

Exegesis of Colossians 1:15–20

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The portion of text under discussion (Col. 1:15–20) commences with a relative clause, describing ‘the Son of his love’ in v. 13b (τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ; with v. 14 being an adjectival, prepositional clause also modifying the same). Since v. 13b speaks of the ‘kingdom’ of this Son into which the Colossians have been delivered by the Father, it is expected that vv. 15ff will speak to the matter of how it is the Son’s kingdom, or perhaps even how it is that the Son contributes to the delivering accomplished by the Father.

In the broader context, the reason why Paul has mentioned the transferring into the kingdom is because of his longing that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of His will, etc. (1:9–12). Although Paul has commended them for their faith (1:4), he has presumably found something amiss, so he feels the need to clarify what *gnosis* is.

The structure of the section, vv. 15–20, could be taken in a number of ways. It might be thought that there are two main statements: the Son as ‘the icon’ (v. 15, ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν) and ‘the head’ (v. 18, καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ). Verses 19–20 would then stand as a causal or explanatory statement of either vv. 18–19 alone, or vv. 13b/15–19 inclusive (see below).

Topically, and by the repetition of the word ‘firstborn’ (πρωτότοκος), it seems that the two main ideas are not ‘icon’ and ‘head’, so much as ‘firstborn over creation’ and ‘firstborn from the dead’. Both these thoughts could be taken as explanations of what it means that he is the ‘icon’. He is the image by virtue of holding the double offices of firstborn, one in relationship to the Creation, and one in relationship to the Church. The two ὅτι statements can be taken in an explanatory or causal relationship with each of the two main points. In summary, the main statement is in v. 15a, and the two derivative statements are in vv. 15b–17 and vv. 18–20.¹

To indicate the way in which the major syntactical relationships of the text are understood, the following diagramme is offered (with a focus on demonstrating genitival,

¹ This is the structure adopted by J. M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1.15-20," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79 (1957). 270–287; James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: S.C.M., 1980). 188; although this structure has been criticised by some, such as Ian Keith Smith, *Heavenly Perspective: A Study of the Apostle Paul's Response to a Jewish Mystical Movement at Colossae* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006). 157, who struggles to see where vv. 17–18a belong.

adverbial and conjunctive relationships, rather than indicating subject-verb-object relationships).

15 ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν
τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,

πρωτότοκος
πάσης κτίσεως,

16 ὅτι

ἐν αὐτῷ
ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς
καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
τὰ ὀρατὰ
καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
εἴτε θρόνοι
εἴτε κυριότητες
εἴτε ἀρχαὶ
εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·

τὰ πάντα
δι' αὐτοῦ
καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν
ἔκτισται·

17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν
πρὸ πάντων
καὶ τὰ πάντα
ἐν αὐτῷ
συνέστηκεν,

18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ
τοῦ σώματος
τῆς ἐκκλησίας·

ὃς ἐστὶν ἀρχή,
πρωτότοκος
ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,

ἵνα γένηται
ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς
πρωτεύων,

19 ὅτι

ἐν αὐτῷ
εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι

20 καὶ

δι' αὐτοῦ
ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα
εἰς αὐτόν,

εἰρηνοποιήσας
διὰ τοῦ αἵματος
τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ,

[δι' αὐτοῦ]

εἴτε τὰ
ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
εἴτε τὰ
ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.²

1. The main statement (v. 15a)

At first, it looks as though v. 15 is making a statement about the ontological existence of the Son. 'He is the image of the invisible God' (ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου).

The word, εἰκὼν, is used by Paul in a number ways, including of the images or statues of false gods (Rom. 1:23), and of the image of God in man (being deliberately gender-specific according to the argument of 1 Cor. 11:7. Romans 8:29 speaks of the predestined being conformed to 'the image of his Son', presumably referring to the moral transformation of the Christian. The Romans passage also speaks of Christ as the firstborn, as does the Colossians passage, so these are ideas that Paul has twice linked.

The reference in Colossians 1:15 need not be, then, an ascription of deity, unless something in the context so indicates. The question needs to be asked, in what way is the Son the image of the invisible God?

