

## JESUS: GOD'S AGENT OF CREATION

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One aspect of the person and work of Jesus Christ that has not been explored adequately is the work of the preincarnate Logos in the creation of the earth and universe. This study is an attempt to stimulate discussion relating to a biblical understanding of the work of Jesus in creation.<sup>1</sup>

There are four primary passages in the NT which speak of Jesus' role in creation. These passages are 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2, 10; and John 1:3, 10. These passages are familiar, but seldom considered as a body which may reflect a tradition or belief within the early church. These passages will be considered for their impact on the issue; then implications derived from the passages will be presented.

### *The Biblical Data*

The four passages will be examined from the earliest to the latest. The language and context of each passage will be especially noted. The goal of this section is not a full exegesis of each passage; instead, the purpose will be to demonstrate that in each of the four passages Christ's role in creation is declared and that the context and occasion for that declaration may be similar.

#### 1 Corinthians 8:6

The earliest of the four passages, 1 Cor 8:6, is part of a literary unit discussing involvement with idolatry, specifically related to eating foods sacrificed to idols and then sold in the marketplace, dining in temples devoted to idols and gods, or perhaps both. Much has been written on the specific situation, and it is not necessary for the purpose of this study to define the situation more precisely.<sup>2</sup>

"Jesus," "Christ," and "Jesus Christ" are used interchangeably in this study, with no significance as to which term is employed.

<sup>2</sup>For more discussion of the exact situation, consult Gordon D. Fee, "Εἰδωλόθυτα Once Again: An Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 8-10," *Bib* 61 (1980): 172-197; Ben Witherington III, "Not So Idle Thoughts About *Eidolothuton*," *TynB* 44/2 (1993): 237-254; Bruce N. Fisk, "Eating Meat Offered to Idols: Corinthian Behavior and Pauline Response in 1 Corinthians 8-10 (A Response to Gordon Fee)," *TrinJ* 10 ns (1989): 49-70; and Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids:

The religious pluralism in Corinth is well known. The ancient writer Pausanias recorded the presence of twenty-six different shrines present in Corinth.<sup>3</sup> There were temples dedicated to Apollo, Demeter and Kore, Aphrodite,<sup>4</sup> as well as a shrine for the healing cult of Asklepios.<sup>5</sup> Archaeologists have discovered evidence of the Egyptian cults on inscriptions on coins to Sarapis and Isis.<sup>6</sup> Numerous statues of gods were present in Corinth.

I have argued elsewhere<sup>7</sup> that in this unit, Paul follows a literary pattern demonstrated in other passages of presenting the words of those in Corinth who might hold a position contrary to his own by refuting or modifying the statement. In 1 Cor 8:4, then, Paul announced a new topic with the prepositional phrase *Περὶ τῆς βρώσεως οὖν τῶν εἰδολωθῦτων* ("So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols").<sup>8</sup> He then cited the saying of the Corinthians, *οἴδαμεν ὅτι οὐδὲν εἶδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ καὶ ὅτι οὐδεὶς θεός ἐι μὴ εἷς* ("We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one"). Apparently, the Corinthians argued from this monotheistic beginning point that they had the freedom to eat or go to temple dining areas because the idols or gods were nonexistent. Paul then refuted this false line of reasoning with the words: *καὶ γὰρ εἴπερ εἰσὶν λεγόμενοι θεοὶ εἴτε ἐν οὐρανῷ εἴτε ἐπὶ γῆς, ὥσπερ εἰσὶν θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοὶ* ("For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or earth [as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'"], 8:5).

This language refuted the Corinthians' misunderstanding of the unity of God. Paul corrected the claim that the nonexistence of other gods and of idols meant that there was no danger in involvement with elements of the Corinthians' pre-Christian religious life.

In 1 Cor 8:6, Paul continued his response to the erroneous

Eerdmans, 2001), 617-620.

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 6.

<sup>4</sup>H. D. Saffrey, "Aphrodite à Corinthe: Réflexions sur une Idée Reçue," *RB* 92 (1985): 359-374.

<sup>5</sup>Andrew E. Hill, "The Temple of Asclepius: An Alternative Source for Paul's Body Theology?" *JBL* 99 (1980): 437-438.

<sup>6</sup>Dennis E. Smith, "The Egyptian Cults at Corinth," *HTR* 70 (1977): 217-218.

