THE SUPREMACY OF MESSIAH IN CREATION AND RECONCILIATION:
The Christ Hymn (1:15–20)

The most frequently cited and studied part of Colossians is the Christ Hymn of 1:15–20. Here (together with Phil 2:4–11; John 1:1–18; and Heb 1:1–4) we have one of the most sublime and profound descriptions of the person and work of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The scholarship on this short piece of text is immense and nearly everything about the passage is disputed.[1]

15 He is the image of the invisible God
the firstborn of all of creation
16 because in him were created
all things in the heavens and upon the earth
the visible and the invisible
whether thrones or lords or rulers or authorities
all things were created through him and for him.
17 And he is before all things
and all things are sustained in him.
18 And he is the head
of the body, the church.
He is the beginning
the firstborn from the dead in order that in all things he might have
preeminence
19 because in him [God] was pleased to have all his fullness dwell
20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things
by making peace through the blood of his cross through him
whether upon the earth or in the heavens

1. See Bruce 1984b; Wright 1991: 99–119; Barclay 1997: 58–68; C. Stettler 2000; Kooten 2003; McL. Wilson 2005: 122–59; Pizzuto 2006; Smith 2006: 146–72; Gordley 2007.

This passage is probably a Christian hymn or poem about Jesus Christ. The use of relative clauses in verses 15 and 18 is indicative of other confessional and hymnic materials in the New Testament (e.g., Rom 4:25; Phil 2:6; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 1:3; 1 Pet 2:21–24). Paul is probably using some traditional material given the unique vocabulary, the liturgical feel, and the near intrusion of the text upon the immediate literary context. However, it is almost impossible to gauge what the original "poem" was and what Paul has added, subtracted, or rearranged.[2]

The religious-historical background of this pre-Pauline poem is disputed in scholarship (some even suggest that it is a pre-Christian text that has been taken up by Christians). First, there have been proposals that the background to the poem lies in a gnostic redeemer myth where an archetypal human comes to redeem the human race from corruption and the mortal condition.[3] This is improbable because: (1) There is no extant pre-Christian evidence of a gnostic redeemer who entered into the world of darkness in order to redeem the sons of light by becoming the "redeemed Redeemer." There was then no gnostic redeemer myth that was waiting in the wings to be taken up, Christianized, and applied to Jesus. This "redeemed Redeemer" is himself a "myth" of mid-twentieth-century German scholarship. (2) It is not a "supra-historical" perspective or elements of a "metaphysical drama" that typified Gnosticism, rather, it was an "anti-cosmic dualism" that drove a wedge between the good god of salvation and the malevolent god of creation that lay at the core of Gnosticism. (3) A gnostic hymn would be unlikely to trace creation and reconciliation to the same divine being. (4) It is impossible to excise all Christian traits from the poem as "firstborn" and "reconcile" are near technical Christian terms here.

Second, others have argued that it reflects mediator figures from Hellenistic Judaism, most notably personifications of Wisdom extant in Jewish wisdom literature (e.g., Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon) and the *Logos* from Philo.[4] The problem is that while the parallels with Wisdom are numerous they are often oblique. For example, Wisdom is often regarded as a created entity (Prov 8:22–23; Sir 1:4, 9), whereas in the poem

2. If there is anything that might be distinctly Pauline here it is probably the reference to the church as the "body" and the "blood of his cross."

3. Cf. Käsemann 1964.

4. Cf. Lightfoot 1879: 143–44; Lohse 1971: 46–47; Martin 1973: 58; Barclay 1997: 66–67; Dunn 1998: 269, 275–77; Lincoln 2000: 605; Witherington 2007: 130–33.

