

COLOSSIANS 1:13-20: A CHIASTIC READING

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The striking character of the language used in the middle section of the first chapter of Colossians suggests the identification of vv.15-20 as a separate hymnic unit: a glorification of the Son of God as co-creator of the universe and the one in whom God reconciles all to Himself. As with other such passages in the NT, this demarcation then became the basis for the claim that the hymn “pre-existed” its inscription within the epistle itself, and, consequently, prompted various attempts to reconstruct the “original,” “unaltered” text of this hymn.¹ Although the epistle as a whole, in both language and style, is similar to other Pauline letters, the passage delineated as a hymn contains, it is argued, “considerable differences from the speech and manner of expression used in the chief Pauline letters.”² But this does not necessarily imply that the author of Colossians merely adapted an earlier hymn, providing a new introit and perhaps a different emphasis. Indeed, there is no reason to assume that the author of the “hymn” (if “hymn”

¹For instance, E. Käsemann, who claimed that the phrases “of the Church” (v.18) and “through his blood of the cross” (v.20) were additions, and that therefore the original hymn was a pre-Christian hymn referring to “the gnostic myth of the Archetypal Man who is also the Redeemer.” “Eine urchristliche Taufliturgie,” in *Festschrift für R. Bultmann* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1949), 136.

²Cf. E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Fortress, 1971), 84-91; quotation from p. 90. This work tends to prefer to find the background for understanding Col 1:13-20 in Platonism, Stoicism and Hellenistic Judaism. It would seem methodologically more sound, however, to have such recourse only when something is clearly to be so explained, or cannot be explained in terms of the OT. Such is the approach of M. Barth, *Colossians*, Anchor Bible v.34b (NY: Doubleday, 1994); to whose work much of this paper is indebted.

it is) is any other than the author of the epistle.³ This then suggests that the demarcation of the "hymn" (vv.15-20) need not be so rigid as is usually assumed. Whilst many commentators have spoken of the preceding verses as an introit, an invitation to glorify God (similar to the function of vv.1-6 in Ps 105 [LXX 104]), it is also possible to take vv.13-14 as an integral part of the passage, chiastically paralleling v.20, thus suggesting the following chiastic structure:

- 1-A He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins,
- 2-B He is the image of the invisible God,
- 3-C First-born of all creation; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him,
- 4-D He is before all things and in Him all things hold together,
- 5-E and He is the Head of the body, the Church,
- 6-D' He is the *arche*,
- 7-C' First-born from the dead, that in everything He might be pre-eminent,
- 8-B' For Him [God] was pleased to let all fullness dwell,
- 9-A' and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

³M. Barth: "Paul, or any other author of the epistle, can be excluded as the poet of the hymn with a certain assurance only if either the hymnic style and the "hymnic vocabulary" of the author of the epistle are known and are not associated with the Colossian hymn or if the author has excluded himself as the original author of the poem. Neither is the case." *Ibid.*, 235.

This article offers a commentary on this important passage, based upon the suggested chiasmic structure.⁴ The passage vv.13-20 is introduced (v.11) by the author's prayer that the (Colossian) reader will be strengthened in the power of God, and the invitation (v.12) to give thanks to the Father who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints.

1-A

He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins

In this initial section we are introduced to many themes which are developed more fully later on. Of prime importance in the interpretation of this passage is the fact that, in both vocabulary and imagery, it is based on the OT. The phrase, "He has delivered (ἐρρύσαστο) us," refers back to the "deliverance" of the Israelites out of Egypt, the event which is constitutive both for the formation of Israel as the people of Yahweh, and, on the basis of this past event, for Israel's continuing relationship with their God: the God of Israel is the Deliverer (cf. Is 63:16; Ps 79:9 [LXX 78:9]), and this distinguishes Him from all other gods (cf. 2 Kgs 18:33). Although the verb "to transfer" does not possess the same connotations, this verb is used, in the LXX and NT, to indicate a change of location, and is used by Josephus for the "deportation" of a people (*Ant.* 9.235). Yet, while this geographical sense is appropriate for recontextualizing the Exodus event as the return from exile in Babylon, it cannot be determinative for understanding our transferral from "the dominion of darkness" to "the kingdom of His beloved Son." As the following verses make unambiguously clear, the Son is Lord over *all* things, and as such the kingdom does not refer to a spatial location apart from "the dominion of darkness." The Biblical opposition between light and darkness does not parallel Gnostic dualism (extended by them into a series of oppositions: darkness/

