TRAVIS R. NILES

The Image of the Invisible God

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe
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The Image of the Invisible God

An Exegetical Study of Colossians 1:15–20

Mohr Siebeck

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For my parents,
Bob and Suzanne Niles

Preface

Composing a doctoral thesis often feels like crossing a glacier in a whiteout. Getting one's bearings is difficult and whether the goal is up to the summit or down to high camp, you need to keep moving. But it's also because such a trek is no solo expedition: without competent instructors, one cannot learn the craft of mountaineering properly, and without the companionship of a good rope team, there is a chance you won't get off the glacier at all. And so, I am grateful for a minimalist index card that has hung on my wall throughout this whole doctoral ascent. It was given to me by my friend Mark J. Edwards, a steady companion during my time at Princeton Theological Seminary who also introduced me to the world of mountaineering in British Columbia where, in a former life, I was a glacier-crossing backpacking guide. His card simply reads, "Travis – Climb on."

Now, the climb is over: the present monograph is a revised version of my doctoral dissertation, which I defended before the Faculty of Theology at the University of Bern on November 11, 2021. By the time I submitted the thesis, I had had the unusual but good fortune of having two *Doktorväter*: Prof. Reinhard Feldmeier (Göttingen) and Prof. Rainer Hirsch-Luipold (Bern). Following Prof. Feldmeier's retirement, I transferred to the University of Bern and Prof. Hirsch-Luipold took the reins as the primary advisor. Through numerous conversations in formal and informal settings, they taught me the craft of New Testament exegesis, and their interest in combining exegetical issues with religious-philosophical history and theological questions was exemplary. At every step along the way, they displayed their magnanimity, not only in the collegiality necessary for 'sharing' an advisee, but also by their constant availability for my questions and concerns. Time and again, they embodied Bonhoeffer's notion of "being there for others" (*Dasein für Andere*).

Without the exceptional cadre of colleagues who helped me along the way, this book wouldn't be half of what it currently is. In Göttingen, Jan Basczok, Matthias Becker, Jens-Arne Edelmann, and Michael Wandusim not only showed interest in my work but also were constant friends. The broader circle of colleagues involved in the Göttingen New Testament research colloquium offered constructive feedback. Among those involved, Prof. Florian Wilk and Prof. Jürgen Wehnert deserve special mention. In Bern, I gained new friends and colleagues who accompanied me in the home stretch: Stefano De Feo and David Staub. Here, too, the members of the New Testament research

colloquium offered significant help. Both within and outside of the framework of the colloquium, both Prof. Benjamin Schliesser and Prof. em. Samuel Vollenweider were valuable resources. Special thanks are due to Alma Brodersen and Nancy Rahn for reading the section "The Hebrew Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls" and offering helpful remarks.

This monograph was also made possible through various means of institutional support. The research group "Stratification Analyses of Mythic Plots and Texts in Ancient Cultures," funded by the German Research Foundation and spearheaded by Prof. Annette Zgoll and Prof. Christian Zgoll (Göttingen), provided funding for the project. The Swiss National Science Foundation generously provided funding for open access publication of the work. In addition, various staff members of the theological faculties of Göttingen and Bern played a key role: Susanne Matthies, Elke Schikora, the late Petra God, Marcus Hase, Frank Schleritt, Simone Häberli, and Markus Isch.

This book also wouldn't be in your hands if it weren't for the kind acceptance of the manuscript for publication in the second series of *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* by Prof. Jörg Frey and the assistance of Elena Müller, Markus Kirchner, Matthias Spitzner, and Sara Contini at Mohr Siebeck. Many thanks to you all.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family: my parents Bob and Suzanne Niles, to whom this book is dedicated because their love and support never wavered, even when pursuing this project meant moving across the Atlantic; Prof. em. James R. Edwards and his wife Janie, a couple of Germanophiles who kindled my interest in German language and culture; Mark J. and Janine Edwards, who were always there for me during my time in Princeton; Rolf-Joachim Erler-McLean, whose door is always open; and Dylan Johnson, for his camaraderie. Last but not least, for her selflessness and warm spirit, Anni Seeger deserves more thanks than I can give.

