The Colossian Hymn
Col. 1:15-20

An Exegetical Study

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Introduction:

Paul's letter to the Colossian church is well know for its advocacy of the all surpassing supremacy of Christ and its high Christology which centers around Col. 1:15-20. The Colossian "hymn" as it is commonly known stands out due to it's rhythmic metrical qualities, its third person testimony to Christ and its rich theology which is sandwiched in the midst of thanksgiving, intersession and admonition to the readers. The question that is most often asked is whether this "hymn" was composed by Paul as he wrote, or whether it existed in some form as a Christian or pre Christian confessional, creed, catechism or liturgy which Paul then adopted, in its entirety or with modifications to achieve the purposes which he had in writing the letter. In examining these issues, we shall use textual, rhetorical and form criticism as well exegetical and theological arguments. We shall show that most likely the hymn did exist as a separate unit and that its background was most likely *Hellenistic Judaism*. Using these techniques, we will identify its most likely original form and seek to learn about Paul's intent and purpose as he included it, expanded it and applied it in his letter to the Colossians.

The Epistolary Context and Function of the Hymn:

The author of the letter identifies himself in the opening prefix as Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and Timothy and the recipients as the brothers in Christ at Colosse. The letter conforms to the general structure of similar Epistles sent by Paul to churches, which were formal letters designed to be read publicly (Col 4:16). It is evident that Paul had not established this church directly, but that it had come into being through the efforts of Epaphras (1:7) who had brought the Gospel back to Colosse (4:12) and whom Paul values highly. The occasion and the purpose of the letter can be inferred from its rhetorical structure:

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Exordium
        Prescript 1:1-2
        Thanksgiving 1:3-8
        Prayer 1:9-11
        Thanksgiving 1: 12-14
                Hymn 1:15-20
     Paraenesis 1:21-23
        Authority, role & struggle of the apostle 1:24-2:5
Propositio & Probatio
        Paraenesis 2:6-7
        Warning against Philosophy 2:8
        Thesis 2:9-12  The All Sufficiency of Christ
        Rationale 2:13-16
        Warning against earthly rules 2:16-17
        Warning against false teachers 2:18-19
        Warning against ascetic regulations 2:20-23
Exhortatio (Paraenesis)
        General mindset of the believer 3:1-17
        Application to households 3:18-4:1
        Exhortation to Prayer 3:2-6
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       Personal Notes & Greetings
           Personal Notes: 4:7-17
           Final Greeting & Benediction 4:18

The rhetoric is deliberative and its main purpose is to warn the believers of the danger of being "kidnapped" (2:8) by deceptive philosophy, "judged" on the basis of worldly regulations and "disqualified" by false teachers that rely on human traditions and basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. Believers are rather to stand firm in their faith (2:6), which is founded on their baptism into Christ (2:12), and are exhorted to live a life consistent with their identity in Christ (3:1).   Much of the letter is paraenesis, which flows directly from the thesis. This thesis is presented in (2:9-12) and is that, in Christ all the fullness of God dwells and the believers now have this fullness by virtue of their identity in Christ, by repentance, rebirth (symbolized by a circumcision done by Christ) and faith in God's resurrection power of which they are partakers through baptism, provided that they continue in the faith (2:6). From this Paul exhorts the believers to set their hearts on things above where Christ is (3:1). They have died and their life in now hidden with Christ in God (3:3). General exhortations to holy living are given and are followed by more specific exhortations to behavior in households and in the marketplace. Final greetings and instructions close the letter in characteristic fashion.

Some, such as Hooker[1] would argue that there is no real Colossian heresy, arguing that the letter's Exordium contains a lengthy section lauding the health and stability of the congregation (1:3-12) and that warnings and references to false teachers are rather oblique. However, a thorough rhetorical analysis depicts the clear structure outlined above, in which the thesis occurs about mid way through the letter, anticipated by the hymn, which serves as a theological high point. The last half of the letter consists of paraenesis and is the logical application of the thesis. Paul uses logic in his argument, drawing the thesis out from the narratio of the Hymn, and expanding on it in chapter two. He also uses his Apostolic authority (Ethos) as he describes his "struggling" (1: 24- 2:1) for the Colossians and uses Pathos to make his appeal to Godly conduct in view of the fullness that they have in Christ. The warnings in 2:8,16 and 18 are clearly designed to bring about a change in actual or potential behavior and indicate that, although a full fledged heresy may not be raging, that there was indeed danger present and Paul was making an appeal through a letter characterized by deliberative rhetoric.

