

SAVIOR AND CREATOR

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In the current creation-evolution debate, this article studies the Christological hymn of Col 1:15–20, exploring what it means that Jesus is called creator. The study looks at how the different attributes of Jesus Christ mentioned in the passage relate to the creation theme and how the creation theme affects the concept of Jesus as sustainer and savior. It argues that creation and salvation belong together inseparably.

Keywords: creation, evolution, sustainment, divinity

1. Introduction

During the year 2009, people around the world celebrated the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his most important book, *On the Origin of Species*. Here are some opinions on the evolution versus creation debate and on related concepts such as the Fall. All of the following quotations come from scholars who consider themselves to be Christians:

Francisco J. Ayala, scientist and philosopher writes: "The evidence for evolution is overwhelming."¹ "That evolution has occurred . . . is a fact."² "It was Darwin's greatest accomplishment to show that complex organization and functionality of living beings can be explained as the result of a natural process, natural selection, without any need to resort to a Creator or other external agent."³

On the other hand, scientist Cornelius G. Hunter holds: "How then can evolution be a fact if even the positive evidence does not support it very well? The answer is that evolution is considered to be a fact because

¹ Francisco J. Ayala, *Darwin and Intelligent Design* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), x.

² Ayala, 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

Darwinists believe they have disproven the alternative: divine creation."⁴ "Darwinism depends on religion, but only to overrun the opposing theory. . . . Evolution, by default, becomes the explanatory filter for all we observe in nature, no matter how awkward the fit."⁵

The British scientist-theologian Arthur Peacocke takes a different position. He states: "Biological death can no longer be regarded as in any way the *consequence* of anything human beings might have been supposed to have done in the past, for evolutionary history shows it to be the very *means* whereby they appear. . . . The traditional interpretation of the third chapter of *Genesis* that there was a historical 'Fall,' an action by our human progenitors that is the explanation of biological death, has to be rejected. . . . There was no golden age, no perfect past, no individuals, 'Adam' or 'Eve' from whom all human beings have descended and declined and who were perfect in their relationships and behaviour."⁶

Theologian Christopher Southgate talks about "a spurious and equally unscientific appeal to a historical fall."⁷ And philosopher-theologian "Patricia A. Williams objects to fall narratives. . . . From her perspective they are a misreading of Gen 2-3, which [according to her] was misread long ago by Paul in order to provide the 'catastrophe' from which the Christ-event is our 'rescue'."⁸ At least she is clear enough with regard to the implications: If there was no creation, there was no fall, and the coming of Jesus did not mean salvation from sin for humanity. Many Christians are inconsistent by believing in Jesus as savior while denying Jesus as creator.⁹

In Col 1:15-20 Paul records a majestic hymn focusing on Jesus Christ. This is one of the most outstanding christological hymns in the NT:

⁴ Cornelius G. Hunter, *Darwin's Proof: The Triumph of Religion over Science* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine and Human* (enlarged ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 222–223.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸ Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 29.

⁹ Many Christians still use the term "creator" and speak about "creation," however, they when talking about creation they mean theistic evolution or a related concept, not biblical creation. God has "created" through evolution. Biblical words are filled with new meaning, oftentimes against clear intentions of the biblical text. Such a procedure leads to misunderstandings and confusion. It has also been called category translation. See, Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *The Journal of Religion* 41 (July 1961): 204.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

2. Context

2.1 The Historical Context

Colossae was a city about eleven miles from Laodicea and thirteen miles from Hierapolis with its hot springs. Although no modern city was built on top of the ruins, now covered with sand and dirt, Colossae has not been excavated. The Christian church in Colossae was probably founded by Epaphras. Here also played the famous story involving Philemon and his runaway slave Onesimus converted by Paul in Rome.

The church in Colossae was confronted with one or more strange teachings. This may have triggered Paul to send a letter to the Colossian Christians. We do not know the precise nature of the problem but find elements of this teaching by looking at Paul's refutation. Obviously, it was detracting from the person and status of Christ. The letter to the Colossians portrays Jesus in highest terms showing his preeminence. So we can assume that the importance of Jesus must have been downplayed. Dunn writes:

There is general agreement that one reason [why the letter was written], probably the primary reason, was to counteract teaching that might become or already was either attractive or threatening to the baptized in Colossae, particularly with regard to their appreciation of the full significance of Christ. Beyond that, however, views vary quite considerably.¹⁰

¹⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 23. He deals with the Colossian problem intensively on pages 23–25 as does Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 44 (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), xxx–xxxviii. For further discussion see also D. A. Carson, D. J. Moo, L. Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 335–337; Guthrie, 546–551; and

In Col 2:8 Paul warns against “philosophy and empty deception.” Angel worship is found in Col 2:18, and “the elements of the world” occur in Col 2:8, 20. These elements of the world can be understood as elementary spirits, namely “the powerful spirit-world” or elementary teaching, which “would presumably describe a purely materialistic doctrine concerned only with this world.”¹¹

Furthermore, extreme forms of asceticism associated with mystical experiences may have been present (Col 2:16),¹² associated with Jewish elements such as circumcision (Col 2:11; 3:11) and references to feasts, new moons, and the Sabbath/Sabbaths (Col 2:16). The “human tradition” of Col 2:8 may have also been a Jewish element. Therefore, it seems best to understand this teaching as a form of syncretism that was attractive to many people including some church members at that time and in the setting of Asia Minor. O’Brien notes: “This is not to suggest, however, that (1) Paul’s language (even when quoting the phrases of his opponents) has been fully comprehended, or that (2) the false teaching was simply Jewish without any admixture of pagan elements such as appear to have been prevalent in Phrygia.”¹³

How to help the church? Paul’s struggle for the Christians in Colossae is recognizable right from the beginning of his letter when he talks about truth (Col 1:5, 6), about Epaphras’ faithful teaching (Col 1:7), and his own desire that the Colossian Christians may be filled with and grow in the knowledge of God (Col 1:9, 10). For Paul the solution to the problem of false teaching is found in Jesus. “A firm grounding in Christology, then, and in its practical implications for the daily life of believers was the best defense against the illusory attractiveness of the Colossian heresy.”¹⁴ Therefore, the christological hymn as well as other statements about Jesus

Francis D. Nichol et al., eds., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1980), 7:184.

¹¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 548.

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 26, holds: “The Colossian heresy evidently encouraged the claim that the fullness of God could be appreciated only by mystical experiences for which ascetic preparation was necessary. Paul’s answer to such a claim is that the fullness of God is embodied in Christ, so that those who are united to him by faith have direct access to him to that fullness and have no need to submit to ascetic rigor . . .”

¹³ O’Brien, xxxviii.

¹⁴ Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 28.

