

The ecological–theological implications of the narrative of creation in the Pauline tradition

**Author:**Seo-Jun Kim¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of New Testament Studies, United Graduate School of Theology, Keimyung University, Daegu, Republic of Korea

Corresponding author:

Seo-Jun Kim,
aromaletter@live.co.kr

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This study investigates the theological significance of creation across the Pauline corpus, examining key passages in which creation, life, and created beings are explicitly addressed (e.g. Rm 1:20; 8:19–22; 11:36; 14; 1 Cor 8:6; 10:26; 15:20–28, 35–49; Col 1:15–20; Eph 1:20–23; 3:9; 4:6). It argues that, although Paul does not present a systematic doctrine of creation, his letters exhibit a coherent narrative framework that integrates creation, redemption and eschatological consummation. Within this narrative, creation is consistently portrayed as participating alongside humanity in both present suffering and future transformation, thereby forming a shared community of destiny. Furthermore, Paul affirms the intrinsic goodness and revelatory significance of the created order while reconfiguring its value within a christological horizon, in which all things are created through and reconciled in Christ. This study also contends that the eschatological vision of creation's liberation and restoration reshapes the relationship between believers and the created world, fostering an ethic of responsibility without collapsing the distinction between creator and creation. By articulating a christologically grounded narrative of creation, this study offers a theological foundation for contemporary Christian ecological engagement.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study contributes to Pauline scholarship by highlighting the integrative role of creation within the framework of creation, redemption and eschatological consummation. It challenges reductive anthropocentric readings and offers a more comprehensive theological interpretation of Paul. Interdisciplinarily, it provides a christologically grounded foundation for ecological theology and environmental ethics. It also suggests a constructive role for the church in contemporary environmental engagement, grounded in its theological understanding of creation.

Keywords: creation; creation care; ecological theology; environmental ethics; new creation.

Introduction

In response to the growing crisis of ecological pollution and environmental destruction, biblical scholars have increasingly begun to interpret scripture in relation to these pressing issues, and such research continues to develop today. The Pauline epistles, in particular, have long attracted the attention of scholars who critically engage traditional interpretations from an ecological–theological perspective. This is largely because Paul has often been perceived as standing at the centre of what ecological theology critiques as an anthropocentric worldview within traditional Christian thought (Byrne 2000; Horrell 2019). Paul's anthropocentric soteriology and apocalyptic eschatology have been understood as providing theological grounds for the formation of anti-ecological attitudes within the church (Bauckham 2010; Byrne 2000). In response to this perception, a considerable body of scholarship has emerged that seeks to reinterpret the Pauline letters through the lens of ecological theology.

In particular, Romans 8:19–22 and Colossians 1:15–20 – passages that speak of the eschatological liberation of creation and the reconciliation of all things through Christ – have become central texts for ecological readings of Paul. Studies of these passages have attempted to challenge conventional interpretations and propose new perspectives on the value of creation in eschatological fulfilment (Balabanski 2010:103–106; Byrne 2010:91–93; Horrell et al. 2010:65–71).

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These studies have made significant contributions by emphasising that the created order remains under God's ongoing concern and participates in eschatological consummation, thereby helping to establish a theological foundation for Christian environmental ethics. However, some interpretations exhibit logical leaps that weaken their persuasiveness or present exegetical readings that remain distant from the text itself (Horrell et al. 2010). Moreover, by concentrating primarily on the future eschatological state of creation or the final form of 'all things', previous studies often fail to account for the broader discourse on creation found throughout the Pauline letters and thus do not fully articulate its ecological-theological implications (Horrell 2014; Moo 2010).

To overcome these limitations, the present study examines not only Romans 8:19–22 and Colossians 1:15–20 but also all relevant Pauline passages that reflect Paul's understanding of the created order.¹ Although Paul does not devote a specific, systematic section to the doctrine of creation, the belief in creation constitutes a foundational layer of his thought. This study seeks to demonstrate the significance of creation theology in the Pauline letters and to show that it serves as a fundamental presupposition underlying Paul's various arguments. Through an analysis of passages in which creation, creatures and 'all things' appear, this study argues that the Pauline corpus contains a coherent narrative structure of creation – one that extends from creation through redemption to eschatological consummation. Finally, the study aims to draw out the ecological-theological implications of this narrative framework for contemporary Christian environmental engagement.

