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COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

John M.G. Barclay

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Does it Matter?

In the ancient world pseudonymity (writing under a false name) was not an uncommon phenomenon. When the reputations of great figures were established, it was natural for subsequent writers to compose works in their name (including drama, philosophy, historiography and letters) which imitated their styles and continued their traditions. Thus we find clearly pseudonymous texts created by Greeks and Romans, but also by Jews and early Christians. The production of such works did not necessarily involve the mercenary or deceptive characteristics we associate with 'forgery' (see Meade [for all such references see Further Reading at the end of the chapter]).

In the modern world we have become fixated by questions of authorship. Whether in the realm of art or literature, we put an immensely higher (cash) value on the 'original' than on the 'imitation', even if their artistic value is indistinguishable. We have tied to the 'author' the notion of 'authenticity' and 'authority', such that a painting 'in the school of Rembrandt' or a sonnet 'in the style of Shakespeare' is greatly devalued by comparison with 'the master's work'. Accordingly, we invest great effort in distinguishing the 'genuine' from the 'fake'.

One of the characteristics of post-modernism, on the other hand, is the loss of interest in questions of authorship and attribution. The meaning and value of a text resides in the text itself and in the reader's interpretation, not in the putative author or his or her intentions. Those who thus celebrate 'the death of the author' ask what difference it would make if we got the authorship attribution wrong. All that matters is the text and our engagement with it, not its origins in a particular mind or context.

From the point of view of theology, the post-modern turn to the text might seem very attractive, even liberating. After all, to take our case, Colossians has influenced the church, and continues to influence it, by means of its own inherent qualities, not by virtue of its authorship. To be sure, its original inclusion in the canon came about only because it was attributed to Paul, but it is hard to see what difference it would make to the theological importance of Colossians if that attribution was proved incorrect. If what Colossians says is true, it is true not only because Paul said it. Thus post-modernists and theologians might be tempted to regard the questions we raise in this chapter as a waste of time.

Unfortunately, historical questions cannot be quite so easily banished. The meaning of ancient texts cannot be entirely divorced from their contexts, inasmuch as those contexts can be reconstructed. Even post-modernist professors show some concern for authorship, as may be seen from their reactions to student plagiarism! Christian theology cannot be wholly indifferent to the historical circumstances of early Christianity, and is rightly interested, for instance, in the transition from Pauline to deutero-Pauline Christianity. In the case of Colossians, the decision about authorship affects our understanding of Pauline theology. If it reflects Paul's mind, it would expand and complicate the picture of Pauline theology we draw from the other letters; if it does not, it represents a post-Pauline development, akin to that which we find in Ephesians and the Pastoralas. As we shall see, many reconstructions of Pauline theology, and of the development of early Christianity, are bound up with this question.

However, post-modernist questions do help us to reflect critically on our presuppositions. In the decision about whether or not Colossians belongs to Paul we are not simply 'reconstructing' history, but to some degree 'constructing' it—
that is, creating an image of Paul and what it was ‘possible’ for him to say. The early church constructed a certain ‘Paul’ by accepting the attribution to him of the Pastoral letters; most modern historical criticism has constructed a different ‘Paul’ by judging that he did not write them. Thus it is legitimate to ask what is at stake in different constructions of ‘Paul’: in other words, we will need to observe what (perhaps hidden) factors influence the judgments of scholars about the authorship of Colossians. In relation to authorship itself, we might also wish to soften somewhat the hard lines we typically draw around ‘the author’. The boundaries between an author and a close associate, or disciple, or well-informed imitator are not in reality all that clear and after examining the evidence we will have to consider how wise or practical it is to insist on definitive demarcation.

