

Colossians 1:15-17
“The Supremacy of Christ”

Introduction:

It is a common belief among New Testament scholars that the verses in this passage represent an ancient hymn (normally believed to be one that Paul adapted for his purposes here, rather than it being something that was an original composition by Paul). However, though there is agreement about this general conclusion, there is little agreement among scholars as to why these words should be regarded as a hymn. The wording clearly indicates that what is written here has been built around a grammatical structure that implies poetry or elevated prose, however, this alone does not prove it was specifically a hymn or a psalm. Ironically, many scholars freely acknowledge that the structure of these words is distinct from the precise criterion that is normally used to identify written words as a first-century hymn. In light of the widespread disagreement that exists in regard to specifics, it is best to recognize that this conclusion (that these verses represent a hymn, and that it was not original to the Apostle Paul) is highly speculative and therefore, it should have little influence on one's interpretation of this passage.

In these verses the style of Paul's writing shifts markedly here from his regular prose to a series of short staccato-like ascriptions of praise to Christ, characterizing Him in the most exalted of terms. At least part of Paul's intent in doing this was to express a Christo-centric monotheism. Also, Paul's powerful appeal here to the supremacy of Christ, seems to indicate that he was responding to the false teacher(s) at Colossae, who were advancing an inadequate view of Him.

Finally, it is helpful to recognize that in these verses Paul described Christ in the same terms that OT wisdom literature and later rabbinical writings used to teach about the role of Divine Wisdom in the creation and sustaining of everything that was made (Prov.8:12-31). Doing this was likely done to demonstrate that the creative role applied to Christ in these verses was something that was consistent with what was revealed in the Old Testament.

I. He is the Image of God: (vs.15a)

Paul opened this passage with the words, “*He is the image of the invisible God*” (vs.15a). The Greek relative pronoun (*hos*) that is rendered here as “*He*” in this translation, has “*the Son*” as its antecedent in verse thirteen, and therefore, “*He*” is a reference to Christ. This opening statement immediately reminds the reader of what we read in Genesis 1:26-27:

*“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’.
So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him;
male and female He created them.”*

Specifically, that man was made in the image of God. As such, man was given dominion over the rest of creation. The original readers might have also thought of a second passage that describes the dominion given to man in more detail:

“What is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen — even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas.”

Psalm 8:4-8

Finally, it is also helpful to keep in mind how that psalm is interpreted messianically in the Book of Hebrews:

“For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. 6 But one testified in a certain place, saying: ‘What is man that You are mindful of him, or the son of man that You take care of him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, and set him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.’ For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.”

Hebrews 2:5-9

The Greek word translated as “*image*” here in Colossians 1:15 conveyed one of two nuances of meaning. Both elements were always present, but one tended to dominate the other in any particular usage. The first is that of representation. The image represented and symbolized the object pictured. This usage occurred often in the context of an image on a coin, or a reflection in a mirror. The second element of meaning was manifestation. When the term was employed in this way, it meant that the image was more than a symbol. The image brought with it the actual presence of the object. This latter idea is the prominent one in this verse, and it conveys the idea that in Christ, the invisible God became visible. Therefore, the idea Paul conveyed by using this word is the same that is found in other NT passages:

“No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.”

John 1:18 (NASU)

“Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”

John 14:9

“who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person”
Hebrews 1:3a

In the immediately previous verses (12-14) the focus was on the redemption accomplished by Christ, and in these verses the focus is on Christ's work in creation. In light of the reality that Paul did not qualify what He meant by the image of God; it is best not to limit the concept at all. Paul was expressing that Christ always has been, is, and always will be the image of God. The Greek word translated as “*invisible*”, like its English counterpart, referred broadly to what either was not seen, or what could not be seen. The specific sense of invisibility that was meant was defined by the context in which the word was used. In this reference to God, the idea does not seem to be that He is literally invisible by nature but rather is unseen or not completely revealed to human beings. The stress then was less on the idea of how God's nature makes Him imperceptible, and more on the idea that it is only in Christ that God can be fully known.

