

REGENT COLLEGE

**“FROM NOW-AND-NOT-YET TO NOW-BUT-NOT-SEEN”:
TRACING THE HISTORY OF ESCHATOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE
LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS**

AN ESSAY SUBMITTED BY

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TO THE

RCSA ACADEMIC SYMPOSIUM 2024

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

5 APRIL 2024

Word Count: 3503

In the mid-20th century, German New Testament scholarship on Colossians took a particular interest in examining the eschatology of the letter. One prominent reading of Colossians developed from the work of Rudolph Bultmann and his students Günther Bornkamm and Ernst Käsemann. They understood the author of Colossians to greatly emphasize the actualization of eschatological promises. Such a reading maintains that the futurist perspective of Colossians' eschatology is minimized in favor of the unveiling of present realities, and sets aside expectations for further material eschatological fulfillment. This paper explores some of the positions of the Bultmann school as developed by Bornkamm and Käsemann, and demonstrates their influence on subsequent scholarship of Eduard Lohse. Lohse's commentary on Colossians has helped solidify this interpretation in modern scholarship, and therefore acts as a catalyst to help trace the history of the aforementioned position. After exploring the "radically realized"¹ position, this paper briefly contests some of its presuppositions by exploring how scholars who maintain a realized/futurist tension in the letter interpret these same passages.

Perhaps the most influential argument for Colossians' radically realized eschatology is a perceived difference in its baptismal language as compared to the uncontested Pauline corpus. In Romans 6, Paul describes baptism as a death with Christ which anticipates a future resurrection (6:4, 6:6). While Col. 2:13 also describes baptism as a death with Christ, the author describes resurrection in the aorist tense: after the event of one's baptism, a formal resurrection has already

¹ Gabriel Francois Wessels, "The Eschatology of Colossians and Ephesians," *Neotestamentica* 21, no. 2 (January 1, 1987): 183–202., 183 and Dane C Ortlund, "Inaugurated Glorification: Revisiting Romans 8:30," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 57, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 111–33., 118. I came across this article while searching for sources and was surprised by how casually Ortlund assumes that this is a universal reading of the letter. When I found the same terminology in Wessels, I decided to adopt it to distinguish between the primary view discussed in this paper, in which the realized components swallow up (or at least dramatically reduce) any future orientation, and the alternative view discussed at the end which suggests Colossians' greater emphasis on the realized aspects of eschatology may be a result of the letter's Occasional concerns.

occurred.² Furthermore, Col. 2:13b-2:15 connects this baptismal resurrection to the completed events of the crucifixion in a way that highlights the completion of Christ's salvific victory.

Because of this unique baptismal language in Colossians, Rudolph Bultmann interprets baptism as an eschatological act in both Colossians and Ephesians: "the present is conceived as time of salvation brought about by God's deed in Christ ... By appropriating this occurrence through baptism ... believers are emancipated from domination by the powers, from the 'dominion of darkness,' and transferred to the Reign of Christ."³ For Bultmann, the author of Colossians understands baptism within a schema of the 'between-times' in which "the non-chronological meaning of the 'between'-situation is grasped, for the determination of the present by the future is grasped."⁴

Günther Bornkamm voices the same opinion when he compares Colossians and Ephesians, stating that "[t]he faithful are translated into this perfect state of salvation through baptism. All these thoughts are proclaimed and unfolded in spatial categories rather than, as with Paul, in temporal and eschatological imagery."⁵ So, too, Ernst Käsemann agrees that baptism in Colossians is a soteriological *fait accompli* such that in Colossians and the other deutero-Pauline letters, futurist eschatological themes are "already somewhat muted."⁶ Referring to Col. 2:12f, he argues that "[a]s participants in the Cross of Christ, the baptized are at the same time participants

² Wessels, 185.

³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1958), 176.

⁴ Bultmann, 175.

⁵ Günther Bornkamm, *The New Testament: A Guide to Its Writings*, trans. Reginald H. (Reginald Horace) Fuller and Ilse Fuller (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 113.

