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COLOSSIANS 1:15-20: PRE-PAULINE OR PAULINE?

Larry R. Helyer*

In Gal 1:8 Paul can boldly proclaim: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!"[1] For Paul the essence of the true gospel, which he "received . . . by revelation from Jesus Christ" (1:12), centered in Christ "the Son of God, who loved [him] and gave himself for [him]" (2:20). Paul scolds the Galatians by forcibly reminding them how this saving deed was accomplished: "Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified" (3:1b). Against those who tried to "avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ" (6:12b) Paul asserted: "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (6:16). Similarly to the Corinthians Paul crisply summarized the content of his preaching with the assertion that "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23; cf. 2:2). Against those who gloried in the wisdom of this world Paul proclaimed a crucified "Lord of glory" (2:8). Furthermore, in his magisterial treatment of salvation in Romans Paul anchors reconciliation in the death of God's Son (Rom 5:10-11), an event whose effect is realized in the believer's union with Christ whereby the "old self was crucified" (6:6) and the new self is "united with him [Christ] in his resurrection" (6:5). For Paul there is no more convincing evidence of the reliability of God's saving purpose and there is no more assuring evidence of the believer's security in Christ than the splendid fact that God "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all" (8:32). Beyond all cavil Paul never conceives of salvation, whether expressed in terms of justification, reconciliation or redemption, apart from the presupposition of Christ's death on the cross.[2]

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate critically a particular understanding of the great Christological passage in Col 1:15-20—namely, the view that Paul has redacted a pre-Pauline hymn and has thereby transformed an aretalogy in praise of Christ as the cosmic world ruler into a hymn focusing on Christ as the redeemer of his people and the reconciler of all personal beings.[3] To put it another way, we

*Larry Helyer is assistant professor of religion at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana.

[1]All Biblical quotations are from the *NIV*.

[2]W. G. Kümmel cites Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 1:23 as evidence that "the message of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ is the most important concern of the Pauline proclamation" (*The Theology of the New Testament* [Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1973] 142). On an even larger scale R. P. Martin believes that a "theology of the cross" is more "determinative of NT thought than a proposal for any other kind of theological emphasis, such as the covenant or the 'in Christ' formula or salvation history" ("New Testament Theology: Impasse and Exit," *ExpTim* 91 [1980] 268). L. Morris notes that the cross for Paul "was an act of God. It was *the* act of God. It was absolutely central. All Paul was, and all that Paul hoped for, centered on the action of God in the cross" (*The Cross in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965] 181).

[3]After R. P. Martin, "Reconciliation and Forgiveness in the Letter to the Colossians," *Reconciliation and Hope* (ed. R. Banks; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 112.

are interested in the question of whether the "theology of the cross," which is clearly present in the existing text, is in fact a Pauline importation into what was originally a hymn articulating the hellenistic concern for cosmic unity and reconciliation. This reading of the evidence assumes "that the earlier hymn was an existing part of the tradition and that the pre-Pauline tradition really represents a type of thinking which was current coin at Colossae."[4] We wish to make it clear at the outset that our investigation of this reconstruction does not proceed from a bias against redactional work on the part of Paul.[5] In principle we have no objection whatever to this hypothesis. Our endeavor simply attempts to assess the correctness of this proposed genesis of the passage and then to make some observations based on our conclusion.

This passage, as it now stands in a pastoral letter, is a confession in exalted language in praise of the Father's beloved Son (1:13).[6] The Son is then further described by a series of five titles (image of the invisible God, firstborn over all creation, head of the body, the beginning, and the firstborn from among the dead) and by a series of predications concerning his threefold work of creation, preservation and reconciliation (1:15-20).

A consensus emerging from modern scholarly research regards the literary *Gattung* of this passage as a hymn.[7] The question of the literary structure of the original hymn, however, has not been as yielding to scholarly examination. In fact, it must be confessed that no definitive reconstruction has been forthcom-

[4]Ibid., p. 113.

[5]We are assuming Pauline authorship in this study. The case for Pauline authorship is well argued by W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (rev. ed.; Nashville/New York: Abingdon, 1975) 340-346.

[6]The immediate context of 1:15-20 is the section 1:3-2:7, which manifests a self-contained movement of thought and serves as an extended proem to the clearly polemical section beginning in 2:8. Colossians 1:3-2:7 displays the literary technique of *inclusio* in that it both commences and concludes with a focus on the spiritual condition of the Colossian church. The *inclusio* may be traced as well by means of the recurring verb *eucharisteō* in 1:3, 12; 2:6. See also J. C. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 101.

