

***Title: Discuss the significance of a high Christology in Paul's letter to the Colossians in the light of its purpose.***

*Course: Introduction to the New Testament*

*Lecturer: Rev. Dr. Tan Jin Huat*

*Student: Scott Thong Yu Yuen*

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#### **DECLARATION**

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

## **Introduction**

In his letter to the believers at Colossae, Paul presents his exhortations (or admonishments) that the readers continue living transformed and holy lives. Throughout the epistle Paul pairs his ardent pleas to the readers with reminders of what Christ has accomplished – forgiveness of sins, redemption, peace through the cross, reconciliation to God and new life in His name. Paul reminds the readers that the man Jesus Christ is also the image of the invisible God, the one who created all things, God incarnate in flesh.

However, Paul doesn't dwell only upon these concepts which are familiar to modern churchgoers. He also declares Christ as the one who has taken us out of the domain of darkness, as the ultimate ruler and authority over all others, as conqueror over perplexing things Paul calls 'thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities, elemental spirits'.

Such ideas may seem jarring and foreign to a modern reader – but in fact, as I shall show, they were familiar notions to the early Christians. Paul has a specific worldview in mind when he mentions these things – and a specific purpose in pronouncing Christ as having triumphed over them.

## **Responsibilities & Reasons**

In Col 1:9-12a, Paul mentions the constant prayers for the readers to have knowledge of God and His will; to walk in His ways and please Him; to bear the fruit of good works; and to be strengthened for joyful endurance and patience. In Col 1:12b-14, Paul provides the motivation for such a response: Christ who provides redemption and forgiveness of sins has qualified us *to share in the inheritance of the holy people in the kingdom of light (NIV)* and rescued us *from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves (NIV)*. These concepts of kingdoms and dominions are crucial ones that will be revisited later in this essay.

In Col 1:19-22a, Paul reminds the readers of how God in Christ reconciled them to Himself through His blood and death on the cross – whereas they were formerly alienated and enemies, again a key concept. Paul continues in Col 1:22b-23 that the reason Christ did this is that they be holy and blameless – if they can just continue in the faith and hope of the Gospel.

In Col 1:24-27, Paul makes reference to a 'mystery' in Christ which is linked to the Gentiles and now made fully known – another important concept I will return to later. Hence, Paul toils to warn them and teach them wisdom in order to present them mature in Christ – as he states in Col 1:28-29.

In Col 2:1-3, Paul again refers to the 'mystery' which is Christ, and in Col 2:4 clarifies that he does so in order that no one can delude the readers with arguments. In Col 2:5-7 he rejoices at their faith in Christ Jesus the Lord, reiterating in Col 2:8 his warning against competing teachings – both of humans and of 'elemental spirits of the world', the latter being another key concept. In Col 2:9-14 Paul doubles down on the superiority of Christ – He is fully deity in bodily form, the head of all 'rule and authority'. He has given them life through the cross, which brings forgiveness and has disarmed and defeated the 'rulers and authorities'.

Therefore, ritual feasts and holy days are not binding on us – these things are shadow while Christ is the substance, as Paul explains in Col 2:16-17. Whether ascetism or mysticism, be not disqualified but instead hold fast to Christ – who is the lifegiving head, as Paul extols in Col 2:18-19.

In Col 2:20-23 he reminds the readers that in Christ they died to the 'elemental spirits of the world' – therefore, why still submit to pointless regulations that are not from God? In Col 3:1-4, he contrasts how they are raised with Christ who is seated at the right hand of God. Therefore and finally, in Col 3:5-25 & 4:1-6 Paul encourages them to turn away from sinful earthly behaviours and instead live in all manner of goodness, holiness, forgiveness, selflessness, peace and love. For Christ is the Master and Lord in heaven who holds their reward.

