

WISDOM IN COL 1:15–20: CONTRIBUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

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Colossians 1:15–20 has been the occasion of voluminous literature and scholarly attention. Questions surrounding the formal structure, composition, and sources of the Christological affirmations of the passage are continually rehashed, with each offering frequently differing from those preceding it on virtually each of the noted heads. Nevertheless we will examine the passage once again.

The purpose of this study will be to examine the viability of wisdom as a backdrop, or a hermeneutical lens of sorts, for the form, content, and categories of thought employed in Col 1:15–20. This is not to argue for direct literary reliance of the author(s) of the epistle/pericope, or even for conscious literary influence, but rather to suggest that wisdom categories and genres so prevalent in first-century Judaism contributed to the religious framework of Paul so that these data would naturally be present in his concept bank at the time of composition. Put more succinctly, this discussion will attempt to show that wisdom contributes to the fabric of thought out of which the presentation flows.

This discussion will not be an exegetical treatment of the passage, though that would be a valuable approach to take. Rather, in focus here will be the broader issues of theological emphasis with an eye toward the significance of this formulation to Paul's point in the passage. Due to the proliferation of literature on our text, only a representative sampling of positions can be given in the space of this discussion. Attention will be directed to three issues: formal structure, the source of the passage, and the categories of thought utilized in the pericope.

I. FORMAL STRUCTURE

1. *Hymn/liturgical unit.* The majority opinion among scholars is that the passage is hymnic or liturgical in form. In terms of its hymnic structure, however, the basis of agreement crumbles. Stemming from the work of E. Norden,¹ scholarship has focused attention upon analysis of the poetic structure of Col 1:15–20. But it was from C. Masson's reconstruction of the

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¹ E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (4th ed.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956) 250–254.

hymn that more recent study has gained its impetus. Masson argues that the hymn, more Semitic than Greek in its parallelism, consists of five strophes of four lines each (v. 18a being an interpolation into the primitive hymn).² J. M. Robinson suggests that the hymn consists of two units that have been conflated and supplemented with lists of *στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου* and allusions to the Church and the cross.³ P. Ellingworth opts for a structure of two strophes (vv. 15–17 and 18–20, with v. 18a inserted by the author of Ephesians),⁴ as do R. P. Martin and J.-N. Alletti⁵ (vv. 15–18a and 18b–20). Several scholars see two strophes of three lines each with an intermediate strophe (vv. 17–18a) and significant commentary inserted by the author of the epistle.⁶ Of additional note is the proposal put forth by S. M. Baugh and N. T. Wright, who see the poetic structure in terms of simple chiasmus rather than in strophic delineation.⁷ E. Lohse, arguing for the improbability that a primitive Christian hymn would have regularly constructed verses and strophes, sees the song consisting of two unevenly constructed strophes with significant editorial insertions.⁸

2. *Midrash*. C. F. Burney, in an important if somewhat overlooked article,⁹ proffered the thesis that in Col 1:16–18 Paul was giving an elaborate midrashic exposition of the first word in Gen 1:1 (בראשית) as it had come to be connected with ראשית as applied to personified wisdom in Prov 8:22, to which Col 1:15 is an obvious allusion (προτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως). It is to be noted that Burney's thesis has garnered support in more recent scholarship. Of special recognition in this regard is W. D. Davies, who furthered

² C. Masson, *L'épître de Saint Paul aux Colossiens* (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1950) 105.

³ J. M. Robinson, "A Formal Analysis of Col. 1:15–20," *JBL* 76 (1957) 284–286.

⁴ P. Ellingworth, "Col. 1:15–20 and Its Context," *ExpTim* 73 (May 1962) 252–253.

⁵ R. P. Martin, "An Early Christian Hymn," *EvQ* 36 (October–December 1964) 196–197; J.-N. Alletti, *Colossiens 1,15–20: Genre et exégèse du Texte Fonction de la Thématique Sapientielle* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981).

