Reconsidering the Authorship of Colossians

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The dispute over the authorship of Colossians only began in the 19th century with the modern critical investigation of its language and style. Since then, further objections have been raised against the letter’s authenticity, and today at least 50 percent of NT scholars consider the letter pseudonymous. Although it cannot be disproved that Colossians is pseudonymous, various considerations set forth in this essay converge to suggest that the argument for Colossians’ authenticity has greater plausibility.

Key Words: Colossians, deutero-Paulines, NT pseudonymity, authenticity, authorship

Despite assertions of certainty that Paul did not author Colossians, the debate over the letter’s authenticity, which began in earnest with the 1838 publication of Mayerhoff’s study, is ongoing. Scholars are now evenly divided on this issue. Regardless of position, most admit that the debate is beyond resolution. Given this impasse, it is understandable that the authorship question no longer dominates studies of Colossians. In fact, in any number of studies, the issues and the author’s response are studied apart from knowing the identity of Colossians’ actual author, which is

2. J. L. Mayerhoff, Der Brief an die Colosser mit vornehmlicher Berücksichtigung der drei Pastoralbriefe (Berlin: Schultze, 1838).
considered inessential. This raises the question, why attempt to identify the author, especially as many scholars now assess pseudonymity, if not altogether positively, at least as a benign literary convention? Particularly influential in this regard is David Meade’s study that positively contextualizes NT pseudonymity within the trajectory of the OT/Jewish tradition of pseudonymous writing. However, even were one to concede that letter writing in Paul’s name grew out of an accepted OT/Jewish practice, or that NT pseudonymers were innocent impersonators with noble motives, or that pseudonymity does not compromise a letter’s canonical status, still there are at least two significant exegetical implications to consider with regard to authorship. First, the contested letters (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1–2 Timothy, and Titus) are usually segregated from the “genuine” Paulines, and their analysis often consists in demonstrating divergences between the pseudonymer’s theological thought and Paul’s. Some consider this segregation the major obstacle to the retrieval of Pauline theology. Second, if Pauline letters are occasional, then authorship is a key determinant of the historical circumstances that occasioned the letter and of whether we are reading Paul’s response to a pastoral situation of concern to him or a Pauline impersonator’s response to a post-Pauline situation.


11. Not everyone is exigent about these issues. James D. G. Dunn, for example, cares less whether Colossians is expressive of the later or late Paul than how the letter reflects the development of Pauline thought, (Colossians and Philemon, 19).
Thus, at least with regard to the diachronic study of Colossians, attempting to identify the actual author is not irrelevant.

At present, there exists no decisive evidence, nor has any methodological breakthrough happened that categorically establishes the authorship of Colossians. Unfortunately, many arguments, especially those cited against authenticity including arguments related to style and theology, are forcefully advanced as having probative value even though they do not. When certainty is unattainable, arguments on both sides of the issue have to be weighed and the standard of judgment must be what is the most plausible. To accept the most plausible is not a matter of compromise necessitated by the unavailability of probative evidence. Rather, it is to accept what most reasonably explains the evidence that is available as a matter of epistemic prudence. The purpose of this study is to weigh the evidence and the key arguments adduced in the Colossians’ authorship debate with regard to their plausibility. Although it cannot be disproved that Colossians is pseudonymous, various considerations set forth in this essay based on, among other things, stylo-statistical information, 1st-century conventions regarding authorship, and agreed-on premises regarding the composition of Paul’s letters weigh in favor of Colossians’ authenticity.

This study will unfold in five parts, beginning with the question whether the criterion of style should factor in the debate. Next, I define terms used in this essay and then briefly consider the letter’s information and purpose. In the third part, I review and evaluate the text-based arguments against Colossians’ authenticity as well as corroborating arguments based on extrinsic factors. I consider the stylistic and theological arguments for Colossians’ authenticity in the fourth part. There, theological content will be considered within a broader set of methodological questions. This section also includes consideration of the occasion and provenance of Colossians. A brief summary and conclusions follow in the fifth part.

**Criteria Employed in the Authenticity Debate**

*Does Style Still Matter?*

Today, scholars have increasingly come to depend on theological content as the decisive factor in judging Colossians’ authenticity. The assumption here is that, while too many variables are involved to isolate Paul’s style, one can be relatively certain of the limits of his conceptual capacity beyond which novel theological ideas should be assigned to a pseudonymer. In fact, Jerome Murphy-O’Connor has concluded that stylistic arguments must be excluded. However, three considerations are worth raising. First, if we could be certain where the conceptual line is, beyond which Paul could not go, without imposing a developmental schema on his thought, then theological content might justifiably be considered the decisive factor. But

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12. As noted by Pizzuto, *Cosmic Leap*, 35.
we cannot be certain; hence, theological content is no more decisive today than a half century ago when it was observed that overreliance on theological content usually leads to an impasse. While proponents of authenticity insist on Paul's theological creativity, opponents insist that certain theological notions and situations necessarily postdated Paul.14 Second, though Murphy-O'Connor may be correct that Paul's use of coauthors and secretaries precludes establishing a writing style exclusive to Paul, his conclusion that the stylistic argument must be abandoned is not necessitated by his observation—even if it relieves the argument for authenticity of one burden.15 To acknowledge that the homologoumena are the result of a creative collaboration that precludes isolating Paul's unique literary style is not to say that the letters have no perceptible style. Whether we now call this the “team” or the “collective” style as opposed to an exclusive Paul style does not change the fact that some letters have been judged to evince consistency in grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, that is, to have a style, which has been used to distinguish authentic from inauthentic letters. Therefore, if the intention is not to abandon the effort to determine authenticity and if an exclusive Paul style is not the only metric of comparison, then with regard to Colossians we might phrase the question this way: does its style approach the style of letters considered authentic which were written by that author/team traditionally identified as Paul? Granted, stylistic studies are not without their limits, but attention to style may still yield some worthwhile insights regarding authorship.16 Third, if the use of secretaries and coauthors precludes isolating Paul's exclusive writing style, should it not likewise preclude establishing theological content unique to Paul? How do we know the extent of the theological contribution of the coauthor(s), secretaries, and other community members, to the letters? These questions are beyond the scope of this article, but they underscore the complexities of the authorship debate.

Definitions, Text Evidence, External Evidence

Definitions

An authentic writing is one whose named author is, in some sense, the real author even if the letter was partly or even wholly written by a secretary or colleague, as long as the named author was alive to authorize the content of the letter written in his name.17 Apropos Colossians, if authentic, this would mean that authorial responsibility belongs to Paul but with-

14. See Andrew Q. Morton and James McLeman, Paul, the Man and the Myth: A Study in the Authorship of Greek Prose (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 31–37. Their study aimed to move beyond the impasse created by relying too exclusively on the criterion of theology that, they persuasively argued, is neither objective nor able to yield assured results.

