To Chrystal
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Colossians 1:1 – 8

Literary Context

As in a number of Paul’s earlier letters, Colossians begins with the identification of its author, coauthor, recipients, and a brief greeting (1:1 – 2). This introduction not only highlights Paul’s authority as an apostle of Christ Jesus; it also points to the public nature of the letter from two leaders to the believers in the church at Colossae. The references to Christ Jesus and God’s will also locate the present concerns within the wider salvation-historical plan of God.

It has often been claimed that Paul follows typical Hellenistic epistolary practice in his inclusion of an opening thanksgiving section (1:3 – 8) in many of his letters, and these sections focus on the epistolary situation: “to introduce the main theme of the letter.”1 It is true that such sections provide a preview of the theological emphases of these letters. In the case of Colossians, this one highlights important themes such as “faith in Christ Jesus” (v. 4), “hope stored up … in heaven” (v. 5), “the gospel” (v. 5), and “love” (v. 8).

It is unclear, however, if such a function is dictated by the convention of the epistolary form. Subsequent studies on the Hellenistic epistolary form have questioned the existence of a typical “thanksgiving section” in Hellenistic papyrus letters.2 While “health wishes” are often found, the lack of the explicit note of “thanksgiving” in most of these letters argues against seeing thanksgiving in a formulaic or conventional way.3 An assumption that Paul is here simply following contemporary

1. Paul Schubert, The Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939), 180, who also concludes that “the papyri convincingly attest a wide-spread conventional use of an epistolary, religious or non-religious, introductory thanksgiving” (180).
3. Peter Arzt, “The ‘Epistolary Introductory Thanksgivings’ in the Papyri and in Paul,” NovT 36 (1994): 29 – 46. Even Jeffrey T. Reed (“Are Paul’s Thanksgivings Epistolary?” JSNT 61 [1996]: 87 – 99), who seeks to respond to Arzt’s challenge, is forced to conclude that one can no longer speak of the “epistolary introductory thanksgiving” in Hellenistic papyrus letters. The few letters that do contain a thanksgiving section point to actual circumstances where the authors need to acknowledge certain gifts and favors. See, e.g., P.Mich.Inv. 2798. Most often, these notes appear in the body of the letter, e.g., P.Mert. I 12.
epistolary form distracts the readers from noticing the significance of the theme of thanksgiving throughout this letter (cf. 1:12; 2:6 – 7; 3:15 – 17; 4:2).4

This thanksgiving section (1:3 – 8) is closely related to the prayer report that follows (1:9 – 14). Both are indirect speeches addressed to God, and in both one finds the introduction to significant themes throughout the rest of this letter. Moreover, both sections point to the acts of God among his people. The focus of the two sections is slightly different, however. The thanksgiving section, comprised of one long sentence, focuses on the power of the gospel among the believers in Colossae, while the prayer report highlights the need to act in a way consistent with the knowledge that the gospel has imparted. The similarities in form and content between the two sections have led some to conclude that they should be considered one section.5 The parallel ideas between the two sections do, however, point to the existence of two independent, though related, semantic units (see Literary Context on 1:9 – 14 for more on the prayer report).

I. Opening Greetings (1:1 – 2)

II. Continuous Work of the Father (1:3 – 14)
   A. Thanksgiving (1:3 – 8)
   B. Intercession for the Colossians (1:9 – 14)

III. Climactic Work of the Son (1:15 – 23)

Main Idea

After the opening greetings, the thanksgiving section highlights the centrality of the gospel of Christ Jesus. This gospel points to the hope stored up in heaven, and such hope enables the believers to express their faith in Christ and their love for others.

Translation

(See next page.)

4. For a further discussion, see David W. Pao, “Gospel within the Constraints of an Epistolary Form: Pauline Introductory Thanksgivings and Paul’s Theology of Thanksgiving,” in Paul and the Ancient Letter Form (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams; Pauline Studies 6; Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2010), 101 – 27.

