

The Firstborn (Col 1:15)

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In Colossians 1:15 Paul states that Jesus is “the firstborn of all creation.” This text has often been understood in the sense that Jesus was born before the creation of humankind and in one way or another emanated from God the Father in ages past, or that Jesus was created by the Father and then continued the creation process begun by His Father. How should the term “firstborn” be understood in the context of Colossians 1:15?

The Greek word *prōtotokos* (“firstborn”) is found 127 times in the Septuagint and eight times in the NT. In the majority of the cases it refers to a literal firstborn (Gen 41:51) whether of humankind or of animals (Exod 34:19-29). The human firstborn enjoyed the birthright (Gen 43:37) and a double portion of the inheritance (Deut 21:16-17). According to 2 Chronicles 21:3 the firstborn son of the king received the kingdom while various gifts were given to the other sons. The chiefs of the tribes of Israel were the firstborn (1 Chron 5:12).

However, in a number of cases persons who originally did not belong to the category of the firstborn were made firstborn. Manasseh was the firstborn (Gen 41:51), but Ephraim, the second, took his place (Gen 48:20; Jer 31:9). Although Shimri was not the firstborn, his father made him first (1 Chron 26:10). Very enlightening is Psalm 89. This Psalm describes God’s lovingkindness and faithfulness. He had made a covenant with David promising that his throne would endure. David is mentioned in verse 3 and again in verses 20, 35, 49. In verse 27 an incomplete parallelism is found:

I also shall make	him [David]	firstborn,
-	-	the highest of the
		kings of the earth.

David who was the eighth child of his parents (1 Sam 16:10-11) would be made the firstborn. What this means is expressed in the second half of the verse: David as the firstborn would be the highest of the kings. The covenant with David was finally fulfilled in the Messiah, the antitypical firstborn and the King of kings. Ps 89:27 does not stress the issues of being born or being the first chronologically, but emphasizes the special honor, greatness, and authority of the firstborn.

In the NT the term *prōtotokos* is applied to Jesus six times: He was the firstborn of Mary (Luke 2:7), but He is also the firstborn among many brothers (Rom 8:29), the firstborn of all creation (Col 1:15), the firstborn from/of the dead (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5), and the firstborn whom the angels worship (Heb 1:6).

The term *prōtotokos* points to the special rank and dignity of the firstborn. However, being the first or being born is not always stressed and is, therefore, not necessarily important to the understanding of the term. This is the case in Colossians 1:15. The text and the immediate context (Col 1:15-20) show that Jesus is the image of God. He has created all things. Therefore, He Himself is not created. He is the Redeemer in whom all things have been reconciled to God. He is the One who holds all things together. Here is an outline of the passage:

A **He is** { the image of the invisible God,
the **firstborn** of all creation.

For in Him all things were created . . .
all things have been created through Him and for Him.

B And He is before all things,
C and in Him all things hold together.
B' And He is the head of the body, the church;

A' **He is** { the beginning
the **firstborn** from the dead . . .

For in Him it was His Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell,
and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself . . .

In this passage the term “firstborn” is used twice. As Jesus is the firstborn of creation so he is the firstborn of the dead. The second phrase, which explains the first, makes it clear that the issue is not birth. Jesus was raised from the dead but not literally born from the dead. Second, he was not the first in a temporal sense. Others were raised before Him. He was first in the sense that all resurrections whether past or future were and are dependent on His resurrection. Without His resurrection no other resurrection is possible. Verse 18 shows what that means, namely “that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.” As in Psalm 89 so here too, being the “firstborn” is associated with having supremacy.

When the term is applied to Jesus and does not refer to his birth by Mary, “firstborn” points to Christ's exalted position as the supreme king and ruler of the universe and does not suggest that he has been created or has emanated from God in ages past.

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