

PAPER #7

Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

One of the important, controversial claims of Transcendent Monotheism in the modern context is its denial that there is an eternal, pre-existent Son who is distinct from God the Father. In this paper, I shall examine whether there is any evidence in Colossians that would settle this issue. Colossians 1:16–17 is one passage that is commonly understood to support the notion of a pre-existent Son who is distinct from God, the Father. In its immediate context this passage reads:

Col. 1:12 εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ πατρὶ τῷ ἱκανώσαντι ὑμᾶς εἰς τὴν μερίδα τοῦ κλήρου τῶν ἁγίων ἐν τῷ φωτί·

Col. 1:13 ὃς ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους καὶ μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ,

Col. 1:14 ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν·

Col. 1:15 ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,

Col. 1:16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὄρατα καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται·

Col. 1:17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,

Col. 1:18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας· ὃς ἐστὶν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,

Col. 1:19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι

Col. 1:20 καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι' αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

The NASV translates this:

Col. 1:12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

Col. 1:13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son,

Col. 1:14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Col. 1:15 ¶ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Col. 1:16 For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.

Col. 1:17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Col. 1:18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

Col. 1:19 For it was the *Father's* good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,

Col. 1:20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, *I say*, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

Argument for a Pre-existent "Son"

The argument from the evidence of these verses in support of an eternal, pre-existent Son goes something like this:

Step 1. Paul identifies the subject of his concern as God's "beloved Son." This "beloved Son" is undoubtedly a title for the man Jesus; for Paul goes on to claim about him that "in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." This latter is a reference to his death on the cross.

Step 2. Paul claims, of this "beloved Son," that he is "the image of the invisible God," and further, that he is "the first-born of all creation," and that everything that was created was created by his agency [1:16]. Furthermore, Paul explicitly says that this Son existed temporally prior to everything else that exists [1:17].

Step 3. Since "Son," "first-born," and "image of invisible God" all describe the man Jesus, it would appear, at first glance, that Paul is claiming that the man Jesus was the agent responsible for the creation of absolutely everything. This, of course, cannot be true. Therefore, Paul must have in view some other agent who created everything and with whom Jesus is somehow identical. (The second person of the Trinity and the Arians' created Logos are two proposals for who this other agent might be.) Whoever this agent is, it is that one who created everything, not the human Jesus *per se*. However, since Jesus is the incarnation of that other agent (and can therefore be identified with him), Paul can speak here as if Jesus was the agent responsible for the creation of the world.

Step 4. Since we know from other passages (John 1, esp. 1:10; Hebrews 1:2–3) that there is an agent of creation who became the man Jesus and who is distinct from God, the Father (Logos = Son), then he must be the being in view here in Colossians. Accordingly, Colossians is further evidence of an eternal, divine person distinct from God the Father and is further confirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Initial Response to the Argument for a Pre-existent Being

Nothing in the argument in steps 1–3 demonstrate the point at issue—namely, that the being in view is actually other than and distinct from God (the Father) himself. A Transcendent Monotheist could easily embrace the argument in steps 1–3. He would simply draw a different conclusion: Jesus can be said to be the agent responsible for the creation of the world, because he shares the same identity as the transcendent creator God. Jesus is he who created the world in the sense that he is the incarnation of the transcendent creator God. This conclusion satisfies the text of Colossians perfectly; but it requires no inference that Jesus is the incarnation of anyone other than the one and only transcendent God.

