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Primogenitus omnis creaturae: Chrysostom, Christology and Non-dualism

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Abstract

Chrysostom's homilies, particularly the ones directed against Eunomius and other heretics, serve to defend the divinity of Christ. Often the answer as to whether he succeeded in doing so appears unclear to the modern mind. This article delves into a section of Chrysostom's homily on Colossians 1:15 with the intention of clarifying his defence of the full divinity of the Son through the concepts of "image" (*eikōn*) and "firstborn" (*prototokos*). It represents an attempt to reconcile the "ontological" and the "revelatory," namely "what Christ is in Himself" and "what Christ reveals through Himself" in Chrysostom's Christology.

Keywords: image; firstborn; ontological; revelatory; *aparallaktos* (exact likeness)

1. Introduction¹

Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians (1:15) presents Christ as “the image (εἰκών) of the invisible God, the Firstborn (πρωτότοκος) of all creation.” Chrysostom’s commentary on this passage, in his homilies, hinges on the interpretation of the two terms “image” (εἰκών) and “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος), primarily in defending the divinity of Christ against Eunomian subordinationism. The major concern of this article is to show how Chrysostom does this in his *Homily 2 on Colossians*. Against the neo-Arians, he illustrates that the aspect of the Divine name (εἰκών) is to be understood as unveiling the shared ontological reality of the Father in contrast to the Eunomian supposition that εἰκών refers only to the Son’s identity as the “seal of the totality of the Father’s power (not his essence).”² Chrysostom’s interpretation of εἰκών is clarified through the hermeneutical lens of Mark Chan and Stanley Grenz, who distinguish between “ontological” and “revelatory” categories when referring to divine persons (see below). Chrysostom’s understanding follows a similar pattern. The same applies to the concept of “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος). The article’s concern is thus the question of whether or not the concepts of εἰκών and πρωτότοκος can be understood in terms of equal essence with the Godhead. In order not to be restricted by the limitations of *Homily 2 on Colossians*, I shall equally examine part of *Homily 3* in order to provide more context. This study is necessitated by the lack of studies devoted to Chrysostom’s theological doctrine.³ It also examines his methodological limitations in addressing the problem. The aim here is not to impose on Chrysostom the complex philosophical categories of theological reflection as employed by the neo-Arians. It is rather to show how his interpretation is accomplished in its rhetorical context, and in comparison with the ideas of some contemporary scholars.

In order to explore these aspects, I shall: a) address the current state of scholarship on Chrysostom to further indicate the need for explorations and illuminations of his theology; b) give a summary of *Homily 2 on Colossians*; c) indicate how Chrysostom addresses Col. 1:15 in *Homily 3*; d) argue that his discourse projected the ontological content of “image” and “firstborn” in reaction to the neo-Arians; and finally e) show the limitations in Chrysostom’s method.

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- 1 I acknowledge the profound assistance of Prof Dr Johan Leemans and Dr Samuel Pomeroy, both of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, in shaping the ideas in this article.
 - 2 R. P. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 229.
 - 3 F. G. McLeod, *The Image of God in the Antiochene Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1999), 119.

2. Scholarship on Chrysostom

Scholarship on Chrysostom's works continually addresses various theological themes.⁴ This article traces the line of the christological content which some scholars have addressed in the past. Ashish Naidu's *Transformed by Christ* only focuses on his homilies on the *Epistle to the Hebrews* and on the *Gospel of John* but remains useful to the overall understanding of Chrysostom's Christology as inseparable from his "understanding of the Christian life."⁵ Naidu envisions Chrysostom's teaching as reflecting a "pastoral" Christology, in which the divinity of Christ is linked to redemption as its practical consequence. Thus, "only if Christ is the natural Son, in whom the divine and human are inseparably united, can he redeem and restore us to participate in his eternal relationship with God."⁶ Meanwhile, notable Chrysostom scholars Pauline Allen and Wendy Mayer, in their 1994 article only examined the *Homilies on Colossians* as a case study on the determination of the provenance of Chrysostom's homilies.⁷ There are other works on Chrysostom's Christology which do

4 There are a couple of studies on Chrysostom in the areas of Soteriology, Christology, Pneumatology, etc. See J. H. Juzek, "Die Christologie des hl. Johannes Chrysostomus: Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Dogmatik der Antiochener," doctoral diss., University of Breslau, 1912; L. R. Barnard, "Christology and Soteriology in the Preaching of John Chrysostom," Th.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1974; M. E. Lawrenz, *The Christology of John Chrysostom* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996); A. J. Naidu, *Transformed in Christ: Christology and the Christian Life in John Chrysostom*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 188 (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012); P.-W. Lai, "The *imago Dei* and Salvation among the Antiochenes: A Comparison of John Chrysostom with Theodore of Mopsuestia," *Studia Patristica* 67 (2013): 393–402; D. Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); S. G. Papadopoulos, "The Holy Trinity and the Parousia of the Holy Spirit according to St John Chrysostom," in *Agape and Diakonia: Essays in Memory of Bishop Gerasimos of Ahydos*, ed. P. Chamberas (Brookline, MA.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 97–125; R. C. Hill, "'The Art of Prayer' (Chrysostom on Psalm 4): Antioch's Recipe for the Spiritual Life," in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. 4, *The Spiritual Life*, ed. W. Mayer, P. Allen and L. Cross (Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2006), 1–18; N. Tănase, "Pneumatologia chrysostomiană receptată în sinteza isihast-palămită: Harul teurgic al Duhului este identic cu energia esențială a lui Dumnezeu" [The Chrysostomian pneumatology and its reception in the hesychast-palamite synthesis: The theurgical grace of the Spirit is identical with the essential energy of God], in *Misiune și Propovăduire*, ed. D. Alic (Cluj-Caransebeș: Presa Universitară Clujeană and Editura Episcopiei Caransebeșului, 2015), 331–351; N. Tănase, "Ființă și har: Distincția dintre ipostasul și energia Duhului sau Sfântul Ioan Chrysostom – un palamit 'avant la lettre'?" [Existence and grace. The distinction between the hypostasis and the energy of the Spirit or Saint John Chrysostom—a Palamite before the fact?], in *"Tuturor toate m-am făcut": Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur și lăcașul pastoral al teologiei*, ed. D. Lemeni (Sibiu: Astra Museum-Partoș, 2015), 119–168. Since this article situates Chrysostom's Christology within eastern theological developments, it is important to note similar attempts in recent eastern orthodox approaches, such as: P.-W. Lai, "The Eusebian and Meletian Roots of John Chrysostom's Trinitarian Theology," *Scrinium* 14, no. 1 (2018): 37–62.

