'preferred to place the emphasis on what God had already done in Christ'.

6 Cf. J. Murphy-O'Connor (*Paul: A Critical Life* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1996], 247), who maintains that 'future statements predominate in Colossians'. Contrast A. T. Lincoln ('Colossians', *The Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 [Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000] 573), who remarks: 'In Colossians, the stress is clearly on the present aspects.' So, likewise, J. M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (ed. A. T. Lincoln; NT Guides; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 26: 'The emphasis in Colossians is on *realized* eschatology' (italics his). Cf. also O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 168.

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II. Eschatological materials in Colossians

In this section we will scour Colossians for eschatologically oriented passages. We will work under the headings 'realized eschatology' and 'futurist eschatology' respectively. At this juncture, we will not concern ourselves with what Paul did or did not say/might or might not have said elsewhere. Our interest here is to locate and explicate the eschatological materials in the epistle. Having done so, we will summarize our findings before proceeding to the next section.

Realized eschatology in Colossians

According to Col 2.6a, the Colossians had received Christ Jesus as Lord. Their reception of the traditions related to the person, mission, and instruction of Jesus Christ entailed, among other things, hearing about and ascertaining the grace of God as pronounced in the gospel, the word of truth (1.5b–6).[7] Though previously hidden, the mystery of the gospel – the word of God – had been revealed to the saints, i.e., believers in Christ (1.25–6; cf. 1.2, 12; 4.3).[8] In Colossians' theological economy, the mystery of God is a person as well as a proclamation. The letter lauds Christ as the repository of wisdom and knowledge (2.2–3). Indeed, in Christ, the mystery of God, the fullness of deity was pleased to dwell bodily and/or substantially (1.19; 2.9).[9]

It was in Christ that the Colossians had placed their faith (1.4; 2.5–7, 12) and were to live (1.10; 2.6, 20; 3.17). Through Christ, the firstborn from the dead (1.18c), God had given life to a group of people who were formerly dead in their sins (2.12–13). By virtue of Christ's bloody death on a cross (1.20, 22; 2.11, 15), benighted Gentiles who were previously estranged from God, hostile in mind, and engaged in evil deeds (1.21; cf. 1.27) had been delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved Son (1.13). Moreover, through Christ and his cross the Colossians had been redeemed (1.14), reconciled (1.22), circumcised! (2.11), forgiven (2.13; 3.13), freed (2.14), and made victorious (2.15). Indeed, Colossians claims that Christ's work on the cross was cosmic in scope and effect. The epistle speaks, if but proleptically, of God reconciling all things in all places to

7 The term παραλαμβάνω in 2.6a signals the reception of transmitted tradition. Rightly noted by, among others, F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) 92–4.

8 On revelatory language in Paul in general and Colossians in particular, see M. Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 178–93. I do not concur, however, with Bockmuehl's suggestion that the saints spoken of in 1.26 'constitute the body of those who exercise ecclesial authority or leadership' (183).

9 On the meaning of σωματικῶς in 2.9 consult, among others, Moule, *Colossians and Philemon*, 92–4.

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himself 'through the blood of [Christ's] cross' (διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, 1.20).

The church's concealed life with Christ in God (3.3) commenced at conversion, which the epistle depicts as a dying and rising with Christ through burial with him in baptism (2.12, 20; 3.1).[10] Given Christ's enabling power and presence in their lives and midst (1.27; 2.10; 3.15–16), Christians in Colossae are commanded to seek and to set their minds upon the things above and not on earthly/fleshly things (3.1–2; cf. 2.11, 20–3). It is there at the right hand of God where Christ, the Colossians' very life, is enthroned in power (3.1, 4).

Out/off with the old (3.5, 8) and in/on with the new (3.10, 12, 14) became the order of the day for those who were being renewed in the *imago Dei* (3.10). If the gospel was to continue to flourish among the Colossians and beyond Colossae (1.6), then the believers would need to jettison fine-sounding rhetoric and empty 'philosophy' (2.4, 8), to be fully cognizant of their new identity in Christ and the implications thereof (see esp. 2.17; 3.11), and to conduct themselves with charity towards one another and with wisdom towards outsiders (3.14; 4.5–6). In short, they were meant to remain steadfast in the received faith (1.23; 2.5–7).