II. He is the Source of All Created Things: (vs.15b-16)

Next, Paul wrote, “*the firstborn over all creation*” (vs.15b). These words represent a further identification of Christ. Not only is He a perfect manifestation of the person of God, He also was “*the firstborn over all creation*”. There is some ambiguity in the original Greek wording. The Greek word translated as “*creation*” can be properly rendered as either “*creature*” (*a particular created thing*) or “*creation*” (*the totality of what God created*). In light of the universal language that Paul employed, the latter sense of the word is what Paul had in mind. The second ambiguous thing about Paul's wording is the genitive form of the word that is rendered here as “*creation*”. Literally, the word is “*ktiseos*” and it represents a genitive form of the noun. In Ancient Greek, as in most ancient languages, prepositions were built into the various forms of a given noun. A genitive noun basically is represented with the English preposition “*of*”, but it can convey a number of nuances. The question is which particular nuance did Paul have in mind when he wrote this? Since these words are tied to the idea of Christ being “*firstborn*”, a common heresy throughout Church History has been that Paul was saying that Christ was the first being that God created. However, it can be demonstrated that this is not what Paul was conveying to his readers. Though it is true that the Greek word translated as “*firstborn*” was often used in a literal sense to refer to the first child to emerge from the womb. The word also was used frequently in a metaphorical sense to refer to the status of preeminence that belonged to the one born first. In the ancient world this figurative use could be applied to an adopted son who was given this status over those born into a man's household. This term is used in this sense in the Book of Hebrews (1:6) where it is used as a Messianic title in reference to Christ. This is an important cross-reference because in that verse, God Himself commands the angels to worship the “*firstborn*”. The Messiah therefore could not be human, because Yahweh had previously commanded that only God Himself was to be worshipped (Ex.20:3-5). Instead, the whole point of that particular passage (Hebrews ch.1), and in fact the

entire book, is the same as here in Colossians, asserting Christ's superiority over all created things. It is also helpful to know that in common usage, the term "*firstborn*" referred primarily to rank or position. In fact, in Jewish culture, over time the idea of supremacy quickly overshadowed the idea of temporal priority. Additionally, the phrase "*the firstborn before all creation*" could not mean that Christ was the first being to be created, because it is emphasized immediately after this that He was the one by whom the entire creation came into being, thus distinguishing Christ from those things that were created. Also, the idea that the use of the term "*firstborn*" implies that Paul was saying that Christ was the first being created, runs contrary to the overall idea of who Christ is that is stressed throughout the book. For Paul to write here that Jesus was a lesser being than God, would undermine everything else that he will write about Christ in this epistle, and it would actually lend support to the heretics he was seeking to refute. Instead, the designation "*firstborn*" denotes two different truths about Christ. First, that He preceded the whole Creation, and second that He is Sovereign over all Creation. The focus on the preeminence of Christ in these verses is quickly used to show that Christ possesses absolute and unique authority over creation. Because of the stress in these verses on Christ's distinction from and authority over creation, the NKJV renders the genitive phrase as "*over all creation*".

Then Paul wrote, "*For by Him all things were created*" (vs.16a). The Greek conjunction translated as "*for*" is used here to introduce an explanation of what was just stated in verse fifteen, explaining Christ's position as "*firstborn over all creation*". However, there is a dispute over the meaning of the Greek preposition translated as "*by*". There are a number of ways the Greek preposition "*en*" can be rendered. Rendering it as "*by*" indicates that the translators decided that the preposition expresses instrumentality, meaning that Paul was saying here that Christ was the agent through Whom God created all things. There is a big problem with that conclusion. Specifically, Paul expresses that exact idea later in this same verse using a different preposition. This then would render a very awkward construction where Paul used two different prepositions to convey the same thing, and then used a third preposition to convey a completely different idea. It would be far more consistent with how Paul wrote elsewhere to understand that the three prepositions convey three distinct ideas. Because of this, it is best to understand that the Greek preposition in this phrase means sphere, and that it should be translated as "*in*" resulting in the phrase "*for in Him all things were created*".

