

Perspectives from the Christ hymn in Colossians 1:13–20 on cosmic powers and spiritual forces within an African context



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The central argument of this article is that the way in which the author of Colossians makes use of this Christ hymn can provide useful perspectives within the African context where people often struggle with assumed threats of cosmic powers and spiritual forces. The author of the letter positions and utilises a Christ hymn in a strategic and functional way. This hymn forms a pivotal point in his letter and mentions the crucial theological issues that are at stake. The Colossians were threatened by false teachings according to which they were subjected to different forces and powers. Christ is, however, exalted and praised as superior to all these powers. As such, the hymn lays the basis for the refutation of all the deceiving arguments. The hymn describes the significance of Christ. He is the mediator of creation, the reconciler of the world, and the head of the church. Dependence on Christ sets one free from ties to all the proposed powers. The author assumes that his readers would also associate with the contents of the hymn regarding the supremacy of Christ. If so, the author in effect wins his argument. He, therefore, does not need to convince them of his theological viewpoint anew, but can immediately continue warning them about the dangers of false teachings threatening their community.

Keywords: Colossians; Christ hymn; Traditional African Religion; Ancestor; Powers; Spirits; Healing; Liturgy; Cosmic forces.

Introduction

The letter to the Colossians¹ speaks to specific issues of local concern related to the influences of angels and elemental spirits (Seitz 2014:33). Yet, before the author, Paul,² writes about these challenges, he asserts the all-embracing reign of Christ. He does this by way of a telling hymn on the supremacy of Christ (Col 1:15–20), and it seems that the author strategically uses this hymn for the main argument to address these issues. The central theoretical argument of this article is that the way in which Paul makes use of this Christ hymn can provide useful perspectives within the African context where people often struggle with assumed threats of cosmic powers and spiritual forces.

As starting point for this article, the typical African image of Jesus as part of the spiritual realm is briefly discussed. Then, turning to Colossians, a brief overview is given of the powers and spiritual realms probably referred to in this letter, the origin of the hymn, and the strategic placement of this hymn within the letter. Specific emphasis is placed on the contents of this hymn to demonstrate how it forms the basis for the argument about the superiority of Jesus above all forms of powers and spiritual forces. The salvation Jesus brings is totally sufficient for all believers. Fear or reference of spiritual powers is a deception that disregards the sufficiency of the deliverance of Jesus.

Traditional African theology and God of the Christian Bible

While Western churches are grappling with secularism, African churches are often struggling with a fear of the influences of spiritual powers and forces. This manifests in practices such as

1. Based on the similarity of language and contents of the letters to Colossians and Ephesians, many scholars regard the letter to the Ephesians as an extended development of the one to Colossians (Childs 1984:317; Seitz 2014:32).

2. Scholars such as Collins (1988:171ff.), McKnight (2018:5–18) and Talbert (2007:7–11) provide overviews of the discussion of the authorship of Colossians. Before the 20th century, there was no serious question about Pauline authorship of Colossians, but Bultmann and others began to speak of Colossians as deutero-Pauline. Though the evidence for such claim has not changed that much, the evidence is now seen as more weighty. Brown (1997) pointedly remarks: 'Although this issue is most often presented as one of Pauline authorship ... the term "author" offers difficulty. If the letter were written twenty years after Paul's death by a Pauline disciple seeking to present the thought of his master, in the ancient estimation Paul might very well be called the "author", that is, the authority behind the work' (p. 610). When we are asking the question, 'Who wrote Colossians?', we should take the time to also ask, 'Are we using modern literary standards or ancient ones?'. For the sake of this article, Paul is referred to as the author of the letter.

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magic, witchcraft and exorcism. Even pious Christians are involved in movements dealing with forces of evil through exorcism. Exorcism implies the expelling of unwanted forces by summoning another force with greater power to drive out the lesser evil power (Kasomo 2012:10). The flip side to this coin is the growth in the prosperity gospel in Africa. This movement proclaims that Christians should always be healthy and wealthy. Anyone who is poor or sick has failed in some way. It is often assumed that such ailments and poverty are the result of the influence of malevolent spirits (Kasomo 2012:11). Thus, even Christians seek their wellbeing with miracle workers to obtain healing and the improvement of their socio-economic positions.

In traditional African communities, misfortunes are believed to be caused by malevolent supernatural spirits. Health is understood as the vital force or power in one's soul (Kasomo 2012:12). Traditional African theology can be defined as a theology of life (Stinton 2004:54–61). All religious practices have the aim of acquiring the vital force and living strongly. Life is regarded as holy (Bujo 1992:17). 'God' is the provider and protector of life. Life implies having part in the source of life, namely having part of 'God' as such. 'God' can manifest itself not only in human beings, but also in the material and spiritual world, visible and invisible, living and dead (Brinkman 2007:283). Humans can experience the manifestation of 'God' and the spiritual realm even through animals or trees and, very commonly, at burial sites.

While 'God' is regarded as the provider of life, it is believed that he uses mediums, such as ancestors and healers, to establish and maintain the connection between the biological and spiritual world (Brinkman 2007:282; Kasomo 2012:11). Without these mediums, one cannot experience the power of the 'Almighty God'.

As a result of the Christianisation of traditional African religions, Jesus is seen as primary agent through whom 'God' establishes life. Passages such as John 10:10 ('I have come that they may have life and have it to the full') and Galatians 2:20 ('I no longer live, but Christ lives in me') are typically regarded as supporting such a view (Brand 1999:220). Who Jesus is, is primarily related to how Jesus' power to create life can be experienced. Not only does he give life as healer, he also restores life (Brinkman 2007:284).

Jesus is often viewed as part of the ancestry (Nyamiti 1984:140). As the son of the Father, he is regarded as the oldest brother within the ranks of the ancestry. From the overview provided by Nyamiti (1984:15–16), the characteristics of ancestry can be summarised as follows:

- There is a natural relationship within a family and tribe that transcends death.
- Ancestors enjoy supernatural status.
- Ancestors can mediate between the divine and human.
- Ancestors are usually regarded as leading morally exemplary lives.
- They maintain contact with earthly family members.

