

CHRIST, THE IMAGE OF THE INVISIBLE GOD, THE PROSCENIUM OF OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT. PERSPECTIVES OF KNOWING GOD FROM COLOSSIANS

Abstract

Christ is the visible representation of the unseeable God. Although this statement emphasises Christ's relationship with the Father, it is Christ who reveals God to the world. The text in Hebrews reinforces this same concept. Christ is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (1:3), and thus only His Son can make Him known (Col 1:18). In 1 Cor 15:49 and 2 Cor 4:4, the Apostle Paul employs the term *εἰκών* to portray the resurrected and exalted One, in whom, analogous to the eschatological Adam, all humanity is recapitulated. The risen One, however, is the image of the unseen God of eternity. In light of the statements in Colossians 1:13-14, it becomes evident that there is a dynamic relationship between the experience of redemption and the statements about the One through whom God accomplished the act of redemption. Although the initial section of the hymn is centred on Christ's role in creation, the Christological statements can be interpreted from a perspective of redemption. It is only through His blood (Col 1:14-20) that the Redeemer, who is the image of the unseen God, can effect redemption.



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Introduction

In patristic theology, the acquisition of knowledge about God is contingent upon the experience of deification. Consequently, knowledge of God represents an intrinsic aspiration of rational existence. The search for God is correctly perceived as a reciprocal

process, whereby God reveals Himself of His own volition. This revelation represents the sole means of acquiring knowledge of the divine. When God communicates an immeasurable truth to created rational beings, it is done in a manner that is consistent with the nature of the being for whom it is intended. However, an essential element of knowing God is that it is contingent and transformative for the human being. This study will concentrate on the concept of the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), which is described as “an image above all images” (Casarella 2023, 19). The term εἰκὼν is a biblical concept that is found within the pages of the Holy Scriptures. The concept of the image of God is a central tenet of the Old and New Testaments. It is discussed in Genesis in the context of God’s creation of man in his image and likeness, in Colossians in the definition of Christ and connection with the moral renewal, and in John when he speaks of the complete restoration of the image of Christ at the return of the risen Lord. Man, shaped by God to become the image of the invisible God and in whom the Holy Spirit restores the image of God, will be fully conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Henry 1999, 540-1).

In his writings, the Apostle Paul employs the term “mystery” to describe God’s self-revelation. In the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul elucidates God’s plan of salvation for the entire world. He concludes the section comprising chapters 9–11 with a doxology or hymn of praise to God (11:36-39). This hymn of praise is representative of the language used in the works of Isaiah and Job (Keesmaat 2014, 560-2). The Apostle Paul grapples with the challenge of understanding God’s ways and conveying them to humanity through a profound expression of astonishment at the sheer complexity of grasping the divine nature or the “mind of the Lord.” In the Epistle to the Colossians, this “mystery” of God’s self-knowledge is revealed to the Apostle through divine revelation (1:24-29). The Apostle elucidates this “mystery” through the Christological hymn, with liturgical overtones, of Colossians 1:15-20 (Sumney 2023, 466). The initial expression of this hymn is associated with the concept of divine knowledge. Christ is the image of the invisible God. The objective of this study is to examine this Pauline expression to gain insight into how Christ reveals the nature of God.

Context of the Christological hymn

Colossians 1:13-14 builds upon the preceding verses, enumerating further reasons for gratitude to God for His grace in the lives of the Colossian believers. The description of the reality of God’s work in their lives is presented, commencing with

1:13, and including the Apostle Paul and those who were with him. This is illustrated by the shift from the second-person plural (1:12) to the first-person plural (v. 13) in the passage. Furthermore, the primary focus of God's work is centred on Christ, which serves to pave the way for the Christ hymn (1:15-20).

The verb *ῥύομαι* is found in the terminology of the LXX, in the context of the exodus of God's people from Egyptian bondage (Ex 6:6; 14:30). From a temporal perspective, the exodus from Egyptian bondage precedes the inheritance of God's people. However, it is integral to the larger economic narrative of God's kingdom. The exodus marks the transition from bondage to the presence of God, the imparting of the law, the establishment of the covenant, and finally, the living of life in the presence of God. The Colossians text places particular emphasis on the fact that God has once again removed his people from the dominion of darkness, which He brought into being, and displaced them into the reality of His kingdom, which is that of the Son of His love. In Col 4:11, the term "the kingdom of God" is employed, as is the case in most references in Pauline literature (Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal 5:21). Additionally, the concept of Col 1:13 is referenced in 1 Cor 15:24.