Jesus is closer to the role of creator and is not part of the created order. What is more, there is no known reference to the world being created for Wisdom.[5]

Third, others argue that the poem represents a christological interpretation of Genesis 1 and the language of "image" and "beginning" finds suitable parallels there.[6] C. F. Burney proposes that the poem understands the figure of Wisdom in Prov 8:22 in light of Gen 1:1.[7] He makes much of the Hebrew compound word *bereshith* ("in the beginning") in highlighting the instrument of divine agency in creation. Overall, I find this third option the most likely. The poem is evidently rooted in the Jewish framework of monotheism, creation, and intermediaries with clear echoes of Gen 1:1, 26–27. As such, Jesus is the "image" of the new eschatological humanity and the "beginning" of the new creation. Though I admit that links with wisdom traditions are simply too plain to ignore.[8] I suggest, then, that it is precisely because Jewish wisdom theology was so indebted to Jewish views of creation that links between Col 1:15–20 and Sirach, Proverbs, Philo, and Wisdom of Solomon can be found.[9] The most analogous text, however, is probably 1 Cor 8:6. Taken together, 1 Cor 8:6 and Col 1:15–20 provide an affirmation of a Jewish creation scheme, Jewish monotheism, and God's action through intermediaries. Yet this well-

5. See the thorough critique in Fee 2007: 317–25.

6. Cf. Burney 1925; Davies 1955: 150–52; Moule 1957: 62; Wright 1986: 66–68; 1991: 99–119; Fee 2007: 299–300.

7. Burney 1925: 173–75; cf. Wright 1991: 111–12.

8. (1) In Gen 1:1 LXX, *archē* ("beginning") is a translation of the Hebrew *reshith* (Col 1:18); (2) *reshith* is a polysemous word and can mean "beginning," "first-born," "chief," and "head" (Col 1:15, 18); (3) the preposition *be* ("in, with, by") in *bereshith* might correspond to the prepositional clauses "in him," "through him," and "for him" (= Col 1:16–17, 19–20); (4) in the LXX *eikōn* ("image") occurs in Gen 1:26–27 for Adam (Col 1:15); (5) in terms of links with Jewish Hellenistic wisdom traditions we should note that Wisdom is among the first things created in the "beginning" (Prov 8:22–23; cf. Sir 1:4, 9; 24:9), Wisdom is the "image" of Gods goodness (Wis 7:26), elsewhere "all things were made in wisdom" (Ps 103:24 LXX; cf. Wis 8:5; 9:1–2; Prov 3:19; Philo *Det.* 54), Philo calls Wisdom the "beginning and image and sight of God" (*Leg.* 1.43) and the Logos is "the beginning and name of God, and the Word, and man according to God's image, and he who sees Israel" (*Conf.* 146). According to Smith (2006: 161), "It can be concluded that *eikōn tou theou* is reflective of a Jewish tradition of an anthropomorphous hypostatic representation of God."

9. For a combination of both Old Testament imagery and Jewish Hellenistic wisdom traditions see Dahl 1964: 434; O'Brien 1982: 38–40, 43–44, 61–62. Beale (2007: 855) also shows that wisdom and adamic traditions are not mutually exclusive.

known paradigm is radically redrawn around a particular view of Israel's Messiah as participating in the divine acts of creation and redemption.

The structure is particularly hard to determine, mainly because the wording is asymmetrical, and the shift from vv. 12–14 to vv. 15–20 is hardly abrupt. The most likely option appears to be that the poem is framed in two major strophes (vv. 15–16; 18b–20) both beginning with a relative clause and with two lines (vv. 17–18a) sandwiched in the middle functioning as an abridgment.[10] In my opinion, the coherence and unity of the poem is based around certain key motifs in both strophes that are activated by certain words.

He is . . .	Divine Personhood: The identity of Jesus in relation to God.
Firstborn	Divine Preeminence: The supremacy of Jesus over creation and new creation.
Because	Divine Perspective: An explanation of how Jesus relates to the prerogatives and presence of God.
In him	Divine Agency: What purposes God works out through the Son.
Whether . . .	Divine Authority: Signals the extent of the Son's reign over creation and salvation.

In terms of a rhetorical function, this passage operates much like a *propositio*, which sets forth the central thesis of the epistle.[11] It also has some affinities with Asiatic rhetoric, which tended to be far more ornamented, flowery, and even pompous at times. This rich tapestry of highly poetic and poignant christological imagery is set forth in order to

10. Cf. Martin 1973: 55–56; Lincoln 2000: 602–3; McL. Wilson 2005: 126–27, although I remain unsure about making vv. 17–18a a "strophe" of its own.

