

Beholding the Word of Christ: A Theological Reading of Colossians

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Abstract

The Epistle to the Colossians has suffered much neglect in modern Biblical scholarship, and when attention has been paid, the interest has mostly been in matters pertaining to its authorship, the false teaching involved, or the household code. Rarely have Paulinists endeavored to engage in a theological reading of Colossians. This article attempts such a reading, utilizing a method that gives attention to the socio-historical context of the letter as well as to its canonical context. By bringing Colossians into conversation with two other biblical texts, Deuteronomy and the Gospel of John, what we see emerge is a “hearing versus seeing” motif, in which the scriptural emphasis falls on *word* as the focal point of divine revelation, and not *image*—what the ear *hears*, not what the eyes *sees*. It is argued and concluded, then, that a “good hearing” theme is pertinent to the theology of Colossians. This leads to a discussion of the proper meaning of “word of Christ” in Col 3:16, and the implications of this reading for the church today. The article ends by addressing potential objections to this theological reading, particularly as it relates to the incarnation (as the visible presence of God in Jesus) and the visual nature of sacramental worship. Although both these elements are useful for the church, they do not match or replace the supremacy of “word” for revelation of God’s presence, relationality, edification, and instruction.

Colossians is a text that may fit the same category that John Elliott attributed to 1 Peter in modern scholarship, namely, that of an “exegetical step-child” among

the canonical books of the New Testament.¹ Like 1 Peter, Colossians is given little attention in NT introductions, and few scholarly articles and monographs focus on this letter in comparison to texts of similar length like Galatians and Philippians.

One of the most unfortunate omissions in Biblical scholarship is a serious examination of the theological substance of Colossians. Indeed, it is telling that the Pauline Seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature that met annually from 1986 to 1995 chose to focus exclusively on the undisputed letters, treating texts like Colossians as unhelpful in the pursuit of a genuine “Pauline theology.”² All too regularly, Colossians has been regarded merely as an early interpretation of genuine Pauline theology (at best)³ or as propaganda of a more institutionalized Paulinist movement that sought to balance the apostle out or even to undermine his perspective (at worst).⁴ It would seem that, when Colossians *has* been studied, scholars have been interested in it primarily as (1) a text that may unearth layers of early Christian tradition concerning Christology (1:15–20), (2) evidence of a more domestic and unthreatening brand of Christianity with its orderly household of patriarchy (3:18–4:1), (3) an early pseudonymous letter that was included in the Christian canon, or (4) a Christian refutation of Jewish ascetic-mysticism.⁵

However, a number of influences in recent years have led to the beginnings of the “rehabilitation” of the Colossian exegetical step-child, including interest in apocalyptic eschatology in early Judaism and early Christianity, implications for NT interpretation raised by the “New Perspective on Paul” as well as by political readings of the NT,⁶ and recent conversations about theological interpretation of Scripture (especially as practiced with the whole scriptural canon in view).

Most recent monographs and articles on Colossians in the last thirty years have focused on historical questions related to the text. Only a small portion of the increase in Colossian scholarship has examined the text *theologically*. It would seem that only two books have attempted this,⁷ and even then in a limited way (especially insofar as neither one is exclusively a theology of Colossians). First,

1 See J. H. Elliott, “The Rehabilitation of An Exegetical Step-Child: 1 Peter in Recent Research,” *JBL* 95 (1976): 243–254.

2 For a critique of this seminar and its methods, see B. S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 2–3. It should be observed, though, that the Society of Biblical Literature has a program unit for their annual meeting called “Disputed Paulines” into which the study of Colossians fits.

3 See H. Roose, “Die Hierarchisierung der Leib-Metapher im Kolosser- und Epheserbrief als ‘Paulisierung’: Ein Beitrag zur Rezeption paulinischer Tradition in pseudo-paulinischen Briefen,” *NovT* 47, no. 2 (2005): 117–141.

4 For the latter viewpoint, see N. Elliott, “The Apostle Paul and Empire,” in *In the Shadow of Empire* (ed. R. Horsley; Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2008), 97–116.

5 For a state of the scholarship of Colossians (from 1970 to 2002), see Hans Hübner, “Die Diskussion um die deuteropaulinischen Briefe seit 1970,” *Theologische Rundschau* 68, no. 4 (2003): 395–440.

6 H. O. Maier, “A Sly Civility: Colossians and Empire,” *JNT* 27, no. 3 (2005): 232–349.

7 There certainly may be a few other books focused on the theology of Colossians, but I have come across none in my research that have been of serious influence on Colossian scholarship.

there is *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, with the section on Colossians written by A. J. M. Wedderburn. Wedderburn focuses on the Christo-centric eschatology and ethics in the letter, with special interest in 1:15–20 and 3:18–4:1.⁸ Much the trend in the history of the study of the letter, focus on the christological “hymn” in the first chapter tends to draw so much attention that other portions of the text are too easily neglected.

A more robust approach to the theology of Colossians has been recently undertaken by M. M. Thompson.⁹ She recognizes that Christology is the life-blood of the letter. Furthermore, she explains how, for Colossians, “Christ stands at the center of Paul’s ‘integrative view of reality’ because his life, death, and resurrection are the primary means by which God brings new life to the cosmos.”¹⁰ Thompson connects Colossians’ Christology, then, especially to eschatology and to soteriology as “the renewal of the world traces the narrative of Christ’s death and resurrection.”¹¹ Through a narrative approach to Colossians’ theological framework, Thompson capably outlines the wider theological horizons of this text to explicate its cosmological vision.

No doubt Thompson would not consider her discussion the final word on the theological substance of Colossians. In fact, I will attempt a fresh theological reading of Colossians especially with the aid of thematic resonances within the scriptural canon in tandem with a close reading of Colossians itself. My argument will be that Colossians, as read within its discrete¹² context as well as in dialogue with other canonical texts, reinforces the idea that a more powerful form of revelation happens through *hearing* God rather than through what one sees. That is, God makes himself known primarily through “the Word” (Col. 3:16; see below). First, we will engage with methodological questions pertaining to how to undergo a proper “theological reading” of Colossians. Secondly, we will situate the message of Colossians in its discrete historical context. Thirdly, we will bring Colossians into dialogue with two other canonical texts: Deuteronomy and the Gospel of John. Next, we appeal to the hermeneutical approach of Bonhoeffer in his reading of Scripture as it relates to “word” and “image.”

After that, having established the “hearing” motif in these discussions, we turn our attention to the meaning of “word of Christ” in Col 3:16. The article concludes by addressing some objections to this “hearing” motif in theological perspective.

8 See A. T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

9 M. M. Thompson, *Colossians, Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

10 Thompson, *Colossians, Philemon*, 113.

11 Thompson, *Colossians, Philemon*, 113.

12 By “discrete” I mean a reading of the text by itself (primarily through socio-historical and literary exegetical study).