The Trinitarian argument relies completely on step 4. This results in two important flaws in the argument: (i) The argument becomes a circular argument; it assumes the very thing it is supposed to prove. Namely, for the sake of advancing the argument, step four has to *assume* that the being of whom Jesus is the incarnation is a distinct person from the transcendent God himself. The argument does not demonstrate from the text of Colossians that this person must be eternally distinct. It must simply assume it. (ii) It attempts to remedy the first problem—the circularity of the argument—by appealing to the evidence of other passages. This would be sound argumentation if the evidence of those other passages was incontrovertible. But it is not. As I have shown in the

accompanying papers, it is highly unlikely that either of them imply the existence of a divine person who is eternally distinct from the Father. None of the relevant passages provides clear, indubitable evidence of an eternal Son (or Logos). All of them are alleged to do so only because they are being read through the lenses of Trinitarian theology. This is another instance of circularity. Passages interpreted under the assumed validity of Trinitarian doctrine are offered as evidence for the validity of Trinitarian doctrine. This is an altogether unconvincing argument.

We could stop here. This response alone is enough to vindicate the compatibility of Transcendent Monotheism with the text of Colossians. I have not, however, shown that Trinitarianism is incompatible with the text of Colossians. We can see that Colossians certainly does not require Trinitarian doctrines, neither does it rule them out.

We must examine this passage in Colossians further to see if it can shed any light on the controversial question of whether Jesus is the incarnation of an eternally distinct Son.

Further Analysis of Colossians and Its Implications

I will proceed with a more thorough analysis of the passage by making a series of six observations about the more popular understanding of this passage and its attendant assumptions.

Observation #1: Colossians 1:13–20 is talking about the post-incarnational, human Jesus; it is not talking about a pre-existent, pre-incarnational divine Jesus.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the orthodox Trinitarian view is correct. We can make a distinction between the pre-incarnate second person of the Trinity and the post-incarnate/human second person of the Trinity. If, speaking loosely, we want to call both persons "Jesus," we must then distinguish between the pre-incarnate Jesus and the post-incarnate/human Jesus. Accordingly, Col. 1:13-14 is making an assertion about this human Jesus, and decidedly NOT about the pre-incarnate Jesus; for the pre-incarnate Jesus did not die to pay the price of our redemption; the human Jesus did that. That is indisputable. Therefore, it is this post-incarnate/human Jesus who is the antecedent of the pronouns throughout Col 1:15-17 as well. Hence, the most exegetically straightforward way to read Col 1:15-17 is this way:

- It is the post-incarnate/human Jesus who is the "image of the invisible God."
- It is the post-incarnate/human Jesus who is the "first-born of all creation."
- It is the post-incarnate/human Jesus of whom it can be asserted that "by Him all things were created," and that "all things were created through Him and for Him."

- It is the post-incarnate/human Jesus of whom it can be asserted that "He is before all things."
- It is the post-incarnate/human Jesus of whom it can be asserted that "in Him all things hold together."

To reinforce this point, note that all the assertions that immediately follow (in Col 1:18-20) are, without dispute, assertions about the post-incarnate/human Jesus.

A thoroughly straightforward exegesis of Col. 1: 13-20 would understand Paul to be speaking specifically of this human Jesus. There is no syntactic signal that would anywhere suggest a shift of antecedent to a pre-incarnate Jesus.

Many approaches to this passage simply assume that, in some of the assertions he makes, Paul is simply talking about a pre-incarnational Son who helped create the world. To these interpreters the question is easily settled. In their minds Colossians provides proof of the eternally distinct Son. He is explicitly the one Paul is talking about. Such an approach, however, is simply careless. To see this, let us trace Paul's flow of thought carefully:

1. We who are saints have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This "beloved Son" can be none other than the human being, Jesus. Paul explicitly identifies the Son as the one in whom we have redemption. Redemption is an unmistakable reference to the costly price that the *man* Jesus paid when he offered his life in exchange for our liberty from death. Hence, in Paul's mind, when he says "beloved Son," he clearly means to denote the man, Jesus.

2. Paul identifies the "beloved Son" as the "image of the invisible God" and as the "first-born of all creation." Therefore, it is the human being, Jesus, who is the "image of the invisible God" and the "first-born of all creation."

