

Firstborn, *prototokos*

Col 1:15, 18

In 1:15, Paul describes Jesus as the “firstborn of all creation” and in 1:18 the “firstborn from the dead.” This raises the question what does “firstborn” mean, especially with regard to creation.

Some (such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses) use this to give Jesus a demotion. They say it means that Jesus was the first created thing. In other words, he’s not eternal like God the father; he’s created.

But that’s not what “firstborn” means in this context.

The Greek word for “firstborn” is *prototokos*. It had two main uses in the ancient world.

Primary meaning: A king's "firstborn" son was the one who was heir to the kingdom. Thus the word was used to denote the one whom a ruler would choose to be his heir and successor (not necessarily his own son) granting him the authority to rule. For example, Julius Caesar adopted his nephew, Octavius, and appointed him heir to his empire. And thus Octavius became Caesar, later given the title Augustus, of Luke 2 fame. Octavius did the same and adopted Tiberius who became emperor after him.



Caesar Augustus

Secondary meaning: to denote a forerunner, the first to do something.

Note that in Colossians 1:15-16, the emphasis is on the supremacy and authority of Jesus. Thus the primary meaning is in view. Jesus is the king and heir of all creation. In fact, v. 16 adds to it that all things were created by Him. Not most things, but all things. In other words, there was nothing that was created that He didn’t create (cf. John 1:3), which means he couldn’t have been created.

When Paul says that he is the firstborn from among the dead, this seems to be the secondary meaning. He was the first one to rise from the dead never to die again.