God's creation and created beings

The origin and goodness of the created order

Among the letters widely recognised as authentically Pauline, 1 Corinthians 8:6 most clearly articulates the fundamental claim that all things originate from God's act of creation. In addressing the issue of food offered to idols in the Corinthian community, Paul first defends the 'knowledge' possessed by those who claim the freedom to eat such food. This knowledge is grounded in faith in the one God, and at its core lies a belief in creation: 'for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things [ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα] ...' The affirmation that all things originate from God reveals God's unique divine power and status while exposing the falsity of all other so-called gods (Garland 2003; Schrage 1995; Thiselton 2000). Everything that exists 'in heaven and on earth' is nothing more than God's creation and cannot be anything beyond that. The same applies to offerings made to such entities.

¹This study seeks to examine all the Pauline letters included in the canon under the designation 'Paul' or 'the Pauline letters', understood as writings shaped by the influence of Paul's thought. Unlike a strictly historical-critical approach, eco-theological studies on Paul often employ these designations as integrative terms referring to the broader Pauline tradition. Accordingly, this study will focus on Colossians – frequently treated in previous eco-theological discussions of Paul – as well as Ephesians and 1 Timothy.

Another passage that connects the origin of all things to God's creative act is Romans 11:36. In the context of praising God's marvellous plan of salvation – through which both Jews and Gentiles receive mercy and are led towards salvation – Paul concludes with a doxological affirmation of God's greatness as the creator of all things: 'For from him and through him and to him are all things [ὅτι ἐξ αὐτοῦ καὶ δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν τὰ πάντα]'. The use of the prepositional triad ἐκ, διὰ, and εἰς may suggest conceptual affinities with Middle Platonic or Stoic natural philosophy (Norden 1913; O'Connor 1978); yet it is ultimately rooted in the Jewish theological tradition that confesses God as the creator and sovereign sustainer of all things (Dunn 1988b; Moo 2018; Sterling 1997; Wolter 2019). The triadic prepositional structure [ἐκ, διὰ, εἰς] not only affirms God as the origin of all things but also emphasises that the ongoing existence of all things depends on God and that their ultimate purpose is directed towards God. Drawing on this theological framework, Paul highlights the depth and greatness of God's wisdom and plan – surpassing human understanding – much like the wisdom tradition reflected in the book of Job (Fitzmyer 1993; Wolter 2019).

In the Deutero-Pauline letters, particularly Ephesians and Colossians, a distinctive christology emerges in which the significance of the Christ event is extended to a cosmic scale, emphasising Christ's lordship and sovereignty over all creation. Nevertheless, the unique sovereignty and status of God as the creator and sustainer of all things remain firmly intact. Ephesians 3:9 clearly demonstrates this point. In explaining God's salvation, which includes the Gentiles, the text emphasises that this plan was established before creation. Through the gospel, Gentiles become fellow members and participants in the promise in Christ, and this reality is described as 'the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things [ἐν τῷ θεῷ τῷ τὰ πάντα κτίσαντι]'. The author's intention is to connect God's salvific work – transcending the distinction between Jews and Gentiles – with God's universal work of creation (Hübner 2002; Thielman 2010). A similar connection appears in Ephesians 4:6, where the unity of all peoples in one community through faith in Christ is again linked to God's creative activity. Although Colossians does not explicitly emphasise God's act of creation as Ephesians does, it still presents the creation of all things through Christ as events that take place within God's sovereign authority. This is particularly evident in the consistent preservation of God as the implied semantic subject (Arnold 2025; Dunn 1996; Hübner 2002).

Based on God's creative act, Paul affirms the purity [καθαρός] and goodness [καλός] of all things. In Romans 14:14 and 20, while addressing disputes within the community concerning food, Paul expresses this conviction clearly. Representing the position of the 'strong', who possess freedom in matters of food, Paul insists that food itself cannot be inherently unclean, nor can it be the cause of distress or destruction. Rather, 'nothing is unclean in itself' (v. 14), and 'all things are clean' [πάντα καθάρ] (v. 20). Such statements evoke the divine

affirmation in the creation narrative, where God repeatedly declares creation to be 'good' (Gn 1). Food itself, as something created by God, is good and clean (cf. 1 Cor 10:26). The issue arises not from the food itself but from the perception of the one who receives it, which may cause offence and even lead to stumbling. 1 Timothy 4:3–5 addresses negative attitudes towards food in a different context. In opposition to heretical teachings that advocate abstaining from food alongside the rejection of sexual desire, this passage reaffirms the intrinsic value of food, which takes precedence over ascetic practices. This affirmation is grounded in the fundamental conviction that 'everything created by God is good' [πάν κτίσμα θεοῦ καλόν]. Accordingly, one's attitude towards food must be shaped by a proper understanding of creation (Herzer 2004; Towner 2006).