A Word on Method

How does one carry out a theological reading of a text of Scripture? There have been many approaches to this matter,¹³ but I find most helpful the hermeneutical mindset recommended by Michael J. Gorman. First and foremost, he makes the important point that theological interpretation is not a method *per se*, but a goal. What is that goal? It is “to understand a biblical text in order to appropriate its message as a guide for contemporary belief and behavior within a community of faith.”¹⁴

In order to properly study the text towards such a goal, Gorman encourages sensitivity to two “contexts” of the passage under examination. One context is that text’s own discrete historical and literary context. Secondly, attention must be paid to the canonical context. He encourages interpreters to ask: *what role (if any) does this text, and/or its primary theme(s) and character(s), play in the rest of Scripture?*¹⁵ By giving due attention to the rest of the canon, the exegete is able to “put biblical texts in conversation with one another.”¹⁶

A helpful example of intra-canonical contextualization comes from John Burgess in his book *Why Scripture Matters*. In the study of the Song of Solomon, for example, a historical reading can offer some insight (perhaps in terms of situating it in the ancient Near East and studying contemporaneous examples of secular love poetry). When it is brought into conversation with other canonical texts, the Song of Solomon can be seen from a new vantage point, and theological meaning in the text is re-invigorated. For example, when it is read with Gen 2:15–25, it could offer a commentary on the love of Adam and Eve. Or, Burgess considers, it may be read over against Hos 2: “The image is no longer the garden of innocence, but the wilderness of desire, in which Israel runs after gods who promise her prosperity.”¹⁷ Or, again, one could bring it into conversation with Rev 21:1–4, where it helps the reader to imagine the relationship between Christ and the church. Each

13 Note how apparently the Two Horizons New Testament Commentary Series (Eerdmans), Brazos Theological Commentary Series (Baker), and the newer Belief series (WJK) are all attempting theological interpretation of Scripture, but clearly each series carries out the hermeneutical task in its own unique way.

14 M. J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (rev. and exp. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 146.

15 Gorman, *Elements*, 78.

16 Gorman, *Elements*, 78. Robert Wall promotes a similar double-context approach to “theological reading,” but he is less optimistic that a “historical” approach (in the first task) will offer much insight. Thus, instead of encouraging a kind of “historical-critical” reading of the text in its original context, he prefers to see the first task as an investigation of the “plain or literal sense of the biblical text studied,” with a view towards literary-critical study. See Wall’s “Canonical Context and Canonical Conversations,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 170. Although I appreciate Wall’s concerns, Gorman’s approach (which includes historical examination) is still valid because he supports a cautious approach to historical-critical study.

17 J. P. Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters* (Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 1998), 76.

of these passages (Genesis, Hosea, Revelation) comments on the other. Together, they point to larger themes of love and desire that run throughout the canon.¹⁸

We will carry out our theological reading of Colossians in a way similar to how Gorman and Burgess approach interpretation, first taking an interest in the discrete context of Colossians itself, and then examining it in the context of the canon, to see how intra-canonical resonances shed light on what Colossians has to say after all about God, humanity, Christ, church, discipleship, and world. In particular, it will be argued that Colossians consistently focuses on the revelatory virtues of orality and aurality related to the “word of Christ.”

The Story of Colossians: the Discrete Historical and Literary Context

Most scholars contend that Colossians and its theological vision are fixated on Christ, some even referring to a “cosmic Christ,” the one who reigns supremely. There is no reason to gainsay this position, but it should be kept in mind that it is not simply Paul¹⁹ waxing eloquently about his Lord. It is a *responsive* christological vision. In the study of the theology of the Gospel of John, Tom Thatcher, for example, uses the language of *negative Christology* in this responsive way—that is, John “expresses his messianic beliefs largely in negative terms, producing a portrait of Jesus that clarifies what he is not or what he is ‘greater than.’”²⁰ For example, John portrays Jesus as *greater than Moses*, as reflected in the feeding of the five thousand, a story that shows how Jesus trumps Moses as mediator, redeemer, and provider of Israel.²¹ Using this same kind of “negative Christology” approach, Frank Matera argues “the Christology of Colossians is in the service of moral exhortation. Paul must persuade the Colossians that there is no need to submit to a philosophy that extols the ‘elements of the world’ because the fullness of God resides in Christ, the sole mediator of the orders of creation and redemption.”²²

A study of Colossians in its discrete context, then, must appreciate the dynamics of Paul’s Christo-centrism in view of the deleterious “philosophy” that has enticed (or become of interest to) some of the Colossians. Paul is being *responsive*.

18 Burgess, *Why Scripture Matters*, 76. For a similar perspective, see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80–81.

19 Although the historical authorship of Colossians is much debated, on balance it would seem that there is slightly more optimism that Paul did write this letter (or at least authorized someone else, like Timothy, to do so) than there is doubt among commentators. However, I am merely using the name “Paul” to refer to the encoded author, if you will, and in the course of this argument nothing significant hangs on whether the author was genuinely Paul or someone else in his lifetime or just after his demise.

20 See T. Thatcher, “Remembering Jesus: John’s Negative Christology,” in *The Messiah in the Old and New Testaments* (ed. S. E. Porter; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 177.

21 Thatcher, “Remembering Jesus,” 182.

22 See F. Matera, *New Testament Christology* (Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 1999), 136.

That does not mean that his words were trite or mere rhetoric. In fact, recognizing the directions that he takes his Christology in view of the philosophy he finds troublesome serves to highlight new angles of his theology.

In order to properly comprehend the shape and the force of Colossians' christological statements, it is helpful to briefly examine why Paul finds this Colossian philosophy so upsetting.²³ While Morna Hooker attempted to argue that "seeing" opponents in the text introduces an artificial polemical scenario, most Paulinists still recognize enough internal evidence (especially in 2:16–23) to warrant a view that Colossians is, in fact, responding to some kind of problematic teaching, even if that teaching has not permeated the Colossian church.²⁴

Paul issues a number of criticisms against this philosophy, the most important being that it distracts the worshipper from the supremacy of Christ (see 2:17). Also, it fosters a spirit of personal privilege and superiority ("*I was given secrets and saw special visions*") and a rejection and condemnation of others (see 2:18). At the end of the day, though, Paul argues, it fails as a "good philosophy" because it carries "no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh" (2:23).

Who is this Christ, then, that Paul sets as head over any philosophy, power, or person? Given that Christology permeates his theology and supports every level of his argument against the Colossian philosophy, Paul has much to say, indeed, about the person of Christ. We might divide his christological statements into three categories: personhood, position (or status), and activity. As regards his personhood, he has a unique relationship to the Most High God as his unparalleled "Son" (1:3; 1:13). So similar to the Father is he that he can be called God's own "image" (1:15). Moreover, he brims over with God's "fullness" (1:19; 2:9).

Secondly, not only does he have a unique personhood, he also has preeminent status. On a personal level, for Paul, Christ is the apostle's supervisor and reigning authority (1:1, 7; 4:7–14), even "head" over the whole church (1:18). He also holds a

23 The literature on the Colossian philosophy and its proper background and context is voluminous, and we will not spend time re-hashing this discussion. John Barclay has cogently prompted interpreters to be cautious and tentative simply because there is too little evidence to outline the philosophy in detail historically (see *Colossians and Philemon* [London: T & T Clark, 2004]). Taking this concern seriously, we will touch only briefly on this matter: scholars like Ian Smith are probably on the right track by associating the Colossian philosophy with Jewish mystical movements (*Heavenly Perspective: A Study of the Apostle Paul's Response to a Jewish Mystical Movement at Colossae* [LNTS 326; London: T & T Clark, 2005]). In my own commentary on Colossians, I draw almost exclusively from the information in Colossians to work up a profile of this philosophy using the meager information offered by Paul. Thus, I refer to it as a "transcendent-ascetic philosophy": transcendent insofar as worshippers seek heavenly visions and secret wisdom; ascetic insofar as there appears to be a negative view of the body and a deep desire to suppress natural urges and appetites, especially through extreme forms of deprivation. See N. K. Gupta, *Colossians* (Smyth & Helwys Biblical Commentary; Macon, Ga.: Helwys, 2013).