First, the adjective, 'invisible' means just that: 'not seen'. It can be used of unseen spiritual powers (1:16). The other two uses of the word in the Pauline corpus (traditionally reckoned) are significant, both being used of God. First, Romans 1:20 equates the 'invisible

² For a review of the many inconsistent and inconclusive views on the structure and origin of this 'hymn', see Jeffrey S. Lamp, "Wisdom in Col 1:15-20 : Contribution and Significance," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 1 (1998). 45–47.

things of him’ with his ‘everlasting power and deity’. Secondly, 1 Timothy 1:17 uses the word of God in conjunction with ‘immortal’ and ‘only’.

It is unlikely, then, that in Colossians it is being said that the Son is the image of the Father in a moral sense. The Son is related to the Father in terms of the latter’s deity.

Secondly, it would be natural to conclude that ‘image’ is indicating that the Son makes visible or gives representation to those invisible properties of the divine Father. The Son is as an idol, but not merely representative of divine qualities, but in some way emulating those qualities. The properties of deity are found in the Son, then. Man may be in the image of the Son in a moral way, but the Son is the image of the Father in a different, and far more profound, way. Regardless of whether the background to the list of attributes in Romans and 1 Timothy is to be found in Greek or Jewish thought, the statement is one of ontology. This is supported by the very nature of the sentence, ‘who is’ (ὅς ἐστιν). It is not about what He does, but who He is.

Thirdly, however, that is not the end of the discussion. The ‘icon’ statement is paralleled with the statement, ‘the firstborn over all creation’, in v. 15b, which is aligned with the ‘head’ and subsequent ‘firstborn’ statement of v. 18. This is to be taken as a statement of *position* (see below). It is reasonable to conclude that not only is ‘the image’ language not solely about ontology but position, but also that in some way the idea of the ‘firstborn’ intersects with the idea of ‘icon’.

The Son, then, has the position of image (and stressing the present tense, ἐστιν, this still is the case). Just as Epaphras is he ‘who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf’ (1:7, ὅς ἐστιν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ), so too does Christ hold the office of image. It begins to become clear why ‘image’ and ‘firstborn’ can be equated. It would have been difficult to understand a relationship between the divine ontology of the Son and him being the firstborn. It makes sense, though, that as he holds the offices of firstborn in relationship to the Creation and the Church, so too does he hold the office of ‘image’, again in relationship to the Creation and the Church. The ‘image’ language has the most exalted

ontological implications, but it is still primarily a statement about what the Son is to the world. He holds the office of making the Father known to the world. It is not about the Son *in se*, but about him, *pro nobis*, to borrow a classical distinction.³

2. The Son's relationship to the Creation (vv. 15b–17)

(a) The statement (v. 15b)

Verse 15 continues, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως. As noted, this is parallel to the statement, 'the image of the invisible God'.

There are nine uses of the word, 'firstborn', in the New Testament. The word is used three times of one who is 'literally' the first son to be born to his parents (Matt. 1:25, Luke 2:7; describing Jesus of Mary; Heb. 11:28, of the firstborn liable to be destroyed in Egypt). Paul uses the word only once outside of Colossians 1:15, 18, in Romans 8:29, where the idea seems to be that of Jesus being the older brother of all those who are conformed to his image. He has a nature held *in common* with these ones (all are brothers), but also *over* these (he is the model to whom there must be conformity, and he is the leader in the group), and is chronologically 'born' *before* these ones (since it probably relates to the idea found in Col. 1:18 and Rev. 1:5, that he is the 'firstborn from the dead': the first to be raised).

How does this relate to 'firstborn over all creation'? Would it mean that he has a nature *in common with* 'all Creation', and yet was born *before* Creation? It has to be admitted that looking at this statement alone, the interpretation of Arianism is a real possibility. The case of πάσης κτίσεως could be emphasised, so that the translation is 'firstborn of all creation', with an objective genitive emphasising that the Son is a *product* of Creation.⁴

However, the preceding 'image' statement and the ensuing insistence that he created all (and a prior theological commitment arising from the interpretation of other texts, in

³ David H. Johnson, "The Image of God in Colossians," *Didaskalia (Otterburne, Man.)* 3, no. 2 (1992). 11, is right also to draw on the context of Genesis 1, so that the Son being the image is about his rule over the world as the second Adam.

