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THE COSMIC CHRISTOLOGY OF
COLOSSIANS 1:15–20 IN THE LIGHT OF
CONTEMPORARY ECOLOGICAL ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

An awareness of ecological issues can suggest fresh ways of reading biblical texts. The ancient hymn to Christ in Colossians 1:15–20 lends itself to such a reading. The hymn establishes the central christological principles and theological perspectives for the Colossian Christians in their attempt to assuage unsuccessfully the destructive cosmic forces, the ‘principalities and powers.’ The hymn is carefully structured into two stanzas and celebrates Christ’s pre-eminence and unique role in creation. He is the means of cosmic and human reconciliation. A careful study of the hymn reveals a profound sacred cosmology: God’s life permeates the cosmos through Jesus’ unique relationship with God and the whole created universe. The hymn can also suggest important contemporary ecological insights, in our attitude to the cosmos and the recognition of its fractured but blessed nature.

IN THE PAST DECADE, THEOLOGIANS AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARS HAVE ADDED ecological issues to their focus of research. They have sought to respond creatively and challengingly to the present crisis. This new focus has critiqued a conventional or unquestioned stereotype perpetuated by some Christian commentators: The Christian church has been partly responsible for the ecological crisis that we are experiencing; its emphasis on the divinely appointed human mastery over creation from, say, a reading of the creation story in chapter one of the Book of Genesis has sustained this anti-creation attitude. This in turn has led to an anthropocentrism that views all created things as secondary; they are

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1 This paper was delivered at the Australian Catholic Biblical Conference in Melbourne on 10 July 2004, and is a significant expansion on an earlier presentation, “Celebrating Biodiversity: The Hymn to Christ in a Letter from Ancient Colossae (Col 1:15–20),” now published in D. Edwards and M. Worthing (eds), Biodiversity and Ecology: An Interdisciplinary Challenge (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004).
created to serve humanity. Mastery over creation rather than stewardship has typified this theological mindset or, at least, its interpretation.

The ecological shift in theology and biblical study, the ‘turn’ towards creation, has definitively undermined this stereotype. While theological anthropocentrism and biblical androcentrism once governed ecclesial research, now, an openness and sensitivity to the issues of our planet have allowed theologians and biblical scholars to look at the sources of Christian teaching with fresh eyes. The perspectives of liberationist theologies and feminist hermeneutics have helped us recognize the link between creation and religious living. In one case, this link has been articulated in the principles of an earth-oriented hermeneutic explicated in the Earth-Bible project.

**THE LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS AND ITS ADDRESSEES**

From this ecological context, I come to reflect on an ancient Christian writing, the Letter to the Colossians, and explore its cosmic christology. This christology adds strength to an ecological theology that affirms the beauty, goodness and centrality of the cosmos as the arena of God’s saving action. This also critiques an anthropocentric subservience of creation and affirms the interrelatedness of the cosmos.

The Letter witnesses to how one of the earliest Christian communities sought to articulate its baptismal faith in social, cultural and cosmic terms. The desire for this cosmic articulation deepened as it engaged the cultural aspirations of the Greco-Roman world with its interpretation of the cosmos. Nowhere is this more evident than in Col 1:15–20. It is here that we find insights and wisdom that might contribute towards the contemporary quest to protect, nurture and celebrate the earth and its biodiversity.²

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us already been offered by I. J. du Plessis, “Die mensoverhoudinge in Kolossense (The God and human relations within Colossians),” Skrif essis emphasises the mediating role of Jesus in the ecological perspective from a different other’s iconographic and cosmic christology. D. nt in the Environmental Age,” Currents in The- (1997) 259–66, also explores the ecological implica-


The Letter to the Colossians is a beautiful and very complex letter penned by an Anatolian Christian of the Lycus Valley in Southern Turkey in the latter part of the first century CE. The author sought to communicate freshly the implications of Paul’s teaching for a new generation of Christians that was apparently in crisis. They lived in a new moment, arguably not long after Paul’s death, confronted with new challenges to their understanding of Jesus.3 The Colossian Christians lived in, what Robert Karris calls, “an age of anxiety.”4 This had implications for the way they understood themselves, the Christian community and the world and society in which they lived, and impacted on the living-out of their faith. The letter is explicitly christological. It offers a presentation of the Christ-event for the Colossian Christians that is satisfying, comforting, challenging and responsive to the attractions of what seems to be an ascetical form of Phrygian folk-religious syncretism. This ascetical attraction also indirectly represented an attitude to the world and, in contemporary language, its biodiversity.