The power and divinity of God revealed in creation

For Paul, the created order is the sphere in which God's power and divine nature are made manifest. While indicting the unrighteousness of the Gentiles, Paul presents the created world in Romans 1:20 as evidence of 'his invisible attributes' [τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ], namely, his 'power and divinity' [δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης]. Paul's idea that God can be known through the created world is often associated with Platonic or Stoic philosophical traditions. However, the notion that God's glory and majesty can be perceived within creation is also a recurring motif in the Psalms, Job and the prophetic writings (Jewett 2007; Moo 2018; Wolter 2014). Accordingly, all human beings who live within the created order inhabit a space that continually bears witness to God's power and divinity. Creation functions as a realm in which 'what can be known about God' [τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ] is made manifest (v. 19). All people dwelling within this revelatory space are without excuse in their knowledge of God. In this way, the created order holds a distinctive value for Paul as a locus of divine revelation.

God's act of creation is also invoked by Paul in passages that articulate the core content of the gospel, particularly in striking parallels between God's creative power and the power of resurrection. In Romans 4:17, a key verse describing Abraham's faith, Paul characterises God as the one 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' [ζῳοποιῶντος τοὺς νεκροὺς, καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα]. Paul combines traditional expressions to portray Abraham's trust in God (cf. Jos. Asen. 20:7; Eighteen Benedictions). The phrase καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα should not be understood as calling what does not exist as though it already existed; rather, it refers to God's creative power to bring into being what does not exist (Cranfield 1975; Lohse 2003; Wolter 2014). According to Paul's formulation, Abraham's reception of life – Isaac – from a condition described as virtually dead [νεκρωμένος, νέκρωσις] constitutes a direct experience of God's creative power, which brings forth being out of non-being. By linking Abraham's faith and its resulting blessing to faith in the resurrection of Christ, Paul emphasises that faith in Christ is, in essence,

trust in God's creative power. The God who brought light and life out of darkness and chaos is the same God who granted Isaac to aged Abraham and Sarah, and who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

The interconnection between creation and resurrection is further developed in 1 Corinthians 15:35–49. In this passage, Paul explains the transformation of believers into a spiritual body, and a key feature of his argument is the recurring motif of creation, life and transformation. Paul constructs his argument by moving from events that have already occurred – God's act of creation and the emergence of the created order – to events that have not yet occurred, namely, the resurrection of believers (Schrage 2001; Thiselton 2000). Within this argumentative structure, God's creative power functions as a crucial empirical basis for understanding the resurrection, in which the dead physical body is raised as a spiritual body. Just as a new form emerges from what appears to be a dead seed, so in the resurrection the dead receive a new body endowed with life. This body is spiritual [πνευματικόν] (v. 42) and imperishable [ἀφθαρσία] (v. 44). As the Spirit of life who raised Jesus Christ from the dead is at work in believers (Rm 1:4; 8:11), they too will be raised and will bear 'the image of the man of heaven' [εἰκὼν τοῦ ἐπουρανίου] (v. 49). In this way, Paul responds to those who doubt the resurrection of the body by appealing to God's creative power, explaining both the process and the nature of resurrection through the motifs of creation, life and transformation.

Finally, although the resurrection of Christ or believers is not explicitly mentioned, there is a passage in which God's creative act is closely connected to the divine work of revealing and enabling faith in the gospel – namely, 2 Corinthians 4:6. In its broader context, Paul defends his apostolic ministry by describing the proclamation of the gospel as the shining forth of 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ'. Those who do not believe are portrayed as those who have not received this light, whereas those who have come to faith, like Paul, are described as those who have received 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. Of particular significance is Paul's distinctive rhetorical parallel between God's primordial act of creating light and the ministry of the gospel, both described in terms of shining light. Through this parallel, Paul's ministry of the gospel is implicitly endowed with the authority of the Creator God who brought light into existence (Barnett 1997; Harris 2005; Schmeller 2010). At the same time, it underscores the fundamental significance of the gospel as an act that dispels darkness and brings light into the world.

The Christ event and creation

The creation of all things through Christ

For Paul, God's act of creation not only forms the foundation of monotheistic belief, as in other strands of Jewish thought, but is also integrally related to the resurrection of Christ, the hope of believers' resurrection and the transformative power of the gospel. Moreover, it provides the basis for a new

pattern of life and ethical orientation within faith in Christ, transcending the law and various inherited traditions. Within this broader framework, the creation of all things is associated not only with God but also with Christ. It is important to note that Paul avoids explicitly stating that 'Christ created all things'. Rather, he employs an indirect formulation – especially through the prepositional phrase with διὰ – to indicate that Christ is indeed involved in the act of creation. In this sense, Christ is to be understood not as the Creator in the strict sense, but rather as the mediator of creation.

