

THE LOST VERSE OF THE COLOSSIAN HYMN?
A STUDY IN HYMN CRITERIA IN COLOSSIANS 1:12–20

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Many have undertaken to give an account of the hymns that were sung among the early Christians of the first century. These efforts have been conducted with varying degrees of rigor and results yet always with great verve. In an effort over the last half-century to discover hymns in the New Testament, scholars have put forward several sets of criteria and identified numerous embedded hymn fragments—particularly in the epistles. Despite some serious criticism,¹ most scholars seem to have settled on a consensus that at least some of these passages are poetic, even if they disagree over the nature of the poetry.

One problem has infiltrated this process from the very beginning, however. Scholars tend to employ reconstructed contextual situations for these texts in assessing the hymnic nature of these texts. Though historical, cultural, and literary contexts are extremely significant to understanding the meaning of a passage of ancient scripture, recognizing a poetic text enmeshed, as it were, in the midst of prose requires consistently employed syntactical and stylistic criteria. The proposed Colossians hymn provides a test case for this kind of analysis. In this paper, I will argue that, if applied consistently, the clear syntactical and structural criteria for recognizing hymnic literature embedded in the New Testament requires that Colossians 1:12–14 be included

¹ The most significant critiques, *inter alia*, for our purposes are Gordon D. Fee, “Philippians 2:5–11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose?” *BBR* 2 (1992): 29–46, and the more recent Benjamin Edsall and Jennifer R. Strawbridge, “The Songs We Used to Sing: Hymn ‘Traditions’ and Reception in Pauline Letters” *JSNT* 37: 290–311. The primary critiques are not that these passages *cannot* be hymns, so much as a warning against assuming them to be hymnic without adequate data and criteria, which is precisely what this paper is seeking to examine.

in the Colossian hymn. First, I will quickly survey the history of the question. Second, I will assess the standard syntactical criteria put forward for recognizing New Testament hymns. Third, I will assess the standard structural or formal elements that characterize hymns in the first-century world. Finally, I will test Colossians 1:12–14 against these criteria and analyze their place in the larger structure of the Colossian hymn.

History of Interpretation

The first scholars to analyze this hymn as a piece of poetry posited that the hymn began in 1:12 and proceeded through verse 20.² However, quickly after this analysis surfaced, other scholars began to argue that the hymn started later, in verse 15. This was not on the basis of literary form or syntax, but on a proposed distinction in setting. Thus Schweizer can say, “Verses 15–20 clearly stand apart from the setting of 12–14 and 21–23. Typical characteristics of the style of Colossians are completely lacking in vv 15–20.”³ Since then, commentators seem to have latched onto this assessment of the bounds of the hymn as a matter of course.⁴ However, some recent commentators who take this view seem to wrestle with what to do with verses 12 to 14. For example, Sumney claims, “the poetic features in v. 12 show that the author is adjusting his

² See Matthew Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Tests and Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 122, who cites Eduard Norden, Ernst Lohmeyer, and Ernst Käsemann as promoting this view. Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Andrew Chester (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982 [1976]), 46 adds Eckart, Giavini, Stanley, and Vawter to this view. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 32-33 takes this view. Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians*, AB (New Haven, CT: YUP, 1974), 193 consider this as a possibility.

³ Schweizer, *Colossian Hymn*, *ibid.*

⁴ Virtually all commentaries in English since Schweizer include 1:12–14 with 1:9–11 as one major section and begin a new major section at 1:15. Schweizer himself, along with Ralph P. Martin, still include 1:12–14 as introductory material to the hymn, even though they argue the hymn begins in v. 15. This organization goes back at least as far as Calvin (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. John Pringle., digital ed., Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2010 [1851], 145) who grouped 1:12–17 together as one section, although he could have been influenced by the punctuation in the Latin text(s) he was using which and a sentence at Col 1:11.

style to ease the transition to the longer poetic section.”⁵ In one fell swoop, Sumney analyzes these verses as poetic, with similar criteria to those used to recognize the hymn in 12–20, but then feels it necessary to distinguish this passage from the verses that immediately follow it! There is clearly a problem in how the criteria for recognizing hymnic material are applied if one can get two poems exhibiting many of the same major features sitting on top of one another and yet distinguish between them only on very fine points of content.

Criteria for Recognizing New Testament Hymns

Various interpreters have offered criteria for recognizing hymnic lines in the New Testament literature. The background has some importance here, but the potential options are broad and various influences are difficult to nail down with certainty. What is certain is that these hymns would have been written in the first century in a context accessible to early Christians. In the case of Paul and many of the other New Testament writers, the primary influences would have come from a Greco-Roman setting, the culture and ideas of the Jewish diaspora, and the early Palestinian and diaspora Jewish Christians themselves (i.e., the 12 Apostles, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Apollos, Priscilla and Aquilla, etc.). From this point of view, the Jewish background has profound significance, but not to the exclusion of the realities of life under the Roman empire. The current consensus seems to be that the Jewish influence is most significant for the authors of the New Testament writings (in this case Paul), and thus the Hebrew Bible, Septuagint, and other Second Temple Jewish literature provide models for the kind of poetry most likely available within the conceptual world of these authors.⁶ The ubiquity

⁵ Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 56.