Pokorny[2] suggests that identifying roles in an argument is an important part of analyzing the argument provided that the roles are characterized from the author's prospective and correlated to their functions within the ancient church. In 1:1 the writers are Paul and Timothy who speak in the first person plural, yet in 1:24, 2:1, 4:7,18, it is only the apostle Paul that speaks. Thus, the letter is submitted entirely to his

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[1] Hooker M.D. Were There False Teachers in Colossae? *Christ and the Spirit of the New Testament* B Lindars and SS Smalley, Cambridge University Press 1973 p. 315-31

[2] Pokorny, Petr, *Colossians A Commentary* Translated by S, Schatzman from *Der brief des Paulus an die Kolosser* 1987, English translation 1991 Hendrickson Publishers . Peabody, MA   p. 28

authority.   The recipients are addressed in the second person plural and described as "saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse". They represent a larger Christian group comprised of house churches (4:15). Through Epaphras, they are related to the Pauline mission. Others who represent the connection between Paul and the recipients are listed and characterized (4:7-14). The writer is concerned that the recipients are not able to resist a threatening heresy. The letter is designed to unmask the heresy as a threat and to equip the saints theologically.   The opponents are false teachers who are heard about in the third person singular or plural or only indirectly (2:4, 8. 16-19, 20, 23). They capture (2:8), judge (2:16) and disqualify (2:18) the saints and are thus to be opposed. The roles of assistants to the Apostle and the opponents are not played by individuals but by the traditions to which both parties appeal in support of their authority. Porknoy suggests that Paul, the writer, uses the cited hymn (1:15-20) as his helper. It is introduced via expressions in the first person plural amidst prayer and thanksgiving in 1:13. Similarly the section in 2:14 is related to "us" is an appeal to Christian tradition. The opponents are also supported by their own helpers, which are their own traditions, which cannot be specifically described. From the content of the letter, we can see that the false teachers venerate God and Jesus Christ as well as the supernatural powers. The crux of the conflict occurs in how these powers are to be seen and related to Jesus Christ. The hymn is crucial in disarming the opponents, for it defines the nature of the relationship between Christ and these powers. The false teachers saw these supernatural powers as something that must be revered and "appeased" in order to gain access to God (2:16-18). The hymn defines Christ as supreme over all and ruler of all. For the false teachers, Christ did not play such an important part. They saw him as incapable of mediating adequately between heaven and earth. The hymn, is important to Paul's argument, for his thesis has its inception within the hymn itself. The question that has perplexed most interpreters is whether the hymn was composed by Paul or had its origin in an older liturgical or confessional tradition. If composed by Paul, it carries less weight as a helper in the rhetorical argument, requiring more weight rest on Paul's Apostolic authority. If pre-Pauline, the Hymn functions as a significant helper to the rhetorical argument for his thesis flows from it. In any case, it is the theological high point of the Epistle, a poetic and linguistic masterpiece.

The Form of the Hymn:

The hymn occurs in the thanksgiving and intersession section of the Exordium, where Paul begins with thanksgiving (1:3-8) moves into intersession (1:9-11) and then back into a model of thanksgiving (1: 12-20), which then contains the hymn (1:15-20) and concludes with paraenesis (1:21-23). The Chiastic thanks-intersession-thanks structure focuses on the reason for the thanksgiving, which is Christ Himself and the redemption that He has wrought. Thus, the hymn flows naturally from the midst of Paul's thanksgiving and prayer and his desire from the recipients to enter also into this thanksgiving, which is focused on Christ. The hymn stands out as a separate unit for Paul moves from the "we…us" language of intersession and prayer into the third person singular "He" introduced by the relative pronoun ὅς in verse 15. Paul then moves back to addressing the recipients in verse 21 as "you" (plural) signaling the end of the descriptive hymn.   An important question is whether this hymn is from another source or

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whether Paul composed it himself as he wrote the letter.   We can start by identifying the text and diagramming the structure of the many linguistic parallels (shown in colors) which emerge in the text.

