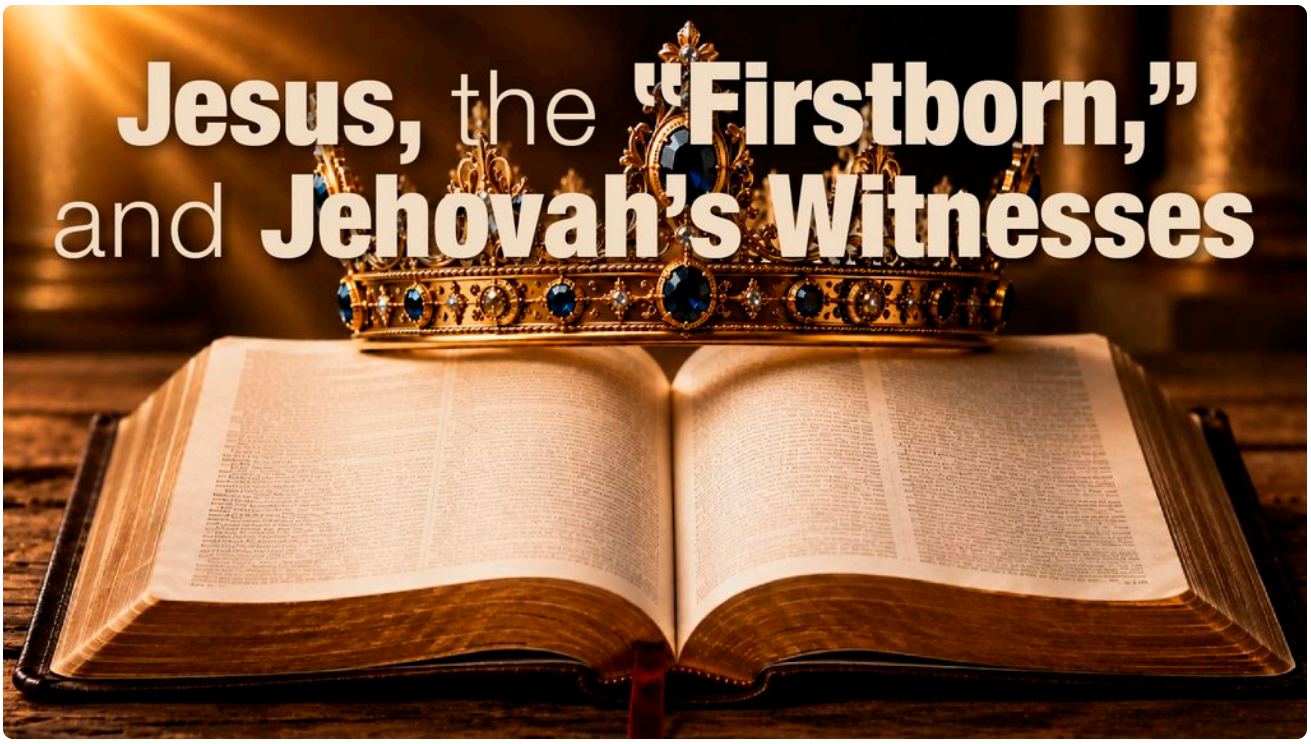


Jesus, the “Firstborn,” and Jehovah’s Witnesses

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R&R DEITY OF CHRIST DOCTRINAL MATTERS ISLAM AND OTHER WORLD RELIGIONS JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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A distinguishing feature of the belief system of Jehovah’s Witnesses is their adamant contention that Jesus does not partake of deity. Instead, they claim that Jesus was the **first** created being. However, a careful consideration of the underlying Greek word πρωτότοκος reveals that Greek has two basic meanings for the word: (1) birth order/sequence, as in Luke 2:7 and Hebrews 11:28; and (2) having special status (like a firstborn son), hence, “supreme,” “superior,” “exalted,” “highest,” and even possessing “sovereignty.”[1] A host of the world’s Greek scholars have weighed in on the meaning of “firstborn.”[2] Respected Greek scholar Bruce Metzger observes: “The adjective ‘first’ refers both to **rank** as well as time. The Apostle alludes here not only to Christ’s priority to all creation, but also to his sovereignty over all creation.”[3] Conservative commentator Donald Guthrie noted: “Firstborn must be understood in the sense of **supreme** rather than in the temporal sense of born.”[4] J.R. Dummelow of Cambridge explains: “The word expresses priority to and then supremacy over. **Probably the latter only is meant here**.”[5] In the Beacon Bible Commentary series, John Nielson observes: “Paul is saying that Jesus Christ is none other than God Himself…. ‘firstborn’ is equivalent to ‘only begotten,’ and is a Jewish technical term meaning ‘uncreated’.”[6]

