

THE DOCTRINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY
AS SEEN IN COLOSSIANS 1:15-17

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ABSTRACT

THE TRANSCENDENCE OF CHRIST AND ITS
CONTRIBUTION TO THE DOCTRINE OF
ANTHROPOLOGY AS SEEN IN
COLOSSIANS 1:15-17

by

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ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH

Thesis

Andrews University

School of Graduate Studies

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Title: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF CHRIST AND ITS CONTRIBUTION
TO THE DOCTRINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY AS SEEN IN
COLOSSIANS 1:15-17

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Problem

The theological doctrine of anthropology has been almost entirely eclipsed by a sociological and biological approach to the study of man. It is suggested that the neglect of this doctrine arises from a failure to inform anthropology by an adequate doctrine of creation. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine Col 1:15-17 for the implications it can make theologically to a contemporary doctrine of anthropology.

Method and Procedure

Col 1:15-17 was selected as being one of the principal creation passages in the New Testament, and was submitted to

historico-grammatical analysis. The research proceeded in four stages. First, all of the significant English literature was surveyed which related to the Colossian problem and interpretation of the pericope; secondly, consideration was given to the false teaching at Colossae as it related specifically to the Christology and anthropology, so as to provide an historical context. Thirdly, the pericope was examined in detail both structurally and exegetically. Fourthly, the theological implications for Christology and anthropology were drawn.

Results

It was discovered that the primary concern of the writer of Colossians was to stress the supremacy of Christ over all creation. This was accomplished by presenting in hymnic form the concepts of Christ's pre-existence, his mediatorial function as revealer of the Father, and his transcendence over everything created, including angelic powers. Preeminently, Christ is presented as the Creator, the One through whom all things came into being, and the goal towards which all creation is directed. This transcendence implies complete dependence of man upon the Creator for life, sustenance, and meaning of existence. The supremacy of Christ over all powers gives confidence to Christian commitment, and denies trust in any power other than the Creator.

Conclusions

It was concluded that Col 1:15-17 is a hymnic passage affirming the transcendence and supremacy of Christ, and the causal indebtedness of all creation to him. This implies that

creature-to-Creator dependence is a significant factor in any doctrine of anthropology.

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A Thesis
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Thomas F. Torrance, in discussing the role of the Church in the new era of scientific and cosmological change, stated:

For the first time, then, in the history of thought Christian theology finds itself in the throes of a new scientific culture which is not antithetical to it, but which operates with a non-dualistic outlook upon the universe which is not inconsistent with the Christian faith, even at the crucial points of creation and incarnation.¹

He sees this as an opportune time for Christian theology to speak to contemporary man, man who is in a transitional period of chaotic ideas. Diverse viewpoints concerning ecology, man's place in nature, and the psycho-physical basis of man's existence witness to the need of a clear Christian message.

Our day, then, is one of widespread disintegration of form, not least in the arts and humanities, of fragmentation and pluralism in society with corresponding confusion in the social sciences, and of ecological chaos resulting from the technological decomposition of the organised coherences in nature. While all these are features that arise at the phenomenal level, they are not just ways in which modern society is developing and to which we must give expression in the communication of the Christian message, but are symptoms of serious disorder below the surface of human existence, which must be set right and to which the church must address itself.²

¹Thomas F. Torrance, "The Church in the New Era of Scientific and Cosmological Change," in Theological Foundations for Ministry, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), p. 755.

²Ibid., p. 756.

A contemporary presentation of the doctrine of creation is required, especially of that dimension which relates to man in creation.

Such a presentation of the anthropological aspect of the doctrine of creation is difficult to find. Denbeaux noted in 1958 that "it cannot be said that Protestantism has a clear doctrine of creation."¹ His observation is still pertinent. Heron, in evaluating a century of Protestant thought, sees theologians affected by the recognition of change and randomness in the physical universe and in retreat from the abyss of meaninglessness opening up before them. In consequence they

. . . have been tempted either to abandon the doctrine of creation as no longer tenable or to reinterpret it in a fashion which will preserve it from any direct connection with the conclusions of science--and to take the path to one or another of the cities of refuge labelled 'inwardness', 'personal and spiritual values', 'human existence', 'religion' or even 'revelation'. In this way, the erosion of the sense of God as Creator, and of the natural world as his creation, which can be traced in the development of modern science, has found its mirror-image in a good deal of theology as well.²

Torrance sees this reinterpretation as the worst approach to contemporary man, for, in essence, it tempts theologians to allow themselves

. . . to be panicked by the avant-gardes into translating the Christian message into current social manifestations which are themselves part of the sickness of humanity. . . .

¹Fred Denbeaux, "Creation," in A Handbook of Christian Theology, ed. Marvin Halverson and Arthur Cohen (London: Collins, 1958), p. 72.

²Alasdair I. C. Heron, A Century of Protestant Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 203.

I want to challenge them to follow the example of the Greek Fathers in undertaking the courageous, revolutionary task of a Christian reconstruction of the foundations of culture: nothing less is worthy of the Christian Gospel.¹

Such a task is formidable, but necessary. A contemporary Christian apologetic cannot be adequate unless informed by a clear doctrine of creation. What is particularly in view here is not a doctrine of origins, or a cosmology, but rather a doctrine which delineates the status of man, his origin and his relationship to the Creator. An understanding of truth in this area must undergird any doctrine of salvation and Christian living and will give relevance to the church's pronouncements in the area of ethics and human behaviour.

In an endeavour to make a contribution towards such an objective, this thesis examines one passage from the Pauline corpus to determine its contribution toward the anthropological dimension of the doctrine of creation. Col 1:15-17 is part of a Christological passage in which Paul confronts the situation in Colossae with a statement of Christ's lordship over creation. Guthrie points out that it is a "high Christology."² In summary of the passage, he states:

Christ is pre-eminent over all other creatures and over creation itself. In fact, all things were not only created by Him but for Him. He is seen at the centre of the universe, sovereign over all principalities and powers, over all agencies, that is to say, which might challenge His authority.³

¹Torrance, p. 756.

²Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, rev. 3d ed. (London: Tyndale Press, 1970), p. 551.

⁴Ibid.

This examination of the passage will be literary, exegetical and theological. While the genuineness of Pauline authorship of Colossians has been widely contested, it will be assumed for the purposes of this study. Questions of dating and historical setting will be considered as study is given to the problem which gave rise to the Colossian letter.¹

¹For a full discussion of the place where the letter was written see Bo Reicke, "Caesarea, Rome, and the Captivity Epistles," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (London: Paternoster Press, 1970), pp. 277-86.

CHAPTER II

COLOSSIANS 1:15-17--THE SCOPE OF INTERPRETATION

Introduction

Col 1:15-17 is a problematic New Testament passage. Scholarly opinion has been divided over issues such as whether it is Pauline in origin, deutero-Pauline, or has pre-Pauline material incorporated into a Pauline document. This passage, amongst others, has caused Colossians to be excluded from the Pauline corpus by some critical scholars. Issues of authorship are not the concern of this research; but rather, the exegesis of the actual text.

In order to exegete the pericope it is first necessary to see it in terms of the purpose of the epistle. And this reveals further the problematic nature of the passage. Exegetes are divided over the background to Colossians. Obviously the epistle was written to meet a specific need. The reconstruction of that need has brought forth differing viewpoints. The purpose of this chapter is to survey these viewpoints, notice the scope of interpretation presented, and observe where the weight of scholarly opinion rests.

J. B. Lightfoot in his 1879 commentary on Colossians used the term "Colossian Heresy" to designate the false teaching that

he felt Colossians was written to refute.¹ Later scholars have frequently used Lightfoot's term though it seems preferable to use an alternative description--"Colossian Problem."² The reason for this is that there is no surety as to the exact nature of the teaching being opposed, and "heresy" may be unjustified.³

Paul was a controversialist, polemic in style and in situation. Col 1:15-17 is polemical in its intent, but what was the situation being addressed? Colossians in itself is only part of a two-way exchange. We are limited to examining the one part of the communication to find hints as to the expressions of the other party. Henry notes that it is "notoriously difficult to reconstruct the 'Colossian heresy' from the letter's refutation of it."⁴ Yet the task must be undertaken by the exegete.

The varying interpretations surveyed here differ partly because of each individual exegete's location of the letter in a somewhat different historical context. These conclusions have in themselves been determined by considerations of authorship

¹J. B. Lightfoot, Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon ([London]: Macmillan, 1879; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 73.

²See Fred O. Francis and Wayne A. Meeks, Conflict at Colossae, rev. ed. (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975).

³G. B. Caird argues that the term is "loose, almost to the point of anachronism," because heresy implies a well-established orthodoxy, and this distinction could not be drawn until late second century." Paul's Letters from Prison (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) in the Revised Standard Version (Oxford: University Press, 1976), p. 160.

⁴Patrick Henry, New Directions in New Testament Study (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 164.

and dating.¹ The broad scope of interpretation has resulted from a changing understanding of Gnosticism and Judaism. Particularly since the discovery of the Qumran literature in 1947, there has been an interest in possible connections between Qumran and the problem at Colossae.

While differing interpretations are here described under different subdivisions, it must be emphasized that distinction is somewhat arbitrary. There can be no clear-cut separation between any of the viewpoints presented. Burgess explains:

The religious world of the time must not be thought of as a kind of pie, with each piece being a different religious persuasion. Instead, that religious world was like a whirlpool, mixing the various religions and drawing them into its center, syncretism. Some distinct lines remained, some flotsam whirled in quasi-independence, but the pull was strong. "Normative Judaism" was not very normative. The distinction between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism has proven to be less than complete. Discoveries at Qumran and elsewhere indicate how syncretism had included Judaism. Who could help being caught up by this time? Magic, astrology, and the mystery religions were everywhere.

The famous Gnostic systems of Valentinus and Basilides will not appear until later, but the Gnostic "spirit" and "proto-Gnosticism" were already present.²

In the following survey, then, there is consideration of the positions of prominent exegetes. Their main point of emphasis is presented, while recognizing that this may be one influence

¹Thus Clayton Bowen states: "A fundamental discrepancy runs through the present text of the letter. The anti-heretical passages posit a developed situation and a late date; most of the rest of the letter posits a primitive situation and an early date." "The Original Form of Paul's Letter to the Colossians," Journal of Biblical Literature 43(1924): 191.

²Joseph Burgess, "The Letter to the Colossians," in Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, the Pastoral Epistles, Proclamation Commentaries, ed. Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 41-42.

among a number. The Colossian problem is considered with reference to two aspects. First, there is the nature of the problem itself--what it was and how it may have developed. Secondly, there is the answer which Paul gives to meet the problem. It is the second aspect which has concerned exegetes the most, particularly in reference to the possible source of some of his answer material. In the literature survey which follows the dual consideration of the problem must be kept in mind. Some exegetes focus more on the problem itself while others detail Paul's response.

Gnosticism and the Colossian Problem¹

Outstanding among those who see a Gnostic background to the Colossian problem is Ernst Käsemann. His treatment of Col 1:15-17 is entitled "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy."² In establishing the Sitz im Leben for the passage, he first examines its structure. Following Lohmeyer, he sees the passage as a "classic example of hymnodic form, unparalleled in the New Testament."³ The hymnic construction he sees as irregular, through the insertion of obvious Christian elements. He concludes that "these words are to be seen as a Christian redaction of a pre-Christian hymn."⁴ Käsemann goes back to Col 1:13 for the

¹The categories employed are similar to those used by Peter O'Brien to designate possible backgrounds to the Colossian hymn. See his Colossians, Philemon, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1982), pp. 37-40.

²Ernst Käsemann, Essays on New Testament Themes (London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 149-68.

³Ibid., p. 150.

⁴Ibid., p. 152.

beginning of the hymnic construction. Then he observes that by bracketing eight of the total of 112 words in the text, every specific Christian motif is eradicated. The introductory thanksgiving in vs. 12 he considers liturgical. The reference to Christ in vs. 13 as "beloved Son"¹ he sees (following Bornkamm) as a paraphrase of the proclamation of the Father concerning Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:11). In result, "the sense of the liturgical redaction of the pre-Christian hymn is to convert it into a baptismal liturgy."²

Käsemann sees an underlying gnostic mythical source in expressions such as "in him all things hold together" (vs. 17), and "in him all the fulness" (vs. 19). He states:

Even the title 'First-born from the dead' can no longer be put into this [Christian] category by anyone who has to some extent familiarized himself with gnostic terminology, in which the Redeemer, acting as the pathfinder and leader of those who are his, makes a breach in death's domain. Similarly, creation and new creation are invariably linked together in the myth of the Archetypal Man who is also the Redeemer.³

Käsemann's thinking is also influenced by πλήρωμα in v.19. The expression "is only properly comprehensible in a gnostic setting. . . . The subject, therefore, is Pleroma, the all-embracing, all-uniting fullness of the new aeon."⁴ The gnostic myth he acknowledges as present in a form characteristic of Hellenistic Judaism.⁵

¹Scripture references throughout are to the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

²Käsemann, p. 164.

³Ibid., p. 154.

⁴Ibid., p. 158.

⁵Ibid., p. 155.

The purpose of the Colossian passage is this:

The Colossian community is threatened by false teaching. This false teaching must be repelled. This is done by anticipating antithesis by thesis, polemic and paraenesis by the confession of the community. But the confession of the community is contained in the baptismal liturgy. This provides both a base for the necessary battle and at the same time the authority under whose banner the battle is to be fought.¹

Rudolf Bultmann is of similar mind to Käsemann. Though he does not specifically examine the passage in question, he states that "Col., the pastorals, Jude, and II Pet. also polemicize against a gnosticizing Christianity."² In the warning in Colossians against philosophy, "of course, not Greek philosophy is meant but Gnostic speculation."³ He follows Käsemann in his brief comment on 1:15-20:

The fact that the author in 1:15-20 made use of a pre-Christian hymn that had already received a Christian editing before him proves to what an extent Christian craving for knowledge had already mingled with cosmological speculation.⁴

In the first volume of his Theology, Bultmann considers Gnostic motifs. Cosmic reference he sees as Gnostic, hence to his thinking, the Colossian author in 1:20 makes the church a gnostic reality by giving it the character of a cosmic entity.⁵ In the same verse he maintains that "Biblical tradition has been forsaken and Gnostic mythology is at work."⁶

¹Ibid., pp. 165-66.

²Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, 2 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1952-55), 2:132.

³Ibid., 2:133.

⁴Ibid., 2:134.

⁵Ibid., 1:178-79.

⁶Ibid., 2:149.

Günther Bornkamm is a further exponent of a gnostic heresy at work in Colossae. He bases his study on the concept of the "elemental spirits of the universe" [2:8] as personal, angelic powers."¹ This he sees as the first and most important characteristic of the Colossian heresy.² The fulness of deity dwelt in these powers. Investigation of the milieu of early Christianity revealed that the "elemental spirits" meant "the elementary powers and forces of the cosmos, which hold sway mysteriously and peremptorily in the phenomena of nature and the destinies of the human world, threatening and bestowing life."³ He states his conclusion firmly:

No doubt seems possible to me, however, on one point: The Colossian doctrine of the elements belongs to the ancient mythology and speculation of the Oriental Aeon-theology, which was wide-spread and active in Hellenistic syncretism. Its origins reach back to the Indo-Iranian cosmogony and its conception of a world-deity, whose gigantic body was composed of the elements of the universe. . . . Redemption means apotheosis of the gnostic to the Aeon. The process of redemption is served by the mystery procedures, revelatory discourses, and magical prayers, which transmit to the gnostic and initiate the vision of the heavenly elements and thus accomplish his deification.

From a series of peculiar expressions in the Letter to Colossians can be inferred that the Colossian heresy promised to its adepts redemption and deification in this sense.⁴

Bornkamm thus sees the heresy as syncretistic with elements from the mystery religions. He sees parallels between Colossians and the deification mystery in the "Mithras liturgy."⁵

¹His essay is in English translation, "The Heresy of Colossians," in Francis and Meeks, pp. 123-45.

²Ibid., p. 123.

³Ibid., p. 125.

⁴Ibid., p. 126.

⁵Ibid., p. 127.

He also sees it as inclusive of Jewish elements, such that he designates it as a "variety of Jewish gnosticism."¹ The Jewish element is seen in law being set over against Christ (though he uses a parallel from Galatians to do so). The festivals mentioned in 2:16 are particularly Jewish.

Bornkamm sees his reconstruction as supported by documents of Jewish gnosticism, in particular the Book of Elchasai and the Pseudo-Clementines. He sees support for his thesis, but not identity of doctrine, between these works and the Colossian heresy.

In sum, Bornkamm sees that the Colossian heresy "originates in a gnosticized Judaism, in which Jewish and Iranian-Persian elements, and surely also influence of Chaldean astrology, have peculiarly alloyed themselves and have united with Christianity."²

One who appears to follow Bornkamm in his interpretation of "elemental spirits" is R. M. Grant. He considers Paul's own spiritual world to lie somewhere between Jewish apocalyptic thought and the fully developed Gnosticism of the second century in that much of the significance of Christ lies in his victory over the evil powers. He then observes:

If Paul explained his Gospel in this way, it is not surprising that some of his converts went even farther than he did. This development in their thought helps explain the situation which we find at Colossae and reflected in the letter to the Colossians. As far as one can tell--and certainly some of this analysis has to be guesswork--the Colossians believed that there was a pleroma or fullness of divine being which was made up of the "elemental spirits of the world," the angels. They worshiped these angels and held that they themselves were bound to obey not only the Jewish law, which the angels had given, but also certain ascetic requirements.¹

¹Ibid., p. 130.