The christological representation of Christ as the mediator of creation is clearly attested in 1 Corinthians 8:6. In the context of a conflict over food offered to idols, Paul explains to the Corinthian believers what it means to confess faith in the one God who created the world. It entails recognising that there is no other god besides God and that idols are nothing. It also entails understanding that both those who eat and those who abstain from food offered to idols live for the one God, the Father (vv. 4–6). Paul then proceeds to speak of creation through Christ, explaining both the origin of all things and the origin of 'us', that is, the Christian community. According to Paul, 'all things' [τὰ πάντα] came into being through 'one Lord, Jesus Christ' [δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα], and at the same time, 'we' also exist through him [ἡμεῖς δι' αὐτοῦ]. Here, the statement that believers exist through Christ does not refer merely to the creation of their biological existence, but rather to the new creation of 'us' through Christ's death and resurrection, that is, the work of redemption (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gl 6:15) (Fee 2014; Schrage 1995; Thiselton 2000). Attention should be given to the connection between creation through Christ and redemption through Christ.

Another passage that associates Christ with the work of creation is the opening section of Colossians 1:15–20, often referred to as the Christ hymn. Whereas in 1 Corinthians 8:6 Christ is mentioned primarily in relation to the origin of all things, here he is proclaimed as both the ground and the goal of all creation:

All things have been created in him [ἐν αὐτῷ], in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him [δι' αὐτοῦ] and for him [εἰς αὐτόν]. He himself is before all things, and in him [ἐν αὐτῷ] all things hold together. (Col 1:16–17)

The emphasis on Christ's comprehensive authority over all things is one of the most distinctive features of Colossians. This is further underscored by the declaration that Christ is 'the firstborn' [πρωτότοκος] (v. 15) and that he holds 'first place' in all things [πρωτεύων] (v. 18). Similarly, Ephesians, which also exhibits a cosmic expansion of christology, strongly emphasises Christ's universal sovereignty and dominion over all things. Although Ephesians does not explicitly describe the creation of all things through Christ, its portrayal of the unification of all things in Christ and of Christ as ruler over both the church

and the entire cosmos effectively presuppose the idea of creation through Christ (Campbell 2023; DeSilva 2022; Hübner 2002).

Within the broader context of Colossians, the message that Christ, as the mediator of creation, surpasses all powers and authorities is closely connected to exhortations addressed to believers who, despite professing faith in Christ, remain entangled in erroneous beliefs and religious practices (especially Col 2:8–19; cf. Eph 4:7–24). What Colossians emphasises above all is that believers must establish a new relationship with all that exists within the framework of their faith in Christ, who has redeemed them. This new relationship begins with the recognition that, as the cosmic Christ hymn proclaims, all things in the world are subject to Christ's universal lordship and sovereignty, and that at the centre of this sovereignty stands the church, which has been transferred into the kingdom of Christ (Arnold 2025; Hübner 2002). Christ surpasses all things not only in terms of temporal priority and hierarchical status, but also in essence. Acknowledging Christ's lordship and rule provides the foundation for believers to move beyond former patterns of life – such as regulations concerning days, festivals and food, as well as the worship of angels – and to experience true salvation within faith in Christ. Similarly, Ephesians also seeks to cultivate a proper understanding of cosmic spiritual powers. However, its primary emphasis lies in the abolition of the law through the Christ event, through which the unity of Jews and Gentiles has been made possible (Eph 2:11ff.; 3:1ff.).

The reconciliation of all things through Christ

In the latter part of the Christ hymn in Colossians, Colossians 1:20 moves beyond the creation of all things through Christ to speak of the reconciliation of all things through him. In the undisputed Pauline letters, reconciliation with God through Christ is clearly applied to human beings – specifically to those who believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour (Rm 5:1, 10–11; 2 Cor 5:18–19). However, the Christ hymn brings together creation and reconciliation through Christ, thereby offsetting the imbalance between humanity and 'all things' observed in 1 Corinthians 8:6. Within this expanded theological horizon, an analogy emerges between Christ's relationship with believers and his relationship with all things, and these two dimensions are intricately integrated with Christ at the centre (Bruce 1984; McKnight 2018; Moo 2008).

The distinctive character of the reconciliation of all things in Colossians 1:20 becomes even clearer when compared with Romans 8. In Romans 8, the eschatological liberation of creation is presented as a future event, anticipated in hope. By contrast, in Colossians 1:20, the reconciliation of all things through Christ is portrayed as an accomplished event. Because this reconciliation is said to have taken place through the blood of Christ's cross, it cannot be understood

as a future occurrence. Furthermore, whereas the liberation of creation in Romans 8 is not explicitly linked to the Christ event but rather to the revelation of believers, the reconciliation of all things in Colossians is directly grounded in Christ's death, thereby extending the significance of the Christ event to a cosmic scale. This cosmic extension is already implied in the preceding statement that all fullness dwells in Christ (v. 19).

