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The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15-20: Drawing from the Wisdom Tradition in Hellenistic-Judaism

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THE CHRIST HYMN OF COLOSSIANS 1:15-20:
DRAWING FROM THE WISDOM TRADITION IN HELLENISTIC-JUDAISM
TO TIDY UP THE CHURCH AT COLOSSAE

By Rev. Mr. Leonard W. Andrie

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity in Partial
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Final Research

Advisor Approval

I have examined the final copy of the research submitted by Rev. Mr. Leonard W. Andrie and found that it has incorporated all of the changes and modifications requested. I hereby give final approval for its meeting the requirements of the Master of Arts in Theology.

Advisor Signature

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Date

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is to explore whether the author of Colossians 1:15-20 strategically appropriated language and concepts typically employed to depict Wisdom in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition and adapted it to give expression to his faith in the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. While most biblical scholars agree that Col. 1:15-20 reveals at least some linguistic and conceptual dependence upon the role of Wisdom in the Wisdom literature, they disagree about the extent of such dependence. For example, whereas theologians such as Gordon Fee emphatically deny any linguistic and conceptual ties between the two, other authors such as Eduard Schweizer conclude that the first stanza of Col. 1:15-20 is so obviously dependent upon the Wisdom literature that it could be quoted word by word in the Wisdom literature. In this thesis, it will be argued that the author of Col. 1:15-20, like a wise scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven, masterfully adopted what was previously said of Wisdom in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition (i.e., brought out the old) and creatively adapted it to Christ (i.e., brought out the new) to express both the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. This, in turn, not only enabled the author present a cosmic vision of Christ, but also to refute a novel teaching that was threatening the church at Colossae.

Introduction

Jesus asked his disciples, “‘Have you understood all this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes.’ And he said to them, ‘Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old’” (Matt. 13:51-52).¹ The Apostle Paul, a “Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil. 3:5), was adept at bringing out the old (Jewish heritage) and the new (what has happened in and through Jesus) in order to present his children holy and blameless in Christ (Eph. 1:4; Col. 1:22).² In particular, the Apostle demonstrates the depth of his ability in the so-called Colossian’s “Christ-hymn” of Col. 1:15-20, which is, as many scholars have put forth, “soaked” in the Wisdom tradition of Hellenistic-Judaism.³ In this

¹ All Biblical references will be taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise indicated. *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments: Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1966). See Appendix I for Colossians 1:15-20 taken from the *Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*. Additionally, see Appendix II for Peter O’Brien’s outline for the Letter to the Colossians. Peter O’Brien, “Colossians, The Letter of Paul to the,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds., Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 127.

² Daniel J. Harrington, ed., *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 of the *Sacra Pagina Series* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 208.

³ See, e.g., Christopher A. Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, vol. 96 of *Biblical Interpretation Series*, eds., R. Alan Culpepper and Ellen Van Wolde (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Allan R. Bevere, *Sharing in the Inheritance: Identity and the Moral Life in Colossians*, vol. 226 of the *Library of New Testament Series*, ed., Stanley E. Porter (New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003); W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London, UK: SPCK Publishing, 1965); James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989); James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, vol. 8 of *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, eds., I. Howard Marshall, W. Ward Gasque, and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996); André Feuillet, *Le Christ Sage de Dieu, d’après les épîtres pauliniennes*, (EBib, Paris: Gabalda, 1966); Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, trans., William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, ed., Helmut Koester (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971); Margaret MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, vol. 17 of *Sacra Pagina Series*, ed., Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000); Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, vol. 9 of *The New Testament Commentary*, ed., D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008); Peter O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 44 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds., David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1982); Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: Commentary*, trans., Andrew Chester (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982); Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians & Colossians: Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament*, eds., Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007); Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of*

paper, it will be argued that by strategically adopting language and concepts typically employed to depict Wisdom in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition (i.e., bringing out the old), the Apostle Paul adapted it to give expression to his faith in the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ (i.e., bringing out the new).⁴ This, in turn, not only enabled the Apostle to present a “cosmic vision of Christ who is assigned titles which allude to the profundity of His Person and mission,” but also helped him ward off a heterodox “philosophy” that was creeping into the Colossian Church.⁵

Wisdom (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994); Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

⁴ Robert Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon: The International Critical Commentary*, eds., G.I. Davies, F.B.A. and G.N. Stanton (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2005), 144. The debate over Colossian authorship was fierce in the twentieth century. While it will be touched upon later, significant treatment of the debate is outside the purview of this paper.

⁵ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, “Colossians,” in *The Oxford Biblical Commentary*, eds., John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1194.

Chapter One

Historical Background

I. The City of Colossae

Before discussing Col. 1:15-20, it will be helpful to briefly discuss the historical background of the city of Colossae. This will not only shed light on Paul's motivation to write a letter to the community, but also develop an appreciation for the selected passage. According to author Michael Gorman, "In the Roman period Colossae was a city of moderate importance. It was located in the region of Phrygia and in the Roman province of Asia, about 120 miles east of the provincial capital of Ephesus and not far from the more prominent cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis."⁶ Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, in the fifth century B.C. speaks of Colossae as "a great city of Phrygia," while in the following century the chronicler Xenophon described it as "a populous city wealthy and large."⁷ However, Colossae declined considerably in importance such that in Roman times, two generations before Paul, the ancient Greek historian Strabo speaks of it only as a "small town."⁸ The three cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae were eventually destroyed by an earthquake in the early 60's A.D. According to Gorman, the city of Colossae was never rebuilt.⁹ Thus, one can conclude that by the "time Paul

⁶ Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 472.

⁷ Peter O'Brien, "Introduction to Colossians," in *Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1982), xxvi. O'Brien notes that "Colossae's commercial significance was due to its wool industry. The wool was gathered from sheep which grazed on the slopes of the Lycus Valley, and dyed a dark red color that was generally known as 'Colossian.'"

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

⁹ Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 472n1.

wrote to the Christians living at Colossae the commercial and social importance of the town was already on the wane.”¹⁰

II. The People of Colossae

Scripture commentator Peter O’Brien states that the people of Colossae were an admixture of indigenous Phrygian and Greek settlers, along with a Jewish settlement stemming from two thousand Jewish families brought from Babylonia and Mesopotamia by Antiochus III in the early part of the second century B.C.¹¹ Consequently, Colossae was part of an area where pagan cults, local religions, and Judaism mingled. Such an admixture of religious populations resulted in a religious climate in Phrygia which was “quite diverse, with a host of elements coming together from the mystery religions, Iranian worship, Judaism, and Pauline Christianity.”¹² Against this backdrop, Gorman notes that “The possibility of religious syncretism – the fusion of beliefs and practices of diverse traditions – was perhaps even stronger here than elsewhere in Paul’s polytheistic world.”¹³

III. The Church at Colossae

Paul addresses the Colossians as “the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae” (Col. 1:2). According to the letter, it was not Paul but rather Epaphras who founded the church at Colossae (Col. 1:7). Epaphras himself was a Colossian (Col. 4:12) and was considered by Paul as a “faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord” on behalf of the Colossians

¹⁰ O’Brien, “Introduction to Colossians,” xxvii. Quoting J.B. Lightfoot, O’Brien generally agrees that “Without a doubt Colossae was the least important church to which any epistle of St. Paul is addressed.” See page xxvii.

¹¹ O’Brien, “Introduction to Colossians,” xxvii.

¹² Watson E. Mills, “Colossians, Letter to,” in *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University of Press, 1992), 163.

¹³ Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 472. Author Vincent Pizzuto concurs that the pervasive syncretism which characterized the Greco-Roman world was particularly influential in the Lycus Valley throughout the first century C.E. Vincent A. Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith: An Authorial, Structural, and Theological Investigation of the Cosmic Christology in Col 1:15-20* (Leuven, Paris: Peeters, 2006), 231.

(Col. 4:7). The community may have come into existence in association with Paul's Ephesian ministry during Paul's second missionary journey. Acts 19 records that Paul and his disciples held daily discussions for two years in the lecture hall of Tyrannus with the result that "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:9-10). It is possible that the church at Colossae was planted by Epaphras along with congregations of Laodicea and Hierapolis at this time.¹⁴

Regardless, according to O'Brien, "We have no firsthand information about the beginnings of these Christian communities except what may be derived from the letter to the Colossians itself."¹⁵ Gorman puts forth that the letter itself reveals "there were certainly Gentiles in the church (1:27), and they may have been the majority, but there is also every reason to suspect that there were Jewish believers in the community; it was a multiethnic church (3:11). From its inception the church was a growing, flourishing body (1:4-8)."¹⁶ Additionally, Paul's letter indicates that this blossoming community had strong ties with the nearby church of Laodicea. Paul reminds the Colossians that he is struggling for them and for those in Laodicea (Col. 2:1). In concluding the letter, he asks the Colossians to "Give my greetings to the brethren at Laodicea... And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea" (Col. 4:15-16).¹⁷

¹⁴ Commentator Peter O'Brien concurs with the proposal that Colossae came into existence by Epaphras during Paul's missionary activity associated with Ephesus. Specifically, he states, "The Christian community at Colossae came into existence during a period of vigorous activity associated with Paul's Ephesian ministry (ca. 52-55 C.E.), recorded in Acts 19. Paul was assisted by several coworkers through whom a number of churches were planted in the province of Asia. Among these congregations of the Lycus Valley, Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, which were the fruit of Epaphras' endeavor." Peter O'Brien, "Colossians, The Letter of Paul to the," 128.

¹⁵ O'Brien, "Introduction to Colossians," xxviii.

¹⁶ Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, 472.

¹⁷ The heavily discussed "heresy" or "empty philosophy" that many scholars believe was creeping into the Colossian Church will be discussed after a careful exegetical analysis of the hymn.

IV. The Question of Authorship

According to O'Brien, "The first significant denial of Paul's authorship in recent times came in 1838 when E.T. Mayerhoff claimed to have found in Colossians un-Pauline thoughts, evidences of disputation with the second century Cerinthus and a dependence on Ephesians."¹⁸ Since that time, the question of Pauline authorship of the letter has been hotly debated.¹⁹ Author Loren Stuckenbruck concisely summarizes both sides of the debate. Specifically, he provides the following points for those favoring deutero-Pauline authorship: (1) the widespread practice of pseudonymity in Graeco-Roman antiquity, (2) stylistic differences between Colossians and Paul's 'undisputed' letters (especially in vocabulary, style of argument, and use of tradition), (3) a more fully developed church order in Colossians (1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15; cf. Eph. 4:15-16), and (4) differences in theological perspective (e.g., regarding Christology, eschatology, and ethics).²⁰ Those arguing for deutero-Pauline authorship generally "favor earlier dates for the epistle

¹⁸ O'Brien, "Introduction to Colossians," Xli.

¹⁹ Scripture scholars D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo state that since 1945 "the considerations urged against the traditional view have simply come to be seen as more weighty. Some, including Kümmel, Moule, Bruce, O'Brien, and Garland, still argue for Paul as the author; others think 'deutero-Pauline' is a better description." They cite Charles Masson, E. Lohse, E. Schweizer, and Joachim Gnilka as proponents of the deutero-Pauline position. See D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, "Colossians," in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 517. According to Moo, "Raymond Brown estimates that 60 percent of current scholars think that Paul did not write Colossians." See Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 29.

²⁰ Loren T. Stuckenbruck, "Colossians and Philemon," in *Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed., James D.G. Dunn (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 117-118. Generally speaking, those arguing for deutero-Pauline authorship differ about the weight each individual factor plays in concluding that Paul is not the author of Colossians. For example, while scripture scholar Andrew T. Lincoln argues that the cumulative evidence points to an author other than Paul, he believes that style is much more decisive than vocabulary or theological emphasis. In his opinion, there is nothing in the setting of the Colossians letter that would demand such a major shift in style. See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, vol. 11 of *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 577-583. Eduard Lohse, however, argues differently in that after an extensive analysis of the language and style of the letter, he concludes that no final decision can be reached on the Pauline or non-Pauline authorship of the letter on the basis of language and style. In his opinion, the question of Pauline authorship is answered by contrasting the theology of Colossians to that of the major Pauline letters. See Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 84-91; 177-183.

(generally before 80 C.E.).”²¹ A deuterio-Pauline position would be bolstered if Paul was unable to write because of his imprisonment.²² Author Margaret MacDonald, for her part, suggests that the pseudepigrapher may have been Paul’s disciple Timothy who wrote in his name (Col. 1:1).²³

On the other hand, Stuckenbruck says that those favoring Pauline authorship argue based on the following grounds: (1) given that pseudonymous figures were nearly always attributed to revered figures from the *distant* past, the composition of the letter in the name of the *recently* deceased apostle would have been highly unusual, (2) the language, style, and theology of Colossians are sometimes not regarded as decisive, (3) as with ‘authentic’ Pauline letters, Colossians draws heavily on traditions which may go back to liturgical practice or theological reflection on baptism (2:20; 3:1-15, 9b-12; cf. Rom. 6:4-5; Gal. 3:27-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-13), (4) Colossians, as among the undisputed letters of Paul, retains a certain eschatological reserve wherein the ‘resurrection life’ attributed to the Christian is not yet one in which ‘glory’ has been achieved (e.g., Col. 3:3-4).²⁴ Those favoring Pauline authorship put forth that the letter must have been written before the earthquake struck Colossae in the early 60’s A.D. They tend to link the letter to the final stages of Paul’s career, between about 57 and 63 A.D.²⁵

Author Vincent Pizzuto points out that those favoring deuterio-Pauline authorship typically argue that the divergences between the letter and authentic Pauline literature are

²¹ Margaret MacDonald, introduction to *Colossians and Ephesians*, 9.

²² Paul’s remarks “for which I am in prison” (Col. 4:3), “my fellow prisoner,” (Col. 4:10), and “remember my chains” (Col. 4:18) have led commentators to identify the letter as one of Paul’s “captivity Epistles.” Generally, there are four New Testament letters called the captivity Epistles: Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, and Philippians. In addition to debating about Pauline authorship, there is debate about where Paul was captive. O’Brien suggests the following possible places for imprisonment: Rome, Caesarea, and Ephesus. See O’Brien, “Introduction to Colossians,” xlix – liii.

²³ MacDonald, introduction to *Colossians and Ephesians*, 10. Author Vincent Pizzuto points out that regardless of whether the pseudepigrapher was a student or an admirer, he was not only familiar enough with Paul to incorporate traditional material and thereby remained faithful to his master’s theology, but he was also creative enough to respond adequately to the new situation that confronted him. See Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 75.

²⁴ Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Colossians and Philemon,” 118.

²⁵ Margaret MacDonald, introduction to *Colossians and Ephesians*, 9.

“inconsistencies with authentic Pauline theology” and therefore “point necessarily to an author other than Paul,” while those favoring Pauline authorship typically argue that they are a “development of Paul’s own theology and a necessary polemical response to the local situation in Colossae.”²⁶ While Pizzuto himself believes the collective weight of evidence together points to a pseudepigrapher who was an admirer (indeed a disciple) of Paul, he recognizes that this is neither a settled hypothesis nor one without vulnerabilities.²⁷

Scripture scholars D.A. Carson and Douglas Moo are among those who recognize that the weight of evidence against Pauline authorship does not present a serious obstacle to seeing Paul as the author of Colossians. After analyzing the epistle’s language and style, theology, and relation to Ephesians, they believe that the arguments against Pauline authorship are not decisive. Specifically, they argue against proponents of deutero-Pauline authorship by stating:

They do not reckon sufficiently with the fact that a mind like Paul’s was capable of adaptation to new situations and to the adoption of new vocabulary and new concepts where older ones do not meet the need. They also fail to give a reason for addressing the letter to the unimportant town of Colossae. Surely an imitator would have selected a city of some importance, such as Laodicea or Hierapolis. In view of the letter’s claims and of the many undoubtedly Pauline features it manifests, we should accept it as an authentic Pauline writing.²⁸

²⁶ Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 38.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 14. Pizzuto acknowledges that while contemporary scholars make similar observations, they sometimes draw different conclusions. He cites Peter O’Brien who disagrees with his conclusions on Pauline authorship by stating, “The emphatic cosmic dimension of Christ’s rule is a fuller and more systematic exposition of the theme of Christ’s universal lordship, already made plain in earlier Pauline letters (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; 1:24; 2:6-10) and now spelled out in relation to and as a correction of the false teaching at Colossae. There is no need to postulate an author other than [deutero-] Paul as the source of such ideas.” Peter O’Brien, quoted in Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 45.

²⁸ Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 520-521. After his lengthy analysis of the language, style, and teaching of the epistle (e.g., Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and tradition), O’Brien reaches a similar conclusion by stating, “In our estimation the so-called differences between Colossians and the generally accepted Pauline letters do not constitute grounds for rejecting the apostolic authorship of this epistle. Differences of emphasis there are, but these are best interpreted as being called forth by the circumstances at Colossae.” See O’Brien, “Introduction to Colossians,” xli-xlix. For a synthesized analysis of O’Brien’s arguments in favor of Pauline authorship, see Peter O’Brien, “Colossians, Letter to the ,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. F. Hawthorne, Ralph Martin, Daniel Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 150-153.

Carson and Moo believe that their conclusion is supported by the fact that Colossians shares a number of links with Philemon, which almost all scholars take to be a genuine letter of the apostle. They point out that in both epistles greetings were sent from Aristarchus, Mark, Epaphras, Luke and Demas, who plainly were with Paul when he wrote (Col. 4:10-14; Philem. 23-24). Additionally, Onesimus, the slave at the center of the letter of Philemon, is sent with Tychicus and referred to as “one of you” (Col. 4:9). Finally, Archippus, “our fellow prisoner” (Philem. 2), is given a message to “complete the work” he has received from the Lord (Col. 4:17). Such similarities, in their opinion, make it “difficult to argue that Colossians was not written by Paul.”²⁹

²⁹ Ibid., 521. Carson and Moo state in a footnote that some have argued that the most compelling reason for accepting the authenticity of Colossians is its artless links with Philemon.” See Carson and Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 521n14. While the question of authorship continues to be debated, this paper will presume that Colossians was composed by the Apostle Paul. Regardless of the position that one takes on the question of Pauline authorship, scripture scholar Frank Matera’s comments summarize well a docile attitude toward what is ultimately an unresolved issue. Specifically, he agrees that there are seven letters whose Pauline authorship is beyond dispute: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Concerning the six remaining letters, Matera says, “I am inclined to think that there is evidence that Paul was the author of 2 Thessalonians and Colossians. I am not quite as confident, however, that he is the author of Ephesians and the Pastorals. However, if I were to learn that he was, I would not be surprised. For, while the style and theology of these letters diverge from the style and theology of the non-disputed letters, these letters are essentially faithful to the thought and theology of the one whose name they bear. Thus, if they were not written by Paul, they were composed by followers who knew and cherished his thought and so updated and applied it to new circumstances.” Frank J. Matera, *God’s Saving Grace: A Pauline Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 13.