²Ibid., p. 135.

³R. M. Grant, Gnosticism and Early Christianity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 158-59.

Grant makes the assertion that in correcting the angelology of the Colossians, Paul presents his own "realized eschatology." He goes so far as to say that Paul himself is moving in the direction of Gnosticism and was more dualistic than the Colossians.¹

Wilfred L. Knox in his study of heresy and orthodoxy in the early church described the false teaching in Colossae as a "relatively simple type of Gnosis of the earlier type before Valentinus had introduced the complication which was bound to result from the attempt at a complete duplication of things celestial and things terrestrial."² This simple Gnosticism was also Jewish in character:

The synagogue of Phrygia, with a tendency to laxity in other directions, would be particularly disposed to come into contact with the types of speculation which were coming into vogue in the Hellenistic world and were beginning to have a certain influence on orthodox Judaism. Where Judaism was already unorthodox it would naturally be disposed to admit such speculations to a degree which the stricter synagogues would at once reject. We have no account of the mission of Epaphras to Colossae; but it appears that after the lapse of some years from Paul's mission to Ephesus, apparently after his arrival in Rome, Colossae was the scene of an attempt to fit the Gospel into the fashionable scheme of Hellenistic religion, as interpreted by circles which had a definitely Jewish character.³

Paul counters the false teaching by presenting the conception that "the wisdom of God or the ideal cosmos was also the 'beloved' of God, and thus could be clearly identified with the historical

¹Ibid., p. 160.

²Wilfred L. Knox, St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles (Cambridge: University Press, 1939), p. 155.

³Ibid., p. 149.

Jesus. . . The coincidence of the Messianic and cosmogonic titles could not have been more appropriate to Paul's argument."¹

It may be concluded that there is a body of exegetes who consider the problem at Colossae to be a problem involving specific Gnostic teaching. This problem was met by Paul's teaching in Col 1:15-17, and that this in itself had a Gnostic base. The credibility of this viewpoint is questionable, since it relies upon reading back into first-century literature ideas which were not developed until the second century.²

Judaism and the Colossian Problem

The Judaism of the first century cannot be considered as any sort of homogeneous entity. The Judaism practised in Palestine and centred on the Temple prior to its destruction was different to that practised in the Diaspora.³ Separatist and ascetic groups such as the Essenes developed their own particular emphases. Consideration of the relationship between Judaism and the Colossian problem must therefore be categorized under various headings.

Rabbinic Judaism and the Colossian Problem

Numerous commentators have observed that the problem at Colossae was, at least in part, Jewish in origin. A typical early proponent of this view is A. S. Peake.

¹Ibid., p. 159.

²See appendix p. 104.

³The degree to which the two differ has received varied evaluation from different scholars. See, for example, Burgess' comment on p. 7.

The false teaching against which the Epistle is chiefly directed was of a Jewish type. This is clear alike from the characteristics mentioned and the nature of the polemic. It insisted on observance of regulations as to meats and drinks, festivals, new moons and Sabbaths. It drew on the tradition of men as its source. The reference to circumcision seems to show that the false teachers attached value to it; and the declaration that the Law has been abolished, which forms the basis for the definite attack, shows that they regarded it as still binding.¹

Peake discusses alternative views. He not only finds it difficult to see "full-blown Gnosticism" mirrored in the epistle, but also finds it improbable that even a rudimentary Gnosticism is there.² He does not accept Essenic influences in the Colossian problem because he finds no reference to some of the most important Essenic practices. Since all features of the Colossian situation can be accommodated in a Judaic setting he is content with that explanation.

The classic exponent of the relation between Pauline theology and Rabbinic Judaism is W. D. Davies. In his standard work, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism, he gives consideration to the Colossian problem.³ Davies does not discuss the nature of the problem itself, but follows J. B. Lightfoot in seeing in the problem a strong Jewish element.

Davies' concern is more with Paul's response to the problem. His thesis is that Paul's language was chosen from the

¹A. S. Peake, "The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians," Expositor's Greek Testament, ed. W. Robertson Nicholl (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1917), 3:484.

²Ibid., 3:485.

³W. D. Davies, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

vocabulary of the Wisdom books, in order to present Jesus in cosmological terms. For Davies, Paul is presenting Jesus as the New Torah--not in explicit terms, but by clear implication. He sees this, for instance, in the contrast drawn in 2 Cor 3 between old and new covenants and their ministries. The consequence of this identification for Davies is that "to regard Jesus as the Torah of God meant that Paul would be influenced in his interpretation of Jesus by those conceptions which Rabbinic Judaism cherished about the old Torah."¹

In specific consideration of Col 1:15-17 Davies analyses key expressions concerning Jesus. He considers the first assertion that Christ is the "image of God" to have its basis in Genesis and its description of Adam. Christ is the Second Adam, "a being who like his counterpart would of course be in the image of God."²

Other statements concerning Jesus he acknowledges as being contentious but sees no reason to turn to a Hellenistic Judaism for their background. Rabbinic Judaism had ascribed to the figure of Wisdom a pre-cosmic origin and a part in the creation of the world. "It becomes probable therefore that Paul has here pictured Christ in the image of Wisdom."³ Davies bases this conclusion on the work of C. F. Burney whom he quotes for his argument. Paul's expression "the first-born of all creation" is seen to be a direct allusion to Prov 8:22 where it is said

¹Ibid., p. 149.

²Ibid., p. 151.

³Ibid.

concerning Wisdom "the Lord created me at the beginning of his work." He cites Burney's contention that

. . . the term rêshîth in Prov. 8:22 was used by Rabbinic Judaism as the key to the berêshîth which begins the Hebrew Bible. This latter berêshîth of Gen. I.I. was correspondingly interpreted as meaning "by wisdom."¹

Paul is thus considered to be referring to Jesus as "the rêshîth of creation."²

Davies, again following Burney, sees that the "all things" passages also can be explained in the light of Rabbinic usage. Recourse is again made to Gen 1:1 and it is concluded that "Christ fulfils every meaning which may be extracted from Rêshîth."³

Davies concludes:

We can now see the significance of all the passage in Col. I. 15-18. In a later treatment of Prov. 8-9 we shall have occasion to observe that the function of Wisdom was twofold, it operated both in the cosmos, in creation, and also in the world of men, in what we might call the work of redemption. The twofold function is here transferred to Christ, who is not only the agent in creation in the physical sense but also the agent of the moral recreation of mankind.⁴

While Davies obviously builds on the work of Burney, a significant paper by T. E. Pollard builds a further dimension onto the work of both Davies and Burney.⁵ Pollard considers that Col 1:15-20 is set in the framework of redemption. The hymn is placed

¹Ibid., p. 151.

²Ibid., p. 152.

³C. F. Burney, "Christ as the APXH of Creation," Journal of Theological Studies 27 (1926): 175-76, quoted in Davies, p. 152.

⁴Davies, p. 152.

⁵T. E. Pollard, "Colossians 1. 12-20: A Reconsideration," New Testament Studies 27 (1981): 572-75.

in "soteriological brackets" by Paul.¹ He notes that Burney's suggestion has met with only qualified approval by some scholars and has been dismissed by others, yet no one doubts that the figure of Wisdom lies immediately below the surface of the passage.

Pollard follows the Rabbinic interpretation of Gen 1:1 into connections with Jer 2:3 where Israel is called the rêshîth (first-fruits) of God's harvest. He gives the Rabbinic interpretation of Gen 1:1 as "for the sake of Wisdom and Israel, Yahweh created the heavens and the earth."² He cites Rashi's Commentary on the Pentateuch as support for the inclusion of Israel in the interpretation.

Pollard thus reconstructs the thoughts of Col 1:15-20 to include the thought of Israel:

If this configuration of ideas is present in Colossians . . . then in Colossians Christ is said to supersede Wisdom (Torah), "the image of God" (new Adam) and Israel (the new Israel). The idea of Christ as the beginning of God's new humanity, the first-born of the new Israel, is an important theme elsewhere in Colossians, and this new humanity, this new Israel, is the Church which is his body. The interweaving of several themes in this passage is typical of Jewish exegesis, be it Rabbinic or Philonic: Wisdom, Torah, Adam, Israel are linked together to emphasize the newness of what God has done in Christ. . . .³

N. A. Dahl has noted the work of Burney and Davies, also the Rabbinic connection between Gen 1:1 and Jer 2:3. He failed, however, to draw out the implications of this connection for Colossians. His conclusions concerning the Colossian passage are, that while parallels can be found in Gnosticism and in Hellenism in general, the Jewish ideas of Law, Israel, and Temple

¹Ibid., p. 573.

²Ibid., p. 575.

³Ibid.

must also be taken into account.¹ He considers it "at least possible" to "find an allusion to Gen i.1;" and the allusion is in terms of the Rabbinic interpretation of Wisdom, Torah, and Israel. In "the image of God" he sees "more indisputable" allusion to Gen 1:26. He concludes for the Colossian passage that "we may therefore safely assume that we have here traces of a 'christological' interpretation of Gen i with a double reference, both to creation and to salvation."²

These exegetes, then, see a background in Rabbinic Judaism as sufficient to explain the Colossian situation. More particularly they see the Colossian passage as building upon Gen 1 and Prov 8.

Hellenistic Judaism and the Colossian Problem

It is recognized that no radical distinction can be drawn between Rabbinic and Hellenistic Judaism. The extent of difference is debatable. The description "Hellenistic Judaism" is used here for the purpose of discussing a particular group of exegetes. The term "Hellenistic" has frequently been given a broad meaning so as to refer to anything influenced by Greek thought or work. Undoubtedly the Gnostic influences discussed above come within the scope of being Hellenistic ideas. It is intended here to examine the work of those exegetes who see a

¹N. A. Dahl, "Christ, Creation and the Church," in The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), p. 434.

²Ibid.

non-Palestinian form of Judaism as the primary influence in the Colossian situation. Such exegetes centre their attention on the Alexandrian teaching of a personified Wisdom as presented by Philo.¹

Eduard Schweizer is preeminent among those who see a Hellenistic background to the Colossian passage. He reconstructs the passage to form two balanced stanzas:

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation,
for in him all things were created,
in heaven and on earth,
through him and for him all things have been created.

He is the beginning, the first-born of the dead,
for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,
through him to reconcile to him all things.

He then places between these two, a third stanza which connects both:

And it is he who is before all things,
and in him all things hold together,
and it is he who is the head of the body.²

Schweizer then points out that the first stanza parallels concepts found in the Wisdom literature, particularly Wisdom as the mediator of creation. The intermediate stanza shows that it

¹This is not to say that Philonic thought was the only non-Palestinian Jewish influence. It is just that leading exegetes focus on this. It seems clear that the local setting would have its influence too. Thus Bruce speaks of a "native Phrygian variety" of Judaism, in E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), p. 166.

²E. Schweizer, "The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ," New Testament Studies 8 (1961): 6-7. The intermediate stanza he likens to the footnotes of a modern commentator.

is Christ who holds the cosmos together. He states: "This is the Christian reinterpretation of the well-attested Hellenistic concept of the cosmic body ruled by God, either Zeus or Ether, Logos or Heaven, as its head."¹ The second stanza contains the new message that in Christ heaven and earth are reconciled.

Schweizer's argument cannot be understood apart from his reconstruction of the text. He argues that

all clauses exceeding the rhythmical order and the parallelism of the supposed original hymn agree with the theological conceptions of the author of the letter, and, with the exception of the first one, disagree with the conceptions of the hymn. The first clause also relates the statement of the hymn to the actual situation in Colossae, as the author of the letter sees it.²

He reconstructs the Colossian situation in three stages: (1) the problem, (2) the answer of the Christian group at Colossae, and (3) the corrective given by the author of the Colossian letter. The problem is that of Hellenistic man: "the feeling of being an alien on this earth, irreparably separated from heaven, that is, from a life with the gods, from any real happiness and from any existence rich in meaning."³ To this, the Christians at Colossae gave answer in the words of the two-stanza hymn. The writer of Colossians cites their hymn but amends it to present Christ, not as "a mysterious spiritual power like the Stoic world-soul or like some divine atmosphere wrapping in the whole world,"⁴ but as Lord of the world and of his body the church. It is in his body, the Colossian author asserts, that Christ is permeating the world.

¹Ibid., p. 7.

²Ibid., p. 9.

³Ibid., p. 7.

⁴Ibid., p. 9.

The difference lies particularly in the understanding of "body" (σῶμα)--first used to apply to the κόσμος, but reinterpreted to apply to Christ and his mission.¹

Schweizer thus sees the heresy in the Hellenistic concepts of the Colossian Christians. But this heresy "became the pace-maker of a strongly needed orthodox reinterpretation" given by the author of the Colossian letter.²

F. -W. Eltester has examined Col 1:15-20 as regards to possible sources for the hymn. His study particularly centred on the concept of "image." For this he found two roots: the doctrine of Sophia and the doctrine of the cosmic Anthropos. After comparing Colossians with the Logos doctrine of Philo, he concludes:

In Hellenistic Judaism, for which Philo serves as our source, an intermediate being, in whom the figure of Sophia and the figure of Anthropos flow together, bears the designation εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ. This intermediate being participates in the creating and sustaining of the world. It represents the entirety of the world insofar as the world is its body, but it transcends the world as head. The hymn in Col. i. 15ff. carries over such a presentation onto Christ, whereby the stoic τὰ πάντα formula is made use of, and whereby in addition gnostic motifs show their influence. This presentation belongs in the large scope of the cosmological speculation of Hellenism.³

Martin Dibelius may be considered here though his thought is closely related to that of Käsemann. Dibelius supposes that

¹C. K. Barrett, From First Adam to Last (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962), p. 84.

²Schweizer, p. 11.

³F. -W. Eltester, Eikon im Neuen Testament, BZNW 23 (Berlin, 1958), p. 147, cited in Jack T. Sanders, The New Testament Christological Hymns (Cambridge: University Press, 1971), pp. 82-83.

the Sophia figure and the primal Man-redeemer figure from the world of Hellenistic thought had become blended into one figure, and this figure is represented in Col 1:15-17. He sees some aspects of world-soul and world creator coming from Stoicism. In Philo there is the concept of primal Man, and there the "cosmological speculation is linked to a religious concept."¹ He finds the nearest parallel to Col 1:15-20 in Iranian religion. Thus, as Sanders suggests, we find in Dibelius a "convergence of motifs."² Sanders concludes:

Dibelius thought that Hellenistic Judaism had already laid the ground for the similarity between the Christian concept of the redeemer found in Col. i. 15-20 and the other concepts he had shown to be related 'perhaps less by the identifying of the "Man" with the Messiah, but rather with "Wisdom."' Thus Col. i. 15ff. is seen to be like a praise of Wisdom.³

In his essay entitled "The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites," Dibelius turns from the source of the Colossian material to the nature of the problem being faced. Francis and Meeks summarize his argument:

He argues that members of the Colossian church entered into association with outsiders in a cultic life devoted to the powers. These Christians joined with their non-Christian teachers without abandoning their Christianity. Dibelius finds in embateuein [Col 2:18] a technical term of the strange cult. On the basis of his analysis of the inscriptions from the Clarian Apollo he believes embateuein signifies mystery initiation. The Colossian Christians were initiated into a cosmic mystery devoted to the elements.⁴

Dibelius terms this mystery a Gnostic one. "The fact that around the year A.D. 56 members of the Christian church in Colossae were initiated into the mystery cult of the 'elements' cultivated

¹Martin Dibelius, An die Kolosser, Epheser, an Philemon, rev. by Heinrich Greeven, HNT 12 (Tubingen, 1953), p. 15, cited in Sanders, p. 76.

²Sanders, p. 75.

³Ibid., p. 77.

⁴Francis and Meeks, p. 210.

there constitutes probably the earliest certainly datable and historically recognizable case of an early and germinal Christian-gnostic formation."¹ "To sum it up in a formula, it is the origin of a Christian-gnostic formation by double initiation, by Christian baptism and by initiation into mysteries already transformed in a gnostic direction."²

Fred O. Francis also studied Col 2:18 with reference to the source of the Colossian problem.³ He rejects Dibelius' preoccupation with mystery initiation and speaks rather of an "ignorance" on the part of the Colossians. Regarding the angelic worship in Colossae, he states:

There is universal agreement that the Colossian error fundamentally [sic] consists of a limitation of Christology. Interpreters have commonly expressed this in terms of the mediation or rule of powers other than Christ, and the attendant honor paid to them. Our exegesis of vs. 18 indicates that the angelic powers were not thus venerated.⁴

He adds: "The argument lay in their soteriological and eschatological implications. The errorists did not have the spiritual wisdom to understand that they were 'now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death,' . . ."⁵ Behind this ignorance Francis sees a "distinct form of Hellenistic piety, namely ascetic mysticism directed toward visionary ascent and entrance into heaven."⁶

¹Martin Dibelius, "The Isis Initiation in Apuleius and Related Initiatory Rites," in Francis and Meeks, p. 91.

²Ibid., p. 92.

³Fred O. Francis, "Humility and Angelic Worship in Col 2:18," in Francis and Meeks, pp. 163-95.

⁴Ibid., p. 183.

⁵Ibid., p. 184.

⁶Ibid.

These exegetes, then, consider that the Colossian situation can be explained by the influence of Hellenistic ideas upon the Jewish background of the Colossian Christians. The result was a false teaching which had close affinity to the mystery religions.

