



Pizzuto, Vincent A.

A Cosmic Leap of Faith: An Authorial, Structural, and Theological Investigation of the Cosmic Christology in Col 1:15-20

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Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Vincent A. Pizzuto is Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Francisco, California. *A Cosmic Leap of Faith*—the published version of his doctoral dissertation written under the supervision of Reimund Bieringer—presents a detailed study of the authorship, structure, and theology of the so-called hymn of Colossians 1:15-20. The book is divided into three main sections: 1) Authorship; 2) Structure; 3) Christology, with summative introductory and concluding chapters and a selected bibliography.

In chapter one Pizzuto mounts an argument for Colossians as pseudepigrapha by examining Ernst Mayerhoff's four arguments (lexical/stylistic differences; unique vocabulary; response to the Cerinthian heresy; and dependence on Ephesians) against Pauline authorship, concluding that the first two arguments (style & vocabulary) continue to have force, while the third (Cerinthian heresy) is marred by ambiguity about the heresy Colossians is responding to (he maintains that the "Colossians philosophy" fits no known group and is therefore a composite of different errors that can work universally against practically any group), and the fourth (dependence on Ephesians) is generally rejected by modern scholars. Pizzuto also argues that the hymn was composed (rather than being taken up and modified) by the author of Colossians.

Recognizing that differences in style and vocabulary between Colossians and the Pauline *homologoumena* are not strong enough to settle the matter on their own, Pizzuto examines the

Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology of Colossians in order to supplement these arguments in chapter two. Colossians presents Christ as the preexistent Creator of the cosmos, which is more advanced than anything we find in the authentic letters. The ecclesiology advances on the authentic material in its emphasis of Christ as head of the body and focusing on the universal, as opposed to local, church. Colossians' realized eschatology as shown, e.g., in the idea of resurrection life being a present possession (Col. 3:1) also marks a significant shift in eschatology.

Chapter three looks at recent contributions to the authorship debate (i.e., the works of M. Kiley; R. F. Collins; E. P. Sanders; E. Lohse) and highlights features of Colossians, such as "Pauline reductionism," which is the presentation of Paul as the only apostle, as well as an emphasis on the person of Paul as evidenced in the use of the emphatic "I" (ἐγὼ) in Colossians 1:23, 25, which is intended to "distinguish him from other members of the church" (60). Pizzuto also posits literary dependence on the Pauline *homologoumena* as seen, e.g., in several "points of contact" between Colossians and Philippians and Colossians and Philemon or in the conflation of several proto-Pauline texts in single passages in Colossians, e.g., "(1) Col 1:26-27 with 1 Cor 2:7; Rom 16:25-26; Rom 9:23-24; and (2) Col 2:12-13 with Rom 6:4; Gal 1:1; Rom 6:11; Rom 8:32" (70).

Chapter four briefly summarizes the main arguments set forth in the preceding chapters and suggests that pseudepigrapha was an accepted practice in the ancient world and that the letter's authority and canonical status is not bound up in authentic authorship but preservation of apostolic testimony. Pizzuto also attempts a reconstruction of the events surrounding the writing of the letter dating it to sometime in the mid-70s to early 80s CE by setting Paul's martyrdom in 64 CE and Ignatius' knowledge of Ephesians (which is dependent on Colossians) in ca. 100 CE as the limits of composition, which would allow enough time for Paul's legendary status to develop in the Pauline school, as well as for the churches at Colossae and Laodicea to recover from the earthquake of 60/61 CE.

Chapter five begins by defining the term "hymn" as Pizzuto is using it, noting that the designation is "neither agreed upon universally, nor is it employed uniformly" (108). He believes the author to have composed the hymn "expressly for the purpose of encouraging his congregation(s) to take up these verses in their future liturgical celebrations, much like in the tradition of many liturgical psalms in which the author was very likely steeped" (109). Pizzuto (in agreement with N. T. Wright) sees the style as "reminiscent of the genre of Jewish Psalmody" and asserts that the "function of Col 1:15-20 is at once confessional (psalm-like) and credal (pedagogical), confessing in poetic (hymnic) form, that Christ is Lord of the cosmos" (110). He proposes the following A-B-C-B'-A' chiastic structure for the hymn:

A	15a	ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου,
	15b	πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,
	16a	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
	16b	ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
	16c	τὰ ὀρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
	16d	εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες
	16e	εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·
	16f	τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτίσται·
B	17a	καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων
C	17b	καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,
B'	18a	καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας·
A'	18b	ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή,
	18c	πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν,
	18d	ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων,
	19	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι
	20a	καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν,
	20b	εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ,
	20c	δι' αὐτοῦ εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

Who is the image of the invisible God
firstborn of all creation
for in him were created all things
in the heavens and on earth,
The visible and the invisible,
Whether thrones or dominions,
whether rulers, or powers;
all things, through him and for him, have been created;
And he is before all things,
And all things in him hold together,
And he is the head of the body, the church;
Who is the beginning,
firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything;
for in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,
and through him, to reconcile all things to himself,
by making peace through the blood of his cross,
through him [<i>to reconcile</i>] whether the things on earth, or
the things in heaven.

Pizzuto spends the rest of chapter five and all of chapter six examining E. Käsemann, E. Lohse, and E. Schweizer's arguments concerning the hymn's structure and background. In each instance he finds their arguments for omitting verses 18a & 20b wanting. Each theory¹ results in the same problem: "if one begins to assume that portions of the Colossians hymn were not original to its pre-epistolary existence, then logically, we must also assume that portions which were original to the hymn could have been omitted by the author at the time of its incorporation into the letter. Once we recognize that possibility, there are no longer any syntactical grounds upon which Käsemann or Lohse can base their omissions, nor structural grounds upon which Schweizer might support his claim for an original 'perfect symmetry'" (182-83). Since Pizzuto sees the hymn as an original composition by the author of Colossians he can point out how the proposed A-B-C-B'-A' chiasmus "enhances the two-fold structure of the hymn concerning the twin themes of creation and redemption," which hold together in Christ (204).