5 Naidu, *Transformed in Christ*, xv.

6 Naidu, *Transformed in Christ*, 260.

7 P. Allen and W. Mayer, "Chrysostom and the Preaching of Homilies in Series: A New Approach to the Twelve Homilies *In epistulam ad Colossenses* (CPG 4433)," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 60 (1994): 21–39.

not focus on the *Colossians* homilies.⁸ Perhaps related to my attempt here is Raymond J. Laird's essay which discusses Chrysostom's attack on the neo-Arians in defence of the divinity of the Son.⁹ He, however, focuses exclusively on *De incomprehensibili* with no reference to the *Colossians* (or other works), and defends Chrysostom's methodology instead of his theology.

There are therefore scant studies on Chrysostom's *Homilies on Colossians*, particularly on his treatment of Col. 1:15.¹⁰ In this article, I shall make use of the *Homilies on Colossians* to highlight Chrysostom's approach to christological issues as a response to the neo-Arians. While appreciating his unique method and motives as Laird did, I shall further contextualise his relationship to the doctrinal content of these rival groups.

3. A Survey of Chrysostom's *Homily 2 on Colossians*

Homily 2 on Colossians is part of a group of 12 homilies with a shared provenance of Antioch and Constantinople. Studies have shown that the homilies may not have been presented in a series, in contrast to how they had come down to us.¹¹ The case study by Allen and Mayer assigns Constantinopolitan provenance to *Homily 2* (and 3, which also forms part of the focus of this article).¹² *Homily 2* is focused on verses 9 and 10 as its preceding biblical text indicates. However, one discovers that the scope of its content far exceeds verse 10 and stretches into verse 15. Chrysostom begins with a direct

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- 8 See R. N. Capes, "Philippians 2:6–11: Pre-existence or Second Adam Christology? A Comparison of the Exegesis of Three Modern Scholars with That of St. John Chrysostom," MA diss., University of Saint Thomas, 2012; C. Kannengiesser, "'Clothed with Spiritual Fire': John Chrysostom's Homilies on the Letter to Hebrews," in *Christology, Hermeneutics, and Hebrews: Profiles from the History of Interpretation*, ed. J. C. Laansma and D. J. Treier, Library of New Testament Studies 423 (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 74–83; A. J. Naidu, "John Chrysostom's Homilies on Hebrews: An Antiochene Christological Commentary?," *Perichoresis* 6, no. 1 (2008): 85–108; E. L. Betz, "Christology in *The Epistle to the Hebrews*: Martin Luther's reception of John Chrysostom," MTh. diss., Boston University, 2010.
 - 9 R. Laird, "John Chrysostom and the Anomoeans: Shaping an Antiochene Perspective on Christology," in *Religious Conflict from Early Christianity to the Rise of Islam*, ed. W. Mayer and B. Neil, *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 121 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 129–149.
 - 10 Apart from the limited attention paid to the *Homilies on Colossians* by Allen and Mayer, there is also T. Baytsar, "Theological and Literary Analysis of John Chrysostom's Homilies on St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians with Special Attention to the Eighth Homily," Adv. MTheol. diss., KU Leuven, 2009.
 - 11 Allen and Mayer, "Chrysostom and the Preaching," 21, state: "Indeed, in Chrysostom's regard, what constitutes a homiletic series is a problematical question: we seem obliged to deduce that some homilies which, properly speaking, did not constitute a series delivered sequentially by the homilist were later mustered into a collection on the basis of various rationales."
 - 12 Allen and Mayer, "Chrysostom and the Preaching," 37, 38, by examining internal evidences in the 12 homilies, argue for the Antiochene provenance for *Hom. Col. 6* and *7*. *Hom. Col. 2* and *3* are assigned to the Constantinopolitan period. For the rest, they submit that "there is insufficient evidence to assign *In Col. hom. 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11*, and *12* definitely to either to Antioch or Constantinople." And conclusively they opine that "further close investigation might enable us to demonstrate that *In Col. hom. 8* and *10* were delivered in Antioch, and *In Col. hom. 9* in Constantinople."

connection to the material of the homily. He starts with the very words of the passage “For this cause,” followed by a direct question: “What cause?”¹³ In the rest of the initial part of the homily, he proceeds with a fairly literal interpretation of the preceding text, taking the phrases or words in the initial quote one after the other and analysing them carefully. During the course of the homily, he begins commenting on verses 11, 12, 13 and 14 which are not in the text quoted above the homily. However, at verse 15, he comments briefly and hesitates to move along further for two related reasons: a) he feels it is a very important and sensitive topic: “a question of heresy,” and b) he notices that the attention of his audience has waned since he suggests that it would be better to address it to their ears “when they are fresh.”¹⁴ But then, the homily continues for quite a long time, sufficient for him to deal with the subject matter of Col. 1:15. Why then does he defer the topic to another day? Perhaps, he intends to spend enough time on it, and if possible, make it the sole content of his next homily. In the rest of *Homily 2 on Colossians*, we find continual digression to other issues.¹⁵ The importance of this topic for Chrysostom helps us in uncovering his motives in the homilies. It assists us in reading between the lines in order to discover what his homilies propose in today’s context.

