

The following text is the unedited version of what appears in *Contours of Pauline Theology*. It is therefore longer than the book chapter with many more supporting references. It has not gone through the proof reading stage.

Chapter 12. Firstborn and the Colossian Hymn.

Introduction.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that the letter to the Colossians provides evidence of a Paschal theology in the early church. This is a perspective that until now has gone unnoticed. This oversight is despite the growing appreciation of the presence of the New Exodus as a controlling paradigm in the thought pattern of the early Christian community.¹ Regardless of the growing recognition of the influence of the Exodus motif, the Passover as the heart of the Exodus has not been explored. Of course, at the heart of the Passover is the death of the firstborn.

My intention in the first part of this chapter is to search for the possible origins of the hymn which is the most important part of the theology of the letter. If there is evidence that the Passover/Exodus celebration is a valid possibility, then the relevance of the hymn to a Paschal theology will be explored. If this theme can be identified as being present, then the theology of the letter is integral with the theology of Romans, which we have seen to have distinct Paschal/Exodus strands. This in turn will demonstrate the error of assuming that Paul was the originator of a new theological understanding. It will rather establish that there is no reason why Paul could not have written Colossians and also that Paul is one with Jesus in centering his death in the event of the Passover. It will also, if found to be Paschal based, provide further evidence that Paul's thinking is Semitic and not Hellenistic.

The authorship of the letter.

The Colossian letter has been at the center of ongoing unresolved debate in Pauline studies. There are those who say that the theology of the letter is uncharacteristic of Paul. This is largely because of the presence of a highly developed cosmic Christology, which is considered to be too late to be genuine Pauline material. It is claimed that this is proof that the letter is the product of a second century imitator.² The motives for this imitation are seen to range from a Paulinist who sought to promote what he thought would be his teacher's views in the developing challenges to the gospel, to an impostor of a less worthy sort. Either way, Pauline authorship is denied and the letter disqualified as a source in any inquiry into Paul's thought.

A further example of a developed theological theme is the letters doctrine of the church. Lohse rejected Pauline authorship of the Colossian letter because, he says, the church is universal in Colossians and not in the uncontested Pauline letters.³ It is not possible to respond to Lohse in the word limit of

¹ Watts *Isaiah, passim*; Joel, *Way, passim*; Evans, "Continuing", 77-100; Stanton, *Matthew*, 232-55

² See Sanders, "Dependence", 28 for examples of this argument.

³ Lohse, E., "Christusherrschaft", pp206-7, a view that is supported by Dunn, *Colossians*, 19.

such a paper, but I believe that the Paschal/Exodus perspective that I am arguing for nullifies the claim of Lohse.⁴

Literary affinities.

It is not only the theology that has caused misgivings over authorship. The letter has clear evidence of literary affinities with Ephesians, the first letter of Peter, Romans and Corinthians.⁵ Some sort of dependence is obvious, and this has been used as an additional argument to claim that the letter is not authentically Pauline. This of course is not convincing. The argument depends on the assumption that the theology has first been settled to rule out Pauline authorship. On its own, the claim that Colossians is copying Romans is as weak as saying that Paul has copied himself!

I would argue that Paschal theology challenges the viability of rejecting Pauline authorship on the basis of supposed theological incompatibility. Indeed, I would argue that the differences are not due to development but due to the use of wrong paradigms and methods to interpret Paul. There are others, however, who see no need to question the authenticity of the letter even without appealing to the Paschal theology that I am proposing.⁶ These scholars are equally convinced that there is no basic conflict with other undisputed Pauline letters. They claim that any apparent variations in thought are merely the inevitable developments to be expected as the apostle adjusted his language and arguments to the particular problems that prevailed at Colossae.

The Christ hymn.

The authorship of the hymn.

The authorship of the hymn has likewise divided scholarship. Those who accept that the letter is Pauline divide into two groups. There are those who say the passage is an independent composition of the early church as a hymn in praise of Christ.⁷ Ellingworth is a representative of this group and says that the ideas in the hymn are congenial to Paul but not identical with his theology.⁸ Ellingworth's argument is that Paul is not the author of 1:15-17, 18b-10, but he is responsible for placing it in its present context. Others who argue for none Pauline authorship of the hymn, but accept his authorship of the letter itself, think that Paul quoted the hymn as a confessional statement. His aim, they argue, was to secure common agreement in introducing the theme of his letter.⁹ To do this he used in the opening of the letter a passage that many recognise from their worship.

⁴ See my forthcoming volume *Paul and the Spirit*, Christian Focus, Fern, Scotland, due 2003.

⁵ Mitton, "Relationship", p68 says that Colossians is closely related to Ephesians and 1 Peter. Lohse "Colossians" 213 says that the letter is stamped with Romans. Sanders "Dependence" 28 sees the letter as the work of a Paulinist who based it on Romans and Corinthians.

⁶ For Pauline authorship see Barrett, "Lamb", 271 also O'Brien, *Colossians*, 40-44; Gibbs, *Creation*, 93 who sees no need to reject Pauline authorship and gives supporting bibliography; Cannon, *Use*, 24 note 33; Lohse., "Colossians" 211-220 rejects Pauline authorship but provides a bibliography of those who accept it. For details of those who deny Pauline authorship see Sanders, "Dependence" 28 note 2.

⁷ Vawter, B., "Hymn", 80; O'Brien, "Reconciliation", 48; Aletti, *Colossians*, 102-3; Bennett, *Search*, 72; Ellingworth, "Colossians", 252-3; Schweizer, *Colossians*, 55 says, "It is no longer a matter of dispute that we have in these verses a hymn which has been taken over by the author," yet he later acknowledges (p55 note 1) that some scholars, e.g. Caird, accept Pauline authorship of the hymn.

⁸ Ellingworth, "Colossians" 252-3.

⁹ So, Allmen, "Reconciliation", 38-9 and Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul*, 242 who argues that the hymn was brought from Colossae by Epaphras.

Those who deny the Pauline authorship of the letter normally see the hymn to have been quarried out of Gnostic Wisdom traditions and adapted as a hymn to praise Christ.

A third group, who accept Pauline authorship of the letter, see no need to deny Pauline authorship of the hymn.¹⁰ These claim that it is Paul's own composition in praise of the cosmic Christ. Most of this group see the hymn to be influenced by the Jewish Wisdom tradition.

The source material of the hymn.

Sanders¹¹ says that vs. 15-16, "may be composed from different passages in Romans and Corinthians." Eckart¹² sees vs. 13-14 to be expressing the confessional worship and praise of the baptised. de Lacy¹³ links Col. 1:15-20 with Heb. 1:3, Jn. 1:18; 3:11-13;14:9 which he sees are parallels. Helyer¹⁴ also links the content with other NT texts, namely Col. 1:18 with Heb. 1:6 and Rev 1:5. Aletti¹⁵ argues that Paul did not seek to correct the hymn but that he used it to encourage the young church. This suggests that Paul had no problems with its theology. O'Neill saw the hymn to be a series of confessional statements and claims that its source was Palestinian Judaism.¹⁶ A Paschal setting for the original material that the hymn is based on is proposed by Manns. He cites Gen. R. 1.1 and Sifre. Deut. 11:10 and claims that the *Sitz im Leben* for the original material is Passover celebration.¹⁷ However, Lyonnet claims that the hymn originally celebrated the Jewish New Year.¹⁸

Among those who claim a Greek background for the hymn there is again division. Earlier opinion saw the vocabulary as a technical accumulation of terminology from the Gnostic Redeemer Myth.¹⁹ Käsemann, for example, who supports this proposal, held that the removal of the words 'of the church' in verse 18 and 'through the blood of his cross' in verse 20 left a hymn which has no specifically Christian characteristics.²⁰ He argued from this that the original material was a pre-Christian Gnostic hymn. In its original form it dealt with the metaphysical and supra-historical drama of the Gnostic Redeemer. Käsemann saw the hymn to have been adopted by the early Christian community. After adaptation they used it as a confessional statement for baptismal candidates. Käsemann pointed out that creation and redemption formed part of the myth of the primeval man and Redeemer. This redeemer figure was seen to have broken into the realm of death to bring about a reconciliation, not only for those who belonged to him, but also for the whole universe. This reconciliation included all of the aeons which made up the cosmos.

¹⁰. Rollins, "Tendenz", 125 says, "Paul responds as a Jew and thinks as a Christian about the cross and resurrection." See also Helyer "Arius" 59; Gibbs *Creation* 152 and Schweizer "Colossians" 55 note 1.

¹¹ Sanders, "Dependence" 35.

¹² Eckhart, K. G., "Exegetische", 186.

¹³ De Lacy, *Form*, p19.

¹⁴ Helyer, "Arius", 12. See also Dunn *Making* 207; Longenecker, "Distinctive", 541.

¹⁵ Aletti, *Colossians*, 102-3.

¹⁶ O'Neill, "Source" 90-1.

¹⁷ Manns, "Midrash", 100-110.

