THE GOSPEL POETICS OF UNIVERSALITY AND EXCLUSIVITY:

LITERARY-THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

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> As is painting, so is poetry.
> – Horace, *Ars Poetica*[1]

> A poem should not mean
> But be.
> – Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica"[2]

INTRODUCTION

This paper appears at the confluence of three streams in my own thinking. The first stream flows from the reality of globalization and religious pluralism in which we find ourselves at the beginning of the twenty-first century, leading to questions of how we as Christians should navigate through all this in a way that is faithful to Scripture's claims regarding Christ and salvation. A second stream flows from my doctoral research, which involved an exploration of such ideas as narrative epistemology, the Christ events as epistemic authority, and the Pauline "gospel."[3] And a third stream flows from a still older interest (coming from my unfulfilled ambitions to be an English professor!), an interest in literary criticism, in genres and poetry and stories and how these work.

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[1] *Ut pictura poesis.* Horace, *Ars Poetica.* In *Satires, Epistles, and Ars Poetica* (Loeb Classical Library 194; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929).

[2] Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica." (1926)

[3] My doctoral dissertation has been revised and published as Pahl, *Discerning*.

These three streams—the significance of Paul's gospel, the nature of Christianity's truth claims, and literary criticism—converge in this study of the so-called "Christ hymn" of Colossians 1:15-20. How should we read both the universal and exclusive statements in this text, understanding the passage both in terms of its immediate literary and theological context and in terms of its specific literary type?

THE COLOSSIAN SITUATION AND PAUL'S GOSPEL RESPONSE

It is not entirely clear what prompted the apostle Paul to write this letter to the Colossian Christ-followers.[4] However, he seems to have been motivated by two general concerns.

First, there was some pressure from outsiders—or the real potential for outside pressure—to follow a version of religious faith and practice that did not cohere with Pauline Christianity. The letter explicitly points to those who might "deceive" (παραλογίζηται) the Colossian believers "through fine-sounding arguments" (ἐν πιθανολογίᾳ) that denied the sufficiency of Christ alone for genuine "wisdom and knowledge" (2:2-4), promoting a "philosophy" (διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας) based "on human tradition (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων) and the elemental spiritual forces of this world (κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) rather than on Christ" (2:8). This outsider worldview included emphasis on visionary experiences, on special foods and drinks, on distinct religious festivals and holy days, and generally on abstaining from things in this world seen as running counter to a holy, God-honoring life (2:16-23). Ironically, this rigorous asceticism did not actually restrain sinful indulgence but may have

[4] On Pauline authorship, see O'Brien, *Colossians*, xli-xlix; Witherington, *Colossians*, 1-19; Moo, *Colossians*, 28-41.

provoked it (2:23; cf. 3:5); certainly the Colossian believers were susceptible to relational sins within the community: anger, malice, slander, and the like (3:8-9).[5]

Second, the Colossian believers have experienced some "separation anxiety," a sense of disconnection from other Christ-followers and the leaders of the Pauline mission—a problem likely exacerbated by the outsider pressures just noted. "I want you to know (θέλω γὰρ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι)" Paul says, using an emphatic disclosure formula,[6] "how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally" (2:1). Throughout the letter Paul goes to great lengths to reassure the Colossian believers of their connection to the wider Christian community, the Pauline mission, and indeed to Paul himself. For example, he highlights his continual prayer for the Colossians (1:3, 9), he emphasizes the link from Paul through Epaphras to the Colossian believers (1:7-8), he underscores the ways in which his mission includes a special focus on Colossae and surrounding region (1:23-2:5), he commissions Tychicus to pass on news of Paul and his work, sends greetings from those with him, and encourages connections between the Colossian believers and those in nearby Laodicea in particular (4:15-16; cf. 2:1; 4:13).

