

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## THE LORD OF CREATION

For well over a century, many Biblical scholars (with a liberal bent) have sought to establish an enormous gulf between Jesus and Paul. The latest attempt is surely one of the boldest. James Tabor teaches in the religion department alongside Bart Ehrman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.<sup>1</sup> His book *The Jesus Dynasty* made the cover of *U.S. News and World Report*. Even though the book is designed for specialists, Walmart has the book on its radar alongside *The Da Vinci Code*. However, unlike Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*), Tabor's book was not written as a novel. Instead, Tabor's credentials as a respected archaeologist and New Testament historian give his book a great deal of credibility in the eyes of the academic community. "There are two completely separate and distinct 'Christianities' embedded in the New Testament. One is quite familiar and became the version of the Christian faith known to billions over the past two millennia. Its main proponent was the apostle Paul. The other has been largely forgotten and by the turn of the first century A.D. had been effectively marginalized and suppressed by the other" (p. 261).<sup>2</sup> Tabor clearly has a theological agenda, and even though he does not stoop to the level of Dan Brown and the kind of nonsense that characterizes *The Da Vinci Code*, Tabor nonetheless has no sympathy for traditional, orthodox Christianity. For example, amongst his "scholarly speculations," Tabor boldly admits that "the assumption of the historian is that all human beings have a biological mother and father and that Jesus is no exception" (p. 59). He later makes a similar assumption that the resurrection could not have happened because the notion of the supernatural is incompatible with a modern worldview (p. 233). Since Jesus was not born of a virgin, and Joseph was not the father, than who was? Tabor "resurrects" the old canard of the anti-Christian philosopher Celsus (late second century), who wrote a strident polemic against Christianity that includes the claim that Mary was impregnated by a Roman soldier name Pantera (p. 64). Jesus according to Tabor, viewed himself as a revolutionary who would lead the nation of Israel in a revolt against Rome (p. 108). This Jesus, Tabor claims, most certainly did not see himself as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, on the contrary he fully expected that his followers would rescue him from the hands of the Romans before his crucifixion (p. 181). In keeping with his main thesis, Tabor strenuously objects to the idea that Jesus could have said "This is my body....this is my blood" at the last supper with disciples. He emphatically declares, "Such an idea could not have come from Jesus the Jew" (p. 203). He thinks Paul dreamed this idea up based on Greco-Roman Osiris worship where the Blood of the beloved is consumed. He also assumed Paul grew up in Tarsus outside the land of Israel. This is contradicted by Acts 22:3 where we are told by Luke that Paul grew up in Jerusalem and was trained by Gamaliel. But Tabor considers Luke to have been a very careless historian who frequently embellished his stories to make a favorable impression on his Gentile readers. And what are we to think about Paul's remarks in I Cor. 11:23-26 and the words of institution given at the last supper? Paul, Tabor asserts, simply made it up (p. 205). One thing is for certain. Tabor's picture of Jesus is *not* the one given to us in the Gospels and the Epistles.

After Jesus calmed the stormy sea (in the Old Testament, the God of Israel is Lord of the roaring sea, cf. Ps. 33:7, 65:7, 77:16; Job 12:15) and rebuked His disciples for their fear and lack of faith, they were awestruck and said to one another, "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey Him?" (Mark 4:35-41). In response to this question, the writer to the Hebrews declares, "He is the radiance of His (God) glory and the exact representation of His nature, upholding all things by the word of His power" (Heb. 1:3). The Apostle Paul proclaims that "He is the image of God; He has primacy over all created things" (Col. 1:15). The Jehovah's Witnesses in their *New World Translation* (NWT) renders the passage this way: "He is

the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; because by means of him all (other) things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible and the things invisible, no matter whether they are thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. All (other) things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all (other) things and by means of him all (other) things were made to exist." You will note the four occurrences of the word *other* (in brackets.) In the foreword of NWT the editors state, "enclosed words inserted to complete or clarify the sense in the English text." By inserting the word *other*, however, the translators have not merely "completed" or "clarified" the English translation, they have altered the meaning of the original. Why? A look at the Jehovah's Witnesses doctrines of the Bible and of God and Jesus soon reveals the answer. Jehovah's Witnesses would concur with much of the kind of stuff that *The Da Vinci Code* and others of this stripe have written about the Council of Nicea.<sup>3</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses deny the doctrine of the Trinity and the coequality of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, holding instead a modern form of the ancient heresy of *Arianism*. Christ, they believe, was created by God as a spirit-creature named Michael. Then through Christ, God made all other created things. Therefore, if Scripture is to fit preconceived doctrine, Col. 1:15-20 needs *clarification*, to wit, *amending*. Otherwise the Bible is here declaring that Christ is *before all things* and in fact was involved in the creation of all things. It would, in short, make him, as historic Christian orthodoxy teaches, coeternal with God. Hebrews 1:5 uses the expression of Christ, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." The Apostle Paul likewise uses this language in Col. 1:15-20.