From what the writer overtly addresses, the syncretism involves “the worship of angels” (θρησκεία τῶν ἄγγελων) in Col 2:18. The precise nature of what is attractive to the Colossian Christians is difficult to formulate, and scholars have proposed a number of plausible configurations.5 However, what seems clear from an analysis of the writer’s language and the ascetical issues and practices that the letter addresses is the concern about the cosmos, the powers that rule or govern it, and the relationship that the Colossian Christians had to the physical world.6 All of this might be summed up in the Colossian

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3 There is a debate about the authorship of the Letter, and fine scholars are lined up in two main camps. There are those who hold that Paul himself was the actual author, and others who believe that the Letter is the work of one of Paul’s disciples or companions, like Epaphras. For a summary of the principle positions consult Margaret Y. MacDonald, Colossians and Ephesians (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000) and Eduard Lohse, Colossians and Ephesians (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990).

4 My own position is for post-Pauline authorship. The actual identity of the author will never definitively be resolved and, in a sense, does not affect this present study.


6 For example, T. W. Martin, By Philosophy and Empty Deceit: Colossians as Response to a Cynic Critique (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) argues that Colossians is a response to Cynic philosophers who have captured the religious imagination and mind of Colossian Christians addressed by the letter. These Cynics regard, among several things, the role of angels and their worship as essential. Human reliance upon these intermediaries guarantees divine protection. The letter’s author takes a contrary position (149–67).

7 The cosmic theme of the letter has suggested to scholars several other possible configurations for the opponents addressed by the writer. Besides Cynic philosophers as suggested by Martin, By Philosophy, J. J. Gunther has summarised 44 different types of opponents at Colossae, St Paul’s Opponents and their Background: Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 3–4; R. E. Demars, The Colossian Controversy: Wisdom in Dispute at Colossae (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) offers five classifications of proposed opponents into Jewish
desire for a form of divine knowledge and access that would guarantee their protection from destructive cosmic forces.

The Colossian Christians seemed to adopt a form of theological or liturgical rigorism in an attempt to pacify the "principalities (ἀρχαὶ) and powers (ἐξουσίαι)" that are interpreted as having the potential to annihilate them. In this context, it is suggested that the angels either became the focus of worship or were coopted to assure safety from harm by the powers and forces that ruled the cosmos and universe. The author wants to address the cosmic and anthropological separation to which the Colossians were attracted, and a style of asceticism which discounted the importance of the present world.

The understanding of the world and the cosmos of the letter writer and of these Colossians Christians is a remarkable one by our conventional interpretation of the ancients. We tend to regard their division of the cosmos in the same way as we do, with the heavens and earth separated from each other in definable and exclusive spheres of existence. The ancients, however, affirmed the interrelatedness of the universe and its system of interconnectivity involving the gods, the spirits and all creatures and aspects of creation. A heavenly/secular dichotomy was impossible in their worldview. They believed in the presence of the spirit world that interacted with and influenced the human world. The cosmic community was interrelated, dependent and one.

**The Introduction to the Christological Hymn (Col 1:1–14)**

As the letter’s theological rhetoric unfolds, a key moment occurs early in Col 1:15–18, in the form of what is known as the christological hymn. It is a hymn about Jesus and establishes the central christological principles or theological perspectives intended to speak to the Colossian Christians’ experience, their desire to assure the cosmic powers, their interpretation of the world and human existence, and their appreciation of the role that these powers play in life. The hymn is central to the writer’s argument. This is evident from what leads to it, and how its key themes or motifs are expanded upon in the letter’s subsequent sections concluding the kinds of practicalities out of which the Colossian

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7. Karras, *Symphony* 73–4, summarises a scholarship that interprets a positive and optimistic disposition in the hymn towards these ‘principalities and powers’ but, in the verses that surround the hymn, they are viewed more negatively.