⁴ For a fuller discussion of the possibilities of the genitive, in the context of discussing Arius's use of the text, see Larry R. Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31, no. 1 (1988).63.

conformity with the position advocated by the dominant voice of the early Church) make it more likely that there is discontinuity between the two ‘firstborn’ statements. The Son is not ‘of’ the Creation in the same way that he arises from ‘out of the dead’ (and it is unlikely that Paul is thinking of the Son in his enfleshed state, either, since he speaks of the Son as the Creator).

That leaves the element of being ‘over’. He is the firstborn of Creation in the sense that he has a position of authority over it, just as an older son has such authority. The genitive relationship allows for the sense of ‘over’, but the point does not really depend upon the translation of the genitive, but on the possibilities of the word, ‘firstborn’. He still belongs to Creation, but belongs to it as its leader. The firstborn belongs to the Creation in the sense that the Creation belongs to the firstborn.

Background to this idea of firstborn can be found in the Septuagint. Psalm 89:27 (v. 28, LXX) says, ‘And I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.’ (RSV) This is said of David (v. 20). The idea includes that of favour and affection, but it is primarily presented as being about status and authority: ‘the highest’ of the kings of the earth. It is this position of authority that Paul says the Son has, not by virtue of being the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3), but even prior to and apart from incarnation.

(b) The explanation (vv. 16–18).

Verses 16–18 give further information about the position held by the Son. The introductory ὅτι could mark an explanation or a causal statement. Is Paul explaining the way in which the Son exercises his office of firstborn (‘so that by him...’), or explaining why he is the firstborn (‘since/because by him...’)? Perhaps the latter is more likely, only because logically the world has to be created before the Son can become the firstborn of it (not a very sound grammatical argument, though). Being Creator constitutes him the firstborn, rather than being firstborn constituting him the Creator.

The explanation itself consists of two parts.

i. First, there is the statement, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα..., with the sundry explanations throughout v. 16a. He is the firstborn, because he created (using the chronologically non-specific aorist of what is certainly a past and completed event). There is no hesitation in Paul in acknowledging this. He is not negatively impacted by a Greek view of matter, but his mind is moving in the Judaic framework, in which case an astonishing claim is being made for the Son.

It is the Son that did this creating, for the adverbial phrase says, ‘in him’ (clearly emphatic). The English proposition, ‘in’, could leave room for doubt as to precisely whether he actually did the creating, so some versions (i.e. KJV) opt for ‘by him’. ‘In’ may arguably be the better translation, though, in light of the ensuing ‘through him’ statement (δι’ αὐτοῦ, which itself does not necessarily mean ‘through’ as opposed to ‘by’—Heb. 2:10, used of the Father’s work in creation—but the use in Col. 1:20 makes the thought clear), and also because Paul simply refrains from having the Son as the subject of an active verb⁵ (unless Paul has decided for stylistic or other reasons to make ‘all things’ the subject and to use a passive verb). He may be the Creator, but he does not take the primacy in that. He is the image of the Father in his work of creating.

That which is created is πάντα, ‘all things’. This is explained by two, parallel, adjectival phrases, ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. This is everything.

If that were in doubt, ‘all’ is further explained by a string of exegetical statements:

τὰ ὀρατὰ

καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,

εἴτε θρόνοι

εἴτε κυριότητες

εἴτε ἀρχαὶ

⁵ The so-called divine passive is used, ‘was created’. P.T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1982). 45.

εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·

The first two items are a matching, rhyming pair: τὰ ὀρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα belong together. It is not that the visible things are on earth and the invisible in heaven. These, and the ensuing terms, are things that exist in heaven and earth.

The ensuing four terms are probably explanatory of ‘the visible and the invisible’, and are words that can be used of angelic powers⁶ and of human kings⁷. There is no way to decide definitively between those two possibilities, and there is every reason to think that Paul is referring to both, since he has said ‘visible and invisible’.⁸ To the extent that he refers to spiritual powers, he has not posited a fanciful order of angels, as was the practice in some Jewish apocalyptic works (or in proto-Gnostic thought, with a succession of aeons and demiurges). The four words, θρόνοι, κυριότητες, ἀρχαὶ and ἐξουσίαι are largely synonymous, with the explication designed to have the rhetorical effect of giving a sense of fullness: the πάντα.⁹

ii. Secondly, there is in v. 16b a recapitulation of ‘the all’—τὰ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται—which is followed, within the one sentence, by a parallel qualification in v. 17—καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν. A shift of thought comes at the end of v. 17, even though Paul is still mid-sentence (as has been the case throughout—it is an emotionally elated doxology that rushes from one thought to the next).

