

Paul's Epistle to the Philippians

Chapter Two

A Hymn Celebrating Christ

In the second chapter of Philippians, Paul continues the encouraging message that he had begun in chapter 1. He opens with an appeal to his community to be of the “one mind,” grounded in love (v. 2). Such love will manifest itself in looking to the interests of others (v. 3). Paul’s strategy is to shape the “mind,” or fundamental attitude of his community, by cultivating certain core values, exemplified by the “mind” of Christ.

The Christ Hymn

To help him build the kind of shared values which he desires to inculcate, Paul tells the story of Christ in a remarkable passage (vv. 6-11), shaped in balanced cadences and replete with rich vocabulary. The literary qualities of this passage have suggested to many readers that Paul is here citing a “hymn” used by him or his congregations in their worship life. Further support for the notion that Paul is citing received material here is the fact that there is tension between the affirmations about Christ contained in the passage and affirmations about Christ in other parts of Paul’s letters, for instance, Rom 1:3-4, which focuses squarely on the final stage of the Christ story, his exaltation to heavenly status. The rhetorical force of the hymn depends instead on the details of a more complex account of Christ’s origins, human existence, and exalted state.

The hymn begins (v. 6) with a brief sketch of Christ’s initial condition “in the form (*morphe*) of God,” a condition that is immediately equated with having “equality with God.” Some interpreters of the hymn suggest that all that is meant by this phrasing is that Christ was a

man like Adam, made in God's image (Gen 1:27), but on such a reading it is hard to make sense of the sharp contrast in the next verses between Christ's initial state and his taking "human form." Rather this initial verse expresses the sense that Christ was a heavenly being before taking on human flesh. The roots of that "high" Christology probably lie in the idea held by many of his followers that Jesus was an incarnation of divine Wisdom.

Beginning with a hymn in Proverbs 8, Jewish authors had long celebrated the figure of Wisdom (in Hebrew: *Hochmah*, in Greek: *Sophia*). Ben Sira, the author of a book of wisdom written at the end of the third century BCE also celebrated the figure of Wisdom (Sirach 24), and finally equated it with the Torah of Moses (Sirach 24:23-24). At the end of the first century BCE or early in the first century CE, an Alexandrian Jew wrote the Wisdom of Solomon in Greek and celebrated Wisdom (*Sophia*) in terms derived from Stoic philosophy, as an emanation from God that pervades the world and holds it together (Wis 7:22-8:1). Near the same time the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo developed an elaborate interpretation of how God relates to the world through word (*Logos*) which is another name for his Wisdom. This kind of thinking clearly influenced other early Christians who tried to make sense of the connection of Jesus to God (John 1:1-18; Hebrews 1:1-4), and it probably is at work behind the "hymn."

Christ, in any case, did not consider this status of "equality with God" (cf. John 5:18) something "to be exploited" (NRSV). The Greek word used in this verse, *harpagmon*, is unusual and has generated continuous scholarly debate. The root of the word has to do with "grasping." Some interpreters, who take the position that Jesus is being presented as a new Adam, did not consider a state of equality with God as a goal to be attained, a prize to be snatched. Those who see the image of a divine figure such as Wisdom in the background understand Jesus not to

consider his equality with God something to be held on to, or, as the NRSV's translation suggests, something to be used to his own advantage.

The next verse (v 7) seems to support the second reading of the previous verse. The hymn now portrays Christ as “emptying” himself. The root of the Greek verb, *ekenosen*, has been used as a label for the image of Christ painted here. His “kenotic” or “self-emptying” action has been a focal point for theological reflection. The simple plot of the hymn suggests that this action involved a disregard for high status and a willingness to engage in solidarity with those who suffer. Some theologians have pushed the notion to suggest that Christ somehow divested himself of his divinity, but the hymn is not working with the metaphysical framework of later theologians who tried to make sense of Christian claims about Christ's full divinity and humanity. The main point of the hymn is made by the three balanced affirmations: Christ was in the “form of slave,” “born in human likeness,” and “found in human form.” He was, says the hymn, fully human.

The servile status of this human being may evoke the image of the “suffering servant” sketched by the prophet Isaiah (Isa 52:13–53:12). Paul does not explain why Jesus died on a cross or what the effects of that death were. The possible allusion to Isaiah may evoke the notion of vicarious suffering. As the prophet says, “by his (i.e., the servant's) bruises we are healed” (Isa 53:5). Yet Paul does not, here or elsewhere, work out a theory of atonement. A similar account of Christ's adoption of a slave-like status appears in the foot washing scene of the Fourth Gospel (John 13), where the action of Christ is presented as a model for the disciples to follow. Paul will pursue a similar line of applying the hymn.

The “emptying” or abandonment of lofty, divine status did not end with the incarnation of the one who was “equal to God.” He humbled himself (v. 8) in an act of obedience that lead

to his death, and here Paul seems to add a phrase to the hymn that he was using, “death on a cross.” Paul elsewhere focuses on Christ’s death on a cross as an, if not the, essential part of his Gospel, particularly in 1 Cor 2:1-5, where he celebrates the paradoxical quality of that good news.

