

Some Reflections on New Testament Hymns

Ralph P. Martin

[p.37]

Introduction

In what may be regarded as a notable section of his compendious *New Testament Theology*,¹ Donald Guthrie bids us consider the place and significance of 'the Christological "hymns"' which modern New Testament study has isolated, classified and studied, usually at some depth. In tribute to the honoree of this *Festschrift* the following pages are offered as an attempt to set the New Testament hymns found in the Pauline corpus—and with special attention to the Christological examples—in their historical, cultural and theological framework. It is generally conceded that the heart of Paul's understanding of the person and place of Jesus Christ as the church's Lord and creation's head is to be found in these hymnic ascriptions. So what is being considered should have a distinct bearing on New Testament Christology and give us some pointers in the modern discussion.

The background and early development

The specimens of church life that meet us in the pages of the New Testament literature give evidence of a set of worshipping communities of believing men and women. This is clear from the descriptions in the book of Acts (1:14; 2:42, 46; 4:31; 5:12; 13:1-3; 20:7-12) and from the pastoral remarks of Paul, notably in 1 Corinthians 5:3-8 and chs. 10-14. It might be expected that these chapters and references would contain some allusion to a specific part of the Christian cultus, namely the worship of God in religious song. That is exactly what we find in one of the most revealing of these texts. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 Paul sets down what appears to be an 'order' of public worship:

[p.38]

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn (Greek *psalms*), a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.

Three short comments are invited on this verse whose importance can hardly be over-estimated. First, most likely Paul is writing descriptively and assessing the situation as it existed in the Corinthian assembly. He need not be expressing approval of the various items in the list.² Rather, in a way analogous to his appeal to the strange practice of 'baptism for the dead' (1 Cor. 15:29) he may simply be reporting what was the case at Corinth. Secondly, the objectivity of the statements in this verse seems to be confirmed by how Paul proceeds: 'let all things be done for edification'. As J. Jervell³ pointed out, he did not say here, 'let each one bring what he has', but 'what each one has let him bring to *edify the church*'. The overall

¹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (IVP, 1981), pp. 343-365.

² Or even actively disapproving of this type of worship because of the dangers leading to confusion and disorder inherent in it, according to A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, ICC (T. & T. Clark, 1914), p.320.

³ J. Jervell, *Imago Dei in Gen. i. 26f. im Spätjudentum, in der Gnosis and in den paulinischen Briefen* (FRLANT 76: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), p.206 n.132.

concern of the apostle was not with the presence or absence of specific elements of corporate worship. Rather his main interest was to ensure that all contributions of whatever nature served to promote the well-being and growth of the entire community (*cf.* 12:7: 'for the common good' and the repeated stress on 'edification' in 10:24; 14:5, 12). As a third observation, we may remark that Paul chose to open the list with a reference to 'the hymn'. Some see here an allusion to synagogue practice based on the rubric to begin the worship of God always with praise; others infer that there must have been special significance for the priority of hymns in Paul's thought of a correct 'order' or sequence.⁴ 'All things should be done decently and *in order*' (14:40: where the last words, *kata taxin*, could conceivably reflect a concern for arranging items of worship in what Paul deemed to be the right sequence as distinct from spontaneous contributions offered by the Corinthian believers; *cf.* 1 Clement 40:1 which so interprets 1 Cor. 14:40).

Paul's word *psalmos* has an unusual connotation, since it could be misunderstood by Greek-speaking people as a special type of musical composition: and yet it would be familiar to readers of the LXX who would recognize it as the heading given there to many psalms. The suggestion, made by M. Hengel,⁵ is that *psalmos* would be understood on its non-Greek, therefore Jewish, background.

[p.39]

If Paul's term is deliberately chosen, it would indicate a contribution to Corinthian worship in religious song which was based on the Hebrew psalter.

