

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

THE EPISTLE TO THE COLOSSIANS.

V.

THE GLORY OF THE SON IN HIS RELATION TO THE FATHER, THE UNIVERSE AND THE CHURCH.

“Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in Him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through Him and unto Him; and He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence”—Col. i. 15-18 (Rev. Ver.)

As has already been remarked, the Colossian Church was troubled by teachers, who had grafted on Jewish belief many of the strange speculations about matter and creation which have always had such a fascination for the Eastern mind. To us they are apt to seem empty dreams, baseless and bewildering; but they had force enough to shake the early Church to its foundation, and in some forms they still live.

These teachers in Colossæ seem to have held that all matter was evil and the seat of sin; that therefore the material creation could not have come directly from a good God, but was in a certain sense opposed to Him, or, at all events, was separated from Him by a great gulf. The void space was bridged by a chain of beings, half abstractions and half persons, gradually becoming more and more material. The lowest of them had created the material universe and now governed it, and all were to be propitiated by worship.

Some such opinions must be presupposed in order to give point and force to these great verses in which Paul opposes the solid truth to these dreams, and instead of a crowd of Powers and angelic Beings, in whom the effulgence of Deity was gradually darkened, and spirit became more and more thickened into matter, lifts high and clear against that background of fable, the solitary figure of the one Christ. He fills all the space between God and man. There is no need for a crowd of shadowy beings to link heaven with earth. Jesus Christ lays His hand upon both. He is the head and source of creation; He is the head and fountain of life to His Church. Therefore He is first in all things, to be listened to, loved and worshipped by men. As when the full moon rises, so when Christ appears, all the lesser stars with which Alexandrian and Eastern speculation had peopled the abysses of the sky are lost in the mellow radiance, and instead of a crowd of flickering ineffectual lights there is one perfect orb, "and heaven is overflowed." "We see no *creature* any more save Jesus only."

We have outgrown the special forms of error which afflicted the Church at Colossæ, but the truths which are here set over against them are eternal, and are needed to-day in our conflicts of opinion as much as then. There are here three grand conceptions of Christ's relations. We have Christ and God, Christ and Creation, Christ and the Church, and built upon all these the triumphant proclamation of His supremacy over all creatures in all respects.

I. We have *the relation of Christ to God* set forth in these grand words, "the image of the invisible God."

Apparently Paul is here using for his own purposes language which was familiar on the lips of his antagonists. We know that Alexandrian Judaism had much to say about the "Word," and spoke of it as the Image of God: and probably some such teaching had found its way to

Colossæ. An "image" is a likeness or representation, as of a king's head on a coin, or of a face reflected in a mirror. Here it is that which makes the invisible visible. The God who dwells in the thick darkness, remote from sense and above thought, has come forth and made Himself known to man, even in a very real way has come within the reach of man's senses in the manhood of Jesus Christ. Where then is there a place for the shadowy abstractions and emanations with which some would bind together God and man?

The first thought involved in this statement is, that the Divine Being in Himself is inconceivable and unapproachable. "No man hath seen God at any time nor can see Him." Not only is He beyond the reach of sense, but above the apprehension of the understanding. Direct and immediate knowledge of Him is impossible. There may be, there is, written on every human spirit a dim consciousness of His presence, but that is not knowledge. Creatural limitations prevent it, and man's sin prevents it. He is "the King invisible," because He is the "Father of Lights" dwelling in "a glorious privacy of light," which is to us darkness because there is in it "no darkness at all."