¹⁸ Lyonnet, "L'hymne", 94-5.

¹⁹ Lohse, "Christusherrschaft" 206-7 says that Paul uses the language of traditional mythology.

²⁰ Käsemann, "Primitive", p40ff supported by Schweizer, *Jesus*, 24 and Zeilinger, *Erstgeborene*, p76.

Objections to Käsemann's thesis.

O'Brien²¹ noted that the suggested backgrounds for the hymn have been, "remarkably varied." O'Brien listed the following objections against Käsemann's thesis.²² 1). His analysis of the strophes of the hymn is deeply suspect on stylistic grounds. 2) He does not give due weight to the presence of OT allusions in the hymn. 3) He has not been fair in his acknowledgement of what is the specifically Christian element of the hymn. 4) It is doubtful whether there was a non-Christian parallel to the Redeemer who through incarnation unites man and God. Indeed, taking up O'Brien's last point, the Gnostic origin of the hymn is being increasingly questioned by scholars. This is because it has been shown that Gnosticism was a second century development rather than predating the NT as was originally thought. Of course this is not a problem for those who are prepared to push the letter further into the second century. Their argument that the letter is dealing with a Christian response to Gnosticism still stands. But increasingly, it is being appreciated that the vocabulary of the heresy described in the letter fits perfectly into what we have come to know of Second Temple Judaism. Thus it has been recognised that rather than Gnosticism being the source of NT ideas, the NT itself was the source of much of Gnosticism's vocabulary.²³ The present prevailing view of those who continue to hold a Greek source for the hymn is that it has been adapted from the redeemer myth.²⁴

Beasley-Murray²⁵ illustrates the concerns of those who feel that the Hellenistic sources are not appropriate. Commenting on the interpretations of the meaning of *kephalē*, another Greek technical term found in the hymn, he wrote, "The general bankruptcy of this "cosmic body" position is illustrated by Lohse, who has adduced remote Iranian parallels to support the hypothesis. We conclude therefore that not only is the natural structure of the Colossian hymn against our understanding *kephalē* in the cosmic sense, but also Greek usage does not favour such interpretation. Any attempt to discern an earlier form of this hymn, in which the cosmos was termed Christ's body, we must with Bruce label as an "unwarranted exercise of imagination". Both in the pre-Pauline form of the hymn, the Church is the body of Christ."

The structure of the hymn.

Further debate has centred on the original structure of the hymn in 1:15-20. This is illustrated in the way that Lohmeyer forced the hymn into a 3-7-3-7 pattern of lines which the text will not support.²⁶ Bammel²⁷ and Wright²⁸ say that the hymn was constructed on a chiasmic pattern but this is disputed by

²¹ O'Brien, *Colossians*, 37.

²² O'Brien, "Reconciliation", 45-53.

²³ So Talbert, "Myth", 418. Kehl, *Christushymnu*, 88 says of the hymn that everything distances cosmic, Gnostic ideas and bases itself on history of salvation. Martin, R. P., *Colossians. The Church's Lord and the Christians Liberty*, Exeter, 1972, p54 says that 1:15-20 is not being used to check incipient Gnosticism. Lyonnet "L'hymne" 100 says that the hymn was originally based on the New Year feast.

²⁴ Fiorenza, "Wisdom", 29 says that rather than Wisdom, the hymn is a reflective mythology. So also Lohse "Christusherrschaft" 203f. Fossum, "Colossians", p201 sees Colossians to be based on an Anthropos Christology.

²⁵ Lyonnet, "Colossiens" 182. See also the discussion by Kroger "Head" who argues that κεφαλή means source. Gruden strongly rejects Kroger's argument saying that her evidence and method are flawed and that the meaning of the word is 'head'.

²⁶ cited by Robinson, "Analysis", 270.

²⁷ Bammel, "Versuch", 88f.

²⁸ Wright, "Poetry", 447., so also Baugh, "Form", *passim*.

Vawter²⁹ who also says that the hymn is one of the passages which most epitomise the hermenutical quandary revealed by redaction criticism.³⁰ Vawter warned of the danger of allowing prejudices to determine the form of the material that is accepted which then determines the outcome of the exegesis.³¹ Wright himself warned that if insertions are to be allowed then so are omissions and this makes reconstruction virtually impossible. This means, says Wright, that we can only deal with the text we possess. Reumann shares the same concerns saying, “As a rule of thumb, the least complicated analysis of a formula with ‘insertions’ is the best one, for there has been a tendency by critics, in treating passages like 2:6ff and Col. 1:15,20 to carry their refinements so far that the whole analysis threatens collapse.”³² Fiorenza says that, “as long as the original hymn is lacking, the reconstruction will remain an exegetical task that can never find a definitive solution.”³³ After evaluating the suggested original forms of the hymn Gibbs claimed that there is no single reconstruction of the hymn that is fully persuasive.³⁴ Martin says that all notions of literary structure and growth are speculative and tentative.³⁵ To add to this array of opinion O’Neill claims that the passage is not a hymn at all. He claims it is nothing more than a collection of confessional statements and that it therefore has no corresponding literary structure.³⁶

The introduction and size of the hymn.

The hymn has an introduction in vs. 12-13 the origin of which is viewed by scholars as being from a range of possibilities. Some see it as the composition of the author of the letter to introduce the hymn.³⁷ Others think that it is an integral unit with the hymn and that it was part of the original composition,³⁸ whoever its composer was. Not only is the start of the hymn debated, but so also is it’s ending. Not all are convinced that the hymn concludes at v20.³⁹

The purpose of the hymn.

Those who claim Pauline authorship of the letter, but deny the Pauline authorship of the hymn, quite often share a similar view to those who deny the authenticity of the letter itself. Both normally see the hymn as an adaptation of a Greek or a Jewish hymn in praise of Wisdom. By the adaptation of this hymn, Christ is proclaimed as the unifying principle of creation, and as such, without any rival. Because he is without equal, there is no creature that can be allowed to share in the worship or honour that is due to him alone. The hymn is important for it is the key to the theology of the letter, as Lohse says: *Colossians unfolds its Christology on the basis of the*

²⁹ Vawter, “Hymn”, 9 note 20.

³⁰ op cit 67.

³¹ op cit 66.

³² Reumann, “Righteousness”, 440.

³³ Fiorenza, “Wisdom”, 19.

³⁴ Gibbs, *Creation*, 99.

³⁵ Martin, *Colossians*, 54. McCown, “Structure”, *passim* says that Paul quotes the hymn verbatim.

³⁶ O’Neill, “Source” 90.

³⁷ Käsemann, “Primitive”, *passim* sees vss 12-14 to be a baptismal confession, so also Eckart, “Exegetische”, 106. Radford, *Colossians*, 165 links the verses with the baptism of Jesus.

³⁸ Vawter, “Hymn”, 74 says that the introduction vss 12-14 was already part of the unit before being used in Colossians and that the hymn was composed from a multiplicity of sources (pp72 -73). So also Norden, cited by Cannon, *Use*, 36 and O’Neill, “Source”, *passim*. Schweizer, “Dying”, 5 says that the use of ‘kingdom’ in vs 13 is rare in Paul and proves that we have here a traditional liturgical phrase.

³⁹ So Aletti, *Colossians*, 102-3. Du Pont suggests that vss 24-29 form a unity with vss 13-23, cited by Aletti, p18.

*Christ hymn cited at the beginning.*⁴⁰

Support for equating firstborn with Wisdom.

The debate concerning the theology of the hymn mostly centers on the meaning of the term *protōtokos* (firstborn). Some see the 'title' as hierarchical,⁴¹ while others see it to be ontological.⁴² Dunn says that the term is, "among the most contested in the history of NT interpretation."⁴³ Dunn however is clear as to the origins of the term firstborn. He says that, "The antecedent for the use of the word *prwtotokoj* (firstborn) in relation to creation is most obviously Wisdom."⁴⁴ Casey argues that the historical reason for its adaptation was that, "The inclusion of a larger number of educated men had also forced attention on philosophical problems with which Palestinian Judaism was not concerned ...introduced ways of thinking which were foreign to all but the Hellenistic Jewish mind.... Nobody seems to be in doubt that OT and later Jewish Wisdom speculation has provided a great number of the motifs and even vocabulary."⁴⁵ Lamp claims that Wisdom not only provides the content but also provides the framework of thought for Paul's theology.⁴⁶

Some see that the source of the Wisdom of the hymn is Judaism itself.⁴⁷ Vawter agrees that the vocabulary was from OT Wisdom vocabulary, "But only in some artificial sort of way can personified-Wisdom ideas be seen as the model for the portrayal of a cosmic redeemer."⁴⁸ Vawter acknowledged that there are several blocks of similar material in the NT but said, "We do not really know what function this distinctive form served in the ecclesial communities that made use of it."⁴⁹ Burney⁵⁰ suggested that the hymn was similar to a Rabbinic Midrash in which Proverbs 8 was used to interpret Genesis 1. This has been followed by many scholars⁵¹ and is the majority view at the present time.