Chapter Two

I. Delimitation of the Hymn from Context

In many ways, the letter to the Colossians exhibits similar characteristics with other letters attributed Paul. There is an opening address in which Paul identifies himself and the recipients to whom the letter is addressed (1:1-2). This is followed by introductory matters including an extensive thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-23) and statements affirming Paul's commitment to the gospel and to the Colossians, Laodiceans, and others who have not seen him (1:24-2:5).³⁰ After a lengthy introduction, the main themes of the letter are presented (2:6-4:6), which are then followed by a series of personal greetings (4:7-17) and a closing (4:18).³¹

The passage under consideration, for its part, falls in the subunit of thanksgiving and prayer (1:3-23). Author Charles Talbert structures this subunit by stating that "there is a thanksgiving (1:3-8; one sentence), an intercession (1:9-14) that breaks into a paean of praise (1:15-20), together constituting one sentence, followed by a statement about the hymn's immediate relevance for the readers (1:21-23; one sentence)."³² Talbert adds that "The mention of God's 'beloved Son' (1:13) is a catalyst for the author to give a second reason for thanksgiving, breaking into the Son's praise."³³ Moreover, the sentence immediately following the hymn (1:21-23) relates the message of the hymn to the readers who have become participants in the reconciliation God has effected through Christ's death (1:20, 22).³⁴ These comments

³⁰ Stuckenbruck, "Colossians and Philemon, 117.

³¹ Stuckenbruck points out that while the letter exhibits many features typical of letters attributed to Paul, its structure departs in two ways: (1) the surprising length devoted to the introductory matters before the main theme of the letter is articulated (1:1-2:5); and (2) the inclusion of a series of household codes in the otherwise customary exhortations at the end (3:18-4:1). Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 38.117.

³² Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians & Colossians: Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament*, eds., Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 185.

³³ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

suggest that the hymn serves an important role in its context. Concerning this, O'Brien comments:

Whatever previous existence the passage may have had (and whether it was composed by Paul or not), it is clearly central to the context in which it currently stands, and the task of the exegete is to explain its meaning within this framework and not some hypothetically reconstructed context. Paul's lengthy prayer leads up to the hymn, while the words which immediately follow take up phrases and ideas from it and apply the truths to the readers. Indeed, the paragraph undergirds the whole letter; remove it and a serious dislocation occurs.³⁵

In its context Col. 1:15-20 not only brings the subunit of praise to its peak, but also helps Paul apply its message of reconciliation to its readers. This structure, as author W.D. Davies notes, is typical in New Testament studies. Specifically, he says, "It is commonplace of New Testament studies that Paul's greatest doctrinal statements subserve his ethical exhortations; when Paul had to impress certain ethical duties upon his converts he appealed to what Jesus essentially was and did."³⁶

While Col. 1:15-20 serves as an anchor for subsequent ethical exhortations, scholars identify many characteristics which suggest that the passage pre-dates its present context. For example, theologian James D.G. Dunn points out that the "hymnic passage is introduced by a relative pronoun, 'who'; but it is quite clear that the antecedent is 'the Son of his [God's] love' (1:13)."³⁷ Scripture commentator Douglas Moo adds that the pronoun 'who' (ὃς) continues the

³⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 62.

³⁶ D. Paul Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (London, UK: SPCK Publishing, 1965), 146.

³⁷ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 268. Author Eduard Lohse puts forth that given the quotation begins with a relative clause, at least one brief line must have preceded the original hymn. It could have been something like "blessed be the Son of God." See Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 41n64. Commentator Andrew T. Lincoln, for his part, concurs by stating that "the relative pronoun ὃς (*hos*, "who"), which begins verses 15, 18b, is not a natural part of the context. It has all the indications, as in 1 Tim. 3:16, of being part of performed material that may have been preceded by some such words as 'We praise our Lord Jesus Christ.'" See Andrew T. Lincoln, *2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 602.

sequence of relative pronouns that begins in v. 13. Specifically, he says, “*the Father* [v.12] **who** [TNIV *he*] brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in **whom** we have redemption...**who** is the image....’ If Paul is quoting a ‘hymn,’ he has probably replaced the original noun with the relative pronoun to connect the hymn to the context.”³⁸ Scripture scholar Eduard Lohse identifies Phil. 2:6, 1 Tim. 3:16, 1 Pet. 2:22, and Heb. 1:3 as similar hymnic quotes which open with relative clauses.³⁹

Along with an awkward opening, Col. 1:15-20 has other peculiarities which suggest that it pre-dated its present context as an independent unit. For example, MacDonald points out that there is a shift in pronouns. Specifically, she explains that “verses 15-20 are in the third person, while verses 13-14 are in the first person and verses 21-23 are in the second and first persons.”⁴⁰ In other words, whereas the readers are directly addressed in the surrounding context, Col. 1:15-20 “contains no references to believers or to the readers in particular.”⁴¹ Furthermore, as will be later discussed the unit displays the use of rhetorical devices such as the chiasmus (A-B-B-A pattern) giving it a precise shape.⁴² Moreover, commentators have recognized that Col. 1:15-20 contains non-Pauline expressions and *hapax legomena* or words that only occur once in the letters of Paul. Some examples include: “‘visible’ (*horatos*), ‘thrones’ (*thronoi*), the intransitive form of ‘to be established’ (*synestēkenai*), ‘beginning’ (*archē*), ‘to be first’

³⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 116-117.

³⁹ Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, trans., William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, ed., Helmut Koester (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), 41n65. While scriptural commentator Robert Wilson identifies the same passages, he says that this does not mean that all passages which begin with a ὅς are to be regarded as fragments of hymns, creeds or confessions. See Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon: The International Critical Commentary*, 126. For a detailed study of the structure, content, and historical religious background New Testament Christological hymns, see Jack T. Sanders, *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1971).

⁴⁰ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 65.

⁴¹ Lincoln, *2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 602.

⁴² MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 65.

(*prōteuein*), ‘to make peace’ (*eirēnopoiein*), [and] ‘blood of the cross’ (*haima tou staurou autou*).”⁴³ Finally, although the passage helps Paul transition from praise to ethical exhortation, if verses 15-20 were removed from the letter, verses 13-14 and verses 21-23 would join nicely and naturally.⁴⁴ Consequently, the unexpected opening, along with the shift in pronouns, precise shape, unique language, and the loose attachment to its context suggest that Col. 1:15-20 was an independent unit inserted into the letter.⁴⁵

II. Literary Analysis

In terms of literary form, according to MacDonald, “Scholars have come to believe that these verses constitute a hymn.”⁴⁶ For example, relying upon the work of Ernst Käsemann, commentator James Robinson says, “The hymnic character of Col. 1:15-20 is long since recognized and generally accepted.”⁴⁷ In fact, scripture commentator Eduard Schweizer goes so far as to say, “It is no longer a matter of dispute that we have in these verses a hymn which has been taken over by the author.”⁴⁸ He believes that the collective evidence of the unique characteristics warrant classifying the passage as a “hymn.”⁴⁹ Theologian Ben Witherington III,

⁴³ Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 182.

⁴⁴ David M. Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 51; cf. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 183;

⁴⁵ Author R.E.O. White puts forth that the peculiarities of the passage suggest that Paul adapted an early Christological hymn to Christ. Specially, he states, “In 1:15-20 certain peculiarities of language, the elevated style, the loose attachment to its context, and the closely parallel structure in two strophes have suggested that Paul is using and adapting an early Christian hymn to Christ (cf. Eph. 5:14; Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16).” See R.E.O. White, *In Him the fullness: Homiletic studies in Paul's Epistle to the Colossians* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1973), 221.

⁴⁶ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 65.

⁴⁷ James M. Robinson, “A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76, no 4 (December 1957): 271.

⁴⁸ Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: Commentary*, trans., Andrew Chester (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), 55.

⁴⁹ While certainly in the minority, certain commentators such as Larry Helyer argue that the unit is not a hymn, but rather a poem. He says, “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

for his part, concurs that verses 15-20 should be classified as a hymn because it “manifests a basic V pattern so characteristic of early sapiential Christological hymns, chronicling the drama of creation, salvation, and glorification in its three Christological stages. In Col 1:15ff. Christ is seen as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer all wrapped up into one.”⁵⁰ Commentator Steven Baugh explains that the term “hymn” is usually used to include any number of things from liturgical and baptismal confessions, prayers to musical pieces.⁵¹ If Colossians 1:15-20 was a baptismal confession, commentator Teresa Okure puts forth that the passage may have been a “type of creed to which every Christian pledged himself or herself at the moment of baptismal initiation into Christ. In this baptismal context, the passage is not simply a hymn about Christ, but a pledge, a commitment on the part of the baptized to live in accordance with their faith in Christ.”⁵² The distinctive unit, then, could be about the believer’s Christian identity. The Christian need not remain a slave to the “elemental powers of the world” (Col. 2:8) because in baptism he or she has died and risen with Christ. Regardless, scripture commentator Andrew Lincoln explains that it is not at all strange that Paul had recourse to quoting, either exactly or with some additional words of application, a hymn given that he exhorts the Colossians to teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God (Col. 3:16).⁵³

both creation and redemption.” Larry L. Helyer, “Cosmic Christology and Col. 1:15-20,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, no. 2 (June 1994): 235.

⁵⁰ Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World*, 107.

⁵¹ Steven M. Baugh, “The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15-20,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 227n1. Scripture commentator David Hay puts forth that since the work of Eduard Norden, scholars have widely agreed that this passage quotes (perhaps with modifications) a self-contained christological statement that was probably part of an early church liturgy. See Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 50.

⁵² Teresa Okure, “In Him All Things Hold Together: A Missiological Reading of Colossians 1:15-20,” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 360 (January 2002): 64.

⁵³ Lincoln, *Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 602.

III. Structural Analysis

A. Two Strophe Structure

Commentator Steven Baugh states that scholars generally arrange Colossians 1:15-20 into either two or three strophes.⁵⁴ Those who divide the hymn into two strophes believe that each strophe begins at verses 15a and 18b.⁵⁵ Hay explains that “The ‘he is’ (Gk. *hos estin*) clauses in verse 15a (‘he is the image’) and verse 18b (‘he is the beginning’) seem to divide the passage into two main clusters of assertions.”⁵⁶ Scripture commentator Jerome Murphy-O’Connor states that the parallels between the two stanza arrangement reveal an intentionality on the part of Paul. Specifically, he says:

The first lines of each strophe begin with ‘who is,’ and the second lines with ‘firstborn.’ The third lines commence with ‘for in him,’ which is followed by a verb in the passive (‘were created/was pleased’), whose subject is a universal (‘all things/all the Fullness’). The fourth lines contain three identical expressions, ‘all things,’ ‘through him,’ and ‘to him.’ So many correspondences must be intentional. They are the result of careful planning to achieve balance between the two strophes. No one who had made such an effort would destroy the elegance of his or her creation.⁵⁷

To achieve perfect symmetry, Murphy-O’Connor, suggests that verses 16bcde, 17, 18ad, and 20bc were added by another hand.⁵⁸ Some modern commentators have been criticized for excessively altering the hymn in order to achieve perfect symmetry between the two strophes

⁵⁴ Baugh, “The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15-20,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 228. Baugh provides examples of scholars who defend each approach. Those who defend the two strophe approach include: Eduard Norden, James M. Robinson, Eduard Bammel, and Eduard Lohse. See page 229. See appendices III and IV for examples of two strophe structures provided by Eduard Lohse and David Hay respectively. Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 44-45; Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 51.

⁵⁵ For examples of proposed two stanza approaches, see Eduard Lohse (appendix III), David Hay (appendix IV), and James Robinson (appendix V). Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 44-45; Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 51; James R. Robinson, “A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76, no. 4 (January 1957): 273.

⁵⁶ Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 52.

⁵⁷ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “Colossians,” 1193-1194.

⁵⁸ See Appendix VI of a reconstructed arrangement of two four-line strophes as proposed by Murphy-O’Connor taken from page 1193 in *The Oxford Biblical Commentary*.

because they erroneously presume that perfect symmetry was expected in the ancient world. Concerning this, Lohse says, “It is hardly probable that a primitive Christian hymn would have consisted of regularly constructed verses and strophes, the individual strophes probably differed in structure and were composed in the free rhythm of hymnic prose.”⁵⁹ Lohse, then, cautions against meddling too much with the text to achieve an exact two strophic structural parallelism.

Even in its final form, the hymn possesses an amazing correspondence between the two strophes. For example, Schweizer explains that whereas in the first strophe Christ is extolled as he in whom, through whom, and for whom the whole creation has come about, in the second strophe he is celebrated as the Risen One, in whom, through whom, and for whom, by means of the presence of the divine “fullness,” the reconciliation of the world has come about.⁶⁰ Robinson suggests that such correspondence may result from the fact that ideas were clustered in Christianity prior to the composition of Colossians. For example, he points out that the phrase “all things” which occurs in both strophes recurs in other liturgical kerygmatic texts such as Heb. 1:3, John 1:3, and 1 Cor. 8:6.⁶¹ Like other liturgical kerygmatic texts, the Colossians hymn drew from the ideas that Christ existed before “all things” and that “all things” exist in Him, through Him, and for Him.

B. Three Strophe Structure

Those who divide Colossians 1:15-20 into three strophes argue that verses 17-18a should stand as an independent strophe rather than as a part of the first strophe.⁶² They argue that these

⁵⁹ Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 44.

⁶⁰ Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: Commentary*, 63.

⁶¹ Robinson also compares Philippians 2:6-11 with an extra biblical text to highlight the close affinity of concepts which recur in Colossians 1:15-20. See Robinson, “A Formal Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20,” 278-280.

⁶² Baugh, “The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15-20,” 229. Those who defend the three strophe approach include Eduard Schweizer, Ernst Lohmeyer, Jack T. Sanders, Ralph P. Martin, Wayne McCown, Paul Beasley-Murray, and

verses serve as a transitional strophe from the first to the second strophe. According to Schweizer, this arrangement emphasizes Christ as creator, preserver, and redeemer respectively.

Concerning this, Schweizer states:

Thus, our hymn praises Christ in a first stanza as ‘the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, in whom, through whom, to whom all things were created,’ in a second stanza as ‘the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, in whom, through whom, to whom all things were reconciled.’ A short middle stanza says: ‘And He before all things, and in Him all things hold together, and He is the head of the body.’⁶³

Additionally, this arrangement highlights the hymn’s chiasmic pattern. For example, Baugh argues for the following chiasmic pattern: verses 15-16 (A), verse 17a (B), verse 17b (C), verse 18a (B’), and verses 18b-20 (A’) (see Appendix VIII).⁶⁴ For Baugh, the A/A’ sections attribute supreme lordship to God’s Son in the realm of creation and re-creation respectively. Whereas in the A section Christ is presented as the unique heir and agent in God’s creation, in the A’ section He is presented as the head and agent of the new creation. Sections B/B’, for their part, serve as summaries of A and A’ respectively.⁶⁵ The same Christ who is the head of church (the locus of the new creation) is the same preexistent Christ who is head of the first creation. Finally, Baugh argues that the “C section is the center of the chiasm, and thus should be seen as the focus of the poem.”⁶⁶ The C section relates that both the sphere of creation and the sphere of redemption find their unity on Christ.

most recently, F.F. Bruce. See pages 229-230. See appendix VII for Moo’s proposed three strophe structure. See Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 116.

⁶³ Eduard Schweizer, “Colossians 1:15-20,” *Review and Expositor* 87, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 97.

⁶⁴ Baugh, “The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15-20,” 236.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁶⁶ Lincoln, *Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 237.

IV. Formal Analysis

A. Pre-Christian Gnosticism

While scholarly opinion generally agrees that Colossians 1:15-20 is a hymn, such widespread consensus does not exist regarding the sphere of thought from which the hymn originated. Some scholars assert that Paul used a pre-Christian Gnostic hymn in order to refute Gnosticism. For example, Lincoln states:

Käsemann held that, once the additions ‘of the church’ and ‘through the blood of his cross’ were removed, the original hymn no longer displayed any specifically Christian characteristics. It could, in fact, be seen as a pre-Christian Gnostic hymn that dealt with the metaphysical and supra-historical drama involving a Gnostic redeemer. This hymn had been taken over into Christian usage in a baptismal liturgical reinterpretation and finally was cited by the writer in a refutation of what Käsemann considered to be the Gnostic countermovement that provoked the letter. There is irony to this reconstitution, since the hymn had originally come from Gnosticism and was now being employed to refute it.⁶⁷

Paul’s use of “fullness” (*plērōma*) in Col. 1:19 figured prominently in second century Gnostic thought. MacDonald explains, “Among the Valentinians the concept referred to the totality of emanations that came forth from God. The eons emanating from God filled the space in the uppermost spiritual realm – the space closest to God. The spiritual or heavenly realm was understood as separated from the cosmos by a boundary.”⁶⁸ While some see Paul using the hymn to refute this false teaching by asserting that God dwells fully in Christ alone, other scholars find this hypothesis doubtful.⁶⁹ It is not only anachronistic in that there is little evidence

⁶⁷ Lincoln, *Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 604. See Appendix IX for Lincoln’s outline with proposed additions to the hymn in brackets taken from pages 602-603.

⁶⁸ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 63.

⁶⁹ See William Barclay, *The Letters of the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), 97-99, 113-166. Barclay presumes that Gnosticism was at play in the Colossian Church. Specifically, he states, “It is clear that the false teachers of Colossae were tinged with Gnostic heresy. They were trying to turn Christianity into a philosophy and a theosophy, and, if they had been successful, the Christian faith would have been destroyed.” See page 99.

of a clear Gnostic redeemer myth in the first century A.D., but the hymn's perspective of relating creation and redemption to the same source of agency is inimical to Gnosticism.⁷⁰

Additionally, Pizzuto explains that “Despite its creativity, Käsemann’s interpolation theory, which had seemed rather promising in the 1930’s, has since come under sharp criticism and lost much of its appeal.”⁷¹ For example, he points out that the “*Religionsgeschichte* of the Colossians hymn is not that of gnosticism, but more properly Second Temple Judaism, which had long been wading into the currents of Hellenistic philosophy and syncretism that were so prevalent in the Greco-Roman world.”⁷² In other words, the hymn was not born from an unambiguously Gnostic milieu, but rather a widespread syncretistic milieu. Commentator Bruce Vawter explains this well by stating:

We are doubtless trying to preserve an anachronism if we insist on an all-or-nothing explanation of the world of ideas behind the hymn imbedded in Col. 1:15-20, if we demand that it be either ‘Jewish’ or ‘gnostic.’ What we have been compelled to recognize more and more through recent discoveries and studies is the strongly syncretic character of the world into which Christianity was born, a syncretism that was not confined to the Hellenistic-Roman world that prized it as an ideal of life, but a syncretism that had permeated even such supposedly closed societies as that of Palestinian Judaism.⁷³

⁷⁰ Lincoln, *Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 604. Additionally, commentators Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke add that “A Gnostic derivative, as it was suggested by E. Käsemann, already miscarries in the sense that this concept cannot be proven in a technical sense before the 2d century. Besides that, it is not frequent in the Gnostic literature and it has special meaning only in the system of the Valentinians. The dualistic idea that is connected with *plērōma* is, however, distant from that in the Colossian Hymn.” Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 34B of *The Anchor Bible*, eds., William Foxwell and David Noel Freedman, trans. Astrid B. Beck (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994), 212-213n80.

⁷¹ Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 139.