Trends in the History of Scholarship

The letter to the Colossians purports to be from Paul and Timothy (1.1) and uses the T form on several occasions in describing Paul’s apostleship (notably in 1.23–2.5). It is also signed personally by ‘Paul’ (4.18) after a lengthy passage of personal greetings (4.7-17) which tallies extremely well with personnel listed in the letter to Philemon. Thus, for most of Christian history Colossians has been accepted as authentic. However, with the rise of biblical criticism in the early nineteenth century, the possibility of pseudonymity was recognized in relation to biblical documents just as in the case of other ancient literature. F.C. Baur was not the first to question the authenticity of Colossians (that ‘honour’ belongs to E.T. Mayerhoff in 1838), but the student with access to a well-stocked library may still read his powerful arguments against both Colossians and Ephesians, which in his view must stand or fall together. Baur maintained that these letters represent a form of Gnosticizing metaphysical speculation that goes well beyond Paul and belongs rather in the post-apostolic era. The exaggerated claims for Paul’s apostleship (e.g. in 1.23-24) and the peculiarities of the Greek style of these letters (full of repetitions and tautologies, ‘so far inferior to Romans’) further confirmed his sense that the theology of the letters reflected a later stage when the church was anxious to stress its unity and universal significance (Baur, II, pp. 1-44). Baur’s role as founder of the ‘Tübingen school’ ensured that his judgments were vigorously debated throughout the rest of the nineteenth century: they divided German scholarship, though they were generally rejected by the more conservative English-speaking scholars (e.g. the commentaries of Lightfoot and Abbott).

A shift in scholarly perceptions arose from the work of the ‘History of Religions School’ (1880s onwards). Here pioneering work by scholars such as R. Reitzenstein and M. Dibelius showed that the ‘speculations’ in Colossians on cosmic powers and the assertion of the universal authority of Christ did not need to be relegated to a post-apostolic period of Gnosticism, but could easily reflect the religious conditions of Paul’s lifetime. In the 1930s and 1940s Dibelius and E. Lohmeyer wrote commentaries on Colossians in the most influential German commentary series, both taking the letter to be by Paul; and a massive monograph on Colossians and Ephesians by E. Percy in 1946 further reinforced the respectability of their position. English-speaking scholars were content to find their conservatism thus vindicated. However, by the 1940s and early 1950s the tide was beginning to turn decisively in Germany under the influence of the Bultmann school. R. Bultmann and his pupils (e.g. E. Kasemann, G. Bornkamm, W. Marxsen and E. Schweizer) revived interest in Pauline theology, and the specific framework in which they interpreted it (influenced by Lutheran and existentialist theology) was hostile towards aspects of Colossians and Ephesians. Thus Bultmann found in Colossians a less radical view of faith and eschatology than he championed in Paul, together with ‘a certain doctrinaire and moralization’ in its understanding of salvation (Bultmann, p. 180). Kasemann considered Colossians to reflect a Christianized form of Gnostic mythology, which he regarded as alien to Paul, and found traces of an appeal to apostolic authentication which he took to be ‘the voice of the sub-apostolic age’ (p. 167). Bornkamm had originally thought Colossians to be genuinely Pauline, but his change of mind at
the end of the 1940s represents this shift in German Protestant scholarship. The theological investment in keeping Paul 'clean' from the 'mythological' or 'moralizing' elements in Colossians and Ephesians is evident in Käsemann's blast against H. Schlier, a Bultmann pupil who became a Catholic and started to defend the authenticity of these two letters: in Käsemann's opinion, Schlier's work meant that 'decisive elements in the original message and theology of Paul are curtailed and devalued' (cited in Lohse, p. 181 n. 9). Similarly, Schenk judges that those who consider Colossians to be by Paul only show what an imprecise hold they have on Paul's theology: to add this to the list of Paul's letters would be a quantitative gain but qualitative loss (p. 3349).