Colossians 1:1–8

1a Sender Paul, b apposition an apostle of Christ Jesus, c means by the will of God, and d parallel Timothy, e apposition our brother,

2a Recipients to the saints at Colossae, b apposition the faithful brothers in Christ: c Desire Grace to you and peace from God our Father. We always give thanks to God,

3a Assertion We always give thanks to God, b apposition the Father c relationship of our Lord d apposition Jesus Christ, e simultaneous when we pray for you, 4a basis (of 3a) because we have heard of [1] your faith in Christ Jesus and [2] the love c description (of 4b) that you have for all the saints b parallel on account of the hope stored up for you in heaven, 5a basis (of 4a, b) which you have previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel, b identification that has come to you, c comparison just as in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, d comparison so it has been bearing fruit and growing among you, 6a time since the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth, b expansion as you learned it from Epaphras, c description our beloved fellow slave, d time of your love in the Spirit.
Structure

Paul begins not only by identifying himself as an “apostle” (v. 1b), but also by clarifying the source of his calling (v. 1c). The prepositional phrase “by the will of God” presupposes a verbal idea embedded in the title “apostle” (i.e., “to send, to choose”). Together with Timothy (v. 1d), Paul addresses the believers in Colossae. As in his self-identification, Paul also identifies those in Colossae by means of their relationship with Christ (v. 2b).

The thanksgiving prayer is addressed to “God the Father” (v. 3a-b), but the christological focus in this prayer cannot be missed (cf. vv. 3d, 4a, 7c). The basis of the prayer, as expressed by the causal participle “because we have heard” (ἀκούσαντες), points to the “love” and “faith” manifested in the lives of the believers in Colossae. Unlike elsewhere in Paul where the triad of “love,” “faith,” and “hope” is expressed in parallel terms (cf. 1 Cor 13:13), here the “hope” that is stored up for the saints in heaven (v. 5a) forms the basis of the “love” and “faith” manifested in the lives of the believers. This paves the way for the later emphasis on the eschatological hope of believers (1:23, 27; cf. 3:4).

In explaining the “hope,” Paul introduces the significance and power of the “gospel” (v. 5b). Though tucked in a series of subordinate clauses, the “gospel” becomes the focus for the rest of this thanksgiving section. This “gospel” is portrayed as an active and powerful agent that has “come” to the Colossians (v. 6a), and it is “bearing fruit and growing” among the Colossians (v. 6c) as it is elsewhere in the world (v. 6b). The concluding note introduces Epaphras, the one who brought the gospel to those in Colossae (v. 7) and who had reported to Paul and his coworkers the situation in the church at Colossae (v. 8).

Exegetical Outline

I. Opening Greetings (1:1 – 2)

II. Thanksgiving for the Continuous Work of the Father (1:3 – 8)
   A. Occasion for the prayer (1:3)
   B. Faith and love manifested in the lives of the recipients (1:4)
   C. Basis of their faith and love (1:5 – 6)
      1. Hope stored up in heaven (1:5a)
      2. Hope as expressed in the powerful gospel (1:5b – 6)
   D. Role of Epaphras (1:7 – 8)
      1. Messenger of the gospel (1:7)
      2. Reporter of the situation in Colossae (1:8)

6. Most recent English versions take this as a causal participle (e.g., NET, NLT, NRSV, REB, TNIV, NIV) with the notable exception in NJB, which takes it as a temporal participle.


Explanation of the Text

1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, and Timothy, our brother (Παῦλος ἀπόστολος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός). Paul begins this letter by identifying himself and his coauthor. The name “Paul” is likely his Hellenistic cognomen, one that is known among the Gentile churches. From Acts, one also learns of his Jewish name, Saul (e.g., Acts 7:58; 8:1; 9:1; 11:25). While an “apostle” (ἀπόστολος) can be merely a “messenger” (2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25), in letter openings (Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Titus 1:1) and elsewhere when Paul refers to himself (Rom 11:13; 1 Cor 9:1 – 2; 15:9; 1 Tim 2:7), this word functions as a title that points to his special position in the plan of God. By identifying himself as an “apostle,” Paul is not simply explaining his mission as an “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13; Gal 2:8); he is also drawing attention to his special status as one who speaks for Christ.7 This also reflects the Greco-Roman context in which envoys represent and carry the authority of the one who sent them.8 The following phrase, “of Christ Jesus,” points to the authority of the risen Lord, and Paul’s unique role is also highlighted in a later section of this letter (1:24 – 2:5).