Paul's response to these concerns follows a strategy found in most if not all of Paul's letters: he reminds them of the gospel that had been proclaimed to them.[7] The Pauline gospel (and, according to Paul, the wider apostolic gospel) is focused on (1) Jesus the "Christ," (2) his death "for our sins," and (3) his resurrection "on the third day," understood (4) according to the

[5] While these general points are relatively incontrovertible, there has been no consensus yet on the precise nature of the so-called "Colossian heresy": its origins, its defining characteristics, its scope, or its actual presence among the Colossian believers. See e.g. Wilson, *Colossians*, 35-58; Witherington, *Colossians*, 107-111; Moo, *Colossians*, 46-60.

[6] On these disclosure formulas, see Pahl, *Discerning*, 141.

[7] On the gospel as epistemic authority for Paul in his theologizing, see Pahl, *Discerning*, esp. 83-104. On the use of this strategy in 1 Thessalonians see Pahl, *Discerning*, 140-155.

Jewish Scriptures (1 Cor 15:1-11).[8] It is thus the "good news" of God's action through his crucified and resurrected Messiah to rescue and restore humanity and all creation from sin and all its effects, bringing about God's right-making and life-giving reign throughout the earth.[9] This "true word of the gospel" is that which initially prompted the Colossians' faith, hope, and love (1:3-6). If they continue in their faith and hope in this "gospel," they will one day be presented holy before God (1:22-23), "fully mature in Christ" (1:28). This gospel is "the word of God in all its fullness" (1:25); it is "the mystery of God, namely, Christ" (2:2), or simply "the mystery of Christ" (4:3), that is, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). It is "the message of Christ" which is to dwell among them richly, in all their teaching, in all their worship, in all they do (3:16-17).[10]

Paul opens the letter by describing this gospel, a description framed by two parallel references to "gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον) at the beginning and end of the section (1:5 and 1:23):

- the "gospel" is the "true word" that came to the Colossians through Epaphras, the message which "is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world" and among the Colossians, prompting their faith, hope, and love (1:3-8); and
- the "gospel" is the message that the Colossians heard and "that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven," the message that can secure the Colossians' full maturity if they continue in that faith and hope (1:22-23; cf. 1:28).

[8] The language of first-century Roman imperial texts and inscriptions also provides important context for understanding the New Testament's "gospel" language (along with related ideas of divine sonship, "lord," "salvation," "peace," and so on). However, the apostolic gospel was "according to the Scriptures": the Jewish Scriptures provided the framework for understanding Jesus, his death and resurrection; the Roman imperial propaganda at most provided a foil. See Pahl, "The 'Gospel.'" On the Roman imperial "gospel" language, see Pahl, *Discerning*, 123; Stanton, *Jesus and* Gospel, 22-35; Harrison, "Imperial Gospel"; Wright, "Gospel and Theology."

[9] On the content of the "gospel" for Paul, see Pahl, *Discerning*, 83-88. On "gospel" in the New Testament generally, see Pahl, *Discerning*, 122-129; Pahl, "The 'Gospel'"; Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel*, 9-62; Hengel, *Four Gospels*; Bockmuehl and Hagner, *The Written Gospel*; Jervis and Richardson, *Gospel in Paul*.

[10] On "word of truth" (ὁ λόγος τῆς ἀληθείας, 1:5), "word of God" (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ, 1:25), and "word of Christ" (ὁ λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 3:16) as equivalent to "gospel," see Pahl, "The 'Gospel'"; Pahl, *Discerning*, 122-135. On "mystery" and "gospel," see Pahl, *Discerning*, 50-52.

Within this "gospel" frame, Paul provides two parallel descriptions of the Colossian believers' saving experience of this "gospel":

- the Colossian Christ-followers were in "the dominion of darkness," but they have been "rescued" and "brought into the kingdom of the Son [God] loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:13-14); and
- they "were enemies in [their] minds because of [their] evil behavior," but they have been "reconciled…by Christ's physical body through death" (1:21-22).

