

Colossians 1:15-20

“Subverting Wisdom, Asserting Messiah”

“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 [assembly]; 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, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven.”

This section of Paul’s letter to the Colossians⁷ is agreed to have likely formed an early hymn or poem present in the ancient Messianic community,⁸ used to exclaim the supremacy of Yeshua the Messiah over the cosmos. (Even if this is not a hymn, Paul is still expressing some significant thoughts about Yeshua.) This is probably the most important part of the entire epistle, due to its Christological claims, which would be specifically important for understanding the angle of the philosophy later referred to (Colossians 2:8), something that errantly influenced the Colossians. Parallels can be seen between Colossians 1:15-20 and additional statements that will be made in Colossians ch. 2:

PAUL’S PARALLEL ARGUMENTS⁹	
COLOSSIANS 1:15-20	COLOSSIANS 2
For by Him all things were created, <i>both</i> 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 (Colossians 1:16)	He is the head over all rule and authority (Colossians 2:10b)
He is also head of the body, the [assembly] (Colossians 1:18a)	...and not holding fast to the head... (Colossians 2:19)
For it was the <i>Father’s</i> good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him (Colossians 1:19)	For in Him all the fullness of [the] Deity dwells in bodily form (Colossians 2:9)
and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, <i>I say</i> , whether things on earth or things in heaven (Colossians 1:20)	When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him (Colossians 2:15)

⁷ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*.

⁸ For possible poetic, rhymic divisions, consult N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 65; Andrew T. Lincoln, “The Letter to the Colossians,” in *NIB*, 11:602-604.

Also consult the discussions in R.P. Martin, “Hymns, Hymn Fragments, Songs, Spiritual Songs,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 419-423.

⁹ Cf. Douglas J. Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 109.

When reviewing the hymn of Colossians 1:15-20, it is possible that its claims are derived from theological sentiments seen in First Century Judaism, as well as Diaspora Hellenistic Judaism,¹⁰ where Proverbs 8, Genesis 1, and Wisdom of God beliefs are in some kind of view. The language of Colossians 1:15-20 is notably dissimilar from Paul, which indicates that he is probably quoting something—in this case to most likely refute how the false teachers of Colossae had been devaluing Yeshua the Messiah. Moo concludes, “Paul has quoted and redacted an earlier hymn,”¹¹ adapting it for his purposes in the letter. For Larry W. Hurtado, author of *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, “it is likely that [the hymn] either originated within the context of early Christian praise and worship, as a hymn celebrating Jesus, or was composed by the author of Colossians himself as...an expression of Christ’s supremacy.”¹²

Why would Colossians 1:15-20 serve to be the most important part of the Epistle to the Colossians? It is not that difficult to see, because in these verses we see Yeshua the Messiah uplifted as the

1. Image of God (Colossians 1:15)
2. Firstborn (Colossians 1:15)
3. Creator (Colossians 1:16)
4. Head of the *ekklēsia* (Colossians 1:18)
5. Firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18)
6. Fullness of God (Colossians 1:19)
7. Reconciler of all Things (Colossians 1:20)

How one interprets the claims that are made in Colossians 1:15-20 will significantly affect one’s Christology. Most of today’s evangelical Christians and Messianic Believers concur that this hymn reflects a high view of a Divine Messiah who would be incarnated as a human. The hymn was specifically employed by Paul to refute whatever false teaching(s) had circulated in Colossae, something which undoubtedly subtracted from the supremacy of Yeshua and His work. It is not unlikely that the various terms, used by false teachers in Colossae to denigrate the place of Yeshua, were subverted by Paul to highlight and exalt Yeshua, being overturned. The hymn contains unique words and a unique message that are targeted to *both* non-Jewish pagans and Jewish non-Believers—philosophies that could errantly influence the Colossians. This does require modern readers, who often approach the text with no historical framework for the statements made, to expel some effort to follow what is said a bit more carefully.

Wright indicates how Colossians 1:15-20 “is a typical statement of Jewish-style monotheism, and would be a telling rejoinder to any dualistic theology which saw creation as inherently bad.” But where a statement would be expected to be made of the LORD, the God of Israel, it “is now said in reference to Jesus Christ. He has not displaced the God of Abraham, the God of the exodus. He has made him known. If the hymn stands with mainline Judaism, over against paganism, it also stands over against Judaism itself.”¹³ From this vantage point, then, what is seen in Colossians 1:15-20 would be similar to what Paul does to the *Shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:1-6. There, he takes the confession “The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4), and fills it in with content that speaks about Yeshua: “for us there is *but* one

¹⁰ O’Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 38-39.

¹¹ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 110.

¹² Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 506.

¹³ Wright, *Colossians-Philemon*, 66.

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God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Yeshua the Messiah, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him" (1 Corinthians 8:6).