The genitival construction “of Christ Jesus” (Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ) is best taken as a genitive of relationship.9 This phrase is especially significant in this letter where the supremacy of Christ is the foundation of Paul’s response to those who distract the Colossians from the true gospel.10 The word order “Christ Jesus,” instead of “Jesus Christ,” seems of no significant theological value since in v. 3 and in the openings of some of his letters (Gal 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1) Paul uses “Jesus Christ” instead.11

“By the will of God” (διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ) presupposes a verbal idea behind the previous semantic unit. Embedded in the noun “apostle” is the idea of “sending” (ἀποστέλλω), and Paul explicitly noted in 1 Cor 1:17 that Christ “sent” him to preach the gospel. Paul’s identity as an apostle cannot be separated from his Damascus experience when he became Christ’s “chosen instrument” in the gospel ministry (Acts 9:15; cf. 22:14 – 15; 26:17 – 18). In this context, this phrase highlights God’s role behind Paul’s ministry, and thus authenticates the gospel he preaches.12

“Timothy” accompanied Paul in his missionary journeys (cf. Acts 16:1 – 3; 17:14; 18:5; 19:22), and he was likely converted by Paul (cf. 1 Tim 1:2). His name also appears in the introductory salutations of 2 Corinthians, Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 10. Cf. 1:2, 3, 4, 7, 24, 27, 28; 2:2, 5, 6, 8, 11, 17, 20; 3:1, 3, 4, 11, 15, 16, 24; 4:3, 12. This also suggests that “Christ” acquires a titular sense and is not simply to be understood as a personal name.

11. One does find the title “Lord” before “Jesus Christ” in v. 3 (and more than forty instances elsewhere in the Pauline letters), but not before “Christ Jesus” (but see “Jesus Christ our Lord” in Rom 1:4; 5:21; 7:25; 1 Cor 1:9). This may highlight the titular significance of “Christ” in the construction “Christ Jesus.”

12. The anarthrous “will of God” (θελήματος θεοῦ) does point to the definite “will of God,” as the article is often omitted after a preposition; cf. BDF §255.

7. The origin of the Pauline use of the term “apostle” (ἀπόστολος) is unclear. Since this term was not commonly used in Hellenistic literature as a designation of a special emissary, it seems that the term could reflect a Jewish background, where one finds the explicit note in the rabbinic material that “the one sent by a man is as the man himself” (m. Ber. 5:5). Cf. K. H. Rengstorf, TDNT 1:415.


and Philemon. Such inclusion can be explained in two ways. First, because he is mentioned in three of Paul’s four “prison letters,” he was likely present with Paul during his Roman imprisonment. Second, in the case of Colossians, Paul’s own signature at the end of this letter (4:18) may imply that he employs a secretary for the writing of the rest of the letter. If so, Timothy may have served as his secretary.13 This is further supported by the fact that Timothy has had no prior contact with the church at Colossae. His appearance in this salutation therefore points to his specific role in the composition of the letter.14

The translation “our brother” (ὁ ἀδελφός) takes the article (ὁ) as implying the first person plural pronoun, “our.”15 Unlike 1 Thess 3:2, where Timothy is explicitly called “our brother” (τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἡμῶν), the absence of the personal pronoun here may point to the use of the term “brother” in an absolute sense as a title, “the brother.”16 This would explain the absence of the pronoun whenever a cosender is called a “brother” in salutations of Pauline letters. “Brother,” then, may function as a title as “apostle” does.17

1:2 To the saints at Colossae, the faithful brothers in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father (τοῖς ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ἁγίοις καὶ πιστοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ· χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν). Paul locates his audience in their geographical and theological locations. We begin by exploring the relationship between “saints” (ἁγίοις) and “faithful” (πιστοῖς). At issue is whether ἁγίοις should be rendered simply as an adjectival modifier (“holy”) or as a substantive adjective (“saints”). Grammatically, it may appear to be more natural to take both words as adjectival modifiers with “brothers” (ἀδελφοῖς): “to the holy and faithful brothers.” The single article (τοῖς) may point to the two adjectives as modifying a single entity, and elsewhere in Colossians Paul exhorts the Colossians to be “holy” (1:22; 3:12).18

Nevertheless, in light of the use of this term in other Pauline salutations (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1), it seems best to take this adjective in a substantive sense: “To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters” (NRSV; cf. NET, NLT, TNIV).19 This substantive sense is supported by a number of other passages in Colossians (1:4, 12, 26). Even in 3:12, where the Colossians are described as “holy” (ἁγίοις), this adjective is used to explain their status as the “elect of God” (ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ), a phrase that explains what it means to be “saints” in the traditions of Israel (cf. Exod 22:30 LXX). Taking the word in a substantive sense also means that the conjunction (καί) that connects the two parts should be taken epexegetically: “To the saints at Colossae, [that is,] the faithful brothers in Christ.”

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13. For a discussion of ancient practices of the use of a secretary in the composition of a letter, see E. Randolph Richards, The Secretary in the Letters of Paul (WUNT 2.42; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991). The name of one of Paul’s secretaries, Tertius, appears in Rom 16:22.