[7]We refer to the oft-cited words of E. Käsemann, who noted that "the hymnic character of Col. 1:15-20 has long been recognized and generally acknowledged" ("A Primitive Christian Baptismal Liturgy," *Essays on New Testament Themes* [London: SCM, 1964] 149). For a listing of scholars who endorse this view see R. P. Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn (Col. 1:15-20)," *EvQ* 36 (1964) 200 n. 6. There are, however, a few dissenting or at least doubting voices raised on this issue. E.g., M. D. Hooker affirms that "there is, however, no real evidence, in spite of the ingenuity of exegetes, that such a hymn ever existed" ("Were There False Teachers in Colossae?", *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament* [ed. B. Lindars and S. S. Smalley; Cambridge: University Press, 1973] 316-317). Cf. also J. C. O'Neill, "The Source of the Christology in Colossians," *NTS* 26 (1979) 87-100. For recent studies on hymns in the NT see R. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit: Untersuchungen zu Form, Sprache und Stil der frühchristlichen Hymnus* (SUNT 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967); J. T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971); K. Wengst, *Christologische Formeln und Lieder des Urchristentums* (SNT 7; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1972), esp. 170-180; R. P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (2d ed.; Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974).

ing.[8] The lack of unanimity in a proposed reconstruction of the strophes of the *Urhymnus* is a considerable problem inasmuch as the reconstruction of a symmetrical hymn is inextricably bound up with the issue of the isolation of a supposed pre-Pauline hymn. As R. P. Martin observes: "Any solution to the problems of the passage which can offer help in both areas simultaneously is most likely to be correct than any proposal which deals with only one matter of the tandem partnership."[9]

We proceed initially by setting out the clear parallelism found in the passage, which argues for at least two strophes:

hos estin eikōn	*hos estin archē*
prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs	*prōtotokos ek tōn nekrōn*
hoti en autō . . . di' autou kai eis auton	*hoti en autō . . . di' autou . . . eis auton*

Additionally the presence of two *kai autos estin* clauses in juxtaposition lends support for a *Mittelstrophe* as follows:

kai autos estin pro pantōn
kai ta panta en autō sunestēken
kai autos estin hē kephalē tou sōmatos [tēs ekklēsias]

It will be observed that we have deliberately omitted some words and phrases in order better to emphasize the parallelism within the composition. This arrangement into three strophes seems to have garnered the most support in recent stud-

[8]"The fact is that scholarship has developed no consensus about the number and content of strophes in Col. 1:15-20 . . . no single reconstruction is fully persuasive" (Gibbs, *Creation* 98-99). H. J. Gabathuler gives a convenient survey of various analyses and reconstructions of this passage that appeared up to the early 1960s (*Jesus Christus: Haupt der Kirche—Haupt der Welt* [ATANT; Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1965]). The following studies not analyzed by and subsequent to Gabathuler should be noted: Martin, "Early Hymn" 195-205; "Reconciliation" 104-124; N. Kehl, *Der Christushymnus im Kolosserbrief* (SBM 1; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1967) 28-49; Sanders, *Christological Hymns* 12-14; Deichgräber; *Gotteshymnus* 24 n. 4 (who expresses skepticism that definitive conclusions about the original form of this text will be reached); B. Vawter, "The Colossians Hymn and the Principle of Redaction," *CBQ* 33 (1971) 62-81; J. Lähnemann, *Der Kolosserbrief: Komposition, Situation und Argumentation* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971) 34-42; E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 41-46; F. Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene der Schöpfung: Untersuchungen zur Formalstruktur und Theologie des Kolosserbriefes* (Vienna: Herder, 1974) 34-43. The latest *Forschungsbericht* is conducted by P. Benoit, "L'Hymne Christologique de Col 1.15-20," *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty* (ed. J. Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1975) 226-263. Especially helpful in Benoit's treatment is his chart on p. 238 in which the conjectured glosses of the various scholars are indicated for the hymn. Four recent studies are F. Manns, "Col. 1, 15-20: Midrash chrétien de Gen. 1, 1," *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 53 (1979) 100-110; O'Neill, "Christology in Colossians" 87-100; W. McCown, "The Hymnic Structure of Colossians 1:15-20," *EvQ* 51 (1979) 156-162; P. Beasley-Murray, "Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn Celebrating the Lordship of Christ," *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to Professor F. F. Bruce on His 70th Birthday* (ed. D. A. Hagner and M. J. Harris; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 169-183.

[9]Martin, "Reconciliation" 109.

ies of the hymn, though it is not without problems.[10] Beyond this, however, any attempt to delimit the original hymn has failed to command a consensus. W. G. Kümmel's assessment of the issue reflects, in my judgment, the best reading of the evidence to date:

> It certainly cannot be denied that 1:15-20 bears a hymnic character, but the numerous reconstructions of the hymn expanded by the author that have been undertaken since Lohmeyer's analysis have scarcely led to a really convincing result. Indeed, *the assumption is not yet proved that a hymn constructed according to a strict scheme has been used* and that accordingly every fragment of a sentence beyond the scheme must stem from the author of Col.[11]

A question crucial for an understanding of the terms contained in the hymn is that of authorship. Is the author of the letter also the author of the hymn? The point of departure lies in the observable shift from personal references to the readers in vv 12-14 to no direct references to them in vv 15-20. Then in vv 21 ff. we have a resumption of personal allusions in which the teaching of vv 15-20 is applied to the Colossians. This suggests that the author of the letter has inserted a hymn either to enlarge on what is involved in the conception of redemption or, more likely, to establish a doctrinal platform from which to counter the false teaching.[12] This observation does not, however, rule out the possibility that the author of the letter was also the composer of the hymn.