The Apostle Paul is found here working within First Century Jewish monotheism, but is redefining it in light of the identity of Yeshua. Most significant to consider for the message of the hymn is the role of the Jewish Wisdom tradition, because Paul has previously labeled Yeshua as "the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:24).¹⁴ Some of the titles and descriptions given to Yeshua in Colossians 1:15-20 are also given to the figure of Wisdom, evidenced in the Tanach, Apocrypha, and Philo. They include

1. Image of God (Wisdom 7:26; Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.43)
2. Firstborn (Philo *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 4.97)
3. Agent of Creation (Proverbs 8:22-36; 3:19; Philo *On Flight and Finding* 109)
4. Beginning (Proverbs 8:23; Wisdom 6:22)

The most significant comparison that we will have to consider is how Wisdom is referred to as both "image" and "beginning," claims that are made of Yeshua the Messiah as well (Colossians 1:15, 18). As is seen in the works of Philo:

"And God planted a paradise in Eden, in the east: and there he placed the man whom he had formed [Genesis 2:8]:" for he called that divine and heavenly wisdom by many names; and he made it manifest that it had many appellations; for he called it the beginning, and the image, and the sight of God (*Allegorical Interpretation* 1.43).¹⁵

Now the image of God is the Word, by which all the world was made (*Special Laws* 1.81).¹⁶

When we consider how Yeshua the Messiah is specifically called the "image" and "beginning," what is being asserted here by the hymn? Generally speaking in theological studies today, those who hold to a low Christology will conclude that the author of Colossians widely associates the Messiah as being God's Wisdom—a quasi-personal emanation of God's mind or His thoughts. From this angle, Yeshua would be the most important mediator between the Father and humanity, but not that much more than a mediator. Perhaps the Messiah might be semi-Divine or supernatural, but is not to be considered fully Divine as a part of the Godhead, and in all probability is a created being in some way. As personified Wisdom says in Sirach 24:9, "From eternity, in the beginning, [God] created me¹⁷." For a theologian like Dunn, Wisdom was a way "of speaking of God's own outreach to and interaction with his world and his people," a manner "of speaking of God's immanence while safeguarding his transcendence—in a word, 'personifications' of God's wisdom rather than 'intermediaries.'"¹⁸

It is difficult to avoid the fact that the hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 does parallel some of the descriptions seen of Wisdom. Proverbs 8:22-23 notably says, "The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth." This depicts a force from God existing before the world of humanity. Yet to what degree is Yeshua the Messiah to be associated with Wisdom? How far one pushes the Wisdom motif is an ongoing debate between theological conservatives and liberals, with conservatives arguing that *echoes* of Wisdom are in view, and that Yeshua is One who is far superior. Wisdom possesses some of the same qualities as

¹⁴ Grk. *Theou sophian* (θεοῦ σοφίαν).

¹⁵ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 541.

¹⁷ Grk. *ap' archēs ektisen me* (ἀπ' ἀρχῆς ἔκτισέν με).

¹⁸ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 88-89.

Yeshua, but when the descriptions of Wisdom are fully tallied together, **Yeshua is testified to do things that Wisdom has not done and cannot do.** Lincoln observes, “At this early stage of christological reflection...no problem would have been contemplated in holding that, like Wisdom as God immanent in creation, Christ was both sovereign and first within creation as the divine agent of creation.”¹⁹ It is not what Yeshua and Wisdom have in common that is important to notice in Colossians 1:15-20; it is what classifies Yeshua as *different* that is important to notice.

While Yeshua might be thought of as God’s “Wisdom,” He is much, much more.²⁰ The major and significant difference between Wisdom and Yeshua the Messiah, as we will see, is that Wisdom was just an intangible, created force of God that emerges in history. Wisdom *was not* a personal being that is supreme over the cosmos, has created the cosmos, has brought final redemption to humanity, and actually desires a personal relationship with men and women. Witherington remarks how “the element of personal preexistence in this hymn goes beyond the personification of Wisdom in the Jewish sapiential material. The first stanza is about a person, not merely the power God exhibited in creation, for that power was exercised in person by the Son...Whereas Wisdom is seen as bringing God’s people together in Sirach, Christ is given this role in the christology of Colossians and Ephesians.”²¹ Considering whether or not Yeshua is *just God’s “Wisdom”*—or whether He goes *beyond Wisdom*—will determine whether or not the hymn of Colossians 1:15-20 reflects a high Christological view of the Messiah or not.

The opening of the hymn says that Yeshua the Messiah “is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15a). Yeshua as the image of God is a concept seen elsewhere in the Apostolic Scriptures, specifically as He reflects the Father’s glory (2 Corinthians 4:4; Hebrews 1:3). It is also difficult to avoid that some kind of connection is made between Yeshua as God’s “image,” and the creation of humans in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27). How far can we push some of this, and could a low Christology of Yeshua being an exalted human really be in view?

This would be a very difficult conclusion to draw, because a very specific description is used: *eikōn tou Theou tou aoratou* (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου), **not** “the image of God,” but instead “the image of the **invisible** God.” In the Septuagint rendering of Genesis 1:27, human beings were only made in the *eikona Theou* (εἰκόνα θεοῦ).²² Similarly, Wisdom is only said to be “an image of his goodness” (Wisdom 7:26) or *eikōn tēs agathotētos autou* (εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ), and “the image, and the sight of God” (Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.43)²³ or *eikona kai horasin Theou* (εἰκόνα καὶ ὄρασιν θεοῦ). Yeshua the Messiah, in stark contrast, represents something that cannot be seen or is invisible. The adjective *aoratos* (ἀόρατος) means “*unseen, not to be seen, invisible*” (LS).²⁴ Paul details how such invisibility is a quality that only God Himself possesses:

“Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible [aoratos], the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:17).²⁵

¹⁹ Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:598.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 11:607-608.

