

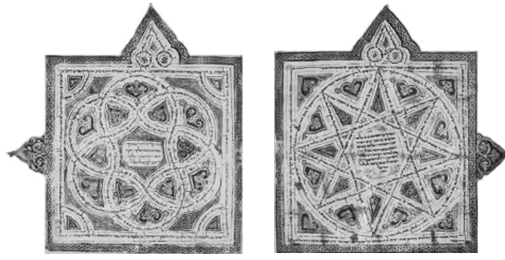
Theological Parting of the Ways before 70 CE: Dunn Revised through *John*, Phil 2:6-11, and Col 1:15-20^{*}

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Abstract: This article revises James D. G. Dunn's influential account of the "parting(s) of the ways" between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. First, it defends the legitimacy of Dunn's theological model alongside sociological and historical accounts, arguing that a discussion of theological parting remains beneficial as long as it avoids an oversimplified picture of "the partings." Then, it advances a pre-70 CE, rather than Dunn's post-70 CE, date for a theological parting grounded in high Christology in the Gospel of John, Phil 2:6-11, and Col 1:15-20. Dunn treats John as a late first-century composition that indeed portrays a high Christology, but he reads Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20—earlier than 70 CE—as representing merely a human Christology. This article briefly reconsiders the dating of John to caution against a quick dismissal of an early composition. Moreover, it argues that Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20 attribute a high Christology to Jesus through claims that he was "in the form of God" and "equal to God" (Phil 2:6) and that "the fullness (of deity) dwells" in him (Col 1:19; 2:9). The result is a revised timeline: while sociological and ritual separations crisscross unevenly across locales and centuries, the theological parting was already underway prior to 70 CE.

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Key Words: Parting of the ways, James Dunn, Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:15-20, *Gospel of John*

Since James Dunn, “parting of the ways” has become a standard phrase for describing the separation between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, or more precisely, between two Jewish movements that ultimately became rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.^① According to Dunn, four pillars featured Second Temple Judaism: Monotheism, Election, Covenant focused on Torah, and Land focused on Temple.^② Dunn suggests that the non-negotiable boundary marker for both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity was their understanding of Monotheism—particularly, for Christians, Christology. Compared to Monotheism, the other pillars were negotiable because, for instance, both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity continued to flourish after the destruction of the Temple. Regarding Monotheism and Christology, the crucial point was the divinity of Jesus; Dunn argued that only in 70-135 CE did Jesus come to be worshiped as divine, making the parting of the ways unavoidable.

Although Dunn’s theory has been widely received, doubts about his approach have persisted since the first edition of *The Partings of the Ways* (1991). For instance, Lieu concludes that, for the historical study of the separation, theological interpretation is less helpful than sociological.^③ Meanwhile, alternative approaches have been developed to explain how and when Judaism and Christianity separated. An important alternative is Boyarin’s sociological-heresiological interpretation, which places the final “parting” in the third-fourth centuries.^④

This article revises Dunn’s theory in two directions. First, Section 1 argues

① For a helpful review, see Timothy A. Gabridlson, “Parting Ways or Rival Siblings? A Review and Analysis of Metaphors for the Separation of Jews and Christians in Antiquity,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 19 (2021): 178-204.

② James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (2nd ed; London: SCM Press, 2006).

③ Judith Lieu, “‘The Parting of the Ways’: Theological Construct or Historical Reality?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 56 (1994) 101-119; see also Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity* (2nd ed; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016)

④ Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

for the continuing legitimacy of a theological interpretation of the parting(s), emphasizing that theological and sociological approaches can and should coexist. Second, Sections 2-4 revise Dunn's dating by arguing for a pre-70 CE theological parting. For Dunn, John's high Christology violates Jewish Monotheism and constitutes a non-negotiable boundary. Because Dunn accepts the prevailing view that the Fourth Gospel was composed late (at least after 70 CE), he places the theological parting after 70 CE. Section 2 briefly revisits the dating of John, noting that the lateness of the Gospel is increasingly an open question. Sections 3 and 4 focus on two crucial Christological pericopes—Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20—and, against Dunn, argue for their high Christology. Since these passages are widely dated before 70 CE, they support a pre-70 CE theological parting.

I. Is a Theological Model Still Acceptable?

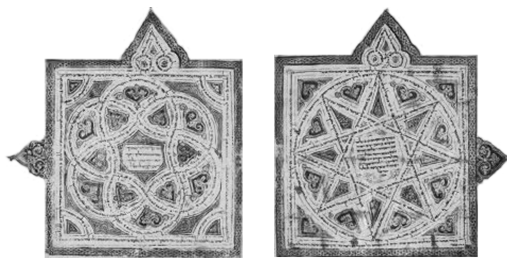
As noted, Dunn identified four axioms on which all forms of Judaism in first-century Palestine at the time of Jesus were built. These four pillars, representing a “family resemblance in the different siblings of pre-70 Judaism,”^① are Monotheism (God is one), Election (a covenant people, a promised land), Covenant focused on Torah, and Land focused on Temple. According to Dunn, the partings of the ways happened during the process in which the followers of Jesus had to “question and redefine each of these four axioms in greater or less degree—at any rate, to a degree unacceptable to mainstream Judaism.”^② Thus, regarding issues about whether, how, and when the parting occurred, “the most obvious procedure is to examine earliest Christian attitudes to each of the four pillars in turn.”^③

As will be highlighted below, Monotheism is the non-negotiable boundary marker between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. For the present section, it is essential to note that Dunn's methodology is primarily theological, emphasizing the doctrines of crucial elements common to various groups of

① Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 26.