8. Though there is little scholarly dispute as to the hymnic nature of Col 1:15–18, there is more about its authorship, whether the Pauline author of the letter or an earlier authored hymn reshaped in the light of the writer’s aim. For some discussion of this see, T. J. Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 171–73, and Schweizer, *Colossians* 55–56, esp. n. 1.

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Christological Hymn (Col 1:1–14)

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1:9 For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge (γνῶσις) of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (σοφίας), so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you...
bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge (της άπιστησιν) of God. 11 May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ...¹⁰

This brings the letter's hearers to two climactic announcements, one concerning baptism, the second, the cosmic role of Jesus. The first leads to the second; the second is a theologically thematic mirror of the first. Both deepen the addressees' present experience of religious engagement and expand on the christological insight received from Paul's teaching, but reshaping to speak to the new discourse to which the addressees are being exposed.

In Col 1:12–14, the Colossians are urged to continue

12 giving thanks to the Father who has made us sufficient for the portion of the inheritance of the saints of light, 13 who has delivered us from the power of darkness, and transferred us into the basileia of his beloved son, 14 in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

This baptismal statement serves as a reminder of what the Colossians have existentially and personally experienced through the ritual of baptism. The use of the imagery of night/day symbolically describes the experience of the baptized Colossians. God has transferred them from the power of night, the abode of demonic and evil forces against which they feel defenceless and debilitated. Their quest to align themselves with other benevolent spiritual powers that will help them triumph over these forces, more explicitly identified later in the letter, is superficial, unnecessary and feeble. These forces are already defeated and under God's power revealed in Jesus. This recognition of God's authority operative in Jesus captures the essence of the Colossians' baptismal act: they have been transferred into the basileia, God's powerful presence revealed in Jesus. This basileia is the Colossian community of believers where people already experience communion with God ("redemption") and with the cosmos ("forgiveness of sins").

Undergirding the baptismal formulae expressed in these verses is the writer's implicit cosmology. This is designed to insert the Colossians into the realities of their world, rather than reinforcing a tendency to flee from the present or suppress their engagement with society beneath a cloak of false and obsessive asceticism.¹¹

¹⁰ Apart from the use of the NRSV translation here, all other translations are my own.
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Journal of the Evangelical Theological Soci-

THE HYMN (COL 1:15–20)
The mention of Jesus, called God’s Son in 1:13, leads naturally to the great
christological hymn that reinforces the meaning of their baptism:

15 He is the icon of God, the invisible one, firstborn of all
creation, 16 because in/by him were created all things in the
heavens and upon the earth, things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions, whether sovereignties or au-
authorities; all things through him and for/to him were created.
17 And he is before all, and all things in/by him cohere, 18
and he is the head of the body, the church. He is the begin-
ning, firstborn from the dead, in order that he might be
in/among all things pre-eminent 19 because in him all the
fullness was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to recon-
cile all things unto himself, bringing peace through the blood
of his cross [through him] whether things upon the earth and
things in the heavens.

(Col 1:15–20)