4. Chrysostom’s Elaboration of Col. 1:15 in *Homily 3*

Chrysostom’s deferral of his commentary on Col. 1:15 fits in with his pedagogical insistence on “quality” rather than “quantity of instruction.”¹⁶ Jaclyn Maxwell remarks that since Chrysostom was “concerned about the combination of his audience’s perceptiveness and his own clarity, he observed that a good preacher should wait until the right time, when his audience was in the right frame of mind, so that his words would have the greatest effect.”¹⁷ This was exactly what he did in *Homily 2* on Col. 1:15 despite his intermittent tendency to return to the topic. In what follows, I shall look at the deferred homily as presented in *Homily 3* while highlighting the attention to clarity and comprehension which Chrysostom seeks.

13 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 2* (NPNF¹ 13:264).

14 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 2* (NPNF¹ 13:267; PG 62.313).

15 The rest of the homily treats other issues like the Last Judgment, the role and method of the devil, conscience, a few words on sobriety and indolence, and how to engage in argument with Greeks.

16 J. L. Maxwell, *Christianity and Communication in Late Antiquity: John Chrysostom and His Congregation in Antioch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 92. Chrysostom in his *De Lazaro conciones* (PG 48:991), reveals his pedagogical philosophy: “So that you do not spit out what you are given, I have not tipped the cup of education for you all at once, but I have cut it up for you into many days, providing you with a break from the work of listening on some days, so that what is put down should stick securely in your thoughts, my friends, and that you should receive what I am about to say next with a relaxed and mature soul.” In fact, Rylaarsdam’s work on Chrysostom’s pedagogy of “divine adaptability” extensively examines Chrysostom’s homiletical methods. Cf. Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy*, 228–282.

17 Maxwell, *Christianity and Communication*, 92.

Chrysostom begins *Homily 3* (on Col. 1:15–18) by immediately connecting to the deferred discourse on Col. 1:15. His opening statement which contains “debt terminology” and “temporal references,” strengthens the claim that *Homilies 2 and 3* follow serially and so justified a common provenance for both:¹⁸ “Today it is necessary for me to pay the debt which yesterday I deferred, in order that I might address it to your minds when in full force.”¹⁹ Alertness of the mind remains for him a necessary criterion for understanding. Perhaps, an alert mind would readily understand the mystery of the divine essence which is equally shared by the Father and the Son, while the un-alert may likely conclude on face-value that Col. 1:15 points to the Son as a creature. He begins by defining the “Image” in the opening phrase, “Who is the Image of the Invisible God,” as denoting “exactly similar,” “exact likeness,” and so *not different* from God. The aim is to disprove any suggestion of the creatureliness of the Son: “But if a creature: how is He the Image of the Creator?”²⁰

In the complementary clause of the opening phrase, “the Firstborn of all creation” (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως), Chrysostom embarks on a literary and theological defence of the divinity of the Son, while insisting that the proofs are discoverable in the text itself. This same text, which as Gregory of Nazianzus attests, was employed for neo-Arian theology,²¹ is here appropriated by Chrysostom to defend what the neo-Arians contradict. If the text is taken by neo-Arians as justifying the created nature of the Son, Chrysostom argues the other way around by insisting that the text actually defends the nature of the Son as fully divine. He therefore ridicules the idea of those who in interpreting the “firstborn” seek to rob the Son of His dignity by reducing Him to a creature whose existence is determined by time. He directs his critiques against Paul of Samosata and his followers.²² Chrysostom contrasts the concepts of “firstborn” and “first created” to show that “firstborn” does not necessarily imply creatureliness:

“The Firstborn of all creation.” “What then,” said one, “behold, He is a creature.” What is the reason for this? Tell me. “Is it because he said ‘Firstborn.’” However, he did not say “first created,” but “firstborn.” It is therefore reasonable that he should be called many things. For he must also be called a brother “in all things.” (Heb. ii. 17.) Does this

18 Allen and Mayer, “Chrysostom and the Preaching,” 36–37.

19 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62:317).

20 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62:317).

21 F. W. Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory of Nazianzen*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 13 (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 64.

22 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:271; PG 62:319). In the passage, Chrysostom mentions Paul of Samosata thrice even though there is no indication of whether a group or sect linked to Paul of Samosata or to his teachings still existed at that time. It could perhaps be the case that Chrysostom finds the position of the neo-Arians (of reducing the Son to a creature) to be connected with the ideas of Paul of Samosata, who is said to have denied the personality of both the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is reported that Paul dismissed the incarnation and also limited the reception of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the original apostles who were direct witnesses of the Pentecost. See Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 166–169.

mean that we must take from Him His being Creator; and insist that neither in dignity nor in any other thing is He superior to us? And which wise person would say this? For the word “firstborn” is not expressive of dignity and honor, nor of anything else, but of time only. What does “the firstborn” signify? That he is created, is the answer. Well. If this is to be taken as an answer we also should note that it has also kindred expressions.²³

Chrysostom further illustrates his argument with kindred expressions in order to critique the interpretation of the Son’s creatureliness. Thus, Colossians’ (1:18) “firstborn from the dead” (πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν) is contrasted with “of the dead” (νεκρῶν)²⁴ to show the different senses to which the idea of “firstborn” could be applied. Chrysostom goes further to situate the concept of “firstborn” within the theological context of the passage Col. 1:16–17, thus interpreting the Son as the “foundation” (θεμέλιον) of all things: “Not only did He Himself bring them out of nothing into being, but he equally sustains them now, so that if they were to be severed from His Providence, they would at once be undone and destroyed.”²⁵ It is clear from this that Chrysostom shows the sufficiency of the biblical language in offering us a coherent theology without recourse to speculative language. He demonstrates that with an appropriate exegesis, a preacher could encounter the accommodating *Logos*, and in so doing rediscover the heart of the Christian doctrine and make it applicable in the life of the people.²⁶

Chrysostom advances his arguments with the other verses as well. Taking on Col. 1:17, “in Him all things consist,” he argues against those who by interpreting the “firstborn” as the created nature of the Son place His existence as determined by time. This implies that there was a time when He was not, since His being created means He was created at a time before the rest of creation. Against this, Chrysostom questions: “How can all

23 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.318–319). Translation slightly revised by me. Michel René Barnes has shown that at the centre of the difference between the Trinitarian theologies of Eunomius and Gregory of Nyssa is the question of “transcendental causality.” Eunomius would argue out a causality that establishes the Father as temporally prior to the Son. Hence, the Son is rendered as a creature, perhaps the only creature, but one who is imbued with the capacity to create. The Son’s creative capacity is therefore mediated. Gregory does not present the Father as temporally prior despite maintaining the causal priority of the Father to the Son. For Gregory, therefore, the Son’s creative capacity is intrinsic to his nature and so confirms his equality with the Father. Cf. M. R. Barnes, “Eunomius of Cyzicus and Gregory of Nyssa: Two Traditions of Transcendent Causality,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 52, no. 1 (1998): 59–87.