② 同上, 48。

③ 同上。



Judaism. In her critique, Lieu argues that the “parting of the ways” works best with a theological agenda even when framed as history.^① By “theological model” Lieu means “the abstract or universal” and “particular theological affirmations.”^② She worries that a theological model is problematic because “a purely doctrinal definition is far from obvious or adequate.”^③ For instance, “People do continue to live and worship with those with whom, theologically, they ought not to be able to and separate from those with whom they believe most things in common!”^④

Lieu’s comment quoted above tacitly presupposes a theological criterion: the claim that certain people “ought not” to worship in a certain way already invokes norms about what counts as boundary-crossing. If such a criterion is not clear, how could one know that certain people “ought not to be able” to worship with others? A historical context behind Lieu’s comment deserves consideration: in the fourth and even fifth centuries, some Christians attended synagogue to celebrate Jewish festivals, despite being theologically prohibited from doing so. Dunn did not deny that such things happened. The question is how to explain it. Lieu infers that a doctrinal definition is therefore inadequate. But a doctrinal definition remains adequate at least to the extent that it can judge such participation as crossing a line. In this sense, Dunn’s comment on the same situation is acceptable, which states,

Rather the position was more like what is common in the days of denominational Christianity; that is, where ‘ordinary Christians’ feel free to attend the services of different denominations without thinking that they are being untrue to their more specific Christian heritage.^⑤

As Dunn’s comment indicates, Christians might attend the Jewish festivals without being untrue to their Christian identity. Nor did their interactions with Jews necessarily mean their ignorance of boundaries. The problem behind Christian attendance at Jewish festivals is not necessarily the

① Lieu, “The Parting of the Ways,” 108.

② 同上。

③ 同上, 109。

④ 同上。

⑤ Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, xx.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

ambiguity or inappropriateness of doctrinal definition. There could be a tension between knowing and doing. Lieu has pointed out that there were some “God-fearers” who “hovered on the fringe of ‘the synagogue,’ sufficiently interested to remain there yet unwilling to jump the final hurdle, *male* circumcision.”^① By the same token, the Christians who attended the Jewish festivals might be unwilling to jump their final hurdle, although they saw it. This possibility presupposed a real hurdle there, a theologically non-negotiable marker between Christianity and Judaism.

Other scholars also note persistent interaction. Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, for instance, argues for direct contact between Jews and Christians at festivals after the fourth century and thus chooses “to approach the general question of the ‘parting of the ways’ from the perspective of ritual rather than that of doctrine.”^② Unlike Lieu, however, Ben Ezra’s approach does not lead to a conclusion that theological or doctrinal definition of the parting is not obvious or adequate. Rather, Ben Ezra concludes that his studies speak against “the conventional view of a once-and-for-all ‘parting of the ways’ between Christianity and Judaism” and “the view that the ‘Parting of the Ways’ happened at the same time and in the same way in all geographical locales.”^③

Dunn has no problem with Ben Ezra’s conclusion. In his preface to the second edition of *Partings of the Ways*, Dunn asserts that “‘The *Partings* (plural) of the Ways’, was and is, of course, to make the point that the separation of Christianity from rabbinic Judaism cannot neatly be identified as taking place at a particular point in time or place.”^④ Notably, Dunn emphasizes the plural nature of “Partings,” indicating that the parting of the ways is not either theological or ritual/social; instead, it could be both, and it happened at different periods. In this sense, a theological discussion remains appropriate and illuminating alongside social-ritual accounts.

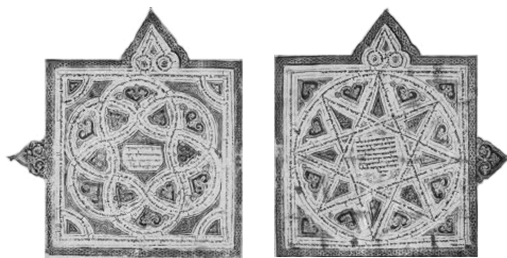
It is beneficial to return to Lieu’s conclusion of her critique of Dunn,

① Lieu, *Neither Jew nor Greek*, 50.

② Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “Who Fast Is It? The Ember Day of September and Yom Kippur,” in Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds, *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 259-282(261).

③ 同上, 280.

④ Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, xxv.



which is nuanced:

The “parting of the ways” may continue to be useful to explore theological development or to defend a theological interpretation; in trying to make sense of the uncertainties of the early history of Christianity it may prove to be theologically less satisfying but sociologically more persuasive to picture a crisscrossing of muddy tracks which only the expert tracker, or poacher, can decipher.^①

Lieu’s comment that the picture of the parting of the ways is a crisscrossing of muddy tracks resembles Ben Ezra’s observation that the parting of the ways did not happen once and for all. Like his potential response to Ben Ezra discussed above, Dunn accepts Lieu’s comment, stating, “I accept Judith Lieu’s critique that the imagery of ‘ways’ parting is too simple … whereas the sociological reality might be better depicted as a crisscrossing of muddy tracks.”^② However, this does not mean that theological interpretation cannot contribute to describing this complex picture of the partings. As emphasized above, a theological or doctrinal point of view provides a criterion or criteria to judge what a particular group of religious people should and should not do. Without this primary judgment, one is even unable to claim that Christians attended Jewish festivals in or after the fourth century.

An important alternative approach to Dunn’s comes from Boyarin, who approaches the interactions between Christianity and Judaism from the perspective of Heresiology. According to this approach, “The question of when Christianity separated from Judaism is a question whose answer is determined ideologically.”^③ The term “ideologically” used by Boyarin reminds one of “power.” Not surprisingly, Boyarin emphasizes the importance of “power” for investigating the separation of Christianity and Judaism, asserting that “borders themselves are not given but constructed by power to mask hybridity, to occlude and disown it.”^④ Boyarin appreciates Lieu’s suggestion that separation occurred only in the fourth century, stimulated by dramatic

① Lieu, “The Parting of the Ways,” 119.

② Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, xii.

③ Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 6.

