

COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY AND COL 1:15-20

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Modern studies of Col 1:15-20 have not paid enough attention to a discussion of the cosmic Christology found in the passage. Much ink has been spilled on questions of genre, strophic arrangement, background and redaction of the so-called Christ-hymn, with relatively little regard given to the actual theological affirmations about the relationship between Christ and the cosmos.

Before addressing the hermeneutics of cosmic Christology in Col 1:15-20 I need to set out my understanding of the critical issues surrounding the passage. Since I have written at some length on these matters in several previous articles¹ I will not argue their validity here but simply state them as presuppositions for the following discussion. Briefly stated, Col 1:15-20 is a Pauline composition that, while perhaps hymnic in content, is not properly a hymn but rather a poem that confesses and celebrates the role of the exalted Christ in both creation and redemption. Although the confession develops ideas and concepts that stem from the earliest Palestinian Church, their formulation here derives from the theological thought of Paul.

I. THE ISSUE STATED

The questions before us are these: What did Paul intend to communicate to the Colossians concerning the relationship of Christ to the cosmos? How are we to understand this so-called cosmic Christology? We may begin with a *prima facie* reading of the text. There can be little argument that such a reading yields a portrait of Jesus Christ as the preexistent agent of creation, the regent of creation, and the reconciler of creation—creation being understood as the universe, including spiritual beings and powers.² Needless

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¹ L L Helyer, "Colossians 1 15-20 Pre-Pauline or Pauline?", *JETS* 26/2 (June 1983) 167-179, "Arius Revisited The Firstborn Over All Creation (Col 1 15)," *JETS* 31/1 (March 1988) 59-67, "The Theology of Colossians" (unpublished paper) 1-20, "Recent Research on Col 1 15-20 (1980-1990)," *Grace Theological Journal* 12/1 (1992) 51-67

² "Once again then we have found that what at first reads as a straightforward assertion of Christ's pre-existent activity in creation becomes on closer analysis an assertion which is rather more profound—not of Christ as such present with God in the beginning, nor of Christ as identified with a pre-existent hypostasis or divine being (Wisdom) beside God, but of Christ as embodying and expressing (and defining) that power of God which is the manifestation of God in and to his creation" (J D G Dunn, *Christology in the Making A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* [Philadelphia Westminster, 1980] 194, italics his)

to say, this had been the traditional Christology of the Christian Church until the post-Enlightenment and modern eras. Today this conception of Christ has undergone significant modification within the liberal wing of the Church. The impact of a scientific worldview has resulted in nuanced presentations of cosmic Christology or the outright rejection of the category as a meaningful one for the modern age. My purpose is to examine the text once again and inquire whether we, in the evangelical tradition, have heard Paul accurately in his portrayal of Christ in this passage.

II. MODERN APPROACHES TO COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY

We review, first, several modern approaches to cosmic Christology in NT scholarship.³ On the one hand, a number of scholars prefer to restrict the reference of Paul's cosmic statements to the sphere of soteriology. What Paul was really getting at had to do with the salvation of human beings and not the actual cosmos in all its vastness. To be sure, Paul uses cosmic language, but we must scale it down to anthropological referents if we are to grasp his real concern. The cosmic language provides merely the trappings for what is of real importance—namely, salvation from the impersonal forces that enslave and engender guilt and anxiety. In such an approach cosmic Christology is reduced to anthropology or soteriology. Rudolf Bultmann gave classic expression to this approach to Paul's cosmic Christology, and he has been followed in this by many others.⁴

Another closely related approach simply shrugs off the cosmic language as incidental to Paul's thought as a whole. Paul's adoption of such language is highly circumstantial in nature and consists of an ad hoc response to the Colossian errorists who were advocating, among other things, astrological and cosmological doctrines. They argue that were it not for this aberrant teaching cosmic Christology would never have been part of Paul's theologizing at all.⁵

³ They share a common factor. They are essentially reductionistic, diminishing the sense in which Jesus Christ is the Son of God or can properly be called divine. Alternative Christologies fall short of affirming an ontological status of God for the person of Christ. See K. Rumba, *The Modern Christological Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984) 95.