24 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.319).

25 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:271; PG 62.319). Translation slightly revised.

26 M. W. Elliott, “Exegetical Genres in the Patristic Era,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to 600*, ed. J. C. Paget and J. Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 780. Meanwhile, in his exposition of Chrysostom’s soteriological and sacramental thoughts, Naidu, *Transformed in Christ*, 147, arrives at the centrality of “the idea of reconciliation with God” as evidence of Chrysostom’s “unitive Christology.” According to him, “the view that we can share in the divine communion through our union with Christ reflects a unitive Christology in that it requires his person to be the Logos himself: for only the Son who possesses this privilege by nature can enable us to share in the divine life.” If Chrysostom’s preaching on reconciliation with God is to be maintained, then the meditative presence of the Logos remains a necessary condition.

things ‘consist’ in one who was not?”²⁷ In other words, how can all created things pre-exist in one who at a certain moment did not exist? Meanwhile, on Col. 1:18, “That He might have the preeminence,” Chrysostom presents Paul as alluding to the Son’s position within both the inner-divine life of the Godhead and the realm of Creation, what he calls the “later generation.”²⁸ Thus, Chrysostom justifies Paul’s use of “firstborn” on the grounds that the Son “is first of the Church; and first of men after the flesh, like as of the Creation.”²⁹

5. Defending the Full Divinity of Christ against the Heretics

Chrysostom’s diatribe against the peddlers of christological controversies in late antiquity was provoked by the theological propositions of Arius and his later followers. A priest in Alexandria, Arius had argued that God is unoriginated (ἀναρχος) while the Son is originated and so is not unbegotten (ἀγέννητος), as the Father is. According to Arius, prior to his being “begotten, or created, or determined or established” the Son did not exist,³⁰ and as such does not share in the substance/essence (οὐσία) of the Father. Logically, it follows that if the Son is considered as existing from a particular time, then his creatureliness is easier to accept. This idea which continued after Arius in what is now known as Arianism is based on some key assumptions: a) that divine revelation and salvation brought about a certain reduction of the divinity such that they can only be executed by a less fully divine being;³¹ b) that the divine Word and the human body share in the weakness and limitations of the incarnate Christ and this shows how inferior the Son is to the Father;³² c) that the theology of the God who suffered justifies the subordination of the Son.³³ Prominent among Arians is Eunomius, who was succeeded by the Anomoeans (neo-Arians) against whom Chrysostom often warns his listeners.

Eunomius furthered the theological discourse of Aetius, and so of the neo-Arians. Born around 330 in Corniaspa, Cappadocia, he became bishop of Cyzicus. He was condemned by the Council of Constantinople of 381.³⁴ Eunomius built his theology on the divine name of “unbegotten” (ἀγέννητος), which he reserved for the Father. Thus, the Son is designated as a creature (κτιστός). He did so perhaps by drawing from the scriptural references of the Son as the “only begotten” (μονογενής) of John 1:14 and the

27 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:271; PG 62.320).

28 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:271; PG 62.320).

29 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:271; PG 62.320).

30 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1988), 6. Hanson does a very basic thing of examining what Arius actually taught before considering the reportages of what he said or meant, as well as the amplifications of his teachings by later followers.

31 Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 100.

32 Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 106.

33 Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 109.

34 K. Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 70.

“first born of all creation” in Col. 1:15.³⁵ One might conclude that Eunomius, by so doing, categorises the Son with the rest of creation. Yet Frederick Norris cautions against such conclusion. He argues:

To say that the Son is a “creature” is not to say that he is like all other creatures. When applied to the Son, the word “creature” is a homonym. It has the same pronunciation and expression, but not the same meaning. “The first born of all creation” (Col. 1:15) is prior to all other creatures. Although the Son did not exist before his generation, he is not like any other creature. His place in the hierarchy is not acquired; it belongs to him by nature.³⁶

Eunomius reserves the highest level of creatureliness for the Son. The Son enjoys this position because he alone “resembles his begetter with a most exact likeness in accordance with the meaning which is proper to himself ... as the image and as the seal of the whole activity and power of the Almighty, the seal of the Father’s deeds, words, and counsels.”³⁷

Eunomius thus uses his idea of the “created effect” to subordinate the Son to the Father and equally subordinate the Holy Spirit to the Son. According to Eunomius, the Holy Spirit “is not on the same level as the Father” and neither “is he made the equal of the Son,” despite transcending every other created thing.³⁸ The Holy Spirit is subordinated to the Son as His “first and principal power,”³⁹ thus indicating that the Holy Spirit is made by the Father through the Son.⁴⁰ But then, “both Son and Spirit are creatures and, hence, are *anomoioi*, that is, in no way like the substance and being of the Father.”⁴¹ Clearly, it is logical to suspect that once the Son has been subordinated and reduced to a “created thing,” the Spirit would then be subordinated under the Son, and both of them under the Father. Despite the fact that Chrysostom did not address the question of the Spirit’s status in *Homily 2* and *3*, the logic of the connection is never lost to the reader. The basis of this is evidently the philological interpretation of the categories of “unbegotten,” “begotten,” and “procession,” which are ascribed to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit respectively. This interpretation is built on the distinction between homonyms and synonyms, as easily adapted from rhetorical training in the late Second

35 Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 64.

36 Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 65; cf. Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* 15, 16, 24, in Eunomius, *The Extant Works*, ed. and trans. R. P. Vaggione (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

37 Eunomius, *Expositio Fidei* 3.27–33 in Eunomius, *The Extant Works*.

38 Eunomius, *Expositio Fidei* 4.3; 5.

39 Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning*, 66.