Concern over Wisdom's status.

While the Wisdom motif is widely accepted, even those who see it as being the most plausible meaning have misgivings.⁵² The difficulties center on the

⁴⁰ Lohse, *Colossian*, 214, so also Weiss, "Colossians", 306

⁴¹ So Gibbs, *Creation* 104; Argyle, "Colossians", *passim* says that the context makes it plain that the phrases must mean 'born before all creation'. Helyer, "Prototokos", 10 says that, "It is not possible to explain 1:15 apart from Hellenistic cosmic thought." Michaelis, *TDNT* 6:87, after dismissing the meaning as a reference to the priority of the firstborn says, "The only remaining possibility is to take it as hierarchically." So also Helyer, "Arius" 59; Buckley, *Phrase*, 18-19 and Argyle *prwtotokoj* 62..

⁴² Gibbs, *Creation* 108.

⁴³ Dunn, *Making*, 189.

⁴⁴ Dunn, *Colossians* 90. So also Sabourin, "Christology", 54 and Dahl, *Origin*, 120.

⁴⁵ Casey, "Earliest", 268. So also Vawter, "Hymn", 71.

⁴⁶ Lamp, "Significance", 52.

⁴⁷ Schreiner, *Apostle*, 156.

⁴⁸ Vawter, "Hymn", 72

⁴⁹ op cit 69.

⁵⁰ Burney, "ARXH", 174.

⁵¹ Supporting a Jewish based Wisdom Christology are Fuller & Perkins, *Who*, 160; Gnlika, *Kolossierbrief*, 60, Feuillet, "Creation", 7; Reese, "Incarante", 46; Alletti, *Colossians*, 179-80; Lohse, *Commentary*, 49 foot note 115; Buckley, *Phrase* 41ff; Bammel, "Versuch" 88; Gibbs, *Creation* 108; Schillebeeckx, *Experiment*, 431; Goppelt, *Theology*, 298-9; Fuller, "Evaluation", 106; Kim, *Origins*, 258; Pearson, "Speculation", 43; Kummel, *Theology*, 163; O'Brien, *Colossians*, 43-4; Hengel, *Son*, 73f; Feuillet, "Creation", 4-7; Wright, "Poetry", 460; Gabathuler, *Christos*, 153; Zeller "Christology" 325 and Dunn, "Reflections" 108.

⁵² So Caird, "Jesus", 59. Keck, "Renewal", 368-9, says that, "The study of titles does not bring us to Christology." See also Holloway, "Christology", 65-82 and Hurtado, "Christology", 23 who says that the background data of Christology is misused. Stewart "Neglected", cited by Macgregor "Principalities" 17 said, "We

fact that there are a number of unresolved tensions within the idea of Wisdom Christology. One of the problems is that neither the Torah nor the Messiah were understood to be eternal in Judaism, yet this is an attribute essential for the orthodox understanding of Christology.⁵³ Further more, as Martin⁵⁴ who accepts a Wisdom Christology acknowledges, “Nothing in the teaching on Wisdom adumbrates the theme of redemption, whether cosmic or personal.” While Aletti⁵⁵ accepts a Wisdom Christology, it was not, he claims, to be understood in terms of Wisdom becoming personified, which is at the heart of most understanding of Wisdom Christology. O’Brien,⁵⁶ who accepts a Wisdom interpretation, notes that there is no statement in Jewish Wisdom literature, nor in any other Jewish literature, which shows that Wisdom was seen to be the goal of creation.

Schweizer admits, “One cannot help but notice the theological difference between the hymn itself and the commentary which the author of the epistle provides.”⁵⁷ This is particularly significant as the hymn is universally accepted to be the introduction to the letter.⁵⁸

Casey⁵⁹ acknowledges that neither the language nor the thought of St Paul suggests that he was familiar with Greek speculative philosophy, yet he still thinks that Paul used Greek philosophical terms but, “in a rough and ready fashion.” Balchin noted that the gender of *sophia* is feminine and that the title would more naturally be related to the Holy Spirit than the incarnate Christ.⁶⁰ Balchin claimed that this is evidence of the church’s “discriminating creativity”, in that it could adapt such material. Others do not believe that gender would have had the same significance for the ancients as it does for modern man.

Another problem is raised by Witherington. Even though he supports the Wisdom interpretation of *protōtokos*. He acknowledges that, “One cannot say of Sophia (personified Wisdom) that she is the head of the body”.⁶¹ His solution is to assign this to the Pauline hand as a result of his editing of the original hymn in praise of Wisdom. In other words, the editing of the hymn is

shall never get inside of Paul until we take seriously what has been ‘ a neglected emphasis in New Testament Theology’ and cease to treat ‘as secondary and extraneous elements in the primitive Christian proclamation’ what in fact are integral and basic components of the Gospel.” See also Robinson, “Sophos”, *passim*. The context of Wisdom 18, which is used to support Wisdom Christology, is about the death of the firstborn, so De Lacy, “Mediator”, 112. Indeed, the last ten chapters of the book of Wisdom is an Alexandrian Passover Haggadah, so Buckley, *Phrase* 53. If these observations are correct, then the theme of Wisdom in the book of Wisdom, used to support a Wisdom Christology, ought to be redirected toward a soteriological application within a Paschal framework.

⁵³ so Delling, *TDNT* 5 :478-489, p482.

⁵⁴ Martin, *Colossians*, 48.

⁵⁵ Aletti, *Colossians*, 179-80, see also Whitehouse, “Creation”, 126.

⁵⁶ O’Brien, *Colossians*, 40.

⁵⁷ Schweizer, “Colossians”, 56.

⁵⁸ Lohse, “Colossians”, 214.

⁵⁹ Casey, “Earliest”, 269.

⁶⁰ Balchin, *Significance*, 212. However Stanton, *Gospel*, 370 says concerning the claims of some that Mtt 11:27 is a Wisdom text in which Jesus is claiming to be the personification of Wisdom, “I find it difficult to see how either Matthew or his readers could make the jump from v.27 where Jesus is presented as ‘ the Son’ to v.28, where, it is alleged, Jesus is Sophia/Wisdom. It is not just that Wisdom is a feminine noun in both Hebrew and Greek. In the Wisdom tradition Sophia is always portrayed in strongly female terms. Those who search and seek after her are always men: sexual imagery lies just beneath the surface in many passages. A similar point is made by Reese, “Incarnate”, *passim* when he insists that ‘it would have been as incongruous to ancient Jewish sensibilities as it is to ours to speak of “Lady Wisdom” being incarnated as the “Son”.’

⁶¹ Witherington, *Narrative*, 106.

founded solely on the basis of deciding what Paul not have said or what the original hymn could not have said, and editing accordingly. A solution that took the hymn seriously as it stands would be much more preferable as avoiding prior judgment concerning authenticity.

The importance of context.

The danger of getting the context of the hymn wrong has been noted by a number of scholars. McArthur warned that theological language would lose its reference if removed from its original context. He says that it, “may have the same words but the tune has been changed.”⁶² de Lacy says that it is inadmissible to collect Wisdom material from a range of sources without any reference to how it was used in its original setting and then use the collected texts to construct a Biblically based Christology,⁶³ a warning given more generally by Barr.⁶⁴ Van Roon denies links with Wisdom on linguistic criteria.⁶⁵ Aletti, who even though eventually deciding on a Wisdom Christology, questions the Wisdom link.⁶⁶ Wright holds to a Wisdom Christology,⁶⁷ even though he has elsewhere warned of the danger of treating parallels as sources.⁶⁸

This unease is accentuated even further when it is appreciated that there is a weakness in the original premise on which much of the work has been built. Most modern discussion is based on Burney’s argument, yet the Rabbinic source which Burney used as his model (acknowledged by Burney, yet not with any caution considering the weight given to it) is late third century AD. Such a late dating seriously weakens its usefulness as evidence of what was in the mind of the writer of the Colossian Christ Hymn.⁶⁹

The Semitic content of the hymn.

The widely accepted Jewish Wisdom content of the hymn does have in its favour the fact that it has returned to Judaism for its origin. This does justice to the Semitisms which are much in evidence in the material⁷⁰ and which could hardly be expected if the hymn was originally a Hellenistic work. It is however the presence of such an array of Semitisms that has persuaded

⁶² McArthur, “Johannine”, p92.

⁶³ De Lacy, “Mediator”, *passim*.

⁶⁴ Barr, *Semantics*, *passim*.

⁶⁵ cited by Aletti, *Colossians*, 70.

⁶⁶ Aletti, *Colossians*, 83.

⁶⁷ Wright, “Poetry”, 458.

⁶⁸ Wright, *Messiah*, 7. Balchin “Wisdom” 209 falls into this trap as shown when he says “although there is no book where all these characteristics occur together, the New Testament authors were heir to them all through the LXX.” But Balchin cites references from Proverbs which he acknowledges are poetical and not philosophical, and buttress their use by bringing alongside them not other OT texts, but those he gathers from the extra canonical wisdom literature.