Since the 1950s, despite the rearguard action of W.G. Kummel, the vast majority of German scholarship has declared against the Pauline authorship of Colossians: Lohse's influential commentary (first published in 1968) is an obvious case in point. English-speaking scholarship held out rather longer, as one may see from the commentaries by Moule, Bruce, Houlden, Martin and Caird (spanning the 1950s to the 1970s). German scepticism was bolstered by a full-length analysis of the style of Colossians by W. Bujard, published in 1973. Since stylistic analysis can claim to be less subjective than theological evaluation, the case against Pauline authorship has often since that date been taken to be proven. Nowadays throughout mainstream scholarship (even English-speaking), Colossians is routinely bracketed out as 'deutero-Pauline': the consensus accepts only seven letters as 'assuredly' Pauline (Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon and 1 Thessalonians). Colossians and Ephesians are taken to exemplify a stage of development towards moral regulation (household codes) and 'stabilizing institutionalization' (MacDonald), a stance perhaps influenced by a desire to distance Paul from the politically incorrect sentiments of the Colossian household code (3.18–4.1). However, many Pauline scholars will admit that the case against Colossians is not nearly as strong as that against Ephesians and the Pastorals. Unfortunately, the work of those who defend Pauline authorship (e.g. Cannon and the commentaries by Wright and O'Brien) has a distinctly conservative air about it (and no doubt conservative theological commitments play some part on this side of the debate). In fact, the evidence for pseudonymity is not decisive, and strong arguments can still be mounted for Pauline authorship even if one takes a 'radical' view on other historical questions. If New Testament scholarship is worth anything it must proceed by evidence, not by majority voting.

This overview of scholarship suggests that the grounds and moods of the debate have shifted somewhat over the decades, not unrelated to theological commitments. We may now examine in more detail the three main criteria for judgment: historical plausibility, congruity in ideas, and style. These are in essence the same criteria that historians use in relation to any disputed document (e.g. the famous 'Hitler diaries'). In the case of the Pastorals, they each produce results that argue decisively against Pauline authorship, but we must see how they turn out in relation to Colossians.

### Historical Plausibility

Here the question concerns whether the type of document we have in Colossians, and the types of issues it discusses, fit plausibly in the life-time of Paul, or must be consigned to a later period. We may leave aside here one special factor that has bedeviled our topic since the days of Mayerhoff: the nature of the relationship between Colossians and Ephesians. Over the years several scholars have argued that Colossians was written in imitation of Ephesians or was interpolated with material drawn from that letter: either possibility would obviously rule out Pauline authorship of the present Colossians. However, the current consensus is surely right to hold that, if there is a literary relationship between the two letters, Colossians was used by Ephesians, not the other way around; that makes it possible still to hold that Colossians is by Paul.

Considering first the general character of Colossians, it must be said that in its shape, in its targeting of some specific problem (see the next chapter), and in its use of personal greetings, it matches what we know of Pauline
letter-writing very well. In particular, a comparison of the
greetings in 4.7-17 with the names listed in Philemon 23-24
reveals both a close matching and a wide variation in order
and style. That suggests *either* that Colossians was written
by Paul at the same time and in the same circumstances as
Philemon *or* that it was written by a Pauline imitator who
knew Philemon and was capable of very skilful adaptation of
its names to make Colossians look authentic. There are small
differences between the two lists, but these are more easily
explained by real circumstances than by a subtle fictitious
use of the names in Philemon. To be sure, the Pastoral
(which may be shown on other grounds to be pseudonymous)
contain extensive personal references, but no attempt is
made there to match these to an original Pauline letter. If
Colossians is by a later Paulinist, it is unparalleled in its
sophisticated adaptation of incidental details to camouflage
its inauthenticity (contrast the wooden use of Col. 4.7-8 in
Eph. 6.21-22). That does not rule the possibility out of court,
but it gives one reason to pause.

As was noted above, it has been argued that the theology of
Colossians, and the 'error' it was directed against, are only
imaginable in a post-apostolic period of early Christianity.
Such arguments should be treated with caution since they
suggest a far more precise knowledge of developments in
early Christianity and in its contemporary thought-world
than is truly available to us. To be sure, the battle-front in
Colossians is different from that discernible in other Pauline
letters, but we are much too ignorant of early Christian
history to be able to rule this *impossible* in Paul's lifetime.
Unlike in the Pastoral, there are no signs here of developed
church offices, and while Ephesians arguably looks back
wistfully to an apostolic era (Eph. 2.20), nothing in
Colossians is demonstrably anachronistic. (Kiley's argument
[pp. 46-51] that the lack of reference to financial transactions
is suspicious can hardly be taken seriously, and Sanders did
not quite prove his case that Colossians shows signs of an
imitator copying phrases from authentic letters.) Thus it
cannot be said that there is anything in this letter that
argues against its composition in Paul's lifetime: indeed
Schweizer and Dunn, who both take the stylistic arguments
to rule out Pauline authorship, nonetheless hold that
Colossians was written in Paul's lifetime, but by an asso-
ciate.