3. Finally, the antecedent of the "He" who created everything [if that is the right way to understand verse 16] is the "first-born of all creation." The "first-born of all creation" is identified with the "image of the invisible God." The "image of the invisible God" is identified with the "beloved Son." The "beloved Son," as we have seen, is clearly the human being, Jesus, the one who died on the cross (1:20).

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

Therefore, everything that Paul is asserting—from Jesus being the one in whom we have redemption to Jesus being the one “in whom” all things were created—is being asserted of a post-incarnational, human Jesus.

Observation #2: Colossians 1:13–20 could be talking about Jesus *insofar as he is being viewed as an ordinary human being* (JESUS_{man}) or it could be talking about Jesus *insofar as he is being viewed as the incarnation of God* (JESUS_{God}).

The first observation does not address a remaining crucial question about how to interpret this text. Paul is clearly making statements about the post-incarnate, human Jesus in this passage. But how is Paul viewing this man? Is this post-incarnate, human Jesus being viewed as an ordinary human being? Or, is he being viewed as an incarnation of God? In other words, to devise a short-hand, is the subject of these affirmations JESUS_{man} or JESUS_{God}?

This is a subtle distinction. Let me explain the difference. Trinitarian doctrine is a complex doctrine. Given the nature of the incarnation as Trinitarians conceive it, there is a certain logic that pertains. Since Jesus, the incarnation of God (the second person of the Trinity), is a single person with both a human and a divine nature, it follows—according to the logic of Trinitarian doctrine—that anything that can be predicated of either “nature” can be predicated of the person of the incarnate Jesus. If the God who has incarnated in Jesus is the creator of the world, then it can be said that the incarnate Jesus created the world. If the human being in whom God incarnated died on the cross, then it can be said that the incarnate Jesus died on the cross. Therefore, while a human being did not create the world, and God did not die on the cross, nevertheless both can equally be attributed of the incarnate Jesus. Such is the logic of the incarnation as Orthodox Trinitarianism understands it.

There are two ways to view Jesus. On the one hand, we could (as Trinitarians typically do) view Jesus as the incarnation of God [JESUS_{God}]. On the other hand, we could view Jesus as an ordinary human being who shares humanity with all other human beings [JESUS_{man}]. Since the incarnation is a matter of God becoming a man, both viewpoints are possible, even for a Trinitarian. It is simply a matter of perspective. If I view Jesus as an ordinary human being, then it makes no sense to say that he existed before the foundation of the world. If I view Jesus as the incarnation of God, then it makes perfect sense to say that he existed before the foundation of the world. What I can reasonably predicate of Jesus is entirely dependent upon which viewpoint I adopt when I speak of him.

Notice further that it is not a question of what one *believes* about Jesus; it is a question of how one chooses to view him and talk about him. One does not have to deny that Jesus is the incarnation of God in order to adopt the view that considers Jesus an ordinary human being. Paul can firmly believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God and still

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

compose a paragraph that views Jesus from the standpoint of his ordinary humanity. It is not a question of what Paul believes about Jesus. The question is from which perspective he has chosen to view him, as JESUS_{man} or as JESUS_{God}. Is he viewing him as an ordinary human being or as the incarnation of God? If he is describing JESUS_{God}, then it would be perfectly valid to say that Jesus existed before the beginning of the world. If he is describing JESUS_{man}, then it would not.

Still further, notice the asymmetry of the two standpoints. On the one hand, only what can be predicated of a human being can be predicated of JESUS_{man}. Nothing that pertains to the divine nature can be predicated of him. JESUS_{man} did not create the world, pre-exist, etc. On the other hand, everything that pertains to Jesus' humanity can be predicated of JESUS_{God}. JESUS_{God} hungered, grew weary, died on the cross, etc. JESUS_{God} is a particularly flexible and powerful standpoint. Virtually anything that one would ever want to say of Jesus can be said of Jesus viewed from this standpoint.

(The only exception is this: One cannot meaningfully say, "JESUS_{God} is God." At least, not without asserting something that is more or less tautological. On the other hand, to say "JESUS_{man} is God" is to make a substantive, meaningful claim about the incarnation.)

