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‘KING OF KINGS’ IN OTHER WORDS

COLOSSIANS 1:15A AS A DESIGNATION OF AUTHORITY RATHER THAN REVELATION

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Summary

Colossians 1:15a is typically understood to designate Jesus as the way in which the otherwise unknowable God can be known by human beings. Support for this conclusion is drawn from Hellenistic Judaism, Greek philosophy, and theology merely inferred from the ‘image of God’ concept in Genesis 1:26-28. However, a more satisfactory reading of this verse sees in it a presentation of Jesus as Yahweh’s representative ruler of the earth. There are several supports for this reading: (1) the explicit development of the ‘image of God’ concept in Genesis; (2) parallel uses of the ‘image of God’ concept in ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman sources; (3) the modification made to the preposition in Colossians 1:15a; (4) an alternative reading of the word ‘invisible’; and (5) the subsequent phrase in Colossians 1:15b, ‘firstborn of all creation’. By describing Jesus in such a way, he is presented as the legitimate ruler of the world, potentially in deliberate contrast to the world rulers of that day: the emperors of Rome, who were thus viewed by the merit of their special relationship with their gods.

1. Introduction

In the fewest possible words, the purpose of the Colossian ‘hymn’ of Colossians 1:15-20 is to state that ‘Jesus is Lord’. The exalted picture painted therein presents him in a manner rarely seen elsewhere in the New Testament writings, using language and assertions that declare him to be the master of all things whether in the heavens or on the

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earth, whether they can be seen or cannot be seen, whether they belong to the old era or the new era. The opening ascription of 1:15a, however, is frequently understood in a different light. The claim that the Son is the 'image of the invisible God' has been taken to designate a revelatory function instead.[1] Justification for this understanding is generally derived from Hellenistic sources surrounding the concept of 'wisdom', as shall be seen below.

This article argues that Colossians 1:15a is better understood when it remains grounded in Genesis 1. The original occurrence of the 'image of God' concept in Genesis 1:26-28 provides the core idea needed to explain Colossians 1:15a in a way that corresponds to its parallel ascription of 1:15b and fits with the theme of Christ's supremacy in the remainder of Colossians 1:15-20. Two modifications are made to the original concept as they are applied to Jesus, both of which serve to confirm and elevate the authority inherent in the basic concept of εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ.

2. The Use of the Wisdom Tradition

The Hellenistic Jewish wisdom tradition is usually called upon when interpreting Colossians 1:15a. Commentators generally recognise that there is some connection between Colossians 1:15a and Genesis 1:26-28, but tend to either fail to draw on the explication that is given to εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ in the Genesis text itself, or to discount it altogether. For example, Sumney holds that ἐικών has a different meaning in Colossians 1:15 than it has in Genesis 1:26-28, but makes no attempt to justify this.[2] James Dunn goes so far as to reject outright the usefulness

[1] See e.g. James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1996), 87-89; Jerry Sumney, *Colossians* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 64; Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 118; P. T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1982), 43-44; R. McL. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 130-33; Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, 46-48; F. F. Bruce; *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (Eerdmans, 1993), 57-58; Eduard Schweizer, The Letter to the Colossians, (London: SPCK, 1982), 63-66.

[2] Jerry L. Sumney, *Colossians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008): 64; cf. his 'Writing in the Image of Scripture: The Form and Function of References to

of Genesis 1:26-28 on the basis that any 'Adamic' Christology is ruled out because of the connection of Colossians 1:15 to the act of creating seen in the following v. 16.[3] So instead of exploring Genesis 1, commentators tend to pursue the question asked within Hellenistic Judaism concerning how God can be known.[4]

The issue of the knowability of God originates in the attempt made by thinkers such as Philo, ben Sirach, and the writer of the *Wisdom of Solomon* to reconcile the God of the OT with the remote and unknowable deity shaped by the philosophical tradition defined by Plato and subsequent Greek thinkers. For Hellenistic-oriented thinkers, particularly the Platonists, the knowledge of the divine was imparted by some kind of intermediary that was said to 'image' God and reflect knowledge about him.[5] For the writings of Hellenistic Judaism, the personified concept of 'Wisdom' came to designate God's means of revealing himself in this way. This is best observed in Wisdom 7:26:

> For she is a reflection of eternal light,
> a spotless mirror of the working of God,

Scripture in Colossians' in *Paul and Scripture: Extending the Conversation*, Christopher D. Stanley, ed. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012): 197-98.

[3] James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980): 188. Stanley Grenz does make the connection of Col. 1:15a to Gen. 1:27 in the sense of 'ruling representative', as does Paul Beasley-Murray. See Grenz's 'Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology', *JETS* 47, no. 4 (2004): 620, and Beasley Murray's 'Colossians 1:15-20: An Early Christian Hymn Celebrating the Lordship of Christ' in *Pauline Studies: Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on his 70th Birthday*, Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980): 169-83.

[4] This can be seen quite bluntly in Lohse's commentary where he writes that 'the Hellenistic understanding of [εικών] is to be assumed' and the collection of texts illustrating the use of εικών are cited without any justification for their use in interpreting Col. 1:15a – their meaning is simply superimposed on to Paul's ascription. Lohse, *Colossians*: 46-48. Cf. Also the commentaries of Dunn, Moo, O'Brien, Wilson, Schweizer *ad loc*. Within this article Paul will be referred to as the author of Colossians, including 1:15-20, which may have been a pre-composed 'hymn' that he made use of in his letter.