⁷² Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 141. Referring to the term Second Temple Judaism, Pizzuto says in a footnote, “This term speaks to a broad range of Jewish thought and speculation that includes at once Palestinian Judaism and those Jews of the ‘Diaspora.’ We are of the view that the terms ‘Hellenistic’ and ‘Palestinian’ Judaism are somewhat misleading because of varying degrees, all Judaism of the first century had been affected by the syncretistic influences of the Hellenized world. Thus, in light of modern research, such a sharp distinction between them can hardly be sustained.” See Pizzuto, 141n136.

⁷³ Bruce Francis Vawter, “The Colossians Hymn and the Principle of Redaction,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (January 1971): 72-73.

Vawter argues against the false preconception that first century Christianity emerged from watertight compartments of “Jewish/Non-Hellenistic” or “Non-Jewish/Hellenistic” thought. Instead, writers were able to borrow terms and ideas from one tradition that were functionally useful to them without necessarily committing to the tradition. Concerning this, Vawter says, “In like manner, Col. 1:15-20 appears to have made use fairly indifferently of language and thought-patterns available from various resources without necessarily committing itself unreservedly to the intellectual background of any of them.”⁷⁴ Rather than pigeonhole Colossians 1:15-20 to a particular stream of thought, then, it is more appropriate to acknowledge that these verses cannot be wholly explained by either Jewish nor Gnostic thought and in part is conflict with both of them.⁷⁵

B. Hellenistic-Judaism

According to Pizzuto, the milieu from which the hymn originated was from Second Temple Judaism which had long been influenced by the currents of Hellenistic philosophy and syncretism that were so prevalent in the Greco-Roman world.⁷⁶ Consequently, he states:

We should expect then, that the deutero-Pauline Colossians hymn would reflect elements of a formal structure as well as terminology that had developed in the synagogue, which itself had assimilated its scriptural heritage with syncretistic speculation. Thus, the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 73. Vawter adds that Colossians 1:15-20 is really what it professes 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. It is by no means the theology of Paul; indeed, wherever it has been utilized in a Pauline writing the need has been felt to Paulinize it. It is, for all that, a theology that was formative of the NT, and for that reason it deserves examination in its own right.” See pages 73-74.

⁷⁶ Stephen L. Harris and Robert L. Platzner, *The Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2008). These authors affirm the prevalent influence of Greek culture upon Judaism subsequent Alexander the Great’s conquest of Palestine by stating, “But whether the Jews found themselves living under Ptolemaic or Seleucid authority, the dominant culture to which they were exposed was a globalized Greek culture known as Hellenism – a general term designating the arts, philosophy, and religious practices of Greek-speaking peoples throughout the lands conquered by Alexander. Many Jews, particularly the wealthy and socially prominent, found Hellenistic civilization quite attractive and willingly embraced Greek values and lifestyles, often blending Hellenistic and Judaic cultural traits. See page 358.

degree to which we identify Judaism as the primary framework behind the hymn, must be balanced by a nuanced articulation of the degree of syncretistic influences involved as well.⁷⁷

Pizzuto puts forth that while Judaism is the primary framework behind the hymn, it must be properly balanced by giving adequate attention to syncretistic influences. He then examines a number of motifs within Second Temple monotheistic Judaism to determine the extent which Paul may or may not have borrowed from them.⁷⁸ Among the motifs analyzed, he says, “Of all the motifs that we have examined, none will play as central a role in our discussion of the christology of Col. 1:15-20 as the OT personified figure of Wisdom.”⁷⁹ Indeed, many scholars have recognized that there is a strong correlation between the Jewish reflection on divine Wisdom and the language and imagery of Col. 1:15-20. For example, referring to the first and transitional strophes of the three strophe structure (vv. 15-17), Dunn states:

Indeed, few issues in recent NT theology have commanded such unanimity of agreement as the source of the language and imagery used in these two passages. By common consent, it was drawn from earlier Jewish reflection on divine Wisdom. The language appealed to the first Christians because it had been so much used of the figure of heavenly Wisdom. What we have in these passages, in other words, are classic expressions of Wisdom Christology.⁸⁰

After summarizing the parallels between divine Wisdom and the hymn, Dunn reaches the conclusion that “such a sequence of correlation can hardly be a matter of coincidence.”⁸¹

Schweizer, for his part, seems to suggest an even stronger correlation by stating, “The theology

⁷⁷ Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 141.

⁷⁸ Examples include: The literary style of Jewish psalmody, Second Temple Jewish cultic life, the Exodus motif, the ‘Shekinah’ motif, and the intermediary figure of wisdom. See Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 221-241.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁸⁰ Dunn, *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 269. cf. Pizzuto who says that “it is hardly debatable that the Christology of Colossians had indeed been shaped by the language of Wisdom, speculation within Hellenistic-Judaism.” See Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 237. Additionally, O’Brien states, “The significance attached to the Wisdom tradition in which Wisdom’s function is understood in Colossians 1:15-20 as being transferred to Christ is a point accepted by exegetes who have preferred to seek the background to the paragraph in Hellenistic Judaism.” See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 38-39.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 269.

of the group that created this hymn is obvious. One could quote the parallels to the first stanza word by word in the Wisdom literature.”⁸² To demonstrate, Gorman provides a few excerpts from the canonical book of Proverbs and the deuterocanonical book of the Wisdom of Solomon.⁸³ Some of the similarities include:

	<u>Wisdom</u>	<u>Christ</u>
Image of God	An aura of the might of God and a pure effusion of the glory of the Almighty (Wisd. of Sol. 7:25)	He is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15)
Firstborn	The Lord begot me, the firstborn of his ways (Prov. 8:22)	the firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:15)
Creation	Wisdom founded the earth (Prov. 3:19)	For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth (Col. 1:16)
Re-creation	And, she, who is one, can do all things, and renews everything while herself perduring (Wisd. of Sol. 7:27)	He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...and through him to reconcile all things for him (Col. 1:18, 20)

Commentator Jeffrey Lamp recognizes that “the flow of thought of the whole passage encapsulates the sum of what can be said of the depiction of wisdom in Jewish wisdom thought:

⁸² Eduard Schweizer, “The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ,” *New Testament Studies*, 8, no. 1 (October 1961): 7. As will be discussed later, Dunn & Schweizer’s conclusions are greatly criticized by theologian Gordon Fee.

⁸³ Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 481. Scripture scholar David deSilva notes that Wisdom of Solomon is a product of Alexandrian Judaism from the turn of the era (placed anywhere between 220 B.C.E. and 100 C.E.). The work is believed to have been written by a pious Jew living in Alexandria, the famous center of learning and Hellenistic culture, to encourage *continued* adherence to the Jewish way of life in the face of a dominant majority that devalued that heritage. There is, then, rhetoric in Wisdom intended to promote a “we versus they” mentality in order to guard against assimilation. Additionally, deSilva says that “Wisdom is perhaps the most important of the Apocrypha in terms of impact upon the early church during the most formative centuries of Christian theology.” For example, texts such as Heb. 1:3 and Col. 1:15 demonstrate that “Wisdom of Solomon’s lavish expansions on the personified Wisdom’s relationship to God provided important raw material for Christology in the early church.” See David A. deSilva, “Wisdom of Solomon: ‘The Righteous Live Forever,’” in *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 127-152.

Wisdom, active in creation, is also active in redemption.”⁸⁴ Scripture commentator Allan Bevere summarizes the correlation nicely by saying “For Paul and Timothy all that can be said of wisdom can now be said of Christ.”⁸⁵

While Dunn and Schweizer argue for a strong correlation between divine Wisdom and Christ in Col. 1:15-20, other authors such as Christopher Beetham believe the correlation is much more subtle. For example, concerning the relationship between Prov. 8:22-31 and Col. 1:15-20, Beetham says, “Paul has not alluded to Prov 8:22-31 in a strict sense, but rather to it *in its first century C.E. interpretative development*, which was ‘in the air’ of his day.”⁸⁶ Beetham refers to the intersection between Prov. 8:22-21 and Col. 1:15-20 as an “allusion.”⁸⁷ That is, given the word agreement and rare concept similarity between the two passages, it appears that Paul was aware of the book of Proverbs and intended to link Wisdom to Christ. Thus, in Beetham’s opinion, the language typically used in regard to Wisdom serves as an

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Lamp, “Wisdom in Col. 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 1 (March 1998): 51.

⁸⁵ Bevere, *Sharing in the Inheritance: Identity and the Moral Life in Colossians*, 126. As will be discussed later, most scholars recognize that there are unique elements in the hymn which cannot be accounted for in the Wisdom tradition. In other words, there is not simply a one-to-one correlation or transference of concept between divine Wisdom and Christ. See Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom*, 270.

⁸⁶ Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 113.

⁸⁷ Beetham explains that there are three criteria necessary for an allusion: (1) availability; (2) word agreement, as well as rare concept similarity, and (3) essential interpretive link. Regarding *availability*, Paul displays awareness of the book of Proverbs. He quotes from it at Rom. 2:6 (Prov. 24:12; Ps. 61:13 LXX), 12:20 (Prov. 25:21), and 2 Cor. 9:7 (Prov. 22:8a). Regarding *word agreement and rare concept similarity*, Col. 1:15-20 holds numerous words and concepts in common with the Prov. 8:22-31 interpretive development. Regarding *interpretive link*, the reader must recognize the allusion to this parent text (in its 1st century C.E. development), realize it is deliberate, remember aspects of this text in its development and connect one or more of these aspects to get the point that Paul is depicting Christ in language typically used in regard to Wisdom, the figure present at God’s side before and during his work of creation at the dawn of time. See Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 114. In terms of availability, scripture commentator André Feuillet concurs by stating that “it is not at all improbable that Paul had available to him the original text of Proverbs.” See Feuillet, *Le Christ Sagesse de Dieu, d’après les épîtres pauliniennes*, 188. This quotation and all subsequent quotations from Feuillet are translated from the original French to English by professor emerita Dr. Virginia Schubert, professor of French and Francophone Studies at Macalester College (1965-2006).

“interpretive key” for Col. 1:15-20.⁸⁸ While the first readers of Col. 1:15-20 may not have realized this connection, they would, of course, still have comprehended the surface-level meaning or “un-allusive sense” of the passage.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Beetham’s study focuses on Prov. 8 given that he believes other texts in the Wisdom literature such as Wis. 7 and Sir. 24 are developments of this parent text.

⁸⁹ Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 114.

Chapter Three

I. Gordon Fee's Criticism

Theologian Gordon Fee greatly criticizes modern scripture commentators who emphasize the linguistic and conceptual links between divine Wisdom and Col. 1:15-20. From his research, he believes that three important conclusions in terms of Paul's reliance upon the Wisdom tradition can be drawn: (1) Paul's certain citations and allusions to this tradition are quite limited; (2) when he does cite the tradition, it is invariably in keeping with the point made in the cited text; and (3) these citations/allusions are limited to the canonical Hebrew Bible and this includes neither Sirach nor Wisdom of Solomon.⁹⁰ He looks at six texts from the Wisdom tradition in the Pauline Corpus: 1 Cor. 3:19 (Job 5:12-13); 2 Cor. 9:7 (Prov. 22:8a LXX); Rom. 3:10 (Eccles. 7:20); Rom. 12:20 (Prov. 25:21); Rom. 11:35 (Job 41:11); and Rom. 11:33 (similar perspective with that of the author of Job). After discussing these texts, Fee concludes: "Finally, it should be noted that apart from these six instances, the wisdom tradition as such simply cannot be found in the Pauline Letters. None-the-less, a careful analysis of these texts in their Pauline corpus makes it clear that Paul knew the tradition well, since his echoes in particular give evidence of a knowledge of the tradition that lies deep within."⁹¹ Fee's conclusion, of course, directly challenges that of Dunn's which puts forth that "By common consent, it [the language of 1:15-20] was drawn from earlier Jewish reflection on divine Wisdom."⁹²

⁹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 602. Regarding the third point, in looking at Wisdom of Solomon and comparing them to 1 Cor. 8:6; 2 Cor. 4:4-6; Col. 1:15-20, Fee boldly asserts that "there are neither linguistic *nor conceptual* parallels between this document and the Pauline texts." See page 606.

⁹¹ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 605.

⁹² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 113n116. In this same footnote, Moo provides the overall conclusion of Fee's work, which is that "Wisdom Christology is *not* found in Paul's letters and thus has no role in the reconstruction of Paul's Christology; cf. Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 619. Moo believes that Fee appropriately criticizes a tendency toward an uncritical acceptance of, and overemphasis on, Wisdom Christology.

Additionally, Fee investigates whether Paul has personified Wisdom as a backdrop of his view of Christ in Col. 1:15-17. To do so, he not only analyzes Paul's actual use of the word Σοφία ("Wisdom") in the entire letter, but also his alleged use of Wisdom vocabulary in the first strophe of the "hymn" in Col. 1:15-17. Regarding the former, Fee recognizes the fact that the word wisdom itself is used six times (1:9; 1:28; 2:3, 2:23; 3:16; 4:5). Of these six references, only 2:3 juxtaposes Christ and wisdom. In Fee's opinion, this reference identifies Christ with the attribute of wisdom rather than personified wisdom. In short, he summarizes Paul's actual use of the word wisdom (σοφία) as follows:

Paul's actual usage of σοφία in Colossians thus does very little to generate hope that in 1:15-17 he is thinking of God's Son in terms of personified Wisdom. Locating all the treasures of "wisdom and knowledge" in Christ, thus making Christ himself the depository of all the wisdom of God, is not the same thing as identifying him with Lady Wisdom herself. Nor does the language of any of these uses appear in the Jewish Wisdom literature in contexts where wisdom is being personified. Although "wisdom" was part of the issue that Paul was rebutting, this says very little in favor of his alleged use of other language found in the wisdom tradition and applying it to Christ, which in fact he does not.⁹³

According to Fee, the actual usage of the word Wisdom itself does little to support Dunn's assertion that the "sequence of correlation [between Paul and personified wisdom] can hardly be a matter of coincidence."⁹⁴

Fee acknowledges that more important than Paul's actual use of the word σοφία is his use of language that is alleged to be the special provenance of Wisdom literature per se and of Lady Wisdom in particular. Contra Dunn's claim that Paul's language in Col. 1:15-17 offers "classic expressions of Wisdom christology," Fee boldly claims that "there is a rather complete lack of

However, his failure to consider the larger wisdom/word tradition as found in Philo renders the strength of his conclusion questionable.

⁹³ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 319.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 319; cf. Dunn, *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 269.

both linguistic and conceptual ties to this tradition.”⁹⁵ He then scrutinizes five alleged linguistic correlations between the Wisdom literature and Col. 1:15-17. Specifically, these include: “image” (Wis. 7:26; Col. 1:15), God’s “firstborn” in creation (Prov. 8:22, 25; Col. 1:15), “before all things” (Sir. 1:4; Col. 1:17a), “in him [the Son] all things hold together” (Wis. 1:6-7; Col. 1:17b), and “beginning” (Prov. 8:22-23, Sir. 24:9; Col. 1:18).⁹⁶ Each of his criticisms will be numbered and discussed.

1. Fee acknowledges that “image” (εἰκών) is a term that is always the first to be brought forward as evidence of Paul’s reliance on Wisdom. For example, while many commentators point to the parallel use of “image” in Wis. 7:26 and Col. 1:15, Fee believes that they are used differently. Concerning the language of personified Wisdom in Wis. 7:26, he says:

Rather, she is but ‘an image of his *goodness*’ (εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθοτήτος αὐτοῦ) – one of the clear concerns of the author. Paul, on the other hand, is intending something very much like what he says in 2 Cor 4:4-6: the unseen God can now be known in his beloved Son (Col. 1:13), who alone bears the true image of the Father, to whom Paul has been giving thanks (v. 12).⁹⁷

Fee contends that whereas Wisdom is conveyed only as an image of God’s *goodness* in Wis. 7:26, Christ *is* the εἰκὼν the invisible God in Col. 1:15. In Fee’s opinion, the source of Col. 1:15 is not Wis. 7:26, but rather Gen. 1-2. He says that “*the Son alone* bears the true likeness of the Father. In this way, although not explicitly stated, the Son also becomes the second Adam, bearing the *divine* image in his humanity, the image that Adam and Eve had been intended to bear.”⁹⁸ In other words, relying upon the language in Gen. 1-2 (Gen. 1:26 in

⁹⁵ Ibid., 319-320.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 320-325.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 324.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 325.

particular), Col. 1:15 presents Christ as the one who alone bears the “image” of the invisible God. In Fee’s view, the language of Wis. 7:26 simply fails to capture this truth adequately.⁹⁹

2. Regarding God’s “firstborn” in creation, Fee argues that not only does Paul’s word “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος) not appear in the entire Wisdom tradition, but the two texts traditionally brought forward (Prov. 8:22, 25) carry a considerably different meaning than Paul’s use of the term. Whereas “Wisdom is the first of God’s ‘creations’ so that she might be present to frolic as he creates all else...Christ *as Son* holds the rights of primogeniture with regard to every created thing, since they were all created *in* him and *through* him.”¹⁰⁰ Fee adds that recourse to Philo of Alexandria, a first century Jewish philosopher and scriptural interpreter, does not offer additional help in finding the word πρωτότοκος in the Wisdom literature.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Ibid., 325. Fee dissects the language of Wis. 7:26 and concludes that it presents Wisdom as a spotless mirror, which reflects the light in which God dwells eternally. She is neither the light itself nor the source of light. Additionally, Wisdom is a mirror image of his goodness: again, she is neither goodness itself nor the source of goodness. He asserts that this, unfortunately, does not even come close to what Paul says in Col. 1:15 of God’s Son: he himself *is* the εικων of the otherwise unseeable God. See pages 324-325.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 320.