Then, the next truth included here is, that Christ is the perfect manifestation and image of God. In Him we have the invisible becoming visible. Through Him we know all that we know of God, as distinguished from what we guess or imagine or suspect of Him. On this high theme, it is *not* wise to deal much in the scholastic language of systems and creeds. Few words, and these mainly His own, are best, and he is least likely to speak wrongly who confines himself most to Scripture in his presentation of the truth. All the great streams of teaching in the New Testament concur in the truth which Paul here proclaims. The conception in John's Gospel of the Word which is the utterance and making audible of the Divine mind, the conceptions

in the Epistle to the Hebrews of the effulgence or forthshining of God's glory, and the very image, or stamped impress of His substance, are but other modes of representing the same facts of full likeness and complete manifestation, which Paul here asserts by calling the man Christ Jesus, the image of the Invisible God. The same thoughts are involved in the name by which our Lord called Himself, the Son of God; and they cannot be separated from many words of His, such as "he that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." In Him the Divine nature comes near to us in a form that once could be grasped in part by men's senses, for it was "that of the Word of life" which they saw with their eyes and their hands handled, and which is to-day and for ever a form that can be grasped by mind and heart and will. In Christ we have the revelation of a God who can be known, and loved, and trusted, with a knowledge which, though it be not complete, is real and valid, with a love which is solid enough to be the foundation of a life, with a trust which is conscious that it has touched rock and builds secure. Nor is that fact that He is the revealer of God, one that began with His incarnation, or ends with His earthly life. From the beginning and before the creatural beginning, as we shall see in considering another part of these great verses, the Word was the agent of all Divine activity, the "arm of the Lord," and the source of all Divine illumination, "the face of the Lord," or, as we have the thought put in the remarkable words of the Book of Proverbs, where the celestial and pure Wisdom is more than a personification though not yet distinctly conceived as a person, "The Lord possessed me in the beginning of His way. I was by Him as one brought up—or as a master worker—with Him, and I was daily *His* delight . . . and *My* delights were with the sons of men." And after the veils of flesh and sense are done away, and we see face to face, I believe

that the face which we shall see, and seeing, shall have beauty born of the vision, passing into our faces, will be the face of Jesus Christ, in which the light of the glory of God shall shine for the redeemed and perfected sons of God, even as it did for them when they groped amid the shows of earth. The law for time and for eternity is, "I have declared Thy name into My brethren and will declare it." That great fathomless, shoreless ocean of the Divine nature is like a "closed sea"—Christ is the broad river that brings its waters to men, and "everything liveth whithersoever the river cometh."

In these brief words on so mighty a matter, I must run the risk of appearing to deal in unsupported statements. My business is not so much to try to prove Paul's words as to explain them, and then to press them home. Therefore I would urge that thought, that we depend on Christ for all true knowledge of God. Guesses are not knowledge. Speculations are not knowledge. Peradventures, whether of hope or fear, are not knowledge. What we poor men need, is a certitude of a God who loves us and cares for us, has an arm that can help us, and a heart that will. The God of "pure theism" is little better than a phantom, so unsubstantial that you can see the stars shining through the pale form, and when a man tries to lean on Him for support, it is like leaning on a wreath of mist. There is nothing. There is no certitude firm enough for me to find sustaining power against life's trials in resting upon it, but in Christ. There is no warmth of love enough for us to thaw our frozen limbs by, apart from Christ. In Him, and in Him alone, the far off, awful, doubtful God becomes a God very near, of whom we are sure, and sure that He loves and is ready to help and cleanse and save.

And that is what we each need. "My soul crieth out for God, for the *living* God." And nowhere will that orphaned cry be stilled, but in the possession of Christ, in whom we

possess the Father also. No dead abstractions—no reign of law—still less the dreary proclamation, “Behold we know not anything,” least of all, the pottage of material good, will hush that bitter wail that goes up unconsciously from many an Esau’s heart—“My father, my father!” Men will find Him in Christ. They will find Him nowhere else. It seems to me that the only refuge for this generation from atheism—if it is still allowable to use that unfashionable word—is the acceptance of Christ as the revealer of God. On any other terms religion is rapidly becoming impossible for the cultivated class. The great word which Paul opposed to the cobwebs of Gnostic speculation is the word for our own time with all its perplexities—Christ is the Image of the Invisible God.

II. We have the *relation of Christ to Creation* set forth in that great name “the firstborn of all creation,” and further elucidated by a magnificent series of statements which proclaim Him to be agent or medium, and aim or goal of creation, prior to it in time and dignity, and its present upholder and bond of unity.

