



THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST IN PAULINE CHRISTOLOGY: PHILIPPIANS 2 AND COLOSSIANS 1 IN DIVINE IDENTITY THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The origin, nature, and rapid development of early Christian devotion to Jesus have long constituted a focal point of intense scholarly debate within New Testament studies. While traditional historical-critical scholarship, heavily influenced by nineteenth-century paradigms, often posited an evolutionary trajectory from a "low" Jewish Christology to a "high" Hellenistic deification of Jesus, recent advancements in biblical theology fundamentally challenge this anachronistic framework. This paper investigates the divinity of Christ in Pauline Christology through a rigorous, comprehensive exegetical analysis of the Philippians Christ Hymn (Philippians 2:5-11) and the Colossian Hymn (Colossians 1:15-20) situated firmly within the framework of Divine Identity Theology. Employing the historical-grammatical method to analyze the text, the study demonstrates that the Apostle Paul compellingly included Jesus Christ within the unique, uncreated divine identity of Yahweh. The conceptual paradigms of "kenosis" and the "firstborn of all creation" are deeply exegeted to reveal that Paul's high Christology does not represent a departure from Second Temple Jewish monotheism, but rather its relational and eschatological climax. Findings indicate that early high Christology manifested as binitarian worship was a rapid, early Jewish-Christian reality rather than a late Hellenistic corruption. The paper concludes by recommending that local churches integrate deep exegetical teachings on Pauline Christology to foster robust, orthodox allegiance among congregants.

Keywords: Pauline Christology, Divine Identity Theology, Kenosis, Philippians 2, Colossians 1.

Introduction

The theological landscape of New Testament scholarship has historically been polarized over the fundamental question of the origins of Christology. The identity of Jesus of Nazareth, and specifically how His earliest followers understood His ontological relationship to the God of Israel, remains the most critical inquiry in Christian theology. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (History of Religions School), spearheaded by scholars such as Wilhelm Bousset and later popularized by Rudolf Bultmann, argued that the Apostle Paul and the primitive Palestinian Christian movement originally viewed Jesus merely as



an exalted human creature, a suffering servant, or an eschatological prophet. According to this evolutionary hypothesis, it was only much later, as the nascent Christian movement expanded beyond the borders of Judea into the broader Greco-Roman world and interacted with pagan mythologies of divine mediators and deified emperors, that Jesus was ontologically elevated to the status of a fully divine figure. This long-held hypothesis posits that a "high Christology" is fundamentally incompatible with the strict, unyielding monotheism of Second Temple Judaism and must logically represent a later Hellenistic corruption of the primitive, historically grounded Christian faith.

However, this evolutionary paradigm has been significantly challenged by recent advancements in the study of Second Temple Judaism and Pauline theology, though it continues to find modern advocates. For instance, Bart D. Ehrman (2014) posits an "exaltation Christology," arguing that the earliest Christians did not view Jesus as pre-existent, but rather as a human who was adopted or exalted to divine status only after his resurrection. Similarly, Maurice Casey (1991) constructs a rigid dichotomy between Jewish and Gentile thought, arguing that Jesus was merely a Jewish prophet whose identity was later deified entirely by Gentile converts detached from strict Jewish monotheism.

Furthermore, James D. G. Dunn's earlier work (1980) suggested a "low Christology" starting point, expressing skepticism that a robust theology of Christ's pre-existence emerged before the late first century. While these scholars present articulate models, their arguments reveal critical historical and exegetical vulnerabilities when confronted with the Pauline corpus. Ehrman's "exaltation" timeline fails to adequately account for the pre-Pauline hymnic material (such as Phil 2:5-11), which already contains a fully developed theology of pre-existence and kenosis mere decades after the crucifixion.

Casey's model falters by relying on an outdated, rigid binary between Judaism and Hellenism, ignoring how Second Temple Jewish monotheism itself contained categories for divine mediation (Gathercole, 2006). Furthermore, Dunn's hesitation regarding early pre-existence is countered by Paul's casual, undefended appeals to Christ's role in cosmic creation (Col 1:16), which strongly suggests this was already the established orthodox baseline, not a late development. Therefore, the thesis of this comprehensive paper is that Pauline texts provide compelling evidence that Jesus was included within the unique divine identity of Yahweh. Paul did not abandon his Jewish monotheism; rather, he drastically redefined it around the person, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To substantiate this thesis, this paper will extensively explore the concept of "Divine Identity Theology," which argues that the highest possible Christology was entirely commensurable with Second Temple Jewish monotheism (Lucy, 2011). By conducting a deep, verse-by-verse textual exegesis of two monumental Pauline texts 9Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-200 this study will demonstrate how Paul boldly appropriates Old Testament language reserved exclusively for Yahweh and applies it directly and unapologetically to Jesus. Ultimately, this research seeks to definitively resolve the manufactured "problem" of early high Christology by demonstrating that the worship of Jesus was not a late Hellenistic corruption, but a rapid, early Jewish-Christian reality that demands absolute theological and practical allegiance today.