⁶ D. von Allmen, "Reconciliation du Monde et Christologie Cosmique de II Cor. 5:14–21 à Col. 1:15–23," *RHPR* 48 (1968) 39; R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973) 168–178; E. Schweizer, "Die Kirche als Lieb Christi in den paulinischen Antilegomena," *Neotestamentica* (ed. Schweizer; Zürich: Zwingli, 1963) 293–316; "Lord of the Nations," *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* 13 (1972) 13–21; "Christ in the Letter to the Colossians," *RevExp* 70 (1973) 451–467; "Col. 1:15–20," *RevExp* 87 (1990) 98–99; W. McCown, "The Hymnic Structure of Col. 1:15–20," *EvQ* 51 (July–September 1979) 158–161. While most of these scholars hold to a bistrophic arrangement with an intermediate stanza and several editorial insertions into the hymn ("the church" and the word about the cross), McCown argues that the text as it stands was quoted verbatim. It should be noted that Martin advocated this arrangement in *Colossians and Philemon* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1974) 55–57.

⁷ S. M. Baugh, "The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15–20," *WTJ* 47 (1985) 235–242; N. T. Wright, "Poetry and Theology in Col. 1:15–20," *NTS* 36 (1990) 449; *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 64–66.

⁸ E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 42–44.

⁹ C. F. Burney, "Christ as the APXH of Creation," *JTS* 27 (1926) 160–177. Cf. also A. Feuillet, "La Création de l'Univers 'Dans le Christ' d'après l'Épître aux Colossiens (1.16a)," *NTS* 12 (October 1965) 4–7; M. H. Scharlemann, "Scope of the Redemptive Task," *CTM* 36 (April 1965) 294–296; C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1957) 61–62.

Burney's work by relating it to the rabbinic background of Paul's thought.¹⁰ F. Manns suggests that the *Sitz* of this midrash was that of Passover, suggesting that the possibility of Col 1:15–20 being a paschal hymn gave rise to significant reaction against this process from Jews.¹¹ Wright has modified Burney's thesis to take into account the broader context of Jewish thought.¹²

3. *Other suggestions.* J. C. O'Neill¹³ has reacted against the idea that the author of the epistle cited an extant hymn (arguing that the passage fails all of his criteria for identification of the passage as liturgical) or that the author was a creative theologian who drew from time to time on a store of theological ideas that he made his own. Rather, he argues that the author has "put together a great number of distinct but related statements which already existed in his sacred traditional sources."¹⁴ In a more moderating tone, several scholars have classified the passage as rhythmic prose, highlighting the poetic elements of the hymn while noting that no established forms of either Hebrew or Greek poetry are recognized.¹⁵

II. SOURCE OF THE PASSAGE

While discussion of this issue is closely related to the issue of categories of thought behind the passage, it will be addressed separately for simplicity's sake.

1. *Pre-Christian composition.* R. Bultmann has attributed the origins of the passage to pre-Christian gnosticism, primarily to a gnostic-redeemer myth, "which the author [of Colossians] has rather strangely accommodated to the Christian tradition by his editing of it."¹⁶ E. Käsemann follows suit, adding that in focus is the archetypal-man myth, which is indicated by the convergence of Sophia and Adam defined by the predicate *πρωτότοκος*, an image that, once it became known to Jewish thought, was retrojected quickly back into tradition.¹⁷ R. S. Barbour and J. H. Burtness, attributing the error at Colosse to an incipient gnosticism, have argued for the appropriation and modification of a hymn of gnostic origin for polemical purposes.¹⁸

¹⁰ W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (3d ed.; London: SPCK, 1970) 151–152.

¹¹ F. Manns, "Col. 1:15–20: Midrash chrétien de Gen. 1:1," *RevScRel* 53 (1979) 100–110.

¹² Wright, "Poetry" 455–458.

¹³ J. C. O'Neill, "The Source of the Christology in Colossians," *NTS* 26 (1980) 87–100.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 87.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problem Pt. 2: The Christ Hymn of Col. 1:15–20," *BSac* 41 (April–June 1984) 99–111. In the course of his discussion, however, Bruce examines the passage by means of strophic delineation. Cf. also F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 55–56; M. J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 41–42; P. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987) 32–37.

¹⁶ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1951) 1.176.

¹⁷ E. Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1964) 155–159.

¹⁸ R. S. Barbour, "Salvation and Cosmology: The Setting of the Epistle to the Colossians," *SJT* 20 (1967) 257–271; J. H. Burtness, "All the Fulness," *Dialog* 3 (Autumn 1964) 257–263.