⁶ John M. G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (London: T&T Clark, 2001) has a good overview of this issue. See also Martin Hengel, “Hymns and Christology,” in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest*

of the Greek language and the fact that Paul demonstrates a knowledge of Greek poetry at some level should be considered as well.⁷

As such, both Greco-Roman and Jewish hymns should be assessed when compiling criteria to evaluate whether or not New Testament passages are hymnic. In a relatively recent and detailed study, Matthew Gordley concludes that most of the hymn fragments in the New Testament follow the model of Greek “prose hymns,” a type of rhetorical, encomiastic literature purportedly popular in the first-century Greco-Roman world.⁸ While Gordley does extensive work in form and style, he focuses primarily on the themes and “cultural matrices” of the Colossian hymn.⁹ He concludes, though, that early Christian worship exhibited in the New Testament hymns “represented a fusion of Jewish and Greco-Roman literary conventions and styles,” and this is surely the case.¹⁰

Gordley offers the most recent, standard list of criteria via David Aune (via Ethelbert Stauffer), and another helpful list is provided by Markus Barth.¹¹ These criteria do not apply in

History of Christianity, trans. John Bowden (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 78-96. Also, F. F. Bruce, “Colossian Problems Part 2: The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15–20,” *BibSac* 141: 99–111; N. T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15–20,” *NTS* 36: 444–68. Compare Jack Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background*, Paperback, vol. 15, SNTS (Cambridge: CUP, 1971) and Schweizer.

⁷ Acts 17:28 x2—Epimenides (possibly Sappho) and Aratus; 1 Cor 15:32—possibly from Sappho, 33—Menander; Titus 1:12—Epimenides. This last famous saying, incidentally, is also quoted in the great, mid-third century BCE Hellenistic poet Callimachus’s Hymn to Zeus, line 8. Callimachus was a contemporary of Aratus, a native of Paul’s home region of Cilicia, whose *Phaenomena*, another Hymn to Zeus, is what Paul likely quotes in Acts 17:28b.

⁸ Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context*, vol. 228, WUNT 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), and more recently Matthew E. Gordley, *New Testament Christological Hymns: Exploring Texts, Contexts, and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 7–37.

⁹ For example, Gordley, *New Testament Hymns*, 38–78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20–21 citing David Aune, “Hymn,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 222–24, who draws from Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 88–100. Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Chapters 1–3*, AB (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 6–9. Compare also Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*:

all places, and this expansive list of criteria may be narrowed to a few points under two subheads: syntactical features and formal features. Syntactical features include (1) syntactical dislocation, (2) a preference for relative clauses or participial predication (i.e. substantival or adjectival participles), and (3) compressed syntax within phrases (e.g., dropping expected articles, avoiding particles, employing predicate adjectives and appositives). Formal features include (1) introductory formulae, (2) parallelism, and (4) strophic arrangement. Other criteria such as content, themes, and meter cannot easily be evaluated without first using other criteria to determine if the passage is hymnic. Secondary structural criteria like chiasmus occur frequently in prose and thus can only supplement other, more obvious markers of poetry.

It is the combination of these features that makes a passage poetic, not one single feature. For example, even in good English prose one may rhyme, alliterate, rhythmically articulate the words, or use figurative language. But it is a preponderance of these features that makes it obvious one has stumbled onto a poem. Thus, it will not do to argue that if one of these features is found in prose it cannot be signs of poetry. It will also not do to say that one feature in and of itself guarantees poetry. For poetry in any language is first and foremost compressed language arranged for maximal emotional effect.¹²

For the sake of space and time, this paper will focus on two syntactical features, both related to the use of the relative pronoun in purported hymnic passages, and two formal features,

Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 18–19, whose initial criteria are a bit illusive although his analysis elsewhere is insightful.

¹² I was at a loss to find such a definition in a standard dictionary, since most of these are focused on the specific poetry of a particular language, i.e. an English dictionary typically emphasizes rhyme and meter as indicators of poetry, since these are longstanding features of much English poetry. But even these do not feature in all English poetry, and certainly not always together. There is the blank verse of Shakespeare and others, as well as the creative, sometimes eccentric work of Whitman, Dickinson, and Robert Frost to disprove the definition of English poetry that assumes it must include regular meter and rhyme. For the definition given above, I must credit my 10th grade English literature teacher, Deborah Perry.

introductory formulae and parallelism, which bear directly on the issues involved in understanding the Colossian hymn. One helpful example of many of these features in a compact passage embedded in a Pauline letter is 1 Timothy 3:16, and it will be used throughout the following analysis for helpful comparison to the Colossian hymn and other New Testament hymnic passages.