Then Paul elaborated on this basic statement that Christ was the creator of all things by writing, "*that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers*" (vs.16b). The expression "*heaven and earth*" is a common Biblical merism (a construction in which two elements function together to indicate a single whole). Here this expression refers to the scope of what Christ created, using words that would reinforce the idea already conveyed in the previous phrase "*all things*". The words "*visible and invisible*" restate the previous pair of descriptive references in reverse order as part of a chiasmic arrangement ("*visible*"-earth, "*invisible*"-heavens). This qualification

was written in opposition to the influence of Greek dualism on the minds of these believers (philosophers taught that spiritual things were intrinsically good, while material things were intrinsically evil). Paul was reinforcing the Biblical idea that everything that exists was made good, and that evil only entered the creation because of the willful choice made by human beings and angelic creatures to rebel against the Creator. Therefore, the “*invisible*” portion of creation is a reference to spiritual beings that were originally created by God. The words that follow next specify at least some of the specific invisible creatures that came into existence through Christ. The Greek word translated as “*thrones*” literally referred to the chair that represented the authority of a monarch. This term came to be used metaphorically to refer to the authority of a monarch. The Greek word translated as “*dominions*” refers generally to those who have authority over others. The Greek word translated as “*principalities*” has the basic meaning of being “*first*”. It can refer to being at the beginning of something, but in this context, it refers to positional primacy, or political authority. The Greek word translated as “*powers*” refers to the authority, power, or right to do something, or to an individual who has that authority. In reviewing these terms, it becomes very clear that these various words are in a sense synonymous with one another in that they all express the idea of having authority over others. These are very general terms, they do not define by themselves the sphere or the nature of the authority that is being spoken about. Rather, these things are defined by context and usage. Regarding the specific titles “*principalities*” and “*powers*”, Paul consistently used these titles in tandem to refer to angelic powers and more specifically to evil angelic beings (I Cor.15:24; Col.2:10; Eph.1:21; 3:10; 6:12). The later context of this book confirms that this is what Paul had in mind in this letter, for in the next chapter he wrote that these principalities and powers had been defeated by Christ on the cross (2:15). And though it is possible to see these powers in terms of their influence over human governments and earthly structures that is not the primary concern here. The emphasis here is upon Christ’s sovereignty over the invisible realms of these spirit beings, and thus, whatever power or authority they have, it is subordinate to that of Christ.

Next Paul wrote, “*All things were created through Him and for Him*” (vs.16c). The words “*all things*” refers to the totality of the entire created universe, in both time and space. The expression is identical in scope with the expression “*all creatures*” in verse fifteen. In writing that all things were “*through Him*”, Paul was saying that Christ was the intermediate and sustaining agent of God’s creation. Paul had already written that creation was “*in Him*”, that He represented the sphere of creation. In writing that Paul echoed what is also taught elsewhere in Scripture (Jn.1:3; Heb.1:2). The final prepositional phrase is “*for Him*”. This phrase points toward the idea of purpose or result, indicating that all creation exists for the glory of Christ, just as it exists for the glory of the Father.

In this verse Paul asserts that the reason that Christ is Lord over the Creation, it is because all creation owes its existence to Him. Also, in the work of creation, as with all of God’s other works, it is accomplished by the Trinity, and each person has a distinct role. In creation, the Father is depicted as planning and initiating, the

Son oversees the construction of the creation, and finally the actual work is accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

The implication of this assertion about Christ as the Creator is that there is nothing in creation that represents a real threat to the people of God, because everything is subservient to Christ. The cumulative effect of this catalog of powers was to emphasize the immeasurable superiority of Christ over whatever rival the false teachers might have suggested the Colossians should submit to. At that time and in that place, it was believed that angelic creatures fulfilled the role of protectors in response to worship. In light of what is written later in this letter, it would appear that the Colossians were being taught to render subservience to various spiritual entities rather than rendering their devotion and service to Christ alone.