④ 同上, 15。

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

changes in access to power.^①

Boyarin's position makes sense, as does that of Lieu or Ben Ezra, given that religion is a complex phenomenon involving not merely doctrine but also practice, including the power struggle for survival in a society. In this sense, it is appropriate to claim that Judaism and Christianity were not separate religions until the fourth century. However, Boyarin does not deny that one can discern two separate groups of faith, stating,

In suggesting that Judaism and Christianity were not separate entities until very late in late antiquity, I am, accordingly, not claiming that it is impossible to discern separate social groups that are in an important sense Christian/not Jewish or Jewish/not-Christian from fairly early on (by which I mean the mid-second century).^②

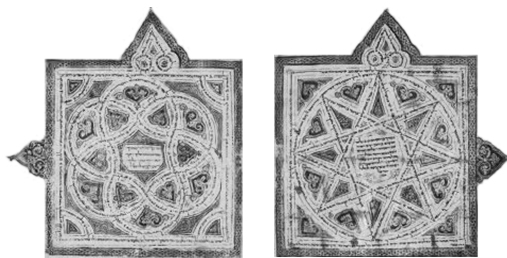
This statement allows for a theological interpretation of the parting of the ways, an approach that differs from, rather than conflicts with or is excluded by, an ideological approach or Heresiology. It is the theological mindset that helped to discern separate social groups that are in an important sense Christian or non-Christian, although something more is needed to distinguish Christianity and Judaism as two religions, depending on how one defines "Religion." In other words, there could be various ways to discuss how and when Christianity and Judaism separated from each other because, as Dunn's response to Boyarin emphasizes, the parting of the ways was ongoing "over a lengthy period, at different times and places, as judged by different people differently, depending on what was regarded as a non-negotiable boundary marker and by whom."^③

All in all, while different theories challenge Dunn's theological model for the parting of the ways, this model continues to contribute to scholarship in the relevant field, provided one does not see it as the only model and does not draw a simplistic picture of the parting(s). It is in this sense that this paper aims to revise Dunn's work, as detailed below.

① Boyarin, *Border Lines*, 6.

② 同上, 13。

③ Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, xxv.



Ⅱ. The Gospel of John: Its high Christology and Date

The Gospel of John is crucial for Dunn's argument that the parting of the ways did not happen until the post-70 CE period. On the one hand, the high Christology of this Gospel is regarded as what Dunn calls a "non-negotiable boundary marker" by both Christians and Jews. The former could not abandon this Christology, as it was essential for identifying oneself as a follower of Jesus Christ; the latter could not accept this Christology, for it stood against the Jewish tradition of Monotheism, even though the followers of Jesus did not think so. On the other hand, Dunn accepts the dominant view that the Fourth Gospel was composed later, as late as the end of the first century. By contrast, other New Testament writings composed earlier, particularly Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20, two famous Christological hymns, do not describe high Christology.

The following two sections will focus on Christology in Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20, and this section deals with the dating of the Fourth Gospel, emphasizing the revived doubt about its late composition. Before that, it is helpful to briefly discuss Dunn's examination of John's Christology.

For Dunn, the Temple is obviously not the non-negotiable boundary marker between rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, because both survived the destruction of the Temple. As to Torah and election, these two pillars "need not have proved sufficient in themselves to cause the final split between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism."^① The last pillar, Monotheism, is left, involving the identity of Jesus. In this regard, Dunn's discussion of Jesus's title "Son of God" deserves mention because it points to an essential feature of the non-negotiable boundary marker.

Dunn points out, with which I agree, that "at the time of Jesus 'Son of God' was a way of characterizing someone who was thought to be commissioned by God or highly favoured by God. It was not necessarily a title of divinity; not only angels were sons of God."^② Thus, according to Dunn, the

① Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 215.

② 同上, 225。

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

title “Son of God” did not necessarily imply any overtones of divinity. This observation is helpful because it suggests that identifying Jesus as divine is the real challenge to Monotheism. For Dunn, the non-negotiable boundary marker between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism is the divine nature of Jesus, which is a core doctrine for the former but a violation of Monotheism for the latter.

Furthermore, Dunn notes that the divinity of Jesus is clearly expressed in the Fourth Gospel, where “Jesus speaks with an unclouded consciousness of a divine existence with God from before his time on earth.”^① In Dunn’s terms, the point here is Jesus’s “divine existence with God from before his time on earth,” which is seen as “subversive of the unity of God.”^②

Thus, Dunn’s discussions of the title “Son of God” and Jesus’s self-identification in the Fourth Gospel contribute to the exploration of the parting of the ways by providing a workable criterion for discerning what should be judged as crossing the border between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. This criterion is convincing, given the nature of Monotheism and the primary doctrine of Christianity embedded in biblical texts.

Dunn’s further observation of Jesus’s divinity in the Gospel of John deserves more detailed consideration. Dunn reminds his readers that Jesus’s ways of identifying himself in the Fourth Gospel are missing in the Synoptic Gospels, arguing that “the most obvious explanation is that this is the style of the Fourth Evangelist, not of Jesus.”^③ For Dunn, the unique feature of Jesus in the Gospel of John, Jesus’s divinity, did not come from the historical Jesus but from the author who composed the stories about Jesus. It is this author who put an understanding of Jesus’s divinity into the mouth of the historical Jesus, whose self-identification in the Fourth Gospel was merely a projection of the author’s theology, a “much developed theological reflection.”^④

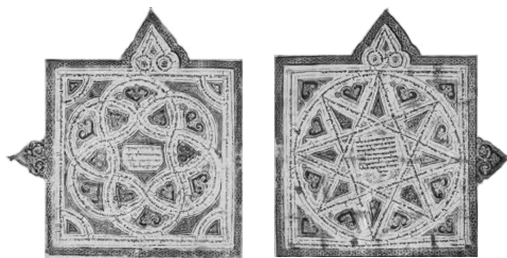
Particularly, Dunn emphasizes that “the movement towards a final parting of the ways was a fairly drawn-out process running through the first century. But *had Jesus spoken in the terms ascribed to him in the Fourth Gospel the*

① Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 232.

② 同上, 240。

③ 同上, 233。

④ 同上。



crisis must have come much sooner.”^①Dunn concludes, “the Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of Christ is evidence for a later stage of Christology and of the resulting tensions between ‘the Jews’ and the believers in Messiah Jesus, not for the first stage.”^②

Dunn’s argument contains two points. First, the theology in the Fourth Gospel is developed in comparison to that in the Synoptics. Second, Jesus’s self-identification in the Fourth Gospel must have led to tension between the Jews and the followers of Jesus, which occurred later in history.

Regarding the first point, Dunn seems to assume that a “developed” theology is necessarily later than “undeveloped” theology, though he did not say so. However, this assumption only holds if the Fourth Gospel depends on the Synoptics; otherwise, the “developed” theology may reflect the specific perspective of the composer rather than the date of composition, as the discussion of the dating of John below will further show. An independent argument about the date of the Fourth Gospel is necessary.