Another factor to be taken into consideration relates to the vocabulary and style of the passage. There are five *hapax legomena* with respect to the generally accepted Pauline corpus (*horata, thronoi, kyriotētes, prōteuōn, eirēnopoiēsas).*[13] In addition, Charles Masson has noted that "these five verses contain about ten terms or expressions which we do not encounter again in the epistles which are recognized as authentic."[14] Nikolaus Kehl, however, maintains that "on the basis of the literary findings alone, it is possible that the author of Colossians also wrote the hymn."[15] Thus C. F. D. Moule reminds us that unusual vocabulary may only reflect the particular theme under discussion. Furthermore, Pauline passages of elevated style containing a high percentage of *hapax legomena* may be found elsewhere. At any rate, when the argument is turned around and it is inquired whether there is anything in the section that Paul could not have written, one can

[10]This arrangement into three strophes is set out by E. Schweizer in "Die Kirche als Leib Christi in den paulinischen Antilegomena," *TLZ* 86 (1961) col. 241. It is adopted by Martin, "Reconciliation" 109-110; Sanders, *Christological Hymns* 12-14; and most recently by Benoit, "L'Hymne" 237. We call attention to McCown's interesting proposal to treat vv 17-18a as a refrain that is inserted between the first (vv 15-16) and second (vv 18b-20) stanzas ("Hymnic Structure" 158-163).

[11]Kümmel, *Introduction* 342-343. Agreeing essentially is Benoit, "L'Hymne."

[12]Cf. Martin, *Lord and Liberty* 35. J. M. Robinson believes this argument to be stronger than any based upon vocabulary and style ("A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20," *JBL* 76 [1957] 287 n. 21).

[13]I would reduce this to four since I hold to the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and thus would eliminate *kyriotētes* (Eph 1:21).

[14]C. Masson, *L'Epître de Saint Paul aux Colossiens* (CNT; Neuchâtel-Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1950) 106 n. 2 (my translation).

[15]Kehl, *Christushymnus* 51 (my translation).

scarcely return an affirmative verdict.[16]

It has also been argued that the Christology of this passage is both more advanced and more impersonal than that found in Pauline literature. While this ought to be taken into account, we should also recognize its lack of conclusiveness. The remarks of A. M. Hunter serve as a moderating influence lest we put too much weight on this argument:

> It is not disputed that Col. 1:15-20 is a Christological advance on anything else in Paul's commonly accepted letters. Nowhere else does he so boldly give Christ the freedom of the universe. Nowhere else does he say that he is creation's goal (cf. Rom. 11:36 and 1 Cor. 8:6), or declare that the reconciliation wrought through him embraces all beings not only on earth but in heaven. We cannot categorically assert that this view of Christ cannot be Paul's. What we can say is that it is not Paul's in the other letters certainly from his pen.[17]

Hunter's caution at this point can be taken further by pointing out that there are grounds for positing a circumstantial development of Paul's thought—that is, owing to the error at Colossae it was necessary for Paul to extend the religious primacy of Jesus to the sphere of the cosmological. Hence the new advance on his earlier Christology.[18]

If one could clearly demonstrate a baptismal setting for the hymn, this would go far toward establishing that Paul incorporated a pre-existing liturgical piece. Ernst Käsemann has argued for this in such a way as to relate the hymn to the polemical purpose of the epistle as a whole. He contends that "the confession of the community is contained in the baptismal liturgy. This provides both a base for the necessary battle and at the same time the authority under whose banner the battle is to be fought."[19] But as Pierre Benoit points out, the hymn itself contains no definite allusions to either baptism or the eucharist.[20] The fact remains that we do not know enough about primitive Christian liturgical forms to be confident in our isolation of such supposed pieces in the NT epistolary literature.[21]

A final argument relates to the circumstances in which Colossians purportedly had its genesis. Some scholars entertain doubts as to the likelihood that prison conditions coupled with an urgent pastoral concern would be conducive to the production of such an exacting piece of hymnic literature.[22] The argument is

[16]C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary; Cambridge: University Press, 1957) 61-62.

[17]A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (2d ed.; London: SCM, 1961) 126. Cf. Also the discussion of this point in Martin, "Early Hymn" 204-205 n. 26; Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption* 95; Masson, *Colossiens* 129 n. 7.

[18]See e.g. R. N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (SBT 17; Naperville: Allenson, 1970) 56-57.