Essenism and the Colossian Problem

J. B. Lightfoot in his commentary on Colossians written over a century ago discerned two strands in the Colossian heresy.¹ The first was the Judaic strand evidenced by the statement concerning observance of sabbath, new moons, and festivals, and reference to meats and drinks. The second strand was an element of "theosophic speculation" alien to Judaism proper. This second strand he designated as Gnostic. The two elements to Lightfoot were intermingled, and did not present the teaching of two distinct parties. Rather he suggested that the heresy was from a source which mingled the two strands, and this he considered to be Essenism.

Lightfoot defined Essenism as "Gnostic Judaism."² We should note that he sees the Essenism at Colossae as referring to the type of heresy, rather than to its origin. He states: "When I speak of the Judaism in the Colossian Church as Essene, I do not assume a precise identity of origin, but only as essential affinity of type, with the Essenes of the mother country."³

¹Lightfoot, p. 73.

²Ibid., p. 93.

³Ibid., pp. 94-95.

He singles out three characteristics which are distinctive of Gnosticism and which reappear in Essenism.¹

1. The Essenes exhibit the same exclusiveness in the communication of doctrine
2. Their theological speculation takes the same direction, dwelling on the mysteries of creation; regarding matter as the abode of evil; and postulating intermediate spiritual agencies as necessary links of communication between heaven and earth
3. Essenic speculative opinions involve the same ethical conclusions and lead also to a rigid asceticism

Lightfoot then examines the Colossian letter with reference to these three characteristics, and finds that each is a characteristic of the Colossian heresy. He concludes that the Colossian heretics held to an "incipient gnosis"² which was developed later by Cerinthus.

Lightfoot's sources for Essenic doctrine were limited. He was forced to depend on writers such as Josephus, Philo, and Hegesippus. It is not without significance that following the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the production of a number of scholarly works discussing relationship between Paul and Qumran that Lightfoot's theories were still considered to be of value. Pierre Benoit, for instance, has written:

As J. B. Lightfoot suspected, and recent discoveries have confirmed, the error combated by the epistle to the Colossians appears to be tainted with Essenism. A return to the Mosaic Law by circumcision, rigid observance concerning diet and the calendar, speculations about the angelic powers; all this is part and parcel of the doctrines of Qumran. Paul himself

¹Ibid., p. 93.

²Ibid., p. 110.

can hardly have been unaware of the writings of the sect when writing Col 1:12-13.¹

Joseph Coppens may also be cited in respect to Paul's use of "mystery": "Qumran offers few or no points of comparison with the Captivity Epistles' doctrine concerning the concentration of the mystery in the person of Christ, the pleroma of the divinity, but the passages wherein St. Paul describes the content and unfathomable riches of the mystery evoke numerous Qumran pericopes."²

Stanislas Lyonnet, in supporting Dom Jacques Dupont's concept of the Colossian heresy as a "gnosticizing Judaism," uses Qumran material to refute those who see the gnosis of Colossae as essentially a Hellenistic syncretism.³ He notes parallels in references to the "mystery", to the calendar, to the sabbath, to food laws, and to angelology.

The Qumran discoveries also directed W. D. Davies into further consideration of the Judaic background to the Pauline writings. He notes that

In particular has it become clear that the traditional convenient dichotomy between Judaism and Hellenism was largely false. In the fusions of the first century

¹Pierre Benoit, "Qumran and the New Testament," in Paul and Qumran, ed. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), pp. 16-17.

²Joseph Coppens, "'Mystery' in the Theology of Saint Paul and Its Parallels at Qumran," in Murphy-O'Connor, p. 151.

³Stanislas Lyonnet, "Paul's Adversaries in Colossae," in Francis and Meeks, pp. 147-61. In opposition to Lyonnet's thesis it could be suggested that Qumran was an Hellenized community.

the boundaries between these are now seen to have been very fluid.¹

He further observes that "the multiple intricacy of the background of Paul is becoming increasingly evident."²

Davies then examines the teachings of the Dead Sea Scrolls with a view to points of contact with the Colossian heresy, and he notes several. Calendrical niceties, sabbath regulations, asceticism, angelology, and a dualistic understanding of the world are points at which he sees similarities.³ He sees the Scrolls as illustrating the nature of the Colossian heresy.

Ernest W. Saunders has undertaken to compare the Colossian problem and the Qumran manuscripts in areas similar to that studied by Lightfoot. He notes "points of similarity . . . between the conceptions of revelation, mystery, and perfection" in the Colossian letter and the sectarian literature from Qumran."⁴ With reference to angelology he states that "while no certain correspondence can be claimed, it is striking that the dogmatic system at Colossae which has all the pretense of a 'philosophy' enjoins a relationship with angelic beings which was also a feature of Essene thought."⁵ He finds it "not improbable" that

¹W. D. Davies, "Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Flesh and Spirit," in The Scrolls and the New Testament, ed. Krister Stendahl (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 157.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 167-68.

⁴Ernest W. Saunders, "The Colossian Heresy and Qumran Theology," in Studies in the History and Text of the New Testament, ed. Boyd L. Daniels and M. Jack Suggs (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1967), p. 137.

⁵Ibid., pp. 138-39.

the distinctive teachings of the ritual purists of Qumran influenced sectarian life at Colossae.¹ His conclusion sums up the concepts of this section:

There is little doubt that the errorists represented a species of Judaism impregnated with the theosophical speculations and rigid ascetism [sic] which characterized a style of thought that has come to be known as Gnostic. It is equally evident that a similar concept of gnosis penetrates the religious beliefs and practices of the Qumran community. Bishop Lightfoot's nineteenth century hypothesis of a discernable affinity between the Colossian heresy and the Gnostic Judaism exhibited in the Essene sect is further corroborated as we move from the descriptive accounts of Philo and Josephus to the primary literature of the sect at Qumran. No identity of origin can be documented between the Colossian heresy and Qumran heterodoxy, but the literature from the Dead Sea sect amplifies the sparse references in the Colossian polemic, permitting us to obtain a clearer understanding of the forms of syncretistic Judaism which proved a disturbing influence in many of the Christian congregations in Asia Minor.²

Several exegetes, then, consider the Colossian situation to reflect characteristics which were common also to the Qumran community. They see this particular form of Judaism as background to the false teaching confronting the Colossian Christians.

Syncretism and the Colossian Problem

It has been observed throughout this survey that there has been no identification of the Colossian problem with any known school of false teaching. The Colossian problem reflects various errors, which, when woven together, form a single fabric of concern to the author of Colossians. The majority of exegetes are content to note the intermingling of various strands of false teaching, without emphasizing any one strand in particular.

¹Ibid., p. 141.

²Ibid., pp. 141-42.

Kümmel finds that there is in the Colossian heresy a "secret wisdom of a syncretistic type . . . which combines the ascetic-ritualistic veneration of the elements with Jewish ritualism and Jewish speculation about angels. Influences of a particularly Gentile-Eastern cult cannot be demonstrated for sure, and gnosis in the strict sense of the term is scarcely in the picture."¹

Patrick Henry writes of the heresy being an "amalgam of doctrines about spiritual beings and various rules about eating and sexual relations."² He sees elements which would later be parts of Gnostic systems. Lewis sees a "veritable medley of religious philosophy, belief, and practice."³

Foulkes is typical of those who simply describe the false teaching a "Judaistic form of Gnosticism."⁴ C. F. D. Moule terms the amalgam a kind of "theosophy."⁵ Burgess describes the Colossian opponents as "syncretistic Jews infected with the Gnostic spirit."⁶ Guthrie would see included in the syncretistic Jewish-Gnosticizing heresy an influence from the worship of Cybele.⁷

¹Werner Georg Kümmel, Introduction to the New Testament, rev. ed. (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 339.

²Henry, p. 164.

³Edwin Lewis, "Paul and the Perverters of Christianity," Interpretation 2(1948): 148.

⁴F. Foulkes, "Epistle to the Colossians," New Bible Dictionary, ed. J. D. Douglas (1962), p. 244.

⁵C. F. D. Moule, The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary, (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), p. 31.

⁶Burgess, p. 45.

⁷Guthrie, p. 549.

Others would see Christian teaching also included in a syncretistic religion. Thus Johnston sees the "mixture" as a "syncretistic form of Christianity, with strong Jewish as well as proto-Gnostic constituents. The Jewish side has close affinities with the Essene piety of Qumrân."¹ F. F. Bruce sees no difficulty in a Jewish-Hellenistic syncretism "expanding and modifying itself sufficiently to take some Christian elements into its system."² Ralph Martin presents this reconstruction:

In the Colossian church we appear to be in touch with a meeting-place where the free-thinking Judaism of the dispersion and the speculative ideas of Greek-mystery-religion are in close contact. Out of this interchange and fusion comes a syncretism, which is both theologically novel (bringing Christ into a hierarchy and a system) and ethically conditioned (advocating a rigorous discipline and an ecstatic visionary reward). On both counts, in Paul's eyes, it is a deadly danger to the incipient church.³

Eduard Lohse favours a similar reconstruction. He sees the false teachers as supporting that their "philosophy" could very easily be united with Christian faith, and would bring Christian faith to its true completion.⁴

¹George Johnston, ed., *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon*, The Century Bible, new ed. (London: Nelson, 1967), p. 52.

²Simpson and Bruce, pp. 166-67. See also James S. Stewart, "A First-Century Heresy and Its Modern Counterpart," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 425. P. T. O'Brien (p. xxxviii) sees scholarly work on "Jewish-Christian ascetic and mystical background" as illuminating the Colossian situation.

³Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Century Bible, rev. ed. (London: Oliphants, 1978), pp. 18-19.

⁴Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Hermeneia Series (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 3.

This syncretism is aptly described in the words of

Johannes Munck:

Syncretism is a general definition which accurately describes the period in which first Christianity and then Gnosticism came into existence. New religions arise, and merge with those already existing. The Oriental religions acquire a Hellenistic dress, and the Greeks and Romans turn to the cults and mythologies of the Orient. The "modern man" of the period tried to overcome his loneliness in the world with the help of the most archaic of the Oriental religions he could find.¹

It would seem that scholarly opinion in general sees the Colossian situation to be an example of this type of environment. The Colossian Christians were in danger of being drawn into its vortex and thus lose the distinctiveness which is integral to Christianity.

Despite the amount of scholarship that has gone into study of the Colossian problem, there is one who questions the whole effort. Morna D. Hooker asks "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?"² She answers her own question by noting obvious differences between Colossians and the Galatian church, one actually troubled by false teachers. There is not the polemic in Colossians that appears in Galatians. She observes the positive tone in parts of the epistle. The negative tone (especially in chapter 2) she considers to be simply a warning:

¹Johannes Munck, "The New Testament and Gnosticism," in Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation, ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 236.

²Morna D. Hooker, "Were There False Teachers in Colossae?" in Christ and Spirit in the New Testament, ed. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), pp. 315-31.

To the newly-baptized Christian, called to be 'holy and blameless and irreproachable' (1:22) and surrounded by the lax morality of the pagan life he had abandoned, the pressure to achieve purity by keeping the regulations of Judaism must have been enormous. The convert who accepted so much from Judaism would naturally tend to accept these also. There is no need to postulate the arrival in Colossae of 'false teachers' or 'Judaizers' to explain Paul's warnings.¹

The consequences of her ideas for the Christological passage in Colossians 1 are given:

If no Colossian 'error' existed, then Paul's christological statement here was not, as has been suggested, developed or formulated in any attempt to combat false teaching. It may, however, have been developed and formulated (whether composed specifically for its present position or not) in order to demonstrate that both creation and redemption are completed in Christ because he has replaced the Jewish law.²

Hooker has received some degree of support from O'Brien,³ but others are not convinced by her arguments. Ralph P. Martin rejects them.⁴ He sees actual quotation of the heretical slogans in chapter 2, particularly in reference to the "stoicheia." Hooker seems to be begging the question. Even if Paul is giving a "warning," such admonition implies that a threat to faith actually existed. The question becomes a matter of degree--to what extent was there a danger to Christian faith in Colossae? And to what extent was this a threat from outside the church?

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted a representation of prominent exegetical attempts at reconstruction of the Colossian situation--

¹Ibid., p. 318. ²Ibid., p. 329. ³O'Brien, p. xxxi.

⁴Ralph P. Martin, New Testament Foundations, 2 vols. (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1975-78), 2:213-14.

the problem, and how Col 1:15-17 relates to it. Diversity of viewpoint is evident. It is clear that the source materials are too vague and meagre, and their origins so open to alternative positions, that no definitive reconstruction can be made.

In each attempted reconstruction there is admission of some degree of syncretism. The weight of current scholarship, as revealed in this survey, suggests that the problem must be seen as arising from a syncretistic teaching in which various elements from the religious world of the first century appear, but in which no one particular element predominates.

Diversity of opinion exists also in the function of the passage, though most exegetes favour considering it as part of a Christological hymn in which the problems at Colossae are confronted.

CHAPTER III

CHRISTOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY AT COLOSSAE

The question confronting the apostle as he faced the situation at Colossae is put this way by Lohse:

Is the preaching of the gospel to be drawn into the varicoloured mesh of the syncretism of late antiquity, or is the proclamation of the crucified, resurrected and exalted Christ to be taken as the exclusively valid answer which applies to all man's questions and searchings.¹

The weight of scholarly opinion suggests that the threat facing the Colossian church involved a syncretism of ideas drawn from various sources. Clearly, the apostle had to counteract the eclectic thought by presenting the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel--Christ as the answer to man's needs. Before examining Col 1:15-17 in detail, it is necessary to notice what was being presented at Colossae in these two areas: Christology and anthropology.

The problem was a very real one with eternal consequences. The believers were in danger of being shifted "from the hope of the gospel" (Col 1:23). Certain unnamed persons, who may be termed "false teachers,"² were attempting to "delude" them by "beguiling

¹Lohse, p. 3.

²While Paul uses the singular "no one" in Col 2:4,8,16,18 with reference to the party causing the Colossian problem, this may simply be a literary device. We cannot be certain as to which

speech" (2:4); to make "a prey" of them "by philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8); to "disqualify" them from Christ by "insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels" (2:18). It would seem that to some extent the "worship of angels" was taking the place of the worship of Christ. The apostle's concern is to elevate Christ as supreme. He is the subject of the apostle's proclamation (1:28). He is the One in whom God's fulness dwells (1:19; 2:9). The object of the apostle's labours is that believers may know the mystery of God, which is Christ (2:2). The false teachers, by contrast, had lost connection with him (2:18,19).

Instead of the primitive apostolic emphasis in preaching the resurrected and reigning Saviour, the false teachers were more concerned with questions of food and drink, festivals, new moons and the sabbath (2:16). The denigration of Christ was accompanied by a corresponding emphasis on man and his works as the way to "knowledge."

The apostle goes to the extent of utilizing the dualistic metaphor of light/darkness (1:13) to illustrate the difference between Christ and the false teachers. A similar dichotomy is employed with reference to man's works. The rules of the elemental spirits are not obligatory (2:20) on one who belongs to Christ, for he has died to those things and his life is hidden with Christ (3:3). The ceremonial injunctions of the false teachers were based on human commands and teachings (2:22,23).

number is meant. For the purposes of this thesis the plural number will be used.

The point of these contrasts is to show the distinctiveness of Christ and his way. Christ is separate from all others and not to be integrated with them in some system of ideas. The believer is separate from the world and his lifestyle is not integrated with human commands and teachings.

Christology at Colossae

While an attempt is made here to isolate elements of the problem relating to Christology, it is recognized that the false teaching was basically a unity.¹ False teaching in one area usually brings about concomitant errors in other areas. An erroneous Christology incurs errors in the doctrine of man, and particularly in lifestyle.²

Of primary concern to Christology in the epistle is the false teaching regarding "worship of angels" and regard for the "elemental spirits of the universe." Most commentators see these as aspects of one situation. O'Brien reconstructs the situation this way:

It is probable that in the syncretistic teaching being advocated at Colossae these στοιχεῖα were grouped with the angels and seen as controlling the heavenly realm and man's access to God's presence. One way they could be placated

¹Thus H. C. G. Moule: "In the first place it is reasonably plain that the influence on the whole was one. Some critics have assumed two independent but concurrent invasions of Colossian faith, one speculative, the other ritualistic. But let the reader take the Epistle as a whole, and he will surely feel that such a division is arbitrary; the insistences on truth and warnings against error are too freely interwoven for the theory." The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: University Press, 1894), p. 31.

²"The threat to apostolic faith and life was both academic and practical." Martin, New Testament Foundations, 2:213.

was by rigorously subduing the flesh so as to gain visionary experiences of the heavenly dimension and to participate in their angelic liturgy . . . By this the devotees gained fullness of salvation, reached the divine presence and attained the esoteric knowledge which accompanied such visions. Christ had in effect become just another intermediary between God and man.¹

O'Brien's identification of the "elemental spirits" with powerful cosmic spirits is typical of most exegetes, but the identity is not unquestioned. Burgess points out that the "elements" originally were earth, water, air, and fire. "Only in the second century after Christ did the term 'elements' by itself mean angelic powers."² He points out that in the first century the relationship between 'elements' and 'angels' had not been systematized.³

Martin gives close study to the "elemental spirits."⁴ While tracing the development of meaning of the word, he sees two possibilities in the Colossian context.⁵ The first is to see

¹O'Brien, p. 132. See also Francis W. Beare, St. Paul and His Letters (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962), p. 107, where the "thrones," "dominions," "principalities," and "authorities" (Col 1:16) are considered to be names given to the "elemental spirits."

