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This Is My Song, But Is It My Story? Philippians 2.5–11

Robert F. Hull Jr.

If we could wander back through time and slip into a little house church in ancient Corinth some early morning on the first day of the week, we might be surprised at what we would hear. Paul, in describing one of these gatherings, writes in 1 Corinthians 14.26, "Each one has a song, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation." Each one. Imagine that. Everyone brought a gift to the worship, and some people brought songs. The word I translated as "song" is the Greek *psalmos*, which could possibly be understood to mean that someone sang one of the OT psalms, but I have taken it in the broader sense of a song of praise. That the early Christians sang in worship is certainly not surprising. Jews who confessed Jesus as Messiah had grown up hearing and singing the psalms of Israel, and other songs as well, for their holy books preserved such inspired compositions as the Song of Moses (Exod 15.1–18) and the Song of Deborah and Barak (Judges 5.2–31). Greeks and Romans who confessed Jesus as Lord were also acquainted with the custom of singing in worship; songs in praise of Zeus and Isis, for example, have been preserved in their literature.

There was something about singing that was so characteristic of early Christian life that Paul includes it among his exhortations to the Ephesians (5.19) and Colossians (3.16), telling them to speak to each other, teach and encourage each other by means of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual odes." I think there may be a valuable clue here about how songs functioned in the community lives of the early Christians, namely, that they were not simply embellishments of their gatherings for worship, but were central to what we might call the "curriculum of the school of Christ" (see Eph 4.20). Students of early Christian worship often quote Amos Wilder's famous words:

Before the message there must be the vision,
before the sermon the hymn,
before the prose the poem.[1]

Wilder here suggests that there is something so foundational, so essential, so *effective*, about the vision, the hymn, the poem, that our lives would be impoverished without them, our messages trite, our sermons plodding, our prose powerless. If he is right about this, don't you wish we could recover some of the hymns the first Christians sang?

This is not an easy thing to do. At least the OT writers sometimes tell us when they are about to quote a song: "Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song, saying . . . " (Exod 15.1). But the NT writers never tip us off, at least not directly. Even so, there is wide agreement among NT scholars that we can identify a fair number of *Great Songs of the Church*, to quote the title of the old blue-backed hymnal in the chapel where I first worshipped. In fact, Philippians 2.6–11 was the very first text to be identified as an early

1. Amos N. Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

Christian hymn. Ralph Martin summarizes the work of Johannes Weiss, who first noted the poetic structure of the passage in1897, and Hans Lietzmann, who first identified the passage as a "Christological hymn" in 1926.[2] What was it they saw in this text that led them to these conclusions? This isn't the place to rehearse all the technical details, but their research set in motion a careful analysis of a number of passages in the NT that seemed to share some elements that set them apart from their more prosaic contexts. Here are the most obvious characteristics:

1. These texts seem to fall naturally into stanzas or lines.
2. There are recurring structural and rhetorical elements, such as parallelism, or verbs or participles with the same kinds of endings.
3. These texts often contain words or phrases either not used elsewhere by the author or used in a different manner.
4. Often, the name of the subject of the hymn (God or Christ) is replaced by a relative pronoun or participle ("who" or "the one being [or doing]" this or that).
5. These texts express in a nutshell basic convictions about the person or work of Jesus Christ.

Despite the widespread agreement that this text is a hymn, scholars differ a great deal in how they analyze the structure and even more in what they identify as the background of the hymn. But very few of them ask the question that has bothered me the most about this text: Why did Paul quote a hymn in the middle of this letter to the Philippians?

Before the Message the Vision

Recall that about ten years before he wrote this letter, Paul had answered an urgent appeal in a vision: A Macedonian man appeared to Paul in the night imploring him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16.10). So Paul, Silas and Timothy went to the great Roman colony of Philippi. They made converts there, including Lydia and her household, but they also encountered opposition and were thrown into jail. "But about midnight," as the story tells us, "Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God" (Acts 16.25). We remember how an earthquake broke their bonds and the jailer was afraid all would escape; how Paul and Silas spoke the gospel to him and his household and they were baptized. We don't know what hymns they were singing, but I'll bet the jailer never forgot. Paul and Silas left a church there, probably meeting in the house of Lydia, and for the next ten years there was regular contact between Paul and that congregation. It was the only church in Macedonia that formed a supporting partnership with Paul, sending funds to assist him in his work (Phil 4.15–16). How dear and blessed that partnership has become now that Paul is in prison again! We are not sure where he is imprisoned: possibly Rome, maybe Caesarea or Ephesus. The point is that in the Roman prison system, the state did not provide for the physical needs of the captives. Prisoners relied completely on their families or friends to bring them clothing, food, books, medicines and company. The Philippian congregation has sent Epaphroditus with supplies for Paul (4.18). Epaphroditus has brought news of the congregation, and some of the news is troubling to Paul. That newborn church had received a burst of growth after a midnight jailhouse hymn-sing. Paul's own well-being is obviously sustained by hymn-singing, and no doubt that is true of all his churches. It is by no means unlikely that Paul had sung hymns with the Philippian Christians in their worship. I think it likely that they had sung *this very hymn* together. Why *this hymn?*