[19]Käsemann, *Essays* 166.

[20]Benoit, "L'Hymne" 231.

[21]See e.g. G. W. H. Lampe, "The Evidence in the New Testament for Early Creeds, Catechisms and Liturgy," *ExpTim* 71 (1959-60) 359-363; J. Houlden, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Pelican New Testament Commentaries; Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 170; Deichgräber, *Christushymnus* 82; O'Neill, "Christology in Colossians" 87-88.

[22]See Martin, "Early Hymn" 199.

quite subjective, and little weight can be accorded it. Modern examples of "prison literature" ought to put us on our guard about conjectures as to what could or could not be expected under such conditions.

We conclude that the above arguments are not sufficient to prove that the hymn is non-Pauline. Thus we must weigh the probabilities involved. First, the view that the hymn was composed by the Colossians is quite unlikely. Without at all denying that the Colossian community of believers did compose some Christian hymns (cf. Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14:26), one must remember that Paul was personally unknown by the church at Colossae (2:1), which had been evangelized by Epaphras, a colleague of Paul (1:7). Thus it is difficult to envision how Paul could have been familiar with their hymnic compositions, unless Epaphras brought a sample to Paul in prison—a decidedly forced expedient. It should be added that if C. R. Bowen's thesis is correct that the letter to the Colossians gives evidence of a newly founded church, and if an Ephesian imprisonment as the setting for the epistle be thought likely, than a "Colossian hymn" hypothesis becomes well-nigh impossible.[23] Some scholars conjecture that the hymn was sung by the churches in Asia Minor, a thesis that can neither be proved nor disproved.[24] One could also postulate a Syrian Antioch derivation for the hymn on the grounds that as the primary center for the Gentile mission this church was the source of the catechetical and confessional materials that the Pauline missionary circle transmitted.

The present writer inclines to the view that Paul wrote the hymn. The primary argument in support of this position is that the theology contained therein is so compatible with and adducible from uncontestably Pauline thought that the best hypothesis is also the simplest: Paul is the author. We thus align ourselves with Benoit who, after a thorough study of recent scholarship on the passage and his own careful analysis, concludes that

> the passage is best explained by the genius of Paul himself, as the acme of his theological thought developed in the course of his earlier epistles and crystallized here in a new way in reaction to the speculations encountered at Colossae.[25]

Justification for this stance is required since many NT scholars would concur with Eduard Schweizer's assessment: "The theology of the group that created this hymn is obvious. One could quote the parallels to the first stanza word by

[23]C. R. Bowen, "The Original Form of Paul's Letter to the Colossians," *JBL* 43 (1924) 189-190. Bowen says that "at the time the letter is written the Colossian church has been in existence only a period of weeks or of months at most" (p. 190). See also R. P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations: A Guide for Christian Students* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 2. 216-222.

[24]See e.g. Lohse, *Colossians* 46 and n. 100.

[25]Benoit, "L'Hymne" 226. In essential agreement are A. Feuillet, *Le Christ sagesse de Dieu d après les épîtres Paulinienes* (EBib; Paris: Libraire Le Coffre [J. Gabalda], 1966) 246-273; Beare, *IB*, 11. 162; Houlden, *Prison Epistles* 170.

word in the Wisdom literature."[26] Schweizer is confident that "in the background of this passage, there are definite traces of Hellenistic-Jewish speculation . . . which point to a reinterpretation of Pauline ideas in a Christian congregation which was influenced by such a theology."[27] He sees three reinterpretations that the author of Colossians has made in this hymn. In contrast to the hymn, which viewed Christ as the head of the world body, the author has added the words "the church" inv 18a and thereby has redefined the sphere of Christ's reconciliation.[28] Second, the original hymn focused on the resurrection as the event that has reunited the two spheres of the divine and human, the heavenly and the earthly. In place of a physical miracle effecting this reconciliation he inserts the reference to the blood of the cross in 1:20. As Schweizer understands this redaction,

> reconciliation must, according to Colossians, not be thought of in terms of physical or metaphysical events which would automatically change everything and make sure to participate in their result by means of sacramental union. Rather, it must be conceived in terms of human relationships, of deeds of love done by one to another.[29]

Thirdly, the writer of Colossians reinterprets the way in which Christ permeates the world. Instead of a sort of cosmic "soul," as the original hellenistic hymn conceived of it, Christ pervades the cosmos through the apostolic preaching of the gospel. This is made clear in the commentary that follows the hymn in 1:21-23.[30]

A couple of comments are in order. With respect to the supposed gloss in v 18a ("the church"), the evidence is far from conclusive. Whereas Martin holds that the grammatical form clearly betrays the fact that it is an afterthought,[31] M. Zerwick cites this as an epexegetical genitive, which "while comparatively rare" has other parallels in Paul at Rom 5:18; 2 Cor 1:22 (cf. also Eph 4:9).[32] Kehl insists that the phrase was original to the hymn on the basis of syllable counts and a Pauline meaning for *sōmatos*. This latter point is important for, as Kehl has perceived, if the term *sōmatos* originally referred to the cosmos of which Christ was