⁶ Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 125.

in his Resurrection and Enthronement, liberated from the old aeon of death and the powers and translated into the new aeon of the Kingdom of Christ.”⁷

A second justification for this over-realized eschatology stems from a shift from temporal to spatial eschatological categories. In the quote above, one sees how ‘aeon’ has started to shed a temporal interpretation: as Käsemann relates it to Christ’s resurrection and enthronement, the term takes spatial overtones associated with Christ’s upward movement and the locational sphere of his enthronement and kingdom. Bornkamm also advances spatial overtones in his discussion of baptism in Romans 6 and Colossians 2:15. Here he maintains that Romans 6 describes not only a logical future, but a temporal “genuine future.”⁸ However, when Bornkamm introduces Colossians into the discussion, he suggests that the realities of the new aeon are truly present, but are hidden,⁹ which suggests a conflation of soteriological certainty with eschatological attainment. That these realities and the new aeon are hidden, rather than incomplete, implies a shift away from temporal to spatial imagery.

G.F. Wessels notes that Bornkamm continues in Bultmann’s footsteps by melding Colossians’ eschatology with its soteriology.¹⁰ One of Bornkamm’s most significant contributions to discussion of the Colossian eschatology is his treatment of the Colossian ‘hope.’ In such a reading, the author of Colossians uses ἐλπίς “to convey that which is hoped for or the object of hope as opposed to the eschatological or existential manner in which [Paul] utilized

⁷ Käsemann, *Questions*, 125, see also Käsemann’s remarks on Col. 2.11ff in Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret Kohl, First American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971)., 145, in which he describes the eschatological nature of the circumcision at baptism as a “translation to heavenly existence”.

⁸ Günther Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience*, trans. Paul L. Hammer, First United States edition (New York ; Harper & Row, 1969)., 78.

⁹ Bornkamm, *Experience*, 80.

¹⁰ Wessels, 183.

ἐλπὶς.”¹¹ Because the author of Colossians describes this hope as “stored up in heaven” (Col. 1:5), Bornkamm understands that “‘past’ and ‘future’ have been replaced by ‘below’ and ‘above’.”¹²

A third motivation for finding a “radically realized” eschatology in Colossians lies in ecclesiological concerns. Wessels notes that Protestant scholars who detect “early catholic ecclesiology...” in the deutero-Pauline epistles are often “... tempted to interpret the less explicit futurist eschatology in Ephesians and Colossians as part of a process of replacing the fervent expectation of the kingdom of God with an early catholic church triumphalism.”¹³ Bultmann’s writing on the cosmology of Colossians and Ephesians display this tendency. No sooner has he described the exalted position of the church within an increasingly gnostic, “post-apocalyptic” Christian cosmology, than he compares the eschatological visions of Philippians and Colossians.¹⁴ In contrast to an ambiguity that he ascribes to Philippians’ eschatological timeline, Bultmann then declares that “Col. 2:15 clearly speaks of Christ’s triumph as already achieved.”¹⁵

Käsemann continues in this tradition and develops it further, such that Wessels identifies Käsemann as “[t]he name which has come to be most closely linked to this interpretation of Ephesians and Colossians as a retrogressive ‘early catholic’ development.”¹⁶ Käsemann goes so

¹¹ Todd D Still, “Eschatology in Colossians: How Realized Is It?,” *New Testament Studies* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 125–38. 134.

¹² Wessels, 194.

¹³ Wessels, 184.

¹⁴ Bultmann, 149-153.

¹⁵ Bultmann, 153.

¹⁶ Wessels, 184.

far as to argue that in Ephesians “the church has become the central eschatological event.”¹⁷

Lincoln and Wedderburn attribute such a reading of Ephesians to the transitional work of Colossians which enables the ecclesiological development Käsemann so strongly argues for by bringing “the cosmic role of Christ to the foreground.”¹⁸

Insofar as Käsemann’s reading of Colossians is concerned, he maintains that ‘the church’ is an authorial addition to borrowed hymnic material in Col. 1:18 that introduces new ecclesiological weight to the act of baptism. Käsemann says that, “The introduction of τῆς ἐκκλησίας in v. 18 has dogmatic significance. It illustrated the condition of being ‘translated’ into the kingdom of the Son and makes the cosmological statement into an eschatological one.”¹⁹ Therefore, he binds together the aforementioned baptismal and spatial readings of Colossians through its ecclesiology to emphasize that the new creation has come. “There is no way through to the original creation other than the way which passes through, and continues in, forgiveness,” and to be in the community of forgiveness requires belonging to the body of Christ, the church.²⁰

Eduard Lohse argues in his 1971 commentary that in the letter to the Colossians “there is no waiting for the future consummation.”²¹ Lohse draws on all three of the aforementioned arguments of the Bultmann school to make this point. In his concluding summary, he notes that

¹⁷ Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 121.