A good summary of the linguistic data pertaining to "firstborn" in Colossians 1:15 is provided by William Barclay's insightful observations given in his popular commentary series:

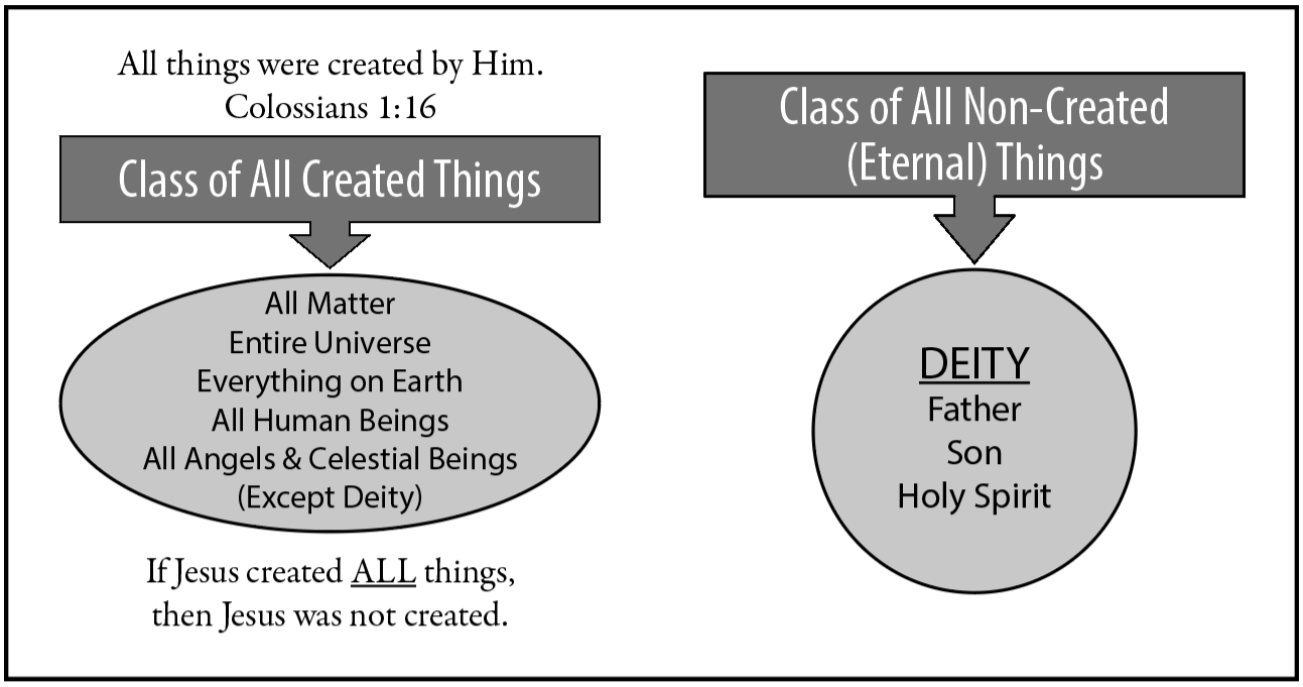
> We will remember that according to the Gnostics the work of creation was carried out by an inferior god, ignorant of and hostile to the true God. It is Paul's teaching that God's agent in creation is the Son and in this passage he has four things to say of the Son in regard to creation. (i) He is the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 1:15). We must be very careful to attach the right meaning to this phrase. As it stands in English it might well mean the Son was the first person to be created, but in Hebrew and Greek thought the word firstborn (*prototokos*) has only very indirectly a time significance. There are two things to note. Firstborn is very commonly a title of honour. Israel, for instance, as a nation is the firstborn son of God (Exodus 4:22). The meaning is that the nation of Israel is the most favoured child of God. Second, we must note that firstborn is a title of the Messiah. In Psalms 89:27, as the Jews themselves interpreted it, the promise regarding the Messiah is "I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth." **Clearly firstborn is not used in a time sense at all, but in the sense of special honour**. So when Paul says of the Son that he is the firstborn of all creation, he means that **the highest honour which creation holds belongs to him**. If we wish to keep the time sense and the honour sense combined, we may translate the phrase: "He was begotten before all creation."[7]