### Congruity in Ideas

Until the use of the computer put stylistic arguments onto
more solid statistical ground, the weight of the argument
concerning Colossians rested on its theological compatibility
or incompatibility with Paul (see e.g. Lohse, pp. 177-83). On
this issue, those who argue against Pauline authorship
usually assert that the author of Colossians has picked up
peripheral Pauline themes and made them dominant in a
fashion uncharacteristic of Paul, or that a shift has occurred
that has taken Pauline thought in a direction he could never
have followed. All the main themes of Colossians have come
under scrutiny in this way. We may put them under five
headings:

1. **Christology.** At stake here is not so much the centrality
   of Christology, but the exalted terms in which Christ is
depicted in Colossians. We will examine one key passage
   (1.15-20) in some detail below (Chapter 4), but here we may
   note in general how Christ is accorded a cosmic role in the
   creation and reconciliation of the universe (1.15-20), how
   his universal sovereignty over the powers is emphasized (1.16;
   2.10, 15) and how it is claimed of Christ that 'in him the
   whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (2.9). Thus, in a striking
   way, the central mystery celebrated in Colossians is Christ
   himself (2.2) and there is greater reflection on the nature of
   Christ and his role in the universe than in any of the assured
   letters of Paul. It is agreed on all sides that there are partial
   parallels to Colossian Christology in the 'hymn' cited by Paul
   in Phil. 2.6-11 (on Christ's sovereignty) and in the 'creed'
cited in 1 Cor. 8.6 (on the role of Christ in creation); there are
   also comments on Christ's role in relation to the powers in
   such passages as Rom. 8.38 and 1 Cor. 15.20-28. If Col. 1.15-
   20 is, as many think, based on a pre-formed 'hymn', one
   might imagine how Paul could incorporate ideas that he does
   not express elsewhere, but to many scholars the fixation of
   our author on such 'mythological cosmology' (Bultmann) is
   uncharacteristic of Paul, and the celebration of Christ as
already exalted over the powers is too far out of step with the cautious assertion of his future rule in 1 Cor. 15.20-28. That leads us to our second category.

2. Eschatology. The emphasis in Colossians is on realized eschatology. The Colossian Christians are assured that they have been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God’s Son (1.13), and later they are described as having been both buried and raised with Christ in baptism (2.12), a motif that governs 3.1-4. As is well known, Paul expresses himself far more cautiously in 1 Corinthians, emphasizing the ‘not yet’ at least as often as the ‘already’ (e.g. 1 Cor. 4.8-10; 13.8-13), and in his reflection on baptism in Romans 6 he seems to go out of his way to avoid saying that the baptized have been raised with Christ: they have ‘newness of life’ (6.4) and will be united with him in a resurrection like his (6.6), but are not described as already raised. The question is how large a shift this represents and whether it occurs at a point where Paul would have refused to change his ground, whatever the situational circumstances. Some scholars have claimed that Colossians displays a tell-tale loss of interest in the imminent parousia of Christ and associated notions of judgment and resurrection. There are still forward-looking references (e.g. 3.4, 6, 24), but the Christian life is no longer lived under the shadow of the future as radically as in Paul. The dominant metaphors have become spatial (below and above, e.g. 3.1-4) rather than temporal (now and then). It is hard to deny that there is a different complexion to the eschatology of Colossians; the question is how different it is and whether it is unthinkable that it derives from the mind of Paul. The presence of spatial metaphors in the acknowledged letters (e.g. Gal. 4.26; Phil. 3.20) and the variations (or developments) in Paul’s eschatological views do not make this a wholly straightforward matter.