⁶⁹ See Dunn, *Making*, 77 over the dispute about the admissibility of the use of the Similitudes of Enoch, dated in the early second century, to determine the meaning of the Son of Man title. For dating Enoch see Hindley, “Towards”, 551-65. Even though Buckley, *Phrase*, 56 recognised the lateness of the text Burnley based his explanation on, he seems to have found no difficulty in accepting it as the foundation of the whole hypothesis, not so Higgins, *Jesus*, 159.

⁷⁰ Moule, *Colossians*, 50; Martin, *Colossians*, 38; Balchin, *Significance*, 179; Masson, *Colossians*, 104-7; O’Brien, *Colossians*, 38; Maurer, “Begründung”, 88; Schweizer, “Colossians”; Kaiser, “Promise”, 225 and Dunn, “Reflections”, 100. Shogren, “Arius”, 176 says, “Almost all of the words (or at least synonyms of the words) of Col 1:12-14 are found in the LXX to describe the New Exodus motif”. There are many terms which were once held to have originated in Hellenism, but are now being identified as coming from a Judaistic cradle, so Longenecker, “Distinctive”, 526ff. Indeed, it is becoming recognised that Judaism itself is the origin of so much Christological understanding that was once thought to have developed during the later Gentile mission. Until now there has been little development beyond these observations.

O'Neill to postulate that the hymn is nothing more than a collection of OT motifs about the creativity of God, strung together as a confessional statement.⁷¹ Aletti supported a Jewish origin because Paul did not seek to correct the hymn but encouraged the young church through it.⁷² This in itself is not enough evidence to support a Jewish origin because he could equally encourage a Hellenistic congregation through a Hellenistic work. Such a claim however is not sustainable because the heresy of the letter has been recognised to be Jewish and therefore to early to be second century.

Sanders who dates Colossians about 50 AD, about the same date as 1 Corinthians, supports the primitive nature of the hymn.⁷³ Hunter however, observed the early position of the verb and the parallelism, which he thinks reflects a Semitic origin.⁷⁴ Pannenberg, who though supporting the personification of Wisdom as the meaning of *protōtokos* says that early Christology was OT based but its origin was lost in the second century.⁷⁵ If these Semitic observations are correct, then the hymn has to be interpreted from the perspective of the OT theology out of which it has come.

Widespread consensus.

What is widely accepted by scholarship is that the introduction to the to the hymn (vs. 12-14) is based on the New Exodus promise.⁷⁶ It speaks of being delivered from the kingdom of darkness and being brought into the kingdom of light. The theme of the introduction is so emphatic that it is one of the few uncontested aspects of the letter. Aletti claimed that form analysis shows 1:15-20 to be a special unit of text,⁷⁷ and that 1:13-23 formed a literary unit.⁷⁸ He further claimed that vs. 16f-18a are an accumulation, and that 1:13 announces v15-16c and 16f-17ab prepares for 18a-20.⁷⁹

Shogren claims that 1:12-14 draws on 3 layers of tradition. First the Exodus, then the promised New Exodus and finally Paul's own commission in Acts 26:17-18.⁸⁰ Klijn sees the language of vs. 12-14 to be reflecting the LXX description of the Exodus or Isa. 63.15-19.⁸¹ Martin said, "The church, like

⁷¹. O'Neill, "Source", 91 also noted the poor metrical form of the hymn. He claimed that Col 1:9-23 and 2:6-15 were taken directly from Jewish sources. He wrote, "the Christology which these citations express was not the result of long Christian meditation on the death and resurrection of Christ; rather, the Christology was something that had grown up in Judaism long before"(op cit 99). O'Neill (op cit 97) also noted that the passage contains ideas which are at home in the cosmological meditations of parts of Judaism and so the author of the letter was able to quote these passages without comment. It would be obvious to him and to his readers that this redemption had been fulfilled in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The author could safely leave the texts as they were to speak for themselves. Hengel, *Son*, p67 agrees that Jewish Christianity was the driving force determining the early development of Christology. Héring, *Le royaume*, 163 did not think it impossible that extra-Jewish influences had been at play in the hymn, but maintained that the inner-Jewish tradition was quite sufficient to account for it (cited by Vawter, "Hymn", 71). Davies, *Rabbinic*, 150-152 says that Paul's opponents at Colossae were Jewish, so also Wright, *Colossians*, 24-30. This might suggest that it would be Semitic material that would be used to answer them.

⁷² Aletti, *Colossians*, 102-3.

⁷³ Sanders, *Hymns*, 216.

⁷⁴ Hunter, *Predecessors*, London, 125.

⁷⁵ Pannenberg, *Jesus*, 156-8.

⁷⁶ So Martin, "Reconciliation", 106f. Barth *Colossians*, 192-3 commenting on the importance of the New Exodus promises for the introduction says: "for Deut-Isa, the forgiveness of sins signifies the end of captivity; also its reverse is true: redemption means the beneficial and healing presence of God which brings with it the forgiveness of sins"

⁷⁷ Aletti, *Colossians*, 39.

⁷⁸ Op cit 39.

⁷⁹ Aletti, *Colossians*, 7.

⁸⁰ Shogren, "Entering", 177.

⁸¹ Klijn, "Study", 428.

Israel before her, celebrated her Exodus, the New Exodus, and rehearsed and recalled by dynamic story re-telling - so Col. 1:15-29, Phil. 2:6-11, 1 Tim. 3:16.”⁸² Martin also said that the Christian confessional hymns, “stayed in the liturgical tradition of the Old Testament in which Exile in Egypt/Promised land were the major theme.”⁸³ Wright noted that: the parallelism between the two halves..., invites the reader or listener to draw the conclusion that the creator is also the redeemer.”⁸⁴ Wright went on to say, “Col. 1.15-20 is reinforced by the echoes of Jewish redemption ideas. In v12-14 which evoke in particular the imagery of the Exodus, the time when Israel’s God showed himself to be God of the whole world by defeating both the Egyptians and the mighty waters of the sea. The New Exodus was the act of New Creation, bringing the chosen race to a new birth out of chaos and slavery. The same impression is given by the verses (21-3) which follow the poem, in which the God of all the earth (v23) has become responsible for the reconciliation of the Colossians and their grafting into his true people (22).”⁸⁵ Shogren noted that 1:13 is not about individuals entering the Kingdom of God but about the Church corporately.⁸⁶

It is not just that the introduction to the hymn interprets the hymn that is important, but that the hymn itself determines the interpretation of the letter.⁸⁷ This makes a correct exegesis even more essential.

Exodus and redemption.

If the introduction is, as would normally be the case, the major determining factor in interpreting the material that follows, then it brings the hymn into the Paschal setting. This is the hymn’s inevitable setting because redemption (v14), in the original Exodus, was the Passover sacrifice.⁸⁸ Consequently, the hymn must be read in a redemptive context. This is recognised to varying degrees by some scholars. There are those who see the whole of the hymn as speaking of redemption while others think that it is v18ff that alone relates to this theme. Surprisingly, few see that this is what the introduction itself has determined.⁸⁹ In fact, it is not only the introduction that fixes the context the interpretation of the main text, the conclusion tells what should have been understood in the reading or hearing of the text.

The importance of the introduction and the conclusion is so obvious that it need not be argued. Despite this, scholarship has repeatedly failed to take note of these two key determinative factors for the interpretation of the hymn. Here in this piece of poetry the conclusion states, “through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making

⁸² Martin, “Reflections”, 44. Matera “Christology” 141 acknowledges that Col. 1:9-20 “recalls the creative and redemptive work of God’s Son” yet sees the term firstborn to be limited to meaning first in a series or superior.

⁸³ op cit p39.

⁸⁴ Wright, “Poetry”, 452.

⁸⁵ op cit 453-4

⁸⁶ Shogren, *Entering*, 180.

⁸⁷ So Aletti, op cit 13 and Lohse, “Colossians”, 214. See Stanton, *Gospels*, 113 for the importance of introductions.

⁸⁸ Piper, “Eternal”, 290 says, “verses 15-20 are not simply tagged on to the text in a loose way.”

⁸⁹ One exception to this is Wright, “Poetry”, 453-4 but he follows the prevailing Wisdom interpretation and so, despite his New Exodus emphasis, fails to interpret firstborn in its redemptive context. Another exception is Barth, *Colossians*, 194 who says: “He is praised, into whose kingdom the Colossians have been transferred, he in whom they have redemption and the forgiveness of sins, accomplished through the cross”. Despite this clear linking of the theme of the introduction to the meaning of the hymn, Barth, unlike Wright, turns to the notion of priority being behind the use of *protōtokos*.

peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” The conclusion therefore clearly speaks of an act of cosmic reconciliation achieved through the shedding of blood. What ever the passage is about, surely to force it into discussions of philosophical abstractions of any sort is to miss the mark by miles. It is a discussion/reflection on the redemption that has been achieved through the shedding of Christ’s blood. The setting for interpreting the hymn must therefore be cultic.