The origin of the church in the matrix of the Jewish ancestral faith made it inevitable that the first followers of the risen Lord, themselves Jews by birth and tradition, would wish to express their devotion in a way to which they were accustomed. But did the synagogue pattern of worship include the use of religious song? The evidence is hard to interpret, and it is usually concluded that psalm-singing was confined to the Temple and its choirs, while the Palestinian synagogues adopted a severely didactic form of worship based on a sequence of prayers, Scripture lections, homily and confession of Israel's faith.⁶ This distinction may well have held for Palestinian Judaism or at least for Judaism in its orthodox centre at Jerusalem. But clearly the practices of sectarian groups, at Qumran and among the Therapeutae according to Philo, did include a celebration in song shared by all the community members. In the world of the Jewish dispersion, the hellenistic synagogues were more open to this type of worship. It may be, as Hengel suggests,⁷ that the excluding of hymns from the orthodox synagogues was a response to the use of hymns among groups the Pharisees judged to be heretical.

The evidence of the Lucan canticles (Luke 1:46-55—the *Magnificat*; 1:68-79—the *Benedictus*; 2:14—the *Gloria in excelsis*; 2:29-32—the *Nunc Dimittis*), certain hymnic

⁴ A. Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu* (Calwer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1969), p.383: 'the fact that the hymn/song is mentioned first of all perhaps points to the situation where the assembly began with a song'.

⁵ Martin Hengel, 'Hymn and Christology' in *Studia Biblica* 1978, III. Papers on Paul and Other New Testament Authors. Sixth International Congress on Biblical Studies. Oxford 3-7 April 1978, ed. E. A. Livingstone (*JSNT Supp. Series 3*: Sheffield, 1980), pp. 173-197 (174).

⁶ See W. Schrage, art. 'synagogē', *TDNT* 7, pp. 798-852.

⁷ M. Hengel, *art. cit.*, p.188.

fragments in the book of Revelation (e.g. 15:30 and the early scenes recorded of the Jerusalem church supports the conclusion that messianic psalms were being sung in the Jewish-Christian circles that treasured these compositions. The purport of these compositions, from all we know of them, was partly celebratory but chiefly apologetic, and formed part of the theodicy by which the early Christians sought to justify their conviction that God was sovereign in their affairs in spite of the suffering and opposition they were called upon to endure (see Acts 4:24-31). The theme of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy in their day linked these messianic pietists with the Qumran covenanters, with the obvious difference that the Jewish messianists held firmly to the belief that the promised Messiah had come and that his name was Jesus of Nazareth. His sufferings had issued in a triumphant vindication by God (Acts 2:32), attested by Davidic oracles and by their own experience as witnesses. And now Jesus of Nazareth was exalted as head of a messianic community in which alone salvation was offered as a present reality (Acts 2:37-42; 4:10-12). The centre of their proclamation was also the focus of their

[p.40]

worship: God has glorified his son/servant (Greek *pais*) Jesus, who is now enthroned as the 'stone', disallowed and rejected by the Jewish 'builders' (or leaders) but raised to the place of honour by Israel's God himself (Acts 3:13; 4:11). It is not difficult to detect the way Christian apologetic was already busy at work in exploiting the messianic motifs in such psalms as Psalm 2 (God adopts his son;⁸ cf. the early hymnic fragment in Rom. 1:3f.), Psalm 22 which foretold the sufferings and reward of the righteous man in Israel,⁹ Psalm 45 (the anointed warrior-hero who is now 'lord') and especially the related Psalms 8 and 110.¹⁰ From the early speeches in Acts we may conclude that the leading theme relating to the understanding of Jesus' mission was his rejection and vindication, and to illustrate this nexus the proof-text appealed to was Psalm 118:22:

The stone the builders cast aside
Is now the building's strength and pride

(as Moffatt's translation renders the couplet). The same *testimonium* recurs in the Gospel tradition (Mk. 12:10 par.) as well as in 1 Peter (2:7); and Paul is indebted to the same 'complex', or text-plot to do with the 'stoneship' of Christ in Romans 9:33.