40 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* 28.14–15.

41 P. W. Harkins, “Introduction” to *St. John Chrysostom: On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, trans. P. W. Harkins, *Fathers of the Church* 72 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 24.

Sophistic.⁴² It was this downplaying of the dignity of the Son, which invariably affected the dignity of the Holy Spirit, that Chrysostom challenged among the Anomoeans, the neo-Arians.

6. A Case of Context-Conditioned Polemics: Between the “Revelatory” and the “Ontological”

Chrysostom’s exegesis of Col 1:15 may have been conditioned by the continual presence of a heretic Christian group in Constantinople, evidently the Eunomians/Anomoeans.⁴³ Thus while his exegesis seems contrived, it is related to the question of whether or not εἰκών and πρωτότοκος can be interpreted in terms of divine identity. The Pauline description of Christ as the “image of the invisible God” appears as a repetition of the fact that the spiritual and invisible attributes of God (cf. John 1:18, 4:24; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16) are only made accessible to human knowledge through His self-revelation, made manifest in the Son (2 Cor. 4:4–6). Thus, Jesus Christ “embodies” in Himself the very character of God; in Him the invisible God is made visible.⁴⁴ Chrysostom refutes any interpretation that fails to make this strict identification. He rejects any argument that reduces the meaning of “image” to that of a mere picture or copy or semblance, as in the case of offspring to its parent, or of a person’s reflection in a mirror. He makes it clear that the term must be interpreted by equality of essence: “Paul, discoursing as we showed of the dignity of the Son, says these words: ‘Who is the Image of the invisible God.’ Whose image then will thou have Him be? ... But if as God and God’s Son, God’s image, he shows the *exact* likeness.”⁴⁵ This argument might be challenged on the grounds that it already presupposes that the Son is God before trying to prove the same with the idea of “image.” That is to say, it is a type of circular reasoning. However, the following questions remain: Does Chrysostom consider the divinity of the Son an issue that needs to be proven? Given the influence of the heretics, is it not enough merely to have the doctrine explained to the Christian community?

In another of his homilies, on John’s Gospel, Chrysostom defends this “dignity of the Son” as constituting in His equality of essence and His co-eternity with God the Father: “For, if the Son be not of the same Essence, there is another God; and if He be not Co-eternal, He is after Him; and if He did not proceed from His Essence, clear it is that He was made.”⁴⁶ Basil of Caesarea affirms a similar position by asserting that the “image”

42 See G. Anderson, *The Second Sophistic: A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993); T. Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

43 Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33–34. Interestingly, the second homily Chrysostom delivered after arriving in Constantinople (*Contra Anomoeos 11*) focused on the Anomoean heresy, which shows that the Anomoean community there was still exerting considerable influence at that time.

44 P. T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary 44 (Waco: Word Books, 1982), 43.

45 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.317). Italics mine.

46 Chrysostom, *Hom. Heb. 4* (NPNF¹ 14:18; PG 59:49).

here does not refer to “an inanimate image, nor made by hand, not the work of technique or concept, but a living image, or better, an image that is life itself, maintaining intact the absence of any difference.” Basil continues, “it is not a superficial likeness, but in the substance itself.”⁴⁷ Thus, since Paul applied the concept of “image” in illustrating the dignity of the Son, it follows therefore that equal divinity of the Son with the Father is maintained here.

Eunomius, however, would disagree with this. For him, divine essence remains one and indivisible, and so admits of no division or circumscription.⁴⁸ This essence is designated by the name “unbegotten.” Thus, to describe Christ as “image” and “firstborn” implies that the Son is a creature by virtue of being “begotten,” and He is the image of the Father as a reflection of the Father’s will.⁴⁹ To defend his position, Eunomius makes a distinction between the essence of the Father, the “unbegotten” and the essence of the Son, “offspring,” the “begotten.” According to him,

We call the Son “offspring”, therefore, in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures. We do not understand his essence to be one thing and the meaning of the word which designates it to be something else. Rather, we take it that his substance is the very same as that which is signified by his name, granted that the designation applies properly to the essence. We assert, therefore, that this essence was begotten—not having being in existence prior to its own coming to be—and that it exists, having been begotten before all things by the will of its God and Father.⁵⁰

Eunomius is convinced that any defence of the equality of essence of the Father and the Son lacks merit based on the designation of the names assigned to the Son as “image” and “firstborn.” He argues that there must be a correspondence between the names and the meanings. The Son cannot be referred to as “image,” “offspring,” “firstborn,” “begotten” and at the same time share the same essence with the “unbegotten,” the Father. Eunomius describes any attempt to defend the contrary as “sacrilegious” (ἁσεβής)⁵¹ and warns that it would amount to “a confusion of both the names and their objects.”⁵² In such a case, “there would be one essence which both is and is called ‘unbegotten’, yet there would be included within the scope of its definition still another essence, an essence designated ‘begotten’.”⁵³ Chrysostom’s argument, contrarily, admits of no double essence but rather argues that any name belonging to the Son

47 Basil of Caesarea, *Contra Eunomium* I, 18 in *Basile de Césarée, Contre Eunome suivi de Eunome, Apologie*, ed. and trans. B. Sesboüe, G.-M. de Durand and L. Doutreleau, Sources chrétiennes 299 and 305 (Paris: Cerf, 1982), 234–236.

48 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* 22.10.

49 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 48–49. cf. T. T. Tollefsen, *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 42–43.

50 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 48–49.

51 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 50–51.

52 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 50–51.

53 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 50–51.

(whether “image” or “firstborn”) indicates the essence of God (not just His will or activity), as well as the common divine essence of the Father and the Son.

This indication of essence in Chrysostom’s argument may be usefully understood within the framework of Mark Chan’s use of the categories of “revelatory” and “ontological” for understanding the immanent Trinity in the theology of Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg. Pannenberg’s approach, according to Chan, moves from what is derived from Christ’s revelation to establish the ontological equality of the triune persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From Christ’s historical revelatory event we derive “the principle of relationality or mutual self-differentiation and submission”⁵⁴ which aids the understanding of the inner-divine life of the Trinity. Pannenberg’s methodology, which “looks to the revelation of the Threeness of God in history and from there moves on to a unity of divine essence,”⁵⁵ is a way of holding both the revelatory and ontological natures of the Son together.