## Domains and Their ‘Gods’

Throughout his letter to the Colossians and elsewhere in his writings, Paul repeatedly refers to dominions, rulers, authorities, powers and so on. He makes it clear that such things are not *flesh and blood*, but *spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places* (Eph 6:12, *ESV*). It is greatly clarifying to realize that all those terms “... were used in both the New Testament and other Greek literature for *geographical domain rulership*.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul is operating upon a worldview that suffuses the Old Testament, and from which he draws heavily in composing his letters. For example, the word translated by the *ESV* as ‘rulers’ (1 Cor 2:6&8 and Eph 2:2) is the Greek *archon*<sup>2</sup>. This term is used in the Septuagint at Daniel 10:13<sup>3</sup> & 20<sup>4</sup> to denote the ‘prince’ (*ESV*) of Persia, of Greece and Michael. The related word *arché*<sup>5</sup> is translated by the *ESV* as ‘rule/rulers’ in the context of spiritual forces (Rom 8:38, Eph 1:21 & 3:10 & 6:12, and Col 1:16 & 2:10 & 2:15).

The concept of national, ethnic or territorial deities or spirits can be seen throughout most of human history. This idea might seem quaint or peculiar in the modern West, which has undergone centuries of secularization and many more centuries of Christianization. However, in the East, pockets and echoes of this worldview still hold sway – for example, the small shrines found throughout Malaysia that are constructed for the *Na Tuk Kong*<sup>6</sup> or *Datuk Keramat*<sup>7</sup> local spirits.

Within the pages of the Bible, we see this territorial view reflected in the aforementioned princes of Persia and Greece (Daniel 10); as well as the Syrian notion that Israel’s gods are linked to the hills (1 Kings 20:23-30) and the Assyrian view that defeating a nation meant the failure of their gods (2 Kings 18:33-35). There are also judgments pronounced upon the gods of Egypt (Exo 12:12), and punishment upon gods (Jer 46:25) or heavenly host (Isa 24:21-23) that are linked to earthly kings. Paul explicitly states that sacrifices of pagans to their various deities are, in actuality, offered to demons (1 Cor 10:20).

In 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 and Ezra 1:1-4 & 6:1-5, King Cyrus of Persia makes a proclamation permitting the exiled Jews to return to Jerusalem. They are to rebuild the house of YHWH – the God of heaven and Israel, who is in Jerusalem – and return the holy articles that had been looted by the Babylonian conquerors (2 Chron 36:7, Daniel 5:3&23). The Edict of Cyrus is corroborated by the archaeological discovery of the Cyrus Cylinder dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C., which elaborates upon Cyrus’ reasoning:

From [Shuanna] I sent back to their places to the city of Ashur and Susa, Akkad, the land of Eshnunna, the city of Zamban, the city of Meturnu, Der, as far as the border of the land of Gutu – the sanctuaries across the river Tigris – whose shrines had earlier become dilapidated, the gods who lived therein, and made permanent sanctuaries for them. I collected together all of their people and returned them to their settlements, and the gods of the land of Sumer and Akkad which Nabonidus – to the fury of the lord of the gods – had brought into Shuanna, at the command of Marduk, the great lord, I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every

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<sup>1</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham/USA: Lexham Press, 2015), 121-123.

<sup>2</sup> Bible Hub, “758. ἄρχων (archón)” (accessed 16-Jun-2021): [https://biblehub.com/greek/strongs\\_758.htm](https://biblehub.com/greek/strongs_758.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Study Bible, “Interlinear Daniel 10:13” (accessed 16-Jun-2021): <https://studybible.info/interlinear/Daniel%2010:13>

<sup>4</sup> Study Bible, “Interlinear Daniel 10:20” (accessed 16-Jun-2021): <https://studybible.info/interlinear/Daniel%2010:20>

<sup>5</sup> Bible Hub, “746. ἀρχή (arché)” (accessed 16-Jun-2021): [https://biblehub.com/greek/strongs\\_746.htm](https://biblehub.com/greek/strongs_746.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, “Na Tuk Kong” (accessed 16-Jun-2021): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Na\\_Tuk\\_Kong](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Na_Tuk_Kong)

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia, “Datuk Keramat” (accessed 16-Jun-2021): [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datuk\\_Keramat](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datuk_Keramat)

day before Bel and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my lord, this: “Cyrus, the king who fears you, and Cambyses his son, may they be the provisioners of our shrines until distant (?) days, and the population of Babylon call blessings on my kingship. I have enabled all the lands to live in peace.”<sup>8</sup>

In the worldview espoused by the Cylinder, the reason that the Babylonian Empire of Nabonidus crumbled is because he had transplanted the shrines from each of the vassal nations into Shuanna (Babylon) – and along with those shrines, the indignant resident gods within. Whereas the reason that Cyrus’ Persian Empire supplanted the Babylonians is because the ‘great lord’ and ‘king of the whole of heaven and earth’ (in Cyrus’ reckoning, Marduk) appointed him to correct this grievous wrong – and hence, Cyrus returns those gods to their local sanctuaries to ensure the prosperity of his empire.