²¹ Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 132.

He further indicates, “This and the other christological hymns in the NT demonstrate what a high christology existed in the church, even before and during the time of Paul” (*Ibid.*, pp 132-133).

²² Heb. *tzelem Elohim* (צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים).

²³ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 29.

²⁴ *LS*, 86.

²⁵ Given the preceding verses in 1 Timothy 1:14-16 which describe Yeshua the Messiah, we are right to conclude that the designation of both *aoratos* and “the only God” applies to the Son, and not just the Father (discussed further).

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The “invisible attributes” are considered by Paul to be “His eternal power and divine nature” (Romans 1:20). If Yeshua is the “image of the invisible God”—not just “the image of God”—what specific things would such invisibility relate to? Having taken on human flesh, what would the Messiah be able to reflect of His Father to the world of mortals? Ezekiel 1:26 gives us some important clues: “Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, *was* a figure with the appearance of a man.” Bruce remarks, “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.”²⁶ So in asserting that Yeshua is “the image of the invisible God,” the hymn makes a claim about Yeshua *that goes beyond* human beings made in only God’s image, and likewise Wisdom being a force made in God’s image.

It can certainly be suggested that several of the Tanach’s most significant theophanies involved pre-incarnate manifestations of Messiah Yeshua, as such an “image of the invisible God.” The author of Hebrews speaks of how Moses “persevered because he saw him who is invisible” (Hebrews 11:27, NIV), a reference to the burning bush, which is notably preceded by a statement about his service for the Messiah (Hebrews 11:26).²⁷ Yeshua being the “image of the invisible God,” should be taken as proof of His pre-existence. Yeshua being the “image of the invisible God” highlights His unique identity, not only with the Father, but also in redemptive history. One should be able to see that with Yeshua asserted to be the “image of the invisible God,” contrary to any other, how the claims of the hymn will continue to build, clarifying any misunderstandings that the ancient Colossians would have had.

Yet why refer to Yeshua as God’s image at all, even if it is an invisible image that only He possesses? Consider our Lord’s words in John 14:9, “Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” Yeshua has just been called “His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13). When we see Yeshua as “the image of the invisible God,” while it is absolutely true that we see His great power and authority present—as God Incarnate in human flesh—we also see “the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3), something that extends to God’s great love and compassion. Yeshua as “the image of the invisible God” does represent all of the fullness of God, but He also represents a fullness that Believers should be trying to reach as they mature in faith (Ephesians 3:19; 4:13). Human beings, while only being the image of God and *not* “the image of the invisible God,” should reflect enough of their Creator’s basic character. For humans, being God’s *eikōn* (εἰκὼν) still regards “**that which represents someth. else in terms of basic form and features**” (BDAG).²⁸

Yeshua’s association as God’s image is something far closer than we can comprehend, even closer than Wisdom. John 1:18 explains how “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.” Yeshua is to reflect in the world of mortals what the Father is. If Paul had been confronting any kind of errant philosophical or Gnostic-style errors present in Colossae, where anything physical was considered to be evil, then the Messiah portrayed as *eikōn* would easily refute this. Yeshua the Messiah is a physical representation of His Father, incarnated in the flesh (Colossians 1:22). The

²⁶ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp 57-58.

²⁷ “[C]onsidering the reproach of Messiah greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward” (Hebrews 11:26).

To this can be added 1 Corinthians 10:4, “and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Messiah.”

²⁸ BDAG, 282.

Messiah only being God can reduce the importance of His redeeming work for fallen humanity, and the Messiah only being human can likewise reduce the gravity of His redeeming work, and what it has taken to reconcile us to the Father (cf. Psalm 49:7, 15). In Yeshua being God's *eikōn*, we can see who the Father truly is, but we can also see what someone can be without the presence of human sin.

Those who hold to a low Christology, of Yeshua the Messiah *only* being God's "Wisdom," would not make close observations about Him actually being "the image of the invisible God." There is a noticeable trend in such liberal theology to be over conciliatory to the Jewish theological tradition, which views the Messiah as only being a human and/or some (supernatural) agent empowered by God. Sadly enough, this view can be very tempting to some of today's Messianic Believers as well, even at the expense of key Biblical doctrines. Against such a tide, though, Wright would remind us,

"[I]t is only in Jesus Christ that we understand what 'divinity' and 'humanity' really mean: without him, we lapse into sub-Christian, or even pagan, categories of thought, and then wonder why the doctrine of incarnation causes us so much difficulty. Paul's way of expressing the doctrine is to say, poetically, that the man Jesus fulfills the purposes which God had marked out *both* for himself and for humanity."²⁹

Far be it from Yeshua the Messiah just being another version of the force Wisdom, the Apostle Paul is clear to specify how "you are in Messiah Yeshua, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Bruce concludes, "Christ was the personal (not personified) and incarnate Wisdom of God."³⁰ O'Brien summarizes how in Diaspora Jewish theology, the figure of Wisdom was "a quasi-personal way" to speak of a power of God, whereas in contrast, "the one spoken of in our paragraph of Colossians is the living person, Jesus Christ, whom Paul had met face to face on the Damascus road."³¹ Yeshua the Messiah certainly does represent God's Wisdom, but He is more than just an intangible force witnessed throughout history. Yeshua the Messiah goes beyond Wisdom, and provides redemption for the human race—something which the Hellenistic Jewish idea of Wisdom did not do—demonstrating a *personal interest* in people, just as Paul had first encountered the Lord.