⁴ The following scholars are representative of those who hold that Pauline theology is essentially soteriological and not really interested in cosmological concerns: R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribners, 1951–55) 227–232, 254–259; J. M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15–20," *JBL* 76 (1957) 270–287; H. Hegemann, *Die Vorstellung vom Schöpfungsmittler im Hellenistischen Judentum und Urchristentum* (TU 82, Berlin: Akademie, 1961); E. Kasemann, "A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (SBT 41, Naperville: Allenson, 1964) 149–168; H. J. Gabathuler, *Jesus Christus Haupt der Kirche—Haupt der Welt* (ATANT, Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1965); E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); T. E. Pollard, "Colossians 1:12–20: A Reconsideration," *NTS* 27 (1981) 572–575. Pollard notes that "the cosmology, if it is cosmology, is totally subservient to soteriology, and by making it thus Paul runs true to form" (p. 573).

⁵ Representative of this view would be F.-W. Eltester, *Eikon im Neuen Testament* (BZNW 23, Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1958) "In Col 1:15 the original, cosmological motif appears in the foreground. Paul has no interest in it; he employs the conception of the Image of God in order to express the fact that Christ is the revelation and representation of God" (p. 149). This

Still another approach insists that to hear Paul correctly in our own day we must recognize that he, like other NT Christians, was groping for ways to explain the significance of Christ. He naturally had recourse to the language of mythology in order to convey this meaning. Paul was trying to assert that God was truly at work in the man Jesus and that God's ultimate intention for creation, especially human beings, could be discerned in the person and work of Christ. Cosmic Christology is thus a pointer to the salvific intentions of God—intentions that, of course, pre-existed the original creation and are adumbrated in the new creation in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Rom 8:16-25, 32).⁶ I shall call this an ideal cosmic Christology.

III. A RESPONSE TO MODERN VIEWS OF COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY

My thesis is that the attempt to reduce cosmic Christology by redefining it or by relegating it to the periphery of Paul's theology must be judged a failure on exegetical grounds. The reason is that the evidence simply does not support such a reading of the text. On the contrary, the evidence clearly supports cosmic Christology, as traditionally understood, as the real intention of the apostle. My evidence will consist of arguments drawn from authorial usage, cultural milieu, and the structure of Pauline theology.

I respond first to those approaches that assign cosmic Christology to the periphery of Paul's theology. Virtually all modern students of Paul acknowledge that statements about his theology must be provisional inasmuch as we are inferring a presumed informing theology from a highly circumstantial correspondence. The ad hoc nature of the letters results necessarily in truncated views of Paul's theology. It is precarious to assert in the light of silence on a given topic that Paul did not deem it important. More likely his silence is simply a consequence of his pastoral concern that dictates the content of a given letter. Not surprisingly, cosmic Christology occurs rather infrequently in the Pauline corpus, given the urgency of problems arising in the founding and maintaining of Gentile churches in the Greco-Roman world. Furthermore there is an element of truth to the observation that cosmic Christology appears in response to a form of false teaching that made some claims about the cosmos (as in Col 1:15-20). It is a different matter, however, to claim that Paul improvised his cosmic Christology and that it lies on the periphery of his thought. What I wish to demonstrate is that in contexts where a polemic against false teaching involving the created order is not in view, one discerns passing references that imply a cosmic understanding of the significance of Christ. These passages either assume his preexistence, a corollary of cosmic Christology, or, in one case, refer to his mediatorship in creation. These

may also best describe the approach of J. Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 380.

⁶ See n. 2 *supra*.

incidental references, all but one of which are dated earlier than Colossians, create a presumptive case for the prior existence of a form of cosmic Christology that could be drawn upon as need required.