Verse 16b–17 is no mere recapitulation, however. The δια clause is repetitive, but creates a fascinating echo in John 1:3 (πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο). John expands that to say,

⁶ A. Wesley Carr, *Angels and Principalities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). 52, argues that they are angelic beings, and not necessarily evil ones. R. Kent Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon: The Supremacy of Christ, Preaching the Word* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1989). 31, has them as classes of angels.

⁷ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). 66.

⁸ Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). 36–39, in her excursus on the subject, is inclined to think of these things as evil, angelic powers, but ultimately setting on them simply being opposing ‘powers’ of any kind, including ‘individual, corporate and cosmic forces of tradition, consumerism, illness, sin’, etc.

⁹ Holly Diane Hayes, "Colossians 2:6-19," *Interpretation* 49, no. 3 (1995). 285, suggests that Paul prioritizes the assertion of the supremacy of Christ (1:15–20), since the Colossians were seeking to find reconciliation with God ‘other than through Christ’, which would then be from things which ‘arise from within the created order established through him’.

καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. Something of that sentiment is contained with Colossians, seen in the fact that Paul is being so repetitive on the point of ‘all’. Although the modern interpreter is aware of the influence of later Christological debates, might it be the case that what Paul and John are driving at is that ‘the Son was not created’? There never was a time when the Son was not.

All things were also created ‘to/for him’ (εἰς αὐτὸν). This advances the argument. Creation exists for the sake of the Son. Creation is Son-ward. He will be glorified by his creation. It would be wrong to give praise to any created thing, then, whether principalities or powers, or thrones or dominions. The Colossians are not to entangle themselves with Christless Jewish observances or with angelic speculations.

Furthermore, ‘He is before all things, and in him all things hold together’—καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν (v. 17).

‘Before’ all things perhaps indicates:

- a. that he is not part of all things, but something different. There is no univocity of being; and
- b. he chronologically precedes the existence of all things. This makes sense, considering that Paul has said that the Son is the image of the invisible God, who elsewhere is said to be immortal and eternal. This would be a Jewish way of expressing pre-temporal existence, or existence in what might be poorly termed ‘eternity past’ (so that we today express the concept in a way more clumsy than Paul).¹⁰

Alternatively, πρὸ πάντων might be indicating status: ‘above all’. This has the advantage of conforming to the other two uses of the expression in the New Testament (James 5:12, ‘But above all, my brethren, do not swear...’; 1 Peter 4:8, ‘Above all hold unfailing...’), and

¹⁰ Richard C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937 [repr. 1961]), 59, wants to apply this to both the divine and human natures of Christ. ‘Eternity is communicated to the human nature just as all the other divine attributes are. Inconceivable? Most assuredly!’ Lutherans may well have a unique approach to the *communicatio idiomatum*, proclaiming the ubiquity of the body of Christ, but for the Lutheran, Lenski, to claim the pre-existence of that body goes well beyond Luther.

also of making better sense of the present tense, ἐστίν. He still is above all things. It would be awkward to say that he still is chronologically before all things. Verse 16b has used a perfect tense of the creation of all things, which creation is a past action, but a continuing state in terms of its ‘through him’ and ‘for him’ nature. However, v. 17a insists upon the present tense, looking at what is true now, without looking back to the time of creation.

With the use of the present tense, it is realized that the interpretation of the ὅτι in v. 16 as causal does not work for the entire section. Him being the firstborn of creation is a synonymous idea to him being ‘above all things’. That is precisely what ‘firstborn’ means here.

‘In him all things hold together’. Paul reverts to a perfect tense. This is the state of things, as it were. ‘Hold together’, apart from one use by Luke and one by Peter, is a Pauline word in the New Testament, and usually means ‘commend’ or ‘approve’. The basic idea does seem to be present in the two parts of the verb, ‘to stand with’. The Son makes all things stand or continue to exist by standing or being present with it. ‘Are sustained, supported, upheld’ would be a helpful English translation.