Futurist eschatology in Colossians

Although the recipients of the epistle are informed that they have died, have been buried, and have been raised with Christ and presently enjoy fullness of life in him (note again esp. 2.10–12; 3.1, 3), Colossians does not suggest their salvation is a *fait accompli*.[11] Even though they have a hope laid up in heaven (1.5), they are not to waver in this hope (1.23). Despite their having been qualified by the Father to share in the heavenly inheritance (1.13), they can be disqualified by not holding fast to the Head (2.18–19). Their spiritual resurrection with Christ notwithstanding, there are still spiritual strides to take (2.6, 20; 3.1–17). Colossians does not question whether Jesus Christ is God's full and final revelation; it does, however, leave ample room for Christian maturation and development (note 1.9–11; 1.27;

10 On the resurrection language in 2.12 and 3.1 as conversion and transformation imagery, see D. E. Garland, *Colossians/Philemon* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998) 150 n. 43. Cf. J. Murphy-O'Connor, 'Colossians', *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman; Oxford: Oxford University, 2002) 1191–9 (on 1191), who rightly notes that, when taken in context, the passages that refer to the resurrection of believers as a past fact (i.e. 2.12; 3.1) are 'nothing more than a vivid expression of their passage from "death" to "life" '.

On the centrality of baptism in Colossians, with particular reference to 1.15–20, see E. Käsemann, 'A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy', *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 149–68. For a thoughtful response and necessary corrective to Käsemann's stimulating proposal, see A. J. M. Wedderburn, 'The Theology of Colossians', *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (ed. J. D. G. Dunn; NT Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993) 48–53.

11 *Pace* Yates, *Colossians*, 71.

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3.14; 4.12). The Colossians are clearly on this side of eternity; they have not yet reached their heavenly destiny.

In fact, Colossians presents Paul's ministry[12] as one of filling up that which is lacking not only in Christ's afflictions (1.24)[13] but also in Gentile Christians' conceptualization and appropriation of Christ (1.28). The apostle continues to suffer and strive on behalf of the Colossians, the Laodiceans, and all other Christians precisely because they need to be further fortified and edified in the faith (1.29–2.2; 2.5). Proclamation of the gospel and exertion for the kingdom of God were to continue unabated (4.3, 11). Christ's reconciling work and Paul's apostolic toil were both meant to enable the Colossians to be presented before God in due course as holy, blameless, irreproachable, and complete (1.22; 2.9). This all-important presentation, however, had not yet occurred.

The Colossians' presentation would not occur until Christ – the hope of glory (1.27) – appeared. At the point of Christ's parousia,[14] what had been concealed would be revealed, even the Colossians themselves who were hitherto hidden in Christ (3.3–4). Arguably, the coming wrath of God would occur concurrently (3.6). At the consummation, those who do wrong will receive due recompense even as those who serve the Lord will be rewarded with the inheritance (3.23–5; cf. 1.12). Whether later or sooner, be one slave or slave-owner, all believers will be ultimately accountable to an impartial Master (3.25–4.1). In Christ the substance is come shedding light where there were formerly shadows (2.17),[15] but time remains and ought to be redeemed (4.5). Spiritual renewal could yet occur (3.10); watchful, thankful prayer could still be offered (4.2); the mystery of Christ could be further declared (4.3).[16]

12 On the presentation of Paul in Colossians and other letters presumed to be deutero-Pauline (i.e. Ephesians and the Pastorals), see M. C. de Boer, 'Images of Paul in the Post-Apostolic Period', *CBQ* 42 (1980) 359–80.