Syntactical Features of New Testament Hymns

Syntactical Dislocation

One of the primary ways to initially identify that a passage within prose may be hymnic is to recognize a disconnect in the syntax. One clear and well known example is the beginning of 1 Timothy 3:16: “καὶ ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον. Ὃς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι... (confessedly great is the mystery of godliness, **who** appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the spirit...).” Clearly, ὃς in this context is problematic syntactically since it is masculine and the potential antecedent, μυστήριον, is neuter. If the relative pronoun is to modify something, perhaps it modifies the implied personal predicate of the “mystery of godliness” (in this case, then, the person of Jesus Christ). But this is still problematic, since it is not obvious grammatically. In fact, one of the reasons some manuscripts substitute either the neuter relative pronoun (D, lat) or the noun θεός (among others, \aleph^3 , A^c, C², D², Ψ, 81, 1241, 1739, 1881, Byz, vg^{ms}) may be precisely to iron out this grammatical confusion.

Hebrews 1:3 also exemplifies this issue, in which case the nominative masculine relative pronoun must go back eleven words for its antecedent, υἱῶ. Another, less obvious example of this kind of disjointed syntax at the beginning of a hymn passage may be 1

Corinthians 8:6 where one has to supply a copula between ἀλλ' ἡμῖν and εἶς θεός, but this is not as problematic grammatically, since New Testament Greek may often drop an implied copula.

Other examples of syntactic dislocation are less related to the initial connection between the “hymnic” passage and its context and more related to the subsequent clauses or phrases being extended predications back to an initial antecedent which create one or more unusually long sentences. For one possible example, in Philippians 2:5–11, the initial relative pronoun has a clear antecedent in Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, but the proceeding clauses relate three participles and two finite verbs back to this initial relative pronoun before a new explicit subject (ὁ θεός) appears in 2:9. In a sense here, the relative pronoun is doing a lot of heavy lifting. The length and complexity is not necessarily unusual since Paul elsewhere composes long, complex sentences (Rom 5:1–11, 12–21; 2 Cor 6:14–16; Eph 1:3–14), but the weight put on the relative pronoun here is at least interesting. This also features in 1 Timothy 3:16, where the relative pronoun controls no less than six finite verbs.

However, one immediately encounters potential pitfalls in this process. First, there may be other reasons for the odd syntax. For example, Phil 2:6–8 could simply be a long, well-balanced sentence predicating Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ in verse 5. Second, the author could, theoretically, weave the wording of a hymn into the syntax of his own work quite smoothly so that one could not differentiate the hymnic elements from the prose of the letter. This reality prompted N.T. Wright to quip, “if insertions are to be allowed omissions should be as well, making the task of reconstruction virtually impossible.”¹³ Thus, observing some type of syntactic dislocation is only a preliminary step in trying to determine whether a passage may be hymnic (i.e. in a poetic genre distinct from its prose, epistolary context).

¹³ N.T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15–20,” *NTS* 36: 445.

The Use of the Relative Pronoun as a Personal Pronoun

Another, more promising, clue is the preference of these “hymn” passages for relative clauses and thus the relative pronoun. Several purported hymns that appear in the New Testament letters begin with a relative pronoun (e.g. Rom 4:25; Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:(13)15–20; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:3–4) or an article substantizing a participle (1 Tim 6:15–16; 2 Tim 1:9–10; cf. Ig. *Tral.* 9.1–2, where an article substantizes phrases throughout). In fact, Daniel B. Wallace suggests, based on the work of Ralph Martin and others, that an introductory relative pronoun could be one criterion for the identification of hymns in the New Testament.¹⁴ This is certainly supported by others who have worked on identifying New Testament hymns.¹⁵ The question becomes whether the relative pronoun is employed in an otherwise unusual manner in hymnic passages that provides a compelling basis for using this as a criteria for identifying NT hymns.

The prominence of relative clauses occurs commonly in Greek hymns. Though from the pre-classical era, the *Homeric Hymns* continued to be used throughout the classical, post-classical, and Hellenistic eras. This can be demonstrated by the fact that these were standard forms used by playwrights and poets of later eras as models for their works, and they were likely used in Greek religious ceremonies or in daily life in the Greek-speaking world up through the

¹⁴ Daniel B. Wallace, *An Exegetical Syntax of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 340–42; cf. Ralph Martin, “Aspects of Worship in the New Testament Church,” *VE* 2: 17.

¹⁵ For example, Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical and Religious Background*, SNTS Monograph Series 15 (Cambridge: CUP, 1971), 1, 4, 14, 19, going back to Eduard Norden’s seminal study, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede*, 2nd ed., reprint (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956), 250–54 and Appendix 8.

first century.¹⁶ Often, these begin with an introductory formula followed by a string of relative clauses (e.g., *Homeric Hymns* 9–12, 14–15, 20, 22–23, 28).¹⁷

In the proposed New Testament hymns it also seems like the relative pronoun rather uniquely functions as a personal pronoun. Usually a relative pronoun in Greek will follow its antecedent very closely, and only in specific constructions can it function similarly to a personal pronoun.¹⁸ In most of these cases which appear in the New Testament, the relative pronoun acts indefinitely and one would expect ὅστις or the relative pronoun with ἐάν. Paul is apparently careful in this distinction.¹⁹ So when a relative pronoun, especially the masculine, nominative, singular ὅς, appears far removed from or without its antecedent *or* controls a long string of verbs, it may be the strongest initial clue that one has come upon a hymn fragment in the New Testament.