The interesting thing to notice is the continuance of the theme of victory in Psalm 118:26 which apparently found its way into early liturgies as an acclamation heralding the triumphant return of Messiah, based on his entry into the holy city (Mk. 11:9 par.), but soon the text came to be associated with his parousia in glory. The evidence for that latter idea is the Aramaic prayer-call *marana tha*, 'Our Lord, come!' found in 1 Corinthians 16:22 and Didache 10:6. The division of the letters in the original term *maranatha* so as to yield the translation just given is all but conclusively proved by some recent discoveries from Qumran's Cave 4 (*i.e.*

⁸ For the wider implications of Psalm 2:7 in the NT, see L. C. Allen, 'The Old Testament Background of PRO-ORIZEIN in the New Testament', *NTS* 17, 1970-71, pp. 104-108.

⁹ J. Reumann, 'Psalm 22 at the Cross: Lament and Thanksgiving for Jesus Christ', *Interpretation* 28, 1974, pp. 39-58.

¹⁰ On the use of Psalm 110 as a Christological 'testimony' see W. R. G. Loader, 'Christ at the Right Hand - Ps. cx. 1 in the New Testament', *NTS* 24, 1978, pp. 199-217.

dated in the Middle Aramaic period).¹¹ Thus the contention that the earliest believers invoked the risen Jesus as Lord and awaited his return in glorious power rests on a firm linguistic basis.

Two other factors need to be added. M. Hengel's recent discussion argues that *maranatha* was 'an expression of the close relationship which Jesus'

[p.41]

disciples had with their Lord who had been elevated to share God's throne'.¹² In other words, the prayer-speech, 'Come, our Lord' suggests the incipience of a cultus centred upon the living Lord who was believed to be now exalted in fulfilment of Psalm 110:1. The focus of concentration was clearly set on the glory Jesus Christ had recently received, and his elevation to the divine splendour—clearly seen and heard in Stephen's cry, 'I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7:56)—eclipsed other aspects of Christ's person at that time. The enthroned Lord was present as 'the glory of God' glimpsed as a known reality (Acts 7:55).¹³ And it was not appropriate, for reasons we have yet to explore, to relate his glory to his pre-temporal existence (his 'pre-existence') or his future lordship at the end of the age. The earliest Christology had a vision of the Easter triumph of the crucified Jesus and its immediate after-glow in his being exalted to the Father's presence, whence the blessedness of the new age of messianic salvation flowed down to those men and women who in turn were caught up to share his present reign.

That 'conquering new-born joy' is expressed in the pristine church's sense of 'unbounded gladness' (Greek *agalliasis*). The term in question is, as R. Bultmann¹⁴ has shown, essentially eschatological. That is, the joy refers to a present experience that reached out to grasp the wonder of what God had promised to do at the end-time when his kingdom would come and his will prevail over the earth. For these believers, living as they were sure at 'the turning point of the ages', God's age-old promises of his rule's coming in power were known as present fact since God had raised Jesus out of defeat and death into new life and had given him glory (1 Pet. 1:21). It was not to be wondered at therefore that they could rejoice with a joy both unutterable and exalted (1 Pet. 1:8) in keeping with their knowledge of the enthroned Lord.

Yet he was no distant figure. The prayer *maranatha* is suggestively set in the context of the eucharist where also 'they broke bread... with glad (Greek *en agalliasei*) and generous hearts' (Acts 2:46f.). The Aramaic watchword thus found its natural setting as an invocation for 'the coming of the Lord to His people in a visitation which prefigures the final advent'.¹⁵

¹¹ See J. A. Fitzmyer, 'The Aramaic Language and the Study of the New Testament', *JBL* 99, March 1980, pp. 5-21 (13).

¹² M. Hengel, 'Hymn and Christology' (as in n.5), p.185.

¹³ This verse could well be translated, Stephen 'saw the glory of God, that is (Greek *kai*) Jesus standing at the right hand of God', a possibility suggested in R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi: Philippians ii. 5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, SNTSMS 4 (CUP, 1967), p. 111, and now accepted by N. Turner, *Christian Words* (T. & T. Clark, 1980), p. 198, n. 14.

¹⁴ R. Bultmann, art. 'agalliaomai', 'agalliasis', *TDNT* 1, pp. 19-21.

¹⁵ G. Wainwright, *Doxology. The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (Epworth Press/OUP, NY, 1980), p.72.