III. He is Before Everything: (vs.17)

Next Paul wrote, “*And He is before all things*” (vs.17a). The phrasing of the initial words in the Greek text is emphatic (literally rendered as “*He Himself*”). In essence, Paul was expressing that Christ, and Christ alone is before all things. Here we find that the teaching of verses fifteen and sixteen is now recapitulated in a twofold reaffirmation of the pre-existence and cosmic significance of Christ. In the first century, many Greco-Roman philosophers wrote that all things were held together either by Zeus or by the Logos, divine reason. In writing this they were emphasizing the unity of the cosmos. Greek-speaking Jewish writers also emphasized that God’s Logos held the creation together, further identifying Logos with divine wisdom. In Stoic thought, the Logos gave form to the primeval fire; in rabbinical Judaism, wisdom existed before all things and through it, God created and then shaped the world. There was a general acknowledgement that someone or something was at the center of what brought the universe into existence. Here Paul was reminding the Colossians that this was a role that belonged to Christ and God alone. The statement “*He is before all things*”, has a time orientation, and it teaches that before creation, Christ existed. Therefore, the words “*He is before all things*” refers to temporal priority. This naturally follows the teaching that everything was created through Christ. Since He created everything, it is logical that He existed before those things He made. Given Paul’s consistent temporal use of the preposition “*before*”, a temporal sense is indicated here as well (Rom.16:7; I Cor.2:7; 4:5; II Cor.12:2; Gal.1:17; 2:12; Eph.1:4; II Tim.1:9). Therefore, here, Christ’s pre-existence is clearly affirmed. However, considering the link to the idea of Christ being the “*firstborn*”, there is also focus on the supremacy of Christ, an idea that becomes the focus of what Paul will write in verses eighteen and following.

Then Paul wrote, “*and in Him all things consist*” (vs.17b). The Greek verb translated as “*consist*” has the basic semantic sense of coherence, being in a state of close relationship. The idea is that Christ continues to sustain the creation that was made through Him. This would have been another affirmation aimed at correcting the influence of the Colossian heretics. Grecian philosophy taught that since matter was evil and was created by a remote spirit being, it all would

eventually be swept away. However, truth was that the fate of the creation was not in the hands of some powerful but capricious creature, it was Christ who created all things and who continues to sustain it. The physical universe in itself is not the source of evil, contrary to what the philosophers taught. What Paul wrote here means that what holds the universe together is not an idea, but a person, the resurrected Christ. Without Him, electrons would not continue to circle nuclei, gravity would cease to work, the planets would not stay in their orbits. Christ maintains the universe in its present order, while keeping it stable and productive.

Even though much of the language reveals a connection with the Jewish tradition of personified wisdom participating in creation, the fact remains that Paul saw cosmic, universal unity, not in an idea, or in personified wisdom, but in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. The astounding reality was that the person who created the universe and sustains its existence, had recently been crucified at the hands of the Romans. But His ultimate identity was vindicated when He was raised from the dead by God.

The language here may be connected to the culture at large, but the theology presented here is different and more fully developed than anything that existed in the world at large at that time. It conveys that the Gospel opens us up to a profound understanding of reality that would otherwise be hidden from us. We are told that the universe is held together by the same One who died to save us from our sins.

Conclusion:

The purpose in these verses was to elevate Christ in the perspective of the saints at Colossae. Through the influence of heretical thought, they had come to regard Christ as less than He was and thus were seeking at least some of their security and meaning elsewhere. Paul was reminding these saints that Christ was God almighty incarnate, and because of that He was more than sufficient to meet all their needs, spiritual and physical.