The final chapter brings the first two sections on authorship and the hymn's structure together in an examination of the hymn's Christology. Contra Lohse and Schweizer, Pizzuto finds Wisdom speculation alone as an inadequate conceptual background for the hymn. He turns to the broader matrix of Second Temple Jewish monotheism in order to establish the hymn's continuity with

¹ Käsemann posited that these verses were Christian interpolations on a pre-Christian hymn based on a Gnostic redeemer myth; Lohse thought that they were later Christian clarifications of a pre-Pauline Christian hymn influenced by Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom speculation; and Schweizer suggested that they were Christian redactions to a hymn that echoes Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom speculation as seen, e.g., in the Wisdom of Solomon and Philo, although his main reason for eliminating the verses in question was to preserve the alleged symmetry of the original hymn..

concepts that came before (e.g., temple, exodus, shekinah, as well as the authentic Paul's own *εἰκῶν* Christology) as well as its novel features from the pen of the Colossians author. In agreement with S. Kim, Pizzuto believes that the authentic "Paul's *εἰκῶν* christology inseparably merges together elements of both a Wisdom-christology and an Adam-christology" (255-56). Where he sees the Pauline school making a unique and novel contribution is in applying a cosmic dimension to this *εἰκῶν* Christology where a person, namely Jesus of Nazareth who has died in the recent past, is exalted as Creator and Redeemer of the cosmos, the one in, through, and for whom all things were created and will be reconciled by the blood of his cross. Thus Colossians takes a "leap" from earlier NT Christologies and presents us with arguably the highest Christology of the NT.

Pizzuto's presentation is clear and well thought out. He does well to summarize a great deal of Colossians scholarship with regard to the letter's authorship, provenance, and the structure of the hymn. Those seeking to engage in any kind of structural analysis of Colossians 1:15-20 will benefit from Pizzuto's reviews. His rejection of arguments in favor of Christian redaction of a preexisting hymn is warranted and well argued, as is his case for the hymn's composition by the author of Colossians, which I find compelling. Pizzuto also reads the hymn within the proper framework (Second Temple Jewish monotheism) and he rightly notes its high "cosmic *εἰκῶν* Christology" as well as the flow and focus of the hymn from Christ as Creator to Redeemer. I especially appreciated his proposal that the C of his A-B-C-B'-A' chiasmus holds the twin themes together.

There are, however, a number of questions to be asked and critical remarks to be made. While I appreciate a good literature survey as much as the next person, I found myself asking exactly what Pizzuto's contribution to the debate over Colossians authorship was. As it stands, he's happy to agree with those arguing for Colossians as pseudepigrapha, but he doesn't bring anything to the table himself. Likewise, I found the arguments² for inauthenticity unconvincing on the whole, relying for the most part on circular reasoning, i.e., knowing what's authentic in order to judge what's not (but that assumes what has to be proven). Pizzuto also uncritically repeats the argument that pseudepigrapha was accepted in the ancient world, relying on only

² At one point Pizzuto suggests that the lack of mention of the earthquake in the Lycus Valley in 60/61 CE is evidence of enough time having passed to account for such silence (see 88). Of course if Paul had written *before* the earthquake it wouldn't be mentioned. Or, to take another example, Pizzuto makes much of the realized eschatology of Colossians (1:21, 22, 26, 27; 3:1-4), which allegedly distinguishes it from the future eschatology of the Pauline letters. But this is generally overemphasized and Doug Moo has pointed out the "not yet" aspect of Colossians eschatology, which Pizzuto has underappreciated (see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* [PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008, 69]).

secondary literature to support his claim, but Bart Ehrman has shown the bankruptcy is this argument through an examination of primary sources from the ancient world.³

One wonders exactly why the authorship issue is given the extensive treatment that it is. Presumably it's to show the "leap" between the Christology of the Pauline *homologoumena* and Colossians, but if such a "leap" actually happened, is it not possible that Paul himself took it? In other words, I don't see the payoff of establishing authorship one way or the other as it relates to the Christology of Colossians 1:15-20. I also have questions about Pizzuto's A-B-C-B'-A' chiasmus, which he admits is "based on semantic rather than strict syntactical considerations" (267 cf. 205). The identification of this kind of semantic/conceptual chiasmus rides roughshod over much NT scholarship but the looming question is always, "Is that actually a chiasmus, and if so, so what?" Would the passage be any less about Christ as Creator/Redeemer if Pizzuto's chiasmus didn't hold up? I think not. And one last point of criticism would be that I think Pizzuto doesn't take advantage of the broader Second Temple Jewish themes in his search for continuity and novelty. Sean McDonough has argued persuasively that Messiah and Kingship commend themselves above Wisdom as themes in the background of the Colossians hymn.⁴

But these questions/critiques are incidental to the overall analysis of the hymn's Christology, which on the whole, I think Pizzuto gets right. I would argue that Colossians' Christology is high, but no higher than that of Romans, Philippians, 1 Corinthians, John, or Hebrews. But regardless of where one comes down on the issue of authorship or the unity/diversity of NT Christology, Pizzuto's work merit's engagement, if for no other reason than to see an innovative structural analysis that challenges positions that were once considered dominant in critical NT scholarship.

³ See Bart D. Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who We Think They Are* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

⁴ See Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 172-91.