Regarding the second point, Dunn’s argument begs the question of when the parting of the ways happened. He seems merely to accept the dominant view that the context of the Fourth Gospel, including the tension between Jews and the followers of Jesus described in passages such as 9:22; 12:42; 16:2, is the late first century:

There is also wide agreement that the context of the Fourth Gospel is late first century CE and that *its writing reflects a crisis between the new sect and a dominant form of Judaism*, or at least a parting of the ways between the Johannine congregations and another form of late-first-century Judaism.^③

The problem is that the “wide agreement” has become increasingly doubtful, especially in the most recent scholarship on the Fourth Gospel. In an article published in 2025, van Kooten argues for a pre-70 CE dating of the Gospel of John based on a sophisticated analysis of the dating of the pool with

① Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 234; the italics are original in Dunn.

② 同上。

③ 同上, 288; the italics are original in Dunn.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

five porticoes described in John 5:2.^① According to van Kooten's argument, because a colonnaded pool was there as a historical fact, the key point for dating John 5:2 is to ascertain how the word “ἔστιν” (there is) in the present tense is used in the text. If it is used as a historical present, the author of John 5:2 describes a past event, which means that the author was writing after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the pool in 70 CE. If it is used as a normal present, the author was describing an event in his own time, namely, before the destruction of the pool. Van Kooten appeals to linguistic usages internal and external to the Fourth Gospel to argue that ἔστιν in John 5:2 is used as a normal present. Moreover, he examines external historical records and archaeological reports to confirm the pool's desolation after 70 CE. Together, linguistic and historical evidence support dating John 5:2 to a period prior to 70 CE.

Van Kooten goes further to argue that the entire Gospel of John must have been written (and edited) prior to 70 CE, as “the Gospel contains no anachronisms which necessitate that the author must have been writing after 70 CE.”^② Notably, regarding the expulsions of followers of Jesus from synagogues described in John 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2, van Kooten holds a view contrary to that of Dunn, emphasizing that they “were a practice already known to Paul (1 Thess 2:14-16; cf. 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6).”^③

A more comprehensive discussion of and argument for the early date of the Gospel of John comes from Mark Matson.^④ In his more recent article, Matson surveys arguments, including his own, that support the early date of John, some of which are pertinent to this article's discussion. For instance, he concludes Robinson's argument for the priority of John,^⑤ stating, “John is not

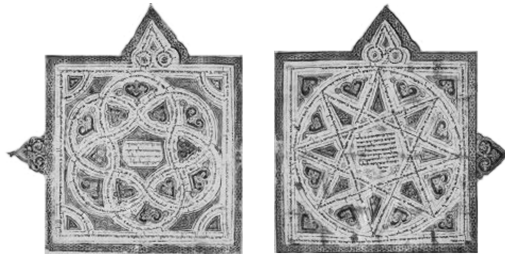
① George van Kooten, “The Pre-70 CE Dating of the Gospel of John: ‘There is (ἔστιν) in Jerusalem...a pool...which has five porticoes’,” *New Testament Studies* 71 (2025): 29-55.

② Van Kooten, “The Pre-70 CE Dating of the Gospel of John,” 54.

③ 同上。

④ Mark A. Matson, “Reviving the Priority of John,” in Ben Wiebe ed., *Jesus and Christian Origins: Direction toward a New Paradigm* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 128-166; Mark A. Matson, *In Dialogue with Another Gospel? The Influence of the Fourth Gospel on the Passion Narrative of the Gospel of Luke* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2001).

⑤ John A. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: Meyer Stone, 1985).



secondary because of its theological sophistication, or because of its difference from the Synoptic Gospels.”^① This conclusion explains my above doubt about Dunn’s assumption that John’s developed Christology indicates its late date. Other helpful points made by Matson include:^② 1) John is not dependent on the Synoptics, but rather independent; 2) the Gospel shows a remarkable literary cohesiveness, which resembles van Kooten’s point just mentioned; 3) archaeological evidence has demonstrated time and again that John’s information about Palestinian geography has very often been as strong, or stronger, than the other Gospels, of which van Kooten’s article is a strong proof.

The writings of Van Kooten and Matson do not overturn the dominance of the view that the Fourth Gospel was composed later than 70 CE. Nevertheless, their research at least suggests that scholars have not reached a consensus on the date of John. In the words of Matson, “it is always dangerous to assume a consensus on any aspect of gospel scholarship.”^③ Or as another scholar concludes, “given the current state of Gospel source criticism, the relationship of John’s Gospel to the Synoptics is sufficiently unsettled that it should not be used to either exclude or favor any possible relative ordering of the texts in question.”^④

Therefore, Dunn’s position that the tension between Jews and the followers of Jesus described in the Fourth Gospel reflects a context of the end of the first century becomes less compelling than it initially appears. It is possible that, as van Kooten argues, similar tension is the context of Paul’s writings. If so, what was the cause of this tension? The discussion in the following two sections provides an answer to this question.

Ⅲ. The High Christology in Phil 2:6-11

In addition to the Gospel of John, two pericopes in the New Testament

① Matson, “Reviving the Priority of John,” 135.

② 同上, 136-166。

③ 同上, 134。

④ Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 89.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

are crucial for Dunn to argue for a post-70 CE date of the parting of the ways: Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20. Many scholars argue that these two pericopes convey a high Christology, or Jesus's divinity. Given that this identity of Jesus is an non-negotiable boundary marker between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, the dominant reading of Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20 indicates an early date of the theological parting of the ways, as no scholars, including Dunn, doubt that these two letters were composed before 70 CE.

However, Dunn argues that the identity of Jesus in Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20 follows the Jewish tradition rather than breaking from it. The discussion in the current and next sections clarifies two points. First, there are indeed Jewish elements in both pericopes, so Dunn's position makes a certain sense. Second, something significantly different from the Jewish tradition is added in these two pericopes, involving a high Christology of Jesus. For the convenience of discussion, this section addresses Phil 2:6-11, and the next section covers Col 1:15-20.