13 If this controverted verse is best understood against the backdrop of the messianic woes meant to precede the coming of the 'new age', as not a few scholars contend, then this would be yet another instance of futurist eschatology in Colossians. See R. J. Bauckham, 'Colossians 1:24 Again: The Apocalyptic Motif', *EvQ* 47 (1975) 168–70. Cf. similarly, D. C. Allison, *The End of the Ages Has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 63–4. Against this reading, note Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, 119–21.

14 'Although some have disputed it, [3.4 refers] to the parousia. It is true that being made manifest, or revealed, is not necessarily the same thing as coming, but elsewhere in the Pauline corpus Christ's being revealed from heaven is synonymous with his coming (see 2 Thess 1:7; 10)' (Lincoln, 'Colossians', 639).

15 Interestingly, 2.17a reads: ἅ ἐστιν σκιὰ τῶν μελλόντων (lit.: 'things which are a shadow of the things which are about to come'). The eschatological texture of this statement is often concealed in translation. This verse connotes that 'the age to come has already been inaugurated in Christ' (Lincoln, 'Colossians', 632). Furthermore, it implies that what has been inaugurated has not yet been culminated.

16 J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996) 201, 262, 266 detects futurist eschatology in 3.10; 4.2, 3, 5.

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Eschatology in Colossians: both already and not yet ?

It may well be that some will perceive my presentation of the eschatological materials in Colossians as a misrepresentation of the textual reality. I have sought to support my views on the verses referred to above more fully in my forthcoming commentary.[17] Interpretive particulars notwithstanding, my reading of Colossians as a whole does not allow me to concur with the common scholarly notion that realized eschatology dominates futurist eschatology in this letter so as to negate it. I am perfectly willing to concede that the 'already' features prominently if not predominantly in the epistle. I am also inclined to agree with those who point out that the sense of eschatological urgency and immediacy that may be readily detected elsewhere in Paul (e.g. 1 Thess 4.15; 1 Cor 15.51; Rom 13.11–12a) has receded into the background in Colossians.[18] (Neither talk of Christ's coming nor cries of 'Maranatha'! punctuate this epistle.) But what is arguably true of eschatological expectation in particular is not the case for futuristic eschatology in general. Indeed, the forward-looking character of so many verses in the epistle make it not only allowable but also advisable to speak of the 'not yet' as well as the 'already' when describing the eschatological contents of Colossians.[19] The passages noted in the section immediately above, however un(der)developed they may be in their expression of the eschatological 'not yet', 'stand obstinately as witnesses to a temporally viewed eschatology; certain events will happen in the future to fulfil what has so far occurred'.[20]

III. A comparison between the eschatological orientation of Colossians and pertinent passages in the 'undisputed' Paulines

Even if one is convinced (as am I) that Colossians preserves to a considerable extent the eschatological tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' that

17 T. D. Still, 'Colossians', *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 11 (rev. edn; ed. T. Longman and D. E. Garland; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, forthcoming).

18 So, e.g., A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (rev. edn; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 105; J. Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (rev. edn; ed. P. R. Ackroyd and G. N. Stanton; Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University, 1990) 130; J. L. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 136; Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 89; Lincoln, 'Colossians', 573; and Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 180. Dunn (*Colossians and Philemon*, 266) doubts 'whether we should speak of a loss of imminent expectancy in Colossians'. Witherington ('Transcending Imminence') calls into question the centrality of imminence in Pauline theology.

19 So rightly, e.g., Lincoln, 'Colossians', 573; O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 168–9; R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (NCB; Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1974) 35; and N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (TNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/Leicester: InterVarsity, 1986) 132. Contra Schrage (*Ethics*, 245), who only detects 'traditional motifs of judgment and reward' in the parenetic section of Colossians.

20 Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, 136.

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is present in Paul's acknowledged letters,[21] this does not necessarily mean that the eschatological vision of Colossians is of one piece with that set forth by the apostle himself. In this section we will examine how (in)compatible the eschatological outlook of the letter is with what one finds in the 'undisputed' Paulines. To delimit this discussion, we will direct our attention to the most commonly detected eschatological differences between Colossians and the universally accepted Paulines. I will conduct this eschatological comparison under the following headings: 1. The Coming of Christ: Temporal Imminence and/or Spatial Immanence?; 2. Resurrection with Christ: Future Promise and/or Present Reality?; and 3. The Christian Hope: Eternal Expectation and/or Heavenly Possession? Each of these topics has been broached above, but all require additional comment and development.