[5] Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 29a-c, 37d, 92c; *Republic* 508b-509c, where the cosmos and man are also said to reflect eternity and therefore also God himself, thereby mediating knowledge of the divine. For further discussion see George van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context* (Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 93-95; Dunn, *Colossians*: 87-90; Sean McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford University Press, 2009): 119-25. McDonough concludes in his section on mediation (119-31) that the Platonic view of and need for mediation was not universally shared – 'and the New Testament writers were free to avail themselves of any of them, or none of them' (131).

> and an image (εἰκών) of his goodness.[6]

Here, personified Wisdom is identified as the way in which God's goodness is made known. In the Hellenistic context of these writers, this was a good apologetic which allowed them to safeguard the unknowability of God while creating a bridge across the otherwise unbridgeable gap between God and the invisible realm on the one hand and humanity and the visible creation on the other.[7] The use of this background in explaining Colossians 1:15a gives εἰκών a revelatory function and makes Jesus the mediator of the knowledge of God.

Although the idea that Wisdom formed the background to Colossians 1:15-20 as a whole is widely held, not all are convinced by this idea. Several scholars have questioned the viability of personified Wisdom as a background to Colossians 1:15-20, pointing out that genuine verbal correspondences are lacking. Individual words are found in both, but the correlation ends there. Fee complains that 'This view usually simply asserted and then footnoted with references, as though these references should be plain to all.'[8] McDonough also calls attention to this fact and argues that since no source can be positively identified for our passage (e.g. as in Philo's use of Plato), nor does a parallel account demand the existence of one (e.g. as seen in the Synoptic Gospels), a Wisdom background cannot be asserted with certainty.[9] The motivation to associate Wisdom with Jesus is usually

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6 NRSV translation. Philo also relates Wisdom with εἰκών in *Leg. All.* 1.43; 3.96; *Mig.* 40; *Her.* 112; and also to λόγος (a concept closely related to εἰκών in Philo) in *Conf.* 97; 147; *Somn.* 1.75; 1.239; 2.45; *Spec leg* 1.81; and *Fug.* 101.

7 Cf. the sources in n.5.

8 Fee, *Pauline Christology*: 598. For examples of this see Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*: 267-72; Jeffrey S. Lamp, 'Wisdom in Col. 1:15-20: Contribution and Significance', *JETS* 41.1 (1998): 50-051; Kim, *Paul's Gospel*: 117; Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976): 73; and in commentaries such as those noted in n.4. In this discussion Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*: 506, refers to the study by Stettler, 'Kolosserhymnus': 75--103. This work is considered by Hurtado to show that recourse to Wisdom (or a heavenly redeemer figure) is unnecessary and implausible.

9 McDonough, *Christ as Creator*: 173 (cf. also 173-80 for further discussion on the [mis]use of Wisdom here). Fee labours this point extensively in his *Pauline Christology*: 317-25, 595-619. In addition to the examination of the Wisdom texts usually propounded he also discusses how the Nestle-Aland Greek NT text's margin notes support his position that Paul did not use Wisdom for his Christology (605-606). Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975): 79--80, disagrees with the Wisdom background: 'One must properly distinguish here between the terminology and the matter itself.' He considers the correspondences to be only vague and Paul's use of Wisdom language in Colossians as a whole to simply be on account of the Colossian heresy.

driven by the need to find a precedent for agency in creation and for pre-existence (which are clearly seen in Colossians 1:15-17) rather than by any concrete linguistic correlation. Since no other possible background in Jewish or Greek literature is found, Wisdom is enlisted to serve this purpose.[10]

Furthermore, and returning to Colossians 1:15a more specifically, using εἰκών in a revelatory manner this is not the only way εἰκών is used in Hellenistic Judaism. The assertion made by Wisdom 2:23 – which states that humanity was made in God's image – must be included in the discussion on εἰκών in the Wisdom tradition as interpretive background to Colossians 1:15a, as well as Sirach 17:3-4, which also puts forward the idea that humanity as the divine image-bearer was given dominion over the creation. Philo also uses the concept of the image of God in relation to humanity's role of rulership.[11] The omission of these texts from the discussion (see commentaries *ad loc*.) is surprising since the 'image of God' concept as found in Genesis surely had currency at least as common as that of Wisdom 7:26 in NT Christianity, if not more. The presence of ἀοράτου in Colossians 1:16 may have contributed to this. While it is true that Jesus is the fullest revealer of the knowledge of God, to understand Colossians 1:15a in this way not only ignores a strand of the Wisdom tradition – it also overlooks the more direct connection found in Genesis 1:26-28, which gives us its own definition of εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ.

3. Image-Bearing in Genesis

3.1 Uses of Εικών

It will be useful for the forthcoming discussion to notice that none of the NT uses of εἰκών aims to indicate a revealing of something that is

[10] In addition to the lack of verbal correspondence, a conceptual difference is also present between this Wisdom concept and Col. 1:15-20, and the preexistence ascribed implicitly to the Son in Col. 1:16 is an attribute denied to Wisdom, which is only spoken of as the *first* of God's creations (Prov. 8:22; Sir. 1:4). See Fee, *Pauline Christology*: 500-512, 595-619 for further discussion on these two points.

[11] *De Vita Moses*, Life of Moses 2.65 '… man having received the supremacy over all earthly creatures whatsoever, being a kind of copy of the powers of God, a visible image of his invisible nature, a created image of an uncreated and immortal original'. It is interesting to observe that a revelatory function is present in this, but that it reveals God's rulership bestowed upon man.

otherwise unknown, but each use rather designates an object that derives its appearance from something else. In Colossians 1:15a there is no strong reason to believe that εἰκών is utilised for a primarily revelatory function, although it is a legitimate inference.