Wisdom and soteriology.

Murphy says, “The meaning of the personification of Wisdom is about as elusive as the origins. For example what precisely does Prv. 8:22-31 have to say? Is it basically an elaboration of Prv. 3:16? Why is a practical ‘modus vivendi’ according to the ‘fear of the Lord’ put in a creation context? What is the difference between personifications in Prv. 2 & 9 and c.8? Is there any reflection of the marriage theme (Yahweh - Israel) in the personification? Is the personification influenced by the attitude in Prv. 1-9 to the ‘strange woman’ and by the emphasis on proper sexual conduct? What factors led to the development of Wisdom (Bar, Sir, Wis) into the law? Future studies will doubtless wrestle with these questions.”⁹⁰ The interesting point about these questions raised by Murphy is that they move the focus of Wisdom to the divine marriage symbol in Israel which took place in the context of the Passover and which displayed the Wisdom of Yahweh. In this model wisdom is not ontological but soteriological. It is speaking about the display of Yahwah’s wisdom to the nations through His redemption of Israel. This is of course the very focus of the argument being made in this paper from a Paschal perspective. This is supported by Lemico who commenting on the importance of Wisdom for the Jews says that the Wisdom link was nothing more than that the king was supposed to be wise, i.e. to live in the fear of the Lord. Israel looked for such a king/Messiah. This is quite different from taking the theme of Wisdom and personifying it and developing it into a major foundation for NT Christology.⁹¹

Possible choices.

The choice of the background is straight forward in terms of identifying possibilities. It comes from one of the following.

- a. It was a Greek hymn in praise of Wisdom.
- b. It was a Jewish hymn in praise of Wisdom.
- c. It was a hymn celebrating the Day of Atonement.
- d. It was a hymn celebrating the Passover.
- e. It was a confessional statement of the creativity of Israel’s God.

My judgment is that the strong emphasis on redemption in the introduction and conclusion of the hymn supports the celebration of the Passover. This brings the term *protōtokos* into the realm of soteriology rather than ontology which it is normally understood to be rooted in. This in turn suggests that an unpreviously identified Paschal theology exists in the writings of the NT. The extent of this Paschal theology is the subject of other studies.⁹²

⁹⁰ Murphy, "Problems", p112.

⁹¹ Lemico, "Intention", 196.

⁹² See my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology*.

OT theological themes in the hymn.

Creation and redemption.

Along with the growing awareness of the need of new insights into the development of Christology in the NT, there has been a growing appreciation that in OT thinking, Yahweh alone, as the creator, could redeem creation.⁹³ This has been identified as the basis upon which the NT authors developed their doctrine of the redemption of creation.⁹⁴ All of this suggests that the NT writers were much more in touch with OT theology and the covenantal promises on which it was built than was previously thought. Kehl says that for Paul creation is a type of the new creation⁹⁵

The beloved son.

Returning to the content of the hymn, the key term is *protōtokos* (firstborn). Buchsel says that *protōtokos* equals 'only begotten'.⁹⁶ Bretscher argues that Ex. 4:22 is behind Col. 1:13 and that the title 'Son of God' came from the use of the title firstborn.⁹⁷ Sabourin accepts a Wisdom meaning for *protōtokos* yet nevertheless sees the origin of the title to be in Ex. 13:11-16, however he fails to comment on the fact that this passage is saturated in redemptive imagery.⁹⁸ Gibbs says that the use of *archē* (first) in Colossians does not equate to the meaning in Rev 3:14 but that it is describing Christ as the founder of the new humanity.⁹⁹ Kaiser notes that the oscillation between the one and the many is, "exactly what we have observed in such parallel examples as 'seed', 'anointed one', 'servant' and 'firstborn'." These are of course a range of titles that have deep soteriological significance.¹⁰⁰ Maurer says that 'head' is the same as 'image', 'beginning' and 'firstborn',¹⁰¹ whilst Caird said that the NT writers take the titles of Israel and apply them to Jesus. Israel was never seen to be the Wisdom of God, but was seen to have a special redemptive role in the evangelisation of the nations. Israel was to be the vehicle by which God's Wisdom was to be displayed.¹⁰² Alletti says that vs. 16-18a is an accumulation for justifying 15ab.¹⁰³ In other words, even though Alletti does not state it, it is only because Christ is the creator that he can act as its redeemer. Starert observes that *archē* can be a soteriological title.¹⁰⁴ This adds to the credibility of the claim that the meaning of *protōtokos* is soteriological, for *archē* and *protōtokos* are inseparably linked. O'Brien says that 'firstborn from the dead' is in parallel with 'firstborn of all

⁹³ Gibbs, *Creation* 19; Maurer, "Begründung," 90; Martin, *Colossians* 55; Simpson and Bruce, *Colossians*, 197 and Goldingay, "Salvation", 201. De Lacy *Form*, 19 cites the following Biblical and intertestamental material, Is 43:1f, 14-21; 51:9-11; Amos 9: 5-7; Ps 135-136, Esth 13:9-17; 1 En 84:2-6; Jub 25:11-13; 2 Bar 21:4-25 and 1QM 10f. Schweizer "Colossians", 61 says that to see creation as the beginning of the events of redemption is an OT idea. c.f. Wright, "Poetry", 452.

⁹⁴ Rom 8:22f; Eph 1:20-22; Phil 3:21; Heb 2:9ff; Rev 21:1.

⁹⁵ Kehl, *Christushymnus* 82-93. See Kline, "Feast", 497-510 for links between creation and Passover. Pokerny, *Genesis*, 135 says that "Reflection on the relationship between creation and redemption is however, a later stage." This comment completely misses the expectations that had been sown by the prophecy of Isaiah and that is reflected in Romans 8.

⁹⁶ Bruschel, *TDNT* 5:737, so also Hughes, *Image*, 36. Piper, "Eternal", 228 says that the emphasis of the hymn falls on the redemptive activity of the Son. So also Kehl *Christushymnus, passim*.

⁹⁷ Bretscher, "Exodus", 309 & 311.

⁹⁸ Sabourin, *Christology*, 84.

⁹⁹ Gibbs, *Creation*, 106.

¹⁰⁰ Kaiser, "Promises", 225.

¹⁰¹ Maurer, "Begründung", 91. Moule, F.C.D., *Colossians, passim*, says that the term firstborn is used to suggest 'supremacy over'.

¹⁰² Caird, "Jesus", 59.

¹⁰³ Alletti, *Colossians*, 39-40.

¹⁰⁴ cited by Robinson, "Analysis", 276.

creation', therefore the former title interprets the latter one and vice versa.¹⁰⁵ This is supported by Buckley who says, "Col 1:18 and Rev 1:5 bespeaks of the role of the Resurrected Christ who through his blood effected a new creation." Nevertheless, neither scholar has suggested a Paschal context for interpreting *protōtokos*. Robichaux¹⁰⁶ says that the term firstborn refers to Christ's humanity and it affirms that God accomplishes all his economy, both in the old creation and the new, through Christ the firstborn. Helyer questions if Paul would have spoken of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus apart from the cross.¹⁰⁷ This statement is evidence of the lack of a Paschal perspective for that is exactly what vs. 13-14 have been about. In a most important study, David Levinson has demonstrated the importance of the theme of the death of the beloved son in OT theology.¹⁰⁸ Levinson has suggested that it is a theme that has influenced the writers of the NT but he failed to realise how it is part of the Paschal theology of the early church. In fact, the link between the beloved son and the firstborn are made clear outside of the NT literature. 'Son of His love' and 'firstborn' are related in Ps. Sol. 13:9 and in 2 Esdras 6:58 where we find the overlapping of these honorific titles. So, "We Thy people whom thou hast called Thy firstborn, Thy only-begotten, Thy beloved." Such overlapping of honorific descriptions supports the claim being made in this paper concerning the meaning of *protōtokos*. It is only as cross pollution is allowed to take place between the various 'titles' in the context of New Exodus imagery that we will appreciate the nature of the Christology of the early church.

Redemption and creation.

As we have noted, scholarship is increasingly appreciating that the New Exodus motif was widely used by Paul. What has not been appreciated is that at the center of that model was the death of the beloved son.¹⁰⁹ His death was the key to the redemption of His people. In calling Christ the *protōtokos* of all creation Paul is attributing to the death of Christ, the only begotten or only beloved Son, something that no other firstborn's death ever achieved. His death has achieved the redemption of the whole of creation. Indeed, comic redemption is certainly not a periphery theme (not only here but elsewhere in Paul) it is at the heart of the hymn,¹¹⁰ Craddock says that, "The hymn calls attention to him who is creator and Redeemer".¹¹¹ Aletti sees the hymn as being in the same tradition as 2 Cor. 5:14-21,¹¹² this, I have argued elsewhere is Paschal.¹¹³ Schweizer says that, "Since the community lives in the sphere of both creation and redemption, it praises Christ simultaneously as creator and redeemer."¹¹⁴ Perkins says that Col. 1:15-20: challenges theologians, "to say how the creative and redemptive activities of God came together in Jesus."¹¹⁵ It would therefore seem that Christ's status is not limited merely to

¹⁰⁵ O'Brien, *Colossians*, 36.