This hymn reminds the Colossians about the one into whom they have been
baptised and continues the cosmological intent of the previous verses, explicat-
ing the relationship that Jesus has with the created universe through God’s
agency. Thus, their union with Christ in baptism has cosmological implications.
It empowers and protects them from forces that could overwhelm or annihilate
them. In other words, both the baptismal summary and the christological hymn
that follows it act with similar force. They remind the Colossians that any cultic
ritual other than baptism is superfluous, and their union with God through Jesus
inserts and links them to their world and all the life systems that compose it.
They are not under the control of malevolent forces that want them to be sepa-
rated from the world and its living realities. Rather than a distrust of human
reality and the complex life forms of the universe, the writer wants to insert the
addressees into a world already under the aegis of God and imbued with God’s
loving presence revealed in Jesus. This is emphasised by the way the author
radically and ingeniously unfolds the nature and activity of Jesus in hymn form,
drawing on a previously known Sophia/Wisdom song.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^\text{12}\) Sappington, drawing especially on R. P. Martin, suggests the wisdom Christology
evident in the hymn is “derived from” Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom speculation
(Revelation 172–73). A broader consensus sees the hymn as a Sophia hymn re-
shaped to apply to the nature and mission of Jesus. C. Marcheselli Casale, “Der
christologische Hymmus: Kol 1, 15–20 im Dienste der Versöhning und des
Friedens,” Teresianum 40 (1989) 3–21, suggests four stages in the development of
the hymn.
The Sophia-nature of this hymn and the language of creation that permeates it serve to reinforce what we might anachronistically call an ecologically sensitive, creation-tempered christology. Jesus is the pinnacle or climactic expression of God’s creative act and the divine bond and access to the materially created world. The hymn expresses the author’s conviction in Jesus as the tangible expression and revelation of God, and, through Jesus, of God’s disposition towards the created universe. What emerges is a profound theology about God’s concern and intimacy with the created world and all its life forms.

**THE HYMN’S STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY**

The hymn can be thematically divided into two stanzas (1:15–17, 18b–20).\(^ {13}\) The first is the reworking of an ancient hymn that celebrates Sophia (Wisdom). Here it is applied to Jesus as Wisdom’s representative and acclaims his part in creation.\(^ {14}\) The second stanza teases out the implications of the christocentric creation themes of the first stanza and applies them to the human community. Between the two stanzas and framed by them is the hymn’s affirmation of the relationship of Jesus to the Church, as “head of the body” (v. 18a). The positioning of this verse suggests the author’s intent to link Christ’s cosmic pre-eminence celebrated in the first stanza and his agency in the human community in the second, with the role or function of the Christian community (“the body”).

With these divisions in mind (the two stanzas 1:15–17 and 1:18b–20, surrounding the important v. 18a) a possible literary structure could appear thus:

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\(^ {13}\) Though there is generally much scholarly support for the literary structure of the hymn into two stanzas (e.g., Schweitzer, *Colossians* 57; Karris, *Symphony* 66), the centrality of v. 18a is rarely acknowledged, and is absorbed into the first stanza. Some argue for a threefold stanza structure (1:15–16; 17–18b; 18c–20), for example, M. Bath and H. Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 193–94. N. T. Wright, “Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15–20,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990) 444–68, suggests a chiasmic A–A1, B–B1 structure for the hymn.

Christology of Colossians

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THEOLOGY

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sible literary structure could appear thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STANZA 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(15) He is the icon of God, the invisible one, firstborn of all creation,</td>
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<tr>
<td>(16) because in/by him was created all things in the heavens and upon the earth things visible and invisible whether thrones or dominions whether sovereignties or authorities all things through him and for/to him were created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17) and he is before all and all things in/by him cohere</td>
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<tr>
<td>(18) and he is the head of the body, the church</td>
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<th>STANZA 2</th>
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<td>(19) because in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell in order that he might be in/among all things pre-eminent</td>
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<tr>
<td>(20) and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, bringing peace through the blood of his cross [through him] whether things upon the earth and things in the heavens.</td>
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S. Fiorenza (ed.), Searching the Scriptures 2, A Crossroad, 1993) 317–18, has offered a recon-
sit Sophia-inspired elements from the Wisdom see also Lohse, Colossians 43–44; D. Edwards, Ecological Theology, Ecology and Justice 7.
The two stanzas together celebrate Christ's role in the totality of the created universe as the source and means of reconciliation and in the cosmic community, which includes human beings. According to the first stanza, Jesus has a unique role and function in creation—whatever that might mean for the author, and which we will explore further below. His creative supremacy gives him an authority over all real and imaginable powers. According to the second stanza, because of Jesus' authoritative pre-eminence in creation, he is the agent of peace and reconciliation. This agency echoes and fills out the meaning behind 1:14 ("in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"). This is the final statement of the baptismal remembrance of 1:12–14, and the rhetorical link to the hymn, which serves to ground the reason for the possible experience of redemption and forgiveness.

