

EARLY CHRISTIAN HYMNS

(David Capes)

The first generation of Christ followers gathered regularly in house churches for instruction, encouragement, and worship. A central part of these gatherings was the chanting and singing of hymns. Explicit reference to the use of hymns in the Christian church is found in Paul's admonition to sing psalms (*psalmoi*), hymns (*hymnoi*), and spiritual songs (*ode*) with gratitude to God (Col. 3:16; cf. Eph. 5:19–20). These three terms likely refer to the practice of using the biblical Psalter along with distinctly Christian compositions. The worship of God with hymns had its immediate background in Jewish synagogue practices. Early believers used psalms, particularly messianic psalms, to express uniquely Christian perspectives on God's recent actions in the world. Likewise, Ephesians 1:3–14 is constructed on a Jewish hymn-pattern known as the *berakah* ("blessed is . . ."). While the pattern is clearly Jewish, the author used it in a way that is explicitly Christian. Gentile believers would have also been accustomed to hymn-singing in the ethos of Greco-Roman religion.

Scholars have detected hymns and hymn fragments throughout the Gospels, Acts, Letters, and Revelation utilizing various criteria, including introductory phrases (e.g., "therefore it says," Eph. 4:8), poetic parallelism, special uses of relative pronouns and participles, the presence of unusual vocabulary and rhyming features, and disruptions to the context. Although not all scholars agree, there is a general consensus that the following passages represent early Christian hymns: Romans 11:33–36; Philippians 2:6–11; Colossians 1:15–20; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:3–4; 1 Peter 2:21–24; and Revelation 4:8–11, 19:1–4. These hymns may have been preformed traditions quoted or alluded to by a writer or spontaneous compositions understood to be Spirit-inspired. Some hymns are so clear and self-contained that later generations of Christians have named them (e.g., the Magnificat = Luke 1:46–55; the Benedictus = Luke 1:68–79). The New Testament contains both hymns to Christ and to God the Father, demonstrating a trinitarian shape to early Christian devotion. Furthermore, the content of early Christian hymns is directed to soteriological themes such as creation, incarnation, and redemption. For early Christ believers, hymnic praise was essentially a response to God's saving actions in Christ.

Though not all agree, many scholars think the earliest extant Christian hymn is the hymn to Christ found in Philippians 2:6–11. The hymn consists of two parts. The first narrates the descent and humiliation of the preexistent Jesus to become a man and to suffer a merciless death on the cross. The second describes the ascent and exaltation of the crucified Jesus by God to receive the adoration of every creature and the confession "Jesus Christ is Lord." This hymn functioned to recall the essential story and therefore had a didactic purpose. Paul utilized it further to make Jesus the lordly example of humility and service (cf. 1 Pet. 2:21–24).

By its nature, poetic or hymnic language appears to affect in significant ways those who use it. Whether it was chanted or accompanied with musical instruments, hymns were easier to memorize and recall than other forms of instruction. Therefore, it seems that early Christians used New Testament hymns for several purposes: (1) to instruct; (2) to express praise and thanks to God; (3) to confess faith; (4) to form communal identity; and (5) to provide an example for proper behavior.