Conceptual Clarification

To properly navigate the complex Christological claims of the Pauline epistles, it is absolutely imperative to clarify three foundational concepts that serve as the bedrock for the ensuing exegetical analysis: Divine Identity Theology, the concept of Kenosis, and the title "Firstborn of all creation."

Divine Identity Theology

The traditional approach to understanding the divinity of Christ throughout church history has relied heavily on Greek metaphysical categories of "essence," "substance," and "nature" (such as *ousia* and *hypostasis*), which were formalized during the Nicene and Chalcedonian councils in the fourth and fifth centuries. However, first-century Jews, including the Apostle Paul, did not primarily think in these Hellenistic ontological terms. Instead, they understood God fundamentally through the lens of "identity." According to this paradigm, Jewish monotheism was fiercely characterized by monolatry, the exclusive worship of the one God, YHWH, who was uniquely identified by specific, exclusive actions: He is the sole Creator of all things and the sovereign Ruler of the cosmos (Lucy, 2011).

Divine Identity Theology, therefore, asserts that early Christians included Jesus into this unique divine identity without violating their strict monotheism. Jesus was not seen as a secondary deity, a lesser god, or a created demiurge acting on God's behalf; rather, He was recognized as sharing the uncreated, sovereign identity of the one God of Israel. Paul's divine Christology is thus fully divine but expressed in a particular, culturally intelligible way: it is relational. The Pauline Christ-relation corresponds precisely to the language concerning YHWH's exclusive relationship to Israel in Second Temple Judaism (Chris, 2012). The worship, obedience, and ultimate devotion that a faithful Jew owed exclusively to YHWH, often recited daily in the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4), were entirely transferred to, and shared with, the risen Lord Jesus Christ. This theological framework enables us to see that Paul's highest Christological statements were deeply Jewish at their core.

Kenosis (from Philippians 2)

The theological term *kenosis* is derived from the Greek verb *kenoō* ("to empty"), found in the famous "Christ Hymn" of Philippians 2:7, where Paul states that Christ "emptied himself" (*heauton ekenōsen*). Historically, the concept of kenosis has generated intense and often confusing theological debate. In the nineteenth century, various "kenotic theories" emerged, particularly in German and British theology, which erroneously suggested that the pre-existent Son of God literally relinquished or laid aside some of His essential divine attributes (such as omniscience, omnipresence, or omnipotence) in order to become human during the incarnation.

However, modern exegetical scholarship has decisively corrected this metaphysical misunderstanding. Kenosis in Paul's narrative soteriology does not mean the loss or reduction of divinity, but rather its most profound and ultimate expression (Michael, 2009). For Paul, the self-emptying of Christ is the ultimate paradigm of "cruciformity", the transformative process of conforming to the crucified Christ. God's divine nature is most clearly, violently, and beautifully revealed in the self-giving, self-emptying love displayed on the Roman cross. Therefore, kenosis is not a cessation of deity, but the exact shape of true divine identity acting in love for the salvation of humanity. Furthermore, in an analysis of the trends in critical scholarship regarding the



Philippians hymn, the kenotic act of Christ functions both as a profound soteriological declaration of Christ's pre-existence and as a mimetic ethical model for the Christian community in Philippi, serving to directly contrast and subvert the prevailing Roman cultural values of status, honor, and self-aggrandizement (Gregory, 2015). To empty oneself, in the Pauline sense, is to exercise divine prerogative for the sake of the other.

"Firstborn of all creation" (from Colossians 1)

In Colossians 1:15, Paul refers to Jesus as the "image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (*prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*). In Christian antiquity, the Arian heresy exploited the word "firstborn" to argue that Jesus was a created being—the first and greatest creation of God, through whom God made the rest of the world, but fundamentally a creature nonetheless. This misinterpretation continues to be propagated by various modern theological sects. However, conceptual clarification of the Greek term *prōtotokos* within its Old Testament and Jewish Septuagint milieu provides a counter-argument to this Arian misinterpretation.