In a similar way, Chrysostom’s interpretation of εἰκών and πρωτότοκος are “revelatory” attributes of the Godhead. They are reflections of the divine (His glory, creative power, etc.) without necessarily implying the same essence. Yet on the other hand, precisely because these terms are revelatory of the divine essence, Chrysostom’s argument necessitates an “ontological” reading, because for him the image is identical with the essence and substance of God. Thus, in the context of disputes with Eunomians, Chrysostom’s interpretation would be seen to move from the “revelatory” to the “ontological.” The essence here for Eunomius is not the same as the divine essence of God, but rather the essence of “Father” as designating the “will,” “power” or “activity” of God.⁵⁶ Part of the reason for Eunomius’s difficulty in reconciling the revelatory and the ontological is his distinction between activity and essence. The activity belongs to God’s will (designated by the name “Father”) and has nothing to do with the essence of the Godhead (which is “unbegotten”). Therefore, the Son is relegated to the will and without any contact with the divine essence as such.⁵⁷ In this sense, Eunomius would claim to have rescued the Pauline usage of the “image” and “firstborn” by arguing that

54 M. L. Y. Chan, *Christology from Within and Ahead: Hermeneutics, Contingency, and the Quest for Transcontextual Criteria in Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 233. Meanwhile, the American Baptist theologian Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 304, deploys the same concepts while arguing that Nicaea and Constantinople brought about a resolution of the conflict between functional and ontological Christology. According to him, “Jesus’ revelatory unity, therefore, leads explicitly to his ontological unity with God and humankind.”

55 Chan, *Christology from Within and Ahead*, 233.

56 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 66–67. For Eunomius, the designation “Father” manifests the *action* of the “unbegotten”.

57 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 62–65.

they all point to the action of the “unbegotten” and have absolutely nothing to do with His essence.⁵⁸

Chrysostom does not seem to be concerned with the strict definition of God as “unbegotten” (which forms the groundwork of Eunomius’s logic); rather, the common essence of the Father and the Son, for him, is a given.⁵⁹ And in relation to Christ, it is his conviction that both the divinity of Christ and what He reveals are inseparable, since we can move from “what He is” (*esse*) to “what He does or represents” (*agere*). Since the Son is God, He at once reveals both the attributes and the essence of God, and so remains God. In his *Homily 2 on Hebrews*, Chrysostom illustrates this unity with the concept of “form”:

Therefore just as “the form of a slave” (Phil. ii. 6, 7) expresses no other thing than a man without variation [from human nature], so also “the form of God” expresses no other thing than God. ... Having said, “Who being the brightness of His glory,” he added again, “He sat down on the right hand of the Majesty.”⁶⁰

The pre-existent Son of God is therefore the same as the incarnated Christ. And even after His ascension to God’s right hand, He remains the pre-existent One. This of course is “not an external honor bestowed on him but something which belonged to him before the incarnation because he is the same person.”⁶¹ The categories of the revelatory and the ontological should thus not be understood as introducing some sort of duality into the identity of Christ but (in doing exactly the opposite) is employed to describe how Chrysostom’s logic works in his response to the heretics. Against their position which assigns the Son a place within the created realm, Chrysostom sustains the argument that

58 Eunomius, *Liber Apologeticus* (trans. Vaggione), pp. 64–65: “This is the reason for ‘image’, but the mention of ‘all the things created in him’ along with ‘the firstborn’ points not to the unbegotten essence (for that essence has nothing in common with these things), but to the action through which the Son ‘in whom are all things’ came to be The word ‘image’, then, would refer the similarity back, not to the essence of God, but to the action unbegottenly stored up in his foreknowledge prior to the existence of the first-born and of all things created ‘in him’.”

59 Chrysostom affirmed the nature of the Father as unbegotten and the Son as begotten of the Father (cf. *Homily 2* in John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist, Homilies 1–47*, trans. T. A. Goggin, Fathers of the Church 33 [Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1957], 22), but then he criticises the strict Eunomian designation of God’s name as “unbegotten.” For him, if the “name ‘God’ can belong to and denote only that personal reality,” then the addition of the name “Father” becomes superfluous. He distinguishes between common names (such as “God,” “Lord”) which indicate the same essence, and proper names (e.g. “Father,” “Son”) which are proper to the personal realities. He argues that “God” is common to both the Father and the Son, and it is only in this context that the designation of “the first and begotten personal reality” can be meaningful. It must be noted, however, that Chrysostom’s addition of the “first” already presupposes the existence of another personal reality, or even more. Cf. *Homily 5* in John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, trans. P. W. Harkins, Fathers of the Church 72 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 141–142.

60 Chrysostom, *Hom. Heb. 2* (NPNF¹ 14:372).

61 Naidu, “John Chrysostom’s Homilies on Hebrews,” 95.

the image does not just point to God, but expresses an ontological identity of the Son that is revealed in the person of Christ. This ontological identity of the Son does not emerge from the will or activity of God, but belongs to the very essence of God, the Godhead.

Ralph Martin argues that in the terms of the New Testament, image (εἰκών) denotes “representation” and “manifestation.” According to him, εἰκών in antiquity is conceived not just as a “plastic representation” of the object that is identified with it, but understood as participating in the very substance of the object symbolised.⁶² In other words, it cannot be separated from the object, or considered as intrinsically unrelated to it, or even incapable of existing outside of consciousness. Chrysostom’s exegesis resonates with this understanding. In fact, he presupposes such an understanding of the term when he notes that the quality of exactitude must characterise the relationship between the image and the reality.