11. According to MacDonald (2008: 67) the principle themes of Colossians are announced in this hymn, including: Christ's preeminence as foundation for the arguments against the "philosophers," the reigning Christ prepares the way for the proclamation that believers have been raised and co-enthroned with Christ, and body symbolism which is central to the cosmic and social integration of Colossians. For Lohse (1971: 178) this section provides the *leitmotif* that runs throughout the letter and is the basis for all subsequent christological reflection. Barth and Blanke (1994: 194) say of Col 1:15–20, "These thoughts form the basis for the principal affirmation of Col." As such I disagree with Witherington (2007: 128) who sees it as part of the *narratio*, and Lincoln (2000: 557) who identifies it within the *exordium*.

persuade the Colossians of the sufficiency and supremacy of the Messiah over all things in creation and make him the exclusive agent of salvation. Socially the poem functions here to reinforce the ideological boundaries between the "faith" of the Pauline churches and the deviance of the philosophy that devalues the place of Christ in the cosmological order.[12] Indeed, Paul's inclusion of this poem is intended as a polemic primarily against a particular cosmology upon which the teachers' aberrant Christology is based. The issue is far more than, "Is Jesus God or is he only quasi-divine?" More appropriately, it asks what place Jesus occupies in the cosmological order in relation to the one God of Israel, and to various spiritual entities with varying degrees of power and authority as well.[13] The poem is deployed here in aid of creating a symbolic universe that is defined chiefly by a "christological monotheism" over and against the angelology of the philosophy.[14] All this through a short piece of primitive Christian hymnody!

The Supremacy of the Messiah in Creation (1:15–16)

The content in vv. 12–14 might represent a piece of traditional material like a baptismal liturgy, but it is impossible to tell its origins and function.[15] Nonetheless, Paul proceeds to include some traditional material in vv. 15–20. Verses 15–17 focus specifically on the Messiah's relation to creation. Paul begins with **He is the image of the invisible God**. **Image** (*eikōn*) conveys the sense of that which has the same form as something else.[16] Jesus has the same form or reflection as God, which is reminiscent of Phil 2:6, where Jesus was in the "form of God" prior to his incarna-

12. Cf. Wright 1991: 118.

13. According to Dunn (1996: 97), Paul moves from a "cosmology of creation to a cosmology of reconciliation."

14. On a symbolic universe in Colossians see MacDonald 2008: 68–70; Talbert 2007: 192–93.

15. On 1:12–14 as traditional material see Cannon 1983: 12–19. He writes: "While the traditional character of 1:12–14 cannot be proved with certainty, the evidence points to the probability of such a conclusion. The opening participle *eucharistountes* points to the confessional character of these verses. The change of pronouns and the style and language strongly suggest that the writer drew on an outside source. And finally, the manner in which the concepts related to the Exodus motif are presented intimate the sacrament of baptism as the source of the homology" (19).

16. BDAG 282.

tion; Heb 1:3, where Jesus is the "radiance" and "exact replica" of God's glory and being; and obviously 2 Cor. 4:4, where the glorious Christ is the "image of God." The key ideas are representation and manifestation.[17] The mention of **image** also relates back to Gen 1:26–27 where Adam and Eve were the bearers of the divine image. What the *imago Dei* (image of God) exactly is remains disputed by theologians. Since kings in the ancient Near East were supposed to be the image or shadow of God, it may mean no more than that humanity is royal in God's eyes.[18] That accords with the role given to humanity as rulers over creation in Gen 1:26–30 and the focus of the poem on Jesus's sovereignty. As the image of God, then, Jesus is the new eschatological Adam of God's renewed creation, which corresponds once more with what Paul says elsewhere in 1 Cor 15:45, 47, where Christ, by virtue of his resurrection, is the "last Adam" and "second man." The image is related to the **invisible God**. That God was invisible (i.e., beyond the realm of human perception) was axiomatic in Jewish thought and reaffirmed in the New Testament (e.g., Rom 1:20; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 11:27). Indeed, as the image of God, Jesus makes the invisible visible for all to behold, underscoring the revelatory function of his imaging of God.[19] In sum, as the **image of the invisible God**, Jesus is: (1) of the same likeness or form of God; (2) the beginning of the new eschatological humanity,;and (3) the one who reveals God to human beings in his very person.