¹⁰⁶ Robichaux, "firstborn", 30-38

¹⁰⁷ Helyer, "Pre-Pauline", 167ff.

¹⁰⁸ Levenson, *Death*, *passim*.

¹⁰⁹ Exod 12:12 & 29. Levinson, *Death*, is one of the few scholars who has noted the importance of this theme but does not explore a Paschal theology.

¹¹⁰ So Helyer, "Cosmic", 237.

¹¹¹ Craddock, "All Things", 80.

¹¹² Aletti, *Colossians*, 33.

¹¹³ See my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology*.

¹¹⁴ Schweizer, "Colossians", 85.

¹¹⁵ Perkins, *Who*, 61.

representing his family, considerable as that would be as the goal of redemption. He also represents the whole of creation. He is the last Adam. Thus, he is 'the firstborn of all creation'. Such an understanding has removed the title from the category of an ontological description and has placed it firmly in the realm of soteriology. This is itself supported as the likely meaning by those who have recognised that the early church was not concerned with ontological speculation but soteriological significance.¹¹⁶

Isaiah and the new creation.

One of the great themes of Isaiah's prophecy was that the redeemer would bring about the redemption not only of Israel from her distress, but of the whole creation from its alienation from God. This expectation, in the setting of first century Judaism with its widely held expectation of a New Exodus, would have given the primitive Christian community the material to work with in the very earliest stages of its reflections. They did not need to wait for help from Hellenistic insights to reach a cosmic soteriology. Cosmic salvation had been long anticipated within Judaism itself. Isaiah had predicted that creation itself would be renewed when the children of God were delivered from their captivity.¹¹⁷ Wright has claimed that the hymn parallels Isa. 40-55.¹¹⁸ This is of immense significance, for this section of Isaiah is dominated by the theme of Yahweh being Israel's redeemer who restores her to her inheritance, the land. Yahweh is Israel's redeemer who for her sake redeems creation from the curse of the fall.

Thus the New Testament is making use of the New Exodus theme, presented with particular clarity by Isaiah. The favourite title of Yahweh is the Redeemer of Israel, so it becomes especially significant that the title redeemer is absent from the entire NT as description of Jesus. There can only be one explanation for this startling omission. Paul (as have other NT writers) has gone beyond Isaiah back to the first Passover. From there, he has introduced into his theology the significance of the death of the firstborn.¹¹⁹ The New Exodus, which is cosmic, is brought about by the death of the 'firstborn of all creation'.¹²⁰ Significantly, in all those places in the NT where the death of Jesus is described in redemptive language, he is not called the redeemer but the firstborn. This is understandable once it is realised that the redeemer role could be abdicated and in itself did not entail vicarious suffering. It was essentially a social function and did not require the laying down of life. The firstborn was in reality to be the redeemer, but as mentioned, he could abdicate that particular role. He could not however avoid the vicarious role of coming under the judgment of the angle of death, not unless, of course, there was a vicarious substitute for him. In the OT this was the Passover lamb. In the NT there is no substitute. Yahweh's firstborn must die to save His people.

Paschal links.

¹¹⁶ So Caird, "Jesus" 67; Fuller, *Foundations*, 15; Keck, "Christushymnus", 362; Lemico, "Intention", 195; Styler, "Stages", 399; Pollard, "Colossians", 573; Torrance, "Atonement", 245-269; Keck, "Renewal", 370 and Maurer, "Begrundung", 88.

¹¹⁷ Isa 55:12-13; 65:17-25, something that Paul develops in Romans 8. Gregory saw the Passover to be linked with cosmic redemption, so Chupungco, *Cosmic*, 84.

¹¹⁸ Wright, "Poetry", 454.

¹¹⁹ Pollard, "Colossians", 573 says, "the cosmology, if it is cosmology, is totally subservient to soteriology."

¹²⁰ For a fuller discussion see my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology*.

The language used to exalt Christ further strengthens the linking of the hymn with the Passover. He is being ascribed with such titles not to compete with the pagan deities the Colossians were in danger of turning to, but to underline the fact that he is the only one who can act as redeemer. Bedale has noted that *kephalē* (head) does not mean the head of the community as in Classical Greek, but rather it is from the LXX and is found to be the same as *protōtokos*, husband and king/leader¹²¹ This is a very significant observation, for these are the very titles that were explicitly associated with the Passover. Yahweh spared the firstborn and led the people out as their king for the purpose of them becoming His bride. Longenecker observed that the expressions ‘*archē*’, ‘*archos*’, ‘*protōtokos*’, ‘*monogenēs*’, ‘*kephalē*’, ‘*morphē*’ and ‘*eikōn*’ were all used by Jesus and the Jewish Christians.¹²² Longenecker went on to say, “If the features indicated above be accepted as elements of the body of early Jewish Christian Christological imagery... this must effect procedures in their construction of Christological affirmation in the New Testament.... our suppositions must not dominate and so determine what was possible in the Palestine milieu.... we must approach the subject from the perspective of these distinctive features of the Jewish cycle of conceptualisation and expression.... or we might be removing evidence.”¹²³ Vawter has noted that in each instance of the Christological hymns of the NT that, “the language was being used that was calculated to strike a responsive chord in the heart of a church that had long employed it and was accustomed to it as pertaining to its identity. He went on to say that the, “The primitive hymn which was adapted to the liturgy of the Colossian church was surely no isolated piece of private homework but represented a current of Christian thought that had been respected and was respected.”¹²⁴ This suggestion is particularly endorsed if the material is put into the context of the Passover with all of its significance for the early church.

In other words, the connection noted earlier between the OT and NT that it is only the creator who can redeem, is being followed here with precision. The titles are not primarily intended to exalt Christ, though that will be a consequence, but rather to present the evidence for his claim to be the redeemer of creation.

Adamic imagery.

Nor again is the reference to Christ as the image¹²⁵ of the invisible God ontological. It is Adamic language¹²⁶ referring to the role of Christ as the

¹²¹ Bedale, “Meaning”, 211-215.

¹²² Longenecker, “Distinctive”, 541.

¹²³ op cit 545.

¹²⁴ Vawter, “Hymn”, 80.

¹²⁵ So Leaney, “Image”, 470 who says that image is eschatological and that it is linked to Passover. Martin, *Colossians*, 57, says concerning the term image that, “the description is revelatory, more than ontological. It tells us what Christ does (to reveal God) rather than what he is in himself.”

¹²⁶ Black, “Adam”, 175; Colpe, *TDNT* 8:400-477, p472; Jeremias, *TDNT* 1:141-143, p143; Sabourin, *Christology*, 112; Casey, “Deification”, 702; Sahlin, “Adam”, 28. Wright, “Poetry”, 456 says that *archē* (v 18c) and *eikōn* are from the Genesis creation story and he sees this association to indicate a Wisdom Christological motif functioning. Wright, *Messiah*, 1 & 32 further says that Col 1:15-20 reflects Eph 1-5, 2 Cor 5 and Rom 6:1-11. These passages have a clear New Exodus motif behind their arguments (see my forthcoming *Paul and the Spirit*). This is supported by Leaney, “1 Peter”, 478 who says that Col 1:16 has Paschal associations. Jeremias, *TDNT* 5: 896-904, p901 says that there was, “a rich Passover typology in the primitive Church.” Thus, we are finding the same pattern that we have found elsewhere, but especially in Romans (see my forthcoming volume *Paul and the Spirit* and my forthcoming commentary on *Romans*), that the eschatological Passover inaugurates the New Exodus which brings the church out of the bondage into which Adam had brought his descendants, Contra Schweizer *Colossians*, 66 who says that Adam plays hardly any part in Colossians!

representative of Yahweh. Indeed Ridderbos¹²⁷ has specifically identified *protōtokos* as Adamic imagery. While it might appear at first that such an admission weakens Trinitarian orthodoxy, the reverse is in fact the case. No creature, no matter how great, could redeem creation. As the OT and NT alike make clear, it can only be the creator, the Lord, who can do this. As in the OT, the redeemer (firstborn) is Yahweh Himself.

Aletti¹²⁸ goes further than Ridderbos saying that ‘firstborn from the dead’ in Col. 1:18 is itself Adamic, if this is so, it continues the pattern which we have noted throughout the letters of Paul in which the scope of salvation achieved through Christ’s death is related to the original loss experienced through the fall and is therefore cosmic.¹²⁹ Christ dies as the firstborn, the promised King of Israel, the last Adam, the head of the new creation, to redeem his inheritance.

Paschal and Adamic links.