[26]E. Schweizer, "The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ," *NTS* 8 (1961-62) 7; *The Church as the Body of Christ* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964) 65; *Der Brief an die Kolosser* (EKKNT; Zurich: Benziger, 1976) 56-63. Cf. also Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge: University Press, 1939) 159-165; Lohse, *Colossians* 45-46; Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 58; 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: University Press, 1973) 172-177. B. Vawter, "The Colossian Hymn," *CBQ* 33 (1971) 71, observes that "nobody seems to be in doubt that OT and later Jewish wisdom speculation has provided a great number of the motifs and even the vocabulary. The amount of these is, indeed, impressive, and it is not surprising that many authors have, explicitly or by implication, looked in this direction almost exclusively to find the ideological origins of this christology."

[27]Schweizer, *Church* 65.

[28]Ibid., pp. 68-69. So also Käsemann, *Essays* 150-153; Martin, "Reconciliation" 112.

[29]Schweizer, *Church* 70-71.

[30]Ibid., p. 72.

[31]Martin, "Reconciliation" 112.

[32]M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (ed. J. Smith; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963) 17.

the *kephalē*, in what sense did it still require a reconciliation?[33] Paul Beasley-Murray has likewise called into question the common assumption that *tēs ekklēsias* is a Pauline gloss.[34] He bases his objection, like Kehl, on a form analysis of the hymnic structure and on a semantic analysis of *sōma*. With respect to the structure Beasley-Murray insists that "a reference to the church is essential if the *parallelismus membrorum* is to be preserved." But more telling is his evaluation of Schweizer's assumption that *sōma* was commonly perceived by hellenistic men to be the cosmos:

> Nowhere is *sōma*—in the sense of world body—used in such an abrupt manner as is alleged to be the case in Col. 1:18a. Another important fact, frequently overlooked, is that the standard contrast was always between the cosmic body and the divine soul . . . not between the head and the body. . . . What is even more relevant is that God is nowhere expressly termed "head" of the cosmic body—at least, this is not the case in the evidence so far brought to support such a view. . . . The general bankruptcy of this "cosmic body" position is illustrated by Lohse, who has to adduce remote Iranian parallels to support the hypothesis. We conclude therefore that not only is the actual structure of the Colossian hymn against our understanding *kephalē* in a cosmic sense, but also Greek usage does not favour such an interpretation.[35]

Kümmel says that "the oft-repeated assumption that the cosmic statements of the hymn have by the addition of *tēs ekklēsias* (1:18) been transmuted into churchly statements is completely unproved."[36] F. F. Bruce concludes rather bluntly that "to envisage an earlier form of the hymn in which the cosmos, and not the church, was so called is an unwarranted exercise of the imagination."[37]

An even more basic issue, however, must be faced in evaluating the position of Schweizer. As J. C. Gibbs has demonstrated, many scholars proceed on the presupposition that Pauline theology was only soteriological and lacked truly cosmic dimensions.[38] Accepting this premise, one can more readily isolate the supposed Pauline additions to this "hellenistic-Jewish" hymn. But it is precisely this presupposition that the present writer calls into question. In order to do this I now propose to reconsider the background of the passage.

With respect to the prevailing view that strophe one manifests terminological similarities to the Wisdom predications in the OT and intertestamental literature we have no quarrel. What must be clearly recognized, however, are the not inconsiderable differences in the concepts themselves. One must balance the similarities in language with the fact that Wisdom, despite its important role in creation and providence, is nonetheless a created being. Against this we must take cognizance of the fact that for Paul Christ "stands on the side of God."[39] Furthermore,

[33]Kehl, *Christushymnus* 39-45. See Martin, "Reconciliation" 113-116, for a clear explanation as to Paul's alleged transformation of the meaning of "reconciliation" in the *Grundschrift*.

[34]Beasley-Murray, "Colossians 1:15-20" 179-182.

[35]Ibid., pp. 180-182.

[36]Kümmel, *Introduction* 343.

[37]F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 420.

[38]J. C. Gibbs, "The Cosmic Scope of Redemption According to Paul," *Bib* 56 (1975) 20.

[39]H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 79.

in the OT and intertestamental literature Wisdom is depicted as a personified being, and here the difference between the two conceptions comes into sharp focus. For there can be little doubt that Paul in Col 1:15-20 is speaking of the "beloved Son" (Col 1:13) who is identical with the historical man, Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Acts 9:4-5).[40] In addition a survey of extra-canonical Jewish literature will show that no link is evidenced between messianic concepts and Wisdom speculation.[41] This is important inasmuch as Col 1:15-20 has messianic overtones and is placed in a context of explicit messianism (vv 12-14).