¹⁸ Andrew T. Lincoln and A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge England ; Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137.

¹⁹ Ernst Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague, 2nd edition, Studies in Biblical Theology, no. 41 (London: SCM Press, 1964), 168.

²⁰ Käsemann, *Essays*, 168.

²¹ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon; a Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1971), 38.

“[s]ince eschatology has receded into the background, the understanding of *baptism* [sic] has undergone an essential transformation.”²² Comparing the baptismal formulas in Romans and Colossians, he says that “[i]n contrast to Rom 6:4f it is said: the resurrection has actually already happened in baptism. In Col, what is still to come in the future is not called the resurrection of the dead. Instead, the future event is described as the revelation of that life which was received in baptism and is now still hidden ‘with Christ in God.’”²³ Lohse cites Bornkamm to comment on the *continuity* between the baptismal theology in Romans and Colossians; however, this citation emphasizes the temporal and eschatological shift between the passages.²⁴ Lohse develops the baptismal observations from the Bultmann school further by claiming that “the author points to baptism as the basis of the new life ... God’s eschatological act has already taken place; he has called man from death to life.”²⁵

Lohse also builds upon Bornkamm’s interpretation of ‘hope’ to argue for a spatial orientation to Colossians eschatological outlook. According to Lohse, “[h]ope, understood as the content of hope, already lies prepared in the heavens ... The believers’ thinking and searching, therefore, is directedly toward that which is above (3:1). This shifts the concept of ‘hope’ from a temporal-eschatological orientation to one which has spatial characteristics.”²⁶ Lohse likewise draws on Käsemann to argue for a spatial orientation by arguing the author of Colossians understands the Christ-event through a Hellenized cosmology that seems to replace a Jewish

²² Lohse, 180.

²³ Lohse, 104.

²⁴ Lohse, 105n81.

²⁵ Lohse, 132.

²⁶ Lohse, 17-18.

eschatology.²⁷ Thus he posits that, “[i]n order to restore the cosmic order reconciliation became necessary and was accomplished by the Christ-event ... The universe has been reconciled in that heaven and earth have been brought back into their divinely created and determined order through the resurrection and exaltation of Christ.”²⁸

Finally, Lohse sees a close connection between the ecclesiology of Colossians and its eschatology. He describes Colossians’ ecclesiology as “most intimately connected with its Christology;” therefore, with Christ as the head of the church, the letter’s cosmic Christology extends such a cosmic perspective unto its treatment of the body, the church.²⁹ This builds off of Käsemann’s thesis concerning the increased ecclesiological identity of the Colossians church.³⁰ Lohse immediately turns from discussion of the teaching and identity of the church to eschatology. The elevated position of apostolic teaching echoes Käsemann by introducing a link between ecclesiology and spatially oriented eschatology:

The fact that *eschatology* in Col has receded into the background corresponds to this emphasis upon the apostolic teaching. The expectation that the Lord would come soon has disappeared. True, it is said that the Christ will appear at some future day (3:4) and that hope is the content of preaching and belief ... ‘Hope’ ... already lies prepared in heaven for believers (1:5). A spatially determined mode of thought replaces the expectation which eagerly longs for the future fulfillment of the divine promise.³¹

²⁷ Lohse, 59n199.

²⁸ Lohse, 59.

²⁹ Lohse, 179.

³⁰ Lohse, 180n6.

³¹ Lohse, 180. Lohse quotes his own statements on hope already referenced on pages 17-18 and again invokes Bornkamm (Lohse, 180n7), showing the dual influence of Bultmann’s students on his interpretation of Colossians’ ecclesiology.

Lohse's commentary remains influential today, serving as a reference point for contemporary discussion concerning the eschatology of Colossians.³² Even among those who hold a more conservative position regarding the letter's eschatology, the insights of the Bultmann school are not wholesale rejected. G.F. Wessels, Todd Still, and Adela Yarbro Collins engage, modify, and integrate some of the justifications for the 'Bultmannian' position in their work. These scholars advocate for a reading that recognizes the genuine emphasis on the realized attributes of Colossians' eschatology, while maintaining its continuity with Pauline eschatology. This paper concludes by exploring the objections these three scholars raise to radically realized eschatology in Colossians.