⁴I will not attempt to justify through grammatical and linguistic analysis the chiasmic structure presented here; such analysis is beyond the scope of the paper.

matter/body—light/spiritual/pneumatic seed). In the Biblical perspective, both realms are certainly exclusive, yet they do not stand side by side; they are co-extensive but not co-intensive, for Christ is Lord also over the realm of darkness; in Him all is reconciled to God, in whom there is no darkness. This assertion, celebrated in vv.13-20, is central to the purposes of Paul in dealing with the situation at Colossae: the relapse of some Christians there into their pre-Christian practices—practices not viewed in the light of Christ.

The connection of “kingdom” with “Son,” as elsewhere in the NT, is based upon the promise to David in 2 Sam 7:12-14: “When your days are fulfilled . . . I will raise up your offspring after you . . . I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son.” The filial relationship of the king to Yahweh is also indicated by Ps 2:7 Ps 89:26-7 (LXX 88:27-28), both of which are of considerable Christological importance in the NT. Thus, against this background, Col 1:13 asserts that Jesus is indeed the expected Messiah, the Davidic king and Son of God, and that His kingdom or reign has therefore begun. This affirmation of Jesus as *the* Son of God is further emphasized by the phrase “of His love,” which M. Barth suggests is simply a “Hebrewism” for “beloved,” and as such refers to the LXX translation of the Hebrew term *yahid*, “only,” “unique” (e.g. Gen 22:2—cf. the use of *μονογενής* in the Johannine writings).⁵

Transferred into the kingdom of the Son of God, we have “redemption” (*ἀπολύτρωσις*). Although this term is used extremely rarely in both the OT (once in the LXX — Dan 4:34) and the NT (once in Paul — Rom 3:24), the verb behind this term (*λυτρόω*, to deliver) is used to refer to the deliverance of, for instance, the first-born (Ex 13:13 etc.) and, in Deuteronomy, almost exclusively of the Exodus. The same terminology is used in Deutero-Isaiah (Is 44:24; 52:3), where Yahweh is also named the “Redeemer” (*passim*). More important is the fact that in Deutero-Isaiah, in the context of the deliverance from exile, this terminology becomes invested with the eschatological vision of the universal reign of Yahweh. It is this “redemption” which is announced in the NT (cf. Lk

⁵Cf. Barth, *ibid.*, 189-90.

1:68; 2:38; 21:28; 24:21), and proclaimed in Col 1:14 as accomplished in the Son. In Him we have, as a present reality (ἔχομεν — present⁶), the redemption effected by God described in v.13, in the aorist), and this is further explained in terms of forgiveness of sins (cf. Eph 1:7; 1 Jn 1:7 & *passim*). Whilst the forgiveness of sins is not a characteristic of the Exodus, such forgiveness had come to be associated with deliverance from the exile in Babylon, for this was viewed as a result of the transgression of the covenant. As such, the content of redemption was recast in terms of the forgiveness of sins and of healing in the reestablishment of peace with God, and, through this, the glorification of God (cf. Is 44:21-23). Hence the proclamation of the signs of the kingdom in the NT are frequently connected to the ability of Jesus to forgive and to heal; and it is the peace established with God in Christ, granting redemption and forgiveness, that is announced in 1-A and its chiotic parallel 9-A'.

This first section of Col 1:13-20 has introduced many themes and established the background against which its assertions are to be understood. However, although it is specified that God, through His Son, has delivered us from darkness and transferred us into the kingdom, and that in Him we have redemption and forgiveness, this section has not indicated *how* this has taken place. This will be answered in section 9-A', where it is specified that his reconciliation and peace has been established by "the blood of His cross."