“The firstborn of all creation.” At first sight, this name seems to include Him as the eldest in the great family of creatures, and clearly to treat Him as one of them, just because He is declared to be in some sense the first of them. That meaning has been attached to the words; but it is shown not to be their intention by the language of the next verse, which is added to prove and explain the title. It distinctly alleges that Christ was “before” all creation, and that He is the agent of all creation. To insist that the words must be explained so as to include Him in “creation” would be to go right in the teeth of the Apostle’s own justification and explanation of them. So that the true meaning is that He is the firstborn, in comparison with, or in reference to, all creation. Such an understanding of the force of the expression is perfectly

allowable grammatically, and is necessary unless this verse is to be put in violent contradiction to the next. The same construction is found in Milton's

"Adam, the goodliest man of men since born,
His sons, the fairest of her daughters, Eve."

where "of" distinctly means "in comparison with," and not "belonging to."

The title implies priority in existence, and supremacy. It substantially means the same thing as the other title of "the only begotten Son," only that the latter brings into prominence the relation of the Son to the Father, while the former lays stress on His relation to Creation. Further it must be noted, that this name applies to the Eternal Word and not to the incarnation of that Word, or to put it in another form, the divinity and not the humanity of the Lord Jesus is in the Apostle's view. Such is the briefest outline of the meaning of this great name.

A series of clauses follow, stating more fully the relation of the firstborn Son to Creation, and so confirming and explaining the title.

The whole universe is, as it were, set in one class, and He alone over against it. No language could be more emphatically all-comprehensive. Four times in one sentence we have "all things"—the whole universe—repeated, and traced to Him as Creator and Lord. "In the heavens and the earth" is quoted from Genesis, and is intended here, as there, to be an exhaustive enumeration of the creation according to place. "Things visible or invisible" again includes the whole under a new principle of division—there are visible things in heaven, as sun and stars, there may be invisible on earth, but wherever and of whatever sort they are, He made them. "Whether thrones or dominions, or principalities or powers," an enumeration evidently alluding to the dreamy speculations about an angelic hierarchy

filling the space between the far off God, and men immersed in matter. There is a tone of contemptuous impatience in Paul's voice, as he quotes the pompous list of sonorous titles which a busy fancy had coined. It is as if he had said, You are being told a great deal about these angel hierarchies, and know all about their ranks and gradations. I do not know anything about them; but this I know, that if, amid the unseen things in the heavens or the earth, there be any such, my Lord made them, and is their master. So he groups together the whole universe of created beings, actual or imaginary, and then high above it, separate from it, its Lord and Creator, its upholder and end, he points to the majestic person of the only begotten Son of God, His Firstborn, higher than all the rulers of the earth, whether human or superhuman.

The language employed brings into strong relief the manifold variety of relations which the Son sustains to the universe, by the variety of the prepositions used in the sentence. The whole sum of created things (for the Greek means not only "all things," but "all things considered as a unity") was in the original act, created *in* Him, *through* Him, and *unto* Him. The first of these words, "in Him," regards Him as the creative centre, as it were, or element in which as in a storehouse or reservoir all creative force resided, and was in a definite act put forth. The thought may be parallel with that in the prologue to John's Gospel, "In Him was life." The Word stands to the universe as the incarnate Christ does to the Church; and as all spiritual life is in Him, and union to Him is its condition, so all physical takes its origin within the depths of His Divine nature. The error of the Gnostics was to put the act of creation and the thing created, as far away as possible from God, and it is met by this remarkable expression, which brings creation and the creatures in a very real sense within the confines of the Divine nature, as manifested

in the Word, and asserts the truth of which pantheism so called is the exaggeration, that all things are in Him, like seeds in a seed vessel, while yet they are not identified with Him.