²Burgess, p. 44. Carr's study concludes that the stoicheia are "rudimentary notions which are suited to the childhood of humanity." Wesley Carr, Angels and Principalities (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 75.

³Burgess, pp. 44-45.

⁴See Martin, Colossians and Philemon, pp. 10-14; and Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1972), pp. 13-15. Note also Guthrie, p. 548.

⁵Martin, Colossians and Philemon, p. 12. George Eldon Ladd sees the same possibilities, but chooses the interpretation of Burgess and Carr. See his A Theology of the New Testament (Guildford, England: Lutterworth Press, 1974), pp. 402-3.

reference to the false teaching as a rudimentary or elementary system exclusively tied to this world--a meaning more in harmony with Burgess' suggestion. The second meaning is to see reference to powerful spirit-intelligences, as with O'Brien. Martin gives a number of reasons to support the second meaning. Basic to several of the reasons he gives is the fact that the "elemental spirits" were in opposition to Christ, and threatened to usurp his prerogatives. Paul's stress that Christ was victor over principalities, powers, and "elements" and that "fulness" dwells in him alone, presents a contrast between spirit-forces and Christ, rather than between spirit and matter. Martin concludes that

. . . the Colossian 'philosophy' was concerned to give a prominent place to angelic orders as custodians of human destiny. In current hellenistic thought this was closely related to the stars and their patron deities.¹

Lohse agrees, by stating that "these elements of the universe, represented as strong angelic powers, determine not only the cosmic order but the destiny of the individual."²

It was this exaltation of the "elemental spirits" at the expense of Christ that called forth the Christologic assertions of the epistle. To cite Metzger: "The seriousness of the Colossian heresy lay in its compromising the absolute preeminence of Christ as the only Mediator and Redeemer."³

¹Martin, Colossians and Philemon, p. 14.

²Lohse, p. 3.

³Bruce Manning Metzger, The New Testament, Its Background, Growth, and Content (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 232.

Brief consideration should also be given to the expression "worship of angels" in 2:18. It is consistent with identification of the "elemental spirits" as angelic powers to have their veneration as part of the false teaching. Some writers, though, see this as going too far. Jewish schools of thought speculated about angels, but did not worship them. The same attitude is assumed of Christian communities. Bruce points out that the external practice of religion is in view here,¹ and supports those who consider the Colossian veneration of angels as a local phenomenon.

Francis takes the genitive construction as subjective rather than objective, and sees the false teachers stressing a sharing in worship led by angels.² It may be questioned whether such an emphasis would call forth the Pauline polemic, and even whether such a practice could "disqualify" the believers. Surely to join with the worship of angels would be commendable. Martin sees Col 2:23 a rebuttal to Francis' suggestion.³ Worship directed towards angels is contrary to worship of Christ. Kümmel sees the possibility that the veneration of angels took the form

¹Simpson and Bruce, p. 247, n. 87.

²Francis and Meeks, p. 214. Francis is followed by Lane, who, noting that the Colossians are commended for their faith in Christ, asserts that "cultic veneration of angels is incompatible with a firm faith in Christ." William L. Lane, "Creed and Theology: Reflections on Colossians," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 21 (1978): 217.

³Martin, Colossians and Philemon, p. 15, following Lohse, pp. 118-19, n. 36. But note the criticism by O'Brien, p. 143.

of a mystery cult,¹ but there does not seem to be a refined mystery religion in the false teaching at Colossae. There is no need to insist that the Colossians had accepted the "worship of angels." It could be considered a threat still external to the body of believers.

In summary, it may be stated that the apostle confronted false teachings which directed attention away from Christ. He had to "deal with an error which, whatever else it did, did this--it put Jesus Christ into the background."² "He was practically minimized."³ While he warned against false teaching, the apostle counteracted it by a positive Christology.

Anthropology at Colossae

A false teaching at Colossae was also concerned with the nature of man. This becomes particularly evident when the praxis enjoined upon converts by the false teachers is considered.

The doctrines and practices of the false teachers had Jewish connotations. Col 2:16 refers to judgments made by them in regard to food, drink, and observance of a festival, new moon, or sabbath. These things were but shadows of the reality which is Christ (2:17). The mention particularly of "sabbath" places a Judaic stamp upon the doctrines involved, as does also the reference to circumcision in 2:11.

¹Kummel, p. 339.

²Handley C. G. Moule, Colossian and Philemon Studies (London: Pickering and Inglis, n.d.), p. 9.

³Ibid., p. 11.

The ritual tendencies described here are legal ordinances, regulations, and prescriptions of the Jewish calendar--things which "had lost their validity now that Christ, the reality which they foreshadowed, had come and fulfilled their significance."¹ There is in view here those ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic law which typified Christ, but there may also be included those further regulations and ordinances of Rabbinic Judaism. The warning against "human tradition" (2:8) could be a reference to the tendency (particularly of the Pharisaic element) to superimpose the traditions of the elders upon the Mosaic law. What seems clear is that these Judaic elements had become part of a "philosophy." Col 2:20-23 calls for "self-abasement" with a further list of "taboos" which, while not characteristically Judaic, nevertheless were ceremonial regulations to which submission was required.

The false teachers were making a strong impact on the believers. Col 2:20,21 suggest some degree of success gained by them in that the believers were submitting to their ceremonial regulations, a return to living as if they "still belonged to the world."

Lohse elaborates the point that the observances required were to be kept for the sake of the "elemental spirits." It was these "elemental spirits"

. . . who direct the course of the stars and thus also prescribe minutely the order of the calendar. By birth and fate man is subjected to the elements of the universe and

¹Simpson and Bruce, p. 166.

must serve them by meticulous conformity to food laws and special times.¹

In summary it may be said that the false teaching required a submission to regulations and observances, formulated into a list of taboos, that showed dependence upon the "elemental spirits." For all practical purposes, this superseded dependence upon Christ. With the focus of worship shifted from Christ to angels and spirits, a subservience to the spirits was introduced which was not in harmony with the Biblical concept of the nature of man. Man and his ceremonial works were considered to have salvific merit. While the soteriological emphasis is primary, the situation has its impact on anthropology. The whole of man's existence is affected by the locus of his commitment. Subservience to spirits rather than commitment to the lordship of Christ results in man being less than he was meant to be. His life is misdirected and in consequence he lacks satisfying fulfilment in his endeavours. The futility of the practices taught by the false teachers is well described in 2:23. On the one hand a "self-abasement and severity to the body" is required, but on the other hand, such practices "are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh." The end result is man living for himself.

Conclusion

In the false teaching being perpetrated at Colossae there were Judaic elements, and elements from Hellenistic philosophical

¹Lohse, pp. 115-16.

ideas, fused into a teaching which threatened to destroy Christian faith. Christ was denigrated at the expense of the "angels" and "elemental spirits." The human body was held in contempt and its physical appetites rigidly controlled. In all, "the wisdom of man was set above the wisdom of God. The gathered fragments of traditions embodying human guesses respecting the riddle of existence were given a reverence not given to what God himself, in the fulness of time, had disclosed in Christ."¹

But man was made for more than that. The main thrust of the Colossian epistle is to meet the threat posed by the false teachers by presenting the true position and relationship of Christ and man. The apostle's Christology posits a corrective for the false anthropology.

Christ cannot be compromised by Paul. The false teaching "provoked Paul into writing his fullest statement of the cosmic implications of the gospel and of the universal sovereignty of Christ."² Klijn perceptively sees in Colossians "the first confrontation of Christianity with a trend against which it was to be forced to defend itself for centuries to come."³ It is a "forthright exposition of the faith."⁴

Lohse becomes specific regarding Paul's object when he writes:

¹Lewis, p. 164.

²Caird, p. 164.

³A. F. J. Klijn, An Introduction to the New Testament (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), p. 117.

⁴Stewart, p. 421.

In order to oppose this "philosophy," the letter to the Colossians at its very beginning refers back to the hymnic confession with which the community is familiar (1:15-20); and from this hymn the letter develops its message, in which Christ is proclaimed as Lord over all the world.¹

Col 1:15-17 is then of primary importance to the message of the epistle. A detailed study of the pericope must now be undertaken.

¹Lohse, p. 3.

CHAPTER IV

EXAMINATION OF THE PERICOPE

The apostle's teaching in the passage under consideration is primarily ascertained by careful exegesis. In this instance the literary form is distinctive and contributes to the impact of the words. The structure of the passage is therefore considered prior to exegesis.

Structural Analysis

Hymnic Structure

Along with a number of other passages in the Pauline writings, Col 1:15-20 is almost universally recognized as a Christian hymn.¹ This assertion is based on several observations.² It may be noted first that there are contextual dislocations at the beginning and end of the passage. Col 1:12-14 is couched in personal language using first person pronouns. Vs. 21 is similar in its personal language with the second person pronoun, and further is linked by thought to vs. 14. Vss. 15-20 are, by contrast,

¹"The hymnic character of Col. I.15-20 has long been recognized and generally acknowledged," Käsemann, p. 149. See also Kümmel: "it certainly cannot be denied that 1:15-20 bears a hymnic character," p. 342.

²The observations which follow are basically those presented by Ralph P. Martin who has written copiously on the passage, though various commentators note them.

impersonal in nature, using the third person throughout. The contrast suggests an insertion into the flow of the writer's message. Again, vss. 15-20 are introduced by the relative pronoun *ὅς*,¹ a "tell-tale mark of *liturgica*,"² which "fastens it like a pendant on to the preceding section (1:12-14) with little syntactical or contextual connection."³

In the second place there are observations which can be made concerning the literary and lexical scheme of the passage. Martin notes three principal items in this connection. The verses are (1) creedal or confessional in nature, "directing attention to the person and achievement of the redeemer;" (2) "liturgical with sonorous nouns and verbs, such as 'image of the invisible God', 'reside', 'be pre-eminent'"; and (3) artistic, evidence for which is seen in the careful positioning of key phrases such as *πρωτότοκος*, and the use of chiasmus.⁴ In this last connection, Beasley-Murray cites "striking parallelisms both of ideas and of form."⁵ Martin further says:

¹To facilitate the exegetical purposes of this chapter the Greek text is used where specific comment is made.

²Ralph P. Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn," *Evangelical Quarterly* 36 (1964): 197. See also John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 95; and Lohse, p. 41, n. 65.

³Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, 2:249.

⁴Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981), p. 115.

⁵Paul Beasley-Murray, "Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn Celebrating the Lordship of Christ," in *Pauline Studies*, ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1980), p. 169.

If we add in the features of some rare words¹ not used elsewhere by Paul or other Christian writers, and traces of alliteration, antithesis, and lines arranged as couplets, it seems reasonable to suppose that we are looking at a piece of early hymnody of a confessional and doxological type.²

Further, it bears the character of drama in that it deals with a cosmic redemption.³

The end result of these observations is to acknowledge that in Col 1:15-20 we do not have a spontaneous poetic creation, but rather a carefully composed piece of writing, set in a poetic mould.

Many and varied have been the analyses conducted of this hymnic passage.⁴ The existence of parallelism (clearly evident in the verses) is the only feature on which there is scholarly consensus.⁵ The "obvious starting point, as far as form is concerned" is to note the parallel between vs. 15 and vs. 18b.⁶ Both begin with the relative pronoun and introduce two sets of parallel thought: εἰκὼν and ἀρχή; πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως and πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν. It is the logical conclusion to make a separation of the passage into two principal sections at the end of vs. 17.

¹Use of "rare words" does not make a passage hymnic, unless their use is clearly part of a poetic pattern or rhythmic device.

²Martin, Reconciliation, p. 155.

³Sanders, p. 5.

⁴A thorough historical survey of the literary form and background of the passage is in R. P. Martin, Colossians and Philemon, pp. 61-66.

⁵Gibbs, pp. 98-99.

⁶Eduard Schweizer, The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), p. 56.

The parallel nature of the two sections continues with the identical phrase--ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ--commencing both vs. 16 and vs. 19. Vs. 16 continues with creation of all things in heaven and on earth, whereas vs. 20 continues with reconciliation of all things on earth or in heaven.¹

Thus far there is little problem. It is with vss. 17 and 18a and the conclusion to vs. 20 that difficulties surface. There is no parallel in the first section to the declaration εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ in vs. 20. Vss. 17 and 18a also seem to stand apart, not being directly part of either section but with links to both--vs. 17 to the creation emphasis of vs. 16, and vs. 18a to the reconciliation emphasis of vs. 20. It is also argued by some that the description of the powers in vs. 16b is not part of a regular hymnic structure.

At this point commentators speak of possible additions to the hymn²--the description of the powers in vs. 16b, and the αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ statement in vs. 20. There is limited agreement that vss. 17 and 18 stand apart as a separate verse intermediate between the two sections (and with the possible addition of τῆς ἐκκλησίας at the end of vs. 18). This intermediate passage "binds together the twin ideas of creation

¹See the listing of the parallels in these lines in A. M. Hunter, Introducing New Testament Theology (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 125.

²Lohse, p. 42, for instance, says "It is clear, moreover, that the author of the letter did not incorporate the hymn without alterations."

and redemption"¹ and unifies them in Christ. The hymnic structure can be presented as follows:

Verse 1

He is the image of the invisible God,
The first-born of all creation;
For in him all things were created,
In heaven and on earth,
Visible and invisible,
Whether thrones or dominions or principalities or
authorities--
All things were created through him and for him.

Verse 2

He is before all things,
And in him all things hold together.
He is the head of the body, the church.

Verse 3

He is the beginning,
The first-born from the dead,
That in everything he might be pre-eminent.
For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell.
And through him to reconcile to himself all things,
Whether on earth or in heaven,
Making peace by the blood of his cross.

Beyond any such broad versification we cannot safely go.²

Craddock is correct in asserting that "the effort after symmetry is at points strained and artificial."³ The effort may not even be necessary:

¹Beasley-Murray, p. 169.

²Even this much has been considered too much. P. Ellingworth argues for two strophes: "it thus appears more satisfactory to recognize a clear division at the end of v. 17 than, with Masson, to group vv. 17,18b in one 'hinge'-strophe." "Colossians i. 15-20 and its Context," *Expository Times* 73 (1962): 252. Lohse also accepts a two-strophe hymn but with additions in vss. 18 and 20. In the end, content is more important than structure. Structure may usefully enhance the presentation of content, but it is, after all, only a mechanism.

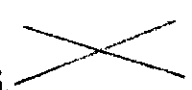
³Fred B. Craddock, "'All Things in Him': A Critical Note on Col. I.15-20," *New Testament Studies* 12 (1965): 79, n. 1.

It is hardly probable that a primitive Christian hymn would have consisted of regularly constructed verses and strophes; rather, the individual strophes probably differed in structure and were composed in the free rhythm of hymnic prose.¹

We may cite Schweizer's summary of the hymn, -as a portrayal of its message:

In the first strophe, then, Christ is extolled as he in whom, through whom, and for whom the whole creation has come about. The connecting strophe supplements this by saying that the permanence of the cosmos is secured by Christ who has been preordained and set as its head. In the second strophe he is celebrated as the Risen One, in whom, through whom, and for whom, by means of the presence of the divine "fulness," the reconciliation of the world has come about.²

While discussing structure, comment must be made on the use of chiasmus in the hymn. There is agreement that chiasmus is present in vs. 16c and vs. 20 as follows:³

A	τὰ πάντα		B ¹	καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ
			A ¹	τὰ πάντα
B	δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ			

E. Bammel has argued for a wider use of chiasmus in the passage, even to finding its use in individual verses.⁴ This systematic use has been largely rejected on the basis that it conflicts with the use of parallel phrases in the verses.⁵

¹Lohse, p. 44. Cf. C. F. D. Moule, p. 61: "Arguments based on rhythm, parallelism, and supposed strophic arrangement are precarious enough at the best of times, and most of all when there is no recognizable quantitative metre by which to judge."

²Schweizer, Commentary, p. 63.

³Martin, "Early Christian Hymn," p. 197; Reconciliation, p. 115.

⁴See his "Versuch zu Col. I:15-20," Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 52 (1961): 88-95, cited in Carr, p. 48.

⁵See, for instance, the comment of Martin in Colossians and Philemon, p. 64.

Of more concern for the purpose of this thesis is to notice the inversion of thought between vss. 16 and 20:

ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς

ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς . . . ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς

The same inversion is apparent in the creation reports in Gen 1 and 2:

Gen 1:1 heavens and the earth

Gen 2:4b earth and the heavens

Jacques Doukhan performed a careful analysis of the literary structure of these two creation reports and found that the heaven/-earth and earth/heaven references relate to two different emphases:

It may be said that both pericopes describe the creative activity of God in two opposite symmetrical ways. C [Gen 1:1-2:4a] emphasizes the universal aspect of this creation: God appears there transcendent and far from man. C' [Gen 2:4b-25] emphasizes, on the contrary, the particular aspect of this creation in relation to man. God appears there immanent and close to man.¹

The same emphases appear in the Colossian hymn in a similar chiastic structure. The emphases of Doukhan--applied to Colossians--can be considered as supporting Schweizer's summary of the hymn as cited above, yet they go beyond Schweizer in presenting the contrast of transcendence and immanence of Christ. It can be considered then that the transcendence of Christ is emphasized in that part of the Colossian hymn which refers to

¹Jacques B. Doukhan, The Genesis Creation Story (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1978), p. 35.

creation, and the immanence of Christ is emphasized in that part of the hymn which refers to reconciliation and the cross.