In Paul's extended rebuttal of the Judaizers in Gal 2:15-4:31 he makes the point that Jesus Christ came into the world under the constraints of the Mosaic law in order to free those who were under condemnation by that law (4:4-5). Note, however, that this coming is expressed in the language of preexistence: "But when the fullness of time had fully come, God sent his Son."⁷ A close parallel is Rom 8:3: "For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." As Sanday and Headlam point out, "the emphatic *heautou* brings out the community of nature between the Father and the Son."⁸

The Corinthian correspondence provides other allusions to the cosmic significance of Jesus Christ. In 1 Cor 1:30 Paul seeks to correct a misunderstanding of the gospel, which some at Corinth were viewing as a species of popular philosophy. He identifies Christ as the "wisdom from God." Furthermore in 2:7 he elaborates by saying that "we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began." This is so similar to the way preexistent Wisdom and Torah were described in intertestamental Judaism that it strongly suggests that Paul has transferred to Christ the attributes he formerly ascribed to Wisdom/Torah.⁹

Even more clear is 1 Cor 8:6, a passage suggesting a pre-Pauline confession that he is quoting: "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live." The context of this confessional statement is the matter of food offered to idols. Paul grounds his pastoral directive in the doctrine of God and creation, including Jesus Christ within the sphere and prerogatives of the divine nature.¹⁰

⁷ W Neil observes that "Jesus was not for Paul primarily the Messiah of the Jews but the Son of God, 'begotten of his Father before all the worlds,' who came from God and returned to him. The full measure of Paul's thought on this point can be seen in Phil 2:6-11" (*The Letter of Paul to the Galatians* [Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967] 65).

⁸ W Sanday and A C Headlam, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC, New York: Scribner's, 1915) 192. If read in isolation, Rom 1:3-4 ("regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord") might not seem to refer to his preexistence. But in light of the entire presentation of Christ in the letter, and especially the close parallel in 8:3, one ought to include it here as well. On this see further S Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 111.

⁹ See further in R G Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre existence, Wisdom and the Son of Man: A Study of the Idea of Pre existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973), G W E Nickelsburg and M E Stone, *Faith and Piety in Early Judaism: Texts and Documents* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

¹⁰ G D Fee does not mince words: "Although Paul does not here call Christ God, the formula is so constructed that only the most obdurate would deny its Trinitarian implications. In the same breath that he can assert that there is only one God, he equally asserts that the designation

In 1 Cor 10:1-5 Paul employs a form of typological exegesis drawing upon the narratives of the wilderness wanderings in Exodus through Numbers. A correspondence is traced between the crossing of the Red Sea and the supernatural provision of food in the wilderness on the one hand and the Christian ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper on the other. In this context he says, "For they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (v. 4). Much discussion has focused on this statement. Is it a midrash on the Biblical text similar to one known from rabbinic literature, and is Paul dependent on that tradition?¹¹ In any event he does appear to ascribe to Christ an historical presence in those events. Explanations that reduce this passage to allegorical language representing spiritual realities currently being experienced by the Corinthian believers simply lack conviction.¹²

Of course pride of place for those passages asserting the preexistence of Christ must go to Phil 2:6-11: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped." Dunn's exegesis of the passage would require no more than saying that Paul's intention is to set Christ over against Adam—an Adam Christology that stops short of ascribing deity to Christ.¹³ Surely Ralph Martin more accurately conveys the intended meaning when he says that "the preincarnate Christ has as His personal possession the unique dignity of His place within the Godhead as the *eikōn* or *morphē* of God. . . . He possessed the divine equality, we may say, *de jure* because He existed eternally in the 'form of God.'"¹⁴

Critical scholarship rarely includes the pastoral epistles within the Pauline corpus. We believe a strong case can be made for their authenticity and for a continuity of thought with the undisputed epistles. First Timothy 1:15 stands alongside Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20 in affirming Christ's preexistence: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full