What, then, does it mean to say that all things have been reconciled to God? Reconciliation generally refers to the restoration of peaceful relations between parties previously in a state of hostility (Breytenbach 1989; Martin 1981). Yet Colossians 1:20 does not clearly specify the prior condition of all things in relation to God before this reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians 5:18–21 and Romans 5:1–11, the meaning of reconciliation with God is made explicit through the descriptions of the hostile relationship between sinful humanity and God. In Colossians, however, such explicit hostility is described primarily in 1:21 with reference to the former state of those who have now become believers. What can be inferred from the broader context is that all things, rather than being in an overtly hostile relationship with God, existed in a disordered relation that deviated from the original purpose of creation. When considered alongside Colossians 2:15, which speaks of Christ's victory over rulers and authorities, it is reasonable to assume that certain powers stood in opposition. In this sense, the core content of reconciliation is that all things are once again placed under Christ's lordship and dominion, through which the original order intended by the Creator God is realised within the world through Christ (Dunn 1996; McKnight 2018; Moo 2008).

In Ephesians 2:16, reconciliation clearly refers to the event in which Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God, with particular emphasis on the Gentiles entering a relationship of peace with God. Nevertheless, as noted above, Ephesians – like Colossians – strongly emphasises the newly established order of all things centred on Christ, and the proper relationship between believers and the created order that follows from it. Although Ephesians does not explicitly mention the reconciliation of all things, it does speak of Christ's victory over all powers – rulers, authorities, powers and dominions (Eph 1:21–22). One notable difference from Colossians is that in Ephesians the authority and dominion of Christ over all things are expressed not only through creation and redemption but also through his resurrection and exaltation (Eph 1:20). The victory over rulers and authorities is also connected with the mission of the church, as the church's work is portrayed not merely as the salvation of human beings but as a struggle against spiritual powers (Eph 6:12) (Bruce 1984; Thielman 2010). Thus, the church is not simply a local community but occupies a central place within the cosmic community whose head is Christ (Eph 1:22–23).

Eschatological consummation and creation

The eschatological freedom of creation

In the undisputed Pauline letters, there is no explicit reference to the cosmic scope of the Christ event described in Colossians and Ephesians as the reconciliation or fullness of all things. Instead, in Romans 8:19–22, the freedom of creation is presented as a scene within an eschatological vision. As noted above, reconciliation with God in the present is granted only to those who believe in and accept the gospel of Christ. What, then, is the present condition of creation? In this passage, the condition of creation may be summarised in four expressions: (1) it has been subjected to futility; (2) it is enslaved to decay; (3) it groans and suffers; and (4) it eagerly awaits the revealing of the children of God, that is, its participation in the freedom of glory.

Within the immediate context, it is clear that Paul refers to the groaning and suffering of creation to comfort Christians who are themselves enduring suffering and to offer them hope. It is important to note that in Romans 8:22ff. Paul speaks of three distinct subjects who groan: (1) creation (v. 22); (2) 'we' (v. 23); and finally (3) the Spirit (v. 26). By referring to the groaning not only of 'us' but also of creation and the Spirit, Paul reminds the Roman believers that they are not alone in their suffering. Of particular significance is Paul's statement that creation 'groans together' [συστενάζει] and 'suffers together' [συνωδίνει] with believers. This clearly indicates a solidarity between creation and believers in their shared experience of suffering. The motif that creation suffers and is restored in connection with humanity's condition is frequently found in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature (Gn 3:17–19; Is 11:6–9; 24:1–20; 43:19–21; 55:12–13; Jr 4:23–28; Ez 34:25–31; Hs 2:18; 4:1–3; Jl 1:10–12, 15–20; Zph 1:2–3; Zch 8:12; 1 En 45:4–5; 51:4–5; 4 Ezr 8:51–54) (Horrell et al. 2010; Marlow 2009). Drawing on this tradition, Paul interprets the suffering of believers within a broader, more-than-human framework and articulates a solidarity of groaning and suffering between creation and humanity (Byrne 2000; Horrell et al. 2010; Jewett 2004).