As demonstrated in masterful classical commentaries on Colossians, the term *prōtotokos* denotes supremacy in rank, privilege, and heirship rather than a statement of temporal or biological origin (Joseph, 1879). In the Davidic covenant, God declares of David, "I will appoint him my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth" (Psalm 89:27). David was not the chronologically first man born, nor even the firstborn of his own family (he was the youngest of Jesse's sons), but he held the absolute rank of supremacy over all other rulers. Thus, calling Jesus the "firstborn of all creation" is a declaration of His absolute sovereignty, preeminence, and lordship over the entire created order. It establishes Him as the pre-eminent heir and ruler of the cosmos, not as a constituent part of the created order itself. It is a title of absolute authority, reflecting his uncreated nature acting over creation (Simon, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

This research systematically employs the Exegetical and Historical-Grammatical method as its primary theoretical framework. This method insists that the true meaning of any biblical text must be derived strictly from its historical context, cultural background, grammatical structure, syntax, and the original authorial intent, rather than imposing foreign, anachronistic, or modern dogmatic frameworks onto the ancient text. Words must be understood exactly as they were used in their original setting, considering the specific audience to whom the epistles were addressed.

Within this rigorous methodological approach, the paper utilizes the specific lens of Divine Identity Theology to read the Apostle Paul firmly within his Second Temple Jewish context. It is essential to remember that Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisees, deeply immersed in the scriptures, oral traditions, and the fierce monotheistic fervor of first-century Israel. Paul's consistent Jewish identity must not be overlooked; his dramatic Damascus Road encounter did not cause him to abandon his fundamental, ancestral beliefs about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Rather, the addition of Jesus as the promised Messiah represented a profound, dynamic, and eschatological development wherein salvation through the cross became the unexpected climax of his entire theology (James, 2006). Pauline theology is fundamentally theocentric; God's entire salvific action in history is entirely wrapped up in Christ's death and resurrection (Joseph, 2003). Therefore, to understand Paul's Christology, one must first understand Paul's theology of God.



Furthermore, this theoretical framework must carefully account for the Greco-Roman religious context in which Paul operated. The Greco-Roman world was undeniably replete with divine mediators, deified emperors, mystery cults, and a sliding scale of human-divine entities. However, early Christianity intentionally synthesized its understanding of Jesus in stark, unyielding contrast to pagan polytheism (Matthew, 2020; Michael, 2022). Early Christians maintained their strict Jewish monotheism but expanded its boundaries from within to accommodate the eternal Son. This theological phenomenon is what scholars describe as "binitarian" devotion, a unique, historically unprecedented religious mutation wherein early Jewish Christians venerated Jesus alongside God the Father, offering Him worship, prayers, doxologies, and hymns that were strictly and legally reserved for Yahweh alone (Larry, 2003). This was not a gradual evolution, but a sudden, explosive development. Understanding this historical reality, that early Christians worshipped Jesus as God almost immediately following the resurrection, provides the vital, indispensable framework for interpreting Paul's most exalted Christological texts (Charles, 1978).

Application to Paper: Exegetical Analysis

To conclusively demonstrate how Paul seamlessly and intentionally integrates Jesus into the divine identity, a deep, verse-by-verse textual exegesis of Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 is required. These passages represent the zenith of Pauline high Christology, showing Paul taking sacred Old Testament language reserved exclusively for Yahweh and applying it directly and unapologetically to Jesus.

Exegetical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11 (The Christ Hymn)

Philippians 2:5-11 is widely regarded by critical scholars as an early Christian hymn, possibly pre-dating Paul's letter, which Paul adapted and incorporated to address issues of internal strife, pride, and disunity within the Philippian church. The text is densely packed with profound Christological assertions that establish the divine identity of Christ from eternity past to eternity future.

Paul begins the hymn proper in verse 6 by stating that Christ, "being in the form of God (*en morphē theou hyparchōn*), did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped (*harpagmon*).¹ The Greek phrase *morphē theou* is of monumental importance. In Greek philosophical and literary usage, *morphē* denotes the essential nature, the inner reality, and the unalterable character of a thing, as opposed to its mere outward, changeable appearance (*schēma*). Thus, Paul is asserting that Christ pre-existed in the very essence and nature of God. The concept of a heavenly, pre-existent identity is not an exclusive theological innovation of the later Johannine literature; it is a pervasive reality in early Christian thought, solidly and fundamentally present in Paul's earliest theology (Simon, 2006).