'Lord,' which in the OT belongs to the one God, is the proper designation of the divine Son. One should note especially that Paul feels no tension between the affirmation of monotheism and the clear distinction between the two persons of Father and Jesus Christ. As with other such statements in the NT, Jesus is the one through whom God both created and redeemed. Thus together the two sentences embrace the whole of human existence. God the Father is the source of all things, which were mediated through the creative activity of the Son, the Son is the one through whom God also redeemed us, so that our existence is now 'for' and 'unto' God" (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 375-376)

¹¹ See further *ibid* 447-449, J. W. Aageson, *Written Also for Our Sake* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 121-125

¹² As argued by Dunn, *Christology* 183-184

¹³ *Ibid* 121

¹⁴ R. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976) 148. In agreement with Martin's analysis are J. Behm, "morphē," TDNT 4:751, G. Stahlin, "isos," TDNT 3:353. J. L. Houlden says that the author of this passage "speaks of Christ as personally existent before his entry into this world. This notion of Christ's pre-existence, arising so quickly in the history of the Church, here finds perhaps its earliest statement" (*Paul's Letters From Prison* [London: Penguin, 1977] 75). More recently A. F. Segal writes that "in Phil 2:6, the identification of Jesus with the form of God implies his preexistence. Christ is depicted as an eternal aspect of divinity" (*Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* [New Haven: Yale University, 1990] 62).

acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.”¹⁵

We conclude that there are enough passages, in addition to Col 1:15–20, that imply the preexistence and mediatorship of Christ to refute the notion that Paul’s cosmic Christology is a mere appendage.

I now place Paul’s cosmic Christology against the backdrop of his Jewish roots, so crucial for understanding his thought.¹⁶ There is wide agreement among students of Colossians that vv. 15–17 reflect indebtedness to Jewish wisdom speculation. Furthermore the Torah was equated with wisdom and viewed it as preexistent in a number of intertestamental and later rabbinic sources (see Sir 24:1–34; Bar 3:9–4:4; Wis 7:15–8:1; 9; *Gen. Rab.* 1:1).¹⁷ A face-value reading of Col 1:15–20 must be seen against that backdrop. Accordingly it hardly seems convincing to argue that the preexistence of Christ and his involvement in creation are a peripheral item in Paul’s theology.

Alongside the above two arguments I add a third. This has to do with the composition of the text itself. Back in 1925 C. F. Burney offered an ingenious explanation for the literary composition of this passage. He suggested that Paul performed a midrashic exposition on Gen 1:1 by means of Prov 8:22–23, 30. In short, Paul expounded the meaning of the opening phrase of Gen 1:1, “In the beginning” (*br²šyt*), by Prov 8:22: “The LORD brought me forth as the first (*r²šyt*) of his works.” Paul then developed his description about Christ in terms of the primary meanings of the word *r²šyt* and the several meanings of the preposition *bē-*. As N. T. Wright adapts and modifies Burney’s theory we may set it out as follows:¹⁸ (1) He is the image [like Wisdom herself, and evoking Gen 1:26]. (2) He is the firstborn [like Wisdom herself: the first meaning of *r²šyt*]. (3) He is the supreme (*pro pantōn*) [the second meaning of *r²šyt*]. (4) He is the head [the third meaning of *r²šyt*]. (5) He is the beginning [the fourth and climactic meaning of *r²šyt*]. (6) He is the firstborn—this time from the dead [like Wisdom again, but now firmly as a human being]. The Hebrew preposition *bē-* has the principal meanings of “in,” “by” and “for.” Paul applies those meanings to the work of Christ in both the original and new creation (see

¹⁵ “To say that he came into the world, of course, does not in itself necessarily imply pre-existence, but such an understanding would almost certainly have been intended” (G Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* [San Francisco Harper, 1984] 18)

¹⁶ A point made repeatedly and with scholarly acumen by M Hengel, see most recently *The Pre Christian Paul* (Philadelphia Trinity Press International, 1991)