¹⁰¹ Fee argues that Philo’s three occurrences of the term πρωτοτοκος with regard to the Logos is an adjective accompanying the word “son” (*Agr.* 51; *Conf.* 146; *Somm.* 1.215). Furthermore, he puts forth that “in each case it carries the sense of ‘the first male out of the womb’ and thus none of the additional sense of having the rights of primogeniture or of inheritance.” He adds that he finds it hard to imagine a Jewish author of the first century could think of a *woman* (wisdom) in terms of a “firstborn *son*.” See pages 320-321. It should be noted that Fee finds it somewhat problematic to bring Philo into a discussion of the Wisdom literature itself – all the more so when it is the *only possible referent* that one has. See pages 323n75. According to author David Scholer, “Philo, usually known as Philo the Jew (Philo Judaeus) or Philo of Alexandria (a city in Egypt with a large Jewish Diaspora population in Greco-Roman times), lived from about 20 B.C. to about A.D. 50. He is one of the most important Jewish authors of the Second Temple period of Judaism and was a contemporary of both Jesus and Paul. Yet, Philo is not nearly as well known or as frequently read as the first century A.D. Jewish historian Josephus.” Additionally, Scholer notes that “Philo is significant for the understanding of first century A.D. Hellenistic Judaism. He is the main surviving literary figure of the Hellenized Judaism of the Second Temple period of ancient Judaism. Philo is critical for understanding many of the currents, themes, and interpretative traditions which existed in the Diaspora and Hellenistic Judaism. Philo confirms the multifaceted character of Second Temple Judaism; it was certainly not a monolithic phenomenon. Judaism, in spite of its concerns for purity and ethnic identity with reference to the law of Moses, also found considerable freedom to participate in many aspects of Hellenistic culture, as Philo so clearly evidences.” Finally, in contrast Fee’s opinion of bringing Philo into the discussion of the Wisdom literature, Scholer states, “Philo is noteworthy for understanding the early church and the writings of the New Testament, especially those of Paul, John, and Hebrews. It is sometimes forgotten that the New Testament documents were written in

3. In terms of “before all things,” Fee analyzes the correlation between Sir. 1:4a and Col. 1:17a by stating, “In saying that Wisdom was *created* before all things [προτέρα πάντων], Sirach almost certainly means ‘before all things else.’ Thus Sirach is simply reflecting on Prov. 8:22-31, that the earth’s ‘wise’ design means that God in his own wisdom created the world; when Wisdom is then personified, she of necessity must have been ‘created before all things else.’”¹⁰² Obviously, this understanding is contrary to Paul’s understanding that Christ *is* before all things. Consequently, Fee believes that the phrase from Sirach “offers neither verbal nor conceptual correspondence to Paul’s understanding of the Son as eternally preexistent.”¹⁰³

4. Fee also analyzes Paul’s phrase “in him [the Son] all things hold together” in Col. 1:17b, which is alleged to correspond to Wis. 1:6-7. In Wis. 1:6-7, “that which” holds all things together is the Spirit of the Lord. In Fee’s view, to find personified Wisdom in this phrase requires several leaps of faith. He argues against finding personified Wisdom in Wis. 1:6-7 for three reasons. First, Paul does not equate Wisdom with the spirit of the Lord, but rather to the “spiritual” quality of wisdom. Second, given that the personification of Wisdom does not begin until 6:12 and ends abruptly in 10:21 (except for the cameo appearance in 14:2), personified Wisdom is not to be found in two-thirds of the book. Finally, Wis. 1:6-7 can only be used as a

Greek by authors who were Jews (of course now committed to understanding Jesus as Christ and Lord) who were part of the Hellenistic culture of the Greco-Roman world. Most of the early churches reflected and described in the New Testament were part of the social fabric of the Hellenistic Greco-Roman world. Precisely because Philo is a Hellenistic Jew, he is essential for New Testament studies.” Scholer also notes that “Philo’s ideas about Logos/Wisdom are also indispensable for New Testament studies...” See David M. Scholer, “An Introduction to Philo Judaeus of Alexandria,” forward to the updated edition of *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C.D. Yogne (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), xi-xv.

¹⁰² Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 321.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 321.

source for Wisdom Christology in Paul if “spirit” and “wisdom” are identical in Pseudo-Solomon, which is not even a remote possibility.¹⁰⁴

5. Finally, Fee investigates the term “beginning” (ἀρχή) in Col. 1:18 and its corresponding reference in Prov. 8:22-23.¹⁰⁵ Linguistically, Fee argues that although the Septuagint translator used the term ἀρχή for “Wisdom,” it is unlikely that he intended to identify Wisdom with ἀρχή. Concerning this, Fee states:

After all, the author’s own elaboration of v. 22 in v. 23 specifically identifies her not with this word as such but with her being present ‘at the beginning,’ before the creation itself. And since this is the only way Sirach understood it (24:9; cf. 1:4), it is quite unlikely that Paul had Lady Wisdom in mind when he called the risen Son the ‘beginning.’¹⁰⁶

For Fee, the verbal correspondence between Prov. 8:22-23 and Col. 1:18 with the term “beginning” is not substantive, but rather accidental. The term was employed by the Septuagint translator in Prov. 8:22-23 as a way of expressing Wisdom’s presence before creation. As with the term “firstborn,” Fee argues that appeals made to Philo’s usage of the term in his writings add little clarity to the issue.¹⁰⁷

After concluding his analysis of these five parallels, Fee concludes that none of them support Dunn’s “sequence of correlation” between Wisdom literature and Col. 1:15-17. Fee strongly criticizes those commentators who find parallels of any kind in Paul’s writings between Christ and personified Wisdom by stating:

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 321. In Fee’s opinion, these three points support his argument that personified Wisdom is not depicted nor identical with “spirit” in Wis. 1:6-7 and therefore, should not be considered as a source for Wisdom Christology in Paul.

¹⁰⁵ It also occurs in Sir. 24:9, but Fee asserts that it simply an echo of Prov. 8:23. See Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 323.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 323.

¹⁰⁷ Fee admits that Philo does in fact speak of God’s wisdom as the “beginning” in *Leg.* 1.43. However, in doing so Fee argues that “It is not at all clear that he is thinking in terms of personified Wisdom: and Paul seems obviously to be reflecting Gen 1:1 and is thinking of Christ in terms of the new creation – an idea totally foreign to the wisdom tradition.” See page 323.

Indeed, there are no true *linguistic* ties in the Colossian passage with the Wisdom literature at all: and whether one can argue for *conceptual* ties without the linguistic ties seems to be a moot point. What Paul's sentences point to instead is a Son of God Christology, in which he uses *biblical* images from Genesis and the Davidic kingship. Some kind of clear *literary* or *conceptual* dependence of Paul on the Wisdom literature needs to be demonstrated – such as vv. 12-14 demonstrably have with Israel's basic story – in order for us to entertain the idea of a Wisdom Christology in Paul's thought. But that is precisely what is lacking, both here and elsewhere in the Pauline corpus.¹⁰⁸

While Fee's work provides a helpful check on the tendency toward overemphasizing the dependency of Col. 1:15-20 upon the Wisdom tradition, his conclusion is questionable. Thus, a fresh look at the Colossian's hymn is in order to assess the accuracy of Fee's conclusion.

II. Exegesis of Hymn by Component Parts

Theologian John Anthony Dunne, who like Fee argues against the Wisdom motif as the background for the Christology found in the hymn, openly acknowledges, "The majority of scholarship is in basic agreement that Wisdom themes pervade the Christological 'hymn' found in Col 1:15-20."¹⁰⁹ For example, in discussing the parallels between Prov. 8:22-31, Beetham says that the "The cumulative weight of evidence validates the allusion to this development as virtually certain."¹¹⁰ While Beetham's "virtually certain" may be an overstatement, a look at those components parts of Col. 1:15-20 which Fee criticized will reveal that the passage is indeed reliant upon a number of distinct statements from the Wisdom tradition.¹¹¹ This will

¹⁰⁸ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 325.

¹⁰⁹ John Anthony Dunne, "The Regal Status of Christ in the Colossian 'Christ-Hymn': A Re-Evaluation of the Influence of Wisdom Traditions," *Trinity Journal*, 32, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 3.

¹¹⁰ Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 130. See appendix X for a summarization of parallels between the first century interpretative development of Prov. 8:22-31 and Colossians from pages 135-36. Additionally, see appendix XI for Witherington's summary of the dependence of Col. 1:15-20 upon the Wisdom of Solomon. See Witherington, *Jesus as Sage*, 267.

¹¹¹ While most scholars acknowledge at least some linguistic and conceptual ties between Col. 1:15-17 and the Wisdom tradition (roughly the first strophe of the hymn), the evidence suggests that such ties are not present in the second strophe of the hymn. Concerning this, Schweizer says, "If then the first strophe corresponds quite well to the religious-historical parallels in the wisdom sayings in Hellenistic Judaism, the second in corresponding style describes the newly attained world of peace (v. p. 74), that is, the new creation inaugurated in the resurrection of

reveal that not only did Paul incorporate language and ideas appropriate to Wisdom, but also he elaborated upon and adapted them for his own purposes. In other words, while Col. 1:15-20 reveals dependency upon the Wisdom tradition in Hellenistic-Judaism, it also contains an individuality of its own.

A. The Image of the Invisible God

Concerning the phrase “invisible God,” Dunn states that it is “a central Jewish *theologoumenon* that God cannot be seen. Hence the figure of ‘the angel of the Lord’ in the patriarchal narrative (e.g., Gen. 16:7-12; 22:11-12; Exod. 3:2-6; 14:19-20) and the importance of the commandment against idolatry (Exod. 20:4-6; Deut. 5:8-10).”¹¹² The question is if God is invisible, how can he be known? According to Col. 1:15, He is revealed through Christ who is said to be His “image.” It is not immediately apparent, however, what this means.

Consequently, one must identify the source behind the term in order to understand its meaning.

According to Fee and Dunne, the source behind the term “image” is the language of Gen. 1-2.¹¹³ The Adam-Christ motif helps develop the truth that whereas the first Adam in his

Jesus Christ from the dead, the reconciliation of the universe.” Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossian: A Commentary*, 86.

¹¹² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 87. The New Testament, for its part, concurs with the Old Testament. For example, Dunn points out that the adjective is used of God in four of the five New Testament occurrences (here and in Rom. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27) and nowhere else in biblical Greek. Ralph Martin adds that “The invisibility of God is a conclusion which follows from his nature as ‘spirit,’ i.e., non-material (John 4:24). No one has ever seen God (John 1:18).” Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church’s Lord and The Christian’s Liberty An Expository Commentary with a Present-Day Application* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), 44. Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on Colossians, explains that “God is said to be invisible because he exceeds the capacity of vision of any created intellect, so that no created intellect, by its natural knowledge, can attain His essence: ‘Behold, God is great, and we know him not’ (Job 36:26). He dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim. 6:16). And therefore, he is seen by the blessed by means of grace, and not by reason of their natural capacity.” Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary by St. Thomas Aquinas on the Epistle to the Colossians*, trans., Fabian Larcher, ed., Daniel A. Keating (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2006), 17. In short, the “idea that God cannot be seen physically is fundamental to the biblical tradition.” Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 55.

¹¹³ For example, J.A. Dunne says, “Instead, it seems preferable to view the use of εἰκόν as an allusion to Gen 1:26-28. In coherence with other Pauline texts, we have here a picture of Christ as the true human, the Last

humanity was meant to bear the divine “image,” the second Adam, Christ, *alone* in his humanity bears the true image of God (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). Beetham disagrees, however, that “The ‘image’ εἰκόν language here does ultimately derive from Gen 1:26-27, as the strong evidence in Philo has shown.”¹¹⁴ He argues that while the term “image” in Col. 1:15 echoes Gen. 1:26-27, it is a secondary allusion to that of language employed to depict the divine Wisdom/Word.¹¹⁵

Concerning this, he says:

The language, nevertheless, is not *first* an allusion to Gen. 1:26-27, as if the writer were developing a last Adam Christology. Rather, the title is first of all a designation for the divine Wisdom/Word that was current in Hellenistic-Jewish circles of Paul’s day, and the use of this language here is intended to recall first of all this figure as it is found together with the rest of the language of Col. 1:15-20.¹¹⁶

Instead of maintaining that “image” relies upon either Gen. 1:26-27 or the Wisdom tradition as do Fee and Dunne, Beetham argues for a “priority of language” in that the term relies primarily upon the texts from the Wisdom tradition and only secondarily upon Gen. 1:26-27. Beetham supports his assertion by arguing that while there is indeed a linguistic overlap between Col. 1:15 and Gen. 1:26-27, the latter does not adequately account for the context of the former.

Specifically, he says:

That Wisdom/Word is being alluded to at 1:15 and not primarily Gen 1:26-27 is confirmed by the ground given in v. 16, stating *why* these titles may be appropriately attributed to Christ. It is *because* (ὅτι) “in,” “through,” and “for” him all things were created. Since Adam was not the mediator of all God’s creating activity, nor was this ever claimed for him in any of the early Jewish literature, it is improbable that Christ is

Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-21, 1 Cor. 15:45-49)” See J.A. Dunne, “The Regal Status of Christ in the Colossian ‘Christ-Hymn,’” 9.

¹¹⁴ Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 131. Beetham references his chart, which is provided in appendix X.

¹¹⁵ Authors such as Beetham sometimes use a “Wisdom/Word” designation because in Philo’s writings the Word is related conceptually to Wisdom, such that the two are closely intertwined and at times appear virtually identical. Specifically, Beetham, quoting Harry Austryn Wolfson, says “Wisdom, then, is only another word for Logos, and it is used in all the senses of the term Logos.” See Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 122-24.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 132.

here depicted as a final Adam figure. Those who argue for a direct allusion to Gen. 1:26-27 at Col. 1:15 seem to focus on the word ‘image’ but neglect the rest of the context and especially the immediate logical argument.¹¹⁷

Beetham believes that Gen. 1:26-27 does not sufficiently account for the context of Col. 1:15, which presents Christ as the mediator of all God’s creating activity. In other words, Gen. 1:26-27 fails to take into account the cosmic role of Christ, who is depicted as the sphere (“in”), the instrument (“through”), and the purpose (“for”) of all created things. Therefore, another sphere of thought is needed to account for this cosmic dimension.

References within the Wisdom literature such as Prov. 8:22-31 and Wis. 7:25-27 present the significance and role of Wisdom in creation. Referring to Wisdom, Lohse states:

She was already praised by Pr 8:22, which states that Yahweh created her at the beginning of his work as the first of his acts of old, before the creation of the world. In Wisd Sol 7:26 she is called an “image of his [God’s] goodness” (εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ), which makes known the goodness of God.¹¹⁸

Yahweh is said to have “created” wisdom at the beginning of his work as the first of his acts of old, before the creation of the world. The verb “create” in Prov. 8:22 has historically caused exegetical (and therefore subsequent theological) problems.¹¹⁹ According to theologian E.C. Lucas, “the verb *qnh* in the opening clause of Proverbs 8:22 should be understood in the sense of ‘begot’ (ESV mg.), ‘acquired/possessed’ (NASB) or ‘created’ (NRSV).”¹²⁰ He says that while the issue remains unresolved, it is clear that Wisdom has a “divine origin (the natural way

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 132.

¹¹⁸ Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 47. Lohse adds that the writings of Philo ascribe the majestic titles to Wisdom such ‘beginning’ and ‘image’ and ‘vision of God.’ He says that Philo “grants to her the same dignity as to the Logos, which itself is called ‘the Beginning’ and the Name of God and His Word and the Man after His image and ‘he that sees,’ that is Israel.” See pages 47-48.

¹¹⁹ In the fourth century AD, Arius used this verse as the basis for his heretical teaching that put forth the Son was “made” like the rest of creation yet before the rest of creation. In Arius’ mind, the Son’s causal subordination also became the Son’s temporal subordination and essential inferiority. Thus, the Son had a beginning (albeit before creation, including time) and yet he was begotten “timelessly.”

¹²⁰ E.C. Lucas, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*, eds., Tremper Longman III and Peter Inns (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 905.

to read Prov 8:24-25 is that the Lord was the one by who she was ‘brought forth’) before the creation of the earth (Prov 8:22-26). She was present at the creation the earth, even if her role is unclear (Prov. 8:27-30a).”¹²¹ In poetic fashion, then, Prov. 8:22-31 presents Wisdom as intimately united with God as He begins to creatively fashion the world.

Additionally, Wis. 7:25-27 helps clarify the way in which Wisdom is intimately associated with God in his creative work. Wisdom is, in the words of Wis. 7:26, a “reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.” According to Fee, this is the only occurrence of the word “image” in the Wisdom literature and its usage here does not correspond with its use in Col. 1:15. For whereas Wisdom is an “image of his goodness” in Wis. 7:26, Christ is *the εἰκόων of God* in Col. 1:15. Consequently, Fee believes that Wis. 7:25 should be disregarded as a source for “image” in Col. 1:15 because it is reductionistic in that Christ is not simply an image of God’s *goodness*, but the *image of God*.

Unfortunately, Fee’s fixation on the phrase “image of his goodness” fails to consider its broader context. The phrase occurs within the context of Wis. 7:25-27, which poetically describes Wisdom in terms of God’s creative work as “a pure emanation,” “a reflection of eternal light,” and “an image of his goodness.” Such poetic descriptions convey that Wisdom manifests not only God’s goodness, but also His creative power.¹²² The context, then, suggests that rather than insist on a one-to-one correlation (image = God’s goodness), there is a “loose association” or a “fluidity” between Wisdom and her descriptors. The fluidity between Wisdom and her descriptors makes it possible for Paul to poetically describe both God’s goodness and His creative power.

¹²¹ Ibid., 905.

¹²² For example, Schweizer says that “as early as Wis. 7:25f. the image is described in dynamic terminology as ‘emanation’; it represents the active power and goodness, that is, his creative and redemptive work.” See Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossian: A Commentary*, 65.

Furthermore, the fluidity in biblical texts such as Wis. 7:25-27 between Wisdom and her poetic descriptors allowed later writers such as Philo to associate Wisdom with the Word.¹²³

Beetham, relying upon the work of James Drummond, says that numerous texts in Philo's writings express a fluid relationship between Wisdom and the Word. Specifically, he says:

Both, for example, are represented as the highest of divine powers. Both are identified as the miraculous rock, fountain, and manna as narrated in the exodus wilderness account (cf. 1 Cor. 10:4). Both are understood as preexistent and as agents in the creating process. Both have the same titles or names applied to them (e.g., "Beginning"; "Image"; "Seeing Israel" = "the vision of God"). Both serve as archetypes for earthly wisdom and virtue. In sum, though there are "apparent inconsistencies in Philo's language," these "may be explained without violating the ultimate identity of Logos and Wisdom."¹²⁴

Beetham refers to the phenomenon of the overlap and interrelatedness between Wisdom and Word as "Wisdom/Word." Additionally, he provides examples from Philo's writings where both Wisdom and Word are given the majestic titles of "image." For example, concerning Wisdom he refers to Philo's *Alleg. Interp.* 1.43, which states: "By using many words for it Moses has already made it manifest that the sublime and heavenly [W]isdom is of many names: for he calls it 'beginning' and 'image' and 'vision of God'; and now by the planting of the [garden of Eden]

¹²³ Beetham says that "For Philo, the Word is a central concept. It is God's reason, or his 'mental activity' employed in the act of creation." See Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 122.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 123. In his extensive study on Philo, scholar Harry Austryn Wolfson analyzes the relationship between Logos and Wisdom in Philo's writings. Like Beetham, Wolfson argues that Philo treats these terms as identical. Concerning this, he says, "Wisdom, then, is only another word for Logos, and it is used in all the senses of the term Logos. Both of these terms mean, in the first place, a property of God, identical with His essence, and, like His essence, eternal. In the second place, they mean a real, incorporeal being, created by God before the creation of the world. Third, as we shall show, Logos means also a Logos immanent in the world, and so, also wisdom, again as we shall show, is used in that sense. Fourth, both Logos and wisdom are used by him in the sense of the Law of Moses. Finally, Logos is also used by Philo in the sense of one of its constituent ideas, such, for instance, as the idea of the mind." In Wolfson's view, in passages where it appears that Philo does not treat Logos and Wisdom as identical terms, one should not be quick to accuse the philosopher of inconsistency. Instead, one should analyze those passages to determine whether the philosopher uses one of the two terms in one sense and the other in another sense. After analyzing a few such typical cases, Wolfson concludes that inconsistencies disappear when considering the different senses in which the two terms are used. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 253-261.

he brings out the fact that the earthly wisdom is a copy of this as of an archetype.”¹²⁵ Philo’s writings demonstrate that the fluidity between Wisdom and her poetic descriptors in the Wisdom literature such as Wis. 7:25-27 eventually made it possible for majestic titles such as “Beginning,” “Image,” and “Vision of God” to be predicated of Wisdom.