2. *Pre-Pauline Christian composition.* Martin's conclusion is representative of this position: "[Colossians 1:15–20] embodies an early Christian tribute, set in hymnic form, to the Church's Lord, which the writer borrows from the liturgical praxis which was familiar both to himself and his readers."¹⁹ Robinson and D. von Allmen similarly hold that the hymn was appropriated from a Christian context but has been modified according to the author's purposes.²⁰ E. Schweizer vividly likens additions to the original pre-Pauline form of the hymn to the case in which a preacher paraphrases a Biblical passage familiar to the audience along with the preacher's own explanatory comments.²¹

3. *Pauline composition.* In addition to those listed above who viewed the passage as a midrashic exposition from the mind of Paul, others have seen the passage as from the thought of the author of the epistle. L. Helyer, on the basis of affinity of the theology in the passage with that found in the uncontested Pauline letters, argues that the simplest solution is to attribute authorship to Paul.²² O'Neill, as noted above, has argued for a non-liturgical presentation of distinct statements flowing from the mind of the author.

4. *Later redaction into the epistle.* Masson, on the basis of affinity of thought with Eph 1:15–23, sees Col 1:15–20 as a later redactional insertion into the letter by the author of Ephesians.²³ B. Vawter has presented a more extensive redactional analysis of the passage.²⁴ He sees two stages of redaction in the final form of the epistle. The earlier stage consisted of the inclusion of vv. 12–14 (which are non-Pauline) in preparation for the eventual inclusion of vv. 15–20 (non-Pauline), which is the later stage. He concludes:

We believe that the author of Colossians took at a second stage, and as basically acceptable, a christological hymn that had already been redacted in a direction that he could only choose to pursue to its final conclusions, which had been firmly set within the limits of an historical concept of salvation. In making use of what was presumably the Colossians' own liturgy he did not intend to deny a theology which he regarded as heterodox but to modify it with provisions he thought necessary or at least highly desirable.²⁵

¹⁹ Martin, "Hymn" 199–200; cf. also Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* 65–66; Ellingworth, "Col. 1:15–20" 252–253; Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence* 168–178; Bruce, *Colossians* 56.

²⁰ Robinson, "Analysis" 285; von Allmen, "Reconciliation" 39–40. P. Pokorný, *Colossians: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 64, sees the hymn as existing prior to the composition of Colossians but later than the major letters of Paul, originating from a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian context.

²¹ Schweizer, "Christ" 451–452.

²² L. Helyer, "Col. 1:15–20: Pre-Pauline or Pauline?", *JETS* 26 (1983) 167–180. Helyer further questions whether Paul would sanction by his appropriation a hymn that spoke of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ apart from the cross. Cf. also L. Helyer, "Cosmic Christology and Col. 1:15–20," *JETS* 37 (1994) 235; O'Brien, *Colossians* 40–42.

²³ Masson, *Colossiens* 106.

²⁴ B. Vawter, "Colossians Hymn and the Principle of Redaction," *CBQ* 33 (1971) 62–81.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 78. Vawter cites the references to the Church (v. 18) and to the cross (v. 20) as redactional activity on the hymn itself.

III. CATEGORIES OF THOUGHT

While the categories adopted here (Hellenistic, second-Adam, wisdom) may appear to overlap or to oversimplify the situation, they will suffice for the scope of this discussion.

1. *Hellenistic thought.* The positions of Bultmann and Käsemann (gnostic-redeemer myth) have been cited above, as has that of Barbour. J. Fossum, however, has attacked the view that a gnostic-redeemer myth underlies Col 1:15–20 on the basis of a lack of evidence that such a myth existed before the time of Mani. Rather, he posits influence to the common Jewish matrix out of which both Christianity and gnosticism emerged, especially that of Jewish mysticism. He cites several parallels to Jewish mystical texts, Nag Hammadi documents, and Hermetic writings to argue that Col 1:15–20 depicts an *anthrōpos* Christology.²⁶ F. B. Craddock, following the lead of H. Hegermann, asserts that the passage reflects the myth of a preexistent *Schöpfungsmittler* with whom Jesus had been identified within one generation after Golgotha (1 Cor 8:6). Craddock disagrees with Hegermann's view that Col 1:15–20 is a direct appropriation from Philonic-stoic thought. Rather, he suggests a mediating myth form, that of the *Urmensch*.²⁷

2. *Second Adam.* H. Ridderbos is perhaps the best example of one who dogmatically ascribes the background of Col 1:15–20 to Jesus Christ as the second Adam to the exclusion of the other categories of thought considered here.²⁸ References to Christ as the "image" of God, as "firstborn" of all creation, and as "firstborn" from the dead constitute obvious allusions to Genesis 1. The sense of depicting Christ as the second Adam in Colossians 1, however, differs from that of 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5. In the latter references Christ is described as the second Adam who follows the first in the order of redemptive history. In Colossians 1, however, the second Adam is antecedent to the first. What Ridderbos proposes is a double Adamitic significance to Christ, in which the redemptive significance of Christ as the second Adam is completed by recognition of Christ as the preexistent Son of God.