2-B

He is the image of the invisible God

Most commentators have tried to see in this statement a dependence either on the Platonic cosmology of the *Timaeus*, where the cosmos is described as a visible god made in the image of the intellectual (god) (92c), or on the Philonic interpretation of Genesis, in which the logos of God is described as an "image," both of God and as the pattern of the

⁶The "realized" character of salvation in Colossians is especially striking when compared to, e.g. Romans, yet it is balanced by Col 3:3-4.

visible creation, and also as playing an active role in the act of creation itself (cf. *Spec. Leg.* I.8; *Op. Mund.* 25). Rather than following these lines, M Barth suggests that the verbal adjective ἀόρατος should not be translated as "invisible"—not capable of being seen at all, but rather in a factual and pragmatic manner, that is, that "it is simply not within the capacity of human beings to see God," without special protection provided by God.⁷ In this context, the idea of the "image" does not refer to a revelation of God, making Him visible, but, as in Gen 1:26-28, in terms of the function of dominating the earth, a function which also falls to the First-born (the title mentioned in the following clause), the one who inherits all from the Father, and thus the terms "image" as well as "First-born" "both proclaim the supreme position of the Son in the cosmos."⁸ It seems that Barth's argument is based upon a common reaction of "Biblical theologians" against anything to do with a possible similarity to Greek philosophy—especially those which speak of a "substantial participation" of the image in that which it reveals.⁹ Whilst Barth's argument is attractive, for its emphasis on the OT basis for understanding the assertion, it nevertheless overlooks the fact that the NT does speak of the *visible* revelation of God in Jesus Christ, most clearly, of course, in the Gospel of John (e.g. Jn 14:9), and that this is the most straightforward reading of this assertion, and, moreover, the "substantial participation" which this revelatory function presupposes is, in fact, described by the chiasmic parallel of this section (8-B'; cf. Col 2:9), which, as in the relationship between A and A', explains the "how" of B. The importance of the revelatory

⁷*Op. cit.*, 196. Cf. Mt 15:20: ἀνίπτους χερσίν—clearly refers to unwashed hands, not unwashable hands; so also Acts 17:23 ἀγνώστῳ Θεῷ.

⁸*Ibid.*, 249-250.

⁹Cf. "In fact, the concept [of image] incorporates a 'radiance, a visible revelation of the being with substantial participation (*metochē*) of the object.' [Kleinknecht, *TWNT*] We can find this concept of 'image' in Platonic cosmology, for example, in which the cosmos is described as the visible image of an intelligible god. We could recognize a remote parallel to Col 1:15 here, in which it is not the cosmos, but rather Christ who is the image. The proclamation would be that Christ reveals the invisible God and that he himself has a part in his being. This explanation, however, does not suffice for the statement in Col 1:15." *Ibid.*, 195.

For a devastating critique of such "biblical theology," with its underlying substitution of "concepts" for "words," see J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961).

function of Jesus Christ as the image of God was clearly noted by St Irenaeus. God is infinite and invisible; so if He is actually to reveal Himself, and so enable His creatures to see and know Him, if He is going to enter into communion with them that they might enter into communion with Him, then He needs to find a measure for His incomprehensibility and a clearly defined limit to His infinity. For Irenaeus this is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who, because He is the Son, comprehends the Father, and is therefore the measure of the Father to us: (*AH* 4.4.2), and thus the One who reveals the Father to us: “the Father is the invisible of the Son, and the Son is the visible of the Father” (*AH* 4.6.6). If it were not God that we saw in Jesus Christ, but some other, “second” God, then we would not be drawn into communion with God Himself. As it is only in Jesus Christ that we *see* God, His divinity is revealed in and through His humanity: to see Jesus Christ is to see the Father in the only way that He can be seen and known. Yet, in becoming visible and measured, the infinite and invisible God does not cease being infinite and invisible: as Irenaeus put it, “the Father is the invisible of the Son”—not that the Son is unable to reveal everything concerning the Father, that something *must* remain invisible or beyond our grasp; rather the Son guards and administers the Father’s invisibility and incomprehensibility, gradually revealing the Father to the human race to the measure that they are capable, so that we continue to grow in communion with God, and yet never come to despise God, falling into death, thinking we know all there is to know (cf. *AH* 4.20.7).