Before we study the creation motif and theology that permeate the hymn, a final point is worth noting. This concerns the thematic development and parallels in each stanza labelled A—A', B—B' and C—C', and the function of what seems to be the hymn's centrepiece v. 18a.

A—A' act as the thematic headings for both stanzas subsequently developed in B—B' and C—C'. They identify the nature and primacy of Christ: in the first stanza, in his relationship to God; in the second, to the human community. In both he is described as "firstborn," of creation in stanza 1 and "from the dead" in stanza 2.

B—B' explicate the reason for Jesus' supremacy. B is a literarily balanced verse that emphasises the reason for Jesus' primacy in creation and the totality of the cosmos. This is the heart of the overall development of the hymn's christology. Its aim is to underscore Jesus' power over all possible authorities, human, divine, heavenly and earthly. Indirectly, the writer's aim is to relativise the threat and dominance of the powers and authorities that threaten the Colossians. B' reinforces Jesus' authoritative pre-eminence in the cosmos with what could be arguably described as one of the christological highlights in the Second Testament, the statement that in Christ "all the fullness was pleased to dwell."

C—C' concern Christ's agency of cosmic coherence (C) and communal reconciliation (C'). Jesus is celebrated as the source of unity, enacted through his passion and death, and influential in the total universe (C' v. 20b–c). There is also a sense of resolution to the earlier verses of each stanza, both in C and C'.

V. 18a is a central statement in the whole hymn and adds a theological insight that is unique. It represents a significant
Christology of Colossians

...rate Christ’s role in the totality of the created order of reconciliation and in the cosmic community. According to the first stanza, Jesus has a role—whatever that might mean for the author, t sh below. His creative supremacy gives him an able powers. According to the second stanza, pre-eminence in creation, he is the agent ofictory echoes and fills out the meaning behind „the forgiveness of sins“). This is the final verse of 1:12–14, and the rhetorical link to the reason for the possible experience of notif and theology that permeate the hymn, a concern the thematic development and parallelism between B—B¹ and C—C¹, and the function of what 1v. 18a.

ic headings for both stanzas subsection B¹ and C—C¹. They identify the main topic: in the first stanza, in his relationship, to the human community. In both, the “creation in stanza 1 and 2.

a for Jesus’ supremacy. B is a literature-emphasises the reason for Jesus’ role in the totality of the cosmos. This is the complement of the hymn’s Christology. Jesus’ power over all possible avenues, heavenly and earthly. Indirectly, the threat and dominance of the threat threaten the Colossians. B reinforces pre-eminence in the cosmos with references to one of the Christological 1 Testament, the statement that in is pleased to dwell.”

gency of cosmic coherence (C) and (C¹). Jesus is celebrated as the through his passion and death, and verse (C¹ v. 20b–c). There is also a : earlier verses of each stanza, both present in the whole hymn and adds a unique. It represents a significant development in the light of the creation theme already developed in the preceding section.

A closer look at the christology of the hymn reveals a profound sacred cosmology: God’s life permeates the cosmos through Jesus’ unique relationship with God and the whole of the created universe. This includes Jesus’ primary and pre-eminent relationship with human beings.

Jesus as “Icon” (Col 1:15)

Jesus is celebrated as God’s “icon” (v. 15), the visible and tangible expression of God’s presence and the one through whom God is accessed. This profound christological statement is rare in the New Testament. It finds its closest parallel in the prologue of John’s Gospel, especially John 1:14, where Jesus, God’s “word” becomes ‘enfleshed’ in the human community. John’s prologue emphasizes Jesus as the locus of God’s glory and the expression of God’s intimacy with the fragility of human beings. But the language of ‘flesh’ also underscores that God’s revelation actually occurs within human brokenness and limitation. The opening verse of the Colossian hymn, while not antithetical to the Johannine insight, opens up another possibility about God’s communication and self-revelation.