15. Murphy-O’Connor, Paul, 237.

16. For critical observations, see Aletti, Colossiens, 28–29; and Richards, First-Century Letter Writing, 143.

out precluding a collaborative process in the formulation of content and composition of the letter. Today, one might express this by saying Paul “owned” the content even though its crafting and articulation may be the work of others.

A pseudonymous writing is one in which the real author, that is, the formulator and composer of the content contained in the document, has consciously ascribed his/her literary composition to a deceased figure from the past. Throughout this essay, I refer to the real author of the pseudonymous document as the pseudonymer and use pseudonymity to describe the activity of ascribing a written composition to someone other than the pseudonymer. With regard to Colossians, this implies that Paul would have been dead at the time the letter was composed; hence, the letter is “post-Pauline” literally and not merely conceptually.

Internal Evidence

Paul’s authorship of Colossians is thrice asserted within the letter (1:1, 23; 4:18), which provides the following information. Paul was in prison (4: 3,10,18) when Colossians was composed and sent via Tychichus and Onesimus (4:7–9). Second, Paul wrote this letter to a congregation with which he had no direct, personal contact (2:1). However, this community was part of the network of foundations associated with Paul’s Ephesian ministry. Paul wrote Colossians to express his pastoral concern for the community after having been apprised of the community situation by its founder, Epaphras (1:4, 7–8; cf. Phlm 23). Apparently, Paul sent this associate to evangelize his native city as well as Hierapolis and Laodicea (cf. 4:12–13). Third, the notices at 1:21 and 2:13 and other text clues suggest that the Colossian community was comprised of converts from paganism. Some maintain that the community would have included believers of Jewish origin. However, the ostensible addressees of this letter are Gentile Christians. Fourth, the information relayed to Paul about the community, and for which he gave thanks, was altogether positive (Col 1:4–6; 2:5). Fifth,

19. Schweizer considers Colossians pseudonymous but not post-Pauline (Colossians, 23–26). But why imprisonment would have prevented Paul from approving Colossians’ content and many other questions are left unexplained by Schweizer.
20. On the missionary expansion in Asia Minor, see Murphy-O’Connor, Paul, 173–75.
21. E.g., lack of citations from the OT; scarce allusions to the OT that appear to be limited to Ps 89:28 at Col 1:15b; Prov 2:4–5 and Isa 45:3 at Col 2:3; Jer 4:4 at Col 2:11; Isa 29:13 at Col 2:22; Gen 1:26–27 at Col 3:10; the typical Gentile vices mentioned at 3:5–7; and Epaphras’s own Gentile pedigree.
22. On the Jewish presence in Asia Minor, see, inter alia, Paul Treblico, Jewish Communities in Asia Minor (SNTSMS 69; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); F. F. Bruce, “Jews and Christians in the Lycus Valley,” BibSac 141 (1984) 3–15. Dunn estimates that by the first century b.c., Colossae’s Jewish population was already ca. 2,000 to 3,000 (Colossians and Philemon, 22).
in addition to that positive account, it was apparently reported that the community was being subjected to specious argumentation (παραλογίζηται, 2:4), captivatingly expressed (πιθανολογία, 2:4) by an advocate of an unspecified “philosophy,” qualified only as according to human tradition and elemental spirits and not according to Christ (2:8). Apparently, the advocates of this other teaching were judging the community as unqualified for salvation on account of certain practices and the omission of others (2:16–23). Whether the advocates of the “philosophy,” were community insiders, offering their own version of the gospel, or outsiders, offering an alternative to the gospel, is not certain. Nor do we have any certainty about the content of their teaching or the nature of the practices they promoted. These issues are continuously debated, but no consensus has been reached. Finally, it is not even certain whether we should speak of a group as opposed to an individual because the text consistently uses τις at 2:8, 16 and 18. In any event, it is questionable whether τις can be construed as an indicator of pseudonymity.

Based on the text information, it is evident that Paul wrote to encourage (παρακαλέω, 1:2; 2:2; 4:8) and exhort the Colossians to remain steadfast in their faith (1:23; 2:6–7) and live more fully the new life they have in Christ through baptism and to warn them (βλέπετε μή, 1:8) against falling prey to teachers, ideas, and practices that would shift their focus from the gospel. Why the community, or a segment, would be curious about this philosophy and its practices is a matter of speculation. There is no indication that the community addressed has split its allegiance between Paul’s gospel and the advocates’ philosophy or that the advocates have assailed Paul’s authority. Defection is a possibility Paul wants to prevent (Col 2:4), and so he responds with undeniable exigency. However, his response here is not charged as in Galatians, where his authority was impugned (1:11–2:10) by Judaizing Christians carrying on a vigorous proselytizing mission, and where some community members had already defected (1:6). By contrast, Colossians contains praise, prayer, and thanksgiving (1:3–14), a limited amount of admonition (2:8–23), and a proportionately large amount of exhortation (2:6, 3:1–4:6).

23. See below, p. 242 n. 80.
24. Paul uses the indefinite sing. τις (“anyone”) even when he may have a definite individual in mind (cf. 1 Cor 3:12; 2 Cor 2:5). He also uses τις instead of the pl. τινες (cf. 1 Cor 1:15; Gal 1:9), when the context suggests he has a definite group in view; finally, he uses τις with no specific individual and/or group necessarily in view (cf. Rom 8:9 and 1 Thess 5:15).
25. Kiley’s conclusion that Colossians is inauthentic not because its issues postdated Paul but because its personnel “is an indefinite ‘someone’” (Colossians, 63–5), ignores the evidence cited in n. 24.
27. The letter’s purpose is hortatory. See the discussion in J. P. Heil, Colossians: Encouragement to Walk in All Wisdom as Holy Ones in Christ (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
In brief, nothing contained in the letter’s information nor anything about its purpose invites the suspicion that Colossians is pseudonymous. Moreover, the ancient witness to the letter is consistent in recognizing it as an authentic letter of Paul.28

ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE AUTHENTICITY OF COLOSSIANS

Internal Evidence

Various arguments have been adduced against Colossians’ authenticity. Some, such as the peculiar vocabulary of Colossians, continue to be cited even though they are recognized as indecisive.29 Here, I review only the most significant arguments. They concern style and theology.