15   ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
                                    πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
16   ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
                            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 ἔκτισται·
17   καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ
            τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,

18   καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας·
   ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
                        ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,
19   ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
20   καὶ δι᾽ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας
            διὰ τοῦ αἵματος του σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι᾽ αὐτοῦ]
                                    εἴτε τα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
                                    εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

The only textual variant in the hymn occurs in verse 20, where an extra δι᾽ αὐτου occurs in a long list of early manuscripts including p^{46} ,S A C D and a host of Byzantine texts. Some Western and Alexandrian manuscripts omit it and it is printed in square brackets in all three UBS editions (see Metzger 621) which give a certainty rating of C. Including it would be the more likely original text, as one could see how a scribe could omit it (thinking it redundant, as one δι᾽ αὐτου has already occurred in verse 20) yet one would be hard pressed to imagine someone inserting it as there is no added theological meaning given by its insertion, other than emphasis. Including it would also be the more difficult reading, as one must then ask how to interpret it, whether resumptive ("through Him, *I say*) , or emphatic ("through Him alone"). Harris[3] sees it as emphatic and linked to ἀποκαταλλάξαι. Kasseman[4] characterized the phrase "by the blood of His cross" as an insertion and the extra "through Him" as linked to it. However, as Kasemann admits, there is no textual evidence whatsoever for this, and he argues that Paul redacted a pre-Christian hymn, adding also "of the church" in verse 18.

The hymn can be divided thematically into two sections. Verses 15-17 speak of Christ's role in creation and His relationship to all created things. In verses 18-20 the focus shifts to His redemptive and reconciliatory work as firstborn from the dead, head of the church and His resulting preeminence. An

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[3] Harris, Murray J., *Colossians & Philemon, Exegetical Guide to the New testament Greek,* Eardmans, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 52

[4] Kasemann, Ernst, *Essays on New Testsmanet Themes, translated by W.J. Montague from the German"Exegetissche Versuche ubd Besinnungen" 1960,* SCM Press, London 1964

analysis of form suggest that there are two main sections each beginning with ὅς ἐστιν. Verses 17-18a can also be seen as a middle bridge between the two. Schweizer[5] identified this as a three fold division in which the first stanza (15-16)consisted of three lines in which the cosmic Christ is praised as Lord of creation, the One who brought the universes into existence and directs it, the middle bridge (17-18a) repeats the thought of Christ's preexistent activity and asserts Him as the unifying principle that holds all together. The third stanza (18b-20) praises the cosmic Christ who embodied the divine fullness. As the risen One, he is God's agent in bringing the universe into harmony through reconciliation.

Most scholars agree that the writer(s) have included an already formed hymn. This is not to be understood as a modern "hymn" but as a confessional, credo, or liturgical unit that existed in worship or for the purpose of teaching converts. Some believe that it may have been part a baptismal confessional or creed. The evidence for this is summarized by Dunn[6] and others:

1. A relative clause beginning with "who" presupposing an opening line identifying the object of praise (see also Phil. 2:6, 1 Tim 3:16, Heb 1:3; 1 Peter 2:22)
2. A sequence of clauses and phrases that fall easily into rhythmic units
3. A clear structure of two strophes (15:18a, 18b-20), perhaps with a mid section that serves as a transition (17-18a)
4. Parallel motifs and phrases (see color code of text), chiasmus and inclusio.
5. A rounded unit whose meaning is self contained and independent of the immediate context yet appears to be nested within a thanksgiving, intercession thanksgiving chiastic structure.
6. A literary unit that with a metric form and lilt that sounds much like a confessional creed or liturgy.
7. The appearance of various terms (θρόνοί, ὁρατα, συνέστηκεν, ἀρχή, πρωτεύων, εἰρηνοποιήσας) not found elsewhere in Paul.

Nevertheless, unless physical evidence can be found testifying to the existence of a previously formed hymn, it can never be proven. It is possible that Paul simply became lyrical at the thought of all that we owe Christ and struck up a magnificent passage. A persistent minority[7] (Fuillet, Kummel, Caird, Helyer, Balchin) continue to deny the presence of any pre Pauline material here. Another hypothesis is that parts of the Hymn were pre-existing and that Paul simply included and expanded on them. The first part (verses 15-17) could have existed as a hymn /poem in praise of Christ's role in creation supplemented by a second hand (Paul's) to bring out the significance of Christ's redemptive work. However, much has been written under the supposition that parts of the hymn are preexistent and many have hypothesized as to its source and its original form.

There are three main backgrounds suggested for a preexistent form of the hymn. Kasemann (*Essays 149-168)* maintains that it was a pre Christian Gnostic text, which dealt with the metaphysical and supra-

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[5] Obrien, Peter, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 44* Word books, Waco, TX

[6] Dunn, James D.G., *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon,* Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 84