3. *Wisdom.* At this stage of the discussion it will suffice to reference several scholars who see wisdom as the fabric of thought from which Col 1:15–20 flows, since the next section will seek to develop this further. Certainly those who follow Burney's midrashic hypothesis ascribe the categories of thought to wisdom,²⁹ as do several others who posit other formal

²⁶ J. Fossum, "Col. 1:15–18a in the Light of Jewish Mysticism and Gnosticism," *NTS* 35 (1989) 183–201.

²⁷ F. B. Craddock, "All Things in Him: A Critical Note on Col. 1:15–20," *NTS* 12 (October 1965) 78–80.

²⁸ H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 78–85.

²⁹ Burney, "APXH" 175–176; Davies, *Paul* 150–152; Feuillet, "Création" 4–7; Manns, "Col. 1:15–20"; Wright, "Poetry" 455–457 (though he modifies Burney to allow for a broader scope of Jewish thought); *Colossians* 66–68; Moule, *Colossians* 58.

structures.³⁰ T. F. Glasson argues lexically for Sir 24:6 as the background for Col 1:18.³¹ Masson and Helyer see a convergence of wisdom with Adam categories.³² E. Schüssler Fiorenza sees the hymn as a trajectory of reflective mythology, a theology that employs mythical materials and concepts whose roots are in wisdom mythology.³³ Several others see an interweaving of several themes (wisdom, *tôrâ*, *logos*, Adam, Israel) in the passage, as is typical of Jewish exegesis in general and Jewish wisdom speculation in particular.³⁴

IV. AN OBSERVATION ON THIS SURVEY

The foregoing survey of scholarly investigation into Col 1:15–20, brief though it was, has revealed a wide divergence of opinion regarding the form, composition, and background to the passage. It often appears that this wide variety of thought is due to rather myopic approaches to the pericope. Often discussions focusing on poetic structure fail to give adequate attention to the categories of thought employed, and vice versa. It will be the intention of the remainder of this discussion to determine if the rubric of wisdom can bridge form to content, and to examine the contribution of this passage to Pauline thought, if only in very sketchy ways.

V. COLOSSIANS 1:15–20 AND WISDOM CATEGORIES

It will be the purpose of this section to illustrate the affinities of Col 1:15–20 with the categories of thought present in the Jewish wisdom tradition and to identify the significance of these categories for Paul's presentation in this passage.

1. *Parallels to wisdom thought in Col 1:15–20.* Several parallels between Col 1:15–20 and wisdom exist, both in terminological and conceptual areas. Verse 15: εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ (Wis 7:26; Philo *Leg. All.* 1.43); πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως (Prov 8:22, 25; Sir 1:4; 24:9; Wis 9:9; Philo *Quaest. in Gn.* 4.97; *Virt.* 62; *Ebr.* 30–31). Verse 16: ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα (Prov 8:27–30; Sir 1:4; 24:9; 43:26; Wis 7:22; Philo *Quis Her.* 189, 199; *Fug.* 109, 112; *Quaest. in Gn.* 2.118). Verse 17: πρὸ πάντων (Prov 8:27–30; Sir 1:4; 24:9); τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν (Sir 43:26; Wis 1:7; 7:22–25, 27; 8:1). Verse 18: εἰκὼν/πρωτότοκος

³⁰ A. Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958) 158–159; Aletti, *Colossians*; Bruce, *Colossians* 56; Pokorný, *Colossians* 68; O'Brien, *Colossians* 37–40.

³¹ T. F. Glasson, "Colossians 1:18, 15 and Sirach 24," *NovT* 11 (1969) 154–155.

³² Masson, *Colossians* 98–101; L. Helyer, "Arius Revisited: The Firstborn over All Creation (Col 1:15)," *JETS* 31 (1988) 161; E. J. Schnabel, *Law and Wisdom from Ben Sira to Paul* (WUNT; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1985) 252–253.