Literary Style

An attentive reading of Colossians reveals a number of stylistic features infrequently encountered in the uncontested Pauline letters.30 The list of peculiar features most cited by deniers of authenticity often begins with notice of Colossians’ unusually long, awkward sentences, created by the stringing together of relative clauses and participial phrases (e.g., 1:3–8 and 1:9–20; 2:8–15). Deniers also note the redundant style evident in the abundance of synonyms (e.g., 1:9, 11, 22, 23, 26; 2:7; 3:8; 4:12) and highlight the number of explanatory genitives concentrated in the first two chapters of Colossians (cf. 1:5, 12, 13, 20, 24, 27; 2:2, 11, 12). These readers also note the grouping together of words with the same stem (e.g., 1:11, 29; 2:11, 19), the use of loosely joined infinitives to express purpose or result (e.g., 1:10, 22, 25; 4:3; 4:6), the use of ὁ ἐστιν without regard for the gender of the word it explains (e.g., 1:24) and the use of ἐν to connect nouns to phrases (1:6, 8, 12, 29). Finally, scholars note the lack of economy with which thought is unfolded in this letter, which differentiates it from the direct and argumentative style of the uncontested Paulines. Eduard Lohse attributes this cumbersomeness to the letter’s hymnic, liturgical quality.31

These examples illustrate the stylistic differences between Colossians and the uncontested letters of Paul, and they need not be disputed. But

28. Colossians is first listed in the 10-letter canon of Marcion, ca. second century A.D. (cf. Tertullian, Marc., 5:19). It is among the 13 Paulines presumed genuine listed in the Muratorian Canon, ca. second century A.D. (cf. Muratorian Frag., 64–67, in Metzger, Canon of the NT, 307). It was also cited or alluded to by the apostolic fathers, apologists, and other writers of the first Christian centuries who considered it a genuine letter of Paul (cf. Aletti’s citation list, Colossiens, 20–21).


30. Lohse’s catalog of stylistic peculiarities cited against Colossian’s authenticity remains the most exhaustive (Colossians, 88–91).

31. Lohse, Colossians, 89.
to be precise, the differences are a matter of quantity, not kind. With the exception of ὢ ἐστὶν, which is never used in the uncontested letters, every other feature noted above is also present in the letters considered authentic, albeit with less frequent occurrence. If one wanted to state this positively, it could be said that Colossians and the uncontested letters have a number of peculiar stylistic features in common.

**Theology**

Advocates of pseudonymity claim that Colossians’ Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology argue against Paul’s authorship of this letter. Here I consider only the most salient points made with regard to these three categories drawn primarily from the discussion in Lohse. Apropos the letter’s Christology, already in the Christ hymn at 1:15–20, scholars note the stress on Christ’s victory over cosmic forces in contrast to the typical Pauline stress on both Christ’s victory over sin, law, and death and on the cross and resurrection as the source of justification. Here the emphasis is on creation through Christ, who is preeminent. It is also pointed out that Colossians goes well beyond the content of traditional Christological confessions encountered in the *homologoumena* (e.g., Phil 2:9–11; 1 Cor 8:6) with its emphasis on Christ as preexistent (1:17), its description of Christ as the icon of the invisible God (1:15), and its claim that the entire fullness of the deity dwells in Christ (1:19; 2:9).

With regard to ecclesiology, two contrasts between Colossians and the uncontested Paulines are usually signaled. The first is between Col 1:18a and 1 Cor 12:12–20. In Colossians, Christ is the κεφαλή of the body, the church. In the Corinthian passage where the body metaphor is used, the head is accorded no primacy or distinction. Romans 12:4–8, where the body metaphor is not developed, is also cited as contrasting with Col 1:18a. The second contrast is between the use of ἐκκλησία in Colossians at 1:18 and 1:24, where it signifies the universal body over which the Lord rules, and its more typical use in the uncontested letters as a reference for one or more local communities.

Proponents of pseudonymity consider Colossians most at variance with the theological thought of the uncontested Paulines when it comes to eschatology. They note that, whereas the expectation of Christ’s imminent return is the exigency driving Paul’s mission and conditioning his thought in the genuine letters, in Colossians the sense of expectation and exigency

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32. In his detailed presentation of Colossian’s stylistic features, Lohse cites parallels in the uncontested letters to the peculiar stylistic features under discussion in Colossians (Colossians, 89). All the parallels appear in Romans and 1 Corinthians except one noted at 2 Cor 11:2 and another at Gal 2:3–5, 6–9, the latter cited as an example of long and labored sentences.

33. I omit consideration of “absent” themes because what is absent or scarce is not a certain indicator of pseudonymity. Moreover, these arguments are used arbitrarily. Justification, for example, is mentioned once at Phil 3:9 and only twice in the Corinthian correspondence at 1 Cor 6:11 and 2 Cor 5:21; but the scarce mention of this theme is not used to argue against their authenticity.

34. For more detail see Lohse, Colossians, 177–83.
is subdued. Lohse would say it has “disappeared.” 35 Instead, various passages reveal a shift in emphasis away from the future and onto what has already occurred in the present (e.g., 1:13, 22, 26; 2:12, 13). It is also noted that the shift of attention from future to present has affected the meaning of “hope.” In the authentic Paulines, faith makes hope possible (Rom 4:18) and hope is linked to the end time (Rom 8:18–20), whereas in Colossians hope is no longer an expectant attitude nor is it linked to time. It is instead something stored up in a place (1:5). The eschatological differences are patent.

For NT scholars who maintain that Colossians is pseudonymous, these theological differences between it and Paul’s uncontested letters, combined with the evidence of lexical and stylistic differences, constitute a compelling case against Paul’s authorship of the letter. They sustain their case further with external evidence.

**Extrinsic Evidence**

The case for Colossians’ pseudonymous character based on stylistic and theological considerations is supported by two warrants based on extrinsic evidence, neither of which is incontestable. The first is that pseudonymity was a commonly employed, well-accepted literary convention readily adopted by earliest Christianity. Some signal its widespread use in secular society to explain its adoption in earliest Christianity; 36 others place Christian pseudonymity within a trajectory of Jewish tradition. 37 Whether viewed as a cultural or religious practice, the assumption is that it simply passed into Christian usage. The second is that there existed a Pauline school that would have composed letters in Paul’s name. In fact, a number of scholars consider Colossians the first of the deutero-Pauline letters produced by Paul’s school soon after his death. 38

Assumption one is questionable on a number of grounds. First, a fair amount of evidence reveals that Greco-Roman writers did have a concept of intellectual property, had scruples about its violation and studied documents critically to test for authenticity. 39 So even though pseudonymity was a known practice in secular society, it was not necessarily considered an irreproachable practice. 40 Christians also exhibited similar reservations and likewise tested for authenticity; thus, there is no reason to assume that