But is it legitimate to treat these uses of the relative pronoun as a personal pronoun (as in 1 Timothy 3:16 and, perhaps, Hebrews 1:3), or is this merely convenient for English translation? This hypothesis must be tested. Examining all uses of the masculine, nominative, singular, relative pronoun in the New Testament can give an initial starting point for examining this phenomenon.

¹⁶ On the Homeric Hymns see the introductions in Martin L. West, *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer*, in the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Michael Crudden, *The Homeric Hymns: A New Translation*, Oxford World Classics (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ See the relevant hymns in West, *Homeric Hymns*, LCL.

¹⁸ See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 335–45, especially 339–43. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert A. Funk (Chicago: CUP, 1961), §293–97.

¹⁹ BDF §293(4).

I conducted a search in Logos of the Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece 28th Edition* of all occurrences of the masculine, nominative, singular relative pronoun more than five words away from a singular noun which could act as its antecedent. This search did not rule out antecedents embedded in a verbal subject or a participle or pronoun or the relative pronoun in questions, and the Logos morphology based search included the indefinite pronoun ὅστις. But once these were ruled out, the data provided interesting results that help to assess whether or not the relative pronoun function in a special way to mark the beginning of a hymn or other distinct passage rather than simply connecting one clause to another.

The vast majority of results (42 out of 72) were independent, indefinite uses of the relative pronoun ὅς followed by ἄν or ἐάν. Thirty-seven of these were in the Gospels with only one example in John (4:14). Two occur in Paul (Rom 10:13; 1 Cor 11:27) and three in 1 John (2:5; 3:17; 4:15). These accounted for the vast majority of results. Another nine had other features that clearly indicated an independent use, such as πᾶς plus ὅς for “all who” or “anyone who” (Lk 12:10; 14:33; Gal 3:10) or in a μὲν...δέ construction (Mt 22:5; Rom 14:2, 5 (x2); 1 Cor 7:37; 11:21).

However, there are a few examples where ὅς appears with a finite verb in the indicative mood and no other words that would indicate indefiniteness. Most of these occur in the gospels in proverbial statements from Jesus expressing a gnomic idea with ὅς as the subject of a present tense indicative verb (Mt 10:38; Mk 4:9, 25 (x2); 9:40; cp Luke 18:30, which has the subjunctive). For example, in Mark 4:25 Jesus says “ὅς γὰρ ἔχει, δοθήσεται αὐτῷ· καὶ ὅς οὐκ ἔχει, καὶ ὃ ἔχει ἀρθήσεται ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ. (For, the one who has, it will be given to him; and the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him).” This construction functions

practically the same way as the indefinite use of the relative pronoun, and only shows up in proverbial sayings in the gospels.

Once the relative pronoun shows up at the beginning of a clause that modifies a second person verb at the end of the sentence, but it clearly functions in the normal, subordinate way (Rom 2:23). Acts has more difficult constructions with the relative pronoun occurring further from its antecedent than usually occurs elsewhere in the New Testament. In Acts 3:3 the relative pronoun could go back to the *τις ἀνὴρ* at the beginning of verse 2, who is certainly the semantic antecedent. However, the relative pronoun could also primarily be controlling either the participle *ἰδὼν* immediately following it or the main verb *ἤρώτα* later in verse 3. So this could be an example of a relative pronoun functioning as a personal pronoun, but it clearly has an antecedent that could be construed to be in the same sentence, however distant.

Something similar could be going on in Acts 16:2. The *ὃς* could be going back to Timothy at the beginning of verse 1, and this is how most English translations take it. However, it could also refer to Timothy's father, "*πατὴρ δὲ Ἑλληνας*," in verse 1 which occurs immediately before "*ὃς ἐμαρτυρεῖτο*." There is no reason grammatically to relate this relative pronoun back to Timothy, unless *πατὴρ δὲ Ἑλληνας* is a parenthetical statement. This is likely contextually, if Timothy's father being a Greek is contrasted to his mother being a "believing Jew," but this is not clear grammatically, since his father's Greekness may only be in contrast to his mother's Jewishness. He is not said to be an unbelieving Greek, so it could be merely his ethnicity that is in view.

In Acts 21:32, the *τῷ χιλιάρχῳ τῆς σπειρίας* in verse 31 is only four words earlier than the relative pronoun, so this poses no real exception to normal usage, even though English

translations often treat the relative pronoun here as a personal pronoun. Similarly, ὅς in Revelation 10:6 goes back to a phrase immediately preceding it, with some intervening words between the relative pronoun and the initial substantival participle it modifies.