[7] ibid p. 84

historical drama of the Gnostic redeemer. He argues that the hymn was taken over in Christian usage by a baptismal liturgical reinterpretation and that Paul's introit to the hymn (12-14) points in this direction. Kasemann posits that Paul made just two additions "of the church' (18a) and "through the blood of his cross" (20) and that if these are removed that the remaining hymn displays no specifically Christian characteristics. He further asserts, astonishingly, that Paul cited this very hymn in a refutation of the Gnostic movement at Colosse! This, however, makes no sense. Why would Paul use the text of a heretical hymn to refute the heresy itself by adding a few "glosses". In addition, as Schweizer[8] suggests, Kasemann's theory is wrecked by the phrase πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν (first born from the dead) which is clearly Christian in character. Yet, to expand on Kasemann's argument, could not Paul have added this also to the hymn. Kasemann puts much weight on the Fourth Ecolugue of Virgil in which cosmic peace is achieved as a result of the universal savior's entry into his kingdom. This is the thrust of the hymn if the reference "through the blood of His cross" is removed. He also argues that "firstborn from the dead" is also a reference to the redeemer myth, where the redeemer creates a breech in death's domain. Yet, one must remember that there is a significant difference between mythology and historical fact. There are not many "hymns" created that celebrate myths, yet many are created to remember actual events. The theory that Paul took a pre Christian Gnostic hymn and modified it must be rejected.

The second possible background against which to see the hymn's origin is *Rabbinic Judaism*. Parallels are drawn between the hymn and Old Testament passages such as Gen. 1:1 ("In the beginning God created… ") and Proverbs 8, where the Lord created and appointed Wisdom (Prov. 8:22,23) as the first of creation, a "craftsman at His side" (Prov. 8:30) who is intimately involved with and rejoices in the creative process. While these parallels overlap with *Hellenistic Judaism*, W.D. Davies and Burney[9] maintain that Paul has given a meditative exposition on the opening words of the bible, a *B[ereshith]* exegesis of the Hebrew text drawing out hidden meaning (in *reshith*, by *reshith*, into *reshith*, Beginning, Sum Total, Head, First Fruits). Paul is never recorded as doing this sort of exegesis anywhere else, and it begs the question as to why Paul would have done so in writing to a chiefly Gentile church, on whom the thrust of this wonderful exegesis would have been lost.

Ernst Lorimeyer[10] has maintained that the whole hymn can be unraveled by means of the concept of reconciliation and should be understood against the background of the Jewish Day of Atonement. As Israel receives the pronouncement of the forgiveness of sins, the Creator and Lord of the world returns to His people so that creation and reconciliation are brought close together. The picture of Christ is drawn from the "myth of the primeval man" of the eschatological "Son of Man" which is closely related to a new cosmological view of Adam. These concepts are certainly in the two parts of the hymn (creation &

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[8] Obrien, Peter, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 44* Word books, Waco, TX

[9] Lohse, Eduard, *A Commentary to Colossians & Philemon,* Fortress Press, Philadelpia, p. 48

[10] Lohse, Eduard, *A Commentary to Colossians & Philemon,* Fortress Press, Philadelpia, p. 45

reconciliation), however, as Lohse points out, the term to reconcile (ἀποκαταλλάξαι) does not allude, even remotely to a concept of Jewish sacrifices and the Day of Atonement, neither has Rabbinic Judaism connected the concept of creation with the Day of Atonement.

Another argument against seeing the Hymn as coming from Rabbinic Judaism, is the fact that many of the same concepts come out in Hebrews 1, which was clearly written to a Jewish audience and full of Rabbinic exegesis. In Hebrews 1:1-2, the Son is seen as creating all things, being the "radiance of his glory" and an "representation of his substance" (ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτὴρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ), yet the expressions used in no way overlap those used in the hymn. If Rabbinic Judaism were in fact the Hymn's background, one would likely see some overlap in such a passage, which is essentially communicating the same thing.

The only useful element to come from these views are the significance attached to the Wisdom tradition in which Wisdom's function is understood in the hymn as being transferred to Christ, who takes on the personification of Wisdom, a view that also emerged from the Johannine Gospel (John 1:1-2). However, this view is supported by those who prefer to see the hymn as coming from a background of *Hellenistic Judaism*.