As a comprehensive explanation for the background of the hymn, the Wisdom speculation hypothesis is inadequate. It is readily acknowledged that in vv 18-20 "a fresh background is to be sought. There are no immediate parallels in Jewish thought except the descriptions of Wisdom as 'the beginning' (Leg. All. 1.43; cf. Prov. 8:22)."[42] Not only this, but also in the first stanza there is difficulty in finding Wisdom parallels for all the assertions. Even Schweizer, for instance, acknowledges that "the formula 'unto him' is novel with respect to the Jewish Wisdom literature."[43] Bruce Vawter has puzzled over our passage and has concluded that

> when read without presuppositions the Colossians hymn can hardly be taken simply as a paean to the personified creative wisdom of God found realized in Christ. Nor *pace* Käsemann is it the gnostic redeemer-myth newly identified with him. It contains elements that it may have derived from both streams of thought, but it is not explained wholly by either of them and in part it is in conflict with both of them. One may venture to suggest that it is, rather, really what it professes itself to be, a literary and thought form that has developed out of the Christian experience. As such it contains a theology which, as we have seen, turns up elsewhere in the NT canon.[44]

Some scholars suggest that at least in vv 18-20 Paul has in mind the idea of Christ as the Second Adam.[45] Thus in the expression "firstborn from among the dead" (Col 1:18) we find an echo of "Christ, the firstfruits" (1 Cor 15:23) in a context where Christ is explicitly designated "the last Adam" (15:45) and "the second man" (15:47). The points of contact between vv 18-20 and the Second Adam motif are concisely summarized by Martin:

> Death—life form a contrast which recalls man's own personal history. Moreover, Adam was God's image (Gen. 1:26, 27) and God's son as king of paradise. He was the

[40]*Pace* Bultmann, "The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul," *Faith and Understanding* (ed. R. W. Funk; London: SCM, 1969), 1. 241. We are in agreement with Bruce who avers that for Paul "the risen Lord . . . was in his mind identical with the historical Jesus" (*Paul* 100). Cf. also Benoit, "L'Hymne" 227-228.

[41]See e.g. L. R. Helyer, "The *Prōtotokos* Title in the New Testament" (dissertation; Fuller Theological Seminary, 1979) 104-167.

[42]Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 58; Benoit, "L'Hymne" 248.

[43]Schweizer, *Kolosser* 61.

[44]Vawter, "Colossians Hymn" 73-74.

[45]Cf. e.g. Houlden, *Letters from Prison* 167, 171; Martin, *Lord and Liberty* 48.

> beginning of the old order, doomed to sin and death and decay. Christ is the second Man, whose coming marks a new beginning as a new segment of humanity is brought into existence. As Adam's sin brought ruin and death, so Christ's resurrection heralds a new age of life and hope. He is the firstborn of many brethren (Rom. 8:29); the first-fruits of a harvest yet to be reaped (1 Cor. 15:20); a life-giving spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), who promises life for all His members as they are united to Him (1 Cor. 6:17).[46]

As the above quotation clearly illustrates, vv 18-20 are quite characteristic of Pauline theology, a fact that should give pause in desiring to find a non-Pauline background for vv 15-17.[47] The present writer has investigated Rom 8:29 and concluded that the Second Adam motif was indispensable for understanding Paul's thought in that passage. It can scarcely be coincidental that precisely in Col 1:15 we have a similar juxtaposition of "image" and "firstborn." Furthermore, both passages are set in contexts that concern creation and have a cosmic scope. We should recall also that in Jewish sources Adam is designated both as "image of God" and as "firstborn." Thus in the Latin version of a work entitled "Life of Adam and Eve" and thought to go back to a Semitic original dating from about the beginning of the Christian era it is recounted how, after Adam was first created, the angels were charged to worship him as the image of God.[48]

The most difficult problem with this understanding of the background of Col 1:15-17, however, is trying to establish the connection between Christ as Second Adam and the theme of Christ's role as the agent in and sustainer of creation (vv 16-17), with special attention being given to the angelic powers. Can we follow the lead of Herman Ridderbos, who asserts that in Col 1:15 "Paul applies the same 'Adamitic' categories (Image, First-born) with which he describes Christ's significance in 'eschatology' to his place in 'protology' as well"?[49]

The strength of Ridderbos' view is its comprehensiveness in illuminating the entire hymn without recourse to different Christological schemas for the three stanzas. One must ask, however, whether the comprehensiveness is more apparent than real. Ridderbos himself admits that one cannot simply move from the Adam-Christ typology of Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 to Col 1:15-20. One must appeal to "a highly organic and structural relationship between Christ's place in the *Endgeschichte* and in *Urgeschichte.*"[50] Without at all denying the above observation and granting the point that the Second Adam motif is present in vv 15-17 as well as vv 18-20, the present writer nonetheless believes that no single motif or theme is able to provide a comprehensive view of the Christ-hymn. It seems too lopsided to exclude all influence deriving from canonical and extracanonical development of the role of Wisdom in creation and providence. The ter-

[46]Martin, *Lord and Liberty* 48.