24 See M. Hooker, "Were there False Teachers in Colossae?" in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament: In Honour of C.F. D. Moule* (ed. B. Lindars and S. Smalley; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 315–331.

special position as judge over humanity (1:23, 28). As “lord” (1:13; 2:10; 3:1), he has set for his people a high standard for righteousness and holiness, as noble rulers are apt to do (1:10; 2:6; cf. 3:16). He is matchless with regard to his power, having conquered triumphantly over his enemies (2:15). Beyond the realm of any mortal, he is so great as to be a sphere of existence in and of himself, in whom others can live (1:2, 27; cf. 3:1) and to whom they must commit themselves (2:5, 6–7). Their lives are hidden with him in God (3:3–4). Perhaps no more superlative statement can be made than that he “is all and he is in all” (3:11)—not that he *is* everything, but that the value of everything is determined in relationship to him.

Finally, Paul makes much of the peerless activity of Christ. He is the unique agent of God’s work in creation (1:16). Not only that, he is the sole savior who redeems and graciously forgives (1:14; 2:14; 3:13; cf. 1:20, 22). He actively gives new life to his subjects (2:13) through the Holy Spirit (1:29), nourishing them from his own fullness (2:19).

To paint Christ in such superlative colors would probably have made such a figure attractive to the proponents of the Colossian philosophy who apparently emphasized fullness and power, and boasted in their privileges (see 2:18). The shocking part of Paul’s Christology is especially identifiable in 1:20 and 1:24. The Messiah Jesus, lord of creation, was nailed to a cross, and his blood was poured out by the Romans. How could this be? Where did he go wrong? Paul not only avoids seeing this as a demotion of Christ’s status, but he actually centers his theology on the crucifixion itself. It is there, on that cross, that the reconciling plan of God came to a climax (1:20; 2:14). Thus, those who properly believe in Jesus celebrate his death, not as a failing mortal, but as the embodied fullness of God (1:19; 2:9) that accepted human suffering and shame to free mortals from the grip of sin and the fear of evil. This is the Christ that Paul encourages believers to praise and to emulate. In a sense, then, Paul’s Christology of cruciformity is meant to be an antidote to the poisonous Colossian philosophy of spiritual transcendence.

It is especially important to note how Paul criticizes this philosophy’s obsession with *visions*. He writes, “That person goes on at great lengths about what he has supposedly seen, but he is puffed up with empty notions by his fleshly mind” (2:18b). Even though the meaning of ἐμβρατεύω (“dwelling on”) in this context is unclear, it is interesting that Paul identifies a particular problem with the enthrallment of what their eyes can see. In fact, James Dunn takes this as a telling sign that the Colossian philosophy has much in common with “apocalyptic and mystical Jewish traditions” that regularly highlight what is *seen* in heaven through a mystical journey.²⁵

The Colossian philosophy may have had a less-than-enthusiastic appreciation

25 See J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 184. Note in *1 Enoch* how “Enoch” recounts what he saw (ὁράω) while sleeping,

for the preeminence of Christ precisely because the man Jesus lived on earth like any other mortal who could be seen by anyone—hence Paul’s appeal to the work of Christ in creation, a rhetorical maneuver that sets Jesus apart as unique. Not only did Christ create normal *visible* things (τὰ ὀρατά), Paul points out, but he also created the things that are *invisible* (τὰ ἀόρατα) to human eyes (1:16). This would naturally quell any concerns that the human Jesus was severely limited by his visibleness; someone who created the invisible realm must be superior to all, Paul argues.

A third place in Colossians seems to take an interest in “what the eye sees,” but does not seem directly related to the Colossians philosophy, and that is the behavior of lazy (or perhaps cunningly ambitious!) household slaves who are “people-pleasers” who only give the impression of diligence in their tasks when the master is watching (3:22). The term Paul uses in his criticism of such people (ὀφθαλμοδουλία) literally means “eye-service.” This word ὀφθαλμοδουλία, then, may be a Pauline neologism, as it occurs nowhere else in extant Hellenistic Jewish literature (apart from a parallel use in Eph 6:6). Andrew Lincoln explains the plain meaning of the term as “the sort of service carried out by slaves in order to attract their masters’ attention.”²⁶

We might be able to say, on the basis of looking at evidence from 2:18b and 3:22 (and perhaps also 1:16), that Colossians challenges any obsession with assigning value based on what the eyes can see. Granted, one cannot and should not make a case for a key theological concern of a text based on two (or three) brief statements. What makes this thesis more plausible is the overwhelming space and interest Paul gives in the letter to another human sense: *hearing*.

The word λόγος appears seven times in this short letter (1:5, 25; 2:23; 3:16–17; 4:3, 6). Four of these occurrences refer to the “word” of the gospel (1:5, 25; 3:16; 4:3). Certainly other Pauline texts conventionally refer to the gospel as the “word” (see especially 1 Thess 1:5–6, 8; 2:13; 4:18), but we see several features in Colossians that revolve around what we might call a “good hearing” motif. For example, Paul compliments the Colossians for being attentive “hearers”:

You have **heard** of this hope [of inheritance] before in the word of truth, the gospel,²⁷

... from the day you **heard** it and truly comprehended the grace of God,²⁸

which he relates by human tongue (1 *Enoch* 14.2). Later he refers again to his “vision” (ὄρασις; 14.8). According to the *Apocalypse of Ezra*, “Ezra” saw (ὀράω) the mysteries of God and his angels (1.5).

26 A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Dallas, Tex.: Word, 1990), 421.

27 Col 1:5b (emphasis added)

28 Col 1:6b (emphasis added)

... provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you **heard**, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.²⁹

Not only does Paul highlight that the Colossians are good listeners, but he also adds that he and his coworkers themselves are too, as they are attentive to the reports concerning the churches connected to them:

... for we have **heard** of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the saints.³⁰

For this reason, since the day we **heard** it [i.e., your love in the Spirit], we have not ceased praying for you.³¹

Moreover, Paul and his coworkers heard well enough to be moved to give thanks to God and to pray for the church's maturity and well-being.

Paul is so invested in the power of "the word" that his mission is fundamentally one of *proclamation*, speaking so that others can hear and receive the good news. He describes the gospel as being "announced" (κηρύσσω) to every creature (1:23). The apostolic mission also includes the kind of proclaiming (καταγγέλλω) that involves teaching and warning with a view towards wholeness (1:28). When he requests prayers for his own situation, Paul encourages the Colossians to pray that he might "unveil" (φανερῶ) the gospel with the right manner of speech (λαλέω; 4:4). Quite interestingly, Paul uses a verb normally associated with what is seen (φανερῶ) in companion with a verb of orality (λαλέω), suggesting that "the word" is a fountainhead of revelation.

Finally, when it comes to Paul's words of counsel for the Colossians, he underscores the importance of their intra-communal wisdom teaching, especially as they sing together (3:16). That is the way they are to approach the life of the church. But "word-wisdom" is also the order of the day vis-à-vis outsiders: "Let your *word* (λόγος) ever be grace-filled, attractively seasoned, so that you will know just how to respond to each and every person" (4:6 AT).