¹⁷ “Wisdom emerges as a heavenly person. Sometimes Wisdom is God’s, yet it is regarded as an independent entity, it is no longer merely the sum of the teachings of the wisdom schools, the collections of wise maxims for the conduct of men or even of court officials. In these later texts, Wisdom was associated with God in the act of creation, or at least existed before creation. It is hidden from men and often said to be revealed to them by God himself. This divine Wisdom is identified with the Torah, the special revelation of God to Israel, and it is thus particularized in it. At the same time, Torah develops from being the concrete revelation to Moses on Sinai and all that flows from it—although it never ceases to be that—and it becomes that in accordance with which the world is constituted” (Nickelsburg and Stone, *Faith* 204)

¹⁸ See N. T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1:15–20,” *NTS* 36 (1990) 445–458

vv. 16, 19). This careful, deliberate composition is in fact a meditation on two OT texts that focus on the doctrine of creation. The notion that cosmic Christology is somehow on the periphery of Paul's theology or is a mere incidental appendage hardly carries conviction in the face of such a literary composition. Paul has given considerable thought to the place of Christ in the cosmos. Granted, in terms of quantity cosmic Christology is not as prominent as other formulations. But in terms of significance in Paul's overall Christology it must be assessed as the culmination of his profound reflections on the person of Christ.¹⁹

IV. IDEAL COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY

I now turn to what may be the most challenging of modern alternative Christologies: ideal cosmic Christology. In what follows I intend to interact with the work of James D. G. Dunn, whose work on the NT background of the doctrine of the incarnation is a piece of immense scholarship. His exegetical method demands careful study because it raises acute questions that must be honestly faced by conservative exegetes. While he frankly acknowledges that a face-value reading of Paul yields a Christology involving preexistence, mediatorship in creation, and incarnation, he inquires whether this was really what Paul intended to say. It is a legitimate question. Dunn's answer begins with a survey of the OT and of intertestamental Judaism, since those sources were most formative for the thought of the apostle.

Dunn notes that the OT displays a rich use of metaphorical language in describing the ways of the God of Israel in his created world. The Hebrew poets and prophets were especially adept at vivid personification of God's attributes, such as wisdom, power and faithfulness. They also could incorporate mythical images and motifs into their poetry in order to employ it for the glorification of Yahweh. One thinks here of the allusions to the primal sea monsters Leviathan and Rahab.²⁰ The wisdom tradition of Israel personified Yahweh's wisdom in such well-known passages as the hymn to wisdom in Proverbs 8. Now the point that Dunn makes—and, I think, correctly—is that in no case was such personification conceived of as the assertion of an independent entity or a hypostasis (a term that Dunn thinks is misleading since it imports the nuances of the later Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries into the discussion). The poets and prophets of Israel were not departing in the least from belief in the power of the one, true and living God of Israel in the affairs and governance of the created order.²¹

¹⁹ See H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 78-86; F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 418-421.

²⁰ See B. Waltke, *Creation and Chaos* (Portland: Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1974), and bibliography.

²¹ Dunn, *Christology* 174.

In like manner Dunn canvasses the literature of the intertestamental period where reference is made to intermediary beings and seemingly pre-existent entities. Dunn argues that, just like the OT writers before them, the Jewish authors of this literature were not affirming the actual, literal, independent existence of these various beings but were simply trying to express the reality of God's constant and immanent presence in his world and especially in the history of his people Israel.²²

When Dunn turns to the epistles of Paul he asks whether Paul, when he uses wisdom language to describe Christ, is really ascribing preexistence to him. He takes up the passages that we have adduced above as evidence that preexistence was not a mere appendage to his theology. In each case he finds reasons to doubt that Paul is actually affirming the preexistence of Christ.