Honouring ancestors demonstrates the African context of a family. Death does not terminate the relation between the living and deceased family members. Jesus as ancestor ultimately provides the continuity between life across the border of death (Brinkman 2007:284).

In the Christianisation of the idea of ancestry, Jesus is seen as the primary ancestor (Nyamiti 1984:140). This includes a variety of images such as chief, king, master of initiation and eldest brother (Brinkman 2007:283). Ancestors form part of Jesus' mediatory function, as Jesus incorporates them in this process (Nyamiti 1984:71).

A link is easily drawn between the role of ancestors and the intercession asked from saints in the Roman Catholic tradition (Brinkman 2007:282). In the Roman Catholic tradition, the mother of Jesus and other saints can be asked to intercede for living humans, as they are regarded as being close to Jesus and God. Believers can even ask for intercession by angels. Within the Christianised African traditional religions, it only requires a small step from requesting the intercession of saints, such as in the Roman Catholic tradition, to the request for intercession from ancestors in general.

The longing for physical healing plays a central role in African religion. Traditionally, it is believed that sickness doesn't have a physical origin but is caused by disharmony with unsatisfied ancestors or spiritual entities (Kasomo 2012:13). Evil and non-respected ancestors do bad things to their descendants. Sickness could indicate a distorted relation between living humans and their deceased ancestors, the influence of surrounding spiritual powers or bad blood between humans (Ela 1990:50–52). Therefore, a pure medical approach to healing is usually not regarded as enough. The intervention of supernatural spiritual powers is needed for physical healing. Traditional healers, magicians and wizards play a significant role in the mediation with these powers (Bujo 1992:31; Kolié 2000:141–142).

Within the Christianisation of these ideas, Jesus is regarded as the all-round healer, among many others, though superior to many. He is the saviour of lives, physical and social. Jesus is regarded as the primary agent through whom God provides vital force and life. He is honoured as the one who restores life, also on this side of death (Brinkman 2007:284; Stinton 2004:64). From his significant rank as ancestor, Jesus acts as healer, as giver and saviour of lives. 'Christian healers' gain access to Jesus in the practice of exorcism to effect physical healing for bodily ailments related to spiritual influences and threats (Brinkman 2007:295). The expectation is created that Jesus can heal people by protecting them from evil spirits, while the Holy Spirit is regarded as a good spirit among numerous evil spirits. However, from the traditional perspective, the question arises whether Jesus can be regarded as the most effective healer among many others (Kolié 2000:149).

Powers and forces in Colossians

The addressees of the Colossian letter also grappled with beliefs in spiritual entities that would threaten their wellbeing. Though the author does not mention his purpose with writing this letter explicitly, it seems that he learned from Epaphras that there were some issues that raised concern (Col 1:8–9). The author warns his readers against people who ‘deceive you by fine-sounding arguments (ἐν πιθανολογίᾳ)’ (Col 1:2:4) and of those who take:

... you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy (διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης), which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world (κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) rather than on Christ. (Col 2:8)

Those who ‘judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day’ (Col 2:16). They ‘delight in false humility and the worship of angels (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων)’ (Col 2:18). Because of such threats, the author urges his readers to be ‘disciplined ... and firm’ in their faith in Christ (Col 2:5) and to hold on to the good teaching they have received (Col 2:7–8). He repeatedly mentions the importance of the truth of the gospel they have received (Col 1:5–8, 23, 29; 2:2; 3:1–2, 16). From these references, it is apparent that the author intends to equip his readers to safeguard them against the false teachings to which they are exposed (Köstenberger, Kellum & Quarles 2016:685; Moo 2008:47).

The precise nature of this false teaching is not mentioned explicitly. What the text provides is the author’s warning against and refutation of a false teaching. Lincoln (2000:561) puts it pointedly: ‘Although the prescription for cure comes across reasonably clearly to the present-day reader of Colossians, the ailment defies a really detailed diagnosis on his part’. Moo (2008:49) states the benefit of not being able to precisely define the false teachings for ‘it means that we can apply Paul’s teaching in the letter to a wide variety of historical and contemporary movements that share the general contours of the false teaching’. Nevertheless, considerable elements can be recognised from these warnings and teachings³ with which to construct the nature of the false teaching.

In Colossians 2:8⁴, the reference to τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης [hollow and deceptive philosophy] suggests some coherent system. From the reference to κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων [which depends on human tradition], which corresponds to Jesus’ criticism of the scribal traditions, it seems that this false philosophy has some Jewish elements. These teachings depend on τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου [elemental spiritual forces of this world] and οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν [not on

3.Through the letter in general is concerned with the false teaching, it obviously does not mean that every point or warning or teaching is directly related to the false teaching.

4.Βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτηςκατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν [See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ] (Col 2:8).

Christ]. The puzzling reference to τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Colossians 2:8, repeated in Colossians 2:20, implies that the false teachers taught that believers remained under the control of these principles. The theological problem was probably related to the way the ancient Mediterranean people viewed the hierarchy of the cosmos. Bruce (1984) remarks that in some mystery religions:

... security was sought from cosmic intimidation – from the terrors of existence in a world which was directed by hostile and implacable powers. Those powers are referred to in this letter as στοιχεῖα – ‘elements’ or ‘elemental forces’. (p. 95)

Dunn (1996) thinks that the Jewish belief in the multiple regions of heaven is in view. He says:

If the usual topography is in mind here, the implication would be that the lower reaches of heaven were populated by (normally hostile) ‘principalities and powers’, with God and his angels in the upper regions or beyond all the heavens. The hope, then, would be for a destiny that outmanoeuvres and defeats these powers and reaches right into the presence of God. (pp. 59–60)

From Colossians 2:16⁵ it seems that false teachers advocated the observance of certain food laws ‘by what you eat or drink’ (ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει,) and Jewish holy days, such as religious festivals, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day (ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων).