Given the overwhelming attention paid to the positive impact and the importance of words themselves (especially the proclamation of the gospel), the value of attentive listening, and the missional work of proclamation (particularly in view of the destructive effects of obsessing over what is "seen"), there is good reason to believe that Paul puts his theological reasoning to work to establish Christ as the

²⁹ Col 1:23 (emphasis added)

³⁰ Col 1:4 (emphasis added)

³¹ Col 1:9 (emphasis added)

good “Word” that brings life and redemption (see discussion of Col 3:16 below), even as the Colossian philosophy only promotes “visions” that erode the community. The power and the presence of God are better recognized by the ears, not the eyes.³² True wisdom flows from the word of Christ, not from transcendent tourism and site-seeing.

Is this “true” of Colossians? Is this a “good” reading of the theology of Colossians, to reflect upon a “hearing vs. seeing” motif? A discrete interpretation (looking at Colossians alone) opens up this possibility, piquing interest in how Paul criticizes heavenly mystical pursuits of wisdom through visions. Certainly the emphasis on hearing is helpful insofar as it develops this motif by establishing a counter-perspective to dwelling on visions. However, further investigation, especially through intra-canonical conversation, may yield more insight and a wider perspective.³³

Colossians in Conversation: Reading with Deuteronomy and John in Canonical Context

As we already noted with the example from Burgess, placing one text (like Song of Solomon) in conversation and interaction with other canonical texts (after a plain, literal, or what I call “discrete,” reading has been done) can yield very stimulating results on the way toward a good theological reading of Scripture. In this case, I have found that Deuteronomy (in the OT) and the Gospel of John (in the NT) make for exceptionally helpful companions on this interpretive journey, for each one appears to carry this same “hearing vs. seeing” motif as Colossians, and both share with Colossians as well an interest in the question: *how do we really come to know who God is?*

We will begin with Deuteronomy, particularly ch. 4, where Moses relates God’s commands for complete obedience. Gerhard Von Rad makes a noteworthy observation about this section. He perceives in 4:9–24, especially, that the text awkwardly proceeds along a “double track.” On the one hand, the law revealed by Yahweh at Horeb is mentioned in comprehensive terms (vv. 9–14); but beside it there runs an exhortation that revolves around a single concern, namely that of making the prohibition of images compulsory (vv. 15–20, 23–24).³⁴

32 The paradox involved in this “seeing vs. hearing” dynamic is complicated by the reality of the incarnation of which Colossians is no doubt aware (see Col 2:9). Discussion of this will appear in the conclusion.

33 For a thoroughgoing exegetical analysis of Colossians that argues in favor of this overall reading, see Gupta, *Colossians*.

34 See G. Von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (2nd ed.; Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 1966), 49. See also a similar reading by R. E. Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (NIB 2; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 314–317.

This comes to a head in 4:15, where Moses argues that idols should not be manufactured because “you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of fire.” Instead (see 4:1–14), God made himself known in the word of the law. Patrick Miller recognizes this as paradigm-setting for the fifth book of Scripture, as well as the canon and Christian theology as a whole.

Revelation of the divine will, for the future as well as the present, is through the word of the Lord. “Word” is the overarching category in Deuteronomy for speaking about the Lord’s instruction for life and God’s intention for the future. Indeed, as Deuteronomy 4 indicates, it is virtually a theologoumenon, a manifestation of the reality and presence of the deity. Thus it is through God’s *word* communicated by the prophet that the divine rule is carried out.³⁵

Miller points to Deut 4 and the Mosaic prohibition of idolatry as evidence of his claim that the “word of the Lord” is the primary way that God wishes to reveal his identity and will. The Israelites are not to make an idol in any form or likeness of mortal or animal “since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire” (see Deut 4:15–18). Miller also argues that precisely this way of conceiving the importance of the *verbal and invisible* giving of the law was formative for the theology of the people of God, such that “it shapes the rest of Scripture and the mode of encounter between the Lord and the Lord’s people.”³⁶ This has a major impact on the operation of the community of God today as well. It is precisely because “word” is how God has chosen to show his presence that preaching is a central ministry of the church.³⁷

One can easily see how this theme of “word vs. image” is analogous to the reading of Colossians in its discrete context. Thus, Colossians resonates with Deuteronomy in this regard, and it is perhaps even possible that Colossians was influenced by this theological vision of Deuteronomy.³⁸

³⁵ P. Miller, *Deuteronomy* (Interpretation; Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2009), 152.

³⁶ P. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville, Ky.: WJK, 2009), 52. Note Walter Brueggemann’s similar perspective: “It is *by utterance* that later generations of Israel are always again brought to Sinai and the drama of covenant making. By utterance, this generation is invited to the awesome assembly, whereby Israel is entrusted its peculiar identity in the world. By utterance this generation hears a voice but sees no form. That voice of Sinai keeps sounding into all subsequent generations of Israel. That voice speaks covenant, binding Israel in all generations and in each generation to the life and will of YHWH.” See W. Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 54; also see T. Work: “After admonishing Israel not to forget what its own eyes have seen, Moses describes a vivid scene (cf. Exod 19:16–21) in which the most significant detail is what Israel’s eyes did not see . . . The lesson is one that the Fourth Gospel takes to heart: the form of God is none other than the Word.” See Telford Work, *Deuteronomy* (Brazos Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 63.

³⁷ Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 52.

³⁸ Deuteronomy is certainly one of those texts that is recognized to have been of deep interest to NT

Now let us turn to the Gospel of John.³⁹ It is remarkable to note the similar ways that these two canonical texts (Colossians and John) portray Christ. Both texts present Jesus Christ as the Word of God (John 1:1; Col 3:16; 4:3), the living and life-changing expression of divine power, presence, and interaction with humanity. Also, both texts attribute to Christ a central mediating role in the great act of creation (John 1:3; Col 1:16). Finally, Colossians shares with John a christological interest in Jesus as unique Son of the Father (John 1:18; 3:16; Col 1:15). Even though we could go on drawing lines of convergence, it is prudent to focus on the most illuminating “hearing vs. seeing” dynamic in John, that of the evangelist’s portrayal of Jesus’s “signs.” For insight into this matter, I appeal to the stimulating work of Paul N. Anderson in his book *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*. Anderson exposes the paradoxical portrayal of Jesus’s miracles by John. On the one hand, Jesus performs miracles that function as signs, visible indicators regarding his identity as the Messiah and Son of God. However, on many occasions Jesus criticizes the crowds for their pursuit of visible signs and proclaims, instead, that “those who believe without having seen are considered blessed.”⁴⁰

Anderson (rightly) does not resolve this tension by appealing to sloppy redaction on the part of the final editor. Rather, he is persuaded that this tension stems from “*the Evangelist’s dialectical thinking*.”⁴¹ Anderson reflects on how this double-perspective on signs may have come about historically. He wonders if it is possible that John witnessed the signs of Jesus, which instilled hope. However, when Jesus rose from the dead and ascended, those “signs” were no longer available (visibly) and their tangible testimony gone. Perhaps, then, by underscoring Jesus’s teachings on the blessing that comes from *not* seeing (John 20:29), John was trying to attract audiences of a later generation for whom “the head-turning miracles of Jesus are no longer available.”⁴²

Essentially, if John were an “eye”-witness of Jesus, he clearly recognized the value of seeing him do miracles, but he eventually came to the realization (especially after Jesus departed from the earth physically and visibly) that the ability to see the presence of God is not normal, or perhaps is not the ideal form of revelation. The offering of visible “signs” to instill faith plays *some* role in Jesus’s ministry in John, but Anderson is quick to point out that it is woven into the gospel’s liter-

writers, both in quotations and in allusions. See M. J. J. Menken and S. Moyise, eds., *Deuteronomy in the New Testament* (London: T & T Clark, 2008); also see C. Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians* (BINS 96; Leiden: Brill, 2008); see pp. 157–180 where Beetham makes a case for Col 2:8–15 drawing inspiration from Deut 30:1–10, particularly 30:6.