Given this background, it was logical for the early Christian community (and Paul in particular) to apply the concept of “image” to Christ. Behind the phrase “the image of the invisible God,” there is the worldview of Wisdom in all its richness. By claiming that Christ is the “image of the invisible God,” it would be have been understood that Christ is of divine origin, who was ‘brought forth’ before the creation of the earth (Prov. 8:22-26). Additionally, as the “image of God” He reflects not only God’s goodness, but also His creative power in fashioning the world (Wis. 7:25-27). Scripture commentator William Barclay summarizes the Jewish worldview of Wisdom lying behind the concept of “image” well by saying:

It is as if Paul turned to the Jews and said, “All your lives you have been thinking and dreaming and writing about this divine Wisdom, which is as old as God, which made the world and which gives wisdom to men. In Jesus Christ this Wisdom has come to men in bodily form for all to see.” Jesus is the fulfillment of the dreams of Jewish thought.¹²⁶

Moreover, Paul’s usage of “image” would have not only resonated with the Jews, but also with the Greeks who identified the Word with *eikōn*.¹²⁷ Barclay explains that “It is as if Paul said to

¹²⁵ Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 125-26.

¹²⁶ Barclay, *The Letters of the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 117.

¹²⁷ Beetham says that in Philo “image” is one of the chief titles for the Word or the Logos. For example, he quotes *Confusion* 146-47, which states, “But if there be any as yet unfit to be called a [s]on of God, let him press to take his place under God’s Firstborn, the Word, who holds the eldership among the angels, their ruler as it were. And many names are his, for he is called, ‘the Beginning,’ and the Name of God, and His Word, and the Man after His image....For if we have not yet become fit to be thought sons of God yet we may be sons of His invisible image, the most holy Word. For the Word is the eldest-born image of God.” See Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 125. Additionally, Barclay says that “This very word *eikōn* is used again and again by Philo of the Logos of God. ‘He calls the invisible and divine Logos, which only the mind can perceive, the *image (eikōn)* of God’ (*Philo: Concerning the Creator of the World: 8*).” See Barclay, *The Letters of the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 117.

does not mean “first-created,” but rather “preeminent” or “supreme rank.”¹³² The Davidic king in Ps. 89:27 is preeminent, the highest of the kings of the earth.¹³³ He holds priority in status. Likewise, Talbert explains that “by virtue of being creator of everything, visible and invisible (thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities), in heaven and on earth, the Son is preeminent in status (1:13).”¹³⁴ Thus, given its theological contribution, authors such as Dunne argue that Ps. 89:27 is the most relevant source behind Col. 1:15.¹³⁵

Theologian André Feuillet acknowledges that “It is easy at first sight to have recourse or go back to the biblical tradition which calls the ‘firstborn’ either the chosen people (Ex. 4:22, Jer. 31:9) or a king of Judah, descendent of David, in whom tradition often saw the Messiah (Ps. 89:27).”¹³⁶ As normal as it may seem to enter the tradition of Davidic Messianism, in Feuillet’s mind it is insufficient. As with “image,” he believes that such references cannot account for the cosmic function of Christ as it is presented in the passage from Colossians. Concerning this, Feuillet says:

But this reference remains uncertain, and, anyway, insufficient: the formula ‘first-born of every creature’ and the development of the cosmic role of Christ, which is intimately

Colossians: Commentary, 67-68; Talbert, *Ephesians & Colossians*, 187; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 39; J.A. Dunne, “The Regal Status of Christ in the Colossian ‘Christ-Hymn,’” 13.

¹³² Witherington, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World*, 108.

¹³³ Harris adds that “The use of this term to describe the Davidic king in Ps 88:28 (LXX) (=Ps 89:27, EVV), ‘I will also appoint him my firstborn (πρωτότοκον), the most exalted of the kings of the earth,’ indicates that it can denote supremacy in rank as well as priority in time.” Harris, *The Colossians and Philemon*, 39. Furthermore, Lohse says that “In Judaism, not only the messianic king, but also Israel, the Patriarchs and the Torah are given this title of distinction.” Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 48n115.

¹³⁴ Talbert, *Ephesians & Colossians*, 187.

¹³⁵ J.A. Dunne, “The Regal Status of Christ in the Colossian ‘Christ-Hymn,’” 13.

¹³⁶ Feuillet, *Le Christ Sage de Dieu, d’après les épîtres pauliniennes*, 187. In French, this quote reads: *Séduisant à première vue est le recours à la tradition biblique qui appelle « premier-né » (πρωτότοκος), soit le peuple choisi (Ex. IV, 22; Jr. XXXI, 9), soit un roi de Juda, descendant de David, en qui la tradition a souvent vu le Messie (Ps. LXXXIX, 28; cf. R Nathan dans Shemoth Rabba 19); cf. le texte hébreu de l’Écclésiastique XXXVI, 14; Psaumes de Salomon XVIII, 4; 4 Esdras VI, 58; en He. I, 6, πρωτοτοκος donne l’impression d’être une désignation messianique bien connue.*

linked to it, as if primogenitor found its meaning in this cosmic function, introduces us into a sphere of thought which is totally different from that of David's Messiah.¹³⁷

To account for a cosmic way of thinking, Feuillet looks to the Wisdom tradition and in particular Prov. 8:22. He believes such a move is necessary because it justifies the cosmic role attributed to Christ in Colossians 1:15-20. Specifically, Feuillet explains:

The title of *rêshith* given to divine Wisdom can mean both 'beginning' and 'first-born.' It is linked to a display of the cosmic activity of Wisdom, just as the expression *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως* attributed to Christ in Colossians leads to a development of his cosmic role. It is not even unthinkable to suppose that Paul had available to him the original text of the Book of Proverbs, although the thing seems probable to us.¹³⁸

Obviously, Feuillet's suggestion that Paul had the original text of Proverbs before him as he composed the passage is pure speculation. Regardless, he makes an excellent point that a text such as Prov. 8:22 – with its display of the cosmic activity of Wisdom – lends itself much better to the cosmic role attributed to Christ than that of Ps. 89:27.

Although Prov. 8:22 may provide a better account for the cosmic role attributed to Christ, Fee's concern that the term "firstborn" is absent from Prov. 8:22, 25 still remains. Moo concurs that not only is *πρωτότοκος* absent in the LXX, but it is also absent from Philo's writings.¹³⁹ In his view, while there may be a conceptual parallel between Prov. 22, 25 and Col. 1:15-20, the

¹³⁷ Feuillet, *Le Christ Sagesse de Dieu, d'après les épîtres pauliniennes*, 187-188. In French, this quote reads: *Mais cette référence demeure incertaine, et, de toute façon, insuffisante: la formule « premier-né de toute créature » et le développement sur le rôle cosmique du Christ qui lui est intimement lié (πρωτότοκος ... □τ), comme si la primogéniture avait sa raison d'être dans cette fonction cosmique, nous introduisent dans une sphère de pensée toute différente de celle du messianisme davidique.*

¹³⁸ Feuillet, *Le Christ Sagesse de Dieu, d'après les épîtres pauliniennes*, 188-189. In French, this quote reads: *Le titre de rêshith donné à la Sagesse divine en Pr. VIII, 22 peut signifier à la fois « prémices » et « premier-né ». Il est lié à un tableau de l'activité cosmique de la Sagesse, tout comme au titre πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως attribué au Christ dans Colossiens fait suite un développement sur son rôle cosmique. Il n'est même pas indispensable de supposer que Paul a eu recours au texte original du Livre des Proverbes, bien que la chose nous semble probable.*

¹³⁹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 119n142. While absent as a title for Wisdom, Beetham points out that it is used as a title for the Word (e.g., *Confusion* 146-47, *Dreams* 1.215, *Agriculture* 51). For these references, see Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 126.

lack of linguistic connections does raise questions. Feuillet, on the other hand, appears more confident that despite the lack of linguistic connection regarding the term “firstborn,” there is a parallel between the two texts. Concerning the linguistic problem, he explains:

Indeed, as Gewiess notes, πρωτότοκος and ἀρχή (the word in the Greek version of Prov. 8:22) are used in the LXX almost as synonyms. ...In Prov. 8:24-25, the Septuagint, just as in the Hebrew text, speaks of the birth of Wisdom, so that the use of the term “firstborn” presented itself easily to the mind of Paul who had just called Christ the “Son of his predilection.”¹⁴⁰

In Feuillet’s opinion, πρωτότοκος and ἀρχή are used almost as synonyms. As support, he relies upon texts such as Gen. 49:3 and Deut. 21:17 in the LXX where “beginning” occurs with “firstborn.” Regarding the former, Jacob says of Reuben, “You are my firstborn (πρωτότοκος), my might, and the first fruits (ἀρχή) of my strength.”¹⁴¹ As the “firstborn,” Reuben is the ἀρχή of Jacob’s strength. Likewise, as the “first” of God’s acts of old (Prov. 8:23), Wisdom is at the ἀρχή of God’s work (Prov. 8:22). In both cases, as the “firstborn” or the “first,” they are “beginning.” There is, then, a close relationship between the titular terms. The later writings of Philo both confirm and strengthen the similarity between the two terms. For example, Philo uses the names of God’s “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος), “beginning” (ἀρχή) and “image” (εἰκόν) interchangeably for the Logos.¹⁴² While “firstborn” is absent from these names with regard to Wisdom (as Fee recognized), it is none-the-less significant given the interrelational fluidity and

¹⁴⁰ Feuillet, *Le Christ Sage de Dieu, d’après les épîtres pauliniennes*, 189. In French, this quote reads: *En effet, ainsi que le note justement J. Gewiess, πρωτότοκος et ἀρχή (le mot de la version grecque en Pr. VIII, 22) sont utilisés dans les LXX presque comme des synonymes, témoin Gn. XLIX, 3: Ρούβην πρωτότοκος μου, οὐ ἀρχὴ μου καὶ ἀρχὴ τέκνων μου; cf. aussi Dt. XXI, 17. En Pr. VIII, 24-25, les Septante, tout comme le texte hébreu, parlent de l’enfantement de la Sagesse, si bien que l’appellation de « premier-né » s’est présentée aisément à l’esprit de Paul qui venait d’appeler le Christ « le Fils de sa dilection ».*

¹⁴¹ Cf. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 129.

¹⁴² Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, cf. Philo, *Conf. Ling.* 146, 56n172.

overlap between Word and Wisdom in Philo's writings.¹⁴³ Thus, the linguistic hurdle created by the lack of the term "firstborn" in Prov. 8:22, 25 is not as high as Fee puts forth given the close relationship between firstborn and beginning.

Finally, there is the argument put forth by Fee that the use of "firstborn" (or "beginning") in Prov. 8:22, 25 carries a considerably different meaning than Paul's use of the term in Col. 1:15. In Fee's mind, Wisdom is presented as the first of God's "creations" in Prov. 8:22, 25 whereas Christ *as Son* holds the rights of primogeniture with regard to every created thing in Col. 1:15. Prov. 8:22, 25, then, aligns Christ on the side of creation (albeit the first thereof) rather than on the side of the Creator. Thus, in Fee's opinion it should be disregarded as source for Col. 1:15.

Beetham's work helps alleviate Fee's concern that a Christological reading of Prov. 8:22-25 would unfortunately strip Christ of His divinity. He looks at the interpretative problem of verse 22 and questions whether the verb קנה means "acquire" or "create." The question is challenging because on the one hand, the "verb קנה occurs thirteen other times in the book of Proverbs, and all without exception in their respective contexts carry the meaning 'to acquire, obtain, get' (or even 'buy,' as in to purchase something)."¹⁴⁴ It seems justified, therefore, to translate קנה as "acquired." On the other hand, it is more theologically difficult to justify "acquired" over "create" given Judaism's strict monotheism. Beetham says that by

¹⁴³ See Beetham's analysis on pages 122-130 in *Echoes in Scripture*. Beetham relies upon the work of J. Drummond, Harry Austryn Wolfson, and Erwin R. Goodenough to argue that there is an interrelational and overlap between the two figures of Wisdom and Word in the works of Philo and in Wis. 9:1-2 such that many scholars have coined terms like 'the Word-Wisdom' to capture the interrelationship.

¹⁴⁴ Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 116.

translating קנה as “created,” Wisdom is “explicitly made a creation of God and thus subordinate to him.”¹⁴⁵

Unfortunately, the chapter’s context is not entirely helpful in solving the interpretative problem. Again, on the one hand, קנה could be interpreted as “acquired” because it is in line with the purpose of Proverbs 8 as a whole. Specifically, Beetham says that Proverbs 8 is meant to “‘magnify the authority of Wisdom’ so that the readers pursue her and attune their life to her ways. YHWH thus becomes the model for his people.”¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, Beetham acknowledges that verses 24-25 clearly present YHWH not acquiring something that was already in existence, but rather YHWH acquiring Wisdom when she was given birth.¹⁴⁷

To solve the interpretative problem of קנה, Beetham suggests employing what he calls “birthing imagery” to describe God’s acquisition of Wisdom (“I was brought forth”; LXX γεννῶμε, “he begat me”).¹⁴⁸ His suggestion appears to steer a middle course between Wisdom as something already in existence and acquired by YHWH and something created by YHWH at a specific moment in time. Regardless of how קנה is interpreted (i.e., “acquired” or “created”), the complexity of the problem demonstrates that Fee’s quick dismissal of Prov. 8:22, 25 as a source for Col. 1:15 is unjustified. Prov. 8:22, 25 does not address origin of Wisdom (contra Fee’s assessment that the texts present Wisdom as the first of God’s “creations”), but rather Wisdom’s role in creation. Beetham explains that “The main point of vv. 22-29 is that both before and

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 116.

¹⁴⁶ Additionally, Beetham compared various versions of the verb קנה to address the interpretive problem of verse 22. Regarding this, he says, “The versions differ: the LXX (ἐκτίσεν), Syriac, and Targum (בר) support the latter, while Philo (*Drunkness* 31), Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion (all reading ἐκτίσατο) and the Vulgate (*possedit*) support the former.” See Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 115-116.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 116n9.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

during the construction of the world, Wisdom existed and was present.”¹⁴⁹ In other words, there appears to be a conceptual parallel between the role of Wisdom in creation and that which is attributed to Christ in Col. 1:15-17. Thus, the meanings between Prov. 8:22, 25 and Col. 1:15-17 are considerably closer than Fee would have one to believe.

C. He is Before All Things

Fee argued that the phrase “Wisdom was *created* before all things [προτέρα πάντων]” taken from Sir 1:4a (which is reliant upon Prov. 8:22-31) almost certainly means “before all things else.” This, of course, is contrary to Paul’s understanding that Christ *is* before all things. Consequently, in Fee’s estimation the phrase (and all phrases from Sirach) offers neither a verbal nor conceptual correspondence to Paul’s understanding of the Son as eternally preexistent.

In order to address this concern, it should first be recognized that there is a conceptual parallel between Wisdom of Solomon and Col. 1:15-20 concerning the phrase “all things” (τὸ πάντα). Regarding the phrase as used in Wisdom of Solomon, Beetham says:

The author of Wisdom heavily employs πᾶς (“all”) to describe the extent of Wisdom’s nature and activity. She is “all-powerful” (παντοδύναμον) and “oversees all” (πανεπίσκοπον; 7:23). She penetrates and pervades “all things” (πάντων; 7:24), is able to do “all things” (πάντα; 7:27), and knows and understands “all things” (πάντα; 9:11). Wisdom is the artificer of “all things” (πάντων; 7:22 [7:21 LXX]), renews “all things” (τὸ πάντα; 7:27), extends over all the earth and excellently orders or manages “all things” (τὸ πάντα; 8:1), and is the active cause of “all things” (τὸ πάντα; 8:5; NRSV). God remains the ultimate source of creation, but did by means of his Word/Wisdom make “all things” (τὸ πάντα; 9:1).¹⁵⁰

By frequently employing the phrase τὸ πάντα, the author of Wisdom is able to emphasize the nature and extent of Wisdom’s influence upon creation. According to Dunn, “all things” was a

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 117.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 121. Scholars have recognized the influence of Stoicism upon these verses. For example, theologian Roland Murphy says, “Scholars have pointed out the influence of the Stoic pneuma and the Platonic world soul in the terminology and ideas of 7:22-24.” Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 88.

familiar way of speaking about “everything, the universe, the totality of created entities.”¹⁵¹

Wisdom penetrates, pervades, renews, and orders “all things,” which poetically expresses the universality of her activity.

Similarly, Paul uses the phrase “all” eight times in Col. 1:15-20 to describe the nature and extent of Christ’s nature and activity. Concerning this, Beetham says:

He is firstborn of “all” creation (1:15b), and “all things” (τὰ πάντα; twice) have been created in, through, and for him (1:16). He existed before “all things” (πάντων; 1:17a), and “all things” (τὰ πάντα) hold together in him (1:17b). He has attained preeminence in “all things” (πᾶσιν; 1:18d), and “all” the fullness of deity was pleased to dwell in him (πᾶν; 1:19) as well as to reconcile “all things” (τὰ πάντα) through him and for him (1:20a).¹⁵²

By frequently employing “all,” Paul demonstrates the full scope of Christ’s reign over creation.

According to the hymn, Christ reigns over “heaven and earth,” things “visible and invisible,” and even spiritual beings such as “thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities.” Theologian Ivan Havener explains that “all” helps clarify that “Everything is subject to him, and it is through his continuing creative power that creation itself continues on. Nothing is left to chance, all is in Christ’s control.”¹⁵³ One can see, then, that just as nothing lies outside the influence of Wisdom, so nothing lies outside of Christ’s control.

Additionally, there appears to be similarity regarding the phrase “before all things” in Sir. 1:4a and Col. 1:17a. As Fee noted, the similarity is not perfect in that Sirach 1:4a says that “Wisdom was *created* before all things [προτέρα πάντων],” whereas Col. 1:17a says of the Son,

¹⁵¹ Dunn, *Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 267.

¹⁵² Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 134-35.

¹⁵³ Ivan Havener, “Colossians,” *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Dianne Bergant and Robert Karris, eds. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 1182. Havener also notes that Paul has indirectly adopted terminology from Stoicism in Col. 1:15-20 to present the scope of Christ’s reign. He notes that this kind of terminology also appears in other liturgical formulations such as Rom. 11:36; Eph. 4:6; 1 Cor. 8:6.