### **Divine Allotments by the Most High**

The Bible’s explanation for this globally-adopted view is to be found in Deuteronomy 32:8, based on the Septuagint variant as corroborated by findings among the Dead Sea Scrolls: *When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders/territories of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. (ESV)* That most Septuagint manuscripts have ‘according to the number of the angels of God’ is testament to the interpretation that this passage describes supernatural entities.<sup>9</sup>

The reference to dividing mankind obviously refers to the Babel event of Genesis 11, where God dispersed mankind across the earth. It is no happenstance that the very next chapter of Genesis deals with the calling of Abram, the grandfather of Jacob/Israel; Deuteronomy 32:9 similarly continues: *But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. (ESV)*

Deuteronomy 29 contains another reference to this event, warning in verses 18 & 25-26 of what actions would stir YHWH’s great anger: *Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. ... Then people will say, ‘It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them. (ESV)*

This concept of ‘allotment’ of gods to different nations (or vice versa) finds extra-Biblical attestation in the writing of Plato known as Critias: “In the days of old the gods had the whole earth distributed among them by allotment. ... They all of them by just apportionment obtained what they wanted, and peopled their own districts; ... Now different gods had their allotments in different places which they set in order.”<sup>10</sup>

The parallels to Deuteronomy 29 & 32 are striking – it would seem that the Bible agrees with the Greeks about why different people groups have different deities. Paul seems to be aware of the Greek worldview in Acts 17:26-27, where at the Areopagus he states: *And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the*

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<sup>8</sup> Irving Finkel, “Translation of the text on the Cyrus Cylinder (archived)”, *The British Museum* (accessed 16-Jun-2021):

[https://web.archive.org/web/20121221112524/http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/c/cyrus\\_cylinder\\_-\\_translation.aspx](https://web.archive.org/web/20121221112524/http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/c/cyrus_cylinder_-_translation.aspx)

<sup>9</sup> Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *LBTS Faculty Publications and Presentations* (2001), 52.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, “Critias”, *The Internet Classics Archive* (accessed 17-Jun-2021): <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/critias.html>

*boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. (ESV)*

But in typical Pauline fashion, he doesn't leave it at that – because the same Most High who permitted the old order of things now demands a new appointment. Paul gives the listeners fair warning in Acts 17:30-31 that: *The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (ESV)*

Why the change, when between the time of the division at Babel to the coming of Christ it seemed satisfactory for the Most High God that the status quo remain? The key lies in Psalm 82, where verses 1-2 & 6-8 declare: *God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? ... I said, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you; nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince." Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations! (ESV)*

There is some disagreement over whether the 'gods, sons of the Most High' are heavenly/spiritual beings or humans (such as judges of Israel). By my reckoning, the former is more coherent due to the fact that they are sentenced to die like men<sup>11</sup> (a redundant statement if they are, in fact, mere men); as well as similar council/assembly scenes in Job<sup>12</sup> and Psalm 89<sup>13</sup> having clearly supernatural settings.

Psalm 82's usage of the term Most High to refer to YHWH should draw the mind back to Deuteronomy 32:8, as should the mention of His sons and nations. It seems that the arrangement made as to the allotment of 'gods' – sons of God, sons of the Most High – over the post-Babel nations will be discontinued due to their mismanagement and unjust stewardship. The psalm thus ends on verse 8 with the promise that God Himself would 'judge the earth' and 'inherit the nations' – and such language should in turn immediately prick up the ears of anyone familiar with the gospels.

### **Christ, The Most High**

Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Psalm 82:8 – He is God, come to judge and reclaim the nations. That the spiritual rebels are aware of the impending sentence pronounced in the psalm is evident – they fear punishment and destruction by Jesus in Mark 1:23-24, Matthew 8:28-29 and especially Luke 8:26-29 where that familiar term 'the Most High God' is uttered.