Paul then adds that Jesus is the **firstborn of all of creation**. **Firstborn** literally means "eldest child" (e.g., Gen 25:25 LXX; Luke 2:7; Heb 11:28). In a Greco-Roman household the firstborn was the designated heir of the estate, while in the Old Testament the firstborn son had special privileges of inheritance (Deut 21:15–17) and was dedicated to God (e.g., Exod 22:29; Num 3:12–13; 8:17–18). We should note also that Israel is called God's "firstborn son" (Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9; *4 Ezra* 6:58; *Pss. Sol.* 18:4; Philo *Fug.* 208) and Israel's king is likewise referred to as the "firstborn" and the "highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps 89:27). The word **firstborn** (*prōtotokos*) has also been a playground for ancient and modern theologians in light of controversies about the nature of Christ (especially

17. Lightfoot 1879: 145–46.

18. Cf. *NDIEC* 9:15, which mentions a papyrus ca. 221–25 BCE that refers to a king who is said to be "the living image of God."

19. Cf. Martin (1973: 57): "The description is revelatory, more than ontological."

the Arian controversy of the fourth century).[20] Does **firstborn** imply that Jesus is merely the most supreme created being? Hardly! The main point is surely Jesus's function in bringing creation into being and his sovereignty over the entire created order. That authority encompasses the material and immaterial realms, the earthly and heavenly spheres, human and angelic creatures.[21] Moreover, if Paul had wanted to suggest that Jesus was the first of God's creatures to be formed he would have used the adjective *prōtoktistos* ("created first") or the noun *prōtoplastos* ("first made"). The words for "firstborn" and "first-fruits" are ascribed to Jesus in the New Testament where they carry connotations of priority since Jesus is the firstborn of a new humanity which is to be glorified as its exalted Lord is glorified (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:20, 23; Rev 1:5 and Col 1:18).[22] In Hebrews, "firstborn" implies a special status and higher rank over and above others (e.g. Heb 1:6). As the **firstborn** Jesus is: (1) God's appointed ruler over all of creation with priority in time and primacy in rank; (2) Israel's Messiah; and (3) a Son of God like Adam and Israel.

A rationale for these statements is given in a causal clause **because in him were created all things**, wherein **all things** encompasses every imaginable sphere including **heavens** and **earth,** things **visible** and **invisible**. The element of divine agency is repeated again when it is stated that all things were created **through him** as well. This underscores the notion of God the Father creating the world through his preexistent Son. In many ways, the Son appropriates the role normally attributed to the Spirit in the creation of the cosmos. What is unparalleled, christologically speaking, is that Paul says that the universe came into being **for him**.[23] It is hard to emphasize what a striking remark this is as it makes creation subordinate to Jesus the Messiah. This could mean that the universe came into existence for his benefit, but more likely it means that the universe exists in order to be his designated domain of authority. It is an authority

20. Cf. Lightfoot 1879: 148–50; Gorday 2000: 12–14.

21. Cf. H. Balz (*EDNT* 3:190–91) who sees "firstborn" as not just a "matter of purely temporal priority of the pre-existence Christ, but rather of a superiority of essence."

22. BDAG 894.

23. Cf. Martin (1973: 58): "No Jewish thinker ever rose to these heights in daring to predict that wisdom was the ultimate goal of creation"; and Lightfoot (1879: 155): "This expression has no parallel, and could have none, in the Alexandrian phraseology and doctrine." I think the closest analogy to this text is *4 Ezra* 6:53–59, which says that the world was created for "Israel," and the *Shepherd of Hermas* 8:1, which says that the world was created for the "church."

that rivals and exceeds **thrones or lords or rulers or authorities**.[24] These most likely refer to hostile angelic powers associated with the bondage of the present age that hold parts of the world in the sway of their dark grip (see Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 8:5. Eph 1:21; 6:12).[25] Later Paul will say quite dramatically that Jesus is their conqueror and champion (2:15).