Colossians 2:18⁶ mentions ascetic disciplines of the false teachers, delighting in humility, which probably refers to ascetic practices such as fasting and the worship or fear of angels (θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων). This reference to angels should be read in relation to ‘powers and authorities’ elsewhere in the letter (θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι [thrones or powers or rulers or authorities (Col 1:16)], πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας [every power and authority (Col 2:10)], and τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας [powers and authorities (Col 2:15)]).⁷ The question is whether the false teachers feared or venerated the angels. Furthermore, these false teachers made a great deal of the visions they had seen (ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων), and their unspiritual minds puffed them up with idle notion [εἰκὴ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ (Col 2:18)].

The result is that the false teachers lost connection with the head of the body, Christ (καὶ οὐ κρατῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν), and they propagate various rules (Col 2:20–23).

It seems that the false teachers claimed spiritual experiences that could not be found through Christ alone. Paul counters

5.Μὴ οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω ἐν βρώσει ἢ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων [Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day] (Col 2:16).

6.Μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς καταβραβεύετω θέλων ἐν ταπεινοφροσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἃ ἑώρακεν ἐμβατεύων, εἰκὴ φυσιοῦμενος ὑπὸ τοῦ νοῦς τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ [Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind].

7.Wright (1986) remarks: ‘The identity of these “powers” is much debated. Some of the terms Paul uses belonged to complex metaphysical systems in contemporary non-Christian thought. It is not easy to separate the different terms clearly’ (p. 72). O’Brien (1982:46–7) suggests that ‘four classes of angelic powers are listed ... They probably represent the highest orders of the angelic realm’.

these claims with the fullness to be experienced in Christ alone (Col 1:19, 2:9, 10). They seemingly also advocated circumcision (Col 2:11; 3:11), suggesting Jewish elements in their teachings. They questioned the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, especially in relation to other spiritual beings.

Scholars have come up with numerous proposals to identify a movement or group of the first century that matches the criteria of the false teachings. Gunther (1973:2–4) has identified 44 different constructions of what the heresy might have implied. Since then, several new proposals have seen the light. Smith (2006) identified four main proposals: (1) Essene Judaism and Gnosticism, (2) Hellenism, (3) Judaism, and (4) Paganism. Smith persuasively dismisses the first two proposals. Regarding the first proposal, it should be noted that fully-fledged Gnosticism postdates Colossians and the Qumran is geographically too far from the Lycus Valley. The second proposal is also improbable as it neglects the typical Jewish elements in the philosophy (e.g. Sabbath and circumcision), and also draws from Gnosticism, which postdates Colossae.

Smith (2006), along with scholars such as Bandstra (1974:339–343), Evens (1982:195–201), Francis (1962:109–134) and Roberts (1988:821), therefore, suggests that the false teaching should rather be identified as a syncretism with Jewish apocalyptic mysticism as in the Jewish *Merkabah* (*chariot*)-mysticism, which was prevalent from approximately 100 BC until 1000 CE. Aspects of these mystic beliefs include the following:

- God in heaven is surrounded by heavenly beings, angels and powers.
- Humans can already experience mystic heavenly travels in this bodily dispensation.
- Salvation comprises of a pilgrimage through the heavens to the seventh heaven for mystic unity with God.
- The space between God and the world is filled with a series of powers of several orders.
- Salvation implies that one should be saved from these powers and cosmological forces and should bypass them on one's way to the throne of God in the seventh heaven.
- Full salvation depends on the benevolence or evasion malevolent powers and angels.

This syncretism, therefore, questions the adequacy of salvation and reconciliation accomplished by Christ. Besides the salvation by Christ, humans still must master the rules and rituals for deliverance to obtain such spiritual ascension.

The fourth proposal is presented by the investigation of Arnold (1996). In his major monograph on the Colossian false teaching, Arnold (1996:243) argues that the 'Colossian Philosophy ... represent a combination of Phrygian folk belief, local folk Judaism, and Christianity'. This folk belief had much to do with magic and ritual powers, which implied appeals to spiritual beings and angels, accompanied with various rituals to ward off evil. Arnold is, therefore, of the

opinion that the false teaching in Colossae consisted of a syncretism between the veneration of angels by way of ascetic practices and rituals drawn from paganism and Judaism.

This proposal of Arnold fits well with the *Weltangst*, which can be considered a fundamental feature of 1st century Hellenistic culture. This *Weltangst* was based on the belief that the universe was governed by a host of apathetic supernatural powers and wrathful gods. Humans had to struggle against this relentless fate (Wilson 1997:3). Mortal human beings therefore sought access to the supernatural powers via intermediary beings and mystical experiences. This would include efficient means of appeasing these powers to their favour to obtain protection against the evil terrestrial world and to enter the next world (Wilson 1997:4).

Whatever the precise nature of the false teachings in Colossae may have been, it implied an appeal to spiritual beings, associated with visions and rules to find security in a very puzzling universe. In doing so, they disregarded the sufficiency of Christ (Vergeer 1995:413). The salvation of God was not regarded as sufficient to establish unity and reconciliation between God and human beings. Full salvation was dependent on mortal beings' 'own success in mastering the rules and rituals of spiritual accent' (Van Broekhoven 1997:88). Colossians clearly serves as a Christ-centred correction of such false teachings. At this point, the message of Colossae is also applicable to the contemporary beliefs in African context on the influence of ancestors, spiritual powers and evil spirits determining the wellbeing and salvation of mortal beings, as such beliefs devalue the efficiency of Jesus' salvation.