For most scholars, Phil 2:6-11 is a short Christological hymn circulated before Paul, who inserted it into his letter.^① A few scholars emphasize Paul's authorship; for instance, Barclay claims, "in many ways this is the greatest and the most moving passage that Paul ever wrote about Jesus."^② For the present investigation, the redaction history of this hymn does not matter; what matters is its final content, as shown below (Table 1):^③

① G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 100-104, 119; Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 84; Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Phil 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation & in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 42-45.

② William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1959), 42.

③ All English translations of biblical texts in this article are from NRSV, unless otherwise noticed.

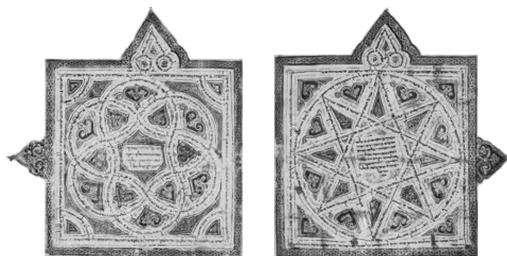


表 1 《腓立比书》2:6-11(NRSV)

6	<p>who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,</p>
7	<p>but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,</p>
8	<p>he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.</p>
9	<p>Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,</p>
10	<p>so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,</p>
11	<p>and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.</p>

As one can see, this hymn contains several messages about the life of Jesus, like his incarnation (being born in human likeness), death (on a cross), and resurrection (exaltation). For this article’s purpose, the focus is on his divine identity: whether this hymn describes a recognition of Jesus as divine in nature. In this regard, the crucial verse is 6 (Table 2),

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究
第26辑

表 2 《腓立比书》2:6 的希腊文和英文

Greek	English
ὃς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμόν ἡγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ	who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

Dunn emphasizes that Paul seems to propose an Adam Christology, mainly exposed in Rom 5:12-21, to “express the importance of Christ by comparing him and his significance with that of Adam.”^① Furthermore, he argues that “Adam Christology is also probably the determinative clue to our understanding of Phil 2:6-11,” listing significant parallels between Adam and Jesus in Phil 2:6-11, such as:

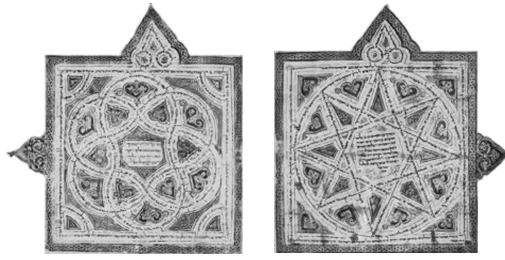
- 2.6a-in the form of God (cf. Gen. 1.27)
- 2.6b-tempted to grasp equality with God (cf. Gen. 3.5)

For Dunn, Phil 2:6-11 merely expresses a theology that continues the Jewish tradition, just as some Jews of the same period offered worship to Adam, as described in *Life of Adam and Eve* 13-14.^②Dunn concludes,^③

In short, then, one of the main categories of early Christology which seems at first to go well beyond Jewish thought (Christ as a corporate individual, as more than individual) is in effect *an outworking and development of the more familiar Adam theology* drawn from Gen. 1-3 and from subsequent reflection on these chapters... The categories were certainly being stretched by such usage, but we cannot yet say that the new wine had already burst the old wineskins.

Dunn’s argument overlooks a couple of vital messages that the text indicates. As he has noticed, there is a crucial difference between Christ and Adam, despite the parallels between them: Christ represents the new age, the age of life through death, whereas Adam represents the old age, the age of sin

① Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 252.
② 同上,255。
③ 同上,256; the italics are original in Dunn.



ruling over humanity to death.^① Given this difference, it deserves closer examination whether and how Christ differs from Adam in their nature of being. In the text, at least one such difference exists, which can be discerned through the word *μορφῇ*.

As some scholars have highlighted, the key term for understanding the entire hymn of Phil 2:6-11 is the Greek term *μορφῇ*, which is translated as “form.”^② The question important for the current discussion is: What does it mean to claim that Jesus was in the form of God? In this regard, Hawthorne and Martin provide a comprehensive survey, pointing out four possibilities that Paul’s theology supports: glory, image (Gen 1:26-27 and 3:1-5), mode of being, and condition/status.^③ Dunn seems to accept the second possibility, given his emphasis on the parallel between Phil 2:6 and Gen 1:26-27. In other words, Dunn argues that Jesus is in the form of God (Phil 2:6) just as humanity was created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27).

It is crucial to note that the term *μορφῇ* occurs only two times in the original texts of the entire New Testament: Phil 2:6 and 2:7.^④ To clarify the meaning of *μορφῇ* in Phil 2:6, it is beneficial to consider how this word is used in 2:7, which states that Jesus empties himself and took the form (*μορφῇ*) of a slave/servant (*δοῦλος*). The “form” in Phil 2:7 is unlikely to mean “glory” because it does not make sense to claim that Jesus empties himself and took the glory of a servant. The meaning of “image” does not make sense either because, as Barclay has emphasized, Paul meant that Jesus really and truly became a man.^⑤ Thus, the meaning of *μορφῇ* in 2:7 likely describes the mode of being, namely the essence of an existence. The possibility of a condition/status is not excluded, as it makes sense for Paul to claim that Jesus took the status of a servant. Nevertheless, this possibility does not conflict with the

① Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 252.

② Richard R. Melick, Jr. *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 88; Martin, *A Hymn of Christ*, 99.

③ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 111-114.

④ It also occurs in Mark 16:12, but it has been accepted without disagreement by scholars that the original ending of Mark is 16:8.

⑤ Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 45.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

meaning of “mode of being”; instead, they describe different aspects of a being. In other words, Jesus emptied himself (incarnation) to become a human in essence and accepted the lower status of being a servant.