What, then, does it mean that creation has been 'subjected to futility' [τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἡ κτίσις ὑπετάγη] and is in 'bondage to decay' [ἡ δουλεία τῆς φθορᾶς]? The term ματαιότης, which Paul uses to describe the present state of creation, is semantically broad. In wisdom literature, it can refer to a range of meanings from physical mortality to meaninglessness and ontological emptiness (Hahne 2006; Wolter 2014). Within the context of Romans, it may be understood as describing creation's deviation from its original purpose, having become entangled in human desire and sin (cf. Rm 1:18–25) (Horrell et al. 2010; Moo 2018). The expression 'bondage to decay' may be taken in its most straightforward sense, referring to the condition in which creation is subject to corruption and perishing. Many commentators have associated these expressions with the fall of humanity in Genesis (Gn 3:17–19)

and the resulting curse upon the ground (Byrne 2000; Dunn 1988a; Hahne 2006; Moo 2018). However, the text of Romans itself contains no explicit reference to Adam's sin, nor does it clearly allude to the curse of the earth. It is therefore uncertain whether the subjection of creation to futility should be traced directly back to Adam's transgression (Horrell et al. 2010). From a broader perspective, the cause of this subjection may be linked not to a single past act, but to the ongoing sin and unrighteousness of humanity. Within the flow of the argument, the more immediate cause of creation's groaning and suffering is the reality of evil and injustice in the world – specifically, the persecution of believers, which Paul himself is witnessing (cf. Rm 8:35ff.).

What creation now awaits amid its groaning and suffering is the eschatological freedom of the children of God [ἡ ἐλευθερία τῆς δόξης]. When the children of God are revealed and come to participate in the glory of Christ's resurrection, creation too will share in that glory. This will mark the moment when creation is finally set free from its subjection to futility and its bondage to decay. Notably, Paul employs the same language to describe the eschatological future of creation as he does for the children of God. Thus, the solidarity between creation and believers, previously emphasised in the context of suffering, also extends to future participation in glory. Although Paul's brief description does not allow us to reconstruct in detail what this participation entails, reference to passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:35ff. may suggest a transformation of creation into a new mode of existence – one that is enduring and imperishable (Hahne 2006; Horrell 2010; Jewett 2004). Even so, what remains clear is that creation shares, as a companion in a common destiny, in the future freedom of glory that God will ultimately grant to believers.

Eschatological consummation and all things

Alongside Romans 8:19–22, another passage that portrays the eschatological future of realities beyond humanity is 1 Corinthians 15:27–28. In that it speaks not merely of creation but of 'all things', and emphasises Christ's comprehensive lordship and dominion over all things, this passage is closely related to Colossians 1:15–20 and Ephesians 1:20–23. However, like Romans 8:19–22, it presents Christ's universal rule not as an already accomplished reality but as a future eschatological vision. Moreover, the final sovereignty over all things does not terminate in Christ but ultimately returns, through Christ, to God.

The eschatological consummation [τέλος], in which God becomes 'all in all' [τὰ πάντα ἐν ᾧ], is situated within the cosmic drama of Christ's *parousia* and judgement. As Paul explains the future resurrection to the Corinthians, he states that those who belong to Christ [οἱ τοῦ Χριστοῦ] will be raised at his coming. Along with this *parousia*, there will be judgement upon all 'rulers and authorities and powers' [πᾶσα ἀρχὴ καὶ πᾶσα ἐξουσία καὶ δύναμις]. As in Colossians and Ephesians, this judgement most likely extends beyond earthly powers to include cosmic and spiritual forces

(Garland 2003; Schrage 2001; Thiselton 2000). This interpretation is further corroborated by Paul's reference in the immediate context to the final enemy to be destroyed – 'death' (1 Cor 15:26, 55). When Christ's reign reaches its consummation through the defeat of all hostile powers, he will hand over the kingdom to God. In this way, the eschatological telos is realised, whereby God becomes 'all in all'.

In what has been called a 'small apocalyptic drama' (1 Cor 15:23–28) (Lindemann 2000), the *parousia*, judgement, and reign of Christ form the central axis. Yet, as Paul repeatedly emphasises in verses 27–28, it is ultimately God who subjects all things under Christ's rule. God's absolute sovereignty over all things is evident both in the fact that he is not included among the 'all things' subjected (v. 27) and in that he is the one who ultimately brings the kingdom to completion. Above all, the expression 'all in all' most clearly conveys that God is the Creator and sovereign ruler over everything. That God becomes 'all in all' signifies that his rule over all things is fully consummated and that all things are restored to the order originally intended in creation (Fee 2014; Schrage 2001; Garland 2003).

Thus, the eschatological consummation envisioned by Paul entails not only the resurrection of those who belong to Christ but also the restoration of all things within God, in accordance with his immeasurable wisdom and providential plan. Although the resurrection of believers occupies a central place in this cosmic drama, the eschatological fulfilment brought about through Christ's *parousia* and judgement also includes the restoration of all things to their proper place. In the kingdom that is consummated through Christ and ultimately handed over to God, both humanity and creation will together participate in a harmonious state characterised by the fullness of life.