Finally, I do not intend to challenge the validity of the logic attached to JESUS_{God}. However, it is not obvious that it is valid. If a 70 year old man has been exceedingly healthy his entire life, but has recently developed cancer, I cannot justifiably assert of him, "he is a healthy man." I cannot argue—on the grounds that the young man and the old man are one and the same man—that anything that can ever have been predicated of the young man can continue to be predicated of the old man. Yet, on the surface, something like this is the rationale behind the logic used with respect to JESUS_{God}. Anything that is or has ever been true of God can be predicated of JESUS_{God}, because God and JESUS_{God} are one and the same person. To be fair to Trinitarian theology, they acknowledge that the incarnation is something of a mystery in their conception of it. JESUS_{God} is simultaneously identical to God and wholly different from God. Given this mysterious, paradoxical conception of the incarnation, I will not challenge the validity of Trinitarian (incarnational) logic. I do not reject Trinitarian theology because it is illogical (even if it is). I reject it on other grounds.

Observation #3: Due to the flexibility and scope of the concept, there is an obvious exegetical advantage to understanding Colossians 1:13–20 to have JESUS_{God} in view rather than JESUS_{man}.

The surface exegetical difficulty with Colossians 1:13–20 is to determine how all of the claims can be made of the same person. On the one hand, the person being described is the one *by* whom all things were created, the one *through* whom all things were created, the one who is before all things, and the one in whom all things hold together. On the

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

other hand, the person being described is the one in whom we have redemption, the one who is the image of the invisible God, the one who is the firstborn of all creation, and the one for whom all things were created. The former series of affirmations seems to describe a person with divine attributes. The latter, a person with human attributes. The exegetical challenge is to explain how Paul is doing both at the same time.

The peculiar power, scope, and logic of JESUS_{God} solves this exegetical dilemma. Since both human and divine attributes can be predicated of JESUS_{God} with equal validity, then clearly JESUS_{God} could be the subject of every assertion in this passage.

Observation #4: Given the traditional translation (and interpretation) of Colossians 1:13–20, understanding Colossians 1:13–20 to have JESUS_{man} in view is not a reasonable option. So taking Colossians 1:13–20 to have JESUS_{God} in view is the only reasonable choice left—if we must retain the traditional reading.

There are four clauses—as they are traditionally translated—that are incompatible with JESUS_{man} being their subject: (i) “For by him all things were created...” (ii) “all things have been created through Him...” (iii) “He is before all things...” and (iv) “and in Him all things hold together.” All things were not created by or through JESUS_{man}. JESUS_{man} was not before all things. And it is not in JESUS_{man} that all things hold together.

To insist on making the subject JESUS_{man} and at the same time to accept the traditional translation results in Paul making a series of totally outrageous assertions:

- The human Jesus created the cosmos.
- The human Jesus existed before everything else.
- The human Jesus is the one holding all things together.

This Jesus who did not know the day or hour of his own return (only the Father knew) is one and the same as the Jesus who created the cosmos, existed before all else, and holds all things together? That is absurd!

Obviously, one needs to find a way to read this passage that saves Paul from these outrages. But so long as the traditional translation and interpretation of these four clauses remains unchallenged, there is no way to avoid these absurd claims if JESUS_{man} is the subject of them. Making JESUS_{God} the subject of these clauses is the only immediately obvious way to avoid this problem

Observation #5: There is a possible translation (interpretation) of Colossians 1:13–20 that does not foreclose on understanding Colossians 1:13–20 to have JESUS_{man} in view.