The possible meanings of μορφή in 2:7 help to ascertain its meaning in 2:6 because there is a contrast between v. 6 and v. 7 regarding Jesus’s identities before and after his incarnation, indicated by the conjunction “but” (“ἀλλά”) in v. 7.^① If 2:7 means that Jesus became a human in nature and accepted the status of being a servant, then 2:6 likely means that Jesus, before the incarnation, had the form of God in nature and the high status of being equal to God. Thus, suppose one accepts Dunn’s view that Jesus is described as the second Adam in Phil 2:6-11. This parallel could have various implications. As Fee concludes, viewing Jesus as second Adam may lead to “a diminished Christology that sees Christ as only human and not preexistent,” as Dunn does; that said, it may also move “toward a high Christology that sees an intentional contrast between Adam’s failure and the divine Christ’s stepping into that role with full success.”^② My discussion supports the second direction, according to which “that Jesus was in the ‘form’ of God means nothing less than that he was God.”^③

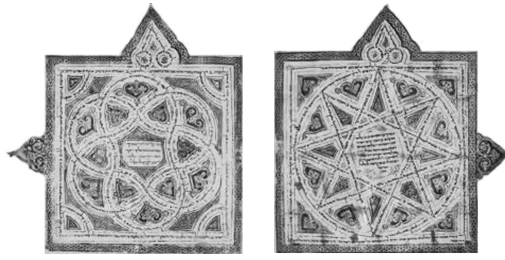
In short, reading Phil 2:6 and 2:7 together points to a contrast: while the first Adam was created in the image of God (in the sense that he was not God) but tempted to be equal with God, the second Adam, Christ, was in the form of God (in the sense that he was God) but gave up this status of being equal with God. Such a contrast constitutes what Caird calls the “rhetorical balance of the passage as a whole: he who renounced *equality with God* to become man can be adequately contrasted only with a man who aimed at *equality with God*.”^④ Hurtado argues that the contrast here is not between Jesus and Adam

① For an emphasis on this contrast, see Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 196; *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 2007), 375.

② Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 375-376.

③ F. C. Synge, *Philippians and Colossians: Introduction and Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1951), 30.

④ Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, 121; the italics are original in Caird.



but between Jesus and foolish humans.^① Even in this reading, the contrast between humanity and divinity stands.

Notably, the term “equal to” (ἴσος) in Phil 2:6 occurs rarely in the New Testament, only eight times, and the expression “equal to God” occurs two times: Phil 2:6 and John 5:18. The context of John 5:18 suggests that there was a quarrel between the Jews and Jesus regarding healing on the Sabbath: Jesus healed a sick man, who then took his mat, beside the pool with five porticoes (John 5:2). As a result, “the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God” (John 5:18). In the verses following John 5:18, Jesus gave a long discourse, which, as mentioned in Section 1 above, Dunn sees as a clear indication of Jesus’s consciousness of a divine existence with God. Thus, if Dunn sees the Christology in John as high, the parallel between John 5:18 and Phil 2:6 on the phrase “equal to God” suggests that the Christology in Phil 2:6 is also high.

In conclusion, this section’s discussion supports reading a high Christology in Phil 2:6-11. Even if one accepts Dunn’s view that Phil 2:6-11 expresses an Adam Christology, the texts indicate that this Christology moves toward a direction opposite to what Dunn thought: it describes Christ as divine instead of as merely human. Because in Dunn, Jesus’s divine nature is the non-negotiable boundary marker between the followers of Jesus and the group of Jews that later became rabbinic Judaism, the theological parting of the ways might occur as early as the date of *Philippians*. It makes sense to assume, as van Kooten does, that Paul knew the expulsions of followers of Jesus from synagogues described in John 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2.

IV. The high Christology in Col 1:15-20

Like Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:15-20 is also widely seen as a Christological hymn circulated before the composition of *Colossians*.^② While it is controversial

^① Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?*, 100.

^② Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, 174; David Hay, *Colossians* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 50. Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1982), 32.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究
第26辑

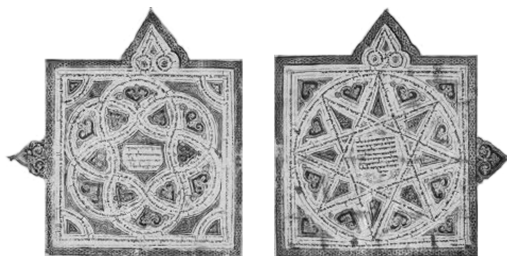
whether the author of this letter is Paul, it is largely agreed that its theology is distinctively Pauline,^① especially given the similarities between Colossians and Ephesians.^② For this paper's discussion, what matters is the Christology the texts expresses, no matter who wrote it and where its theology came from. As a hymn, its entire content is as follows (Table 3):^③

表 3 《歌罗西书》1:15-20

15	He is the image of the invisible God, The firstborn over all creation,
16	For in him all things were created, In heaven and on earth, Things visible and invisible, Whether thrones or dominions, principalities or powers, All things were created through him and for him;
17	And he is before all things, And in him all things hold together.
18	And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, The firstborn from the dead, In order that he might be pre-eminent in everything,
19	For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,
20	And through him to reconcile all things to him, Whether things on earth or in heaven, By making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

The statement that Jesus is in the image of God (Col 1:15) resembles the assertion in Phil 2:6 that Jesus was in the form of God. Thus, if Phil 2:6-11 has a high Christology, as discussed above, Col 1:15-20 also exhibits a similar

① Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, 174; Hay, *Colossians*, 53; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 40-41.
② Synge, *Philippians and Colossians*, 53-59.
③ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*.



Christology; one can argue that Col 1:15-20 sets out a contrast between Adam and Christ.^① However, the message of Col 1:15-20 is much more complicated because it is related to several different traditions, including the Jewish tradition concerning Wisdom, which Dunn emphasizes. As Dunn sees it, this passage, as well as 1 Cor 8:6 and probably Phil 2:6-11, uses Wisdom language that is typically Jewish tradition concerning divine Wisdom to describe the pre-existence of Christ.^② Some typical Jewish texts Dunn mentions include (Table 4):^③

表 4 犹太文本中先存的“智慧”

Prov 8:22-23	The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
Sir 24:9	From eternity, in the beginning, he created me, And for eternity I shall not cease to exist
Wisd 7:26	For she is the reflection of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of his goodness.
II Enoch 30:8	On the sixth day I commanded my wisdom to create man.

