

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

natural. In other words, the events do 'march.' There is no halting. We can see opposition developing; and the final issue flows naturally out of the beginning. The unbelief and hostility of the Jews and their final rejection and crucifixion of Jesus stand out clearly and consistently. But something more will have to be said in our next and concluding paper in answer to objections which are made to the Fourth Gospel on the ground of its inconsistency with the other three.

E. H. ASKWITH.

AN ANCIENT CHRISTIAN HYMN BOOK.¹

DR. RENDEL HARRIS has made a notable contribution to our knowledge of early Christian literature by his recent discovery and publication of forty canticles or hymns, which were known in the third century (if not still earlier) under the title of *Odes of Solomon*. Apparently the title is lost in Dr. Harris's MS., but the identification is established by passages of the *Pistis Sophia* in which Odes vi., xxii. and xxv. are quoted in whole or in part expressly as Odes of Solomon. The *Pistis Sophia*, a Gnostic work, is usually assigned to the third century, A.D., and accordingly the Odes (which seem to form a homogeneous collection) may be provisionally assigned to some earlier date in the third century, or, more probably perhaps, to the second century. The language of the MS. is Syriac, but Dr. Harris shows that the Syriac text is a translation from the Greek. Forty second-century Christian hymns! It is a very welcome discovery.

For even now our knowledge of the Christian hymnody of the first 350 years of the Church's life is disappointingly meagre. "The Christian Church," writes Mr. W. H.

¹ *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon*, now first published from the Syriac version by J. Rendel Harris. Cambridge, 1909.

Frere, " may be said to have started on its way singing " ¹ ; but (apart from the Psalms of David) we know very little about the words of its songs. Pliny in 112 A.D. tells the Emperor Trajan that the Christians were accustomed on a fixed day to assemble together and to sing antiphonally a hymn to Christ as to a God.² Of the text of the hymn thus sung we know nothing ; it may have been a Messianic Psalm from the Old Testament ; it may have been the fruit of the Christian inspiration of the first century ; but the knowledge of it is lost for us. Indeed from the first three and a half centuries hardly anything of Christian hymnody is preserved. In Greek there remain the ὕμνος ἑωθινός, " hymn for the dawn," preserved in the Codex Alexandrinus and printed in Swete's Septuagint (vol. iii. pp. 832 ff.), and also the evening hymn, φῶς ἱλαρόν, quoted by St. Basil, *de Spiritu Sancto*, 29, and printed in Greek and English in *Hymns A. and M.* (Historical edition, p. 25). In Syriac the beautiful Gnostic *Hymn of the Soul* survives. These three poems with one or two others have hitherto been for us almost the sole remains (of importance) of the multitude of Christian hymns which were in use before the middle of the fourth century.

But the evidence which proves the existence of early Christian hymns also supplies (in part) the explanation of the loss of most of them. The authorities of the Church were jealous of the use of " Psalms " other than the Psalms of David in public worship. The well-known canon (no. 59) of the Council of Laodicea (363 A.D.) forbids the public recitation of " private " Psalms.³ The Muratorian Fragment, a damaged document of the beginning of the third

¹ Introduction to *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (Historical edition).

² *Epist.* x. 96 [97]. Stato die ante lucem convenire carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem.

³ Οὐ δεῖ ἰδιωτικὸς ψαλμοὺς λέγεσθαι ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ.

century,¹ in distinguishing books which ought to be received into the Church for public use from others repudiates with vigour a certain "new book of Psalms." The reason of this repudiation is manifest, if the corrupt words with which the Fragment closes are rightly read as attributing the *novum psalmorum librum* in part to the pen of the Montanists and in part to that of certain admirers of Marcion the Gnostic. Readers of Tertullian will hold this conjunction of Montanist and Gnostic to be a strange thing, but it is hardly stranger than the meeting of authors in our modern hymn books. Finally in the East we find Ephraim the Syrian inveighing against Bardaisan (Bardesanes the Gnostic) for having composed a Psalter. In prosaic verse Ephraim complains :

"He desired to imitate David and to rival the beauty of the Psalter.