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37. See Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon*.
38. See, e.g., Angela Standhartinger, “Colossians and the Pauline School,” *NTS* 50 (2004) 572–93. Dunn thinks Colossians could reflect the theology of either the later or the late Paul (*Colossians*, 19). Elsewhere, he expresses more certainty that Paul was alive when Colossians was written; cf. above, p. 227 n. 18.
40. Granted, in certain contexts for certain purposes (school rooms for imitation and philosophical circles to promote a revered teacher), pseudonymity could be viewed positively
this secular literary convention was widely adopted in Christian circles. Second, categorizing a Pauline letter as spurious disregards the fact that no independent testimony exists from the first Christian centuries that explicitly states that any of the canonical letters that name Paul as author was suspected of being anything but genuine. This might seem a weak argument from silence except for the fact that distinctions were made, based on character, style, and content, between genuine, accepted writings (homoologoumena), disputed writings (antilogoumena) and those rejected as spurious (nōtha). Thus, if a letter was accepted as a genuine Pauline, it was on the basis of established criteria. In fact, evidence from the Muratorian Canon, ca. second century A.D., attests that two letters purportedly from Paul, one to the Laodiceans and the other to the Alexandrians, were judged forgeries and rejected. Granted, not all documents were judged accurately with regard to authenticity. However, this in no way undermines Colossians’ authenticity, which only came into dispute with the modern critical inquiry into the letter’s style and content. Third, there appear to be no parallels to the disputed Pauline letters in Greco-Roman literature. Though Pauline letters and Greco-Roman letters share some common features, they radically differ in that the disputed Paulines were not written for literary or propaganda purposes but as real correspondence to address an actual situation in communities where the apostle’s word carried unique authority. Finally, and most importantly, there are no extant examples from antiquity of recognized pseudonymous literature written within a decade or two after the imputed author’s death, which is the time frame most advocates of Colossians’ pseudonymity suggest. Such literature was typically produced centuries after the ascribed author’s death and, in most cases, the identity of the pseudonymer was, and remains, undiscoverable.

A number of questions also accompany the theory that Christian pseudonymity grew out of acceptable Jewish practice. First, there is no certain evidence that the earliest Christians recognized pseudonymous writings among the biblical books. Second, there is no evidence that they operated with the awareness that in producing pseudonymous documents as Kiley (Colossians, 17–23) pointed out. However, there is no evidence that these contexts and purposes affected Christian views.

41. As attested by Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.25.1–7.
44. Wilder, Pseudonymity, 76–77.
45. Kiley claims that the inclusion of Wisdom of Solomon in the Muratorian Canon, followed by the notice “written by the friends of Solomon in his honour,” reflects the church’s “recognition” and “respect” for the phenomenon of pseudepigraphy (Colossians, 17, 23). But because the composition has no authorial inscription, it is uncertain that a positive assessment of pseudepigraphy is intended. On the difficulties associated with this notice, see Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 14, 200–205.
they were continuing in line with an acceptable Jewish tradition. It is one thing for contemporary scholars to recognize and speak of a “tradition of pseudonymity.” It is quite another to assume this same awareness existed in the ca. mid-first century A.D. among Paul’s coworkers, one or some of whom are alleged to have produced the letters suspected of being pseudonymous. Add to this the fact that most of these coworkers were Gentiles and the assumption seems more questionable. Third, Stanley E. Porter has justifiably questioned Meade’s claim that a parallel exists between assumed pseudonymous Pauline letters and the book of Isaiah. Whereas the letters are ascribed to a known author and written as Paul’s own words, the book of Isaiah is anonymous literature, claiming to contain Isaiah’s words. As Porter also observes, in Isaiah, the tradition is expanding over a long period of time which results in the growth of a single document. This is not the case with an individual letter considered pseudonymous, which, to be precise, is not an elaboration or an expansion but a separately conceived document written to address a new situation and ascribed to Paul. Fourth, exact Jewish epistolary parallels to Paul’s letters do not exist. Many consider the Epistle of Jeremiah a sermon, and most agree that the Letter of Aristeas is not a letter. None of the other Jewish pseudonymous letters are independent letters like Paul’s but are contained within other documents. Finally, if it was always understood that the ultimate author of the sacred text was the Spirit, as Kurt Aland claims, why would anyone need to write under a pseudonym? Would anonymity not be the more logical conclusion of the presupposition that the ultimate author was the Spirit? Moreover, Aland’s explanation seems inadequate in view of more recent findings that Jews like Paul had a much more complex view of scriptural authorship and the relative authority of various parts of scripture than usually assumed.

With regard to the second assumption, though proponents of a Pauline school may disagree about its emergence, they agree that Paul’s coworkers carried forward his legacy after his death, with someone, or perhaps

46. Lincoln insists they were aware but offers no supporting evidence (Ephesians, lxix). Further, if the practice was acceptable, how do we explain the exclusion from the canon of obvious pseudonymous works such as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, or apostolic pseudepigrapha such as the Epistles of Paul and Seneca or the Apocalypse of Peter? Since these were not doctrinally objectionable, it seems obvious, as Ellis concludes, that it was the false appropriation of the names of those with normative authority that led to their exclusion (“Pseudonymity and Canonity of New Testament Documents,” in Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Ralph P. Martin [ed. M. J. Wilkens and T. Paige; JSNTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992] 212–24, here, pp. 218–19).


49. Aland remarks, “When the pseudonymous writings of the NT claimed the authorship of the most prominent apostles only, this was not a skillful trick of . . . fakers . . . to guarantee the highest possible reputation . . . for their work, but the logical conclusion of the presupposition that the Spirit was the author” (“The Problem of Anonymity,” JTS 12 [1961] 39–49, here, p. 47).

a group, writing in his name. However, the existence of such a school is built on circumstantial evidence and depends, above all, on the evidence of letters alleged to be from this school that are then construed as testimony to its existence. Moreover, none of the advocates of a Pauline school has convincingly explained why a member, or members, of this school chose to impersonate rather than reference Paul as, for example, Clement of Rome, in the mid-90s A.D. The idea that the pseudonymer would have had no stature or authority of his own and had to impersonate Paul to legitimate the contemporizing of his teaching loses traction especially when the suggested pseudonymer was a well-respected collaborator of Paul. Consider Timothy, who is most often thought to be the pseudonymer of Colossians and coauthor of a number of the genuine epistles. As Paul’s esteemed collaborator and unparalleled soul mate (ἰσοψυχόν, cf. Phil 2:22), highly regarded in the Pauline communities, how probable is it that Timothy needed to resort to impersonation to legitimate his reappropriation of Paul’s teaching? The same may be said with regard to Epaphras unless one agrees with Kiley’s speculation about Epaphras’s motives for writing Colossians. Some maintain that pseudonymous letters were needed to deal with the power vacuum created in the wake of Paul’s death, but this suggestion lacks supporting evidence. Finally, Ellis’s observation that very few of Paul’s numerous associates collaborated with him continuously on a long-term basis seems to weaken the case for a school, unless the term includes anyone ever influenced by Paul, and to strengthen the case made by Richards and others that Paul’s letters were coauthored by those explicitly named in the superscriptions of his letters. The secretary


53. Clement frequently alludes to Paul, e.g., 1 Clem. 37.7–12 depends on 1 Cor 12:12–20; 1 Clem. 35.6 on Rom 1:32; 1 Clem. 24.1 on 1 Cor 15:20; Col 1:18.