[p.42]

So far then we have considered one specimen of 'religious song', patterned on the Old Testament Psalter and expressing in a conscious tribute to the messianic types already available the fulfilment of Israel's hope for a coming saviour. He was hailed as Jesus of Nazareth who after the humiliation of rejection and death was now raised to his Father's presence where he enjoyed the divine glory. He will come again from that seat to consummate God's purposes (for Israel); and in the meanwhile—and it may be as a prelude to his advent—he was appealed to to 'come' and visit his people who 'broke bread' as a sign of their joyful participation in the new age of the messianic banquet soon to be spread and shared (based on Is. 25, as O. Hofius has shown).¹⁶ Such examples of 'psalms' applied to Christ may well be accurately called 'messianic' tributes, or 'Christ psalms'.

The setting in the Graeco-Roman world

Associated with the influence and work of the proto-martyr Stephen and his followers, the early Christian mission reached out to offer its message to those who lived in Graeco-Roman society.¹⁷ In that world the singing of hymns to the deities of contemporary religious cults was already an established practice. The use of hymns in corporate and private worship in that culture went back a long way; but it reached its high-point at a time when the finest and most sensitive spirits in late classical civilization were becoming conscious of their need of 'salvation'. The immediate occasion was the onset of pessimism and despair, caused partly by Greek science that offered a naturalistic explanation of the universe and partly by Eastern astrology that placed a vast distance between human beings and the gods whom Homer and Hesiod described. A valiant attempt to relate the traditional deities to human life was made as an answer to belief in impersonal 'fate', or 'chance' or iron 'necessity' (Greek *heimarmenē*). We see a fine specimen of this religious aspiration in Cleanthes' 'Hymn to Zeus':

Thou, O Zeus, art praised above all gods: many are
thy names and thine is all power for ever.

[p.43]

The beginning of the world was from thee: and with law
thou rulest over all things.
Unto thee may all flesh speak: for we are thy offspring.
Therefore will I raise a hymn to thee: and will ever sing
of thy power.

Written by Cleanthes (c. 331-232 BC) this poem represents a lofty statement of Stoic belief in the rule of 'law' which governs the universe, and a readiness to apply the idea of Zeus as father and king of the gods to humankind (see Acts 17:28 for a similar connection made in

¹⁶ O. Hofius, *Jesu Tischgemeinschaft mit den Sündern* (Calwer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1976), pp. 16-25.

¹⁷ I accept M. Hengel's far-reaching conclusion that in the earliest Christianity there were already two groups: an Aramaic-speaking congregation of Jewish messianists (the so-called *Urgemeinde*) and also, maybe from the start, a Greek-speaking congregation led by the Seven and with Stephen as prominent as spokesperson for a missionary theology. So-called 'hellenistic Christianity' on this view was part of the earliest church and not a later development due to the mission to Gentiles. See Hengel, 'Zwischen Jesus and Paulus. Die "Hellenisten", die "Sieben" and Stephanus (Apg 6,1-15, 7,54-8,3)', *ZTK* 72, 1975, pp. 151-206; and cf. I. H. Marshall, 'Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments', *NTS* 19, 1972-73, pp.271-287.

Paul's Athenian sermon). But the Stoic lacked a firm conviction regarding God as personal, and the hymn does not really break out of the imprisoning circle of 'fate' in which all human lives are enmeshed. In fact, this same 'Hymn to Zeus' trails off in a sad identification of the father of the gods and human beings with fate itself. The noble sentiments here expressed serve only to show the need for some confidence in a personal God whose ways are known and can be trusted.

An even more poignant example of the limitations of contemporary religious aspiration is seen in pagan prayers as they are expressed in personal hymns. The scope of such prayers is largely self-centred and the devotee's range of interest does not step outside the circle of egocentricity, as we may observe in the suppliant's appeal to the deity Serapis in Aelius Aristides' 'Hymn to Serapis'. This composition contains some lofty thoughts but without the involvement of personal religion.¹⁸