Try to imagine *not* having any theological predilection to assume Trinitarian Orthodoxy, and reading Col. 1:13-20 with no such preconceptions. You get to Col. 1:16 and you read that this human teacher whom we follow, Jesus—the beloved Son, the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation—is the one “*en* whom all things were created.” Since you have no theological or doctrinal commitments to defend, the most straightforward approach to interpreting this phrase would be to ask, “What does Paul mean by ‘*en* him’ all things were created? How are all things created *en* Jesus?” Does Paul mean “by” him all things were created? That makes no sense. The cosmos was not created by the human Jesus. The cosmos was created by God himself, the transcendent Creator.

We know from Genesis that the cosmos came into being at the mere will of God. God did not “work” to create the cosmos; he did not break a sweat. He simply spoke it into existence. God said “Let there be X” and X simply came into being. Where is there any room for Jesus to be the agency of creation in Genesis? If God can say “Let there be X” and X comes into existence by the mere willing of it, then where is there any role for any intermediary?

It is far more likely that *en* him does not mean “by him” in the sense of agency or instrumentality. Therefore, a different exegesis of “*en* him” is absolutely demanded—if you are to avoid construing Paul as making the absurd claim that the human being Jesus created the world. Only a strong predilection to preserve Col. 1:16 as a proof text for some cherished theological doctrine could possibly motivate you to ignore what is absolutely demanded by a straightforward exegesis of the verse—that is, to determine an alternative way to understand the phrase “*en* him.”

What if you cannot discover another way of understanding “*en* him” that is consistent with how a native speaker of Greek at the time might construe it? What if there is no other way to take Paul’s language than to understand him to be asserting that Jesus was the agent of creation? Certainly that would create a problem for how one ought to understand the description of Jesus in Col. 1:13-20. The solution to that problem would probably have to take the form of either Arian theology (namely, that a first-created Logos created the cosmos and then later incarnated as Jesus), the form of Orthodox theology (namely, that the eternal second person of the Trinity served as an agent of creation and then later incarnated as Jesus), or the form of Transcendent Monotheism (namely, that the transcendent Creator God created the cosmos and later incarnated as Jesus).

All of these are solutions of last resort—*ad hoc* interpretations posited to solve an exegetical difficulty to which one sees no other solution. Straightforward exegesis requires that I resist all of these solutions unless I am left no choice—unless the

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

traditional translation and interpretation of the text of Colossians is completely indubitable.

That brings us to the most important question of this paper: is there a way to understand the Greek text of Col. 1:16-17 other than the traditional reading? Is there a way to understand it that does not construe it to be making outrageously false claims about the HUMAN Jesus being the creator and sustainer of the universe? I would argue that there is.

Let me seek to explain and defend an alternative interpretation and translation of Col. 1:16-17. Our interpretation of these verses hinges on four questions: (1) What does *sunesteken* mean in the clause "*en* him all things *sunesteken*"? (2) What does *en* him mean in the two clauses, "*en* him all things were created" and "*en* him all things *sunesteken*"? (3) What does "all things have been created *dia* him" mean? (4) What does it mean that he was "*pro* all things"?

Translation question #1 > What does *sunesteken* mean in the clause "*en* him all things *sunesteken*"?

Consider the clause "and in Him all things hold together." The traditional reading of this clause tends to understand *sunesteken* as meaning "hold together" in the sense of to make to cohere to prevent the creation from dispersing into random, chaotic nothingness. It is not unusual for people to equate Jesus' activity here with the strong nuclear force or some other mysterious element of modern physics. If one looks at how the word is used, however, it makes more sense that it means something like "constituted"—in the sense of, "made," "built," "put together" or "arranged." That being the case, this statement describes the act of creation; not an ongoing activity of sustaining the created order in existence.

This is, in part, confirmed by the fact that it is in the perfect tense here. If Paul wants to describe an ongoing activity of holding the universe together, why does he not use a present participle of some appropriate verb? The way I am interpreting it, it virtually requires the perfect tense or its equivalent: "and *en* him all things have been constituted." I would understand this in the sense of "*en* him all things have been made," or "*en* him all things have been formed," or "*en* him all things were put together," or even "*en* him all things were arranged." Paul is using *sunesteken* as a synonym for "created."