39 It is very interesting to note that both Patrick Miller and Telford Work connect Deut 4:15 to John and to the emphasis on Jesus as “Word” in the Fourth Gospel. See Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 52; Work, *Deuteronomy*, 63.

40 P. N. Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 181.

41 Emphasis original; see Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 181.

42 Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 181.

ary fabric that some people saw the miracles and yet still did not understand who Jesus was. In fact, the signs occasionally had the effect of distracting would-be disciples from truly comprehending Jesus's identity and teachings: "the greater the audience's religious investment, the greater is their inability to glimpse the revelation and to see the significance of Jesus's words and works."⁴³

The way in which Anderson rounds out his discussion of this paradox of signs in John is insightful. Even though the resurrection is the last great "sign" of Jesus's identity, Anderson argues that "the Johannine record itself becomes a sign, welcoming hearers and readers across the confines of time and space into the community of postresurrection existence."⁴⁴ Although Thomas opened his eyes and cried out "My Lord and my God" when he saw the risen Jesus (20:28), Jesus responds, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29). Obviously those who believe and have not seen are those who ground their faith in what they have *heard*.

Craig Koester underscores another dimension of John's "word" theology, namely that in Jesus's physical absence, the people of God are given the Holy Spirit as their guide. The activity of the Paraclete is "word-ly" insofar as he "continues to disclose the meaning of Jesus's words and deeds after the conclusion of his incarnation. God communicated through the Word made flesh, and the Spirit continues to teach and remind people about the significance of what Jesus said."⁴⁵

Again, we see a pattern where "hearing," at the end of the day, offers a more blessed form of divine revelation than "seeing." Or perhaps, more properly, the route that God finds most appropriate for self-revelation is *word*, not *vision*. To receive God, then, is not to fashion an idol, or to look for a sign *per se*, or even to seek out heavenly visions, but to listen to the right words attentively under the tutorship of the Spirit. As Miller notes (see above), this kind of theological framework is precisely why the work of "preaching" is so critical, generally speaking, for many Christian worship traditions.

Before returning to Colossians to see how these other texts may illuminate aspects of this theology of divine revelation, I wish to appeal to a relatively modern interpreter of Scripture who recognized this same "word-ly" theme in Scripture and who translated it in its wider implications for the church: Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Part of good theological interpretation is reading Scripture in community. Bonhoeffer is particularly helpful because (1) his view of Scripture was undoubtedly inspired by Col 3:16, and (2) he apparently read the whole Bible according to the "word vs. image" motif (as explicated below).

43 Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 183.

44 Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 183.

45 C. Koester, *The Word of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 30.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theology of Word and Image

Colossians 3:16 was a text to which Bonhoeffer often returned to reflect on the presence of Christ in the Scriptures, and the text's speech as the voice of Christ.⁴⁶ He drew deep implications from the phrase "word of Christ" in Colossians, and this idea shaped his Christology. In a series of lectures given at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer made some rather bold statements about the relationship between Jesus Christ and the "word" of the gospel. He began by observing that true Christians would never say that the incarnation reveals only the "outward shape of God." The man Jesus *is* God. So, by analogy, "the word of the sermon" should be directly associated with Christ; indeed, the proclaimed word "is Christ himself walking through his congregation as the word."⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer rebuffed the simplistic and banal view that preaching is about giving advice or prompting the human will. The proclaimed word aims for a ministry of sustainment: "The word is there that burdens might be laid upon it. We are all borne up by the word of Christ."⁴⁸ Thus, Bonhoeffer could speak of the *Sacramentum verbi*. Because of the primacy of the proclaimed word, Bonhoeffer was quick to note that, although cultic acts and liturgy have a place in the ministry of the church, they must be subordinated to preaching. Christ "enters" into the congregation through preaching, and *then* liturgy leads worshippers in adoration.

In a sermon at Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, on May 28, 1933, though, Bonhoeffer spoke a provocative message that drew a stark distinction between a ministry of hearing the word and a ministry of enacting visually oriented rituals ("A Church of the World or a Church of the Word?"). As his scriptural point of focus, he examined Exod 32:1–34. In this text, Bonhoeffer saw a juxtaposition between priest (Aaron) and prophet (Moses). The former represented the "worldly" church, and the latter stood for the "church of faith"—"the church of Aaron against the church of Moses."⁴⁹ Moses was associated with the Word because he alone stood on the mountain, "living solely to hear the Word of his Lord."⁵⁰ Aaron, on the other hand, was in the valley sacrificing "far from God."⁵¹

For Bonhoeffer, it is important to recognize that Aaron and the other Israelites began to worry because they could not *see* Moses. So the church of Aaron primar-

46 See D. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (DBWE 5; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 32; cf. *The Young Bonhoeffer* (DBWE 9; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 399; also see *Sanctorum Communio* (DBWE 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 158, which appears to draw from Col 3:16, though no specific citation is given.

47 These lectures were compiled and published as a book called *Worldly Preaching*; see C. E. Fant, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching* (Nashville: T. J. Nelson, 1975), 108.

48 Fant, *Bonhoeffer*, 127.

49 See G. B. Kelly and F. B. Nelson, *Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: HarperOne, 1995), 209.

50 Kelly and Nelson, *Testament to Freedom*, 209.

51 Kelly and Nelson, *Testament to Freedom*, 209.

ily relies on their eyes, a worldly interpretive lens. Alternatively, the church of Moses lives by true faith and wishes to hear the “Word of God.”

Bonhoeffer continues in his Exodus interpretation: Aaron wants to fashion an idol because “the worldly church, the church of the priest, wants to see something.”⁵² Aaron’s people cry out to him, “God has left us, but we need gods. We need religion. If you cannot prevail with the Living God, make us gods yourself!”⁵³

Bonhoeffer’s final exhortation was a call for the modern church to identify with the prophet Moses, striving to become a church that will “live from the invisible.”⁵⁴ Only when Aaron’s idols have been shattered can the church really change. The people of God must repent

as a church which is humbled as it is faced with the Word, as the church of Moses, the church of the Word. The impatient church becomes the quietly waiting church, the church anxious to see sights becomes the church of sober faith, the church which makes its own gods becomes the church which worships the One God.⁵⁵

So, we can see that Bonhoeffer, too, was interested in this “word vs. image” tension, reading it both from the text of Colossians as well as in the story of Moses.