Dunn also argues that Jesus seems to link himself with the figure of divine Wisdom because, in Luke 7:35, he calls himself a child of Wisdom.^④ For Dunn, the point is that the statements about a figure of divine Wisdom were widespread during Second Temple Judaism without being seen as any threat to the doctrine of Monotheism because Wisdom was not seen as another god.^⑤

While the parallels between Col 1:15-20 and the Jewish tradition of

① Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 518.
 ② Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*, 257.
 ③ 同上, 258。
 ④ 同上, 231。
 ⑤ 同上, 259。

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

Wisdom are explicit, as other scholars have also noted,^① it is not so explicit that Col 1:15-20 continues or accepts the Jewish understanding of Wisdom. In my discussion of Adam Christology in Phil 2:6-11, I argued that Paul might use the tradition of Adam to develop a Christology different from or even contrary to the Jewish understanding of Adam. This argument applies to Col 1:15-20 as well because, in Beetham's insightful words, "The composer of the hymn or poem [Col 1:15-20], however, has taken his description of Christ in the language of Wisdom/Word an astonishing step beyond anything said about the Wisdom/Word figure in the early Jewish literature."^②

Beetham mentions a couple of places where Col 1:15-20 goes "an astonishing step" beyond Jewish literature about Wisdom. He argues that in Col 1:16, all things were created in him (εἰς αὐτὸν), instead of merely through him, and "this is language that elsewhere in the NT is reserved for God alone (see Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Heb 2:10)."^③ This example is not sufficiently convincing because the statements in Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6 and Heb 2:10 are different, involving not creation but the existence of the world in him (God). A more convincing example is Beetham's observation that "Wisdom figure has been connected to the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, an actual historical figure. This interpretation stood in strong contrast to the Judaism of the apostles' day, which identified Wisdom with their Scriptures, the Torah."^④

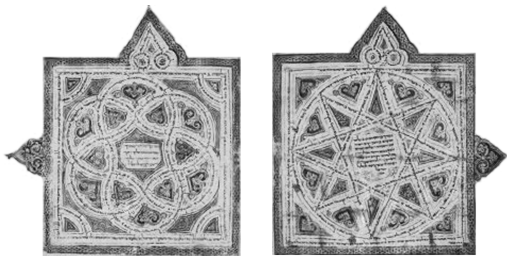
This latter example is more convincing because a brief comparison of the Wisdom of Solomon with Col 1:15-20 regarding their connection to Prov 8 can clarify the point. First, as Beetham has observed, while divine Wisdom is personified in the Wisdom of Solomon, it is not connected to a historical person's entire life. Second, the personified Wisdom functions differently from Jesus. Take Wisd 8:16 as an example, where the notion of personified Wisdom

① See, for instance, Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 29. Hay, *Colossians*, 54; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 38-39.

② Christopher A. Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letter of Paul to the Colossians* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 137.

③ Beetham, *Echoes of Scripture*, 137.

④ 同上, 139。



has here reached its peak:^① Wisdom accompanies humans to bring pleasure and joy, avoiding harshness and pain. Jesus functions more broadly and deeply: he is the head of the church and the firstborn from the dead; he reconciles all things and makes peace through his blood. It is not merely about joy and pleasure but is concerned with reconciliation and salvation. Lastly, and most importantly, Col 1:19 describes Jesus in a way that does not occur in any Wisdom literature: “In him all the fullness was pleased to dwell.”

There has been a debate on the source of the term fullness (πλήρωμα), which also occurs in Col 2:9 to describe Jesus in a similar but more precise way (see Table 5 below):

表 5 《歌罗西书》1:19 和 2:9 的希腊文和英文

	Greek	English
Col 1:19	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι	For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell
Col 2:9	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς Θεότητος σωματικῶς	For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily

Some scholars argue that πλήρωμα is a technical term of Christian Gnosticism to describe all the aeons or emanations which came from God.^② Other scholars disagree. For instance, Melick presents two cases that counter this interpretation. First, Gnosticism was a second-century movement, and there is no real evidence for a widespread Gnostic-like worldview near the middle of the first century.^③ Second, since emanations are distinct from God, the phrase “fullness (πλήρωμα) of deity” indicates a non-Gnostic interpretation of πλήρωμα. The second point is similar to that of Hay, who states, “Unlike later Gnosticism, the hymn makes no distinction between God and the

① Takamitsu Muraoka, *The Wisdom of Solomon in the Septuagint* (Leuven: Peeters 2024), 88.
② Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thesalonians*, 136-137; E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philippians* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), 57.
③ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 213; see also E. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of Proposed Evidences* (2nd ed; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973).

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

‘fullness’,”^① and Moule, who argues that “fullness of deity” cannot possibly be equated with the Gnostics’ hierarchy of beings lying between God and the world.^② As discussed below, whether this term is from Gnosticism or not, the readers of Col 1:19 and 2:9 may understand Jesus as divine.

If πλήρωμα is not a technical term from Gnosticism, one can understand it according to its literal meaning. In this case, as Melick points out, the term may mean simply “totality,” and it expresses that “Jesus was completely God. Everything that God is, Jesus is.”^③ It is helpful to note that, the “dwelling of the fullness” is modified by the adverb “bodily” (σωματικῶς), which occurs only once in the NT. In O’Brien’s high Christological reading of Col 1:19 and 2:9, “the addition of σωματικῶς (“bodily”) indicates the manner in which the fullness dwells in Christ.”^④ According to this reading, God dwells in Jesus completely in a physical, substantial, and ontological sense. It is not merely a functional term describing the idea that God completely saves through Jesus, as “a functional Christology presupposes, and finds its ultimate basis in, an ontological Christology.”^⑤

Caird puts forward four possible meanings of “bodily” (σωματικῶς):^⑥ (a) “in bodily form,” i.e., incarnate; (b) “embodied,” i.e., in the corporate life of the church; (c) “in organic unity,” and not diffused throughout a hierarchy of powers; (d) “in solid reality.” Caird argues for (d) and against others. Differently, Wright states that one does not have to choose between (a) and (d) because “part of Paul’s point is that the incarnation, the taking of ‘bodily’ form by God, was and is the ‘solid reality’ in which were fulfilled all the earlier foreshadowings.”^⑦ Wright’s comment also applies to other options, although he does not examine them. For instance, it is possible that Paul saw

① Hay, *Colossians*, 62.