The light (1:12) and the kingdom of the Son (1:13) are in opposition to the dominion of darkness (1:13). In the kingdom of the Son, believers undergo a process of redemption, which is defined as the act of liberating someone or something from a state of bondage or suffering. Although the term *ἀπολύτρωσις* is only used once in the LXX, the derived verbs emphasize the divine act of liberation from Egyptian bondage (Dt 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 15:15; 24:18). Nevertheless, authentic liberation is bestowed by Christ, not merely from Egyptian bondage, but moreover from the fundamental bondage of sin itself, which is the root cause of all bondage.

The term "kingdom of the Son" likewise evinces an echo of the Davidic covenant. The text of 2 Sam 7:12-18 is especially illuminating in this regard. David articulates his aspiration to build up a house or temple for the Lord. Nevertheless, divine intervention through the prophet Nathan establishes the terms of the covenant that God Himself makes with David in this context. David is not the one who will construct a house for the Lord; rather, it will be his descendant who will do so. God will provide him with eternal strength and guidance, thereby establishing a paternal relationship between them. In conclusion, David poses a question regarding the fulfillment of God's promise. "What is my house of love?" The history of the Old and New Testaments identifies the Davidic son with Jesus Christ. The terms of the Davidic covenant are fulfilled in two

ways: first, through the eternal kingdom that the Son receives, and second, through the establishment of the true temple, which is His Body. Following the Law of Atonement (Lev 16), the only day when the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies with the blood of atonement, Christ, as the High Priest, “entered once and for all into the Holy of Holies with His blood, finding us eternal redemption” (Heb 9:11). This is evidenced by the fact that the High Priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies only on the Day of Atonement, and that Christ, as the High Priest, entered the Holy of Holies with His blood.

Given that the concept of “forgiveness of sins” is situated about “redemption,” this phrase elucidates how believers undergo a process of liberation from bondage and are ushered into the presence of God in the present moment. The concept of forgiveness is reiterated in Col 2:13, where the term *παράπτωμα* is employed. This term specifically denotes a “mistake,” as opposed to *ἁμαρτία*, which denotes “sin” (1:14). The term is employed within the context of the Apostle Paul’s polemical engagement with the philosophical tenets prevalent in Colossae. The truth about God’s redemptive work and its effect, the forgiveness of sins, must have encouraged the Colossian believers to cease giving in to rhetoric that spoke to them about the necessity of their forgiveness in other ways and not through Christ.

The phrase *τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν* may also be interpreted in the context of baptism, as reported by Mark (Mc 1:11). The concept of forgiveness of sins is presented by Luke in Acts 2:38, within the same baptismal context. In Romans 6:1-11, the metaphor of transition from death to life is employed, situated within the context of baptism. The explicit reference in Colossians 2:12 to the act of baptism, in conjunction with the unambiguous baptismal references recorded in 1:13-14, serves to remind the recipients of the significance of transforming their spiritual status.

Christological Hymn – structure

In terms of both composition and content, the hymn in Col 1:15-20 represents the fundamental text [1]. This provides the foundation for addressing the heretical teachings that were prevalent in Colossae at the time (Hegermann 1961, 89-93; Burger 1975, 3-52, Deichgräber 1967, 143-55; Zeilinger 1974, 179-205; Stettler 2000, 84-177; Gordley 2007, 170-270).

The Christological anthem begins in Col 1:15, where an intentional shift in stylistic approach is observed until Col 1:14 (Maisch 2003, 32-40). The pericope of

Col 1:3-14 is distinguished by stylistic characteristics that are consistent with those observed throughout the epistle. These include participles, a minimal presence of infinitives, an increase in the number of synonyms, a high frequency of genitival constructions, and repetitions. It should be noted, however, that these features are absent from Col 1,15-20 (Ludwig 1974, 32-56). In Colossians 1:15-20, these stylistic features are notably absent.

Moreover, there are noteworthy linguistic peculiarities. The following terms are attested in the New Testament as *ἀπαχ λεγόμενα*: *ὄρατός* (seen [1,16]), *πρωτεύω* (first [1,18]), and *εἰρηνοποιέω* (making peace [1,20]) (Lohse 1971, 85). The terms *θρόνοι* and *ἀρχαί*, as referenced in 1:16, are absent from the Pauline epistles. The Holy Apostle Paul only refers to the blood of Jesus Christ when corroborating the expression with the traditional material of the early epistles (cf. Rom 3:25; 1 Cor 10:16; 11:25.27). Moreover, the phrase *τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ* (1:20) is absent from all other extant texts of the Pauline corpus (Schnelle 1998, 291).

The division of the hymn into two stanzas is indicated by the expression *ὅς ἐστιν* in verses 15 and 18b. Furthermore, the phrase *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως* („the firstborn of all creation”) in verse 15 is analogous to the expression *πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν* (the firstborn from the dead) in verse 18b. The two relative sentences are followed by the causal *ὅτι* (verses 16 and 19). Verse 17 and 18a are linked to *καὶ αὐτός*, v. 20, through *καὶ διὰ αὐτοῦ*.