3. Ecclesiology. The two themes thus far considered bear directly on this third, inasmuch as ‘the church’ is described in Colossians in relation to Christ and time in a way unparalleled in the seven assured letters. The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ (Col. 1.18; 2.19) is similar to that famously employed in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, but in Colossians Christ is singled out as ‘the Head’, whereas in 1 Corinthians and Romans the metaphor is not pressed in that direction. Arguably what is at stake here is not merely a shift in metaphor (hardly impossible for Paul, whose metaphors are notoriously unstable) but a new conception of the church as participating in the cosmic authority of Christ. Has the term ‘church’ here developed a new sense, beyond that of a local gathering in a house (a usage still found in Col. 4.15), as a single universal entity that channels or embodies the Lordship of Christ? The ecclesiology of Ephesians certainly indicates a shift in that direction, but some see the same process of development already operative in Colossians. Once again, the question is whether this stretches Pauline reflection on the church (e.g. 1 Cor. 3.21-23; 6.2-3) further than is historically and psychologically plausible.

4. Apostolic Importance. As is well known, Paul describes himself in fairly grandiose (some would say ‘self-important’) terms in his letters, as the apostle to the Gentiles. Nonetheless, some statements in Colossians have seemed to go further than is imaginable from Paul and to hint at the (later) notion of apostolic church-foundation or succession. Could Paul have described himself as ‘the servant of the church’ (singular, 1.24-25) who ‘completes what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions’ for its sake (1.24)? Granted the use of not-dissimilar language in 2 Corinthians (e.g. 4.7-15), could he have generalized its application from his own churches to ‘the church’ in general? Further, could he have considered the gospel to have been ‘proclaimed to every creature under heaven’ (1.23; contrast the sense of an unfinished task in Rom. 15)? Are these signs of a later age inflating Paul’s apostolic role? And does the careful recommendation of Epaphras (1.7-8) function, like some of the personal references in the Pastorals, to legitimate the next generation of leadership in the Pauline churches (see Marxsen, pp. 177-85)? Or are these all explicable features of Paul’s own style in writing to a church he has not founded but for which he feels himself responsible?

5. Ethical Codification. This last factor has only become prominent in recent years. None of the general ethical
instruction in Colossians 3 is exceptional. Indeed, its presentation in the form of indicative and imperative ('you have died... put to death, therefore...'); 3.1-5) matches exactly Paul's own style (e.g. Rom. 6.1-12). However, in 3.18-4.1 we find the outlines of a 'household code' (see below, Chapter 4), whose ethos is one of hierarchy and subjection. Is what is said here about husbands and wives (3.18-19) incompatible with Paul's discussion of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7? And is the instruction to slaves and masters out of step with the letter to Philemon? Is it likely that Paul would adapt a code like this, or is this a sign of creeping 'institutionalization' in the 'sub-apostolic' era? Clearly, our general image of Paul will determine our judgment as to the size and significance of the distance between Colossians and the assured letters.

It is inevitable that this combination of differences and similarities will be variously assessed by different scholars. Cumulatively it looks more significant than on each individual account, but still the question remains whether the distance from authentic Pauline theology is significant enough to require positing a different author. We have already drawn attention to the fact that ideological considerations may sometimes influence such a decision, especially the concern to keep Paul theologically and ethically 'untainted'. But there is also a methodological question about what range and variety we might expect from a figure like Paul. Scholars are now perhaps less prone than in previous generations to regard Paul's thought as consistent, systematized and neatly edged, but there is still the tendency to regard the seven assured letters as representing the limits of what is imaginable. Many years ago, H. Chadwick pointed out what 'an uncommonly ingenious controversialist' Paul was and suggested that 'the case against the authenticity of Colossians depends... above all on a capacity gravely to underestimate Paul's versatility and intelligence' (p. 271). Yet, clearly, some limits must be imagined and are applied quite plausibly by those who regard the Pastorals as the product of a mind other than Paul's. Even when allowing for the influence of the Colossian situation on Paul's mind, and the necessities of his confrontation with the 'philosophy' there, it is plausible to argue that some aspects of the theology of Colossians have moved too far from Paul to be credited to him. But it is harder to prove such a claim. The problem is that both sides in this debate are able to argue 'Heads I win, Tails you lose.' On the one side, the similarities with Paul are taken to argue for authenticity, and the differences indicate only his flexibility of mind, differences which a careful imitator would hardly introduce. On the other, the similarities with Paul show the extent to which the imitator was steeped in Pauline thought, but the differences indicate the operation of a different mind. It is hard to see how such an argument can be resolved.