(e.g., Col 1:26–28; 2:2–3, 6–15, 19; 3:1, 11, 23–24; 4:3) throughout the epistle are of great importance.¹⁵

The christological hymn in Col 1:15–20 portrays Jesus' all encompassing greatness as creator, redeemer, and sustainer of the entire cosmos so that "indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister" (Col 1:23).¹⁶ Again in Col 2 adherence to false teaching is contrasted with life in Jesus. Having received Jesus (Col 2:6), being rooted in him (Col 2:7), having been made complete in him (Col 2:10), having been circumcised in him with a spiritual circumcision (Col 2:11), having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with him from the dead (Col 2:12), having been made alive with him, and having experienced forgiveness (Col 2:13) is to rule out all involvement with contradictory teaching.

2.2 The Literary Context

After a short opening salutation (Col 1:1–2) Paul engages in thanksgiving and, beginning with v. 9, in a prayer for the church in Colossae (Col 1:3–14) stressing in a remarkable way the present reality of the church members' salvation (Col 1:12–14). Then follows the hymn praising the importance and magnificence of Jesus (Col 1:15–20).

In Greek vv. 9–20 consist of one long sentence which makes it somewhat difficult to tell where the prayer ends.¹⁷ Since a poetic section begins with verse 15 and since Paul's prayer for the Colossian Christians to be filled with knowledge, wisdom, and understanding in order to live worthy of the Lord is followed by four present participles describing the actions and the experience of the believers, namely bearing fruit (Col 1:10), increasing in knowledge (Col 1:10), being strengthened (Col 1:11),

¹⁵ Cf. Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 29.

¹⁶ Marianne Meyé Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon* (The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 28, states that the hymn "contains a number of affirmations about Christ that lay the theological foundation for challenging the Colossian heresy. Specifically, the passage asserts the complete adequacy of God's revelation and salvation in Christ in order to show the futility of trying to gain deeper understanding of or relationship to God through any other means."

¹⁷ Cf. Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Paideia Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 190.

and giving thanks to the Father (Col 1:12), we assume that the prayer reaches up to verse 14.¹⁸

The hymn is clearly linked to and grows out of this section on intercessory prayer. For instance, the mention of God the Father is followed by a participle in the dative and a relative pronoun in the nominative. The mention of the Son is followed by a prepositional phrase in the dative and a relative pronoun in the nominative.

[J]ust as there is movement from 'you' to 'us, where the latter included Gentile and Jew together, so also there is movement from the role of the Father to that of the Son. Thus vv. 12–13 are all about what the Father has done. . . . With the mention of the Son at the end of v. 13, the focus then shifts altogether to what the Son has done (v. 14) and finally to who the Son is in relation to the whole created order (vv.15–16).¹⁹

Verses 21–23 are also related to the hymn, because they apply reconciliation achieved by Jesus to the church members in Colossae.

3. The Structure

A syntactical diagram of Col 1:15–20 seems to indicate that the section consists of three parts, a central piece and two other parts that correspond with each other.²⁰

¹⁸ "we have not ceased praying and asking (1:9)
 that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will . . .
 to walk worthy of the Lord . . . (1:10)
 ▪ bearing fruit in every good work (1:10)
 ▪ increasing in the knowledge of God (1:10)
 ▪ being strengthened with all power . . . (1:11)
 ▪ giving thanks to the Father (1:12)
 having qualified you to share in the inheritance . . . (1:12)
 ▫ who has rescued us from the domain of darkness
 ▫ and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son
 (1:13) in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of
 sins" (1:14)

¹⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 294.

²⁰ For a discussion of the form of the hymn see Steven M. Baugh, "The Poetic Form of Col 1:15–20," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 227–244.

15 ὅς ἐστινεϊκῶν { 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·

ὅς ἐστιν { ἀρχή,
 πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
 ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων
 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν
 • πᾶν τὸ πλῆρωμα κατοικῆσαι
 20 • καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,
 εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ,
 • εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
 • εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

From the diagram above, the following outline is derived:

A the image of the invisible God
 the firstborn of all creation.
 For in Him all things were created...
 all things have been created through Him and for Him.

B And He is before all things,
 C and in Him all things hold together.
 B' And He is the head of the body, the church;

A' He is {the beginning
 the first born from the dead
 For in Him it was His Father's good pleasure for all the
 fullness to dwell,
 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself

This hymn has an interesting structure, which may even be a chiasmic structure. The first and the last part seem to correspond, while the first part stresses Jesus as creator (vv. 15–16):

1. The opening phrase *ho estin* in v. 15 is repeated in the beginning of the third part (v. 18b). Both times it refers to Jesus and introduces his supreme status and quality.
2. The term *prōtotokos* follows the opening phrase in v. 15 and the same phrase in v. 18a.
3. As in v. 15 Jesus is characterized in a twofold way, he is the image of God and the firstborn, so in v. 18b, he is the beginning and the firstborn. These two pairs of two seem to be parallel.
4. Verse 16 begins with the phrase *hoti en autō*. Verse 19 uses the same phrase right at its beginning.
5. *Ta panta en tois ouranois kai epi tes ges* occurs in v. 16 and in a slightly modified and inverted form in v. 20, namely *ta panta . . . eite ta epi tes ges eite ta en tois ouranois* pointing to the cosmic and universal dimension of Jesus' activity as creator and redeemer.²¹

²¹ Cf. Larry L. Helyer, "Cosmic Christology and Col 1:15–20," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/2 (June 1994), 235–246. He emphasizes that "Colossians 1:15–20 is a statement of the cosmic significance of Jesus Christ" (246). Vincent A. Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith: An Authorial, Structural, and Theological Investigation of the Cosmic*

6. *Di' autou* and *eis auton* is found at the end of v. 16. All things have been created through Jesus and for him. The same phrases reoccur in v. 20 now relating to reconciliation.²² Actually, in both parts the same prepositional phrases occur in the same order: *en autu, di' autou, eis auton*.
7. The term *pas* is found three times in vv. 15–16 and again three times in vv. 18b–20. *Ta panta* is employed in v. 16 (twice) and 20. It stresses the all-inclusiveness of Christ's work.

The middle section, consisting of vv. 17 and 18, is not disconnected from the other two parts. On the contrary, it shares with them the prepositional phrase *en autu*. It also shares with them the auxiliary verb *estin* in the phrase "he is." And it shares with the other sections the term *pas* and even its neuter plural form including the definite article, namely *ta panta*.

Part 1 All things (*ta panta*, twice) were created through him and for/to him.

Part 2 All things (*ta panta*) hold together in him.

Part 3 All things (*ta panta*) are reconciled through him to him.²³

This central part, also called part 2, consists of three lines which point to three aspects of Jesus' nature and work:

1. He was preexistent, being before all things.
2. He is the sustainer of all things.
3. He is the head of the body, the church.

Christology in Col 1:15–20 (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology; Leuven: Peeters, 2006), comes to a similar conclusion, however, rejects Pauline authorship of this "cosmic εἰκὼν-christology" (249).