The coming of Christ: temporal imminence and/or spatial immanence?

If an anticipation of Christ's imminent coming permeates the 'undisputed' Paulines, particularly 1 Thessalonians (1.10; 2.19; 3.10; 4.15, 17; 5.2) and 1 Corinthians (e.g. 4.5; 7.26, 29; 15.51; 16.22), the same cannot be said of Colossians. Indeed, there is but one explicit reference to the final coming of Christ in Colossians (3.4), and even there 'atypical' Pauline language is utilized to speak of the event.[22] This apparent contrast prompts one commentator to contend, 'The expectation that the Lord would come soon has disappeared'.[23] Any attempt to argue that a sense of 'end-time' imminence *suffuses* Colossians would be like trying to push water uphill.[24] In the epistle it does in fact seem that the Christian future does not impinge upon the Christian present as forcefully as it does in other places in Paul.[25] Be that as it may, to de-emphasize certain features of futurist eschatology – even an element as central as the approaching parousia – does not automatically render the document void of a forward-looking character or, at least, futurist characteristics. If one were to use the concentration of 'not yet' eschatological elements such as the parousia as a criteria for authenticity, then that would arguably render suspect even the likes of Galatians and perhaps Philippians.

21 So also, e.g., W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (rev. and enlarged edn; Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991) 344.

22 Col 3.4 speaks of Christ's appearing and the Colossians' appearance with him (φανερόω) and not of Christ's coming (παρουσία) as in, e.g., 1 Thess 2.19; 3.13; 4.15; 5.23; 1 Cor 15.23. Cf., however, 2 Thess 2.8, and note also 2 Cor 4.10–11 as well as 1 Tim 6.14; 2 Tim 1.10; 4.1, 8; Titus 2.13. Yates's claim (*Colossians*, 73) that 3.4 is 'the only futuristic eschatological reference in the epistle' is simply mistaken. Nevertheless, it reinforces in the minds of (lay) readers the (presumed) eschatological chasm that exists between Colossians and the universally recognized Paulines.

23 Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 180.

24 But see Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, 266.

25 Noted also by Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 26.

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If a diminished sense of end-time imminence does not necessarily place Colossians outside the apostle's epistolary pale, neither does the heightened focus upon Christ's immanence and the spatial language employed to depict such. To be sure, Colossians is replete with references regarding believers living, dying, and rising with Christ (1.2, 4, 13–14, 27; 2.5–6, 10–13, 20; 3.1, 3–4, 11, 15–17, 18, 20, 23–5), and 3.1–2 exhorts those raised with Christ to seek and to set their minds upon the things above (ἄνω; cf. 1.26–7). As we will see in the next section, talk of being raised with Christ does not occur elsewhere in the seven-letter Pauline corpus (cf. Eph 2.6, although this verse goes beyond Colossians in contending that believers have been *seated* with Christ in the heavenlies). It should be noted first of all, however, that it is commonplace in Paul to encounter passages which speak of living and dying in reference to Christ (e.g. Rom 6.4, 8; 8.9–11; 1 Cor 15.31; 2 Cor 4.10–11; 5.14–15; Gal 2.20; Phil 1.21). Additionally, spatial terminology and thought is not altogether absent in the uncontested letters (cf. 1 Thess 4.16–17; Gal 4.26; Phil 3.14, 20; 4.5[?]).[26] It would be both premature and inappropriate, then, to regard Colossians as out of synch with Pauline eschatology based upon the facts that the letter lacks eschatological urgency and employs spatial imagery.[27]

Resurrection with Christ: future promise and/or present reality?