Εἰκών carries a limited range of uses in the NT, each related to the central idea of 'derived resemblance'. Implicit in this is the understanding that the εἰκών is based upon an archetype from which it gains its appearance. The word differs from the similar ὁμοίωμα, which carries the idea of 'resemblance' but is not necessarily a deliberate resemblance.[12] The uses of εἰκών in the NT range from the 'image' of Caesar's portrait on a coin (Matt. 22:20) to idols of animals and humans (Rom. 1:23), as well as what are presumably cult statues of the Roman emperor in Revelation,[13] to uses which echo the 'image of God' concept in Genesis 1.[14] The idea of 'derived resemblance' is clear in each of these uses. In the LXX εἰκών was used to translate צֶלֶם, which followed the same basic meaning as its Greek counterpart, such as the 'image' of God (in Gen. 1:26,27; 5:3; 9:6), and idols (in Deut. 4:16; 2 Chr. 33:7; Ezek. 8:5; Hos. 13:2). It is also used for the statue seen in Nebuchadnezzar's dream (in Dan. 2:31-35).[15]

3.2 Εἰκών in Genesis

Genesis 1:26-28 provides key insights for understanding Colossians 1:15a and cannot be justifiably neglected.[16] Whatever philosophical questions may have been present in the cultural milieu of the day,

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[12] Both words are used in LXX Gen. 1:26, typically translated as 'image' and 'likeness' respectively. Interestingly, it is ὁμοίωμα is used in Jas 3:9 for the 'image of God' concept rather than the more common εἰκών.

[13] Rev. 13:14-15; 14:9,11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4.

[14] These include men as the image of the Creator God (1 Cor. 11:7); Christians in the process of being renewed in that image (Col. 3:10); humanity bearing the image of Adam (1 Cor. 15:49); Christ being the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), and Christians being destined to bear the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18). Additionally, there is the use of εἰκών to designate the 'true representation' of the heavenly reality of which the Law was only a shadow (Heb. 10:1).

[15] See van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology*: 112-18, to see a range of sources illustrating the use of εἰκών for statues and images of the gods in pagan contexts.

[16] O'Brien, *Colossians*: 43, does notes the possibility that Gen. 1 can provide a background to Col. 1:15a, but since the midrashic interpretation offered by C. F. Burney's article ('Christ the Ἀρχή of Creation', *JTS* 27 [1926]: 160-77) defines this possibility for him, he does not explore other outcomes this could have for interpretation. Sumney, *Writing in the Image of Scripture*: 198, also omits to explore the context of Gen. 1, noting that 'there is no clear theological development from Genesis in this text'.

Paul's theological heritage remained rooted in the Jewish scriptures. This is especially so given that it is not simply a word (ἐικών) that is in view, but a phrase (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ), and one which holds a prominent position at the opening of the OT canon and which in turn is raised frequently in extra-biblical literature.[17] This context must be brought to bear upon our understanding of Colossians 1:15a. The immediate context of εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ in Gen. 1 suggests that functional rather than ontological overtones should be heard here.[18] This is indicated by the association of 'image of God' with a blessing and a series of commands. An exposition of the meaning of the phrase itself is absent from Gen. 1. Because of this, any ontological anthropology built from this statement can be only speculative at best. It is more fruitful to pay attention to what the text focuses on: the uniqueness of the man and woman and the activities assigned to them at creation.[19]

Several details indicate that 'image of God' is intended to differentiate humanity from the 'other' animals. As well as underscoring the uniqueness of Adam, these uphold the understanding that 'image of God' is functional, since the uniqueness of humanity is expressed in distinction to the animals. This sets up the expectation for an explanation of this distinction which is then found in the commands of Genesis 1:28. The first and most obvious difference is that humanity is created in the image of God whereas the animals are not. This clearly sets humanity apart from the animals and somewhere closer to God,

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[17] The initial section of van Kooten's *Paul's Anthropology*: 1-47 looks at a wide range of sources illustrating ancient Judaism. Van Kooten makes the concluding observation (44-45) that the use of the 'image of God' concept has a wide variety of uses in these sources, but is not a prominent feature of any one writer's thought – instead, the concept is often co-opted into their own theological purposes. Within this variation, frequent themes included the affirmation that the 'image of God' had nothing to do with the 'images' found throughout the Greco-Roman world, and that the 'image of God' (being understood in terms of knowledge, intelligence, and understanding) was point of commonality between God and man, and the point of difference between man and the animal kingdom (46-47).

[18] Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1982): 29--32 discusses the five major interpretations of 'image of God' and concludes that the strongest case is for the position that humankind is God's representative ruler on earth. However, he does acknowledge that this fails to reveal anything about what the image actually *is* – a problem for which (this article will argue) Col. 1:15a provides a solution.