The third general approach Old Testament uncovering the background of the hymn is then to be sought in *Hellenistic Judaism*. This is the view of many European scholars, especially Schweizer[11] who considers the hymn to be part of a wider New Testament Christology, which has its roots in Hellenistic Jewish speculation focusing on the Wisdom of God, and coming from the Wisdom literature. They praised Wisdom (σοφια) as created before all creatures, as the first-born of God, the primordial beginning and saw in her as the mediator of redemption and salvation, all elements that are present in the hymn. These concepts would have syncrestised easily into Platonic philosophy where Plato had already called the cosmos the visible image of God (Tim 92c.) and the Greeks would have seen the cosmos as created by God "in His image" (κατ· εἴκονα ἄυτου *Corp. Herm.8.2*). Man too was seen as another image of God. This understanding of image was taken over by Hellenistic Judaism and transferred to Wisdom. In the Wisdom of Solomon 7:25, she is called an "image (εἰκὼν) of God's goodness" which makes known the goodness of God. Philo describes Wisdom as well as the Logos as "the perfect way", which leads to God" (*Deus Imm. 142f; Migr. Abr. 175*)[12]. Wisdom was present before creation but found no dwelling place and returned to heaven (1En 42:1f) . She was to reappear in the last times when her spirit would dwell in the son of Man to execute judgment (1 En 49:1-4). Plato also described five causes of any creation: the one 'from which' (material), the one 'in which' (formal), the one 'according to which'

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[11] Obrien, Peter, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 44* Word books, Waco, TX

[12] Lohse, Eduard, *A Commentary to Colossians & Philemon,* Fortress Press, Philadelpia, p. 48

(exemplary) and the one 'for which' (final). These suggest also Stoic formulations in the sentence (καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν).

It is most likely that the Christian community took these concepts from *Hellenistic Judaism* and Hellenistic philosophy and applied the "image" concept to Christ so as to praise Him as the one in whom God reveals Himself.   It would have been natural for the authors of the hymn to take these ideas and "correct" them composing the hymn, using it to confess Christ as the personification of Wisdom, "the image of the invisible God", "the firstborn of creation", the "firstborn from the dead", the one who brought about reconciliation through the "blood of His cross", "the Head of the church" and the preeminent One. Such a hymn would likely have been an early creed or confessional used in baptism of liturgical worship. The question is, would Paul have taken a clearly formed hymn and incorporated it into his letter intact, or would he have taken elements of the hymn and inserted (redacted) his own interpretive additions to stress the points that he wanted to make?   If the latter is true, is it possible then to reconstruct and discover the original form of the hymn?   The full hymn certainly has rhythmic parallels, but it also contains irregularities, which many have sought to solve, by deleting lines or phrases that could have been added by Paul. No consistent criteria have emerged on what to delete and what to keep. Kasemann, suggested that anything Christian should be deleted, to support his thesis of a pre-Christian Gnostic hymn. He suggested that if τῆς ἐκκλησίας and διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι' αὐτοῦ] were omitted then the hymn would have no Christian content arguing that πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, could have referred to the Gnostic redeemer myth. Schweizer's approach was to try to make the hymn rhythmic and he omitted four sections:

εἴτε θρόνοι   τῆς ἐκκλησίας
εἴτε κυριότητες   ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,
εἴτε ἀρχαὶ
εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·   εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι' αὐτοῦ]

Schweizers[13] version of the hymn would then read:

He is the image of the invisible God The firstborn of all creation For in Him all things were created In heaven and on earth, visible and invisible All things were created through Him and for Him And He is before all things And in Him all things hold together He is the head of the body He is the beginning, the first born from the dead For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell And through Him to reconcile all things to himself Things on earth and things in heaven	ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται· καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν, καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας εἴτε τα ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

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[13] Obrien, Peter, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 44* Word books, Waco, TX

Schweitzer's reconstruction makes sense and does much to solve the rhythmic unevenness of the hymn. If Schweitzer's theory is correct, what can we discern from Paul's redaction and how would it serve his rhetorical purpose?

Paul certainly could have added the list of "thrones, dominions, rulers or authorities" to show that *all* the orders of the angelic realms were in fact created by Christ and for Him. This would fit the admonition not to partake in or be impressed by the "worship of angels" in 2:18. Paul, could have also added "the church" as a gloss in verse 18. However, this may also have been part of the original hymn. Scweitzer argued that this was added by Paul to reinterpret the false idea that Christ's body is to be identified with the world or that redemption was strictly a physical or supra physical event. However, if this were a Christian hymn coming out of Hellenistic Judaism, would not the identification of "the body" have been the church, especially as this was a common theme to Paul (1 Cor 12:27, Eph. 4:12) and presumably to others. Adding "the church" does not add much to his rhetorical argument. Whether Christ is head of "the body" *meaning* cosmos (as Schweitzer argued from Philo), or "the body " *meaning* church" does not diminish Paul's thesis and argument.   If Paul added, "that in everything, He might be preeminent" to the hymn in verse 18, one can easily see why. His thesis is the all-encompassing supremacy of Christ (2:9-10). To preface this, adding this line here would make perfect sense. It is, after all only an amplification of what the hymn has already established at this point, but it deserves to be stressed to set up the thesis and the main argument.   That Paul added, "having made peace through the blood of His cross" can also be supported.   Paul argues that the angelic beings, the powers and principalities were defeated and disarmed and that this was accomplished "through the cross" (2:15). As this is part of his argument for the identity, freedom and power of the believer, the idea of making peace fits with the concept of reconciliation. The fundamental significance of reconciliation is averting the wrath of God in the final judgment, a Pauline concept (Rom 1:15, 5:9-11, 2 Cor 5:10-20). This also fits with Paul's theology of the cross, which ties together the Lord's supper and baptism (Rom 3:25, 5:9). This is also part of his argument in Col 2:13-14, where forgiveness is seen as coming through the cross.