Furthermore, Passover language lurks at the back of v18. While the statement primarily refers to the Adamic figure, the Davidic king who is the firstborn of the rulers of the earth.¹³⁰ Here it is applied to Christ’s Lordship over the ultimate enemy, death itself. He is thus the king (firstborn) over death.¹³¹

Furthermore, in the OT the great Passover events were celebrated by the Jewish kings.¹³² Indeed, according to Ezekiel the king was to be the main figure in the eschatological celebration of the Passover¹³³ This has been taken up by the Gospel writers in the way they emphasise that Jesus died in the context of the Passover as King of the Jews. In other words, the use of the title ‘firstborn from the dead’ is drawing these redemptive threads together.¹³⁴ As redeemer he has conquered death and delivered his people from the realm of darkness in which they lived in fear.¹³⁵ If Paul had wanted to say Christ was the first to rise from the dead, as is so often suggested he means, he could

¹²⁷ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 84.

¹²⁸ Aletti, *Colossians*, 69

¹²⁹ See my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology*.

¹³⁰ Psalm 89:27. Rollins, “Tendenz”, 133 sees ‘firstborn from the dead’ to be echoing Adamic Christology, so also Helyer, “Arius”, 59. However, Dellling, *TDNT* 5:484 sees the imagery as being Stoic. Sanders, *Hymns*, 25 comments that the title firstborn from the dead, “implies that he dies.” This observation ought to link vss 15,18 and 20. Beasley-Murray, “Colossians”, 179 claimed a Wisdom background to the hymn, but also held that more weight ought to be given to the description of Christ as the image of God. He saw this to be a reference to Adam who was made in the image of God and noted how kingship was a status bestowed on Adam. Adamic imagery is used elsewhere by Paul e.g. Rom 5:12 ff; 1 Cor 15:21f and Phil 2:6-11. Beasley-Murray op cit 175 recognised that *kephalē* had the meaning of ‘head over a family’ and saw it to mean ‘As the beginning’ of the church. Beasley-Murray op cit 179 discerned a further redemptive theme emerging when he wrote, “Christ is portrayed as the Second Adam whose salvific acts involve not only mankind but also the whole of creation.” Despite recognising these repeated themes of redemption, Beasley-Murray was unable to see any more than a Wisdom Christology in the title *protōtokos pasēs ktiseōs*

¹³¹ Langkammer, “Absoluten”, 216 links *plēroma* with *sōmatikos* and says that the filling took place in Christ’s resurrected body and by this reconciled all things because Christ is the firstborn from the dead.

¹³² 2 Chron 30:1-24 and 35:1-19. See also Ezekiel 45:22ff. Rom 1:3 speaks of Jesus being raised by the Spirit of Holiness which some see as cultic. This is in the context of Jesus being declared to be the Davidic king who has brought about the redemption of his people (Rom 3:21ff) in a Paschal context (see my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology*). The significance of the king’s role in the Passover was correctly discerned by Engell, “Furstfodda” vol. 1 p714.

¹³³ Ezekiel 40ff, see especially 45:22ff.

¹³⁴ Wilson, “Promise”, 6 says that Psalm 89 is behind NT redemptive themes, so also Wilckens, *TDNT* 1: 418-423 and Simpson and Bruce, *Ephesians*, 197. This puts Ps 89:27 “I will also appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth” into a redemptive context.

¹³⁵ See vs. Col 1:13-14.

have, and would have used the term first fruits.¹³⁶ However, even with such a term there is a saturation of Paschal imagery.¹³⁷ The significance of firstborn from the dead is that Christ is the promised Messianic king who through his death and resurrection has brought everything, including death itself (v20 all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven) under his Lordship.¹³⁸ It was the original Passover that Pharaoh was humbled and made to recognise the supreme lordship of Yahweh.

This OT setting is further supported when it is appreciated that the claim that ‘in Him all the fullness dwells’ (1:19) is not an ontological statement.¹³⁹ Once again it is based on OT prophetic expectation. The fullness refers to the completion of the purposes of Yahweh.¹⁴⁰ His covenantal promises are brought to their climax in the person of Christ who is the promised redeemer. Speaking of the fulfilment of the covenantal promises which shadow the expression the righteousness of God in Romans and Galatians, Moule has said, “To a unique degree, Jesus is seen as the goal, the convergence point, of God’s plan for Israel, his covenantal promises.....The Passover gathers up into itself a large number of strands of covenant promise: to speak of “its full realisation” is to use the root we are considering in a highly significant manner.”¹⁴¹

Cosmic redemption.

The redemption of creation by the firstborn is upheld in v20 when the writer speaks of all things being reconciled through his blood shed on the cross.¹⁴² This is expanding the significance of the death of the firstborn of all creation, i.e. it achieves the reconciliation of all things. This is the high point of the hymn and is the climax of the movement which culminates in the redemption of creation.¹⁴³ The hymn throughout is in praise of the creator redeemer¹⁴⁴

¹³⁶ So 1 Cor 15:20. Whitherington, *Narrative*, 107 is quite mistaken to say that ‘firstborn from the dead’ reveals that they hymn is none Pauline because he would have used ‘firstfruits from the dead’ as in 1 Cor 15:20. In Colossians 1:18 Paul is speaking of Christ as the Davidic firstborn and His conquest of all alien powers. In 1 Cor 15 Paul is speaking of Christ as the pledge of the coming resurrection. The two descriptions serve quite different ends.

¹³⁷ 1 Cor 15:3 is based on the presentation of the first fruits which took place three days after Passover, Lev 23:11. Paul went on to call Christ ‘the first fruits of those who sleep’ 1 Cor 15:20. Thus the imagery is thoroughly Paschal. This passage is most significant because as Dodd, *Apostolic*, 13 says, 1 Cor 15:3-8 is the *locus classicus* for the reconstruction of the *kerygma*. 1 Cor 15:20 is an early expansion of this *kerygma* evidenced in that three days links both events of resurrection and presentation of the firstfruits. See my forthcoming *Paul and the Spirit*.

¹³⁸ Rom 8:32ff. Commenting on Col 1.16-20 and Eph 4.5 Murphy-O’Conner “Cosmology” 262 says “It is not entirely clear that either of these texts is to be interpreted in a cosmological sense”

¹³⁹ Piper, “Eternal” *passim* says that in the OT ‘filling’ speaks of providing empowering, so Ex 32:39 where it speaks of the filling of the Levites hands so that they could perform their ministry. Langhammer “Absoluten” 260-1 says that Paul adapted Stoic terminology for his concept of fulness in Col 1.19.

¹⁴⁰ McGregor, “Principalities”, 23 says that Col 1:19 reflects Rom 8:21. Barbour, “Cosmology”, 464 says that fullness refers to the fullness of God, so also Ellingworth, “Colossians”, 52-3 who says that Col 1:19 is amplified in 2:9 by the addition of *tes theotetos*. Casey, “Earliest”, 68 says of *plēroma*, “The meaning here is that Christ is not a segmented fraction of the Godhead but contains its totality in bodily form (cf 2.9).” Wright, “Poetry”, 64 says that 1:19a-b reflects the Temple Shekina. In a New Exodus context it might be best to say Tabernacle Shekina but for the fact that Ezekiel (ch 40ff) uses Temple imagery as part of the New Exodus. Kehl, *Christushymnus*, 126 says that the motif of indwelling is not cosmically directed but linked with election in covenant theology.

¹⁴¹ Moule, “Fulfillment”, 294 & 301, so also Overfield, “Pleroma”, 396.

¹⁴² O’Brien, “Reconciliation”, 53 says that Col 1:20 does not point to a universal reconciliation in which every man enjoys bliss. Aletti, *Colossians*, 39 sees v20 as Paul’s comment on an old hymn. If this is so, then it ought to mean that 1:15, the firstborn of all creation, ought to be interpreted by the description of the reconciliation of all things.

¹⁴³ So O’Brien, “Reconciliation”, 50.

¹⁴⁴ Sanders, “Dependence”, 39 says that the background of Col 1:20 is Romans 5:10. Whiteley, “Atonement”, 250. Surprisingly Aletti, *Colossians*, says that 1:20 does not speak of the final transformation of the cosmos and Kraus, *Christology*, 183 note 6 says that Colossians 1:20 is based on the imagery of slave purchase yet went on to say that it refers to the blood of the covenant. O’Brien, *Colossians*, 53 says: *The need for reconciliation*

and has grown, “from the central statement about the cross, that is, it developed, so to speak, from the second strophe backwards, just as the Old Testament doctrine of creation was fashioned as a consequence of the credal confession of God’s historical act of redemption.”¹⁴⁵

However, Gibbs, the author of the above comment, failed to see the connection he had made with the great redemptive event of the OT, i.e. the Exodus, and the passage he was expounding. Consequently, he failed to see the significance of the title ‘firstborn of all creation’.

Servant imagery.

Servant imagery is adopted in 1:24-25 and is found elsewhere in the Pauline letters.¹⁴⁶ The servant theme is closely related to the Second Exodus pattern and the proximity to material that we have suggested is at the heart of the New Exodus motif is significant for supporting the proposed exegesis.