A chiasmic structure of type A-B-C-B'-A' can be observed, wherein a thematic movement is evident, progressing from the cosmological focus of the initial stanza to the soteriological focus of the subsequent one. The logic of the presence of the central parts is of great importance. Firstly, B provides a summary of the first stanza (A), and secondly, B' offers a predictive summary of the last stanza (A'). The assertion contained within the central segment (C) represents a synthesis of the two preceding stanzas (Pizzuto 2006, 203-5).

A. The supremacy of Christ in creation (cosmological focus): “all – have been created in, through and for Christ” – 15-16

B. Body of the Universe: “Christ is before all” – 17a

C: Christ – the Creator and Savior Logos of the world: “all in Christ are hold together” – 17b

B'. The Body of Christ: “Christ is the Head of the Body, the Church” – 18a

A'. Christ's supremacy in redemption (soteriological focus): “all – reconciled

through and for Christ” – 18b-20.

The division of the hymn into two stanzas is determined by a combination of grammatical and content-related factors. The initial stanza is centred upon the cosmological import of Christ’s actions, whereas the subsequent stanza is characterized by its soteriological dimension. The genitive *τῆς ἐκκλησίας*, when joined to *ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος* in v. 18, serves to outline the structure of the text, as it introduces the soteriological-ecclesiological dimension as an anticipatory conclusion. Furthermore, this interpretative element aligns with the understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, as elucidated by the Apostle Paul in Col 1:24 (*τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκκλησία*).

An important interpretative element is found in the double prepositional phrase *διὰ τῶν αἰτιῶν τῶν σταυροῦ* (v. 20). The reference to the Sacrifice of the Savior on the Cross is understood as a “paradox” in the hymnological text by the Holy Apostle Paul. This is because it serves to unite the cosmic dimension of Christ’s saving work with that of the Cross, respectively the historical dimension (Sumney 2008, 79).

The hymnological content evinces a parallel with Hellenistic Judaism, specifically with the sapiential Christological dimension. In his writings, St. Apostle Paul employs the Christian hymn, which likely originated in Asia Minor, as a foundational element in his argument for a church where hymnology plays a significant role (cf. Col 3:16) (Lohse 1971, 41-61; Thurén 2000, 159-160).

In Colossians 1:15-20, the Apostle Paul presents seven characteristics of Christ, thereby expressing the full revelation of God in Christ and the knowledge of Him. He is *ἀρχή*: (1) *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ*, (2) *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως*, (3) *ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα, and ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν*, (4) *ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας*, (5) *πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν*, (6) *ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι*, (7) *δι’ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν*.

The following section will focus on the initial characteristic, as it represents the primary focus of our investigation. The remaining characteristics will be addressed concisely after this section.

Christ – εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου

In verse 15 of Colossians 1, the relative pronoun *ὃς* is used in continuation of the relative pronouns in verses 13ff. In verse 1:13, the phrase *ὃς ἐρρύσατο*” is employed to refer to the Father. In verse 14, the phrase *ὃν ἔχομεν* is understood to refer to the Son

(τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ), which can be interpreted as a reference to the Kingdom of the Son. The following verses address the subject of Christ, elucidating His position and significance.

In Christ, through Him and for Him, everything was created; He is *εἰκὼν* and *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως* of God. As the mediator of creation, He stands on God's side and as Lord over creation. In Him the whole universe has life, he holds the world together and is the Head of the cosmic Body (v. 18). When we speak of the world, we must speak of Christ's role in the world; he assigns to all the powers their place and guarantees their order. Cosmology is entirely under the sign of Christology.

In the words of Karavidopoulos, the Christological hymn in verses 15-20 represents the foundation of the Apostle Paul's theological discourse and refutation of the heretical teachings espoused by the Colossian heretics (Karavidopoulos 2011, 433). Christ is superior to all creatures, including angels. As the head of the Church, which is His body, He is sovereign overall. Those who are members of the body of Christ have already been redeemed from the authority of worldly powers, have already been forgiven their sins through the shedding of Christ's blood, and are therefore immune to the influence of heretical teachings that are nothing more than "vain deceit." The Apostle Paul frequently reiterates these interpretations of the hymn throughout the remainder of the epistle (Gese 2020, 39). In verse 15, Christ is described as *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου* and *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως*. It is noteworthy that the characterization of Christ as *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ* is a relatively uncommon occurrence in Paul's writings. This concept is fundamental to Paul's Christology, as it elucidates the revelation of the image of God in the person of Christ (Luz, 1998, 201).