- 22 Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (The New International Greek Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 104. Due to textual ambiguity there is, however, some discussion whether the phrase *eis auton* in verse 20 refers to God the Father or Jesus Christ. The majority view is that it refers to God the Father. See, Patzia, 34; N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon* (rev. ed.; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 76; Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 64. However, Fee, 309–313, shows convincingly that *eis auton* in v. 20 refers also to the Son. Among others, he argues that otherwise the personal pronoun must be converted into a reflexive which "was not once done in the long history of the textual tradition" (310) and that the flow of personal pronouns in v. 20 (*di' autou, eis auton, autou, di' autou*) would be destroyed by introducing God the Father and having to revert back to Christ.
- 23 Fee, 312, notes, "we should probably understand the *ta. pa,nta* of this strophe to be identical with the *ta. pa,nta* of the first strophe, so that the 'all things' of both strophes refer to the whole creation."

While preexistence refers back to creation, i.e., to the first part of the hymn, because as the creator of all things Jesus must have been preexistent, headship of the church points to reconciliation through his death on the cross being mentioned in the third part with its implications being described in vv. 21–23. Those who are reconciled form the church whose head Jesus is.²⁴ On the other hand, reconciliation through the shedding of his blood requires his incarnation,²⁵ and his being the firstborn from the dead requires his resurrection. Jesus is the head of the church because of his incarnation, death on the cross, and resurrection.²⁶

The hymn's OT background has been widely discussed. The creation account and Adam, Israel and David as firstborn, and biblical as well as extra-biblical wisdom tradition as possible backgrounds have been proposed.²⁷ Although the OT background cannot be limited to a single passage, it undoubtedly includes creation.

This christological hymn contains many aspects of and deep insights into the life and ministry of Jesus. No wonder that G. Fee declares: "A higher Christology does not exist in the NT."²⁸ Jesus is the creator of the

²⁴ The concept of the church as a body is found also in other Pauline letters, e.g., 1 Cor 12:12; Rom 12:4–5. Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44; Waco: Word Books, 1982), 49, observes: "In Colossians (and Ephesians) there is an advance in the line of thought so that the relationship which the church, as the body of Christ, bears to Christ as head of the body is treated." Patzia, 32, adds: "Only in Colossians and Ephesians is Christ designated as *head* over *the church*. The reason for this surely lies in Paul's intention to proclaim the lordship of Christ over all things." Thompson, 32–33, states: "The church is the body of which Christ, rather than any other lord or deity, is the head; in him the church has its origins, and hence it also finds its identity and unity in Christ. . . The church is a body drawn from every people and social class (3:11), because the head of the church is one whose work is universal and cosmic in its scope, not only in redemption, but already in creation." Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament: Interpreting the Message and Meaning of Jesus Christ* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), 402, suggests: "At this point [verse 18] the hymn shifts from creation to new creation. Christ as 'the head of the body, the church.' moves well beyond earlier Pauline conceptions of the local congregation as the 'body of Christ' (cf. 1 Cor 12:12, 27; also 10:16–17; Rom 12:5). In view is the universal church and Christ's 'headship'."

²⁵ Fee, 313.

²⁶ Cf. Holladay, 402.

²⁷ Cf. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 58–60, 62; Dunn, 87–90; Fee, 295, 299–301; 521; O'Brien, 43–44; Petr Pokorný, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Epheser* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 5; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1992), 62–64.

²⁸ Fee, 303.

cosmos. He is its sustainer²⁹ and “the cosmic glue that holds everything together.”³⁰ He is the reconciler and redeemer who brings about a new creation. These aspects of Jesus’ work cannot be separated from each other.³¹

4. Jesus as Creator

4.1 The Unique NT Perspective

The NT adds a unique dimension to the topic of creation in the OT. Students of Scripture are typically used to have in view both the OT and the NT when it comes to a biblical teaching. And this is good. But let us assume for a moment one had the OT only. What one would hear about creation would be impressive. One would be informed that God created everything including humanity. According to a close reading of the text, this creation was quite recent, several thousand years ago, and took only a few days to be completed. Later the fall changed not only humanity’s relationship with God and introduced death to creation, but also altered the entire ecosystem.

However, without the NT some aspects of creation would not be completely clear. Although the OT points to Christ as the creator in a hidden way,³² it is the NT which clearly spells out that Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, is the creator of all things—John 1:3; Col 1:15–16; Heb 1:2,10. These texts exclude Jesus from the realm of created beings. His role is not exhausted in bringing about salvation. He has also created humankind and has a personal interest in each human being. In addition, the cosmic perspective, which includes more than the creation that we encounter, is spelled out quite clearly in the NT.

The Gospel writers left us also with Jesus’ own statements about creation, for instance, when he said that the Sabbath *was made* for humanity (Mark 2:27–28), or when he confirmed the creation account: “from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For

²⁹ “The world is not part of God nor is God part of the world, but neither does the world exist independently of the sustaining power of God,” writes Thompson, 30.

³⁰ Holladay, 402.

³¹ Thompson, 28, notes: “In its structure, it sets creation and redemption parallel to each other. Each has its focal point in Christ, who is the firstborn, agent, and goal of both creation and new creation.”

³² E.g., the plural in Gen 1:26 and wisdom in Prov 8. Cf. Richard M. Davidson, “Proverbs 8 and the Place of Christ in the Trinity,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17/1 (2006): 33–54.

this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, and the two shall become one flesh" (Mark 10:6–8). In another place, he talked about "the creation that God created" (Mark 13:19). He also mentioned Abel, the son of Adam of Eve and understood him to be an actual person that lived on earth (Matt 23:35).

The NT authors followed Jesus' example and again and again connected creation, fall, and salvation. One is dependent on the other. No creation, no salvation. According to the last book of Scripture in a time of crisis God's end time people call the human race back to the worship of God as creator (Rev 14:7).

4.2 Jesus in Col 1:15–20

Colossians 1:15 begins with a relative pronoun followed by the auxiliary verb "to be." Its antecedent has to be found in vv. 13 or 14.³³ Undoubtedly, it is God's beloved Son, Jesus Christ. The hymn is thus closely related to Paul's prayer. In addition, the Son is closely linked to the Father who is said to have rescued us (*ruomai*, Col 1:13) while the Son has set us free/delivered us/redeemed us (*apolutrōsis*, Col 1:14). Thus, Father and Son are involved in the process of salvation.