Accordingly, Jesus is not part of the creation. He stands above and before **all** created things. He is, in fact, the Creator.

Apart from these scholarly observations, which could be multiplied many times over, the biblical text itself serves as its own best interpreter. The word "for" (ὅτι) is the Greek conjunction/marker of causality[8] meaning "because"—even as the *New World Translation* renders it. By use of the term, Paul **explains and defines** the meaning of "firstborn" in the context, answering the question, "In what way is Jesus the 'firstborn'" or "how can He be considered 'firstborn'"? Look at the Holy Spirit's answer: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." **FOR—**

- By Him all things were created (vs. 16).
- All things were created **through** Him (vs. 16).
- All things were created **for** Him (vs. 16).
- He is before all things (vs. 17).
- In Him all things consist/inhere (vs. 17).
- In all things He has the preeminence (vs. 18).
- In Him all the fullness dwells (vs. 19).

Hence, for Jesus to be "firstborn" means that He is the Creator Who **precedes** all created things and in Whom dwells the fullness of divinity. [Examine the graphics below.]



The expression "all things" (τὰ πάντα) is used four times in Colossians 1:16-17 to refer to **all things that were created**, including both the created order, i.e., the material Universe, as well as the spirit realm—"in heaven and…on earth" (cf. Ephesians 1:10; 3:9). English theologian and biblical commentator Daniel Whitby commented: "Now he who is therefore the First-born of the whole Creation, because he created all things, cannot himself be any part of the Creation, either in Heaven or Earth, or be numbered amongst his Creatures…. Christ is here styled the First-born, as being the Lord of all things."[9] The book of Colossians alone is sufficient to establish the deity of Christ and, therefore, the fatal error of Jehovah's Witness doctrine.

Interestingly, the *New World Translation*, perhaps unwittingly, provides support for these observations in its rendering in Colossians 2:9—"because it is in him that all the fullness of the divine quality dwells bodily." The NKJV renders the verse: "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." Here is a verse that forthrightly declares that Jesus possesses deity. For if the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ, then deity resides in Christ. Metzger rightly declared:

> Nothing could be clearer or more emphatic than this declaration. It means that **everything without exception which goes to make up the godhead, or divine quality, dwells or resides in Jesus Christ bodily**, that is, is invested with a body in Jesus Christ. It is to be noticed also that Paul uses the present tense of the verb, "dwells." He does not say that the fullness of the divine quality "has dwelt" or "will dwell" in Jesus Christ, but that it "dwells" there.[10]

In his discussion of the "Colossian Heresy," celebrated English theologian and Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, J.B. Lightfoot, discusses Paul's responses to the forces that endangered the faith of the

Colossian Christians, which included a firm declaration of the deity of Christ. Referring to Jesus, Lightfoot observed: "He is the visible image of the invisible God. He is not only the chief manifestation of the Divine nature: He exhausts the Godhead manifested. In Him resides **the totality of the Divine powers and attributes**."[11] He summarizes the meaning of "firstborn":

> The main ideas then which the word involves are twofold…. (1) Priority to all creation. In other words it declares the **absolute pre-existence of the Son**. At first sight it might seem that Christ is here regarded as one, though the earliest, of created beings. This interpretation, however, is not required by the expression itself…. And if this sense is not required by the words themselves, it is **directly excluded by the context**. It is inconsistent alike with the universal agency in creation which is ascribed to Him in the words following, ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ["in him were created all things"—DM] and with the absolute pre-existence and self-existence which is claimed for Him just below, αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων ["he is before all things"—DM]…. (2) *Sovereignty* over all creation…. "He is the Firstborn, and, as the Firstborn, the absolute Heir and sovereign Lord, of all creation."[12]