[19] For the purposes of the present study, the commands to 'rule' and to 'dominate' shall be the focus of discussion, while the commands to 'be fruitful' and 'multiply' shall be passed over. These last two commands do in fact have echoes in the letter to the Colossians (see esp. 1:6,10), but their significance falls outside the scope of this study.

preparing the way for the blessing and commands which follow. Furthermore, the wording of the narrative contains a few other suggestions which imply a divine–human relationship that is somewhat closer and more personal than that with the animals and God. So, secondly, the fact that the creation of Adam stands as a second act within the sixth day also serves to set humanity apart. Thirdly, the command pronounced in each of the days of creation is altered in the creation of Adam, where the command shifts from the jussive ('let there be …') to a cohortative ('let us make …'), indicating a more personal involvement in human creation, as is further indicated by the fact of their image-bearing following this. Fourthly, the blessing and command given to the first man and woman is spoken *to them* rather than simply over them, as is done for the animals, implying a direct relationship between God and humanity (compare Gen. 1:22 with 1:28).[20]

The commands given to the unique human beings demonstrate their role of rulership as God's image bearers. The imperatives 'exercise dominion' (1:26, 28 – רָדָה, LXX ἄρχω) and 'subdue' (1:28 – כָּבַשׁ, LXX κατακυριεύω) indicate that they are placed over the other creatures. These commands are not filled out further in the text, but from their use in the OT it appears that they designate a 'caretaking' role over creation that entails a representative rulership on the behalf of God.[21]

The context of εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ in Genesis 1:26-28 leads us to see an inherent role of representative rulership for its bearers.[22] This was not unique to Genesis, but was also shared by other ancient cultures, albeit in a less universal form.

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[20] See Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*: 33; James McKeown, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008): 27.

[21] The former imperative denotes the idea of ruling in a variety of settings. The latter carries more force and tends to have negative and violent connotations in the OT, although Hamilton believes this nuance does not need to be seen here and can be understood as a reference to settlement and agriculture, seeing these imperatives as semantic parallels to 'till and keep' in Gen. 2:15. For discussion see Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988): 137--40.

[22] Cf. Philo's *de Vita Moses* 2.65.

4. Image-Bearing in the Ancient Near East

Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) ideology surrounding rulership lends support to a functional understanding of 'image of God' in Genesis 1:26-28. It was commonplace in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia for kings to be acclaimed as the 'image' of the nation's patron deity. For example, an address by the god Amon Re to Pharaoh Amenhotep III (r. 1388/91–1349/51 BC) is recorded thus:

> Thou art my beloved son, come forth from my own limbs, my very own image, which I have put upon the earth. I have permitted thee to rule over the earth in peace.[23]

Likewise, the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta (r. 1243–1207 BC) is ascribed as the 'radiance' and 'eternal image' of the god Enlil in the *Tukulti-Ninurta Epic*, raised by Enlil like a firstborn son.[24] The Rosetta Stone heralds Ptolemaeus Epiphanes of Egypt (r. 204-181 BC) as the 'living image (εἰκών) of Zeus, the son of Helios'.[25] Wisdom 14:17 gives us another example of the use of εἰκών, which even relates it to the statues of (Hellenistic?[26]) ruler cults:

> When people could not honour monarchs in their presence, since they lived at a distance, they imagined their appearance far away, and made a visible image (εἰκών) of the king whom they honoured, so that by their zeal they might flatter the absent one as though present.

Further examples are well attested from both these regions and do not need to be repeated here.[27] Despite the marked differences that do exist between the concept of the phrase 'image of God' in Genesis and the wider ANE, the functional understanding of image-bearing is common to both.

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[23] Cited in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984): 153, italics mine. Citation is from W. H. Schmidt, *Die Schöpfungsgeschichte der Priesterschrift*, Kap. III B 9: 'Das achte Schöpfungswerk: die Menschen. Gen. 1:26-28', WMANT 17 (1964): 127-48, on page 139.

[24] Tukulti-Ninurta epic II. 18, 20; cited in Peter Machinist, 'Kingship and Divinity in Imperial Assyria' in *Text, Artefact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, 2006):161.

[25] Lohse, *Colossians*: 47 n.106.

[26] The date and description matches the Hellenic ruler cults. See S. F. R. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 23-52.

[27] For a series of examples, see Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*: 152--53. For a lengthy discussion of this phenomenon as a background to Genesis 1:26-28, see J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005): 93--145.

The end result of these findings in Genesis and in ANE sources is that the phrase εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ in Colossians 1:15a finds ample support for the assertion that authority is intended by this first ascription.[28] However, we do not need to presume that this means Paul was thinking about stories of kings who would have been distant history by the NT era. Instead, as McDonough explains, these findings illustrate a

> deeply rooted Ancient Near Eastern conception of divine kingship which is likely embedded in biblical portraits of Adam and the coming anointed king. The point is made all the stronger when we recall that Plutarch could still speak of a ruler bearing the divine image in *Ad Principem ineruditum*, 780e5-f2.[29]

The concept of εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ demonstrably suggests 'representative rulership' in Genesis 1:26-28, and this is consistent with the uses of the concept in ANE sources. Next, two significant alterations to the concept as it is employed in Colossians 1:15a will be identified and extrapolated.

5. Two Modifications to Εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ

When understood in light of Genesis 1:26-28, Colossians 1:15a presents the Son as God's representative ruler. Two important differences between the representative rulership of humanity in Genesis 1:26-28 and of Jesus in Colossians 1:15a need to be noted so that the precise intention Colossians 1:15a can be recognised. Firstly, the different prepositions used in Genesis 1:26-28 and Colossians 1:15a must be considered. Following this, we will explore the impact of ἀοράτου on the ascription.