3-C

the First-born of all creation; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him

It is easy, in the light of the Arian controversy, and by referring to Prov 8:22ff, to interpret the title “First-born” in a purely temporal sense: the birth of the Son, prior to His

activity in creation. However, the hymn as a whole is primarily concerned to emphasize the superiority of Christ over all creation, rather than with the "pre-existence" of Jesus Christ. The title "First-born," both in the OT and in the NT, is a designation of rank: the one who inherits all. In a passage already referred to in section 1-A, Ps 89:27 (LXX 88:28), it is said concerning the Davidic king that he will be Son of the God Who promises that "I will make him the First-born, the highest of the kings of the earth." Similarly in Heb 1:5-6, which repeats many of the themes referred to in Col 1:13-14.

Of the First-born this section begins by asserting that all things (τὰ πάντα—a technical term for the universe, again emphasizing the universality of the realm of the Son) were created (ἔκτισθη— aorist) in Him, and concludes by stating that all things were created (ἔκτισται— perfect) through and to/for Him. The importance of this change of tense is that it underlines two aspects or dimensions of God's creative activity: the "perfective aspect" of the aorist implies the completed and unique nature of that activity; whilst the "stative aspect" of the perfect indicates the givenness of this state of affairs, in this case resulting from a previous action and implying some kind of continued duration of its effects.¹⁰ These two dimensions are generally interpreted as "creation" and "redemption" respectively, and then the continuity of the creative activity of God in both is underscored. In this way it is demonstrated that "redemption" is not simply an *ad hoc* measure of God, in response to the Fall, but has always been envisioned as the very purpose of creation itself, and that, therefore, creation can never be thought of in itself, without reference to the One who was to come (cf. Rom 5:14), the Messiah, the Davidic king and the First-born beloved Son of God, in the terms of the Colossians passage we have discussed so far. This was the truth maintained by Duns Scotus against Aquinas. But as the Colossians passage points out, the moment at which the creation was thus realized is not that of the Incarnation, but the Cross (in the parallel between A and A') and Resurrection (C-C'): it is through the (blood of the) Cross that we are delivered from the dominion of darkness and transferred to

¹⁰Cf. S. Porter, *Idioms of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, 1994), 21-2.

the kingdom of the beloved Son, the First-born from the dead, having redemption and forgiveness in the peace and reconciliation established by God through His Son.¹¹

Barth (as others) takes the creative activity described by the aorist to refer to the "unique occurrence at and as the beginning of history," and suggests that the activity described by the perfect does "not permit this unique creative act of God to be concluded in the far-distant past; rather it allows it to continue, and thus it includes the work of the Messiah who has become man. He and his work become a part of, and the real purpose for, the act of creation by God."¹² However, whilst taking these descriptions of God's creative activity in and through Jesus Christ to refer, on the one hand, to the historical origins of the world, and, on the other, to the economy of redemption, facilitates how one can understand these two "events" as part of one and the same continuing activity of the selfsame God, and so glimpse the inner "cohesiveness between creation and redemption in the OT," it nevertheless raises the awkward question of "how one can consider the Kingship of Christ since creation and simultaneously through his death on the cross."¹³ Barth's answer is based on the premise that the fulfilment of the essential purpose of God's creative activity lies in the future, a time, that is, subsequent to the initial creation itself. Throughout the OT the kingdom of Yahweh can be spoken of as a present reality, and, without contradiction, as a futural expectation. Thus:

It is the *manifestation* of the status of Yahweh as king that is awaited. *This* is the future, according to the declarations of the hymn, that has become real in the crucifixion, for which in turn the resurrection is the proof even more than the creation. (*Ibid.*, p. 245)

Barth is indeed right to assert that, according to Colossians, this Kingdom "becomes real in the crucifixion," and that therefore the resurrection is a surer proof of this than creation itself. But is it not possible to go one step further, to locate the cre-

¹¹Forcefully stated by Barth, *ibid.*, 244-5.

