

Christ Vs The Cosmic Forces

“Jesus is nothing more than a superhuman being”. “He is insufficient, incomplete and weak”. “If you really want deliverance, then recite this magical spell and invoke these angels”. “You can’t really expect Christ to keep you safe”. “Christianity would be okay, but it needs some work”. What if someone at church made some comments like these, or a preacher in the pulpit? What if you heard someone teaching this in a bible class? What if this was the basic view of Christ, that your congregation held?

Christology is the study of Christ, or the teachings about Christ. One can further divide Christology into two main subcategories; the person of Christ and the work of Christ. Over time, many different schools of Christology have arisen. Churches have split, religions were created, and the precious lives of people were affected; for, either a healthy or distorted Christology. The question remains: “Why would it be necessary, to have a correct perception of Christ?” In the book of Colossians Paul addresses Christian’s who were threatened, from within with distorted, useless philosophies about Christ.

Did these believers or others in the surrounding provinces believe in the deity of Christ, or did they believe he was just some supernatural being? Did they see Christ as the unique creator of the entire universe, or was he himself a part of creation? What exactly was Paul’s Christology asserting? What images was he trying to paint in the minds of his audience? This research will dissect the poetic portrait of Christ as “firstborn over creation” (verse 15-20), and how this passage relates to the various false teachings. To unpack this phrase, this paper will examine and explain Paul’s Christological assertions, as well as some of the explicit and implicit heretical teachings that he was trying to combat.

“Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae belonged to the province of Asia. Majority of its inhabitants were Phrygian and Greek settlers, but in the early part of the 2nd century B.C. two thousands Jewish families from Babylon and Mesopotamia settled in the region (Josephus *Ant.* 12.3.4 147-153). By time of Paul’s day the city was considered a busy populous were many different cultures combined” (O’Brien “Colossians”). The Church at Colossae probably began from the outgrowth of Paul’s three-year ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19; 20:17–38). So effective was the witness of the church at Ephesus that “all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). This would include people in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Wiersbe “Colossians”)



After beginning with greetings (1:1-8), Paul expresses his continued prayers for the Church (1:8-13); while asking God to give them knowledge, spiritual understanding, and wisdom. The reason why he prays for these specific things is so that they can live in a worthy manner compared to Christ, and become productive.

Next, Paul introduces a prose; in order to warn the believers, refute false teachings, and instruct them on the proper understanding they should have.^[1] here are many compelling arguments on where and how many stanzas to divide this passage into. Some believe that this passage is not a hymn, because of the lack of any clear metonym or meter. At a glance, the repetition of words or phrases in corresponding positions, rich imagery, and parallelism, it is evident this was intended to be piece of poetic mastery. Whether one considers it a liturgical hymn, doxology, or a simple piece of prose; Paul's goal is clear: "to tap not only into the intellect of his audience by providing logical discourse; but into their emotions through a beautiful piece of poetry as well" (Martin, Ernest. 61).

I. Stanza: exalting Christ as supreme (the Image of God, Sovereign Creator)

¹⁵ **He is** the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of All creation.

¹⁶ For **by him** All things were created,

in heaven and on earth,

visible and invisible,

whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—

All things were created through him and for him.

Bridge: Christ the central figure (preexistent, sustainer, and head of Church)

¹⁷ And **He is** before All things, and in him All things hold together.

¹⁸ And **He is** the head of the body, the church.

II. Stanza: Christ work as redeemer/ reconciler (His unique resurrection, absolute superiority , deity, his reconciliation).