54. See e.g., Schweizer, Letter to the Colossians, 23–24.

55. Kiley’s suspicion that Epaphras wrote the letter as a self-recommendation is necessitated only by the prior assumption of pseudonymity (cf. Colossians, 95–97).


and other community members present may have also contributed to both form and content.\textsuperscript{58}

To summarize briefly, the case against Colossians’ authenticity is advanced on stylistic and theological grounds and relies for corroboration on external considerations that are less than compelling. But, as we will see, even the arguments based on style and theological content are not irrefutable in view of recent stylo-statistical studies, theological evidence, and other methodological considerations, which favor the probability that Colossians is authentic.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF COLOSSIANS’ AUTHENTICITY

Stylistic Considerations

The criterion of style is usually not omitted by those arguing against Colossians’ authenticity who invariably cite the results of Walter Bujard’s stylistic study as conclusive evidence that Colossians is pseudonymous.\textsuperscript{59} But a closer look Kenneth Neumann’s study, both because of his methodology and because his results allow us to entertain not just the possibility but the probability that Paul authored Colossians, is warranted.\textsuperscript{60}

Neumann adopted a population model and then, using sophisticated computer methods of analysis, applied the multivariate technique of discriminant analysis to three contested letters, 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians, to test for the probability of Pauline authorship.\textsuperscript{61} Multivariate discriminant analysis, as it applies to linguistic data, is a mathematical and statistical technique that tries to isolate which of the varied indicators that can be used to assess style are the most determinative and then applies those indexes to the sample. In this study, Neumann examines Paul’s writing style in comparison with other writing styles in extant literature of non-Pauline origin, more or less contemporaneous to the letters of Paul. This is a departure from the usual, inherently biased, approach which has been to establish a “normative” Pauline style and diction from the “genuine letters” and then use this as a basis for comparison with the alleged pseudonymous documents to see if Paul could have written them.

\textsuperscript{58} See Richards, First-Century Letter Writing, esp. pp. 32–46 and 103–6; Murphy-O’Connor, Paul the Letter Writer, 8–16.


\textsuperscript{60} Kenneth J. Neumann, The Authenticity of the Pauline Epistles in the Light of Stylostatistical Analysis (SBLDS 120; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990). In this five-chapter study, with appendixes, Neumann reviews the five areas usually considered in authenticity debates in ch. 1, critiques past statistical studies including Bujard’s in ch. 2, describes his own method in ch. 3, presents his results in ch. 4, and considers their significance in ch. 5.

\textsuperscript{61} As distinct from a consistency or resemblance model of authorship, a population model is one in which the analyst takes various works of “contemporary possible” authors of \(x\) (= the “disputed work”) and tests to see with which of the possible authors’ styles \(x\)’s style most closely fits (Stylostatistical Analysis, 19).
Neumann started with a large sample, but ultimately reduced it to six, selecting three 750-word samples from the authentic Paulines and three equally long samples from the comparison authors, namely, Hebrews, Clement, and Ignatius.\textsuperscript{62} In his second analysis, using the six samples of four authors, Neumann also reduced the indexes to 18, divided evenly among three categories: lexical, syntactic and nongrammatical, and morphological.\textsuperscript{63} Neumann's analysis reveals that, contrary to what is usually assumed,\textsuperscript{64} the most effective indexes for assessing the style of the four authors in his sample group are (1) word length in letters, which according to Neumann distinguishes the writing of Paul more than any other criterion; (2) the use of a pair of pronouns, the relative and indefinite pronouns; (3) the proportion of words with initial \textit{tau}; (4) the relative position of the first noun in a sentence; and (5) the number of sentences with initial connectors compared to the number of independent and major dependent clauses.

Apropos Colossians, Neumann's analysis yields the following picture.\textsuperscript{65} With an average word length of 4.93, Colossians is well within the range of Paul's word length, which varies from 4.72 to 4.94 for 68% of the samples, with Paul's average word length at 4.83. This is the single most important criterion for discriminating between Paul and Hebrews, Clement, and Ignatius. The results yielded in view of criteria 3 and 5 are less decisive. In Paul, initial-\textit{tau} words (criterion 3) average 100, in Colossians, 112, and Hebrews, 113. While Colossians' average is obviously closer to Hebrews, if one standard deviation (10.58) is added to Paul's average, Colossians is actually within Pauline values as well. Colossians, averaging 0, is most similar to Clement, at 0, regarding initial connectors (criterion 5); however even here, if we take Paul's average minus one standard deviation, the Pauline range begins at 0.01104, and this places Colossians only slightly outside that range. Regarding first-noun position (criterion 4) Colossians is closer to Ignatius or Clement, at 1.8 times Paul's standard deviation. Colossians differs most from Paul in use of relative and indefinite pronouns (criterion 2). Its average of 22 is 3 times the standard deviation of Paul and closer to Hebrews and Ignatius.

The results from Neumann's analysis are mixed. Criteria 2 and 4 results suggest the author of Colossians is probably someone other than Paul. In view of criteria 3 and 5, although the results cannot be called decisive, they do show Colossians proximate enough to Pauline values to say that it

\textsuperscript{62} The samples exclude quotations, salutations, and dialogues. For the full discussion of criteria for sample selection, see Neumann, \textit{Stylostatistical Analysis}, 124–40.

\textsuperscript{63} The first time Neumann ran his analysis, he used 6 of the 7 undisputed Paulines (Philemon was omitted due to its brevity) plus Hebrews, 1 Clement, Ignatius, Philo, Epictetus, and Josephus. He also used a total of 617 indexes in 6 categories (cf. table 3.A). Initial results were unsatisfactory so Neumann refined his methodology, delimiting the control group, categories, and indexes applied to the samples. For details, see \textit{Stylostatistical Analysis}, esp. pp. 167–89.

\textsuperscript{64} Neumann identifies, among the least effective, \textit{hapax legomena}, the presence of unusual words or phrases, the infrequent use of conjunctions, and sentence length. All are usually cited as evidence against Colossians' authenticity (\textit{Stylostatistical Analysis}, 23 -112; 202–06, 214).

is almost as probable that Paul wrote Colossians as did the author of Hebrews or Clement. Criterion 1, on the other hand, is decisive. Neumann’s study is evidence that a Pauline style, or at least distinct stylistic features, can be isolated and that the best criteria for discriminating Paul’s style are not those usually applied. Therefore, to eliminate stylistic considerations in the debate over authenticity seems extreme, especially because it raises doubts that Bujard’s stylistic study, appealed to by all deniers of authenticity as conclusive evidence, should really be considered the last word. Taken together, the results produced by Neumann’s analysis do not confirm beyond doubt that Paul authored Colossians but show that it is as probable that he did as an alleged pseudonymer.

Theological Considerations

Some defenders of Colossians’ authenticity have provided point-by-point responses to each of the theological pieces of evidence cited by its deniers.66 Defenders do not deny that theological differences exist between Colossians and the generally accepted Paulines. Instead, they conclude that these differences do not constitute sufficient evidence to discount Pauline authorship of this letter. Rather than repeat their arguments, I will consider the theological evidence within a larger context that concerns the method and presuppositions underlying the use of the theological evidence as it is cited against authenticity.