Rather than emphasizing God’s immanence (as in John), the hymn’s focus is on God’s transcendence, revealed iconically in Jesus. The movement is not from God to the human world by means of the Word’s ‘enfleshment.’ Rather the path of divine encounter is from the created cosmos to God. The whole created universe encounters the invisible God through the one who is explicitly named God’s “icon” and “the firstborn of all creation” in Col 1:15. In Jesus, creation and God meet. In John’s Gospel, through Jesus the Word, God’s face is turned towards the created universe; in the Letter to the Colossians, through Jesus the icon, the face of the created universe is drawn into the transcendence and mystery of God.

The importance of the christological assertion in verse 15 cannot be stressed enough. It lays the foundation of what will be unpacked in subsequent lines of the hymn. It acknowledges the nature of God and God’s transcendence, focuses on Jesus’ relationship to God, and affirms Jesus’ intimacy with the created cosmos. Most significantly, it provides the basis for asserting the indissoluble, divinely inscribed bond between Jesus and the created universe. This has important implications how those addressed by the letter are to view the universe: the cosmos is the means of revelation of the presence of Jesus, and by association, of God. Because of this, the cosmos and all life within it are sacred. They

15 In the Hellenistic age, the world was regarded as the icon of the gods. See Plato, Tim 92c and Corp. Her. 8.2. This became ascribed to Sophia (Wisdom) and then, by attribution, to Christ (Lohse, Colossians 46–47).
are the means of divine encounter. This panentheistic sensitivity is explored in the rest of the hymn.

**Jesus as “Firstborn of Creation”** (Col 1:16)

**AND “Fullness”** (Col 1:19)

The next verse (Col 1:16—B) explains the reason that Jesus is “firstborn of creation.” Using Wisdom imagery borrowed from the Sophia hymn, Jesus is acknowledged as the one by whom and in whom all things are created. He is the expression or reflection of God’s wisdom. The ambiguity of the Greek ἀπὸ κυρίου (“with/by him”) leaves open the possibility that Jesus, like Sophia, is both the agent of God’s creative activity and the summation of all creation. Wisdom is celebrated beside God in creation and is daily God’s delight (Proverbs 8:30), so too Jesus. This motif is echoed in a slightly different way in the final phrase of the verse, which, taken with the first line of the verse, acts as a literary frame around a description of the universe and its powers. These are depicted in cosmological, geographical and chronological terms. They represent all the ways in which such powers are experienced or imagined. The poetic parallelism in both parts of this centrepiece underscores the totality of creation being envisaged as under the creative power of Jesus. It embraces the heavenly and earthly realms.

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<tr>
<td>things visible and invisible</td>
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<td>whether thrones or dominions</td>
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<tr>
<td>whether sovereignties or authorities</td>
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<td>all things through him and for/to him were created</td>
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(Col 1:16)

The framing pattern also has the effect of surrounding these powers, subverting their potential to destroy or annihilate the Colossian Christians. The rhetorical dynamic in this literary technique would help to alleviate their fear and need to enact false religious practices designed to placate such powers. The final line (“all things through him and for/to him were created”) expands on the connection that Jesus has with creation. Again acknowledging Jesus’ agency in creation, it also sees creation being directed to Jesus (“for/to him”). The passive voice of the final verb (“were created”) emphasises that this is God’s act. In other words, it is God’s intention that creation has its meaning and completion in Jesus, God’s Sophia. He is the cosmos’ end, direction and meaning. This idea leads logically to the next verse (Col 1:17—C) where Jesus is affirmed as the one through whom everything comes together. He holds all
This panentheistic sensitivity is explored in the Christology of Colossians. It explains the reason that Jesus is “firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15) and in whom all things are created. He is God’s wisdom. The ambiguity of the Greek word “Logos” en the possibility that Jesus, like Sophia, is both active and the summation of all creation. In creation and is daily God’s delight (Prov 8:22). It is echoed in a slightly different way in the aken with the first line of the verse, acts as a chiasm of the universe and its powers. These are phrical and chronological terms. They represent the powers of the heavens and upon the earth things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions, ther sovereignty or authorities, through him and for to him were created (Col 1:16)

things together, and in him the universe coheres and is sustained. He is the source of unity of all creation. Everything becomes transformed because of him. 16

The next line of the hymn, v. 18a, focuses on Jesus’ headship to the Church:

... and he is the head of the body, the church ...