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[28] This role of rulership can still carry the moral or spiritual qualities often argued for bearers of the 'image of God'. Humanity is made to represent God, and so should be like him so far as is possible for created beings. Rulership can be exercised over the creation worthily or unworthily of the Creator who repeatedly proclaimed it to be 'good', by either respecting its integrity as it was made or by ruining it. This idea is present in Wis. 9:2-3. In Eph. 4:24, Paul has moral qualities in mind for the recreation of humanity in the 'likeness' (cf. 'image') of God. However, the key import of 'image of God' as given in Genesis 1 is that humans represent God and rule on his behalf.

[29] McDonough, *Christ as Creator*: 86--87. Plutarch also notes that the Persian king was regarded as the image of God in his *Themistocles* 27:1-3.

5.1 Prepositions

The opening words of Colossians 1:15 are the relative pronoun ὅς followed by the verb of being, εἰμί, which connect the passage with the antecedent 'the beloved Son' (Col. 1:13). The function this carries is to open the occasion on which the person of the 'Son' may be described in detail for the first time in Colossians. However, the presence of ἐστιν here also presents a striking (though often overlooked[30]) difference between the use of the term in Genesis and in Colossians: while humanity was made 'in' or 'according to'[31] the image of God, the Son is said to actually *be* that image. The prepositions used in Genesis 1:26-28 indicate that humanity was not the image of God *per se*, but only beings who were made *according* to that image, which is left otherwise unidentified.[32]

In light of this, Colossians 1:15a appears somewhat paradoxical: we are called to look back to Genesis, only to find that Paul would have us place 'the Son' (hereafter referred to as Jesus) prior to Adam since he is the Creator. The apparent consequence is that Colossians 1:15a understands Jesus' *authority* in terms of the authority given to Adam, but at the same time understanding Adam's *existence* in terms of Jesus, who is the image of God. McDonough provides a helpful heuristic for moving through this. He suggests that here we have things the wrong way around if we understand Jesus as the 'image of God' in that he

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[30] This is even in detailed commentaries such as those by Dunn, Sumney, Wilson, and O'Brien. Bruce, *Colossians*: 58 does recognise that the 'image of God in humanity … is a copy or reflection of the archetypal image … God's beloved Son'. Moo, *Colossians*: 117 n.134 notes the difference but neglects to discuss what significance it may carry. Ἐιμί might be overlooked because it could be seen merely as a poetic device. Van Kooten does pick up on this difference that exists in Paul's vocabulary between the relationship of either man or Christ and the image of God, but unfortunately his book focuses on Romans and 1–2 Corinthians as far as Paul's letters are concerned. See his *Paul's Anthropology*: 216-17.

[31] The Hebrew prepositions בְּ and כְּ carry the force of 'in' and 'according to' generally but have a semantic overlap, and so the difference in meaning should not be exaggerated here. This gains support from the fact that they are used interchangeably in Gen. 1:26,27; 5:1,3; 9:6, and that the LXX uses κατά to translate both in these texts from Genesis. See Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*: 145; Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*: 28.

[32] This may have been because the phrase was obvious enough in its original setting, perhaps related to the 'divine representative' concept as it was commonly used throughout the ANE. Cf. §4. Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007): 187 and Gerald L. Bray, 'The Significance of God's Image in Man', *TynBul* 42.2 (1991): 212 believe that reference to Adam is ruled out due to this difference in prepositions, but as we shall see the difference in fact opens a pathway to an impressive development in Adamic Christology.

fulfils Adam's role. Instead, Adam as the 'image of God' should be understood as being derived from the preincarnate Jesus.[33] In this way a perspective on the problem emerges: since Jesus is the *actual* 'image of God', his rulership is qualitatively superior to that of humanity because it is not derived, but rather intrinsic to who he is. Far from being unhelpful, as Dunn suggested,[34] Genesis 1:26-28 and the figure of Adam helps to make sense of an otherwise puzzling modification in the phrase.

The loose thread that this leaves is this: *how* is Paul able to identify Jesus as this image that carries intrinsic authority? A probable solution is found in Ezekiel 1:26 where the manifest glory of God has as its centre 'a likeness with a human appearance' (in the LXX it is slightly different, adding the recognition of the heavenly nature of this figure: ὁμοίωμα ὡς εἶδος ἀνθρώπου ἄνωθεν, 'a likeness as a form of a man from above'). Daniel 7:13 likewise provides a similar key, where the seer saw that 'with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a son of man'. 'Coming with the clouds' has clear references to divinity in the OT (cf. Deut. 33:26; Ps. 68:4 (LXX 68:5); 104:3), but here this 'one like a son of man' (ὡς υἱος ἀνθρώπου) is distinguished from God since he 'came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him'. The significance these texts have for Colossians 1:15a is evident, even if the precise wording is not the same. Daniel 7:13 suggests the existence of a heavenly 'human-like' figure differentiated from God, while Ezekiel 1:26 gives an enigmatically human shape to the divine glory. That the glory of God is in the shape of a man should lead to further reflection on Genesis 1:26-28. McDonough states:

> The Genesis text is not simply affirming that Adam is a visible likeness of God when it says he is created κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν. Rather, Adam is created after the likeness of the man-like, visible glory of God as seen in Ezekiel 1.[35]

Adam therefore is a derivative, a copy, a representation of the archetype. Paul identifies this 'archetype' as the pre-existent Son who became Jesus. Seyoon Kim argues that Paul was able to make the claim

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[33] McDonough, *Christ as Creator*: 89--90. Moo, *Colossians*: 118; Ridderbos, *Paul*, 70--72; and Thomas R Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press/Apollos, 2001): 155 also come to this conclusion.

[34] Cf. n.3.