The hymn so far has traced a downward movement, from divine status, to human, slave-like status, to a miserable and shameful death on a cross. The movement now (v. 9) pivots and turns upward as the hymn celebrates the vindication of the executed. Jesus was given a name to be revered by one and all (v. 10), a name that is finally specified in v. 11. Jesus, who is the “Christ,” the Messiah, is also “Lord” (Greek: *Kyrios*). That is, he bears the very name that the Greek translation of the Bible had used for the Tetragrammaton (יהוה), which we usually render today as Yahweh. In other words, precisely because of his solidarity with suffering humanity, Jesus has now been revealed as “equal to God.”

The hymn that Paul cites thus not only makes a claim about Christ, preexistent, incarnate, and exalted. It also makes a claim about who God is, how God reveals himself, and where God is to be found, in solidarity with suffering humanity. The claim of this hymn, with its celebration of Christ’s exaltation, is particularly striking in its original context, a Roman colony that would have regularly celebrated the “divine” status of another figure, the Roman emperor, whose glory was most decidedly not revealed in his identification with the lowly.

Drawing implications from the Hymn

Paul applies the lessons of the hymn in a general way (vv 12-13), telling his congregation to “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.” What Paul has in mind is probably

the awesome yet fascinating mystery of which the hymn has spoken. One who is “divine” has given himself for others, suffered for them, and by doing so he calls others to similar action.

The phrase “with fear and trembling,” which may evoke Ps 55:5, also inspired a famous piece of theological reflection, by Søren Kierkegaard of 1843, although the Danish philosopher applies the line not to Paul and his congregation in Philippi but to Abraham at the “Binding of Isaac” (Genesis 22).

Paul continues with a somewhat more pointed admonition to act “without murmuring and arguing” (v. 14). Here he may have in view a situation of tension within the community that lead him, in this or a related letter, to admonish Euodia and Syntyche to be “of the same mind in the Lord” (4:2).

His further call to the community to be “blameless and innocent,” that they should be “without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (v. 15) may suggest something of the social reality in which his addressees found themselves. By accepting Paul’s Gospel message, and paradoxical affirmation of a glorified Messiah who had been executed as a Roman criminal, they had put themselves at odds with their environment. They probably took their fair share of ridicule for their faith, but Paul is offering them consolation that they have chosen a better path, a way of virtue that conformed to the reality of God revealed to them in Christ.

Personal comments

Paul makes his admonition personal. The fidelity of his congregation provides assurance to him that he had not “run in vain” (v. 16). Their endurance is a cause of his joy (v. 17), even if

his own situation is dire and he, like the Christ whom he has just celebrated, is “being poured as a libation over the sacrifice.”

The remaining verses of the chapter (vv. 19-30) attend to practical matters, the kind of things that often conclude a letter, one reason that many scholars see the letter ending here. Paul first tells the Philippians that he hopes to send his close companion, Timothy, to them. Both the Book of Acts (Acts 16:1-3; 17:14-15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4) and Paul’s own letters (Rom 16:21; 1Cor 4:17; 16:10; 2Cor1:1, 19; 1 Thess 1:1) attest the important role that Timothy played on Paul’s missionary team, often serving as an emissary for Paul to keep in touch with his congregations.

Paul also sends to the Philippians one Epaphroditus (vv. 25-30), who had been sent by the Philippians to assist Paul in prison (v. 25), and who apparently had become quite ill (v 27). Paul asks the Philippians to rejoice in his return, particularly because he “came close to death for the work of Christ” (v. 30). Paul’s language here is touching and ties these personal remarks back to the hymn at the center of this chapter. Although we cannot be certain, it is likely that Epaphroditus was either a slave or a freedman of one of the households in Philippi. His action on behalf of Paul was doing “the work of Christ” in more than one sense. He exemplified in his person as well as his action the kind of self-giving service that the hymn celebrated. His return to the Philippians, perhaps delivering this letter and its famous hymn bore eloquent testimony to Paul’s gospel.

Questions for discussion:

1. The “Christ Hymn” of Philippians 2 has been described as the core, the summary, or the “master narrative” of Paul’s gospel? Do you recall other places in his letters that might bear out that claim? Are there elements of Paul’s teaching that you know from other letters that are missing here?
2. How do you react to the image of Christ presented in the Christ hymn? Are there elements of that image that are problematic?
3. How useful is it to keep in mind the Roman context of this chapter when thinking about what Paul is trying to say?
4. Is there “fear and trembling” in your reaction to this or other scripture?

Further Reading:

Adela Yarbro Collins, “Psalms, Philippians 2:6-11, and the Origins of Christology,” *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003) 361-72.

Joel Green, “‘Although/Because He Was in the Form of God’: The Theological Significance of Paul’s Master Story (Phil 2:6-11),” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007) 147-69.

Hannah Stewart, “Self-emptying and Sacrifice: A Feminist Critique of Kenosis in Philippians 2,” *Colloquium* 44 (2012) 102-110.