Probable origin of the hymn⁸

To refute the threat of these false teachings, Paul strategically incorporates a hymn into his argument. Though it is possible that he composed this hymn, *de novo*, as Ridderbos (1960:151) proposes, it is more plausible that he used an existing hymn,⁹ possibly even previously known to his addressees (Köstenberger et al. 2016:694). He probably reworked, an existing hymn by adding contents in order to address concerns that were prevalent within the Christian community he addressed (Barkhuizen 1985:20; Moo 2008:110). This has led many scholars to attempt to reconstruct the original version and redactional development of the hymn as incorporated in Colossians (Roberts 1988:91; Sanders 1971:ix):

- Käsemann (1965:36–39) seeks the origin of the hymn in Gnosticism. He regards the expression 'πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως' [firstborn of all creation; Col 1:15] as typical Gnostic. He regards the phrases 'τῆς ἐκκλησίας' (of the church; Col 1:18) and 'διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ'

8.This section builds on a previous article of mine (Viljoen 2002:67–89).

9.Most of the terms in Colossians that are unusual to Paul, appear in Colossian 1:15–20. Some of the terms are *hapax legomena*, while others appear very rarely and are used with different meanings (Köstenberger, Kellum & Quarles 2016:682). Moo (2008:108) discusses the syntactical distinctiveness of these verses in context with its position within the letter.

[through his blood of the cross; Col 1:20] as redactional additions by the Christian author of the letter for use as part of a baptismal liturgy. According to him, there is nothing else specifically Christian to the hymn. However, claiming a Gnostic origin of the hymn seems unlikely, as full Gnosticism only developed in the second and third century CE, while the letter to the Colossians is dated much earlier.¹⁰

- Lohmeyer (1964:43–47) regards Jewish traditions related to the Day of Atonement to form the religio-historical background of this hymn. He bases his argument on the concluding phrase of the hymn, ‘καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ ...’ [and through him to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross; Col 1:20].
- Kehl (1967:152–161), Lohse (1968:84), Schweizer (1976:53) and Pokorny (1987:52–57) seek the background of the hymn in Hellenistic Judaism. They regard the references to Jesus as ‘εἰκὼν τοῦ Θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου’ (the image of the invisible God) and ‘πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως’ [the firstborn of all creation; Col 1:15] as typical of the characterisation of Wisdom as known in the Hellenistic synagogues. Rabbinic sources refer to Genesis 1 and Proverbs 8 in order to discuss the role of Wisdom as intermediate figure in creation (Gordley 2007:19). Wisdom is worshiped as having been created by God before anything else, as the firstborn of God (Helyer 1994:241; Lamp 1998:53). It is argued that this Wisdom tradition has been transferred to Christ in Colossians 1.
- Cox (2004:223) compares the two strophes and identifies two different religious traditions combined in a ‘relatively uncritical’ manner. The first strophe uses language from the Jewish Wisdom tradition, while the second strophe speaks of eschatological Christology.

Instead of trying to establish the origin of the hymn, Martin (1983:132) suggests that one should rather determine the catalyst that led to the creation of new forms of hymns in the New Testament period. He proposes that the redaction of the Colossian hymn directed at the praise of Jesus Christ as exalted Lord and ruler of creation, should be sought in the false teachings that threatened the addressees (Martin 1983:134). It seems that this formed the background of the development of the Christ hymn to refer to the pre-existence of Christ, his incarnation and eventually his supremacy over all powers (Snyman 1989:46). Paul uses traditional material to establish common ground with his addressees (Moo 2008:110), which becomes an effective way to advance his argument in the letter.

Position of the hymn within the letter

The strategic function of the hymn appears from its significant position within the letter (cf. Viljoen 2002:71–72). Obviously, the analysis of the structure of a letter is somewhat subjective,

10. Some scholars argue that the Colossian opponents were ‘proto-gnostic’ (MacDonald & Harrington 2000:63). Martin (1974:65) regards this as ‘a Gnosticizing trend within the Hellenistic Judaism mediated through the Phrygian synagogues and picking up ideas which are found in Wisdom literature’.

though when principles and theory of ancient epistolography (cf. DeLockery 2018:32; Malherbe 1988) are applied, certain elements can be identified according to which the structure of the letter can be analysed (Du Toit 1984:8–9; Witherington 2007:20). Based on those elements, scholars have consensus about the following structure in Box 1.

Paul begins his letter with the usual *praescriptio* and *prooemium*, yet he adds the confession and hymn to the usual report on his thanksgiving and intercession. This significant addition of the hymn demonstrates its strategic function within the letter. The author probably draws upon a hymn known in the community. ‘It draws believers back into the arena of worship where they discover and renew their experience of lordship with Christ’ (MacDonald & Harrington 2000:68). With this unusual addition with its tightly knit contents and affective value, Paul from the start states the core of his argument on the sufficiency of Jesus’ salvation in refutation of heretic teachings in the Colossian church (Dunn 1996:87). With this hymn, the table is set for the warnings and admonitions to follow immediately in the *corpus* of the letter.

Being poetic material, this hymn has dense content in a form with emotive power. Besides its intellectual contents, the hymn also provides an emotive basis for the argument to follow. Hymns are intended to be sung, which contributes to the affective value of their texts.

Closer consideration of abovementioned components of the letter, demonstrates the function even more.

Confession and hymn within the *Prooemium*

Colossians 1:1–12 forms the build-up to the confession and hymn (cf. Viljoen 2002:72). Some scholars suggest that this

BOX 1: Structure of Colossians.