Despite eternally possessing absolute equality with God, Christ did not view this divine equality as an *harpagmon*. The word *harpagmon* is rare, but it essentially means a thing to be seized, exploited, or held onto for one's own selfish advantage. Unlike earthly rulers, specifically the Roman Caesars who demanded to be worshipped as gods and ruthlessly clung to their power, Christ refused to exploit His divine status for self-aggrandizement (Gordon, 2007).

Instead, verse 7 declares the shocking paradox of the gospel: He "emptied himself (*heauton ekenōsen*), by taking the form of a servant (*morphēn doulou*), being born in the likeness of men." The juxtaposition here is striking and intentionally jarring. He who existed in the eternal *form of*



God (*morphē theou*) willingly took upon Himself the temporal form of a slave (*morphēn doulou*). The incarnation did not diminish Christ's divine identity; rather, the assumption of fragile, mortal humanity was the profoundest demonstration of His divine grace and sovereignty. The Creator entered His own creation. As a pre-existent and now incarnate Savior, Christ's obedience unto death, even the shameful, cursed death on a Roman cross (v. 8), serves as the ultimate ethical and soteriological paradox (John, 1925). The cross is the ultimate display of the character of the God of Israel.

The theological climax of the hymn occurs in verses 9-11: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." This passage is arguably one of the most astonishing texts in the entire New Testament because Paul is directly quoting Isaiah 45:23. In Isaiah 45, Yahweh emphatically and jealously declares His exclusive sovereignty: "I am God, and there is no other... To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance."

In his groundbreaking study on Old Testament Yahweh texts in Paul's Christology, the astounding fact is pointed out that Paul, a former Pharisee who gloried in his strict Jewish heritage, takes the sacred, unspeakable name of God (Yahweh) and the exclusive, monotheistic worship demanded by Yahweh in Isaiah 45, and applies it directly to Jesus of Nazareth (David, 1992). The "Name above every name" bestowed upon Jesus is not a new title; it is the divine name itself, *Kyrios* (Lord), the standard Septuagint translation of the tetragrammaton, YHWH. By applying an exclusive, fiercely monotheistic Yahweh-text to Christ, Paul makes a compelling case for including Jesus within the unique divine identity. Every cosmic entity, angels in heaven, humans on earth, and demonic forces under the earth, must render to Jesus the exact, unadulterated worship that Yahweh demanded for Himself alone. This is not the elevation of a mere man to godhood; it is the recognition that the man Jesus was, and is, the eternal God incarnate.

Exegetical Analysis of Colossians 1:15-20 (The Colossian Hymn)

If Philippians 2 portrays the divine identity of Christ primarily through the lens of incarnation, humiliation, and subsequent exaltation, Colossians 1:15-20 portrays it through the majestic lens of cosmic creation, sustenance, and eschatological reconciliation. Paul is addressing a syncretistic heresy in Colossae that likely involved the worship of angels, reliance on visionary experiences, and the veneration of lower spiritual mediators. In response to this local crisis, Paul elevates Christ to the position of absolute, unrivaled cosmic supremacy.

Verse 15 declares Jesus as the "image of the invisible God (*eikōn tou aoratos theou*).\" In Hellenistic and Jewish wisdom literature, such as Proverbs 8 and the Wisdom of Solomon, divine Wisdom was often described metaphorically as the image of God. Paul boldly asserts that the invisible, transcendent God has become perfectly visible, tangible, and knowable exclusively in the historical person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, as established in the conceptual clarification, calling Him the "firstborn of all creation" establishes His absolute sovereignty and kingly dominion over the cosmos, not His status as a created being.

Verse 16 provides compelling evidence against any notion that Jesus is a part of the created order. Paul writes, "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." To ensure no exceptions are made, Paul employs three distinct Greek prepositions to describe Christ's all-encompassing relationship to creation: *en autō* (in Him as the locative sphere and architect of creation), *di' autou* (through Him as the instrumental, mediating agent of creation), and *eis auton* (for Him as the ultimate goal, purpose, or *telos* of creation). In Second Temple Judaism, the absolute, unbridgeable dividing line of reality was between the Creator and the created. By designating Jesus as the locative, instrumental, and teleological cause of *all* creation, including the very angelic beings the Colossians were tempted to worship, Paul places Jesus firmly and irreversibly on the Creator side of the divide (Simon, 2006).