[35] McDonough, *Christ as Creator*: 91.

that Jesus is the εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ based on his visionary conversion experience (Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15). Within biblical literature, previous visionary experiences had witnessed glorious but unidentified human-like figures (such as in Ezek. 1:26 and Dan. 7:13), but in Paul's case the figure of the vision identifies himself as the recently crucified Jesus.[36]

Colossians 1:15a draws on the theology of Genesis 1:26-28, but not to say that Jesus is some kind of second Adam. Instead, what Paul is doing here by his alteration of the preposition is to demonstrate that Jesus, the pre-incarnate Son, is the archetype of humanity in its role of ruling the creation. The authority that humans exercise as bearers of the εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ is derived from the Son, the pre-incarnate Jesus. Colossians 1:15a therefore presents Jesus as the source and embodiment of rightful human authority, and as such also presents him as the ruler of the rulers of the earth.

5.2 The God Who is Invisible

Next we must observe how ἀόρατος impinges upon this interpretation of Colossians 1:15a. As noted above, this word is normally taken as a referent to Hellenistic philosophers' perception of 'ultimate reality', in that God is unknowable.[37] However, I suggest that a simpler and contextually more consistent solution can be found: that ἀόρατος to be an adjective that *differentiates* rather than one that merely *describes*. The God whose image the Son is, is the unique and supreme god known as Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Ἀόρατος – the negative of ὁρατός – is used only rarely in the NT. It is used as a predicate for God in 1 Timothy 1:17 and Hebrews 11:27 and similarly in Romans 1:20 to refer to certain divine qualities. These uses are found in contexts that highlight the supremacy of God, describing him in a manner that sets him above and apart from others. The doxological words of 1 Timothy 1:17 combine God's invisibility with his being the 'only' (μόνος) God (cf. the similar ideas in 1 Tim.

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[36] Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 223--33.

[37] See for example Dunn, *Colossians*: 87--90; Moo, *Colossians*: 117--19; Lohse, *Colossians*: 46--48; Sumney, *Colossians*: 64; O'Brien, *Colossians*: 42. For discussion on the word group ὁράω and how the in/visibility of the gods was described in Greek mythology and philosophy, see Wilhelm Michaelis, 'Ὁρατός, ἀόρατος' in *TDNT*, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. (Geoffery W. Bromiley, tr.; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1967), 5:368-70.

6:16). No hint is given of invisibility being a quality of unknowability. Its association with God being the 'only' God suggests that it is a unique characteristic of him. Hebrews 11:27 more explicitly puts God in a position of contrast: Moses was faced with the choice of regarding either Pharaoh – a godlike being in the ancient world – or 'him who is invisible' (τὸν ἀόρατον), and exercised faith as a means of seeing God and obeying him rather than fearing Pharaoh. The use of ἀόρατος in Romans 1:20 shifts from the prior two texts in that it does have the knowability of God in view: certain characteristics of God are knowable not in themselves, but only through beholding and considering the created order (but note that no special mediator is needed to perceive these).

The only other NT use of ἀόρατος is also in our passage, where in 1:16 it refers to things 'invisible' in contrast to things 'visible' as part of a formula designating the totality of the created order.[38] In the LXX it is used three times: in Genesis 1:2 where the earth was 'unseen' before it was formed and filled; in Isaiah 45:3 for 'unseen' treasures; and in 2 Maccabees 9:5 for an 'invisible' plague. In the writings of the apostolic fathers ἀόρατος is used as a predicate for God several times: in *2 Clement* 20:5 'τῷ μόνῳ θεῷ ἀοράτῳ' (cf. 1 Tim. 1:17); in *Diognetus* 7:2 where God is ascribed as all-powerful, all-creating; and invisible; in Ignatius *To Magnesians* 3:2 where his invisibility is contrasted with the visibility of human bishops as a warning against hypocrisy; and in Ignatius *To Polycarp* 3:2 where in a reference to the incarnation he is said to be invisible but to have become visible for us.

Within this spread of uses within biblical and post-biblical Christian literature, we can see some variety of use – at times ἀόρατος is simply used to designate that something cannot be seen, but at other times it is used to describe God – as a complement to his supremacy,[39] to differentiate him, or to show his intrinsic unknowability. The platonic use of the word resonates with the last of these uses (Rom. 1:20, see below), but as the texts above have shown it is not the only way the word can be used.

In Greek philosophical discourse ἀόρατος and its counterpart ὁρατός came to have special use regarding knowledge and perception. In platonic thought the latter came to designate the world that can be

[38] Cf. the use of ἀόρατος within a similar context in Ign. *Tral*. 5:2; Ign. *Smyrn* 6:1.

[39] This combination of invisibility with God's supremacy is seen also in *Syb. Or.* III.15-16; *Syb. Or.* frag. I.10-11

perceived by the senses, while the former was used for the world perceivable only by the mind, including the divine. Philo uses ἀόρατος 100 times and ὁρατός 70 times, but ὁρατός is often in the negative sense which effectively raises the count of ἀόρατος. His use continues and extends Plato's use of the terms and understanding of reality.[40] Ἀόρατος is not used as a predicate for God in Plato, but is so in Philo in the sense of God not being perceivable by the senses.[41]

As noted above, the Platonic/Hellenistic–Judaic usage of ἀόρατος is generally followed in the commentaries on Colossians 1:15a, designating the unknowableness of God. This has led to the requirement that something mediates the knowledge of God for humanity, which is then found in Jesus the (revelatory) εἰκών of this ἀόρατος – i.e. 'unknowable' – God. Ἀόρατος in Colossians 1:15a thus becomes a designator for 'unknowability'. Discussion at this point often expresses puzzlement over how something 'invisible' can be 'imaged', leading to deliberation concerning the nature of the 'image of God'.[42]

