
(This is a detailed response to a question from our “Ask Ambrose” column.)

*Q:* In Eucharistic Prayer B (BCP, p. 369) at the end of paragraph 2, it states that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation.” I can read it as the most celebrated being in creation, which goes along with the rest of the sentence as head of the church, but the wording always causes me to stumble when I read it. It makes me think of the heresy that Jesus was the first created rather than being at the beginning with God the Creator and the Holy Spirit. Could you comment?

The line is, as you may know, taken from a hymn embedded in the letter to the Colossians. Former Presiding Bishop Frank Griswold, who wrote the prayer for the 1979 BCP, captured the language for the final portion of Eucharistic prayer B. In its original setting in Scripture, that hymn reflects Hellenistic Jewish thought influenced by Greek philosophy. So, like most questions about Scripture, an answer requires a little understanding of the context and the language of the time in which it is written.

First off, a number of biblical translations, and plenty of commentators, favor a translation of the Greek that reads “first born before all creation.” That translation gets the nod for being a little better (though either translation will do), since it is a bit more consistent with the overall structure of the passage. Of course, that doesn’t yet address your concern about what it means to say Christ was “born” at all.

The passage reflects Greek thought in which the cosmos itself is made an image of the invisible maker, albeit imperfect or “shadowy” in comparison; and this Greek idea influenced in turn the way Jews viewed creation as an image of God, coupled with the notion that humanity, too, was very specifically an image of God (think of the first creation narrative in Genesis). But in Jewish thought, the idea of God’s Wisdom is also very important, and in the last few centuries before Colossians was written, God’s Wisdom came to be thought of by Jews as the one through whom God creates. Wisdom is not just identical with God; yet, as GOD’S Wisdom, is not different either! So God’s Wisdom, emanating from God, but one with God, is the pattern through which all creation is made. That’s the structure the passage reflects: in order of importance, first comes God; then the image through whom God makes all things; then the things themselves. (That’s more or less where Christians get the idea, later, that Christ is the *logos* through whom all things were made – like one sees in the prologue to the gospel of John.)

So notice that when Paul (or whoever authored Colossians) speaks of Jesus as “the the firstborn of/before all creation,” he has linked it with “the image of the invisible God.” The two are a couplet. He is doing the best he can with poetic, hymnic language to signal that it is Christ, one with God, through whom all things were made, and he is not like any creature – certainly not in the sense your question is worried about, in being the first in a
succession of creatures. As Eduard Lohse puts it, “The point is not a temporal advantage but rather the superiority which is due to him as the agent of creation who is before all creation.” (That’s from Lohse’s commentary on Colossians in the *Hermeneia* series…take a look.)

As an aside, when you understand all this, you get the brilliance of Bishop Frank’s conclusion of the Eucharistic prayer: the one through whom all things were made (Colossians), is the one to whom all things are also gathered in the end, in “the fullness of time” (Prayer B)... the one who receives our offering of thanksgiving and prayer. Christ is both the source and the summit of all things. If you read the rest of the Colossian hymn, you’ll see that it links Christ as the image of God to a vision of the cosmos, and both of those to a vision of salvation that comes through him. That’s exactly what Bishop Frank’s composition captures. So he’s doing more than quoting a line or two; he’s conveying with the prayer the pre-eminence of Christ exactly as the whole Colossian hymn does.

In conclusion, the key is not to take the poetry of his being “first-born” as a statement about biology. Remember first of all that it is a translation; and it is one of a number of philosophic metaphors, if you will, that convey this notion that in Jesus was en-fleshed the very wisdom or reason of God’s own self, and all creation depends upon him for our existence.

In conclusion, I suppose we could wish that a different term were used than the one we translate as “first-born.” But, again, it’s a metaphor like almost all the language we use of God. We also have to remember that the writers of John and Colossians are not trying to answer the technical debates that Christians are having three and four hundred years later about whether it was more proper to speak of Jesus, in his relationship to the Father, as “born” or “generated,” subordinated to or “of one being with” God. The Bible itself reflects many different ways in which Jesus was understood in his relationship to God; not all, in fact, take him to be divine in the way that Nicea and Chalcedon ultimately did. This, one, however – the one you asked about in Colossians – happens to be the view that became formalized and accepted by those ecumenical councils later, through an ever more technical use of the Greek philosophical terms of their own day.

Context is everything!