The possible dangers of that profound truth, which has always been more in harmony with Eastern than with Western modes of thought, are averted by the next preposition used, "all things have been created *through* Him." That presupposes the full, clear demarcation between creature and creator, and so on the one hand extricates the person of the Firstborn of all creation from all risk of being confounded with the universe, while on the other it emphasizes the thought that He is the medium of the Divine energy, and so brings into clear relief His relation to the inconceivable Divine nature. He is the image of the invisible God, and accordingly, *through* Him have all things been created. The same connection of ideas is found in the parallel passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where the words, "*through* whom also He made the worlds," stand in immediate connection with "being the effulgence of His glory,"

But there remains yet another relation between Him and the act of creation. "*For* Him" they have been made. All things come from and tend towards Him. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the ending. All things spring from His will, draw their being from that fountain, and return thither again. These relations which are here declared of the Son, are in more than one place declared of the Father. Do we face the question fairly—what theory of the person of Jesus Christ explains that fact?

But further, His existence before the whole creation is repeated, with a force in both the words, "He is," which can scarcely be given in English. The former is emphatic—He Himself—and the latter emphasizes not only pre-

existence, but absolute existence. "He *was* before all things" would not have said so much as He *is* before all things. We are reminded of His own words, "Before Abraham was, I am."

"In Him all things consist" or hold together. He is the element in which takes place and by which is caused that continued creation which is the preservation of the universe, as He is the element in which the original creative act took place of old. All things were and form an ordered unity in Him. He links all creatures and forces into a co-operant whole, reconciling their antagonisms, drawing all their currents into one great tidal wave, melting all their notes into music which God can hear, however discordant it may sometimes sound to us. He is "the bond of perfectness," the keystone of the arch, the centre of the wheel.

Such, then, in merest outline is the Apostle's teaching about the Eternal Word and the Universe. What sweetness and what reverential awe such thoughts should cast around the outer world and the providences of life! How near they should bring Jesus Christ to us! What a wonderful thought that is, that the whole course of human affairs and of natural processes is directed by Him who died upon the cross! The helm of the universe is held by the hands which were pierced for us. The Lord of Nature and the Mover of all things is that Saviour on whose love we may pillow our aching heads.

We need these lessons to-day, when many teachers are trying hard to drive all that is spiritual and Divine out of creation and history, and to set up a merciless law as the only God. Nature is terrible and stern sometimes, and the course of events can inflict crushing blows; but we have not the added horror of thinking both to be controlled by no will. Christ is King in either region, and with our elder brother for the ruler of the land, we shall not lack corn in our sacks, nor a Goshen to dwell in. We need not people

the void, as these old heretics did, with imaginary forms, nor with impersonal forces and laws—nor need we, as so many are doing to-day, wander through its many mansions as through a deserted house, finding nowhere a person who welcomes us; for everywhere we may behold our Saviour, and out of every storm and every solitude hear His voice across the darkness saying, "It is I; be not afraid."

III. The last of the relations set forth in this great section is that between *Christ and His Church*. "He is the head of the body, the Church; who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead."

A parallel is plainly intended to be drawn between Christ's relation to the material creation and to the Church, the spiritual creation. As is the Word of God before incarnation to the universe, so is the incarnate Christ to the Church. As in the former, He is prior in time and superior in dignity, so is He in the latter. As in the universe He is source and origin of all being, so in the Church He is the beginning, both as being first and as being origin of all spiritual life. As the glowing words which described His relation to creation began with the great title "the Firstborn," so those which describe His relation to the Church close with the same name in a different application. Thus the two halves of His work are as it were moulded into a golden circle, and the end of the description bends round towards the beginning.

Briefly, then, we have here first, Christ the head, and the Church His body. In the lower realm the Eternal Word was the power which held all things together, and similar but higher in fashion is the relation between Him and the whole multitude of believing souls. Popular physiology regards the head as the seat of life. So the fundamental idea in the familiar metaphor when applied to our Lord is that of the source of the mysterious spiritual life which flows from Him into all the members, and is sight in the

eye, strength in the arm, swiftness in the foot, colour in the cheek, being richly various in its manifestations but one in its nature, and all His. The same mysterious derivation of life from Him is taught in His own metaphor of the Vine, in which every branch, however far away from the root, lives by the common life circulating through all, which clings in the tendrils, and reddens in the clusters, and is not theirs though it be in them.