Bern,
September 2023

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Abbreviations

AAS	*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AJP	*The American Journal of Philology*
AnBibS	Analecta Biblica Studia
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*
ARGU	Arbeiten zur Religion und Geschichte des Urchristentums
ASBF	Analecta Studium Biblicum Franciscanum
ASNU	Acta seminarii neotestamentici upsaliensis
ASR	*Annali di scienze religiose*
BA	*The Biblical Archaeologist*
BBB	Bonner biblische Beiträge
BDR	Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch
BPS	Brill's Plutarch Studies
BU	Biblische Untersuchungen
BVR	Bausteine zur Volkskunde und Religionswissenschaft
BZ	*Biblische Zeitschrift*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CGCG	Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek
COMES	Civitatum Orbis MEditerranei Studia
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
DK	*Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Diels/Kranz)
DNP	*Der Neue Pauly*
DSSEL	Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library
ÉBib	Études bibliques
EC	*Early Christianity*
EKK	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ELCH	English Literary and Cultural History
ESV	English Standard Version
EWNT	*Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FoiVie	*Foi et Vie*
FPG	*Fragmenta Philosophorum Graecorum*
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments

FTS	Frankfurter Theologische Studien
HALOT	*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*
HCS	Hellenistic Culture and Society
HDAC	Histoire des doctrines de l'Antiquité classique
HTKAT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament
HUT	Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
KEK	Meyers Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
KST	Kohlhammer Studienbücher Theologie
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	*A Greek-English Lexicon: With a Revised Supplement*
MNS	Mnemosyne Supplements
NA^{28}	Nestle-Aland: Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th ed.
NEchtB	Neue Echter Bibel
NewDocs	New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NovT	*Novum Testamentum*
NovTSup	Novum Testamentum Supplements
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
NTL	New Testament Library
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
NVBTA	Nuova versione della Bibbia dai testi antichi
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OGIS	*Orientis graeci inscriptiones selectae*
ÖTK	Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar
PEG	*Poetae Epici Graeci*
PG	*Patrologiae graecae cursus completus*
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
QD	Quaestiones Disputatae
RAC	*Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*
RGG4	*Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart,* 4th ed.
RNT	Regensburger Neues Testament
SAPERE	Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam REligionemque pertinentia
SBAB	Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände
SBM	Stuttgarter biblische Monographien
Siebenthal	Griechische Grammatik zum Neuen Testament
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SPA	Studies in Philo of Alexandria
SPhilo	Studia Philonica Annual
STAR	Studies in Theology and Religion
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
SVF	*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*

TBl	*Theologische Blätter*
TEG	Traditio Exegetica Graeca
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
ThKNT	Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
TOBITH	Topoi Biblischer Theologie / Topics of Biblical Theology
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
TWNT	*Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WSA	Würzburger Studien zur Altertumswissenschaft
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*
ZTK	*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*

Abbreviations of the titles of ancient works derive from Patrick H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999).

Translations

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. The translations of Hebrew and Aramaic texts either derive from or follow those found in the *New Revised Standard Version* and the Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library.

Introduction

A. Homo Pictor?

Within the last thirty years, the "iconic turn" has emerged as a significant development in the humanities. Also known as "iconic criticism" or "image science," this research approach seeks to analyze the nature and function of images in the history of human culture, the practice of visual communication, the impact of images in mass media, and the manner in which images not only convey but even constitute meaning.[1] The advent of iconic criticism is not only a reaction to the twentieth-century explosive proliferation of images confronting the consumer due to the rise of mass media but emerges rather from greater depths: the insight that language itself, by and large the chief medium of human communication, depends on the human ability to re-present, to de-pict one thing as another by way of a construed sign. In this sense, not only language, but even thought is "bound to be metaphorical" (*metaphernpflichtig*),[2] for in our thought and speech, "something becomes visible and plausible *as* something [else]":[3]

"Das stupende Phänomen, daß ein Stück mit Farbe beschmierter Fläche Zugang zu unerhörten sinnlichen und geistigen Einsichten eröffnen kann, läßt sich aus der Logik des Kontrastes erläutern, vermittels derer etwas als etwas ansichtig wird. Was der Satz (der 'Logos') kann, das muß auch dem bildnerischen Werke zu Gebote stehen, freilich auf seine Weise. Das tertium beider, zwischen Sprachbildern (als Metaphern) und dem Bild im Sinne der bildenden Kunst, repräsentiert, wie wir sahen, die Struktur des Kontrastes."[4]

As Belting puts it, the ability of images to speak to humans and that of humans to connect with images is grounded in the realization that humans are the

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[1] The three scholars most readily identified with the origin of this approach are W.J.T. Mitchell, the herald of the "pictorial turn," Gottfried Boehm, the chief architect of the "iconic turn," and Hans Belting, who has called for a transition from a history of art to a history of *images*. The landmark studies by these three authors are: W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986); Gottfried Boehm, ed., *Was ist ein Bild?* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994); Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1990).