<sup>7</sup>Calvin D. Redmond, "Paul and Idols: Concern for Conscience or Caution Against Compromise? 1 Corinthians 8:1-6," Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, November 2002, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>8</sup>Unless other noted, the NIV translation is used.

thoughts of the Corinthians. He explained that God's "oneness" is in terms of relationship and worship. This relational element is emphasized by the introductory phrase ἀλλ' ἡμῖν ("but for us"). He used a sentence with two parallel members, the first showing the work of God, and the second delineating the work of Jesus Christ the Lord. The parallelism is best observed by placing the Greek in parallel columns:

8:6a	8:6b
εἷς θεὸς	εἷς κύριος
ὁ πατὴρ	Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς
ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα	δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα
καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν	καὶ ἡμεῖς δι' αὐτοῦ

The parallelism is clear. The difference appears to be that God the Father is the ultimate source out of which all things come, while the Lord Jesus Christ is the agent through which all things come. Both members of the parallelism lack a verb. Chapter 8:6 can be translated: "but for us, one God the Father, from whom all things, and we to him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things, and we through him." The awkwardness of the lack of a verb is apparent in this translation.

This passage is understood by the vast majority of interpreters to be a statement of Jesus' work as the agent through whom God created the world. The careful distinction between the Father as the source of all things and the Lord Jesus Christ as the agent by whom all things were created reflects a careful, theological statement as well as a fine literary style. The phrase τὰ πάντα shows the sphere of Christ's creative work, and at the same time demonstrates that Christ is superior to all other divine beings or intermediaries.

Recently, some have argued that the verse speaks of redemption or salvation rather than creation. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor views the verse as an acclamation, which may be correct, but then writes:

[A]n acclamation is essentially related to power as experience. . . .  
 [I]t is most natural to understand the power of which there is question in 1 Cor. VIII.6 as being the salvific act of God in Christ. Christians were much more vividly conscious of this than of the power displayed in the creation of the universe.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>J. Murphy-O'Connor, "1 Cor. VIII, 6: Cosmology or Soteriology?" *RB* 85 (1978): 258.

Murphy-O'Connor's argument is not self-evident. The subjective, internal experience of salvation may seem to pale for some in comparison to the objective reality of the creation of the universe. Additionally, Murphy-O'Connor's explanation of the function of acclamations is shallow; acclamations have a number of social functions, including promoting unity in a divided audience, indicating assent or approval, and enunciating group sentiments.<sup>10</sup> Finally, if this study has correctly understood the context of this passage, then soteriology is not at issue; rather, the issue is christological, establishing the person and work of Jesus in comparison to the lesser idols of the world.

Paul's argument was that there are many gods and idols, as a casual stroll through the streets of Corinth would have demonstrated. Paul did not ascribe legitimacy to these objects, but also did not dismiss them as meaningless. The somewhat paradoxical view of idols in Judaism is depicted well in the following short saying from the tractate *Abodah Zarah*: "We both know in our hearts that there is no reality in an idol, nevertheless we see men enter [the shrine of Asklepios or Serapis] crippled and come out cured."<sup>11</sup> While many of the pagan neighbors of the Corinthian believers might participate in the veneration of these gods and idols, Paul reminded the Corinthians that for believers there is only one God worthy of worship, and that the true God is evident in the binitarian formula of 1 Cor 8:6. The supremacy of both God the Father and the Lord Jesus is demonstrated by the act of creation, in which God the Father was the source of all creation and Jesus was the agent by whom God's creative purpose was accomplished in creation. The phrase τὰ πάντα is significant, for it demonstrates the superiority of the Christian God over even the gods and idols worshiped by the pagans.

#### Colossians 1:15-20

The city of Colossae, located in the Lycus River Valley, was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 61. Its religious background is diverse. Peter T. O'Brien aptly comments that "the Colossae of Paul's day seems to have been a cosmopolitan city in which differing cultural and religious elements mingled."<sup>12</sup>

The important work of Clinton E. Arnold in the last decade

<sup>10</sup>Charlotte Roueché, "Acclamations in the Late Roman Empire: New Evidence from Aphrodisias," *JRS* 74 (1984): 181-184.

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Bruce W. Winter, "Theological and Ethical Responses to Religious Pluralism—1 Corinthians 8-10," *TynB* 41/2 (1990): 215-216.