In most of its uses in the New Testament *sunistemi* means "to demonstrate." For example, in Romans 3:5, "if our unrighteousness demonstrates (*sunistemi*) the righteousness of God..." It is used a handful of times with this meaning. It is also used frequently to mean "commend." Hence, in 2 Corinthians 3:1, "Are we beginning to commend (*sunistemi*) ourselves again?" In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament we find it being used in a wide variety of ways. To cite a few: in Psalm 141:9 it is used to indicate the "setting" (*sunistemi*) of a trap; in Psalm 107:36 it is used to

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

indicate the “establishing” (*sunistemi*) of a city; in 3 Mac. 6:38 it is used to indicate the “appointing” of a certain day for someone’s destruction. Most revealing for understanding Colossians are these two uses: in Galatians 2:8 Paul writes, “if I rebuild what I once destroyed, I constitute [make] (*sunistemi*) myself a transgressor,” and in 2 Peter 3:5 we find, “. . .by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed (*sunistemi*) out of water and by water.”

As this brief survey of its use in the Bible shows, there are probably a few different senses that Paul’s statement here in Colossians could have. All things considered, I think its use in 2 Peter reflects most closely how Paul means it here—as a synonym for “to create.” The translation I prefer is “*en* him all things were arranged” or even “*en* him all things were put in motion.”

Translation question #2 > What does *en* him mean in the two clauses, “*en* him all things were created” and “*en* him all things *sunesteken*”?

An examination of how the Greek preposition is used reveals that *en* (like the dative case alone) includes the following uses: (1) it can introduce the person who *benefits* or is *advantaged* by something; and (2) it can introduce the person *with respect to* whom something is true. [See Appendix K] Applying these options to our two clauses here in Colossians means that we could translate them: (1a) “all things were created *for the benefit of him*” or (1b) “all things were created *with respect to him*” and (2a) “*for the benefit of him* all things were arranged” or (2b) “*with respect to him* all things were arranged.”

While all of the above translations would make sense in this context, I am inclined toward taking *en* in sense (a) above. Hence, I would employ translations (1a) and (2a). Theologically, this accords well with other explicit claims made in the New Testament. New Testament teaching certainly paints the picture that God’s purposes in history ultimately resolve themselves into the ultimate purpose of bringing glory, honor, praise, and substantive reward to his Son. That is, everything that God does is done *en* the Son.

The issue in our passage is the import of this human teacher, Jesus, whom Christians follow and hold in such high regard. Paul’s point, I think, is that everything that was created was created for the purpose of benefiting this Jesus. It was for the purpose of benefiting him that God constituted everything in the cosmos. In other words, the whole cosmos was built for Jesus, that he might be granted the reward that God had predestined to grant to him. That’s how important Jesus is. He is the main character! Everything else is either a prop or a supporting actor. Everything else is *en* him.

Obviously there is no difficulty understanding the “him” to be JESUS_{man} under this interpretation of the assertion. Paul would be saying, “JESUS_{man} is so important that all

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

things in the cosmos were created to bring benefit or advantage to him—that is, to grant him the blessing that accords with God’s eternal purposes with regard to him.”

Translation question #3 > What does “all things have been created *dia* him” mean?

We have already encountered this question. Not only have we encountered the question “What does *dia* mean?” More specifically, we have encountered the question “What does it mean that the everything that exists was created *dia* him [Jesus]?” So far, we have examined this very claim in John 1:10, Hebrews 1:3, and 1 Cor. 8:6. It seems eminently reasonable that this claim here means exactly the same thing as it does in those other three places. The contexts are very similar. All of them, for one reason or another, assert the unique importance of this person Jesus. Each assertion makes the claim that Jesus’ unique importance can be seen in the fact that everything that has ever been and occurred has been *dia* him. In each case, I contend that this claim can be translated thus: “everything that has ever been and everything that has ever occurred has been made or has occurred *with a view to* him” or more simply, “everything that has ever been and everything that has ever occurred has been made or has occurred *for* him.”