2. Ralph Martin, *A Hymn of Christ: Philippians 2:5–11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 24–25 .

BEFORE THE SERMON THE HYMN

Let's look briefly at the structure of the hymn. As I noted, scholars disagree about how best to analyze this text structurally, but for our purposes the layout in the NRSV will serve. It happens to conform to the structure in the most widely-used edition of the Greek NT, except for one line. The hymn falls into six stanzas. Verse five is not part of the hymn, but forms an essential bridge from Paul's preceding instructions and explicitly names the subject of the hymn:

5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 *who, though he was in the form of God*
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 *but emptied himself,*
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
8 *he humbled himself*
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

9 *Therefore God also highly exalted him*
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 *so that at the name of Jesus*
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 *and every tongue should confess*
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

What shall we name this hymn? The answer may depend on what you understand the function of the hymn to be. The essential *movement* of the hymn is not in question: It traces the descent of Messiah Jesus from the highest status to the lowest and up to the highest again. But is it basically a theological statement—an assertion that the man Jesus had a pre-existent divine identity, that he gave this up in humble obedience to God, resulting in his crucifixion, and that God has now exalted him as Lord?[3] If so, we might put over the hymn the title "The Divine Christ Humiliated and Exalted." Think of the contemporary praise song "Lord, I Lift Your Name on High," with its easy-to-remember lyric:

You came from heaven to earth to show the way,
From the earth to the cross my debt to pay;
From the cross to the grave,
From the grave to the sky;
Lord, I lift your name on high.

3. See Ron Tyler, "Philippians 2:5–11 and the Mind of Christ," *Leaven* 5/3 (Summer, 1997): 24–27.

This may not be a sterling example of musical art, but it sticks to the theological outline of the Jesus story. Paul, however, is not simply making a theological point, rehearsing a confessional statement. As the letter makes clear, he is dealing with serious issues in the Philippian church, involving selfishness and rivalry (1.15, 17; 4.2), opposition to the gospel (3.2–3), "worldliness" (3.18–19) and disagreements between congregational leaders (4.2). If he were able to come to Philippi in person, he might preach them a very pointed sermon about how they ought to behave. Since he cannot be there, he *writes* them a very pointed sermon about how they ought to behave (there are thirty imperatives in the letter). So, is the hymn just a kind of "sermon illustration," stuck in to reinforce all these imperatives? Did Paul begin with some ideas—Here's what I need to say to these friends in Philippi to straighten them out, and here's a nice hymn to illustrate it—or did he work from the other direction: start with the hymn and build the sermon around it? I think there is every indication he moved in this direction. I think he was preaching from the hymnbook: "Before the sermon the hymn."

Notice how the letter opens: Not "Paul an apostle," or "Paul, called to be an apostle," or even "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle," but this: "Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus." That's all, just slaves of Jesus. This is the only letter Paul begins this way. Already the hymn about Jesus who became a slave is being foreshadowed. Indeed, the letter is bathed in the key terminology and concepts of the hymn from the very beginning. When Paul tells his readers in 2.5 to have the same "attitude" or "mind" or "mindset" as Jesus Messiah, he has already borrowed the same Greek word to talk about his attitude toward them (1.7) and twice to emphasize the "one mind" that unites them in affection, sympathy and love (2.2). In fact, the big issue at Philippi was this: Which mindset characterizes your life—the mindset of envy and rivalry, self-assertion and personal promotion, self-protection and comfort? Or the mindset of humble service, self-sacrifice and obedient suffering for the gospel? Maybe the title of the hymn ought to be "The Messianic Mindset and Christian Community."

Paul's reference to his own imprisonment, his hope that he may not be ashamed, but may honor Christ in his body whether he lives or dies (1.20), is also grounded in the hymn, with its story of Jesus. This Jesus is not self-protective: He did not consider his equality with the Father as "something to hang onto" or "exploit" (*harpagmos*, a word that occurs only here in the NT). He was not reluctant to take on the form of a human, nor to assume the lowest human status, that of a slave, nor even to be humiliated by the most shameful death of all, the death on a cross. Such a death by Paul would be "worthy of the gospel of Christ."