In opening line of the hymn, Yeshua the Messiah is further exclaimed as "the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15b). Some Bible readers, not knowing where this description originates, may immediately draw an assumption that Yeshua being "firstborn" means that He is a created being. But this is not at all what is being communicated. The designation of Yeshua as *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs* (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως) does not relate to a status of possession—as though the Earth were to own Him as only being human—but instead relates to a status of preeminence. Norman Geisler points out how *prōtotokos* is notably different from *prōtoktisis* (πρωτόκτισις), which would mean "first-created."³² The designation *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs* is best understood to mean "firstborn before all creation" (NICNT)³³ or "firstborn over all creation" (NIV), as Bruce describes how renderings like these are "designed to clarify the force of the genitive phrase,"³⁴ further consistent with "before all things" (Colossians 1:17). In the estimation

²⁹ Wright, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 70-71.

³⁰ Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 60.

³¹ O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 40.

³² Geisler, in *BKCNT*, 673.

³³ Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 59.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

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of Daniel B. Wallace, the clause *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs* is a genitive clause of subordination, which would regard Yeshua's status as "the firstborn **over all creation**."³⁵

Anyone familiar with the Tanach should immediately note how the title "firstborn" (Heb. *bekor*, בְּכוֹר) is one of high, preeminent status. It is applied to people regardless of where or when they were "born," sometimes even if they were actually not the first born in their family line. Firstborn describes Reuben the son of Jacob (Genesis 49:3-4), the people of Israel as God's "son" (Exodus 4:22), King David (Psalm 89:27), and the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim (Jeremiah 31:9). The title "firstborn," possessing royal distinction, is appropriate for the King of Kings and His ultimate authority (Revelation 1:17-18). As it was said of King David, "I will make him the first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth"³⁶ (Psalm 89:27, RSV). Similarly, Yeshua being firstborn of creation—and Him actually being the Creator of it all (Colossians 1:16b)—by necessity draws *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs* to be "firstborn over all creation" (NIV), the One who is the preeminent over everything, Yeshua being the "heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2).

The NEB paraphrases *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs* as "his is the primacy over all created things." Its translators are not at all trying to imply that Yeshua the Messiah is a created being, but are trying to convey, in more contemporary language, the dynamics of His Kingship. This rendering, however, can very much confuse people, who will often not take the time to read the text of the hymn a little closer, and consider the claims that it makes. The assertion that Yeshua is a created being, and not God Incarnate, can only be made if "firstborn" is divorced from its wider Biblical context (cf. Romans 8:29; Hebrews 1:6; Revelation 1:5). When we see Yeshua as the Agent of Creation, firstborn meaning "supreme" is best understood, as "When all things began, the Word already was" (John 1:1, NEB). Furthermore, we see that Yeshua being firstborn merits Him being worshipped, something that would be idolatrous if He were not God (Hebrews 1:6; cf. Psalm 97:7).

Even though ancient Jewish literature from the First Century period did portray various pre-existent figures or forces used by God, they did not possess *all of the qualities* that the Apostolic Scriptures portray Yeshua the Messiah as exercising. Bruce indicates how, "to none of them are such cosmic activity and significance ascribed as are here ascribed to the preexistent Christ."³⁷ While connections can be seen between Yeshua the Messiah and the figure of Wisdom, there should be no question that in comparison, Yeshua is the One who is unique. In his refutation of the Arians, who believed that Yeshua was just a created being, Colossians 1:15-16 were pointed out by the Fourth Century theologian Athanasius as being of considerable importance:

"[T]he word 'First-born' has again the creation as a reason in connection with it, which Paul proceeds to say, 'for in Him all things were created.' But if all the creatures were created in Him, He is other than the creatures, and is not a creature, but the Creator of the creatures" (*Orations Against the Arians* II.62).³⁸

Robert M. Bowman, Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, writing in their book *Putting Jesus in His Place*, properly add how "The logic of Paul's reasoning from verse 15 to verse 16 (the son is the firstborn of all creation *because* everything was created in, through, and for him) really requires...that in this context the Son be distinguished from 'all creation.' In any case, then,

³⁵ Daniel B. Wallace *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 104.

Other examples of a genitive of subordination provided by Wallace (Ibid., pp 103-104), include: Matthew 9:34; Mark 15:32; 2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 Timothy 1:17; Ephesians 2:2.

³⁶ Heb. *af-ani bekor et'neihu el'yon l'malkei-eretz* (אָפִי אֲנִי בְּכוֹר אֶתְנֵהוּ עֲלֵיוֹן לְמַלְכֵי־אֶרֶץ).

³⁷ Bruce, *Colossians-Philemon-Ephesians*, 61.

³⁸ Cf. Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:598.