Standing between the outer frame of these occurrences of εὐαγγέλιον and the inner frame of these salvific summaries is 1:15-20, a thoroughly "gospel text" according to the Pauline gospel sketched out above—indeed, as Douglas Moo characterizes it, "the heart of the gospel."[11] The passage focuses throughout on (1) Jesus, as divine "Son" and perfect "image of the invisible God" in whom God's "fullness" dwells, the mediator of God's creative and reconciling acts, and thus as supreme over all things. It underscores (2) his death, his reconciling and peace-making "blood, shed on the cross" (1:20). It highlights (3) his resurrection, as the "firstborn from among the dead" who has been vindicated by God and exalted to his rightful place over all things and over the Church (1:18). And all this is presented (4) in accordance with the Jewish Scriptures, re-interpreting Genesis 1:1 and Jewish wisdom texts in light of the Christ events.[12]

Paul's gospel response to the Colossian situation continues through the body of the letter,[13] as Paul narrates the Colossians' story in gospel terms, bringing Jesus, his death, and his resurrection to bear on their situation. The Colossian believers have welcomed "Christ Jesus as Lord," and so they are to "continue to live [their] lives in him" (2:6-7). As they do so, they will

[11] Moo, *Colossians*, 107; cf. Christensen, "Colossians 1:15-28," 318; Scharlemann, "Scope," 298-299. Moo also recognizes the "gospel frame" described above, though he does not develop these thoughts as extensively as I am doing here; see Moo, Colossians, 67-68, 79-80.

[12] Moo, *Colossians*, 111-114; Lamp, "Wisdom"; Wright, "Poetry," 452-458. On specific connections between Col 1:15-20 and Roman imperial language—again, properly understood as a foil to Paul's gospel—see Maier, "Sly Civility."

[13] Moo, *Colossians*, 67-68.

discover that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are found in Christ, that they can experience "fullness" in the Christ in whom "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:2-3, 9-10). As the "fullness of the Deity" in Christ is discerned only through his death and resurrection, so any "fullness" the Colossian believers can experience is only found in their union with Christ in his death and resurrection, as signified in their baptism (2:11-12). They have therefore died with the crucified Christ to sin and the Law and the powers and authorities and spiritual forces of this age (2:13-15, 20; 3:3); thus they must not let themselves be judged by false notions of holiness and godliness (2:16-23), and they must put to death that which is real sin, that which is destructive and contrary to God's life-giving purpose of restoring the image of God in Christ (3:5-11). They have been raised with the resurrected Christ to the glory of God's right hand (3:1-4), and so they must clothe themselves with the Christ-like virtues of God's new humanity in Christ, particularly love leading to peace (3:12-15). In doing all this they will be fulfilling Paul's call for the gospel to dwell richly among them, doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus (3:16-17).

In sum, Paul responds to the Colossian concerns by reiterating and expounding the gospel. The gospel that "is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among" the Colossian believers, the gospel that "has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which…Paul [has] become a servant"—this gospel can provide for the Colossian Christ-followers that sense of connection with wider Christianity that they crave. The gospel of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, the creating and reconciling and redeeming Christ, the Messianic King and Lord through whom God rescues and restores humanity and all creation from human sin and all its effects—this gospel can give the Colossian believers the tools

they need both to live out their own faith and to respond to alternative visions of faith and practice.

UNIVERSALITY, EXCLUSIVITY, AND PARTICULARITY IN COLOSSIANS

Paul's response to the Colossian situation is thus saturated throughout with the gospel. But this is not a generic gospel tract; the gospel is nuanced in specific ways to respond to the situation in Colossae.[14] This nuance has a well-defined theological focus: the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.[15] Jesus, as Messianic King and divine Son and Lord, is supreme over all things; and, therefore, Jesus is sufficient to meet any legitimate salvific or ethical or social need the Colossians may have.