Christ is initially described as *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου* (Michaelis 1954, 369-71). The concept of an invisible God is a recurring theme in various religious traditions (Muller, 2022, 159). The word *εἰκὼν* (Botterweck 1974-2006, 3:12; Wolff 1974, 159-66; Spicq 1994, 1:412-29) has a long history both in the early Greek and Hellenistic world and in the Old Testament, which we cannot trace in detail in this brief hermeneutical digression. In general terms only, we will refer to the perceptions of the age, to ascertain what perceptions of the image exist as background to the characterisation of Christ as *εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου* in our verse.

If, for modern logic, the existence of a visible image of an invisible thing is a contradiction in terms (Karavidopoulos 2011, 434), for the archaic and Hellenistic era,

the relationship between image and prototype was understood and had a completely different meaning. In the early Greek world, the word *εἰκῶν* was understood and had a different meaning. *Εἰκῶν* was useful mainly in the field of art, but from Plato onwards it was used in philosophical terminology. Thus, according to Platonic cosmology, *εἰκῶν* denoted the representation of the idea in the sensible material world, since between the visible image and the mental prototype there was believed to be a great distance. In contrast to Plato (Kleinknecht 1976, 2:386; Silva 2014, 102), for example, who understands the cosmos as an image, a perceptible copy of an intelligible god, in Col 1:15 the same person is called “the image of God”, who opposes the cosmos because the world was created by him. According to Barth, this interpretation, together with the use of the term “image” in a cosmological context, may recall the thought of Philo. In his view, *logos* is the immediate image of God, and transmitted by *logos*, the cosmos is the image of God (Barth 2008, 248). In this way, the difference between Creator and creation is preserved rather than actually denied.

In the Hellenistic age, *εἰκῶν* acquires greater ontological weight, since the prototype is sens sensorially present in its image. Thus, the prevailing view is that the image is a projection and manifestation of the essence of the original, it is a true and living representation. This character of the concept of the icon, namely that it reveals and presents the essence of the original, is found especially in the texts of Hellenistic Judaism. Philo’s *Logos*, for example, is ultimately called *εἰκῶν τοῦ θεοῦ*, because it reveals God to people (Philo, *Περὶ φυγῆς* 101). Likewise, the heavenly man in the Gnostic texts is also characterised as *εἰκῶν τοῦ θεοῦ* (*Corpus Hermeticum* 7,5). Barth considers that there is yet another possibility of interpretation without the need to introduce into the hymn the Platonic tradition through Philo and without the need to speculate on the essence and meaning of the term “image” when used as the title of Christ (Barth 2008, 248).

What we are mainly interested in here is the investigation of the question of where the characterisation of Christ as *εἰκῶν τοῦ θεοῦ* in verse 15 comes from. According to Karavidopoulos, hypothesis that the closest parallels with this verse are what is said in Plato’s *Timaeus* about the sensible world as an image of the intelligible. Many accept that here Christ is called the image of God by analogy and in contrast with the first Adam, who was created *κατ’ εἰκόνα καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν* of God (Gen 1:26). The characterisation of the image is justified, according to this view, for the eschatological Adam, who became man to restore the transgression of the first Adam (Karavidopoulos 2011, 434).

Karavidopoulos, however, considers it more probable that the meaning of verse 15 is to be found in the Hellenistic conception emphasised earlier that the icon reveals the original hidden within it. This version of the icon is also found in Hellenistic Judaism. In *Σοφία Σολομώντος* 7,25-20, Wisdom is called *ἀπόροια τῆς τοῦ παντοκράτορος δόξης εἰλικρινῆς, ἀπαύγασμα ἐστὶν φωτὸς αἰδίου. . . καὶ εἰκὼν τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτοῦ*. Moreover, the view that the Christology of the New Testament and even of Paul borrows expressions and formulations from the wisdom teaching of Hellenistic Judaism has been held by many scholars (Karavidopoulos 2011, 435). So, the invisible God reveals himself fully and completely to people in the person of Jesus Christ, who is his *εἰκὼν*.

Müller asserts that there are only a few instances within the OT tradition where it is mentioned that individuals can see God. According to Ex 24:9-11, apart from Moses and Aaron, these instances are limited to Nadab and Abihu and seventy elders of Israel. However, it is unclear whether they saw God or what was beneath His feet. Exodus 33:18-20 is illustrative of this point. Although Moses speaks to God “face to face” (33:11), this is immediately corrected in verse 20. Moses is permitted to see “the glory of God,” but not God “face to face,” for “no man shall live who sees me” (1 Kgs 19:11-13). Consequently, the experience of beholding the glory of the Lord (Nm 14:22) is not a straightforward visual encounter. Rather, it is an encounter with the divine presence (cf. the parallelism between revealing and seeing in Is 52:10). In the Psalms, the act of seeing God may serve as a metaphor for the assurance of his proximity (Ps 16:15; 62:3 LXX). In contrast, Job’s lament in 23:8f indicates a lack of certainty regarding God’s nearness. In 42:5, Job confesses that his eyes have seen God, which also refers to the experience of God’s sovereignty (Müller 2022, 160).