(Col 1:19)

This introduction of what seems to be an entirely different theme is reminiscent of a similar theme in other post-Pauline letters. The reference to the Church as “body” could be an authorial effort to connect the letter’s audience to the historical Paul’s teaching found in his own letters. The explicit reference to “church” and “body” recalls Paul’s ecclesiology in Rom 12:5 and 1 Cor 12.12 and 12. The insertion of this ecclesiological motif might suggest that this is a later development designed to link an ancient hymn of Sophia, formulated in a different context, with the lived communal situation and practical realities of the Colossian Christians.

In its present context, the insertion attempts to apply the creation-theological motifs of stanza 1 to the “Church” or even to add an expectant note of hierarchy that might give added weight and validity to the patriarchially oriented household code located towards the end of the letter. Whatever its literary history or the author’s purpose, the lines do have implications for those who identify themselves as part of the “body” of Jesus. By an intimate association that comes through baptism, they share in his power over the potentially annihilating cosmic forces. The author could well be suggesting that the Church is not only the localised experience of the community of disciples evident in the Colossian Christian households in the Lycus Valley. The Church is also influential in and linked to the whole cosmos. That the two stanzas architectonically surround v. 18a suggests the writer’s intent to make this statement a focal point.

The opening of the second stanza recapitulates on Jesus’ priority in creation and expands on the theme of his “firstborn” nature (Col 1:18b—A). Now the hymn moves to consider Jesus’ role with the human community—as “firstborn of the dead.” There is a movement from creation to redemption.17 Jesus’ pre-eminence, reaffirmed in v. 18c–19, is now established because of his resurrection from death. It is God’s act to Jesus in his resurrection that makes him the “beginning” point of creation and gives him unsurpassed power over the most destructive of forces, death itself. This also leads to another christological highlight of the hymn, again reminiscent of John’s prologue.18

16 Edwards, Jesus 81.
17 Edwards, Jesus 80.
... because in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell ...

The Johannine resemblance comes from the verb "dwell." In the Gospel prologue this is similar to what the Word does (literally, "pitch tent"). It could be this link with John’s Gospel that attracted the addition "of God" after "fullness" in some English translations of the letter. It is absent in the Greek text. The English addition of the "fullness of God" might have been created by translators importing the thought of a later verse (2:9: "because in him dwells all the divine fullness bodily"). With this addition, of course, Col 1:19 ranks as one of the most exalted christological statements in the New Testament. However, in conformity with the hymn's development, the "fullness" that dwells in Jesus is not about the fullness of God. In a sense, Jesus' intimacy with God has already been established in v 15, though without the richness or complexity found in the Johannine prologue. The "fullness" referred to here concerns creation. Just as Jesus is God's icon, he is also the expression of creation. What creation is about is revealed in him, in his relationship to God. In Jesus, the cosmos is taken to a new height; it is sanctified and revelatory of God's own being. This insight naturally leads to the final verse of the hymn, 1:20.

In C's Jesus' pre-eminence already affirmed now enables him to bring about peace and reconciliation within creation. The means of this possibility is found in his death ("through the blood of his cross"), a theme familiar in Paul's letters (Rom 3:25; Gal 6:14). The reconciliation envisaged in the hymn is global and total. Jesus' power to bring about peace and reconciliation permeates every place and thing—even in the potentially annihilating powers, agencies and principalities. This is the sense behind the concluding line,

... whether things upon the earth and things in the heavens

(Col 1:20c)