**HISTORICAL SITUATION AT COLOSSAE:** We owe this great passage of Pauline Christology to the heresy of Gnostic Judaism, which had made inroads in the Church at Colossae.<sup>4</sup> This heresy taught the existence of angelic intermediaries (as listed in Colossians 1:16) between the Creator and the material universe. Jesus was considered to be only one of these angelic intermediaries. It is against this background that Paul writes.

**NOTE:** This passage (Colossians 1:15-20) is a "hymn," but it does *not* carry the same meaning as a congregational song. Rather, it is a term that is really "creedal," having dogmatic, confessional, liturgical and doxological import. The reason it is called "hymnic" is due to its stylistic (rhythm, parallelism, meter or chiasm) and linguistic (very selective vocabulary) structure.<sup>5</sup>

## **I. THE SOVEREIGN LORD OF CREATION**

### **A. The Essential Basis of Christ's Lordship (v. 15a)**

The first thing Paul declares is that Christ is "the image of the invisible God." What does this mean? Besides the very obvious notion of "likeness," the Greek word EIKŌN (also used in II Cor. 4:4, 3:18; Rom. 8:29; and Col. 3:10) involves two other ideas:

1. **Representation** (compare with the word CHARAKTĒR in Hebrews 1:3). It indicates not mere resemblance (like one egg to another) but implies an archetype of which it is a copy. It is derived from its prototype. The context unfolds how the word is to be understood.
2. **Manifestation**. The Word as pre-incarnate or incarnate is the revelation of the unseen Father. Christ is the manifestation of the invisible God (Ex. 3:20; 1 Tim. 6:16 compare with John 1:18).

**NOTE:** If Jesus Christ is God, how can He be the image of God? The reference to God is God the Father. The Person of the Son bears the likeness of the Person of the Father (John 14:8,9).<sup>6</sup>

### **B. The Economic Basis of Christ's Lordship (v. 15b)**

Christ Jesus is "the firstborn of every creature" (lit. "over all creation" as in the NIV). The Jehovah Witnesses argue that this means that Christ is the first creature. The word PRŌTOTOKOS does *not* mean, "first created." The Greek word for that idea is PRŌTOKTISTOS (which is never used of Christ). PRŌTOTOKOS means "first-begotten" and is similar to "only begotten" (KJV), "only" (NIV), trans. from the Greek word MONOGENĒS of John 1:18.<sup>7</sup> This word, in John's Gospel is Hebraic, ascribing *priority* of rank to the firstborn son, who enjoys a special place in the father's love and who accordingly is the father's primary heir (cf. Ps. 89:27ff; Ex. 4:22 and Heb. 1:2). Whereas "image" emphasizes Christ's relation to God, the second title, "firstborn of all creation," designates His sovereignty over creation. "Paul is effectively refuting any claim (like that of the Jehovah Witnesses) that Christ is an angelic creature emanating from God. Christ is God, and He is Lord of all

creation."<sup>8</sup> The insertion of the word *only* is not warranted by the Greek text. Metzger again responds, "It is not present in the original Greek and was obviously inserted to make the passage refer to Jesus as being on a par with other created things." Metzger goes on to point out that Paul originally wrote Colossians in part to combat a notion of Christ similar to that held by the Jehovah's Witnesses: "Some of the Colossians advocated the Gnostic notion that Jesus was the first of many other created intermediaries between God and men."<sup>9</sup> The Jehovah's Witnesses have deliberately altered Col. 1:15-20 because, as the text naturally reads, it explicitly contradicts their doctrine that Christ is a creature. Metzger notes six other passages which the NWT also twist to form a more congenial to Witness doctrine: John 1:1, Phil. 2:6, Titus 2:13, 2 Peter 1:1, Rev. 3:14, and Pro. 8:22. (We will examine these.)

C. The Explicit Proof of Christ's Lordship (vv. 16,17)

Two great things are described as the foundation of Christ's Lordship over creation.

1. CHRIST IS THE CREATOR. This central activity of Christ in creation is also stated in John 1:3 and Heb. 1:2 and is a complete denial of any Gnostic philosophy. The word trans. "were created," EKTISTHĒ, is aorist and describes the definite historical act of creation.
2. CHRIST IS THE SUSTAINER OF THE UNIVERSE. "All things hold together in Him." Apart from Christ's continuous sustaining activity (Note the word trans. "hold together," SUNESTĒKEN, perfect tense), all things would literally come unglued!

CONCLUSION: Since Christ not only created all things but sustains creation, can you not trust Him? Every breath you draw, you do so because Christ gives it to you (cf. Dan. 5:23). The One who is the Sovereign Creator is also the One who became a man and gave Himself up as an atonement for sinners. He now is enthroned at His Father's right hand. Confess Him as your Lord and Savior. The day will come when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10,11).

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ehrman is the author of the book *Misquoting Jesus*.

