

What Child Is This?
Colossians 1:15-20
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Introduction:

I was reading a book recently about marriage, but one of the passages that stuck with me was not about marriage, but about the differences between the Old and New Testaments. In the midst of his marital crisis, a writer and professor named Harrison Scott Key decided to read the Bible from start to finish. He's not a theologian so please don't take offense; these are his honest reactions:

"The answer to the riddle of my life was somewhere in this book. I can't say how I knew, but I knew. Genesis never disappoints, crammed as it is with nudity, murder... and DIY boatbuilding instructions. This opening book rocks you with its audacity, the greatest opening montage in world literature. There's a big bang and epic scenes of world formation and a man having the best of times and (messing) it up anyway, in a garden whose fruity trees turn sour. Suddenly, this cryptic book felt radically personal. I devoured it.

Halfway through the Old Testament, the grand comic fugue of Scripture devolves into an excruciatingly slow-action movie that made me want to eat a bag of glass. The book of 1 Chronicles felt like a history textbook written by somebody who kept blacking out. Reading the minor prophets – Hosea, Joel, Amos – felt like reading YouTube comments written by people who hate a video of Israel... The gloriously poetic book of Isaiah feels as if a clinically depressed Middle Earth elf king wrote it, and Ecclesiastes now sounded not unlike an... Edward Albee monologue delivered on a park bench by a wealth manager pondering suicide, and the Psalms read like a high school friend's Facebook posts about all the cryptic drama in her life that she won't fully explain...

The first thing you notice about the New Testament is how intensely contemporary it feels. The Old Testament is mythic and teeming with monsters and death, like hearing your great-grandfather describe what it was like to ride woolly mammoths. Then, after a thousand pages of *The Silmarillion*, you stumble into pages that read almost like a real novel, stories of tenderness and hope and dialogue and real people walking around real cities that still exist. It's a shock, after all the war and blood feuds and burning bushes and armies and leviathans and foreskins... to turn to the New Testament and there it is: a little baby."¹ (*end quote*)

A little baby. Thousands of years of God establishing, teaching, and moving among His chosen people brought the light of history to a moment in time when He would do His greatest work through the birth of a child. Four different books of the Bible present historical accounts of this life, two of them going into detail about the events surrounding His birth, but all of them describing His life's work, and then His painful death. And then every one of them reports that He did not stay dead but came back to life. What child is this? What was so special about Him that the climax of the Bible is the historical recounting of His birth, life, and death? Our focus hymn today, the last one in our series, was written over 150 years ago called "What Child is This?" and our Scripture passage is Colossians 1:15-20, one of the great texts to help us answer that question:

"¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—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, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of

¹ Harrison Scott Key, *How To Stay Married: The Most Insane Love Story Ever Told* (New York: Avid, 2023), pp. 159- 166.

God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

("The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord endures forever." Let's pray.)

Let's examine the details of this description of who Paul has introduced earlier in Colossians as Christ Jesus our Lord. Verse 15 starts by telling us that "*He is the image of the invisible God.*" He is not the symbol of God, not just a representation of Him, as a coin with George Washington's face is a representation of the former president. He is the "manifestation." Romans 1 says that all humanity has been shown the glory of God in nature, so God has revealed Himself in a very limited way to every person. We see in the Old Testament that God revealed Himself in greater ways to the Israelites: Moses saw His back, the prophets and leaders heard His voice, and they wrote down His words. But now in the person of Jesus Christ, God Himself appeared. Combine this with verse 19, that in Jesus "*the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.*" He was not one of many revelations of God, which is what most cults and world religions claim about Jesus if they don't simply write Him off as a man; He was the supreme, complete and final revelation of God to us because He was and is part of the Triune God.