Todd Still tackles the finality of baptism as read in the radically realized position. He argues that ethical exhortations of Col 3:5-10 preclude such a reading, as there are still clearly acts of putting to death and raising to life that remain for the believer.³³ Still does not reject the significance of the aorist tense of the believers' resurrection, and yet "Colossians maintains that believers have been raised with Christ by faith as signified in baptism; however, it concurrently holds that this raising was but a foretaste of glory divine, an intimation of immortality."³⁴

Wessels believes the over-realized interpretation fails to understand the metaphorical thrust of the baptismal imagery.³⁵ While the over-realized position focuses on the eschatological implications of Col. 2:12, the following verse holds an interpretive key. As Wessels

³² E.g. Still 126n3, 132n30, Paul Foster, *Colossians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 206, 399, 427, Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Reception of Paul's Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Letter to the Colossians," *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 76 (January 1, 2011): 21–39, 30.

³³ Still, 134.

³⁴ Still, 133.

³⁵ Wessels, 188.

demonstrates, Col. 2:13 makes this metaphorical reading clear, for “the believer is made alive in terms of judicial acquittal.”³⁶ Furthermore, because this baptismal death and resurrection are connected to an explicitly future Parousia in Col. 3:1-4, Wessels maintains that “[i]n Colossians, therefore, these metaphors do not describe an ahistorical, gnostic transformation as a substitute for an eschatological salvation. Their function is to express the present aspect of salvation, without denying the future eschatological salvation.”³⁷

Collins also notes the metaphorical thrust of the baptismal imagery. She too draws attention to Col. 3:1-4, but here she comments on its exhortation: “[i]f, of course, the addressees had been literally raised with Christ, they would already be ‘above’ with him. The affirmation of their metaphorical resurrection is the basis of the exhortation to ‘seek the things above.’”³⁸ Furthermore, while the radically realized position holds that the eschatological thrust of Col. 3:4 only refers to an unveiling of present realities, Collins reminds readers that the letter mentions ‘the wrath of God’ just two verses later, which “most likely refers to the final judgment day, in conformity with Paul’s usage.”³⁹ This reference invokes a Jewish eschatological outlook which does not allow for a Hellenized unveiling of present realities, but speaks to future cosmic developments.

Still directly addresses Bornkamm’s understanding of Colossian hope, first by remarking that the author does not use *ἐλπὶς* in only one way: “even though ‘hope’ connotes objective content in 1.5, it is used to speak of ‘a hopeful way of life’ grounded in Christ and the gospel in

³⁶ Wessels, 189.

³⁷ Wessels, 189.

³⁸ Collins, 36.

³⁹ Collins, 37.

1.23.”⁴⁰ Next he argues that Bornkamm is incorrect to completely disconnect ‘hope’ and eschatology, stating that “Christ, who is depicted in 1.27 as ‘the hope of glory’, has yet to appear in glory (3.4).”⁴¹

Wessels engages the spatial question by looking to the genre of Colossians. He argues that it is inappropriate to extract a fully formed vision of the author’s eschatology from an occasional letter:

“[i]f Romans, I Corinthians, Colossians and Ephesians were small *summae theologiae*, one could reason that there was indeed a theological shift from Romans/ 1 Corinthians to Colossians/Ephesians, because futurist eschatology, which plays an important part in Romans/ 1 Corinthians, is only briefly mentioned in Colossians/Ephesians. However, these documents are not treatises but letters. They are responses to anticipated historical situations.”⁴²

Therefore, he argues that the spatial material in Colossians does not exceed that found in Philippians, to which few ascribe an overly-realized eschatology, despite the fact that “futurist eschatology is not a prominent feature of [Philippians].”⁴³ It is more likely that spatial imagery fit the needs of the addresses of Colossians more accurately than temporal imagery, particularly as it pertains to the polemic content found in chapter 2.

Collins also picks up on Pauline use of spatial metaphor in the uncontested works.⁴⁴ She recognizes that while ‘hope’ in Colossians “shifts the accent in this case from Paul’s typically

⁴⁰ Still, 135.

⁴¹ Still, 135.

⁴² Wessels, 198-199.

⁴³ Wessels, 199.