But if He were merely a creature: how is He the Image of the Creator? For a horse is never the image of a man. If “the Image” mean [sic] not *exact likeness* (ἀπαράλλακτον) to the Invisible, what hinders the Angels also from being His Image? For they too are invisible; but not to one another. The soul is invisible: but because it is invisible, it is simply on that account an image, though not in the same manner as he and angels are described as images.⁶³

The implication then is that Christ becomes the objectification of God in humanity, not a “copy” of God.⁶⁴ Christ becomes the embodiment of the divine among human beings. This christological nature is exclusive and inaccessible even to angels, despite their invisible nature.⁶⁵

Chrysostom seems to have paid much attention to the way Paul constructed the passage of Col. 1:15–20. Paul in this hymn appears to have substituted Jesus for pre-existent Wisdom in Hellenistic Judaism’s Wisdom traditions. This is understandable because the Colossian community had many diaspora Jews who were influenced by the Wisdom speculation of the Greeks that invariably affected their theology.⁶⁶ It was a theology that denoted the immanent activity of God by the term Wisdom, which does not in any way indicate a clear separation from divine transcendence. Of course, to make this separation between immanence and transcendence would vitiate strict Jewish monotheism.

62 R. P. Martin, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Colossians and Philemon* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 57.

63 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.318). Translation slightly revised. Italics mine.

64 Martin, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 57.

65 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.317). Translation slightly revised.

66 J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 148. Of course, one understands how complicated this idea is since it is an essentially Jewish reflection, but it is employed here because of the non-dualistic purpose it serves.

James Dunn asserts that for pre-Christian Judaism, Wisdom is but “a personification of God’s immanence.”⁶⁷ There is a strict identity here, whereby Wisdom includes in itself the revelatory and the ontological. Dunn links this idea to Paul’s explanation. For Dunn,

The probability then is that Paul in applying Wisdom language to Christ is in effect simply saying: that which you have hitherto ascribed to Wisdom, we see most fully expressed and embodied in Christ; that same power and wisdom you recognize to be manifested in God’s creative, revelatory and redemptive purpose, we now see manifested finally and exclusively in Jesus Christ our Lord. This would also explain why Paul never used the name “Jesus” alone for the pre-existent one: Jesus was not himself pre-existent; he was the man that pre-existent Wisdom became.⁶⁸

Chrysostom’s position follows in this line of argument though without mentioning “Wisdom.” He first establishes the “revelatory” character of the terms, and together with this, the relational attribute. To express the relational nature of the Son, the use of “firstborn” is made clearer. It refers to the fraternal bond, the intimacy of the one who is taken as a “brother” in relation to all things.⁶⁹ The idea of “brother” is incarnational and relational. It highlights the type of relationship which God desires to establish with humanity by the revelation of Himself through Christ.

Chrysostom progresses from that which is revealed through Christ to the true nature of the Son:

For that they may not think Him to be of more recent existence, since in former times the approach was through Angels, but now through Him; he shows first, that they had no power ... next, that He is also before them. And he uses as a proof of His being before them, this; that they were created by him. “For in Him,” he said, “were all things created.” ... “And He is before all things,” he said. This is befitting God.⁷⁰

The first reason adduced here shows how the Son had taken up the *revelatory* function which hitherto was assigned to angels. The Son was able to reveal God to human beings on the basis of the “absolute authority” that He possesses.⁷¹ Secondly, the Son’s equality with the Father is reaffirmed by presenting him as a Creator, thereby dismissing any suggestion that He is either a creature or that He is not co-eternal with God.

The “heretics,” on the other hand, fail to make this progression from the revelatory to the ontological. For them, what Christ revealed is the glory, the power of God which is not identical with divine essence but rather with divine will or activity. Their main concern is to disprove the claim that Christ shares the same substance (οὐσία) as God

67 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 238.

68 Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, 238.

69 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.319).

70 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:271; PG 62.319).

71 Chrysostom, *Hom. Heb. 2* (NPNF¹ 14:370; PG 63.20).

the Father. Christological concepts—“image” and “firstborn”—are considered less divine. The Son is then reduced to the created status of angels, but with a special place in the hierarchy of created beings. Their argument seems echoed in Chrysostom’s question, “Wherefore hath no Angel anywhere been called either ‘image’ or ‘son,’ but man both?,”⁷² which suggests the reduction of the Son to the realm of angels by the opposition. They were satisfied with describing the Son as a “copy” who has no exact similitude with the Father. This position is roundly negated by Chrysostom by his multiple use of ἀπαράλλάκτως.⁷³

However, to avoid sounding rather simplistic, one notes that the ontological interpretation of εἰκόν by Chrysostom, shown by his use of the identity indicator ἀπαράλλάκτως “exactly like,” is not original to him. It had already been used in the debate surrounding the Council of Nicaea (325).⁷⁴ Vaggione reports that the application of this term by Eusebius’s followers was met with stiff rejection by the Arian circle.⁷⁵ The reason as adduced by Vaggione for this rejection was non-theological. It was rather of a psychological nature, expressed as a fear of exclusion by a particular group. According to Vaggione,

One of the reasons why the word was controversial, of course, was quite simply that it had been used by Arius’ enemies. They had described the Son as the “exact image” of the Father (ἀπαράλλάκτως εἰκόν), and at Nicaea said he was “the Word exactly like him in all things” (τὸν λόγον ὅμοιον τε καὶ ἀπαράλλακτον ... κατὰ πάντα τῷ πατρί). They believed that this addition would exclude Arius’ teaching.⁷⁶

Their major concern is not with the “image” as such but rather with what it denotes. An ontological identification which names the Son as the image of God the Father, and thus insists that the Son shares the same essence as the Father, is what the neo-Arians rejected. What Chrysostom does is to re-assert the ἀπαράλλάκτως interpretation of the Nicene formula as a defence of what the church officially teaches.⁷⁷ According to him, the distinction between the human person as the image of God and the Son as the Image

72 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.317).

73 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.317–318). The term was used four times within the same passage.

74 Athanasius, *De decretis Nicaenae synodi* 20.1 (in H.-G. Opitz, ed., *Athanasius Werke*, vol. 2 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1935], 16, lines 27–30).

75 Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 65.

76 Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus*, 65–66.