CONCLUSIONS

The hymn in the opening chapter of Colossians was important for the original hearers addressed by the letter. The author sought to respond to the issues dealing with how religion was understood and practiced. The writer incorporated this hymn into the early part of the letter's rhetorical argument as a way of reminding the addressees of their privileged status because of baptism. This need to recall their baptismal transformation was not intended to reinforce an attitude of social or spiritual segregation or sectarianism. Rather, taken with the preliminary verses that lead up to it, the hymn seeks to recognise the social reality of the Colossian Christians. It celebrates the nature and function of Jesus in cosmic and universal terms, and imaginatively expands on the place of the Church, Jesus' "body," over which he is its head. The hymn thus becomes a celebration of the created cosmos, and indirectly of the Colossians themselves.
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From this perspective, I want to accentuate five features about the hymn impor-
tant for Christians reflecting on issues about contemporary biodiversity.

1. Jesus' Place in Creation. The hymn honours the importance of the
world in which the addressees find themselves. It focuses on God
and Jesus' relationship to God, as well as the "invisible"—an ad-
jective used twice in the hymn. The hymn also exalts the link
which Jesus has with creation. The created world, what is both
tangibly experienced and imagined, that which can be expressed
and the unarticulated—all this forms part of the creative universe
that is important for Christian existence and authentic living. The
hymn invites reflection on the connection between our experience
of the world, our relationship with God, and the way that God
through Jesus, who is its fullness, touches the universe.

2. Human Attitude to the Cosmos. The recognition that Jesus is cre-
ation's "fullness" further invites a positive and admirable disposi-
tion to what is encountered in the created universe. This means
that our outlook needs to be essentially open and grace-expectant.
It is an attitude of soul that affirms the possibility of God's self-
communication through the world in which we live, of deepening
our relationship and intimacy with Jesus, God's icon, and through
him of being in communion with all creation and the whole uni-
verse in time and space. This links closely to a theology of sacra-
mentality that affirms that God's presence is always mediated
through our material world and our human experience. Our rela-
tionship with the cosmos, God and Jesus is sacred and can be
deepened.

3. Recognition of Global Fracture. This positive attitude to the cos-
mos and the potential it offers us for sacred encounter of a deep,
personal and global nature does not lead to a pantheistic spiritual-
ity. The hymn's christological affirmation that Jesus is the source
and means of union, peace and reconciliation in the universe is a
balancing recognition that all is not well. Healing is needed and
Jesus, through the ecclesial community ("his body"), is the means
of this. Though cosmic communion is God's intent as reflected in
the hymn, there is always the reality of global fracture and dishar-
mony. The world is flawed, as is our experience and interpretation
of it. The call to ongoing reconciliation is profoundly integral to a
comic, creation-aware spirituality and theology.

4. Life and Mission of the Christian Community. The hymn affirms
Jesus' role as reconciler and the one in whom all things cohere.
Because of the Church's bond to Jesus, as the extension of Jesus'
presence in the universe, the act and process of peace making and
reconciliation also becomes part of the Church's mission. The
Church is called to be the tangible demonstration of the possibility
of peace and reconciliation. This has implications for the inner life

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of the Christian community and its spirit of inclusivity and welcome to all judged alien or hostile.

5. *God's Presence*. The hymn asserts that no power, known or imagined, can destroy or even determine us. The hymn incontrovertibly articulates the faith of an ancient writer that God's presence, expressed in Jesus and localised in the Colossian Christian community, permeates our world. Every act of living, every cell of life is a reflection of the power of God to overcome that which seems to threaten or annihilate. This same hymn has the capacity to remind us that our world is blessed, and that the cosmos has the potential to reflect and reveal God's biodiversity.

The Sophia-nature of this ancient early Christian hymn and the language of creation that permeates it reinforce what we might anachronistically call an ecologically sensitive, creation-tempersed christology. Jesus is the pinnacle or climactic expression of God's creative act and the divine bond and access to the materially created universe. The hymn expresses the author’s conviction in Jesus as the tangible expression and revelation of God, and, through Jesus, God’s disposition towards the created universe. What emerges is a profound theology about God’s concern and intimacy with the created world and all its life forms.