"Being covetous of the same praise he composed like him
"A hundred and fifty hymns."

No wonder that the authorities of the Church exerted themselves against the use of "new Psalms."

But the action of the authorities would probably have failed, if it had not been forwarded by the nature of these early compositions. The hymns perished, but not merely because some of them were written by heretics or by Montanists. Hymns beyond other religious literature are the expression of feeling, and feeling changes. The earliest Christians, in their "new Psalms," let themselves go to a degree which seemed excessive to later generations. The rich freedom of expression which marked the joyful thankfulness of the first two centuries was checked, when Christian reflection began to give a more restrained and definite form to Christian teaching.

¹ So Zahn.

The

Infantine

Familiar clasp of things divine

seemed too daring, as the Church grew up into riper theological knowledge.

Nor is this all that may be said. If on the one hand the language of early hymns was too bold and too free, on the other hand it was also too cryptic for a later age; indeed expressions which may appear cryptic to us, were signs of an open and familiar vision to earlier Christians. The use of veiled expressions was forced upon the early Church by Pagan opposition and persecution, and presently it became a habit asserting itself even under circumstances which did not require it.

Dr. Harris's newly found canticles fully answer to the description we have given of early Christian hymns. They are in the first place fervent in spirit; they are whole-hearted in thanksgiving; their joy is like that of the first days. They show again the want of restraint in expression which was natural while Christian theology was still in its infancy. Lastly, their language is often symbolic or even cryptic. Though they are certainly Christian, the name *Jesus* never occurs in them. It is very difficult to decide what events of the human life of Christ are or are not referred to. Mystic waters and mystic Divine milk and a mystic seal are mentioned, and yet it cannot be said positively whether there is any allusion to the sacraments or not.

The MS. from which the Odes are taken is but meagrely described by Dr. Harris. "Its age," he writes, "may be between three and four hundred years. . . . In spite of its relatively late date, the text is a good one" (pages 2, 3).

This judgment of the Editor may be correct in general, but seeing that *ex hypothesi* thirteen or fourteen hundred

years intervene between the composition of the Odes and the writing of the MS., it is reasonable to suppose that a good number of errors, including some of importance, have crept into the text during the course of so many hundreds of years. In fact not a few places may be found, in which a slight change of reading is either necessary for the grammar, or advisable for the sense. As a contribution, therefore, to the emendation and better understanding of the Syriac text, a few Odes are given here in a revised rendering taken from Dr. Harris's printed text. Where an emendation is followed a footnote is appended.

Words supplied to fill an apparent gap in the Syriac text are inserted within square brackets. *Italics* are used on the same principles as in the Revised Version of the Bible.

Dr. Harris's MS. is defective at the beginning, and the first of the Odes which is preserved in it is numbered as the Third in the Collection. It tells simply and yet beautifully of the mystical union between the Lord and his follower.

ODE III.

1. [With the spirit of the Lord] I am clothed, and they that are His ¹ members are with Him.
2. To them do I cling, and He loveth me.
3. (For I should not have known how to love the Lord, if He had not loved me.)
4. Who is able to discern love, but he that is loved ?
5. I love the Beloved, and the Beloved ² *loveth* my soul.
6. And where His rest,³ is, there am I.
7. And I shall be no stranger,⁴ for with the Lord merciful,⁵ and compassionate there is no grudging.
8. I am united to *Him*, because the *Lover* hath found the Beloved.
9. Because I love the Son, I shall become a son.⁶
10. He that cleaveth to Him that dieth not, shall himself be free from death.⁶
11. And he that delighteth in life, shall live.

¹ Or, my members.

² By a slight emendation.

³ Matt. xi. 29 (Syriac).

⁴ Heb. xii. 8 (Syriac).

⁵ By a slight emendation.

⁶ *Lit.* without death.

12. This is the spirit of the Lord which cannot lie, which teacheth the sons of men to know His ways.

13. Be wise, and know, and watch.

HALLELUJAH.