Colossians 1:15 does not teach that the Son was the first creature whom God made.”³⁹ The title “firstborn” is one of great status and rulership, and if a reader can understand that **firstborn=anointed king** in Colossians 1:15, it becomes obvious that Yeshua is not a created being, and it is perfectly legitimate to treat *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs* as a genitive of subordination: “**the firstborn over all creation**” (NIV/HCSB/TNIV).

After designating Yeshua as both “image” and “firstborn,” the hymn makes the claim “for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Colossians 1:16, RSV). These are very broad sweeping categories, encompassing the whole of Creation, that to some degree are affected *en autō* (ἐν αὐτῷ) or “in Him.” The role that Wisdom played in God creating the universe needs to be considered here, as Proverbs 3:19 says “The LORD by wisdom [*b’chokmah*, חָכְמָה] founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens.” Proverbs 8:22-36 depicts Wisdom as a pre-existent force of God, able to carry out His bidding:

“The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills I was brought forth; while He had not yet made the earth and the fields, nor the first dust of the world. When He established the heavens, I was there, when He inscribed a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when the springs of the deep became fixed, when He set for the sea its boundary so that the water would not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth; then I was beside Him, *as* a master workman; and I was daily *His* delight, rejoicing always before Him, rejoicing in the world, His earth, and *having* my delight in the sons of men. Now therefore, *O* sons, listen to me, for blessed are they who keep my ways. Heed instruction and be wise, and do not neglect *it*. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at my doorposts. For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD. But he who sins against me injures himself; all those who hate me love death.”

Philo actually depicted God as the father of humanity, and Wisdom as the mother, further claiming that it was Wisdom “by means of whom [*di’ hēs, δι’ ἡς*] the universe arrived at creation” (*On Flight and Finding* 109).⁴⁰

It is difficult to argue against echoes of Wisdom being present in Colossians 1:15-16, and those who hold to a low Christology often simply assume that Yeshua the Messiah was a created being or force of God, not at all dissimilar from Wisdom, if not Wisdom itself. Yet again, while there are similarities to be seen between Yeshua the Messiah and Wisdom, are there any significant dissimilarities? Lincoln is keen to note, “Col 1:16 goes further in its christological reflection so that here Christ can be said to be the goal of creation also. This addition of ‘to him’ or ‘for him’ also goes beyond what is said of Wisdom...[as] it adds to the conceptuality of the wisdom tradition.”⁴¹

The activity of God the Father, working through the Son, is evidenced *hoti en autō* (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ), “for in Him...” Yeshua is to be considered “the firstborn of all creation” (Colossians 1:15) because of the specific reason “because in him were...all things created” (Colossians 1:16, YLT). The reason Yeshua is to be considered the firstborn is because He made the universe! Dunn,

³⁹ Robert M. Bowman, Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 77.

⁴⁰ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 331.

⁴¹ Lincoln, in *NIB*, 11:598.

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who perhaps relies more heavily on the Wisdom tradition than he ought, is still forced to conclude, “That ‘firstborn’ must denote primacy over creation, and not just within creation, is indicated by the conjunction linking the two verses,”⁴² making note of the construction between Colossians 1:15-16: *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs, hoti en autō ektisthē* (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη).

The hymn claims that “all things have been created through Him” (Colossians 1:16), *di’ autou* (δι’ αὐτοῦ), similar to God’s use of Wisdom in Philo. But Wisdom in Philo is only a force that assists God in creating the universe. Contrary to this, Yeshua’s creation extends *ta panta en tois ouranois kai epi tēs gēs, ta horata kai ta aorata* (τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὄρατα καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα), meaning that it is multi-dimensional. This includes “all things created, those in the heavens, and those upon the earth, those visible, and those invisible” (YLT). We may need to each be reminded of how God, and not only the Father but also the Son, being involved in the creation of the universe, is something clearly implied by Proverbs 30:4: “Who has ascended into heaven and descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has wrapped the waters in His garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name or His son’s name? Surely you know!”

Even more specifically than this, Yeshua is stated to be Creator of thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities. Yeshua is supreme, especially over angels, a concept which will be important for Paul to stress as many of the Colossians had succumbed to angel worship (Colossians 2:18). A reference to these various authorities can certainly be found in the literature of the Pseudepigrapha. *Testament of Levi* 3:8 refers to how in Heaven, “There with [God] are thrones and authorities.”⁴³ Similarly in *1 Enoch* 61:10 are depicted “all the forces of the heavens...the cherubim, seraphim, ophanim, all the angels of governance...and the other forces on earth (and) over the water.”⁴⁴ Just as Yeshua exercises creative power over these authorities, some of them could probably also be associated with the elemental forces of Colossians 2:8.