Verses 16–18 thus predominantly explain why it is that the Son is the firstborn of creation, which itself is an explanation of what it means that the Son is the image of the invisible God. By being the Creator, or the one through whom the Father created, he has the station of firstborn over the world. In holding that office, he stands as the representative of the invisible God himself, exercising the function of deity and receiving the praise due to the deity. The Son is exalted over creation on behalf of the one who not only is invisible in his being, but whose work in creation in Colossians 1:15–17 has also gone unstated and unseen.

3. The Son’s relationship to the Church (vv. 18–20)

(a) The statement (v. 18)

Paul’s thought shifts to another way in which Christ is the image of the invisible God.

‘And he is the head’. That the idea of headship emerges here confirms what was said about the significance of the metaphor, ‘firstborn’. It is primarily about office and honour. Elsewhere in Colossians, this idea of ‘head’ will be applied to all principalities and powers (2:10) and to the Church (2:19). Here in chapter 1, it has been applied explicitly to the Church, but in its synonymical relationship with ‘firstborn’, it is effectively applied to both spheres.¹¹

That of which he is the head is ‘the body’, not ‘the body of his flesh’ (1:22), but ‘the Church’ (cf. 1:24). The body is not an institution called the Church, but a living organism, nourished from its Head (2:19). It is identifiable in the world, not as a building, but as a group of people assembled with common purpose, particularly for worship (4:15–16).

Paul continues in v. 18 with a relative clause, expanding upon αὐτός, ‘him’. It is he ‘who is the beginning’. This is the same word that appears three times in the feminine plural in Colossians, and is usually translated ‘principalities’. In v. 18, then, it is about priority in office and dignity: the leader, the chief ruler. It parallels ‘head’.

This is further explained in the term, the πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν. This parallels the expression, ‘the firstborn of all creation’, except that here, the preposition, ἐκ, is specifically included. Whereas he is the firstborn over all creation, he is the firstborn *from out of* the dead. Does this signify that he is the firstborn of those who have come out of the dead (i.e. resurrected ones), or is it rather that he is the firstborn by virtue of having himself been raised? The statement does seem to be elliptical. It seems best to take ‘of the dead’ as another designation for ‘the body, the Church’, and so he is the firstborn of those who have been raised from the dead. It is not necessarily saying, although it may well be implied, that he himself has been raised from the dead, just as ‘firstborn of all creation’ does not necessarily mean that he himself is of the creation.

¹¹ ‘In Hellenistic texts, including Philo...the *world* is seen as the divine or great “body” governed by its “head,” Heaven or Zeus (the highest God) or his Logos...’ Eduard Schweizer, “Colossians 1:15-20,” *Review & Expositor* 87, no. 1 (1990). 98.

The purpose for him being the head, leader and firstborn of the body, the Church and raised ones, is ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων (ἵνα with the subjunctive indicates purpose). This is a little surprising, considering that vv. 15–17 have already insisted that he is the creator of ‘all’. How could he have anything but pre-eminence in the Church, if all things are ‘through him and for him’? Is the Church not part of ‘all creation’? Apparently, though, the Church is not a subset of creation. Is the thought that the Church is a distinct entity—a new creation, just as the man who was created (κτίσαντος) according to Colossians 3:10 has become a new man (τὸν νέον), being the one who has been renewed (τὸν ἀνακαινούμενον)? It emerges from the old creation, but is more permanent, and will eventually and entirely replace the old.¹²

(b) The explanation (vv. 19–20)

As with the first section (vv. 15b–17), there is an explanation of how the Son came to be the firstborn (v. 16 and v. 19 both commence with an explanatory ὅτι). With an emphatic, ἐν αὐτῷ, it is said, ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι.

The Father was ‘pleased’ to have all the fullness dwell in him. ‘Pleased’ emphasises that this was a free decision of God, not acting under compulsion, and was something that he took delight in. The RSV and NRSV translate it thus: ‘For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell’. This would be the only reference out of 21 uses of the verb in the New Testament in which the subject was not directly a person. Nevertheless, grammatically ‘fullness’ is in the nominative, and should be taken as the subject of the sentence, as it is in 2:9 (‘the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily’).