By way of summary it can be stated that a Christian hymn is seen in Col 1:15-20 by virtue of its use of recognizable hymnic elements. An unequivocal presentation of its structure is not possible. Attempts to do so result in circular reasoning.

The Question of Derivation

To make the acknowledgement that in Col 1:15-20 is a hymnic passage taken up and utilized by the apostle Paul is to immediately raise the question of authorship of the hymnic passage. Debate on the question has been considerable as to whether the hymnic composition was Pauline, pre-Pauline, or post-Pauline, or some form of redaction. To provide any certain answer is difficult. Francis and Meeks note that part of the problem is that the function of traditional material such as hymns has not been clearly delineated.¹ While the weight of scholarly opinion considers the hymn to be pre-Pauline² there are significant objections to this designation.

Some of the words used are rare in the Pauline writings-- such as ὁρατά, θρόνοι, κυριότητες, πρωτεύων and εἰρηνοποιήσας-- as are also the expressions εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ (1:15) and αἷμα τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ (1:20). The preponderance of rare terms in such small compass excludes, in the thinking of Lohse, "the possibility that the author of this letter could have composed

¹Francis and Meeks, p. 216.

²O'Brien, p. 32.

these verses himself by using traditional phrases."¹ He prefers to think that "this is a quotation from a primitive Christian song which celebrates the unique dignity of the exalted Lord."²

O'Brien questions this conclusion from the use of rare words. He asks "was Paul incapable of using these words if the subject matter so demanded?"³ He answers by showing that the use of these words harmonizes with use of cognates by Paul, or are perfectly intelligible when context is considered. To counter Pauline authorship these words would have to be shown as belonging naturally to some non-Pauline source. This has not been done.

Gibbs, following Masson, cites unusual features of style and thought as precluding Pauline authorship.⁴ Hunter states similarly that the Christology of the passage is an "advance on anything else in Paul's commonly accepted letters."⁵ It is difficult to see any significance in these observations. The Colossian situation was without parallel in the early church and called for a particular Christological emphasis. To deny Pauline authorship on this ground simply projects authorship onto some unnamed genius who did not have the occasion for constructing the hymn that Paul did.

¹Lohse, p. 42. On the other hand Kümmel sees it as "far more likely" that "the author of Col himself has formed the hymn, utilizing traditional material," p. 343.

²Lohse, p. 42. Ed Parish Sanders also considers that "the non-Pauline characteristics of Col I 16 are also readily explained on the hymn hypothesis." "Literary Dependence in Colossians," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 37.

³O'Brien, p. 41. ⁴Gibbs, p. 95, n.2. ⁵Hunter, p. 126.

The use of the introductory relative pronoun in Col 1:15 has been taken as indicating that the hymn has been selected from a larger whole. While the parallel use of the pronoun in vs. 19 militates against this idea, the usage itself can be construed as indicating a continuous train of composition, as well as thought, from prose to poetry.

O'Brien's summary of authorship criteria is appropriate:

In other words, the case against the Pauline authorship is considerably more flimsy than its more ardent advocates would have us believe. We may thus ask: Is it impossible to imagine that Paul was using a hymn which he had earlier composed (so Feuillet, *Christ*, 246-73) with interpretative additions or expansions here and there (but not corrections or contradictions) in view of the situation of his readers, or expressing in an exalted hymnic style his beliefs about Christ in view of the situation of his readers and making use of some of their language? In our view one or other of these alternatives is more likely than that the hymn is pre-Pauline.¹

In the end, all conjectures regarding structural analysis are secondary matters. The primary thing is the use of the hymnic passage, and especially its theological impact.² Addressing translators, Bratcher and Nida conclude that whether or not Paul created the hymn, the practical implication is slight.³ It may be as well that a similar conclusion is reached for the exegete.

¹O'Brien, pp. 41-42.

²Martin sees this as "paraenetic" and "practical," *Colossians: The Church's Lord*, p. 50. Lohse sees it as the starting point to argue against the false philosophy, "Pauline Theology in the Letter to the Colossians," *New Testament Studies* 15 (1968-69): 213.

³Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1977), p. 21.

Exegesis of the Pericope

The hymn of Col 1:15-20 presents in succinct form the principal foci of the doctrine of Christology--Christ as Creator and Christ as Redeemer--and in so doing conveys implications for other doctrines. For the subject of this thesis it is proposed to examine the first of these doctrinal emphases. In the process there will be reflection on the transcendence of Christ which is portrayed in the hymn through descriptive titles relating to his person and delineation of creation's origin and continued existence through him.

The Person of Christ

The relative pronoun beginning Col 1:15 refers back to the Son in vs. 13 and then makes two statements relating to Christ, the Son of God--first, his relation to God; and secondly, his position in relation to created things.¹ Each of these relationships are examined in turn.

The image of God

In an expression used elsewhere in the Pauline writings only in 2 Cor 4:4, Christ is termed εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ. The term

¹These categories are those used by Lightfoot, p. 144, and by other commentators. This division is disputed by Francis W. Beare who argues that "in both phrases it is Christ's place in the universe as Son of God that is in question; both image and first-born are titles of sovereignty, and are related not to metaphysical doctrines of absolute reality, but to ancient conceptions of the kingship." "The Epistle to the Colossians: Introduction and Exegesis," Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), 11:163. Beare is too strong in his reaction. In the final analysis there is little difference in the conclusions of both scholars and Lightfoot's division, as followed here, is simply an analytical device.

basically refers to "likeness."¹ But it must be more than the mere "likeness" of the emperor which appeared on coinage (Matt 22:20). Horst dichotomizes the two concepts by stating that "image"

. . . means . . . the form becomes visible in its essential nature in the counterpart, thus simply the rendering visible of a form and its essential nature.²

"Likeness" he sees as "only the copy, the shadow, often merely a pale and inadequate reproduction of the subject."³

The εἰκών in this case is of the ἀοράτος. Kleinknecht points out that while to modern logic this seems contradictory,

. . . the peculiarity of the expression is related to that of the ancient concept, which does not limit image to a functional representation present to human sense but also thinks of it in terms of an emanation, of a revelation of the being with a substantial participation (μετοχή) in the object.⁴

It is necessary to see in the expression "representation" and "manifestation" as well as "likeness."⁵

Peake points out that physical visibility is not the question here. The "invisibility" of God is not physical so

¹William F. Arnt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 221.

²Friedrich Horst, "Face to Face," trans. John Bright, Interpretation 4 (1950): 268.

³Ibid.

⁴Hermann Kleinknecht, "The Greek Use of εἰκών," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (1964); 2:389 (hereafter cited as TDNT).

⁵Lightfoot, p. 145.

much as that he is "unknowable."¹ The article with ἀοράτου makes an apposition and adds emphasis to the adjective.² Thus by contrast, Christ as the "image" of God is the revealer of the invisible.³

As image of the invisible God the Son is God manifest, the bearer of the might and majesty of God, the revealer and mediator of the creating and sustaining power of the Godhead in relation to the world.⁴

He is revealer because εἰκών is more than ὁμοίωμα--likeness. Εἰκών "implies an archetype of which it is a copy."⁵ "An image is a representation of an object by means of which the object itself is present to the mental eye."⁶

[Image] has a share in the reality. Indeed, it is the reality. Thus εἰκών does not imply a weakening or a feeble copy of something. It implies the illumination of its inner core and essence.⁷

¹Peake, 3:502-3. He cannot be known unless he chooses to reveal himself.

²R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1946), p. 51.

³See John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), p. 149. See also Martin: "a coming into visible expression of the invisible God", Colossians: The Church's Lord, p. 45.

⁴Beare, Interpreter's Bible, 11:164.

⁵Lightfoot, p. 145.

⁶Otto A. Piper, "The Saviour's Eternal Work," Interpretation 3 (1949): 293.

⁷Kleinknecht, 2:389. See also O. Flender, "εἰκών," The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, ed. Colin Brown (1971), 2:286-87 (hereafter cited as NIDNTT).

Indeed, "there is no difference here between the image and the essence of the invisible God."¹ The invisible God is made manifest to men. The "image of God" is God's Personal expression of Himself."²

In this connection, some writers argue that the deity of Christ may be assumed in the εἰκών description:

Though this reference [Gen 1:27] to man's creation as God's image and consequent dominion may well have been in the background, it does not do full justice to the idea conveyed here in Colossians with respect to the Son. Man, though God's image, is not God. But as the image of the invisible God, the Son is, first of all, himself God.³

This may be more exposition than exegesis and must have for its support other verses such as Col 2:9; εἰκών cannot be pressed into identity of essence. As Martin puts it, "the description is revelatory, more than ontological."⁴ At best we can say that deity is implied.⁵

The First-born of all creation

After describing the relation of Christ to God, the apostle now presents his relation to created things, and in so doing he describes further the person of Christ. He is πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως.

¹Flender, 2:288.

²W. R. Nicholson, Oneness with Christ, ed. James M. Gray (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1903), p. 74.

³William Hendricksen, A Commentary on Colossians and Philemon, Geneva Series Commentaries (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), p. 71.

⁴Martin, Colossians and Philemon, p. 57

⁵Johnston, p. 59.

The description has been the object of controversy at different periods in Christian history (particularly in connection with the Arian controversy), and is still without unanimous agreement as to its meaning. The principal interpretation of "first-born" is accurate, and clearly distinguishes the term from others such as πρωτόκτιστος--"first-created," or the Philonic πρωτόγονος--"first begotten." In itself the phrase could be understood as describing Christ as included among "created things" and as the first of such. In other words, to consider the genitive as partitive, with the meaning, "first creature produced of all creatures." However, he was "first-born" not "first-created." Contextual considerations also prohibit such interpretation. Vs. 16 refers to Christ's activity in creation:

It distinctly alleges that Christ was "before" all creation, and that He is the agent of all creation. To insist that the words must be explained so as to include Him in "creation" would be to go right in the teeth of the Apostle's own justification and explanation of them.¹

Two interpretations of the term appear as possible alternatives. The first is to emphasize the time element of the term. Thus, for example, Bengel states:

The πρό, in πρωτότοκος, first-born, governs the genitive κτίσεως, creature. Time is an accident of the creature. Therefore the origin of the Son of God precedes all time.²

¹Alexander Maclaren, The Epistles of St. Paul to the Colossians and Philemon, 7th ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), p. 76.

²John Albert Bengel, Gnomon of the New Testament (Philadelphia: Perkinpine and Higgins, 1864; reprint ed. as New Testament Word Studies, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1971), p. 454.

This temporal sense of priority emphasizes that the Son was "born" or "begotten" before all creation. This "begetting" refers to the unique relationship of the eternal Son to the heavenly Father and has no reference to his birth at Bethlehem. Lightfoot goes so far as to say that the phrase "declares the absolute pre-existence of the Son."¹ The Son was uncreated, hence he is eternal.²

The use of πρωτότοκος again in Col 1:18 must be taken into account in interpretation. There "first-born" does not have temporal associations. Christ was not first to be resurrected from the dead in point of time. As Eadie points out, the reference is to prerogative, "for He is not simply the first who rose, 'no more to return to corruption,' but his immortal primogeniture secures the resurrection of his people, and is at once the pledge and pattern of it."³

A second interpretation may then be the point of emphasis, and that is to interpret πρωτότοκος in terms of supremacy, or sovereignty of position--"the supreme rank of the pre-existent Christ."⁴ Exegetes appeal to Ps 88:27 (LXX) where πρωτότοκος is used specifically of David, youngest of eight sons. He was to

¹Lightfoot, p. 146.

²The "first-born of all creation" does not lack a "rudimentary ontology." Martin, Colossians and Philemon, p. 57.

³John Eadie, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians (n.p.: Richard Griffin, 1856; reprint ed., Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), p. 51.

⁴K. H. Bartels, "First, Firstborn," NIDNTT 1:668.

be the highest of the kings of the earth. Exod 4:22 referring to Israel as the Lord's first-born son is also called upon to support the concept of supremacy.

These two aspects of interpretation--priority and supremacy--are given differing credence by the commentators. Lightfoot, for instance, includes both ideas. The first being associated with the Alexandrian conception of the Logos, and the second with the Palestinian conception of the Messiah.¹ Beare emphasizes the second, stating that the phrase is "a title of dignity and function; it has nothing to do with relations of time."² So also Michaelis: "The only remaining possibility is to take πρωτότοκος hierarchically . . . What is meant is the unique supremacy of Christ over all creatures as the Mediator of their creation."³

Abbott argues conversely for the temporal aspect: "the only tenable interpretation of the words before us is 'begotten before πάντα κτίσις'."⁴ He shows weaknesses in Old Testament support for the concept of supremacy, but noticeably omits discussion of Col 1:18 in his argument. While there is no unity of interpretation, Peake offers a balanced viewpoint:

. . . the stress should lie on the lordship of the Son rather than on His priority to creation. For what Paul is concerned

¹Lightfoot, p. 146. ²Beare, Interpreter's Bible, 11:164.

³Wilhelm Michaelis, "πρωτότοκος, πρωτοτοκεία," IDNT, 6:879.

⁴T. K. Abbott, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), p. 212.

to prove is the superiority of Christ to the angels, and for this the idea of priority is not relevant, but that of dominion is.¹

A note should be added concerning πάσης κτίσεως--"of all creation." The RSV translation uses the collective form in preference to the distributive "every creature" of the KJV. Lightfoot supports the former rendering on the basis that πρωτότοκος seems to require a collective noun, or a plural, and that κτίσις can be anarthrous.² Peake disputes both points for πρωτότοκος as "ruler" does not require the collective noun, nor is κτίσις without the article to be treated as a collective.³ Abbott further argues that words occasionally anarthrous do not dispense with the article when πᾶς precedes,⁴ and he concludes:

There appears, therefore, no sufficient justification for departing from the natural rendering, "every created thing." This furnishes an additional reason against the interpretation which would include the πρωτότοκος in πᾶσα κτίσις.⁵

In fact, as Hendricksen observes, "it makes little difference in resultant meaning"⁶ whichever translation is chosen.

The two descriptions of Christ in Col 1:15 go together, to present a composite picture. The Son is the image of the invisible God--one like the Father who reveals Him--and as such stands supreme over every creature. This supremacy is expounded further in the succeeding verse.

¹Peake, 3:503.

²Lightfoot, p. 148.

³Peake, 3:503.

⁴Abbott, pp. 212-13.

⁵Ibid., p. 213.

⁶Hendricksen, p. 72, n. 52.

The Supremacy of Christ as Creator

The extent of creation

Christ is supreme over every creature because "in him all things were created" (Col 1:16). The apostle then expands his concept of "all things" by delineation of categories of "things." These are examined in turn.

The general statement of τὰ πάντα is inclusive of the whole of creation--"all things, the universe."¹ In this setting the universe is regarded as a collective whole. Four times in two verses (16, 17) the description is repeated. "The whole universe is, as it were, set in one class, and He alone over against it."² The apostle could not be more emphatic in presenting the supremacy of Christ as Creator. The term occurs in Gen 1:31 at the conclusion of the first creation account (LXX), but the succeeding categorization suggests that Isa 44:24 may be behind the apostle's words:

I am the Lord, who made all things,
who stretched out the heavens above,
who spread out the earth . . .

More will be said on this later. The comprehensive statement is then elaborated by the apostle. He presents a series of classifications within τὰ πάντα.

¹Arndt and Gingrich, p. 638. It may be noted that the Stoic term, τὸ πᾶν, is not used by Paul or any other Biblical writer because of its pantheistic connotations (Lightfoot, p. 151). Beare comments that "in Christian thought the universe is not self-contained or self-existent; it does not include God, but is dependent on him for life and order and motion" (Beare, Interpreter's Bible, 11:165).

²Maclaren, p. 77.

First, he writes of things "in heaven and on earth." He means "everything which exists in heaven and everything which exists on earth."¹ The term is Hebraic and denotes the entire created universe (as in Gen 1:1); while the two elements--heaven and earth--denote two regions within the whole. The description adds emphasis by repetition, not opposition, to τὰ πάντα. As Lightfoot observes, this is a classification by locality.² Heaven and earth comprehend all space.

Secondly, he writes of things visible and things invisible. Lightfoot speaks of this as a classification by essences.³ Again the whole of creation is included under this new principle of division. However, there is now a direction towards emphasis on the invisible, as evidenced by the description which follows. Inasmuch as heavenly powers are an object of his concern, he leads to them by reference to the "invisible." Certainly all orders of being are included, as well as material things beyond human sight. The distinction is not drawn between matter and spirit. The purpose of these classifications may be noted:

First, it tacitly repudiates the notion of a fundamental division between the spiritual and the material--the pernicious dualism which lay at the root of all the "Gnostic" systems. It asserts that matter and spirit are alike of divine origin and have part alike in the divine economy. Second, it leads up to the particular insistence that spiritual existences of every order, no matter how exalted, are included in the totality of things that "were created in Christ."⁴

¹Bratcher and Nida, p. 23. ²Lightfoot, p. 151.

³Ibid. ⁴Beare, Interpreter's Bible, 11:165.

The third classification consists of a fourfold description--
θρόνοι; κυριότητες; ἀρχαί; ἐξουσίαι. Commentators generally consider
the four terms to apply to further distinctions within the category
of things invisible, that is, to spirit beings.