New Testament examples of hymnic prayer are quite different as they focus on 'objective' realities which are at the same time intimately related to the believer's experience in the Christian community: the coming of God's kingdom, the progress of the gospel in the world, and the upbuilding of the church. To the extent that these specimens of hymnic prayer-speech (as Paul calls them at least by allusion in 1 Cor. 14:15) celebrate the good news of what God has done in history and especially in the sending, ministry, saving work and triumph of his son Jesus Christ, they stand in the liturgical tradition of the Old Testament.¹⁹ The confession of Israel's God, of which the credo in Deuteronomy 26:5b-9 has been treated as a distillation of cultic praise, centred on several themes of 'didactic exposition'. G. von Rad's study isolated four such themes: the patriarchs, the oppression in Egypt, the march to and entry into Canaan,

[p.44]

the promised land and home of Israel. Martin Noth wished to enlarge the number of items to include the encounter at Sinai. We note that in each case Yahweh's power is praised as it had been revealed and experienced in events of Israel's historical memory. The might of Israel's God is rehearsed in dramatic fashion and in so doing the faithful Israelite brought the past events over into the present. What God did long ago was re-enacted in the credal recitation and 'contemporized' in a grateful recall.

The basic idea is one of 'remembering' construed in this dynamic way and is carried over into the new Israel and its worship. The events of the 'new exodus' were similarly there rehearsed and recalled in a dramatic re-telling. At this point we are touching upon the shift in an understanding of New Testament canticles that focus on Christ's saving achievement. Unlike the earlier species of 'messianic psalms' these hymns seem—from all the evidence at our disposal—to have been created *de novo* as spontaneous creations of gifted, Spirit-filled members of the community (1 Cor. 14:15; Col. 3:16f.; Eph. 5:18-20), who may be further identified as 'prophets'. If this title is accurate, it suggests that their role was one of

¹⁸ So G. Dellings, *Worship in the New Testament* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962), p.114; A. J. Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks* (University of California Press, 1960), p.99.

¹⁹ For what follows see J. I. Durham, 'Credo, Ancient Israelite', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Volume*, ed. K. Crim (Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 197-199. He gives the bibliography of G. von Rad and M. Noth.

instruction and 'exhortation' (*paraklēsis*), according to 1 Corinthians 14:3. And their ministry was intended to 'build up' the congregations, and to do so in one specific regard, namely to ward off erroneous teaching by a positive statement, at services of worship, of how the faith was to be understood and applied with particular reference to Christ's redeeming mission.

We have several extensive pericopes in Paul where, on lexical, stylistic and contextual grounds, we may well suspect that he has taken over and set into the 'flow' of his epistolary correspondence these pre-formed liturgical passages. The more obvious examples in the Pauline corpus are those mentioned by Donald Guthrie: Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15-20; 1 Timothy 3:16, though the list can be considerably extended. Ph. Vielhauer nominates six accepted hymnic passages, while R. Deichgraber offers five examples of the genre, 'Christ-hymn'. Extending the survey to include Paul and the rest of the New Testament, M. Hengel speaks of 'a dozen christological texts originating within a 50 to 60 year period (40-100 AD)'.²⁰ After that terminal point at the close of the century there are several well-known references to *carmina Christi* in Pliny, the Letters of Ignatius,²¹ and the Odes of Solomon (an early Christian

[p.45]

'hymnbook'). Interestingly, by the time of Justin, at the mid-second century, the flow of such compositions has apparently been checked. The form of the Christian *synaxis* or gathering for public worship at Rome is patterned on the synagogue 'liturgy of the word', to which is then added the 'liturgy of the upper room'. There is less scope for the free rein of the Spirit to inspire spontaneous effusions, though 'prayer' may be free even if led by the president at the Lord's table, 'according to his ability'.

The significance of 'Hymns to Christ'

The teasing question is to know what purpose was served by these Christological hymns. The examples we may point to in Paul's writing suggest that they were well-known in the various churches—else why did Paul take them over, sometimes with slight, if important, adaptation?²² They were clearly fresh creations, and not simply a reworking of ancient Jewish or messianic texts, though their imagery and idiom have identifiable echoes drawn from the biblical literature. They were also more extensive in length and scope than either the messianic psalms or the fragments of credal statements that can be spotted very obviously in Paul's pastoral discussions in such places as Romans 10:9f.; 1 Corinthians 12:3; 15:3ff. and Colossians 2:6; these are all variations on the credal motif 'Jesus is Lord'. We still need to enquire what may have been the 'catalyst' for the creation of the more elaborate 'hymns to Christ'. Granted as a truism that 'the praise of the community is the response to God's saving

²⁰ Ph. Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur* (de Gruyter, 1975), pp.40-47; R. Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 118-155; M. Hengel, *art. cit.*, p.186.