Therefore, the phrase "who is" in verse 15, which is oftentimes translated as "he is," brings along a context pointing to the unity between Father and Son, who share the same concerns, actions, and privileges and thereby point to the divinity of Christ. "[T]he Son who redeems through his own blood is the ultimate expression of God's love for us."³⁴

4.2.1 The Image of God

Colossians 1:15 calls Jesus "the image of the invisible God." The term *eikōn* can be translated as "likeness," "image," "appearance" or "form." It can point to likeness or representation or both.³⁵ The term is used only once in Colossians to refer to Jesus as he relates to God the Father.³⁶

³³ Fee, 297, notes: "What is especially significant for the rest of the narrative is that 'the Son of his love' is the antecedent to all the subsequent pronouns through v. 22."

³⁴ Fee, 142.

³⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 117, mentions Nebuchadnezzar's image in Daniel 3 and the image of the beast in Rev 13.

³⁶ According to Col 3:10, the believer is to be "renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him." Cf. O'Brien, 43.

Thompson points out that an image is something visible, while God is invisible.³⁷ This sounds almost like a paradox. On the other hand, "How then can God be known, if he is invisible?", asks Dunn and points to the "image" as bridging "the otherwise unbridgeable gulf."³⁸ "[T]o say that Christ is the *image* of God means that, in some way, the unseen or invisible God becomes visible, moves into our sphere of sense perception, in the life of this human being."³⁹ Patzia explains:

By image, Paul does not mean mere resemblance or similarity, because the Greek word used is *eikon*. This communicates the idea that Christ participates in and with the nature of God, not merely copying, but visibly manifesting and perfectly revealing God in human form (in 2 Cor. 4:4 Paul talks about 'the glory of Christ, who is the image of God').⁴⁰

Vaughan is probably right when he states that the concept of image should not be limited to part of the existence of Christ, whether preexistence, incarnation, or exaltation only.⁴¹ It includes all these, and certainly the incarnation which is presupposed in our passage. The major OT background for the image of God is most probably Gen 1:26–27, the creation account.⁴² In v. 27 the phrase "image of God" is used. Originally, humankind was created in the image of God, but humanity failed in truly representing God. However, Jesus is God's true representative (John 1:18). Through him God can indeed be known. Yet Jesus surpassed Adam and Eve by far in that he became also the one into whose image believers are now being transformed in a kind of new creation. By becoming like Jesus they become in some way like God. "In other words, 'Christ is not only

³⁷ Thompson, 28. The invisibility of God is confirmed in other places such as Rom 1:20; 1Tim 1:17; Heb 11:27.

³⁸ Dunn, 87–88.

³⁹ Thompson, 28.

⁴⁰ Patzia, 30. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 57–58, supports this suggestion: "To say that Christ is the image of God is to say that in him the nature and being of God have been perfectly revealed—that in him the invisible has become visible." He points among others to the Johannine literature and texts such as John 1:18 and 14:9. In the latter Jesus claims: "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Wright, 70, goes so far as to say: "From all eternity Jesus had, in his very nature, been the 'image of God', reflecting perfectly the character and life of the Father. It was thus appropriate for him to be the image of God as man."

⁴¹ Curtis Vaughan, "Colossians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 181.

⁴² Cf. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 58. On page 57 he also points to Eze 1:26. Cf. Moo, 117; Pokorný, 62–63; and Thompson, 28–29.

eikon tou theou, as was Adam, but also king over creation in a way vastly different from the first man."⁴³

4.2.2 The Firstborn of all Creation

Jesus is also the firstborn of/over/before all creation (Col 1:15).⁴⁴ Now creation appears directly. In the LXX, the term *prōtotokos* (firstborn)⁴⁵ occurs about 130 times. Typically, the term *prōtotokos* in the OT is used in the literal sense. There were firstborn among humans, which at least sometimes included females.⁴⁶ The firstborn belonged to God but were replaced by the tribe of Levi.⁴⁷ There were firstborn of animals⁴⁸ which were included in some of the regulations concerning the firstborn of humans.⁴⁹ The human firstborn enjoyed the birthright (Gen 43:37) and a double portion of the inheritance (Deut 21:16–17). According to 2 Chron 21:3, the firstborn son of the king received the kingdom while various gifts were given to the other sons.

However, the term was also used in different ways:

1. Israel as God's people (Exod 4:22) was called "my son, my firstborn." Israel was neither directly and in a literal sense born by God nor was Israel the first of all peoples. According to 2 Sam

⁴³ Tompson, 29.

⁴⁴ The phrase can be understood in a distributive way ("of every creature") or in a collective sense ("of all creation"). Larry R. Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 31/1 (1988): 62–63, shows that the collective sense is to be preferred. He also discusses the various kinds of genitives that have been proposed for the translation of *prōtotokos pasēs ktisēōs* coming to the conclusion that an objective genitive fits best the text and context (63–65).

⁴⁵ Cf. K. H. Bartels, "Prōtotokos," in *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament 1. Abraham-Israel* (eds. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard; Wuppertal: Theologischer Verlag R. Brockhaus, 1977), 280, suggests that *prōtotokos* was formed by using the term *prōtos* and the aorist stem *tek-*. The letter is derived from the verb *tiktō*.

⁴⁶ Gen 10:15; 22:21; 25:13, 25; 27:19, 32; 35:23; 36:15; 38:6, 7; 41:51; 43:33; 46:8; 48:18; 49:3; Exod 6:14; 11:5 (2x); 12:29, 29; 13:13, 15 (2x); 22:29; 34:20; Num 1:20; 3:2, 12, 13, 40, 41, 45, 46, 50; 8:16, 18; 18:15; 26:5; 33:4; Deut 21:15, 16, 17; Josh 6:26 (2x); 17:1, 2; Judg 8:20; 1 Sam 8:2; 14:49 (daughter); 2 Sam 3:2; 13:21; 1 Kgs 16:34; 2 Kgs 3:27; 1 Chron 1:29; 2:3, 13, 25 (2x), 27, 42, 50; 3:1, 15; 4:4; 5:1 (2x), 3, 12; 6:13 (LXX); 8:1, 30, 38, 39; Ps 77:51; 88:28; 104:36; 136:10; Mic 6:7; Zech 12:10.

⁴⁷ Num 3:12, 41, 45; 8:16, 18.

⁴⁸ Gen 4:4; Exod 11:5; 12:29; 13:15; 34:19 (2x), 20; Lev 27:26; Num 3:41; 18:15, 17 (3x); Deut 12:6, 17; 15:19 (3x); 33:17; Neh 10:37.

⁴⁹ Exod 11:5; 12:12, 29; 13:2, 13, 15; Num 3:13; 8:17 (2x).

19:44, the ten tribes contrasting themselves with the tribe of Judah claimed to be the firstborn and have a better claim to David. God declared that he would be "a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn" (Jer 31:9).