<sup>12</sup>Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC 44 (Waco: Word, 1982), xxvii.

identified local cults in the area from inscriptions and other ancient evidence.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Arnold identifies veneration and prayer to angels among both pagan cults and Jews. He identifies the worship of angels and the centrality of the hostile powers described by several different terms in Colossians, including *στοιχεῖα*, which he believes are hostile angelic powers. Many observers have identified the syncretistic nature of the Colossian beliefs challenged by Paul.

It is also well known that two thousand Jewish families were sent to the region in the third century B.C. by Antiochus III. Most commentators see some elements of Judaism in the controversies at Colossae. It is likely that the mention of circumcision in 2:11 and 13, the dietary restrictions, and the mention of the Sabbath in 2:16 point to practices within Judaism. The description of such things as a "shadow of the things that are coming" (2:17) fits well with practices consistent with a Jewish background, but seems strange if applied to pagan practices.

This passage displays a balanced form and parallelism that make it seem poetic or hymnic in some sense, and many scholars consider it a hymn.<sup>14</sup> It is not necessary to enter into the extensive debates about the form or origin of this hymn, but is more profitable to consider the passage as it stands now.

Colossians 1:15-20 is an extended description of "the Son of his love" (v. 13). Although there are many proposals about the hymn's structure, fundamentally the passage contains two stanzas or verses, with most scholars finding that the first stanza begins with the relative pronoun clause *ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου* ("He is the image of the invisible God"), while the second stanza begins in v. 18 with the relative pronoun clause *ὃς ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ* ("who is the beginning"). There is a short bridge between the two stanzas in vv. 17 and 18a. Again, while many see the work of a redactor in v. 17 and especially 18a, the present study sees little benefit in seeking a prehistory of the passage.

There are a number of linguistic or conceptual parallels between the two verses. In both stanzas, the term *πρωτότοκος* immediately follows

<sup>13</sup>Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface Between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Tübingen: J.C. B. Mohr, 1995), 2:77.

<sup>14</sup>In his survey of scholarship on the structure of the hymn, Jean Noël Aletti lists some nineteen scholars who see two stanzas (*Colossiens 1,15-20: Genre et exégèse du texte: Fonction de la thématique sapientielle*, AnBib 91 [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981]). More recently, David E. Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 85, 86; and James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 84.

the “who is” clause, and a form of πάς is used to indicate the inclusiveness of Christ’s work. Verse 20 uses the prepositional phrases δι’ αὐτόν, εἰς αὐτοῦ, and τὰ πάντα in a manner reminiscent of the first stanza (as well as 1 Cor 8:6). Verse 20 concludes with εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς (“whether things on earth or things in heaven”), very similar to τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς (“things in heaven and on earth”) in v. 16. Hence, the verses have a great deal of parallelism in language. This may be demonstrated most easily in the following chart:

1:15-18a	1:18b-20
who is the image of the invisible God (15)	who is the beginning (18)
firstborn over all creation (15)	firstborn from the dead (18)
all things created in him, through him, for him (16)	to reconcile all things to him (20)
all things, the things in the heavens and upon the earth (16)	all things to him, whether the things on the earth or in the heavens (20)
he is before all things, and all things exist in him (17)	he may be first in all things, and all the fullness was pleased to dwell in him (18, 19)

The first stanza speaks of Christ’s work in creation, while the second stanza describes Christ’s work in redemption and pacification of the fallen created order and the enemies of God. The hymn, then, presents two reasons to praise Jesus: he is the agent of creation and the redeemer.

The structure of vv. 15 through 16 is artful.<sup>15</sup> Structurally, the passage appears as follows:

ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,  
 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα  
 ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,  
 τὰ ὄρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,  
 εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ξηουσίαι·  
 τὰ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται·

<sup>15</sup>“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him” (1:15-16).

Verse 16 is chiasmic, with the final clause similar to the first clause, affirming the creative work of Jesus, while the interior members are a delineation of some of the objects created. Even in form, all created objects are surrounded and contained by the creative work of Jesus. Functionally, this chiasmic structure emphasizes that all things are part of what was created by Christ.

The more explicit statements concerning Jesus' role in creation are found in Col 1:16. The use of the verb κτίζω, which appears twice in this verse, explicitly identifies the work of Jesus as the work of creation. The objects of the creation "by him" are both in the heaven and on earth. As in 1 Cor 8:6, the term τὰ πάντα is used to describe the things created by Jesus.