Moreover, verse 17 states, "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." This speaks of Christ's eternal, chronological pre-existence ("before all things") and His ongoing, active providential sustaining of the universe ("hold together"). If Christ were to cease His sustaining work, the cosmos would instantly unravel into chaos. Verse 19 adds a stunning ontological claim:

"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." The term *plērōma* (fullness) denotes the absolute totality of the divine powers, attributes, and essence. Christ does not merely possess a spark of the divine, nor is He a lesser emanation in a long chain of spiritual beings; the absolute, undiluted totality of God dwells permanently in Him.

Finally, verse 20 speaks of Christ reconciling all things to Himself, "making peace by the blood of his cross." The concept of "the God of peace" is a distinctly New Testament development predominantly found in the Pauline epistles, highlighting a transformative aspect of God's nature revealed through the gruesome reality of the cross (Jericho, 2015). Christ represents the climax of the covenant, the teleological fulfillment of the law and the prophets (Roberto, 1993). Christ achieves cosmic reconciliation, restoring the fractured, rebellious creation back to the Father through His sacrificial atonement. Through this deep, meticulous exegesis, it becomes evident that Paul views Jesus not as a secondary emanation, but as the sovereign Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer who completely shares the uncreated identity of the God of Israel.

Findings

The meticulous and comprehensive synthesis of the exegetical data derived from Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 precipitates profound, paradigm-shifting findings that reverberate throughout Pauline Christology and the broader discipline of early Christian theology. By analyzing these texts not merely as isolated poetic fragments, but as windows into the theological engine of the primitive church, a multi-dimensional portrait of early Christian belief emerges. These findings systematically dismantle long-held liberal critical theories, illuminate the complex interconnectedness of the Godhead, and firmly establish the relational and eschatological framework of Paul's theological enterprise.

The Decisive Refutation of the Evolutionary Hypothesis

First and foremost, the textual evidence from the Pauline epistles poses a substantial challenge to the evolutionary hypothesis proposed by the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (History of Religions School) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars of this era, operating under presuppositions heavily influenced by Hegelian dialectics, hypothesized that early Christology evolved in a slow, linear trajectory. They postulated that the earliest Palestinian Jewish



Christians viewed Jesus merely as an inspired rabbi or an eschatological prophet. According to this framework, it was only decades or centuries later, when the Christian movement supposedly became disconnected from its Jewish roots and deeply submerged in Hellenistic syncretism, mystery cults, and pagan apotheosis (the deification of heroes and emperors), that Jesus was ontologically elevated to the status of a divine being.

The exegetical data from Philippians and Colossians strongly suggests that Paul did not view Christ as a secondary deity, an angelic mediator, or an exalted human creature who was eventually deified by later generations of Hellenistic believers. Writing barely two to three decades after the crucifixion, Paul explicitly attributes the acts of cosmic creation and universal sustenance to Jesus (Colossians 1:16-17). Furthermore, Paul unapologetically transfers exclusive, monotheistic Yahweh texts, specifically the demand for universal, knee-bowing worship found in Isaiah 45:23, directly to Jesus of Nazareth (Philippians 2:10-11).

This phenomenon is historically unprecedented and philosophically staggering. As noted in the foundational research surrounding Paul's use of Old Testament texts, Paul, a rigorously trained Pharisee, weaponized the sacred texts of Jewish monotheism to articulate the divinity of Christ (David, 1992). The worship of Jesus as God was not the result of centuries of gradual theological accretion; it was the foundational bedrock of the earliest Christian communities. Paul does not present these high Christological concepts as novel theological innovations that he is attempting to defensively argue to his audience. Rather, by utilizing hymnic structures, he appeals to these concepts as the *already established* and universally accepted baseline of Christian orthodoxy. The implications are enormous: the highest conceivable Christology, one that includes the historical Jesus within the unique, uncreated identity of the Creator, was present at the very genesis of the Christian movement.

The Pneumatological and Trinitarian Matrix of Pauline Christology

Second, the exegetical findings reveal that the relationship between God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit in the Pauline epistles is deeply and organically intertwined, fundamentally laying the necessary conceptual groundwork for the later formalization of Trinitarian dogma. While Paul does not use the fourth-century Hellenistic terminology of *ousia* (substance) and *hypostasis* (persons), the ontological reality of the Trinity permeates his Christological framework. The divinity of Christ is never presented in isolation; it is constantly tethered to the initiating will of the Father and the animating power of the Spirit.