1. *Passages employing "sending" language (Gal 4:4; Rom 1:3; 8:3) are best regarded as indebted to the messenger motif of the OT whereby the prophet was an emissary of Yahweh.* This, he says, is closer to hand than alleged indebtedness to various Hellenistic heavenly beings who were "sent" into the earthly realms.²³ Phil 2:6-11; 2 Cor 8:9 do not really advance much beyond this, inasmuch as Paul utilizes Adam Christology as the vehicle for his parenthesis. In fact this is one of Paul's major contributions to the development of Christology. Paul's Adam Christology presents Jesus as the eschatological man. The most that can be said here about preexistence is that there is an ideal preexistence—that is, Jesus is the one predetermined in the plan of God to be all that God intended for humanity. He was ordained to be the elder brother of a new eschatological humanity (cf. Rom 8:29).²⁴

2. *In each passage considered above, Dunn finds on a closer reading that Paul's language is circumstantially conditioned in such a way that*

²² "Hellenistic Judaism of the LXX did not think of Wisdom as a 'hypostasis' or 'intermediary being' any more than did the OT writers and the rabbis. Wisdom, like the name, the glory, the Spirit of Yahweh, was a way of asserting God's nearness, his involvement with his world, his concern for his people. All these words provided expressions of God's *immanence*, his active concern in creation, revelation and redemption, while at the same time protecting his holy transcendence and wholly otherness. *It is very unlikely that pre-Christian Judaism ever understood Wisdom as a divine being in any sense independent of Yahweh.* The language may be the language of the wider speculation of the time, but within Jewish monotheism and Hebraic literary idiom Wisdom never really becomes more than a *personification*—a personification not so much of a divine attribute (I doubt whether the Hebrews thought much in terms of 'attributes'), a personification rather of a *function* of Yahweh, a way of speaking about God himself, of expressing God's active involvement with his world and his people without compromising his transcendence" (ibid 176, italics his). But see n 17 *supra*.

²³ Dunn, *Christology* 36-46

²⁴ "The main emphasis in Adam christology, for Paul at least, is eschatological. Christ as last Adam is eschatological man. His role as last Adam begins with and stems from his resurrection not from pre-existence, or even from his earthly ministry" (ibid 126). See also his conclusions on pp 125-128, 254-256. For a thorough study of this entire issue that refutes Dunn's position see Kim, *Origin* 137-268.

preexistence is not really the point of his statement at all. In Gal 4:4, for example, the emphasis is not on Christology but on soteriology. The point of Jesus being designated as a "son" is to establish that he too, like all Israel, had to live under the constraints of the law (as developed in 3:23-4:7). In similar fashion, when he examines 1 Cor 1:24, 30 he concludes that

there is no thought here of wisdom as a pre-existent divine hypostasis or person, either among the Corinthians or in Paul himself. The degree to which Paul's description of Christ here is determined by the situation and language confronting him at Corinth raises the strong possibility that the initial identification of Christ as God's wisdom was provoked by the wayward elitism of the Corinthian "gnostic" faction. There is no evidence that Paul spoke of Christ in wisdom language before I Corinthians. Perhaps then it was the Corinthians' claim to wisdom over against Paul and Paul's kerygma which prompted from him the response²⁵

3. *Dunn asserts that it is scarcely credible that Paul believed in and expected his readers to assume that Christ preexisted because this would have been such a radical notion at the time.* According to Dunn, Paul—like later OT and intertestamental Jewish writers—was firmly committed to absolute monotheism. Paul's language consistently preserves monotheistic faith and subordinates Jesus to God the Father (e.g. 1 Cor 15:27-28). In summary, he posits a developmental theory of the doctrines of preexistence and incarnation in which we first have a bona fide doctrine of incarnation in the prologue of the gospel of John near the end of the first century.²⁶ Dunn believes it would be irresponsible to use the gospel of John as an historical source for reconstructing the divine self-consciousness of Jesus or a doctrine of preexistence.²⁷ What we can say, according to Dunn, is that the earliest Christians confessed Jesus as Lord at his resurrection and exaltation to heaven. This eschatological divine sonship became the springboard from which we have a slowly emerging reflection on the person of Jesus that by the end of the century was extending into the realms of cosmology and protology the significance of the person of Christ. One also catches a glimpse of this process by comparing the synoptic traditions and the gospel of John. Assuming Markan priority, we discover the transfer of an affirmation of divine sonship from his baptism (Mark) to his virginal conception (Matthew, Luke) to his eternal preexistence with God the Father (John's prologue and throughout his gospel).