<sup>2</sup> J. Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty* (Simon & Schuster, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. The insert in this week's bulletin by Carl Trueman, *Fallacious History* for more details on this.

<sup>4</sup> The exact identity of Paul's opponents at Colossae is a matter of debate. The language Paul uses strongly suggests that they were Jewish mystical ascetics who, like the later Gnostics affirmed a "special" knowledge of God's mysteries that came to a person apart from any divine mediator, thus no need for Christ. Cf. A. J. Bandstra, "Did The Colossian Errorists Need a Mediator?" in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* eds. R. Longenecker and M. Tenney (Zondervan, 1974) p. 329-343. I need to comment on Gnosticism in the NT because the claim made by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* that the Gnostic gospels predate the four Gospels of the NT. New Testament scholar S. C. Schindlermanthe, in a recent paper on the subject points out that "for the Gnostic gospels to truly represent the earliest form of Christianity, we would have to establish at least two points. First, the Gnostic gospels and the theological perspective found in them would need to predate the canonical gospels and their theological perspective. Second, the theological perspective found in the canonical gospels would need to emerge out of the theological perspective found in the Gnostic gospels and alter the Gnostic theological perspective in some way.

In fact, the evidence points in the other direction. The evidence leads us to conclude that the canonical gospels represent the earliest form of Christianity. Gnostic Christianity came later and emerged as a deviant form out of orthodox Christianity.

The work of biblical scholar Edwin Yamauchi focused specifically on these issues, and what he discovered directly contradicts the idea that orthodox Christianity emerged out of Gnostic Christianity as its deviant form.

Yamauchi established the developmental timeline of Gnosticism in relationship to early Christianity and identified three stages that culminated in the development of full-blown Christian Gnosticism. The first and earliest stage can be characterized by the terms *gnostic* or *gnosis*. The term *gnosis* can be used to describe much of Greek philosophical thought after the time of Plato in which physical things like the body were thought to be evil and spiritual things were thought to be good. This body-spirit dualism became characteristic of much of Greek philosophical thought after Plato. At this stage, *gnosis* was more of a general, dualistic way of viewing life than it was a well-developed theological system.

A second stage of development, which Yamauchi refers to as 'incipient Gnosticism,' occurred shortly after the emergence of Christianity in the first century AD. As the Christian gospel spread throughout a Greek-speaking world that was dominated by dualistic thinking, some 'converts' began to syncretize the teachings of Christianity with their body-spirit dualistic thinking. It was this syncretization that the apostle Paul was most likely attacking in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Again, this

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second stage does not represent a sophisticated theological system. Rather it actually shows the earliest stages of Gnostic thinking attaching itself as a parasite onto orthodox Christianity.

The third stage brought about the development of the Gnostic gospels and a full-blown Christian Gnosticism in the third century. By this point, the syncretism had developed more fully. Not only had Gnostic Christianity syncretized Greek body-spirit dualism with orthodox Christianity, but it had developed an entire intricate theological system around that basic belief. This Gnostic Christianity taught that Jesus was a mediator figure between humans and Yahweh, but it also had numerous other mediatorial figures known as aeons that stood between Yahweh and an ultimate transcendent divine being. The need for these numerous mediator figures was based on the idea that the divine could never expose himself to this dirty, evil world. Therefore, his contact with this world had to be mediated by several mediating figures so as to avoid contamination.

Yamauchi's methodology for establishing this chronology was based on a close examination of all the Gnostic Christian texts available to him. He established that the earliest Gnostic Christian texts date back only to the third century AD, whereas the manuscript evidence for the New Testament books dates back much earlier than that. If one were to argue that orthodox Christianity emerged out of Gnostic Christianity, one would have to point to evidence that the Gnostic Christian texts were written before the orthodox Christian texts—or at least that there is evidence for Gnostic Christian texts written close to the same time as the orthodox Christian texts.

The fact is that there is no evidence for Gnostic Christian texts that predate the third century AD. Since none exists, orthodox Christianity couldn't have emerged out of Gnostic Christianity. This fact, coupled with the reality that some of the key theological concepts found in the Gnostic Christian texts cannot be found in any of the earlier New Testament texts, has established the view that Gnostic Christianity sprang out of orthodox Christianity and not the other way around." (See his full article at [www.geneva.edu/magazine](http://www.geneva.edu/magazine).)

<sup>5</sup> cf. Robert Reymond, *Jesus: Divine Messiah. The New Testament Witness* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), p. 245.

<sup>6</sup> cf. John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Colossians* (Rpt. James Family, 1979), p. 175.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Bruce M. Metzger, "The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ", *Theology Today* (Apr. 1953, Vol. X, No. 1).

<sup>8</sup> Peter T. O'Brian, *Colossians, Philemon: Word Biblical Commentary* (Word Books, 1982), p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Metzger, op. cit. cf. also J.W. Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (IVP, 1980), p. 36.