[2] Cf. Gottfried Boehm, "Die Wiederkehr der Bilder," in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. Boehm (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994), 11–38, 26–29.

[3] Boehm, ibid., 29: "[…] etwas wird *als* etwas sichtbar und plausibel."

[4] Boehm, ibid., 31.

"place" of images: "Natürlich ist der Mensch der *Ort der Bilder* […] ein lebendes Organ für Bilder […] allein [er] der Ort, an dem Bilder in einem lebendigen Sinne […] empfangen und gedeutet werden […]."[5] Similar conclusions had been drawn previously by Mitchell[6] and Hans Jonas. The latter's essay *Homo Pictor: Von der Freiheit des Bildens* (1994) argues that the *differentia specifica* of the human vis-à-vis other animals is the ability to depict objects and experiences of the world in which it lives; this presupposes a capacity for eidetic abstraction from disparate phenomena – the cave dweller does not paint this or that buffalo, but *the* buffalo – which is itself the germ of further stages of rationality. Even though the implementation of such an ability may remain on a relatively primitive level – the cave painting is not the Sistine Chapel – the basic ability to represent one's world in images constitutes the "transanimal freedom" and basic criterium of the human.[7] If Hans Jonas is correct to identify the *homo pictor* as the foundation of the *homo sapiens*, then the "turn" towards images advocated by Mitchell, Boehm, and Belting reveals itself as a logical development of the attempt to reflect upon the conditions of human knowledge.[8]

The rise of iconic criticism has also left its mark on theological studies, as can be seen in numerous publications, such as the series *IKON. Bild + Theologie* (Ferdinand Schöningh/Brill, est. 1999), the anthologies *Bild und Tod: Grundfragen der Bildanthropologie*[9] and *Die Zeit der Bilder: Ikonische Repräsentation und Temporalität*,[10] the monographs *Christologie der Bilder im Johannesevangelium*[11] and *Das andere Bild Christi: Spätmoderner*

[5] Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, 2nd ed. (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2002), 57.

[6] Mitchell said of the relationship between the physical world on the one hand and images as a phenomenon of human consciousness on the other: "If there were no more minds, there would be no more images, mental or material. The world may not depend upon [human] consciousness, but images in (not to mention *of*) the world clearly do" (*Iconology*, 17).

[7] Hans Jonas, "Homo Pictor: Von der Freiheit des Bildens," in Boehm, *Was ist ein Bild?*, 105–24, 106–7, 120–24.

[8] Cf. Gottfried Boehm and W.J.T. Mitchell, "Pictorial versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters," in *The Pictorial Turn*, ed. Neal Curtis (London: Routledge, 2010), 8–26, 10.

[9] Philipp Stoellger and Jens Wolff, eds., *Bild und Tod: Grundfragen einer Bildanthropologie*, HUT 68, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

[10] Michael Moxter and Markus Firchow, eds., *Die Zeit der Bilder: Ikonische Repräsentation und Temporalität*, HUT 73 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

[11] Ruben Zimmermann, *Christologie der Bilder: Die Christopoetik des vierten Evangeliums unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joh 10*, WUNT 171 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). In this case, we are not dealing with an attempted appropriation of iconic criticism for NT exegesis; nevertheless, it seems clear that the iconic turn at least provided an impetus for this study (see the chapter "Bild und Bildersprache," ibid., 61–87).

Protestantismus als kritische Bildreligion,[12] and the chapter dedicated to the interpretation of the New Testament through the use of images – influenced by the iconic turn – in Ulrich Luz's *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments*.[13] In addition, the four-volume *Handbuch der Bildtheologie* (2007–2020) aims to remedy the differing levels of attention and methodological precision applied to images in the various fields of theology by offering a research tableau wherein such efforts find common theoretical ground and points of departure for the further study of images in a theological context.[14]