²¹ Pliny, *Ep.* x. 96 (which I have considered in *Carmen Christi* [as in n.131, pp. 1-9] and Ignatius, *ad Eph.* 19, the 'Song of the Star' (cf. *ad Eph.* 4).

²² Usually such additions serve to anchor redemption in historical events such as Jesus' true incarnation as man and his atoning death on the cross. These saving events assure to the church a place in the new age based on forgiveness of sins. For a discussion of the principle of 'tradition' and 'redaction' in Paul's use of the hymns, see R. P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott/John Knox Press, 1981), esp. ch.7 (on Col. 1:15-20).

act',²³ thus making Christian hymns reflexive and expressive of gratitude to God for all he had done for the world's reconciliation and the church's salvation, we still need to ask why 'Christ hymns' arose in the form they took. Believers, we may be confident, would want to express their praise to the redeemer and to respond to the prompting of the Spirit within their lives. The delicate issue is to ascertain why their hymnic praise to Christ took the shape it evidently did, namely in celebration of what Christ was and did before creation, and in his mission of incarnation and reconciliation that led to a universal acknowledgment that he is now installed as Lord of all worlds and ruler of every agency, heavenly, human and demonic.

The reason, we submit, may be traced to a serious threat to the Pauline kerygma associated with a religious attitude known generically as *gnōsis*. As

[p.46]

early as the situation in 1 Corinthians (or even earlier in Galatians and 1 Thessalonians, it has been claimed),²⁴ a rival understanding of the Christian message arose, partly drawn from the prevailing Graeco-Roman religious scene and partly as an attempt to turn the church into a hellenistic conventicle. The fullest example is seen in the crisis which prompted the writing of Colossians and maybe the Pastorals and Ephesians. Moreover some emphases in Paul's own preaching may have been recruited and subtly altered to fit into a version of the kerygma Paul no longer wanted to own. Gnostic teachers offered a teaching which quickly challenged the apostolic message as Paul delivered it, and imposed their presence on the churches of the Pauline mission. The tenets of this 'alternative gospel' are seen in a denial of the lordship of Christ as the sole intermediary between God and the world, the insidious relaxing of the moral fibre which led Christians to be indifferent to bodily lusts and sins, and the uncertainty that underlay the meaning of life since the star-gods still held sway and needed to be placated. It is not accidental that the main specimens of New Testament hymns address the various situations in which the presence of gnostic ideas has been suspected and form the polemical counter-thrust to heretical teaching in the areas of doctrine and morals.

Paul's response is directed to these threats which form a network of ideas and practices that are built on a single notion, namely a dualism that separated God from the world. In gnostic thought, God is pure spirit who, by definition, is both untouched by matter and has no direct dealings with the material order. The creation of the universe was relegated to the work of an inferior deity, sometimes linked with the God of the Old Testament. The inter-stellar space between the high God and the world was thought to be populated with a system of emanations or aeons in a connected series, stretching from God to the point at which contact with matter, which was regarded as evil, was just possible. In the Colossian teaching which threatened the church in Lycus valley Christ was evidently given a role as one aeon in a hierarchy, and treated as himself part of the network spun off from the emanating power of the high God.

The 'fulness' (Greek *plēroma*) of aeons that filled the region between heaven and earth was somehow thought to contain 'elemental spirits' which in turn the Colossians needed to venerate (Col. 2:8, 18). Nor was there any assurance that a person's destiny was secure, since the regimen of 'decrees' (Greek *dogmata*: Col. 2:20f.) imposed an ascetic way of life which,

²³ R. Deichgraber, *loc. cit.*, p.201.