14. Witherington, Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians, 116, further suggests that because Timothy “was from the region just beyond Asia and his father was a Greek … he took a more active role in composing this document in Asiatic since he was familiar with it.”

15. See, e.g., Barth and Blanke, Colossians, 137 – 38.


17. See also Andrew D. Clarke, A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership (LNTS 362; New York/London: T&T Clark, 2008), 93, who notes the function of the term “brother” in Greco-Roman contexts warns against seeing it as a clear indication of egalitarianism in Paul.

18. For a recent defense of this position, see Thomas B. Slater, “Translating ἁγίοις in Col 1,2 and Eph 1,1,” Bib 87 (2006): 52 – 54.

19. It is clear in this context that the word “brothers” (ἀδελφοῖς) is to be understood in an inclusive sense: “brothers and sisters.”
To call the believers in Colossae “saints” is to remind them of their status as those who have been transferred to the “kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). This paves the way for Paul’s argument that additional ascetic practices will not contribute to their status in the presence of God (2:16 – 23). To call them “faithful” also reminds them to be faithful to the gospel they have received (2:6). In this letter, Paul will mention three individuals as models of “faithful” brothers: Epaphras, Tychicus, and Onesimus (1:7; 4:7, 9).

The parallel phrases “at Colossae ... in Christ” (ἐν Κολοσσαῖς ... ἐν Χριστῷ) pave the way for the theological topography constructed in the body of Paul’s argument. Historically and geographically, the recipients are “at Colossae,” which Herodotus claimed to be “a great city in Phrygia” (Hist. 7.30.1) in the fifth century BC. In the Roman imperial period, however, its status and significance are unclear. A passage from Strabo (Georg. 12.8.13) seems to group Colossae with other neighboring small cities like Aphrodisias, although a lacuna in the text questions the certainty of this reading. It is clear, however, that Colossae could no longer compete with Laodicea, a major city of the Lycus Valley eleven miles NW of it. This also explains the references to Laodicea in this letter (2:1; 4:13, 15, 16). There is also evidence of the relative inferior status of Colossae even when compared to Aphrodisias, a city that boasted a significant imperial cult dedicated “To Aphrodite, the Divine Augustus and the People.”

Equally important is Paul’s identification of the Colossians as being “in Christ.” First, while “saints” points to God’s elect and “brothers” to the new identity within the family of God, “in Christ” highlights the new identity of this people of God under the lordship of Christ. No longer are God’s people defined by their blood relationship with their own kin; their identity is now rooted in Christ. Second, the “in Christ” formula paves the way for Paul’s discussion of the sufficiency of the work of Christ (cf. 1:27 – 28). The only criterion through which one’s spiritual status can be measured is Christ and Christ alone. Third, the parallel construction “at Colossae” and “in Christ” points further to the spatial significance of the “in Christ” formula. In 3:1 – 4, the recipients are reminded that they have been raised with Christ, the one “seated at the right hand of God” (3:1). Seeking “the things above,” (3:1) therefore, is not to be understood as the search for additional fulfillment through spiritual exercises; rather, it is to focus on Christ, the one who has accomplished all.

As in Paul’s other letters, his greeting is adapted from contemporary Hellenistic epistolary practices. The implied verb “may ... be” (εἴη) is often missing in this formulaic greeting, as it is often so in Hellenistic letters. A typical greeting in Hellenistic letters contains a word of greeting and a health wish, with or without the note of prayer. Paul here substitutes the typical Greek word for “greetings” (χαίρετον) with “grace” (χάρις), a significant theological term in his own writings. Jewish letters often contain a prayer of peace as well, and “peace” (εἰρήνη) here reflects such a practice.


22. It could also be expressed in a full sentence, as in, “it would be as I wish” (εἴη ὁ λόγος ἐγώ; cf. P.Eleph. 13 [Sel.Pap. §96] [III BC]).

23. This is the case even in Aramaic letters, see Bezadel Porten, “Address Formulae in Aramaic Letters: A New Collection of Cowley 17,” RB 90 (1980): 398 – 413.
For Paul, “grace” and “peace” are not merely subjective experiences of kindness and tranquility; rather, they point to the powerful salvific work of God through Christ, (e.g., Rom 3:24; 5:17) and the reconciliation that is already promised for the eschatological era (e.g., Rom 5:1; Eph 2:14 – 18; cf. Isa 52:7; 57:2). Here, Paul again reminds his audience of the foundational significance of the gospel.