In 1.27—2.4 Paul states as clearly as possible what is the vocation of the Philippians and, indeed, of all Christians. It is to exhibit a "polity," a "citizenly conduct" (the verb form, *politeuo* occurs here, the noun *politeuma* in 3.2) that is worthy, not of the Roman empire, but of the gospel of Christ (1.27). It is to be united in every way, so as to advance the cause of the gospel against every form of opposition (1.27–28). It is to accept suffering on behalf of Christ as a gracious gift of God (1.29). It is to be so much in agreement that they have the same "mindset," which gives them comfort in Christ, the consolation of love, fellowship in the spirit, compassion, tenderness and joy (2.1–3). In short, their vocation is to do nothing from selfish ambition or empty glory, but to serve each other in humility. What can possibly motivate such behavior, inspire such selfless living, but the story of Jesus in his humble life and death as a slave? To live this way is nothing less than to follow the pattern of the Messiah. First the hymn, then the sermon!

The hymn not only *foreshadows* the letter; everything following the hymn reaches back to it; the hymn *backgrounds* the letter. That's precisely the force of the "so then," or "therefore," of 2.12. To participate in Christ is to share in the story of his downward movement from power to humble obedience, even if it might lead to rejection, suffering, fear and trembling. Consider the example of Timothy, who is anxious for their welfare and cares not for his own interests, but for those of Jesus (2.19–22). Consider Epaphroditus, who became ill and almost died "for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete your service to me" (2.25–30). And if there is any doubt that the story of Jesus can rewrite the story of your own life, consider my

story, writes Paul,[4] and goes on to detail the downward movement from a life of power and status in Judaism to "the loss of all things" for the sake of Christ, whose sufferings Paul desired to share, in hopes that he might be raised also to share Christ's glory (3.5–11).

Before the Prose the Poem

At the end of his autobiographical statement, Paul shifts from the singular "I" to the plural "us," "you" and "we" (3.15–16). Those plurals drew his first readers into the story, but they draw us latter-day readers as well: "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us" (3.17). So here is the question: How can the poetry of the hymn be translated into the prose of our everyday lives, our "prosaic," lives? In fact, I think the letter raises the larger question of how our worship music functions, or ought to function, to animate our *living*, and not only our corporate worship. What are the hymns that are so rich in the gospel that we can carry them with us outside the sanctuary? The hymns that can teach, admonish, and equip for our life as citizens of a different polity than that of Caesar? What are the songs that remind us of the saints we should imitate ("mark those who so live")? Not surprisingly, some of these songs are basically paraphrases of the Philippians hymn ("At the Name of Jesus, Every Knee Shall Bow," "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name"). We know that many popular hymns and other spiritual songs arise from deep personal experience, but how many of them emerge out of the toils, struggles and joys of communal life? And how can an old song become new because it has been translated into the prose of a particular situation in the life of a congregation? Imagine the letter from Paul being read to the Philippians at a worship gathering. If the believers actually broke into song when the hymn was quoted, did the old song become new? How about the next time it was sung?

I do not know what songs evoke for each generation the response Paul seeks, just as I do not know what songs do this for my brothers and sisters in Kenya, or Malaysia, or Brazil. But somehow the basic *stuff* of the Philippians hymn has to get into the worship music of all believers if the stories of our lives are going to be shaped by the gospel. "Sing them over again to me," we old-timers used to sing, "wonderful words of life . . . words of life and beauty, teach me faith and duty." The governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor wrote to the Emperor Trajan around A.D. 110 describing Christian worship. Among other customs, he explained, Christians gather early in the morning and "sing hymns to Christ, as if he were a god." What hymns, we wonder? By hymning Christ "as if he were a god," were they trying to lift their spirits out of this mundane world and live for awhile in the heavenly realms? If we are paying close attention to Paul, we will realize that our hymns are not so much designed to lift us out of this world and bring us to heaven, as to remind us that heaven has come down to us. In 3.20–21 Paul again plays on the word root that means "to live as a citizen," when he writes "Our commonwealth is in heaven," but he does not go on to say, "*to* which we are going," but "*from which* we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him to subject all things to himself." That transformation will not be complete until "the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" (Rev 11.15). But this is a process that is already supposed to have begun, such that our congregations are already outposts of the kingdom, where our "heavenly citizenship" marks us out as the humble subjects of our humiliated, but exalted, Lord.

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4. See Robert Hull, "Getting Our Stories Straight: A Meditative Reading of Philippians 3:2–28," *Leaven* 5/3 (Summer, 1997): 20–23.