²⁴ By W. Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics* (Abingdon Press, 1972).

being essentially negative, gave no certainty of salvation nor inspired confidence that these astral deities had been successfully overcome. Life's mystery remained to haunt the devotee and he was virtually imprisoned in a mesh of superstition, fear and uncertainty,

[p.47]

with no way to break the iron grip of astrological control and cultic taboos. What was needed—as we learn from contemporary aretalogies (*i.e.* tributes of praise offered to deities in the mystery religions)—was fellowship with a mighty god or goddess who would lift his or her adherents out of this imprisoning circle and give assurance of salvation and new life. Not surprisingly the delivering deity was hailed as 'lord' (Greek *kyrios*) and 'saviour' (Greek *soter*).

Paul's use of the traditional hymns directed to Christ exactly met the need of his congregations. The ruling idea in such Christological tributes as survive is a portrayal of the odyssey of Christ. His 'course' is surveyed from his life in the Father's presence where he 'functions' as God's *alter ego* or 'image' to include his descent and humiliation in obedience and on to his exaltation in heaven where he received the accolade of a title and a new dignity as ruler of all (*kosmokratōr*). The imagery is one of descent/ascent which replaces the Judaic model of rejection/vindication current in the earlier Christianity.

But the real point of distinction has more to do with an exploration of the cosmological role attributed to the person of Christ. There is a double way in which that adjective came to be applied. First, his pre-existence and pre-temporal activity in creation were made the frontispiece of the hymns. The existence of Christ is taken back to speak of a relationship with God he enjoyed 'in the beginning'. Whether the raw materials of this idea derive from wisdom speculation or from the idea of a heavenly man or from an idealized picture of Adam we cannot really say:²⁵ what counts is that, as a direct response to the

[p.48]

²⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (SCM/Westminster Press, 1980), pp.114-128 devotes a closely reasoned section to Philippians 2:6-11 in the context of Paul's Adam Christology. The thesis he follows and defends is that the hymn uses the model of 'first Adam/last Adam' in that sequence. So there is no need to postulate a pre-temporal existence of Christ, a thought traditionally seen in 2:6a: 'being in the form of God' and so explaining the incarnational allusion in v. 7: 'being born in the likeness of men.' Dunn's position sets up a simple equation: what the Adam of Genesis 1-3 lost, namely his possession of divine 'glory', has been restored to the last Adam, Jesus Christ whose 'glory' is described in 2:9-11. The frontispiece of 2:6a plays no role, Dunn contends, in portraying the 'glory' from which Christ came, nor does it make allusion to his pre-existent state.

Dunn's chief polemic is directed against all attempts at seeing a 'heavenly man' doctrine based on gnostic teaching or derived from Philo's exegesis of Genesis 1 - 2 or drawn from speculation concerning the pre-existence of wisdom. His denials are probably soundly made, and his recourse to the single model of a two Adams teaching is perhaps justified. But has not his championing this line been secured at too high a price, when he proceeds to deny the element of pre-existence behind v. 6a? Granted the Pauline 'order' is first Adam/last Adam, there are several places in the Pauline corpus where the effect of Christ's reconciling work is to restore man's destiny as 'the divine glory' which was *Christ's in the beginning*. See Col. 3:10 (on the meaning of *eikōn* here, see R. P. Martin, *Colossians: the Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* {Paternoster, 1972, pp. 115-117}), Ephesians 4:13, 24 as well as the references to the 'image of God' which is *both* what redeemed humankind has (1 Cor. 11:7; Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18), and what Christ was 'in the beginning' (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4-6). Only on the basis of the second member of this equation can the hope implied in the first statement be adequately sustained.

threatening charge that Christ was part of an angelic hierarchy and so linked more with the creation than the Creator, the early church in its outreach to Gentiles came quickly to trace back his being to the very life of God himself. This was done not in a developed way nor, at this stage, as a piece of theologizing, but by attributing to the cosmic Christ an active share in the glory of God (Phil. 2:6) and a role in the creating of the world (Col. 1:15f.). His protological significance was seen as a necessary part of his true being, since only if he existed 'with God' and 'as God' in the beginning (as John 1:1 puts it) was he able to be linked with creation not as part of it but as its maker and groundplan. And only on the assumption of his pre-existent relationship with God could these confessional texts speak meaningfully of Christ's 'being sent' (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3, 32) or alternatively of his 'choosing' to accept the humility of incarnation and obedience (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6-8).²⁶