The Apostle Paul certainly believed that these kinds of angelic forces existed, but perhaps in contrast to some of the Colossians who believed that Yeshua was just another one of them—not unlike Wisdom—the hymn makes the claim that they are all subordinate to the Messiah. In his paralleling letter, Paul teaches that Yeshua is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:21; cf. Revelation 4:4). This would be a significant contrast between Yeshua the Messiah and the Jewish Wisdom tradition. While Wisdom may be an important feature of comparison in the Colossians 1:15-20 hymn, what is seen in the Epistle to the Colossians, in Moo’s words, “does not depend [exclusively] on that tradition,” and here “Christ’s relations to creation that *all things have been created...for him*, goes beyond any Jewish tradition about wisdom.”⁴⁵

Wisdom is only an impersonal force designated by God to do important tasks, and was used by Him in creating the universe. In stark contrast to Wisdom, not only in Yeshua were all things created, but also *di’ autou kai eis auton* (δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτόν), “through Him and for Him.” Wisdom was used to create the universe on God’s behalf; **Yeshua created the universe in Himself and for Himself** as a member of the Godhead, and is supreme over all authority. Yeshua the Messiah is the Creator, He exercises authority over the created forces of good and

⁴² Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 90.

⁴³ H.C. Kee, trans., “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 789.

⁴⁴ E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁵ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 124.

evil that He has made, and He is the One who will determine the final fate of those forces to which various Colossians had been making an appeal. There is no anticipation that Wisdom will be responsible for the final judgment of all beings, as such judgment is given to Yeshua alone (cf. Revelation 20:11). Paul's usage of the hymn would admonish the Colossians to turn to Yeshua for their deliverance, being the physical representation of everything the Father in Heaven is, demonstrated by His ministry on Earth.

Yeshua's ultimate supremacy is seen in the hymn's declaration "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). This is where those holding to a low Christology believe that their case is sealed, because as Sirach 1:4 says of Wisdom, "Wisdom was created before all things." Yeshua is before all things, and with the associations seen in Colossians 1:15-16 previously, it is thought Yeshua must be a created being no different than Wisdom. Wisdom 7:24 would add, "For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things." Could this not be a power granted to God's Messiah?

If the Colossians had been influenced by any errors that denigrated who Yeshua the Messiah was to be for them, and Paul had never encountered them in person before, we can expect the Apostle to subvert the terms and descriptions used by the false teachers to lead them astray—overturning them. So, if the false teachers were claiming that Yeshua had just been a created intermediary force of God, a force like Wisdom that scurries around the universe, Paul is going to use descriptions of Wisdom and describe how Yeshua possesses those same qualities, **but is also substantially different**. In this case, the hymn says *autos estin pro pantōn* (αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων), "He is before all things" or "He exists before everything" (Colossians 1:17, TLV), with the verb *estin* appearing in the present active indicative tense. Contrary to this, in Sirach 1:4, Wisdom *protera pantōn ektistai* (προτέρα πάντων ἔκτισται), or it "was created before all things," with the verb *ektistai* appearing in the perfect passive indicative tense. Yeshua just *is*, but Wisdom *was made* by an external force. Moo indicates, "while these texts assert that wisdom was the first thing created, the claim in our verse is bolder: Christ existed before creation itself."⁴⁶ This is far more than just some statement of high status: "He was there before any of it came into existence" (The Message); "**is before all things**" is a statement which affirms Yeshua's pre-existence.

When the hymn claims that Yeshua the Messiah existed before all things, this "before all" (*pro pantōn*, πρὸ πάντων) relates to time. Yeshua said in John 8:58, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am," and shortly after saying this, "they picked up stones to throw at Him" (John 8:59). But not only does the hymn claim that Yeshua is "before all things," it also says that "in Him all things hold together," *ta panta en autō sunestēken* (τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν). A definite connection with Hebrews 1:3 can be seen, where Yeshua "upholds all things by the word of His power." O'Brien describes how "Not only was the universe created in the Son as the sphere, by him as the divine agent, and for him as the goal; it was also established permanently 'in him' alone." Notable to be considered is how this must be a continuous action, as seen by the perfect tense participle *sunistēmi* (συνίστημι). Without such action, as O'Brien indicates, "all would disintegrate."⁴⁷ Such were never the claims made of Wisdom. Wisdom works within the universe, whereas Yeshua *actually runs* and upholds the universe! As Moo is right to conclude,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁷ O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 47.

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“What holds the universe together is not an idea or a virtue, but a person: the resurrected Christ. Without him electrons will not continue to circle nuclei, gravity would cease to work, the planets would not stay in their orbits.”⁴⁸

Yeshua the Messiah is indeed, the supreme Creator! He is not just some agent within Creation.

In the previous verses of the hymn, Yeshua’s role in creating and sustaining the universe has been described (Colossians 1:16-17), and as such He is to be the most important One in the minds of those within the community of faith. Now the theme of the hymn shifts, as such significance will undoubtedly impact those who make up the congregation of the faithful: “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent” (Colossians 1:18, RSV).

The first title Yeshua is given is as “head of the body,” here a reference to the Body of Messiah, the *ekklēsia*. But while Yeshua has authority over both Earthly and cosmic powers (Colossians 1:16), is Yeshua as *hē kephalē tou sōmatos* (ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος) an exclusive claim of authority, or is it one of Yeshua being the origin of His Body?⁴⁹ Speaking of the sphere of those affected by Yeshua, it might be best for us to consider how Paul writes in Romans 12:4-5, “For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Messiah, and individually members one of another.” Yeshua as Head, would thus be the “brain” that directs the various parts in His Body (Colossians 2:19). The Colossians were to be integrated into the supreme Yeshua, and not the cosmic powers (Colossians 2:15, 18).