The Word-Theology of Colossians

We may finally return to Colossians to take stock of the yields from reading Colossians both in its discrete context and in its canonical context, aided by the insights of Bonhoeffer. Although we argued that most scholars are right to insist that “Christology” is the heart of this letter, it is wise to press further and to examine in what direction Paul seeks to move his readers through this Christology. There are many reasons to see a “hearing” motif at work in the Christology of Colossians. This appears to counteract the vision-obsessions of the Colossian philosophy that some Colossian Christians probably found attractive.

As we examined the canonical context, we saw that Colossians is not alone in its “hearing vs. seeing” dynamic. Deuteronomy bears out this theme, promoting the “word” of Torah, the word of the Lord, over and against natural inclinations to fashion a visible idol. God is *in the word*, spoken and heard, not *in the idol*, formed and seen. In the Fourth Gospel, we observed that although John knew Jesus to be

52 Kelly and Nelson, *Testament to Freedom*, 210.

53 Kelly and Nelson, *Testament to Freedom*, 210.

54 Kelly and Nelson, *Testament to Freedom*, 211.

55 Kelly and Nelson, *Testament to Freedom*, 212.

a visible, living human being, he wrote a gospel precisely to instill faith in the living Jesus who is now *unseen*. Blessing comes from faith in the invisible God and in the risen Jesus through the proclamation of the gospel and the reception of the Holy Spirit, who brings Jesus's words to life in order to impart life.

I would like to return to Colossians with a focus on one verse, 3:16, keeping in mind the contextual analyses carried out above, in the hope that we can bring insights from the intra-canonical readings into a fresh study of this letter and of its theological dynamism.

In the third chapter of Colossians, Paul paints a portrait of the freed life of the resurrected mortal, somehow already graced with the security and the glory of a still-awaited inheritance in Christ. Yet, given the nature of the times, believers must lay claim to the proleptic benefits of the new age of fulfillment. The core practice of this act of faith and hope is persistence in love and in the pursuit of unity (3:14–15). How can this love and unity be engendered? The answer lies with the λόγος. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (3:16).

There are three peculiarities of this verse that have attracted the attention of many commentators in the past: (1) the meaning of the phrase “word of Christ,” (2) the purpose of the language of “dwelling” (ἐνοικέω), and (3) the mention by Paul of singing as a key communal practice.

First, when it comes to the “word of Christ,” the relationship between “word” and “Christ” is syntactically ambiguous. Should it be understood as the “word *about* Christ” (objective use of genitive focused on the message of salvation),⁵⁶ the “word *from* Christ” (subjective use of genitive focused on the teachings of Jesus),⁵⁷ or as something else? A number of scholars reject this kind of disjunctive approach, preferring to see a broader, all-encompassing connection between “word” and “Christ.” Dunn argues (especially with a view towards Paul's perspective in 2:6–7) that it is likely that early Christian teaching involved both reflection on the Christ event as well as instruction from the Jesus tradition.⁵⁸ However, I think much more can be said about why Paul uses this somewhat elliptical language, especially in view of the verb for which it is the subject: ἐνοικέω. Although οἰκέω and κατοικέω are found with some frequency in the NT, ἐνοικέω is surprisingly

56 So P. T. O'Brien, “it is probably objective referring to the message that centers on Christ, that Word of truth or gospel which came to the Colossians and took firm place in their lives from the time Epaphras first preached it to them”; see *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 206–207.

57 J. B. Lightfoot confidently opts for this reading; see *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 222; also H. A. W. Meyer, *A Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, and to Philemon* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1885), 447.

58 See Dunn, *Colossians*, 236.

rare, found exclusively in the Pauline corpus, and merely twice in the undisputed letters (Rom 8:11; 2 Cor 6:16; cf. 2 Tim 1:5, 14). The meaning of the word is rather obvious—“to dwell among or within.”

Words, however, are not normally thought of as “dwelling” anywhere. They leave the mouth and enter the ears, but do not stick around. It is almost as if this “word” is treated as having some kind of ontology, an independent “being” that can fill up a space. When this kind of phenomenon is considered, two parallels come to mind. First, the notion of a unique “word” that “dwells” on earth or inhabits human space has a kind of Johannine quality—*the Word* became flesh and *dwelt* among us (1:14). We will return to this idea a bit later.

Second, that Paul calls for this word to inhabit the community pervasively (πλουσίως) could carry the imagery in the direction of the “filling” of the church with the Holy Spirit. This is precisely how ἐνοικέω is used in Romans 8:11: “if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells (οἰκεῖ) in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit that dwells (ἐνοικοῦντος) in you.”

In Rom 8:10, Paul had already mentioned that where the Spirit brings life, so Christ is also there. Thus, even in Col 3:16, when the Spirit is not expressly mentioned, it need not mean that the presence of the word of Christ excludes the presence of the Spirit. Indeed, in Rom 8, Paul refers to the Holy Spirit as the “Spirit of Christ” (8:10).

Let us now return again to the matter of the meaning of “word of Christ.” Based on the use of ἐνοικέω in Rom 8:9–11, there is good reason to believe that Paul is communicating more than the presence of “words,” that somehow he is referring to the presence of Christ himself (perhaps through the Spirit).⁵⁹

At this point, it may be helpful to inspect the other Pauline use of ἐνοικέω, which appears in 2 Cor 6:16. In 2 Cor 6:14–7:1, Paul sets up a series of juxtapositions that demarcate the holy people of God and that discourage certain associations between things that should not mix (light/darkness, belief/unbelief, Christ/Beliar, etc.). The only pairing that receives extended discussion occurs in 6:16: “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live (ἐνοικήσω) in them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.’”⁶⁰

Elsewhere we learn that Paul recognizes the presence of God’s Spirit as the determining factor in the location of the eschatological temple (1 Cor 3:16). The

59 See J. Becker and U. Luz, *Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser, und Kolosser* (DNTD; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 231.

60 One might think that associating this text with Col 3:16 based solely on one word is a tenuous link, but I am working on the assumption that, because the word is so rare, it requires a special sensitivity to any other occurrences, especially ones within the same thought-world (let alone by the same author, if that is the case).

difference between the “temple of God” and “idols” in the context of Paul’s argument in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 is, then, the presence of the Holy Spirit. What do the unfaithful, those in darkness, those associated with Beliar, and those who worship idols have in common? Their way of life, their worship, and their so-called spirituality lack the illuminating presence of God’s Spirit. Indeed, if Paul says “we” (the Jesus community) *are* the temple of God, he might be insinuating that the unfaithful, darkened community is the equivalent of an idol—a hollow religious form with no Spirit.⁶¹

The connection between the Spirit and the temple is also made by Josephus and may shed further light on Paul’s use of “dwelling” language.⁶² In his *Antiquities*, he recounts Solomon petitioning the Lord that he may dispatch a portion of his spirit to “emigrate” (ἀποικίζω) into the temple (*Ant.* 8.114). Although Solomon recognized it was but a meager residence for such a great and holy God, he expressed hope that God would come to treat it as a household (οἰκεῖος) for himself. Josephus’s interest in a unique spirit of God is representative of a wider interest in such a presence of God in early Judaism.⁶³

If Jews in the Second Temple period anticipated a fresh presence of God in a perfected eschatological temple,⁶⁴ perhaps Paul was using “dwelling” language in reference to Christ with such hopes in mind.⁶⁵ Such a perspective has some bearing on the interpretation of “λόγος τοῦ Χριστοῦ” in Col 3:16, because if it is proper to connect ἐνοικέω with the presence of God (here Christ through the Spirit), it may be best to interpret this as an *epexegetical genitive*—“the Word *which is Christ*,” or paraphrased “the word which actualizes the presence of Christ through the Spirit of Christ in testimony.”⁶⁶

61 Note the repeated line of argumentation in Jewish idol polemic—idols of stone and metal are not alive; they have no senses of hearing, seeing, and speaking. Most importantly, there is no “breath” (πνεῦμα) in their mouths (LXX Ps 134:17; cf. Jer 10:14). Sometimes the addition “in their mouths” is absent, such that the criticism is that these idols have no πνεῦμα (Jer 51:17; cf. Hab 2:19; Ep Jer 1:25). Certainly there is a clever play on words here. In a literal sense, idols are not like people who have actual breath, which proves “life.” On another level, they lack “spirit,” which every real “being” possesses.