For all these reasons Schweitzer's form of the original hymn as described may be very close. It is quite likely that Paul took the basic tenets of the hymn and expanded on it in the areas described to set up his theological argument and rhetorical purpose in the main body of the Epistle.

The Theology of the Hymn:

The hymn begins by declaring that Jesus is the image of the invisible God (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου). Both Old and New Testaments make it plain that no one has ever seen God. John's gospel adds "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the father, has made Him known" (John 1:18).   The use of εἰκὼν brings to mind Gen 1:26 where man is made in the "image" (εἰκὼν LXX) of God. Paul also affirms that man is "the image and glory of God" (1 Cor 11:7). The function of the image of God was expanded in

Hellenistic Judaism. As a reflection of God it was seen as the original image of the rest of creation and as the Logos. It is called by Philo as the firstborn (Conf. Ling. 63). This image also came to be identified with Wisdom (Proverbs 8, Wisd. 7:25) as the mediator of creation. εἰκὼν is also employed by Paul on an number of occasions not only with reference to Christ (2 Cor 4:3) but also regarding the increasing transformation of the people of God into that same image by the power of the indwelling Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18, Col 3:10, Eph 4:24). God's intension in creation is focused and incarnate in Christ, who being the second Adam, transforms others increasing to this image "bringing many sons to glory" (Heb. 2:10). The author of Hebrews also expresses this by saying that "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:3).   As God is invisible, Jesus, is the only God that man will ever see. John states this in his gospel as Jesus declares "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:7).

"First born of all creation" (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως) is the second title given Christ in the Hymn and indicates either temporal priority or supremacy in rank. In Judaism "firstborn" has special significance as one who had a special place in the father's love as well as the birthright itself. God had redeemed Israel at the price of the firstborn of all the Egyptians, and the Passover has special significance as to the firstborn, which continued in the rite of redemption (Ex. 13:15).   In most New Testament uses the term tends to mean supremacy in rank (1 Cor 15:20, Acts 26:3, Rev. 1:5). The genitive here is distributive and either objective genitive "supreme over all creation" or genitive of comparison "prior to all creation" [14] . Harris points out that if the intent here was temporal priority in creation, the adjective πρωτόχτιστοσ would be expected.

Christ's unique position as "firstborn of all creation" is next given specific proof in the ὅτι clause that follows "for in Him all things were created" (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα). The aorist passive here indicates that God is the Creator and that creation occurred in the past, a point reiterated later with "all things were created through Him and for Him" where (ἔκτισται) is used. The perfect passive here draws attention to the continuing state of the created order as having its basis in Him. The phrase "in Him" has been taken as instrumental by some and locative by others. In the former, He was the instrument of creation, while in the latter creation occurred within the sphere of Christ. Both senses would be consistent with the views expressed of Wisdom in Proverbs 8.

Commentators have drawn attention to the similarity of Paul's language and Stoic terminology, especially the use of "all things" (τὰ πάντα) and the play on prepositions (ἐκ εἰς ἐν) by which the unity of all that exists is expressed. However, this does not presuppose that Paul was integrating Stoic philosophy, but rather supplanting it by showing that Christ was the divine agent and master workman of the Wisdom literature. For Paul the "master-workman" of Proverbs 8 was no longer an Old Testament figure of speech, but the personal heavenly Christ that had appeared to Him on the Damascus road.