Yet although the academic study of theology has been influenced by the iconic turn, it would be a mistake to think that the increased occupation with images can be attributed only to the theories of Mitchell, Boehm, and Belting. The late Roman Catholic theologian Alex Stock, professor emeritus at the University of Cologne, had pursued *Bildtheologie* in his publications as early as 1979[15] and made it to be the center of his scholarly work until his passing in 2016. In addition to publishing works on the theology of images prior to the pictorial and iconic turns, he founded a research department for *Bildtheologie* at the University of Cologne in 1998, the aforementioned series *IKON. Bild + Theologie* in 1999, and composed an eleven-volume *Poetische Dogmatik*[16] in which the poems, literature, and images of the Christian tradition become sources for constructive theology. Such a theological use of images would be unimaginable if *Bildtheologie* were grounded solely in modern aesthetical theory, the *Bilderflut* of modernity, or a particular predilection for art. To place the endeavor on that footing would evince, at the very least, a nonchalant or naïve disregard for the history of theological conflict over the propriety of visual depictions of God.[17] The precedent of the liturgical use of images throughout the history of the Christian churches would be a stronger footing, but perhaps still not sufficient from a Protestant theological perspective. In contrast to this anthropologically determined viewpoint, Alex Stock proposes seeing the history of images in the Christian churches as a history of God's self-revelation:

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[12] Malte Dominik Krüger, *Das andere Bild Christi: Spätmoderner Protestantismus als kritische Bildreligion*, Dogmatik in der Moderne 18 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

[13] Ulrich Luz, *Theologische Hermeneutik des Neuen Testaments* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2014), 313–57.

[14] Reinhard Hoeps, "Einleitung," in *Handbuch der Bildtheologie,* ed. Hoeps, vol. 1, *Bild-Konflikte* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2007), 7–23.

[15] Alex Stock, "Bildersturm und Augenweide: Theologische Aspekte der Kunst," *Diakonia* 10 (1979): 378–87.

[16] Alex Stock, *Poetische Dogmatik*, 11 vols. (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1995–2020).

[17] For an historical overview of the topic, see Reinhard Hoeps, ed., *Handbuch der Bildtheologie*, vol. 1, *Bild-Konflikte*.

"Die Geschichte der Kunst ist in ihrem gesamtem Ablauf Offenbarungsgeschichte. Die Gottesbilder dieser vom 4.–18. Jahrhundert währenden Geschichte stehen in einem Zusammenhang, dessen einheitsstiftende Instanz nicht bloß ein wie immer geartetes Kollektiv (z.B. das Abendland), sondern Gott selbst ist. Insofern ein und dasselbe Subjekt in der Abfolge der Kunstwerke seine Geschichte hat, ist diese als ein in Phasen gegliedertes Epiphaniekontinuum wahrzunehmen."[18]

Stock knows, however, that the linguistic and iconic worlds mutually condition each other and that the ability to identify particular moments and features in this revelatory history depends on the knowledge one gains from the Bible, other religious literature, and the history of religions.[19] One could support this statement from a Protestant theological viewpoint and say that if there is any solid foundation for the notion that the divine may reveal itself in images, then it must be found in the earliest Christian sources. Image-theologians such as Alex Stock and Reinhard Hoeps are aware of this, and therefore it is not surprising to find references and allusions to the Letter to the Colossians of the New Testament strewn throughout scholarly discussions of a theology of images. Specifically, this means the claim of Col 1:15 that Jesus Christ is the "image of the invisible God."

Although the presence of such a statement in the New Testament by no means suggests that the propriety of visual depictions of God is guaranteed without further ado, the idea that Jesus Christ is somehow the "image of the invisible God" cracks open the door for just such a discussion. That this and other New Testament verses such as 2 Cor 4:4 and John 1:14 were received in this way, at the very least in the history of Christian images, can be seen in the medieval phenomenon of Christomorphism: "Die Gestalt Christi wird zum Gottes- und eben auch zum Gottvaterbild des Mittelalters. Bis über das Jahr 1000 hinaus gibt es die Darstellung Gott Vaters nahezu ausschließlich im Typus Christi, in Christomorphie."[20] That Col 1:15 was important not only in the practice of crafting images, but also in theological reasoning can be seen by the intensive reception of Col 1:15–20 by patristic theologians generally and during the Arian controversy in particular.[21]

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[18] Alex Stock, *Poetische Dogmatik*, vol. 7, *Gotteslehre: Bilder* (Paderbon: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2007), 129. The context of this statement is the discussion of an epochal art-historical thesis of the late German art historian Wolfgang Schöne, and perhaps some minutiae in the formulation would be different if Stock had presented a list of his own theses. It is clear from the further development of his argument, however, that the theology of revelation embedded in the larger statement is indeed Stock's own position; cf. *op. cit.* 130–31.

[19] Stock, *Gotteslehre: Bilder*, 134.

[20] Thomas Sternberg, "Bilderverbot für Gott, den Vater?," in *Bilderverbot: Die Sichtbarkeit des Unsichtbaren*, ed. Eckhard Nordhofen (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001), 59–115, 70. Sternberg points out that in some instances, the Holy Spirit as well was depicted Christomorphically (83).

