

Critical Comments Concerning The Wisdom Christology of Colossians 1:15-20

By: Dan Mages

There seems to be a ground swell of scholarship within Evangelicalism, which now acknowledges the presence, and reality of a wisdom Christology within the NT documents. The IVP *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* devotes entire sections to the concept, and scholars as prominent as James D.G. Dunn and Colin Brown are using it to revise their understandings of Jesus' existence prior to the miraculous conception. It may be more plausible to conceive of Jesus as the word/wisdom of God prior to the conception of the Messiah in the womb of Mary.

Colossians chapter one is a classic example of wisdom language. James Dunn speaking of Col 1:15-20 and 1 Cor 8:6 says, "Indeed, few issues in recent NT theology have commanded such unanimity of agreement as the source of the language and imagery used in these two passages. By common consent, it was drawn from earlier Jewish reflection on divine Wisdom."¹ I will illustrate how some of the NT writers, especially Paul utilized available and existing concepts, language, and philosophy to display and help his readers understand the preeminence of Jesus. Starting in vs. 15 Paul says that Jesus is the "image of the invisible God." It should be noted and observed that although this text is typically used as evidence that Jesus is God Almighty, the *one* God of Israel, Paul begins by saying Jesus is the *image* of the *invisible God*. Jesus is what the *one* God of Israel would look and act like in a six-foot Palestinian Jewish man wearing sandals.² Earlier Jewish reflection said virtually the same thing about wisdom. The Wisdom of Solomon, composed probably in the late first century B.C., similarly says that wisdom is the "image of his goodness" (7:26).

Jesus is then said to be the firstborn over all creation (Col 1:15). There has been discussion whether firstborn means literally the first one born, or whether it is a term for pre-eminence, similar to Isaac being called the firstborn even though his brother Ishmael was born first. Much of scholarship has sided with the latter, meaning that Jesus has precedence over all creation. Although I agree with this basic point, I think what is often overlooked is that the term continues to connote a birth, a beginning, a point of origin. Even though Isaac was the

¹ James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 269.

² I am indebted to Anthony Buzzard for this word picture.

son of promise, he was still a son, which requires a beginning. Even God's wisdom is spoken of having a beginning, metaphorically, when God used his wisdom to bring forth the world. In the book of Proverbs, wisdom is pictured as saying, "The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began" (8:22). Likewise, verse 25 depicts wisdom as saying, "before the mountains were settled in place, before the hills, I was given *birth*" (Emphasis mine).

Colossians goes on to say, "For by him all things were created" (1:16). The wisdom of God is continually portrayed as the agent of creation in many texts previous to Colossians. Psalm 104:24 says, "How many are your works, O LORD! In *wisdom* you made them all" (NIV Emphasis mine). Proverbs 3:19 states, "By *wisdom* the LORD laid the earth's foundations, by *understanding* he set the heavens in place; by his *knowledge* the deeps were divided" (NIV Emphasis mine). Lastly, The Wisdom of Solomon states, "O God of my ancestors and the Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word, and by your wisdom have formed humankind" (9:1-2). Notice that in this last text, the Hebrew parallelism indicates that wisdom is virtually synonymous with word, which is practically identical with spirit (Ps 33:6). The Hebrew word *Ruach* means breath, which is used to speak words. Spoken words reveal the wisdom or knowledge of the person speaking. I think it is this very close relationship that causes these concepts to be used interchangeably at times.

Colossians 1:17 says concerning Jesus that "he is before all things." Interestingly enough, about 200 years earlier, Ecclesiasticus, otherwise called Sirach was written, which stated, "Wisdom was created before all other things" (1:4). The same book later states, "Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all ages I shall not cease to be" (24:9). These passages coupled with the texts cited earlier concerning wisdom being the firstborn and a solid case is made concerning the paralleled concept.

Finally, Paul says of Jesus that, "in him all things hold together" (1:17b). Prior to this, wisdom was said to be that which "holds all things together" (The Wisdom of Solomon 1:7). Along the same lines, the book of Sirach says, "by his word all things hold together" (43:26). Once again, there seems to be such a close relationship between wisdom and word that they

are virtually interchangeable. Although wisdom and word do not always share a 1:1 identity, it seems that at times they do. Other times they have very subtle overtones that are slightly different, but overall they are very much related and overlapping concepts.