18b **He is** the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,

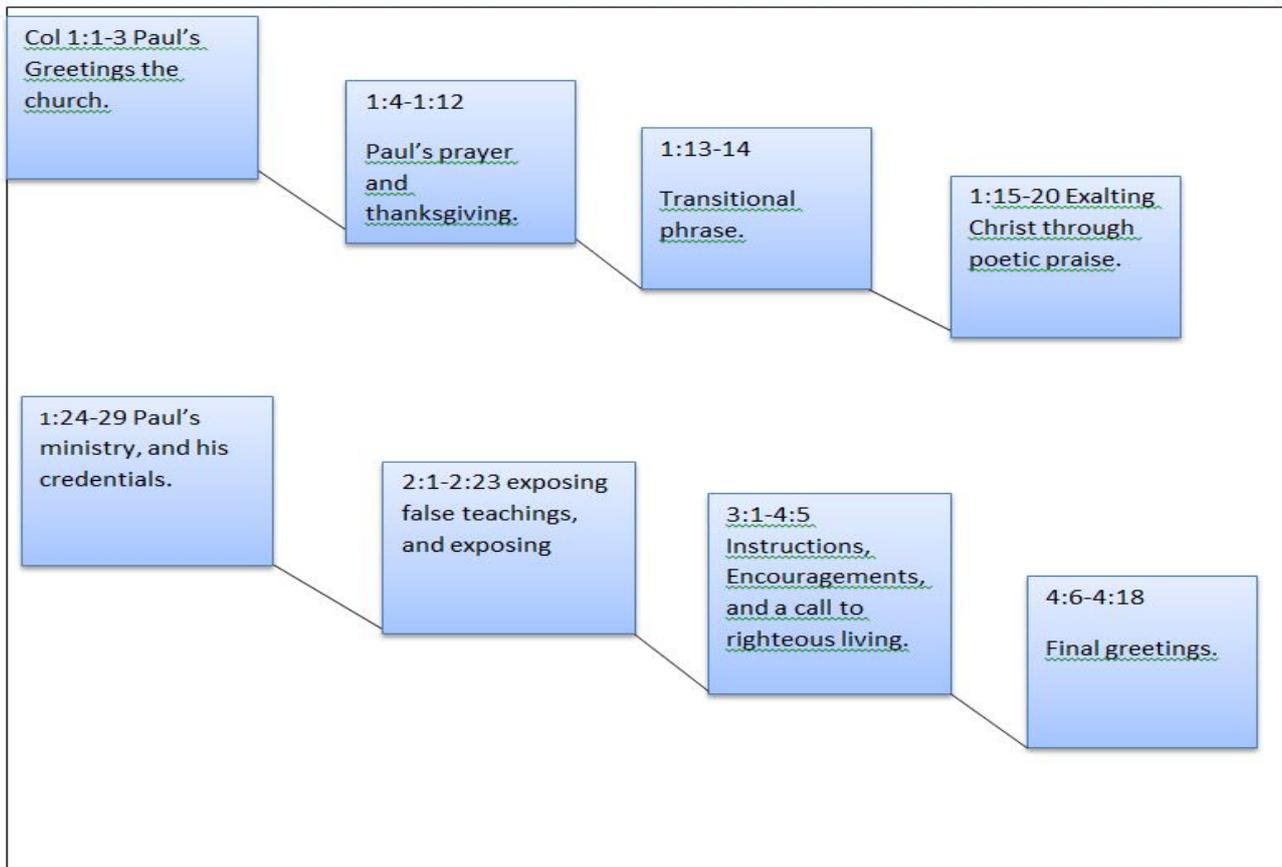
that in Everything he might be preeminent.

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰

and **through him** to reconcile to himself all things,

whether on earth or in heaven,

making peace by the blood of his cross.



Within the book of Colossians, there are at least twenty words of assurance and affirmations;^[2] in contrast to at least eight rebuttals, or condescending words^[3]. This observation illustrates a very practical principle: while it is important to prohibit behavior, it is more important to provide positive reinforcement. In order to understand the dangerous heresy that threatened the Church during this period it is necessary to have basic idea of the religious background of this region. Like any other city in the Roman Empire at this time, Colossae was religiously pluralistic. This is evident in the variety of gods and goddesses depicted on a few discovered coins that were originally minted in the city. Some of the “deities” worshiped in Asia Minor n were: Artemis, Zeus, Men, Cybelle Selene, and the Egyptian Isis. It was common at this time not only to practice polytheism (worship of many gods or goddesses), but to also borrow ideas and aspects of other religions and blend them together; this is know as syncretism (Arnold 370-372).

Describing the common peoples’ fear of the gods, worry of demonic attacks, a 1st century historian wrote an entire essay^[4]. The people he wrote about experience dreadful dreams and witness frightening visions. They also live in fear of life beyond the grave. This deep seated anxiety drives some to wear protective amulets and use magical spells (Plutarch, “Des

Superstitiones” lines 164-166)[5]. They generally believed that various spirits and deities held power of ones fate and influenced the affairs of daily life. In addition, numerous inscriptions also show that Jews and Gentiles in Asia Minor tended to invoke various spirit beings for protections and deliverance[6].