Müller observed that there are only a few instances in the New Testament where God’s invisibility is referenced. John 1:18 affirms that no one has ever seen God and that the only begotten has proclaimed and interpreted him. Hebrews 11:27 refers to Moses, who relied on God “as if he had seen him”. Romans 1:20 speaks of God’s invisible nature, which can be recognised in his works. As different as these passages may be, together they address a relational aspect: God cannot be seen, but he can nevertheless be proclaimed, recognised and can be invoked. In 1Tim 1:17, on the other hand, *ἀόρατος* is understood as an attribute: God is imperishable and invisible; the combination of *ἄφθαρτος* and *ἀόρατος* indicates a specifically Hellenistic horizon of thought (Müller 2022, 162).

Furthermore, as Müller proposes, wisdom and logos are frequently regarded as being synonymous. In Plato, the perceptible world is regarded as an image of God. In contrast, in Philo, the divine Logos is seen as occupying this position, with the perceptible world representing a concrete manifestation of preconceived ideas within the divine Logos. In this context, the Logos may be understood as the expression of divine reason, situated on the side of God. The perceptible world, in turn, is understood as a creation emerging from this divine source. In contrast to this view, however, Philo maintains that the concept of creation preserves the distinction between the Creator and the Logos, on the one hand, and that which is created, on the other (Müller 2022, 16; Schweizer 1997, 58-60; Wolter 1993, 76).

The concept of Christ as the “image of God” (Müller 2022, 163) emphasises the idea of proximity to God rather than distance. Similarly, the concept of God as an agent is also evident in verse 13, and the term *εἰκών* also has a dynamic emphasis. Colossians 1:15 does not seek to elucidate the nature of God or the universe, but rather to make a statement about Christ (Gnilka 1980, 61). However, this statement is made in a way that also determines Christ’s relationship to the cosmos as God’s *eikōn*. Despite the proximity to Philonian statements and a comparable scope of thought, a direct dependence on a specific passage in Philo cannot be substantiated. The Apostle Paul would later reiterate this same teaching in his epistle, employing the phrase *ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς* (2:9).

Christ – πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως

The second description of Christ in Colossians 1:15-20 is that of the *πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως*. Psalm 88:27 (LXX), in reference to the firstborn, does not perceive this as a temporal priority, but rather as a matter of divine sovereignty. From a temporal perspective, it would be the first in all creation, as Arianism argued in the fourth century. In his commentary on Colossians 1:16, St. Athanasius demonstrated that an Arianist interpretation would fail to take into account the immediate context of the text. In his epistles, the Apostle Paul asserts that all were constructed upon, through, and for the Son of God. In Revelation 1:17, Christ Himself makes the declaration, *ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος*.

Psalm 88 (LXX) reiterates the theme of God’s faithfulness to the Davidic covenant, a concept also present in 2 Samuel 7. The ascension of the Messiah, as depicted in Psalm 88:27, was intended to bolster the conviction of God’s people in His

fidelity, assuring them that He would bestow redemption not only upon the land but also upon the entire world. In Exodus 12, the role of the firstborn of the Jewish family was related to the redemption of the entire family, as well as the dignity received in this context (Ex 1:2-15; Dt 21:17). In the context of the New Testament, Christ is understood to possess both a redemptive right for all of his brothers (Heb 2:11-15) and to act as the paschal lamb, whose blood atones for the sins of the world (Jn 1:29). Therefore, it can be argued that it is through Christ as the Firstborn that the entire edifice becomes potentially redeemable [2].

In his writings, St. Athanasius elucidates the distinction between the terms “one-born” and “firstborn,” emphasizing that: “One begotten, as it was said, is for the birth of the Father; and the firstborn, for the descent to the edification and because it makes many men brethren,” [3] concluding that: “the expression ‘Firstborn’ has the creation united with it as its cause. This is what Paul added, saying, ‘That in him were all built’ [Col 1:16]. But if all creatures were created in him, he is none other than creatures, and is not a creature, but the Creator of creatures.” [4]

“So he was not called ‘the firstborn’ because he is of the Father, but because in him the creation was made. And as before creation was the Son himself, by whom the creation was made, so before he was called ‘the firstborn of all creation,’ was the Very Word to God, and God was the Word.” (St. Athanasius, *Three Words Against the Aryans* II,63) [5].