[21] Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, vol. 1, *Von der Apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451)* (Freiburg: Herder, 1979), 102: "Kein

Yet what exactly does Colossians mean to convey by the statement that Jesus Christ is the "image of the invisible God"? To begin with, this statement is a twofold interpretation of the man Jesus of Nazareth: in the first instance, that he is the "Christ," God's Messiah, and in the second instance that he is this God's image. Colossians and other New Testament writings provide us a record of some of the earliest interpretations of Jesus of Nazareth offered by his followers, interpretations presented by a multiplicity of authors, conveyed in a variety of modes – narrative text, epistle, apocalyptic literature – and with a broad array of motifs and themes. Common to them all is the articulation of the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. These sources, however, display that such an interpretation is anything but straightforward.

The man known as Jesus of Nazareth lived ca. 4 B.C. to A.D. 30 and, as innumerable others before and after him, was executed upon a cross by the Roman authorities administering Judea. In the roughly three years preceding his death, he managed to accrue a number of followers, supporters, and sympathizers; according to the portrayal of all four gospels, he even found sympathizers in the highest circles of the Jewish and Roman authorities.[22] Extant literary sources concerning his life paint a picture of a man who wandered about the territories of Galilee and Judea – with isolated episodes in Samaria and the Decapolis – teaching, engaging in debates with religious authorities, and performing healing miracles and exorcisms. The support he gained throughout the period of his public activity is only one side of the medallion: the devotion given by some was mirrored by fierce opposition from others, the latter being the precondition of the political will generated in favor of his execution.[23] Rather than simply denying his importance, some of Jesus' opponents attempted to detract from his legitimacy by attributing his power to demonic forces (cf. Mark 3:22) or chose instead to plot his ruin (cf. Matt 12:14; Mark 3:6). Even his own family doubted his sanity (Mark 3:21). In sum: the response to Jesus of Nazareth was not uniform. A fine theological point is put on the issue in the

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anderer der christologischen Hymnen des Corpus Paulinum hat in einem so viele Themen kontinuierlicher Diskussion unter Vätern abgegeben wie Kol 1,15-20. Es geht um *eikon*, *prototokos* und *archē*; Christus als Haupt war weniger umstritten […] [Der] Kol-Hymnus hat in besonderer Weise dazu beigetragen, die Problematik der nicaenischen Zeit auszudrücken und – nach Überwindung des Arianismus – die Christologie des Nicaenums auszubauen. Dieser Hymnus kommt damit erst recht in seine theologische Rolle hinein."

[22] Nicodemus, a Pharisee and "ruler of the Jews" (John 3:1, ἄρχων τῶν Ἰουδαίων; cf. 7:47, 50–52); Joseph of Arimathea, stylized variously as a "rich man," a "disciple of Jesus," and a "member of the council" (Matt 27:57; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:50–51; John 19:38); and Pilate's wife, who refers to Jesus as "that righteous man" (Matt 27:19, τῷ δικαίῳ ἐκείνῳ).

[23] Of course, it is not as though a mere dichotomy of 'firm support' or 'fierce opposition' existed, for there were various degrees of interest and commitment. This is alluded to in the "crowd" (ὄχλος) who may have only been interested in him for the material benefit of his miracles (cf. John 6:22–26) and the followers who turned away from him for the difficulty of his teaching (John 6:60, 66).

account of Jesus asking his disciples first who the general public considers him to be and subsequently asking them, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:27–30). The Gospel accounts of the New Testament, which are themselves interpretations of Jesus, do not obscure the necessity of interpreting Jesus of Nazareth and his significance, but recount it as a basic feature of his life story.

The Corpus Paulinum, of which Colossians is a part, knows this as well. Paul was aware that his presentation of Jesus as the crucified Christ was "foolishness to those who are perishing, but to [those] who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18, cf. 22–23), that he and those who spoke of Jesus in this way gave off a particular "fragrance," albeit a "fragrance unto death" to some and a "fragrance from life unto life" to others (2 Cor 2:15–16). The Lukan portrayal of Paul's missionary activity shows a man arguing with his Jewish brothers and sisters to accept his understanding of Jesus,[24] a matter which many of them rejected, as did certain Romans either out of fear (Acts 24:24–25) or because the issue was not immediately intelligible to them (Acts 23:29; 25:19). This demonstrates, anecdotally, that no statement made about the identity and significance of Jesus of Nazareth can be considered a given or a simple matter of course.[25]

The driving question of this historical study, therefore, will be, "What does Col 1:15 mean by the appellation 'image of the invisible God' and how does it relate to the image discourse of the world in which it was written?"