Another dangerous element of the Colossian heresy the high value placed on secret wisdom and special revelation (2:2-4, 2:18). The visionary experience was a core feature of some of the mystery; whose primary purpose was to enter into a spiritual realm to seek special visions from the gods. Notice the repetition of words like “you will see”[7]

“Draw in breath from the rays, drawing up three times as much as you can, and you will see “yourself being lifted up and (540) ascending to the height, so that you seem to be in mid-air. You will *hear* nothing either of man or of any other living thing, nor in that hour will you see anything of mortal affairs on earth, but rather you will see all immortal things. For in that day (545) and hour you will see the divine order of the skies: the presiding gods rising into heaven and others setting. Now the course of the visible gods will appear through the disk of god..... And you will see the gods staring intently at you and rushing at you..... Then you will see the gods looking graciously upon you and no longer rushing at you, but rather going about in their own order of affairs (PGM lines 539-585)”(Arnold “Colossians” 391).

One of the final aspects of the religious atmosphere of Paul’s audience is the manifestations of extreme forms of behaviors within the context of worship. This is best illustrated by the nature of the worship directed to the mysterious rituals of Cybele and Attis. Worshippers often engaged in dietary restrictions, severe fasting, abstinence from ones’ spouse, and perhaps even self mutilation, and other extreme bodily abuses” (Arnold, “Colossians” 372-375).

In spite of attempts to label these false teachings as Gnosticism[8], Paul never explicitly describes the false teaching that threatens his audience. To deduce the nature of the heresy, one must infer from the counterarguments Paul made to the false teachers. When one looks at the composite sketch of the statements against the backdrop of Judo- mysticism, and oriental occultism then they can understand the nature of the heresy (Kenneth L Barker, “Intro to Colossians”). One could label the Colossian heresy as a precursor to Gnosticism. However, the evidence more accurately points to several regional or tribal cult practices. The spiritual climate in Asia Minor can best be described as syncretism (blending of different religious ideas and practices) (Arnold, “Colossians” 370-375). Hippolytus describes the teaching of a Christian leader named Elchasai who lived at the end of the 1st century although he was not from Colossae here is an example of how one could mix Christianity, Judaism, and Pagan occultism together[9].

“For *Elchasai* speaks thus: There exist wicked stars of impiety. This declaration has been now made by us, O you pious ones and disciples: beware of the power of the days of the sovereignty of these *stars*, and engage not in the commencement of any undertaking during the *ruling* days of these. And baptize not man or woman during the days of the power of these *stars*, when the moon, (emerging) from among them, courses *the sky*, and travels along with

them. Beware of the very day up to that on which *the moon* passes out from these *stars*, and then [baptize](#) and enter on every beginning of your works. But, moreover, [honor](#) the day of the [Sabbath](#), since that day is one of those during which prevails (the power) of these *stars*. Take care, however, not to commence *your works* the third *day* from a [Sabbath](#), since when three years of *the reign* of the emperor Trojan are again completed from the time that he subjected the Parthians to his own sway,— when, *I say*, three years have been completed, [war](#) rages between the impious [angels](#) of the northern *constellations*; and on” (Hippolytus “Refutation of All Heresies” 9.11)

(See chart on the next page for a summary of Paul’s Counter arguments against the teaching)

A analytical chart on the elements of the Colossians Heresy follows on the next page.[\[10\]](#)

Paul’s counter arguments or instructions

1:15, 19, 2:9,, 2:17 “Image of the Invisible God”,
“whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”,

2:2-4 “... to reach all the riches of full assurance
of understanding and the **knowledge** of God’s
mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all
the treasures of **wisdom and knowledge**”.2:18
“.....going on in detail about **visions**, puffed up
without reason by his carnal mind”.

2:11, 2:16 ...”questions of food and drink, or with
regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath”.

2:4, 2:8, 2:22. in order that no one may
delude you with plausible arguments, ⁸ See to it
that no one takes you captive by philosophy and
empty deceit, according to human tradition”.

2:18, 2:21, 2:23. “These have indeed an
appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made
religion and asceticism and severity to the
body”.

Elements of the teaching

These passages seem to suggest that these
teachings, either striped him of his deity, or reduced
Christ to a mere superstitious entity or angel. They did
not fullyunderstand who He was, or there was a
complete rejection of the person and work of Christ.
This is all implied by Paul’s high “Christology” in this
entire book.

It appears that one of teachings of this heresy was the
seeking of some secret knowledge; either as a way to
prove their devotion to God, or as the agent of their
salvation.

Strict observances of certain rituals. They were
probably folk religion which combined aspects of
Judaism an various pagan practices[\[11\]](#). The New
moon refers to astrological occult practices.

A reliance upon and promotion of human
philosophies and special knowledge , again viewing
them as the agent of salvation.

Asceticism (False Humility), treating body harsh to
obtain a sense of spirituality. Severe fasting, self
mutilation, forbidding of marriage.