Some scholars take Colossians' contention that believers have already been raised with Christ (2.12; 3.1) to be a telltale sign that the letter is post-Pauline.[28] There is indeed a difference between this assertion and what one finds, for example, in 1 Corinthians and Romans. In comparison, Colossians does not display the caution and reservation one detects in Paul when speaking of resurrection.[29] In fact, E. Lohse maintains that the author of Colossians thought that resurrection with Christ to new life had already happened in baptism and that he sought to shape his ethical exhortation to cohere with this conviction.[30]

It is worth pondering further, however, what the writer of Colossians was seeking to communicate when he spoke of the resurrection of believers as a past

26 See esp. A. T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology* (SNTSMS 43; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1981).

27 Note the similar conclusions of Lincoln, 'Colossians', 572–4, and Wedderburn, 'Colossians', 48–53.

28 E.g. E. Grässer, 'Kolosser 3,1–4 als Beispiel einer Interpretation secundum homines recipientes', *ZTK* 64 (1967) 139–68, esp. 161; Donelson, *Colossians*, 183–4; and Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 180.

29 Cf. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 26. Texts noted by Barclay include 1 Cor 4.8–10; 13.8–13; Rom 6.4, 6.

30 Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 180.

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event. He obviously did not mean that his audience had already been raised physically from the dead,[31] nor did he envision some kind of spiritual resurrection that rendered redundant the appearing of Christ and the future glorification of Christians (see 3.4).[32] Rather, it does in fact appear that Colossians employs resurrection language to speak of a believer's conversion to, union with, and transformation through Christ. Christians have not yet been raised with Christ to glory (3.1, 4). Furthermore, the resurrection life that they experience in the present is predicated upon their 'faith in the working of God who raised [Christ] from the dead' (2.12b).[33] Additionally, although it is not specifically stated, the depiction of Christ as the 'firstborn from the dead' (πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν), regardless of the statement's ultimate origin (pre-Pauline, Pauline, or post-Pauline),[34] strongly implies that Christians will follow in his train (cf. 1 Cor 15.20). That is, 'just as [Christ's] resurrection was in bodily form, so also those who participate in the restored creation will experience a bodily resurrection from the dead'.[35] Additionally, the talk of 'life' and 'glory' that recurs in the letter (see esp. 1.11, 27; 2.12; 3.3–4) could well intimate not only bodily resurrection but also cosmic transformation.[36] Colossians maintains that believers have been raised with Christ by faith as signified in baptism; however, it concurrently holds that this raising was but a foretaste of glory divine, an intimation of immortality. They must remain firm in faith; they must continue to hold fast to the Head; they must conduct their lives in concert with the Life (1.4, 23; 2.5, 19; 3.2, 17).

What may be said in response to Lohse's contention that Colossians deconstructs the delicate Pauline dialectic between the indicative and the imperative, the

31 So, rightly, Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul*, 247.

32 So also Brown, *Introduction*, 613, and Wedderburn, 'Colossians', 52. Interestingly, 2 Tim 2.16–18 describes Hymenaeus and Philetus as godless chatterers 'who have swerved from the truth' and whose 'talk eats its way like gangrene' because they held that 'the resurrection is past already'.

33 Rightly noted by, among others, Kümmel, *Introduction*, 344; and L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 359, who remarks: 'The language [of Col 2.12–13; 3.1–4] is slightly different, but the thought is virtually identical to that in Rom 6:1–14.'

34 On the 'hymn' in Col 1.15–20, see, among many others, N. T. Wright, 'Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15–20', *NTS* 36 (1990) 444–68.

35 Lincoln, 'Colossians', 573. Cf., similarly, O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 168–9.

36 So Lincoln, 'Colossians', 573. Contrast Barclay (*Colossians and Philemon*, 89–90), who suggests that Colossians is silent regarding the future transformation of world conditions, further transformation, and bodily resurrection. Given the 'hymn's' celebration of universal reconciliation as a past event and the epistle's vision of salvation as 'primarily an inner reality', Barclay suggests, 'there is less concern about the destiny of one's body and its material environment' (90). In context, Barclay directs the reader to consider by way of contrast Phil 3.20–1 and Rom 8.18–25.