This focus on the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ for the Colossian Christians prompts the portrayal of three dimensions of God's action in Christ. The first is "exclusivity," that it is the Lord Jesus Christ—not anyone or anything else—who is supreme over all things and sufficient for all needs. This is seen throughout Colossians, for example, in the language already noted of "gospel" as a "word of truth," a "word of God," and a "word of Christ" (1:5-6, 23, 25; 3:16); in the emphasis already discussed on Jesus' death on the "cross" and his resurrection (e.g. 1:18, 20; 2:12, 14), and, most significantly, in the frequent, typically Pauline language of "in Christ" (e.g. 1:2, 4, 14, 16-17, 19, 28; 2:3, 6-7, 11-12). The second dimension of God's action in Christ is "universality," that Christ's supremacy and sufficiency touch all spheres of human and cosmic existence. This is evident in Colossians through phrases such as "throughout the whole world" (1:6), "to every creature under heaven" (1:23), "among the Gentiles" (1:27), "the powers

[14] Reflecting coherence and contingency in Paul's gospel; see J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumpht of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

[15] See e.g. Thompson, *Colossians*, 9-12; Moo, *Colossians*, 61-63.

and authorities" and "the elements of this world" (2:15, 20), and "no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free" (3:11). Most emphatically this universality is stressed through the high frequency of "all" (πᾶς; 39 times) and "fullness" (πληρόω and πλήρωμα; e.g. 1:9, 19, 25; 2:9-10) in the letter. The third dimension of God's action in Christ is "particularity," that Christ's supremacy and sufficiency meet the very specific salvific and ethical and social needs of the Colossian Christians—evident in Paul's pointed use of the second person plural throughout the letter, especially in applying general realities to the particular Colossian situation (e.g.1:6-7, 23-24; 2:1, 5-7, 10-12).

It is striking that in Colossians 1:15-20 the dimension of particularity is absent: there is no second-person "you" in the passage, but rather it is the universal "Church" which is in view. This is remarkable given the prevalence of particularity throughout the letter. Equally striking, however, is the fact that in these verses the dimensions of exclusivity and universality are even more pronounced than elsewhere in the letter. The strongest markers of exclusivity (language of "in/through/for him [i.e. Christ]") and those of universality ("all/all things" and "fullness") dominate the passage: "*in him all things* were created…*all things* have been created *through him* and *for him*"; "*in him all things* hold together"; and "God was pleased to have *all his fullness* dwell *in him*…and *through him* to reconcile *all things*." In a passage conveying "the heart of the gospel," in a letter reiterating and expounding the gospel, the exclusivity of Christ and the universality of Christ's saving work are especially emphasized. We will return to these observations later.

THE POETIC CHARACTER OF COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

One more stream still needs to be explored: how Colossians 1:15-20 contributes to the letter and its themes *as poetry*. But is this passage properly read as "poetry"? The question is not an easy one to answer.

Definitions and descriptions of poetry abound, whether ancient or modern. "Painting is silent poetry, and poetry painting that speaks," said the fifth century B.C.E. lyric poet Simonides.[16] Aristotle affirmed that poetry is the "art that imitates by words," in "verse" that uses meter.[17] A modern dictionary defines it as "writing that formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in language chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm."[18] Modern poets and literary critics have defined poetry variously: it is "an order of words that as movement and tone (rhythm and pitch) approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music as a kind of mathematical limit;"[19] it is "a verbal device that [preserves] an experience indefinitely by reproducing it in whoever read[s] the poem;"[20] it is "emotion put into measure;"[21] it is "the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal [but] which the reader recognizes as his own."[22]

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[16] Simonides, quoted in Plutarch.

[17] Aristotle, *Poetics* I. *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature* (trans. Leon Golden; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 3.

[18] "Poetry." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary.* Online: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/poetry. Accessed October 31, 2011.

[19] Louis Zukofsky, "A Statement for Poetry," in Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2004), 297.

[20] Philip Larkin, "Writing Poems," in Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2004), 340.

[21] Thomas Hardy, in Florence Emily Hardy, *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*.

[22] Salvatore Quasimodo, New York Times (14 May 1960)

These diverse descriptions of poetry suggest that both form and function are important in truly getting to the essence of poetry—yet neither poetry's form nor its function are easy to pin down. As for formal considerations, perhaps the most one can say with confidence is that there is some writing which, by its economical and evocative use of diction, metaphor, and imagery, rhyme, rhythm, and meter, repetition, symmetry, and structure, is clearly "poetry"; and that, likewise, there is some writing which by the lack of those distinctive features is clearly not poetry, that is, "prose." But these are then end points on a spectrum, not binary opposites, and between those clear end points is a categorical gray area that includes such hybrid creatures as "prosaic poetry" and "poetic prose."

