

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 389—"Creation and Redemption in Col 1:15-20"

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Introduction

Colossians 1:15-20 is one of the most disputed christological passages, due to its exalted perspective of Jesus. Two of the major interpretive issues that arise from it deal with Jesus' role in the act of creating all things and what sort of creation is being spoken of throughout the hymn. Another issue that I have been promoting for a few years now is whether Paul is employing wisdom christology in this hymn, and if so, how does it affect the meaning of the passage.

In this week's episode, we will attempt to interpret the Colossian hymn (which is what scholars of the Letter to the Colossians call verses 15-20 in chapter 1). My approach will have 4 steps, and these steps are deliberate in order to persuade my listeners and viewers of some of the key pieces of context that often get completely left out of readings of the Colossian hymn. In this episode, I will be interacting with some of the arguments that are often made, arguments that I don't find persuasive. So, this is not a debunking session. Rather, I want it to be a charitable engagement with positions, in hopes of arriving at the truth.

How can we make sense of the confusing Colossian hymn and its exalted references to Jesus?

I. Does Paul Have a Wisdom Christology?

- A. but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1 Cor 1:24)
- B. But by his doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor 1:30)
- C. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:7–8)
 - 1. Fem relative pronoun, relating back to wisdom
- D. 1 Cor 10:4 - the rock that followed them was Christ (1 Cor 10:4)
 - 1. Several Jewish writers contemporary to Paul say that the rock in the wilderness was God's wisdom (Sirach, Philo, Wisdom of Solomon) - See Ep 276.
 - 2. Furthermore, Paul tells his readers in the context that he is using typology and that he is speaking typologically
 - a) Wisdom is the prototype, and Jesus is the antitype.
- E. "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 . . . What we have in these passages, in other words, are classic expressions of Wisdom christology."
 - 1. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 269.
- F. Prior to the writing of Colossians, we have evidence of Pauline wisdom christology in 1 Cor, 2 Cor, Gal, and Romans. These are not insignificant letters, like one might think of something small like Philemon. These are arguably the most, or at least among the most influential letters of Paul.

II. Wisdom Christology in Colossians

- A. Noun sophia 6x in Colossians
- B. Lets read some of them
 - 1. For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord (Col 1:9-10)
 - 2. We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. (Col 1:28)
 - 3. Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom (Col 2:3)

4. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another (Col 3:16)
5. Praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak. Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. (Col 4:3-5)



6.

III. Jewish Portrayals of Personified Wisdom

A. Nine things we need to know about God's personified wisdom from pre-Christian Judaism

1. Wisdom was the image of God (eikon) - Wis 7:26, Philo, *Leg Al.* 1.43
2. Wisdom was illustrated as the firstborn of all creation - Prov 8:22-23; Philo, *Gen* 4:97 ("Wisdom is the firstborn mother of all things")
3. Yahweh is the sole creator, but he made all things through his wisdom - Ps 104:24 "In wisdom You created all things; the earth is full of your possessions" (*en sophia*) - Prov 3:19; Jer 10:12; 51:15
4. Thrones, scepters, and rulers were summoned to honor personified wisdom so that they may reign forever (Wis 6:21)
5. Wisdom was before all things in time, which naturally made her preeminent over all things (Prov 8:22) "Yahweh possessed me, wisdom, at the beginning of his way, before his works of old"
6. Wisdom holds all things together (Wis 1:6-7)
7. Wisdom is the ruler/head (arche) - Philo, *Leg. Al.* 1:43.
8. Wisdom dwells among the righteous people of God (Wis 1:4 speaks of wisdom not dwelling in the body of a sinful person, implying that wisdom does dwell in the body of righteous persons.
 - a) Prov 31:10-31 - excellent wife
 - b) Sirach 50 - Simon the High Priest
 - c) 1Q20 - Genesis Apocryphon - Sarah, Abraham's wife
 - d) Philo - Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, Zipporah
 - e) NT - Jesus
9. Wisdom brings peace - Prov 3:17 says that all of wisdom's paths are peace.

IV. A Well-Informed Reading of the Colossian Hymn

- A. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him.
- B. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church. (1:17-18a)
- C. He is the ruler, the firstborn from the dead, so that he himself will come to have first place in all things. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (1:18b-20)
 - 1. Wisdom was the image of God (*eikon*)
 - 2. Wisdom was illustrated as the firstborn of all creation
 - 3. Yahweh is the sole creator, but he made all things through his wisdom
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 - 5. Wisdom was before all things in time, which naturally made her preeminent over all things
 - 6. Wisdom holds all things together
 - 7. Wisdom is the ruler/head (*arche*)
 - 8. Wisdom dwells among the righteous people of God
 - 9. Wisdom brings peace
 - a) If we add these 9 wisdom sayings to the 6 other references to wisdom/sophia in Colossians, then we have 15 connections, which is quite a lot of evidence for Colossian wisdom christology that seems to be completely absent from several reconstructions of the meaning of the hymn in Col 1:15-20.

Creation Strophe

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. (1:15-16)

Redemption Strophe

He is the ruler, the firstborn from the dead, so that he himself will come to have first place in all things. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him, and through him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. (1:18b-20)



Transition from Creation to Redemption

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church. (1:17-18a)



Creation Strophe

ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
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ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες
εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·
τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν
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αὐτοῦ,
εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς. (1:18b-20)



Transition from Creation to Redemption

καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων
καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,
καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς
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(1:17-18a)



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Thanks for listening to this week's episode!

Join us next week as we explore whether Jesus demonstrated faith in God, and if so, what implications does it have for understanding Jesus and God.

Please look forward to our next episode.

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Host: Dustin Smith