“He is before all things.”¹⁵⁴ Here, as with term “image,” one should not demand a one-to-one correlation concerning the parallels. There is, rather, a “loose association” or a “fluidity” that exists between the poetic descriptions of Wisdom and of the Son. For example, in discussing the phrase “before all things,” Moo recognizes this by saying: “There are again wisdom parallels for this idea; see Proverbs 8:22-31, cited above, and also, for example Sirach 1:4, ‘Wisdom was created before all things.’ But while these texts assert that Wisdom was the first thing created, the claim in our verse is bolder: Christ existed before creation itself.”¹⁵⁵ Thus, whereas Fee disregards Sir. 1:4a as a source for Col. 1:17a because of the discrepancy, Moo appears quite comfortable with it by asserting that Paul simply has advanced the idea. In other words, it may be the case that Paul adopted the phrase “before all things” and adapted it for his own purposes to point out that Christ the eternal one ‘is,’ but creation ‘became.’¹⁵⁶

D. In Him All Things Hold Together

Fee argued that Wis. 1:6-7 did not correspond to the phrase “in him [the Son] all things hold together” in Col. 1:17b. In his estimation, the clause beginning with “that which” in Wis. 1:7 does not refer to personified Wisdom, but rather the Spirit of the Lord. He put forth three reasons why personified Wisdom cannot be found in Wis. 1:6-7. First, the author does not say Wisdom is the “Spirit of the Lord,” but rather a “kindly spirit” (i.e., a “spiritual” quality of wisdom). Second, Wis. 1:6-7 falls outside the section of the book in which Wisdom is personified (i.e., 6:12 – 10:21, with the exception of 14:2). Third, Wis. 1:6-7 should be

¹⁵⁴ Concerning the reference to Sir. 1:4a, Schweizer observes in a footnote that Sir. 24:9 affirms that it is ‘from eternity’ and thus that it ‘will not cease to exist’; Prov. 8:22 declares that Yahweh created (wisdom) at the beginning of his work, so that it was already there at the creation (8:27-30; also Wis. 9:1f., 9; Sir. 24:3[?]).” See Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossian: A Commentary*, 67n29.

¹⁵⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 125.

¹⁵⁶ Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 52n143.

disregarded as a source for Paul's Wisdom Christology because it is highly unlikely that "spirit" and "wisdom" are identical in Pseudo-Solomon. Consequently, Fee concludes that even if Paul knew this passage, it could have hardly influenced him.

Unfortunately, Fee's argument fails to consider that the way in which the author opens the book affects how the entire Book of Wisdom should be interpreted. Concerning the opening verse, scripture commentator James Reese says:

This exhortation to '*righteousness*,' which acts as the prologue to the entire Book of Wisdom, is a carefully constructed appeal in a poetic style that imitates Hebrew poetry. The lines are composed in the characteristic feature of Hebrew verse, namely parallelism: each image is stated in two successive sense lines, called *stichs*. Ordinarily two stichs make up one verse, but sometimes there are three as in verses 1, 5, 6cde, 9. This manner of expression slows the pace to give the poetry a reflective mood.¹⁵⁷

The author of the Book of Wisdom is not developing a treatise with theological precision, but is instead exhorting the "rulers of the earth" in a poetic style that imitates Hebrew poetry.

Consequently, readers should expect "fluidity" in the author's thinking as he encourages a "practical faith and ethical response that God demands of those who acknowledge him as creator and final judge."¹⁵⁸ In this way of thinking, the author often uses a plethora of descriptors to belabor his point. For example, Wisdom will be portrayed as a "kindly spirit" (Wis. 1:6), "radiant and unfading" (Wis. 6:12), "the fashioner of all things" (Wis. 7:22), and "pervading and penetrating all things" (Wis. 7:24). In saying that "Wisdom is a kindly spirit," then, the author's goal is not to exclude what Wisdom is not (i.e., the "Spirit of the Lord"). Instead, it is the author's way of poetically describing that "Wisdom is a spirit devoted to man's good," and that

¹⁵⁷ James M. Reese, *The Wisdom of Solomon, Song of Songs*, vol. 20 of *Old Testament Message: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, eds., Carroll Stuhlmueller and Martin McNamara (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983), 28-29.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

“she will not hold a blasphemer blameless for his words, because God is a witness of his inmost being, who sees clear into his heart and hears every word he says.”¹⁵⁹

Additionally, Fee’s second point presumes a traditional tripartite structure of the Wisdom of Solomon. Concerning this structure, theologian David Winston states:

The Wisdom of Solomon is readily divided into three parts: (I) Wisdom’s Gift of Immortality (1:1-6:21); (II) The Nature and Power of Wisdom and Solomon’s Quest for Her (6:22-10:21); and (III) Divine Wisdom or Justice in the Exodus (chaps. 11-19), with two excursuses, one on Divine Mercy (11:15-12:22), the other on Idolatry (chaps. 13-15).¹⁶⁰

Aside from one exception, Fee argued that personified Wisdom falls within the second section of the book.¹⁶¹ Therefore, a reference such as Wis. 1:6-7 does not speak of personified Wisdom and therefore precludes it as a possibility as a source for Col. 1:17 (because it presumes that personified Wisdom = Christ). Theologians such as Leo Purdue concur that there is a difference in the way Wisdom is presented between the first and second sections of the book. For example, Purdue says that whereas Wisdom is presented as a literary personification in the first section of the book (Wis. 1:1-6:21), the author moves beyond this literary device and equates her with the divine spirit who mediates between heaven and earth (thus hypostatization through metaphor and

¹⁵⁹ Ernest G. Clarke, *The Wisdom of Solomon* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 13.

¹⁶⁰ David Winston, “Solomon, Wisdom of,” vol. 6 of the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed., David Noel Freedman, (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 120. This structure dovetails closely with Roland Murphy’s threefold division (e.g., 1:1-6:21; 6:22-11:1; 11:2-19:22). See Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 86-94. DeSilva concurs with the tripartite structure of Wisdom of Solomon by stating that “Virtually all agree that Wisdom subdivides into three major sections: the ‘book of eschatology,’ the ‘panegyric on Wisdom,’ and the ‘historical retrospect.’” He adds that “There is little agreement, however, concerning where one section ends and the next begins, where one finds the ‘seams,’ as it were. The first section has been seen to end variously at 5:23, 6:8, 6:11, 6:21, and 6:25 and the second section at 9:18, 10:21, and 11:1.” See deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message Context, and Significance*, 129-130.

¹⁶¹ Roland Murphy compiled a list of the passages (minimum) where Wisdom is found to be personified: Job 28; Prov. 1, 8, 9; Sir 1:9-10; 4:11-19; 6:18-31; 14:20-15:8; 51:13-21; Bar 3:9-4:4; Wis. 6:12-11. See Murphy, *The Tree of Life*, 146.

imagination) in the second section of the book (Wis. 6:22-10:21).¹⁶² Wisdom receives a “principal position,” then, in the teacher’s theology in terms of her roles both in creation and in salvation history.¹⁶³ Interestingly, Dunn does not see a problem with the distinction. For example, he explains:

It is more than a little doubtful whether this question had ever occurred to Paul or to the author of the hymn writer, presumably because their thought of personified wisdom was wholly Jewish in character and the language only became personalized for them when it was the exalted Christ who was in view.”¹⁶⁴

In other words, Paul’s concern was not in baptizing personified Wisdom *per se*, but rather to appropriate that language concerning Wisdom which was wholly Jewish in character (i.e., language presenting Wisdom as a way of speaking of God’s creative activity) and “personalize” it in light of the exalted Christ. Understood in this light, it is not problematic that Wis. 1:6-7 falls outside the section of the book in which Wisdom is personified (Wis. 6:12-21).

Moreover, Fee argued that the only way Wis. 1:6-7 can be turned into a source for Wisdom Christology in Col. 1:15-20 is if “spirit” and “wisdom” are identical. This is because it does not say that “Wisdom holds all things together,” but rather the “spirit” does. In Fee’s opinion, this is not even a remote possibility. Unfortunately, Fee does not explain why he believes it is so unreasonable that Wisdom and spirit are identical in Wisdom of Solomon. In contrast to Fee, other scholars argue that they are identical because in their view, Paul is borrowing various philosophical and religious ideas concerning “spirit” and appropriating them to Wisdom. For example, Reese explains:

Spirit played an important role also in Stoic philosophy as vivifying both human bodies and the whole cosmos, and as distinguishing between each level of existence. The Sage

¹⁶² Leo G. Purdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 319.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁶⁴ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 189.

was aware of such speculation. In treating Lady Wisdom he will go into detail in attributing her qualities of the Stoic world spirit. In this opening exhortation he seems to be giving a kind of stream of consciousness. By tracing briefly the glories of the God of revelation, he reminds Jewish students that their God is the source of all life and wisdom.¹⁶⁵

According to the author of Wisdom of Solomon, it is not an abstract “spirit” or “world soul” which fills the world, but rather the “Spirit of the Lord” (Wis. 1:6-7) or Wisdom (Wis. 7:24).

Paul, then, appears quite at ease in interchanging the terms “spirit” and “wisdom.” Theologian A. Peter Hayman concurs by saying, “In the Wisdom of Solomon the Spirit/Holy Spirit/Spirit of the Lord/Word of the Lord/Wisdom are largely interchangeable (see 7:22; 9:1-2, 17, and cf. *I Enoch* 49:3).”¹⁶⁶ Thus, contrary to Fee’s conclusion, one could say that “Wisdom has filled the world, and “that which holds things together” just as the “Spirit of the Lord” does.

Finally, it should be noted that Moo believes the strength of Fee’s conclusions are questionable because he has failed to consider the larger wisdom/word tradition as found in Philo.¹⁶⁷ In particular, as mentioned there is significant overlap or interrelatedness between Wisdom and Word in the writings of Philo.¹⁶⁸ That said, many scholars not only have

¹⁶⁵ Reese, *The Wisdom of Solomon, Song of Songs*, 32. Clarke’s assessment concurs with that of Reese’s in that the author of Wisdom is borrowing concepts of “spirit” from Greek philosophical thought and appropriating it to Wisdom. Specifically, he says, “Does the *spirit of the Lord* mean God or wisdom? In the Old Testament ‘the spirit of the Lord’ is God in his activity in the world; and, as such, is omniscient and omnipresent. The phrase (in the second half of the verse), *that which holds all things together*, is borrowed from Greek philosophical thought of a divine bond which unified the world. Here the author of Wisdom sets it in parallel to *the spirit of the Lord* and so emphasizes the fact that it is God’s spirit which is the unifying force in the world. See Clarke, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 18. Likewise, Purdue explains, “The Jewish teacher’s basic familiarity with Hellenistic philosophy, in particular the notion of the “World Soul” in Stoicism, is indicated in the portrayal of Wisdom (spirit, reason, providence, destiny, and universal law).” See Purdue, *Wisdom Literature*, 299.

¹⁶⁶ A. Peter Hayman, “The Wisdom of Solomon,” *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, eds., James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 764.

¹⁶⁷ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 113n115.

¹⁶⁸ Relying upon the work of James Drummond, Beetham found that both Wisdom and Word were understood as preexistent agents in the creating process, both had majestic titles applied to them, and both served as archetypes for earthly wisdom and virtue. Given the interrelatedness between the two, he concurred with Harry

recognized the conceptual parallel between Wis. 1:6-7 and Col. 1:17b, but also between

Sir. 43:26 and Col. 1:17b. Commenting on the conceptual parallel of the latter, Lohse states:

The divine Logos, indeed God himself, is the unifying bond which includes all things and holds them together: “And by his word all things hold together” (ἐν λόγῳ ἀπαντα συγκείται τὰ πάντα Sir 43:26). Just as the concept of the mediation of creation was applied to Christ by the Christian community, so too this latter concept was likewise applied. Christ upholds the universe “by his word of power” (τὸ ἔμματα τῆς δυνάμεως ἀπαντα). Everything that is, is established in him alone, for he is the Lord, the head of the body.¹⁶⁹

For Philo, the divine Logos of the Word is the unifying bond which includes all things and holds them together (cf. Sir. 43:26). And given the interchangeability between Word and Wisdom in his writings, one can also say that “Wisdom” is the “unifying bond which includes all things and holds them together.” Thus, just as Paul borrowed Wisdom’s role in creation and applied it to Christ, so he also borrowed Wisdom’s role as “unifier of the world” and applied it to Christ as well (cf. Col. 1:17b).

E. He is the Beginning

According to Fee, the term “beginning” (ἀρχή) in Prov. 8:22-23 is not a title for Wisdom as such, but rather the author’s intention of identifying Wisdom being present with God ‘at the beginning,’ before creation itself. This identification, in his mind, is the same way the author of Sirach understood it in 24:9. Therefore, it is quite unlikely that Paul had Lady Wisdom in mind when he called the risen Son the “beginning.” In short, while there is a linguistic connection with the term “beginning” in Prov. 8:22-23, Sir. 24:9 and Col. 1:17b, it is not substantive, but

Austryn Wolfson’s conclusion that “Wisdom, then, is only another word for Logos, and it is used in all the senses of the term Logos.” See Beetham, *Echoes in Scripture*, 124.

¹⁶⁹ Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 52.

rather accidental. Any attempt to appeal to the usage of the term in Philo's writings adds little clarity to the issue.

As the verb *qnh* in Proverbs 8:22 presents an interpretative problem in whether to translate it as "acquired/possessed" or "created," so the verb *re'sit darko* (*the beginning of his way*) in the same verse presents an interpretative challenge. Concerning this, scripture commentator Michael Fox explains:

Re'sit can be understood in three ways: (1) The best or most important thing (e.g., Amos 6:1; Jer 49:35; advocated by Irwin 1961: 140). (2) The first *thing* temporally, in apposition to "me" in "created me" (e.g., Exod 23:19). "First" can simultaneously imply excellence (e.g., Gen 49:3; Ps 105:36). (3) The first *stage* (e.g., Mic 1:13; Prov 4:7; Job 8:7; 42:12). This is the best explanation. Radaq accurately paraphrases *re'sit darko* as *bi'hillat ma'āšayw* "at the beginning of his deeds." Explanation no. 3 is favored by the parallel *qedem*, which only means prior in time.¹⁷⁰

Fox agrees with Fee's conclusion. *Re'sit* functions adverbially. Wisdom is acquired "at the beginning," or "from the start."¹⁷¹ This is commensurate with the RSV translation of *re'sit darko* in Prov. 8:22, which is "at the beginning of his work." According to Purdue, "The translation perhaps is an echo of Gen. 1:1 (*bērēsīt*, 'in the beginning,' or 'when [God] began')."¹⁷² The suggestion of this echo agrees with Fee's conclusion that "Paul seems obviously to be reflecting Gen. 1:1 and is thinking of Christ in terms of the new creation – an idea totally foreign to the wisdom tradition."¹⁷³

Purdue, however, doubts that the meaning *re'sit darko* is best captured by the RSV translation. Concerning this, he explains:

¹⁷⁰ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18a of *The Anchor Bible*, eds., William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 280.

¹⁷¹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 280.

¹⁷² Leo G. Purdue, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 143.

¹⁷³ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 323.

More likely the expression in Prov. 8:22 means the ‘first of his [creative] activity’ or the ‘firstborn of his creation’ (see Job 40:19; Pss. 78:51; 105:36). The word *first* suggests that Wisdom was the initial product of divine creation. This also may indicate the sense of being the best and most valued of all the things that God created (see, e.g., the “first fruits” of the harvest, Amos 6:1, 6).¹⁷⁴

In other words, Purdue believes that the first of Fox’s three possible understandings of *re’sit* (i.e., the best or most important thing) is the most likely expression in Prov. 8:22. He essentially agrees with Feuillet who put forth that terms “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος) and “beginning” (ἀρχή) (the word in the Greek version of Prov. 8:22) are used in the LXX almost as synonyms. As with the problem of interpreting קָנָה as “acquired” or “created”, then, the challenge of interpreting *re’sit darko* demonstrates that Fee’s quick dismissal of the verbal parallel “beginning” between Prov. 8:22 and Col. 1:18b is unjustified.

Although there is a linguistic parallel of the term “beginning” between Prov. 8:22-23, Sir. 24:9 and Col. 1:18b, the conceptual parallel between the two texts remains unresolved given the interpretative problem *re’sit darko*. Consequently, as Moo recognized it is important to reference the larger Wisdom/Word tradition as found in Philo.¹⁷⁵ In looking at the writings of Philo, many scholars have found that the Jewish philosopher not only bestowed the title of “image” upon Wisdom, but also the title of “beginning.”¹⁷⁶ For example, Hay says, “Philo gives

¹⁷⁴ Purdue, *Interpretation*, 143. Scripture commentator Dermot Cox reaches a similar conclusion that *re’sit darko* does not have a temporal sense, but rather a qualitative sense. Specifically, he says, “‘Beginning’ (*re’shit* in Hebrew) has a temporal and qualitative sense. However, since the supplementary term ‘first’ (*qedem* in Hebrew) has a temporal meaning it is most likely that Wisdom has priority as Yahweh’s firstborn in time. She has been begotten by God before the rest of creation, and the following verses carry the same emphasis.” Dermot Cox, *Proverbs*, vol. 17 of *Old Testament Message: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, eds., Carroll Stuhlmueller and Martin McNamara (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1983), 154.

¹⁷⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 113, 115n. According to Beetham, Philo of Alexandria is the author whose work is most laden with the Word/Wisdom theme. See Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 121.

¹⁷⁶ See Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 61; Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 125; Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 129; Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 56; Witherington, *Jesus as Sage*, 269.

the name ‘Beginning’ to both the Logos (*Conf. Ling.* 146) and divine Wisdom (*Leg. All.* 1.43).”¹⁷⁷ Fee, too, acknowledges the reference but quickly dismisses it because in his view it is not at all clear that Philo is thinking in terms of personified Wisdom.¹⁷⁸ His objection bears resemblance to his earlier objection of using Wis. 1:6-7 as a source for Col. 1:17b. It is, however, untenable given that as Dunn explained Paul was not concerned about baptizing personified Wisdom per se, but rather with appropriating language concerning Wisdom which was wholly Jewish in character and “personalizing” it in light of the exalted Christ. Thus, the interchangeability between “Wisdom” and “Beginning” as found in Philo’s writings, strengthens the possibility that Paul is again alluding to Wisdom’s role in creation as presented in texts such as Prov. 8:22-23 and Sir. 24:9 and applying it to Christ in Col. 1:18.

F. Summary Comments

Gordon Fee provides a helpful check on those modern scripture commentators who overemphasize the dependency of Col. 1:15-20 upon the Wisdom tradition in Hellenistic-Judaism. However, his conclusion that “there simply is no parallel of any kind in Paul’s writings between Christ and personified Wisdom” is highly questionable. In looking at his five objections (e.g., the linguistic and conceptual parallels of “image” (Wis. 7:26; Col. 1:15), God’s “firstborn” in creation (Prov. 8:22, 25; Col. 1:15), “before all things” (Sir. 1:4; Col. 1:17a), “in him [the Son] all things hold together” (Wis. 1:6-7; Col. 1:17b), and “beginning” (Prov. 8:22-23,

¹⁷⁷ Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 61. Concerning the reference from *Leg. All.* 1.43, the specific quotation provided by Beetham is as follows: “By using many words for it Moses has already made it manifest that the sublime and heavenly [W]isdom is of many names: for he calls it ‘beginning’ and ‘image’ and ‘vision of God’; and now by the planting of the [garden of Eden] he brings out the fact that the earthly wisdom is a copy of this as of an archetype.” See Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 125. Moo also recognizes that Philo calls Wisdom “the beginning.” See Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 129. Finally, Lohse makes use of the reference in his writings. See Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 56.

¹⁷⁸ Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 323.