The unlimited scope of the creation is then made explicit with a series of pairs, beginning with the paired opposites ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς and ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. This first pair indicates the universal scope of Christ's work in creation. The next series of paired opposites forms a chiasm with the first pair, ὁρατά is matched with "upon the earth," while ἀόρατα fits with "in the heavens."<sup>16</sup> These paired opposites are intended to include both physical and spiritual beings within the sphere of Christ's creative work.

As further delineation of τὰ πάντα, four additional terms are given. The first two, θρόνοι and κυριότητες, are used in Judaism as terms for angelic beings. The other two terms ἄρχαι and ἐξουσίαι are "often named as supermundane beings and powers. . . . They probably represent the highest orders of the angelic realm."<sup>17</sup>

Scholars in the twentieth century, following the demythologization program of Rudolf Bultmann, have argued that these titles represent human or institutional rather than demonic figures,<sup>18</sup> and liberation theology has identified these powers as oppressive or unjust spiritual beings. Walter Wink observes: "Unfortunately, the Powers have long been identified as an order of angelic beings in heaven or as demons flapping around in the sky. Most people have simply consigned them to the dustbin of superstition. Others . . . have identified them as institutions, structures, and systems."<sup>19</sup> James B. Stewart laments that "St. Paul's 'principalities and powers' and 'spirit

<sup>16</sup>O'Brien; Garland, 88-89.

<sup>17</sup>O'Brien, 46-47.

<sup>18</sup>This development of thought is traced in P. T. O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16 (1992): 362-363.

<sup>19</sup>Walter Wink, "All Will Be Redeemed: How Can We Oppose Evil without Becoming What We Hate?" *Other Side* 28/6 (1992): 17-18.

forces of evil' are now known, we are told, to have been mere apocalyptic imagination."<sup>20</sup>

The significance of these unnamed forces is not in the precise identification of each angelic being or order, but instead lies in their use to demonstrate that the creative work of Jesus encompasses all divine or human beings. It does seem apparent that in the life setting of the first readers, these terms would apply to divine or spiritual beings rather than humans.

The second stanza focuses upon the role of Jesus in redemption. Verse 20 uses the preposition δι' αὐτοῦ to indicate the role of Jesus, and then uses the infinitive ἀποκαταλλάξαι ("to reconcile") to focus upon the redemptive work of Jesus. The explicit phrase εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ ("by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross") makes the redemptive theme even more explicit.

The hymn of Col 1:15-20, then, speaks very clearly about Jesus' work both as creator and as redeemer. It is important to note that these are presented as parallel, coordinate concepts. As Larry L. Helyer observes: "There can be little argument that such a [*prima facie*] reading yields a portrait of Jesus Christ as the preexistent agent of creation, the regent of creation, and the reconciler of creation—creation being understood as the universe, including spiritual beings and powers."<sup>21</sup>

There is a tendency among scholars of the last century to view the second stanza, which focuses on redemption, as primary, while making Jesus' work in creation subsidiary to that, and perhaps simply a logical necessity. Eduard Schweizer observed and approved this tendency:

[I]t has been conjectured that the hymn grew precisely from the central Christian statement about the reconciliation on the cross; that is, it developed, so to speak, from the second strophe backwards, just as the Old Testament doctrine of creation was fashioned as a consequence of the creedal confession of God's historical act of redemption. It is certainly the case that allusion is made in the New Testament to the position of Christ as mediator in creation, in order to describe the dimensions of the one whom the community extols as its savior.<sup>22</sup>

Initially, the demythologizing program of Bultmann and his

<sup>20</sup>James B. Stewart, "On a Neglected Emphasis in New Testament Theology," *SJT* 4 (1954): 292. A detailed refutation of this demythologization process of demonic forces is found in Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 170-182.

<sup>21</sup>Larry L. Helyer, "Cosmic Christology and Col. 1:15-20," *JETS* 37 (1994): 235.