All the other examples of a relative pronoun with either no antecedent or a distant antecedent occur in the epistles. In Romans 4:25, which may be a hymn fragment, the antecedent of ὅς occurs six words after Ἰησοῦν, but this is not far enough to be particularly problematic to a normal subordinate use of the relative pronoun as seen in Acts 21:31 and Revelation 10:6. However, in Romans 4:18, the antecedent to ὅς must be Ἀβραάμ, ὅς ἐστὶν πατὴρ πάντων ἡμῶν at the end of verse 16! Verse 18 is clearly a new sentence and the relative pronoun clearly refers to Abraham. Thus it cannot be indefinite, and may justly be treated as a personal pronoun. Hebrews 5:7 behaves similarly, and in both cases there is an intervening Old Testament quotation with commentary between the semantic antecedent and the relative pronoun.

An interesting construction appears in Romans 8:34, which has some similarities to some proposed hymn fragments in the building up of participles, relative clauses, antithesis, and parallelism:

Χριστὸς [Ἰησοῦς] ὁ ἀποθανών,
 μᾶλλον δὲ ἐγερθείς,
 ὃς καὶ ἐστὶν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ,
 ὃς καὶ ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν

The first relative pronoun here should be seen as simply linking back to the previous participle, which in turn clearly modifies Χριστὸς. However, the second relative pronoun requires going back seven words to the previous relative pronoun. This does not require taking the relative pronoun as a personal pronoun, but it is stretching of the normal usage.

2 Corinthians 1:10 is treated like a new sentence both in NA28 and many English translations, but an antecedent is readily supplied in $\theta\epsilon\tilde{\omega}\ \tau\tilde{\omega}\ \acute{\epsilon}\gamma\epsilon\acute{\iota}\rho\omicron\nu\tau\iota$ only two words earlier in the previous verse. Although this verse also displays a balance of clauses that could be described as parallelism, both syntactically, auditorily, and semantically, and 1:9–10 has some very similar syntactical and verbal features to Colossians 1:12–13. These include a term for God in the dative followed by a substantival participle in the dative, followed by two parallel lines beginning with a relative pronoun $\delta\zeta$ and using the term $\rho\acute{\upsilon}\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ (3x in 2 Cor 1:10; 1x in Col 1:13).

Colossians 1:13 and 15 both have distant antecedents that are obvious semantically, but grammatically problematic in comparison to the normal usage of the relative pronoun. The $\delta\zeta$ in verse 13 is thirteen words removed from $\tau\tilde{\omega}\ \pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\rho\iota$ and eleven words removed from the participle which follows it. The presumable antecedent $\tau\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}\ \upsilon\iota\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}$ is twelve words before the $\delta\zeta$ of verse 15 and the relative pronoun and there are still seven words between in and $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \tilde{\omega}$ in verse 14. Thus, these relative pronouns could possibly be treated as personal pronouns or in a special way introduce a new thought or (sub)section of the passage. The relative pronoun in 1:18b is less problematic grammatically, since it could easily go back to $\acute{\eta}\ \kappa\epsilon\phi\alpha\lambda\acute{\eta}$ in 18a. It is only because of the parallelism between 1:15–16 and 18b–19 that this relative pronoun may need to be treated abnormally.²⁰

Hebrews 1:3 is another passage where the semantic antecedent is obvious but distant. However, the previous relative pronoun could serve as the grammatical antecedent. The only issue at that point would be that 1:3 begins the third relative clause in a long string of relative clauses and participial phrases all modifying $\upsilon\iota\tilde{\omega}$ in verse 2. In this case, it seems directly,

²⁰ See below. cf. F.F. Bruce, “Colossian Problems, Part 2: The ‘Christ Hymn’ of Colossians 1:15–20,” *BSac* 144: 100, who—with many others—points out not only the $\delta\zeta\ \acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\iota\nu\ \dots\ \pi\rho\omega\tau\acute{\omicron}\tau\omicron\kappa\omicron\varsigma$ in both lines, but also the sequence of $\delta\tau\iota\ \acute{\epsilon}\nu\ \alpha\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}\ \dots\ \delta\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}\ \dots\ \epsilon\iota\varsigma\ \alpha\tilde{\upsilon}\tau\omicron\tilde{\upsilon}\nu$.

syntactically linked to these preceding clauses, functioning together more clearly as a unit. The hymn of Philippians 2:6–11 suffers a similar problem,²¹ since the initial relative pronoun which commands much of the rest of the hymn has its antecedent immediately preceding it in 1:5, which is universally held to be still a part of Paul’s prose.

Finally, 1 Peter 2:22–24 has three masculine nominative singular relative pronouns in sequence in which the first has an antecedent directly preceding it, but the rest all go back to this same antecedent. This passage is another that is regularly considered a hymn (it is set off as such in NA28), and this passage has significant similarities contextually to Philippians 2:5–11. 1 Peter 2:21 leads in, “leaving you an example so that you might follow in the steps of him, who...” with this first ὅς immediately following αὐτοῦ, much like the first ὅς of Philippians 2:6 immediately follows “Christ Jesus.” The ὅς in 1 Peter 1:23 does the exact same thing following the αὐτοῦ at the end of verse 22. In 2:24 there are some intervening words, but the verb παρεδίδου is only five words before and thus the implied subject can serve as a near antecedent. So, unlike Philippians, one relative pronoun does not control a whole series of clauses, but like Hebrews 1:2–4, a long string of relative clauses all go back to one antecedent—Χριστός at the beginning of 2:21.