¹²*Ibid.*, 198-9.

¹³*Ibid.*, 245.

ative activity referred to in v.16 to the crucifixion and resurrection, the passion itself?

It is commonly accepted that the Yahwist creation account and, even more so, that of the Priestly writer, are not meant as historically accurate descriptions of primal history. In the case of the Yahwist, the aim was to legitimate the united kingdom by providing a story of its origins in absolute terms, i.e., by presenting its own God, Yahweh, as the creator.¹⁴ Similarly, the concern of the Priestly writer was to emphasize the unique, monotheistic, transcendence of God, and hence His absolute rule: One who is not even bound by time and space, for He created them.¹⁵ This recognition does not "dehistoricize" the Genesis accounts, for it has not invested them with "historicity"; it recognizes that they are meant as affirmations about God, not about the history of creation. The historical dimension of God's creative activity is located rather, and more precisely, in His dealings with Israel, based, as we saw earlier, in the specific event of the Exodus, God's free election, and subsequent fashioning, of His people.¹⁶ The locating of this creative activity of God in the shaping of His people is radicalized in the fourth Servant Hymn from Deutero-Isaiah, a text which, as we have seen above, contributes much to the understanding of the background for the assertions made in Col 1:13-20. Through his voluntary silence and submission, the servant gives God the freedom to act absolutely (as in the Priestly creation account), and more specifically (according to the chiasmic center of the Hymns¹⁷) to exalt the one who was wounded for our sins.

In contrast to Israel's habitual disobedience "forcing" the Lord's hand, through the servant's perfect obedience God is now given the opportunity to do things completely his way, without interference, from be-

¹⁴Cf. P. Tarazi, *Historical Traditions* (New York: SVS Press, 1991), 63.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 135-6.

¹⁶"Not only did He *not* build Jerusalem; not only was He *against* the appointment of a king, but His 'beginnings' as Yahweh did *not* extend into mythological times. Rather they were *historical*, i.e., linked to an event in the 13th century B.C." *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷Cf. P. Tarazi, *Prophetic Traditions* (New York: SVS Press, 1994), 179-180.

ginning to end. In other words, this servant would offer God an absolutely obstruction-free “void” within the realm of the human world and history, that he may act as the “Creator *ex nihilo*” of a new world, his world, the way he wants it . . .¹⁸

As we have seen, vv.13-20 of the first chapter of Colossians speak of Christ in terminology that can only be fully understood against the background of the Exodus, the continuing history of the relationship between God and His people, and their eschatological expectations: Jesus is praised as the beloved Son of God, into whose messianic kingdom we have been transferred, delivered from the dominion of darkness, and in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. Thus it seems that section 3-C functions similarly to the Yahwist and Priestly accounts of creation: to proclaim the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ, the “First-born of creation,” that is, the One in and through whom God was fully able to create—“*ex nihilo*.” Moreover, the means of this creation is, through the chiotic parallel (C-C’), referred specifically to the resurrection, arrived at through the Cross and the blood shed on it, i.e., to the death of Christ as the Suffering Servant. In this perspective, the aorist, ἐκτίσθη, refers to the “once for all” crucifixion and resurrection of the Son of God, while the perfect, ἔκτισται, indicates the continuing creativity of God in and through the passion of His Son. It is the resurrection, the fact that Jesus is “the First-born from the dead,” according to the chiotic parallel in 7-C’, which demonstrates that this is indeed the kingdom which God has initiated—this “proof,” as Barth noted, is more important than the creation itself.¹⁹