77 The first canon of the First Council of Constantinople (381): “Every heresy is to be anathematized and in particular that of Eunomians or Anomoeans, that of the Arians or Eudoxians, that of the Semi-Arians or Pneumatomachi, that of the Sabellians, that of the Marcellians, that of the Photinians and that of the Apollinarians.” Cf. N. P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 31. Prior to Constantinople (381), the Council of Nicaea (325) condemned Arius and his followers for suggesting that “the Son of God is subject to change or alteration” (εἶναι ἡτρεπτόν ἢ ἀλλοιωτόν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ). Cf. Tanner, *Decrees*, 5.

of God demands this exactness: “But if as God and God’s Son, God’s image, he shows the *exact likeness*.”⁷⁸

Chrysostom makes a very important point of explaining this phrase in view of the relationship of the Son with creation.⁷⁹ The Son is related to the world in two dimensions, namely as a revealer of God and as the one who is preeminent over the created world, having been responsible for its existence: “for through Him all things were created” (Col. 1:16; John 1:3). His identification as the “firstborn of all creation” does not therefore imply that he shares an equal status with the created world; neither does it reduce His status to a created one. Regarding this, Chrysostom rhetorically asks: “And we must take from Him His being Creator; and insist that neither in dignity nor in any other thing is He superior to us?”⁸⁰ It is without doubt that Paul’s intention is to demonstrate Christ’s primacy over all created things. For, outside this context and without reference to other Pauline (and NT) texts about Christ, this phrase might be interpreted in an inclusive sense to equate Christ with all creatures.⁸¹ E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, interpreting this passage, corroborate the position of Chrysostom by stating that, “The context makes it clear that this title is not given to Him as though He Himself were the first of all created beings; it is emphasized immediately that, far from being part of creation, He is the One by whom the whole creation came into being.”⁸² Thus the concept of firstborn is to be interpreted “in the sense of a foundation,” for “this does not show the creatures to be consubstantial with Him; but that all things are through Him, and in Him are upheld.”⁸³

7. A Minor Limitation of Chrysostom’s Approach

Chrysostom appears to have failed to maximise the use of his distinctive interpretative method of intertextuality. By not referring to any scriptural passage (either Old or New Testament) on the concept of “image” or to its synonyms: “likeness” or “form” (cf. Phil. 2:6), and by limiting his scriptural references to cognates of “firstborn” (only in Col. 1:18 and Rom. 8:29), one could say that he fails to really make use of his greatest asset in advancing his case. One recalls that Chrysostom often appealed to the self-sufficiency of Scripture in interpreting itself, something close to the *sola scriptura* principle. This, indeed, drew the fascination of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers towards him. My point here, however, is that he uses it insufficiently and not

78 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.317).

79 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3*, (NPNF¹ 13:270–271; PG 62.318–319).

80 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3*, (NPNF¹ 13:270; PG 62.319).

81 O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 44. The term “firstborn” (πρωτότοκος) occurs in several NT passages though these could be interpreted differently: Rom. 8:29; Heb. 11:28; 12:23, and there are similar expressions in 1 Cor. 15:20; Acts 26:23; Rev. 1:5.

82 E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1957), 194.

83 Chrysostom, *Hom. Col. 3* (NPNF¹ 13:271; PG 62.319).

that he totally discarded this method of approaching the Scriptures. The Greek word εἰκὼν appears over 20 times in the New Testament alone where it was applied in different contexts, while its Hebrew equivalent תְּמוּנָה (tmunah) appears several times in the Old Testament. In the Septuagint, we find the term “firstborn” used about 130 times, especially in denoting genealogical hierarchies⁸⁴ and some forms of supremacy. The different contexts of its usage would have intensified Chrysostom’s attempt at disproving the erroneous understanding of the term by the neo-Arians, especially by emphasising those instances in which εἰκὼν expresses identity between two subjects (e.g. the image of Caesar on the coin, cf. Matt. 22:20; Mark 12:16; Luke 20:24). Despite this, one cannot deny that Chrysostom’s emphasis on the ontological served to bolster his position against the heretics even on theological grounds.

8. Conclusion

Chrysostom came onto the pastoral scene at a time when there were divergent interpretations of the Nicene formula. The victory of the Cappadocian fathers, which led to a refinement of Trinitarian statements at Constantinople (381), offered Chrysostom the official teaching of the church as against the “error” of the neo-Arians. Neither the Son nor the Spirit is to be subordinated to the Father because they are considered “in a real sense one in themselves.”⁸⁵ One therefore understands Chrysostom’s plight as a committed shepherd who had the responsibility of leading his flock away from error while calling for the conversion of those who were already in error. In his *Homilies on Colossians*, especially 2 and 3 (Col. 1:15), Chrysostom argues that the Pauline description of the Son as “image” and “firstborn” does not only reveal Christ’s function with respect to creation, but more importantly identifies him as sharing the same essence as the Father. The Father in this sense does not imply a designation for God’s “will or activity” as Eunomius argues but refers to God Himself, the first person of the Trinity. Thus, the Son shares equal essence with God. In the light of this also, using modern theological distinctions, I have advanced the argument that Chrysostom’s approach aimed at projecting an ontological interpretation (as different from the neo-Arians’) of the key concepts of “image” and “firstborn” as contained in Col. 1:15. While the neo-Arians might concede to the ontological category that only identifies the Son with God’s will or activity which can never be mixed by with the indivisible essence, Chrysostom insists that the Son is equal in dignity and essence to God. Unfortunately, Chrysostom fails to make proper use of his exegetical methodology of intertextuality. He rather seems preoccupied with the attempt to respond vehemently to the provocations of the neo-Arians. If the concerns expressed here were fully met by Chrysostom, a much deeper insight would have been gained on how Scripture defends the ontological content of the concepts of “image” and “firstborn” with regard to Christ,

84 O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 44.

85 G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, 233, quoted in Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 737.

without giving way to speculative thinking. Besides, the appeal to divine names with regard to the identity of the Son offers ground for one to either contest or defend the pro-Nicene theology due to the linguistic ambiguity that characterises these names.⁸⁶ This explains why both Eunomius and his opponents could develop divergent but reasonable interpretations.

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