B. Working Assumptions of the Study

I. Discourse Analysis

Colossians is of course not the only document of the first century A.D. to employ some notion of an image of God. As I hope to demonstrate, the use of such a notion places Colossians within a broader contemporary discourse concerning the topic, one which transcends linguistic, religious, and regional borders. A discourse, however, is not only constituted by concrete statements made about and sustained reflection offered on a given topic, but is also something more, for any given discourse is a hypothetical structural connection that

[24] Acts 13:5, 13–52; 14:1–6; 17:1–5, 10–11, 17; 18:4–5; 19:8; 20:21; 22:1–21; 24:14; 26:19–29; 28:23.

[25] Cf. the remarks of Udo Schnelle, *Paulus: Leben und Denken*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 1–25, where he notes that the sources historians use are themselves already constructions of meaning: "Schließlich sind jene Nachrichten, die als historische 'Fakten' in jede historische Argumentation einfließen, in der Regel auch schon Deutungen vergangenen Geschehens" (4). Schnelle applies this to Paul (8) while also rejecting the notion that the construal of history in general or in Paul's case in particular is necessarily subjectivistic (4) or that one must necessarily accept the ontological implications of constructivism (16).

underlies disparate semiotic events: "Diskurse regeln also das Sagbare, Denkbare und Machbare. Sie organisieren Wirklichkeit."[26] Because a discourse represents the subconscious substructure of the knowledge that informs intellectual conversation, intellectuals are often not aware of it; one may think here of Foucault's concept of an "archaeology" of knowledge.[27] The foundations of a discourse are therefore not necessarily the direct object of reflection. For this reason, we must examine linguistic and semiotic usage in order to reconstruct the discourse constituted by the shared assumptions of a particular socio-cultural group, and this reconstruction is always hypothetical. What the philologist and New Testament scholar Matthias Becker has written in the introduction to his comparative study of Luke-Acts with the corpus of Dio Chrysostom may be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to our study as well:

"Bei der vergleichenden Inbezugsetzung von Texten aus der paganen Gebildetenschicht und des Neuen Testaments können Begriffs- und Motivanalysen zum Bestandteil einer Diskursanalyse werden. Denn sowohl pagane Autoren als auch neutestamentliche Schriftsteller stehen als Kinder ihrer Zeit in breiteren Diskurszusammenhängen, die unbeschadet differierender Denksystematiken, Sondersprachen und Abgrenzungsversuche thematische Überscheidungen erkennen lassen."[28]

The purpose of the following analysis, therefore, is not to assert religious-historical "parallels" nor to posit hypothetical literary or philosophical dependencies of one thinker upon another, as though one were drafting a manuscript stemma.[29] Instead, the purpose is to determine the uniting characteristics of this discourse in the hopes of elucidating more clearly the peculiarities of the various thinkers and documents under consideration, with the ultimate goal of gaining a clearer understanding of what Colossians means when it names Jesus the "image of the invisible God."[30]

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[26] Achim Landwehr, *Historische Diskursanalyse*, Historische Einführungen 4, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 2018), 20–21.

[27] Landwehr, ibid., 64–66.

[28] Matthias Becker, *Lukas und Dion von Prusa: Das lukanische Doppelwerk im Kontext paganer Bildungsdiskurse*, Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible 3 (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2020), 47.

[29] On the issue of the foolhardy construction of parallels and dependencies, see Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81, no. 1 (1962): 1–13.

[30] What NT scholar Florian Wilk has said of the comparison of Philo's *De migratione Abrahami* with Paul's allegorical interpretation in Gal 4:21–5:1 can also be applied to the comparison of Colossians with its contemporaries: "Gerade das Gemenge von Gemeinsamkeiten und Divergenzen aber hilft dazu, das besondere Profil der paulinischen Allegorese der Erzählung von Abrahams ersten beiden Söhnen und ihren Müttern zu erfassen […]" (Florian Wilk, "De migratione Abrahami als Kontext des Neuen Testaments," in *Abrahams Aufbruch: Philon von Alexandria, De migratione Abrahami*, SAPERE 30, eds. Maren R. Niehoff and Reinhard Feldmeier [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017], 219–44, 238).