Making the question even more difficult is the fact that what distinguishes "poetry" varies from culture to culture. Both classic Hebrew poetry and classic Greek poetry—the two most likely literary backgrounds for any "poetry" in the New Testament—have some distinctive marks. Hebrew poetry is characterized by a symmetry of thought—through repetition or antithesis or synthesis—expressed in immediately parallel lines; by the use of rhythm, though not necessarily in a regular meter; and, often, by the use of rhyming sound—alliteration and assonance—within lines.[23] These features continue to be seen in post-biblical Hebrew poetry such as that found among the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls, though with less rigidity in rhythm and parallelism.[24] Greek poetry has several similarities to Hebrew poetry, but also has some differences: it also utilizes rhythm, but this is normally in a regular meter that remains consistent throughout the poem; it likewise employs symmetry of thought, though this may not necessarily

[23] See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Paralellism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); David L. Peterson and Kent H. Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Augsburg Fortress, 1994); cf. the summary in Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 52-56.

[24] Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 85-100; Baugh, "Poetic Form," 232-235.

be expressed in immediately parallel lines; and, like Hebrew poetry, Greek poetry can often use alliteration and assonance within lines.[25] Both Hebrew and Greek poetry can also employ larger patterns and structures such as distinct strophes and chiasm.

Colossians 1:15-20 contains several of these features of Semitic and Hellenistic poetry. There is a larger structure to the text, divided into two roughly parallel halves: 1:15-17, a focus on "Christ and creation," set off by ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν; and 1:18-20, a focus on "Christ and the Church" or "Christ and reconciliation," set off by ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή. More specifically, these two "strophes" include a series of parallels that effectively outline the passage:

15	ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν	18b	ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή
15b	πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως	18b	πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν
16	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ + verb	19	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ + verb
16	τὰ πάντα	19	πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα
16	δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν	20	καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ...εἰς αὐτὸν[26]

Further symmetry can be seen in more specific units of text: for example, the repetition of πᾶς scattered evenly throughout (8 times); the merisms of "in heaven and on earth" (ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) and "things visible and invisible" (τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα; v. 16); the quartet of "powers" delineated by εἴτε (v. 16); and the concluding return of one of the merisms ("on earth" and "in heaven"; ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς and ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς) delineated by εἴτε (v. 20). Also, rhythm and rhyming sound can be heard in various parts of the text: for example, the abundant genitival endings throughout, such as τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου (v. 15); the alliterated π- and κ- sounds of the opening clauses of each half, ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν...πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως (v. 15) and ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή

[25] See Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 36-39, 182-183; Baugh, "Poetic Form," 230-232.

[26] As noted in Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 177.

πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν (v. 18); and the end rhymes of phrases such as ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν and ἐκ τῶν πρωτεύων (v. 18) and πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι and δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι (v. 19).[27]

These observations suggest that Colossians 1:15-20 is "poetic," yet it does not fit neatly into either classic Hebrew poetry or classic Greek poetry.[28] In particular, the passage does not have the consistent meter typical of Greek poetry, and it does not have the consistent line-to-line parallelism of Hebrew poetry. Still, while it could be classified as "poetic prose" or even a "prose hymn," it is not unreasonable to consider Colossians 1:15-20 as "poetry" akin to the more fluid form of Semitic poetry found among the sectarian Dead Sea Scrolls.[29]

This formal question leads naturally to the question of function: What role does poetry play in human discourse, whether ancient poetry or poetry in general? What does poetry do that prose does not? Again, the questions are not easy to answer.

Structure and symmetry, rhythm and rhyme, all make poetry memorable and thus useful in teaching. Matthew Gordley, in his survey of poems and hymns found within ancient letters and essays, concludes that these "have the function of supporting the main argument of the letter, either by providing an example, providing an ancient authority, or otherwise providing

[27] For a sample of some formal analyses of Col 1:15-20 in light of these considerations, see the Appendix. For surveys of scholarship on the form, type, origin, and background of the passage, see Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 3-26; Lamp, "Wisdom," 45-50; McCown, "Hymnic Structure," 156-158.