Lightfoot also points out that *prototokos*/firstborn cannot be allowed to create inconsistency with another term that the Bible uses to describe Christ, i.e., *monogenes*—defined as "**alone** of His kind and therefore **distinct from created things**."[13] To summarize, Lightfoot rightly notes that verse 15 explains the sense in which "firstborn over all creation" is to be understood: "Thus connected, it shows that the πρωτότοκος [firstborn—DM] Himself is not included in πάσα ktivsi$ ["all creation"—DM]." Indeed, Jesus is not a created being. Since Scripture is its own best interpreter, observe the obvious comparison between Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1—a comparison that further demonstrates the divinity of Christ is seen below.

The Deity of Christ	
Colossians 1:15-17	**Hebrews 1:1-3**
Image of God	Brightness of His glory Express image of His person
Firstborn over all creation	Heir of all things
All things created by Him	He made the worlds
By Him all things consist	Upholding all things by the word of His power

To summarize, the allusion to “firstborn” to refer to Christ in Colossians 1:15 does not mean that Jesus was a created being. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, repeatedly indicates that Jesus Christ was God in the flesh—Who came to Earth to atone for human sin. This singular doctrine is, in fact, the heart and core of the one and only true religion on Earth: Christianity.[14]

Endnotes

[1] Frederick Danker, et al. (2000), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago), p. 894.

[2] The reader is urged to examine the great “Arian controversy” that transpired in the early 4th century between Arius and Athanasius. Arius taught that “the Son came into being through the will of the Father; the Son, therefore, had a beginning. Although the Son was before all eternity, he was not eternal, and Father and Son were not of the same essence”—Hans J. Hillerbrand and Matt Stefon (2022), “Christology: The Arian Controversy,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christology/The-Arian-controversy.

[3] Bruce Metzger (1953), “The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Jesus Christ: A Biblical and Theological Appraisal,” *Theology Today*, 10[1]:77.

[4] Donald Guthrie (1970), *New Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), p. 1144, emp. added.

[5] J.R. Dummelow (1925), *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: Macmillan), p. 981, emp. added.

[6] John Nielson (1965), *Colossians* in *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press), p. 379.

[7] William Barclay (1959), *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster), p. 143, emp. added.

[8] Nigel Turner (1963), *Syntax* in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, ed. James Moulton (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark), 3:86; Danker, p. 732.

[9] Daniel Whitby (1709), *A Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (London: W. Bowyer), 1:353.

[10] 1953, 10[1]:77-78.

[11] J.B. Lightfoot (1892), *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan), p. 100, emp. added. When the New Testament states that Jesus is the “image of God,” it cannot refer to the same idea that human beings are created “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). In both Colossians and 2 Corinthians (4:4), Paul states—not that Jesus is **made** in God’s image—but that Jesus **IS** God’s image.

[12] Ibid., pp. 145-146, italics in orig., emp. added.

[13] Ibid., emp. added. As one would expect, it is John who uses *monogenes* repeatedly to refer to Jesus’ unique status (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9). The English rendering “only begotten” is generally rejected by linguistic authorities. The lexicographers are fairly uniform in their definitions of the term. Danker has “(1) pertaining to being the only one of its kind within a specific relationship, *one and only*, only…. (2) pertaining to being the only one of its kind or class, *unique (in kind)* of something that is the only example of its category”—Danker, p. 658, italics in orig. Moulton and Milligan give the same definition: “literally ‘one of a kind,’ ‘only,’ ‘unique’ (*unicus*)”—and further note that “only begotten” is incorrect since that Greek word would be *monogennetos*—James Moulton and George Milligan (1930), *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-literary Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982 reprint), pp. 416-417, italics in orig. See also Thayer, p. 417. In his monumental 1894 volume *The Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour*, H.P. Liddon defines *monogenes* as “that which exists once only, that is, singly in its kind”—(London: Longmans, Green, & Co.), p. 233.

[14] For a more lengthy analysis of Jehovah’s Witness doctrine, see the book *What the Bible Says About the Jehovah’s Witnesses* available as a free download at the Apologetics Press website: **https://apologeticspress.org/issue/what-the-bible-say-about-the-jehovahs-witnesses/**.

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