[47]See Ridderbos, *Paul* 80; Benoit, "L'Hymne" 248.

[48]Helyer, *"Prōtotokos"* 192-200. Cf. B. J. Bamberger, "Adam, Books of," *IDB,* 1. 44-45. Cf. the English text in *APOT,* 2. 137.

[49]Ridderbos, *Paul* 82.

[50]Ibid., p. 85. Ridderbos here refers to N. A. Dahl, "Christ, Creation and the Church," *The Background of the New Testament and its Eschatology* (ed. W. D. Davies and D. Daube; Cambridge: University Press, 1956) 432.

minological parallels are too precise to be pure coincidence. Neither Wisdom Christology nor Adam Christology is sufficient by itself to explicate the hymn. For that matter, both concepts could well be secondary attributions that find their locus in an even more fundamental conception of Jesus of Nazareth.

Interestingly, Ridderbos concludes his discussion of the "firstborn of all creation" by coming back to this central point: the "all-controlling fact of Christ's death and resurrection."[51] The fundamental affirmation of primitive Christianity, confirmed by the resurrection, was that Jesus is Lord (cf. Rom 10:9; 2 Cor 4:5; 1 Cor 12:3). George Ladd has underlined the significance of this acclamation by noting that "*Kyrios* is the Greek translation of the tetragrammaton *YHWH*, the covenant name for God in the Old Testament. The exalted Jesus occupies the role of God himself in ruling over the world."[52] That in fact the apostolic Church intended by the *Kyrios* predication to ascribe to Jesus the exalted status of the OT Yahweh is evident from the manner in which they cite OT passages. Passages referring to Yahweh, such as Isa 8:13; 45:23; Ps 102:25, are explicitly applied to Jesus (cf. 1 Pet 3:15; Phil 2:10; Heb 1:10 respectively).[53] The Ps 102:25 citation in Heb 1:10 is especially important here since it identifies Jesus as the creator of all things. Cullmann notes concerning this verse: "I do not believe discussions of New Testament Christology have given this passage in Hebrews the attention it deserves."[54] While Hebrews is not among the earlier NT documents, its Jewish-Christian character argues for a tradition rooted in the primitive community.

We conclude that with the resurrection of Jesus the earliest community of believers confessed the lordship of Jesus in terms of his victory over death and his vindication by God, but that this was quickly seen to entail nothing short of the position in creation ascribed to the *Kyrios* of the OT. In brief, cosmic Christology was implicit from the beginning of the primitive Church.

Now we must admit that Col 1:15-20 does not use the title *Kyrios*. We recall, however, our observation that Col 1:3-2:7 is a self-contained unity that displays the literary technique of *inclusio*. Notice in this connection then that the entire section is framed by the ascriptions "our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3) and "Christ Jesus as Lord" (2:6). The ground upon which Paul confronts the false teaching is the basic Christian confession that Jesus is Lord. The hymn is the primary means by which this lordship is recalled and explicated to the readers. Furthermore, we should note that in Phil 2:6-11, similarly believed to be a Christ-hymn, the climax of the piece is the acclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord. Also in Romans 8

[51]Ridderbos, *Paul* 85.

[52]G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 416.

[53]For further discussion on this point see F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 73-74; "Jesus is Lord," *Soli Deo Gloria: New Testament Studies in Honor of William Childs Robinson* (ed. J. M. Richards; Richmond: John Knox, 1968) 23-36. Cf. C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977) 41-42; I. H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976). Denying this equation is G. Howard, "Phil. 2:2-11 and the Human Christ," *CBQ* 40 (1978) 383-384. For a response to the assertion that the LXX usage of *Kyrios* for the tetragrammaton is not modeled on Jewish precedent see Moule, *Origin* 39-41; Marshall, *Origins* 98-99; Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 195.

[54]Cullmann, *Christology* 234-235.

where we have the occurrence of "image" and "firstborn" (v 29) the climax of the passage is likewise concluded with the title "Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39). Finally in Eph 1:3-23 this long section of praise and thanksgiving, which manifests some links with Col 1:15-20, is headed by the ascription "our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:3).[55]

We also call attention to the fact that even the pattern of the Colossian hymn has OT models. Thus vv 15-17 relate to creation and preservation, and vv 18-20 deal with redemption. This pattern, however, already appears in Psalm 136. After an initial ascription of general praise (vv 1-3) vv 4-9 take up the theme of creation and vv 10-22 deal with the redemption of Israel from Egypt in the exodus and settlement in the land of promise. To be sure, one must transpose the exodus into a higher key to parallel the NT concept of redemption and reconciliation, but the typological link is apparent.[56] In a shorter compass the companion Psalm 135 likewise displays the same creation-redemption pattern in vv 5-14. Psalm 104:1-30 consists of a lengthy hymn in praise of the Lord as the creator and sustainer of all things. Then in vv 31-35 we have a note of the Lord's intervention in his creation, which is concluded by a prayer for the restoration of the original harmony of the created order (v 35).