[28] "Certainly one cannot recognize here the established forms of either Hebrew or Greek poetry" (Bruce, "The 'Christ Hymn,'" 99).

[29] This follows the conclusion of Wright, "Poetry," 448; see also Baugh, "Poetic Form." Gordley provides the most extensive treatment on this question, concluding that the passage is "elevated or artistic prose," what I have called "poetic prose." This would not preclude the passage being a "hymn," and indeed Gordley seems in the end to prefer to speak of this as "elevated prose" and not "poetry" so that it can be considered a "didactic hymn." See Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 196-198. Gordley's identification of the passage as a "hymn," following a long line of such thought, is not without its problems, most notably that the text does not directly address Christ but speaks indirectly of Christ. For the view that the passage is neither poetry nor hymn, see Balchin, "Colossians 1:15-20."

material that is commonly accepted by the readers."[30] Ancient poems and hymns served a clear didactic function in this regard.[31]

But even recognizing this didactic function does not fully answer the question, for poetry does not "teach" in the same way that prose does; indeed, this is true of prose genres as well, for a parable does not "teach" in the same way that a piece of deliberative rhetoric might. Furthermore, these same features that make poetry useful in teaching also make poetry aesthetically pleasing, pointing to a role for poetry in addition to—or even distinct from—the didactic. Poetry across cultures appeals to the senses, not just in its use of imagery but also in its use of sound and rhythm. This sensory appeal can give poetry a role that is quite different from didactic concerns. Poetry can be evocative, not definitive; it can be descriptive, not prescriptive; it can produce a visceral response, not a logical response. This is as true of ancient poetry as it is of modern poetry; as Gordley notes, even distinctively didactic hymnody was used in antiquity "to engage the imagination of a human audience as it invited that audience to see the world in a particular way in light of the broader tradition and current setting in which the writer and his or her community found themselves."[32]

This is the significance of the parallel *artes poeticae* that opened this paper, one ancient and one modern: Horace's "As is painting, so is poetry," and MacLeish's "A poem should not mean / But be." MacLeish was famously speaking out against the tendency in his day toward merely instructive or informative or illustrative poetry, poetry that functioned purely as a statement: a proposition in verse. This was also, in turn, a criticism of purely analytical methods

[30] Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 250.

[31] See Gordley's extensive study of this, *Teaching through Song*.

[32] Gordley, *Teaching through Song*, 393.

in order to arrive at a clear and communicable "meaning." Rather, for MacLeish, poetry provides a different way of knowing that can often defy critical analysis and methods: an experiential, even existential, epistemology.[33]

Horace was doing something similar for his own age, echoing the prior thoughts of Simonides and Aristotle noted above, that poetry[34] is an art analogous to painting or sculpture or music or dance. Thus Horace called for a way of interpreting poetry akin to that of appreciating a painting, allowing for the art of poetry to be absorbed through experiencing the poem, being pleased by the poem. Some poems, Horace goes on to say, call for close attention, while others call for a wider view; the reader needs to be sensitive to the differences among poetry so as not to force the poem to do something it was not intended to do.

CONCLUSION: THE GOSPEL POETICS OF UNIVERSALITY AND EXCLUSIVITY

Paul's response to the Colossian situation is framed around the gospel, God's action through the crucified and resurrected Christ to rescue and restore humanity and all creation from sin and all its effects, and 1:15-20 is identifiable as a crucial Pauline summary of this gospel. In reiterating and expounding the gospel for the Colossians Paul views God's saving action in the supreme and sufficient Christ through the dimensions of exclusivity, universality, and particularity, of which exclusivity and universality are especially highlighted in 1:15-20. This gospel summary, bringing together this exclusivity of Christ and universality of Christ's saving work, is highly poetic,

[33] The irony of this has been noted, as MacLeish's poem itself is making a statement and not merely capturing an experience. See John Haislip, "Archibald MacLeish: 'Ars Poetica' and other Observations," in *Poetries in the Poem* (ed. Dorothy Z. Baker; New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

[34] Again, following Aristotle, any "mimetic" text in verse, or any rhythmic and strophic text that provides an imaginative imitation of reality; see Aristotle's definition of "poetry" (ποίησις) above.

exhibiting features of ancient poetry and functioning according to the expectations of such poetry.