In the Pauline corpus, the Spirit is depicted as a vital, animating force that actively shapes and illuminates the believers' cognitive and spiritual understanding of Christ's divine identity (Howard, Volker, & Cornelis, 2012). The confession "Jesus is Lord" (*Kyrios Iēsous*), the very climax of the Philippians hymn, is impossible apart from the direct agency of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3). Therefore, Pauline Christology naturally and inevitably demands a robust pneumatology. The Spirit acts as the eschatological seal and the empirical evidence that the exalted Lord is currently reigning over the cosmos.

Furthermore, this interconnectedness redefines the classical understanding of God's interaction with time and history. The God of the gospel is defined primarily by the narrative of raising Jesus from the dead. God's "timefulness," His eschatological movement towards the consummation of



history, and His triune nature are inextricably linked to the historical incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Son (Scott, 2013). God is not presented as an abstract, static, Aristotelian "Unmoved Mover." Instead, the Father is the one who exalts the Son, the Son is the one who empties Himself in obedience to the Father, and the Spirit is the one who actualizes this divine reality in the life of the Church. Thus, Paul's high Christology operates strictly within a proto-Trinitarian matrix. To understand the exalted Christ of Colossians and Philippians is to understand the dynamic, mutual, and co-eternal life of the triune Godhead.

The Relational, Covenantal, and Eschatological Contours of Divine Identity

Third, the findings reveal that Paul's theology is fundamentally relational, covenantal, and eschatological. The diverse Christological expressions across the breadth of the New Testament, from the synoptic Gospels to the Johannine literature, to the apocalyptic visions of Revelation, all converge harmoniously on the absolute lordship of Jesus (Richard, 2005). The New Testament is fundamentally built upon the foundational, explosive messianic claim that Jesus is the incarnate, crucified, and enthroned messiah of God (Joshua, 2020).

Consequently, Paul's inclusion of Jesus within the divine identity of Yahweh is not a rupture from the Old Testament covenant, but the breathtaking, teleological culmination of Israel's long-suffering messianic hopes. Paul views the cosmos not merely as a physical space, but as a fractured covenantal reality that requires reconciliation. In Colossians 1:20, Christ is the agent of this cosmic reconciliation. Paul's divine Christology is expressed profoundly through the relationship between Christ and believers, which is presented as the eschatological fulfillment of the relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Old Testament (Chris, 2012).

In Second Temple Judaism, Yahweh's identity was defined by His covenantal faithfulness to Israel, His role as the sole Redeemer from Egypt, and His demand for exclusive loyalty (monolatry). Paul takes this precise relational mapping and applies it to Christ. Jesus is the new Redeemer, the cross is the new Exodus, and the Church is the new Israel of God. The loyalty, love, fear, and obedience that a devout Jew owed solely to Yahweh are now owed directly to Jesus. Therefore, Paul's high Christology is not a metaphysical puzzle to be solved; it is a relational and covenantal reality to be lived. The divinity of Christ demands a cruciform response from the believer, mimicking the kenotic self-emptying of the Lord (Philippians 2:5).

Solution: Resolving the "Problem" of Early High Christology

For decades, skeptical scholars, secular historians, and critical theologians have framed the rapid emergence of high Christology as an insurmountable historical "problem" or a historiographical paradox. The fundamental question driving this skepticism is psychological and historical: How could fiercely monotheistic, first-century Jews, people whose ancestors had endured martyrdom rather than bow to foreign idols, and who daily recited the *Shema* declaring that God is absolutely One, so quickly and seamlessly begin worshiping a crucified Galilean carpenter as the eternal Creator of the universe?

Crucifixion was the most degrading, shameful, and culturally scandalous form of execution in antiquity, reserved for slaves and rebels. To the Jewish mind, a crucified man was explicitly cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). The proposition that such a figure was the Lord of



Glory should have been an insurmountable cognitive dissonance. Yet, the historical data proves that the early Church worshipped Him as God almost instantly. The definitive solution to this perceived historical problem lies in properly recognizing the historical and theological data: the worship of Jesus was not a late Hellenistic corruption, but a rapid, early Jewish-Christian reality birthed by a profoundly transformative historical event.