Prescript (*Praescriptio*): 1:1–2

Introduction (*Prooemium*): 1:3–2:5

(Preparation for the admonition to follow: God’s salvation and the danger of deception)

Report of Paul’s thanksgiving: 1:3–8

Report of Paul’s intercession: 1:9–12

Confessional formula and hymn: 1:13–20

Significance of the confession and hymn for the addressees: 1:21–23

Warning against the backdrop of the confession and hymn not to be misled: 1:24–2:5

Body of the letter (*Corpus*): 2:6–4:6

(A life style in accordance to the confession and hymn)

Introduction (*Partitio*): 2:6–8

Equipping the addressees against the heresy (*Argumentatio*): 2:9–23

In Christ they have full salvation (*Probatio*): 2:9–15

They need no alternative (*Refutatio*): 2:16–23

Appeal to focus on Christ (*Perotatio*): 3:1–4

Earthly reality of a resurrected life (*Exhortatio*): 3:5–4:6

Putting off the old life and taking up the new: 3:5–17

Household codes: 3:18–4:1

Concluding paraenesis: 4:2–6

Conclusion: 4:7–18

section represents a classical *exordium*. The threefold function of the *exordium* is to secure goodwill (*benevolentia*), focus attention to what is important (*attentio animi*) and to make the audience receptive (*docilitas*). These elements can be recognised in the opening of the Colossian letter (DeLockery 2018:36). Paul softens his addressees so that they would be willing to listen to what he has to say. There are clear signs of the main concern Paul addresses in this letter. Right from the beginning he tries to convince his readers to stick to the gospel that has been proclaimed to them, and not be misled by the heresy in their midst (Wolter 1993:37).

Prescript (*Praescriptio*) (Col 1:1–2)

In the usual *praescriptio*, the author confirms his authority to write as an envoy of Jesus Christ, as he identifies himself as 'ἀπόστολος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ' [an apostle of Christ Jesus; Col 1:1], over and against the presumed authority of false teachers. He did not decide by himself to become this messenger of Christ Jesus. He acts by the will of God (διὰ θελήματος θεοῦ) in collaboration with Timothy the brother (ὁ ἀδελφός). The addressees are holy and faithful brothers in Christ (ἀγίοις καὶ πιστοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ), with 'brothers' referring to a familial unity, a *familia Dei* (Lohse 1971:10), formed by their shared faith in Christ. The 'Christ-event' has shaped their lives, as they were brought together under the dominion of the exalted Lord to form the body of Christ. As holy people, they should be loyal and faithful believers in Christ, in contrast to those who are not. He emphasises that God the Father bestows grace and peace on them (χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν). It is the sufficiency of this grace and peace that Paul later in his letter argues is questioned and undermined by the false teachers. With this *praescriptio* it, therefore, seems that Paul, right from the start, establishes internal cohesion and trust between himself and the addressees (Van Broekhoven 1997:76).

Introduction (*Prooemium*) (Col 1:3–2:5)

Report on thanksgiving and prayer (Col 1:3–12)

In the *prooemium*, which follows the *praescriptio*, the group loyalty is further strengthened as the author writes about his gratitude and concerns for his addressees.¹¹ This thanksgiving is framed by the verb expressing thanksgiving: εὐχαριστοῦμεν (Col 1:3) and εὐχαριστοῦντες (Col 1:12).

In Colossians 1:3–8, he reports their continuous thanksgiving to God (εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ πάντοτε) for the positive message they have received about the addressees. They have heard that the addressees had come to faith in Christ Jesus (ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ) and that they have love for all the saints (καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους). The faith that the Colossians have is not just any religious belief. It is defined as faith in Christ Jesus. This places greater importance on the statements in the hymn about Christ's superior

position (DeLockery 2018:39). This faith and love are based on a hope that is stored for them in heaven (διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς). Regarding the plural form 'heavens', it can be assumed that the Jewish belief in the multiple regions of heaven is in view. The implication would be that the lower reaches of heaven with its normally hostile principalities and powers is defeated so that the believers can reach right into the presence of God in the upper regions of all the heavens (Dunn 1996:59–60). This hope is based on who Christ is and what he has done for the believers. Paul assures his addressees that the gospel they have heard, is truthful (ἦν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου) and that they have heard it from a faithful servant of Christ on their behalf (ὅς ἐστιν πιστὸς ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν διάκονος τοῦ Χριστοῦ). This assurance stands in contrast with the teachings of the false teachers who cast doubt on this glorious hope.

He proceeds to report on their continuous intercession (οὐ παύομεθα ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι) for the addressees (Col 1:9–12). This report consists of two sections. In the first section (Col 1:9–10a), he reports on their prayer that God would fill them with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives (ἵνα πληρωθῆτε τὴν ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ καὶ συνέσει πνευματικῇ), so that they may live a life worthy of the Lord. Though the addressees have heard the gospel and have come to faith, they still lack some knowledge, wisdom and understanding. This lack could lead towards them being confused by the false teachings. In the second part of his report on their petition (Col 1:10b–12), he describes four features of a life pleasing to God:

- they should bear fruit (καρποφοροῦντες) in every good work;
- they should grow in the knowledge of God (αὐξανόμενοι τῇ ἐπίγνωσει τοῦ Θεοῦ);
- they should be strengthened with all power (ἐν πάσῃ δυνάμει δυναμούμενοι κατὰ τὸ κράτος) so that they then can endure and remain patient; and
- they should give thanks to the Father (εὐχαριστοῦντες τῷ Πατρὶ) as he has qualified them to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of the light. This is likely meant to contrast with the immediate reference to the 'dominion of darkness' (Col 1:13).

These prayers should encourage the addressees and assure them of the sufficiency of the salvation God has prepared for them. There is no need for anything else to ensure their salvation.

It is apparent that Paul, through this report on his continuous thanksgiving and intercession, prepares his readers for the core message to follow in the hymn and corpus of the letter, where he speaks of God's salvation and the danger of seduction.

Confession and hymn (Col 1:13–20)

Before the author gets to the corpus of the letter, he strategically includes a confessional formula (Col 1:13–14)

11. O'Brien (1982:100–102) identifies four functions of thanksgiving that also appear in Colossians: to express his pastoral concern, to announce the main theme of the letter, to remind these addressees of the key issues of their prior learning, and to provide a glimpse of the *paraenesis* to follow in the letter.

and a Christ hymn (Col 1:15–20). Hymns very often contain elements of confession, while confessions are often hymnal in nature (Stauffer 1948:214). A result is the close connection between these two elements.

Confessional formula (*Glaubensformel*) (Col 1:13–14): Colossians 1:13–14 can be regarded as a confessional formula, a *Glaubensformel* [credo], to be distinguished from liturgical tradition material known as a *Bekennntnis* [homologia] (Hahn 1980:207; Zimmermann 1968:162–163; 169–172). Colossians 1:13–14 states the *Glaubensformel* on the salvation that the Father has established through his Son. See Table 1 in this regard.