That thought of the source of life leads necessarily to the other, that He is the centre of unity, by whom the "many members" become "one body," and the maze of branches one vine. The "head," too, naturally comes to be the symbol for authority—and these three ideas of seat of life, centre of unity, and emblem of absolute power appear to be those principally meant here.

Christ is further the *Beginning* to the Church. In the natural world He was before all, and source of all. The same double idea is contained in this name, "the Beginning." It does not merely mean the first member of a series who begins it, as the first link in a chain does, but it means the power which causes the series to begin. The root is the beginning of the flowers which blow in succession through the plant's flowering time, though you may call the first flower of the number the beginning too. But Christ is root; not merely the first flower, though He is that also.

He is head and beginning to His Church by means of His resurrection. He is the firstborn from the dead, and His communication of spiritual life to His Church requires the historical fact of His resurrection for its basis, for a dead Christ could not be the source of life; and that resurrection completes the manifestation of the incarnate Word, by our faith in which His spiritual life flows into our spirits. Unless He has risen from the dead, all His claims to be anything else than a wise teacher and fair character

crumble into nothing, and to think of Him as a source of life is impossible.

He is the beginning through His resurrection, too, in regard of His raising us from the dead. He is the first-fruits of them that slept, and bears the promise of a mighty harvest. He has risen from the dead, and therein we have not only the one demonstration for the world that there is a life after death, but the irrefragable assurance to the Church that because He lives it shall live also. A dead body and a living head cannot be. We are knit to Him too closely for the Fury "with the abhorred shears" to cut the thread. He has risen that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

So the Apostle concludes that in all things He is first—and all things are that He *may* be first. Whether in nature or in grace, that pre-eminence is absolute and supreme. The end of all the majesty of creation and of all the wonders of grace is that His solitary figure may stand clearly out as centre and lord of the universe and His name be lifted high over all.

So the question of questions for us all is, What think ye of Christ? Our thoughts now have necessarily been turned to subjects which may have seemed abstract and remote—but these truths which we have been trying to make clear and to present in their connection, are not the mere terms or propositions of a half mystical theology far away from our daily life, but bear most gravely and directly on our deepest interests. I would fain press on every conscience the sharp-pointed appeal—What is this Christ to us? Is He *any* thing to us but a name? Does our heart leap up with a joyful Amen when we read these great words of this text? Are we ready to crown Him Lord of all? Is He our head, to fill us with vitality to inspire and to command? Is He the goal and the end of our individual life? Can we each say I live by Him, in Him, and for Him?

Happy are we, if we give to Christ the pre-eminence, and if our hearts set "Him first, Him last, Him midst and without end."

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

THE FAYÛM MANUSCRIPTS.

THE march of events is rapid in every direction. Politics, trade, science have experienced this tendency, and such too is the case in that quieter region of scholarship which deals with the discovery of ancient manuscripts. We have scarcely recovered from the excitement attending the great discoveries of Tatian's *Diatessaron* and the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, when we hear rumours of fresh discoveries which may, in course of investigation, eclipse even these. The scene of the latest accessions to our knowledge is the Fayûm province, a district which, lying fifty or sixty miles to the south of Cairo, has been from the earliest ages celebrated for its fertility. Egyptian history, as reconstructed by Brugsch, tells us that more than two thousand years before Christ one of the Pharaohs established there the lake Moeris which, after eluding the search of many generations, has now been satisfactorily identified.¹ The construction of this lake was intended to prevent the waste of Nile water, by storing it up for future use. In any case it rendered the Fayûm province the garden of Egypt, and developed there a life of which the buried records have now come to light. We must however tell a preliminary story.

It is just one hundred years since a very intelligent Frenchman travelled through Egypt and Syria, leaving as the result a narrative which is of great importance as

¹ See *Proceedings of Society of Biblical Archaeology*, vol. iv. p. 124, for identification of the site.