<sup>22</sup>Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Andrew Chester (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 61.

followers argued against Christ's work in creation as a reality. R. G. Hammerton-Kelly took Bultmann to task for this, writing:

Bultmann's view does not deal seriously with Christ as the mediator of creation. It seems arbitrary to assume, as he does, that the idea of pre-existence intends only to illuminate salvation, and not to say anything important about creation. It seems to be important for the theology of Paul . . . that the same power operative in the redemption was operative in the creation as well."<sup>23</sup>

An example of those who find the second stanza primary, and interpret the first stanza in light of the second, is Eduard Lohse, who writes:

[T]he right understanding of the cosmological statements of the first part of the hymn is disclosed only by the soteriological statements of the second stanza. The great drama, wherein the principalities are stripped of their power and the reconciliation of all things has taken place, is for the sake of man alone.<sup>24</sup>

Lohse's statement is indicative of the Reformation emphasis on justification by faith as the dominant theme in Paul's writings. Without minimizing its significance, justification by faith is not the only major theme in Paul's thought, and should not be allowed to subsume other categories of his thought. Those who deny the reality of Jesus' work in creation need not carry the day. John G. Gibbs argued persuasively that each stanza represents a sphere of Christ's lordship. In Gibb's words:

In spite of a strong theological presupposition by some, there is no evidence which says that strophe 1 must be interpreted by strophe 2, or that creation must be interpreted by redemption. Again in this hymn, rather, creation and redemption are both there under Christ's lordship, neither is subordinated to the other, and both are related to one another only through that lordship.<sup>25</sup>

### Hebrews 1:2, 10

The background and occasion of Hebrews are notoriously difficult to ascertain. The book itself makes no statement of intended recipients or author. There is also no explicit textual clue that identifies the date of

<sup>23</sup>R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-Existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man*, SNTSMS 21 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 6.

<sup>24</sup>Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, ed. Helmut Koester (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 61.

<sup>25</sup>John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology*, NovTSup 26 (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 113.

the book beyond dispute. These issues are examined in standard works of introduction, as well as other sources.<sup>26</sup> The assumption of this study is that the author of Hebrews is unknown and not the author of other books in the NT, and that the recipients were Jews who had followed Jesus but were now in danger of returning to Judaism. While I hold a pre-70 date for the book, the dating is not essential for this study.

A number of features of Hebrews make it likely that the book was written to an audience composed of Jews who followed Jesus as Messiah. These features include the extensive citation of OT passages; the treatment of OT themes, including the temple, priestly, and sacrificial systems; and the use of even obscure OT characters such as Melchizedek as part of the argument of the letter.

As the initial chapters of Hebrews are read, the author's strategy seems to be to contrast Jesus as Son of God to a number of features of the Jewish religious system, e.g., the prophets (v. 1), angels (1:5–2:17), Moses (3:1-19), and Joshua (4:8). In each of these areas, Jesus is presented as superior.

It is often presumed that the purpose of the extended contrast between the Son and the angels in the first chapter of Hebrews is to influence the letter's readers to stop worshipping or venerating angels. Apparently, honor due to Jesus was being given to the angels. Arnold's research, showing Jewish prayer to angels in Asia Minor, might be pertinent to the situation in Hebrews as well, especially since Asia Minor is one of the proposed settings for the book of Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews begins with a pointed comparison between Jesus and the prophets. The author indicates that the time for revelation through prophets has ended, and "in these last days God spoke through a Son." The writer quickly continues speaking of the Son: ὃν ἔθηκεν κληρονόμον πάντων, δι' οὗ καὶ ἐποίησεν τοὺς αἰῶνας ("whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe"). The last word, αἰῶνας, though literally meaning "the ages," is commonly understood and translated as "the world." Any dispute over the meaning of this passage is resolved by v. 10, where Ps 101:26 (LXX) is applied to the Son: οὐ κατ' ἀρχάς, κύριε, τὴν γῆν ἐθεμελίωσας, καὶ ἔργα τῶν χειρῶν σου εἰσιν οἱ οὐρανοί ("In the beginning, O

<sup>26</sup>Among other sources, see J. C. McCullough, "Some Recent Developments in Research on the Epistle to the Hebrews," *IBS* 2 (July 1980): 141-165; George Wesley Buchanan, "The Present State of Scholarship on Hebrews," in *Christianity, Judaism, and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, Part One: New Testament, ed. Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 299-330; and Randall C. Gleason, "Angels and the Eschatology of Heb 1-2," *NTS* 49 (2003): 93-97.

Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands"). The writer has left no room for doubt that the Son was God's agent in creating the world, at the same time equating the Son with the God of the OT.

In a series of quotations from Psalms, the writer demonstrates the superiority of the Son, using such terms as πρωτότοκον (v. 6), τὰ πάντα (v. 3), and the paired opposites τῆν γῆν and οἱ οὐρανοί (v. 10). The reader has encountered these terms before in the brief examination of 1 Cor 8:6 and Col 1:15-20. A conceptual and partial verbal parallel with both 1 Cor 8:6 and Col 1:15-20 is apparent. Similar language, again related to the creation theme, is also found in Heb 2:10: δι' ὃν τὰ πάντα καὶ δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα ("for whom and through whom everything exists").