This formula expresses the specific point Paul wants to bring across to his readers. He emphasises the contrast between opposing realities, of darkness and the kingdom of the light. He refers to God's acts of salvation by rescuing believers and bringing them into the kingdom of the Son (Col 1:13), and the experience of the confessors of being saved and forgiven (Col 1:14). Dunn (1996:77) and Wright (1986:62) note the relation between these words and the rescue of God's people from Egypt (cf. Ex 6:6–8).¹² Another strong connection is with the deliverance of Israel from exile (cf. Ps 107:2, 6, 14, 20¹³ and Isaiah 42:7, 16; 49:9)¹⁴ (Moo 2008:103). It seems that the exodus and return from exile thus becomes paradigmatic for God's ultimate rescue of his people as pronounced in the confessional formula of Colossians 1:13–14.

Hymn (*Bekennntnis*) (Col 1:15–20): While the confessional formula (Col 1:13–14) expresses the deliverance of God and the experience of salvation by the believer, the hymn (*Bekennntnis*) that follows (Col 1:15–20) expresses the significant position of the Son. The confessional formula provides the grounding and explanation of the Christological hymn to follow. Because of the Son's unique status, he is the appropriate mediator for all believers to experience full redemption. The confessional formula and hymn¹⁵, therefore, form an extended confession with a rich content.

Scholars have suggested a variety of strophic compositions for this hymn (cf. Balchin 1985:78–79; Viljoen 2002:79). The predominant view is that the hymn consists of two strophes. This view is mainly based on the following parallelisms that form the introductory phrases¹⁶ for both strophes as indicated in Table 2.

12.'... I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you ...' (Ex 6:6–8).

13.'... those he redeemed from the hand of the foe ...' (Ps 107:2); '... He delivered them from their distress ...' (Ps 107:6); '... He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness ...' (Ps 107:14), and 'He rescued them from the grave' (Ps 107:20).

14.'... to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness ...' (Is 42:7); '... I will turn the darkness into light before them ...' (Is 42:7) and '... to say to the captives, "Come out," and to those in darkness, "Be free!"' (Is 49:9).

15.In Colossians 3:16, Paul writes that hymns are to be used for teaching. Their content centers on the word of Christ. These songs should form a rule, standard and foundation according to which believers should base their lives (DeLockery 2018:62).

16.The introductory phrase, ὅς ἐστιν, is typical to hymns in the New Testament (cf. Php 2:6; 1 Tm 3:16 and 1 Pt 2:22) (Stauffer 1948:332).

TABLE 1: Composition of the confessional formula.

Col 1:13–14	Translation
ὅς	Who
ἐρρύσατο ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ σκότους καὶ	He has <u>rescued</u> us from the dominion of <u>darkness</u> and
μετέστησεν εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ υἱοῦ τῆς ἀγάπης αὐτοῦ,	<u>brought</u> us into the <u>kingdom of the Son</u> He loves,
ἐν ᾧ	in whom
ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν.	we have <u>redemption</u> , the <u>forgiveness of sins</u> .

TABLE 2: Parallels in introductory phrases of strophes.

Parallels	Strophes
ὅς ἐστιν (1:15)	ὅς ἐστιν (1:18)
πρωτότοκος (1:15)	πρωτότοκος (1:18)
ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ (1:16)	ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ (1:19)

This division is supported by the contents of each strophe as the first deals with the Son's status in relation to creation, and the second his status in relation to the recreation. This hymn places the resurrection of Jesus parallel with the creation of the world. The significance of the resurrection is comparable with the creation of the cosmos (DeLockery 2018:97).

These two strophes are linked by way of a refrain (Col 1:16b–17).¹⁷ The content of the first two statements is similarly to that of the first strophe, while the content of the third, referring to the church, is not. Similarly, the first two statements, referring to the original creation do not fit the second strophe. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that these three statements of vv. 17–18a were most likely meant to stand between the two strophes and to connect them, probably to be sung as a refrain (DeLockery 2018:85; see Box 2).

Other than in other early Christian confessions, we don't find a chronological exposition of Christ's salvation, such as his passion, ascension and eschatological return. However, the typical Christological motives of salvation from death and reconciliation with God are directly linked to the creation and maintenance activity of God. Christ not only is mediator for recreation, but also for creation. The cosmological role of Christ is emphasised. DeLockery (2018:67) justly remarks: 'The Christological hymn in Colossians 1 is one of the most sweeping and grand statements about the creator and his relationship to creation in the entire New Testament'.

The hymn has a highly poetical style, with no less than 30 parallelisms and even more figures of speech (cf. Botha 1989:55), which strengthens its impact.

The first strophe opens by defining the status of the Son in terms of his relation to the Father (Col 1:15a), a typical feature of hymns of the early Christian church (Martin 1983:135). Yet, it comes in paradoxical terms, as the Son is praised as the image of the invisible God (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου). God has revealed himself in a marvellous

17. Not all scholars agree that these verses form a refrain. The appearance of καὶ at the beginning of each of the statements in Colossians 1:17–18a has led some scholars to argue that these statements form the introduction of the second strophe, while Colossians 1:16b forms part of the first strophe (see Balchin 1985:78–79 for a discussion of major arguments in this regard).

BOX 2: Strophic composition of the hymn.

Strophe 1: The status of the Son with regards to creation (Col 1:15–16a)	
ὅς ἐστιν	He is
εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα	the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created:
ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὀρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι.	things in heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities;
Refrain (Col 1: 16b–17)	
τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτίσται καὶ αὐτὸς ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν,	all things have been created through him and for him and he is before all things, and in him all things hold together
Strophe 2: The status of the Son regarding recreation (Col 1:18–20)	
καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας. ὅς ἐστιν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων, ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.	And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, by making peace through his blood of his cross. whether things on earth or things in heaven,

manner in the Person and ministry of his Son, which emphasises the superior status of the Son.