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[14] Harris, Murray J., *Colossians & Philemon, Exegetical Guide to the New testament Greek,* Eardmans, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 44

Next Paul expands on the "all things" to ensure that there is no confusion as to what he means. He adds "in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or principalities, or rulers or authorities" Paul likely added these specifically to address the Colossian heresy which was discounting Christ's superiority to these very things. Principalities (κυριότητες) where mentioned in Judaism among heavenly hosts of angels (2 Enoch 20:1) and these were certainly the objects of worship for some of the false teachers (Col . 2:18). Paul is breaking the flow of the hymn to point out that all these angelic beings and authorities were created, have their being and are now held together in Christ. This is the essential point of verse 18a. "He is before all things and in Him all things hold together" . συνέστηκεν here is perfect active emphasizing the continuing state of "cohering" giving it a present meaning. Not only was the universe created in the Son, as the sphere, by Him as divine agent, and for Him as the goal, it also continues to owe its very existence to Him. Apart from His continuous sustaining activity, all of it would disintegrate. This is a profound truth and one that the Hymn, whether Pauline or pre Pauline asserts boldly right in mid section. Christ is the central power of the universe, who holds all things (including those Paul has just listed) together. This one line establishes the unsurpassing supremacy of Christ in everything and demolishes all other arguments about His subservience to anything in the created order. Christology has its high point right here.

The next strophe starting with verse 18 transitions into the soteriological section of the hymn. "And He is the head of the body, the church". If Kasemann is correct and "the church" was a gloss added by Paul, this line would continue in describing the created order where "body" was seen in Stoic thought as the living cosmos. In fact the cosmos was seen to be God Himself.[15]   It is unlikely that Paul or the hymn writers had this in mind for the idea of "the body" as the body of believers in Christ was well developed (1 Cor 12:27, Eph. 4:12) at least in Paul. Nevertheless the inclusion of τῆς ἐκκλησίας makes it clear what body Paul means. The word was used throughout the LXX as a gathering of people, those called together usually for religious purposes. Paul uses it to describe the assembly of God's people as the gathering of church. The second part of verse 18 "He is the beginning, the first born from the dead' is decidedly Christian in character, despite Kasemann's attributing it to a mythical redeemer figure. The term ἀρχη has to do with primacy, either temporal, (Matt 19:24, 8, John 15:27 Acts 26:4, Heb 1:10, 2 Peter 3:4, 1 John 2:24) or with reference to sovereignty (Rom 8:38, 1 Cor 15:24, Eph 1?:21, 6:12) and has here in connection with "firstborn from the dead" the idea that Christ is the beginning of a new created order that of those "born from the dead". At Genesis 49:3 these two terms "firstborn" and "beginning" appear together to describe a new people (LXX Deut 21:17) a theme that Paul echoes in Rom 8:29 "first born among many brothers"

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[15] Lohse, Eduard, *A Commentary to Colossians & Philemon,* Fortress Press, Philadelpia, p. 53,54

Verse 18c "so that in all things He might have first place" is a purpose clause stating that Christ is the beginning and the firstborn in resurrection as well as in creation. In both the old created order and the new creation through resurrection, first place belongs to Him alone.   If Paul added this phrase to the hymn, one can see why. It anticipates Paul's thesis, which is upcoming. Christ is the preeminent one and should have first place in the faith, obedience and affection of the Colossian believers. All other powers, angelic beings and authorities are subject to Him. The believers union with Christ through baptism and resurrection places them in Christ above and beyond them. The admonitions to not be captured, judged or disqualified by those that propose subservience to them are a natural outcome of the all surpassing supremacy of Christ, which come to an apex in this verse.

The reason for the primacy of Christ is given in verse 19: "in Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell". (ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι). Commentators disagree as to what the subject of "was pleased" should be: God, Christ or "all the fullness". It is not likely to be Christ as ἐν αὐτω would seem to exclude Christ as the subject. IF God (ὁ θεός) is to be supplied as the subject, then the masculine participle "making peace" (εἰρηνοποιήσας) fits well and πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι can be taken as an accusative infinitive construction. This can be justified as the verb εὐδόκησεν can be used to denote the good pleasure of God (Luke 2:14, Phil 2:13). On the other hand, "all the fullness" (πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα) can also be seen as the subject, if we take the phrase to mean "God in all His fullness" and πλήρωμα then stands for a masculine. This last option is the best, as it does not necessitate supplying a subject. It is also consistent with Col 2:9 in which "all the fullness of deity" (πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος) is the subject of the same verb (κατοικεῖ).   Another issue is what does "all the fullness" mean? A suggestion that this is a Gnostic term of the second century is premature here, although the notion of "fullness" as emanations coming from God is present in Valentinian teaching. It is unlikely that Paul or the hymn writers were indebted to Gnostic thought, especially as one needs to look no further than the Old Testament this concept.   God is often seen as "filling" (πληω) the whole earth (Psalm 72:19, Isa 6:3, Eze 43:5) yet this is not seen as pantheistic. Often Zion is described as the place where God is pleased to dwell (εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς κατοικεῖν ἐν αὐτῷ LXX Ps 67:17) Thus, as God filled the temple in the days of Moses, so God's fullness is presented as dwelling in Christ. Jesus himself referred to the temple of his body in his destruction predictions which were a source of conflict at his trial (Mark 15:29).