The centrality of Jesus' role in creation in the book of Hebrews has been noted. Craig R. Koester writes:

Hebrews begins and ends by emphasizing that the world is dependent upon the word of God. The world came into being through divine speech in the past (1:2; 11:3), it is sustained by the word of the Son in the present (12:3), and it will be shaken by the voice of God in the future (12:25-27). God is the one "for whom all things and through whom all things exist" (2:10) and "the builder of all things" (3:4). Hebrews affirms that the world was created and that it will pass away, but God and the Son continue forever (1:10-12).<sup>27</sup>

The immediate effect of the application of these OT quotations to Jesus is to demonstrate his equality with God the Father. This high Christology functions as a contrast to the limited efficacy of prayer directed to the angels. The anticipated result of this comparison would be for the readers to place their faith in Jesus, the greater figure, instead of relying upon angels or other institutions of Judaism.

### John 1:1-3

As with Hebrews, it is difficult to establish a precise geographical or historical context for this passage. There is no explicit identification of the target audience for this Gospel, although the history of the interpretation of the passage has vacillated between a Jewish Christian audience and a Greek audience. In contemporary scholarship, there is a recognition of the Jewish background and influence of the Fourth Gospel.

There is also a possibility of locating the context in Asia Minor. There are many early church traditions that place John in the area of

<sup>27</sup>Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 97.

Ephesus.<sup>28</sup> If these traditions are correct, then the original audience for this Gospel may be similar to that of Colossians, and not altogether different from that of 1 Corinthians.

The last of the explicit passages involving Christ's work in creation is John 1:1-3. John 1:1-2 introduces the Logos, indicates the preexistent presence of the Logos with God, and affirms the deity of the Logos. It is in v. 3 that the first creation statement is found: πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν ("through him all things were made, and without him was not anything made that was made"). In this short statement, we again see the use of πάντα as well as the prepositional phrase δι' αὐτοῦ. The term τὰ πάντα is inclusive of everything. As Gerald L. Borchert notes:

The Greek term must refer to the created order, and the "all things" of the NIV should probably be read to include all realities except God. Although it is not stated here, those realities could well include the angelic hosts discussed in the lofty theological comparison with Jesus in Hebrews 1.<sup>29</sup>

The passage speaks clearly to the role of Jesus in creation. As Raymond E. Brown writes: "From the 2nd century on, this has been taken as a reference to creation."<sup>30</sup>

In a similar expression, v. 10 reaffirms the work of Jesus in creation: ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω ("He was in the world, and though the world was made by him, the world did not recognize him"). This verse is similar to 1:3, yet uses ὁ κόσμος rather than πάντα as the sphere of Christ's work. The second clause emphasizes that all of the creation, not merely humans, was the object of Jesus' work in creation.<sup>31</sup>

In both John 1:3 and 1:10, the verb ἐγένετο is used for creation. This verb is used in the Greek of the LXX of Gen 1 for the fulfillment of God's plan for creation as different elements of the creation are

<sup>28</sup>Ireneus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.2, and Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, cited in Eusebius, *Ecl. hist.* 3.31.3.

<sup>29</sup>Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11*, NAC 25A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 107.

<sup>30</sup>Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (i-xii): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 29 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 8.

<sup>31</sup>Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 1-6*, Hermenia, trans. Robert W. Funk (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 112. This is in opposition to Bultmann's contention that creation is only intended to apply to the human race.

formed on different days,<sup>32</sup> while the aorist verb ἐποίησεν is used for the summary statement of creation in Gen 1:1.

Unlike the other passages, there is no explicit comparison between Jesus as agent of creation and other objects of veneration. There are indications, however, that such an idea might be in the mind of the writer. Initially, vv. 6 through 8 are a description of John the Baptist as one who is not the Light or Word. It is possible that the readers of the Fourth Gospel were followers of John the Baptist. If so, then it is possible they gave respect and honor to John the Baptist that should have been rendered to Jesus. The mention of the disciples of John in Ephesus, the traditional location of the origin of the Gospel of John, in Acts 18:24 through 19:6 could give evidence for a group that followed John the Baptist; Brown notes the writings of Pseudo-Clementine in the third century, using second-century sources, which indicate that followers of John the Baptist believed that he, rather than Jesus, was the Messiah.<sup>33</sup>