I will not mount a defense for my interpretation here. My defense has been made throughout the previous papers and in the appendices dealing with *dia*. For the same reasons that I translate it “for” or “with a view to” in those other contexts, I would translate it here as well. Hence, the clause here should read: “all things have been created *with a view to* him... .”

Note that there is no difficulty understanding the “him” to be JESUS_{man} under this interpretation of the assertion. Paul would be saying, “JESUS_{man} is such an important, exalted person in God’s cosmos that all things in the cosmos have been created with a view to him—that is, with a view to bringing about God’s eternal purposes with respect to him.”

Notice, consequently, how similar the four back-to-back claims in Colossians are: “for the benefit of [en] him all things were created”; “all things have been created with a view to [dia] him and with regard to [eis] him”; “for the benefit of [en] him all things were arranged.” The fact that the four assertions overlap so much and are so close to one another in meaning is not a problem. Given the purpose of the paragraph—namely, to highlight the central importance of this man Jesus—the restatement of virtually the same idea using different phrasing is perfectly understandable. This sort of restatement and repetition is Paul’s device to emphasize the point.

Translation question #4 > What does it mean that he was “*pro* all things”?

Even a cursory examination of the Greek preposition *pro* reveals that it is capable of two logically distinct meanings: (1) priority in time and (2) priority in status or rank.

Clearly, then, this clause does not have to be saying that Jesus existed before all things in time (as the traditional reading tends to prefer). Paul could very well be saying that Jesus exists before all things in status; there is no being in the cosmos of higher rank or import than he. I would argue that the primary purpose and significance of the entire Colossians 1:13–20 passage is to stress the importance of the man Jesus. Accordingly, this second reading is in direct accord with the whole point of the passage. The first reading could certainly be construed to contribute to such a point indirectly; but the second does so directly. It is therefore a very reasonable, straightforward translation to construe *pro* as indicating priority of status. This clause should be translated, “he is before all things in rank” or “he is of greater rank than all things” or “he is higher in status than all things.”

Under this interpretation, the Jesus in view can clearly be JESUS_{man}. This clause presents a problem for JESUS_{man} only if *pro* is understood to be speaking temporally.

Observation #6: We face a choice between two premises: (i) It is more likely that Colossians 1:13–20 is talking about JESUS_{man}, hence, it follows that the non-traditional translation is the right one. Or, (ii) It is unlikely that the non-traditional translation is right, therefore, it follows that Colossians 1:13–20 must be talking about JESUS_{God}.

The discussion so far has left us with two significantly different readings of Col. 1:16–17. One I will call the “traditional reading”; the other I will call the “non-traditional reading.”

Traditional reading: For by His (Jesus’) agency all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through His agency and for Him. He existed prior to all things in time, and it is through his power that all things are sustained in existence.

Non-traditional reading: For his (Jesus’) benefit all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created with a view to him and with regard to him. He is greater in status than everything that is, and it is for his benefit that all things were arranged and put in motion.

The interpreter of this passage will tend in one of two directions: (A) he will believe it highly unlikely that the non-traditional reading could possibly be right (precisely because it is non-traditional) and, hence, will have no choice but to embrace the expedient of reading Colossians 1:13–20 as a description of JESUS_{God} (in order to prevent it from entailing outrageous assertions with regard to a mere human being); or (B) he will be persuaded of the superiority of the exegetical judgments that have gone into the non-traditional reading as well as the greater simplicity and higher likelihood of Colossians

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

1:13–20 being a description of JESUS_{man} and embrace the non-traditional reading without reservation.