The ecological–theological implications of the narrative of creation

The narrative of creation across creation, redemption and eschatological consummation

As we have seen, the Pauline tradition is permeated with references to the created order. This narrative of creation appears in a variety of contexts and is interwoven with diverse theological themes: in the apologetic defence of the gospel (Rm 1:18–23), in instructing believers on matters such as food and ethical conduct (1 Cor 8:6; 10:26; Rm 14:20; 1 Tm 4:4), in articulating the hope of resurrection (Rm 4:17; 1 Cor 15:35–44) and in shaping a proper understanding of the created world (Col 1:15–20; Eph 3:9; 4:6). Moreover, in the Pauline letters, references to God's creative activity are not confined to the initial act of creation. Rather, creation is integrally related to the broader history of salvation: to the emergence of life from what is as good as dead, as exemplified in the story of Abraham; to the resurrection of Jesus Christ

from the dead; and to the eschatological resurrection of those who, like Abraham, trust in God's life-giving power. In this way, creation serves as a theological framework that encompasses the whole of God's saving work.

Crucially, as evidenced in passages such as Romans 8:21; 1 Corinthians 15:28, Colossians 1:20, and Ephesians 1:22, creation is not mentioned only in relation to its origin but also in connection with the history of redemption through Christ and the moment of eschatological consummation. Throughout these stages, creation is consistently portrayed as accompanying humanity. This persistent inclusion of creation within the overarching drama of God's saving and restoring work reveals both God's particular concern for creation and its intrinsic value (Horrell 2014; Moo & Moo 2018). Accordingly, within the narrative that spans creation, redemption and eschatological fulfilment, the created world is not merely a space for human activity – something to be used and consumed for human survival – but a reality that participates in God's life-giving and restorative work. It is destined to be transformed into a state of glory together with humanity and to share in an enduring, eschatological existence (cf. Rm 8:21; 1 Cor 15:36–44).

Furthermore, this narrative demonstrates that creation and humanity stand in a relationship of solidarity as a shared community of destiny. Romans 8:19–23 offers one of the most striking expressions of this solidarity: creation suffers and groans together with believers amid the painful reality shaped by human unrighteousness; it shares in their hope for eschatological freedom; and it ultimately participates in that freedom (Byrne 2010; Hahne 2006). As discussed above, Colossians 1:15–20 and Ephesians 1:20–23 likewise portray, within an expanded framework of cosmic christology, the close relationship between humanity, redeemed through Christ, and all things, reconciled and unified through him. Within this theological structure, the community of believers – the church – and the entirety of creation are brought together into a new order and a unified community centred on Christ (Balabanski 2010; Russell 1993).

The goodness and restoration of creation

According to Paul, the created order, as God's creation, is good and pure. This conviction serves as a fundamental presupposition that shapes attitudes towards all created things, as seen in passages addressing disputes over food (1 Cor 8:1–13; Rm 14:13–23; 1 Tm 4:1–5). As God's creation, inherently good and pure, the created world also possesses a distinctive value: it reveals God's power and divinity (Rm 1:19–20). Creation serves as a medium of revelation, containing within itself what may be known about God. Importantly, Paul does not ground this valuation of creation solely in Jewish tradition or Greco-Roman philosophical thought. Rather, through a christological expansion – most clearly expressed in 1 Corinthians 8:6 – he redefines the value of creation in relation to Christ (cf. Col 1:15–17). This renewed christological

understanding of creation provides an important foundation for contemporary Christian ecological theology and ethics.

Such a perspective on creation, grounded in faith in God as Creator, offers a dimension of ecological responsibility that goes beyond what general environmental ethics can provide. Christian ecological theology does not advocate the preservation and restoration of the environment merely for the sake of human well-being or for the intrinsic beauty of nature. Rather, Christians are called to care for and restore the created order because they believe it to be the creation of God – and of Christ – and because they recognise the value and role of all beings within it as God's creatures (Horrell et al. 2010; Moo & Moo 2018). Yet today, the created world – which ought to reveal God's power and divinity, and even to bear witness to Christ – is, to borrow Paul's language, marked by suffering and groaning. As emphasised above, this suffering and groaning is not only that of creation but also that of humanity.

As we have seen, the narrative of creation – spanning creation, redemption and eschatological consummation – depicts a vast cosmic drama in which God restores creation (or all things) that exist in suffering, groaning or in a disordered relationship with him. In terms drawn from Colossians and Ephesians, the new cosmic order, reconstituted around Christ and the church, is part of God's salvific plan established in Christ before creation. The goal of this divine economy is that God may become 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28). In this restored state, where God's sovereignty and rule over all things are fully realised, death is no more, and the fullness of life pervades all creation. The recognition that God not only sustains life throughout the unfolding of history but also directs the world towards the eschatological vision of the renewal of all things provides both the foundation and the ultimate orientation for contemporary Christian engagement in the protection and restoration of the environment (Horrell 2014; Russell 1993; Sittler 1972).