II. Which Traditions?

Yet who should be considered in such a discourse analysis? To begin with, it must be pointed out that this is not an exhaustive study on the theory and use of images and divine images in antiquity. Because the study aims to elucidate Colossians, a document of the first century A.D., the image theory of writers who were active beyond the first half of the second century A.D. will not be considered. Any references to such thinkers will be the exception rather than the rule. Secondly, we will focus on texts that contain reflection on the nature of images and of divine images. Material culture such as the political use of images on the part of Roman emperors or other rulers will be mentioned when appropriate, but will not be a primary focus. Thirdly, the traditions with which Colossians will be brought into dialogue must be determined by the context of the first century A.D. This encompasses two aspects: (1) Colossians as a member of the Corpus Paulinum and thus an early Christian document, and (2) currents in the broader intellectual world of the first century A.D.

As a member of the Corpus Paulinum, Colossians will be read against the background of other Pauline writings that deal with the topic of images. This will not presume any necessity of continuity of Colossians with the protopauline letters nor will it be concerned with multiplying distinctions between them, but rather with elucidating more clearly the meaning of Colossians. Further, as the Corpus Paulinum itself belongs to the emerging Christian movement, we must also consider relevant traditions from the Hebrew Bible and other writings present within the context of ancient Judaism.

Secondly, because Colossians is a religious-philosophical document of the first century A.D., any study of it must consider developments and tendencies within the broader intellectual world of that time. The first significant trend, as it concerns our topic, is the resurgence of an interest in Plato's writings. Until the closure of the philosophical schools in Athens in 86 B.C. at the hands of Sulla, the official teachings of the various schools – excepting the Epicureans[31] – were determined largely by the scholarchs running them. The texts of the founders of the various schools – Plato, Aristotle, Zeno – played a secondary role to the interpretations of institutional personnel. The closure of the schools and concomitant removal of the scholarchs significantly changed the situation. What counted as "Platonic" or "Stoic" now had to be gleaned from written

[31] Michael Erler has pointed out that the development sketched here had already existed in a slightly altered form among the Epicureans: following the death of Epicurus and the last of his original students and thus as early as the second cent. B.C., the *scripta et dicta* of Epicurus assumed an outsized importance and the philosophical philology conducted upon them evinced "noteworthy parallels" to the exegesis of Plato's texts in the Imperial era ("Philologia Medicans: Wie die Epikureer die Texte ihres Meistes lasen," in *Vermittlung und Tradierung von Wissen in der griechischen Kultur*, ScriptOralia 61, eds. Wolfgang Kullmann and Jochen Althoff [Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1993], 281–303, 289, 303).

sources. Constructive philosophical work took the form of exegesis and in the case of the Platonic corpus, it even attained a spiritual dimension.[32] Though the practice of constructive exegesis and commentary itself was no novum,[33] the increased application of it to the founders of the great philosophical schools was.[34] As Harold Tarrant has put it, Platonic texts shifted from "fringe reading" to "core curriculum" by the second century A.D., which itself depended in large part on the "infrastructure" developed in the two centuries prior.[35] The decentralized nature of the resurgence led, as one might expect, to a multifaceted Platonism. As Mauro Bonazzi points out, the Platonism of the early Roman imperial period can be compared to a "battlefield" in which diverse interpretations of Plato clashed with each other in an attempt to gain hegemonic significance.[36] We gain a glimpse of this at the outset of Plutarch of Chaeronea's *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, where he states that his opinion on the origin of the soul diverges from that of "most of the Platonists" and must be defended (*An. procr.* 1012b). By mentioning the *Timaeus*, we happen upon that dialogue which generated the most interest among readers of Plato.[37]

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[32] Gábor Betegh, "The Transmission of Ancient Wisdom: Texts, Doxographies, Libraries," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity,* 2 vols., ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 1:25–38, 26.

[33] One may think here of the Derveni Papyrus, a fourth cent. B.C. document that perhaps goes back to an original from the fifth cent. and which offers an allegorical exegesis of an Orphic cosmogony (cf. Mirjam E. Kotwick, "Einleitung," in *Der Papyrus von Derveni*, Sammlung Tusculum, ed. Kotwick [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017], 11–63, 14–17). Cf. further Irmgard Männlein-Robert and Christoph Riedweg, "Hauptsächliche literarische Gattungen philosophischer Wissensvermittlung," in *Philosophie der Kaiserzeit und der Spätantike*, vol 5.1 of *Die Philosophie der Antike*, Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie, eds. Christoph Riedweg, Christoph Horn, and Dietmar Wyrwa (Basel: Schwabe, 2018), 64–83, 78–79.