Style

Arguments from style have played some part in the debate on the authorship of Colossians from the very beginning, but it is only in the last few decades that the question could be rigorously assessed by the application of statistical analysis (stylometry) and by harnessing computers for multiple and large-scale stylistic tests. In the early stages of the debate, scholars set great store on factors that now seem wholly unpersuasive. Thus it was noted that there were 34 words unique to Colossians in the New Testament (such are called, in technical parlance, hapax legomena) and 28 that are found in Colossians in common with other New Testament books, but not in common with the seven assured letters of Paul (see the lists in Lohse, pp. 85-86). But such statistics might be simply explained by reference to the unique situation addressed in Colossians, and an analysis of Philippians would show still higher figures (without proving anything about its authorship). Similarly weak was the argument that Colossians lacked a range of words that were typical of Pauline theology (see again Lohse, pp. 86-87). This would only be a serious argument if Colossians was directed against something very like the target of one of Paul's other letters (this is indeed a major flaw in N.T. Wright's argument that Paul here addresses something much like the situation in Galatia). But if the topic of conversation differs, we cannot insist that Paul always use the same language! In fact,
vocabulary usage (or non-usage) is an inadequate criterion for an issue like this.

Fortunately, there are plenty of other stylistic tests which promise greater objectivity by the fact that they measure the whole character of the document including those elements that represent a writer's unconscious habits. In Greek there are a lot of little words—conjunctions and particles meaning things like 'so', 'and', 'but', 'neither'—which are integral to the language but not the sort of thing that an author (or an imitator) would think much about. Charting their frequency in a largish body of prose might reveal a significant discrepancy. This was an exercise first conducted in a thorough manner by W. Bujard in 1973. He also attempted to give a more scientific basis to the analysis of the syntax of the letter (how its phrases and sentences are put together). It had often been observed that some of the sentences in Colossians were extremely long and that their style was rather loose, with repetitions, near synonyms and the piling up of expressions. For instance, Col. 1.3-8 is all one long sentence in the original Greek, with apparent synonyms like 'bearing fruit and growing' (1.6) and the piling up of phrases like 'the word of truth, the gospel' (1.5). Bujard also examined the 'rhetorical engagement' of the letter, that is, how it argues and advances its thought. Students can gain access to some of Bujard's work in the discussion by Kiley (pp. 51-59), where it will be seen that Bujard tried to give his results a numerical value and to compare percentages with the seven assured letters. In some cases, he found Colossians to fall within the range of usage found in those letters (it is often closest to Philippians), but in a number of others it stands out on its own. Bujard took his research to prove, on a cumulative basis, that Colossians could not be by Paul.

What Bujard's case lacked was a thorough grounding in statistics, by which alone one may judge how significant is a result that shows deviation from a Pauline 'norm'. He also failed to use any comparison outside the Pauline corpus which might give a better sense of how far Colossians deviated from the assured letters. Already in the 1960s computers were beginning to come into use for stylistic analysis (the technique was pioneered by A.Q. Morton) and since then a highly sophisticated statistical method has developed in conjunction with computer technology, and is now employed in literary analysis in a number of disciplines. Sometimes, at least, such computer analyses really work. Recently, for instance, a book published anonymously in America under the title Primary Colours was compared by computer analysis to the style of a number of possible authors (political journalists) and shown to be closest to that of Joe Klein (a columnist for Newsweek). He initially denied authorship, but was later forced by supplementary handwriting analysis to admit that the computer had pointed in the right direction all along. Thus we might hope that if we could run the right tests through a computer, the mystery of Colossians would be solved once and for all.