1 Timothy 3:16 did not appear in the search results because a singular noun appears immediately before ὅς. However, since μυστήριον cannot be its antecedent, this is another example where the relative pronoun must function like a simple personal pronoun. There could be other examples like this, but such a search would go beyond the space available in this paper.

²¹ Of course this is only a problem in that the use of the relative pronoun in relation to its antecedent in Phil 2:6–11 does not in itself delimit the text from its previous context (i.e. as a hymn in contrast to the surrounding prose).

So, what does this survey of the relative pronoun reveal? In the New Testament the nominative, masculine, singular, relative pronoun typically either (1) follows within four or five words of its antecedent, (2) functions as an indefinite pronoun in conjunction with the subjunctive mood and/or the indefinite particle, or (3) functions as a pronoun in generic or gnomic statements with an indefinite force. There does not seem to be one consistent way in which the masculine, nominative, singular, relative pronoun operates in purported hymnic passages. However, it does seem to stretch its normal usage in these passages by doing one of three things: (1) behaving as a true personal pronoun rather than a relative or indefinite pronoun when starting a new sentence removed from its antecedent (Col 1:13, 15; 1 Tim 3:16; cf Ac 3:3; Rom 4:18; Heb 5:7), (2) parallel a series of relative clauses all going back to one primary antecedent (Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 1:10; Col 1:13, 15, 18; Heb 1:2–4; 1 Pet 2:21–24), or (3) may follow closely after an antecedent but control a long string of finite verbs and participles (Phil 2:5–11; Rom 4:25; cf 1 Tim 3:16, which does not have an antecedent, but does control a string of finite verbs; cp Ac 3:3). Colossians 1:(13)15–20 and 1 Timothy 3:16 each in some way fit in two of these categories, and some examples from category two also fit category three (Heb 1:2–4; 1 Pet 2:21–24).

Further study should be done to compare these findings with the use of the feminine and neuter forms of the relative pronoun, the relative pronoun in other cases, and relative pronouns when they immediately follow their antecedent. However, this initial information demonstrates that many of the supposed hymnic fragments in the New Testament that begin with a relative pronoun do behave somewhat abnormally in their usage of the relative pronoun. This helps to demonstrate, if nothing else, that these passages have a unique or perhaps elevated style, which in conjunction with other features can demonstrate whether or not these passages are in fact poetic.

Formal Features of New Testament Hymns

Introductory and Conclusion Formulae

As mentioned earlier, Greek hymns typically had some form of introductory formula, usually involving the verbs “sing” (ἀείδων; cf Homeric Hymn 12 *To Pan*) or “hymn” (ὑμνεῖ; cf Homeric Hymn 9 *To Artemis*). This would lead into the hymn, which usually began with a relative pronoun or substantival participle. They would usually end with a request or petition after the hymn proper. These were also short hymns intended to be performed alongside other works, so they may provide some parallel to short hymn fragments found in the New Testament in comparison with longer Greek hymns used for competitions or intended to be the main public entertainment.

It does not seem like any recognized hymn fragments in the New Testament have such clear introductory formulae. However, many credal forms in the New Testament do. For example, 1 Corinthians 15:5–11 begins with a tradition formula, “for I passed on to you at the beginning what I also received” (παρέδωκα γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐν πρώτοις, ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον; cf 11:23) and begins the creed with ὅτι. One New Testament hymn which seems to clearly have a kind of introductory formula is 1 Timothy 3:16, which uses the adverb ὁμολογουμένως, “confessedly.”²² One could also consider the hymns in Revelation 4:8–11 and 5:8–14 that are introduced with the living creatures either saying (λέγοντες) or singing (ᾄδουσιν ᾠδὴν καινὴν λέγοντες; 5:9) the words. There is a strong relation both in the New Testament and the Old Testament between singing, thanksgiving, and confession (cf Eph 5:19–20; Phil 2:11), but to defend this would take another

²² See Mark M. Yarbrough, *Paul’s Utilization of Preformed Traditions in 1 Timothy: An Evaluation of the Apostle’s Literary, Rhetorical, and Theological Tactics*, LNTS 417, ed. Mark Goodacher (New York: T&T Clark, 2009) for detailed analysis of criteria for preformed material and introductory formulae in the pastorals.

paper. The primary distinction between the credal and hymnic introductory statements seems to be that in credal formulae the idea is explicitly of passing on a tradition that one received, whereas in a hymnic introductory formula the language relates to praising, speaking (i.e. singing or declaring), thanking, or confessing (none of which are mutually exclusive, and may simply be different ways of saying the same thing).