Next, verse 15 tells us that Jesus is "*the firstborn of all creation.*" The term "firstborn" has been misunderstood to teach that Jesus was created from God, one in a series of prophets or minor gods. The better sense of firstborn, though, is not to think in terms of time but in terms of honor, the heir of God's inheritance. Jesus is first in line to receive God's blessings. He was not created or born from God, He was always completely equal in substance, power, and glory to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He took a subordinate role, a voluntary position of fulfilling the Father's plan for Him to come to earth and redeem His people. But that does not take away from His equality with the rest of the Godhead. Add to this verse 18 saying that Jesus was the firstborn from the dead, meaning that He was the first to be raised to new life after death. Because He was raised, all of those who are joined by faith to Him can be raised as well.

Verse 16 – "*all things were created through him and for him*" echoes John 1:3 that says that "*through Him all things were made.*" Jesus created all things. If you're thinking that you've read about creation in Genesis 1 before and never seen Jesus' name there, it's because Jesus is not explicitly identified by name in the Old Testament. The New Testament sheds light on the Old Testament (progressive revelation) so that we can see that Jesus was around and created all things. And here we have the additional idea that all things were created "for Him." That's the goal of creation: to honor and glorify Jesus. And verse 17 says that Jesus not only created all things but continues to hold everything together. Without Him the world would see chaos.

Verse 18 – "*He is the head of the body.*" 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 develop the theme of the church as the Body of Christ working together; here we have Christ named as the head. All bodies are submissive and obedient to their heads. Without a head, the body is useless and powerless.

Verse 20 - Finally, what Jesus did here on earth, reconciling us to God and bringing peace between God and His people. In our natural state, we choose to be enemies of God, rebels who don't want to acknowledge our Creator. Through His death on the cross, Jesus gives us the path to peace and reconciliation with God.

This amazing picture of Jesus Christ is the answer to "What Child is This?" He is the image and fullness of God the Father, the firstborn of creation and the dead, the Creator and Sustainer of the world, the head of the church, and the great Redeemer of all believers. That's some baby!

Let's turn now to our hymn. Its author, William C. Dix, was born in Bristol, England in 1837 and died shortly before the turn of the century at age 62. The son of a surgeon, he was trained in the business world and managed an insurance company in Glasgow, Scotland. Though most hymn writers of that day and age were clergymen, William stayed in business and wrote hymns as a layman in his spare time. At the age of 29 he suffered a near-fatal illness that forced him to be confined to his bed for many months. He was severely depressed, but this led to a spiritual awakening and dedicating himself to reading the Bible. He also wrote many of his hymns that year.²

One of the popular hymns that he wrote that we still sing is "As With Gladness Men of Old."³ The other is our focus hymn for this morning, "What Child is This?" written in 1865, which was the year that the Civil War ended across the ocean in America. He and his co-writer, John Stainer, took the tune *Greensleeves* that had been around for a couple hundred years and supplied lyrics that both ask and answer the questions about Jesus' identity and purpose.

The first stanza:

1) What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping.
This, this is Christ the King whom shepherds guard and angels sing.
Haste, haste to bring Him laud - the Babe, the son of Mary.

John Piper says that, as a kid, he was not impressed with this song that asked a question that everyone already knew the answer to: "What child is this? Really? It's Jesus, of course. We all know that- even the kids." He recognizes that he didn't appreciate rhetorical questions back then, questions that are asked to make a point, not elicit an answer. He eventually came to realize the power of the hymn, and that "it is fitting that at times, like Christmas, we wonder, we marvel, we declare in awe, "What child is this?"⁴

In this stanza, we are invited into the stable to gaze upon the young mother, Mary, holding her baby in her lap. The second and third lines refer to Luke 2 where an angel announced to a group of shepherds that the Savior who is Christ the Lord would be born in the city of David, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And the shepherds hurried to find the child to worship Him. Every stanza ends with the reminder that the baby is the son of Mary, but does not mention Joseph; obviously because Jesus was not born from Joseph, but from the Holy Spirit placing Him inside Mary the virgin. This child is the King, a later stanza will call Him the "King of Kings" – some recognized His kingship, most of the world did not.