The absence of the expected “and our Lord Jesus Christ” has prompted some early scribes to insert this phrase into the text. Most commentators find this omission puzzling, although some have suggested that Paul is reserving this phrase for the next verse. The parallel in 1 Thess 1:1 may further support this reading when Paul’s greeting is simply “Grace and peace to you,” whereas “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” already appeared in the previous clause when describing the church of the Thessalonians.

1:3 We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι).

Paul now begins a lengthy thanksgiving section (vv. 3 – 8). The principal verb “we give thanks” (εὐχαριστοῦμεν) is following by a participle (“when we pray,” προσευχόμενοι). The plural “we” could be an “epistolary plural,” where the verb refers to Paul himself, but the switch back to the singular in 1:23 suggests this is not the case. Most commentators see both Paul and Timothy as the subject of this verb, but it remains puzzling as to why the singular form of the verb is used elsewhere, even when Timothy (among others) is listed as a co-sender of the letter (cf. 1 Cor 1:1, 4; Phil 1:1, 3; Phlm 1, 4). With this plural verb, it is at least possible that Paul intends to include his other coworkers as well as witnesses to the work of God among the believers in Colossae. The reference to the work of the gospel in “the whole world” (v. 6) may lend credence to this reading.

“Always” (πάντοτε) can modify either “we give thanks” or “when we pray.” In light of other Pauline introductory thanksgivings (1 Cor 1:4; 1 Thess 1:2; 2 Thess 1:3; Phlm 4; cf. 2 Thess 2:13), it seems likely that it modifies the former. In Col 3:17, Paul will explain what it means to give thanks to God always, and this in turn supports our reading here: “whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In Paul, thanksgiving is always directed toward God. In line with the OT heritage, this is an act of praise and confession when the mighty acts of God among his people are remembered (cf. Pss 35:18; 100:4; 109:30). It is proper, therefore, for Paul to offer such thanks to God when he prays for the Colossians. Instead of the modern understanding of thanksgiving as a private sentiment, such an act of praise “seeks to persuade others to acknowledge

the deeds of God.” 29 As a public act of praise, the content of this thanksgiving prayer draws attention to their “faith” and “love” (v. 4), but the focus is quickly shifted to the power of the gospel in the lives of these believers (v. 6). After all, God alone is the proper object of thanksgiving and worship.

“Our Lord Jesus Christ” (τοῦ κυρίου Ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) is an important formula in both Pauline letters and early Christianity. Variations of this formula include “Jesus Christ our Lord” (e.g., Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 1:9), “Christ Jesus our Lord” (e.g., 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2), and “the Lord Jesus Christ” (e.g., Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2). In early Christian proclamation, one finds the confession that “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). The frequent appearance of this title in the openings of Paul’s letters may reflect a common liturgical usage (cf. 1 Cor 12:3) that points to Jesus’ identity as that of his Father (cf. 1 Cor 8:6). In Colossians, the lordship of Christ is repeatedly affirmed (1:10; 2:6; 3:13, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23, 24; 4:1, 7, 17), and the identity of this Jesus is closely tied with God his “Father” (cf. 1:15 – 20). To reaffirm the significance of this confession in the lives of the believers is precisely the purpose of this letter (cf. 2:6 – 7).

1:4 Because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the saints (ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους). With a causal circumstantial participle (“because we have heard,” ἀκούσαντες), Paul provides the basis of thanksgiving. Although the verb “to hear” can take a genitive object, here it takes an accusative with no apparent difference in meaning. 30

“Faith” (τὴν πίστιν) points to the trust in and acceptance of Jesus Christ and his gospel. It is not, however, a virtue about which one can boast. Paul is insistent that faith itself is an act of God, one that enables believers to witness the power of the gospel in one’s life (2:12; cf. Rom 5:1 – 2). In this thanksgiving section, the active role of the gospel is explicitly noted, as such a gospel is solely capable and responsible for “bearing fruit and growing” among the Colossians (v. 6). It has been noted that “in” (ἐν) indicates that “Christ Jesus” refers to “the sphere rather than the object of the faith.” 31 While the objective sense should not be completely ruled out (cf. 2:5), the use of “in” does point to “Christ Jesus” as the sphere within which faith finds its true fulfillment.