³³ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "Wisdom Mythology and the Christological Hymns of the New Testament," *Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. R. L. Wilken; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1975) 17–42.

³⁴ T. E. Pollard, "Colossians 1:12–20: a Reconsideration," *NTS* 27 (July 1981) 574–575; Lohse, *Colossians* 45–46; Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence* 168–178.

(see parallels to v. 15). Verse 19: πλήρωμα (Prov 8:12–14; Bar 3:38; Sir 24:4–11). Verse 20: The message of reconciliation can be seen to recall the role of wisdom in redemptive history in Wis 10:1–12:17. Indeed, the flow of thought of the whole passage encapsulates the sum of what can be said of the depiction of wisdom in Jewish wisdom thought: Wisdom, active in creation, is also active in redemption.

At the same time there are predications of Christ that appear in the hymn that do not appear in conjunction with wisdom. In v. 16 Christ is described not only as the mediator of all creation but also as its goal (εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται), a predication absent from Jewish characterizations of wisdom. Moreover the references to the death (v. 20) and resurrection (v. 18) of Christ have no precise parallel in Jewish wisdom speculation. The depiction closest to this predication is that of the descent, rejection and ascension of wisdom in *1 Enoch* 42. Rather than weakening the argument that Paul here is ascribing predications of wisdom to Jesus Christ it demonstrates that Paul creatively adopts and adapts Jewish wisdom traditions in his depictions of Christ.³⁵

2. *Contextual support for wisdom in Col 1:15–20.* Two considerations regarding the place of Col 1:15–20 in the overall context of the epistle lend credibility to the suggestion that wisdom categories are prominent in the pericope. The first consideration is the wisdom frame that forms an inclusio for our passage. In 1:9 Paul prays that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. The convergence of wisdom and spirituality in the context of knowledge of the divine will is reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 1–4. In Col 2:2–3 Paul speaks of Christ as the mystery of God, in whom are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Again, the association of Christ, wisdom, and the divine plan of salvation recalls several themes in 1 Corinthians 1–4. Moreover the clustering of the terms wisdom, treasure, knowledge, understanding and discernment are found in several Jewish wisdom contexts (Prov 2:3–6 [LXX]; Sir 1:5; Bar 3:15; Wis 7:14; Isa 45:3 [LXX]; *1 Enoch* 46:3). The focus on wisdom in this framing, especially in the noted similarities to 1 Corinthians 1–4, provides one contextual support for seeing wisdom categories in Col 1:15–20.

The second contextual factor is the following parenetic emphasis in the epistle. As in 1 Corinthians, a wisdom discussion is followed by exhortation on how to live in light of the theological teaching just provided (Col 3:1–4:6). Stated another way, Paul follows his discussion of wisdom with guidelines for living in accordance with the divine order—namely, Christ. This is especially pertinent in Paul's discussion of the idolatrous tendencies of some Colossians (2:6–23). Aletti has suggested that Paul combats these tendencies

³⁵ This is analogous to Paul's appropriation of Jewish wisdom traditions in his depictions of Christ in 1 Corinthians 1–4; 8:6. See J. S. Lamp, *Christ Jesus, Wisdom, and Spirituality: An Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in Light of Jewish Wisdom Traditions* (dissertation; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995).

by casting Christ in terms previously applied to personified wisdom, the ultimate anti-idolatry figure in Jewish thought (Wisdom 13–15).³⁶ The philosophy (Col 2:8) based on these principles may appear to be wisdom (2:23), but true wisdom is found in the Christ with whom the Colossians died to the influences of such things. Dying to this world's wisdom aligns one with the true wisdom of God, the crucified and risen Lord.

3. *Christological significance of wisdom categories in Col 1:15–20.* Colossians 1:15–20 has been mined for theological significance, especially in terms of Christological expression, by many scholars. One example of such, to be mentioned especially for its pertinence to the present discussion, is the doctrine of the preexistence of Christ. Many scholars have correctly appealed to this passage in support of this doctrine.³⁷ Yet the perspective from which one argues for the truth of such an understanding makes a significant difference to the expression of its content, and in this sense a wisdom framework provides a sound manner for its exposition.