The Catalyst of the Resurrection and the 'Development' Paradigm

To resolve this historiographical dilemma, one must look at the chronology of the primitive church. The most explosive and significant Christological developments occurred in the first two decades between the crucifixion of Jesus (c. 30 CE) and the writing of the earliest Pauline letters (c. 50 CE). This incredibly brief timeframe is far earlier than the subsequent centuries of patristic dogma formation and the ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon (Martin, 2007). In a span of less than twenty years, the highest possible claims about Jesus' divine identity were already circulating in standardized, liturgical hymns like those found in Philippians and Colossians.

The catalyst for this unprecedented theological explosion was not the gradual integration of Greco-Roman philosophy, but a historical event: the resurrection. Early Christians interpreted Jesus' bodily resurrection not merely as a miraculous resuscitation, but as the ultimate, eschatological divine vindication of His radical earthly claims and teachings. The resurrection overturned the "curse" of the cross and revealed the cross as the very center of God's redemptive plan.

In analyzing this phenomenon, it is vital to distinguish between "evolution" and "development." Christology was not an "evolution" into a completely new species of Hellenistic myth or pagan apotheosis; rather, it was a "development" of understanding what was intrinsically, ontologically present in Jesus from the very beginning of His earthly ministry (C.F.D., 1978). Just as an oak tree develops from an acorn without changing its fundamental species, the early church's articulation of Christ's divinity was the natural, Spirit-led unfolding of the reality of who Jesus actually was. The early believers did not invent Christ's divinity; they recognized it, experienced it, and finally articulated it through the theological grammar provided by the Old Testament scriptures.

The Phenomenon of Binitarian Worship and Cultic Devotion

Furthermore, the resolution to the "problem" of early high Christology is found in the liturgical and cultic practices of the primitive church. The devotion to Jesus emerged rapidly as a "binitarian" mutation strictly within the confines of Jewish monotheism. Early Jewish believers did not abandon their monotheism; they radically redefined it around the person of Jesus. This binitarian devotion was not primarily an academic or philosophical exercise; it was an intensely practical, lived, and cultic reality.

Historical evidence demonstrates that from the very beginning, early Jewish believers engaged in specific cultic practices that were exclusively reserved for Yahweh. They prayed directly to Jesus, invoking His name for salvation. The Aramaic prayer *Maranatha* ("Our Lord, come!"), preserved in 1 Corinthians 16:22, dates back to the earliest Aramaic-speaking Palestinian Jewish Christian communities, proving that the invocation of Jesus as the divine Lord predates Paul's Hellenistic missions. They sang spiritual hymns to Him (such as the Philippians 2 and Colossians 1 hymns), praising His cosmic pre-existence and sovereignty. They baptized converts specifically in His



name, and they partook in the Lord's Supper specifically in His honor, recognizing His real presence among them (Larry, 2003).

This cultic devotion preceded the written New Testament texts. The memories, oral traditions, and faith of the earliest believers formed the canonical Gospel accounts precisely because these believers already worshipped Jesus as the Lord of glory (Michael, 2014). The Gospels were written by and for communities that were already deeply entrenched in the worship of the divine Christ. Even the most complex, highly symbolic apocalyptic texts, such as the Book of Revelation, showcase this immediate, unquestioned integration of Jesus into the divine identity, portraying the Lamb sharing the single, central throne of God and receiving the exact same cosmic worship as the Almighty (Mohr, 2009).

The Exclusivity of Jewish Monotheism Maintained

It is also critical to understand that this binitarian worship occurred in direct, hostile opposition to the surrounding pagan culture. The Greco-Roman world was highly pluralistic and accommodating; it frequently added new gods and deified heroes to its pantheon. If the early Christians were simply adopting Hellenistic pagan practices, their worship of Jesus would have caused no controversy in the Roman Empire. The Romans would have gladly welcomed Jesus as just another deity in the pantheon.

However, the early Christians insisted on the absolute exclusivity of their worship. They claimed that Jesus was not *a* god among many, but that He shared the unique, uncreated identity of the *only* true God, the Creator of the universe. This fierce, uncompromising exclusivity, rooted deeply in Jewish monolatry, is what brought early Christians into violent conflict with both the Jewish synagogue and the Roman imperial cult (Matthew, 2020). The early Christians were executed as "atheists" by the Roman state specifically because they refused to worship the emperor or the pagan gods, reserving their absolute worship solely for the God of Israel and His Son, Jesus Christ.