With these conclusions in view we can now return to our opening question: How should we read both the universal and exclusive statements in this text, understanding the passage both in terms of its immediate literary and theological context and in terms of its specific literary type?

First, if Paul in Colossians is reiterating and expounding the gospel, and if Colossians 1:15-20 really is "the heart of the gospel," then, given the emphasis on exclusivity and universality in this passage, *we must affirm that the gospel requires both universality and exclusivity*.[35] There is both a wideness and a narrowness to the gospel, and both dimensions need to be part of our understanding and expression and living out of the gospel.

This gospel exclusivity has a particular shape: it is Christocentric, cruciform, and anastatic;[36] that is, it is focused on Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. There can be no true gospel apart from Jesus of Nazareth, the Messianic King and divine Son and cosmic Lord. There can be no true gospel apart from the cross, the sin-defeating death of Jesus which radically alters the fabric of divine-human and human-human relationships. And there can be no true gospel apart from the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God's eschatological vindication of Jesus and the paradigm of God's new creation.

The gospel universality highlighted in Colossians 1:15-20 also has a particular shape: it is soteriological, related to divine rescue and restoration from human sin and its effects. It is

[35] See the development of these in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

[36] On the use of "anastatic" in reference to the resurrection, see James McClendon, *Ethics*, vol. 1: *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 242-275.

not enough simply to say that God through Christ is creator of all things, or to say that Christ is Lord over all things. The gospel requires that we also say that God through Christ is the reconciler of all things (1:20). Naturally this raises further questions. What does this universal reconciliation actually look like? Does it involve the eschatological, eternal salvation of every human being? What does it mean for non-humans, the "powers and authorities," the "invisible things," "things in heaven and things on earth" to be reconciled to God "through [Christ's] blood, shed on the cross"? Should we conceive of this universal reconciliation in different ways for followers of Jesus versus unbelievers, for humans versus God's non-human creation?

These are important questions (as well as complex and difficult),[37] yet Paul's rhetoric of universality in Colossians points our attention elsewhere. For Paul, this gospel universality demands that we proclaim the gospel "throughout the world" (1:5), even "to every creature under heaven" (1:23). And for Paul, this gospel universality demands that we live out the gospel holistically, this "message of Christ" dwelling richly among us so that we do everything, whether in speech or in action, in the name of the Lord Jesus (3:16-17). Genuine gospel faith is woven together with both hope and love, not compartmentalized and reduced to mere intellectual agreement (1:4-12). Genuine gospel existence sees every area of our lives fall under the cross's judgment and forgiveness of sin, and rise again in the newness of resurrection life (2:12-3:14). Genuine gospel preaching is extended to all without reservation, without partiality (1:6, 23, 27;

[37] The passage has been key for proponents of universal salvation, seeing the soteriological universality of the passage in its fullest possible sense for every human being; see e.g. Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*. An alternative proposes the idea of "pacification": the reconciliation and peace-making described here involves putting all creation in its proper order, whether willingly for those who respond positively to the gospel or unwillingly for those who do not; see e.g. Moo, *Colossians*. Maier provides an especially interesting window into this notion of pacification by comparison with imperial language of "peace-making" through military subjugation. However, while Maier acknowledges that Christ's pacification of God's enemies is different, being accomplished "through his blood, shed on the cross," he offers tantalizingly minimal reflection on exactly what it looks like for Christ to bring about "pacification of his enemies" through his own self-giving on a cross. See "Sly Civility," 333, 348-349.

3:11). Genuine gospel mission seeks peace among all human beings, even the peace of the entire created order (1:20, 23). These are the directions Paul's language of universality leads him: not to a statement of affirmations and denials about exclusivism and universalism, but to a truly evangelical, missional work of God through Christ, in and through Christ's body, the Church.