The Sixth Ode is written in cryptic language, and it is not easy to decide to what school of Christian thought it belongs. Dr. Harris repudiates Harnack's suggestion that it is Gnostic. "Neither here," he writes, "nor anywhere else is there anything definitely Gnostic in the book." Harnack's view was based on the latter half of the Ode, all in fact that is quoted in the *Pistis Sophia*; but now that the beginning of the Ode is before us it seems possible or even probable that it is a Montanist utterance, and that the Beatitude with which it closes is intended for the Montanist prophets. Most unfortunately the reading of an important word is uncertain in the opening clause. Dr. Harris gives, "As the *hand* moves over the harp," but the verb which he renders "moves" means rather *to go*, and "hand" as the subject of the verb seems hardly appropriate. If, however, we read *ruḥa*, "the wind," we have a word which fills the gap in the Syriac quite as well as *'ida*, "hand," and the subject matches the verb somewhat better. Moreover the correspondence of "wind" in verse 1 with "spirit" in verse 2 allows full force to the "So, thus" (*hākannā*) which introduces the simile. If such a reading of verses 1, 2 be correct, the Ode begins with a statement of the Montanist view of inspiration: the prophet is passive as the harp, while the Spirit speaks through him. In verse 3 it is explained that as the prophet speaks the merely human element, "strange" to the Divine, is destroyed, so that the words uttered are wholly the Lord's. This was the case (it says) with the ancient Scriptures, from Genesis onwards (ver. 4), and now this same inspiration is renewed in the saints of a later age (ver. 5).

In the last six verses is celebrated the ministerial work of the Montanist prophets. Such, at any rate, is the interpretation offered in this paper of this beautiful but cryptic Ode.

ODE VI.

1. As the wind¹ goeth in the harp, and the strings speak,
2. So speaketh in my members the spirit of the Lord, and I speak in His love.

3. For He destroyeth that which is strange to Him, and all that I speak is the Lord's.²

4. For so it was from the beginning³ even unto the end, that there might not be anything contrary to Him⁴; and nothing shall oppose Him.

5. The Lord hath granted an increase of the knowledge of Himself, and is zealous that the things should be known, which are given us by His grace. And His song He hath granted us, a song of praise to His name.⁵

6. Our spirits praise His Holy Spirit.

7. For there went forth a stream, and it became a river⁶ great and broad:

8. For it overwhelmed everything, and it . . . ?

9. And those of the sons of men who would have restrained it, could not restrain it, nor could the contrivances of those who restrain waters.

10. For it came over the face of the whole earth, and filled everything, and all the thirsty upon earth drank thereof.

11. And their thirst was quenched and was extinguished, for drink was given from the Most High.

12. Blessed therefore are His ministers, who are entrusted with His waters.

13. They have given drink⁷ to dry lips, and the enfeebled will they have confirmed.⁸

14. And the souls that were nigh to departing they have held back from death.

¹ The Syriac appears to be illegible; Dr. Harris suggests *hand*. *Wind* and *Spirits* are represented by the same word in Syriac.

² So the MS.

³ Syriac, "from *Breshith*" (the opening word of the Hebrew book of Genesis).

⁴ 1 Tim. i. 10 (Syriac).

⁵ Syriac obscure.

⁶ Syriac text has, *a light*.

⁷ Text corrupt.

⁸ An obvious emendation: Syriac text has, "They have given rest."

⁹ So, if Syriac text be sound.

15. And the limbs that stumbled they have set upright and established.

16. They gave life¹ to their dead,¹ and light to their eyes.

17. For each man acknowledged them in the Lord, and they lived by the living waters which are for ever.

HALLELUJAH.

The Twelfth Ode belongs to the group of those which are more definite than the rest in their statement of Christian truth. The singer sings of the Word, the Son of God, the Revealer of God in language which reminds the reader partly of the Epistle to the Hebrews and in part of the Fourth Gospel. The Coming of the Word has brought peace. The singer concludes with a Beatitude on those who acknowledge the Incarnate Word, and through Him the Lord (the Father).