Secondly, at the conclusion of his earthly life (and it may be after his willingness to enter the realm of the dead)²⁷ he took his place in God's presence by receiving universal homage and the acclamation of cosmic spirit-powers that confessed his lordship and so were forced to abandon their title to control over human destiny. This eschatological dimension, heralding the dawn of a new age already glimpsed as a present reality—since 'Jesus Christ is Lord'—would be important to assure believers that their lives were safe under the protection of the regnant Christ. The church that sang the text of Philippians 2:6-11 knew itself to be living in that new world where, all external appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, the astral powers were defeated and Christ the sole ruler of all the worlds was truly Lord. His lordship was no theoretical proposition, nor even a part of their credal profession; it was the living assurance they needed to face their contemporary world with its many 'gods and lords' (1 Cor. 8:5f.) and to rebut the false ideas, both theological and practical, that their lives were the playthings of 'fate' or 'chance' or in the grip of iron determinism. The enthronement of Jesus Christ 'to the glory of God the Father' (Phil. 2:11) gave confidence that God had brought victory out of defeat, installed his son as world-ruler, and now wore the face of Jesus Christ whose characteristic name

[p.49]

for God was 'Father' (note how the hymn ends with the Father, as though to betoken a restoration of men and women to God's family).

Conclusion

The Christological 'hymns', as Donald Guthrie calls them, in the event turn out to be soteriological tributes paid to the cosmic salvation wrought by the redeemer. His salvific work is seen as that of bringing together the two orders of existence ('flesh'/'spirit' in 1 Tim. 3:16)—the celestial and the terrestrial—and his reconciliation is described in a cosmic, transcendental setting. The person of Jesus Christ is set forth in relation to his work as reconciler and world ruler. But inasmuch as he accomplished what God alone could do—the making of the world, the pacification of the hostile powers that had mysteriously broken away

²⁶ This contention is the point of M. Hengel's dictum that the two decades of AD 30-50 (*i.e.* the pre-Pauline era, when the hymns were formulated) were more decisive in innovative and ultimately determinative Christology than the next seven centuries (*The Son of God* {SCM, 1976}, p.2).

²⁷ See R. P. Martin, *Reconciliation* (as in n. 22), pp. 66f. for the possibility of a *descensus ad inferos* teaching in Philippians 2:8.

from their created order, and the enthronement of a true lordship—and had received from the Father's hand the right to rule human life and to be the judge and criterion of history (as in Rev. 5), it was a short step for the early Christians to go further into Christology. This way of viewing the relation of Christology to Jesus' work suggests that it was *in worship* that the decisive step was made of setting the exalted Christ on a level with God as the recipient of the church's praise. Hymnology and Christology thus merged in the worship of one Lord, soon to be hailed after the close of the New Testament canon as worthy of hymns 'as to God' (Pliny's report of Bithynian Christians at Sunday worship, AD 112).²⁸

It was this close drawing together of the persons of the Godhead which laid the foundation for the trinitarian creeds, and raised a bulwark against classical gnosticism in the late second century: yet it has been suggested in this essay that the incipient presence of what became gnosticism led to the creation of these inspired hymns. Just as the occasion of false ideas and customs at the Lord's supper at Corinth prompted Paul to give authoritative teaching in rebuttal and correction, so the rise of aberrant notions touching on the person and place of Jesus Christ in the universe and human life occasioned, under God, a new type of hymnic utterance. Where 'messianic psalms' played their role in defining and defending the church's belief in the fulfilment of Old Testament types and prefigurements, it required a new species—the 'hymn to Christ'—to open fruitful avenues of Christological and soteriological enquiry that set the church from its early days on a course that led eventually to Chalcedon and the *Te Deum*:

Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ,
Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.

© 1982 Inter-Varsity Press. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.

Prepared for the Web In January 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

²⁸ As in n. 21.