In Luke 10:1-24, the coming of the Kingdom of God is linked to demons being subject to Christ's name, Satan falling and the Father handing all things to Jesus – it is no coincidence that there is a variant in Luke 10:1&17 as to whether seventy or seventy-two disciples were sent out<sup>14</sup>; Genesis 10's Table of Nations is similarly counted as either seventy (Masoretic Text) or seventy-two (Septuagint) names<sup>15</sup>. Jesus proclaims in Luke 11:20 that His driving out demons is a sign that the Kingdom of God has come.

Jesus Himself declares the beginning of the transition from the old Deuteronomy 32:8 allotment to the new Psalm 82:8 appointment in Matthew 28:18-20's Great Commission: *And Jesus*

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<sup>11</sup> John Piper, "Putting the Gods in Their Place," *Desiring God* (accessed 22-Jun-2021):

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/putting-the-gods-in-their-place>

<sup>12</sup> John Piper, "Did Jesus Say We Are gods?" *Desiring God* (accessed 22-Jun-2021):

<https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/did-jesus-say-we-are-gods>

<sup>13</sup> Michael S. Heiser, "You've Seen one Elohim, You've Seen Them All? A Critique of Mormonism's Use of Psalm 82," *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 221-266, here 225-226.

<sup>14</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey* (MI/USA: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 12.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Sperber, "Nations, The Seventy (In the Midrash)," *Encyclopedia.com* (accessed 17-Jun-2021): <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/nations-seventy>

came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (ESV) As Messiah and God in the flesh, Jesus has been given all authority for judgment (John 5:22&27, Acts 10:42, etc.). He has overcome the world (John 16:33). He is the very same Most High God who arises to judge the earth and inherit all the nations.

This command of Jesus is sealed at Pentecost, where in Acts 2:1-13 the author Luke draws intentional parallels to the Babel event<sup>16</sup> – using the same Greek words for divided (*diamerizo*) and confused (*suncheo*) as found in the Septuagint’s rendering of Genesis 11:7<sup>17</sup> and Deuteronomy 32:8<sup>18</sup>. Luke’s intention is clear – humanity which was divided into different tongues and tribes will be reunited; the grace at Pentecost is a reversal of the punishment at Babel; the old allotment is made obsolete by the new appointment. A further piece of evidence is the geographical area that falls under the list of territories mentioned in Acts 2:9-11; when overlaid against Genesis 10’s Table of Nations, one westernmost area is glaringly absent<sup>19</sup> – it is Spain, which Paul fervently intends to reach with the gospel (Rom 15:24&28).

### **Christology Most High**

Against this backdrop, we return now to Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Whether Jewish or Gentile, they would have been familiar with the worldview that the nations of the earth were allotted to different spiritual forces. They themselves would have been living under such arrangements – until very recently, when the Most High sovereignly implemented the new appointment.

Thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities, elemental spirits and others who oversee the domains of darkness – all are defeated by Christ through the power of the cross. *None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Cor 2:8, ESV)*. By tasting death, Christ descended in order that He might ascend – with captives in His wake (Eph 4:8-10; a citation of Psalm 68 which is about YHWH’s conquest of spiritual enemies<sup>20</sup>).

For Christ is not ‘merely’ a prophet, a human Messiah or a heavenly (but created) being. He is God Himself – the very same Most High who once established, now overturns the allotment of nations to the spiritual powers. No voice booming from heaven in fire and thunder was required to establish the new covenant – God had decisively spoken through His own human incarnation.

So, to the believers at Colossae and beyond: we no longer belong to the domain of darkness but to Christ’s Kingdom (Col 1:3) – the Kingdom of God which will eventually encompass all the nations, even the whole earth. Hence, we ought to behave in a manner that befits Kingdom citizens, rather than continue in the ways of unjustice.

Christ holds rights over all creation, having created all things including those very same spiritual powers (Col 1:15-19) – therefore, what power can they claim over the Most High God or the people under His protection? Can anyone accuse us when God Himself declares us reconciled, holy and blameless because of our faith in Him?

Christ is God embodied, the ultimate ruler and authority (Col 2:9-10) who used the legal amnesty of the cross to free us – and thus, utterly nullify and subordinate all lesser rulers and authorities (Col 2:14-15). Return not therefore to the captivity of their false teachings and worship of heavenly created beings, as if they still held any power or could fulfil any of their empty promises.