2. A number of times the second born was put in the place of the firstborn and received his position so that a reversal took place. In these cases, the time element was no longer important. Ephraim, the younger brother of Manasseh, was raised to the rank and position of the firstborn (Gen 48:18–20; Deut 33:17; Jer 38:9). Although Shimri was not the firstborn, his father made him first (1 Chron 26:10).
3. According to 1 Chron 5:12, the firstborn named Joel was the chief. Virtually, all English translation render *prōtotokos* in this text as chief, head, or leader. This is due to the fact that the MT uses *rōš*, "head"/ "chief," which the LXX translated with *prōtotokos* indicating that an important element in being the firstborn is leadership.
4. In 1 Chron 11:11 some versions of the LXX use *prōtotokos* while others employ *prōtos*. This may indicate that in some cases the terms were considered exchangeable.
5. Very enlightening is Ps 89 (Ps 88 in the LXX) which takes the concept of leadership one step further. This Psalm describes God's lovingkindness and faithfulness toward David. He had made a covenant with him promising that David's throne would endure forever. David is mentioned by name in v. 3 and again in vv. 20, 35, and 49 (English Bibles),⁵⁰ while God's speech concerning him is not limited to these verses. In v. 27 an incomplete parallelism is found:

I also shall make	him [David]	firstborn,
-	-	the highest of the kings of the earth.

David who was the eighth child of his parents (1 Sam 16:10–11) would be made the firstborn. What this means is expressed in the second half of the verse: David as the firstborn would be the highest of the kings. The covenant with David was finally fulfilled in the Messiah, the antitypical firstborn and the King of kings. Psalm 89:27 does not stress the issues of being born or being the

⁵⁰ English translations and the Hebrew text agree in the numbering of chapters, while the LXX and the MT agree in the numbering of verses.

first chronologically, but emphasizes the special honor, greatness, and authority of the firstborn.⁵¹

Obviously, Zech 12:10 is a messianic prophecy which was understood as such by John in his gospel (John 19:37). The Messiah who would be pierced is compared to a firstborn.⁵² The context seems to suggest that Yahweh is speaking about himself, first in the first person singular and then in the third person singular. Here the issue of being born as well as the time element are irrelevant.

In the NT *prōtotokos* occurs eight times.⁵³ Apart from Heb 11:28 and 12:23 the term always refers to Jesus Christ or, stated differently, all places in which *prōtotokos* appears in the singular talk about Jesus: Jesus was the firstborn of Mary (Luke 2:7), but he is also the firstborn among many brothers (Rom 8:29), the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15), the firstborn from/of the dead (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5), and the firstborn whom the angels worship (Heb 1:6).

As in the OT the NT uses the term literally or figuratively.⁵⁴ Michaelis holds that Luke 2:7 "is the only instance in the NT where . . . *prōtotokos* refers unequivocally to the process of birth, and this in the natural sense."⁵⁵ Spicq, however, considers all NT references to *prōtotokos* apart from the plural found in Heb 11:28 as figurative pointing to "honor, dignity, or preeminence."⁵⁶ In Heb 12:23 the "church of the firstborn" may describe the true members of the invisible church.⁵⁷ This text must also be

⁵¹ W. Michaelis, "prōtotokos," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Friedrich; Grand Rapids: Publishing, 1982), 6:874, suggests that in Ps 89 adoption is implied. Earlier he stated that "as an equivalent of בְּכֹרִית this might become increasingly remote and even detached altogether from the idea of birth or the whole question of origin."

⁵² Francis D. Nichol (ed.), *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002), 4:1113, states: "Looking upon the 'pierced' Messiah . . . perceiving as never before the marvelous love of God in the gift of His Son, men would deeply mourn over their past defects of character. . . John notes that this scripture was fulfilled when one of the Roman soldiers pierced the side of Jesus (John 19:37)."

⁵³ Luke 2:7; Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; 11:28; 12:23; Rev 1:5.

⁵⁴ Bartels, 281, distinguishes between *prōtotokos* "im wörtlichen Sinn" and *prōtotokos* "in übertragenem Sinn als Würdeprädikat Jesu."

⁵⁵ Michaelis, 876.

⁵⁶ Cf. Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (3 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 211–212.

⁵⁷ Cf. Francis D. Nichol ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002), 7:487; Bartels, 282.

understood figuratively, because “obviously the church does not consist only of literally firstborn human beings. The expression ‘firstborn’ emphasizes their preeminent status among the ‘sons of God’.”⁵⁸

In Colossians the issue is not whether Jesus was born or created.⁵⁹ The issue is that he is the one through whom creation has become possible. This is stressed in the very next verse: He has created all things. If he created all things, he himself is not created. He is not part of creation. But neither is he born in eternity past. A beginning should not be assigned to Christ. Paul parallels the “firstborn of creation” in v. 15 with the “firstborn of the dead” in v. 18. As Jesus is the firstborn of creation, so he is the firstborn of the dead.⁶⁰ Again the issue is not birth. Jesus was raised from the dead, but not literally born from the dead. But even as the firstborn of the dead he was not the first in a temporal sense. Others were raised before him. He was first in the sense that all resurrections whether past or future were and are dependent on his resurrection.⁶¹ Without his resurrection no other resurrection is possible.

Verse 18 shows what it means that Jesus is the firstborn, namely “that he himself will come to have first place in everything.” As in Ps 89 so here too, being the “firstborn” is associated with being exalted as the supreme

⁵⁸ Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002), 99. Among scholars there is widespread agreement that the firstborn of Col 1:15 should be understood figuratively. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 243–244, suggests: “Colossians 1:15 means that Christ has the privileges of authority and rule, the privileges belonging to the ‘first-born,’ but with respect to the whole creation.” Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (second ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 714, states: “the expression ‘first-born’ does not primarily mean first in time, but first in rank or preeminent.”

⁵⁹ In his article on wisdom in Prov 8, R. Davidson has investigated the birth language applied to wisdom and has shown that in Prov 8 as well as in Ps 2 birth language has been used to talk about installment into an office. According to Heb 1:3–4, a passage which has various connections to Col 1, Jesus has taken his place at the right hand of God the Father, has become superior to the angels and has inherited a more excellent name. These statements and their contexts suggest that when applied to the Messiah birth language including the term *prōtotokos* points to installment into his heavenly office which took place after Christ's resurrection and ascension.

⁶⁰ Cf. O'Collins, 35. In addition, another element is added to each of the two occurrences: “The image of God”—“the firstborn of creation,” “the beginning”—“the firstborn from the dead.” The two double titles correspond with each other.

⁶¹ Cf. Pokorný, 70; Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 71; O'Brien, 51.

king and ruler of the universe. Jesus is the king of creation,⁶² and he is the king of resurrection, another form of creation. Both creation and resurrection are only possible through him.

4.2.3 The Creator of All Things

Jesus as creator has created all things (Col 1:16). The term "all" is stressed throughout the Christological hymn in Col 1:15–20 and occurs eight times, three of the eight occurrences being directly connected to creation.