Θρόνοι--"thrones"--occurs in the New Testament primarily
with reference to ruling authority, whether of human kings or
of God. The preponderance of usage is, however, of God's throne,
leading Carr to state:

It would therefore appear impossible for the term when used
absolutely, to refer to anything other than the heavenly
court, which sits with God and worships Him.¹

It must be questioned whether the plural is necessary to signify
the heavenly court. By the use of the plural perhaps a wider
meaning is in view. Thus Arndt and Gingrich separate the usage
in Col 1:16 to a category or class of supernatural beings who
exercise dominion or sovereignty.²

Κυριότητες appears to have a similar meaning, being the
power wielded by a κύριος--"lordship" or "dominion"--and again
are separated in Colossians as a class of angelic powers who
bear ruling power or dominion.³

Ἀρχαί and ἐξουσίαι should be considered as a unit, since
most examples in the New Testament occur together. Ἀρχαί is

¹Carr, p. 49. He concurs with Calvin who wrote: "I am
rather, however, of opinion, that the heavenly palace of God's
majesty is meant by the term," (p. 150). Both in turn seem
dependent upon the Fathers such as Theodoret who interpreted the
θρόνοι as "cherubim (or winged, gryphon-like creatures which
supported God's throne in Ezek. i)" (cited by C. F. D. Moule,
p. 65).

²Arndt and Gingrich, p. 365.

³Ibid., p. 461. See also H. Bietenhard, "Lord, Master,"
NIDNTT 2:518.

rooted in the concept of rule or authority and carries the concept onto persons or beings who rule. These can be human, angelic, or demonic.¹ Civil or religious authorities are mentioned in Luke 12:11; 20:20 and Titus 3:1. Similarly, ἐξουσία meaning "power" carried onto the plural the concept of bearers of power and authority.² The consensus of scholarship is that again heavenly powers are being referred to.

There are differences of interpretation as to what heavenly powers are in view. O'Brien states the general position:

The most natural interpretation is that four classes . . . of spiritual and supernatural forces (possibly representing the highest orders of the angelic realm) are in view.³

Most exegetes see the possible listing of different orders of angels here, but are careful not to draw distinctions between them. Schmitz says of ἁγίων that it seems to refer to "one of the highest classes of angels, though no precise distinction is possible."⁴ Foerster notes also that it is not possible to distinguish between ἀρχαί and ἐξουσίαι and that they "are different expressions for much the same thing."⁵ He does attempt to differentiate in one way by suggesting that ἁγίων and

¹Arndt and Gingrich, p. 112. ²Ibid., pp. 277-78.

³P. T. O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers and their Relationship to Structures," Reformed Theological Review 40 (1981): 5.

⁴Otto Schmitz, "ἁγίος," IDNT, 3:167.

⁵Werner Foerster, "ἐξουσία," IDNT, 2:573.

κυριότητες might stand in the immediate presence of God, while the ἀρχαί and ἐξουσίαι might be linked with earthly things. He adds, however, that "as to this there can be no certainty."¹

We ask whether these terms should be confined to angelic or supernatural beings. The meaning is usually so given on the basis that the four terms are an elaboration of the ἄόρατα. It may be more in harmony with the apostle's thinking to consider τὰ πάντα in vs. 16a as the general and inclusive term incorporating all that follows in the succeeding descriptions. Thus ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς is included in τὰ πάντα but is a further description of τὰ πάντα. Similarly, τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἄόρατα is included in τὰ πάντα and is a further description of τὰ πάντα. The θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἀρχαί, and ἐξουσίαι that follow can be considered an elaboration of the whole τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἄόρατα. On this basis there is no necessity to confine the θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἀρχαί, and ἐξουσίαι to the invisible and supernatural. The terms could well include human powers and authorities, as they do in other parts of the New Testament. Wuest is thus inclusive in this statement that "the words, 'thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers' refer to both holy and fallen angels, to demons and man."²

¹Ibid.

²Kenneth S. Wuest, Ephesians and Colossians in the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), p. 184. Peake excludes earthly powers on the basis that the terms used appear in Jewish angelology and that reference to earthly dignitaries would be irrelevant to the polemical purpose of the passage (3:504). The inclusive nature of the description given by Paul argues against the latter point.

While a greater breadth of meaning of the terms is allowed in the pericope itself, it is contextual considerations that have tended to support the supernatural interpretation. Primary in consideration is Col 2:18--θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων. The phrase is enigmatic, for we have little evidence to suggest that angel worship existed among Jews of the time. There was interest in angels and in the orders of being amongst them,¹ but not worship. E. Percy suggested that the angel-cult is simply subjection to law and legalism since angels were the mediators of the law.² F. F. Bruce in discussing this says "something more than this is required to satisfy Paul's strong language about an angel-cult 'figuring centrally in the plan of salvation.'"³ He offers the suggestion of an angel-cult as a non-Jewish ingredient in the amalgam of beliefs making up the Colossian heresy.⁴ If the false teachers were propagating religious worship of angel beings, it is a logical conclusion to consider the apostle in 1:16 as showing the inferiority of angel beings to Christ. Longenecker would not go this far, for he sees in the "worshipping of angels . . . such

¹Macgregor speaks of "extraordinary proliferation of Hebrew angelology in the inter-testamental period." G. H. C. Macgregor, "Principalities and Powers: The Cosmic Background of Paul's Thought," *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954): 19. From that time and later, C. F. D. Moule (p. 65) cites usage of the Colossian terms in 1 Enoch 41:9, 61:10; 2 Enoch 20:1; Testament of the XII Patriarchs, Levi 3:8; and Ascension of Isaiah 7:21. Further discussion of the background of the terms may be found in Jung Young Lee, "Interpreting the Demonic Powers in Pauline Thought," *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970): 54-69.

²E. Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe* (Lund, 1946), p. 168, cited in Simpson and Bruce, p. 248.

³Simpson and Bruce, p. 248.

⁴Ibid.

prominence given to angelic manifestations and angelomorphic categories as to minimize the uniqueness of Christ."¹ The conclusion is the same--Christ is shown as supreme over angelic powers, no matter what the exact nature of the "worship" directed to them.² The use of ἐξουσία in 1:13 to refer broadly to powers of darkness supports a supernatural interpretation. The use of ἀρχαί and ἐξουσία in 2:15 has been taken in different ways.³ On the cross, Christ triumphed over all earthly and supernatural powers that opposed him.

In Eph 1:21 the apostle makes a statement of Christ's superiority similar to that in Col 1:16. There Christ is placed above the ἀρχαί, ἐξουσίαι, and κυριότητες. ἐπὶ is not used but δυνάμει is. Interpretation of this statement can be inclusive of earthly as well as heavenly powers. The variation in terms used in Ephesians suggests that the apostle is speaking generally and is not concerned with precision of meaning.

The wider context of the New Testament is of little assistance in understanding the Colossian terms. The Gospels frequently refer to οἱ δαίμονες but not to powers that are under consideration here.

¹Richard N. Longenecker, "Some Distinctive Early Christological Motifs," New Testament Studies 14 (1968): 532.

²Lane's suggestion that Col 2:18 refers to "worship directed toward God by the angels" (p. 217) requires that the false teachers were putting inordinate emphasis on men achieving a visionary witness of the angelic service. The end result is the same--the angels are the focus of attention, rather than Christ--and the focus must be shifted back to the Supreme One.

³See pp. 84-85 below.

In the context which we are discussing, Paul has in view demonic intelligences of a much higher order than the 'devils' who possessed the poor disordered souls that meet us in the Gospel pages. These are cosmic spirit forces which possess and control not only individual human lives but the very course of the universe.¹

Whiteley draws the further distinction that the demons of the Synoptic Gospels are

. . . the putative cause of afflictions which come upon individuals and are now treated, with varying success, by physicians and psychiatrists. The 'principalities and powers' are the concern of politicians, sociologists and others.²

In the final analysis it seems best not to attempt any limitation on the meaning of the terms employed here by the apostle. Supernatural powers are definitely in view. They must be competitors of considerable standing in relation to Christ, or Paul would not have spent time writing about them. We may keep in mind that earthly powers and authorities may also be included in the descriptions. As far as the argument of the epistle is concerned, Bruce's statement of the false teaching is a plausible construction:

In this teaching a decisive place was accorded to the angelic beings through whom the law was given. They were not only elemental spirits but dominant ones as well-- principalities and powers, lords of the planetary spheres, sharers in the plenitude of the divine essence. Since they controlled the lines of communication between God and man, all revelation from God to man and all prayer and worship from man to God could reach its goal only through their mediation and by their permission. It was therefore thought wise to cultivate their good will and pay them such homage as they desired.³

¹Macgregor, p. 19.

²D. E. H. Whiteley, The Theology of St. Paul (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1964), p. 19.

³Simpson and Bruce, p. 167.

The point of Paul's emphasis in Col 1:16 is that these powers--whatever their exact nature--were created by Christ, and hence under his dominion.

The cumulative effect of this catalogue of powers is to emphasize the immeasurable superiority of Christ over whatever rivals might, by the false teachers, be suggested: he is himself the agent and the place of their creation, and their very raison d'être.¹

The process of creation

Col 1:16 speaks of the process of creation in two phrases: ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη and δι' αὐτοῦ . . . ἔκτισται. The first intention of these phrases (as indicated by the introductory ὅτι) is to show that the πρωτότοκος is not included in "all creation," for "all creation" came to be through him.

Ἐν αὐτῷ has been considered by the majority of exegetes to be a locative rather than an instrumental dative. This may restrict too much the meaning of the apostle. The grand scope of his description in the verse would suggest that C. F. D. Moule may be right in seeing "possibly both instrumental and local" in the dative.² Wuest cites Vincent on ἐν αὐτῷ as

. . . not denying the instrumentality, but putting the fact of creation with reference to its sphere and center. In Him, within the sphere of His personality, resides the Creative will and the creative energy, and in that sphere the creative act takes place. Thus creation is dependent on Him.³

¹C. F. D. Moule, p. 66.

²Ibid., p. 65. See also O'Brien, p. 45.

³Wuest, pp. 183-84.

The statement is eclectic. This "dependence" can be viewed both as to position, and as to instrument. The aorist--ἐκτίσθη-- denotes the historical act of creation, an act which took place at a certain point of time.¹ This further supports interpretation of the dative as instrumental by focussing upon the act. As to ἐκτίσθη, "in the N.T. κτίζω, κτίσις, κτίσμα are always used of original creation or production."² It is obvious from the following that this "excludes emanation as well as pre-existent matter."³ Ἐν does not allow of pantheistic conceptions.⁴

¹Lindar's observation is worth noting that the phrase probably depends on an old midrash of Gen 1:1. Barnabas Lindars, New Testament Apologetic (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 212. The similarity of the verbs, ἐκτίσθη and ἐποίησεν would confirm the historical act of Genesis as being in view.

²Abbott, p. 215. Meyer stresses that the words denote "the original bringing forth, never merely the arrangement of that which exists." Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, rev. and ed. William P. Dickson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879), p. 283.

³Werner Foerster, "κτίζω: Creation in the New Testament," TDNT, 3:1029.

⁴Exactly what is in view in the use of ἔν has been debated. Some have attempted to see a Philonic Logos concept with the Son being the archetype of the universe--"the eternal pattern after which the physical universe has been created" (Peake, 3:504). Lightfoot sees in Colossians "an enlargement of this conception, inasmuch as the Logos is no longer a philosophical abstraction but a Divine Person" (p. 151). But this interpretation cannot be accepted. The aorist ἐκτίσθη expresses the historical act of creation, not making reference to the "ideal universe." More detailed objection to the Philonic interpretation is found in Beaseley-Murray, p. 172.

Pantheistic ideas associated with the Stoic Logos cannot be read into the text either. As Craddock expressed in response to Hegermann, "the Son who is the image of the invisible God is the one 'in whom' are all things. He is not in all things but all things are in Him . . . the Colossian hymn praises him in whom all things begin, continue, and conclude because they are in, through,

In the phrase ἐν αὐτῷ then, the apostle is writing,

. . . not of the existence and essence of the universe in Christ, but of the becoming created, which took place in Christ (ἐν αὐτῷ ζῶν ἦν, John i. 4), consequently of a divine act depending on Christ.¹

'Dependence' is perhaps the key concept in the phrase. "The act of creation depended causally on the Son."² He is "the creative centre, as it were, or element in which as in a store-house or reservoir all creative forces resided, and was in a definite act put forth."³

The second description of the creative process is δι' αὐτοῦ . . . ἐκτεταται. The change of tense in the verb is significant. In contrast to the aorist used previously, the perfect used here expresses "the abiding result from the act at a definite point of time."⁴ The "abiding result" signifies a "permanent and indissoluble relationship to Christ, a relationship which ever seeks to find fulfilment in him."⁵ The preposition διὰ, used here signifies agency. "The universe is the result of the exercise of His omnipotence."⁶ Maclaren points out that there is consequently a "full, clear demarcation between creature and creator."⁷ This implies that there cannot be an

and unto him as a pre-existent being" (p. 79). Lohse rules out a pantheistic conception, for while God acts creatively in nature, he "also stands against it as its ruler" (p. 50).

¹Meyer, p. 282.

²Peake, 3:504.

³Maclaren, p. 78.

⁴Peake, 3:505.

⁵Beasley-Murray, p. 173.

⁶Eadie, p. 56.

⁷Maclaren, p. 79.

equating of the Son with the creation, and further, that the Son is clearly related to the Father as the one through whom creation was accomplished.

The purpose of creation

The final phrase in Col 1:16 is teleological: εἰς αὐτὸν ᾧ ἐκτίσται. "Christ is the goal toward which all creation moves for its justification and very existence."¹ He is the purpose for creation, and creation finds its finality in him. This purpose is elaborated elsewhere in the Pauline corpus in eschatological terms.² Here it is stated simply, but the conclusion is inescapable that all things are created to serve him and glorify him--"for him to control, for him to achieve his ends in them."³

The sequence of prepositions in Col 1:16 serves to reinforce the concept of Christ's supremacy over creation, already introduced in vs. 15. All things were created ἐν αὐτῷ; δι' αὐτοῦ; and εἰς αὐτὸν. Creation is founded in him, caused to exist by him, and oriented toward him as its objective. There can be no mediate position for Christ within creation. He transcends the whole, be it the material or the invisible realms of creation.

His Pre-existence⁴

The use of πρωτότοκος in Col 1:15 implied the pre-existence of the Son. This is more clearly established in

¹"The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians," Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1957), 7:192.

²See 1 Cor 15:20-28.

³Lenski, p. 58.

⁴This point is currently under debate by scholars such as James D. G. Dunn and I. Howard Marshall.

vs. 17 by stating that αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων. Remembering that τὰ πάντα includes the entire universe, it is clear that the Son exists before all, be it the visible or invisible realm, matter or spirit. The personal pronoun--αὐτός--is included for purposes of emphasis and completes the meaning by stressing his personality.¹ The present tense of the verb, instead of a past tense, is a similar use to that of John 6:20; 8:58, and serves to declare that his pre-existence is absolute existence.²

The significance of πρὸ would seem to be temporal. The Son exists before the time when τὰ πάντα was created. The term can be used of rank (and would seem to be so used in Jas 5:12; 1 Pet 4:8), but such use is limited in the New Testament and there are more likely ways of expressing priority in importance. There are exegetes who incorporate both concepts in interpretation of the phrase.³ The main point is clear: "it emphasizes once again the unique position of Christ as Lord over the cosmos."⁴

Sustenance of Creation

To complete the presentation of Christ's lordship in reference to creation, it is stated that τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ

¹Lightfoot, pp. 155-56.

²Ibid., p. 155. Lightfoot's accentuation of ἐστιν has been questioned. See the discussion in C. F. D. Moule, pp. 66-67. The build up of argument regarding the position and nature of the Son in the preceding two verses would find a logical climax in Lightfoot's accentuation ἐστιν, stressing "he exists".

³Thus Bruce: "The words not only declare His temporal priority to the universe, but also suggest His primacy over it," Simpson and Bruce, p. 200.

⁴Lohse, p. 52.

συνέστηκεν. The progression of thought evident in the previous lines reaches its climax here. Creation came into existence through the Son. Now it is said that all things "stand together" or "cohere" in him. Again the perfect tense is used "expressing the state of the universe as an ordered system,"¹ both in its original organization and its continued maintenance. "It expresses that there is in Christ not merely the creative cause, but also the cause which brings about organic stability and continuance in unity (preserving and governing) for the whole of existing things."² The term was used by the Stoics to describe the coherence of the universe, "but the force of its use here is that for Paul it is the living Christ, who died to redeem men, that is the sustainer of the universe and the unifying principle of its life."³

Beasley-Murray goes further than most and sees in συνέστηκεν not only the concept of coherence, but also the "putting together of sundered parts."⁴ In this extended meaning he sees reference to Christ's work of restoration and reconciliation, the work which is the subject of the remainder of the hymnic passage. The line thus serves to bind together both parts of the hymn in ordered sequence.

¹Beare, Interpreter's Bible, 11:167.

²Meyer, p. 288.

³Simpson and Bruce, p. 200.

⁴Beasley-Murray, p. 174.

Conclusion

The entire pericope, in harmony with its suggested hymnic character, is devoted to a progressive presentation of the supremacy of Christ over the entire universe. This presentation is in both structure and word. The progressive elaboration of his supremacy is accompanied by an intensification of the concept, building up from straight-forward statements to an emphatic climax.¹ Christ is portrayed in relation to the Father and in relation to creation. In relation to creation he is presented as before all in terms of existence, and that the entire universe came to be as a result of his working. Further still the goal of creation is Christ, indeed it only continues to exist by virtue of his sustaining power.