There is also a running contest in the Gospel of John between Light and Dark. In this competition, Jesus is the bearer and revealer of Light, while the forces of Darkness are the enemies of God. This conflict has been observed by many commentators on the Gospel of John; the conflict first appears in 1:5, and in the Prologue Jesus is first identified as the Light in 1:4, 7, 9. The contrast and conflict between Light and Dark is also seen in 3:19-21; 8:12; 11:9-10; 12:35-36, 45. The inability of the Darkness to defeat Light is seen in 1:5, in which the controversial phrase καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν ("The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it") is used. If, as has been traditional, the verb κατέλαβεν is understood in the sense of "overcome" or "overtake," then the sense of conflict is evident. Brown has noted that "the opposition between light and darkness in Johannine dualistic thought seems to demand such a verb to describe their encounter."<sup>34</sup>

This symbolic battle between Light and Dark is similar to elements of several religious and philosophical systems, and much has been made of the Gnostic dualism of light and darkness. Basilides, a second-century Gnostic teacher, taught the following, as recounted by Hegemonius: "In the beginning there were light and darkness. . . . When each of these came to recognition of the other, and the darkness contemplated the light, the darkness, as if seized with desire of the better thing, pursued after it, and

<sup>32</sup>Brown, 6.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 8.

desired to be mingled with it and to participate in it."<sup>35</sup>

The conflict between Light and Dark is presented both as an explanation for the failure of "his own" to know and follow the Logos, and as an implicit challenge for the readers to avoid such a mistake and to become some of those "as many as received him" who would be granted authority to become sons of God. Such a reading fits with the perceived "missionary thrust" of the Gospel of John, as in the self-described purpose statement of 20:31.

As with the other passages, there are those who deny that the Prologue has a genuine creation focus. Bultmann's view is such a challenge, although he affirms the reality of creation—but only in a unique, anthropocentric sense. Bultmann's anthropological focus sees the action of the Logos of the Prologue upon men and the world; in his view, πάντα is used instead of κόσμος for stylistic and literary reasons,<sup>36</sup> and vv. 1:3-4 do not mention the cosmic powers or the Devil, while "on the other hand, it is clear that mankind belongs to the πάντα, and mankind alone is the subject of what follows."<sup>37</sup> The focus of creation is on the revelatory function of the Logos: "[H]e is God himself insofar as he reveals himself. The world is God's creation, and as such God's revelation; this is the sense of v. 3, and both these aspects are developed in v. 4."<sup>38</sup> Bultmann elsewhere demonstrates the link between creation and redemption as he sees it: "To have faith in the cross of Christ means to be prepared to let God work as the Creator. God creates out of nothing, and whoever becomes nothing before him is made alive."

Bultmann's view equates creation with redemption, blending the nothingness of noncreation with the existential nothingness by which he sees man approaching God. Creation and redemption are linked in the radical dependence upon God which underlies both. Bultmann argues that in the Prologue, the cosmology (which he sees as Gnostic in origin) has been repressed, and the soteriological aspect has become dominant.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup>As cited in C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 105. It is important to understand this teaching not as a source of John's thought, but, if related at all, as an interpretation of John's thought. It may simply be a reflection of common beliefs around the end of the first century.

<sup>36</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 37.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>This brief critique of Bultmann's view of creation drew extensively from Robert Kysar, "Rudolf Bultmann's Interpretation of the Concept of Creation in John 1,3-4," *CBQ* 22 (1970): 77-85.

While some of Bultmann's understanding is no longer persuasive, it is common for observers to minimize Christ's work in creation in various ways, and to make it subordinate to or merely a logical necessity for Christ's redemptive work.

### *The Implications*

#### Apologetic Value

The examination of the above passages has demonstrated that the role of Jesus in creation is affirmed by each of the passages. The life setting of each of the passages presents a contrast between Jesus and other beings that might be revered or worshiped, including idols in 1 Cor 8:6, angels and other deities or demons in Col 1:16, angels and significant figures from Jewish history and cult in Heb 1, and John the Baptist, and perhaps more esoteric elements of darkness opposed to the Logos, in the Prologue of John's Gospel.

Given the life settings described in the previous paragraph, it appears that Jesus' role in creation was used as an apologetic against those who might be offering prayers, veneration, or worship to other, lesser beings, whether these beings are human, angelic, or divine. The writers of these works all answered the misdirected veneration by pointing to the superiority of Christ as demonstrated by his work in creation.