The second stanza:

2) Why lies He in such mean estate where ox and lamb are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spears shall pierce him through, the cross he bore for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the Babe, the Son of Mary.

What is a "mean estate"? Mean has the older sense of something that is modest and not ideal. And so, like the first verse, there is a question: Why was the Christ child, a king, placed in the same

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Chatterton_Dix

³ https://hymnary.org/person/Dix_WC

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-child-is-this>

trough where animals fed? The last three lines link this poor condition at Jesus' birth with the pain and indignity He would suffer at the end of His life, the crucifixion that He endured for each of us sinners who needed someone to atone for us. This is one of many Christmas carols and hymns that remind us that we need to see the cross in the shadow of the manger. I know that we'd rather leave Jesus' gruesome death for Good Friday and other times of the year, while at Christmastime, we just want the cute baby who is a gift to His parents and the whole world. No nails, no blood, no death sentence please. But this baby, so cute and precious, would one day be put to death by people who hated His message of being the only way to be made right with the Father; that the kingdom of heaven can only be entered through faith in Him.

The third stanza:

3) So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh, come, peasant, king, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise a song on high, the virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born, the Babe, the Son of Mary.

This is the only stanza without a question, it gives us imperatives, demands: "Bring Him gifts," "enthroned Him," and "raise a song on high." Everyone from the peasant to royalty are invited to receive salvation from this King of kings because He will save any who come to Him, from high to low. This song, and the fact that God chose to send His Son as a baby, should remind us of the truth of 1 Corinthians 1:27-30: "*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*"

Jill Carattini reminds us that "children are not usually the main characters in the stories we tell, yet the story of Christmas begins and ends with a child we don't quite know what to do with. Here, a vulnerable baby in a dirty stable breaks in as the harbinger of good news, the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets, the anointed leader who comes to set the captives free - wrapped in swaddling clothes and resting in a manger. Coming as a child, God radically draws near, while at the same time radically overthrowing our conceptions of status, wealth, power, and authority."⁵

People didn't only wonder who Jesus was at His birth, the questions continued all through His life. In Matthew 8:27, after Jesus calmed a storm, His disciples asked, "*Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?*" Even John the Baptist, who had preached about Him and baptized Him, was confused late in life; he sent men to Jesus to ask, "*Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*" (Luke 7:20). The religious leaders and teachers of the Law weren't sure, asking Him "*Tell us by what authority you do these things*" (Luke 20:2). Pilate, the Roman governor, tried to clarify, "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" (Luke 23:3). There was confusion all through Jesus' life as to His true identity - from "what child is this?" to "what man is this"? And there has been confusion ever since because the world does not want to accept the real answer, that this baby boy was God come in the flesh. Everything He said was the truth, everything He did was a display of His eternal love and power. And ultimately, the greatest gift that He gave His people was His lifeless body hanging on a tree, but a body that would be resurrected three days later, to return to heaven to rule at the right hand of the Father. Martin Luther, the great German reformer, said it like this:

"Here is the Child in whom is salvation. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, playing in the lap and at the

⁵ Jill Carattini, 12/12/07 email devotional

breasts of his most gracious mother... Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, and guilt, if you come to this gurgling Babe and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save.”⁶

It's not enough to sing the hymns and carols about this child. Not enough to just gaze at the manger scenes and appreciate the fact that Jesus came down to live among His people. It's not even enough to believe that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life are historical facts. If you want to have your sins forgiven so that God does not count them against you when you die, so that you are adopted into His family and given eternal life, you must put your faith in Jesus. Saving faith means that you repent of your sins and place your trust in Him alone as your Savior and Lord. “Word of the Father now in flesh appearing, O come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!” Paul said it this way in 1 Timothy 1:15-17:

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”

Benediction

1 John 5:20-21 – *“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.”*

⁶ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/a-devotional-on-the-birth-of-jesus-by-martin-luther/>