Hence whereas it may be said that the world in its past, from which it originates, in its present, in which it now exists, and in its goal, to which it is moving, can only derive its existence from God's good gift, it must also be said that this gift of God bears the name of Jesus Christ.²

Nothing within the universe can challenge him. He is supreme over all. It would then be futile to put trust in anything less than him.

¹Vs. 17 is thus to be considered in a sequential sense rather than in a summarizing or recapitulative one. Vss. 15-17 are a unit.

²Schweizer, Commentary, p. 72.

CHAPTER V

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The pericope under study has as its primary point of emphasis the transcendence of Christ over all creation. This is developed by the emphasis on his role as Creator. Man is a creature whose origin and continued existence are rooted in Christ. The implications of this relationship must now be examined.

Relation of Christology and Anthropology

Craddock describes Christology and anthropology as "inextricably interwoven themes."¹ The one cannot be discussed without entering into discussion of the other. The whole revelation of Christ is concerned with the historical context and experience of man. Craddock sees in Gnosticism an attempted divorce between the two with the result that Christology becomes "a cosmic drama of a pre-existent being."² At the other extreme is humanism which also attempted a divorce between the two, but with the result that theology is reduced to anthropology.³ Only as anthropology is informed by Christology is the balance of truth

¹Fred B. Craddock The Pre-existence of Christ in the New Testament (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 166.

²Ibid., p. 168.

³Ibid.

maintained. In the Colossian hymn "cosmological categories" that were used to explain man's situation in the world were employed by the apostle. These "Paul employed to explain Christ, and Christ explained man. In the language and terms of that day Paul explained Christ existentially, and he explained existence Christologically."¹

The exegesis of the pericope has seen Christ explained existentially--and that is taken to refer to the nature of his person and his transcendence over creation. It remains to examine how the pericope explains man's existence Christologically.

The Person of Christ and Anthropology

The two descriptive titles given to the Son--"Image of the invisible God" and "First-born of all creation"--present Christ as the pre-existent One who created the universe and who manifests the Father to the universe. This emphasis is unique in the Pauline corpus. In contrast to other Pauline epistles, the emphasis here "has moved from the work of Christ to the person of Christ, from soteriology to cosmology."²

The roots of these descriptive titles have been of concern to most exegetes for they appear to be of particular worth in accomplishing the apostle's purposes. Both titles are connected to the creative work of Christ and call to mind the Old Testament creation references. The use of "image" has connotations with Gen 1:26,27,³ and the use of "first-born" with Prov 8:22.

¹Ibid., p. 166.

²A. Q. Morton and James McLeman, Paul, the Man and the Myth (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), p. 36.

³Simpson and Bruce, p. 193: "No reader conversant with the OT scriptures, on reading these words of Paul, could fail to be

Gen 1:26,27 speaks of man as created in the "image" of God. The reference is to the product of the Creator, not to the Creator himself. Adam was made in the image of God. That, Barclay points out, "is what man was meant to be, but sin came in, and man never achieved his destiny."¹ Man today is but a shadow of what he was in the beginning. He has lost the nobility he held. His powers have become dwarfed. Adam is elsewhere described by Paul as "the image of God."² It seems that the apostle saw a close relation between Christ as perfect man and Adam, the first man. This thought is developed particularly in his Adam/Christ typology in Rom 5 and 1 Cor 15. The Colossian description, which stresses Christ's revelatory function, can then be seen as not only revealing the Father, but also by implication what man was meant to be.

We may conclude, then, that one dimension of meaning inherent in the description of the Son as "image of God" is the

reminded of the statement in Gen 1:26f., that man was created by God 'in his own image.'" Herman Ridderbos counters those who see no connection between Col 1:15 and Gen 1 by stating that "the whole of the so-called hymn in that passage speaks of the creation. The expression Image of God is here clearly rooted in Genesis 1:27." Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of his Theology (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), p. 71. See also Douglas R. de Lacey, "Image and Incarnation in Pauline Christology - A Search for Origins," Tyndale Bulletin 30 (1979): 15.

¹William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, 2d ed., The Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960), p. 141.

²1 Cor 11:7. Beare (Interpreter's Bible, 11:164) attempts to distinguish between Adam as made "after the image" and Christ who "is the image." Caird correctly points out that this distinction cannot be drawn because of the Corinthian description (p. 176).

representation and manifestation of perfect man.¹ This must be held in tension with that dimension already described, that the Son is the perfect manifestation of God. These two dimensions of meaning are those inherent in the tension of the divine-human nature of Christ. Recognition of two dimensions of meaning here obviates the question as to whether or not it was at the incarnation that the Son became the "image." The incarnation "brought Him, as being that image, within our grasp."²

The title "First-born of all creation" calls to mind the wisdom figure in Prov 8. In the Colossian hymn, wisdom appears personalized in Christ. He is "Incarnate Wisdom."³ Much study has been given to the background of Paul's presentation,⁴ but it is not necessary to see a literary dependence on Old Testament or inter-testamental wisdom literature. Paul is using "wisdom"

¹de Lacey considers that Paul uses the term "primarily to express human potential" (p. 23).

²Nicholson, p. 75.

³Beare, St. Paul and His Letters, p. 111.

⁴See R. S. Barbour, "Creation, Wisdom and Christ," in Creation, Christ and Culture, ed. Richard W. A. McKinney (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), p. 29; F. F. Bruce, Paul and Jesus (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 85; Reginald H. Fuller, The New Testament in Current Study (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), pp. 117-18; T. Francis Glasson, "Colossians I 18,15 and Sirach 24," Journal of Biblical Literature 86 (1967): 215. Ladd, pp. 240-41; John Warwick Montgomery, "Wisdom as Gift," Interpretation 16 (1962): 48; C. F. D. Moule, The Origin of Christology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 43; Alan Richardson, An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament (London: SCM Press, 1958), p. 158; and A. van Roon, "The Relation between Christ and the Wisdom of God according to Paul," Novum Testamentum 16 (1974): 233.

concepts to illumine his presentation of the cosmic Christ.¹ He is not implying that the "wisdom" of the Old Testament books is Christ. Rather, he is implying that by studying the Old Testament wisdom literature, more can be understood about the pre-existent Christ. The theological point of departure is thus the opposite to what is often assumed.

The function of Christ as Creator is that which is emphasized. This transcendent function has as its correlate the fact that man is a dependent creature. This dependence is not upon an impersonal force, but upon one who can be described by the personal quality of wisdom. This dependence is emphasized further in the sustaining function which Christ holds in relation to man and the rest of creation.

"The New Testament hardly ever speaks of the person of Christ without at the same time speaking of his work."² The cosmic Christology delineated here by Paul grasps "the true magnitude of his person," yet at the same time reveals that the primary point is his significance for the whole cosmos.³ And of particular focus in the cosmos is man.

His Supremacy over the Powers

In Col 1:16 "the whole universe is, as it were, set in one class, and He alone over against it."⁴ All forms of power

¹Ridderbos, pp. 79-80.

²Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 3.

³Eduard Schweizer, Jesus (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 86.

⁴Maclaren, p. 77.

and authority specifically stand under his dominion as "creatures" to Creator.

In Colossians the apostle does not designate the powers as being either good or bad. The tendency of exegetes is to consider them as evil, by making appeal principally to Eph 6:12 where Christians are at war against the "principalities" and the "powers." In that context, supernatural powers of evil are definitely in view.¹ The breadth of New Testament interpretation shows that this is not the only viewpoint taken for Colossians, and in fact some see a neutral interpretation.²

A "neutral" interpretation could be supported if the angels of Col 2:18 are considered to be "good" and the "powers" of Col 1:16 identified with them. This identification is highly questionable. While it is inconceivable that a Christian group would worship malevolent spirits, it is possible that Christians would fear malevolent spirits and seek to placate them through superstitious or ritual practices.³

The statement of Col 2:15 must also be taken into account here. The triumph of Christ is usually presented as being over the powers, that is, they are paraded as captives. A persuasive case is made by Carr for considering the triumph metaphor as

¹Gustaf Aulén makes much of this conflict motif in Colossians. See his Christus Victor, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: S.P.C.K., 1931), pp. 69-70.

²As, for instance, Ladd (p. 402) and Carr (p. 52).

³All the more possible if they are new Christians who have emerged from a pagan background.

portraying Christ leading the heavenly powers in his procession as the army who triumphs with him.¹ This interpretation is consistent with the triumph metaphor in 2 Cor 2:14 (where Paul and other Christians are part of the procession) and with the concept of Christ's headship of the powers in Col 2:10 and 1 Pet 3:22.² Carr's viewpoint has not found general acceptance.

On the other hand, 1 Cor 15:24,25 refers to Christ destroying the powers, as enemies he puts them under his feet. The Eph 6:12 concept of powers comes in here. Rom 8:38 conceives of the powers as ineffective agents in separating the Christian from the love of God, giving a clear implication that that is what they would attempt to do.

Inasmuch as Paul in Colossians does not delineate further the nature of the powers or their significance, it may be well to keep the question open and not attempt to define more than Colossians reveals. There seems to be a tension in the Pauline references to the powers and they could be considered good, or evil, or both, depending on context. As far as Colossians is concerned, what is revealed is that all powers are subservient to Christ. His lordship and dominion extends over them all.

There is a further group of exegetes who are not prepared to accept the reality of the powers, and demythologize the language. Whitely is an example:

¹Carr, pp. 58-64. The crux of his interpretation is the meaning given to ἀπεκδυσάμενος in Col 2:15.

²Note also Eph 3:10 reference to the powers in the heavens in this connection.

I personally believe that, whatever may be said about the demons of the Synoptics, St. Paul, consciously or otherwise, was using mythological language. In other words, there are no principalities or powers, but St. Paul employs this language to express something which is both true and important.¹

To deny the reality of supernatural powers would also call into question the other supernatural elements of the passage, and particularly questionable would be the pre-existence of Christ.

Whatever the position or nature of the powers, the crucial point for the apostle is that Christ is supreme over them:

"Whatever powers there may be, angelic or demonic, Christ is above them all, their very existence came about through Him."²

Having established this foundation with respect to the powers, one dimension needs to be explored further. The powers are not isolated from man. The apostle's description does not merely serve to portray extra-terrestrial realities. The powers are active in the affairs of earth and "exercise a large area of power over the course of this age."³

Working from this point of departure, many exegetes then consider the powers to be cosmic, but also to include "their actual human executives."⁴ "It is these invisible beings who in

¹Whiteley, p. 20. Caird similarly speaks of "symbolic representatives of an aspect of human experience," p. 46.

²T. Francis Glasson, "The Uniqueness of Christ: The New Testament Witness," Evangelical Quarterly 43 (1971): 28. So also Beare, St. Paul and His Letters, p. 109: "he completely overshadows all the angelic powers that could be imagined." This assertion would counteract any ideas the Colossians had of the powers participating in Christ's divinity or receiving some portion of his lordship (see Rudolf Bultmann, 2:150).

³Ladd, p. 402.

⁴Macgregor, p. 23.

some way . . . stand behind what occurs in the world."¹ Such an inclusive concept obviates the need to demythologise, and yet makes the Colossian situation applicable to contemporary man.²

Macgregor comments this way:

We are still conscious that, apart from the victory of Christ, man is a helpless victim in a hostile cosmos. It is little comfort to us that the inexorable fate which was once expressed in terms of the influence of the stars, conceived as personal demons, is now expressed in terms of psychological, or physical or economic determinism. We still ask how a man is to triumph over an evil heredity, or how he can be free and victorious in a world of rigid law and scientific necessity.³

O'Brien asks concerning the relationship of the powers to structures, traditions, and institutions, and argues that structures can become demonic.⁴ He issues a note of caution in that powers of evil work through people rather than structures.⁵

The assurance of the apostle is that Christ is supreme over the powers, and over whatever influence they may attempt to exert in the life of man. There need not be a fatalism that sees the human situation as hopeless.

Comment has been made on the contrast of the apostle's words to Stoic pantheistic philosophy. The contrast is between two vastly different perspectives as to the universe and life

¹Oscar Cullmann, Christ and Time (London: SCM Press, 1962), p. 192. See also his The State in the New Testament (London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 110; and Aulén, p. 69.

²Thus Simpson and Bruce, Commentary, p. 241, n. 74: "We need not demythologize Paul's language in order to appreciate how directly he speaks to the condition of modern man."

³Macgregor, p. 27.

⁴O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers," p. 10.

⁵Ibid.

within it. Stoic philosophy affirmed that man was 'at home' within the universe. The apostle, by presenting Christ as Creator, Sustainer and Goal of creation, affirms that there is need to move outside of creation to find life's origin, meaning and purpose. Otto Piper, in discussing that all was created "for him," says:

The universe is "toward him," that is to say, there is a deep-seated longing in everything that exists to transcend its present state and to come under the kingly rule of Christ. . . . The being "toward him" implies also that this world does not have a meaning of its own. As it proved unable to impart meaning to our lives until we encountered Christ, so it is unable in any other respect to attain to a final meaning of its own.¹

The supremacy of Christ over the powers brings both meaning and security.

Creation and Anthropology

Creation

Col 1:15-17 presents a clear and unequivocal doctrine of creation. The universe came to be through the creative work of the Son of God. In Colossians, creation doctrine is expressed within the Christological framework of the supremacy of the Son.

While not directly stated, the implication is clear that creation was ex nihilo. If the entire universe was created by the Son, if he was before all things, then there could have been no pre-existing matter.² This assertion "is a denial of any kind of philosophical position that would place God on balance with

¹Piper, pp. 294-95.

²"Creation ex nihilo is certainly assumed here." J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., "Creation," Bakers's Dictionary of Theology, ed. Everett F. Harrison (1960), p. 146.

the universe."¹ "Nothing exists outside of God, nothing that does not in some way depend upon His prior being for its being."²

It is also apparent that the doctrine of creation denies any concept of total immanence that would subsume Christ within creation. The primary emphasis of the pericope is on the transcendence of the Son of God, against any doctrine of immanence that was being propagated by the false teachers.³ The apostle states in the most forcible way⁴ the superiority of Christ. Significantly he does not appeal to the resurrection to show his supremacy but rather to creation for

. . . the very meaning of sovereignty, or lordship, as used of the Risen, Ascended and Living Lord Jesus Christ, is discovered in the historical fact of Creation as recorded in the Genesis account, and as affirmed repeatedly throughout both Old and New Testaments.⁵

¹Earle Hilgert, "Theological Dimensions of the Christian Doctrine of Creation," Spectrum 1 (1969): 19.

²Jack W. Provonsha, God Is With Us (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974), p. 62.

³To state such is not to deny the presence of Christ in the universe. Each historical situation calls for a particular emphasis and the Colossian situation called for emphasis on the transcendence of Christ. John Macquarie sees the combination of transcendence and immanence in the Son well expressed in Col 1:17, in Principles of Christian Theology (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 203.

⁴"No more explicit terms could have been used." Donald Guthrie, New Testament Theology (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), p. 356.

⁵T. Robert Ingram, "The Grace of Creation," Westminster Theological Journal 37 (1974-75): 207. We need not go as far as Brunner and deny that "creation" denotes the manner in which the world actually came into existence. See Georges Florovsky, "The Last Things and the Last Events" in The Theology of Emil Brunner ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 209.

Hilgert asserts that it is here that the great difference is seen between myth and the Biblical account of creation:

. . . the primary concern of the Genesis story is not to answer the question of origins, but to assert the primacy, the uniqueness of the lord, who is the covenant God of Israel.¹

Mythical accounts are cosmogonies designed to answer the "how" of creation. The Biblical account is different and in Colossians there is no "independent speculative cosmology" but an interest that is "both Christological and practical."²

This carries significant implications for the propagation of the Christian faith. Rather than concentrating on the 'natural history' aspects of creation--the "how" and "when"--Christian proclamation should concentrate on the supremacy of Jesus Christ.³ Provonsa makes the startling simple yet penetrating statement that "many never really grasped the significance of the theological doctrine of Creation--that it is, above all, about the Creator."⁴ Traditionalists have been preoccupied with pre- and post-Darwinian conflicts over creation as "natural history" and have let the larger war sweep past them.⁵

The only reference to the "how" of creation in Colossians is that creation was "through him," thus rejecting every power that would claim to have shared in the work of creation.⁶

¹Hilgert, p. 17.

²Gibbs, pp. 33-34.

³See Molleurus Couperus, "Tensions Between Religion and Science," Spectrum 10 (1980): 76.

⁴Provonsa, p. 60. Hilgert gives as the "first basic premise regarding the theology of creation: Jesus Christ is the basis, the center, and the key to the doctrine of creation" (p.14).

⁵Provonsa, pp. 59-60.

⁶F. Graber, "All, Many," NIDNTT, 1:95.

The assertion that the Son sustains the universe highlights further this supremacy. It shows that the universe is "dependent upon him for its existence and maintenance."¹ In the terms of this thesis, man has the same dependence.

Anthropology

God's creatorship is not, for Paul, a cosmological theory which professes to explain the origin of the world and its existence as it is. Rather it is a proposition that concerns man's existence.²

The existential connotations of this description are considered below. At this point the relation of the doctrine of creation to anthropology is examined. The centre of emphasis is under question. Is man the chief focus in the doctrine of creation, as suggested above; or is Christ the Creator to be the point of emphasis? Gibbs considers it a weakness of Western theology that up to Chalcedon attention was given almost exclusively to the Person of Christ, to the neglect of the work of Christ.³ The work of Christ particularly neglected was his work in creation.