There have been a number of recent attempts to determine the authentic Pauline letters along these lines, most notably in the books by A. Kenny and K. Neumann and in some articles by D. Mealand. Unfortunately, they come to different conclusions, or at least finish with different degrees of certainty. Kenny cautiously concluded that he saw 'no reason to reject the hypothesis that twelve of the Pauline Epistles are the work of an unusually versatile author' (p. 100). Neumann found the disputed letters (Ephesians and Colossians) closer to the Pauline norm than the Pastorals or other New Testament writers, while Mealand reported good evidence for the distinctiveness of Colossians and Ephesians as compared to the seven assured letters. Thus, just as it seemed as if a truly objective basis for decision was being discovered, different experts give us different verdicts.

For those (like me) who are not trained in statistics or in the technicalities of computer literary analyses, it is very hard to understand, let alone to assess, the workings and the arguments of these experts. However, it is clear that there are a number of difficulties with this sort of analysis, which will always render its verdicts somewhat problematical. For instance:

1. It is not always agreed by the experts what are the best tests of 'style'. To achieve results that are statistically significant requires measuring something that occurs
frequently (e.g. use of words that begin with a certain letter, or the position of the subject in the sentence), but it is debatable which are the most valuable definers of style. Some older forms of test, for example concerning sentence length, have now been thoroughly discredited.

2. Clearly it is better to run a range of tests rather than just one or two, in the hope that patterns will emerge (a 'multivariate' approach uses several variables at once). But how does one assess the situation if different tests bring different results? There is a danger here of in-built bias in highlighting only those tests that show difference and discounting those that prove unable to discriminate.

3. Some would question whether our samples of literature are big enough or representative enough to be amenable to proper testing. Some New Testament experts work with 750-word samples, others with 1000 words, but are even the latter big enough? Moreover, in the case of Colossians, some scholars would argue that considerable sections of the letter are based on pre-formed hymnic or ethical traditions, and so do not reveal the author's own hand. On this basis, for instance, Mealand's sample begins after 1.15-20, but it has been argued (e.g. by Cannon) that large parts of the rest of the letter are also heavily dependent on tradition. Even if they are not tradition-based, should we make allowances for authors' variations in style according to the genre in which they write or their subject matter? In other words, are we being careful enough to compare like with like?

4. The most difficult question is to assess how great a stylistic difference has to be before we are forced to recognize the work of a different author. Neumann helpfully compared a range of New Testament authors, and found the disputed letters closer to Paul than to others, but that is only what one would expect from a skilful imitator. Mealand presents a range of graphs showing the relative distances of Pauline and other writings from each other, but it is extremely hard to assess what the distances represent, especially as they vary from one graph to another. In the case of the book Primary Colours mentioned above, the computer was able to compare the unknown author with a range of known authors and thus see who was closest. But in the case of Colossians, we are positing an unknown author, whose style is not otherwise available to us. We can judge that Colossians is a little unlike Paul in certain respects, but not that it is like any 'Paulinist' whom we know independently.

5. Indeed, our greatest difficulty in this case is that, if Colossians is pseudonymous, it is the work of a very careful imitator of Paul. Stylistic tests can obviously work well in discriminating between two different authors writing in their own style, but they have a much harder task in distinguishing between an original author and someone else who is steeped in his language and thought. To use a musical parallel, it is known that Mozart did not finish his Requiem Mass (K.626) before he died, and that it was finished off by his pupil Süssmayr. Mozart had discussed the unfinished parts of the work and sketched out some elements of them, but it is now often impossible to tell what in the later sections is Mozart's own work and what that of Süssmayr. One meets things which it seems Mozart would never have accepted, followed immediately by some entirely Mozartian passage. If Colossians was written by such a careful pupil and imitator of Paul, will we ever be able to say for sure from whose hand it comes?

Thus, as Mealand himself acknowledges, 'at the end of the day statistics does not provide a magical black box' (p. 79); indeed, sceptics will recall the cynical saying about 'lies, damned lies and statistics'! The results of these statistical analyses will depend to a degree on the ways the material is fed in, and the presuppositions with which the statistics are read. They confirm the presence of stylistic difference, and thus suggest the possibility of another author, without being able to provide decisive proof.