If one argues for the preexistence of Christ in this passage from a propositional perspective one is left with the difficult problem of explaining this in metaphysical terms, and to this concern the passage offers little if any help. In fact one may be thrust once again into the Arian controversy. A wisdom framework, however, alleviates this difficulty. Davies argues that in Judaism the notion of preexistence was conceived midrashically. Therefore to seek deep metaphysical truth in such a formulation is to miss the point of the presentation.³⁸ Judaism conceived of creation as conforming to the pattern of *tôrâ* (wisdom), affirming a continuity between creation and revelation, nature and grace. “In teaching that Christ was the agent of creation Paul, too, we cannot doubt, was seeking to express a similar truth.”³⁹

If the wisdom framework of interpretation holds for this passage, it may be stated axiomatically that what is said of wisdom (*tôrâ*) in Judaism is also said of Christ here.⁴⁰ Indeed Paul may have stated as much in Col 2:9. Yet it is at this point that the full scope of the wisdom framework must be taken into account. Wisdom is not merely the provider of content. It is also a framework of form. A perusal of Jewish wisdom literature reveals that the sages conveyed their message in a variety of literary forms, ranging from the simple proverb to the complex devices of poetic personification. Epigrammatically, the relationship can be stated as follows: Form plus content equals wisdom. It is in this sense that many of those who speak of wisdom influ-

³⁶ Aletti, *Colossians*.

³⁷ E.g. Ridderbos, *Paul* 68–69; Davies, *Paul* 155; Helyer, “Arius” 65–67; “Cosmic Christology” 235–246; Bruce, “Colossian Problem” 101; Richardson, *Introduction* 155; K. H. Schelkle, *Theology of the New Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1971) 26. J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 194–195, raises objections to this understanding in his reconstruction of the development of NT Christology.

³⁸ Davies, *Paul* 174. Similarly, Richardson (*Introduction* 155–157) argues that the presentation is poetic rather than metaphysical.

³⁹ Davies, *Paul* 174.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 151.

ences in Col 1:15–20 have not carried the task far enough: They are content to restrict the influence of wisdom to content alone. And those who are concerned with the formal structure of the poem seem to divorce this aspect from its intimate relationship to content. If this passage be a piece of *liturgica*, such certainly falls within the scope of wisdom literary forms (e.g. Prov 8:22–31).⁴¹ So, too, if the passage is midrashic. Is this not quite similar to what is said of wisdom in pseudo-Solomon's recounting of redemptive history (Wis 10:1–12:27)?

This framework, then, has a direct bearing on the interpretation of the passage. If wisdom provides both the form and content background to Col 1:15–20, then to reduce its teaching to formal propositions robs it of its power. The passage needs to be interpreted as a whole rather than as a dissection of its constituent parts. In this respect those who seek to understand the passage in terms of its flow of thought from Christ's role in creation to Christ's role in redemption have best retained the integrity of a wisdom interpretation.⁴² The twofold function of wisdom in Judaism, in creation and in redemption, has been transferred to Christ. "Christ is the wisdom of God in both spheres."⁴³ Taken as a whole, the passage elicits powerful images to the reader, a presentation that extols the cosmic dimensions of Christ and his works. And in so doing it reverberates with assignments of preeminence to Christ. Verse 18 states as much in its designation of Christ: γένηται ἐν παῶν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων. "To identify something with the pre-existent Wisdom was to attribute to it the highest possible divine reality under God himself."⁴⁴

To summarize: Wisdom, as appropriated here, extends its influence beyond content parallels to considerations of form. As such, the passage does not present a series of merely propositional statements of metaphysical reality. Rather, it utilizes the full scope of the wisdom framework as a vehicle of communication to present Christ in his preeminence in terms of his creative and redemptive significance.

⁴¹ B. Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry and Tragedy of Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 95–96, 105–111, in his identification of wisdom traditions as a significant source from which early Christians drew to compose Christological hymns, argues for wisdom as a viable background to Col 1:15–20 on the basis of a merging of form and content.

⁴² E.g. Bruce, "Colossian Problem" 99–111; Dunn, *Christology* 194–195; Schelkle, *Theology* 26–27; Wright, "Poetry" 444–468; G. Lampe, "New Testament Doctrine of κτίσις," *SJT* 17 (December 1964) 459.

⁴³ Davies, *Paul* 152. Pollard ("Col. 1:12–20" 574) says as much when he suggests that in Col 1:15–20 Paul may be expounding upon 1 Cor 8:6, where wisdom categories are used to describe Christ in his creative role, and upon 1 Cor 1:24, 30, where Christ is called the σοφία of God in his redemptive role.

⁴⁴ Richardson, *Introduction* 155.