ODE XII.

1. He hath filled me with the words of truth that I might speak for Him.

2. And as a stream of waters truth floweth from my mouth and my lips declare the fruits thereof.

3. And He hath increased within me His knowledge, for the mouth of the Lord is the True Word and the door into His Light.

4. And the Most High hath given Him to His worlds *to be* the interpreter² of His own beauty, and the teller² of His praise, and the confessor² of His counsel, and the evangelist² of His will, and the purifier² of His servants.

5. For the swiftness of the Word cannot be expressed, and according to Its swiftness so is Its sharpness.³

6. And Its course hath no limit, and It never faileth, but It standeth sure; and no [one] knoweth⁴ the place of Its descent,⁵ nor Its path.

7 For according to . . . ,⁶ for It is the light and dayspring of [His] counsel.

8 And by It the worlds spake one to another, and those who were silent became *skilled*⁷ in speech.

9 And from It came love and concord, and they spake one to another of that which they had, being impelled by the Word.⁸

¹ Syriac text emended slightly.

² Syriac text has *seyame*, but wrongly.

³ Heb. iv. 12 (Syriac).

⁴ By a slight emendation.

⁵ Or, "alighting."

⁶ Syriac, corrupt.

⁷ Acts xviii. 24 (Syriac).

⁸ Cf. Acts xviii. 5.

10 And they know Him who made them, for they are in concord, because the mouth of the Most High hath spoken to them, and through It cometh the interpretation thereof very quickly.

11. For the tabernacle of the Word is a Son of Man, and Its truth is love.

12. Blessed are they who by This One acknowledge All, and know the Lord in His truth.

HALLELUJAH.

The Twenty-third Ode describes the coming of the Word incarnate. For those who are willing to receive it it brings salvation, but those who resist it expose themselves to destruction. Then by a turn of thought strange to us the singer passes on to speak of the written word. The poetry of the Ode suffers, but the necessity of the time forces the writer to claim for the Christian dispensation the same great possession as the Jewish Church possessed. The Hebrew claimed to have a Law written by the finger of God, and the writer of the Ode, a Jewish Christian, claims that Christians too have a book of Divine origin, sealed with the threefold Divine name.

The imagery of the Ode presents no little difficulty to the interpreter. The mixture of metaphors is most perplexing. The counsel of the Lord in the Incarnation is first compared to a letter, but the descent of the letter to earth is compared to the discharge of an arrow from the bow. But the letter is sealed; men fear to break the seal, and the letter escapes from their fingers. It is possible that the book with seven seals of Revelation v. is in the writer's mind, but the sequel of the incident is different. A mysterious Thing receives the letter, and the letter rides upon it. The Syriac word is *gīglā*, which Dr. Harris translates *wheel*. The three verbs, however, which follow describe the operations of harvesting: the "wheel" *reaps*, *cuts down*, and *gathers in heaps* those who stand against it. It is therefore an obvious suggestion that *gīglā* stands in

the place of the cognate Syriac word *maggalthā*, "sickle," either intentionally or by scribal error. If the mysteriously moving thing be in truth a sickle,¹ then it becomes probable that Revelation xiv. 14 is in the singer's mind.

(In that passage the Prophet-seer sees one sitting upon a cloud like unto a son of man and bearing a sharp sickle, with which the earth is presently reaped.) On the other hand it is not improbable that the statement that the *gīglā* obstructed rivers and made a broad way contains a reference to the drying up of the Euphrates, "that the way of the kings that come from the sunrising may be made ready" (Rev. xvi. 12). The obscurity of the whole passage, however, leaves us in serious doubt as to the soundness of the text. Probably the Greek had suffered before the Syriac version was made.

ODE XXIII.