This is an issue more affected by what is seen in the paralleling letter of Ephesians, as Yeshua is exalted as “head over all things” (Ephesians 1:22), but then later as head is depicted as the One “from whom the whole body...[is] being fitted and held together” (Ephesians 4:15), as He is its origin. Likewise, per the debate over what Paul means by “the husband is the head of the wife” (Ephesians 5:23), this is best understood in light of the controlling statement “be subject to one another in the fear of Messiah” (Ephesians 5:21), and most significantly “husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies” (Ephesians 5:28). These are statements that were radical for the First Century—in either a Hellenistic or a Jewish context—as they afforded considerable value to the woman, as the husband was to understand himself as *her origin*.⁵⁰

The hymn of Colossians 1:15-20, and the head-body issue, concerns more how the *ekklēsia* functions by the power of its Lord, and “head” in Colossians 1:18 is joined together with the titular rank of “firstborn.” So in the words of Witherington, “Ideas of both authority and origin come together in this use of the word [*kephalē*] because the origin of something was thought to be determinative for what came forth or followed from it.”⁵¹ With this in mind—Yeshua as the Head of the assembly—Believers are to look to Him to be their preeminent example of how to live, with His thoughts flowing down to the diverse parts of His Body: “And He is the source of the body, the assembly; He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; so that in all things He might have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18, PME).

When one understands Yeshua as the Head of His Body, while some important claims are made about the Lord’s power and authority, we need not overlook the special relationship that He has to His followers. Moo remarks, “as the metaphor of body and head implies, Christ is in

⁴⁸ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 125-126.

⁴⁹ One definition of *kephalē* (κεφαλὴ), which is lit. “head,” is notably “the head or source of a river” (LS, 430).

⁵⁰ If necessary, consult the relevant sections of the author’s commentary *Ephesians for the Practical Messianic*.

⁵¹ Witherington, *Philemon-Colossians-Ephesians*, 135.

organic relationship to his people in a way that is not true of the creation in general.”⁵² Dunnam further explains how, “This means *in Christ* is the basic clue for answering all the world’s big questions—war, racism, starvation, illiteracy, ecology, pollution—for Christ is the ‘heartbeat’ of the entire created universe.”⁵³ Yeshua as Head, perhaps even in terms of authority, does direct His Divine thoughts that are to control the actions of His followers. A comparison between God as Creator, and the human being who desires to follow Him, as seen in Psalm 19, may be considered:

“The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether. They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them Your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Who can discern *his* errors? Acquit me of hidden *faults*. Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous *sins*; let them not rule over me; then I will be blameless, and I shall be acquitted of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:7-14).

Similar to what has been previously described (Colossians 1:15), Yeshua the Messiah is once again labeled “firstborn,” but in Colossians 1:18b as “the firstborn from the dead,” *prōtotokos ek tōn nekron* (πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν). Yeshua being considered “firstborn” means that He possesses a very high and preeminent status, as previously described (Colossians 1:17-18a). This is seen in Revelation 1:5, where Yeshua is “the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” In 1 Corinthians 15:20, Yeshua is called “the first fruits of those who are asleep,” not only an emphasis on His completed work for us, but that His resurrection assures us that there will be a resurrection in the future for all (cf. Daniel 12:2-3).⁵⁴ Following His resurrection, Yeshua was exalted to the Father’s right hand (Philippians 2:9), and it is from there that we await His return “with all His saints” (1 Thessalonians 3:13) who have died in faith.

The hymn that Paul has been quoting from makes a very significant claim about Yeshua the Messiah: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Colossians 1:19, NIV) The clause *en autō eudokēsen pan to plērōma* (ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα) is actually rendered by YLT as “in him it did please all the fulness to tabernacle.” *Plērōma* here communicates the totality of God with all His powers (cf. Colossians 2:9), or what the NEB calls “the complete being of God.” The Septuagint employs cognates of *plērōma* to depict the Father in all His power and glory:

“And they cried out one to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth; the whole earth is full [adjective *plērēs*, πλήρης] of his glory” (Isaiah 6:3, NETS).

“If someone shall be hidden in secret places, is it not I that shall also see him? Do I not fill [verb *plēroō*, πληρῶω] the sky and the earth? says the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:24, NETS).

⁵² Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 128.

⁵³ Maxie D. Dunnam, *The Preacher’s Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Vol 31 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 346.

⁵⁴ Yeshua being “firstborn from the dead” is a title of His status as the preeminent among those who will be resurrected. It is **by no means** an attestation that being “born again” occurs at the resurrection. Being born again or spiritually regenerated is something that is to take place now, in the current age, among His people who receive salvation (1 Peter 1:3, 23). It was first an ancient Jewish designation for proselytes, who would turn their back on their previous way of life in paganism (b. *Yevamot* 48b).

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“And a spirit took be up and brought me into the inner court, and behold, the house was full [adjective *plērēs*] of the glory of the Lord” (Ezekiel 43:5, NETS).

“And he brought me in by way of the gate to the north, opposite the house, and I looked, and behold, the house of the Lord was full [adjective *plērēs*] of glory, and I fell upon my face” (Ezekiel 44:4, NETS).

“And blessed be the name of his glory forever, even forever and ever, and the whole earth will be filled [verb *plēroō*] with his glory. May it be; may it be” (Psalm 72:19, NETS).