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'already' and the 'not yet', by melding baptism and resurrection?[37] While it is true that the Christian's future with Christ does not feature as the primary grounds for enjoining ethical behavior in this letter (cf., e.g., 1 Thess 1.9–10; 4.3–6; 5.6–10; 1 Cor 6.9–10; Gal 6.7–10; Rom 13.11–14), neither is the connection between believers' destiny with Christ and their moral life in Christ altogether absent.[38] Having spoken of the future manifestation of Christ and thereby Christians in 3.4, the writer turns straightaway to exhort his audience to put to death (νεκρώσατε) their earthly members (3.5). The Colossians had already died with Christ (2.20; 3.3; cf. Rom 6.2–4; 8.13), but they must now put ethical feet to this theological fact (cf. 2.6; 3.1). Indeed, they must put away their previous patterns of living because the wrath of God is coming to judge the very vices in which they formerly walked (3.7).[39] The old self must be put away; the new self must be put on (3.8, 10). Their conversion, incorporation into Christ and his multifaceted body, and protracted transformation require as much (3.8–11). Moreover, there is a close link between present living and future reckoning in 1.22–3, 1.27–8 and 3.22–4.1. How the Colossians live or fail to live the life of faith will impinge directly upon their eternal inheritance. The indicative/imperative pattern and the already/not yet tension are more integral to the ethical instruction of this epistle than Lohse (and others) have supposed.[40]

The Christian hope: eternal expectation and/or heavenly possession?

Another argument (and the final one we will take up here) against the eschatology in Colossians being of one piece with what one finds in Paul revolves around the way the epistle employs the word 'hope' (ἐλπίς). G. Bornkamm has argued that Colossians utilizes the term (1.5, 23, 27) to convey that which is hoped for or the object of hope as opposed to the eschatological or existential manner in which the apostle utilized ἐλπίς, i.e., to hope for something (see, e.g., 1 Thess 4.13; 5.8; Gal 5.5: Rom 4.18; 5.5; 8.20).[41] While his observation is accurate to an extent,

37 Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 180; *Ethics*, 148–9. Cf. Sanders (*Ethics*, 69), who suggests: 'The imperative in the indicative is then, by a tour de force, artificially brought into conjunction with the definition of a Christian as one who already has been raised with Christ.'

38 Lohse (*Colossians and Philemon*, 180) fails to note that there are other grounds or warrants for exhortation than eschatological motivation in the 'undisputed' Paulines. On warrants for the moral life in Paul, see esp. R. B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 36–41.

39 Lincoln ('Colossians', 642) rightly observes the eschatological motivation behind the imperative to 'put to death' various vices and practices.

40 Schrage (*Ethics*, 244) forcefully and accurately asserts, 'It is certainly wrong to speak of a contrived and artificial association of indicative and imperative [in Colossians]'. He also rightly observes that the parenesis of Colossians 'cautions against associating [it] too closely with . . . "realized eschatology"' (245).

41 G. Bornkamm, 'Die Hoffnung im Kolosserbrief. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage der Echtheit des Briefes', *Studien zum Neuen Testament und zur Patristik* (TU 77; Berlin: Akademie, 1961) 56–64.

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there are three factors that cloud the clarity with which Bornkamm sees this issue and give cause for pause. First of all, even though 'hope' connotes objective content in 1.5, it is used to speak of 'a hopeful way of life' grounded in Christ and the gospel in 1.23.[42] Secondly, despite Bornkamm's claims to the contrary, 'hope' is not wholly unrelated to eschatology in Colossians. Christ, who is depicted in 1.27 as 'the hope of glory', has yet to appear in glory (3.4).[43] Lastly, even if Paul typically regards hope as 'hope by which something is hoped' (*spes qua speratur*) rather than 'hope which is hoped for' (*spes quae speratur*),[44] in Rom 8.24–5 the apostle employs ἐλπίς in the latter manner.[45] While the primary connotation of hope in Colossians may well be concrete and objective (as opposed to abstract and subjective), this 'atypical' meaning of 'hope' is attested elsewhere in Paul, and the 'typical' Pauline meaning is not altogether missing from the letter. As one interpreter puts it, in Colossians 'hope stands for confident assurance on the basis of what has already been achieved and is precisely what, in the writer's view, would be undermined by the philosophy'.[46]