One further comment should be made here: The emphasis in the Christ-hymn on the powers (the angelic agencies) is most likely circumstantial—that is, it reflects Paul's deliberate purpose to place these beings under Christ's lordship since the false teachers were apparently ascribing too much weight (or perhaps worship) to them.[57] It should be noted, however, that even this feature has OT precedent in a few hymns and poetic passages where the Lord is pictured as the creator and sovereign of the angelic beings (Ps 89:6-7; 103:20-21; 148:2-5; Job 38:7; Isa 34:4 LXX).[58]

Our interest in this rather restricted issue does have wider soteriological implications. If we should conclude that Paul in fact modified a Christian hymn that articulated a reconciliation achieved by Christ in his resurrection and exaltation apart from his death on the cross, we should have to inquire further whether this kind of *kērygma* is acceptable without alteration. In short, would it be legitimate to preach a "crossless" formulation of the gospel? Is it keeping faith with the apostolic Church to proclaim cosmic reconciliation without anchoring it in the historic saving deed at Golgotha?

Scholars such as Schweizer, Lohse and Martin, among others, conclude that

[55]Cf. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption* 148-154, for a helpful discussion of the *Kyrios* title and cosmic Christology.

[56]For a helpful discussion of the exodus as an anticipation of redemption through Christ see L. B. Smedes, *All Things Made New: A Theology of Man's Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 143-149.

[57]On the circumstantial nature of this aspect of the hymn see Longenecker, *Christology* 53-58; W. L. Lane, "Creed and Theology," *JETS* 21 (1978) 213-220.

[58]R. E. Morosco, "Conceptions of Spiritual Powers in the Pauline Corpus" (dissertation; Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974) 46. Morosco's treatment of the OT background here is most helpful. He summarizes the OT contribution by saying that "the NT utilizes most all of the germ ideas of spiritual powers found in the OT, and the importance of the LXX in the language depicting spiritual powers cannot be overemphasized" (p. 62).

Paul "felt impelled to modify . . . and recast the hymn in order to ensure a fuller understanding of reconciliation as a soteriological reality by relating it closely to the death of Christ on the cross."[59] According to Schweizer the author of Colossians viewed this hymn as both "fascinating and dangerous."[60]

On the basis of our examination of the evidence, however, we hold that the theology of the hymnic portion is thoroughly Pauline and stands in a continuity with pre-Pauline tradition going back to the Palestinian Church. Furthermore, in Paul's thought the cross has truly cosmic dimensions (cf. Rom 8:18-25; Eph 1:9-10; Col 2:13-15). In view of the centrality of the cross for Paul's missionary preaching we find it difficult to believe that he would even bother to "modify" a hymn that was "dangerous" in its conception, especially in light of the false teaching to be combatted at Colossae.[61] Whether there was a distinctive hellenistic theology of reconciliation devoid of connection with the cross being promulgated in the Pauline churches cannot be demonstrated one way or the other on the basis of the present evidence.

What seems clear, regardless of how one understands the background and genesis of the Christ-hymn in Colossians, is that Paul insisted that God reconciles sinners "by Christ's physical body through death" (1:22). To imagine that one may achieve reconciliation on any other terms is to lose "connection with the Head" (2:19). In an age of increasing theological pluralism and syncretism evangelicals must continue to stand with Paul and the apostolic Church in proclaiming a theology of the cross.[62]

[59]Martin, "Reconciliation" 113.

[60]Schweizer, "Missionary Body" 6.

[61]R. Scroggs notes that "had Paul disagreed with these hymns, he would hardly have quoted them; they can thus be used to determine his thought" (*The Last Adam: A Study in Pauline Anthropology* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966] 62 n. 5).

[62]S. Neill calls attention to the contemporary threat of ecumenical syncretism in terms that sound very much like the supposed theology in the pre-Pauline hymn of Schweizer's reconstruction: "The new ecumenical theology of mission derives from an attempt to take seriously the doctrine of the Lordship of Christ; Christ has been 'exalted to the right hand of the Father'; his death and resurrection mean much more than the salvation of a handful out of the whole mass of mankind. In some way, it holds, the whole universe has been made new, since the new creation is already here. Since Easter, every man born into the world has been born into a world of which the sovereign is Jesus Christ; therefore he is in some way related from his birth to Jesus Christ. We do not have to go, it is said, to tell him that he has got to become a Christian; we are to tell him that he is already a Christian and to help him to understand from within his own experience what this means" ("Syncretism and Missionary Philosophy Today," *RevExp* 68 [1971] 66).