Eschatological consummation and a new relationship with creation

In the Pauline Corpus, the eschatological destiny of creation is not fundamentally different from that of believers. It entails liberation from bondage to decay (Rm 8:21), transformation into a new form (1 Cor 15:35ff.) and restoration to the state originally intended by God at creation (1 Cor 15:28; Col 1:20; Eph 1:22–23). This eschatological vision provides an important theological resource for responding to critiques that the Christian worldview constructs a hierarchical and even oppressive relationship between humanity and nature (McDonagh 1990; Russell 1993). To be sure, a comprehensive reading of the narrative of creation – spanning creation, redemption and eschatological consummation – does not support the claim that humanity and the rest of creation possess identical value (Horrell et al. 2010; Moo & Moo 2018). This is evident even in passages such as Colossians 1:20, where the theme of the reconciliation of all things might seem to elevate creation to its highest point. Nevertheless, the

portrayal of creation within Paul's vision of eschatological consummation undoubtedly fosters an attitude of reverence and respect towards the created order (Hill 1998; Horrell 2014; Moo & Moo 2018).

At the same time, a sacralisation of creation itself stands at odds with the form of ecological life envisioned within Christianity. Romans 1:19ff. provides a clear boundary for the relationship between believers and creation: creation must not become an object of worship in itself. The glory of creation ought to be directed back to God, its Creator; yet, in their ignorance, humans fall into the worship of perishable created things. The emphasis on a proper understanding of creation, already evident in Colossians and Ephesians, is grounded theologically in the Christ event. The Christian church confesses Christ, through whom all things were created and through whom all things are reconciled to God, and is therefore called to move beyond misguided forms of veneration or superstition directed towards creation. Christian ecological engagement is thus not grounded in the worship of creation but in the value that God – and Christ – has bestowed upon it (Moo & Moo 2018). At this point, Christian ecological movements may be distinguished from ecological approaches rooted in indigenous spirituality or animistic belief systems.

Finally, it is important to highlight the significance of Paul in reconfiguring the value and destiny of creation beyond the framework of general Jewish creation faith, situating them within a christological horizon. As noted above, Paul articulates a christological doctrine of creation, according to which all things originate from Christ. This perspective makes a significant contribution by introducing a christological motivation for the preservation and care of the created order. Moreover, the reordering of the cosmos around Christ, emphasised in passages such as 1 Corinthians 15:28, Colossians 1:20, and Ephesians 1:22–23, carries important implications for Christian ecological engagement. Within the Pauline vision, the eschatological freedom of creation – the process by which creation is restored to its original order – places the work of Christ at the centre, encompassing his death, resurrection, exaltation and parousia. Among these, Christ's death holds particular significance for the reconciliation of all things. The self-giving sacrifice of Christ, through which God brings about the reconciliation of all creation, provides a fundamental paradigm for the attitude the Christian church ought to adopt towards the created order (Horrell et al. 2010; Moo & Moo 2018).

Conclusion

The various passages concerning the created world in the Pauline letters have been examined within the overarching framework of creation, redemption and eschatological consummation. This framework reveals a coherent narrative structure that may aptly be described as a story of creation. In the Pauline tradition, creation consistently appears as humanity's companion within the overarching redemptive drama of God, one that brings life and restoration. Creation

participates not only in the suffering and groaning experienced by humanity, but also in the eschatological freedom and restoration that lies ahead. All this underscores God's particular concern for the created world.

Paul further affirms the distinctive value of creation as God's handiwork. This value is evident in the conviction that everything God has created is good and pure, and in the understanding that creation serves as a medium of revelation, manifesting God's power and divine nature. Such an outlook serves as a foundational premise shaping how believers relate to creation. Moreover, Paul does not ground the value of creation solely in traditional Jewish creation faith but develops a new christological foundation by presenting creation as mediated through Christ. As emphasised above, this christological grounding provides a uniquely Christian motivation for ecological engagement. In addition, the vision of a renewed cosmic order centred on Christ and the church calls forth the church's distinctive vocation within the whole of creation.

The Christian church, therefore, is called to cultivate a proper understanding of the created world, considering the conviction that God is directing history towards an eschatological consummation in which creation itself participates. The eschatological destiny of creation is not different from that of believers: it entails liberation from decay, transformation into a new form and restoration to the state originally intended by God. This vision challenges hierarchical and dominant conceptions of the created world, instead of fostering an attitude of reverence and respect towards it. Furthermore, Paul's narrative of creation, structured around the Christ event, provides a clear orientation for Christian ecological engagement.

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