IV. Conclusions

Mention of the 'philosophy' in the quotation directly above serves as a suitable segue to the conclusion of this essay. In section III we have observed that there is both continuity and discontinuity between the eschatology one encounters in Colossians and the eschatology one discovers elsewhere in Paul. One way that scholars have explained these differences is by making an appeal to the situation into which Colossians was written.[47] Contextual exigencies, it is argued, adequately account for whatever eschatological discrepancies there are between Colossians and Paul's (other) letters. Arguably, a 'philosophy' that centered on bodily asceticism and heavenly ascent was afoot in the fellowship.[48] The

42 See Kümmel, *Introduction*, 344, and Lincoln, 'Colossians', 574.

43 Also noted by O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 12; cf. similarly Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35.

44 The words that appear in quotations and parentheses are taken from Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35.

45 Noted by O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, 11; Kümmel, *Introduction*, 344.

46 Lincoln, 'Colossians', 574.

47 In addition to Lincoln ('Colossians', 574, and *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 131), note, e.g., O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, xlvi; Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, 35; Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, 136; Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 191; Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul*, 247–8; and Garland, *Colossians/Philemon*, 202–3.

48 This is, of course, not the place to take up the controversial and convoluted topic of the 'Colossian heresy'. For a succinct, yet sufficiently full, treatment of the 'philosophy', see Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon*, 37–55, and Lincoln, 'Colossians', 560–8. Full-length studies on the subject have been conducted in recent years by, among others, C. E. Arnold,

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author of Colossians, it is thought, viewed this development as a threat to the spiritual well-being of the assembly. Interpreters have suggested that it is against the backdrop of this deleterious influence, whatever its precise nature, that Colossians must be read. This explains in particular, we are told, the exalted Christology and realized eschatology that permeate the epistle.[49]

Theological development is another, though not necessarily separate, explanation that exegetes offer for the eschatological orientation of Colossians. Some think that a gradual shift in the apostle's eschatological thinking occurred over the course of his Christian life and written correspondence. It is said that a trajectory may be traced from 1 Thessalonians to 1 Corinthians to 2 Corinthians to Romans to Philippians which demonstrates an odyssey from a more futurist, 'physical' eschatology to a more inaugurated, 'spiritual' one.[50] In this evolutionary conception of Pauline eschatology, Colossians would be viewed as a natural next step. While some scholars think that a developmental hypothesis provides a satisfactory explanation for the eschatological variation among the Pauline letters, others regard such a theory as unnecessary or unconvincing – unnecessary, because whether Colossians is or is not authentic, there is (they would contend) a basic continuity between Paul's own eschatology and that contained in Colossians;[51] unconvincing, because whatever changes did occur in Paul's eschatology over the course of his ministry, it did not develop (or devolve!) into the eschatology one finds in Colossians.[52]

The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae (WUNT 77; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1995); R. E. DeMaris, *The Colossian Controversy: Wisdom in Dispute at Colossae* (JSNTSup 96; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994); T. W. Martin, *By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as a Response to a Cynic Critique* (JSNTSup 118; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); and T. J. Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae* (JSNTSup 53; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991). For the argument that talk of a 'Colossian heresy' is a flight of interpretive fancy, see the well-known essay of M. D. Hooker, 'Were There False Teachers in Colossae?', *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* (ed. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973) 315–31.

49 E.g., in a sub-section entitled 'Eschatology and Ethics', Murphy-O'Connor (*Paul*, 247) writes: 'For Paul it was imperative to make sure that the Colossians understood that Christ had done everything essential. His plenitude meant that there was nothing that the spirit powers could add.' So similarly, Sappington (*Revelation and Redemption*, 227) maintains: 'The emphasis on blessings already obtained in several important passages in Colossians undoubtedly resulted from Paul's attempt to combat the perspective of the errorists.'