The Body of the Universe and the Body of the Messiah (1:17–18a)

The following verses inject, or perhaps even interrupt, the flow of the poem with some brief remarks about Jesus's priority to creation, his preservation of creation, and also of his authority over the church. Jesus is not the first of the created things but he is **before all things**, which lucidly ascribes to him preexistence. In another striking christological remark, Paul says that **all things are sustained in him**, which means that Christ is the reason why there is a *cosmos* instead of *chaos*.[26] This role is similar to that of the *Logos* in Stoic philosophy where the *Logos* is the captain or pilot of the universe. While the authority of Jesus is cosmic in scope, it is no less ecclesial. Even as the cosmic lord, Jesus remains the **head of the body, the church**. References to the church as the **body** are common in Paul[27] and the metaphor was well known in antiquity and could even be applied to the universe (e.g., Plato *Tim.* 28B).[28] Jesus is supreme over both such bodies.[29] As the "body of Messiah" the church is the physical

24. Arnold (1996: 254) points out that the *archai* ("rulers") and *exousiai* ("authorities") are part of the Jewish vocabulary for angelic beings, but are not common in Hellenism for gods, spirits, demons, or mediatory beings.

25. Cf. Gnilka 1980: 127; Arnold 1996: 253. Philo (*Gig.* 6), commenting on Gen 6:2, says, "Those beings, whom other philosophers call demons, Moses usually calls angels; and they are souls hovering in the air" (trans. Yonge).

26. Lightfoot 1879: 156.

27. Cf. 1 Cor 10:16–17; 12:12, 27; Rom 12:5; and more parallels in Eph 1:22–23; 4:15.

28. Cf. van Koonten 2003: 17–30, who supposes that a Stoic and Middle Platonist conception of the universe as a body stands behind 1:17, 2:9–10, 17, 19. At this point, the hymn is Stoic to the extent that it is concerned with the stability and coherence of the universe in the sense of what holds it together (2003: 19–20). But this section lacks the view of the cosmos as animated by the divine world-soul; instead, it is controlled by the head who is clearly the Messiah (Bruce 1984b: 105).

29. The metaphor of "body" could also be applied to the Roman people (Livy *Hist.* 2.32.9–12; Epictetus *Disc.* 2.10.4–5). We have an implied contrast between two bodies:

representation of Jesus upon the earth. The church (*ekklēsia*) here means the universal church. Jesus is the **head** of the church, not in the sense of its source, but as its titular head and leader. While the poem has a high Christology, it also has a high ecclesiology, as the one who is the creator of the cosmos is also the head of the church. However disjoined these verses initially appear to be, they subtly shift the subject matter from creation (all things are sustained in him) to reconciliation (the church as the body of people reconciled to God) and so assist in the progression of the poem to the next subject matter.

The Supremacy of the Messiah in Reconciliation (1:18b–20)

The next strophe of the poem begins with another relative clause, and two things stand out in juxtaposition here, viz., that Jesus is the **beginning** and **the firstborn from the dead**. The mention of **beginning** is a fairly obvious echo of Gen 1:1: "In the beginning . . ." As we saw earlier the word **firstborn** in the New Testament is used largely to denote Jesus as the prototype and provision for God's renewed humanity. The Jewish hope of resurrection, though not held uniformly by all devout Jews in the first century, looked ahead to the day when God would renew and recreate the entire world and return it to a period of Edenic goodness. Salvation is not escape from the created world through the release of an immortal soul encased in a body (as in Greek philosophy) or the liberation of the divine spark from its fleshly chrysalis (as in Gnosticism), rather salvation consists of the redemption of our bodies to live and abide in God's new world (see Rom 8:23). That new creation has kicked off, proleptically and quite unexpectedly, in the resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is also significant christologically because he is raised and exalted by God in order to rule beside God. It is hardly surprising then that New Testament references to Jesus as the firstborn or firstfruits of the general resurrection are bound up with the reign of God over the nations and the created order (see especially Rev 1:5–7 and 1 Cor 15:20–25).