Understanding this helps to solve the difficult question of what the ‘fullness’ is. Some have argued that whereas 2:9 is about the fullness of the deity, 1:19 is about the fullness of suffering, since 1:20 mentions the cross. Clearly, however, ‘fullness’ is being personified in 1:19, and can only refer either to the Father or to the Deity (as in τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος in

¹² As David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). 92, has it, drawing on N. T. Wright, *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1986). 74–75, Christ is the Lord of all, but must subsequently exercise his lordship over sin by being the firstborn from the dead.

2:9). This usage of πλήρωμα is similar to that in Ephesians 1:23, 3:19 and 4:13, but it does look peculiar in Colossians 1:20 as a bald metonym for God. The reason for this would be the proto-Gnostic leanings of the recipients. Approximately a century and half later, Irenaeus would need to write his *Against Heresies*, countering those who held to a view of a succession of aeons and demiurges, all constituting the *pleroma* of deities.¹³ Paul's point is that the Deity is all that He needs to be in Himself. He needs no other derived gods to be in counsel with Him. This is not just the fullness, either, but 'all' (πᾶν) the fullness.

This fullness, that is, the Deity, was pleased 'to dwell' in him, that is, in the Son. 'Dwell' is not a favourite Pauline word. He uses it elsewhere only in Colossians 2:9, of the same concept, and in Ephesians 3:17, of Christ dwelling in the Ephesians' hearts by faith. Looking at Colossians 1:19 with Ephesians 3:17, Paul could mean that the Son was indwelt by the Holy Spirit in the same way that the believer is. Perhaps this is a form of adoptionism (Paul does use the word, 'well pleased'. Perhaps he is thinking of the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism.). That something different to that is intended is evidenced in Colossians 2:9, in which Paul uses the adverb, 'bodily' (σωματικῶς), presumably qualifying the verb, 'dwells' (and also noting the use of the present tense rather than the non-descript aorist of 1:19, so this is a continuing situation for the Son). The Deity has been *somatikized*, as it were, or as it is more usually put, incarnated. The icon of God now appears in the flesh. This is the first step in the path to the Son becoming the head of the Church.

Co-ordinate with dwelling, v. 20 expresses what else 'all the fullness' was pleased to do. καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν... 'And through him to reconcile all to him'. 'Through him' parallels the situation as it pertained to Creation. The fullness thus works through the Son in redemption, and in Creation. 'To him' refers also to the Son, paralleling the 'through him and to him' statement of v. 16.

¹³ Robert Paul Roth, "Christ and the Powers of Darkness : Lessons from Colossians," *Word & World* 6, no. 3 (1986). 337, is one who finds that the nature of the Colossian problem was 'a syncretism of Jewish and pagan Gnosticism'. Contrary to Smith, *Heavenly Perspective*. 170, that full-blown Valentinian Gnosticism is a later development does not rule out Gnostic-type influence at Colossae, and that Christ is pictured in Colossians as the creator of the emanations is missing the point.

That which the fullness does is ‘to reconcile’. This is once again a word the Paul uses only for the more mystically-inclined readers of Ephesus and Colossae (Why would the Corinthians be omitted? The shorter word, καταλλάσσω, is used four times in the extant Corinthian correspondence, and once in Romans, when Paul was writing from Cenchrea.). The import of the word emerges in the next two verses, saying that the Colossians have moved from being enemies of God to being ‘irreproachable before him’. It is thus about bringing peace, both in terms of status and personal attitude, where once there had been hostility.

What is said to be reconciled? ‘All things’, is the answer (τὰ πάντα). Unless there are other considerations, this would naturally refer to the ‘all things’ created through the Son. If taken strictly, this says so much more than just ‘universal’ salvation, since ‘universal’ is usually understood to mean ‘all human beings’. The last line of v. 20 directly relates back v. 16, by explaining that ‘all things’ means things ‘whether on earth or in heaven’. Is there any significance in the change of order? Verse 16 had heaven mentioned before earth, whereas v. 20 prioritizes ‘earth’. What are ‘all things’, anyway? From v. 16, the focus is not on inanimate objects, but upon spiritual and worldly authorities. Is Paul saying that angels and/or demons are reconciled through the Son? This would be an uncharacteristic Pauline doctrine, to put it mildly. Is Paul then merely waxing eloquent (again, something uncharacteristic for Paul), speaking of the reconciliation in Christ as though it had even heavenly ramifications? Is he thinking of the Church, both earthly and heavenly? Given that the section is about the Church, not all creation, and given that v. 21 will proceed to speak about the reconciliation of the Colossian believers, the latter is the most likely solution to a difficult text.¹⁴