O'Brien, considering these descriptions of God from the Tanach, describes how this “draws attention to the immanence of God and his personal involvement in the world,” something “not to be understood along either pantheistic or dualistic lines.”⁵⁵ Neither is Yeshua the Messiah some force, or even just an agent sent by God. Yeshua is not a place like the Temple that was filled with God's presence. Even though Temple language may be used to describe the Messiah from time to time, as a person the Messiah is *not* the Temple. Yeshua is, rather, God the Son, possessing all of His Father's attributes, incarnated in the world of mortals. Dunn actually concurs how “the wholeness of God's interaction with the universe is summed up in Christ. Here the thought reaches well beyond that of Wisdom or even God ‘dwelling in’ a good and compassionate person.”⁵⁶ Yeshua the Messiah is to be the only One where all people look for “fullness.”

The hymn depicts how the Father actually expresses delight in the Incarnation of His Son (John 1:14; cf. Luke 3:22). This is similar to how the Lord was pleased to dwell on Mount Zion (Psalm 67:17), or demonstrate His good pleasure (Psalm 44:3; 147:11; 149:4). Yet, in contrast to God's presence being manifest in a *place* on Earth, Yeshua the Messiah is an actual *person* who will bring redemption not only to humanity, but all Creation. Via the Incarnation, Yeshua is later specified by Paul to the One in whom “all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). Wright makes the point, “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.”⁵⁷ Yeshua was not just one of many mediatorial beings between humanity and God; He is God dwelling as a human among sinful humans to redeem humans from their transgressions. *This goes beyond God's presence manifest in His Temple or upon Mount Zion.* Bowman and Komoszewski excellently summarize,

“What Paul says about Christ...is that all the fullness of what constitutes God dwells bodily in Christ. The presence and nature of God is totally or *wholly* (‘all’ or ‘whole’) found in Christ; it is *fully* (‘fullness’) found in Christ; it is found in him *personally* (‘in him’); and it is found in him *bodily*. It is difficult to imagine a more forceful, emphatic affirmation that Jesus Christ literally embodies God's very being.”⁵⁸

The very reason that Paul would use *plērōma* language in praising God for His Son, other than for various connections seen in the LXX, may be to immediately discount what the false teachers in Colossae were promoting. The fullness of everything that the Father is can only be found in Yeshua the Messiah, and not in whatever mediatorial beings or angels the Colossians were considering. Moo summarizes how “since the Gnostics used ‘fullness’ language quite a lot, it has been suggested that this phrase betrays the fact that the ‘original’ hymn was in praise

⁵⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians-Philemon*, 52.

⁵⁶ Dunn, *Colossians-Philemon*, 101.

⁵⁷ Wright, *Colossians-Philemon*, pp 75-76.

⁵⁸ Bowman and Komoszewski 77.

of a gnostic redeemer figure. A more plausible variation of this thesis suggests that the hymn may have picked up the language from the Colossian false teachers and turned it against them.”⁵⁹ The hymn, then, simply provided Paul with the ammunition that he needed to discredit them, and we should easily disregard the proposal that the hymn itself was Gnostic in origin. Hurtado further states, “the proposal that 1:15-20 may represent a Christianization of a hymn to a heavenly redeemer from pre-Christian ‘gnostic’ circles has suffered a considerable decline in recent decades.”⁶⁰

What the Colossians are looking for can only be found in Yeshua—as the “fullness” or *plērōma* of God involves something that no other mediatorial agent can be said to have done.

The uniqueness of Yeshua the Messiah is that “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20, NRSV). **Yeshua is the One who provides final redemption**—and not only to individual people, but ultimately to all Creation. This does not at all speak of a universal salvation for all people with sinners not consigned to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46), but rather establishes the principle that all people can be redeemed to communion with the Father via Yeshua’s atoning sacrifice. Within the rubric of how God will be “all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28), is how even though unredeemed, things “under the earth” (Philippians 2:10) will bow their knees and recognize Yeshua as LORD (Isaiah 45:23). Via the work of Yeshua, one day, things will be set right in the universe (Romans 8:19-22).

Coming to the end of the Colossians 1:15-20 hymn, the fascinating description it offers of Yeshua the Messiah, and the likely subversion of ideas that had errantly influenced the Colossians, Hurtado summarizes for us how “drawing upon a traditional vocabulary of devotion to Jesus, the author of Colossians 1:15-20 produced a fresh and memorable declaration of Christ’s glorious status. Those who first heard this celebration of Jesus probably recognized basically familiar convictions expressed freshly and eloquently.”⁶¹ While some of the descriptions we see of Yeshua in Colossians 1:15-20 might not be those that people today would immediately use regarding Him, they held some key importance in relation to halting the influence of the false teaching in Colossae. Yeshua is far more than just some agent or force of God; He is the One in whom and for whom all of Creation must give an account. In the larger discussions surrounding the nature of Yeshua and Christology, it should be obvious that Colossians 1:15-20 is not the only passage that informs us about who the Messiah is, and as such Colossians 1:15-20 should not be read isolated.

⁵⁹ Moo, *Colossians-Philemon*, 132.

⁶⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 505.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 508.