Verse 16 begins and ends with the statement that all things were created in him (*en autu*), and through him (*di' autou*).⁶³ Later "for him" (*eis auton*) is added. We have already pointed out that these phrases occur in the same order in vv. 19–20. That may be a reason for employing them. How should *en autu* be understood? The phrase can be translated "by him" or "in him." "In him" may suggest that Jesus is the Father's agent in bringing about creation.⁶⁴ However, that would be a repetition of the idea already expressed with the mediatorial role of the firstborn. This is possible, but it is also possible that *en* expresses the same thought that *dia* communicates. Moo suggests that we might be "seeking a specificity that Paul does not intend. He wants to make the very general point that all of God's creative work took place 'in terms of' or 'in reference to' Christ."⁶⁵ Creation did not take place independent of Jesus. It took place in him. He is the originator.⁶⁶

The list of created realities in verse 16 is all inclusive and presents a cosmic picture: heaven and earth, the visible and the invisible, and all the rulers and authorities. This leaves no room for Jesus to be a created being.⁶⁷ "Heaven and earth" is a well-known merism describing the entire universe. It goes back to Gen 1:1.⁶⁸ "The visible and the invisible" may parallel the previous statement. The visible would be what is in the reach of humans, the invisible what transcends our perspective. The four

⁶² Moo, 120, talks about "Christ's mediatorial role in all of creation." O'Brien, 45, stresses that Jesus is "distinguished from all creation (cf. Heb 1:6). He is both prior to and supreme over that creation since he is its Lord."

⁶³ Pokorný, 64, talks about a chiastic structure of verse 16. O'Brien, 45, points out that "in the first clause the aorist tense is employed to draw attention to the historical act, while the second reference uses the perfect to focus on creation's continuing existence." Cf. Wright, 73.

⁶⁴ Wright, 71.

⁶⁵ Moo, 121.

⁶⁶ Cf. O'Brien, 45; Vaughan, 182.

⁶⁷ Cf. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians*, 59.

⁶⁸ Cf. Moo, 121.

elements "thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities" seem to point to personal beings. "Rulers and authorities" (*archai kai exousiai*) appear also in Col 2:10, 15. At least in Col 2:15 they seem to be understood negatively. In Eph 3:10; 6:12 they are spiritual powers, whether good or evil.⁶⁹ "Dominions" (*kuriotēs*) appear also in Eph 1:21 and may likewise refer to spiritual powers. Are these humans and angelic-like beings or just supernatural entities? The latter seems to be the case.⁷⁰ What about the question whether they are both positive and negative or just negative? Since Paul uses "all" heavily, we may assume that they encompass all spiritual powers, although negative powers were not originally created as evil powers.

Since all things are created by Jesus, he cannot be created, or he must have created himself. But the latter option is not feasible because it would require a conscious part of him to exist prior to his self-creation, which in turn would not be a real creation. "He [Jesus Christ] is not simply part of the created world itself."⁷¹ "He [the Son] is not a creature, not even the first creature; he is creator. That places him on God's side of the line ontologically: creator not created."⁷² On the other hand, since Jesus has created all powers and authorities, he surpasses them as the firstborn of all creation. Jesus is presented as the cosmic creator and Lord. "No power structures are . . . independent of Christ."⁷³ Elsewhere in the NT the creator is also clearly portrayed as being God (John 1:1-3). That everything and everyone are created for Jesus means that the entire creation finds its goal, purpose, and destiny in him.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ For a more detailed discussion see Thompson, 36-39, and Pokorný, 66-68.

⁷⁰ Cf. O'Brien, 46.

⁷¹ Wright, 71.

⁷² Talbert, 193. Fee, 504, writes: "So intent is Paul in placing Christ as supreme, and thus above 'the powers,' that he elaborates the Son's role in creation in two ways: first, by using two of the three prepositions that in Rom 11:36 he had used of God the Father . . .; and second, by twice using the all embracing *en autu* (*in him*) regarding the Son's role both in creation itself and in its currently being sustained. Christ the Son is thus both the Creator and the sphere in which all created things have their existence." Cf. Thompson, 31.

⁷³ Wright, 73.

⁷⁴ Moo, 124, states: "Christ stands at the 'beginning' of the universe as the one through whom it came into being, and he stands at its end as the goal of the universe." O'Brien, 47, points out that Jesus Christ as the goal of creation "finds no parallel in the Jewish Wisdom literature or the rest of the extant Jewish materials for that matter." Cf. Vaughan, 182. F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15-20," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141/562 (April-June 1984), 103,

4.2.4 The Preexisting One

Jesus is before (*pro*) all things (Col 1:17). Most likely this statement talks about his preexistence. Although it is possible to understand *pro* in terms of rank, in his letters Paul uses it always in a temporal sense.⁷⁵ This is also true for the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 11:5) where Pauline authorship is disputed. Probably based on these data Melick declares: "Clearly this comment has a time orientation, and it teaches that before creation Jesus existed."⁷⁶ Not only did he live prior to his incarnation, but he also existed before any other thing. As far as we would like to go back into eternity, there is no time when Christ was not. He is not created or born but is the Creator God. Some scholars point out that this verse may be associated with Jewish wisdom tradition according to which wisdom existed before the creation of the universe (Prov 8:22–31; Sir 1, 4).⁷⁷ Although Paul's statements surpass wisdom tradition, it is evident that in this context Christ's preexistence is linked to his activity as creator.

4.2.5 The Sustainer of All Things

The center of the hymn depicts Jesus as the sustainer of "all things" (Col 1:17). The term *ta panta* used twice in connection with Christ's creation activity links the previous verse to verse 17. "All things" that were created by Jesus are now sustained by him who was before all things and who is the head of his church. The verb "to hold together" is used in the perfect tense underlining Jesus' continuous sustaining activity of all things. "Apart from his *continuous* sustaining activity . . . all would disintegrate."⁷⁸ While Wright concludes that "no creature is autonomous,"⁷⁹ Moo

states: "The concept of Christ as the Goal of creation plays an essential part in Pauline Christology and soteriology."

⁷⁵ The references are Rom 16:7; 1 Cor 2:7; 4:5; 2 Cor 12:12; Gal 1:17; 2:12; 3:23; Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9; 4:21; Tit 1:12 apart from Col 1:17. Cf. Moo, 125. Vaughan, 183, holds that the statement primarily has a time reference but may in our context also denote status.

⁷⁶ R. R. Melick. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, (The New American Commentary Nashville, vol. 32; TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 220.

⁷⁷ Cf. Dunn, 93. Talbert, 188–189, discusses Logos and Wisdom. See also Jeffrey S. Lamp, "Wisdom in Col 1:15–20: Contribution and Significance," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41/1 (1998), 45–53. He states on page 53: "[T]hose who seek to understand the passage in terms of its flow of thought from Christ's role in creation to Christ's role in redemption have best retained the integrity of a wisdom interpretation."