It is the last Adam¹⁴⁷ who is the Servant, the king of creation, the only begotten Son of God, the firstborn of the new creation. It is his atoning death alone that has brought about the reconciliation of all things to its creator.

The New Exodus and Christ’s victory.

The opening of the second chapter directs the readers back to the death of Christ when they came into union with him.¹⁴⁸ If the ideas found by scholars in Romans are in fact present here,¹⁴⁹ then the reference to the death of Christ has strong Paschal and hence Second Exodus significance. The reference to the complete indwelling of God in Christ (2:9) is thought by some to reflect the dwelling of Yahweh amongst His people in the Exodus.¹⁵⁰

The cross is at the center of the victory that Christ has achieved over all of his opponents (2:10b).¹⁵¹ Their power was shown to be impotent in the face of his self-sacrifice. Here again are echoes of the Exodus when the power of Pharaoh was broken on the night of the Passover. Until that time Pharaoh had appeared to be invincible, he was well able to match the challenges put to him by Moses. However, the Passover broke that arrogance and brought the man who was once the mightiest man the world had known to plead for mercy.

presupposes that the unity and harmony of the cosmos have suffered dislocation. Although Wright, “Poetry”, 453-4 follows a Wisdom Christology his comments on 1:15-20 sum up the powerful setting of the Exodus for the significance of the firstborn title when he says, “Col 1:15-20 is reinforced by the echoes of Jewish redemption ideas in v12-14 which evoke in particular the imagery of the Exodus, the time when Israel’s God showed himself to be God of the whole world by defeating both the Egyptians and the mighty waters of the sea. The New Exodus was an act of new creation, bringing the church race to a new birth out of the chaos of slavery. The same impression is given by the verses (21-23) which follow the poem, in which the God of all the earth (v23) has become responsible for the reconciliation of the Colossians and their grafting into his true people (v22).”

¹⁴⁵ Gibbs, *Creation*, 101.

¹⁴⁶ See my forthcoming volume *Paul and the Spirit*.

¹⁴⁷ “The entire NT would offer clearer unity, and its theology would appear more unified if, in the Gospels, ‘Son of Man’ were always translated by its equivalent ‘The Son of Adam’ or ‘Second Adam’”. Cortes and Gratti, 490.

¹⁴⁸ cf. Rom 6:1-4.

¹⁴⁹ i.e. Exodus being the model Paul uses to describe Christ’s death and resurrection, so Warnack, “Heilsgeschehen”, 259ff and Warnack, “Römerbriefes”, 274ff. Warnack argues that Rom 6 is based on the Jewish cultus system, the Passover being specifically identified as the source. So also Nixon, *Exodus*, 24; Knox, *Gentiles*, 9; Cullmann, *Baptism*, 45,53,67; Marsh, *Fulness*, 137f and Leaney “1 Peter”, 244. The expression ‘the glory of God’ is a circumlocution for God’s power or possibly *pneuma*, so Monte, “Place”, 88, in which case the resurrection of Christ was the display of the power of God. God’s power was supremely displayed in the Exodus/resurrection.

¹⁵⁰ So Moule, “Fulfilment”, 294 and 301 and Overfield, “Pleroma”, 396.

¹⁵¹ Sanders, “Dependence”, 34 says that Col 2:10 is possibly dependent on 1 Cor 12:13. This is a similar conclusion to that I have reached in my forthcoming *Paul and the Spirit*.

The death of the firstborn son was a judgment on his family. The message of the Colossian letter is that there is no other Lord. All other claims to this position are false.

Once again the imagery of circumcision occurs (2:11).¹⁵² The rite was the essential requirement for partaking in the Passover and through that experience of sharing in the Exodus event.¹⁵³ The Paul is asserting that requirement has been perfectly fulfilled in the death of Christ. He speaks not of an act done on them, but for them, through the death of Christ Himself. There is no danger of this circumcision ever becoming a work, for it was done to Christ on man's behalf. It is grace from beginning to end. The language of 2:12-13a.b. is reminiscent of Rom 6:1ff which we have seen to be Paschal in its setting.

That the New Exodus material continues to be present is supported by the reference to the forgiveness of sins which we have noted, occurs earlier in 1:12-14 and which we saw to be unquestionably New Exodus material. Paul says that every opponent, the law (2:14), which excluded gentiles from the covenants of promise, and all powers and authorities (2:15),¹⁵⁴ have been overcome to make the believers' freedom possible. As the triumph of Yahweh over Pharaoh took place on the night of the Passover when the firstborn of Egypt were slain, so Christ has triumphed 'by the cross' (2:15) when he, the firstborn, died.

Because of this eschatological victory, the Colossians are free from all of the ceremonial regulations that had governed them in the previous age. These regulations were merely the shadow of what has now come in Christ (2:17). The Church's death with Christ (2:20) means that believers have died to the law as a way of achieving righteousness.¹⁵⁵

Union with Christ.

Because the Colossians have died with Christ, they have also been raised with him and share his eschatological victory (3:1). They are to live in the light of this fact. As the Jews were called to live a new lifestyle as a result of their deliverance from Egypt,¹⁵⁶ so the Colossians are urged to live worthy of the Lord their redeemer (3:2-10). The appeal is not essentially to individual believers, although they must personally respond to the responsibilities of being part of the covenant community, it is to the Colossian church.

The corporate basis of the appeal is supported by the command to put on the 'new man' (v 10).¹⁵⁷ The new man is not an individual; he is the Christian

¹⁵². See my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology* for the rabbinic association of Passover and circumcision. Sanders, "Dependence", 40 says that Col 2:11-13 is a conflation of material from Rom 6:1; 4:25; Gal 1:1; Rom 6:11 and Rom 8:32. This is material which is without exception Paschal, see my forthcoming *Paul and the Spirit*. For the connection between the Passover and circumcision see chapter 8. Martin, *Reconciliation*, 122 says that the circumcision of Christ was when he stripped off from himself the spiritual powers that assaulted him. Barth, *Ephesians*, vol 2 p282 says, "The circumcision of the Messiah mentioned in Col 2:11 is most likely to be a metaphor for his death." Contra Moore, "Baptism", 509 who says that it refers to the circumcision of the heart.

¹⁵³ See my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology* and *Paul and the Spirit*.

¹⁵⁴ Macgregor, "Principalities", 23 says Col 2:15 is the key verse of the epistle explaining how Christ accomplished this primary redemption. The bondage was from servitude to the spirit forces of evil, which he says were cosmic powers requiring a cosmic redemption. Maurer, "Begrundung", 92 links the triumph over the powers to the crucifixion and not the resurrection.

¹⁵⁵ Romans 10:4; Galatians 5:3-6.

¹⁵⁶ Lev 11:44-45; 19:33-37.

¹⁵⁷ not 'self' as in NIV.

community made in the image of its head.¹⁵⁸ The regular application of the term to the individual believer has caused confusion and distress in sensitive souls who have been distraught that they have not attained such a goal. The believer will not attain it until the church has attained it fully on the day of Christ's return.¹⁵⁹ That is not to nullify the quest for personal holiness, but to set it in its proper context.

The salutation in chapter 4 is general and appears to add nothing of a theological nature to the main section of the letter.

A Paschal paradigm both for the hymn and for the letter is endorsed by Daly's comment, "Thus, growing out of a religious atmosphere in which all the important events of the past were considered to be Paschal events, and in which participation in the Paschal rite assured the individual and the nation of receiving the salvific effects of the Pasach, and in which the eschatological end-event was looked forward to as a Paschal event, it is not surprising that the New Exodus Christology is so thoroughly Paschal."¹⁶⁰ Despite this very positive statement regarding the influence of the Passover, Daly shows no signs of appreciating just how extensive this influence is.

Elsewhere I have argued for the Paschal/New Exodus motif is fundamental to the theology and letters of Paul.¹⁶¹ If this can be sustained, then it means that the letter to the Colossians shares the same theological perspective. There is therefore no need to treat the letter as anything other than at least compatible with other Pauline letters. Rejection of the letter as authentically Pauline must be based on other evidence than incompatible theology.

¹⁵⁸ Eph 2:14 shows clearly the corporate nature of the new man, and interestingly it is in a section dealing with the nature of circumcision (v12ff). So also Gal 3:26-8 which is corporate in its description, see my forthcoming volume *Paul and the Spirit*. The old and new man, reflects Rom 5, so Cullmann, *Baptism*, 174. The cultic background to the sacrificial imagery in that the passage is Paschal, so Whiteley, "Atonement", 250. Sanders, "Dependence", 42 says that it appears that Col 3:5-10 has been built around Rom 13:12ff and Galatians 5:19.

¹⁵⁹ Rom 8:22-7; Phil 3:21; 1 John 3:2-3.

¹⁶⁰ Dally, *Sacrifice*, 203

¹⁶¹ See my forthcoming *Contours of Pauline Theology*.