It has been demonstrated above that Paul in Colossians 1:15-20 has identified and attributed the role which was previously given to divine wisdom, to Christ. Was wisdom a real divine person/woman? This is unlikely since in Proverbs wisdom says she dwells with prudence (8:12). In a similar fashion, Psalms speaks about love and faithfulness meeting together; righteousness and peace kissing one another (85:9). In light of such poetic texts and Jewish monotheism, James Dunn argues for “read[ing] the talk of Wisdom as an extension of Israel’s use of vivid metaphor and personification in speaking of God’s interaction with the world and his people.”³

Furthermore, Jews had previously identified divine Wisdom with the Torah. Lady wisdom says, “Whoever obeys me will not be put to shame, and those who work with me will not sin” (Sirach 24:22). In the very next text, the author says, “All this [the varying descriptions of Wisdom] is the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the law that Moses commanded us as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob” (23). Baruch, probably written between 200 and 60 BC says concerning God’s wisdom, “Afterward she appeared on earth and lived with humankind. She is the book of the commandments of God, the law that endures forever. All who hold fast will live, and those who forsake her will die” (3:37-4:1). These texts explicitly identify God’s wisdom as the Law of Moses.

Since various texts in Psalms and Proverbs quoted earlier say that wisdom was active in creation, now that wisdom has been identified as the Torah, does this mean that these Jewish writers believed that the law of Moses was literally active at the creation of the world? This seems almost absurd. It would probably be more accurate to say that they saw in the Torah, the fullest manifestation and embodiment of God’s knowledge and wisdom. In like fashion, it could be argued that when Paul identifies Jesus, the resurrected and exalted Messiah with

³ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul The Apostle*, 270.

lady wisdom, that Paul did not necessarily believe that the “man” Jesus⁴ (1 Tim 2:5) was literally there and active at the creation, which would bring his humanity into question⁵, but saw him as the fullest and greatest manifestation and embodiment of God’s wisdom. It is especially important that in other places, Paul overtly identifies Jesus the Messiah with “the power of God and wisdom of God”(1 Cor 2:24). The Messiah “has become for us wisdom from God – that is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption” says Paul (1 Cor 1:30 NIV). James Dunn articulates this perspective in this way,

In effect what Paul and the other first Christians were doing was putting Christ in this equation in place of the Torah. And the rationale was probably the same: not so much that Christ as Jesus of Nazareth had preexisted as such, but that preexistent Wisdom was now to be recognized in and as Christ.⁶

It is hard to be absolutely certain in these areas of Jewish philosophizing, but it would appear to stand on two solid premises. One, that God’s wisdom, word, spirit and other attributes or characteristics were not typically, possibly never believed by Jews prior to the 3rd or 4th century to be literally separate persons from the *one* God of Israel, but as vivid metaphoric personifications. Secondly, texts like Isaiah 44:24 which states, “I am the LORD, who has made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself,” should have prevented the idea of an actual literal person beside YHWH partaking in the creative act from getting off the ground. Whereas YHWH used agents and mediators to do many of his works, even saving, delivering, and rescuing, this text seems to make it clear to the reader than YHWH spread out the earth by himself, that is, with no agents, other than

⁴ It could be said that Jesus was a name which was given to the son of Mary after the birth, which means that it would even be anachronistic to speak of Jesus at all prior to the birth of the man Jesus in Bethlehem. Therefore, it would be more proper to speak of an unnamed non-human person who would later enter Mary’s womb to become Jesus. This creates many problems that are seemingly irresolvable.

⁵ If Jesus were literally present at the creation of the world, his humanity would have to be brought into question. In what sense can an already conscious, created, non-human person, then be created again as a man, that is a creature made out of dust/earth. Would not the ego (the I, the self, the center of consciousness) of this non-human person be already formed and developed from its heavenly existence, and if so, what would happen to that ego when placed into a womb of a human woman, Mary, as a seed? Luke’s birth narrative seems to use the language of special creation, similar to the language in Genesis, the spirit overshadowing Mary like the spirit hovering over the waters. A creative act of God seems to be taking place. Presumably a newly created ego is made which has to develop, learn, and mature (Lk 2:52)? Would there then be two egos? What happened to the heavenly non-human ego? Which ego was Jesus? If there was only one ego, which one remained? Did they morph together to make a non-human/human ego? How could the already created heavenly ego become an ego that is made or created if it already existed?

⁶ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul The Apostle*, 274.

his own knowledge, understanding, and wisdom which as has been discussed, is not a real separate person.

This wisdom Christology helps in retaining Jesus as an authentic man. He is the last or second Adam according to 1 Cor 15. Since God's good intentions and purposes were thwarted by Adam, the first man, the man Jesus was created to excel where Adam failed. Jesus carried out the will of God, fulfilling the all work that God set before him. Jesus overcame the trials that caused Adam to stumble. Jesus resisted temptation to the point of shedding blood. Adam was disobedient, but Jesus was obedient, even willing to die a criminal's death (Phil 2).