#### Wisdom Christology

It is clear that the language of creation draws heavily upon the Wisdom traditions of Hellenistic Judaism and numerous points of contact with the language and thought of Philo and works such as the Wisdom of Solomon. The language of the Jewish Wisdom traditions was applied to Jesus, and descriptions of Wisdom seem to be applied to the preincarnate Jesus. "Wisdom" was a way of helping Jewish Christians to define and understand the life and ministry of Jesus. Attention should be given especially to the works of Ben Witherington III in developing an evangelical Wisdom Christology.<sup>40</sup>

#### Indication of Early Christology?

The passages have significant similarity in form. While I have commented upon this earlier, it is useful to see the similarities in the following table.

<sup>40</sup>Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); and idem, *Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster, 1995).

	1 Cor 8:6	Col 1:16	Heb 1:2-3	John 1:3	John 1:10
<b>Preposition</b>	δι'	ἐν, δι'	δι'	δι'	δι'
<b>Verb</b>	(none)	κτίζω	ποιέω	γίνομαι	γίνομαι
<b>Pronoun</b>	οὐ	αὐτῶ, αὐτοῦ	οὐ	αὐτοῦ	αὐτοῦ
<b>Antecedent of the Pronoun</b>	εἰς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός	τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αυτοῦ	ἐν υἱῶ	ὁ λόγος	ὁ λόγος or τὸ φῶς
<b>Subject or Object</b>	τὰ πάντα	τὰ πάντα	τοῦς αἰῶνας	πάντα	ὁ κόσμος

In evaluating the language of creation in Hebrews, Lala Kalyan Dey has correctly recognized as a unified group the passages above (but has not identified John 1:14 separately).<sup>41</sup> To these, Dey has also added Rom 11:36 and Heb 2:10, passages which have been identified earlier in this study.

The verbal similarities of these passages suggest at least the possibility of a common source.<sup>42</sup> Several writers recognize the similarity of at least some of these passages; few recognize all four. If there is an underlying source—whether hymnic, poetic, liturgical, or catechetical—then a source antedating 1 Corinthians would be early indeed. “Agent of creation” may be an important part of the very early Christian understanding of Jesus.

### Contemporary Application

The impulse to worship gods or angels is not restricted to the first century of the Christian era. In many areas outside the influence of Western rationalism, an animistic worldview honors departed ancestors, as well as spirits of rivers, fields, trees, and so on. Sometimes the interaction between these traditional religions and the imported Christianity of Western colonizers leads to a strange, syncretistic religious system, combining forms and elements of both the traditional religion and the imported Christian religion. Some of these belief systems have moved to the Western world and gained adherents.

<sup>41</sup>Lala Kalyan Kumar Dey, *The Intermediary World and Patterns of Perfection in Philo and Hebrews*, SBLDS 25 (Missoula, MT: SBL Press, 1975), 138-142.

<sup>42</sup>Dey, *ibid.*, concludes exactly the opposite—that the differences between them rule out any possibility of a common source or origin.

Understanding the cosmic Christ might be of benefit to Christians as they seek to minister in these environments. One of my students, Z. O. Villa, recently wrote of his application of Col 1:15-20 to his Filipino context:

If Christ is sovereign and supreme over all creation, those who truly fear Him should no longer live in fear of anything else. Because Christ Himself rules over all of creation, over all powers and authorities, over all events and circumstances, those who believe in Him can place full and confident trust in His activities and purposes. In the context of the Asian/Filipino church, I think that means that spiritism, occult practices, witchcraft, animism, demon or angel worship are incompatible with a belief in Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Villa correctly sees the significance of Christ's work in creation and his supremacy in the Asian context in which he lives.

### *Conclusion*

Christ's role in creation is affirmed by the NT. Rather than being at issue, Christ's cosmic role seems to be a common ground appealed to by the NT writers in order to respond to controversial, related issues. It is used as a theological apologetic against worshiping lesser beings than Jesus Christ. A proper Christology should include not only the biblical references to Christ's work, but a development of the context and significance of Christ's work in creation. In this manner, Christ's work in creation can be seen to have contextual significance to the original audiences of these NT passages and has the potential to speak to a contemporary audience as well.

<sup>43</sup>Z. O. Villa, Private e-mail to the author, August 31, 2003.