50 See, e.g., Hunter, *Paul*, 98–107. Cf. C. H. Dodd, 'The Mind of St. Paul: Change and Development', *BJRL* 18 (1934) 3–44; and R. N. Longenecker, 'Is There Development in Paul's Resurrection Thought?', *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament* (ed. *idem*; McMaster NT Studies; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 171–202.

51 E.g. Sappington (*Revelation and Redemption*, 226) states: 'The contrast between the eschatology of Colossians and that of the undisputed letters appears to have been exaggerated.'

52 Lohse (*Colossians and Philemon*, 180) asserts that Pauline theology, including – but not limited to – his eschatology, 'has undergone a profound change in Col[ossians]'. Lohse's disappointment in such a development is thinly veiled.

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Contextual considerations and developmental reconstructions vis-à-vis the eschatology of Colossians greatly complicate the question that we are seeking to answer in this paper.[53] Opinions proliferate, permutations escalate. The limited evidence to hand seems to heighten indecision and to mock conviction. Tentative conclusions, however, do not necessarily result from muddle-mindedness or loss of verve. Sometimes less is more, even if it does not settle the score. In any event, 'Biblical studies are not helped along by being certain about the uncertain'.[54]

Setting undue caution aside, however, I will now state my own position. I presently see a basic congruity between the eschatology set forth in Colossians and that contained in the 'genuine' Paulines. Even if the 'already' features in the letter, the future is not allowed to collapse upon the present (as it is sometimes thought to do in Ephesians and John).[55] While there is not, to my mind, the sense of eschatological expectation in Colossians that occurs elsewhere in Paul, the epistle does preserve a genuine tension between what is and what will be.[56] Furthermore, the letter admonishes progression in the 'now' in preparation for the 'not yet'. It would be wrong-headed to deny differences in eschatological emphases and expressions between Colossians and 'Paul'. However, if one may appeal to contextual and perhaps developmental influences to explain the precise shape of Colossians' eschatology, then one would not be required to conclude that the eschatological outlook of the letter is wholly incongruent with that of Paul. As it happens, Paul's very own eschatology was (arguably) marked by variety (or some might say inconsistency).[57]

The conclusions reached in this paper do not, of course, establish Paul as the author of Colossians. In fact, it is unlikely that this study will either galvanize the position of those who think Colossians is inauthentic or neutralize the arguments of those who regard the letter as authentic (though it could conceivably do the opposite). This paper might well, however, prompt some interpreters to question (anew) the common assertion that the eschatological texture of the letter differs

53 Barclay (*Colossians and Philemon*, 26) remarks that seeking to ascertain how close or far the eschatology of Colossians is from Paul's own is not 'a wholly straightforward matter'. One's willingness to accept at face value or dismiss out of hand the authenticity of the letter might lessen the difficulty of our query.

54 Brown, *Introduction*, 596.

55 On the eschatology of Ephesians and John respectively, see A. T. Lincoln, 'The Theology of Ephesians', *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (ed. J. D. G. Dunn; NT Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993) 114–19; and C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John* (New York: MacMillan, n.d.) 56–8.

56 So also Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 133.

57 See T. D. Still, *Conflict at Thessalonica: A Pauline Church and its Neighbours* (JSNTSup 183; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999) 53–4. On just how variable the apostle's eschatology could be relative to contextual factors, see also C. F. D. Moule, 'The Influence of Circumstances on the Use of Eschatological Terms', *JTS* 15 (1964) 1–15.

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drastically from that of the established Paulines. Moreover, because the case against the authenticity of Colossians is a cumulative one which is built upon finely balanced and carefully nuanced pros and cons, this essay's argument that the epistle's eschatology is not wholly unlike that of Paul (in sum if not in part) might convince some Pauline scholars to shift from the category of 'already' to 'not yet' with respect to the document's pseudonymity.

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