⁷⁸ O'Brien, 47.

⁷⁹ Wright, 73.

describes what that means in practical terms: "Without him, electrons would not continue to circle nuclei, gravity would cease to work, the planets would not stay in their orbits."⁸⁰ How it was possible for Jesus to maintain and sustain the universe even during his incarnation surpasses our understanding but this is to be expected, when we talk about God. Being the creator and the sustainer of all creation places Jesus on the divine side.

4.2.6 The Head

The concept of headship (Col 1:18) underlines among other things—such as a relational and organic model and the concept of union—supremacy and rule.⁸¹ The term *kephalē* occurs in Col 1:18; 2:10, 19. The notion of Jesus being the head of the body, the church (Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15; Eph 1:23; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30) is a further development of what we find in 1 Cor 12:21, where the head is just a member of the body. Here the head is Christ who governs the entire body. This is an important christological contribution.⁸² The body as the church is now also understood in a wider sense. The church is no longer just a local congregation but the worldwide church of God.⁸³

Again headship is widened in Col 2:10. There Jesus is the head over all rule and authority. He is also seated at God's right hand (Col 3:1). The phrase *pasēs archēs and exousias* (Col 2:10) returns to the *eite archai eite exousiai* of Col 1:16 that were created and therefore also to the creation theme. In the related letter to the Ephesians Jesus is described as the one who has created one church out of Jews and Gentiles (Eph 2:15), being its head (Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23). Undoubtedly, Christ's headship is connected to the concept of creation.

The headship of Christ, as the last segment of the middle section of the hymn, prepares for the last major part of the hymn (Col 1:18a–20). "[T]he thought moves from creation to new creation."⁸⁴

4.2.7 The Beginning

Jesus is the beginning (Col 1:18). *Arche* can mean "beginning" (Luke 1:2), "beginner"/"domain"/"realm" (Jude 1:6), "principle" (Heb 5:12), and

⁸⁰ Moo, 126.

⁸¹ Talbert, 189, declares: "If verse 17 praised the son as the unifying factor in the cosmos, verse 18a's praise lauds the Son's unifying role in human community."

⁸² Cf. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 2," 104. See also footnote 24.

⁸³ Cf. Dunn, 96; Moo, 127; Wright, 73–74.

⁸⁴ Wright, 73. Dunn, 96, talks about "the church as the greenhouse in and by means of which the green shoots of God's purpose in and for creation are brought on."

"corner" (Acts 10:11). In order to determine the right meaning the context must be consulted. Probably, the most important shades of meaning are "beginning," "originator," and "ruler."⁸⁵

The term occurs four times in Colossians. According to Col 1:16, Jesus has created all rulers (*archai*). According to Col 1:18 and context, he is the beginning (*arche*), the ruler that has supremacy over all other rulers. Therefore, the term points to Christ's primacy and sheds light on *prōtotokos* found in the immediate context.⁸⁶ This is confirmed by the other two texts dealing with *arche* in this letter. According to Col 2:10, Jesus "is the head over all rule (*arches*) and authority." Colossians 2:15 teaches "that God has, in Christ, 'stripped' the rulers (*archas*) and authorities and held them up to contempt."⁸⁷ Possibly, the letter to the Colossians uses *arche* consistently in the sense of "ruler." Consequently, Jesus is the supreme ruler.⁸⁸

According to Rev 3:14, Jesus is the origin or ruler (*arche*) of God's creation.⁸⁹ The idea of originator may be important to Revelation. This text is not irrelevant to our discussion. The message of Rev 3:14–22 is addressed to the church in Laodicea, the neighboring town. Obviously, a close connection existed between these two churches. They shared letters written to them (Col 4:16). John may have defined the beginning of Col 1:18 as the originator of creation. In John 1:1 *en archē* is not identified with Jesus but associated with him as the creator God (John 1:3). The same phrase is found in the very beginning of Gen 1:1, the context of creation. It is also found in wisdom tradition.⁹⁰ So it may well be that *archē* with its important creation associations in OT and NT does not only point to the supreme ruler but also to the creator, consequently also to the founder and Lord of the church, his new creation.⁹¹

⁸⁵ Vaughan, 183, calls it "(1) supremacy in rank, (2) precedence in time, or (3) creative initiative." He opts for the last possibility.

⁸⁶ Cf. O'Brien, 50.

⁸⁷ Wright, 115.

⁸⁸ Cf. Pokorný, 70.

⁸⁹ Cf. Dunn, 97. According to Rev 21:6; 22:13 both, God the Father and Jesus, are the beginning (*arche*). Beginning must therefore be understood in an active sense such as "beginner," "originator," or ruler.

⁹⁰ Cf., Moo, 129, who mentions Prov 8:22 and Philo who calls "wisdom 'the beginning.'"

⁹¹ Moo, 129, suggests: "But more than simple temporal rank is surely intended. Christ stands at the head of new creation as *the firstborn from the dead.*"

4.2.8 The Firstborn from the Dead

The firstborn has already been discussed above. Some short remarks may suffice here. The term *archē* defines the following *prōtotokos* as does the term that follows "firstborn." Talbert points out that *archē* and *prōtotokos* are both found in Gen 49:3. Reuben is Jacob's firstborn and the beginning of his strength. "This suggests the firstborn is the founder of a people."⁹²

As the firstborn from the dead Jesus guarantees that a great number of people will share his resurrection and eternal life. Romans 8:29 talks about him as "the firstborn among many brethren." In Revelation Jesus is again "the firstborn of the dead" (Rev 1:5). That means, not only the term "beginning" occurs in Colossians and Revelation, also the phrase "firstborn of the dead" does. This may indicate that the exalted Christology of Jesus as creator and Lord is not restricted to Paul and his communities but may have been well-known in early Christianity.⁹³

In any case, the firstborn in Col 1:18 must definitely be seen in close parallel to the firstborn of all creation in Col 1:15. Creation and redemption are set in relation to each other. Redemption and resurrection are a kind of re-creation. And Jesus is the one who spans "all time and creation from beginning to end, from primal time to final time."⁹⁴

4.2.9 The One Who Has First Place in Everything

The second part of Col 1:18 is interesting, because it explains by the somewhat related term *prōteuō* how *prōtotokos* should be understood.⁹⁵ The firstborn is the one who "will come to have first place in everything." That means he will have supremacy. Again the term "all" occurs. Jesus who has created all things and sustains all things will have supremacy over all things. This term "all" clearly links the various aspects of the work of Jesus and suggests that they are all interrelated. Salvation must be seen on the background of creation.

Wright suggests that "this part of the poem refers particularly to Christ's rule over the final great enemies of mankind, sin and death. . . . That which he has by right he became in fact."⁹⁶ Jesus who has created all things and sustains all things will have supremacy over all things. This

⁹² Talbert, 190.

⁹³ Cf. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 2," 106–107.