We would do better at this impasse by doing two things. First, we can recognise that Jewish and Christian usage of ἀόρατος did not need to refer to God's unknowability (as above) – it could simply refer to the fact that God could not be seen. Second, we can understand ἀόρατος to be an adjective that *differentiates* rather than one that merely *describes*. It does describe ('God cannot be seen …'), but it also differentiates ('… unlike the other gods of the ancient world'). The effect that this would have is to select, of all the gods present in the pagan religious context, the one God who had no visible form – Yahweh the God of Israel. The monotheistic outlook held by Paul and early Christianity was shaped by its Jewish heritage, which sharply distinguished itself from the pagan world around it by the fact that its God had no cult statue. This peculiar tenet was enshrined in the OT dogma surrounding the ban on images (Exod. 20:4) and in the fact that the located presence of God occupied an empty space within the Tabernacle cultus (Exod. 25:22). The invisibility of the Jewish–Christian God is demonstrably

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40 Michaelis, *TDNT*, 5: 368.

41 Michaelis, *TDNT*, 5: 366. The following texts use ἀόρατος in relation to God, and do so in keeping with the sense of unknowability: *Op. Mund.* 30-31; *Leg. All.* III.206; *Rer. Div. Her.* 115, 119; *Plant.* 18; *Mut. Nom.* 14; *Decal.* 120; *Som.* I.72. The last of these also associates the invisibility of God with his omnipotence.

42 See esp. the commentaries listed in n.1.

unusual to the pagan religious mind in Tacitus' *Histories* 5:5 (of the Jews) and in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9:2; 12:2 (of the Christians).[43]

Hence, to speak of a God who was ἀόρατος spoke of a god who was distinctly different to the rest. As put by Kremer,

> God himself is characterised in Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27 (in accordance with Jewish–Hellenistic usage) as ἀόρατος, *the invisible one*, not least in distinction from the pagan concept of the visible presence of the gods cultic images.[44]

No knowledge of philosophical ideas about the divine is needed to understand Colossians 1:15a, and so there is no need to argue that the audience at Colossae was familiar with such works (or at least their ideas) as are often cited in commentaries. Ἀόρατος simply differentiates the God of the Jews and early Christians from the gods of the nations.

The significance of all of this is as follows: by designating God specifically as the one who is categorically different to the other gods of the nations, Paul conjures to mind the assertions made through the OT scriptures that Yahweh is superior to these other gods (e.g. Exod. 15:11; Isa. 46). Consequently, the representative of this God is to be regarded as superior to the representative of any of the other gods. Jesus represents the God of Israel as his authority on earth, over and against all other gods and their representatives. Reading Colossians 1:15a in this way gives us a consistent parallel to 1:15b, which likewise presents Jesus as the ruler of the world on account of a special relationship with the God of Israel.

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[43] While there are demonstrably more sources illustrating the 'platonic' use of ἀόρατος than this one, two things must be recognised in its defence. First, literary works like philosophical treatises were far more likely to have been preserved from the ancient world than any literary sources on the traditional cults of the gods and thereby remain available today for comparison to biblical texts. The fact of their survival to the present day does not necessitate their relevance to biblical texts. Second, ancient literary descriptions of 'common' paganism are virtually non-existent since these religious cults were of little interest to writers of that time and were not fortunate enough to have schools of thought dedicated to preserving descriptive literature. Traditional Greco-Roman religions were more concerned with ritual than with doctrine, meaning that much of what we would regard as 'theology' was held to be assumed knowledge and so did not require recording. An exception to this is Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BC), who was an important source on ancient Roman religion, but his writings on this subject are now only known through quotations in other ancient works.

[44] J. Kremer, 'ὁράω', in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 2:528. Italics original.

6. Firstborn Over All Creation

The message of the second ascription (1:15b) is similar to that of the first, although more readily understood. Its assertion is that Jesus is the ruler of the whole creation based upon his special relationship with God. The occurrence of this title immediately following the first ascription should be recognised as an instance of synthetic parallelism, whereby phrases are coupled together in such a way that the pair can be said to reflect something of the meaning of the other, but adding a further shade of meaning through their differences. The poetic nature of Colossians 1:15-20 together with the corresponding parallelism at the opening of the second stanza of the passage (1:18b) further establishes the two parts of 1:15 as the two halves of a parallelism. The bearing that this observation has on our understanding of εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου is that it supports the interpretation that Colossians 1:15a is a designation of authority. In this section the intention of πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως will be discussed and shown to support the interpretation of Colossians 1:15a above.

6.1 Uses of Πρωτότοκος

In the LXX πρωτότοκος is commonly used for בְּכֹר to refer to the 'first (male) to be born' in a family, of either humans or animals. Normally it is found in the context that the firstborn is to be sanctified to the Lord (Exod. 22:29, 34:19f; Num. 18:15-17; Deut. 15:19) or within genealogies (Gen. 10:15; 1 Chr. 1:29; 2:3). However, the word began to allude solely to the privileged position and attendant entitlements that were due to a firstborn son. This is exampled in Exodus 4:22 where it designates a special father–son relationship between Israel and God (cf. Jer. 31:9). More significantly for our passage this use is found in LXX Psalm 88:28 (MT 89:27) in which God's anointed future king is designated 'the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth', which stands as a distinction given with his special relationship to God.[45]

[45] This is found more distinctively in Pss. Sol. 13:9; 18:4; 2 Esdr. 6:58ff, where it carries connotations of being the 'only begotten' of God, the 'chosen' and beloved' one. See H. Langkammer, 'Πρωτότοκος' in *EDNT*, Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 3:190; cf. also Michaelis, *TDNT*, 6: 874.