Less Advanced, More Advanced, and beyond Paul?
Paul’s thought is assumed to progress in a linear way with “less developed” ideas necessarily preceding “more advanced” versions. This assumption becomes a problem when it leads to imposing on Paul’s thought a developmental trajectory with a determined endpoint, with developments deemed beyond that conceptual terminus labeled post-Pauline. Moreover, it is questionable whether Paul’s ideas can be charted along a linear trajectory and assigned logical (less/more developed or too advanced for Paul) and temporal (early/later or post-Pauline) precedence or posteriority. Some problems associated with such schematization of Paul’s thought are evident in, for example, the conclusions reached about Paul’s ecclesiology in Colossians vis à vis the homologoumena. As previously noted, it is regularly observed that (a) in 1 Cor 12:12–20 where the body metaphor is used, Christ is not described as “head of the body” as in Col 1:18a, where the use of κεφαλή distinguishes Christ from the body and assigns Christ a place of singular importance in relation to the church over which he rules, and (b) in Col 1:18a, in the phrase “of the body, the church” the universal church is in view. Taken together, these observations point to an ecclesiology which understands the church as a supra-local sphere of the saved who

live under the sovereignty of Christ, the head. This left Raymond Brown asking whether Paul could be responsible for such advanced ecclesiology. For scholars convinced of pseudonymity, there is no question: Col 1:18a reflects a stage of ecclesiological thought attributable to a disciple who advanced his own interpretation of Paul’s body metaphor. However, this picture is complicated by a number of factors. First, Col 1:18a is part of what is almost universally agreed to be a hymn at Col 1:15–20, which most scholars take to be pre-Pauline. If it is pre-Pauline, and “the church” in v. 18a is not a gloss, then neither Paul nor a post-Pauline pseudonymer is responsible for this ecclesiology which is linked to the hymn’s Christology. If Paul, whether alone or with coauthors, incorporated this piece of tradition into Colossians, unredacted, it is reasonable to assume he/they agreed with its basic content. Second, even if the ecclesiology of Col 1:18a is Paul’s, we simply do not know, despite schematization of his thought, whether an idea of Paul’s deemed “advanced” was actually conceived after a “less” advanced form, much less after a conceptual endpoint imposed on Paul. For example, apropos the use of the “body metaphor,” the fact that Christ is not described as the head of the body in 1 Cor 12:12–20 does not mean that before Col 1:18, Paul had yet to think of Christ as more than coterminous with the aggregate of believers called the “body of Christ.” Nor is it the case that before Colossians Paul had yet to think of the ekklesia as a supra-local reality. As Raymond Brown noted, there are a few examples of the universal use in the homologoumena (Gal 1:13 and 1 Cor 12:28; 15:9) and one instance of the local use in Colossians (4:15–16). The universal sense of church is also intended at Phil 3:6 and 1 Cor 10:32 and it seems reasonable to conclude in view of 1 Cor 1:2 and 2 Cor 1:1 that Paul understood the individual community to be a localized expression of the universal church. Moreover, already at 1 Cor 3:23, there is the sense that believers stand in a subordinate position to Christ, and at 1 Cor 11:3 Christ is described as the head of every man (ἡ κεφαλή), used in the transferred sense of source or origin of humanity. These ideas are already percolating in Paul’s head in the early to mid-first century A.D. along with thoughts about Christ’s role in both creation and redemption (cf. 1 Cor 8:6). This would appear
to preclude categorical assertions that the thought in Colossians is either necessarily “later” Paul or post-Pauline.

Apropos ecclesiology, the simplest explanation for why Colossians’ ecclesiology does not factor in Paul’s earlier correspondence with the Corinthians is that 1 Corinthians was occasioned by different circumstances: in Corinth, the issue was not whether Christ was preeminent but whether by possessing certain gifts some believers were preeminent over other believers in the body of Christ. Paul’s response at 1 Cor 12:12–20 dissolves some members’ claims to preeminence by illustrating the indispensability of each member with his/her own gifts to the functioning and unity of the whole body. This leads to a second consideration.

**Paul’s Letters Are Occasional**

Today, no one disputes the occasional character of Paul’s letters. However, advocates of Colossians’ pseudonymity quickly dismiss the situation-specific arguments advanced by defenders of authenticity as inadequate to explain the conceptual developments and varied emphases notable in Colossians. This is hard to reconcile with the almost universal insistence that the views expressed by Paul in Romans and Galatians on Jews and the Law are completely misconstrued apart from an appreciation of the specific circumstances that elicited the Apostle’s thought in those letters. If the specifics of the situation are considered not only crucial but indispensable to understand the particular evolution and articulation of Paul’s thought in some letters, should the same not be true with regard to the circumstances that evoked the response we read in Colossians with its particular vocabulary, themes, and emphases? This is more than a rhetorical question. For advocates of pseudonymity, the stress on present eschatological existence, especially as it finds expression at Col 2:12, 13, and 3:1, is the most critical piece of evidence cited against authenticity because it departs from Paul’s more usual emphasis on future eschatology or the “not yet.” Pointing out the few places (e.g., Col 3:4, 6, 24; 1:22–23) where the accent is on future eschatology, or where eschatological motivation is evident (e.g., Col 3:5) does not explain why the emphasis on present eschatological existence is dominant in Colossians; it only shows that the emphasis is not totally on present eschatological existence in every statement in the letter. The important question is why the obvious emphasis on the “already” as opposed to the “not yet”? Unless there is some justification, beyond the a priori judgment of pseudonymity, for treating Colossians according to a different standard, then its occasion must be allowed to factor in the assessment of eschatology as it affects the debate over authenticity. Granted, reconstructing the situation of any letter is not without problems, as J. Barclay’s study

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73. George E. Cannon has persuasively argued that the vocabulary and thought of Colossians were shaped precisely by the peculiar exigencies that occasioned this letter and the use of traditional material (*The Use of Traditional Materials in Colossians* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983]).
underscores. But this is no excuse for ignoring the situation specific exigencies that shaped the response in Colossians.

Though the details are elusive, most scholars agree that the situation of Colossians was provoked by teachers offering an attractive alternate path toward spiritual perfection that apparently required ascetical practices, certain observances associated with the Jewish law, and visionary experiences (2:16–18). Paul’s position is clear: the Colossians have no need for additional practices or for ascetical or mystical pathways to attain full spiritual growth and knowledge of God (2:16–18). They are complete in Christ (2:10), in whom they encounter the fullness of God (1:19), who through Christ is reconciling the world to Himself and making peace (1:20; cf. 2 Cor 5:16–21; Rom 5:1). They are nourished and unified and grow with a growth from God (2:19; cf. Phil 1:6). This assurance about the status they have already attained in Christ is meant to serve as a deterrent (2:4) against the inducements of those teaching otherwise, whose arguments are specious and founded on human tradition (2:8). It is also meant to render the Colossians impervious to the judgments of these teachers (2:16) who are attempting to reduce the Colossians’ confidence in the gospel and subvert their assurance of salvation. But the Colossians can be confident (4:12); thus Paul exhorts them to keep their focus on Christ (3:1–4).