St. Athanasius makes two important clarifications in this context. The Apostle Paul did not say, “firstborn among other creatures,” but “of all creation,” to show that he was none other than all creation; neither should the “firstborn of all,” that he should not be reckoned to bear any body other than ours, but “among many brethren” (Rm 8:29), for the likeness of the flesh.

“He was thus designated “the firstborn among several brethren” about the kinship of the body, and “the firstborn from the dead” in recognition of the fact that out of him and after him is the resurrection from the dead. He was also identified as “the firstborn of all creation” in light of the Father’s love for humanity, which manifested not only in the creation of all things in the Word but also in the very creation itself, about which the Apostle wrote that “awaits the revelation of the sons of God.” Therefore, upon liberation, the Lord will assume the role of the Firstborn, along with all those who have been established. This indicates that he will be the first to remain after those who follow

him, anchored by the Word as a foundation” (St. Athanasius, *Three Words Against the Aryans* II,63).

Rev. Prof. D. Stăniloae posits that Saint Athanasius imbues the expression “firstborn of all edification” with a novel significance, one that resonates with the meaning of the expression “firstborn of the dead.” He elucidates that the Son is “the firstborn of all creation” not merely because in Him all things were created, but also because through Him or in Him, after the incarnation and resurrection, they will all emerge from the bondage of decomposition and death, becoming all eternal sons of God, in the Son who became their brother (Saint Athanasius, *Three Words Against the Aryans* II,63).

Christ – ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα

The third statement about Christ pertains to His relationship with the entire creation, as evidenced by the phrase “in him were created all things” (ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα). This concept is highlighted in 1:16. The assertion is made on two occasions that all were constructed through and in Him. This purpose encompasses both the spiritual realm and the physical universe, uniting those in heaven and the unseen with those on earth and seen. Although Paul the Apostle emphasizes these concepts in a doxological context, he does not neglect to mention that the unseen are represented by the hierarchy of heavenly powers. Thrones, lords, beginners, and masters. The return to the polemical context on the hierarchy of the heavenly powers (2:10.15) gave rise to the interpretation that the Apostle Paul would prepare from the Christological statements a critique of the excessive emphasis placed by the Colossians on the role of these powers (Lincoln 2000, 598; Aletti 1993, 100).

We encounter the four heavenly powers in late Jewish literature in 2 Enoch 20-22; in 2 Mac 3:24: “The high Master of spirits and of all powers,” 1 Enoch 61:10, T. Levi 3. In the context of creation, the ontological one, we speak of the hierarchy of heavenly powers, but v. 20 brings a new nuance: they are part of all those who need reconciliation, and in 2:15 there are heavenly powers defeated by Christ, left without any power over believers.

Additionally, Col 1:16 delineates the eschatological perspective, indicating that Christ is the purpose of creation (Rev 1:8; 1:18; 2:8; 21:6). In the context of redemption, this Christological statement is articulated in 1:20, after the anthem, through the concept of reconciliation.

Col 1:17 represents a synthesis of the preceding two verses. The phrase: Christ *ἔστιν πρὸ πάντων* is a synthesis of the preceding verses. He has no temporal origin; rather, He exists from eternity to eternity. The pre-existence of Christ is an eternal reality. Nevertheless, all of these entities are a part of the created order, and it is through Him that they are held together. The verb *συνίστημι* introduces the concept of harmony and unbroken belonging. Christ is the Proniator of the entire universe, the One who, in a caring and benevolent manner, places all things in their proper order and context. In his pre-existence, Christ is responsible for the creation of all things. In his role as the Logos, Christ serves to unify the created beings. In Christ, the purpose, fulfillment, and perfection of all creation are realized (cf. Sir 43:26).

Christ – ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας

In verse 18, the hymn begins to increasingly focus on the redemptive aspect. The presentation of Christ, Head of the Body (*ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος*), of the Church (*τῆς ἐκκλησίας*), serves to underscore the authority of Christ over the Church. In 1:24, the image of the body of Christ the Church (*ἡ ἐκκλησία*), is resumed. In Colossians 2:10, the Apostle Paul asserts that Christ has authority over all forms of rule and dominion. Nevertheless, in Col 4:15-16, the designation “church” (*ἐκκλησία*) is limited to its local, sense, as applied to the church (*ἐκκλησία*) in the house of Nimfas and the church (*ἐκκλησία*) of the Laodiceans. The meaning conveyed in Col 1:18 places emphasis on the singular authority that exists within the universal Church (1 Cor 12:13). This authority is none other than Christ himself. The function of this reality is exemplified in Col 2:19. To maintain a close connection with the Head (*τὴν κεφαλὴν*), which represents the source of guidance and direction for the entire body (*τὸ σῶμα*). The ecclesiastical mode of existence, which is based on the authority of Christ, is designed to facilitate spiritual growth and maturity.