This historical reality demolishes the idea that early Christology was a syncretistic compromise with Hellenism. As recent scholarship on the intersection of early Christology and the Greco-Roman world has shown, the early church utilized the language of their day to articulate their faith, but the *content* of that faith remained rigorously tethered to the unique God of Israel (Michael, 2022).

Synthesis and Final Resolution

Thus, the definitive solution to the "problem" of early high Christology is that there is no problem at all, provided one accurately assesses the historical and theological data. The rapid emergence of the worship of Jesus is inexplicable through the lens of secular sociological evolution. It is only explicable if the precipitating event, the resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, actually occurred and fundamentally altered the disciples' perception of reality.

The early church, guided by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit and the undeniable, eyewitness apostolic witness of the resurrection, experienced the risen Christ as Yahweh in the flesh. They searched the Hebrew Scriptures and, under apostolic authority, realized that texts referring to Yahweh's final, eschatological triumph were actually referring to Jesus. This



theological paradigm organically, rapidly, and necessarily birthed the profound, sweeping Christology evident in Paul's letters. By recognizing this, contemporary scholarship can move beyond the outdated, skeptical paradigms of the nineteenth century and appreciate the stunning, coherent, and utterly revolutionary theological achievement of the Apostle Paul and the early Christian movement. Jesus was not a man who became God in the minds of his followers over centuries; He was God who became man, was vindicated by the resurrection, and was rightfully worshipped as Lord from the very genesis of the Christian faith.

Recommendations & Conclusion

The theological implications of Pauline Christology are not merely historical, academic, or relegated to the ivory towers of biblical scholarship; they are profoundly practical, spiritually urgent, and vital for the contemporary church. The biblical gospel requires significantly more than mere intellectual assent or passive belief; it demands absolute, active allegiance to Christ the King (Matthew, 2019). If Jesus is truly the sovereign Creator, the sustainer of the cosmos, and the Lord who shares the uncreated divine identity of Yahweh, then the only appropriate, logical response from humanity is total surrender, worship, and cruciform obedience.

Therefore, based on the findings of this research, the following practical recommendations are made:

- i. **Deep Exegetical Preaching:** It is strongly recommended that local churches, particularly in regions where theological syncretism, moralistic therapeutic deism, and the prosperity gospel are prevalent, integrate deep, rigorous exegetical teaching on Pauline Christology. Congregations must be systematically taught the historical and grammatical depth of foundational texts like Philippians 2 and Colossians 1 to safeguard against modern resurgences of Arianism and dangerously low views of Christ.
- ii. **Theological Education Reform:** Seminaries and Bible colleges must aggressively push back against the lingering, obsolete remnants of the History of Religions School by emphasizing Divine Identity Theology in their curricula. Institutions must teach future pastors and scholars how early Jewish monotheism successfully and necessarily accommodated the worship of Jesus without compromising its core tenets.
- iii. **Liturgical Worship and Hymnody:** Churches should intentionally recover the rich, doctrinal hymnody of the early church. Singing theologically robust, biblically saturated songs about the eternal pre-existence, the stunning kenosis, and the cosmic supremacy of Christ will significantly strengthen orthodox belief and foster a culture of deep reverence among congregants.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on New Testament Christology by synthesizing the exegetical data of Philippians 2:5-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 with the paradigm of Divine Identity Theology. The findings sharpen our understanding of Paul's theological achievement: in Philippians 2, the concept of *kenosis* operates not as a shedding of deity, but as the ultimate revelation of the divine character, culminating in the application of Isaiah 45's exclusive Yahweh-worship directly to the exalted Christ. Concurrently, Colossians 1 subverts Hellenistic mediator frameworks by explicitly positioning Jesus as the uncreated, instrumental, and teleological agent of cosmic creation. By demonstrating that Paul utilized the most exalted, monotheistic language available to Second Temple Judaism to articulate Christ's pre-existence and sovereignty, this paper offers compelling evidence against delayed evolutionary models of



Christology (such as those proposed by Ehrman and Casey). Ultimately, Paul's epistles reveal that the inclusion of Jesus within the unique identity of the Creator was not a late Hellenistic corruption, but the foundational, early Jewish-Christian reality. Recognizing this profound intersection of history, exegesis, and theology remains essential for both rigorous biblical scholarship and the orthodox praxis of the contemporary church.

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