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁹If the creative activity of Christ [or of God in Christ], spoken of here, is to be located in the crucifixion and resurrection, rather than in “primal time” or at the beginning of chronological time, this would imply that “Biblical typology” be understood as a literary device, rather than a means of tying together different historical events as a “salvation history.” K. J. Woollcombe makes this suggestive distinction: “Typology considered as a method of exegesis, may be defined as the establishment of historical connexions between certain events, persons or things in the Old Testament and similar events, persons or things in the New Testament. Considered as a method of writing, it may be defined as the description of an event, person or thing in the New Testament in terms borrowed from the description of its

The various subclauses of v.16 are clearly meant to emphasize the universality of the reign of Christ. C. F. Burney makes the interesting suggestion that the prepositions used in v.16 (in, by, for), followed by the various affirmations made in vv.17-18 (Christ is the beginning, sum total, Head, First-born), are based upon a Rabbinic exegesis of the first two words of Genesis (*b-re'shit*) through the prism of Prov 8:22.²⁰

4-D

He is before all things and in Him all things hold stronger

The claim that Jesus Christ is "before (πρὸ) all things" can be taken in two ways: either as a temporal assertion, or as an affirmation of supremacy. Whilst πρὸ is used, both in the LXX and in the NT, in a temporal sense, it is not so used either in the Prologue of John or in Phil 2:5-11. Moreover, the preposition πρὸ, used in a temporal sense, would require a past tense. The use of the present tense, "He *is* before all," is reminiscent of Jn 8:58, "Before (πρὶν) Abraham was I AM," although the latter absolute use of εἶστίν would seem to refer to the divine name (as also Phil 2:5-11), which is not done in Colossians. Given the emphasis of the first three sections, and the passage as a whole, it seems preferable, then, to understand this statement as an affirmation of the supremacy of Jesus. For this reason Barth prefers to translate the clause as "He reigns over all things."

prototypical counterpart in the Old Testament." "The Biblical Origins and Patristic Development of Typology," in *Essays on Typology* ed. G.W.H. Lampe (1957), 39-40. I would suggest that the creative activity ascribed to Christ in Colossians (located in the Passion) is based upon its "prototypical counterpart" of the creative activity ascribed to God by the Yahwist and the Priestly writer—and that each of these are literary means, or "methods of writing," which function to ascribe universal supremacy to the One concerned. The alternative, "exegetical" understanding of typology based upon *Heilsgeschichte*, in which historical persons and events are invested with a prophetic significance, and in which Christ's Incarnation stands at the center, as the purpose of creation and history, giving meaning to the whole, seems to be based in the nineteenth-century Erlangen School, and especially Joh. Chr. K. von Hoffman, cf. *Weissagung und Erfüllung* (1841, 1844), esp. p. 184.

²⁰"Christ as the APXH of Creation," *JTS*, 27 (1925), 160-77.

The second clause of section 4-D, "all things hold together in Him," uses a verb συνίστημι, which has only 2 Pet 3:5 as a direct parallel. There it refers to the preservation of all creation by the Word of God. Barth (unlike Lohse) discounts, because of the lack of evidence, a possible Stoic-Alexandrine background for the term, and points to parallels in Wis 1:7 and Sir 43:26: "by His Word all things hold together."

However, following the chiac structure, it would seem that both clauses in 4-D are to be explained by, and themselves expand, 6-D': "He is the ἀρχή." Christ, through whose crucifion we have been reconciled to God, in peace and with forgiveness, is the universal Lord (before all — "reigns over all") and the One through whom and in whom God is creatively active, and as such is both the "source" (ἀρχή) of our fellowship with God and the principle or locus of that fellowship: the new creation subsists in Him. A further explanation of this is given in Col 2:19, as we will see in the next section.

5-E

He is the Head of the body, the Church

This section is the chiac center of the passage. It uses a familiar Pauline image for Christ, that of the "head," although unlike 1 Cor 12, the image of the head and body is used in Colossians specifically in terms of the relationship of the Church to Christ, and not of the community itself as a body (cf. Eph 1:22-3).²¹

In its immediate context, this term picks up another dimension of the title ἀρχή given to Christ in 6-D', and one which helps to explain the clause in 4-D that "all things hold together in Him." In Col 2:19 we are urged to hold onto Christ, as the head, "from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God."