The final concept in the hymn is that God's fullness was pleased also "through Him alone to reconcile all things to Him, making peace, through the blood of His cross, whether things upon the earth or in the heavens."   The concept of reconciliation is certainly not new in Paul (Rom 5:10,11, 11:15, 2 Cor 5:18-20). It is presented here as a completed event with the aorist infinitive. The question is what does reconciliation mean? Are the objects of reconciliation limited to that which is reconcilable? Does "all things" refer to persons on earth and angelic beings in heaven or does this extend to the creation itself? Some see this reconciliation as a reversal of the estrangement described in Romans 1:23, where men

exchanged the glory of God for images resembling man, animals or reptiles. Certainly, the estrangement that occurred in Gen 3 at the fall of man must also be in view. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). However, the gospel represents such an individual reconciliation as contingent on repentance and faith (Acts 2:38) and not universally accomplished, although the basis for such reconciliation has been accomplished and in that sense is finished. (John 19:30). Another view is to limit reconciliation to the pacification of cosmic powers. In the popular worldviews of the time, which bore a Stoic Platonic imprint, the material realm was considered one of the filthy realms, removed from God and governed by lesser powers[16]. While man was seen to originate in the spiritual realm, he was seen also to be imprisoned by the elements of the world, which were hostile. As these powers are in rebellion, they need to be brought into subjection to Christ. This theme is echoed in Col. 2:15 "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." NIV. However, this view seems also to be a narrow interpretation of "all things". A third view is that the universe "all" which suffered a cosmic disturbance at the fall, (the first Adam) has now been reconciled through the Christ event (the second Adam). Heaven and earth have now been returned to their divinely created and determined order through the resurrection and exaltation of Christ. This theme is also echoed in the Philippian hymn where "every knee shall bow" (Phil. 9:11). The reference to "making peace through the blood of His cross" also shows that this has not happened apart from the death of Christ. Another approach is suggested by Mussner, Trier and Vogtle[17] who see the emphasis of the passage not so much on what is reconciled but on who is the mediator of reconciliation and to that the answer is "Christ alone".   In the last strophe as in the first, the centrality of Christ is asserted as the one in which reconciliation is accomplished at the exclusion of all else. Paul's rhetorical purpose must also be kept in view at this point. The Colossians are not to be concerned or impressed by angelic powers for these have been stripped of their antagonistic influence by the cross of Christ (Col 2:15). Thus, reconciliation and peace are through Him alone. This point is applied to the readers themselves in verse 21, which follows the hymn. The believers were alienated from God by their wicked behavior, but are now reconciled by God through Christ's physical death. The reconciliation of all things is applied to them through the agent of reconciliation, which is Christ and "the blood of His cross" his completed work.

Summary:

Paul's main purpose in writing to the Colossians was to remind them of the all surpassing supremacy of Christ and of the fullness that they now possessed in Him by virtue of their baptism and identity in Him, and to warn them about those who would capture, judge and derail them through philosophy, regulations and the worship of angelic beings. In light of all this, they are to set their minds on things that are above where Christ is. They are to live Godly lives in their homes and in society, overflowing in thankfulness

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[16] Pokorny, Petr, *Colossians A Commentary* Translated by S, Schatzman from *Der brief des Paulus an die Kolosser* 1987, English translation 1991 Hendrickson Publishers . Peabody, MA   p. 87

[17] Obrien, Peter, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 44* Word books, Waco, TX

and prayer to the one in whom their lives are now hidden. Paul accomplishes these purposes by including in his opening Exordium, the text of a Christian hymn which had its origin in the life of the church. Paul expanded on the hymn in places to bring about the emphasis that he desired and in the process created a theological masterpiece which has inspired adoration, confession and faith for generations. Out of the hymn flowed Paul's thesis which is that all the fullness of the deity dwells in bodily form in Christ and that they have been given this fullness by virtue of the baptism which identifies them with the life death and resurrection of Christ. Because of this they now have fullness, belonging, identity, forgiveness, freedom and power. They are to set their minds on things above and live out their faith through Godly living. Paul makes masterful use of deliberative rhetoric to accomplish his purposes in the letter. The Colossian "hymn" is a high point of Christology and to it and to Paul, the church of Christ is deeply indebted.

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