In the middle of v. 20, an aorist, participial clause clarifies something about the reconciliation: ‘having made peace through the blood of his cross’ (εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ). One might think that the aorist participle indicates action prior the main verb, and thus the peace precedes the reconciliation. The peace would be an

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems, Pt 4 : Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler," *Bibliotheca sacra* 141, no. 564 (1984). 291–302, deals with the cosmic reconciliation of Christ.

‘objective’ peace, looking to the immediate effect of the death of the Son. The reconciliation would be ‘subjective’, being about the actual relationship formed between God and believers.

Nevertheless, given that v. 22 speaks of the reconciliation made ‘in his body of flesh by his death’, thus paralleling the expression, ‘having made peace through his blood...’, it is unlikely that Paul is drawing a distinction between reconciliation and peace. Rather, the aorist participle seems to be restating and then expanding upon the verb, ‘to make reconciliation’, and might even be causal. ‘It pleased the Father...to make reconciliation, making that reconciliation or peace through His Son’.

This reconciliation or peace comes, then, ‘through the blood of His cross’. This is the only mention of blood in Colossians (excluding the variant reading of 1:14), and one of only a few such references in the extant Pauline corpus. ‘Cross’ is one of ten uses by Paul (twice as many as ‘blood’), although he only uses ‘his cross’ in Colossians (twice). In other words, the expression ‘the blood of his cross’, turns out to be a unique combination of words in Paul. ‘Blood’ is a poignant way of speaking of the death of Christ as a sacrifice, and so emphatically recalls that in the Son ‘we have a ransom’ (1:14, ἀπολύτρωσις). ‘His’ cross is one of the stranger aspects of the entire section under discussion, which avoids the use of ‘Christ’. Is this done for rhetorical-theological effect, making ‘him’ the ethereal Son, or is it even possible that Paul is drawing on language that was being used in the Christian community (an early Christian hymn)?¹⁵

Overall, vv. 15–20 form the core of the primary theological message of the letter to the Colossians. The Colossians need to focus on the headship of Christ over Creation and the

¹⁵ There is considerable debate about whether Paul has borrowed or authored an early Christian ‘hymn’. ———, “Colossian Problems, Pt 2 : The “Christ Hymn” Of Colossians 1:15-20,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 141, no. 562 (1984). 99, has it as ‘rhythmical prose...with strophic arrangement’. There is no way of determining which parts of the hymn were used by or agreed to by the recipients (contra Harold Van Broekhoven, “The Social Profiles in the Colossian Debate,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, no. 66 (1997). 89, who argues that the Colossians accepted the cosmic role of Christ but not his historical role, and hence Paul adds to the hymn to supplement their Christology). As Larry R. Helyer, “Cosmic Christology and Col 1:15-20,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, no. 2 (1994). 237 argues, there are no exegetical grounds for relegating the cosmic Christ to the periphery of Paul’s thought. John Behr, “Colossians 1:13-20 : A Chiastic Reading,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1996). 248, finds that there is a chiastic structure in vv. 13–20, thus demonstrating that the so-called hymn is at least well integrated with the letter. On the proposed chiasm itself, it does not do justice to the linear progression of the text.

Church, that is, on Christ the Creator and ruler over all authorities, and on Christ the reconciler, incarnate, crucified and raised, and so recreating the world. Salvation for all is found in having this knowledge,¹⁶ and submitting to him, producing the obedience spoken of throughout the letter.

¹⁶ And the focus is on Christ—even on ‘abstract and contentious formulations’—and not on the ‘significance’ of the Colossians being ‘bound up’ with Christ’s significance, *contra* Teresa Okure, “‘In Him All Things Hold Together’: A Missiological Reading of Colossians 1:15-20,” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 360 (2002). 71.

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