Conclusions (or Anti-Conclusions)

For many contemporary scholars the stylistic evidence is strong enough on its own to rule out Pauline authorship, though the difficulties noted above might cause some to modify their confidence a little. For others, the combination of the theological and stylistic differences makes the case on
a cumulative basis. Some such accumulation is certainly legitimate (so long as only strong arguments are included, and not the weak as well), and those who defend Pauline authorship would be well advised to meet the force of the whole cumulative argument and not to attempt to win the day by piecemeal counter-arguments. The force of tradition and non-academic factors must also be acknowledged on both sides. 'Conservative' positions may be influenced by church expectations, or the ethos of the institution in which such scholars work or the publisher for whom they write: to concede Colossians would certainly necessitate the 'fall' of Ephesians and the Pastorals as well. On the other side, hidden factors may require a reconstruction of Paul's image free of the complications or disappointments of Colossians, and the growing custom of discussing Pauline theology by reference only to the seven 'assured' letters makes Colossians look odd simply because it is always omitted from that discussion.

And now we may add one further complication. We noted above that the arguments about historical plausibility did not point strongly towards a date later than Paul's lifetime. Could the stylistic, and perhaps also the theological, differences between Colossians and other Pauline letters be put down to the use of a secretary or an associate in the composition of this letter? We know that Paul did use secretaries (e.g. Tertius, Rom. 16.23), and secretaries could be used in a great variety of ways, ranging from mere dictation to co-authorship or independent composition (see Richards). Has Paul relied more on a secretary here than in other letters? That is a possibility one could neither prove nor rule out, though one might ask why he would do so in this case, and how likely it is that he would give a secretary this degree of freedom in moulding the theology of the letter. Alternatively, could he have entrusted the composition of this letter to an associate? This theory has been advanced by a few scholars (e.g. Schweizer's commentary, pp. 15-24) and usually takes Timothy, named in the opening salutation (1.1), as the most likely candidate. It is in fact somewhat doubtful that Timothy, who according to Acts 16.1-3 was uncircumcised until adulthood, would have written disparagingly about uncircumcision in the terms of 2.13. But more generally, the question again arises whether Paul would have allowed an associate to write a letter in his name which included such differences from his own theology. This solution (which appeals also to Dunn) thus looks neat, but it depends on unknown and imponderable factors; to many it appears too 'convenient' by half.

Thus we are faced with an interesting conundrum that shows how difficult it is to draw neat lines around authors and their thought. Scholars are notoriously unwilling to admit ignorance or indecision [the Latin for 'we do not know' is 'ignoramus']!, but it is not the object of this guide to give 'answers', only to indicate by what means readers might assess the matter for themselves. If the decision proves to be a close call, or even impossible, that might cause us to reflect a little more on authorship and individuality. It turns out, for example, that the differences are not large between Paul himself writing this letter, Paul writing with the aid of a secretary, Paul authorizing an associate to write it, and the letter being composed by a knowledgeable imitator or pupil of Paul. Perhaps with our intense concern to demarcate 'Paul' from 'non-Paul' we are working with an artificial or anachronistic notion of individual uniqueness: was Paul completely different from his contemporaries and associates, or did he typically work with others, influencing them and being influenced by them? Have we created a Paul of utter uniqueness in line with the peculiarly modern cult of the individual? Whether by Paul, by a secretary, by an associate or by a pupil, Colossians is clearly a 'Pauline' letter. Readers must decide for themselves whether they can place it more precisely than that, and if so where.

Further Reading

All commentaries include a discussion of this issue in an introduction or excursus. In addition, see the following literature, mostly cited in this chapter:

Baur, F.C., Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ (trans. A. Menzies from 2nd edn; 2 vols.; London/Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1875 [1845]).


Chadwick, H., "All Things to All Men" (1 Cor. ix.22), *NTS* 1 (1954-55), pp. 261-75.


Schenk, W., 'Der Kolosserbrief in der neueren Forschung (1945-1985)', *ANRW*, II.25.4, pp. 3327-64.