There is a notable awkwardness in continuing the subordination of the prayer in Colossians 1:3–11 into verse 12, not so much grammatically as semantically, since Paul seems to complete one thought, focused on benefits to the Colossian believers, and introduce a new one related to thanking God. This can be seen in the division of the text in NA28 and has been noted by Gordon Fee.²³ In light of this, and specifically the term *εὐχαριστοῦντες*, several scholars in the past have pointed out the relation between this and the introduction to Jewish thanksgiving psalms or hymns which would typically begin with a thanksgiving or invocation to give thanks followed by a narrative recounting the great deeds of God in creation and redemption.²⁴ Thus, in a sense verse 12 could serve as a kind of introductory form signaling a hymn or more specifically a thanksgiving psalm type hymn in the following verses. Grammatically though, *εὐχαριστοῦντες*, can be seen as doing double duty as a participle of result²⁵ flowing out of all the requests Paul has made on the Colossians behalf in verses 9–11. In this sense verse 12 could be seen as “transitional” as a result from the prayer and an introduction to the hymn which follows.

²³ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 293.

²⁴ Sanders, *New Testament Christological Hymns, 2–7* follows the identification of this hymn type by Hermann Gunkel for the Old Testament psalms in its application by James M. Robinson to the Colossian hymn in this way. For a more recent discussion that demonstrates little change on this issue see Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context*, WUNT2, 228 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007) 36–38, 42–52.

²⁵ *ExSyn* 637–638.

Parallelism

Encomia and hymns of praise were Greek literary genre that were beginning to encroach on diaspora Jewish literature (Sir 24, 44–51; Wisd 10).²⁶ Thus, it is possible that the New Testament authors could be drawing on both Hebrew psalm literature and this hybrid of psalm and encomium. Because many examples of these in the Greek literature are considered “prose hymns,” Gordley proposes that this is the proper genre nomenclature for most of the New Testament hymns.²⁷ However, while there are aspects of the “prose hymn” genre in the New Testament hymns, the psalm tradition in combination with this still leaves the door open to seeing these as truly poetic compositions.

One of the most significant criteria for identifying a New Testament hymn is parallelism in the tradition of the Old Testament poetry seen from the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 to the Psalms of David to the Prophets and into the literature of the Jewish diaspora. This comes out of the Jewish background of the early church and the New Testament authors.²⁸ They were clearly familiar with Hebrew poetry either original or in translation based on their numerous quotations from the Book of Psalms and poetic portions of prophetic literature. Moreover, most or all of the New Testament hymns usually identified exhibit clear parallelism.

Parallelism in Hebrew poetry can occur in two or more parallel lines or within one line.²⁹ While line length was usually relatively congruent between parallel lines but can vary by

²⁶ See *ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See Martin Hengel, “Hymns and Christology,” in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 78–82 for a defense of the influence of the Jewish, psalm-singing background in forming early Christian worship.

²⁹ My thanks to Brian Webster for patiently enduring my many questions on this topic in Beginning Hebrew 2 class and for his many insights which influenced this section of the paper. His textbook, *Reading Biblical*

one or so words in Hebrew;³⁰ however, when brought over into Greek this would have caused a greater difference in line length since Greek does not compound words to the degree that Hebrew does. Hebrew poetry this was much less strict than the standards of Greek and Latin metrical poetry.³¹ Different sets of parallel lines could be of different lengths from other sets of lines within a stanza, and this tends to be what we see in some of the New Testament hymns which defy most metrical analysis.³² Parallels could be created by parallel syntax, words, concepts, or even sound play.³³ Thus there was a wide variety of ways to set off a parallel colon (i.e., a set of parallel lines). But the traditional categories of semantic parallelism are (a) synonymous, in which one line restates the first in some way, (b) antithetic, in which the second line directly contrasts to the first, and (c) synthetic, in which the second line completes or extends the meaning of the first.³⁴

Several scholars have pointed to parallelism as an important element of New Testament hymns,³⁵ and certainly this can be seen in the psalm-style hymns of Luke 1–2.

Hebrew: Introduction to Grammar (Belmont, MI: DigiScroll, 2017), 215–225, can serve as a basic introduction to Hebrew parallelism for the purposes of this study. See Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, Revised & Expanded (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) for a detailed treatment of various typologies of parallelism in Hebrew poetry.

³⁰ Webster, *Biblical Hebrew*, 216.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 217.

³³ Berlin, *Biblical Parallelism*, 17.

³⁴ Webster, *Biblical Hebrew*, 216.

³⁵ See Sanders, *New Testament Christological Hymns*, 9–15. Gordley, *Colossian Hymn*, 52–57.

However, the application of parallelism to hymn fragments in the epistles has tended to be imprecise or ignored for other structural features.³⁶ Nevertheless, Hurtado rightly concludes:

The error in trying to “reconstruct” the hymn on the basis of Greek poetic meter is the assumption that classical Greek poetic conventions are relevant. Among many Greek-speaking Jews and Christians of the time, however, the Greek Old Testament was scripture and, thus, a strong influence on their vocabulary and discourse patterns, as is easily shown in the New Testament writings. It is thus far more likely that their own efforts at liturgical praise was [sic] modeled after the Old Testament, especially in the Greek Psalter. The principal stylistic feature of Colossians 1:15-20 is in fact the parallel structure that is also the primary poetic feature of the Psalms. The uneven length of lines does not conform to Greek poetic conventions of syllabic meter because this particular statement of hymnic praise was composed as what Stettler rightly characterizes as a “Christ-psalm,” lauding Jesus in the cadences of the Psalter.³⁷

Analyzing the New Testament hymnic passages for parallelism may prove fruitful.