It seems evident that the emphasis on Christ’s preeminence and sufficiency for salvation and on what has already taken place in the life of the Colossians is intended to assure them of their status precisely because others were questioning the sufficiency of the Colossians’ faith and practice and advocating a variety of supplemental paths and practices required to attain full spiritual maturity. But while these circumstances required Paul to emphasize present eschatological existence they did not cause him to dissolve the tension between the “already” and the “not yet” completely. This is clear from the fact that the letter is punctuated by references to the future coming of the Lord (3:4); the coming wrath of God (3:6); future reward and retribution (3:24); and a future reckoning (1:22–23; cf. Phil 1:10). That the eschatology of Colossians differs in its emphases from what we read elsewhere in Paul is not in dispute. But the conclusion that Paul could not have been responsible for the eschatology of Colossians is unwarranted. The simplest explanation is that the situation shaped the eschatology emphases of this letter.

Appealing to the circumstances in the Colossian community to explain Paul’s theology in this letter is not a case of special pleading. It is a standard practice in Pauline studies and it simply will not do to ignore the situation of Colossians or consider it inconsequential when the letter’s theology is offered as key evidence of pseudonymity. Short of a situation that can be proven to postdate Paul, there is more reason to acknowledge the effect of the circumstances at play in Colossae on Paul’s theology than to assume a secondary development of his thought by someone else with all the difficulties and uncertainties attending such speculation.

An Inept Pseudonymer or Authentically Paul?

If Colossians were written a century or two removed from the life and death of Paul, one can see how this letter could have been taken as an obvious fiction by the second- or third-century or later readers. However, as already noted, most who advance the case for pseudonymity consider the letter to have been written relatively soon, perhaps not even a decade, after Paul’s death. That means, worthy motives notwithstanding, the pseudonymer’s intention was to pass the letter off as a genuine letter of Paul. This required that the pseudonymer take pains not only to imitate Paul’s style, but also to hew closely to his thought to create as much verisimilitude as possible. The alleged pseudonymer of Colossians has done neither well. Otherwise one should hardly expect the variances, especially in theological content, that have been cited as evidence of pseudonymity. Rather than recourse to an inept pseudonymer, perhaps we need to acknowledge, as more probable, that the conceptual differences between Colossians and the homologoumena actually point to the letter’s authenticity. If so, we should understand the differences as the product of Paul’s own mind as he responds to a new situation, something he had done many times before in dealing with the practical implications and complications of his bold proclamation that, in the Christ event, God had inaugurated the new age. Why many insist that Paul’s theology seeded the mind of the alleged pseudonymer of Colossians but refuse to allow that Paul advanced his own thought in response to the situation in Colossians remains a curiosity of the contemporary debate over the authenticity of this letter. Barth and Blanke may be right when they opine that the reason scholars are unwilling to affirm Colossians’ authenticity is that it challenges traditional views of Paul’s theology.  

A Pauline or Post-Pauline Pastoral Situation?

More than 50 years ago, Charles F. D. Moule remarked with regard to Colossians’ authenticity, “a decision turns largely on whether or not one can imagine the type of error implied by Colossians having appeared already in St. Paul’s lifetime.” This question remains crucial and its answer must be derived from the text of Colossians even though the text information can be, on the one hand, too indefinite (“philosophy and empty deceit,” 2:8; “no one/anyone” 2:8, 16, 18) and, on the other, can refer to something so specific and open to various translations (e.g., ἅ ἑόρακεν ἐμβατεύων at 2:18) that what is intended remains an enigma. Given this, Morna Hooker’s suggestion that environmental pressures were stressing the converts at Colossae is attractive; furthermore, the situation she describes reflects conditions that were known to prevail throughout Paul’s ministry. However,
despite the lack of detail, most scholars believe that a specific threat was in view.\textsuperscript{79} Though scholarly reconstructions of the religious/cultural background of the position refuted in Colossians vary, any number reflect conditions that could have prevailed during Paul's ministry and would have elicited his response were they negatively affecting a community within his sphere of pastoral responsibility.\textsuperscript{80} More importantly, no reconstruction requires the conclusion that the conditions reflected in the letter necessarily postdate Paul's life.\textsuperscript{81} Deciding which among the many and varied hypotheses has more merit is not necessary here.\textsuperscript{82} It is sufficient to affirm that the ideas and practices that evoked the warning in Colossians could certainly have occurred during Paul's lifetime; hence, they do not constitute prima facie evidence against the letter's authenticity. In consequence, it is unwarranted to assume that Colossians was composed by a pseudonymer who intended to address a post-Pauline community and its situation via an address to a fictional audience of Colossian Christians from the past featured as confronting a situation parallel to the pseudonymer's

and to exhort them to avoid succumbing to specious arguments and submitting to unnecessary practices (“Were There False Teachers in Colossae?” 315–31). Kiley (Colossians, 63–64), Pizzuto (Cosmic Leap, 21–24), and recently Heil (Colossians, 8–9) find her argument persuasive.

\textsuperscript{79} Detail may have been unnecessary since the Colossians were obviously exposed to the teachers and their teaching. Moreover, the author’s purpose was to exhort the Colossians, not to polemicize with the teachers via a point-by-point refutation of the philosophy, even if the teachers’ presence in the community occasioned the letter.


\textsuperscript{81} F. C. Baur’s contention that the heresy combated in Colossians was second-century Ebionitism has been largely abandoned (Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Works, His Epistles and Teachings [2 vols.; London: Williams & Norgate, 1873–75; repr. as 1 vol., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003], vol. 2, esp. pp. 1–44).

\textsuperscript{82} The text clues, esp. at 2:16–18 and 2:11, point to a background in Judaism, albeit a current in Judaism that appears to have combined Torah observance with mystical and ascetical practices. Colossian Christians, evangelized by Epaphras, a Gentile, probably learned a limited amount about Judaism and may have become curious to learn more. What is difficult to ascertain is whether the willing teachers were Judeo-Christians, trying to “Judaize” Christianity at Colossae, or whether they were Jews trying to snatch up Colossian Christians for the synagogue. The latter could be insinuated from the use of συλαγωγῶν, a NT hapax, which means “to carry off as booty or as a captive.”
actual audience. Rather, we are reading Paul’s pastoral response to the actual situation of the Colossian community who are the addressees of this letter. Teaching from this letter may have been useful to other communities of the Lycus valley but it is not necessary to infer from this that the composition was pseudonymous and directed to another or other communities.

A Letter from Prison

Because Colossians leaves Paul’s location unspecified, it is not clear which of Paul’s multiple detentions is the context for Colossians. Some sustainer's of the letter’s authenticity consider it a late work of Paul composed during his house arrest in Rome, sometime in the early 60s. Subscriptions from a few ca. fourth-century A.D. and later manuscripts claim that Colossians was sent from Rome. It is also possible, but not necessary, to infer from Eusebius that Colossians was sent from Rome. Other sustainer's associate the letter with an imprisonment sometime between late A.D. 52/53 and 55 in Ephesus. Others put the letter’s provenance in Caesarea sometime during Paul’s incarceration there between A.D. 58 and 60.