Sir. 24:9; Col. 1:18)), each of them were proven to be untenable at best and incorrect at worst. In contrast to Fee, it has been demonstrated that in these five areas Paul strategically borrowed language typically employed to depict Wisdom and applied it to Christ. However, the question that still remains is why did Paul do this? In other words, why did Paul believe it was necessary to appropriate language typically used of Wisdom in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition and apply it to Christ in Col. 1:15-20? As will now be discussed, many scholars believe that there was some type of heterodox “philosophy” which was creeping into the Colossian Church. Consequently, Paul found the language and concepts typically employed of Wisdom advantageous for warding off the novel teaching which was threatening the faithful in Colossae.

Chapter Four

Recalling the Symbolic Universe

In her commentary on Colossians, MacDonald offers a unique approach to the interpretation of biblical literature called social-scientific criticism. Concerning this, she says:

The goal is to discover a document's occasion and purpose. Social-scientific criticism in the NT is also very much concerned with context, but context is generally understood much more broadly. Rather than concentrating on the unique circumstances underlying a particular document, social-scientific interpreters seek to understand the place of the document within the broader society and thus pay attention to the social mechanisms at work both within the particular group where the document was produced and in the interplay between the group and the wider social order.¹⁷⁹

In light of this approach, MacDonald tries to understand the role of Paul's letter in relation to the Colossian community. While Paul was not the community's founder, he writes as an Apostle in absentia to remind the Colossians that given their reception of Jesus Christ, they are to live in Him (Col. 2:6). For Paul, it is only in Christ "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2) that the Colossian community has been built up and established in the faith (Col. 2:7). Paul's perspective of "life in Christ" can be defined sociologically in what MacDonald calls a "symbolic universe" or a "canopy of ideas offering meaning to the individual and the group."¹⁸⁰ In Paul's case, the "symbolic universe" is the "knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ," in whom the Colossians community has become "knit together in love" (Col. 2:2). Thus, Paul reminds the Colossians that it was Christ who forged them into a community and who will continue to strengthen them as a community as long as He remains the focal point of their belief, worship, and way of living.

¹⁷⁹ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 1.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

Unfortunately, while the gospel has been “bearing fruit and growing” (Col. 1:6), Paul has received word that there is also an empty, seductive philosophy beginning to creep into the community (Col. 2:8). According to Paul, this teaching was “according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8). Consequently, Paul must take action to ensure the maintenance of the Colossian community. Relying upon a famous treatise on the sociology of knowledge by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, MacDonald explains the phenomenon of “boundary maintenance” in terms of sociology by explaining that “contact with ‘deviants’ or ‘heretics’ leads to legitimations of the symbolic universe (attempts to justify a particular perspective, perhaps by making use of the language of the perceived deviants). These legitimations are incorporated into the symbolic universe and the symbolic universe is ultimately transformed.”¹⁸¹ In other words, the false teaching not only motivates Paul to both justify and explain the faith that the Colossians have already received, but in the process of doing so he incorporates those “grains of truth” contained therein which inevitably both expands and transforms the “symbolic universe” as a result (i.e., pushes the faith forward).¹⁸² A look at the identity of the false teaching threatening the Colossian community is now in order.

I. The Empty Philosophy

Certainly much ink has been spilled to identify the erroneous teaching commonly known as the “Colossian heresy.” O’Brien says that the “nature of it has been discussed for more than

¹⁸¹ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 42.

¹⁸² Concerning how Christian doctrine typically advances, Barclay keenly remarks, “It is one of the facts of the human mind that a man thinks only as much as he has to. It is not until a man finds his faith opposed and attacked that he really begins to think out its implications. It is not until the Church is confronted with some dangerous heresy that she begins to realize the riches of orthodoxy. It is characteristic of Christianity that it can always produce new riches to meet a new situation.” See Barclay, *The Letters of the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 113.

one hundred years since Lightfoot wrote his important commentary on Colossians in 1875.

There is still considerable difference of opinion as to exactly what was this false teaching that threatened the peace and stability of the Colossian Christians and their near neighbors.”¹⁸³

Relying upon scholarly works, MacDonald provides a few suggestions:

Some commentators have felt that it was a product of Judaism (e.g., Wright [1986]; Dunn), but others have argued that it was a syncretistic movement, combining Jewish elements with aspects of Paganism (e.g., Lohse). Some have looked to mystery religions (e.g., Dibelius) or Gnosticism (Pokorný [1991]) for an explanation of the phenomenon. Philosophical traditions such as Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, and, most recently, Cynicism (T.W. Martin) have also figured in theories concerning the identity of the Colossian opponents.¹⁸⁴

The problem is that there is no extra biblical evidence to help identify the philosophy referred to by Paul. Consequently, the chief features of the philosophy can only be identified by piecing together and interpreting his counterarguments.¹⁸⁵ Moo, for his part, has nicely summarized the clearest statements taken from 2:8-13 appropriately used to reconstruct the false teaching.¹⁸⁶

Some scholars such as Barclay argue that the “philosophy” is Gnosticism. After discussing the great Gnostic doctrines, Barclay comments on Col. 1:15-23 by stating, “These, then, were the great Gnostic doctrines; and all the time we are studying this passage, and indeed the whole letter, we must have them in our mind, for only against them does Paul’s language become intelligible and relevant.”¹⁸⁷ Those who identify the false teaching as a form of

¹⁸³ O’Brien, “Introduction to Colossians,” xxx.

¹⁸⁴ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 7.

¹⁸⁵ O’Brien, “Colossians, The Letter of Paul to the,” 128. This is sometimes referred to as “mirror reading,” which is the practice of attempting to reproduce a conversation and/or the circumstances of the letter with only half of the dialogue. In this case, the reader tries to use what is supplied by Paul in his letter to the Colossians to ascertain the philosophy that he references in the letter.

¹⁸⁶ See appendix XII taken from Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 50-51.

¹⁸⁷ Barclay, *The Letters of the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 116. Barclay’s main points of Gnostic doctrine include: (1) matter was altogether evil and spirit altogether good; (2) matter was eternal and that it was out of this evil matter that the world was created; (3) the true God could not touch matter and, therefore, could not himself be the agent of creation; (4) God put forth a series of emanations, each a little further away from God until at last there was one so distant from God, that it could handle matter and create the world; (5) the emanation

Gnosticism point to Paul's references of "self-abasement" (Col. 2:18, 23) the idea of "fullness" (Col. 1:19, 2:9-10) and "knowledge" (Col. 1:9-10, 2:2-3, 3:10). Other commentators such as Moo, however, argue that this conclusion is unlikely. Regarding this, he says:

As is now commonly recognized, 'Gnosticism,' as a coherent system, arose only in the second century. Various teachings that later became part of this system certainly existed in Paul's day, and so some interpreters will speak of 'incipient Gnosticism' as a factor for the false teaching. But even this more modest suggestion is probably not appropriate, since there is nothing in Colossians to suggest a coalescence of typical Gnostic elements. Any alleged gnostic elements that are hinted at seem to involve ideas that were generally part of the first-century intellectual environment.¹⁸⁸

According to Moo, it is anachronistic to identify the false teaching as Gnosticism given that it arose in the second century. Additionally, in his mind the scattered references which seem to allude to a Gnostic way of thinking were typical of the first-century intellectual environment rather than the coalescence of typical Gnostic elements.

Additionally, those who see a Jewish component in the false teaching typically believe that the false teaching is either some form of "Jewish mysticism" or "Judaism itself as taught in the local synagogues." O'Brien, a proponent of the former, argues that if the false philosophy was Judaism, it was a Judaism of a different form from that which Paul combated in the churches in Galatia. Specifically, he says:

It was one in which asceticism and mysticism were featured, and where angels, principalities, and powers played a prominent role in creation and the giving of the Law. They were regarded as controlling the lines of communication between God and humankind, and so needed to be placated by strict observances. This teaching is to be read against the background of ascetic and mystical forms of Jewish piety.¹⁸⁹

who created the world was both ignorant of and hostile to the true God, and sometimes they identified that emanation with the God of the Old Testament. See page 114. Theologian F.F. Bruce, quoting Scholem, defines Gnosticism as "'religious movement that proclaimed a mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine,' the knowledge being 'soteric' as well as 'esoteric.'" F.F. Bruce "Colossian Problems Part 3: The Colossian Heresy," *Bibliotheca sacra* 141, no. 562 (July-September 1984): 195-208.

¹⁸⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 53.

¹⁸⁹ O'Brien, "Colossians, The Letter of Paul to the," 128.

Advocates of this position point to Paul's references of "worship of angels" and experiential visions induced by self-abasement in Col. 2:18.¹⁹⁰ This position, however, has several weaknesses. For example, Moo states that "It does not provide an obvious explanation of why Paul would be so intent on demonstrating Christ's superiority to spiritual beings elsewhere in the letter (1:16, 20; 2:10, 15)."¹⁹¹ More importantly, it does not offer an adequate explanation of the letter's emphasis on "rules." In Moo's view, "Colossians 2:20-23 suggests that the false teachers are making adherence to these rules a central plank in their platform."¹⁹²

In a similar way, some interpreters believe that the false teaching was "Judaism itself as taught and practiced in the local synagogues."¹⁹³ They point to Paul's concern with circumcision (2:11, 13; 3:11), his polemic against the "elements of this world" (2:8, 20; cf. Gal. 4:3, 9), the observance of Jewish food laws and holy days (2:16; cf. 2:11-14; cf. Gal. 4:10), a concern with "purity" issues (2:20-23; cf. Gal. 2:11-14), and a concern with angels, in connection with the law (2:14-15; cf. Gal. 3:19).¹⁹⁴ However, like "Jewish mysticism," this view has weaknesses as well. In particular, Moo argues that it cannot adequately explain all the data about the false teaching and Paul's response to it.¹⁹⁵ For example, particularly troublesome is the "silence of Colossians on three key elements of Judaism (in virtually any form): the Old Testament, circumcision, and the law."¹⁹⁶ In his opinion, if the false teaching were merely "basic Judaism," there should be more overt references to the Old Testament to rival claims of Jews and Christians that were

¹⁹⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 54. According to Moo, Jewish mysticism was first proposed by Fred O. Francis in 1962.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 55-56. Moo says that James D.G. Dunn is a major proponent of this position.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-57.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

being debated in the letter.¹⁹⁷ Additionally, while circumcision is mentioned (2:11; cf. 2:13; 3:11), Moo believes these references are very incidental.¹⁹⁸ Finally, Moo points out that if the “philosophy” was fundamentally Jewish in nature, there should be greater polemic around the issue of the law and the inclusion of the Gentiles such as is found in Ephesians.¹⁹⁹ Thus, Moo concludes that while a Jewish component (whether “Jewish mysticism” or “basic Judaism”) may have played a role in the false teaching, neither is sufficient for explaining the false teaching.

In contrast to “Jewish mysticism” and “standard Judaism,” Moo states that the majority of scholars have argued that the false teaching is syncretistic, that is, a mix of two or more religious and/or philosophical traditions.²⁰⁰ For example, Mills explains:

The identity of the Colossian heresy has been greatly debated.... It seems to be a blending of some form of Jewish Christianity with incipient Gnosticism, influenced by elements of astrology and possibly the pagan mystery religions. The adherents focused on visions (2:18), intermediaries between God and the earth (2:20), and food laws, and days (2:16). The result was a low Christology (cf. 1:15-20) and an extreme ascetic ethical stance (2:20-23).²⁰¹

While some believe that characterizing the false teaching as “syncretistic” is simply an easy way out of the problem, this option reflects Vawter’s observation that the world from which Christianity was born was strongly syncretic in character. In other words, syncretistic proposals

¹⁹⁷ Hay concurs with the Moo’s Old Testament point by stating, “The fact that Paul doesn’t argue against the Error on the basis of Old Testament, in sharp contrast to the approach taken in Galatians, is strong evidence that the Error was not primarily a form of Judaism.” See Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 27.

¹⁹⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 57.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57. Moo justifies this point by stating that Ephesians is so similar to Colossians and probably written at the same time. While Ephesians refers to the law and develops an extensive and pointed defense of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the new covenant community (2:11-22), the law is surprisingly omitted from Colossians. See page 57.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁰¹ Mills, “Colossians, Letter to,” 163-164. Additionally, Moo believes the work of Clinton Arnold best captures the Colossian heresy by stating, “The Colossian ‘philosophy’...represents a combination of Phrygian folk belief, local folk Judaism, and Christianity. The local folk belief has some distinctive Phrygian qualities, but it also has much in common with what we could also describe as magic or ritual power.” See Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 57.

reflect “the realities of life, in which most people do not hold a ‘pure’ form of any religion or philosophy, but a set of beliefs drawn from an often bewildering variety of sources.”²⁰² In this respect, the city of Colossae was no different given that it was a cosmopolitan city where a wide variety of religions and philosophies mingled. Thus, as Moo recognized, “it is this possibility that bedevils any attempt to come up with a ‘neat’ identification of the false teaching.”²⁰³

II. Sufficiency of Jesus Christ

Regardless of the identity of the false teaching, Paul recognized that he needed to respond to this perceived threat to the Colossian community. Concerning this, Moo explains:

The false teachers were appealing to spiritual beings, visions, and rules to find security in this very uncertain universe. In doing so, they were questioning the sufficiency of Christ. They may have done so directly, but it is more likely that their questions about Christ were implicit in their approach and that it is Paul who draws out the implications of this “philosophy” for Christology.²⁰⁴

In Paul’s mind, this new teaching was not “according to Christ” (Col. 2:8) and was questioning (explicitly or implicitly) the sufficiency of Christ.²⁰⁵ Therefore, he needed to respond with a new development of a Christology which affirmed both Christ’s supremacy over the whole universe and His sufficiency as the redeemer of creation.²⁰⁶ The key question, however, is what sources would enable Paul to develop such a Christology? As discussed, although texts such as Gen. 1:26-27 and Ps. 89:27 demonstrate linguistic parallels to Col. 1:15 and Col. 1:16 with their assigned titles of “image” and “firstborn” respectively, neither text sufficiently accounts for the

²⁰² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 58.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁰⁵ The parenthetical “explicitly or implicitly” is added because Dunn notes that “The absence of polemic suggests that Christ’s status and significance were being devalued rather than attacked, that an alternative religious system was being exalted, so that any disparagement of the Colossian Christians’ faith and praxis was more or a corollary than a central objective.” Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 86.

²⁰⁶ Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 38-39.

“cosmic vision of Christ” presented in the hymn and therefore able to refute the heresy. Instead, another sphere of thought was needed such as that of the Wisdom in the Hellenistic-Judaism tradition. Only this tradition with its rich presentation of Wisdom in terms of its role in creation and redemption is able to adequately account for the cosmic role of Christ as presented in Col. 1:15-20.

Paul’s strategic appropriation of language typically employed to depict Wisdom from Hellenistic-Judaic tradition in order to present the sufficiency of Christ to the Colossian community is somewhat akin to the Israelites despoiling the Egyptians (Ex. 12:36). Concerning this strategic move, Dunn explains:

The most obvious explanation of all this is that *the first Christians were ransacking the vocabulary available to them in order that they might express as fully as possible the significance of Jesus.*” They were saying in effect to Jew and Stoic and to those religious seekers influenced to any degree by the syncretistic speculation of the time, ‘What you understand by divine Wisdom, the divine image, etc., all these deep and profound insights into the reality of the cosmos and into the relationships between the divine and human which you express by those concepts, we see and proclaim to have been most fully expressed and finally realized in Jesus our Lord.’²⁰⁷

In other words, Paul reminds the Colossian community that Wisdom is not to be found in some novel teaching in “self abasement,” “worship of angels,” “visions,” or in “human precepts and doctrines” (Col. 2:18, 22). These indeed have the “appearance of wisdom” (Col. 2:23), but they are “not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8). Instead, Wisdom is none other than “Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:30), in whom “all the fullness of God was please to dwell,” (Col. 1:19) and through whom God reconciled to “Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20).

²⁰⁷ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 196.

As mentioned, however, Paul's reliance upon the Wisdom tradition does not demonstrate a one-to-one correlation transference of concepts between divine Wisdom and Christ. Instead, there is what Witherington identified as an "element of uniqueness" involved in talking about Christ that had been prepared by Wisdom.²⁰⁸ For example, there is not a perfect correspondence between texts such as Sir. 1:4a and Col. 1:17a. Whereas Sir. 1:4a says that "Wisdom was *created* before all things," Col. 1:17a says of the Son, "He is before all things." In other words, Paul adopts statements previously said of Wisdom (i.e., she was created before all things) and adapts it for his purpose of showing that Christ *is* before all things. Furthermore, as Dunn recognized, Paul freely adopts such texts as Wis. 1:6-7 and "personalizes" it in light of the exalted Christ.²⁰⁹ Finally, as many scholars have recognized, Paul goes beyond the Wisdom tradition in saying of the Son that all things were created "for him" (Col. 1:16).²¹⁰ For Paul, Christ was not only the mediator of creation, but also its ultimate purpose and goal. As Martin aptly comments, "No Jewish thinker ever rose to these heights in daring to predict that Wisdom was the ultimate goal in all creation."²¹¹ Thus, whereas Fee argues that such discrepancies demonstrate a lack of any linguistic and conceptual tie between Paul and the Wisdom literature,

²⁰⁸ See Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom*, 270

²⁰⁹ Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 189.

²¹⁰ See, e.g., Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 137; Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: Commentary*, 70; Talbert, *Ephesians & Colossians*, 192; Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 124; Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 296; Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 57; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* 40.

²¹¹ Martin, quoted in O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 47. Theologian Jeffrey Lamp recognizes that the hymn also contains novelties such as references to death (Col. 1:20) and resurrection (Col. 1:18). These have no precise parallel in Jewish wisdom speculation. Jeffrey Lamp, "Wisdom in Col. 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 1 (March 1998): 51.

other authors believe that such discrepancies demonstrate Paul's ability to creatively adopt and adapt Jewish Wisdom traditions in his depictions of Christ.²¹²

²¹² For example, after analyzing the discrepancies between those predications of Wisdom and those of Jesus Christ in Col. 1:15-20, Lamp concludes, "Rather than weakening the argument that Paul here is ascribing predictions of wisdom to Jesus Christ it demonstrates that Paul creatively adopts and adapts Jewish wisdom traditions in his depictions of Christ." Lamp, "Wisdom in Col. 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance," 51.

Conclusion

While Paul was not the founder of the Colossian community, he wrote as an Apostle in absentia to “legitimize” the symbolic universe which was being threatened by “deviants” or “heretics” who were questioning the sufficiency of Christ. In his mind, their novel teaching was “not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8) and therefore threatening the community. Consequently, Paul responded by developing a “cosmic vision of Christ” in Col. 1:15-20 not previously taught in his other letters. While scriptural texts such as Gen. 1:26-27 and Ps. 89:27 are commonly proposed as sources for the majestic titles of “image” and “firstborn” in Col. 1:15 and Col. 1:16 respectively, neither text can adequately account for the universal significance of Christ presented in Col. 1:15-20. Instead, another sphere of thought such as that of Wisdom in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition is needed to account for the significant christological development. Only by strategically adopting language and concepts typically employed to depict Wisdom in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition and adapting it to Christ could Paul express the universal supremacy of Christ and refute the false teaching to ensure the maintenance of the Colossian community.