Πρωτότοκος in the NT generally retains this special titular meaning and is normally used for Jesus.[46] Three of these instances are found in Paul (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15,18) and two in the remainder of the NT (Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5). At times the temporal sense is clearly in view (Col. 1:18; Rev. 1:5); other times it recedes to allow the idea of rank to take higher importance.

6.2 Messianic Overtones of Πρωτότοκος

Psalm 89 (LXX Ps. 88) provides a straightforward OT background to Colossians 1:15b. In this psalm, a recalling of God's promises to David gives way to the confidence that in time God will provide an anointed king in the Davidic line (vv. 19-37). Most significant at this point of our discussion is v. 27 (LXX v. 28), where the future king is called the πρωτότοκος. Its meaning here is reiterated by the following line: 'the highest of the kings of the earth'. This puts πρωτότοκος in a use which highlights the recipient's exalted position amongst his counterparts, a position that is based on his special relationship with Yahweh rather than on being a πρωτότοκος in the literal sense of the word. Colossians 1:15b extends the extent of rulership out from 'the kings of the earth' in Psalm 89:27 to 'all things' (Col. 1:16), although this is then particularised to political terms in 1:16: 'thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities', an expression that resonates with the reading of Colossians 1:15a that this article offers.

As far as providing background to Colossians 1:15b, Ps. 89 fits suitably within the context as an attestation of messianic authority. In the text immediately preceding our passage (Col. 1:13) Paul has been using language reminiscent of messiahship – 'kingdom' is messianic in NT literature and 'beloved Son' evokes texts like 2 Samuel 7:14-15 and Psalm 2:7. Additionally, the verses before and after Psalm 89:27 assert the sonship of the future anointed king (v. 27) and the love God has for him (v. 29), further strengthening the connection of Colossians 1:15b to this psalm through the antecedent found in Colossians 1:13.

Widening the scope of our examination of this psalm, we can see further correlations between God's reign and the king's reign. Comparing vv. 6-19 with vv. 20-28, we can see that the king's supreme power correlates to God's, since God's arm sustains both his own and

[46] Exceptions include Luke 2:7; Heb. 11:28; 12:23.

the king's rule.[47] While these need not suggest anything more about this king other than that his reign would be supported by God, the similarity of his reign over the earth compared with God's reign over the cosmos presents him as a ruler who is also God's representative on earth.[48]

This lends support to the thesis concerning Colossians 1:15a in this study and further shows how these two ascriptions are to be seen as a pair, each in its own manner asserting the authority of Jesus over the world by virtue of his special relationship with God.[49]

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that Colossians 1:15a should be understood as a designation of authority rather than of revelation. Wisdom, insofar as it was the prime mediator of the knowledge of God within certain strands of Hellenistic Judaism, has been shown to be an unsatisfactory background. With this, the position that Colossians 1:15a is indicative of the Son's revelatory role has lost its key support. In its place, a case for a role of representative rulership has been developed.

There have been five supports to this argument. The Genesis foundation to εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ has furnished us with a context that favours representative rulership, and the historical cultural context has reinforced that. The preposition in Colossians 1:15a identifies the Son as an antecedent to Adam's authority, and quite possibly as the figure seen in the visions of Ezekiel and Daniel. The differentiation of God as the *invisible* God sets God and his ruler apart from and above other

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47 Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (Waco, TX: Word, 1990): 423.

48 Jon Douglas Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994): 22--23.

49 The connection between the two is further strengthened by the fact that Jewish thought often glorified Adam in terms of kingship. See Jub. 2:14; 2 *En.* 30:12; 2 Esdr. 6:53ff; *Apocalypse of Moses* 24:4. This can also be seen in early Christian thought in Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Cor. 15:21ff. Kuhli recognises the impact 1:15b should have on our understanding: 'In Col. 1:15 it is not revelatory function (though it is present here) but Christ's cosmological significance that stands in the foreground, for he is not only "the *image* of the invisible God", but also "the first-born of all creation". What εἰκών means in the Colossians hymn must therefore be asked as a question concerning the relationship of Christ to the cosmos.' H. Kuhli, 'Εἰκών, όνος, ἡ' in *EDNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 1:390, italics original. However, the article says that the word then must be understood in light of Jewish thought on Wisdom as mediator and the Gnostic myth of the 'primal man', thus failing to adequately explain the bearing that the two ascriptions have on each other.

contenders. And lastly, the corresponding designation of Colossians 1:15b matches 1:15a with a parallel ascription of divinely derived authority.

Against the historical backdrop of the Roman empire, the claims made in Colossians 1:15 come into a sharper focus by presenting a challenge to the position held by the emperors of that day, ostensibly bestowed by the gods of Rome. Whatever may be said concerning Paul's exhortation to obey earthly rulers, Jesus is here given a position that supersedes all earthly rulers. Paul claims for Jesus a greater authority that is granted by a more powerful God. In the face of the unchallenged claim that the emperors ruled supreme, Paul begged to differ, shaping his Christology to offer an alternative world-ruler, sent not only to rule but also to redeem the Creator's wayward world.