Second, if the language of universality and exclusivity is a rhetorical device for Paul in responding to the Colossian situation, and if Colossians 1:15-20 is in any sense "poetry," then *we must be careful not to push the language of universality and exclusivity beyond what it can bear*. The emphasis on universality and exclusivity throughout the letter generally is part of Paul's rhetorical strategy to reassure the Colossian believers of their connection to wider Christianity and to strengthen them in their gospel faith in the face of alternative versions of religious faith and practice. Furthermore, Colossians 1:15-20 is poetry, and thus calls us not merely to seek instruction but also to enter imaginatively into the artistic world of the poem.

In light of these things, on the one hand, we must not force the language of "all" in Colossians 1:15-20 to mean "every individual thing without exception." The expansive landscape Paul has painted in this poem requires us to step back from the painting to take it all in, not to scrutinize it with a magnifying glass for its individual brush strokes. On the other hand, though, we must be equally careful not to deny any force to this universal and exclusive language. We must take seriously the "all" of the passage; "all things" really have been created by God through Christ and for Christ, and Christ truly does reconcile "all things" to God through his death on the cross. Paul has painted an expansive landscape of God's action in Christ, and we must not crop the painting to focus on a scene we find more theologically or practically comfortable. To use the language of Archibald MacLeish, there is a point at which we must allow this poem simply "to be," and not force it "to mean" everything we might want it to mean.

It plays a crucial role in the theological aims of the letter, to be sure, yet it defies reduction to a set of propositional truths.

One final thought: if Colossians 1:15-20 reflects the heart of the gospel, and if the passage is indeed poetry or even a poetic hymn, then Paul has given us a specific example of his command in 3:16 to "let the message of Christ dwell among you richly" in the singing of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude to the Lord." What we have in 1:15-20 is the gospel in poetry, even suggesting a gospel aesthetic—suggesting also that *we should be encouraging the development of artists and art that expresses and explores the human condition through the lens of the gospel of Christ, crucified and risen.* Not kitsch—a genuine gospel art must take seriously the complexities and harsh realities of a sin-scarred world. And not propaganda—a genuine gospel art will follow Jesus and the apostles in persuasion, not coercion or manipulation. But genuine art for art's sake: poetry and fiction, painting and sculpture and photography, music and dance, doing all in the name of the Lord Jesus, inviting the world "to see the past, present, and future in light of the life, death, and resurrection of…Jesus Christ."[38]

[38] Gordley, *Teaching through Song*, 393.

APPENDIX: A SAMPLE OF FORMAL ANALYSES OF COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

Two strophes plus epode, with interpolation (Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 191)

Strophe

15 ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα,
τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται
17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων
καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν.
18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ
σώματος, τῆς ἐκκλησίας·

Anti-strophe

ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,
19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν
πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι
τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,
εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ
αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ,

Epode

δι' αὐτοῦ εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

Redactional material (middle of verse 16):

ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες
εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·

Four-strophe chiasmus with no interpolation (Wright, "Poetry and Theology," 449)

A	15a	ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν
	15b	τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου
	15c	πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως
	16a	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
	16b	ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
	16c	τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα
	16d	εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες
	16e	εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι
	16f	τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται
B	17a	καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων
	17b	καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν
B	18a	καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ
	18b	τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας
A	18c	ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή
	18d	πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν
	18e	ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων
	19a	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν
	19b	πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
	20a	καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι
		τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν
	20b	εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος
		τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ [δι' αὐτοῦ]
	20c	εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
		εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

Five strophes, plus interpolation (Masson, *Colossiens*, 105)

15 ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,

τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες,
εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι,
τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται·

17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων,
καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,
18 ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,

19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν
πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι
τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,

εἰρηνοποιήσας
διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ,
δι' αὐτοῦ εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

[18a καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος, τῆς ἐκκλησίας]

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