[34] Mauro Bonazzi, *Il platonismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2015), 75, notes that the philosophy of the early Roman imperial era consisted in a "return to the ancients" (i.e., Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and even Pyrrhus) in the conviction that the truth had been revealed at an earlier time and the contemporary philosophical task was to bring it to light.

[35] Harold Tarrant, "From Fringe Reading to Core Curriculum: Commentary, Introduction and Doctrinal Summary," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plato in Antiquity*, eds. Tarrant et al. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2018), 101–14, 101–2.

[36] Bonazzi, *Il platonismo*, 87; cf. also Mauro Bonazzi, "Plutarch's Reception in Imperial Graeco-Roman Philosophy," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Plutarch*, eds. Sophia Xenophontos and Katerina Oikonomopoulou (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 56–65, 60. See also Franco Ferrari, "Metafisica e teologia nel medioplatonismo," *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 70, no. 2 (2015): 321–38, *passim,* on the differing opinions of Middle Platonists regarding the relations of Demiurge of the *Timaeus* to the idea of the Good in the *Republic*.

[37] Cf. Thomas A. Szlezák, *Platon: Meisterdenker der Antike* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2021), 458–59; Gretchen Reydams-Schils, *Demiurge and Providence: Stoic and Platonist Readings of Plato's Timaeus*, Monothéismes et Philosophie 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 14; Männlein-Robert and Riedweg, "Hauptsächliche Gattungen philosophischer Wissensvermittlung," 79; Bonazzi, "Plutarch's Reception in Imperial Graeco-Roman Philosophy," 56–

Plutarch, in addition to his aforementioned essay,[38] dealt with material from the *Timaeus* in five of his ten *Quaestiones Platonicae* (2, 4, 5, 7, 8). In the first century B.C., Cicero provided a (perhaps intentionally)[39] partial translation of the *Timaeus* and treated Platonic thought in *De natura deorum*.

Among the writings of the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who interpreted the Holy Scriptures of his people with the aid of Greek philosophical traditions, the treatise *De opificio mundi* evinces strong influence by the *Timaeus*. When one inspects Philo's other writings, one might conclude, in the words of David T. Runia, that Philo "had direct access to the actual text of the dialogue and was intimately acquainted with its contents."[40]

Yet why is the renewed interest in Plato's writings in the first century A.D. important for our study? It is grounded in the subject matter itself: Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic* deliver key remarks and analogies concerning the nature of images, and when one considers the *Cratylus, Theaetetus*, and *Sophist* dialogues, one is compelled to conclude that more than any other ancient author, Plato offered the most sustained reflection on the topic. If one were to study a New Testament text in its own context, which includes writers like Philo and Plutarch who adopt and reshape Plato's thought, then it would be reasonable to expect from the exegete at least an elementary awareness of Plato's writings. When it comes to the topic of images, this is doubly true. This does not mean that Platonizing writers of the first century A.D. were always in lockstep with Plato, but simply that any consideration of their writings cannot leave Plato completely out of the picture. And Philo and Plutarch, as we shall see, put the concept of an "image" to serious theological use in their writings.

This leads us to the second noticeable trend of the first century A.D., namely an increased interest in *images*, especially the use of the term εἰκών in a religious-philosophical context. This can be seen not only in the writings of the aforementioned Platonizing writers, but also in the *Olympic Discourse* (*Or.* 12) of Dio Chrysostom, which concerns figural images in the context of theological

57. Franco Ferrari, "Interpretare il *Timeo*," in *Plato's* Timaeus *and the Foundations of Cosmology in Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy 1/34, eds. Thomas Leinkauf and Carlos Steel (Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press, 2005), 1–12, 1, stakes the claim that the *Timaeus* was the Platonic dialogue that contributed the most to the formation of 'Platonism' as a system.

38 On this categorization of Plutarch's *De animae proc.* and commentary on it, cf. Jan Opsomer, "Plutarch's *De Animae Procreatione in Timaeo*: Manipulation or Search for Consistency?," in *Philosophy, Science and Exegesis in Greek, Arabic and Latin Commentaries*, BICS Supplements 83, 2 vols., eds. Peter Adamson, Hans Baltussen, and M.W.F. Stone (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2004), 1:137–62, 139.

39 Karl Bayer and Gertrud Bayer, "Einführung," in *Marcus Tullius Cicero: Timaeus. De universitate/Timaeus. Über das Weltall*, Sammlung Tusculum, eds. Bayer and Bayer (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2006), 93–124, 96.

40 David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria and the* Timaeus *of Plato*, Philosophia Antiqua 44 (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 371.

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