²⁵ Dunn, *Christology* 178-179

²⁶ "The importance of these steps taken by the Logos poet and the Fourth Evangelist should not be underestimated so far as our evidence (Christian and non-Christian) is concerned, *the author of John 1 1-16 was the first to take that step which no Hellenistic Jewish author had taken before him, the first to identify the word of God as a particular person, and so far as our evidence is concerned, the Fourth Evangelist was the first Christian writer to conceive clearly of the personal pre existence of the Logos Son and to present it as a fundamental part of his message.* Certainly therefore the Fourth Gospel can properly be presented as the climax to the evolving thought of first century Christian understanding of Christ" (ibid 249, italics his)

²⁷ Ibid 31

V. EVALUATION OF DUNN'S THESIS

Dunn's exegetical endeavors deserve our careful consideration. One must appreciate his attempt to investigate the NT sources in a rigorously honest and historical way. His caution about reading backward from Nicaea and Chalcedon into the NT is timely. Furthermore he expresses his gratitude to the framers of Chalcedon and acknowledges the creeds as legitimate reflections on the person of Christ, standing in a line of continuity with the development he discerns in the NT sources. One must also express appreciation for his thorough treatment of the relevant NT material by means of vertical cross-sections summarized in a chronological framework. This is no mean achievement.

There are, however, some disconcerting and puzzling features to Dunn's hypothesis. I call attention to several weaknesses.

1. *Dunn seems at several points to concede too much to the presuppositions of historical-critical scholarship.* While his caution at claiming too much based upon insufficient evidence is commendable, it seems to me that his elimination of the gospel of John as a source for ascertaining Jesus' self-understanding evidences too much skepticism. Furthermore, according to Dunn, the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke betray no hint of a belief in preexistence, and Mark's transfiguration narrative is a literary creation designed to anticipate the resurrection.²⁸ There is no treatment at all of the nature miracles in the synoptic tradition, leading me to suspect that, for Dunn, either they are not authentic or they are not admissible as evidence. One suspects that playing by the rules of historical-critical scholarship has greatly affected the exegetical enterprise.

2. *His contention that Paul never really affirmed that the exalted Lord Jesus personally preexisted and had an active role in creation is simply unconvincing and, at points, highly contrived* (as in the case of his trying to explain the "sending" language used of Christ as being akin to the OT emissaries of Yahweh). To be sure, Paul is always careful to affirm monotheism as foundational for his converts (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6). But when Dunn admits that cosmic Christology is a plausible interpretation of Paul's affirmations, only to insist that this is not the probable meaning because it would seriously undermine Jewish monotheism, something has misfired. Is there not a note of the completely new, even unheard of, in Paul's statement of the meaning of Christ? (See 1 Cor 1:20-25; 2:6-16; 2 Cor 3:7-11; 5:16-17; Rom 16:25-27; Phil 3:7-11; Col 1:25-27; cf. Eph 3:7-13; 1 Tim 3:16.)²⁹ Is it credible that the one whom many would consider the greatest

²⁸ *Ibid* 47-51

²⁹ In this connection, it is worth recalling the words of Oscar Cullmann "One must certainly react from the very beginning against the erroneous notion lying behind many representations of early Christian Christology, that this Christology had necessarily to conform to the conceptual scheme already present in Judaism or Hellenism. But as scholars we simply cannot neglect to take Jesus' own self-consciousness into consideration. For one must reckon *a priori* with

mind to interpret the significance of Christ never really broke through to the notion of cosmic Christology and that his failure to do so lies primarily in the circumstance that he lived in a time not yet ready intellectually and spiritually to take the next step? This has about it the air of artificiality, the attempt to fit everything into a procrustean theory of development. How could one who encountered the *šekinâ* glory of the risen Lord, the very image of God (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4, 6), and to whom many revelations were bestowed (2 Cor 12:1; cf. Eph 3:3), not have grasped the cosmic role of Christ? How could one who followed in the train of predecessors who were already applying OT texts to Jesus (cf. Acts 2:21, 25, 34-36) that in their original contexts spoke of Yahweh not have penetrated into the conception of the real preexistence of Jesus? I think N. T. Wright serves us better in stressing that Paul redefines Jewish monotheism so that Christ himself is a part of that monotheism.³⁰