Because neither Acts nor Paul mentions an Ephesian incarceration, one is usually inferred based on Paul’s description of affliction in Asia (2 Cor 1:8–10; cf. further 1 Cor 15:32), the geographical proximity of Ephesus to Colossae (ca. 90 miles), and Acts 19:23–41, which may well be an overblown account of friction between Paul and persons invested in the local pagan cult. But even if it is not, it is still difficult to gather from Acts 19:23–41 that Paul was imprisoned. Judging by the text, Paul was not even assaulted (v. 29), and when things calmed down, he left for Macedonia (Acts 20:1). The proximity of Ephesus to Colossae is a worthwhile consider-

83. The suggestion that Colossae’s destruction was the circumstance that made it possible to disguise the letter’s pseudonymous origin is clever; but, as Aletti notes, the earthquake evidence cannot be decisive (Colossiens, 11).
84. Acts reports two brief imprisonments (16:16–40 at Philippi and 21:27–23:33 at Jerusalem) and two lasting two years (23:23–26:32 at Caesarea and 28:16–31 at Rome). Paul also mentions imprisonments (2 Cor 6:5; cf. Acts 20:23), but whether they are identical with or beyond those mentioned in Acts is not certain. Clement reported that Paul was in bonds seven times, 1 Clem. 5:5.
86. Eusebius reports on Paul’s transfer to Rome, noting that with him was Aristarchus “whom he [Paul] also somewhere in his epistles quite naturally calls his fellow-prisoner” (Hist. eccl. 2.22.1). Eusebius must have been referring to Col 4:10. But if Aristarchus was imprisoned along with Paul in Rome, then it is likely he was imprisoned with him in Caesarea and, together with Paul, transferred to Rome. If so, then Col 4:10 could refer to either a Roman or a Caesarean imprisonment or to neither.
ation because it easily accommodates Onesimus’s two round trips between Colossae and Paul, and the host of Paul’s visitors mentioned in Colossians and Philemon. However, the hypothesis’ major drawback is the absence of direct text evidence for an Ephesian imprisonment. The silence is all the more notable assuming the detention must have been long enough for Paul to receive visitors, hear reports, and then compose and send Philemon and Colossians, and possibly Philippians.

The traditional view is that Colossians, along with the other three prison letters, should be set during Paul’s Roman imprisonment (Acts 28:16–31). Some consider this the most probable setting. Moreover, its origin toward the end of Paul’s life suits the notion that the developed theology of Colossians reflects the mature mind of Paul in his later years. The Roman imprisonment, where Paul enjoyed relative freedom, could explain the joy he professes and the stress on the worldwide spread of the gospel found at Col 1:6, 23. Paul would have had to compose and send Colossians early on during his Roman imprisonment (A.D. 60–62/63) because Colossae was destroyed by earthquake as early as A.D. 60 or 61 but no later than A.D. 64. However, this view is not without drawbacks.

The Caesarean imprisonment has also been defended as the place of composition for Colossians, along with Philemon and Ephesians. A Caesarean provenance can accommodate the view that Colossians contains Paul’s more developed thought from later years and has a number of other advantages which are discussed in detail elsewhere by Bo Reicke and E. Earle Ellis, each of whom has advanced a persuasive case for Caesarea.

While the Caesarean imprisonment has the most to recommend it, Rome remains a possibility whereas the case for an Ephesian imprisonment is highly circumstantial. That the provenance of Colossians remains an open question does not contravene the fact that it can easily be fitted into the chronology of Paul’s life. The idea that the prison context was part of the staging by a pseudonymer to add to Colossians’ verisimilitude would probably not occur to anyone apart from the prior assumption that Colossians is inauthentic.


90. See, among others, Moule, Colossians, 25; Barth and Blanke, Colossians, 126–34; Bruce, “St. Paul in Rome,” 268–85; Dunn, Colossians, 39–41.

91. The earlier date depends on Tacitus’ report (Ann., 14.27), the later on Eusebius in his Chronicon, as contained in Hieronymi Chronicon, Olympiad 210.10, on-line: http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_chronicle_03_part2.htm.

92. Rome’s distance from the Lycus Valley (ca. 900 miles) could speak against a Roman provenance when factoring in Onesimus’s trips. Also, Paul’s request for hospitality for a planned visit to Colossae at Phlm 22 does not square well with his plans to go west (cf. Rom 15:23–24).

93. See above, n. 88. If Paul wrote Colossians in the latter part of his Caesarean imprisonment (ca. A.D. 59) or early in his Roman imprisonment (ca. late A.D. 60 or early A.D. 61), the difference could be anywhere from months to slightly more than a year.
CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the authorship of Colossians, the explanation that requires the fewest assumptions is that Paul wrote this letter. Moreover, two key assumptions supporting the case for authenticity, namely, that Paul’s letters were occasional and that they were collaborative creations, are premises that are almost universally agreed on in Pauline scholarship today. They are not determinative for establishing Colossians’ authenticity. However, they have the advantage of being widely accepted, and they favor the letter’s authenticity because they can best account for indisputable variations in style and developments, or changed emphases, in theology. The circumstances in the Colossian community can explain the theological developments and emphases in this letter. The collaborative aspect of composition can explain the stylistic variations. If we add to this the stylostatistical results of Neumann’s study which puts Colossians within, or sufficiently close to, the range of authentic letters, the near certainty that the situation that occasioned the letter occurred during Paul’s lifetime, and the threefold claim within the letter that Paul is its author, there is an accumulation of evidence that reinforces the probability that Colossians is authentic.

By contrast, the case for pseudonymity rests on the multiplication of assumptions required to support the claim that Colossians is pseudonymous. In addition to the evidence related to style and theological content, this claim is propped up by one assumption about the acceptability of pseudonymity in the early church and another pertaining to a Pauline school. The internal evidence is not decisive and, as I have argued, neither of the two supporting warrants based on external evidence is compelling. In fact, neither warrant is a matter of scholarly consensus. Moreover, as noted throughout this study, a number of assumptions and speculations appear forced and would probably not occur apart from the need to provide support for the prior assumption that Colossians is pseudonymous. Especially with regard to theology, it appears that deniers of authenticity have imposed limits on Paul’s thought and introduced expectations that have less to do with Paul’s mind and more to do with their presuppositions.

My goal in this study was to weigh the arguments for and against authenticity and consider which position has greater plausibility in light of the available evidence. In the end, the authorship of Colossians will remain an open question until a rigorous methodology is worked out and scholars make a greater effort to question the many presuppositions and questionable criteria that guide the debate. Given the fact that after nearly two centuries of effort, the authorship of Colossians remains a question mark, perhaps we should reconsider giving more weight to the witness of the early church which never expressed doubt about the genuineness of Colossians. That witness coupled with the considerations set forth in this study seems to tip the scales in favor of authenticity.