Thereafter, the superior status of the Son is explained in terms of his relation to creation (Col 1:15b–16). He is praised as the firstborn of all creation with a phrase with striking assonance (o-sound) and alliteration (π-, τ- and ζ-sounds) (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως). He has existed before all creation and is, therefore, superior to everything that is created. The use of πρωτότοκος in Colossians 1:15 forms the first part of a diaphora to be repeated in Colossians 1:18.

This statement is followed in Colossians 1:16 by the reason for being the firstborn. The status of the Son is illustrated by way of fascinating chiasms and figures of speech. The objects 'in heavens' correspond with the 'invisible' as those 'on earth' with the 'visible'. The 'τὰ -' sounds in 'τὰ ὀρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα' form alliteration. God created all that is visible and invisible through his Son, so that his Son can be the ruler of all creation (cf. Col 1:13). Paul mentions four groups of authority to emphasise that even they were created by the Son (εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι).¹⁸ Terms of 'authority' are repeatedly used to form an anaphora (with the repetition

18. Some scholars regard this series of lexemes of 'authority' as a redactional addition to a previous hymn (cf. Balchin 1985:79; Van Broekhoven 1997:85), which supports the argument that Paul reworked an existing hymn to convey the key message of the letter on the authority of Christ over all forms of power.

of εἴτε). The identity of these 'powers' is not easy to determine, as the terms Paul uses belonged to complex metaphysical systems in contemporary non-Christian thought (Wright 1986:72). These terms are probably related to the previously mentioned 'visible and earthly' and 'invisible and heavenly' forces. This coincides with views found in the book of Revelations of a connection between supernatural powers that oppose Christians and authorities that physically rule the earth.¹⁹ The repetition of terms referring to powers and forces emphasises the central theme of the letter of Christ's superiority to all forms of powers.

Though it is not all clear what is meant with each of these 'powers', clearly some of the addressees felt threatened by powers and authorities that supposedly had influence in their lives and wellbeing. Paul inserts this hymn into this letter to assure them that the Son has authority over whatever kind of power or authority there might be, whether visible or invisible, earthly or heavenly, personal or impersonal. God has created all these powers through and for his Son. The living Christ, who reigns over all creation, can dissolve the concerns of the false teachings. Believers are under the authority of the Son and need not fear any cosmological power, in whatever form.

Colossians 1:16b–17 seems to form the refrain of the hymn. This refrain once again exhibits significant stylistic features. Besides the alliteration and chiasmic structure, 'τὰ πάντα ... πρὸ πάντων ... τὰ πάντα' also form a striking anaphora. It functions as a link and transition between the first and second strophes. The Son is praised for his supremacy over all that exist in creation (strophe 1) and the church (strophe 2). The refrain once again states the ultimate superiority of Christ compared to all powers. All of them have been created through and for Christ, and they can't continue to exist without him.

The second strophe (Col 1:18–20) praises the Son for his supremacy over the church. The opening words of this strophe 'αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος' (Col 1:18) stand parallel to the opening words of the first strophe 'ὅς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ' (Col 1:15). 'Πρωτότοκος' in Colossians 1:18 is diaphoric parallel to 'πρωτότοκος' in Colossians 1:15. The Son is the origin of the new beginning (Col 1:18b), as he conquered death (Col 1:18c). He is the firstborn from among the dead, with the result that he has supremacy over all. The head-body metaphor emphasises the important relation between Christ and the Colossians:

If they have an intimate connection with the creator of the universe who is responsible for their salvation ... what more could anyone offer? No powers or authorities could give more. (DeLockery 2018:92)

Colossians 1:19–20 provides the reasons for the status of the Son. The first reason is introduced by the words 'ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ' (Col 1:19), which are parallel to the same words in the first strophe (Col 1:16). God's fullness dwells in him with the

19. However, Dunn (1996:92) reasons that these terms refer to a hierarchy of invisible heavenly powers. Similarly, O'Brien (1982:46–47) suggests that they refer to four classes of angelic powers, probably representing the highest orders of the angelic realm.

result that one cannot help but confess the supremacy of the Son. The second reason is that it pleased God to reconcile everything to himself through the Son (Col 1:20). He did this through the blood shed on the cross. This is emphasised by the striking assonance created by the repetition of the 'οὐ'-sound in τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ'. All things that Christ reconciled with himself are stated in the form of a chiasm, things on earth and things in heaven. This refers to all creation that rebelled against God. Things in heaven obviously also refer to all forms of powers and spiritual forces that would rebel against God. A battle had raged between God and his creation. Yet, God intervened and reconciled the rebellious world with himself.

With this highly poetical hymn, Paul stresses the fact that the salvific work of Christ is complete and sufficient. There is no power in the entire cosmos, whether human, demonic, personal or impersonal, that could ever be as great as that of Christ, because Christ created the cosmos and is renewing it:

What is being claimed is quite simply and profoundly that the divine purpose in the act of reconciliation and peace-making was to restore the harmony of the original creation, to bring into renewed oneness and wholeness 'all things', 'whether things on the earth or things in the heavens'. (Dunn 1996:104)

Because of the stylistic features and emotive value of the hymn, it should have had a significant impact on the understanding and feelings of the readers. Those who share the confession as articulated in the confessional formula and Christ hymn, should not be threatened by the confusion of the false teachings. The argument of the letter is, therefore, already won by the contents of the confessional formula and Christ hymn.

Transition to the Corpus of the letter (Col 1:21–2:5)

Once Paul has confirmed the cohesion between himself and the addressees based on their mutual confession in the formula (Col 1:13–14) and hymn (Col 1:15–20) on the sufficiency of the salvation of Christ, he proceeds with the development of his argument (Gordley 2007:25). The use of the third person in the hymn is changed to the second (καὶ ὑμᾶς) to focus on the Colossians. As transition to the corpus of the letter, two elements are added. The first element is an explanation of what the confessional formula and Christ hymn imply for believers (Col 1:21–23), as indicated in Table 3.