62 See J. R. Levison, “The Debut of the Divine Spirit in Josephus’ *Antiquities*,” *HTR* 87 (1994): 123–138; “Josephus’ Interpretation of the Divine Spirit,” *JJS* 47 (1996): 234–255.

63 See A. L. A. Hogeterp, *Paul and God’s Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 277–278.

64 See LXX Amos 9:11; Tob 13:11; *4QFlor*, 11Q19 29.7–10.

65 Richard Bauckham argues generally for this perspective of the early Christians: “The earliest Jerusalem church must have preserved Jesus’s prophecy of the destruction of the temple. Since this occurs in nearly all strands of the Gospel tradition in a variety of forms, it must have been current in the earliest community. Therefore they must have viewed the temple as a doomed institution, in which they participated while it lasted, but which they did not expect to last long. The early Jerusalem church saw *itself* as the new, eschatological temple of God. This is made probable by the fact that the concept of the Christian community as the eschatological temple is very widespread in early Christian literature.” See *The Jewish World Around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 185.

66 See B. J. Walsh and S. C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire* (Downers Grove,

Such an interpretation would have a number of affinities with both Deut 4:15 and John 1:1–18. As for the former, there is an expressed tension between empty idols, which cannot represent the Lord, in comparison with the clearly demonstrated manner in which he chooses to reveal himself—through word, just as he did in creation. Isaiah 55:11 represents the word of the Lord as if it were a thinking being, a servant or an agent who moves at his master’s will and who carries out his mission unhesitatingly. In turn, Paul reminds the Colossians that the people of God must lean on their ears, not their eyes, to know the Lord. They must close their eyes and tune their ears in anticipation of the divine presence.

Similarly in John, the “Word” is introduced as if it were a person, communing with God, crafting and shaping the objects of creation, and radiating life and light. He becomes God’s presence on earth, but not as a walking and talking idol; he is no *eikon*. After all, the Lord has ensured that “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18a). His form cannot be *visibly* represented. Yet, we come to learn that this Jesus (who is “named” as such only for the first time in 1:17, signified only before this as *logos*) has managed to become such a representation. However, his mediation of the divine presence and his manner of revelation expressed here is not one of optic reflection, but of *verbal narration* (ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο; 1:18b).⁶⁷ Similarly, the spiritual presence of Christ is characterized in particular by the “word-iness” of his revelatory being. This establishes an altogether different kind of community than other religious clubs that congregate around a statue or that strive to see special visions. The “Christ” community concentrates on *hearing*.⁶⁸

Ill.: IVP, 2004), 176.

⁶⁷ See F. Maloney, *The Gospel of John* (Sacra Pagina 4; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), 47.

⁶⁸ John Webster communicates this, with a view towards the Revelation of St. John, quite aptly: “The Word is not *in* the church but announced *to* the church through Holy Scripture. The church is therefore not first and foremost a speaking community. John the seer says that he turned to the voice that was speaking to him (Rev. 1.12); and there are few more succinct statements of the primary dynamic of the Christian assembly. The church *is* that turning. And, further, in making that movement, in fear and trembling, falling at the feet of the son of man, the church receives its appointment to a specific task: it is summoned to speech”; see “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 153–193, at 190. Webster, by his reference to the church as that turning itself, no doubt means that when the people of God listen intently, they actualize their identity as a community of reception, particularly of a response of agency and mediation between God and his broken world.

No doubt Webster himself, even in the use of the language of a “hearing community,” owes a conceptual debt to Karl Barth; note the similar conception in his *Dogmatics*: “The preservation of the community takes place as it is upheld by this prophetic and apostolic word [of Scripture itself], or as led back as a hearing community to this word. And so we can only say to Christians who are troubled about the preservation of the community or the maintaining of its cause that they should discard all general and philosophico-historical considerations (however unsettling or cheerful) and hear, and hear again, and continually hear this word, being confronted both as individual and united hearers by the fact that the community certainly cannot uphold itself, but that all the same it is in fact upheld, being placed in the communion of saints as this continually takes place in the hearing of this word”; *Church Dogmatics Study Edition* (26 IV.2; London: T & T Clark, 2010), 66–68.

That God prefers to have his people encounter his glory through *word* and not *image* is not an arbitrary choice. There is a theological rationale to this preference. Patrick Miller, in his reflection on the prohibition of idol-making in Israelite law, explores the concerns that the Lord had with worshipping as the other nations do.

The Lord speaks to the people out of the fire [on the mountain], a powerful image, something bright and visible, capable of being seen and illuminating; but it is also dangerous and untouchable, a reality that is not subject to being “made” or handled in any way. Nor is it in the form of any likeness. To make an image is indeed an effort to domesticate God, to tame the fire and control it.⁶⁹

Miller continues his discussion by pointing out how the place where God chooses to set his presence in a special way, the ark of the covenant, is also the location where the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments are laid. Idol-making involves mortals “forming” their gods, but when the Lord speaks and commands, *he* is forming and re-forming his creatures.

John Webster sees precisely this kind of *formational* dimension of the indwelling of the “word of Christ” in Col 3:16. Especially in his study of the impact of “the word” in the community activity of “teaching and admonishing one another,” Webster underscores the moral and ministerial work of speech. According to Webster, Col 3:16 testifies that the manifestation of the glory of God is “audible, it takes contingent form as human address. That is, in the domain of the divine Word there are creaturely speech activities of which we may say: in them there is a ‘making known’ of the Word in which both God and creatures act.”⁷⁰ Webster interprets Paul’s reference to the “word of Christ” in a way remarkably similar to Bonhoeffer, namely, that Jesus Christ is the “communicative one who is present in his Word.”⁷¹ However, Bonhoeffer views Christ’s word-ly role particularly in the sense of gospel confrontation and acceptance (perhaps exposing his Lutheran influences). Webster identifies this communal “word” specifically with “moral agency,” where Christ’s word, “spoken by him, *vivifies* the enterprise of moral community” and has as its goal “human perfection” and “maturity in Christ.”⁷²

Thus, when it comes to the interpretation of “word of Christ” in Col 3:16, Webster’s reading of the text would probably align with an exegetical understanding of the genitive case of Χριστός. Christ is present in his *logos*, dwelling in the midst

69 Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 51.

70 See J. Webster, “Where Christ Is: Christology and Ethics,” in *Christology and Ethics* (ed. F. L. Shults and B. Waters; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 47.