Numerous New Testament hymn passages demonstrate parallelism very similar to traditional Hebrew psalms. To revisit 1 Timothy 3:16, it has six parallel lines:

Ὁς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί,
 ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι,
 ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις,
 ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν,
 ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ,
 ἀνελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ.

These demonstrate exact syntactic parallelism, where each line begins with an aorist passive verb followed by ἐν plus a noun in the dative. While some may be confused over trying to determine whether there is any semantic parallelism, this is not required for the passage to demonstrate poetic parallelism through its obvious parallel syntax.

³⁶ S.M. Baugh, “The Poetic Form of Col 1:15–20,” *WTJ* 47: 277–244 and N.T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology.” Have made the some of the most substantive interaction with the hymn from the perspective that the Jewish psalm background is significant, but both focus much of their attention on parallelism across stanzas and potential chiasms in vv15–20. A simpler, more straightforward analysis focused on parallel lines may be fruitful.

³⁷ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 507.

Other New Testament hymnic passages are similar, but with more obvious semantic parallels. For example, Romans 4:25 demonstrates synonymous syntactical parallelism, but synthetic semantic parallelism:

ὃς παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν
καὶ ἠγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν

Each line begins with an aorist passive main verb, followed by *διὰ* plus a substantive in the accusative case followed by *ἡμῶν*, demonstrating the clear syntactic parallelism. However, while the syntax is exactly parallel, the idea of each line is progressive from one line to the next, “he was handed over because of our iniquities, yet he was raised for our justification.” Thus a passage with one form of synonymous parallelism (in the syntax) can also have a layer of parallelism at the semantic level, in this case, synthetic parallelism. 1 Corinthians 8:6 provides another example in which the syntactical parallelism where virtually everything structurally stays the same between lines except for a shift in subject and a change of prepositions.

O’Brien, among others, has pointed out that clear parallelism can be seen in Colossians 1:13–14.³⁸ If one starts with the relative pronoun in verse 12, the lines lay out in two bi-cola (two sets of two parallel lines each):

ὃς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκοτους
καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ [τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ,]³⁹
ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν,
τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν·

These lines show both feature at least two kinds of parallelism. In the first set, comprising verse 13, there is a finite verb followed by a prepositional phrase *with the article* followed by an articular, genitive, singular noun. The fact that the prepositional phrases contain an articular noun

³⁸ P.T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 18–19, 27–29 [Plagiarism acknowledged].

³⁹ I have put the last phrase in brackets merely to show the parallel elements more clearly.

is redundant and could be to heighten the syntactic parallelism, specify the substantives more clearly or both. The semantic parallelism is synthetic (or climactic), since we are rescued “from the authority of darkness” and put “into the kingdom of the son.” The final two lines in verse 14 feature verbal and semantic parallelism with the related terms of redemption (*ἀπολύτρωσιν*) and forgiveness (*ἄφεσιν*), and very similar line length, if divided in this way. There may also be some sound parallelism between these two lines, but this is difficult to determine due to the difficulty of being sure of how the Greek of this period was pronounced.

Testing Colossians 1:12–14 against the Criteria

While the Colossians hymn has typically and popularly been restricted to Colossians 1:15–20, verses 12–14 also exhibit many of the criteria used for identifying 1:15–20 as a hymn. Verse 13 begins with ὃς removed by several phrases from its likely antecedent. In fact, virtually all modern translations render this ὃς as a relative pronoun as the subject of a new sentence in verse 13, just as they do for verses 15 and 18b.⁴⁰ This should be one signal that this could begin or be part of a hymn. There is also a break in syntax involved; Paul has been speaking to the Colossians in the second person or in the exclusive first person. In 13, he uses the inclusive first person and then sustains third person discourse until verse 21. The other major factors in determining if this is a hymn are the fact that verses 13–14 can easily be set into parallel lines and the potential that the thanksgiving language in verse 12 may signal an introductory formula for a thanksgiving psalm or hymn. Additionally, the idea of redemption clearly reoccurs at the end of the hymn (18b–20) and could function as an inclusio.

⁴⁰ This is also the way Dean Depp treats this verse in the Lexham Clausal Outlines. He takes v. 13 as a new sentence, syntactically unconnected to the previous one.

If these verses are a part of the hymn, this would be significant, because then the hymn is not simply about Christ, but about the Father (1:12–13) and the Son (13b). This would align well with some shorter hymn fragments in the New Testament (Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 8:6) as well as longer hymnic texts which feature both God and Christ together (Phil 2:6–11; John 1:1–18; cf the move from praising God on his heavenly throne to praising the lamb that was slain in Rev 4–5). All in all, it seems at least plausible that Colossians 1:12–20 is a more united whole than typically treated, and this should be investigated further.

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