In terms of further research, some authors have recognized that in addition to the christological development in Col. 1:15-20, there is also significant ecclesiological development.²¹³ For example, there is an ecclesial advancement from Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12 to Col. 1:18. Concerning this, Pizzuto notes that whereas the Pauline analogy of body illustrates the various functions and obligations which Christians have toward each other in Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12, in Colossians the body comes to denote the sphere of those who are saved under the

²¹³ See, e.g., Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 34-36; Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 46-57; Schweizer, “The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ,” 1-11; Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 52-55.

universal lordship of Christ, its head.²¹⁴ The question becomes, then, what accounts for this change?²¹⁵ Furthermore, in what way, if any, did Wisdom as depicted in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition contribute to this advancement?²¹⁶ Moreover, in what way is the Colossian's ecclesiological development a reflection of its christological development?²¹⁷ Further research can shed light on the underlying reasons for these significant theological advancements.

Finally, this analysis has focused primarily on Wisdom in terms of its role in creation in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition. Some scholars, however, have recognized Wisdom's role in terms of redemption as well.²¹⁸ According to Davies, Wisdom reveals the way of life and righteousness to human beings or the redemptive activity of God.²¹⁹ Consequently, Wisdom can say, "For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord; but he who misses me injures himself, all who hate me love death" (Prov. 8:35-36). The question becomes, then, in

²¹⁴ Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 48.

²¹⁵ Schweizer suggests that the Hellenistic conception concerning the cosmic body and its head is being reinterpreted in this development. Specifically, he says that "Christ is the world-soul permeating and ruling the whole cosmos; as such he – and not Zeus or Ether or any God of mystery religion – become, in his ascension, the head of the universe. The author of Colossians (Paul himself in his later years, or one of his disciples) takes up this problem and this answer and reinterprets it anew. Christ is indeed the Lord over the world." See Schweizer, "The Church as the Missionary Body of Christ," 10.

²¹⁶ Beetham suggests that there exists some evidence in the literature that "head" may have served as a title for Wisdom. He notes that the rabbis play on the word "head" and the word "beginning" that is found in Prov. 8:22, to signify that Torah (=Wisdom) is the "Head" of God's ways. Thus, in saying that "He is the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18), Christ is presented as the "beginning," though not merely as the beginning of God's initial work of creation, but now the "beginning" of the renewed creation, as the first to experience the resurrection from the dead. See Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians*, 129, 134.

²¹⁷ For insights concerning this question, see Pizzuto, *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*, 48-50.

²¹⁸ See, e.g., Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 46; Lamp, "Wisdom in Col. 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance," 51; Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 168-172. In contrast to these scholars, Martin argues that nothing in the teaching on Wisdom adumbrates the theme of redemption, whether cosmic or personal (except perhaps references to Prov. 8:35, 36, which however seem remote). Consequently, in his opinion, a background other than Wisdom must be sought for the second strophe of the hymn (Col. 1:18b-20). See Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and The Christian's Liberty An Expository Commentary with a Present-Day Application*, 48. Likewise, Talbert argues that the second strophe of the hymn (Col. 1:18b-20) moves beyond the language of Wisdom/Word that gave conceptual form to the cosmological first strophe. See Talbert, *Ephesians & Colossians*, 189.

²¹⁹ Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology*, 168.

what way, if any, did Paul and the early Christians confer upon Christ what was previously said about Wisdom in terms of redemptive role? Furthermore, is there a one-to-one correspondence or rather an “element of uniqueness” in conferring upon Christ what was previously predicated of Wisdom in texts such as Prov. 8:35-36? As discussed, Paul freely adopted certain texts such as Wis. 1:6-7 and “personalized” them in light of the exalted Christ. If there is a transference of language and concepts, then, they may be unique elements conferred upon Christ not previously attributed to Wisdom in terms of its role in redemption.²²⁰ Regardless, there is great opportunity for further research to uncover additional parallels between Wisdom as depicted in the Hellenistic-Judaic tradition and Christ’s preeminence in the spheres of creation and re-creation so clearly presented in Col. 1:15-20.

²²⁰ In fact, authors such as Lamp and Hay argue that there are elements of uniqueness found in the second strophe of the hymn (Col. 1:18b-1:20) which have no precise parallel in Jewish wisdom speculation. For example, Lamp puts forth that the death (Col. 1:20) and resurrection (Col. 1:18) of Christ are not found in Jewish wisdom speculation. See Lamp, “Wisdom in Col. 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance,” 51. Additionally, commenting the presupposition of some radical disruption of the world which occurred after creation in Col. 1:20, Hay says, “Such Hellenistic-Jewish thinkers such as Philo and the author of the Wisdom of Solomon generally do not seem to presuppose any radical corruption of nature, certainly not any breakdown in God’s created order necessitating special divine intervention (cf. Wis 19:18-22; Philo, *Somm.* 2.250-54).” See Hay, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Colossians*, 64.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Colossians 1:15-20

[15] He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation;

[16] 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.

[17] He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

[18] 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.

[19] For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,

[20] and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Appendix II

Peter O'Brien's Outline of the Letter to the Colossians

- I. Introductory greeting (1.1-2)
- II. Thanksgiving: Faith-love-hope and the gospel (1.3-8)
- III. Praying for knowledge and godly conduct (1.9-14)
- IV. Christ the Lord in creation and reconciliation (1.15-20)
- V. Reconciliation accomplished and applied (1.21-23)
- VI. Paul's mission and pastoral concern (1.24-2.5)
- VII. False teaching and its antidote (2.6-3.4)
 - A. The all-sufficiency of Christ (2.6-15)
 - B. Freedom from legalism (2.16-23)
 - C. Seek the things above (3.1-4)
- VIII. The Christian life (3.5-4.6)
 - A. Put away the sins of the past (3.5-11)
 - B. Put on the graces of Christ (3.12-17)
 - C. Behavior in a Christian household (3.18-4.1)
 - D. Watch and pray (4.2-6)
- IX. Personal greetings and instructions (4.7-18)

Appendix III

Eduard Lohse's Two Strophe Structure Proposal

*He is the image of the invisible God,
The first-born before all creation,
For in him all things were created
In the heavens and on earth,
The visible and the invisible,
Whether thrones or dominions, principalities
or powers;
All things were created through him and for him;
And he is the head of the body, [the church].
He is the beginning,
The first-born from the dead,
In order that he might be the first in all things,
For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell
And through him to reconcile all things toward him,
Making peace [through the blood of his cross]
through him
Whether on earth or in the heavens.*

□ς □στιν ε□κ□ν το□ θεο□ το□ □ορ□του,
πρωτ□τοκος π□σης κτ□σεως,
□τι □ν α□τ□ □κτ□σθη τ□ π□ντα τ□
□ν το□ς ο□ρανο□ς κα□ τ□ □π□ τ□ς γ□ς,
τ□ □ρατ□ κα□ τ□ □□ρατα,
ε□τε θρ□νοι ε□τε κυρι□τητες ε□τε
□ρχα□ ε□τε □ξουσ□αι
τ□ π□ντα δι□ α□το□ κα□ ε□ς α□τ□ν □κτισται
κα□ α□τ□ς □στιν προ□ π□ντων
κα□ τ□ π□ντα □ν α□τ□ συν□στηκεν
κα□ α□τ□ς □στιν □ κεφαλ□ το□ σ□ματος [τ□ς □κκλησ□ας]
□ς □στιν □ρχ□,
πρωτ□τοκος □κ τ□ν νεκρ□ν,
□να γ□νηται □ν π□σιν α□τ□ς πρωτε□ων,
□τι □ν α□τ□ ε□δ□κησεν π□ν τ□ πλ□ρωμα κατοικ□σαι
κα□ δι□ α□το□ □ποκαταλλ□ξαι τ□ π□ντα ε□ς α□τ□ν
ε□ρηνοποι□σας [δι□ το□ α□ματος το□ σταυρο□ α□το□] δι□ α□το□
ε□τε τ□ □π□ τ□ς γ□ς ε□τε τ□ □ν το□ς ο□ρανο□ς.

Appendix IV

David Hay's Two Strophe Structure Proposal

Assertions about God's Son	First Stanza	Second Stanza
who is	15 <i>a</i> the image of the invisible God	18 <i>b</i> the beginning
he is the firstborn	15 <i>b</i> of all creation	18 <i>c</i> from the dead
he is preeminent	17 <i>a</i> He himself is before all things	18 <i>d</i> so that he might be preeminent in all things
explanation of his supremacy	16 <i>a</i> because (Gk. <i>hoti</i>) all things were created in him 16 <i>b</i> – things in heaven and on earth 16 <i>c</i> things visible and invisible 16 <i>d</i> whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – 16 <i>e</i> everything was created through and for him	19 <i>a</i> because (<i>hoti</i>) in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell
the Son unifies	17 <i>b</i> in him all things hold together 18 <i>a</i> and he is the head of the body, the church	20 <i>a</i> and to reconcile all things through him 20 <i>b</i> making peace through the blood of his cross
“everything is related to him”	cf. 16 <i>b</i>	20 <i>c</i> whether things on earth or in heaven

Appendix V

James Robinson's Two Strophe Structure Proposal

v. 15	<i>Who is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation;</i>	A1
v.16	<i>For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth,</i>	A2
	Visible and invisible	A3
	Whether thrones or dominions	A4
	Or principalities or authorities;	A5
	<i>All things through him and to him have been created,</i>	A6
v.17	<i>And he himself is before all things,</i>	A7
	<i>And all things in him have come together,</i>	A8
v.18	<i>And he himself is the head of the body the church;</i>	A9
	<i>Who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead,</i>	B1
	<i>That he might in all things himself might be pre-eminent;</i>	B2
v.19	<i>For in him was pleased all the fullness to dwell,</i>	B3
v.20	<i>And through him to reconcile all things to him</i>	B4
	<i>Making peace by the blood of his cross,</i>	B5
	<i>Through him whether those on earth</i>	B6
	<i>Or those in heaven.</i>	B7

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's Reconstructed Two Four-line Strophe Proposal

v. 15a	1	Who is (the) image of the invisible God
v. 15b	2	Firstborn from the dead
v. 16a	3	For in him were created all things
v.16f	4	All things through him and to him were created.
v.18b	1	Who is (the) beginning
v.18c	2	Firstborn from the dead
v.19	3	For in him was pleased all the Fullness to dwell
v.20a	4	And through him to reconcile all things to him.

Douglas Moo's Three Strophe Structure Proposal

¹⁵The Son [**who**] is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation

¹⁶FOR *in* him all things were created:
things in heaven and things on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers,
or rulers or authorities;
ALL THINGS have been created

through him
and *for* [*eis*] him.

¹⁷He (*autos*) is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
And he (*autos*) is the head of the body, the church;

He [**who**] is the beginning
and the firstborn from among the dead,
so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

¹⁹FOR God was pleased
to have all his fullness dwell *in* him,
²⁰and *through* him to [*for; eis*] reconcile to himself
all things,
whether things on earth or things in heaven,
by making peace through his blood,
shed on the cross.

Steven Baugh's Chiastic Pattern Proposal

Line

- | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|------|---|------|
| 1. <i>(He) who is</i> the (b) image of the (a) invisible God | | | | |
| 2. <i>The firstborn</i> over all creation | } | - X | } | |
| 3. <i>Because in him</i> were created all things | } | | | |
| 4. a <i>in the heavens</i> and | } | | | |
| b <i>upon the earth</i> | } | | | |
| 5. b things visible and | } | | | |
| a things invisible | } | | | |
| 6. b whether thrones (visible) | } | - Y | } | - A |
| b whether dominions (visible) | } | | | |
| 7. a whether rulers (invisible) | } | | | |
| a whether authorities (invisible) | } | | | |
| 8. c all things | } | | | |
| d through him | } | - Z | } | |
| e and unto him were created | } | | | |
| 9. <i>And he himself</i> is before all things | | | | - B |
| 10. And all things continue to exist in him. | | | | - C |
| 11. <i>And he himself is</i> the head of the body, the church. | | | | - B' |
| 12. <i>(He) who is</i> the Beginning/Chief | } | | | |
| 13. <i>The firstborn</i> from the dead | } | - X' | } | |
| 14. In order that he himself might be pre-eminent in all things | } | | | |
| 15. <i>Because in him</i> (God) was pleased that all the fullness dwell | } | | | |
| 16. e and | } | | | |
| d through him that he reconcile | } | - Z' | } | - A' |
| c all things unto himself | } | | | |
| 17. By making peace through the blood of his cross | | | | |
| 18. Through him | | | | |
| 19. b whether things <i>upon the earth</i> | } | | | |
| a whether things <i>in the heavens</i> . | } | - Y' | } | |

Appendix IX

Andrew Lincoln's Colossian's Hymn Additions Proposal

Strophe I

who is the image of the invisible God
the firstborn of all creation,
for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth
things visible and invisible
[whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers] – addition (i)

Transitional Strophe II

all things were created through him and for him
and he himself is before all things
and all things hold together in him
and he himself is the head of the body of the body [the church] – addition (ii)

Strophe III

who is the beginning
the firstborn from the dead
[so that he himself might have preeminence in all things] – addition (iii)
for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell
and through him to reconcile all things for him,
making peace through him
[through the blood of his cross] – addition (iv) after “making peace”
whether things on earth or things in heaven

Appendix X

Parallels Between Col. 1:15-20 and Prov. 8:22-21 Wisdom Figure

First Century C.E. development of the
Proverbs 8:22-31 Wisdom Figure

Colossians 1:15-20

Wisdom/Word is the “image” of God:

Christ is the “image” of God (v. 15a)

Wis. 7:25-26; Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* 1.43,
2.4, 3.96; *Confusion* 97, 146-47;
Creation 25, 31, 146; *Planting* 19-20; *Flight*
12-13, 101; *Names* 223; *Dreams* 1.239,
2.45; *Moses* 1.66; *Spec. Laws* 1.81, 1.171,
3.83, 3.207; *Heir* 231; *QG* 2.62.

Wisdom/Word is the “firstborn” (of all
creation);

Christ is the “firstborn” of all
creation (v.15b)

Philo, *Confusion* 146-47; *Dreams* 1.215;
Agriculture 51; *Heir* 117-19; cf. Prov. 8:25

Wisdom/Word is the “beginning” (of
creation):

Christ is the “beginning” of the
renewed creation (1:18b)

Philo, *Confusion* 146-47; *Alleg. Interp.*
1.43. Cf. Prov. 8:22

Wisdom/Word preexisted creation:

Christ preexisted creation (v. 17a)

Prov. 8:23-25 LXX (προ [6x]); Sir 24:9;
Wis 9:9; Aristob. 5.10-11a; Philo,
Migration 6; cf. John 1:1-3

αυτος εστιν προ παντων

Wisdom/Word was the agent of creation:

Christ was the agent of creation (v.
16c)

Prov. 8:22 LXX (εις εργα αυτου); Wis7:22, 8:6, 9:1;
Philo, *Flight* 12, 109; *Spec. Laws* 1.81;
Unchangeable 57; *Heir* 199; *Migration* 6;
Worse 54, 115-16; *Sacrifices* 8;
Alleg. Interp. 1.65, 3.96; *Drunkenness* 30-31;
Virtues 62; *Dreams* 1.241, 2.45;
2 *En.* 30:8; cf. *Alleg. Interp.* 2.49; *Hier* 53; John 1:1-3

τα παντα δι αυτον...εκτισται

Word/Wisdom sustains the created order:

Christ sustains the created order (v.
17b)

Philo, *Flight* 112; *Heir* 187-188; cf. Wis
1:6-7 (“Wisdom” and “Spirit of the Lord”

το παντα εν αυτω συνεστηκεν

Are interchangeable in this last text)

Wisdom is the “Head”:

N.B.: The evidence here is from *after* the first century C.E.; it may nevertheless reflect a tradition that goes back to the time of the apostle Paul.

Aquila’s κεφαλαιον at Prov. 8:22 (ca. 140 C.E.); see *Midr. Rabbah* Song of Songs 5.11, §1; *Midr. Rabbah* Leviticus 19.1.

Heavy employment of *πας* (“all”) to describe the extent of Wisdom/Word’s nature and activity

Wis 7:22, 23, 24, 27, 8:1, 5, 9:1; Philo, *Flight* 112.

a) The Word “contains all [God’s] fullness” [LCL]:
Philo, *Dreams* 1.75

b). Wisdom/Word is the “house” (temple) of God:
Philo, *Migration* 4-6; cf. *Alleg. Interp.* 3.46

**Wisdom is agent of reconciliation and peace
Between God and humanity:**

Philo, *Heir* 205-06; *OF* 2.68

Appendix XI

Ben Witherington’s Summary of the Dependence of Col. 1:15-20 upon the Wis. of Sol.

(1) Wis. 7:26 – “For she is...a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness” (cf. Col. 1:15a)

Christ is the “Head” of the Church, his Body (v. 18a)

Heavy employment of *πας* (“all”) to describe the extent of Christ’s nature and activity:

Col. 1:15, 16a, 16f, 17a, 17b, 18d, 19, 20

In Christ “all the fullness” of God was pleased to dwell (v. 19)

N.B. Col. 1:19 is an echo of Ps. 67:17 LXX (see chapter eight), a reference to the presence of God in The temple on Zion. In light of the strong temple overtones of 1:19, these other references in Philo are Included here as significant parallels.

Christ is the agent of reconciliation and peace between God and Humanity (v. 20)

- (2) Wis. 6:22 – “I will tell you what Wisdom is and how she came to be...I will trace her course *from the beginning of creation*” (cf. Col. 1:15b)
- (3) Wis. 1:14: “for he created all things so that they might exist” (cf. Col. 1:16a).
- (4) Wis. 5:23d; 6:21; 7:8 – on thrones, scepters (Col. 1:16d)
- (5) Wis. 7:24b – “For Wisdom... because of her pureness pervades and penetrates all things” (cf. Col. 1:16-17, 19);
- (6) Wis. 1:7 – “that which holds all things together knows what was said” (and) 8:1b – “She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well” (cf. Col. 1:17b)
- (7) Wis. 7:29c – on priority and superiority (cf. Col. 1:17a, 18d).

Appendix XII

The Clearest Statements about the False Teaching at Colossae

1. The false teaching is a “hollow and deceptive philosophy” (v. 8);
2. The false teaching “depends on human tradition” (v. 8, cf. also v. 22);

3. The false teaching “depends on...the elemental spiritual forces of this world” (v. 8);
4. The false teaching does not “depend on...Christ” (v. 8);
5. The false teachers were advocating the observance of certain food restrictions and of certain Jewish “holy days” (v. 16);
6. The false teachers practiced ascetic disciplines (v. 18; cf. also v. 23);
7. The false teachers focused attention on angels (v. 18);
8. The false teachers made a great deal about visions they had seen (v. 18);
9. The false teachers are proud: “their unspiritual minds puff them with idle notions” (v. 18);
10. The false teachers are losing connection with “the head” of the body, Christ (v. 19);
11. The false teachers were propagating various rules – which Paul regards as “worldly” – as an important means of spiritual growth (vv. 20-23).