Dantine argues that

. . . it will be best to begin with that area of the problem which can be the starting-point not only for theology, but also for the general understanding of the world, viz. with anthropology. It is man who believes in Christ, and it is the same man who must recognize himself as existing in the

¹Frederick C. Grant, An Introduction to New Testament Thought (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), p. 119. It is a conception, he says, which the Bible everywhere takes for granted.

²Bultmann, 1:228.

³John G. Gibbs, "Interpretations of the Relation Between Creation and Redemption," Scottish Journal of Theology 21 (1968): 11.

world. If we bypass man, we can neither come to a general understanding of the world nor to a theological consideration of creation. Anthropology holds a key position which cannot be ignored with impunity.¹

The result is that creation is "approached in terms of soteriology and eschatology."² This does limit the scope of the doctrine of creation but nevertheless does make a valid approach if considered in Christologic terms, as for instance Lampe does:

The New Testament picture of creation is anthropocentric in a new sense. Its centre and focus is Christ, the second, or, in a sense, the true Adam, and the new man in Christ, that is the renewed people of God who are the body of Christ.³

This approach is true to the Colossian hymn. It may be suggested that Creation, Christology, and Anthropology can be kept in coordination (to use Gibbs' term) and that there is no need to subordinate one to another. Craddock points out that "Paul has no Christology divorced from anthropology" and states further:

That Paul's thought centered in Christ prevented degeneration into an anthropocentric circle; that his thought centred in Christ crucified prevented degeneration into cosmological speculations about the pre-existent.⁴

Barbour sees that Hebrew thought is "overwhelmingly and astonishingly anthropocentric" yet at the same time is also

¹W. Dantine, "Creation and Redemption: Attempt at a Theological Interpretation in the Light of the Contemporary Understanding of the World," Scottish Journal of Theology 18 (1965): 131.

²Ibid., p. 133. Gibbs condemns this approach as almost forgetting Christ's cosmic work and not dealing with creation in its own right. "Interpretations," p. 11, n. 1.

³G. W. H. Lampe, "The New Testament Doctrine of Ktisis," Scottish Journal of theology 17 (1964): 453-54. this "anthropocentric" picture is also Christological and theocentric; see pp. 451, 455.

⁴Craddock, The Pre-existence of Christ, p. 168.

"overwhelmingly theocentric."¹ It is possible to maintain both viewpoints. In this light, then, comment may be made concerning the implications of creation doctrine upon anthropology; keeping in mind that only one facet of a multifaceted truth is being discussed. "How does Pauline thought understand the creation of man?" Gibbs asks, and gives reply:

Not by analysis of the human situation nor of writings contemporary to the author(s) of that literature, but by beginning with the central reality of the Christian life, namely Jesus' lordship, and finding there the answer to the questions who man is and for what end he was created.²

The Colossian Christian, being reminded of the supremacy of Christ in his creative work, would be conscious of his utter dependence upon Christ. "The Bible never thinks of the world as self-sufficient and detached from God; the world always remains in God's hands."³ The fact that every creature derives existence from God infers that meaning is also to be found there. Provonsa states that "in proper relation" to the Creator, the creature "finds meaning for his existence, security, and happiness. The attempt to go it alone leads only to alienation, estrangement, and isolation--from God and from one's fellow man."⁴ This alienation can also be from his environment.

¹R. S. Balfour, "Salvation and Cosmology: The Setting of the Epistle to the Colossians," Scottish Journal of Theology 20 (1967): 264.

²Gibbs, Creation and Redemption, pp. 137-38.

³Rudolf Schnackenburg, Christian Experience in the New Testament, 2 vols. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968-69), 1:211-12.

⁴Provonsa, p. 63.

The apostle's doctrine of creation through Christ can then inform man of the basis of his existence and provide a solution to the problem of existential anxiety.

These [problems of conscience] are, however, not the only burdens of our existence: men are also deeply troubled by anxious fears arising from their weakness as creatures. The feeling of dependence and contingency, of being subject to uncontrollable forces, forms the content of one of these anxieties. The experience of temporality and mortality, of an approaching 'deadline to one's powers and life,' forms the frightening content of the other. These experiences of our 'creaturehood' foster an undertone of anxiety in our lives; from this dread too, we need rescue if we would be whole. To these anxieties of our finitude, the Christian faith in the creative and providential power of God provides the only sufficient answer. The idea of creation is, therefore, the concept in theology which answers the problems of our 'creatureliness,' . . . it is itself one of Christianity's most healing affirmations.¹

This is particularly so, if, as with the Colossian Christians, there may seem to be a threat from cosmic forces or spirit agencies from the invisible realm. The affirmation of Christ's superiority over all such powers, and indeed their own dependence upon him for existence, brings reassurance. Instead of fear and insecurity there is peace and security; instead of alienation, there is belonging; instead of futility, there is significance, worth, and purpose.

The doctrine of creation through Christ is "a confession of a man's absolute dependence upon God."² Life must be lived in

¹Langdon Gilkey, Maker of Heaven and Earth (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 6.

²William Hordern, "Creation," Dictionary of Christian Theology, ed. Alan Richardson (1969), p. 78.

Christocentric dependence--"unreservedly and totally orientated to Christ."¹

It must be stated also that since "all things" have been created by Christ, the universe "makes sense"; "it is orderly, dependable, shows purpose and design--but behind it all, as its ground, there is a designer who is aware and cares."² Man must be considered in relationship to his environment.³ He cannot stand apart from it in isolation.

The same power and grace that operated in creation in the beginning continue to operate in sustaining creation. Christ is still at work and is still the transcendent Sustainer. Lenski observes that the use of the perfect ἐκτίσται in Col 1:16 "states that they remain as having been created, they never get beyond that state."⁴

But then, the creation hymn in Colossians affirms that human existence has an ultimate purpose which is rooted in Christ. "The totality of creation hangs ontologically on Christ: 'all things are for Him': the end of creation is to glorify Him, and it finds in that its completion."⁵ Beare avers that "this is

¹Gerhard Trenkler, "Creation," Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology, ed. Johannes B. Bauer (1970), 1:153. "Only faith in Christ gives meaning to human existence" avows Brunner--see Florovsky, p. 213.

²Provonsa, p. 64.

³As Genesis 1 and 2 affirm in the beginning.

⁴Lenski, p. 57.

⁵Paul Evdokimov, "Nature," Scottish Journal of Theology 18 (1965): 11.

the ultimate meaning of things for Christian discipleship."¹ The obligation to obey is derived from the creature-Creator relationship,² with resulting consequences for Christian ethics. Indeed, the ethical demands of the latter part of the Colossian letter have this as their basis. The apostle calls for identification with the Transcendent One (him who is "above", Col 3:1) and with his manner of living, in contrast to the sensual lifestyle advocated by the false teachers. Christ as the "image of God" or "last Adam" gives a "picture in which mankind can view and know itself. Here men may see their origin as well as their final goal."³

Christ, the goal of creation, brings into consideration the divine purpose and providence. Dantine states in this connection that the important thing "is that the Creator is guiding His creation through the history of the cosmos to its consummation and that man, in his historical responsibility, has a part in this history."⁴ This responsibility includes, for Dantine, responsibility for the transformation of nature. Others too assert that "an adequate anthropology must necessarily involve a whole assessment of man's total impact upon his environment."⁵ An ecological ethic is implied. As spelled out by Provonsha:

To take Creation seriously means to discover in every material reality, whether personal or social, an object of

¹Beare, Interpreter's Bible, 11:167.

²Ingram, p. 214.

³Dantine, p. 138.

⁴Ibid., p. 141.

⁵Barbour, "Salvation and Cosmology," p. 270.

legitimate concern. It is to understand that the restoration of health to mind, body, and world is the creative purpose of a redeeming faith oriented to the Edenic ideal.¹

Anderson sums up the anthropological implications of the doctrine of creation through Christ by stating:

In Christ is laid bare the meaning which undergirds all existence; through him men acknowledge the God upon whom they are completely dependent; from him they hear anew the summons to a task within God's plan.²

More simply, contemporary man, together with the Colossian Christian, can say:

I am created by Christ;
I am sustained by Christ;
I exist for Christ.

Creation and Redemption

The pericope under study is one part of a hymnic passage. The second part has for its theme the reconciliation effected by the Son. The hymn is a unit and while only one part is under examination, the isolation truncates the apostle's purpose.³ The doctrine of Christ's transcendence must ever be balanced by the doctrine of his immanence, and particularly his incarnation. To this aspect of Christology the second part of the Colossian hymn has relevance. Brief contextual comment would at this point, therefore, not be misplaced.

¹Provonsa, p. 65.

²Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Earth Is the Lord's." Interpretation 9 (1955): 20.

³"It can never be allowed, even by the sin of silence, that redemption can be separated from creation." Ingram, p. 209.

The relation between creation and redemption has frequently been the object of study and research.¹ In the context of the Colossian hymn the subject is relevant, for the hymn considers both matters. It does so in a way that often seems more effective than the writings of those who comment upon it.

In the hymn, Christ the Creator is lauded also as Christ the Reconciler. He who made all things in heaven and on earth is able to reconcile all these things through the blood of his cross. He who brought about the first creation, brings about the new creation. The new creation may be assumed in the telos of creation in Col 1:16.² Dahl points out that the two sections of the hymn parallel each other and in this connection reconciliation is a parallel to creation.³ The purpose of the Creator is realized in the new creation.⁴ This must not be taken so as to dismiss a consummation at the end of the age, but it does relate the lordship of Jesus to redemption. Such a relationship exists in the poems of Isa 40-55 where creation faith "serves to authenticate

¹See, for example, the detailed work of Gibbs, Creation and Redemption, the whole of which is devoted to the subject.

²Some contemporary theologians are calling for the development of an eschatological doctrine of creation (see, for instance, Jürgen Moltmann, "Creation and Redemption," in Creation, Christ and Culture, ed. Richard W. A. McKinney (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1976), p. 120. The issue is beyond the scope of this thesis but such discussion does serve to highlight the creation-redemption coordination.

³Dahl, p. 434. See also Bo Reicke, "παῦς in the NT," TDNT, p. 894.

⁴Dahl, p. 440.

the message of impending salvation.¹ In Isa 44:24 the Redeemer is identified with the Creator. This motif could be in the background of the Colossian hymn.

Gibbs argues that creation and redemption are to be "held together within the purpose of God. This is the view held by the apostle Paul, who neither opposes creation to redemption nor subsumes creation under redemption, but holds them in co-ordination under the lordship of Christ."² The first option stressed natural theology, the second a singular emphasis on justification by faith. The view of coordination holds both creation and redemption under the lordship of Christ. de Lacey coordinates both aspects when he says:

[Paul's Jesus] is not simply a paradigm of the new life--he is himself its source. This surely also takes us close to his mediation in creation in that he mediates a new creation and, through the Spirit which he bestows, the blessings of God in that creation.²

¹Ph. B. Harner, "Creation Faith in Deutero-Isaiah," Vetus Testamentum 17 (1967): 301. See also Theodore M. Ludwig, "The Traditions of the Establishing of the Earth in Deutero-Isaiah," Journal of Biblical Literature 93 (1973): 345-57.

²Gibbs, "Interpretations," p. 10.

³de Lacey, p. 27. Horst, p. 269, asserts similarly that "that which was promised to man in the creation story, without being given into his possession, is to be realized for him in Christ."

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

H. J. Schoeps has written of Paul that "his thought was penetrating, leading us to well-nigh unfathomable depths. Often he merely suggests and instead of a whole chain of thought will give us flashes of ideas."¹ It is that way with Col 1:15-17. The depths of thought in the pericope are unfathomable, yet in the brief compass of this hymnic passage many ideas are encompassed. These ideas have been surveyed and implications have been drawn. Tuckett has noted that "no Christian theology is done in a vacuum, and all Christian theologizing is, in a sense, an interpretation of the Christian tradition. Any new theological synthesis is formulated in part as a dialogue with past theologies."² Such dialogue has been carried out as various interpretations of the pericope have been evaluated.

It may be concluded that the apostle's purpose in Col 1:15-17 is polemical. The Colossian Christian community, in entertaining the ideas of false teachers, was in danger of embracing a false Christology, one which compromised the absolute

¹H. J. Schoeps, Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), p. 49.

²Christopher Tuckett, "Christology and the New Testament," Scottish Journal of Theology 33 (1980): 401.

preeminence of Christ,¹ and with it to follow certain ascetic practices. To draw the Colossians back to the true position, the apostle presents the Son of God as supreme over the universe,² in a fuller way than in any other of his epistles. To accomplish this emphasis on Christ's transcendence, Paul utilizes a hymnic construction as the vehicle for his teaching, a hymn employing creation typology and doctrine.³ This hymn, placed at the beginning of the epistle, serves as the basis for argument against the false teaching.⁴

The transcendence of Christ is portrayed through description. The Son as the "image of God" is the Revealer of the invisible Father, and representative of perfect man. As "first-born of all creation" he exists before all creation and transcends all creation as the Supreme One. This thought is expanded as the Son is presented as the pre-existent Creator of all the universe, including all the powers within it. He is the One in whom creation is centred, through whom creation came to be, through whom creation is sustained, and in whom creation finds its goal.

¹Metzger, p. 232.

²From the moment on the Damascus road when he addressed Jesus as "Lord", the supremacy of Jesus became the leading motif in his theology. "The hour of Damascus is the key to Pauline theology." J. Jeremias, "The Key to Pauline Theology," Expository Times 76 (1964): 30. "Let it be suggested that Jesus' lordship was the center of Paul's theology no less than it was the primal datum at the beginning of his Christian experience." John G. Gibbs, "Pauline Christology and Ecological Crisis," Journal of Biblical Literature 90 (1971): 478.

³E. Earle Ellis, Paul's Use of the Old Testament (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), p. 129.

⁴Lohse, "Pauline Theology," p. 213.

The Christological affirmations are extensive, embracing the concepts of Christ's pre-existence, his divine nature, his power in creation, and his mediatorial function of representing the Father to the universe. His function as Creator and Sustainer has the greatest implications for anthropology. Man is a created being. It is immediately apparent that man's existence is rooted in Christ. A relation of dependence exists between man and Christ. This relationship man can attempt to negate, but such attempts only result in insecurity and alienation from all which gives meaning. Only Christ can make life "a cosmos instead of a chaos."¹

To return to the situation at Colossae, Carr assesses the problem as follows:

The whole church was failing to understand the concept of completion both in its Christology and in its moral outlook. The error appears to have been at heart an inadequate understanding of the connection between belief and behaviour, which for Paul evidences a fundamental misunderstanding of² the relation of the Christian to Christ and to the church.

The same "fundamental misunderstanding" is at the root of the "serious disorder below the surface of human existence."³ The message of Col 1:15-17 can lead, therefore, to a satisfying and fulfilling human existence, which in itself can also contribute to a "Christian reconstruction of the foundations of culture."⁴

¹Lightfoot, p. 156.

²Carr, p. 79.

³Torrance, p. 756.

⁴Ibid.

APPENDIX

A GNOSTIC PHILOSOPHY?

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Brief comment may be made on the fact that a number of exegetes see in the false teachings at Colossae some form of Gnostic thinking. The apostle describes the teaching as "philosophy and empty deceit" which is "human tradition" (2:8). His use of the Greek terms σοφία and γνώσις in 2:3 πλήρωμα in 1:19 and 2:9 has given rise to this question of possible Gnostic thought. These words later became 'catch-words' of developed Gnosticism. Of related importance is the use of μυστήριον in 1:26,27.

It is not possible here to examine the question in depth. Some observations may be made, however, which are pertinent to the Colossian situation.

It is false reasoning to project back from second-century Gnosticism and read into first-century terms the later meaning.¹ The most that can be inferred is that the false teaching at Colossae held some ideas and concepts also held by later Gnostics. Casey is forthright in stating that "the New Testament requires no

¹In regard to the use of πλήρωμα in the New Testament, Overfield observes that "the Gnostics failed where many an NT exegete has succeeded: they failed to recognize incipient Gnosticism in these πλήρωμα texts." "Pleroma: A Study in Content and Context," New Testament Studies 25 (1979): 396. So also R. McL. Wilson, Gnosis and the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), p. 59.

explanation, either as a whole or in any of its parts, in terms of a hypothetical primitive Gnosticism."¹ He considers that the New Testament and Gnosticism "occupy narrow strips of common ground" partly explained by "joint heritage of Greek philosophical ideas" and partly by "the indebtedness of the Gnostic theologians to the New Testament."²

It may be convenient to refer to the false teachings of Colossae as an "incipient" form of Gnosticism³ or "proto-Gnostic,"⁴ but even these terms may go too far in making a link between the teachings of the different times. The false teaching is called a "philosophy," but as Murray warned, the use of the term "philosophy" does not necessarily imply a definitely formulated metaphysical or cosmological theory. It may refer only to an ethical system.⁵

It may well have been that the Colossian believers were confronted with a vigorous and forceful teaching which mixed together concepts and theories from various sources current in the culture of the time and area, and accompanied the teaching with insistence upon a rigid asceticism. Out of such prepared soil, Gnosticism later grew and flourished.

¹R. P. Casey, "Gnosis, Gnosticism and the New Testament," in The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology, ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), p. 80.

²Ibid.

³Caird, p. 160.

⁴Munck, p. 236.

⁵J. O. F. Murray, "Epistle to the Colossians," Dictionary of the Bible, ed. James Hastings (1898), 1:455.

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