⁴⁴ Collins, 29n47.

temporal language about hope for the future to spatial language about present heavenly realities. Nevertheless, the addressees do not possess the object of hope in the present.”⁴⁵

Finally, as it pertains to the intersection of Colossians’ ecclesiology and eschatology, Still argues that the ethical exhortations of Colossians suggest that the believers’ “conversion, incorporation into Christ and his multifaceted body, and protracted transformation” indicate an ongoing, incomplete work.⁴⁶ As previously noted, Wessels argues that the elevated position of the church in Colossians only triggers accusations of overly-realized eschatology among Protestants, for “Catholic theologians would not find such a shift disturbing, but a natural development.”⁴⁷ Accordingly, “[i]t is noteworthy that Catholic scholars are either less sure that the eschatology of Ephesians and Colossians has been radically realised, or less concerned whether or not it is the case.”⁴⁸ Finally, Collins feels that Colossians does represent a different ecclesiology than the uncontested Pauline letters. She notes that “[t]he most significant differences between the two authors seem to concern the communal dimension of the life of the addressees.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, she does not tie this difference to any change in eschatological outlook, rather suggests that this could emerge from a pseudonymous authorship that addresses the church at large rather than a specific congregation.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Collins, 29.

⁴⁶ Still, 134.

⁴⁷ Wessels, 184.

⁴⁸ Wessels, 183.

⁴⁹ Collins, 38.

⁵⁰ Collins, 38n92.

Radically realized readings of Colossians have a long history in the German school of New Testament studies. This paper has reviewed just one lineage of the development of eschatological readings of Colossians in the 20th century, which emerged from the work of Rudolph Bultmann and his students, Günther Bornkamm and Ernst Käsemann. A broader study of this theory would include the works of Martin Dibelius, Joachim Gnilka, Horatio E. Lona, and Andreas Lindemann; however, space and the inaccessibility of translated works precluded the present author from including them. While the evidence for the presence of realized eschatology in Colossians is strong, one would need to simultaneously demonstrate that Colossians negates expectations of a futurist eschatology in order to effectively argue for the radically realized perspective that emerges when Lohse and other scholars adopt the reading of the Bultmannian school. As Still remarks, “to de-emphasize certain features of futurist eschatology - even an element as central as the approaching parousia - does not automatically render the document void of a forward-looking character or, at least, futurist characteristics.”⁵¹

Similarly, interpretations of baptism and spatial features in Colossians may arrive at such conclusions when interpreters “treat the eschatological language of Colossians in conceptual terms rather than metaphorical terms.”⁵² It likely that the author of Colossians employs eschatological language and metaphors that fit the pastoral and occasional need of the letter. Attempts to surmise a distinct systematic treatise on eschatology from Colossians are

⁵¹ Still, 131.

⁵² Collins, 28. Cf. Collins 30: Collins’ use of ‘conceptual’ corresponds to a systematic treatment of eschatology, which she recognizes in the interpretation of Thomas Witulski as opposed to a ‘metaphorical’ interpretation, which she grants that Lohse has grasped. As an example, she demonstrates how a conceptual treatment predisposes Witulski and others to emphasize spatiality in the Christ hymn of Col. 1:12-14, thereby conveying the mechanics of eschatology. By contrast, Lohse’s metaphorical reading can identify these kingdoms of darkness and light as representational aids to understand the completed eschatological act. Cf. Sumney, 18: “Thus, the letter’s emphasis on realized eschatology reflects its rhetorical exigence (more, perhaps, than it indicates a significant shift from Paul’s eschatological outlook.)”

anachronistic and betray a misunderstanding of genre: namely such an approach attempts to read Paul's Occasional Letters as "small *summae theologicae*."⁵³ Instead, it would be more productive to ask how the eschatological emphases of Colossians fit into the internal message and narrative of the letter. An inside-out approach to Colossians that begins by interpreting Colossians according to its self-presentation may be more productive. For example, Sumney has convincingly argued that "all of [Colossians] 1:3-23 prepares the recipients for the core of the letter's argument."⁵⁴ It is this core which is likely to provide a more robust hermeneutic for and recognize the function of the rightly recognized realized eschatological elements of the letter.⁵⁵

⁵³ Wessels, 198. On the Occasional nature of Colossians, cf. Wessels, 199: "In Colossians, Christ is shown to be more powerful than the angelic cosmic powers; in Ephesians it is emphasised that "in Christ" believers are made alive and made one. In that perspective, it is understandable why futurist eschatology is not treated extensively in Colossians and Ephesians."

⁵⁴ Sumney, 55

⁵⁵ Cf. Sumney, 17-19 in which he concludes that "[T]he timing of the Parousia does not shape Colossians' message; it stands in the background, without playing a significant role in the letter's argument. Therefore, while the *certainty* of the Parousia holds an important place in Colossians, its *immediacy* does not."

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