1. Joy is of the saints ; and who shall put it on but they alone ?
2. Grace is of the Elect ; and who shall receive it but they who trust in it from the beginning ?
3. Love is of the Elect ; and who shall put it on except those who have possessed it from the beginning ?
4. They walked in the knowledge of the Most High without grudging, *entering into* His joy and the fulness of knowledge of Him.
5. And His counsel was as a letter, His will descended from the Most High,² and it was sent as an arrow from the bow, which is shot with strength.
6. And many hands³ ran (?) upon the letter to seize it and take it and read it.
7. And it escaped from their fingers, and they feared it, and the seal that was upon it.
8. For they had no authority to loose its seal, for the power which was upon the seal was more excellent than theirs.
9. But they who beheld it followed the letter, that they might know where it would alight, and who would read it, and who would hear it.

¹ Cf. Zech. v. 2, where a *flying sickle* appears in LXX and perhaps also in the Peshitta.

² Perhaps read, "from above."

10. But a rolling thing received it, and it rode upon it.¹

11. And a sign was with it, *the sign* of kingship and of government.

12. And everything which met² the rolling thing it mowed down and brake in pieces.

13. And many of the enemy it destroyed; and it dammed rivers, and passed over and uprooted many forests, and made a broad path.

14. And that which came upon it (15) was a letter of salvation,³ that all lands might be gathered together.⁴

16. And there appeared at the head of it the sign³ which is revealed, even the true Son from the Father Most High.

17. And he inherited everything and received it, and the device of many was brought to nought.

18. But all the rebellious . . .⁵ and fled, and all who persecuted became extinct and. . . .

19. And the letter became a great volume written wholly by the finger of God.

20. And the name of the Father was upon it, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, to give counsel for ever and ever.

HALLELUJAH.

Dr. Harris points out that the subject of more than one of the Odes is the Descent of Christ into Hades in order to preach and to rescue the spirits imprisoned there. To the examples given by the Editor should be added the Thirty-third Ode, for the only difficulty in the way of this explanation is removed, if we accept "Grace" as a cryptic designation of our Lord.

ODE XXXIII.

1. Again Grace hastened and left Hades (corruption), for He⁶ descended into it in order to empty it.

2. And He destroyed Abaddon⁷ before Him, and brought to an end all his power.

3. And he stood upon a lofty summit (i.e. in Hades) and sent forth His voice from one end of the land unto the other.

4. And He drew to Him all who obeyed Him.

¹ Lit., "it came upon it."

² An emendation.

³ Emendation.

⁴ Cf. John xi. 52.

⁵ Syriac text, "acted with audacity."

⁶ In the Syriac *fem.*, the antecedent being "Grace."

⁷ Cf. Rev. ix. 11.

And He did not appear as a malefactor, [5] but He was as a perfect Virgin standing and making proclamation and crying out and saying,

6. Turn ye, sons of men, and live, ye daughters.

7. And forsake the ways of this Hades and draw nigh to me ; and I will enter into you and will bring you forth from Abaddon.

8. And I will make you wise in the ways of truth ; ye shall not be corrupted neither shall ye perish.

9. Hear me, and be ye saved, for I speak among you the grace of God ; and by me ye shall be saved, and shall be blessed.

10. I am your judge, and they who put me on shall suffer no harm, but they shall gain the new world that is incorruptible.

11. Mine elect walk in me, and I make known my ways to those that seek me, and make them trust in my name.

HALLELUJAH.

In conclusion the hope may be expressed that Syriac scholars and students of early Christian history will give their most serious attention to these Odes. Much work remains to be done on the text, but such labour will be worthily expended. These Odes stand very high indeed among the recent discoveries of forgotten Christian literature both for their beauty of form and for the suggestiveness of their teaching.

W. EMERY BARNES.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN TREATMENT OF SIN AFTER BAPTISM.

THE most primitive form of Christian doctrine held that Christians, as such, were free from sin. They had been born again into a state of sinlessness,¹ and it was their duty to see that they never relapsed again into the dangerous state which they had left ; if they should fail in this duty, it was questionable whether they had any further chance of salvation.

¹ Sinlessness is a somewhat ambiguous term ; it is here used as the equivalent of *posse non peccare*, not of *non posse peccare*.