Paul provides two reasons why God has purposed to launch this new creation through his Son and what singularly suited him for this redemptive role. First, God's plan was that in all things Jesus would have **preeminence**; analogous words are "supremacy" (NIV, NJB) or "first

one headed by Caesar and the other headed by Jesus.

place" (NRSV, NASB, NET).[30] Here we are talking about far more than being a very important person. We are talking about authority, honor, and power rolled into one. The most analogous background I can think of is the Roman emperor Augustus who claimed to exceed everyone in *auctoritas*, that is, a combination of power and prestige. The Augustan age created a pyramid of power and hierarchy that put him inviolably at the top. Indicative of this is that Augustus held the proconsulship of Rome well beyond the normal limitations of service; he was invested with the power of the tribunate with right of veto over the senate; he was the *princeps* or chief citizen of the government; he had direct military command of over three quarters of the Roman legions, the power of intervention in imperial provinces; and he was given titles like *pontifex maximus*, or "high priest" of the empire, and *Imperator Caesar divi filius*, "emperor and son of a god." The implied rhetoric in this poem is that as the preeminent one Jesus is the real *auctoritas* over and against the pretentious claims of earthly rulers to be sovereign and divine. This becomes all the more powerful if we remember that Paul is imprisoned, in Rome or Ephesus, during the reign of Emperor Nero when writing this. Roman emperors, at death or even while alive, could be lauded as a god, a son of god, or be numbered among a series of deities in a cosmic, cyclic order.[31] Political potentates and heavenly powers were intertwined in antiquity (e.g., Isa 14:4–27). But Caesar was at best a twisted parody of the real Lord of the world and at worst a malevolent tyrant who created "empire" and "peace" through the application of violence. The Pictish King Calgacus is portrayed as saying: "These plunderers of the world having taken all the land, now claim the seas, so that even if we fly to the sea there is no safety from them. They kill and slay, and take what is not theirs, and call it Empire. They make a desert and call it Peace."[32] The Jesus of Colossians brooks no rivals, be they the malevolent powers of the cosmos or brutal dictators in a foreign land. A second thought is proffered by Paul: Jesus has unique qualification to be the agent of reconciliation. Paul says that **in him [God] was pleased to have all his fullness dwell**. The subject for the verb **pleased** (*eudokeō*) is missing, but the implied subject is probably God (or perhaps a periphrasis: "God in all his fullness"). God was

30. The word *prōteuōn* might even be an honorific title. See *NDIEC* 2:96; and W. Michaelis, *TDNT* 6:881–82.

31. Maier 2005: 339.

32. Tacitus *Agr.* 30.

pleased to have **all his fullness** inhabit the Messiah. The word for **fullness** (*plērōma*) was a near technical term in Valentinian Gnosticism for the totality of intermediaries or emanations radiating from the supreme God. There may be an implied critique here of something from Hellenistic philosophy that eventually became part of a gnostic cosmological framework and might even be part of the Colossian philosophy,[33] but the main point is surely christological: the fullness of God—God's word, wisdom, glory, Spirit, and power—dwells in the Messiah.

In much the same way that this poem attributes to Jesus agency in creation, so now he is regarded as God's agent in reconciliation. Paul says that **through him** or by the activity of the Messiah, God was able to **reconcile to himself all things**. The word **reconcile** (*katalassō*) means to exchange hostility for a friendly relationship.[34] This implies a prior state of alienation and hostility between Creator and the creation which has now been restored (see Col 1:12; 2:15). Here we find that the offended party, God, takes the initiative in reconciliation in order to remove the hostility between himself and his creation. Furthermore, the object of reconciliation is not merely human beings, but **all things**, which gives reconciliation a cosmic scope as Paul says in 2 Cor 5:19: "God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself."[35] As Lohse comments, the "universe has been reconciled in that heaven and earth have been brought back into their divinely created and determined order . . . the universe is again under its head and . . . cosmic peace has returned."[36] The mechanism of reconciliation and thus **peace** is through the **blood of his cross**, and Paul elsewhere refers to the blood of Jesus's death with its particular atoning function in securing forgiveness, redemption, and justification (e.g., Rom 3:24–25; 4:7; 5:9). Just as things in the **heavens** and the **earth** were created in him, so now are all things in the same realms are reconciled to God through the blood of the cross.

33. Against reading second century Gnostic systems into this first century text see Lohse 1971: 57; Dunn 1996: 86 n. 8; McL. Wilson 2005: 153–54, 158–59; Lightfoot 1879: 158–59; contrasted with Baur 2003 [1873–75]: 2:9–12; Käsemann 1964: 158–59.

34. BDAG 521.

35. Cf. Bird 2008a: 104–6.

36. Lohse 1971: 59.