Christ – πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν

In the New Testament, Christ is referred to as “The Beginning, the Firstborn from the Dead” (*ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν*). This designation underscores the significance of Christ’s role in the new creation. Accordingly, the term *ἀρχή* is polysemous, denoting both temporal origin and authority or sovereignty. In the new creation, He is *ἀρχή* in that He rose from the dead, thus being *πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν* (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:20.23). His resurrection from the dead signifies His triumph over

death (Heb 2:14; 1 Jn 3:8). If we accept that Christ has supremacy in the new creation, then the repetition of 1.18c serves to reinforce and reiterate this conviction for the recipients: *ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων* (1:18c). The eternal Logos (Jn 1:1), which “became flesh” (1:14) and “humbled himself” (Phil 2:8), has now been “exalted” by God and “given a name above every name”: *κύριος* (Phil 2:11). The name *κύριος* is emphasized in the thanksgiving of Col 1:3, in 2.6, where the entire apostolic tradition is summarized, and in the parenetic part of the epistle (3.18.20.22.23.24; 4.7.17).

Jürgen Roloff draws a parallel between the text of Revelation and the concept of „the Firstborn from the Dead”, positing that the phrase refers not only to the event of the resurrection but also to the contemporary understanding of Jesus Christ within the churches. In consequence of the resurrection, Jesus Christ has advanced as the Firstborn from the kingdom of death (of darkness – Col 1:13). Consequently, God’s new creation has already become a reality in Him (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15). Those who belong to Him are promised that they will walk with Him and through Him from death to life. In Revelation 1:5, the evangelist John alludes to a concept that was already familiar to the churches of Asia Minor. In his view, Christ is the Firstborn from the dead, as well as the Head of the body of the Church (Col 1:18). He posits that, because of this intimate bond with her Lord, the Church is already situated within the reality of the resurrection (Roloff 1993, 24-5).

Christ – ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα

The oneness of Christ in the economy of God is underscored by the following Christological statements made in the hymn. Firstly, in Christ, the fullness of deity was pleased to dwell. The use of the term “God” in translations is justified in this context by reference to Colossians 2:9 – *ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι*. The expression *πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα* can be understood to signify the deification of the body of Christ. This is to say that the risen Christ is God, in all his divine fullness. The doctrine of the incarnation asserts that God dwells in Christ. Consequently, all created entities, whether in heaven or on earth, must find their purpose in this divine presence.

Christ – δι’ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν

The initial section of verse 20 presents a rationale that supports the overarching assertion made in verse 1.19. God intended to reconcile all things through and in Christ. The verb *ἀποκατάλλασσω* is only found in verses 20 and 22 (and

Eph 2:16). The comparison with 1:16 is readily apparent. Just as Christ is the agent and rationale behind creation, so too is He the agent and rationale behind reconciliation.

The concept of reconciliation is elucidated by the apostle Paul through the act of making peace, which is defined in his writings as *εἰρηνοποιέω*. The enmity that encompassed the entire creation (*τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς*) is resolved in the historical event of His Sacrifice. The phrase *διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ* places particular emphasis on the significance of the act of sacrifice, as well as the Cross, which is identified therein with the body of Christ that is offered as a sacrifice. In conclusion, it can be stated that the two verbs, reconciliation and peace-making, elucidate the meaning of redemption. The ultimate emphasis, about all that exists in the celestial and terrestrial realms, serves to remind the recipients that none of the entities or phenomena within the created order can be of greater significance than Christ within the divine economy.

In light of these observations, it can be posited that the Old Testament echo of the entire hymn may be the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies – the place in which the glory of God dwelt when Moses erected the Tent of Meeting – the offering of the blood of the sacrifice by which sins were cleansed: these may constitute landmarks in the creation of a theology existing in Colossians. This theology would have emphasised the need to relate to what God Himself had revealed as the way of entering into His presence once the Israelites had come out of Egyptian bondage, bringing them into the promised land where they were to receive their inheritance.

Paul's emphasis is on the reality that the Colossian believers have the same experience of God as those of old. However, he also asserts that the promised One has already come, as evidenced by the construction of the new temple, which is the body of Christ. Furthermore, Paul claims that the One who was promised has already made reconciliation through the blood of His Cross. This reconciliation is not only for men but also for all things in heaven and on earth. Finally, Paul states that this promised One has already brought redemption. The new people are no longer to subjugate the entire promised land; rather, believers are called to disseminate the Gospel to all humanity, as each individual requires growth, maturity, and fulfillment in Christ. In this manner, it can be asserted that they are progressing in the pursuit of eternal knowledge of God.