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<sup>16</sup> Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 298-299.

<sup>17</sup> Study Bible, “Interlinear Genesis 11:7” (accessed 17-Jun-2021):  
<https://studybible.info/interlinear/Genesis%2011:7>

<sup>18</sup> Study Bible, “Interlinear Deuteronomy 32:8” (accessed 17-Jun-2021):  
<https://studybible.info/interlinear/Deuteronomy%2032:8>

<sup>19</sup> Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 300-304.

<sup>20</sup> Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 292-294.

At the right hand of God sits Christ (Col 3:1), referencing the divine Adonai of Psalm 110:1 – your life and loyalty belong to Him now, so put to death the sins which would bring His wrath. The ethnic and national divisions of Babel are subsumed by Christ (Col 3:11) – behave then as one unified body of love, not with the partiality that the Most High condemned in the wayward gods.

In fact, this view that the cross of Christ results in the defeat of the spiritual powers of darkness was widespread and predominant among the early believers. Known as the *Christus Victor* theory, “... there can be no dispute that it is the dominant idea of the Atonement throughout the early church period. ... It was, in fact, the ruling idea of the Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history.”<sup>21</sup>

Those who choose Christ as their saviour, master and lord are now legal citizens of His Kingdom – the Kingdom of God. Just as Christ the risen king offers us protection and providence, He also requires of his subjects utter fealty and loyalty. Peter echoes this view in 1 Peter 3:18-22, linking baptism to the crucifixion and to all powers being subjected to Christ – baptism is “... a pledge of loyalty to the risen Savior. In effect, baptism in New Testament theology is a loyalty oath, a public avowal of who is on the Lord’s side in the cosmic war between good and evil. But in addition to that, it is also a visceral reminder to the defeated fallen sons of God”.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, early baptismal creeds included renunciations of the domain of darkness, such as “... we have renounced the devil, his pomp, and his angels” as recorded by Tertullian<sup>23</sup>, and “I renounce you, devil, and your works and your empires” as recorded by Ambrose<sup>24</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

In Colossians 1:25-27, 2:2-3 & 3:3-4 Paul makes reference to a ‘mystery’ linked to the Gentiles, which he does not fully explain in this letter. To find an explicit description of what this mystery is, we must turn to his companion letter to the Ephesians<sup>25</sup>, where he states in Ephesians 3:1-13 that: *This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (v6, ESV).*

Paul declares that this amazing revelation – the abolishment of the Deuteronomy 32:8 order and the reversal of Babel, the inclusion of Gentiles into the promises of Abraham’s seed – is: *so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Col 2:10, ESV).*

To the Gentile followers of Christ and their Jewish brethren – indeed, to each and every one of us who declares allegiance to Jesus – this is tremendously good news! God Himself has chosen us to be the ‘new’ Sons and Daughters of God through Christ (John 1:12, Rom 8:17, 2 Cor 6:18, Gal 4:7). It will be our role and responsibility to administer the nations (1 Cor 6:2, Rev 2:26-27 & 20:4) in place of the Deuteronomy 32:8 order.

To the corrupt Sons of God, Sons of the Most High who formerly held these roles and will one day face judgment – this is the dreaded culmination of Psalm 82 coming to pass. It may very well be that the faithful human believers in Christ will be the very ones to pronounce judgement upon them (1 Cor 6:3).

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<sup>21</sup> Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study Of The Three Main Types Of The Idea Of The Atonement* (London/UK: SPCK Publishing, 2010), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *Reversing Hermon: Enoch, the Watchers, and the Forgotten Mission of Jesus Christ* (N.p: Defender, 2018), 144-145.

<sup>23</sup> Tertullian, “Of Public Shows (IV)”, *The Tertullian Project* (accessed 17-Jun-2021): [https://www.tertullian.org/lfc/LFC10-13\\_de\\_spectaculis.htm](https://www.tertullian.org/lfc/LFC10-13_de_spectaculis.htm)

<sup>24</sup> Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism: Ritual, Theology, and Drama* (NY/USA: Cornell University Press, 1985), 100.

<sup>25</sup> Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 302.

And so, for this mystery of undeserved grace and in everything, we shall thank God the Father through Jesus (Col 3:7).

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