²¹This difference is best explained in terms of the different contexts of the letters, rather than by discarding as unpauline the phrase, "of the Church" (cf. ftn. 1), or relegating the letter to a deutero-pauline status, cf. E. Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians* (Augsburg, 1982), 57-60.

In terms of the whole passage, 5-E explains the relationship between Jesus Christ and the whole of creation more precisely. As we have seen it so far, the emphasis has been on the supremacy of Jesus Christ in creation, as the Son of God, the First-born, the Image of God, and the Messianic King. The central characteristic of this supremacy is now asserted to be that of headship over the body, a body ($\tau\acute{\alpha}$ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\alpha$ in the terms of the preceding sections) which, under this headship, is now described as the Church. The Church is, therefore, creation in so far as it has been (re)created and reconciled to God in Christ its head (cf. v.20). But, most importantly, this status of the recreated world as Church, under the headship of Jesus Christ, is achieved by integrating creation into the historically developing relationship between God and Israel—the Exodus, the monarchy, and its eschatological expectations—all of which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ; and so through Him everyone has the possibility of being “delivered from darkness,” and brought into the kingdom of the Son of God, possessing the expected redemption and forgiveness.²² Attempting to abstract a dogmatic system out of this history, and then translate this theology into a different milieu, would deprive the movement of its reality and content.

6-D'

He is the *arche*

In elegant simplicity this section recapitulates many of the themes that have been treated in 4-D and 5-E. With the various

²²If one is to take seriously the distinction drawn earlier between typology as a method of writing, on the one hand, and as a method of exegesis based on *Heilsgeschichte*, on the other, a further word needs to be said concerning the place of Jesus Christ, as the Head, and the Church, as His body, as the culmination and definitive Word of God to His people Israel. I suggested earlier that the creative work of God in Jesus Christ should be referred to the Cross, as a literary means of confessing His supremacy in all things (typologically based on the Yahwist and Priestly creation accounts), and to His resurrection, as First-born from the dead, as the surety of God's work. If this is indeed so, then one must also say that the “History of Salvation” is also *created* at that point, in that the activity of God in Jesus Christ on the Cross, and guaranteed by the Resurrection, is His definitive Word which orders all things, and acts as a prism through

dimensions and aspects of the Headship and Lordship of Jesus Christ that these sections have indicated, it is difficult to know how to translate the Greek term ἀρχή. Given the dominance, in this whole passage, of imperial imagery focused, through the Cross, on the crucified and risen Christ, it is interesting to note St Irenaeus' interpretation of Is 9:5 (LXX): "Unto us a Son is given, and the government (ἀρχή) will be upon His shoulder." According to Irenaeus, these words "refer, allegorically, to the Cross, upon which His shoulders were nailed; for that which was and is a reproach for Him and, through Him, for us, the Cross, that, he says, is His government, which is a sign of His reign (or: kingdom)."²³ It is through the Cross that Christ reigns, and reigning upon this throne, He is indeed the ἀρχή.

7-C'

First-born from the dead, that in everything He might be pre-eminent

This section, beginning with the term "First-born," immediately recalls section 3-C. I suggested in my comments to 3-C, that the "creative activity" and "redemptive activity" of Jesus Christ should not be thought of as chronologically sequential, but that both are wrought through the Cross. This would imply that the two designations, "First-born of all creation" and "First-born from the dead," affirm the same fact, the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ ("that in everything He might be preeminent"), with, perhaps, the difference that the latter title, implying His resurrection, stands surety, and is the basis, for the former. It is, according to Rom 1:4, through the resurrection that Jesus Christ was "designated Son of God in

which the purpose of the continuing activity of God can be discerned—in much the same way that the final chapter of a novel can be said to create the novel by drawing all the preceding chapters and threads together into one work. This, perhaps, is the essential theological rationale for the closure of the canon of Scripture—a canon whose key is then the crucified and risen Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Through this prism, history can be viewed as "Salvation History," and this then forms the basis for a typological method of exegesis.

