

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"



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Who is Jesus?

Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. (Colossians 1:15–17)

The whole idea of Jesus being God Incarnate, of God literally taking on the form of a human body and living in His creation for a time, is a central point of the Colossian letter. The Gnostic teachers who attempted to invade and take over Christianity in the first century despised and rejected anything material. They viewed the "god" of the Old Testament who created the material universe as an errant and inferior "demiurge" who misread the chief deity's wishes when he created the material universe. Thus, when Paul introduces this passage with its emphasis on Jesus being God Incarnate and possessing a literal human body, he specifically rejected a major theme of Gnostic error. Apparently this error continued to grow and intensify, for John later devoted most of First John to the problem, becoming far more detailed in his condemnation of the docetic Gnostic rejection of Jesus being God manifest in literal human flesh. The "docetic" view taught that Jesus only appeared to have a literal human body. Supposedly, it was really a "spirit body," or a mere empty image. Another docetic error held that the "Christ," the deity inhabited the human body of Jesus at some time after his natural birth and left His human body before Jesus' crucifixion.

Gnostic belief continued to threaten Christianity for at least three hundred years. Arius' views of a lesser, created Jesus, not eternal, and not co-equal with the Father, illustrates a later manifestation of Gnostic influence. Thankfully, the Christian community rebuffed Arius and his beliefs. Arius' modern followers will actually cite our study passage and claim it as supporting their idea that Jesus is a lesser deity, and a created deity, the first created being that Jehovah created. Let's examine the passage to discover its teachings.

Who is the image of the invisible God.... The word "image" in this verse was translated from the root for our English word icon. In English the word suggests an imitation or a copy. This is not the case in the Greek language of the New

Testament. D. A. Carson makes the point quite clearly.

The image of the invisible God indicates that the very nature and character of God have been perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ; in him the invisible has become visible. No-one has ever seen God, but God the only Son has made him known (Jn. 1:18). Humanity as the climax of creation was made in God's image (Gn. 1:26–27). From all eternity, Jesus, in his very nature, has been the image of God. The English word *image* may suggest a copy that is less than perfect; the Greek original, which is a term of revelation, does not imply this. Jesus, who is perfectly like the Father, reveals who he is in all his goodness (*cf.* Pr. 8:22).¹

Many New Testament scholars believe these verses originated as a first generation hymn sung in the first churches. If so, it makes a powerful point that the words in our hymns should be as true and sound as the words spoken from our pulpits.

This hymn is also as far as one could imagine from Gnostic dualistic thought since it has a robust appreciation for creation and re-creation, and its vision of redemption includes resurrection. Furthermore, the hymn leaves no room for additional mediators between God and humankind. Christ is the be-all and end-all of all mediators. Angels and principalities need not apply. The hymn thus not only makes clear the basis on which the Colossians already have the salvific benefits they need and the reason they need not entertain supplements or replacements for what they have already

cf. cf. compare

¹ D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

believed and have been doing, but also provides a pattern or trajectory of the Christian life which involves death, resurrection, and eventual glorification.²

...*the firstborn of every creature*.... One meaning of the word “firstborn” refers to birth order, the first or oldest child in a family. However, this contemporary meaning does not frame the Biblical meaning of the word. Often in Scripture the word refers to one who is “first” in order of importance or preeminence. Consider the following:

And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD, Israel is my son, even my firstborn.... (Exodus 4:22)

Also I will make him my firstborn, Higher than the kings of the earth” (Psalm 89:27)

If Jesus was the first of God’s natural creation, Israel cannot also fill that position. Only one being can be the firstborn or first created. Is it Jesus or is it Israel? However, if we interpret the word “firstborn” as the most important one or the preeminent one, Israel was more important to God than Egypt or any other nation that existed at the time of the Exodus.

In Psalm 89:27 the prophetic message directs us to the Lord Jesus Christ in His Incarnation. In this setting applying the same meaning to the term gives us the obvious and true meaning. In His Incarnation, not in His eternal pre-Incarnate existence, Jesus was/is the most preeminent of all things natural in God’s created universe. However, I believe the true intent is that the Word, co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father, would continue His preeminence, His co-equal standing with the Father, even during the Incarnation. John 5:17-18 affirms this truth, as does John 10:30-38. In both passages, Jesus clearly claimed present equality with the Father, even in the midst of the Incarnation.

Thus, the Biblical use of the term “firstborn” affirms Jesus’ Incarnate deity and thus His inherent preeminence. Let’s see if Paul affirms this point in context.

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him.... Follow the simple, concise

² Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians : A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles*, 129–130 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007).

language of the lesson. All things natural have their origin in Him. Things visible, from submicroscopic atoms to massive constellations, all came to exist from His personal creative power. Things on Planet Earth all came to exist by Him. Things in the vast spread of the heavens came to exist by Him. Even invisible things, things outside the scope of molecules and atoms, angels, for example, came to exist by Him. Wait. If He exists in the order of angels, albeit the most preeminent of angels, how could He create Himself before He existed?

In this point Paul categorically refutes the whole notion that Jesus was created as the first order of angels, or as a lesser god below Jehovah God. He could not possibly be the cause of creation and Himself be part of the created universe. Paul distinctly affirms that He transcends creation; He is rather the Creator, not part of the creation, not even the most important of the creation.

...*all things were created by him, and for him*.... Not only were all things created by Him, but Paul affirms that all things were created for Him. Again, Paul goes to great length to make the point that Jesus is not one of a class of lesser deities, the precise error of Gnostic teaching that Paul confronts and refutes in this letter. He transcends all things created. He created all things created. All things created He made for Himself.

Thus the very passage offered by advocates of a lesser deity, a Gnostic non-material, spirit-being Jesus, stands out as one of the strongest passages in the Bible in affirmation of His co-eternality and co-equality with the Father, as well as His not being part of what He Himself created.

This same glorious, uncreated, eternal Word, fully and wholly equal with the Father in every essential attribute, is also our Savior. By His coming and by His successful and finished work, by His doing the will of the Father as the Father’s full equal, He redeemed us from our sins, extracted us from the fallen and alienated race of sinful man, and translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son. Jesus and the Father—no less the Holy Spirit—personally and equally worked together to accomplish our redemption, to make us members of the family of God and citizens of heaven’s glorious kingdom. *The Socio-Rhetorical Commentary’s* statement above affirms the bedrock truth.

Paul’s language “...leaves no room for additional mediators between God and humankind. **Christ is the be-all and end-all of all mediators. Angels and principalities need not apply.**”

God has already filled that position, and His Son succeeded fully. Hallelujah! What a Savior!

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Worship service each Sunday	10:30 A. M.
Joseph R. Holder	Pastor