71 Webster, “Where Christ Is,” 48.

72 Webster, “Where Christ Is,” 48.

of the community where the hortatory “word” challenges believers towards full obedience.⁷³

One last perplexity in the text: *why does Paul refer to the hymn-singing activity of the church?* Here, again, we might appeal to Josephus’s recounting of the dedication of the Solomonic, proto-typical temple where God directed his Spirit. After the temple was properly dedicated, Josephus notes that Solomon “worshipped a long time” (*Ant.* 8.118). This very well may have included singing. However, this form of homage to God is made more explicit when the Israelites celebrated a festival following the dedication. Afterwards, Israelite pilgrims made their way home, praising Solomon their king and returning with joy and gratitude. In particular, they sang hymns to God.⁷⁴ Is it possibly that, using the same imagery, Paul is identifying the Colossians with the “new temple” community, where God is present with his people in the *naos-ecclesia*? Like pilgrims leaving the dedicatory festival with merriment and songs of worship, the Colossians are to celebrate the presence of God in the kerygmatic and hortatory *word*; but, unlike the Solomonic pilgrims, the Colossians never need to leave the temple!

Israel, Incarnation, and Icon

The substance of what has been argued above, especially regarding Colossians, attributes a certain revelatory privileging to the word and commandment of God over (and sometimes against) the beholding of something visible: Torah over idol, hearing over seeing, and preaching over sculpting. Robert Jenson, however, raises a caveat regarding this juxtaposition.⁷⁵ The first regards Israel, the second the incarnation of Jesus, the Son of God, and the third the use of icons.

On the first point, Jenson urges that, although Israel did not have holy images, it had “Temple and Sinai and the wings of the storm, and prophetic and apocalyptic visions of the ‘One high and lifted up.’”⁷⁶ Although he admits that “hearing transcends and precedes seeing in the relation to JHWH,” he hastens to add that Israel regularly used their eyes in worship. In response, I would suggest that it is prudent to make a distinction between divine revelation through sight (which is

73 A similar reading is found by Pokorny, but he refers to this as a “genitive of content”: “According to 1:25–27 the presence of Christ in the Christian community (“Christ in you”) is part of the word of God and leads to an ever new unfolding of the word of God. The author has taken the metaphor of dwelling from the hymn [1:19] and applies it to the Christian community”; see P. Pokorny, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 173.

74 Josephus *Ant.* 8.124: τὴν πορείαν ἐποιούντο μετὰ χαρᾶς καὶ παιδιᾶς ὕμνους εἰς τὸν θεὸν ᾄδοντες.

Col 3:16: ψαλμοῖς ὕμνοις ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς ἐν [τῇ] χάριτι ᾄδοντες ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν τῷ θεῷ.

75 See R. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Works of God* (vol. II; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 270–288 (“The Word and the Icons”).

76 Jenson, “The Word and the Icons,” 286.

rare in the OT), and the use of visible objects and institutions as *facilitators* of worship. Sinai and the temple are *places* of revelation and of worship, and they are beloved because God presented himself there in a special way. However, they are not objects that inspire divine revelation in and of themselves.⁷⁷ Regarding visions, I would add that (a) they tended to focus not on what was seen, but on response to what was said (Isa 6:1–13); (b) they were highly volatile (Exod 33:20; Rev 1:17)⁷⁸; and (c) they were indirectly or only partially revelatory.⁷⁹

The second point Jenson makes is in regards to the incarnation—*is not the physical appearance of Jesus in the flesh enough to show the possibility and the power of visual revelation?* T. F. Torrance remarks on this exact concern in his *Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*.⁸⁰ Torrance points to Jesus's reply to Thomas regarding the blessedness of belief that has *not* seen (John 20:29–30; see above). Torrance also includes Paul's maxim that "we walk by faith and not by sight" (1 Cor 5:7). What these texts have in common is the reliance on wisdom and on revelation that transcends our visual perception.⁸¹

Torrance makes the point that, in order to be fully present and representative as a human, Jesus had to be visible, and yet the mere fact of his visibility was not revelatory in any concrete sense. Some who saw him accepted him, and others rejected him. Torrance adds,

It is significant that nowhere in the gospels or epistles of the New Testament do the eye-witnesses tell us anything of what Jesus looked like, for the divine reality they speak of was one which they knew primarily through hearing. Hence they concentrate on giving us reports of Jesus's words, and even when they tell us what they actually observed of his actions of when they describe events in the Gospel story, that is only *incidental* to his proclaiming and teaching the Word of God.⁸²

An additional point Torrance makes is that, although it is true that Jesus came in

77 For example, when Pompey wished to examine Jewish worship more closely, he was not satisfied with seeing the temple itself, but brashly and audaciously forced his way into the forbidden Holy of Holies to see, much to his astonishment, there was no cultic image of their deity (see Tacitus *Hist.* 5.9).

78 Marianne Meye Thompson entertains a distinction between Moses *speaking* to God face-to-face (Exod 33:11), which he apparently did, and *seeing* God face-to-face, which he was not permitted to do (Exod 33:18–23). See *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 110.

79 Jody Barnard distinguishes between seeing God and seeing God's *glory* as a substitute. See *The Mysticism of Hebrews: Exploring the Role of Jewish Apocalyptic* (WUNT II; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 162.

80 T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001).

81 See fn. 39.

82 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 39 (emphasis added).

the flesh, his enduring ministry is as the “living Word who meets us and addresses us in the words of Holy Scripture.”⁸³ We might appeal to Heb 1:1–2 for a helpful example. Although it is true that, as Hebrews suggests, the advent of Jesus is the climax of divine revelation, it should be noted that the emphasis falls on the role of Jesus (and the prophets before him) as agents of God’s own speech (λαλέω), and even the emphasis on his glory and his representation (which one might assume reflects on his visible presence) focuses on the power of his word (see 1:3; φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ).

What does this mean for a high sacramentality and the use of icons? Jenson himself notes that this should have limitations. Icons, Jenson suggests, should be mainly depicting Christ, and especially scenes from the Gospels. Jenson is careful to explain that such images “must not be *portraits* of the Son, for it is strictly his narrated identity.”⁸⁴ In terms of use, Jenson explains that icons should not be objects of worship, but, rather, signs pointing to Christ, “allowing the icon to direct our intention of God.”⁸⁵

Jenson, while reflecting positively on the use of icons, still admits to the priority of hearing over seeing in revelation. When it comes to icons, I would propose that the “proper” place of icons involves their use for scriptural teaching, concentration and mediation, reflection, and worship. The image does not teach and direct, except insofar as it represents what is already present in the written word.

Conclusion

In this study, we have addressed the question regarding what a theological reading of Colossians might look like. Although scholars have attempted to explore the “theology of Colossians,” the surface has only been scratched. Pauline scholars have a long way to go. This is still a text that is in need of further rehabilitation.

Rarely do scholars patiently listen to the sustained song of the letter. With attention to the discrete context in harmony with the other canonical books (Deuteronomy and John in particular), a beautiful tune is orchestrated, one that perks up the ears. If we listen closely, we will hear the “word of Christ,” Christ visiting the Colossian community as God’s kerygma and call to action. If we listen long enough, we may just find ourselves humming along.

83 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 40.

84 Jenson, “The Word and the Icons,” 287. He adds that attempts to capture Jesus’s own divinity (by “countenance and expression”) tend to lead to idolatry.

85 Jenson, “The Word and the Icons,” 288.