²³*Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 56, PO 12.5, 702.

power": through the crucifixion and resurrection Jesus Christ is recognized and acknowledged as the Son of God, and hence proclaimed to be the "First-born of all creation."²⁴

8-B'

For in Him [God] was pleased to let all fullness dwell

The Greek of this section is somewhat obscure; but it seems to make most sense to take God as the subject of the verb "to be pleased," and to connect the verb "to dwell" with the preposition "in."²⁵ The terminology of this section is once again best explained in terms of the OT. In the LXX κατοικέω is frequently used to describe the dwelling of the presence of God on the earth, on Mt Sinai, and the Temple. In Ps 68:16 (LXX 67:17), κατοικέω is combined with εὐδοκέω in a manner very close to Col 1.19; and in the Targumim, this vocabulary is further employed for the *shekinah* of God.²⁶ The word πλήρωμα, on the other hand, although it later became a central term and concept in Gnosticism, is not used in Scripture outside of Colossians. However, the verb, "to fill," and adjective, "full," are frequently used in respect to the presence or glory of God. That the word πλήρωμα does indeed refer to the presence of God is indicated by its use in Col 2:9: "For in Him [Christ], the πλήρωμα of divinity (τῆς θεότητος) dwells bodily." The fullness of divinity dwells tangibly in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Moreover, as v.19 states, it is *all* the pleroma that dwells in Christ: it does not, then, dwell anywhere else. It is, therefore, in Jesus Christ, and *only* in Him, that we actually see God *bodily*, in the flesh. This section, therefore, explains the "how" of its chiasmic antecedent, 2-B: Christ is the "image of the invisible God."

²⁴Cf. Barth, *ibid.*, 209-10.

²⁵Cf. *ibid.*, 210-212.

²⁶Cf. *ibid.*, 212.

9-A'

And through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His Cross.

In this final section we get the “key” to the whole passage, which explains “how” what has been proclaimed was brought about: the reconciliation and peace established “by the blood of His Cross.” This expression is both singular and curious. The mention of blood invokes both a covenantal and sacrificial dimension. The phrase itself is similar to the “blood of the covenant” (cf. Ex 24:8; Mt 26:28; Heb 9:20, etc.). Barth argues that the mention of blood in v.20 is simply used to denote a violent death (cf. Mt 27:25, etc.), and that therefore the theme of sacrifice is not prominent in Colossians.²⁷ However, given the extent to which the whole passage, vv.13-20, is based upon the history of Israel, culminating in Jesus Christ, it would seem most appropriate to understand the phrase “the blood of His Cross” in terms of sacrifice and covenant: creating a new, universal (τὰ πάντα . . . “whether on earth or in the heavens”) covenant of peace. In the eschatological expectancy of Israel, the return of the Davidic King in the Messiah was connected with the establishment of peace (cf. Is 9:6ff, Mic 5:1-5a). Thus this peace is not simply the absence of strife and war, but rather the correlate of the universal dominion of Christ.

These few verses, 13-20, bring together in an extraordinary fashion all the major themes, from throughout Scripture, to explain what God has done in Christ, and thereby exalt Christ as the universal Lord. I hope to have shown just how essential vv.13-14 are for a full understanding of the passage, and how the whole passage can be understood in an integrated fashion through a chiastic analysis. The passage is one of the most profound, and subtle, Christological statements to be found in the whole of the NT. If there is one facet which characterizes these verses, it is given in v.20, as the key to the whole passage (paralleling what I have suggested for the relationship between, on the one hand, the unique key or event which “con-

²⁷*Ibid.*, 217-8.

stitutes" salvation history and through which history can be seen as such, and, on the other hand, typology, both as a method of writing, the "construction" of this salvation history, and as the method of exegesis based upon this edifice): all the Christological assertions are based upon and through "the blood of the Cross." In this, the epistle shows its profoundly Pauline character:

For I decided to know nothing among you except
Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (1 Cor 2:2)



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