Conclusion

The truth expressed in Colossians 1:15 regarding the relationship between the Father, the unseen God, and the Son has implications for humanity. As imperfect beings, humans require the perfect image of Christ to fulfil the destiny of the earthly Adam, which is to adopt the image of the heavenly Adam (cf. 1 Cor 15:49). The dynamic relationship that characterizes the union of the two images in the divine plan (cf. Rom 8:29; Eph 1:3-14) is evident in the life of the Christian. Through the mystery of baptism (Rom 6:3-6; Col 3:10), the Christian becomes one with Christ and is thus the son of God (1 Jn 3:2). Furthermore, the Christian is transformed from glory to glory in the image of the Son, the firstborn among many brethren (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29). The ultimate consequence of this uninterrupted metamorphosis is the resurrection, which endows the Christian with the status of being permanently invested with the likeness of the celestial Adam (1 Cor 15:49). This entails the formation of “the body of our humility after the body of his glory” (Phil 3:21).

Notes

[1] A recent study that combats categorisation as the hymn of the text of Col 1,15-20, based on the latest research of form criticism is of Edsall & Strawbridge 2015: 290-311. In the authors’ understanding, the ancient definition of the hymn (*ὕμνος*) demonstrates that “Christological hymns” (Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20) do not meet those criteria.

[2] Regarding the Paschal-redeeming meaning of the expression firstborn, St. Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher, explains: “So the name *Israel* means a man *who overcomes a power*. For *isra* means a man who *wins*, and *he* means *power*. This was also prophesied by the mystery of the struggle that Jacob had waged with him who appeared to him in the accomplishment of the father’s will, and who, by being the first-born Son of all creatures, was God. And this would be done by Christ also when he was to be a man. [...] His name was anciently Israel. By this name he called the blessed Jacob, blessing him by his name, and thereby preaching that all who come through him to the Father are the blessed Israel (St. JUSTIN Martyr and the Philosopher, *Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon* 125, PG 6, 765D-768A.768C). A development of the meaning approached by St. Justin, see in Sullivan 2004, 52-55, 99-101.

[3] ἵνα Μονογενῆς μὲν διὰ τὴν ἐκ Πατρὸς γέννησιν, ὡς περ εἴρηται, πρωτότοκος δὲ διὰ τὴν εἰς τὴν κτίσιν συγκατάβασιν, καὶ τὴν τῶν πολλῶν ἀδελφοποίησιν (St. Athanasius, *Oratio II contra Arianos* 62, PG 26, 280A).

[4] τὸ δὲ, πρωτότοκος, συμπεπλεγμένην ἔχει πάλιν τὴν τῆς κτίσεως αἰτίαν, ἣν ἐπήγαγεν ὁ Παῦλος λέγων· Ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα. Εἰ δὲ πάντα τὰ κτίσματα ἐν αὐτῷ

ἐκτίσθη, ἄλλος ἐστὶ τῶν κτισμάτων, καὶ κτίσμα μὲν οὐκ ἔστι, κτίστης δὲ τῶν κτισμάτων (St. Athanasius, *Oratio II contra Arianos* 62, PG 26, 280B).

[5] Οὐ διὰ τὸ ἐκ Πατρὸς ἄρα πρωτότοκος ἐκλήθη, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸ ἐν αὐτῷ γεγενῆσθαι τὴν κτίσιν. Καὶ ὡς περὶ τῆς κτίσεως ἦν αὐτὸς ὁ Υἱὸς, δι' οὗ γέγονεν ἡ κτίσις· οὕτω καὶ πρὸ τοῦ κληθῆναι πρωτότοκος πάσης τῆς κτίσεως, ἦν οὐδὲν ἦττον αὐτὸς ὁ Λόγος πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν, καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ Λόγος. (St. ATHANASIUS, *Oratio II v. Arianos* 63, PG 26, 280B-C). Rev. Prof. D. Stăniloae observed in this context that “The Holy Apostle Paul calls Christ not only “the firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18), but also “The firstborn of all building up” (Col 1:15). The meaning of the first expression was explained by saying that He is the firstborn from the dead because He became a man. The meaning of the second is now shown, saying that the Son in the same capacity is the beginning of all. But Saint Athanasius adds another nuance to further exalt the Son to creation. He called himself “The firstborn of all creation” only after the world was created in him. This means that He is independent of creation. Only by ascertaining that in him God created, when he benevolently created, all the building up, could it be said that he is the “firstborn” of all creation, to show that apart from him it could not be brought into existence. The world is dependent in its existence on Him, but He is not dependent on it.” (St. Athanasius, *Three Words Against the Aryans* II,63).

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