3. *It is inconceivable to me that Paul, in Col 1:15-20, was not ascribing to Christ a preexistent role in creation.* The symmetry of Christ's role in both orders of creation is so apparent and intentional as to require a confession of his preexistent status as image of the invisible God. The entire passage was the platform from which Paul assailed the false teaching at Colosse. The message centered in Paul's climactic affirmation: "So that in everything he might have the supremacy" (Col 1:18). Failure to affirm a full-orbed cosmic Christology undermined Paul's argument *vis-à-vis* the Colossian errorists who seemingly limited Christ's role in the cosmos.

4. *Dunn would no doubt say that my reading of Paul is colored by the lenses of Nicea and Chalcedon. That may be, but it also appears that his reading is colored by the lenses of modernity—signaled by the penchant for analyzing everything in terms of developmental and evolutionary theories.* The

the possibility—even with the probability—first, that in his teaching and life Jesus accomplished something new from which the first Christians had to proceed in their attempt to explain his person and work, second, that their experience of Christ exhibited special features not present in every obvious analogy to related religious forms. It is simply unscholarly prejudice methodically to exclude from the beginning this possibility—this probability" (*The Christology of the New Testament* [rev. ed., Philadelphia Westminster, 1963] 5)

³⁰ "Paul has modified Jewish monotheism so as to place Jesus Christ within the description, almost the definition, of the one God. And in this radical redefinition of monotheism there is also contained the radical redefinition of election, whereby the people of God are now to be understood as the people of Jesus Christ. One implication of this phenomenon is that the boundaries of history-of-religions analysis are being burst: it is simply not the case that Jewish parallels will serve to explain this new departure" (Wright, "Poetry" 460). Other writers who help us formulate a Biblically sound Christology are R. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (SBT 17, London SCM, 1970), I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1976), *Jesus the Saviour Studies in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove InterVarsity, 1990) esp. 150-180, C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge Cambridge University, 1977), Kim, *Origin 100-233, Christ the Lord Studies in Christology presented to Donald Guthrie* (ed. H. H. Rowdon, London Inter-Varsity, 1982), B. Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis Fortress, 1990), R. T. France, "Development in New Testament Christology," *Themelios* 18/1 (October 1992) 4-8

problem with Dunn's statement of Paul's cosmic Christology in Col 1:15–20 lies not in what he affirms but in what he does not affirm. To say that God intended from the beginning that Jesus should embody all that humanity was meant to be surely reflects a Biblical emphasis. It just does not say all that Paul intended to affirm. Dunn's hypothesis constricts the meaning of Paul's cosmic Christology by a dubious assumption concerning what he would have been able to believe as a committed Jewish Christian monotheist living before the (also dubious) remarkable intellectual breakthrough during the last quarter of the first century AD.³¹

VI. CONCLUSION

Colossians 1:15–20 is a statement of the cosmic significance of Jesus Christ. It is awe-inspiring, breathtaking and mind-boggling. In the man Jesus of Nazareth we have the incarnation of the eternal Son of God: the one in, through, and for whom all things were made in the beginning, and who, by means of the cross and resurrection, has brought into existence a new beginning. May he "who is God over all" (Rom 9:5) be forever praised!³²

³¹ Contrast M Hengel, *The Son of God* (London SCM, 1976) 2 "One is tempted to say that more happened in this period of less than two decades [30s and 40s] than in the whole of the next seven centuries, up to the time when the doctrine of the early church was completed "

³² For a defense of this text as affirming the full deity of Jesus Christ see M Harris, *Jesus as God The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1992)