⁹⁴ Dunn, 97.

⁹⁵ O'Brien, 51, notes: "The words 'be the first' (*prōteuō*) resume the double reference to 'firstborn' (*prōtotokos*, vv. 15 and 18), as well as the phrase 'he is before all things'."

⁹⁶ Wright, 74, 75.

includes "the final great enemies of mankind, sin and death"⁹⁷ that are encountered for the first time in Gen 2–3.

4.2.10 All Fullness Dwelling in Him

Colossians 1:19 is difficult to translate.⁹⁸ Nevertheless we can say that it ascribes fullness to Jesus Christ. "For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." Bruce notes: "No doubt the word πλήρωμα had a special sense (or senses) in Gnostic terminology, but it does not follow that the present occurrence originally bore that special sense (or senses)."⁹⁹

Nevertheless, this term is hotly discussed. While some take it as a reference to Jesus' complete power and righteousness, others interpret it in the light of the Deity.¹⁰⁰ What that means is further developed in Col 2:9: "For in him [Jesus] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." "[T]he word translated 'Godhead' is the Greek *theotōs*, which literally means the very essence of divinity. . . . And this very essence of divine nature dwells 'bodily' in the incarnate Christ, the 'firstborn!'"¹⁰¹ Therefore, he has the ability to create through his word and speak things into existence. He also had the right and was able to redeem us.

4.2.11 The Reconciler

Reconciliation presupposes ruptured relations. Reconciliation of all things through Jesus and to Jesus is stressed in Col 1:20 and applied to the Colossian Christians in v. 22.¹⁰² Ephesians 2:16 employs the same term

⁹⁷ Wright, 74.

⁹⁸ Cf. Moo, 131–132.

⁹⁹ Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 2," 108.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Vaughan, 185.

¹⁰¹ Whidden, 100. Wright, 75–76, commenting on Col 1:19 states: "The full divinity of the man Jesus is stated without any implication that there are two Gods. It is the one God, in all his fullness, who dwells in him." Cf. Fee, 308–309; Patzia, 32. Eph 3:19 speaks about the fullness of God and Eph 4:13 about the fullness of Christ.

¹⁰² For a discussion of the different views on what reconciliation means see the extensive treatment by O'Brien, 53–57. Dunn, 103, expresses his view stating: "The implication is that the purpose, means, and manner of (final) reconciliation have already been expressed by God, not that the reconciliation is already complete." In any case, the issue of reconciliation and pacification envision—according to Thompson, 33–34, "a cosmic conflict, in which 'principalities and powers' are arrayed against God. Moreover, human beings are estranged from and hostile toward both God and each other (Col 1:20–21). Through the death of Jesus, God has made peace, overcoming the alienation, and bringing an end to hostility. And yet we do not now see the reconciliation of all things in its fullness [sic!]. As Wolfhart

apokatalassō to describe the reconciliation brought about by Jesus which unites Gentiles and Jews that believe in Jesus in "one body." In Rom 5:10 and 2 Cor 5:18–20 the same term, however without prefix, *katalassō*, describes the reconciliation of humanity with God, a restoration of fellowship. The Father's saving activity mentioned in Col 1:13 and the Son's saving activity, although described with different terms, refer to the same reality.

The *ta panta* and the sphere of reconciliation encompassing *epi tes ges* and *en tois ouranois* reflect precisely creation in verse 16.¹⁰³ The same phrases occur in vv. 15 and 20 with the exception that heaven and earth are reversed. In other words, reconciliation is not limited to humanity. This does, however, not suggest universal salvation of everyone. Paul and the NT must be seen as a whole. There will be those that are saved, and there will be those that are lost. Even some heavenly powers will be lost. What Paul seems to stress is that according to the pattern of already and not yet all rebellion has been and will be overcome and Christ's rule and peace be completely established.¹⁰⁴

Jesus the creator God is Jesus the savior God. "The Colossian vision sets forth the incarnate Son in whom the fullness of God dwells bodily, who effects a universal reconciliation, and who exercises a universal reign."¹⁰⁵

5. Summary

Colossians' remarkable christological hymn emphasizes Jesus as creator. Somehow the creation theme permeates the entire hymn and yet is enlarged to describe Jesus also as sustainer and savior. While most of the designations used for Jesus in Col 1:15–20 have some relation to creation, some directly, others indirectly, the term *pas/ta panta* links the various aspects of the hymn and create a unified whole from which none of the

Pannenberg phrased it, "the reconciliation of the world has been accomplished, but by anticipation."

¹⁰³ Patzia, 33, notes: "In other words. It is not just the church (humanity) that has been reconciled; the reconciliation wrought by Christ extends to the entire cosmic order. . . every part of the universe is included in the reconciling work of Christ." Talbert, 196, asks the question, if reconciliation means "ultimate reconciliation of all people and all hostile powers as well." He answers this question by saying: "All things may be reconciled, but in Pauline thought the powers are reconciled through subjugation (1 Cor 15:24–28; Phil 3:21; Col 2:15)."

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Moo, 135–137.

¹⁰⁵ Talbert, 197.

elements can be omitted. Creation is the canvass on which salvation and other topics are painted. Jesus as creator is foundational to Jesus as savior. In this hymn and its context Paul follows the Genesis account which moves from creation (Gen 1–2) to the fall (Gen 2) and to the promise of salvation (Gen 3:15).

The concepts of creation, constant care, and salvation are linked inseparably. Therefore, it is illogical to give up Jesus as creator or to reinterpret his creative activity into an evolutionary process and yet maintain him as savior. The different roles cannot be separated. In addition, to claim that Jesus has saved us through his once and for all death on the cross, a short event in history, but maintain that he has created us through a process, which takes millions or billions of years and involves death as crucial mechanism, is inconsistent. "The God who made the world in Christ will redeem it through Christ, for God has not abandoned the cosmos and its inhabitants."¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, Jesus' creative power is seen in the fact that his followers are spiritually recreated (Eph 2:10; 2 Cor 5:17) and that Jesus has created his church (Eph 2:15). In Rev 21–22 we even hear about a new heaven and a new earth that will be created with the Father and Jesus dwelling among his people. None of these creative acts which depend on Christ's sacrifice on the cross requires long-term evolutionary processes.

On the other hand, if it is true that Jesus is the creator, he should know by which process he has accomplished creation. It is obvious that Jesus supported a literal understanding of Gen 1–2 and took the creation account at face value. This would also include the account of the fall in Gen 3. Therefore during his earthly ministry Jesus could freely talk creation, about sin and forgiveness, and about giving his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28). Because Jesus actually is our creator and savior his words carry a weight that surpasses all human knowledge. Since Jesus is the creator God, we cannot talk about the topic of creation and the problems related to faith and science without focusing on him and taking him and his words seriously.

¹⁰⁶ Thompson, 28.