The 'ποτε ... νυνὶ δέ' statement highlights the change in the addressees. Paul contrasts their condition before their reconciliation with God (ποτε ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἐχθρούς) with that thereafter (νυνὶ δὲ ἀποκατηλλάγητε).

TABLE 3: Implication of the confession and hymn for believers.

Col 1:21–23	Translation
καὶ ὑμᾶς ποτε ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἐχθρούς τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς	'Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.
νυνὶ δὲ ἀποκατηλλάγητε ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου παραστήσει ὑμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους καὶ ἀνεγκλήτους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ	But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation'

He personalises the contents of the confession and hymn to assure the Colossians of their reconciliation with God, though there is an essential condition (Col 1:23) as shown in Table 4.

Paul warns his addressees not to be moved away from the security provided by the gospel as proclaimed to them. This would result in them being robbed of their hope.

The second element of the transition comes in the form of a 'you should know' section (Col 1:24–2:5). Based on the preceding confession and hymn, the addressees shouldn't be deceived 'ἐν πιθανολογίᾳ' [with fine sounding arguments] (Col 2:4).

Body of the letter (Corpus) (Col 2:6–4:6)

Following this transition, Paul continues with the Corpus in which he connects belief with praxis (DeLockery 2018:132). He time and again refers back to theological perspectives provided by the confession and hymn, without further explanation. He repeatedly urges them not to be misled in any way so that they lose their focus on Christ.

Unlike most other letters, he doesn't introduce the corpus of his letter with a positive exposition of salvation, but his *Partitio* starts off with an introductory admonition:

Ὡς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον, ἐν αὐτῷ περιπατεῖτε ... Βλέπετε μὴ τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστὸν [As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live in him ... See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ]. (Col 2:6–8)

Paul provides a short summary of the philosophy's problems. The παράδοσις τῶν ἀνθρώπων is set parallel to the τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. Other than the teaching of Christ, this philosophy is a man-made attempt to understand reality. According to this tradition, 'security was sought from cosmic intimidation – from the terrors of existence in a world which was directed by hostile and implacable powers' (Bruce 1984:95).

He then proceeds in his *Argumentatio* (Col 2:9–23) to equip his addressees against prevailing heresies. In doing so, the author reminds his addressees that they already have full salvation in Christ. He is head of every power and authority (ἐστὶν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας). God has disarmed the powers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in Christ (ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ) (*Probatio*) (Col 2:9–15). The Colossians,

TABLE 4: Condition to be reconciled with God.

Col 1:23	Translation
εἴ γε ἐπιμένετε τῇ πίστει τεθεμελιωμένοι καὶ ἑδραῖοι	if you continue in your faith, established and firm,
καὶ μὴ μετακινῶμενοι ἀπὸ τῆς ἐλπίδος τοῦ εὐαγγελίου οὐ ἠκούσατε ...	and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel

therefore, need no alternative to gain salvation. He warns them against the false teaching that they need more than Christ to be saved, whether through some cultic practices or the worship of angels (θρησκεία τῶν ἀγγέλων). They have died with Christ to the basic principles of this world (ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ ἀπὸ τῶν στοιχείων τοῦ κόσμου) (*Refutatio*) (Col 2:16–23).

The addressees are once again admonished not to lose focus but to set their hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (τὰ ἄνω ζητεῖτε, οὗ ὁ Χριστός ἐστὶν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ Θεοῦ καθήμενος (*Peroratio*) (Col 3:1–4).

He encourages the addressees to live, within a heathen society, a life according to the confessional formula and Christ hymn (*Exhortatio*) (Col 3:5–4:6).

In the corpus, Paul clearly draws his ideas from the Christ hymn as previously quoted. The lives of the addressees are governed by the confession that Christ is one with God and is the Cosmocrator who rules over all sorts of authorities and powers. In Christ, believers have full salvation. Evil powers can no longer pose a threat to them.

The letter is concluded with some personal greetings (Col 4:7–18).

Conclusion

The author of the letter to the Colossians strategically utilises the confessional formula (*Glaubensformel*) and Christ hymn (*Bekentnis*) to put forward the core of his message. Besides their intellectual contents, these components provide an emotive basis for the argument to follow.

Colossians passionately argues the supremacy of Christ. The cosmological status of Christ is clearly stated. He was involved in all creation. All created powers and authorities are subordinated to him. With his reconciliation, he saved people from the dominion of all powers. He controls cosmic powers. His work is fully sufficient. Christians do not have to perform all sorts of rituals to appease these powers in order to be reconciled with God. Through Christ, believers are fully reconciled with God.

Paul associates himself with the contents of the confessional formula and hymn. He expects his addressees to do the same. Misconceptions as propagated by the false teachers can simply be refuted with this mutual confession. The hymn can bring the addressees to a better understanding of the gospel. This confession should be manifested in their everyday lives.

The way the author uses this confession and hymn can be used as example in religious communities today who struggle with fears for cosmic powers in their lives, such as in many African churches struggling with fear of spiritual powers and forces. The idea that ailments and poverty are the result of the influence of malevolent spirits should be refuted with

perspectives provided by biblical texts. No mediums such as ancestors or healers are needed to experience the deliverance of God. Jesus can't be regarded as part of the ancestry as he has the ultimate supreme position over creation and the church. Physical ailments and bad socio-economic positions are not caused by disharmony with unsatisfied ancestors or other spiritual entities. To assume that prosperity can be gained through the mediation of spiritual leaders and miracle workers, is deceptive and often leads to the exploitation of many desperate people who use their limited resources to pay for such assumed mediation.

A hymn such as in Colossians has a strong emotive and didactic function. If liturgically utilised in an appropriate manner, it can contribute to a better understanding of the full salvation in Christ and the countering of deviant man-made misconceptions on deliverance. With a song, a liturgist can sometimes achieve more than with spoken words.

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