② C. F. D. Moule, *Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957; reprint 1991), 166.

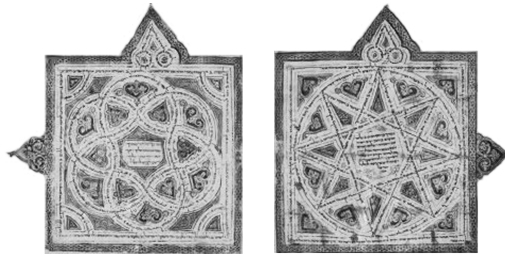
③ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 213.

④ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 111.

⑤ 同上, 112。

⑥ Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, 191.

⑦ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 89.



the incarnation as God’s real dwelling in Jesus to make him the head of the Church (Col 1:18). The point is that all the possible readings of “bodily” (σωματικῶς) do not exclude each other, including (c), the focus of the following discussion.

As emphasized above, many scholars nowadays do not see πλήρωμα in Col 1:19 and 2:9 as a technical term coming from Gnosticism. Caird even argues that Gnosticism borrowed this concept from Paul.^① For this article, what matters is the theological meaning of this term, rather than its historical origin. It is not harmful to assume, according to the view of a few scholars, that πλήρωμα in Col 1:19 and 2:9 is a Gnostic or Gnostic-like term. Even if this is the case, readers may still read Jesus as divine rather than human because the author was using this term in an anti-Gnostic sense, as indicated by the warning against false teachings in Col 2:8: See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

The author of Colossians was teaching something different from what was circulated, including philosophy, human tradition, and the elemental spirits of the universe. Whatever those false teachings are, the author warned his audience to reject them. Thus, if Gnosticism or Gnostic-like thought was one of the false teachings, the author was using a term from this thought to argue against it—which makes sense of the above (c) reading of “bodily” (σωματικῶς) in Caird. Because Gnosticism understood Jesus as one of the emanations or even all the emanations (Gnostic πλήρωμα), Jesus was lower than God; in contrast, the author taught an opposite understanding of Jesus as completely (Christian πλήρωμα) divine.

Returning to the entire hymn, one may also find some parallels between it and other contemporary thoughts, such as Platonic cosmology, which describes the cosmos as the visible image of an intelligible god.^② However, such parallels are far from suggesting that the author described a Platonic

① Caird, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, 180-181.

② Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 160. Hay, *Colossians*, 58. Lohse, *Colossians and Philippians*, 50. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 47.

JEWISH STUDIES

犹太研究

第26辑

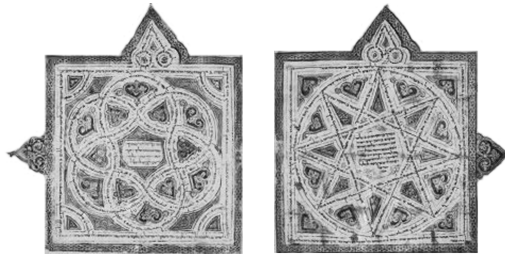
Jesus. Similar comments apply to the possible impact of Stoic philosophy on this hymn because some scholars have noticed that “there are close parallels and also crucial differences between Stoic cosmology and the hymnic material of Col. 1:15-20.”^① The warning in Col 2:8 suggests that the author might be teaching against a Platonic or Stoic understanding of Jesus, although a Platonic or Stoic term might be used. Such a writing strategy resembles the one Phil 2:6-11 suggests. As discussed in the preceding section, a parallel between Adam and Christ does not imply that Paul proposed an Adam theology that interprets Jesus as merely a human; rather, Paul set up a contrast between Adam and Christ to highlight Jesus’s divine nature.

All in all, a closer examination of Col 1:15-20, especially its description of Jesus as the image of God (Col 1:15) and the statements that the fullness (of deity) dwells in Jesus (Col 1:19; 2:9), indicates a high Christology that raises Jesus as high as God instead of a low Christology that interprets Jesus as human. Together, Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20 point to what Dunn calls a non-negotiable boundary marker between Christianity and rabbinic Judaism—Jesus’s divinity.

V. Conclusion

This study has argued that theology and sociology are not rival frameworks but complementary lenses for describing the ongoing “partings” between emergent Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. Because, as Dunn has pointed out, Monotheism/Christology provides the non-negotiable boundary markers, theological criteria legitimately help us discern when specific claims cross a line—even when social practice remained “muddy,” overlapping, and locally variable for centuries. According to Dunn, the theological parting did not happen until post-70 CE because 1) it has been widely agreed that the Gospel of John, which contains a high Christology that could serve as the non-negotiable boundary marker, was composed at the end of the first century and 2) Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20, although composed before 70 CE, portray a low Christology within the Jewish tradition, not describing Jesus as divine.

① Vicky Balabanshi, *Colossians: An Eco—Stoic Reading* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 74.



While the article does not claim consensus on an early Johannine date, it highlights reasons to doubt a consensus on a late date, decoupling high Christology from a necessarily late compositional setting. Doing so weakens Dunn’s case for postponing the theological parting and aligns with the possibility that expulsions and synagogue conflicts reported by John were already known in the Pauline horizon because, textually, Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20 support a high Christology that might have caused the line to be crossed. The statements that Jesus was in the form of God and equal to God (Phil 2:6) and that fullness (of deity) dwells in Jesus (Col 1:19; 2:9) indicate an ontological elevation of Jesus that stretches and surpasses the extant Jewish categories like Adam/Wisdom motifs. These passages therefore relocate the theological parting earlier than Dunn’s 70-135 window, even while acknowledging the Jewish resonances both authors employ.

The case offered here is cumulative rather than definitive, for it relies on caution against drawing a settled conclusion about the date of John and simultaneously arguments for a high Christology in Phil 2:6-11 and Col 1:15-20. Taken together, these lines of inquiry can refine a more nuanced chronology: multiple social “partings” across the long second-fourth centuries, grounded in an earlier, pre-70 theological parting marked by the confession of Jesus as sharing in the divine identity.