If one is a committed Trinitarian who feels strongly the need to have biblical evidence for his Trinitarian doctrine, then it is highly likely that he will embrace premise (i), taking direction A. In my judgment, if one is not a committed Trinitarian—in the sense that he is open to the possibility that Trinitarian doctrine may be mistaken—then it is highly likely that he will embrace premise (ii) and take direction B. The exegetical judgments that have gone into the non-traditional reading are well-supported and sound. Overall, it leads to a much more straightforward reading of the text.

The traditional reading—as I have rendered it—cannot be shown decisively to be fallacious; it is a plausible reading (on the assumption that Trinitarian doctrine itself is plausible). However, I have shown that there is a very good alternative reading. That alternative reading construes Colossians 1:17–18 in such a way that these verses no longer provide any evidential support for the pre-existence of the Son and, hence, the doctrine of the Trinity.

In closing, I briefly raise two questions that, in my mind, call the traditional reading into question.

Question #1: How would Paul's original readers have understood his description of the Son in Colossians 1:13–20? Specifically, can one really expect that they would have known that Paul was referring to JESUS_{God}?

We must not forget that the specific doctrine of the Trinity with all its intricacies and mysterious logic was not formulated until a few centuries later. It is a failure to appreciate the realities of history if we think that Paul's original readers were fully conversant in the peculiar logic of Trinitarian reasoning such that it would have been immediately obvious to them that JESUS_{God} was the subject of Paul's description. Likewise, it is anachronistic to think that Paul could have expected his readers to understand him if he was describing JESUS_{God}. It would be another thing if our understanding of the Trinity and its three persons had been spelled out and articulated by Paul or some other apostle such that all the original readers of the New Testament could be expected to be privy to it. But everyone involved acknowledges that this was not the case. The Trinity was not a concept developed by any apostle. It was developed over the course of many centuries and not fully formulated until 2-4 centuries after the time the New Testament was written. This is a significant mark against the traditional reading. The traditional reading makes Colossians 1:13–20 a text that Paul could not realistically have written, nor his readers understood.

PAPER #7: Colossians & the Pre-existence of the Son

Question #2: Implicit in the traditional reading of this (and similar) texts are two important assumptions: (1) Paul is an orthodox Trinitarian, and (2) it is the fact of Jesus' divine nature that serves as the ground for Paul's belief in Jesus' exalted status. If both of those assumptions are correct, why does Paul never make the simple straightforward argument that those two assumptions would permit—namely, Jesus is the eternal, self-existent God himself; God is as exalted as you can get; therefore, Jesus is as exalted as you can get? If Paul believes that Jesus is "filled" with the ontological essence of the transcendent, self-existent God himself, why does he have to make **any** arguments for the status and importance of Jesus? Jesus is God! What other argument need be made? In fact, Paul compiles many different claims as evidence for the exalted status of Jesus. Doesn't that fact call into question the two assumptions underlying the traditional reading? Doesn't it call into question whether Paul is, in fact, an orthodox Trinitarian, since he doesn't make the sort of argument that a Trinitarian would make? Doesn't it also call into question whether it is Jesus' divine nature that serves as the ground of Paul's belief in Jesus' exalted status?

The Trinitarian might contend that Paul does make arguments with the following structure: *Jesus is God, therefore, he has a most exalted status*. It is just that they take an indirect form: *Jesus has the attributes of God; [therefore, Jesus is God] (an implicit, unstated conclusion); therefore, he has a most exalted status*. But this does not solve the problem raised by this question. The question can be recast: if Paul is an orthodox Trinitarian, why are all of his arguments indirect? Paul never directly argues: Jesus is God, therefore he is the most important being in the world. At best, he argues: Jesus created everything, Jesus existed prior to everything else, Jesus sustains everything in existence, therefore, he is the most important being in the world. Why such an indirect, oblique argument if the actual logic of Paul's position is: Jesus is God! Therefore, he's very important. The fact that Paul does not argue in a manner consistent with what we would expect from an orthodox Trinitarian calls into question the very assumption. Perhaps, in fact, Paul is NOT an orthodox Trinitarian.