

A Hymn and the Cosmic Christ

Q

I read that Colossians 1:15-20 is a Christian hymn. Is this true, and if so, what is its purpose?

A

It is generally believed that Colossians 1:15-20 is an early Christian hymn expressing, in a succinct, elegant, deep, and poetic way, the magnificence of Christ as Creator and Redeemer. If it is a hymn, it contains two strophes: Christ the Creator (verses 15-17); and Christ the Redeemer (verses 18-20).

1. THE COSMIC CHRIST (VERSES 15-17)

The first strophe gives us an important glimpse into Christ's cosmic work. He is introduced to us as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (verse 15, NASB; "first" in the sense of supremacy over creation).^{*} The significance of these two titles is developed by stating that all things were created "through [*en*, "in"] Him"—He is the Creator of the cosmos, meaning that He created all things in heaven and earth, whether visible or invisible, as well as all heavenly beings ("thrones, or dominions, or rulers, or authorities" [verse 16, NASB]). Three prepositions are used to describe the act of creation: All was created "in Him" (in oneness with Him; in the absence of sin, verse 16, NIV), "through [indicates agency] Him" (verse 16, NASB), and "for Him" (oriented to Christ as its center) (verse 16, NASB). The hymn goes on to clarify that the Son of God was not a creature, because He was "before all things" (verse 17, NASB) and because they were "created through [*dia*] Him and for [*eis*] Him" (verse 16, NASB). The text finally specifies that "in Him all things hold together" (verse 17, NASB)—Christ is the one who holds the cosmos together and preserves its existence. The first strophe tells us who the Son is with respect to creation (He is the image of the invisible God, the Creator, and the Sustainer), and indicates His superiority and supremacy over all creation (the firstborn of creation) as its Creator and Sustainer.

2. CHRIST THE REDEEMER (VERSES 18-20)

The second strophe identifies the Son as the head of His body, the church, and as the beginning of a new humanity. The title "firstborn from the dead" (verse 18) emphasizes His supremacy among those who will be resurrected, for without His resurrection there is no resurrection from the dead. The concept of supremacy is further defined by the words "He Himself will come to have first place in everything" (verse 18, NASB), that is to say, the Son will restore what was His when He created everything. This is possible because of His incarnation: "It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." The purpose of the Incarnation is stated: To reconcile all things—in heaven and on earth—through His sacrificial death. In one way or another, the whole cosmos will be reconciled to the Son (Phil. 2:9-11).

3. COMMENTS ON THE HYMN

The first strophe presents the Son as the Creator who is essentially different from creation—He is divine. His supremacy over and His primary role within creation are clearly indicated. He is the image of the invisible God within the cosmos. He is the image of God and the firstborn of creation whose primary responsibility is to reveal to the cosmos the goodness of God. It is at this moment in cosmic history that He assumes this most important role. The first strophe describes the condition of the universe in the absence of a cosmic conflict. The second strophe presupposes the cosmic conflict and describes the work of the Son as consisting in the reconciliation of the whole cosmos. The effectiveness of this work is now visible in His supremacy within the church and will reach cosmic dimensions through cosmic reconciliation. ☉

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