In reference to “love” (τὴν ἀγάπην), however, the preposition “for” (εἰς) clearly points to “all the saints” as the indirect object of the verb “you have.” If Paul had intended to highlight the parallelism between their “faith” and “love,” he could have written “your love in the Spirit,” as he does in v. 8. The fact that only the “love” of these believers is mentioned in v. 8 encourages some to take the “and” (καί) in this verse in an epexegetical sense, 32 and the lack of parallelism between these two phrases may further support this reading: “because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, a faith that is expressed in the love that you have for all the saints.” 33 This focus on the “faith” in the sphere


30. Wallace, Greek Grammar, 133.

31. C. F. D. Moule, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), 49.

32. Cf. Barth and Blanke, Colossians, 153, who call this “a case of hendiadys.” Hendiadys occurs when two words combine to form one concept although sometimes one term is dependent on the other. In this case, it might be rendered “loving faith” or “faith that expresses itself in love.” Similarly, in v. 23 only “faith” is mentioned in connection with the “hope of the gospel.”

of Christ Jesus paves the way for Paul’s repeated emphasis that the Colossians should stand firm in their “faith” (1:23; 2:5, 7). “Love,” by contrast, is the “perfect bond” manifested in those who hold firm to this “faith” (3:14).

“All the saints” refers to all the believers. As in v. 2, “saints” (ἁγίοι) does not point to the moral achievements of a selected group of believers but to those who are the elect of God. Some have therefore preferred simply to render this phrase “all of God’s people” (NLT). The idea of “holiness” is important, however, though not as an attribute of believers; it refers to the accomplished work of Christ; who died on the cross: “now he has reconciled you in his body of flesh through death, in order to present you holy [ἁγίους], without blemish, and blameless before him” (1:22). It is tempting to see the all-inclusive “all the saints” as anticipating the arguments against a certain type of elitism among the false teachers (2:16–23; cf. 3:11), but the phrase often appears in Paul’s writings, especially the prison letters, so it is better understood in a nonpolemical way as a general reference to believers (cf. Eph 1:15; 3:18; 6:18; Phil 1:1; 4:21, 22; Phlm 5).

1:5a On account of the hope stored up for you in heaven (διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς). Paul now turns to the basis of the “faith” and “love” of the Colossians. The mentioning of “hope” (τὴν ἐλπίδα) completes the triad of “love,” “faith,” and “hope” (cf. Rom 5:1–5; 1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thess 1:3; 5:8). The origin of this triad is unclear, and its use is not limited to Paul (Heb 10:22–24; 1 Pet 1:21–22).34 For Paul, “faith” is often understood as the foundation of “hope” (Rom 5:2; Gal 5:5) and “love” (1 Cor 13:2; 1 Tim 1:5), and when all three terms appear together the focus is often on the social manifestation of the gospel message (1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thess 1:3).35 In this verse, however, the focus is on the fundamental significance of “hope,” and the series of subordinate clauses that follow testifies to the emphasis placed on “hope.”

The readers should expect the phrase introduced by the preposition “on account of” (διὰ) to provide the grounds of a verbal act, but the basis of the preceding verb “we . . . give thanks” has already been stated in v. 4 with the causal participle “because we have heard.” This prepositional phrase can modify the verbal noun “love” or both “faith” and “love” (as taken by most English versions): “the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven” (TNIV, NIV). The choice between “love,” the immediate antecedent, and “faith and love” is less of a pressing issue when one takes the “and” in v. 4 as epexegetical — “love” as the manifestation of “faith.” In any case, “faith” and “love” flow from “hope.” Syntactically, the three terms are not strict parallels, as “hope” becomes the source of “faith” and “love.”

In Paul, “the hope” is not primarily a subjective sentiment of optimism. Hope is rooted in the promises of the faithful God, the one “who raises the dead” and the one who “will deliver us” (2 Cor 1:9–10). Based on God’s acts in the past, this hope points forward to the consummation of his work in Christ (Titus 2:13). As such, this hope “does not disappoint” (Rom 5:5 NRSV). In Colossians, this “hope” is the reality proclaimed in the gospel (1:23) and centered on the work of Christ (1:27). Instead of the subjective sentiment, therefore, this hope is the object that provides grounds for one’s confidence in God’s continuous acts in history.

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34. See the discussion in Thomas Söding, Das Trias Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe bei Paulus: Eine exegetische Studie (SSB 150; Stuttgart: Katholische Bibelwerk, 1992), 38–64. While recognizing the contribution of Hellenistic Jewish paraenetic traditions, Söding concludes that Paul was ultimately the one responsible for this formulation.